



momo  
Story  
for  
A  
Black  
Night

***PURE HEART***  
***in***  
***Black of Night***

A play in one act  
by Robert Locke

Adapted from the novel by Clayton Bess  
***STORY FOR A BLACK NIGHT***

Illustrations by Angela K. and Thomas B., fifth graders from Virginia to whom their teacher had read *STORY FOR A BLACK NIGHT*.

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### Setting

1. A hut in a clearing in the jungle of Liberia, West Africa, 1955-1960
2. A nearby village
3. The footroad in between

### Cast of Characters

<u>MOMO</u>	an African boy, aged 8-9
<u>HAWAH</u>	Momo's mother, aged 30-35
<u>OLD MA</u>	Momo's grandmother, aged 50-60
<u>MAIMA KIAWU</u>	a stranger, aged 20-30
<u>OLD WOMAN</u>	Maima's mother, aged 50-60
<u>MUSU</u>	Momo's aunt, aged 35-40
<u>MRS. GBALEE</u>	the wife of a village reverend, aged 40-60
MEATTA and SEATTA	two bundles to represent babies

### The History of the Story

a true story told to Peace Corps Volunteer Robert Locke, 1970  
first written by Bob for his 10th grade students in Liberia  
read in ms. by Sonia Levitin in 1972 who then spent ten years helping Bob get it published  
published novel *STORY FOR A BLACK NIGHT*, Parnassus Press-Houghton Mifflin, 1982

starred reviews

"It is not often that a reader, after completing only a page of a book, realizes he or she has come across an authentic and beautiful, yet tragic tale that transcends national, racial and ethnic boundaries." *Voice of Youth Advocates*

"...a story of horror and beauty, of selfishness and heroic sacrifice and of complicated moral choice..." *School Library Journal*

"...an unabashed moral tale and a crowd-holding story." *Kirkus Reviews*

published in France, *Par une nuit noire*, 1984

published in Japan, *Under the Big Tree*, 1984

published in Mexico, *Cuento Negro para una Negra Noche*, 1986

Phoenix Honor Award twenty years after its first publication for "a story that has endured"-2002

revised and published by Lookout Press, 2002

revised and republished in France, *Par une nuit noire*, 2003

revised and republished by Graphia Books-Houghton Mifflin, 2004

first stage play, *Black Night*, by Sonia Levitin © 2013

new edition Japan, *By the River Under the Big Tree*, 2014

This is the way I picture Momo



*Setting: Bare stage with two main acting areas:*

*1. A small clearing in the jungle, a hut at center with imaginary walls, a small yard in front of it with a fire pit down-center.*

*2. A small village, an hour's walk away. There will also be a journey in between.*

*The only set-feature is a monkey bridge constructed of narrow logs or bamboo poles crossing an imaginary river SR, with vines reaching aloft which effectively hide the Up-Right area of the river from view. There are also stumps of logs about the stage that serve as stools for the actors: one at the SL end of the monkey bridge, and one beside the imaginary door to the hut which is perpendicular to the audience, facing SR, through which actors go in and out of the hut.*

*As the walls and door of the hut exist only in the audience's imagination, so do all props, pantomimed by the actors, all except OLD MA's stick, plus the neat stack of fresh lappas (3' x 5' colorful cloths) that are in a neat pile in the back corner of the hut, as well as the two babies wrapped in smaller lappas. We never hear the frequent crying of the babies, which is indicated by actors softly shushing them.*

*LIGHTS UP on OLD MA banking the fire for the night in the fire pit down-center. LIGHTING EFFECT of firelight playing with shadows all around.*

*HAWAH is seated on a stump beside the imaginary door to the hut, nursing MEATTA beneath her loose blouse. Inside the hut MOMO pantomimes lighting a kerosene lamp, a low glow coming up all about him.*

MOMO

*(coming out of the hut and downstage to address the audience)*

My children. Ehn the night is black tonight! This blackness bring to mind ... somehow ... that other night, long ago, when Maima Kiawu bring her evil to our house. Shadows all around, long shadows, longer and longer in high bush, sun going and now gone-o.

HAWAH

Momo, come inside now. Night coming-o.

OLD MA

Black of moon tonight.

MOMO

*(on his way back into the hut, stops)*

How you can know such, Old Ma? With no eyes, how you can know black of moon?

OLD MA

I can feel black of moon. Black of moon all around.

MOMO

And how you can clean fish so, with no eyes, scrape fish, slit fish, gut fish, all slimery and with sharp knife so, yet never slicing your own hand.

