

## Retold from the French-3

## Without a breath or a murmur

AKÉ LOBA

THE CLASS WAS FAR from normal; impatience and joy registered itself on the faces of the students. Instead of his usual French course, the teacher was telling a story of the Middle Ages, but nobody was listening. Since the early morning the minds of the boys had been on their vacation. Two weeks to be spent at home, in the family circle, away from books and ink, away from dusty cloakrooms and the playground darkened by winter . . . two weeks of romping, of meals prepared by mothers to satisfy voracious appetites, of feasts and laziness . . . Two weeks!

Kocoumbo was not paying attention either. His eyes travelled over the stunted trees in the garden, and his heart was sad. No vacation for him, at least no vacation with his family, nor even with his friends. The week before, Mrs Brigaud had written him that they had been invited by their cousins and they would all be leaving for Brittany to spend the Christmas vacation there. The young man was staying at the school and he had watched his schoolmates packing their suitcases and putting their books away without being able to share their gaiety. Five more minutes, and the happy swarm of schoolboys, finally dismissed for the term, would emerge from the school and spread over the town towards the station. But Kocoumbo could only idly ramble through the school building, the yard without an echo, the dormitory without a living soul; he would get to know solitude, silence, and boredom; he would spend a useless vacation, counting the days that separated him from the beginning of the new term.

"I'll work to pass my time," he said to himself, "and above all I'll try not to think of home. . . ."

A LIGHT KICK brought him back from his sombre meditations. His neighbour held out a red book to him under the desk. He took it. It was a volume containing Corneille's collected works.

"Something to keep you busy during the vacation."

Kocoumbo's eyes lit up with gratitude. He had only read selected passages from that author. Corneille's works would recall the epics his father used to tell him when he was in Africa. Of course, at that time he could hardly take any more of those savage tales of bravery, but here everything that made him remember his country stirred up his emotions.

The bell rang. The pupils got up and left the room in disorder. They had all packed their satchels without letting on, while the teacher was speaking of beautiful Aude with her white arms. They had only waited for the signal announcing the end of class so that they could rush out. Suddenly Kocoumbo was alone. He looked at the deserted classroom for a moment, at the benches which seemed strangely remote from the desks, at the violet rims of the ink-stained ink-wells, and at the blackboard where a geometry problem, forgotten since the previous day, was beginning to fade without the help of a duster.

"Where has the duster gone?" Kocoumbo wondered. He had decided to tidy up the classroom and to remove that morose and neglected old wives' look from it.

His eyes searched the room, and he saw the duster lying about near the door. A pupil in a hurry must have put it up in passing so that it fell down at once from the groove where it was smothered under the chalk-dust. He picked it up and for a split-second he had the impression that this little bit of grey cloth came alive and was going to get rid of its own dust by giving off a lusty sneeze. Even this little thing needed a vacation.

Smiling at his absurd idea, Kocoumbo started letting his arm swing like the hand of a metronome over the blackboard figures which vanished one by one.

The noise made by the pupils came up from the yard. He slowed down his movement and dropped the duster. What was the use? . . . His heart sank. He took his books and went down the stairs.

"I'll watch them when they're leaving. That will cheer me up."

UNDER THE ROOF of the playground, behind the glass door of the hall, one could distinguish parents talking with the headmaster. Kocoumbo, sitting on the bench under the bell, glanced out of the corner of his eye at the boys coming out with their parents. They were shaking off their boarding-school timidity and taking on again the determined expression of children on holiday.

The door opened letting out mothers carrying a satchel or suitcase, fathers rejuvenated by their sons, loudly talking with them with jovial expressions on their faces; and youngsters who under their air of importance could not hide their glee at having finished their term, and their inner excitement fired with a thousand plans for the games and expeditions that lay ahead of them.

Kocoumbo noticed the physical resemblance between the fathers and their children. "How fine it is to have your family near you!" he thought. And he took in avidly this touching sight. The greatest happiness for any adolescent was certainly to have a father and a mother who not only loved you but also thought of you and your future, of everything that concerned you closely or even remotely. For the first time Kocoumbo felt this to be an overriding need.

A father came out of the hall looking flushed after the conversation he had just had with the headmaster. He bent down his tall frame and pulled up his son's socks after first cleaning his nose with a mother-like gesture. Kocoumbo felt his heart throbbing in his chest, and a large tear ran down his cheek.

HE STOOD UP. The pillars supporting the roof of the playground seemed to brace themselves more rigidly. The night began to engulf the yard, which imperceptibly took on the appearance of a fleeting, jeering phantom. Never had he felt so alone.

