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From the Selected Works of Chukwuma Azuonye

1972

Nsukka Harvest: Poetry from Nsukka, 1966-1972

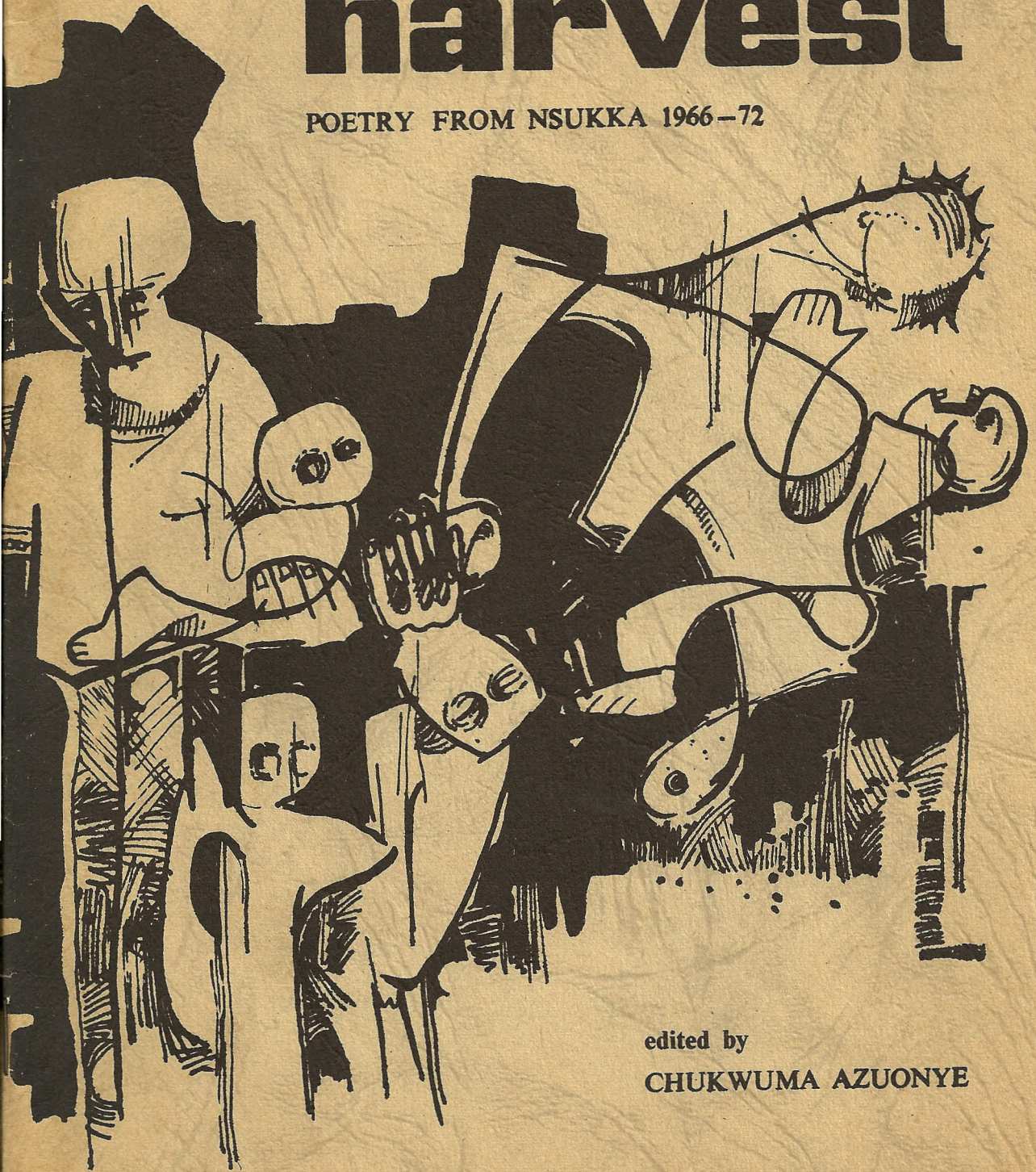
Chukwuma Azuonye, *University of Massachusetts Boston*



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nsukka harvest

POETRY FROM NSUKKA 1966-72



edited by
CHUKWUMA AZUONYE

ODUNKE PUBLICATIONS

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Chukwuma Azuonye

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Into the moments of each living hour
Feeling for audience

Okigbo, *Siren Limits*

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NSUKKA HARVEST

POETRY FROM NSUKKA 1966—72

Edited and Introduced By
CHUKWUMA AZUONYE

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NSUKKA

To
The Memory Of
KEVIN ECHERUO 1946 - 69

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INTRODUCTION

The mood of the Nigerian youth in the wake of the killings of 1966 was the mood of utter disgust over the incipient brutalization of their country. The title of a poem which Akomaye Oko cyclostyled and distributed at Nsukka early in 1967, epitomizes this mood. The Poem, Cleansing the Sacred Springs, is addressed 'to the progressives of Africa', and is similar, in its appeal, to Okogbule Wonodi's Two poems for the Leaders of Thought (February 1967); and in its prophetic concern for the pollutions of the sacred springs, it is reminiscent of the last strophe of Okigbo's Lament of the Drums. Oko presents, in four memorable lines, a bizzare picture of the chaos and barrenness that then threatened to swamp all national purpose in the country:

Now the men
lodge dormant seeds in barren wombs
Small-headed babies are born
who swallow their mothers.

In the face of these anomalies, the generation of young men, who returned to Nsukka in October 1966, felt that all was lost, and, in consequence, even where the Biafran attempt did not offer a panacea, it at least represented a new thrill - a new hope. Optimism became the keynote on the eve of secession; but it was optimism wide of the usual forms of national partisanship which accompany such revolutionary moments. Dubem Okafor greets the emergence of what he would call "the phoenix" in Path of Freedom; but the terms in which he sees it, are universal and represent a continuing human hope for regeneration after the blackest outrages:

The scorched seed
dormant and putrid in the old earth
has sprouted in the new fertile soil;
the squeezed bud
has burst into flowers
hanging on water shoots.

It is with the same humanity with which our generation of young men accepted this revolutionary opportunity that most of us rejected Biafra when it appeared to have turned reactionary to our hopes and aspirations. As Emeke Okeke-Ezigbo says in Rejection:

We drained our manhood
sleepless
spading in the heated blackout
to raise Ivory Salem on
quicksand

What we have there is recognition: recognition of a new dimension of "the great evil thing" that made the hasty young man reject Nigeria as the "drying lake" and accept Biafra as "the rising spring". There is the recognition that the sinister "They" (in capital), a realization that the reactionaries at the helm of affairs are continually present. In Biafra they were there as if to frustrate the zeal of youth by continuing the excesses that polluted "the sacred springs" of old Nigeria.

Okeke-Ezigbo's rejection is almost entirely rooted in dis-satisfaction with the misappropriation of relief meant for the suffering poor by the corrupt rich, who "shared meat at Lent". But that is basic. The poetry of the generation gathered in this book has in fact been described by a colleague as the poetry of hunger. In a way, it is precisely that. But the meaning of hunger of course has many other physical and spiritual extensions. You will find all these possible extensions in the poetry of this book; and so the bitterness of Okeke-Ezigbo's rejection re-echoes in many situations in our common Biafran life and finds its sublimest expressions in the Oduke song for peace, the play Veneration to Udo in which all the physical, spiritual and moral hunger excited by the decadence of the Biafran attempt, is confronted through a ritualistic dance drama.

