

Excerpts from
SENTINEL ANNUAL
LITERATURE ANTHOLOGY

Edited by
Unoma Azuah (Poetry)
Amanda Sington-Williams (Fiction)
Nnorom Azuonye (Drama)
additional poems selected by
Roger Elkin

Note: Although some poems and stories appear in full here, only the first few lines from the majority of them appear here.

Part One: Poems

Edited by

Unoma N. Azuah

NICHOLAS Y.B WONG

Lives

A cat travelled mountains after
mountains, valleys after fields,
until trees got bored with being born.
It reached a frosted apex, where a

waterfall never froze. The water
reflected no rainbow, it was the
rainbow. The cat leaned forward,
wetted its impaired lips, lost its balance and fell.

...

NICHOLAS Y.B. WONG

B, an Orphan in Adulthood

Blasts between the clouds,
a sharp silver light descended –
directions got lost.

A boy flinched inside a cage, not knowing
where he was, why he was surrendered.

He eyed at the cornice, hoping the
drifts might bring meatballs or raw bones.
He hated the ghetto food:
it's never served right.
The larger kinds,
the belligerent kinds,
the beastly kinds, always, devoured it all.

...

NICHOLAS Y.B. WONG

One Degree Celsius

The globe is warming, everyone says.
I say it's a petit cherry tart in our oven,
with custard gently overflowing its crust,
an edible volcano slowly hurting
our lips and tongues.

Hot! Your fingers seal my lips.
Should I hush? No, I shouldn't eat.
It's not about diet. After all,
I weigh like paper. I shouldn't eat
as you care no more.

...

BYRON BEYNON

Sorbonne

A café of students
delivered from lectures,
the February tourists
searching for Richelieu's tomb.
The infectious laughter of a girl
sitting by the window,
a genuine smile
in a room
busy with speech,
the tested leaves
as books lean on stained tables.
Yellow lights,
your shadow
fragrant before me,
the promise like a corner
yet to be turned.

BYRON BEYNON

At Bunhill Fields

By late morning I could hear
the screams of children at play

under a flourishing sky of navigable blue.
Before Blake's headstone

...

HAJO ISA

Shut the eloquence

Let's share the lot
The wanting, the feeling, the going without
Make some sense of it,
Anything less of contrived nonsense
Make it cruel, rude and orally persuasive
Open to give,
Your secrets, the diary, your kingdom key
Make conversation in groomed vulgarity,
Damning truth
Conjure in me some crude awakening
However illogical, speak to me.

Absence

I miss you when waiting
I miss you by the drifting hours,
I miss traces of you in my arms
I miss your dark shadow by my open door,
On barren nights when I am crazed by your neglect
I am lost in dreaming you

...

RUSYAN SOPIAN

Hide and Go Fracture

I saw waves and waves of despair today.

Story after story:

torn

at the same pages, with lost fingers

clutching,

hopeful

of one thread left untangled.

Tonight it is still and black

breathe it in

whole

before it slips

into a dawn air

that will scar your half-lung

assemble _the_ voice

rub your eyes

grit your teeth

it's tomorrow now,

and the mangled day

begins.

NSUHORIDEM OKON

My Heart is a Desert

My heart is a desert
No nomad in sight
Only bleached, scattered skeletons
For lack of an oasis
An arid
Clearness to the air
Shows unrelenting
Shifting sand
...

NSUHORIDEM OKON

Waiting

In the passion of yesterday's dawn
I stand at twilight's door
Feet forward
Eyes turned
To a hope in the mists of tomorrow
Unwilling to cross
Unable to return
I wait for a passenger seat
On a ferry-ride to bliss
...

ABIGAIL GEORGE

Learning to fly

We monitor bright-eyed constellations, their threads across
The sky stars are cultivated in the night air with their pleasant
White bellies shiny and new like a coin from the mint
My mother and I watch the dogs as they go
For their evening run dressed in our nightgowns
Hair at the nape of our necks wet from our hot baths
We are still warm the day's events finally catching up
With us, the machinations, the torments we dismissed we are
No longer at war I must take advantage of this recovery
I watch the weather report on the news
Willing it to rain to address the water restrictions
But the showers and the downpours do not come
...

KATIE MCDERMOTT

The Itch

I scratch an open wound,
Still no relief,
Inside me rests the itch
'till all confound, consume,
Deny and drive to pitch
My ill balanced form
From where I rest
To wander hopeful.
Absence itches on my edge,
Extremities unbound
The centre round, filled up
With swelling form,
To float and dangle,
Happy bliss.
I fervently await
The kiss that soothes
The itch.

ZINO ASALOR

Oil of My Childhood

Circus. Dolphins. Quicksilver
The newest old trick:
An eye also a tail
Tying to a tired today
Memories running back
Through primary school
Where I learnt the stitch
And a needle pricked my virgin thumb
How I hated yet loved Miss Ero
Bending over, quenching the fires of pain
with her lips
...

NIKE ADESUYI

Another Life

(For KC)

I

Night.

And rumours firm-up, form flesh, find you
But morning springs solace to the surface
of murky undertones; The wind is crisp with
the promise of new things, your life...it breathes again.
If you sit at the altar of your soul,
Sift the Odds from the Ends,
You will find the Truth
That is not artificially flavoured, or it will find you.
Look to the cattle and egret
Where beak meets hide
There is a meaty mystery
Understood only by cattle and egret
Her feathers shimmer already,
Still, he bears her up content with
The peace that she pecks upon his hide;
Don't seek the kernel in the sky where banal clouds
Array themselves in easy glory.
Sift the odds, sift the ends
Exhume the Truth
Which binds feather to cowhide

NIKE ADESUYI

Evading Hell

{For Pope Poet the 1st, whose unction broke my dam of words & to the memory of Eberonwu – who cut so close to the bone on Directors' Cut.}

So, here I am Pope Poet,
evading hell, melting to your wheedle
like fired butter in a pan
Talents are not for wasting,
Like vagrant bullets seeking ignobility
At our police death-points...
So stand I upon my Sinai
Irradiated by the wisdom of Moses
Receive my Zen-commandments
Timed to transmute destiny before queens
Waywardly had I wandered...
Today, I undo rebellion's harness
I unjinx the words away without official leave
Screaming from lost places in cyberspace:
I bounce over blame; I escape hell with my poems.
So my will crumples Pope Poet,
Eats the communion pie at your vaulting altar-
I, Progenitor of Victors, wearer of Nike boots,
I will wear the word on my sleeves
For the world to swoon at
I am what you say I am: the beauty of jewelled words
Coasting homewards to the sensuous peak of lights.

