



Okike

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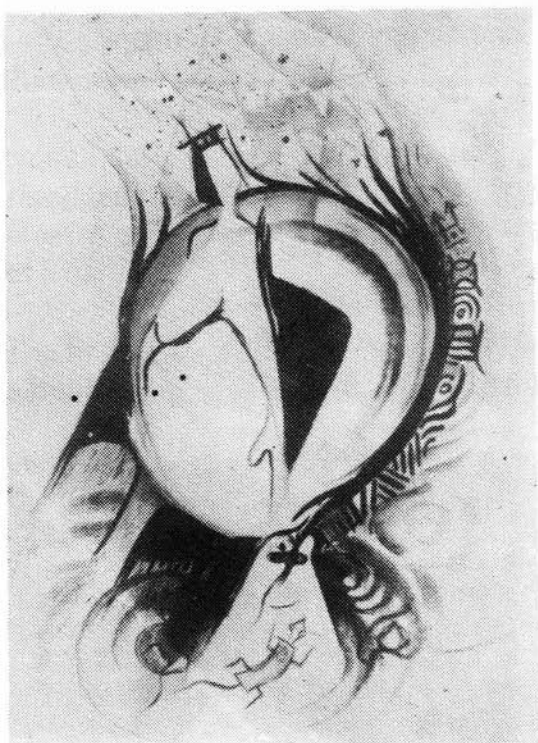
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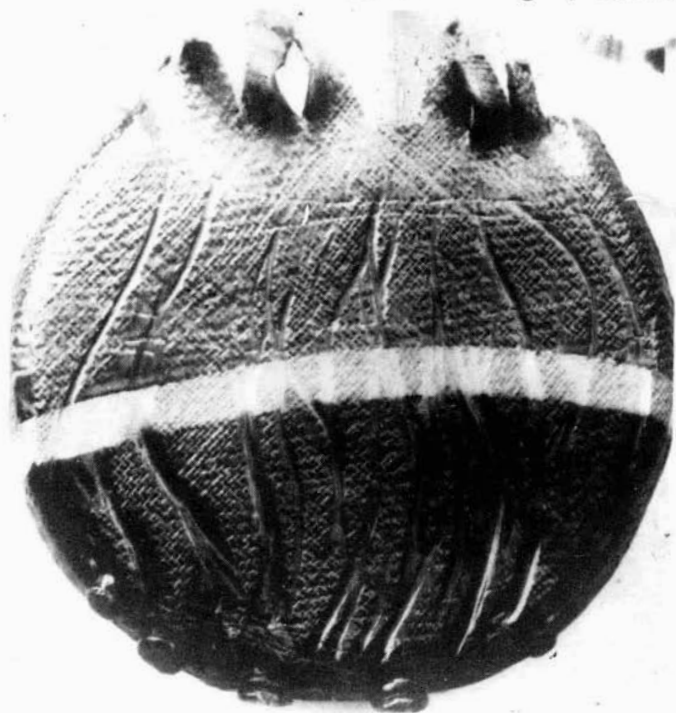
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The African woman.

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Stampede.

PATIENCE JUNE URHIAFE-ESAN

Contemplation I

Fragrances like windows of a house
emit their fullness of light.

By what divine hand
is my fragrance stirred?

Intangible as the sweetness of opium
opaque as the shroud of my aura

Pure or profane!

Not all the scents of Persia,
seasoned in practised perfumery
cloak the debauchery
of a dark pit, fouled in maggots.

The hand that nurses
a hollowed crown, in smiles, must wear

With patience, mellowed, must I my cross bear

So woman be a rose
for in your beauty is life.

Street Talk

"The eye sees not itself but by reflection"

it speaks, nativity

it is the voice of a thousand
tongues and tribes

an unlearned knower

its treasures are blood bred
mother maya's miracles

what code lies behind the littlest mole,
or greying strand?

by choice, not chance,
is the least rustle of the wind in the leaves
moulded am I, sculptured eminence
to imminent purpose

so I say, speak sister

yet speak easy
from your heart's bounty
man's only mirror for the eye.

GBENGA ODUNTAN**Jagajaga**

Fà-fùrì, Fé-fùn
 Yà-fùn, Yé-fùn
 Wéré-ni, Kò mò kàn.*

Seconds ahead hasten in terror
 Very winds herald with fervor
 Dust is raised, panic spreads
 Naked fear, manic raids
 Jagajaga comes.

Cocooned in the very existence of his mania, he gloats
 Scowling, satiated in many fears he spreads
 Appreciating instinctive recoil from the evil he breeds
 Unwitting he teaches the humility he dreads
 Jagajaga rages.

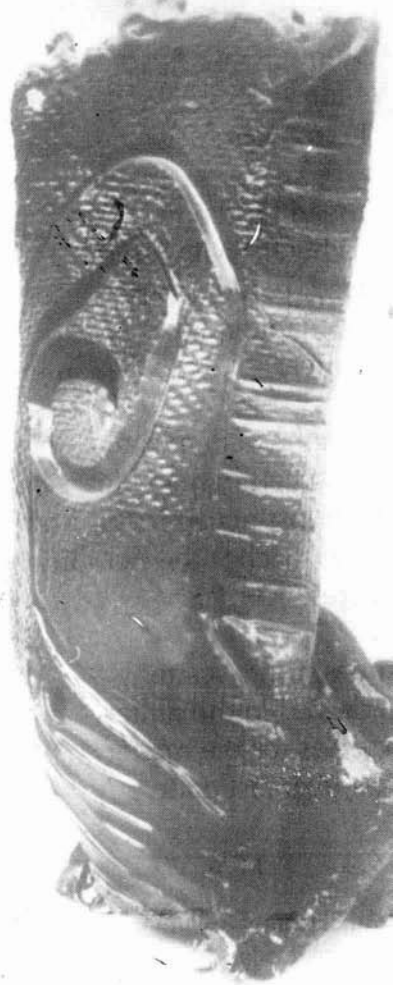
Hawker flees, fruits scatter
 Husband dashes in the gutter
 Vehicle bashes for the matter
 Terror rises, feet fast patter

*Draw from him, Scream
 Step aside from him, Dodge him
 He is deranged, he knows not.

At the very imminence of this hater
Commuters scuttle to safe distance
Jagajaga hurries.

Why every person apart from my party so normal?
He wonders
Why any person so apart from his senses?
We wonder
Jagajaga goes.

Fà-fùn, Fé-fùn
Yà-fùn, Yé-fùn
Wéré-ni, Kò mò kàn



E. CHUKWUDIFU UZOMAH**What Song for Africa?**

What song
Shall I sing for you now,
Africa?

My throat is patched
And my Creed is callous
I cannot produce those
Saccharine songs of yore

Those Sonorous Songs
That praised your budding shoots
Waiting to be watered
by the dew
of independence

What Song
Shall I sing for you now
Africa?

Shall I sing of your
m-a-n-g-l-e-d flesh
Thrown and scattered
round the globe
by
Your rapacious chiefs
Those savage scions of yours,
In the quest for

Gin and gem
From the ferocious fingers
of foraging foes.

Just to bespatter
a void

Shall I sing a Berlin Song
Of the monsoon
With its acid rain and wind
That swept across your homestead
In its sweeping current of cold air
That scattered your hearth
And blinded us with ashes.

Tell me Africa!
The creator of true lores
Now swathed
In hazy tenets
Spun from outer lands
And administered by quislings
Of your own roots

Tell me Africa!
What song will soothe
Your cracked face!
What song will water
Your roots
And rejuvenate your torpid frame
That rests massively
Like a rotten stump
Of a felled iroko tree

Tell me
Africa!
The root and base of my pedigree
The anchor upon which
My hope is moored,
For this massive stump
Must sprout a new shoot
Devoid of bitter taste.



Nigeria.

UNOMA N. AZUAH**The Sacred Lake**

It was dawn. Umueke lake rippled with mating insects. I stood beside the lake watching the ripples. The lake was enshrouded with thickets from where crickets shrilled. The ripples subsided and I crept in. I felt the knotted end of my white wrapper above my breast and blinked my white chalked eyes. I returned my knife to my right hand and held the white cock firmer. I waited till I felt Adaeke's presence. I dipped the cock in the lake, with a gulping sound I raised it up, trails of water ran down its damp feathers into the lake. I waited till the last drops were falling off the cock and it began to shudder. Its eyes were shut as it shook off the water on its head and hiccuped. The goddess of Umueke lake demands the flow of blood, the blood of a white cock to appease her. Tourists had invaded the sacred lake and I, the priestess of Adaeke, would have to appease Adaeke, the lake goddess.

"Adaeke!, here is the sacrifice for the cleansing," I said, cutting off the head of the cock in one blow. Its head fell into the lake, and blood gushed out into the lake. The cock convulsed. I called out again, "Adaeke! here is the sacrifice. You watch over Umueke, and mortals do go to slumber, in slumber the strangers' footsteps never stirred them, they are mortals, Adaeke".

She surged from the lake. She was like an ordinary woman - averagely built, glossy dark skin, long dread locks. Her enormous breasts covered her laps. She was sitting in a lotus poise. I looked at her very familiar face, but her features were blurred. I could only make out the oval outline, then the water eddied and she vanished. She has forgiven, but reluctantly. I looked at my hand,

the cock was dead. I went into the lake for the ritual wash, then went home.

Whoever met me on the way to or from the lake accidentally was to run away or hide until I was out of sight. When I got home the sight of my elder brother provoked me. I saw the glitter of curiosity, or was it anger, in his eyes.

"Where are you coming from, this early morning?" he asked, his eyes boring into mine. I closed my eyes in silent prayer and walked past him but he thrust me back, insisting. I kept calm. "Answer my question, you insolent bitch!" And he shook me violently. Seeing no reaction, he raised his hand to slap me, but I landed mine first. He screamed in pain. My parents came running to us but I hurried into my room.

"Nnamdi, are you all right?" I heard my mother ask.

"What made you scream so?" inquired my father.

There was a long pause, then I heard my brother speak with a shaky voice, "I felt the blow of ten thousand men from that little swine. She left very early this morning, before I could stop her or ask questions. I then waited to find out the meaning of all that. It was some time before she came back; just as she had walked out, she walked in, ignoring me, and then this blow, this terrible blow."

"Oh my son!" I heard my mother say, "Our ancestors be praised, Adaeke spared you. We should have told you earlier..."

"Told me what? Who is Adaeke?"

"It's a long story. Nnamdi, let's sit down," my mother said to him.

It seemed my father had left as he found he had done amiss not to have let his son know what had been happening while he had been away from home.

My brother had been visiting home at this time and had not known that I had succeeded as the priestess of Adaeke the water goddess. He was not interested in the traditions of the land. He

saw them as self-deprecating.

"I don't believe all this," he interrupted my mother. "You and papa can't have allowed yourselves to be slaves in your own land. Adaeke, or whatever you call her, should know that Nma is a young girl; she has a future and a life to live, and cannot continue with these chains. Tell that goddess or, rather, that demon, to stop making my sister an object to be possessed at will, this cannot continue!"

I could not wait to face him. I had cleaned my eyes and dressed up. I opened my door and walked up to him. "I am Nma, not Nnamdi nor Nnamdi's twin. You are my brother. I accept, but that is by chance. I have been with Adaeke even before the union that gave you to the world. I have been destined to be Adaeke's priestess, we are linked for now and ever. There is just nothing you can do about it. Fight against your will, fight to mind your business or you will sing songs of severed heads abandoned at the shrine of Adaeke. You will sing songs of lips swollen with agony."

"You are out of your mind. By the time I am through with you and that demon, you sure will have something worthwhile to say," he said and walked into his room but stormed out immediately with a Bible.

I ran after him and said to him, "Nnamdi, do whatever you think you can do to Adaeke in your house, do not go to the lake!"

"Are you afraid?" He snarled at me.

"Nnamdi, please for the last time, do not go to the lake."

"Are you now begging? Save your breath, Nma, Adaeke is already destroyed!"

Panic gripped me. I could not imagine what will become of Nnamdi. I followed him to the lake. When he got to the lake, he stared ahead clutching his Bible.

"All ye water demons, I bind and destroy you. I command you to loosen your hold on my family. I render all your powers

useless, I ..." he shouted at the lake. Suddenly I saw Adaeke beside me with the Bible and Nnamdi plunged into the lake as if he was pushed. I did not see him again. Then I heard the gurgle of water. "Adaeke, no!" I yelled.

The gurgling stopped and I saw him at the other end of the lake. Adaeke vanished. Nnamdi was murmuring to himself, he looked around, he pulled out his shirt, then his trousers. He was just on pants, then he broke into a run. I took his Bible from Adaeke's shrine and went home. I met my mother crying, my father was pacing round the sitting room. As soon as my mother saw me, she ran to me and pleaded, "Nma, please let's go back to the lake. Nnamdi is out of his mind."

"Where is he?" I asked, keeping the Bible on the table.

"He has locked up himself... please let's go to Adaeke."

"Mama, there will be no need for that," I said, holding her. I wiped her tears. "It shall be well," I consoled her. I looked at my father and he said through clenched teeth, "I have told him, if you don't accept it, just keep away. I go to church but I will always keep my reverence for Adaeke!"

"Let's call him and see if he will respond," my mother continued.

"No mama, let him rest, he needs it," I said and retired to my room. I did not understand Nnamdi's fear, I was enrolled in a school and was even the head girl of my school. I could not understand his fear except that I will not marry or have children. I had to remain a virgin for Adaeke as the bearer of her purity symbol. I loved my life as a priestess. I would not have opted for any other. If I was happy, why should he bother? I waved away thoughts of him and thought of Adaeke. One thing still bothered me, the tourists would still be going to the sacred lake. If it continues, people will die or Adaeke will invade homes and make many homeless. I had to do something. Adaeke's wrath was not easily quelled. An idea struck me: Adaeke would have to leave Umueke for her mother source - Oshimili.

I had drifted off to sleep, but my mother woke me to tell me that Nnamdi was now all right.

"He took his bath, dressed up and apologized to me and your father but he insisted on going back to the city," she said

"Let me see him," I said, getting up.

"He has gone, he said that we shouldn't disturb you and he sent his love," she concluded.

At dusk, I met Adaeke. This time she showed her face - dark eye brows, slit eyes, broad nose and thin lips. "Adaeke, I want you to have more space and more air. I want you to move into Oshimili." She smiled, then I heard her ask, "Will you keep our bond and visit me as many times as you can?"

I smiled back and responded, "You know I will." She must have read my mind for she did not object or ask questions.

Within two days Adaeke moved into Oshimili. Umueke lake dried up.

ANTHONIA NNENNA UGWU**The Ungraspable Force**

The flow of life is cut off and ebbs away
Like a breath of air that flies off the tangent
By that brutal force that inflicts the final break
Precipitating the separation of soul from body
That comes to everyone in the end
As the soul goes on its journey to its destination
We know not where
O dire immortality!
What awful reality,
What cold fact, the knowledge of which is clear
To all rational men.

What brutal force is this?
Maybe it is some invisible spiritual thing
Ungraspable by the touch of human hand or modern machines
Does it happen in the molecules of the brain, frontal or back?
Changing this or that
Turning the chemistry, computer-fashion to some other level
That transports to another realm
Higher or lower, we know not how!

The deed is done; the dedicated doctors wring their hands
in despair
For the precious vessel is broken
The silver cord is severed and the golden fluid poured away!

Only the body remains inert and helpless, needing attention.

Now is the time for tears, consolation, plans
Now is the time to adjust to the painful acceptance of
The permanent exit of God's lovely earthling.

The Maidens

As I sat there cycling
In the coolness of the gym,
I looked out of the window
And saw two maidens
Walking beside the lush lawn
To the 'suya' vendor close by
The lovely sight planted a smile on my face
And bombarded my thoughts with images of beauty
That cling to youth like a body hug

Hands entwined, the maidens
Moved harmonious, stately limbs, supple-skinned,
In the bright sheen of the late morning air
O, the strength and aliveness of healthy youth,
The grace and innocence of inexperience

The maidens' beings peeped out
Through eyes, large and luminous
To behold the beauty and their African world
The dappled blue sea of sky stretching out interminably
And on the landscape, concrete houses
Have replaced the cool thatched huts of their forefathers !

How are these youthful maidens
To understand the pains and turmoil;
The transformations and transmutations
That changed the African landscape
And are changing the African mind?
How can they comprehend the interfaces
And complexities of meaning of
Loud thundering words like democracy, deregulation and the
rest?
How deeply can they appreciate the beauty
Of becoming one's own self?

These wholesome ripe tangerines, our tall, slim maidens
Rejoiced in their trendy clothes,
Jeans, leggings and T-shirts
They laughed in their simplicity
Shining like the sparkle of champagne
In a tall crystal glass;
Like the frothing of freshly harvested palm wine
In a new transparent bottle
Oblivious as yet of why the new must take
From the old and why beautiful builders
build firmly their own blocks.

