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Black Tongues Against The Dawn

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Black Tongues Against The Dawn

By

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Abstract

Black Tongues Against The Dawn

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LAST POEM TO BE WRITTEN

Tonight, I want to end this story.

What do I know of the end?

What do I know of the outline

of a body becoming ruins?

To end it all, I must leave.

I must take the page and tear it
all apart.

Tell me, do you know what it means to
bear witness to a family's wound?

The hour is boundless.

OPENING MAP

I have taken my tongue and planted a story for you.
Within these stories are witnesses.
Please.
Do not forget their names.

I

is the voice who was never given a voice.
Her words are overflowing and spilling out of her mouth.
Listen.

Nwa nwanyi is the daughter of Nwoke and Woman.
She is where the flowers bloom.

Nwoke is Nwa nwanyi's father.
He is a blind shark. A beast that is
always hungry.

Woman is Nwa nwanyi's mother whose name we cannot remember.
She is what happens when prayers cannot find their way to God.

HERE AND NOW

It doesn't usually happen like this.
The day forgotten and bruised into memory.
How do we take light and stretch it into our hands?
How do we say *yes yes* when everywhere is blooming
black and white. Say color is possible. Say exile is only
on the table because we could not return. Listen.
A kingdom awaits. The story unfolds here.

AN INVENTION OF STORY

The women's tongues we dig. Out. Of. The ground. Where do stories come from?

Women must not tell lies.

There were three brothers.

A father split land and gave each of his sons a piece. It was not enough. When is it ever enough? Greed bloomed and slithered in each of the sons' eyes.

We will come back to them. Stories do not end. I apologize to say.

We just find. More women. More tongues. We dig. Out. Of. The ground.

WATCHMAN

Let me bloom you a story from the dirt.

For many nights a watchman's gong echoed in the silent fields. This watchman had a wife that could only see demons. She screamed always in the deepest black of the night. The demons' fingerprints staining her thoughts. The watchman did not know what to do. He rang his gong night after night. Let his tears create puddles around the village. The village people were afraid of his wife. How her screams tangled in the air. It happened like it always does, when the moon is not present. Some of the living climb their way into Heaven. The demons that night had the watchman's wife by the throat. She finally succumbed to death. There were not enough stairs in the sky that night. Her soul stuck between Heaven and Hell. The watchman took his wife's body and planted her in the ground. He let his tears flow endlessly. What came after was a month of rain.

UNCLE CHIGOZIE

I have to confess that this tale
isn't new.
By that I mean
if we had only known.
But we did not have a word for love then.
There was only Uncle Chigozie.
Nwa nwanyi would go over before her
parents woke and help him fetch water.
After, when the air was tight with heat,
they would sit on the red ground. He would
tell her about the woman who made him feel
like the sky had pressed its palm against his
chest. Nwa nwanyi didn't yet understand how
beauty slid into the hearts of men, how all a
woman needed to do was tangle words in her mouth.
One morning, Nwa Nwanyi came over and Uncle
Chigozie refused to speak. The grief had
swallowed his tongue. He could not warn
any of us, as he had not uttered a word in centuries.
What more was there to say after such entanglement?

SILENCE

How to tell a story in a white language on a white space

There are words that I am hiding from you

Fuo

Mmeru ahu

Nwoke would wander at night
after the beating of Woman.

You may remember Nwoke.
His hands a woven nightmare.

But this is about Nwa nwanyi.
How when Nwoke was away at
the market and woman asleep
she would go to the fields and
listen out to the insects
conceive music in the night.
Lay her heart out for the moon.

It was a small moment dripping with silence

THERE ISN'T A STORY TO TELL THIS TIME

Back then you were allowed to be anything you wanted.

Our prayers were not wrinkled with sins.

How do you expect God to let us into a new hour?

Before my color was the color of guns.

I walked on a sky that would not break beneath my feet.

In a midnight that spiraled into day, I took my teeth and dragged light by the hour.

My dreams swelled up skies.

I lied. This is a story. A story of blackness pouring from my mouth.

