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TABLE OF CONTENTS

THE EDITOR	<i>In Other Words, In Other Worlds</i>	6
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FLASH FICTION

CHIDINMA NNAMANI	<i>Memorabilia</i>	8
NONSO ANYANWU	<i>Lost</i>	9
CHI-CHI AYALOGU	<i>Lovemaking</i>	10
KIPROP KIMUTAI	<i>Earth Woman</i>	11

POETRY

VINCENT NWILO	<i>The One that Comes and Goes</i>	14
	<i>Daughter of my Father's Friend</i>	15
D.E. BENSON	<i>Monalisa</i>	16
KELECHI EZEIGWE	<i>Uganda Shore</i>	17
	<i>You and I in America</i>	18
CONFIDENCE JIDEOFOR	<i>If God is a Pimp</i>	19
AJISE VINCENT	<i>I am Me II</i>	20
STANLEY PRINCEWILL MCDANIELS	<i>Poem xxv</i>	21
	<i>Understanding Displacement</i>	22
ADAEZE MICHAEL	<i>Lost Birds</i>	23
	<i>First Love</i>	24
EBENEZER AGU	<i>Quizzing God</i>	25
	<i>Once Upon a Memory</i>	26
CHISOM OKAFOR	<i>Chains</i>	27
	<i>My Sister Draws Circles</i>	29
CHIDIEBERE EKERE	<i>Sorrow</i>	30

	<i>A Spill from Time</i>	31
GINIKACHI C. UZOMA	<i>From the Stars III</i>	32
NZUBE IFECHUKWU	<i>Burden of Memory</i>	33
	<i>Moonstruck</i>	34

FICTION

SOTONYE DAN	<i>A Radio Story</i>	36
TJ BENSON	<i>The Apparition of Priya Sethi</i>	40
OTOSIRIEZE OBI-YOUNG	<i>The Love Laws, Or the Smell of Guava Leaves in the Rainy Season</i>	45
GBOLAHAN ADEOLA	<i>Like a Thief on a Stormy Night</i>	54

NONFICTION

KELECHI NJOKU	<i>False Memory</i>	67
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DRAMA

KINGSLEY O. UKWUNGWU	<i>Conflict of Schools</i>	72
KENNETH CHUKWUEMEKA ALI	<i>Hands of the Gods</i>	77
VINCENT NWILO	<i>Destination Africana</i>	81

CRITICAL WRITING

OGOCHUKWU UKWUEZE	<i>Humour of Mechanical Inelasticity: The Comic Formative of Gabriel Okara's The Voice</i>	89
EJIOFOR UDU NWOGWU	<i>Visions of Terror and Hope in Akwanya's "Easter I (Of God and His Works)"</i>	99

GEORGE ARINZE	<i>Literature, Jaundiced Criticism, and the Vulgarizing of the Art</i>	109
SOSTHENES N. EKEH	<i>Tragedy and the Dynamics of Class Structure: A Reading of Hardy's Tess of the D'urbervilles</i>	115
<u>ART</u>		
OSINACHI	<i>Three Pieces</i>	131
<u>INTERVIEW</u>		
ARINZE IFEAKANDU	<i>"You Have to Care": An Interview with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie</i>	135
<u>READERS' RESPONSE</u>		
OTOSIRIEZE OBI-YOUNG	<i>Is this Why Readers Love Half of a Yellow Sun?</i>	142
<u>CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES</u>		147
<u>PAST EDITORS</u>		151

IN OTHER WORDS, IN OTHER WORLDS

The American novelist and short story writer, Jhumpa Lahiri fell in love with Italian, and some years ago moved to Italy with her husband and children where she mastered the language and wrote her memoir, *In Other Words*, in it.

When I read about what Lahiri had done, I wondered why a writer successful in a language would abandon it for another. It is not a question that I can answer. But I cannot stop thinking about how creative writing resembles this action of Lahiri's: an abandoning of a language whose idioms we are familiar with, whose premises we are comfortable in, for another. Perhaps we suspect that this familiar language, fraught as it is with redundancy, corrupted as it is by cliché, and blinded as it is by convention, has failed to capture clearly and truly our fears and passions and ideas. Perhaps we have seen the limits of convention, witnessed the truth that *common sense is no sense at all*. Perhaps by seeking a new language, a literary one, we are trying to reclaim our feelings and experiences from the tedium and banality of the familiar language.

Martin Amis, in his preface to *The War Against Cliché*, writes that “all writing is a campaign against cliché. Not just clichés of the pen but clichés of the mind and clichés of the heart.” The writers in this issue of *The Muse* are aware of this war. They are mostly interested in the mundane—love, death and dying, childhood memories—which accounts for the overall nostalgic tone of the works. But where they deal with the mundane, they do so with such freshness of sight. When they write about childhood—*She is that girl / That stole under the bed / with you / When you were six / Yet came out undefiled*—one is struck by how keenly their eyes for detail and sense of nostalgia are; and when they write about love—*perhaps it was merely what love did, making its slaves define and re-define their beloved in the light of strengths*—we are humbled by the gentle wisdom that they exude. With every poem, every story, every play, we are transported to another world, this transportation made possible by the power of *Other Words*.

In celebrating ten years of *Half of a Yellow Sun*, readers testify to the power of *Other Words*; and in her interview in this issue, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie attests to the way it can create whole new worlds, make people invested in the world that they create—*I get this silly kick of excitement each time somebody tells me they want to visit Nsukka because of my fiction*.

You will be invested in the various worlds that our writers create in this issue.

—Arinze Ifeakandu

Flash fiction

CHIDINMA NNAMANI

MEMORABILIA

It was not the burial that broke her—she survived the burial. That day, she had stood beside Auntie Bene, feeling nothing, watching the sweaty men as they lined up the four coffins. The screams from the mourners around her came from faraway and in her head she tried to fix a memory, any memory to replace the emptiness. But her mind was a dull haze. When the priest asked her to read, she peered at the page and saw the sky. There were no words, only clouds. When she tried to tell the priest, she found that her tongue was glued.

At home, in Auntie Bene's house, she stayed in the room that had a balcony, the one that overlooked the streets. Sympathizers came during the day, making loud exclamations and filling the sitting-room with their sobbing. In the evening, Dr Nnadi came, his chubby face gentle, his eyes searching her face for signs. He held her hands and asked how she felt, if she had eaten, if she wanted to go out. But she could only think of the velvety feel of Dr Nnadi's palms, soft like Amara's cherubic hands.

The day the truck brought the things from Enugu, she stayed in bed and covered herself with the bedsheet and listened to the shuffling of feet. That was the day she saw the thing that broke her: the label of the new shoe that Mummy had bought for Kene, the one Mummy bought because he got a scholarship, the one he was to wear to the airport, the one on whose label Kene had scribbled his name in cursive black. The sight of the label peeking out from the waste bin sent her staggering against the door and the image of the accident found its way to her head.

She watched their car stop at Ninth Mile, watched her mother haggle with the woman with bananas, heard her father tell Amara to stop crying and then she saw the petrol tanker. She felt hands lifting her, heard someone murmur "This one is still alive", felt the haze clear from her eyes and then she saw their car squeezed like a can of Coke, the blood seeping out like a drink. She did not realize she was screaming until she heard Auntie Bene shouting: "Ifenna, ozugo!" She did not realize she was struggling until she felt someone pinning her down.

In the days that followed, she learned to mourn gently, to bury her head in a pillow and cry. And on the bleakest days, she clung fiercely to pleasant fantasies, hopeful images of the future and she repeated Auntie Bene's words: "Ifenna, you will heal."

NONSO FRANKLYN ANYANWU

LOST

You were in the compound the morning Auntie Gloria brought Ifunanya from the village, and you refused to see her as the small girl who called you Brother Rufus—who rushed to grab your briefcase when you returned from work, who you sent to Mallam Aliyu's provision store, who sat on the carpeted floor of your room on Saturdays, legs folded, watching *African Magic*—but as a beauty.

How old are you? you asked her the day you were watching a comedy show. She was laughing uncontrollably as she always did. She leaned on you. You held her shoulders and kissed her ears.

It tickles! she said in laughter.

I'm sorry, you said, your eyes locked in hers. She looked away playfully, and said she was thirteen.

*

You thought it was just a stomach ache. You should have rushed her to the hospital, saved her from dying before her time, instead of the *sorry* you kept saying when she coughed out blood this way and that way, when she fell, writhing, her eyes rolling, bulging out, as if threatening to pop out from their sockets.

You were soaked in sweat, your legs shaky. You felt light when her legs finally straightened, when she sighed and became still.

*

Neighbours gathered round, murmuring and hissing: How could this beautiful girl go just like that? Auntie Gloria cried and cursed you, swearing never to let you go free. You were saying something, but your words were broken.

*

A girl ate the meat-pie you gave her and suddenly died, and you're here claiming innocence? the policeman yelled at you. He then advised you to forget about this case, that the autopsy result said food poison.

CHI-CHI AYALOGU

LOVEMAKING

Lovemaking for the two is a night on a worn mattress, noisy springs in syncopation with their restlessness, legs straddled about each other, the amber glow from the bedside lamp spilling their shadows onto the wall. They cling to each other, desperately, against the backdrop of a cold Harmattan, ripping cloth from skin. For the third time, they meet in this cheap hotel like thieves in the dead night.

“I love you.”

The girl whispers it in a raspy, broken voice, a voice so childlike. An attempt at sexiness. And for an instant, the man thinks that maybe he was not her first client. But quickly brushes this off. She isn’t even eleven, and she’s much more stiff-backed than he’s used to.

He shushes her with a wet kiss, releasing an almost imperceptible moan in response to the small palm on his groin. But this only encourages her. “I loove youu soo soo much,” she says again, this time her Nigerian accent quite heavy on the vowels.

The older man sighs and sits back, undoing his tie, his bulky stomach gathered before him sack-like. From the low light, he can barely make out the girl’s features—the dark skin in stark contrast to his pale whiteness, closely resembling polished wood; the big wide hopeful eyes meeting his unabashedly. He had paid her employer a hefty sum for their discreetness, or for what seemed like that, but now he needs confirmation:

“You know this is just between the two of us, right?”

It comes out curt, harsher than he intends, and from the girl’s sharp breath, he knows he’s inadvertently landed a hard blow. But such love proclamations, falling on the wrong ears, might incite a lynch mob, or at the very least embarrassing publicity for him. Though, nothing a bit of his oil money can’t pay off. He sniggers at his own joke: oil money. That’s what the locals call it. Shifting into a more comfortable position, he eases off his wrist watch and lets it fall with a clatter down the side of the bed.

“I know,” she says, nodding vigorously. “I won’t say anything. I just wanted to tell you—”

“I know, kid.”

KIPROP KIMUTAI

EARTH WOMAN

I cannot remember her name. Her face is but a shadow now. She was the tallest in class though, taller than all the boys, and stronger. I cannot remember her voice. I wonder if she ever talked; though she was crying the day O entered class 5. She had been forced to repeat the class and a teacher was comforting her, telling her it was a new year with its share of blessings. She walked barefoot as most of my classmates did. There was a manner in which she walked the earth, as if it was dough and she was kneading it with her feet. She was always gentle and kind to me. Let us call her Earth Woman.

Time flew swiftly, my classmates lost in the melee of their rough and tumble games, with me still so shy as ever, walking around talking to my invisible friend Promet as if my mind was in a craze. Then the rumour started, from a boy in our class, that Earth Woman was number one that term. I was aggravated. I was always number one. End term came and the whole school sat in the football field in a circle, with the teachers in front of us on desks. Mr GG started reading out all our rankings, from class one, starting with the person in the last position.

Earth Woman came late. New uniform. A handbag strapped on her shoulder (we all laughed at her grown up woman act) but the most amazing thing was that she wore shoes, beautiful, well-polished shoes with a strap. I remember wondering if the ground her bare feet knew so well would recognize her with her shoes on. Mr GG now announced that he was reading the ranking for class 5. Earth Woman smiled brighter. After all, she was number one. I stifled a tear. How could I not be number one? All went still, even the wind, and there seemed to be an eternity concealed between Mr. GG catching his breath and him announcing the person in the last position.

“Position number last, Earth Woman.”

Mr. GG was loud. We all heard it. The air cracked as if it was solid. Earth Woman sat so still as if she had turned into a statue. Then the air shook with the force of laughter. Boys clapped. I kept silent and watched as Earth Woman stood up. I watched as she bent and took off her shoes and clasped them under her arms. I watched as she leapt up so quick, like a flash of light and run, avoiding the gate but jumping over the fence and running as fast as she could toward Silanga (a tiny stream from which we collected clay).

The headmaster sent the strongest boys to run after her and bring her back, calling her behavior insolent, but that day Earth Woman must have been aided by the wind, for when her pursuers were plodding their way down to Silanga, she was already a tiny, darting dot going up the Chebokokwo hills.

Maybe she went to the other side of the hills, caught her breath and decided to join Chebokokwo Primary School. Maybe she gave up on school and decided to help out her parents on their farm. Maybe God was waiting for her on top of the hill with a chariot of fire, and she was taken to heaven and turned into an angel. All I know is that she never came back to school the next term and I never saw her again.

Poetry

VINCENT NWILO

THE ONE WHO COMES AND GOES

Last night
while the world rested
we lay in bed, wrapped
in our all.
We locked eyes
and hearts
and giggled and tickled.

This morning,
you are gone
and your aura has no trail,
not even the echo
of laughter -
a carry-over from last night's.

You're the one who comes
and goes at will.
This door is yours.

VINCENT NWILO

DAUGHTER OF MY FATHER'S FRIEND

You've become dew
and I, freshness,
at our arrival,
Restless One.

You've become that
which the gods used
in spicing the edible maggot;
that which I munch and smile.

You, who the world sees differently,
as loose,
as one whose mind is perforated.
You, same you, showed me godliness
In these stark piles of un-litness.

You, in whose embrace I will fall flatly
and helplessly
and seek no rescue,
it's you, Daughter of my Father's Friend
that I've come to worship,
– hear me this day.

D.E. BENSON

MONALISA

there is a fractured smile
held captive by a broken frame frozen over
in time's ice

i melt it every morning
over the fire in my eyes
warming memories
until it pours

as molten tears washing away the last particles of you

KELECHI EZEIGWE

UGANDA SHORE

You remember the evenings
We walked those lonely paths
Thick with cracked red clay
Walking down to Uganda shore
I fingered the wild flowers dressed in dust
And you let the harmattan butterflies peck brown flakes
On the rough darkness of your beards
We held hands
Sweaty and agile,
And sang of love and freedom
And watched the sun descend in royal splendour
Down a vast blanket of orange cloud
We sang of the cactus that withered in a
Barren desert of loneliness
And of lovers lying broken
Like wooden crosses in old cemeteries
Through Uganda shore
We breathed in the sea's breeze
'Our love is a mystery,' I said
As we sat together
You and I alone, in the stretched solitude of Uganda shore.
Your hand light on my willowy back
And my head laid softly on your broad shoulder
We awaited night in a gradual darkening of the earth
Enveloping the mystery of a kind of love
We alone knew its sweetness

KELECHI EZEIGWE

YOU AND I IN AMERICA

We had memorized America in school
Like ABC, an early morning anthem
That tranquil moment when our heads swelled proudly
And we admired the flags fluttering in the air
We will go to America soon
We cuddled through the night
And made love, last African love
Then while you snored, sprawled on the bed
I watched the moon travel through the clouds
To Achina, where we were boys
Kissing secretly beneath
Your mama's wrapper and I knew the taste
Of *udara* was sugar in your tongue
I thought of the backyard hibiscus we planted
A flower you said would grow and bloom and climb
Our walls and electric wires and ceilings
Then you would name it *freedom*
It withered and I teased you
I teased you even while we held hands
As we travelled away from home
And breathed in the new breeze of a new place
I said *freedom* grows better
On my new dreadlocks, on your new raven-thick afro
But you reared a new nursery at the backyard
Of our new home in America to grow *freedom*
I still teased you, even when it began to grow
To bloom and climb walls and ceilings and wires
And windows, and sprouted rainbow petals
Gay and radiant
I teased you, that America has better soil
America is black and loamy and *freedom* thrives fine in it
Freedom thrives like the colossal statue of liberty
Then you teased me, you called us the statue
I the flaming torch, you gigantic Columbus
Large and free, twirling in the air, round and round
Then the morning we stood before it, holding a stalk of *freedom*
You said you preferred it holding the hibiscus
I looked at you and we cackled loud and gay
For the first time we kissed, in America, before the towering statue
Tasting in each other's tongue sweet bubbles of freedom

CONFIDENCE JIDEFOR

IF GOD IS A PIMP

If God is a pimp then heaven's but a fancy hotel,
where virgins are proffered with breakfast and bed
and offered to brave soldiers who had looked in the eyes of death
brave soldiers who had ambled home on mangled body parts
brave soldiers from Paris, America and Nigeria.

AJISE VINCENT

I AM ME II

(a creed of self-confidence)

your love

tried to metamorphose

me instantaneously into

a river ,fresh , flowing

towards the estuary

of perfection

but I would rather be

me – a waterfall

small, tempestuous

: imperfect

, yet housing ounces of gold

STANLEY PRINCEWILL MCDANIELS

POEM XXV

i love you
& i do not love you
as in
when you curl yourself into my hold
like kitten,
gentle & harmless.
scrambled moments mould me into a collection
of incomplete poems tossed here & there like stolen funds.
the whore running in my head
is a football match without a referee
so i become a drifter
meandering through moments as they come.
everything passes like a missed flight,
like time,
or like people late for work on a Monday
& I do not love you
as in the space between two planets-
light years that hold the fate
of every new sun.
a stream flows to mingle with a lagoon
& loses itself, but everything passes
& yet, nothing passes-
not you, not us,
not the dreams we never lived.

STANLEY PRINCEWILL MCDANIELS

UNDERSTANDING DISPLACEMENT

everything passes
sometimes, the lines
come like a man making instalmental payments
sometimes,
i become a hungry man with money but
does not know what to eat
for his heart is troubled,
starved, sore, red with need for love like ulcer,
like a kid dying of thirst
in the middle of a war
& my heart sinks further
into emptiness like an elevator out of control-
a violent descent
down the dark gullet
of a piercing kind of blackness
only, there is no landing place,
no crash site,
no end to this fall,
this anguish, this torment,
this torture
i grab what i can
to keep me buoyed:
chandeliers, red labels, rainbow coloured medals,
cigarettes, fucking vaginas
but someone said love fits you
like a tailored tux,
like a gun to its holster, like a magazine,

like a ring
to your penultimate finger

ADAEZE MICHAEL

LOST BIRDS

We used to be happy around here
You can tell from the paintings on the walls
We used to be many around here
Till something stole our joy

Look at the walls and tell from them:
There are differences in the strokes
Bend over the woods that served as stools
They still breathe warmth even though we are gone

Nights begot days and piled into years
The rains came and went
And the scorching sun tamed
Yet none of us returned to where we lived
Like birds that lost track of their nests

I will stand here and wait
To grease the paints and dust the woods
To claim our home from weeds and thorns
Till a seedling sprouts
Holding our joy inside her fold

ADAEZE MICHAEL

FIRST LOVE

Everyone has a first love
We often forget
You kiss her lips
And she goes chaste
You trespass her waist bead
Yet she remains a virgin

She is not that bright maiden
That appears on your way to the stream
And remains in you like the water in a coconut
She isn't that damsel
That eases your stress at moonlight
By caressing the hair of your chest
Or lying eagle-spread on dry grass
So you can waste your strength

He isn't that boy that carried your wood
While you laughed at his tales
Not that one
That made you talk back at your mother

Your first love is that boy
That saved his parcel of meat
Till he sowed it in your mouth
She is that girl
That stole under the bed with you
When you were six
Yet came out undefiled

EBENEZER AGU

QUIZZING GOD

'Make a wish if a shooting star hurries across a night sky'
Mother always says this

Today one eased across a dim sky

A bit slowly, to pick my wish
And I asked the lord on the other side of the cloud:

Do you still stoke hell? For whom?

See, the smoke chars your kindness
And the fume from salty flesh chokes your messengers

Did you make humans in your own image?
Or are we disguised firewood?

He smiled and sent me a neat white cat to keep.

EBENEZER AGU

ONCE UPON A MEMORY

I followed my thought to a day in my childhood
Under a dwarf mango tree, at a sunset
Watching the sun glow a gentle gold
It dragged downwards, behind a mottled cloud
Earlier, it was azure and taut

I pondered heaven
Joshua stresses heaven's beauty at Sunday school
'O! Heaven of crystal glory'
A somnolent wind graced my face
I asked it: 'Does the sun travel to heaven?'
I love to play hide and seek in dark corners
Will heaven's crystals betray my hideout to Jimmy?
What of *Snow White*, can I bring it along?
Will I find time between hours of worship to glance through its pages?
Will mother make pancakes or shall we starve through ages of praises?
I have a cat, Tom
It strides as if on air but mews a lot
Will heaven feel disturbed?'
It tossed my questions on its retreating tail and swooped off

I sauntered back from my childhood after futile years of waiting
At the bank of a lake, the sun casting mirages on the rowing water,
I sighted an approaching canoe and got my fare ready
It will ferry me across that I may see heaven for what it is

CHISOM OKAFOR

CHAINS

at sundown, your week ends
and you seek cheaper remedies
to your old worries
at the brothel in Dodan Barracks
where nightfall
arrives with the strong scent
of perfumed men-visitors
and morning is a snapshot
of littered rubber condoms
like lizards, basking
in the noonday sun

tonight, your pipeline
is full to bursting point
your lady calls out
like horses at a durbar
you are now tumescent,
adrenaline-soaked
exhaling relief
unearthing your emptiness
willing your fire
to burn your spent week
to cold debris
and leave behind,
delicious fulfilment

above you, a thunderstorm rages
its rains are
a thousand sticks
beating madly against the roof
like many talking drums
below you, her thighs wriggle
like catfish in water
in and out
with wave after wave
of electric pleasures
around you,
Asa's folk music wafts across
'I'm in chains,
You're in chains too
Mister Jailer'

soon, the world will stand still
while her silent moans
will cast a fresh spell
on you
and lead you into another week
of new beginnings
and new cravings.

CHISOM OKAFOR

MY SISTER DRAWS CIRCLES

My sister draws circles
when she dances
she draws them
with each dance step
like a circumventing vulture
over burnt offerings
her circles are wide ones
at first
before she closes in
like lovers at foreplay
and makes them smaller
till she hits centre-point
with her moves intensified
like a hawk's swoop
on an unsuspecting prey

she raises dust
each time her circle-making
approaches climax
once upon a time
her white waist beads
in the course of dancing
became dust-stained and brown
that they refused to be washed clean
weeks and months, afterwards

my sister's ways are beautiful
like the tiny painted circles
on the wings of a butterfly
except her love cycles
which are irregular as the patterns
on a child's drawing book

you can tell each heartbreak day
when it comes
by the circles gone from her eyes
as she returns home
swaying from side to side
like a train
running on a jagged rail

CHIDIEBERE EKERE

SORROW

Feeling is like a gust-inflated football
Agile, and unwieldy:
Once it has been shot into motion
By that impersonal leg that serves us all
It is done for all of us,
We begin;
Watch us suddenly come alive
In activity and in conversation
And watch the restless little thing
As it circulates among us
Weaving us a dense network
When the air becomes steeped in all passions
We can never know again
What force moves our legs that move the ball.

CHIDIEBERE EKERE

A SPILL FROM TIME

For a self-conscious young man
lounging safely on his soft resilient mattress
all by his lonesome, sufficiently concealed
from all idle prying eyes;
whose freshly-wounded heart has
endured even greater pain
from watching the burdened feet of time
as they drag –

For him it is relief deep thrusting, if
with suppressed amusement he watches
through the reflective glass windowpane
of his room
an even older adult, re-enact madness
before the outer side of the window –
Most probably this sane adult is confident
that he is by his lonesome
in this well-secluded house,
and thus is sufficiently concealed
from all idle prying eyes –

So that with unconstrained abandon
he pulls a wild grin at his own reflection
then a mock-fist-bump, some finger jabs,
mock-knuckle-punches, grin –

Then something in his tobacco-blackened
teeth, stills him; he stares, reflectively,
and as if impulsed into some profound
presentiment, he lets his wild grin
die away, and turns, ambles away:
just before the unsuspected, least noticed,
observer explodes with choking guffaw.

GINIKACHI C. UZOMA

FROM THE STARS

- III -

Take a look at the stars...no, wait

First, close your eyes

Then, go back a little in time

Make it a cool evening

Imagine the heavens naked

Imagine them without even a single star

Imagine them dark, and quiet, and stagnant

Then lift yourself high above the earth

And take a look down below

If there are no smiths—black, gold, or silver

If there are no artists—music, dance, or sculpture

If there are no festivals—wrestling, masquerade, or choral

If there are only alphabets, and words, and books, and etcetera

The world would be.... Well, you figure that yourself

Now, open your eyes

Look at the stars coming stealthily out of their sheaths

One by one till they cover the surface of the heavens

Twinkling endlessly

How do they look?

How do the heavens look behind them?

And how does the earth look beneath them,

And around the smiths, and artists, and festivals?

NZUBE IFECHUKWU

BURDEN OF MEMORY

Your tongue of fire
dries the mirth
from my smiles
my lips and eyes suffused
with cold glee

Your pride
flings an axe
at the log of my heart
– and my heart drools ruddy tears –
in search of faggots
to ignite your ego

My jealousy
turns me a spy
like my shadow

My love
heaps the burden of memory
on my heart

But

my head
will snap the twig
that grafts my heart onto memory

NZUBE IFECHUKWU

MOONSTRUCK

Love drugs me with opium
numbs my limbs
that I turn an effigy
when heartlessness nibbles at my heart

Love gets me inebriated on palmwine
gags my throat
that I only flash my snaggle-tooth
when indifference snuffs my ego

Love anaesthetizes me
freezes my senses
that I only gawp
when pretence puts on its mask

Love suffocates me with sulphur
asphyxiates my nostrils
that I rarely sniff
when draughts of lavender drift by

Love porcupine-pierces my pupil
blinds my eyes
that I seldom see
when sultry backsides wiggle pass

My head, white from love's filth
knows Obi when he simulates a man
It knows also that
love is not a function of character

Fiction

SOTONYE DAN

A RADIO STORY

She was on live radio:

“Eighteen minutes past ten o’ clock, you are still listening to Colossal Radio, 92.1 on your FM dial. The show is “Lullaby”, and we apologize for beginning somewhat behind schedule...”

The moment her show began, Kasa logged on to Instagram, onto her page, to see the pictures she was uploading. But, as if conscious of a longing somewhere, she was only posting silhouette images of herself. So he logged on to Google and streamed the radio studio live, and watched her. The room was dark, the only light coming from the console and the computer screens. And so she was the same thing he’d seen on Instagram, a silhouette, a ghost.

“...eenie-meenie, here is Asa’s “Eyo”, and after it, I’ll read you a poem.”

He lit a wrap, the smell of marijuana in his nostrils.

If voices were colours hers would be cream; if they were light hers would be a brief match flare. Something that came and went, came and went. Impatient, he paced the room, the bed sheet around his waist in a weak knot, dragging itself on the floor behind him.

A beautiful voice did not always mean a beautiful face, but the workings of our mind oftentimes paired both. Remembering David Hume’s rejection of cause-effect relationships, he shelved that possibility. Then shelved the whole David Hume thing. Then sulked on his addiction—not of the marijuana, but of her. The good thing about philosophy was its provision of plausibility, so he ran through alternate plausibilities in his head, like a finger on book spines, picking one perfect for his craving.

The receptionist at Colossal Radio looked distracted when he walked up to her table. She fidgeted through her words: “Ehhhm...you see, Inara is a bit withdrawn and meets people only when necessary. Besides, you do not have to see her to advertise on the show. Marketing will handle all that.”

“Is that so?” Kasa said.

“Of course. You could drop your card if you don’t mind,” she said.

As Kasa pushed the door to leave, she said, “Hold on,” and walked to him: “How about lunch this afternoon? I’ll give you a call.” He looked at her, surprised, this lady who flirted this outrageously.

Thirty-one and with a PhD in Philosophy, the university community had presented him with an array of women like her who made wild moves. In their variations of shapes, sizes, colours. It always flattered him that a woman was hitting on him, the fact that roles, for once, could so desperately be reversed. The preambles of romance, of love, were what thrilled him, not the eventuality of sex.

His office.

He could recall seeing the face somewhere, maybe one of his students.

“Sit down,” he said. “And let me warn you, if it’s about sorting, I don’t do that, ask your friends. I’ve forwarded the results to the department, unless you want to sort the senate.”

She smiled, shoved her braids aside, sat down.

“I called your line but you didn’t pick up,” she said. “So I thought I should come down here instead. Any eateries around here?”

It was only then that he made the connection. How could she have driven all the way from town? Perhaps he could meet Inara through her. He decided to go to lunch with her.

“You remind me of Buhari,” she told him. “With that your open teeth.”

Kasa had never thought of his dentition as attractive, had never imagined any dentition could even be attractive. At six feet, he was like his teeth, evenly built with a Shea-butter-smooth skin. His appearance was intellectual. He had clear vision but had never stopped using those spectacles made him by a girlfriend in his undergraduate days. That girlfriend, Kendra, would have been a successful optometrist had her family not met her corpse at the spot where her kidnappers said she was going to be. A victim not just of kidnap but of the successes of her father.

Eating small chops, they drove in her weather-beaten Mercedes which had a surprisingly good engine.

“Can you tell me about Inara?” he said when they parked by the roadside.

