

## A STORY THAT WILL GOBSMACK THE WORLD

This introduction takes the form of a letter from Ukamaka Olisakwe, author of *Eyes of a Goddess* (Piraeus Press, Boston, 2012), and an African writer chosen in 2014 as one of 39 of Sub-Saharan Africa's most promising writers under the age of 40, after reading *Gods Among Gazelles*.

I must say, Peter, your story is an unusual one. Your book is a discovery to me I haven't read anything quite like it before - this story of gods (though my debut novel, *Eyes of a Goddess* is actually about goddess). I also haven't written a review before; all I know how to do is read and write my own stories. But I found myself writing something, putting my thoughts into words; explaining my amazement at your kind of story. I once read a story about reincarnation-- In fact, I have heard a lot of stories about reincarnation. It is part of us, part of Africa. We believe in reincarnation. We believe we live and die and come back again and die and come back again. We always come. We are always here. But religion came; Christianity and Islam, and they began to wipe out the rudiments of those beliefs. They began to reshape our thinking, and today, everything originally African now has a bit of westernization to it. Though, some people resent this, I accept it because time changes, lives evolve and will keep evolving until the end of time, that's if there really will be an end of time.

*Gods among Gazelles* is an amazing story. Your writing style is hypnotic, Peter. I don't know, but there would be hardly a reader who would read you and not get hypnotized. It is in the flow of your words. You do not waste words explaining scenes; instead you draw the reader, like singing, like chanting of incantations; like my grandmother used to do when she sang and told us stories of when men were gods.... I am bereft of words to explain what I felt while reading the story. Perhaps my lack of actual words is because I am left with more questions about life. You started with the story of the gods and how life came about. The story of the young god, the one-who-bends-the-earth, is so enchanting. It did something to me, something I am ashamed to say though: I believed your story, momentarily, forgetting it was a figment of your wild

imaginations; your very own story, until I caught myself. But then the questions have been kindled: What if the Christian God came this way, was he one of the chousing young Baobabs and was uprooted and flung away by the young god? What if He was flung to this place without form, and void, and dark? What if he was part of the small Baobabs and was dispersed upon the face of waters, and only then did he have the opportunity to say “Let there be light?”, and there was light, and he created life here, like the young god did... What if? The human mind is a tricky thing... We get swayed by an awakening, and I believe it is this same awakening that most religious gatekeepers fear: that obedient members do not get overwhelmed by what they discover out there. You made the Baobab tree a myth for discovery. You gave divinity to it and I’m left wondering. Your story of creation will surely get some people worked up, but I loved the profound creativity. I compared it with our story of creation of the world and was for a moment wondering if the bible writers did not create that story. I am left wondering about a lot of things, but of course, yours is fiction, but there is a kind of divinity to your story.

Peter, you are an amazing storyteller, and what you have created, this story/poetry/drama/fiction is a new birth, one that will leave your readers with more questions about life. I loved Africa through your eyes; the trees, landscapes, animals, the lives and lives and lives. You made Africa glamorous. You made it a place of coming home to, a place where life began. And now I’m wondering: will the world accept such story, or will they marvel? It will surely gobsmack a lot of people.

Your language is exotic, it is like a confidant telling you how the day went. Your ability to fluidly bring in drama and theater into your novel, without even jarring the reader, is very exotic. I couldn’t tell how you did it. I reread this passage for a long time and still wonder how you did it:

“Sometimes the curtain rises when it should fall, and sometimes it falls when it should rise. The man responsible for the curtain used to pull a series of ropes connected to pulleys so that the rising and falling would happen on cue. In the largest theatres there would be a team of men. But now the curtain is raised and

lowered with the convenience of a mechanical contrivance and the man simply pulls a lever or a switch, or maybe he pushes a button, and the actors go about their business. Today, however, the curtain is neither rising nor falling. Today the curtain is stuck. The mechanical contrivance is broken. The man pushed the button or pulled the lever but instead of moving in predictable, rhythmic fashion, the curtain remained almost all the way up, jerking spasmodically for several minutes, a buzzing, whirring, whining sound echoing in the rafters, the dust from the folds of the curtain descending in quick, cloudy, glittery bursts and then settling on the stage below, and then the whirring, whining sound grinding to a halt. The man pulled the lever a few more times, or pushed the button, impatiently, angrily, as if he were waiting for an elevator that would not come, but nothing more happened. The curtain was stuck. It is still stuck. And so the man is sitting on a stool back stage, a comic book in his hands, a first-edition Tarzan comic book that will be worth several hundred thousand dollars at a Sotheby's auction in fifteen or twenty years, but he is not reading. He is looking up at the stuck curtain and wondering how long it will take before the curtain is fixed. He told the stage manager and they put in a call to an electrician, but the electrician is booked until Tuesday next week. Or perhaps Thursday."

