

SANKOFA

The Soldier's Tale Retold

by

Titilope Sonuga

CHARACTERS

NARRATOR	An all seeing voice that tells the story, providing context and emotional cues.
YAA	The Soldier's mother, a voice of wisdom voiced by the Narrator.
SOLDIER	Name: Jevaun (meaning Warrior). Protagonist who sets out to enlist in WW1.
DEVIL	Antagonist. Appears as several disguises including: An old woman, a recruitment officer, a Sergeant.

Sankofa*The Soldier's Tale Retold**Titilope Sonuga*

NARRATOR

Blood travels just as oceans do
we carry tribulations like tributaries in our
bodies too.
Bodies born of water that still remembers
and will split rock, quench fire down to its
embers,
just to return to the place it all
began
to reclaim everything it outran.

In the before, there was a people
--a royal lineage before the gospel.
On their land acres of gold,
more riches than their hands could hold.
In the after, calamity sails in on a ruthless
tide,
to trade, steal and sell far and wide.
Named after the port of their
enslavement,
the Kormantse waged war in every moment.

In the myths they chewed off their slavers
chains,
fought them right down to their remains,
then pulled them flesh from bone like fruit to
hull
and made a drinking bowl of a man's skull.

This blood memory travels the ocean floor
and battles for dignity everywhere water touches
the shore.
Out from the Gold Coast, now Ghana,
emerging in the West Indies, Jamaica
to arrive in Nova Scotia in 1914
where our soldier's story will begin.

A man born of this warrior bloodline
will fight for his chance to define
his place in the order of things,
as he leaves the nest to find his wings.

In his ears an ancient phrase
like a compass to hold within his gaze

(In Yaa's voice) Sankofa; Se wo were fi na
wosankofaa yenkyi -
-retrieve what was left behind to see,
how the future calls endlessly - into the past,
that we may know ourselves at
last.

PART I

Music: "The Soldier's March"

NARRATOR *(during music)*

The stars are low enough to touch,
on a night you wouldn't consider much,
But for a man on this road
carrying on his back a
load.
He's marching to the place they claim
every man can give his
name,
until he's in that uniform
a soldier's duty to perform.
Maybe if his blood is shed,
they'll call his name when history's
read.

Music ends

NARRATOR

Across the clearing to the west
of where he pauses for a rest,
men as far as the eye can see
ready to set sail across the
sea.
United by a common cause
--without fanfare or applause,
all the world in war and strife
each one has wagered his own life.

NARRATOR

He dips a rag into the stream
and wipes his face 'til there's a gleam,
he glistens in the moonlight
like a black pearl in the night.
Around his neck hangs from a string,
pinned by its closed wing,
Sankofa, is what he calls the bird,
who holds his history in a word.
A symbol, an ancient guide,
resting near his heart with
pride.

SOLDIER

A lesson to keep in mind,
return for what was left behind.

NARRATOR

He takes the load off his back
and unfolds the paper in his sack
"Here's your chance, it's men we want!"
the poster declares in bold font.
Here he is, a man indeed
and into the moment he'll proceed.
His clothes are plain, his pockets empty,
but where courage is needed he has plenty.

At every chance along his way
he gathers his thoughts to relay
in letter after letter to Yaa, his mother,
--though they might never reach her

SOLDIER

What did the ancestors know,
feet pressed against a ruthless
shore?
Yaa, tell me again of our
survival,
of choices made at the crossroads.
Tell me of the courage that carried
our people across continents
--survival thumping in their chests like a war

drum.
 At every crossroad the questions;
 whose blood is shed and in whose name?
 what wars are waged and on whose land?
 which weapon shall I touch my hand to
 and what truth could it yield?
 What is the price of a dream?
 I ask the same questions now amidst the whispers
 of all the men, not too weak or too old to be
 enrolled
 but too Black...too Black even to die
 among.
 If I fight in their war, will they see me?
 If I put to death another mother's son
 can I one day stand skin to skin with them
 and finally be called a man too?

Music: "Airs by a Stream."

NARRATOR *(during music)*

The man rises to his feet
 to set his steps back on a
 beat.
 But before he gets back on his way,
 a melody begins to play.

He bends his ear toward the sound
 --until his body's turned
 around,
 and there seated in the grass,
 an old woman with eyes like glass.
 From her fiddle music rings,
 her fingers dancing on the strings.

NARRATOR

(In Yaa's Voice) She a duppy? She a fairy?
 Something about her makes him wary.

