

Sonny AYEWANU

Selections from  
*25 New Nigerian Poets*  
(Berkeley: Ishmael Reed Publishing, 2000)

### **A Man with a Hat**

A man with a heart  
As soft and fragile  
As stone, sitting  
And allowing the earth to roll by.

Who will listen to his blues  
Study the sharp strokes from his furious brush  
Read his vigorous verses steeped  
In the esoteric  
Who will look, who will listen, who will read  
The wheels of a speeding day?

When dusk dawns on earth  
He cannot hide the pain in his heart  
In his hat, yet  
The earth will cheer itself with a merry moon  
Tickle itself with the seething sun  
And the rivers will flow  
The river will flow, and he  
Like a fish is stuck at the banks.

### **God's Voice**

The servant was startled  
To see his master at the door  
Staring at him

What!, he thought aloud

Sunny Ayewanu

I should be cleaning the rooms  
And dusting his tables  
I should be washing his clothes;  
Those clothes, soiled  
By the spoils of high society  
I should . . .

The boy stopped his morning meditation  
And put his bible aside

“Where are your roots?”  
The voice was calm,  
Was clear enough

“The streets my lord. You picked me from the streets  
As I walked through the valley  
Of the shadow of death”  
The servant answered tremulously

The lord said nothing, but rather  
Cast a cold glance at the bible  
Beside the poor boy’s pillow

“Who then is your God?”  
The servant fell on his knees  
Raising his hands as if supplication  
Blurting

**“You are my God; for you provide me shelter  
and give me my daily bread”**

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From  
*Passport to a New World*

**My Bible Is Bigger Than Yours**

Sunny Ayewanu

It was the first Sunday of the first month in the new year and the festive mood that hung heavily in the air from the beginning of December was now clothed in a dry-cold harmattan haze.

Sam woke up with a start in his room, a surprise expression on his face as he looked at the clock on the wall. 'Sweet Lord, it is ten to seven,' he exclaimed softly and got out of bed, 'I should be getting ready for church now, for the new year service.' He looked away from the clock and focused his attention on the big parallel Bible resting against the wall on his night table. He bought the Bible just some few days to Christmas. 'Our pastor provoked me into buying it,' he told himself again with a somewhat sense of fulfillment.

Two Sundays ago, the pastor had joked, quite seriously though, that some Christians seemed too shy of carrying Bibles. Some, he said, carried Bibles that were so small that one could hardly notice them carrying anything. Some, he noted, even went to church with small Bibles that contained only the new testament. He mentioned the gift Bible distributed by Gideons International as an example. Many in the church had laughed but Sam didn't find it too pleasant a joke as he quickly tucked away the small Bible he was holding into his pocket. There and then, he decided to buy a very big Bible, the one that would be bigger than any other person's in the church. He picked the bulky Bible and held it with somewhat solemn reference. He read some psalms in it and began to pray. As he was praying, the new year address of the head of state on radio was coming straight at him.

The new head of state, who was in tears, was saying he felt genuine pains, like all other concerned citizens, for the transition programmes of the past governments that were nothing but a ruse. He stressed that it was regrettable that the people had to go through so many years of painful political transitions that were authored for the wind.

He enjoined the people to forget the past and look forward to a new beginning that he now assured. He would start his own transition programme which he vowed was real. He pleaded with the people to 'sacrifice in order to move the country forward.' 'Sacrifice', that word again. It was now obvious that the poor masses were going to continue to sacrifice for the country until they lose their lives, Sam thought.

As if the head of state could read the mind of his listeners, he admitted that he was equally aware that many citizens had been deprived of air, vowing that his government would 'do everything humanly possible to bring the air closer to the people,' that is quoting his exact words. 'If only they could spare us this rubbish for once!' Sam said exasperatingly and turned off the radio. He added more points to his prayer points: *Father, all military men masquerading as democrats, please strip them naked this year and let the people stone them in the streets. Lord, those who say the common man should not as much as breath in fresh air, except*

*the polluted air they are rationing to us, God choke them to death on the air they've stolen and trapped in their big air-conditioners.*

The atmosphere in the church was gay and colourful. The members of the church were all flamboyantly dressed as it was the normal practice on such special occasions. But this time, it had even come with church sanction. The pastor had told the congregation the previous Sunday that they must come in their best dresses for the new year service and the church members more than lived up to the billing.

