# Christopher Okemwa, Poet and Writer

### Purgatorius ignis

Hanging in this burning emptiness of retribution, between Death and the final dwelling--in this condition of existence I move stealthily like a cat, perpetually on the balls of his Feet; with the cat's impression, indifferent aloofness, My face drooped; in my eyes no light at all. I cry, "I want affliction and fire!"

The soiled hamlet from whence I have come, voices rise
To cry for the pain and torture that my soul bore here
Aware that my spirit is not fully independent of the stains of
Mundane effects of wrong-doing, its consequences; neither
Sufficiently evil to be fated for abyss; but keeps on strengthening
Itself in sanctity here

Having no purifications -- neither sacrament of baptism, nor of penance -- my venial sins weigh heavy on my soul I cry for pain, fire, to suffer for the rewards of the divine abode A Garden of delights. I ask to be relieved of my Earthly baggage; for the pain of joy to be completed, to feel blissful mystery of Him

I find myself in that condition of mind and feelings
When reality gives place to reverie and merges with
The shadowy visions of the first stages of purgatories ignis
I've carried, on clammy hands, venial sins, to be purged
Of them, being only momentary pain, then soon be on my
Way to Olympus

Here it comes, like a clap of thunder, or like a magic spell Light one moment and darkness the next—a big fire!
Burning brightly, spreading within me. I scream, "burn me!" I hear those assembled in the hamlet from whence I have Come, singing, raising their sacrifices up for my sake—

To be purified.

#### The mortal soul

(Is there need to invest in permanent things in this world?)

The long merciless hand when it takes you away You will part with your house, car, all that you own All that you have sweated for, gathered day by day Will now be possessed by relatives once you are gone

You will take nothing with you, not a jewel not a penny Better then to learn to live without the good things you own For the soil in its selfish mode won't provide you any But will let you lie there, empty, naked as you were born

Or, better still, you can try and be dead in Ghana Where for example if you are a well-known farmer You can be buried in a coffin the shape of a banana A driver in a bus, a carpenter in a mallet or a hammer

At least that will make you feel a little worthwhile You won't regret a bit for having worked so hard And lost everything at once; your enormous verse file Will be there, open round you, in case you were a bard

But even those West Africans don't have any luck For when in the soil you won't identify the colours The saintly white, the ash grey, or the funeral black The mortal soul knows only the red on the flowers.

# Don't cry

If I die, don't cry
Because I would become a rose flower
Grow in your flower garden
And exude fragrance
You will pick me during Christmas
Display me during birthdays
Smell me during wedding ceremonies
I will be part of you
So, if I die, don't cry

If I die, don't be grieved
Because I would become a pumpkin leaf
Grow in your vegetable garden
Pick me for supper in the evenings
Cook me in the kitchen at nights
I will be at the dining table with you
So, if I die, don't be grieved

If I die, don't moan
Because I will become rain
Fall down from the sky
Gather me by the gutters
And wash kitchen utensils with me
I will be in your kitchen
So, if I die, don't moan

If I die, don't scream
Because I will become a tree
Grow in the corner of our homestead
Cut me occasionally for firewood
Keep a heap of me in your kitchen
Make fire and cook *ugali* with me
I will be part of the household
So, if I die, don't scream

## A withering rose

I saw a rose flower at the hedgerow Withering, leaves stuck together Like skinny limbs of a human being Flaccid and of pallid complexion

Bedraggled in the rainy weather The rose had become coldly lifeless I became so sad and felt like crying Thinking that at one time in its life

It was open to hilarious joy and happiness With richness of colour, life and vitality Carried on its body the symbol of LOVE And swains picked it for their beloveds

Now it was wilting, life juicing out of it A sick person who eventually would die Tears gathered at the corner of my eye I wanted to sob and grieve for the dead

Suddenly a small bee came flitting in Hovered for a while above the flower Its hum a dirge, a solemn expression Of the bereavement, the inevitable loss

It couldn't get the nectar upon the fading leaves A Sordid mass of dark green, tasteless wetness The bee flew away in disappointment, as if From a carcass, a near-decomposed corpse

Bitter tears rolled down from my eyes
I sobbed silently for the loss, for the fact that
Every beautiful thing, at one time, must
Decay and die, vanish completely from the earth

Who will then ever know we were here? That we once joyfully and exuberantly existed? Who will recall the beauty of our colours? Explain how we were a source of life and love?