

INKSPIRED CHAPBOOK SERIES 2024

Ọ̀yẹ́kú

MOTHER OF DEATH



OLUMIDE MANUEL

Ọyẹ̀kú, Mother of Death

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FOREWORD

Of all the things that preoccupy the minds of mankind, death holds a prominent position. The question of *passing* rears its head in several iterations: what happens after death? Is death the end of a life? What if I pass without fulfilling my array of dreams? What if this sleep is my last? While this chapbook *Oyeku, Mother of Death* doesn't answer these troubling questions, it offers a persona that engages *death* as a subject to the point of making peace with her that they only ask the mother of the spirit of death to “tarry from this body/tarry from this home/tarry from this soul”. Through reading the modest but stimulating collection, a reader is bound to take on the persona's disposition towards death.

An irreducible trove, the collection, home to ten poems, begins with “end”— where the persona asserts “I have betrayed nothing but the burden of fate, in refusing my name inside a torrent of grief”. Here, they are unfettered and unperturbed— and goes on with their existential trade “farming a destiny out of ploughs of patience, tending its seeds under Osupa”. In “sphere” the light-heartedness the readers lose with the poet's gloomy imageries— “...the peels of nightbirds colliding with dews the cry of noons echoing at twilight”— they regain with the persona's bold, exhilarating claims towards the end of the poem. The persona says, “regardless I bud fresh grace, tetherless— my life is a debt to myself, not to death, not to endless pursuits, my life is my debt to myself, not mortgage unto grace.”

After touching on the inevitability of death, especially how it touches everyone, regardless of their gravitas— the persona finds

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themselves stuck in a dilemma, like everyone else. They lament, “I don’t know if it’s death chasing me; or I am chasing it. This the persona seems to unravel in the last poem *Oyeku*. Yes, they are chasing death, as they “...plead the blood/the blood for a token of grace...”

One of the beautiful deliverables of *Oyeku, Mother of Death*, is that it readily demonstrates the power of Christ over death without sounding preachy. Olumide engages *death* without churning out threnodies but shedding sunlight, particularly in both *immortality* and *life*

Beyond the content, Olumide Manuel bares his refreshing use of language—an act only a maestro of the art can do. The poet has given us sunlight, an essential for mortals, and we must all relish it.

—*Ayomipo Ifenaike*

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end

i have betrayed nothing but the burden

of fate, in refusing my name
inside a torrent of shame, old as blood,
raging like hell. i farm a destiny
out of ploughs of patience, tending its seed under Orupá.
the moon melts inside my eyes, i scrub
them red to forlong the naked darkness.
now, my harvest is ripe—

i have come undone.

life

life is a canoe through rapids & i am a one-armed
paddler caught within winds &
raptures about a market of storms
raffiaed to a green bottle, all slime,
alcoholic foams of a tentering weight.

life is as minute as a grain in the scheme of stars,
specks of light, all dust bodies
sharding from a lineage of fine
brokenness. just like everyone, i live
& i heal. i breathe. i live through
wagers of dying & every healing leads me
to the eventual. my body is home to
every flower & every burning, every desire
& ruining. one day when i, ripe & again, meet
death, the mother whose embrace is the cold of
graves, the creak & the clamp of spinning doors
I will flux her dark end with crested solanum

around

my head & hug it insanely. I will not be afraid.

sphere

the matrix of annihilation backheels
the long journey, the maw of time, the wheel of the world
turning on a spot. it is the peels
of nightbirds colliding
with dews the cry of noons echoing at twilight,
the spirals eating spirals, the roll of the black spiderweb
spending every soul into a flytrap
of existence— yesterday teeth-marked me &
every sickle of tomorrow is after my life.
i am caught between two separate stillness of a juncture—
dawn & twilight, overflowing with
forest mimosa & the food served at the
birth ceremony & the bristles of horsetail & the money
sprayed at a funeral. regardless i bud fresh grace, tetherless—
my life is a debt to myself, not to death, not to endless pursuit,
my life is my debt to myself, not
a mortgage unto grave.

