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## Donning the White Agbada

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DONNING THE WHITE

AGBADA

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**

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**Thesis Approval**  
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ABSTRACT

**Donning the White Agbada**

by

Abayomi Animashaun

Dr. Aliko Barnstone, Examination Committee Chair  
Professor of English  
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

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.

## MORNING POEMS

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 man 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 ra 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-punnh 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 your 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 your 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,

The Unseen (page 2, continue stanza)

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 and 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 its 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 shinning 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.

How to Speak The  
Language of Birds (page 2, begin new stanza)

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 croaking.

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,

How to Speak The  
Language of Birds (page 3, begin new stanza)

Her wings thrashing  
Among the sky's massive cumuli

Her beak long and arched  
In your direction.

Their 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 shinning.

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 horsed 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.

HERE AND THERE

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 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  
'We, 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 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.

The Elemental Prosody of Birds

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 —

Khokhê. Khokhê. Khokhê.  
Whihpûm. Whihpûm. Whihpûm.

Surprising me with enjambments —

Hsuwêë  
umh.

Hsuwêë  
umh.

Hitting home spondees —

Swhê Swhê.  
Swhê Swhê.

And rounding off with anapests —

Ktwe ktwe ûh.

The Elemental Prosody of Birds (page 3, continue stanza)

Ktwe ktwe ûh.

Ktwe ktwe ûh.

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

Whîh pum whîhpum whîh pum 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

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 and 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 whose 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 his 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

I

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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