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I Will Take You to the Mountain / Dirge / Taking Breath

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Three Poems

TANURE OJAIDE

TAKING BREATH

We could have gone farther than here by now, but, believe me, we are where we ought to be.
A sandstorm has caught up with us, and we have to shelter in our minds in the open—now we see the wisdom of sunglasses in our kit; now the baobab, once abused, is an ally in our loneliness.

Here we take breath in the marathon charging the limbs, telescoping the unending lap of our fate—the road is mapped out through stones, sand, and clay; sometimes I feel that those who fall eternally behind turn to stones, and I know how it hurts to fail.
Lucky we must have been not to veer into evil djinns, lucky that we did not break down before the lion’s den, lucky that in famine we did not choke ourselves with poisonous fruits.

We could have gone farther than here by now, but we are not yet gods to cross the earth with lightning; we are still men and women with the feeble flesh of desire.
Believe me, we are where we ought to be.
Lucky that we are already here, lucky that our heels are still whole.
Here we take breath in the race:
let the evil djinns go with the passing storm;
we’ll proceed in the vigor of our rejuvenation.
I WILL TAKE YOU TO THE MOUNTAIN

A

father tells his son, “At your age
I never kept late nights; even now
I neither take beer nor inhale tobacco, yes
at your age I could tell a deadly smell from afar
and step aside till the evil wind blew past.
I never in all the years had an idle holiday—
I spent time on the farm for a good harvest;
I was often lucky with a good catch in the stream;
in between I ran errands for my elders
and joined my age group to clean the streets.”
A farmer cries, “Children trample my yams
underfoot, they turn my farm into a playground.”
A mother weeps, “My only son crashed into a ditch
in the company of a harlot; whom do I
lean on at this age these unkind days?”

We hardly have the time it took you
to grow up, though we see your height
within reach. We have more schools to go through
than you had—true, your strength is our weakness:
our whisper blares into everybody else’s ears,
our glance searches out hidden things,
our stride oversteps the path you built;
our daring veers into recklessness.
So when we cry of hardship, the hangover
of a spendthrift generation, the world jeers;
when we laugh at superstitions, are scolded for irreverence.

“I will take you to the mountain
where we shot lions and sat on their skins
to commune with the gods that gave us strength.”
Your mountain has sunk below our minds,
and we need not hunt the beasts
we have tamed with generosity.

Do not think we are not warriors because we do not
wield hatchets in our family circles—
we can be heroes without spilling blood.

Even now I groan inside the cloak you wore smartly;
the thing is heavier than my will.
And more will come that cannot understand this,
because they will be free of the shackles
clamped upon you, then more savagely upon me—
we expect in their turn
those who eat our leftovers to overpower us,
those who take the highway we now build
to go beyond the farthest stretch of our imagination.
A fisherman's magic net caught the mermaid in our stream, and we parted forever with the enchantment in our lives; a drunkard fired at our all-seeing pilot and we lost the star, who would have taken us through the treacherous road of night ahead. They had impregnated the beauty queens of the land before our circumcision, so we were denied the romance of eloping with them to the moon for draughts of honey. The hearth had its log burnt out before our farm produced the prize yam of the festival of decades—now we grow only tubers that can be eaten raw; each age group makes good of whatever it has to survive. Changing so fast, who knows whether we'll still walk with our legs in the cyclone of time blowing mad; already we see clearly without eyes, hear without ears—the cripple we carried to the playground comes back on his own legs; the blind one sees the thin line separating life and death, and stops short of killing himself. We research to turn fossils into wands in a desperate fight against the sterility gnawing at our wombs. Even now we look through mist-covered windows for the offshoot of dead heroes—it is not that we belittle ourselves; they are becoming a rare species. We are bringing down heaven, dispatching angels to hell, the strong taste of betrayal on their lips; we open our hands, close our eyes to the fruits of persistent struggle and prayers, unripe and rotten. By the time we have made too much money and so much love, there'll be no life to live—we have seen the end and the beginning, seen the beginning and end in the midst of unending currents. Though laughter is rare in the face of pain, though our share of blessings amounts to nothing in hand, this dirge I sing is not a hopeless song. We are still building the dome into tomorrow; this is not another plasticine that any bigot recasts in his lust, nor another caper in the dark, but a dream-conceived, life-giving offering of mourners.

(MAY 8-13, 1985)