“Next time, start by saying ‘Thank you for the lunch’,” Tiana said.

Kasa laughed.

“We’ll talk in your office. Perhaps you should drive,” she said, in a commanding tone she must have intended to be ironic. She was an irony, her behaviour at odds with her name, Christiana. And she had always had her way with men, Kasa could sense that. And so they walked into his office.

He taught the importance of rationalism over emotivism in his classes and yet here he was, willing to do anything to meet a person whose face he'd never seen, whose voice he'd merely heard on radio. His need to meet Inara was Tiana's route to him.

Slightly trimmed curves aside, Tiana was a Nicki Minaj crayoned in black. Oily as though on a pole, she could have her way with a Pope.

If told that what went on to happen in his office happened in another office for the reason it did, he would have remembered Immanuel Kant: *Act in ways that treat others as a means in themselves, and not as a means to achieve your ends or that of others*. Now, though, he had embraced Machiavelli—*the end justifies the means*.

Because Tiana, after a week or so, had confessed love for him, confessing also that she had never met Inara in person, Kasa had stopped seeing her. Inara, she told him, arrived nightly to do her show, at a time when she had closed for the day, and so they had never met. She only knew, from the catalogue, that there was a presenter called Inara.

For two successive nights, Kasa tried following Inara from work. He lost her on the first and on the second was held down at a police checkpoint after she had spoken briefly to them before passing. She must have known someone was following her. He had parked a few yards from Colossal Radio, the car filled with his *igbo*. When he heard Bez's "There's a Fire", and then her voice, he walked to the gates, tipped the night guard, and walked into the premises. The studio manager, a short man in blue, told him that, for security reasons, Inara no longer presented live, was merely sending her pre-recorded shows. After weeks in coma after being kidnapped, he explained, Inara had developed agoraphobia, amnesia, a host of anomalies, and retreated into a secret life.

Kasa stared at the man and stared at the man until the whirlwind in his head picked itself up one last time and flung itself against his skull.

"Where did this happen?" he said quietly.

"Wilberforce Island, Bayelsa. She was in school then, Niger Delta University."

Kasa turned, began walking. "Sir?" the studio manager said. Kasa sat down. "Who is she?" he said.

"What?" the studio manager said.

"Who is she? Was she always called Inara?"

"No. Her name is Kendra—"

"Kendra Buseri."

The studio manager stared at him. "You knew her?"

Slowly, carefully, Kasa pulled out a wrap, lit it. The room seemed to have taken on a frigid quality.

“You’re crying, sir?” the studio manager asked, his tone hushed, as though between them now sprouted an embarrassingly personal secret: the fact of a stranger walking into his office, crying, he squatting beside him, holding his shoulders, a gesture of consolation he did not even understand why he had to offer.

TJ BENSON

THE APPARITION OF PRIYA SETHI

Priya Sethi had been a meticulous woman; nothing escaped the trenchant scrutiny of her brain, fingers and broom, not the cobwebs that gathered in the ceiling of her living room, nor the dust settled at the back of the television hung on the wall, nor the mysterious contact numbers in her husband's mobile phone.

On such moments as these, she would drop the phone and wear her henna tattooed hands on either side of her thickening waist like handles of a ceramic tea-jug, in aggravation that only stubborn grime could cause. A few years back, when these numbers saved with curious names such as 'Baby' and 'Heart' first surfaced, Njideka, forty-eight then, had broken down in tears, saying that they were members of his ancestral occult in his village who were after him, threatening to kill his darling Indian wife and two half-caste sons if he did not join their secret cult. Priya had not known what to say.

She had met Njideka at Ahmadu Bello University in the seventies. She was the only Indian student that year. Boys taunted her because she was brilliant and Indian, and she wanted to run away to India without telling her parents, suddenly overcome with longing for a country she didn't know. She wanted to wear a sari, eat roti and greet any stranger she met on the crowded streets of Mumbai, saying, 'Namaste!' She had been crying at the back of the class and making these plans when Njideka walked up to her. He told her she was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen.

When years later the strange numbers started calling, she let him figure out how to handle the occult oppressors. However, when a particular contact saved in the phone list as 'Sweetheart' called, she did not need to be a witch to know whoever the person was had nothing to do with the occult. It had happened to her Nigerian friend. Until then, she had never thought of it as something that would happen to her too.

She dropped the broom on the carpet and dropped herself onto a sofa. It was the kind of sofa that had springs and lots of stuffing, the kind that gathered dust aplenty. She had made sure she did all the cleaning, all these years, fearing her husband would look elsewhere as it was rumoured most business men did. For the same reason, she'd not employ nannies either. She'd maintained her job as a gynaecologist with the Ministry of Health, in case his export business went bad. She had taken all the necessary precautions to secure their happiness despite his family's hostility towards her. His mother had lunged for her neck on several occasions.

But Priya was a peaceful woman, and never dignified their attacks with complaint. She had not married them, but Njideka.

Njideka who was now terrorized by an occult member called *Sweetheart*.

She remembered their foodstuff was finished and mentally combed her room for her Federal Government pension receipt card. Njideka would kill himself before he let her touch it. She hauled herself from the chair and went to her room. The card was in a folder dated ten years back, about the time she retired from the Federal Government and started collecting pension. He had insisted she stopped working since he was doing well in business.

As she stood up from the bed her sons spoke to her, soothed her from the picture frame on the wall above the headrest that housed their hopeful faces, frozen in time by camera. They were undergraduates at Oxford University, so there was no one in the house to ask where she was going. What she was going to buy for them before coming back. How she missed them!

It took effort to remember where exactly the Pension office was, even though they had lived in Abuja for the last two decades. Maybe it was because it had been three years since she last went there. It could also be because the dynamic metropolis was in a continuum of structural evolution. Storey buildings rose even higher, road-side kiosks cleared away to allow billboards, crescents widened into roads and roads doubled into expressways. The monsters of glass and concrete loomed above her, almost obliterating the sun, lonely and devoid of people, as if the city that housed them had reached the end of time. Observing all these things driving along Maitama District, she felt suffocated by an inexpressible sense of an ending.

When Priya stepped into the ground floor of the Pension Office, she was rudely awakened by the brawling mass of people that infested the place. They were everywhere, on zigzagging queues, scattered on mats spread on ash-tiled floors, standing on plastic chairs, seated on window sills. They looked harsh and feral under the florescent lights. She couldn't see them as individual people, but as one: a single organism of frail bodies standing and sitting and pacing. Those tired of squeezing and pushing on the queue replaced those hurling insults and curses from the window sills. Some got tired of that too and spread themselves on the immaculate tiles to recover from their battle scars. After regaining their strength, they marched back to the queue to fight. The enemies behind the counter were barely visible above the wrestling bodies. It was sad, old people struggling to collect from the cashier the years they had dutifully served their country in hopeful anticipation of secured tomorrows. They did not seem to be making any progress.

Undeterred, Priya stepped forward. She was not a newcomer to this country; she was born here. There was a hallowed silence as she approached. She was used to people staring,

used to receiving preferential treatment from Nigerians because of her perceived foreignness, and so wasn't surprised when they began to make way for her to walk up to the counter.

An old woman began screaming something about long hair, witches and marine spirits in pidgin English. Priya walked up to the desk and the cashier who had been panting, sweating profusely behind his desktop, immediately composed himself at the sight of her. "How can I help you?" he asked, feigning an accent. She told him how she originally wanted to withdraw some money from her account but seeing the number of people on the line, now only wanted her account balance. The lanky young man insisted that it didn't matter, she could make a withdrawal.

After collecting her pension card, his face morphed into a confused mask. From where Priya stood, she could see him tap the refresh button over and over. Finally, he looked up, his brow furrowed. He handed her two sheets of freshly printed paper containing all her details: year of registration, period of service to government, age. Nothing was wrong, she told him, except that her account was empty.

He told her, gravely, that her name was printed in red ink.

The woman who had screamed something about marine spirits started talking about ghosts and pointing wrinkled fingers at Priya. People had begun to murmur also, their voices merging to form a single roaring groan. So what if her name was printed in red? She was confused. And then, almost as if the answer were written in the cashier's disturbed eyes looking up at her, or in the whooshing murmur encircling her, she knew. She was *deceased*.

She did not need to see the death certificate her husband had signed to know he had withdrawn all her money. Her sweat and toil in a country that was never really hers, all for nothing. Walking down the aisle, she felt something die inside her. She was so immersed in her mourning she did not notice the stupefied stares of people. She would have understood if she saw them, for here was a ghost come to collect pension.

She welcomed the melancholy outside the building this time, the sun bright against the azure sea above. The woman in her yearned to call Njideka and yell at him, yearned to lie down somewhere and cry. But it was that woman, she realized, that was the thing in her that had died. When she got back home she realized she hated the place, the sheer coldness of the decor, the pretentiousness of the furniture; she hated what the pictures on the walls made her remember. Her boys. How would she tell them she was going to leave?

Leave.

The word, full of purpose, startled her. An action word. She wondered if she had done anything of purpose all these years without Njideka's prompting. True, it was she who had

wanted to have children, but then he stole the originality of the idea from her: he wanted offspring to carry his family name. He bought all their clothes, insisting on suits for her even though she would have loved flowing chiffon skirts. He decided which hospitals she would work in and, when the time came, chose careers for their boys. Ten years ago, he'd decided that it was time for her to retire. The only original thing she had left was her surname. Sethi.

How do you break your children's hearts with such news? They might pretend not to care. She considered waiting for them to come back to Nigeria in summer. But she knew she could not spend an extra moment in this house.

She walked into their bedroom. As if begging for a last chance, it tried to speak to her: the fading crayon lines on the wall from when Dozie started painting; the dentures on the lichen carpet where the boys squatted playing their video games; dark circles engraved in the armrests of the tea-coloured leather chair, from years and years of carefree children's play.

She padded into the living room. Njideka's forgotten phone sat on the bookshelf. She stared at it. How sad, she thought, that a mere phone number could bring to fore things unspoken for years. She went to her room and began to rummage through her belongings in search of something that wasn't Njideka's idea. Her drawers. Her brown leather suitcases. Her jewellery box. She found nothing, not a single piece of clothing. Not an earring. She sat on the bed and started to cry.

Ramalingham Sethi had given his daughter a wedding present, a silk gown and matching sari that she never saw reason to wear. She ruffled through the compartments in her wardrobe, throwing out bits of clothing, until the dress spilled out.

She hurried into it, stood in front of the mirror. It gave her a new kind of joy, standing there in her sari. It was as though her parents had somehow come alive in the fabric, in the gentle light of the bedroom. Did her people not say that love supersedes human lifetime?

She gathered up all her clothes in a pile outside and sprinkled kerosene on them. She dropped Njideka into the flames: the phone, car key, jewellery, as though she were sprinkling spices into a boiling pot. How joyously the flames leaped. She went back inside and picked her ATM card. As if she would be forever trapped in this moment if the sun set before she left, she raced out of the house and hailed a taxi. She was gasping when she told the driver she was going to Nnamdi Azikwe Airport.

It was in a mall at the airport that she bought her a new phone, with *her* money. It made her giggle all the way into the plane, a woman in her late forties excited at buying something for herself. She sobered when she remembered she had to give her sons a kind of explanation.

I'm going away for a while; call you boys when I get there. We make the right decisions by narrowly missing the wrong ones, she thought, staring out the window. Because right decisions rarely come to us.

OTOSIRIEZE OBI-YOUNG

THE LOVE LAWS, OR THE SMELL OF GUAVA LEAVES IN THE RAINY SEASON

Only that once again they broke the Love Laws.

That lay down who should be loved.

And how. And how much.

Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*.

The wild bush of roses in front of the studio was where he took most of his photographs. Where most of his customers preferred. There in the open where a bold rock protruded from the ground, beneath the foliage of guava trees where bloated ants congregated in the rainy season. It was there, too, that Somto sat while he worked inside, watching customers coming and going, taking in fresh air and mellow sunlight that filtered through the leaves and branches and turned the ground into a rug of leopard skin. Most times Somto came with books to pass away time, and he would read and pause, read and pause, for hours until he could read no more. Then he would take a walk. Brief, contained, within the compound dense with thick greens and breeze.

As evening fell, Ulonna would come outside and say, "I'm done," and then lock the studio and sit beside him on the rock and say, "Look," pointing at the sky, the formation of doves or wrens or egrets or pigeons gliding across. And, for the first time that day, Somto would stare up at the sky. He barely remembered looking up because there was so much down here, so much to keep people occupied, occupied enough to drive them insane. He would listen as Ulonna told him about the woman who had demanded with a steady smile that all those pimples on her face be photo-shopped out of a photograph she earlier insisted she wanted to be real: *Just me, the way I am*, she'd said. Or the child who came with his father and asked if he could make it appear as though the picture had been taken in the rain. Or the girl who sat in his office and smiled and smiled and smiled until she realised he was never going to be interested and promptly paid her cost. "I did pity her at a point," he said. For someone whose office breathed with people daily, who worked himself off, he never appeared tired. When he finished, Somto would drive them to his own flat in Ngwa Road where, night approaching, they climbed into bed and continued talking until Ulonna held his hand and guided it to his groin.

Outside, on the balcony where the guava branch extended itself through the railing to offer them the smell of its wet leaves, they sat for some time, airing their bodies in the breeze, watching the drizzle die out. Due to the heavy rain earlier, the badgering on the zinc that

drowned everything including the songs from Ulonna's phone, they had said little to each other since they came out. They continued to say nothing now as Somto lit another cigarette. The beads of water on the railing reminded him of mornings when he watched Ulonna work out, watched him jog around the small compound, around the slender, thorny eucalyptus in its centre, his muscles, the beads of sweat rolling down, an ode to the stark sunlight. It had been a month since they first knew each other. That evening, in his uncle's shop, Ulonna had gone in to sign the receipt for the TV and when he came out, Somto noticed his shirt had been buttoned up, his hair combed, beard brushed. "You look like an Arsenal fan," Ulonna told him as he gave him his receipt. "They are always frowning."

"Arsenal, *kwa*. Back to sender, *Nna*." For the first time that day, a smile lit up Somto's face. "I be Barcelona abeg."

"See as you sharp finish come be Barca man. Na Chelsea you suppose dey na."

"I resemble cripple for your eye? Chelsea *ndi-ngworo*. *I lere* match *unyia* against Leverkusen? Messi, five goals," he said, counting money. He couldn't help noticing also that for someone in Shopping Centre dealing with a stranger, Ulonna had not examined the notes he gave him, had not held them up against the sun to see if they were counterfeit; as though he hadn't due to some tacit trust. Instead, their banter had dovetailed into him offering to carry the TV to his car. And then he had entered the car. Sat beside him. Because a wind had descended and it had suddenly begun raining. (Later, when they talked about this first day, Ulonna would tell him, "See? Even God is on our side," and they would laugh.) He thought of how they had somehow ended up in his flat. How after keeping the new TV and standing around they had simply undressed each other right there in his sitting-room. How, in the midst of clapping thunder, they had descended to the rug—his hands roving on Ulonna's chest and abs and laps, tracing the glow of the drenched orange sunset from the curtain, knowing it was showing him the way.

"I have to go," Ulonna said after that first time, getting into his trousers, and Somto silently escorted him to the gates. It would take Somto several days to realize what had happened with this man. Several days of standing on that balcony and gripping the railing. Of staring into the distance that was Christ the King Cathedral, a daily vigil. Of feeling nothing other than a new awareness: that he was wide awake, that he had never been more wide awake in his whole life. On his second visit, on the bed soaked with sweat, Ulonna said, "I just don't know. I just want to be happy." On his third visit two days later, Somto brought him to the balcony, showed him the delicate interweaving of guava stalks around the railing, so intricate it looked like a horticulturist's doing. They had begun eating the fruits when Ulonna raised his

eyes into the distance and said, “Is that CKC?” Somto said yes: the view from his balcony offered most of the area around the cathedral, around Shopping Centre, to keen eyes; most of Asa Road and Ehi Road and Azikiwe Road and all of Asa Triangle Road. From there, CKC’s tower and gigantic cross loomed, an Eiffel reigning over the city. Monsignor Nwanegbo Complex’s five-storey hurtled close, a doting companion. For a vantage in Ngwa Road, even for the last floor of a three-storey, it was too much offering, too much sight.

When he first moved in here, he had instantly liked the view, the confident chaos that it was. Aba, in the beginning of the rainy season, swarmed with small floods, miniature mud pools here and there. By the time the rains normalised, the ponds grew into lakes, rising and rising until, in places like Cemetery Road or Faulks Road or Ariaria Market, people had to wade through the brown water with their clothes pulled up to waist level, their footwear in their hands. In better places, gutters full with refuse spilled, washing back crumpled and stuffed waterproof sacks and torn plastic and water sachets onto roads already un-navigable. Roads on which potholes yawned with alacrity. Still, tankers hurtled past. And SUVs, because they were SUVs, strode on. And cars, because they were just cars, took their time, gliding in and out of the mini-pits the potholes were becoming. Because it was a major junction, there was constant noise, endless honking and honking. So much that the mornings were rude introductions and the afternoons coherent assaults on the senses. But by evening, it all settled into an untenable stability: of vehicles locked in traffic, of young men and boys pushing vehicles stuck in the ponds, of steady trains of people hurrying home. Aba was the beautiful chaos to Nsukka’s terse calm. So stark was the difference that it felt like a parallel world. He had never been much of a traveller, but he never failed to compare wherever he was to where he had earlier been. Among the cities in the East, Nsukka, squatting in its dusty, cold smallness, was the nerd, schooled but timid: a sample of what happens when introverted ingenuity is tucked away. Onitsha was a collection of three-, four-, five-storeys jam-packed like a tight broom: the classmate who tried to know Commerce and Physics and History all at once. Enugu was a laid-out plan overlaid with an elite ambience: the Cool Kid with new shirts and neat textbooks and polished shoes. Owerri was a collage of hotels and enticing shops, the air there heavy with the pressure to catch up: the eager-to-please one who knew too much sex and worried about his image. Port-Harcourt, with its structures and grandness, was the kid born into old money, oil money, the impolite kid who nevertheless knew what suffering was. But none of them had Aba’s rough swagger: of the class bully who knew too much book.

“Living in Aba is like chewing a guava without a toothpick,” Ulonna once told him. He had grown up in this town as a street boy, knew all the streets that warranted knowing.

Later, in the kitchen, slicing onions and fresh pepper, Somto said, “We still don’t know anything about each other.” A part of him felt violated by this engrossing intimacy they did not actively create, this familiarity that had simply caught on. Ulonna was standing at the door, Sia crooning from his phone, *You shoot me down, but I won’t fall, I am tit-a-a-a-n-i-i-u-m!* He chuckled and said, “That’s the way it usually happens.”

Now Somto wondered how quickly it had become a ritual of theirs, this post-coital standing or sitting or lying on the balcony, airing their naked bodies because they would not take a bath, would not wash off each other’s sweat and smell. He blew another ring of smoke and imagined how his cigarette would look from afar: a spark of miniature light, an orange dim in the darkness. It had started with Dumeje, the cigarettes; it had been his first post-coital indulgence. Everything had started with Dumeje. Dumeje had deposited too much of himself in him, too much of everything that was him. The breeze intensified. He inhaled, imagined it was the early morning air in Nsukka, that smell-less smell of gushing freshness.

There were times when he pondered how his life had become stuck in Nsukka. How everything that he saw or did, everything that he felt or wanted to feel, found in his memory a connection to that town. In Aba, he was reanimated, *alive*, but in Nsukka, he was *more*, felt more, as though he was part of the peculiar existence there—not as a single entity but as a facet of its totality. Ceaselessly, he compared everything about the two places, as though to find in their shortcomings comforts with which his own internal void could be plugged.

Dumeje could have plugged it. Put a final end to it. Because it had ended so many times that one end was in fact the start of another beginning. Dumeje with his inborn authority, his need to beat the world into shapes he felt were best because they suited him. Their relationship had bothered on obsession. Unhealthy, he had come to realise now, too unhealthy to possess healing power.

Evenings, when Somto came to his faculty, he waited for Dumeje in the thatch-roof structure with white-sand floor and tiled seats built to spell FASA—*Faculty of Arts Students’ Association*. Dumeje’s French and German classes ended late so he would sit there, on a stone pew that faced the road, eyes washing the buildings: two gigantic identical two-storey structures with concrete roofs curved in Vs, like open books resting on gutter pavements. There was an aura about the ageing structures, a confidence about them that flaunted that despite the yawning glasslessness of the windows that had come to look like deliberate design, the peeling walls that screamed for a saving retouch of bright red, the smug look that announced years and years of neglect, that despite these pimples they were still very beautiful. They stood at the

bend of Library Road, at the swerve of the Department of Works road: two women past menopause at a junction, determined to prove to passers-by how sexually-active they had remained.

For someone from the Faculty of Physical Sciences, Physical Sciences of thick buildings and taut air, it was the statues that held his interest, the many grey statues outside Fine Arts department that were final year students' projects. Two muscular men in pants fighting, faces contorted; one's hands around the other, on his neck and back. Two faceless images moulded as one, the male behind the pregnant female, caressing her belly; perhaps the sculptor's impression of two people fallen in love, into each other. A bare-bodied boy sitting, his palm under his jaw, in that famed posture of Thinkers. A ball of rough auburn rocks strung together with metal wires, rocks suspended evenly as though by some centripetal force, so that together they looked like a Screaming Earth Breaking to Pieces. In front of the workshop, students sat astride wooden benches, drawing. Merely watching these students sweat under the dimming sun, observing their faces, noting their peculiar ways of sitting, the angles of their hunched backs, filled him with a sense of serenity. Not happiness or satisfaction, just serenity: a massive calm he'd never bothered to explain to himself, to interrogate. Months on, in the final weeks after he made his decision, he would walk from his own faculty, almost across the breadth of Campus, and come here hoping it would be for the last time. Hoping to laugh, to clear his head, prepare. This place would fill him with emotions, all overwhelming in their varying degrees, and he would cry and refuse to wipe his face because in that cold evening, that dust-hoarding breeze, no one would notice. But now he thought this place missed trees, broad cool shades. Should have a garden tendered just for these beautiful art works.

Dumeje liked trees, flowers and vegetation, nature, in that reflective, philosopher manner of his. "They remind me that my life should be lived to its blooming fullest," he often said, laughing, mocking his own clichéd idea, his palm tight in Somto's, his face opening up with that kind of confidence manifest in people who Owned things, people who were Sure of things. Perhaps this was a reason Somto admired him, this tendency to Own, take control. This bright positivity that scared away his own weaknesses, made him feel strong. Perhaps Dumeje had none of this—perhaps it was merely what love did, making its slaves define and re-define their beloved in the light of strengths. Even in their room when they talked and Dumeje looked at him almost every time he spoke, staring sometimes as though he was talking to only him, as though expecting his agreement and could not continue without it, Somto saw it as Confidence. Ownership. Yet sometimes, Somto thought he did not know how to love him, did not have the naked courage to own him in that way. Once, a night they walked back from Dumeje's lecturer-

uncle's house, Somto asked him whether he thought their roommates knew about them, whether they suspected anything. It was on Fulton Avenue, on the inner unpaved walk where the street lights did not shower, just in front of the houses where branches of flower trees sagged and petals of purple, red, yellow, turquoise blue hovered above. Dumeje laughed, coughed, and said no. And threw away his cigarette and stretched to pluck a petal. He stuck it into Somto's polo and, as he tightened his hand in his, said, "Why are you so afraid?"

In the month that would follow, he and Ulonna would know each other like the hair on their bellies, the toes on their feet, the nails on their fingers. They'd grown up in Aba: he studying Physics but working six to eight daily in a bank; Ulonna dropping out of his Electronic Engineering programme in the polytechnic for lack of fees, not wanting to go back even now that he was buoyant enough from his photography business. These similarities—being born in the same place, becoming what they had not planned to become—were further proofs for Ulonna that *God is on our side* ("What does that even mean?" Somto would say). That they were born Catholic and Somto turned agnostic; that they were eight years apart in age, he thirty-four, Somto twenty-six—these ones did not matter. "You smell like guava," Ulonna whispered once, his back on the wall, Somto astride him. "Guava." And so Ulonna began calling him Guava. A new day and he had a new thing to say, a fresh observation. "What's it about this *Blue Jasmine* movie you see every day?" he asked once. And then, the first day he'd stumbled into Somto's wardrobe, into the arresting array of brown, black shoes and grey, black ties and grey, white, blue shirts and trousers: "You know you have an obsessive compulsion to organize things, right?" And finally, one morning: "I didn't know you soliloquize." The small flat was swelled by his existence within it, bubbled with new life. After Somto began calling him Anaconda because, in the hours after sex, he paraded the flat with his soldier still agile, he always replied, "You can't do it because you're embarrassed. What kind of man walks around with a pin?"

This morning, when he woke up, the first thing he said was, "Did we use condoms?" Somto was staring at him. He stared back, blank. "Did you use a condom?" Somto repeated. He was lying on the bed, eyes on the ceiling now.

"Yes," Ulonna said finally. "I think we did."

"You think *we* did?"

"I mean, we were both drunk. I was drunk and you were drunk. I'm trying to remember but I think I did. There's no way I can know for sure because I must have flushed it in the toilet." This night, an hour ago, Somto's tongue running along the parting of his chest and abs,

and in the heated dampness that his groin had become, Ulonna whispered, “*Chere*. Condom.” But Somto held him back down, cupped his scrotum. He often told him that he had balls of pebbles, made of pebbles and smooth like pebbles. “Condom,” he whispered.

“No,” Somto whispered back.

Dumeje had insisted and so he had moved to Mbanefo Hall, swapped bed spaces with a roommate of Dumeje’s who wanted Eni-Njoku Hall. He had lived in Eni-Njoku in first year, in a room where everybody minded their own business, the only noises within being the opening and closing of cupboards, the turning of book and hand-out leaves, the subdued clank of spoons on plates, the rare rusty “welcome” offered by whoever was in the room when others returned from lectures. He never really liked the hostel, Eni-Njoku. Populated by Medicine and Pharmacy and Agriculture students but nearly always looking dry and empty in comparison to others. It *was* a dull hostel because, somehow, the students sent there every year were the quiet ones, the socially serene ones. Nothing like Alvan Ikoku Hall just next to it, and definitely nowhere around Mbanefo. Mbanefo was notorious and beloved for being noisy and exciting: it was the idiosyncratic, care-free, satisfied Eldest Brother to the other two male hostels. Alvan was the ideal one with everything in the right amounts, like the Responsible Second Son loaded with his parents’ heavy hopes in the face of the first son’s jarring failures. Eni-Njoku’s ambience ensured it was the shy, often-forgotten, Sulking Lastborn who never wanted to grow up and experience the world. Who always locked himself in his room, crying and licking ice cream. The hostel folded into itself, like a roll of toilet tissue, remained reluctant to yield to school life. Perhaps its reputation, its environment, stilled everything, every student, into a compromising coldness. Nkrumah, the only female hostel not near the school’s centre, wasn’t at all like the mother in the family—it was more like the mistress. A mistress from whose windows girls called out to Mbanefo boys, replying every “Show me your breast!” with “Show me your prick!” The last and newest hostel, the Post-Graduate Hall, was just there, standing, observing, the uncaring guardian shooing the boys away. But while he never really liked Eni-Njoku, he also never really wanted to be someplace else. Like most things he would never mow from his life, the hostel soothed him because of its safety, its stubborn unlikelihood of Things happening. And yet, in the middle of second year, after being perpetually pestered, he packed into Mbanefo. Dumeje’s room was on the first floor, and somewhere that evening, either on the second or on the third, a boy was shouting: “Mbanefo, I dey hungry o! Mbanefo, I wan eat *mai shaye*!”

In Santa Village that night, plates of rice on the table between them, Dumeje said, “You are the most important thing to me right now. I love you like *mad*.”

The first time he followed Ulonna to work—a friend of a friend’s birthday party in Terminus Hotel—he’d sat in a corner near the swimming pool, watching him. The way he walked around asking if people needed pictures of themselves, the way he smiled when taking down a customer’s phone number, the way he gestured for posers to move closer or a bit apart, the easy efficiency that came with his sheer love of what he did for a living. There was something about him—this man that, after everything, would come home to him with his imposing body, with sweat that shone his face and arms in the sun, and with laughable ignorance of how he had blessed people with his charisma—that made Somto suddenly feel grateful. And because he was grateful, he fought the urge to compare.

“You should try street photography,” Somto had told him the first time he came into his studio. The walls of the fairly large room that served as Reception were covered in photographs the sizes of ceiling boards, a few of which were deliberately sepia-toned for effect, the rest of which colourfully burned. All of them faces bearing down on sitting, admiring customers. His photographs of posing people had an enduring quality that may be better realised when channelled into spontaneous shots.

“I prefer these people the way they are. They pay,” Ulonna had replied. And he caressed Somto’s jaw, and then requested a nude shot of him, that his face would be masked, that only his body would be captured.

“You’re mad,” Somto told him.

He was out there in the crowd for more than two hours, but every five minutes or so his eyes turned to where Somto sat as if to make sure he was still there. Finally, he came over to him, whispered, “Are you okay?” Somto nodded. In the jeep after the party, in a pothole in the gridlock of Port-Harcourt Road, Somto said, “I never thought of you as handsome until today.”

Ulonna laughed, said, “Men, historically, have never needed good looks to make someone fall in love with them.”

Somto said, “Really?”

It was what Dumeje had said two months after they became roommates, during their very first fight when, alone in the room, Somto had held Dumeje’s Nokia and said, “Who is Elvis? Who is he?” and then flung the phone across the room and it scattered on the floor. Dumeje got up

from the mattress, picked his phone, put it together, and walked out. For some minutes he stood on the balcony and then he came back in, stone-faced, and said, “Really? This is the trust?”

