



KOLEKA PUTUMA [SOUTH AFRICA]

BLACK JOY

We were spanked for each other's sins,
spanked in syllables and by the word of God.

Before dark meant home time.

My grandmother's mattress

knew each of my

siblings,

cousins,

and the neighbour's children's

morning breath

by name.

A single mattress spread on the floor was enough for all of us.

Bread slices were buttered with iRama

and rolled into sausage shapes;

we had it with black rooibos, we did not ask for cheese.

We were filled.

My cousins and I would gather around one large bowl of umngqusho,
each with their own spoon.

Sugar water completed the meal.

We were home and whole.

But

isn't it funny?

That when they ask about black childhood,

all they are interested in is our pain,

as if the joy-parts were accidental.

I write love poems, too,

but

you only want to see my mouth torn open in protest,

as if my mouth were a wound

with pus and gangrene

for joy.

LOCAL

My mother tongue
sits in my throat like an allergy

It feels like I will die if I speak it
It feels like I will die if I don't

I am carrying
An overnight bag
A bag of tricks
A survival toolkit
A suitcase of DOs and DON'Ts

There is no space to pack
or unpack my history or my selves

I am trying to move
without attracting too much attention
to what I don't have
or what I have lost
or what has been stolen from me

WATER

The memory of going to the beach every New Year's Eve,
is one I share with cousins and most people raised Black.
How the elders would forbid us from going in too deep
to giggle, to splash in our black tights
and Shoprite plastic bags wrapped around our new weaves,
forbid us from riding the wave,
for fear that we would be a mass of blackness swept by the tide
and never to return,
like litter.

The elders forbid us as if the ocean has food poisoning.
I often wonder why I feel as if I am drowning every time I look out into
the sea
this and feeling incredibly small.

And I often hear this joke
about Black people not being able to swim,
or being scared of water;
We are mocked
and we have often mocked ourselves
for wiping our faces the way that we do when we come out of the water.

Compare it to how they do it: all Baywatch-like,
and how we so ratchet-like with our postures and kink.
Yet every time our skin goes under,
it's as if the reeds remember that they were once chains,
and the water, restless, wishes it could spew all of the slaves and ships
onto shore
whole as they had boarded, sailed and sunk.

Their tears are what have turned the ocean salty,
this is why our irises burn every time we go under.

Every

December 16th,

December 24th,

December 31st,

And January 1st,

our skin re-traumatizes the sea.

They mock us

for not being able to throw ourselves into something that was instrumental
in trying to execute our extinction.

For you, the ocean is for surfboards, boats and tans
and all the cool stuff you do under there in your bathing suits and goggles.

But we,
we have come to be baptised here.
We have come to stir the other world here
We have come to cleanse ourselves here.
We have come to connect our living to the dead here.
Our respect for water is what you have termed fear.
The audacity to trade and murder us over water
then mock us for being scared of it.
The audacity to arrive by water and invade us.
If this land was really yours,
then resurrect the bones of the colonisers and use them as a compass.
Then quit using Black bodies as tour guides
or the site for your authentic African experience.
Are we not tired of dancing for you?
Gyrating and singing on cue?
Are we not tired of gathering as a mass of blackness
to atone for just being here?
To beg God to save us from a war we never started.
To march for a cause caused by the intolerance for our existence.
Raise our hands so we don't get shot.
Raise our hands in church to pray for protection,
and we still get shot there, too,
with our hands raised.
Invasion comes naturally for your people.
So you have come to rob us of our places of worship, too.
Come to murder us in prisons, too.
That is not new either.
Too many white people out here acting God.
Too many white people out here doing the work of God.
And this God of theirs has my tummy in knots.
Him and I have always had a complicated relationship.
This blue-eyed and blond-haired Jesus I followed in Sunday school
has had my kind bowing to a white and patriarchal heaven,
bowing to a Christ, his son, and 12 disciples.
For all we know,
the disciples could have been queer,
the Holy Trinity some weird, twisted love triangle
And the Holy Ghost transgender.

But you will only choose to understand the scriptures that suit your
agenda

You have taken the liberty to colonise the concept of God;
gave God a gender, a skin colour,
and a name in a language we had to twist our mouths around.

Blasphemy is wrapping slavery in the gospel and calling it freedom.

Blasphemy is having to watch my kind use the same gospel to enslave each other.

Since the days of Elijah, we have been engineered kneel to whiteness,
and we are not even sure if the days of Elijah even existed,
because whoever wrote the bible did not include us.

But I would rather exist in that God-less holy book
than in the history books that did not tell truth.

About us.

For us.

On behalf of us.

If you really had to write our stories,
then you ought to have done it in our mother's tongues,
the ones you cut off when you fed them a new language.

We never consent.

Yet we are asked to dine with the oppressors

And Serve them forgiveness.

How, when the only ingredients I have are grief and rage?

Another one (who looks like me) died today.

Another one (who looks like me) was murdered today.

May that be the conversation at the table

And we can all thereafter wash this bitter meal with amnesia.

And go for a swim after that.

Just for fun.

Just for fun.