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## Obi Nwakanma United States, 2016

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# Obi Nwakanma

## United States, 2016



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### **Dr. Kevin Meehan, United States, 2018:**

Dr. Kevin Meehan is professor of English at the University of Central Florida where he specializes in Caribbean and multi-ethnic U.S. literature, and climate change education. He is the author of *People Get Ready: African American and Caribbean Cultural Exchange* (2009) and numerous articles. His analysis of negritude and Nwakanma's poems situates the verse in the context of Negritude.

### **Variations on Negritude**

Born and raised in southern Nigeria, Obi Nwakanma is an Igbo poet and scholar of African and African diasporan literature. The three poems included here, "A Brief Memoir of Time," "Child of Four Winds" and "Last Will and Testament" come from his book, *Birthcry* (Kraft Griots 2016), which was a finalist for the 2016 Nigeria Literature Prize. These poems capture the author's uniquely lyrical, gnomic, and prophetic voice and represent well the themes that define the volume: ancestry, historical consciousness, the politics and psychology of decolonization, Africa's place in a polyethnic global society, and openness to the future as the speaker's

generation passes on the challenges of life to the next generation, imagined as a child listening to the speaker's verse.

Students and teachers will encounter these poems directly through their specific stylistic and thematic qualities, but such encounters will be richer when readers acquire some understanding of relevant historical and literary background, and thus are able to see Nwakanma as the inheritor of a rich legacy of Nigerian, Pan-African and global modernist poetic traditions. The first president of independent Nigeria, Nnamdi Azikiwe, had been a contemporary of Langston Hughes and others figures prominent in the Harlem Renaissance before his political career. Through his association with Hughes and others, Azikiwe also became familiar with the *Négritude* movement founded by Leopold Senghor (Senegal), Aimé Césaire (Martinique), and Léon-Gontran Damas (French Guyana) that promoted black consciousness, cultural pride, and a push for decolonization among Francophone writers from Africa and the Caribbean. When Zik, as he was popularly known, returned to Nigeria after many years abroad as a student and journalist, he promoted literary production and the work of younger writers like Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Christopher Okigbo and others along with his activist journalism and political organizing. With additional support from expatriate German professors Ullie Beier and Janheinz Jahn, who edited a literary journal *Black Orpheus*, these efforts coalesced in the formation of the Mbari Club in 1962 that promoted literary salons, dramatic performances, conferences, and publishing. The club, with bases in Ibadan and Nsukka (both university towns), was named for the Owerri Igbo ceremony of mbari in which a house dedicated to the earth goddess, Ala, is constructed over the course of nine months. After being filled with ritual statues and paintings that depict Igbo deities, village officials, everyday people, heraldic animals and notorious historical events, an Mbari House is, upon completion, ritualistically ignored while being left open to the weather and allowed to rot and decay. The artistic principles driving this process—an embrace of creativity, decay, regeneration and the conviction that there is no proper separation between art and life—informed not only the efforts of Nigeria's first literary movement but are also apparent in the cyclical life-death-rebirth thematics of the poems in *Birthery*.

Nwakanma's poetry has also important affinities with *Négritude* writing, though this may come as a surprise given how many of the same Mbari Club writers strenuously rejected the idea of a global black culture promoted in the poetry and essays of Senghor as a sentimental and civilizing counterpart to overly-rational European society. To take just one example, Christopher Okigbo (whose biography Nwakanma published in 2010) famously rejected a literary prize offered by a *Négritude* arts festival with that claim that there is no such thing as a black poet or black poetry. When Nwakanma projects an unflinching distaste for imperialist violence, however, as he does in "A Brief Memoir of Time" and its reflection on Congolese independence leader Patrice Lumumba, or the long imprisonment of Nelson Mandela and other African National Congress leaders on Robben Island in South Africa, he has much in common with Césaire, to whom Nwakanma has dedicated other poems. Moreover, the concern of Damas with using literature to understand and remedy the psychological impact of that imperialist violence finds an echo and an extension in the final question from "Last Will and Testament," where Nwakanma asks, "What anger, posted from another century./Another clime, can smoothen the frown./From the face of the world?" Where much of the tension evoked by Damas and other *Négritude* writers remains unresolved in their work, Nwakanma's mbari-influenced verse seems more hopeful about the possibility of smoothing out the frowns of psychological unease.

# Child of Four Winds

## i

In the mill city came the voice  
Of the indigo peasants calling the son of the grocer  
To Shihar, to teach them the peace of cottonfields—  
Among them, those for whom the wheel turns, enlightened,  
5 For drawn on the seven mounts are the pearl divers of Gujarat—

Following the thin and straggling line,  
In the steps of Porbandar's grocer,  
A movement rooted in dance. The moon marigold  
Spinned into the lineage of the weaver, born to Kashmir,

10 In the year of the coming of the ninth Earl of Elgin,  
Over the mills of Bombay, spindling the biography of  
A race, held later in one birthcry.

