

on spiders and ghosts

vangile gantsho

there is a spider on my hand red tiny spider many tiny spiders on my hand on my arm all over my body i enter the water to wash them away without frightening them they do not leave my skin

the stories of great men are found in books and painted on walls, turned into objects and handed down from children to countries. the women are myths. urban legends whispered through umbilical cords. and we know all about breath and the granted taken of air. there is a place in the eastern cape called a hole in the wall. i think the wind was tired of people hearing about her without something to touch.

xa sibuzo amathambo bathi abantu abadala igama lakho alivuki. the name you are using is not the name they have given you and all the steps you take bring you to a white wall built by a ghost. made without windows and a sliver to carry you out. what happens to those left behind? those left running, separated and those left selling? what happens to the unreturned? at the bottom of the ocean a woman delivers a baby with gills. a new nation is born. an old nation is broken up into tiny pieces. a bird cannot carry an entire people home without a thing to carry them in. a thing is important. is evidence. and evidence is important for a people stripped of their language and cords. the bones say the wall is the forgetting. the bones say that without an apology the flakes of gold will remain in the water and the stomachs of the people it washes will remain empty. the bones say they cannot be unscattered and a heart cannot be un-broke. further south, there is taking there too. there is darkness in our blood. in our skin. the crushing of tobacco, the pounding of chains. the sickness trickles down our legs and fills our homes with a stink we mask with english. i am reminded to leave other people's histories alone. i have my own shadows to bathe.

what broke, i wonder? is it something we can fix?

athi amathambo abandtu abadal abalelanga kakuhle. they are not sleeping at all. are not resting. do not know peace. this is how the madness begins, slowly with a snake at the front door, a child who cannot ignore it, a mother who has forgotten. and because she has forgotten, beats the child because she is embarrassing her. because she is tired. because she does not know what else to do. the snake bites the ankle of the child who is running from her mother and the venom is enough to wipe out an entire village. makes its way up the leg of the land. the thighs of the child turn black. up the hips, the vagina, into the intestines, the navel and eventually the hands cannot touch other children. the child runs to the water, begs her to wash the land clean. the child's mother beats the child for going to the river alone. the child scares the mother, who beats the child because she does not know what else to do with her fear. the mother who is tired has been up long enough to see what the sun can do to water. what a mother-in-law can do to a woman who does not deserve her son. the river follows the child home without water. without memory. the waterless river pours herself into the child's bed, into her sleep, into her words. into the love she gives her brother.

the bones ask the child: where is your father? the child responds: you are the bones. where is my father?

who broke your father's heart? it is easier to blame azania but before her, it was the ghost. and after her it was the tax. the ghost arrived on many horses with guns and forced my father into the cities. forced him into a hole. the ghost understands the power of putting men into holes. knows how the darkness is imprinted into blood. the ghost knows the weakness that turns black men into ghosts and every man i have ever loved has found a way to pour his darkness into my body. i am older now and this story has many holes. moves forward and backwards and cannot be covered with a cloth. i want to miss my father but i cannot remember him before he followed the ghost. we do not talk about what a ghost can do to a home. we protect the ghost. euphemise him. the ghost

is an object of memory. shape shifts into a king. a president. a man on the corner of a street. or the ghost is an intellectual in a beer hall or a university with a knife in his pants. takes everything he wants by force. as he knows ghosts to do. before the ghosts... it is said we do not remember.

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there is a spider in my room bigger than the ones covering my body and he will not leave i am a guest here i ask for permission to sleep on the bed to use the bathroom to sit at the desk he is generous we speak regularly and he is teaching me the ways of this house