OLD MA

Ehn you see me chunk you with fish head flat between your own eyes? You want I should chunk you again? Don't you humbug me about my no-eyes. Pox empty my eyes, and so what? Bring me that fish head again back, you will see.

HAWAH

Momo, leave humbugging Old Ma, and come inside now. Spirits coming to walk soon. No time for goldbricking.

OLD MA

Hawah, Ts Ts! Hush now.

HAWAH (*alarmed*)

What is it, Ma?

OLD MA

Leopard near-o!

MOMO

Leopard! Where, Old Ma?

OLD MA (*pointing*)

Just there, over across the water in the bush. Light sufficient you can yet see?

HAWAH

(*clutching Momo's shoulder*)

Oh! There! You see him, Momo?

MOMO

Mmm! Eyes yellow in the leaves. Oh, hear him cry! Long, high cry to chill my blood.

OLD MA

Leopard never bold to come near people so. It be s-s-sign!

HAWAH

Stay close, Momo. Stop fidget. Stay.

MOMO

He gone now, blink yellow eyes, and gone-o.

OLD MA (*sniffing*)

Not gone. Stay there. (*beat*) Now he gone.

MOMO

Not move, just slip away in bush, quiet, and gone-o.

OLD MA

It be sign. Trouble coming-o.

HAWAH

Here, Momo, take Meatta and go inside. I will bring the rice and cassava leaf, Ma. Come inside now. Your fire bank fine.

*Still watching for signs of the leopard, HAWAH comes down to the fire pits and pantomimes picking up two pots, then turns back upstage and into the hut. OLD MA feels about for her stick and follows HAWAH, but stops just outside the door and sniffs the air, turning SR as OLD WOMAN and MAIMA KIAWU start to enter stealthily, MAIMA with a baby in her arms.*

*When the two women see OLD MA stop at the door, they draw back and wait until OLD MA, stymied, goes inside the hut, closing and bolting the imaginary door behind her. LIGHTS have been changing steadily so that now the entire stage is dim except for the interior of the hut illuminated as though by a single kerosene lamp.*

*The two women continue now toward the door, stealing across the monkey bridge.*

OLD MA

*(under her breath, as she pantomimes bolting the door)*

That bad-lucky leopard. Trouble coming-o.

MOMO

What kind of trouble, Old Ma?

HAWAH

Momo, hush. You know your Old Ma and her signs. You remember Mommy Water and how Old Ma always tell you to stay from bridge.

OLD MA

And you take heed, Momo, or Mommy Water come for you one day. And you try carrying Meatta over across that bridge again, you catch hard time from your Old Ma.

HAWAH

You try carrying Meatta over across that bridge again, you catch hard time from my self, from this hand here. Yah?

MOMO

I hear.

HAWAH

Oh, listen to Meatta crying, stay hungry. Bring her to me now, Momo, oh, sweet thing.

*(taking the baby, beginning to nurse her beneath her blouse)*

Ts ts ts, Meatta, don't cry now. Look, Momo, how sweet she can take breast.

OLD MA

But not Momo, oh no! Momo, when you baby you too brute with that breast.

HAWAH

Oh, no, Ma. Momo not wanting to be brute, ehn-eh, Momo? Ehn-eh, Meatta, oh, she who too sweet and gentle.

MOMO *(alarmed)*

What that noise?

OLD MA *(whispering)*

Baby outside. Baby! Starting to cry. Outside?

*The two women, meanwhile, have almost reached the door and now Maima Kiawu turns away from the door, trying to quiet the baby. Old Woman quickly utters the knocking sound made in villages.*

MAIMA

Tss, tss, tss, hush.

OLD WOMAN

Kpa, kpa, kpa!

MAIMA

*(as OLD WOMAN pushes her toward the door)*

Kpa, kpa-o.

OLD MA *(whispering)*

Hawah, blow out the lamp.



MAIMA

Kpa, kpa-o.

OLD MA

Don't answer. Ts, ts, Momo.

MOMO

Ma, don't!

HAWAH

*(rising with MEATTA still in her arms, approaching the door)*

Who there?

MAIMA

You not know us. My name Maima Kiawu. I here with my ma and my baby, just we three.

HAWAH

What you want, Maima Kiawu?

MAIMA

We want shelter. Only shelter, for one night only.

HAWAH

Why you are here, so far from town? You saw night coming, yet you walking on footroad?

MAIMA

We came from Kakata. We going to Golata.

HAWAH

But Golata too far! How you can leave Kakata and hope for Golata with night coming-o?

OLD WOMAN

*(quickly, seeing her daughter falter, her voice dry and full of wrinkles)*

Man told us footroad to Golata not long.