It was a movement rooted in dance.

15 A white Gucci flannel, a tie bowed gracefully  
At the whiff of damoiselles, all manners—  
No pretence—the act of the indentured,  
Dressed in the habit of the empire, stolid in purpose.  
He forgot the taste of his name

20 In his own tongue.  
On breaking out first to the world  
On a long bullock ride, the journey was haunted  
By loneliness, for the shy one, lingering  
Flirtingly with the hours.

25 Crossing the arches, through the partition,  
And the cold smog of Karachi,  
The swollen eyes of the day,  
Opened like a bowl of light.

## ii.

It was April—  
30 The month that fed me violets.

Time was adolescent in sleeveless clothes,  
When the rapturous pilgrim entered the sanctuary,  
and found the maiden, kneeling in supplication  
at the feet of our lady of mercy, in Cook County,  
35 where the word had gone out earlier,  
from the tea leaves, that she would there find,  
her dark one. There is mystery there. And a story—  
child of the nautilic wind:  
each narrative strand kneaded into the dough  
40 of time and place, becomes the bread of your life,  
to be eaten gently. There is history there—

At the eleven cities,  
Broken in two, seeping  
Out of the inlet of Westergea  
45 Running from the lake Burgum,  
Towards the city of Ljouwert.

From this land the oar sought the waters,  
Full was the sail that billowed in the wind  
Towards the Bight of Biafra,  
50 Berthing among the coastal reefs, carrying  
Its great fevers inland to shore. Among them,  
Your kinsman, son of the daughter of Friesland,  
And of Mata Hari, from whose distant shores,  
Your blood has mingled, in the dance of the ages,  
55 And flowed—

### iii.

Like the blood of those too, sent into captivity,  
Through the tangled routes,  
From the oilbean forests of Umuoma,  
To the white beaches of Igweocha, through the  
60 Bowel of the tide, to St. Lucia,  
To the windswept marshes of Glyn,  
To Dunbar Creek.

You can still see their remnants, child,  
At Canon Point's plantation, and hear  
65 Their spirits, wailing, in the marshes, in the  
Winds of St. Simon's Island.

The hard wind rocking your pendulum  
Back and forth—  
Over spumes of bitter waves,  
70 At the place of the Igbo Landing  
Where the waters stirred with defiance,  
And the free spirits followed their trail homewards,  
Through the somber aisles of the milky way.  
There too, is history.

**iv.**

75 For as I turn away from the street  
Where its face opened like an old scar  
Brooding, the grey crumbling castles  
And their lintels from which ancient greed has walked  
I think only of the bonded.  
80 Their arched backs still bent by shame.  
From Delmar, the Castlereagh,  
And the temple of the Masons,  
And all the grand excavated things  
I think about how time has undone all things.  
85 I think of the secular, unversed,  
Absolute margins, in the architecture of cities,  
Built on the indentured backs of men,  
And how we have kept our places,  
Ephemeral—in this land of migrants.  
90 There is history, my child, where you have nestled.

## Last Will and Testament

Three boxes will contain my will  
In a fascicle. It will be all that the  
Future will get from me.

A locked box will contain my  
5 Awkward name. My frail identity.  
My mind in its ornate complexity,  
A second, will hold a locket of hair  
From my dashing years.

The third: three poems, one to the unborn,  
10 My swooning words, my eyes that have  
Beheld the fever. Some will call it  
Psycho—others will analyse it.

But, child, to whom do I leave the unsaid things?  
Those unnamable things that still clutch to my throat?

15 What anger, posted from another century,  
Another clime, can smoothen the frown,  
From the face of the world?

## A Brief Memoir of Time

King Leopold sent an  
emissary. The English  
Realm sent a viceroy.  
The Americans had a  
5 Trade mission. The picture  
Was complete. The  
Rising of the sun came.  
The horse-drawn carriage,  
Bearing the royal insignia,  
10 came cantering on  
The cobblestones.  
There was no Hamlet.  
It was only  
The rumpled figure of the  
15 Prince of Belgium. His eyes,  
The colour of whiskey,  
held the archives of midnight's  
Carousing. The colonnades,  
the great imperial statues,  
20 The imported battalion, standing mutely  
outside the street,  
Saluted his royal highness.

