1999

Poems

Jackie Kay

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Poems

Abstract
LUKOZADE, THE SHOES OF DEAD COMRADES, PRIDE
My mum is on a high bed next to sad chrysanthemums. 'Don't bring flowers, they only wilt and die.' I am scared my mum is going to die on the bed next to the sad chrysanthemums.

She nods off and her eyes go back in her head. Next to her bed is a bottle of Lucozade. 'Orange nostalgia, that's what that is,' she says. 'Don't bring Lucozade either,' then fades.

'The whole day was a blur, a swarm of eyes. Those doctors with their white lies. Did you think you could cheer me up with a Woman's Own? Don't bring magazines, too much about size.'

My mum wakes up, groggy and low. 'What I want to know,' she says, 'is this: where's the big brandy, the generous gin, the bloody Mary, the biscuit tin, the chocolate gingers, the dirty big meringue?'

I am sixteen; I've never tasted a bloody Mary. 'Tell your father to bring a luxury,' says she. 'Grapes have no imagination, they're just green. Tell him: stop the neighbours coming.'

I clear her cupboard in Ward 10B, Stobhill Hospital. I leave, bags full, Lucozade, grapes, oranges, sad chrysanthemums under my arms, weighted down. I turn round, wave with her flowers.

My mother on her high hospital bed waves back. Her face is light and radiant, dandelion hours. Her sheets billow and whirl. She is beautiful. Next to her the empty table is divine.

I carry the orange nostalgia home singing an old song.
THE SHOES OF DEAD COMRADES

On my father’s feet are the shoes of dead comrades. Gifts from the comrades’ sad red widows. My father would never see good shoes go to waste. Good brown leather, black leather, leather soles. Doesn’t matter if they are a size too big, small.

On my father’s feet are the shoes of dead comrades. The marches they marched against Polaris. UCS. Everything they ever believed tied up with laces. A cobbler has replaced the sole, the heel. Brand new, my father says, look, feel.

On my father’s feet are the shoes of dead comrades. These are in good nick. These were pricey. Italian leather. See that. Lovely. He always was a classy dresser was Arthur. Ever see Wullie dance? Wullie was a wonderful waltzer.

On my father’s feet are the shoes of dead comrades. It scares me half to death to consider that one day it won’t be Wullie or Jimmy or Arthur, that one day someone will wear the shoes of my father, the brown and black leather of all the dead comrades.
When I looked up, the black man was there, staring into my face, as if he had always been there, as if he and I went a long way back. He looked into the dark pool of my eyes as the train slid out of Euston. For a long time this went on the stranger and I looking at each other, a look that was like something being given from one to the other.

My whole childhood, I'm quite sure, passed before him, the worst things I've ever done, the biggest lies I've ever told. And he was a little boy on a red dust road. He stared into the dark depth of me, and then he spoke: 'Ibo,' he said. 'Ibo, definitely.' Our train rushed through the dark. 'You are an Ibo!' he said, thumping the table. My coffee jumped and spilled. Several sleeping people woke. The night train boasted and whistled through the English countryside, past unwritten stops in the blackness.

'That nose is an Ibo nose. Those teeth are Ibo teeth,' the stranger said, his voice getting louder and louder. I had no doubt, from the way he said it, that Ibo noses are the best noses in the world, that Ibo teeth are perfect pearls. People were walking down the trembling aisle to come and look as the night rain babbled against the window. There was a moment when my whole face changed into a map, and the stranger on the train located even, the name of my village in Nigeria in the lower part of my jaw.
I told him what I’d heard was my father’s name.
Okafor. He told me what it meant,
something stunning,
something so apt and astonishing.
Tell me, I asked the black man on the train
who was himself transforming,
at roughly the same speed as the train,
and could have been
at any stop, my brother, my father as a young man,
or any member of my large clan,
Tell me about the Ibos.

His face had a look
I’ve seen on a MacLachlan, a MacDonell, a MacLeod,
the most startling thing, pride,
a quality of being certain.
‘Now that I know you are an Ibo, we will eat.’
He produced a spicy meat patty,
ripping it into two.
Tell me about the Ibos.
‘The Ibos are small in stature
Not tall like the Yoruba or Hausa.
The Ibos are clever, reliable,
dependable, faithful, true.
The Ibos should be running Nigeria.
There would be none of this corruption.’

And what, I asked, are the Ibos faults?
I smiled my newly acquired Ibo smile,
flashed my gleaming Ibo teeth.
The train grabbed at a bend,
‘Faults? No faults. Not a single one.’

‘If you went back,’ he said brightening,
‘The whole village would come out for you.
Massive celebrations. Definitely.
Definitely,’ he opened his arms wide.
‘The eldest grandchild – fantastic welcome.
If the grandparents are alive.’

I saw myself arriving
the hot dust, the red road,
the trees heavy with other fruits,
the bright things, the flowers.
I saw myself watching
the old people dance towards me
dressed up for me in happy prints.
And I found my feet.
I started to dance.
I danced a dance I never knew I knew.
Words and sounds fell out of my mouth like seeds.
I astonished myself.
My grandmother was like me exactly, only darker.

When I looked up, the black man had gone.
Only my own face startled me in the dark train window.