

The strength of the Man, his feet heavy in the fertile swamp.
The strength of the Man, the reeds hampering his effort.
His warmth the warm primeval entrails,
The strength of the Man's inebriation is the hot wine of the Beast's
Blood and the froth bubbling in his heart
Ha! more millet beer for the Initiate!

A long comet cry streaks across the night, a great noise
Sounds from a judicious voice. And the Man floors the Beast,
Talking in tongues of the danced song.
He floors him with a great burst of laughter in a gleaming
Dance danced under the rainbow of seven vowels.
Hail to the Rising Sun Lion whose look can kill
Hail to the Tamer of the bush, You, Mbarodi!
Lord over mindless forces.

And the lake blooms with water lilies, dawn of divine laughter.

Translation from the French by Melvin Dixon

THE KAYA-MAGAN

(guimm for kora)

Kaya-Magan am I! the first person
King of the black night, the silver night,
King of the night of glass.
Graze my antelopes safe from lions, far from the charm of my voice.
You delight in dotting the silent plains!
Here you are each day my flowers, my stars,
Here you are at my joyful feast.
So feed on my abundant breasts, for I, who am the source of joy,
Do not eat. Graze from my strong, manly breasts,
The milk grass gleaming from my chest.

May a thousand stars be lit each night on the Great Square
May twelve thousand bowls ringed with sea serpents be warmed
For my pious subjects, for the fawns of my womb,
The residents of my house and their dependents, the *Guélowârs*
Of the nine fortresses and the villages in the wild bush,

For all who have entered by the four carved doors—
The solemn march of my long-suffering people!
Their steps are lost in the sands of Time.
For the whites of the north, the blacks of the south
Of so soft a blue. To say nothing of the red men of the west
Or the River herds! Eat and sleep, children of my sap.
Live your lives fully and peace to you who decline.
Even you draw breath from my nostrils.

I say Kaya-Magan am I! King of the moon, I join night and day.
I am the Prince of the north, of the south,
Prince of the Rising and Setting Sun
The savanna open to a hundred ruts, the mold that melds
Precious metals. Red gold comes from it and the red Man,
Red my delight as King of Gold—I, who have the splendor
Of noon and the feminine tenderness of night.
So peck at my curved brow, birds of my serpentine hair.
You can't live on whole milk alone. So nibble the Wiseman's brain,
The master of hieroglyphics in his glass tower.

Graze, fawns of my womb, under my scepter and my crescent moon.
I am the Buffalo that mocks the Lion and his rifles
Loaded up to his chin. He'll have to prepare himself
Inside his walls. My empire is Caesar's banished ones,
The great outlaws of reason or instinct
My empire is that of Love, for I am weak for you, woman,
Foreigner with clear eyes, lips of cinnamon apple,
And a sex like a burning bush
For I am both sides of a double door, the binary rhythm of space
And the third beat, I am the movement of drums,
The strength of future Africa.
Now sleep, fawns of my womb, sleep under my crescent moon.

Translation from the French by Melvin Dixon

COMMENTARY

Some readers have complained that my poems contain African words that they do not "understand." They must forgive me. The important thing to understand is not the real, but the surreal — what lies beneath the real.

I might add that I write primarily for my people. They know that a kora is not a harp nor a balaphon a piano. Besides, it is through reaching Afri-

cans who speak French that we can best reach Frenchmen and, beyond those seas and borders, the rest of humanity.

However, I have no intention of pursuing exoticism for its own sake nor of taking an easy way to make my poetry obscure. This is why I thought it might be helpful to provide brief explanations for those African words I have used in these volumes of poetry.

I have added other words that are not found even in good French dictionaries, like the Robert.

