Donning the White Agbada

Abayomi Animashaun

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DONNING THE WHITE

AGBADAJ

By

Abayomi Animashaun

Bachelor of Science
Marian College
2002

Master of Fine Arts Creative Writing
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
2006

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

Master of Fine Arts Degree in Creative Writing
Department of English
College of Liberal Arts

Graduate College
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August 2006

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Entitled

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ABSTRACT

Donning the White Agbada

by

Abayomi Animashaun

Dr. Aliki Barnstone, Examination Committee Chair
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No poet, Eliot says, makes art alone by himself; he works with the collection of the dead and living poets around him. It is with this in mind that I have put together this poetry collection, Donning the White Agbada, in honor of William Stafford. Although the collection is dedicated to Mr. Stafford, it is not limited to him; it draws freely and extensively from different writers, different materials, and different periods — from the Christian Bible, to Robert Frost, to Sophocles, to Nigerian History, and to Yoruba mythology, among others. So that what is created (in my ongoing exploration of Western poetics on the one hand, and Nigerian /Yoruba poetics on the other) are poems that are oral but plain-spoken — as seen, for example, with the opening poem ‘What I Seek’, and other poems such as ‘The Elemental Prosody of Birds’, ‘Threnody’, ‘My Son’, ‘Kneeling For What Is Right’, and ‘Calling Water By Its Name’. The hope with this collection is that the reader gets a good sense of how deeply I appreciate some of the masters who have come before me and how they (Yoruba or not) continue to influence my work — especially William Stafford.
DEDICATION

For William Stafford
Master of the dark road
Father of Fish
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What I Seek

I must begin again.

Using alphabets the way I was taught
Is not enough.
I have to use the language,
In ways that help me navigate the dark.

Too many words, used too loosely.
Such continuous spiraling from meaning.

I am in search of the right words.
Those when spoken
In the right order and at the right time
Meaning happens –

An instant leap over the void,
Into the beginning.

A refastening of dual forces,
(One born of the other,
The other renewing the one.)

Both rediscovering each other

The world righting itself. –

As when the Lord stood
Within the dark and pronounced:

'Let there be light,'
And there was light.

I am in search of the words when
Put together, when spoken,
Hold me accountable to their manifold nature,
And arrest me when I am false.
Before I was Born, I Made a Pact

Before I was born,
I made a pact with the Maker saying –
I am about to join the living.
There is no other way.
The time for my departure has come.

Lord, if it is possible
Let me be in your forest one more day.
To dance around the white trees of your home,
And the purple lakes and seas,
Where red iguanas
Are forged against stones.

Down there are aimed arrows
Tipped with poison,
Long spears,
And amulets as never amassed before.

If I must go Lord,
If it is my destiny to wander away
From this forest white with trees,
Then let me take the memory of your name,
And words from your house,
That I might find in these the ways of creation.

And when I am born,
Carve words deeply in my palms
On a day parallel to that
When the hen made the world.
Calling Water by Its Name

Elder call water by its name;
They call it Olalore.
It is an entity with great powers.
Those who start the day with water,
In a glass, a bowl, or even a plate,
Calling it by its name
And saying –

Olalore builds and destroys.

Olalore build this day for me. Let my day be fresh.
Let any man that comes my way be fresh
Like the insides of a good guava.
Let any woman that comes my way be fresh
Like the innards of a nice potato.
Let me not be at home when destruction,
Bearing withered leaves on battered trellises, comes to visit.
And when it is on the road
Let me be at home eating my good guavas and nice potatoes.

Those who start the day with water,
Who call it by its name,
Who say these words,
Will enjoy its powers.

I, too, am about to leave my house. Olalore
Let my day be fresh like the innards of a potato
As I drink you from this bowl.

I pour what is left of you on the ground.
Let my passage through the world be fresh.
Let the road not swallow me.
To Hermes

Guard of night.

Weaver of dreams.

Giver of new landscapes,

The hour has come.

Trees are dressed in black,

Singing stories of children

Who drowned at sea playing fishermen.

Girls, their faces painted black,

Walk this land in a procession

Behind the black elephant.

Blessed Guide of the dead,

Stir me away from this passage,

And lead me back to that village,

Where my body,

Cold in the morning light,

Awaits my true arrival.
Prayer to Rain

Blessed one of the harvest —  
Husband of all dry maize quiet upon the stalk,  
Silent one who walks with fresh fronds glistening  
Around his waist. Naked one among the seeds sown  
In the time of spring. Bringer of bounty to the faithful  
Who never forget to raise their hands to her —  

Every morning, on the way to the farm,  
We see too many people at the road’s edge  
Sitting behind bowls with hunger carved deeply  
On their faces. They raise their gnarled fingers  
To passers-by who hurry on without a second glance.  

And at night, racked thin by hunger, they rummage  
Through the city dump for remnants of bread.  
We raise our hands to you holy one  
As we are about to fill the earth with seeds  
Bless us with a bounty harvest.  

