

My dog listens to our exchange patiently then jerks me away with a shake of his leash to explore the neighbourhood, which his wondrous nose discovers as new every single walking excursion we make. I love this innocent enthusiasm of the animal. He is a poet at heart! His world is ever fresh, an adventure that he sniffs out with pleasure, reading the news of other dogs in the cracks and crevices of the pavement and the walls of the houses we pass. At each gate post which warns 'Attenti al cane' or from where the noise of barks issue, he lifts his hind leg and leaves his liquid visiting card!

I return to my terrace and sink into the book left open in the shade. I am reading a stunningly beautiful novel called *The Poisonwood Bible* by Barbara Kingsolver, who I discover as no surprise, is a poet too. I trust a fiction writer who also writes poetry. This was apparent when I had randomly opened the book in the bookshop on the sentence that decided I had to buy it. This line described the narrator at a picnic lunch "watching ants boil darkly over the crumbs." 'Boiling' instead of the ordinary 'teeming'! Wow! That is the sort of literary sensibility I appreciate, and Kingsolver straddles the world of poetry and prose, which in my opinion is where all great writing lies.

I must share two passages from the book with my readers. The first is the exquisite opening page, describing a forest in the Congo where the main protagonist-narrator has arrived with her family and her preacher husband. (The story is the tragic undoing of an evangelical priest who thinks that he has arrived in post-colonial Africa to save the natives. Neo-colonisers like Bush and his cohorts would do well to read a sensitive book like this about the dangers of tampering in a world best left to itself. A potent and poetic cautionary tale.) The second passage hints at the tragedy of personal and human history when arrogant conquering and 'civilising' forces are unleashed in a world that has its own natural rhythm, order and chaos best suited to it, best left to evolve in its own way.

"...First, picture the forest. I want you to be its conscience, the eyes in the trees. The trees are columns of slick, brindled bark like muscular animals grown beyond all reason. Every space is filled with life: delicate, poisonous frogs...Vines strangling their own kin in the everlasting wrestle for sunlight....the breathing of monkeys...a glide of snake belly on the branch...a single-file army of

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ants biting a mammoth tree into uniform grains and hauling it down to the dark for their ravenous queen. And, in reply, a choir of seedlings arching their necks out of rotted tree stumps, sucking life out of death. This forest eats itself and lives forever."

The second passage: "She is inhumanly alone. And then, all at once, she isn't. A beautiful animal stands on the other side of the water. They look up from their lives, woman and animal, amazed to find themselves in the same place. He freezes, inspecting her with his black-tipped ears...the forest's shadows fall into lines across his white striped flanks. His stiff forelegs splay out like stilts, for he has been caught in the act of reaching down for water...Finally he surrenders his surprise, looks away, and drinks.... That one time and no other the okapi came to the stream and I was the only one to see it..."

"I didn't know any name for what I'd seen until some years afterward in Atlanta, when I attempted briefly to consecrate myself in the public library, believing every crack in my soul could be chinked with a book. I read that the male okapi is smaller than the female, and more shy, and that hardly anything else is known about them. For hundreds of years people in the Congo Valley spoke of this beautiful, strange beast. When European explorers got wind of it, they declared it legendary: a unicorn. Another fabulous tale from the dark domain of poison-tipped arrows and bone-pierced lips. Then in the 1920's, when elsewhere in the world the menfolk took a break between wars ...a white man finally did set eyes on the okapi. I can picture him spying on it with binoculars, raising up...the rifle sight, taking it for its own. A family of them now reside in the New York Museum of Natural History, dead and stuffed, with standoffish glass eyes... And so the okapi is now by scientific account a real animal. Merely real, not legendary..."

"Oh, but I know better...consider...an Africa unconquered altogether. Imagine those first Portugese adventurers approaching the shore, spying on the jungles edge...imagine that by some miracle of dread or reverence they lowered their spyglasses, turned...sailed on. Imagine all who came after doing the same. What would that Africa be now? All I can think of is the other okapi, the one they used to believe in. A unicorn that could look you in the eye."

I am lost to the world, far away in the magic forest of prose as subverted poetry. Till next week.