Part of the starvation that overwhelmed the creative spirit in Biafra was the lack of materials for work. A good many of the poets collected in this volume turned to writing when they could no longer cope with the continued denial of their usual means of expression. There is also the fear that the artist might get completely rotten. The hunger behind this fear is deeply expressed in a poem which Kevin Echeruo addressed to an American friend early in the war. He says:

This poem is harvest ...
but by the time you read this
it will be new yam feast
or this yam seedling
will be rotting
between two harvests.

Frustration, futility and disillusionment are therefore the pervading mood of the poetry of this book. This mood reflects the sadness of a generation whose life ambitions had been cut short by "a sad and senseless" war, whose deathless vision of uncoming peace continued to recede as the physical waste deepened. Sometimes the very assertion of the vision strikes the reader only as a mere romantic hope, as in the following lines from Udechukwu:

But
The birds still shall sing
the sun still shall rise
Though ruins assail the silent sky.

Read into its proper context, such visions of the sun that "still shall rise" are really visions of futility. There is such a strong sense of abandonment to the situation (an acceptance of death as the new kind of life) that what sounds real is Ikechukwu Azuonye's service man's daily stock-taking of those whose death had really been heroic,

who served this time
for a burnt sacrifice.

Such stock-taking is part of the general preoccupation of the poetry of this book. Udechukwu's Lament of the Silenced Flute (dedicated to Christopher Okigbo) and my Petals of Fire (dedicated to a young uncle killed in action) are types of recognitive and consolatory rather than religious assertions of immortality. There are also oblique expressions of frustration. But as part of the general recognition of "the beautiful ones" born of the whole dirty mess, they excite various kinds of hunger which, whether magically or symbolically realised, are kinds of idealism.

Perhaps, Nsukka Harvest is after all "a gathering of Romantics" as Michael J. C. Echeruo commented after reading the first typescripts of this book. The romantic, and even transcendental, tendencies of most of these poems will probably declare themselves eloquently from a first reading. Almost every poem included here was full-formed by the spontaneous feelings that brought it forth and (talking from an intimate knowledge of all the poets) little revision had to go into the final form. The beautiful and, sometimes, the mellifluous are generally here and the very nakedness of the artist and his hunger demanded a poetry devoid of African back-to-landish classicism with their sometimes exclusive concern for the tapestry of myth, proverbial rhythms and idioms. These elements may be found in this poetry to a certain degree, but it is from "the open air" and from the impulse of the moment that the poet of Nsukka Harvest creates his images.

Nsukka Harvest, then, is the cry of young men. It is our wounded outrage, shall we say, against the crisis and war that threatened, and restively still threaten, the future of our people. The rubbish heaps and filth that informed Ayi Kwei Armah's The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born, and the dangerous revolutionary misadventures at the back of Soyinka's Kongi's Harvest are akin to the decay on which these sheaves have been fostered. But there is the inevitable effect of the climate of war: and its most noticeable effect, save for the voices of Nwabiani and Okeke-Ezigbo, is to resolve the satirical and cynical, and sometimes savage attacks, of Soyinka and Armah into the lamenting sadness and mystical undertones of many

of these poems. Further, we have here, to a greater or lesser degree, the spirit of the poetry of the generation of young English writers, who saw the First World War and whose dominant song is "war and the pity of war." The shock of the Nigerian civil war is still here with us, and in quieter moments we can still hear the "triumphant cannon-laughter" that followed trains after trains of refugees and whose last din lingers on, I think, in my Whispers of the Silence. Finally, Nsukka Harvest is the anguish of a generation who for three years fed on the "taste of ash" which Okigbo detected in the "air's marrow" as far back as in the Distances.

Yet this harvest is essentially the second Harvest of poetry from Nsukka. The theme of "the great plenty" caught by Peter Thomas from the recognitive lines of Eben I. I. Ibe's poem, Emergence, is essentially the theme, and spirit, of the poetry of the first generation of young men who studied and wrote at Nsukka between 1960 and 1965. Writing in a time of relative peace, or is it the euphoria of normalcy, that masked high-voltages of disaster, their pre-occupation was with "THE MUSE." They explored the meaning of the aesthetic experience, digging up the past, with the avidity of classicists as if to "trace the muse upwards to her springs." They found her in Okigboesque images of beauty, identified by Peter Thomas in his Great Plenty essay (THE MUSE 1972) as the watermaid, the dancer or the sunbird. It was with this preoccupation that Okogbule Wonodi published his first collection of poems under the title Icheke, the name of "a bird which is symbolically a seer."

By 1965, most of the students writing at Nsukka - Wonodi, Clem. Abaziem Okafor, Pol Ndu, Egudu, Bona Onyejeli, Edward Okwu and Sam Nwaojigba - had featured in important anthologies and literary magazines, and their poetry had become sufficiently engaging to suggest an anthology. This has been readily supplied by Ulli Beier in a volume titled Nsukka, long-awaited from Heinemann. If, and when, Ulli Beier's anthology appears, it will be the first harvest of Nsukka poetry and this "gathering" will then take its proper place as the second harvest anticipated by Kevin Echeruo in his poem to Ruth.

The reader of Nsukka Harvest will notice certain genotypical relationships with the older strains of Nsukka poetry. The phenotypes represented here are the result of the dominance of certain strains which were already there recessively in the earlier poetry. The difference is the intense concern for issues of national and political rather than personal aesthetic dimension, a concern which created the fine ears in Ndu's Royaldrums that could catch the sinister "murmurs of distant drums" - signalling war.

This harvest would have been impossible without the active encouragement and assistance of Michael J. C. Echeruo, Adiele Afigbo, Emmanuel Obiechina, A. O. Anya, Godwin Nzegwu, Uche Okeke, Chinua Achebe and the Administrator of the East Central State, Mr. Ukpabi Asika. They do not share any of the faults of this book; they are rather responsible for the fine details that have given it any merits it possesses. Thanks are also due to all the writers presented here, to the members of the Oduke Community of artists, especially to Obiora Udechukwu, Kalu Okpi, Joel Anyim, Paul Igboanugo, Okechukwu Uchegbu, Uzochukwu Ndubisi and a few others through whose toil we can now boast of this harvest.

Chukwuma Azuonye

Enugu
April 1972.



LAMENT OF THE SILENCED FLUTE

(in commemoration of Christopher Okigbo:
poet, prophet, prodigal)

The moonman has gone under the sea

The singer has gone under the shade

Okigbo, *Transition*

I. O V E R T U R E

YOU...

that girded your loins
and called us to the gate
whose flute sang to us
new songs each moon

without cease

Now that your flute is silenced
Where is half the song?

II. SALUTE

YOU...

lone voice that subdued the echoes

YOU...

firefly that left the bad bush
and grew into a star

YOU...

shrub that pierced the forest
and knocked the poplars with his jaw

YOU.

who changed your lunar flute
for a spear
that future generations
might not bite sand

If the moon has killed his chi's goat
What will the cat's back but touch the ground

III. SACRIFICE FOR REBIRTH

that a minstrel
dry of throat
may not cease to sing
and, we, keyless at the Gate
may yet listen to his flute
 send to Idoto
 tongue-tied at dusk
 not looking back

a black ant and a white hen
for in a palm grove
somewhere beyond the hills
the blood of her sunbird
merged for ever with sand

at the confluence of seven seas
 the Sunbird and his lioness
at the confluence of seven deserts
 a new bird takes shape.

FLEETING IMAGES

at the outskirts of the town
glimpses of black
fire-scorched patches
dotted with dried faggots
on forked charred stumps

we speed by
toward the evening sky

a few lonesome figures
quick glances from their hoes
occasionally waving
as we pass

tears well up
but cannot surface

fleeting images of black
but where do I belong?
at the transition belt -
 town and village
 beer and upwine
 or just drifting.....
 but it's you I miss, black figures
 as your images fade.

