BOOK THREE IN *THE FAMISHED ROAD* TRILOGY

INFINITE RICHES

'Fiction's master of enchantments'
Marlon James



'Pure celebration'
Scotsman

BEN OKRI

WINNER OF THE BOOKER PRIZE

BEN OKRI

Ben Okri is a poet, novelist, and playwright. His novel, *The Famished Road*, won the Booker Prize in 1991. His works have been translated into 26 languages. He has been a Fellow Commoner in Creative Arts at Trinity College, Cambridge and is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature.

Ben Okri's books have won numerous international prizes. The recipient of many honorary doctorates, he is a vice-president of the English Centre of International PEN and was presented the Crystal Award by the World Economic Forum for his outstanding contribution to the Arts and cross-cultural understanding. He also wrote the film script for the film *N: The Madness of Reason*. He is an honorary fellow of Mansfield college, Oxford. His book *Astonishing the Gods* was chosen by the BBC as one of the most influential novels written over the last 300 years.

He was born in Nigeria, and lives in London. His latest novel is *The Freedom Artist*. His latest book, a volume of stories, is *Prayer for the Living* and a new collection of poems *A Fire in my Head* was published in 2021.

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ALSO BY BEN OKRI

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Flowers and Shadows
The Landscapes Within
The Famished Road
Songs of Enchantment
Astonishing the Gods
Dangerous Love
In Arcadia
Starbook
The Age of Magic
The Freedom Artist

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Incidents at the Shrine
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Prayer for the Living

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Birds of Heaven
A Way of Being Free
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Infinite Riches

'Infinite riches in a little room'

Christopher Marlowe

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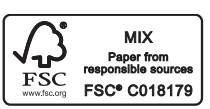

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To my beloved Mother
Grace Okri
1936–1996

Now that serenely
You rest on high
Forgive your son
Who couldn't say goodbye

But Death was a tyrant
On the rich land
And you had written
Enigmas in my hand

The more they try
To press you down
The more beautiful
Grows your crown

And now that you
Are as a spiritual dove
Dwell forever
In our eternal love

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BOOK ONE

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ONE

The little room

'Who can be certain where the end begins?' said Dad, shortly before he was arrested for the murder of the carpenter.

'Time is growing,' he added. 'And our suffering is growing too. When will our suffering bear fruit? One great thought can alter the future of the world. One revelation. One dream. But who will dream that dream? And who will make it real?'

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TWO

The leopard

While the whole community dreamt of the dead carpenter, Dad sat in our darkened room, talking deep into the night.

I listened to him, with dread in my heart, as he spoke words which heated up the air of the room. With blazing eyes, almost without purpose, he said: 'Some people who are born don't want to live. Others who are dead don't want to die. Azaro, are you awake?'

I was surprised by the question.

'Yes,' I replied.

He carried on, as if I hadn't said anything.

'My son, sometimes we find ourselves living in the dreams of the dead. Who knows the destination of a dream? How many worlds do we live in at the same time? When we sleep do we wake up in another world, in another time? When we sleep in that other world do we wake up here, in this world? Is history the converging dreams of many millions of people, living and dead? Have I just died and am I now living in another zone? Are we asleep all the time? When we wake, is it to one level above the deep sleep of our days? Do we wake when we die? My son, I

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feel as if I have just died and yet I have never felt more awake.'

He stopped again. His speech frightened me. Something incredible must have happened to him in the forest when he was burying the dead carpenter. It was as if he had burst out of a tight space which had been confining his raging spirit.

Then, in a sleepwalking voice, he suddenly cried out:

'I have never felt more awake, but I see a leopard coming towards me. Am I a leopard? Is the leopard my dream? Look!' he said, with an illuminated anguish in his voice, 'The room is becoming brighter!'

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THREE

Disappearance

I looked with widened eyes. My heart was still. The room was flooded with a subdued green intensity. The smell of herbaceous earth overwhelmed my senses. The forest darkness compacted into corners of the room. And, condensing beside Dad, as if the green were alive, its own light, contracting into an unmistakable form – was the leopard.

It was old. Its eyes were like blue jewels. And it sat peacefully at Dad's feet. The leopard was phosphorescent, spreading no shadows, as if it had come to the end of its dreaming.

Then something odd occurred to me.

