

STEVE CHIMOMBO

NAPOLO AND THE
PYTHON

SELECTED POETRY



Heinemann

STEVE CHIMOMBO, born in Zomba, Malawi, was educated in Malawi, England and the United States of America. He holds a doctorate from Columbia University, New York, and an Honorary Fellowship in Writing from the University of Iowa. He is Professor of English at the University of Malawi.

In addition to his poetry, Chimombo has written two plays – *The Rainmaker* (1978) and *Wachiona Ndani?* (1983) – a collection of short stories entitled *Tell Me a Story* (1992), a novel, *The Basket Girl* (1990), and a critical work on the folklore of his country, *Malawian Oral Literature* (1988). He is also the Director of Writers and Artists Services International and editor of *WASI*, a magazine for the arts.

Heinemann Educational Publishers
A Division of Heinemann Publishers (Oxford) Ltd
Halley Court, Jordan Hill, Oxford OX2 8EJ

Heinemann: A Division of Reed Publishing (USA) Inc.
361 Hanover Street, Portsmouth, NH 03801-3912, USA

Heinemann Educational Books (Nigeria) Ltd
PMB 5205, Ibadan
Heinemann Educational Boleswa
PO Box 10103, Village Post Office, Gaborone, Botswana

FLORENCE PRAGUE PARIS MADRID
ATHENS MELBOURNE JOHANNESBURG
AUCKLAND SINGAPORE TOKYO
CHICAGO SAO PAULO

This collection © Steve Chimombo 1994

Napolo Poems First published 1987 © Steve Chimombo 1987

Python! Python! First published 1992 © Steve Chimombo 1992

'Meanwhile in the Drought' and 'Developments from the Grave' were first
published in *WASI*, Vol. 4, No. 1, December 1992.

First published by Heinemann Educational Publishers in 1994

Series Editor: Adewale Maja-Pearce

The right of Steve Chimombo to be identified as the author of this work has
been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents
Act 1988.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

AFRICAN WRITERS SERIES and CARIBBEAN WRITERS SERIES and
their accompanying logos are trademarks in the United States of
America of Heinemann: A Division of Reed Publishing (USA) Inc.

ISBN 0435 911996

*Cover design by Jennifer
Cover illustration by Michaela Buder
Author photograph by Kieran*

Phototypeset by CentraCet Limited, Cambridge
Printed and bound in Great Britain
by Cox & Wyman Ltd, Reading, Berkshire

94 95 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

PR
9385.9
C44
N21
1994

*Dedicated to all artists and other visionaries
who dream of founding empires*

first

x has
tents

and

CONTENTS

Preface ix

NAPOLO POEMS

Napolo	3
Beggar Woman	12
Obituary	17
Four Ways of Dying	19
Derailment: A Delirium	21
Three Songs	29
Of Promises and Prophecy	33
The Suppliants	36
Chingwe's Hole Revisited	39

PYTHON! PYTHON!

Dramatis Personae	47
The Pantheon	48
Place Names	48
Prologue	50
Part One: The Rainmakers	51
Part Two: The Flight	91
Part Three: The Python	125
Epilogue	151

POEMS 1987-92

A Death Song	155
Writers' Workshop Revisited	158
Lies Unlimited	161
Meanwhile in the Drought	164
Developments from the Grave	167
Appendix	169
Glossary	177

PREFACE

Putting together this selection has not been very easy. The two major volumes from which the poems were taken seemed impossible to bring together initially. *Napol Poems* was published in 1987, *Python! Python!* in 1992. Time separated the two. The former was about 'Napol', the mythical underground serpent associated with landslides, earthquakes or cyclones. The latter was about 'Mbona', a historical, albeit legendary, male figure. Subject matter separated them too. Napol is usually associated, since the 1946 visitation and the more recent eruptions, with Zomba. Mbona is associated with Nsanje more than anywhere else. Thus space also separated the poems. The two volumes, then, seemed incompatible.

Over the several months I had to make the decision, however, the more I thought about it the more the poems seemed to belong to the same conceptual framework. Time need not be a decisive factor: the imaginative mind is timeless. So is Napol – he is still erupting, witness the Phalombe disaster of 1991. So more Napol poems could still be written, as in fact has since happened. Space does not seem to restrict the poems either. Napol is known throughout the country, either by that name or in other local languages. After Zomba mountain, he erupted in Ulumba and Ntonya mountains. More recently, the biggest and most devastating manifestation was in Mulanje district.

So Napol cannot be contained in one part of the country. Neither can Mbona. Historically, he fled from the central region. Linearly he was the grandson of Undi Chirindzodzwe, the founder of the Manganja/Nyanja/Chewa people who entered the country from the north to settle in the centre and the south. So, Mbona is a national cult figure who cannot be restricted to Nsanje alone. In any case, cultists from other districts have always made pilgrimages to the shrine by custom. Mythologically, too, Napol and Mbona belong to the same symbolism of the snake and rainmaking. Napol is conceived of as a giant snake living under mountains or deep pools. Mbona is embodied in the python of the living world. Napol

is associated with rains and floods, Mboma is the rainmaker. Chronologically, spatially, historically and mythologically, then, there are interrelations between them.

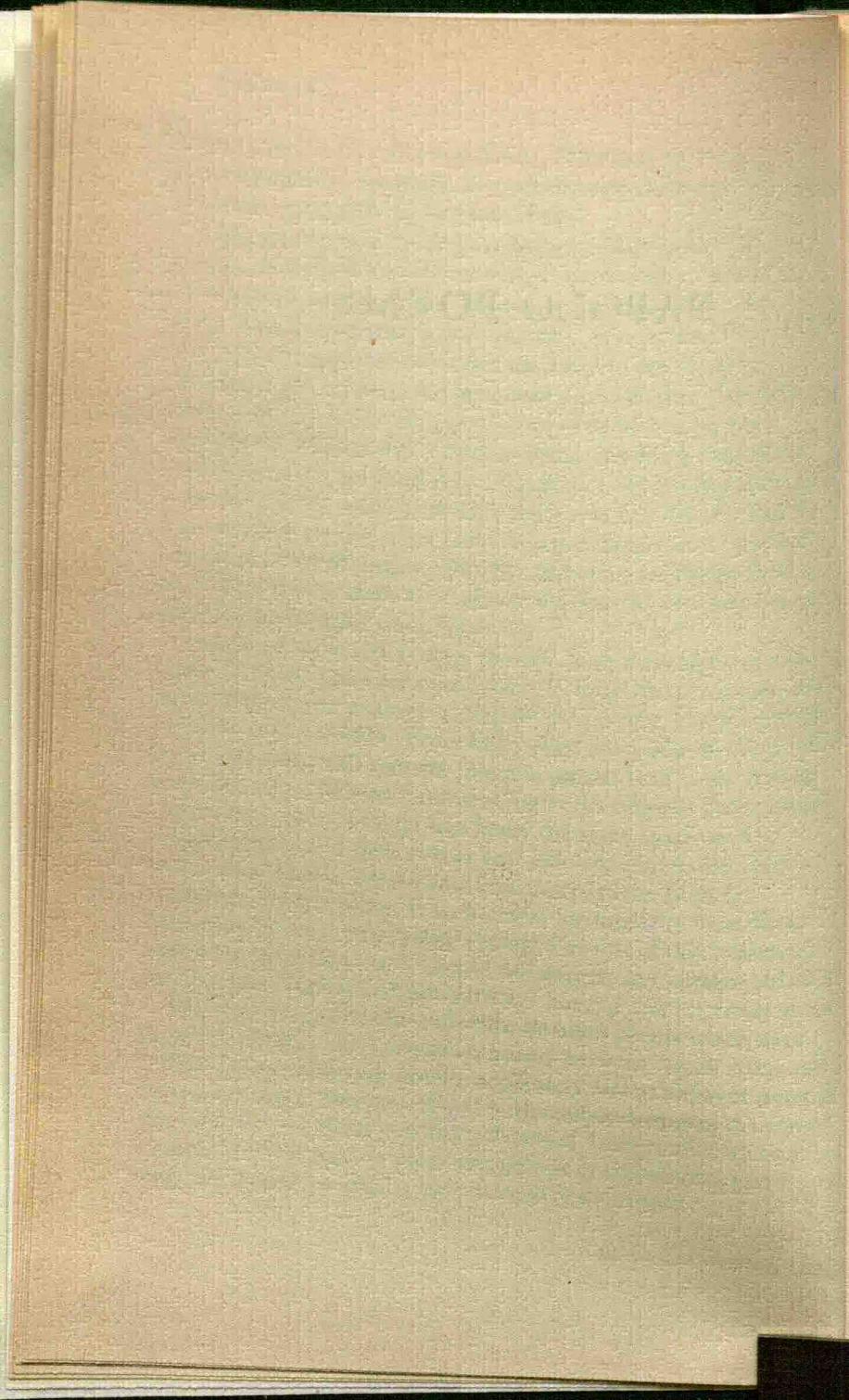
There are several differences between Napol and Mboma though. Napol is associated with destructiveness: landslides, earthquakes, and cyclones. Mboma is the rainmaker: a benevolent being. The former comes with the rain, in fact, after heavy rains. The latter brings rain or causes the rains to fall. In terms of sequences, the latter is the precursor of the former. Napol is non-human, he has never been conceived of as having human dimensions. Mboma was a human being, his death marked the beginning of his spiritual role. Napol is a devastating spirit, no one prays for him to come or to save them – in fact the very opposite is true. Mboma, on the other hand, is a guardian spirit the cultists turn to in times of plague, drought and other hardships faced by man. This is why there is no shrine for Napol, yet there has always been one for Mboma since his death.