EZE CHI CHIAZO**The Poet I Know***(For Ossie Enekwe, on histh Birthday)*

As if the world was a giant egg
at the edge of a precipice
he fears even to breathe

his words, whispers
who knows
they could push the egg

and our rulers, the soldiers
speed along, howling
pulled by the lion's tail
past this world of ours

their laughter ricochets as the poet sighs
soul gnawed by pain

pain, pain, pain!
of our dying world

Once More, a Girl

I too, felt the pain
when the sister groaned
after child birth

where does it pain, sister
in the head, stomach
or the gate of birth

groan, sighs, moan
brother pain, pain
pain in the soul

once more a girl
the gods are mad

OSITA OBI**Uncle Mike's Last Audience**

"Why did you turn your back on me?" Michael Freeman said.

"Me?" Helen said, turning toward him, cut by the unexpected edge in his voice.

"My little ma'am."

"My dear, how could I?" she replied. The wine in the glass she was holding swam in its crude redness as she kept the bottle on the glazed board of the grand piano. She looked at him with very soft iridescent eyes and smiled.

"But you heard me right?" he said, his voice shaking with an ailment he could no longer hide.

"No, uncle. Did you say anything then?"

Mr Freeman sat there on the slick stool humped like a ventriloquist whose audience walked out on. He lowered his head and wearily looked about him. "Perhaps," he muttered, "I merely imagined it."

"Imagined what, uncle?" Helen moved closer, leaning over his shoulders. Calling him uncle was a habit of her girlhood and she wished she could call him something dearer, something to reflect what he had meant to her. How suddenly he had grown old and weak.

"I thought I'd said let's do this piece together," he said.

"Perhaps you didn't say it loud enough. Let's do it together then," she purred, stroking the naked back of his neck.

"Now then," he smiled as if his mind had drifted.

Helen stood beside him; she rubbed her long soft fingers together and took a deep breath. "Now then," she said.

Uncle Mike straightened himself before the ivory keyboard and cleared his throat. "Let's start with 'The Day I Saw You Among the Crowd'," he said. And there was nostalgia in his voice.

Silence.

Suddenly, for the very first time in his long career, Uncle Mike could not decide which note to strike first. He stared at the large and glistening teeth-like keys before him, his hairy fingers hanging over them, trembling. Then it came to him and he discarded it. That he had to think of it threw him into despair. He wasn't sixty yet, but the world that had seemed so broad and far-flung had brought him so dangerously to the edge. He was meeting the horizon too soon. And presently it was this feeling of standing on the path of a fast approaching gloom that tortured him. He had many a time willed himself to accept his fate boldly, but from time to time, often his dimmer moments, he would see himself in his mind plodding through a derelict graveyard and, in a sweat under the fierce sun, fighting off wild creepers that reached out to strangle him. Always he woke up tired and sweating and a smothering fear of death enshrouding him. God, he didn't want to think of all that now. He took a deep breath and blinked his eyes. Why had Doctor Williams told him this was probably his last performance for an audience? Why hadn't he waited until this tour was over? Blessed Mamisso! He hadn't even had the nerves to let Helen know. But he would because he had to. When his daughter, Lora, flew in this morning he would have to tell them both together. He had earlier thought it might be better that his manager told them. But now, no. He had to do it himself. Suddenly, he broke out, "How I wish Lora comes tonight!"

"But she is coming," she said.

"Oh, will she?" he said. But realizing that he had voiced his thought, he recoiled, "But we aren't sure, are we?"

"But you know we can be. We just pick up the phone and find out from the airport if she's coming in at four as scheduled. That's simple, isn't it?"

"You'd do that for me, wouldn't you?"

"It wouldn't be a pleasure crossing you tonight, uncle. I'll do it, but on a promise," she said, raising a finger for emphasis; "on a promise that you'd let me in on what's bothering you. Don't tell me again it's the pressure of work; no uncle, I won't accept that." Her eyes were searching.

Uncle Mike's eyes gleamed as he took the glass of wine beside him and sipped from it. "Okay," he said, smiling a weak fatherly smile. "Okay." He licked his lips and closed his eyes briefly. And in his soul, he felt deeply aroused by a force that flitted about his chest like pressurized bubbles. It was a creative force he had known all his life. Now it came over him like a soft-winged, nectar-sucking insect, sucking lazily at his soul, rousing him to a sweet, half-felt, weightless sensation. He felt like a butterfly caught up in a small breeze. And his breath ceased and began; again ceased and began; and his fingers came down on the keyboard. It was all so natural once again...

Unobtrusively, Helen turned and walked across the large, richly furnished hotel-room. Michael Freeman's eyes followed her. She was fully feminine and graceful in her movement. He had never breathed it to another, but fully feminine things greatly inspired him. And Helen was feminine in all respects. She had youth and a pleasant air of delicateness. She was rarely wild or vulgar, except in most refined and unpredictable ways. Like most young women though, she often had fits of pompous imaginings. But her few shortcomings all receded before her comely body: long, silky hair tied behind her with brilliant ribbons, prominent eyelashes aligned like fine palings round her iridescent, pearly eyes. Michael Freeman could spend a lifetime gazing on her face. Not that hers was the most beautiful he had ever seen. But hers was unique - a vibrant cast of Indian and

African union at its best. Well filled-out bust and full, broad hips! In fact, having her around at rehearsals always inspired him to greater heights. Most of all, she had such airs - the specifics of which Uncle Mike could not pinpoint - but she had such airs which creative and passionate men strove to protect from the harassment of crude men.

Uncle Mike was a creative and a passionate man. He had met Helen years ago, the first night he performed in Hanover. And had written for her, thereafter, "The Day I Saw You Among the Crowd". She was eighteen then, lodged in a genteel and cheering audience with her stepmother, tears of excitement running down her face. It was her air of fragility that made him spot her easily. And when he called her out and she came, the sight of her round feminine features made him gasp, having scooped up the memories of his late wife. Helen and her stepmother met him afterwards for an autograph and after an elaborate evening dinner, became frequent guests at Michael Freeman's house. Eight months later, Helen moved in as an "adopted" daughter and a playmate to Lora, his only child. Five years later, Helen married a boisterous young man who made a couple of half-successful films. And as Uncle Mike knew it would, the marriage broke down in nine months and she came running back to him. After Lora herself got married, Helen and Uncle Mike became great friends, touring the world together and learning a great deal of its affairs.

He began to see that Helen wasn't exactly the innocent, richly fragile woman she always seemed. There was a faint mysterious coyness about her that worried him. Lately, she had grown extravagant and restless. By soft remarks and deeds, it seemed she wanted more of her time spent outside Uncle Mike's fatherly eyes. Uncle Mike knew but did nothing, because she grew more lovable by the day. And she wasn't yet as corrupt as the entertainment world. But whenever he thought of this, it pricked

his conscience that in his relationship with Helen, what he had done was try to mould her in his own image merely because he saw his wife in her. This was grossly unfair for a young woman with a whole lot of world in front of her. Now that he had made her wholly dependent on him, how in the world could she live happily after he was gone? But recently he found solace in the fact that he wouldn't swear that he quite succeeded, for there was something about Helen and his career that were as elusive as they were unpredictable.

Helen herself had only one irrepressible desire now - to be free. But in what way? She could not tell. For Uncle Mike had never restricted her in any way. She knew she was living his life and had begun to hate it. She was desperate about it but didn't know where to begin. It frustrated her that Uncle Mike was too large a character. He was everywhere - in the magazine ads, on radio broadcasts, on billboards, in telephone conversations - in fact, Uncle Mike was seen or felt in whatever she saw, heard or read. She even thought his own thoughts and that pained her most. The only way she tried to assert her freedom was by excusing herself from rehearsals, and lately, from performances. The intention was to hate the man's music since she could not hate the man himself. This quickly proved impossible because Uncle Mike's music was fashionable, and being a woman, she was naturally fashion-crazed. Outside Uncle Mike, only her acting lessons occupied her. She was in her mid-twenties yet and could do a lot with herself. Could her freedom lie only in Uncle Mike's death? She dreaded having to think this, but the thought nagged her mind even as she fought it. Hence when Uncle Mike's manager told her the week before of Uncle Mike's failing health, she did not know what to wish for. The information made her happy and then made her sad. That such thought should creep through her mind was most unfair to dear Uncle Mike. But she wanted her freedom, a little freedom that wouldn't hurt anyone. Tomorrow's performance would be his last - and

hers, perhaps. She had prayed for it in her heart, she had yearned and wished for it. Why now shrink from it? Uncle Mike hadn't told her anything yet, but she was sure that was why he had sent for Lora. It wouldn't be long before he told her. Poor Uncle Mike, how would it be getting a little away from him?

She had picked up the telephone receiver to inquire about Lora. And instantly, from the open door behind her, flowed faintly into her ears the liquid notes of Uncle Mike's concert grand piano, like the elusive lure of a distant perfume. She held the receiver and waited, a smile breaking on her face. In flowed the notes, softly, unwaveringly. She stood still, holding her breath; it was as if a movement would ruffle the pool of sensation gathering in her heart. Uncle Mike's music had never been this nostalgic, as from one familiar tune to another, the notes of the grand piano swept her along, toward the estuaries of her deepest emotions. The most nostalgic moments of her life, in these brief minutes, began to float on her mind. The music suspended her in timelessness. Her breath seemed to hang high above her head as she walked dreamily to the door, her comely face uplifted like a ballet dancer's led by the nose by a spell of music. Like waves in harmony, the musical notes that sailed to her rose and fell, ringing with *schmaltz*. As it rose, she saw painted before her the radiance of the rising sun, and as it fell, the luridness of the evening sky ravished her. Her heart felt full, soft and bursting. Still the sweet musical notes flowed, filling her with the blissful sensations of her first romance and gradually afterwards, with the sad tortures of her mother's death. Tears began to well up in her eyes as she stood like in a trance, watching the humped figure of Uncle Mike in front of the piano, tirelessly sluicing out the liquid musical notes that flooded her soul. Looking through the wide glass window with drawn curtains, further after Uncle Mike's humped figure, beyond the balcony, she saw in the darkness of the empty concert hall far-reaching fingers of various spotlights

slashing through the air. Out and down there, oblivious of the entire world, the lighting crew rehearsed for tomorrow's concert.

And suddenly, the notes began to flow very fast, thin and rough, like a small stream rushing down a rocky waterway. Faster and faster the notes flowed and thinner and rougher they grew, until Helen woke in a gasp. And seeing Uncle Mike jabbing away furiously at the keyboard like a demon, ran toward him, fearing that his heart disease was possessing him. And instantly a life without Uncle Mike scared her.

When she reached him, she stood stiff with fright. She could not touch him. She had never seen Uncle Mike so wild-looking, and it terrified her. He sat rigid like death, his neck looking like bleached scarlet. Only his finger ran all over the ivory keyboard in a frenzy. And he was dripping with sweat. Helen stood trembling. Suddenly his arms collapsed over the keyboard and a sizzling silence rang long in Helen's ears. She touched him on the shoulder and, as if she had punched at a switch, the lights of the concert hall and all the rooms went out. She cried out aloud with a taut, resounding voice; and her whole world went down her throat in one bitter lump. She did not want her freedom in darkness. She wanted the light, she wanted the light.

She ran out to the balcony and, in the overbearing darkness, cried out so that the lighting crew below could hear her. Her voice was sharp and loud and there was terror in it.

IDA I. OFFOR**Beware of Filthy Men**

Chief Alade of Manshanu Group of Companies was thoroughly organized. His workers arrived punctually to work because Chief himself was an early riser. Even in the early hours of the morning, lorries and pickup trucks queuing the night before for their haulage of groundnut oil, were already starting their engines, discharging their impatience in thick black smoke from their exhausts. The iron gate to the premises was thrown open only when Chief Alade gave the signal. Ojo the gateman ran up the flight of steps to collect the keys from the key box at the corridor. Chief Alade's cough, an accustomed practice, was enough signal that Chief knew Ojo had come for the keys. He issued instructions and soon the screechy noise of vehicle tyres, reversing and taking up positions at the warehouse announced the dawn of yet another busy day. Although Chief was strict and observed rigid work hours, he was equally cheerful and exuberant. He reserved the big agbada gown for occasions and for the office where he received official and business associates. His work outfit was the inner jumper hanging over baggy trousers. The side pockets held his jotter, biro and keys to his office and safe.

Chief Alade was also a sociable man who enjoyed the company of his group of friends at the town club. He encouraged young professionals who cared to listen to him to draw from his experience. His doors were open to them too. They had freedom to visit him in his office and at home. He had good rapport with everybody. His bosom friend, Lawyer Ketu, was a regular companion at the club. Bald and astute, Ketu was Alade's

company legal adviser. He called at home regularly in the evenings. The children ran around to welcome Uncle, as Ketu was fondly called. Tolu, the youngest of Chief Alade's children, always climbed up Ketu's laps to ask numerous questions. Ketu enjoyed his evenings with them. As they rushed to welcome him, he lifted them one by one, hugging and embracing them.

In the mornings, Ketu discharged his business briskly when he called on Alade. He was always in his white upon black stripped lawyers' outfit. The learned gentleman. The children admired him from upstairs. Some wanted to become lawyers when they grew up. Most evenings, Lawyer Ketu came more relaxed in flowing *agbada*. Mrs Alade offered him drinks and whatever food they had at home. The squat gentleman was very much at home and no one minded the liberties extended to him. He had humorous jokes which kept them all happy. Tolu could perch all evening on his lap as they all joked and watched the television, while he made funny remarks on the TV programmes. Tolu's childlike trust endeared her to him. The family could go about their other businesses, leaving them alone.

Little Tolu was unaware of the greater delight her warm soft body gave Ketu as she nestled on his chest. One day, she suddenly jumped down when she felt a hard thrust from below. She got off Ketu's lap and inspected the underneath of the carved wooden chair to see if the springs were broken. She beat the *agbada* with her bare palms to ensure her safety. She climbed back unsuspecting. To her consternation, the jab reoccured and was withdrawn each time she showed a sign of discomfort. Her enthusiasm for Ketu's lap began to wane.

Another day, Ketu arrived, and in his usual way, hugged and swept Tolu off her feet and carried her in a flash to the window seal. Ketu's quick sense told him mum and dad were out and that the house was virtually empty. Ketu pointed to the line up of vehicles outside and teased her ears with the cold tip of his nose. She giggled, enjoying the view and chattering about where each

person had gone. Ketu asked about each member of the family, and as the answers flowed, he pressed on her soft back squeezing and grinding his manhood on her. Again, Tolu felt the hardness and squirmed to free herself. She was alarmed. "Sh-ee shee" Ketu hissed, begging her to keep steady and admire the hustling and bustling along the main street. The child was bewildered as Ketu panted, breathing down hot flushes on her neck, and she struggled to disengage herself. As she swung around, eyes levelled up with Ketu's, she saw a different human being. She wondered if he was in pain? His grip on her was firm. He had a queer look. There was a sheepish smile which terrified her. "Shee shee", was all he muttered as she jumped down and scuttled away to freedom. Mrs Alade walked up the front door. No one had heard her footsteps. She coughed.

Lawyer Ketu stood petrified. He stretched out his arms in exasperation, as he wheeled around to face her. His starched jumper was creased in front. He looked foolish, caught in his salacious activity.

"Oh, wel-come," he forced himself to say, a hollowness in his voice.

"How long have you been here?" she politely asked, her eyes taking in all.

"Not long, not long." Lawyer Ketu replied guiltily, with eyes searching the floor. When the little girl heard her mother's voice, she rushed out to hug her, burying her face in her fold. She found security at last.

"My little girl, my little one," Mrs Alade said, stroking her head in reassurance.

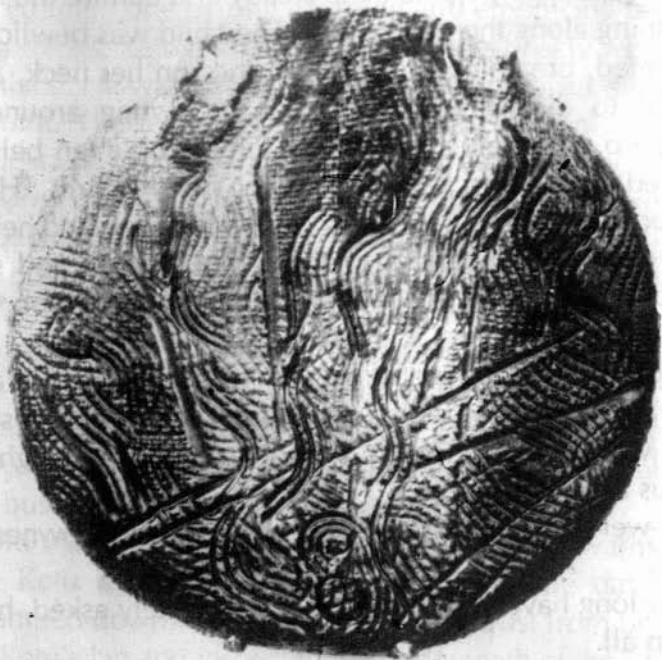
"I must be leaving," Lawyer Ketu excused himself lamely, as he dragged his feet to the staircase, ashamed of his self-betrayal.