“You’re a fucking liar,” Somto said quietly. “You are a fucking liar, Dumeje.”

GBOLAHAN ADEOLA

LIKE A THIEF ON A STORMY NIGHT*When I was fifteen, my friends and I decided to rob a bank!*

It's imprudent—and this goes without saying, really—to start a conversation with this kind of thing: a scandalous criminal past. But it's a good way to start a story. It's intriguing; most of us are fascinated by people who do things we find reprehensible. And as much as we might revile these people, we often cannot resist talking about them. And hearing about them . . . Unfortunately, I must confess, now that you are fascinated, that this story is not actually about a bank robbery. It isn't even about a fifteen-year-old. But you'll keep reading, I'm sure, despite my confession, because liars are fascinating too. And liars who repent of their lies? We're filled with admiration for them—paradoxically, even more than we can muster for those who have not lied at all. Doesn't the Bible say that there's more joy in heaven over the one sheep that was lost and then found, than there is for the rest of the flock, which did not think to stray?

But I digress. This story is not about sheep—just like it is not about a robbery—and while one might say that it is about repentance, it is, in fact, simply the story of a twenty-five-year-old Nigerian man who, ten years after he and his friends decided to rob a bank, is trying to get married and settle down, and has, for this reason, found himself in a church.

It is not his wedding day. He is not standing at the pulpit beaming, as his bride approaches, veiled, to latch on to him and he to her *until death do us part*. This twenty-five-year-old man—his name is Tunde—is waiting. Tunde has waited two hours, already, for the service to end. Tunde has sat through two hymns, a sermon, and three offerings. When Tunde thrust his hand into the basket to drop the third offering, and the usher smiled at him, Tunde smiled back and thought that perhaps if he and his friends had started a church all those years ago, they might not have needed to rob a bank. But then Tunde quickly quelled this thought; this being God's house, He was probably watching.

After this third offering, the pastor's wife mounts the pulpit to lead what Tunde hopes is the benediction. Tunde knows that this is the pastor's wife. The woman beside him in the pew, whose hand he is currently holding, had pointed her out to him. And Tunde had thought, as she did so, that he would have recognized the pastor's wife even without being told: the way she'd sat in the foremost pew, her back straight, her chin high, her hands clasped across the gigantic Bible on her lap, her overall demeanour hard and exacting and forbidding, like a commandment

etched across a tablet.

You might be wondering, now, at the reason for Tunde's foray into the house of God, or even about the woman whose hand he is holding. Let me tell you what you need to know about Tunde, beginning with the fact that his name is *not* Tunde. Lying is a tedious endeavour. Tunde is me. Well, there is no Tunde. But this man is me. And indeed there I am, seated beside my fiancé Lovett in her family's church, waiting for the service to end. Why am I in church? Because I have to meet the pastor, Lovett informed me a week ago, for 'couple's counselling.'

"So," I said. "You are dragging me off to church, in essence, for some kind of spiritual approval?"

"Call it what you want," Lovett said. "The church won't marry us if they don't get a chance to talk to us... well, you, first."

I sighed dramatically and muttered something about how unexpectedly stressful marrying her was turning out to be.

She chuckled. "You'll also get to meet the pastor's wife," she said. "Mrs. Peters is an absolute idol. I don't know how I would have survived my parents' separation without her."

The pastor's wife is not there to lead the benediction. She is there to take donations for the renovation of the church offices. The ushers do not go round with baskets this time. Instead, the donations are conducted as a reverse auction of sorts. She starts with ₦50,000, and the people in the congregation who are willing to donate that much flock toward the pulpit for blessings. Then she drops the amount in multiples of five thousand and the congregation flocks forward and flocks forward . . . Each person according to their capability, they flock! If this story were about them, it might be about sheep after all. But it is not about them. It is about me, and my beautiful fiancé Lovett, whom I will do anything to marry.

The service ends a few minutes after I decide it never will. Lovett leads me to the church offices, which look fine to me. Another smiling usher, who introduces herself as Rolake, places glasses of fruit juice and slices of cake in front of us while we wait. The pastor calls us into his office eventually, and leads us to an L-shaped settee across the room from his desk. His wife takes a seat beside him, and after some preamble, he begins with the air of someone who has perfected his performance, but hasn't quite mastered his efforts to pretend he is not preforming.

"You should consider yourself a very blessed young man indeed," he says to me. "Not only because 'he who finds a wife finds a good thing,' but also because Lovett is a wonderful

young woman.”

I glance sideways at Lovett and smile. She is smiling as well.

“And yet marriage can be quite painful,” the pastor’s wife chimes in. “So tragic, the way a man swoops in and snatches a woman away from her family.” She looks straight at me. “It is almost like stealing, wouldn’t you say?”

The pastor looks at his wife with the mildly displaced bewilderment of an actor whose co-star has suddenly gone off script. He clears his throat.

Beside me, Lovett laughs and says, “At this point, I think my family is just relieved I’m not going to grow into an old spinster.”

“Also,” I add. “Isn’t it the man who ‘leaves his father and mother’ and ‘cleaves’ to his wife? I would argue that Lovett is the one doing the stealing here. She has stolen my heart.” I reach for Lovett’s hand and smile with exaggerated earnestness. She rolls her eyes and laughs.

The pastor laughs too.

His wife smiles. “One might say you are both thieves then. Although I would still say that only one of you is.”

The pastor glances quizzically at his wife, his bewilderment clearly mounting. “Well, this is a beautiful kind of thievery.” He turns to Lovett and me and smiles. “The Bible says that two are better than one because...”

“Yes, yes,” his wife cuts in. “Stealing is not always bad. Doesn’t the bible say of our Lord’s second coming that he will return like a thief on a *stormy* night?”

The pastor shifts in his seat. “‘Two are better than one because...’”

“I don’t know that the bible specifies that it will be a *stormy* night,” I say smiling.

The woman smiles too. “Doesn’t it?”

“No. I think it just says ‘like a thief in the night.’”

“Well, I do believe that night will be quite stormy, especially for those who do not confess and repent of their sins.”

For a moment, the room is silent. Then, “‘...because they have a good reward for their labour’,” the pastor finishes carefully.

Lovett looks from me to the pastor to his wife. And there is, on my fiancé’s face as she regards Mrs. Peters, the thoughtful, eager contemplation of a student attempting to parse her teacher’s elusive proposition, to locate its intricate wisdoms.

My friends and I decided to rob a bank because we wanted to buy a car. What we really wanted was our own basketball court. The one in our neighbourhood was always taken over by the

boys from the army barracks a few miles away, who were bigger than us, and tougher than us, and could actually throw a ball. We had bounced it around for a while, the idea of building our own outdoor court. But the process sounded cumbersome—not to mention expensive—what with all the workmen you had to hire and permits you had to acquire. And who was to say, should we succeed in building a new court, that the barrack boys would not hijack that as well? So I came up with the idea, luminous to me at the time, of buying a car. A car would make us popular among the barrack boys—we could give them rides to places—so that whether or not they liked us, they would tolerate us and let us have the court at times. If you have found some flaws in this logic, it is not because you are particularly clever. It is because my friends and I, at fifteen, were particularly not clever. Of course, to my twenty-five-year-old self, these ideas seem ludicrous, even for me at fifteen, so ludicrous as to have been the inspirations of someone else—someone named Tunde, perhaps, who knew that neither his parents, nor the parents of his three friends would entertain the suggestion of buying them a car, someone named Tunde, who really did think that the most viable option was to rob a bank.

“There are several reasons why the Lord, in his infinite wisdom, blessed humanity with the institution of marriage,” the pastor is saying now. His wife is silent, smiling beatifically beside him. Lovett is holding my hand. “For if they fall, one will lift up his companion. But woe to him who is alone when he falls, for he has no one to help him up.”

The pastor’s wife nods fervently. The pastor seems to tense up for a moment, as though waiting to see if she might speak, and yet hoping that she does not. When she says nothing, he continues: “Yet, ‘can two walk together except...?’”

“And how easy it is to ‘fall’ these days,” she cuts in cheerfully. “So much temptation everywhere, so much greed. Perhaps that’s why people steal, to satisfy their unreasonable greed.”

“True,” I say. “But who are we to judge. ‘Men do not despise a thief, if he steal to satisfy his soul when he is hungry.’”

The pastor’s wife laughs. “Proverbs 6:30,” she says. “Still, verse 31—and I’m worried you seem to have not read that far—tells us that if this thief is found, he must give up *all* the substance of his household.”

“That sounds a bit harsh,” I say in mock horror.

“It’s a good thing, then,” says the pastor firmly. “That we have—all of us here—committed ourselves to God’s way. As I was saying, the Bible asks us to ponder a question especially pertinent to marriage: ‘can two walk...?’”

“Yet how can we truly tell who *has* committed himself...?”

“‘*Can two walk together except they agree?*’” The pastor is looking at his wife when he finally completes his quote; his tone is pointed.

Again there is silence. This time, when Lovett glances around, she looks more bewildered than anything else.

“Actually,” I say, because I am unable to resist. “Lovett and I have a car. We will not be walking much.”

Tunde was especially nervous about the plan to rob a bank. His parents were strict, upright, Christians, the type who had daily early morning devotions at home and herded the family to church three times a week. He would be in for it, he knew, if they learned he had been—to borrow one of his mother’s favourite Bible verses—‘walking in the way of the ungodly.’ But Tunde would not have his friends know this. So he reassured himself they weren’t doing anything too bad. The amount it would take to buy a car, which was all they were going to steal, would barely make a dent in the bank’s finances.

Tunde and his three friends had tacitly decided that their heist could not possibly depend on brawn. None of them had much of it. They had to use their brains. This was possible, they imagined. Probably because you do not see a lack of intelligence when you look in the mirror.

Their plan was simple. No, not *that* kind of simple. The other kind. I would explain it to you in detail, but again this story is not about a robbery. I will say, however, that the plan involved several fake guns and a small canister of nitrous oxide, stolen from their school’s chemistry lab.

Lovett is puzzled. The pastor, it appears, has finally decided his wife’s epistles have strayed from the right Testament. The woman looks mildly penitent at her husband’s discomfiture, but there is also a glint in her eyes; it is clear she is anything but ready to give up. I have begun, by now, to enjoy the whole thing as a game.

The pastor is trying his best to hold the conversation together, so that his mien is now more determined than kindly. “It is not as easy as it seems, being married,” he says. “You might go into it giddy and absolutely in love, but marriage is a lot of hard work, a lot of perseverance. And tolerance.

“The Bible implores men, in particular, to love their wives as they would their own bodies. There’s a lot that must be gleaned from this.” He turns to me. “First you must love and value your own self. For if you do not value your own self, how can you value your wife? And

having learned to love yourself, you must undertake the even more challenging task of loving someone else *as much* as you love yourself.

“Your love for your wife must be complete and absolute.”

“Complete and absolute,” the pastor’s wife echoes with a firm nod.

“Yes,” the pastor says. “And from the wife, the Bible demands submis...”

“Complete and absolute,” his wife says again.

“Yes,” the pastor agrees again.

“Like repentance,” she says. “True love, like true repentance, must be complete and absolute. And consider this: ‘if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us.’”

The pastor takes a deep breath. “Yes, forgiveness is also very important in marriage,” he says. And for a moment, I cannot help but admire this effort to power through, stranded as he is with a costar who has gone completely haywire.

“But before forgiveness, there must be repentance,” Mrs. Peters says.

“I imagine there must be,” I say.

“Then,” she says, matching my facetiousness, “‘remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent.’”

I pretend to shiver. “If I didn’t know any better,” I say. “I would think the Bible were threatening me.”

Lovett makes a sound that seems as though it had, conceived as a laugh, decided it would much rather be a yelp. The pastor, by now, looks absolutely exasperated. He turns to his wife and says, gesturing towards our now empty plates: “Ruth, it seems that our guests have run out of refreshments. Maybe we should see if we could get Rolake to fetch some more.”

His wife smiles and waves her hand. “Oh I think they’re perfectly fine. Man shall not live by bread alone *abi*. What they’ve come to feed on, today, is the word of God.”

The pastor’s smile, as he rises to his feet, looks forced. “Still, that is no reason to starve them. We don’t want Lovett looking like a skeleton in her wedding gown.”

All four of us laugh. “We are fine, sir,” I say.

“Nonsense,” he says. “Come with me, Ruth.”

“The young man says they are fine,” the pastor’s wife says.

Again there is silence.

“Perhaps I should come help you fetch the refreshments, sir,” Lovett volunteers cautiously.

The pastor frowns. “You don’t have to do that, Lovett.”

“Actually, I think that’s a splendid idea,” says his wife. “Lovett, help him with the snacks, will you, while I get to know this wonderful young man a bit better.”

Lovett springs instantly to her feet. The pastor takes a deep breath as he starts out of the room.

There is a reason why this story is not about a bank robbery, why, indeed, it cannot be about a bank robbery: *deciding* to rob a bank is not quite the same as robbing one. There was, in the end, no robbery at all. Tunde and his friends would learn more, sometime after their intended heist, about ‘laughing gas.’ What it could do. But more importantly, what it could *not* do: incapacitate bank employees and guards with recalcitrant fits of laughter. What they did learn that night was that if you wished to storm into a bank and rob it, it is important to arrive at the bank before it closes.

When they arrived at the bank at 7 p.m., the doors were firmly shut and there was no one in sight except the gateman. The four boys lingered outside the gates for a moment, completely defeated. Perhaps they might have considered going home, regrouping, returning on a different day. But dejection is never so absolute as when it arrives on the heels of exhilaration. Even after ten years, I remember how we felt. Our mission might have been quixotic, our plan spurious at best, but the sadness that overcame us was real. There we stood, bruised and broken, suffering the ignominy of defeat, our shame illuminated by the halogen lights that flooded the premises of the bank. The bank in which our car was trapped.

The security man finally noticed us loitering and yelled for us to clear off. We started for home. And then, as though the night were intent of proving that things could get worse, the stars suddenly faded. A flash of lightning pierced the sky, followed by an explosion of thunder. If the situation were less depressing, I might have made a joke about Sàngó, Yoruba god of thunder who punished thieves by striking them with lightning. But all we could think about then was finding shelter from the impending storm. The closest of our houses was a mile away.

The rain began with a drizzle. We began to run. Perhaps it is simply an illusion, or perhaps it is vengefulness on the part of God’s weeping angels, but if you’ve ever run in the rain, you must know that the faster you run, the heavier it gets. So, realizing we could not possibly outrun the storm, we headed for the closest house we could find, stood at the front steps, and rang the doorbell.

When I thought about it later, I could not imagine what the woman who answered the door was thinking, letting four teenage boys, all clad in black, take shelter on her veranda. Granted, one of us had a giant Spider-Man print on the front of his black shirt. Still we were

four teenage boys. Carrying suspicious backpacks.

Ten years later, however, when I walked into church with my fiancé Lovett, whom I would do anything to marry, and I saw this same woman in the foremost pew, looking exacting and forbidding, I decided it must have been some kind of Christian charitableness that made her take pity on us that night.

She did not look exacting or forbidding then. She looked benevolent. She regarded us, shivering in the balcony, and offered to make us tea. Again, there was a flash of lightning. As she opened the door to go in, there was a rumble of thunder. From inside the house, a little child cried, “Mummy, I want Daddy.”

“Daddy won’t be home for a while, dear,” she said, shutting the door behind her. “But don’t worry, Mummy is here.”

That was when Tunde had another terrible idea.

The pastor’s wife is staring at me unspeaking. She is tapping the bible on her lap. I am wondering how long it will take before Lovett and the pastor return.

“I wonder if Lovett and Pastor might need some help,” I say.

The woman’s lips stretch slowly, like something uncoiling, into a tight smile.

“I really enjoyed the service,” I say. “It was... extensive”

She taps the bible on her lap.

I am suddenly angry. “What do you want from me?” I whisper fiercely. “An apology? I was fifteen! Teenagers do stupid things.”

For a while she is silent. Then, “Assurance,” she says. “For starters.”

“What?!”

“I need to ascertain”—she finally stops tapping the bible—“that you’re not the person now, that you were then.”

“You know nothing about who I was then!”

“And yet you’ve spent the past hour giving me an idea of who you are now.” She clicks her tongue a few times. “I’m not sure about that person.”

“You have no right...”

“You might have shown some remorse. A sense of recognition of the mistakes you made in the past. It says a lot that you’ve chosen to be amused.”

“So all that needling... This is what you want: that I hang my head in shame? Be... penitent?”

“Who says I want anything from you? I just want what best for everyone.”

“Or perhaps you simply want to punish me.”

“If I did,” the pastor’s wife laughs, “I would be talking to Lovett and my husband now, and you would be alone in this room.”

“And what will you tell her? That she refuse to marry me because of something that happened ten years ago?” Now I’m the one who is laughing.

The woman’s lips flatten, into something that is not quite a smile. She says nothing else. When Lovett and the pastor return with a tray of biscuits and bottles of iced tea, she leans forward, picks up one of the bottles and, peering at the label, says to Lovett, “You know, I hear these aren’t very good for you. They are made with artificial sweeteners now, my friend Pelumi says. I must tell Rolake to stop buying them.”

Seconds later, when I reach for a bottle of the drink, Lovett places a hand gently on my lap and smiling, murmurs: “You shouldn’t drink that, honey. Mrs. Peters said not to.”

I look up, a bit amused, in time to see the pastor’s wife lean back in her seat. There is a glint in her eyes, of something shaped like triumph. And flecked with warning. My palms are suddenly cold.

It occurred to Tunde that even if he could not pull a bank job, the night might yet not go to waste. He had a new plan, not nearly as lucrative as a bank robbery, but something, nonetheless. When the woman opened the door again, a tray of tea items in her hand, Tunde drew his fake gun and yelled at her to back into the house. The woman obeyed, shocked. Then her expression changed to amusement, which soon changed to annoyance.

“Young man,” she said. “I don’t know what kind of prank you are trying to play, but I must ask you to drop that toy gun and stop this at once.”

Tunde glanced at his gun. He looked shocked now, as though he too were only just realizing that his weapon was a fake. Still, “Give me all your money and jewelry,” he screamed unrelenting. The small boy in the corner of the room looked a little scared, but more confused.

The woman looked at Tunde from head to toe. Then she began to laugh. And perhaps one should pause, here, to admit that Tunde *did* look quite a laughable figure, in his Spider-Man shirt and with his obviously fake gun and bright green backpack.

But the woman should not have laughed. In that moment, the disappointment from earlier that night, his frustration at the weather, and this final humiliation, her mockery, tipped something in Tunde that was already teetering on the edge, so that before he could stop himself, he’d hurled his gun at the television and begun to scream. Then, running around the living room, he grabbed vases off the cabinet, ripped photos off the wall and threw things every which

way. You might wonder what Tunde's three friends were doing while he ran amok. Tunde would wonder the same thing too, years later. He would wonder when they disappeared, so that when his eyes moved to the doorway, it was as though they had never been there at all. As though he'd conceived, alone, this hare-brained operation. As though he'd trekked to the bank by himself, arrived dripping wet, and still alone, at the woman's house.

The woman had begun to scream. Tunde stopped his wild thrashing, suddenly exhausted. He stiffened for a moment as he looked around the room and took in the havoc he had wreaked. Then, remembering to grab his gun, he ran out the door. It was only through the corner of his eye, as he fled into the rain, that Tunde saw the small boy whom he had knocked down in his madness, and the boy's mother, devastated, as she rushed towards her son to comfort him.

For the rest of the session, the pastor talks, uninterrupted by his wife, about the need for Lovett to submit to her husband, about couples' responsibility to each other, and the church and their family, when they decided to start one. I am unable to concentrate. I glance at Lovett, who is nodding at the man's words, then again at Mrs. Peters, who seems, now, as though she is simply waiting for her husband to finish. There is a knock on the door at some point and a teenage boy walks in with a message for the pastor. The pastor, smiling, introduces the boy as his son.

When the session ends, the pastor says a short prayer and wishes us a safe trip home. Lovett and I get up to leave. The pastor's wife stands too, offering to walk us to our car. As we walk through the office building on our way out, I begin to notice places where the ceiling has started to sag, where the painting needs to be retouched. The offices suddenly do not look 'fine.' I feel a bit guilty. But the heaviness in my chest, the twinges of panic I spent the last minutes of the session trying to quell, have been dulled by the pastor's wife's silence. I am telling myself that I am not afraid of Mrs. Peters when...

"Lovett, dear," she says as we step out of the building. "Are you doing anything on Tuesday evening? My spirit tells me we need to join hands in prayer regarding your wedding." But she is not looking at Lovett. She is looking at me.

"Actually," I say. "We are picking out the cake on Tuesday evening. We have an appointment."

"We can cancel it," Lovett says. "Mrs. Peters says we have to pray."

"That's settled then. See you on Tuesday, Lovett." She turns to leave.

"I'll like to come as well," I say quickly. "If that's okay."

"By all means, do. But there will be lots of other opportunities for me to pray with

Lovett before she marries you. You might be busy at some of those times, with a late-night job to complete, for instance. Or the weather might not permit you. You won't always be able to pray with us."

I take a deep breath. "Still, it's not like there's an alternative to prayer," I say. "What can we do in the place of prayer?"

Lovett giggles. "Look who is suddenly a believer."

"What can we do in the place of prayer?" I ask again, meeting Mrs. Peters' eye. I wonder if I seem desperate; I think I sound desperate.

"We can't let ourselves be ignorant," she says, gesturing casually towards Lovett, "of Satan's devices." She smiles—"lest he should get an advantage over us"—and gestures not so casually towards me. "In the absence of assurance, we must pray."

"We could have faith as well," I say, "the assurance of things that we do not see. The bible says so."

"'Faith without works is dead.' The bible says that too." There is, for the first time, something resembling an edge to her voice.

"What kind of works can I do?" I say.

Lovett looks genuinely concerned. "Honey, I'm sure you're fine. As Daddy always says, 'God understands our limitations.'" She smiles ruefully, turning to the pastor's wife. "Then again, Daddy uses that to justify every atrocious thing he does."

The woman laughs at this. I laugh too, a bit too loudly, and the woman looks me in my eyes, which are limpid with the defiance I cannot muster, and the plea I cannot shake. Her own eyes still have the glint in them.

Lovett is saying something that I do not hear.

The pastor's wife closes her eyes and raises a hand to her forehead, the gesture of a person who has suddenly remembered something important. "I nearly forgot," she says, "I must talk to Rolake before she leaves." She pulls out her cell phone, dials a number. "Rolake," she says into the phone. "How much have we raised for the renovations so far?" She repeats the amount out loud and states, "That's about half what we need." A pause. "But praise God—and I should have told you this earlier, but I forgot—we might not need to raise funds anymore. Someone has *assured* me they will donate the rest." She tells Rolake not to leave for home yet and hangs up.

Lovett's eyes are wide. "Is that true? Oh! God is wonderful!"

"He truly is," the pastor's wife says. She turns to me. "As Lovett said, God understands."

So did I.

When she leaves us moments later, Lovett and I continuing towards our car, Lovett says, “Was it just me, or was Mrs. Peters being a bit strange?”

“I’m sure she was just looking out for you,” I say.

We get into our car, a black BMW, which had been a gift from the father of my fiancé Lovett, whom I will do anything to marry. Lovett is talking about the service now, saying something about the voice of the chorister who led the second hymn. I am thinking about voices as well, the ones we think strident, when they are barely more than whispers. And the ones that maintain, even when they speak stridently, the muted quality of whispers. When I get home I’ll fetch the check book for the bank account Lovett and I share, the one she’d convinced her father to open. I’ll write a check memo-ed ‘for office renovation,’ making sure to tear out the carbon copy as well, and mail it to the church. I start the car. Lovett is chattering, now, about our wedding. I am thinking about assurances. And thieves.

Nonfiction

KELECHI NJOKU

FALSE MEMORY

One evening in January 2013, I phoned to congratulate my godfather on his son Henry's approaching ordination as a Catholic priest. It was the fourth or fifth time I would be speaking with Godfather in about three years; the last time I saw him was in '96 or '97 – I'm not sure now. Our phone calls were usually warm and brief, and stuck to enquiries about each other's wellbeing and the families behind us. Always, I asked after his twin sons Omo and Ojo: I had made sand-huts with them when we were four and five years of age and the three of us had leapt over our neighbour's stairs to see who could fly over the most number of steps.

I imagined my childhood friends, now, hovering behind Godfather as he spoke to me on the phone. The most recent image I had of them was from twenty years before, when they were six and I five.

'Can I speak to Omo and Ojo?' I asked Godfather. With the ordination ceremony a few weeks away and our reunion certain, I thought it rather graceless to not want to hear their voices, congratulate them too and to – *honestly* – begin diluting some of the awkwardness I already envisaged when we all met again over the weekend of the ordination.

But Godfather did not call Omo and Ojo to the phone. Instead, he said: 'Don't worry, you'll see your friends soon. Then you can speak with them as long as you want.' His tone was soft, and I imagined that an indulgent smile softened his face too.

I chuckled, and agreed with him, even as I thought his reason for not putting me through to Omo and Ojo rather strange. He was playing a go-between role reminiscent not of a conduit but of a stage curtain, a blocker.

The ordination ceremony was to take place in Abuja where Godfather and his family had lived since '94 when they moved from Okene, the mountain-speckled town that held my childhood.

The day before the ceremony, my sister Chidi and I arrived in Abuja from Okene. Godfather was to pick us up at Jabi Park. We got out of the cab, bought some bread. We called Godfather to let him know we had arrived.

'Look for a white Audi parked close to the Second Gate,' he said.

Before he was done describing his car, I saw him and waved.

He wore glasses, had a bold forehead, a loud smile. He was as I remembered him.

Chidi and I hurried over to him, embraced him. He remarked on how much we'd grown, how little we'd been the last time he saw us.

Earlier, I had thought about pocketing an old photo of me with Omo and Ojo, in which they wore blue shorts and shirts and I wore a sweatshirt and dungarees. But I cancelled the idea. It was a gesture too mawkish for life outside the movies. I would keep it simple: we would talk about the houses we had grown up in. Houses so identical in the way they donned ribbed green roofs, opened out, through partitioned-glass doors, to pink veranda walls, and shared a landlord. We would reminisce about the slim path that underlined the east end of both our houses; they would remember that through this path, we had, all day, yo-yoed between each other's homes until nightfall when we retired to our respective houses to continue yelling conversations at each other through bedroom windows. I would tell them about Uncle Kennedy, the neighbour who had moved into their former home after they left, and who let Dad record *Sarafina!* and *The Jungle Book* on VHS...

Minutes later, Godfather drove into a neighbourhood of several four-storeyed blocks. He parked in front of one of the blocks. Chidi and I got out of the car just as I wondered if Godfather lived on the ground floor, like my family and his had back in Okene. Or if they lived upstairs.

Godfather led the way up two flights of stairs until we stopped at a door, then entered. We paused in the foyer by the kitchen to greet Godfather's wife God-Ma, and a younger woman who had mirthful eyes.

'I know this face!' I blurted, anxious to not process anything quietly today, to not be dismissed as dull or shy.

The woman with mirthful eyes simply smiled.

'This is Florence,' God-Ma said, her arms open to embrace Chidi and me.

Recognition sank. Of course. Godfather and God-Ma's oldest daughter, married with a son. She had been in secondary school the last time I saw her in '94.

We moved into the living room. A man my age rose from a sofa to greet me, hand outstretched. I skipped the *good afternoon* and quickly said: 'Ojo, right?'

Godfather and the man my age chuckled in that manner that made gaffes suddenly self-evident. My cheeks throbbed with embarrassment.

Godfather said, 'This is Omo, actually!'

'Oh whoa.' I shook his hand. Stared up at his face – the forehead that was Godfather's, the dusky-fair skin – trying to pour these details into the mould of a certain five-year-old boy I used to know. I wanted to make sense of him *now*.

The day I learned they would be leaving Okene soon and for good, it was Ojo, the darker one of the twins, who had announced it. We had been playing on our neighbours' stairs, jumping from top step to the bottom step, counting scores.

'Where will you go?' I asked, making my way seven stairs up for a fresh leap.

'Abuja,' Ojo said.

'We are moving to Abuja,' Omo said.

I stopped running up. In their eyes, I already saw myself left standing on those stairs, alone, the space where they stood right now hollow air. I said nothing. I was reluctant to breathe life into the dread I felt by discussing their impending departure. I watched them race back to their house as dusk settled into night. How long before they no longer raced along that slim path that underlined our homes and held both our families together?

On the Saturday morning in '95 they left, I stood quietly on the mouth of that tiny path, with my sisters Chidi and Eby and Aunt Chioma, watching Godfather and his family pile their belongings into a van and hand the keys to their old home over to my parents to deliver to our landlord. I waved at their blue pickup and the van as they drove away, unsure if the gesture was appropriate for what I felt at the moment: abandonment.

As soon as we got back to our own house, I went to the long sofa – the one Dad favoured – lay on my stomach, and hid my face in my folded arms. I did not hear Aunt Chioma sit beside me, until she touched my shoulders, gently prised my hands off my wet face and said: 'You'll see them again one day, do you hear? Stop crying.'

I did see them again, Omo and Ojo. And mixed up their names.

They remembered nothing of me. Not the sand-huts, nor my red football, nor our identical homes with the pink verandas, nor our church with the round steeple and the big white crucifix.

I wondered how they could have forgotten everything the three of us were supposed to know. We were roughly the same age after all, they being older by nine months. Did Godfather not talk about Okene to them at all?

