

Native Life in the Third Millennium

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Abstract

In *Native Life in the Third Millennium*, Masande Ntshanga's third book after *The Reactive* (2014) and *Triangulum* (2019), a poet, philosopher and programmer wrestle with systemic oppression and themselves, navigating anomie, alienation and flashes of abundance in millennial Africa. This excerpt, shared with the permission of Model See Media, is the opening long-form poem that gives the book its title.

native life in the third millennium vol. 1 & 2

vol. 1

2009

i

today i heard a maxwell song and listened closer and it sounded like the end of the world. at the back of a taxi at the back of a taxi- rank at the back of albert camus' 'a happy death' i'm late for work again. i take my time. i take all of my time and pull it over my head. i roll it inside a stack of carhartt skull caps and twist kush. i hide inside a waste of time.

i want to create something beautiful. i want to create an ornament to stand above my laptop and i will sleep while it writes misnomers without passion.

i don't understand poetry inside the elevator at work. i'm too thin

i pull myself through the elevator doors and then at the end of the work day i push myself back out through the elevator doors.

i need insurance.

i need a healthcare plan for a low-income beginner household. i need sleep.

ii

saturday i wake up at home and drink a beer. i watch a soccer match and don't care.

my housemate cuts himself shaving. he's explaining how he hates his job.

he rubs the blood off his chest and says "oh well"

in my room an ornament stands above my laptop, writing poetry without passion.

i feel like the worst poem written by this ornament

i feel like understanding that has been obscured, but makes sense,

because i am the one obscuring the understanding, if that makes sense.

iii

i wake up at work.

it's 10 a.m. and full of office dread. processed rice cakes and cottage cheese.

editorial meetings in which i remain mute,

flashing back to weekends lined with buckets of tortured chickens and troubled friends. designer kush. jägerbomb comedowns and chlorophyll shots. mortal fear. postpunk and idm. cape town rapper suicide. dub plates and pills. native life in the third millennium.

my boss walks up to me and says "homie"; high-fives me; says "meeting in 15 stanzas"

i feel like my heritage is obstinate

that it drains me.

that a version of microsoft word could walk up to this poem and draw a red line beneath "nigga" and change it to "nigger";

that it just did.

that sitting at my desk and pretending to work i conduct experiments on an inherited language. investigating its tonal architecture and writing to keep from killing myself.

not that i'm prone to with such hands.

but that i'm black and need to recover from the lesions borne on the hearts of all colonised men. born shattered inside the nefarious laboratories of eugenicists, to shattered progenitors, i need therapists to restore me from the nightmare imagination of whiteness to the child it made me abandon. the doctor i weep in front of tells me there's a spook hiding inside the mirrors of black folk, grinning at their innocent children. i need to recover from

a colonial ghoul and from antihuman transistor farms

i need expensive dates. sex and to be petted and for that i need to work for these masters and to demonstrate a willingness to. i need rent and a healthcare plan for a low-income beginner household and to give back to the woman who raised me.

i need to charm the dissident children of boston brahmins i need to write her a book that'll be taught at harvard.

iv

in my room the ornament wins a nobel prize and walks up to the podium burning the worst poem written by "the ornament wins a nobel prize"

meaning me. that i need to keep going. i wake up inside a deadline and wait.

i'm afraid of all things and at all times now. i keep a high guard inside the supremacist lattice.

the ornament says meeting in 1 stanza

meeting

vol. 2

2019

before covid, i remember being in grade 9, not knowing joe brainard, windows xp, and a bright beam of sunlight in our computer lab; i remember unending circuits around our small boarding house plot; i remember our headmaster, mr. ballam; i remember 2001 and being friends with quett and jackson; i remember seeing zinzi in her bra and calling her "effulgent", afraid to ask her out; i remember reading norse mythology to her in the library once after it rained; how alive it made me feel; i remember jackson's beautiful yellow game boy that got stolen by edwin

i remember being at a party in parktown in 2017, meeting an american writer who joked about my novel-in-progress having an unreliable narrator; i remember jackie and i laughing in the living room; her brilliance; i remember her being interested in my novel being sciencefiction

i remember warm iced coffee in 2009; long commutes without masks on and passive suicidal ideation; blogspot, animal collective and gorilla vs. bear; i remember writing a poem and impressing a famous writer; drinking too much coffee; i remember being ungrateful to be alive

i remember a party at my place and a thin sick body in 2011; hipster runoff; heartache and remorse; i remember the music being too loud and all of my friends being new and hot.

i remember not thinking about the anthropocene in bhisho in 1992.

i remember hard drugs in hillbrow in 2016; trump's victory on reddit; learning about the mariana trench from

corrupt missionaries in 1995; a friend laughing at me as he slipped further into addiction; how i failed to help either one of us; i remember waking up in his mother's car; strobe lights and women dancing out of collapsing economies.

i remember reading existentialist philosophers on the train and wearing a peacoat in 2008; i remember village memories and trips to gugulethu; i remember tshepo crying and laughing on the phone in 2013; how long we used to talk for and how i still betrayed him in the end; i'm sorry, tshepo; i remember the world feeling lonesome and confusing to him

to us.

i remember disconnection. fleeting joy in 2006. being drunk and alone and determined.

i remember not thinking about humankind as a species of monsters like i do now; before covid, in 2003, listening to portishead on a dorm bed at the start of winter; or to system of a down telling me to steal their third album; or of crowds as patterns of bones stacked inside mounds of flesh; contaminants running restless over the earth's crust; tonguing the marrow of fellow mammals and choking the world inside a carapace of plastic

i remember basketball practice and cd-r pornography; i remember scoring my first lay up in 3rd team in 2002; how each english teacher made a difference in how they unbullied me; how i once benched for a 2nd team game without my glasses on and the ball smashed into my face.

willpower.

i remember being seventeen and sweaty and sexual

i remember 1998; windows 3.1, playboy deodorant, playing golden axe and simcity with my only friend; i remember counterfeit sega consoles and "no warranties"; i remember alex kidd

i remember technology and popular mechanics. the year 2000. dj walker and senyaka. i remember elisha cuthbert and ultimate mortal kombat 3. alice, zeleni, and my grandmother's village in 1990.

i remember thinking about the european renaissance in 2015; dressed well and full of designer drugs at the back of an uber in sandton; running out of a conscience and feeling numb as i looked over at alex; thinking of bearded men hunched over cadavers in the dark; rand merchant bank and the sewer system beneath the johannesburg stock exchange; of leonardo da vinci prying his neighbour's chest open for inquiry like an implement

of all masters being barbarians.

i remember being at the hague in 2017; sharing a cigarette with a blonde poet before we went inside and told the audience the world was ending; to applause; i remember signing books for university students from cologne; talking race with their professor and thinking of all the race abuse i would never know about at home

i remember dancing in a silent disco without losing hope; encamped in a faction of allies and global south millennial harbingers of doom; i remember mit paying me to imagine a future for us; i remember dumile feni collapsing in his favourite record store in the east village; i remember wandering european cities alone; traversing

western states of mind; seeing kreuzberg and rebecca taking photos of me in front of the berlin wall; i remember a transparent cloud of pollution coating our shins as we entered the u-bahn; a brother selling me kush and tipping his hat to me in the park; i remember remembering to remember