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AT THE END OF THE JOURNEY

poems by Sithembele Isaac Xhegwana.

University of Cape Town

AT THE END OF THE JOURNEY

By Sithembele Isaac Xhegwana XHGSIT001

Dissertation submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Master of Arts in Creative Writing.

Department of English
Faculty of Humanities
University of Cape Town
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10/09/02

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UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN
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AT THE END OF THE JOURNEY

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Dedicated to my wife, Ntomboyise and child, Khazimla.

University of Cape Town

BABYLON

From third world to first world, from periphery to centre
 From rural to urban, from township to suburb,
 From dust to concrete, from oil lamps to street lamps,
 From pine to pine, from sky to sky,
 I have come.

From the broken village, I have come
 to this place of robots, crowded by fruit and flower sellers,
 This city choked with taxis, their drivers hooting, screaming,
 The beggars on the kerbs pushing their trolleys, mobile homes,
 The street children in the doorways, stoned for the winter night.

From the city now I go
 back to the townships where robbers demand their life's share,
 Where drug dealers knock from door to door,
 Where police officers are also directors of crime,
 And women open their thighs for survival.

On the way I pass monuments
 Victorian, Georgian, colonial,
 I pass tourists, grinning, sleek.
 There are the suburbs where the wealthy recline,
 Where their children ride horses, swim.

From third world to first world, from periphery to centre
 From rural to urban, from township to suburb,
 From dust to concrete, from oil lamps to street lamps,
 From pine to pine, from sky to sky,
 I have come -

Here where I cannot change what has been,
 Where I sing anthems from a no longer heroic age,
 That of the extinct Sarhili's and Hintsas'-
 Here, where my past dwindles and the village dies.

TO HIMSELF

I

I find myself, on this bed,
Without a wife, my child gone,
My father miles away.

I have been to places
where no mother's love
could fetch me.

I have wandered,
Like a vagabond,
In and out of institutions.

The last time I was in Cape Town
I can't remember coming here,
Who I was, or what I was.

I know all
the psychiatric drugs by name:
Lithium, Lagatil, and all the others.

I have some disorder,
So I'm told, bipolar,
Manic depression.

II

Here, in this city,
I walk, I suffer,
All the chains of consciousness.

Back there, in the country,
In the village where I was born,
It is no different too.

They say to me, my relatives,
"He undermines the ancestors.
That's why he suffers. Let him."

My mother, too, she sweated
under that village sun, my father
lived elsewhere: I never knew him.

I – it seems I will never now give her
the garden she longed for,
That my father, absent, never gave her.

I – I am nothing but
these vindictive spells,
This malady of mind and heart.

III

I watch others, all their virtues,
But to me
they have no value.

I hear all these words,
But to me
they have no meaning.

I was supposed to be among them,
An achiever, figurehead, success.
And today, where am I?

Again, on this bed,
Without a wife, a child,
With only this mind that races,

This heart that knows only
its own illness, and
the solitude that attends all loss.

THE NECKTIE

They gave you to me
as an award – for service –
a sense of belonging.

Now you hang round
my neck as if
there hung from you

Those years, that other world,
a university, a residence,
a place where I

First learnt
to give up
my childhood.

Where I knew
what it was to be swallowed
into other kinds of love.

Lately I take
my solo walks
through these same dark streets,

Every day I wipe
my mouth, so dry,
with my dirty right hand,

Trying to wipe away
a world, yours,
I hoped to forget.

Yet your big blue wedge
stares at me from this mirror
where I stand:

A neck-tie,
circling my neck,
that lasso

Of the other world,
still tightening round my throat,
as if it were a noose.

MY SON, A LETTER

I

My dearest son

We are well at this side
 Hoping you are also in Cape Town
 Just wanted to say one thing
 We are struggling at this side
 Too much.

I cannot afford the Smart Centre account
 Last month I did not pay
 As I had to get lunch for your sister
 And food for everybody
 You know that my son
 Don't you?

This month I have to pay twice the installment
 And all in all the money is R240.
 Your brother is going to court on the 9th
 I am not sure if you are going to receive this letter before then.
 But I thought I should let you know
 Anyway, I asked Themba to post this letter.
 He is such a hope to us!

II

I know my son that you shall receive this letter.
 For that white lady you have told me she is good to you,
 She will let you know about the letter in time.
 I wonder if you do check the letter box,
 Or if you open my letters.
 (You already know my hand-writing, don't you?)
 I will write them anyway!

My dearest son,
 We are struggling here.
 I know you are struggling too.
 But, where can we look my son?
 For the sun is too strong for our eyes,
 And the universe too wide for a vain quest,
 In those western horizons that stole you.

I have just told you about your brother,
 He is going to court on the 9th.
 I wanted to support him also,
 I love him also my son.
 His hands might have ceased to produce,

His feet might have tired to walk,
And bring us that gold from Jo'burg.

But, you remember my son?
He used to take a bus from King,
And go, and go, all the way to Jo'burg.
And travel – for a long time my son!
To bring us gold and joy from that we desired.
Did he not bring it?