BEFORE THE PREGNANT HILLS

When the eye of the sky is shut
And its face is stippled with stars;
When minstrels plod the sleeping paths
Of these distant farms
Seeking the lost flute
By the withered tree,

Our famished streams
Snake through desolate lands
Dragging our saltless tears
To the banks of the distant river.

And we dirge here on sapless stems:
Young birds before the pregnant hills.

DREAMS AND ASPIRATIONS

a fire-crested hen
thrust her iron claws
through my rustic dreams
and assailed my ears
with electronic waves
from her rusty throat

but i shall lift up my eyes
to the East
and trail the footsteps of the mind
over the seas
the seven secret seas
the seven distant deserts,
till from the mystic domain
of the Grand Lama
i surmount, serene,
the smoke-shrouded noise
below my feet.

and i shall return,
not to propped-up breasts
and false sweat,
but to that place
where the eye of the East
can,
through the low eaves
of the homestead,
ease gentle fingers
to my eyelid,
opening my noise-dulled ear
to the fresh lyrics of the morning birds.

no longer through the streets
with men of hollow smile
no longer through the streets
with men of shallow mind

but through a path
beneath the bowing palms
to the clear pebbles
of the laughing brook
and to watch at sundown
the smiling face of the lake
in the moonlight.

RETURN OF THE EXILES

in the wake of the whirlwind
a woman stood in silence
 beneath aborted telegraph wires
a woman in black
 probing the avenue of ruins and giant grass
a woman in black
 before the beheaded palms
the birds are singing again
 singing home the exiles
the land is humming a dirge
 humming home the fallen
the whirlwind is over
and the exiles return
but they have no shelter from the rains.

AFTERMATH (1)

When this morning window
Reveals silhouettes of fresh desolation,
I wonder why we sing reason
When harvest is hate and rubble,
Wonder how we can sing
Where all is rust and decay.

BUT

 the birds still shall sing
 the sun still shall rise
Though ruins assail the silent sky.

ARS LONGA, VITA BREVIS

treading the shaded village path
this October day
ochres and umber
in the stripping green
dashes of cobalt and magenta
in the sky ...
impasto
chiaroscuro
washes and transparencies...

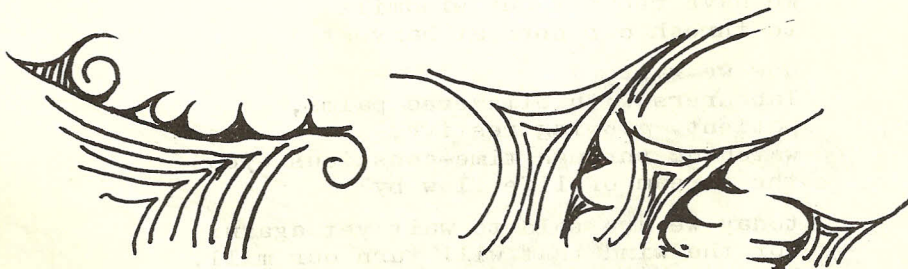
i raised my cadmium cry
over the shaded iron gate
but on
broken twig and stifled bud
cells and plasm, what and where?
lines and colours only are.

DRUMLESS MONODY*

Tonight the roving moon paled
behind a screen of solemn cloud.
Tonight the masquerade walks
the dual pathway of the anthole,

But there are no drums for the descent
There are no flutes for his return

And we, dumb as our drums,
dumb as our flutes,
Can only moan, silent,
For him who died but shall not die.



* Written after 'Biafra' Radio announced the death of Wole Soyinka August 1968

FAR FROM LOVE

I gambled in moonlight
for her love;
but that was three years gone
in these lost years
I weep my distant love
each time the moon appears,
and see again
(in psychic mirage)
that pregnant girl-shaped tree
by our village ama,
beside which we stood,
in moonlight,
and guessed at pregnant futurity...

NIGHT MOVEMENT OF TROOPS

Packed together
In open lorries
Shrouded in darkness
Total and almost tangible,
We move, towards
The noisy war-front,
Ourselves silent

We've had much casualty
In recent times
And we really hope
It won't always be so

The lorries roll on
In the darkness;
Night birds cross our path
And, in the silent sky
Stars begin to peep

WAITING FOR THE WIND

We have rebuilt our windmill
to thresh our corn at harvest
now we wait,
labourers with blistered palms,
patient, growing restive,
watching through time-conscious eyes
the stream of life flow by
today we are told to wait yet again:
for the wind that will turn our mill,
for the wind that may never come....

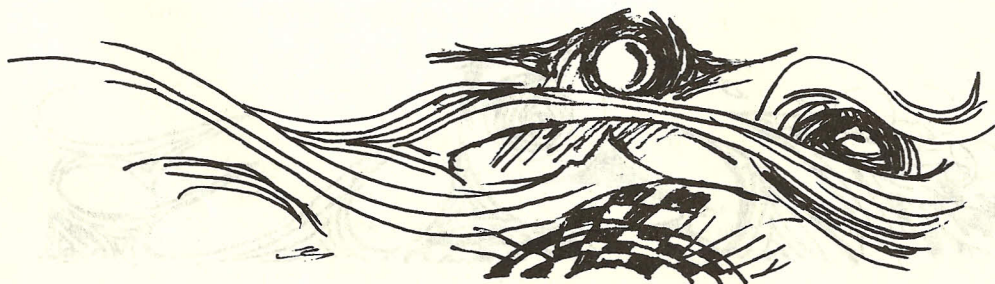
SACRIFICE FOR THE FATHERLESS

fatherless at dusk
a hundred blood-tinged eyes
peering into mine
out of the dark
 I must now be their father
 and mine
 and lead them
 into the fire,
this living fire reaching out for us,
a million fiery arrows
in a storm of sound:
I, first, then they:
 and at even,
 when the fire has burned,
I will count again to know
who served, this time,
for a burnt sacrifice -.

LAMENT OF THE FALLEN

I loathe to dream
stolen dreams;
But I must, now,
as I bend this dream to horizon's plane,
pulsing flesh and blood,
shivering on the mat
at peak of Eros' Everest,
as my octopus arms
move round every curve
magnetic - and tendentious

 I, even I,
by moonlight,
a thief of chastity.



YOUNG OLDSTERS

and sunset unstopped sunrise
the moon in eternal wax and wane.
there is peace in heaven

 next year is soon enough
Time cannot wait for us
matter grows, normal
abnormally real
enclosing stunted spirits,
shadows four years old,
 airy dwarfs
in giants' flesh

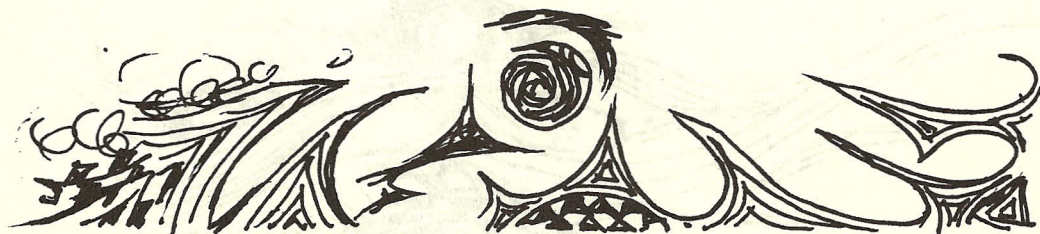
 next year is soon...
Time cannot wait with us!
bald-headed boys, toothless,
and grey-haired girls,
forty-years young.....

JANUARY THEMES

We have thrown our bivouac fires
to the four winds;
we have cast the myth of our shoulders
into the black forest

our silenced iron gongs
with quenched fires
crash tree-like into the woods
 into the rivers
fall by the pathway
and suck in the sand

those that trembled at our word
yesterday
stand today
and dare us to our myth
Gods have become Men
in the impulse of a night!