Godfather's youngest child, Francis, was in the sitting room, too. I remembered him as a faceless toddler, playing in the veranda of their house. He had grown to possess Godfather's quick smile. He was studying political science in university. Francis did not remember Okene himself, of course, although his older siblings had told him they used to live in *that* town.

When we ran out of things to discuss, I glanced around at the cosy sitting room with the gold-brown drapes and charcoal-black cushions. Overlooking the dining area were two

pictures, one of Jesus, the other of Mary. Their resolutions had yellowed a bit, as though they had been left in the sun too long. These pictures had also hung over their dining table in Okene. But I said nothing about this. This, I thought, must be what it was like to lose one's mind: to inhabit a parallel reality no one else shared.

The air stank of fraud. Fraud reminiscent of those situations with 419ers who phoned you out of nowhere with an overly familiar hello, to tell you they were your uncle or cousin 'from abroad' – did you really not recognise their voice? Here I was, in this beautiful cosy house, telling my childhood friends – whose names had lived in my heart and in our house years after they left – that *we* were something they did not remember. Something that might as well be false.

I left the sitting room for the bedroom my sister and I were put up in. Florence sat with her baby on the lower bunk of the bunk-bed. I remarked that there had been bunk-beds, too, back in their former home in Okene. And waited, half expecting her to say I was mistaken. But she smiled. Indeed, there had been bunk-beds in their former home. Relieved that there was at least one person to validate my memories, I carried her baby and thought how ideal bunk-beds in the children's room would be for families that wanted many kids.

We talked about the people and families she remembered from Okene.

Godfather's head slanted through the doorway to announce that he, and 'Collins' and 'Davis' were going to the reception hall – about five minutes' drive from the house – to set it up for tomorrow's ceremony. Did I care to join them?

'Of course,' I said. I handed Florence's son back to her, went out behind Godfather.

Downstairs, the twins were already waiting in the car. I asked them, in the spirit of small talk, if the reception hall was far from the house. They said no, it was just a five-minute drive away. I said the choice of reception venue was perfect, very convenient.

Godfather unlocked the car and we got in. I understood, now, why he had been hesitant to put me through to the twins that evening two weeks ago. True to what he was – my Christian guardian – he had been shielding me from a difficult truth, no doubt feeling sorry that I would be meeting my childhood friends as very different people now; that I would come bearing soft memories which would only end up crushed; and that I would be left to decide whether to continue saving these memories, or release them to the winds of irrelevance. I wound down the window and wondered if, perhaps, Godfather had worried about me too much. Because, right now, these two men in the car with me were no longer 'Omo and Ojo from Okene'; they were Collins and Davis to me now and fresh memories could begin from here.

Drama

KINGSLEY O. UKWUNGWU

CONFLICT OF SCHOOLS

SCENE ONE

Afternoon. In a large room, a round table placed at the centre with five plastic seats enclosed in a semi-circle facing the audience. Enter three boys and a girl about the same age. They proceed to take the seats located beside the round table. They take seats leaving a seat at the middle empty. A lanky man in his early thirties enters, carrying a laptop, its charger folded on top of it. He goes and sits on the empty seat. They all adjust themselves with an air of importance.

SOLO: *(After connecting the laptop charger to an electric outlet on a wall nearby, he clears his throat)* Good day ladies and gentlemen.

All: *(Resume flipping their notes)* Good day.

SOLO: As you all have seen from the text message I sent to you, Mrs Kanem wants us to write a paper on *Half of a Yellow Sun* by Adichie for presentation in African Women's Conference at Efua Sutherland University, Johannesburg. So, may I start by introducing myself once more? My name is Mr Solo Gregory, Department of English. By my right is...

KEN: *(Interrupts)* My name is Mr Keneth Odua, popularly known as Heidegger. *(All exchange glances.)*

CHIOMA: *(Knocks on the table as she stands up and motions to Ken for attention)* I hope you are through? *(Ken nods.)* Ok, my name is Ms Chioma Aba. In addition, let me include my nickname since someone has started it. *(Adjusts her bracelet)* Okay, I am popularly known as Woolf. Or, better, call me Walker. *(She sits. Solo motions to those at his right to continue.)*

ABE: My name is Abe but some of my friends call me Stephen Greenblatt *(resumes flipping pages)*.

KUNLE: My name is Kunle but my friends call me Derrida.

SOLO: As I can see, we all came prepared. We are looking at a fifteen-page paper. Where do we start? We have to start with the topic.

ABE: Excuse me, I suggest we write on the Nigeria-Biafra War of nineteen-sixty-seven as told by Adichie. A possible title is 'History as Narrative: A Study of Adichie's Perspective'. We can look at the social concerns of the author.

SOLO: You suggest we approach the paper from extrinsic point of view?

KEN: *(Raises hand. SOLO nods in affirmation.)* According to Aristotle, literature is that art form that happens by means of language alone. I don't understand the angle Mr Abe is going by mentioning Adichie and historical concerns.

CHIOMA: Have you started this “according to” nuisance?

KEN: We need those “according to” to justify our own stance. I’m only making things clearer here.

(SOLO resumes typing on the laptop.)

ABE: Let me clear him, Ms Chioma. *(CHIOMA stares at him.)* I mean Woolf. Ken, gentlemanly speaking, one doesn’t write in a vacuum. Henry James advises every artist to try and capture the colour of life itself. The work of art before us is culture in action. Let us locate this work in its appropriate context as New Historicists put it. Let us not try unnecessary domination...

CHIOMA: *(Interrupts.)* As men always try to dominate women?

KUNLE: Are you trying to say that we do a historical reading of the text?

CHIOMA: Yes...whichever way you look at it.

KUNLE: I hate it when people see a text as a historical document. Can’t we look at the text as an object that exists for its own sake? For God’s sake, according to Derrida, there is no *outside the text*. The text is auto-telic and autonomous.

KEN: Also in Akwanya’s *Verbal Structures*, the work is not in the hand of the artist so much as it is in that of language.

ABE: There’s no way literature can be severed from the history that gave birth to it. Let us look at the work, the period it captures, and the author.

CHIOMA: let’s look at how Adichie has carved a room of her own in the text via *(demonstrating with her hands)* displaying how women are subjected to the traumatic experiences during the Nigeria-Biafra War. *(KUNLE tries to stand up)* Wait, let me finish. According to J. S. Mill: *The belief in women’s disabilities elsewhere are only clung to in order to maintain their subordination in domestic life; because the generality of the male sex cannot yet tolerate the idea of leaving with an equal.*

KUNLE: If I should borrow Barthes words, you are merely trying to put a stop clause on the text. The text we are dealing with is literary, or what Frye calls verbal structure, existing for its own sake. In Derrida’s words, meaning rethought as form.

CHIOMA: *(Vigorously pressing her phone)* Let me call Adichie, she will clear both of you on what she intends to do with the text...

KEN: Ms Chioma, may I remind you. Once Adichie finished writing, her power over the work ceases. And she enters into her death as in the words of Roland Barthes. Haven’t you heard of the death of the author? You are only wallowing in the maze of intentional fallacy because of your ardent belief in authorial intention.

- ABE:** For God's sake, if we really want to write this paper, let us be realistic here. Even the speech Ojukwu delivered in Nsukka is exactly the one in the text.
- KUNLE:** *(Interrupts.)* That may be argued to be a coincidence, and nobody doubts that history may enter into literature. But when it does its wings are clipped off—decimated. You speak as if you have no knowledge of the epistemological break of the mid nineteenth century...
- KEN:** *(Cuts in.)* If we are to study the history that gave birth to the text, what then becomes of the text itself? That is an unnecessary distraction. Let's approach this work with a phenomenological reflective gaze—close reading. Charles Bressler talks about Husserl's *bracketing*, which entails putting aside one's preconceived belief about the phenomena under study. A phenomenological reduction.
- CHIOMA:** *(Stands.)* What are you people saying? That we neglect the sufferings of the women in the then Biafran part of the country, which is depicted by the raping of Ugwu's sister and the bar girl in the text? *(Solo glances at Chioma and continues with his typing.)* I need an answer... *(She sits)* According to Helen Cixous: *Women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions... smashing yokes...* That reminds me, Alice Walker has been projecting her wounded eye in her works as a symbol of... *(She coughs indiscriminately.)* Some of us here are trying to start what Kate Millett calls sexual politics. *(There is a bang on the door. COLONIAL enters, semi-nude, his waist covered with green leaves, bare-footed, and motions expansively, half-torn books in his left hand.)*
- CHIOMA:** Jesus! What is Colonial doing here? *(To SOLO, who is also gazing in amazement.)* You invited this madman too. Are we still going to write this paper today?
- COLONIAL:** *(Cackles eerily)* Writing, what are we writing? *(Dumps the books on the ground. CHIOMA runs to hide behind ABE.)*
- CHIOMA:** What are we waiting for? Let's call security men...
- KEN:** *(Interrupts.)* This is a total restraint to scholarship...
- COLONIAL:** *(Sits on the floor.)* You are all lost in the maze of schools. *(Shivers like one entering a trance.)* I see what Opatá describes as the Oduche Complex hovering in the air *(they stare at each other)*. I'll write my own history, restore my identity, and reclaim my space. I will reclaim my history. According to Ngugi, one should write in his own language. *(He punctuates this monologue with intermittent cackles.)* Literature is what one takes it to be. Eneke's stand is my stand; you should not subject my art to Western yardstick, mine is different. Africans had their art before they came. Who came? I have to write myself to the centre, yes! *(They gaze at him.)* You people want to be whiter than Mongo Park! He claims he discovered River Niger my forefathers used to swim in

before I was born. Mr Discovery. Colonialism. *(Gestures.)* Bible on the right hand, and guns on the left one. *(Bundles his torn books and exits. They keep staring at each other, COLONIAL's voice echoing from offstage.)* To write my history is my manifesto! Art is my means of expression, for restoration and liberation of my race, culture, language... *(Voice fades.)*

CHIOMA: And my gender! *(After reflections.)* Is this man really mad?

KEN: He just spoke like one.

CHIOMA and ABE: *(In unison.)* He is not mad! *(They stand to confront one another. SOLO angrily leaves with his laptop. They confront each other as if for a physical brawl.)*

LIGHT FADES

SCENE TWO

Same place, similar arrangement except for some broken plastic seats by the corner. Almost all of them have new clothing except KEN. The atmosphere is tense, and only the occasional shuffling of SOLO's book can be heard.

SOLO: *(Clears his throat.)* I take all the blame for what happened yesterday. I should not have invited people from different schools for a paper, especially the ones that think it's by power. No matter what, you people shouldn't have fought for God's sake.

KEN: Sorry, Mr Solo, she held unto my clothes for no reason. *(To others.)* Look at my clothes *(CHIOMA gazes at him in contempt)*. I was not disputing anything; my stand was for us to focus our attention on the object before us. In the words of Wimsatt and Beardsley, a text is not a will, neither is it a documentary. We are not here to study the author. Literature has no outside reference or any job in the society except to display itself.

CHIOMA: You have started again. So a text has no public utility?

SOLO: Scholars, we are here to resolve the conflict.

KEN: *(They do not notice him anymore.)* Its utility is to seize the gaze... affirm itself. The function of language in literature is representation. It is different from equipment, says Heidegger, because of its self-referential status. Let us unveil the multiplicity of meaning inherent in the text with a theory that works.

ABE: *(Cuts in.)* Tell us the so-called theory that works?

(CHIOMA slams on the table in support of ABE's demand. SOLO hastily exits leaving his book behind.)

KEN: *(Motions to KUNLE.)* Let me educate them. *(They sit.)* These shoes, for instance, if I should borrow Heidegger's analogy. As you have them on your

feet, you rarely think about them. Its *equipmental* being is exhausted as you put them in use, unlike what happens if it is painted on cardboard paper as an artwork. In the latter, it is self-sufficient. It is there as an object of perception.

CHIOMA: (*Angrily.*) Mr Heidegger, we are talking about literature, not painting. From all I know, even George Lukas pointed out that literature starts from experience and ends in fiction. Stop wallowing in the maze of schools.

KUNLE: All art is Art, no matter its medium of representation.

ABE: (*Bursts out in laughter.*) In this your so-called proposition, it points out that art has no public utility.

CHIOMA: Don't mind them. If that is the case, the government should ban art.

KEN: No! (*Stands defensively.*) Art defines man, art makes man complete. (*CHIOMA glares at him.*) I mean *man* in a generic sense. (*Sits.*) Don't sound Platonic here; we are not after what literature does but what literature *is* in itself.

ABE: (*Motions to KUNLE and KEN.*) Both of you are merely contradicting and confusing yourselves, not the two of us.

KEN: That is an arbitrary conclusion.

KEN: (*Furiously.*) Allow me to conclude!

SOLO comes in with four security men. They drag the two factions apart, but they still hurl words at one another. The security men move KEN and KUNLE out of the room, followed by CHIOMA and ABE, held yards away. The argument continues offstage, their voices fading. All exit except SOLO who stands staring at the door.

Light Fades to Blackout.

KENNETH CHUKWUEMEKA ALI

HANDS OF THE GODS

MOVEMENT ONE

Morning. A compound in Azama village, up stage centre is a hut; up stage right is a smaller hut. A tree stands at the centre of the compound. Five local stools are placed in a semi-circle shape facing the audience. Azegba and Onodu are seated on two of the stools.

The director can choose his costumes.

ONODU: I have told you that it takes a lot of carefulness to kill a fly that perches on the scrotum. If you don't handle the situation with utter carefulness I fear that something bad will come of it.

AZEGBA: What have I not done? I have consulted the oracle many times and have done all that is required of me. I have sent him to stay with his elder brother in Lagos but it got worse there. *(Grimaces.)* He was sent home after just one week.

ONODU: *(After reflections.)* Did Ezedibia not say that he came after your father's eldest son? I think you should try to appease him.

AZEGBA: I did that. He even got worse after the appeasement. Only our neighbours used to complain about Ejike. But after appeasing Agaba *(shakes his head)*, the whole village started coming to complain about him.

ONODU: This one is really serious. *(He sits up.)* In the past, public flogging would have solved cases like this. I still don't understand why this stubborn nut is proving too hard to crack.

AZEGBA: *(After few seconds of silence.)* I am beginning to think that it is better to slap the scrotum while killing this stubborn fly.

ONODU: *(Very anxious.)* What do you mean? *(AZEGBA glances at him.)* I mean what do you intend to do?

AZEGBA: Anything. *(Pauses for a while, then continues.)* Ezedibia had suggested public execution, but I had pleaded with him several times to give me time. I have been sending him palm wine and kola nuts since then. I think he should go ahead and do whatever he wants.

ONODU: *(Shocked.)* Are you implying that you cannot do anything any longer? Even though you are not the one that made the toad to squat always, I think there should be another way out.

- AZEGBA:** I would rather he faced the execution than bring more shame to this family. *(He pauses for a while.)* Do you suggest a different thing?
- ONODU:** No! *(Stares at AZEGBA in disbelief.)* The gods. The gods will help you, they will help us. *(Stands.)* I should be on my way now.
- AZEGBA:** *(Stands.)* Please forgive my foolishness. Sit down let me offer you kola nut. I should have thought about it since.
- ONODU:** *(Chuckles.)* Don't sound that way. Who goes to a burial and demands for kola nut when the corpse has not been buried? Even though some people do it these days, must we join in the madness, eh? A farmer drops his hoe when he sees something bigger than his work. We shall eat kola nut when we are less troubled. Thank you. And remember to attend this morning's meeting. *(He turns to leave.)*
- AZEGBA:** *(As he walks him off)* I will be there. The town crier said that crucial matters would be discussed. *(They exit stage right.)*

Light fades

MOVEMENT TWO

Same setting. Later in the day, Nnedi and Ejike are seated under the tree.

- NNEDI:** What have we not done for you? Why have you chosen to rub our faces with shame? Must it be my anus that would foul the air in every gathering, eh?
- EJIKE:** I have not brought shame upon anybody. If I have done shameful things, let me bear the shame. Have I asked anybody to share in my shame?
- NNEDI:** You don't seem to understand that a mad man is called after his people. Our people always say that if a thief is not ashamed, his family and friends will bear the shame. The villagers are saying bad things about you and you don't consider that shameful.
- EJIKE:** You don't need to complain. You just need to stay inside your hut so that nobody will see you and say, 'Look at Ejike's mother.'
- (Azegba enters and sits on the stool at the centre. A brief moment of silence follows before Nnedi turns to Azegba.)*
- NNEDI:** *Nnanyi*, how did it go? This one that you are quiet, is everything alright?
- AZEGBA:** *(Shakes his head.)* The stubborn fly is set to enter the grave with the dead body.

NNEDI: *(Confused.)* Nnanyi, I don't understand. Who is the fly and who is the dead body?

AZEGBA: *(Clears his throat.)* Ezedibia has declared that Ejike will be executed according to the will of the gods.

NNEDI: *(Freezes with shock. After few seconds, she screams, both hands on her head.)* Finally, my enemies will celebrate. *(Turns to Ejike.)* Now that you have invited my enemies to celebrate my shame, just endeavour to entertain them. *(Her voice takes on a brash loudness.)* Ejike, you have brought my feet to the public. Others showcase new *ankara*, the latest design that they have bought for their mother. What do you showcase? Bad name, Ejike. *(Beats her chest.)* Ejike, you have sucked my breasts dry, *(tearfully)* but you lack the wisdom they give. The only palm nut that has lost in... oh. May the gods forbid.

EJIKE: *(Nonchalantly.)* When will you learn not to shiver over another's cold? *(NNEDI stops crying, mouth open, staring at EJIKE.)* I am the one to be executed not you. Allow me to face it. The worst they can do is to cut off my neck.

AZEGBA: *(Shakes his head again)* Why me? Your mates bring happiness to their homes. Is it not your mates who build *(demonstrates with his hands)* big-big houses and buy big-big cars?

EJIKE: *(Cuts in.)* I know that, but don't forget that your mates also built big houses and bought big cars for their children. I would not be executed if you were rich.

NNEDI: *(Charges at him; he dodges.)* How dare you talk to your father that way? *Ekwensu!*

EJIKE: Yes mama. *(Retreating.)* I know that Agaba will help me out of this. You said that I am his incarnate and that he behaved worse. He will surely get me out. *(EJIKE exits upper stage left.)*

AZEGBA: Mama Ejike, are you sure this is what I gave you that night?

NNEDI: *(In anger.)* What are you trying to say?

AZEGBA: *(In resignation.)* Don't worry; let me not add more firewood to flame.

[NNEDI hisses and enters the hut. AZEGBA is still seated gazing at her in amazement.]

Light Fades

MOVEMENT THREE

At the Village Square. Evening. Four paths leading to the Otobo are wide and surrounded by small bushes. Villagers are gathered. Standing at stage left are Ezedibia, the elders, EJIKE, and two young men beside them. Standing stage right are other villagers. EJIKE is kneeling before a stone with his feet and hands tied. Four young men guard him, each wielding a cutlass.

EZEDIBIA: *(Adjusts his raffia bag, demonstrates with his rattling staff.)* Dear people of Amagu, there is no cause to waste time. We have our farms and other things with which we can engage ourselves. We all know that we have come to remove the hand of a monkey from our delicious soup pot before it turns a human hand. It is no longer a new thing that Ejike has been stealing from all and sundry. He has not only put us in fear of acquiring new property because we would lose them, but also rubbed shame on our faces. Our neighbouring villages have complained bitterly about him. He no longer steals but wherever he passes, things get missing. He tried to run away today. Who can run away from the ground itself? *(Deep murmuring rises from the crowd as they keep talking to one another. EZEDIBIA clears his throat and the noise subsides.)* A blind man doesn't see, a deaf doesn't hear and a dumb doesn't speak. The gods have decided to decimate the hands of the kleptomaniac *(the villagers shout in support)*. He would not steal without his hands, yes! *(To four young men standing by EJIKE.)* Untie him and place his hands on that stone. *(He is struggling to wriggle free but they hold him tightly. EZEDIBIA brings out a container from his raffia bag, empties the content in his left hand, and blows the powder into EJIKE's eyes. He shivers in discomfort and the young men hold him tightly.)* Be still. The gods are wise.

EJIKE: *(Tearfully.)* What have I done to myself? *(EZEDIBIA still murmuring incantations.)* I will never steal again, I promise you all! *(Some villagers shake their heads in pity.)* I don't know what comes over me when I do the things I do. The gods of our forefathers rescue me and chain my gluttony! You are the ones that own these hands and not me. *(Tears rolling down his eyes.)* You can as well control them! *(Louder.)* He-l-l-l-p! He-e-e-l-p!

EZEDIBIA hoists the cutlass in the sky. The crowd roars. EJIKE looks up to the cutlass. EZEDIBIA's gaze shifts from the crowd, to the elders and to EJIKE's hands. As the cutlass descends, EJIKE immediately springs up with swiftness withdrawing his hands and the cutlass lands on the stone producing flickers of sparks. EJIKE takes to his heels almost at the same time into the bush. There's pandemonium as some yell and scream. The guards go after EJIKE at the command of EZEDIBIA. As the guards enter the bush, the elders and the villagers begin to murmur to one another as they go their ways.

LIGHT OUT

VINCENT NWILO

DESTINATION AFRICANA

SCENE ONE

Light opens on a stage. A bus is parked. The driver, MR ROGERS enters. He is in his forties. His singlet is faded white, a towel around his neck. He walks to the parked bus, examines it, checks the tyres and then turns around. His conductor is not at work yet.

MR ROGERS: It is 6am already. Should any serious person be at work already? *(He walks to the audience, addressing the people personally.)* Did I make the wrong choice when I chose Alakiri for an assistant? Anyone who has a child that big would boast of a wonderful. But isn't he a big mess? *(He heaves.)*

MR ROGERS: When he arrives and you ask him where he has been, he will say *(in ALAKIRI's voice)* "I ate this strong akpu last night. It wouldn't come out. I sat at the toilet for about an hour. I am very sorry." Is that what anyone should listen to? If I let him go, people who have no business whatsoever to do with driving or making money in Lagos will begin to talk nonsense.

(ENTERS ALAKIRI, struggling to put on his shirt.)

ALAKIRI: Morning, sir. *(He makes to prostrate.)*

MR ROGERS: Come on get up from there and dust the seats of this vehicle.

ALAKIRI: Thank you, sir.

MR ROGERS: Are you not a fool? *(He gestures at him to hush.)*

MR ROGERS: Are you not a young, energetic fool?

ALAKIRI: No, sir.

MR ROGERS: Did I ask you to speak?

ALAKIRI: No, sir. I thought, sir.

MR ROGERS: You thought?

ALAKIRI: Yes sir.

MR ROGERS: And you think you are not mad?

ALAKIRI: No, sir.

(MR ROGERS approaches ALAKIRI, removing the towel around his neck. ALAKIRI moves backward. Mr. Rogers chases him a little and stops. ALAKIRI has already gone around the bus.)

MR ROGERS: I don't have your time. Clean this bus before I show you what I did during the civil war.

ALAKIRI: *(From afar.)* Thanks, sir.

(ENTERS a food seller, a basin on her head. Mr. Rogers notices her.)

MR ROGERS: Iyawo! You woke up early today.

(The seller turns. She talks with an accent.)

IYAWO: I beg you in the name of God, it is too early for insults.

(Mr. Rogers laughs.)

MR ROGERS: Can't someone play with you?

IYAWO: No. Don't. Rogers. Go to Rivers State where you come from and tease your wife who you left there to pursue all these small-small girls.

(Mr. Rogers frowns. Iyawo walks away with her food. Rogers returns to the bus. Alakiri is still cleaning.)

MR ROGERS: How long will it take you to dust these seats, eh?

ALAKIRI: I am through with it, sir.

MR ROGERS: And call passengers na. Will I teach you that one again?

ALAKIRI: No, sir.

(Alakiri calls out to passengers for Yaba! Three passengers join the vehicle, randomly. Two are women in their thirties and a man in his fifties. Mr. Rogers enters the vehicle, starts it. Alakiri stands in the doorway, whistling 'Wonder-Wonder' by Femi Kuti.)

MR ROGERS: Alakiri, dem done tell you where dem dey stop?

ALAKIRI: No oh. Dem no wan talk.

MR ROGERS: Why na?

ALAKIRI: I no know oh.

MR ROGERS: You don ask them?

ALAKIRI: My voice don die where I dey ask question.

(He turns head back to see his stern looking passengers.)

MR ROGERS: Why una no wan' answer the conductor na?

WOMAN 1: Won't you face your front and drive us safely to where we are going?

MR ROGERS: That's the point. Where are you going to?

WOMAN 1: How is that your business?

MR ROGERS: How that one no take concern me?

ALAKIRI: He is the driver.

WOMAN 1: My friend shut up. Who invited you into this talk?

MR ROGERS: Madam. Why you dey quick vex?

WOMAN 1: Can't he shut his peace inside his bony structure while adults talk?

ALAKIRI: Madam. You mean say I no be adult?

WOMAN 1: You are a baby!

ALAKIRI: Why you choose to insult me na. Wetin I do you this early morning?

WOMAN 1: You chose not to mind your business.

(Driver swerves as if someone just wanted to hit him.)

PASSENGER 1: Driver, are you blind?

WOMAN 1: Doesn't he look blind and stupid?

PASSENGER 1: You want to get us killed?

MR ROGERS: How?

PASSENGER 1: Didn't you see that oncoming vehicle?

MR ROGERS: I see am na him make I dodge am

PASSENGER 1: But you almost had us killed.

ALAKIRI: He did not.

WOMAN 1: Hey. Hold it there. See person wey dey speak English oh.

ALAKIRI: Madam, I no know wetin your husband do you oh. But, abeg, respect yourself or we go tear shirt here.

WOMAN 1: See your life. It's a woman that you want to fight. Isn't that shameful?

ALAKIRI: You just dey vex anyhow. You don reach menopause?

WOMAN 1: What?

MR ROGERS: What is menopause?

PASSENGER 1: Why would you say such to a passenger?

ALAKIRI: No be she start am?

MR ROGERS: Wetin be menopause?

WOMAN 1: Driver will you shut up and move? You and your conductor are ignorant pieces of rubbish.

PASSENGER 1: They are not just ignorant but also brainless.

MR ROGERS: I get wife for house oh.

WOMAN 1: Not my kind of woman.

ALAKIRI: What kind of woman are you?

WOMAN 1: Can someone tell this piece of nonsense to shut up?

ALAKIRI: Madam. E don too much for you oh.

MR ROGERS: Alakiri, leave am. Maybe him husband done marry another wife.

MAN: I have been observing the controversy in this vehicle and it is unnecessary to raise a quarrel.

ALAKIRI: Oga, professor. Where you dey stop?

MAN: Nowhere in particular.

(The driver stops. He steps out of the vehicle.)

MR ROGERS: Excuse me. Which human beings wey I carry this morning? Una no get destination, una enter motor?

MAN: My wife had quadruplets. I didn't ask God for that so I had to leave the house. Take me to anywhere I can find peace.

WOMAN 1: Why now? Isn't that wicked?

MAN: It depends on what you call wickedness.

PASSENGER 1: It is absurd.

ALAKIRI: Grammar.

WOMAN 1: You are a goat, Alakiri, or whatever shameful name you have.

ALAKIRI: My name is not Shameful. It is Alakiri.

WOMAN 1: It sounds very stupid.

ALAKIRI: I like it like that.

MR ROGERS: Oga, prof. Why you run leave house?

MAN: I thought I just made that known.

PASSENGER 1: So who takes care of the poor woman?

MAN: God.

MR ROGERS: How?

MAN: He put the babies there.

WOMAN 1: And who slept with her?

MAN: I did. It couldn't have brought four seeds. She must have seen three other men.

PASSENGER 1: You sound enlightened yet you talk like a foolish man.

MAN: Every man has his foolish moments.

ALAKIRI: Me, I no get oh.

MR ROGERS: Oga, I beg you. If na to reverse my bus, I go do am. Go back to that woman and help her.

WOMAN 1: Reverse which bus?

MR ROGERS: Why we no fit help a man wey need am?

WOMAN 1: And how is that your concern?

MR ROGERS: I am the leader of this vehicle.

(A boy hawking 'pure water' passes by. Mr. Rogers calls him. He collects a sachet and gestures to the passenger to do same. They all collect.)

PASSENGER 1: My husband thinks I'm too old to give him a male child. And so he brought in a younger woman.

WOMAN 1: Into your house?

PASSENGER 1: Yes.

WOMAN 1: And you didn't break someone's skull?

PASSENGER 1: Is that legal?

WOMAN 1: There are many things you don't know until you try.

MAN: You already have other children?

PASSENGER 1: I do. Two girls.

ALAKIRI: And the man no like am?

WOMAN 1: Isn't that how you all are, men? Chauvinistic bastards.

MR ROGERS: One man go do something and all men to get the blame.

ALAKIRI: I am not supposed to be here. I had to leave school to hustle. So you see, madam. I am not an ordinary conductor. Man mus' wack. If I don't do this I may not eat or buy at least a text book.

WOMAN 1: No. You are not. You are extraordinary, idiot. How is that my business?

ALAKIRI: I think you have complex issues.

MAN: I think she likes you, conductor.

ALAKIRI: If na only her dey this world, I no go find woman. I go find man marry.

MR ROGERS: Alakiri!

ALAKIRI: Oga, leave me jor. This woman na witch.

WOMAN 1: You call me a witch?

(She jumps out of her seat, grabs him by the scruff of his shirt. The rest of the passengers try to break them up.)

MAN: This hasn't called for this hassle.

WOMAN 1: It has oh. Look at the fool exchanging words with me. If I were in my Range Rover, if not for that stupid man, will he have the nerves to insult me?

