

A South African Elegy

An orange moon
glowing over Thaba Nchu
and in the wind a promise of rain.
The smell of smoke and of cow dung
lingering around the huts,
where the fires burn,
and the cry of a night bird
hovering in the air,
a question without an answer.

It's a colorful country, they say,
it's a colorful country
if you don't mind the pied crow.

The depths of a silent universe
and the Milky Way, those webs of light
in the cricket-shrill African night –

NO! No more rhymes to beguile you!
Don't touch the strings of the harp!
Keep away from the flute
in a country that's out of tune!

A hoarse croak on the High Veld.
Beware of the crow, the pied crow!

They say there are spies everywhere;
the dove on the housetop may be one,
the sparrow in the gutter ready to give you away.

O the shadow of the pied crow –
dimming the light of the sun,
poisoning the milk
in the full breasts of young mothers,
scaring the child in the kobo
and making young men
clench their fists in frustration,
keeping husbands away from their wives,
stirring up bitter questions.

Beware of the crow, the pied crow!

The clouds break
and the waters fall like a curtain.
O the wild sweet smells
the rains beat up from the ground!
My heart is as parched as the earth.
Wash it, rain, wash it,
wash the salt in my eyes away,
drench me down to the roots of life.

“To see we have only to look;
I beseech you to look.”

Life is a bushbuck,
leaping out of the forest
and darting back to it,
making your heart beat and break.

Somewhere in a hut
an old man lying on his sleeping mat,
and Death on the doorstep
calling “go-go,”
his brown face even darker
with the shadows of death.
There he is lying,
wondering about Heaven,
if there is a door
“Whites Only.”

– *Margarethe Mehren, South Africa,*
November 1973

Explanations:

Kobo in Sesotho is the blanket in which a mother carries her baby tied on her back.

The Pied Crow: A South African crow that is black but for a ring of white feathers around its neck, the most vulnerable part of its body; here I use this crow as a symbol of apartheid, imposed by a white minority on the black majority.

“Go-go”: The sound one makes before entering an African hut. It replaces the knocking at the door. Here it has a double meaning as it can also mean the English word “go,” death calling that it is time to go.