"And please don't come back," Mrs Alade's voice was raised enough for him to hear. She muttered a curse.

"Why mummy?" her little one asked. Without a reply, her mum pushed her backwards and raised her face to look in her

eyes.

"Beware of filthy men", she said, as she stroked her cheeks and sent her to fetch a glass of water.



Ogoni Land.

UNOMA N. AZUAH**Many Nights**

Nwaka, sing songs to me
sing songs of birds bursting out
with blossoms of sun flowers
sing songs to appease the
shrill of restless crickets
sings songs to light up
the bulbs of my tears
I've borne the waters of my earth gorge
Furious for an outlet
I've stared into nights
desperate for a single star
I've groped through scorched sands
In search of a glitter in a grain
I've seen the rage of broken waves
scurry like a zillion scorpions
Nwaka, sing songs to me
sing songs of dark clouds
slashed in lightnings
of rains roped in deserts
for I've witnessed the birth
of too many crippled dawns
In too many tortured nights.

Onishe**

Let me be the egg
 bearing the stench of stillbirth
 Let me be the blood
 bleeding before the oracle

I may be the white yam ringed with cowries
 I may be the lone voice piercing the path of tear

Let me be the calabash
 bearing totems at the cross-roads of death

Live Band in P.H.

The jazz wriggled through me
 like a dozen maggots in hot spittle
 the gait of the guitars
 wavered with the wings of my eyes
 the band thumps
 taught my heartbeat a fresh pace
 in a jig of smoke and alcohol
 in the

s

w

i

n

g

of half dressed women

poised for negotiations

I gulped the night like a juice.

On Okene Hill

A splash of rust
a lash of pain
on a pair of eyes
leaping down stoned hills to a glaze

a flash of stones
a haze of heat
on a pair of eyes
bounding down rugged hills
to the blare of songs and sounds

a crowd of worshippers
splashes of water in ablutions
a wail from a wall
and a mosque shoots above rusty zincs
then a procession like a throng
of ants bearing a bounty
conveys a corpse to a pit

a splash of rust and stones
a lash of pain
in a haze of heat.

IK AKONOBÌ**Sagging**

My mind's angel
spreads its white wings
flutters, flies, and glides
to the horizon . . .

Behind the caged eyes
visions of minutia senses
cloud the sky -

Saggy cheeks
of a swollen mulatto
dripping oil
into baking powders . . .

Mist falls
on silent blue sea.
All I see
ripples.

EBELE OSEYE
(Ellese Southerland)**Wiser But Weaker**

I was probably five, maybe six when I first heard my father read those ominous words, "And the generations shall get wiser, but weaker," and they carried the same blistering effects as stories about slavery. I was a big listener, but a small person, expecting to grow taller and get stronger. And smarter. Not weaker. The contradiction was too heavy for my mind to carry. But I've witnessed the unravelling of this truth. The years have truly gone overboard, fulfilling this prophecy. We're losing it, displacing life's basics with harmful ridiculous substitutes: Motherhood. Where is her voice in our stories?

A nervous generation nurtured on artificial food, living off broken sleep cycles ruined by artificial light, we've dumped our common sense and seem to expect the laws of life to support our rearranged reality. We're too smart to recognize the difference between day and night. We've murdered our imaginations, allowed our communal stories to be displaced by a number of recycled nightmares, "television shows".

The television is one ugly surrogate mother, with its hard voice, quick flickering lights, stories formulated by distressed imaginations, ruled by "marketing values". What about the soft, impressionable and hungry spirits of the young? Their minds should not be treated like rubbish bins. The stories told in a natural mother's voice produce the calm and comfort critical to a young child's growth. We need interaction, questions and a few thoughts exchanged, the touch of hands, heart and eyes. We

know there's no substitute, but the television is still a baby sitter, while so many seniors, lonely and living away from their families, suffer in isolation.

The sucking motion of the baby helps the mother's womb to shrink. Mother's milk is the first line of defense for the baby. We dry the milk. Must we impose a federally funded study to investigate why an entire generation of children is so tense and moody?

After throwing out the mother's milk, we follow-up with artificial foods. Something dry and scratchy to throw in the bottom of the belly first thing in the morning. And cold milk, to shock a warm body. Plenty of chemical coloring, sugar, salt. The lineup of laxatives, and other drugs for indigestion make their own comment about the quality of the food. Elementary and junior high school teachers have observed that students are hyperactive after "lunch". Funny. Real food sedates us. And real food does not give us asthma, as does the "Quarter Water", so popular with the young children. With all the technical advances, our bellies are full, but we're hungry.

While teaching in a room without windows, I often think of lines from Langston Hughes' poem "As I Grew Older": "My hands, break through this wall, smash this wall into a thousand suns". The sun and the sky kept me good company throughout my school days. Yet we've walled out the sun, rain and sky: we've walled out the air. The longer we stay in a closed building, the gooy-er our eyes get. Respiratory problems get worse. But economics has taken a hefty swing at our common sense and left us sleeping in bedrooms, with little more air and circulation than that in a bank vault. We work out of an office cubicle the size of a newspaper kiosk. Madison Avenue, and 57th Street, we recently learned, have the poorest air quality because the heavy traffic of diesel buses is deadly, polluting the air. One of the most expensive places in town, has the most pollution.

Three tender looking boys appearing to be about sixteen or

seventeen, their smooth faces looking so imbued, were in Service Merchandise, recently shopping for a gun! And the clerk who could have been their mother, was requesting identification, with quiet formality. They didn't seem interested in shooting anyone, just going through this rite of passage, buying a gun. What's wrong with us? Selling firecrackers to young children. Giving them music at a volume that will take a good portion of their hearing before they reach thirty. Selling them guns. These children do not design the heavy speakers or make and ship the deadly guns.

Now having given the children guns, we are about to change the definition of children so that we can engage in outright murder and call it legal. Now that is purely weak.

Pleasure and happiness need clear definitions, not those horrible definitions promoted by television stories where volume, speed and bloodshed describe "excitement".

Budget cuts? Go for the children. Reduce the lunch. (That could make a person weak). Cut physical education. Cut the arts. Ignore body and soul. Then what's left?

Of course many things modern are purely wonderful. But we need basics. We need our mothers. And fathers. We need real food. Air. Sleep. Imagination. And without these we will continue to degenerate.

CHIKA UNIGWE**Psychotic Ramblings**

- and if the president hangs
who shall shit into our bowls
give it to us at sunset
in copper plated trays
ask us to be grateful
for such little mercies

- and if the music stops
no one shall force us to dance
ask us to waltz
and fox-trot and jump
to jazz and jargon

- and if the little boy down
the road
refuses to listen to my musings
who shall I chase
and throw orange peels at

- and if our house burns
who shall we tell
as it goes up in flames
and razes to the ground.

To My Fellow

Nwanyibuife

Do not cry

perhaps the day will come when the sun is left to shine on you

do not groan

who knows

maybe one day you won't be sitting at his feet

do not wail

dare to hope

to see the dawn when reason shall reign.

Karma

Silent screams in the night

shall ring in your ears

pelting you like rock rain

grating against your window pane

harsh against your polluted glass

stained with blood

dirt

scum

until our wails break through

the silence of the night

shatter the wood house

and have you buried in the debris of the ruin

and we shall build another, firmer.

CHIKA OKEKE**The Road to Lagos**

The morning sun was still buried in the entrails of the distant horizon. Above, a few patches of faint sky fought an army of dark clouds hurrying towards the east in readiness for a clash with the advancing daylight. Few early birds could be seen working out, preparing for the day's labour in far away maize farms. Some others, perhaps the young ones, only sang. I guessed they either had no choirmaster, or he was drunk, or mad. Our neighbours were still asleep. Even uncle Mike too. Traditionally, he woke up first in the yard and he never missed the early morning BBC broadcast. I doubted that he ever tuned to any other station, except during the occasional coups d'etat. My little brothers, Uche and Nnamdi, ordinarily, would have sulked ceaselessly for being out of bed that early, but excitement could be seen in every move they made that morning. Even Tito, our half cast Alsatian who slept like a human being was up, like everyone else. Uche and Nnamdi rummaged through every box in the house, not sparing my father's, searching for my personal things that I may have missed out. Tito was far more excited. He swished his hairy tail endlessly as he made several attempts to wallow in the pile of clothes scattered on the floor. Occasionally, he would catch my trouser in his jaws and let me drag him along as though he was training to be a guard dog.

In the sitting room, my parents discussed in very low tones. All the unrestrained gaiety of Tito and my brothers and even the birds outside died from the numbing impact of my parents solemn voices. My father's deep baritone engaged the silence in

there, though I could not make out, even when I strained my ears, what it was they talked about. I listened with the attention of a priest hearing the confessions of a dying old man, but the muffled sounds that came back told me of my failure. In resignation, I decided that the rare consultation must have been occasioned by my trip to Lagos. My heartbeat stopped, then doubled. My adrenal could have ruptured, and a cold shudder ran through the length of my spine as my lips formed the word and my brain some unclear pictures. With an effort, I resumed my packing, with my brothers, and Tito.

But I could not help thinking about my mother's face when I saw her that morning. Something in it made me very uneasy. I could not divine what it was. She had said nothing to me since. Even when I had greeted her, she had answered with a gravity that had no precedence, though she looked at me directly in the eyes. I thought she hadn't heard me, but I did not repeat my greeting. I had seen many things in her eyes that left me worried. At one time they were like Tito's the day he was nearly run over by a careless driver; at another, they were dilated like a blue-eyed French doll's. They were cold and unblinking. The last time, and I am sure it was the first, I saw those things in her eyes was when my little sister, Ngozi, died of measles two years after the war. I was barely six then, but the face of my mother which my young eyes saw then was painted bold like graffiti on the walls of my memory.

"What is wrong, mama?" I asked, as I brought my bag out to the sitting room.

"She has a fever, a mild headache," came my father's voice as he made his way to my mother's side. His mood equalled the sombre tone of his voice and neither could be linked to the usual dullness that followed an interrupted morning sleep. Looking at both of them, mother sitting on a wooden chair, and father's right hand on her shoulder, a melancholic mist hovered over them; I

could not restrain my thoughts from reaching for those portraits of American peasants by Grant Wood. The mist dissolved the two figures into patches of cold venetian blues and trembling carmine reds as if they were a still-life set for an exercise in colour theory. I could feel anxiety separating, yet binding the complementary colours, till they mixed and coagulated into a black, sticky substance. I began to sigh but the voice of a bird called back my parents from the growing wet blackness. The solemn clarity of the sound made me think it was an owl's although my father once said that those harbingers of death do not visit homes during the dry season. I had believed him, but when I saw his hand tighten its hold on my mother's shoulder I wasn't sure any more. Mama started saying something.

"She will be all right. It's just em. . . are you set?" He looked at his wrist. His watch was not there, but he was not surprised.

"Yes Papa." I looked around the room.

My mother sighed as she struggled to her feet with unusual difficulty as if she had aged overnight. She looked at me but her eyes seemed to see beyond me. She made to her room as in a trance. "Just a minute, Papa". I dropped my bag and went to my mother's room. She sat at the edge of the huge bed, with a pillow held to her bosom and her eyes fixed on the small framed black and white family photograph that was taken after the war. She was smiling. Even little Ngozi in her arms was smiling. It took the power of death to kill that smile on mother's face and smother the little life out of Ngozi. That particular picture was the only surviving one of the beloved daughter, and mother never allowed it to leave the walls of her room. Never. I was struck by the solemnity of her uninterrupted gaze at the photograph. And I could even hear her heartbeat. "Mama," I whispered not wishing to startle her.

"Chidi." Her voice was strange and far. "You should not travel today. I want you to stay with us. Please, do not leave today, my son. Promise me Chidi." Her eyes glistened in the poorly lit

room. And they focused on mine with the same intensity as they had done on the photograph. I felt very uneasy. And confused. She could have been sleep-talking, or something of the sort, but for what she seemed to communicate with those two eyes glazed with an indeterminate fear, something she could not communicate by mere words. It was beyond the power of verbal language and its effect was dizzying. It sent me reeling back into a not very distant past. About four months ago.

It was a particularly cold, dusty, slightly hopeless morning and I was in bed with a headache, covered in a large cotton bed-cloth, not unlike those unidentified corpses at the Government Hospital morgue. But unlike them, I was still fortunate to feel the torture of unemployment and headache. More importantly, a tiny flickering flame of hope still burned in the altar inside me.

"Chidi," mother's voice had broken into the privacy of the world trapped within the sheets. "Good morning, Mama." I discarded the sheet but not the headache, struggled to a sitting position, rubbing my eyes with both hands. It was not often that mother woke me.

"How long can this go on, Chidi," she began. "You can't sit around my kitchen forever, doing nothing. Is this how you hope to make a living, marry a wife, and give me my grandchildren by God's grace? Or maybe you want to grow grey hairs living in your father's house."

Her voice was tired and a monotone as though she hadn't slept at all that night. It was strained by that maternal pain known only by mothers, fearful that their first-born might come to nothing.

"Chidi, it is not that I want you to go away from me, from the family. No. You know, and my *chi* knows too, that I don't. But you see, there is no future for you here. Your father and I survived in this place because it was a different world then. Life was kinder to the few, like your father, who started work in the

civil service many years before the white man left. But now, things have changed, and you must change with them. You must survive and prosper much more than your father, for life is no more . . ."

"Mama," I cut her short, not knowing what else to say.

"I know what you are going through. I feel it even in the thinnest bone in my body. But something has to be done. Must be done. You must start somewhere, by going away. To Lagos, perhaps. You are not lazier, neither are you less intelligent than Chima, the son of Nweke, and your other mates who have gone to Lagos and come back with a Mercedes, never mind that they brought with them overbleached wives. Your wife will look like your mother. Thank God you passed through university which they did not." She almost smiled. "You must go to Lagos, Chidi."

"I will, Mama," I answered, staring at the road to the legendary Lagos where my mates, the successful ones and the not-yet-successful ones, fought and clashed with life and death, for wealth and social acceptance. It didn't matter what they did to make it. The only crime, perhaps, was failure. I wondered if my mother knew that Chima, according to news from Lagos, made frequent trips to Bangkok and Italy on hard-drug related business. I closed my eyes, thinking. But beyond the nagging headache came echoes of my mother's voice. *You will go to Lagos, Chidi.*

And now she was asking me not to go to Lagos: "I don't understand you, Mama. How can you? Is it your fever, or what?"

"No, Chidi. No!" she started. Her voice had lost all colour, save grey perhaps. It had something of a child's enfeebled by malaria and hunger, yet cannot swallow the sugar solution prepared by its pleading mother. "I may have a fever, but that has nothing to do with what I am telling you. Nothing at all, Chidi. Believe me, nothing." She never removed her gaze from my face. She could have been conjuring up all her maternal powers to make me listen to her.

"What then is the matter, Mama?" Anxiety was beginning to compound my confusion. And somewhere deep inside, I could feel the first signs of anger welling up.

"I had this nightmare." The terror she felt inside pulled at the little muscle of her face until her voice quivered. Her eyes grew wider till they almost looked out of place for her small round face. They turned away from my face and concentrated once more on the photograph.

"Tell me about this nightmare, Mama," I said, more like a doctor faced with a patient who had a mysterious ailment and whose cure depended on how well she could describe what she felt inside. I could admit to myself that I was relieved by the knowledge that my mother's strange behaviour was due to an ordinary nightmare. Nightmares are dreams. Bad dreams. I had read volumes on psychology, parapsychology, ESP, and even the Caballa, during my university days, such that I could predict the plot of my dreams before nightsleep. Though I must confess that I almost always failed. But I was certain that dreams, or nightmares, for that matter, were mere unconscious extensions of our hopes, fears, anxieties, wishes, and doubts. I believed that I could monitor my dreams and if it was a pleasant one I would let it go on and on; or shorten it when bad. Admittedly, I once had a terrible dream that defied all my learned and practised checks so much so that even when I woke up, read some passages from the new Bible given to me by my 'born-again' room mate, and went back to sleep, the dream continued from where I had interrupted it. The following morning, I was down with a bitter fever, my eyes puffed and swollen, and I felt sore for several days. That was in my second year in the university, I think.

