

RIVERS  
WITHIN

NDUKA OTIONO



## BAND OF WORSHIPPERS

At Mama Bomboy's street corner shack,  
They call every evening,  
Proverbial wayfarers so heavily burdened  
But with no one to give them rest.

First to call this evening is Awalu,  
Tall, dark Fulani man with hazel eyes  
Telling muted stories of a pilgrim,  
Tenant of memories of miseries.

Next is Samanja, so named after his  
Legendary walrus moustache curved  
Upwards at the corners, pointing heavenwards  
And accusing God of complicity in his painful fate.

And then there are half a dozen others—  
Slaves of paraga, herbal alcoholic brew  
Advertised by Mama Bomboy  
As gbogboshe, a cure for all ailments.

Before every gulp they pour libations  
In salutation to the guts  
And for each gulp they hope for renewal  
After a backbreaking day at the construction site.

Every shot is for the famished road  
But "the last is for missus," a potent  
Mix of gburantashi, an aphrodisiac,  
Taken to make war, not love.

Then once upon a cold harmattan evening,  
The band of paraga worshippers arrived at their haunt  
And found the site razed by the General's bulldozers  
Paving the ground for an Officers' Mess to sprout...



## PAINT THE SKY

it's a wet, breezy Friday night  
and I will paint the sky tonight  
inspired by my wrinkled jacket,

a raincoat that reminds me  
of the gossamer feel of condoms.  
I'm in an Edmonton bar, alone,

dreaming of homeland and Maxim  
with all the Stars, pepper soup and  
ugba salad that Friday night offers...

inside Ratt, there're no rats.  
the bar is clean like a newly shaved chin  
but instead of the fragrance of aftershave

the smell of tobacco hangs in the air  
suffocating desire with nicotine  
and I, a troubadour, am perched

on a stool with spindly legs like  
the stilts of some African  
masquerade, facing the window...

outside, Edmonton is the  
tortured splash of  
incandescent bulbs...

from my glassy hotspot I see  
angels of darkness in flight  
with no compass to locate my condo

shadowed somewhere in the horizon  
where-in I've grown weary from  
keeping vigils for a dreaded winter

as each day glides past with  
expectations of nature's frozen temper.  
tonight, I see red in the air for

"Red is freedom road," F.O.\* said  
and red is Ratt's Star outlined  
by colour blue that reminds

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FEBRUARY  
13, 2007



me of hurrying cumulus outside...  
I will paint the sky red tonight  
when the clouds are spread out

like the wings of an eagle in mid flight.  
I see floating atop the watery film  
of my favourite beverage, pictures of

Edmonton's rousing skyline  
but cannot find buried somewhere  
in her valley, her river of peace.

at the west end, clouds gather like wools  
drifting towards this 'room at the top.'  
inside the bar, Edmonton is a chatter of

tongues converging from distant  
climes on this dragging Friday night-  
but between Power Plant and Ratt

there are no signs of Joel with  
Bagger, and his advance party,  
poets on a mission to pour

libations to their Muse.  
now in this suspended bar,  
lonely, I wander through a maze

of temptations beckoning  
like Irish cream and thinking  
of special Thanksgiving turkeys

and the festivities in the air  
for tonight I shall paint the sky  
inspired by my wrinkled jacket,

a raincoat that reminds me of  
the gossamer feel of condoms.  
alone in this Edmonton bar

I dream of homeland and  
all the guns and crude oil  
in combat in the Niger delta.

\* Nigerian playwright, Femi Osofisan. One of his plays is entitled  
*Red is Freedom Road*.



## GRANDMA'S PIPE

She's been long dead  
But she returns with  
Every pipe I see,  
Old woman with the pipe,  
Chip of the rare breed.

She would sit leisurely on her  
Ancient bed in the family house,  
A red mud platform that  
To keep cool & soothing,  
She would scrub daily with  
Dead roots of plantain trees,  
Fresh like wet bath sponge.

Then the ritual would begin—

First, she would sort the tobacco,  
Rolls of golden brown leaves  
So unique and so aromatic  
You are tempted to sniff them.  
Grandma would caress every part  
Of it with the tenderness of  
An experienced weaver in a loom.  
Next, she would load her pipe,  
Brown like the tobacco leaves,  
Curved upwards as though  
Swearing allegiance to her.  
In turn, she would stroke it gently  
Taking her time around the bend  
Like a driver at a dangerous corner.  
Then she would take a break  
To fetch a piece of burnished coal  
From the busy fireplace,  
Admire the loaded pipe as if  
Reluctant to hurt it with fire.  
She would hesitantly drop the red  
Coal onto the soul of the pipe,  
Raise it to a crooked angle onto  
Her mouth & so suck with the urgency  
Of a baby breastfeeding hungrily  
You would think she was about to choke.

