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41

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OKike

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"One of the most difficult aspects of publishing long established journals, literary or otherwise, is improving on or maintaining the standard set by its founder. While some have fallen by the wayside, others have simply refused to take root, and yet a few have blossomed as a result of the managerial skill and intellectual savvy invested in such ventures. To this last group belongs *Okike: An African Journal of New Writing* established in 1971 to, among other things, "discover new writers, publish them, and to set a new school of thought for the critical standards of African literature" - *The Post Express*

Power as Woman

Soft

Gentle

Lovely

Feminine

Therein lies power as woman.

In it's insidiousness

Not in its seeming guilelessness.

In it's knowingness.

In soft acquiescence masking steely resolve.

In helpless persistence masking fierce determination.

The power of the Rebeccas and the Jezebels

Is no less than the Indiras and the Thatchers.

Power as a woman in a man's world

Is to remain a woman

Not to become a man.

Ripe Comfort

I feel connected
I feel real
There are no masks
There are no real barriers
More like a switch into my frequency.

I feel burrowed
I feel safe
There are no pretenses
There are no compromise cloaks
More like a bird in my nest.

I have flown through high emotions
I have crawled under low betrayals
I have tiptoed around prostituted "sleeps"
I have never walked tall along such
Comfortable feelings.
It is my ripe wish
I am at rest at my plane.

The Cocky Cuckold

Happy is the cuckold
of a discreet spouse.
What he knoweth not
he knoweth not.
In his ignorance,
he walloweth gleefully.
Of the abiding peace
at home, he boasteth
unaware from whence
his peace cometh
Do let him take
the credit, for in
his cockiness a
cuckold he remains.

Black Sunrise or Dark Morning

Sharp spasms of agony each break of dawn
Like lesions permeating each bone
Each sinew, each ligament.
At such pain-ridden times
Rising remains distanced from shining.

To lift an arm, turn the neck, shift the leg
All become tortuous journeys into masochism
That realm of pleasure pain.

Yes pleasure

What purer ecstasy.

What greater joy than to lift a limb, turn the neck,
Shift the leg, thought shattered.

At such great relief, physical

Agonies remain transient.

Pleasure ultimately transcends pain.

So, though the mornings be dark

With pain and sunrise black with agony

Though the joints be slow and shivery

I remain suffused with immeasurable pleasure.

KWABENA OPARE-AKURANG

To You: Fertile Sahara Desert

I

Peroration.

We embrace your enchanting dust, Fertile Africa,
 And perfume our thoughts, lingering in the WEST,
We reach out for your dignity and regality, Africa,
 And enshrined in your awe-inspiring dust, we
Walk merrily in your world of golden dunes.
 Brains mechanized, eyes neonized in the WEST, we
Still touch your dust in the navels of our birth, Africa
 The keys of our pristine birth and worldview, and we
Gorgeously, massage your inner resources.
Crystal as the morning dew on the golden dust,
 Warm as the rising sun on your entrancing dust, we
Balm our snowed limbs, heal our neonized eyes
From the fertile crevices below your fecund dust.
 Ah! Touching your inner strength is invigorating,
Like the rising sun on your morning dust.
 Solacing on the pristine and majestic Sahara,
Clad in the sanctuary of your navel, and
 Stored in the sarcophagus of your dust, we
Eclipse neon signs of WESTERN morbidity.

II

Departure.

Hunted, hounded, trapped by the WEST, with their
Dressed guns, IMF SAPS, and transnationals,
Packaged in elusive cargoes of mirth,
We depart your golden footpaths of dust, Africa
Of the Sahara, wishing no footprints behind.
And plunge into the plastic Atlantic WEST
To taste the sugar of the Atlantic West.

III

Still-born.

Searchlight on our bodies and minds at airports;
Hounded by passports of plastic visceral attachment,
Foreign inks of filial piety, we desert you, Africa.
Subjected to acrid immigration policies, enticed by
Transnational cakes and addictive Atlantic toffees.
Dancing to their senseless deluge of the cargo-cult,
We go in search of the WESTERN cargo and solace potion
And immigration rubber stamps rape our navels.
Forced orgasm from mechanic copulation, offsprings
Of mundane fertility and an aridity of our progeny.
Then quarantined in clinics of misplaced identity,
Dissected with official surgical miscarriage,
Ah metallic cotton-wool on our dissected alien navels!
We linger on the new paths of still-born identity.
Confined to rustic life in mega-cities of the West,
We bleed innermost daily and we yell at us
All the plunging into the Atlantic...

All the wounds of dressed guns...
All the acidity of toffees...
All the weight of the cargo-cult...
Of the new paths and old crossroads.

IV

Regeneration.

To you Fertile Africa, Fertile Sahara Desert
We salute, celebrate, and pay you homage:
We find in the gracious clouds of the WEST
Saintly beckoning whispers of miragic truths,
Of shrivelled seeds of vaunted decorum.
Oh, Africa, we know now, our Fertile Sahara,
And we clamour for you, our Fertile Sahara,
Even in your aridity, there is fecundity.
Soulful out in Africa, caressed by the sun.
Soulless in the WEST, confined by the snow.
Our Fertile Sahara, our Fertile Africa
We have learnt now, not to wear their,
To wear their prostheses of vaunted glory,
Of happiness, of permuted plastic smiles,
And thronging neon-lit sanguinary streets,
We mourn in us against a thousand snows.

