"It is true."
"What is true?"
"I couldn't believe it myself."
"Couldn't believe what?"
"That he left about two weeks ago. I only knew about it yesterday. I wanted to interview him as you instructed in your letter but ..."
"Where did he go to this time?"
"Madam, are you alright? Or ... maybe the line is not clear?"
"What do you mean!" It is unusual for a student of mine to talk to me in this kind of patronising tone. And to think that Efosa is particularly courteous .... She keeps quiet.
"What are you talking about?"
Again she says, "It is true."
Again the opening dialogue.
"What is true?"
"I couldn't believe it myself."
"Believe what?"
"That he is gone."
I did not notice her substitution of the word 'left' with 'gone.'
I ask again,
"Gone where?"
"That place no-w."

Although my conscious mind refuses to accept the message, it is possible that my subconscious received it because I have become uneasy and maybe even heading for a mood. Anybody brought up in the culture can appreciate the traditional method of this kind of dialogue. I am saved from developing a mood by the telephone which rings again. Again, it is Efosa. She has to change tactics in order to force me to receive the information. It is nice of her to have gone into this kind of trouble. Maybe it is because I am alone in a foreign country.
I am not crying. I am not even sad anymore nor happy either. I am not dumbfounded. Not emotional whatsoever. I am just transported backwards in time to that day in our class in Nsukka. The scene looks real as I relive it alone in my apartment, remembering the characters and their lines. I therefore replay it in the present tense as it unfolds before me just as it happened several years ago:

I am sitting by the window, concentrating on my work, oblivious of the chattering of other students. Star nudges me on my back.

“What is it?” I ask, in a tone that does show my annoyance for the interruption.

“You are missing a serious joke.”

I am about to ignore her and continue with my work when a burst of laughter breaks out. Very irritating. I look up. What do I see? The popular comedian of the class is imitating him.

He seems to have used, I think, charcoal or maybe somebody’s black eye pencil (I am yet to find out). He might have used it to paint his eye lashes making them appear bushy and dark. Only one person in our Oral Literature class has such thick lashes and that person has not entered the class. This is really funny.

The actor is about to continue when the same Star who has nudged me asks him, “Why don’t you use chalk to make your teeth white. You will look more like him without those brown teeth of yours.” I notice that this student who likes to make fun of others does not take kindly to this joke. He frowns. People are impatient because of the disruption of the drama and they protest:


At this point, the subject of the drama enters the class, fifteen minutes late. The whole class burst into laughter. He also joins in the hilarious laughter without knowing why we are laughing.

“You know,” he says when the laughter is subsiding, “I like a class that knows how to laugh because they also know when to start business.” We get the message.

Radiance flies out through sad windows of our happy class, As shutters snap shut the smiling guards,
He Wants to Marry Me Again...

gates of bright teeth,
of playful professor.

This duty verse which I scribble on my paper is seen by Star alone because I am shy about my verses.

"My fun-loving classmates would surely laugh at the naivety of my cradle effort. I shall not be the subject of their drama," I always think.

Do you know the first thing the professor does? He tells us to say proverbs in our indigenous languages. This would not have been a problem if he has not added that we should also write them in the particular dialects of our forebears. Some of us do not like this kind of thing. We look at each other. Professor laughs and tries to reduce it to a joke by saying that left to him, the class ought to be conducted in an indigenous language were it not for the fact that we do not all share a common linguistic background.

Professor no prepare today-o.
Na cunny-cunny he from come-o.
Take pass class-time today-o.
For sake of wetin?
Him no sabi wetin him go teach-o.

Another piece of frustration hidden between my lecture notes. I do not like the way the professor is handling this class. I have read the books he recommended. I have read the oral literature from various parts of Africa. I have read his own collection, the one he did with Egudu. We expect him to lecture us on these. I wish I could let him know how unpopular his demands are. I guess he knows for he seems to be greatly amused as some of us fumble with our efforts. The class comedian, however, comes up with a number of proverbs which we cannot understand. He claims that they are in his dialect. Who knows. I am surprised by the number of people raising their hands. I realise that only a few of us are still uncomfortable with the question. Our problem is not with the proverbs but with writing them. I am still battling with my answer when the professor commits what I consider an unforgivable act of wickedness. I hope that other students share my view on this. I am so disgusted that I just write.

WICKED is a name.
It belongs to OLP.
Oral Literature Professor.

I find that instead of going to the hostel, I am walking along Zik Drive towards my brother's house. I review the matter. How can anybody who is not wicked tell another person, even if that person is only a student, brought up under our school system to write a folk tale in dialect? WICKED is a name. Any right-thinking person, let alone a professor, ought to know that we did not learn indigenous languages in school. So, how can we write what we have not learnt? In fact, Star asked the question that was in our minds.