'Are you awake, Dad?' I asked.

The light of the great animal flickered. Dad was silent. I asked the question again, louder. Mum turned on the bed. For an instant the room darkened again. Then the green radiance glowed, filling out the place. I got up from my mat. As I neared Dad, the leopard's illumination dimmed. I stopped, and whispered hard into his ear.

'ARE YOU AWAKE, DAD?'

'WHAT?' he cried, jumping up suddenly, plunging the room into night.

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The leopard was gone. I stayed silent for a moment.

Then, as if he had woken into sleep, Dad brushed past me, muttering something about seeing things for the first time. He went out of the room. For a moment I was confused. Then I went out after him, ran to the housefront, and looked both ways. Dad wasn't anywhere. I went to the backyard, but he wasn't there either. I hurried to the street again, ran one way, then another. It was very strange, and the thought scared me, but it seemed as if Dad simply stepped out of our door, and out of reality. I went back to the room and waited for him. While I waited it occurred to me that Dad had been talking from his sleep. I had entered another of his dreams.

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FOUR

Circling

I was restless. I waited a long time in the dark. I lay on the bed. Then I rose out of myself, and began circling. I circled in and out of the dreams of the community. Circled in the dreams of spirit-children who keep coming back to the same place, trying to break the chains of history. Circled in the dreams of the dead carpenter, who grew bigger in his coffin, till his swelling body split his wooden encasement.

As I circled, I saw that the dead carpenter had left his grave without moving the mighty rock that was above him. He had white flowers all over his body. He went from place to place, stirring the spirits of the dead. He wandered from one sleeper's house to another. Rattling their roofs. Trying to get into their lives. Trying to manifest himself to them in some way.

The dead carpenter knocked on people's doors. Banged on their windows. Grimaced into the blind faces of dreamers. Held long conversations with sensitive children. Roamed around the kitchens clattering the cooking utensils. Out in the open air, he glowed in the dark. Soon he drifted up into the sky, and hung in mid-space, threatening pestilence until his murderers had confessed their crime. Until

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he had been properly buried. He stirred revolt in the universal air of dreams.

I went on circling. Mum turned again on the bed. She was dreaming about the time, many years on, when she would be serenaded by a man who sold cement. Her dream changed. She found herself with her mother, who had been dead for twenty years and was now living on another continent, near the silver mountains. In the dream she stood with her mother beneath an Elysian sky. Together they stared at the faces of great women sculpted on the rocks by nature.

Then, I saw someone staggering down our street, with a bucket on his head. The man's face was completely wrapped in cloth, except for the eyes. When the wind blew against our window, our room was invaded by a bad smell. A reminder of our wretched condition, in which we live instantaneously with all the consequences of our actions.

After some time, I lay down again, and resumed circling. Twenty miles away, the future rulers of the nation slept in peace. They dreamt of power. They dreamt of bottomless coffers to steal from. Houses in every famous city. Concubines in every major town. Power removing them from the consequences of their own actions, which we suffered in advance. And suffered for long afterwards.

Meanwhile, the man with the bucket was shouting incoherent abuse as he staggered past the houses. The smell of his bucket altered our dreams. After he went past, we heard a loud cry, and then silence.

Twenty miles away, in a richer part of the city, on mattresses that would be transformed into palatial

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beds, the future rulers of the nation breathed easily. They were reliving their ascension, their victories. Numbering their enemies. They were dreaming their nation-destroying policies in advance. Tribal dreams of domination that would ignite civil war.

Thirty miles away, the English Governor-General, who hated being photographed, was dreaming about his colonial rule. In his dream he was destroying all the documents. Burning all the evidence. Shredding history. As I lingered in the Governor-General's dream a wave of darkness washed me to an island, across the ocean, where many of our troubles began, and on whose roads, in a future life, I would wander and suffer and find a new kind of light.

I wasn't long in that world when someone appeared at our door, stinking of a crude perfume made from the bitter aloes of the desert. I stopped circling. I descended into my body, woke up, and saw Dad. He was freshly bathed and looked thoroughly scrubbed. He also stank of carbolic. Wrinkles were deep on his forehead. His eyes bulged. A candle was alight on the centre table.

