

TADE IPADEOLA

from *The Sahara Testaments*

“there is a lie in every line that rhymes
a line in every rhyme that lies”
—Harry Garuba

CHAPTER I

I

And in the beginning, it was verdant furrows
Aegyptosaurus, clams, strays from the sands.
The Raman spectra cast vertebrate shadows
Through Fata Morgana on these immense lands.

Atlantic winds carried echoes from the Amazon
Rainforest, tectonic twin, twice removed by sea
Habitat of Thermidor, feast-prawn of Avalon.
Flora breathed the nascent Levant air, free

From Mediterranean speech, received rain
Cooling the dark earth and the rocks annealed
Into this *stabilitas*, this strength sure as the grain
Of the cosmos, the vast universe congealed.

Transportation of fragments, task of first muse
Began here and Saint Augustine, millennia hence
Would trace the truth of God’s abstruse
City through time into a mighty permanence.

II

The fishwife in her wooden market stall
Tucks in a franc into her black brassiere,
Smiles as she hands over the fish. She is tall
Her teeth glisten whiter than the sassier

Neighbour’s, whiter than any woman’s, so white
I wondered if God knew she’d make it
Into a magnet for custom and light.

I did not ask her name, I wouldn't pit

My halting French against her effortless river
Of Bambara and market French. I forget
What the fish tasted like but not the fever
Of curiosity, flaring as it did from a nugget

Of ivory that blinded my wandering eyes.
That woman was Senegal. Senghor's woman
Immortal in her blackness, market wise
Bringing back tides of the musings of a man

On a land made for poetry, the perfect
Turn of every phrase. In all of these
The desert was ever present, its idiolect
Suffusing the streets with a certain ease

Found in the Sahel, elegant, understated
Borderland dexterity, animist bon vivant
Measured out in bright speech that elated
With the germinal wisdom of the sun.

III

The decorous chameleon of my continent
Rouses to incantations from gas flares
And a millennium of sand turns pertinent
In a sea-bound spill of harried hectares.

There is no stealth to the spreading wound
Let loose upon yesterday's savannah
No genteel grace to the usurped ground
Famished of clues to a lost nirvana.

Our chameleon loses limbs, loses pigments
Save for one dull range and we, transfixed,
Watch spellbound the rampant instalments
Of a dragon's diet. Flowers and blood are mixed

But these are not enough to halt the hunger
Rising from the belly of the earth
And nothing will suffice to appease the anger
Of this land except raw green mirth.

IV

An ibex dreams of grass and vagabond chlorophyll
Redacting the legend of leaves in deep green shrubs,
It ruminates ibex-heaven as a cockerel in Brazzaville
Blows its shrill trumpet. It wakes with dawn, rubs

Rested eyebrows against a mate's white belly, rises,
Capra nubiana, effortless as sunrise, pure beast.
And it seemed a sin to the hunter to add to his prizes
This beauty of the Sudan. Lowering his gun, he went east.

There he met Emma McCune, daughter of fate
Heroine of a thousand tales. He fell in mortal love.
With her alabaster urn, devotion did not abate
When time froze the wings of his priceless dove.

He sat and wept by the river Nile. She didn't hear
His crying, did not need to. He made circles
Around his loss but none could help him bear
This magnitude of grief, he made Canticles

Still his tears outran the Nile. He made a monument
To a name that freed a generation, a shy name
That his tongue pronounced in a bold moment
That made an angel his lifelong ochre flame.

There is that remote Sudan, land of the Nile
And sun, motley as Meroe, vivid with dreams
Where the children flourished without guile
Where forest and shrub drank the same streams.

And there is this Sudan, *codex rescriptus*, palimpsest
Where janjaweed repaints memory in blood clots
Of innocents, where crude-fed militias kill in jest
Where oil and race yield endless, deadly plots.

Slaughter, food skirmishes, rape and dire need
Exhaust Sudan every hour of the sundial
And dying is art where those that bleed
Fasten themselves to earth in their last trial

Of blackness, tendrilled as truth. We die,
Are written in the books of life and death
And also in another, where murderers lie
About their wealth with their last breath.

