CUTTING NEW PATTERNS



Poems, Althea Romeo Mark

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Section I: Not Your last View of the Yellow Sun



Checkpoint II
(Liberian Civil War)

The line is tortoise slow.
Dust, smelling of pungent death,
is churned up by people in cars,
and on foot, fleeing,
after passing inspection,
after surviving interrogation.

Death lines the roadsides.
The rankness of piss
and fetid decay of tossed bodies,
mostly men, charge your nose.

You wait your turn,
hear and feel fear rattling in your chest,
running through your body
like a rushing river.

Fate waits in black and white
—a split-second decision
made by a soldier-boy
high on weed and power.
His verdict could be based
on a bad experience—an adult who once
whipped his back raw red.
Or, he might not like your face.

Or, you might be spared,
if you remind him of the father
he lost to the war,
the memory, painting his life gray,
clouding his once bright moon.

The green grass you ate this morning,
because there was no food,
is finding its way back down your gut.
You can hear your belly squelching,
settling back down
into the trenches of your bowel.

You speed away, dash away,
escaping the bang, bang, bang
of what could have been
your last view of the yellow sun,
brown dust rising against the light blue sky.

Carrying the Spirit of a Siafu

Dear "Red Ant,"
you didn't know that this hated name
hurled at you in anger,
during a school yard fight,
would later suit you.

Your voice would not be lit by vengeful anger,
nor would your words bear a venomous sting.

You would become a quiet striver,
not caving in to failure,
but driven by it, and
piloted by your dreams.

The voracious reading of mythologies
would tap into your inner explorer,
lead you to crisscross continents.

Armed with hope and determination,
you would bounce back after missteps,
bending but not breaking, soldiering on.

You would carry the spirit of a Siafu,
red survivor ants, leaders of their world.

Note: Driver ants Dorylus, also known as ***driver ants***, safari ***ants***, or siafu, is a large genus of ***army ants*** found primarily in central and east Africa, although the range also extends to southern Africa and tropical Asia. The success of the ant in so many environments has been attributed to their social organization and their ability to modify habitats, tap resources, and defend themselves.

Cutting New Patterns

(on fitting into a new country, society)

I did not have time to sketch new homelands in my mind
before my parents moved islands
to escape Caribbean natural disasters,
before my family fled the Liberian Civil War.

We never have time to cut a new country
to the strength of our desire when fleeing.
Adjusting to new homes is like cutting patterns,
and taking hems up and letting them down.
You adapt to new cultures, new languages, new accents.

When fitting in, there are things
you have to tuck in or let out,
so surviving is not overwhelming.

Ah, this living within set patterns can be constricting.
Sometimes, we have to discard a pattern
and start anew.

Our worlds need not always be
ill-fitting, constricting, tight.

Designing your own way of living is draining.
Our lives are not always ready-made.

Section II: Roads We Must Travel



She Asks Herself If She Will Remember

Sometimes when I lie in bed
next to my sleeping grandson,
this aging grandmother wonders
if she'll be around to see him
grow into a young man.

She wonders if he'll remember
these quiet moments of deep sleep
after she has danced him around,
his arms choking-tight around her neck,
or after she has carried him on her hips--
a body brace holding her back up,
giving her the strength
to rock him to sleep.

"The wheel on the bus
goes round and round…
Old McDonald had a farm
ei, ei oh…."
Hips swaying,
knees dipping,
back bending.

She wonders if she'll be still around
when he is eighteen,
will she remember him,
will she remember from where she came,
where she is, who she is?



Joy and Hope

Joy is the look I wear on my face

when with my youngest grandchild.
I observe and learn again,
how quickly, like a flower,
the new-born blooms.

I watch my grandson watch the world,
observe him as he absorbs
the details of his surroundings,
his people, the sounds of their voices,
their different smells.