ANU OLUWAKEMI ORIMOLOYE

Bachelor's Eve

I can't think of any alternative; I have to end it this way. I cannot help thinking that it has been going on for some time now. It is so unbearable for me to think that I have spent years of my life in strong devotion to this unfaithful husband.'

Zenny Cole was in the kitchen, preparing food for herself and her husband while thinking all this. Since the discovery late in the afternoon, things had dramatically changed for Zenny. When she left the scene of the incident, she immediately drove to a quiet place - one of those executive clubs she used to patronise with her husband on weekends. She got a table at a very quiet corner where she could take advantage of the lagoon's peaceful breeze. But for her this evening, the breeze was not peaceful. She sat at her table and ordered two shots of Scotch whisky. Over the drink, she let her mind run through the assaulting scene, it was hard for her to even think about it. However, she tried to understand her situation and after two hours of brooding, she made up her mind on what to do. It was then she came home to prepare food.

When the food was ready, she served it into plates and emptied the content of the small sachet she had into them and put them in the oven. She then moved to the sitting-room and sat down on the couch. The magazine on the centre-table had an interesting headline which attracted Zenny as she picked it up trying to divert her thoughts from what was about to happen. She thought of her children and missed them very much. It was only last night she was thinking of asking her husband to call his

mother and ask her to send them back. They had already spent six weeks of their holidays with her and it would not do them much good to spend the entire holidays in London, for the old woman only spoilt them. Anyway, the situation at hand would not require their presence, they would probably now have to live with her. As much as she tried to force the thought away, they kept drifting back and she now turned her full attention to it. She was immediately transported to twelve years back, to the time she met Dele, her husband...

It was during her undergraduate days at one of the first generation universities in the country. She remembered their meeting vividly and, in fact, it was a fond talking point between them. It was in the heady days of the 1978 students' riots when she was a student activist. When the police started shooting, everyone ran for their lives. Zenny, in the heat of the confusion, found herself following some of her male colleagues running along a path in the campus. She did not know how it happened but she suddenly found herself on the ground with her shoulders covered with blood. At first, she thought it was the police bullet that had caught up with her, but it soon became clear that it was the thorny branches along the path that had cut deep into her flesh. There was no time to look at the wound now, the police were on their trail and most of the students simply ran past her, none tried to help her. She was helpless and was too weak to get up. She was in tears. A few minutes later, two other students dashed past her, but on seeing her, one of them rushed back to help her to her feet. That Good Samaritan was Dele.

Dele helped her on slowly and they eventually entered a house where some of the students were hiding. He sought the help of a woman in the house to treat her cuts. After about two hours, when the riots seemed to have subsided, they all dispersed to their various hostels where they heard of the university's closure.

Zenny had just finished packing her bags and was

expecting her friend from the other block to come for her when Dele walked in. He had packed and was on his way and said he had come to collect her address so as to pay her a visit during the forced holiday. Reluctantly, Zenny gave him her home address before they bade each other goodbye.

During the holiday, Dele visited her many times and they became fast friends. When the relationship was getting too intimate for her liking, she thought of breaking it off for she was wary of starting an unsuccessful relationship. After all, this would not be the first time and this FEAR was her greatest enemy. That four-letter word stood before her like a barrier; the lonely childhood, her revered feminist fervour, Tunde's jilt and her unhappy and almost empty life until she met Dele.

Her childhood had been drab, for though she had devoted parents who loved her dearly, she had been alienated from them because of her precociousness. She never really got very close to her parents nor with any other person for that matter. Thus, she grew up with her emotions bottled-up and kept to herself; she did not have any close friend with whom to share her thoughts and fears. And as she grew up, it became difficult for her to find people who could understand her.

Because of her precociousness, her parents were always accusing her of wanting to be like a man, and she was always confronted with things a female should not do or aspire to be. So, when she got to high school, where she read about feminism, she accepted it like a religion. She developed the feminist idea that a woman did not need a man to survive and that the female dependence on the male had been the bane of womanhood. She never wanted to have anything to do with men.

However, toward the end of higher school, she met Tunde Ajayi who swept her off her feet. All her feelings and emotions were aroused. She was scared out of her wits and had it been possible, she would have run away from herself. Tunde was sweet in his talk and promised her heaven and bliss. Then she

realised the need for a man in a woman's life, she realised the need for that opposite element to fulfil her own self. She, therefore, started a relationship with Tunde. Unfortunately, she entered the relationship with her eyes closed, giving everything and not getting much in return. Four months after it began, the relationship hit the rocks as he dropped her and had her heart broken to pieces.

Fortunately for her, she got admitted into the university in the same year and this helped her to manage her disappointment. At the university, she embraced the feminist idea with more fervour and she joined the feminist movement on campus. For two years, she was very active and she applied herself studiously to overcome her loneliness. She got involved in students union activities and became a very active member. It was in her third year in the university, during one of the major demonstrations over food subsidy that she met Dele.

Zenny did not think much of the relationship when it started for she found it hard to believe that a man could be whole-heartedly attached to one woman. And since she could not stand anything short of that, she thought she might as well remain her lonely self for the rest of her life. As time went on, however, she began to realise that Dele was actually different; even after his graduation, he was still very attached to her, and she decided to get serious with him. When Dele proposed to her on the day she was to travel to Jos for her youth service, she did not say no. Six months later, they were married...

