

Children in the Forest

When I left the last village
voices of children
in the foliage
grew louder
than the white-water river.

Twenty found me
and crowded around--
*Tell us your name, they sang out happily,
Do you go
for the old German cemetery
in the bush? The big stone house
in the forest, with columns? You look
for the old jail
in the woods?*

*Can you tell me, I asked,
Are there spirits in the bush?*
On the tallest tree
there was not a single leaf,
just branches bearing a spiky green fruit
I had never seen.

A boy picked a beautifully colored beetle
from a stem and held it before me.

*Yes, many, they answered.
Can you tell me their names?*

I heard a buzzing in the ground foliage
like that of trapped bees
probing for an exit
to the sun.
A stand of pink blossoms
turned to butterflies
as we approached.
A yellow butterfly
settled on the trail
and became a leaf.

*Alinka lives in the waterfall,
on the mountain, a boy replied.
He protects the village.*

*Agboth captures those wandering alone
in the forest. He beats them to death
and eats them. He comes at night
to the village.*

A foot-long blossom,
containing a red tongue
opened like the moist mouth
of paradise.

*At the brook on the road
lives the spirit of a white man
who died in a motorcycle accident,
but he is neither good nor bad.
He does nothing.*

Boys pointed to broad, spreading leaves,
each with twelve fingers, and said,

*This tree, too, has fruit
but it is poison.*

A boy plucked a locust
from a leaf, held it before me
and said, *We prepare it like this,*
as he deftly tore off each leg and wing,
then tossed it to the ground,
laughing. The tombstones were broken,
weed-choked, effaced,
their metal plaques gone.
Trees glistened in the sun
Through what had been
the plantation house roof.

The wall of a sitting room
had been used as a blackboard
for first grade arithmetic.

A Western toilet,
hauled into the kitchen
contained the remains
of someone's recent vomit.
The large parlor room
was scattered with goat shit,
graffiti, and a few singed aluminum cans.

I heard a rush of insects
sounding like a distant wind.

The German prison
stood solid, impenetrable
in the foliage.

*Atami causes sores and pox,
like these. Two boys rolled up their pants legs.
There are many, many smaller spirits.
But since the woods were burned
long ago, there are no gods
in here. Now there is God, only one God,
in the sky.*

Against Dying

1.

Because of the gods and spirits
that surround Kudadze's home...
Because his family was curious,
since I am light skinned, and, by local standards, rich.
Or because Kudadze is kindly and patient,
or since I am a stranger, or because
his family expected money...

Because it was already noon
and I was leaving the next day,
he and two friends led me to his home
through miles of heat and dust.
When I could no longer ride his rusted bicycle
they walked with me.
When I could no longer walk in the sun
they sat in the shade. *Not much more,*
they smiled, *Not much more.*

2.

Because the countryside, flat and treeless,
had been surrounded by warlords
and slave-traders
since before they counted years --
the people still build their homes
as fortresses--dried mud walls
too high to be scaled, too thick
for arrows and muskets.
Since dry mud cannot protect
against what is not visible,
to keep out hostile spirits
they etched tightly bunched lines
across the walls.
Taking a double bond against fate,
they scarify the lines
across their foreheads and cheeks.

Because the spirits of sickness
seep like water
between etched lines,
A god is needed,
Kudadze labored to explain
in pidgin French.

*A priest is needed
to know which god.
An augury is needed
to inform the priest
what food and drink
the god must have.*

3.

*Beside the doorway a sheaf of grain
assures the plentitude of rain.*

*Monkey skulls beside the sheaf
watch the home against the thief.*

*Crockery crumbling in a tomb
feeds the dead as in the womb.*

4.

At first featureless and limbless,
the large mud god
they had formed rested
before the house. *He sees and hears,*
Kudadze tells me, *eats and breathes*
through the hole
that is his navel.

The priest said he demanded cowrie shells--
we set these into the mud
of his body.

He demanded wood
to form his legs--
we brought two trunks.

He demanded the white feathers
of a baby bird--
we stuck these
to his head.

He demanded water--
we set the kettle
before him.

He demanded millet--
we poured the porridge
over him.

He demanded goat's blood--
we spilled the blood
upon him.

He demanded meat--
the goat's skull
is beside him.

He demanded his children--
the small gods
are around him.

5.

Beneath my feet
I noticed the shallow breaths
of a week-old puppy,
rust-brown like the dirt and dust,
struggling to stand
and failing

6.

*A boar's skull beside the door
assures the hunt as before.
The gazelle's tracks in the shaman's sand
predict the bounty of the land*

*The shaman reads the face and sum
of what is passing and to come.*

7.

Children and an old woman
surrounded me from a distance,
too shy to come closer

I became aware of a friend or brother
of Kudadze approaching me,
then a soft, frightened chicken
pressed into my arms, and a voice
in a language I do not know,
repeating what could have been,
You, please, take, and gift.