6

A Study in Battlefields

Veli Mnisi

I. Cradle, or "The Burial Enigma"

And if we can believe that *Naledi* tended to her dead
Set them down with all their favourite things
Laid them knees to stomach, bodies postured in unending prayer

The very bones nestled in sediment, resounding through the earth
The way carbon knows carbon, and erstwhile blood knows blood
And the living call to the dead,

We can find from that site of the first controlled fires
Of The New First People, and the shadows cast upon their
    irradiated murals
Those Testaments to "Large Uncertainty," or "The Great Perhaps,"

Eternal consolation that Eden was not so much a place as the
    forgotten fifth season
Transgression not a sin but a leap forward to the shore
Regression a willingness to concede that we've come far enough,

That the most senseless things about us should be the most
    redeeming
That fate has a great fondness for moments like these,

It should be fitting that the tomb should be the cradle
the end in the beginning.

II. Deep Time/Aubade

Didn't I heave a breath and form a cliff?
Wasn't each sigh like pulling hard soil through mesh?

Didn't Autumn fall? Didn't the leaves follow?
Didn't the fruit?

Didn't they stitch this river of tar along my spine?
Didn't they call it 'road'?

Don't my shoulders pierce the sky at obscure angles?
Am I not high enough to split a cloud?

After the butchering, after the carving—
Did you make sure to take all you could take?

Weren't your faces flush with want?
Didn't we at least eat well while the feast was on?

Didn't it taste good, the Night?
Here comes our good friend, Day, shining through my cracks,

bringing absolute heat to bear down on my barrenness.
Still, am I not the earth? Was I not lighter than air?

III. Accelerator Mass Spectrometer, or "The Machine," or "The Eye of God"

i — Isolate the element of interest
after the bombardment of pure light
the sheer barrage of these
pieces of the universe
that had no choice but to fall homeward.

atomic reminders that very little here is of here.
the first step is knowing what not to look at.
this is a new sort of creation story.
that of the eye; fixed, discerning.

for when thine eye is single, thy whole body also is full of light!
and that primary cosmic ray,
meets the nucleus going about its day,
in situ, in high energy, high collision.

it is expelled and becomes the earth.
it becomes the earth and everything the earth begets.

ii — Convert into an element suitable for ionisation
now we play gods.
split the wretched from the redeemable,
the light from the dark.
toss the negative ion,

and when thine eye is evil, the body is full of darkness.
atoms are heavy work.

iii — Acceleration
the ions move so quickly
— strange thing to do
when you're an incontrovertible truth.
things called to shape the world usually move slowly, like an age.

know that this is the fragment
that will become part of the earth.
know that this part of the earth will ripen.
know that this ripening will form a fracture.

know that there are those who will slip through the fracture.
know that they will put the pickaxe and shovel to work.

iv — Detection
and when the stones turn white,
know that we're tuned to clarity.
It is not absolute — the eye is only a machine.
we'll have to forgive

the misfires and
the false starts and
the breaks in transmission.
the bombardment of divine *something* has descended here on earth.

For our part we want to know
what is going on right beneath us.
we want to know how things work.
we want to know the truth of the pickaxe and the shovel.

We just want as much as we can get.