The elders say that if anyone raises his hands to a god,  
Utters her name, offers a sacrifice, whatever he asks  
The god, without hesitation, will provide.  
We, standing on this crossroad, call you by your name.  
We raise our hands to you. Accept our sacrifice.
DONNING THE WHITE AGBADA
Playing Tennis With The Net Down

"...Writing poetry without form is like playing tennis without a net."

- Robert Frost

I play tennis with the net down
Rolled across the lawn and pushed to the side
On afternoons, the sun glaring on my back,
Sweat heavy across my chest.

I practice a slow paced served, that hangs
In the air long enough for me to travel
To the other side, bring the racquet low
And place a high lob.

All these years friends have pointed
And jeered. This is no game, they say.
What purpose to all this?
What point to prove?

Sometimes I watch them go at it.
The tightness on their faces,
The name calling, the rules waiting
To be bent, all call me back to my ways.

Now children come and watch
The ma who plays tennis with his shadow.
They ask if they can stretch the net
Across the lawn,

If they can play fisherman
In long boats on the waters
Ready for a big catch. I nod across at them
'In this type of tennis, even fishing is possible.'
The Second Passage

The seeds of my next poem –
Black, shriveled –
Sleep tonight on the table

Fatigued from laughing,
Straight cachinnating,
With the pens, rulers, and the moon-lit particles.

Others lie fatigued from digging wells that plunge
Into the center of the table
And paving roads for unseen goats that cross to the other side.

Black, Shriveled,
Some seeds of my next poem,
Sleep on the table,

Fatigued from wrestling with the others –
The ones that broke into a Latin dance
And fell off the edge,

The ones that dreamt of stolen women,
Boarded the thousand ships,
And sank with the fleet.

What other seeds remain don their white garb,
And walk one after the other on a dark road
In the direction of my next poem.
One's Art

Of all professions, we have chosen one
That demands we put ourselves behind it
In order to be reborn.

Such a demanding medium.

The prophets were right.
A kind of continuous dying is necessary
For us to reach a state of perpetual birth.

No wonder Stafford, Jimenez
Neruda and Elytis
Cavafy and Seferis

Yoruba priests and those of the Delphi –
Whose prophecies are revealed
Through poetry –

No wonder these, through the single act
Of raising their hands each morning
To the medium,

Are able to discover the right words
That lead us through uncertainties
And them toward the embodiment of their art.
How I Write

I write with the window open.
My attention fixed
Not so much

On the blankness of the page,
But to the people and shadows
Roaming the streets.

I sit outside. No shirt.
Perhaps a hat.

No tight-frown at the page.
No head bent in severe thought.
No chasing away children
That blabber and disturb.

I sit instead. Well slouched.
The curve of my back
Hung loose of the chair.

I raise my head at cars
Honking and speeding
To their destinations.

Then I raise my head
At the big breasted
Girl selling oranges.

(As I am doing now)

Today she is wearing
Heavily starched buba,
And her iro is swept quite tightly
Around the curve of her bottom.

I wave at her.
Buy a few from the lot,
How I Write (page 2, begin new stanza)

(As I have just done)

And watch as she carries on
Singing her ware:

"Omo Olosan de,
E ta Osan,
Omo Olosan de."

To which I laugh at a possible translation:

(As I am doing now)

"The orange girl is here,
Buy your orange,
The orange girl is here."

"The orange girl is here..."
How simple and beautiful
Her song.

Today, like yesterday,
And the one before,

I listen for this girl's song
Along with the bellowing punnh-punhh of the cars
Honking and speeding their destinations

And the hurried sounds of those children
That blabber and disturb in their hurried,
Mind bending, chase of one another.

These become guides
To the inner-outer fields of existence
Where poems pause for those
Who are open.
Ode to Soyinka

There is a road you follow where
Travelers wear their hair white.

You came into the world with
Palm fronds held tightly in both hands.

You came with your mouth open,
Ready to sing.

Though an infant, you were brought into the counsel of elders.
They held you up on the seventh day of your birth and nodded
'This is he we have been waiting for.'

Though young, you understood how you arrived in the world,
And what amulets hung lightly on you neck.
Even them, when placed by other infants
You related stories of the dark forest and the god of iron.

We all saw you grow, tending your father's garden,
Breaking what withered leaves hung stupid on the roses.
Especially the roses. Here, in the garden, in this parsonage,
And the world of ghosts all around, Master Hunter,
You completed your higher studies in the inevitable.

Many times you have wandered the forest
Hacking your way into new countries
Where the people in their ghostly ways welcome you
And take you to their elders, who in turn throw a feast in you honor saying
'Our child among the living has now returned to us.
Let the women pound yam, the men tap wine, today is a great day.'

When word came that you were held in a dark room,
Ode to Soyinka (page 2, continue stanza)

Held down with chains and sentenced to solitude, we sang to Ogun. 
The god of iron sent word of life, laurels, and oils on your feet.

Giver of laughter in the height of noon. 
Master Hunter who sings with the night owl. 
Father with the axe, rescuer of dawn, 
It is time again for your dance 
At the edge of the forest.

