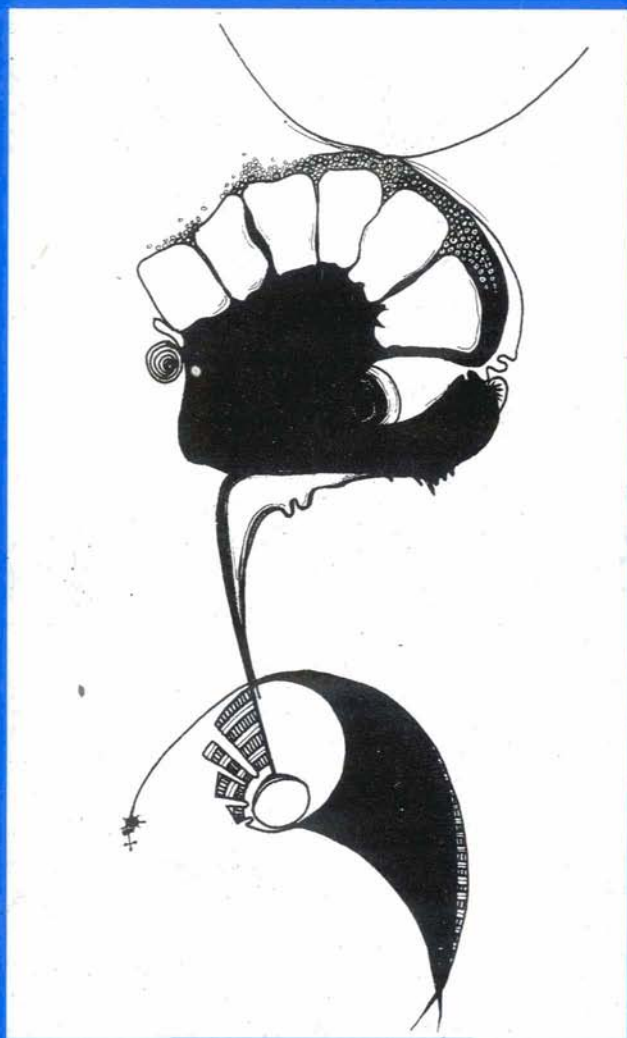




# OKIKE

AN AFRICAN JOURNAL OF NEW WRITING



37

**OKIKE**

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## From the Editor

The contents of this issue strongly underline the literary character of *Okike*. For instance, we are featuring five short stories by up-and-coming writers, a far cry from the situation last year when we remarked the dearth of short stories, plays and reviews.

In addition, there is an increasing presence of writers from different parts of the world. We look forward to more contribution from lovers of *Okike*.

Our contributors are once again reminded to attach short biographical notes to their manuscripts.

Best wishes!

**ONUORA OSSIE ENEKWE**

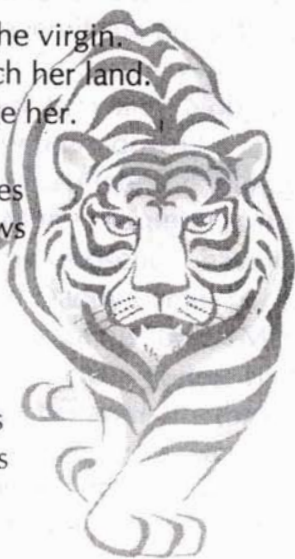
**The Lion Does Not Die**

*(For Samora Machel)*

In her land  
clouds blend  
part at will.  
Gentle breezes ruffle  
her silvery-grey hair  
upon the hills  
calm as lions  
limbs stretching  
gazing at the world  
through glass-hued dawn.

Insatiate eyes seek the virgin.  
Hawks' talons scratch her land.  
Hungry winds ravage her.

Gently the lion wakes  
eyes, a flash of arrows  
over the plains,  
plants his legs  
upon a path  
ferries his bulk  
over shrub and grass  
roams the mountains  
awash with light  
dares intruders





step on his shadow.

The lion does not hesitate.  
 He hauls himself against  
 evil eyes and talons.  
 He dies, a seed  
 at the moment of germination

The lion does not die.



## **OZIOMA IZUORA**

### **No Water! No Fuel! No Hope!**

Ring! Ring!! 'That's the phone! Hello!'

'Is your mother home?'

'No Auntie, she's not.'

'And your father?' 'He's not home either!'

'Anybody I can leave a message with?'

'Only me, Auntie'.

'How old are you?'

'I'm six.'

'How can they leave you at home all by yourself?'

Where have Mummy and Daddy gone to?'

'Mummy went to look for kerosene. She says she can't afford gas anymore, even if she finds it. Daddy has gone to the 'Black Market' to look for fuel. My brother and sister went with our House-help to look for water. Nobody wants me to go with them because I'd slow them down.'

'My dear, you are bright for your age! I'm sure you can take a message. Tell Mummy Auntie phoned to ask if she has found a station that has kerosene. I have looked everywhere and I can't find. And if Daddy comes back with fuel, I am interested in the location of his 'Black-Market'. As for water, tell Mummy I've found a clean gutter. That apart from the refuse that house-helps occasionally throw into it, it doesn't seem there is anything toxic in its water; that if I'm able to keep the brats off long enough, the water settles. I'll tell her how to treat the water when I see her. She should ring me

we'll talk about it.'

'Okay Auntie. Em... but, Auntie, she can't ring you.'

'Now, why ever not, my child?'

'Our phone, Auntie, it's on toss.'

'Goodness! You wouldn't know if Daddy has not paid the NITEL bills, would you?'

'Indeed, I know! He's been grumbling about NITEL's inefficiency. They were supposed to take us out of toss two weeks ago when Daddy paid the bills.'

'Hey, poor child, how can you be like a real six year old if you get saddled with so much of adult worries?'

'Mummy and Daddy tell us everything, so that if anything happens to them before we're grown up we'd already know enough to survive. If they don't tell us anyway, we'd still know it, Auntie. The hourly news on both the radio and the television would be full of it. Besides, I only got to know about kerosene about two weeks ago when Mummy bought the stove. When I asked her what it was for, she told me about how gas has risen from 25 Naira to 350. I can't even count that far yet. Again, we'd never eaten anything that was not bread and tea for breakfast, now we'd have to do without it.'

'Poor, poor child'

'No, Auntie, I don't think that makes me poor. I know poorer children. They eat what's thrown into garbage bins and gutters. I'm not poor, Auntie.'

'But it's not fair for your Mummy and Daddy to tell you so much about these things!'

'What things Auntie?'

'For instance, why should they talk about what will happen if they die? Why should they die?'

'Don't you know? Daddy says it's by God's grace we're alive today. He says that the reason for so many obituary announcements of young men and women is the harsh economic, social and political situation the country is in. Daddy

says that every grown-up person in Nigeria ought to be very sad. And he says that sadness can kill more than cancer.'

'Good God!'

'Yes, and Auntie, Daddy says that any grown-up Nigerian who is happy, really happy, that is, is either a rogue or is not capable of thinking. That to think in present-day Nigeria is enough to give one a heart attack!'

'Your Daddy says all these things to you?'

'Yes Auntie, and much more!'

'Your vocabulary is certainly not that of a six year old!'

'Thank you, Auntie'

'I don't mean that as a compliment'

'What's a compliment?'

'Never mind!'

'Yes Alice?'

'Yes child?'

'Will things ever get better? I mean the way they do in films?'

'I don't know, child, but we could pray. We just have to pray that God takes control. Our leaders are certainly incapable of doing anything about anything. We'll soon be needing special license to import breathable air!'

'Auntie, now you sound like my Daddy!'

'Yes, poor precocious dear. Tell your mother I'll call her again. And don't forget to pray for our country!'

**VICTORIA MITCHELL****Mignon**

1

My love, do not call me dramatic  
because I've sobbed for the one who fed me Spring  
with her topaz eyes. I call her to me even now with that part  
of my core that remained impervious until I held her in my feeble  
arms  
and watched the sunlight of her eyes gather shade, felt her  
tenderness  
seep into Darkness. Those sobs you heard were my nakedness.

2

I dance through the immense Darkness,  
where no one else can even walk, and  
descend into the grey-walled cave  
shunning the desperate forms reaching  
out to me. You are there in the corner  
silent. I embrace you and carry you  
up into morning's tangerine sky.

## Grief

(For Mignon)

I wrote my prescription on the back of your calling card: keep busy, write a poem, call a friend. I filed it deep in memory: Knowing will make it easier next time. But when you came again Grief, my undiscerning senses only whispered:

I walked into a room waist high in steel drawers. My hand pulled out the first. Formaldehyde's acrid insistence burned my nose: I knew... and greeted her anyway. A primal I jumped out of bed and called out: How do you expect me to survive without touch, or sight or sound of...

*Oh, Mary don't you weep.* I've dressed a table with red cyclamens; a five-day John the Conqueror candle; a Madonna filled with scented, glittered holy water. ...*Don't moan.* Grief, I'm older now. I can look at you and say that Zophar was as blind as I. He didn't see you.

Didn't see you in Job's eyes. Couldn't see memories shoving out one to make room for the next two or three or four more impatient ones. ...*Tell Martha not to moan.* I've put some sympathy cards on the table and blessed the house with sage oil. I can now say that I believe Elihu was deaf.

He couldn't hear his friend's longing. I hear the sorrow all around me, from the trees; they've known you. One tree kept me awake all night wailing. Its head was lying in the dumpster. *Sorrow is the only faithful one*, it said. *Steal away home...* Who can hear Job and I, or see us trembling,

wandering, calling to someone who'll never turn back? ...Steal a way to... Mignon tells me she is ecstatically happy. She wants me to let her... Wants me to love her in her new life. Wants me to let her go. She tells me I must believe I can find the thread; tells me she's here with me. Wants me

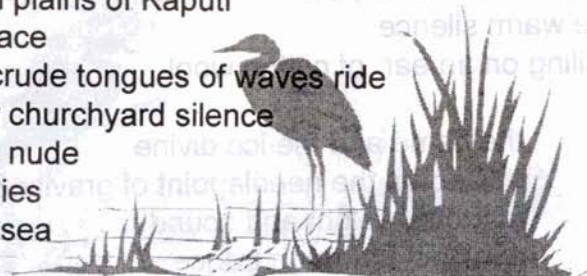
to come to her on my own. *Oh, Mary don't you weep. Don't moan.* Sit down with me, Grief. Sit down. Grief, you are born of a time when the sun has turned its back and leaves whiter, a time when the farmer's sharpened plow cuts the field and turns it in on itself to sleep in darkness.

You are born of Death, but are afraid of dying. But unlike you. I am of a time when gardenia bloom and the scent of magnolia's wildness rushes to my head.

**OSITA OBI****Seaside Palms**

gay palms of the seaside  
fluttering thro' rain, thro' sun  
or when weatherman warns of hurricane  
flagging sleek fronds in delight  
leeward, windward, a cheery sight  
reaching out high, fondling the sky  
tall and naked on elastic trunks  
lithe and graceful from hurricane's hug  
like Masai maidens bearing beauty  
across the tropical plains of Kaputi  
what fun, what peace  
watching forever crude tongues of waves ride  
in noisy rupture or churchyard silence  
what thrill dancing nude  
to saline symphonies  
of a wind-hassled sea  
in the silvermoon  
hosting seamaids on lecherous prowls  
while opulent men and idle maids  
bake in the sun beneath your feet  
where bare footprints on up-turned sand  
still reek of yesterday's pleasures

over there bulldozers fume for a charge  
I resolve not to be here when you fall





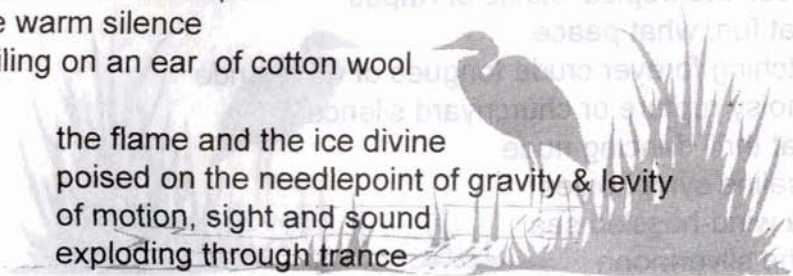
so I must break the chilly news  
 the dictator yesterday decreed you must die  
 no parliament to argue your case  
 still you flutter, wild and gay  
 as if tomorrow you'd lick another ray

tell, palms of the seaside, tell  
 when will sadness be your lot?

## The Being

... a frozen storm  
 on a tip of void  
 a presence ever-descending  
 on wings of a pulse  
 a gliding shadow  
 over a freshwater pool  
 the warm silence  
 sailing on an ear of cotton wool

the flame and the ice divine  
 poised on the needlepoint of gravity & levity  
 of motion, sight and sound  
 exploding through trance  
 into plug-sparks of epiphanies  
 to the still small voice  
 of the burning bush

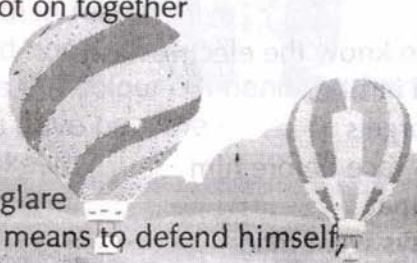


**A. N. AKWANYA****Two from the Wilds**

As long as I can be  
by myself  
I am much like everybody else,  
peace-loving;  
I fear nothing:  
I can hold my own.

It is when I see those two  
from the wilds  
who have never got on together  
and never will,  
then I am afraid.

That one,  
with the accusing glare  
and no manner of means to defend himself,  
is ragged:  
every word he utters  
as a strip torn  
from a flank  
or a sap  
leaves a sorry sight.  
He is exposed to the core...  
but how can you help hating  
your accuser?



The other has eyes that glint  
only for his desires,  
and mild in regard to me  
because  
I give him everything:  
you can't hold back  
with one who can sweep you  
off your feet  
head down  
then up again  
dizzy  
like a band-leader's baton.

And while I make obeisance,  
my face clouds for deep thoughts,  
the teeth clench  
to dredge up fierce energy,  
and I fix the wracked man  
glare for glare  
till he comes to know the electric flash  
of teeth honed in bile.  
Can it be he forgets  
so many of his race before him  
fixed just like that,  
how they always went mad  
by and by?

**CHUKWUEMEKA AGBAYI****Black Woman***(For mother, and all widows worldover)*

Black woman,  
life has aggressively  
torn you into tatters.  
You now stand like a scarecrow:  
tatters on moth-hollowed trellis.

Black woman,  
you are the dying glow  
of a once fierce flame.  
You whose teeth in rusted days  
held a thousand noon suns,  
whose skin was the colour of ripening palmtree,  
is this what you have become -  
a poor artist's sketch?

Black woman,  
for five, and ten kobo profits,  
to trap the cynics' scorn in the teeth,  
you would wake up at five,  
sleep after midnight,  
standing all day,  
serving beer and meat  
to grinning men  
with lecherous eyes,  
men who find succour

in the emptiness  
of green bottles.

I was then too small to soothe  
the pains of a lonely life,  
too small to moisten the dryness of poverty,  
too small to crack the kernels with you.

You satisfied your conscience  
but it robbed your face of its cheer,  
your heart of its song,  
rubbed your head in dust,  
and left your body a rag.  
Even the legendary resilience  
of your lineage has bowed out  
in the face of this ravishing poverty.

But linger awhile:  
in the life of a blink  
the crescent grows into fullness.  
I shall yet grow and kill your fears.  
And in the cup of my hands  
offer you songs and grains.  
In the cup of my overflowing hands  
the lavender fragrance of fulfilled dreams.

## Sing to me of Stars

Sing to me of stars and meteors.  
Sing to me of the sun and the moon.  
Sing to me of joyful children,  
of the sparkle in their eyes,  
the love in their hearts.

Grey sunlight smears everything with death.  
The odour of death clogs the nose.  
I hear only songs of melancholy.  
I see only stains and smears.  
In the ghetto have I lived and there seen  
virginity shredded at twelve  
by gentlemen in sleek shining cars.  
There have I seen unabashed youth  
execute crimes attributed to gangrened virtues.  
I have lived in GRAs<sup>1</sup> too.  
There have I seen a celibate father two men,  
a pastor proven a wizard.  
There have I also seen a groom's bestman  
bed the bride.

Sing to me of stars and meteors.  
Sing to me of the sun and the moon.  
Sing to me of joyful children,  
of the sparkle in their eyes,  
the love in their hearts.  
Only in these is innocence left.

---

<sup>1</sup>Short for Government Reservation Areas, dwelling place of the upper class

## Futility

I

I am a scrap of paper  
in a whirlwind.  
The current is drifting  
drifting, drifting ...

II

I am a ship  
loose from moorage  
on the wild sea drifting.  
I could drift into a fatal kiss  
with a strolling iceberg  
or ...

III

I am a blind man  
chasing butterflies  
in a labyrinth  
waiting for the sun  
to crash on me.