UNOMA AZUAH

Umunede: Moulding Memories

Umunede crawled
Flickered its tongue like a rattle snake.

Its wells
gulped the fury of storms

calabashes bore
Offerings

Offerings that
cracked the face of dawn.

And the slashes of knives on necks mouthed
screams that tore through town
Like a cloth ripped apart

Part Two: Short Stories

Edited by

Amanda Sington-Williams

ANGEL PROPPS

Flying the Kestrel

‘I’m telling you,’ Willie said, ‘The kestrel is the smallest of the raptors and...’

‘I thought you said it was a bird,’ Lou said tiredly as she dipped her work reddened hands into the dough, kneading and turning, wishing she was anywhere but there.

‘It is a bird.’

Lou turned towards him, her belly bumping against the counter. Her eyes wanted to rest on him lovingly but ...well he was Willie. Bent shouldered, saggy at the jowls and bloated in the middle. Grey and tired and silly, that was Willie.

‘Sounds like a dinosaur.’

‘Woman, don’t you listen to nothin’ I say? The raptors are birds. Eagles, hawks...’

‘Kestrels?’

The heat was suffocating. It rode over the sills of the open windows, lay ugly and thick at the door. The smell of the river was a stink that they had learned to live with but not ignore. It was dead fish, mineral laden mud, things that were tossed by the folks who lived in town and were too cheap or careless to haul their big garbage to a real dump and just shoved it off the long bridge that ran out of town instead. They had found plenty of things in the filthy brown waters; refrigerators that Willie cannibalized for parts, lawnmowers and kids toys. A body. That had been scary. Willie had pushed it off the dock with a long stick and they had watched it float away but for a long time she had wondered who that man was, if he had been a good man, if he had ever fallen in love.

She had sat out there on the dock a few times with some small branches from the overgrown lilac bushes. She had sat there rubbing the fragrant blooms across her face and imagining that they were a lover’s embrace, wishing she was someone thin and lovely. That she had light bones and pale skin. That she was different. She had imagined that the dead man was a knight who had died during his attempt to reach her and, when her sadness had become utter and complete, she had dropped the lilac

branches into the water in a gesture meant to honour his death in her name. Eventually she tired of the game and the man became just one more piece of garbage that had floated past.

She had been beautiful, Willie thought. She'd had had a kind of grace. Her face had grown coarse, her body thickened from work and hardship. The river took a lot from a woman and she had lost her loveliness. It hurt to look at her now, to see the gaps where her teeth had gone missing, thanks to rot and a strong fishing string. Her black hair had once spilled across her shoulders like silk, like midnight on the river. Now it was oily, rough and streaked with white. He felt mourning in his belly, a sadness he could not explain and he dropped his gaze so he would not say things he should not say.

The biscuit dough was tacky, wet and salted with the sweat from her brow and hands. It stunk and when cooked it would be chewy and tough, it would taste like tears. She rolled it out on the flour sprinkled counter with a heavy bottomed water glass, another thing rescued from the river. The glass sent flashes of colour shooting up at the ceiling, multi coloured and lovely prisms that they didn't notice anymore. The bread went into the old oven and she stood there, her heavy calves trembling from her weight, her brow wrinkled in thought but what she thought she could not say, everything seemed to whirl and spin away from the surface of her brain.

Willie looked back down at the book that sat in front of him. It seemed to glow with a kind of inner light, a promise that somewhere out there lived things that were still beautiful. His stubby ring finger traced the colourful picture of the kestrel; the *F.tinnunculus*, also known as the *Old World Kestrel* or the *European Kestrel*. He had dismissed the *American Kestrel* after only a glance but this one, it kept haunting him. He kept imagining it, being there in the misty green, cool lands of the Old World. He saw himself standing tall and brave and strong, throwing his falcon at the sky. That image would not leave him. He saw it all the time. He would lay in the creaking, stinking bed next to Lou at night and the shadows on the ceiling would become a graceful, deadly bird. He would be wading through the muddy waters, casting his net, hoping for a fish that was not bitter

with pollution, that the gators were not hungry and hiding right below his line of sight and he would look up to find himself far from the dripping humidity of the river. He would no longer be standing in mucky water that always smelled of iron and pennies but in a calm meadow under a soft sky with his hair blowing in a low wind and a bird waiting meekly on his wrist for the permission to fly.

Lou sat the old china plate that held the spoon gouged round of cheap margarine on the rickety old table. She glanced at the book, some thick and complicated looking thing that Willie had found in a trash pile during one of his rare visits to town. She did not go to town. Not now. When she had been younger she had gone plenty, like all the river girls. At fifteen she had been walking propane, all she had needed was the match to get all lit up and she had found plenty of sparks there in town but when it came time to settle down she had come home to the river. None of the men in town really wanted to wipe river slime off their sheets in the morning, they wanted it to wash down the drains of their fancy stall showers when the bed things were done. After a few years she had stopped going to town, she had lost a few teeth and the men had been unkind. She had gained a little weight and they had laughed. She came home to the river and she had never returned to town.

Willie had taken her in and wedded her. He had brought her here, to the house that sat high above the river on stilts. It was a good house because it sat above the gators and the snakes and the silt. It was crookedly built and all the doors hung to the left, Willie was not much of a carpenter, the floors were all splintered and sometimes she would find herself limping from room to room because every step brought fresh splinters. Still, the house was standing and Willie was too. So many of the river girls would love to be her. So why did she feel so dissatisfied?