My mother finally let it out: "It was a terrible nightmare. And it was so lucid. God forbid. Armed robbers. There were five of them armed with several guns and clubs. They attacked the bus you boarded to Lagos. They stabbed you in the stomach, and one

of them, the one who had the ugliest mask raised his gun at you." She cringed. "Then I screamed myself out of it all. Your father heard my scream and woke me up. Chidi, I do not scream when I dream. Never. Ask your father. Even in my worst nightmares. You must believe me it was not a dream." Her voice had grown colder and stronger with a strange firmness, and with it a screaming conviction.

"That was a very bad dream." I said stressing the last word. I also felt strange deep inside me. The waters of my being stirred as if a gale was approaching the shores of my future. I could have knelt down before my mother and prayed like a pilgrim at Lourdes, but I felt like inviting my soul to a feast of propitiatory weeping, if that could drive away the air of the nasty, dream. But I no longer had an inclination to pray, since our parish priest banished my father from the church for demanding that the account of the funds paid for the building of the new church be given to the congregation. My eyes turned to the funereal face of my mother, and a firm quiet descended on both of us, blocking out the mocking tic-tac of the clock in the outer room.

"Chidi, I hope you won't miss the first bus," my father's voice came, pushing the dreadful gloom in which mother and I were trapped. The latter, having been assaulted, withdrew, then congealed into a numinous presence which hovered round and stuck itself onto the family photograph. His voice woke something inside me. It inebriated my being and set it on the road to Lagos. My body also was ready. I then took a new look at my mother's face which had taken on darker hues of despair, but I no more felt like crying or praying. I now saw in my mother, the legendary frailty of women, the suffocating, maternal protection, and the anxiety of mothers whose first sons had crossed the bridge of manhood.

"Mama, it was a bad dream." I repeated "But it was only a dream. And dreams are far from reality. Only in the mind, in acquiescing minds, can dreams come true. But nothing will

happen to me, to any one of the family. Our ancestors will protect us from the evil plans of our enemies, and the devil. Do not worry on my account; I will come to no harm. And the road to Lagos, the major roads, are safer these days what, with the massive anti-crime campaign by the police, and the efforts of the Road Safety Corps. Their chairman was given a chieftaincy title in Lagos for reducing road accidents by a third. You saw it on TV yesterday. Didn't you?"

My valedictory speech had such profound effect on my mother that, rather than give her optimism, it eroded the last traces of hope in her eyes. They were vacant, and strange like an old abandoned house.

"Mama, let me assure you, I will phone uncle Achebe as soon as I get to Lagos today. That should do, shouldn't it, Mama? Please, cheer up. Your face can make the children sick for days." I got up, stretching myself with a long yawn.

"I am not seeing you off." Then she added, "not today."

"Then pray for me."

"My only prayer is that you don't leave."

She turned away and I started towards her, but my father entered the room, sending a draught of cold, comforting air into the room infested with maternal passion, and fear.

"Mama Chidi, you act like a child," father chided her. "What is a mere dream, sorry, nightmare, that you should spoil the child's heart on a day like this. I have told you we will discuss this dream of yours in detail after he has gone. Then, we will go to a diviner, or to your kinsman, the prophet, for interpretation, if you wish." He now moved closer to her, sat down, and lowering his voice said, "This is not the way to say farewell to our son. Or don't you want him to have some peace of mind when he gets to Lagos. Cheer up my dear." Father's voice had an unprecedented gentleness. He placed his hand on mother's shoulder and shook her as though they were old lost-but-found friends.

happen to me, to any one of the family. Our ancestors will protect us from the evil plans of our enemies, and the devil. Do not worry on my account; I will come to no harm. And the road to Lagos, the major roads, are safer these days what, with the massive anti-crime campaign by the police, and the efforts of the Road Safety Corps. Their chairman was given a chieftaincy title in Lagos for reducing road accidents by a third. You saw it on TV yesterday. Didn't you?"

My valedictory speech had such profound effect on my mother that, rather than give her optimism, it eroded the last traces of hope in her eyes. They were vacant, and strange like an old abandoned house.

"Mama, let me assure you, I will phone uncle Achebe as soon as I get to Lagos today. That should do, shouldn't it, Mama? Please, cheer up. Your face can make the children sick for days." I got up, stretching myself with a long yawn.

"I am not seeing you off." Then she added, "not today."

"Then pray for me."

"My only prayer is that you don't leave."

She turned away and I started towards her, but my father entered the room, sending a draught of cold, comforting air into the room infested with maternal passion, and fear.

"Mama Chidi, you act like a child," father chided her. "What is a mere dream, sorry, nightmare, that you should spoil the child's heart on a day like this. I have told you we will discuss this dream of yours in detail after he has gone. Then, we will go to a diviner, or to your kinsman, the prophet, for interpretation, if you wish." He now moved closer to her, sat down, and lowering his voice said, "This is not the way to say farewell to our son. Or don't you want him to have some peace of mind when he gets to Lagos. Cheer up my dear." Father's voice had an unprecedented gentleness. He placed his hand on mother's shoulder and shook her as though they were old lost-but-found friends.

Tito started barking outside. When he stopped, I noticed that the night bird also had ceased its song. The sun, emerging unscathed from the dawn battle, was now up. Soft wafts of sunlight filtered into the room expelling the last remnants of darkness, although on mother's face were several intractable shadows.

"Mama Chidi, get up let's see him off to the park, or he will miss the early bus. Chidi, you are set? let's go."

"I am not going anywhere." Mother's voice surprised father. He stood there looking at her, but her eyes never left the family photograph. I thought her gaze could shatter the glass of the framed picture. But it did not.

"Well, if you insist, but . . ." Father stopped himself, turned towards me and I saw his face was beginning to darken and more creases appeared on his temple.

"Chidi, you must go now. Your mother will get hold of herself, I am sure. You must write us as soon as you get there. Do not forget. Your mother would be looking forward to that. Do you hear?"

"But I told her I will phone through Uncle Achebe."

"All the better."

"Papa Chidi, it wasn't a dream. Believe me it wasn't . . ." Mother burst into a hysterical sob. I made to hold her and console her, but father took me by the shoulder as he led me away, out of mother's room.

Listening to my mother's voice as I left our house, the memories of days long gone, crowded my mind. The days of Sunday School where we learnt almost every page of the Bible by heart. The image of Rachel wailing for her lost children loomed in the wilderness in my head. I also remembered my scripture teacher's usual analogy between human mothers and the mother hen that would raise dust, thrash the air anytime the hawk threatened her chicks. None of us in the class liked the teacher for the disrespectful comparison. My mother did not wail

like Rachel, but the howling ominousness of her muted cry carried the same passionate weight as Rachel's, if not more.

Uche and Nnamdi had since turned quiet and cold, and their faces were wiped clean of the earlier excitement. They stood at the veranda watching in silence as my father whose hand never left my shoulder, led me away towards the bus station. He did all the talking. Tito whined, and barked twice facing the sun, but did not wag his tail. And he did not follow us to the road. I turned and waved to them, smiling as much as my spirit could allow. But when Uche and Nnamdi raised their hands, their eyes were clouded and unblinking. My mother's voice told them all was not well with my leaving. The bird started her dirge again, faintly, till I could hear it no more.

I turned away, walking. And my father was still talking.

The bus had just left the Benin toll gate when a young man stood up from behind and walked to the front, just behind the driver's seat. He was warmly dressed, and clean. As he passed my seat, a trail of sweet-smelling perfume went after him. On his face were two prominent eyes that glowed with confidence. The kind of arrogant confidence seen in those filled with a sense of divine favour. His moustache sat above his lips with a severe coordination, like a manicured garden. His teeth matched the whiteness of his long-sleeve shirt. He had a long black silk tie around his stiff collars, and touching his dark well-cut trousers. His shoes looked expensive. Pure leather, perhaps. The man had a domineering corporate air about him. Like those yuppie stock brokers or bankers at Marina. A blanket of silence fell on the air and moods in the bus as soon as the man took his place. The silence waited, patiently.

"My brothers and sisters, as we make this appointed journey to Lagos, I most humbly praise the Almighty for shielding us from the arrows of the evil one." His voice was clear with an authoritative sharpness that was surprising. But I was jolted to a

consciousness by the words of the young man who had in my mind evoked the image of a corporate banker.

I had seen several itinerant preachers who displayed their religious sophistry in as many unlikely places as inconvenient times. I had seen also, irate audiences boo, or threaten preachers in hotels, casinos, motor parks and university auditoria. Once a white-robed preacher was given a black eye and bleeding nose by a certain man who saw his person publicly insulted and by the preacher when the man of God denounced, and damned fornicators and adulterers in the neighborhood who were no less than dogs on heat in the devil's sinful kingdom. But the man standing in the bus did not wake such memories. Neither could his presence remind me of any of the shout-and-holler evangelists I had seen before. Not even the American-trained preachers on TV. He was a curious aberration. His voice made the silence in the bus deep and hungrier, possibly because the sleepers in the bus heavily outnumbered those who were struggling to keep awake.

"The Holy Book in Matthew Chapter Twenty-three, verses three to four, told us of this age. The age that will see the great day of reckoning when Satan will be unleashed unto the world and the lives of men, the age preceding the glorious coming of the Saviour." He raised his leather-bound bible, stared at it, and continued, more forcefully.

"But the righteous will persevere until the great coming. Rumours of war, starvation, pestilence, and the ever present armed men of the night, and other harbingers of doom, can never touch anyone bathed in the Holy Blood." The silence left at the mercy of the preacher's voice took the colour of rainy night. A snore from the back ceased as those who were asleep were hushed awake by those who listened. I closed the book I was reading and thought. I thought of nothing, and when I was about to wander into nothingness, I was called back by the voice. "So my brothers and sisters, you must turn away from your evil ways.

You must look for your salvation before the assault of the evil one. In chapter twenty-four, verse thirty-four, we are told that this generation will not pass away before His coming. Brethren, where will you be when, as we are told, He comes like a thief?"

His question took form, jetted to the end of the bus, rebounded, gathering more energy flew back to him, inspiring him the more. He bent his head, made barely audible noises, clutching his bible to his chest. He then raised his face, inspected his audience, and appearing impressed by what he saw continued. His voice was strained but exhortatory.

"Today, you must give your life to Christ. This moment, this hour, death may knock at the door. Will you open it to Satan, or to the blissful glory of paradise?" His face softened into a faint smile. He closed his eyes and prayed loudly, summoning all available angels to ferry the bus and its occupants who had given themselves to The Word to the promised land, and to Lagos. He implored the flaming sword of Michael and the racing chariots of the horsemen of Apocalypse to smash to dust Satan and all evil men. His prayer swept him aloud till he reached new heights of religious ecstasy. His diction acquired new energy, moving gradually into the terrains of undifferentiated syllables. Suddenly he tripped and fell into the terminal valley of built-up exhaustion.

"In Jesus Name!"

"Amen!" A deafening chorus greeted the preacher's supreme performance. Even the driver, who was overtaking a huge timber-laden truck, joined in the tumultuous "Amen". A new silence approached but was fought back by a rolling cavalry of murmurs built up by several heads bowed in prayer. The preacher's now hoarse voice still modulated the tempo of the disorganized prayer session. I was impressed by the sight and thereupon decided on writing a poem, but I saw, pages of a short story forming, instead.

"In Jesus Name!!!"

"Amen!!!" A few screamed "Alleluia!"

Another wave of silence blew across everyone in the bus whose window curtains danced to the wind, fluttering vulgarly, in defiance of the religious atmosphere. I opened my book and made more notes.

The preacher, with a triumphant air of an accomplishment, began handing out religious tracts to all but those who gave him no encouraging look of brotherhood or showed no obvious signs of immediate repentance. I got none. But as he made his way back to his seat, another young man stood up from the front. He turned round facing us, cleared his throat and remained silent. He wasn't a particularly handsome fellow, but something in his face made you want to look at it again. His eyes could have looked more intelligent if they were behind a pair of bi-focal glasses. They were large and moved as though they could see immaterial things. And shone as if he woke up yesterday. When the preacher took his seat, the man broke into the spontaneous smile of one who was about to give testimony to the prompt arrival of his salvation.

"Thank you my brother pastor as you don invite God to follow us to Lagos. You do well. But my people, before we reach Lagos, I get some small articles and medicines I go like make you see." He was a salesman. He bent down, pulled out a large black bag from under his seat and before he opened it, he straightened up, and smiled again.

"Sorry I never tell you my name. Well, some of you wey de use this bus everytime suppose to know me. My name is Original Doctor Jack, and I dey sell original European medicines from America, Czechoslovakia, and Russia! Thank you." He smiled again, looked round for approving nods, winked at imaginary acquaintances and customers, and returned to his big black bag. A small weather-beaten vulcanizer's signboard standing precariously in front of an ancient bamboo shed showed we were approaching Ore. I looked at my watch. It was twelve-thirty and my stomach rumbled quietly. Ore was the place where most

Lagos-bound drivers stopped for refreshments at the transit restaurants. I hoped our driver would. "This my medicine go cure many problems and diseases. It can save you from malaria, all kinds of headache and pains, even pile, gonorrhoea, and other woman diseases."

"Where is this your magic medicine," a female voice sneered.

"Na from heaven you bring am? a male voice followed.

"E remain small to reach heaven my brother. I import am direct from," he hesitated, "Czechoslovakia. This my medicine no dey for market." He bent down again and made a showy attempt to fish the drug out of his black bag. Everyone watched in anticipation. But the bus swerved, tossing the salesman into the arms of a sleeping young woman as the driver pedalled the brake, bringing the vehicle to a sharp halt.

"Mother of Jesus!" The preacher exclaimed from the back.

"Mother fucking fool!" A booming voice cursed.

"Foolish man. Wetin you de drive?"

But the driver was quiet and still. So also were all at the front seats. I looked out through the window to see what was wrong. One of the many police check points, perhaps. But a volley of gunfire from what must have been automatic weapons screamed at the confusion and quiet in the bus. I ducked behind the seat in front of me.

"March out with your hands on your heads. Everybody. Any nonsense we shoot. March out!"

At the door were two masked but well-dressed awesome men wielding rusty Kalashnikovs that could have been salvaged from the Civil War. They started hitting, slapping and pummelling everyone who passed through the door as if they were the gatemen of hell. The orgy of violence drew screams rarely heard in the human species, religious epithets, and pleas for mercy. Many more masked men appeared ripping trousers and gowns, pulling out purses, wallets and breasts with equal relish. One of

them, short and stout, had a face mask that gave him a tragic theatrical look. From behind his mask, two amber-coloured eyes glistened as he came to the preacher.

In a brief moment, the eyes ran from the leather shoes up the trousers, to the brilliant silk tie and down to the leather-bound book which the preacher held solemnly to his chest. The two pairs of eyes met. Each was scornful. But the masked one, reacting to the challenge, whirled his gun in a wide arc and the butt caught the preacher in the stomach. He doubled, but held his treasure tightly. He straightened up with an inspired jerk and raised the bible in a triumphant manner facing the masked one. The preacher's eyes glimmered.

"In the name of Jesus, you must . . ."

Bullets from the robber's gun cut him short. He reeled and fell back. His bible flew up and when it landed, it was immersed in his blood. I was sick. Several butterflies hovered above my head and went into me. They found their way into my empty stomach and continued their macabre dance.

Taking cue from the others who before me had submitted to such violence as could only be seen when anti-riot police confronted demonstrating students, I stripped myself naked, save for my underpants. I waited for my own initiation into the cult of violence. One of the masked men who had a familiar athletic gait came upon me. I thought he was going to hit me or even shoot. But his eyes, partially hidden behind a multi-coloured mask, surveyed my face briefly. Then his gun pointed downwards. I had forgotten to handover my watch. Deep inside me, something screamed. I trembled, tearing my watch from my wrist. It dropped, and the man bent down to pick it up. His mask unhooked from the back, and fell off. He cursed and jerked round. It was too late. He ran to the one who had shot the preacher. Seconds later, the one who ran away returned. He wore no mask. His bulging eyes were still the same but with a marked ruddy tint. They sought mine and locked on them: There

was a pained look of regret in his face. And he sweated. The muzzle of his gun moved up slowly till I could see the dark round tunnel. I looked into it and saw my mother on the floor of her room clutching the family photograph to her bosom. I then heard her voice coming from the great plain of eternal apparitions.

His hand trembled. His finger found the trigger. Then he said something, looking away.

I summoned all strength and screamed my mother's name, reaching out to her.

His index finger jerked backwards.

"Chidi! Chidi!! I am here, my son." Mother's hand was on my temple. "You were screaming, my dear."