"Go and learn it," he has replied in his usual manner of reducing everything to a joke.

"This is your opportunity to discover your own language," he added seriously.

I am discussing the matter with my brother. "I came to the University to study English not Igbo." I argue.

In a more even tone, he replies, "Igbo is also a language like English." Being a scientist, I presume that my brother does not know the difference between English as a subject of study and Igbo which should belong to the languages department, according to the academic structure of the Faculty of Arts. I desperately need him to appreciate the absurdity of the Professor's unreasonable demand. So, I decide to lecture the professor. He listens patiently to my argument, at the end of which he remains silent. This means either that he does not understand my argument or he does not agree with me.

I emphasise my point forcefully.

"English and Igbo are not the same! If you learn English, you also learn literature. With Igbo, it is just the language."

This time, he replies. I would have preferred his silence to the kind of thing that comes out of his mouth. "You can learn Igbo literature too."

I fight him by ignoring his line of argument. I divert to a technicality.

"In the first place, they do not teach Igbo or Igbo literature here. Even if they do, what am I going to do with it? It will soon be like Latin, a dead language!"

He also abandons my line of argument and runs to tradition. "Our fathers said that the fire that is placed on the hands of a child, does not burn her. Your professor was my teacher in Christ
He Wants to Marry Me Again...

the King College, Onitsha. I know him. He is not punishing you."

It is my turn to keep quiet. Tradition is wrong, very wrong this time, I think, for does Mamma not always hammer into our ears that “izu ka mma na nne ji”? How is it then that the person born of the same mother with me readily prefers his school affinity to the mother's blood we share? Tears gather. I fumble in my bag for my handkerchief. I never knew that my brother could be so partisan and even kparakporic. To side with the Professor against his own sister simply because of Old Boys' affinity is definitely partisan. I squeeze the handkerchief. I do not let the tears flow. I stifle them. I blow my nose. He must have read the disappointment on my face. He tries to pull me up gently from the chair. I resist. He smiles, the smile of one who knows his sister. I pout.

“What is he smiling at?” I wonder furiously, even though I know.

He calls upon a familiar proverb for aid. “I know you too. Are you not dry meat that fills the mouth?”

What is he up to now? I know. This is one of our father's favourite proverbs. He is using it to appeal to me. “Sneer at a tiny pot,” he adds, “It overboils and quenches the fire.” I smile for the first time since that afternoon class when he adds, “You are capable of conquering anything, even the difficult Professor, if you decide to do so.”

I now tell him why I am angry about the assignment.

“I had hoped to make an easy A in this course. But now, the professor is pouring sand into my garri.”

“So, why not defeat the professor hands down? I know that you can do it. You will begin by travelling to Enugu. Mamma and Papa are there to help you. Mamma can teach you how to write Igbo. It is not difficult. I learnt it myself in Papa's school.”

The scene vanishes as if the play is over. And it is over. But it lingers in my memory. I remember how my father accompanied me to our ancestral home and we started digging the mountain. Thus began my romance with festivals, songs, performances; things I had taken for granted without thinking that they could be subjects of study. I also began to dig into my mother's wealth of stories with new interest.

Thank you professor.
Latin is not dead.  
Igbo is bubbling  
with helpful life,  
Longing for harvesters  
of its bountiful barns.  

I cannot remember the grade I scored in that course. It is no longer relevant. I gained more than an A+. My journey home is no longer mere trips to participate in events: harvest festival, Christmas, funerals, and so on. It has become an inquiry into my culture and tradition. It has led me to other cultures, experiences and “wicked” professors. For these, I cannot weep. I celebrate his life with a song. I thank God that I no longer hide my thoughts. My forebears, I rejoice that this song has escaped through my shy mouth, even without my permission. It is for Ezinne, his wife. Please, let it touch her heart. Ezinne, who did cross seven waters and seven forests to build her nest on the mighty stem. She knows how it feels. Tell her NDO, SORRY.

Shed no tears, dear sister,  
For that huge tree,  
That black stem in our house,  
Its leaves withered  
Thorn in this deadly season.  
Harmattan will pass, my dear.  
Then the Mighty Stem,  
With deep black roots,  
Boiled at home and beyond,  
Shall flower in new colours.  
The petals shine already,  
In myriads of books,  
Folklore and festschrift:  
All beginnings of the feast.

My friends,  
Fellow students and scholars,  
do not be angry,  
For the host exits  
As guests get ready.  
Spirits of our land,  
Shall we break kola,  
And pour libations,
When you allowed
Professor to leave
With the deadly visitor
Efosa could not name?

