

Missing on Seven Sisters

Oluwafemi Hughes

A daughter of the earth and of African and Asian heritage explores loss and reclamation, inspired by the Seven Sisters cliffs.

Part One: The Migrant's Lamp

On Seven Sisters' green curves, I lie
Cliffs and I looking out to sea. Sunlit sky dazzles,
Squinting my eye. Chalk face glistens, mirrored
on quiet waters blue, as air drifts by winter cool.

In her murmuring, I hear a tinge of mourning.
Wind echoing the spirit of someone I miss.
Can it be an Orissa's long-song beckoning?

East Sussex to her coast cleaves, waves curling and unfurling on distant ports. Yet, seas separate flesh and bone as in 1944. With a British college education, his French, English and Yoruba languages in tow, my father boarded a merchant ship, set sail from Lagos, skirting Takoradi and Freetown's coastal lip. The wide ocean's wave and whiff of salty seaweed slowly seeped in beneath his skin.

Moulded by a story painted red, white and blue, Baba embarked on a journey from his Lagos Island home, resolved to defend the colonial mother's shores. The older man giggled a lot, his shoulders jumping in rhythm. He often quipped:

'So neglectful a mother was she, she never invited me for tea!'

Behind a migrant's smiling face, the sorrowed brow of a stranger.

Gathering from crumbs, a life. Yet, among weeds, sown seeds of

fellowship.

For his jokes invoked an inner lamp, a light in a place of strife.

'Peace and Tranquillity' was his affirmed desire, while he gave way to time.

On the green-haired back of Seven Sisters, I walk
Roar of rolling tide, battering the cliff chalk.
Her worn face slides into the wide salty mouth,
I see my father as Shango facing the fierce tides.

Just as this God of thunder, Baba persisted. Endured, when his passport, annulled, gave no permission to go and return. A migrant till he died aged 79. For no vessel was marked 'The Citizen Ship', not one to grace a Yoruba mother's final ceremonial passage.

As tides turned and autumn leaves began to fall, as if to grant his calling, Bramber Road in Peacehaven became his final abode. Here, tea was served with kind eyes, from tender hands. His last road swept down to the sea and to the Meridian line monument, connecting these shores to West African ports and Olokun. At last, his heart a harbour of tranquillity, in companionship with the wide ocean.

On Seven Sisters' cliffs, I gaze out to the steel line of the horizon
Dazzled by sunlit silver sea. In ever-changing hues, air hums by
winter cool. I honour my father's survival by his lamp. His inner
light by the sea that cleaves to this chalk and bone, this
shore-sand and beyond to his ancestral land.

Part Two: A Mother Emerges

With Seven Sisters, I lie on our earth mother's body

A long-song I hear, carried on the wind's breath

A fleeting presence. Someone I miss – who once missed me.

I am Irene Sudarshana, a dancer from Bombay. I turned my dancing spirit through Europe, until the hour of Germany's 1939. Part of a cast of characters, bound to leave by road, bus and boat. On Britain's grey coast, I shivered in chiffon clothes, a magenta saree trimmed with threads of gold. Then, I had wings. How could anyone have known how besieged we'd be by the war years, in ammunition factories. Around us bloodied and broken limbs of the fallen.

In the post-war years, our family threads wore thin. Marriage of Asia to Africa, my offspring too was forbidden, they said. Soon, pearls of youth, tarnished, treasured gold rings, sold for pennies. At times, we felt angels walked with us, till threadbare, our ties broke away.

Dear Irene, I'm told you found love among ruins, flowered in the first years. They say you fought with steel, bore a mischievous grin and would sing, mimicking Dietrich, 'Falling in Love Again'. Yet the hurricanes of

migration swept away petals, severed the stems of kinship; as shuttered windows you faced, walls and doors yelled 'GO!' Chafing at brown skin, your Indian-dancer's spirit dimmed. Your floor finally caved in. Wild Winds hurled your children to bearers of the cross: a sacrifice for love, the black book said. Yet, the hands that held up the sacred also clipped budding wings, separated brothers and sisters, and smothered a thousand kisses.

How can a migrant, after 200 years of British colonial reign, be left to flounder without safe harbour, common wealth or a course on Britain's shores?

The poet said it was because the Jewel of India pulled free from Empire's hold. The story told of India's peasant rice-farmers, of cotton weavers, pockets drained of trillions of dollars. Pot-bellied bandits, disguised in upturned moustaches and tall hats, poured wine in horse drawn carriages, in rickshaws. British traders. Cities, drunk with the spoils of conquest.