ON THE FADING SHADOW

On the fading shadows of
This dark hour hang
Your heart of pumpkin
Bearing no stem no stilt
These frozen tears
Beads of primy offshoot yet
Must festoon the lurking
Spirit... Where
Mourning dew is decoyed
In the still lungs.

So, all nights I sleep amongst you,
My sleeping ones, amongst
The flowered heap in the mud -
Ivory bones, jewel eyes, singed hair -
What hands, what eyes have caressed
In dream in wake
Your mangled faces?

Stand up, now, O my soul,
Before the passing flood
From the broken stone rushing,
For the dead within you, within you;

The dead within you
Passing cold over your living soul;

The sacred green stones
Spouting red pain.

The punctured apple-heart
Gushing pus.....pus
Forever
Burning light, smothering
Lights grey ash in fertile places.

TRANSITION

We were once dead,
And feared no more of another hunger;
And food was in a shadowing abundance
Reflecting light in a dry basin
On a wash-stand on the dry sands;
And the land was filled with milk
And honey that turned to stones
In peoples' stomachs; and the ponds,
Streams, rivers, except the salty seas,
All went up in steams into the grumbling sky
And formed heavy dark clouds...

JOSHUA UZOIGWE

And rain never came.

And our epitaph read:

'We died of hunger, never of the will.

And we journeyed laboriously
To found another God

- A terrible God

- The God of hunger

And this God said,

Let us make man in our image, after our likeness:

And let them have dome-shaped heads

Standing on hollowed spindles;

Let them have balloon-shaped bellies

Balanced on stilts;

Let them have dominion over

The pebbles of the sea,

And over the vacuity of the air;

And finally, let them be sacrificed unto me,
The Very God!

and so: through the midnight mist we walked

In the misty vein...aghast

As with cat-eye simmering

In the shuttled shrine cast off

From the sight of our brothers

We crawled on the mangrove mud,

Hing'd with the juggernaut of years:

Liquid ash drunk from common calabash

Curse stilt to drown;

Forked knife goggle-eye-slits

The apple's throat: Osondu's

Sockets telescoping

Onyije's bones - vulture-beaked...

The head without a body.

And we cried out aloud

Returning to our first God

- Alfa

- Omega

And we were heard.

We were once dead.

And dying, we now live in a roost

Perching with the sustaining gaze

Of a new-born babe

On a troubled world.

DRYING LAKE, RISING SPRING

We mount the precipice of life

And come down with a bang! or a boon!

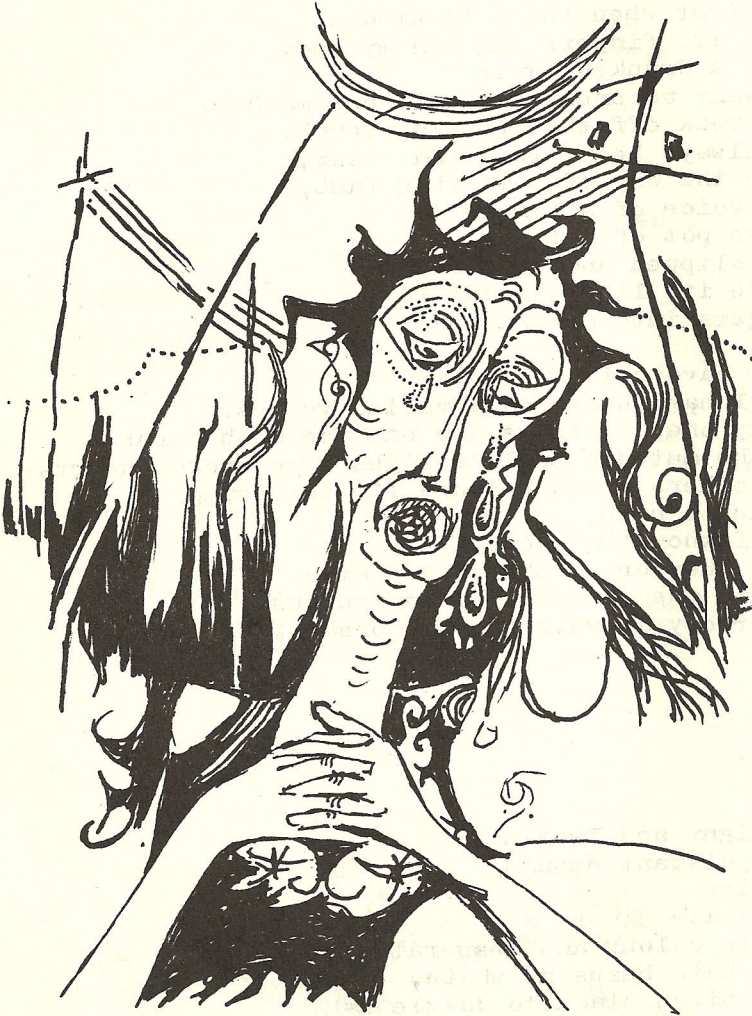
The resurrection is ended

And we begin life anew.

The senses come to a staggering pause
The nerves jab, jerk...vibrate once;
The body is dead;
The soul has risen.

We shall rise and stare heavenwards
Clamber up the narrow three-rung ladder;
Regeneration shall continue
And new stocks from there issue.

Let the three candles reverse their dark ends
We grope sheepishly down the abyss of fire
To be exhumed or consumed
To pay the debt of our forefather.



BROKEN POT

The heavy bosomed hill
Lies close to our house,
And the winding narrow path
Stumbles into our farm.
Up above, where the squirrels prance,
Or the naughty birds endlessly gossip
About my little sister and I,
I want to go and see
The king of the animals.

At night when the cold wind
Runs its fingers through my body
like a drunken lover
We want to press close to our mother,
To break off the crawling touch.
We always hear, loud and clear,
Like the cry of a missing lamb,
The voice of a virgin
Whose pot of water
Has slipped and crumbled
While its little fountain
Lingers into our garden.

Many have cried
And I have heard many varied voices:
Husky ones as folks who eat too much corn;
Or the muted ones like sighs from broken hearts;
And others which because I'm too young
I cannot name.
But I know that some
When they break their virginity
Within the shades of a benign bush,
Never cry as when the pot breaks.

HATE

Cantigny and Iwojima
Seem distant enough
In time
And space
Not in colour and desperation,
When hate burns us white,
From pitch black to dazzle ash
The only way to be white.

REVIVAL

I'll drink, dear
From the cups of your palm
Strong liquor
To wake my veins.
But drinking - shall not stumble
To kiss the earth
In drunkenness.

Lord Jesus - the midst and the light,
Dispensing beamstreaks of warmth
To all that yearn.
That naked - shall not stumble
To kiss the earth in drunkenness.

And so I'll back to Christ -
My soul! back to Christ
This is time to rent my soul
To his keeping
And tense my face to his tenement.

SOUL

Crazy pantomime
That ruffles the soul of music?
Or the clasped palms of an emotion
While dragging a step a tender leg
Amidst a tearful face and bleeding sore?

Let me understand: can it be
The wasting of waists
With buxom bottoms
Without the closed eyes of a lover?
Or the visible tears of a mother
While looking for her child?

