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What we now call the trees were once called the gods. Their kingdom a green and honest song. Their angels adorned the wings of birds, the hooves of horses, an onyx braid at the water's edge. To know them, we must remember what the colours made in the earth's eye, what the bulbul spoke in the ghazal's ear, freshwater blooming between this bloodwork of bark, these brooks of branch. Each leaf was a green and honest name, a drop of time in an endless clock. Gods of ants, gods of winds, gods of the gold sentences in a summer sky.

Our eldest mothers knew this worship, bent their knees, treated temple whatever touched life, knew everything touched life, treated everything as prayer, fastening their faith to the season's name. They learnt the language of the lakes, the angles of light, songs to be made between wind and wood, fires to be stoked inside a pregnant night. Gods of women, gods of wombs, nine moons growing full beneath their breasts. Our eldest mothers fed the land as they fed their kin, nursed the flowers, collected the rain, understood the circle of things, how even beauty blooms in decay.

Where now there is plastic, once, there was soul. A container of light for the body's grain. How it crinkled, how it filled, how when the time came, it made a boat of the evening breeze and swam to a land we have tried to name. Some say heaven, some say afterworld, some know the gods in the inches of things, the halos tied to blades of grass, the pearly gates of winter's gown. It's winter here. Outside my window: monopoly, free markets, an imperialist shade. The river spits up the factories' waste, the forests, the low jungles cough entire seasons of smoke, even breathing has to be bought, here, even dying is something to afford—bodies piled high in a corporation's grave, how blood feeds the green in the pockets of men, how power feeds the greed. There's a crying baby in a cardboard crib. There's a bleeding calf in a slaughterhouse mill. There's the burger its mother will make with her meat, a dollar at McDonald's the only meal the mother of the crying baby can reach. Don't we understand the cycle of greed? Don't we know the currency of crime has never been need?

Dear gods of forgiveness, gods of grace. I don't know when we forgot, but I know that we did. I've seen the maps in the white man's hands, the imaginary lines he pulls across earthen flesh and ocean's blood. I've learnt the names he's given to life far larger than us. Gods of knowing, gods of seed: Who dies for my sins today? Whose hands dig the footprint I leave on the world's glimmering skin, whose life pays for this comfort I'm in?

Gods of justice, gods of root. Help us to remember what we already know—the ocean salting our lovers' eyes, the forests filling our mothers' lungs. Put back in our mouths your green and honest song, let our fingers sound the strings and let our choices water our wings. Gods of mercy, gods of love. Here is the fist the size of heart. We know the path is paved an upward slope. The artist's art to play its part, must build a house of hope, and hope.

Written as a contribution to the Winternachten international literature festival The Hague by Sanam Sheriff.