I am told it does not belong to him,
Although 24 hours he sweated.
Digging that very gold my son!
In the bowels of the earth he shivered,
He knows what it is to suffer harassment.
He was always reminded that he is a Xhosa,
And why should he dig money that belongs to Sotho's and Tswana's,
And take all the way to Sebe and Gqozo's Xhosaland?

Remember my son he suffered,
Remember his return always made your days.
You all fought over his nice clothing.
And every time he came back,
It was Christmas for all of us.

Remember he gave you his only suit,
Although you lost it when you had to be circumcised.
You still cannot afford that suit my son.
You know that very well.

They say you have nice shops in Cape Town;
They say you have the Waterfront,
They say you have Pick & Pays as high as the sky.
I still shop in Hoza Stores,
And Pep is still a luxury to me.
I was lured to Smart Centre
By these shrewd girls who come to the hall in Ginsberg,
Where these governments of Botha, De Klerk and Mandela,
Still dish welfare to us.

You told me anyway my son,
That Smart Centre cannot be my contemporary.
But, what could I do my son?
I had to get Christmas clothes for your sister,
She has grown very tall since you left.
She has passed her Standard Six very well.
I am sending you her report my son,
It is confidential, so they say.

You know my son, Simphiwe was crying,

And Nosipho joined the chorus,
 They wanted to be like other children.
 Remember Sithembiso, when it was your turn,
 You never had to cry like them.
 I was a domestic worker then,
 And my sister's shebeen was flourishing.

You remember that beautiful shirt she bought you?
 They called it *georgette* those days,
 I do not think you can still find it around.
 Have you ever seen it in Cape Town?
 It was ver *soft* Sithembiso.

Now, my son,
 I have a homework for you
 Count for yourself
 R230 + R200
 You minus that from this disability grant –
 It is only R490, remember?
 If you do that arithmetic properly,
 What do you have left?

Nothing Sithembiso.
 It does not end there, anyway.
 On top of that this year I have joined another stokvel.
 It costs each of us R100 to be full members,
 And two members have lost their loved ones.
 One has lost her mother.
 You know better my son,
Ubuntu does not give me many options,
 I must contribute.
 And as a stokvel veteran I have to buy drinks,
 Food, for the bereaved.

Keep well my son.
 But I want you to count well,
 I know you are struggling my son,
 But while I am writing this letter we have no food.
 I will be waiting to hear from you,
 They are all greeting you.

III

Then decide for yourself my son,
 Why can't you count it for yourself?
 It is simple arithmetic,
 You do not even need Sub A for that.
 But yet that university has confused you.
 What will you be anyway my son?
 A perpetual reader of these big books?

And me starving to death?
 And your brother and sister?
 And all these many children in my household?

What will you be Sithembiso?
 Please tell me.
 Let me offer my suggestions,
 Two things will happen to you.
 Either your stomach bursts out,
 Before you can eat all those books,
 For their number is great my son!
 I know.
 You were only born yesterday,
 And today's children are ambitious,
 Like you my son.

Do you think those white-skinned men will give you
 All the papers?
 Forget my son, forget,
 For that is their only paradise,
 And that is their only strong tower,
 Since Rolihlahla is holding the reins in parliament.
 They are gripping tight the ropes in those chambers.
 And my son,
 I am told that your university makes things really tough.
 Do you think you are going to survive?
 There is just no hope for you.

For starters,
 You could not lead those cattle,
 And could not handle the plough,
 You could not even hoe the ground.
 Do you remember my deceased brother?
 He should be your model.
 He tilled the ground of his fathers,
 Alone, he chased those weeds away.
 Away! Away! From Nongqawuse's promised land.
 That olive-skinned man should be your model,
 With his rough hands he fed us – to infinity,
 You must come back to us,
 For here we love you,
 And the future here is certain my child.
 There are cattle for you to lead,
 There is a plough rusting to dust,
 That my brother left as our inheritance.
 It is never too late.
 Like children of today,
 You are too ambitious,
 I know you will never listen to my advice.

Before I forget:

The second thing that will happen is this,
 If by chance you get those papers,
 And Rolihlahla's laws force those professors to crown you,
 You know what my son?
 They tell me,
 Black-skinned as you are,
 When you get those papers and wear those gowns,
 When you put that crown on your head,
 You become too expensive.
 For Verwoerd's laws are still alive and well,
 That you should till the ground,
 And your sister wash the nappies,
 As me and your father did,
 There is just no future for you, my child.

Then it will be all in vain,
 You leaving us for all these years.
 And riding these buses from the dawn of the decade,
 (Your very hobby my son).
 And me starving to death?
 And your brother and sister,
 And these many children in my household.

IV

There is a letter for you,
 It is from your sister,
 That only sister of yours.
 She asked me to shove it inside,
 So that her brother may read it.
 She too has something to remind you about.
 Perhaps you have forgotten about those tekkies.
 It is tough for her my son,
 At school they demand the tekkies.
 It is tough for her.
 Remember,
 I bough you everything your heart desired.

Remember when I nursed her,
 You used to fetch water with a bucket from that ground hole,
 So that I could wash your sister's nappies,
 And in reward I bought you a quarter-loaf.
 Only for your luxury my child.
 Sometimes it is tough here,
 That a lunch box to your sister is more than a luxury.
 By the way your brother is working,
 For a nearby contractor,
 (Only for his weekend drinks, that you know).