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death

death comes for both

the gentle chameleon & the bouncy frog;
the lion and his prey; the hunter and his
lantern; the king and his horsemen; the
fish and the fisherman; the haves and
the have-nots; and like the amaranthus
stretching under the cool of tall plants,
I'm spent into it with weights of ambitions,
I do not know if it is death chasing me; or I chasing it.

Chroma

the umbral embouchure of a dirge floods the lungs,
the organ of little lights tiny pulses, splintered
like how a delta laments its fragments inside
my nightmare. like how a desert winds its sands
inside her sojourners. like how a season kills a tree
of his green, perhaps a rebirth in spring, perhaps
a fuel for flame. nothing is fair, i'm sure
but this is life, and darkness
has its hours. yet I will live out my despair in all
partitions of rainbow. in light. in shadows.
in shades between a pregnant cloud and the after-smile of a
night.

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immortality

is immortality the undying of a lifetime,
or the act of floating above death?

no matter how i look at it,
it is a torture.

'cos, how lonely must the endless be?

the gift of an end
that cannot be touched
by their divine hands?
just how lonely?

when immortals gathered
to mock human wretchedness,

i will, in turn, sit among flowers,
to pity their loneliness.

I might not understand glory
or attain it as a bud should,

but if death is final,
how relieving is that?

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karma

if you listen well,
chaos is an orchestration
a body *ungardens* from its basest
soil of choices & chances. same manner
many fingers plant harsh nails
inside rains & marrows
for their future to reap.

the rains circle back, &
the marrows became banks
of karma & gene. indeed
our fathers ate sour grapes, and
we have not learned how to brush our teeth.

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mouth

the mouth
an organ of constraint
of tongues, diverse;
of inverse soliloquies,

the marrow of
fate dancing on its axis,
astragal spinning orange hopes
against the decay of time,

it whirls a harmony of
intangible seeds, settling into
the bone-white destiny
bleached with words,

out of the ineluctability of praying,
of chanting, weeding and replanting
with the power organ,
somehow with callused knees;

for dreams or tomorrows unbound
in the silence trained in faithful patience,
in concave realities; of a wet, tensile soul

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knife

how to say *the knife is blunt* in Yorùbá?

say the knife is dead,
or the mouth of the knife is dead
because the death of the mouth is the death
of destiny, because the potency of life is
plumbed in the metric noesis inside its tongue.
a soul must sing its course as the fire must burn its yoke
of oxygen. where I come from, the mouth is also a lethal weapon.
where I come from, you cannot hush the gong of its pealing,
unless the gong is not a gong. whatever silence the knife
has learned in exile is self-taught. so go ahead, my soul,
sharpen all the knives the Blacksmith sheathed
under your skins. break the rust of
the despair of death blunting
you into oblivion.

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Oyékú

Oyeku/ mother of death/ mother of cycles
you mother/ the end in beginnings/ the music
eating silence/ you everlasting womb of mysteries/
you consume to reborn/ you reborn to consume/
in you karma is seeded/ in you it ripened/into
a moon of blackholes/ for every soul that sinned shall
die/but what must die/ should live first/ & live full

& here I come/ palms reddened with/ amaranthus
veins/neck-crested in mimosa/to shadow the calvary
/from every crossroad/ & plead the blood/the blood/
for a token of grace/may the universe's/ mercy converged here
that you might tarry/ again/ o mother of the spirit of death/
tarry/
from this body/ tarry from this home/ tarry from this soul

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Olumide Manuel is a poet, educator and an environmentalist. He is a 2x nominee of Pushcart award, a Best of Net nominee and the winner of the Ake Climate Change Poetry Prize 2022. His poems have been published on Up The Staircase Quarterly, Trampset, Gigantic Sequins, A Long House, Waccamaw Journal, Fiyah Magazine, Tinderbox Poetry Journal, Frontier Poetry, Ake Journal, Reckoning Press, and elsewhere.



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