NARRATOR

Closer still until they're level,
he's standing right before the devil.

Music ends.

SOLDIER

I didn't mean to bother you,
but I've never heard a song so true.

DEVIL

Oh, I'm just taking in the view.
Yes, this old fiddle is still good as new.

NARRATOR

(In Yaa's Voice, warning)
Monkey play de fiddle mek baboon dance

SOLDIER

(To Yaa/himself)
--she'll mess up my plans if I give her the
chance

DEVIL

Just a moment please my dear,
a small request while you're still here.

SOLDIER

ma'am, I wish that I could stay,
but I really must get on my way.

DEVIL

Just this log, it won't take long,
a few minutes for one so strong.
My home is just further down the way,
I promise...I can even pay.

SOLDIER

No need.

DEVIL

Indeed, and once we have agreed,
I'll give you something you will need.
I've travelled this road a while my dear,
enough to know more than I hear.
Your eyes give your heart away,
and there's wisdom in this head of grey.
So, if you're hoping to enlist,
there is a way I can assist.
Stronger men have been turned back
and I know the one thing they all lack.

SOLDIER

What's that?

DEVIL

A hand?
--there's plenty of time to chat.

SOLDIER

What more could I possibly need,
isn't it the same blood that all men bleed?

DEVIL

It is -- and yours pumps like a raging storm.
Come, we'll get you in that uniform.

NARRATOR

The man nods and seals the deal,
wondering what she might reveal.
Off they go into the night,
already giving way to morning light.
The path is rough and never ending
and he begins to feel the load he's bearing,
but just before he can protest,
they arrive at her home, a shack at best.

DEVIL

set it down by your feet
won't you have something to eat?

SOLDIER

A promise made, a promise kept

NARRATOR

The man refuses to accept

DEVIL

There's enough for two
rest a while you'll get what's due

Devil and Soldier sit to eat.

NARRATOR

And so they sit for a meal,
as time spins on like a wheel.
First rice and peas, brown stew
chicken
--the sights and scents of his mother's kitchen.
Then with coco bread as soft as
foam
the devil serves him a taste of home.
By the time the food is done,
the man's fears are all but gone.
He's rested and softened to her charm,
by now he is sure she'll do no harm.
Suddenly he rises, gathering his things
a bell in his head, the memory rings.

SOLDIER

My God! the day is all but gone
I'll miss my chance if I don't head on

NARRATOR

The Devil rises from her chair
and pulls her fiddle from thin air

SOLDIER

Your fiddle?
What is this, some strange riddle?

DEVIL

I promised that I would help you,
so take this before I bid you adieu.

Everything you will need is here,
in the music that touches the ear.

SOLDIER

What are you saying?

DEVIL

Too much talking, when you should be playing.

NARRATOR

He sets his fingers to the string
and suddenly he hears it ring.

NARRATOR

A melody begins to rise,
much to the soldier's surprise.
He knows every inch of the instrument,
and time stands still in that moment

SOLDIER

What dark magic is this?
A single note I did not miss.
I've never touched this thing before.
Surely, there must be something more.

DEVIL

The instrument is pure, it cannot lie,
only reveals the players "why".
So if you play and your heart is earnest,
it will give what you hold
dearest.
Its charm is strong, its magic
potent,
it calls forever into a
moment,
causing a thousand men to stand
for the one who holds it in his hand.

NARRATOR

The music's charm hangs in the air
 and traps the soldier in its snare.
 A man in a trance, he accepts the gift,
 and tries to make his departure swift.
 as night fades into a new day
 dawning,
 he dissolves into the cold
 morning.

The Soldier's March (Reprise)

NARRATOR *(during music)*

Our man is on the road again,
 there's lots of time to regain
 each moment off the path
 feels like years in the aftermath.
 He presses on with fresh resolve
 and before long the hours dissolve.
 And when he arrives at
 last,
 his expectations are surpassed.
 Men by the thousands stand
 --each one with a helping hand.
 They'll fight until their final breath
 they'll push beyond the fear of death

NARRATOR

The devil again in disguise
 an officer now in his new guise

DEVIL

Next! Who's next our country needs you.
 We have an enemy to subdue.

NARRATOR

Our man steps up eagerly
 barely able to contain his glee

DEVIL

Name. Age. Place of birth.
We don't have all the time on earth!