—

There is a road your follow where people wear their hair white 
And sing of the beginning and the end of things. 
One foot in that world, the other in this, 
You sing praises to Ogun wielding an axe.

Master Hunter, singer of songs in the dark forest, 
Storyteller with tales cared neat on trees

    Of Baroka and Sidi
    Trial and Metamorphosis of Jero
    Pentheus and Dionysus
    Death and The King’s Horseman
    And Life in the parsonage

—

Oluwole
Akinwande
Son of Wild Christian
Of you we heard long ago
Pre-Requisites For The Gift
Of Prophecy

To divine for another
You must learn the art

Of casting the oracle
The right way

And holding the door way
Of your life open

For those
Who have come before you.

Mastered,
You follow your path
To the right end.

All things become a blessing.

The parting of winds,
The breaking of light,
The single turn of a leaf,
Become divinations.

Even the dew collected
In a plain glass of water

Becomes ‘That-Which-Prevents-Death’.
The Unseen

They come with the second flood —
At the hour when
We are high-wound in the dullness
Of our daily work —

Singing the tunes before the first words —
Before the separation,
Before the creation got drunk on wine
And left the act to the hen.

They come carrying
Pots filled with no water,
And trays with no trinkets,
Walking among trees,
Their cold bodies gleaming dark
From the river with no water.

—

On the streets, we don't see
The long rounded shapes
Of their footprints, nor
Hear their murmurings.

Still, everyday and in the same hour
They sit beside us. Wash their infants
Beside us and conduct their festivals.

They send their children to their school
To learn their own alphabets and
Make their own music.

—

We await their dark arrival —
That gust of wind,
That last minute breath
Against the thatched leaves.

The fire catches.

The carpenter tightens his grip
Pounds in place that nail with the hammer.
The farmer pulls hard at the weeds.
The school teacher points his stick,
The third time, at the map of a people near-forgotten.
The student raises her head from a book.
The man locked-gentle with another woman,
Feels the sudden need to be home.
My Son

The boy I never had
Goes to school
Somewhere.
Every morning,
He packs his bag
And walks away
From the other
Boys and girls.

He skips school a lot
Distracted on his way
By rats, lizards,
And spectator cats on window sills.
Sometimes,
While chasing a stray,
He winds up at the school gates
And goes in grudgingly…

He sleeps during lectures,
Questioning the need
For adding or subtracting
Using such stupid tools
As numbers.
Nothing in school matters,

Save the stories
Of occupations and conquests,
Rebellion and uprisings.
He sleeps during
And after recess.
Most times, he is asleep
When the final bell rings.

After school,
He returns
To the village of the unborn
My Son (page 2, continue stanza)

To join the other children,
Everyday wondering
About the uselessness of school
And the fool that denies him life.
"I am not I..."
- Juan Ramon Jimenez

I am not the one who moves
Inside this one
With the sad eyes and drooped cheeks,

The bald one leaning from the window
Waiting for the return of his head-strong child
Who roams the night for a fix.

No, I am not he who heaves uncontrollably,
Who leans into the silence and waits
For the next knock at the door —

Another bimbo his child’s age
Wearing scented panties,
High heels, and a coat too large.

Look at him — standing in front of the mirror.
How malnourished he looks with the thinned neck —
What bend to his nose. What multiple stamp of warts on his face.

No. I am he who tries to hold his chest steady in the dark,
Who reminds him to pull his coat from the rack
And step into the night to search for his child.
Archetypes

Yesterday,
Looking at the round,
Sunken, eyes of a snake

I saw the perfect replica
Of my collapsed face.

In those unblinking eyes,
My head was compressed and elongated,
But robust an full of hair.

My neck was thin,
But revealed no lacerations —

No long years of operations.

Looking at it, I saw
It too was observing its own image
In my run-down eyes.

I knew it too
Was creating a replica
Of its own body.

(I wonder what happened
To the thick long cuts on it sides
In that new image of itself.

I wonder too about the underside of its tail
Caught in the dusty net of its own slough.)

We stayed like this for awhile.
It, with its neck crested long and soft atop a log.

I, bent-limp and hung
Over a stick, staring down.
Archetypes (page 2, begin new stanza)

This was no omen.
Just an extraordinary circumstance —

Two beings understanding better
Who or what is was
Through the eyes of the other.
An Ordinary Day

Nothing special. An ordinary day.
Trees waving on their height.
Squirrels knocking at my door.
Dead friends walking in and out of walls.
Kneeling For What is Right

If in the right hour, you kneel by a tree on crossroads,
Making sure the palms of your hands are placed
Gently on its bark, while whispering in a chant –
‘Young men are blessed when they kneel
In the presence of their elders for what is right,
Bless me with your presence tonight’ —
Then watch as two people (a man and woman)
Step out of the tree.
Both bald. Chalk-white from head to foot.
Their sockets shining empty and lined
With traces of mud and retired insects.
Yet both holding each other’s hand,
And nodding continuously
Knowing why you, at a time when people are asleep,
Have called upon them to look in your direction,
And open their dark mouths your way.
If you’ve chanted the right words,
And spoken with a correct heart, you’ll find
Upon returning home, your sick wife
Carrying a pail of water inside the house
To begin preparations for the morning meal.
CONVERSATIONS WITH WILLIAM STAFFORD –
(FOUR LESSONS, TWO PRAISE POEMS, AND ONE ODE)
The First Lesson

The thing
To keep in mind
Is to make time for sleep.