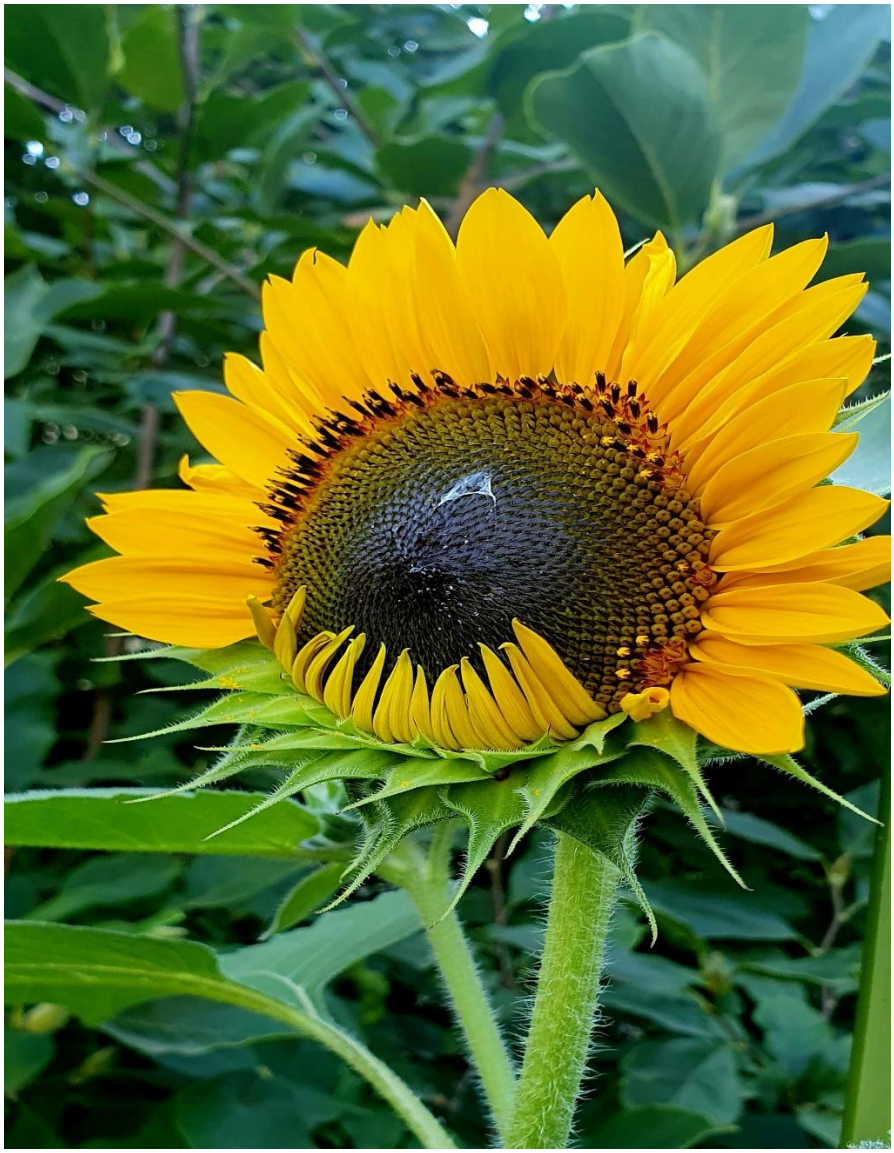
I marvel at the small metamorphoses—
him turning over, sitting up
exploring his terrain on hands and knees,
then taking his first step, stumbling,
his attempts at speed-walking,
the bruising mishaps.

I witness the uttering of his first words,
and then making demands, giving commands,
as he tests the boundaries of new vocabulary.

I gaze at him, knowing
that it is through small miracles
that we survive.

I guard him in my dreams and in nightmares
of what the world could become,
and pray he never loses hope.
For it is hope that kept our ancestors alive.

It is hope and joy
that have seen us through
from generation to generation.



Rising from the Rubble

I.

Life-changing news,
out of the blue,
alters your lifestyle.

New routines must be adhered to
when longevity, once taken for granted,
is threatened.

A diagnosis shakes your confidence,
sends you into a storm of uncertainty.

But you do not let dark forecasts
cloud your view of the world.
spoil the beauty of daily living.

II

Unexpected verbal bashings,
threatening confrontations
have become the norm.

Unpredictable days
shake a once secure foundation.
You duck threatening fists,
avoid cutting words,
navigate the tornado of abuse,
do what is necessary to survive.

Do not dwell on bruising words
hurled from the cliff of an angry tongue.

Be the tree that withstands the wind.
Be the flower that bursts through the ground in spring.
Be the one who rises from the rubble after an earthquake.
Be the Lazarus of your will.

Life's Catwalk

We walk the long walk.
The world looks on,
judge and jury of shade,
our stride, our demeanor.

How well do we carry ourselves
in the skin-tight clothing nature gave us?
Our outfits neither Gucci nor Prada,
are dictated by climate and culture,
are indispensable, not disposable.