\*

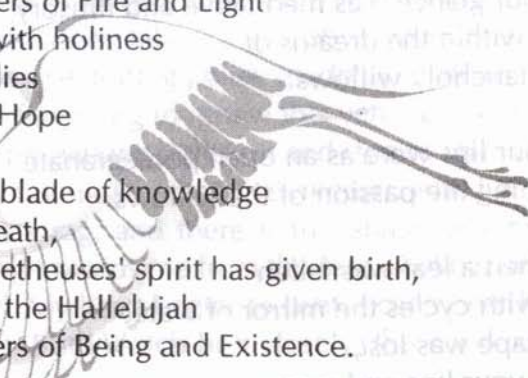
Ah, truth has broken into my head  
like a thief at night:  
Burning wood is blazing ash,  
Stone is dust.



## **MANDO KATSOULOU**

### **Solemnity**

We, the lovers of Life,  
We, the priests of Righteousness,  
We, the worshippers of Freedom,  
And we, the makers of Fire and Light  
Kneel, covering with holiness  
The bleeding bodies  
Prometheuses of Hope  
In human form.  
We line with the blade of knowledge  
All the laws of Death,  
With which Epimetheuses' spirit has given birth,  
Singing solemnly the Hallelujah  
Beyond the borders of Being and Existence.



### **The Swirl**

The ship hadn't sailed for long  
The harbor was still very far  
A wave that rushed, enormous  
As circle of desperation,  
Drew and dragged her - all hands on board -  
Under the specious open sea  
To look beside the buried metals -  
For the kingdom of Redemption.



**NIKI I. SIDERIDOU****Illusion**

Your shape reflected for a while  
in the river where the lonely willows  
were dipping their branches.  
And your glance was meditative and illusory,  
closed within the dreams of  
the melancholy willows.

And your lips were as an open pomegranate  
awakening the passion of the willows.

And when a leaf was fallen  
filling with cycles the mirror of water  
your shape was lost,  
mixing your lips and eyes,  
desires, reflexion, illusion,  
along with the shadows of willows  
in the deepest of the river.

Now, that your figure is not reflected  
in the serene surface of the water,  
your meditative and illusioned eyes,  
hid the willows dreams,  
reverberating sunsets in the bottom  
serene mirror of the waters.

**OSITA OBI****The Night by the Road**

For this time of the night, the darkness is already thick as soot. Perhaps because it is going to rain. The lightning is tearing the sky in shreds and is very vocal about it. Already lone drops of rain are hitting the windscreen here and there. And this dirt road has punctured the front tyre. Why did I have to take this detour, after all? Should have taken the asphalt road and faced the ubiquitous, money-extorting police roadblocks. Why, for God's sake, do I keep forgetting to renew this vehicle license? O shit.

I leave the parking lights on and start to change the tyre. I do it fast, very fast, in less than five minutes. And I am cleaning my hands with a rag, and there is this shape of a man in the darkness coming towards me from the rear, walking on the other side of the road. My heart begins to beat. I can't hear his footfall as he advances. But I watch him closely, the wind cold on my face.

He walks as if he doesn't know I exist. Perhaps he is a lunatic. Or a night watchman. But, God, if he is an armed robber I am done for.

I rush into the car and turn on the ignition. The engine roars, jerks and jerks and dies. Fear comes over me like broken cobwebs in the dark. What is the meaning of this? I turn the ignition again and there is no sound at all. Good God. Panic reaches for my throat. I reach out under the seat for the matchet I always keep there. I am sure to use it if I have a chance or if my nerves allow.

I wait, wishing that I wouldn't need it. I still watch from

the corners of my eyes. The man comes, walking by the other side of the road, his head bending downwards, looking this way and that way. He walks past making no noise. I think he's alone. But that isn't soothing my agitation. He stops a few metres in front looking around him. Perhaps his head is not 'correct'. Or that he's lost something and is looking for it. It comes into my head to flash the light. I don't know why, but I do it. I flash it again and stop. He turns and starts walking back. I want to flash the lights again, this time to see his face, but somehow I can't. I think it rude too. He would do better to ask me himself. I leave the matchet and pull the bonnet open.

I am still watching the man walking on the other side of the road. Suddenly he stops and he's facing me now. I thrust one hand into the front seat for the matchet, but I can't take it further. Do I hear him say something? I think I do and I hold my breath.

The wind is still beating my face, cold and strong. And balls of light shine sparingly at the intersection far ahead. A streak of lightning rips through the black sky and pelts of rain fall intermittently. There is silence, a deafening spate of silence. Around are lumps of shadows, gloomy and awesome. Everything is fast dissolving into shadows. There are large iron-gates, half open, on both sides of the road set on half-fenced, half-built up houses. And there are crab-like shadows of grass crawling about the fringes of the road marked off here and there by stumps of trees. And far and about, as the lightning streaks still rip the sky, monstrous shadows of uncompleted storey buildings loom toward the horizon. Suddenly from everywhere frogs and toads begin a noisy refrain.

The man is still looking at me. "You're looking for something, eh?" I am forced to say. "Hmm? Oh yea-yea. But I can't ever seem to find it. Guess it's no use in this darkness either," he says. "I've been at it since, up and down this road, day and night, too, but it's no use. Yet I can't kind of give up. There might be a chance yet, you know.

You seem to be having some problem with your car, eh?"

He walks over and stands beside me. And there is this foul odour that comes from him. I hold my breath and move further away. My nerves are relaxing as I resolve that if he attacks I will run.

"First it was the flat tyre. Now it just won't start," I answer him.

"It will," he says. "They obey me, these things. I scare them creepy. That's what I do all the time. Mechanics everywhere do that. I am a Peugeot specialist. Only I can't seem to move these hands because I hurt them real bad, you know, real bad."

I observe that his hands are deep in his jacket which is stained and rumpled. I am curious to see his face but the parking lights aren't bright enough. I suppose too he is deliberately keeping his face away from contact with light. But I am settled in my mind now that he is not likely to hurt me. And again this foul odour comes from him as the wind changes direction.

"It's unfortunate that I didn't leave the house with a torch," I say.

"I can see all right, now that I've grown used to the dark. You're lucky, you know," he says, poring over the entanglements of the engine wires. "I wasn't that lucky myself when I drove through here. I came down that slope on full speed that night. I guess I was a little drunk. I serviced the brakes and didn't remember to bleed them. Just took off like that and found myself tumbling in and out of those ditches yonder. Now I can't ever find my ten-eleven to fix those brakes. Been looking for it since, but can't ever seem to find it. It's like I talk too much, huh. Excuse me though... here is your problem, there... push in those plug cables, they are loose. This and this. And if you wouldn't care much for time you can unscrew the jet and blow through it, too."

I take the first cable and it comes out loose. I push it in

and push the other one in too. I care for my time of course and won't want to unscrew anything in this darkness. Besides, the rain is still threatening. And the loneliness of this road suddenly comes down on me like some weight in lead. Why hasn't there been any other fellow going this way all this while? I can't imagine myself walking up and down this road in search of spanners and the like. This fella certainly is weird.

"Are they worth it" I ask, "these spanners, on a night like this and on a road this lonely?"

"Ah, you may never know," he says in a very flat voice, "when a man has a problem like mine he may never care for lonely roads and stormy nights anymore. It was earlier on that folks here tried to scare me with tales of robbers and ghosts that walk up and down all night long. But they don't scare me anymore. Not when I set my mind to something. Ghosts whoever they may be don't scare me anymore. They say there is one that knocks cans together at midnight, but he—"

I bang the bonnet shut and go into the car. I hate yarns like this in a dark of night. I turn the ignition on and the engine comes to life. I am relieved.

"See? I told you there ain't no problems like mine," he says and walks over to the passenger's side of the front seat.

"Would you need a lift?" I say, switching on the headlamps.

"Why, when all I want in the world is a spanner and a screwdriver, which I can't ever seem to find."

I open the pigeonhole and bring out the spanner and the screwdriver; I think I can buy myself out with them. "Take then," I say.

He wrestles one of his heavily bandaged hands from his pocket; grimy and blood-clotted, and leans on the side window to take them and that foul odour fills the car, stirring my guts. Now his face comes down and the dashboard lights are on it — and my spine is sinking on the seat like I am in a quicksand.

There is a large gash on his forehead clotted by a sleazy mass of green flesh. His eyes are shut and rheumy, his lips a drooping mass of decaying flesh. And a gaping sore runs from the side of his mouth through his left ear. He opens his eyes to look at me and, God, there are no eyes in his sockets!

"Jeeesus Christ!" I cry out loud. I don't know how I managed that. But my foot comes down on the throttle pedal and I speed into the night, his voice still clear in my ears, "See? I told you there ain't no problems like mine."

**B.M. MBA****The Prize Tag**

Pieta scampered up, sweating, panting; panic-stricken. Another reality? He bent back in a sitting position on the thorny wall of his house. His gothic inheritance.

His sight penetrated the craggy edge of his half zinc, half grass of roofing. The sky was dense with rainy cloud. The stars had hidden their twinkles; the moon had shied away; the sun had gone to bed. Pieta bent forward, his jaw touching his naked chest. His eyelids winked but still revealed his pupils, dull as those of a pig on heat. Reverie.

A gecko attacked an insect by the neck. The buzzing of the prey got Pieta on his feet. He hurriedly looked for his lantern, lit it, but found nothing. An omen. He sat with the lantern on his straddled legs, thinking.

He was living in the heart of Lagos. His house, neatly walled round to government specifications, was the only one in the vicinity that everyone in every adjoining house looked over. It was a long three room house, with two rooms in grass and one in corrugated iron roof. Where he was now was his living-bedroom; of the other two, one was the kitchen, the other the toilet.

His eyes were sullen, the way they had not been for years. He helped himself up after a heavy heave, took two long strides forward and faced the grave of his parents, lantern in hand. He gazed at them for some minutes, benumbed. He managed a sigh, his eyeballs charcoal red and wobbled back into the habitat - the

more things differ, the more they remain the same.

Pieta worked as a gateman. He guarded the entrance of a company building, the business of which he knew nothing about. He could not describe how he got the job, a job that paid him fairly well, a job he hoped would enable him to rebuild his house after a few years.

Pieta's mother died. Of what, he didn't know. He could still recollect remotely the last journey he made with her. She came to his school that eventful day to take him home. They drove straight to the market where she made purchases. They were homebound when they saw a big water tanker veer from a sidewalk into the road. That was at Mile 4. There was also a Mercedes car that had just overtaken them, and then came face to face with the tanker. The driver swerved recklessly into the fast lane and hit an oncoming motorcyclist. The car knocked down the cyclist and dragged his motorcycle a few metres away. The cyclist was in a pool of his own blood.

Pieta's mother, Yvonne, was a nurse. She alighted from their volks-wagen beetle car and made attempts at saving the cyclist. Her first-aid treatment was to no avail. Pieta wept until he convulsed.

The man in the Mercedes abandoned his car. While some people drove the cyclist to the hospital, Yvonne went to the Security Services Commission to report. The security agents took her statement, thanked her for her public spiritedness and asked her to come back the following day. Pieta remembered seeing them shake hands with his mother, beaming smiles at her. They drove home. That was the last night he saw her well.

She began going out frequently. She did not let Pieta know anything. She just offered excuses and used her job to explain her long absence. Finally, she came back after a three-week absence, pale and sick. She had got two boots. One from her boss; the other from her landlord. She was accused of negligence of duty. That earned her a sack from her job. And the



landlord accused her of contracting an infectious disease. She constituted a health hazard to her co-tenants. They had to pack out.

It was on her dying bed that she drew Pieta to her elbow and shed tears.

"Pieta, my son"; she groaned, "I am dying because we helped an accident victim, just like your father, in the hands of the police agents. My son, don't go home, and be wary". She felt stiff.

Pieta felt desolate and stranded. He had many things to weep about. He hardly knew his father. Then his mother was gone. His mother's last words did not explain much. How did his father and mother die? Why must he not go home? And what did she mean by being wary? And of whom? Only two things were certain. His parents died mysteriously. His life was in danger. The enormity of his problems stared him in the face.

The only option left for him was to go home, to the village. He was barred. His mother once told him when they were the only two left in their yard who did not go home for Christmas that his father was on self exile to Lagos. He lost all his brothers to his kinsmen who wanted their great grand father's homestead and an adjoining piece of land overlooking their market. Self effacement an infinite regress; his bane.

His father, Museveno, survived because he was an undergraduate and in school when the "telekill" was sent. In addition, he was warned never to come home; otherwise he would have a headache.

As a science student, he doubted the science behind the telekill. However, he dared not go home, his orientation notwithstanding. Fear is the hunch of life. He would not dare them immediately. An only palm fruit should not get lost in hot ashes.

Pieta was forced to stay back in Lagos. Life must go on until death called. He saved every kobo that condolences

attracted. With the savings he bought bamboo and straw with which he roofed the three room out- house. He was then ten years old. His company was his recalcitrant ex-school mates who came to stay with him after school and to escape from battering by their parents.

After the condolence visits had abated, land owners came with entreaties. They persuaded him to sell one part of the compound and, with the proceeds, live a more decent life. Others enticed him with sponsoring his education up to university level. The more sadistic of them threatened that government would demolish the whole fencing because it hid a thatched house; the only one of its kind in Lagos. He respectfully rejected all their entreaties. The landowners thought that he rejected their offers out of rare wit and intelligence. Only Pieta knew he had no other earthly possession or abode except that compound. The landowners, despite their disappointment, popularised him as a fearless and calculating young man. Unknown to Pieta, this was what earned him the job he was engaged in.

He was, to a large extent, content with his pay. He completed the roofing of one of the rooms and furnished it within three months. But for how long would the bubble last? His bosses were spoiling his fun. Their business was diabolical; the public and security agents were becoming alarmed. They might soon be closing in on them. His mother's caution twanged through his brain.

Pieta had to buy a transistor radio and a black and white television. He soon observed that each time there were new consignments at the company, there were announcements of kidnapping and ritual murder. What chilled him to the marrow were pictures of children displayed on television as missing children. He became agitated - his conscience told him he was aiding and abetting crime.

What convinced him that his bosses were involved in the

kidnapping were the air and the kind of customers that patronised the company. Very rich men, each coming in and going out unobtrusively. Furthermore, once in a while, he observed droppings of red thick blood at the entrance to the company. His mind ran wild. In addition, when it was announced that some of the kidnappers had been arrested, his bosses disappeared for weeks. When they came back, they resumed with truck and pick-up business. Things became worse. Bombs began to blast. Hell let loose. Pieta's world seemed to cave in.

Government announced a curfew and a prize of six million U.S. dollars for anybody that led to the arrest of those perpetrating the crime. A time for Pieta. He had many alternatives. Each, however, seemed to bode death. The first alternative was to abandon his duty. His chief boss, Owo, was both highly connected and heartless. He would send death after him. And he would not get far. He was that convinced. The second alternative was to report to the security agents the activities of his bosses. However, even though he could swear that his bosses knew something about the killing and bombing, he was not sure the security agents were not involved. Furthermore in a world full of bribery and corruption, he was not sure whether money would not be used to cover up the rot. He was convinced that not all security agents were corrupt but he was not sure who had the reins of power. In the same vein, one could not know the activities of the bosses without being party to those activities. He shrunk. And finally he thought of staying put at his duty post and denying any knowledge of the activity of the company when the security agents came cracking. But why was he paid? Each way seemed to lead to death. Like the swan, he laughed.

Sleep eluded him. Finally, he sweated into a conclusion. His father and mother died in the hands of the security agents. How, he never knew. But he would not make himself available

to them. His parents went to them; the security agents did not come for them. He had an immediate responsibility to himself and his dying lineage. He must formalise the marriage of his fiancée already carrying his baby.

To him, there was one sure thing about patriotism and six million dollars. They were only for the living. It is more unpatriotic to encourage one's incarceration and death than hold some privileged information to one's self. He smiled at his cleverness and dozed off. Malaria dreams.

Soon, funny visitors started knocking at the company gates.

**VIRGINIA RHODAS****Prayer**

"Humanity can't live just by logic, it also needs poetry."

M. Gandhi.

Brother of mine, white, black and yellow brother.  
Brother of the sweat, of light and the darkness,  
from the sources carried in trade on blood:  
*Universal madness* as stubborn fog.

Brother of countries where hatred is flooding;  
Of lashing that stains the wheat fields in red:  
sordid contempt, cruel prisons, desperate cries,  
and fiery ostracism collapsing our thoughts.

As the hopeful shipwrecked cling to a board,  
you pray...sing...ponder...embrace all mankind,  
offering your pardon as evergreen bough.

Remember the eternal, sweet love of Christ.  
Saintly non-violence, Gandhi's tenderness.  
And the rightful stroke of ALMIGHTY GOD!