ALAKIRI: If I were in school, would you come to me and tell me shit?

MR ROGERS: So you have husband issues too?

WOMAN 1: The bastard died. And his people took everything.

ALAKIRI: Ewo!

WOMAN 1: Stop admiring yourself, stupid.

ALAKIRI: I am sorry, madam.

WOMAN 1: Shut the fuck up!

MAN: Take it easy, woman. I think he likes you too.

ALAKIRI: What?

MR ROGERS: Prof, who I come like?

MAN: You like this one. Haven't you noticed how she's been looking at you?

(Mr. Rogers turns, meets the cold stare of PASSENGER 1.)

MR ROGERS: I no believe you.

MAN: I think it's true.

ALAKIRI: Can we have this bus reversed so we can go and see Prof's babies?

MAN: I forbid that.

MR ROGERS: Why? They are your children. It is not the making of the woman.

MAN: And you, Rogers. You speak better English than a normal driver. Who are you?

MR ROGERS: How do you mean?

MAN: Why are you a driver?

MR ROGERS: Because it is a job.

WOMAN 1: We know it is a job. But when did you begin?

MR ROGERS: Been a while.

PASSENGER 1: How long?

MR ROGERS: Four months?

MAN: And what were you doing before that?

MR ROGERS: I was a man like everyone.

PASSENGER 1: And you are less a man now?

MR ROGERS: I led a simple life until there was an oil spill in my community. Some concerned youth and I demonstrated against it. Few days later we were accused of criminality. I had to leave my wife and children behind. When the weather is calm enough, I shall return.

(He restarts bus. Light fades. We hear 'prof' scream "Nooooo".)

SCENE TWO

A hospital, a woman lying in bed, smiling. Four babies are in cots at her bedside. Prof is standing with his guests.

WOMAN 1: They are so beautiful.

PASSENGER 1: And this one looks like him. His nose.

(She points at one of the babies. Prof's eyes well with tears. He kneels next to the woman, holds her hand.)

MAN: I lost my job. When the news came, all my brain told me was to run away. But I have realized how stupid I acted. I am truly sorry. Please forgive.

MAN'S WIFE: I already did before you asked.

(He hugs her. Mr. Rogers, Alakiri, and the rest of the passengers look on, smiling. They are clearly moved by the scene.)

MAN'S WIFE: Who are these people?

MAN: *(Turns around.)* They are our friends.

MAN'S WIFE: Welcome, you all.

The men shake her hands, muttering congratulatory messages, while the women hug her. As all these happen, lights fade to soft music.

Critical Writing

OGOCHUKWU UKWUEZE

HUMOUR OF MECHANICAL INELASTICITY: THE COMIC FORMATIVE OF OKARA'S *THE VOICE*

Abstract

Literature is *essentially* ambiguous. Its attempt to exclude is, by extension, an apparently calculated inclusive effort. In its self-sufficiency, for instance, lies a wholesome self-insufficiency. Why? because as a self-sufficient object, it requires no external reference for its validation; but on the other hand, its self-insufficiency lies in the fact that it has no conclusive meaning within itself, hence rendering it 'open[] to [multiple] interpretations' (Derrida, qtd in Akwanya, *Language* 222). The sense in which the literary object is not self-sufficient has evidently sustained its critical lifeline, for every reading of a text becomes a new encounter capable of giving rise to 'new critical discoveries' (Frye 17). Such is the fate of Okara's *The Voice* which has assuredly survived critical validation as literary. In this reading, the text hitherto viewed as tragic presents its comic orientation – an aspect of the ambiguity immanent in the literary. The mechanical rigidity or inelasticity in which consists the humour of the protagonist, Okolo, is revealed as the comic framework of the text. Other comic underpinnings of the text are equally staged in a view to establishing the text as an ironic (low mimetic) comedy of humour.

Keywords: mechanical inelasticity, humour, comedy, low mimetic, *worlding*, *thinging*, self-sufficient, formative, ironic.

Introduction

Okara's *The Voice* has received relatively large number of critical attentions especially with regard to its experimentation on the English language. Others have been concerned with the extent to which the text mirrors society – Nigerian society precisely in its moral decadence. Most of these readings see Okolo as a tragic figure owing to his alienation and final expulsion from Amatu. Ashaolu, for example, takes Okolo as 'that voice in the wilderness' calling the people like the humanist's poet back to a sense of justice and truth. For him, this voice that decries societal abnormalities has an expedient mission, so, '...when the fabric of a society like Amatu or Sologa is made up of soul-eroding materialism virtually deified by the people, it is not madness to engage in a crusade against disgusting public ills, whatever the cost' (114)). This ridiculous crusade out of obsession earns Okolo a comic nature in our view. We reiterate here, the words of Philinte: 'And there is no greater folly, if you ask me/Than trying to reform

society (Moliere, Act1 Scene1, 157-158), Ashaolu's reading is not altogether unfounded; we take it as an existing thought on the text being that the motivation of the present study owes to Heidegger's injunction that 'only when we turn thoughtfully towards what has already been thought, will we be turned to use for what must be thought' (Heidegger, *Identity and Difference* 41). That which must be thought, which we are set to do here is *The Voice* as a comedy!

Yet it is unusual to have a work commonly held as tragic reread as comic; it is beyond establishing a mere presence of one mode in another which Sewall rightly puts thus:

The highest comedy gains its power from its sense of tragic possibility, and the profoundest tragedy presents a full fleeting vision, through the temporary disorder of an ordered universe to which comedy is a witness (qtd in Akwanya, *Discourse Analysis* 43).

The implication of the above assertion is that comedy can be perceived in tragedy, and vice versa. This is far less than the business of this essay, neither is it within the boundary of what Ugwuanyi and Ekeh call 'genre crossing', which designates a feature of modern African drama that makes it possible for tragedy and comedy to be read into one text at the same time. Perhaps, genre crossing may turn out as the unintended consequence of this study but it is certainly not its preoccupation; highlighting the comic sequence of the text is!

Comedy is ordinarily known to bear the thematic implications of integration and social harmony/promotion. The absence of these does not in any way render a text *uncomic*, for that is but one out of many ways of looking at comedy; it cannot be crammed down into one single conclusive view. Accordingly, Gurewitch avers that "'comedy" [is] buried beneath an avalanche of miscellaneous, conflicting attributes, so that comedy threatens to become all things to all men' (42). The threat does not materialize for there are canonical views/ theories of comedy so that a comedy must be certified by one of those views.

Humour for one is recognized by Ben Johnson as an energy of comedy. A humour character possesses a dominant trait that makes him think and act mechanically. His destiny is to repeat his obsession. Bergson sees *mechanical inelasticity* as a humour type in an individual which renders such character comic. He arouses laughter by the seriousness and determination with which he advances his absurd drive, baring his irrationality. Mechanical inelasticity is therefore a 'certain rigidity of body, mind and character that society would still like to get rid of in order to obtain from its members the greatest possible degree of elasticity and sociability. This rigidity is the comic, and laughter is its corrective' (Bergson 18).

It is this kind of humour that pervades the character of Okolo. 'He was in search of *it* with all his inside, with all his shadow' (Okara 23). His obsessive search for *it* makes him

inelastic, and denies him our sympathy, he having proven to be one of those 'comic persons, punishable by laughter' (Gurewitch 31); Alceste and Socrates are his archetypes. A sub-generic study though uncommon in a novel does not invalidate this essay since 'comedy may take place as drama as well as narrative, just as is the case with tragedy' (Akwanya, *Discourse Analysis* 50). Okolo's mechanical inelasticity as we shall see as the discourse unfolds forms the comic framework of *The Voice*.

The Comic World of the Text

As language proliferates, a process of *worlding* is initiated and sustained, its full emergence being the end of language. The becoming of the text announces a new world created – the feature creative artists share with God. Heidegger understands that in the speaking of language, things and beings are called or bid into constituting a world (of the text):

This gathering, assembling, letting stay is the thinging of things. The unitary fourfold of sky and earth, mortals and divinities, which is stayed in the thinging of things, we call – world. In the naming, the things named are called into thinging. Thinging, they unfold world, in which things abide and so are the abiding ones. By thinging, things carry out world...Thinging, things are things. Thinging, they gesture – gestate – world (Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought* 197).

The world of *The Voice* is confronted at every reading of the text; a world made up of two communities namely, Amatu and Sologa; a world with resounding autonomy, with flexible ways its members 'live, move and hold their being!' The world of *The Voice* as with all artist-created worlds continually distances itself from all the values and rules of other worlds, especially that of the artist – the real world. The world at its inauguration states and expounds its own *modus operandi*, its morality, not to be judged by reference to any outside it. Seth's claim that 'the world is in this room. This here's all there is and needs to be' (Morisson 102) aptly underscores the idea espoused here. The comic world markedly grows and glories in ridiculousness where evil triumphs over good; where flexible vice is much tolerable and less ridiculous than rigid virtue (Bergson 33). It is this world of 'moral holiday' that we meet in *The Voice*.

Admission into such world requires indifference and disinterestedness. Readers, suggests Bergson, would better encounter this world by 'imposing silence on their emotions and calling into play nothing but their intelligence' (Bergson 13). And that of course should be the case with all literary objects. Given the celebration of vice to which comedy is attracted,

reading ought not to be in relation to a real world. If Frye's figurative relating of Aristotle's words for good and bad – *spoudaios* and *phaulos* – with weighty and light respectively is anything to go by, it implies that 'the light', (comedy) is perpetually doomed to present an ugly world, morally speaking; which is just another way of understanding Hardy's insistence that comedy is a lie (qtd in Gurewitch 22).

Our critical lens locates in this world of *The Voice*, Okolo, that 'individual hampering social intercourse and relationships by following absurd, unenlightened rules and mechanical behaviour patterns' which as comedy demands, leaves him 'frustrated, and the status quo he would change restored and reinforced' (Akwanya, *Discourse Analysis* 51-2). His intrusion into a smooth running society is a disruption, and the progress of the story is towards restoring normalcy – that is the expulsion of *Okolo*, the 'blocking character'. He is the typical character whom Stylian suggests 'would otherwise be viewed detachedly' (24).

The Comic Figure and His Humour

Discourse analysis counts 'a meditation and a vigil' on character as a reliable guide to determining the form of a poetic representation – that is not to say that it is the sole determinant – for it is held from Aristotle that poets '...include characters for the sake of the action...its fable or plot' (Aristotle Chap 6). In other words, a character is an agent of the action which also necessitated him. Akwanya espouses this further:

...it is discourse that provides itself with characters. That means that the nature and properties of these characters are equally assigned by discourse. Whether a character is marked by courageousness or wiliness or generosity is strictly by requirement of the specific instance of discourse (Akwanya, *Language* 226-7).

If this is the case, we can rightly say that our humour character, Okolo, is a requirement of the comic discourse, and as such the discourse can be validated or proven to be comic by turning round to look at the character it breeds—Okolo himself. For Bergson, 'it is the person (humour character) who will supply it (the comedy) with everything—matter and form, cause and opportunity' (Bergson 14, parentheses mine).

The inelasticity exhibited by Okolo pervades the story: he remains adamant in his search for *it*. As a humour character, his sense of discretion and moderation, unlike others who also feel the need for a change but are guided by rationality, is silenced. He is not in any way the only member of society with either the kind of exposure he has nor with moral awareness. Abadi for instance holds a PhD, and has been to foreign land like Okolo, but he is not so obsessed with turning the wheels of society. He rather buys into the spirit of the age, and gets

incorporated as one of the prominent figures in their society. Even in the face of elderly call for moderation, Okolo's humour overrides his reasoning. A character's obsession or passionate interest strikes the reader as humorous, especially when this is brought to reason. In other words, a character does not set out to make humour; it is rather the reader who sees him as such. At times it is even the character's seriousness that gives off this humour, when seen at a distance by the reader. One of the elders tells him:

This thing you are doing is too heavy for you be. I went to school only a little, but I have killed many years in this world than you have. You can not get anything in this world if you do things like this... Change and do as others are doing (Okara 48-9).

This sincere advice however falls on deaf ears. His inelasticity is contrary to the flexibility society expects of its members for effective functioning. Such flexibility/elasticity we see in one of the messengers who declares: 'As for me (shrugs his shoulders), if the world turns this way, I take it. Any way the world turns I take it with my hands' (25).

What makes his humour, his obsession arouse more laughter is the motivation of his quest namely, to change the world, which is ridiculous, given the impossibility of such mission in a society that has broken free of its moorings, and hence is set adrift. At Sologa, this quest of his is explicitly stated as an unthinkable endeavor by the inscription on the wall of the eatery: EVEN THE WHITE MAN'S JESUS FAILED TO MAKE THE WORLD FINE. SO LET THE SPOILT WORLD SPOIL (82). Okolo's moral earnestness and pursuit for truth and justice bring him on the same pedestal as Alceste in *The Misanthrope*. Alceste advocates honesty at all cost and expels discretion from his faculty. He aims at refining the world, a motive to which his friend, Philinte, who is a counter figure to him as Dr Abadi is to Okolo, comments mockingly:

The world won't change whatever you say or do
And since plain speaking means so much to you,
I'll tell you plainly that by being frank
You've earned the reputation of a crank,
And that you're thought ridiculous whenever you rage
And rant against the manners of the age (Act 1, Scene 1, 103-8).

Okolo's refusal to adopt and adapt to the manners of the age, and his subsequent attempt to reverse the situation makes his society suspicious of him. His search is a disruption to the heretofore smooth running village of Amatu. His inelasticity automatically presents his insolubility in society and his otherness to communal life; for 'elasticity and compromise are the secret of human relations' (Styan 29). Hence, he stands the chance of expulsion because 'he

must not spoil their pleasure' (24). The sweetness of his inside is in finding it (85), an unbearable trouble and difficulty for the people (126) in that it poses a thorn in the flesh of their social harmony. Okolo, therefore, proves himself as that 'comic victim' (Bennett and Royle) who 'has to be eliminated, sometimes, brutally or—which is the same thing—have his self-esteem deflated; or they may be corrected in some way so that normalcy would return' (Akwanya, *Discourse Analysis* 55). Okolo defies the two other options: correction and deflation of self-esteem; hence eliminated he must be, and so he is by the way.

This expulsion or elimination according to Frye tends to upset the comic balance of a story, and forces it down the path of the tragic (165). However, tragic tendency is common and expected in comedy of humour. Meredith observes that 'the stroke of the great humorist is worldwide, with lights of tragedy in his laughter (qtd in Styron 40). The punishment or downfall of the humour characters—Moliere's Alceste, Tartuffe, Harpagon; Aristophanes's Socrates; Okara's Okolo—tend to seduce the emotion of the reader, but the latter will always see them as those *comic pharmakoses* who needs face such fate. This admixture of seemingly extraneous elements like the pathetic and tragic which comic stage permits (43) is subtly diluted by some sympathetic utterances or dispositions of some individuals within the community of expulsion which leaves the impression that the 'comic victim' is not left with no one to 'mourn' his elimination. When Alceste is forced to depart his society for his eccentricity, not everyone rejoices at his departure. Philinte, his friend, feels him and says: 'Come, Madam, let's do everything we can/To change the mind of this unhappy man' (Moliere Act 5, Scene 8, 23-4). This function is also undertaken by Dr Abadi who at the point of eliminating Okolo becomes morose, and when confronted by Chief Izongo and the elders, especially Otutu, bares his mind:

I will go alone and speak to him. If I fail to make him see how today is, if I fail to wake him from his dream, then we will do what we said we would do if he showed his face again in this town. This is what I see (125).

The threatening tragic import is placated here, and in addition, Ukule's presence, and Okolo's 'going' with his lover, Tuere, wrenches the text from all coldness to commend it to the warm hands of ironic comedy – the one in which a humorous society triumphs or remains undefeated, where Wrong Logic makes more convincing argument than Right Logic as in Aristophanes *The Clouds*.

Other Comic Orientations of the Text

So much, other than just character type, goes into the making of comedy. As that language art which is whole, with all its parts constituting its essence, literature takes into account all that it

creates. A study would hardly be complete until attention is paid to the various configurations that the text is weighted with. In this reading of *The Voice*, some other elements contribute to its comic purport.

In his discussion of style and forms, Akwanya agrees with Auerbach that how a text treats love and its bodily functions are a good guide in determining its form or stylistic level. He avers that 'the low style (low mimetic comedy) searches out these very aspects (of amorous feelings and dispositions) and focuses on them, highlighting particularly scenes where they appear most degraded and degrading' (Akwanya, *Verbal Structures* 276 parentheses mine). This quickly reminds us the scene in the canoe on Okolo's way to Sologa; the girl's pulling off her dress and pressing herself closer to him, the accusations and uproar that follow this, and the consequent trial of Okolo on the basis of the supposed 'touching of the girl' all render the text base – very typical of a comedy.

The coupling traditionally associated with comedy is also seen between Okolo and Tuere. Tuere the beautiful maiden, whose beauty has rendered an object of jealousy to the people, gets attracted to Okolo while she is under estrangement. Okolo becomes that valiant knight to give her maiden succour and restore her joy. She tells Okolo that all the feelings that are known of women have eluded her; the arrival of Okolo makes it possible for the flame to be kindled again. The amorous feeling that exists between this two subtle lovers is symbolically rendered in the flame/fire that begins to burn in Tuere's hut at the arrival of Okolo. The flame is kindled by a meeting of hearts, not of one of the couple:

Then he saw the embers move and glow like a new-appearing sun or a going-down sun. Then he saw splinters of firewood drop on the embers. And then he heard her trying to blow the embers to living flames. She blew, blew, blew and blew, but the embers only glowed not responding like a god more sacrifice demanding...

Okolo stood watching and speaking to his inside. How many years has she killed tending the dying embers of her fire with her breath and shadow and wishes and remembrances?

...with a start he moved, towards the corner...he touched the splinters of firewood propped against the wall. He took them and moved back...Then there was more blowings. *Then suddenly a twin flame shot up. The twin flame going into one another and becoming one, grew long and short, spread and twisted and danced, devouring the essence of the firewood like passion.* And the face of Tuere was satisfaction, for her breath and shadow had gone into the flame. She

remained kneeling...looking at what is behind the flame, the root of the flame...then slowly rose to her feet, turned and faced Okolo (Okara 33-4, italics mine).

Of course, the root of the flame is the feelings of love. From this moment, one's problem becomes the other's. The bond initiated here is sustained till Okolo's final elimination. And not even this elimination is to separate them from each other; for both are allowed to go together, perhaps, for the safety of the union. This exemplifies Tuere a faithful lover, as opposed to Celimene in *The Misanthrope* who withdraws when her man is exiled. The constancy of the Tuere's love underlies her words when the people come for Okolo: 'from this standing moment, wherever you go, I go' (127). In order not to tear asunder what fate has put together, the people respect the flame of love and send both adrift; an effort that stifles the more any tragic offshoot.

The language of the text is also far below the 'elevatedness' of language attributed to the tragic; only comedy can condone, or better put produce such deviant language style. Here we meet 'language itself made comic' (Bergson 60). The repetitions and inversions that mark the language of comedy as Bergson propounds is duly portrayed in this instance. The phrase: 'have you got *it*' is repeated many times by Okolo to the amusement of the readers. The sentences that make up the text are uniquely inverted, so that some linguistic units are no longer in their usual position in a grammatically correct linguistic utterance. There are such sentences as: 'Did he anything to you do? Did he no part of your body touch?' (65); 'Your nonsense words stop'; 'If my left foot against something hits as I walk, it's a warning be' (24). The diction and the general orientation of the language incite a great deal of laughter. The simplicity it reeks of amplifies the comic spirit it bears. In the case of such constructions like: 'your hair was black black be, then it became white like a white cloth and now it is black black be more than blackness' (25); 'some of the townsmen said Okolo's eyes were not right, his head was not correct. This they said was the result of his knowing too much book..(23), and many other phrases therein; 'it is language itself that becomes comic' (Bergson 53).

The change of heart perceived in Abadi and the rest of the people whom the narrator claims are affected by Okolo's word is only but exemplification of the 'inconsistency of the comic characters' (*Discourse Analysis* 55). They change as things change. They are not meant to be steadfast like the tragic figures, only the humour character buried in his obsession may maintain his comic stand until he is taken away. And what is more comic than the manner of his supposed elimination which is more or less an integration: his humour gets defeated, and his canoe of life begins to float aimlessly, 'carried by the current' of the age, the rotten society. The moment Tuere and Okolo get swallowed up by *the river* (life in Amatu), things normalizes

and *the river* 'flowed smoothly [] as if nothing had happened'(267). A new society crystalizes as Okolo's *character* is expelled from Amatu. The story's ending as dawn/morning comes signifies the (re)birth of the desired society which is made possible by the elimination of the mechanically inelastic *character*.

Conclusion

Since every reading of a text is 'either to invalidate that previously done, or to offer a different critical dimension of the work (Ekeh 28)', we submit that this essay subscribes more to the latter motive. It is the nature of literature to offer a wide range of possibilities, and only one of such possibilities has been explored in this study. From the foregoing, one could see the extent to which Okara's *The Voice* flaunts its comic orientation such that the previously held view about it seems to be a fault of surface reading, or say, negligence of the mechanical inelasticity that (in)forms its sequence. Nevertheless, we do not forget that any critical encounter with a literary object is but a 'displaced interaction' none of which is 'necessarily preferred: there is nothing to force the choice of one over the other' (Akwanya, *Verbal Structures* 317). All is then, severally unique beginnings of everything again in the direction of thought which literature provokes.

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EJIOFOR UDU NWOGWU

VISIONS OF TERROR AND HOPE IN AKWANYA'S 'EASTER I (OF GOD AND HIS WORKS)'

Abstract

Lyric, one of the three forms of literature, as identified by Aristotle, is characteristically small in magnitude compared to the other forms – drama and narrative. That natural characteristic smallness is however not a disadvantage on the side of lyric at all, as it always gains in 'intensiveness what it loses in extensiveness' as Akwanya would say. Consequently, a lyric is capable of attaining representations and giving rise to meanings or interpretations quite more than itself – to use the phrase of the persona of Rilke's 'Duino Elegies'. It is quite capable of prompting endless reflections; quite capable of attaining the status of inexhaustibility thereby proving its literary artistic merit. In line with the above, this paper seeks to discuss the poem, 'Easter 1 (Of God and his Works)', as profoundly, albeit subtly, articulating Terror and Hope – the two figures responsible for the two orientations of literature – thereby not just redeeming its identity as literature but also incredibly immersing itself in the tradition, particularly the modernist one. The paper will also look at the functioning of myth in the poem. The discussion is essentially guided by the discourse of poststructuralism.

Keywords: Myth, Primary Symbol, Mythic Symbol, Terror, Hope, Tragedy, Comedy.

Introduction

A.N Akwanya's poetry collection entitled *Visitant on Tiptoe and Other Poems* contains a number of great poems. Regrettably though, neither the collection as a whole nor the individual poems have been given deserved critical attention since the publication of the collection in 2012. So far, the only writing done on the collection is a review of it by Oluchukwu Pius Ifechukwu, located at Pionga.blogspot. This lack of attention towards the collection could be part of the widespread aversion and disfavour given to poetry generally by both critics and lay-readers. It could also be because some of the poems are not readily appropriable at the level of 'social dynamics' (Holquist, qtd in Akwanya's 'The World's Far Side....' 88), nor are they easily amenable to stylistic analysis. But the truth is that some poems in the collection are profoundly artistic. The greatness of the poems, particularly 'Easter 1', lies in the incredible, if subtle, way in which they articulate and immerse themselves in the tradition so that it can be easily studied together with other older texts.

This paper is largely premised on the terms Terror and Hope. Terror (which in this paper is synonymous with Fear) and Hope are the two phenomena responsible for what is usually referred to as 'the two vectors of action and representation in art, tragedy and comedy.' (Akwanya A.N., 'Overwhelming Existence in Rilke's Duino Elegies [] and Eliot's Ash two ' 18). On the other hand, they are examples of what Paul Ricoeur in his account of myth calls 'primary symbols'. Ricoeur distinguishes between two kinds of symbolic orders – primary and mythic symbols. The former is so called because it is unknowable and inarticulate. Example of primary symbols include terror/fear, hope, evil, divinity, power, etc. Mythic symbols, on the other hand, are more articulate and knowable. Ricoeur writes: 'Mythical symbols are more articulated; they leave room for dimension of narrative, with its fabled characters, places, and times, and tell the Beginning from the End of experience of which primary symbols are the avowal.' (*The Conflict of Interpretations* 298). Since primary symbols are not always readily known, they can be known only at the moment of encounter with them. But the encounter itself is already at the mythic level; which is to say that mythic symbols come by as an instance of the attempt to elaborate a primary symbol. From Ricoeur's explanation above, the attempt of mythic symbol to articulate a primary symbol is predicated on narrative with characters, place and time. However, such elaboration of a primary symbol is not only rendered in and as narrative; it can be equally rendered in and as a lyrical meditation, as is the case of the poem under consideration. In lyrics however, primary symbols are conceived as 'pure perceptions' (Akwanya, *Discourse Analysis* 236). It is also important to note that mythic symbols never exhaust primary symbols – a primary symbol 'always exceeds every representation of it' (*Discourse Analysis* 236). In Ricoeur's terms 'Symbol [endlessly] gives rise to thought' (*The Conflict* 288). What Ricoeur calls primary symbol is what Northrop Frye calls significance. And a significance according to him is 'an incommunicable state of consciousness' (qtd in Akwanya, *Verbal Structures* 133).

Part of the business of this paper is to show how the poem represents the two modes (tragedy and comedy) – the former through the vision of terror and the latter through the vision of hope. Discussion of tragedy and comedy in relation to a poem may sound somewhat strange, but tragedy and comedy are literary modes which can take any form: drama, narrative, or lyric; as a result, they are not limited to a particular form. The presupposition that the two modes interact in the poem does not imply that the poem is tragi-comic. It only means as Sewall has argued that in every tragic work, there is a comic possibility and vice-versa. He observes that '[tragedy] hovers about the best comedies as an imminent possibility, and that '... the highest comedy gains its power from its sense of tragic possibility and profoundest tragedy presents

full if fleeting vision, through the temporal disorder of an ordered universe to which comedy is witness' (qtd in *Discourse Analysis* 25 and 39). For Frye, tragedy and comedy behave in this way in literature because both originate from the same myth – the quest-myth. He maintains:

If we are right in our suggestion that romance, tragedy, irony and comedy are all episodes in a total quest-myth, we can see how it is that comedy can contain a potential tragedy within itself. In myth, the hero is a god, and hence he does not die, but dies and rises again. (*Anatomy*, 215).

The dying and rising of a tragic hero as indicated by Frye is already a transition from the vision of tragedy to that of comedy just the same way Frye has argued that comedy can contain a potential tragedy in itself – this shall be considered latter in a larger dimension in the course of our analysis of the poem.

The seeming contention above between Frye and Sewall may be quite curious. But it is not however altogether so, especially because ambiguities and ambivalences are both definitive characteristics of art in general and literary art in particular. This ambiguities and ambivalences in both form and representation together imbue literature with the quality of undecidability (See M.C Onunkwo, 'Literature and the Undecidable'). Put differently, literature is 'a double-edged sword' (*Verbal Structures* 248). Literature is therefore really truly 'consistently inconsistent', as Aristotle says while speaking of characters, which is why hunches can be made in the study of literature; but if such hunches must be taken seriously, they have to be textually verified for support and validity. The above arguments and more are what this paper sets out to validate from the analysis of 'Easter I'.

The Vision of Terror

Right from the first lines of the first stanza of the poem, an atmosphere of perplexity has been inaugurated, for both the faithful and the faithless are confused about God and his works. This confusion precipitated by God and his works is already an uneasy situation, however, both the faithful and the faithless are still at this point excused until the real terror emerges. The pandemonium generated by God and his works seems just a harbinger of what is to come. The poem reads:

Of God and his works even those with faith
may be as unsure as those who have none
and all are excused until they are favoured
with knowledge of terror (lines 1 - 4)

That knowledge of terror, glimpsed at the very moment when neither the faithful nor the faithless will be excused any longer, is recounted from lines 5 - 13 of the same stanza, thus:

... the day the key to the store house is lost
 where all the defensive weapons
 cleaned, oiled, and checked
 are carefully stacked
 and one trusted friend
 who would surely have forsaken all and come
 is out of the country
 without the roving software
 to hear your cry (lines 5 - 13).

Even without terror being mentioned by the persona, one can readily surmise that what is at issue in those lines is an encounter with the primary symbol, terror/fear. Also, implicit in those lines is the image of Tantalus. This is because it is not that the individual who encounters this terror lacks protective accoutrement against such incident: there is indeed 'defensive weapons / cleaned, oiled and checked' and 'are carefully stacked', which is to say that they are ready for use. They therefore ought to have been sufficient to save the individual, on whose possession they probably are, from any threat or danger whatever. Unfortunately, however, 'the key to the storehouse' where all the defensive weapons are kept 'is lost' and '*one trusted friend* / who would *surely* have forsaken all and come / is out of the country / without the roving software / to hear [his] cry' (emphasis mine). The case here is that the individual does have a friend; not just a friend but a trusted one at that. This trusted friend would have certainly come to the rescue of his friend. Unfortunately, 'he is out of the country' with not even 'a roving software to hear [his friend's] cry', thereby totally precluding the possibility of help being offered to the suffering subject. Obviously, therefore, what the individual has found himself in is a helpless and fearful situation which is bound to leave him in an ineffable and astounded state – which is always the lot of anyone encountering a momentary deity – the encounter that gives off the primary symbol.