Sleep.

After breakfast, sleep.
After lunch and dinner, sleep.

After composing a line
That relatively meets you well, sleep.

This, Mr. Poet is
The first lesson in poetry —
The practice of being still;
The practice of letting go;
The practice of resting your reason
Beside a tree and waiting
For your heart
To come along
And guide it home.
The Second Lesson

Speak the second language
Fashioned from words
Alongside the unknown.

Set out early
Into the darkness of it all,
And allow yourself
To be led by an aged hand.

Mostly, you won’t know
Where you are going.
All the same trust,
And cut onto the next road
With words held hard.

And slowly,
Without method or plan,
You’ll recover remnants
Of a lost country,

Where goats smoke all night,
Lost children play at sea,
And black elephants lead the dead
In long processions
Through dark forests.
The Third Lesson

There is a part of us connected to the infinite
That needs to be satisfied by the music of laughter
And the long sweet complaint of birds.

It is the part of us anchored long ago
To the depths of the ocean by a dull hook,
Its line frayed, the hand leading it old.

It is the part of us swept clean of impurities
By that hand which glides us steady
Through those paths prepared for us before birth.

It is the part that wanders far —
After the pull of the thread, that tug of the hook —
Into the musical strain of the hour.
How to Speak The
Language of Birds (The Fourth Lesson)

It is not as hard
As it sounds.

Three steps really.

First:

You need only wait
For the flock to arrive.

How you wait —

On one foot
Your neck crooked —

Does not matter.

Where you wait —

A garden, park,
Or junkyard —

This too,
Does not matter.

Be sure to have bread crumbs
At the ready.

On seeing you
With its morning meal, that one
Wayward among them
Will alert the rest to your kindness.

Don't be afraid when they flap
And inch toward you.
Second:

Pay attention to how they,

On this morning,
Bend their necks and peck
At the scattered pieces.

Bend and peck
At the scattered pieces also.

After all,
This is a communion.

Last:

On the third day,
One among the flock
Will meet and lead you into the fold.

Tear and sprinkle the loaves again.
Only this time, listen

To the pecking and cooing,
Fluttering and crooking.

Do likewise.

By now, and you might not notice,
She who watches over all the birds
Will be circling above you —

Her feathers concealed by the blue
Light of afternoon,
Her wings thrashing
Among the sky's massive cumuli

Her beak long and arched
In your direction.

There will be no visions.
No trances.
No spells of delirium.

Arrive early
The following day,

And watch
As the miracle of that morning
Begins to unfold.
What Bill Stafford Knew

Dead deers
Edge of a canyon
Reason for unseen stars
Camps people sing at night
Old hands and black hats
Farms where the dead drink
Length of a side wind
Silence back of all things
Gates along a thread
Roads west of all cities
Stories that could be true
Travels through the dark
Kansas where it all begins
Directions on How to Find Bill Stafford

It is inherent that you be drunk on life.
Go on! Dance with the beetles along a worn path.
Swap clothes, so that now

They wear your pants, shirt, maybe your hat
And you in turn, their breastplates
Their black carapace — round and shining.

Dance along the edge until you arrive fresh
On the next page. There, seated along the dark
Of the early morning surf, you'll find the holy one —

Father of fish, his net spread loose over the sand
His boat upturned and resting by a tree —
Holding conversations with the fish gathered round.
Ode to Bill Stafford

Your poems were never to a set agenda.
What words people marveled at
You put aside, for what others might call
Mundane, out of place, too ordinary,
All too available.

Every morning at five
You the explorer, put on
Your gray shirt, khakis, and shoes
And went in search,
Not of a poem

But the first faint call
Of a fish hook glinting dull in the mud,
A lost country on a wall where
Ants pass on the right,
Black hats with voices
That ride our thoughts.

You, the explorer with the dull
Glinting hook, did not throw it away
For lack of promise.
You held fast instead and listened
To its real music,
And danced along the shore.

You became a flute-player,
Father of fish, and they
Hearing the melody
Dance onto the shore
With their fish legs after you
Twisting their fish bodies
Doing the holy wiggle.

You, the explorer, gave your
Gray shirt and khaki pants
Ode to Bill Stafford (page 2, continue stanza)

To the lead fish – still dancing –
And walked into a high cabin
White from the sanctity of the hour.

And your sister waiting
With scarves, and gloves
Laughs at you because she knows
You’ve been dancing with the fish
To a melody all too forgotten.

How strange that we laugh at your explorer ways
How you go out in search of nothing
And come back complete,
With ants, fish, deer,
Black hats, white suits, a war camp,
Dead people, a lost country.

How is it that for us that come after you
Your music is old.
Must poems come from grand ideas?
We are so intellectual.
We forget sometimes the best
Lesson is the complaint of birds.