MAIK NWOSU**King Ignatius**

Death was on the loose in New Maroko that season. Ignatius was the first to go. Ignatius the Hunchback. A beefy fellow with agitated eyes and the tattoo of a fish on his usually clean-shaven head, he would make jokes and arresting remarks about his hump: "It is not the fault of the hunchback that he carries on him the secrets of all the earth, That is what is locked away in vaults of the hump. And that is why the hunchback is both a champion mountaineer and swimmer. He has tanks of oxygen locked away in his hump and a life-buoy all strapped on. And when I walk down the street, does the hump not speak to you? It is a mobile pulpit preaching the nature of man and his existence. The hump, the hump - it is the voice of God!"

He had appeared in Maroko one dawn with an unforgettable story of being on land-exile. "The mysteries of the river are as deep as its bottom," he had pronounced, and the fact that he had until recently been a ferryman had lent weight to his words. "I used to ferry people across the Niger. 'Come on board, come on board, the Hump will take you there. Money-back guarantee in case of accident.' Nothing like a money-back guarantee, even an improbable one, to pull in customers. Man, I had the most fetching canoe for miles around - I had modelled it after a ship, can you imagine that? - and there were days I had to select my passengers amidst the rush to get on board. And I knew the river. My father and his father before him and my father's father's father all had been ferrymen. And let me tell you, the river is not just

water flowing; it is a flux of depths upon depths.

"So, when one morning, a dashing, young lady came up to board my canoe, I was in two minds whether to take her. There was something about her that set off alarm bells in my ancient brain. You see, the river never claims what does not belong to it, which is why it regularly deposits bodies on its banks or sucks in treasures and leaves them unravaged. But the river that rejects is also the river that passionately, even implacably, claims its own. When I saw this dashing young thing and I saw the look in her eyes, noted her ankle-chains, remarked her geography, I said to myself: 'Ignatius, you know the river... is she not of the river?' But she was all pleas; she had to get to Ahaba within the hour and there was no other way to travel that fast. At last, her pleas melted my hardening heart and I rowed off with her on board."

"Right in the middle of the river, it happened. The water rose in great heaves, obviously intent on capsizing my canoe. But what is a hunchback, if the vaults of his hump are empty of the secrets of the earth and the rivers? I knelt down in my canoe and called the river by its eight secret names, and I put out my hand to touch the waves and I pleaded with the spirit of the Niger: 'It is I, Ignatius. Ignatius, the Hunchback. Between us, O water-maid, there is no schism. But you know the children of these days; they know nothing, although nothing knows them. Allow us this safe passage, this one time.' But the waves rose higher and higher. Another moment and all would have been lost. 'O water-maid,' I cried out once more, 'if you let us pass through this one time, just this one time, I will sacrifice to you a whole goat at the hour of configurations and I shall chasten myself with three years of exile.' And at last, the rage of the river subsided and I rowed like never before across its expanse. I had gained a safe passage but I had also lost my livelihood.

"The sacrifice was not easy. A whole goat is not a cockroach, you know. It costs more money than a fisherman makes

sometimes in a whole week. But I had made a pact with the river. So, the next day, at the hour of flux between the night and the day, I appeared at its bank and cast off the promised goat. At dawn, it had been washed ashore, but its head was gone. The river, the river - it is the repository of many sacrifices. Afterwards, I set off on the road of life and it led me to Maroko, a denizen of the river washed ashore at the foot of three hills. I am a ferryman on exile, which is why I have scraped off my hair and tattooed a fish atop my dome. But the river is in my blood and to it I shall return in due course."

A strange prophecy. He had spent three years in Maroko before the compelled re-location to New Maroko, off the coast of the Atlantic Ocean. Ignatius had been one of the first to arrive; he had transformed himself from an odd-jobber to a fisherman and soon became known all over for his prize catches. He has already garnered so many unofficial laurels that when the New Maroko fishing festival was announced, it had been interpreted to signal a launching event for the formal crowning of Ignatius the Hunchback.

The announcement was made by Shanka, a wily character who had been the leader of the hunters' guild in Maroko and who had surfaced in New Maroko barely six months ago. With no hills to hunt in in the new settlement, he had set up "in business" in a back-room in an old one-storey building; a finger-post announced his Kaita Investments. No one knew precisely what Shanka did those days, but there was ample evidence that whatever it was was flourishing. Within a year, he became a car-owner; the folds of his clothes multiplied and thickened, and he began to "speak in slow motion" - as Ignatius would jest. When he went about in his car, on which he had mounted a loud-speaker, with some members of his guild, announcing the fishing festival "to inaugurate the Christmas Season and the anniversary of the exodus," not many paid him any heed. But when they went about erecting massive shelters on the water-front, many

more began to take an interest in his announcements. When he announced the prime prize of a cow and had the animal paraded round the settlement, New Maroko at last began to bustle with preparations. As the bustle grew, so did the questions.

"So, what is in it for Shanka?"

"How come hunters are promoting a fishing competition, with themselves as the judges?"

Haile was at the fore of those who expanded the horizon of such questions. But, like many others, he was also one of those who thronged the water-front on the appointed day.

The competition was as open as it was fierce. Many were the contestants. Few were the rules. "Just get into the water - on foot, on canoe or whatever - and haul out the biggest fish, and if the scale here says so, you go home with the cow," Shanka announced to the contestants and the spectators, many of whom had come to New Maroko especially to witness the event.

"Ashikodi, look after the cow for me," Ignatius called out with supreme confidence before he rowed off in his ship-like canoe, his clean-shaven head gleaming in the sun as if it had just been oiled. Although his land-exile was over, he had taken to keeping his head that way. "What is the worth of a tattoo buried underneath a forest of hairs?" he would say. "And what is memory without its tattoo?"

Ashikodi was Ignatius's closest friend. How the friendship had started was a mystery of sorts, but the two were often to be seen together, although, while Ignatius evidently had a passion for work, Ashikodi appeared to have as strong an aversion for it. Both notorious and popular for his many exhibitions of his head-walking skills, Ashikodi was not resident in New Maroko but lived in Coconut Island, a nearby settlement populated mainly by fishermen from neighbouring countries. Commonly accepted as one of the unhinged idlers drawn to the bustle of New Maroko, he had made a name for himself for being both ubiquitous and

a ventriloquist.

When a shout was raised far out in the water, not many of the spectators quite understood whether it was one of triumph or alarm. When, however, they saw a ship-like canoe buck up like a flying boat before capsizing, the cloud of doubt cleared. Even as the other canoes converged around the one in distress, rescue-leaders launched off from the beach in stand-by canoes. A shuddering stillness descended on the spectators. When, eventually, the canoe was towed back to the water-front but the whereabouts of its owner remained unknown, the explanatory tales grew big heads and long tails. Some said Ignatius the Hunchback had been swallowed by a big fish he had attempted to haul in. A fierce fight had ensued between him and the fish and, although he had fought valiantly, he had eventually lost out to its greater might. Others swore the tattoo on his dome had suddenly become a real fish-dragon and had sucked him into the belly of the water with emissions of fire. Some there were who reported that the hunchback had actually caught a prize fish and had hauled it in but had simultaneously vaporized, his hump disappearing first. Shanka announced that the competition had been cancelled and that the cow would be slaughtered, after the period of mourning, and shared among the people in honour of "the Hump who would have been Champ." His legend began to grow.

"You don't hear the latest about Shanka?"

"Ah, that Shanka is a first-rate fellow, after all."

"He is the great, new revelation of New Maroko. Life na wa-o!"

"The Lord has given and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord," Ashikodi intoned endlessly at the funeral. Beyond the event, it became his constant refrain. That season, after the death of Ignatius the Hunchback, he was overflowing with biblical pronouncements. When he was not blessing the name of the Lord for giving and taking away, he chanted:

"Blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy, blessed are the pure in spirit for they shall see God."

"Hey, what are you talking about?" challenged Haile when he burst into his shop one evening muttering his new incantations.

"How can the Hump not see the god of killer-fishers now?" he returned and continued on his way. In Prizni's café he recounted a strange dream-vision in which Ignatius the Hunchback was a prince living away from home. "He was the Hump Prince or Prince Hump, whichever. And then his father, the king, died. The king-makers sent for him to come home and ascend his father's throne. You know, the tradition of ages beyond and above the Hump. "Go tell them," he said to the messenger, "my kingdom is not of this earth. I am fine where I am, just fine." But that same day, he went mad. His people were bothered. They now had no king and their prince was mad in exile. So they went to the river and pleaded with the water spirit to save them - in return for a commensurate sacrifice. When she appeared to the Hump Prince as a dashing, young woman, he could not resist her; she seduced him and enticed him homewards. The moment he set foot on his homeland, he became well again. But the mermaid had also fallen in love with him and instead of taking him to his people took him into the depths of the river. In frustration, his people put a goat, with the tattoo of a fish on its forehead, on the throne, and called it King Ignatius."

*"King Ignatius" is excerpted from *Invisible Chapters*, a novel in progress.

MAIK NWOSU**Christmas 1995**

Christmas 1995
- the end of history
it began with you and i
humping for aquiline memories
in mosquito palace
triangles before tree-angles
traversing the arab quarter next street
i am a ghost choir-master
flailing foregone arms
at an infinite mass for the dead
here the suns of kush chant down the sky
with firecrackers
primed for salvaging detonations
browning pillars of salt
beckon through hazes of mascara
from bleating corridors

semen and blood, blood and semen
i could wish for another christmas
now the road farms out
its revelations testaments of the season
in the nimble distances of fore-oaths
a white cross towers
above sun-conscripted pews
like an interminable solemnity

the toll-gate attendant
winks at me furiously
like a rogue pimperl
he knows his pockets he knows his winks
in the aisle
spirits of a latter ascension
hymn for souls with carnivorous chastity
flogging their babylonian *mire-acles*
to galilean deaths

out the window
ashen wayside markets
agitate for absent buyers
you must wait
traders from forests of bamboo and kwashiorkor
the buyers will come
when the churches close
brimming with homilies
haggling for every kobo
blood on the road
reeling unicorns beside a blazing bus
still, the road hungers like eternity
between me and the famished road
a burnished pact of passage
you who must summon the wind
to a conclave of scales and gridlocks
yes, i still remember
the rites of passageway
and the road remembers me too
here at last therefore
the thirty vowels of my nativity
here the world began
and here it must end

before and after aspecting shamans
of distances

yesterday, a man was tied to the stake
and shot by land-robbers and thieving chiefs
who must hook pieces of the sun
in their shoal of darkness
today, you are a chest-thumping cantata
proclaiming its immaculate self
at the crossroads of the world
to you immaculate city of darkness greetings of the season
to those who chant for life and liberty
behind barricades of tradition and silence
testaments of the season

"o bethlehem

*how many ships did come sailing in
from all the ports of the world?"*

to those who would build bridges of faith
with tons of nails and iron-rods
testaments of the season

"santa-santa

what gifts remain

when the kitty is empty?"

to those who would compel
options of death
between mother and wife
between father and son
wherein the incandescence of the season's end?
now the pleas are all choice morsels of history
sentence me therefore for all crimes
except the guilt of logarithms
sentence me even in soot-courts
of the innermost fringes
questing for pontifical acclamation

but the pope, like me, is also a man
like me, he is also a pilgrim

omens to quills and ethanol
what then will the river be
without all its fingers?

christmas 1995

- the beginning of history
it ended with me sunning with cosmetologists
in cheap motel balconies
uz remains the password between us
and the chimera of magic lanterns, ama
and your secret knowledge still swamps me
cupping breasts to quickening nipples
thighs of highlife to orifices of jazz
blood and semen semen and blood
translucent promises headier
than the conniving walls of cheap motels
i could wish for another christmas
wishes become nights
giant rats in wooden crevices
diligently scratching away the peace
levitating cockroaches bearing sacramental plagues
whining grenades of mosquitoes
sworn to a massacre
whirlpools of darkness
tearing down the gates of light

nights become wishes
but the night has nine incarnations
and i am the vain horseman of its apocalypse
- until your invitational embrace
rhapsodized my nightmares of a second nativity

uz still remains the password between us
and the dreadful nights
of flighty homecomings
in the fog of dawn
away from a history of bitter kolanuts
and bristling rosaries
i descant anew and always
your feline praise-names
to your reincarnating debts, ama
farewells of the season
between me and the ghost road
a surging parable of motion
our conclave is over
your magisterial excellencies
the season is ended
and the world still is spherical
to those who pray punctually
to the patron-saint of finger biters
farewells of the season
to your monarchical chaplets
still smelling of jerusalem
still dangling between east and west
but implacable in judgement

farewells of the season
to those who moon-light
the boundless perimeters of tomorrow
with hannibals of yesterday
farewells of the season between us
knighting is become a festival
of bush fowls and parisian salad
a catechism of extravagant novenas
scripted anew in your parish councils
you the old icarus

i the new daedalus
with only the dirging river niger between us
without its boat-load of mungo parks
many many more discoveries await us
in our amethyst corridors
where strange ghouls now speak
of margarine and ice-fish
with the tongue of the sawmill

what then will christmas be
o merchants of twilight
without its crystals and calabashes
in those village conclaves
where we pledged rainbows of life
the earth still reverberates
in assent
and still and ever we are one
fingers of the niger
farming out from clemency into clarity
between us therefore and our blue thunders
only a parable of extreme unction
and i am left still swimming
in a sea of beauty.

CHUKWUEMEKA AGBAYI**Mental Torture**

George Okoro took a deep breath and lowered himself into the bath tub. He had just come back from the office and, as he relaxed in the tub, the water dissolved away his tiredness. He splashed the water and soap lather over his body, scrubbing vigorously, and lounged some more in the tub.

George sighed with contentment, as he got out of the bath-tub, towelled, and slipped into a bath-robe before stepping into the sitting room, the sweetness of the bath still lingering on his mind like the fading fragrance of an ageing perfume. He nearly fell down as he stepped on the arm of a chair turned upside down on the floor. He caught himself and stopped to see what was wrong.

It was then that he noticed: his sitting-room was in a complete mess. "Christ have mercy!" George swore aloud as his heartbeats thumped against his chest. Unconsciously, his face contorted in a mixture of fear, panic and wonder. His thick lips hung open, bright red; gone from his cheeks was the healthy coffee hue, as they sagged from shock. Little globules of water sailed unnoticed down his large, hairy arms, like dewdrops down tree leaves after percolating in the early morning sun. Quickly, the condition in his living room spread through and suffused his numbed mind like drops of dettol in water. Everything was turned upside down. Even his long and heavy settee. Incredible! His television set and compact disc player were on the thick, multi-colour Arabian rug. Their remote control modems lay carelessly near them. This had all happened within the ten minutes or less he had spent in the bathroom. And he hadn't heard any sound.

whatsoever. It have been swallowed up by his splashing in there, George thought. It occurred to him that whoever did this might still be around, waiting to upturn him like another piece of furniture.

George ducked back into the bathroom, instinctively, noiselessly too, and continued his survey from there. Just then his eyes caught the white paper on the table. It was a distinct white against the smooth nut-brown surface of the centre table - the only thing that was not moved in the room. And it was not there before. George tip-toed into the sitting-room and picked up the paper. On it was scribbled in neat cursive writing: *I knew you were in the bathroom. I could have killed you, but I do not want to yet. Meanwhile, nothing has been destroyed here. Just rearranged, like I am going to rearrange you when eventually I decide to get down to the kill. Bye.* The note was signed by Mr Perters. George felt his blood slowly congeal in his veins as cold sweat broke out on his face.

George walked to the entrance door to check it. Sure enough it was open. He cursed his habit of leaving his door unlocked. He locked the door firmly, and checked again to confirm before walking back into the room.

"Mr Perters Odogbolu," George called quietly. "Mr Perters Odogbolu," he repeated to himself, almost silently. The name brought to life dead memories. George remembered the day he had met Mr Perters. That was about two weeks ago, shortly before he employed a secretary. A tall, clean shaven, soft spoken man with glassy eyes had walked into his office and had introduced himself as Mr Perters. The man had placed an order for a personal computer and an electric typewriter. These he had paid for in cash from an evidently expensive portfolio. George had given the man a receipt from his own stock of fake receipts, and had promised delivery 24 hours later. Two days after, Mr Perters came back demanding an explanation for the non-delivery of his order. George denied ever seeing Mr Perters in all

his life.

"I have a good head for faces and figures, and I am sure you are the gentleman I paid to," Mr Perters had calmly replied, and explained that he was given a receipt for the money he paid.

When he produced the receipt, George had, even more calmly, explained to Mr Perters that it was fake, and, therefore, couldn't have been issued by him. He had shown Mr Perters some original receipts and, to buttress his point, had pointed out just a few discrepancies between the originals and the fake one. Then George had, in an easeful manner, as if that was the most natural thing to do, proceeded to tear the fake receipt to shreds.

Mr Perters had not flown into a rage. He had not thrown any tantrums. He did not create a scene as George had expected and was used to seeing others do. Mr Perters had only looked George coldly in the eye and said: "You think you are smart, eh? We'll see." And quietly, with an unruffled dignity, he had walked out of the office.

