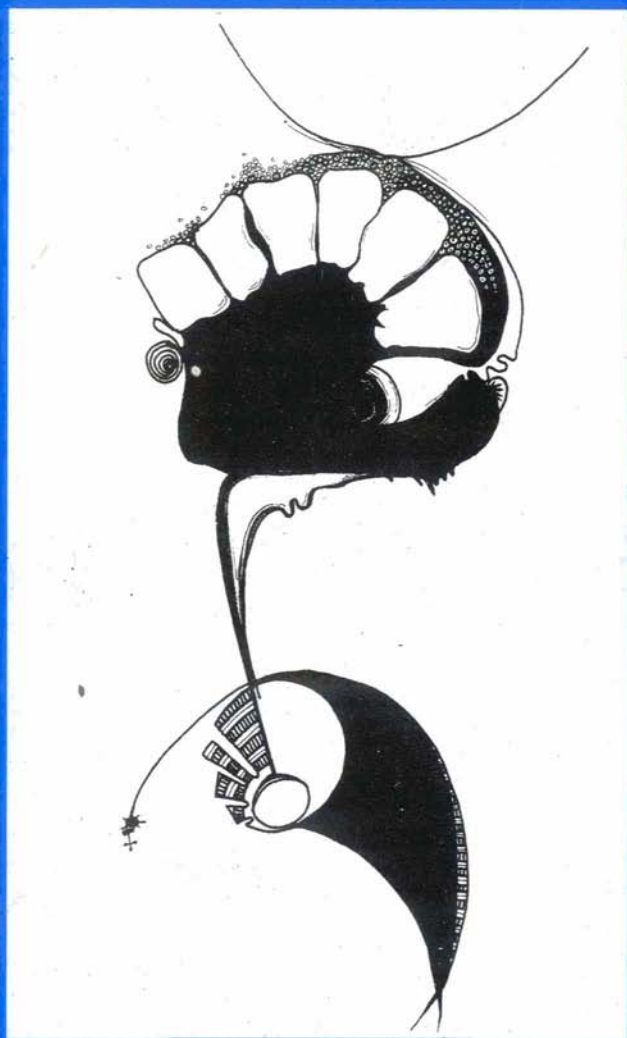




# OKIKE

AN AFRICAN JOURNAL OF NEW WRITING



37

**OKIKE**

**An African Journal of New Writing  
NUMBER 37, OCTOBER 1997**

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**Printed by**

Snaap Press Nig. Ltd.,  
1 Snaap Drive, Independence Layout  
Box 11204, Enugu, Tel: 459902.

*Manuscripts (not more than 15 quarto pages long) should be in duplicate, typewritten, double-spaced with ample margins. A brief autobiographical note should accompany each submission. Unused manuscripts shall not be returned, unless accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelopes.*

ISSN 0331-0566

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*An African Journal of New Writing*

NUMBER 37

June 1997

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### **Acknowledgement:**

This publication has been made possible by a grant from the  
Heinrich Boll Foundation of Cologne, Germany.

## From the Editor

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

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

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

Best wishes!

**ONUORA OSSIE ENEKWE**

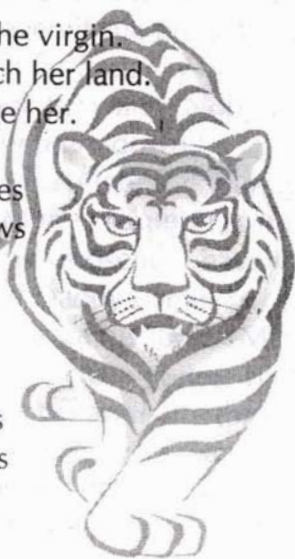
**The Lion Does Not Die**

*(For Samora Machel)*

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

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

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



step on his shadow.

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

The lion does not die.



## **OZIOMA IZUORA**

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

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

'Is your mother home?'

'No Auntie, she's not.'

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

'Anybody I can leave a message with?'

'Only me, Auntie'.

'How old are you?'

'I'm six.'

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

Where have Mummy and Daddy gone to?'