And your sister,
Waiting, steps onto the hard
Snow-covered ground
Fasten dogs to the sled
And waits for you to come out
Decked in winter gear.

Father explorer,
What will you find?
Threads in the snow reaching
Deep into our silence?
White horse dead
Ode to Bill Stafford (page 3, continue stanza)

In front of your sled?

This morning I found your shirt
And khakis, well washed,
Hanging on the branch of a tree.
The hook, anchored to the front right pocket,
Still glinting dull.
On Leaving Lagos:  
December 28, 1996

(After Cavafy)

As you set out on this journey to leave Lagos,
Wish that the way be long,
Full of adventures, full of knowledge.

Don't be afraid of customs officers with cocked
Berets and machine guns.
You will not find them on your way.

Wish that the way be long.

May there be many mornings
With such pleasure, such joy,
As when you enter the ports for the first time.

Always keep Lagos in your mind.
But don't hurry the journey at all.
Better if it lasts many years.

If you find yourself in that country an old man,
Rich with all you have gained along the way,
Remember, Lagos gave you the beautiful journey.

Without her, you would not have set out on the way.
She has no more to give you.

If now you find her poor, Lagos did not betray you.
By then, with all your wisdom, all your experience,
You will understand what Lagos means.
History Lesson

On the wall is a map of places, the so-called explorers—Mungo Park and the rest of them—Discovered. But did they know Of my longing to kiss you tonight?

Did those leaders who went to Berlin In 1885, when they sought to open a 'dark continent', Did they know of my lusty need to ravage your breasts Holding you against the cold stove?

(This is taking too long!) Why not travel to my chest, And I to yours on that bed You know so well, and rewrite history The way we know how?
At a Supermarket

At a supermarket an old man in white shirt,
Tucked in worn blue jeans, sees my hand in yours
And shakes his head in disapproval.

We pick eggs, bread, doughnuts.
You raise your nose, as we walk past
The meat cooler with cow-tongues and ox-tails.

In the beverage aisle, two women look at you
As if you stole something from them.
They roll their eyes at me. You don’t notice. I do.

First check lanes, then doors, where the old man still stands
—in disapproval. My hand finds yours. I call you pale one.
You call me monkey.
The Roadmap Of My Life

Opening the roadmap of my life, I find
Stenographed on each page some of the words
Stolen away in the carelessness of youth:

_Buba, Sokoto, Iro, Agbada, Ewu, Bata_
_Igi, Ewe, Ikoriko, Igbo, Ode, Ibon,
Okuta, Omi, Okun, Osa._

I have wandered for many years
Taking in the ways of those in this city, and ignoring
These words (and others) within me.

These words seem so foreign now, yet
So palpable and true, near opposite
The grandiosity of fellow immigrants

In this country, who say
'Ve, the Yoruba men, in foreign lands
Are ghosts without origin.'

Here (in this country) I got dressed
In the _Buba, Sokoto_, and _Agbada_.
To my surprise,

I found it all fitting, still.
I tried on the _Bata_,
And this was also true.

I closed the roadmap,
And continued with my journey.
The instant outlaw with origin.
The Game

When finally I took you home,  
To visit the family, there was uproar.  
The old women saying they would not  
Talk to me anymore, all because  
I brought you, love, into their midst.  

I would walk past people,  
And there would be the same old rolling  
Of the eyes, the inadvertent snide remarks,  
And the long lasting onrush of gossip.  

One woman, especially upset,  
Promised to do all in her power to make me 'suffer'.  
Saying I had brought shame into her life.  
Love, no one really said why they were mad,  
But I knew it had something to do with you.  

How you were left miserable,  
All those times I ignored you —  
Sleeping around instead — knowing fully well  
You had no choice but wait till I returned.  

Worse, I rocked to the songs against you in Yoruba  
And made fun of you with those other men and women.  
Though, my mother saw through the spectacle. Knew what I was doing.  
Yet, what criticism she brought I left unheeded.  

Now we're on the plane, half way across the Atlantic.  
Me on the aisle. You on the window seat.  
You are busy with Breytenbach, leaving me to sort through those few days —
The Game (page 2, begin new stanza)

And I recall how shy and quiet you were, not understanding
The tiniest phrases, save in standard English or pigeon.
How you became invisible, even the house girl forgot you were there.

These days we continue in the new silence of our lives,
Playing a fine game of shadows and pretences.
Only now, the roles are reversed.
Two People

Even here, in Lagos,
When I sleep,

I dream of us re-enacting
The tale of Echo and Narcissus:

Like Echo, you are inflamed with desire.
Though, you lack the where-with-all
To reach for me with your own formulations.

I laugh as you hide again
Behind a bush.

And I listen as you hang on to the words
"Come!" & "Together!"

You repeat them again and again
While I, in my boyish ways, look on

At my reflection formed
Perfectly in a pond.

And there you go again.
"Come!" & "Together!"

I look up briefly recalling
That curse placed on you
By Heaven's Queen.

