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Michael C. Mbabuiké. *Poems of Memory Trips*. New Jersey: Sungai, 1998. 00 pp. ISBN 978-1-889218-08-3.

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Poetry is art. A picture is worth a thousand words, and moreover, with its intentional omissions and additions, a drawing may be more revealing than a realistic photograph, and by analogy, a short poem may tell more than a hundred pages of prose. Poetry is like a painting, but also like a song. The art of words encompasses both, the aesthetics of an image and the rhythm of music. A poem may reveal feelings and set free emotions beyond the descriptions of lengthy prose. Michael Mbabuiké's *Poems of Memory Trips* captures life in such a way. The distinguished professor's poetry thus ventures far beyond a thousand words of academic writing.

The poems in this volume succinctly capture Mbabuiké's own world and the world around him, expressing his personal emotions, as well as universal human feelings, individual experiences as well as knowledge based on both, concrete encounters, events, and abstract ideas; individual, ethnic and human history, concerns and aesthetics. A book review might discuss the literature and describe what the book being reviewed actually says. But in the case of poetry, I am hesitant to describe poems by way of transferring poetry into descriptive prose. Narrative prose seems too inappropriate a tool to re-iterate the mere succinctness and aesthetics of poetry. Despite this dilemma, we may cautiously group the *Poems of Memory Trips* into different categories or themes, each illustrated by a quoted poem, to facilitate the readers's orientation.

Firstly, there are poems on memories of past life, personal life history, and experiences including places, people, events, or moments of the author's childhood and later stages in his life. These poems, if prose, could be described as belonging to the genre of "Bildungsroman". Poems in this category may include: "Memories Ahoy", "Night of Silence", "D(bre)ad from Overseas", "Nkpikpa Waters", "Dancers of Yore", "War Zone Refrain", "Onit-

sha Road", "Lizard Encounter", "Dry Season Play Tune", "The Great Event". Some poems in this category, e.g. "Memories Ahoy", are lengthy allegories, that cover milestones of African village life, play and work, harvest and masquerade, smells, foods, sounds, characters, and daily chores recounted from the child's perspective. Others are short, capturing a moment in the author's past, e.g. on "Onitsha Road", one particular site of his childhood's environment, e.g. "Nkpikpa Waters", the intense feeling of pleasure emanating from dance, e.g. "Dancers of Yore", or the tenseness of one particular night e.g. in "Night of Silence":

"The eeriness of the strange night grips all the living. Thickness of darkness resists butchers' sharpened knife. Scared silence fills quiet air. All noises dilute in anxious anticipation. Night insects hide in holes of stuffed larvae Animal dens remain motionless. Far distant tam-tam gives out faint groans, Children snore in wet beds of their own streams. Elders keep precarious vigil of endless wait. The bush owl crowns in funeral baritone. Throbbing hearts palpitate with nervous certainty. Big something has happened Tomorrow we cry together in funeral communion." (Poems of Memory Trips: 75)

The night so described belongs to the author's personal repertoire of experiences. Yet, the intensity of this feeling of night, its secrets and place strikes an immediate chord with anyone who has spent night after night in an African village for an extended period of time. The African reader, but also the visitor, may immediately relate to a distinctive village's sounds of silences experienced, mixing inside and out, sounds of people and night creatures' little noises, the aura of expectation and of knowledge covering the wait for dawn. Reading these lines, the identity of the place seems clear. We think of an African village. Yet those who have slept in a rural village of Europe or Asia might also relate to this feeling.

Despite different specifics, the tenseness of knowledge, of communal anticipation is equally felt across cultures and continents. Our categories must therefore be applied with caution. Even though "Night of Silence" recounts a time in one man's life and his memory of a specific night and place, the poem also invokes collective memory, draws a line to others, crosses the boundaries of categories, of culture and ethnicity, and thus addresses our all inclusive human nature.

