

Black Forest

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Black Forest

It is the year 1406.

The aggrieved triplets, their brother and uncle are lost in the immense Black Forest of Mount Nyangani as they attempt to journey south-west to the Kingdom of Mutapa.

When the sun turned gangrene
at dusk,

the triplets sobbed
beside an acacia.

Their sobs
exhausted
the stillness.

They were so contorted
by grief
not a chameleon
would creep close
to them.

The triplets screamed
when they saw
their mother's torso
and bones
shattered upon
the heather.

They saw her lips
sipped and purpled by death.

Her corpse
had been dumped beside a bush
by their father.

It lay frigid,
like a log.

Grief
in the soul destroys
everything inside

like black frost
at the earlobe
of a leaf.

That dusk,
grief snaked

in their memory

again
and again.

It was a poison
to drink.

They knelt
in the scrub
 to grieve their mother
 gruesomely killed
 by their father.

They carved
 their grief
 onto the acacia

and wiped her blood.
 Blood that smeared the grove
 in scarlet.

Near a termite mosque,
 grass shivered
 in the wind

because below
the fecund earth,
 deep in glum holes
porcupines crept.

At the blink
of night,

dusk spooned the azure
into it,

the mountain swallowed
the mustard yolk
of the sun.

Zephyrs bullied branches
that hugged rickety trees.

At the blink
of night,

appeared another sky

moonlessly fallow
but
brailled
by stars.

At the blink
of night,

beasts began to roam
that immense
black
where sleep is born.

At the blink
of night,

darkness snatched
the saffron
from the stars.

Every star
became a eunuch

as their mother
lay berthed
in death

eaten
by maggots.

It was the father.

Their father
who recoiled
 at the birth
of the boy born white
as the moon.

It was the father
 who recoiled from his son
born white as white
from his wife he swore
 was cursed.

It was
 their father
who recoiled
 into hate.

The three ran
to their uncle
Sekuru Ngoni
who held the boy,
their brother Nasanai
white as the moon.

That night
they sought
the mind of the King.

At dawn,
clouds were bloated
thunder grumbled.

At dawn,
the morning rain
was a necklace
of saliva
trickling onto stone.

Stone
gritted together
like canines.

At dawn,
the triplets,
Nyasha, Nduramo, Nyaradzai
and Sekuru Ngoni
 took the infant
and ran from the village
 banished to the Black Forest.

Never return!
 Never return!

the Manyika King commanded
the Manyika King raged
the village trembled
 in its fear
that witchcraft had come.

From the same womb,
 identical
 but different
each triplet
 bore
the same love:

Nyasha
with frizzy hair who giggled with fondness
for millipedes
as she let one
crawl up her arm
 or curl
in a ball in her palm.

Nduramo,
broad shouldered
whose wrinkled nose
foraged for mushrooms
at the base of a tree.

The soft squint
 of Nyaradzai
who loved rainbows
and sang in the rain.

From the same womb
 they had come
and became one
 beyond
 words.

A look, a hand
 moving
or a shrug
 could tell one
the mind of the other.

They woke up in the Black Forest,
the triplets, baby and uncle
to the rain
like a family lost.

Hungry
for berries and wild basil
that had been drenched.

At last the mist was dispersed
by a zephyr

garnet glistened

and sunrays
juttred behind
a rhombus
of cloud.

Slowly,
the sun
ossified above them

shrouded by clouds
that had stopped
their splutter.

In the afternoon,

they followed the
river Pungwe
searching

for frogs locked
in the knuckles of rock,

rock
tufted by
jade moss.

While Sekuru Ngoni swam
with the ducks
in a still river
slicing his ebony arms through the water,

the triplets took turns
rocking little Nasanai
on their backs.

But as Sekuru Ngoni swam,
no one noticed two crocodiles
circling
 their uncle.

One crocodile tore off his arm,
the other ate his leg.
He shrieked
and shrieked
as the triplets watched helplessly
their uncle dragged under the current.

Again,
the triplets fell
into grief.

His death came
as if the wind
was a clerk

brushing
black runes

of soot

from cloaks
of logs.

It is easy to die,
they thought.

Weak without their uncle,
they found strength
 in the will
to survive

picking
 wild figs
hanging
 among
spider webs
in the lush ark of the trees.

They caught
 glimpses
of snails
 curled contently
in their shells
waiting on rocks
as they wondered
where their new home would be.

 They collected twigs
and branches
to light a fire that would keep them warm
at the blink of night.

At the blink
of night,

tree shadows bled
their blackness into the triplets...