As already argued in the introduction, terror is the symbol responsible for the production of tragedy. Therefore, what the 'knowledge of terror' as seen in lines 5-13 above has initiated is a tragic sequence, which henceforth begins to gain momentum and thus ready to 'crush' the individual in its vicious motion; for its inexorability is seen in the fact that all the possible escape routes for the individual have been closed. What is left for him is therefore to stay and stare, so to speak, as this kind of tragedy does not even offer him the opportunity to

struggle. Even if he were given such opportunity it would ultimately have been futile. The poem does not in any way relate what the suffering subject has done to merit such misfortune. It is therefore taken for granted that the individual has done nothing in terms of offence to merit his ordeal. Whether he has done anything or not is after all immaterial, for more often than not, 'tragedy is set off, not by what one has done, but by who one is' (*Discourse Analysis* 120). That of course implies fatality in tragedy which is the case of Sophocle's Oedipus, and Maurya's male children in J.M. Synge's *Riders to the Sea*. That tragedy deals much with who one is rather than what one has done is explicit in Sewall's famous argument that: 'Tragedy is the sense of ancient evil, of "the blight man was born for", of the permanence of the mystery of human suffering, that is basic to the tragic sense of life' (*Discourse Analysis* 25).

To say that tragedy is predicated on one's fate is to say that divinity – God or gods – is involved which is why man can hardly do anything to save himself since divinity means more than or superior to man. That divinity has a hand in the suffering of the human subject in 'Easter 1' is present in the inaugural lines of the poem where it is stated that, 'Of God and his works even those with faith / may be as unsure as those who have none'. In fact, the involvement of fate/the divine is actually fundamental to tragedy. For Ricoeur writes:

To the same group belong the tragic myths which show the hero subject to a fatal destiny. According to the tragic schema, man falls into fault as he falls into existence, and the god who tempts and misleads him stands for primordial lack of distinction between good and evil (*The Conflict* 294).

It is this sense in tragedy that man suffers helplessly for what he can neither control, understand nor fight that makes it capable of eliciting the emotion of 'pity' (Aristotle). The suffering subject in our text ought therefore to be pitied, to be sympathised with.

Moreover, tragedy has the sense of the absurd. Akwanya posits that 'Fundamental in the tragic attitude [] is the notion of the absurdity of life – not that human beings thwart the order of the world, and render it absurd but rather [] that life is cruel in a blind way' (*Discourse Analysis* 216). This absurdity of tragedy makes for its painfulness to the human heroic subject: that before the tragedy befalls him, he does not foresee the possibility of suffering any helpless situation. This is because he is usually an individual full of himself, well prepared for any eventuality. This is actually the state of the suffering subject in our text who has 'defensive weapons / cleaned, oiled , and checked' and even a 'trusted friend' – this is indeed preparation enough. However, at such inauspicious but significant moment of encounter with terror/fear, with divinity, with more than man, he makes the sudden discovery: that all his preparations and personal strength are too small and too puny to save himself, having been plunged into tragic

vortex. This discovery/recognition is what Aristotle calls 'anagnorisis'. According to Aristotle, what follows discovery is reversal (peripeteia) and suffering (pathos). Suffering is exactly the lot of the human subject in our text immediately after the realisation that he is strengthless and helpless. His suffering is captured thus:

Expect to loose a great deal that day,
your flesh lacerated
and every advantage taken of you
to your utmost mortification (lines 14 - 17).

The physical ordeal whereby '[his] flesh is lacerated' and the emotional trauma whereby every 'every advantage [is] taken of [him]' are suffering indeed. It obviously follows the sudden knowledge of his helplessness owing to the loss of the key to the arsenal where 'all the defensive weapons / well cleaned, oiled and checked / are carefully stacked' and also the absence of 'one trusted friend'. What is related from lines 1 – 17 is therefore a whole and complete tragic incident. The lyric therefore 'merely resumes the same old meditation upon a new ground' (*Discourse Analysis* 127).

The Vision of Hope

The expectation is that since the suffering subject has been stripped of any form of help, he will be utterly consumed by the sequence. That however does not seem to be the case. Even amidst his pathetic and helpless condition the vision of hope flickers. This flash of hope is glimpsed early on in the poem in lines 3 and 4, where it is said that 'all are excused until they are *favoured* / with the knowledge of terror' (emphasis mine). The sense of hope in those lines is implied by the word 'favour', as one begins to suspect that there is something unusual about the kind of terror whose knowledge is said to be a favour, instead of say, an encounter, trouble or punishment; that this terror must needs have something unconventional about it.

The suspicion is however confirmed from line 18 downwards, where the persona swiftly replaces the former foreboding and negative tone with that of positiveness and consolation, and hence implores the individual to take the situation with equanimity:

But be consoled
if afterwards,
on looking back
you notice a few leftover thorns
stab blindly where your helpless body was to have been
and turn glum-faced that the evil work dozens of others

had taken to an advanced stage
 had escaped unfinished...

The reason why the persona gives the advice as can be seen above is that more horrible things could have attended the individual. And how he may be aware of the fact that what happens to him is a peripheral aspect of what is laid in stock for him is that 'on looking back', he would 'notice a few leftover thorn/stab blindly where [his] helpless body was to have been.' Here it is not just few thorns, but 'a few leftover thorns' and 'a few' is grammatically greater than 'few' which is to say that there are a lot of thorns that stab 'blindly where [his] helpless body was to have been.' He should equally be 'consoled' because more sophisticated torture which has been prepared to be inflicted on him has not come-off as planned: 'and turn glum-faced that the evil work dozens of others/ had taken to an advanced stage / had escaped unfinished[.]' From the above lines, there is already a sense of hope, even amidst the bloodcurdling experience. And this is because he has escaped part of the suffering and torture meant for him – arguably, more painful ones.

Furthermore, there is hope for him as all that has been happening to him is said to be a confirmation of better things to come. The whole incident is related to what is encountered in Judeo-Christian Bible where Jesus advised his disciples not to panic in the face or midst of trials and tribulations. According to him, Jesus, suffering is a confirmation of the fact that he is with them as he himself suffered also. And his being with them is a source of hope indeed for his disciples, in spite of what they are suffering. Hence, we read in the poem that:

you will have learned
 just like Jesus
 from what you have suffered,
 your unhealable bruises
 and disorders after trauma,
 that he is indeed with you always
 according to his promise.

From the above, it is discernible that there is an aspect of regeneration in the whole sequence. For Jesus being the Judeo-Christian equivalent of Greek Dionysius and Prometheus is a Year-god: accordingly, he never dies. Whoever identifies with him has automatically assumed his figure and therefore has joined in the realm of deathlessness. And from the text, the individual has obviously identified himself with Jesus through his suffering. This is all the more accentuated by the title of the poem, 'Easter 1'. Easter is a feast in Christian religion when the resurrection of Jesus, as mentioned above is celebrated. It is akin to the Dionysian

feast. Therefore, there is hope for the individual even as Jesus himself ‘promised’. What is seen in this poem is that the individual through his suffering has been expiated, which is hope indeed. However, the emergence of this hope for the individual is quite unexpected – which is to say that it is illogical. For it would have been logical for him to be completely and hopelessly consumed in the sequence, having been ‘denied’ from the outset any source of rescue and ‘redemption’.

Our text shares a lot with those of the modernist tradition. In fact, it can be argued that the poem itself is modernist since for some scholars we are still in modernist period. Part of what it shares with modernist poems is its structure – lack of rhyme and sound devices – and representational ambiguity: its movement from terror to hope. This feature it shares particularly with Rilke’s *Duino Elegies*, where it is said that ‘beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror’ (First Elegy). There in the same elegy, we read that ‘[e]very Angel is terror.’ In terror, beauty can be found and even an Angel can exhibit terror. All this is encountered only in literature. But the movement from terror to hope is seen in the way the anguished and hopeless persona of the the elegies has solved ‘his problematic of being in the world’ (Akwanya, ‘Angst in Rilke’s’ 40). This he has done by ‘re-interpreting’ the world, as evident in his first associating himself with a tragic hero, and second by dying. We read that, ‘In death, this subject is certain to attain “excess of being”; he would at last become, like the arrow, the violin, the saint, GastaraStampa’s love, “something more than itself”’ (‘Angst in Duino Elegies’ 40). In the same manner, the lyrical voice in our poem has re-interpreted the ordeal of the human subject to be a form of association with Jesus, the Judeo-Christian tragic hero. This is properly speaking what Paul De Man has called “reversal of negativity into a promise” (‘Angst in Rainer Maria Rilke’s Duino Elegies’ 40).

Mythic Ideation in the Poem

This kind of thought where terror changes to hope, beauty and Angel is purely mythic. For it is only mythic thought that is capable of apprehending ‘occurrences in isolation, [] often under the aspect of fear and hope’ (*Verbal Structures* 135) and that is the main difference between scientific and mythic thought, because the former ‘seeks to establish a connection among disparate phenomena and if possible, reduce this occurrences to a regular pattern’ (135). Mythic thought on the other hand does not seek to reduce the occurrences to a regular pattern, and that art in general and literature in particular comes to being in the realm of mythic thought makes that air of uncertainty and unpredictability ever present.

From the forgoing, terror and hope have entered into the text as discourse formatives. The former coming first and the later following much later at practically unexpected means and time. And if as said above that mythic thought is capable of apprehending things under the aspects of fear/terror and hope, it means that mythic ideation has set in in our poem. For, 'fear and hope are the conditions for mythic ideation...' (Akwanya, *Habits of Thought* 264). Mythic ideation in the form of fear/terror and hope is the very conditions of the emergences of the two broad orientations in literature: comedy and tragedy. These two orientations are not always widely separated, they continue to 'veer and tier' on the walls of each other until one gains upper hand, as hinted at the introductory part of this essay following Sewall and Frye. It can therefore be said that our text started its movement in a tragic orientation and ends in a comic one, for as we have seen, the emergence of hope announces that the orientation has changed.

Conclusion

This study is a reading of the text in terms of transforming the text 'into a simultaneous network of reciprocal relationships' (Rousset, qtd in Derrida's *Writing and Difference* 28). The study has been largely based on the functioning of the two formatives that are responsible for the two literary artistic modes – terror/fear and hope. It is however important to reiterate, as already said in the introduction – that the possible interaction of the two formatives in the poem does not make the poem tragi-comic, neither is it absurd to say that the two formatives which individually produce different modes, tragedy or comedy respectively, coexist in the poem. From what we have seen as different views of profound literary scholars, tragedy and comedy are not mutually exclusive. In our text, hope, in other words comic vision, comes as an aftermath of the tragic vision. This is of course not unprecedented in the tradition as this is the case with Oedipus and the person of 'Duino Elegies' as has been seen. Oedipus after his tragedy enters his hopeful/comic plain through his deification at Colonus. That is the same way the subject in 'Easter 1' has been made to enter the realm of the gods through the allusion to Christ and his suffering. Transition from the tragic to the comic plain is therefore not new in literature as it actually has started with mythical tragic heroes: Jesus Christ and Dionysius respectively. Another point that needs to be stressed as this reading has shown is that literature is so fraught with ambiguities, metaphors, ironies, myths etc. and has high propensity to change, so that astute and accurate prediction of its trajectory is always difficult, if not impossible. Such prediction is bound to be misleading. Hence, Akwanya tells us in his *Verbal Structures* that 'art [literary art in this regard] is so full of ambiguities and irony so basic in its constitution that it does not admit channelling to specific and exclusive statement' (247).

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GEORGE ARINZE

LITERATURE, JAUNDICED CRITICISM, AND THE VULGARIZING OF THE ART

Not so very long ago Ben Okri put out an essay called ‘A Mental Tyranny Is Keeping Black Writers from Greatness’ in which he submitted that black and African writers have had brought upon them a certain ‘anomaly of perception’ from being expected to write about certain kinds of things or else be dismissed as irrelevant. This has resulted in a ‘mesmerism’ with so-called relevant subjects and perhaps more regrettably a loss of the sense of the true significance of art so that now we ‘automatically’ think a novel significant if it is say about slavery or colonialism or civil wars or female circumcision or imprisonment; certainly more significant than a novel say about a chap who drinks too much palm wine, regardless if the latter kind of novel is as much or even much more art than the former. Some mitigation has been found for this in the history of tragedies that have dogged these black and African writers' nations and the consequent treating of their writers as spokespeople against such ills. Alas this has cost the writers their ‘freedom,’ which Okri says is ‘the essential thing’ without which no people can be great, without which no literature can be great; and have doomed their works with monotony and sterility.

This observation about the writers is just as true for the critics, perhaps even truer. As it is the critics who ordinarily bring the writers’ work to the public notice, it is they who so often saddle the writers with these crippling burdens of expectations and demands as to what is relevant and what not. In the event many a writer has been swept off their true track of call which is the creation of unfettered art to pander to the whims of these pontificating critics smarting helplessly from this bewildering ‘mesmerism of subject;’ whereas the true significance of art, its constant relevance is usually in its *art* than its subject matter. Only this mental tyranny would seem to be even doubly disturbing and perilous in the case of the critics because it may lead, for who ideally are supposed to be custodians of the art, instead to a vulgarizing of the art.

Such for example might be the case with Adichie’s short story, ‘Apollo,’ which Neelika Jayawardane and Ainehi Egoro’s reading tend to have reduced to a mere move in a broader subsisting game of securing more tolerant, more accommodating sentiments towards gay sexuality, gay sexuality itself being one of the topical and perhaps therefore one of the ‘relevant’ subjects of the recent times. And this is a key debility which this anomalous attitude, which Soyinka has had course to also call Fascist, to literature often breeds, a staggering incapacity to see what is truly going on in the piece of creative writing before one’s very eyes, and really

because all the time the critic's concern is with a certain 'relevant' phenomenon in the social space rather than the story on his reading table. So once the critic has stumbled upon even as much as one single word in the story which seems to touch on this cherished social phenomenon, bingo! Henceforward the whole story reduces to this phenomenon, and is accounted relevant or not, significant or not, in accordance to whether or not it denounces this phenomenon if it is considered socially obnoxious or lauds it if otherwise. Which means that the critic ends up reading something in their own head already not the artwork before their very eyes.

Thus does 'Apollo's' relevance and significance tend to be reduced to a challenging of 'heteronormativity' and 'unsympathetic and cringe-worthy' representations of homosexuality and homosexuals in more orthodox literature as perceived by Jayawardane and Egoro. The essay in question is called '(Gay) Sexuality and African Writers: Adichie, Osman' and a bit of it reads Adichie's 'Apollo' thus: 'Okenwa's homo-erotic desire for Raphael intensifies but remains largely unspoken. His admiration for Raphael's body and his tortured longing for companionship betrays an underlying attraction that Adichie never openly terms as being homosexual. But Raphael's body, associated with that of Bruce Lee, does go from being an object of admiration and awe to an object of a desire.'

Now this is a most presumptuous reading to say the least. It is even outrageous. The most that could be said for it is that it betrays a hunch which the readers have to the effect that Okenwa might possess homosexual tendencies. But to submit this hunch as *definitely* a trait of Okenwa or an incontrovertible item of fact from the story is another matter altogether. It smacks of a violation of the integrity of the character by reason of having not really paid attention either to him or the story which has given him animacy in the first place. For far more subtly complex things are at issue in this story than gay sexuality, far more subtly complex things at issue in regard to Okenwa's character than this rather too hurried reduction to homo-erotic desires.

To begin with to argue that Okenwa's admiration and longing towards Raphael's companionship betrays an underlying homosexual attraction is preposterous and gives away a crass inattentiveness to the story's whole logic and sequence. For what actually happens is that, as he himself remembers it, prior to his unsought fellowship with Raphael, one merely out of several other houseboys he comes to know in his childhood, Okenwa is already ill at ease in what is supposed to be his home. He is already in a state of *angst*, to use that word in a philosophical technical sense, in a household in which he is born late to parents who as good as have given up hope of ever carrying their own biological child. Quite simply he is *not* at home. And this by reason of he and everything else in this environment not excepting even the

houseboys who ‘treated [him] with the contemptuous care of people who disliked [his] mother,’ being so *disjoint* that he feels ‘transient, as though [he] were not where [he] was supposed to be.’

There practically is not a single intersection ground between him and this environment and the goings-on therein: his parents would rather he were quickly responsive when spoken to, but throughout his childhood he worried about not being quick enough at this. His parents cared for books; he didn’t, reading only to satisfy them and to answer offhand questions they may throw at him during meals. They liked badminton; he found it a most boring ordeal, the shuttlecock looking to him an unfinished thing as though the inventor of the game had stopped halfway.

By contrast the one thing in all the world he loved, Kung Fu, no one else seemed to care for, with the result that he is constrained to indulge it solitarily within the confines of his own bedroom. Well, before Raphael comes along at any rate. And it is significant that when Raphael chances upon him practicing his dear kung Fu, that he, by sort of default, ‘expected a mild reprimand’ arguably enough by being now so sensible of the general mismatch between him and everything else around him; because this is where the admiration and longing for Raphael’s companionship which Jayawardane and Edoro tie to a rather speculative homo-erotic inclination in Okenwa may be more logically rooted. For instead of the expected reprimand Raphael ‘smiled, touched his chest, and brought his finger to his tongue, as though tasting his own blood,’ and in those token gestures recaptures Okenwa’s ‘favourite scene’ from the Bruce Lee films which he has watched so often he knew all the lines. At this Okenwa ‘stared at Raphael with pure thrill of unexpected pleasure’! This event occurs when Okenwa is only twelve years old, ‘and had, until then, never felt that [he] recognized [himself] in another person.’

It emerges therefore that the question of Okenwa’s attraction to and admiration for Raphael is hardly anything to do with homo-eroticism or anything of the sort. It is a matter simply of a ground of *sympathy* having opened up between these two characters. And if we recall that Michel Foucault in whose sense the concept sympathy is here applied accounts for it as an instance of the *same* so potent that it renders things identical, causing their individualities to disappear, then Okenwa’s sudden recognition of himself in Raphael ceases to be so unlikely. It is a matter of Raphael holding out even for this once to Okenwa the possibility of the latter feeling no longer ‘an interloper in our own house,’ of no longer feeling transient and belonging elsewhere other than his natal home, of no longer being ill at ease but *at home* at long last. That is to say Raphael is the one who holds out for once the chance of what

Okenwa cares about not being utterly against the grain of the rest of his surrounding; Okenwa and his world for once are at an intersection.

And this is not at all because Raphael is male nor Okenwa homosexual; it is the reposing of this possibility, this chance, in Raphael that's all. To speak more technically Okenwa has a *disposition* to become attracted to this possibility of being *at home* in a situation that this possibility is held out to him, in a situation that he is within the forcefield of this possibility. And it is absolutely immaterial what the sex of the repository of this possibility is, male, as is Raphael, or female; or whether the repository is consciously aware of itself as so or not. And if one is attentive to the text, one will find too that together with this *disposition* in Okenwa comes already as a sort of necessary *complement* a certain implacable subverting of everything else to whatever holds this possibility of being at home, not excepting even personal health. But it is encountered first as defiance of his parents albeit in more symbolic terms when he would pull his mattress onto the floor and stand on two thick books (the very hallmarks of his parents profession, being both professors) just to practise his Kung Fu! Up to this point the possibility of being at home is held out to him by his dear solitary kung Fu so anything and everything may be trampled including books just to get it going. Then Raphael comes along and now dear solitary Kung Fu gets a chance to breach the borders of Okenwa's bedroom and as it were be consolidated and rendered permanent by being linked to something other than the self.

But something else comes along in turn to threaten this element of consolidation, Raphael, in the guise of conjunctivitis. Raphael who held out even the vaguest chance of Okenwa becoming a black belt one day. Raphael who knew what *really* mattered. Raphael with whom after school his real life began. Raphael who caused him when he ate lunch with his parents to dream of escape. It is this Raphael not another that Apollo has quite out of a blue sky come and knocked out into expedient incarceration in his room in the boys' quarters. And as if the circumstances are not harsh enough as they are his parents instruct Okenwa to not go anywhere near this Raphael while this incarceration lasts. Now if it has been made out that a certain implacable subverting of everything else to being at home is also an organic character trait of Okenwa then it will be logically expected that for him to have effectively stayed away following his parents' instruction from Raphael during the latter's quarantine would amount to a character inconsistency in Okenwa. It would have been impossible not to say illogical. Except of course say the parents had mounted some sentry or other to actually physically ensure Okenwa complies with their instruction. But this they don't do. So quite expectedly Okenwa moves again, this time more literally, in defiance of his parents to subvert even this, their

instruction, to the possibility of his being at home, even at the personal peril of contacting apollo. So he steals away at the foremost chance and visits Raphael in the boys' quarters where he is confined. As it turns out Raphael has not been using the medicinal eye-drops because according to him 'I cannot do it.'

From this point it appears just how far Okenwa can indeed go just to have what he cares for restored, the possibility of his being at home reinstated. For not even Raphael's 'Don't come close' can stop him now. He has moved already to put in the eye-drops for Raphael, 'touched his face, gently pulled down his lower left eyelid, and dropped the liquid into his eye. The other lid [he] pulled more firmly, because [Raphael] had shut his eyes tight.' And if one considers that Okenwa cannot possibly have very effectively executed this putting in of the eye-drops for Raphael without their physically touching in any way, especially as Raphael's eyes blinked so that it behooved on Okenwa to hold the lids steady by one hand in order to get the drops in all right, then the sheer ridiculousness of Jayawardane and Egoro's reading of their bodies' touching as a 'moment of intimacy' which 'Adichie expertly invests with desire' stands out in all of its vulgar proportions. For them this physical contact is again *evidence* of Okenwa's even if nascent homosexuality, as is the fact of his being unmarried decades later, something they tag his 'problematic' marital status. But these do not necessarily prove anything, certainly not that Okenwa is definitely homosexual. About the matter of the physical contact at the scene of the putting in of the eye-drops for Raphael I believe the vacuity of the logic is by now glaring enough.

As to Okenwa's unmarried status, again, it is at most a hunch, which must be inserted back in the body-text to see if or not it connects, to see that this item of speculation is not in the end only being foisted on the text externally. And when this acid test is carried out, what shows up is that this unmarried status is really not so inconsistent with Okenwa's character without necessarily being any indubitable proof of his homosexuality for that matter. For what is seen as another vital aspect of Okenwa's character is a certain sort of proneness to being easily conscience-stricken and its attendant need to try and abort as quickly as can be helped the fountainhead of such uneasy conscience or else try and make up in some way for whatever perceived or real transgression that has given rise to the guilt in the first instance. For example he suffers such an unease from feeling that he is constraining his parents to a sort of bondage whenever he is sick and they drag an armchair into his room the easier to minister to him while the sickness lasts. To try and do away with this he would *will* himself to get well quickly so as 'to free them'. Again it is read in the fourth paragraph of 'Apollo' that he visits his old parents so regularly and dutifully in Port-Harcourt really because this to him is a tacit way of making

up for his being unmarried like the rest of his parents' friends' children and giving them a grandchild: 'And yet I knew that if I had a family, if I could complain about rising school fees as the children of their friends did, then I would not visit them so regularly. I would have nothing for which to make amends.'

So if this is the situation, who is to say any more definitely, any more incontrovertibly, that his unmarried status is to do with the possibility of his being gay than with such another attempt at trying viscerally to compensate for something such as the lie he tells against Raphael which leads to the latter's being summarily dismissed from work, more especially as it is the rankling guilt of this incident that seems to have etched the memory of Raphael so in his mind, that seems to have evoked it now so lucidly when he hears the sad tale of his inglorious ending? For having let that opportune time '[b]efore my father turned to Raphael, and before my mother lunged at him as if to slap him, and before she told him to go pack his things and leave immediately' slip irretrievably, it is no more so highly improbable given what has just been uncovered as part of his character trait for such as Okenwa to keep trying to amend this injustice over and over again, especially as now the effort can issue forth only in futility.

SOSTHENES N. EKEH

TRAGEDY AND THE DYNAMICS OF CLASS STRUCTURE: A READING OF HARDY'S *TESS OF THE D'URBERVILLES*

Abstract

Considerable critical attention has been given to Thomas Hardy's novels. And so can be said of the concept of tragedy. These are bold assertions whose truth can be verified simply by keying in on Google search engine either of the aforementioned keywords to see the countless smorgasbord of themes immediately on display. But there have been perspectives on these studies; perspectives which, I daresay, have only been as such. For none has so far taken into consideration what Oscar Mandel calls 'the original configuration', especially the tragic perspectives on the texts. A careful study of 'the original configuration' of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and some of the novels of this period will bring to light the prima facie convergence of their tragic motifs – that all Victorian tragedies have their originary source in the dynamic interplay of class structure inextricably interwoven with the texts. I therefore hazard in this reading that Tess's tragedy lies in the tension of the dialectical opposition between the middle and the working classes, with her tragic fate always already inscribed in the fact of her low class status.

Keywords: tragedy, class structure, consciousness, original configuration, *pharmakos*, fate, binary opposition.

Introduction

To respond to the nature of literary art, one may be required to take no position at all, but, like a chameleon, to be always ready to blend with the colour which it presents. For the tenor of a work is subject to the fluidity which characterises historical movement. Frye would observe that one's definite position is 'one's weakness, the source of one's liability to error and prejudice, and to gain adherents to a definite position is only to multiply one's weakness like an infection' (*Anatomy*, 19). That is to say, to take a definite position is to deny oneself an objective or perhaps, a comprehensive view of the multi-facets the art object exhibits. It is simply to shut oneself away from any possible encounter with it as an object of *study*, as this might betray the arbitrary conjectures or speculation which has hitherto governed one's standpoint. And this is true, needless to say. But however biased or provincial a particular vantage point may be, it is still after all an indispensable position to account for the object in question. For how can the art object be grasped in its byzantine complexity if no position be

taken at all? You see, one can't help it; so that taking a position becomes a welcome expedient, however jerky, wobbly or vulnerable it may be, while using theory as a supportive tool to safeguard, and equally to validate one's position. But one must needs break away from the localising influence of some positions. So much now for taking of position.

Nevertheless, if much is said to have been done on tragedy and Hardy's novels, does it not implicate that every position has been exhausted, which, no doubt, will beg the question of what calls for our present research? But then, we recall in Akwanya that in art, progress is measured by a new work 'doubling back' (*Verbal* 320) to tradition, or having what T.S. Eliot calls 'the historical sense' ('Tradition and Individual Talents' n.p). In other words, to write is to resume or enter into the movements of thought which have always already begun, and the opening of new paths in the given work is only by thinking along with tradition (see Derrida, *Writing*). In this regard do we commence our reading of tragedy in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. A reading which no doubt calls forth the tradition and what it has to offer with regard to criticism, but which in spite of the handsome number of criticism done on tragedy in Hardy's novels has the new path it opens as something to recommend it. For the fact that Farkhanda Nadir has carried out a Marxist study of *Tess*, our point of departure is therefore to see class structure as the pivot of tragedy in this novel. I may say with some confidence that the issue of class structure and how it underlies the tragedy of not only *Tess* but roughly all the tragic novels of this period, particularly Hardy's, has not received adequate treatment from critics. The struggle for survival, orchestrated by the limiting class division, is the very tragic necessity or what F.U. Okoro calls 'the cloud of inevitability' ('Archetype' 42) which hovers above every tragic protagonist in Hardy's novels, and usually propels them inexorably to their ultimate end. The texts are sites for the encounter with these struggles, engaged in by the two ideologically opposed classes – the middle and the lower classes. Hence the essay promises an insight which Marxist criticism tends to bring to the study of tragedy.

The Original Configuration

'By original configuration,' Mandel defines, 'is understood the total data, as given by the author, concerning the protagonist and the world as far as it is relevant to him, *at the moment of the tragic action or decision*' (*A Definition* 32-3, emphasis original). We may in this fashion proceed to ask what could be said to constitute the original configuration of Hardy's *Tess*. Our attention is drawn to some random comments made in the text. The first and the most crucial of these comes out in the conversation between Abraham and Tess. We read:

'Did you say the stars were worlds, Tess?'

'Yes.'

'All like ours?'

'I don't know; but I think so. They sometimes seem to be like the apples on our stubborn tree. Most of them splendid and sound – a few blighted.'

'Which do we live on – a splendid one or a blighted one?'

'A blighted one.'

'Tis very unlucky that we didn't pitch on a sound one, when there were so many more of 'em!' (25).

In this brief exchange do we follow Ricoeur to conclude that all there is to know is already known, that all 'has been said in enigma' (*The Conflict* 288). For to live on a blighted star implies that one is always only fated, and this is a fact of history, so that one sees the pointlessness in Abraham's question, 'How would it have been if we had pitched on a sound one?' In response to which Tess is altogether unhinged, 'O Aby, don't – don't talk of that anymore!' (25); for the contrary possibility does not bear thinking at all, but for Abraham, it is just a matter of exercising his childish imagination. Notable is that the fate here is generally that of the family, and has not begun to single out our heroine. Her inauspicious destiny begins to stand out with the death of Prince, their family horse, and equally the 'bread-winner' (28) whose accidental death soon changes the temper of the narrative. Here we chance on the second original configuration: the liminal guilt. For "'[t]is all my doing – all mine!" the girl cried at the spectacle. "No excuse for me – none"' (26). Subsequently, '[h]er face was dry and pale, as though she regarded herself in the light of a murderess' (28). And lastly, "'[w]ell, as I killed the horse, mother," she said mournfully, "I suppose I ought to do something"' (29). No more is she just regarding herself the murderess; she is now the subject 'I' who exercises as intentionality the action of killing the horse, and by so doing she accepts the guilt. We must take it as part of the configuration that Tess cannot free herself from this guilt, as the *ought-to* sentence continues to haunt her every now and then. This 'ought to' in the final analysis is to set the stage for the adventures our heroine embarks on, for entrusted upon her young shoulder is how she *ought to* help her parents out of their present quagmire into which she has dragged them (28). Can we not therefore say that the main driving force of the text is the need to relocate the family on a splendid star, which, following Mandel still, is to become her 'tragic purpose'? Hence is the necessity of struggle, which as Mandel would say 'is established in the most characteristic cases by the actual presentation to the reader of a complete pattern which includes the purpose and the co-existent elements which must balk it' (36). 'What are those elements in the text which must balk Tess's purpose?' we may ask. We take a leap forward.