SOLDIER

Jevaun. 20. West Indies...Jamaica.
they say our people first lived in Africa
I travelled a long way here, you see,
to Nova Scotia where I could live free

DEVIL

Only provide the details I ask,
what makes you think you're up to the task?

SOLDIER

I'm healthy...eager and strong,
I'm sure this is where I belong.

DEVIL

I'm afraid that not enough,
not everyone's made of the right stuff.

SOLDIER

Why don't you put me to the test,
I'm just as good as all the rest.

NARRATOR

Before the young man can say more,
a hand slams down like a closed door.

DEVIL

There's no place for you here, boy,
or any others like you to
deploy.
This is a white man's war and
land,
and there's nothing more to understand.

NARRATOR

There...now it's all been said
 the words confirm the soldier's dread,
 but then he at once recalls
 the devil's words, his magic gift
 whose tune can make his fortune
 shift.
 He'll cast the spell and fill the air
 and then he'll get what's good and fair

The man picks up the fiddle to play. The instrument stutters the sound discordant.

Next! Who's next, our country needs you,
 we have an enemy to subdue.

Music: Pastorale.

SOLDIER

(during music)

This feeling, now familiar as breathing
 --to be talked down, through and
 around.
 So we reach for blind faith,
 we reach for false magic to be seen and
 known,
 to make this little life count for something.

NARRATOR

The devil appears once more.
 the same old woman from before

SOLDIER

What do you want from me again?

DEVIL

Old friend, to what do I owe this disdain?

SOLDIER

I'm tired, I've tried to do my part.
 Now, I no longer have the heart.

DEVIL

You simply do not see your power,
so your despair grows hour after hour.

SOLDIER

It was a distraction I fell for foolishly,
searching for worth externally.
No talent we offer, no magic, no art,
could ever soften a darkened heart.

DEVIL

But you have a voice, a sacred skill,
to bend every man's ear to your will.
So, take to the streets, knock on every door,
turn your whisper into a
roar.
One fiddle plays a lonely tune,
but an orchestra? Well...that's its own platoon!

SOLDIER

I've tried your magic, I played the song
but the music it came out all wrong.
No more riddles no more tricks,
rejection has landed like a ton of bricks.
Ten steps forward and twenty back
--a Black man marches an endless track.

DEVIL

Perhaps there was just one more thing
--a missing piece to make the fiddle sing.
My dear, it requires your sacrifice.
You see, every dream has a price.

SOLDIER

I have nothing worthy left to pay.
Just, let me be on my way.

DEVIL

This necklace that you wear,
it seems to me you hold it dear.

SOLDIER

The bird, blessed by my mother's hand
 is what ties me to my homeland.
 Her spirit and voice are held inside,
 with every stride, she's by my side.

DEVIL

That's it, a worthy offering.
 My dear, just slide it off the string.

DEVIL

Listen, you would make your mother proud
 the past would be just a passing cloud.
 In that uniform, you'll be reborn
 a son to revere, celebrate and adorn.

NARRATOR

The Soldier contemplates his fate
 poised to take the devil's bait

SOLDIER

Yaa, tell me again of our survival,
 of choices made at the crossroads.
 Tell me of the courage that carried
 our people across continents
 survival thumping in their chests like a war
 drum,
 at every crossroad the same question
 --what is the price of a dream?

NARRATOR

He hands the precious necklace over
 a man resolved, resolute and sober

Music: Pastorale (reprise).

NARRATOR

Our man thinks he can understand
 the devil's clever sleight of
 hand.
 The fiddle --a symbol of his power

played in concert to empower
 men like him to claim their place
 and force the world to make space.
 With talents to use and voices to raise,
 he gets to work in the coming days.
 There are men to gather, each with his gift.
 Preachers, speakers and those who uplift,
 leaders and writers with their
 letters,
 petitions for sons, and fathers and brothers.

But rejection comes with each request,
 each day reveals a crueler test.
 White soldiers say no in disgust
 each new reason even more unjust
 The world can barely contain their fear
 that their colonies will disappear.
 If a Black man learns the art of war,
 all oppression would cease forever more.

Music: Airs by a Stream (Reprise).

NARRATOR

(during music)

The petitions rise to a fever pitch
 until a proposal flips the switch.
 A Black man, while not a welcome neighbour,
 could be used in the war for his labour.
 No weapons to hold, no frontline fight,
 but hundreds of men would make the work light.