Sam sauntered into the church in his flowing white *agbada* in guinea-brocade starched and ironed until the edges stood out. He found a seat in front of the row I was sitting. When he turned round and saw me, his lips parted in a wide grin. 'O boy, long time, how now?' he greeted airily and I nodded.

The pastor was introduced to the pulpit amidst loud applause from the congregation. Immediately after, he began to deliver the sermon of the day. He referred to a passage in Joel and a man in the congregation stood up to read it. As he was reading, the pastor grinned and waved him to a stop.

'There are some of you that still carry Bibles that say, he goeth forth and wipeth, he cometh back and speaketh...All that archaic language. Thank God for the anointed men of God who have published new editions of the Bible that convey God's words in modern Queen's English...'

The congregation laughed. Pastor Bright, who always prided himself on the fact that he was one of the youngest pastors in the country and the founder of one of the fastest growing churches, never lacked humour.

'I expect you to go for them. There're several of them. There's the Dake Annotated Reference Bible, the Classic Reference, the Nelson Imperial, Holy Bible Dictionary Concordance, the New Strong's Concordance, New Strong's Exhaustive Concordance, the Amplified Bible, People's Parallel edition, A Paraphrased – A Thought for Thought Translation, Life Application Bible, Spirit-filled Life Bible, Thompson Chain Reference, which the publishers say is a Bible with a biblical library including eight complete departments...' The pastor paused, looked down fondly at the congregation with an amused expression on his face. The auditorium exploded with a spontaneous applause.

'Brethren,' the pastor continued, 'there're many ways by which you can demonstrate your passion for Christ. One of them is having a shelf of different Bibles,' he shouted and punched the air with his clenched fist.

'We're now in the third millennium. When we were talking about year 2000 just some ten years back, it looked like a century away. But now the year is here. So, brothers and sisters don't start this new century with old stinking Bibles. Say halleluyah!'

After the roar of 'amen' had died down, Pastor Bright added, 'Without doubt, this third millennium will be a millennium of giant strides in all facets of human endeavour. But what is in it for us Africans, especially Christians like

us...White men can annex space. They can tinker with nature using their technology, but the battle for the soul of the world cannot be fought with science, but with the word of God.'

He took a breath and continued: 'Brethren, the greatest weapon we have now, we people of the black race is evangelism. With the Bible in our hands and full understanding of God's words, we can conquer the world this century. Modernism; advances in science and technology have taken the white man away from God. Their society has broken down. They are daily enmeshed in sexual perversion, violence, broken homes and communal alienation.'

He paused to ask: 'How many of you watched my London, Amsterdam and Bonn crusades last year?' Many hands in the congregation jerked up automatically.

'You saw the number of white people that were delivered. I have a vision that the black race will bring the white race back to God this century. We shall colonise their countries just as they colonised us through their Christian missionaries decades ago. So, be ready brethren. Each and everyone of you is a vessel for the expansion of God's kingdom this century!'

He shouted and waited for the audience's reaction which came in a thunderous applause.

When pastor Bright finished his sermon the church entered into heated marathon prayer sessions for the new year. As the prayers were being made, I noticed at a point that a hand was scribbling some things on the walls. I saw figure O which went circling into tiny strokes that I could not immediately decipher. Then suddenly I heard a thundering of feet as if there was a stampede of a million people who were scrambling for a way of escape. I looked round and saw that the noise was not coming from the members of the congregation, for there was no shuffling of feet. Just then, I saw some monstrous figures in the church.