This being an unprecedented reaction, George could only stare. Some minutes after Mr Perters had gone, George was still staring. Then he dismissed the man and the incident from his mind, his experience with others he had treated similarly having taught him that most threats were empty and cheap.

George remembered Mr Perters's eyes. Long after he had pushed the man out of his mind and had ceased to worry because of the man's strange reaction, his memory of the man's eyes lingered. The eyes shone like long tall glasses washed too clean with omo and filled with sparkling spring water. But they had a disturbing effect on George's soul. Staring into them had been drowning in a vortex of fire or losing grip and sliding smoothly down a cauldron of acid.

And now this. George's eyes went round the room again. Did Mr Perters really think this kind of joke would get him back his money? He must be a great joker, this Mr Perters, or pompously queer. But that was a close brush anyway, must be more careful

next time, George admonished himself.

He crumpled the note, retrieved the waste basket from somewhere and replaced it at the west end of the room, then dropped the note into it. George then returned the furniture to their places, carried his state-of-the-art compact disc player back to its place. Gingerly, he picked up his notebook computer and mobile phone set from the floor and carefully set them down on the small table beside his favourite armchair. As he worked, he wondered why most men never realized that life was a game without rules, that life was all about winning, all about aggression and calculation. Life was for winners.

George carried his aquarium to its usual place on the glass table by the big colour television. He stood and stared at the fishes. He had always been enthralled by the similarities between life in the sea and life on land: fishes living and swimming in water, men living and walking in air; big fishes eating small ones strong men crushing small men.

Aloud he said, "And from those who do not have, even the little they have shall be taken away from them. And they talk about justice and fairness. Is life itself fair? The end always justifies the means. Always. Mr Perters, a big joke." He found his statement profoundly funny and began to laugh aloud to himself.

George spent the evening at a drinking parlour nearby. The bar was almost full when he got there. He shared a table with two other men he met occasionally. One was balding, short and thick-set. He spoke with the air of a man who had been around the world. The other was of average height, average intelligence, average ambition, and - George could tell from the way the man was always asking for the price of any item before he ordered - average income. They were talking politics and current affairs when he came, and because it kept his mind off the thought of death, he gladly joined them. Together, they talked about the nation's unending transition to civil rule programme, about the

latest police effort at curbing crime - Operation Sweep, how they shot people first and questioned them afterwards, and about the galloping inflation that was gradually making all kinds of food items unaffordable. The short man said the inflation was no longer galloping. It was soaring like an eagle in flight, but without the grace of an eagle, though. They drank beer and stout and ate cow tail and goat head. The average man expressed his gratitude about still being able to afford beer. Most other men, he observed, had now resorted to palmwine or *burukutu* or even *ogogoro*, just for a few moments of forgetfulness.

It was almost midnight when George walked back to his flat. His ebullient spirit froze immediately he saw a white paper on the centre table in the sitting room. He was almost afraid to go into his house. This was no longer his idea of a joke. But this was his house and he had to go in. With a grimace he swallowed his fear, like a stale cup of beer. He invoked courage, went in and picked up the note. On it was written, in the same cursive writing: *I knew you were at Mama Mia's. I could have killed you then, but I do not want to kill you yet. Why hurry? I will get you, whatever you do, wherever you are. Enjoy yourself while you can. Bye.* It was signed by Mr Perters.

George stood motionless in the centre of his sitting-room, shocked. In the octopus-grip of the silence of night. This was no longer a joke. It meant Mr Perters now trailed him all over town. He could be dead any minute. It was a situation George didn't like at all. Terror was something he liked giving, not taking. Which was why he always intimidated into obsequiousness anybody he duped. George would have preferred it if Mr Perters had raved that day for that would have given him the opportunity to cow him thoroughly with threats and intimidation.

George stealthily headed towards the inner room. He paused at the door and listened to know if there was a second party around. Hearing nothing, he went into the room, and from out of the corner of his eyes, caught a fleeting shadow. George spun

round immediately, but it was only the shadow of the rotating fan he had left on earlier. He sighed with relief.

George kept seeing shadows, kept imagining Mr Perters hidden in every dark corner of the room. George saw terror take form and breathe down his thick neck and, in his determination to shake it off and also avoid a bullet visiting him with death, kept jumping from one corner of the room to another, like a frenzied pastor of a Pentecostal church. George brought out his travelling bag and began to pack his things. He took only the very essentials. It was no longer safe to be in this house - at least not for now. He could not imagine how Mr Perters lets himself into the house. For all he knew, Mr Perters might even be in the room now waiting to kill him in his sleep, which would be terrible: it was better to meet death eyeball to eyeball. Because it was too late to knock anybody up, or to start looking for hotel accommodation, George decided to pass the night in his house and move tomorrow.

The next morning, George strode into his office with a confidence he really did not feel.

"Good morning, sir," his secretary cheerfully greeted, looking petite and antiseptically clean in a tight fitting pink suit.

"Good morning, Suzzy. How're you today?"

"I'm fine, sir. And you, sir, I hope you had a good rest?"

"Yes, I did," George lied. "Any messages for me?"

"None yet, sir."

"Okay." George walked past her. Then he stopped and turned.

"Suzzy," he called.

"Sir?"

"Cancel all appointments for today. I don't want to see anybody."

"Is everything all right, sir?"

"Yes, Suzzy," George lied again, then added, as an afterthought, "I just don't feel up to them." Which wasn't really a lie.

"Remember you were supposed to meet with the Pater Council over the allegation that we are illegally marketing . . .

"I know, Suzzy, I do remember, but I don't want to see anybody. Cancel all appointments for today." George stressed and he turned and walked into his office.

The air-conditioner was already on. The room was chilled and neat. Everything was in place. Suzzy was undoubtedly efficient and George reminded himself to commend her about that later. He walked past the door leading to his private urinal, past his table, to the sliding glass window behind his executive black leather chair; there he stood for some minutes staring at life outside, his mind a hamper of unarranged thoughts. Outside his window, up above, baleful clouds floating lazily about the sky prophesied rain, cast a dark gloomy shadow over all life. In the distance, from what looked like giant incense sticks stuck to equally giant stands haphazardly scattered across the city, smoke emanated and traced a course up the sky, a burnt offering to the sun god for a possible shower of warm sunlight. Sky scrapers towered above everything else. They always had a buoying effect on him. It was as if they carted the human spirit with them to star-heights. They signified the triumph of man. Mind over matter. Now, as always, the contemplation of Lagos city-scapes had a calming effect on his restless mind, so he pulled out his chair and sat down to work - or to worry, he wasn't sure which.

A little over an hour later, George felt an urge to urinate and he went into the urinal. When he finished, he took some time to examine himself in the full-length mirror in there. He looked impeccable in his dark blue three piece suit and matching polka dot tie. His muscular six feet frame accentuated the fit the suit gave. His chubby cheeks glossed in the light from the fluorescent tube above. He had a day's growth of beard, which saddened him. He always liked to wear a clean shave, as it made him look younger than his 38 years. But what time did he have to shave when he had to run out of his house fast? Yet he looked even

inch the successful chief executive he was. Who would believe that he had only just set out on his own, after a long stretch of unemployment. And how would he have been here where he was today but for cutting paths, taking detours, or creating them where they didn't exist? Real smart moves! And who said every short cut was a wrong cut. George chuckled to himself, contentedly.

Immediately he re-entered his office, he saw it - the dreaded white paper. This time it was glued to the glass window behind his chair, now slightly open, the window before which he had stood and surveyed the world outside. The sky scrapers behind that window lost their buoyancy, and had a whittling effect on George, instead. Like irokos cast in concrete, they stood cold, menacing, daunting. George stood staring at that piece of white terror, transfixed. Even in his office? There's no sanity anywhere in the world then, he told himself. George found himself walking closer to read the paper: *You wonder why I still let you live. It is out of love. The love of justice. For is justice not really love? What greater love can a man show his fellow than to give him the opportunity to learn the wickedness of his action. I could have blown off your head from this window before you went out. That I opened your window - slightly - symbolically attests to that. Packing out of your house will not do either. You see, I am not as close as your own shadow, for shadows die with darkness. I am your mind, your conscience. And no matter where you hide, I'll get you. But, not to worry, it'll soon be over. I promise you that.* Again, it was signed by Mr Perters.

Suddenly, all self control and reason left George, as if washed out by a strong detergent. Its suddenness can only be likened to the quick and total collapse of the walls of a fortification.

"Kill me. Kill me now," George screamed. "You are already killing me slowly. Finish it. Kill meeeee" His palms were rolled into fist-balls of rage.

Suzzy, George's cheerful secretary, ran into his office. George

ran to and pressed himself against the wall. He wanted squeeze himself into the wall. He thought it was Mr Perters.

"Mr George?" the secretary called, alarm in her voice.

"Go ahead. Kill me now," George replied.

"Mr George? What is the matter?" Alarm was now replaced shock.

"Leave me alone. Leave me allooonnnne." George screamed his clenched fists stretched out before him.

Whatever was the matter, George needed help, his secretary decided and ran out of the office, in search of it.

George brought out the fake receipts and held them with the tenderness of a mother for her little baby. Before tossing them out of the window, he caressed them with deep emotion. They were what had given him the sweet taste of the good life. But how soon the taste had gone rancid. He heaved a great sigh of impotence, and surrender. He had thought that Mr Perters was either a great fool or a great joker; but now he could see that Mr Perters was a smooth operator. Mr Perters had style and finesse. Life was a game all right, but this time, he, George Okoro, had played one game too many. Somewhere at the core of his being he had a sense that it was all over. There was no need to continue. Mr Perters would get him. That had already been proved. Mr Perters had promised him that too.

Just then George's face lit up. A shy smile played about his lips as an idea hit him inside the head. Yes, he nodded. He was going to show Mr Perters that he was not gamesome for nothing. He would have the last laugh yet. That overwhelming satisfaction that comes from having fulfilled a yearning, or from having won in a game, would elude Mr Perters Odogbolu. He would make sure of that.

George ran out of his office and through his secretary's. With even more speed he burst out of the office complex. People were too busy wondering what a well-dressed gentleman could be chasing so recklessly to stop him. It took two cars a few minutes of noisy, violent interaction to turn George into a mélange of bones, fluid, and flesh.

IFEANYI AJAEGBO**A Smile in the Dark**

"Dead man walking." A lone voice, sad and plaintive, rang out, piercing the darkness. It was like the harsh clang of metal against metal, stone against stone, soul against soul.

"Down the streets of hell." A myriad of voices responded. Drawing the last melodies of the lone voice, yet accentuating its sadness, its call.

"Dead man floating."

"Towards the gallows."

"Who will walk with the dead man?"

"Not I. Not I. Oh, not I."

"Dead man without a brother."

"I have never seen his sister."

"Dead man who must die alone."

"May the darkness of death welcome you."

The song continued outside, rising to a crescendo, each time the lone voice sang, falling to a muted sharp echo when the others responded. Inside the cell, I sat, my eyes fixed on a darkened spot on the wall before me.

Apparently, the inmates had been waiting for this moment, for even through their words, through the sound of their voices, I could hear the sound of footsteps approaching. It was a sound I had come to know so well since this small cell became my home. The footsteps belong to the man who led those condemned to die to the gallows. Called Baba Die here, he was always masked when he came to take his victims. It was rumoured that no one had ever seen his face, except at the point

of death. Individually, he would show them his face just before he killed them. That was a rumour, mind, just a rumour. The rumour also had it that no one he showed his face lived. He made sure they should die before he took off his mask.

Now he was here. Baba Die. None of the inmates knew who would die tonight. I did not know. It could be me. It could be one of the others. Part of the game they played with us was keeping us in the dark as to when we would die. However, the inmates sang for whoever it was. I discovered I could not sing with them those words I knew so well. Some force I could not understand had glued my tongue to the roof of my mouth. A taste, sanguine and bitter, was on my tongue.

Silently, in the absolute darkness, my ears sifted and juggled both sounds. The voices singing "Dead Man Walking". And the footsteps that appeared directionless and menacing. As I wondered who it was that would see the hangman's face tonight, my mind continued to ask what I was doing here. What I was doing in this dark shiny kind of hell, filled with absolutes, never a middle, never a compromise. This home of silence and solitude, where the soul died a quick gruesome death. As I listened to those soft steps, like those of a bride going to meet the groom, I asked myself who had arranged for me this marriage of death. Slowly, as if it wanted to forget, never to acknowledge, my mind began to remember.

First, it remembered the zeal born of the need to be. The zeal to create, to make something new out of nothingness. The zeal to be like Jehovah, God of the Christian, who made the earth from nothing. I wanted to create. I wanted to hold nothingness in my hands, and watch as it became something. I would, at this time, keep a blank sheet of paper before me and imagine it fill with words. Thought led to action. I started writing. Neruda, was it not you who once wrote that the poet is not a little god picked out by a mystical destiny. You lied Pablo, you lied because in the little world I created with my words, I was god.

Not just a little one. I could tell obvious truths, and expose obvious lies. More, I had visions of what I could do with the words whirling around in my mind like the waters of an stream.

I started writing. They came then. Men in a myriad of uniforms. Green, white, blue, grey, black. All shades. They came. Others came too, dressed in mufti. These ones came like ghosts. Nondescript and faceless, they had followed me wherever I went. They had hovered around me like mindless sub-human spirit entities, bent on tearing out what was on my mind for the whole world to see. They came in unmarked cars, without official number plates, walking on shiny shoes with crepe soles that made no noise. They came with soft words and reassuring smiles which later bred shiny guns and handcuffs and icy stares and voices that would chill the soul. They came to take me away, along with whatever piece of paper they could find. Someone wanted to make sure that every word I had written died.

Reactionary writer. Revolutionary writer. Rebel writer. Incendiary writer. Racial writer.

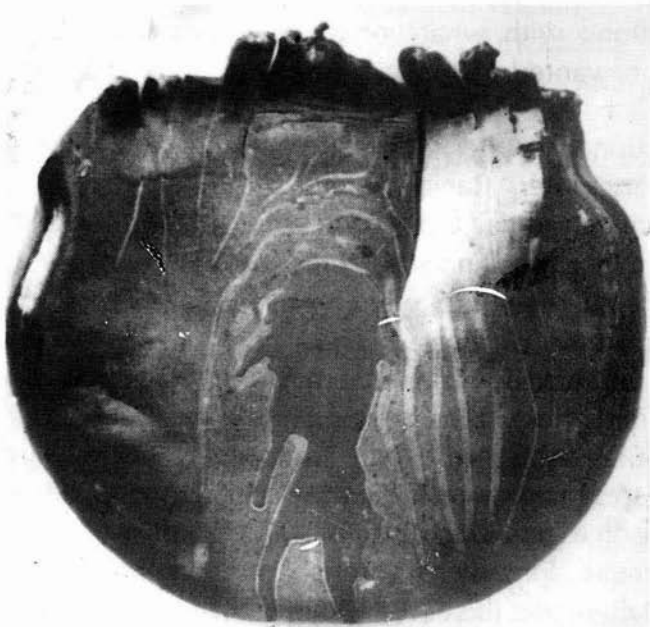
Where they got all those names they labelled me with because I put down words and ideas on paper, I would never know. I would never know, too, what it was in their nature which made them so afraid of ideas. I was thankful for whatever it was though, because by making them afraid of my ideas, it had made them afraid of me. It had also made me unafraid of them. They called me names, dredged from their wildest nightmares. Nightmares I had come to personify for someone. They took me from prison to prison so my family and friends would never know where I was. Finally they brought me here.

Now there was this song, and the footsteps. Listening to them, I wondered who they would kill tonight. Idly it occurred to me that I could die tonight. It could be me. I smiled into the darkness. Smiled because I was not afraid to die. Smiled because I would never die. My words had planted the seeds of

my soul in the millions of hearts all over the world who had read my works. I would never die. I was prepared, I discovered, for this moment. Somehow, I had always known it would end like this. You would know too if you lived in a country like mine.

The footsteps stopped before the door of my cell. The voices stopped too, now the others knew who would die. Calmly, I stood up and walked to the opposite wall. Even in the choking darkness, I knew my way. Standing before the wall, I said a personal prayer in my mind. I played back important words I had once said to myself before I wrote them down. When I finished, I thanked God for the life I had lived.

As the key turned in the lock, coldly calm, icily, I started hitting my head against the wall.



Ogoni: The Bloody Tale

ROMANUS EGUDU**Power and Poverty in Nigerian New Poetry in English**

Social justice has always been the primary concern of modern Nigerian poetry in English. But while the older poets (Christopher Okigbo, J.P. Clark Bekederemo, Wole Soyinka, and Gabriel Okara, for example) are contented with depicting and satirizing misdeeds and actions that offend social justice, the younger poets (published between 1970 and the present) not only deal with similar issues with like satirical attitudes, but also overtly try to inspire and mobilize the oppressed to fight injustice and change their piteous plight for the better. Notable among these younger poets are Niyi Osundare, Odia Ofeimun, Ossie Onuora Enekwe, Tanure Ojaide, and Okinba Launko.