The sound of a car in the compound jerked Zenny back to reality. She looked at the wall clock, it was about six-thirty. 'That must be Dele', she thought and she was about to get up when Dele walked in with her Auntie, Julie. She greeted both of them well, as if nothing was wrong, but her aunt was not fooled. She called her and they both went into the guest room.

Dele sat on the couch and started shaking; he had never had an experience as this one. He was scared to death, for he

believed he had hurt Zenny terribly. He remembered her on their wedding day and that deadly statement she made: 'I love you very much, Dele and I will never ever be unfaithful to you. I can give you a chance tonight to go and fulfill your desire. But if you ever betray me after tonight, I will never live to think over it.' And now the worst had happened and he still loved her very much even after many years of marriage. He remembered how it had all started, this messy affair...

It was three months ago when Henry was getting married. In fact, it was at his Bachelor's eve. Zenny could not attend with him as she was slightly indisposed. Their friends had always admired them for their love for each other, though some of them also complained about Zenny's hold on her husband. For he would not go with them to a party if Zenny was not attending, and whenever he went without Zenny, he was always such a bore.

However, it was a different thing with Henry's party. He had to go alone for he could not turn down the invitation and, in fact, it was Zenny who had urged him to go. Henry was one of his closest friends and also his business associate, so, he went along with his friends to the party. Late in the night, when the party was in full swing, Dele's friends picked a girl each and also assigned one to him. He was feeling cold and was already missing Zenny. His friends encouraged him and he started a conversation with the girl. He discovered that she even resembled Zenny or may be it was the drink that was now working wonders in him. He drank a lot of wine at the instigation of his friends and they also encouraged him to play around at least for once. With wine in his head and the excitement of the party, he took the girl to the dance floor, dancing and keeping themselves company till the end of the party.

A week later, when he had even forgotten about the whole event and had continued his happy life with Zenny, a girl walked into his office in the afternoon and it was Jane, the girl he

had met at the party. As a humanist, he could not send the girl away. He entertained her and they talked, but he made sure he referred to 'my wife' more than six times. When Jane was leaving that day, she said she would call again the following week and Dele could not tell her not to, but he prayed she would not.

Dele became unhappy as Jane kept coming back and he was in a dilemma what to do. At last, Dele resolved to ask her not to visit him again but for three weeks after this resolution, Jane did not show up.

However, one morning, Zenny had to travel on behalf of her company to Kano. Her flight was scheduled for ten o'clock. So Dele had to leave her at home promising to phone her later to say goodbye. After the phone call, he became very busy with the work on his table and became lost in that until after 12 noon. The whole place was very quiet and he guessed the others must have gone for lunch. He decided to rush over the remaining files so as to clear his table before going for a late lunch. Almost immediately, the door opened and Jane walked in. She immediately rushed to Dele, hugging him and telling him how she had missed him for the past three weeks of illness. She said she was annoyed that Dele had not asked of her when she hadn't come to see him. She was by now sitting on his laps and he immediately started complaining, but she merely kissed him, telling him he should be a man.

'Why are you shaking like a kid? After all, your secretary and the clerks have all gone for lunch. Besides, they won't come in to the G.M.'s office without knocking', Jane teased him. Dele relaxed a little, but he still was not comfortable. 'It is not that. Why don't you sit on the other chair and let me look at you', Dele tried to disentangle himself.

'No, I want to sit on your laps and kiss you. After all, it's lunch hour, and you can afford to play'.

While they were still talking, the door opened suddenly and in walked Zenny. She was rooted to the spot for about two

minutes when she saw them. Then, she recovered herself and walked out of the office. Dele rushed after her, pushing Jane aside, but by the time he got to the car park, Zenny had got into the car, driving off at a high speed.

'I do not feel like leaving both of you alone, but since you said you will be all right, well...' It was Zenny's aunt coming out of the guest room with Zenny. Dele was brought back to the present by those words and he got up to escort Auntie Julie out.

'We will be all right, Auntie, don't worry. I've heard your advice, thank you, Auntie,' Zenny replied.

Dele also joined in. 'Thank you very much, Auntie, I am very grateful. I will be seeing you tomorrow'.

After Auntie Julie left, Dele was still shaking, he did not know what to say to Zenny. In fact, her calmness troubled him. When she drove off that afternoon, he thought she wanted to go and commit suicide, for he remembered those words of hers on their wedding night. And that was why he went to her aunt, the only person who was also close to Zenny, to explain everything to her. She was a little annoyed, but because she accepted his explanations, she promised to talk to Zenny. Together, they had driven through the city looking for Zenny in all the possible places she could go to since she was not at home. They never thought she could be at the club. Dele was terrified when they could not find her and was, therefore, relieved when they now found her at home. But he was still not sure what she would do.

She had gone to the kitchen now and she had started setting the table. Should he go and prostrate to her and explain or what? This speechlessness was scary to him. He decided he would talk to her to break the ice.

'Zenny darling...', he began

"Sorry dear, I don't want you to darling me tonight, let's eat first', Zenny replied.

'Please, let me explain, it wasn't like that at all, oh my God...'

'Please, let's eat first, we can talk later', Zenny said calmly.

'Okay, if you say so.'