**NOBERT OYIBO EZE****Palm-Wine**

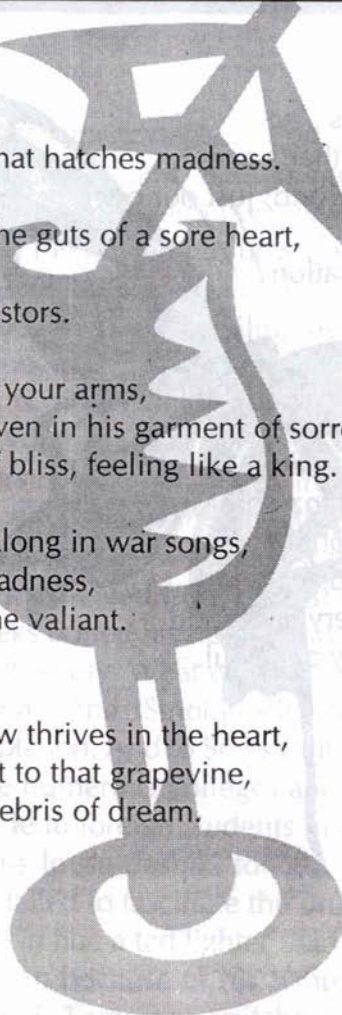
Palm-wine  
sweet soothing sap that hatches madness.

When you settle in the guts of a sore heart,  
he whirls with joy,  
and sings of his ancestors.

In ravish embrace of your arms,  
the bleeding poor, even in his garment of sorrow,  
leaps into a haven of bliss, feeling like a king.

The cripple gallops along in war songs,  
and with crushing madness,  
tears off the cap of the valiant.

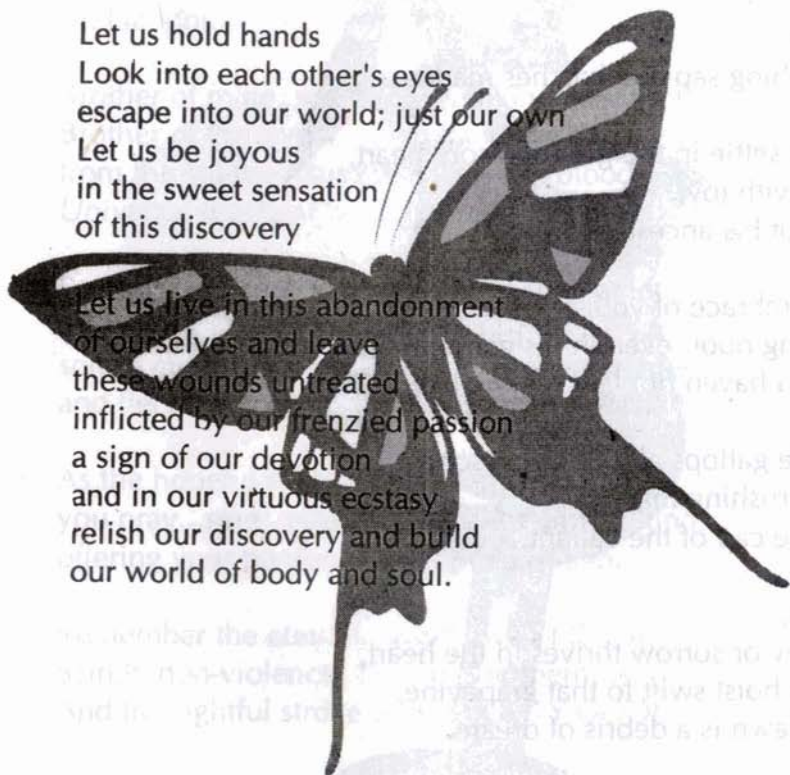
Palm-wine,  
whether joy or sorrow thrives in the heart,  
your lyrics hoist swift to that grapevine,  
which at dawn is a debris of dream.



**CHIMEZIRI OGBEDETU****Ecstasy**

Let us hold hands  
Look into each other's eyes  
escape into our world; just our own  
Let us be joyous  
in the sweet sensation  
of this discovery

Let us live in this abandonment  
of ourselves and leave  
these wounds untreated  
inflicted by our frenzied passion  
a sign of our devotion  
and in our virtuous ecstasy  
relish our discovery and build  
our world of body and soul.



**CHARLES E. NNOLIM****Soul Sister**

He met her in the bar deservingly called The Smoky Pit: what with french fries crackling and cheeseburgers sizzling in the front burner in that windowless affair in winter weather where all and sundry gathered in the evening to unwind. Well, not quite *all* and *sundry*. It was the gathering spot of the rainbow coalition-blacks, Hispanic, students from the Philippines and south-east Asia. Come to the Smoky Pit on weekend evenings and you understand why it has its other name – the mini-United Nations. What language won't you hear at every nook and cranny of the Smoky Pit: students cursing their professors in the safety of their native tongues; Indian girls and their dates whispering in Hindi; Africans in colourful dashikis swearing and speaking in pidgin.

Mukasa had just emerged from his last semester exams. He had for several weeks buried his head in his books; and here at last was relief. He felt empty. What was he to do with time this first night of freedom? The Smoky Pit stood before his imagination like a temptation. And to Smoky Pit he went. He was a student in one of the numerous colleges and universities that opened their doors wide to foreign students in the Washington, D.C. area. He wore his loose dashiki tonight with its delicate embroidery that never failed to fascinate the ordinary American. Tall and athletic with skin hue a tad lighter than coal, his friends kept a distance from him because of his temperament. Today, cheerful and lighthearted. Tomorrow irritable and morose. This hour bantering and jocosely. The next, tight-lipped and glum. But



when he stepped into the Smoky Pit tonight, he was in his mood ever and his smiles, revealing those pearly white teeth which could light a starless night. When he arrived at the Smoky Pit around seven in the evening, there was hardly sitting space. And it took time for his eyes to adjust to that smoke-filled room to find an empty seat. Diane Jones, sitting at the far side of the bar all by herself needed company, but she went about things the way street-wise city girls do. She dressed up smartly. Lipstick a little too loud. An eye pencil that started from one corner of her brows and disappeared somewhere near the ears. Artificial eyelashes a little too droopy, wearing a smile aimed at no one in particular but wide-enough not to miss its message.

Diane barely finished high school and her hold on literacy was tenuous. But she learned early that a high school diploma was not really necessary for success in life. She did not need college education to know that as an attractive young woman all she needed do was use what she had to get what she wanted. Raised in surroundings full of so many smart alocs in college who only dated one of their kind, Diane preyed on her clientele as a perennial undergraduate. Once, she told a date that she was a junior majoring in biology. He, a graduate student in the biological sciences embarrassed her with a barrage of questions about Mendel and DNA and messenger RNA, asking her point blank at a juncture what she thought of the operon theory in genetic studies. After that she had shifted ground to safer subjects like secretarial studies and physical education.

When Mukasa asked her if he could sit with her, "sure" she said, which encouraged him. A few awkward moments later she asked him in a falsetto voice, "Are you from Africaw?" As he nodded assent (someone had put a coin in the jukebox), Donna Summers was singing The Unconditional Love:

Give me the unconditional love  
The kind of love I deserve

The kind I'd like to return.

They found themselves on the floor. Amid the noise and the shuffling of feet she managed to shout: "You said you're from Africaw"?

"Yes, Uganda."

"Where is Uganda? Is it the capital of Ethiopia."

Mukasa was not really shocked at such crass ignorance. A college professor had once asked him whether it wasn't Morocco that once tried to secede from Haiti?

"I kinda like your outfit. D'you like it here in Americaw?"

"Yep." Mukasa has by now taken one too many and tried to play the Yankee guy. "In Africaw," he mimicked, "my father is a Chief."

He convinced her in no time that he was a princeling in a remote African village, is well-provided financially, and any girl lucky enough to be his wife would be a princess.

"Really?"

"Sure. She would have cooks, maids, stewards to attend to her every wish."

She was fascinated in an odd sort of way by his loud raspy voice and strange accent. And she liked the way his face lighted up when he smiled. Her next question was really dumb.

"In Africaw, do people go to school?"

He was irritated by the depth of her un-information. But he could pardon her. He was already in a mood for romance, having taken in more than he could withstand, of her perfumed hair and femininity. Why begin to cavil at a general American malaise? The average American's knowledge of world geography he had discovered was worse than zero.

"Americaw" is the world and the world is America. And this is not a matter for debate. After all, the world series in

baseball is there to prove it in concrete terms, even if it Baltimore Orioles facing the Cleveland Indians.

They ended up in her apartment along 14th and U. During the drive home, she had asked him his name and Mukasa Kugana was too much for her. She decided to address him as Soul Brother. "The white dude ain't got no soul," she told him. But he was a soul brother and in that moment of closeness, he agreed to address her as **soul sister**. Diane Jones began to sound familiar.

When he lied again to her that he worked at the Embassy of Uganda, she had looked him over appraisingly. "You kind of cute," she told him, and shifted closer to him in the car, a beat-up VW. When they emerged from the car after she invited him in, he was worried by the neighborhood. Dilapidated buildings looking so threatening in the unlighted alleys. Broken bottles littering the alleys through which they passed to reach her apartment. And Mukasa wasn't less nervous when they had to pass through a cordon of two hefty guys playing checkers on the stairs who returned his greeting with a grunt, and half blocked his passage.

Diane motioned him to her apartment, a room quite bare except for a narrow bed at the corner and a table and chair at the far end. In no time, Diane had shifted into a see-through lingerie with her white underpants quite visible. She was devastatingly voluptuous with her breasts which seemed to him were quite handful. She began to sweet-talk him into undressing, with a peck flush on the lips. He had begun to breathe heavily.

He took time to give the room another look once over. That brought home to him the poverty among blacks he had been reading about. And come to think about it, he had never entered a black home in all his three years in America. And he had never made love to a black American girl. All his girl-friends were either white or oriental. But his friends had told him of the romantic exploits of the black American girl in bed. She would

give him the shakes and blow his mind. That would be the night, he thought.

Apprehension had started to outrun reality. She motioned him to the bed and saw him with a huge hard-on. He was all over her in no time.

"Not so fast," she restrained him. "Have guys jumped on you before?" He was so ready for action he hardly heard her.

"Wait. Shit," she hissed impatiently, looking more like a tigress on the hunt than a girl in a romantic mood. He went limp. "Have guys jumped on you before?" she repeated.

"No.". It had dawned on him she was addressing him. "Why should guys jump on me," he said quite cleverly. "I've got no quarrel with them."

"Those guys at the door will jump on you unless you give me money," she said, seeming to notice his Bulova watch for the first time. She undid the strap of his watch; "just to admire it", she said, when he protested. She then excused herself, went to the next room and returned without the watch.

As he felt trapped when she left the room, other sounds began to creep into his consciousness. Across the street familiar music wafted to his unappreciative ear. It was his favorite Belafonte:

Brown skin girl stay home 'n mind baby

Brown skin girl stay home 'n mind baby

I'm going away, in a sailing boat

And if I don't come back

Stay home 'n mind baby.

He was going over in his mind the sort of American girl that would stay home to mind the baby while her man went roving around the world. Definitely not Diane. When she jolted him back to reality: "Ain't you got some'n for your soul sister? See, if you don't give me some'n, those guys gonna jump on you."

He felt trapped. He got up from the bed to fetch his wallet, looking so unattractive with his hard-on. He picked up his wallet and gave her a thirty dollar bill. He thought that was more than appropriate in the circumstance. He lay down again in an anticipatory mood. She excused herself again and he heard her voice just above a whisper in the corridor.

She rejoined him in bed and began kissing him passionately. He was hard again and was beginning to enjoy her attentions when she caught sight of the gold chain on his neck. "That's cute," she said.

"Thanks," he said. "My girlfriend in Africa gave it to me as farewell."

"Can I look at it. Looks like real gold," she said, unclasping it.

"It is real gold, 14kt."

He next found his chain on her neck. "Can I keep it," she said in a falsetto voice.

"No!" he exploded. "It is a keepsake."

She excused herself again and left for that other room. He heard a whisper but before he could bestir himself, she was back with him, without the chain on her neck.

"Those guys will jump on anybody," she told him, but I've told them you are all right.

He was flat again. "Where did you keep my watch and neck-lace," he asked, a little worried about their safety.

"I'm never gonna take your watch. You get it back 'fore you leave." He felt reassured, and lay back to enjoy himself. She has by now taken off her lingerie but kept her underpants. She looked so luscious, and he was about to jump on her this time when her restraining hand pinned him down for a brief moment.

"Not so fast. You got some money for your sister?"

He was now tired of her antics. "I gave you all the money I had."

"That was for them dudes outside so they won't jump on

you. Let's see," she said, climbing down from the bed. She fished his wallet out of the back-pocket of his pants and found a fifty-dollar piece he always kept in his pocket for emergency. She cupped it in her left hand and began to frisk his clothes. He lay quietly, helplessly watching her. Finding nothing in the various pockets of his clothes, she went back to his wallet, unzipping every compartment until she took out a wallet-size photo of his white girl friend, Jo-Anne. "You date white girls," she asked him, tight-lipped.

"Yes, sometimes."

"She is very pretty," she said. "Don't you like sisters?"

"I like you." He did not have the courage to tell her what he has got now, liking her. He had had it. He made to grab his pants, dress up, and run.

He was not prepared for what happened next. She slapped him hard and ordered him to go back and lie down. "You lied to me," she said, very accusatory. "You ain't gonna git out of here. You raped me."

At the last word he froze. Rape. Police. Television. His picture splashed on the front pages of Washington newspapers. Jail. The scenario playing before his eyes was bizarre. He already saw himself in manacles.

"Why did you lie to me?," she asked him again without expecting an answer. She was out again barely putting on back her lingerie before opening the door. She did not forget to grab his car keys as she left. He had never felt more helpless.

She came back with one of "them dudes." He looked thoroughly like a hoodlum, with black gloves and dark glasses. He was menacing in his mien. "What you doin' to my sister, dude? Git out fast before I call the cops." He pistol-whipped him.

He was dressed up in a jiffy, relieved the cops weren't already there. But Diane wasn't finished with him yet. With the presence of her hoodlum, she grew bolder. "You don't need your coat," she told him. "Jist loan it to me for tonight, 'cause I'm

gonna return everything to you tomorrow, remember?"

He could detect some sneer-blended mockery in her voice. They never exchanged addresses or phone number. Losing his car was the most painful of all nightmares of that evening.

Diane's next move took him completely by surprise. She went over to the next room and came back properly dressed. She took his arm and they descended the stairs like a very loving couple, with the hoodlum following a little distance behind. She began to walk him to his car, two blocks away, carrying on with him what seemed like a cherry chat by a couple on a date.

At the next road junction with street lights making everything brighter, they met another man coming in the opposite direction. They all stopped to exchange greetings. He looked like the other hoodlum on the stairs when they had entered the building. He surely was, because he handed Diane his own very car keys she had taken from him.

"Listen," she told him, unhooking her arms from his. "Continue on to your car and wait for me." He dutifully obeyed.

When he reached his car and turned back, there was no one to be seen. The car clock told him it was three o'clock in the morning. The entire street was deserted. He found his car ransacked but there was nothing of value in it. Thank God he never kept valuables in that jalopy of a VW.

Mukasa flagged down a police patrol and reported his experience. They led him back to the scene of the crime and it was completely deserted. He went home and cried. It was not the sort of encounter he wanted to share with even his closest friends. How does one avenge Diane? He gave up the idea of redress from a common criminal like Diane. He was rather thankful to the Good Lord for emerging from the ordeal unscathed.

## **PIUS ADESANMI**

### **VILLE CRUELLE?**

*Literature's Tragic Paradox*

*Porte Océane fut une série de cauchemars pendant des années [...] J'avais parfois envie de mettre le feu ala cité [...] Porte Océane m'apparaissait comme une ville où travailleurs et chômeurs, indigènes et toubabs vivaient dans un cercle d'indifférence et de mépris. Les chômeurs étaient si nombreux que beaucoup préféraient se réfugier dans les prisons. Alioum Fantouré*

*For years, Porte Océane was a series of nightmares [...] Sometimes I felt like setting the city ablaze [...] Porte Océane looked like a city where workers and the jobless, natives and whites lived in a circle of indifference and contempt. Jobless people were so numerous that many of them preferred to seek refuge in the prisons.*

Abdul JanMohamed uses the thesis of the Manichean Allegory as a conceptual paradigm for explaining the epistemic confrontation between the imperialist (signifying) self and the reified (signified) native in colonialist literature. This binarism, which has its roots in what the theorist calls the "Function of Racial Difference", creates the absurd situation in which the imperialist's mode of cognition is foisted on the psyche of the disempowered native.

An extrapolation of JanMohamed's thesis from the volatile site of post-colonial theorizing to the no less thorny site of the relationship of the writer to his context of operation (the city is where the production and consumption of literature is mostly



situated) is likely to reveal a double-edged Manichean Allegory. In the first case, for instance, there is a unidirectional relationship in which the epistemic elements of cognition and signification are exclusively generated by the imperialist self, the native subject serving as an eternal receptacle. But in the case of the writer and the city, trans-temporal literary experience can only reveal a symbiotic engagement - the city continually feeds the author's imagination with the quotidian experiences it generates and the writer in turn uses this imagination to project a certain image of the city.