I barely grasped what came to pass; I only know my mother, Irene – her magenta saree billowed in a frame – aged 23. Was the absence of her footprints felt, even for a moment, in the snowy northern belt where we

children were sent? No! Irene drifted as a feather in the wind – my heart
froze –and she was gone.

A murmuring air drifts, tinged with mourning
Grasses ripple as waves conducting a long song.
A knotted hawthorn tree, I feel wind-bent, forlorn.
Yet as I rise to leave these siblings and earth mother
Catching my eye, a magenta kite in a fierce dance.
Oh Sisters! Is this some kind of trickster?

Part Three: Earth Echoes

Walking the moss-green path and cliff top
Seven Sisters stand shoulder to shoulder.

Ramparts of shell, limestone, bracing storms.
Waves curl across rocks; in flow Sisters' debris, swallowed.

Not chalk nor stone alone. Flesh and bone. Turmoil.
On our Island's shores, plastic-laden fish, birds lying limp.

I sense silent chalk face, forlorn, wondering:

Over how many eons will we mourn our species?

A lone stone I pass marks Exceat; fisher-folk, wool-weavers
names rarely known, except as peasants who carried rods.
Women, rough wool pricking skin; they'd tread, card and spin yarn.

The warp and weft of their lives undone at the whim
of landlords in furs, looking down on labours from above.

Five centuries on, I smell the sweat of my ancestor's swelling rebellion,
Hands bound by the same veins of landowners in these surrounds.

Riches extorted from the lashed back of Africa's body
A people unseen, except as sugar, cotton, or cash.

Echoing a life I've known. Siblings, voices hemmed in,
Withheld: a hand to hold, no book, pen, nor a life task.
Our cloned, numbered clothes bore the mark 'Underclass'

African-Indian birth, our indigenous knowledge: Whitewashed
And a black veil drawn, cast shadows over all colours of earth.

OH MAMA WATA witnessed the moment
I became imperceptible to myself, as my story. Invisible ink

Spilled. While unseeing eyes blinked, mouths steeped in silence,
Something in me expired.

Hear, distant hum, drum beats, stamping feet.
Peoples in circle ceremony, call and response
Earth's body multitudes uniting.

Black-headed gulls flock, joining chorus, call over Cuckmere Valley

'ENOUGH! RECLAIM!'

Tell them how your heart was drained grey.

Reveal the coral reef, bleached to our dismay

Breathe,

savour scents of seaweed,

salt, sand, grass

Flow, with every bend of our sinuous river

Oceans of gold, turquoise, indigo. Your birth-right.

Drop down, green field of your mother's breast

Yielding. Imagine your imprint moulded in this clay.

Above, in bird song, together belonging

As a reluctant leaf falls from her tree,

Shed your grief in me.

Observe kittiwakes gather on rocks, defying the tides.

Flaunt with gorse, with every criss-cross of your step.

Your return as swallows, native to earth.

And ask WHY, even as I, your mother, floods her fields with tears.

WHY are we all not crying when our nature siblings are dying?

As I rage and raze forests to the floor,

human hands replant rough bark of oak, ash and birch again,

I wonder at the spark, turning our fire into a blazing flame

of Love that can burn ourselves clean.

I sit listening to the river in myself, the soil in which I grow,

See injured children, breathing purified air, healed.

Horizon's watery haze mirrors my mind. Emerging Yemaya,

Ocean Goddess. From billowing sky-blue robe, cowry shells, thrown.

Arising in me the energy of Ifá priests, rattling beads,

Diviners invoking prophesy – a great turning.

I rise with Indigenous warriors in painted faces, stepping
forward defending life, tending our fragrant fertile garden.

With weavers gathering threads, restoring our delicate web
A tapestry I stitch; my African kin, Indian foot-print, a Celtic spirit.

In celebration song, folk lay down autumn's cloak. Being
one with earth mother returning to balance.

I sense a deep dream, etched into this landscape, pictured in stars.

Tender are the hands of lovers, yet with force of currents so strong,

With Sisters I stand, arm in arm, steadfast in the storm.

Oluwafemi Hughes

Oluwafemi Hughes writes prose-poetry on the texture of marginalisation, from landscapes to the personal, social, natural worlds and beyond, and other transforming experiences. With African-Indian heritage, she writes on gaining Scottish and Sussex identities, and her writing reflects a connection with nature, deepened through exploring and writing about Seven Sisters and surrounds. Her work has been anthologised in *Ink on my Lips* (2013) for Waterloo Press; *Hidden Sussex: a new anthology for Sussex* (2019); and she also has written short stories for Disability Arts. Her poetry was featured in the 2021 Brighton Festival in *Tenebrae: Lessons Learnt in Darkness*.

A recording of this text can be found at **writersmosaic.org.uk**

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