Professor,
Shall we await your return,
When we all know
that that deadly visitor
Always returns alone,
Where owl sings a dirge?
Shall we feed the spirits still?
Guardians of our homestead
Who have failed to arrest
The ghostly fouler of our feast.
Take heart, dear ones
For the sun shall rise still
At the break of day.

I am not crying. I am doing nothing, just watching the night,
and thinking and wondering about things, about life. Am I having
a dream? No. I think I am watching a scene. I am not weeping,
for sure. I should not weep because I am watching a great scene.
Not a representation of a past event like my undergraduate
experience in the Oral Literature class. This is a scene I have
never seen before. Two characters are involved. I am not a
participant as in the other play. I am the sole audience of the
episode:

As soon as he realises where he is going, he starts laughing.
“Why are you laughing? I am used to companions who are
confused. Some of them even weep.”
“This is why I am laughing,” he replies. His white teeth have
assumed a new brilliance and his skin shines with blackness as
he continues.
“I am laughing at the ridiculous situation.”
“What is so ridiculous?”
“You. You were happy, very happy to see me briefly confused
when I did not know what was happening. As soon as you noticed
that I had found my bearing, you became deadly morose. You
are ridiculous. You are sadistic, sadornic and satanic. Hell I
know book-o. My students would have clapped for these big words. But, you are so metallic that you can't even appreciate a joke."

His companion does not reply. It is obvious that he loathes the man who dares ridicule him. The man's interest in his surroundings also infuriates his companion. Instead of being nostalgic like many others, he is behaving as if this is the best thing that has ever happened to him. What the man's companion does not know is that he is a man who makes the best out of any situation, good or bad or both.

"I can see some interesting objects which I would like to study." He really looks happy. In fact he is happily observing the surrounding which somehow I cannot see myself.

"This man is really annoying," the deadly being thinks, without saying it loud. He merely sneers at the man for not knowing that the place is not structured like the world from which he came. He refrains from saying anything for the man's vivacity cowers him. He would have liked to send the man back but Chukwu had ordained the journey and the ancestral spirits have gathered for the festival of homecoming. The man pulls his deadly companion. "That piece reminds me of Chris Okigbo. What of ..."

Oh God! I am just about to tell him to look for my Papa because he can see the world that I cannot see when the scene fades. He may still find my father since he is still interested in literature.

"Try to find him, Professor, for he will tell you stories, stories sweet, stories strict, stories strong and stories wrapped in folds of laughter, like the big fold of my father's cloth."

Tears snake down lonely cheeks
Searching for warmth
In this cold place,
Searching for Papa,
Mazi, my father.

Eyes seek out spaces,
Searching for spirits,
In this same place
Of passing scene.
Searching for Papa,
Dede, my father.
Ears grope for sound,
For whisper,
Of passing wind,
Straining to catch,
Straining to feel,
To hear,
The voice of Papa,
Teacher, my father.

Seek.
Seek that sweet self
Snatched by loathsome visitor
That stole my father from me,
From us, from Mamma,
Before the feast of books,
My books that loved
My father's heart.

"Tell him for me. Tell him, Professor ... you will know him. He looks like the sun but he does not burn. His teeth are like yours. Tell him that you were there, at the feast of books, my book. Tell him about it, how you praised me, the same way he would have done. He would like to know. Tell him...." I am trans-ported again to the reality of that loath-some telephone. Even before I pick up the receiver, I already know the dialogue that would ensue:

"It is true."
"What is true?"
"I couldn't believe it."
"You couldn't believe what?"
"He is dead..."
I continue with my mourning experience all alone, far from home.

Flashes of white teeth.
Bushy eye lashes.
Black.
Ivorienn black.
Blacker than black.
Golden black.
Different.
Bronze. Ebony.
Different from blackness of eye.
Different from blackness of hair.
Different from blackness of black board.

Black board behind him.
Golden black.
Ivory black
Shaded penetrating eyes
That compel attention.
Shake.
Shake away images
Of that day in Nsukka ...
This man with a deadly companion,
Companion without a face,
Without a heart ...
Again,
A call,
A call from Nigeria.
Fright!
Fear!
Who is it this time.
Again the same voice.
Again the same Efosa.
I sleep finally but I wake up at dawn and still alive.
The sun is still out.
I still hear squirrels
Playing outside my door.
Even the birds still sing.
And the sun still shines.
Do people still laugh?

Let him go,
Let him depart,
Peacefully.

Let him stay well.
We who are left,
May we also stay
In peace,
Continue with work
That is left behind.
Egbe bere,  
Ugo bere,  
Nke siri ibe nya ebena,  
Nku kwopu nya.  
Ise. Ise. Ise.  
Let kite perch,  
Let eagle perch,  
The one that says that the other should not perch,  
May its wings break off.  
So be it. So be it. So be it.