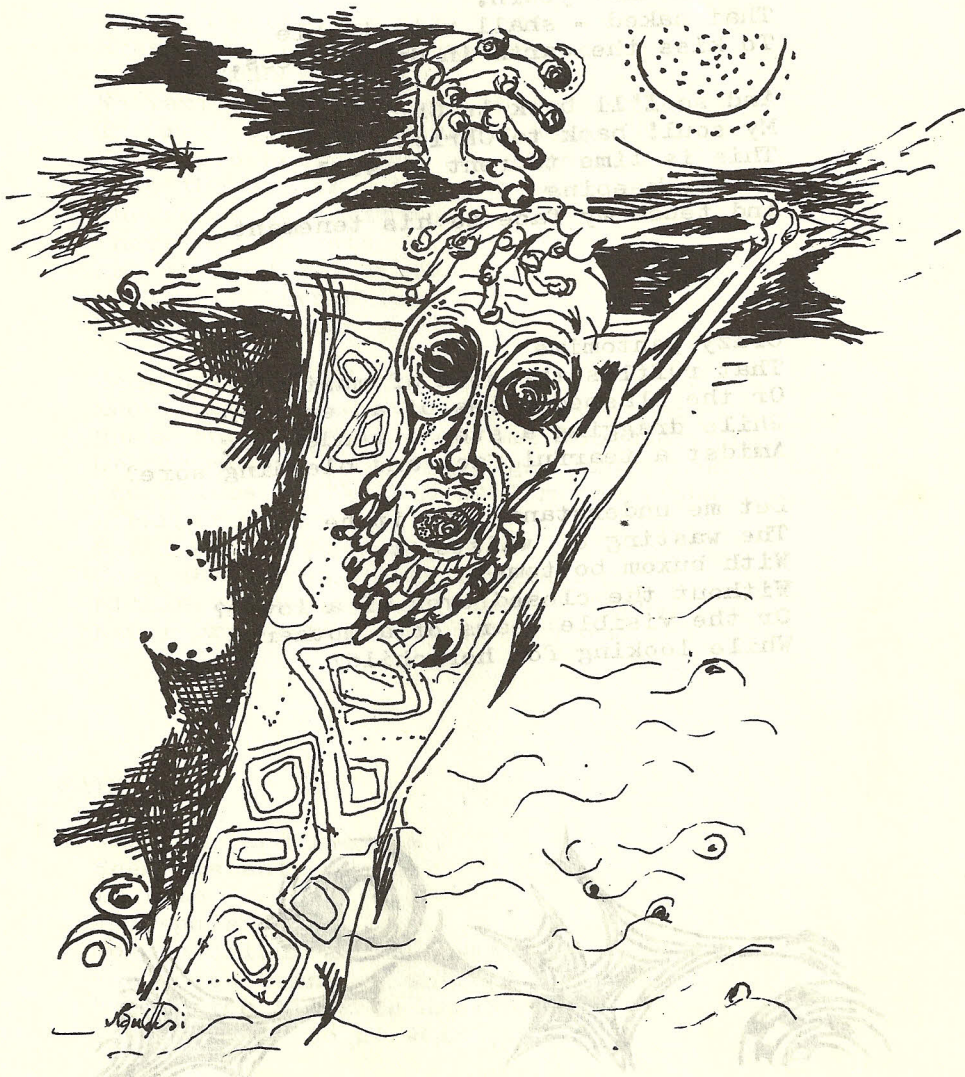


RESURRECTION

I saw my great, great grandfather
Coming back after spending a century
inside the soil.

He was groping his way
in broad daylight, carrying grotesque beards
Smudgy hands and visionless eyes.

His voice, a rusty esoteric rumble
announced a refresher course on earth,
for the dead.



PATH OF FREEDOM VI

The cold scattered ash
has smouldered into flame;
the scorched seed
dormant and putrid in the old earth
has sprouted in the new fertile soil;
the squeezed suppressed bud
has burst into flowers
hanging on watered shoots.

And so with hopefulness,
in faithful bravery we march
forward with the lion.
amidst the cyclic darkness
the new man moves;
and the glowing sun
amidst the dark clouds
leads us into light:
And from the swollen waters
the phoenix emerges:
and we march on
showing white teeth.

DUSK TO DAWN

| | |
|-----------|---|
| at dusk: | dusk is dark incepting when black and grey contend allowing streaks of silver here and traces of yellow there when boughs bow like thick black clouds and mountain fringes undulate like the thick lead lines in an artist's sketch book |
| at night: | the mingling of tones is achieved in the dominance of black |
| at dawn: | rusty brown becomes distinct with hues of green in black and brown yellow trickles among vegetation and the sky is a mass of blue with mounds of brown and patches of silver juxtaposed with faint yellow: |

ON A CLOUDY MORNING

these images of gloom clad in sack-cloth grey
like widows in a funeral procession
each clutches the other for support
they drag reluctant feet
their heads hanging low
their jaws gaping wide
they sob and shake
but do not express emotion
in terms of watery harmony
they build for the crisis

their gusty sigh sweeps the earth
then the rivulets of tears
rain down a shivering blessing.



THE TRANSFORMATION (*to the age that saw the struggle*)

The thing that brings tears on every eye,
that thing lies there

and eyes are dry!

The sound that sends our hearts pit-a-pat,
that sound roars near

and here we drink!

Who feels so deaf or is so blind,
who is so lame of feet that fails to swing
with the pendulum of time?



WAR CABINET ASSEMBLY

Let the lecherous love-starved lieutenant
bring his latest catch

The shouting staff-sergeant numbed from
the abandoned trench

The tattered militia-major scratching
inside his pocket

The rank and file heavy with loot
saluting every pip

As for the idle civilian, let him bring
those secret rumour files

They may all buzz in screw-faced
like a squad of hungry flies

To this august assembly
To plan the final invasion
on a heap of shit.

MEMORY IS MY WOE

Not the bleeding wound, but the jeering scar
Not the cry of agony, but the taste of tear-drops
Not just the cause, but the just cause and effect
Not the ruins of war, but the treachery of history

When mortal man can slip through the
tight fingers of death's immortal grip
And break through the impregnable
fortress of haunting dreams

Then shall memory cease to be my woe
And I too shall learn to court my foe.

ALL IN A MOMENT OF COMBAT

The sudden roar
Of thunderous explosions
The frantic stampede
Of frightened mortals
The booming of challenging boffors
The aak-aak music of oerlikons
The shrinking and choking
Of people cramped in bunkers
The urgent protestation
To the insouciant heavens
Of the black mushroom smoke
The instant rousing siren
Of the fire-fighting squad
The muttering of prayers,
The wailing and cursing
Of pairs of jittery lips
The hastened clearance
Of human wreckage
The triumphant survey
Of the hovering vultures
All in a moment of combat.



THE HARE'S HEAD

Only when the hare fell -
On its cunning path
that men,
with tongues of spade,
dug up the past -
of the cunning hare,
and his enemies -
the toad and the bat.

They made fine pots
or nice patterns on women's heads
with their tongues -

to win the hare's head.

Now, strong men fight women
for want of war.

They sit under cold fires,
with squared shoulders,
and loose bandages,
round their dry throats.

Telling stories.

And we laughed and cried
like the childless -
mourning a dog's death,
for want of a dead child.

I heard another laugh within my laughter.
It was the voice of the dead,
asking in jest -

Where was the hare's head?
And the palm wine?
Where were men
beside the fire?

CLEANSING THE SACRED SPRINGS

(to the progressives of Africa)

The leaves fall under the stones
of polluted air.
One whistled in the charmer's home,
the snakes rush out.

They have spoilt the Sacred Springs.

The chief washed the cloth and rags
that wiped his adulterous sweat -
committed in the forbidden noon,

in the Sacred Springs.

They watered the stolen goods
for the headman;
and rinsed cups in these waters

to drink wine -
blood-offered by the wicked one
to cleanse justice from judgement.

On the virgin seats of the gods,
under the ancient cotton tree,
by the Sacred springs -
they planned -

for the orphan's juicy lands;
the poor man's pretty bride;
and the people's blood.

