Necks swivelled,
eyes ogled,
jaws dislocated,
mouths gaped,
as fear gripped the supplicants
to behold the apparition
approaching the edge of the crowd.

Pregnant Nabanda gave birth suddenly
and Naphiri miscarried instantly in her fright.
Mbewe's palpitating heart stopped completely.
Dizzy heads fainted in terror.
Weak legs went *lebwede! lebwede!*
collapsing uncontrollably where they stood.
Lend me a hoe.
Chiuta, let him loose!

The supplicants strained
to confirm disbelief
and increase the terrorama.
The crowd jostled and pushed
as the fearsome sensation
made for the sacred arena.
To dig around the khonde.
Chiuta, let him loose!

The spectacle parted the crowd
as a herd of elephants does
grass, shrubs and trees
standing in their awesome way.
The bodies and limbs shrank away
as ripples rise and fall fast
from the centre of a whirl.
Lest the water floods in.
Chiuta, let him loose!

Mlauli at the ringside shook his head:
'Can that thing unleash
the still slumbering Mphambe,
thicken as thick as bark cloth
the thin and empty air?'
Mlauli's cohorts derided:
'Tell us, are you greater
than your master here?
Who eddies faster than
the spinning top to make whirlwinds?
Who spins so fast his hair
brushes the ceiling of the sky
to catch the fleeing clouds
and toss them back
to granite-faced Kaphirintiwa?'

The *kamango* drum thundered
mpete! mpete! dii! mpete! mpete! dii! dii!
and Mbona danced his *mgwetsa*
in loops, interlocking rings,
ovals and circles.

Mbona slashed the north
and the *kandranga* went *ng'wii!*
whistling in the desiccated air.
This little one?

Mbona stabbed the south
and the *kandranga* went *ng'aning'ani!*
singing like a released bull roaring.
Is it this little one?

Mbona lanced the east
and the *kandranga* went *ngwingwiriri!*
ringing like an ironsmith's workshop.
That little one?

Mbona lashed the west
and the *kandranga* went *phali! wali! wali!*
unleashing pent-up lightning.
From which little cloud
will the rain fall?

At each dagger thrust, the air coagulated,
turning silver, then grey, then black.
At each slash, black clouds exploded
and rocketed from dagger-point skyward:
cumulus, nimbus, cumulus, nimbus,
nimbus, cumulus, nimbus, cumulus.
Give me water:
My throat is parched!

Cumulus accelerated, overtaking nimbus
over the jubilant supplicants' heads.
Parched throats roared,
cracked hands clapped,
blistered feet drummed,
anticipating the deluge.
We shall see the floods
by the pathway
when we return.

The grilled dust hissed and bubbled
as the first pellets of rain
sizzled on the upturned faces,
bare backs, chests, legs, and feet.
Rain, wash away!
Rain, wash away!

Gigantic blobs swelled and plopped
as if a huge earthenware cauldron
was boiling thick millet porridge.
The steam and dust convoluted
in the supplicants' eyes and ears,

noses and mouths, as puddles
became pool became streams
became rivers became lakes.
Rain, wash away!
Rain, wash away!

The supplicants – the elders,
men and women, drummers –
did not linger to watch the miracle
of summer-nude trees,
of summer-stripped earth,
of drought-stricken skies,
becoming rain-clothed shrubs,
rain-washed ground,
rain-drenched air.
Let's run! Run! Run!
Let's run! Run! Run!

The chants of devotion reared,
the prayers of thanksgiving cartwheeled,
the cries, shouts, cheers,
ululations mingled chaotically
with the renting of the skies
illuminated by the crash of lightning.
Turned into screams, howls and yells
as huge hailstones beat
as heavy as hammer blows
on the dancing supplicants below.
Let's run! Run! Run!
Let's run! Run! Run!

The terror of tons of torrents
burying them overcame the jubilation
as each hailstone dug holes in the ground:
You could put in a post to build a house.
Human figures were transformed:
rain-seekers to rain-fliers,

rain-bathers to rain-runners,
running from a coalition of mud
and water, hail and thunder.
Let's run! Run! Run!
Let's run! Run! Run!

Rain-walled black bodies,
succession after succession
of heads, arms, torsos and legs,
dismembered instantaneously
at each illumination of lightning,
transfigured into aquatic rain-forms
in the intervening darkness,
only to become rain-sheets
again in the next,
as the supplicants fled from
the venomous abundance,
the generous vengeance,
the vicious beneficence
of the rain Mbona had unleashed.
Let's run! Run! Run!
Let's run! Run! Run!

Mbona remained motionless,
an iridescent silhouette
bedecked with the watery darkness,
face supernal under a cloud wreath,
kandranga unsheathed, still aloft,
the rain pellets sizzling on it,
deflecting the giant hailstones,
clanging on the double blades
and rebounding into space,
before falling again to the ground.
The metamorphosis of Mbona:
the rain-dancer, the rain-caller,
the rain-bringer and the rain-maker.

Mbona looked at the rain-embraced
Kaphirintiwa, the cradle of mankind.
The granite-faced massif reared its head
and beckoned to him on the rain-shrine.
Mbona, the rain clouds still swirling
like drenched dreadlocks round him,
answered the ancestral spirits' urgent call.

Mlauli's Son

It so happened that Mlauli's son
by his favourite young wife,
hearing the drums and songs
of his father's rival's dance,
itched in his mother's house
and burned with the desire
to witness for himself the miracle.

At each tattoo of the *kamango* drum
he drew nearer and nearer to the door.
At each chorus, a foot or a hand twitched
and beat its own rhythm in the house.
His buttocks could not stick to the floor
and at the first peal of thunder
and the first flash of lightning,
he tugged at the stopper and pulled.
Free at last, he darted outside
to see horde after horde of supplicants
going *nyomi! nyomi!*
like a flock of drenched chickens
fleeing from the onslaught of the rain,
feet and toes splattering mud on the ones behind.

As he gaped at the rain-runners,
Mphambe incinerated him where he stood.
He did not even utter a cindery whimper
as he crumpled outside his mother's house.

Only the smell of scorched flesh remained,
with bones and earth, where Mphambe had struck
and never glanced back to inspect the results.

Mlauli found the mother kneeling down,
searching in the ashes and scraping the mud,
for what had once been her son.
Her drenched hair quivered
in spasms of anguish.
No sound came from the gash
that was her mouth.

A charred leg crumpled beneath the body
as the torso went *gwebede!* crashing to the ground.
An incinerated arm dislodged and dissolved
in its own pulverised ashes.
The burnt remains frothed in the torrent.
Only a heap of bubbling ashes smouldered
when the mother reached her son at the *bwalo*.

She raised her eyes from her toasted son
to gaze at her husband arrested in mid-flight
from the rain dance and rain flight.
When the wail came, it turned
the stomachs of those who heard it.
'He killed my son!
Mbona killed my son!'
Her hands beat the ground
around the head, trunk and arms.
'What wrong did I do him?
So young, so innocent, so defenceless.'
Her tears rivalled the raging storm.
Her eyes smouldered sorrow and rage.

Mlauli's agitations were non-apparent.
He stalked round his grief-stricken wife
and the smoking remains of his son

like a lion that has spied its prey.
He snorted like a raging hippopotamus
coming up for gulpfuls of air and water.

Mlauli's favourite wailed unceasingly:
'Like the clay child here my son lies
on his mother's doorstep dissolving,
a leg here, an arm there, ashes everywhere.
Between the mud and the ashes
there is nothing for me to bury.
How are we going to bury
these dripping remains?
In what coffin does one carry
a pulverised corpse?'

As the scooped-up ashes awaited burial,
the favourite spoke again to Mlauli:
'He must die, too. Mbona must die.'
Mlauli quivered again inside:
'What? Kill my own kinsman?
He is my nephew, remember?'
The wife sobbed: 'The bundle
of ashes we will bury tomorrow
will be your son's. Mbona killed
a kinsman who was your son, too.'
Mlauli countered: 'Mbona is more
than a kinsman and a nephew now.
He is the rainmaker, the python priest
of all the Mang'anja from here to there.'

The wife was urgent: 'All the more reason
to kill him before the poets start singing
panegyrics that will resound forever
through the valleys and over the hills.
Before sunset Mbona's pacans will be heard
in the pounding of millet under the eaves,
in the grinding of stones on the *khonde*,

in the woodsman's axe blows by the riverside,
in the hunter's arrow-shot in the forest.

How can you bear the humiliation
of losing your place as python priest
and having your conqueror follow
his victory home to kill your son too,
all in the same rain on the same day?
You are finished as the great rainmaker.
Are you finished as a man, too?
At your age, are you going to make
another son like the one your rival killed?'

And so the favourite taunted on.
The smell of blood stung Mlauli's nostrils:
'You who found me by the riverside
still a virgin, and I opened up
my inside as the mimosa
unfurls its leaves wide.
I nurtured my love, as
I did the son that came out
of me, for nine moons.
You, who find that I am still hot
for you and you only.'

Mlauli, in the heat of indecision,
remembered coming upon her
by the riverside, unnoticed,
as she prepared to take a bath.
The wavelets gently teased her vision
as she gazed at her reflection in the pool,
limpid eyes melting in watery essences.

