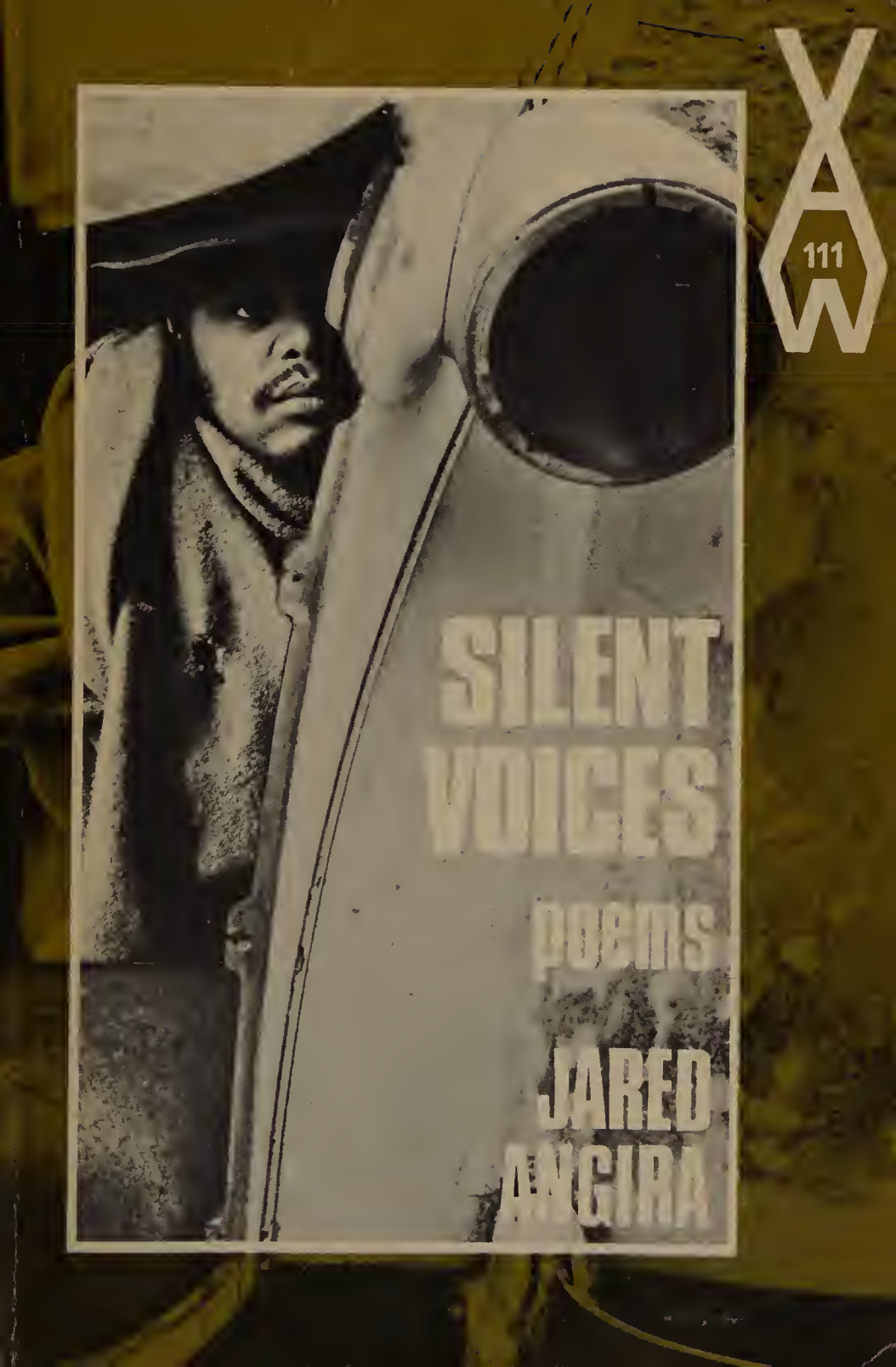
111
SILENT VOICES
poems
JARED ANGIRA

AFRICAN WRITERS SERIES

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Silent Voices

POEMS

JARED ANGIRA



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THE SILENT VOICE

How I wish to understand your voice
and appreciate your beauty
and unmask the seat
of your fathomless power
how I long to measure the volume
of that variable music
of your giant power
that shakes houses apart
and cripples trees
scraps vessels on blues.

You who bring rains
and yet so slim
were I able to sight your dwelling
I'd falsify God and create a world anew.

PINHOLE

Shall we dance the waltz
when the taut cord
becomes flippant?

The amber mart
ministrant at toes
shall we
at the guttered waterhole
bend and strike the tadpole?

Don't flout me out
of undug ant-hill
my variegated body has no thimble
serve me opium not anaesthesia
before the bartered pinnacle

but shall we dance the underground waltz?

The gate is trenched
no angels tread
turn me now crescent and on lull
to the pale full moon
and shall we dance the platonic waltz?

Pound not the mortar
'the mortar is dry'
many rounds have woe'd me
tattoos flounder drowsily across my belly
but sister shall we dance the waltz
to the boomerang of human uprooting?

SACRAMENT

Lingering
Shall I in the orbit of stoneset catapult
shiver and drowse on a waking bud?

Tramping
Shall I in the road block
shiver and drowse on a shaking bridge?

Panting, panting
Shall I with the hungry maneater on my trails
shiver and drowse between tortuous thorns?

Crosscutting
Shall I with unrelaxed slash of a simi
spare and smear the crimson corpse?

IF

a squirrel crosses my way
while on a trip
then luck is mine
but when it's a cheetah
or wild cat that crosses there
I turn and go back.

I knock my right foot on stone
while on a trip
I melt in joy
since I shall be overfed
but when it's the left
I turn and go back.

I slip in my shirt
the inside coming out
I jump in merriment
for I shall be overfed.

the first being
I meet in the feeble dawn
is an old woman
I turn to my blanket
it's all ill luck

I dream my relative dead
in midst of sweet slumbers
I wake in joy
knowing he's overfed
the previous night
and if I dream I am dead
I rejoice
for growing an inch.
and if I dream
of my ideal girl

then I lose hope
the answer is no.

I wake up in the morning
and find my teeth shaking
and loose
surely I know
they went eating excreta
while soul courted in fairyland.

A hen crows
it must be killed
bad omen
a dog howls
instead of barking
the village owner
is at death's door
and if I walk on my head
then I am dead.

THE SLUM

a one way road
dusty with flour of sand
the slum bears the load
of the port's bulk of labour.

a flattened tin roof
or greying makuti thatch
later serves the bedbug paratroop
to land on sleepers.

a collapsing mud wall
a depression or protruding floor
later eases the mice holes

to search the bones or nails at night.

a potent girl comes out
wrapped in a black buibui
and feet in papping sandals
tender in steps . . . terror at sex.

street arab boys
with parched garments
countless times to form
a bed for bugs.

loose beauties called harlots
smart in their surface posture
sit on verandahs with grotesque smile
waiting like alchemists for their clients.

night steals in unnoticed
and spreads a thick black buibui
over the slum where street lights are in conception
and the slum begins to roar.

slum drums beat
and ageing damsels and lads
dance in circles showing glimpse of romance
and the night goes slowly in the slum.

slum drums beat afar
right into the heart of the town
where senior servants of municipality
sleep off their cakes in peace.

slum drums beat afar
right into the ears of planners
as bugs fall from greying roofs
and lice jump from uneasy sleepers.

slum boys kick afar
Charley from college flees the slum
but Petro comes back
but wants to dwell by the sea.

slum boys think afar
while their grannies stay subsumed
messenger or clerk
the slum roars afar.

