

AFRICA 39

NEW WRITING FROM AFRICA
SOUTH OF THE SAHARA

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With an Introduction by Wole Soyinka

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The Sack

Namwali Serpell

There's a sack.

A sack?

A sack.

Hmm. A sack. Big?

Yes. Grey. Like old *kwacha*. Marks on the outside. No. Shadows. That's how I know it is moving.

Something is moving inside it?

The whole sack is moving. Down a dirt road with a ditch on the side, with grass and yellow flowers. There are trees above.

Is it dark?

Yes, but light is coming. It is morning. There are some small birds talking, moving. The sack is dragging on the ground. There is a man pulling it behind him.

Who is this man?

I can't see his face. He is tallish. His shirt has stains on the back. No socks. Businessman shoes. His hands are wet.

Does he see you?

I don't know. I'm tired now. Close the curtains.

Yes, *bwana*.

J. left the bedroom and went to the kitchen. The wooden door was open but the metal security gate was closed. The sky looked bruised. The insects would be coming soon. They had already begun their electric clicking in the garden. He thought of the man in the bedroom, hating him in that tender way he had cultivated over the years.

J. washed the plates from lunch. He swept. A chicken outside made a popping sound. J. sucked his teeth and went to see what was wrong.

The *isabi* boy was standing outside the security gate. The boy held the bucket handle with both hands, the insides of his elbows splayed taut. His legs were streaked white and grey.

How do you expect me to know you are here if you are quiet? J. asked as he opened the gate. The boy shrugged, a smile dancing upwards and then receding into the settled indifference of his face. J. told the boy to take off his *patapatas* and reached for the bucket. Groaning with its weight, J. heaved the unwieldy thing into the sink. He could just make out the shape of the bream, flush against the inside of the bucket, its fin protruding. J. felt the water shift as the fish turned uneasily.

A big one today, eh? J. turned and smiled.

The boy still stood by the door, his hands clasped in front of him. His legs were reflected in the parquet floor, making him seem taller.

Do you want something to eat?

The boy assented with a diagonal nod.

You should eat the fish you catch. It is the only way to survive, J. said.

I told him about the first dream but I did not tell him about the second. In the second dream, I am inside the sack. The cloth of it is pressing right down on my eyes. I turn one way, then the other. All I can see is grey cloth. There is no pain but I can feel the ground against my bones. I am curled up. I hear the sound of the sack, sweeping like a slow broom. I have been paying him long enough – paying down his debt – that he should treat me like a real *bwana*. He does his duties, yes. But he lacks deference. His politics would not admit this, but I have known this man since we were children. I know what the colour of my skin means to someone of our generation. His eyes have changed. I think he is going to kill me. I think that is what these dreams are telling me. Naila. I cannot remember your hands.

They lifted the bream out of the bucket together, the boy's hands holding the tail, J.'s hands gripping the head. The fish swung in and

out of the curve of its own body, its gills pumping with mechanical panic. They flipped it on to the wooden board. Its side was a jerking plane of silver, drops of water magnifying its precise scaling. The chicken outside made a serrated sound.

Iwe, hold it down!

The boy placed his hands on either end of the body. J. slid a knife beneath the locking, unlocking gills. Blood eased over their hands. The fish bucked once, twice. Stopped.

I needed your help, J. smiled.

He deboned and gutted the fish. The boy wiped the chopping board, hypnotised by his own hand tracking thin loops of purple and yellow entrails across it. J. fried the fish in cooking oil with salt and onions and tomatoes. He served a piece of it to the boy, setting the plate on the floor. He set a portion of the fish aside for himself and took a plate with the rest of it to the man in the bedroom.

The room was dark but for an orange patch on the wall from the street lamp.

Who is here?

The *isabi* boy. J. put the plate on the side table and turned on the lamp.

The man began to cough, the phlegm in his chest rattling as he heaved and hacked. J. helped him sit up and rubbed his back until the fit ceased. When it was done, the man was tired.

