

Martha Mahlangu's Dream on April 6

Yesterday night, my noble son, again in my dream
I read your letter.
Do you remember it? The one you sent me
from your Pretoria death cell!
A crumpled-up piece of paper, so dear to me.
Memories, sad or pleasant, are as painful
as a stiletto in the heart.

I wandered out in search of your lost tomb.
Outside, the autumn sunset
was clear and crisp.
It had been raining profusely,
the last stubborn rains.
I splashed blindly through the puddles
and stumbled into a band
of grimy workmen. They
guffawed, the louts. I shrilled and shrieked.
They went on reviling and ridiculing me.

That was yesterday night. I lost my way.
I came back battered and blue with defeat.
There I sat and forgot
to snuff out my candle.
My heart thumped heavily with vague forebodings
until the grey of dawn.
Today everybody says I have grown thin,
thin as a plucked chicken.

Your letter reminded me that your family never was.
We left your umbilical cord at Potgieter's farm.
That is where your father died.
Do you know how he died?
You might never know
'cause your family never was.

He died of overbleeding from his knuckles.
Potgieter had spat in your father's face.
A sputum that clung like filthy sin.
In great fury your father punched a tall gumtree
nearby with his bare fists like frenzied pugilist.

He resisted to obey in fear and meekness.
He punched it the whole day and then dropped dead.

We put his body on a sledge behind two oxen.
We filled his grave with sandy soil.
We left him alone with his favourite dog.
It sniffed at the fresh soil,
 made doleful and ugly sounds.
It sniffed the soil for three days
 and then dropped dead with exhaustion.

My dear son you were still too young to see
 that sorrowful sight.
You simply crept away into the grove, all alone.
Unschool'd individuality! No wonder your first year
 at a township school was so sad!
Girls poking fun at you and mistresses
 so overflowing with bad temper on Mondays.
Everybody thought you were so uncouth.
How tormented you felt,
 how thoroughly wretched! At bedtime you wept,
 poor little boy, blue with cold.
Your true virtue of character only fermented with age,
 like young beetroot in vinegar.

Your father still pays me visits in my sleep.
A grouchy farm-hand, in winter jostling
 with children for a position at the fireplace.
And me, not to be a killjoy, straddling and sidling up
 to the rickety Welcome Dover.





Your sister is now out of school, at a very young age,
Money is hard to come by. I developed
housemaid's knee and my boss hired
another chambermaid.

Your sister wept with all her pores,
poor little thing.

Oh, my little girl, misfortune is contagious!
What an imp she is, always making me laugh.
Telling me how much I have changed
since you left us.

A quick-witted cherub she is, although something of a tomboy.
I resent to be told how much of my nature has changed.

Do you remember what you used to say?

Mama, don't be faint of heart!

And I would say, Goodness, my child with a heart of lead!
I have changed. I have learnt to hate with certainty.

Intense hatred of the oppressor is half-victory
for every revolution.

My fear has been fully eaten away by ants
like a dead salamander in the sun.

I used to have the heart of a lamb, prudent and kind.

It is only my children who used to think I'm a proper shrew,
keeping them under my thumb.

Today I possess the heart of a ferocious lion.

My finger itches for a gun which spits fire.

Oh, my little fledgeling, what I have said
was only a dream!

If my letter be full of odds,

or too sensible for a dream, it is only because
I forgot to snuff out my candle.

Good dreams are born of dark houses.

KLAUS MAPHEPHA