L. S. Senghor (translation by Melvin Dixon)

Grand-Rayée: a large drum often played to compete with other drums. *Griot*: a praise singer and oral historian [now in widespread American usage—eds.]. *Guélowâr* (or *Guélowar*): Serer word for noble descendant of the Manding conquerors. *Guimm*: song, poem. From the Serer *gim*. It is an exact translation of the Greek word for "ode." *Kaya-Magan*: a title of the emperor in an old dynasty of Mali. *Kora*: an instrument with many strings attached along a wooden arm and extending from a hollowed calabash. *Taga*: a eulogy, a type of praise poem. *Tama*: a small drum carried in the armpit to accompany odes or eulogies.

Léon Damas 1912–1978

JUST LIKE THE LEGEND

Hair that I gloss down
that I gloss again
that glistens—
so long as I'm not allowed
to leave it kinky

In a long shell of wool
my neck gets lost
my hand grows weak
and my toes remember
the warm breath rising from my native hills

And all of me frozen stiff

And lamp-posts
making sadder still
these nights to whose farthest end

my shadow moves on
occidentally
just like my legend
of the monkey-man

Translation from the French by Norman R. Shapiro

S.O.S.

Only then and not before
will you all understand
when they get the idea
and they'll get that idea soon
to go and stuff themselves on nigger
like Hitler
stuffing himself on jew
seven fascist days
out of
seven

Only then and not before
will you all understand
when their superiority
sprawls out
along their boulevards from end to end
and when
you see them
doing anything they please
no longer satisfied to laugh pointing with nervous finger
at black man passing by
but
coldly beating up
but
coldly shooting down
but
coldly laying out
but coldly
beating up
shooting down

laying out
and
cutting off the sex of the blacks
to make them into candles for their churches

Translation from the French by Norman R. Shapiro

HICCUPS

For Vashti and Mercer Cook

I gulp down seven drinks of water
several times a day
and all in vain
instinctively
like the criminal to the crime
my childhood returns
in a rousing fit of hiccups

Talk about calamity
talk about disasters
I'll tell you

My mother wanted her son to have good manners at the table:
keep your hands on the table
we don't cut bread
we break it
we don't gobble it down
the bread your father sweats for
our daily bread

eat the bones carefully and neatly
a stomach has to have good manners too
and a well-bred stomach never
burps
a fork is not a tooth-pick
don't pick your nose
in front of the whole world
and sit up straight
a well-bred nose
doesn't sweep the plate

And then
and then
and then in the name of the Father
and the Son
and the Holy Ghost
at the end of every meal

And then and then
talk about calamity
talk about disasters
I'll tell you

My mother wanted her son to have the very best marks
if you don't know your history
you won't go to mass
tomorrow
in your Sunday suit

This child will disgrace our family name
This child will be our . . . in the name of God
be quiet
have I or have I not
told you to speak French
the French of France
the French that Frenchmen speak
French French

Talk about calamity
talk about disasters
I'll tell you

My mother wanted her son to be a mama's boy:
you didn't say good evening to our neighbor
what—dirty shoes again
and don't let me catch you any more
playing in the street or on the grass or in the park
underneath the War Memorial
playing
or picking a fight with what's-his-name
what's-his-name who isn't even baptized

Talk about calamity
talk about disasters
I'll tell you

My mother wanted her son to be

very *do*
very *re*
very *mi*
very *fa*
very *sol*
very *la*
very *ti*
very *do-re-mi*
fa-sol-la-ti-
do

I see you haven't been to your vi-o-lin lesson

a banjo
did you say a banjo
what do you mean
a banjo
you really mean
a banjo
no indeed young man
you know there won't be any
ban-or
jo
or
gui-or
tar
in our house

They are not for *colored* people
Leave them to the *black* folks!

Translation from the French by Ellen Conroy Kennedy

Aimé Césaire b. 1913

from **NOTEBOOK OF A RETURN TO THE NATIVE LAND**

Islands scars of the water
Islands evidence of wounds
Islands crumbs
Islands unformed

Islands cheap paper shredded upon the water
Islands stumps skewered side by side on the flaming sword of the Sun
Mulish reason you will not stop me from casting on the waters at the
mercy of the currents of my thirst
your form, deformed islands,
your end, my defiance.