V

Every robe of this desert is native
And every robe is new. The ancient skin
Of the vast wastes takes captive
Every colour under the sun and nothing

Of the night is alien. The jewellery
For the desert's dance is a trove
Of stars, silent banners, deep-dyed cavalry
Of black storms, whispering love

Kindling stifled fires with dry provision,
Radical notions, sentient ambitions from the late
Pleistocene, fearless in the face of extinction,
Surviving to tell the truths that conquer fate.

This austere birthplace of the boomerang rings
Louder than any bell, it is eminent as death,
Killing clean both commoners and kings.
Quarry and hawk dance, now, with one breath,

Inexorably mapping the spaces of survival.
Their dance is keen, is a form of ancient
Poetry, their unrehearsed and adept revival
Of animal chess. It is orient, it is occident,

It is a waltz of hemispheres, a duel
To the death before mankind invented
The condition. Theirs is nothing cruel:
Pure nature, need, not the merely wanted.

Their arboreal evasions, the spare economy
This is the music in their aerial moves,
Their angles, their terse, implicit taxonomy
Their inductive pi. Somewhere close, doves,

Feeding in the delta among papyrus and flax
Evading crocodiles, enact a different code:
Also musical, tamer – animal friendship, *pax*,
Soft as the small of every ear, tender as ode.

*Thus reflecting, was the riddle of Meroe solved,
Thus were the writings deciphered, Nubia's migrants
Walled up in southern cities where saints absolved*

Even the bloodthirsty so that death warrants

*Waited for wind shifts. Time cures some defects
Worsens others, sheds light on runes, draws the veil
Into the soul, through skullcaps and black berets
That some truth may shine into the darkened pale.*

VI

A fleeting, irascible memory of a dry day
With the gang, craving straw hats like water
On the climb up the Sun Stone in May
Feeling the hubris falling off a quarter

Of the way to the place of carvings.
Oued Tihalioune made my hamlet's *Oke Jewoese*
Seem like a joke. All superficial cravings
Shed for elemental liquid. The finesse

In the pose of that static rhinoceros
Weighed against the use value of stone
Made the artist and his work more precious
That eternal summer in purgatory's zone

Facing nature and the sweat of ancestors
Who also climbed, and laboured, and left.
The desert relived a verdant age of creators
Exhaling breath fragrant with their sweat.

VII

Here the elements in deep play spun the first gyre.
Upon a wing of the *Sirocco* perched, Kairos,
Diffident artist draped in indigo, astute with the lyre:
Upon the other wing, callow Chronos.

Gliding they did a duet, red and brown, of dust
And epigenesis; grace and guile. Still elastic
Their flight-path of song spread the ruse of rust
Now to Luxor, through Bubastis into the Baltic.

Africa touched the world before the world
Touched Africa. It was ever thus, the lush
Semantics of sub-tropic birds coming unfurled
From within the cravat of a great heart-rush

Filling a lake to slake a thousand leagues of thirst
Growing polyglot plantations and a promenade
For every degree of the compass. It was a first.

Alas, nothing now survives the loose cannonade.

VIII

It was the age of flame trees, their implacable beauty
 Claiming more surface than the sand. Lavish sunlight
 Daubed each petal with pigment from stars. A fruity
 Blanket perfumed Sudan, made a galaxy of delight.

It was the age of the rose, called by many names
 In minds as simple as the reptilian, whose sole sport
 Was blood drawn in death duels, whose games
 Further dyed the landscape the hue of rich port.

Roaming magnate crocodiles, massive as mastodon
 Mulled away their spendthrift afternoons, their talent
 For flesh sated with fish, zebras, duiker by the ton
 Shared alike with Afrovenators. The feeble lament

Raised by doves disappearing in the rosy haze
 Of catholic aromatherapy, a sunlit hemisphere
 Rent by fiery growth so rank it seemed ablaze
 Intent on the continent. As if remorseful Mr. Blair

Should turn his gift of speech on every African
 Persuading all to plant flamboyant trees, carnation,
 Amaranths. As if in Egypt's wake, the Nile's watering can
 Should turn on every blossom, the soil of every nation...