This symbiosis is however not actuated on an equal basis for long. For when the city feeds the writer's imagination, it is a noiseless, often unnoticed process. But the process of transforming the experiences thus garnered into an image of the city in his works is a necessarily noisy one in that the work reaches out to thousands of his readers. It is this sense that the city, like the native in colonialist literature, becomes a signified marionette in the Manichean configuration.

A major consequence of this is that the 19th century writer and his 20th century successor have collectively bequeathed humanity with a terrifying image of the city. Indeed, the writer in most cases finds in literature a handy instrument for a seemingly compulsive city bashing agenda. Perhaps, the literary image of 19th century Paris best exemplifies the "Manichean Allegory" which has consistently pitched the writer and his art against the city. The French capital rose to the level of a fictional character, albeit with a monstrous visage in Balzacian realism.

Paris as the archetypal "ville cruelle" constitutes one of the thematic standpoints of *Le père Goriot*. In the novel, one comes across a fiendish city whose socio-moral codes foist animal instincts on the characters in the nightmarish web of survival. When the roguish Vautrin tries to initiate the hero, Rastignac, into the perplexities of survival in an antihuman city, one has the

aching feeling that Balzac actually pushes words into the mouth of that character to draw an image of Paris which suits an obvious anti-city temperament.

Maupassant's *Bel-Ami* provides another irrefutable proof of the uneasy relationship between 19th century French fiction and the city. More than Balzac, Maupassant presents the city (Paris) as generative of socio-moral structures which serve the sole purpose of subjecting the subaltern sexed subject to reckless exploitation. Paris it is that imbues Georges Duroy, a hitherto harmless ex-service man, with a Machiavellian desire to succeed in life through uncharitable means and consequently turns him to a heartless gigolo. The novel leaves one with the impression that the hero could not have succeeded in wrecking so much emotional and psychic havoc on his female victims if Paris had not aided and abetted his devilish orchestrations.

If Paris openly inflicts its violence on the characters of Balzac and Maupassant, it pursues the same agenda in an insidious, but no less deleterious manner in Zola's *Germinal*. This novel, which has been contentiously (perhaps rightly) branded as the ancestor of Sembene Ousmane's *Les bouts de bois de Dieu*, uses the dynamics of revolutionary aesthetics to present us with hundreds of mine workers caged in the dreary zones of extinction by the profit-spinning mechanisms of a masochistic capital. The interesting thing here is that the rapaciously exploited workers never come into any direct contact with Paris. For them, the city exists only in oneiric realms as the abode of the invisible Molochs in whose mines they have been condemned to a life of perpetual misery.

The African city did not fare better than Paris with the advent of Africa fiction of protest and conflict in the 1950s. "Ville cruelle" which we have chosen as the title of the present essay is actually the revealing title of a 1954 novel by Eza Boto, the Cameroonian writer more commonly known as Mongo Beti.

Boto's title is a *titre annonciateur* which says volumes about the hostile position that African fiction would eventually maintain in relation to the city in the course of its evolution. It is

true that the harsh realities of the colonial experience predisposed pioneer African writers to a negative conceptualisation of the city. This explains why in their works we come across cities where the racial line is clearly drawn. In such cities, the well-planned "Quartier Résidentiel" of the colonial masters always perches on a hill above the slum "quartier indigène" where the natives live in sub-humane conditions.

The rise of cultural nationalism in the 1960s had as a major consequence the need to valorize African culture as a way of deconstructing the modernist epistemologies of the invading Occident. Since the village was seen as the site of an unalloyed traditional culture, African writers were quick to pitch it against the city which was seen as the site of a corrupt Western civilization. Hence, it is the textual strategies of the novels of cultural nationalism that yielded the village/city binarism of African fiction.

In such novels, the hero/heroine always abandons the cultural security of his/her *royaume d'enfance* ('kingdom of childhood', Senghor's expression for the village) for the lures of the city where disappointment and eventual destruction await him/her. This is perhaps why Jacques Chevrier describes the African city in his *Littérature nègre* as "le lieu de l'échec et de l'illusion" (the site of failure and illusion). Abdoulaye Sadi Maïmouna (1958), Ahmadou Kourouma's *Les soleils indépendances* (1968) and Malick Fall's *La plaie* (1967) are novels where the protagonist abandons the cultural cradle for an urban civilisation that is sure to destroy him.

It is interesting to note that even if the thematic preoccupations of African fiction have shifted from a conflictual engagement with the colonial process and the concerns of cultural nationalism to what Abiola Irele has referred to as the "New Realism" of our beleaguered existence, the city has continued to draw the fire of our writers.

African writers see in the contemporary African polis nothing but the chaos and anomie that result from the Darwinian codes of survival by which a disoriented civil populace is forced to live. And when they convey these facts through the social realism of their texts, they draw a frightening picture of the city. It is worth noting that in their attempt to grapple effectively with the anti-people disposition of the African city, our writers have appropriated the dual sociological concepts of subsistence urbanisation and urban hypertrophy. Breese (1966) submits that subsistence urbanisation occurs when a large concentration of city dwellers find themselves in conditions that are far worse than those in the villages from which they emigrated. On his part, Duru (1974) suggests the notion of urban hypertrophy to explain the inability of the resources and infrastructure of the African city to adequately support the urban populace. A cursory survey of texts like Meja Mwangi's *Going Down River Road* (1976), Alioum Fantouré's *Le cercle des tropiques* (1972) and Calixthe Beyala's *Tu t'appelleras Tanga* (1988) will reveal that the aforementioned sociological concepts are highly instrumental to the negative depiction of the African city by contemporary African writers.

African fiction has not been indifferent to the military incubus. Decades of anti-democratic military despotism have enriched the African literary patrimony with a welter of "militarised texts". In such texts, we come across the fictional version of the Mobutus and the Eyademas unleashing the apparatuses of the State on a hapless populace with zoophilic gusto. Here, the city comes out doubly negative. First, it is the site of unending suffering for people that have been robotised by the omnipresent military despot. Secondly, it provides the tyrant and his cronies with the resources they need for the brutalisation of the people. The rural milieu is notably absent in "militarised texts" since the people and the oppressors play out their conflictual drama entirely in the city. Examples of such texts are William Sassine's *Le jeune homme de sable* (1979), Boris Bobacar Diop's *Le temps de Tamango* (1981), Henri Lopés' *Le*

*pleurer-rire* (1982), Patrick Ilboudo's *Les vertiges du trône* (1990) and Rachid Mimouni's *Une peine à vivre* (1991).

Thus from France to Africa and from the 19th to the 20th century, a lot of writers have projected a consistently negative image of the city. This should lead us to a serious questioning of the writer's relationship to the city in order to determine whether the Manichean Allegory which makes the city the repository of all evils and literature the positive, sanitising idiom can be justified at all times. Put differently, is the city always as evil as the writers would have us believe?

I have hinted earlier that the city's contribution in developing the writer's imagination is not negligible. But that is just a chip of the iceberg in what constitutes the city's monumental instrumentality to the very existence of literature. For we must not lose sight of the fact that the much-maligned Paris of the 19th century played a crucial role in the literary development of writers like Balzac, Flaubert, Stendhal and Maupassant just to mention a few. The city, with its salons and *cénacles*, provided the ground for rich intellectual and cultural exchange between these writers and other intellectuals. Cuvier's Saturday evenings at his home in the Jardin des Plantes were frequented by Stendhal and Merimée while the baron Gérard's Wednesday evenings at his studio was Balzac's favourite hang out. Chateaubriand was a regular face at Mme Récamier's salon while Anatole France and the young Proust interacted with historians and philosophers at the salon of Mme Armand de Caillavet in the later 19th century.

Most significant and, perhaps, most paradoxical is the role that the *Quartier Latin* of 20th century Paris eventually played in shaping the destiny of Francophone African poetics. It is now well known that one of the greatest paradoxes of African literature is that Négritude was born in Paris and not in Africa as most people would have loved. From the 1920s to the 1940s, the *Quartier Latin* was the site of much intellectual exchange

between nascent African writers like Senghor, Ousmane Socé, Birago Diop, David Diop and their Caribbean counterparts like Aimé Césaire, Léon-Gontran Damas, Etienne Léro and René Ménil.

It will be recalled that the intellectual ferment generated by these writers and scholars culminated in the birth of *La revue du monde noir* and *Légitime défense*, two important journals where the ideas that culminated in the birth of Négritude were first launched. Yet, no sooner had the movement taken shape than it embarked on a processual deconstruction of the monocultural epistemes of the civilisation represented by the city of its birth. One should be quick to stress that this is a strictly dispassionate observation and should not be seen as a legitimisation of the accusations of ingratitude that are often levied against Négritude writers by Eurocentric Western scholars.

Perhaps it is in modern Cuba that we can determine the extent to which the very existence of the writer and his art sometimes depends on the "protection" offered by the city. When Taiwo Oloruntoḡa-Oju speaks of "the writer and the junta", he could have been speaking of the nightmarish ordeals of a whole generation of Cuban writers in the web of the Castrist junta. Castrism, like all totalitarian ideologies, can tolerate literature only when it serves as an instrument of propaganda. In such contexts, the stubborn writer who insists on the liberty of his art puts his life on the line.

In Cuba, old writers like Virgilio Pinera and Lezama Lima refused to put literature in the service of Castrist propaganda and paid heavily for their dissent. More than these two, the generation of writers born in the 1940s proved a thorn in Castro's flesh. They owe their survival to the salutary role played by the city of Havana as we shall soon explain.

Reinaldo Arenas, one of Cuba's most influential novelists is the most persecuted member of this generation. He records the travails of his generation in his instructive autobiography, *Avant la nuit* (1992), a book which throws invaluable insight into the relationship between Cuban "opposition" writers and the city

of Havana. But first, the statement on the travails of his generation is worth quoting in some detail:

*Notre génération, celle qui est née autour des années quarante, a été une génération perdue: détruite par le régime communiste [...] Oui, nous avons perdu la plus grande partie de notre jeunesse [...] à suivre d'interminables discours où l'on répétait toujours la même litanie, à essayer de déjouer les lois répressives, à nous battre sans cesse pour dégouter un blue-jean ou une paire de chaussures [...] à lutter pour échapper à l'éternelle persécution de la police, aux arrestations (146-147).*

*Our generation, that which was born around the 1940s, is a lost generation, destroyed by the communist régime [...] Yes, we lost the most crucial years of our youths [...] listening to endless speeches where the same litany was continually repeated, trying to circumvent repressive laws, struggling ceaselessly to buy a blue jeans or a pair of shoes [...], struggling to escape from eternal persecutions and arrests [my translations].*

Arenas' is the story of a writer whose art could not have flourished without the felicitous instrumentality of the city. Having little formal education, Havan's National Library placed him on the tortuous path of self instruction. During his formative years, he was an employee of this library and he spent hours poring through the classics and the major texts of World Literatures. He came to be influenced by Latin American greats like Jorge Luis Borges, Octabio Paz and Carlos Fuentes through his interaction with members of his generation.

By the 1960s, he had already become a marked man and Castro's agents were desperately after his manuscripts. Needless to say that during this period, precious manuscripts that would have enriched the world's literary heritage were confiscated by Castro's agents for not aiding the "cause" of the revolution. If Arena's manuscripts survived, it was because Havana provided

the network of structures (friends, hiding places, etc) which put them beyond the long arms of the State. He vividly describes the complexities involved in keeping literary manuscripts alive in Castro's Cuba:

*Dés cette époque, en 1969, j'étais en butte aux persécutions incessantes de la Sûreté de l'Etat et j'avais toujours des inquiétudes pour les manuscrits que j'écrivais sans relâche. Je rangeais tous les textes de mes romans et de mes poèmes antérieurs [...] dans un énorme sac de ciment, puis je faisais la tournée de tous mes amis pour chercher une personne qui [...] serait susceptible de me les garder [...] Si on était découvert, on pouvait être condamné à plusieurs années de prisons (180).*

*As from this period in 1969, I was incessantly harassed by the State's security operatives and I was always worried about the manuscripts I kept on producing. I used to pack manuscripts of all my novels and old poems [...] in an enormous cement bag and move from friend to friend to see if anyone would keep them in safety for me [...] If caught, one could be sentenced to several years in prison. [My translation].*

Havana's role in the preservation of literature reaches a glowing height with the case of the manuscript of one of Arena's novels. For many years, the embattled writer took advantage of the numerous hideouts provided by the city to keep the manuscript away from the prying eyes of Castro's men. It was eventually smuggled out to France, translated to French and published in 1968 as *Le monde hallucinant*. The novel was an instant success in Paris. Its tremendous impact on the French public is evidenced by the fact that it was joint winner of the prestigious French prize for the best foreign novel with as important a novel as Gabriel Garcia Marquez' *Cent ans de solitude*.

Ironically, an event that should have been seen as the finest hour of Cuban letters turned out to be the death warrant of a writer who dared win an international prize with a "reactionary" novel after successfully beating Castro's security dragnet. He became a dangerous enemy of the State, hunted like a dog in the streets of Havana by overzealous security agents.



Up to this moment, only his manuscripts had needed the hidden havens of Havana to survive. But no sooner had the prize brought him international acclaim than his very life came to depend on the "protection" offered by the Cuban capital. He changed address by the day, carrying with him his manuscripts and typewriter.

And when it became totally unsafe for him to hide in squalid rooms provided by concerned friends and fellow writers, Havana offered him what one may call the protection of the streets. This should be seen as the highpoint of the relationship between the writer and the city in the absurd context of political repression. For when the tyrant lets his men loose on the uncompromising writer, the city provides a "human shield" with its crowded streets.

In *Avant la nuit*, Arenas avails us of several instances where he escapes arrests by dissolving into the crowds of Havana. He would take advantage of parks or other densely populated public places to throw off Castro's men from his trail. Behind this human curtain, he kept the embers of his creative genius alive by reading and reciting poetry. When it became clear that Havana's protection had been thoroughly undermined by the inquisitional efficiency of Castro's street combers, Arenas was left with no choice than to embark on an exile to the United States.

The psychological consequences of exile for writers faced with this 20th century albatross of literature have been analysed with considerable brio by George Lamming in, *The Pleasures of Exile*. Hence, we are not so much concerned with Arenas' flight as we are with the fact that his impressive oeuvre of eight novels, five plays, one collection of poetry, one collection of short stories and two collections of essays were preserved for humanity by the city as we have tried to demonstrate.

But Arenas' is not the only case in which the city has had to play the fundamental role of protecting literature by ensuring

the survival of the writer in a hostile political context. Another prominent case in point is that of the renowned Greek poet and resistance hero, Alexander Panagoulis, known simply to his admirers as Alekos. This poet embarked on the quasi-suicidal enterprise of taking the hated dictatorship of Papadopoulos frontally in the 1960s.

The Italian journalist, Oriana Fallaci, has brilliantly recorded the grisly details of the poet's struggle in, *A Man*. The point needs to be stressed that at the most trying times of his life when he needed to gather incriminating evidence against his tormentors, the cities of Athens and Rome played for Panagoulis a role similar to that of Havana in the life of Arenas.

Our analysis so far should have underscored the need to rethink the relationship between literature and the city at a level different from the textual representation of the urban milieu. Existing discursive practices tend towards a monolithic legitimation of the Ekwensi-type representation of the urban topography at the fictional level. This, to my mind, is responsible for the monotonous flow of discourses in which the consideration always boils down to the city in the works of the writer. Very few of us have bothered to examine Ekwensi the writer in the city. It is only when we "de-scribe" the expansive theme of "literature and the city" that we can extend the argument to the supra-textual level of the writer in the city.

This approach to the argument adds another dimension to the Manichean Allegory epitomised by the said theme. The expression "literature and the city" itself may look harmless at a first glance but it is ultimately Manichean in that it has a semantic veneer under which lurks the image of the eternally cruel and infected city which must be perpetually subjected to the Aesculapian functions of literature. For sure, one cannot fundamentally disagree with this perspective. But the holistic imperative is such that "literature and the city" must go hand in hand with "literature in the city". The latter implies the writer in the city, the conditions in which he creates and other such considerations.

If we look at the issue from this angle, the Manichean Allegory is considerably weakened. We have seen the role played by the textually monstrous Paris of Balzac, Maupassant and Zola in developing the art of these writers; and in facilitating the will-to-existence and the will-to-power of a determinedly anti-Western Négritude discourse. We have also seen similar examples in Havana, Athens and Rome.

The writer then is a man in a dilemma as far as his relationship with the city is concerned. If he is not to betray his mission as a writer, he must use the fictional idiom to translate his people's urban experience. And there is hardly any city in the world where the people - Frantz Fanon's "wretched of the earth" - do not live in the sub-human conditions created by crass material deprivation and social injustice. When the writer textualises this, he ends up with the picture of the archetypal "ville cruelle", a city that nurtures his art and sometimes saves his life and manuscripts. Nothing, in my opinion, better exemplifies literature's tragic paradox.

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**JEKWU IKEME****Boomerang**

*(to the harbingers of encumbrance)*

Our life  
does like a mirror  
reflect,  
our past days outlived.

Like the echo  
that thunders back,  
so do  
our deeds to us recoil.

