Christopher Okigbo

Limits
CHRISTOPHER OKIGBO

Limits

mbari publications Ibadan
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author wishes to acknowledge his debt of gratitude to Louis Ekpechi who nursed him through a most anxious period of illness; to Ulli Beier who rescued this manuscript; and to Sunday Anozie to whom this poem owes much more for its present form than can adequately be expressed.
I

SUDDENLY becoming talkative
like weaverbird
Summoned at offside of
dream remembered

Between sleep and waking,

I hang up my egg-shells
To you of palm grove,
Upon whose bamboo towers hang
Dripping with yesterupwine

A tiger mask and nude spear...

Queen of the damp half light,
I have had my cleansing,
Emigrant with air-borne nose,
The he-goat-on-heat.
II

FOR HE WAS a shrub among the poplars
Needling more roots
More sap to grow to sunlight
Thirsting for sunlight
A low growth among the forest.

Into the soul
The selves extended their branches
Into the moments of each living hour
Feeling for audience

Straining thin among the echoes;
And out of the solitude
Voice and soul with selves unite
Riding the echoes

Horsemen of the apocalypse
And crowned with one self
The name displays its foliage,
Hanging low

A green cloud above the forest.

III

BANKS of reed.
Mountains of broken bottles.

& the mortar is not yet dry...

Silent the footfall
soft as cat's paw,
Sandalfed in velvet,
in fur

So we must go,
Wearing evemist against the shoulders,
Trailing sun's dust saw dust of combat,
With brand burning out at hand-end.

& the mortar is not yet dry...

Then we must sing
Tongue-tied without name or audience,
Making harmony among the branches.

And this is the crisis point,
The twilight moment between
sleep and waking;
And voice that is reborn transpires
Not thro' pores in the flesh
but the soul's back-bone.

(... cont'd. over)
Ill cont'd.

Hurry on down —
  Thro the high-arched gate —
Hurry on down
  little stream to the lake;
Hurry on down —
  Thro the cinder market —
Hurry on down
  in the wake of the dream;
Hurry on down —
  To rockpoint of CABLE
    To pull by the rope
    The big white elephant . . .

& the mortar is not yet dry
& the mortar is not yet dry . . .

and the dream wakes
  and the voice fades
In the damp half light,
  like a shadow,

Not leaving a mark.

IV

AN IMAGE insists
  from the flag pole of the heart,
The image distracts
  with the cruelty of the rose . . .

  My lioness
  (No shield is lead plate against you)
Wound me with your sea-weed face,
  blinded like a strong-room.

Distances of your
  armpit-fragrance
Turn chloroform,
  enough for my patience—

When you have finished,
  and done up my stitches,
Wake me near the altar,

& this poem will be finished.
UPON an empty sarcophagus
    out of solid alabaster,
A branch of giant fennel,
    on an empty sarcophagus ...

Nothing suggests accident
    where the beasts
Are finishing their rest:

Smoke of ultramarine and amber
Floating above the fields after
    moonlit rains
From tree unto tree distils
    the radiance of a king ...

You might as well see the new branch
    in ENKI;
And that is no new thing either...
HE STOOD in the midst of them all
and appeared in true form,
He found them drunken, he found none
thirsty among them.

Who would add to your statue,
Or in your village accept you?

He fed them on seed wrapped in wonders,
And deemed it a truth-value system.
Man out of innocence,
And there was none thirsty among them.

Dados and brackets,
The model is not far off ... 

They cast him in mould of iron,
And asked him to do a rock-drill:
Man out of innocence —
He drilled with dumb bells about him.

(...cont'd. over)

VI cont'd.

And they took the key off
And they hid the key of ... 
that none may enter.

And they took the hot spoils off the battle,
And they shared the hot spoils among them:
Essakes among them;

And they were the chosen
mongrel breeds,
With slogan in hand, of
won divination . . .