A story that I invented from my own tongue.

There is nothing more to say. I have no suns to give to the future.

THE FIRST OF THE THREE BROTHERS

And in the beginning there was light.
It is always light. This is nothing new.
But for Ugochukwu light mattered.

In the wide mouth of youth, he was just a boy.
In the first few years of existence, he would run
and lay his body on the grass. The night sky
would cover his body and he liked that he could
not be found. But light still followed him wherever
he went.

When his father gave him his share of land,
Ugochukwu had the choice to leave.
There was a throbbing need to dissolve
into the wind and live a nomad life.

For a few years he followed the black spaces,
reeking of darkness. Used up all his money from
selling his share of land. It happened suddenly,
as things do. Where the light that had always followed
him found his body on a dirt ground. Scraped the darkness
away from his body and took his body above.

AGAINST NWOKE'S VOICE

Before the moon spilled & left holes
in the sky, Nwa nwanyi would sit among
trees, the whispers of their leaves
shading her from *Nwoke's* voice &
watch a boy dance to the flap of mosquitos.
His feet made the soil rattle, his body moving as
if the beat were alive inside the pockets of his
hips, as if dancing could shake out the hunger that clung
to his bones. This was when the air still held lyrics,
when Nwa nwanyi witnessed how words can go through a body.
You must know this because there was once an hour
when all a boy knew with his body was to sing.

I AM GOING TO DIVERT FROM THE STORY

A boy made myself hurt.
He came to the doorstep of my body.
His eyes knew there was a history there to swallow.

I allowed the folding of myself into another.
Didn't even flicker an eye.

He was an intruder in my chest.
A kiss to the breast a soft blow.

It happened in the November light.
He seized my hand and we climbed
the mountain together.

I didn't know.
I didn't know.

I apologize for this interruption.
Oruola oge eji aga.

SORROW

How do I tell you a boy found a woman at dusk
on her stomach at the edge of another day?

He pulled the body as if it was scrubbing earthen floor
blood coloring his hands
a child's witness to onwu

Nwa nwanji ran to the fields that night.
Nwoke 's hand was like a wooden spoon

scooping for anything that could remind him
that he had wings early that evening.

The boy dug a grave created a square for the body.
Said a prayer that was so heavy it crashed onto the moon.
How a body can talk to the stars on its way to a holy hour.

Mosquitos hung in the air
weeping that night,
it was too red to see that evening.

Nwa nwanji saw her first death.
Saw how even a butterfly's wings
turned black in mourning.
How darkness is a soaked coat.

Heavy with the language of death
The end will collect us like dust,
Back to our ruins, back to the beginning.

AUNT AMARACHI

She held a dead child
inside her but didn't know.

Aunt Amarachi came to the house
one day, bleeding.

The father was nowhere to be found,
having disappeared in the night's holy hour.

Nwa nwanyi's mother collected towels
and held Aunt Amarachi

as she screamed into the night.
Her pain crept into every corner
of the evening's wings.

The sun set that day, leaving an aftertaste
of death in the sky.

What does it mean to have a crack in the sky,
a lost child?

I haven't told anyone.
I too have held a dead world
inside myself.

Felt firsthand how darkness can bruise.
How getting up and seeing light feels out of reach.

I never screamed but a sky darker
than my skin came to me during a dream.

Didn't speak but I understood.
I would never see light again.

OPENING MAP

The stars roamed and bruised the night sky.
Limply the sun rose.
And with the sun God's hand.
Molding bodies into witnesses.
These witnesses pulse above the ground.

I

Is when a flame bites the heart.
When the fracture creates an interminable wave.

Nwa Nwanyi is a second beginning.
A skeleton dancing into a spring day.

Nwoke

His voice a hammer.
He swarms the day like a locust.

Woman is a tremor that never ends.
An hour swallowed and lost in the throat.