THE HARP'S FRIEND

sitting alone
. . . nostalgia
days going acidic
head motoring separate tracks
. . . to old memory
nostalgia
isolated like an oasis
in a desert of thought
desiring neurons
but nights go acidic
the sky
translucent and cruel
the moon weeps and swims westwards
nostalgia
the limbo comes next
homeland of ancestry
and a wife
one lies by
no eerie bond
birds . . . owls perhaps
may sing cheerily
but in the blanket

it's acidic and corrosive
no dreams of haven
nostalgia
bleached image
of a by-gone age
of yellow wedding gown
a decaying black night-gown
a tattered letter of the priest
crammed in his convulging head
slowly he goes
proverbial
and philosophical
to launch a tune
for morrow's mourning:
    better to hear
    and let the word be
    like the maize grain
    that plants the farm
    than to see and leave
    like an uninterested cinemagoer
    people always recall rich men and beauty
    but not beggars
    death is a strategist
    striking at his convenience
    getting the enemy unmobilized
    death is a VIP
    never seen publicly save on special occasions
then
. . . nostalgia
mourning ended
days of youth crystalize
gently with needle-shaped crystals
nostalgia
then
. . . elegy
for a dignified life.

HOLY MARY

Holy Mary, full of grace
when I stand and view you
in the artist's innocence
with your palms which
dovetail into human love
when I stare at your celestial whiteness
and the artist's holiness around your head.
Holy Mary, full of grace
I myriad times
Knock against the trunk of my being
if there ever
shall in this ruptuous storm
stand in silhouette,
or faintly smear on the façade
human holiness that seems so far from the Holy Gate!

NOSTALGIA

Arrows of rain
fall on potato daisies
unfurling the hay of a past
that lies in exile

the harp
pierces the deaf ears
and languor of waghowl
balance on periphery
of ancient generation
pendulous
like the village cock

cramp
and touch the legendary cucumber

of briny sand bathe
in the Harphone

the spectrum
magenta to symbolize
the embryonic fulfilment
of an ardent bond
suspended
on sabbatical leave
of indigo

spot
paratroopers by sand-bags
spearmen with blunt shields
the image unfurls
a reminted statue.

LUMBAGO

Do I forget
the swift reversal
of the wheeze-ball
and the colourless garland
beneath the half-mast flagpole?

descending on the cradle
plundering the cowshed
and casually reciting
an eventide credo

lumbago
of anonymous spine
lingers in the trap
of a stone-set catapult

Do I recall then
ancient potsherds
buried on eve
of seismic inexpectation?

FEMI-AURA

An insane idiot on the maiden date
set his ears on the solid night
and it happened

that the sound of a passing wind
was his girl
the noise of mating cattle
was his girl
the thunderous sound of flapping lightning
was his girl
the roaring river down the valley
was his girl
the croaking frogs on nuptial season
was his girl
and each time he went to meet his girl in vain
but the girl came
when an angry leopard on a final hunt
roared past the village gate
and kissed the idiot with loving arms
and carried the idiot to a crimson gate.

TRUTH

You brick-red complexioned mother
when you carried in your womb

that weightless messenger
when you took a forceful ride
in the postal van
and entered my apartment
unannounced
I misjudged you
and cast a hollow smile.

You speared and tore
the mass of peace
that had for long taken refuge
in my heart
you raped and left it covered
in a pool of blood.

Did I ever know
that simple as you are
you would be the last conveyor
of her facial expression?

Did I ever dream
that her soprano voice
would so suddenly dwindle
to a mere reported speech?

But now in you
I see a sharp crystal truth.

ALOO TO THE HILL

Aloo sings
to the rhythm
of the millstone
to the temperate heat
of the fish cooking fire

to the chorus pour
of her waist beads.

Aloo laughs
to the dodo under the shade
where old men praise
Aloo the beer queen.

Aloo is hounded
by birds of the bush
for her voice
among the trees
gathering wood.

The fishes swim
to reach the shore
where she stands
drawing her pot.

This Aloo
Peninah that is
just left the bay
where for long we stood
and hillwards paced
to the call of piano
and tho' I warmed the drum
and played with skill
I only saw on the façade
her footprints facing the hill!

FRAGMENT

. . . PULL on the bay
and anchor safely
unload your womb

of sentiment's cargo
burn not
your coal of temper
but count oh count
the breakages
and report the loss
to the Examining Officer
sitting on a stool
beside the moustached gatekeeper
and whip not the ship.

FINALE I

The village falls under
the cloud umbrella
harnessed in the cobwebs
of vicious spiders

Tenor Then let us lie
in stony silence
and await
the twinkle
of the thunderous lightning
across the navy-blue sky

Alto To gather the amputated rags
of capsized vessel
struck by unspotted cannon
and unradared grenades
hidden in earth's sockets

Bass Then let us all
open the palms and throats
and take the cross-marked passports
let us all with open palms

smear the shedded blood
scarlet and crimson
and let all turn to Titan

Chorus Then let us all
go blind at crimson rags
let us all
go blind at amputated arms
and loudly hum the Titanic tune.

PEACE

In peace have we come
to this island
to let the skin
war on breeze
and ants.

Were peace
so soft as sand
the herbaceous skin
of the banana fruit
would never part.

The axe stands erect
to split the nut
before the hunt
for a deer
in the jungle.

We'll share
in parts
and with one accord
pass a beaded chair
to the toothless.

On a waylay
by pards and lioness
fold your arms
and die in peace
lest it in mirage flash.

UNCTION

The father sips wine
on my behalf
I must suffer
on my behalf
for my sins
confessed
through the oval hole
forgiven by father
for a millet basket.

I must believe
in the Holy Catholic Church
that exiled me
for eloping
with the mother
of my children.

My children are outlaws
for our celibacy
causing regeneration
behind the dark wall.

She went for penance
through the oval hole
few coins.
She will suffer
for my sins

I have suffered enough
after all.
You are God of mercy
God of grace

the other
is father
of our earthly behalf.

The kids
have fasted too long
let them sight the moon
that you have concealed
in the bosom part
of your black gown

let them drink
at the wedding in Galilee
inspid suffering
has cysted their faith.

HITCH-HIKE

The Memory
stands like a cracked bronze statue
in a museum
talking, smiling when we are tired with life

we struggle to frustrate
old pressures on our backs,
rain beats the ground, we flounder, slip
but fall on our ribs

having travelled far, I came upon
mountain of histories,

dead lakes on which libraries are erected
wheels of the train
passed us
chattering like idiots
billows of future meandered, followed the rainbow

sugar and salt are same to a dying tongue
I must try to join
the broken particles of my slate
though the line will be there
and only keen eyes will see
that my slate broke once, and on waking was joined –
the slate with a line, not black, not white
I'll hitch-hike with pilgrims to Vietnam, the boss has said.

EACH TIME

Each time you pass
and tow your shadow
lass
something goes foetal
and the wind catches
the last relic
of your presence.

Must I hover then
convergence of my dreams
over
all the hills of the earth
and sail, all seas of the world
when you hide, watch, laugh
among lianas
along that oasis?

Shall I reach you in dust
behind the sand dunes
when potence is gone?

Perhaps
Sometimes
I'm cold, am dumb, am all bad things.