We are clad in white, brown, black,
and shades in between.
Distinctive marks are highlighted or hidden.
A mole on chin or cheek, could be a sign of beauty.
Unsightly, a blotched body lacking melanin,
or draped in a white coat of Albinism.

Some colors are never in season
in blinded corners of the world.

We live, love, give life,
sustain our path with will and wit
in sickness and health
in sanity and madness.

Our pigmentations and frames
designated by DNA,
we walk this long walk
in the eyes of the world.



A Destined Departure

We cannot call You a thief.

We are given warning at birth
that your visit is in the cards.

Sometimes You arrive unexpected.
We, barely having dipped our feet
in the waters of life,
we, barely around long enough,
to fulfil our bucket list of dreams.

You do give us notice,
send us quiet reminders—
a subtle jolt in head, heart, limbs,
and then, there is the weakening of bones,
the slackening of flesh
as we pile on years,
carry the weight of our experience,
its baggage heavy on body and mind.

Some enjoy teasing You,
mock You with reckless, dare-devil experiments—
a climb to the peak of Mount Everest,
a tight-rope walk across a body of water.
Their need to leave their name in annals of history,
and stare Death in the face is strong.

We wear our accomplishments with pride;
wear our failures like a heavy chain around our necks.

We know our time of departure
is written on an invisible calendar,
the date circled in red in another realm.

Most leave reluctantly.
Our ties to loved one make it so.
Yet some, whose lives are filled with darkness.
leap, unforewarned, to the other side.
But that too is pre-destined.

Others, around so long,
their determined departure too distant
on the universe's calendar,
summon You in their prayers,
are eager for your arrival.

Section III: Under Nature's Umbrella



Memory in the Wind

The wind pushes, No! It shoves.

It wakes a childhood memory—
my mother's hand,
pressed on my back-bone,
thrusts me forward,
impels my dragging feet.

I am embodied by stubborn denial.
Apology is stuck on my tongue.

At the destination,
an uneasy, "sorry",
is forced out of my mouth
by the threat of an unforgettable whipping.

Threatening words leave welts
in my imagination…how soon
they could be real…?
Mother has a belt in her hand.

The welling up is a strong wind
in my eye.

The white froth of the choppy Fish Hoek sea,
is like family witnessing my inner turmoil.

Fessing up is followed by heaving, shuddering shame.

The flower pot I said I forgot at church,
I admit to reckless handling, breaking.

Truth is the wind easing.