**I Think We Die**

*(a word to sword)*

I think we die  
to escape the fire  
that dropeth  
from knell pyre,  
that we may  
in the bossom  
of peace rest.

I think we die  
to appraise  
from new vistas,  
the path  
our life treaded.

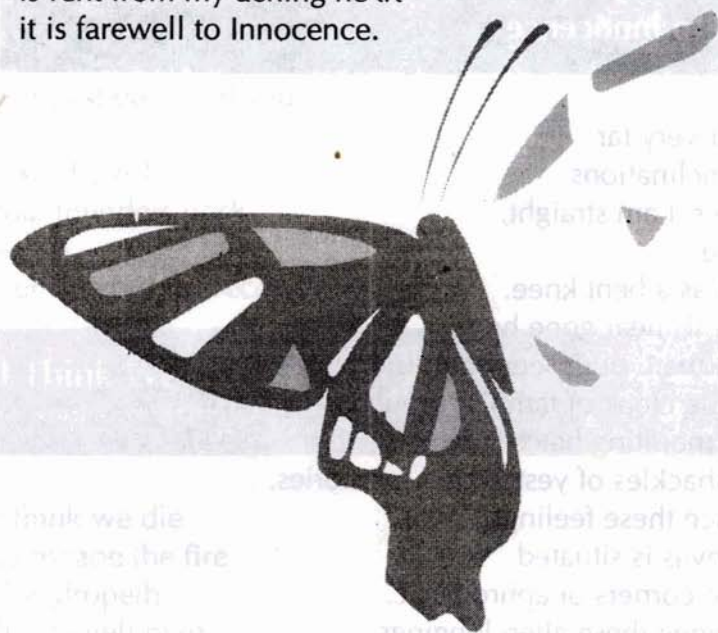
I think we die  
to be onlookers,  
to watch  
with pitying amusement,  
as life  
on earth unfolds.

I think we die  
to suffer no more.

### **Farewell to Innocence**

It is far, far very far  
from my inclinations,  
and brother, I am straight,  
believe me  
as straight as a bent knee.  
Not until this near gone hour,  
in the aftermath of unseen impulsion,  
to divest the cloak of familiar grounds,  
to aid the moulting hatch  
from the shackles of yesterday's memories.  
I experience these feelings  
whose canvas is situated  
around the corners of aphrodisiac.  
They are new; these alien longings,  
my limbs and frame have found  
new love and fresh diapers. And now  
I can see me  
in rocks of foreign lands:  
First, the crossing of the threshold,  
where the bull and the lamb  
nurse their boundary dispute,  
I am yet to forget the investiture;  
the portion they yearn to make me swear,

to send me to sleep  
at moments of wakefulness.  
I wake to perceive the scent  
in this revelation,  
to look back, down the now-gloomy-view  
and see  
the hazy silhouette  
of drum beats I left behind,  
and yet another song  
is rent from my aching heart  
it is farewell to Innocence.



**OGAGA IFOWODO****The Day Too Bright***(A Ruler Sings to Himself)*

The day too bright for my bloodshot eyes  
I crave the eternity of night  
All is well then, truest sound my lies

The sun steals the shine from my shoulders  
Dims my swords and stars to a dead light  
All is gloom then, when the sun smolders.

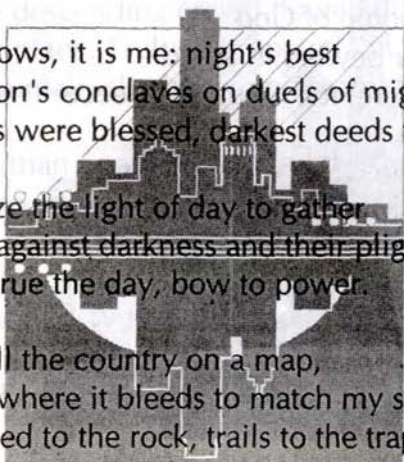
Holding loaded guns and shooting blind  
Dead to death, I see the victims' fright  
All is right then, taking all I find.

Oh such power as I felt that July,  
Look flaming Lagos, tanks won the fight:  
All dressed the throne, blood hurled up the sky.

Who knows, it is me: night's best  
For treason's conclaves on duels of might,  
All coups were blessed, darkest deeds the test.

They seize the light of day to gather  
And rail against darkness and their plight,  
All must rue the day, bow to power.

Can't tell the country on a map,  
Must be where it bleeds to match my sight  
I chained to the rock, trails to the trap.





The rock! 'Brahim feared an angry day  
Build bunkers, a fortress in granite,  
All cold as stone, freeze for the stay.

But the sun is stubborn, so am I.  
To deny blood, I won't wash it white  
Sunglasses on, I can brave the sky.

### Steffi's Shoes

*(Sight-seeing in Kassel)*

A king's profane pleasure did it all.  
He loved to walk in the wood, pause and toughen his knee  
a high horse.  
He observed how melted snow would fall

Over the rocks, start up the musical  
Murmur of water happy to be free  
From the bondage of a frozen knee.  
Or he would choose the simple, practical

Joy of looking up from the terrace of his  
Castle at the hilltop home of God  
And ponder the water beyond in a pod:  
'There is power up there, the myths of Greece

Prove it. And when the white rocks of winter  
Sprang up in the sun to prepare the trees  
For the dance, he saw at once his mind's ease.  
Now, Hercules, as stony testament to power,

Cast by command, in green stands on the hill,  
Forces water, it seems, to flow and sing.

A lake was prepared below for the final thing -  
A jubilant fountain, a happy concentrated shrill

Of joy - like the pressured smoke-pipes  
Of all the demons' underwater nuclear plants  
Set off by the button beneath the waterplants.  
The descending showers all turn windpipes.

## II

The day before, we had biked and enjoyed the ride  
Through streets, green parks and museum.  
The university was closed and the auditorium  
Mocked us with our faces on the wide

Glass door. You promised us the finest of parks  
When ever the one we rode in seemed hard  
To beat. The sun glorious, sun-worshippers had  
Come better equipped than us - with lunch-packs

And climbing shoes. The weak-hearted sat round  
The lake, the hard-boned climbed up the Hercules,  
To the upland pond where the water calculates  
Its measured flow down the steps. Mere mound

Of earth or true hill, none panted anymore  
As the descending crowd flowed down the canals  
To the place. Truly ill-prepared - in the annals  
Of mountain-climbing - you were! You stooped more

Times than I could count to relace your shoes.  
I said to you to tie them rather fast.

That didn't help, you stooped now to cast  
Out stones! We could have suffered boos

Still climbing when all were going down

To see the beginning and end of the water  
Dance. And for shoes to make us falter!  
But we saw it even more beautiful looking down.

## Vivien's Jailer

A cruel irony sought one too human  
for a joke so cold it scorched the tongue  
that laughed. An impish glee and a can  
of tricks hemmed his dark sarong.

All is not sleight-of-hand - the master  
torturer knows the bone to break  
and the fleshly cast of plaster  
to cover the damage in a freak.

Not one for the common coin -  
the beginner's test, such as pulling  
vanished cigarettes out of the loins  
of a blushing maiden - he went raving

in darkrooms, seeking the spell  
to give praise to the devil  
and the patron-saints of hell  
for the divination and the evil.

Oh, if you try hard enough, pull  
together all the wisdom of the world  
and for what you lack, seek the school  
you too will, with sufficient hate and a word

raise the prison to punish crime:  
the stealing of peanuts or private water  
the snatching of a purse and the prime

murder, every known or human hunger

damnable by the menacing arm of law,  
you will lay brick upon brick and carve  
the club to break the digging claw.  
How to banish light and air, and starve

a living room of the stray morsel  
of life? To prevent the groan of death,  
the smell of unwashed bodies and unwashable  
sores, of the spilling buckets of human waste

kept in the corners of the cell;  
how to keep the smell of the putrefying prisoner  
bottled beneath the leaking roof? Lose no sleep,  
the jailer quips, joying in the answer -

"Here is the elusive cure for crime:  
the convict and the soon-to-be-convict  
shall measure each second of time  
to be served against the profit

"in the act. The walking cadaver  
the TB plague and the epidemic death  
prove deterrence to all but thief and murderer  
who alone get the rap and deserve no mirth

"And there was greater crime and torture for her  
that would serve with a gentle hand  
light and air to the haunted hall, breaker  
of the absolving wall of guilt; who would stand

"and spray with tar the jural brick. But since  
a dwelling homelier than the body's flesh  
cannot be, a prison then of her own body  
the ossification then of fluid and flesh,

"the freezing of joints. Only the blinking  
of the eyes to prove a living thing. Applaud  
she must then - though stern and stunning  
the sentence be - this jail where frozen blood

"cements cell to cell for the perfect prison.  
The key in his hand, locks rusted, head or tail  
the jailer wins." Or does he? Listen  
to Vivien's voice assailing walls anew. And hail!

**KWABENA OPARE-AKURANG****Messages to Africa**

I

Mother, let me sing you a simple song.

Africa let me tell them a simple story.

Beautiful, pristine, the other day;

Last night you gave light to the world.

Mother, let me sing you in the present.

Mother let me caress your tragedies,

You are beautiful in your present,

And your past defines the present.

I will then sing you the present.

I will then explain your present.

I will then tell them a new story.

I will then warn the world that

The Sudan, Somalia, Rwanda, Zaire

Do not presage your eclipse!

II

Mother, dirges about you abound.

The obituaries of your children...

Your grand final farewell, of obsequies.

And I ask, should that happen, Mother?

Yesterday was Rwanda, today is Zaire!

They predict all your children!

They are waiting, the rest of the world,

Lurking, tuned to their TV, cataloguing,

Noting a spear of anarchy in your womb:

Mother, they say you are all diseased...

You are all of the Serengeti, the Sahara  
Where wild animals live with your children  
Where your children dance naked, waiting  
For the Divine Intervention of the Haves.

## III

Let me present your present, Mother:  
Warfare, hunger, disease, death.  
All baneful to the rest of the world,  
And the resonance is all chaos, anarchy!  
Their Africa of the Darkest Africa,  
Cultivated in the minds of their worth,  
Ploughed into their mining minds,  
By delirious TV, newspapers, scholars.  
Where is the truth, the real story  
Liberia, Somalia, Rwanda, Zaire...  
Mother Africa, Dear mother Africa  
The TV and newspapers pontificate  
Hunger, disease, wars, and death!  
The truth, truth, where is it?

## IV

In tunnels of cuddly deceit, Mother,  
Their newspapers, TV... Africa,  
Mother, all pontificate Africa  
Your perennial drought, Mother  
Your sanguinary despots, Mother  
Your internecine warfare, Africa  
Your ethnic rivalries, Africa  
Sometimes, the focus changes;  
And they would point to  
Green monkeys of AIDS, Mother,  
Lions of the Serengeti, Mother  
Barrenness of Sahara, Africa  
Futility of autonomy, Africa  
A Masai dance, Asante stools!

## V

Ethiopia, Somalia, Rwanda, Zaire...  
You are not alone in your tragedy  
Far into the cocoa fields of Ghana  
Far into the coffee fields of Kenya  
Far into the Bauxite, tin, diamond...  
Far into the gold and golden vaults  
Of you, Mother Africa, your womb  
Paris, London, Ottawa, Bonn, DC, with  
Rituals of quaint triumph and civility,  
Sitting on IMF, pontificating on SAP...  
They price the rape of your womb, that  
Cocoa farmers never see cocoa butter,  
But come to love Divine Intervention,  
New "maxim guns", mother, hunting you!

## VI

Hence, dear Mother Africa, look outwards,  
But, Mother Africa, look inwards too.  
Pause, look at your children's footprints,  
Pause, look at your children's strides.  
And Mother examine their pace, Mother.  
But, there, there look beyond them,  
There, the self-righteous DIVINE ONE.  
Another child made their day - Zaire,  
A moment for a Divine Intervention;  
A calculated, pontificated salvation,  
Coming from those who have all!  
Coming from those who know all!  
Who claim to have all the answers,  
Yet have not asked any questions!



## **DON BURNES**

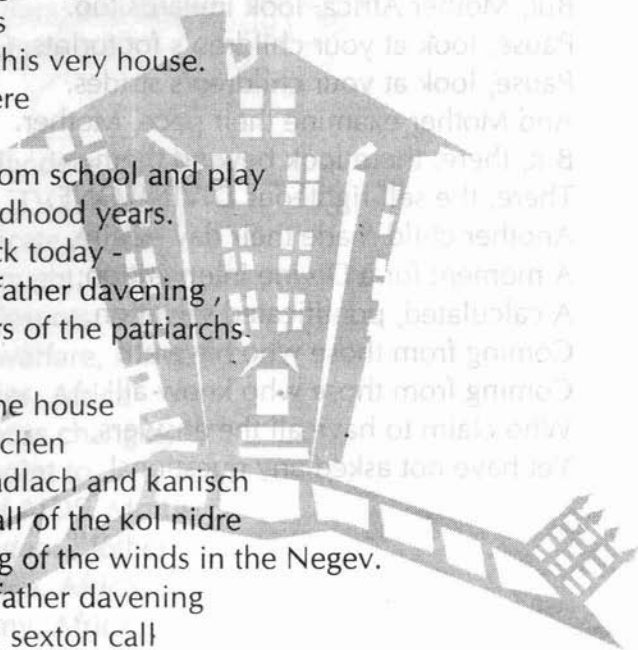
### **For the Apparel oft Proclaims the Man**

Fashion has had its highs and its lows  
but was there ever an age with uglier clothes?

### **The House on Griswold Drive**

They are no longer alive  
my grandparents  
who resided in this very house.  
I used to visit here  
every day  
coming home from school and play  
in those my childhood years.  
I have come back today -  
I hear my grandfather davening ,  
I hear the prayers of the patriarchs.

I have entered the house  
looked at the kitchen  
where I ate kanadlach and kanisch  
and heard the call of the kol nidre  
and the whistling of the winds in the Negev.  
I hear my grandfather davening  
rabbi cantor and sexton call  
from my grandfather's house to the wailing wall.



## On Listening to the Chorus of the Slaves from *Nabucco*

Only angels could sing like that  
this music that flies beyond manacles of time and place  
This is the divine world  
in blue and red of Fra Angelico  
when in his cell in San Marco  
he had intimations of paradise

They say when Verdi died  
the people sang this chorus as the angelus rang  
from the towers of Tuscany  
over the smiling toms of Tarquinia  
the tintinnabulation of beautiful sorrow.

## Messages to Li Hooyan

It is late afternoon  
and the clouds paint  
in elegant brush strokes  
calligraphy of orange harmony  
while the acrobatic squirrels  
novembering from branch to branch  
dance from  
birch to beech.

Soon the river of stars will cascade  
across Monomonac sky  
and the northern moon will kiss the lake  
and read poems of Li Bai.

I will ask the clouds  
to carry to Li Hooyan  
my poem  
and hope she will look out  
her window in Hangzhou  
and will read the calligraphy  
from beyond the seas  
of one who also loves  
squirrels and clouds and trees.

### **At Robert Frost's House in Laconia**

*(For Bill Ball)*

Once I climbed the hill at Tilbury Town  
where another poet sang the world's fate  
where Eben Flood laid his jug tenderly down  
and Luke Havergal went to the western gate.

I know the house on Brattle Street where fire  
singed the poet's world of the spinning wheel  
and I have passed the sacred Amherst spires  
where poet married gossamer and steel.

Now I walk the road to your old age place  
and stand looking with your searing eyes  
at trees and mountains and open space  
and cloudy lonely foreboding skies.

Today I journey to honor and praise  
the preacher poet of New Hampshire ways.

## I Hear America Crying

- I hear America crying  
the lamentations and ululations of mothers burying their  
children gunned down as they sit at doorstep or chat on  
the corner
- I hear America crying  
Battered women defenseless against the mad fury of male  
dissatisfaction, words knife-sharp and bullet-ready
- I hear America crying  
the unemployed teacher, factory worker, computer  
salesman, hotdog seller at the stadium where no baseball  
is played exiled from the dream, discarded like  
yesterday's garbage
- I hear America crying  
children sexually molested by god's army by fathers  
uncles cousins and babysitters
- I hear America crying  
behind the laughing mask of the money festival behind  
the gaiety of the budlight dance behind the song of the  
sybarite lonely lonely men and women looking for love  
in the run down tenement of their dreams
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the homeless man married to a subway space, the vagrant  
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the dependence of the drug addict and the screaming  
guitar of the rock musician as the thrown guitar breaks  
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handgrenade
- I hear America crying  
children of divorce who don't know what father is,  
children of marriages where laughter and joy are

foreigners

I hear America crying

while politicians, bankers, lawyers, athletes, television  
gods and goddesses count their millions and write their  
autobiographies

I hear America crying

the Mexican-American in El Paso and Los Angeles the  
black man and woman throughout the land - victims of a  
national heritage of intolerance and unwelcome as songs  
of patriotism echo in the churches and in the hills and  
throughout the Sonora and Chihuahua sands

Yes I hear America crying...