Yet, before I form that notion
To find you

I find myself marveling
At the fine physiognomy
Reflected beneath me.

Our re-enactment stays true
Two People (page 2, continue stanza)

To Ovid's story.

Only, right before I awake,
You whisper "you" & "me".
Men of Serious Ways

On Karimu Street,
The important man was easy to tell apart.
It was always he behind the thick mustache,
Bent serious on the railing of an upstairs balcony.
Everyday, always the thick mustache.
Always the stern look of a person
Lost in complex thoughts.

We, the children, knew to stop running
When passing such men.
Something about their mustache glistening
In the red of evening confirmed

These men knew the secrets of the universe.
Solemn, we walked slowly past them, our lips tightened.
Our brows furrowed in deep imitation.

Always, we stopped and bowed before them.
Only then did we resume our waywardness
Chasing after soccer balls and cola bottles.

Time and again we were reminded:
"Real men don't chase after cola bottles.
They feed on books all day,
And look stern in the evenings."

Now older, years of school behind,
I come back home from a long day
Of scrubbing the public toilet.
Drenched with sweat.

And stepping into the cool of evening —

With thoughts of the park waiting to be swept
Hanging over my head,
Men of Serious Ways (page 2, begin new stanza)

With my back tight from bending,
Kneeling, scrubbing, and standing, at one stall

Only to start the routine all over in the next —

Leaning slightly over the iron railing,
Easing the tenseness and cramps
Collected along my spine,

I hear a smoldering of laughter,
See two boys pause in front of me.
Nod. Before going their way.
The Way of the Moon

In this city the moon
Walks the streets
Dressed in white damask

Have you seen her

Out there in your garden
Filled with guavas
She is taking a bath

Even darkness gathers
Around her white dress
Hung loose by the well
A Faint Howl

Looking from the cold sill
Of my window
Into the surprised silence of the morning—

No boys shouting
No infants crying
No goats roaming—

I find four men, bent
By a tree

Lifting and hitting
Hitting and lifting

In near-synchronized motion
With the wide sticks held
In their hands

I wondered what thief had the luck
Of stealing their hens,
Or shirts, or pots.

Only then I heard a faint howl.
I heard the voices, too, urging
"Bark!, damn it"
"Stupid dog!, bark"

All the while,
Without knowing why,
I see these men,

Grown as I,
Busy in their continued beatings
Of a dog silenced,
And tied to a tree.
A Faint Howl (page 2, begin new stanza)

A moment's lapse,
Maybe fatigue,

One of them stands back —
His head cocked,
His arms akimbo —

Marveling,
Shaking his head
In renewed anger,
At this animal's quiet defiance.

Then, I swear,
From the cold crooked sill
Of my window

I see my friend, Akanbi,
Trapped and bent
Within the body of that dog —

Akanbi, whom we mocked
For being so damned Victorian

With his swear-soiled suits
And stupid kerchiefs.

Whom we mocked
And called an anachronism.

Who never listened to us.
And we loved for never listening. —

No wonder, when the dog came to my house
It stood at the door
Until invited to come in.

And no wonder why, though weak
A Faint Howl (page 3, continue stanza)

And barely able to move,
It never initiated its desperation for food.

Akanbi.
So mannered.
So cultured.
Even as a dog.

Now, at the point of death
My 'gentle-man', Victorian, friend

You see me running toward you
Yet you make to stand

Thought your ribs are broken
And your legs continually wobble.

And together by the tree,
We watch as the men
Walk away in the distance

Making howling noises,
Barking loudly like dogs
And mocking you
My dear friend

Repeating the antics
We produced years ago
When your mannerisms
Baffled us.
A year has passed
Since I composed my last poem.

(And I know you will think:
'This is an excuse and not a poem.'

It is both.)

Things got in the way —

The demands of a child plagued
With an incurable disease;

The arrogance of an ex-wife
Who 'has found happiness'
With another man.

The daily toil of rising limp and achy
Each morning for a farm job
Where my 'I' is raked and plowed
And mostly forgotten among the sow —

A year now of circling full speed
Trying to meet the demands
Of our trapped lives.

Yet remaining stuck.

"The girl?" She's still sick.
"The woman?" Still flaunts her man.
"The farm?" I'm still a sow.

Yet, this morning,

(After the normal tiring push and shove
At Idi-Iroko bus-stop.)
The Elemental Prosody of Birds (page 2, begin new stanza)

Amid the warped humidity, the sweat,
And the odor of at least sixty others

Packed tightly within
This accursed locomotive
Made for half the number)

Getting sick and tired
And absolutely impatient

I hear the croo-ing prosody
Of pigeons gathered
At the foot of the bus

Singing in iambs —

Whihpûm. Whihpûm. Whihpûm.

Surprising me with enjambments —

Hsuwêë
umh.

Hsuwêë
umh.

Hitting home spondees —

Swhe Swhé.
Swhé Swhé.

And rounding off with anapests —

Ktwe ktwe ūh.
The Elemental Prosody of Birds (page 3, continue stanza)

Ktwe ktwe ūh.
Ktwe ktwe ūh.

