

LEBOGANG MASHILE

THE SLAVE LODGE/ SOLDIER EAT

A scene from Venus vs Modernity

NOTE

The award-winning play *Venus vs Modernity* unpacks the life of Saartjie Baartman, a South African woman of Khoi descent, who was exhibited as a freak show in nineteenth-century Europe under the name “Hottentot Venus.” At the peak of her fame in the early 1800s, Saartjie Baartman became a reference point for abolitionists, fashion designers, and political satirists alike. Her remains were dissected and put on display at the French National Museum for 150 years. In 2002, Saartjie Baartman was finally returned to the land of her birth.

SAARTJIE

When they exploded my universe
hailed me from my heart
To that place I hate
We'd walked enough steps
For my feet to weep
The first white man I'd ever smelled up close pulled a woman's breast
out of his pocket
I was fifteen
My wedding fires called them

VENUS

The soft breast had been dried with care
A once full milked moon
A baked brown nipple
It could have been mine
It held coins like the ones my father brought home to show us kids
Plucked stars
I said how do you eat stars Papa
How can people fight for stars
He said white men traded them for cattle

This is how our family eats
I survived because I did not want
My bits in anyone's pocket
So I walked when others fell around me

SAARTJIE

After 9pm
There are no more people at the slave lodge
Everything below the neck is poes
A white man can trade the stars for terrors
No one speaks of this in the day
Soldier comes home with the sun
Smelling like a night of slaughters
Someone has to keep the cages closed
Keep the big men pinned down
Legs splayed
Shut their mouths
Someone has to wipe away the war in the cages

VENUS

Soldier is someone
Someone has to gets the scraps
Like a pig who eats anything
Soldier eat
It's your turn
Soldier

SAARTJIE

After 9pm
Everything below the neck is poes
The heart is poes
The breath is poes
The womb is poes
The child is poes
The father is poes
The mother is poes
The imam is poes
The blacksmith is poes
The seamstress is poes

The healer is poes
Soldier eat
It's your turn
Soldier eat

VENUS

What you do to the land
To the sea
To the stream
What you do to the body
You do to me
What you waste in the water
What is left when you leave
What you kill
When you change
The very nature of the seed

There are no songs in the day
No songs in the streets
Cover up your head
No shoes on your feet
There are no husbands for wives
No feasts for the dead
When every family is broken
Who will remember what was said

In this home we have made
Of skin, heart and bones
In your hands made of clay
In your hands I am home
How do the hands that hold me
Hold the night moon made of screams
How do the hands that hold me
Feed the hell that we feel
How do the hands that hold me
Come together and pray
For the dream that comes to life
In the love where we lay

Where is the man that I love
When you leave this place
When you slave for the demons
And force a smile in their face
Who is the man that I love
Do you sometimes take a piece
Of the the body baas chews
While you kneel at his feet
Where is the man that I love
In this land of tears and blood
Where is the man that I love
Soldier *wailing*
Soldier *wailing*
Soldier eat
It's your turn
Soldier eat

HE GOT LOST

A poem from Venus vs Modernity

I wake up in the morning
I wear beauty as armour
Outside the front door is war
A neighbour sees a hippopotamus
A taxi driver sees sex
School children see a joke
I move past them
Back tall
Namas firm
Make-me-nice holding me back
Hoping that the person sitting next to me in the taxi won't be fat
You can't have two fat people together
Eyes everywhere at the mall praise, criticize and hate
Maybe they hate my hips
Maybe they hate my walk
"O sdudla se sexy!" (shout)
On tour I have to worry about walking
The elderly white couple gawking as I check into the flight
Walking down the aisle of the plane
Sideways
I can feel the familiar weight of laughter from behind

I am not normal anywhere
Every street, every building, every step is a stage
A courtroom
A battlefield
A spotlight
My skin is thick
My heart is thin
Gravity pulls worlds towards me
There are lips on my knees
Eyes on my back
Cannons on my bum
Poised for attack

The roar of my thighs
Plagues the minds of many men
I'm a living fantasy
I leave them for dead

I once loved a man who was very very small
I put him in my heart where I could keep him warm
He loved the lights
He loved my voice
He loved the drama of the stage
But when I took him home the love was not the same
He got lost in the rolls
He got high on my arse
He tried to swim in my belly
He did not have a plan
For who I really am when no crowds are around
He got lost in my meat
He drowned in a song
Weighed down by a persona
We both carried for too long
When I tried to take it off it was too much for him to bear
The heaviness of the woman left when no audience is there
He got lost in my arms
He got buried in my breasts
He suffocated in the oceans I carry in my chest
He got lost in our home
He crawled out into the streets
He got lost between the bones of women skinnier than me
For seven years I tried to hold him in the folds of my flesh
Seven years of searching until my sanity left
It takes guts
Its takes tears
It takes a fuck shit mentality
To know that I am sexy
When every eye screams, "freak"
I sing because there is a war being fought over my body
My small lover says, "Usindwa nga masende la endlini"