Do you remember?
 That when it was your turn,
 You never had to beg my child,
 For my business too was prospering.
 Remember my old knitting machine was working then,
 And every child in this village used to come in our household?
 I dressed the whole school my child.
 Remember those few bottles,
 That my dearest child used to go and fetch?
 You my son, do you remember?
 They made life better for all of us, including you.

I know you still do not approve of those bottles.
 But remember,
 You must not disapprove without an alternative.
 We are still clinging to these bottles,
 As presently they are what is surely ours.
 We are waiting for you, my dearest son,
 To come up with a better name for us.
 You remember that name I gave you?
 Actually, the spirits gave to me that name,
 For they hoped you were to brighten our lives.

I am afraid my child,
 I sometimes think you do not deserve that name.

V

Please then my child,
 Add those two numbers,
 And subtract them from that meagre sum.
 And add your brother's bail,
 And add the funeral costs,
 For the two stokvel members.
 And subtract again my son,
 Do not forget your sister's tekkies,
 Did she tell you how much they cost?
 Then tell me my son,
 How much are we left with?
 Not even our lives can be a ransom,
 Not even our muddy dwellings,
 Not even the few left-overs from my brother's cattle,
 That were my father's anyway,
 And his father's anyway.
 How far could I go,
 In counting this beautiful circle,
 Of our ancestral gathering,
 Laying in those beautiful fill just over there?
Oo Fakade my child!

I know you are a rebellious child,
 You hate the mentality of my people,
 Your very people.
 You do not believe those spirits exist.
 If they don't,
 Who brought you up then?
 I know you will say it's God the Father,
 But I will tell you His name,
 It is *Mvelatanci* my child, that wide-breasted one,
U-Sifubasibanzi mntwan'am!
 I know my child you hate such sayings,
 You call them what ... "rhetoric".
 Which is why you did not take those sacrifices,
 I offered on your behalf,
 When you joined the beautiful brotherhood of *Xhosaland*.
 You still refuse my child,
 To sacrifice to these spirits,
 For you think there is an eternal sacrifice for you,
 Jesus Christ, the Son of Man.
 I know Him also my son
 But you cannot forget your father's ancestors.

Forgive me my son,
 I know you love your Lord.
 Who told you about God, my son,
 Could it be our prophet Nxele,
 Who sailed to worlds unseen from Robben Island,
 And promised to come back as the son of god?
 We are still waiting for his return my son.

I am still enquiring from you,
 Where did you hear about God,
 Could it be from Mlanjeni,
 Nxele's successor, that healer of our land?
 But fiercely they fought with your hero,
 Tiyo Soga, the missionary who went to Scotland.
 Of course I know my son,
 You do not have to answer me.
 It is not Nxele that you heard from,
 Or Mlanjeni that you follow,
 But Tiyo, who was like you in every way.
 He loved his God, he rejected our traditions,
 He even refused to be circumcised.
 He fearlessly served His God,
 He fought the 'demonic spirits',
 Incarnated in Nxele,
 Who in turn fought Ntsikana,
 That great prophet of our land.

I know you very well my son,

I carried you for nine months,
 You were rebellious even then,
 And refused to walk when others did.
Wena wakhula sesilibele!
 You picked up your feet when we had all forgotten,
 They all thought you were going to be like me.
 Why not, why not my son?
 When sons can easily become like fathers.
 But yet they did not know,
 Heaven was not happy to give me one life,
 Grace wanted to double my existence,
 In you my son I continue,
 In your works my ideals are perpetuated,
 You are me, *ungumceph'ucandiwe*.

As I have already said,
 I know that you say you hate such "rhetoric",
 Me musing about my origin and your origin.
 I will teach you one lesson my son,
 Although your home might be in heaven,
 You are still walking here on our land, the *Xhosaland*,
 You still eat the fruits of our land,
 And indulge yourself with the honeys of our valleys.
 If you may not know,
 All this means this my son,
 Although you are fighting for the realisation of heaven's many dreams,
 You must know about Africa's pains.
 This great woman,
 Who has fed the whole world,
 From her bleeding selfhood.
 You must know about her struggles,
 And her hopes.
 Listen to me now my son,
 I know your thoughts run conversely.
 I know also my son,
 That you love humanity at her purest,
 That is why colour does not matter to you.
 Your world is not portrayed only in two colours,
 Black versus white.
 Your horizons do not only have two dimensions,
 East versus West.
 For your vision looks far beyond our human affairs,
 And on God's throne it shall descend.
 But, look at you now –
 You are in fire my child, you are getting burned!

I know,
 Like those professors you think I cannot be trusted,
 You think my words do not tally,
 And my visions cannot coincide.

But, I am wiser than you my son,
 For the creator endowed me with such a gift.
 I might not have riches to offer,
 I might not have fame to display,
 But I am wise my son
 And that is all I need from heaven.
 I know I told you,
 That you should know about Africa –
 And her struggles,
 And her pains, her birth pains
 And her great loss,
 And her death,
 And her riches,
 And her hopes for resurrection.
 I am not a prophetess for Africa,
 Many are there, they are doing the job well.
 Here, I am a representative of heavens,
 And like you, their ideals are my very life.
 What I wanted to say is this my son:
 Look good,
 At Africa and her ups and downs,
 Then you will know,
 About God and His people.
 Own her pains and struggles,
 And you will be enlightened,
 On the oppression of God's heritage,
 Don't misplace her moments of joy my son!
 Then you will know about your very hope.