Only to begin again
Just when I think
They are done.

In our cramped condition,
I lean back in the seat
(Just as this man to my right is doing)

Into their continued *croo-ing,*
Where the beginning of this poem —

“A year has passed
Since I composed my last poem.”

Which I heard as:

Khô khe Khô khe
Whîhpum whîhpum whîhpum whîhpum —

Was waiting for me.
Ballad of the Drunk Who lives
Under the Bridge at Ojuelegba

I fell in love with a tree once. Swaying
She giggled as I touched her,
Pulled down her branches and
Wiped sweat from her face.
My! She was bleached white
With purple eyes and burgundy ears.

A Fantastic tree.
With nothing more than vines
She would dress herself up
And with green leaves
Signal me to her…

Oh! That I would hear her laughter again.
She was pruned thin
One early morning by the moon, who
Jealous for my affection,
Took her stem, root, and all.

How to tell my lover, I have fallen for the moon…
See how she stands naked among the grass
Threading her hair lightly upon her lips.
What I would give to be naked along side her,
To lay hold and lie beside her
(No, I haven't had too much to drink.
No man can ever have too much to drink.)
Give her from this wine gourd and
Lead her right onto the shadows at my door step.
How Shehu Became The Neighborhood Sanitation Prophet

He woke up early one morning
The thought of going to work far from his mind,
Settled into the corner of his house,
And pondered the next move in his life.

'What to do,' he said.
'The day after day of work,
The ever-widening hand of solitude.
What to do,' he said, 'what to do next.'

Again, he woke up early the next day
And decided 'no way will I end up
In that hell hole...that job.
No way will I cycle round that routine.'

That day. That afternoon.
Walking the path of an isolated street,
He knelt to tie his laces when, he said
'A voice came from nowhere.'

'What moment of clarity,' he claimed,
'What clear direction to follow,'
'I must start my life anew.'
'A plank-by-plank approach to a house badly shaken.'

So, he gave up the drinking
And the late night banter with friends —

Who, tired of lending him money,
Gave a fine applause at his being 'born again' —

He quit his job and swore
'The next thing for me

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How Shehu Became The Neighborhood
Sanitation Prophet (page 2, begin new stanza)

Is to start cleaning streets
At no cost to my poor neighbors' —

Who looked on in amazement
At this man chosen by God

To rake globs of paper
From the street, the gutter,
The darkened alleyways of the neighborhood,

And who, above all,
Was instructed for some reason
To wear white at all times.

It was then children followed him around,
Jeering at each other.
Laughing after him.

Walking, when he walked.
Pausing, when he paused.

Worse, the news reached his mother —

Who, no doubt, sat him down
And told him again the history
Of his family's battle with poverty.

'How to make do with no money coming in,' he said,
'How to survive…'

That day (tired of the ridicule,
Beat thin with hunger, doubting whether to go)
Looking out his window
He saw two children walking onto the street
Dressed in white, carrying what looked like rakes over their shoulders.
A Church Service

The congregation already was full of spiritual ecstasy,  
When I — at the urging of a friend — arrived for worship.  
Raising their hands high, swaying ever-so-gently to the slow  
Rhythms of the many organs playing at once — lifting  
These people on 'holy ground', with their eyes closed —  
And I, completely taken by the songs sung in unison,  
Feeling the immense togetherness of the moment,  
Brought my head down in reverence for what deity  
These people might be honoring, pondering no way  
Could this deity who many here are so lost within be different  
From the leading hand that directs us through the difficult path  
To the doorway of the soul. I too was swept clean into prayer.  
The pastor (he with the gelled hair and a parting  
In the middle, he in the double-breasted suit on stage holding  
What looked like a bible, standing behind the lectern)  
With the abrupt wave of his hand brought the worship to a calculated end,  
Before moving right '...into the day's message on family values in American society'.  
This same man who, during worship, had worn the high-arched  
Gleam of someone lost in the presence of 'the holy spirit' came minutes  
Into this sermon shouting and yelling, spitting and raving  
'...Gay people are to blame for the AIDS epidemic. We  
Should do our duty by voting for a president who holds  
Like-wise in thought and action as we do.  
No Moslem ever understood the word of God...'

Going on and on to the startlingly googling sounds of  
'Yes' and 'true' by the same people I raised my hands with in 'pure worship'.  
In the final hour, when it came time again to 'raise our hands to the lord',  
And everyone was again lost in the ecstasy of the moment,  
I, filled by the continuous rattling of the doves within,  
Beating their wings against the bones of my chest,  
Cooing violently in my conscience a heavy dove-like 'no',  
Picked up my bible and walked out of the service.
Grief

"How difficult it is to go on Lord,
too many comrades wasting
away in hunger. Their bodies
run thin and ashen from poverty,
their mouths trapped open in a
rounded 'O' as in a cough.

I have walked the length of this city,
Holding a thought tightly within
Reminding myself
Whoever believes in You will not starve.

Yet, each day, walking back
From Your house of worship
I come to this woman who reaches
Out to me with one hand, and
With the other holds her child.