So they both ate in silence and when they had finished, Zenny cleared the table while Dele merely followed her about.

'Please, I want to go and pray, when I come back, we can talk', Zenny said and walked into the bedroom leaving Dele to stare after her.

Dele was too flabbergasted by all that was happening. He merely sat down in the sitting-room, staring into empty space. About fifteen minutes later, he started feeling a little discomfort in his stomach. That was when Zenny started talking.

'Dele love', she began, 'I love you, I gave you my life, my whole life but you destroyed it. You are the only thing that matters to me in life, I have no other friend but you; you are my brother, my father, mother, sister and everything, but you betrayed me. When I left home this morning, I never imagined you were happy to see me leave so you could turn to somebody else. I was happy when my flight was cancelled, poor innocent me, I was happy to rush back to my one and only, not knowing he had already dumped me. God! To think you can do this to me, Dele, and I told you at the beginning of it all. You have forgotten so soon what I told you on our wedding night just eight years ago when you promised me your life, oh my God Oh, sorry, you have a discomfort in your stomach? Sorry, mine too has started... yes... You see, I cannot live to remember this day and I cannot bear to leave you alone because I love you very much, so... yes... I... I... I... poisoned our food, my dear...'

'What!', Dele exclaimed, writhing in pain on the couch.

'I'm sorry love, we are going to die together... yes... I have written a note explaining everything. I'm sure your parents and mine will take care of our children ... yes... and... I assume... the money we are leaving behind will be enough to... yes... see them through... ex...except you have others....'

Zenny could not finish the statement, neither could she wait for Dele's side of the story before she died. Meanwhile, Dele had managed to crawl to the telephone stand. He managed to dial one of his friend's house.

'Hell...Hell...llo. It...it...is...Dele...Cole...come...'

He could not finish the sentence as he also died on the spot.

A few minutes later when the friend Dele tried to call rushed in with some others, they met the two dead bodies. They saw the piece of paper in which Zenny had written a confession. The police were called in and Dele's friends felt terrible that he was to die this way. But they all agreed that had Zenny died alone, Dele would never have lived a happy life thereafter, for he also loved his wife very dearly.



*RINTA S. MOHAMMED****An Aching Void***

Amar blew out the candle light and flung himself on to the bed. Meanwhile he sat and gloated over his friend Ahmad's felicity. He was imaginative, and now he had something concrete to work upon. Nothing in the whole of life stirred him so profoundly, and so utterly, as the thought of this woman. For Safina was strange, foreign, different from the ordinary girls: the rousing, feminine quality seemed in her concentrated, brighter and more fascinating than in anyone he had known, so that he felt most like a moth near a candle. He would have loved her wildly - but Ahmad had got her. His thoughts beat the same course, round and round. What was it like when you kissed her, when she held you tight round the waist, how did she feel towards Ahmad; did she love to touch him, was he fine and attractive to her; what did she think of himself, did she merely disregard him, as she would disregard a horse in a field; why should she do so, why couldn't he make her regard himself, instead of Ahmad? He would never command a woman's regard like that, he always gave in to her too soon; if only some woman would come and take him for what he was worth, though he was such a stumbler and showed such disadvantage, ah, what a grand thing it would be; how he would kiss her. Then round he went again in the same course, brooding almost like a madman. Meanwhile the rain drummed deep on the roof, then grew lighter and softer. There came the drip-drip of the drops falling outside.

Amar's heart leaped up his chest, and he clenched

himself, as a black shape crept round the door of his room and entered silently. The young man's heart beat so heavily in plunges, he could not recover his breath to speak. It was shock, rather than fear. The form felt towards him. He sprang up, gripped it with his great hands panting 'Now, then!'

There was no resistance, only a little whimper of despair. 'Let me go,' said a woman's voice.

'What are you after?' he asked, in deep, gruff tones.

'I thought he was here,' she wept despairingly, with little, stubborn sobs.

'And you've found what you didn't expect, have you?'

At the sound of his bullying she tried to get away from him. 'Let me go,' she said.

'Who did you expect to find here?' he asked, but more his natural self.

'I expected my husband - he was here this afternoon. Let me go.'

'Why, is it you?' exclaimed Amar. 'Has he left you?'

'Let me go', said the woman sullenly, trying to draw away. He realized that her blouse was very wet, her arm slender under his grasp. Suddenly he grew ashamed of himself. He had no doubt hurt her, gripping her so hard. He relaxed, but did not let her go.

'Where did he leave you?'

'I left him - here. I've seen nothing of him since.'

'I would think it's good riddance,' he said. She did not answer. He gave a short laugh, saying:

'I should have thought you wouldn't have wanted to set eyes on him again.'

'He's my husband - and he is not going to run off if I can stop him.'

Amar was silent, not knowing what to say.

'Have you got an umbrella?' he asked at last.

'You're wet all over, aren't you?'

'I shouldn't be dry, coming through that heavy rain. But he is not here, so I'll go.'

'I mean,' he said humbly, 'are you wet through?'

She did not answer. He felt her shiver.

'Are you cold?' he asked, in surprise and concern. She did not answer. He did not know what to say.