In spite of these differences, though, both meet again at a higher symbolic level. They are cataclysmic in their manifestations. At the physical level, the passage of Napol causes rifts, chasms and other divisions in the terrain. Years later, even those who never witnessed the actual event will remark, 'Napol passed here' when coming upon the scene. Mboma's rainmaking at the original shrine caused rifts in the society. Msinja was never the same again once his cohorts abandoned their homes and followed him to the south to erect a rival shrine. Seen from these perspectives, both are extensions of each other. It is therefore legitimate to have *Napol Poems* side by side with *Python! Python!* The title of this collection, *Napol and the Python*, then, should not suggest any antagonisms but connections: Napol with the python – kinship and interrelatedness.

The final section in this collection includes poems which were mainly written in the intervening period between *Napol Poems* and *Python! Python!* Although written separately and at different times to these collections, they are related to the major themes of the rest of this volume, as a closer reading will reveal. Images of death and metaphors of creation or creativity prevail in this section, and I therefore thought it appropriate to include them here.

Steve Chimombo, 1993

NAPOLO POEMS



Napolo

1 NAPOLO

The Apocalypse

Mlauli's tomb roared:

'*Mphirimo! Mphirimo! Mphirimo!*'

Kudzabwera Napolo?'

Mbona was checked in mid-leap,

Chilembwe turned over and went back to sleep.

Mulanje, Zomba, and Nyika fled their places,
whimpered and hid their faces.

Shire curled round its course and bit its tail.

Lilongwe reared its head but it was too frail.

Songwe exploded and threw its seed
into the lake where it caught typhoid.

Yes, it rained.

Oh, how it rained that time!

The parched throat of the earth drank it up,
swelled its stomach in pregnancy;
but it came so late,
and with it came Napolo.

Napolo gnawed the womb of the earth,
the earth groaned and aborted, showing its teeth,
its teeth uprooted the trees on the banks,
the banks where birds sang around the python's flanks.

The Path

I washed my feet in the waters of Mulungusi
and anointed myself with the blood
of those Napolo had left unburied.

I tied the loin cloth around me in a tight knot;
it was a perilous climb up Kaphirintiwa.

And did Napolo pass here indeed?
The trembling earth under my feet?
The roaring waters around my ears?
The hurtling mountains?

The desolation of the shrines
portends retribution
and revision.

And did Napolo pass here indeed?
Was all that for this?
This ritual of bloodletting?
And that to a deranged god creating
these strange forms of death?

I will to the mountain top
and there divine the message
Napolo brought.
I had washed my feet in the waters of Mulungusi.

The Messengers

Napolo has spoken: Death.
The lizard scuttled in the undergrowth;
the excitement he carried did not burden him.
Mankind awaited his coming.

Napolo has spoken: Life.
The Chameleon stopped to consider
a joint in his leg and hesitated.
He rolled an eye behind and in front,
the shrubbery swallowed his form.
Mankind awaited his coming.

Napolo has spoken:
 The man in the loincloth came to us at dawn.
 We gathered round to hear the message,
 but did not understand.
 He spoke to us in a strange tongue
 and we greeted it with laughter.
 He turned his back on us;
 now we shall never know.
 And yet Napolo had spoken.

The Message

Was it a decade after Napolo
 I met you, friend?
 No matter.
 We lived to tell the story around the fire
 in whispers and behind locked doors.
 We are going to laugh together again
 with empty mouths,
 and dead eyes:
 grimaces echoing hollowed minds.

Review what is left unsaid,
 and, after we have parted,
 we will know
 what it is we wanted to say
 before you noticed the dullness in my eyes
 and I, the emptiness of your mouth,
 before the art of saying nothing
 in a mountain of words
 interrupted our conversation.

In those days, my friend,
 martyrs were left unburied,
 heroes were coffined alive or fled.
 Our tears remained unshed:

we did not know they had died.
No one told us who had gone.

These tears, my friend, are wrung
from a heart shattered
by the apocalypse
that was Napolo.

The Aftermath

Mlauli's tomb roared again:
'Mphirimo! Mphirimo! Mphiri - !'

The snarl of brakes strangled the sepulchral voice,
boots crunched the gravel,
and muzzles of machine guns
confronted the dawn.
Napolo was here
to stay.

2 NAPOLI METAMORPHOSIS

The Metamorphosis

It glared at us in the dailies,
scorched the telephone wires,
was screamed over the radio,
we heard it from breathless mouths,
the whirlwind uprooted the rooftops,
to hurl it round our heads.
The metamorphosis of Napolo
needed no Mlauli's sepulchre
to announce the return.

The man in the loin cloth also
discarded the trappings
of his profession.
Bark cloth was no longer
considered appropriate

and oracular voice too faint
to be heard above the tumult
of expectancy.

Field green replaced bark cloth,
the divining rod
thundered fire and smoke.

The nation held its breath:
there had been nothing like it before.
A lifetime of spiritual somnolence,

intellectual malnutrition,
improvised existence,
pressurised underdevelopment,
programmed exploitation,

needed Napolo to rouse it.

Napologia

The man advised: to see
the teeth of Napolo is patience;
wait until Napolo has gone
and ululate: I am blessed.

The youth answered:
the goat that delayed
got the lash on its behind;
when the sun shines
one knows Napolo has gone.
Then is the time to rejoice.

The man warned:
the weather is like genitals,
it suddenly changes – don't trust it.

The youth retorted:
when you have husbanded lightning
you do not quake at the flashes,
and he who cries for rain
cries for mud too – if not Napolo.

Son, a stranger does not beat the drum.
 Father, the fool beat the drum while
 the clever one danced.

— You know, two cocks do not crow
 under the same roof.

— No, but a cock does not crow away from home.

The man exhorted:
 the arrow that takes long in aiming
 suddenly falls in the eye.

The youth replied:
 the bird had perched right on the bow,
 so we could not kill it.

Then the man admonished:
 to punish a monkey
 you do not arrow it:
 smash its head.

The youth was silent.

The man concluded:
 the old dog does not scratch in vain;
 the words of the elders
 are appreciated only
 with the passage of Napolo;
 the river Tinkanena
 flows into Siizi.

But the youth had the last word:
 old pepper is never hot;
 tough luck for the old stalk,
 the maize cob waits for
 the fire — next time!

The Sons of Napolo

We danced the Ingoma
 in worsted wool and crimplene,
 shoes strapped to our jiggered soles.

The shields we carried
were emblazoned with a motto
written in a foreign tongue.
We danced Nyau steps
to the rhythm of rock 'n' roll:
sycophants to the frenzied music
of our adopted forefathers.

We put tithes
not into extortionate offertory baskets
but bottomless terylene pockets.
The sign of the cross
confused the clapping of hands;
the amens drowned
the ululation to our new gods.

Religiously paying homage
to the four wheels of a Benz;
worshipping images,
grimacing our passwords,
and our passports to survival
in the continual emasculation of existence.

We bared our teeth in complicity
with the daylight sacrilege,
and joined fervently
in the dehumanised chants
of the new dispensation,
under the chilling, pious eye
of the guardian of our traditions.

Moral elephantiasis
is infectious, my friend.
He who guards the well
does not die of thirst;
and if you can't beat 'em
join 'em.

3 NAPOLI: IN THE BEGINNING

Seeds cracked in the sultry afternoon,
 the desiccated undergrowth sizzled,
 stifling new life in its pods,
 twigs snapped,
 wilting trees panted in the long drought.

* * *

Ambuye.

Pepa.

Akumasoka.

Pepa.

Akumizimu.

Pepa.

For seven nights
 your sons have not known their wives.
Pepa.

For seven nights
 your daughters have not seen the moon.
Pepa.

For seven nights
 have we purified ourselves.
Pepa.

Listen, then, to the cries
 of your sons and daughters.

Eyes downcast,
 the virgin placed the basket of flour
 beside the pot of beer and withdrew.
 The *nsolo* tree rustled its leaves.
 The man in the loincloth,
 arms raised, listened.

* * *

A yawn and gentle stirring,
 Changula had opened his eyes.

Li Li Li

The blast bowed the trees,
genuflecting grass remained
on bended knees.

Phiti Phiti Phiti

Changula, forerunner of Napolo,
opened his mouth wide,
howled down the mountain slope,
spun the trees and grass on their heels
to rocking attention,
as the whirlwind,
writhing on its head,
stripped and assaulted
all in its path
and sped on.

* * *

Stillness.

Then the air resounded
with thunder and lightning,
earth's mouth gaped wide.
Trees, boulders, villages,
were sucked into its entrails,
ground and ejected down river.
Heads, arms, legs, chests,
disembowelled earth churned
in the furious current.

