

Waiting for an Angel
(Excerpt, pp 1-44)
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Lomba

In the middle of his second year in prison, Lomba got access to pencil and paper and he started a diary. It was not easy. He had to write in secret, mostly in the early mornings when the night warders, tired of peeping through the door bars, waited impatiently for the morning shift. Most of the entries he simply headed with the days of the week; the exact dates, when he used them, were often incorrect. The first entry was in July 1997, a Friday.

Friday, July 1997

Today I begin a diary, to say all the things I want to say, to myself, because here in prison there is no one to listen. I express myself. It stops me from standing in the centre of this narrow cell and screaming at the top of my voice. It stops me from jumping up suddenly and bashing my head repeatedly against the wall. Prison chains not so much your hands and feet as it does your voice.

I express myself. I let my mind soar above these walls to bring back distant, exotic bricks with which I seek to build a more enduring cell within this cell. Prison. Misprison. Dis. Un. Prisoner. See? I write of my state in words of derision, aiming thereby to reduce the weight of these walls on my shoulders, to rediscover my nullified individuality. Here in prison loss of self is often expressed

as anger. Anger is the baffled prisoner's attempt to re-crystallize his slowly dissolving self. The anger creeps up on you, like twilight edging out the day. It builds in you silently until one day it explodes in violence, surprising you. I saw it happen in my first month in prison. A prisoner, without provocation, had attacked an unwary warder at the toilets. The prisoner had come out of a bath-stall and there was the warder before him, monitoring the morning ablutions. Suddenly the prisoner leaped upon him, pulling him by the neck to the ground, grinding him into the black, slimy water that ran in the gutter from the toilets. He pummelled the surprised face repeatedly until other warders came and dragged him away. They beat him to a pulp before throwing him into solitary.

Sometimes the anger leaves you as suddenly as it appeared; then you enter a state of tranquil acceptance. You realize the absolute puerility of your anger: it was nothing but acid, cancer, eating away your bowels in the dark. You accept the inescapability of your fate; and with that, you learn the craft of cunning. You learn ways of surviving - surviving the mindless banality of the walls around you, the incessant harassment from the warders; you learn to hide money in your anus, to hold a cigarette inside your mouth without wetting it. And each day survived is a victory against the jailer, a blow struck for freedom.

My anger lasted a whole year. I remember the exact day it left me. It was a Saturday, the day after a failed escape attempt by two convicted murderers. The warders

were more than usually brutal that day; the inmates were on tenterhooks, not knowing from where the next blow would come. We were lined up in rows in our cell, waiting for hours to be addressed by the prison superintendent. When he came his scowl was hard as rock, his eyes were red and singeing, like fire. He paced up and down before us, systematically flagellating us with his harsh, staccato sentences. We listened, our heads bowed, our hearts quaking.

When he left, an inmate, just back from a week in solitary, broke down and began to weep. His hands shook, as if with a life of their own. 'What's going to happen next?' he wailed, going from person to person, looking into each face, not waiting for an answer. 'We'll be punished. If I go back there I'll die. I can't. I can't.' Now he was standing before me, a skinny mass of eczema inflammations, and ringworm, and snot. He couldn't be more than twenty, I thought; what did he do to end up in this dungeon? Then, without thinking, I reached out and patted his shoulder. I even smiled. With a confidence I did not feel I said kindly, 'No one will take you back.' He collapsed into my arms, soaking my shirt with snot and tears and saliva. 'Everything will be all right,' I repeated over and over. That was the day the anger left me.

In the over two months that he wrote before he was discovered and his diary seized, Lomba managed to put in quite a large number of entries. Most of them were poems, and letters to various persons from his by now hazy, preprison life - letters he can't have meant to send. There were also long soliloquies and desultory interior monologues.

The poems were mostly love poems; fugitive lines from poets he had read in school: Donne, Shakespeare, Graves, Eliot, etc.. Some were his original compositions rewritten from memory; but a lot were fresh creations - tortured sentimental effusions to women he had known and admired, and perhaps loved. Of course they might have been imaginary beings, fabricated in the smithy of his prison-fevered mind. One of the poems reads like a prayer to a much doubted, but fervently hoped for God:

Lord, I've had days black as pitch
And nights crimson as blood,

But they have passed over me, like water. Let this
one also pass over me, lightly, Like a smooth rock
rolling down the hill, Down my back, my skin, like
soothing water.

That, he wrote, was the prayer on his lips the day the cell door opened without warning and the superintendent, flanked by two baton-carrying warders, entered.

Monday, September

I had waited for this; perversely anticipated it with each day that passed, with each surreptitious sentence that I wrote. I knew it was me he came for when he stood there, looking bigger than life, bigger than the low, narrow cell. The two dogs with him licked their chops and growled. Their eyes roved hungrily over the petrified inmates caught sitting, or standing, or crouching;

laughing, frowning, scratching - like figures in a movie still.

'Lomba, step forward!' his voice rang out suddenly. In the frozen silence it sounded like glass breaking on concrete, but harsher, without the tinkling. I was on my mattress on the floor, my back propped against the damp wall. I stood up. I stepped forward.

He turned the scowl on me. 'So, Lomba. You are.'

'Yes. I am Lomba,' I said. My voice did not fail me. Then he nodded, almost imperceptibly, to the two warders. They bounded forward eagerly, like game hounds scenting a rabbit. One went to a tiny crevice low in the wall, almost hidden by my mattress. He threw aside the mattress and poked two fingers into the triangular crack. He came out with a thick roll of papers. He looked triumphant as he handed it to the superintendent. Their informer had been exact. The other hound reached unerringly into a tiny hole in the sagging, rain-patterned ceiling and brought out another tube of papers.

'Search. More!' the superintendent barked. He unrolled the tubes. He appeared surprised at the number of sheets in his hands. I was. I didn't know I had written so much. When they were through with the holes and crevices, the dogs turned their noses to my personal effects. They picked up my mattress and shook and sniffed and poked. They ripped off the tattered cloth on its back. There were no papers there. They took the pillow-cum-rucksack (a jeans trouser-leg cut off at mid-thigh and knotted at the ankle) and poured out the contents on to the floor. Two threadbare shirts, one pair of trousers, one plastic comb, one toothbrush, one half-used bar of soap, and a pencil.