These poets are generally militant and radical in their works, and through activist (often acid) rhetoric, they attack those leaders whom they perceive to be the authors of poverty among the masses. As if they were consciously organized into a school of poets, there is in their works a general movement from a declaration of a poetic manifesto, through a depiction of vicious as well as piteous spectacles, to the mobilization of the masses.

Niyi Osundare, who can be considered the leading poet of the group, says that poetry is the "harbinger of action" when it stirs many minds ("Poetry Is", *Songs of the Marketplace*; 1983: 3), and that the aim of poetry is to educate the people, to equip them with the knowledge of what is happening in their society, for "knowing is telling/Sawdust from garri" and "knowing is ending evil" ("Prisoners of Conscience", *Songs*, p.60). In view of this

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need for knowledge, he and his colleagues "will till all fal minds/and seed the earth/with a new creed" ("*New Cre Songs*, p.65). This new creed is a revolutionary one which meant to warn the ruling "elephants" that the social "for trodden bare by them can grow nothing "but twigs and famin and also to warn the "greedy fowl" of a leader "to stop guzz the eggs/of its own blood" ("*Homecoming*," *Songs*, p.66).

For his own programme of poetic action constructed around the image of belligerent "cocks", Odia Ofeimun declares they (the poets) are "the cocks/nursing defiant peals" which "rip open the clouds" of ignorance with the "teeth of our moo. They will also with their blood "change the pigment of the sl and by their persistent crowing bleed "away the nights' ignorance and evil deeds "with corrosive heraldings" ("*Neophytes*", *The Poet Lied and Other Poems*, p.61). This war-programme will be directed specifically against such real evil society as the "garbage in the streets", the "false house: prayer", and the "gaudy sins of robber barons", all of which n to be "swept away" ("*Flood and Fire*", *The Poet Lied*, p.47).

In order for their programme to be successfully executed another poet, Tanure Ojaide, states that there is need for them to be forthright, candid, direct and plain in their poetry: "we n speak the truth about ourselves to/ourselves" ("*Naked Wor The Eagle's Vision*, p.11). The duty of being true to oneself, eschewing deliberate self-deceit and all forms of hypocrisy should indeed be the responsibility of not just the poets, but entire populace, that is, if the moral health of society is to be ensured. But the poets can only speak for themselves about their own determination to cultivate the virtue of frankness for one since it appears to them that the managers of society have abandoned that virtue. Thus, the last poet of this manifesto, Okinba Launko, insists that what they need for the realization of their radical objectives are "the eloquent power of a flute" "the euphonious fountain of a pen" two symbolic tools of po

artistry, as against other types of tools or weapons that have been employed for mismanaging society ("Ifa and the Hunter", *Visions*, p.100).

Ossie Onuora Enekwe, in one of his poems, laments what he calls "the sin of my people/upon my people", which according to him, "cannot be cleansed" either by the "waters of Oguta" or "the fountain of Ibuzu" (a Hill and Deity in the poet's town, Afa ("Ripples of the Apocalypse," *Broken Pots*, p.19). This "sin" comprises the acts of oppression, deceit and corruption, as well as the attitude of insensitivity, which Enekwe and other younger poets associate the wielders of power with, and which they have represented with scaring images.

Osundare paints a picture of "fortressed kings" who rule by "boot", "butt", and "sirens" which cut through "the turpitude/squalor/of slums like the butcher's saw." It is these same "kings" who "put a price on wit" and hunt "dissident throats/with bullet from foreign lands" ("Excursions IV", *Songs* p.14). "Wit" stands for poets, and "throats", synecdochically represents social critics who are declared wanted and hunted by the "kings" who are despotic and who are thus appropriately depicted as "butchers and head-hunters.

These leaders are next represented as negative "Christs" and "Messiahs", who, Ofeimun tells us, are "heroding the masses with "imperatives", and feed the masses, not with food which they very much need, but with "21-gun salutes", and "hound us and butt-gun us" ("The Messiahs", *The Poet Lied* pp. 10-11). The ironic role of these false "messiahs" consists in the fact that instead of saving the people as true messiahs do, they further brutalize them with "tall threats, tall decrees, tall abominations" as Ofeimun tells us in another of his poems ("A Footnote 1" *The Poet Lied*, p.4).

Furthermore, the leaders are represented as hypocrites whose enabling principle appears to be deceit or what Ofeimun

humorously calls "tricknology" in "Beyond Fear I" (*The Poet Lied*, pp.111-112). Thus, Launko laments a situation where as "farms are dying" because they are neglected by the leaders, strangely and falsely, "rice ripens daily/in the budget speeches" ("Rice", *The Dream-Seeker on Divining Chains*, p.76). And Osundare presents a picture of "several government people" who have driven their "Mercedes" cars on roads riddled with pot-holes and punctuated with pools of rotten water and pretended not to see the mess. In the same group are "several sanitary inspectors" who are armed with "formidable helmets and gas masks", but who also choose not to notice the "rot" and mosquito larvae in this slum. The poet concludes by ironically observing that as a matter of routine, to these hypocrites, "poverty is an invisible thing" ("Excursions I", *Songs* p.9).

Logically, such leaders will not be responsive to the basic needs of the people. As Osundare observes in another poem, they have no time for "dry days" on which no tap runs, no time for "dark nights" during which the supply of electricity is not guaranteed, and no time for food, hospitals, schools and roads ("Siren: Music of the Visiting Power", p.22). One wonders what the "visiting" rulers are in the community for, if they are not willing to provide the very minimal needs of the masses that voted them into power! Ofeimun corroborates this picture of hypocrisy by sarcastically noting that the leaders "do not see the shrunken bellies" and "the harrowing faces outlining their rounds" ("Their Excellencies," *The Poet Lied*, pp.18-19).

There is hypocrisy also in the leadership of the church. In the church, of all places, we are shown a pastor preaching the type of life he neither believes in, nor lives, as an example for the victims of his false sermon! This scene is presented by Osundare in "Excursions I" *Songs*, (p. 9), where as the bodies of the "faithful" succumb to the "buffets of hunger" (a pleasant ambiguity), the "plump preacher" preaches "between belches" and "extols the virtue of want" as the "only ticket to the wealth

beyond", which, ironically, he himself is not qualified for since he is very far from being in want. This underscores his deceitfulness, for, as a pastor, he normally should be desirous of acquiring that "wealth beyond." This "pastor" is certainly one of those human beings who, according to Osundare in another poem, are "fighting a losing battle with overnourishment", while the poor workers who produce the food and wealth that cause the overnourishment have "bellies bloated by kwashiorkor" against which they are equally fighting a losing battle ("Reflections", *Songs*, pp 37-38). This contrariness of the religious shepherd and his flock is equally seen in the physical symbols of religion (the church building and the mosque) and the habitats of the masses. Thus, Ojaide states in "Traveller's Landmarks" that "churches and mosques in opulent glamour" stand "among colourless homes, devastated by piety", and signify paradoxically the "difference that keeps us one" - and that is to say, that keeps the leaders and the led one!

The next picture painted of those in power is that of thieves. Two characters in Osundare's poetry are the embodiment of that image. There is "Madaru" who in the poem entitled "Ignorance" (*Songs*, pp.33-34) "steals public funds" and buys a "Mercedes" car with which he "blocks the road." He also buys the post of King and rules the people in that capacity. Ironically, the people, whose tax-money is part of the funds stolen by Madaru, praise him, "envy his luck", and willingly accept him as their king. And the poet, seeing Madaru not only as a public thief but also as a criminal, asks with glaring despair and disappointment: "how could sheep all agree to give their crown to a wolf?" The danger which Madaru constitutes for the people is hardly less frightening than that which a wolf embodies for the sheep.

The second "thief" presented by Osundare is "Ayederu" in "Reflections" (*Songs*, pp.37-38). This man "empties the government treasury" and, with the loot, donates generously to

a Church Building Foundation." And for his reward, "special prayers" are said for him (which would conventionally include the wish that God may replenish the source of his donation a millionfold), and he is awarded "Commadership of the/Order of Saint Michael." Embezzlement of public funds is sufficiently tragic in itself, but it becomes more so when it is blessed and rewarded by the very institution, the church, which should discourage and fight it.

The final image of power presented in the new poetry being studied here is that of animals. Launko ("Locusts" *Dream Seeker*, p.31) sees those in power as "carrions" (vermin) which eat up the "silos of our soil", the "baskets of our riches", and "our pots of oil." He also sees them as "locusts" which cause "continuous division among the victims" and eat up "our harvests and our virgins." Furthermore, Ojaide, in a poem paradoxically entitled "The Hawk Prays for Peace" (*The Eagle's Vision*, p.62), presents a picture of the terrifying and hypocritical bird of prey, the hawk, whose horrendous, callous cannibalism is as shocking as it is revolting. Thus, says the "Hawk":

After my feathers have turned red
with the blood of victims,
after I have converted the moon into a nest'
and filled it with the spoils of undeclared war,
after I have seized the arms of the armed
and disabled the fighting spirit of the youth,
after I have become the only bird
and all titles and praise names mine,
the sole proprietor of the world,
after I have become immortal,
let there be peace.

The Hawk's vices of murder, oppression, suppression, selfishness, deceit and self-deification all mock the name of "prayer" and negate the spirit of "peace" for which he is

hypocritically and falsely praying. Communal peace implies the existence of members among whom there can be peace. But in a situation where the world of birds is populated by the "only bird" the hawk and where this only bird becomes "immortal" and no longer an ordinary bird, the quest for peace by the hawk can only be contradictory and absurd.

Power as portrayed by these poets can only produce poverty that is sub-human as it is inhuman. The obvious consequence of the way power has been wielded is the deplorable plight of the poor, who are the victims of the system. It was William Blake who, in a poem entitled "The Human Abstract" (*Blake: Complete Writings*, p.217), said: "Pity would be no more/ If we did not make somebody poor;/ and Mercy no more could be/ If all were as happy as we." In the society about which the young poets have written, with all its poverty, neither pity nor mercy is extended to those made poor and unhappy by their fellow human beings. Their situation is, therefore, doubly tragic since they have been made poor and unhappy by people who are too callous to show pity or mercy.

As if they were working in the tradition of naturalism in literature as defined by A.C. Ward (p.376), the poets portray the poor as the most pathetic images of their own very disabilities: disease, hunger, destitution, insecurity, and social injustice. For example, Osundare in "Excursions I" (*Songs*, pp. 7 - 8) presents some human beings with sunken eyes, gumless teeth, scaly skin like the iguana's, and "feet swollen like watermelon"; he displays babies with "chronic hydrocephalus" who are "squeezing" their "spongy breasts" of mothers whose chests are bony and "shrivelled"; and he further unveils to our view the "kwashiorkor bellies" of boys whose heads have become hairless, and are now too big and too heavy for the "pin necks" to carry, and whose bare, fleshless ribs expose, as the poet ironically puts it, "the benevolence/of the body politic." We are also shown a wretched

"family head" who is hunting rats and insects for meat, and a miserable farmer who is "shaving earth's head" with a tiny hoe, with his back bent to a breaking point like a bow. This is a sad process of "offering futile sacrifice/to a creamless soil," a soil appropriately as neglected and unfed as are those farming it. Two more pictures crown this tear-compelling show. One is that of pregnant women who "rummage gabbage heaps" looking for the "rotting remnants" of the tables of the rich for their food, while hawks and vultures hover above them, waiting for their turn to pick their meal from the same garbage heaps. These women and their likes are thus made to belong to the same class of beings as those birds. The other picture is that of lice-infested women who are sitting on "street pavements" where they are "delousing" each other in "busy reciprocity." And as they do so, they crush the "nits" of the lice between their finger nails.

Other poets in the group have equally chilling visions of these humans made sub-human. Launko in "Sour Memories" (*Dream-Seeker*, p.68) presents for viewing (or mourning) some "wasted bodies, surviving relics" who "wear the flies and jiggers on their festering/sores like decorative beads." The use of "beads" here is significant for it emphasizes the unholy contrast and gap existing between the opulent oppressors who wear beads for decoration and as a sign of their high status as chiefs and the oppressed and disease-ridden poor whose lot it is to wear disease-carriers and blood suckers as their own "beads." In such a situation, where abject penury and disease exist side by side with insatiable opulence and the show of it, it is little wonder that Enekwe in "The Poor" (*Broken Pots*, p.17) has to lament that "the antennae of the poor/like reeds/quake before/a palace of gold."

The life of the poor as depicted by the poets is indeed a "living death," as Ojaide puts it in "People Endure, Unfilled" (1987:67). In this poem which, like many others of his poems, reads like a dirge for the poor, the market-day is said to be "foul", for the sellers who have but little to sell and the buyers who have but

little money to buy with, find themselves robbing one another of that very little. For the workers, the end of the month is a "shameful event" because the "take-home packet" becomes "shrunk", and with it all that can be achieved is "only one plastered hole in a badly perforated home." This situation sadly compels the "teacher/preacher" to steal. And in "The Big Man" (1987:58), we are told that such stealing for the purpose of providing the family with bread sends the poor man to jail without bail, while for the "big man", "stealing Government money won't even earn him jail" because he "acquits himself with naira." This is a case of social injustice, of which the poor are the eternal victims.

Insecurity and suffering are also the lot of the poor. In the poem "What I Carry Along" (1973:39), Ojaide likens the poor man to the sacrificial goat offered to the gods "to appease witches at crossroads/And bring peace to town." Here again, as noted earlier in this paper, it is a mockery of peace if peace can only exist on the condition that the poor cease to exist. It is these same poor people who are always excluded from the "invitation list" in another poem of that title by the same poet (1973:65-66), a list meant for the "commanders of the world", and not for the "luckless" who are lost "in the dark holes of Itire" (a slum area) and whose life is made unlivable by "robbers, wizards and masquerades." And when power is conceded to the poor man as in the poem, "I Be Somebody" (1973:69), it is the type that paradoxically makes him poorer and less human, for it is only the power of providing for the rich man, who cannot find the food to eat "without the poor man," the "salt" that seasons the rich man's "soup." Similarly, some wealth is conceded to poor people, which, like their power just noted, is self-cancelling, since it consists in children as large in number as the nation's "army." The weight of this type of wealth presses them deeper into poverty.

Ojaide further tells us in, "In Our Time" (1973:28), that the poor are those who "do not bleed when they trip on stones," "no blood is left in their desiccated bodies; and it is the poor who have"no tears to shed in pain," for they had long exhausted the tears they used to have. And Ofeimun continues this sad tale about the poor by telling us that in their eyes "cups of misery overbrim" and that their lives are "numbed by want" and "overawed by hunger" ("Their Excellencies", *The Poet Lied*, pp.18-19), and that they inhabit "beleaguered slumscapes" as well as the "sweltering, tattered villages" ("Beyond Fear I", pp.111-112). Nor are the poor who find themselves living in urban areas spared the hazards caused by an unclean environment, since the streets are "clogged with garbage" and are "under the weight of decay, of night so dark" Ofeimun laments that the "rank smell of swollen gutters" has "claimed the peace" of people's "lives" ("The New Broom", pp.5-6).

To make life livable for all, to ensure equity and justice in society, and to enable the poor to recover from the "living death", the poets "prescribe" change and enthusiastically express the hope for such change. Thus in a poem appropriately entitled "I sing of Change" (*Songs*, pp.89-90), Osundare says:

I sing
of the beauty of Athens
without its slaves...

Of earth
with no
sharp north
or deep south
without blind curtains
or iron walls.

He also sings of "the end" of "prisons of hate and fear" and sums up by saying: "I sing of a world reshaped." This is a powerful humanitarian vision of an ideal world, indeed a neotopia, in which oppression and injustice will be checked in human society.

In "Excursions IV" (p.15), Osundare expresses the hope that "oppression's cloud will clear" when people muster enough will power for the redeeming "action;" in "The Horseman Cometh" (p.46), he says that the "grass" which has been trampled down for long by the "horseman" shall rise with its sharp "blades" again: the "pounding hoofs", and that "a new gust of will" shall convince the oppressive horseman that the "turf indeed has changed." In yet another poem, "Homecoming" (pp.66-67), he uses very brilliant images characteristic of his poetry, assigns duties and challenges, as it were, to all the parties that should work for the needed change: the poets must continue to educate and mobilize the people, for "no severing vault can swallow our voices;" the "prostrating lizards" must "stand"; while "all lions must "abate their terror."