OLD MA *(whispering)*

What man, Hawah?

HAWAH

What man?

OLD WOMAN

Man not give his name. He was tall man, bright in face.

MAIMA (*whispering*)

Fulumo.

OLD WOMAN

He say his name Fulumo.

OLD MA

Half the men in Kakata say their name Fulumo, tall man, they lie.

OLD WOMAN

Who that?

HAWAH

That my ma.

OLD WOMAN

Oh, you got your old ma in there with you, she who is blind?

OLD MA

How she know that?

HAWAH

How you know that?

OLD WOMAN

We ... saw her from over across water, but she not see us. We thinking she must be blind.

MAIMA

*(pushed forward again by OLD WOMAN)*

Please, you won't let us come in? It black out here. Spirits coming to walk. We have no place to go. I beg you, yah?

OLD MA

Don't let them in, Hawah.

MOMO

Don't, Ma, don't.

HAWAH

But Ma, where they will sleep?

OLD MA

In the bush, up a tree, in the corn.

MAIMA

Tss, tss, tss, this baby so tired. Please, you won't let us come in? I beg you, yah?

HAWAH

But Ma, with the baby? And leopard? And spirits walking?

OLD MA

Don't open the door to these people, Hawah.

HAWAH

There just you two?

MAIMA

Yes! Ehn I told you that already? Just me and my ma and my baby.

OLD WOMAN

Begging you.

OLD MA

Don't, Hawah!

MOMO

Don't, Ma!

*HAWAH gives MEATTA into MOMO's arms, then returns to the door to slide back the bolt and open the door. MOMO withdraws to the back of the hut while OLD MA prepares to spring. But the two women come in quietly, murmuring their thanks, and HAWAH closes and bolts the door again. The hut is so small that there is little room to move, but they accommodate each other uneasily.*

MAIMA

Thank you, thank you.

OLD WOMAN

You too good, thank you. Too kind. Jesus thank you.

*(putting down their things along the inner edges of the hut)*

HAWAH

You hungry?

No, we finish eating in Kakata. MAIMA

You finish eating in Kakata, yet you left? OLD MA

Man say— MAIMA

Oh, yes, Fulumo, tall man, oh yes! OLD MA

Seem that man was wrong. OLD WOMAN

Seem so! OLD MA

Your baby sick? HAWAH

Oh, no, she can cry loud, yes, but she not sick. She just distress from so much of walking. MAIMA

Where your husband? OLD WOMAN

My husband dead. HAWAH

Oh, I too sorry. MAIMA

No mayah. OLD WOMAN

My pa killed by old Two-Step snake. After he was bit, Pa walk only two more step. MOMO

Momo, Ts. OLD MA (*cautioning*)

MAIMA

Oh, no mayah, my son.

OLD WOMAN

But why he build your house and make your farm so far in bush so?

HAWAH

My husband Mandingo.

OLD WOMAN

*(sharing a look with her daughter)*

Mandingo! Your husband Moslem? Oh. He observe?

HAWAH

All people observe ... somehow.

OLD WOMAN

But you Christian, self, ehn-eh? You, good to strangers, so, opening your door? You know Book?

HAWAH

Mmm, Ma sent me to mission school, I learn to read book.

OLD WOMAN

But THE BOOK. You know THE Book. You read THE Book.

OLD MA

Old woman, even blind, I can see your nose sticking in our face.

HAWAH

Ma, take time.

OLD MA

Hawah put up her book when her man die. When snake will bite, man will die, and there the end.

HAWAH

Ma, please, these women OUR guest. And no, not the end, ehn-eh, Momo? Not the end.

MOMO

No, not the end, ehn-eh, Meatta?

MAIMA

My ma too sorry. We too distress, trap outside with spirits coming to walk. We too grateful.

OLD WOMAN

Mmm, we too distress. I too sorry

HAWAH

Come, less sleep now. Momo, get two fresh lappas for the women to lie upon. I sorry we have no mat for you, but the lappas keep you from the dirt.

MAIMA

Oh, yes, thank you. Lappa be sufficient.

HAWAH

And our house small so, we embarrass tonight with so many, but Momo smallboy, and you can curl tight, ehn-eh, Momo? Yah?

MOMO

*(spreading two lappas onto the dirt floor near the door)*

I hear.

*All lie down, HAWAH and OLD MA and MOMO onto their mats which OLD MA has meanwhile moved close together.*

HAWAH

I blow out the lamp now? Everyone fine? Not too much embarrass?

MAIMA

Too fine, thank you.