CONVULGENCE

Paulina Muga has just gone crazy
her head is growing daisies

she took her husband's shirt
and wore it
she hanged her waist beads
around her neck

she cooked the chicken
in a pot meant for fish

and she ate the chicken
for a woman!
and surely the back
when the husband breathed

Muga has actually gone mad
for her brain is full of mud

she told her son
to erect his simba
on the path of elephants

she washed the milkgourd
with boiled water

and scrubbed the outside
the lando skin
with osinde grass

Muga is a lunatic
tho' romantic still
she took to bed
her drunken son
and a curse is on both

Paul is crazy
and her daisies
grow flowers with thorns.

EPILOGUE
[To Chris Okigbo]

I'll carry the wreath
to the gold laden lair
where you lie
in royalty

the torch
shall burn
your mutilated conscience
and wake you up
from the powdered chamber

so shall I kiss
and be kissed by
the open lips
peeping among lianas . . .
the reeds shall sing, the bamboo hedge
shall dance and open to them
the hidden pathway
to the royal graveyards.

MANNA

So all waited for manna
In the orange dawn
And let their feet
Crack in the dew

No one bothered to ask
The labourers
To bring forth this manna

Many said
A miracle recorded
For God never laboured

The first shipment
Of this manna
Landed to a clean swept spot
And many wide throated waiters
Never chanced to see it.

Children wailed in hunger
Idle mothers rushed
To the screening chamber
Even mothers
Who had worked
Mighty hard
Sank in the scrum

Soon the manna craft
Took off from ground
And hungry natives
Soared the sky
But they only saw
The rainbow
Which promised them
Hunger in seven days
Death in seven ways.

A PRAYER AT THE BAY

All will return,
the polished ones have said
when the foetus is cut
and the castor is ground

the bowl
balancing on branches
of half-dried trees
shakes and yells
to the drumbeat
of the returning

the slashers
sharpen their pangas
to cut a new path
through
the morbific thorns

when the hens
have fallen in love
with rams
and the shepherds
ride crocodiles

then
shall the reed flutes
conduct the choir
to the Pavement Bay
where the returning
shall land

all shall kneel in prayer
lest the sea-worn ship
pass the concrete shore
to a second voyage.

AT THE DELTA

At the delta
where the silt is dense
lie buried
those stones
pursued from the lake

symmetric in irregularity
they grow lilac shoots
and the mosses turn
lemonary

the spade
sinks to unpulled depths
lifelong labour
of back bent prisoner
burst to mirage

the delta is poisonous
with too much
the desert is poisonous
with scarcity

a refugee
sticks a foot in the marsh
and the earthworms shout . . .
who will to rescue come
when the bugles
announce the mercenaries?

the spade
and the grave!

THE SPRINTER

I heard your voice
echo
through the reeds

I saw your shadow
float
on the water

I felt your scent
come
through the wind

I saw your image
in the dream

I saw you
run on boulder rocks
and laugh
with cattle egrets
and kiss the *osaye* fruits
and I sprinted
but where were you to be trapped?

THE ARMY WORMS

The black oak tree
had nearly withered
when the army worms
withdrew
in flight
from the violent wind
across the seas . . .

the army worms
later research revealed
were not green
nor pale blue
rather they were white
but only musked

the army worms
lingered around
while the oak plant
regained her leaves

alas
alas
the army worm is back
and the spray is impotent
the wind is sterile
alas
alas
shall all the leaves go?

the roots
shall they ever remain
residents below the dark ground?

STRANGE SHADOWS

They said I had a high concentration
of the African in me. Needed diluting with a red-hot iron
circumcision of the second order
under the umbrella shade of past loves

Strange shadows of our Unity pan
(call it OAU for economy of life
in our barrack city state)

last night when the star shot across
Greece fell under my unsandalled feet
the triumphant astronauts from the moon
swam to the glass house,
our moon is here
triumph with fat bellies
at least earth worms in our bellies celebrate
lice rehearse around my waist
alkaline for my concentration

Who pinched my glasses while
I swam in the bathroom?
I can see, all things look alike
men don't look like trees, but the same
my mother, sister are all alike
goats, sheep and wolves same overcoats

Will the police chief come for fingerprints?

toothache, constipation, disease of security chiefs!

At least the concentration in my eye
has been diluted by those leaves
I've been promised blindness for seven days!

EXPELLED

We had traded in this market competitively perfect
till you came, in that boat, and polished goodwill
approval from high order
all pepper differentials, denied flag-bearers

and cut our ribs, dried our cows
the vaccine from the lake
burst the cowshed, the draught you brought

planted on the market place, the tree of memory

I had no safe locker to keep my records
when Sodom burnt, and Gomorrah fell
the debtors' records blared
the creditors tapped my rusty door

My tears flowed to flooded streams
and sources the rivulets from my human lake
from my veins, my heart, my whole
disposition of the last penny
the last sight of my fishing-net

Everyone avoids my path; I avoid death's too
pursuit in a dark circus
the floating garden in a gale
plants reject sea water, the sea water rejects me
I have nothing to reject
the broken line runs across my face

The auctioneer will gong his hammer
for the goods left behind.

A STROLL ON THE GRAVEYARD

The salt of life
is the portion worn
the dead, reborn segments
belongings of underworld
for bitter, offended, disowned

The salinity minus worth
is damned in stubs and stone cushions
of each second

There is a pathway through the woods
paraded with shells
of begotten colours
and through it beams
the treasure of my mother's womb

When I row in the gale, twirl my ribs
a victim of sand dunes
the tune of grace hoots . . . the manna will fall

Jog on
jog on
a voice from the eagle's nest
the tumbler is solid with no discharge holes
so, swallow the anxious mucous
before that marrowless smile, and rust begins to reign

THE GAP

Scavengers flap beyond
the horizon
echoes knock on thunder-rocks
behind the saddle
near the gaschamber
of eternity.

Nuptial season
sound from bugles throat
and echo in the hurricane.

Tragedy on placenta
falls on whining females . . .
Voices ooze
from obscene stables
tinkered wings

whirr
and there is a layer
of smoke-laden aroma
filling with candour
the forgotten grounds . . .
those memorial caresses
and the dettol fluid
wet the lips.

A pair rows a distant vessel
and turtles flash . . .
Michelangelos' Adam.

A drum sounds
for the rustic tongues
and those parrots without feathers
set off the long awaited creed.

SURVIVAL

I dream of
Wheezeballs bursting
on the funnel opening
of eardrums . . .
clinging on lead thread
congruent to hope
and parallel to despair
Crisps of hailstones
tear the yellow leaves
and the petals in woods
stand the last soldier
on the frontline.
A shell explodes beneath
and tears the taproot
leaves loose hanging

on dead secondary roots.
The battle swings round
the Hail-grapes and Hell-gates.

MEETING

Milton stood on the rock
and looked down
to see exremental whiteness of life
Owen emerged from Flanders
to inspect the camp of existence
and a blizzard blew my floating head
to float me down the Nilus waters.

THE MARBLE GATE

How shall we close the marble gate
when pards
and carnivores
are just apace

spread the net
and peg the ground
before a bullet knocks
the marble gate

crack that shell
of temptation
and swallow the scum
of age

blow the lamp
and insert the peg
then stir the coals
inside the marble gate.

THE COUNTRY OF THE DEAD

The country of the dead
I speak
no answer
I weep
no pity
I watch
no colour
I listen
no sound
the country of the dead

I shout, the echo strikes
the dead rock
I kick, my toe mutilates
on dry stump
I weep, no pity
the country of the dead

I've searched the exit
but heard no owls
no parrots, the waves beat afar
on wrecks of ships
the sand stares with me
the country of the dead.

