

For Our Own Reasons

By Tanure Ojaide

State Executive

"Wherever we dug for safety, we dug into corpses."

—Donald Hall, *The One Day*

"Wherever we dug for safety, we dug into corpses."

Whatever we hid in our guts, he found and wiped out.

Wherever we fled, he sent his deadly envoy to split us.

We could not shrug off this vicious head from our lives.

Shreds of intellectuals hang from branches of baobabs, bones dissolve into the lagoon to assault us with bad breath.

We have dug up arms from distant farms and wondered if the whole Republic were a boneyard.

All the evaporated faces found solace in the soil, all the spear-tongued critics fed roaming hyenas.

Every year raises the chief's fund of matchets; winds smother wails and rain washes the topsoil.

From the beginning Ogiso chose cost-effective means to exterminate the bugs that would ruin his rule; he found beggar hands to implement blood without stain.

He enlisted assassins from churches and mosques.

For him the long arm of state reaches everywhere and he has circled the land with awesome steel.

The executive wields Aladja-forged axes and rifles; the human-hooded snake slithers to bite dissonant tongues.

Thousands of executions prove right his inaugural boast of peace as an array of still bodies, a cemetery with a busy stock exchange, a record bloodpool chlorinated for a bath.

His rule a great safari of poachers, a vast ward of diseased consultants, a free market of limbs flavored with cheap smiles.

Ogres parade the streets in smart uniform.

Every day lingers with his infinite arm, everywhere throws up freshly savaged flesh, everyone yawns from the blood-laden air. "Wherever we dug for safety, we dug into corpses."

For Our Own Reasons

We have come out for our own reasons. We cast fishnets in the rain to exorcise famine, we dispatch and receive messages through the wind, and we want draughts of freedom in the open.

How can we live in the cave of obscurity and still know the properties of light? We wouldn't be hiding and seeking if the world was not a haunted residence.

For us who have chosen to subdue the bull of life, there's blood in the air and we are not scared—the hermit imbibes the wisdom of the wilderness from the wild cherries he lives on. We are of one mind with the storm to level the dead woods to give more light to the evergreens.

What will we look up to without birds beating their wings above our heads, what will we look up to without trees thrusting their arms into the sky, what will we look up to without the crest of hills?

Our roots drive deep into the soil; they sustain us in our search for fortune.

We shall return, carrying on our faces either dazzling prizes or bruises of undeterred blows; but we would have come out for our own reasons.

You Know Why (for Felie)

And we must hum these notes to ourselves, absorb their fragrance into the vein to bloom radiance in the face.

I had sung of stars and thought it was all I could praise. I had not come to the song of songs.

You are the promised vision, incandescent flower of light; you outshine diamonds.

With your light I comb cosmic lanes for undiscovered jewels; nobody will be richer than me.

For you I know no bounds, for you my days long for dreams, I am drunk in our flight of wonder birds:

the moon is ours to keep
the shield is ours to hold
the war is ours to win.

In another place I would give you flowers. Here we have lit a bonfire in the heart to celebrate gains of exploration.

I know how to sing with naked words but not to sell this prized world to the cheap eyes of the public

We must hum these notes to ourselves, absorb their fragrance into the vein to bloom radiance in the face.

► **TANURE OJAIDE**, a native of Nigeria, is regarded as a leading member of the new generation of African poets. Since 1973 he has published five collections, including *Labyrinths of the Delta*, which earned the 1977 Commonwealth Poetry Prize, Africa Region, and, more recently, *The Endless Song* and *The Fate of Vultures*. In 1988, Ojaide won the prestigious All-Africa Akigbo Prize for Poetry.

Ojaide received an M.A. in creative writing (1979) and Ph.D. in English (1981) from Syracuse. He is a visiting professor at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, where he teaches African literature and culture. He holds a full-time appointment at the University of Maiduguri, in Nigeria.