'Stop a minute,' he said, and he fumbled in his pocket for his matches. He struck a light, holding it in the hollow of his large, hard palm. He was a big man, and he looked anxious. Shedding the light on her, he saw she was rather pale, and very weary looking. Her blouse was sodden and dripping with rain. She wore a beautiful head-gear of smooth cloth. This head-gear was wet where the rain had fallen on it, her wrapper hung sodden, and dripped on to her shoes. The match went out.

'Why, you're wet all over!' he said.

She did not answer.

'Would you stop in here till the rain stops?' he asked. She did not answer.

He waited, but she would not answer. So he lit his candle, and rummaged in the box, pulling out a large brown blanket, striped with black and white. She stood stock still. He shone the light on her.

She was very pale, and trembling fitfully.

'Are you that cold?' he asked in concern. 'Take your clothes off, and put this right over you.' Amar turned his back when he handed her the blanket.

Mechanically, she removed her head-gear. With her black hair drawn back from her low, honest brow, she looked little more than a girl, like a girl driven hard with womanhood by stress of life. She was small, with neat little features. But she shivered convulsively.

'Is something the matter with you?' he asked.

'I've walked to Nassarawa and back', she quivered, 'looking for him - and I've not eaten a thing since morning.' She

did not weep - she was too hardened to cry. He looked at her in dismay, his mouth half open.

'Haven't you had anything to eat?' he asked.

Then he turned aside to his box. There, the bread remaining was kept, and a tin of margarine, and such things as sugar and salt.

She sat down on the small rag that was spread on the floor. He cut her a piece of bread and margarine. This she took, but ate listlessly.

'I want water,' she said. When he gave her a cup of water, her hand touched his and he felt her fingers hot and glossy. She trembled so she spilled the water.

'Do you feel badly?' he asked.

'I can't keep still - but it's only with being tired and having nothing to eat.'

He scratched his head contemplatively, waited while she ate her piece of bread and butter. Then he offered her another piece.

'I don't want it just now,' she said.

'You'll have to eat,' he said.

'I couldn't eat any more just now.'

He put the piece down undecided on the box. Then there was another long pause. He stood up with lowered head. The woman sat hunched on the floor, shivering.

'Can't you get warm?' he asked.

'Don't you bother about me,' she said, almost irritably.

'I'll be going out in a minute, I've got to see if my horse is safe. You can sleep on the bed.'

'Are you coming back?' she asked.

'I might not, till morning.'

'Well, I'll be going in ten minutes, then. I've no right to be here, and I'll not let anybody be turned out for me.'

'You won't be turning me out.'

'Whether or not. I'll go.'

'Well, what if I come back?' he asked. She did not answer.

He went. In a few minutes, she blew the light out. The rain was falling steadily, and the night was a black gulf. All was intensely still. Amar listened everywhere: no sound save the rain. He stood outside, but only heard the trickle of water. Everything was lost in blackness. He imagined death was like that, many things dissolved in silence and darkness, blotted out, but existing. In the dense blackness, he felt himself almost extinguished. Coming back to the room, he was afraid he might not find things the same. Almost frantically stumbling, feeling his way, till his hand touched the wet metal. He had been looking for a gleam of light.

'Did you blow the candle out?' he asked, fearful lest the silence should answer him. 'Yes', she answered humbly. He was glad to hear her voice. Groping into the pitch-dark room, he knocked against the box, part of whose cover served as table. There was a clatter and a fall. He struck a match.

'The cup is not broken,' he said and put it into the box. He hastily blew out his match, which was burning his fingers. Then he struck another. He looked at her. She was a queer little bundle, her face peering at him. As the match went out she saw him beginning to smile.

'I can sit right at this end,' she said. 'You lie down.' He came and sat on the bed, at some distance from her. After a spell of silence

'Is he really your husband? he asked.

'He is,' she answered grimly.

'Hm!' Then there was silence again.

After a while: 'Are you warm now?'

'Why do you bother yourself?'

'I don't bother myself. Do you follow him because you like him?' He put it very timidly. He wanted to know.

'I don't - I wish he was dead,' she said with bitter contempt. Then added: 'But he's my husband.' He gave a short

laugh.

Again, after a while: 'Have you been married long?'

'Five years.'

'Five years - why, how old are you?'

'Twenty.'

'Then I'm four years older than you.' He mused over it.

They were only two voices in the pitch-black night.

'And you just tramp about?' he asked.

'He reckons he's looking for a job. But he doesn't like work in any shape or form. He was a farm labourer when I married him. He left that job when the baby was only two months, and I've been walking about from pillar to post ever since. They say a rolling stone gathers no moss...'

'And where's the baby?'

'It died when it was seven months old.'

Now the silence was clinched between them. It was quite a long time before Amar ventured to say sympathetically: 'You haven't much to look forward to.'

'I've wished many a time for death. But it is no use.'

He was silent. 'But what will you do?' he faltered.

'I'll find him.'

'Why?', he asked, wondering, looking her way, though he saw nothing but solid darkness.

'Because I shall. He's not going to have it all his way.'

'But why don't you leave him?'

'Because he's not going to have it all his own way.'

She sounded very determined, even vindictive. He sat in wonder, feeling uneasy, and vaguely miserable on her behalf. She sat extraordinarily still. She seemed like a voice only, a presence.

'Are you warm now?' he asked, half afraid.

'A bit warmer - but my feet!' She sounded pitiful.

'Let me warm them with my hands,' he asked her.

'No, thank you,' she said coldly.