**AMUCHE NGWU****Not a desert yet**

For the tree's grown dry  
scarifications go through the core.  
All the birds that once supped  
from his heart  
flew away in a league,  
in search of worms  
to feed the emptiness  
that's pit deep  
to find feast  
for they that hunger  
and thirst too.

Stay home please.  
The tree will come alive again  
for its heart lives inert within

not a failed heart.  
nor burnt black  
it lives on  
there'll be food again.

**Tomorrow**

will see me home to motherland  
scorn death in this distant ground  
will not die in exile

TOMORROW

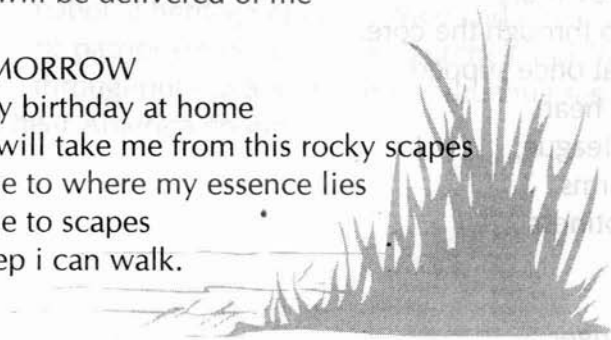
will come with no mist  
a sunny feast  
awaits my arrival

TOMORROW

will quell my daily yearning for home  
like a pregnant mother  
she will be delivered of me

TOMORROW

is my birthday at home  
she will take me from this rocky scapes  
home to where my essence lies  
home to scapes  
asleep i can walk.



I will not die in exile  
I scorch death in the distant ground  
I will see home to my right and

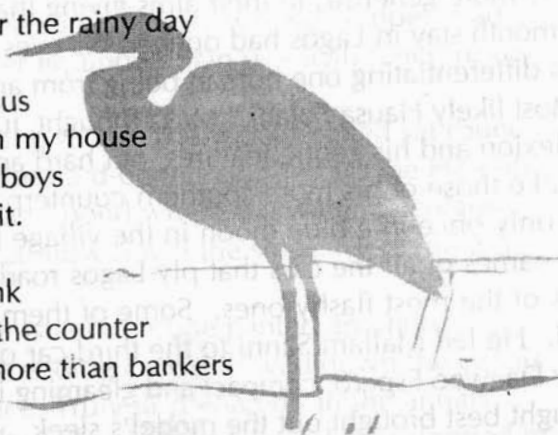
# NWACHUKWU EGBUNIKE

## Help

I'm dying  
 I've no money  
 for many months  
 No pay

I'm Paid  
 Money not sufficient  
 Can't save for the rainy day

I've got surplus  
 Can't keep in my house  
 Or the night boys  
 Pay me a visit.



store in bank  
 Can't get to the counter  
 Customers more than bankers

I'm dying  
 As the bank's distressed  
 My money disappears.



**CHII OCHU AKPORJI****Musa's Courage**

"I'll do it today," Musa resolved once more, as he led Mallam Sanni to the just formed line of traffic. He ignored the first car in the line. He ignored the second, a flashy, metallic-grey Nissan 380ZX. The man, cocooned in air-conditioned comfort, wearing an immaculate white babanriga, with a matching white mallam's cap on his head. Musa and his colleagues consider such drivers more generous in their alms-giving than the others. His eight-month stay in Lagos had opened his eyes to the subtleties differentiating one human being from another.

"Most likely Hausa-Fulani," Musa thought, judging by the fair complexion and his gentle features, not hard and grating on the eyes, like those of his more southern counterparts. He was surprised to see a car only once in a blue moon in the village had come to know the names of all the cars that ply Lagos roads, especially the names of the most flashy ones. Some of them were out of this world. He led Mallam Sanni to the third car on the line, a brand new Daewoo Espero, compact and gleaming in the cold. Musa thought best brought out the model's sleek, aerodynamic form. Its occupant belonged to the category of the public judge, at least amenable to alms-giving in the general esteem of the beggars - a young, professional woman.

Heavily bleached to a near bloody pink, and with the latest punk style hair-cut named after the Rhythm and Blues singer, Anita Baker, she was dressed in a black and white hounds-tooth blazer with broad collars piped in yellow.

"Probably a banker or a lawyer," Musa mused to himself.

A lake was prepared below for the final thing -  
A jubilant fountain, a happy concentrated shrill

Of joy - like the pressured smoke-pipes  
Of all the demons' underwater nuclear plants  
Set off by the button beneath the waterplants.  
The descending showers all turn windpipes.

## II

The day before, we had biked and enjoyed the ride  
Through streets, green parks and museum.  
The university was closed and the auditorium  
Mocked us with our faces on the wide

Glass door. You promised us the finest of parks  
When ever the one we rode in seemed hard  
To beat. The sun glorious, sun-worshippers had  
Come better equipped than us - with lunch-packs

And climbing shoes. The weak-hearted sat round  
The lake, the hard-boned climbed up the Hercules,  
To the upland pond where the water calculates  
Its measured flow down the steps. Mere mound

Of earth or true hill, none panted anymore  
As the descending crowd flowed down the canals  
To the place. Truly ill-prepared - in the annals  
Of mountain-climbing - you were! You stooped more

Times than I could count to relace your shoes.  
I said to you to tie them rather fast.

That didn't help, you stooped now to cast  
Out stones! We could have suffered boos

Still climbing when all were going down

To see the beginning and end of the water  
Dance. And for shoes to make us falter!  
But we saw it even more beautiful looking down.

## Vivien's Jailer

A cruel irony sought one too human  
for a joke so cold it scorched the tongue  
that laughed. An impish glee and a can  
of tricks hemmed his dark sarong.

All is not sleight-of-hand - the master  
torturer knows the bone to break  
and the fleshy cast of plaster  
to cover the damage in a freak.

Not one for the common coin -  
the beginner's test, such as pulling  
vanished cigarettes out of the loins  
of a blushing maiden - he went raving

in darkrooms, seeking the spell  
to give praise to the devil  
and the patron-saints of hell  
for the divination and the evil.

Oh, if you try hard enough, pull  
together all the wisdom of the world  
and for what you lack, seek the school  
you too will, with sufficient hate and a word

raise the prison to punish crime:  
the stealing of peanuts or private water  
the snatching of a purse and the prime

murder, every known or human hunger

damnable by the menacing arm of law,  
you will lay brick upon brick and carve  
the club to break the digging claw.

How to banish light and air, and starve

a living room of the stray morsel  
of life? To prevent the groan of death,  
the smell of unwashed bodies and unwashable  
sores, of the spilling buckets of human waste

kept in the corners of the cell;  
how to keep the smell of the putrefying prisoner  
bottled beneath the leaking roof? Lose no sleep,  
the jailer quips, joying in the answer -

"Here is the elusive cure for crime:  
the convict and the soon-to-be-convict  
shall measure each second of time  
to be served against the profit

"in the act. The walking cadaver  
the TB plague and the epidemic death  
prove deterrence to all but thief and murderer  
who alone get the rap and deserve no mirth

"And there was greater crime and torture for her  
that would serve with a gentle hand  
light and air to the haunted hall, breaker  
of the absolving wall of guilt; who would stand

"and spray with tar the jural brick. But since  
a dwelling homelier than the body's flesh  
cannot be, a prison then of her own body  
the ossification then of fluid and flesh,

"the freezing of joints. Only the blinking  
of the eyes to prove a living thing. Applaud  
she must then - though stern and stunning  
the sentence be - this jail where frozen blood

"cements cell to cell for the perfect prison.  
The key in his hand, locks rusted, head or tail  
the jailer wins." Or does he? Listen  
to Vivien's voice assailing walls anew. And hail!

## **KWABENA OPARE-AKURANG**

### **Messages to Africa**

I

Mother, let me sing you a simple song.

Africa let me tell them a simple story.

Beautiful, pristine, the other day;

Last night you gave light to the world.

Mother, let me sing you in the present.

Mother let me caress your tragedies,

You are beautiful in your present,

And your past defines the present.

I will then sing you the present.

I will then explain your present.

I will then tell them a new story.

I will then warn the world that

The Sudan, Somalia, Rwanda, Zaire

Do not presage your eclipse!

II

Mother, dirges about you abound.

The obituaries of your children...

Your grand final farewell, of obsequies.

And I ask, should that happen, Mother?

Yesterday was Rwanda, today is Zaire!

They predict all your children!

They are waiting, the rest of the world,

Lurking, tuned to their TV, cataloguing,

Noting a spear of anarchy in your womb:

Mother, they say you are all diseased...

You are all of the Serengeti, the Sahara  
 Where wild animals live with your children  
 Where your children dance naked, waiting  
 For the Divine Intervention of the Haves.

### III

Let me present your present, Mother:  
 Warfare, hunger, disease, death.  
 All baneful to the rest of the world,  
 And the resonance is all chaos, anarchy!  
 Their Africa of the Darkest Africa,  
 Cultivated in the minds of their worth,  
 Ploughed into their mining minds,  
 By delirious TV, newspapers, scholars.  
 Where is the truth, the real story  
 Liberia, Somalia, Rwanda, Zaire...  
 Mother Africa, Dear mother Africa  
 The TV and newspapers pontificate  
 Hunger, disease, wars, and death!  
 The truth, truth, where is it?

### IV

In tunnels of cuddly deceit, Mother,  
 Their newspapers, TV... Africa,  
 Mother, all pontificate Africa  
 Your perennial drought, Mother  
 Your sanguinary despots, Mother  
 Your internecine warfare, Africa  
 Your ethnic rivalries, Africa  
 Sometimes, the focus changes;  
 And they would point to  
 Green monkeys of AIDS, Mother,  
 Lions of the Serengeti, Mother  
 Barrenness of Sahara, Africa  
 Futility of autonomy, Africa  
 A Masai dance, Asante stools!

## V

Ethiopia, Somalia, Rwanda, Zaire...  
You are not alone in your tragedy  
Far into the cocoa fields of Ghana  
Far into the coffee fields of Kenya  
Far into the Bauxite, tin, diamond...  
Far into the gold and golden vaults  
Of you, Mother Africa, your womb  
Paris, London, Ottawa, Bonn, DC, with  
Rituals of quaint triumph and civility,  
Sitting on IMF, pontificating on SAP...  
They price the rape of your womb, that  
Cocoa farmers never see cocoa butter,  
But come to love Divine Intervention,  
New "maxim guns", mother, hunting you!

## VI

Hence, dear Mother Africa, look outwards,  
But, Mother Africa, look inwards too.  
Pause, look at your children's footprints,  
Pause, look at your children's strides.  
And Mother examine their pace, Mother.  
But, there, there look beyond them,  
There, the self-righteous DIVINE ONE.  
Another child made their day - Zaire,  
A moment for a Divine Intervention;  
A calculated, pontificated salvation,  
Coming from those who have all!  
Coming from those who know all!  
Who claim to have all the answers,  
Yet have not asked any questions!



**DON BURNES****For the Apparel oft Proclaims the Man**

Fashion has had its highs and its lows  
but was there ever an age with uglier clothes?

**The House on Griswold Drive**

They are no longer alive  
my grandparents  
who resided in this very house.  
I used to visit here  
every day  
coming home from school and play  
in those my childhood years.  
I have come back today -  
I hear my grandfather davening ,  
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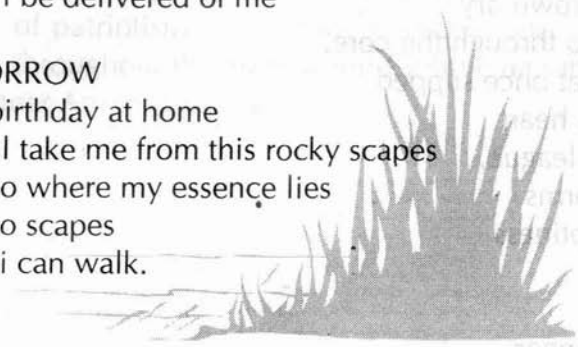
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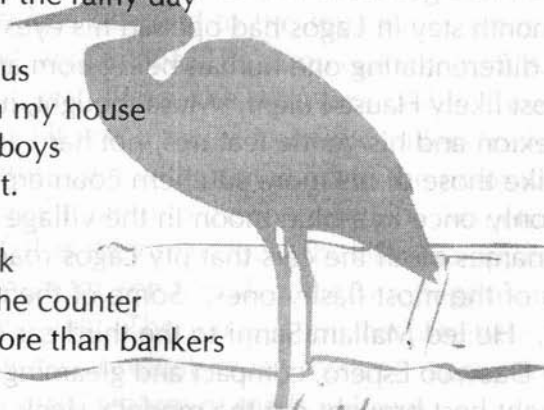
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Customers more than bankers

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**CHII OCHU AKPORJI****Musa's Courage**

"I'll do it today," Musa resolved once more, as he led Mallam Sanni to the just formed line of traffic. He ignored the first car on the line. He ignored the second, a flashy, metallic-grey Nissan 380ZX. The man, cocooned in air-conditioned comfort, was wearing an immaculate white babanriga, with a matching white mallam's cap on his head. Musa and his colleagues considered such drivers more generous in their alms-giving than the others. His eight-month stay in Lagos had opened his eyes to the subtle intricacies differentiating one human being from another.

"Most likely Hausa-Fulani," Musa thought, judging by his fair complexion and his gentle features, not hard and grating on the eyes, like those of his more southern counterparts. He who saw a car only once in a blue moon in the village had come to know the names of all the cars that ply Lagos roads, especially the names of the most flashy ones. Some of them were out of this world. He led Mallam Sanni to the third car on the line, a brand new Daewoo Espero, compact and gleaming in the colour Musa thought best brought out the model's sleek, aerodynamic form. Its occupant belonged to the category of the public judged least amenable to alms-giving in the general esteem of the beggars - a young, professional woman.

Heavily bleached to a near bloody pink, and with the latest punk style hair-cut named after the Rhythm and Blues singer, Anita Baker, she was dressed in a black and white hounds-tooth blazer with broad collars piped in yellow.

"Probably a banker or a lawyer," Musa mused to himself.

"They always make that 'I'm in charge of my life' statement in everything they do; as if no one would take them seriously if they did not." He pulled Mallam Sanni closer to the car, pressing his face to the wound-up car window on the passenger side. He tapped the blind old Mallam on his arm, his cue to commence with his usual recitation for begging.

In a voice cracked and unevened by age, Mallam Sanni began:

"In the name of Allah, the Most High, the Most Merciful, help me. Allah protect you. Allah protect your family. Allah protect your car from accidents. From armed robbers. Allah prosper you in all—"

As he peered in through the window, Musa wondered if he would ever give up looking at the interiors of the new car models, or give up laps watching. Maybe never. It helped to alleviate the tedium of standing endlessly on their wing of Cross Bridges, so called because from their intersection point at Ijora Badiya, the bridges descend to the four major areas of Lagos, Surulere, Festac, and Apapa. The ramp coming from Apapa was adjudged the busiest, hence the most profitable. It was also the most dangerous. It was a major route for trailers fresh from the ports and heavily laden with containers to the point where they would groan up the ramp to the intersection. Sometimes, their brakes would fail as they roar down the other ramp, entirely on their own momentum, sending all other cars, beggars and guides scampering for safety. The intersection has been the scene of some of the worst accidents ever seen on Lagos roads, and accidents are a usual feature of roads in Lagos.

Most of the beggars and their guides clustered along this arm, begging for alms from the passengers in their vehicles of all sorts. Over the past two months, Musa had come to define his own territory on the ramp, where he always stood, come rain or sunshine, queuing for Mallam Sanni, enduring his invectives and the knocks against his knee when the old Mallam felt he was

sleeping, or was not leading him to more profitable customers.

"All that for a few coins from unconcerned motorists, gingerly handed out to avoid contact with your supposedly leprous hands," Musa thought.

Ms. Professional did not disappoint him in this game of his. She matched the hounds tooth blazer with a black skirt that was now riding the upper reaches of her laps, exposing their finely-veined roundness to Musa's lechery. He yielded himself to his most lustful fantasies as Mallam Sanni continued to drone:

"—your endeavours. He will replace whatever you give me many times over. Allah guide you to your destination. All—"

"Take!" Ms. Professional suddenly ordered, interrupting them both. Musa felt the cool scented air waft towards his face as the window came down half-way. "Take this," she ordered again, already push-buttoning the electric window up. Jarred by the rude awakening from the realms of erotica, Musa tried to accept the coins proffered from the dark-knuckled and over-ringed, outstretched hand before the glass was pulled up to its rim. But the three coins jingled and jangled onto the concrete road surface.

Worse still, as he bent down to pick up the coins he narrowly missed being bumped on the head by the sudden forward surge of the vehicle, flagged on to continue on its journey. He could only pick up two. He will have to wait till a new traffic line was halted by the traffic warden to be able to look for the third coin. He looked up at Mallam Sanni's plegm-filled eyes. He was trying to get himself together too. He too had been severely jarred by Musa's swift motion of bending and rising again, and by the sudden swoosh of cars. Musa looked to the intersection point of the fly-overs and glared at the traffic warden in his orange shirt, crossed on one arm by dirty white lanyards, tucked and cinched into equally dirty black trousers by a belt that had seen much better days. With one dirty, white-gloved hand permanently raised to the air, the man continued

with his job, totally oblivious of Musa's murderous stare boring into his side.