He watched as Lou speared fish fried in cornmeal and hot lard out of the old black cast iron skillet. He wondered how many of those fish he had eaten in his life, how it could be possible that his grandmother, his mother and now his wife cooked fish, the same breeds of fish, the exact same way. Breaded, fried hard and served on a plate that had some kind of wadded up paper or a napkin lining it. Fish that came crispy out of the pan and soggy

on the bottom to the plate, all the grease slid to the lower half it seemed.

She sat the plate, lined with some old blue rag today, down on the table. The table rocked slightly as it accepted the load and he said nothing, he just watched as the yams; boiled and then fried in the smaller skillet in cleaner lard before being laced with dark and slow pouring molasses came to the table next. The margarine sat in a gritty golden pool on its plate and she brought the biscuits. The tops were brown but the middle, though done, was raw looking because Lou worked the dough too hard, she always worked the dough too hard, no light hand on her.

They ate in silence, each lost in their own thoughts. Lou was thinking of running away, of becoming someone new, wondering if it was possible. Willie was staring at the kestrel, thinking of air and the freedom of flight.

‘They hover or fly with their heads in the wind,’ he said and Lou looked at him with indifference and disinterest and he went on, feeling desperate, ‘They use ridge lift...’ His voice faltered away.

The sun had fallen below the tree line. The sound of frogs and the splash of animals hunting and feeding came through the floorboards. Lou looked out the window at the river; the endless, slow moving muddy river. At the trees that were too thick to let in light and at the small boat tied to a post, the boat that could not take her far enough away from herself for her to be anything else.

She looked up at Willie. Her tears twinkled on her cheeks. She could have been sixteen or sixty. Her mouth worked and he could see the bone gleam of teeth behind her lips. They were lovely, those lips. Bow shaped, pouty, full on the bottom and short on the top. Rosy and sweet.

He looked down and his eyes fell on words he had not noticed before. He read them slowly and felt his heart squeeze. Traditionally the kestrel could only be owned by a child or a low born woman. God, he thought, looking at the tears on her cheeks, she is both. She is both and there is never going to be an escape for me.

‘Willie,’ she choked and he closed the book gently. ‘Do you love me?’

‘Yes Lou,’ he said softly and his hand was kind as he wiped the tears from her eyes with the ball of his well-worn thumb. ‘Now eat your biscuits.’

Lou looked down at the table, looked out at the river, got up and went to the door. She went out and when she came back she had a small branch of lilac. She stuck it in the dough encrusted water glass and set it on the table.

‘That is pretty,’ Willie said through the pain in his chest and she ducked her head, pleased with the compliment.

Outside, against the setting sun, a large bird of prey flew but Willie could not tell what breed of raptor it was.

AMANDA SINGTON-WILLIAMS

Escape

The driver looked at Hana's children, at the baby held to Hana's breast, then he told her to climb up into the back of the truck where the sacks of beans were loaded.

'We made an arrangement,' she said. 'I paid you more so I can sit in the front. Now you try and go back on your word. It is not right.' She was frightened her children might suffocate, squashed in the back with all the sacks.

There were other truck drivers listening, leaning against their cabs or squatting in the dirt and soon an argument erupted. Hana saw the first sign of dawn slipping into the sky and fretted about the time. She propped herself and her children up against the side of the truck. Drowsy in their sleep-time, her children murmured in dreams while she listened to the men's voices weaving in and out, to the lengthy discussions, their circular route, back to the start:

'I will need extra payment,' the driver at last said. 'The arrangement was for two children.'

'We agreed on three of my children. I have paid you for us all to sit in the front.'

'There is more possibility of disruption, it's dangerous with three.' He took a swig of *Fanta*. 'There are more militia,' he added. 'We have to pay to stay alive.' And he demonstrated the alternative, the edge of his flattened hand, slicing across his throat.

What choice did she have? She gave him some more money, hiding her disgust as he took it, counted the notes, spat on the ground and nodded towards the front of the lorry.

MEL ROSS-MACDONALD

The Starlings

The fat from her untouched sausages cools and congeals in an unappetising mess on the plate; it clings thickly to a small portion of soggy mashed potato that has only been picked at. Meg still sits at the table, staring at her food. Her husband has left some time ago; he no longer tries to cajole her to eat. The kitchen is cold and dull; despite the longer evenings, it is cloudy outside and the light is poor. Still, she does not move to switch on a light or to go into the sitting room where the fire crackles with warmth. Her head rests in her hands. She can feel a pulse at her temples, a rhythmic beat, redolent of life. A painful reminder of what she has lost. Anger bubbles inside and rouses her. Like a puppet, she jerks herself to her feet, hurls the remainder of her dinner into the dog's bowl, throws the plate into the sink with such violence that it smashes into several pieces, then storms out, slamming the door behind her.

JILL RICHTER

New World, New Home, New York.

It takes six hours to drive from the tip of Cape Cod to New York. That's on a good day, when there is no traffic. But the Jeep was ancient and heavily loaded with the trunks they had brought from England. In the gaps they had wedged various possessions collected from Ben's parent's attic, two sets of wooden dumbbells, three crates of books, cooking pots, toys carefully hoarded by his mother for her grandchildren, and a small jade tree. Covering everything was a foam mattress. The boys rolled about on top of it, cocooned in sleeping bags, their blond heads only inches from the roof.

The black curly dog, still dazed by his recent transfer from the English country-side to the sand dunes of Massachusetts, tried to climb onto Julie's lap in the passenger seat, then resigned himself to a lumpy bed of shoes and rope behind it. Beneath their feet, cold air whistled through the rust holes partially covered by an old number plate. Julie was amazed at how fast and far the old machine could move their bodies from one strange place to the next. What would it be like? New home, New World, New York.

The Jeep rattled and bounced its way up the quiet Cape Highway. A fox's bright eyes flashed in their headlights. It hesitated, belly low, before darting back into the shrub pine.

