



Ogaga Ifowodo

Madiba

(Sonnets on and around the Long Walk to Freedom)

I
Stepping away from the podium
Where he swore allegiance to freedom

He faced the multitude, an old man
Made young to the span

Of years it took the sun to rise
And melt the mist, make wise

The rainbow's all-inclusive colours.
The millennial tears, the vapours

Of death that stalked house and street
Had fled the skin of easy meat.

He looked again at the multitude
Gathered today not for the plentitude

Of anger to share, bury or explode
But to witness a new world unfold.

II
And he threw out his arms, charmed
The air as he sang the banned
Kaffir song of terror, now anointed
Anthem in open air, as he appointed

The moment to memory's pain and
pleasure:
'Dancè with me, Luthuli, dance the
pure

Motive of those early years. Dance
With me, stars of Sharpeville, lance

In hand against a false tongue. Come
Biko
Match my steps with a powered
tango.

Join the enchanted wind and sway -
You who died dancing in Soweto -
this day

Is not blood and bullet but mothers'
kisses
On the waiting cheek, answers and
teases?'

And with the fallen branch
Hope she finds her lost but happy
ranch.

III
'And you, O you Chris Hani
Gun on shoulder, dance with me.

As one soldier to another, you know
That graves are the last altar, no
obstacle

To the meeting of old boots
When truce has sealed all truths

Canvassed with the readiness of
blood.
The malevolent plot sought a flood

Of fury to bind your labour, your MK
And your people to the burning lake,
a way

Cold and desperate to stem the
uncoloured tide
Of this day. So dance, Hani, with what
wide

Smile that steeled the weakest heart
And mined hatred's cushioned mat.

IV
In the secluded arms of Mvevo
He followed the faintest echo

Of a solitary bird from veld to kraal
Absorbing the lay of the land, until the
call

Of milk matured on window sill
Guided home his truant skill.

Nature or nurture, a rebellious
bearing
Passed from father to son. Rearing

Cattle at Umtata, or with bruised
ankle,
Learnt at play to serve honour in
battle.

Ogaga Ifowodo

belongs to a
younger, or as
he prefers to
call it — the
stillborn
generation of
Nigeria poets:
graduated in
Law from the
University of
Benin in 1991
and has since
worked as a
human rights
consultant and
editor of
annual reports
for the Civil
Liberties
Organisation
(CLO) in
Lagos.
His
unpublished
first collection
of poems RED
RAIN won the
Association of
Nigerian
Authors

(ANA) poetry prize in 1993. Ifowodo has been in detention since early November 1997 without charge at the instance of the Nigerian authorities. Madiba which is signed 'in Langenbroich, July 1996' belongs to an unfinished collection of poetry.

He sat at the white palace in Mqhekezweni And burnished into shepherd, statesman and impi

To face the dangers of a blunt world. Foreskin shed, he would man as time crawled.

What may take the gentlest gradient Home to water. Leaves ardent

On the lushest branch in the sun Wave to every wind. After the corn

Ripest and sweetest with mischief is eaten (And odes to manhood's stolen pig written)

An honest man must take his spear Draw his own blood to wear

The coat of courage. Standing alone Where before the crowd emboldened the stone

He took the first step at Fort Hare Bled his wound on the bare

And bitter road of invisible gain To build a fortress for private pain.

VI

From snare to trap, danger marked his road. He would not wed with royal fiat. A toad

Leaping from the burning bush Encountered the python's supreme push

For food. The city of light Darkened near the distant view. Night

And day passed on a patchwork suit. His sleeping-rooms mocked a suite.

Midnight's melting candles pined For books in wax of love's rarest kind.

His blistering feet found the road to Sisulu. He saw the naked sun burn them all - Zulu

Xhosa, Coloured, Indian - and light The fires for the first communal fight.

VII

'Madam, are these ... yours? He spotted the slip, Brandished the white lady's briefs on pencil-tip,

Turned her red-hot with racist shame. He forced the monster-hand of law, the claim

Failed, freeing the unhappy maid. A thousand indignities daily prayed

Redress. Ban orders in hand, they shut In his face the half-open back door to court.

There were deputations and telegrams, protestation against a 'Whites Only' creed of humanity, notions

Of privilege-in-skin-pigment ordained by God. They rolled the stone against every word

Of reason. The centurions of race balloted If the kaffir and his Charter had rotted.

VIII

'Soup with meat', 'Soup without meat' Russian cookery book ... They had found it,

Proof of the RED threat, gripped by the torment Of colours. A professor witnessed to the urgent

Hour: 'Communism from the shoulder!'- His own words, which left to smoulder

In a fevered brain, burned red with treason. Cookery not being colour-barred, forced reason

Freed the quarry, the risen rage to hoard For the day when lunatic or liar's word

Would point home the famished sword. Free and foul, how to sweeten the bitter cud?