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

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

we'll talk about it.'

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

'Now, why ever not, my child?'

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

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

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

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

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

'Poor, poor child'

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

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

'What things Auntie?'

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

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

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

'Good God!'

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

'Your Daddy says all these things to you?'

'Yes Auntie, and much more!'

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

'Thank you, Auntie'

'I don't mean that as a compliment'

'What's a compliment?'

'Never mind!'

'Yes Alice?'

'Yes child?'

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

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

'Auntie, now you sound like my Daddy!'

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

**VICTORIA MITCHELL****Mignon**

1

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

2

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

## Grief

(For Mignon)

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

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

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

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

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

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

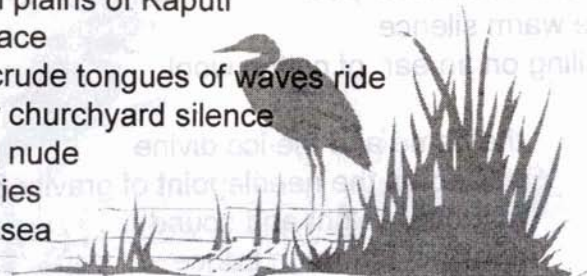
to come to her on my own. *Oh, Mary don't you weep. Don't moan.* Sit down with me, Grief. Sit down. Grief, you are born of a time when the sun has turned its back and leaves whiter, a time when the farmer's sharpened plow cuts the field and turns it in on itself to sleep in darkness.

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

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

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

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



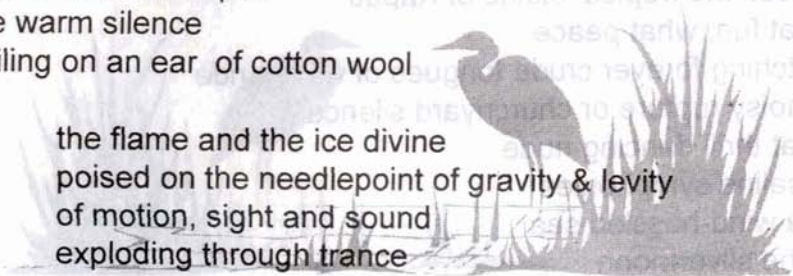
so I must break the chilly news  
 the dictator yesterday decreed you must die  
 no parliament to argue your case  
 still you flutter, wild and gay  
 as if tomorrow you'd lick another ray

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

## The Being

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

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

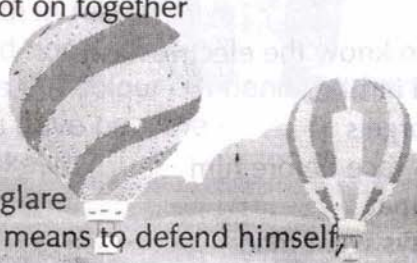


**A. N. AKWANYA****Two from the Wilds**

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

in the emptiness  
of green bottles.

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

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

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

## Sing to me of Stars

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

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

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

---

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

## Futility

I

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

II

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

III

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

\*

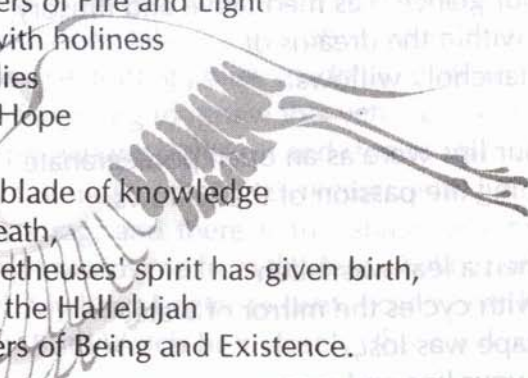
Ah, truth has broken into my head  
like a thief at night:  
Burning wood is blazing ash,  
Stone is dust.



## **MANDO KATSOULOU**

### **Solemnity**

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



### **The Swirl**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

more things differ, the more they remain the same.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

What convinced him that his bosses were involved in the

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

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

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

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

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

Soon, funny visitors started knocking at the company gates.

