

I hoped to climb a ladder to the sky

Tanure Ojaide¹
University of North Carolina-Charlotte, USA

The trees preceded the tribes in the land we call ours.
They endured furious floods and dug deep their feet
before the womb that bore us broke its concealed sack.

And the colorful clans of birds arrived early in the wetlands
dancing on slender reeds that themselves swayed to the wind –
nobody knew where the spirit came from to possess all.

We would have had no homes, no doors and roof overhead
without the primeval abundance that blessed us, proud ones
believing that we lacked nothing we needed to live well.

We would have been wraiths from the vacuous womb
without the beasts that filled the earth, air, and water
that groomed us to assume the graceful gait of arrogance.

And when satiated we forgot that wood still mattered
after high gods nodded to our sacrificial mounds
and the stilts that raised us brought us safely down.

The same way we embarked upon a ritual hunt to ferret out
every life in water, air, and on the soil to pamper our appetites
that turned into voracious monsters after we became strong.

Roaring, the desert that advances to take over our refuge;
the hot winds landing countless battalions of sand regiments
to swamp crowds of people, now captives to inhuman habits.

As for the famine feverishly fanning out to every corner,
it rebukes the hands that slaughtered blindly in the country
now quartered in emaciated bodies doddering everywhere.

As a child I hoped to climb a ladder to the sky and there
meet the bearded Osonobughwe who granted every wish;
I knew the friendly forest would provide me the craft.

I hoped to be borne on wings long before aeroplanes
tore through clouds – there was no jet with the majesty
of the apiapia gliding overhead to assure me of safety.

We did not only disfigure the forest but flared its seeds,
we did not only catapult the birds but poisoned the air;
we cleared the land of what gave us life with their lives.

Each of us can only remember rivers in flowing robes,
species of birds or game that now thrive only in memory.
The forest, its doors and all flared in the frenzy of arsonists.

It's clear what we did to those who preceded us here.
Now we hang by a precipice in place of the paradise.
We have lost it, the beautiful country we were born into.

The muse sends me to the market

I ask no questions of the divine command
and off I go to the market across the main road.

I take along the cast-iron bell that completes my costume –
the messenger must deliver his message with a clear ring.

Above haggling murmurs of milling marketers
I come to mingle with sellers, buyers, and others.

The market is a vast theatre of fortune where
fate tags its caste with myriad sizes of purses:

those come with only a penny to buy all their needs
and a few with tons of cash to buy what is not for sale –

it is clear the divides elsewhere that remain covered
the market surely exposes in abysmal barriers.

Forbidden love exercises freedom here; nobody denied entry
where the living and the dead consort and exchange pleasantries

under the shade of thronged murmurs and spectacle of spices
and stalking robbers display the tortoise's craft they learned.

I have not come to the market on my own volition
to barter songs for palm oil, fresh fish, and salt –

the songs that come free to the minstrel will not
outbid the oil worker's wife overflowing with cash.

I come to poeticise the arithmetic of prices,
denials of poverty and delusions of wealth.

I ring the bell at tilted scales and other measures;
I sing loud against the hat tricks of usurers...

The muse sends me to the market
and I ask no questions of the divine command.

The minstrel is a refugee

Before he realises it,
the minstrel is a refugee

without even a pen in the pocket for possession;
with neither minutes nor paper to scribble the blues

he must sing to carry along the memory
of the shrew that battered him into flight.

Every property too ponderous to carry,
the refugee must travel light in flight –

it is only life that he carries simply with-
out knowing its significance that counts.

The minstrel in a black Indian file
evacuates the death-taunting city –

he has jumped from the roof into a boat;
no stunt that saves life is ever strange.

The minstrel seeks refuge in the kingdom
where the house of words cannot flatten

from the mindless cruelty of Katrina;
much in the head that cannot be trashed.

The muse hits the minstrel with a hurricane,
teaches the primitive lessons of a cyber age –

the common denominator of survival for all
surpasses whatever bank accounts of stardom.

From murderous Katrina's fury he flees;
The minstrel fears death by drowning

hence he looks not back at the gorgon's face
to gather valuables and be transfixed into stone.

The minstrel counts the blessings of a fugitive;
the muse that subjects the caste to calamities

also saves from the road littered with aborted hopes
and makes the favourite one to defy odds to survive.

The song though invaluable is no property
that drowns – even if it goes down, it rises with life;

the song survives unsanitary domes of starvation;
it survives the neglect of smug federal bureaucrats.

The minstrel takes his gruel scrambled with filth
and seeks not the king's table on a flooded floor;

he wishes to arrive sane with memories of Katrina,
his head clean above the muck; no personal tragedy.

Once an insurmountable wall, the horizon
beckons with clouds that give way to sun

and always stalking the minstrel
a beautiful spirit, lips aflame –

the wordless delight springs from pain:
the companion thinks of labour, a fruits.

¹ A renowned poet, Dr. Tanure Ojaide has won major national and international poetry awards, including the Commonwealth Poetry Prize for the Africa Region (1987), the BBC Arts and Africa Poetry Award (1988), twice the All-Africa Okigbo Prize for Poetry (1988 and 1997), and also twice the Association of Nigerian Authors' Poetry Prize (1988 and 1994). His poetry publications include: *Labyrinths of the Delta* (Greenfield Center, NY: Greenfield Review Press, 1986), *The Eagle's Vision* (Detroit: Lotus Press, 1987), *The Endless Song* (Lagos: Malthouse Press, 1989), *The Fate of Vultures* (Lagos: Malthouse Press, 1990), *The Blood of Peace* (Oxford, UK/Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1991), *The Daydream of Ants* (Lagos: Malthouse Press, 1997), *Delta Blues & Home Songs* (Ibadan: Kraft, 1998), and *Invoking the Warrior Spirit* (Ibadan: Heinemann, 1998). He is currently the Frank Porter Graham Professor at the University of North Carolina-Charlotte, USA.