SATIETY

You conditioned me
that
to clear those miles
between me and you
we must venture to the moon

that spaceship
hijacked the pirate sailors

the moon, on secondary wakening
mirrored lifeless, expensive life
and a voice pierced, a city
under the deeps

that submarine/ex-marine
the city seemed near, the water friendly
the human jungle expectant, wordless
the rainbow town, death in seven ways

I faint on this neon pavement
all canaries are gone to the memory!

THE CROSS

I have dug the trenches
the way I was told,
cut innocent roots of ageing trees
removing them from pension list.

I have dug all grounds,
searching for the pipeline
it must be found, and repaired
destiny must never leak.

Lurid skeletons, disturbed in dark sleep
curse me,
the overseer orders me down
to clean the cobweb under the undusted chair
. . . the spider's cave, castle . . .

But why dig all graves
when I burnt the granary after the X-mas party
and refused to eat small potatoes
before the sun!

Now, a pipe-bursts up the Mzima springs
the hydraulic engineer
interrupts my nights, when we are in the process
of conceiving a son
who'll never dig graves. My wife curses
the springs sigh. The boss black-lists.

NOW THAT I AM DEAD

Shut the brothels
of humanity
now that I am venerealed
and close all bars
now that I am drunk
for the OK is given

Give me the calabash
to make me fly
now that am mad
and set the headballs rolling
to box my head
till the cerebellum
turns red
ready for royal entry
through the hellgate
of eternity

Carry me beyond the cross
now that I have died
and let me hear

the unction
from the tall glancia
where the bell has tolled
and raped my slumbers

Let all trees
fly their flags at half mast
and let them wear
black black shawls
now that am dead –
or psalms
from yellow bibles
be sung
by impotent priests
shut all the pathways
under the pumphouse
now that am compressed

Send on leave
good old Sun
now that am blind
and cold
and send on sabbatical tour
the industrious night
now that am in
a dark dark world.

THE ROOT AND THE FRUIT

The taproot
stiff and dark brown
coils itself
in cold discomfort
of the black black clay

the brown
semi-marble murram stones
stage a scrum
to keep the taproot
in suffocation and unconsciousness

the lean secondary roots
like long starved earthworms
loaf
in blindness and confusion.

In the unclear rainbow air
hangs a colourless fruit
blown by wind
and the fruit
sits on a merry-go-round
all day long.

So it is
that the fruit
and the root
follow sole orbit.

EXPECTATION

Such a great expectation it was
that all edibles had no room
desires sank to the bottom
all
remained nonexistent

clouds form
and nearer the hope comes
only to be marred
by the rainbow

the wind
in heavily moisted overcoat
blows a whistle
but the coconut palms
grab the water
before the fall

the soul
is suspended high
on a tree
whose roots
float in the air
hunting for a socket
to push themselves

every train arrival
and craft landing
each ship's anchor
womb a child
long in expectation
yet on each delivery
it is a girl and not a son.

A LOOK IN THE PAST

Once I was a lizard
cheeky and harmless
and built clouds
that the heat
never could melt

I learnt
of the transanimation
into a monitor
deaf to all spikes
a dweller of two worlds . . .

ere my breath had settled
my back grew rough –
my teeth went chisel-like
. . . a crocodile
lurking in sandy seafloor

then one day I died
but knocked my head
on the sharp gravestone
that woke me up
to find me winged
tough-clawed and a scavenger . . .
I was an eagle.

I went on sojourn
and my red eyes blue'ed
till I turned priestly –
pigeoned
till we came to Guernica
where they pinched my olive branch
and gave me a bone

when next I stopped
I was gliding
mutilated . . .
the mongoose pursued me in hideways

I shall go back
to the formless clouds
and melt myself into rain
then shall I land in the plantation
and mate with the secondary roots
of the old fig tree.

ME AND CHRIS

Our fireside tales
had all been
on Guernica
Flanders
Stanleyville
and a raid of food
sent us to Vietnam.

The news came
that the yam
had turned yellow
and the coconut roots were hollow
the cassava tubes were water

then we agreed
to research
for a planticide
and parted.

Chris found a powder
at the gates of Enugu
and powdered the yam
and the palm
till they all went crimson mad
and began somersaulting
as Chris had done
to heavensgate.

And my search?

Perhaps
by the tap of a cowrie
or the toss of a coin.

RENEWAL

Where do I tramp next
when teeth repel
the knock of tongue

the scum
and saliva
duel
on the gum
and flies buzz
beneath the chin

how
to measure the fathom
of this sea
when shovels of failure
keep deepening the floor

when oh when
to strike
when the radar detects
a fault each time

and the cogs
repel each other
and the chain is chained in stagnation
immobile –
and the rider –
immobile:
to bed
to bed
when no motion
can break open
the wall

boulders roll leewards

and the mermaid-fisher
falls on the shivering sand
silent, cold, asleep.

THE SENDOFF

Owiti has just died
many thought it just
that he should die
but not
that his sendaway ceremony
should host
such sandlike collection
of raylike hearts:

for
he had murdered prostitutes
at the brothel
and raped girlshepherds
on the river banks

he had raided
many cattle bomas
and his violent burglaries
went beyond recording

of the many gifts he received
while his pulse beat
was a curse from the priest
for hugging
in majestic moonlight
the holy statue
of Holy Mary

this priest's curses
fell on many clays

Owiti has just died
and the priest, scummy at the chapel
has committed suicide
'for the unsaveable sins of this world'
and a handful of diehards
squatted at his sendoff mass.

CONSCIOUSNESS

Rinse the corrugated
conscience
and wake up
from the perforated gashouse

wake and watch
the relics of pride
staring with candour
at the dungwash
of extracted teeth

plant your taproot
or to Nilus veer
and research

a black Jew
with no money

back Victoria lake
and dive with tilapia
and hook your taproot
by Nilus way

neither Lango in tilapia dish
nor Acholi in nubian gin
shall with grounded voice
recall the conjugation

hey
hey
black Jew
with no money
– castrated robot

sing loud
the unscanned balladry
to the acrobatic feet
of Congolese dancers
and hold your chin
to the solid wailings
of Biafran women

dance
dance
black Jew
with no money
to the reeds as you float past
by the mummified ghosts
in silent quietness
of the Egyptian pyramids

and to Nilus delta
down
down
till the Meddy sea
shall open the skull
on Gibraltar rock
and talk to Jesus!

glue

the canted voice
lest in mordant home
with Tshombe you rest

but ride
oh ride
the gentle tide
till you come
down Nigerian boats
at Port Harcourt
and to Onitsha afloat the Niger
caress R
with blazing love
the trunks
of coconut palms.

FLOTILLA

The fountain cracks
the memory streams
flow with unmaimed innocence
into the tombstone
    lavender mist
    from the tombstone
    cleanses my sight
    to view the fallen leaves

surprised in the rain
in the red flash God's light
yellow pigment
in decision den
    I have asked for bread
    and received stones
    pushed down the gullet

I asked for shelter
new estate bed in the mortuary

I begged for clothes
bandage white clothes
embalmed

I felt unsafe, with scratches
of uncertain weather
security in the detention camp

crisps have formed
around the lung
the surgeons failure
small leaves, small veins, small life
in such commotion
persevere in the rain
it will fill the fountain
of things remembered, soon forgotten
promises never fulfilled
looming at the railway station
sufferings unredeemed
love rekindled, glowed extinguished
the forest of mortality.