The beads around her waist sparkling,
the nipples untouched by man rising,
caressed only by the sun, wind and water.

The splash tore the rays on the waves,
reflection dissolving into refraction,
as image met form, form met image.

Mlauli could not hold still the vision,
only droplets of water and now tears
cascading down the cheeks, joining raindrops
from his favourite's spasmodic lamentations.

Mlauli's exhalations climaxed in an oath
that shrivelled the *timba* in its nest.
He stamped his feet, waking up a few
generations of his forefathers long gone.
He shook his *kandranga* in Mbona's direction.

'Poets, singers,' Mlauli ground his teeth,
'Why do you versify victory songs?
Why do you compose lyrics of celebration,
triumphal odes, eulogies and panegyrics?
You will soon be singing dirges
lamenting the fall of the rain-king.
A life for a life: the blood of a kinsman
can only be appeased by the blood of the slayer.
What more the life of a beloved son?
You should be tearing your hair and clothes.
Women should be beating their breasts,
singing funeral songs – lamentation
upon lamentation for a dead son
and a dead would-be python.
Two deaths to be mourned
on the same rainmaking day.'

And the composers sang more songs,
songs of assassins, cut-throats, murderers,
menacing the air with spillages of blood.

'How can we sing blood-praising songs
on a day like this: We are versifiers of history.'

* * *

Mlauli went to Lundu: 'I ask myself:
What is the meaning of these things.
When I danced the *mgwetsa*,
as I have done for you all these years,
there were always thick black clouds
covering Kaphirintiwa from one peak to another,
even before I drew the *kandranga* from its mother.
I danced twice and not a speck appeared.
But as soon as Mbona appears, the skies change
in great trepidation, as if quaking at his sight.
As soon as he twirls his foot, clouds explode
in front of his toes, racing to the skies,
and I ask myself what is the meaning
of these things. Is there no python left in the land?'

Lundu shook his head very sadly.
'It is not as if some among us were unclean.
We ourselves, as we have always done,
asked you to dance the *mgwetsa* for us
before we all perish in the long drought.
We cleansed ourselves and quenched our fires
seven nights before the rain dance.
The whole land was cool.
We ourselves supervised the offerings:
every gift, large or small, was also cooled.
We inspected them as we cooled them:
cloth, chicken or goat,
from one end to the other all black
as the rain-bringing clouds up above.
We ourselves supervised the killing
of the tethered goat: stab, not slash or cut or hack.
We observed the rituals for the sake
of our land. The moon was in the east, too,

the best time for the rain dance to bring quick results.
If you seek the meaning of these things,
only you can tell us.'

Mlauli complained: 'I could have danced
three times, five times, or even ten times,
and no rain would have fallen.
The sun would still have scorched
as hard as it had before the dances.
And you know the reason why?
The rains had been securely tied before.
What chance did any rainmaker have?
The little rodents – mice or rabbits –
harbingers of deluges, had long fled
from their habitats or starved to death.
The cicadas' throats in the trees had dried up.
They could no longer sing of the hoped-for rain.
Our own fowl had long stopped giving us signs
by taking dust-baths: the dust was too hot for them.
It scorched their feathers, wings and feet.
They dared not walk away from the sheds.
The baobab's elephantiasis melted in the furnace.
The fibre peeled and broke at a gentle touch.
And all day long the *kwele* cuckoo
dared not lift its beak to open its mouth
to croak the advent of rain for the parched earth.
The skies were taut, as if tied in a tight bundle.

And all they needed was piercing with a *kandranga*.
The moon was in the east, too, is still there,
the best time, of all times, for rainmaking.
You can see at night her empty cradle swinging,
ready to be blown to full red roundedness
or to brim to the top with fresh rainwater.

You can see her horns already turned to us,
her empty trough facing the deeps, ready

to fill herself with deluges before turning over
to empty herself in the hills and valleys.

See the winding ring she casts round her flanks,
circling her starry lovers before the cyclone,
like the misty blanket that will soon open,
before it bursts with potfuls of water,
portending storms, hailstones, landslides,
floods, and earthquakes.'

Lundu pronounced: 'Anyone so hard-hearted,
so disloyal to his clan and kin, is a traitor
and should be brought to trial.
But how come, if the rains were so tied,
Mbona was able to untie them
and bring us the much-desired rain?'

Mlauli pointed out: 'The one who tied the rains
and caused the long drought
is the one who loosed them yesterday.
The one who rendered my powers useless
is the one who brought the rains too.
It could only be Mbona who could
have untied what he himself had tied.'

Lundu responded: 'We know
you have performed your duties
as python at Kaphirintiwa without blame
all these years, but the spirits of the forefathers
may have been annoyed with you.
They fled from you and alighted on Mbona.

Mbona saved you great embarrassment.
If there had been no rain, the people's wrath
would have turned on him.
Now that he has brought the rain,
they have forgotten your failures.

You should be rejoicing at the success
of your apprentice: He has proved that he was
well trained, is now a full rainmaker.
Mbona has passed the last hurdle to full python.
You should not be plotting to kill your candidate
who proved to be the most successful apprentice.

This is the wrong time to kill Mbona.
He has just saved Kaphirintiwa from the drought.
He is the hero, and any act to harm him
will only result in bloodshed as his worshippers
will seek revenge for the blood of their martyr.
And Mbona will be seen as a martyr
when he should not be given that opportunity.
Do you want to make him a martyr when he has
already risen to python-priest all in a day?'

Mlauli answered: 'If he had been a lesser sorcerer,
a nail, a bunch of loose hair, a rag from his cloth
would have been enough to put an end to him.
I have some powerful *nsupa* that creates
images of enemies plotting me no good.
I need only prick the image to kill them.
Or I could make an effigy and burn it,
thereby forever consuming my enemy.
But he knows these methods too, and how
to render them ineffective against him.
He also has powerful *chithumwa*
or *chirisi* round his waist.

Lundu observed: 'He surprised
nature herself in the drought.
The baobab, that watchdog of the rain clouds,
did not have time to clothe herself with greenery.
The bark and branches still have no flowers
nor leaves sprouting to witness the downpour.
See how the bark still looks sickly grey.

The wet skin is still blocked from the sun's rays.
When the white blossoms flower in the rain
we will already be starting to eat the green maize.
Even the *chikwelekwele* rain bird has not emerged
from hiding from the hail stones. Now he's ashamed
for he was too startled to chirp to warn the world:
kwele-kwele-kwele! kwele-kwele-kwele!
Tomorrow it's going to rain! Rain tomorrow!
Now when his mate chirps in the early morn, the song:
Grab your hoe, it is dawn! Grab your hoe!
it is out of shame at having failed in his duty.
The nightjar is the only one to rejoice at night:
Let the moon shine gloriously! he exults nightly,
So we can eat tadpoles! The moon obeys
and he finds plenty of tadpoles wallowing
and thrashing and jumping about in the mud.
People are so happy, rejoicing in the rain.
They have put their backs to the hoe.
They are turning the soil and planting.'

Mlauli was chagrined: 'After Mbona's
rainmaking, I'll have to do something
to redeem myself in the eyes of the people.
And you know yourself that the python
who gets too old or ill or fails to make rain
takes poison to make way for the new one.
If not, he infects the whole land again.
And you know yourself, too, the other way:
I could have killed him. But that's no way:
violent blood spilled now would only heat up
the whole land again. We would be plunged
into a worse drought than that which has just
been staved off in my shame.
We need all the coolness in these troubled times.
That is why I came to ask you to call the people
tomorrow for the *mwabvi* ceremony,
the only way to get rid of sorcery in the land

without heating up the elements again.
If Mbona is a sorcerer, he won't escape the *mwabvi*.'

Lundu discerned: 'You make Mbona seem
several kinds of criminal:
Schemer, murderer, usurper.
Yet he is Chiuta's prophet, fulfilling the wishes
of his ancestral spirits. The drought was not
of his doing. The ancestral spirits
brought it upon us as a warning.'

Mlauli confessed: 'Mbona has been a usurper all his life.
As a child, he already surpassed my sons
and all the other assistants in training.
As an apprentice, he already knew more
than his master. As a rainmaker, he succeeded
where I had failed since he had tied the rains himself.
I have divined for my people
from days long forgotten, since I became of age.
When I divined for this drought, it had no cause.
The ancestors had not brought it, Mbona did, so
he could render me useless and become the python.
This is the kind of witchcraft which only *mwabvi*
can get rid of before it infects the whole land,
kin playing upon kin, nephew upon uncle.
It has to be stopped before relatives
start eating each other.'

Lundu remarked: 'The wisdom of our forefathers
is greater than ours.
We cannot have all the answers.
Perhaps they were not satisfied
with you and wanted someone else
to take your place as the rain priest.'

Mlauli said bitterly: 'Then they could not have punished me
so viciously, and doubly so, in front of my own people

when I have done their will all my life: rain failing
and killing my beloved son at the same time?
Just to show me they were displeased with me?
This is not the hand of my revered forefathers.
It is Mbona and Mbona alone who has done this.'

