

*You may replace palm or raphia wine with a Morey-Saint-Denis Burgundy or a Lalande-de-Pomerol Bordeaux as long as you're not on welfare, or « devaluated » or « ID-less » or exiled or condemned for offending the Head of State's wife or in prison for conspiracy or deported for smelling bad or deposed from the Civil Service or on record as an opponent or... Which, I admit, is pretty difficult these days for your average honest African.*

Enjoy your meal anyway !

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translation Gail de Courcy-Ireland

## Ruben Mowszowski

South Africa

# Namaste

**I sit** here in my house on the hillside where other writers have sat, watching the sea past the fig tree and sometimes Johan comes by with his black labrador and sometimes Nina with her one pronoun english, « you get this for you », and I think back this past year when I shared Rockey Street with beggars and drug dealers (who assumed I was the long awaited Mister Big) sidewalk derelicts and out of work actors, the ageing poet looking for chips at four in the morning and the smell of a thousand dead chickens, all the time scratching in my pockets for one last rand while the human anenomes attached to the parking meters, the cargo cult that really works, wave in yet another car, and no, not tonight my friend, I don't even have petrol money for this smoking limousine ; don't watch it, don't look after it, take it for god's sake, maybe its still insured, who knows and who cares anyway when the whole world is collapsing and people are dying by the score at Tokoza and Katlehong and I'm breathing in the fumes from this desperate city, skidding over cabbage leaves and mealie corns at one rand twenty each, writing in my head the book of urban survival; all the trees that are scattered around the leafy suburbs under whose overhanging branches you can eat your fill if you come at the right time, the one week in the year when plums are in bloom or black grapes provided you can avoid the snarling dog that stands on top of the wall

desperate to get its fangs around your head and carry you to its master who sits in the house on the hill hiding behind layers and lattices of bars and trip-wires, panic buttons and revolvers hidden in bedside drawers ready for the night that they will arrive not through the locked door from the maids quarters but through the wall itself, materialising out of the blackness of his dreams dripping water and moss into the dark current of the river and so I walk through pinball machines and leather skulls past the Mozambique corner where black coats and sideburns mix with Portuguese and square tops looking for the last rand coin that will buy the packet of peanuts, never mind they are unhealthy, that will keep me going in my search for Yiayali, the golden angel who occupies my waking dreams and feverish nights.

**I walk** past the cab rank looking for the taxi where I once left fifty rands. Then I thought, let him have it, the world is coming to an end. Now I hoped to find him, at least to say hello! not to get the money back, it's alright my brother, easy come easy go, did it at least change your life ? it's just that my engine has burned out and they want bucks to repair it and now the gas has run out, not gas for the car but for the house that I'm writing from, the house that stands on the hill where you can see past the fig tree to the blue ocean, the house to which Natombi and his three sisters, not to mention their two puppies and four chickens, are going to come in the night, their bodies shaking with cold, to stand under the shower after which they'll run freezing-foot across the dirt yard through the chicken shit and underfelt to huddle together for another hour or two's warmth and if we're lucky we'll sleep through to the morning when we'll all line up again and defrost for the days work in the kitchen, plucking chickens or flaking fish or whatever it is that gets us the thirty rands we need to buy the wooden lounge suite that will make the little mud house back home into a palace providing it fits into the taxi, and now they are gone and the place is grown quiet the way I like it ; no more soccer on tv that Natombi must watch because Argentina is playing South Africa and how can I refuse him the sight of a ball kicked from this his very own first time country, or the dose of reconciliation now our daily fix and yes it is quiet and the weeds grow around the trees and the pointsetia flares lip-red against the blue of the sea and custard apples hang heavy off the branches and the bougainvilleas strike up purple flowers from the hedge and I think about those times on the street when I cried secretly out of humiliation and wrapped arms of comfort around myself or found myself in a bed of loneliness or in love with three women at one time, a madman riding a steel horse, writing deranged words of shamanic prophecy while the princess of the castle weeps for her knight who stares forever into a mirror and so I fight for her on this rocky road, I struggle for her in this dark river of fortune, I shout for her during these black nights of fear, I dance for her in the seedy discos of gun-toting teenagers, I cry for her in the abandoned cafes of five in the morning and I stare now into the mist that covers the mountains and allow this desperate past to enter into my wide-awake mind.