This is the sum of my life, I thought. This is what I've finally shrunk to; the detritus after the explosion: a comb, a toothbrush, soap, two shirts, one pair of trousers and a pencil. They swooped on the pencil before it had finished rolling on the floor, almost knocking heads in their haste.

`A pencil!' the superintendent said, shaking his head, exaggerating his amazement. The prisoners were standing in a tight, silent arc. He walked the length of the arc, displaying the papers and pencil, clucking his tongue. `Papers. And pencil. In prison. Can you believe that? In my prison!'

I was sandwiched between the two hounds, watching the drama in silence. I felt removed from it all. Now the superintendent finally turned to me. He bent a little at the waist, pushing his face into mine. I smelt his grating smell; I picked out the white roots beneath his carefully dyed moustache.

`I will ask. Once. Who gave you. Papers?' He spoke like that, in jerky, truncated sentences.

I shook my head. I did my best to meet his red-hot glare. `I don't know.'

Some of the inmates gasped, shocked; they mistook my answer for reckless intrepidity. They thought I was foolishly trying to protect my source. But in a few other eyes I saw sympathy. They understood that I had really forgotten where the papers came from.

'Hmm,' the superintendent growled. His eyes were on the papers in his hands; he kept folding and unfolding them. I was surprised he had not pounced on me yet. Maybe he was giving me a spell to reconsider my hopeless

decision to protect whoever it was I was protecting. The papers. They might have blown in through the door bars on the sentinel wind that sometimes patrolled the prison yard in the evenings. Maybe a sympathetic warder, seeing my yearning for self-expression emblazoned neon-like on my face, had secretly thrust the roll of papers into my hands as he passed me in the yard. Maybe - and this seems more probable - I bought them from another inmate (anything can be bought here in prison, from marijuana to a gun). But I had forgotten. In prison, memory short-circuit is an ally to be cultivated at all costs.

`I repeat. My question. Who gave you the papers?' he thundered into my face, spraying me with spit.

I shook my head. `I have forgotten.'

I did not see it, but he must have nodded to one of the hounds. All I felt was the crushing blow on the back of my neck. I pitched forward, stunned by pain and the unexpectedness of it. My face struck the door bars and I fell before the superintendent's boots. I saw blood where my face had touched the floor. I waited. I stared, mesmerized, at the reflection of my eyes in the high gloss of the boots' toecaps. One boot rose and landed on my neck, grinding my face into the floor.

`So. You won't. Talk. You think you are. Tough,' he shouted. `You are. Wrong. Twenty years! That is how long I have been dealing with miserable bastards like you. Let this be an example to all of you. Don't. Think you can deceive me. We have our sources of information. You can't. This insect will be taken to solitary and he will be properly dealt with. Until. He is willing to. Talk.'

I imagined his eyes rolling balefully round the tight, narrow cell, branding each of the sixty inmates separately. The boot pressed down harder on my neck: I felt a tooth bend at the root.

'Don't think because you are political. Detainees you are untouchable. Wrong. You are all rats. Saboteurs. Anti-government rats. That is all. Rats.'

But the superintendent was too well versed in the ways of torture to throw me into solitary that very day. I waited two days before they came and blindfolded me and took me away to the solitary section. In the night. Forty-eight hours. In the first twenty-four hours I waited with my eyes fixed on the door, bracing myself whenever it opened; but it was only the cooks bringing the meal, or the number-check warders come to count the inmates for the night, or the slop-disposal team. In the second twenty-four hours I bowed my head into my chest and refused to look up. I was tired. I refused to eat or speak or move. I was rehearsing for solitary.

They came, at around ten at night. The two hounds. Banging their batons on the door bars, shouting my name, cursing and kicking at anyone in their path. I hastened to my feet before they reached me, my trouser-leg rucksack clutched like a shield in my hands. The light of their torch on my face was like a blow.

'Lomba!'

'Come here! Move!'

'Oya, out. Now!'

I moved, stepping high over the stirring bodies on the floor. The light fell on my rucksack.

'What's that in your hand, eh? Where you think say you dey carry am go? Bring am. Come here! Move!'

Outside. The cell door clanked shut behind us. All the compounds were in darkness. Only security lights from poles shone at the sentry posts. In the distance, the prison wall loomed huge and merciless, like a mountain. Broken bottles. Barbed wire. Then they threw the blindfold over my head. My hands instinctively started to rise, but they were held and forced behind me and cuffed.

'Follow me.'

One was before me, the other was behind, prodding me with his baton. I followed the footsteps, stumbling. At first it was easy to say where we were. There were eight compounds within the prison yard; ours was the only one reserved for political detainees. There were four other Awaiting Trial men's compounds surrounding ours. Of the three compounds for convicted criminals, one was for lifers and one, situated far away from the other compounds, was for condemned criminals. Now we had passed the central lawn where the warders conducted their morning parade. We turned left towards the convicted prisoners' compounds, then right towards ... we turned right again, then straight ... I followed the boots, now totally disoriented. I realized that the forced march had no purpose to it, or rather its purpose was not to reach anywhere immediately. It was part of the torture. I walked. On and on. I bumped into the front warder whenever he stopped abruptly.

'What? You no de see? Idiot!'

Sometimes I heard their voices exchanging pleasantries

and amused chuckles with other warders. We marched for over thirty minutes; my slippered feet were chipped and bloody from hitting into stones. My arms locked behind me robbed me of balance and often I fell down, then I'd be prodded and kicked. At some places - near the light poles - I was able to see brief shimmers of light. At other places the darkness was thick as walls, and eerie. I recalled the shuffling, chain-clanging steps we heard late at nights through our cell window. Reluctant, sad steps. Hanging victims going to the hanging room; or their ghosts returning. We'd lie in the dark, stricken by immobility as the shuffling grew distant and finally faded away.