And they raided kitchens in search of

plots
They would tell treason from
meat in pots.

IX
Lilies' or poplars' leaves, none
could proffer
Eternal cover. At Rivonia the
tougher

Road ahead was mapped. The
voice of peace
Silenced with a naked fist found
its lease.

Gun would answer gun, sabotage
would stalk
The breeding-ponds of prejudice:
'Walk

The mile with me, if you wish.
MK
Shall throw burning spears in the
fray.

Puny these arms, but forged in the
moral furnace
They shall double the victories of
your race

Machine. This choice we wake,
the knowledge
Of the cherished blood to flow.
Pushed to the edge

We heed the head, our hearts
renouncing the act',
So the first commander, anointing
the fact.

X
He mended rags in prison with
equal care
As a mender of hearts: what the
hands dare

Touch is human labour. Old
mailbags that shunned
Their anxious letters, he and his
comrades turned

Waterbags for the news-thirst of
the torturer.
They broke rocks, mined lime to
better

The world denied them in and out
of prison.
Forbidden the open air, they
called a meeting

Wherever wind or smuggled note could fool
The warder. Perched on a hurried stool

The High Organ revived battle and the ANC
Nourished on the rich diet of Mqhekwezeni

He held court, turning the eyes of all
To the common foe, to apartheid's fall.

XI
Even he would be startled by the harvest.
Father in jail, children broke thirst.

Drinking rage in every cup. He who taught
Defiance was rattled by the lesson caught:

They would stamp the earth, their earth
With a loud voice and a firm foot. And let

Regulations answer to order. 'Stand before
An Officer?' 'What for?' 'Whose law?'

He saluted the new epoch: 'Oh crocodiles
Of the white river, who kept police files

For men with lighted candles, look to them
In the coming conflagration. Raise the
anthem,

The seed grew even in thorny ground.
We will nourish the wild shoots found.'

XII
The years, the year ... Robben marked
Them with hammer on stone. Nothing
sparked

Heat. The island segregated hate
Made monks of married men. Delivered late

The awaited letter came at last from the
censor -
A paper sieve, salutation the lone survivor.

The nights, the nights, long on cold
Floor. No embrace to unfold

The heart wound full by walls and worry.
He warmed his cell with her picture. Memory

Stoked alive embers of the last kiss.
He would rub nose with her, make this

Daily mime light the fire of the first time.
His prison-garden fruits found his rhyme.

XIII
Nights into days. The years had rounded toes
And fingers in the first count. Even foes

Found the repeating time uneasy joy.
Holy fury threatened another Troy.

In township and mine, marching feet
Saw a tank and dug a pit.

The slow hand of time had suffered
A stroke, moved with ill-tempered

Pace to rust the lock. How many
tides?
Infested waters rose and fell. And
tides

Weathered weed, piled the bank with
shoal.
War at stalemate, so seemed the goal.

Pressed by heavy walls into his secret
self
He climbed the cliff to place his dream
on shelf.

XIV
There are no dead ends, only the
birthplace
of horizons. Plumbed with the bold
mace

New roads arise to the dance hall
Rivers sweep to the flowers' whorl.

It is the false prophet speaks oracles
And hides from storms in tabernacles.

He had dared storms, now he would
be
The storm. He set upon the lonely

Task of prime maker of the road to
freedom,
Ploughing a plot for all in the new
kingdom.

Decades of talking to stone had
spawned faith -
Dry bones would live. Too long now
the wait

Wise maidens' lamps had exhausted
the oil.
So he summoned his jailers for the last
toil.

XV
Breaking through the dark forest, he
saw only
The high branch. Pledge to life wholly

Lived, he would not gather dead
wood.
He purged his heart of its bitter food -

He needed no victory, only the
satisfaction
Of hope: 'Now we may judge action

Outside the blinding flash of war.'
The child will sleep tonight. A mirror

Will prove the mother's smile. Men
Will spend evenings with their
children.

Laughter, at last, tickles the stern lips.
Oh, grass is green again. The orchard
steeps

With fruit. In the cape, the water
Sparkles with hope for fisher and
swimmer.

XVI
So dance with me, Oliver, chance.
You who plumbed wilderness, took
the dance.

And made fire without faggot. And
You, Govan, who governed thought
with hand

And head, take my hand. Come to
This dance, all of you, defiant to

The death. Bring your tears and your
cheer.
shout 'Amandla!' and break the earth
there

Above your graves with your cry
Of 'Ngawethu!' And firmly guide my

Feet along the road you died walking.
Stake on the tallest tree your all-seeing

Eyes find. And chastise to the
unerring path
Your unbroken black pride in this
day's aftermath.