A second category of poems are seemingly preoccupied with nostalgia. These poems may be unique to the African who has left his home for another world and looks back with regrets, telling of exile and abandon. But an Asian or European, or anyone who has migrated from one continent to a foreign land during his own lifetime can also relate to this theme, as will those whose forefathers have migrated, or were forced to leave their homes and live abroad for generations to come. Poems in this category may include "Hide & Lost", "Exile in Bondage", "Fleeting Home", "My Native Land", "The Vanishing Act", "Concrete Abstractions," and "Desertion". These poems, like those of the first category, evoke fond memories of home, but in addition, they also speak of pain: there is pain of loss, of having lost loved ones, of having been left, of having left, and of leaving. The last two sections of "Desertion" may serve as a sample:

"Our youths have gone abroad. We are witnessing,
The beginning of the end of our patrimony.

Our youths have gone abroad, Victims of regretting
guilt for not being there But far away, Lost in foreign
lands Swallowed by disabling distances, Persistent
dreams announce final homecoming."

(Poems of Memory Trips: 38)

There is a deeply felt pain stemming from the loss of home, due to distance of space despite – or because of – closeness of heart. These poems invoke strong memories of Africa, and at the same time, nostalgia and pain, as in an excerpt from "Hide And Lost":

"I went to Oye Nimo to sing in Mgbankwo's shed I could not find Mgbankwo's shed I strolled through left lane, I could not find Mgbankwo's shed I walked along right lane I could not find Mgbankwo's shed. And then I hurried through the center of Oye Nimo Asking people "where is Mgbankwo's shed"? Sudden sadness beheld the faces of people watching my demeanor Women's hands folded across their chests Men held tight walking sticks and fans, their heads shaking Placed hands on my

shoulder straight to my eyes,

"Son, Mgbankwo's shed is no more". Kindly mother who knew here, Co-wives who traded and bargained with Mgbankwo Lamented in chorus: "We searched for Mgbankwo's shed Nobody has seen Mgbankwo's shed. Disappeared are those smiles of her sweet laughter. No more to be seen is that perfect beauty of our co-wive Mgbankwo".

(Poems of Memory Trips: 48)

The poet's personal grief is echoed in the universal human pain felt over the loss of one's mother. At the same time, specific clues clearly invoke an African village market with its lines of sheds, kind African mothers, women's smiles and sweet laughter, and men with walking sticks and fans. The fellow African, but also the repeat traveler who has looked in vain for a dear friend of past visits will understand, as will those looking for their ancestors, or anyone having suffered loss of mother. Despite being so specific, telling of one man's history, his mother, his feelings, and his unique experience, this poem and others in this category, are also inclusive because they invoke collective feelings and memories of all the people who have lost their mothers, left their mother Africa behind, or left their home continent for another.

Mbabuie's distant home lies in Nigeria, more precisely in that country's Eastern part, the land of the Igbos. But Mbabuie has also made his home in other parts of the world, in Europe, and most recently in America. Here he lives with his wife and children to whom the book is lovingly dedicated, his children who grow up differently, in a different place, and who speak a different language from their forefathers.

The west, an alien place of exile is a strange place. Its being alien, its alienation, and aberrations are the theme of a third category of poems, critical of the western world's many negative aspects and societal ills. In this category we may include "Guggenheim's Glass Cage Encounters", "Slippery Times", "Dreamsland Blues", and "Concrete Abstractions". An excerpt from "Guggenheim's Glass Cage Encounters" may illustrate the critical thrust of poems in this category:

"In my veins the gory details Of my gods' transplants
Their dis-deification, Their desecration And yoke
of oblivion. The insolence of occident Has overcome my
people, Making mockery of our Gods Profaning sacri-
leges on our spirits, Ancestors, our rituals and liturgies.
Do we still possess our spines to console The ozos, our

titled men anointed? Our gods and goddesses now scattered Ingloriously in other parts Of this earth planet, except On their original land? ” (Poems of Memory Trips: 32)

In this poem, Mbabuikwe takes issue not only with the deportation of African art objects, and by extension her peoples, but also with the western gaze on Africa, her people and their cultures. This critique accelerates further down, in the same poem:

“Around them assemble the presumptuous misinformed Efulufu Viewers attempting in vain exercise In interpretation of ignorance Pointing, debased on authentic Masculinity and femininity Of proud but sorrow-laden hearts.” (Poems of Memory Trips: 32)

Despite their universal appeal and validity, the poems of the first three category may be regarded as interrelated and united in to their prominent focus on the African home.

