The African e-Journals Project has digitized full text of articles of eleven social science and humanities journals. This item is from the digital archive maintained by Michigan State University Library. Find more at: http://digital.lib.msu.edu/projects/africanjournals/

Available through a partnership with

Scroll down to read the article.
Ogaga Ifowodo

Belongs to a younger, or as he prefers to call it— the stillborn generation of Nigeria poets: graduated in Law from the University of Benin in 1991 and has since worked as a human rights consultant and editor of annual reports for the Civil Liberties Organisation (CLO) in Lagos. His unpublished first collection of poems RED RAIN won the Association of Nigerian Authors.

Madiba
(Sonnets on and around the Long Walk to Freedom)

I
Stepping away from the podium
Where he swore allegiance to freedom
He faced the multitude, an old man
Made young to the span
Of years it took the sun to rise
And melt the mist, make wise
The rainbow’s all-inclusive colours.
The millennial tears, the vapours
Of death that stalked house and street
Had fled the skin of easy meat.
He looked again at the multitude
Gathered today not for the plentitude
Of anger to share, bury or explode
But to witness a new world unfold.

II
And he threw out his arms, charmed
The air as he sang the banned
Kaffir song of terror, now anointed
Anthem in open air, as he appointed
The moment to memory’s pain and pleasure:
‘Dance with me, Luthuli, dance the pure
Motive of those early years. Dance
With me, stars of Sharpeville, lance
In hand against a false tongue. Come Biko
Match my steps with a powered tango.
Join the enchanted wind and sway -
You who died dancing in Soweto -
this day
Is not blood and bullet but mothers’ kisses
On the waiting cheek, answers and teases?’

And with the fallen branch
Hope she finds her lost but happy ranch.

III
‘And you, O you Chris Hani
Gun on shoulder, dance with me.
As one soldier to another, you know
That graves are the last altar, no obstacle
To the meeting of old boots
When truce has sealed all truths
Canvassed with the readiness of blood.
The malevolent plot sought a flood
Of fury to bind your labour, your MK
And your people to the burning lake, a way
Cold and desperate to stem the uncoloured tide
Of this day. So dance, Hani, with what wide
Smile that steeled the weakest heart
And mined hatred’s cushioned mat.

IV
In the secluded arms of Mvevo
He followed the faintest echo
Of a solitary bird from veld to kraal
Absorbing the lay of the land, until the call
Of milk matured on window sill
Guided home his truant skill.
Nature or nurture, a rebellious bearing
Passed from father to son. Rearing
Cattle at Umtata, or with bruised ankle,
Learned at play to serve honour in battle.
(ANA) poetry prize in 1993.
Ipowodo has been in detention since early November 1997 without charge at the instance of the Nigerian authorities. Madiba which is signed 'in Langenbroich, July 1996' belongs to an unfinished collection of poetry.

He sat at the white palace in Mqhekezweni And burnished into shepherd, statesman and impi To face the dangers of a blunt world. Foreskin shed, he would man as time crawled.

What may take the gentlest gradient Home to water. Leaves ardent

Oh the lushest branch in the sun Wave to every wind. After the corn Ripest and sweetest with mischief is eaten (And odes to manhood's stolen pig written)

An honest man must take his spear Draw his own blood to wear

The coat of courage. Standing alone Where before the crowd emboldened the stone He took the first step at Fort Hare Bled his wound on the bare And bitter road of invisible gain To build a fortress for private pain.

VI
From snare to trap, danger marked his road. He would not wed with royal fiat. A toad

Leaping from the burning bush Encountered the python's supreme push

For food. The city of light Darkened near the distant view. Night

And day passed on a patchwork suit. His sleeping-rooms mocked a suite.

Midnight's melting candles pined For books in wax of love's rarest kind.

His blistering feet found the road to Sisulu. He saw the naked sun burn them all - Zulu

Xhosa, Coloured, Indian - and light The fires for the first communal fight.

VII 'Madam, are these ... yours? He spotted the slip. Brandished the white lady's briefs on pencil-tip.

Turned her red-hot with racist shame. He forced the monster-hand of law, the claim

Failed, freeing the unhappy maid. A thousand indignities daily prayed

Redress. Ban orders in hand, they shut In his face the half-open back door to court.

There were deputations and telegrams, protestation against a 'Whites Only' creed of humanity, notions

Of privilege-in-skin-pigment ordained by God. They rolled the stone against every word

Of reason. The centurions of race balloted If the kaffir and his Charter had rotted.

VIII 'Soup with meat', 'Soup without meat' Russian cookery book ... They had found it,

Proof of the RED threat, gripped by the torment Of colours. A professor witnessed to the urgent

Hour: 'Communism from the shoulder!'- His own words, which left to smoulder

In a fevered brain, burned red with treason. Cookery not being colour-barred, forced reason

Freed the quarry, the risen rage to hoard For the day when lunatic or liar's word Would point home the famished sword. Free and foul, how to sweeten the bitter cud?

