



Barnabé Laye



Her Eyelids

The days glide by and our footprints
Fade on the sands of time
Childhood memories are sleeping
Living flesh at the heart of the maze

My mother do you remember
The old red wooden house
Lost among the flame trees
Your eyes so light a picture of your pride
In a bouquet of iris and dog-rose
You disdained the white flowers of the temple tree
And you said: This is the house of my father



Like an arrogance an ecstasy

I remember
Little boy in the poultry-house
My grandmother waved a worried hand
“Oh! Watch out for the little one!
The turkey and his cruel beak”
A muffled voice from somewhere else
Or a voice perhaps already fading
Yet demanding attention and respect
And the turkey gently nodded head and neck
Just as do all the others of his race
Knew nothing of anything of this

My mother do you remember
That day when the sun refused to show
A shroud lay on the village at dawn
Grandmother drew her last breaths
Sleepwalker at the finish line of the course
Edged warily to the journey without return
The cry of cormorants high over the house
Great-winged birds unknown to these shores
An escort to the trade winds’ raging squalls
 My mother do you still hear
 The cry of mournful cormorants
 High over the old red wooden house

I remember
In her bedroom you lit a candle
The old lady’s eyes opened one last time
She squeezed my icy fingers very tight
“Ah! Is it you? My boy! My little boy!”
And then her head fell heavy on the pillow

My mother do you remember



Upon her forehead you placed a farewell kiss
And said: It's for you to close her eyes

She loved you as none other ever will

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Translated from the French by David and Aidan Shanks

Requiem for a murdered country (Excerpt)

At the source
There was a country under the Tropics
A country which lies down
As an insult fallen from the sky
A country which also spreads out
As a skin
 Breathlessly stretched
A country which at times rises up
As a fist bursting out of the ocean

I am not telling you of a country
Born out of dreams and idle fancies



I am telling you of a country
Of resistance and mud
With ephemeral palaces kneaded
Out of blood and tears

With the fire from Heaven
A harsh sun
Over the head
 Of quiet mornings.

I am not telling you of
 an unknown country
Lost in the amnesia of geographies
Somewhere astray
 between moor and mountain
I am telling you of
 a country at auction
Alone before the tempests of History
Leaning come hell or high water
Against the spells of bad omens
Despite him embarked up in the quarrels
And the misfortunes of Others
Playing here and there
 The gladiators of the Empire

And so goes the country...
And the muffled faces of men
When the eyes close in too fast
As a curfew at dusk
The mute faces draping in a veil
Of sleepiness and boredom
To roam into the warm night.
Men hold hands
Along gloomy alleyways
Along somber silences
For at last can penetrate into the veins



The hope which defies fate
The hope which breaks up chains
The hope which makes the dead dance
Then the dead mingle with the living
In the same linking chain
In the same blood chain

The chain
Which connects with the Ancestors
And pushes forward
 Ahead of bravery

Translated from French by Bernard Dhuicq and Marianne Hermitte

Barnabé Laye is a physician, a poet and a novelist, born in Benin. While working as a physician of the Paris Hospitals, he pursued his literary vocation, and published over fifteen books. He was awarded the Prix Émile Nelligan 2010 for his poetical work as a whole, the Prix Aimé Césaire 2015 of the « Société des Poètes français » and the Medal of Vermeil of the « Académie Internationale de Lutèce » for his latest book *Fragments d'errances*
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