Dad was in his chair, silent, as if he hadn't moved. He smoked serenely. He didn't look at me. His thoughts were very intense. When he finished smoking, he put out the candle. Then, without a word, he got into bed with Mum, and fell into a profound slumber.

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FIVE

Prelude to trouble

Dad was still asleep when we woke up in the morning. His perfume chastened us, and hung densely in the room. The perfume was so appalling that it drove Mum out hawking much earlier than usual.

Mum was dressed like a prophetess that morning, as if she were cleansing the day in advance. She wore a white smock, white beads, white kerchief and a fish-patterned wrapper. She made food for us, and left Dad's breakfast covered on the table. She ate with me, but did not speak. Her face was shadowed as if her spirit were conserving its energies for the trials ahead.

After we had eaten, she got her basins of oranges, mosquito coils and soap. She prayed at the door, and then begged me not to wander far from home. She went out into the early sunlight. I listened as she advertised her wares in a new singing voice. Advertised them to a people who were too poor to buy oil for their lamps.

She went down the street, in the direction opposite Madame Koto's bar. Breaking the settled crust of the sleeping earth with her antiquated sandals.

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Walking innocently through all the rumours gathering. She was beginning her day as she would end it. Seeking elusive things. Calling out to people who weren't listening. Soaking in the dust and murmurs of the road.

Meanwhile, Dad was deep in the last decent sleep he would have for a long time. He slept soundly, gathering his secret strengths. While he grew heavier on the bed, our door was wide open for trouble to come and pay us a lengthy visit.

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SIX

Dialogue with my dead friend

Mum left and I waited patiently for Dad to wake up. But Dad snored noisily. I got tired of waiting. I went out into the street and encountered the new cycle. It had begun at night and was now real.

There were loud cries from Madame Koto's bar. It was as if many women had fallen into trances and were possessed. The street was crowded with neighbours and new people with odd faces. Soon I pieced together what was happening. People were talking about the old leopard they had glimpsed in the forest. Its breathing was poor and its growling was hoarse. People had gone hunting for the leopard with dane guns and machetes, but hadn't found it. On their way back they had come upon the enormous figure of Madame Koto, rolling on the ground, raving.

That was when the community discovered that someone had dumped a bucket of something disgusting in front of her bar. I hurried over to see for myself. The crowd there was solid. Madame Koto seemed quite insane. She lunged at us, uttering the most terrifying threats. Her women stood around, with handkerchiefs to their noses. And right next to Madame Koto's new car, in the middle of her

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frontyard, was the appalling bucket. We looked on with fear, knowing that retaliation would come at us in unpleasant ways.

She kept jumping up and down. Cursing. Crying out with the pain of her bad foot and her abnormal pregnancy. She was like a mad witch. In a harsh voice, she ordered her men to fetch people to clear the mess from her barfront. She seemed like her own nemesis. Everyone looked on, thinking about the dead carpenter. Thinking about his son, whom Madame Koto's driver had killed.

While I watched Madame Koto shrieking, a cool wind blew around me. A flash of dazzling light shot through my brain. Then something nearby electrified my skin. I turned and saw that it was the spirit of Ade. The dead son of the dead carpenter. My friend. In his blue suit, he seemed very healthy. With a mischievous smile, he said:

'How is my father?'

'He has been buried,' I replied.

'But who killed him?'

'I don't know. I saw a thug . . .'

'Who gave the thug the order?'

'I'm not sure.'

'How is your father?' he asked.

'He's asleep.'

'How do you know?'

'Because he was fast asleep when I left him.'

'Your mother was singing when she left you, but she is not singing now.'

'Why not?'

'Because she knows something bad is happening.'

'Where?'

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'I'll tell you when my father has been buried.'
'He has.'
'How do you know?'
'I was there.'
'Where?'
'In the forest.'
'What forest?'
'That one.' I pointed, turning.

But when I looked, I was amazed to find that the forest had vanished. I turned back to my friend, but he too had disappeared. Instead, I saw Madame Koto descending on me. She began hitting me on the head, howling. I ran, fell, and got up. A man in the crowd held me and said:

'Why do you talk to yourself when your father is in trouble?'

'What?' I asked, confused.

'Wake up!' he shouted.