Why is the fish boy still here? Did you not pay him?

I gave him supper.

As if I have food to spare, the man grunted. He took the plate on to his lap and began eating.

In the first dream, the sack is full and it is being dragged. In the second dream, I am inside it. What will the third dream reveal? You laugh. You say that dreams move forwards, not back. That I am imagining things. But that is why you chose me, Naila. Or at least that is what I fancied then. Now I am not so sure. Some days, I think you loved me for my hands. Other days, I think you threw stones to decide.

The plate on the kitchen floor was empty. The boy was gone. A tongue cleaned that plate, J. thought as he went to the doorway. The security gate was scaly with insects now, some so heavy their bodies chimed against the hollow metal bars. J. opened it and descended the short set of steps outside. He squatted to open the thatched door of the coop. He could hear the creaking, purring sound of the birds. Light from the house slivered the dark. J. inched along, his hipbone clicking as he went from one chicken to the next. They pivoted their heads and puffed their feathers. The last chicken sat upright on its nest but it wasn't moving. J. heard a shudder and scanned the wall. The boy. Crouching in the corner, light-mottled.

J. turned back to the chicken and inched closer, reaching for it. The feathers were strung with light brittle spines. The bird fell limp in his hand. Then he saw them, hordes of them, spilling down the chicken's body, rolling around its neck, massing from its beak. J. started back. The chicken caved in as a flood of ants washed over it. J. stood, hitting his head on the thatched roof. The chickens were yelping and flapping, feathers rising from the ground. The ants snipped at his skin. As he hunched his way out of the coop, a chicken beat its way past his ribs and loped across the yard, head at full piston. Methodically, J. brushed his body off. Then he reached back and pulled the shaking child from the shadows.

My chest is full of cracked glass. That is how it feels when I cough. But the glass never shatters – there is not even that relief of complete pain. I am sick, Naila. Working for me has only made him stronger. Why does he bother? I thought at first that it was the money. But now I think he has been waiting. I wonder at the dwindling of our cares. We began with the widest compass, a society of the people, we said. But somehow we narrowed until it was just us three. Jacob, Joseph, Naila. You replaced yourself with the baby you birthed. So there were still three. But then your family took our son away. And now there are only two. Every day this sickness bites into my body and soon there will be only one. In the dream that just woke me, I am on the ground. It is night. The man kneels at my side. The face is melted but his hair-line has washed back with a froth of white hair and he has those same

strong arms. His hands are wet. He is tugging the mouth of the sack up over my thighs. This must be when he puts my body into it. We are in the garden. I woke to the smell of smoke.

J. burned the coop. The four chickens left – one had disappeared in the night, snatched by a lucky dog – huddled in a makeshift corral. The fire smelled good; the dead chicken was practically fresh-cooked. From the kitchen doorway, J. watched the last of the smoke coiling up to join the clouds above. The sun took its time. His saliva was bitter and when he spat in the sink, he saw that it was grey. The boy was sleeping on a blanket on the kitchen floor. J. leaned against the counter, watching the boy's chest catch and release. His skinny legs were clean now, greased with Vaseline. J. had hosed the ants off him and anointed the rash of bites. J. made a cup of tea – Five Roses, milk, no sugar – and balanced it on a tray.

The bedroom was ripe with the metallic smell of dried blood. A copper dawn lit the window: *Kwacha! Ngwee . . .*

The man looked up when J. entered the room. What was that fire?
I burned the chicken coop.

Why?

J. put the tray on the side table and began to leave the room.

Do not walk away from me. The man spat.

J. wiped the spit from the floor with his sleeve. White ants, he said.

Bloody superstitions. The man sucked his teeth. Is that bloody fish boy still here? I don't like people coming here. They find out who I am and ask for money.

He doesn't know who you are. He's too young. This boy has no family, J. said. We could use the help.

The man lifted his cup, his hand trembling. He sipped the hot tea and winced with pleasure.

The boy goes. I can't afford such things.