Lundu advised: 'This is the time to cleanse your heart
of all evil, malicious and murderous intentions.
Wash your wounds with the tears of remorse.
Bind up the old sores with forgiveness.
Let us mourn the dead and give them burial
to reconcile them with the desecrated soil.
Let us bring back to life joy and laughter
in this calamity-ridden, drought-stricken land.
Let us pray for the forgiveness of those we have wronged
so that our grain, leaves and fruit sprout again.
So that the crumbling walls of Kaphirintiwa
are re-cemented with solid friendship and kinship.'

* * *

Lundu came to Mbona in the night:
'Tomorrow is *mwabvi* day and Mlauli
is after your heart to regain his powers.
You will be tried as a tier of rains,
a drought-maker, not a bringer of rain,
a sorcerer working in the dark, plotting mischief,
causing hatred between blood and kin,
flying on the backs of owls or hyenas, or in old baskets,
to your next victim, to suck his life blood.'

Mbona replied: 'I'm no sorcerer,
and you know it. I know, too,
who the real sorcerers are.
The spirits of our forefathers tell me
I should not bow down to man's fallible invention.
Mwabvi does not tell the truth: It is death
to the innocent and the enemy of the brewer.

The way of truth cannot be the way of death.
Even though we have always tried witches in this way
it is also the way of bringing hatred into the land.
It heats up the elements and the spirits shy away from us.
It works by double punishment on the victim, too.
You brand a person a witch and as if that is not enough
you force him to take the poison which kills him.
He dies a double death. If innocent, three deaths.
All for the price of making the land safe for the brewer,
his cohorts and the real guilty parties in the dark.

I did not tie or loosen the skies.
The spirits of the forefathers have power to do that.
I have no power to make rain fall or not.
Only Mulungu, the great spirit of rain, sends it through
Chisumphi, Mphambe, Chauta and Leza.
The power of Namalenga is beyond comprehension.
We can only bow to his will for nobody else
can will the rain to fall when he does not will it.
It was not my will that made the rain fall yesterday.
I am only a vessel through whom Chiuta works,
at the will of Mulungu, the great spirit in the skies
and the spirit of our forefathers gone to earth.'

Lundu prophesied: 'A lot of innocent people
will die with you as well as
the ones who are not so innocent,
although everyone will know it's because of you.
After your death, your body will be disembowelled,
your heart taken out, and the rest thrown into
the evil forest like a thing that disgraced the clan,
and Mlauli will continue as python of old.'

Mbona declared: 'The innocent
cannot escape the ordeal either.
Refusal to drink is outright admission of guilt.
Acceptance is already a death sentence.

A prophet of Chiuta will not be an accomplice
to practices that unleash Mphambe's wrath.'

Lundu advised: 'Then the only answer
is to leave the land. In that way,
you save a lot of innocent lives
as well as your own. You live on to see
the light of the next sun.'

Mbona dissented: 'Running away
is a betrayal of the clan.
I have brought the rain which they were praying for.
As you said, the spirits of the forefathers have
abandoned the old python and descended on me.
I should be around to be crowned the new python.
I should be available to help my people
in all their ritual undertakings after Mlauli.'

Lundu asked: 'You think Mlauli will let you parade
your triumph in front of him
every day of his remaining life?
The *mwabvi* he prepares for you will be final.
You won't live beyond the first sip of his concoction.'

Mbona opined: 'I would have expected you
to help me regain what I have lost
all these years, not advise abdication.
You know the children of Undi, Kaphwiti and Mlauli
have divided up the land between themselves,
with no thought of a piece for Nyangu's son.
There is no land the size of the palm of a child
that Mbona can claim as his. With your help
and with me as the rainmaker, we could have righted
all these wrongs that have been eating my insides
for so long since I became disinherited
in my own land, by my own cousins,

in front of my own eyes,
and even with your knowledge and assent.'

Lundu queried: 'What chance have you
of overthrowing Mlauli even if
you stayed and survived the *mwabvi* trial?
What would you do to challenge again
his rightful place as python?'

Mbona asserted: 'Exactly. If I stay and survive
Mlauli is doomed. Doubly shown up
as powerless to continue as python.'

Lundu questioned: 'But why should you
challenge Mlauli? What gains,
apart from usurping the title
which many will think you earned
by dishonest means?'

Mbona retorted: 'How else can I
redress the injustices
he has perpetrated against me
and my family?
It cannot be done in naked fight,
kandranga against *kandranga*,
kin against kin,
uncle against nephew.'

Lundu pointed out: 'Then you see
where you will fail,
however you fight him
and with whichever weapon
you use to topple him
and gain his place.
The moral right will be his.
The people's sympathy will fly to him.

Usurper you are, and you will always
be seen as such.'

Mbona was bitter:
'I cannot be condemned
to perpetual anonymity
through no fault of my own.
You are asking me to be without a title
after acquiring the only title I had ever won
legitimately, with the spirits' assent,
having been trained and prepared all my life for it.
You are asking me to lose my only chance
to regain my rightful land and position
in my own society, and now I ask you:
Where shall I run to? Who will receive me?
Who will accept me as rainmaker
and landowner outside the cradle of mankind?'

Lundu advised: 'Take your lesson from the granite-faced rock.
The first cataclysm exploded the myth of Chiuta
living with man, animal and spirit. The imprints
of all point away from the cradle of mankind.
Chiuta went back to his own land in the skies,
leaving man, animal and spirit to seek anew
his own lands, to build anew, to seek reconciliation,
to seek harmony between discordant elements.

Take your wisdom from your own great grandfather.
Undi Chirindzodzwe did not stay in Urundi.
He moved on to the next valley in Tanganyika.
Dissatisfied with the new lands, he moved south
to Songwe near the great lake.
Not even that was good enough
for the son of the Mang'anja.
He kept on trekking southward,
and here we are with you recreating the same old
cataclysm between your tutor and yourself,

between those loyal to the old rainmaker
and those who will choose to proclaim you python.
All the *mseketela* high and low
and the *mkomawanthu* will be there
to witness the greatest witch purge
in the living memory of man.

And you can also summon all the Chisumphi
and Makemvula, if there is a need for them,
to take up our cause against the witch-hunters.
As ruler of this land and peace-maker,
my advice to you is to let Mlauli end his days
in peace as an old python that can no longer crow
unless he chooses to follow you
and dismember you to regain his powers.
Either way you will die.
The only course open to us is to postpone
when it will be. Like all of us,
Mlauli too, all you will be doing
is keeping death a little longer and further away,
for another day, moon, season or generation.'

* * *

Mbona sat in council with himself.
'Why do I wonder at all this rivalry?
These rivalries between Mlauli and Mbona
did not start with us, the grandchildren.
They are of ancient lineage, of the spirits,
of the gods, as old as the universe itself.

Did Chiuta, the male principle of the rainbow,
not fly with Chauta, his own female,
and man with his woman with him,
and each animal, bird, insect, tree
come with his own female counterpart?
Did they not together traverse the cosmos,
crossing the firmament on their journey,

searching, looking, hunting for a place
of refuge in which to live and prosper?

The whole universe witnessed their flight.
What were they fleeing from?
Where did they come from?
What wrath had they incurred?
Did the great Mulungu say farewell
to them, with a pleasant smiling face,
Fond hand, open palm waving,
as he stood at the rim of the cosmos?

Why did they fly in the vast void,
past the morning star, the evening star?
How close to the sun and near the moon,
the hot and the cold, did they pass?
What were they really looking for?
What was missing from their original home?

Did they not alight at last
on the soft yielding rock of Kaphirintiwa,
the unformed, yet to be formed,
the unmoulded, yet to be moulded,
a new land, freshly populated
by the first god and goddess,
the first man and woman,
the first of each creation?
What did they hope to find here?
Did they find what they wanted?

What was lacking in Kaphirintiwa
that made man make the first fire?
The conflagration devoured the sacred forest,
the scorching fire singeing the glow-worms,
tongues of flame spitting death to all,
jets of fire searing gambolling gazelles,
fiery fingers thrusting into corners

of tender shoots, soft downs and barks;
unleashed the dreaded buffalo grazing
alongside the timid goat and lamb;
unloosened the enormous giraffe
towering over the tiny tick and ant;
untied the untamable crocodile
swimming side by side with the *chambo*;
unfettered the roaring lion, snarling leopard,
snuggling near the mewing cat or hedgehog;
uncoiled the cobra, the mamba, the adder,
beside the burrowing blindworm;
unfastened the eagle, the kite, the vulture
to prey on the mouse, the chicken, the duck.

The stampeding animals jolted Kaphirintiwa
as the elephants lumbered down the steep slopes,
panicked rhinoceroses leapt over yawning chasms,
wave upon wave of fire spurred on
squealing monkeys, howling hyenas,
searing snakes which could not slither
fast enough over precipices to overtake others.

The commotion of drumming hooves tore down
the slopes of Kaphirintiwa, echoed in the valleys,
reverberated back to the great granite face,
and thundered far north to Nyika Plateau,
shrieked far south to Mulanje Massif,
and pierced east to the shimmering lake.

And after the first pandemonium on earth,
Chiuta sent two of his trusted messengers
to pronounce judgement on man's act.
To the chameleon, that gentle creature:
"Man, animal, bird, insect and tree
will breed, pululate and populate
the vast reaches of the earth and beyond.
None of god's creation will die at all.