**I see** all this as a strange adventure into another land that I was forced by circumstance to take but now I'm back in this magic garden with birdsong around me and Alex lying in the bath and the bottle of wine at my side and a few rands coming into the bank to show them that I was not defeated at their bankside but only toppled from my horse after which, emaciated and gaunt from lack of food, consumed with dreams of prose and tumbling words, this warrior returned dragging metal armour and clanking sword right into the sanctum sanctorus of that temple of blacksuited priests. And just look how proudly he stands there on the floor of that marble mausoleum, how he places the wad of green notes on the counter in front of the subdued staff, how he passes in front of the castle where she waits for him at the window, and how he limps then to the shrine of the saint along a road crowded with flags and buntings, ready for the ceremony that will signal the end of the days of darkness and the millennium of the thousand white doves. All this he does for love and out of love and now Alex is sitting in front of the fire and I'm telling her that it's so that I can write, not for the sake of one unlucky zygote ; you did ?  
I didn't, you're sure ?

**I must** put it down before I forget, before it's too good, too usual to know that the bank doesn't chase me, that there's food in the fridge, that I can sit here, glass of red wine in my hand, alright it's only cheap stuff but imagine this : there's another two in the kitchen for later and the pot is full of stew not just potatoes. It's so that I should not forget the desperation or find myself unable to remember how it was walking the streets looking for one rand in my pocket to buy that last packet of peanuts or walking half a block further to find the woman who sells them for ten cents less or sneaking a few out of someone's kitchen stash (how many can one take before it's noticeable, that's another question, not to mention the crumbs on the mouth) or picking the ripe grapes off the vine, the fruit for the week or eating a carrot from the garden to keep me going till I hear her car arrive, a good day if she's home early and a bad day if she's out which means no food till the morning and, yes, I know that thousands if not millions are starving but one gets thinner from worry too and the carping of others, for instance here I am drowning and this voice on my left shoulder is saying, if that's the way you feel about me and other allegations of my manipulations and if I'm such a heel why doesn't she give me up instead of just frightening off the others ? But I'm not interested in him at all, she tells her, you can have him, fuck you and fuck him, and she brings her boyfriend along to the house where she's invited me and struts around as if that's going to embarrass me, just to send a message back and yet when we met we stared at each other like struck ghosts ! we kissed in the car and I felt her breasts and when I finally left she said, why did you sleep with me then ? It was cold, I said and that was the bloody truth and yes, your hormones did race and yes, you did ask me whether women generally

swallow it and yes, you were seduced by my story, you said and me not knowing whether I could pull it off again, (maybe I was only a channel for some higher force) and anyway I couldn't remember even writing the damn thing let alone know how to repeat it and so I lie on her chaise de couch and she frees that object of her desire now standing up to greet her lips which part to take hold of my being in that ultimate swallow. Passing through her like all the words of my life, like all the life of my blood, like the blood of my heart, like the heart of my soul, like the soul itself transfiguring, hallelujah, into the spark that tolerates no imbalance which is the energy of the sun itself, dancing through grass and leaves and plants and trees and worms and flowers and birds and snakes and gods and men and women, so come brother, come sister, come to me and then the log falls off the fire and Alex rushes across to lift it with smoke pouring into the room and balls of glowing charcoal, bits of old tree and iridescent pine cones rolling about in a cloud of sparks across the floor. Hallelujah ! I cry and she looks at me like I'm a madman and yes I am, mad from my heels to the top of my head, mad to be alive, mad to have been the one lying there on her couch, mad to have waded through the flies and garbage of that ruin of a street, mad to have drunk cheap wine and shared one plate of food among three people, crazy to have sat opposite her and told her how beautiful her young breasts were, insane to have stared at the bowl of thin spaghetti and said I was not hungry, to have lost myself ten hundred different ways on freeways, to have gone on a trip without a cent in my pocket and dying of thirst refused a drink at every petrol stop, to have stood on a street corner selling vacuum cleaners when I couldn't pay for the part that goes in the part that makes it work. Mad to have finally screamed at her to get out of my car you leech, shouting so loudly that the hair on her head swept back in a rush of air and her eyes widened with excitement and awe at the derangement of this gentle warrior who finally, one last time, one unequivocally, absolutely convinced last time said, no, he said, no, he won't, no.

