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When the Mask of My Friend Fell

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WHEN THE MASK OF MY FRIEND FELL

It happened in Germany in a city called Bremen
that my friend's mask fell,
a mask I could hardly have believed she wore.

This friend was a teacher like me,
used to visit me in Dakar,
was always calling herself an enemy of colonialism, of neocolonialism,
which she said exploited the African people in particular.

She and I were invited to the University of Bremen
to talk about the books we wrote.
So we traveled together in her car from Paris to Bremen
and all the while my friend had on a mask,
a mask I could hardly have believed she wore.

It happened that one of our hosts asked me
about my attitude toward the French language
since I wrote my books in French and I told her
and the others listening that mostly I think only
in my mother tongue and translate from Wolof to French.

That moment my friend looked as if she had received a slap
so hard it made her reel. She stood up suddenly, beside herself,
sputtering, choking and saying, "What you say is wrong!
What you say is false! All Francophone Africans think only in French.
None of them think in their mother-tongue.
They think only in French."

And at this moment I saw the mask she wore had fallen,
a mask I could hardly have believed she wore.

Translated from Wolof by the author with Christi Merrill.