Under a swollen moon,
they moaned
and sang a requiem
for their mother:

*A floret
withered
on a clod of soil,*

*her petals
had forlorn creases.*

*Her grace
was buried. Buried beneath stiff roots
and mulch.*

Then they sang a requiem
for Sekuru Ngoni.

*Sekuru Ngoni,
the day you died was a second death for us.*

*We have grown lean and brittle.
The weeks sneer at us
and the river
swallows our tears.*

*The day before spring arrived,
We watched an ant scurry
onto a curled leaf*

*whose inner ripple stretched
towards its stem.*

*Although the promise of the season
followed us everywhere,
we are still as we were in winter
— aggrieved.*

As they sang,
ants crawled
on the bark
of a tree
whose branches
swept along grass
tall as giraffe.

Nearby,

mushrooms
were plucked,
 roasted by the fire
 and eaten
 by their father
 who was madly following the triplets
 in order to kill them
 with his spear.

Triplets lament:

*Father,
it has been eight weeks
since we were banished
into the Black Forest.*

*Because of you,
our intestines
have become contorted by cysts
and heavy with kidney stones*

*Because of you,
mother and uncle are dead
and the lingering memory of you
clogs our ducts
and jaundices
our eyes.*

That night
Nduramo dreamt

of flowers
that blinked
at the hissing wind,

flowers that grew on graves
under the moon's vigil,

flowers heavy
with secrets.

The next morning,

the ochre pellet
soared into the sky
to escape the snag of time.

Light scattered colour
over the horizon.
while bronze stars cringed
behind an azure veil

as the sun
glinted
while kissing day.

Then,
she was grabbed
and cuffed

by time.

At dawn,

when the wind
was whirling

and the trees
crouched like priests

Nyasha saw a decadent flame lily
eaten
by millipedes.

It is easy to die,
she thought.

The true danger was not in the forest
but in the hearts
of those who fear.

Afraid,
were those who followed
the path
 bending and dusty
on the marred navel
of Mount Nyangani.

They often wondered:
Were they the same birds
that dipped their beaks
into the Pungwe river every day?

Were they the same birds
that foraged the mulch
for worms?

Were birds not bleak in this forest?

For a week
they were lost in the Forest

banished by the Manyika people
chased to the Black Forest.

They had no choice
but to hike
up across the spine
of the mountain
far above the Pungwe
its shining trickle deep in the gorge.

The Black Forest had a steep valley.
Dolerite spires eroded
into lichen covered cliffs.

A gruelling climb.

A thickening blanket of mist
forced them to give up
at dusk.

In the dark forest
antelope grazed on the tree ferns.

Where shafts of light broke
through the canopy,
they saw monkeys leaping
from branch to branch
and where sunlight struck the forest floor,
broad mushrooms grew
from tree holes.

Fragrant flowers
of the dwarf Msasa tree
carried nectar
to be drunk by hawkmoths

and forest figs
were gobbled by monkeys.

Being lost
was to risk hunger
was to risk injury
was to risk encounters with wild beasts
was to risk the madness
and death.

But in their dreams,
the triplets were guided by the murmurs
of their ancestors and given a vision:

the snake woman
who would lead them
south
to their motherland.

They had to find her.

A voice came with the wind
one day:

*You are lost.
Why should we help you?
Our Lord The Leopard wants to eat.*

*Because we bring you our brother,
shouted Nduramo,
He is albino
chosen to live among you.
We have been banished because of him.
He is pure and needs your protection.*

The voice replied:
*We shall see you soon.
You are getting nearer and nearer to our home.
Follow the snakes,
they will lead you to us.*

Then on a wound
found where the buffalo
had trampled the grass
they found a bed of snakes:
hundreds
curling;
 coiling
in the grass
in and out
 of
 burrows
some shedding some
feeding some
 feeding
 on frogs
and eels
fed to them
by people.

Delighted,
the triplets laughed
as they watched the last egg hatch,
the new-born snake slipped from the crack.

Restless,
it moved in curves
as it pulled itself from the ground,
sliding through the grass

the glimmering mosaic of scales
shifting as it wrapped itself on a branch.
The snake had no eyelids,
only deep pits below its eyes.

Briefly,
its forked tongue flickered.
Nduramo fed it a worm.

On a rocky escarpment
with balancing rocks
perched a colony of birds.
Dozens of insects
scurried by
feeding
on the bird droppings...

The birds convened there
to watch the snakes.

Finally,
the siblings met the Guardians of the Black Forest
snake capturers,
snake milkers,
rock artists,
tree climbers,
ululating mbira players
and contortionists who woke up early to stretch and
twist their limbs.
There were no hunters among them
because they ate no meat.