I speak to her, asking her to
'give our live to the lord'
and always she comes
with the same answer, 'I believe, but
understand, I don't make enough
for me and my child. I am a cook' she says —
always looking straight with a hardened glance —
'employed at a public school in this city,
and daily I know to kneel in prayer.

But look at me, a single mother, I don't even
make enough for myself. Whom do I turn
with this child, where do I go?

Lord always the same exchange,
between me and this woman."
Grief (page 2, begin new stanza)

"Coming home from work today, she wasn’t there –
at that place where she stands, among the others,
her face bronzed by the day’s sun, pondering
whether to ignore me or reach for the crisp note,
I am given daily at your house of worship.

So difficult Lord. What to do. How to go on
spreading your words to ends of the earth,
when many fall to the side from hunger,
their bodies run through with decay, with
no tears shed on their behalf and nothing done to
ease their cause. What to do Lord? What to do?"
Failure Of My Reason

There are places where the laws of the universe break down.
Where one orange added to another yields an abundance of fruit.
Where Spring takes on a bodily form and walks around in a blue robe.

No linear deduction can lead to the purple breasts of Spring
Protruding along the lines of a robe,
Trembling in the light of June along the cape of a river
Where fishermen and painters dip into the unknown.

But how I set out daily with a brick fence imagination,
One layer stacked logically after the other —
Knowing one and one always yields a two.
Believing a child in the fields laughing among crickets
Is distant from a widower who lips are sealed with silence.
Believing sorrow is the opposite of joy.

Yet, Physicists tell us that after all the theories and corollaries
They are pushed without guides into a dark realm
Where all they know breaks down and only faith leads them through.

My great grandfather, who died of prostate cancer at an old age,
Was afraid of his own house. The house he built brick by ever sweating brick.
He complained about the stairs swaying, and how
His mother and father — long dead — were beside him
Laughing ever so loudly at his failures and holding a cane over his head.

And every time he said this, we the children before leading him to his room
Would jeer at each other laughing hard at the old man whose reason had left him.

Now — suffering from the same disease,
Having been told nothing can be done,
Having been told how sorry they are, the doctors —
I come back to that house I know so well, only to find that man,
My great grandfather, at the base of the stairs,
Testing each with is cane and climbing with such slow steps.
Loss

When finally you died,
I was not beside you.

I was tired of it.
All of it —

Your frail murmurings at dusk.
The yellow vomit after you ate.

The slow peel of your skin.
The screams when I tried to rub you.

Mostly, I hated that noise.
That long echoing din amid sobs.

Remember, your body hurt so bad
Nothing I did was right.

I did what all would have done —
Getting the nurse,

And keeping away,
Even when I heard your distinct call for my return;

So faint;
So helpless.

Hoping you’d forget
I existed.

This morning,
Seven to the day of your passing,

I lean among the shadows
Hoping

That a worse disease,
Loss (page 2, continue stanza)

One more difficult to pronounce,

With no cure,
Will find its home

Within me.
ELEGIES FOR A DEAD AUNT
(FOR MODUPE DOHERTY 1939-1991)

"If dirges and planned lamentations
Could put off death,
Men would be singing for ever."

- Sophocles
Too often when we speak of the dead,
We are reminded of coffins and funerals –

People gathered around a laid-out body,
Hushed in rhythmic silence

As the priest, with palm fronds picked specially
For the occasion, sweeps the body clean of evils
That might hinder the person's passage to the other world.

We fail to notice those gathered to the side.
The men decked complete in Fila, Agbada, Sokoto,
The women in Gele, Buba, and Iro.
All unseen, and dressed in black attire.

They roam the streets of the village
Their feet never touching the ground.
They listen for the dead –

Who, awake beside their bodies,
Stare long at their closed eyes,

Their opened mouths,
Their streaming hair
In the dull light.

They stand to the side of funerals.
They wait for the dead to mourn their death,
Then lead them eastward
Into the forest of the black elephant.
II

Saturday mornings
Will never
Be the same.

Whistle of kettle, atop a stove,
Is no more.
The teacup is dry.

No hands will butter the bread,
None will pass the jam.
Chairs of the dinner table will collect dust,
And plates will remain empty.
III

Faceless.
Weeping,
And in white,

Was how
I found you
That night.
Threnody

Why
When I call your name,
You remain silent?
    ...Get up!
But you remain silent.

-  

When you
Get to where you are going
Do not forget the names
Of your children.

-  

If you have gone to a house,
And the owner opens the door
And says welcome,
Enter his house.

If he sits on
A stool, mat, or rock,
Sit on the stool,
Mat, or rock.

If you have gone to a village,
And the people welcome you with
Singing and dancing
And they take you to their elders,
Sing and dance with them.

If it is eba they eat,
Do not say you want rice,
Or goat meat,
Threnody (page 2, continue stanza)

Eat eba with them.

When you
Get to where
You are going, wear
What they wear, eat
What they eat, sleep
When the sleep.

That is another world,
And you must act
As they act.
Do not be stubborn
And say you will
Wear clothes like the living
And act like the living.
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