Remembering Oakland, California

It is Halloween, a festival strange
to transatlantic visitors;
the ghosts are with us always
here in Africa;
residual spirits tightening the stem
of every bush, bracing the leaves,
and extending through the root system
their claim to the earth's core.

But the ghosts in Oakland wear make-up,
crossing the intersections as if
they were subject to the same laws
as pedestrians and motorists.
The only plant life they claim
is a scooped-out pumpkin skull
in which a single candle, burning,
subsists on a diet of wax.

Death is a cult for once a year,
a niche to be filled when occasion
demands. But we feed the masks
hourly. They are lifelines, strings
of blood linking this world
with the next, our frames of cruelty,
incandescences of pain
sunk into burnt limbs and empty eyes.

HAROLD FARMER