Now we were on concrete, like a corridor. The steps in front halted. I waited. I heard metal knock against metal, then the creaking of hinges. A hand took my wrist, cold metal touched me as the handcuffs were unlocked. My hands felt light with relief. I must have been standing right before the cell door because when a hand on my back pushed me forward I stumbled inside. I was still blindfolded, but I felt the consistency of the darkness change: it grew thicker, I had to wade through it to feel the walls. That was all: walls so close together that I felt like a man in a hole. I reached down and touched a bunk. I sat down. I heard the door close. I heard footsteps retreating. When I removed the blindfold the darkness remained the same, only now a little air touched my face. I closed my eyes. I don't know how long I remained like that, hunched forward on the bunk, my sore, throbbing feet on the floor, my elbows on my knees, my eyes closed.

As if realizing how close I was to tears, the smells got

up from their corners, shook the dust off their buttocks and lined up to make my acquaintance - to distract me from my sad thoughts. I shook their hands one by one: Loneliness Smell, Anger Smell, Waiting Smell, Masturbation Smell, Fear Smell. The most noticeable was Fear Smell; it filled the tiny room from floor to ceiling, edging out the others. I did not cry. I opened my lips and slowly, like a Buddhist chanting his mantra, I prayed:

Let this one also pass over me, lightly,
Like a smooth rock rolling down the hill, Down my
back, my skin, like soothing water.

He was in solitary for three days. This is how he described the cell in his diary: *The floor was about six feet by ten, and the ceiling was about seven feet from the floor. There were two pieces of furniture: the iron bunk with its tattered, lice-ridden mat, and the slop bucket in the corner.*

His only contact with the outside was when his mess of beans, once daily at six p.m., was pushed into the cell through a tiny flap at the bottom of the wrought-iron door, and at precisely eight p.m. when the cell door was opened for him to take out the slop bucket and replace it with a fresh one. He wrote that the only way he distinguished night from day was by the movement of his bowels - in hunger or in purgation.

Then on the third day, late in the evening, things began to happen. Like Nichodemus, the superintendent came to him, covertly, seeking knowledge.

Third Day. Solitary Cell

When I heard metal touch the lock on the door I sat down from my blind pacing. I composed my countenance. The door opened, bringing in unaccustomed rays of light. I blinked. *'Oh, sweet light, may your face meeting mine bring me good fortune.'* When my eyes had adjusted to the light, the superintendent was standing on the threshold - the cell entrance was a tight, brightly lit frame around his looming form. He advanced into the cell and stood in the centre, before me in my disadvantaged position on the bunk. His legs were planted apart, like an A. He looked like a cartoon figure: his jodhpur-like uniform trousers emphasized the skinniness of his calves, where they disappeared into the glass-glossy boots. His stomach bulged and hung like a belted sack. He cleared his voice. When I looked at his face I saw his blubber lips twitching with the effort of an attempted smile. But he couldn't quite carry it off. He started to speak, then stopped abruptly and began to pace the tiny space before the bunk. When he returned to his original position he stopped. Now I noticed the sheaf of papers in his hands. He gestured in my face with it.

'These. Are the. Your papers.' His English was more disfigured than usual. He was soaking wet with the effort of saying whatever it was he wanted to say. *'I read. All. I read your file again. Also. You are journalist. This is your second year. Here. Awaiting trial. For organizing violence. Demonstration against. Anti-government demonstration against the military legal government.'* He did not thunder as usual.

'It is not true.'

'Eh?' The surprise on his face was comical. *'You deny?'* I did not organize a demonstration. I went there as a reporter.'

'Well ...' He shrugged. *'That is not my business. The truth. Will come out at your. Trial.'*

'But when will that be? I have been forgotten. I am not allowed a lawyer, or visitors. I have been awaiting trial for two years now ...'

'Do you complain? Look. Twenty years I've worked in prisons all over this country. Nigeria. North. South. East. West. Twenty years. Don't be stupid. Sometimes it is better this way. How. Can you win a case against government? Wait. Hope.'

Now he lowered his voice, like a conspirator. *'Maybe there'll be another coup, eh? Maybe the leader will collapse and die. He is mortal, after all. Maybe a civilian government will come. Then. There will be amnesty for all political prisoners. Amnesty. Don't worry. Enjoy yourself'*

I looked at him, planted before me like a tree, his hands clasped behind him, the papier-mache smile on his lips. *Enjoy yourself. I turned the phrase over and over in my mind. When I lay to sleep rats kept me awake, and mosquitoes, and lice, and hunger, and loneliness. The rats bit at my toes and scuttled around in the low ceiling, sometimes falling on to my face from the holes in the ceiling. Enjoy yourself.*

'Your papers,' he said, thrusting them at me once more. I was not sure if he was offering them to me. *'I read them. All. Poems. Letters. Poems, no problem. The letters,*

illegal. I burned them. Prisoners sometimes smuggle out letters to the press to make us look foolish. Embarrass the government. But the poems are harmless. Love poems. And diaries. You wrote the poems for your girl, isn't it?

He bent forward, and clapped a hand on my shoulder. I realized with wonder that the man, in his awkward, flat-footed way, was making overtures of friendship to me. My eyes fell on the boot that had stepped on my neck just five days ago. What did he want?

‘Perhaps because I work in prison. I wear uniform. You think I don't know poetry, eh? Soyinka, Okigbo, Shakespeare.’

It was apparent that he wanted to talk about poems, but he was finding it hard to begin.

‘What do you want?’ I asked.

He drew back to his full height. ‘I write poems too. Sometimes,’ he added quickly when the wonder grew and grew on my face. He dipped his hand into his jacket pocket and came out with a foolscap sheet of paper. He unfolded it and handed it to me. ‘Read.’

It was a poem; handwritten. The title was written in capital letters: ‘MY LOVE FOR YOU’.

Like a man in a dream, I ran my eyes over the bold squiggles. After the first stanza I saw that it was a thinly veiled imitation of one of my poems. I sensed his waiting. He was hardly breathing. I let him wait. Lord, I can't remember another time when I had felt so good. So powerful. I was Samuel Johnson and he was an aspiring poet waiting anxiously for my verdict, asking tremulously, ‘Sir, is it poetry, is it Pindar?’