The light had gone from copper to white gold, the day spending itself freely. J. squatted on the stoop outside, shelling groundnuts to cook a dish of pumpkin leaves. Students in pale blue uniforms flirted in the dirt road. J. watched them with fond pity as he pressed the knuckle of

his thumb to the belly of a shell. He hadn't tasted *chibwabwa ne'ntwilo* in twenty years. Naila's favourite. When he returned to the kitchen, he could hear voices in the living room. J. looked through the gap between the door and the frame. The man was leaning against the far wall, his pyjamas low on his hips. J.'s eyes narrowed: the man hadn't left his bed in weeks. He was shouting at the boy, who stood with his back to J.

Isa kuno, the man said sternly. Come here! Are you deaf?

The boy moved hesitantly over to him and the man's hand fell trembling on to the bony shoulder. He used the boy as a crutch, levering himself to the sofa. His breathing rasped, shaving bits of silence off the air. In the dull light of the living room, the boy's skin was the colour of a tarnished coin.

There, the man pointed at a picture frame face down on the floor near the sofa. What is that?

J. opened the door. Leave him, he said.

The boy rushed to J.'s side.

He broke it, the man snarled, picking up the framed photograph.

He doesn't know, J. said, looking down at the boy leaning against his leg.

I don't want him here, the man panted.

I owe it to him, J. said.

The man gaped, a laugh catching in his throat. The only debt you owe is to me, old man.

J. pushed the boy ahead of him into the kitchen.

I did not think I would walk again. These dreams give me strength. Not enough. I only got halfway to the kitchen, to the knives in the drawer. They wait like a flat bouquet: their thick wooden stems, their large silver petals. I will gather them up in my tired hands and I will hold them out to you. Naila. Look at you. There is a crack over your face because that bastard boy dropped the picture. But you are lovely in your green *salwar kameez*. Why do you look down? I never noticed before. Your eyelids are like smooth stones in this picture. I am a fool beside you. We reek of arrogance, all of us, J. with his Nehru shirt. How far he has fallen, sweeping and cooking for me like I'm a *mu-sungu*. This picture must have been taken before the Kalingalinga rally,

the one that led to the riot. Do you remember? We were so hopeful. So very young.

J. stood above the sleeping man. He watched him for a moment then slapped his hand against the wall to wake him. A gecko in the corner shimmied upwards, its eyes a black colon punched in its face. The man's head fell forwards and he began coughing himself awake. When the phlegm had settled, he blinked.

Supper, J. said, placing a hand under the man's armpit to help him up. The man swept his weight against J. like a curtain falling from its rails. J. guided him back towards the bedroom but the man raised his hand.

No. I'll eat in there, he nodded his head at the kitchen door. J. shrugged and they proceeded slowly in the other direction. J. kicked the door to the kitchen open and as the *isabi* boy watched warily, he lowered the man into a chair by a small table.

Fish again? the man smiled at the boy.

J. placed a plate of food before the man and a bowl for the boy on the floor. The man stared at his plate. The fish was in pieces, its skin a crimped silver, its eye a button. When J. went to sit on the stoop, the man complained: Join me, he said.

My dream in the living room was short. A man is holding an ankle in each hand on either side of his hips. He drags the body towards the empty sack. It leaves a dark irregular trail on the ground. J. was standing over me when I woke up. You would say that these visions are an old man's nonsense. That no man dreams backwards. Can you see us sitting across from each other now? He eats in silence. The boy on the floor hums a rally song. J. must have taught him that. They are trying to confuse me. I know this boy is not my son but I have to concentrate to keep it in mind. I insisted on this last supper. I am resigned to it. You laugh: you know I am resigned to nothing. You escaped my wilfulness only by dying. I will see this out. We will wrestle like Jacob and the angel.

I do not want the eye, the man said. J. reached for the plate.

Am I child that you must cut my food?