Musa knew it was coming. The punishment. But it was more ferocious than he expected. Mallam Sanni did not just stamp his feet with the butt of his fat walking stick. No. This time around, he raised it high in the air, (Mallam Sanni was tall, at least six foot, two), and brought it down with such force on Musa's knuckle-shaped head that for a few seconds all he could see were twinkling stars. He let out a loud bawl of pain. Two big balls of tears began to roll down his face. He wondered, for the umpteenth time since he had been assigned to the Mallam, whether the man was really blind, so accurate had his volley been.

Through hot tears of pain and shame he could see his colleagues, the other guides, looking over at him from their various positions on the four fly-overs, some nodding their heads in sympathy, urging him with their eyes to take heart, to hold on.

"Stupid boy," Mallam Sanni was ranting amidst the drone of vehicles. "Son of a bastard. Son of a whore and generations of whores. How many times must I tell you to be careful? Each time I take you on, I lose more money than I collect. You daydream the whole time about Allah knows what. You could have had us killed. That car could have knocked you down. And you could've taken me down with you. Me! In my old age. After many years of begging on the streets of this Lagos! I would have been carelessly killed just because Musa Abubakar is my guide. You turd! You son of —" Musa could not hear the rest as the fat stick fortified with age came down on his head once more.

## II

He fell into a warm, enveloping blackness that seemed to go on forever. Suddenly, that blackness was violently broken by a fiery orange setting sun, encircling a memory so dear, so

familiar.

"Musa! Musa! Where are you?," his mother ran out of thatched mud-walled hut, one hand over her forehead, straining her eyes, trying to identify him through the haze of the scorching sun.

"Yes, Mama, I am coming," he cried happily, taking leave of his coterie of friends and running across the parched earth to the cluster of huts. To Mama. To Mama. Beautiful, barefooted, tiny black cicatrices on her brown chocolate cheeks, her hair in tiny cornrows wrapped in a black *tawba* with faded gold dots, complementing the single gold tooth whose brilliance outshone the sun's anytime she smiled.

His world was beautiful then. How he regrets running away from it to Lagos. Mama was there for him and his two brothers and one sister. Baba too, who had been instrumental in his running away from it in the first place. He was a brave cattle rearer who sought only the best grass for his cattle. He took them as far as possible from the caked-clay dryness of the environment. He herded them to as far as Plateau, Benue, even as far down as Enugu. He was away for long periods, sometimes one month, sometimes three. Then, he would come home unexpectedly.

Those magical evenings of his homecoming will be filled with feasting fit for an Emir. Lots of *tuwo shinkafi*, *miyan taosi* and lots of *suya*. All the members of his family, the occupants of the cluster of huts enclosed by a wall of raffia, adults and children alike will converge at Baba's hut, the largest of the cluster. They would eat, play and tell stories till the full moon and stars lit up the clear night sky. Baba would automatically produce his (Hausa guitar) and strum up an appropriate accompaniment. The women, huddled in one corner, would clap and lilt quietly, swaying their torsos in tune with the rhythm of the song. They, the children, both boys and girls, would mingle with the adults, filling in-between welcoming laps or lying across

legs stretched out to accommodate their happy weariness.

They would feast till their tummies distended beyond belief, enthralled to over-indulgence by Baba's hair-raising tales about his life as a nomadic herdsman. He spoke of a land of green and grass for his cattle, of trees so tall and vegetation so thick that the sun could not penetrate, not to talk of the eye. He told them of Enugu with its rolling hills, and about Lagos, where his cattle fetched him the most money. Baba conjured up images of tall buildings reaching for the skies, of roads rising and falling, twisting in and out of each other like a snake shedding its skin, of masses of people busy, crawling everywhere like soldier ants, of the incredible dirt, people sleeping under these twisting and turning roads. From then on Musa knew he would find himself in Lagos one day.

But not this way. Not this way. He remembered the day Baba had deemed him old enough to join him on his cattle runs to the south. He had been excited beyond belief. He had already hatched out his plan. He was not going to come back. Only, Salihu, his best friend, knew of his plans. He said good-bye to his mother and his siblings as he clambered atop the cattle trailer, so called because it was a forty foot trailer specially adapted for the transportation of cattle over long distances. His father sat in front with the trailer driver and his two conductors. He perched atop a narrow bench placed across the open top of the back of the trailer with three other boys who were to mind the cattle during the journey. The driver turned the ignition and the trailer roared to life. His mother and her friends wailed as it slowly moved away. Salihu, Binta and Mohammed his siblings ran along side the trailer for as long as they could before it gathered speed. Musa waved at them until the haze of dust covered them. He knew he would not be seeing them again for a very long time.

They drove all the way from their village near Dambarta in Kano state, by-passed Zaria, Kaduna, Abuja, Makurdi and other cities, and stopped nine hours later when they got to

Enugu-Ezike near Enugu. There, they parked the trailer by the kerb of the east axis of the North-South expressway, which seemed like a harsh, grey, concrete blister, angrily seared into the peace of the lush, green, undulating fields of tall grass interspersed with wild cassava plants. It was almost nightfall. They discharged the cattle from the trailer, one by one. Muttering age-old incantations known only to nomadic herdsman and understood only by their cattle, they led them down the plank gangway gently.

They had allowed the cattle to graze luxuriously amongst these fields for about one week under close supervision, to ensure that they do not stray into the cultivated farmlands of their hosts. Baba and the other adults often left them to go into Enugu, to sell some of the hides and skin bags and slippers they had made to their countrymen living there, and to buy some food and other goodies to supplement what they had brought with them from their village.

At dusk, they would herd all the cattle back into the trailer, set up their sleeping hammocks under the trailer belly, place the big C-CAUTION sign and clumps of grass strategically on the expressway to alert on-coming vehicles on the unlit road of the existence of the trailer. They would roast specially preserved meats for supper over wood fires which would be left burning throughout the night. He remembered he could not sleep well the first night for fear of the huge snakes Baba and the driver had told him inhabited the forests in these parts coming upon him to squeeze him to death and swallow him up. The night noises were also more ferocious here than in the village. By the second night, he had overcome these fears and had slept soundly from then on.

They continued their journey to Lagos, where the cattle were destined for one of the main abattoirs in the city. They got to Pako, inhabited by the Hausa Community in Lagos, where Baba formally handed the trailer over to a cattle dealer and

collected his own money for the transaction. He recalled how exciting Lagos had been then. It was all too heady, the rush of people from different parts of the country with different tongues, of cars and trailers even bigger than theirs, incredible traffic jams on snaking fly-overs of concrete and asphalt. He remembered his first sighting of a white man. Even Mama had told him of such specie of human beings who had conquered the country a long time ago and had wrought immense changes, which remained with us even after they had granted us our 'Independence'.

Dressed in a casual green dashiki and black trousers, the white man had come to Pako in the company of his Nigerian friend to buy more authentic cowskin slippers from the many traders who lived there. Baba was away, so Musa had surged forward, together with the other young boys with their wares, pleading with the white man to buy from them. He had bought from Musa in the end, and had patted him on the head and given him a large tip in addition. That was it. This was much more exciting than anything he had ever imagined.

That night, he tried to tell Baba that he did not want to go back home with him. He felt he was a young man now. He should begin to take care of himself like Shehu, Mustapha and the other new friends he had made in Pako. He would be sending money home from time to time. Because he knew that Baba would brook no such nonsense, he decided to run away, and join the band of beggars' guides whose job Shehu and the others had told him was the surest way of getting a firm foothold of life in Lagos. The *Amir-ul-umm*, beggars' guardian they had met at Ijora had taken him in as one of his *tawalikatus* and had assigned him to Mallam Sanni, perhaps not knowing how wicked the man was.

### III

'Be careful how you hit that boy', Mallam Shehu's warning to Mallam Sanni filtered into Musa's consciousness.



Be careful? Be careful? You should be telling him to careful. He almost got me killed just now.

I saw what happened. There was no way you would have lost your balance. How could you? With all your height and weight, be dragged down by that mere strapping of a youth?

Musa's bawls had lessened to wracking sobs and sniffles. He knew full well that the other beggars and guides nearby sympathised with him. Even Amina, Mallam Shehu's own guide, looked over at him, unreserved sorrow written all over her face. Musa was particularly pleased with this. He had been attracted to Amina ever since she joined the league of Cross Bridge beggars a month earlier. New as she was, she had already become a victim of Mallam Sanni's meanness. Then, Amina had sworn she would never lead him again after he had struck her across her forming breasts with his stick. He had accused her of allowing another beggar and guide to get to a car before them.

"Stop crying, now Musa," Mallam Shehu cajoled him. "Stop crying." Musa's sniffing subsided. He moved to the narrow kerb of the fly-over. Mallam Sanni began to grope for his shoulder. Musa watched the grizzled, bent figure of his constant tormentor grope futilely in the air for him. He kept shifting himself away to elude their loathful grasp, a thin smile of satisfaction playing on his face.

"Musa! Musa!" Mallam Sanni called to him in that gravelly voice of his. "Don't you begin to play games with me, do you hear. Get up at once, you cunt." With a loud sigh of exasperation, he added, "I wonder if I'll ever get to meet at least half of my daily target at this rate."

Let him stew in his own trickery, Musa, resolved. How wish Papa were here. I wouldn't have had to go through all this if I wouldn't. Where would I run to now? Lagos is such a big city. What with all those stories of child abductors looking for sacrificial victims for money-making rituals? They at least feed me in the colony. I have my friends. But I still miss home. I wonder

what Mama will be doing now? She has probably chalked n disappearance to the will of Allah. She will now be bearing with a stoic resignation.

Instinctively, he looked down at the line of newly forme traffic awaiting onward passage from the yellow fever man, curious tilt along the steep gradient of the fly-over, all revvin their engines, roaring to go. The third vehicle down the gradier was a long truck, laden with two twenty-foot containers hel down with heavy cables. It was obviously just coming from th nearby Apapa or Tin Can Island with all its massive weight to th highest point of the gradient. It was resting there on it thoroughly weakened hydraulic brakes, the sheer effort c temporary motionlessness shaking the truck to the roots of it engineering.

Musa had always wondered how securely the container were tied, for he had his fears of their tipping over and crushing to death innocent beggars and hawkers, or even the motorists with eyes completely trained on the road before them, and thinking only of getting to their destinations. One of his bigges nightmares involved his being crushed to death by one of these containers suddenly rolling from its precarious perch on the truck.

Descent onto the other side was no less nightmarish, as the overstretched brakes normally quit trying all together. The trucks would course down the gradients at tremendous speeds, forcing smaller vehicles to scamper away from it as fast as their speedometers would allow, and sending the beggars with various forms of disability, their guides and the bridge hawkers scampering in different directions. Accidents caused by these trucks would have been daily occurrences on the Cross Bridge, but for the fact that the people most at risk were always watchful and ready to flee at the first sign of trouble.

"Get up, you lout," Mallam Sanni prodded him with the base of his stick. "We are losing a lot of potential customers."

You mean you are, Musa replied in his mind. You deliberately falsify the day's taking to our Amir to make sure I get a mere pittance at the end of the day. Yet, he insists I must continue with you.

"But not for long", he vocalized his thought

What did you say? Get on with it, boy. The cars will be moving on any moment from now.

I must summon up the courage. I must do it now.

What are you muttering on about. "I hope you are not cursing me," Mallam Sanni said, waving his big stick threateningly in the air. Your only saviour is my bad hearing. You kids of to-day..... lazy and know nothing about respect for their elders.

"Baba, let us move to the other side of the Bridge."

"That is the side for cars going to Lagos. And the yellow fever guys appear to be under some sort of permanent instruction to wave them on before all others. Our side is the good side. So!"

"How come the people on that side are collecting more money? How do they manage?"

"Baba, I know what I am saying. There's no harm in trying," Musa retorted, peering into the old man's rheumy, pupil-less eyeballs, confirming his total blindness for all time.

"The traffic moving from here is now building up over there. So let's move!"

Musa led Mallam Sanni solemnly past the other beggars, past the yellow fever man, standing in his makeshift booth, dirt white-gloved right arm raised, waving on traffic from Apapa to Lagos. To Surulere. To Festac. To wherever. Suddenly, the strange image of young boy guide, no more than twelve years old, quickly leading a blind old man bent over a walking stick, flitted to the center of his line of vision. Before he could digest the vision Musa had stationed himself and Mallam Sanni in the path of the oncoming truck, which suddenly gathered untoward

speed in its descent towards them.

**A. N. AKWANYA****Book Review**

TITLE: *Awaiting Court Martial*; 255 pp.

AUTHOR: Festus Iyayi

PUBLISHER: Malthouse Press, Lagos, 1996.

Festus Iyayi's *Awaiting Court Marshal* is a collection of fifteen short stories reflecting several different attitudes. In the opening tale, for instance, which is 'Jegede's Madness', the narrator's attitude is detached as he follows the career of an unprincipled opportunist with a stern and crushing regard. The stance is mildly ironic in 'Noruwa's Day of Release I and II'; while in the last story of the collection, 'Sunflowers', the narrator is involved in the action and fully in sympathy with the protagonist. The discursive formations and the accompanying discursive practices are equally varied. We have oppositional politics in 'Awaiting Court Martial', 'Saira', 'Extracts from the Testimony', and 'When they Came for Akika Lamidi'; the return of the past in 'No Hard Feelings' and 'Noruwa's Day of Release'; contemporary realism, mainly of the squalid in experience, in 'She will be Buried Here' and 'Flora's Reply'; *horror* in 'Na Only one Pikin'; the folktale formation in 'Our Father is coming Home'; love and marriage in 'Flora's Reply', 'The Revenge', and 'Three Times Unlucky'. In some of these stories, different discursive formations and practices interact. For example, 'Saira' has the structure of a

mystery, though it is firmly anchored in oppositional politics; while 'Three Times Unlucky' combines the discursive formations of love and marriage with the discursive practice of the confessional novel.

Stories like 'Noruwa's Day of Release' and 'No Hard Feelings' are rather of much less literary interest than 'Sunflowers', 'Flora's Reply' and 'Three Times Unlucky'; and this has hardly anything to do with the so-called content or even with the plot structure. The plot structure of 'Flora's Reply' has important weaknesses after all. For the fourteen-year absence of the protagonist Ehimen Ukiwa from a village where both his parents are alive and in constant and solicitous communication with him sounds rather improbable. Yet during this time he has finished school, taken a degree, and started work in Lagos. The literary appeal of these pieces is to be analysed rather at the level of discourse. For example, the sequence concerning the sudden awakening of a love with roots deep in Ehimen's childhood could easily have been spoilt by a sentimental treatment, as happens in 'Our Father is Coming Home'. But the story veers away from the happy ending which would have been the logical outcome in a 'paperback romance'. Ehimen Ukiwa undertakes a journey to the village to claim the beloved, who has kept faith the whole fourteen-years, though she has had no encouragement nor heard even a word from him during the entire period. But his hesitation at the last moment because of the unexpected circumstance of the woman's illiteracy and postponement of the decision gives someone else the advantage.

In structuralist terms, Ehimen Ukiwa's tragic love is a 'cardinal function' with potential to proliferate endlessly; thus the actual ending is arbitrary in Kristeva's sense (see *Desire in Language*, 1980). The very outcome whereby someone else claims the beloved has potential to initiate further sequences, something that is more fully exploited in 'Three Times Unlucky'.

The arbitrariness of the ending of the narrative in 'Flora's Reply' and 'Three Times Unlucky' is quite different from that of 'Saira' and 'Extracts from the Testimony', where the story clearly has a beginning and a middle, but seems to have no real end to complete its structure. In the absence of such an ending, we have, coda which is utterly effete, being the promise of a revolution not to be brought about by human agency, but presumably by a law of necessity that remains undemonstrated, whose rationality, as Paul Ricoeur would say, is undiscoverable. In 'Jegede's Madness' and 'Na only One Pikin', the reversals suffered by the characters are more in the pattern of poetic justice than of an outcome resulting from the working out of the internal structure of the sequences. Take the latter case in which Sissie pressures her husband to give a lift to an old woman drenched in a downpour, thrusting aside the man's fears of a hold-up. The hold-up duly happens, only that the gunmen refuse both money and the car, demanding instead that the man hand over a child. When the man declares he would rather be shot dead than do as they ask, they shoot, not himself, but the wife, and melt away.

An important source of strength for 'Flora's Reply' is its language. Of course, we do see in it the rhetoric of radical thought filtering through, especially in the early stages. For example, we read:

And then there were other things too that would, under normal circumstances, have filled him with nausea: the small huts roofed with palm fronds trailing one another like the dung of cows; the cruel poverty of the villages, the dense darkness in them, the round-headed children with pot bellies, caged ribs and feverish eyes; the despondent droop of the mango trees; the swarm of flies; the decaying and rotting carcasses of human beings on the sides of the road; the menacing silence of the swamps; the heavy burden on the heads of the women even while they had their children tied to their backs, their downcast eyes and silent faces as they stepped out of the harsh road for the vehicles to pass... (p.177).