The earth bled,
reeked of mud and mangled flesh,
guts bubbled in the torrent.

Gubudu Gubudu

Gubudu Gubudu

Zomba detonated its boulders
and blasted a pathway
down its slope.

Mulungusi was born:
Napolo had decreed it.

Single-hand
nightly unle
at vanguard

Beggar Woman

I

And will the lice,
having intimations of my death,
flee from my body
like rats abandoning a sinking ship
or fleas a dying hedgehog?

I have felt my hair – that lush breeding ground –
stand on its toes to make hairways and highways
for flatulent bellies of overfed lice and unhatched eggs.

The eggs hatch into little ones,
the little lice grow into big ones,
and they all suck my soul,
play hide-and-suck on cloth and hair.

They have coursed the great forests of my hair,
created the well-beaten pathways of tiny feet,
clawing and gorging their way through the tufts.

The black ones claim my head,
the light-skinned ones my body.
The glinting patches, the bloody splotches,
the skeletons are all signs of their progress.

And alone at night I have recorded their work songs,
these humming wonderworkers draining my life-blood,
felt the caress of prowling feet and the love bites.

The syncopation of hunting feet,
the gush of blood from the unlucky,
another louse dead.

The explosion of a swatted louse:
die, louse, die.

And I have
counted my
of genocida

What they
what they
surely they

Single-handed I have fought titanic battles in my rags,
nightly unleashed imprecations, fingers, and fingernails,
at vanguards, and horde after horde, of gigantic lice.

Lean-bellied militants and revolutionaries,
the riot squad and iron-jawed warriors,
reading the Declaration of Lice Rights:
the right to live on unclaimed territory.

And I have woken up in the mornings ululating,
counted my conquests like I count my daily takings
of genocidal nights from the folds of my cloth.

I have peeled, scraped, and wiped off
blotched carcasses, mangled corpses,
raged at the giant blobs of blood,
the smear of lice juice on black skin.

What they want from me, a withered beggar woman,
what they want from the shrivelled dugs, I don't know,
surely they can find juicier conquests out there?

On affluent streets, in carpeted offices,
the teeming buses, the gutting planes,
the Toyotas, the Benzes, the Royces,
the Titanic, the Ilala, the Queen Elizabeth?

Surely there are more choice parts,
jewelled arms, powdered pits, breasts,
perfumed underwear and petticoats
to play games of hide-and-suck in?

Yielding bellies on sumptuous beds,
succulent bottoms on feathered mattresses,
shampooed hair in air-conditioned hotels,
are these not for you and yours too?

2

I can no longer count the sighs and tear-drops
on my bloodstained fingernails and *chirundu*,
nor can I weigh songs and laughter frozen in me
by the scars and fresh wounds on my ragged soul;
too much blood has flowed already to mingle
with myriad lies and dismembered hopes;
many lives have abandoned truckloads of promises.

When the stomach cannot share
the blood the heart has pumped,
the stomach turns upon itself
and feeds upon its own sweat.

I have wrested the beatitudes from the preacher's lips,
thunderbolted them into the teeth of the whirlwind,
and watched double-headed worms transmogrifying;
for I, too, have been to the mountain-top in my *chirundu*,
have felt the rock of Kaphirintiwa on my bare feet;
for I, too, have paid my dues at Msinja and Nsanje,
and have walked trunks of dreams under each arm.

I crouch here in a thicket of ashes,
forging words and lives,
forging the past and the future,
forging the present.

I retrieve from the embers scarred and charred ends
of napalm-coated words, fractured lives and pasts,
atomised futures and presents melting here and now.
I cool them with sighs and tears of brothers and sisters
and fling them, sizzling conundrums, exploding
or rebounding on the granite-faced rock of Kaphirintiwa,
but I hear only cremated echoes of radioactive skeletons.

Echoes of images salvaged
from disremembered shrines;
metaphors of other timeless forges
that weld our present and our future.

3

What the elders said is true:
when the rain sees your dirt,
especially with lice too,
it does not stop.

Yet she who has espoused lightning
does not fear the flashes.

I have seen many rains too:
Napolo found me in the streets.
I sought sanctuary in the shops,
the offices, the church, the school,
but they had all put up the sign:
'Trespassers Will Be Persecuted',
so I walked into the teeth of Napolo,
to a lonely and ancient *nsolo* tree;
I knelt, trembling, in the mud,
and washed my bloodstained *chirundu*;
naked, I squeezed lice between my fingers:
between fingernail and fingernail.

Blood, rain and tears washed over me
and ran in torrents downhill.
I cleansed the knotted corners of my soul,
clogged by lice and clusters of lice eggs;
I shook my hair loose and hurled off
soot, ashes, bats' droppings, and lice;
and my womb quickened with dirges.
I watched torsos of lizards, squashed mice,
entrails of chameleon and cockroach shells
eddying in the whirlpools around me.
And at every lightning flash I could see
the upturned faces of drowned varmints
in the gutters, the sewers, the streams,
swirling past the shops, offices, church doors.
Every lightning flash illuminated me

and the havoc my god had wreaked:
bloated snakes, scorpions, crows, vultures:
dismembered phantoms from Napolo's menagerie
frothing and surging in the furious vortex.

In the aftermath of Napolo,
I emerge from the chaosis
and march down rainbathed pavements
singing on the fingernails of the rainbow.

Obituary

He was a blessing one never prays for –
lightning coming uninvited
while men, women, and children flee
in terror at Mphambe's wrath;
but, once the god has struck
and buried his bolt in the earth,
they rush to the riven place,
claw at its charred remains,
if a tree, at its bark or splinters:
the closer to the thunderbolt,
the more potent the charm.

He was a gift one never utters thanks for –
locusts swarming after the planting rains
while men, women, and children watch
with desperate hearts and raging eyes,
their tender shoots ravished by a horde
of sharp teeth and clicking jaws;
but, once darkness has descended,
run to grab the drooping bodies
and bring home basketfuls of heaven-sent food
from the ravaged greenery after the guests
have laid waste the year's promise.

He stood among us, divine,
listening to our songs,
supervising the rain dances,
receiving our sacrifices
of bull, goat, or cock,
drinking to the dregs
prayers fermenting in beer.

We sang praise songs:
He alone fought the *chidangwaleza*

that haunted the ancestral shrine.
He alone drank the *chilope* from its veins.
He alone shaved Changula's scales.

He sang his own refrains:
I know what broke the elephant's tusks
at the foot of the *dzaye* fruit tree.
I know what shrivelled the feathers
from the old pheasant's head.
He met Napolo head-on.

Four Ways of Dying

The celebrants chanted
to the reluctant martyrs-to-be:
We would have a blood sacrifice!

The Crab's response:
I crawl
in my shell sideways,
 backwards,
 forwards;
Avoid

 direct action on public matters,
 confrontation,
 commitment;

Meander
 to confuse direction or purpose,
 meaning,
 sense;

Squat
 to balance the issues
 weigh,
 consider.

The Chameleon's answer:
Until I have exhausted my wardrobe,
lost my dye to a transparent nothingness,
free of reflection, true to my image,
I'll match my colours with yours,
snake my tongue out to your fears,
bare my teeth to puncture your hopes,
tread warily past your nightmares,
curl my tail round your sanctuaries,
clasp my pincer legs on your veins,
to listen to your heart beat.

The Mole's descent:

Wormlike I build in the entrails of the earth,
fashion intricate passages and halls,
tunnel Utopias and underground Edens,
substitute surface with subterranean vision,
level upon level of meaning of existence,
as I sink downwards in my labyrinth,
to die in a catacomb of my own making.

The *Kalilombe*'s ascent:

The gestation and questioning are over,
I'm restless with impatient foetuses,
belly-full with a profusion of conundrums.
My pilgrimage takes me to the cradle,
the *nsolo* tree, the lie-in of man's hopes.
I grit my teeth, grab the slippery surface
and hoist myself up the nation's trunk.
On the topmost branch I have momentary
possession of eternity whirling in the chaosis,
with the deathsong floating from my lips,
I fling myself down on Kaphirintiwa rock
as multivarious forms of art and life
issue out from the convulsions
of the ruptured womb;
and thus I die.

Derailment: A Delirium

1

I made the pilgrimage again
to the mountain-top to divine
how Napolo parted the waters,
the granite, chunks of earth,
tree trunks, and the skies,
creating the cataclysms
in the mountain, the psyche, and hepatitis.

I drove past my grandmother,
skin stark black under the white dress,
owl glasses glinting in the sunlight,
as I tore past her, waving.
She waved back,
and I wept at ninety miles an hour
wondering: had she got hepatitis too?

On the mountain-top
I parked at the end of the queue,
self-consciously inching my way
to the life-giving waters.
Started and stopped,
knowing the blockage had infected
the blood system, arteries, veins.

Started and stopped,
being careful not to disturb
migrant viruses and zombies.
Started and stopped.
Read a book, smoked, stared around
to count how many zombies
had gone before me,
how many were coming,

starting and stopping,
behind me, praying
I'd get there before
the sacred waters dried up.
Started and stopped.