Annulose islands, single beautiful hull
And I caress you with my oceanic hands. And I turn you
around with the tradewinds of my speech. And I lick you with my
seaweed tongues.
And I sail you un-freebootable!

O death your mushy marsh!
Shipwreck your hellish debris! I accept!

At the end of the wee hours, lost puddles, wandering scents, beached
hurricanes, demasted hulls, old sores, rotted bones, vapors, shackled
volcanoes, shallow-rooted dead, bitter cry. I accept!

And my special geography too; the world map made for my own use,
not tinted with the arbitrary colors of scholars, but with the geometry of
my spilled blood, I accept both the determination of my biology, not a
prisoner to a facial angle, to a type of hair, to a well-flattened nose, to a
clearly Melanian coloring, and negritude, no longer a cephalic index, or
plasma, or soma, but measured by the compass of suffering
and the Negro every day more base, more cowardly, more sterile, less
profound, more spilled out of himself, more separated from himself, more
wily with himself, less immediate to himself,

I accept, I accept it all

and far from the palatial sea that foams beneath the suppurating syzygy
of blisters, miraculously lying in the despair of my arms the body of my

country, its bones shocked and, in its veins, the blood hesitating like a drop of vegetal milk at the injured point of the bulb . . .

Suddenly now strength and life assail me like a bull and the water of life overwhelms the papilla of the morne, now all the veins and veinlets are bustling with new blood and the enormous breathing lung of cyclones and the fire hoarded in volcanoes and the gigantic seismic pulse which now beats the measure of a living body in my firm conflagration.

And we are standing now, my country and I, hair in the wind, my hand puny in its enormous fist and now the strength is not in us but above us, in a voice that drills the night and the hearing like the penetrance of an apocalyptic wasp. And the voice proclaims that for centuries Europe has force-fed us with lies and bloated us with pestilence,

for it is not true that the work of man is done
that we have no business being on earth
that we parasite the world
that it is enough for us to heel to the world
whereas the work has only begun
and man still must overcome all the interdictions wedged in the recesses
of his fervor and no race has a monopoly on beauty, on intelligence, on strength

and there is room for everyone at the convocation of conquest and we know now that the sun turns around our earth lighting the parcel designated by our will alone and that every star falls from sky to earth at our omnipotent command.

I now see the meaning of this trial by the sword: my country is the "lance of night" of my Bambara ancestors. It shrivels and its point desperately retreats toward the haft when it is sprinkled with chicken blood and it says that its nature requires the blood of man, his fat, his liver, his heart, not chicken blood.

And I seek for my country not date hearts, but men's hearts which, in order to enter the silver cities through the great trapezoidal gate, beat with warrior blood, and as my eyes sweep my kilometers of paternal earth I number its sores almost joyfully and I pile one on top of the other like rare species, and my total is ever lengthened by unexpected mintings of baseness.

And there are those who will never get over not being made in the likeness of God but of the devil, those who believe that being a nigger is like being a second-class clerk; waiting for a better deal and upward mobility; those who beat the drum of compromise in front of themselves, those who live in their own dungeon pit; those who drape themselves in proud pseudomorphosis; those who say to Europe: "You see, I *can* bow and scrape, like you I pay my respects, in short, I am no different from you; pay no attention to my black skin: the sun did it."

And there is the nigger pimp, the nigger askari, and all the zebras shaking themselves in various ways to get rid of their stripes in a dew of fresh milk. And in the midst of all that I say right on! my grandfather dies, I say right on! the old negritude progressively cadavers itself.

No question about it: he was a good nigger. The Whites say he was a good nigger, a really good nigger, massa's good ole darky. I say right on!