WHEN THE WORLD BEGAN

Let there be grief */ beg*

If I must go on dragging around a half beating heart

So will everyone else

In the beginning there was love

It is always love

I know it to be true

That this poem and the poem after that will cease

to exist and in the aftermath of the color blue

stars will erupt at the touch

the sun rimming our souls

Without love there is no grief

The moon hummed until the sun rose

Flowers rested their petals on the ground

Tell me I will never hurt again.

ORIGIN STORY OF WOMAN

I am afraid to open my mouth
to allow language to fall out.

Am I worth it to speak on this?
To tell of someone else's demise?

Some days it wasn't worth waking up
for Woman.

What was her name before she became a wife?
That is lost upon us, all we know is that her father

didn't have much to give his family
their land empty, bones clattering when the wind blew.

Eventually, each brother of hers went on to search
for a sky that would not limit them.

She was the only daughter only one to give away.

How to tell a *Nwoke* there are not enough layers to peel back
call it sadness depression what squeezes and blues

the heart.

Nwoke only dreamt of blood, how to make it flow endlessly.
On the wedding night, took her ear and *Nwoke* promised

to break her
igbaji nwanyi

She went to sleep that night inside the belly of a shark.

DO YOU REALLY UNDERSTAND?

And you, my love
cannot understand
how a girl's body was a full moon.
Nwa nwanyi was becoming a full woman.
The men of the land took notice. Especially Nwoke.
When he wasn't stumbling around from
the drink of venom, looked at her as a prized possession.
Nothing has changed, as men owned their women then.

Here is a body she didn't remember opening.
The lineage of blood pouring out of her split legs.
The weight of womanhood was upon her and there
was nothing to stop it from spiraling and breaking
her into a billion stars as there was no one
to hold a bloody moon for her.

NEVER TO BE SEEN AGAIN

Once I took off my clothes.
Laid them in a lake and
Sunk my body into the earth.

The boy saw me naked.
He asked what can you do with your body?

I said I can open a story between us.
I can be small enough to fit in the cup
of your hands.

He never closed his eyes.
Took his thumb and scraped my ribs.

JUNGLE JUSTICE

They were only boys.
That's how I want to begin this.

Then they were dead.
That's not how I want to end this.

Three boys were hungry looking for food.
Their empty stomachs went to the market place
and when they thought no one was looking stole some fruit.

The day was white. Heavy with clouds.
A group of men ran so fast after the boys
it looked like they were part of the air.

What is justice.

The villagers tied each boy to a tree,
lit a flame and burned the bodies.

Their screams weaved in the scarlet light
Tumbling into the night.
The moon stained red by their voices.

Whispers still lace around those three trees
in the middle of *Emii* village.
Blooming on repeat on the top of another evening.

THE INVENTION OF RAIN

His lips moving, the flickering of his tongue.
The words ripple through the throat.

This isn't a false narrative.
Come let me show you.

The rainmaker.
Take the tongue and plant a garden.

Drought had been plaguing the village.
Dry hands and dry crops.

The villagers were afraid of the rainmaker.
White stripes painted all over his body,

Smoke spilling from his lips.
Teeth crushing spells,

He was alone. All he had
was a cane that held the rain they needed.

THROUGH THE EYES OF NWA NWANYI

Nwa nwanji had curious eyes.
When it was time to go to the market,

Her and woman would
pass by the red hills and Nwa Nwanji

would see the rainmaker in all his
beauty and mystery, gliding through the day.

His lush vibrations creating a song
that only she understood.

After, when the sun had dipped.
Nwa Nwanji wondered what else
the earth held.

How to smudge the tip of the world.
How to let light filter and rain make its sound.
How to take the hand and bless whatever is in it.

A LOVE LETTER TO NWA NWANYI

Nwoke will be the collapse of you.
Woman's existence will sink you
to the bottom of the ocean.

But I promise a whole river will
sing your name, when the day
finally ends, when the sun
gives way to the moon,

There will still be light.

Nwa nwanyi, I always wanted more for you.
No one was there for you.
I have taken leftover prayers from Heaven's
hand and spun them with the wind.

You took light and crushed it in your hands.
I take your name and kiss it into another season.