They spat eggs into the waters
that hatched cannibal fishes
to feed on the sacred fish -

that oiled the floods
and cleansed the waters -

so
The floods stopped,
the sparkle ascended the sky,
brown watery blankets covered the waters.

Now, the men
lodge dormant seeds in barren wombs.
small headed babies are born
who swallow their mothers
and glide into the despoiled springs

Corn stalks lie in the farms - dead,
like unburied warriors -

"fallen on the way of life"

NOTICE

(upon looking at picture I have drawn)

WAKE ME

In the morn of Joy
At peace 0'clock

I left a quarter to war 0'clock
Upon my mind;
To tear-proof land
Where we sang one tune
where.....

AKOMAYE OKO

I am king.....

Only feast songs
Line my land.
Love swells the palm's bosom
Whose wine
My people drink and sing
of liberty and joy
Upon my bed.

I shall sleep
Till I can wake
To a morn of joy
Till they have shared
their powers and states
in the war-ground.
Till they have left
only
The Earth and my people under the Sun

ABA TO AFIKPO ROAD

Blaring like a hurt she-cow
in the forest night,
puffing along the skeletal spine
of a martyred adder.

The platform rushes from me
Then stately palms - top to top
in philosophic conference,
in the plains.

Then she crawls humbly at their feet
to avoid the death stare of the peaks.
Sometimes bridging their heads
to defy the steepness of their walls.

Another platform flees my occupation.

Then through a woody funnel
in the forest of green -
thick green, darkgreen, redgreen
yellow-green, browngreen -
Green to the thousandth hue,
under a skyground of clouds -
like milk cotton vulcanized into
a thousand evanescences.

Then into valley of dry walls
Shaven to the baldness of a vulture's neck,

Platforms, platforms, platforms -

Studding the fertility of green
or the bleakness of a shaven plain.
And they rob me of friends
that melt into their arms.

Then, a la fin -
with open arms, my own platform
to receive me and Ben from the Coach

AIR RAID

A noise like the boiling
of a universal kettle
Over a universal fire.
With all the world at random,
like the tempest of all the seas
tossing one mighty ship;
like the descent of all the seas
over a thousand rocky feet of steepness,
or the lightning of Heaven
before the rain that famed the Deluge.

And chickens are scattered
on the advent of the eagle
parcels of noise from the bird
and the chickens minced into eternity.
There is deafening silence,
and the vultures hover sleepily
over the smoke, above the ruins
like the closing music of an act.

FOR EMI

White scarves like wings
flutter in the air, in dance -
wings of birds
scarves of women
of the same feathers

the drummers have
their own banners,
can they? should they
ascend? should they
higher?

can the day and the dream;
yesterday and tomorrow
change beds?
and live?

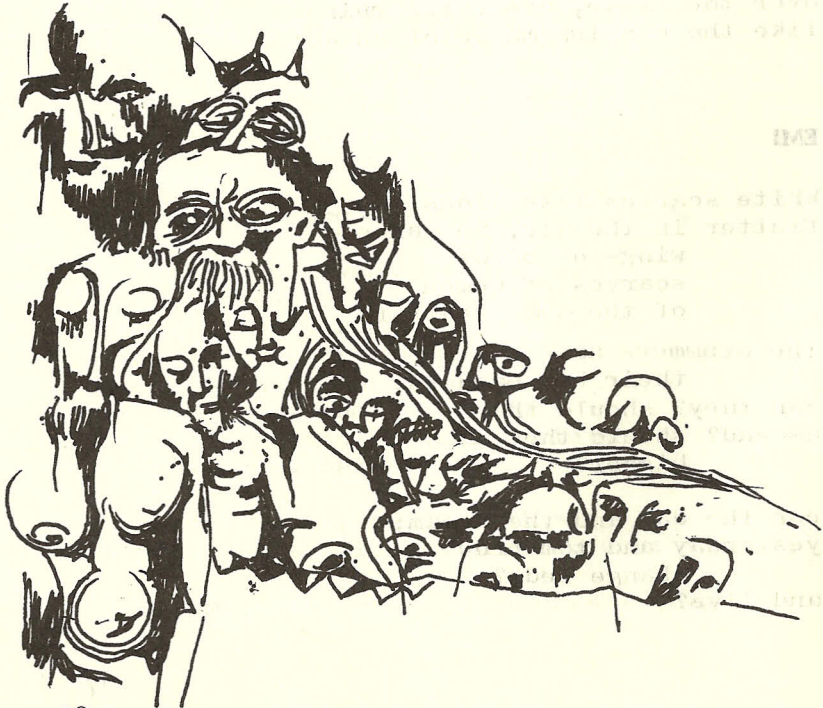
MEMORIALS OF THE THUNDERSTORM

pieces of delapidations,
broken odds and ends flung
here and there.
cymbals of a thunderstorm!

ragged shadows murmuring voices
solemn voices, low sad voices,
people from exile
returning home,
a race retired from soft cushion existence,
a race pensioned into corrugated avenues,
happy survivals sorry sights.
cymbals of a thunderstorm!

They file singly along unbeaten tracks,
erstwhile roads,
in the search of their onetime shelters,
along footpaths now grown thickets
gullied by the floods,
and ridged by deposits of ruins.

on weary feet
They waded through mixed bush and thickets
roped by twiners and tendrils.
sometimes falling down and getting up
till their destination,
blind with shattered, ugly remains of their homes,
memories of the thunderstorm.



NOSTALGIA

We mourn,
not so much the strange soil
we thought was fertile land,
neither for timepenny lost nor booktime fleeting;

Our lone hoe has broken
towards the last mound;

When
shall we sit
in the cleanswept open
in the background of playing
children well-mothered,
astride long kegs of frothing palmwine,
to food the harmattan fire
with the harvest wood,
and toast the new yam
in the natural harmony
peppered salt and
virgin palmoil?

When?

REJECTION

And so it was,
that we who were afield when
the blazing sun set at midday
were abandoned naked in the black
while kinsmen couched clothed dogs
in cushioned kennels.

And so it came to be
that we who gulped down
cathecism to receive baptism
we who bowed before that crucifix
feared the Sacristy
and stopped dead on roads
to say the Angelus
were to groan beside the guarded fence
as They dispensed cornedbeef in Lent
gossiped with the marketwomen
communed with money doublers
and They suffered
not the little children
to come unto Them

We drained our manhood
sleepless,
spading in the heated blackout
to raise Ivory Salem on
Quicksand layered with
wholesome blood and splintered bones;
dragged, rudderless
we are lumbered home
to re youth in coldfisted darkness
gilded with tepid rainbow colours

VACANT FACE OF NIGHT

vacant face of night
before my torch
I search

through flesh
runs full speed in royal emergency
the vision
sulking, stone hard -
consolation and adolescent sorrow

then to the hares
listeners
corks afloat
the diviner announces
the division - head to toe
the confusion in arteries and womb
silence reigns ...

which insect ripped through the web?
answer,
the spider is blinded
and the spider is tomorrow
at the maternity.

MOON SIX

In this innocence
this love, beauty -
Within this prophecy and chaos
is salt (Moon six)

Moon six
is season
old as God
Now listen to eyes
peering from their cam-wood habits
and hear tales told with the eyes

Moon Six
has waxed
and waned
and is waxing in silence
into the seventh sense
the limit,
fading into yet another horizon.
Age.

So to love and madness -
Love is pure and gentle as the moon
Which at its peak is
the beginning of madness
and madness is of art and poetry
the fountain of prophecy
Fruits of the NEW MOON.

HEAPS OF HUMAN DUST

Screaming group of maidens
along the streets
where the sand is wet
and red
under heaps of human dust
after the torrential waves
of red-hot lead

Our spirits hum a dirge
over these silenced heaps
of dust

They have signed the big Books
of temporal honour
and fertilized the land
with their blood
leaving their fractured walls
to those chapters
that will remind the young ones
of this day.