2

I wanted to talk to the other suppliants
swirling around me like amoebas and viruses,
to deliberate the issues concerning the liver,
the causes and effects of the invasion
and the blockage.

Faces:

maimers of my psyche.

Faces:

'These days I only go out with contractors.'

Faces:

'These girls are really decent
but I guess I'll never convince you.'

Snakes

who had abandoned sloughing
formed a corporation
and now make their own
wash 'n' wear fabrics.

Polecats

bought shares in industry
to increase the pollution explosion.

Crocodiles

swam upstream among the marshes
and launched a tears-by-the-gallon campaign.

Cultists,

infected by moral elephantiasis
(not hepatitis),

preached the brotherhood
of all zombies.

But queueing in a car
is not conducive
to contact and dialogue:
metal and glass walls
block communication and vision,
and all I meet are chromium-plated
forms swimming in exhaust fumes:
cabbage-in-pod existences,
eyes of zombies queueing
at the fountain of life.

3

Now indeed Leza has fled this land.
Only Mphambe reigns toying with man,
and Chiluwe, past master in subterfuge,
brings locusts to the table,
leaving the fields bare;
joy to the mouth,
grief to the soul;
peace to the stomach,
war to the mind.

I think as I start and stop:
Wasn't it you grovelling
at the foot of the *nsolo* tree,
imploring Chauta to tell you
why Napolo had passed here?
Wasn't it you pouring
libations thrice to know
the meaning of the drought?
And should I not now
lift up the loin cloth yet again
from the rafters and ascend the peak

to read from the granite-faced
rock of Kaphirintiwa
the meaning of hepatitis?

But Chiluwe had beaten me to the fountain,
he and his United Witches' Corporation
ganging on his side riding baskets,
hyenas' backs, owls' wings,
and the *nzulule*'s night battle cry.

I paused in my stride:
Had I come back to this?
Hepatitis?

Hepatitis,
that was my enemy
and I didn't know it.
Just think of it:
Hepatitis was not across the border
but right here,
in the liver, within.

I ignored Chiluwe
and proceeded
unafraid
to the life-giving waters.

4

Napolo spoke to me
in the waters regenerating my car:
'What kind of hepatitis, son?'
'Premium, please,' I said trembling.
And I saw hordes of them,
layer upon layer,
amoebas and viruses
debating what to do

with your liver.

Premium or Regular?

Amoebic or Viral?

What is hepatitis?

An administrator

wondering what web to spin
and how far across the room
it should reach?

How do you get hepatitis?

From friends speaking so close
you can count how many drinks
they had last night?

How can you tell the difference?

The colour of their eyes,
the palms or the soles of their feet,
a certain discoloration of the nails
tells they are not pedigree.

(And at night

I see your outline in the doorway;
see through to the liver blockage,
the bile flowing into the bloodstream
like petrol into my car.

Could you move

more centrally in the doorway
so I can see what you've got?
A or B Type?

You passed the doorway again,
three times in one morning,
wearing hepatitis.

I asked at last, innocent-like,
'Each time you pass by

you have a different kind.
 What kind is it this time?
 Viral or Amoebic?
 Premium or Regular?")

And I sat by the phone,
 getting messages from satellites,
 wondering at the same time:
 Do satellites transmit hepatitis?
 Operator, urgent, please,
 I've got to talk to hepatitis.

5

At the fountain-head I stopped and prayed:
 Chauta, I want my kids, the nanny, her kid and sister,
 the sixty-year-old man we call garden-boy,
 all inoculated against hepatitis,
 so their livers don't get blockages,
 their bile doesn't flood the bloodstream,
 so their conjunctivitis doesn't mix with their colds,
 their diarrhoea, pinworm, and their arithmetic;
 so they can sing the national anthem
 in the garden as they play house;
 so it doesn't interfere with their appetite
 as they gather it, running, dancing, and riding
 the only bike, it seems, in the neighbourhood;
 so it doesn't pass on to the CCAP kids
 who, after school, politely enough,
 walk to the front door, in spite of the puppy:
 Could they please pluck off a few guavas
 from the garden, they were hungry?

They are always hungry
 since in the morning they visited
 the tree without asking me.
 Chauta, remember also, I told the kids

they could eat the guavas,
but to be careful with the hepatitis
flowering in the branches on the northern side.
It's infectious: Up to six weeks for the incubation,
up to six months in bed.
No guavas, no school, no dancing, no anthem,
only hepatitis.

Remember, too, watching them go to the tree,
swarming in the branches, even the northern ones,
I wondered how long it would take
to reach their livers.

6

And she came to me floating upon the waters,
limpid in her *chitenje* like an after-swim
spirit-maid of Mulungusi, among the amoebas,
swirling in the chaosis with the viruses.

Napolo spoke to me again above the roar:
'It's the friendly kind,' he said.
He'd give me some nice things
to think about instead of nightmares;
give me some nice things to do, too,
like letting me finger her liver,
trace the bile oozing its way up the arteries,
to see how far it had got.
Like letting me share her hepatitis,
for better or for worse,
and that's being nice, really.
When she comes home again
we can go for a second honeymoon
to a hepatitis-free cottage
by the lake.

She spoke to me through the fumes:
'It's no mystery at all, really.
Only a blockage of the liver,
a fortuitous derailment of the bile
outside the borders of gamma globulin;
the blockage playing havoc with the arteries
that feed the nation; an influx of amoebas and viruses;
something to be laughed away at cocktail parties;
a parliament of amoebas and viruses
assembling in the hostels of our being,
sorting out our livers, rifling our bile,
to see how far we can survive amoeba rights
to live in our liver.
Parasites.
Viruses.'

She ended her message with the usual:
'See you soon, I hope.'
As in the old song, I said:
'In a while, hepatitis.'

Three Songs

Tell me how a spirit dies.
Do worms claw at its flesh?
Spiders maul the skeleton?
And mould grow out of the heap?

The Wandering Spirit

The spirit in sojourn strains in its sanctuary,
musing at the voices riding the crest of the whirlwind.
Go, child, they whisper, but do not linger at the crossroads
when darkness is unsheathed to slay the sun's rays
and the jackal leaves his lair to howl in the wake.

But how was I to know the spirits also walked abroad
when the stars flickered and masked their faces
at the sound of the solitary caller's steps in darkness?
And I, too, clothed in the silken coat of darkness?

I gazed into the eddies of darkness wearing webs of silence
as the waves of night wound a cocoon round my soul
and the sinews of sorrow stretched before me to brood
against the support darkness had wrought and bred.

Does darkness wear mantles of happiness, too,
which, unbuttoned, reveal wreathes of smiles
meeting fellow spirits in the whirlwind?

Yet I would rip these walls,
rend the shrouds to shreds
and leap into the chaosis.

What god, tell me,
would say LET NOT MEN DIE
and give the message to the chameleon?

What god, tell me,
would say LET MEN DIE
and give the message to the lizard?

What man, tell me,
would receive one and reject the other?
What man could cling to both?

Yet I have seen the way strewn with corpses by the roadside;
joy and friendship mangled, abandoned to rot in the bushes;
tortured spirits and broken skeletons weeping in the wind:
arrow points of anguish and clubs of malice hardening the heart
till tumours of fear burst searing notches of dread in the soul.

The Dead

Straining against the shrouds smothering us;
breaking the ropes and mats mooring us;
scattering worms and mould from our rotting flesh;
rupturing mounds and walking the same way
we took when leaving mankind for our resting places,

we march by the shafts of early morning,
piercing the horizon to mingle with the living,
one hand holding man's lump of guilt in a potsherd,
the other carrying branches to fend off flies from the burden.
But what music meets the membrane of our return?

You with the potsherds:
vanish from our sight,
your home is the grave.
Why did you come back?

It is true we died long ago and they buried us.
Alongside our lives they laid also their memory and guilt;
but we had hoped at this hour, this time of reunion,

we would unload our burden and dance, glad of the relief.
Yet their fingers point at us and the song rings in our ears:

You, Mangadzi, and you, Mbona,
return to your graves.

When we swept the dancing site,
we were not singing your names.

We walk back the same way: the only funeral songs
our own anguish, faltering footsteps and buzzing flies;
back to the *nkhadzi* trees burdened with humiliation
at least the earth will not reject us in revulsion,
nor the worms and spiders we abandoned in our coffins.

Come, mould, sprout on the worms breeding under the shrouds
and the spiders weaving knotworks in the wood;
muzzle our mouths forever and let only the jackal howl here.
Come, rot, still our skeletons weeping to the winds overhead;
bury us deeper in our graves and stand guard over the mounds.

The Living.

Emerging from the murky depths of Maravi pool at noon-time,
after drinking the dregs of yesteryear's draught,
I saw Mphambe riding the barbed arrows of lightning,
his flashing eyes beating jagged flame-ways in the firmament,
and each stride scorching the earth beneath him to cinders.

Listening to the lament of the living in the embrace of woe,
I heard the strain smothering the tattoo of the sacred drum.
I did not think after this Mbiriwiri would send more oracles.
Indeed the drum that weeps loudest is soonest burst.
Had I not heard the moaning of the skin at the seams?

