

# Gratitude for Being Haunted by a Reverent Destiny

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1.  
I have climbed all the mountains in the world.  
I have climbed the tallest trees to their apical leaves.  
I have cruised the endless waters to the points where the earth kisses the sky,  
or back to my starting point in Lagos on the occasion when I kept west  
for four hundred years for refusing to have a drink of Attenuation Well.  
When I capsized near the end of the southern tip of Cape Horn  
& watched a cavalier mermaid give birth to a dreary marmalade  
there beneath the oceanbed closest to the deepest Pacific,  
an angel blessed with a dazzling kyphosis came to save me.  
I saw a white hippopotamus spread surplus upon a barren bight  
among inscrutable Indonesian archipelagos,  
where cruel rhino and orangutan fathers made empty dinners  
for wayward rhino and orangutan children.  
The angel, blessed with a dazzling kyphosis, bore me on their back,  
saved me once more at the Cape of Good Hope,  
led me back to my tremor Atlantic  
on the shore of where I met my old dog  
who neither barked nor heard until I whistled its name

according to sepulchral notes of the strayed.

Time I now accept refuses to stretch in the way a taut rope stretches  
or a soccer post's crossbar or the genocide barrels of Maxim's havoc.  
Or some story of life and death,  
after a stint deviant across some world's perilous climates  
because I'm, ante & post the psychic bellum, a griot who sings & dances  
from cities to cities, & they say I have a voice dulcet like honey.  
Well, I don't know. & I can't say I dance better than òkòtó  
or a rolling cone, because the caged bird would rather bolt than sing.  
But there's a song evergreen in the bulldozer mouth of the world:

\*Torí ijó ni me Aselébé lówó ó  
torí ijó ni me Aselébé lówó.  
K'ó ní'lù ó pè mí bí tati'jọ  
orò nílá kan ó sì gbòde,  
torí ijó ni me Aselébé lówó.

2.  
My name is Aselébé, or the One who Walks as if the Ground would Soon Sink.  
They also call me Ajóf'èbó, or the One who Dances for the Imperialists.  
My mother no more regrets the day I was born for being the day they were also  
born;  
but my father, the famous General Jo'gunomi or Let the World Breathe,  
had disowned me since I was twelve, since I was eighteen,  
since I said I was proud phantasmic of this Michael-Jackson destiny,  
since I said in the future even conquerors would shudder to say empire  
& those uprooting Congo would have their names spat out  
of the world's choric mouth  
like the greek aftertaste of incessant expeditions.  
But honor is a mosquito to anyone as irredeemable as a minister of war  
or a petulant prince entrenching anathemic exegesis of history.

The drunken proverb goes it is risible to escape a bot  
before a captcha & those yelling God too is mindless.  
Of life and death,  
& this coming late to this wisdom it is suicidal to dread  
becoming a wasteland, emptied viscera, before your inescapable menace.

They say they still say life ends—I beg your pardon—starts at forty.  
Now, my heart has grown older than the relics of extinctions.  
& in my journeys over the apical leaves of the tallest trees,  
I have seen that people run towering  
but for their Kekulé's problems.  
That the crayfish was straight everywhere  
before God said let there be storms.

There's only one lesson left for the humble apprentice:  
whatever you do, do like a bastard  
or like the drunken Hamlet  
or like the unmanifest Ogun at the gate  
of the hellish canyon,

before the gatekeepers of the cosmic matrix.

There's no euphemism for empire;  
whatever you do, do like Jesus Christ.  
Call a lousy spade a shovel; a good-and-perilous, good-and-perilous,  
slippery-more-than-firm internet an unethical paradox  
& the cloud lords callous feudalists on the nose,  
but don't point your friend's prosthetic finger to their face.

3.

One day in Ado-Awaye southwest of Nigeria,  
among the consuming mountains  
narrating the refuge origin of a town founded by Dahomean  
fugitives disguised as ancient spirits descended  
to hunt the hunters incessant of their prime,  
not too far from Iyake, bottomless lake ensconced  
a world's marvel in the heart rocky & elephantine of Ado,  
under a cloying shed of brittle palm fronds crying harmattan  
dirty northwind snapping with the dancing  
one million bulbs variegated in all tiny shades,  
of all climbing smokes. Wasted folks,  
I was crunching life like sàkádà, the tangy bread  
of cassava farina & coconut,  
& boasting of my innumerable peregrinations  
atop the apical leaves of the tallest tree  
when this dandy came a preacher,  
the oenophile specimen,  
my favourite specimen, & insisted—  
The One who Walks as if the Ground Would What?—  
I was undeserving of my name,  
or was I the one they had in mind  
when they entreated, be a dove and a serpent?