HOW MORNING BROKE ME

Your mouth against my inner thigh.
I drag each memory and smuggle it in my bones.
I write the suicide note in the aftermath of our love story.

*

There are not enough tomorrow's to move my body to the next second.

*

I swallow the sun and feel it against my throat.
Such eternal bliss is false.
The heartbreak will come again.

*

You dug your fingers into the back of my throat. The echoes of your movement
create a frenzy in my mind.

A BOY'S VOICE

I must tell you about the boy
Nwa Nwanyi snuck out to hear sing.
His voice pulled even the stars from the sky

at night

breathless

undying

she wanted to be a part of it
how he snuck songs into this world
how his voice blossomed a fire,

webbing a storm in her heart.

A throb cupped her chest and Nwa Nwanyi
didn't know what to do with it.

I have seen boys take knives to the skull.
I have seen the way their tongues
flicker even the tiniest of suns.

SISTERS PART I

The heart came and flew away.
Before we numbered the days and months.
Before the end was even an end.

Two sisters walked on Igboland.

Carried the stars in their arms.
Light melted into their skins.

The people in the village noticed.
How different they were.
How the light would touch and skim their faces.

Men learned greed too soon.
The sister's womanhood ribboned by men's eyes.

SISTERS PART II

The first sister met a man who was brave enough to speak. As everyone else looked but did not have courage to open their mouths to the sisters. The man said "I mara mma." The words carried themselves into the wind. He promised to marry her. To carry wine and bring her all the materials her soul could ache for. The promise of a man's tongue. The first sister fell asleep that night, his words staining her light, just a little.

SISTERS PART III

The second sister overheard the man's words the same evening and became jealous.

One night, the second sister snuck out into the river of the evening and found the man.

While the man was sleeping, she took her knife and sent him to where the dead go.

When the first sister discovered his death, She collapsed onto the ground.

She decided this life wasn't for her anymore. And joined him where the dead go.

There was only the second sister left. She fell into a deep blackness and never saw the light again.

THE WAY THE LUNGS FAIL

1.

You did not ask.
But here I am.
Spilling it to you.

2.

He has left fingerprints on my thoughts.
Again.

3.

Love is a kind of burden.
A sink of failing lungs.

4.

I'm sorry my words – not safe.

I'm sorry this – not a haven.

5.

I am heavy with the aftermath of your touch. This poem needs to end but then who will witness the wreckage of my grief. I inch towards another hour and I am still the same. I wake up and I am still the same. A small explosion of prayers erupts on my tongue.

But do they find their way to my God?

OPENING MAP

Here is the dewy close of night.
Here is the sigh of another end.
The blackout of remembering where we blossom from.
These witnesses may never be seen again.

I

Is in a crisis of language. How to utter words with a bursting lung.

Nwa Nwanyi

Is a growing star. Trying not to be swallowed by the surrounding darkness.

Nwoke

Is an arrow. Tearing its way underneath the skirt of the night.

Woman

Is a swollen lip. Too tender to heal.

LANGUAGE IS NEVER LOST

You opened my mouth and drenched it with English words.

I take it back.

The tongue always remembers
where its roots were dug up.

Cheta

Cheta

Cheta

Cheta

ANOTHER LOVE

Nwa nwanyi was older.
Nwoke felt it was time to marry her off.
He had debts to pay.

But Nwa nwanyi felt her heart tug towards Emeka.
The boy who could sing.

Nwoke was persistent. Brought multiple suitors
to the house and they all fell down at the knees
eyes soaked with the image of Nwa Nwanyi.

It was a raw morning. Nwa nwanyi slipped out
the door and into the day. Her and Emeka lay
out in the field, hands combing each other's bodies.
Young love stood no chance against an end Nwoke held in his hand.

A grief so big it swelled up Nwa nwanyi's body.
How to hold the sorrow tearing through your chest?
How to decide to live for another day?

A WOMAN'S TALE

sinks here in the middle of a sand road.
Tears and famine cover Igboland.
Woman, whose mother did not
know how to hold a sun for her.

