

9-15-1986

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Tanure Ojaide

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### Recommended Citation

Ojaide, Tanure (1986) "I Will Take You to the Mountain / Dirge / Taking Breath," *Syracuse Scholar (1979-1991)*: Vol. 7 : Iss. 2 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://surface.syr.edu/susolar/vol7/iss2/9>

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# Three Poems

## TANURE OJAIDE



Tanure Ojaide studied at Syracuse University from 1978 to 1981, receiving an M.A. in creative writing and a Ph.D. in English. He now teaches African poetry, oral literature, and creative writing at the University of Maiduguri in northeastern Nigeria. Ojaide has published two collections of poetry.

### TAKING BREATH

**W**e could have gone farther than here by now,  
but, believe me, we are where we ought to be.  
A sandstorm has caught up with us, and we have to  
shelter in our minds in the open—  
now we see the wisdom of sunglasses in our kit;  
now the baobab, once abused, is an ally in our loneliness.

Here we take breath in the marathon  
charging the limbs, telescoping the unending lap  
of our fate—the road is mapped out  
through stones, sand, and clay; sometimes I feel  
that those who fall eternally behind turn to stones,  
and I know how it hurts to fail.

Lucky we must have been not to veer  
into evil djinns, lucky that we did not break down  
before the lion's den, lucky that in famine  
we did not choke ourselves with poisonous fruits.

We could have gone farther than here by now,  
but we are not yet gods to cross the earth  
with lightning; we are still men and women  
with the feeble flesh of desire.  
Believe me, we are where we ought to be.  
Lucky that we are already here, lucky  
that our heels are still whole.  
Here we take breath in the race:  
let the evil djinns go with the passing storm;  
we'll proceed in the vigor of our rejuvenation.

## I WILL TAKE YOU TO THE MOUNTAIN

A father tells his son, "At your age  
I never kept late nights; even now  
I neither take beer nor inhale tobacco, yes  
at your age I could tell a deadly smell from afar  
and step aside till the evil wind blew past.  
I never in all the years had an idle holiday—  
I spent time on the farm for a good harvest;  
I was often lucky with a good catch in the stream;  
in between I ran errands for my elders  
and joined my age group to clean the streets."  
A farmer cries, "Children trample my yams  
underfoot, they turn my farm into a playground."  
A mother weeps, "My only son crashed into a ditch  
in the company of a harlot; whom do I  
lean on at this age these unkind days?"

We hardly have the time it took you  
to grow up, though we see your height  
within reach. We have more schools to go through  
than you had—true, your strength is our weakness:  
our whisper blares into everybody else's ears,  
our glance searches out hidden things,  
our stride oversteps the path you built;  
our daring veers into recklessness.  
So when we cry of hardship, the hangover  
of a spendthrift generation, the world jeers;  
when we laugh at superstitions, are scolded for irreverence.

"I will take you to the mountain  
where we shot lions and sat on their skins  
to commune with the gods that gave us strength."  
Your mountain has sunk below our minds,  
and we need not hunt the beasts  
we have tamed with generosity.

Do not think we are not warriors because we do not  
wield hatchets in our family circles—  
we can be heroes without spilling blood.

Even now I groan inside the cloak you wore smartly;  
the thing is heavier than my will.  
And more will come that cannot understand this,  
because they will be free of the shackles  
clamped upon you, then more savagely upon me—  
we expect in their turn  
those who eat our leftovers to overpower us,  
those who take the highway we now build  
to go beyond the farthest stretch of our imagination.

## DIRGE

**A** fisherman's magic net caught the mermaid in our stream,  
 and we parted forever with the enchantment in our lives;  
 a drunkard fired at our all-seeing pilot  
 and we lost the star, who would have taken us  
 through the treacherous road of night ahead.  
 They had impregnated the beauty queens of the land  
 before our circumcision, so we were denied the romance  
 of eloping with them to the moon for draughts of honey.  
 The hearth had its log burnt out before our farm  
 produced the prize yam of the festival of decades—  
 now we grow only tubers that can be eaten raw;  
 each age group makes good of whatever it has to survive.  
 Changing so fast, who knows whether we'll still walk  
 with our legs in the cyclone of time blowing mad;  
 already we see clearly without eyes, hear without ears—  
 the cripple we carried to the playground comes back  
 on his own legs; the blind one sees the thin line separating  
 life and death, and stops short of killing himself.  
 We research to turn fossils into wands in a desperate fight  
 against the sterility gnawing at our wombs.  
 Even now we look through mist-covered windows  
 for the offshoot of dead heroes—it is not that we belittle  
 ourselves; they are becoming a rare species.  
 We are bringing down heaven, dispatching angels  
 to hell, the strong taste of betrayal on their lips;  
 we open our hands, close our eyes to the fruits  
 of persistent struggle and prayers, unripe and rotten.  
 By the time we have made too much money  
 and so much love, there'll be no life to live—  
 we have seen the end and the beginning, seen  
 the beginning and end in the midst of unending currents.  
 Though laughter is rare in the face of pain, though  
 our share of blessings amounts to nothing in hand,  
 this dirge I sing is not a hopeless song.  
 We are still building the dome into tomorrow; this is  
 not another plasticine that any bigot recasts  
 in his lust, not another caper in the dark, but  
 a dream-conceived, life-giving offering of mourners.

(MAY 8–13, 1985)