And you talk of the people,
And there is none thirsty among them.
VII

AND FROM frame of iron
in mould of iron...
and he ate the dead lion,
and was within the corpse...

which is not the point;
And who says it matters
Provided movement is around
the burning market.
The centre—

So lilies
sprouted from rosebeds,
Canalilies,
like tombstones from pavements;
and to the cross in the void
came pilgrims,
came floating with burnt-out tapers:  (...cont'd. over)

VII cont'd.

Past the village orchard
where FLANNAGAN
Preached the Pope's message,
To where drowning nuns suspired,
Asking the KEY-WORD from stone,

and he said:
To sow the fireseed among grasses,
and lo,
To keep it till it burns out...
VIII

BUT the Sunbird—
Listen under the oilbean shadows—
Repeats, repeats,
over the oilbean shadows . . .

'A fleet of eagles
' over the oilbean shadows
' Holds the square
' under curse of their rank breath.

'Beaks of bronze, wings of
' hard-tanned felt,
'The eagles flow
' over man mountains,
'Steep walls of voices,
' horizons;
'The eagles furrow
' dazzling over the voices
' With wings like
combs in the wind's hair

(. . .cont'd. over)

VIII cont'd.

'Out of the solitude,
'The fleet,
' out of the solitude,
'Intangible
' like the silk thread of the sunlight,
'The eagles ride low,
' resplendent . . . resplendent . . .'

And small birds sing in shadows,
Wobbling under their bones.

So squatting,
A blind dog howls at his godmother—

YUNICE at the passageway,
Singing the moon to sleep over the hills,
YUNICE at the passageway—

Give him no chair, they say,
The crier of the dawn,
Riding with gods and the angry stars
Toward the great sunshine.
AND TO US they came—
(Malisons, malisons, mair than ten)
And climbed the bombox
and killed the Sunbird,
And they scanned the forest of ollbean,
its approach,
Surveyed its high branches . . .

And they entered into the forest,
And they passed through the forest,
Oil ollbean,
And found them, the twin-gods of the forest:
The grove was damp, with airs, with airs
the leaves,
And morndew beckoned, beckoned afar
From the branches of the gods of IRKALLA.

Within it—

Not a stir,
Not a dead leaf whispered,
Splitting the dawnlit silence;
Not the still breath of the gods of IRKALLA.

...cont'd. over

IX cont'd.

Then the beasts broke—
(Malisons, malisons, mair than ten)
And dawn-gust grumbled,
Fanning the grove
Like a horse-call-man,
Like the handmaid of dancers,
Fanning their trembling branches.

Their talons,
They drew out of their scabbard,
Upon the tree trunks,
As if on fire-clay,
Their beaks they sharpened,
And spread like eagles their felt-wings,
And descended,
Descended upon the twin-gods of IRKALLA.

And the ornaments of him,
And the beads about his tail;
And the carapace of her,
And her shell, they divided.

...cont'd. over
IX cont’d.

And the gods lie in state
And the gods lie in state
   without the long-drum.
And the gods lie unsung
And the gods lie
   veiled only with mould,
Behind the shrinehouse.
Gods grow out,
   abandoned;
And so do they . . .

X

BUT at the window
Outside at the window,
A shadow—
Listen. Listen again under the shadow . . .
Give me a spooknif, and shave my long beard . . .

   The Sunbird sings again
   From the LIMITS of the dream,
The Sunbird sings again
   Where the caress does not reach,
   of Guernica,
On whose canvas of blood,
The newsprint-slits of his tongue
   cling to glue . . .
& the canceling out is complete.
MBARI PUBLICATIONS

A Walk in the Night (novel)  Alex la Guma
Drawings                  Uche Okeke
Drawings                  es Salahi
Song of a Goat (play)     J. P. Clark
Poems 1962               J. P. Clark
24 Poems                 J. J. Rabeavelo
Heavensgate (poems)      Christopher Okigbo
African Songs            Leon Damas
Three Plays              Wole Soyinka