Julie lit a cigarette and glanced sideways at her husband. He drove with a fierce concentration, intent on the darkness ahead, hesitating only to change the unfamiliar, clonky gears as they negotiated traffic islands. His nose was aquiline, hawk-like really, softened by the mop of curly hair and droopy mustache which he had grown over the summer. She wondered how he felt now their holiday was over and they were about to start life here in earnest. This was what he had wanted ever since the children were born, to go home to America, to his family, to security maybe. But it wasn't her home. Never would be.

TENDAI TSHAKISANI MAKAVANI

Wounds

And now my soul is poured out within me, days of affliction have taken hold of me Job30vs16

I saw her again today. I keep seeing her every day. Her face, pale, agonized and dirty as it was the first and only time I met her. Tambudzai, her whole story writes itself on her face. When you see her you do not need to ask. Every chapter of her tearful story is explicitly displayed on her young face. All you see on her is a huge fire burning right inside her heart. A fire that cannot be turned out. The kind that would burn even those who desire to put it out.

‘There are thorns in my inside,’ she says, ‘Thorns that prick me day and night.’ There is something about the anguish that is displayed on Tambu's face. You can't miss it even if you are heartless. It is rooted in her within. How else can you explain such pain that is conspicuous right in someone's eyes?

‘I cannot sleep at night,’ she says. ‘When I close my eyes I see things. Horrible things that a young woman like me should never see. Things that only adults should see, because they are too big for a heart as small as mine. Imagine, Theresa, living a life where nightfall gives you shivers. At night I cannot sleep. Those who have shared their nights with me have told me that I talk in my sleep. I talk in my sleep yet talking is for daytime. It is for those who are awake.’

That is the kind of jargon that constitutes Tambudzai's speech. It is as if she is reading out a novel. Her life sounds too dramatic to be real. Yet it is the level of emotion with which she says out her story that paralyses the listener. I met Tambu on a very cold winter night. The kind when drops of rain fall to the ground. Elders say that the cold will be dropping its eggs from the heavens. Under normal circumstances I wouldn't have cared less to stop and entertain her, but the agony imprinted on her face, forced me to spare a bit of my time. She stood there, right near the entrance of an alley along one of the busiest roads in the city.

MICHAEL SPRING

Extras

A cannonball landing to the left is the sign for the women to turn back toward the city.

‘One, two, three. Now. Fall down,’ I whisper to myself and I throw myself onto the padded bank.

We are extras in the making of a film called *Valley of the Wind*, a title which makes us all chuckle, and we are about to be slaughtered by some marauding army or other, in front of a city which is made of balsa wood and canvas.

‘Cut!’ someone yells and we rise uneasily to our feet.

‘Not bad. But you, third peasant from the cart...’

We all look round. He means me. ‘Yeah, you. Chequered head-scarf. You’re tired for chrissakes, so fall down easy. And where’s the crippled boy?’ He shouts out notes to about ten of the crowd. We are to try again after lunch.

‘Don’t eat too much. I want to see you back here on the threshold of despair at two-thirty, no later.’ A few people laugh politely. We straggle off toward the buses.

It’s my second day here, and I’m already having trouble with what’s real and what’s not, so when a bearded monk appears next to me, I’m not particularly surprised.

‘I am reliably informed that our choice today is chicken curry or mushroom risotto.’ He looks around. ‘Any idea where the halberdiers are?’

‘Uh?’

‘Halberdiers..?’ He sighs when I look blank. ‘Oh, never mind.’ He stomps off, swinging his rosary, shouting for Jeff, the halberdier.

I’m looking around for anyone I know. Where is Sandra that I sat next to yesterday, after we rioted in protest at the price of bread? She must have been one of those taken prisoner. The prisoners weren’t wanted for the next couple of days or so. They are to be hung or something, at the weekend.

CATHERINE SMITH

Looking Nice

Sunday morning, Brighton; spring sunshine bathes the street and a mild breeze teases blossom on the trees. Outside forty-two Grove Street, a neat, white-painted terraced house with clean windows and a gleaming letterbox, miniature tulips blaze brightly in a hanging basket.

Upstairs, George and Mary Wilson sit side by side on their bed. Mary wears a grey cardigan over a flowery lilac dress, American Tan tights and purple slippers. Her scalp's almost completely bald, apart from a few wisps of white hair. Her face is heavily powdered and her lips are painted bright pink. She has watery blue eyes and blinks rapidly. The room's stuffy; she wishes George would open a window.

George wears a black suit, shiny at the elbows and knees. He is painting her finger-nails palest shell pink. Beads of sweat pop up all over his forehead. He breathes heavily and frowns. Her fingers tremble slightly in his hand.

'Keep still,' he barks, 'or it'll go everywhere. You don't want that, do you? You don't want people saying I don't keep you looking nice?'

'No,' she says, looking down. 'No, I don't want that.'

'Just keep still, she tells herself, just keep still, just keep still

—

He grunts, passes the brush over her thumbnail, and blows on it. 'I'll do your shoes for you before we go. They want polishing. People still notice shoes. You don't want to sit there looking a state, do you? All untidy. People looking down their noses -'

'You look after me, George,' she says, smiling at him, patting his knee. She swallows hard, tasting the strong tea, fried eggs, fried bread and bacon he'd given her for breakfast. 'You always keep me so tidy.'

Part Three: Drama

Edited by

Nnorom Azuonye

Prologue

By

Callum Patrick Hughes

'Prologue', is not a play that could be performed without a great deal of preparation. In the piece the main character mentions his play 'A Midsummer Night's Dream – The Remix'. This would have to be advertised (for real) for months before. The audiences that will attend 'prologue' have to be the type of people who would like the look of such a title. When the audience enters the theatre, there have to be programs, leaflets, fliers and posters, even rehearsal photos of the fictional play.

