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Madiba
(Sonnets on and around the Long Walk to Freedom)

I
Stepping away from the podium
Where he swore allegiance to freedom

He faced the multitude, an old man
Made young to the span

Of years it took the sun to rise
And melt the mist, make wise

The rainbow's all-inclusive colours.
The millennial tears, the vapours

Of death that stalked house and street
Had fled the skin of easy meat.

He looked again at the multitude
Gathered today not for the plentitude

Of anger to share, bury or explode
But to witness a new world unfold.

II
And he threw out his arms, charmed
The air as he sang the banned
Kaffir song of terror, now anointed
Anthem in open air, as he appointed

The moment to memory's pain and pleasure:
'Dance with me, Luthuli, dance the pure

Motive of those early years. Dance
With me, stars of Sharpeville, lance

In hand against a false tongue. Come Biko
Match my steps with a powered tango.

Join the enchanted wind and sway -
You who died dancing in Soweto -

this day

Is not blood and bullet but mothers' kisses
On the waiting cheek, answers and teases?'

III
'And you, O you Chris Hani
Gun on shoulder, dance with me.

As one soldier to another, you know
That graves are the last altar, no obstacle

To the meeting of old boots
When truce has sealed all truths

Canvassed with the readiness of blood.
The malevolent plot sought a flood

Of fury to bind your labour, your MK
And your people to the burning lake, a way

Cold and desperate to stem the uncoloured tide
Of this day. So dance, Hani, with what wide

Smile that steeled the weakest heart
And mined hatred's cushioned mat.

IV
In the secluded arms of Mvevo
He followed the faintest echo

Of a solitary bird from veld to kraal
Absorbing the lay of the land, until the call

Of milk matured on window sill
Guided home his truant skill.

Nature or nurture, a rebellious bearing
Passed from father to son. Rearing

Cattle at Umtata, or with bruised ankle,
Learn'd at play to serve honour in battle.
He sat at the white palace in Mqhekezweni
And burnished into shepherd, statesman and impi
To face the dangers of a blunt world. Foreskin shed, he would man as time crawled.

What may take the gentlest gradient
Home to water. Leaves ardent

Oh the lushest branch in the sun
Wave to every wind. After the corn

Ripest and sweetest with mischief is eaten
(And odes to manhood's stolen pig written)

An honest man must take his spear
Draw his own blood to wear

The coat of courage. Standing alone
Where before the crowd emboldened the stone

He took the first step at Fort Hare
Bled his wound on the bare
And bitter road of invisible gain
To build a fortress for private pain.

From snare to trap, danger marked his road.
He would not wed with royal fiat. A toad

Leaping from the burning bush
Encountered the python's supreme push

For food. The city of light
Darkened near the distant view. Night

And day passed on a patchwork suit.
His sleeping-rooms mocked a suite.

Midnight's melting candles pined
For books in wax of love's rarest kind.

His blistering feet found the road to Sisulu.
He saw the naked sun burn them all - Zulu

Xhosa, Coloured, Indian - and light
The fires for the first communal fight.
plots
They would tell treason from
meat in pots.
IX
Lilies' or poplars' leaves, none
could proffer
Eternal cover. At Rivonia the
tougher
Road ahead was mapped. The
voice of peace
Silenced with a naked fist found
its lease.
Gun would answer gun, sabotage
would stalk
The breeding-ponds of prejudice:
Walk
The mile with me, if you wish:
MK
Shall throw burning spears in the
fray.
 Puny these arms, but forged in the
moral furnace
They shall double the victories of
your race
Machine. This choice we wake,
the knowledge
Of the cherished blood to flow.
Pushed to the edge
We heed the head, our hearts
renouncing the act',
So the first commander, anointing
the fact.
X
He mended rags in prison with
equal care
As a mender of hearts: what the
hands dare
Touch is human labour. Old
mailbags that shunned
Their anxious letters, he and his
comrades turned
Waterbags for the news-thirst of
the torturer.
They broke rocks, mined lime to
better
The world denied them in and out
of prison.
Forbidden the open air, they
called a meeting
Wherever wind or smuggled note could fool
The warder. Perched on a hurried stool
The High Organ revived battle and the ANC
Nourished on the rich diet of Mqhekwezeni
He held court, turning the eyes of all
To the common foe, to apartheid's fall.
XI
Even he would be startled by the harvest.
Father in jail, children broke thirst.
Drinking rage in every cup. He who taught
Defiance was rattled by the lesson caught:
They would stamp the earth, their earth
With a loud voice and a firm foot. And let
Regulations answer to order. 'Stand before
An Officer?' 'What for?' 'Whose law?'
He saluted the new epoch: 'Oh crocodiles
Of the white river, who kept police files
For men with lighted candles, look to them
In the coming conflagration. Raise the
anthem,
The seed grew even in thorny ground.
We will nourish the wild shoots found.'
XII
The years, the year ... Robben marked
Them with hammer on stone. Nothing
sparked
Heat. The island segregated hate.
Made monks of married men. Delivered late
The awaited letter came at last from the
censor -
A paper sieve, salutation the lone survivor.
The nights, the nights, long on cold
Floor. No embrace to unfold
The heart wound full by walls and worry.
He warmed his cell with her picture. Memory
Stoked alive embers of the last kiss.
He would rub nose with her, make this
Daily mime light the fire of the first time.
His prison-garden fruits found his rhyme.
XIII
Nights into days. The years had rounded toes
And fingers in the first count. Even foes
Found the repeating time uneasy joy.
Holy fury threatened another Troy.

In township and mine, marching feet
Saw a tank and dug a pit.

The slow hand of time had suffered
A stroke, moved with ill-tempered

Pace to rust the lock. How many
tides?
Infested waters rose and fell. And
tides
Weathered weed, piled the bank with
shoal.
War at stalemate, so seemed the goal.

Pressed by heavy walls into his secret
self
He climbed the cliff to place his dream
on shelf.

XIV
There are no dead ends, only the
birthplace
of horizons. Plumbered with the bold
mace

New roads arise to the dance hall
Rivers sweep to the flowers' whorl.

It is the false prophet speaks oracles
And hides from storms in tabernacles.

He had dared storms, now he would be
The storm. He set upon the lonely

Task of prime maker of the road to freedom,
Ploughing a plot for all in the new kingdom.

Decades of talking to stone had spawned faith -
Dry bones would live. Too long now the wait

Wise maidens' lamps had exhausted the oil.
So he summoned his jailers for the last toil.

XV
Breaking through the dark forest, he saw only
The high branch. Pledge to life wholly
Lived, he would not gather dead wood.
He purged his heart of its bitter food -
He needed no victory, only the satisfaction
Of hope: 'Now we may judge action
Outside the blinding flash of war;-
The child will sleep tonight. A mirror
Will prove the mother's smile. Men Will spend evenings with their children.

Laughter, at last, tickles the stern lips.
Oh, grass is green again. The orchard steeps

With fruit. In the cape, the water
Sparkles with hope for fisher and swimmer.

XVI
So dance with me, Oliver, chance.
You who plumbed wilderness, took the dance.
And made fire without faggot. And
You, Govan, who governed thought with hand

And head, take my hand. Come to
This dance, all of you, defiant to
The death. Bring your tears and your cheer.
shout 'Amandla!' and break the earth there

Above your graves with your cry
Of 'Ngawethu!' And firmly guide my

Feet along the road you died walking.
Stake on the tallest tree your all-seeing

Eyes find. And chastise to the unerring path
Your unbroken black pride in this day's aftermath.