The great Mulungu is all-forgiving.
Man's inhuman act on god's handiwork
is buried forever under the mantle of love
Mulungu has for all mankind."
To the lizard, that fleet-footed creature:
"Man, animal, bird, insect and tree
will rejoice to their hearts' content.
Song and dance, revelries and festivities
will fill the whole of the earth and beyond,
because of Mulungu's munificence and love,
but only for a short period of time.
In the end, all will die."

So why do I sit here and wonder?
This is an old tale of rivalries on earth
between man and his god, or when tired,
between man and himself or the animals.
These titanic battles and cosmic quarrels
are reenacted on earth almost every day.
See how brother fights younger brother –
Sibling rivalry on a green maize cob:
"Let me make a path for you
to help you eat better your cob."
And lo, there was a path built,
much to the little one's amazement
and the older one's satisfaction at the duplicity
as he munched happily the spoils,
while his own cob awaited him untouched.

The maize game continued unrefereed.
"That was the main path, you see.
Now let me make the trails for you."
He munched still more on the prize,
as the little one's mouth watered
or he winced to see more roads
eating away his precious cob
before he even had a taste of his own.

The games got riskier.
"Let me show you some magic.
You see this maize grain?
I'll make it pop out of my nose.
Just watch." And with a little sneeze,
out flew the grain, to land a few feet away.
And when the little one tried the same,
it got stuck in his nostril.

The games got dirtier.
"I bet you can't chew this piece of charcoal
and still pronounce, 'I'm clever'."
The child fell for it again,
had a mouthful of chewy charcoal,
and was surprised he could utter the sentence,
"I am clever," only to be damped again.
"A clever person does not eat charcoal!"

The games got bloodier.
"You see my fingers? I can shift
the positions of the third and fourth.
Watch me." And lo, the fingers danced
right in front of his amazed eyes.

"How did you do that?" "Easy.
I cut them both so fast
to change them round."
And he laughed as the little one
tried to pull his fingers off to do the same.
But he didn't laugh when the other got out
a knife to improve on the games.

Now the little one has grown up.
Wet ears have dried up.
Eyes have opened wide.
You can't pull the wool over them.

Now I have learnt all the tricks
Mlauli taught me as I grew up.
Now Mbona can call for rain at will,
where his master Mlauli has failed.
Now Mbona can create rain to quench fire,
the same rain that unleashes lightning,
to burn Mlauli's son with a vengeance.
And now Mlauli's fury will not abate.
Until blood is drawn in revenge.
And do I wonder why there's hate,
rivalry, battles, carnage, in the world?'

PART TWO

The Flight

INTERLUDE ONE

This tale is told by many an ancient bard
from one generation to another, and to another:
How Mlauli's angry tread trampled the ground
Mbona had just watered as he fled from Kaphirintiwa.

First Mbona fled to the northern hills,
aided by his flying spinning top.
Then he swam under the great waters,
all the way down to the southern tip.
He surfaced and continued overland,
down to the Maravi Hills in the deep south.

And this is what the elders tell by the fireside.

The Air Flight

The male *uta-wa-leza*
unfurled his rainbow colours
and wove intricate patterns
of red, green and blue
over Kaphirintiwa,
crags, trees and grass.

The female *uta-wa-leza*
uncoiled herself next to him
and plaited multicolours
out of the rain clouds
into the valley below.
She was jostled by the drizzle
of the early morning petering off
from the brows of the grey sky
as droplets splattered off, forming pools,
disappearing in their own wetness.

Wetness drenched everything:
grass, tree, body, house.
The rain-scented air bathed
in morning glory, weighing down
globules of technicolour hanging on
petal, leaf, branch, rock or skin.
The *nsangu-ya-machete* cooed,
chirped and twittered in the branches
of the now empty rain grove.

Children's feet sloshed *chuwa! chuwa!*
in the mud lodging between their toes,
caking on bare bottoms, backs and torsos,
clogging noses and pores;
heedless, the tiny feet wallowed
in the pools, building mud castles
on what had once been dust dunes.

Yanda! yanda! went the jetsam,
gai! gai! floated the flotsam
in the aftermath of Mbona's rain
and the children sang the frog song:

Frog! Frog! Frog!
What did I send you for, Frog?
I sent you for water, Frog!
What did you bring me, Frog?
You brought me mud, Frog!
Kwa! Kwa! Kwa! Frog!

The children squatted in squelching mud,
flung their legs wide in and out,
as arms bobbed, head and torsos,
to hop a few feet away, imitating
Nanthesi, the long-legged frog,
lover of muddy holes.

The sun shone at noon time
to steam out the rain Mbona had brought.
The huge *chiminingo* drum sounded,
beckoning, calling, inviting all tribesmen
to the smelling out or hunting of the witches.
And when the rays of the sun shone
on the west side of Kaphirintiwa,
all the clansmen had gathered
under the big village *bwalo*,
in front of Mlauli's compound.

'We are assembled here,' Mlauli began,
'this afternoon, instead of being in the gardens
to continue planting now that rain has come.
We had to interrupt the work of feeding
so that we could do a bit of weeding.
Among us are those not happy with their fellows,
those who prefer working in the dark
to do mischief to their brothers and sisters,

flying in baskets or on hyenas' backs,
to their enemies' rooftops or victims' mats,
under the surveillance of the owl's hooting.'

Mlauli, ex-python priest of Kaphirintiwa
now turned witch-hunter, danced round
the big *mwabvi* pot, his tails swishing
as he prowled and pranced in the assembly,
as he growled and glanced at one now,
then at the other, as if he was about to pounce
on this victim or that would-be sorcerer,
as one winced at the ardent gaze,
as one withered at the scorching look,
as one ducked, not to meet that glare
head on, or else be invited to partake
of the virulent concoction in the arena.
They knew deadly *bwalero* was in the pot.
You could not take two steps after it.
They knew the lethal *kafere kutali* in it.
You took it and died at your leisure,
two days, two weeks, two months later.

Mlauli did the rounds, stalking the crowd.
He knew who was there: the grandsons
of *mkomawanthu* and *mseketela* of old.
There sat Mtunduwatha who braved
Changula to shave him in his own cave,
as the winds howled round the cavernous mouth,
unleashing the whirlwind prior to Napolo.
There sat Nyamazawanthu, who could
kick the pitch darkness from its moorings.
The next time you heard it was at the lake.

He knew who the real sorcerers were, too.
There sat Mfitilodze himself, unashamed,
with *ndondocha* and *msendawana* in the granary,
farming out a few for a fee every night.

There sat the old diehard, Mfitidzalimba,
bestriding this world and the next,
refusing to die, yet the worms were on him.
You could smell the graveyard near him.
They could not keep away from the *mwabvi*.
Ignoring the call meant admission of guilt.
Those who kept away would be treated at home.
Either way, it meant death for them,
if Mlauli chose that they should die.
But in the reluctant faces before him,
he could not find his young apprentice,
and suddenly something pricked his insides.

Behind the faces whispers floated:
'Where's Mbona?' Kin to kin,
hut to hut, shed to shed,
compound to compound,
village to village.
'Where's Mbona?'
The question uncoiled itself
from the tongue of the valley,
wound round the girth of Kaphirintiwa,
and licked the rock face
to perch on top of the imprints,
to hurl it back to the elders below:
'Where's Mbona?'

For Mbona was not at the sleeping place.
He was not at the talking place.
He was not at the watering place.
He was not at the hunting place.

The sweepers of the rain shrine
did not find him in the grove.
He was not there.
The hunters of the forest
did not find him at the meeting place.

He was not there.
The question was tattooed on the drums:
'Where's Mbona?'

Mbona had departed with the night
and by mid-morning,
like a corpse in transit,
had left no shadow
for his enemies
to point out his trail.

Lundu nudged the elders at the *bwalo*.
It was too early to think of funeral songs
after the blood-baths and *mwabvi* ordeals.
For Mbona had a headstart on Mlauli,
and Chisumphi went with him to the north.
But when their *kandranga* met point by point
would be the time to compose elegies and epitaphs.

He knew he was going to die.
That is why he fled before dawn,
to save us the trouble of trying him.
But the *mwabvi* ordeal has to go on.

And so they brought a black cock
as a substitute for the runaway.
They prised its beak open.
A pale white tongue darted out.
As the throat constricted, swallowing nothing,
Mlauli poured the *mwabvi* down
the choking throat, as fierce squawks,
scrabbling talons and flapping wings
beat the shimmering noonday air.
Gulpful followed gulpful,
as some of the lethal drink spilled generously out,
splattering the holders with poison.

'You are now Mbona,' Mlauli gleefully chanted,
'and as such you are drinking the *mwabvi*
to let us know whether or not you are a sorcerer.
If you are an honest rainmaker, then LIVE!
If you are evil, then, with your evil ways, DIE!'
The cock was released. It ran between legs,
flapping on unsteady wings, dazed already.
It collapsed, twitched once, and wriggled no more.
'You see?' Mlauli triumphed round it.
'Your rainmaker is none other than a sorcerer.
That corpse there is Mbona's body: DEAD.'

* * *

Mbona, like Namanthongo of old,
fashioned himself a flying spinning top.
'Spinning top,' he sang as he flew off,
'make me fly over the elephant grass.
Spinning top, make me skim the treetops,
without touching the sands or earth.'