They have left those rumpled heaps
to scavengers
and flown, on eagle-wings
to the limits of the sky

STRIP-TEASE

See us naked
before a million eyes

Eyes that are shocked
that jeer
or sneer
eyes that sympathize
many eyes that feign indifference

Our nakedness aside -
we search the million eyes
for what men call Humans
They are only Black and White

Among the indifferent
We find the black eye very blind.
Whites giggle and sigh
In a single economic breadth

BLACK,
yes we are black
naked,
self stripped
to entertain a million glass eyes.
we are performers dying
to arouse the emotions of a plastic
White audience.

AN IMAGE OF HOPE

Tears at midnight
dropping uncounted, for
compressed memory, bringing
emotion, squeezing tears from me

Overwhelming...
lying in a gutter at midnight
for the drunk and the doomed

while my goddess
gone with the waves
reflects -

While my tears drop with rains
glow-worms abound showing
moss against my torso

Neon-sign from palm-wine bars
bustling quietude
of a cold wet night

YOUR IMAGE

now the warmth of you is gone
and in my youth,
ponder,...

When -

green, white and green
mowed down by the sickle
and knocked out by the hammer
got mixed up with
earthly stars and bloody stripes
a Union of -
Jack's confused lines,
persisted

And yet there were boundaries
the gutter for the just
a road for the multitude
the two of us at the cross roads.

Yet, Distance drums
a message as I dream

Next season,
Along three strands of the Muse
From the very beginning
Increase and multiply
On eve's bed ...

On grass of hope.

LAMENT OF AN ARTIST

(to Christopher Okigbo)

SHE will weep for me,
now the priest has left
the palm grove,
left the palm groves
the masks dance
in blood and black-out

Am I Christ for sacrifice?

Lord hear our prayers,
give the faithful departed
his pen and deep ink-pot
and Idoto shall rejoice
when ogbanje and his bagles
shall return,
never to leave
The Palm Grove for the Theatre.



AT THE BARBEACH

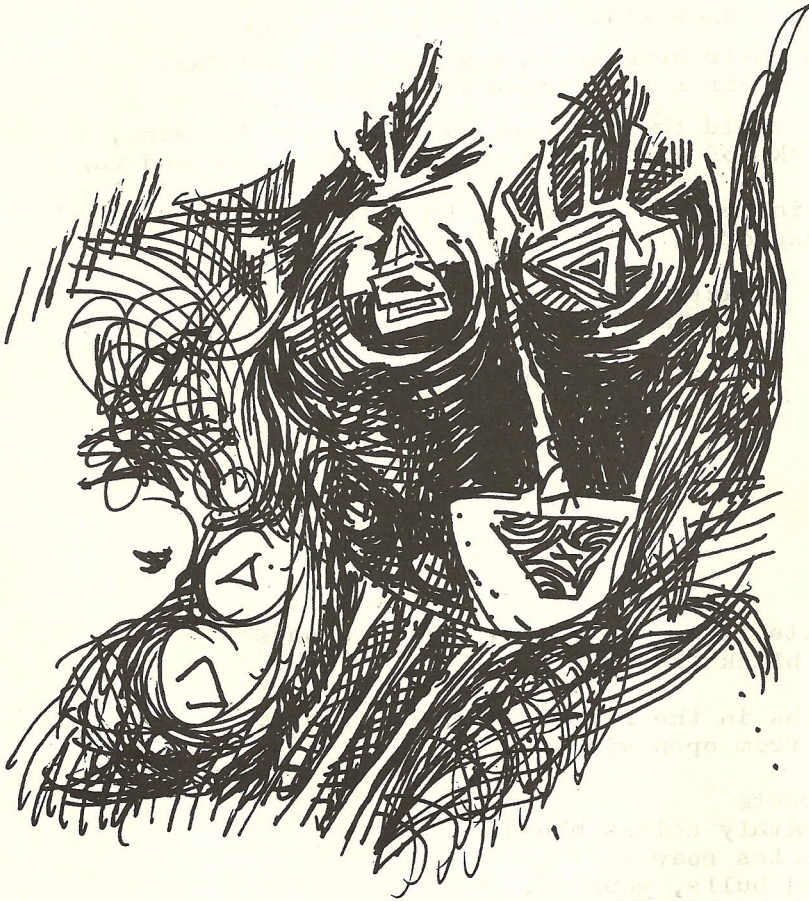
The sea sings a salty accompaniment
to the sandy-throated dirge of shots on drums.
As the crimson fountains spring,
the young sun sets
for the most dangerous seven.



From THE EYES

The robber's face will make the papers sell ...
 A hanky comes up quick. The eyes are veiled,
 The face is lost. The press will wait
 And the execution day will reveal the face.

The days are gone when those eyes raved,
 When the sight of approaching bullets could be saved.



LAMENT OF THE LIBERTINE

I burn away my life like sticks of cigarettes
Ashes fall and scatter with dying specks of me

My days burn out like sticks of cigarettes
and in my pleasures the smoke of my smoking days
choke and cancer me and blurr my visioned joys

And do you know what the boys are saying:

I am their hero because I am young and fast
I am their hero because I'm living well

If they could they'd change their lives for mine,
for sticks of cigarettes, and burn and burn and rage

I am being envied and yet I know for shame
I can expect no fruit of mine at harvest time

This is my autobiography, these ash trays
This is the balance-sheet of all my romping days:

Ashes and stumps

Ashes and stumps

REDLIGHTS

Cigarette lights like many little wounds
on the black flesh of night

Red bulbs in the rainbow surf of lights,
bleed, from open windows...

The streets
with deathly noises bleed
as vehicles roar past
like mad bulls, wounded,
splashing bloodtrails on the people's feet...

The town groans with split voices of hollow metals,
and faceless, the people move
silently on
from bed to bed

whilst clustered bloody eyes
of invisible giant spiders watch the streets

LAMENT

shadows of spiders
 blacken out the mystic face of the sky
 i look up and see a pale lake
 muddied by booted feet
 of masked figures
 searching - is it for periwinkles
 or coral shells in the shallow
 bed of the lake

cankerworms
 taint the goldfruit in god's own farm
 they eat the ancient man
 and his tale

starflowers weep, wilt
 their twinkling voices fade
 for the mystery is gone
 and the song lost in heroic salute of guns

in the bravado
 of leopardmen bringing home
 the diamond sickle looted from the gate
 the lone eye of the sky

i look up beneath the cottonclouds
 and see the moonsore festering;
 its pale yellow glow exuding
 conc sulphurous mist

WHISPERS OF THE SILENCE

Black figures in
 ruffled streams of darkness
 breaking hopes
 in triumphant cannon-laughter

Black figures
 melting
 in remorseless rains
 beating
 the tired back
 of the deathless cause

The faces are lost in darkness
 lost in the endless human race

Along the steelback road
 dark silhouettes
 massed like lost logs
 on the cold weeping earth

Faceless figures lost in the misty
 depths of hopeless breathing
 melting ...

in the black caustic whispers
 of the black caustic silence.

PETALS OF FIRE

(To the memory of Emmanuel Igbo)

i sing to shadows
in moons afterwards
 remembrance
 cold as rain-beaten ash
in abandoned hearths
 but lilies oft do burst
 like flames
 on heaps of ash

i raise a monument
over broken shells
over flesh my own flesh
 broken in the stormy heath
my own flesh like dead leaves
mashed into sodden ash of
 broken loves

i sing to shadows
to you lone spirit whose seed fell
 on desertland
whose flesh shall fertilize the waste
 the fire of whose heart
 unquenched
 shall flower there...

petals of the fire of spirits
from ancestral hearths

song flower

 filling the road and the forest
 with the incense of your zeal
 teaching the earth in crisis
 the peace of the dead

THE THIRD ANNIVERSARY

At dusk, yellow bells of allamandas ring unheard:
Dumb-knells for the stifled buds of may ...