I was stunned into a new alertness. Everything was turning too fast. I ran home. The world was spinning. The road kept opening and shutting. Voices were whispering. The forest had reappeared. When I got to our room, five policemen, acting on rumours spread by the Party of the Poor, had come to arrest Dad for the murder of the carpenter.

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SEVEN

The arrest

Dad was serene. He didn't even smile at the absurdity of their accusation. He put on his boots with a dignity that got on their nerves. The policemen began to hurry and hassle him, but Dad put on his boots more slowly, so they lost their tempers, punching and kicking him. Dad regarded them coolly, with pity almost. I jumped on one of the policemen, who threw me on the bed.

'Sit still and watch, you cricket!' Dad said to me, his voice raised.

I sat still. I watched as they dragged him out with only one boot on. Dad didn't resist, but didn't comply. They had to carry him out into the street, where our neighbours were gathered, demanding in angry voices why the policemen were arresting a good man. But when the policemen threatened them with imprisonment, everyone fell silent.

We all followed the policemen as they carried Dad to their van. But before they managed to throw him into the back, Dad managed a defiant cry and a cryptic statement:

'JUSTICE IS A BLACK GOD!' He shouted.

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They slammed the door on his mad voice and drove away before we could find out where they were taking him.

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EIGHT

The gathering wrath of women

Mum came back that evening, having sold very little, her face swollen with the bitterness of the road, her feet blistered, her eyes red with dust.

When she heard that Dad had been arrested for the murder of the carpenter whom he had been brave enough to bury, she immediately set out on the road again. She sang a song which appeared joyful, but which was actually seamed with anger. I followed her down the street but she turned and shouted at me. She said to keep our door open as Dad had commanded, and to remain in the room. She said I had to be their eyes and ears. Reluctantly, I went back home.

With their ears I heard the insistence of Mum's song to the road that carries people to their unsuspected destinies. I heard her song to the spirits of the dead, who know all the truths obscured to us in pain and ignorance. And I heard her song to the great angels of all women, sisters of justice, handmaidens of fate.

And with their eyes I followed Mum down the roads which keep growing the more human beings dream of places to go. The roads which led to bridges. The bridges which led to highways. The

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highways built on reclaimed rivers, whose goddesses sue constantly at the higher courts of justice for the annexing of their ancient territories.

Mum walked without knowing where she was going. She walked on rage, her mind dimming and brightening. Incendiary visions flamed in her eyes. She was crossing a road, talking furiously to herself, when she walked into a red space. When she recovered she found lorries all around her, blaring their horns. A crowd of women bore her across the road, fanning her, asking her a thousand questions; and all she said, fighting the waves of her mind's blackout, was:

'Police station!'

When one of the women said she knew where the police station was, Mum instantly overcame her dizziness and jumped up and began wildly in the direction indicated. The women followed her, urging her to rest, to recover properly, but Mum pushed on. Her unaccountable single-mindedness magnetized the women. Without knowing why, they accompanied her, as if they were all on the same angry pilgrimage.

The woman who knew the police station led the way. Mum did not speak to the women who accompanied her. She spoke to the road and the air and the wind, complaining about the relentless injustice of the world, singing snatches of defiant village songs. In stirring her spirit, she stirred the women. And the women, chanting and singing, caught the interest of other women who sold beans and roasted corn and fruits along the bustling roadsides. Eternally curious, endlessly harassed by

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history, the women of the roadside joined the surging mass of women. Their numbers swelled, their flow directed by Mum's anger.

They poured down the roads, halting the traffic, overwhelming the traffic wardens. They flowed past the law courts whose buildings were changing to the colour of dust. They swarmed past the banks, and past the inquisitive schoolchildren, who joined the women for short distances, and fell away to other distractions.

And when the women got to the police station which used to be a madhouse they were surprised to see the lone figure of a sergeant-major at the desk, filling out his overtime coupon. The poor sergeant-major looked up and found himself overrun by a scary-looking mob of women, all in their different cracked voices demanding the release of husbands, sons, in-laws, brothers, fathers, uncles, and the missing sons of their friends. The sergeant-major panicked and blew his whistle, thinking that colonial order was being overthrown, or that a new war of liberation had been launched. Two policemen in khaki shorts came running out with batons, but the women overpowered them and stormed into the labyrinths of the police station.