The enraged Mlauli also climbed
on to a witch's basket in hot pursuit,
the *mzulule*, the witch's bird, on his shoulder.
The spinning top went north of Kaphirintiwa.
The witch's basket snarled in its wake.

The elders remembered Namanthongo,
the rejected son who saved his stubborn sister,
who married the hideous monster
and followed him to the land of the weirdos.
Namanthongo, unwanted and unloved brother,
who saw through the glamour of the clothes
to the monster beneath, and carved a top.

'This top will save us from the monster.'
And it came to pass that the very night
the monsters planned a feast of her flesh,

Namanthongo and his sister boarded the top
and the pilot sang at each spin:

Spinning top, spinning top,
take me home, take me home,
home to my mother and father,
spinning top, spinning top.

The disgruntled monsters saw it climb
above the rooftops, the treetops, the hilltops.
At each climb, they roared louder,
as their empty stomachs and mouths
saw the choicest parts fly away.
And Mlauli roared louder too,
as he saw Mbona zooming away
round the next treetop or hilltop.

Mbona took his bearings and sang:

Spider, you who spun a thread
for Chauta to climb to high heaven
to escape man's fiery invention,
now spin me a web too, to flee
from the hatred Mlauli has brought.

The eagle chased the kite
from Kaphirintiwa to Bunda Hill.
The kite lost height and descended,
with the eagle swooping behind.
Mbona landed and hid in the Bunda caves.

There was a dove that crooned
all night long her mournful song.
She foresaw great loss of life.
The last time the dove had crooned,
the little Kafula had been smoked out
from the Bunda caves by the Chewa.

The eagle flushed the tired kite
from the caves of Bunda Hill,
and the chase did not stop till
the birds alighted at Mpata-wa-Milonde.
Mbona sojourned high over the pass.

The *mzulule*, the witch's bird, sang
all night long her haunting whistle.
She foretold dreadful lamentation.
The last time the *mzulule* had sung,
the Chewa had died at Mpata-wa-Milonde.

Eagle and kite, beaks and claws,
sped from Mpata-wa-Milonde
northward to the high hills of Hora,
and there again both birds alighted.
Mbona spent a watchful night on the rock.

The *manchichi*, ominous nocturnal,
hooted all night long till dawn.
He hooted about horrible deaths.
The last time the marsh owl had hooted,
the Ngoni starved the Tonga on Hora Mountain.

Wings beating, talons drawn out,
the battle between eagle and kite
sped on north to the Nyika Plateau,
where they landed on Lake Kaulimi.
Mbona lay on the shore of the lake.

The vultures, scavengers of the skies,
hovered over the noonday sun.
They hovered over sumptuous corpses.
The last time the vultures had hovered,
the Ngoni had died from *kalongonda* beans.

Cicada, give me your throat
to sing the victory song.
Give me your voice
on this sunny day,
to chant the triumphant march
when Mbona turned from Nyika,
outstripping Mlauli on the way,
and headed for the shimmering lake.

The Sea Flight

There was a hippo at Karonga
which fought with an elephant
all night long, and at dawn
the weary hippo fled southward.
On reaching Nkhata Bay it stopped.
The elephant was there too
and they fought again all night,
and at dawn the hippo fled
under water to surface at Nkhotakota.
The trumpeting elephant found him there
and the fight continued till dawn the next day,
when the hippo continued south,
to land sorting at Monkey Bay.
Then on seeing the elephant there, he dived
all the way to Lake Malombe.

There is a pool by the bend of the lake,
away from the snorts of hungry hippos
and jutting jaws of cruel crocodiles
and trample of trumpeting elephants,
clear of the swirls of angry cataracts.

A placid pool with floating water lilies,
flanked by the warm shimmering sands,
swept by the wafts of gentle breezes,
blowing languorously among the green reeds,

genuflecting on dainty necks on the banks.
There, Mbona laid down his *kandranga*,
bows, arrows and spears, to quench his thirst.
There, Mbona laid down a weary head to rest,
and saw the water maid on the golden sands
slumbering on the mattress of her own dreams.

She took him to her domain under the lake,
past the forest of fishes, small, big, huge,
flecked with the rainbow's colours: parading blues,
greens and reds; cavorting stripes,
spots, streaks and hues;
past fanning fins, flipping tails
and wriggling bottoms
of silver-coated *chambo*,
golden-streaked *mpasa*,
black-caped sleek *mlamba*,
down to the submarine sandcastles
and turfs in the craters
and cones at the bottom of the pool,
playing hide-and-seek with courting cichlids,
brilliant in their mating colours outside their bowers,
dancing to unheard marine melodies and rhythms,
circling males and nuzzling females
in amorous dalliance,
hovering over the undulating,
fluorescent, sandy bottom.

'Come into my bower,' she said,
and sang of her love:

We are a pair of flying ants
whirling in and out of the shafts
of the setting sun, gliding,
darting, soaring after the rains,
until we disrobe our wings
and crawl nose to bottom
into the womb of the earth

to create a new anthill,
a new kingdom for ourselves
where you will be my king
and I the queen mother.

The castor oil glistened on her limpid forehead,
melted and rolled down her lush black cheeks.
Mbona saw death in the pale brown lips in front of him.
He slapped her cheek, but lo! his hand stuck there.

I watched our love nurturing
like last year's smoked green cobs
and I missed you greatly,
as a grandmother misses her teeth
at the coming of the locusts
or at the smell of fried corn.

The waves and winds played soft symphonies
around her flowing hair and jutting promontories.
Mbona saw death in the folds of the ripples.
He slapped her on the other cheek, but lo! his hand stuck.

I longed for you as I went
with my playmates to hunt grasshoppers
along the banks of the Shire.
I opened my heart to you
as I open a basket of chigwada
swimming tenderly in ground-nut sauce.

Her eyes flamed like unquenched meteors,
tearless, hypnotic, but as tempting as her cloying breath.
Mbona saw death in the depths of the pool.
He kicked her in her shin, but lo! his foot stuck there.

As I lay on the sands,
the thought of you
pierced me deep,
like a drink of gongoni piss,
and these arms of mine
open to reach you

like the tendrils
of flowering pumpkins.

She uncoiled and loosened her loincloth,
revealing a band of writhing waistbeads.
Mbona smelt death in the rippling waters.
He kicked her in her other shin, but lo! his foot stuck.

And you, my beloved rainmaker,
after stinging me sudden and deep,
you will stick to me and heal
the wound you opened.

Rainmaker stuck to water maid on the sands,
chest to chest, groin to groin, ready to kiss.
Mbona saw doom in the sinuous yielding body,
and it was his turn to sing, the rainmaker's song:

Let me hold on tight
to Chauta's staff
lest I lose it.

'You are no water spirit; you are Kandilowa of old,
sent by Mlauli to detain me with amorous pranks.
Both you and Mlauli are failed rainmakers.
Let Chiuta's servant loose to do his duty. Now!'

Kandilowa in turn heard her end in Mbona's song.
She screamed as Mbona unstuck himself
and emerged from the shimmering waters.

Kandilowa, unvanquished, still sang
after the bounding rainmaker, mocking:

And you, rain-lover, how was I to know
you sting but do not leave the weapon behind
like the bee? At least the rat blows
on the bite it is feeding on, hmph!
But not you, love-hater, hmph!

But the flying python had already disappeared,
parting the reeds with his breath as he flew
over them, singing:

Chiuta let him loose!
Ululate with long trills in jubilation.
Let your hands clap the triumphal march.
Dance the victory stomp, for Mbona
has again eluded Mlauli.

The Ground Flight

There was a lion on Machinga Mountain
which stalked the leopard all the way
to Malosa Mountain. There they fought
all night long and at dawn broke off.
The weary lion fled southward.
On reaching Zomba Mountain it roared:
'It's mine! It's mine! The world is mine!'

Mlauli laughed: 'You are like *timba*,
the little bird that borrowed its royalty
from the lion. It roared all day, "It's mine!"
It forgot to roar in the lion's name.
When King Lion heard the borrowed roar,
it stripped the robin of its royalty.
Now it is back to its tiny chirp
of *tii! tii! tii!* with no one
to hear or acknowledge it.'

Mbona, heading for Chingwe's Hole, answered:
'The domestic hen said to the crocodile,
"Even though you live in the deep waters
and water is my sworn enemy,
you and I are really kith and kin."
The amazed crocodile asked: "How?"
"You and I," answered the proud hen,
"have one thing in common: we both

lay our eggs on the ground, that's how."
Therein lies our brotherhood, so you and I
do not need to fight each other like this.'

Mlauli pondered over that one, but said:
'Beware! Beware! The cock's weapons
are not on the fiery crescent on its head,
are not on its beak or in its strident throat.
They are hidden in its leg-spurs,
tearing as deep as Mphatamanga Gorge,
as broad as the Shire River.
I do not come wagging a peace tongue.
You have already declared war on me.
I am worse than the crocodile's gall,
bitter in the mouth and gullet only.

I am *chitebela*. I destroy even the intestines.
I do not destroy one person or family.
I destroy whole villages, clans, tribes.