Music ends

SOLDIER

Yaa...I promise, I'll make you proud.
 You should see us, each one Black and unbowed.
 It's more than this war, it our fight to be seen
 as who we were and should always have been.
Ma, one finga cyaa catch lice,
 but we're 500 and more, ready to sacrifice.
 This service, this labour, is the only way

the future knows what we did today.
 When all of this is said and done.
 they'll remember us --the Black Battalion.

PART 2

The Soldier's March (Second Reprise)

NARRATOR

(during music)

His boots are heavy on the ground,
 his body worn by every pound,
 Up in the mountains of France
 the Battalion leaves nothing to chance.
 Every load, each weight of timber
 has left them anything but limber.
 Our soldier's weak and aged by time,
 has worked and toiled for every dime.
 Through bitter cold and cruel conditions
 he persists through his instructions

Music ends.

DEVIL

Lift! Pull! Hold! Brace!
 This wood in trenches, holds up the space

SOLDIER

(to himself)

Back breaking split like timber,
 even if no bullet ever left the chamber,
 The war --from forest floor to railway track,
 was built upon a black man's back.

DEVIL

Lift! Pull! Hold!
 Brace!
 This wood on the tracks, keeps the war in pace.

SOLDIER

(To himself)

The enemy within is the one we fear,
his cruelty is what kills us here.
Not the cold or the work or the sickness we
brave,
it's the malice that sends our boys to an early
grave.

NARRATOR

Yet, for his brothers dead and gone,
he'll press on until the work is done.

DEVIL

At ease!

SOLDIER

Yaa?

aren't these the word you taught me to pray,
to call on God, day after day?

Our father...hallowed be thy name
are all of your sons loved the same?
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done,
in heaven, will we meet the suffering we've
outrun?
Give us this day our daily bread
who will remember us when we are dead?

Music: The Royal March.

NARRATOR

(During music)

By decree and the signing of a treaty,
the men are called home from across the sea.
The war is over, the matter is settled
and sons return from lands that are levelled.
The men of the battalion are dispersed
launched back into the world headfirst.
The soldier fears the road ahead
no matter what the good book said.

his future unsure, his memory blurred
 --carried on the wings of a lost
 bird

NARRATOR

The ship is ready at the port,
 our homebound soldier to transport.
 A woman sets out her wares by the water
 -- it's the devil, he pauses a moment to watch
 her

Music ends

SOLDIER

I know you...

DEVIL

You do?
 How about some trinkets of silver or gold,
 something to take back for your wife to hold.

NARRATOR

Around her neck hangs from a string,
 --pinned by its closed wing,

SOLDIER & NARRATOR

Sankofa!

SOLDIER

Give it back, I'm begging you.
 I'll do anything you ask me to.

DEVIL

Oh my dear, that's years in the past
 the trade was fair, you got all you asked.

The Soldier stifles his frustration.

SOLDIER

I did, and yet this emptiness inside --
 you took something from me and it is as if I

died.
 I'm untethered, divorced from my own soul
 and without it I cannot be made
 whole.

DEVIL

Well...perhaps there is a way,
 There's a little game we can play.
 You win, and the necklace is yours, I'll
 resign,
 I win, and both the fiddle and bird are mine.

The devil clears the table and sets down a deck of cards.

NARRATOR

In a moment of déjà vu,
 they're seated for their rendezvous.
 The soldier, desperate for something to hold
 has wandered once again off the road.

Music: "The Little Concert"

(during music)

DEVIL

Tell me, who wins in a war?

SOLDIER

Yes! there it is, one more.

DEVIL

When a man dies by another's hand
 who wins? country? motherland?

SOLDIER

(to himself)

I'm so close, I can win, I can!

DEVIL

you, who would kill a man to be called a man.
So desperate you were to stand beside
the same people who cast you aside.

The soldier groans with joy.

SOLDIER

Sankofa!

DEVIL

--yet you learn nothing from the past.
Look at you now, you won't last.

*The devil doesn't let up, plays again. The soldier moves again,
the devil next.*

SOLDIER

How do you match me with every move?
What is it that you are trying to prove.

DEVIL

Don't you see how it could be,
if I were you and you were me!
Give in to the rage you earned it boy
inside the darkness you'll find new joy.

Music Ends

NARRATOR

The game concludes in an unlikely draw
for the soldier this is the last straw
he bows his head in agony
prepared to make one final plea

Just then, the devil pulls a coin out from her pocket.

DEVIL

Heads or tails?

NARRATOR

--a new plan the devil unveils

SOLDIER

Heads

The devil throws the coin into the air, they step back and let it fall to the ground. Both hover over it as it lands. The soldier lets out a victorious cry.

