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WE USED TO BE BROTHERS

by Felix Mnthali

We used to be brothers,
you and I
sailing the Nile together in that year of our dispersal
after which you clung to the rising sun
saw no horizons beyond the forests on our right
and on our left
only farmland and fodder for your livestock;
it would be aeons, you said,
before farmland like that could ever be exhausted

I moved on and on the way acquired new tongues
discarded certain vowels picked up new consonants:
what once was obscene to both of us became merely funny to me
and what was funny and sometimes polite became violently obscene!
I could no longer marry our cousins
but you continued to prolong our line from inside our own house!
There were so few of us then that such fusions did not really matter
neither did unusual deformities visit our house nor plague the land--
we continued to be brothers and in-laws
sons and daughters of the Nile together

I could not recognize you when we met again
near the slopes of the Ruwenzori
your tongue had changed and your eyes looked restless
as if the years gone by had not quenched your thirst for land
for milk for meat and for all the other gifts of time
for which we forsook the Nile!

We headed south together
but soon parted ways again you going west
and I straight to the south from where I began
that north-easterly journey across the Zambezi
to these mountains and valleys around a lake
which was the secret abode of our ancestors' spirits.

Do you remember Rambuka whose voice dripped honey
whose hands reached out to the skies
as he straddled rivulets and scaled hillocks?
You wouldn't recognize him either after all these generations--
Neither did I until his ghost appeared on the waves of the air
and thundered with the voice of u Shaka.

and thundered with the voice of u Shaka.
How time has passed! The seas have been good to him:
he is not at all like one we thought we had lost forever
when he went fishing and never returned!
May the spirits of our forefathers smile on him forever!

That must well have been a thousand rains
and a thousand dry seasons ago--
for when slavers came and we could neither save our people
nor dislodge the invaders' abomination
you too were here!

You were here when stragglers from the commotions in the south
overrode the land;
crossed and recrossed the lake
sweeping everything and everyone in sight
until today we can no longer tell
who was really theirs and who ours;
you and I have since stood together on these shores
battling usurpers; surviving droughts; dreaming of tomorrow!

I almost forgot the rains and the dry seasons
when you and I had lived apart
traversing this continent in search of plenty--
for whenever we lit our fires next to each other
we knew we were brothers!
I remember our last togetherness
as if it were still here;
you and I shed our blood together against the usurpers;
in honour of those who went before us;
for our children and our children's children
for this piece of earth that we love and call home
for our unspoken dreams and the dreams of our children
and those of their children's children!
You shed your blood for me and I for you--
what more can a brother ask?
Yes we have been brothers for along time,
you and I
but now I wonder,
does that still mean anything to you?

A new clan is ruling this land:
was it from your loins or mine?
They call it *wabenzi*
because it holds that only one *benzi* at a time

should guard the trail to wealth and happiness
and that only those *wabenzi* who speak like him
or can trace their line to his great great grandmother
dare call this their land also!

You call me names and tell the world
that I harm your children and take the lion's share
of our common inheritance;
you deprive me of work; throw my children into your stockades;
kill some and frighten others into exile--
you make them feel like strangers in their own land

Our men of war and our guns are in your house
and obey your commands!
but beware the changing powers of Mother Earth
which, they say, reduced a great warrior into a whimpering pauper!

If we fight when we do fight;
if we light our fires when we light them
there might never be any land
on which to fight or light any fires!

Do they not say that
when two brothers fight a complete stranger
carries away their inheritance?

We used to be brothers,
you
and
I!