Oh, how scarlet-stained the sacred forests of Msinja!
The toilet at Mandevu's grocery-and-bar was knee-deep.
In the aftermath of Mphambe's thunder there was silence,

yet in the silence I saw words sprouting on spearheads
and dancing to the rhythm of demented wardrums.

Words:

tell me what we did in the year of the locusts.
I can't remember.
Don't you remember Napolo?
What is Napolo?

Words:

Promise you won't tell my husband.
Of course not. How could I?
Njala, bwana, tandipatseni
wani tambala yokha, pulizi.

Words:

the shrine at Msinja has no verandah or eaves;
how can I seek refuge even in the shadows
of the granite-faced imprints of Kaphirintiwa?
So lend me a hoe to dig myself a sanctuary.

I heard the python crowing at the rainbow's earthing,
and saw him painting the archway red, yellow, and blue,
and I wondered how a spirit dies: Do worms claw at its flesh,
spiders maul the skeleton, and mould grow out of the heap?
The voices whispering in the whirlwind scorn mortality.

Of Promises and Prophecy

Prologue

Tomorrows reactivate somnolence,
todays perpetuate inertia
yesterdays diffuse dismembered hopes:
the eternal miasma of zombies,

smeared in disco lights,
lacerated with reggae sounds,
groping in the darkness between
the tavern, bar and rest house:

progress punctuated by puddles
of vomit, sweat, beer and wine,
the whore's smile and the thug's
demand for a light or else.

1

No, they shall not have the truth
for facts are explosives
in anonymous brown bags,
exploding between the fingers,
blowing reality into oblivion.

Let the few remaining honest souls
still roaming dangerously abroad
be lured again into the folds
of festering falsehood.

Let common knowledge become
the property of the minority
and mystification be manna
and hyssop for the masses.

And so, after taking some
for one or two rides
let us recede into the citadels
of silence and feed the people
with more lines of lies.

And under the shroud of silence
let retrospection unroll the map,
trace the tracks of introspection
to pinpoint where the derailment
and mass burial of truth took place.

2

No, don't jog memory any more,
let it coil as harmless
as a puff-adder until it's stepped upon;
only add more fuel to the amnesia,
programmed inertia and somnolence.

Let the few tumescent egos still around
mass-produce psychic onanism,
pack them into portable and compact
shapes that will fit into trunks, cases,
bags, pocket-books and passports
saleable at the next port of entry.

Educate the masses with new tools
of ideological bio-feedback
irrigate their drought-stricken spirits with
technological fried-while-you-starve,
computerised mind-swopping, malaise,
anomy, and emotional dehydration.

Arm the beggars, vagrants, peasants
with transistorised pleas, canned laughter;
mesmerise the workers with videotaped leisure,

press-gang local witches into astronauts,
cauterise hope, desire, and memory.

Where are the great plans now?
Where the blueprints?
What is the programme?
What now?

Epilogue

Shall I destroy the citadel
and rebuild it in three days?
Three days in which will rise
a monolith of groans, gasps and gashes
that are mouths screaming silent,
soul-searing, razor-sharp agony?

Three days in which will sprout
a luxurious green gold garden
with patches of Marinas, Mazdas,
Fiats, Fords, Buicks, and Benzes?

Armed with a multi-pronged plan
Man-Against-Self-and-Society (MASS)
I descended from the mountain-top
with a blueprint of self-raising ideology,
improved-me conditions,
modern methods of mass-hypnosis,
and broke the citadels of silence.

The Suppliants

By Napolo's Hole

Now that Napolo's sojourn is nearly over,
the submerged cataclysms about to begin,
Napolo's revisititation hangs
like a crimson halo over the land
and the suppliants pray:

We implore you:
keep him slumbering
under the counterpane of the waves.

See his eyes searing
the waters from the great depths.
Already he has unfurled his giant claws.

See how he erupted
from the bowels of the mountain.
Look at the wounds on the granite face.

Grant us our wish:
that we may sleep knowing
we shall pray again tomorrow.

Virginal blood, sinew, and flesh
were scattered at the mouth of the hole;
parts were flung into the womb of the earth;
and, as an afterthought, a few entrails
followed after disentangling themselves
from the jagged edges to sink out of sight.

By the Waters

The suppliants' adulations
convoluted above the panegyrics of the waves,

cavorted clear of the blue of the waters
and reverberated against the granite face:

You who walk with giant strides
in the sinews of the raindrops;
You who dance with serpentine steps
in the convulsions of lightning;
You who sharpen your steely claws
in the teeth of thunder;

We greet you
in grief;
We salute you
in sorrow;
We bow
in pain.

Take the tethered goat
bleating in the sun.
Drink the frothing beer
under the *nsolo* tree.
Eat the hot food prepared
in spite of the army worms.

The Call

I came wearing the suppliants' call,
hovering over the branches of the *nsolo*,
footsteps blurred under the blue-green waters
as the sun sank behind the mountain,
leaving shadows impaled on the leaves and beaches.

I walked along the sand and the pebbles
on the brink of another cataclysmic crack,
the wet roar around me washing my shadow clean:
I must retrace the way of my forebears
to Kaphirintiwa, the cradle of mankind.

I must retrace the way of my forebears,
a basketful of spirits under my arm
as a tabernacle for posterity.
I must return to my mountain abode
with the exiled spirits.

rs,

Chingwe's Hole Revisited

I

Move your feet a little, dear rock,
as I squat in your shade.
Let me touch your petrified roots
in the aftermath of Napolo,
and gaze at chaosis in Chingwe's hole.
I reach out and the rock shrinks back,
quaking mimosa-like,
only to unfurl itself again
when I'm my shadow's length away.

Like a medicine-man in the moonlight,
hunting for a virulent root
hidden under the scaly claws
of Changula on the craggy face
of the mountain, I wore amulets
and notched tattoos
in the interfaces of memory
as a preamble to my peregrinations.

I moved among the debris, sherds and bones,
poked fingers into the myth-infested crevices,
cocked an ear to the birdsong in a *nsolo* tree
on the banks of a pool nearby.
(They say the chemical composition of the redness
in the water is no longer a mystery,
considering oxidation, and all that.)

What do I seek in this ancient place?
 Chiluwe, the mystifier? Changula?
 Images in a potsherd?
 Cremated echoes of radioactive myth?
 What do I want from this brainchild
 of tired tourists?

(This poem should be written on one hundred per cent
 recycled paper.
 It is only recycled myth written by a recycled poet
 twice removed.)

2

I sat by the edge of Chingwe's Hole,
 listening to the truncated refrains
 hovering uncertainly in the crannies.
 Chameleon-eyed, I surveyed the streams
 drained from their sources,
 laying bare silt, roots, boulders,
 and channels of mystification.

(When contradictions unravel the strands
 of lies we have so carefully knit,
 when webs of silence wear so thin
 migrant spiders abandon their flies,
 chameleons also lose their dye:
 you can see their innards.)

How tiny the rock of Kaphirintiwa looks now
 from the edge of the plateau!
 It hadn't seemed that small
 even from the top floor of Delamere House.

(We must move the unformed rock, they said,
 to another place;
 before the afforestation, you know. Detonations.
 Just imagine a thousand pieces of exploded ore
 and lore
 floating
 whirling
 eddying
 down the slopes

d per cent
 poet

enough to make professors, urchins, street vendors
 sneeze in the valley below.

Indeed, I was caught in the fallout too.
 Perhaps when the dust settles, I will mark the spot:
 The rock of Kaphirintiwa landed here.
 Under whose hands was the rock moved, you ask?)

Itinerant *kalilombe* are rare these days;
 their parturition songs sound faint too,
 especially so far away from home,
 computing their *kwacha*, lives, and hopes,
 programming their virtues to show their young
 how it was before I moved the rock, myself.

(Sometimes I wake up at night terrorised by a question:
 Is schizophrenia hereditary?
 Will it pass on to my children like genes, *et cetera?*)

3

History covered Chingwe's Hole
 with fungal inspiration
 delivered in packages labelled:
 psychoses ready-made;
 traumas made-to-measure;
 paid for as an intellectual piece
 of ritual protection
 against the perception of reality.

The truth lay in the abyss of the hole,
 plummeted over the precipice,
 bounced against
 the outgrowths,
 reverberating
 in the jagged psyche.

Chingwe's Hole assaulted me
 out of the lethargy of apathy;
 paralysed me with probes
 in the crevices of the mind;
 flagellated the prostrate self
 to a nightmarish mass of bio-feedback
 anticipating the ultimate.

I tossed in the chaosis of the whirlwind,
 sped on, whirling, a particle in an electronic nightmare,
 pursued by zombies riding the phosphorescent backs
 of the city lights below.

I got concussion at the crossroads,
 short-circuited by a wayward current
 (Press Button B To Reactivate)
 plugged to the centri- or the petrifugal
 forces of someone else's dream.

The zombies prised me open,
 parting the strands of my own dream,
 draining out globules of images,
 dislodging rooted recollections,
 and displayed them:
 one phantasm to another.

I writhed and gyrated, a displaced foetus
holding fast to the chaosis
on the back of the whirlwind.

(Rock, please, let me hold your knee.
I don't want to die, yet.)

