

Signals On Lion Mountainⁱ
By Ishmael Beah

I.

Bare feet stamped, buckets clattered, tabor rose and fell, followed by splinters of dawn and a call for prayer.

Mangoes that couldn't hold tumbled, one by one onto tin roofs.

Sparrows and doves sang with their falling.

To these, I awoke.

The wind wailed for the previous days' trouble, as it passed through tree branches. In the hollow distance, piled rocks rustled on riverbeds. Iron bells called for school as brooms met dried leaves and birds flapped their wings in shock.

An elder cleared his throat and we the young knew what time it was.

Firewood crackled to signal sunrise. The sun's rays penetrated cracks of houses and gave warmth to the old, chasing out the chill morning air.

Noises of nestling birds faded away and a haze of whispers behind chipped wooden desks arose.

Limestone chalks squeaked words that we recited at the command of a whip.

Whistling competitions with friends, imitating birds that instructed their young on flying. With these, we shortened the journey home and closed the day, chasing the red sun as it sank behind the mountains.

A choir of crickets called for night. Frogs and toads croaked for rain.

By the fire stories began.

Tales of night and day mingled with the flames until rain came, creating a melody on the tin roof to which I slept and dreamed of harvest time when tales are renewed to fit life.

II.

All we carried was a gourd of water. A cock crowed to dispatch the last remains of night, and to mute the crickets that wouldn't let go of the darkness on their own accord.

We turned to see the village one last time.

The sun was slowly rising but had already begun casting its shadows on the mud huts.

The drums from the previous night still echoed in our heads, yet we refused to be happy. It was easier to be sad.

At the edge of the village, the old waited to be warmed by the morning sun.

The sun refused to shine gradually, as it did before. It became bright the minute it surfaced from behind the clouds, its golden rays darkening our eyes.

All we carried was a gourd of water.

At night it felt like we walked with the moon. It followed us under thick clouds and waited at the end of dark forest paths. It would disappear with sunrise but would return again hovering on our path the next night.

Its brightness became dull as nights passed.

Some nights the sky wept stars that headed our direction but they disappeared before our wishes could meet them. Once, under these stars and sky, we used to hear stories. Now it seemed the sky was telling us a story with its stars. They fell violently colliding with each other and the moon bowed its head in shame.

III.

Memories linger on Lion Mountain
They are of those gone, but still want to be here.
The breeze whispers their desire for their breathless presence to be felt.

Their names are written in strokes of lightning
that leave the sky ashamed to smile. It turns vibrant red, shunning its blue.

On Lion Mountain the dead unendingly try to mingle with the living.
Stones do not roll. They stagger behind the living,
carrying with them memories of the lifeless.

Branches snap breaking the silence. Leaves weep with the morning dew
waving goodbye to the footsteps of quietness.
The wind harshly whistles through trees
speaking to the dead ears of the living.

Sometimes here, the sun hesitates to shine and day quickly becomes night
leaving memories to search for their lost shadows
while the moon weeps quietly
wiping its tears for the living on Lion Mountain

ⁱ “Lion Mountain” is a translation of the Portuguese words “Sierra Loa,” which was the first name given to Sierra Leone when the Portuguese arrived on the coast of the country and saw the shape of mountains that resembled a herd of running lions.

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