1998

Poems

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Poems

Abstract
MISSING, PLANTS, Gourd
Olive Senior

MISSING

The last time I went home they told me you were missing. For the first time since I'd known myself, you were not there.

For one so home-bound, who could have foreseen such a dramatic ending: Missing Person. Presumed Dead.

Village fiddler, your playing was always out of tune. Your choice of instrument that creaking violin: What was it signalling? The ne'er-do-well? The one who failed to make the grade? The only one who stayed?

Yet, your discordant life played out, I was amazed to find you hadn't passed through like a false note, a broken string.

You remained a vibrating source of conversation an endless susurration. With the police indifferent,

your poverty-stricken neighbours hired a van to take them on their own investigation across the river to the rumoured scene of the crime, for they believed you had been murdered. Theories were rife:

- You know how he facety when he tek up his waters.
- He did get money so he boasy that day.

Why had you taken that bus at all? Where were you headed?

In a life devoid of excursions did you know you were finally setting out to be tripped up by your fate?

Leaving home like that, you have missed so much: Mass Dick's funeral, Tennie migrating, Pearlie and baby too,
Miss Carmen's husband dead. So many departed.
The young ones sit and wait. Not in the expectation
of any return. Waiting has become an occupation.
A permanent state. Abandonment the theme of this new life.

One day, I thought I heard you, Jumbieman,
unburied wandering spirit playing an unstrung fiddle

headed our way. Miss D who is the oldest person I know said:
*Nah, is you hearing bad. Ol'time sinting done weh*

*Not even duppy bodder wid we now.*
Yes, it's Version Time. Lyrics and licks. A life too raucous

for anyone to hear ghostly fiddlers again. Not you. Not Tambu.

*O Tambu you come back
but wha de use?*

*You come back but
wha de use?*
PLANTS

Plants are deceptive. You see them there looking as if once rooted they know their places; not like animals, like us always running around, leaving traces.

Yet from the way they breed (excuse me!) and twine, from their exhibitionist and rather prolific nature, we must infer a sinister not to say imperialistic grand design. Perhaps you’ve regarded, as beneath your notice, armies of mangrove on the march, roots in the air, clinging tendrils anchoring themselves everywhere?

The world is full of shoots bent on conquest, invasive seedlings seeking wide open spaces, materiel gathered for explosive dispersal in capsules and seed cases.

Maybe you haven’t quite taken in the colonizing ambitions of hitchhiking burrs on your sweater, surf-riding nuts bobbing on ocean, parachuting seeds and other airborne traffic dropping in. And what about those special agents called flowers? Dressed, perfumed, and made-up for romancing insects, bats, birds, bees, even you –

– don’t deny it, my dear, I’ve seen you sniff and exclaim. Believe me, Innocent, that sweet fruit, that berry, is nothing more than ovary, the instrument to seduce you into scattering plant progeny. Part of a vast cosmic program that once set in motion cannot be undone though we become plant food and earth wind down.

They’ll outlast us, they were always there one step ahead of us: plants gone to seed, generating the original profligate, extravagant, reckless, improvident, weed.
gourd

d
hollowed dried
calabash humble took-took
how simple you look. But what
lies beneath that crusty exterior?
Such stories they tell! They say O packy,
in your youth (before history), as cosmic
container, you ordered divination, ritual
sounds, incantations, you were tomb, you were
womb, you were heavenly home, the birthplace of
life here on earth. Yet broken (they say) you
caused the first Flood. Indiscretion could release
from inside you again the scorpion of darkness that
once covered the world. The cosmic snake (it is said)
strains to hold you together for what chaos would ensue
if heaven and earth parted! They say there are those
who’ve been taught certain secrets: how to harness the
power of your magical enclosure by the ordering of sound
– a gift from orehu the spirit of water who brought the
first calabash and the stones for the ritual, who taught
how to fashion the heavenly rattle, the sacred Mbaraká,
that can summon the spirits and resound cross the abyss
– like the houngan’s asson or the shaman’s maraka. Yet
hollowed dried calabash, humble took-took, we’ve walked
far from that water, from those mystical shores. If
all we can manage is to rattle our stones, our
beads or our bones in your dried-out container,
in shak-shak or maracca, will our voices
be heard? If we dance to your rhythm,
knock-knock on your skin, will we
hear from within, no matter
how faintly, your
wholeness
resound?

hollowed
dried
calabash
humble
took-took

how simple

you look