## And what

has this to do with this beautiful view that I stare at, this tranquil sea I look out at, this small village I live in ? Alex stands in the kitchen wearing one of my tops and cooks brown rice and lentils while the log fire crackles gently into the night and Anna Sophie Mutter plays Bartok's Second Violin Concerto. We live within reach of two seas here, never mind the geography, one Indian, one Atlantic, the calm and the turbulent, the warm and the cold, the civilised and the primitive, and how grateful we are that rocks still fall onto roads, that (with due compassion for the lives of sailors) ships still get dashed onto boulders, that roads are closed and hillsides washed away and that Rockey Street, Kali's playground, is there for all of us, a place where we can go to be destroyed and just think about it, down the road next to a park is a small temple, and that's where he now stands, bare footed at the door, hands pressed together, facing the Lord Shiva within his immortal ring, and here is the brass bell that dongs the ear and here is the incense that sends wisps to Brahma's non-manifested nose and there are the flowers that are garlanded around Ganesh's trunk, om namaha shivai, so prostrate yourself my friend for out of destruction does the dance arise, prostrate yourself for out of purity does new birth spring, prostrate yourself for you have journeyed through a mountain of illusion carrying a burden of false

hopes, prostrate yourself because nations and dogmas and theories and schooling have twisted your mind and thrown you off the path, cling to the ground again because that is the start of all knowledge, be low, be nothing, be mud in my mouth, be gone, yes, I give myself up, yes, I will start again, hello my friends, please welcome me, namaste.

© Ruben Mowszowski, excerpt from Souls of Ancient Fish

Ruben Mowszowski is an architect turned writer. His writing has been published in literary and other magazines in South Africa and readings of his work have been held at a number of venues including the Natale Labia Museum (SANG). He was a finalist in the 1992 Nadine Gordimer Short Story Awards and a runner up prizewinner for the 1994 Vita Short Story Awards. He lives and works in Cape Town, South Africa.

## Pluto Panoussis

Photograph - South Africa

Photo-montage accompagnant la nouvelle de Ruben Mowszowski « Namaste »  
Cape Town, South Africa, 1996 © Photo Pluto Panoussis

## Christian Sabas

Painting - France

# Condiments drift

Jean-de-Dieu Ndoutoum, Ibrahim Zongo, David Ndachi Tagne  
Pierre Barrot, Denise Williams

**A steadfast legend** goes that African consumers are very conservative when food is concerned while also ready to unthinkingly imitate the eating habit of its former colonisers. It's true that French-speaking Africa swears by French baguettes and sometimes downs an abominable beverage christened « Chais de Bordeaux », which its fans call wine.

**But these few examples** borrowed from Western food are hardly significant compared to the multiple dishes, recipes and foodstuffs that African countries exchange with each other. Intercontinental migrations are largely responsible for this phenomenon. Alloco (fried plantain banana) is therefore a speciality that the Ivory Coast has managed to magnify to the extent of inventing the neologism « Allocodrome » that denotes the markets where it is consumed. The inhabitants of Bamako and Ouagadougou are today great alloco lovers, so plantain bananas are transported to these Sahelian capitals from the wetter regions. The (China) green tea ritual from North Africa was introduced in Sahel at the same time as Islam by the Dioula merchant caravans via the Arabs. What could be more pan-African than