All this adds up to oppression, and the people live in it and are

crushed by it, without knowing exactly what is happening to them.

The tone of bitter sarcasm in the above is encountered in several of the stories, where it is reinforced by the low language of satire (see Auerbach's *Mimesis* on the structure of satire and the low style). This low language centres mainly on human biological functions, upending the most disgusting details of these. We must take the following from 'She will be Buried Here' as a quotable example of the form:

She watched the nose of her younger sister running a long string of mucus on the grass and spat out on the soil beside the step (152).

But the eye for decay focuses on occasions on non-human, and mechanical contraptions, as in 'The Revenge':

Uku pressed harder on the accelerator and the car spurted forward and soon they were past the taxi whose body was multi-coloured from rot, and rust and peeling paint. The taxi staggered and shivered down the road behind them, its tyres smooth and trembling (197).

The characters whose progress the narrator is following are very angry, and in hot pursuit of the one who has caused the offense. They are hardly in the mood to notice the rot and rust and the peeling paint or the taxi staggering and shivering. At most, they have taken it all in in passing. But certainly the smoothness of the tyres is the narrator's perception, not the characters'. The narrator brings all this forcefully to notice, even though the particular incident has no bearing whatever on the sequence itself. The digression, therefore, implies an intentionality. The narrator is not mediating the narrative in a diaphanous manner (Derrida), but in the service of some interest of his own.

In 'Flora's Reply', 'Three Times Unlucky', and 'Sunflowers' the proform of radical thought is kept at bay - in the latter two more consistently and successfully than in the former. But the sense of the concrete is strong enough in 'Flora's Reply'. For example,

Flora went into her room and examined it. A room spacious enough to



contrast with the 'unnecessary badness' (Aristotle) of Mr Albert Umuna in 'No Hard Feelings', and of the well-regarded children, Oamafo, Iyose, and Owobu in 'Our Father is Coming Home'. Characterization in his particular story moves in extremes. For in contrast to the badness of these well-regarded children of Ejasele Akhabue, is Ifidon, the rejected son, who is invested with a sentimentalized vision of innocence, spontaneity, and unthinking generosity.

The dyadic figuration of binary opposites (Kristeva), in this collection, mainly of virtue against viciousness, always detracts from and reduces the literariness of the story. In 'No Hard Feelings', the very figuration of virtue in Professor Oshodin is self-undermining, and this is facilitated by the flashback technique itself. For faced with three accident victims in a critical condition, and recognizing one of them as the only son of Mr Albert Umunna, who would have had him and his brothers and sisters handed over years before to the retreating Biafran soldiers for summary execution as they had already done their parents, we see Professor Oshodin begin pacing the room, *being* *fall* *into* *his* *thoughts* *and* *finally* *reaching* *the* *decision* *to* *take* *his* *revenge*. In the meantime, he is doing nothing whatever to relieve his patients or check their deteriorating condition, until the younger Mr Umunna begins his last struggle for life. Professor Oshodin launching then into a frenzy of activity is utterly pointless and too late, as his junior colleagues and assistants know:

The doctors stared at him. The nurses stared at him. What was he trying to prove? Had he gone mad? Couldn't he see that it was useless? (135).

Characterization in its most suggestive is to be seen in the last member of the collection, 'Sunflowers'. The protagonists are credible as individuals, and yet they are clearly 'absorptive personae' associated with modernism (MacKay, *Soliloquy in Nineteenth-Century Fiction*). This aspect of their nature, whereby they become plural and incorporate other characters

hold the bed made of wood with a mattress of light brown cotton material filled more with grass and less with cotton and now covered with a wrapper, a small table on top of which stood her small mirror, a jar that once held some pomade but now stuffed with an eye pencil, some cotton wool, chewing sticks, copper earrings, a string of small beads, and other small objects. The table also held a small yellow cardboard box of black and white photographs, about seventeen in all and two full, unopened bottles of malt... Under the bed, there were two basins, one large and the other smaller in which both herself and her sister kept their clothes (183 - 184).

The reason for this sense of contact with the real is that we - and the narrator - are seeing mostly through the eyes of the character, and where the narrator intervenes, as in making a point of the number of photographs in the box, it is not heavy-handed or with the grossness of the passage about the palm-frond roofed huts trailing one another like the dung of cattle, and so on.

Similarly, the dialogue has vitality: a bit of dialogue between Ehimin Ukiwa and Flora:

'I must think about it.'

'No!' she said. 'You have had fourteen years to think about it. You have had this week to think about it. I want an answer now.'

'I want to work this thing out properly,' he insisted. 'I will write to you as soon as I get back. You'll see. I'll write.'

She inclined her head forward.

'What are you afraid of?' She asked (193).

The language is completely credible; not a single false note, as we sometimes see elsewhere in the collection.

The characters are also strong - 'good' in Aristotle's sense. And there is greater consistency throughout the collection in this matter of characterization. Such strong characterization is seen in Mr. Onabreya of 'Na Only One Pikin', the speaker of 'Awaiting Court Martial', Akika Lamidi of 'When they came for Akika Lamidi', Eliza of 'Jegade's Madness', and so on. These

**CHUKWUEMEKA AGBAYI**

**Book Review: Beyond Cabals and Macflecknoes\***

being experienced by the general populace in Nigeria, a pain occasioned by the inane and corrupt leadership to which the country seems welded.

The collection opens with "A Will to Survive", which is indeed a very short story. Set in the city as most of the stories are, "A Will to Survive" tells of an old man who, pretending to be blind and begging for alms, steals the only ₦15.00 in the pocket of a young man struggling to get a ticket for a journey to the Federal Capital Territory. As part of his effort to universalize

\*This title echoes Obi Nwakamma's "Beyond The Cabalistic Criticism", a scathing review of Nduka Otiono's *The Night Hides with a Knife* and Otiono's involved reply: "A Generation In Search of Critics" Both articles first appeared in issues of *Sunday Vanguard*, 1996, and were later reprinted in *ANA Review*, July - September edition, 1996.

and the world itself comes out without the narrator making a point of it, as the antagonist proves to be a figure of authority, whose attitude towards the gifted individual is to appropriate his achievement, or else act as a blight to wither and nullify it.

High modernism is also reflected in the confessional narrative of 'Three Times Unlucky', where the attitude of the narrator often recalls Conrad's Charles Marlow in the intensity of his language and in the judging of events. We read:

Twice they prepared my bills, bade me farewell and helped us with our things to the car. Twice I got my suitcase out of the car and returned with a sense of shame to the confused and intrigued hotel staff to ask for my room back. They were two days when life took its revenge upon me, for daring, I said to myself, to be happy, to live life with my heart rather than with my head (226).

This is a sequence sustained by the intensity of the narrating of deeply felt experience, rather than by the experience itself; stained by the endless search for meaning, by exploration at the level of consciousness, by fascination with psychological states, by the question of mutability, by the refusal to accept easy solutions, and the uncovering of complexity instead, with the result that each living moment that successively comes to attention is there for itself, not with an eye on the outcome. It is in this very story that Iyayi seems to me to have finally let go. His voice which is heard in the same tones in many of the stories, carrying over from his early novels *Heroes* and *The Contract*, the personal direction reflecting the impatience of the committed artist, hardly leave a trace in 'Three Times Unlucky', for that matter, in 'Sunflowers'. With all this goes the strong sense that Iyayi's great works are yet to come, that 'Three Times Unlucky' is the earnest.

the experience narrated in this story, Otiono has omitted to give the city and the old man any names. In "The Night Hides with A Knife", the story after which the collection takes its title and the second in the collection, Otiono is concerned with the capricious nature of existence. Ejiofor narrowly escapes being pushed into a well; his friends are almost stabbed to death - all at the hands of a scraggy youth who has drugged himself to insanity. Again, the youth has no name. He epitomizes the dregs of society, the victim of an uncaring leadership.

"Crossfire" - one of the longer and more engaging stories in the book - surgically examines the old theme of man's inhumanity to man through the story of Stephen who has been framed and subsequently imprisoned. Carefully and beautifully interwoven with this story is a thorough dissection of the nation's prison conditions. This is one of the stories told in the traditional story form.

While in "Jubilant Flames" Kikachukwu tells to Uduak and Eno the story of Suleiman's suicide following the burning of his work tools at Oshodi market by local government officials and mobile policemen, in "Wings of Rebellion", the narrator - a.k.a. Antiquity - tells the story of Akaaga and Nkem - husband and wife cheating on each other, Akaaga out of habit, Nkem out of spite. "Jubilant Flames" is one of the more experimental stories in the collection. This experiment finds its culmination in "Wings of Rebellion".

Of Otiono's experiment D. S. Izevbaye in the 'Foreword' to the collection writes that it "attempts a synthesis of the archetypal forms of the oral tradition with modern urban realism .... Otiono seeks an answer to the problem, 'what happens to narrative as it travels from the oral to the written form.' " It is in this experiment that Otiono's singular achievement in *The Night Hides with a Knife* consists. The dramatic energy and dynamism of oral performance - the traditional storytelling literary form - is to a large degree carried onto and made manifest on the

otherwise austere formalism of the printed page. Such features of orality as audience participation and spontaneity are skillfully worked into the orthodoxy of the short story form. Otiono's experiment somehow calls to mind the dramatic monologue - that marvellous poetic form epitomized by Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess".

Otiono's attention to detail is amply demonstrated in this passage:

As they went inside their premises, Stephen's attention was attracted by two lizards running along the massive fence of the prison. The one was pursuing the other in a deathly chase. Soon they disappeared around the edge of the wall. Stephen tried to ponder all those caustic whispers about an impending bloody action. But he could not think properly. His stomach continued to grumble from hunger. At times it would even growl, almost deafening his inner ear. Occasionally he would clench his left fist while his blistered right hand clutched the blunt cutlass absent-mindedly ....

His awareness of his country's socio-political dynamics, and, inherently, his dedication to positive social engineering finds voice in such passages as:

The policemen emptied three cartons of teargas cannisters to dispel the rioting prisoners who retreated into their cells, lucky that none fell to of [sic] the Force's infamous 'accidental discharge', as the locals would say and

Then he heard shouts of protest from a few cells away, around the wing for condemned prisoners but now reserved for human rights and pro-democracy activists who, General Babayaro the dictatorial president, tagged 'dangerous extremists' whose arrests and indefinite detention without trial he ordered at will.

As the selected passages show, the particulars of Otiono's details are taken from his immediate environment, and he keeps making unobtrusive references to contemporary issues in society. This gives his stories a lot of local colour, validity, and vigour.

In most of the stories, too, but most noticeably in "Just Above A Drunk" and "Crossfire", Otiono demonstrates his keen ear for the speech patterns of the average Nigerian city dweller

in his exciting and colourful dialogues:

"Bobs thank you," Tafioko gulped up what was left in his calabash and refilled it.

"Bobs there's heaven ... and ... there's hell in this country. Bobs, that was ... heaven. What could I .... I do but ehm ... go closer to have a fuller view."

"I wish you were caught," said the whore, casually.

"Your papa," cursed Tafioko. Then someone entered the bukka and wished everyone a good evening. They didn't seem to notice him.

"If I hear any PIM again from you Phina ... you'll regret the ... day you were born. *Ashawo Bas-s-t-a-r-d.*"

That extract reminds one strongly of the brilliant experiment with language in V. S. Reid's *New Day* and Samuel Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners*.

That notwithstanding, Otiono needs to pay greater attention to language and structure in order to avoid telling such stiff stories as "A Will to Survive", and "The Night Hides With a Knife" - the story after which he titled his collection. In those stories, one can see that he has something to say, but has not found the right structure/form for them. His language, unfortunately, and unlike in "Crossfire", for example, or in "Just Above a Drunk", does not do much to energize the stories.

However, this is a first collection, and considering the skill hinted at or demonstrated - in "Wings of Rebellion" especially - one cannot help but conclude that for Nduka Otiono it is, in the words of master craftsman Chinua Achebe, "morning yet on creation day".

**N. F. INYAMA****Book Review**

Title: *The Last Battle and Other Stories*; 98 pp.

Author: Ossie Enekwe

PUBLISHERS: Minaj Publishers, Lagos, 1996.

A rather surprising fact in the development of African literature is that the short story has not kept pace in its growth with the novel. Whereas in Europe, America, and Asia virtually every novelist has also been a prolific short story writer, African writers, on the other hand, appear to be reluctant to complement their novel production with substantial short story writing. Yet, it is a fact that the reputations of some of the world's most famous authors are founded substantially, or even exclusively, on their short stories: O Henry, de Maupassant, Rabindranath Tagore, Bashevis Singer, to name a very, very few.

One would have expected, in fact, that the short story as an art form should have found more favour with African creative writers than even the novel. This assertion or supposition is hinged on the fact that African oral tradition and folk-lore are replete with folk tales which most of our writers are familiar with. In other words, one would have imagined that for the African writer, writing short stories would have been a process of easy transition from the traditional folk tale to the modern short story art.



It is, therefore, something to be celebrated whenever this paradox is broken, through the publication of a new volume of short stories. In a largely non-reading culture such as ours, the populace has to be cajoled into acquiring the reading taste through, as it were, being fed the fare in little doses. The new reader, and even an established one, would presumably find Enekwe's slim volume less intimidating than a fat Victorian-sized novel.

But all this is an aside, a mere fallout among the many delights which this collection embodies. Although by its very form the short story can only bear a limited amount of thematic exploration or deep analysis for profundity, Enekwe has overcome this limitation by concentrating on, and illuminating truths of existence which we would ordinarily not be conscious of. Our certainties are challenged, and the reader is made to re-evaluate his previous assumptions. Is it not true, for example, that Lagos is infested with rich old men who do nothing else with their time and money than seducing young, helpless girls? Well, there are all kinds of answers to such a question, but none could be more striking and revealing than the one we get from reading "A Baby for Chief Bayo". A story like this one would certainly dislocate the conventional wisdom concerning the ways of rich old men, and perhaps modify our cocksureness of moral superiority. Irony, of course, functions strongly in the establishment of the power and messages of these stories. "Emente" is a story that effectively captures one of those paradoxes of existence. When we take responsibility and set out to do good, are the results always what we intended or hoped for? The truth, of course, is that our good intentions do end up sometimes depositing ash in our mouths.

But these stories are not mere moral fables. They are stories that probe character, explore dilemmas, and confront us with truths that may not be palatable. Contemporary Nigerian society gets its due nod in "The Minister's Wife", and "A Baby for Chief

Bayo"; previously mentioned. But I don't really think that Enekwe's heart is in probing the shenanigans of Nigerian politics and politicians. His most profound insights come when he is engaged in a kind of anamnesis.

War, for instance, takes a prominent position in the collection. Anyone who knows anything of recent Igbo history would of course understand why this should be so for an Igbo writer like Enekwe. Nothing, except perhaps creation itself, has had as profound an impact on the Igbo mind and world as the Biafran war, which lasted from 1967 to 1970. But again, Enekwe is not writing history; neither is he really interested in describing battle scenes and other such martial commonplaces. Rather, events are presented in terms of the distinctive revelations they offer with regard to the significant core of the human character. In war, bloodletting is simply taken for granted. But when does a war transcend its physical ugliness of carnage and become an object lesson in the ways of men? What is it that actually breaks men in battle? What is moral or immoral in war? Given the circumstances, do we call Lieutenant Umeh ("The Last Battle") a traitor or a man of courage? Is the old man who refuses to run in the face of the enemy he doesn't quite understand a hero or a fool ("Blood Stains on the Sand")? Can the reader suppress his bitter contempt for a so-called officer whose one goal is lust, even when the woman is faced with the most shattering dilemma of her life ("An Escape")?

These are some of the questions and issues which Enekwe's stories raise. It is, of course, for each reader to interpret each story in his own way and provide his own answers. But I am sure that for the thinking reader the answers won't be easy to come by, nor will they be too pleasant.

As I said earlier, irony functions strongly in these stories. It is a useful narrative strategy, masterfully employed to plausible resolutions of the dilemmas that we witness. In other words, Enekwe's style is critically hinged on the effective manipulation

of the ironies that underlie the actions of the protagonists. Ironically tragic notes on which some of these stories end never awkward, demonstrating the author's stylistic mastery.

But beyond this lies what I consider this main stylistic asset: the deceptively subdued tone of the stories. Enekwe does not, for instance, loudly assault the reader with the physical horrors of war, nor does he delight in the detailed description of human erotica. He pays his reader the compliment of leaving him to imagine much, after giving the necessary hints. That way the reader becomes part of the scene and the action. Enekwe does not insult the intelligence of his reader by over explaining; that would diminish the profundity of the human experiences which the stories explore. This stylistic consciousness demonstrates a high degree of Enekwe's artistic maturity.

It is my hope that more will flow from Enekwe's pen. In the meantime, let me wish the reader a rewarding journey through this richly-varied collection.

### Notes on Contributors

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