The cells were bursting with faces that were like forest carvings and raw-eyed sculptings. The faces of those who battled tirelessly against the colonial order. Faces of the hungry who had turned to crime. The knotted faces of murderers who no longer dreamt at night, no longer slept, but who with paranoid eyes kept awake and ready for the return of the spirits of those they had murdered. The pinched

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faces of pickpockets from creeks deep in the country, money-doublers from towns not mentioned on any maps, armed robbers from tribes whose numbers were very small, and whose languages were dying out. The remorseless faces of thugs, who had taken punishment on behalf of their masters, whose lives blazed with a hunger soul-deep, a rage without a language, their faces raw like wounds which have no intention of ever healing. Faces burning with the fierce intensity of the last of a dying breed of men, who would not let the world forget the unique stamp of their soul's identity. Faces of the half-insane and the downright insane. Faces of university professors who had woken up from their idealistic dreams to find the promises of Independence betrayed in advance, and who had spoken out with all the brashness of those unused to the brackish waters of politics.

The women saw these faces and recognized townspeople, relatives, friends of old enemies, familiar customers. And the police station, with its overcrowded cells, its stench of unwashed bodies and crypts without light, yielded its hoard of vanished names, forgotten heroes, prominent figures in anonymous holes. Among them was a professor insisting that he was a baker, and a money-doubler swearing that he was of royal birth. The prisoners were all weaving in and out of their dissolving identities.

The women, inflamed by their goddess, blurrer of the boundaries of justice, found the keys to the cells and flung open the creaking gates. They unleashed on the roads hordes of criminals who did not dream

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any more, forgers who believed they were aristocrats, thieves who never said thank you, thugs who had no respect for gratitude. Faces poured out of cells which were big enough for seven standing coffins, and held thirty-six men. But none of the faces was recognized by Mum, and none of the faces belonged to Dad.

Her simple search had undammed so much chaos. All around her the women were revelling in the new dimensions of their power. They sang and spoke boldly. But Mum left the precinct and went on walking, seeking the next police station. Again the women followed her.

The story of their rampage, their cry for an unstated justice, found the ears of the city, the judges, the newspapers, and the night.

They didn't get very far. The darkness brought Mum exhaustion, but brought the other women exhilaration. Mum sank on the roadside, her feet bleeding, her eyes raw, her mind going on and off, hot lights in her brain.

The women around her, some of them quite mad, others spoiling for a confrontation, planned their next invasion, their next assault on the political structure. While they made their plans, Mum slept with her back to a concrete wall, with the road babbling all around her. She dreamt of all the faces in all the prisons. She dreamt that the freed prisoners were running mad over the city, burning down vehicles and government houses, starting fantastic riots.

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NINE

The imprisoned tyger

And with my parents' eyes, in my lonely place, I saw Dad in a dark unidentifiable room. It was a room in which they kept murderers, where they created them. Initially, in isolation, they softened their skulls. They softened them for the beating with clubs that was to come at the first excuse, the first question that was not respectfully answered.

Dad saw the leopard again that night. The leopard grew brighter as it neared its death. Dad heard the uncadenced growl of an old beast that knew the ferocity and freedom of prowling the boundaries of dreams, that knew the rage of blood, the salt caves where elephants polish their tusks, and the awesome solitude of the forests.

Dad saw the beast, his being swelling with visions he couldn't understand. And when, at midnight, they came to question him about the murder of the carpenter, Dad did the most characteristic thing. He raged, interminably, about injustice.

He was surrounded by twelve underpaid policemen, all of them illiterate, all of them irritated by Dad's crude eloquence. And so they fell on him and beat the phosphorescent leopard out of his brain. They softened the edges of his bones, hoping to

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dissolve his energies, little realizing that they were doing in thirty minutes what he couldn't do in thirty years. In beating him as they did they opened the gates of his body, broke down its walls, and shifted the massive rock of his self-limiting ego. In beating him as they did they opened all the doors of his body for his bad blood and dream spirit to come flowing out, through pain and unconsciousness. Then darkness invaded the precincts of his mind.