J. stood and wiped his hand on his trousers. He walked around the boy on the floor who was already burrowing into his *nsima*, humming a song in loops, and opened a drawer and took out a short knife with a wooden handle.

Yes, that one, the sharp one, the man said.

J. sat back down, watching the man insert the point of the knife into the cavity in the fish's head and cut the eye out carefully, tipping it on to the edge of the plate. He put the knife on the table and began to eat in that slow noisy way of his.

So, the man said, picking at his teeth with his fingernail. J. was at the sink, rinsing pots. What will we do about that broken picture?

I can get it fixed. We are still comrades, that glass cutter and me, J. said.

Comrades? *Nts*.

J. leaned against the counter, his arms, damp from dishwater, folded across his chest. What word would you prefer? Friend?

What do you know about that word? The man sucked his teeth again. The boy looked up at them, his cheeks dotted with white bits of *nsima*.

Yes, *bwana*. I know nothing of friendship, J. said.

The man looked at him. Rage beat across the air between them. Eating across from each other at a table again had kindled something.

I did not take her from you. J. released the words one at a time.

I've been having dreams, the man whispered.

No. I will not listen to your dreams. I have had dreams, *friend*. J. spat. He paced the room with the easy vigour of an animal, flaunting his vitality. His words cut through the smell of fish and illness, through the boy's whimpering hum.

I dream of her cunt, J. said. The English word was steely in his mouth. I pull a baby from her cunt. The baby's stomach is round and full and I can see through the skin, I see another baby inside it, five fingers pressed strong against the inside. I look at her face, sweating from labour, and I say, How is this possible? She laughs. Then I know that this is what happens when you use a woman with a used cunt.

The man looked away first. J. strode to the sink and spat in it. The boy was gone, his bowl upside down like an eye on the floor. J. stooped

to pick it up and looked back at his boss. The man's eyes were closed, his hands under the table.

We should not talk about that woman.

She is gone.

She has been gone a long time.

And the boy?

The boy is gone too.

The man turned on to his side, gingerly hitching up his knees. J. looked down at him. J. had long ago decided to hate that woman: a feeling which had clarity and could accommodate the appetite he had once felt for her body. But he knew that the man still loved her, that he scratched invisible messages to her in the sheets. J. was sorry for his old friend. But to say sorry would be preface to leaving and he would not leave until it was done. The sick man hiccupped in his sleep like a drunk or a child. J. switched off the lamp and left the room.

When the door clicked shut, the man's eyes opened. He reached under his pillow and the blade snipped him. The tiny pain in his thumb pulsed inside the throng of pain in his body, a whining in the midst of a howling. The man sucked the blood from his thumb and carefully nestled his hand back under the pillow to grasp the knife handle. He could not slow the reversed momentum of these dreams, but he would not succumb like a dog. He kept his eyes open as long as he could.

A man shuffles through the dark, carrying a body over his shoulder. The legs dangle down the man's front and bounce as he moves unsteadily down a corridor. He faces forwards but steps backwards. He turns and fumbles with a door knob. The bedroom door opens with a sucking sound. He bends slowly and lays the body on the bed. It tumbles down piecemeal, buttocks, then torso, then arms. The man stands and looks at it for a long time. All of a sudden, he pitches over the body. He seems grappled to it. A moan lifts and trips and falls into a scream cut short.

Which comes first? The knife handle abrading his palm? Or the wide agony in his chest? The man's eyes open, he gasps. J.'s face floats above as if he had exhaled him: flat as day, dark as night. His fist is

pressed hard to his own chest, his palm around the knife's handle. J.'s fingers are wrapped around his, their hands a bolus of flesh and bone, wood and blade. Together, they wrench the knife free of its home. Blood washes over him, its temperature perfect.

The boy stood in the doorway of the kitchen, looking out. It was night. His *bwana* was at the bottom of the garden, busy with a black lump and a grey sack. The boy's mind was empty but for a handful of notions – love, hunger, fear – darting like birds within, crashing into curved walls in a soundless, pitiless fury.

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