An African Thunderstorm

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An African Thunderstorm

From the west

Clouds come hurrying with the wind

Turning sharply

Here and there

> *Analysis: The opening direction is not incidental. The west, read geopolitically, refers to the powerful Western nations that colonised much of Africa. The clouds and wind coming from the west immediately set up the poem's central allegory: the thunderstorm is colonialism, an overwhelming force arriving from outside and sweeping through African life. Personification appears in "hurrying," giving the clouds purposeful momentum: these are not clouds that drift lazily but clouds on a mission. The rapid, irregular lines that follow, "Turning sharply / Here and there," mirror the erratic, cutting movement of the storm. Sharply carries a double meaning, describing both abrupt turns and something with a dangerous edge, as if the storm moves like a blade.*

Like a plague of locusts

> *Analysis: The biblical allusion recalls the plagues of Egypt, in which swarms of locusts destroyed entire harvests. A plague suggests not only mass destruction but something sent as punishment, an unstoppable force that consumes everything in its path. The simile frames the storm as catastrophic and inevitable.*

Whirling,

Tossing up things on its tail

> *Analysis: The storm is now actively destructive rather than merely approaching. It tosses objects upward and scatters them, overturning the ordinary. The whirling motion calls to mind a tornado, with its associations of dizziness and chaos: a world where nothing stays in its place and nothing is under control.*

Like a madman chasing nothing.

> *Analysis: The simile "like a madman chasing nothing" reinforces the impression of movement without logic or mercy. It also introduces a theme that will recur: the storm does not just cause physical destruction but a kind of madness, a disorientation of those who experience it. The coloniser, in this reading, is the madman, chasing power and domination with no rational end.*

Pregnant clouds

Ride stately on its back,

> *Analysis: The tone shifts here from frantic to stately. Personification gives the clouds a regal bearing: they ride slowly and grandly, as if surveying what they have come to claim. Pregnant carries its literal meaning of fullness and imminent release, but the word also implies a burden about to be delivered onto the land below. Stately is likely a pun: it describes dignity and grandeur, but it also invokes the state, a nation. The clouds are countries, arriving with the pomp and self-assurance of those who believe they are superior and entitled to what lies beneath them.*

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Gathering to perch on hills

Like sinister dark wings;

> *Analysis: The metaphor of perching introduces a bird of prey, and the simile "like sinister dark wings" completes the image: the clouds settle over the hills the way a predator settles over its kill. Sinister means both ominous and, in its Latin root, left-handed or from the left side, historically associated with danger and ill fortune. Dark reinforces menace. Together the words conjure something like an angel of death spreading its wings over the land.*

The wind whistles by

And trees bend to let it pass.

> *Analysis: Alliteration links wind, whistles, and the wings of the previous image, producing a sound that imitates the rushing of the storm through the air. The personification of the trees is significant: they bend not because they have no strength but because they choose to yield, letting the storm pass in order to survive. This is the first response to the storm we are shown, and it matters when it is repeated later.*

In the village

Screams of delighted children,

Toss and turn

In the din of the whirling wind,

> *Analysis: The irony here is stark. The children are delighted, excited by the spectacle of the storm in the way a child might thrill at the danger of a hurricane before understanding what it can do. But the word screams undercuts the delight: even their excited cries carry an edge of anxiety. The personification of the screams themselves, tossing and turning in the wind, is striking. The wind is so powerful that it drowns out and manipulates even the sounds humans make. Human voices are flung about by the storm like objects. The alliteration of toss and turn, and of whirling wind, gives these lines the rushing, swirling quality of the storm itself.*

Women,

Babies clinging on their backs

Dart about

In and out

Madly;

> *Analysis: The contrast between the children and the women is deliberate. The children do not understand the danger; the adults do, and their response is madness, a frantic, directionless running that echoes the "madman chasing nothing" from the opening stanza. The colonised people have been driven to a state of insanity by the arrival of the storm. The babies clinging to their mothers register the danger instinctively, feeling it through the terror in their mothers' bodies before they can name it. The fragmented lines, short and staccato, enact the disorder of the scene.*

The wind whistles by

Whilst trees bend to let it pass.

> *Analysis: The repetition of these lines from the second stanza is not accidental. The word whilst makes this a comparison: the trees bend and yield while the humans do not. The African people, unlike the trees, do not simply submit. They dart and scream and run; they resist rather than accommodate the storm. The*

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repeated line asks us to judge the two responses against each other and to notice that the people, however frightened, do not bend.