As the House lights come down at the start of the play, some commotion is heard back-stage. We hear a man raising his voice and a female STAGE MANAGER runs out onto the stage. She takes a minute, composes herself and begins to speak. The following can be improvised completely, but should not last more than just a moment.

STAGE MANAGER: I'm incredibly sorry, but we seem to be having some technical problems and uh... well the show will now not be starting for a further fifteen minutes. We are extremely sorry for any inconvenience -

MAN: *(Running out on stage)* Shut-up! What are you doing, eh?

STAGE MANAGER: For God's sake, you can't do this! You're so selfish! Do you know how many people have worked for this? Oh, you just fucking do it then!

(STAGE MANAGER storms off stage, the man is left awkwardly alone. He is the writer and dresses and looks accordingly, almost cliché.)

MAN: So, what do you want to discuss? My thoughts, my worries, my queries, my theories, my ideas on religion, sex, monogamy, polygamy, race marriage or hate. Do you want to delve into my digestive system or deliberate

my intake and outputs? Perhaps you wish to relate and mull over... things.

(Takes off one shoe)

Maybe there's more to live than my life. Maybe there's more to life than your life. Maybe there's more to theatre than the expected. SURPRISE! Only joking of course. There won't be any surprises. If you think you've ever been surprised by a form of media, a piece of art, a film, a song, a prayer – you're lying. You are only ever surprised by either theatre you like and didn't expect to like, or theatre you hate and wanted to love. Am I wrong? Perhaps it's foolish of me to use that word. After all, you're probably all very intelligent young people, or perhaps middle-aged (although it's unlikely that you'd make it out to the theatre, out of the country for that matter if you were genuinely looking for something to gamble on). Even if you come under, this glorious phrase, this wonderful thing: "cultured" – You'd want to be stimulated and challenged. This won't happen here. Not tonight. If you want something heart-wrenching and to stand there in amazement as you watch your robotic hands clapping at the vocal range of a young lady in a corset, just stop. Just fuck off and stop and go home and disconnect your television and stop reading the paper. Stop dribbling over Kant and Freud and Bentham and Mill, and stop looking for answers in - oh sorry, I didn't know you were in.

(Picks out audience member)

Chomsky of course! You want to look at the modern aspects of life under the microscope of intellect!

(Takes off another piece of clothing)

So sorry – didn't mean to leave you out of all that philosophy reference, stuff. I just lost myself.

OOH! There's your relativity. Calm down I'm not at Einstein yet! My confusion is finally making you warm to

me. You recognize this. Where did I put my glasses and where did I leave the car-keys and oh yes, isn't it Joe's birthday today? How could I forget? How horrible am I! There – there's you're comfort NOW YOU'RE AT THE THEATRE!!! Why the hell would you warm to the worst aspects of yourselves? Oh – because you're human.

(Takes off another piece of clothing)

Phantom House

A One-Act Play

By

Angela Amalonye Nwosu

Characters

Nutty

Wetin

Sabi

Eshi

Voice of interviewer

Voice of Our Highness

Taga

Three other officers

Scene One

A tiny room with two double-decker beds, the room is built with cheap wood. At a corner is a table of dubious colour, a rusting metal chair and a wardrobe which looks like an ancient metal box with 'NO WAY OUT' written on it. As light comes on, the door creaks open and a man enters, gaunt with a clean shaven head. He carries a bag with a few worn out clothes sticking out of its seams. On his right hand is another bag filled with junk like old motor parts, chains and nails. Sighting the table, he puts the bag of junk on the lower bed of one of the double-deckers.

Nutty: God! What a dingy hole. *(He clasps his head in his hands)* My former crib was certainly better...if only I had money...I mean I do need a stable place for my theory to become reality, anyway, *(he gives the junk bag a smack)* here we are. We have...

(The door bursts open with force, rattling the him and the room. A scowl-like woman walks in, carrying a plastic bag and a clutch bag).

Nutty & Wetin: *(simultaneously)* what?

Wetin: *(regaining herself)* what is whaat?

Nutty: Truth be told, I never imagined sharing this place with anyone and certainly, not with a woman.

Wetin: *(ignoring him)* What is this bag doing on my bed? *(she moves to remove the bag, but the man blocks her).*

Nutty: Hey! Lady, please watch it. Truth be told, I really don't care whether you want to be nice or not. I do know for sure that I paid for a room. What I did not anticipate was sharing a hell of a hole, but as you can see, I was here before you.

Wetin: *(inclining her head like a boxer about to throw a blow)* Well, well, well, mister Sahara, since you are too good

for holes, why not back off (she throws his bag away). You can have the other lower bunk. And just for the records, because as a woman of honour, I like to set things straight - I was here weeks ago, although I didn't see the room, but I saw the door.

Nutty: *(he takes his other bag with a sigh and murmurs to himself)* My heart radiates peace, but then it takes a woman to bring out my other side, anyway *(he sighs again.)*

They ignore each other, becoming so involved in their different activities that they may well exist in oblivion. Nutty sits on the floor, setting up his junk, a paper and pencil in his hand. Intermittently, he writes or draws on the paper. The woman has tied a wrapper on her green-coloured trouser. She also ties a yellow scarf on her head. With hunched shoulders, she takes a paper and begins to demonstrate a speech. She is mute except for her pacing round the room and gesturing wildly like a clown. They jump in shock as two persons suddenly struggle through the door- a man and a woman. The two new tenants are flustered - they remain by the door.

Nutty: *(standing up)* mon dieu! I was just in the middle of solving an elusive equation. You all ruined the chain... I was about chaining my ideas into a theory of permanence.

Wetin: *(scowling)* Theory of permanence or equation of delusion? I can see you care nothing about justice or the world. Heh! I feel I am in Noah's Ark, a weak one for that matter and I guess drowning will be a better option to surviving. *(She slumps into the bed. The paper falls, but she does not pick it. Nutty wants to say something, but changes his mind. He begins chewing on a piece of metal).*

Sabi: *(addresses the lady)* And you - why have you been following me? (Sabi looks like a comrade with his bushy hair and long beard while the other lady looks fragile with long silky hair and a vacant look).