DARKLY, DARKLY HEMP

Beneath the umbrella shade
of acceptance
is a tired corpse
listening

listening
Oh Dale Carnegie
is the art to row the boat

in the gale
and sprint beyond the goalpost

accepting
O mother Rosary
is the philosophy to pass
the narrow pathway
the waterlogged tunnel
to the hills
to carry the wreath
to the mottled grave

observing
the birds of the air
and the resolve of the wheel
miasma of hope
through the milky mirror
driving the sledge
in the dry winter

we laughed and wept
and yawned
like hungry hippoes
kicked the sewn up sacks
listened to the happy . . .
those who left their luggage behind
on the hillside
the lucky . . .
those who broke the slates

the dog barks aloud
the bone
crusts of passage leaf
still float this rough sea.

THE FALL

The lift jams near the thirteenth floor
and I stand a dwarf
in a dark desert . . .
the marine engineers, off duty
confuse their frustrations at the beerhouse

why should the alarm bell
laugh and scorn
bulb blast off
before I shout for life?

I've danced enough rock
long enough to deserve praise
tell God up there I'll escape
and murder him
why kick my stomach
when my buttocks are as soft
as the bridal bed?

I'll kill, kill, kill
my voice is hoarse like a woman
mourning her husband
huuu . . s like an old locomotive engine
puffing without claws
I've wailed enough, master . . .

must the coup take place
while the papyrus fibres
embrace my legs
like overheated adolescents in the bush
may I not jubilate
at the end of the regime?

I'll rape the crocodiles
if the reeds
refuse to sing martial songs

wasn't that holy nun going unholy
at the nightclub
behind the chapel,
who said sex is unholy, not the father of Jesus
yes she clung to a venerealed sailor
and a Mass servant ran to report
and God smote him
that's why I want to murder.

NO COFFIN, NO GRAVE

He was buried without a coffin
without a grave
the scavengers performed the post-mortem
in the open mortuary
without sterilized knives
in front of the night club

stuttering rifles put up
the gun salute of the day
that was a state burial anyway
the car knelt
the red plate wept, wrapped itself into blood its master's

the diary revealed to the sea
the rain anchored there at last
isn't our flag red, black, and white?
so he wrapped himself well

who could signal yellow
when we had to leave politics to the experts
and brood on books
brood on hunger
and schoolgirls
grumble under the black pot

sleep under torn mosquito net
and let lice lick our intestines
the lord of the bar, money speaks madam
woman magnet, money speaks madam
we only cover the stinking darkness
of the cave of our mouths
and ask our father who is in hell to judge him
the quick and the good.

Well, his diary, submarine of the Third World War
showed he wished
to be buried in a gold-laden coffin
like a VIP
under the jacaranda tree beside his palace
a shelter for his grave
and much beer for the funeral party

anyway one noisy pupil suggested we bring
tractors and plough the land.

HE WILL COME

He will come to judge the quick and the dead
only I shall be slow like a snail
and absent
like a slain virginity.
But You'll judge those You trespassed upon
those whose hearts You hollowed with grief
those who never heard of Your helldom.
You led him into temptation
and now You have delivered him into hell.
You never warned me Sir of the truth
Caveat emptor
but gave me daily stones twice a day.
I have no sins worth forgiving
I came to buy beans, You sold me peas.

AGE

You came shouting like weaverbirds
during harvesting season
and here is the warning light.

That books would not
answer all
but the fiery lads
tore off to answer
and the old man queried:

Tell me book people
where rainbow dwells
for all I know
she is the mistress of rain.

The wind blows
vessels apart
and renders to bits
stone built mansions
assess his strength
and his domain
for all I know
he's the quiet hero.

The reed
bends on seeing storm
tell me from your books
which school
the reed attended
for all I know
he swims all day long.

Age rolls past
and the land watches
women fill the wrinkles

with soil and oil
and the hair is flowered grey
run your fingers through
and find
the invented instrument
to reverse the speed
of undisciplined age
for all I know
Age is the unofficial god.

Sharpen your maths
and censure the sands
and the ocean waters
for all I know
the sand is gentle.

When next your books
knock on solid walls
and fracture
your soft toes
and your goggled eyes
then (. . . . .) halt
on a rainbow road.

When next your tongues
are stuck
by odok paste
and your eyes are blinded
by ojur gas

When next your book
reveals
no fortune
and your saliva
turns scum.

When next

you insist not
on knowing when
the lake will empty
and birds will dig
when the bat will reverse
and face the ground
when the quail
will evolutionary go
and land on trees
when the river will stop
and climb the hill
when the graves will open
and occupants weigh
when you cease
to measure the length of night
on a sheep-fur rod

then
the books shall learn
the creed of duol
and majestic bonfire
that the keeper of chickens
knows better
their coming time
and that Age
is the store of wisdom.

HUNGER

The maize will grow
once when
long rains have come
and army worms
have gone

rations
will sink
with hunger
and the coiled intestines
will straighten.

But

that day
shall find many
in the invalid home
with collar'd fathers
at bedside Mass
and others
in graves
with maggots
on palatable meal

and for the grave majesties
the maize cob
shall be
for a rusty funeral feast.

THE HOMESTEAD

All future games in this stadium
Must be played
  under floodlights
  and cows have eaten my underpants
The ram has fallen
On her left hand
The leopard cannot eat her

Have I crossed her path
Have I searched her marrow
Have I slain her bull

But the one-day old kid
Jumped on her mother's back
The herdsboy urinated
in the well
  from where we drank
The cooks fried the owl
For the father-in-law

Have I torn your pink pride
Have I snatched your goblet
Have I robbed your treasure

The soul is below the table
The pumpkin is in the bush
The fowls have grown wild
She aborted
  and threw the baby

Did I give her the baby
Did I see her that night
Did she hear my voice

Legion of knaves
Come from the desert
The blood they tapped
When my nose bled
Has turned into devils
  possessing them.
The lantern I burnt
Is rusty, no chimney to repel the wind

When therefore I shout
Without shame the voice of surrender
And pass the crownet to the regent
Whose mother died before he was born
Whose father was known for adultery around
I hear the VOICES
Curse my human fabric, such impotent being!

TO TABAN

Let us burn ourselves
Now that the gas is on
The limbo and labyrinth
Have been cold enough
The bat flies in the abyss
And it cannot fly out

Since we have refused to die
Our bones cannot break
We may carry more loads
Since our backs cannot bend

We can keep walking
As we have always walked
To the market place
The fast runners
Will have gobbled all the fruits

Who wants the bridge
To join the hillside of the river
To the lowland valley
Where floods sweep all dirty garbage

Let us talk no prose around
For our sages talked in better lyrics
And if no better flutes can play
For heaven's sake lie down and sleep.

THE BROKEN BRIDGE:

(Being the title of a novel I wrote in 1966 and pushed in my wardrobe.)

She kissed me
Lips dead
She hugged me
Dead as a stone

Disconnected circuit
The stones that roll down
Thunder that tears humanity
'Here Part We'

Reaching the altar
I know not how to begin
The pigeons mock my courage
The sweat of trembling heart

'Any Wine Please'

To dilute all sins
And weaken the cells
Of fear
  add more wine
  stronger brand

'Here Part We'

The purple curtain
The bishop's mace
The pulpit
The chapel's image
The forest –

CRESCENT

The morning
The mountain top
  looked so white
  the evening
  looked so grey
  and I cursed my camera
But when the rains came
And thunder tore the few shrubs
And floods swept the little humans
And the wind broke the few reeds
And darkness eclipsed the little light
And lightning drunk
The twittering voices
  I knew not who
  to give the curse
  beyond the Lord
An old man watched
Beneath the thunder-struck tree
Even the deep seas
Have their floors
Patterns are but past deeds

For there he was
Dumb and Mute
The adolescent flair
Had gone to the sages.