4

I was lured to the shade of the rock
by Chiluwe's arts and lullabies;
Chiluwe, performing frenetic dances on the rock,
waiting for Napolo to surface from the womb of the earth.

When Napolo bent an elbow,
placed stony fingers on the stubble of his chin;
and when the valley hoisted her flanks
to meet the craggy gaze of the prodigal above,
yearning for another visit to the shimmering waters
of the lake below;

The three thousand feet of sinuous thrill
tilted on unbalanced shoulders
renting shrouds,
rupturing wombs,
razing shrines,
raking wounds,
as the cataclysm
ground his subterranean peregrinations
in the convulsions of Mulungusi
to sojourn in the ripples of the lake.

And when Napolo, eternal, bloodied,
ancient chaosis,

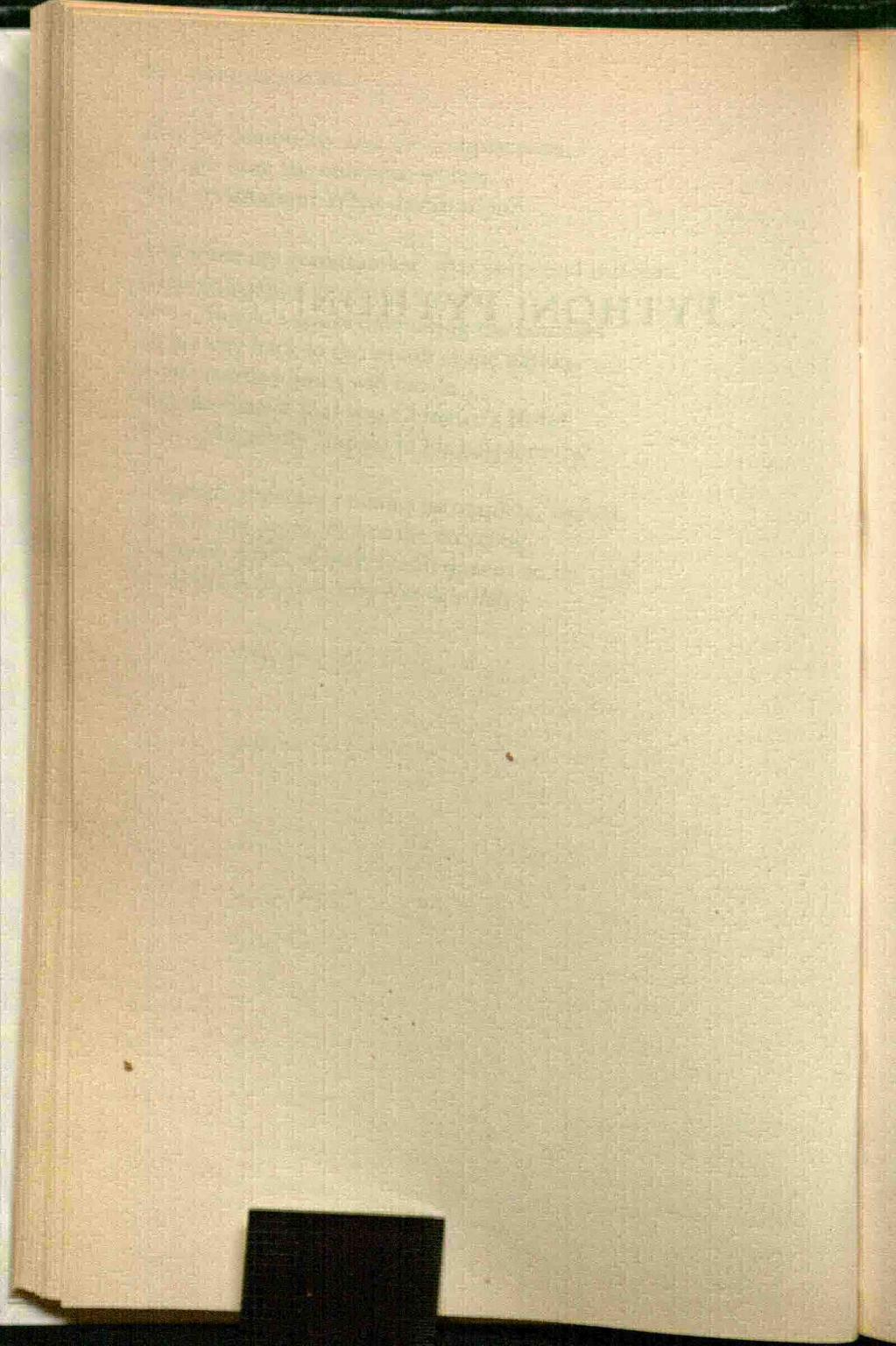
after the complicity and the complacency,
emerges from the oblivious waters,
what revisititation? What devastation?

And when my grandmother, that perpetual watcher,
(Napolo is going to return, son.)
hears Napolo's scales detonating the boulders
on his way back to the womb of the nation,
whose startled limbs will hurtle
into the chaosis that was Chingwe's Hole?
What will petrify Napolo in his hole forever?

(Napolo's itinerary remains incomplete, you see.
So does my poem. Hence the recycling.
Chiluwe, mischief-maker, still dances on the rock
sending his shadow into *Napolo's Hole*.)

PYT

PYTHON! PYTHON!



DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Only the most important human characters from legend, myth or history in the poem are listed here.

Chamdothe a child moulded from clay, according to a folk story by that name

Changamire the first scout who sighted Kaphirintiwa and recommended the Mang'anja under Undi Chirindzodzwe settle there. He is reputed to be the one who fought the fierce Batwa and sent their heads back to Undi, for which he was promoted to the first Karonga

Chilembwe John Chilembwe, the leader of the 1915 uprising

Chiluwe mythical half-human, half-spirit who challenges wayfarers to a wrestling match. If he loses, he shows the victor the secret herbs of the forest. If he wins, he kills the loser

Chingale son of Undi

Chirindzodzwe see also *Undi*. Name given to former king(s) of the Maravi/Mang'anja people

Kandilowa literally, substitute rain priestess

Kaphwiti son of the last Undi/brother of the present Undi

Karonga military commander

Lundu king or chief

Makemvula literally, mother of the rains

Makewana literally, mother of all children

Malemia chief messenger of the paramountcy; literally, walking until tired

Mandevu name of a person

Mangadzi rain priestess

Mbewe a male of the Mbewe clan

Mbona rain priest. Founder of the Nsanje shrine; literally, he who sees

Mlauli seer or prophet, also rain priest in the poem; literally, he who utters strange things

Mwari a rain priestess of the Mankhamba shrine

Nabanda a female of the Banda clan

Namanthango snotty, lousy brother of a folk story by that name,

who saved his sister from being eaten by her monster husband
by fashioning a flying spinning top

Naphiri a female of the Phiri clan

Napolo see Preface on page ix

Nyangu sister of Undi

Salima wife of Mbona at the Nsanje shrine, or head female
keeper or functionary of Mbona; literally, one who does not
hoe in the gardens

Undi son of Chirindzodzwe and the current paramount king of
the Mang'anja. Inherited chieftainship of the Mang'anja

THE PANTHEON

Only Mang'anja, Nyanja and Chewa terms mentioned in the
poem are listed here.

Chauta goddess in the rainbow

Chisumphi god in the whirlwind or storm wind. Also title of the
rain priest of the Chisumphi cult

Chiuta god in the rainbow

Leza god in rain

Mphambe god in lightning

Mulungu (Lungu) supreme god

Namalenga god the creator

PLACE NAMES

Bunda Hill in Lilongwe, where the Chewa smoked out the
Batwa or Kafula from the caves to exterminate them

Chingwe's Hole on Zomba Mountain, a deep shaft variously used
as a burial place or place of punishment. Bodies were thrown
into the hole and came out in the Namitembo (River of
Corpses)

Delamere House one of the tall buildings in Blantyre City

Dzalanyama in Lilongwe; literally, full of animals

Dzambawe in the southern region of Malawi, the place where
Mbona sojourned. He planted a strain of rice which cannot
grow anywhere else. The imprints of his body and spears are

said to be seen where he reclined to drink water from a well he had scooped out with his hands

Hora Mountain in Mzimba, where the Ngoni starved the rebel Tonga to death

Kaphirintiwa reputedly where the first beings of creation landed. When the rock hardened, the footprints remained. Its location changes with each version; literally, the soft or yielding hill

Lilongwe a river in the district of that name

Mpata-wa-Milonde the pass in the central region of Malawi where the Chewa ambushed the Ngoni

Msinja the original rain shrine of the Chewa

Mulanje the highest mountain in Malawi, in the district of that name

Mulunguzi a river in Zomba district

Mwanalilenji any land of plenty, or land of milk and honey; literally, what can a child cry for when it has everything it needs?

