



Obi Nwakanma belongs to a generation of younger Nigerian poets, particularly the clique within it which models its work on the poetry of first generation Nigerian poet, Christopher Okigbo, slain during the Nigerian Civil War. Nwakanma has edited the literary pages of the Lagos Vanguard newspaper for over a decade.



POET

Obi Nwakanma

A STRAW IN THE LIGHT

THE LOOP of the rope is the sign of the road

Whoever walks among the stalks of the corn,
Will hear the rustling of the wind ...

The loop of the rope is
The sign ...
The sign of the darkening road.

The ears which listen which clutch to this fevered moment
Renews a world and several worlds after it:

Ebenebe is the bearer of tales, yet he bared
His throat to the glint of famished steel:

He said: 'how can I sit and preen about the sky,
When the clouds are heavy with rain?'

He chose the death of the pagan

Ebenebe...

He sang and there was none to listen

Ebenebe...

He screamed and the world merely grinned

Ebenebe...

He shook the entrails of the river

Ebenebe...

He carried the offid and drowned it in the rainbow

Ebenebe...

He chose death, the death of the pagan

Ebenebe...

And all the waters of creation flowed downhill at his funeral
Among them, the greying leopard,
Pounced, he did, upon the road, where the signs multiply:
The loop of the rope is the sign of the greying road:

Yesterday we mourned the death of the Elephant
Today, we have cleared the path for a new throne:

The sun crowns the hills, laughing
The drums wander into the orbit tremulous...

Between I, and the smouldering sea, the rope becomes
Naked at midnight and the straw in the light
Burning bright until nothing is left:
We saw the groom approach,
And on the face of the bride was reproach
For we who had kept the vigil must utter a mouthful:

But the drums wander into the world quaking...

And they are sauntering into the sun, the exiles,

Willing the drums speak
With terrified voices
Rousing the dead, from their long dreams and their crumbling

graves:

The exiles return to their places, after
strange gods, dancing to
the drums
After their flights into several kingdoms:

Whoever says the sea is dry
Let him dare a step: the exiles return
to the land
Wearing amulets...

For it is the play of dogs: each one leans
on one and the world
Flows, incessant like the river...

But we who know say: the loop of the
rope is the sign of the beaten path.

CALL ME SPIRIT-CHILD

(For Wole Soyinka at 60)

CALL ME spirit child he says
and he answers baring his face
to the flaming razor shuddering at
the mouth of the gourd ...

He is my kinsman who straddles the
rainbow
where we roamed in unbroken cycles:

The froth of the wine speaks loudest
for the medicinal leaf

bound hand and feet by the oracles
the mystic circuit was broken
Waste not age was the grey imminence
which saddened the ripest fruit

And he would tie his life taut on a stake
and let the flowering of rebellion
sprout as though from a seedling

We mined the temple that season when
the locusts
his strange kinsmen ate the fields fatally

His road devoured the flights of twilight

the forest became redolent with spirit
And blinded by truth he uttered prophecy
'this past will devour the future
the flutes will grow silent awed
by chaos...'

Even as the hills age so the sea
which grows deeper and deeper still

THE LAST LIGHT

(For Sean Devereux, who died in Somalia)

Plumes ... millions and millions of
plumes...
The finest hour, steals the last light away,
leaves footprints like memories
etched on ancient rocks....

And there quivered in the pale monodies
of the sky
like a nameless anthem, like
some bunting of wild lilies
savouring solitude...

And beyond them a shepherd,
spreading the word of peace

Where man and beast once lived,
until bullets began to sprout

like cauliflowers ...

This laughter rises from children -
who seek from the sun
his last lighted torch....

Here lies the spent brambles of the world;
Here lies with a scar in his heart
the wild flute singing
singing, and singing
till he tears became banished.

Above his palace of native earth -
The world flutters like a flag
But will his wild laughter
Gather room?

TO THE LEAVE TURNING

1

I once stood without pride
without knowledge or consent
at your sunken marble altar:

There were words that had no meaning,
but lovely.

There was the suicide note floating from
the deep river; the blurred constrictions
the blood ceremony of innocence
pledging love-

The sense of the stars clinging to heaven
the milkyway, where I rode astride the
starts-

2

I want to feel nothing else but the breath
of the
sea; which makes me so chaste, to feel
the eye inside the sun glass, sipping
ginger
ice cold, observant
a hat across the lids, slightly amused
wondrous;
as if the day has just broken:

I want to see the leaf turn slightly
the water echoing the drums the fast-
paced
conga; the captive from a past age, the
lens capturing
nothing -

nothing at all: at all the nothing
that a closed eye could see:

Is it just the mystery, woman? Is
that all to it?

Is it all of it - in the huge open
binocular which traces the violent
fall, not quite the fall of the leaf -

I say, I want to hear the silent of the
leaf;
to see it turn, to wave a good-bye

to understand why -

why we locked the smile
in the chestnut,
why the beds which once created in
pleasure
seem now so utterly desolate
to feel the world pause, as the dew fall
upon the lips, upon the eyes that once
saw inside...
To watch each footstep leading from
Dan to beersheeba; pause at the stone
step.

3

These words are not merely invocation
they are part of revelation

They are words which fill, as should be
filled
wombs constrained and breathless, as
should be willed -

webs of an ancient life detouring the
earth,
to feel one last touch...

Without hands tracing the bitter sweat of
an erection,
something so momentous
may never have been fathomed:
But what prevails?

A scant glance at my trembling
arches?

That measure me in the hallowed
shadow
of the silver-crowned peak
of ancient mountains,
where deities reside?

What prevails is a question...

Without hands, without the figures
engraved to make them whole.

To mask the trembling urge
I sign the cross:

O holy mother, my worn chasuble
is aflame with lust...

O holy mother

Without hands that cares the
pain -
my soul is lost to beauty!

What prevails?. What truly avails
the spirit in that age

When no answers strain forward
when silence is all I hear.

NADIA

Marrakech: the grey hairs
Atlas, streaks of light of years,
like truth accompanied by a body guard.

It is not war; the fast tumble
is no war, Nadia.

Two pendants, each of hearts, and
the silvery lock lashed unto time;

Is no war: but the travesty of distance,
and this moment, a full breast glistening
out of the moon, the darkened streets and
hooded, like the lawless,
stranger or way farer:

It is the pod streaking with milk,
smelt so close, it vanishes,
like the gecko abandoning her tail.