WHEN RAMOGI WAS KING

When Ramogi was King
those Grey Hills were Green
  those
red lights were Green
  those
thin cows were fat

those
barbed wires were absent
He said
On that lawn he'd be crowned a-new
On that hill he'd wed
On that post he'd hoist the flag
authority lay in sockets
bitterness lost in secret bowels
till Ramogi fell
the only son of Ramogi
who left the land
took the crown

And the hills cannot be razed
The grass shall grow
The Son shall return
He will have drunk enough
At the devil's playground.

CHESS-BOARD AND ROOKS, BISHOPS AND POINTS

We were at San's Chique Beerhouse. We sat three of us; The Daily Nation Columnist Philip Ochieng'; the Kenyan poet Albert Ojuka and I. Ochieng' said:
'Odinga has failed because he has a very high concentration of Luo in his blood' –

Dilute eyes, hanging eyes
Dilated hearts, men's hearts
Beads in glasses, beer beads
Cloud in glasses, future clouds
Watery eyes, beer eyes
Beerhouses, dilution house
Magenta light, safe light
Blind eyes that see farther objects
Hearing unsighted the adjacent wall

Piss off one ball, the juke box plays
Sip down one beer, pattern comes
The misery of pretence
The misery of money
The misery of fear

Sabina was in Lagos
Okigbo in Biafra
Who knew the heat of the frontline
  The darkness in the tunnel
  The noise in the gangway
  The hunger in the battlefield

How easy burns
The granary of hope
So quick the roof-leak
Of satiety palace
The flame heats the beaker
The chemical concentrates
The beaker hardens
  And who knew the heat of the burner
  The power of the chemical
  Who knew the ratio
  Darwin or the Big Accident

Coming along. Gomorrah burned
The steel gates shut, salt pillars
Dilated eyes, sinful eyes
The husbandmen drunk, the contaminated beer
Noah shut dead the ark's one entrance
Roughages of humanity drowned
  When the first call came
  I had no time
  The flute, the bugle, the phono
  I had no time
  The first light, death light
  Time deserted me

Pushed in the dark tunnel
Every soul
Every soul

Must return to earth
Free soul
Free soul
Must aspire to treasury table
On the budget day
God's budget, life pattern
Bad forecast, God's forecast
Relevant data lie in pages
History unwritten
Galleys unread
The absence of concord
The sheep and the dog
The Nine thousand years

The budget number showed
Less sinners more penitents
More nuns less prostitutes
More children more mums
The resignation of planners
Electric boats
Electric van
Down a steep slope
The bridge in solitude
Second halt, crush halt
Open the ward gate, open prison gates

Coming so wrapped,
Coming so masked
Coming so armed!

LEMONADE

Caretakers of this vineyard
husbandmen in self-pity
having eclipsed once
in the labyrinth
swung the dhow into the gale
struck the reef of acceptance
and saw in the old mirror
robots on a baseball pitch

Scarecrows do not scare all
Two-legged ladder never stands
right angled to the sun
The cave is not dark till you walk in
For the railway compartment is bright
Weaverbirds twitter
And never cease to fly from stones
Bayard has no toes left
Karilus the drunkard
Left his dress to the hyenas
but his son never laughed
the village bull saw the glitter of his face
when naked he came
and his daughters gave him
a loin cloth
never did they laugh
though teeth are but bones
laughing at nature's wrath!

REQUEST

Open your palms
to form a jar
and pour there water
to quench the thirst

Open your throat
and form a fan
to blow it over
and cool the panting soul

Burst open the gates
of that home
where Jove
lies in majesty
of loneliness

Tear off the curtain
of the window
on the facade
of satisfaction
and pass me through
to the honeyed comb

Open your bosom
and release
the juice
denied a seedling
below the brassieres

Coil your tongue
Aloo
Aloo
ignite your yellow breath
and let me pass
to the honeyed comb.

THE SIEGE OF RAMOGI

That chloroform sleep
woke me up
in dream
only to find
Ramogi under siege

the calabash lay
in the fireplace
where the fire
had burnt it half
and the fire itself
had gone out half

the half dead tree
on the river bank
lay growing
on the ground

the fire had sunk
below the granary
and the eggs
long hidden there
were in hatching
by that heat.

I saw the drum
hanged on a siala tree
and osimbo
in a potato field

Ramogi stood unstirred
on the lakeshore
watching waves
watching diving fishermen
raise and sink their heads

and a spoilt son
played the guitar –
the harp lay idle
near the duol

the fishes cried
and the crocodiles slept
beneath the feet
of Ramogi
who cast a look
at the farther bank
and saw
THE NILUS FLOW.

HORIZON

And there he shouts . . .
chained to a rock
of frustration
listening
to others shake in their graves
on hearing
the ripple of water
each time
a yam is thrown
with preference
and each moment
a calf
suckles a donkey.

METAMORPHOSIS

So is the metamorphosis
like a heron
watches the sky
with her unplanted possessions

kneaded flour
ever altering its shape
till the frying pan
petrifies it

oasis
whose water is fathomless
and birds
hum distant lands

the path
the path
criss-crosses mountains
of sand dunes

yonder
a whirlwind turns
and uproots the only tree

the metamorphosis
creates a heron
and makes the dreams
nought but turtles
and the span
in this cage
is only one cobweb.

DIVORCE

We shall in the wake of sunset
wash the gutter
and find
where wedlock lies

We'll break the pots
and wash the gourds
with chlorinated water

We'll wake the sleepers
and grass grown limbos
and whip them
for their black silence

We shall kill
the kill of fortune
and throw
the celebrated rituals
into fathomless deeps

We'll march on
the unfordable streams
and burn down the bushes
where the sacred gods
did dwell

We'll march on
and break the bonds
of matrimony perhaps
with those who went under
on the eve
of apostatic eruption.

NEON SIGN

Coming to this courtyard
maiden –
I had a face without a line
skin unscorched
unsored by feeling

I sat –
and stitched with pain
paradox to parches
of contradiction

My teeth chattered
like pneumonia victim
joy went insane

A yellow neon sign
flickers across
This is the Garden of the Suicides

My Mona Lisa is down
shall I ever emerge
below the dust
soft,
like a snail from the shell
without perception?

Mathare is full
And joy is insane.

REGULAR CUSTOMER

That smile
– a mask
a blight
among a bevy of millet
though the drums
of trireme
beat with frantic cold

Lurid skeletons
turn my sight
with a marnial dye
and I see men
looking
like satellite moons

I am still
the regular customer
at the bar
always at the counter
where I discharge
chaos and confusion

The barmaid
pulls my mask
– gawpy
shorping sonny

At the pool
outside the bar –
here I drowned
not for swimming far
but the tidal race
swam me too far.

CLOSE-UP

Up here on the surface
it's smooth
but me –
am below the surface
in the embrace
of roots

darkness –
yelping tom toms
drink my voice
in the jambo room
of the fourth chamber
a rehearsal swings

it's a four-way chamber
there's a maze
a cold storage
and a limbo

well decided
though most on path
for me they've decided
which way I move
from my gasrooms.

HAZY

The mountain
looks like the one
we grazed around

The river
the one we swam
and home
like the one
the house
is a shadow

The currents
and waves
have blown my boat
to this bay

Is it not painful
that I should miss
the path
my mother paced
to the waterhole?