Finally,
they met the Guardians of the Black Forest
who rode zebras,
who wore snake skins,
who plaited their hair
and painted their feet
with charcoal.
They who travelled south every autumn
to trade with the people
in the Kingdom of Mutapa.

They met the Guardians of the Black Forest
albinos
adopted and initiated
to become shamans.

Finally,
they met the Guardians of the Black Forest
silent people with radiant skin
who seldom whispered
in their sacred Forest
where could be heard
the sound only
of water
and the trickle of sound from mbira.

On the third day with the snake people,
the triplets passed Nasanai,
to the shaman
who kissed his forehead
and smiled.

The shaman grabbed a knife
and made incisions on his foreskin
as he cried.
Nasanai would thrive with the snakes
but the triplets could not stay long
with the Guardians of the Black Forest.

They were sad to leave Nasanai
but this the Manyika King had ordered.

Nowhere else could they find albino people.

The woman who helped them
was Tete Mhungu*

a snake milker
who wore the skin of the black cobra.
and carried her mbira.

No one knew when she arrived
no one knew from where she came.

When needed
by those who grieve,

she always appeared
with her snakes.

*** Mhungu: cobra**

Tete Mhundu's strong beautiful fingers
could hold a snake firmly
and drain the venom quickly.

She sold venom and was wealthy
dressed in gold and ivory,
her consort a shaman.

She'd seen the Great Kingdom many times
selling venom and making her riches.

For the journey, she took with her
tamed zebras
on whose back she mounted.

Tete Mhungu taught the triplets how to play
with her snakes.

When they grew tired,
she told them about the elephants
in the Kingdom of Mutapa
and the gold seams that lay close.

She showed them a bird
made from soapstone
from the place near the conical tower
from the people of the Great Enclosure.

Tete Mhungu prophecies:

Your father follows you so that he can kill you all. Blood shall be shed.

*Nduramo will lay her hands on Mutota,
a blind man who will become Chief.*

*Nyaradzai and Nyasha will be priestesses of Chaminuka
who will be reborn centuries later in the Chimurenga.*

*Nasanai will never cry,
instead there will be a flood in the village
where he was born.*

*Until the day he speaks,
the flood will continue and many will drown.*

On their last morning in the forest,
they woke and saw Tete Mhundu fight a black buck
in the grit.

Shocked
how keen her knuckles were.

Skull cracked with a log,
the goat croaked.
She held it down
and bled it dry.

Eventually,
silence.

Quick,
she gripped the gut

a smirk
on her face.

She threw the carcass
into the snake pit.

Three days south on the zebra,
one day from Mutapa,
they stopped by a river
to let their zebras drink and rest.

It was afternoon,
and wild ducks
with indigo wings quacked.

Tete Mhungu played her mbira
and they couldn't hear the footsteps
of the intruder.

Closer he came
hearing laughter grow louder and louder
his daughters
resting by the foot of a tree.

Riven with madness,
he had wandered the forest alone
in search of them.
Now,
his eyes hovered over his victims.

In his hand was a spear,
he clutched it tightly.
He was there to kill,
again.

Trees were knitted together
like skewers.

In them;
perched black-tailed birds on its branches,
bee hives swung in the hollows
and helmeted geckos
skittered along the bark.

All was peaceful,
until the attack.

When it happened,
Tete Mhungu was playing the mbira,
her fingers smelt of resin and tobacco.

When it happened,
Nyasha was sitting on a tree stump and she sang
as she rubbed her cracked feet with aloes .

When it happened,
Nyaradzai was lying in her hammock
giggling at a praying mantis
near her rabbit snare.

When it happened,
Nduramo was erect,
carrying a calabash of water.
It was she who saw the intruder arrive.

As he got nearer,
she recognised her father,
dangerous as ever
with the spear in his hand.

Within a minute,
Tete Mhungu was dead.

The father had thrust at Nyasha
but Tete Mhungu stepped in to block it
and the spear pierced *her* chest instead.

There was blood and screaming...

As their father beat Nyasha and Nyaradzai,
Nduramo took a snake
from Tete Mhungu's sack
and flung it at her father.

Within a minute,
their father was dead.

They didn't sleep that night
but held vigil over Tete Mhungu.

At dawn,
they set off.

They had wrapped her corpse
and mounted it on a zebra.
They would bury her in Mutapa.

At the entrance to the Great Enclosure,
they were welcomed by a guard
in an unfamiliar dialect.

At last,
they entered the Kingdom.