Eshi: Theory of permanence...Noah's Ark. Lovely words. I feel like a floating ship, drifting with the wind.
(She glides around the room in a dream dance).

Sabi: Maybe one of you should tell me what this joke is all about because I paid two hundred Naira for a room. I never reckoned...

Wetin: You never reckoned and you don't suppose others are reckoning. For your information and to set the record straight, I paid two hundred and twenty naira.

Nutty: What? I paid only a hundred naira.

Eshi: *(she had stopped dancing)* And I paid fifty naira.

The other three: What?

Sabi: We all paid for a room and got corners. I am going to strangle that woman.

Eshi: Woman? I paid to a teenage boy.

Wetin: I paid to a man.

Nutty: And I paid to an albino with red hair.

Sabi: Noooo, no, my sense of justice has been rubbished. We have been swindled. I am going after that hag. *(Just as he makes to rush off, with one foot outside, the wall rattles and a booming voice fills the air).*

Voice: Come back. In this room you all are prisoners - any false move and I shall hand you over...

The other three fall down in fear, looking around and wondering where the voice came from. Gradually they all rise cautiously and sit on the bed, shaken.

Sabi: I cannot believe this. I have no skeleton in my pocket.

Wetin: You mean cupboard.

Eshi: This is all so gothic and romantic. Who will believe it when I write about a talking wall?

Nutty: So what are you running from?

Sabi: As God is my witness, I got nothing to hide. *(He looks out of the window).*

Nutty: Oh, no, I was not addressing you.

Sabi: What were you addressing - an envelope?
(They all laugh weakly).

Wetin: Maybe I should just die.

Sabi: Oh, yes (Sabi fishes out a rumpled newspaper from his trouser pocket) oh yes suicide is on the increase and can you imagine this article quoting Our Highness as saying it is a noble, non-violent way of curbing population increase. *(The other three gasp and crowd around to read the article).*

Eshi: All so sad. I was just running from myself.

Sabi: Yourself? But you are here now.

Eshi: It is not like that. My very rich parents wanted me to be a medical doctor and marry someone I didn't love. I refused and was disowned. My twin sister who does all their bidding is now heiress to the financial throne. I have nothing but my arts.

Wetin: Your parents are dictators. They should be hanged.

Eshi: In their own thinking they are right.

Sabi: And here we are fighting the tyrants in the high places when people who should know better play gods in their little kingdoms.

Wetin: *(with admiration)* Are you a rebel?

Sabi: If fighting for justice makes me a rebel then...

Wetin: But the problem is with you men - that primitive instinct of blindly worshipping the phallic relic of -

Sabi: Perish that feminist hogwash... the people in the high places are made up of both men and women. Justice is not selective.

Outside a storm is building up.

Nutty: Not the rains again. It is always raining these days. And what is all the quarreling about when we do not even know our names? Anyway I am not running away from Sin, only poverty keeps chasing me about. Since my graduation from university with a first class degree in physics – with honours - I been unemployed and have now become a first class fugitive – without honours; No job, no woman, no nothing, just only me one. For the past six years I have been skipping my rent for the simple reason that I am constantly broke. In fact I have had to forfeit most of my working tools because I usually leave in a hurry...

Wetin: Thank God for little mercies - so your junk would have taken all the space in this hole...

Nutty: Woman, your tongue...

Eshi: I guess it is all right - let us not quarrel. Things are already so bad outside. All we have now is just this tiny space. We could make it bearable by being friends (*Eshi stretches out an open palm. Others hesitate and look at one another. Wetin contemplates for a moment before placing her palm on Eshi's. Then Nutty follows and finally Sabi*).

Funeral of The Minstrel

By

Nnorom Azuonye

The People

New Ekumeku

(A group of 20 or more ex-students of Esiaba Irobi)

Maduka

Dike

Aloma

(Other Esiaba's ex-students, members of the New Ekumeku)

Earthquake

(Esiaba's ex-student who predeceased him.)

Esiaba Irobi

Dede Okoronkwo

(An Ngwa elder)

Onyebuchi

(Leader of Esiaba's age grade)

Ezidiegwu (Age grade member)

Chiehika (Age grade member)

Esiaba's Age Grade members

The Action Sequence

The scenes in this play blend into each other. There are no breaks and no set changes.

The stage is pitch black. Out of the darkness the sound of stamping feet and angry voices rise. Lights rise to reveal men within the age range of 40 to 50 years. Their feet stamping and chanting rise to a fever pitch. ONYEBUCHI leads and the rest respond.

Obu ngiri?

Iwe.

Ngiri?

Iwe, iwe njuru anyi obi, Iwe.

Obu ngiri ndi iwe anyi?

Onwu.

Ngiri?

Onwu. Onwu Esiaba, Onwu.

ONYEBUCHI: Stop. Stop. Quiet, my brothers. You have spoken an abomination. Spit it away! You charge like angry lions. You say you are angry, angry because of Esiaba's death. Death? What death? What death do you speak of? Spit, spit away my brothers.

EZIDIEGWU: Onyebuchi, all day you have been asking us; 'Why are you angry? Why are you angry?' Onyebuchi, a man with scrotal elephantitis sits with the side of his buttocks, because he cannot deny the monstrosity between his legs. Why then do you pretend you don't

know why our spirits are broken, the reason our eyes bleed?

CHIEHIKA: Onyebuchi is not pretending, my brother. He knows the truth. Being who and what he is, Onyebuchi cannot believe this horrible story. He must not.

EZIDIEGWU: Why not, Chiehika? Why not? You people are unbelievable. This is why I treat villagers with contempt.

CHIEHIKA: Are you not a villager yourself? Goat that treats animals with contempt!

EZIDIEGWU: Don't insult me, Chiehika, or this Ngwa land will drink your blood today.

CHIEHIKA: You are not only ignorant, you are also bloodthirsty.