OLD WOMAN

Thank you.

*Hawah pantomimes picking up the lamp and blowing out the flame. We can still see dimly, however, and during the next few minutes we see...*

*...everyone falling asleep, but the two women whispering together.*

*LIGHTS change to indicate time passage, a dawn occurring. The two women get up stealthily, gather their belongings and quietly slide the bolt and open the door and sneak out, leaving their baby. At the last moment, MAIMA turns back to take a last look at her baby, full of pain. Her mother pulls her by the arm out the door, which they leave open. They exit across the monkey bridge.*

*MOMO is first of the household to wake, and he sees the two women leave the house. He gets up, stretches, goes to the door and looks out. He turns*

*back and goes quickly to STRANGER BABY, picking her up and carrying her outside so as not to wake his ma and old ma.*

MOMO

Tss, tss, tss. Quiet now, you too loud. Oh, look, look look.

*(He points to the sky, holds the baby up as though to see.)*

Oh, yes, look and see. Oh, so nice, oh, yes, eh, the bird can be pretty, fly pretty in the sky?

*He turns in alarm as he hears MEATTA begin to wake up inside the hut. He puts STRANGER BABY down on the ground outside the hut and rushes in to take MEATTA from beside HAWAH, who turns over in her sleep, murmuring gratitude, but not really waking.*

HAWAH

Thank you, Momo, you good boy.

MOMO

*(taking MEATTA outside, trying to hush her)*

Tss, tss, tss. Meatta, Meatta, quiet like this other baby. See? See pretty birds flying? Ooh!

*(Again he points to the sky and holds MEATTA up to see.)*

Here, come and look at this other baby, Meatta. Oh, you can like baby? Oh, you never see baby before? You baby self!

*(laughs, sitting and holding both babies close together in his arms.)*

See! See the baby! Pretty baby.

*HAWAH and OLD MA roll over to face the day, OLD MA with much groaning as she gets up and rolls up the sleeping mats.*

HAWAH

*(coming to the door and seeing MOMO)*

Momo, your Pa teach you good. You make good pa, when you come to be big man.

MOMO

I teaching them bird, Ma. I teaching them sky, I teaching them baby. They never see baby before, all two.

HAWAH

You good big boy, and your ma and old ma thank you for letting us sleep. Where the women?

MOMO

I don't know. They left the house before I rise, and they left door open.

HAWAH

Hunh! They probably washing clothes downwater, to get ready to go on to Golata.

OLD MA

*(picking the lappas off the floor)*

They can't wash their lappas too? This one full of baby piss. Momo, finish with those babies and start washing these lappas.

*(dropping the lappas beside him and starting down-center to the fire pit)*

Hawah, bring the rice from yesterday and the cassava leaf. I think there is sufficient for all this morning, and the two women when they come back.

HAWAH

Oh, my ears! That baby can be loud-o!

OLD MA

*(stoking the fire, adding wood)*

I think she not getting sufficient food. How the breast of that woman?

HAWAH

*(delivering the pots from the house to OLD MA)*

Seem small. She not strong.

*(taking STRANGER BABY from MOMO)*

But I feed this baby for her now. Now she get some good milk. I got plenty milk, sufficient for them, all two. Momo, she sweet?

MOMO

She too sweet, Ma. And you should see. Her eyes get big so when she see Meatta little face.

HAWAH

Oh, Meatta, ts ts, don't be jealous now, you have your turn.

OLD MA

Momo, see if the women have any rice in their pot. I not sure this will be sufficient here.

*MOMO goes into the hut to where the women had put down their things.*

MOMO

Their pot not here-o.

OLD MA

Not there?



MOMO

Nothing here-o.

OLD MA

Nothing? They took all? Hunh. *(gasps)* Hawah! Those women finni gone-o!

*(rising from her knees at the fire pit)*

What wrong with that baby?

*HAWAH takes STRANGER BABY from her breast and holds her away to better investigate, pulling aside the wrappings to see the baby's middle.*

HAWAH *(gasps)*

Pox!

*OLD MA screams outright, staggering this way and that, beating her head and her breast with her hands for perhaps as long as a full minute in terror and despair. Meanwhile HAWAH stands frozen, STRANGER BABY in her outstretched arms. MOMO watches from the doorway, not understanding.*

*OLD MA comes suddenly back to her senses and with immediacy tries to locate HAWAH, but her disorientation makes her continue to stagger, and without her stick she is helpless.*

OLD MA

Give that baby to me! Where you are? Hawah, where you are?