In the deep night of his body, his brain overwhelmed with visions of blood revenge, Dad saw his father, priest of roads. He saw his father wandering in the village square of his mind, pouring out advice that wasn't understood, singing proverbs and parables in the deep idiom of a vanishing language. Then his father disappeared. Light shone in his eyes. He heard voices. He felt rusted bars. And found himself among the compact mess of bodies jammed tight in a hot cell. He saw faces marked with gashes. Faces of erratic criminals. Some of them were evangelists. One of them spoke all night long about the agonies of black people. Another insisted justice was an idea invented by the big crooks who run the world, an idea designed to keep small people in their corners.

Dad listened to their farting, their excreting and their cursing. He listened to the insurgent ideas of his fellow inmates, and soaked in the rough secrets of their spirits. Each element he absorbed pushed him outwards into an unknown space between heaven and earth. And that night, because of the visions in his brain, because of the secrets he was soaking in, because the agony of his broken body was too much for his comprehension – expanding and cracking the

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bowl of his knowledge – he released a frightening cry which sent me running to the door, to the housefront and the street: and I kept looking both ways, because I could smell the fury of his presence. But he was nowhere about. After a while I returned to the room and stayed on the mat, with my back to the wall. A mosquito coil was alight on the table.

I watched our open door. I listened to the footsteps of invisible beings padding up and down our corridor, looking for ways into the lives of unfortified sleepers. And as I listened with all my senses, small amongst the fluid shadows of the room, I heard a new voice singing in the forest.

At last the silence of the forest had been broken. The voice sang in the sweetness of a dirge meant not for the passing away of silence, but for a death announced in advance.

It could have been a spirit or a woman or a bird singing with the voice of humans. Or it could have been a birth uncelebrated. But the night, concentrated in the voice, tightened over our community, and yielded a morning that began with fresh disasters.

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TEN

The fantastic ravings of Madame Koto

When I woke up, Mum had not returned. My neck was stiff. I cleaned the room, as she would have done. I made food for myself, and ate, and went out to investigate the world. Everywhere I went I asked if anyone had seen Mum. Some said they had seen her that morning, seen her setting out to hawk her wares. A woman even said she had seen Dad prowling about in the forest, shouting.

Neighbours were concerned about Dad's imprisonment. They wanted to do something. Some talked of going to protest to the Governor-General. Others threatened journeys to police stations and newspaper offices. But no one did anything. The men went to work. The women fed their children, fetched water from the well, and washed clothes. Then we heard that Madame Koto was raving again.

Her cries of a mad bird with broken wings, cries like the sounds of certain musical instruments forbidden to human ears, came over to us in the hot air. We rushed to her barfront, and saw something quite horrible. We saw that someone had placed a coffin on top of her new car. We knew at once that the coffin contained the body of the dead carpenter.

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It seemed to have been burst open on all sides by the corpse which had been growing during the nights.

We could see the dead carpenter's head with its snarling mouth full of earth, as if he had died of overeating. His ears were large and black. He had stones in his eye sockets. His hands stuck out from both sides of the coffin, his fingers swollen. His feet were big and frightening; they had grown larger than their shoes. And his gleaming body was the colour of palm oil.

When we saw the coffin and the grotesque corpse, we let out a collective cry of astonishment and horror, a cry that was silenced by Madame Koto storming at us from the backyard. Her white beads were in her hands and her hands inscribed the air with the crude shapes of nightmares. Her face was swollen and ugly. A wound in her shoulder seeped blood through her expensive lace blouse. She had an aluminium libation on her lips. Her stomach heaved. And her wrapper fell from round her waist, revealing luminous rashes and cicatrices. She began to rage at us. She raged the most startling torrent of confessions, an eruptive flashing thrust of words crowded with burning dreams that held us fast to the shifting earth. Our mouths hung open. Our eyes twitched in the mercury of the sun's lash. While we listened to many portents within the incoherent rage of Madame Koto's words, white birds poured out of the cloudless sky, winging down on us in the oddest formations.

'So what if a man comes to my bar and is blinded by what he shouldn't have seen?' she shouted in a jagged voice. 'So what if I grow fat when all of you

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have lost your eyes? I did not plant a dead man in ashes. The rock is my mother and I did not eat your children in the wombs of your women. I did not make sores come out in your ears. But, yes, I sit on the head of my enemies. I take power where I find it and if you sleep and let your spirits float about unprotected, I will drink in their secrets. I will speak to the air, such is my nature. But I cannot plant a dead man and reap a bucket of nonsense.'

