

After the Rain: A Poem for Africa

I.

After the rain I drove, windows open,
listening to other cars hissing,
watching steam rise from concrete streets
and iron manholes in New York at one in the morning.
It reminded me of a night I walked
with friends for hours, seeking a bar
that could make a Singapore Sling
just the way I remembered it in college,
finally away from home.

II.

It rains in Africa too,
a steady hissing stream on Day Water Lilies,
a gentle beat on brown water.
An old woman like my grandmother,
crosses a dark stream, her feet
offer little contrast. And she was tired
from being Black all of her life.
Her weary stride made me
ashamed that my desire for a Singapore Sling
could have been an obsession,
and that all I ever sought to escape
was my overindulgence, an extravagance
this woman, in all her eighty years
had never known.

III.

A woman like myself
stands on a hill, surveying the land
her parents and grandparents told her
is hers when she is willing to fight
for it. She is ready now.
And the birds, aware of Who owns the air
into which they sing, sense
the approaching storm. They wait now
in silence.

IV.

For some, it takes a long time
to see another's tears, even
a steady, forceful stream.
Although I have been in political demonstrations,
I have never been in exile. I have yet

to clutch my children, afraid
that some stranger will pull me away from them,
never knowing
if I'll ever see them again.

V.

The birds will sing a new song
after the rain.
Black African women will stop losing
their husbands and sons to relentless wars.
Their children will play
with rocks along the water.
They will have the freedom
to pick up gold and diamonds
and keep them for themselves. They will
catch tears like rain pellets
and cast them back into the sky.

Forest Hills Graveyard

Established 1880

In the middle of a neighborhood cemetery,
historic because of the famous ghosts who could walk there
if they chose to rise again,

stands a black tree, that, on sultry summer days
is black onyx
against a cerulean sky

surrounded by Weeping Willows mourning,
Spanish moss draping trees like haunted remains.
Victorian city park more than resting place,

where Dogwood and Magnolia lined paths weave
through the cemetery like veins,
a depot for those temporarily at rest.
There, among the green palette of trees

as diverse as the souls that lie beneath them,
black slaves buried alongside their great -great grandsons,
prematurely cut down by each other,

segregated even in death,
but still lying with their slave owners in the same southern dirt,
just many plots away. This place for the dead,

more reminiscent of Eden before the Fall
than Savannah's gardens of Good and Evil,

except for the Black Tree,
eternally proud in the middle of it all,
isolated and alone.

Families visiting the remains of their memories
have given this tree a name:

L'abore Noir,
Der Schwarze Baum,
El Arbol Negro,
Tiu-gr-gv-nah-ge,
even The Nigger Tree.

It surrounds itself in fog, sometimes mistaken for
a shadow, sometimes not seen at all.

Just before winter, its leaves fly away
like black crows departing
Leaving behind bare, arthritic fingers

pointing toward the earth,
a grassless circle of tarnished red clay,
hollow underneath.