I am not like the *mbododo*.
In the first water it is already cooked.
I am *kalongonda* beans, ten potfuls,
boiling for three days and still not ready.
It is the bean that killed the Ngoni:
They ate it too soon, before it had diluted.

I am he who pulverises the boulder,
and the enemy hiding behind it
thinking he was well-protected.
I am he who splinters the baobab,
and the duiker hiding behind it
thinking the hunter could not see him.'

Mbona leapt over Napolo,
whose eyes were like
the deep pool that was his abode,

his incisors jutting out like Ulumba,
Ntonya and Mikuyu Hills together,
whose mouth was like the deep chasm
seen from Sapitwa Peak on Mulanje,
whose legs were like baobab trunks
uprooted from the Shire Valley,
as long, as sturdy, as many as
a gigantic hydra seen in a nightmare.

Napolo, Lord of the high mountains,
master of the dark depths of lakes,
draping himself with scales
as big as tortoise shells,
as hard as the crags of Zomba,
licking the bark off trees
with a tongue as hard, but resilient,
as a crocodile's tail,
snapping the legs off a buck
with a bat of his eyelids,
shooing off stray kudus
with a sort of his cavernous nostrils.

And Mlauli cursed to see Mbona's footprints
disappear in the fog that he had created
at noon to confuse his enemy.
By the time his eyes cleared,
Mbona had passed to the east
of the twin-jutting peaks
of Mabele-a-Nyangu, the mother of all chiefs,
crossed Msimbi-ya-Chilembwe,
he who wears cocks' feathers,
re-crossed the land of Mbewe-wa-Mitengo,
and on, criss-crossing mountains,
valleys, rivers, forests.

Unshakable, Mlauli followed,
swimming across rivers,

beating hunger-stricken crocodiles
to the opposite banks,
scaling jagged, glittering cliffs,
jumping across chasms,
hiding from slave-raiders and lions alike,
being mistaken for *wachifwamba*
covering the four winds.

Mwandionerapati met Mbona.
He asked him: 'Where did you first
see me?' Mbona laughed at the temerity.
'I saw you as I crossed the valley
four nights ago.' The little one
was pleased and let Mbona pass.

When Mlauli met Mwandionerapati,
he was asked the same question: 'When did
you first see me, son of the Mang'anja?'
Mlauli was annoyed at being delayed.
'I saw you right there as you emerged
from that little shrub, you shrimp.'

Mwandionerapati was furious with him.
He drew his poisoned arrow and shot.
Mlauli drew his *kandranga* and deflected.
A bloody battle ensued: clubs and knives.
Mlauli cut off the dwarf's head,
hung it upon a tree, and sped on.

Tortoise, give Mlauli
your short squat legs
which appear heavily laden
to waddle over the stumps,
mounds, rocks and logs,
carrying a house on your back.

But give me your shell
to crawl under and hide
from Mlauli's wrath.
Give me your hard crust
to shield me
from Mlauli's spear.

This is not the race between
the tortoise and the hare,
all done in the fun of the run
between one post and another.
There is no fun in death.
This is the race of death.
This is the chase of death.
This is the run of death.

The elders sing of Mbona's spear,
the spear which at Dzambawe
dug into the naked rock. Now rainwater
collects in the grooves the spear
ate out of the hard granite.

The elders sing of Mbona's footprints,
the footprints which at Dzambawe
sank into the hard rock. Now rainwater
collects in the grooves the foot
ate into the hard boulder.

The elders sing of Mbona's fingers,
the fingers which at Dzambawe
scooped out the rock to dig a well,
a well which to this day bubbles
water, nourishing the countryside.

The elders sing of Mbona's rice,
the rice which he planted at Dzambawe,
a strange strain of rice which fed the sower,

the rice which cannot grow anywhere else,
the rice which still feeds people there.

The elders sing of Mbona's body,
the body which at Dzambawe
reclined full-stretch after feeding,
the body which ate into the rock:
you can still see the grooves in the granite.

But Mbona did not stay at Dzambawe.
He only stopped there for a drink.
Mbona did not stop there for long.
He only sowed his rice and ate the first harvest
and, after resting, had to flee south again.

On Mwala-Umodzi, overlooking the rolling hills
and the unscalable summit of Chifunda-cha-Lundu,
the weary tred of the pursuer came upon the carved
imprints of the pursued in the hard rock:
hands, knees, spear,
only to be incensed more:
'Mbona reclined here!
This is the well he dug out
of the rock with his hands!'

After Mlauli had taken a drink
or two from Mbona's well,
the chase started afresh. And the elders tell
how two seasons later Mlauli again sat down
to eat the rice Mbona had sown
at Dzambawe as he passed,
the rice that cannot grow anywhere else.

Filled with Mbona's rice, Mlauli went on,
following seething or winding waterways
or dried watercourses.
He walked shoulder-high through

clumps of undulating scrubland,
across fields of bare rocks,
sharp as axe-blades under foot,
over barriers of boulders
that reared their heads like elephants.

Chameleon, give Mlauli
your slow reluctant feet
to go syaga! syaga!
Syaga usanje! hesitant,
over hilltops, through valleys,
across rivers and gulleys.

But give me your many hues
to hide behind a leafy cluster.
Dress me in a green cloth
when Mlauli passes.
Hide me in a grey mantle
when my dread adversary comes.

Lizard, give me your spindle legs
to scuttle over the sand and pebbles.
Give me your lightweight body
to buoy me over the grass and shrubs.
This is the race of life and death,
as in the beginning of time,
when you brought mankind
the message of death,
leaving the chameleon far behind,
with the message of eternal life.
I am the message of everlasting life,
bringing new life to a new generation.
This is the beginning of the new world.

* * *

Mbona then came upon a forest
by the edge of the desolate land,

where the thick green foliage
was shaken by countless hooves.
And as he walked deep into it
he could hear
the crackling of animals' feet
on leaves, branches and trunks.
He could also see a multitude
of tracks and droppings
of numerous animals, snakes
and ground birds.
And Mbona sang:

The forest is my home.
I lean on the msuku
and masuku rain on me.
I lean on a branch
and reach for a soft mpoza.
I shake the mighty baobab
for a bit of bread.
I shake the tall coconut
for a drink or two.
Who can die in Mwanalilenji?
The forest is my home.

Mbona stepped on foliage amid luxuriant fruit
and blossoming flowers, the fetid undergrowth fed
by squirrels, lizards, mice, butterflies, gnats, flies,
pollinating bees, mating dragonflies and birds.

The dank and misty air sang of centuries
of undisturbed births, growths, deaths,
of ancient vines, creepers, trunks, leaves and carcases
feeding on new generations of grass, tree and beast.

Here no human foot had trod, only hoof or paw.
Here no human hand had cut, only natural fall
of leaf, branch or trunk.

Here no human body had cleared or built,
only nest, lair, burrow, warren or hive.

Mwiyo! mwiyo! the traveller's bird.
When it sang, what did it say to Mbona?
Mwiyo! mwiyo! 'Where are you going?
There is lots of food.'
'Traveller's bird, when I stay silent,'
mwiyo! mwiyo! 'you stay silent too.'

Then *delu!* something flitted past.
delu! delu! it crossed again his path,
one side to the other in front of him.
Mbona drew his *kandranga* and stopped.
'Tell me, you who are playing hide-and-seek
with your own shadow between tree-trunks,
why you cut my path once and twice.
What would you do with a lone traveller?

From your manner you are not Mwandionerapati,
the treacherous little one that springs at you
from nowhere, or from a hole in the ground, to ask
the fatal question: "From where did you spy me?"
Yet neither man nor beast can you ever be.
Yet again you are not from the spirit world either.
True you do possess extraordinary powers,
but not from the spirits or from the ancestors.

You are not sent by Mlauli, as Kandilowa was.
I would have recognised his art.'
But the thing had disappeared.
Mbona proceeded on his weary path.
Then *go!* he heard the tap of stick on stone,
go! He turned a bend in the track and saw the old man
tap-tapping, stooping, shoulders bent over a gnarled stick.

Mbona drew his *kandranga* again. 'Tell me,
you of many forms, what you seek from me?
You are no common cut-throat to waylay
an unwary wayfarer or else you would
have attacked me already in this forest.
Yet you have some purpose with me, that I know.'

The old man stopped on an uncertain step,
craned a spindly neck and looked at Mbona
from a face furrowed by uncountable seasons.
He answered: 'I am a medicine man seeking
rare roots, herbs and barks found nowhere else
but in this ancient, sacred forest.'

Mbona asked again: 'What forest is this, old man?'

'Nyakalambo,' the old man answered,
'the fabled forest of animals,
birds, insects, where all creation
lives as one huge extended family.
Nyakalambo, where the lion does not prey
on the hapless antelope,
the leopard on the innocent deer,
the hawk on the guinea-fowl.
Nyakalambo, where no treacherous track
of the hunter has or will ever set foot.'

'Come,' the old man continued, 'I will show you
Mulungu's creation, the secrets of man's
health and disease, but first relieve an old man
of this dreadful pain in his back, contracted
on his lonely journeys seeking the mysteries of life.'

The old man turned round to reveal a boil
growing as huge as a *mpoza* ready to burst:
'Squeeze with all your might that I may have respite.'