A fourth category focuses more on universal themes, while still recalling Africa. The poems in this category universally celebrate humanity. They deal with life, death, love, and the nothingness of everything. Here we may include “Bouts of Tears”, “In Spite of Myself”, “Wishes”, “Hazy Morning Wish”, “Bells of Absence”, “The Vanishing Act”, “Slippery Time”, “Dualness of Things”, and “Ad Interim”:

“He was there body and flesh, Yesterday. He graced places and peoples with his presence He was there full of life Yesterday. He promised to be there Tomorrow Now he is gone He was still there Yesterday. Now he is absent. We saw him mighty and bold Yesterday Today in flesh, in body Soul and spirit He is gone, Marching away Away into places Where no clocks tick. In our veins and heart Permanent, with sweet pain nostalgia His goodness irritates our memory.” (Poems of Memory Trips: 60).

Reading these lines instantly invoked the memory of one particular man, I have known, and of the anguish I felt over his death. But then, I remembered another important man, I have also known and lost to death. The poem is not about one particular individual, nor about his death. It addresses the phenomenon of death taking away those special human beings, people of stature whom we used to admire and think of as support, whose kindness, character, and wisdom has given us strength, and may continue doing so forever.

Poems/ odes to special individuals are in a separate category. This fifth group, includes “Nardmay” and

“EzeIgboNnem”:

“Your memories fill me with hope Beauty, slim svelte lady, Figure of unmatched beauty Beside you diminutive Apollo envies your Broad generous smile of perfect creation.” (Poems of memory Trips: 43).

Mbabuikwe’s poems transcend specificness of location, culture, and individuals, because they include and yet extend beyond the particular, and invoke his deeply felt humanity as a citizen of planet earth. While this is true of the majority of the poems in the above categories, there is also a group of poems specifically dedicated to the oneness/ unity of all human persons on earth irrespectively of color, race, ethnicity, religion. This sixth group of poems celebrates humanity’s common efforts to solving human problems and to peaceful coexistence. They include “Dawn of the Rainbow”, “Pledge”, “Effort in Togetherness”, “Courage”, “The Absurd in Dreams”, “Veritas”, and “Dualness of Things”:

“I learnt well from elders. All things always go in pairs Of opposites that attract. I drink into my veins The two-ness theories Of male and female Laughter and crying Pain and joy, Love and hate, All culminate In the ultimate life and death, Bed-mates joined by umbilical cord.” (Poems of Memory Trips: 78).

“Dualness of Things” could also be allocated to the fourth category of poems celebrating human life. Thus, while sorting the individual pieces of *Poems of Memory Trips* into categories may be helpful, any categorization must be applied with care, and may even be doomed to fall short of grasping the poems’ full scope of wisdom. Many, if not all, of the poems transcend boundaries. “The Great Event” can be read as celebrating humanity and the stages of life, but also as an allusion to a particular great event in the author’s life. “The Vanishing Act” contains nostalgia, our second category, but also celebrates the nothingness of everything with poems in our fourth group. “Hide And Lost” recollects the loss of one particular person, a specific moment in the author’s personal life history, but it is also about life and death in general, and in addition, refers to a human problem that transcends race, class, ethnicity, religion, and gender. “Lizard Encounter” recalls a time in the author’s life, but also contains nostalgia. “Concrete Abstractions” may recall invocations of nostalgia, but it’s venue is a place of exile.

Poems of Memory Trips harbors great wisdom and is universal because Mbabuikwe’s poems encompasses humanity and human emotions worldwide, irrespectively of different places of origin and destination. They celebrate

humanity and are full of love and respect for human experience, invoking deep memories, at times, nostalgia for times gone by, but also criticism. Far from being merely nostalgic, Mbabuike's *Poems of Memory Trips* ultimately criticizes and challenges the displacements of people and of objects, while teaching about universal meanings in specific human settings.

The collection of poems by Michael C. Mbabuike is beautifully illustrated with drawings by Alvin

Hollingsworth. The anthology's wealth in contents paired with the aesthetics of both word and image make for an attractive volume, enchanted and inspiring reading, food for thought, an ideal gift for loved ones, and a text that teaches without being a textbook.

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