Then, in the darkness, she felt she had wounded him. He was writhing under her rebuff, for his offer had been pure kindness.

'I don't know when they'll get warm' she moaned to herself.

She heard him faintly rattling the match-box, and then a phosphorescent glare began to fume in his direction. Presently he was holding two smoking, blue-green blotches of light towards her feet. She was afraid. But her feet ached so much, and the impulse drove her on, so she placed her soles lightly on the two blotches of smoke. His large hands clasped over her feet, warm and hard.

'They're like ice!' he said, in deep concern.

He warmed her feet as best he could, putting them close against him. Now and again convulsive tremors ran over her. She felt his warm breath on her toes, which were bunched up in his hands. Leaning forward, she touched his hair delicately with her fingers. He thrilled. She started stroking his hair gently, with timid, pleading finger-tips.

'Do they feel any better?' he asked, in a low voice, suddenly lifting his face to her. This sent her hand sliding softly over his face, and her finger tips caught on his mouth. She drew quickly away. He put his hand out to find hers, in his other palm holding both her feet. His wandering hand met her face. He touched it curiously. It was wet. He put his big fingers cautiously on her eyes, into two little pools of tears.

'What's the matter?' he asked in a low, choked voiced.

She leaned down to him and gripped him tightly round the neck, pressing him to her bosom in a little frenzy of pain. Her bitter disillusionment with life, her unalleviated shame and degradation during the last five years, had driven her into loneliness, and hardened her till a large part of her nature was sterile. Now she softened again, and her future might be beautiful. She had been in a fair way to make an ugly old

woman.

She clasped Amar's head to her breast, which heaved and fell, and heaved again. He was bewildered, full of wonder. He allowed the woman to do as she would with him. Her tears fell on his hair, as she wept noiselessly; and he breathed deep as she did. At last she let go her clasp. He put his arms around her.

'Come and let me warm you,' he said, putting her on his knee and lapping her with his heavy arms against him. She was small. He held her very warm and close. She put her arms around him.

'You're big,' she whispered.

He gripped her hard, put his mouth down wandering, seeking her out. His lips met her temple. She slowly, deliberately turned her mouth to his and with opened lips, met him in a kiss, his first love kiss.

CLETUS AGWAMBA***Song for the Rain***

Your familiar sounds are here with us
The intimidating flashes
Are most welcome
For we know that in time
The seeming chaos will wane
To herald
The precipitating droplets
Which bring to us a sober calmness
As we
anticipate the imminent hail.

Soon,
The balls begin to hit the trees
And later,
Slap the roofs with an insistent rhythm
Cascading from the towering heights
Towards the depths
Beyond the deeps
Unswervingly hitting their foci
Before the unsullied clear drops
Are sucked
By the eager clays and loams
Careering the remnants to the base.
Long before the blue-white skies
Are turned,

Into soaring dark encirclements;
The children begin to ready their feet
For the hail-fetching chase
The old ones cling to their easy chairs
To have insightful reminiscences
Of their pleasure-ridden
Pre-arthritic days
And the young grooms
Eagerly find an excuse
To run in to their wives.

The Making of A Nation

If we juxtapose
The is and the ought
And separate the sober from the sozzled
If we recognise
The insidious subterfuge of
Our mendacious patron saints
And identify the paternalistic
With the perfunctory

If we reject
The misleading erudition
Of our misled elites
And subject the doctrines
Of our uncaring guardians
To compulsory emendation
If we refuse
The sporadic disbursement

Of little sums
And then realise
That the totality is indeed ours
If our lives
Are no longer influenced
By feudatory mandates
And the intimidating barrels
Are shoved aside
By our refractory remonstrations

If we make less fetish
Of their rehearsed elocution
And know, amidst the flux
That a cobra
Is indeed a snake

Then
We shall continuously
Seek an equipoise
Wilfully reversing the
Misplaced priorities of our times
And:
Our nation shall be made.

NDUBUISI NNANNA***Song of the Owl*****First Movement****Morning. A detention cell.**

(Apart from the small window high up on the wall, well lined with heavy rods, and the well barricaded door, the room looks like any other room, almost. Three divans are arranged at different angles. A song is heard, rendered by voices of contrasting and disagreeable qualities. The song is rendered in martial tempo, and punctuated with the sound of marching feet. Lights come in slowly, as three men, Wale, Soludo and Haliru, the detainees, are marched in by Corporal Pwajok, a squat pot bellied soldier, accompanied by two guards. Corporal Pwajok brings the marching to a stop and meticulously opens the jail door, ushers the detainees into the cell, carefully re-locks the door, and marches off with the two guards. The three men, sweating profusely, go each to his divan. Wale is in his late twenties, Soludo in his late forties and Haliru in his late sixties. As Haliru sits on his divan, he clutches his chest and starts coughing pathetically. The two other men rush to assist him).

SOLUDO: They should stop this strenuous exercise! This man can't take it any longer. What he needs is to be released!

WALE: (His hands around Haliru) Just take it easy, Baba. But a little while and we shall be free.

SOLUDO: Wale, if deception is the only consolation that you can offer a helpless man, must you continue repeating yourself?

WALE: I am not deceiving anybody, Soludo. Our freedom is only a matter of time, and that time is here. The Libra will soon come.