No parade of leopard masks at freedom-squares
No microphones and guards of honour
No services no winesong
and tales of the heroic dead and thousands killed...

This is the earth's anniversary.

The fields are decked with buntings and flags
of flowers and fresh leaves
shadows and the pregnant air celebrate.
In incense of flowers, the sun birds
sing the requiem as the organ music
of the sad wind pipes through the whistling pines.

This year's broadcast is at dusk,
on the wireless network of the open air:
'It is enough....' That is all we hear...

At night,
the passion-dusts of yesterharmattan
settle back to earth and drink showers of rain:

Only the birds salute the rising sun
and we tongue-tied, drift on
watching
freshbuds break and new leaves
open their praying fingers up to heaven.

THRENODY

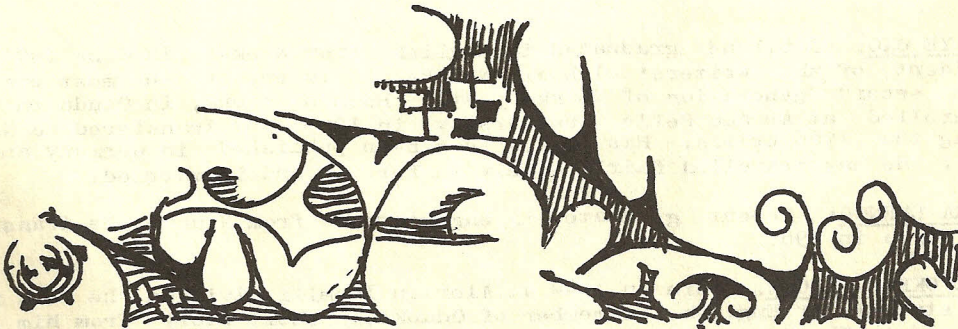
Long live the present holder of the grave.
May he never die, nor grow old.

None among us impotents will ever again aspire
to the golden bough.

Now that he is there, rooted,
May no goodwill rob us of his telescopic eyes:
eyes that have picked the pin-points of our goal
beyond two thousand years.

We fear
change beyond him. He is the end
towards which these revolutions of ritual murders
were sanctified.

Salutamus.



NOTES ON THE AUTHORS

OBIORA UDECHUKWU is a final-year student of Fine Art at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. Born in 1946, he attended the Dennis Memorial Grammar School, Onitsha, where he showed an early talent in painting and drama. With his friend Enukaoha Okoro, he founded the Nkisi Theatre Group Onitsha in 1966. He enrolled at the Ahmadu Bello University Zaria in 1965 and transferred to Nsukka during the 1966 disturbances in Northern Nigeria. During the war he worked as an artist in the Cultural Affairs Division at Ogwa where he was one of the founding-members of the Odunke Community of Artists, contributing the first movement and the epilogue of the play, Veneration to Udo. His poetry has been published in Germany and the United States of America. Now president of Odunke.

IKECHUKWU AZUONYE: born Easter 1949, is a medical student at the Enugu Campus of the University of Nigeria. His poetry is rooted in the war experience. He holds several first prizes in music in the Eastern Nigeria Festivals of the Arts and has arranged Igbo folk songs for the piano. He is a member of Odunke.

JOSHUA UZOIGWE: A member of Odunke, he has completed a verse triplet 'Onyije', 'Osondu' and 'Ndubueze', in which he looks at the war-experience from familiar Igbo name-symbols. He is a student of music at Nsukka and arranges folk music for the piano. He was born at Umuagu in 1944.

OZZIE ENEKWE: Among the first post-war graduates from Nsukka, he is well-known as a guitarist and popular singer. He contributes talks and musical features to the Radio in Nigeria. Now teaches Use of English at Nsukka on secondment from ECS School Board.

OGO AGU: A first year English major at Nsukka, attended Dennis Memorial Grammar School, Onitsha. He writes plays and belongs to the Hilltop Arts Theatre at Enugu and was Aaron in their production of John deGraft's Sons and Daughters. He is the assistant secretary of Odunke.

CHUKWUKA OKAFOR: a third year student of modern languages majoring in French. Has been in Dakar since October 1971 in partial fulfilment of his degree programme.

DUBEM OKAFOR: Born in Onitsha in 1943, he is a third year English major at Nsukka.

OKECHUKWU UCHEGBU: Editor of a popular Campus magazine, Agent 101, he is final year student of fine arts at Nsukka. He transferred from Zaria during the 1966 killings in the North. He is a member of Odunke.

BONS NWABIANI: Born in Oguta, he is a prolific painter and an active student politician. He is a final year student of Fine Art and a member of Odunke. His poetry has been published in Germany. He is married with a son.

AKOMAYE OKO: Until he graduated in English from Nsukka in June 1971, the president of the writers' club at Nsukka, he is one of the most prolific of the second generation of Nsukka poets. Born at Ipong, in Obudu in 1943, he enrolled at Ahmadu Bello University in 1965 and transferred to Nsukka during the 1966 crisis. His poetry has been published in Germany and the U.S.A. He has travelled fairly widely in Europe, and is married.

OBIORA EMENGO: Recent graduate in engineering from Nsukka, he transferred from Zaria in 1966.

EMEKA OKEKE-EZIGBO: Born in 1944 at Alor in Idemili Division, he is a final year student of English. A member of Odunke, a short story from him first appeared in The Insider (Nwamife Books 1971).

KEVIN ECHERUO: A multiple Festival of the Arts medalist and first prize winner in Fine Art, he won the all-African Arts Contest held in Tanzania in 1964. During the war, he produced his own plays and wrote poetry to compensate for lack of art materials. He died quite unexpectedly in September 1969.

MAUREEN EROKWU: born at Onitsha in 1948, is a second-year student of English. Her poems have featured in Omaba and in Odunke Writers' Workshop.

REGINA OKEKE: who is married with two children, is a final year student of English. She was the Vice-President of the UNN Students' Union in the 1970-71 session. Has published poetry in Omaba and featured in Odunke Writers' Workshop.

CHUKWUMA AZUONYE: Born at Okigwe in March 1945, is the general editor of Odunke Publications and editor of The Muse (literary journal of the English Association at Nsukka). He writes and broadcasts for the ECBS at Enugu and has published poetry and short stories in Germany and Nigeria respectively. He is co-editing Poetry from the Nigerian Civil War, now in press in the United States.

NSUKKA HARVEST

Conceived of as a gathering of student poetry from Nsukka between 1966 and 1972, NSUKKA HARVEST is bound to transcend its original purpose. It's poetry defines the responses of a generation of young men and women, most of them under 28, to the shock of the 'sad and wasteful' Nigerian war and to the ravages of the soul brought about by the decay of yet another revolutionary moment.



ODUNKE PUBLICATION No. 1

E R R A T A

- p. 1, para. 3, line 3 - "it" for "if"
- p. 5, SALUTE, line 11 - "gun" for "spear"
- p. 14, line 25 - "Ting'd" for "Hing'd"
- p. 17, REVIVAL, line 8 - "mid" for "midst"
- p. 29, NOSTALGIA, line 13 - "feed" for "food"
- p. 40, JOSHUA UZOIGWE, is a member of Odunke.
- p. 40, OZZIE ENEKWE (Osmond Onuora Enekwe) is
now an assistant lecturer and the editor
of the Nsukka Poetry Monthly, Omaba.
- p. 40, DUBEM OKAFOR, "1946" for "1943"