**VIRGINIA RHODAS****Prayer**

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

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

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

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

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

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

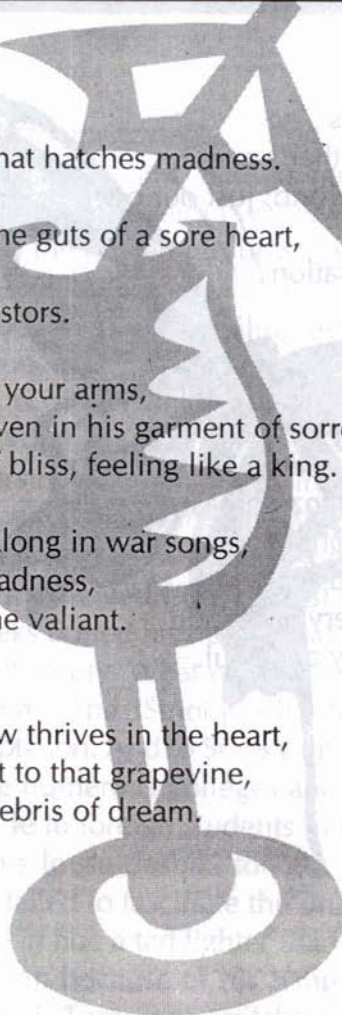
Palm-wine  
sweet soothing sap that hatches madness.

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

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

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

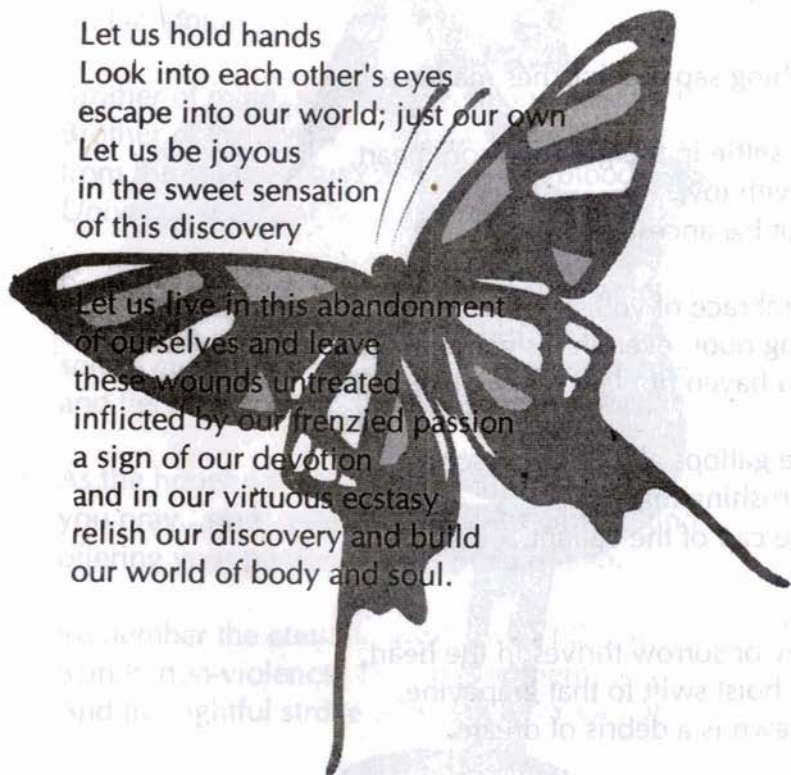
Palm-wine,  
whether joy or sorrow thrives in the heart,  
your lyrics hoist swift to that grapevine,  
which at dawn is a debris of dream.



**CHIMEZIRI OGBEDETU****Ecstasy**

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

Give me the unconditional love  
The kind of love I deserve

The kind I'd like to return.

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

"Yes, Uganda."

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

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

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

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

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

"Really?"

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

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

"In Africaw, do people go to school?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Brown skin girl stay home 'n mind baby  
Brown skin girl stay home 'n mind baby  
I'm going away, in a sailing boat  
And if I don't come back  
Stay home 'n mind baby.

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







































































































































