What about a big bot clocking a captcha atop a canyon?

Did your lord wary of the thumping frog  
preferred the chameleon? Well, to the toad  
saying don't mention my name I don't have a tail,  
one must confess the Bible is hard to cover, at least the Shakespearean  
edict.

I say don't mention my name unless in church unless before the lords  
unless I'm desperate to win the grand title, Your Lordship of All Pregnant  
Canyons.

4.

To my father, the Late General Let the War Breathe,  
there are innumerable ways to expound  
the storm in one's veins.  
But how best to finally die,  
Earth's progeny insatiable?

On my final peregrination southwest of Nigeria

I witnessed life & palm-wine; men & women houseflies,  
This our world of froth is a paradise  
& existence a drink.

The housefly in the froth,  
the moth in the blue-yellow rollercoaster  
hissing back at God.

5.

In the rocky Ado-Awaye north of Oyo,  
& the seat of the palace of death & titanic rebellions  
where the indispositions are like Chingawa monkeys  
confessing tremulously of vassal lots, interred valors  
& all that perish when a people sit to dialogue  
but of mortar & cavalry minds,  
the dandy & preacher insisted & insisted  
tremor dancer of perpetual moonlight & rubber legs,  
a moniker is a brilliant name  
but a name is a useless moniker.  
How did you earn it all?

I have said life furls and unfurls like a stallion's tale in the wind,  
& should be eaten like soft yam etherized in a river of palm oil.  
I have said I envy the plight of a fish caught by a famished boy,  
because it is reverent, because that is how at the end of the broth  
to send back anything fundamentally subatomic.

6.

The conjurer who conjures first is soon a spectator.  
Spring blooms but summer double blooms;  
don't say the orchestra was quick to leave.  
Summon your thunder then it'll boom  
(wait, does thunder boom or bang?)  
Live, I was saying,  
& endorse—or don't bother—your organs over now;  
& tremor, tremor people of perpetual doom.  
To thunder maybe is not to rain,  
but it's still wasteful to go or not go back intact.

\*Aselebe is at this square tonight,  
there's Aselebe at this square tonight;  
the orchestra playing  
like possessed animals  
like the rubber legs should snap;  
like the rubber legs should break.

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## Craft Note on “Gratitude for Being Haunted by a Reverent Destiny”

Four years ago, when the first draft of what has become “Gratitude for Being Haunted by a Reverent Destiny” came to me, I wasn’t thinking of writing a surrealistic poem. Even though I was already conversant with surrealism as that twentieth century movement of avant-garde artists seeking to engender a “super-reality” by bridging the gap between reality and dreams, I was yet to study the techniques and intentions of the movement from an artist’s perspective. I can now see similarities, especially in dreamlike imagery and metaphors, between the poems written in the convention of surrealism and those seemingly strange-sounding lines chanted daily in the traditional world of my upbringing. These similarities explain the reason why I would subconsciously write “Gratitude for Being Haunted by a Reverent Destiny.”

Even though it’s the same sensitivity to the unconscious, surrealist poets practice to liberate the mind by seeking to reconcile dreams with reality, while traditional Yoruba poetry serves, among other things, to calm a person or summon their best essence or alleviate their suffering from, say, an ailment, venom or grief. Dreams are already the origins of human-made reality, so I’d rather surrealism be espoused to foreground everyone’s power to create and recreate reality by dreaming new dreams and thinking new thoughts.

“Gratitude for Being Haunted by a Reverent Destiny” is my attempt first at thinking dreamily, then at making language, an intermediary between reality and the realm of dreams, to manifest on the page, its inherently multidimensional nature. The purpose is to ensure that the reader, caught in the same tedious existence as the speaker (who is merry nonetheless, as everyone should be, especially at these fascistic times), exercises the reality-mastering-and-recreating power of their mind as they make to crack each seemingly counterintuitive syntax, metaphor, and image.

Aselébé, my beleaguered yet merry speaker, and I put the blame for the hyperbolic essence of this poem on none other than Helon Habila, who, in *Waiting for an Angel*, theorizes thus: “Hyperbole is a legitimate device in storytelling. Most stories, in order to achieve maximum effect, have to be exaggerated,” and so should the reader after having substituted storytelling for poetry in the quote.

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