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The Seasons

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Abstract

At first it is easy to accept the coming of the dry season, for the greenness of things takes a while to give way to the dust. But with time it is not so easy to shrug and simply say that the coming of the dry season after the rainy one is as normal as night coming after day. Such indifference is impossible when the dry season has truly arrived and has sunk its claws into people and things. The only good thing about the land then is the sudden, wild thought of leaving, to leave never to come back but go as far as your legs can carry you, to some place where the drought is merely a thing to be told about.

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Gratitude for the past rainy season quickly dies away. All that you are aware of is the slow passage of the drought, which seems to have been there since the beginning of things and will last to the end of time. You look at the empty skies with a buried bitterness, which out of the slightest provocation could be turned on a neighbour with so much bursting violence, to bring a measure of respite to the burning soul. But such possibilities are hard to come upon. Everyone slinks off into an unoffending silence.

You content yourself with hurling imprecations at the self-willed heavens. You vent off your blocked pain in impotent anger, wondering all the while what mad folly hastened you to this damnation, to this sickness, to this death. You swear this will be your last year here, this your last season; no more, you murmur, no more of this dying year after year, season upon season. But you said this last year, and the year before, all these many years you have been here.

Your lamentations continue all through the murderous afternoon to die only with the sinking away of the sun. At night it is easy briefly to forget there is a drought. All that you see are the firelights of this, this and that compound, that say nothing of the yellow barrenness afflicting the land, but merely of bodies waiting to be dutifully filled with food before crawling into sleep. Your awareness of the drought only comes from the sound of the sharp winds cutting into the night.

But the night soon is over and the nightmare begins anew. The heat squats on the land with nowhere to go, and the winds screech down determined to empty the earth of all that gives it life.

At the height of the dry season, people groan with relief as they anticipate a quick giving way by the drought to the short rains. People always know

when the season has spent its life force and there is nothing to expect but a distant shaking of the sky. Chewing their nails, they look up at the gathering heaviness in the sky hanging over the mountain like an outstretched eagle. At night they peer out at the thickness of the heavens and the load bearing down; and they murmur, 'We shall have rain come morning.' But the day dawns to an earth as dry as ever, a sky blue with emptiness. The rains will be late, is all that is said. People shrug off their disappointment, indifference banishing earlier expectation.

Nevertheless, like incurable gamblers, they put into the soil their precious seeds. And as if the rain was waiting just for this it comes down unexpectedly, in a fury of a sudden blackening of the air and sharply risen winds. The rain comes gushing down gathering day and night into one wet rag, and digs out all that is in the ground waiting to stir with a little wetness. And that is the extent of the short rains. The next day the sun is once more very much king of the sky.

People speak of the drought no more. What is there to say? Much better to preserve your energies than dissipate it in some useless talk that does nothing to the hunger rooted in the compounds. Things cannot be worse. Whereas before people always pleaded hunger, even in the best of times, to protect themselves from the evil eye, now one can be believed when he says in his compound he has not a single grain; for it is the very truth. How you are surviving is not for the neighbours to know. Whatever you manage to get, you eat in the solitude of your hunger. What stores were possible from the last harvest are depleted. Not that much went into storage to start with. The bulk of the last harvest went to traders in town, clever fellows who knew nothing about grain except its price. They rushed for the harvest from their little holes in town, all sweetness and smiles as if the farmer was a long lost kin. So now it is the traders who have all that you need to save your children from dying. But of those who go for grain from the traders, many run back heatedly proclaiming that they will die before they pay the killing prices being asked. As they have done many times, they swear that not a grain will they sell next harvest, to people who wait until the height of a drought to prove to you what a fool you were to give in to the jingle of coins. But it is only a matter of time before they give in to the thunder in their children's bellies, and go crawling back to the traders.

Miraculously one day the smell of rain hangs heavy in the air. It is unmistakable. A fever grips the land and ties even the laziest to the fields. But people still hold on to their anxiety. They have but half trust in the weather, which time and again has given them painful lessons about its fickleness; of how wrong it can be to speak up your hopes too soon or too loudly, even when it seems beyond all doubt that things are going your way.

Many are the surreptitious glances cast upwards and at the darkened horizon, to judge the ripeness of the black clouds and how soon they will be pitted against the drought.

The rain falls. It fills the days and nights with its rush and noise and stands on the land like a pillar holding the earth and sky together. It flows on the ground in a thousand narrow rivulets, washing the stiffness of waiting out of the body. The maize bursts upwards into the falling rain with a broadness and sturdy greenness of leaf unseen before.

But it is not until close to harvest time that people dare to speak up their hopes: so much grain, so much food, so much money. This is only whispered among friends. A sham modesty greets strangers: my little piece of land has betrayed me, one would say, a few grains is all that is coming my way.

Many are the sleepless nights however, spent in cold calculation as to how far the harvest will go. And always it is found that one's dreams, rekindled by the thought of yet another crop, are as far from being fulfilled as ever. No matter. You do what you can, unsmiling, uncomplaining: here, token payment is made to a creditor who has one foot in court; there, money is thrown away for an undernourished, overpriced goat at the cattlemart; there, a bribe is peeled out for a useless job in town to keep a layabout son out of mischief.

The anxiety one had waiting for rain only sharpens after the harvest and the money. You think of running away from it all in disgust. You did not endure the drought only to suffer the uncertain gains of the harvest. You have had enough, you are leaving. The only destination you can think of is the small town by the river. You will immerse yourself in it. You will take root there. You will put behind you the relentless battle with life on the fields, where each day a thousand new demands are fed on the uneasy yield of the season.

The little town has a charm all its own. Day would break out to the sight of a man strangled or decapitated on his way home at a forbidding hour. Now and then as a lesson against excessive greed, a thief would be killed by the traders who have as little mercy for such parasites as they have for their customers. A fellow would be discovered murdered by a whore, his manhood carved out and rammed into his mouth; for what reason, the man is too dead to say.

No, you will not leave. But what holds you back is not the expanse of land here that makes dreams possible. It is not the soil which only needs a few drops at the right time to bear miracles. You are wedded to this land. To its dry seasons, bitter on the soul as the dregs of boiled herbs. To its good seasons, unfulfilling yet pleasurable as the first taste of homecoming.