It was as if I was seated there with the man responsible for the curtain.  
(Hehehehehe.)

Your ability to merge the past into the present and present into the past, like a song, is wonderful. As a reviewer, I should also have something to say that was wrong with the story, but I couldn't, sorry. I should criticize well enough to enable you make changes, but I couldn't. All I am left with are questions and questions. Your dreamy style of storytelling, like one was sleeping and dreaming that he was dreaming that he was dreaming, while the story is told, and in between the dreams he is lost but not lost, and the life at the each stage of his dreams washes over him, and at the end of the day he doesn't know which world was real and which is dream.

I loved your prose-poetry. Like here:

“The Boy Soldier: One day they brought my grandfather to the Major General’s court. I was sitting at the table and they brought him up the steps, two red-capped soldiers like me, and my grandfather looked at me and he gave me a quick shake of his head to silence me, and so I kept silent. The two-red caps laughed at his gesture, not realizing it was for me. Maybe they thought he was protesting his innocence. Maybe they thought he thought I was the Major General. But one of the red caps did not laugh long. Enraged by what he called the disrespectful stupidity of a jungle villager, he took his rifle butt and bashed in my grandfather’s right knee, and then he was laughing again, at the way my grandfather sank to the ground before the table, and it was a fierce laughter, his mouth open wide and you could see he had a bronze colored tooth, like he had bitten down on a bullet, his laughter rising up to the sky and the tooth flashing in the sunlight. My grandfather was in great pain, but he did not cry out. He did not mind the red cap laughing. It was almost like his eyes were smiling, but not quite. It was a look I had never seen before. I could see joy and relief and hope and determination in his eyes, but not for himself, the look was for me. It was the look of happiness. Then he seemed to will himself to another place and his eyes became like those of insects.”

And then your exquisite loooooong sentence, like here:

“The world still gives birth to many stories from many places, but the only stories that give birth to the world are found beyond the edges of things, in hidden, tucked-away corners where time folds in upon itself, in wild untamed, unseemly terrain where the concrete disintegrates and the scent of coffee laced with cinnamon has boiled away and the dusty, dry earth is pockmarked with metal casings, shallow, flattened, burnt-out, an entire village

destroyed, or a thousand villages, or a town, or a neighborhood, or a city, beyond the wail of broken arms and legs and collarbones, the survivors gulping back their fear, breathing in their hope, the images of those who did not survive a festering, tangled tattoo upon the skin of the living, the brains of the unlucky men and women and children dashed out against the rocks and the bodies dumped into the river below, floating among the water hyacinth and snakes, the oil-blackened current drifting lazily in the drowsy heat, blue cotton shirts half unbuttoned and green flowery blouses and yellow and orange wraps half-torn fluttering in the river breeze, the bodies now bloated with flies, a festering, tangled tattoo of another sort, and up above the river just outside the square that surrounds the lycée you can hear the laughter of soldiers standing atop mounds of crumbling cement and dirt and pieces of rusted pipe and broken glass, the browns and blues and translucent greens of shattered beer bottles and rum bottles and whiskey and gin, the bits of colored glass squinting and shrieking a thousand bullets against the boiling midday sun.”

Your descriptions amazing, like here:

“By chance they crossed where the river had splintered into several smaller, narrow rivers with hard packed ridges of sand in between, sculpted and grooved, like the ribcages of dead elephants partially submerged.”

It was great honor to find Igbo names in your book: Nkechi, Uzoma, Cheta. I smiled when I came across them, even though your story made no mention of Nigeria.

Just as the Boy Soldier’s grandfather told him after taking him to the largest baobab tree the boy had ever seen ““This is where our gods come from....And also our stories” I wish to ask you dear Peter, “Do you think that’s where our stories came from? I want to know what propelled you to write such a story that brought continents together. And again, what will happen to Nkechi and Adeena? Thank you for sharing this with me.

Ukamaka Olisakwe, 2013