Let us proceed with Harry Blamires to summarise the main characterizing features of Victorian age in the following lines:

What made the Victorian society such a fruitful field for fiction was its peculiar combination of virtues and defects – the extremes of wealth and poverty, the rigid stratification of social class, the inflexible ideal of the family structure, and the competitiveness for place and cash in a sharply individualistic environment. Collision between passions and conventions, idealism and materialism were built into the fabric of the society that the Victorian novelists surveyed (*Literary Criticism* 260).

Evident in the quotation is the inner dialectic of class structures, which of course ensues from the hierarchical social stratification. For this reason, we may define class as a large group of people differing from each other by the place they occupy in a historically determined system of social production, by their relation to the means of production, by their role in the social organization of labour and consequently by the dimensions of the share of social wealth of which they dispose and their mode of acquiring it (Marx qtd in Nazir 3). Simply put, it is the manifestation of economic differentiation. Seen in this light, our eye is quickly riveted to the oscillating tensions between wealth and poverty which resonate all through the story. The gap between the haves and the have-nots being so wide, the two are almost seen to be at the opposite poles of the spectrum, with hardly any ‘transitional gulf’ (Soyinka, ‘Fourth Stage’ 365). Is not the simple reason that the tension between the two dominant classes does not guarantee a ‘transitional gulf’ the very element that will eventually balk the actualisation of Tess's purpose? ‘Tragedy,’ according to Mandel, ‘presents the purpose and the world in which that purpose is born, and lets logic do the rest’ (38). Tess's purpose as born in Wessex society, with its lopsided economic organisation, is to become untenable; for we learn from the text that John Durbeyfields and his family belong to lower social class, and survive through the sheer means of his haggling business. This, already, is a critical point.

The information gleaned from Parson Tringham about their great ancestral descent becomes a possible recourse in the face of a harsh and straitened circumstance into which the death of Prince has plunged them. While this provides a kind of momentary withdrawal from their present bleak situation, it is of particular importance to us, for it inaugurates what is called in structuralist jargon a ‘binary opposition’ between the dominant social classes. Marx identifies three class structures, namely bourgeois, proletariat and landlord. According to him, ‘the landlord is a class whose people were historically important; the class which owns land and derives its income from ground rent. Once powerful and dominant class; but having lost

its central role in the production organization of society considered then marginal' (qtd in Nazir 6). Hence the present Durbeyfields are poor through and through, in contradistinction to the past d'Urbervilles of landed gentry, with monumental records (*Tess* 12) and family vaults at Kingsbere. John's consciousness is the theatre where this opposition is played out; first, that between the wealth of his primogenitors and his present penury, which eventually gives way to a strong, if subtle, opposition between the haves and the have-nots, manifestly realised in the two families of Alec d'Urbervilles and John Durbeyfields.

In a bid to assuage the privation of the household, and possibly mitigate this tension – to create a confluence through which they can benefit from the wealth of their past – our protagonist is propelled to action: to go to Trantridge and claim kin with the supposed vestige of the living d'Urbervilles, and this automatically launches her into tragic vortex. For Tess's encounter with Alec d'Urbervilles, a middle class, culminates in the loss of her childhood innocence, the 'familiar green world' (66). She is raped by Alec; and the birth and death of her baby, her abandonment by Angel, her murder of Alec and her execution inevitably follow from this incident. We must therefore also accept as part of the original configurations the impossibility of breaking loose from the memory of the rape; that this memory will continue to rear up in her consciousness, however she struggles against it. What is more, its stain, given the convention of Wessex society that demands perfect virtue from women. From her working in a cornfield near Marlott village, Tess proceeds after the death of Sorrow to Talbothays where she makes Angel's acquaintance – another middle-class gentleman. This is a place where the opposition between the class structures is extensively played out. One can easily group the characters into two groups of opposing classes, with Tess, Marian, Retty, Izz Huett Jonathan Krail and other dairymaids forming the lower class structure. Antipathetic to this is the group formed by the Dairyman Crick, Mrs Crick and Angel Clare. But through the interactive atmosphere enabled by the Dairyman, the tension between the two classes is alleviated. Yet we can still have a glimpse of this in the separate accommodation assigned to Angel, and his requirement to eat on a different table (103). With the passage of time, there is a gradual collapsing of this boundary, resulting from Angel's refusal of any preferential treatment. Hence the narrator observes that the 'longer he resided here the less objection had he to his company, and the more did he like to share quarters with them in common' (104). This wish is actualised by his falling in love with Tess, a dairymaid from lower class whose social status is to raise his parents' eyebrows.

Marriage is one the factors that can guarantee a movement from a working class to the middle class. Others could be inheritance of wealth or sheer personal labour. For the

dairymaids, they see this possibility only through marriage, for even the wages they are paid are immediately expended in meeting the needs of their respective families. Hence the struggle at Talbothays' dairy where every working woman wants to marry Clare; 'every woman has a practical and sordid expectation of winning him [Angel] as a husband' (238) so as to bridge the cruel gap that brings about their marginalization. But Izz Huett is to point out that '...he won't marry any of us, or Tess either – a gentleman's son, who's going to be a great landowner and farmer abroad! More likely to ask us to come wi'en as farm-hands at so much a year' (120). Is it not therefore plausible to say that Angel's proposed marriage to Tess is prompted by the consideration of his own personal advantage, and not necessarily out of love as he may want us to believe? From the discussion between him and Tess before the wedding, it can be seen that what underlies Angel's choice of Tess is not so much of his love for her or her beauty as of her competence in farm and poultry business: 'O yes; it is for my convenience as well as my happiness. If I have a very large farm, either English or colonial, you will be invaluable as a wife to me, better than a woman out of the largest mansion in the country' (164). And to convince his father of the marriage, this is the same reason he offers (142). So, like Fitspiers in *The Woodlanders*, Angel thinks of having 'an advantageous marriage, not with a woman of family as good as his own, and of purse much longer' (Hardy 134-5), but with one who has the qualities he needs for his social advancement. For the middle class is so much conscious about their class that they are never ready to accept the member of a working class as their own family member, except, in Angel's evaluation, she can be put into use – to be a source of income that will always make them retain their privileged position. In consequence, the course of the narration from the moment of the proposal to marriage changes towards the assimilation of our tragic heroine into a different social class, in fact, into another community with its own governing ideals. But this is to seal her fate, as it involves a vertical movement of transcendence, which, we argue, is proscribed within the text. How?

Let us try linking our original configurations. First, Tess lives on a blighted star; second, she remains guilty of the death of Prince; and third, she cannot break away from the memory of the rape. If this is true, can she now enter into the marriage on a clean sheet, when Angel wants to 'secure rustic innocence' as a wife? The marriage but spurs her tragedy, having deemed it a logical necessity; henceforth is our unconscious willingness to 'play along' with its movement. Angel abandons her, and we tie this to the incident of the rape. Angel's abandonment forces her into the hand of Alec; this we connect to the guilt which thrusts back upon her the *ought-to* sentence. Angel's return already signals Alec's murder, which too is linked to the memory of the rape. But in the murder is discovered the last original configuration

in the text. We read again from Mandel that 'in many cases [] the original configuration is exposed from the outset, so that we may be immediately sure of calamity. But the author may prefer to withhold from the reader some part of the total configuration, just as he may withhold it from the actor himself (36). Thus do we see how it is concealed from us an important part of the configuration, namely the moral order that forbids murder, so that the very moment Tess declares that she has killed, we learn from Angel that 'it was very terrible if true' (339). Everything now comes into play. The tragic purpose of relocating their fate on 'a splendid star' is brought to bear on the completed original configuration which figures in the hopelessness of this venture; for the splendid and the blighted stars are like two different worlds. But why the purpose should now spell her doom is because 'the overthrow of the protagonist appears inevitable in the original configuration; that is, at the very time of the tragic action. And the tragic fall can be defined as the inevitable consequence of a given purpose in a *given world*, external or internal to the protagonist' (Mandel 33, emphasis original).

Here we are in a better position to reconsider Mandel's swipe at Hardy: that '...virtually the whole body of Hardy's work in fiction can be cited as examples of "*tragédies manquées*" –attempts and failures to transcend the drama of intrigue' (38); and as such, he goes ahead to class the works under pseudo-tragedy. Such a general swipe is meant to level all of Hardy's tragic works as just the same, when obviously they are not. For despite that his works share certain features in common, they all have their peculiarities which distinguish them as individual works, so that what can be said of Henchard in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* may not easily be said of Tess, nor of Grace in *The Woodlanders*. One may say that Mandel too is caught in the same limiting perspective as others – the perspective of not taking into account the original configuration of the text, or perhaps, failing to identify the proper one; except if one is ready to concede that *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* is not among the Hardy's texts he studied, as he implies in 'virtually...' For such view that what drives Tess's action is the need to secure a lover is bound to see alternative courses of action available to Tess, which ultimately would have forestalled her tragedy. These alternatives convince Mandel in tagging the text a 'paratragedy', which vitiates from his model configuration of 'true tragedy'.

We do not dismiss the fact that Tess is a lady like everyone else, and as such, she is not cut off from their fancies: getting married to a nice gentleman whom she loves; and such is the wish of all the dairymaid in Dairyman Crick's house. But to see this as only what propels the narrative could be a misreading of a sort, as this will prompt the questions: why does Angel have to return only when Tess has married Alec? Besides, must Tess kill Alec before eloping with Angel? Or even after the murder, why could they not successfully escape the country? As

we can see, these are questions already answered by our consideration of the original configurations of the text, as they bring to light the impossibility of having those alternatives.

Tragedy: The Blight Man Is Born for

We still recall from *Tess* that they live on a ‘blighted star’ instead of a ‘splendid one’ (25). That they live on a blighted star well implies that the tragedy has been inscribed from the very beginning, the provocation of which Ricoeur calls ‘the history of suffering’ (*The Conflict*). Thus ‘[tragedy] is the sense of ancient evil, “of the blight man was born for,” of the permanence of the mystery of human suffering, that is basic to the tragic sense of life’ (Sewall 6). Is it not therefore part of *Tess*’s tragedy to be born into the lower class, as this already has foreshadowed the necessity of struggle, hence, ‘it is an act of hubris to be born’ (Silenus in Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy*)? And it is even futile to question the fact of being born into such a family condition; why is one not born into a different social class that would demand none of the said struggle for survival? is a question whose response is already anticipated in Heidegger, for such is the ‘throwness’ the facticity of which determines the *Dasein*’s possibilities (see *Being and Time*). One sees *Tess*’s frustration in the confrontation with a blunt truth of historical movement, a confrontation which threatens to destabilise her:

Because what’s the use of learning that I am one of a long row only – finding out that there is set down in some old book somebody just like me, and to know that I shall only act her part; making me sad, that’s all. The best is not remember that your nature and your past doings have been just like thousands’ and thousands’, and that your coming life and doing’ll be like thousands’ and thousands’ (*Tess of the d’Urbervilles* 111).

Does this not coincide with what Gadamer says of our historical entanglement? We read:

By that I mean, first, that we cannot extricate ourselves from the historical process, so distance ourselves from it that the past becomes an object for us... We are always situated in history... I mean our consciousness is determined by a real historical process, in such a way that we are not free to juxtapose ourselves to the past. I mean moreover that we must always become conscious afresh of the action which is thereby exercised over us, in such a way that everything past which we come to experience compels us to take hold of it completely, to assume it in some way its truth’ (qtd. in Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics*, 74)

Tess is involved in the movement of historical sequence, a sequence whose inauguration predates even her birth. We see also that this is a tragic sequence, as a result of which it can only make one sad. Hence we may recall in Akwanya that '[t]ragedy in [*Tess*] is part and parcel of being in the world: to be in the world is to be exposed to its provocations and menaced by its traumas' ('A View of Tragedy' 104); and not even the wilful forgetting that 'your nature and your past doings have been just like thousands' and thousands'' will eventually cut one off from this fate, except that one ceases to live, 'for [] existence itself is tragic' (102). There is no safe ground, no escape route, so to speak, only an avalanche of suffering. Hers is a 'tragedy [that] gather[s] momentum as the [text] progresses, and is ready now to unleash its full weight on [her], unmitigated' (Ugwuanyi and Ekeh 4). Thus with the death of Prince, follows the rape and the death of Sorrow, then the abandonment by Angel, the death of John Durbeyfields, the murder of Alec and Tess's consequent death. Bearing in mind of what we said of original configurations, we may repeat our question: What is the motive behind Tess's action, a search for a husband or the imperative need to wrench her family away from the hardscrabble life plunged into by their lower class status? To all appearances, the latter is logically the case, especially if we remember the course of action opened to her with the death of Prince, which makes her give in to her mother's whims; and like the sacrificial lamb of the book of Isaiah (6), she willingly surrenders, declaring in the process, '[d]o what you like with me, mother' (*Tess* 40). But the main original configuration in the text unveils that they live on a blighted star, which implicates the issue of fate, and seen in the broader light of Wessex universe, the impossibility of a transition from one social class to another, linking us to Abraham's observation of the unluckiness of their star; for how could they be on a blighted one when there is a whole number of splendid ones (*Tess* 25)?

We learn from Paul Ricoeur that text explanation is 'a question of "making sense," of producing the best overall intelligibility from an apparently discordant diversity':

...the construction takes the form of a wager or guess. [] there are no rules for making good guesses, but there are methods for validating our guesses. This dialectic between guessing and validating is the realisation at the textual level of the micro-dialectic at work in the resolution of the local enigmas of a text. [] the procedures of validation have more affinity with a logic of probability than with a logic of empirical verification – more affinity, let us say, with a logic of uncertainty and qualitative probability (*Hermeneutics* 175).

Can we not then wager that the tragedy of the text inheres in the inability of the two dominant classes to concatenate, in the sustained opposition between the middle and the working class,

so that the very moment Tess sets out on a redemptive mission she is to make herself the real object of the struggle? The centre of this opposition being always highly concentrated, no character can mediate the two sides without subjecting himself to the pulling forces from both sides; in fact, he is to be torn between the two opposite ideals. Hence Tess would observe, ‘When I see what you know, what you have read, and seen, and thought, I feel what a nothing I am! I’m like the poor Queen of Sheba who lived in the Bible’ (111), thus bringing into focus the yawning gap between her and Angel. For Tess stops only at Standard six; yet it is the instinctive knowledge of her restrictive lower class ideal that prompts her to declare that ‘[s]ometimes I feel I don’t want to know anything more than I know already’ (111). Significant it is that the two classes are mutually exclusive – belongingness to either of the classes tends to foreclose this possibility to the other – so that tragedy is triggered off by an attempt to make a transition from the one to the other. Tess’s tragedy consists in seeing this a possibility. But to the middle class Tess is already a social *arriviste*: she is not only not a member of this community but also not meant to properly belong, however hard she tries. So in her case, we see tragedy which results from the move to assimilate the protagonist into a society to which she does not belong, as opposed to Frye’s notion that tragedy results from the isolation of the individual from his society (*Anatomy* 208).

As always is the case, a tragic hero must strive to transcend his boundary situation, to reach out and attain universality, or become, in Nietzsche’s words, ‘the *one-world being*’ (*The Birth* 71). Such is Tess’s project: to merge the two worlds of different stars. Utterly driven by ‘the human will’ (Akwanya, *Habits* 224), she forgets that to ‘go forward is to suffer’ (Mandel 40). Her tragic purpose in this regard begins to crystallise along the legendary heroes of her type. We are quickly reminded of Henchard in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, of Gabriel Oak in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, Grace in *The Woodlanders*, Pip in *Great Expectations*, Louisa in *Hard Times*, or in African context, of Waiyaki in *The River Between*, Obi Okonkwo in *No Longer at Ease* etc. These are heroes whose tragic purpose is either to create a ‘transitional gulf’ between two supposedly ideologically polarized classes, as in the case of the protagonists of the above Victorian novels, or to merge two conflicting cultures, as we find in the case of Waiyaki and Obi in their respective novels. But we see each of these protagonists fail in their endeavour. Hence by placing Tess alongside these legendary heroes, one can *a fortiori* speculate her likely end in the story. Metaphorically speaking, Tess is the ‘river’ between the middle class and the working class, who is to establish the confluence through which the dialectical opposition between the two classes is neutralized. She is to this end, in Heidegger’s phrase, ‘cast out – out into that *Between* – between [the haves and the have-nots]’ (*Existence*

and Being 312), so that she is at every moment torn at both sides by two conflicting desiderata: the desire to unite with her ideal lover Angel, and the necessity imposed upon her by family's destitution. But both are bound to the same destination. Following the arrows of meaning stumbled upon in the text, I will posit that Tess's tragedy is consummated even before her execution, since her tragedy is as a result of her integration into the middle class society where she cannot belong. Her death is purely to form the emotional climax of her tragedy. And such is said to be the 'undiscoverable rationality' (*The Conflicts* 354) on which this interpretation is based; but then, it cannot fail but meets 'a logic of uncertainty and qualitative probability' which in principle undergirds every interpretation of a work.

If we agree with Arthur Miller that tragedy is the 'consequence of man's total compulsion to evaluate himself justly,' then his destruction in this attempt bespeaks of an evil in his environment; in the case of Tess, in the unjust structure of the Victorian society. Hence she would declare in her desperation, 'I am only a peasant by position, not by nature' (203). In nature, every man is equal. But the 'mechanical universe' (Nwahunanya) man has fashioned for himself has brought a disparity in the should-have-been egalitarian society. The result is that every society or culture now contains within itself a dominant cultural group who determines that culture's ideology or, using the Marxist term, its *hegemony*: its dominant values, its sense of right and wrong and its sense of personal self-worth. All the people in a given culture are consciously and unconsciously asked to conform to the prescribed hegemony (see Bressler *Literary Criticism* 198). Thus Tess is every so often subject to the whims and caprices of the people from the dominant middle class: to the demonic impulse of Alec, to the overbearing demands of Farm Groby and ultimately to the inhuman desertion of Angel, her husband. Overawed by Angel's morbid insistence on convention, she wails, 'I thought I – because I am not respectable, I mean. I told you I thought I was not respectable enough long ago – and on that account I didn't want to marry you, only – only you urged me!' (211). Angel, who is a convention personified, can only point out to her, 'Different societies, different manners. You almost make me say you are an unapprehending peasant woman, who have never been initiated into the proportions of social things' (203). From this, it dawns on Tess that they have been worlds apart; but this only endorses our reading that Tess's tragedy inheres in her attempt to make possible the impossible conflation of the two social classes. That is to say that her tragedy is just the climax of the consequence her social ascendancy is to bring her. So whether the marriage is to Alec whom she hates or to Angel, the one she loves, the common grounds remain that both of these individuals are from the middle class, which is a different class from hers.

We do not lose sight of the question of morality raised by Tess's murder. To this Akwanya would assert that 'the moral quality of the hero's action depends on the existential situation in which he is immersed, which he is aware of but neither fully understands nor can control' (*Discourse Analysis*, 119). Is Tess wholly right in her killing of Alec d'Urbervilles, a man whose sole action has opened up the Pandora's Box of all the tragic incidents of her life? Can't this be seen as a just requitement to Alec for seducing her and later browbeating her into marrying him? Though she may not be wholesomely right for spilling blood, this only qualifies her in Aristotle's sense that a tragic hero is 'a man not pre-eminently virtuous and just, whose misfortune [] is brought upon him not by vice and depravity but by some error of judgment...' (*Poetics*, 13). Tess in this wise, is 'more sinned against than sinning,' as Angel himself admits in the text (203).

Tess, the Pharmakos Figure

The fact that Tess is more sinned against than sinning brings her to Frye's notion of *pharmakos*. The *pharmakos*, according to Frye, is 'neither innocent nor guilty. He is innocent in the sense that what happens to him is far greater than anything he has done provokes.... He is guilty in the sense that he is a member of a guilty society, or living in a world where such injustices are an inescapable part of existence' (*Anatomy* 41). For being born into a lower class structure, Tess has always already been foredoomed to the operation of the social mechanics chiefly engineered by the middle class. Which is to say that her death or perhaps, her tragedy is a full culmination of the dialectical opposition between the middle and working class, in which she is eventually consumed for the mechanical universe to regain its balance. But this does not leave the text's universe undisturbed; at least, there has been enlightenment, or an insight into the unjust organisation of the Wessex universe. Hence Otto Reinert remarks that '[t]he saint's tragedy is less the saint's own than the world's, which in ignorance deprives itself of its saviour' (36-7). In the momentary encounter between Angel and a friend in Brazil, he is brought back to sanity, thus his return to Tess. And by restoring Angel, whom we said is a convention personified, to reason, it means that the ideal of social behaviour as well attains an overhaul. As a consequence, after Tess's execution, Angel remains tied to Liza-Lu, who symbolically is now Tess, or better still, the resurrected Tess. This is the cure *pharmakos* brings to society once expunged. On the whole, we can reaffirm with Sewall that

[h]ubris is not a 'sin.' It is the mysterious dynamic of all tragic action, dangerous because it involves a challenge to the powers that be, but not [] morally good or

bad. It may lead to destruction ... but without it, no man acts or suffers or learns. And it is the distinctive mark of the hero, [of our heroine]' (36-7).

Conclusion

The dynamic interplay of the class structures, whether consciously or unconsciously, is the undercurrent on which rests the tragedy of our heroine. For striving to wrench herself and her family away from their limiting social status, she is exposed to the 'contradiction at the heart of the world [which] reveals itself as a clash of different worlds,' (Nietzsche 71), and ultimately commits sacrilege and suffers. Aristotle's postulates of tragedy are barely referenced here mainly because Tess falls short of the proportion of the tragic hero in his sense. But these postulates, you will agree with me, have undergone serious modifications, so that for Oscar Mandel,

[a] work of art is tragic if it substantiates the following situation: A protagonist who commands our earnest goodwill is impelled in a given world by a purpose, or undertakes an action, of a certain seriousness and magnitude; and by that very purpose or action, subject to that same world, necessarily and inevitably meets with grave spiritual or physical suffering (*A Definition*, 20).

Does this not validate our reading of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* as a tragedy which results from the attempt to mediate the tension between two opposed classes?

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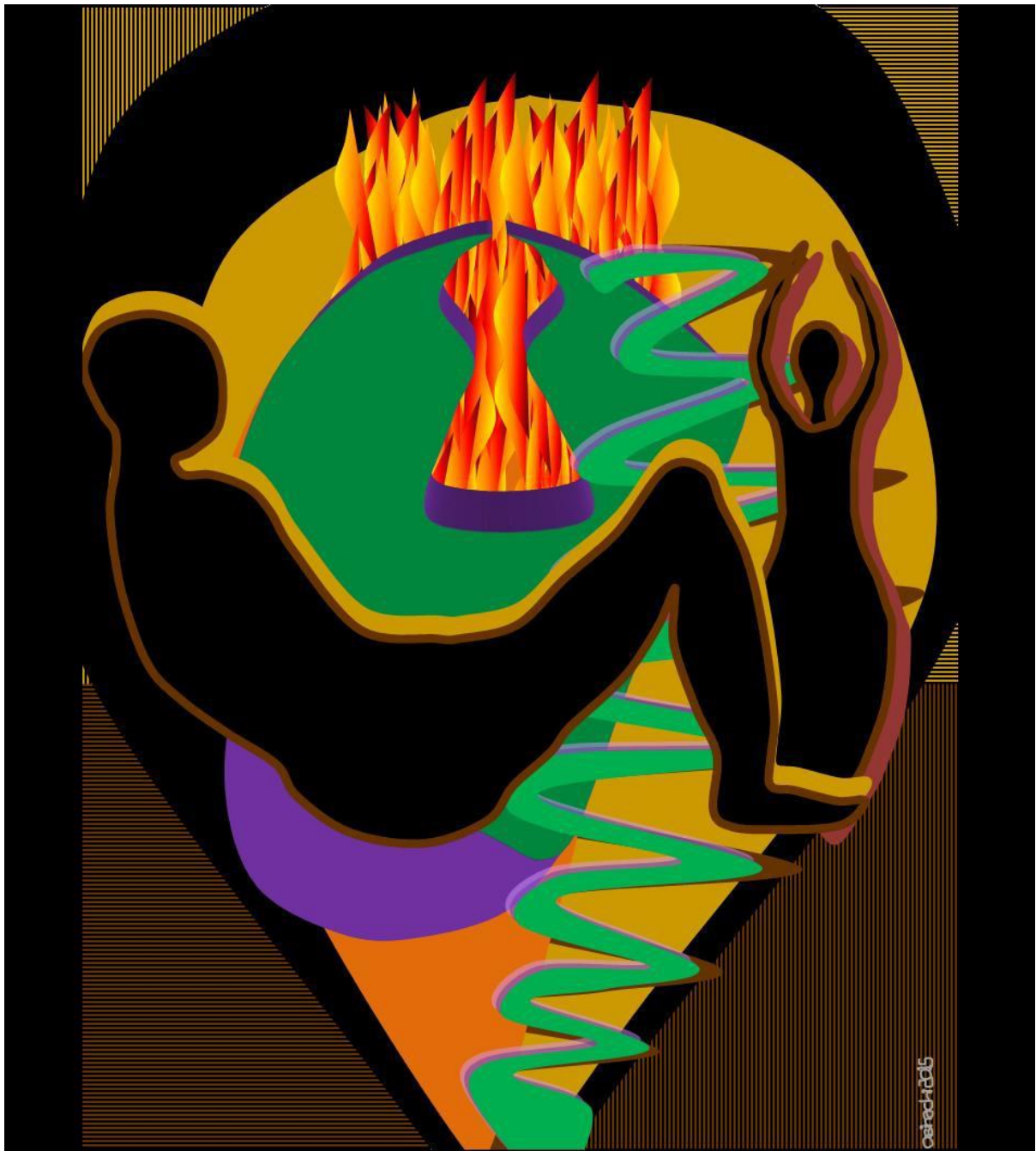
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Art

OSINACHI

TRANSCENDENCE

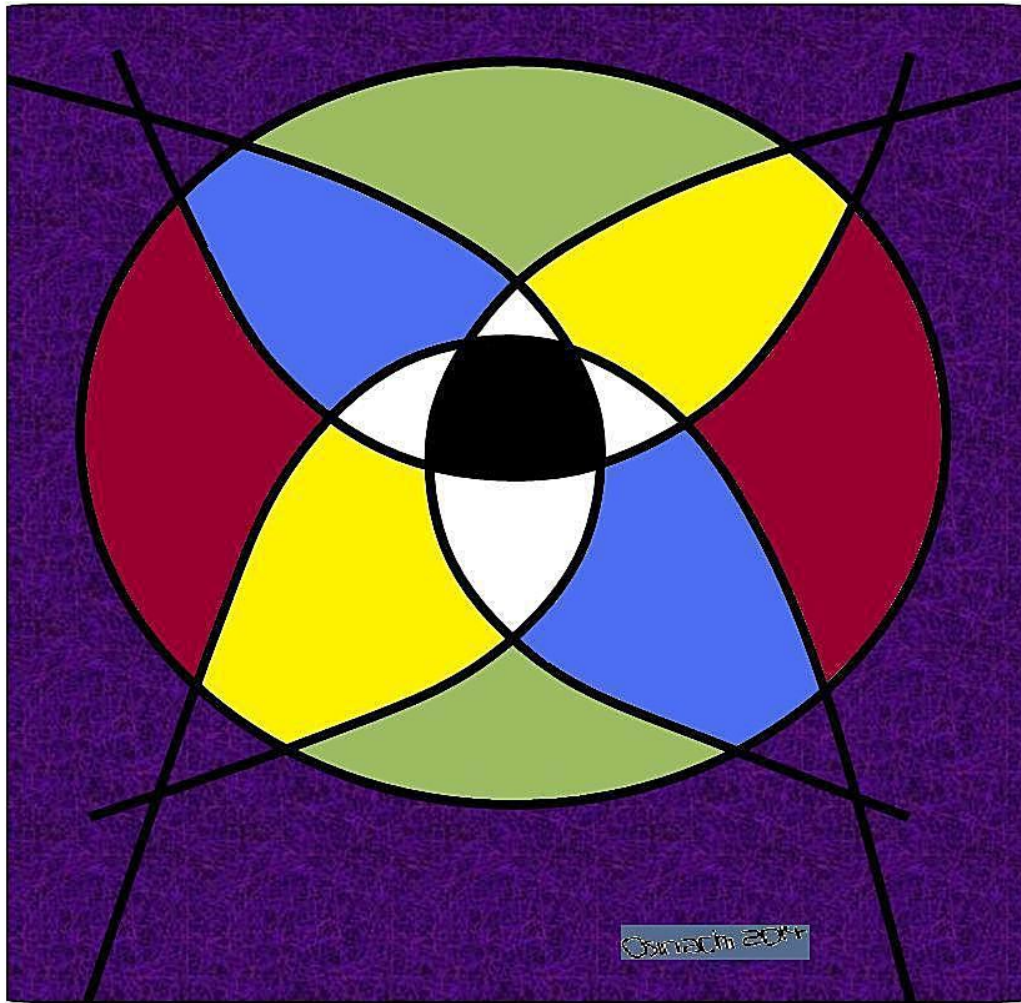


Mixed media (Microsoft Word and Paint)

“To most men, the path to unlocking the fire within is to seek a higher power – something that serves to answer the question ‘Where am I from? Who made me?’”