I wanted to say, with as much sarcasm as I could put

into my voice, ‘Sir, your poem is both original and interesting, but the part that is interesting is not original, and the part that is original is not interesting.’ But all I said was, ‘Not bad, you need to work on it some more.’

The eagerness went out of his face and for a fleeting moment the scowl returned. ‘I promised my lady a poem. She is educated, you know. A teacher. You will write a poem for me. For my lady.’

‘You want me to write a poem for you?’ I tried to mask the surprise, the confusion and, yes, the eagerness in my voice. He was offering me a chance to write.

‘I am glad you understand. Her name is Janice. She has been to the university. She has class. Not like other girls. She teaches in my son's school. That is how we met.’

Even jailers fall in love, I thought inately.

‘At first she didn't take me seriously. She thought I only wanted to use her and dump her. And. Also. We are of different religion. She is Christian, I am Muslim. But no problem. I love her. But she still doubted. I did not know what to do. Then I saw one of your poems ... yes, this one.’ He handed me the poem. ‘It said everything I wanted to tell her.’

It was one of my early poems, rewritten from memory.

‘"Three Words". I gave it to her yesterday when I took her out.’

‘You gave her my poem?’

‘Yes.’

‘You ... you told her you wrote it?’

‘Yes, yes, of course. I wrote it again in my own hand,’ he said, unabashed. He had been speaking in a rush; now he drew himself together and, as though to reassert his

authority, began to pace the room, speaking in a subdued, measured tone. 'I can make life easy for you here. I am the prison superintendent. There is nothing I cannot do, if I want. So write. The poem. For me.'

There is nothing I cannot do. You can get me cigarettes, I am sure, and food. You can remove me from solitary. But can you stand me outside these walls, free under the stars? Can you connect the tips of my upraised arms to the stars so that the surge of liberty passes down my body to the soft downy grass beneath my feet?

I asked for paper and pencil. And a book to read.

He was removed from the solitary section that day. The pencil and paper came, the book too. But not the one he had asked for. He wanted Wole Soyinka's prison notes, *The Man Died*; but when it came it was *A Brief History of West Africa*. While writing the poems in the cell, Lomba would sometimes let his mind wander; he'd picture the superintendent and his lady out on a date, how he'd bring out the poem and unfold it and hand it to her and say boldly, 'I wrote it for you. Myself.'

They sit outside on the verandah at her suggestion. The light from the hanging, wind-swayed Chinese lanterns falls softly on them. The breeze blowing from the lagoon below smells fresh to her nostrils; she loves its dampness on her bare arms and face. She looks at him across the circular table, with its vase holding a single rose. He appears nervous. A thin film of sweat covers his forehead. He removes his cap and dabs at his forehead with a white handkerchief.

'Do you like it, a Chinese restaurant?' he asks, like a

father anxious to please his favourite child. It is their first outing together. He pestered her until she gave in. Sometimes she is at a loss what to make of his attentions. She sighs. She turns her plump face to the deep, blue lagoon. A white boat with dark stripes on its sides speeds past; a figure is crouched inside, almost invisible. Her light, flowerpatterned gown shivers in the light breeze. She watches him covertly. He handles his chopsticks awkwardly, but determinedly.

'Waiter!' he barks, his mouth full of fish, startling her. 'Bring another bottle of wine!'

'No. I am all right, really,' she says firmly, putting down her chopsticks.

After the meal, which has been quite delicious, he lifts the tiny, wine-filled porcelain cup before him and says: 'To you. And me.'

She sips her drink, avoiding his eyes.

'I love you, Janice. Very much. I know you think I am not serious. That I only want to suck. The juice and throw away the peel. No.' He suddenly dips his hand into the pocket of his well-ironed white kaftan and brings out a yellow paper.

'Read and see.' He pushes the paper across the table to her. 'I wrote it. For you. A poem.'

She opens the paper. It smells faintly of sandalwood. She looks at the title: 'Three Words'. She reaches past the vase with its single, white rose, past the wine bottle, the wine glasses, and covers his hairy hand with hers briefly. 'Thank you.'

She reads the poem, shifting in her seat towards the swaying light of the lantern:

Three words

When I hear the waterfall clarity of your laughter,
When I see the twilight softness of your eyes.

I feel like draping you all over myself, like a cloak, To
be warmed by your warmth.

Your flower-petal innocence, your perennial
Sapling resilience - your endless charms

All these set my mind on wild flights of fancy: I add
word unto word,

I compare adjectives and coin exotic phrases
But they all seem jaded, corny, unworthy Of
saying all I want to say to you.

So I take refuge in these simple words, Trusting
my tone, my hand in yours, when I Whisper
them, to add depth and new Twists of meaning
to them. Three words: I love you.

With his third or fourth poem for the superintendent,
Lomba began to send Janice cryptic messages. She seemed to
possess an insatiable appetite for love poems. Every day a
warder came to the cell, in the evening, with the same
request from the superintendent: 'The poem.' When he
finally ran out of original poems, Lomba began to plagiarize the
masters from memory. Here are the opening lines of one:

Janice, your beauty is to me Like
those treasures of gold ...

Another one starts:

I wonder, my heart, what you and I
Did till we loved ...

But it was Lomba's bowdlerization of Sappho's 'Ode'
that brought the superintendent to the cell door:

A peer of goddesses she seems to me 'The
lady who sits over against me Face to
face,
Listening to the sweet tones of my voice, And
the loveliness of my laughing. It is this that
sets my heart fluttering In my chest,
For if I gaze on you but for a little while I am
no longer master of my voice, And my
tongue lies useless And a delicate flame runs
over my skin No more do I see with my
eyes; The sweat pours down me I am all
seized with trembling And I grow paler than
the grass My strength fails me And I seem
little short of dying.

He came to the cell door less than twenty minutes after the
poem had reached him, waving the paper in the air, a real
smile splitting his granite face.