Yet,
 Do not allow deception to fly your way,
 For Africa is doomed.
 From dust she comes,
 To dust she returns,
 That is the law of nature.
 Have these professors got so much educated,
 To forget about simple laws?
 Remind them, my son,
 For you always tell me,
 In their labours you have never found,
 Any spark of life,
 And their "theories" mean nothing to you.

VI

Before I retreat,
 To my familiar silence:
 I want you to think hard on these issues.
 Most of all,
 Always remember

That all I have been doing,
As from the first word,
Is to reclaim you.
I want you,
To reclaim this dusty landscape,
Which is the only one,
That lies close to you and your heritage:
This steel-sharp gravel,
This biting cactus,
This burning mimosa.
These are all emblems,
To prompt you
To come home again.
We have stories,
Bigger than the mountains,
Older than the rivers,
Much brighter –
Brighter than the Cape skies,
For you to learn anew,
For you to tell.
I want you to listen carefully
To my words,
In motion, biting at you.

Why must I watch you edified, stolen from me
by higher forces?
Must I always be helpless, hopeless
and faithless?
Why must my birth pains be
much prolonged?
My child, your exile is
my exile.
I can never withdraw myself
into silence.
For how long will you shut yourself out,
From the common feelings of human experience?

My son,
Come back to history,
Your very history.
My father's house is a playground,
Come back to us,
We need that hope which is you.

AT EVENING

That line where dark and light converge,
where stone and sky would seem to meet—
There are times I've tried to chart, to name it
as it wavers, God's angry light still pouring in,
darkness in the east encroaching, conquering all.

Many's the evening I have waited in that place
where it was never clear—at least to me—
If I should turn, left or right, north or south,
whether that sunset light was God's own glory
or only the halo of a larger emptiness.

I know that He once came to Job
in that moment of moments, apologising
for making him His guinea pig, thanking
Job for being the man who had released Him
from moral bondage to the human race.

But I know I can't be Job,
that my own darkness can't surpass his.
I know, since Job's day on that ash-heap,
God was not obliged to shower
His followers with manna.

And yet, at evening, I still watch that line
where dark and light converge—while a city,
lights emerging, begins to flourish, its mountain
slowly vanquished. I still wait, wondering
what its name could be, what God might call it,

That line, shifting, that runs through my life?

CONFESSIONS OF A WANDERER

I

There is a woman who waits
 for me, somewhere she calls home.
 She likes me to read her Frost each night;
 She likes to call me hers, her own.
 But other things, it seems, are always
 claiming me. It seems the earth itself
 is something that also wants to own me,
 Even its dust is seeking
 day after day to swallow me.

I own a certain purple tree.
 Each time I pass it by, I have to stop,
 to shield my eyes, overflowing with desire.
 In truth, it is this tree
 that owns me—that wants
 to own me, shouting as it does
 from the top of its tree kingdom,
 Never to leave, not
 ever to go away.

II

I hate the stranger
 knocking on my door when—
 you know what I mean to say—
 I start to feel intimate
 with that purple-headed tree. I
 hate the bird whose squawking, screaming,
 like that car, rumbling, unable to start,
 Wakes me from these meditations,
 My desire, my wandering.

But still you stare at me,
 hand to your cheek. I
 look away. I do not court,
 cannot receive, the misery
 I make for you. But the road and me
 are friendly enemies. I cannot stay
 here, in one place. The sea demon, they say,
 is angry with me. I am always
 on the go; I always break
 the flow of her plots
 for my life.

III

I love my life—you know that
 too. But only I can live it.
 Yes, I have—you know it too—
 A face devoid
 Of love or grace. I have always
 been unkind like this. Forgive me,
 but I have searched, sometimes
 it seems the whole world round,
 for a thing not owned. I have searched
 under the very toes of the sea
 I have jumped from that hanging cliff,
 the mind. I have trampled in
 the lion's den, my fear. I
 have embraced the burning bush
 In vision upon vision, befriending
 a thousand hills along the way,
 talking to them, hearing the speech
 of hills.

IV

Yes, we can talk of course,
 still try to be friends. Just don't be hurt
 when I must wander off again, still
 journey on. I will always be this traveller,
 One who cannot be reformed.
 Of course, I'll disappoint you,
 doubtless disappoint myself,
 My hands slipping, like Sisyphus
 with that stone, again and again
 as he attains, almost
 that mountain-crest where he
 at last can rest.

Even now
 I can feel the earth,
 How it shakes beneath my feet!
 Those village witches are after me
 Again; I must soon be gone! A stranger,
 almost in rags, wandering on
 the mountains, citizen of another world,
 A race without a name or nationality,
 Whose love is always
 for some other thing—a love
 that does not sound
 the sound of ownership,
 That declaration of war,
 Of dispossession.

