

Tjawangwa Dema

Commons

Since hunters cannot share the same forest
this is mine.

And here, whoever their mother
Country. Church. Tongue.
Children of the same belly
split the locust's head -
Let no one hunger
or let all hunger.

Did we not say –
when one house burns
a neighbor will surely meet the open air
his own flaming curtains in hand.
Here we gather
blistered tongue to blistered tongue and say
no one owns the forest or its flycatchers
nor its trout lilies or lichen. No one.

Not the birds or the night or the river,
who are you?
Not even the man in Pennsylvania
who cleans raw hides and places a sign to say
trespassers will be _____,
not even that man who wants everything
to himself.
Soon too much is never enough.

Show me your tongue
and tell me – what is everything?
Even the dirt which catches every footfall
must turn its head to hear the roots whisper.
We come to the forest's beginend now, brother.
You say it either stops or starts here
it cannot do both. I turn your head to watch
the beasts descend from their hills
to eat only what they can carry.

Only man, only man devours devouring.
His heart eating everything.

We watch a buck stop in the long shadow then leap out –
out still. His twisted horns victorious in his autumn rut.
Look I say, what boundary shall we insist upon for the air?
Brother, descend from your hill,
no one can say this is mine
and mean anything worth hearing.

Brother,
are you no one?

Note: Commons owes a debt of gratitude to the Setswana language. Setswana speakers will recognize some of its proverbial and idiomatic nature – so often entangled with the environment – in this poem’s language.

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