For his own part, Ofeimun sees action by the oppressed as the only chance for change. Using the image of drought in "The Drought and Us" (*The Poet Lied*, p.110), he "argues" that the solution to the problem of "drought" (which symbolizes want, poverty, and material aridity) should not be left to "rain makers and diviners. The drought, he says, cannot be "beaten" with the people "bowed at the feet of the rain makers" or by "leaving divination to the priests." He advises that "the millions" of the oppressed "rise" and fight the socio political "drought." The same tone of activist urgency and determination is reflected in "Prayer on Friday" (p.37) where the poet says that while the "Muslims went salaaming/and the Christians sang requiem", he was thinking of "battle-plans and marching songs", for he would not be satisfied with the "age-old wisdom" whose exhortation is "to let the dead bury the dead;" he would rather "learn from the dead how not to die;" and that is to say that he would fight against the forces of death.

And Ojaide in his dream-vision in "The Street" (1987:61) already sees the war against oppression raging, with the people

who have been "married to pain from birth" already breaking off the "inhuman bond," for "naked prostitutes flaunt their flesh at preachers;" students who, "tired of ivory towers toss their books into flames" of protest, while "workers barricade themselves against the tyrant misery." All this happens because the "wounded wield the weapons of will," because they can "swallow fire without being scalded" since they have been on fire all their life, because they "can lose everything without being poorer" since they have always possessed but nothing, because "they no longer have tears in their system," having shed all there were; and because they are "stepped by brutal frays for survival."

What Mario Vargas Llosa (1978,p.6) says about the responsibility of the writer in South America very much applies to the Nigerian situation. According to Llosa, "to be a writer means at the same time to assume a social responsibility: at the same time that you develop a personal literary work, you should serve through your writing, but also through your actions, as an activist participant in the solution of the economic, political and cultural problems of your society." Indeed, the Nigerian novelist, Chinua Achebe (1960, p.138) had, much earlier than Llosa, remarked upon the need for such socio-political commitment among Nigerian writers. Thus in a paper appropriately entitled "The Black Writer's Burden," he said that "one of the writer's main functions has always been to expose and attack injustice," and that the Nigerian writers should not "keep at the old theme of racial injustice", but must also grapple with the "new injustices" that "have sprouted all around us."

The Nigerian poets discussed in this paper appear to have been inspired by these observations. What should strike any reader of their poetry is the depth of its humanity as well as the fervour of its social concern and commitment: it is poetry that advocates social health and social harmony; it is poetry of comprehensive human concern and mass mobilization. It exhorts the leaders and enlightens the followers; it warns the strong and

empowers the weak. The poets, therefore, demonstrate the validity of that statement by Shelley (1951:583) that "poets are the . . . legislators of the world", even if they remain "unacknowledged" as such. From the work of these Nigerian poets, everybody in society, whether he is in the upper class or the lower one, has a lot to learn about how human society should be run. The poets have written in good faith and in the hope that their society may become healthy and safe for all its members. Therefore, these poets are serving their country and indeed the entire humanity "with or without the tag of service/from the Cabinet Office", to borrow the words of Ofeimun ("We All Serve the Nation, Sir", *The Poet Lied*, p.60).

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CHINYERE NGONEBU**Book Review**

TITLE: *To My Husband From Iowa*, 268pp.

AUTHOR: Chukwuemeka Ike

PUBLISHER: Malthouse Press, Lagos, 1996

Chukwuemeka Ike, the renowned fiction writer, emerges once again with a piece of prose that is set to capture the reading public. The novel remarkably veers away from Ike's usual themes in African/Nigerian issues and portrays "the writer's perception of life in America." As an outcome of the International Writing Programme of Iowa University whose objective was "to provide visiting writers the opportunity to experience American life and custom" (P. 267), *To My Husband* may be read as "an interesting travelogue". The writer gives a picture of American society, often comparing it with his home country, not with the prejudiced eyes of the European ever ready to eulogise themselves and castigate others; nor with the blind obstinacy of a patriot clinging tenaciously to his country's values, but with the objective stance of a writer set to paint the picture as it is - acknowledging the good, denouncing the bad.

Ike adapts a novel style in chapterizing his work. Instead of the conventional chapter headings, we have cassette numbers ranging from cassette No 1 to cassette No 26. The protagonist, a woman, decides to share her experiences in America with her husband, not in writing but by recording them in cassette tapes which her husband plays back. So, there is a first person narrative

format which gives the impression of intimacy, immediacy of action and close relationship between husband and wife. This contributes much to the conversational tone of the narrative and to a language that is direct and infectious, the words flowing with deep intensity and simplicity. The meanings come out clearly, making it easy for readers of any age to enjoy the book. Consequently, the readers are projected directly into the narrator's world as she takes them on her ride through America, as well as the countries of her fellow writing programme participants. And so with Ify, we take a trip to Indonesia, the Philippines, Korea, Taiwan, Iran, Russia, and also to the world of the Black and the Indian (Native) American. From these trips, Ify extracts lessons for Nigeria and Africa generally. Isn't it remarkable, Ify notes for instance, that the lingua franca of Indonesia is not the colonial language - Dutch - nor that of the strong ethnic group known as Java. Rather, it is that of a minority community living on the Malay Island. The language was selected because it fosters commerce, and is easily understood by neighbouring islands and South East Asian countries. It also has a simple structure and is easy to learn (P. 54). And so DWI (one of the programme participants) writes in this language though he is from a majority ethnic group.

These incursions into other lands notwithstanding, the writer's primary objective still lies in portraying America in all its entirety. From the first page, the suspense builds up increasingly and mounts to a heart-pounding pitch as the reader is drawn to a vicarious experience of every day of Ify's stay in America. The first few cassette numbers all applaud American society with its high technology, incomparable legal, social, and political systems, and breathtaking architectural structures. Ify gives a fascinating description of the facilities and organization of the University of Iowa. The way the students of the university are actively involved in the running of the institution, from the selection of the University Presidents and election of the Board

of Regents, to the management of halls of residence, school transit system and other campus facilities. This, however, is not all. America is a country where everything works to stunning perfection. A single person - a woman - with automated equipment effectively runs a piggery, raising a thousand five hundred head a year (P. 570). Factories are run with the utmost care and dedication, and transport, communication and other social facilities are of the highest quality. Ify remarks that "only an extremely naive Nigerian would expect facilities in Nigeria ... to match facilities here" (P. 145).

Ify, however, does not let us be carried away by all this. There is a lot that leaves her disillusioned about life in America. She came, as she said, "to God's own country" expecting a higher degree of godliness or morality than in Nigeria, considering the rigid standards of virtue demanded of our young people by the "innumerable US based or inspired religious groups besieging Nigeria in recent years. Considering also ... American evangelists holding 'World Crusades' in virtually every Third World Country worldwide" (Pp. 171-172).

But what does she find? "Condom dispensers in public toilets. A woman declaring on TV that it was unrealistic for any mother to expect her daughter of fourteen to be a virgin. Fathers harassing their own daughters - some of them below fourteen - for sex" (P. 172). The list is endless. Behind the glamour, grandiose structures, energy saving devices, and so on lies a society blinded by inordinate quest for wealth and power, riddled with all sorts of inconceivable crimes and criminals.

Ify gives the practices of the TV religious ministries extensive coverage. This is so mainly due to the current wave of healing ministries and the so called Pentecostal churches in Nigeria, most of which have their roots in America. Many of these ministers who are household names in Nigeria, such as Oral Roberts, Jimmy Swaggert, Billy Graham, etc, have turned evangelism into

a lucrative "money spinning" venture. These modern day synthetic preachers play on the viewers' emotions and gullibility, debasing the tenets of Christianity for self gratification and profligacy, while waving the flag of virtue to their innocent and beguiled followers. On the whole, therefore, the picture we get is a society that is in need of moral and spiritual cleansing.

Far from being a historical documentation of facts, events, and situations, *To My Husband ...* is an enthralling and captivating novel. The story line is suffused with light-heartedness and humour. Most of the comedy arise from the divergent comments made by Ify and her co-participants on the amazing discoveries they make in their host country:

"Have you noticed that their mouths are always eating?" Ken observed.

Ojot agreed. "And everywhere you go you bump into vending machines, as if people will die if they don't eat, drink, or smoke for thirty minutes ..." (P. 41).

At one time, Ify marvels over a display of a new brand of dog's food which would guarantee one's dog white teeth and sweet breath (P. 10). And on another occasion, seeing varieties of foodstuff labelled variously "No Sugar or salt added", "low calorie", "weight watcher's margarine - No cholesterol", or "less fat and calories than regular margarine"; etc (P. 41), she examines a crate of eggs she bought to see if the eggs also claimed to be cholesterol free!

The advert of Murdoch Funeral Homes announcing a big offer which enables one to freeze one's funeral costs at today's prices, and the salesman who asks over the phone whether they have taken care of their remains, that is, taken an insurance to cover the cost of their funeral (P.152) make Ify and her co-participants conclude that there is no length Western Civilization will not go.

It is worthy to mention, however, that a number of printing

flaws dot this publication: page mix-up, title duplication, and infelicitous punctuation. The page mix-up occurs between pages 164 to pages 174.

Also, Cassette Numbers 10 and 13, according to the Table of Contents, are entitled "To Korea and Taiwan", giving the impression that there are two chapters/or cassette numbers on Korea and Taiwan. But on getting into the text, one finds Cassette Number 10 (P. 101) entitled "To Korea and Taiwan", while Cassette Number 13 (P. 131) is "Dinner Interlude". Another noticeable flaw is the persistent omission of the full stop after sentences ending with abbreviations (pp. 11, 121, 139, 163, etc), thereby making reading difficult and uncoordinated. We may term these printing errors, but coming from Malthouse Press which prides itself on a thriving and long-standing publication of works of reputed writers is undeserving both to them and to the author.

All the same, *To My Husband From Iowa* makes an interesting reading. Chukwuemeka Ike beatifully weaves an intriguing story touching on timely issues, subtly underscoring the role and right of women, and building up a case for writers in a refreshing prose. Moreover, Ike deftly balances the sordid and the comic. Intertwined in the narrative is the writer's exhortation to Africans to hold fast to their traditional moral values and rich cultural heritage while adopting those commendable aspects of Western civilization, for behind the glamour sold to the outside world lie the crude realities of an amoral nation.

It is clear also that Ike has written not only for the entire populace, but specifically for the young men and women who are obsessed with living in America and who see nothing good in their homeland. Here is a book of discoveries.

I.T.K. EGONU**Book Review**

- TITLE: *Decisions*; 167 pp.
- AUTHOR: A. Adichie
- PUBLISHERS: Minerva Press, London, 1997

Decisions is a collection of fifty poems written by a young poetess and undergraduate of Pharmacy of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, between 1994 and 1995, and grouped by the author into three parts. Part One, made up of 18 poems, is entitled "On Nigeria"; Part Two, comprised of twelve poems, is entitled "To God", and Part Three, made up of twenty poems, is entitled "Personal Poems". We thus have in the collection, poetry on three distinct themes that combine to give us a comprehensive picture, exploring the political, the religious and the interpersonal realms of life. The harmonious blending of such a variety of realms and themes, and the resulting effects of changes of mood and tone help to hold and retain the attention of the reader and ensure that the thoughts and emotions vehicled in the poems do not become laboured.

As expressions of thought, the poems of *Decisions* all have considerable social and spiritual significance and relevance especially for the contemporary reader who is familiar with the Nigerian situation.

"On Nigeria" explores the political and social realms of our lived experiences. The opening poem, entitled "State of Fear"

captures and x-rays the soul of the nation in its state of fear: fear for our lives, fear for our security and fear for our jobs. We can only speak in hushed tones or when lost in the crowd so as not to be identified because we are afraid. "To the Dictator", "Our Man" and "He is Coming" all tell the why of our fears. In "We are Tired" and "Democracy", the poetess raises the issue of our national clamour for democracy. The question is asked whether the adoption of the abstract concept of democracy will make people more honest or less fraudulent in politics and government than they are at the moment, whether democracy will give food and water to the people and provide a solution to poverty and disease. Perhaps, the poetess seems to say, we should worry less about the abstract concept of political orientation and think more of improving integrity and higher moral ideals in public affairs. In that way, whatever form of government we adopt or put in place will concern itself with the welfare of the people.

The social climate of the nation is deftly evoked in "Fuel" which x-rays our often contrived fuel crises manipulated to enrich certain privileged interest groups, and in "Blackout" which recalls the ever recurring trauma of blackout and power failure. "Unity in Diversity" satirizes our often proclaimed national slogan of "unity in diversity" and shows that what we do have is the triumph of diversity and difference over unity. This thought is further illustrated in "May Massacre", which evokes the senseless and irrational massacre of Igbos in Northern Nigeria, in May 1995. The general moral decay of the nation and the resulting national discrimination is dramatically portrayed and lamented in "My Sinking Land." Various aspects of our national and human experiences are thus explored in their ugliness and inhuman dimensions. In spite of this somber evocation of moral crisis, however, there is still hope, the poetess seems to tell us, if we can rise to the challenge of "Seeking Truth",

For 'tis truth
which for this tottering nation
is sole saviour.

To the average reader, familiar with the social environment that has inspired the poems that make up "On Nigeria", they strike us as the echo and the wording of our own innermost thoughts. They seem to say what we have often noticed or thought of but have never been able to articulate as well. They tell us something that we recognize, something which makes us say, "oh, yes, I know what you mean."

Although these poems may appear to be "situational" in their evocations, they transcend these situations and appeal to us because of their artistic beauty. We are dealing with a work of art, and the reference, therefore, is to a world of fiction and imagination. Even when the poems appear to describe real socio-political situations, they are statements of a literary work and therefore may not be taken as literally true, for a poetic statement is not to be taken as a historical or sociological statement or as the expression of an ideological *prise de position*.

In Part Two of the collection entitled "To God", we have a celebration of the young writer's love of God and her deep religious feelings. Throughout the twelve poems of this section, we are led to share the poetess's feelings of security and serenity in the sure knowledge that God really is and does really care for us. Sometimes we hear the intimate whisper of a prayerful soul as in "A Christmas Prayer" and "Take"; at other times, it is the outpouring of a soul saturated with divine favours as in "Thanksgiving Song"; at other times still, it is the solemn expression of total resignation to the divine will, as in "My Trust". We also hear the muted cry of an anguished soul confronted with the awful force of evil, as in "On this World." But in all situations, we feel an unmistakable sense of spiritual ascent, a steady movement toward ultimate union with God.

In the third part of the collection, entitled "Personal Poems" we are led into the expression of the changing moods and emotions of a fresh, honest and uninhibited heart. From "Glorious Infatuation", through "Crush" and "I Wonder" to "You

Stole my Heart", we hear the timid whispers of intimate declarations and recognize them, indeed, as shared and universal human experience and expression. With childlike innocence and simplicity, the poetess freely, yet delicately, allows us to peer into the innermost feelings of her heart and her being; what is felt is pure, what is expressed is noble because it is genuinely human and we can identify and empathize with it.

The spiritual itinerary which appears in the poems "To God" reechoes in its human and emotional dimensions in the "Personal Poems." Indeed the search for a pure and fulfilling human love in "I am Searching" reflects the ascent of the soul in its quest for the divine. There appears thus to be achieved, in this poetic expression, a fusion of the divine love of the soul and the human love of the heart. To be able, however, to appreciate this subtle transition from the human to the divine, this fusion of the soul and the heart, one must read together, the poems of "To God" and those of "Personal Poems."

In exploring the various realms of human experience, the poetess deftly employs both free verse and traditional forms, such as the sonnet, especially, in the prayer poems of "To God." The poetess has also explored the resources of the language in its charming simplicity, often making effective use of metaphorical devices and sometimes deliberately and systematically using the contextual change of meaning and even, in a few rare cases, the irrational association of grammatical categories, in order to force us into awareness and attention. One notes also that the poetess has equally organized and, in some cases, tightened what we may consider as every day language to produce a close-knit structure of poems, such that it would be difficult to change a word or the position of a word without impairing the total effect of the poem.

Decisions is, indeed, genuine poetry and does affect us in a subtle way. A "work of considerable scope and honesty: by turns incisive, thought-provoking and moving" it is bold, honest,

personal, yet with a much wider relevance and significance.

As we explore the wealth, the richness, the artistic and human dimensions of this work, we realize that there can be no substitute to reading the poems personally and savouring their diversity of themes, changes of mood and tone which attest to the skill and versatility of this young poetess.



The General and the Rest of us.

Notes on Contributors

ChukwuEmeka AGBAYI read English at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN), and has worked as a journalist, lecturer, and administrator. He has published essays and short stories in national dailies. He is featured in *Frontiers: Nigerian Short Stories* (Ibadan: Kraft Books, 1991).

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Chika OKEKE is painter, poet, critic and curator. Until recently, he taught art at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

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