They were completely black and short. Each of them had a pair of squinting small eyes, short horns and tails that kept wagging as they ran helter-skelter in the auditorium. There was a frightened expression on their faces as they looked for a way of escape. My eyes opened wider and I saw some figures again in flowing white robes, they seemed to have wings as they circled the auditorium suspended in the air. They were brandishing dazzling swords which they swung left and right. Obviously, they were pursuing the figures in black but they were doing so with such wild abandon, because even when it was obvious that they could get at the figures in black with ease, they seemed to be satisfied with just chasing or tossing them around. Sometimes, they would block the way of the black figures with their bodies that emitted sharp rays that burnt the black figures

when they got close to them. I was so frightened by this tussle that I nearly passed out.

‘Did you see the writing on the wall?’

‘Which writing?’

‘Did you see the demons?’

‘Which demons?’

‘I mean the devil.’

‘Devil?’

‘Yes, Satan.’

‘Did you see the angels?’

‘What are you saying!’

The man standing beside me was now staring at me. I had interrupted his prayers. It was then I realised that he had been hearing what I was saying in my mind. I was also jolted into knowing that I was the only one seeing what was going on. I looked straight into his astonished eyes and I found myself looking into the crystal blue eyes of a cat.

The right eye of the cat enlarged and encompassed the auditorium. I found a path in the eye which invited my feet. I began to walk it, going further and further and further until I got to a wasteland that stretched into several kilometres. The topography of this place was rugged, undulating and stripped of real vegetal life. Plants that pretended to be growing had half their roots shooting out and they were gradually being scorched dry by the sun that burnt with criminal intensity.

Things that looked like grasses were without green and the few lean trees that stood were without leaves. Stumps were everywhere and I knocked my toes on them until I bled. The sand were fireballs. I felt the blood in my feet boiling. I saw a river of blood without a source stopping in a mid-flow. I kept walking until I got to a place where there were several black rocks. At one end of the rocks, I saw some figures in black standing in a semi-circle and leaning against the rocks.

These were terrifying figures. Some had the face of a baboon and their jaws were hanging out. Some had small squinting eyes. Some had big heads and small trunks while some had big trunks and small heads. Some had one eye but the eye was so big that it almost covered the whole head. Some had horns and tails.

A taller and more robust figure stepped out gingerly and immediately I heard shouts of ‘Makutala! Makutala!’ This was obviously their leader. He had two small alert eyes that pointed sideways and it was said that he could always see one hundred cities in the world at the same time, at every turning he made.

One of the figures bowed before him and he began to talk:

“Makutala, the picture I see disturbs me. I see millions of people carrying Bibles and professing their faith with so much fanaticism. If we don’t fight this now, we run the risk of losing more of our friends this year.’

Many of them nodded. Another shrugged his shoulders and said, ‘The growing number we’re seeing doesn’t bother me because many of the faithful in the church are just following the crowd. Ninety-five percent of them have their hearts elsewhere – at our playground.’

‘I am not bothered about the ninety-five percent but the remaining five percent that offers enough threat to our kingdom,’ their leader said forcefully. His voice was guttural with a disturbing razor-edge resonance that cut into the false tranquility of the whole environment. The sky quivered and cracked under the weight of his words. There was a thick silence after this, as if the whole gathering was stunned by their leader’s sudden outburst.

‘You all know pastor Bite,’ he continued, his eyes flickering. ‘He’s leading an assault on our kingdom. He’s bewitching our people to follow his religion. He’s winning many over and his congregation is swelling by the day. He has to be stopped.’

They all chorused ‘yes’.

‘But Makutala, where did the young pastor get his power? We know some of these pastors come to us to get power to influence their churches. But he never associated with us,’ the youngest among them, Zinto asked.

‘Wherever he got his power from, we’ll bring him down,’ Makutala said firmly. Immediately, he gave one of the devils the task to go to earth and disempower ‘Pastor Bite’. Zinto had a wonderful voice. The devil chosen for the mission was to collect his voice in order to effectively carry out the task. On hearing that he had to give out his voice, and thinking that his voice may not be returned to him should the mission fail, Zinto grunted so hard that the ground heaved under him. Then, he pulled a long face. The frown was so deep and jagged-edged that it pulled the sky, leaving it in a crumpled fold at a spot above his head. Then he burst into tears, pleading that he needed his voice that evening to turn stones into rats, rats into elephants and elephants into human beings that would make love to themselves at the banks of the blood river.

