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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 susurrantion. 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, Pearlle 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.
Not Jonkannu. Not silenced Gumbay.

*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.

g
o
gourd
r
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