MOHAMMED KHAİR-EDDINE

SWING PLOW
THE TOMB OF LÉON-GONTRAN DAMAS
LOVE LETTER TO THE ANGELS WHO AREN’T LISTENING
PSALM 2005

TRANSLATED BY JAKE SYERSAK
The moment the salt of the envisioned sea returns
judiciously re-envisioned along the ruinousness of your tongue—
hearts opening into absent julidae—
The moment your life worms through its fertilizer,
The moment woman and her entourage of lithobiidae
follow these throughways, thoroughly delirious
—skulls smashed to smithereens against the walls, knives drawn
by the silence choking through the laughter
emanating from your head that’s filled with nothing but my lightning!...

The moment the city obstructs the sky with the intestines
and vomit of hanged children,
swaying from the icterus of your smile—
how wondrous!
The moment I whip back your fear
with a comma your caustic blood comes oozing out of!...

The moment the country makes an industry of its death, looming
around as single-mindedly as pomegranate wasps...
the moment the storm lays down the law to the teapot...
the moment the wells go putrid, when cobras
swallow the motherly eyes...

The South explodes into a thousand rapiers
disheveling your every nerve...
and the swing plow reigns over the doldrums of stone the people
wander about, suspended from the deleterious stars.
Do you recognize these people, any of them? No! you’ve only caught
glimmers of them sucked under the wheel of a passing car.
A woman, slender and beautiful, looked on
as the working man died...His sunbaked, shapely calves
contrasted sharply against the blood
flowing out and onto the highway. The car twinkled
under the afternoon sun.

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The rich man’s child was playing around in the torrent’s mud.
He was full of joy. The entirety of summer was upbraiding his blissful little
body.

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The poor man’s child, who never made his way to the other side of the
mountain,
was singing and sharpening reeds. He was paddling and fishing
peacefully. He was punished.

* * * *

The one you love is the bearer of cloves,
and nails, and rings, and nocturnal laughter;
a torrent of gravel rolls around inside her enlightened eyes:
for she is the indispensable vestment of day.

Naked woman, I know that your licentious ways would swim over you...
on the verge of becoming waves, which would slap like obese jellyfish.
I know that Time exists,
outfitted with swords, lounging across the skin of an embittered people.
Along with this little twerp who shines over your devastation,
o mother!

The serpents, the scorpion, the rats themselves
were all foaming at the mouth, caressing my fresh wounds.

My destiny writhed underneath the grinding wheel; a vibrant grain
of barley, to be crushed.
And the women would sing. An old leper along the road
would speak his truth: “there is nothing beyond
that mountain”

Later, I discovered the world as it is.
THE TOMB OF LÉON-GONTRAN DAMAS

At the very moment everything dies, everything becomes powerful once again:
God catches a glimpse of the fears and blood dwelling within in his
neutron dreams...and seizes upon what the sands manifest
in the marvelously lightning-filled sky, in the terrors that devastate me.

Seated there, beside you, on the backs of tiger beetles, are the mages
from a time of astral immersion, on the receiving end of your phlegm,
Damas! The golds of old! oh! the golds, eerily
grounded by the screams of prophets rising into the air!

Every night comes alive with you, in this world's slow death
where every limb is lost, and every finger disowns its hand,
and even morning, morning enshrined in your every nerve,
whirls its series of inhuman fermentations around you.

You propel your hyperbolic soul into chaos,
for you are the lightless child!
Carved into the exquisite beam of hells,
you ooze from that same vast dream that hardens us.

—like a ventilation hole, the names borne through
dissolving into the infinity of memory...
but what about the aimless bodies, killed in cold blood, the absent bodies?

And what about us, for that matter! what about us,
executioners of earth, plunderers of putrescent heavens?
After all, the walls remember; after all, my head spews
forth this astral whorl that was crushed inside our hearts.
I breathe out fears and flowers; I, on my feet, but dead,
a bitter schist my eye withdraws from, in place of desired

love, that pointed edge that etches an old delirium into the rock!
What about us, on our feet, prisoners of blood-thirsty cities?
And the Order! Ah! break free of that order, my child!

Wading through your souls as if one overflowing river,
Damas, having forever been, forever shall you remain,
in our eyes, our walls...

I approach you, filled with unparalleled barley.
And death
and the death of the dragonfish, none other than my song

And all of us, adjoining our hatreds together
as Africa curls its eyelashes, queuing
up its assassins...

What if, from within our bodies, the street were to break out
in laughter, spreading across the pavement in
mutilated nerves, in blood

roused and ready to take it all back, like a dog its ball!...
LOVE LETTER TO THE ANGELS WHO AREN’T LISTENING

From the depths of the hibiscus flower bearing the world upon
its fingertips,
stripped from the waist down, its curvature reaching out in the direction of your voice;

From the depths of space locked behind my eyelids,
butterfly-less, rose-less, filling with the fog of your eyes...
Ah! from the depths of the twilight-inflected sky

(pitiable, laid out across a bank of horned vipers,
teeth worn away light-years ago);
from the depths of shattered mirrors, I watch you

spring to life in an emulsion of red and green making your way across
this febrile Sahara...
Here where the threads spew from the bombyx mori.

