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POEMS

LAST OF
THE PROUD ONES

CHRISTINE
AMA ATA AIDO

*I will say a word
A little word
That passing
Through these toothless jaws
Trembles
And like water
Bubbling out a bamboo
Comes rushing
Forceful
Meaningless.
You sneer, little thing?
Youth, do not lift your brows
Nor raise those lids
And curl your mouth
For I will not—
Though I want to—
Talk of the good old days.
But what will you have me do
With bread and cheese?
Cheese, hah!
This stuff you say
Comes from milk
But reeks, reeks
The odour of stinking fish.
There were plantains
And yams
Meat from rams
And . . .
But I will not talk of the good old days
When there were rains.
Child, bring me oil
To rub these dry, patched sticks
That once
Were my legs . . .
(I shiver with the wind
The harmattan this year
Has raged too long;
. . . And come, take away
Your breads and cheeses
A little while and I'll faint
Faint to look at them:
Though I want to go
I'll hate a shove from such
As these.
I will sit here with my stick,
Watching the fire
No one needs—
And when its last flicker is gone,
I too, with cold and hunger
And my Pride
May go
There
Where
Is neither bread nor cheese.*

*There was a poem in last night's "Daily Mail";
Dense and obscure, full of oblique shafts
Of wisdom, an indirect approach—
Hints of hell not statements of belief.
Perhaps it had too clipped a style—
Elliptical to excess. But, at least
Relevant to the world we live in,
It spoke of disease and of health:
The state of the country, the law of the land,
Choice cattle but a sick and peevish soil.
"For Sale. Pure-bred Lincoln Red,
Shorthorn bulls. Off redwater,
Heartwater, gallsick veld."
I see horror hiding in the cool pools;
Danger lurking, abrasive, in the grass;
Subterranean menace in parturient earth.
Death waits to cheat the drooling mouth;
Agony to rot the hardest hoof.
Who could have guessed the canker in the clay,
Poison beneath the sun-tanned skin,
Or squalor in a prosperous land?
Look to the roots, the roots!
Topsoil may give a false
Lie to the land; but taproots record
The season's soiled promise.
Quick! Goad the gallsick
Soil. Burn the chaff;
Cauterize the earth.
Plough fresh furrows
In long familiar land.
After the upheaval, broken tubers shine
White like worms—but less useful.
The sap flows: grass and weeds,
Indiscriminate, grow. Ticks fall from flesh
Replete. No new season
Will banish ticks or weeds
Without hard work and thought,
Baptismal dip and spray, careful
Husbandry and love.
But, first, the dangers must be known
And countered, and then the seeds be sown.*

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