Ndione Pool the sacred pool where Mboma's body was thrown; literally, let me see

Nkhulubvi the sacred forest where Mboma's head was thrown

Nyakalambo the fabled forest where all creation lived harmoniously without preying upon others

Nyamidzere Stream the river that was formed from Mboma's blood

Nyika mountain in the northern region of Malawi

Shire the largest river in Malawi

Songwe the northernmost river, in Karonga district

Zomba the second highest mountain in Malawi, in the district of that name

Prologue

The ancient bards break the long silence
of the gravestones to sing of the granite-face
of Kaphirintiwa, the cradle of warring mankind,
how the engraved rocky imprints were cracked
by cataclysms caused by rebellious pythons.

I take the authority from the unsealed lips
of the old seers to sing of the rejected son
who created the Kaphirintiwa of the south
renowned from Msinja to Nsanje as the python.

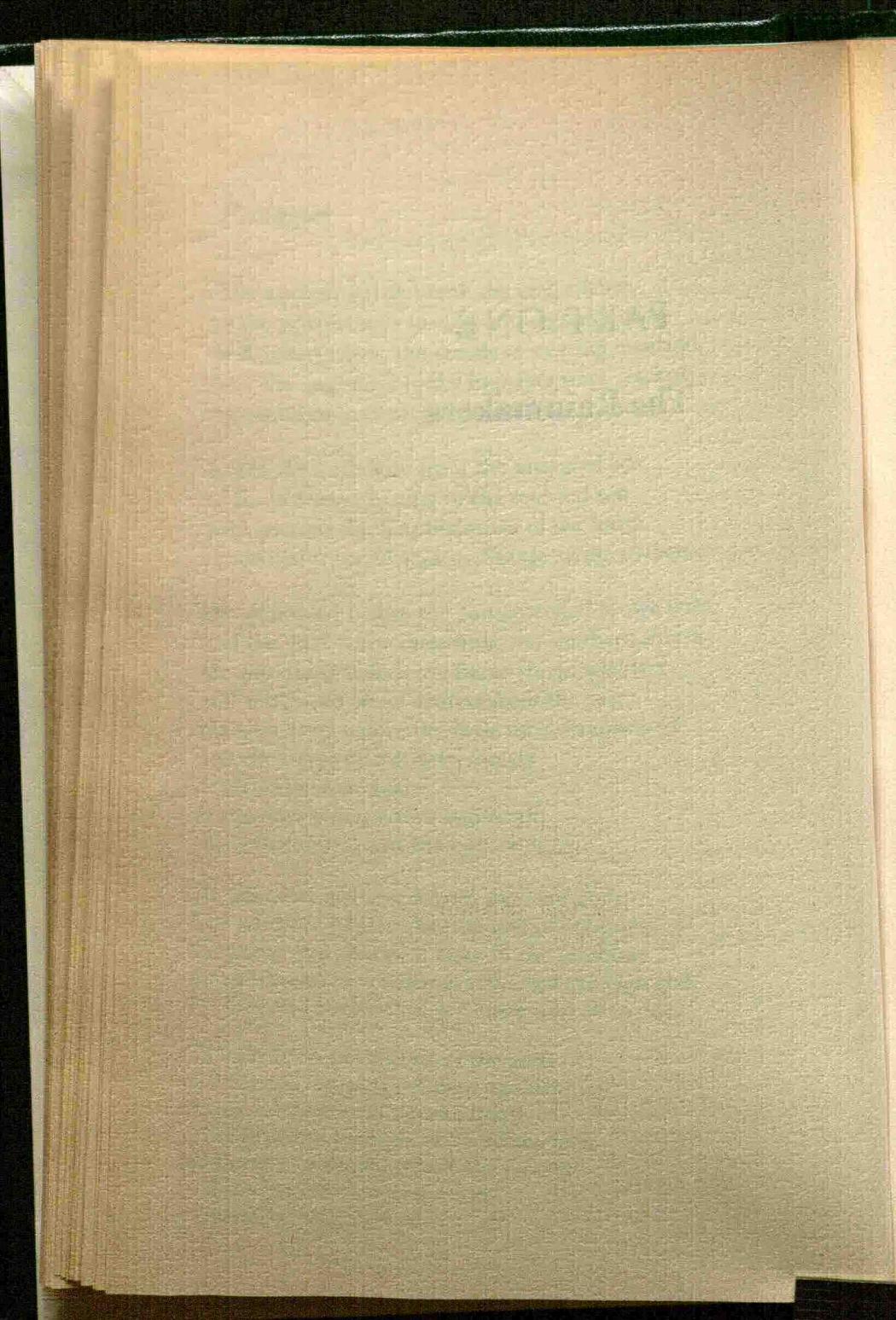
He who lived before the sun-scorched brown ones
and the cold white ones from the southern shores.
He who lived before the fierce shield wielders
and the proud slave dealers from the east.
He who lived before the little men disappeared
into the caves or the deep forests
never to be seen again,
in the days when crows had teeth
and you could count the hair of mice.

He who was fashioned from different gods:
The wrath of Mphambe, the god of lightning;
the peace and charm of Leza in the rainbow;
the grace and benevolence of Lungu the high god;
the fury and turbulence of Chisumphi all in one.

He who knew the secrets of the gods
and the evil workings of man against man
and he who became himself finally
a victim of the schemes of his fellow men
only to die triumphant and live forever
in the minds of men as the new
Python! Python! Python!

PART ONE

The Rainmakers



Mlauli's Rain Dance

Shimmering mirages
mutated into nothingness.
Pulsating heat waves
cavorted around the singing supplicants
into the pitiless sun
dancing and sweating in the searing heat.

The scorching noon sun
beat bare backs and breasts
and the merciless dust
burnt like cinders skin
soles, toes and heels.

And the supplicants sang:

*The Shrine at Msinja
has no eaves:
Where shall I
seek refuge?*

The dust swirled into open mouths,
distended nostrils, panting chests
trying to get more air to cool
the parched throats and the lungs chanting:

*Let me hold on tightly
to Chiuta's staff
lest I lose it.*

Skins gleamed
in the processional march
as dust covered drops of music
tossed off gyrating waists,
clapping chapped hands
and stomping cracked feet
to roll as if aimlessly,
yet to splash drolly

on the supplicants' heels,
chanting the plaintive rhythm
as they drew nearer and nearer
to the sacred rain shrine.

Walk, Mlauli, rain dancer.
Let the winds toss your hair skyward
Black fire riding the crest
of the whirlwind above.

Stride, Mlauli, the dancing arena
is all yours today.
Hear the *kamango* drum
beating the sacred tattoo
on taut animal skin.

Mlauli led the rain song
and danced the old steps,
the *mgwetsa* had started.
Mlauli danced in triangles
rectangles and parallelograms,
twisting, turning, jumping,
prancing, lunging, hopping,
tracing, retracing and extending
the patterns his feet had made:

At Msinja
the maize has dried up:
Rain, wash away!
Give me water,
the heart is parched.
Rain, wash away!

Feet sizzled on the hard ground,
Toes toasted in the dry dust
as the dance and song climaxed:

From which little cloud
will the rain fall?

But alas! Not even
as large as a mouse
hovered over the
expectant, upturned

Let's run!

Let's run!

There was no rain
from the sacred clouds
for the pitiless sun
in the empty sky.

Disbelief swirled
uneasy feet shrank
anxious eyes cast
apprehensive glances
as misery knit

In times past
should have seen
hiding the cattle
a volley of stones
cascaded on them
sinking deep
as stupendous
into balls of fire
as large as mountains
pulverising them.

Mlauli resummed
and led the dance.
He looked about
in the dry dust
one arm twirling
the other dancing
next, legs spread
in the opposite

But alas! Not even a cloud
as large as a mosquito's wing
hovered over the supplicants'
expectant, upturned faces:

Let's run! Run! Run!

Let's run! Run! Run!

There was no need to flee
from the sacred arena or grove
for the pitiless sun shone on
in the empty sockets of the skies.

Disbelief swirled in the dust storms,
uneasy feet shifted from left to right,
anxious eyes exchanged grave looks,
apprehensive hands clapped doubtfully,
as misery knitted the brows of the supplicants.

In times past, gargantuan billowing clouds
should have streaked silver,
hiding the earth in one black mantle of darkness;
a volley of solid water would have
cascaded on their running feet
sinking deeper and deeper into the mud
as stupendous drops of rain rolled themselves
into balls on the ground and pounding hailstones
as large as *mateme* thudded around their ears,
pulverising stones, grass and trees in their wake.

Miauli resumed his rain dance
and led the elders the second time.
He looked as if he was swimming
in the drought-stricken air:
one arm twitching upward,
the other downward behind him;
next, legs split as he did a twist
in the opposite direction,

squatted on his haunches
 in mid-air to land several feet away;
 then, frog-fashion, leapt backward
 as if to catch himself
 before he fell down;
 then projected himself forward again
 to settle on one leg, arms aloft,
 completing the four points:
 north, east, south, west,
 with his *kandranga*, rain dagger:

This little one?
That little one?
From which little cloud
will the rain fall?

Mlauli's gyrations grew faster,
 more desperate and unrestrained.
 His face twisted in tortuous contortions,
 Teeth bared in a ghastly grimace.
 In his exertions he seemed to discard
 his limbs as one time only a head was seen,
 another a leg or an arm or a shoulder,
 until only his torso could be seen
 spinning as if ready to rocket himself heavenward
 to bring the rain himself to the land:

Let's run! Run! Run!
Let's run! Run! Run!