Mbona lanced the boil with his *kandranga*
and out frothed rotten lumps festering in the depths
of the old man's unwashed skin, flesh and bones.
The stench wafted into and burnt
the nose and throat linings.
The old man groaned, grunted,
gritted and gnashed his teeth
but held on to his knobbly stick
until the messy end.

Mbona wiped the wound with soft leaves,
put his own medicinal powders into it,
and covered it with another leaf.

'I thank you, my son,' said the old man.
'Now tell me your name, your clan and your tribe.
Whose name did you eat and how come
you are here panting with haste as if
fleeing in mortal terror from some unseen enemy?
From the kindness of your heart and from your mien
you are no ordinary man out for normal hunting.
From your possessions you are not packed
for returning in the next season,
if you are returning at all.
From your looks you have been travelling
for a long time and from distant lands.'

Mbona began: 'Father, I will tell you,
as we go, who I am, where I come from,
how I come to be here,
and where I am heading, if I know that too.
I am Mbona, son of Nyangu, sister of Mlauli.
I am Mbona, nephew of Mlauli, the rainmaker.
I am Mbona, the apprentice rainmaker of Kaphirintiwa.
I am the *chidzukulutubzi* of the great-great-great uncle
Undi Chirindzodzwe, the founder of the Mang'anja.

True you find me fleeing for my life here,
and the one adversary I flee from is Mlauli,
the same Mlauli who is my uncle and my master,
the same Mlauli who is the brother of my mother,
the same Mlauli who was the last rainmaker,
the same Mlauli who wants to kill Mbona
for bringing rain where he had failed.

I ask myself, father, why uncle
should chase nephew all the way
from Kaphirintiwa to Nyika,
from Nyika to the mud river,
from the mud river to the lake,
from the lake to the high mountains,
from the high mountains to Nyakalambo.
For he is now close on my heels.
I can feel the wind of his passage.
I ask myself, father, what our grandchildren will
think of us when the bards tell them in song
what one uncle did to his nephew for a good deed.
Kinship is like a bone: it does not rot, whatever happens.'

The old man listened, shook his head, and pronounced:
'This quarrel might be the work of the ancestral spirits.
When disputes reign in the family, set fire
to the children's sleeping place and see what happens.
In this case, the forefathers sent a drought.
It is now up to them to arbitrate how it will end.

Come, for your kindness I will unlock all the secrets
of the animal, vegetable and flying kind to you.
I will teach you how to command the beasts with words,
which roots, tubers, leaves and bark cure which ailments,
for I am Chiluwe, the master of all health and disease.
I come between man and the spirits.
I hold birth and death, health and disease.

I am what you could have been had you
been what you would have willed.'

Mbona was not surprised to meet Chiluwe face to face,
Chiluwe, past master of healing arts and subterfuge.
Mbona asked: 'Why did you not challenge me to wrestle?'
Chiluwe answered: 'I do not wrestle with people
who are destined for other wrestling matches
greater than mine.'

Then Chiluwe took him deeper into the forest.
Here were the ancient trees mummified:
chonya, the tree that even red ants dread;
mombo, the friend of builder and carpenter,
provider of rope and post, wood and coal;
mbwabwa, mbawa, thombozi,
kachere, naphini, nkhadzi, matowa,
mpinjipinji, mbvunguti, msuku.

Deeper and deeper they penetrated the thick trees,
past the chatterings, jibberings, grimaces of monkeys;
past the tumultuous flight of fat francolins;
past ponderous elephants striding hugely,
gigantic ears flapping in the wind, huge trunks
drooping in front of them, trudging dams,
trumpeting bulls and calves, with the grand
herd bull all patriarchal, trooping to the water place;
past a herd of zebras gambolling or grazing,
suckling or snuffling, nipping or nuzzling foals,
mares, stallions, feeding next to a pride of lions;
the huge bull antelope with magnificent horns
walking regally on giant hooves, blowing his nostrils,
pacing with dignified air, leading his harem of cows
chewing the cud in the grove, and did not pause
to rear their hoofs and whirl or gallop away,
long tails high in the air, the dust swirling
in their wake at the approach of dreaded man.

The snake-infested undergrowth churned,
cobra, adder and mamba writhed in the branches,
competing with the climbers, tendrils, runners,
to the high foliage, to greet the sun at the top.

Mbona said: 'This is as it was in the beginning
of our founders, the first landing of Chauta,
man, animal, bird and insect as it was
imprinted on the yielding rock of Kaphirintiwa,
all creation living together in harmony in one place.
The cradle of mankind is here.
Kaphirintiwa should have been founded here.
The imprints of man, animal and bird
are not engraved in the granite but are alive,
mingling, circling, living together amicably,
ambling, striding, cantering, galloping, springing.

My forefathers left Urundi, the *munga* country.
No one can grow millet or beans on thornbush.
They struck south to Tanganyika, but no luck.
The trees were stunted, spindly.
Undi Chirindzodzwe, true son of the Mang'anja,
preferred the country of the huge tall trees,
like Nyakalambo here.

Here is neither famine nor drought,
monkey-bread, tamarind, *ngulukututu*,
mpoza, *mauku*, *matowa*, *nkuyu*.
Look at all the edible roots and tubers.
This is Mwanalilenji.
Look at the dark, rich, soft, moist soil,
the lazy rivers, streams, pools snaking around.
I could build my village here.'

Chiluwe shook his ancient locks:
'No man is allowed to cut, dig or build here.
The same thing would happen again as did

at the cradle of mankind, when man invented fire.
Where would these animals flee to now?
What would happen to these trees?
You see those beautiful birds: *mpheta, phwiti,*
kakowa, nthiwatiwa, pumbwa, njiwa, nantema.
As soon as greedy man, who has not learned
to live even with himself let alone his fellow man,
decides to live here, he will destroy all these
and turn the forest into another wasteland.

I am the guardian of this protected forest.
If you harboured evil intentions for the animals
or birds, I would not have let you in.
But you are just passing through, that's good.
You can eat a bunch of fruit or roots,
but you may not take them away.
So sit and eat your fill, and go as you came.
But do not take long: your uncle's footsteps
are ringing at the edge of Nyakalambo forest.'

Mlauli, sliced by *munga* thornbushes,
feet lacerated by stones, toes by stumps,
the *phanga* fly feasting on his bare skin,
and mosquitoes as thick as chaff in the wind
whining in his ears, stinging into soft flesh,
unwavering, dogged the trail left by Mbona.
He also sang to lighten his weary soul:

Kandranga! Kandranga!
I throw it into the bush.
It brings me an antelope.
I throw it into the river.
It brings me a chambo.
I throw it into the air.
It brings me a bird or two.

Washed by waves of woe and wrath,
overwhelmed by consuming resentment,

gnawed by incessant thoughts of retribution,
inebriated by the vision of his son's incendiary ending,
his favourite wife's ultimatum, and his last dance,
he was propelled on by anger, humiliation and vengeance.

Then, *delu!* a form flew past his vision.
Delu! delu! darting in and out of trees and branches.
Mlauli snorted: 'I know you of many forms –
Chiluwe – master trickster and earth spirit.
I do not seek your secret treasure of charms,
only safe passage to the other side of the forest.
So it is useless to ask me to wrestle with you.
My way is long and I have come a long way
and I do not wish to trifle by the wayside
when my quarry is only a few hills away.
I can see his head-dress disappearing in the distance.'

Chiluwe answered: 'Since your heart is full of hate
and you do not wish to be civil, I come directly
to my errand. The ancestors ask, "Why does Mlauli
pursue Mbona with such unshakable resolve?
What has the nephew done to his uncle?"
Bringing rain to a drought-stricken land should not
be repaid by vindictiveness, revenge and murder.'

'No rainmaker was greater than me,' said Mlauli,
'in the whole of the cradle of mankind.
Honour sat on me as huge as Zomba mountain.
But now it has all been and will always
be emptied ceaselessly as the rivers
drain the lake of its waters each day or season.
And all because of Mbona, my nephew.
Now all the panegyrics he wears around his neck
like a wreath, they caress his skin and soul,
making him feel good. He leans his head
against all the praises as a lover inclines
her neck against the betrothed, demanding more.'

Chiluwe pointed out: 'Then it is personal jealousy,
greed for power, to be the only rainmaker.
That explains why you want your rival's head
as praise song after praise song is laid at his door.
This is a personal vendetta: Why does Mlauli
personally chase Mbona across the whole of Maravi?
Does he not have enough warriors, trackers, assistants?'

Mlauli answered: 'There are people
who cast spells on innocent men,
women, and even little children,
afflicting them with malignant diseases,
mental derangement, strange deformations.
And there are those who rid the oppressed
of the dark forces given root by the wicked.
Some medicine men make amulets
or prepare magic concoctions to free
their fellows from others' evil forces.
And there are still others who evoke
supernatural powers given to them
by the ancestral spirits, Chiuta or Chisumphi.

A sorcerer is known by his evil deeds.
Mbona is a great sorcerer: He tied up
the rains, causing drought in our land.
Drought causes death. Witchcraft causes death.
Death causes pollution, bringing more death.
Does evil come plainer than this?
A sorcerer casts spells on other people.
Mbona cast a spell on me, rendering
my rainmaking powerless to untie the rains.
And when the same Mbona unbinds the skies,
he kills my favourite's son. Isn't that evil?
You say the man is invoking the spirits
to perpetrate all these evil deeds on us?