EZIDIEGWU: The oil is already spilt. We could stand here and threaten one another, or we could fetch mops and start cleaning. Can pregnancy be hidden from the eyes of the world by covering it with the palms of hands?

CHIEHIKA: Ezidiegwu you are not a child, my brother. This is our culture. He who bears the news that must not be called by its name, must roll his tongue inside his mouth, and whisper it out from the corner of that mouth.

EZIDIEGWU: What is true is true. Esiaba has died. He walked the world to darkness in Berlin. That is the truth. Full stop.

CHIEHIKA: Ezidiegwu!

EZIDIEGWU: Yes?

CHIEHHIKA: Roll your tongue inside your mouth...

EZIDIEGWU: Nonsense! Esiaba Irobi is dead. Bring out the masquerades to send him forth with the greatest show Ngwaland has ever seen.

ONYEBUCHI: Liar! Liar! Come with me. All of you, come, come with me. Let's go and look for him. Esiaba has been travelling for a long time. The traveller spat on the ground before he set off, we must find him, and we must urge him to come home before the saliva dries and causes his navel to begin to rot.

EZIDIEGWU: Stop talking as if he is still alive.

ONYEBUCHI: He is alive. Ezidiegwu, I think you have gone mad. You must stop smoking that evil weed you smoke.

EZIDIEGWU: You are the mad one, twenty-first century Thomas. Esiaba's body will fall on your head and knock it down into your chest and you will still say he is alive. Mad man. Thomas!

ONYEBUCHI: (*Stares at Ezidiegwu with disdain, and chooses to ignore him*) We shall send the silent message of our forefathers to him. He will hear the call and start coming home.

CHIEHIKA: Onyebuchi, I am not on Ezidiegwu's side, you know that. But what if he is...what if he is, you know...

EZIDIEGWU: Dead? Call it by its name, coward.

ONYEBUCHI: If he is dead, he will hear the music of our forefathers rising from the village square, he will hear the broken beats of our hearts, he will hear us; a choir of men weeping like women and he shall return this very day, to bid farewell to the land of Ngwa, to feed her earth.

There is distant drumming coming from the rear of the auditorium. ONYEBUCHI pauses and stares blankly into the dark for a heartbeat. Then continues...

ONYEBUCHI: If it is true. If it is true that Esiaba Irobi is dead, I shall urinate hot urine into the thirsty gullet of this land, so that the meat of Esiaba's body shall witness against it. This land that should fight the accuser on our behalf, this land that must say to that spirit Esiaba himself once described as a vandal, 'I am not ready to receive Esiaba's body, he has many years to live, he still has a lot more to say, he still has not won his Nobel Prize.' He promised to win the Nobel Prize for Literature twice. *(Weeping)* Oh, if this land did not fight to keep breath in Esiaba's lungs, today, I Onyebuchi, first son of Ahamba, shall urinate hot urine into her gullet. Let's go.

CHIEHIKA (Leads the new chant)

- Ngwa anyi nga.
- Anyi nje l'olee?
- Anyi nje icho Esiaba nwa Irobi, ngwa anyi nga.

(They chant and stamp their feet hard on the ground and leave the stage. As they leave a closed casket is seen on top of a bed Up Stage Centre. The casket is draped with the flag of the Republic of Biafra. There is a framed photograph of Esiaba Irobi leaning on the casket. DEDE OKORONKWO is seen with his head bent, and his two hands on the casket. He is shaking his head from side to side as the angry voices of Esiaba's age grade fade out. He disengages from the casket and addresses Esiaba, walking around the casket, gesticulating. In the background, the dirge, 'Udu m akuwaala O kuwaala, Ezigbo udum akuwaala, O kuwara n'ike' simmers.)

DEDE OKORONKWO: Esiaba, Esiaba nwa Irobi, you have done it all wrong. I search the face of the sky for answers. The only thing I see is that you were not ready. You were ambushed by a master trickster and

he beat you. Only last month, I received a copy of your poetry book, *Why I Don't Like Philip Larkin*, and you made a handwritten note to me on the first page; *'Dee Okoronkwo, read A Ceramic Life. Just remove Chukwudi Eboh's name and slot in your wife's name. It may not comfort you. How can words comfort you, when your soul mate has died?'* Oh, Esiaba, how I wish I had the power to send a telegram to that cursed vandal. If I could, my telegram would read, 'you have devoured my friend, I shall cut you down like the evil tree you are, burn you to cinders and scatter your ashes into the four winds and your name shall exist only in folklore.'

(He wipes his eyes. The dirge rises and is sustained for about one minute, then simmers.)

Or were you sending me a message? Were you telling me you were to join my dear Urediya? Esi, I read what you wrote for your friend: "Chukwudi Eboh, on the day you died, Death sent me a telegram. In it the vandal wrote: "I have devoured your friend, I now wait for you."

That vandal sees no point in writing telegrams; telegrams can be crumpled between angry fingers. They can be thrown with contempt into trash cans.

(The dirge rises and is sustained for about one minute, then simmers.)

He has learnt to box and kick, bite and claw. The hooligan thrives on crimson juices, like volcanic vomit oozing from every wound on the battered body of earth. The vandal swaggers, like all undisputed despots do, from continent to continent he snatches breaths and spits dirty spit on glowering embers. Oh, nature! Why are you not fair? Esiaba Irobi is half my age, how I wish I could

take his place, and he be here, full of life, audacious, with his special way with words, every word a grenade exploding every conscience to life, to what is right, speaking at my funeral as I, the old grist, get flushed away from the mill of life.

(The dirge rises and is sustained for about one minute, then simmers.)

He breaks legs that dance to the music of gods. At his mischievous best he would punch out a poet, knee him in the chest and stuff his mouth with his beddings, beddings unlaundered in a million years. *(Pauses)* Oh, how I wish I could give him a slap, a dirty slap, then banish him to unquenchable fires of hell...