That can't be right. Really as if a contrite Mr. Blair
 Should turn martyr, shed his warm blood
 In a benevolent red fountain, with all his old flair
 In an arc over the Sahara till his vision blurred,

And Bono, deigning, should be sole witness
 Through tinted glasses to the mobile miracle –
 With chary horses galloping wild, shunning harness
 To a past that mastered blood and spectacle.

IX

Here, stone country tales have a hardness to them
 Missing in stories of sand country, the harshness
 Is of a different kind. A warrior Buddha's hem
 Is caught in their pleats, a top-crust narrowness

Keen as stone-cry. These stones breathe brittle
Air, mark brutal graves, mourn nothing new.
Their bone-deep instinct of sentries alter little
Over passing ages in the wild. They are true

To that obsidian creed inherited from earth
When it was young and harder to please –
Grand stones of granite, of gneiss; the hearth.
Under their patrician gaze, reposed in stone-peace

Monsoon after brusque monsoon, ascetic basalt
Inheriting wind, still receding rain, desert scribes
Inscribing the first hieroglyphs, shunning rock salt
Their heirs bequeathing Rosetta stone to the tribes.

X

Blue, blue skies. Clear cloudless morning
Made for fingering by the winter sun.
Such level light. Like smooth fabric adorning
The infant skin of day. Then a gun

Always a gun, praetorian or rogue to ruin
These mornings that could have been
Any from the past millennium. Tuning
The radio solves nothing, a change of scene

The same. It is the land as much as it is
The oil. The desert's haunting beauty
Its pure challenge. Its prospects of bliss.
Add to these the monk's protected piety

Which from history appears to grow
Out of the soil and air. The linked stars
From where we first learnt how
To reckon days, navigate, cure scars.

What grew the desert was the wind
Hot and dry and mangosteen – blowing
With hidden answers, rich with find
The unacknowledged labourer plowing.

XI

Listen, the desert is singing. Singing, just singing.
Listen, it's a duet, a duet with the breeze

They are singing an old song full of clinging
Just clinging and its joys as they squeeze

In the manner of the elements. Their dance
Is a raft reaching back to genesis
Where with jasmine mingling they entrance
The clouds and every creature, sweet is

Their tan rhapsody, their melodies of old gold
Cartwheeling in the sunset, magnificent their display
Crowding space with all the awe it can hold
Riddling the radius of sunset at end of day.

They hum till darkness dons the desert with a cap
Called silence. And silence becomes a pouch
Holding the dignitaries: Mizar and Alioth in the gap
Cabri, Kochab, Alkaid. They sparkle as they touch

In silence, starry-eyed, up above the world so high
Their distant celestial dance as nuanced, as rich
As Liberian diamonds flung in the sky
With Angolan élan. They defy gravity, we itch

To touch them as they brace and bungee-jump
Into Amsterdam, or lunge and parachute into New York
Sky-diving as they please into London, bump
Into relatives in Lisbon and in world capitals where pork

Is taboo. They stay detached like Nigerian inflation
Of which Fela sang with his tenor saxophone
And we launch space-probes into our constellation
For understanding why our craton is so prone...

Too wide for stirrups, the freeborn Sphinx remains
Untamed vendor of Fanon dreams Césaire acres
Diop's elegant logic of roots, architects and domains
Till truth itself is unguent and balm to wounded makers.

XII

For Akeem Agbaje

Age-marbled scrolls at Timbuktu rest on racks
Reincarnated in apographs, they will not bowdlerize
Their exemplars of sculpted stone, their tracks
Testify to salience that will not temporize

Mind equal to Euclid's, punctilious as periplus
Which Scylax made of old wayfaring Nile.
Timbuktu was bulwark, stark as Noah's ark, no gloss
On intent, her end surmised in stoic style.