RED HILL

“Excuse me, have not I met you somewhere?”
 “No, not – I am from the Cape, the Eastern part
 And you, look like a Zulu breed.”
 “Sorry – no offence.”
 “Agreed – no offence”.

At Red Hill, as I passed by
 A tender hand clutched me and shook my flesh
 Quite a million-dollar question she posed
 My identity, her identity,
 My possible affinity with a character she had possibly met.
 People are alike, aren't they?

Or maybe she did see me
 When I crawled with God in the era of Genesis?
 Maybe I heard the eternal voice calling out
 From the dust and mud of Zululand?
 Maybe we both gave God a hand
 To perfect this imperfect architecture-
 Who knows?
 She might be my other lost twin
 Or maybe we walked together
 When the rocky hills of Zululand melted
 in Shaka's burning genius
 And buck ivory could not suffice as an exchange?
 And milk cows could not supply the chain?
 And karioses and calabashes ceased to be furniture?
 When Nandi's cry haunted Zululand
 In one desire to calm the angry Shaka?

Maybe she
 The Red Hill stranger
 Did comfort him?
 Maybe I comforted him?
 But I am a Xhosa from Xhosaland
 And she a Zulu from Red Hill.

KHOLEKA

My black silk doek has turned grey,
 My German print dress has faded away.
 I have abandoned the spot by the riverside;
 These days, I draw water from poisonous taps.

Snakes have long invaded the village.
 The red dust that itched our naked bodies
 lies peacefully by the riverside,
 The commercial train passed early this morning,
 at six,
 And about that fateful morning,
 when your shadow outpaced me to the far away Jo'burg?

In the village, the young boys knock at my door.
 I no longer can team up with married women
 to fetch wood.
 I have stopped writing, my fingers are dry,
 My fires have burned me, our children are
 deserting me.

I wonder if my songs can still enchant you.
 I wonder if I could still capture you
 with my wild dance.
*Taka ka Siph*o, if I have to meet you halfway
 in the obsolete passenger train station,
 Please phone, I will give you my new neighbour's
 phone number.

Please,
 Don't forget to ask to speak to Kholeka,
 As I am now called by my maiden name,
 Since I ran away
 from your most loving family.

DRY SEASON

Listen to the cry of the hungry child
Echoing, menacing the village.
Now his sobs fade into silence;
A cat uses the fire-spot as his sleeping-mat.

Now jackals slaughter our last sheep;
Earth cracks and bakes beneath the cloudless skies.
Lizards scuttle over dry stones, in this dead oasis.
Not even a rainbow arches our destruction.

We have lost our harvests.
Wraith-like, dry leaves lift in the berg-winds.
Mud huts crumbling in the heat, thatch tinder-dry,
And diseases feasting on human flesh, on children.

Churches are empty. They cannot hear our cries;
Sangomas sweat their black magic.
Darkened houses in a dead landscape:
This dry season has eaten us to the core.

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PEOPLE OF THE CITY

People of the city:
 Development consultants
 Who never develop
 Nor consult; with their
 'Poverty alleviation projects'
 That never alleviate, that only project
 Their own agendas.

People of the city:
 The funeral directors
 Who outsource corpses,
 Prey upon the living;
 The contract owners
 Who travel to the country
 To buy the lives of workers,
 Ferrying wood for export
 From Stutterheim to New York.

City people, urban folk
 Who roam the villages,
 Lodging promises, seeking
 Whomsoever they might devour.
 Your limousines still pass us by,
 Past that man with his wheelbarrow,
 Fetching vegetables, that youth
 Standing by the roadside
 By the hitching-spot, alone.

People of the city,
 Your pockets full of cell-phones,
 Lotto tickets, your wallets
 Fat with bank-cards, cash,
 Your hearts full of statistics.
 You Jacks-Of-All-Trades
 Toms, Dicks, Harrys,
 With your soft hands, red suits,
 Your juicy hair, dreadlocks,
 Your love that can only be
 A missionary's love.

Child of the village,
 Always remember
 That things were not always
 Like they seem to be.
 It was dark,
 Child of the village,
 Hopelessly dark-
 Always remember.

Child of the village,
Poor village,
Your troubles are many.
Surviving village,
Even after the roaming wild beasts
Attired in sheep skins,
Even after the plunder
of the elder brother,
You will still be
on your own.

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HOME COMING

The wooden door is broken, the roof thatch
flags. The wind has fallen low—lower
than it was in the beginning. The clouds,
hiding behind our mountains, Amatolas,
seem deader than dead volcanoes.

And here I am—and here you are, mother.
Your dry hair burns in the winter sun.
Your face is pale today in its thin light.
Your hands twist at your chipped lips;
The stick you clutch has blistered them.

Yes, I am home again. But where is the cow
today, that would bellow as it calved?
And where is the horse that gallops as it
always did, from the crown of the hill?
There is only me, your son, who has come back.

Yes, you sent me away, into that other world.
It is ten years now; I have come home.
I kick the dust. My hands are empty.
My head spins, more than before,
while you, silent, bend to the fire.

Yes, you tried to bend me to your will.
You tried to make me one with the shades,
our ancestors. But I feared those images;
I followed another light.
All you worshipped, I derided.