SOLUDO: When is he coming! For over a year, we have been waking up to your delusive chant "The Libra will soon come, the Libra will soon come". When?

WALE: A lot of planning is involved, Soludo. I have faith in the reality of the revolution.

SOLUDO: (Frustrated) Why you continue to have faith in a hopeless situation deludes me.

WALE: Faith is the cornerstone of determination. A belief in things yet unseen.

SOLUDO: But certainly not in things that cannot be seen.

WALE: We must be confident in our ability to salvage our own circumstances. The will of the masses is the life blood of revolution.

SOLUDO: I can see you still find it difficult to believe that you are now in jail, in chains, helpless, impotent.

WALE: Above the angry cumulus is a silvery and smiling sky. When the chick is ready to hatch, the shell collapses. Believe -

- SOLUDO: Vanity! Vanity upon vanity! Our country is doomed. She has long been buried, and I don't believe in reincarnation.
- HALIRU: (Painfully) No, Soludo. A fallen man rises, dusts his soiled clothes and continues walking. All hope is not yet lost, but the watchword is caution. A hasty mouth swallows it's own tongue.
- SOLUDO: Haliru, do not listen to charlatans who pretend to lead the fight when they actually seek cheap popularity and selfish gain.
- WALE: Who are you referring to?
- SOLUDO: I am referring to the DCR. Your Democratic Coalition of the Republic.
- WALE: The DCR is not a hoax. If it were, I would have long ago accepted the government's offer and given them the information they want. All we ask is that the soldiers return this country to democracy and go back to the barracks.
- SOLUDO: You are just saying what you have been told to say. You do not know the remote intention.
- WALE: I do! I am the leader of the Youth wing of the DCR.
- SOLUDO: You were my boy. You are now in jail and you are not even the leader here.
- HALIRU: I think Wale is sincere. We are witnesses to the

continued efforts of the government to buy him over, and his untiring resistance. He has been put to tortures which all of us put together cannot endure, yet he has remained unbroken.

SOLUDO: He has not been offered enough. The more difficult a maiden becomes, the higher the price on her bead.

WALE: The DCR is not for the highest bidder. It is for change. Look around you Soludo. Human rights are abused with abandon, press freedom is non-existent, workers' salaries are withheld without reason, graduates roam in the abyss of unemployment, hoping on a hopeless hope. The corruption rate in government is terrifying! We must -

SOLUDO: Boy, with each passing day, you give me the impression that I overestimated your age.

WALE: What has my age got to do with my cause?

SOLUDO: It is youthful exuberance that has blinded you to the fact that the soldiers have come to stay and with your bare hands, you cannot fight the muzzle of their guns, caressing our brows in a lethal romance.

WALE: With our bare hands, we will choke them until they vomit our destiny from their bloated bowels.

SOLUDO: You have certainly been watching too many movies.

- WALE: I am talking from experience.
- SOLUDO: Experience! What experience could a mere child have had?
- WALE: Soludo, I was born into the pit of poverty, weaned in hopelessness and matured in bitterness. Without anyone to take care of me, I became an adult in my childhood.
- HALIRU: (With paternal interest) What about your parents?
- WALE: The only times I saw my mother each day were at dawn when she took out her hoe and cutlass and left for other people's farms, and at dusk when she returned wearing a garment of sweat and mud.
- HALIRU: And your father?
- WALE: I saw his corpse with the eyes of an infant.
- HALIRU: (Touched) Oh, my son!
- WALE: He died fighting for his right to use a piece of land belonging to him. They poisoned him, just because he refused to let go of his own property.
- SOLUDO: You certainly take after him.
- HALIRU: How did you manage to be educated?
- WALE: My poor mother trained me in primary school, while my secondary and tertiary education was on scholarship.

SOLUDO: And after all that, you still want to die like a cockroach in a poultry.

WALE: An undefined life is not worth living.

SOLUDO: My brother, you will grow up one day. I was not older than you when the civil war broke out and with all enthusiasm (demonstrates) lef Hai! lef Hai! A right turn! a lef turn! Attention! forward march! I marched into the battlefield.

(sings) *Leave your wife and
Join the Army
One more River to cross
One more river, one more river
One more river to cross.*

But the first day I came face to face with enemy fire, I fainted before my finger could touch the trigger. That day I learnt the price of revolution.

HALIRU: That war was a terrible experience. I lost two sons and a brother in it.

WALE: Gentlemen, the reason for that war has not been fulfilled. Our country is still a merciless abattoir. We must sensitise the people to rise up for their rights.

SOLUDO: Wale, I have been a journalist for over two decades, sensitising the people, until the day I wrote an article which the government did not like, and it dispatched me to this endless sojourn, separated from my family, wife and children,

from my job and my friends for four years now! When I was arrested, my colleagues made so much noise, but after some months, everybody forgot me. I have learnt to accept reality.

WALE: It will soon be over, Soludo. Even now, I can see the Libra coming.

SOLUDO: To this Jail?

WALE: Not necessarily. The Libra's coming signifies the ultimate overthrow of the forces of oppression.

SOLUDO: And you said you volunteered yourself to save this man?

WALE: Yes, the security men were closing in on him, so I decided to hold a distracting youth rally during which I was arrested and the Libra used the distraction to escape.

HALIRU: Why did you offer yourself as a sacrificial animal?

SOLUDO: Ask him.