'Lomba, come out!' he hollered through the iron bars.
Lomba was lying on his wafer-thin mattress, on his back,

trying to imagine figures out of the rain designs on the ceiling. The door officer hastily threw open the door.

The superintendent threw a friendly arm over Lomba's shoulders. He was unable to stand still. He walked Lomba up and down the grassy courtyard.

'This poem. Excellent. With this poem. After. I'll ask her for marriage.' He was incoherent in his excitement. He raised the paper and read aloud the first line, straining his eyes in the dying light: "A peer of goddesses she seems to me". Yes. Excellent. She will be happy. Do you think I should ask her for. Marriage. Today?'

He stood before Lomba, bent forward expectantly, his legs planted in their characteristic A formation.

'Why not?' Lomba answered. A passing warder stared at the superintendent and the prisoner curiously. Twilight fell dully on the broken bottles studded in the concrete of the prison wall.

'Yes. Why not. Good.' The superintendent walked up and down, his hands clasped behind him, his head bowed in thought. Finally, he stopped before Lomba and declared gravely: 'Tonight. I'll ask her.'

Lomba smiled at him, sadly. The superintendent saw the smile; he did not see the sadness.

'Good. You are happy. I am happy too. I'll send you a packet of cigarettes. Two packets. Today. Enjoy. Now go back inside.'

He turned abruptly on his heels and marched away.

September

Janice came to see me two days after I wrote her the Sappho. I thought, she has discovered my secret messages, my scriptive Morse tucked innocently in the lines of the poems I've written her.

Two o'clock is compulsory siesta time. The opening of the cell door brought me awake. My limbs felt heavy and lifeless. I feared I might have an infection. The warder came directly to me.

'Oya, get up. The superintendent wan see you.' His skin was coarse, coal black. He was fat and his speech came out in laboured gasps. 'Oya, get up. Get up,' he repeated impatiently.

I was in that lethargic, somnambulistic state condemned people surely fall into when, in total inanition and despair, they await their fate - without fear or hope, because nothing can be changed. No dew-wet finger of light would come poking into the parched gloom of the abyss they tenant. I did not want to write any more poems for the superintendent's lover. I did not want any more of his cigarettes. I was tired of being pointed at behind my back, of being whispered about by the other inmates as the superintendent's informer, his fetch-water. I wanted to recover my lost dignity. Now I realized that I really had no 'self' to express; that self had flown away from me the day the chains touched my hands. What is left here is nothing but a mass of protruding bones, unkempt hair and tearful eyes; an asshole for shitting and farting, and a penis that in the mornings grows turgid in

vain. This leftover self, this sea-bleached wreck panting on the iron-filing sands of the shores of this penal island is nothing but hot air, and hair, and ears cocked, hopeful ...

So I said to the warder, 'I don't want to see him today. Tell him I'm sick.'

The fat face contorted. He raised his baton in Pavlovian response. 'What!' But our eyes met. He was smart enough to decipher the bold 'No Trespassing' sign written in mine. Smart enough to obey. He moved back, shrugging. 'Na you go suffer!' he blustered, and left.

I was aware of the curious eyes staring at me. I closed mine. I willed my mind over the prison walls to other places. Free. I dreamt of standing under the stars, my hands raised, their tips touching the blinking, pulsating electricity of the stars. The rain would be falling. There'd be nothing else: just me and rain and stars and my feet on the wet, downy grass earthing the electricity of freedom.

He returned almost immediately. There was a smirk on his fat face as he handed me a note. I recognized the superintendent's clumsy scrawl. It was brief, a one-liner: *Janice is here. Come. Now.* Truncated, even in writing. I got up and pulled on my sweat-grimed shirt. I slipped my feet into my old, worn-out slippers. I followed the warder. We passed the parade ground, and the convicted men's compound. An iron gate, far to our right, locked permanently, led to the women's wing of the prison. We passed the old laundry, which now served as a barber's shop on Saturdays - the prison's sanitation day. A gun-carrying warder opened a tiny door in the huge gate that led into a foreyard where the prison officials had their offices. I had been here before, once, on my first day in

prison. There were cars parked before the offices; cadets in their well-starved uniforms came and went, their young faces looking comically stern. Female secretaries with time on their hands stood in the corridors gossiping. The superintendent's office was not far from the gate; a flight of three concrete steps led up to a thick wooden door, which bore the single word: SUPERINTENDENT.

My guide knocked on it timidly before turning the handle.

'The superintendent wan see am,' he informed the secretary. She barely looked up from her typewriter, she nodded. Her eyes were bored, uncurious.

'Enter,' the warder said to me, pointing to a curtained doorway beside the secretary's table. I entered. A lady sat in one of the two visitors' armchairs. Back to the door, her elbows rested on the huge Formica-topped table before her. Janice. She was alone. When she turned, I noted that my mental image of her was almost accurate. She was plump. Her face was warm and homely. She came halfway out of her chair, turning it slightly so that it faced the other chair. There was a tentative smile on her face as she asked, 'Mr Lomba?'

I almost said no, surprised by the 'Mr'. I nodded.

She pointed at the empty chair. 'Please sit down.' She extended a soft, pudgy hand to me. I took it and marvelled at its softness. She was a teacher; the hardness would be in the fingers: the tips of the thumb and the middle finger, and the side of the index finger.

'Muftau - the superintendent - will be here soon. He just stepped out,' she said. Her voice was clear, a little high-pitched. Her English was correct, each word carefully

pronounced and projected. Like in a classroom. I was struck by how clean she looked, squeaky clean; her skin glowed like a child's after a bath. She had obviously taken a lot of trouble with her appearance: her blue evening dress looked almost new, but a slash of red lipstick extended to the left cheek after missing the curve of the lip. She crossed and uncrossed her legs, tapping the left foot on the floor. She was nervous. That was when I realized I had not said a word since I entered.

'Welcome to the prison,' I said, unable to think of anything else.

She nodded. 'Thank you. I told Muftau I wanted to see you. The poems, I just knew it wasn't him writing them. I went along with it for a while, but later I told him.'