NARRATOR

An act of mercy from above
the soldier cries with sweet resolve.

SOLDIER

At last, at last, a victory
At last, my God, I'm finally free
I leave you to your endless riddles
no more tricks, no more fiddles.

NARRATOR

As the bird returns to its rightful place,
the knot of memory begins to unlace.
The soldier hears again his mother's voice
--his guiding light behind every choice.
"Sankofa" at first soft like a whisper.

NARRATOR & SOLDIER

Sankofa

NARRATOR

then clean through like a cleaver,
into his heart and out through his lips,

SOLDIER

Sankofa!

NARRATOR

a knowing spreads to his fingertips.

SOLDIER

No sacrifice, no talent, no skill,
 would ever have been enough to fulfill
 a world that will always demand more.
 So it is now, as it was before
 when calamity sailed in on a ruthless
 tide,
 to trade, steal and sell far and wide.
Sankofa; Se wo were fi na wosankofaa yenkyi
(translate to patois)
 retrieve what was left behind to see,
 how the future calls endlessly into the past.
 That I may know myself at last.

Music: Tango

NARRATOR (during Music)

The journey home stretches
 long.
 The soldier's unsure of which world to belong.
 In one, there are songs of joy and merriment,
 in the other, an endless inner torment.

Music: Waltz, Ragtime.

Music: The Devil's Dance.

NARRATOR

(during Music)

The devil appears for her final trick
 without disguise an embodied malefic
 she circles him like a wicked wind
 beneath her spell the soldier is pinned

Music ends.

Music: The Devil's Song

DEVIL

(during Music)

Come on, you fool, you're failing fast,
 wake up and face the truth at last.
 Give me your past and future to mold,
 I'll give you more than you can hold.
 Give into your anger and you will see,
 we're in this together you and me.
 Follow me! Into the depths, let's make them pay.
 Come with me! Into the sea, you'll have your
 day.
 Go back and feel the same old sting,
 all that is left is an endless nothing.

Music Ends

Music: Little Chorale

NARRATOR (during Music)

What pushes through the devil's spell,
 to silence the roar of the oceans swell,
 is a song that rises from a hum
 about what was, what is, and is to come.
 The soldier reaches deeper still,
 an ancient knowledge to distill;

SOLDIER

The measure of man is what we leave
 to a future we might never see.

SOLDIER

We know this place,
 --children born in the shadows of grace,
 nursed drunk on mother's milk and made whole,
 then bludgeoned again by what darkens the
 soul.
 Children marked by the hope of generations
 carrying with us the courage of nations
 insisting on a life beyond the shackle's heavy
 clang,
 even when sorrow returns like a boomerang.
 We reach back, *Sankofa*, grab hold of what we
 know,
 brace our bodies for whatever life can throw.
 Every inch of ground we gain
 is a sting our children will not feel again.

If I go, who will bear witness to our
 laughter,
 or tell of who we were before and in a greater
 after?

Music: The Great Chorale.

NARRATOR (during music)

The soldier arrives at a moment of truth
 back in Halifax, no longer the boy of his youth
 his heart beating in his ears like a drum
 he's tired and cold, his body's numb.

Just maybe, there's a life to be remade.
 Maybe, it could be all he has prayed.
 The people will know what men like him
 gave to the world when all was grim.
 Not for honour or unlikely
 praise,
 but to be seen and heard, their stature to raise.

He calls out
 --the people passing stop their rush
 He calls out
 --their voices simmer to a hush
 Then --as though he were a passing
 breeze
 they carry on like buzzing bees.

SOLDIER

To them, I was never here
 to them, we were never there.
 It's gone,
 --the memory of men who stood like kin
 bound by the colour of their skin.
 We melt away like morning mist,
 no matter how much we
 insist.

NARRATOR

He looks down at his body beginning to sway
 as limb by limb he fades away,
 from the pages of our history books
 not even in the furthest nooks

a ghost to them all, already unmoored
unseen, unheard, a silenced chord

NARRATOR

Blood travels just as oceans do,
tribulations branch off
like tributaries in our bodies too.
Our bodies are born of water
so we remember...we remember

Even now, the wounds of history
echo forward through time to find us here
same war, different frontline
same battle, different weapon

We are living in our own blood memory
we are still battling for dignity everywhere
water touches the shore
yet the chorus continues
and the music will not stop

Music: The Devil's Triumphant March

END