But only hot and dry dust
 clung to dehydrated eyelids
 as the supplicants scanned again
 the empty skies devoid
 of an answering cloud
 or drop of rain.
 Dry eyelashes scraped eyeballs
 but there were no tears falling
 over the last hope of rain.

Fatigue shook Mlauli.
 Bitterly he readied
 and knew fear again.
 What, will the rain come?
 What kind of rain?
 Had he not observed
 Or had he announced
 that, unbending, they
 their children?

He quivered in
 bleeding at the
 How many dead
 in his people?
 How many perished?
 How many missing?
 at the battle-field?
 Was he in the
 from which he
 to the *pwata!*
lakata! lakata!
 amidst thundering

Mlauli thought
 of dancing flocks
 and his soul
 as he saw him
 taken from
 wrests the
 from a van-

Mlauli left
 to wear the
 in the bosom
 and the eyes.
 'The spirit
 but on who

Fatigue shook Mlauli's legs.
Bitterly he read the skies again
and knew fear and humiliation:
What, will the clouds not form?
What kind of betrayal is this?
Had he not observed all the rituals?
Or had he annoyed the ancestral spirits
that, unbending, they would not save
their children in their time of need?

He quivered inwardly with self-doubt,
bleeding at the anguish of the failure.
How many droughts had he staved off
in his people's living memory?
How many pestilences had he lifted?
How many miracles had he performed
at the battle-front and on death-beds?
Was he in the middle of a horrorama
from which he would wake up
to the *pwata! pwata!* of rain,
lakata! lakata! of hail stones,
amidst thunder and lightning?

Mlauli thought of the disgrace
of dancing for the third time,
and his soul shuddered
as he saw his sacred trust
taken from him as an enemy
wrests the offensive weapon
from a vanquished warrior.

Mlauli left the dancing arena
to wear the burden of his doom
in the bosom of his favourite wife,
and the elders pronounced sadly:
'The spirits of our fathers have abandoned Mlauli
but on whose shoulders have they alighted?'

Rain must fall. We need rain
in our parched gardens and souls.'

The *kamango* drum slowed down and fell silent.
The supplicants trooped home, heads down
like oversized baobab fruit.
Vicious satirists' verses sang of the reverse
in the universe, lampooning Mlauli.
Tuneful malice that circled and settled
metrical stabs in the potsherds
under the eaves and in the granaries;
gibes that lacerated the dry heat around.

Mlauli's odes laced with vitriol
singed sympathisers' ears as the minstrels
whistled and hummed their stinging verses
that smattered the compounds and became
mixed with the perverse gossipmongers' converse
that flayed the failed Mlauli without reserve.

And so Lundu, Undi and Kaphwiti,
Karonga, Malemia and the elders sat in council
'It is clear,' Lundu said, 'that the spirits
of the ancestors have withdrawn
from Mlauli. These self-same spirits
we know, however, have descended on someone
amidst us. Maybe on his nephew, Mbona.
I would like us to approach Mbona and give him
a chance to perform the *mgwetsa* tomorrow.'

In days past, when the python had failed
we used to have substitutes. We would ask
Kandilowa to come and dance for us.
But her success is not always assured.
If she failed we then went to beg for rain
from Makemyula, mother of rain herself,
and if we were lucky we would have it.

But we need
We have not
We still hope
If not him, t
Do you agree

Mbona's

Chief Lundu
and announced
have settled
Mbona ans
alight on the
Since I wa
My playm
have const
I was only
of my mot
and not be

Chief Lundu
the nephews
Mbona s...
Everyone
and you
But you
that kno...
Lundu r...
because
All we c...
and he ...
your me...
Who he...
What h...
All we...
And w...
now is

But we need not resort to that.
We have not exhausted ourselves.
We still hope Mlauli's apprentice can save us.
If not him, then one of his sons at least.
Do you agree that we should approach Mbona?

Mbona's Rain Dance

Chief Lundu and the elders came to Mbona
and announced: 'The spirits of our fathers
have settled upon you, our son. Save us.'
Mbona answered: 'How can the spirits
alight on the bastard son of Kaphirintiwa?
Since I was born I have never known my father.
My playmates, Mlauli's sons,
have constantly reminded me of the fact.
I was only apprenticed to Mlauli because
of my mother, Nyangu, his sister,
and not because of my unknown father.'

Chief Lundu was patient: 'It is our custom –
the nephew is tutored by his uncle always.'
Mbona still asked: 'But who was my father?
Everyone knows their father except me,
and you the elders of the tribe know him.
But you and my mother have hidden
that knowledge from me, strangely enough.'
Lundu responded: 'Seek not to know,
because we cannot give you the answer.
All we can say is that your father came
and he went. When he went away
your mother had you thereafter.
Who he was we cannot tell.
What he was we do not know.
All we know is that he made you.
And we are telling you that
now is the time to fulfil your mission.'

Mbona asked: 'And what is my mission?'
 Lundu explained: 'You are the next
 rainmaker, the python-priest, after Mlauli.'

Mbona was not moved: 'Which sons
 of Mang'anja will accept an illegitimate son
 as their rainmaker? A python from the bush?'
 Lundu persisted: 'We do not, as you know,
 by custom trace our ancestry as others do,
 through our fathers, but our mothers.
 You are of Nyangu, Mlauli's sister.
 Both are true children of Undi,
 the same Undi Chirindzodzwe,
 the great founding father
 of the Mang'anja. He who brought us
 all the way from Urundi, Tanganyika,
 to Songwe and then down to Kaphirintiwa.
 You are the true descendant of Undi.'

Mbona was not convinced: 'How can I,
 a mere apprentice of the same Mlauli,
 succeed where he failed? The great rainmaker?'
 Lundu pointed out: 'Even in your childhood
 you showed signs of greatness. Listen:
 You made clay toys, they came to life.
 Even in your apprenticeship, son,
 you were quick to learn where your cousins,
 Mlauli's sons, were slow.
 You were so quick you outshone the master.
 Even Mlauli was afraid of you, son.
 Even Mlauli knew that one day soon
 he would have to fold his legs to let
 the youth pass. Now is the time to pass.'
 Mbona still argued: 'What if I fail?
 How do I know the spirits are with me?'

Lundu concluded: 'You will not fail
but you will only know the answer
tomorrow, there at the rain dance:
Whether or not your forefathers' spirits
are with you, our son. Indeed, all of us.'

Mbona declared: 'Very well, then,
to ensure the success of the venture
this is what you must do: Tomorrow
let every son and daughter be locked up.
Observe what I tell you strictly
or you will see worse disasters
than you have already gone through.'

That evening, every child listened
to the story of Chamdothe, the clay child,
who disobeyed his mother and was punished
by dissolving back into the clay he came from.
The story was told to warn the children,
the sons and daughters of Kaphirintiwa,
to obey Mbona's instructions to stay away
from the *mgwetsa* rain dance tomorrow.

Mbona in the setting sun fashioned his rainmaking tools,
the likes of which no son of the soil had ever seen:
the four shafted horns of the rainmaking tail
from the bull zebra. Each horn had its potion:
the bark of the *mucoloka* taken from the eastern side,
the root of the *ndzaza* dug during the *nkokalupsya*,
and from the *mpondanyama* dug in the last rains,
and from the *sefentha*, the grass that smokes the rains away.
These he burnt, ground and mixed with the *mtsaisi*
to make a potent *nsupa* for bringing the rains.
This he strapped to his waistband made of crocodile skin,
tying together the leather skirt from skins
of *ngoma*, *chipembere*, *mkango* and *nyalugwe*.

He tattooed his face, arms and chest with the charcoal
from the charred splinters of a lightning-struck tree
mixed with the oil from the eyes of a monitor lizard.

He sharpened the *kandanga* in the midnight moon,
facing the east while he himself was naked of clothes.
The double blades glowed, flashed fire and pulsated
as he unsheathed the knife lest he unleash the lightning
too soon, before the morrow's noonday dance.

He unloosened his hair so that it swept the skies
in all directions like the scudding rain clouds.

Lastly he ascended the granite face of Kaphirintiwa
and addressed the ancestral spirits till morning.

'You who have been here before us and the founders,
only through you can we know Chiuta's will
and what he has for us his children on earth.

You are invisible yet you are all around us and see us
in our hearths, harvests, huts and hearts,
by the wayside, by the fields and the riverside,
by the forest paths and by our own doorways.

Let your wishes be manifest in your son tomorrow.'

And Mbona in a half-sleep that was no sleep
his ancestors heard but he did not call out.

They did not call out, but all the same he heard
and this is what Mbona saw in his no-sleep:

Makewana, the mother of children, steering the rock.
By her side was Mwari, the little-known one.

Undi Chirindzodzwe strode in front of the women
and they all said: 'We all know you, son of Nyangu.

You do not step with unhallowed feet upon our bones.
We now sit and listen to what you have to say.'

Mbona said farewell to the granite-faced imprints,
descended from the mountain in full rainmaking regalia,
walked majestically to the sacred arena, singing:

*Chisumphi has come!
Chiuta, let him loose!*