Anyone less than Mlauli is no match for his powers.
I taught him all the magic under Kaphirintiwa.
I alone can bring him back to stand trial
for sorcery and take the *mwabvi*,
personally administered by me.
Mbona killed my son, who was his cousin.
Now I have to kill Mbona, my nephew, because
he killed my son and because he killed me, his uncle,
by tying up the rains and rendering me useless.

Tell whoever sent you this: That mine is a clean cause.
My revenge is not a blood revenge for the two deaths.
Mine is a cleansing killing: The slaying of my son
has got to be expiated or else the earth will stay hot
and a worse drought than the one Mbona alleviated will reign.

I am performing this deed for the sake of the land
and for the sake of my people, although they do not know it.
Now they desecrate Mlauli and consecrate Mbona.
Now he has fled the *mwabvi* lest he challenge
the custom of trying sorcerers and witches.
He has challenged the established order of things.
You think the ancestors approve of him now?
The subverter of the ordinances they themselves laid down?
I have prayed long to the forefathers for guidance.
I have prayed to Chauta and Chiuta, Leza,
Mphambe and all the spirits to lead me,
yes, even to Mulungu, the high god, directly.
The answer is, mine is a just cause.
The act will be forgiven when it is performed.
Then I vowed as I have never vowed before.
Mbona will not reign to make rain as python
in Kaphirintiwa as long as I have strength
to draw, live and strike this *kandranga*.'

Deer, give me your forelegs
to jump over Mlauli's head.

Buck, give me your hind legs
to kick dust into Mlauli's eyes.
Klipspringer, give me hooves
to hop over Mlauli's shoulder.

But give Mlauli elephant legs
to ponder over his wrath
and sink deep in the swamps.
Give him the hippo's head
to snort out his hate
as he tramples on the river banks.
Give him crocodile feet
to crawl back to his lair.
Let all burden him with a heavy tread,
not to catch me in mid-flight.

PART THREE

The Python

INTERLUDE TWO

With what mouth shall I tell the tale?
Who has the spleen of the crocodile to finish it?
Lend me a heart, please, to continue the story
of the day Mlauli met Mbona at Nkhulubvi,
how the enraged uncle caught up with his nephew.

The tale does not end with Mbona's death.
The bard continues to talk of Mlauli's wanderings,
distraught and terrified in the wilds of Maravi,
like a man possessed, gibbering for several seasons,
but because of his potent charms the *chilope*
did not consume him or take away all his senses.

Before ending the tale, the bard takes us back
to Kaphirintiwa to the beginning of time,
where more cataclysms were crackling
in the cradle of mankind.

The Death

Mbona did not build himself a *chemba*
as the Chewa do, or a *linga* as the Ngoni.
He did not run into a cave as a Batwa,
to be smoked out like the bees for their honey.
But there he stood on level ground and said:
'No longer shall Mlauli see my head-dress
disappearing in the distance like a speck.
No longer shall my enemy see my soles
fleeing, smacking dust in his enraged face
in the noonday sun. Here I make my last stand.
Here shall Mbona's shrine stand for all to see.'

Mbona paused in mid-flight and surveyed the land,
the hills, the valleys, the streams, the forests.
'If this be the site for the new shrine,' he said,
'let that promontory over there, though not so lofty
and towering, be the Kaphirintiwa of the south,
and that thicket be the sacred forest, as yet unpopulated
by the *machete*, but soon to be teeming with *machete*,
chirruping and chattering baboons and monkeys,
and this stream be the sacred pool still clear
and sparkling and yet to be bubbling with blood,
before the day is spent, when Mlauli meets Mbona.

Just as a new dancing arena vies for the unbroken voice
of an untouched maiden to be buried in the centre,
to make the drums beat richly, the bells ring tunefully,
the feet move lustily and the throats carry more widely,
so will my body water the new shrine to live
forever and ever in the memory of my people.
I shall be the sacrifice for the new shrine
and as I die so will the new shrine rise to the skies.

Hitherto, our founder fathers needed only to love a country,
perform the founding rituals, and a settlement flourished.

Now rainmakers have to shed their blood,
to die for a new shrine.
They die before they can enjoy the fruits of their foundations,
the chants of the supplicants, the bleating goat and the cloth.
Here I die unknown, unwitnessed and inglorious
in anticipation of the Kaphirintiwa of the south.'

The hills, valleys, forests
and rivers stood still.
The kite, eagle and vulture
glided from the skies.
The elephants, lions and leopards
watched from the trees,
and all lesser animals crouched
or squatted on rocks and dust,
watching Mlauli draw near
to where Mbona waited.

'I taught you the skills,' Mlauli accused,
'of magic medicine and rainmaking.
Is this how you thank your master?
Disgrace him in front of his people and
kill his son into the bargain? Ingrate!
Even a little child knows it cannot
defecate in its mother's front yard
where she spreads her flour for the day's meal.
You are like the slug smearing your excrement
as you slide over earth, rock, leaf and trunk.
You grew up under my ward,
but like the fig fruit all fair outside,
yet festering with malignancy inside.
An apprentice is like a visitor.
He is humility, graciousness, politeness.
He does not boast to his host and hostess
how big his balls are. You are just an upstart,
pawning your conscience to be python priest,
and now you will pay for your two crimes.'

Mlauli unsheathed his *kandranga.*
He intoned with a grand flourish:
'With this dagger I have summoned
the rain clouds from the four winds.
With this dagger the sun has hidden his face
to let Mphambe flash in his place.
With this same dagger I shall kill you.'
Mlauli lunged,
stabbed and cut.

Mbona laughed. 'Your enemy is like an anthill.
You do not shout, "I will kill you,"
until you are standing on top. One hundred arrows
are nothing but grass pricks to the warrior,
to be brushed aside as he advances
into the foray to meet his enemy.
One hundred spear thrusts are mocked
as the elephant grass is parted so that
the hunter can get to his quarry.
One hundred panga slashes are deflected
as one would the slap of a tired fighter.
No smith-forged metal can harm me.'
Mlauli feinted,
slashed and grabbed.

But his eager hands only met flapping wings
of a flock of guinea-fowl whirling *purupuru!* away.
Mlauli asked: 'If martyrdom is what you seek
how come you are so fleet of foot or wing?
Each nimble heel or flight you show me
draws you further and further away
from the people you say you will die for.
If you are a martyr, why have you used
subterfuge after subterfuge to postpone it?
Did you think Mbona
would stop in mid-flight
at your behest or magic chant

like the *nkhumbutera* insect
when little boys sing to it
so they can deal death-blows to it
as soon as it lands on earth, branch or leaf?
Or did you want Mbona all soporific
to kill him in his sleep
like the slumberous *chelule*
drinking avidly the hypnotic lullabies
of boy hunters armed with catapults,
rocks, bows and arrows. Did you?

But you went on pursuing me, tracking
through bush, bramble, reed and thorn.
Vainly you incanted the *namlondola*
to smell me out as little children do
at hide-and-seek, chanting their tracer song
leading them to the hideout of the victim.
And did you expect me at your request
to whistle so that you could hear me,
to blast out the mocking *likhwelu!*
or clamber out of hiding, triumphant:
"You didn't get me! You couldn't find me!"'

Mlauli thrust his *kandranga*
and Zomba split away from Malosa.
Mbona parried and plunged.
Sapitwa peak reared in the sky.
Mlauli, Mbona, Mlauli, Mbona,
Vipya rolled south, Nyika north.

Mlauli parried and struck.
The mountain lion lost its mane.
Mbona thrust his *kandranga*.
The rhinoceros' horn split.
Mbona, Mlauli, Mbona, Mlauli.
The Shire curled in her course
and plunged into Lake Chilwa.

Mlauli flew,
dived and tackled.

Mbona disappeared and multiplied himself
into a forest of tall, smooth *njale* trees.
Mlauli desperately turned from one trunk to another,
then pinioned a stately and slippery one down.
'I train rainmakers. I can also kill them,' Mlauli said,
'when they pervert their office to selfish ends.'
He shouted triumphantly: 'I know how
rainmakers die. You yourself revealed
it to me – arrows, spears, pangas, daggers
are nothing to you, but grass pricks.
The riddle is in the grass pricks.'
Mlauli then took a blade of grass:
'With this grass prick I will kill you,
Mbona, my nephew, the rainmaker,
the would-be python of Kaphirintiwa.'

The blade of grass straightened to metal stiffness
as if forged from a tinsmith's furnace,
and reddened as it cut skin, flesh and veins.
Mlauli continued relentlessly
at Mbona's neck and Mbona shouted,
'Mlauli, my uncle, why do you kill me?'

Words spurted out from Mbona's blood:
'I am not going deathward but spiritward,
toward perpetual renewal in spiritland.
You will find me deathless in your prayers,
in your rain songs and rain dances.
I am the last spirit in the pantheon.'

Mlauli jeered: 'How can you be a spirit
when you are only a day old in death?
How can you be worshipped as a bastard spirit?
What lineage are we going to trace