Then she would relax, as if meditating  
Or perhaps thinking of a joke...



She would puff the smoke,  
Spiral it upwards as if  
Towards heavensgate,  
A contented smile lighting up  
Her dry, wrinkled face.

Again she would relax, as if meditating...

Then her head would jerk like one  
Who's just regained consciousness.

*"Nduka nwaam...Mhuum..."*

A long pause tells a thousand and one tales.

So one day I seize the cue and ask  
When and how she picked up the habit.  
"That's another story," she offers in native tongue:

*"Once your father's father was sick during Biafra  
And I was alone with him, the great Obosi,  
Champion wrestler that never lost a fight.  
His fiery eyes were enough to defeat his foes.  
They shone like the sun at midday,  
Rolling in their orbs...  
Because the world revolved around them."*

Another draught of smoke and sparks fly...

*"Everyone else had run to the bush, Nduka nwam,  
And I was alone with your father's father  
And fever had so wracked his body  
One could boil corn on it.  
And he was once again a child.  
Well, not as if men are not always chill..."*

Her words trail off  
As she casts her eyes on the wall,  
Tracing the delicate Uli patterns on them...

When she stirs, her eyes are moist,  
And sadness overshadows her face.

*"See that hole on the wall there," she points,  
"Look at the other one on the ceiling there:*



That's where the bullet flew in,  
Unexpected thunderbolt from the devil,  
Bounced off the wall and hit Obosi,  
Strongman with a soft heart,  
Dispenser of gifts, scourge of wicked men  
Who defeated Ono and restored justice,  
Earning a moniker that became family name."

Silence upon silence upon silences...  
But there's no science to salience—  
A resilient spirit is a gift from God.  
The eye never sheds blood no matter the sting.

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She raises her charming pipe aloft...

"This was Obosi's pipe," she continues.  
"Grief and loneliness are worse than death.  
War is a ruthless demon that unleashes tragedies.  
I am sole witness to the painful fall of a great man.  
And I died that day, only this sand & ashes remain.  
(She pulls the skin on her left arm violently)  
Only this pipe remains—

My comforter, my memory, my courage, my gun.  
No smoke issuing from it is ordinary, but an ordinance.  
They are gun smoke from every shot I aim in vengeance.  
And I'll continue to shoot his killers until death do us join.

TUESDAY  
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RIVERS WITHIN  
(CALL AND RESPONSE)

I have traced many rivers of love within.  
My heart is full of love songs pleading...

There are veins flowing with sad songs.  
Daily I think of uncharted landscapes within.

Some arteries ferry bitter memories of love.  
Like cancer, some loves never stop spreading.

I have fetched laughters from Obida's\* depths.  
The waves ripple gently like nipples pleading.

The banks of my heart are a bed for ecstasy.  
My request is like a blank cheque pending.

Like Langston Hughes, I've known rivers ancient...  
You are the mermaid, heroine of my rivers within.

You've stained my verses with stanzas of heartbreak  
Passion is the fish swimming in rivers receding.

How do you fish in shallow waters full of effluents?  
Dead water hyacinths floating on oil need weeding.

You are the deep river woman I'm still navigating.  
Your naked eye cannot see the signals I'm sending.

Gauge the blood pressure in the bivalves of my heart.  
Can a love surgeon dam the surging waters within?

Did I hear you say, Obida does not eat stones, Nduka?  
I'm now a fugitive lover with a heart that's bleeding.

\* Obida — a stream in the poet's homeland revered for its  
mystical powers.



**N**duka Otiono, writer, journalist and scholar, was born in Nigeria. He holds a Master's degree in English from the University of Ibadan, where he later became an Associate Lecturer in the Department of English. He has been the General Secretary of the Association of Nigerian Authors and a cultural activist, serving on many national literary committees.

His books include *The Night Hides with a Knife* (short stories), winner of the maiden ANA/Spectrum Prize for fiction; *Voices in the Rainbow* (poems), runner up for the ANA/Cadbury Poetry Prize in 1997; *We-Men: An Anthology of Men Writing on Women*, co-edited with E.C. Osondu, described as the "subject of the greatest controversy in Nigerian literature"; and a new anthology he edited called *Camouflage: Best of Contemporary Writing from Nigeria* (2006).



In 2006 he was awarded the FS Chia fellowship for a PhD in English and Film Studies at the University of Alberta. He was a Guest Poet in the January, 2007 edition of UK-based Sentinel Online Poetry magazine. Most of the poems in this chapbook have been taken from his forthcoming collection of poems, *Love in a Time of Nightmares*, of which *Sunday Sun* of Nigeria notes in a preview that the "verses...serve as a template for the lyrical, the deployment of narratives and folksy idioms that are enchanting. His journey motif flutters from Nigeria to Canada, as the author (Otiono) attempts to bridge borders, and this, also, typifies ... a troubadour's life."



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