

# Forgive me this Grace — A Suite of Poems

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## Forgive me this Grace

*"in Italy a lot of migrants beg for money  
for food, on the street" — Lucky*

I remember your face, veteran  
of the Mediterranean, of sea crossings,  
veteran of boats. I listen in stillness.

I do not say to you, my guilt is America.  
I listen to you talk of shurroty, the act of begging  
for food in an Italian city, the disappointment of exile.

What duty is asked of me other than to witness,  
other than the uselessness of my craft?

Quiet like days after the defeat  
of freedom, I go to my room,  
my plants mock me in their splendor.

Once when we were little, shielded from the brutal  
realities of roads, we walked the woods, singing to birds,  
playing on concrete verandahs. You said the world, wide  
and welcoming, is a journey. And we have walked,

and we have walked and now you call again,  
I, who is ashamed of my comfort,  
does not answer. Weeping

into plants, I say, grow in my shame.

It is nightfall, I must go to sleep wondering  
what refugee camp you will sleep in  
tonight, what ancestor will lie at your feet?  
I do not pray for you, I do not pray for me  
as I lie in my shame, as I bid for sleep to come.

## **Harmattan**

*for old soldier*

And sometime in December when the roads  
were swept clean by winds and the sky  
absent of birds, long gone, reminded us  
of empty music halls, we walked  
down the village, past the police station  
where a thief escaped from last night, scaling the fence  
made out of twigs and broken bottles. There was a song  
you wanted to sing, a song that began with a low hum,  
an elegy for things not seen, a beginning that hoped  
to save us from the past but before you opened  
your mouth another song rhythmmed the air,  
leading you to silence. An old soldier who fought  
in the civil war was singing the battles he fought, the days  
spent cleaning his rifle, the days spent in a small airport  
waiting to be airlifted. The moon was full,  
a witness made to suffer through the night, throwing up  
shadows, not as a way of saying, I was there, but a complaint  
made out of darkness and light, a supplication to be left alone  
to beauty. I did not say to you when we got home  
that the soldier was you and the song was you and the silence  
also. That memory which you have held have known you too,  
an anchor that's life giving and life taking, a road that was lit up  
before, once in battle, and having done so have refused to enter the dark.

## **Iju Train Station**

*with Kam*

A boy hawks chickens, his eyes look beyond the road.  
Quiet like an afternoon in the countryside, he contemplates  
the dying colonial architecture, those old trains, those fading  
white walls, all a reminder of a heritage across the sea, a heritage  
of sculpted lions and whips. What does he truly see? The woman  
whose child is on her back is singing a soothing hymn, a man  
is running with his family to buy some tickets to the north,  
his kaftan knows the pull back of wind. I have also seen this, once,  
twice, I do not know, all of life is repetition, a slow crawl toward  
the end. Who have once stood here, on this solid earth that my shoes  
now stand on, a colonial district officer and his red parrot?  
A government officer and his mistress? A young man with one eye  
returning from the war in Burma? All of our history is tied in movement,  
all of our hope is there too, and Kam keeps shooting pictures, her Canon  
a second eye, an external memory that pays homage to Sembene,  
to the still rivers captured in hastily reproduced photographs hawked  
by sweaty boys. What is there to see? The ordinary can be elevated  
says Kam and I watch her squat before a sleeping goat, waiting patiently,  
waiting for a slight movement, for the ruffle of fur, that hunter  
for beauty. Even here I can imagine the sea, the ongoing journey  
of waves, that abode that knows the dead and the living, marker  
of our colonial shame and hope. There isn't much to say, the train station  
is in conversation with itself, we are just sojourners, a passing breath.  
And we take our tickets, walk toward our train, the distant savannah,  
the flat roofs of northern villages, the guinea fowl seeking escape, all await  
in time, all await in our coming history. How much of the world is a journey,  
I ask Kam, perhaps I know, the earth is an eternal theater and you  
who have seen the world and turned back have seen nothing at all.

## Eviction

*for Takwa Bay, Lagos*

Here lie the fleeing people - a shirt,  
a baby sucking his thumb, hurriedly  
packed bags. On pavement, boys  
are playing harmonicas, from their shoulders  
fishes tied to ropes dangle on shadows  
of women. Beside them

an old man sings of rain, he remembers  
white sands, masquerades, he remembers  
rising smoke from old kitchens.

What is no more was lost in the departure.  
There will be no bamboo fence,

no moonlight running through hair  
of returning women. What is left are empty houses,  
dogs, broken toys on roadside, soldiers seeking  
for those who stayed.

What have they become? The abode of the poor  
is torn in winds, rendered into lands awaiting  
mansions. In the house beside sea, a lantern burns,  
a man sits on a rocking chair, when he sees the soldiers,  
he will say, *my eyes are rooted to this land, in death*

*I will resurrect into dreams. My country has failed  
the shadows, if we die only the birds will sing of us, not the poets,  
where are they, where are birds in the midst of violence?*

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