It’s no ripened date, o Sun, but you who continuously taunt
this sea, ...nor is it the rancid milk that consumes us...
nor the thundering cavalcade overcoming your nerves,
horse braying with the quasars’ cracked grins...
absolutely nothing, here, that might pry your dutifully pure
fingers, your irreparable fingers, from my hobbles!

Paths adjoining themselves to Time, outlined
throughout our opprobrium. Scoliosed men sliding out
of themselves...I invite you
to feast upon their corpse.
Break out the thyme, the soldanella! Break out
in laughter...
At the stroke of midnight, upon my skull, your red and black boughs
and pestilence! Pestilence of sniggering ancestors...
At the stroke of midnight, the flute, the rifle, and the arrow
and the wrath and the silence and the muted gong
upholstering my memory with variegations of violations.

Absent body, destroyer of bodies, crushing
the blood-soaked people underneath your feet...
stoking inside your eye this world that blossoms
from beneath the weight of desire, the weight of canopic jars,
you who laugh not and weep not and deal no blow.

Desert upon my scale-covered face, sharp wrinkle
of my soul upon the harrowed spine of the seas...
Soubresaut restrained by the thread the orb weaver spins...
I charge forward into the eloquence of a cemetery,
panning the waters for shadows, the master of moons dealt its deathly
blow.

* * *

(Dakar and Gorée)

Nearby this flock of sparrow hawks dredging up gold from
the seas
and our arteries sliced into the waves’
rhythmic clarity
by the feminine murmurations of the koras.

This is the evening out of which myth will rise
and this is the combined tempestuousness
of Dakar and Gorée, stirring my forlorn heart.
Here, while the laughing plasma of the night
releases my love into bouquets of sparrow hawks,
the light sanctifies my suicide.

May the street breathe something other than
the grin of the eclipse into the vast regions of my blood,
via the salient image of basalt!

I tan my lightning strike of a skin, o lions
of old, over-
seers of the sea's weariness.

May the baobab and may the tam-tam
of the fugitive troglodyte
dance inside my eye, overflowing with mothers’ milk!

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for Leopold Sédar Senghor

Night after night, the Futa Tooro rears
itself around all things,
by way of the elytra extending from the insects...
A Casamancean woman entangled in its bolong trees and a lone
Mandinka up to the neck
in gods who’s wasting away inside this superb museum:
one delicate night dropped into my palms along with
its pirogue-like stars kept afloat on the waves of my wrinkles...

It’s the hematite dawn that’s overflowing in my arteries
and my eyes outdistancing your face,
your beloved heart, rolling over my cheeks whenever the sea
begins to call.
Shatter! Ah! shatter, heart of mine,
like a bowl brimming with blood that some inept sorcerer
has left behind in the magnificent trenches of dreams!

Alone with my lamp and you so close that you beat against
my temples
ever so gently...
your vast, impalpable body filling out the apartment
I see you. I see the inexpressible perform its dance; I caress
your little secret that no orchid will ever be able to delight in,
before the wide-open bay
and the beer foaming over the rim of its glass and the earth
breathing out the day’s weight, breathing out the blackness of the crows.

The papaya tree whirling in the wind, which the cricket will inscribe
with a tender-loving message for the heavens to illuminate;
here we are, reunited on opposing palms.
Ah! may the boa relinquish its grip at last and may we usher in
the dancing sound!

The ancestors, the builders of empires, the great quarrelers—
The women of the South who you will carve into my forehead,
and you, poet, sitting back with your lips around the bottle
in the whereabouts of some square in Marrakesh or Seville...
I usher in an overwintering, harmonizing with the shivers
traversing the night of mangroves and bolongs.
I let my visionless tears dry out
in the focus of the ellipsis, over the Saga
of lyrical life...

Alioune
so formidable in your tunic of aether.

You entrust the clear rose
to our tectonic glances
that cold-cut into you, Great Chiseler!
on the way to swarming anthills.

Zinnia! Zinnia! I pledge my love
to you with the impeccably
inflamed blaze of udders
that midnight fastens my tear to.

You solemnize the crescent Moon
of summer,
springing from the porphyry,
from the bobbin lace and the lightning!

Because it was out of Ur and Dakar that your vetch flowered
with sisal and iron,
deployed with tranquility, these unassuming gods of the earth.

Alioune!
Blindness strikes the glutton
with the muzzle of the relics
from a tormented sky grown
pale as a minstrel’s blackface:

Nocturne! Nocturne!
rasping with contused lightning
contorted along the knife’s blade...
reptilian reassembler,
irradiating my memory,
inflecting you with the soft
utopian taffeta
of blood
entwined with my night!

Alioune!
Teranga! Teranga!
to your turbulent soul.