And still your silence is what I fear.
Still, I kick the dust, unconsolated
by this old cooking spot, its ashes,
the charred, iron smell of the black pots.
Son and mother—we are back together

You, your cheeks as hollow now
as if you drank the wind,
And I, your child, whose stomach feels
as if it were full of dying orchards,
knowing I am back at the beginning—

Here at home, where all guilt begins.

THE RETURN

Standing in the cold warmth of this sunset,
Hearing the primitive music of those birds again,
I see a world that stands only in its ashes:
Only some memories, of childhood, remain.

A place, encircled by low hills,
With its fat cows and long green fields,
With the extravagant beauty of its trees –
This is a world no longer mine.

Now, pop songs replace folklore.
History has supplanted legend.
Railway-lines have cut their tracks
through the ancient woods and goat paths.

A frontier once – a frontier still –
Where our ignorance enacted
its blood scourge
on a peasant kingdom –

War of the Axe, War of Mlanjeni,
War of Nxele, War of Thuthula –
Here, at the heart of this old unrest,
This bloodshed,

I stand again, like one of those
first peoples who, the waters
of the Fish, the Bushman's having failed,
Now must hunt amidst dry stone.

SONG OF A POOR PEASANT

Here I sit, above the Gxashe,
dry now, full only of leaves,
the broken branches where
the coffee-brown water
used to scatter its
transparent ripples.

In this river,
where only a decade ago
my herds used to bow their heads
for a sip that kept the sacred circle flowing,
I used to wake up, full of energy,
fully clothed in my safari suit
and long gum boots.

I walked this land, a self-made man,
a man of power. The lowing of my cattle
above the village, the shepherd boys
chanting their praises, I took my radio
to every corner. The villagers
would follow to my small speaking box.
I was the star that overlooked
this tinder-dry landscape.

I was the chief's favourite.
Chief Kama, Chief Mhlambiso—
they all sat me down around
their banquet tables. I was
the sought-after master
for the virgin dances. I
deflowered them, abandoning
their children.

I was known
throughout the ten Great Kingdoms:
of Rharhabe, of Gcaleka
and even the land of Sobhuza.
With only a tip of my finger,
I hushed down
every wicked wind.

But now the hungry banks
of the Gxashe howl at me.
Here I lost the battle;
Here the fish-man
grabbed the bottle
of hard brandy I'd bought
in honour of myself.

Only if I don't forget
to give the river-bound angel,
that fish-man, a bottle
of brandy, alcohol,
will I be rich, richer
than Bill Gates perhaps.

But I was a man
of power—I forgot
to make my sacrifice,
to pay my respects.
I thought a man like me,
a man of power, wealthy,
did not need to do such things.

And now? Now
the blanket of the king
is still in tatters. And I
walk by the banks of the Gxashe,
a river filled with leaves,
dry with broken branches,
a poor peasant once more.

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NOPASI

I

She used to fetch the wood from Hoho
And turn it to a gold bundle to bring it home
And her fires never flickered.

II

These very stems have now pinched her
And she herself is in a bundle folded up
We are taking her back to the woods where she belonged.

III

She used to pack water from Keiskamma River
And drive it to her enamel container to bring it home
And children never thirsted.

IV

These very waters now have drowned her
And she can only be transported by wagons
We are taking her back to the waters where her temple is.

V

The spirits that reside in wood and waters
The spirits that brood over Hoho and Keiskamma
The preservers of life, the guardians of death.

VI

Like a flame she walked like lightening she has vanished
Her tiny neck packed the wood and the fires
Here tender feet have already turned into stone.

VII

She performed magic and we saw miracles
From a few mealie grains she fed us all
I am not saying she was never fed.

VIII

The winter blew in winter the roofs fell
The ice from the mountain devoured all
The torrents gushed the sun was anguished.

IX

Let Nopasi sleep for she has appeased the gods
 We are going to forsake her in this green earth: the worms!
 From her breasts the nations are going to feed.

X

The stone marble is going to seal her journey
 Does she from the sea shores gather stones?
 Where she played *rubeka* and *puca* (She was like a stone, Nopasi was solid).

XI

I will sing a song without any lyrics
 I will feed the gods to anger them
 I will embrace my cat skins I will collect my knobkirries and assegais.

XII

I will ride my stallion Bhungani to Qholorha
 I will stop every maid by the river side
 I will follow the shadows to their western dens.

XIII

Like a crippled bull my cries are going to echo throughout Hoho,
 Ntabethemba and Ntabozuko
 Even the Queen of the Oceans will shake in her mystical throne
 I will invade Gwadana I will accompany the western shadows
 to their nests.

XIV

Gonondo has to accompany me to Tsholomnqa
 That is where Nopasi's carcass innocently lies
 Let her speak to the wind: let the fires sing her songs.

XV

I hear that Mlanjeni has captured her
 He is dancing with her he is stealing her to the clouds
 Will she land in Nongawuse's kraal and present her
 with my hadkerchief?

XVI

Let Nopasi go
 For we have finished dancing
 And have even triumphed over the king's thrones.

XVII

Let her go
For the gods have carved the measurement
And she was a faithful servant.

