

Black Abacus



poems by Ian Keteku



Write Bloody North

writebloodynorth.ca

*For my grandmothers
and their mothers*

BLACK ABACUS

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**A DELICATE
SKELETON**

∴ a martyr
before I was born

MOMENT ONE

I remember my birth
like it was tomorrow, the unholy sensation
of abandon, accepted struggle,

my mother's womb a burning revolution,
promise on fire.

I do not recall the choice to be burning,
wayward archeologist
searching for sky in uncharted ground.

Before my skin, colour of handcuffs
became fodder and fuel
for a war I was born into,

clock hands pointing towards a verdict,
seat-belt light off
crash landing into tomorrow.

Mother bled a lament
we could both see tomorrow,

I arrived a blessing fragmented,
a dark-skinned schism.
My cry so familiar, it was heard in the past.

THURSDAYS

My head is wood on a wooden desk.
Class begins and I am already
a dense mess of shavings:

today's the day, I've decided.

The teacher and I
have a relationship to mortar, this hour
we are both softer
than the silence between us.

Seeing the decision in my eyes
she sends me to the office,
where the counselor asks questions,
treats me like kindle.

They both figure the reason
I want out of this life
is because my parents ~~discipline~~ beat me.

For sixteen weeks, a case worker
watches our family be a family;
a studio audience in our living room,
staining the loveseat awkward
searching for splinters, a missed line,
peeling bark.

Every Thursday, our Father displays
rare parts, affectionate
and palm leaf, a steady Capricorn carrying
an almost suicide on his back.

After the case worker leaves,
we stay on stage,
play our parts perfectly.
Hit all the lines for a few more hours
until Friday morning shrivels us back
to who we truly are.

BOOKMARK

a soft *yes*
serenading clifftop, pensive Appalachian
and Himalayan hurt
and an empty Bible sitting restless and fearful

and once I checked out the story of my life
and returned it the next day
I couldn't relate to the protagonist
he was too "not enough"
I will wait for the sequel—it reminds me
of autumn;
how beautiful must it all be—before it all
dies again.

I believe in something
I am too young to love,
and I am afraid
I am too old to know
when it arrives.

POINT OF BOILING

Charred and taunting its privilege,
what temperature do memories burn?

Ash has stained our trembling teeth,
our mouths reluctant of water.

Are memories best served warm?

On a silver tongue, dripping river Delta,
slave ships and servitude

in this loud burning,
our faces singing ballads of the blaze.

Our histories, completed in napalm
remember the roots, the scars,
the smell, Icarus' dream
and the smoldering truth

that a fire cannot be quenched
with oil, with blood.

ARRIVAL ONE

January 1979

My mother's first month abroad,
she's welcomed to Missouri with winter.
Her classes end late, too late
to study the sun.

In the darkness she holds a dilemma:
approach the German Sheppard
conveniently let loose, or walk through
the graveyard and risk being bitten
by something much sharper than teeth.

My mother was raised on hot soup and myth;
both kept her alive this far.
She knows ghosts need a voice to see,
holds her breath tightly

past tombs, sprints the last stretch,
collapses her chest, and watches
her fear form to fog.

The German family with the German dog
rent her a frozen den.
She keeps on her jacket, closes her eyes
and smells hot-pepper soup.