OSINACHI

WATCHING THE LGBT

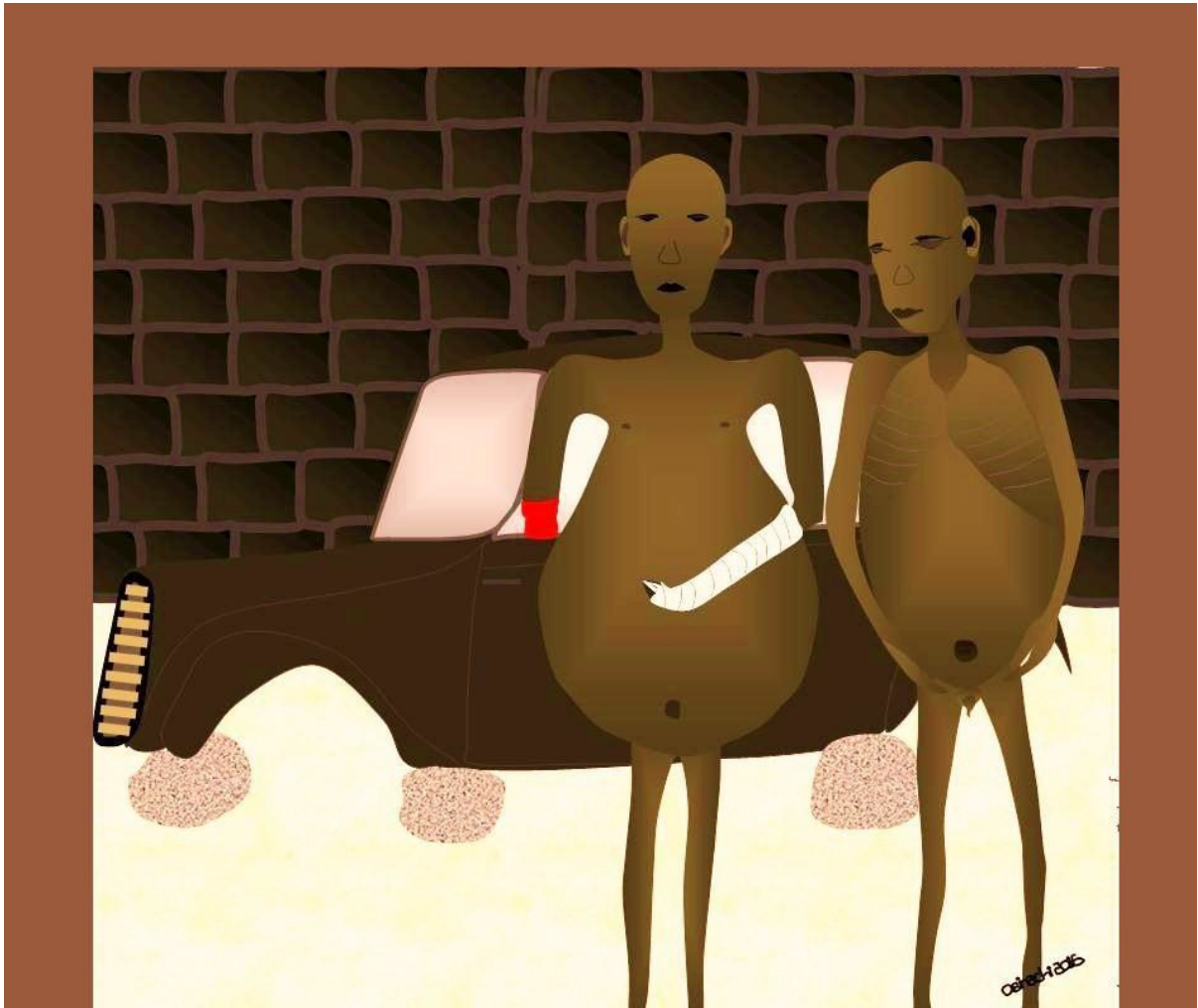


Mixed media (Microsoft Word and Paint)

“For the LGBT community in Nigeria, 2014 serves as an ugly year. That year, the anti-gay law placed the four colours around the vertical eyes of the law and the horizontal eyes of the (jungle justice-loving) public.”

OSINACHI

JACKETS OF RIBS



"War brings everything to a halt, to rust. The Nigerian-Biafran war led to the deaths of thousands of children on the Biafran war. Most of these young ones died out of malnutrition."

Interview

ARINZE IFEAKANDU

“YOU HAVE TO CARE”: AN INTERVIEW WITH CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s novels and collection of short stories have won numerous awards, including the 2007 Orange Broadband Prize for *Half of a Yellow Sun*, and the National Book Critics Circle award for *Americanah* in 2014. Her novels have been translated into over thirty languages, and in 2015 *Half of a Yellow Sun* ranked tenth in a BBC’s list of 21st Century classics. However good accolades are, Adichie has said often that the meaningful moments are when her works make a kind of human connection. Arinze Ifeakandu talks with her about her writing and reading experiences, process and philosophy.

*

Ifeakandu: *You said in We Should all be Feminists that you are angry, that the way gender is constructed, the sheer injustice of it all, makes you angry. Is there a sense in which this anger serves as fuel for your writing?*

Adichie: Yes, I think so. Dissatisfaction is both a scourge and a necessity for a writer. I am dissatisfied—and often angry—about many of the subjects I write about. I should also say that part of the reason I brought that up in my talk is because ‘anger’ itself is a gendered idea. We judge anger in a woman very differently from anger in a man. Women are generally not supposed to be angry. Anger is considered unattractive in women but can often be seen as a sign of strength and power in men. And so, for me, it is important to reclaim anger as a fully valid and human emotion for women.

Ifeakandu: *There is a preponderance of strong female characters in your novels; characters who own their lives and sexualities in a manner rarely seen in fiction. You’ve also talked about your admiration for women who work hard to support their families. Growing up, did you feel any kind of loneliness, or rage, anything at all, not finding these women in the stories you read?*

Adichie: I missed them. But they were not entirely absent. It was rather that they were not central to the stories. *Things Fall Apart*, for example, which on the surface is not in the least bit about strong femaleness, still has these slim slices of strong female characters, and I clung

to them, and remembered them. The priestess, the woman who was her husband's equal, even Okonkwo's favourite child Ezimma.

Ifeakandu: *Marlon James wrote somewhere that characters arise out of our need for them. How true is this for you? Do you find that you create certain characters out of a kind of longing?*

Adichie: Yes. Absolutely. Auntie Ifeoma in *Purple Hibiscus* is very much a product of a certain kind of longing. So is Obinze in *Americanah*. And Kainene, who I deeply admire, in *Half of a Yellow Sun*.

Ifeakandu: *Your works are often praised for possessing emotional truth. You also use emotional truth in describing the kind of stories you love to read. What really is emotional truth, and is it something that can be taught in writing classes?*

Adichie: I'm not sure. There is a certain kind of radical honesty that is required to write true fiction, and a young writer can attend many classes and still not have that. It can perhaps be coaxed out of a young writer, but in the end it is something that comes with an internal and very private decision on the part of the writer.

Ifeakandu: *Can emotionally true fiction be created from a subject matter, or idea, a writer does not care about?*

Adichie: No. Quite simply, you have to care. Deeply. Otherwise, it is all aridness.

Ifeakandu: *There are times when, in talking about your books, my friends and I find ourselves talking about characters on whom we crushed. One recently said that, "Her characters feel like next door neighbours." You have said sometimes that you are a keen listener to conversations and a watcher of people. Does this depth of character in your works come from that?*

Adichie: I think so. I have always been a watcher of people. I have also always *liked* people. I mean that I find people interesting, I find small things interesting, I find flawed humanness interesting. There are writers who do not fundamentally like people, and they produce beautiful

writing and an astute reader can sense the underlying misanthropy in the way the characters are written.

Ifekandu: *I think it was in an essay, or an interview (I'm not sure now) that you talked about a girl in Abba who tripped and, instead of maybe swearing in Igbo, said, "Fuck! Fuck!" You had said how odd it was, and how if used in fiction, that action would have been considered implausible. Is this something in realist fiction that you find annoying—this obsession with plausibility?*

Adichie: Yes. Because it is limiting and odd. Creative people make notes of interesting things, and these things are often unexpected and not the most mundane, and yet when we judge stories on 'plausibility,' we use mundane and expected references. People also base plausibility on their own very limited experiences. I have often heard people say—nobody in Nigeria would ever do or say X. And I find that very boring.

Ifekandu: *Do you worry about plausibility when writing nonfiction?*

Adichie: No. Because nonfiction comes with that label of nonfiction, that idea that 'it really happened,' the reader is not allowed any room to question.

Ifekandu: *You have said in the past that you keep notes of things that interest you: an overheard conversation, the posture of a man, etc. How do you decide eventually what goes into a story, and what becomes a nonfiction piece?*

Adichie: I truly don't know. It is intuitive.

Ifekandu: *Are there experiences in life that are fiction-worthy and others that are not?*

Adichie: I think every experience is fiction-worthy. In fiction, we lie to tell the truth, and there is truth in every human experience.

Ifekandu: *I am reminded of Ranyinudo's clash with Ifemelu over her use of Ranyinudo's experience in a blog post, and I'm wondering if there is a limit to how much a writer borrows from friends, family, lovers, even strangers?*

Adichie: What matters most is protecting the people who need to be protected. The clash was not so much about her using it as it was about *how* she used it, in a way that was very obvious and exploitative. I borrow endlessly from people's lives but I also change things around, twist and re-shape. A friend recently told me—I see you made me a woman in your novel. Which was funny. And partly true. A female character was loosely based on him—because she used an expression that he used—but was also in many ways different from him. I do have to say that I regret once using, in an essay, details of people I know in a way that was obvious, and I apologized afterwards and still feel very bad about it.

Ifekandu: *Have there been moments when in writing a story or essay you stopped because you felt you didn't have the "right", that it wasn't your story to tell?*

Adichie: No.

Ifekandu: *There is a strong sense of place in your novels. One feels it particularly in Purple Hibiscus where you write about Nsukka with such deep nostalgia. Did your being away from Nigeria at the moment of writing that novel sharpen your vision of Nsukka? Do you find that distance sharpens the senses in writing about place?*

Adichie: Absolutely. I had been gone a few years and I missed home so much. And so the novel became this paean of sorts to home, and it was nostalgic and romanticized. My childhood was very happy, and the Nsukka of my childhood—which is now an Nsukka of my imagination—is a place I wanted very much to immortalize. I get this silly kick of excitement each time somebody tells me they want to visit Nsukka because of my fiction. I've heard that from so many different places all over the world.

Ifekandu: *There is so much pain in literary fiction. I think it was Ian McEwan who said that it is difficult to sustain happiness in a novel. Something bad has to happen. Do you think that it is possible to write a novel, or short story that is entirely happy? What do you think is in the nature of fiction that accommodates so much pain?*

Adichie: I've been thinking about this lately. Some literary stories have become parodies of themselves in their insistent disavowing of joy. I don't know about 'entirely happy'—is life

entirely happy? How do we gauge joy if there is no sadness?—but I think happiness is possible in literary fiction. McEwan is brilliant and even he has let in a bit of joy in his later novels.

Ifekandu: *You have said sometimes that you do not rush off to buy a book that people hail as experimental. Yet there seems to be something “experimental” about every new work of art, something “new.” What in your experience do people mean when they use “experimental” in describing a work, and what is it about these “experimental” works that does not excite you?*

Adichie: Bernard Malamud once said that people had begun to talk of ‘the new fiction’ and to hail it as the only valid way of writing, and that they reminded him of people who could not draw human beings, and so began to draw chairs, and then insisted that chairs were the only worthwhile subjects. I do agree that there is something new about each good piece of literature, I also think that all stories have been told but we bring a new humanness to each story we retell. ‘Experimental,’ as used in contemporary criticism, often means the kind of fiction that is ‘about ideas,’ or fiction that is gimmicky (written in one long sentence, or written to be deliberately confusing, that sort of thing), or fiction that eschews character and place and emotion and psychology—which are all the things I love about fiction. It can also often mean style over substance, and because as a reader I want a certain kind of depth and meaning, these stories just do not appeal to me. As a writer, I also know that old-fashioned stories are the most difficult to do well.

Ifekandu: *In your work, especially in your novels, we find a balance of most of the aspects of fiction—character, plot, conflict, language, etc. In reworking your novels, what aspect do you often find yourself particularly paying attention to? Is it the same for your short stories?*

Adichie: Short stories occupy a much more abbreviated space, and so I pay attention to everything. I am also more ruthless in self-editing. In novels, I am more willing to let an unloved sentence stay.

Ifekandu: *You are very particular about re-drafting. You said that in collecting The Thing Around Your Neck you found yourself almost rewriting most of the stories, even though they had been previously published in reputable magazines. I’ll like to ask if there is any such thing as re-working, or work-shopping, a story to death.*

Adichie: Yes. Probably why it is the book I don't love as I love my others, ha! Sometimes one has to let go. I do think re-working to death comes from either the intuitive knowledge that the story is not good enough, or just the general self-doubt that comes with the creative process. The difficulty is in knowing how to make a distinction between the two.

Ifekandu: *In your Acknowledgements, you always thank your draft-readers. Do they play the same role now as they did when you wrote Purple Hibiscus? Also, do they function differently from editors?*

Adichie: Yes, nothing has changed. My draft readers are invaluable. They are mostly people who wish me well and who tell me the truth. Both qualities I find essential. And they are very different and they are not all terribly 'literary' people, just people who like to read. A real reader is much more useful than a writer, I have found.

Ifekandu: *The composer Eric Whitacre once talked about how, in composing a song called "Water Night", one of his most widely-listened-to songs, he just sat at a spot and wrote all of it in one sitting, hardly doing any reworking. He says that it was as though the song were given to him. He describes it as a magical experience that does not happen often. Have you had this kind of experience in writing a story?*

Adichie: Yes, with an early short story. I also had it with the title *Half of a Yellow Sun*. I was sitting at my sister Ijeoma's dining table in Connecticut, and the title came to me and it felt completely right. And it was a magical, beautiful moment that I will never forget.

Ifekandu: *This is the tenth year of Half of a Yellow Sun. It has been translated into over thirty languages and has won prestigious awards. But more importantly, it kindled a renewed conversation on one of the darkest parts of our history. We'll like to say thank you, and congratulations.*

Adichie: Thank you. I really appreciate it.

Readers' Response

OTOSIRIEZE OBI-YOUNG

IS THIS WHY READERS LOVE *HALF OF A YELLOW SUN*?

A war novel; a love story; a tribute to a short-lived nation; an ode to courage; a missive on misses: Adichie's second novel is a much loved book. But more than just its subject-matter, there are many other things that make it a readers' favourite: the prose, the narration, the descriptions, the plotting, the characterization. *Purple Hibiscus* had introduced readers to a kind of prose different from the Achebe-Ngugi style that bestrode literature from Africa. Prose that drew ideology and methodology from Achebe and Ngugi but, in its willingness to differ, defiantly sits nearer Tsitsi Danganremgba and Dambudzo Marechera without seemingly borrowing from them, sitting there and stubbornly facing the Indians—Kiran Desai, Arundhati Roy, Rohinton Mistry. Prose breathing with visuals and suitable for its observant narrator. But what *Half of a Yellow Sun* does is to temper the obsession with the Seen with a heightened indulgence in the Smelt and the Felt to produce an even more powerful pull of language: one that nails both itself and the scenes it captures into the reader's brain, gliding and gliding gracefully across pages. From the first page we see Nsukka, smell and feel its dust and smallness ("a tiny speck of dust in the middle of nowhere")—we see and smell and feel the opulence in privileged Lagos, the cool and Atlantic Ocean view of Port-Harcourt, the tender, almost serenaded life in pre-massacre Kano.

"It made me cry," writes PRINCE JACON. "Within those three nights, as my head lay on my pillow, streams of tears came and went and came. They continued in my heart even as Richard drove off in search of Kainene. Those two held my heart with their love and devotion. Everything was heart-breaking. In a sweet way."

In a sweet, devastating way it is. I first opened *Half of a Yellow Sun* in my second year, the July of 2012, to review it for an assignment. Midway into the second of its four parts, I closed the book and stared at the table. Then I took a walk. Brief, contained, on my hostel balcony. For fresh air. I saw a cobbler hunched over a shoe. It was just him and me on the balcony. Suddenly, in that air between us, there was something stagnant, something that would not move. It took me minutes to realise I was crying. I went back to the book. It took me four days of more breaks and tear-filled moments, four days of re-visiting sentences and paragraphs and chapters, to know that I had finished it; to understand that the images, the smells, the emotional density of the story I had taken in, were why I endured short bouts of shivering. As a History student, the Biafran War, the facts of it and the course of it, was knowledge I had gathered, had always sought out of both necessity and curiosity. But here was a book that

overlaid those factual bones with flesh and nerves, that imbued events with humanity. By the time I finished the book, something else had happened to me: I had decided to write seriously.

There is nothing unique about the experiences of Prince Jacon and—even with my carrying of the book like a Bible—mine. The only thing unique about them is the magic of this novel, the way it summons a range of roughly similar responses from readers. “For long I found it difficult to believe I was in the year 2013,” writes CHUKWUEBUKA LEONARD IBEH. “So lost was I in the civil war, so deep was I, so familiar was I with pain and loss I never experienced. I think the most remarkable thing about it is: the events are never drily recited. Major Madu punching Richard broke my heart. My favourite character is Kainene, then Ugwu. Absolutely stunning.” For TJ BENSON, it is like being plunged into a different existence. “The night before I finished it, there was no light in my area...my estate ebbed out of my consciousness...I was lost from this realm into Adichie’s world of war and betrayal,” he writes. “I heard the gunshots right outside my window. I doubted morning would come. I emerged the next morning like a new man, with a question of more import than what I would have for breakfast: where is Kainene?” This emotional transportation is eerily echoed by ADAEZE M NWADIKE: “I felt alive in a body not my own.” It is the plotting, though, that NKIACHA ATEMNKENG finds most arresting. “I remember I read 100 pages in a single sitting,” he says. “I love the back and forth narration. My favourites: Ugwu, Odenigbo, Olanna.” The withdrawal and conferment of the authority to tell a people’s story is something that also fascinates him. “I find it interesting that Ugwu studied so hard and took up writing a book and Richard tried so hard and halted his writing pursuit. [The book is] very touching, very prosy, dark, profoundly well-nuanced.” However, finishing it left FORTUNES KEN skeptical of humanity: “I fear that if I had lived through the Sixties, my whereabouts would be unknown like Kainene’s. It is one book that makes me question our mutual humanity since the universe could afford to be that silent.” For KIPROP KIMUTAI, it is a confirmation of the tenacity of love. “Olanna’s decision to not go to London, to stick with Odenigbo and to believe in his idea of Biafra symbolizes how integral love is to our lives,” he argues. “It is so necessary that we choose it even when it endangers our lives. This is what makes *Half of a Yellow Sun* beautiful.” The love is also what captures UCHENNA EILLY UGWU’s imagination: “It makes me wish I had felt love like Odenigbo’s and Olanna’s, and gives me hope that I would someday.”

Adichie’s aim in the novel was to capture *emotional truth*: a thing rarely pre-known except when felt. When, on completing the first draft, it was full of political events aimed at capturing the grand climate of international politics, she pruned it, sieved it, cutting and re-writing until it became the character-driven story that it is, with the whole focus on human

beings. So much that we only learn aspects of the war through the way they filter down to affect the characters. Rob Nixon captures this when he writes that the novel “takes us inside ordinary lives laid waste by the all too ordinary unravelling of nation states”. It is, perhaps, the characters she has created that draw the most love for the book. Ugwu, the story’s glue, is so well-realised in his dedication and occasional mischievousness. Olanna’s beauty is so visual it is almost real, balanced only by Kainene’s mix of sarcasm and charm. Mohammed’s handsomeness, and most importantly his open-mindedness, comes across as near-mythical. In a parallel world, Odenigbo might be living his solid life in a vibrant university, a man full of force and belief, “not attractive, but would draw the most attention in a room full of attractive men.” Every character is memorable, their collective intellectualism robust. Their weaknesses clear (Odenigbo, Olanna and Richard’s fall to infidelity, for example) but their dignity intact. Ugwu is most people’s favourite, Kainene a close second. “I will never forget the slap-slap sounds Ugwu’s slippers make on the concrete [in the first page],” writes OKWUDILI NEBEOLISA. “Ugwu is so realised that all I have for Chimamanda is applause that the book came out when she was still 29.” For ARINZE IFEAKANDU, it is something more personal: “I crushed on Ugwu.” The same attachment characterizes JOSEPH BILABI D’GREAT’s reading. “I was relieved that Ugwu didn’t die but heartbroken at the thought that Kainene did,” he writes. “For me, any other person could die but these two. I really wish Ugwu’s girlfriend Eberechi didn’t die. I wept when she died.” More than Ugwu, Kainene and her no-return has stirred the most discussion. “Her portrayal of Kainene...astonishing,” writes JIDEOFOR CONFIDENCE. “The perfect femme fatale I’ve come to adore.” For EBENEZER AGU, it is a longing that he is left with. “I’m still awaiting the sequel where Kainene will return,” he says. But of course beyond the world of fan fiction, that sequel will never come, not from a writer known for not repeating herself. OKOYE GODWAYNE’s response is meditative, like that of one troubled, and reads almost like confusion. “I had sleepless nights trying to chew stones still plaguing the throat of my memory,” he writes. “What happened to Kainene?” The question one comes away with reading the book. Most readers shiver at the thought of what happened to Kainene who, alongside Odenigbo, is my favourite character. There are some also who believe Adichie’s characterization to be allegorical. For CHIJOKE NGOBILI, the latent dislike of Olanna and Miss Adebayo for each other is Adichie’s way of capturing the Igbo-Yoruba cold rivalry. If this is true, then Adichie has not merely asked a question but has also provided an answer: tolerance, peaceful coexistence. If Olanna and Miss Adebayo could remain in the same circle of friends and contribute to the same intellectual discussion, then there is no reason, she seems to suggest, why Nigeria’s ethnicities cannot coexist.

Where do they rank it? EJIONYE EMMANUEL KELECHI delivers the simplest of answers: “It is beyond a book.” The reaction from BASIT JAMIU is more particular. “As I write this, I am staring at my sister’s copy sitting on top of our TV,” he reveals. “This staring recalls to me the day my sister finished it in tears. She just won’t stop. I pitied her, hugged her.” There is subdued melancholy as he continues: “*Half of a Yellow Sun* humanized me, reminds me that we are all human and that that should come first.” And then he places it: “Once a year, I re-read it alongside other personal classics: James Baldwin’s *Going to Meet the Man*, J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*, Ta-nehisi Coates’ *Between the World and Me*. Lucid, brave, flawless, enchanting.” For HANNU AFERE, “There are books and then there are books.” He continues: “After I read it, Chimamanda stopped being a name. She became a title. She became The Adichie.” IBEH CHIKEZIEM KASIEMOBI’s response is to its political implications. “*Half of a Yellow Sun* tries the Nigerian issue in a way that the victor knows why the victim continues to cry,” he states. “We have issues and we need to address the issues.”

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KIPROP KIMUTAI was the second runner-up for the Kwani? Manuscript project. His book, *The Water Spirit*, will soon be published. Aside from the 2015 Caine Workshop, he has participated in the Farafina Trust Creative Writing workshop in Lagos. He's an editor with *Jalada Africa*, and has been able to successfully publish three anthologies so far based around insanity, sex and afro-futures. Reach him on Twitter through @tirobon.

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Nigeria, and an Igbo translation of a story by Ngugi wa Thiong'o published in *Jalada*. He considers himself a dweeb. He blogs at nzubeifechukwu.blogspot.com

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TJ BENSON is a short story writer and creative photographer whose work has appeared in publications including *ANA Review*, *The contemporary Indian Literary Review*, and *Transition Magazine*. He recently won the Amab-HBF Prize, and is currently nominated for the Awele Creative Trust Prize. He shares his photography on Instagram via @TJBensonNG

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THE MUSE EDITORIAL INDEX (1963-2016)

The Muse considers it necessary to document the names of past editors and associate editors for future references. It is our desire to fill in the missing names in subsequent publications.

1. Chukwuma Azunonye.....	No. 4
2. Dubem Okafor.....	No. 5
3. Chimalum Nwankwor.....	No. 6
4. Emeka Nwabueze.....	No. 7
5. Emeka Ijeoma.....	No. 8
6. Ossie Okaegbu.....	No. 12
7. Nwadiotu Odiozo.....	No. 13
8. Ikodiya Uka.....	No. 14
9. Unoma Azua.....	No. 23
10. Maxwell Oditta.....	No. 24
11. Ben Onwudinjo.....	No. 25
12. Ugochi Dawn Ago.....	No. 26
13. Reuben Onyishi.....	No. 27
14. Silas E. Ezeugwu.....	No. 28
15. Ema Obari-Goma.....	No. 29
16. Emeka Anuforo.....	No. 30
17. Okwy Onyia.....	No. 31
18. Ndubuisi Aluu Orji.....	No. 32
19. Chijioke Obed Nwakaego.....	No. 33
20. Chinelo Violet Chukwu.....	No. 35
21. Matthias O. Chukwu.....	No. 36
22. Chikaoha Justice Agoha.....	No. 37
23. Onyemuche Anele Ejebu.....	No. 38
24. Onyebuchi Nnamdi James.....	No. 39
25. Innocent Edeh.....	No. 40
26. Onyeka Emeka Odoh.....	No. 41
27. Ifunanya Felicia Chukwuemeka.....	No. 42
28. Sosthenes Nnamdi Ekeh.....	No. 43
29. Arinze Ifeakandu.....	No. 44

ASSOCIATE EDITORS

1. Jerome Okpewho.....(Drama) No. 4
2. Ojang Omang.....No. 4
3. Nnadozie Inyama.....(Prose) No. 6
4. Amobi Adirika.....No. 7
5. Ifeanacho Atusiubah.....No. 24
6. Fidelis Uchenna Okoro.....(Poetry) No. 24
7. Chika Unigwe.....(Prose) No. 24
8. Kevin Amoke.....(Prose) No. 29
9. Ogechi Chiamaka Onwubiko.....(Poetry) No. 35
10. Bekke Obinna Nwocha.....No. 35
11. Adeoluwa Jolaosha.....No. 36
12. Hyginus O. Eze.....(Prose and Critical Writing) No. 36
13. Jahswill Obiora.....(Drama) No. 36
14. Celestine C. Azegba.....(Poetry) No. 36
15. Bukar Munachi.....(Drama) No. 37
16. Chisom B. Ezekwe.....(Prose and Critical Writing) No. 37
17. Nneoma B. Otuegbe.....(Poetry) No. 37
18. Collins Obeta.....(Prose and Critical Writing) No. 38
19. Victoria O. Emeghara.....(Poetry) No. 38
20. Daniel E. Chukwuemeka.....(Drama) No. 38
21. Ben Modeka.....(Drama) No. 39
22. Somtochukwu Metu.....(Poetry) No. 39
23. Simeon Osogwu.....(Critical Writing) No. 39
24. Sunday Uchenna Samuel.....(Critical Writing) No. 39
25. Jane Ejibe.....(Assistant Editor) No. 40
26. Ejiofor Ugwu.....(Poetry) No. 40
27. Adaeze Amaka.....(Prose) No. 40
28. Nnaemeke Eze.....(Drama) No. 40
29. Benjamin Abia.....(Critical Writing) No. 40
30. Nneoma Joshua.....(Assistant Editor) No. 41
31. Chidiebere Ekere.....(Poetry) No. 41
32. Emmanuel Nwabuikwu.....(Prose) No. 41
33. Christiana J. Pepple.....(Drama) No. 41
34. Oluchukwu Pius Ifechukwu.....(Critical Writing) No. 41
35. Chuka Ezenwosu.....(Assistant Editor) No. 42
36. Sosthenes Nnamdi Ekeh.....(Poetry) No. 42

37. Prince Ihemegbulam.....(Poetry) No. 42
38. Faith Ogechi Ugwu.....(Prose) No. 42
39. Maryjane Onah.....(Prose) No. 42
40. Osinachi Ngozi Ekeh.....(Drama) No. 42
41. Uchenna Innocent Onyemara.....(Drama) No. 42
42. Obi-Young Otosirize.....(Critical Writing) No. 42
43. Charles Bruno Eze.....(Critical Writing) No. 42
44. Chinazom Gloria Excel Agoziem.....(Assistant Editor) No. 43
45. Ebenezer Agu.....(Poetry) No. 43
46. Ejiofor Nwogu Udu.....(Poetry) No. 43
47. Prince Ihemegbulam.....(Critical Writing) No. 43
48. Gideon Uzoma Umezurike.....(Drama) No. 43
49. Arinze Ifeakandu.....(Prose) No. 43
50. Hope Chekwubechukwu Eze.....(Assistant Editor) No. 44
51. Ginikachi Uzoma.....(Poetry) No. 44
52. Richard Ifeanyichukwu Nnamani.....(Poetry) No. 44
53. Chukwujekwu Adolphus Nweke.....(Prose) No. 44
54. Kingsley O. Ukwungwu.....(Drama) No. 44
55. Ogochukwu Ukwueze.....(Critical Writing) No. 44
56. Ebenezer Agu.....(Blog) No. 44
57. Johnson Urama.....(Blog) No. 44

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