(He is interrupted by the singing of an energetic Ekpe song and suddenly a group of about twenty men and women enter. The men all have glistening machetes thrusting in front of them as they dance unto the stage towards Dede Okoronkwo.)

DEDE OKORONKWO: *(Shouting over their song)* Who are you people? Who are you people?

(They pull him further down the stage and continue to dance around him, waving their machetes at him. Finally they stop and form a horseshoe between him and the casket.)

DEDE OKORONKWO: Who are you people?

MADUKA: We are the New Ekumeku.

ALOMA: Whirlwind! We are the new whirlwind.

DIKE: And in our powerful cyclical arms we carry rotten news away and cast it into the Atlantic Ocean. *(Waving a machete at Dede Okoronkwo).*

**Part Four: Poems from the Sentinel Annual
Poetry Competition 2010**

Judged and Selected by

Roger Elkin

HANNAH LOWE

If I were to write honestly

If I were to write honestly, I would write about love.
I heard it in the voices of pious women singing,
in the chanting of the island children, words that rose above the
classroom's corrugated roof and found the mangos hanging from
their branches, loved by sun. I saw it again
in the beautiful bolts of cloth brought to our door
by Syrian tradesmen - the careful wedding
of coloured thread to plain cotton, was love.
I went looking for love in the blue alleyways behind the shop,
in the moon that shone in the eyes of slathering dogs,
a memory of love. I looked for it in the stop
and pause of my father's feet outside my bedroom door.
When he beat me, and later when I beat him off
and left him curled in the yellow dust, even that was love.

GARY SMILLIE

A Small Glow

Gone seven on the coast road home from Wales,
Up front, the cherry glow dot of a roll up cig
Bobs in the dark; in the back I'm near asleep.
At the wheel Jack rubs his eyes and says 'We're lost.'

...

DEREK SELLEN

Standing with Oliver in Oliver's Garden

*for Oliver, shoe-designer, whose
right side was paralysed and whose
speech was affected by a stroke*

Hoarse, something creaks and creaks again,
out of a lagoon of mist below the hill -
late in the year, a corncrake. "Wow!"
says Oliver, a particle of language
won back. He tilts his trilby, Irish-style,
leans on his stick, its head a carved shoe.

Back in his studio, the right hand numb,
the left hand takes on its talents,
pencils arabesques of stitching, positions
precisely eyelets, studs and ridgings,
the season's designs. Undamaged, this
is his passion, his living and his language.

So much seemed lost, the man himself,
unable to articulate, more fields away
than the corncrake on the other side of mist.
Now, by week and month and year, Oliver emerges,
companied by pain but this remaining.
The hand that draws. A love of birds. An artful brain.

W. F. LANTRY

Lark Mirror

... and there are stories of old men who kept
modenas in their lofts in Italy
and flew their kits in hopes a neighbor's bird
would land and seek their trap. Once banded, each
could be kept in a fortnight, then be flown
in jubilation, unconstrained, rehomed,
...

CHRISTIAN WARD

The Butterflies, Kew Gardens

The zebra longwing zooming
past your head to feed
on a piece of papaya held
...

CHRISTIAN WARD

Filming “The Beheading of Daniel Pearl*”

Week twelve. The special effects
guy has quit, citing ‘insensitive
subject matter’. Asshole. \$300k
down. Maryland is no Pakistan

but between the minaret-necked
cormorants and hillbilly locals
I can’t tell the difference. Week
eighteen. The walk-on playing

Pearl’s Taliban executioner can’t
hold the replica scimitar steady,
doesn’t believe it won’t cut. I press
the edge against my right arm, point

to the dent, shallow as a GI’s crew-cut,
it leaves. \$500k down. The man
is still shaking. Dick. Week twenty four.
Some pathetic loser has left a fake head

drooling ketchup outside my trailer. \$2m
down. My head is already loosening itself
from the neck. I don’t need a gimmick to tell me
this is the worst death I’ve experienced yet.

**Daniel Pearl was a journalist beheaded by the Pakistani
Taliban in 2002*

WALLY SMITH

Lost for Words

They found him hanging from a tree inside the village park.
A local poet was the word, but few had ever heard
of him – just friends or fellow poets who were heard remark:
'He could not even find the words to speak
to those who cared'.

No heroic muddied trench with passioned verses sealed.
No Balkan battle ground for him, nor taken in a cradle
of consumption. Just a poet's corner of some local field,
in the dark, out of sight of an unknown enemy.

JANE MORETON

Vino Del Licor

Here is the village fiesta. They pour
us plastic tumblers of Vino del Licor,
brownish and sweet; call my husband Chief,
smilingly press Maria biscuits on us, two by two.

He in the red shirt addresses us: "Which village are you from?" In
halting Spanish we explain our foreignness;
he beams with pleasure, proclaims the programme
of festivities, urges his friend to pour, from a square bottle,
sour white wine - "the best" - of his own making.

We are made welcome.
The sun works on the wine;
we have become their cousins for a time.

JANE MORETON

Summer's End: Paxos

Stars hung in rigging when we first arrived
tangled in the warm dark shrouds that night fetched in;
yacht crews, gilded in lamplight, dined on deck; and slight
stirrings in the air came as welcome caress. Cicadas strummed
"Heat! heat! heat!" while we
stretched, languorous; listened to wind quartets
in the Phoenix Club, Satchmo pulsing along the front.

...

CAROLYN KING

Final Burn

Smirking astride a hijacked Harley
or stoned at the wheel of a hot-wired Porsche,
they mock at the man with his head in the clouds.

But they'll never know the meaning of joy-ride.

...

JONATHAN DAVIDSON

Song and Dance

Not able to remember the words
to a song but keen to sing and dance,
you take to the floor in our front room
between the sofa and occasional table.

...

PAUL GROVES

Etna

The mountain grumbles in its sleep.
I lie here till the crack of dawn,
a widow. Our relationship
goes back to childhood. I played in
the olive orchards while it smoked
erratically, its temper stilled.
Occasionally it nearly creaked
towards activity. Appalled,

...

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