And they raided kitchens in search of
They would tell treason from meat in pots.

IX
Lilies’ or poplars’ leaves, none could proffer
Eternal cover. At Rivonia the rougher
Road ahead was mapped. The voice of peace
Silenced with a naked fist found its lease.

Gun would answer gun, sabotage would stalk
The breeding-ponds of prejudice: ‘Walk
The mile with me, if you wish.

MK
Shall throw burning spears in the fray.

Puny these arms, but forged in the moral furnace
They shall double the victories of your race
Machine. This choice we wake, the knowledge
Of the cherished blood to flow.

Pushed to the edge
We heed the head, our hearts renouncing the act’,
So the first commander, anointing the fact.

X
He mended rags in prison with equal care
As a mender of hearts: what the hands dare
Touch is human labour. Old mailbags that shunned
Their anxious letters, he and his comrades turned

Waterbags for the news-thirst of the torturer.
They broke rocks, mined lime to better

The world denied them in and out of prison. Forbidden the open air, they called a meeting

Wherever wind or smuggled note could fool
The warder. Perched on a hurried stool

The High Organ revived battle and the ANC
Nourished on the rich diet of Mqhekwezeni

He held court, turning the eyes of all
To the common foe, to apartheid’s fall.

XI
Even he would be startled by the harvest.
Father in jail, children broke thirst.

Drinking rage in every cup. He who taught
Defiance was rattled by the lesson caught:

They would stamp the earth, their earth
With a loud voice and a firm foot. And let

Regulations answer to order. ‘Stand before An Officer?’ ‘What for?’ ‘Whose law?’

He saluted the new epoch: ‘Oh crocodiles Of the white river, who kept police files

For men with lighted candles, look to them In the coming conflagration. Raise the anthem,

The seed grew even in thorny ground.
We will nourish the wild shoots found.’

XII
The years, the year ... Robben marked
Them with hammer on stone. Nothing sparked

Heat. The island segregated hate
Made monks of married men. Delivered late

The awaited letter came at last from the censor -
A paper sieve, salutation the lone survivor.

The nights, the nights, long on cold floor. No embrace to unfold

The heart wound full by walls and worry.
He warmed his cell with her picture. Memory stoked alive embers of the last kiss.
He would rub nose with her, make this

Daily mime light the fire of the first time.
His prison-garden fruits found his rhyme.

XIII
Nights into days. The years had rounded toes
And fingers in the first count. Even toes
Found the repeating time uneasy joy.  
Holy fury threatened another Troy.  

In township and mine, marching feet  
Saw a tank and dug a pit.  

The slow hand of time had suffered  
A stroke, moved with ill-tempered  
Pace to rust the lock. How many  
tides?  
Infested waters rose and fell. And  
tides  
Weathered weed, piled the bank with  
shoal.  
War at stalemate, so seemed the goal.  

Pressed by heavy walls into his secret  
self  
He climbed the cliff to place his dream  
on shelf.  

XIV  
There are no dead ends, only the  
birthplace  
of horizons. Plumbered with the bold  
mace  
New roads arise to the dance hall  
Rivers sweep to the flowers' whorl.  

It is the false prophet speaks oracles  
And hides from storms in tabernacles.  

He had dared storms, now he would  
be  
The storm. He set upon the lonely  
Task of prime maker of the road to  
freedom,  
Ploughing a plot for all in the new  
kingdom.  

Decades of talking to stone had  
spawned faith -  
Dry bones would live. Too long now  
the wait  
Wise maidens' lamps had exhausted  
the oil.  
So he summoned his jailers for the last  
toil.  

XV  
Breaking through the dark forest, he  
saw only  
The high branch. Pledge to life wholly  

Lived, he would not gather dead  
wood.  
He purged his heart of its bitter food -  
He needed no victory, only the  
satisfaction  
Of hope: 'Now we may judge action  
Outside the blinding flash of war.  
The child will sleep tonight. A mirror  
Will prove the mother's smile. Men  
Will spend evenings with their  
children.  

Laughter, at last, tickles the stern lips.  
Oh, grass is green again. The orchard  
steeps  
With fruit. In the cape, the water  
Sparkles with hope for fisher and  
swimmer.  

XVI  
So dance with me, Oliver, chance.  
You who plumbed wilderness, took  
the dance.  

And made fire without faggot. And  
You, Govan, who governed thought  
with hand  
And head, take my hand. Come to  
This dance, all of you, defiant to  
The death. Bring your tears and your  
cheer.  
shout 'Amandla!' and break the earth  
there  
Above your graves with your cry  
Of 'Ngawethu!' And firmly guide my  
Feet along the road you died walking.  
Stake on the tallest tree your all-seeing  
Eyes find. And chastise to the  
unerring path  
Your unbroken black pride in this  
day's aftermath.