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When the Wanderers Come Home

Patricia Jabbeh Wesley

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WHEN THE WANDERERS COME HOME

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WHEN THE WANDERERS COME HOME

Patricia Jabbeh Wesley

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The African Poetry Series has been made possible
through the generosity of philanthropists
Laura and Robert F. X. Sillerman, whose
contributions have facilitated the establishment
and operation of the African Poetry Book Fund.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Wesley, Patricia Jabbeh, author.
Title: When the wanderers come
home / Patricia Jabbeh Wesley.
Description: Lincoln: University
of Nebraska Press, [2016]
Series: African poetry book series
Identifiers:

LCCN 2016003756 (print)
LCCN 2016008740 (ebook)
ISBN 9780803288577 (pbk.: alk. paper)
ISBN 9780803295018 (epub)
ISBN 9780803295025 (mobi)
ISBN 9780803295032 (pdf)

Classification:
LCC PS3573.E915 A6 2016 (print)
LCC PS3573.E915 (ebook)
DDC 811/.54—dc23
LC record available at
<http://lcn.loc.gov/2016003756>

Set in Garamond Premier by Rachel Gould.
Designed by N. Putens.

This book is dedicated to the memory of my father, Moses C. Jabbeh, Kwadi Chee, for a lifetime of inspiration, love, and guidance. You are the hero of my life. I celebrate you always.

*We are characters now other than before
The war began, the stay-at-home unsettled
By taxes and rumor, the looter for office
And wares, fearful everyday the owners may return, . . .”*

—John Pepper Clark Bekeremo

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Crab Orchard Review for “Losing Hair”

We Have Crossed Many Rivers: New Poetry from Africa for “When
Monrovia Rises”

Black Renaissance Noire for “Finally, the Allergist,” “Looters of War 2011,”
“When Monrovia Rises,” “You Wouldn’t Let Me Adopt My Dog: A
Poem for Ade-Juah,” “For My Children, Growing Up In America,”
and “Medellin from My Hotel Room Balcony”

Connotation Press for “If You Have Never Been Married,” “I Want
Everything,” “Sometimes, I Close My Eyes”

Heart for “I Go Home”

Literary Orphans for “Sometimes, I Close My Eyes” and “In My Dream”

The Enchanting Verses: Literary Review, for “Loss” and “What Took Us
to War”

RedLeaf Journal’s African Diaspora Folio for “Send Me Some Black
Clothes”

BOOK I

Coming Home

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So I Stand Here

They say thresholds are meant to keep

the outsider out, the insider, in. Crickets
forever creeping along walls, along the edges

of things. You must first lift your right foot,
and then the left, and then enter the hut

before the kola nut is served, before
the spiced pepper is offered, and the water

from the stream, handed to you. This is
the way of things, the way of life, clay to clay,

your hand holds not just a cup of water,
but the source of life. Tradition. After that,

the outsider is now an insider, but everywhere
I go, my country people have become

a different people. So, I stand here,
an outsider, at the doorpost. Do not tell me

that these corrugated old dusty roads
have emerged of themselves out of the war.

Or that the new songs these strangers sing
in this now strange country of ours are

from the time before the bullets. Do not tell
me that the kola nut you served me

will answer all of the questions that linger
in my soul. Do not tell me that I belong
to this new people. I have wandered away
too long, my kinsmen. I have wandered so far,
my feet no longer know how to walk the old
paths we used to walk. I do not know these
people, birthed from the night's passing
of lost ghosts. I do not know these people
who have so sadly emerged out of the womb
of war after the termite's feasting.
My kola nut has lost its taste, and the spiced
pepper, now, with a new spice. I am too
impure to meet my ancestors, and the gourd
of water I have just fetched from Ngalun
weighs heavily upon my head. I stand
at the threshold, my kinsmen, come and help
me over the doorpost that the termites
have eaten. I do not have the hands to greet
my ancestors. I do not have the hands
to greet my kinswomen, and the hand with
which I take hold of the kola nut is shriveled
by travel. The kola nut you served me

is no longer bitter, oh come, my kinswomen,
the horn blower has lost his voice. But they

tell me that the horn blower does not need
his voice to blow the horn to let me in.