He was a good nigger, indeed,
poverty had wounded his chest and back and they had stuffed into his poor brain that a fatality impossible to trap weighed on him; that he had no control over his own fate; that an evil Lord had for all eternity inscribed Thou Shall Not in his pelvic constitution; that he must be a good nigger; must sincerely believe in his worthlessness, without any perverse curiosity to check out the fatidic hieroglyphs.

He was a very good nigger

and it never occurred to him that he could hoe, burrow, cut anything, anything else really than insipid cane

He was a very good nigger.

And they threw stones at him, bits of scrap iron, broken bottles, but neither these stones, nor this scrap iron, nor these bottles . . . O peaceful years of God on this terraqueous clod!

and the whip argued with the bombilation of the flies over the sugary dew of our sores.

I say right on! The old negritude
progressively cadavers itself
the horizon breaks, recoils and expands
and through the shredding of clouds the flashing of a sign

the slave ship cracks everywhere . . . Its belly convulses and resounds . . .
The ghastly tapeworm of its cargo gnaws the fetid guts of the strange
suckling of the sea!

And neither the joy of sails filled like a pocket stuffed with doubloons, nor
the tricks played on the dangerous stupidity of the frigates of order prevent
it from hearing the threat of its intestinal rumblings

In vain to ignore them the captain hangs the biggest loudmouth nigger
from the main yard or throws him into the sea, or feeds him to his mastiffs

Reeking of fried onions the nigger scum rediscovers the bitter taste of
freedom in its spilled blood

And the nigger scum is on its feet

the seated nigger scum
unexpectedly standing
standing in the hold
standing in the cabins
standing on deck
standing in the wind
standing under the sun
standing in the blood
standing
and
free
standing and no longer a poor madwoman in her maritime freedom and
destitution gyrating in
perfect drift
and there she is:
most unexpectedly standing
standing in the rigging
standing at the tiller
standing at the compass
standing at the map
standing under the stars
standing
and
free
and the lustral ship fearlessly advances on the crumbling water.

And now our ignominious plops are rotting away!
by the clanking noon sea
by the burgeoning midnight sun
listen sparrow hawk who holds the keys to the orient
by the disarmed day
by the stony spurt of the rain

listen dogfish that watches over the occident

listen white dog of the north, black serpent of the south that cinches the
sky girdle
There still remains one sea to cross
oh still one sea to cross
that I may invent my lungs
that the prince may hold his tongue
that the queen may lay me
still one old man to murder
one madman to deliver
that my soul may shine bark shine
bark bark bark
and the owl my beautiful inquisitive angel may hoot.
The master of laughter?
The master of ominous silence?
The master of hope and despair?
The master of laziness? Master of the dance?

It is I!

and for this reason, Lord,
the frail-necked men
receive and perceive deadly triangular calm

Rally to my side my dances
you bad nigger dances
the carcan-cracker dance
the prison-break dance
the it-is-beautiful-good-and-legitimate-to-be-a-nigger-dance
Rally to my side my dances and let the sun bounce on the racket of my
hands

but no the unequal sun is not enough for me
coil, wind, around my new growth
light on my cadenced fingers
to you I surrender my conscience and its fleshy rhythm

to you I surrender the fire in which my weakness smolders
 to you I surrender the "chain-gang"
 to you the swamps
 to you the nontourist of the triangular circuit
 devour wind
 to you I surrender my abrupt words
 devour and encoil yourself
 and self-encoiling embrace me with a more ample shudder
 embrace me unto furious us
 embrace, embrace US
 but after having drawn from us blood
 drawn by our own blood!
 embrace, my purity mingles only with yours
 so then embrace
 like a field of even filagos
 at dusk
 our multicolored purities
 and bind, bind me without remorse
 bind me with your vast arms to the luminous clay
 bind my black vibration to the very navel of the world
 bind, bind me, bitter brotherhood
 then, strangling me with your lasso of stars
 rise,
 Dove
 rise
 rise
 rise
 I follow you who are imprinted on my ancestral white cornea.
 rise sky licker
 and the great black hole where a moon ago I wanted to drown it is there I
 will now fish the malevolent tongue of the night in its motionless veerition!