A wreck blown ashore
with specks of existence
and my face
is crusted with salt
but these have never moved.

ENTRY

God howls in his hell
just as I shiver
in the cold forest
where the barbed wire
is fallen

Limbs of trees
move like tongues
of noisy women
I gnaw my yellow teeth
below the surface

Mine is a lolling tongue
does Satan not
jump in jubilation
at his paradise?

Let the juke-box play
against the Black wall.

CONCERTINA

From such ripples
The rain from my joints
The rain from my fears
  come pass my chance

The stone fell on my rib
Rain water sank deep down my flesh
Towel of scorn drywashed my ambition
  come pass my chance

Brief intonations, deity defied
Hot gas rising from heated veins
Overheated bread burnt in the process
  come pass my chance

Queen came, slim as the gate
  to hidden light
For wasp's waist is not so slim
That fashion displayed on the shelf
  tailors on work
The rushing customers with hot money
Material gone, the factory robbed
  come pass my chance

The saddle of my horse, the horse of fear
The needles implanted of discord and vice
The sponge has drunk the droplets of faith
  come pass my chance

Those heavy padlocks gone, rusty with time
Must now be forced open by tinsmith
For such journeys have cloud-laden ends
  come pass my chance

MOUNTAINEERING IN THE FROZEN NORTH

Nearer home I hear the cry
of girls forced to sex
willingly
the happy cry
of fertile womb
opened to the light
of conjugation
continuity born
to strike
of God's hand
life-giving hand

Nearer the door I hear the squeak
of rats raiding the store
forced by nature
to plague the house
for the chapel they held
is dry and silent
God's house
hunger house

SING TO ME, O, SING TO ME

Sing to me
O Sing to me
The songs you sang
In my absence to the woods
Melodies on the rocky hills
The sea was untamed

You had the claws to tear
Solitude and cold

Sing to me
O Sing to me
The tunes of those owly nights
When I searched your address
In nature's directory

Owls were the sole listeners
The solo singers
In our hidden forest
Hermitage revisited
Splinters rekindled

Moths leave their powders
Without much thought
Lucky are the guinea fowls
For their trails shall never be seen

Sing to me
O Sing to me
The verses you scanned
In broken rhythms
To the ears of my shadow

Kicked the river's fury
A bull without horns
A fallen statue

Will you then come
And laugh with me
As you did
Before the crucifix
Where my blood betrayed the riddle?

MY MOTHER WHO ART . . .

Accept me on your laps
And let me close your womb
The fortune of your birthhood

Teeth are but bones
Laughing at the lame

Let me laugh
With the happy robins
The child who closed your uterus
Leaving its walls embracing

Middle-borns do not sweat
The pain of opening the tunnel
And me
The weight of slamming the cavestone

Civilization born
Of unvirgin lands
So wave the flag
And let me hear your maiden voice

Tears are but expressions
Of selected feelings

Let me suckle your breasts
Before they become
Mere antiques of human history
No poison shall pass
No one trails by
Miracles have ceased

For dreams are but pictures
Of the foetal empire.

CRUCIFIX, & ALL THAT: THE TROUBADOUR

O were I able
to stand
and gather my long feet

flatten
the protruding bones
on my shoulder

dry the cracks
on my foul mouth

get the rucksack
on my bow back
for the trip
Beyond this earth's foundations
And say be gone, be gone, cursed thing.

COALITEBEAM

Does it matter
who throws stones in my pond
if I cannot see him?

Chastity in the frying pan
for your decision to call
caveat emptor.

Those dogs have not been fed
for the last nine months
the door never been open
for two barren years
who knows what lies inside?

Playmates in the moonshadow
dentures from the boiler
will these boil my mouth?

Life transmuted
in the absence of the alchemist.

Who said I bother
how much water there is in the ocean
when I cannot drink
what point is there
to drop a bowl of charity
in the sea of poverty
like a drop of dye
in the boundless ocean!

The hunchback knows HOW
WHERE to sleep on the mat.

ROSBELLA ADHIAMBO

I feel the presence of that rugged woman
Whose shadow stands untrammelled

The cinders of joy have billowed seawards
Beyond the hanging sky

She has nothing to do
With this exotic desert

The logics of existence
Have damned her solo voice

She floated the deep seas
In stormy days, passed the reefs

She was alone on that Flood Day
Swept to the lee, with discarded leaves
Of the dismembered life of conjugant toys

She held her shoulders
To the earth's foundation

The years have put some deeper paint
On that statue, O Time, that once was fair

I feel the touch of her fingers
Striking the lead fibres of my harp

The house whose outer wall
Suffers the weather's wrath
And stands in the centre of the city.

The value shoots up, the house still stands
Antique to memory, valuable to present

The touch of the holy water
The pond they polluted

The inner wall of that woman
Stands untouched by those fouled hands.

SHE HAS NOT DREAMT

According to Luo tradition, when a man dies, his widow cannot be married to another man until the widow admits verbally that she has had sexual intercourse with her deceased husband through a dream

She has not dreamt
my father
and none can

to wedlock mat guide her,
the papyrus mat
whistles silence
the cold drives the dagger
across her breast
and the archaeologists
wrestle her bones . . .

I enter the pier
where lie some wrecks
of ships of the past
uncoated, nude, lone
teeth protrude
like carcasses
the vultures left
when they left in a hurry.
Pebbles of broken pots
after regeneration
wrap to knees
what I excavate.

An overseer,
contrast to science
whips my bony back –
I drowse, faint and rise
to the lash . . .
SHE DENIES EVER
DREAMING MY FATHER.

She wears his clothes

In the mergence of rays
a siren howls
for me to storm
the sea of solitude
a boulder rolls from the top
of Mount of Life

knocks my ankle
. . . the venereal that eats
my salad potency
a wind whispers goodbye
to the Three Stones
around my being
a father in my chapel
four times pardons his chest
Hail Mary, Queen of Grace.

In escaping
crusts of salt
fall on my ankle wound
the cause of my suicide
the twain . . . the twain
what of the orbits
of those scattered stars
and satellite moons?
She stands aloof
AND DENIES
EVER DREAMING MY FATHER.

Conjugation banned
by established authority
. . . no more lollipop
on population expansion
and the howdah is nationalized
(or traditionalized?)
her stalactite heart is in pain
from a septic ulcer

She stands on laru
a green stanchion.
I question the turn
'Oppidans unwanted'

Never been to town
still 'Oppidans unwanted'
and she insists of never
KNOWING MY FATHER.

Walking across the limbo
the very grave
where in silent quietness we laid him
I fail to identify
believable?
All graves look alike
with frowning daisies.
My mother, closes her mouth
and laughs at me
the cave of her mouth
is dark and rusty
for the treasure therein
it is a CLOSED AREA:
I enter
The Faculty of Ferments.

MIRAGE

For all the salt
it's a fibrous existence here
they swore
the sun would never sink
and now it's dusk

It has rained
and what difference
has it made to the ocean?

I try to catch
the footsteps of past

I fail
and I ask,
didn't the auditors
check the accounts?

Peasants
in cocoons of livelihood
heave in cinders of hope
and yet
the end of the road
is at the water's edge

Behind the wall
classics shout in dusty shelves
and cockroaches examine them
with no symptoms of insanity
so the owner empties
bottles at the bar.