A feeling of revolt which could not be translated by gestures or even by his facial expression, swallowed him up in its rapid and conflicting maelstrom and turned his stomach to the point of nausea. Nobody in this country, not even a leper, could suffer such a fate! From the remotest time he could remember he had always been surrounded by the sounds of voices and laughter; he always had the spectacle of human life under his very eyes; its rhythm had tinkled in his ears; its hot and vital throb had pervaded all his senses; when he rose with the dawn and left his hut, he could be sure to find outside a pensive old man, a restless child unwilling to sleep, some dogs or goats; when he set out all alone to hunt in the

**U**nlike the invisible presence of millions of animals or insects would accompany him, the spirits of his ancestors would follow in his wake, whispering advice, pouring solemn rhythmical songs into his heart content with their untiring companionship. But here nothing but stone choking the empty dusk, here no ancestors, no spirits, no souls to throb, nothing, nothing, nothing but window panes, tiles, pillars, and this little dried and wrinkled garden without a breath and a murmur. . . .

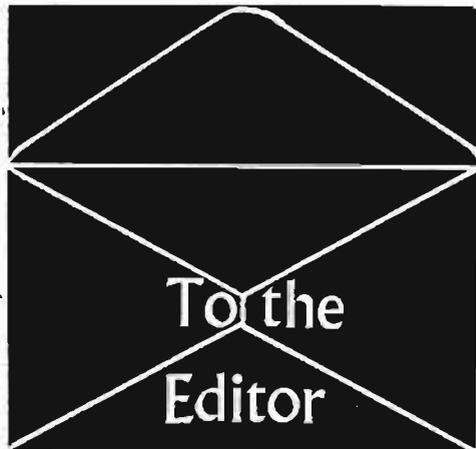
He did not deserve that! This awful school had a macabre, icy look about it; it was the refuge of souls in agony.

Kocoumbo shuddered. For a moment he thought he was dead, a

roving spirit. "They've killed me," he reflected, "but I have not yet been avenged, that's why I cannot join the souls of my ancestors. Have my parents forgotten me? Will I stay alone for ever? Must I go and disturb the living so that they will remember me? But who killed me?"

"Who is the person that killed me?" Kocoumbo murmured.

He swung around abruptly, like a madman. Then he remembered slowly that this dull void which opened its sinister jaws was only a passing mood of forlornness. Forlornness. . . . Oh, now he understood the meaning of this word. . . .



Mazisi Kunene — 1

SIR,—Your article in *The New African* of June 1966, on the poetry of Mazisi Kunene strikes me as unworthy of a magazine claiming to present the arts of Africa in a serious manner.

The writer's obvious enthusiasm for his subject does not in any way mitigate the fact that he illustrated this introduction to a comparatively unknown, and in his and other people's view, insufficiently appreciated poet, only with extracts from the three poems which are readily available to the reader interested in such things. They are of course published in the Penguin Africa Library's *Modern African Poetry*.

His interpretation of these three poems was not such as to inspire much confidence in his strength as a literary critic, but even so, a minimum of work from him on the hundreds of poems which he himself said are lying untranslated and unread around Mr Kunene's London flat, would have helped towards a better understanding of Mr Kunene's work.

The tragedy of this particular poet, and doubtless of many other South African writers is that their work in their own languages is not read by their own people—because of bans which prevent publication of their work or because of heavy government control of such African-language publishing as there is (largely directed at the schools, themselves carefully screened to offer only "suitable" reading matter). Nor is their work read by interested readers abroad, due to problems of translation.

A magazine such as yours, if it exists for any good purpose at all, should surely make a better attempt at filling this deplorable cultural hole than last month's article on the poems of Mazisi Kunene.

ANNE DARNBOROUGH

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[We share Miss Darnborough's concern in the lack of adequate attention paid to Mr Kunene's poetry; but we do not feel obliged to publish only the kind of critical essays with which the editors or Miss Darnborough agree. More fundamental, Miss Darnborough does not say what her disagreements are with the interpretation given to these poems.— LITERARY EDITOR]

Mazisi Kunene — 2

SIR,—Thank you so much for Mr Bulane's article on the poetry of Raymond Mazisi Kunene. The article added great depths to the poems which I had already come to know from Penguin's *Modern Poetry from Africa* and which, when I first read them several months ago I considered some of the finest poetry I had read in a long time. Could I ask you to print his work when there is space in your magazine?

A second request, please. Where can I get hold of more of his poetry to read? Has he published an anthology or has any of it been published in a literary periodical with which I am not familiar?

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