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Interview

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Interview

Abstract

John A Stotesbury interviewed Wole Soyinka at the Second Stockholm Conference for African Writers, April 1986.

ginep almond tamarind mahoe
mango gamelamie—
sliding into, through
brown dried beds of
thirsty ghauts
twisting through soft walls, of
dying long grass—as still as
mountain doves —
bat-blind to all but quivering
heat burning their bleaching heads.
retried volcanic rocks,
black and pitted, play involuntary
hosts to brown, yellow, speckled
butterflies—for the n'th moment.
Patient bottle-green mountain
balancing wide barren gun-metal-
blue-sky of glinting steely light
swallows the
grey path
beaten hard.

SILVANA GARDNER

The Mountain

The mountain changes place according to the seasons.

If I were a geographer, it would be accurately and permanently situated at so many degrees South and so many degrees East in the State of Queensland in the continent of Australia. But I'm not such a specialist nor can I definitely say that it's a mountain at all.

I've heard people say that it looks like a crooked neck from one angle and a needle from another. There are times when I see it as a huge

phallus. The Aborigines probably called it Šky Dick, a long time ago, to accentuate its penetration in the blue yonder.

All I know is that it moves in strange ways during the year.

In the Spring, the whole landscape is taken over by this mountain. There's nothing else, except this enormous crooked neck somebody broke while mountaineering. Whoever broke it must have been all powerful, a giant in fact, when giants walked the earth.

I was a young giantess once, when my glands were furiously overworking. I often accompanied a king giant whose ways were titanic. He named me Teutonia after I climbed the most dangerous mountain all by myself. He, whose ways were promethean, could not believe I was capable of mastering such heights. He decided to put me to the test.

We went in the Spring when the mountain is everything. He trained me well beforehand: I cemented under houses, lifted stumps, tore down hothouses singlehanded, tore down rooves, repaired roads and built bridges. Whenever my muscles looked like deflating, I pushed furniture around and around, from one room to another. He taught me how to tie knots in ropes and to show him how strong my teeth were, I chewed them loose. There was no limit to my strength.

The day we set out, I carried only chocolate. For energy. The giant brought wine to celebrate the grinding of his heel on the mountain's neck.

Leeches didn't stop us. They were everywhere, like the mountain, sucking our blood and growing bigger by the minute. The ferns almost drowned us. Up to our necks in bracken, the mosquitoes pushed us under. I lost my chocolate but the giant held the wine flask aloft till we safely floated on hard ground.

He began to doubt my ever going on the mountain alone. His jovial singing degenerated into mutterings that we were probably lost... It was pointless for me to insist we were already on the mountain, we *were* the mountain and there was no right or wrong way to turn.

The more convinced I became of our respective positions, the more tentative he became. Petulantly he repeated we're lost, we're lost...

I appointed myself LEADER. He raised his eyebrows in disdain but months of body-building encouraged me to vie for supremacy and I challenged him by stating that I could save his life anytime. The king giant said it had always been his prerogative to save lives. Didn't he save countless people during the great wars?

I wanted to raise a toast to my leadership. He refused.

If we drink wine, we'll be lighter... I cunningly suggested. I took a swig.

With my knees considerably weakened (I had been drinking behind his back) I decided that we might spare the neck seeing the cracking had already begun.

He stood up to the full height of the mountain and wobbled a resolution to proceed.

How the rope burnt my hands as he swung on the side of the cliff! He was deadweight, a big lump suspended in mid air, too frightened to make a move for safety. With the strength of a giantess, I pulled him up. He blamed me for the accident. Said I was a stupid girl. But I saved the king giant's life in the Spring when breaking one's neck was everything.

In Summer, the mountain recedes to the outskirts of the city. Any city where people lead ordinary lives. So ordinary that they seek horizons for heights to climb out of their rut.

I was nearly as tall as king giant in Summer. But he still wouldn't acknowledge my equality. He had forgotten my superiority in the Spring. And I kept challenging him to break the neck of the mountain again.

We often spoke of the crooked neck but he always refused to make it legendary. I stopped body-building and led a soft life. He liked me better that way. We grew very ordinary, sitting on the back landing at dusk, looking for mountains or even mere shadows of mountains.

One evening I shocked him by saying the mountain wasn't a crooked neck at all, but an erected phallus. A Sky-High Dick. Could he, a giant, raise himself that high? Could I watch?

He was disgusted and rumbled out into the night. You'd think I had castrated him!

In Autumn, I found my own small mountains to climb.

I didn't even bother to tell him where they were or what I had done. He missed my company. He would wait for me to come home and start conversations on my favourite subjects: I don't know what I would've done without you that day on Crooked Neck, he would say. But I wouldn't fall for it. Legends no longer impressed me and he wasn't a king giant any more.

The mountain shrinks away in Autumn. I have to travel miles before I catch a mere glimpse of it. Sometimes I doubt if it is worth the effort, but once I get there, I realize that breaking its neck is legendary and I must

be legendary even though my name is no longer Teutonia. And if it ever was a Sky Dick, that too is legendary and I must come from a race of giants even though I'm shrinking every day.

In Winter, the mountain disappears altogether. No sign of it in the country, the beaches or the farms. It becomes implanted like a needle in my brain. A rusty needle, defying surgical removal. And it gives me headaches.

The only way to see it, is to close my eyes and explore the greyness of my brain. It looms black North by North-West on the Frontal Lobe. It ranges in size from a needle, a nail or a stiletto knife and despite the rustiness, it's still sharp enough to draw blood. It wounds like no other memory can.

It was his gratitude that's most painful to remember.

The needle mountain awards me with golden words, sincere thanks clotting the blood from other wounds. He thanked me for saving his life and I trembled with gratitude for him saying it. I haemorrhage anew for the poem he would write to honour my glory and the needle buries deeper when I think I could've killed him. He scratches words with a twig, scrambling grey matter like mountain's earth. Poetic lines about infinity. Only now, in Winter, I know he plagiarised.

And the knife turns he's no longer with me and I don't care from whom he stole the poem.

He talked about ideals and how the mountain was *our* ideal and it would always be a symbol of courage for him, never for me, and my headaches grow worse as the needle burns the morality zone of the Temporal Lobe.

I'm not a giantess any more. One grows stunted with a needle buried in the brain. The cells overreact and form scar tissue which, in time, perform strange functions. Like taking away my strength when I want to move furniture or feel dizzy when I climb on a table.