

THE HOFMEYR STORY -A POEM FOR THREE VOICES

- AGNES: Africa.
Grasslands. A rich and fertile valley,
Untamed, wild, like the tall giraffe
Or the lions camouflaged in the brown grass,
And the swaying trunks of elephants migrating
From the snow-cap of Mount Kenya in the east
To the purple line of the Aberdares silhouetted
Against the rapid setting of the sun.
My father tamed this land, broke it,
Grew crops, coffee, built a home
Where I was born and grew, running free
Like the zebra or gazelle, following the
Pathway of the wind through the tall grass
Above my head. (PAUSE) Until my mother died.
- STANLEY: We watched them come, these white men,
Watched them take our land, break it and build
Houses, schools, hospitals, churches, roads, railways,
Prosperous farms, modern cities. They planned -
And we laboured, amazed at what they could perform,
Resentful also, humiliated often, planning for the day
When the land and all its benefits would be ours again.
For that we had to wait. Black Africa suffered - and waited.
- BREMER: I too am African. For two and a half centuries
Families like mine have planted, built, governed,
Taught, directed industry; always giving,
Contributing, on African soil. (PAUSE) But with it we have
Built for ourselves privileges, protecting our position,
Permitting wrongs we never should have allowed
Our brother Africans of different skins to suffer.
And now we stand condemned, the pariahs of the world,
Outcasts in many eyes, yet in our own eyes proud
Of our achievements, determined they shall not be
thrown away.
- AGNES: When my mother died my free life died as well.
School in England seemed like a cage
Of stone and brick and academic discipline.
Trapped under cold and damp grey skies I longed
For the sun, the grasslands, horses, game,
My one ambition to return to Africa. Yet even
There a dark cloud had formed. Life would not
Be the same. My father remarried - and for that
I could not forgive him. I did not want anyone
To take my mother's place. A rift developed
Between father and me, wider than the miles,
Deeper than the sea that separated us:
A division of the heart, poisoned by hatred and resentment.
- STANLEY: We hated too. Hated and waited.

AGNES: Hate wastes and hate destroys. Change, yes,
But the change you hate for is the destructive kind,
Eliminating the wrong-doer with the wrong,
The exploiter with his exploitation. Death
Is the fruit of hate, death of hope,
Death of faith, of family affection.
Love builds but hate destroys - and was destroying me.

BREMER: Until you changed.....

AGNES: People who loved me challenged me
To change; people of purpose who knew
What they were living for, enthusiastic,
Infectious. And I began to catch their fire and faith.
To start to change the world I knew where I must start.
(SHE IS WRITING A LETTER)
Apology broke down the wall of hate and freed me
Once again to love my father, to become his friend.
And friendship grew with my step-mother, too.
(SHE OPENS A LETTER)
"A barrier", my father wrote, "a barrier was there between us
"But I did not understand what built it nor
"How to break it down, until you wrote.
"Please tell me what has happened to you."
(PUTS DOWN THE LETTER)
Through that apology, that repaired relationship,
My faith, which I thought dead, began to grow.
Young and tender still, it's green shoots were unmistakable.
(PAUSE)
Meanwhile my father too began to change.

STANLEY: We noticed it. How could we fail?
Not many white men, employers, possessors of our land,
Come to us, as he came now, apologising
For the wrongs, the injustices, humiliations, they had caused
We respected him for that admired his courage, his integrity.
He was a white man, but a good man - one of the best.
Yet even that was his undoing in the end.

AGNES: Mau Mau, a cruel revolution, overtook our land.

STANLEY: In rejecting the white man we spurned his faith as well.
If that's what their religion does - leads to our exploit-
ation,
Our humiliation, in the land of our birth - then we will
Call up the dark side, the evil spirits of
A terrible tradition, to defeat the white man's God.
Fear was our weapon. Cruelty breeds fear. And fear,
We believed, would drive the white man from our land.

AGNES: My father.....

STANLEY: Her father was a good man, as I have said,
One of the best.

AGNES: Then a black prophetess.....

STANLEY: Interpreting the spirits, at dead of night,
Revealed to us that the life of a white man was required

STANLEY: (cont) To die for the sins of his white race
And to placate the gods of Mau Mau.
(PAUSE) (LOOKS SIDELONG AT AGNES)
Ah, but not any white man would do.
It must be a good man - one of the best that we knew.
(STANLEY MOVES OFF)

AGNES: They carried him up the slopes of Mount Kenya,
Sacred Mount Kenya, snow-capped and pure,
On a night when there was no moon.
And there in the darkness - a pit.
(SHE LOOKS AWAY)

I never

Saw it, but I can see it now, and the black soil
Covering his white face, choking him, smothering him,
As they shovelled it in; and him struggling
And striving for breath, for life. (PAUSE) Until all life,
All breath, all struggle, ceased in the dark earth.
(PAUSE)
We bury our dead. When you bury the living
You bury something else as well.