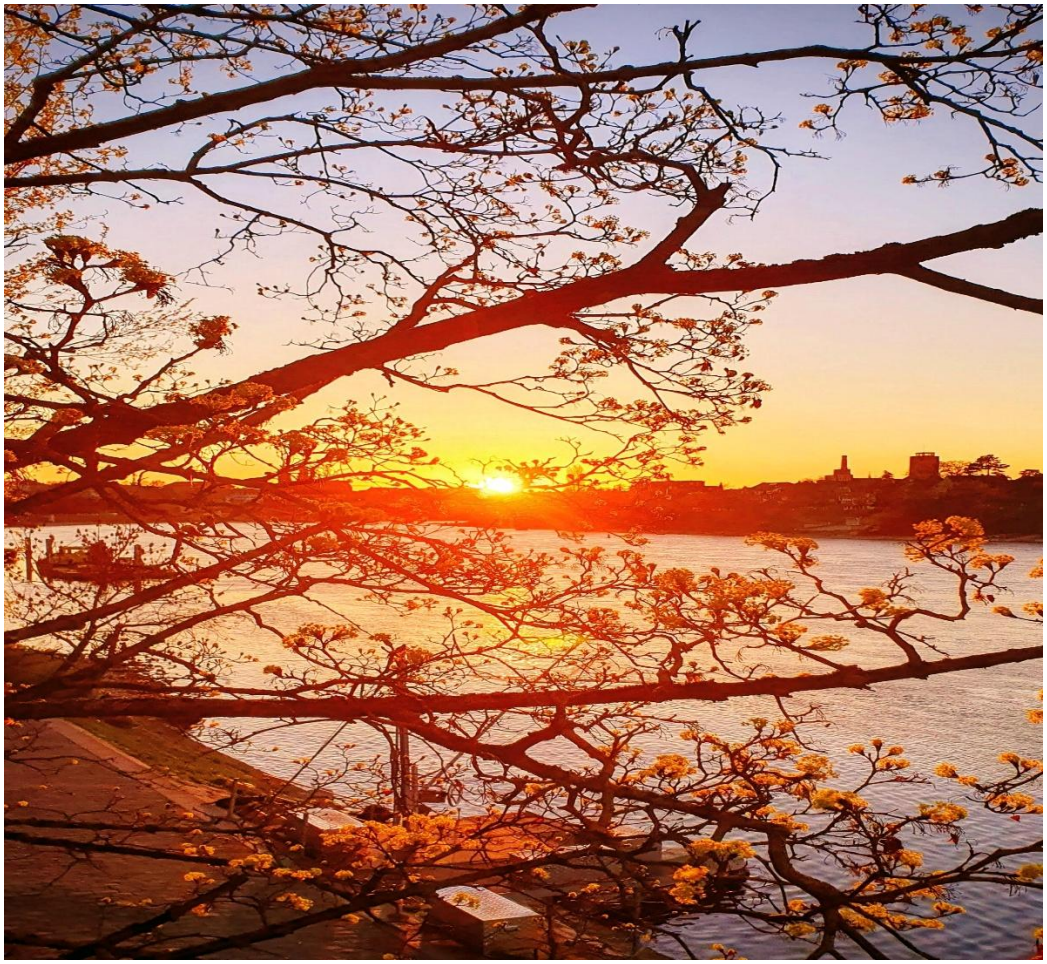


Mother Mountains

(Fish Hoek, Cape Town)

They hover, guard the town,
hold inhabitants in a chain of bosoms.
Mothers hugging their children.

When angry storms invade
the mountains call,
"come to safety,
climb to my peaks,
hide in my crevices and caves.
There is room here if you are brave."



While The Moon Awaits Its Shift

From a distance,
the moon from the sky,
and I from my window,
watch the sun's evening picture show.

It is seen through the backdrop of tall trees,
now silhouettes of black limbs,
branches and leaves.

They crochet, embroider
the disappearing blood red,
egg-yellow, orange and
crimson sun setting,
splash across the fading, blue heaven.



A Penguin Takes Its Leave (Haiku)

1
Penguins seeking shade
in the leafy-green brambles
watch us watching them.

2
And now numbered three
their kin are tiny specks
on gray distant boulders.

3
In another bush
a black and white seabird
lie barely breathing.

4
It is the nature
of the wild and penguins too
to depart on one's own.

5.
The last sacrifice
a black and white offering
to warm Mother Earth.

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"A Penguin Takes Its Leave" (Haiku) Three poems, "Dopo Di Te.." (After you..), "Un Pinguini Si Congeda," (A Pinguin Takes Its Leave," and "L'Ultima Traversata,"(The Final Crossing) published *in Antologia di Poesia, Contemporanea Internazionale,* Universalia, Trento, Italy,

BIOGRAPHY

Althea Romeo-Mark, an educator and writer, was born in Antigua, West Indies, and grew up in St. Thomas, US Virgin Islands.. She has lived and taught in St. Thomas, Virgin Islands, Connecticut and Ohio, USA, Liberia ,West Africa, London, England and Switzerland since 1991. Althea Romeo Mark, who writes and publishes poetry, short stories and personal essays, is the author of two full-length poetry collections, *The Nakedness of New* and *If Only the Dust Would Settle*, (English-German), and four chapbooks, *On the Borders of Belonging* , *Beyond Dreams: The Ritual Dancer, Two Faces, Two Phases, Palaver,* and *Shu-Shu Moko Jumbi: The Silent Dancing Spirit*.

Althea Romeo-Mark's short stories have been published in The Caribbean Writer, The Jamaica Observer, WomanSpeak, A Journal of Writing and Art by Caribbean Women, Kariba Fortella, A Norwegian Collection of Caribbean short stories, and Mini Sagas, The Daily Telegraph, in Support of Arvon Foundation.

Althea was nominated for the Eric Hoffer Book Award in 2024 for her *On the Borders of Belonging* poetry collection *by* Kelsay Books publishers 2023. https://www.hofferaward.com/ She was awarded The Vincent Cooper Literary Prize in 2023, for her short story," Saving Papa Rojas from the Deathbed Flirt." It goes to a Caribbean author for exemplary writing in Caribbean Nation Language (a term used by celebrated post-colonial Caribbean author Kamau Brathwaite to describe vernacular language born in the Caribbean).