

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,  
hailed 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.*