

Cornfields in Accra

They told us
Our mothers told us
They told us:

They told us
Our fathers told us
They told us.

They told us
Red clay
Will shine,
Shine silica,
Shine gold
Red clay will shine

It will shine
Where you polish
How-when-where
You polish.

They told us
Our mothers told us
They told us.

And so
We planted our corn;
Not wholeseeds frok
Last year's harvest
No,
For we are men without barns
Women without fallows.

Some said,
Referring to the corn-seeds,
"They come from Russia"
Others that the bags were marked
"Nigeria."
But we have refused to listen
Or hearing,
Have not cared.

For
When Yaa looked over her courtyard and saw Akosua's
daughter passing by with her trayful of red clay that
shone and gleamed, did she not beg a mould?
And did she wait until she knew which pit had yielded
the clay?

They told us
Our mothers told us
They told us.

And we thought
As we fixed the pipe -
They said it will carry

50,000 cc. of water every day -
We thought
As we fixed the pipe,
"The first day it rains
We shall plant
The corn."

Plot One
Was Nikoi's
It was at the backyard
Where once stood the fitter's
shop:
There,
Among skeleton cars,
Greased and petrolled earth,
Bits of tyres, really
All types of scrap-metal.

The rest,
Hmm, brother,
Was less, not more
Dignified.
Mine was by a mango tree,
A hillock of rubbish dump
A deserted vacant-lot,
With unmentionable contents of diverse chamber-pots.

Yet
Even now
When that moon has not fully died
Which rose on our planting,
Let us sing of
Dark green wavy corn.

My brother,
My sister,
Take the refrain,
Swell the chorus,

They told us
Our mothers told us
They told us.

Finally,
When we have harvested, gleaned and
Threshed our corn,
Or roasted it aromatic,
That is,
After office hours
On Saturdays and throughout the whole of Sunday,
We shall sit firmly on our bottoms
And plant our feet on the earth,

Then
We shall ask to see
Him
Who says
We
Shall not survive among these turbines.

Who
Says
We shall not survive among the turbines?

To Those Who Come After Us

Bertolt Brecht c. 1937
translated for Bram Fischer
by Nicholas Jacobs

The times I live in are dark indeed!
A carefree word is madness. A smooth forehead
Is a sign of insensitivity. Laughter
Only means that the terrible news
Has not yet been received.

What time is this, when
To talk about trees is almost a crime
Because it involves silence about so many horrors!
The man there quietly crossing the street
Is he not beyond reach of his friends
Who are in need?

It is true: I still earn my living
But, believe me, that is mere chance. Nothing
I do gives me the right to eat my fill.
I happen to have been spared. (If my luck breaks
I am lost)

People say: Eat and drink: Be happy you are able to:
But how can I eat and drink, when
I tear my food from the hands of the hungry and
My glass of water from the lips of the thirst-racked?
But still, I eat and drink.

I would like to be wise too.
Old books tell you what wisdom is:
To renounce worldly strife and pass your short time
Without fear
Also without using force
Repaying evil with good
Not fulfilling one's desires but forgetting them
Is wisdom.
But I can do none of these:
The times I live in are dark indeed!

II

I came to the towns in times of disorder
When hunger reigned there.
I came among people in times of rebellion
And myself rebelled with them.
So passed the time
Given me on earth.

I ate my meals between battles
Took my sleep midst murderers
Made love carelessly
And watched Nature with impatience.
So passed the time
Given me on earth.

The streets I led down to the morass in my day.
To speak meant betrayal to the slaughterer
I could only do little. But the powerful
Felt safer without me, I hoped.
So passed the time
Given me on earth.

Our forces were small. The goal
Lay far in the distance
It was clearly visible, even if I
Was hardly to reach it.
So passed the time
Given me on earth.

III

You, who will one day emerge from the flood
In which we floundered
Remember
When you speak of our failings
Also the dark times
Which you were spared.

How we went, changing countries more often than
our shoes
Through the wars of the classes, despairing
When we saw only injustice and nobody outraged.

And yet we know:
Hatred even of what is hateful
Distorts the features.
Anger even at injustice
Makes the voice hoarse. Oh, we
Who so wanted to prepare the ground for friendliness
Could not ourselves be friendly.

But you, when the time at last does come
And man is help to man
Think back on us
With forbearance.

Origins (for Melba)

deep in your cheeks
your specific laughter owns
all things south of the ghosts
we once were. straight ahead
the memory beckons from the future
You and I a tribe of colors
this song that dance
godlike rhythms to birth
footsteps of memory
the very soul aspires to. songs
of origins songs of constant beginnings
what is this thing called
love