Of course, Makutala ignored his plea. Shortly after this, Makutala began sniffing at the air. He seemed to have sensed that an intruder was lurking in the shadows. He looked around, his nose twitching and looking visibly agitated. As if the others also perceived the smell, they began sniffing at the air and the muffled sound of ‘un-hun-un-hum’ rent the air.

‘A human being is here!’ Makutala declared and there was a great commotion. Makutala fixed his gaze at one spot, scanned the distance and he appeared to have seen me where I was hiding. Then, he let out a loud cry that started a storm; trees were uprooted, rocks cracked and threw out hot larva as in

volcano. The day turned into night and a flash of thunder restored the night into day but it was not a day. The sky fell and a loud sneeze threw it back into space.

This went on for five minutes or so. Then, Makutala stretched out his hand and picked the storm. He drove the storm into his heart. Propelled by the force, he lifted a massive rock and hurled it at me. I was already running but as I glanced back I saw the rock tumbling through the air towards me. I clenched my teeth and the nerves in my neck stood out. I knew I would be crushed into pulp should the rock land on me.

I kept running and the rock kept coming. Suddenly I fell and found myself rolling down a long tunnel. When I stopped, I lay sprawled on a lush-green lawn. I looked around in awe. The atmosphere was serene and infectious. The vegetation was rich green and trees that stood straight and were of equal height stretched into the horizon.

Birds with variegated plumage were hopping from tree to tree without making any sound. I took a walk and soon came by a river. The river was the colour of silver, glittering against the bright sky. It was clean and transparent. One could see all the underwater creatures as they swam undeterred in a harmonious flow with the river. I bent close to the river and made to dip my hand into it. My hand could not touch it. I tried again and again – all to no avail until a voice said, ‘This is the river of life. Thou shall not desecrate it.’ A gripping cold snaked up my spine and I shivered.

I left the river and began to walk the road that split into all the roads in the world. Just when I was contemplating which course to maintain, I saw some figures in flowing white robes swirling round and streaming across my path, halting me in my strides. They soon formed a circle with their hands stretched towards heaven. One of them drifted into the middle of the circle and said with a dreamy voice: ‘Now, it is time to go and save God’s people from the attack of the devil.’ There was a melodious murmur of concurrence and the figures melted into the air.

Something stirred in me and I found myself jerked out of my trance. I was now on the floor of the church and two church ushers were standing by me. They helped me to my chair. Having straightened myself, I looked up and saw that the pastor was saying something. The next minute, he paused. He fixed his gaze at a spot in the front row of chairs facing him. He jabbed his finger at the direction of a lady.

‘You there, come forward,’ he instructed.  
The lady hesitated for minutes.

‘I say come forward, sister,’ Pastor Bright insisted.

The lady reluctantly stood up and all eyes in the church followed her as she walked towards the pastor. She was a ravishing beauty; tall, bright coloured with bright eyes that sparkled like diamonds. She wore a body-hugging dress



that was not really obscene but seductive enough for whoever cared to look twice.

‘My sweet lady, how did you come to this church?’

She appeared flustered and didn’t reply.

‘I say how did you come to this church?’ Pastor Bright repeated.

‘By taxi, of course,’ she replied, upset.

The pastor sniggered. For those who were used to his antecedents, they knew a battle was about to begin.

‘Well, you didn’t come to this church by taxi. Tell the whole congregation the truth. Tell them how you entered this church.’

The lady stood there unperturbed determined perhaps not to talk. Pastor Bright turned his attention to the congregation and released his bombshell.

‘Brethren,’ he began. ‘This lady walked into this auditorium with her head.’

The congregation was shocked with disbelief.

‘I saw her the moment she came in but I thought I should finish my sermon before I confront her.’ The pastor explained further.

‘So young lady who are you?’

‘I’m Linda. I am from the kingdom of darkness. I was sent by my master to destroy you because you’ve been taking many of our brothers and sisters.’

‘Hen...enh!’ The pastor interjected quite theatrically, his eyes misty and funny.

‘So how do you intend to destroy me?’