THE PARADE

Always at attention
when cold eats my rebellion
and heat melts my reason

the ground
obedient to sun
boils under my feet
ants
bite my feet
in their naked protest

I must blow the bugle
and play the anthem
tho' hailstones fall
and my throat cracks

orders review
the coat of my heart
for the award
which I always miss

look
spectators forced on hillside
to dry their sentiments
watch the parade
and appraise the edge of my dress
and miss the edge of my bitterness

when I stand at ease
to observe the sergeant
who stands akimbo
I'm court-martialled

the rain falls
and tightens the sandbag
at the firing ground
and each day
I lose my blood.

WOMAN SO LUCKY

A squirrel licked the edge of her paint
and she took a brush, polished her things
with the black-red cobra
a still-born child hingiaaad
between her thighs

I have no country, no house, no name

a voice from the latrine pit
crawling from the solid dungwash
on the dark moonlight

her father died, after her mother, before her soul
and she said
I am not sure if it's my father
he may be . . .

prostitutes are such lucky . . .
need no name . . .
no parentage, no country, and for that
earn unpolished dish of vice
a black line runs across her breast
one end tied to the hellgates of eternity

exploration is our mission
pass me a coconut leaf for my whit-sunday.

REBIRTH

They will shiver with discomfort
And shake the foundations of the earth
They will roar and haul the mountain peaks
The corpses shall rise
Bones of the unawakening shall build barricades
At least their pleas shall be heard
Their eyes shall sting like wasps
The grim face of the limbo shall glow
The women shall be led to their husbands' sides
The hill and sea shall unite
Old men shall recite old creeds
The dry throats shall be oiled with castor.
The tower shall break, and fall into the sea
It will never be seen
It will never be heard
Like a stone thrown into the sea
Rebellious sons shall bring home their brides
And rams shall be slaughtered at dawn

I hear I have not been faithful to my ladyship
I told her she was getting wrinkled
I said her belly was becoming too big without foetus
She was concealing spots on her thighs
With thick stockings
She was greedy to her children
She was wearing too many masks
The high heels had towered her too high
She was fighting Time

I divorced her for all these
And now I hear the drums
Sound from the levelled grassland
Announcing a feast for the new matrimony.

PRIMUS PRIORY

My man is gone away to serve
  the Master
  his chief
At the set of the sun
  the pigeons
  and wagtails
  are homing
Lurking along the cold side
The black wall of euphorbia
  concrete
Down the valleys I hear
  the shepherds call
The wolves have howled
  from the hillside
  caves
The half-potent old man
  virility sailed away with time
  minutes turned into years

The worn-out old men
  sing rustless epics
  from the beer-party gospels
  the golden flutes
I do not know, I do not know
I cannot tell, And I cannot tell
  when my man will come
  when my man will come
I must live these days alone
For my man must serve the Chief
The weaverbird should rest in her nest
And stir not the heat-burnt hope
For the fog is still absent

Let peasants cry into the dusk
The fields have partial answers
Children endlessly rock in the cradles
Shall I go to find my mate?
Hunger shall never let me rest
The hours delve into years
Soon I shall have no tears to shed
No laughter to burst
I will not know
When first it started.

DISRUPTION

Into the organs of my life
enter the germs
of turmoil

And in this basin
of heated vitriol
submerge all light
and laughter

Since the apertures
cannot open any more
immortal distress
dished out
in cracked china bowl
without leakage

Pharaoh tried once
and gave it all up
the haunting river
of bloody waters
the ghosts of massacred frogs
the maimed souls of infant youth

Those who grasp sometimes slip
Rombling to the concrete floor
of mortality well
never to regain
consciousness

If I accomplish such a feat
brother I will contend and pay
tribute to him superior to me
for I yearn to go beyond the frost
where the lantern burns
without any shade.

THE DISTANT WALL

These dreams
I have through the archway
Along the tunnel
And over the mountain

The dreams
Bearing endless longings
Keep knocking

The fabric of my heart
The seat of patience
Knock against the rock

Sorrow towers with pride
Above my earth
Above my sea
And not a single flower
Opens her petals in my presence
And bees keep hovering
With the hope I lack

For what purpose
Are these bells
And barrels of beer
I have decided to remain
Forever drunk,
Forever away from reason
The city shall talk about me more.

THE SIX COMMANDMENTS

He who asks what the chicken eats
  Is not a good MAN
He who hears the voices from the forest
  Is a Madman
He who rejects the sweatless offspring
  Is unworthy to live

  To live on the pink carpet
  And drink the golden cup
  And wear the white dress
  Unstained with 'blacklings'
  To join the Sages' list
  A blind eye, a deaf ear, an immovable tongue
  For then you'll know the agony of sanity.

A DREAM

I am in a garden
treading a royal road
to happiness
a hippo comes
gives the chase
to the riverside
A pot of memory bursts
releasing eggs
of fertilized past
hibernated in pebbles
that have lost their faces
larvæ of nature wriggle
greedy, eating my leaves
my leaves don't bleed
twigs of happiness
dry
the gourd breaks
unleashing blizzards
cold and dry
smiles and patience
pupate in the dark placenta
the adult pulls out
I sit, like a sprayed leaf
white a deceiving complexion
still in the pupa case
Piles of decisions
compose verses of life
elegiac
My garden must make profit
if it is to survive
But the garden is misty
the morning chilly.

A NIGHTMARE

I am a cockrobin
though not as neat
on a tall tree

Below is the Parliament
Building. Other giant birds
noisy like weaverbirds
dressed deep yellow
  are shouting
constantly chorusing
'. . . for the nation . . .'
the nation is still prostrate
under the heavy blanket

A few watchbirds
the owls who . . . whoo . . .
The Parliament Building
now becomes a boat
with a red sail
being wetted by briny water
all rowers
sit on one side
the boat is capsizing
the boat is sinking

Now I am a hawk
dwelling on the beach
near the corpses
of the drowned boatmen
The navy came to save the boat
the navymen had little knowledge
of the carnal area of the sea
with fiery pots of whirling sea
they lived few seconds before dawn
and passed . . .

only the fishermen
veterans of this sea
survived the fall
saved the wrecks
of the boat, the naval ship
and drew water in barrels
to extinguish the fire
that was burning the city.

The city lies semi-conscious
like a rescued fire victim
the building
stands half burnt
outside the lawns grow
seedlings of olives
seedlings of thorns
a few blights lurk
below potatoe tubes

the vultures never perished all
the cockrobins and sparrows still twitter

the building stands
like a wearied fisherman
and a pigeon stands
on the sword-edged pillar.



JARED ANGIRA studied commerce at the University of Nairobi from 1968 until 1971. He was editor of *Busara* which is published by the literature department. He is Africa's representative on the International Executive Committee of the World University Service. His first collection of poems, *Juices* (EAPH) was published in 1970. He was a founder and is treasurer of the Writers' Association of Kenya. He turned down a scholarship to go to Canada and now works for the East African Harbours Corporation in Dar es Salaam.

Jared Angira says of his collection of poetry:
"*Silent Voices* consists of crude voices gasping in the dark, of voices trapped in between despair and existence, of voices caught up in a maze but always seeking to get through. They are voices from rusty tincans of the slums, seeking an outlet into the gay city, they are voices corked up in empty gourds. They are the searching voices that must achieve their goals in a strange silent quietness, quietness that defeats the drums. Yet in themselves the voices are drumbeats, pulsations, heartbeats. They are the yodelling of the slum drums, they are the bugles from ancient limbos, they are the bridge from the past into the present and then into that transparent layer of the future. Some of the voices are everyday voices, even of children thrown by their mothers into latrine pits, some are of progressives caught up in competition and self promotion. Here is a conglomeration of voices."

Cover photograph by George Hallett

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