Burst the bubble of our time machine and enter
Mali today. There is more cream than coffee
In the colour of the sand, more vendetta
In the grouse of the grumbling guide. See,

A mile is still as long in Mali, a fourscore as eighty,
The berry as black as currant in currant country
But sweeter. O Keats, the girls are as naughty
And they wonder at French boys standing sentry

In their tight fatigues, peace-keeping nomads
Contrite in their contradictions. Their boots
When they march in drills delight village lads
Though vicious rumours spread about their roots.

In Bamako, the dream of the last Kiffian lives
Buoyed on bouffant clouds reaching adroitly
Through the shimmering of Sahel sieves
Into Sijilmasa, where none venture confidently.

Look who the winds brought back: Mansa Musa
And his caravans of gold, sheer volatility
Journeying with him on pilgrimage, farther
Into the pleats of carved dunes for posterity

The one man-hurricane that shook a peninsula
To its liquid foundations with solid wealth
Never seen before save in poetry from Africa
Showering principalities in the commonwealth.

To scouts it seemed an exodus of ninjas.
The awe in dust so apparent that none
Would dream of robbery or anything so rash.
Sun Tzu would have applauded or done

Something significant as gesture. The practice
Of a principle as perfect as this was rare.
Musa's company surged like gentle armistice
In the service of peace, paying every fare.

XIII

Tonight, the sky is several districts full
 Of coruscating stars, the heavens are entire
 Cities of light, adrift with gravity's pull
 Their names hanging on dark celestial wire

Fixed as fortune found in certain names,
 Turned rubrical in the struggles of a race
 Cesaire, Marechera, Okigbo – stalwart frames
 Whose alchemy revives with onomastic grace.

The wind descends celestial stairs, dictates
 Vectors and likely durations, rouses trees
 And shrubs to test its limbs, finally fixates
 On a hollow in the hill. By slow degrees

Dissipating with passing time, but weathering
 Away the worth of every hour, invisible to the eye
 But felt on hard rock-skin, as blown scouring
 And on rock-viscera, as bastard Valkyrie.

XIV

Gordon and the Mahdi. Their tale still trembles
 On the lips of whispering winds, two
 War-clad termites, death-duellers. Fate disassembles
 Their chivalries as a painter's hand, framing the coup

de grâce in splendid colours. They expired
 As they thrived, claiming Khartoum, striving
 For mastery against entropy, their words fired
 Mixed multitudes, the plain, the turban-wearing.

And their words hover in English war tales
 Anecdotes told between burqas, mouth to mouth
 Like cloistered communion. Another siege pales
 In comparison with Khartoum's – north to south

Immanent in Sudan's memory, stamped in stone
 These men, their words and deeds. Old men
 Still warn the young against disaster. *'Do hone
 Resolve like either of these, masters of Zen.'*

Inside Sudan is their garden of native tamarinds
 Citrus, pumpkins and melons. It is kept
 By wizened hermits unafraid of blighting winds
 That replace their kind with a sober sept

Of wizened hermits from around the world.
 They say that the garden belongs to God
 And inside the hut is an ancient scroll curled
 With a record of every seed and pod.

In the desert there is no sign that says: Thou shalt not eat stones.
 – Sufi saying

CHAPTER II

I

It took a desert's heat to revisit the sorrow
 Of mothers. Those for whom the world entire
 Was Ramah. Women for whom no tomorrow
 Offered lasting solace. Whose tears tire

Not. It did not matter, saint or courtesan
 If son or daughter could not be found
 In the wake of a slaving raid, as one woman
 They mourned freeborn children now bound

And their anguish rolled loose like the lexeme
 Of the desert, whose monotonous eye rhymes
 Deep and wide, were temptations to blaspheme:
 Offspring crossing boundaries to other times.

Elemental in their sackcloth, the women wept
 Their way to private purgatories, where pain
 Was alpha, omega and where torture, adept
 As priests at inquisition, defamed old Spain.

The names of children, sons and lovers
 Accumulated in the store of memory and spilled
 Beyond bounds, the names of brothers,
 The names of those who fought, those killed

Resisting the tide. These names rose a monument
 Through time, through stormy weather and fair,
 Onomastic totems, towering where they went
 Invincible. Names invisible and essential as air.