‘I am Satan, I’ve only changed to a beautiful girl so as to seduce you. Before I left our kingdom, our leader asked me to collect the voice of one of our brothers who has the sweetest voice in the kingdom. It’s the voice I’m using now. I intend joining the church choir so that I could seduce you with my voice and beauty. I knew I’d become your girlfriend and when you make love to me, I’ll take away all your spiritual power, reduce you to a nobody and your church will collapse.’

There was a loud murmur, hisses and even curses from the stunned congregation.

‘What made you think I’d fall for you?’ The pastor asked as if humouring himself.

‘Many, including popular Preachers, Radiovangelists and Televangelists had fallen for me before. However, we knew that getting you would be a difficult task but we tried all the same. Some of our most powerful men followed me here to give me support but the angels of God defeated them just minutes ago in an epic battle.’

Pastor Bright certainly wasn’t prepared to hear more. He pointed a finger at the devil-girl and bellowed, ‘Let the Holy Ghost fire descend on you right now!’

She fell trashing about the floor, pulling her own hair, tearing her dress, crying and babbling balderdash. The pastor ordered the ushers to carry her out of the auditorium. 'I'll come back to you later,' he said with an air of finality.

At that point, the service was almost over. After some few words with the congregation, the pastor stepped down from the dais and moved towards the exit. Some members of the church accosted him.

An elderly woman stood before him.

'Daddy (as he was fondly called),' she began. 'Thank you for the sermon on the Bible. I've been carrying an old Bible for twenty years. I need forgiveness.'

'So why do you carry an old Bible all these years?' The pastor inquired.

'I've grown so used to it, pastor. Two years ago, I bought one of these modern Bibles, but it was so simplified that it began to read like children's storybook. So, I abandoned it.'

Another frail looking grey-bearded man told the pastor in a trembling tone, 'Pastor, I use a Bible that has two of its pages torn and half its edge slightly burnt by fire.'

'So, why do you still keep such Bible?' The pastor asked.

'Five years ago, my house was engulfed in a mysterious fire. I lost everything. Of all the property I had then it's this Bible that was not consumed by the fire. That's why I still keep it.'

Another said, 'Pastor, this Bible has passed through three generations. My father said it was the only property he inherited from his father. My father in turn passed it to me on his hospital bed. I am so emotionally attached to it. I can't leave it.'

As the pastor shoved his way through those milling around him, some members of the congregation who had been patiently waiting for him by the exit threw themselves at him.

'I need my healing now!' One of them screamed.

'Pastor, I'm dying. Save me!' Another cried.

A gaunt-looking fellow thrust forward and fell at the pastor's feet.

'Father, please heal me,' he pleaded amidst sobs. 'I was wrongfully jailed because I had no money and helper. In prison, I went through the most horrid experience...The sanitary condition in the cell was terrible. It was in the prison I contacted this skin disease that has defied every orthodox treatment.'

He removed his stinking shirt in a flash to reveal his diseased skin and the people around him flinched at the disgusting sight. Before the pastor could say anything, others rushed at him.

Suddenly there was a massive thrust forward as the restless crowd struggled to grab his shirt, tie and trouser. It was believed that the pastor had such enormous healing powers that merely touching anything on his body could give instant healing.

Soon, there was dementia. The number of people in the auditorium multiplied into hundreds of thousands. Then one million. Two million. Three million. The auditorium that was held by an elastic band stretched to its snapping point. The number again increased. Five million. A whole nation in one hall, confused lots seeking divine intervention!

People pushed towards the exit, finding a way of escape. People crushed their loins on buttocks, buttocks against buttocks against the wall. Several retreated to locate another exit.

'That is the way.'

'It is not the way!'

'It is the gate.'

'It is not the gate!'

'It is the door.'

'It is not the door!'

They kept pushing violently until an equally distressed fellow pointed out that what looked like a way through which people were moving out was actually a painting on the wall. It was a brilliant artist's painting of Moses leading the Israelites to cross the Red Sea as they fled Pharaoh's Egypt.

The painting on the wall was so bold and vivid that the people took it for real.

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