XVIII

She was the chosen by the nations from the waters.
And wild animals used to carry her on their backs
And cried: that shook even the Lebanon cedars.

XIX

On a wooden wagon Nopasi came
Those iron reels clicking crashing
Two sets of cattle marching: horses, people and donkeys.

XX

Nopasi clinched in a wooden box: that is her second coming
I will not stop it I will not vanish it: let it go
Throongs over there are waiting to welcome the maid.

XXI

Nopasi ran on these green hills to enchant me
I courted her during dances and ballets
Like a mad sangoma she danced: she wrapped me around
her sharp breasts.

XXII

Nopasi was a celebrated soprano in our kingdom
Her sharp voice cut through the hills of Nkonkobe and Nkanunu
She was heard even in Sandlwane and Mhlab'uyalingana.

XXIII

At 12 noon on the dot me and Nopasi tied the knot
Covered in ochre swimming in blood
I can still recollect those choruses: the bass and the guitar.

XXIV

At 12 on the dot I have to let my Nopasi go
I have to watch that black box slowly descending
I wonder which planets are worthy of such a visit?

XXV

Nopasi hoed this ground to infinity
 Nopasi decorated this land in all colours
 From her breasts even the beasts had their share.

XXVI

We are now standing here wondering
 Who will feed us and clean us and clothe us and hide us
 Nopasi has been summoned by the chiefs "Ah! Mvelatanci!".

XXVII

Shaking gods of Gwadana what offering could appease you?
 I have the cattle the women and the children
 I have the land the mealies and the pumpkins.

XXVIII

Yonder the chiefs are rounded up in a circle
 The fire is burning the bull is bellowing
 Nopasi has finally arrived: the mighty princess.

XXIX

I had a princess in my stable
 From lands far away Nopasi came
 She dragged a handkerchief: I captured a princess.

XXX

Shaking gods of Gwadana what offering could appease you?
 I have the cattle the women and the children
 I have the land the mealies and the pumpkins.

XXXI

Darling! (We will meet in the Dusts)
 My darling! (We will meet in the Dusts)
 My darling! (We will meet in the Dusts).

XXXII

Go! (We will meet in the Dusts)
 Go my darling! (We will meet in the Dusts)
 Go my darling! (We will meet in the Dusts).

NOPASI'S LAMENT*

Once I was a child, a girl
 playing *puca* along the river's quiet.
 Once, a bird spoke, a hare passed by,
 and, from the waters,
 I saw people.

People came, encircling, trapping me.
 My mother, father, called me sick.
 But they had their own demons,
 They could not cast out my own.
 Till I dreamt another dream.

I saw this woman,
 They called her the Queen of the Oceans.
 She held the key to the five great kingdoms.
 She held the key to my dreams:
 A sacred white stone.

Thus I followed
 the shadow of the wind.
 A crushed reed, I fell prey
 to the cruel adventures
 of the sea demon.
 Yet I survived.

Once she heard
 about my impending sangoma graduation
 the Queen of the Oceans
 gnashed her teeth.
 I went through many fires,
 For cleansing, so they say.

I plunged naked
 into deep waters.
 I ate and drank sour herbs.
 I inhaled the iron-red coals.
 But I have a demon
 they cannot cast out.
 It tortures me, devours me.

My place is among
 the lowest of the low.
 My kind will crouch along
 like those low hills,
 those mud huts
 beyond the river.*

* Note: Nopasi is the name of an invented mythical figure, the symbol for an inner journey

The enemy is swift, her arrows sharp.
Warriors are pointing their swords,
The winds are tossing me
under the rocks.
Where is the lion,
To take me across this dark river?

My spirit heavy, my mind
half-beaten, one breast
cut off, womanhood
defiled—where is the road
where the cold of grass, the stone,
will not bite my feet?
Where is the road
on which I might return?

My songs shall go to the silent, the alone.
My songs shall be this pledge to myself.
My songs shall break from tyranny,
The arrogance of chiefs,
of kings.

It is my song, my lament
that is my lion,
That will be my ferry—
A road to carry me across
the river's dark;
To sing me, and you too,
Back to the place of quiet water.

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VOICES IN THE WIND

Voices in the wind
 Accompany me in my adventures.
 They tell me a million stories;
 They speak to me gently.

As I press my feet against the cracks
 of these gravel roads,
 These voices riddle the sand and the dust.
 As I retrace my steps
 In the dark blue enigma of the Muncushe streams,
 They give me stories: cadences.

“No, I don’t believe in you,” I retort;
 I try to duck their giant steps.
 The voices persist, tell me a million stories:
 Stories of the original fall in Eden,
 Stories of man’s grandeur in Babel,
 Stories of King Hintsa’s skull and Nongqawuse’s
 legend.

I raise my hand,
 Persisting, “I do not want to listen.”
 These voices shrug off my many protests.
 The stories unfold, the narrative swells:
 more cadences.

When one mentions King Shaka Zulu, I lift up the
 dusty coils of my ears;
 When I hear of Nxele and Maqoma, working in the
 Cape docks,
 And of Siyolo and Xhexho,
 Coming to the Cape in chains to build the Break-
 Water Prison,
 And of Nelson and Robert, crumbling in the island,
 I weep, I weep.