BREMER: (WITH A TELEGRAM)
Agnes, it's bad news. Terrible news.
(HE HANDS HER THE TELEGRAM. SHE READS IT, BREAKS
DOWN AND CRIES)

AGNES: I was shattered. Why did it happen? Where was God?
What was He doing while my father fought for life
In a black pit, smothered by evil?
How can there be a God of love?
How can there be a God?
(PAUSE)
The green shoots of my faith, watered
And restored by my apology to him, now withered
Under the scorching cinders of my bitterness.
(CRIES OUT)
I don't know what to do!

BREMER: (AFTER A SILENCE. GENTLY)
Why not try listening to God?

AGNES: How can I? I no longer believe there is a God.

BREMER: Let's listen anyway.

(A SILENCE. AGNES PRAYS)

AGNES: God, if you are there, please tell me what I must do.
(PAUSE)
We listened to God together, in silence. I wrote
Down my thoughts. And this is what I wrote:
"Have no bitterness and no hatred, but fight harder
than ever to bring the answer of a change of heart to
black and white alike, no matter how much it may cost."

AGNES: (CONT) (TO BREMER)
But that is impossible.

BREMER:
In your own strength, maybe.

AGNES:
You mean, perhaps
God can use me? (PAUSE) Use me? How??
(THEY ARE SILENT AGAIN)

BREMER:
We love Africa.

AGNES:
Yes.

BREMER:
But the Africans do not love us.
Nor do the Asians, who never forget the Mahatma
As a young lawyer in our land, forced from a railway car
By a white man, who called himself a Christian.

AGNES:
(THINKING)
Humiliations, hurts, embittered relationships....

BREMER:
These wrongs have been done by our race - people like us.

AGNES:
Others like us. (FIERCELY) But not by me!

BREMER:
Yet we, as a white race, have failed in Africa.

AGNES:
No! (PAUSE) It's true. I know, deep down, it's true.....
(SHE IS SILENT AGAIN FOR A WHILE)
When I first let God change me, I knew in my heart
That I was responsible for my sins - for all the
Wrong in my life for which I wanted to blame others,
But which I knew must be laid at my door alone.
I now begin to see I must also be responsible....
(WITH NEW REALISATION)
Yes....responsible for the sins of our race!
(SHE TURNS TO STANLEY)
I am sorry for all the superiority, the arrogance,
The sheer selfishness in me and people like me.
This I know has helped to create the bitterness
And hatred in your hearts from which Mau Mau was born.

BREMER:
(TO STANLEY) Can Africans.....
(TO THE AUDIENCE) ...And Asians too, forgive
these wrongs?
And let us build, with them, a better Africa?

STANLEY:
I heard them speak these words in prison camp
Where I was interred with thousands more from Mau Mau.
They had us in their power, for what we'd done,
And yet here they came, asking our forgiveness.
(TURNS TO AGNES)

STANLEY: (cont) We know what became of your father
And yet you come with words of reconciliation.
We are sorry for what has happened to your family.
This spirit we have seen this afternoon is what our
country needs.
We want to help you carry it to every farm and village.

AGNES: When I heard those words any bitterness still left in me
Just melted.
(TO STANLEY) You are my friends, whom I can work with.

BREMER: And that is what happened. We became friends.

STANLEY: And the spirit we had found spread through our land.
Fear was removed when our new black President,
After Independence, forgave and asked forgiveness,
Calling on all races to pull together as one.

BREMER: There is a sequel to this tale.
After twenty years the three of us met once more.

AGNES: We were at dinner together, in Europe,
When Stanley turned to me.

STANLEY: Agnes...

AGNES: Yes?

STANLEY: There is something I need to tell you;
Something I never wanted you to know before.

AGNES: What is it?

STANLEY: I was a member of that Mau Mau committee
That decided on your father's cruel death.
I want to ask for your forgiveness. I am so ashamed.

AGNES: (MOVED) Thank heaven we found the secret of forgiveness, years ago.
Thank God that both of us discovered faith again.
This is but another piece in the mosaic of life
That has fallen into place. This knowledge is a shock.
But instead of weakening our relationship, black and white,
Your honesty has strengthened it.

STANLEY: There's something more.

AGNES: Not another shock, I hope.

STANLEY: The other day I took part in another committee
That nominated your cousin to sit as the only white MP
For an all-black constituency.

BREMER: With deeds like that a new day dawns.
Together we can work to bring an answer to our continent.

(THEY SHAKE HANDS AND MOVE OFF TOGETHER)

END