She opened the tiny handbag in her lap and took out some papers. The poems. She put them on the table and unfolded them, smoothing out the creases, uncurling the edges. 'After the Sappho I decided I must see you. It was my favourite poem in school, and I like your version of it.'

'Thank you,' I said. I liked her directness, her sense of humour.

'So I told him - look, I know who the writer is, he is one of the prisoners, isn't he? That surprised him. He couldn't figure out how I knew. But I was glad he didn't deny it. I told him that. And if we are getting married, there shouldn't be secrets between us, should there?'

Ah, I thought, so my Sappho has worked the magic. Aloud I said, 'Congratulations.'

She nodded. 'Thanks. Muftau is a nice person, really, when you get to know him. His son, Farouk, was in my

class - he's finished now - really, you should see them together. So touching. I know he has his awkward side, and that he was once married - but I don't care. After all, I have a little past too. Who doesn't?' She added the last quickly, as if scared she was revealing too much to a stranger. Her left hand went up and down as she spoke, like a hypnotist, like a conductor. After a brief pause, she continued, 'After all the pain he's been through with his other wife, he deserves some happiness. She was in the hospital a whole year before she died.'

Muftau. The superintendent had a name, and a history, maybe even a soul. I looked at his portrait hanging on the wall. He looked young in it, serious-faced and smart, like the cadet warders outside. I turned to her and said suddenly and sincerely, 'I am glad you came. Thanks.'

Her face broke into a wide, dimpled smile. She was actually pretty. A little past her prime, past her sell-by date, but still nice, still viable. 'Oh, no. I am the one that should be glad. I love meeting poets. I love your poems. Really I do.'

'Not all of them are mine.'

'I know - but you give them a different feel, a different tone. And also, I discovered your S.O.S. I had to come ...' She picked the poems off the table and handed them to me. There were thirteen of them. Seven were my originals, six were purloined. She had carefully underlined in red ink certain lines in some of them - the same line, actually, recurring.

There was a waiting-to-be-congratulated smile on her face as she awaited my comment.

'You noticed,' I said.

`Of course I did. S.O.S. It wasn't apparent at first. I began to notice the repetition with the fifth poem. "Save my soul, a prisoner."

`Save my soul, a prisoner' ... The first time I put down the words, in the third poem, it had been non-deliberate, I was just making alliteration. Then I began to repeat it in the subsequent poems. But how could I tell her that the message wasn't really for her, or for anyone else? It was for myself, perhaps, written by me to my own soul, to every other soul, the collective soul of the universe.

I told her, the first time I wrote it an inmate had died. His name was Thomas. He wasn't sick. He just started vomiting after the afternoon meal, and before the warders came to take him to the clinic, he died. Just like that. He died. Watching his stiffening face, with the mouth open and the eyes staring, as the inmates took him out of the cell, an irrational fear had gripped me. I saw myself being taken out like that, my lifeless arms dangling, brushing the ground. The fear made me sit down, shaking uncontrollably amidst the flurry of movements and voices excited by the tragedy. I was scared. I felt certain I was going to end up like that. Have you ever felt like that, certain that you are going to die? No? I did. I was going to die. My body would end up in some anonymous mortuary, and later in an unmarked grave, and no one would know. No one would care. It happens every day here. I am a political detainee; if I die I am just one antagonist less. That was when I wrote the S.O.S. It was just a message in a bottle, thrown without much hope into the sea ... I stopped speaking when my hands started to shake. I wanted to put them in my pocket to hide them

from her. But she had seen it. She left her seat and came to me. She took both my hands in hers.

`You'll not die. You'll get out alive. One day it will all be over,' she said. Her perfume, mixed with her female smell, rose into my nostrils: flowery, musky. I had forgotten the last time a woman had stood so close to me. Sometimes, in our cell, when the wind blows from the female prison, we'll catch distant sounds of female screams and shouts and even laughter. That is the closest we ever come to women. Only when the wind blows, at the right time, in the right direction. Her hands on mine, her smell, her presence, acted like fire on some huge, prehistoric glacier locked deep in my chest. And when her hand touched my head and the back of my neck, I wept.

When the superintendent returned, my sobbing face was buried in Janice's ample bosom. Her hands were on my head, patting, consoling, like a mother, all the while cooing softly, `One day it will finish.'

I pulled away from her. She gave me her handkerchief.

`What is going on? Why is he crying?'

He was standing just within the door - his voice was curious, with a hint of jealousy. I wiped my eyes; I subdued my body's spasms. He advanced slowly into the room and went round to his seat. He remained standing, his hairy hands resting on the table.

`Why is he crying?' he repeated to Janice.

`Because he is a prisoner,' Janice replied simply. She was still standing beside me, facing the superintendent.

'Well. So? Is he realizing that just now?'

`Don't be so unkind, Muftau.'

I returned the handkerchief to her.

'Muftau, you must help him.'

'Help. How?'

'You are the prison superintendent. There's a lot you can do.'

'But I can't help him. He is a political detainee. He has not even been tried.'

'And you know that he is never going to be tried. He will be kept here for ever, forgotten.' Her voice became sharp and indignant. The superintendent drew back his seat and sat down. His eyes were lowered. When he looked up, he said earnestly, 'Janice. There's nothing anyone can do for him. I'll be implicating myself. Besides, his lot is far easier than that of other inmates. I give him things. Cigarettes. Soap. Books. And I let him. Write.'

'How can you be so unfeeling! Put yourself in his shoes - two years away from friends, from family, without the power to do anything you wish to do. Two years in CHAINS! How can you talk of cigarettes and soap, as if that were substitute enough for all that he has lost?' She was like a teacher *confronting* an erring student. Her left hand tapped the table for emphasis as she spoke.

'Well.' He looked cowed. His scowl alternated rapidly with a smile. He stared at his portrait on the wall behind her. He spoke in a rush. 'Well. I could have done something. Two weeks ago. The Amnesty International. People came. You know, white men. They wanted names of. Political detainees held. Without trial. To pressure the government to release them.'

'Well?'