Clothes wave like tattered flags

Flying off

Analysis: This simile is one of the poem's richest images. Literally, the storm has torn the women's clothes, and the rags flutter in the wind like flags. But flags are national symbols, and tattered flags suggest nations whose identity has been stripped, soiled, and scattered. The flying-off of the flags implies the loss of sovereignty and self, the disappearance of African nationhood into the wind of colonial power. The metonymy of the flag standing in for the country gives the image a political charge that the torn clothing alone would not carry.

To expose dangling breasts

Analysis: The physical exposure of the women is both literal and symbolic. Colonialism included the systematic exploitation and violation of African women's bodies, and the tearing away of clothing here carries that history. The storm does not merely damage property; it strips away dignity and protection.

As jagged blinding flashes

Analysis: The lightning is jagged, a word that echoes sharply from the first stanza: both suggest something with a dangerous, cutting edge. Blinding works on two levels: the lightning is literally bright enough to blind, but there is also a suggestion of spiritual blindness, the loss of identity and self-knowledge that colonisation imposes. The word flash is also a pun, meaning both a lightning flash and the sudden involuntary exposure of the body, linking the lightning back to the women's exposed breasts in the line before.

Rumble, tremble and crack

Analysis: The onomatopoeia of rumble and crack recreates the sound of thunder, immersing the reader in the sensory chaos of the storm. Tremble is the human body's response inserted between the two sounds of nature, as if the storm and the people shaking with fear have become indistinguishable. The crack could carry an additional resonance: the cracking of a whip, the sound associated with slavery and forced labour.

Amidst the smell of fired smoke

And the pelting march of the storm.

Analysis: Fired smoke suggests fires extinguished by the storm, cooking fires put out and left to smoulder, stripping families of warmth and food. But it can also suggest the smoke of gunfire, bringing the violence of colonial enforcement into the poem's final image. The metaphor "pelting march of the storm" is explicitly military: the storm does not simply pass through but marches, like an army advancing through a village, hurling objects at everything in its path. The poem ends not with retreat or resolution but with the storm still arriving, still moving, still destructive.

About the poem

Author: David Rubadiri (1930--2018)

Context: Published around the time of African independence movements in the 1960s, when many nations were shaking off or still enduring the effects of European colonialism. Rubadiri was a Malawian poet and diplomat who lived through this period. The poem can be read purely as a description of a literal storm, but the weight of its diction and the specificity of "from the

west" support a second, political reading: the thunderstorm is an **allegory** for colonialism and its effects on African people and societies.

Form: Free verse with short, irregular line lengths that vary dramatically across stanzas. The lack of consistent punctuation gives the poem a breathless, relentless quality. The form itself performs the storm's chaos: the lines are as unstable and unpredictable as the weather they describe. The second stanza, which describes the clouds riding stately, is notably more regular, matching the pompous calm of the colonisers' arrival.

Core idea: The storm, on its surface a violent natural event, is also a portrait of colonial invasion: something that arrives from the west, strips away dignity and identity, drives people to madness, and marches on without pause or mercy.

Mood: Tense and foreboding in the opening, building to frantic chaos as the storm arrives.

Tone: Vivid and urgent, with an undercurrent of political anger.

Main themes:

- The destructive power of colonialism
- Man vs nature
- Fear, chaos, and loss of control
- Loss of identity and dignity
- Innocence vs awareness (children vs women)
- Resilience: the people do not bend

🧠 **Remember**

- The poem is an **allegory**: the thunderstorm represents colonialism arriving from the Western world
- The storm's progression maps a colonial narrative: **approach** ("hurrying from the west") ' **occupation** (clouds perching "stately" on hills) '**impact** (people scattered, clothes torn, fires extinguished)
- The **repeated lines** "the wind whistles by / whilst trees bend to let it pass" are comparative: the trees yield, but the people do not
- **Tattered flags** is a **metonymy** for the nations themselves, their identities stripped and blown away
- The **children's delight** is **dramatic irony**: the reader sees the danger they cannot
- Stately is a **pun**: dignified bearing AND invoking the state, one nation dominating another
- The final **metaphor** "pelting march of the storm" frames the storm as a military advance, not a weather event

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