She glared at us out of insane eyes. Before we could breathe, she plunged back into the hallucinated sea of her rage.

'So what if two thousand years ago when you thought the world was the size of your village and your rumours, so what if my crocodiles cried for your flesh and I answered with the children of those who opposed our religion? So what if when I plucked a flower from the farm three men died? And what about the toad I cooked and gave you all to eat? You ate it and grew strong; you hailed my powers, you followed my politics. I do not drink blood from leaking calabashes. All over the country children call my name at night; the people I have saved outnumber my enemies by five to one; people I have sent to school, mothers to whom I have brought justice, marketwomen whom I have protected from thugs and gangs, unions that I have helped. It is not my fault if a carpenter died because he wanted someone to kill him. You all stare at me as if I am giving birth to a horse, but which one of you can give birth to a country and not die of exhaustion, eh? Which one of you can live in three continents at the same moment? Which one of you can enter the

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dreams of one hundred thousand people? Which one of you can talk to white people in their sleep and listen to their plans of making us smaller while they get bigger, eh? Which one of you can bear the responsibility of power, can fight off all the demons of the poor, tame the devils of the rich, ride the colonized air of the country? Which one of you, I want to know, can do battle with the six hundred and fifty-two spirits chaining up our future with a single diamond key, a key thrown into the deepest parts of the Atlantic where the bones of a sunken continent dream our history backwards as if it cannot be improved?'

Madame Koto paused a moment and we glimpsed a terrifying intelligence in the madness of her eyes, an intelligence so fascinating that we lost all consciousness of being in our bodies, under the fiery sun. And then, gently at first, as if seducing us with a forgotten tenderness, but rising again to fury and to shouting, Madame Koto continued:

'So, the secret of our failure is buried in the brain of a dead tortoise: why don't we eat the tortoise? Why come and dump a bucket of nonsense at my bar, why put the coffin of a man who wanted to die on my new car that hasn't even tasted the sweetness of our new roads? I did not cut off the fingers of my husband, and even if I did do you see him complain? I did not poison your dreams, and even if I did can you swear that you did not want it? Which one of you can ride a horse in your sleep and still hold on when the horse turns into a giant bird that takes you to the great white egg of the moon? You people believe in scattered gods; you don't even worship at

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your shrines. Your gods have too many names; and because you have forgotten why the gods were born there are holes in your souls through which your lives leak out. I plug the holes with rocks. The trees grow on my body, leaving all these rashes. I cut down the trees. They grow again, and I burn them, and lightning flashes while you sleep. Some flowers have roots of millipedes. When they die the air begins to boil. The sun bakes the barks of the trees, and they die – all the young trees that are not good for carving and the plants that are good for eating. They die and the great trees that were here before we knew the name of our continent, they give shade to two thousand caravans of spirits. I cannot cut down old trees. Take away your dead. Plant him in your sleep. I will carry the noise and the cries of those whose blood makes my body swell. I will carry the responsibility for those who say I killed them, poisoned them, planted bad dreams in their kidneys – but take your dead, put him on the great river and let him swell up in the sky. I have no words for the blind, nothing to show the deaf, so when you look at me it is your mothers' fevers that you mock, and when you judge me with your hungry ears it is the words of your fathers that you judge. I am the tree that you planted, a tree that you can't find a use for; don't complain if I give you strange shade.'

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ELEVEN

Seeds of mutiny

Madame Koto stopped. No one moved. The birds had vanished from the sky. The only thing that fluttered in our midst was terror at Madame Koto's ravings. Like statues, we stood entranced by the flame of her words. The earth sizzled beneath our feet while she broke again into her confessions. We stood there, rooted at the crossroads of many eras which met simultaneously in our brains. And Madame Koto proceeded to confess to crimes committed in other continents, as an inquisitor who burned innocent women on oakwood fires, and made love to their cries. She confessed to murders committed hundreds of years ago in an Empire which flourished on the edge of a desert. She confessed to the deaths of children, to the destruction of villages, to driving men mad, like the husband who cut off three of his fingers under her hallucinative spells.

On and on she went, accusing us of eternal cowardice, of refusing to use our powers and envying those who do. On and on she shouted, mingling her agony with rage at the coffin. She attacked the air with her thick fingers. She flung her beads about. She jumped and fell, and tore her

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