'Well.' He still avoided her stare. His eyes touched mine and hastily passed. He picked up a pen and twirled it

between his fingers. The pen slipped out of his fingers and fell to the floor.

'I didn't. Couldn't. You know ... I thought he was comfortable. And, he was writing the poems, for you ...' His voice was almost pleading. Surprisingly, I felt no anger towards him. He was just Man. Man in his basic, rudimentary state, easily moved by powerful emotions like love, lust, anger, greed and fear, but totally dumb to the finer, acquired emotions like pity, mercy, humour and justice.

Janice slowly picked up her bag from the table. There was enormous dignity to her movements. She clasped the bag under her left arm. Her words were slow, almost sad. 'I see now that I've made a mistake. You are not really the man I thought you were ...'

'Janice.' He stood up and started coming round to her, but a gesture stopped him.

'No. Let me finish. I want you to contact these people. Give them his name. If you can't do that, then forget you ever knew me.'

Her hand brushed my arm as she passed me. He started after her, then stopped halfway across the room. We stared in silence at the curtained doorway, listening to the sound of her heels on the bare floor till it finally died away. He returned slowly to his seat and slumped into it. The wood creaked audibly in the quiet office.

'Go,' he said, not looking at me.

The above is the last entry in Lomba's diary. There's no record of how far the superintendent went to help him regain his freedom, but as he told Janice, there was very

little to be done for a political detainee - especially since, about a week after that meeting, a coup was attempted against the military leader, General Sani Abacha, by some officers close to him. There was an immediate crackdown on all pro-democracy activists, and the prisons all over the country swelled with political detainees. A lot of those already in detention were transferred randomly to other prisons around the country, for security reasons. Lomba was among them. He was transferred to Agodi Prison in Ibadan. From there he was moved to the far north, to a small desert town called Gashuwa. There is no record of him after that.

A lot of these political prisoners died in detention, although only the prominent ones made the headlines - people like Moshood Abiola and General Yar Adua.

But somehow it is hard to imagine that Lomba died. A lot seems to point to the contrary. His diary, his economical expressions, show a very sedulous character at work. A survivor. The years in prison must have taught him not to hope too much, not to despair too much - that for the prisoner, nothing kills as surely as too much hope or too much despair. He had learned to survive in tiny atoms, piecemeal, a day at a time. It is probable that in 1998, when the military dictator Abacha died, and his successor, General Abdulsalam Abubakar, dared to open the gates to democracy, and to liberty for the political detainees, Lomba was in the ranks of those released.

This might have been how it happened: Lomba was seated in a dingy cell in Gashuwa, his eyes closed, his mind soaring above the glass-studded prison walls, mingling with the stars and the rain in elemental union of freedom; then

the door clanked open, and when he opened his eyes Liberty was standing over him, smiling kindly, extending an arm.

And Liberty said softly, 'Come. It is time to go.'

And they left, arm in arm.

The Angel

Today is the last day of my life.

I knew it when I woke up in the morning and saw a crow croaking on my window ledge. I shivered and waved the pillow at it. I watched it fly away through the trees, croaking till it disappeared.

`When your time comes, you'll know,' a marabout once told me.

Now I know; even if I hadn't seen the black bird I would have known.

Death hangs around me like a mist, and now as I sit by the window in this bar, waiting for the Angel of Death, I feel as if anyone that looks at me can see it.

`Only a blessed few can see Israfael, the Angel of Death, when he comes for them. His face is the most terrible thing to behold,' the marabout said. His words echo in my mind as if he is standing before me, uttering them. But it was six months ago that we went to him, Bola, Lomba and I. We had gone, on Lomba's suggestion, to Badagry to see the slave port, but halfway through the tour we wandered off, depressed by the guide's mournful and vivid descriptions of how the chains and mouth locks had been used on the slaves.

`There is a fortune-teller somewhere on the beach. Let's go to him,' Lomba said. But when we found him he told us he was not a fortune-teller.

He had a crude shed made of bamboo and raffia high on the cliff, overlooking the sea. He was seated on a flat rock before the shed, a skinny Buddha, facing the water. He was naked but for a goatskin around his waist; his skin was wrinkled and scaly from sunburn. His head was cleanshaven; his eyes were hooded, dreamy.

'I am a poet. I listen to the waves for tales of other shores and of the deep. Listen. Sit down,' he told us in a voice bleached by sea water.

We sat. We listened. The waves rose high as walls and broke with alarming violence against the rocks. I closed my eyes. I felt lulled by the alternating roar and silence. He said: 'Life is like a wave motion, full of highs and lows. We sit on life's shores with our hands open, waiting to receive. But the water knows, more than we do, what we need and what we don't need. It takes away from us what we don't need, and drops it at another shore where it is needed. Sometimes it returns to us what it took away, refined and augmented with brine and other sea minerals. The sea, like death, is not an end but a beginning. Beneath it there is no bed, but another surface, another air.'

He stood up suddenly. 'You kids have put me in a good mood today. Follow me into the shed, I'll tell your fortunes, but one by one.'

Lomba entered first. There was a determined look on his face, like someone set on knowing the truth though it may turn out to be bitter. As I waited for my turn, I tried to decide what I wanted to know. Perhaps I should ask for special prayers for my coming exams. Lomba avoided my eyes when he came out; there was a bemused look on his face.

'What did he say?' I asked.

Lomba shrugged. 'Prison. That was all he saw ahead of me. Go in, try your luck, ask for good fortune, don't ask too closely.'

But when I entered and opened my mouth, what came out was: 'I want to know when I am going to die.' The marabout closed the Koran before him and pierced me with his stare. He was seated far inside the shed, on a goatskin. There was a calabash full of sea water to his right. I was kneeling before him, my back to the door and the roaring sea outside.

'Ask for something else. I could give you herbs to transport you and your girlfriend on a trip of a thousand delights. I could teach you a prayer that attracts wealth like moths to a fire. But death - why?'

I shrugged. 'I am curious, that is all. I want to be ready.'

'A wise man is always ready for death. Assume it will come tomorrow, or in the next minute.'