WALE: The Libra is so precious to the revolution. If he was arrested our plans would crumble.

SOLUDO: What if he does not come to save you?

WALE: What if the night does not give way to day. (Emphatically) The Libra will come!

HALIRU: But what if he betrays you Wale? What if he stabs

you in the back?

WALE: No Baba, the Libra is a symbol of faithfulness.

HALIRU: Wale beware! Beware! More than thirty five of my almost seventy years, went to the civil service - I have seen things and people.

SOLUDO: (Points at Haliru) There is a man who will tell you about life. Thrown into prison for telling the truth!

HALIRU: (Very emotionally) Transferred from one jail to another for years, just because I told the state Governor that Adamu Bello was the right Emir of Zango and not Usman Saleh. (Almost in tears) But Allah knows it is the truth.

SOLUDO: He spoke up for Allah, but not even He could save the man from the shackles of the powers that be. Doesn't that tell you something Wale? For close to five years, his three wives and fifteen children have not set eyes on him!

WALE: It tells me that we must calm the bedlam of our nation. It tells me that the oppressive system is due for fleshing. It is only a coward who avoids the battleground for fear of death.

HALIRU: Yes, but you should look around you before you step into the battlefield, or you will be fighting a lonely war. When you get to a dark corner and look back for your torchbearers, you will see them dancing around a bonfire in your enemy's camp.

SOLUDO: (laughs ebulliently) Haliru, my brother, do not mind Wale and his peurile demagoguery. He does not know the difference between a kite and a vulture.

HALIRU: (Prudently) It is true that a change is necessary, but the fruit of revolution does not grow on low trees.

WALE: Believe in yourselves brothers! The Libra will come! He will come! (*Heavy marching is heard approaching. Shortly Pwajok and the same guards who marched in the detainees reappear, guns at the ready.*)

PWAJOK: (points at Wale) Dem wan see you for yonder.

WALE: Why?

PWAJOK: A beg see my hand, see my leg even sef see my yash. I no sabi anytin.

WALE: Corporal Pwajok are they itching for a fresh round of beating?

PWAJOK: A beg, Oga, obey before complain.

(Wale stands. Pwajok opens the gate door, handcuffs Wale, and marches him off, with the guards following behind, alert).

(Lights fade)

Second Movement**Late morning. The interrogation room.**

(At the centre of the room is a long table with two chairs at opposite ends of it. On one of the chairs, sits Colonel Zainab Zakari, smartly dressed in military uniform. The other chair is unoccupied. It is a swivel chair with straps at both arms and legs. Behind Col. Zakari is a high powered lantern, off for now, focused on the swivel chair. Standing at either sides of Col. Zakari are an aide and a female army stenographer. Shortly, marching sounds are heard approaching, and Corporal Pwajok and the guards appear leading in Wale. The soldiers all salute Col. Zakari and stand at attention).

PWAJOK: Beg to report! Mister Fasheun Omowale number Op - 1332/39. (Salutes smartly, wheels on his feet and comes at attention, rather meticulously. Col, Zakari waves him off and he leaves with the guards).

ZAKARI: (offering her hand) It's so nice to see you again Mr Fasheun. Please have a seat.

WALE: (Ignoring her hand) Do I need to sit before you start using your satanic horsewhip?

ZAKARI: Of course, that will be quite unnecessary. You will agree with me that we always insist on cordial relationship with you.

WALE: Yes, I agree with you Col. Zakari. All your elements of torture are part of cordial relationship.

ZAKARI: Mr Fasheun, I have earlier explained that the rude treatment inadvertently meted out to you is not part of my orders.

WALE: So your boys are no longer zombies? Do they now act on their own? What disorder!

ZAKARI: I insist that those were not my orders.

WALE: Well Col. Zainab Zakari, why have you summoned me?

ZAKARI: I have not summoned you, Mr Fasheun. I invited you. We believe in dialogue.

WALE: Yes. Dialogue of slaps and kicks!

ZAKARI: I am sure that it shall not come to that.

WALE: I do not care. Let us talk.

ZAKARI: Well, we just received fresh information from Headquarters (*Takes a sheet of paper from the stenographer*). First, government wishes to honestly apologise for any inconveniences which you may have experienced as a result of your momentary residence here, and expects that you shall accept not to remain here a day longer than necessary. To compensate for the said inconveniences, the Government undertakes as follows:

One! To give you a scholarship for postgraduate studies in any country of your choice.

Two! That as soon as you complete your studies or whenever you may wish, you shall be given automatic appointment into any ministry of your choice.

Three! That the financial compensation earlier offered you, shall be increased to ten million naira (*Drops the paper on the desk*).

WALE: Have you finished?

ZAKARI: You must agree with me that the government is being very benevolent. I wish I was in your shoes.

WALE: But I am under your shoes. I am the one being crushed under the soles of your boots.

ZAKARI: No one intends to crush you, Mr Fasheun. You must understand that no government will overlook insurrection. Order is what we are trying to maintain.

WALE: So why don't you leave me alone and maintain your order?

ZAKARI: We cannot have order when your DCR is upsetting the *status quo* with their persistent uprising. All we want from you is the identity of the man called 'Libra', so we can approach him for negotiations.

WALE: And all the DCR asks of Col. Zakari is that the military should vacate the political arena in this country.