“I must have lost my mind
 To be even communicating with such,”
 These voices gush out anyway,
 They drown me:
 Voices in the wind.
 They order me to retell these stories.
 I say, “Take it easy pal, I still have my democratic
 rights.”

These voices just smile
 And fade from consciousness.
 They transcend to the great abyss

Between stone and sky,
From where, I suppose, they came.
And I am left alone, shrilling and sinking.

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KING SHAKA OF THE ZULUS

I

King Shaka of the Zulus
 Bastard son of Senzangakhona
 Bred by the hills, raised by the lilies
 Broke the Zulu sacrament.

II

Fed of fire and volcano
 Iron man, Taurus
 Zulu bull, bellowing
 Raced with English bulls on the crooked paths of Nongoma.

III

Grazed on the racing hills of Langeni
 Drank from the gushing streams of Khandempemvu
 Nguga, the sanctuary
 Bastard son of Senzangakhona.

IV

Pastoral calf of the Zulu hills.
 Mushroom that shot out of the heart of the sun
 Jewel hidden in the mines of Stanger
 Iron man, iron man.

V

Warlord, hailed death at its tracks
 Tampered with the art of war
 Led man to their momentous deaths
 Iron man, iron man.

VI

King Shaka of the Zulus
 Swallowed his own loins
 Plundered, sucked the blood
 Only to be swallowed by the red soils of Zululand.

VII

Hand in hand with Nomkhubulwane
 To swallow the Zulu monarch
 Shaka Zulu, Shaka Zulu
 Bastard son of Senzangakhona.

VIII

Made love in blood chambers
Gave birth only through his fore-head
Traced the footsteps of Mjokwana
To the sunken Zulu throne.

IX

Iron sword, cutting the sinew,
Fire sparks, grinding the bone,
Ochred blood, stealing the soul-
Bastard son of Senzangakhona.

X

Shaka Zulu, Brutus is coming!
The sons of Senzangakhona, heirs to the throne?
David and Goliath rearing their heads
Shake your iron robe and embrace the earth.

XI

Beloved of the Zulu gods
Even Zeus the Olympian
Fed by the ancient ravens
Shaka Zulu, Shaka Zulu.

GENESIS

Once there was an epoch when
women, men, paced around, searching
the river, the seed, the stone-fire.
They ate the rich sap that lives
in the intestines of the roots.

Once upon a time, our fires burned
tall, their flames opening the darkness
as we chanted. Dancing, we unveiled
the reservoirs of our own light.

There, our feet tattooing, we chased
the moon. We chased the blue buck,
the eland. We raced with the Bushmen
and the Khoi – even as far as the red
pillars of the stormy skylines.

We watched our witchdoctors, sangomas,
negotiating with clouds.
They called roots by name.
They traced and chased death
back to its black caves.

But, while we were busy
with our dancing, our vigil, our beer party,
a great serpent came, from out of the North.
He whisked his red tongue,
our village turned into ashes.

The bulldozers have been and gone,
we have moved our tents from dwelling
places to wildernesses. We were left
with no option but to turn our plough-
shares into swords.

And still the poet sings; still
I make these verses, years later,
even here, where no cowhide drum sounds,
so we may find that river, those footpaths.
So we might find again the seed, stone-fire.

DAYBREAK

This road, its gravel rusted, coiling back upon itself,
takes me to a dam that splinters in the light once more.
Early morning: there is a hint of mountain light, of snow
about this water's shine. The small shrubs, yellow-
budded, warn of the spring. But all is silent.

These hills, surrounding here, have survived
many adversities, going back to Dias, centuries back,
erecting his blind cross above our beaches,
To Nongqawuse, her prophecy, our disaster.
But nature, summer, winter, has her own resilience.

All around me, still, there sounds the history
that almost swallows me—the testimony of men, of women,
children—all swallowed by the earth, its darkness,
their bones now rattling under unattended graves.

But today, to me, these myths, that history,
seem exhausted. Complacent, we are always blaming them,
Dias and his cross, Nongqawuse, her prophecy.
Now, only a tortoise, nerves frightened by my footfall,
runs back to the water, that door to the river,
the shimmer where sun first strikes its surface.

I walk alone this morning, without ancestors,
a river that cannot be tamed by any bridge,
I can see the forked fingers of the sunrise
straightening towards me—a reed that,
knocked flat by many storms, raises itself slowly
on this bank to seek a single sheath of light.

PRAYER

Eternal Spirit, lift us higher than the trees,
Make us see the fires beneath the earth.
Make us walk more slowly than our fleeting breath.
Plant us in your dormitories
beyond sacrificial blood and wooden temples.

May we not be proud of the she-goats, the groaning bulls.
Make us see you walking with the river flowing,
Accompanying, as you used to do, the perished sun.
Make us believe that the mountain
is also your child, and that the sea
is the only sibling of the blue skies.

Eternal Spirit, help us assassinate the drought.
Even if death grows bigger than we are,
May we be in peace with Nongqawuse, her mermaids.
Give to us our war swords. Help us
to make pain and love our own.
Instill in us your present, your continuous knowledge

That you may cease to be that ghost
whose only existence pounds its heavy feet
on the delicate floors of memory.

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