His mind was still cluttered  
With sleep, the virginal fluids  
25 of a raped continent, fresh in his  
Waking, still coursed in his veins.  
He rehearsed the royal proclamation,  
the post-colonial dicta,  
carefully in his thoughts;  
30 And he mounted the rostrum,  
and uttered his farewell,  
And smiled into the microphone,  
and shook his gloved hands  
With the natives, and sat heavily,  
35 like guests of honour,  
to courteous silence:



He could not bear it—  
Lumumba could not bear it,

He rose, and spoke,  
40 About the pain of the true Congo,  
Which U Tam'si, poet of the pagan soul,  
had sung hoarsely about,  
His voice broken, he died in exile,  
still mourning the bloody river.

45 He could not bear it—  
Lumumba could not bear it.

He shook his hands in the face of the prince,  
He raged, and raged, and raged like the storm,  
He tore his hair, and rolled his sleeves,  
50 And dared the prince of Belgium  
to a wrestling match.

O, Lumumba—  
They shaved his head and blinded his eyes,  
They whipped him with hide  
55 And put him to the sword.  
They flayed his acolytes, and in death, fed them  
To the swine. The remnant, those saved  
By the silent veil, fled to the hills.

Child, you will remember him, Lumumba,  
60 With your vegetable offering,  
At the festival of the ancestors.

And what do we say of Mandela?  
Age alone, fostered him to tell  
The tale of the century.  
65 There is a place on Robben Island,  
Where he was sent to contemplate his  
Transgressions. Where we found him  
breaking stones,  
Counting from the sky's  
70 sodden parchment.

How many seasons  
that the moon had crossed,  
How many slivers of rain,  
like those stones,  
75 Could make a flood.

As Sisulu with him, read  
His eyes blind with Das Kapital.  
As each tooth  
Freel from their gums,  
80 they knew deep in their hearts,  
That time was fleeing from them.

We may be in the grip of the cobweb once more  
But we are unbruised by fear, my child.  
I will tell you,  
85 That you may be of good cheer,  
that you may remember,  
That was and pestilence have graced our heels.  
But from our land  
have sprouted sturdy boles of the Iroko,  
90 watered by tears.  
We have grown mute  
to the howl of scud missiles,  
For they fall like ripened pears  
at the feet of children.

95 We have lived the years  
of the cannibal rage, and so,  
To whom do we make our plea?

They say we must  
Cast a spell on the future;  
100 Before its ripening,  
with new age theories, strange  
Economic broth,  
the consensus of the obliged.

I say,

105 Child, may our twilights cross  
the bow of predatory snares.

## Footnotes

### Child of Four Winds

1. Shihar in India
2. Gujarat an ethnic group in British-controlled India
3. Porbandar in the Indian state of Gujarat
4. 9th Earl of Elgin was British Viceroy of India from 1894 -99
5. recognized the value of India to the British Empire and took testimony from ordinary soldiers in his investigation of the Boer War 1902-03
6. Karachi capital of the province Sindh in Pakistan
7. Burgum is in the Dutch province of Friesland
8. Ljouwert is the West Frisian name for Leeuwarden, a city in Friesland
9. Biafra seceded from West Africa and was independent until 1967 when it became the eastern part of Nigeria
10. Umuoma village in southeastern Nigeria
11. White beaches of Igweocha
12. Island where Igbo slaves were held until they were picked up by ships for the Middle Passage. After 1807 when British slavery was abolished, the Brits would harass other slave traders. Some Igbo who were brought to Igweocha were left here because slave trade was now illegal, so a hybrid culture formed among those captured who remained free at Igweocha.
13. St Lucia, South African wetlands town
14. Mata Hari Dutch exotic dancer who spied for Germany during WWI and was executed after her conviction.
15. Dunbar Creek
16. Igbo slaves took control of their ship after the middle passage and landed at Dunbar Creek in GA
17. Canon Point's plantation in GA near St Simon's island
18. Some accounts say that survivors of the Igbo landing were taken to Canon's Point on St Simon's Island

### A Brief Memoir of Time

1. King Leopold exploited (Belgian) Congo for ivory, rubber; Belgian Congo is now Democratic Republic of Congo
2. The English Realm sent a viceory, Roger Casement, to investigate human rights violations in the Belgian Congo in 1903
3. Lumumba a freedom fighter who believed in pan African movement; Born in Belgian Congo, 1925
4. 30 June 1960 King Leopold's great grand-nephew Baudouin gave a speech about how generous Belgium was to Congo. Lumumba corrected him publicly by seizing the microphone and telling his experience, unscripted. He was later punished and killed for this taking this public, if unscripted stance against colonialism.
5. Nelson Mandela, Nobel Peace prize winner; civil rights activist protested apartheid in South Africa
6. Robben Island
7. Mandela served 27 years in prison did hard labor at Robben Island with fellow prisoner Sisulu for "statutory communism" (a euphemism for being against apartheid)
8. Iroko is known as African teak. They are huge trees live for up to 500 years and grow on west coast of tropical Africa

## Source:

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