I stood up to go. 'Thanks,' I said, unable to hide my disappointment.

He raised a hand, stopping me. 'Sit down. Tell me, how old are you?'

'I am twenty-one.'

'Ah, sweet youth. Your life has just started.' He sounded wistful, almost sad. 'Youth. That is one thing the waves never return to us. Once lost, it is gone for ever.'

I sat and watched in silence as he poured a white powder into the calabash of sea water. He stared into it intently, as if it held the answer to the mysteries of life and death, which indeed it might, then he looked at me and said, 'You'll know when your time comes. You are lucky, not many people

are given that privilege. You'll also see Israfael, the Angel of Death, when he comes for you.'

I have been seated here all day, looking out through the window, sipping Coke. I watch each face that enters - one of them might be an angel disguised as a mortal. They are said to do that when they come to earth so as not to scare people with their terrible countenance. The sky above is becoming overcast; soon it will rain. Perhaps I should go home; maybe this is not the place appointed.

Sudden loud shouts draw my eyes to the street.

`Ole!

'Thief! Catch am o!'

A mob wielding cudgels and cutlasses is hot on the heels of a youth who desperately crosses to the other side of the road, narrowly missing the fender of a truck. The mob follows, growing bigger as it goes. The youth, looking over his shoulder as he runs, crashes into a light pole and falls senseless to the ground. Before he can regain a second wind the mob is on him. I watch the cudgels rise and fall, I hear his wailing, ululating scream finally turn into a whimper. They pour petrol on him and set him ablaze. I watch the fiery figure dancing and falling until it finally subsides on to the pavement as a black, faintly glowing, twitching mass.

The Angel of Death is in the neighbourhood, and soon it will be my turn. But not in such an ignoble fashion. I want to go in a way that, a hundred years from now, people will look back at with awe and say, 'His death had meaning.' Like those Christians in ancient Rome who submitted themselves to be eaten by lions in the

arena without raising a murmur. I call that symbolic death. If only I had a way of choosing the manner of my own death, if only I could make it spectacular and momentous ...

Outside, the clouds have descended lower in the sky. Lightning flashes every once in a while, like a tear in the dark fabric of the sky; people hurry to get off the street as huge pellets of rain begin to fall. The bar is filling up fast: people with nowhere to sit line up against the counter, staring at the flickering T V screen behind the barman. Then suddenly the screen goes blank; the announcer's image is replaced by spongy white particles.

'Change the station,' someone shouts.

The barman changes to another channel - he keeps turning the knob, but no image appears.

'Maybe they've no light,' someone says.

'All of them? Impossible.'

'Turn on the radio,' another person suggests.

There are so many faces in the bar, so many bodies pressed together - men and women and children; one of them, I am sure, is an angel. I look at their hands to see if I can detect the tell-tale ends of flight feathers retracted in disguise. There must be something in the eyes surely to suggest ...

'It is a coup!' the barman shouts, raising his hand for silence. The words pass from mouth to mouth round the room. Everyone falls silent, pressing closer to the radio on the counter. Martial music wafts out of the box to hover on the air above the sweating faces. After the martial music, a parade-ground-voiced general makes a lengthy announcement in which only the words 'dusk-to-dawn

curfew' make any visible impact on the room. Suddenly everyone is scurrying out of the bar into the light rain outside.

Soon the streets will be taken over by military tanks and jeeps. People will lock their doors and turn off their lights and peer fearfully through chinks in their windows at the rain-washed, post-coup *d'etat* streets.

Now I am the only one left in the bar. There is still an hour before the curfew begins. I notice the barman staring at me as he flicks a rag aimlessly up and down the counter. He stares at the clock above the door, then out at the deserted street.

'I will wait for an hour,' I say to myself Perhaps this is not the place appointed. But I felt so sure watching the thief doing his *danse macabre*.

The barman comes over. 'Oga, I want to close.' He avoids my eyes. He is elderly. He has a soup stain on his right sleeve.

'I am waiting for a friend. I gave him this address,' I reply.

'Maybe he won't come, because of the curfew,' the barman says.

But just then the door is kicked open. We turn and stare as two soldiers enter, dripping wet from the rain, guns slung over their shoulders. The barman leaves me and rushes over to them, bowing obsequiously. I feel a strange tingling all over my body, as if an electric shock has passed through me. I look at the soldiers, trying to determine which of them is here for me. One is short and fair, the other is tall and dark; but angels can assume any form they want. The barman hurries to the bar to bring them drinks. I keep staring at them, guessing.

'Hey!' the short one shouts at me, 'go home. There's a curfew on.'

'It is not six yet,' I reply, glancing at the clock. The soldiers look surprised at my bold response; they whisper together, then the short one stands up and swaggers to my table. His gun is unslung, the barrel points casually in my direction.

'Get out,' he says.

An ugly birthmark covers the left side of his face.

'I am waiting for someone, and it may be you,' I reply, but before I finish speaking he lunges forward and clears the Coke bottle and the glass off my table with the barrel of his rifle. The glass and bottle break as they hit the floor; the noise they make fills the hall. Thunder roars outside, the rain falls harder. He points the gun at me and moves back. Those Christians, did their hands shake like mine are shaking now, did their foreheads glisten with sweat and their hearts threaten to fail as the lions bounded towards them in the Colosseum? Did the gladiators' voices quaver as they chanted their death-disdaining salute to the emperor: 'Hail Caesar, we who are about to die salute thee!'

My movement is too fast for the soldier because he isn't expecting it. In one motion I shove the table at him; the edge catches him in the stomach, knocking the gun out of his hands. He falls down on the floor amidst the broken glasses. I make a desperate rush for the door, but before I reach it I hear a warning bark: 'Stop or I shoot!'

It is the other soldier.

But when I turn it is not a soldier standing there. It is an angel. It opens its enormous wings and closes them again in a clapping motion. The air from the wings lifts me up

and carries me out through the door. I land with a splash on the wet street. I am bleeding from the chest. I feel life draining out of me - through the haze I make out a huge bird shape flying out of the bar and ascending with the sound of a thousand wings. Then it is gone.