Have you seen knives pour
out of a man's mouth?
Cut away at the words exiting
out of a woman's mouth?

How to bend a boy into a man?
You must plunge into the
body and pull.

Listen.

This is the lineage of womanhood.
The tongues. We dig. Out of. The ground.
There are stories that have ceased to exist.

BIG WAR

I heard it echoes ago,
a tangle of myths in the mouth
after the war of birds and beasts
came the war of tribes,
hours that were sung but not spoken

you have to understand,
here is where it hurts,
have you seen a body drenched in flames?
god didn't weep those evenings

we were a kingdom before Britain carved
out of us, a nation, of opposing tribes
tucked religion into our mouths
the years filled with the hand
of God combing roads,

a silent boy lingering at the edge of day,
before he knew how to use a body
this is what we inherited from colonization
in which a cloud of bodies swells up skies

I'm not sure where to begin
how to say war was never meant for us
how it thieved what little was already here
even the butterflies had to use their wings
to carry children up against the sky,
flesh against stars

I've touched this story before
lingered in the throat of it
it's not honey that makes
the air sweet but a pond of blood
fire bruising a sky that was only meant to sing
my people, my people,
the years red, the hours loud.

EMEKA'S SONG

Have you ever heard a song broken in the sky?
The lyrics curving with the wind
vowels scattering into the air?
How the lungs soaked with grief
still dance. And dance. And dance.
Nwa nwanyi felt the cracks in the song
could tell there was pain that didn't know how
to break through. Emeka sang to the horizon.

Nuru olum, onye o'mam.

How to hold a note and hear it flutter.

ANOTHER LOVE LETTER TO NWA NWANYI

Hello again,
you don't know who I am.
But I must write this.
I must tell you, you are full of unspent beginnings.
Open your mouth wide. Let the rain pour its way
down your throat and cleanse the end you only knew.
I've opened the door to another decade,
rooted your name into the earth so it's never lost.
Let the day curl its way among the tips of your body
and sink another hour into you.
Dust gathers as we die and disappear,
But my words to you shall live and live and live.

IT NEVER ENDS

You kissed my flesh and left teeth marks

I am brimming with promises you
punctured with your breath

I am tripping over my words

Sometimes I do not feel immune in this language

I wonder how I can escape you

I do not want you to see where my heart is

I am in so much pain I must write
this in a different language

Ahurum nwoke a n' anya

Ahurum nwoke a n' anya

Ahurum nwoke a n' anya

Ahurum nwoke a n' anya

THERE IS NOTHING TO BE AFRAID OF

My people, my people go gentle.
I feel the pulse beneath our feet.
I feel the weary in our faces.

The night is home.
It has always been home.
Death clutching the syllables of our Igbo.

Not all words carry violence.
But all words carry violence.
The howl wedged in our lungs.

How to tumble inside the next hour.
How the blade lingered in our hands.
The light is only dying because
There are too many of us in the sky.

I PROTEST LOVE

Today and everyday.

It is a kind of sorrow,
where your eyes tell the story
and not your mouth,
to know what it is like
to have someone remember
your name on their lips.

To be touched is a rebellion.

Open the mouth and have the tongue
drip with light.
Our skins may not match but our souls,
ripened, devour at the touch.

Today and everyday

I dress the thorns
you left in my skin.

FIRST POEM TO BE WRITTEN

It began with a resurrecting flower.

A flower that grew from burning bushes.

My people, my people this beginning is for you.
God forgot about us. But I have not.

I have seen it.

A future with all of us together.

The days leaking into the next.

In this version of

Heaven promises are kissed

on each of our flesh.

The angels open their mouths
and we leave an aftertaste
of our names on their lips.

IGBO GLOSSARY

Ahurum nwoke a n' anya – I love him

Cheta - Remember

Fuo – Leave

Igbaji nwanyi – To break her

I mara mma - You are beautiful

Mmeru ahu – Hurt

Nuru olum, onye o'mam – Hear me, my love

Okwu - Words

Onwu – Death

Oruola oge eji aga – It is time to go