Translation from the French by Clayton Eshleman & Annette Smith

THE MIRACULOUS WEAPONS

The great machete blow of red pleasure right in the face there was blood
 and that tree called flamboyant and which never deserves this name
 more than just before a cyclone or pillaged cities the new blood the red
 reason all words in all tongues which mean to die of thirst and alone
 when dying tasted like bread and the earth and the sea like ancestors
 and this bird shrieking at me not to surrender and the patience of
 screams at each detour of my tongue

(the finest arch and it is a spurt of blood
 the finest arch and it is a lilac ring about the eye
 the finest arch and it is called night
 and the anarchistic beauty of your arms made into a cross
 and the eucharistic beauty—and how it blazes—of your sex in the name
 of which I hailed the barrage with my violent lips)

there was the beauty of minutes which are the marked-down trinkets from
 the bazaar of cruelty the sun of minutes and their pretty wolf snouts
 which hunger drives out of the woods the red cross of minutes which are
 moray eels on their way toward breeding grounds and the seasons and
 the immense fragilities of the sea which is an insane bird nailed dead
 on the gateway of carriage crossed lands there were to the point of fear
 as with the July report of toads of hope and of despair pruned from the
 stars over waters right where the fusion of days guaranteed by borax
 justifies the gestant watchwoman the fornications of grass not to be
 observed without precaution the copulations of water reflected by the
 mirror of magi the marine beasts to be taken in the trough of pleasure
 the assaults of vocables all gun ports smoking in order to celebrate the
 birth of the male heir simultaneously with the apparition of sidereal
 prairies on the flank of volcanic scrotums

scolopendra scolopendra
 until the eyelid of dunes over forbidden cities struck by the anger of God
 scolopendra scolopendra
 until the crackling and ponderous defeat which drives dwarf cities to take
 command of the fieriest horses when in the thick of the sand they raise
 their portcullis over the unknown forces of the deluge
 scolopendra scolopendra
 crest crest cyma unfurl unfurl as a sword as a cove as a village
 asleep on its leg-like pilings and on saphenas of tired water
 in a moment there will be a rout of silos sniffed close up

chance pit face of a mounted condottiere armored in artesian puddles and
the little spoons of libertine roads
face of wind
lemur and uterine face with fingers dug into coins and chemical nomenclature
and the flesh will turn over its great plantain leaves which the wind of
dives outside the stars signalling the backward march of the night's
wounds toward the deserts of childhood will pretend to read
in an instant there will be blood shed where the glowworms pull their little
electric lamp-chains to celebrate the Compitalia
and the childish tricks of the alphabet of spasms which constitutes the
great boughs of heresy or complicity
there will be the indifference of the ocean liners of silence that furrow
day and night the cataracts of the catastrophe in the proximity of wise
human temples in transhumance
and the sea will roll back its tiny falcon eyelids and you will try to grasp
the moment the great feudal lord will ride through its fief at the speed
of fine gold of desire along the neuron roads look at the birdie if it has
not swallowed the stole the great king bewildered in the hall full of
stories will adore his very pure hands his hands raised in the corner of
the disaster then the sea will once again be on pins and needles be sure
to sing so as not to extinguish the morals which are the obsidianal coin
of cities deprived of water and sleep then the sea will very softly spill
the beans and the birds will very softly sing in the seasaws of salt the
Congolese lullaby which the tough old troopers made me unlearn but
which the very pious sea of cranial boxes preserves on its ritual leaves

scolopendra scolopendra

until the cavalcades sow their wild oats in the salt meadows of abysses
their ears filled with the human humming rich in prehistory

scolopendra scolopendra

as long as we do not reach the stone without a dialect the leaf without
a dungeon the frail water without a femur the serous peritoneum of
springhead evenings

Translation from the French by Clayton Eshleman & Annette Smith

A T H I R D G A L L E R Y