*Seeing HAWAH not respond. MOMO goes to her side and clutches onto her lappa.*

MOMO

Here, Old Ma.

HAWAH

Momo, keep from me! I covered with smallpox. Go to the water and wash your hands good, then your face. Get soap from in the house, plenty soap, plenty suds, wash your hands first, then your arms and face, and wash Meatta good, all over. Quick.

*As soon as OLD MA hears HAWAH's voice, she stumbles toward her, but HAWAH eludes her grasping hands. Momo meanwhile seeks to obey his ma, taking Meatta above the bridge to do the washing.*

OLD MA (*overlapping*)

Momo, find me my stick. Momo! Momo, where you are? Find me my stick! Hawah, give me that baby! I already had the pox. The pox not hurt me. Give me that baby!

HAWAH

No.

OLD MA

*(stops rushing blindly, takes a long moment)*

What?

HAWAH

No. I will not give you this baby. Momo, bring fresh lappa from the house to wrap Meatta clean.

OLD MA

What you will do with that baby? Give her to me.

HAWAH

*(picking up OLD MA's stick from beside the fire pit, waving it from a distance until OLD MA can grab it)*

Here, Ma, here your stick. Take time now, you don't fall.

OLD MA

*(catching her breath, gauging Hawah, frenzy replaced by sensibility)*

What you will do with that baby, Hawah?

HAWAH

I know what **you** would do with her.

OLD MA

What I would do with her?

HAWAH

You know what you would do.

OLD MA

Yes, and so **you** should. Those women not coming back for that baby. You must take that baby into bush and leave it for leopard.

HAWAH

No.

Or give her to Mommy Water.

OLD MA

No.

HAWAH

Give her to me then. I will do so.

OLD MA

No.

HAWAH

There is no one to take care of that baby. And not you, Hawah. Pox will catch you! You can't win pox!

OLD MA

Momo, you finish washing now? All over good? Plenty soap and wash the suds down the water?

HAWAH

Yes, ma.

MOMO

And Meatta, too, all over good?

HAWAH

Just coming to finish, Ma.

MOMO

Good. You must go into Kakata to your Auntie Musu.

HAWAH

We go to Kakata? When?

MOMO

Just now, as soon as you wrap Meatta in the fresh lappa.

HAWAH

You coming also too, Ma?

MOMO

No, I must stay here. Just you and Meatta, and Old Ma.

HAWAH

OLD MA

I not going.

HAWAH

You must take the children from here. They can't able go alone. Musu will take care of them.

OLD MA

Who will take care of you? I coming back.

HAWAH

I can take care of my self.

OLD MA

Oh, yes, now. But when pox catch you? Who take care of you then? You not know. Hawah! You sick, you sick so you can't move, you can't see, you can't breathe, you can't take care of that baby, you can't take of your self. Momo, tell your ma. Look at your Old Ma in her ugly face and tell your ma what you see there. The pox come, the pox grow and grow and grow, over your nose, over your mouth, over your eyes, the pox root grow deep into your eyes and empty your eyes of water. You tell your ma.

HAWAH

You ready, Momo?

MOMO

I ready, Ma.

OLD MA

Hawah, give that baby to me.

HAWAH

No.

OLD MA

Why?

HAWAH

Ma, you send me to mission school. What you thought they would teach me?

OLD MA

Words! Numbers! Not this!

HAWAH

Yes, this. Too. Thinking, regret, right and wrong.

OLD MA

I spit on their right and wrong.

HAWAH

Ma, this baby small so, innocent so, this baby everybody baby. This baby my baby.

OLD MA

That baby the baby of a stranger. You kill yourself for that baby? You kill your family?

HAWAH

Ma, I hoping maybe we quick already to win pox, wash pox down the water with suds before it catch. You take them quick from here. Momo, you carry Old Ma to Kakata, Meatta on your back, tie her fast with lappa.

*(MOMO ties MEATTA around his waist with a lappa.)*

You stay with your Auntie Musu, and you do all that Auntie Musu tell you. You obey now, yah?

MOMO

I hear.

OLD MA

You fool, Hawah.

MOMO

*(presents his back to OLD MA)*

Old Ma, you can grab at my neck?

OLD MA

*(grasping Momo's collar)*

Good boy, Momo, I ready. Now, crossing water, you take time!

MOMO

*(as he leads her toward the bridge)*

I know, for Mommy Water, but she not catch us. You fine, Old Ma?

OLD MA

I fine. But now we finish crossing yet you stay embarrass the bridge? Move! Ehn you know the way to turn on footroad?

MOMO

I know the way. I know all the way. Keep water to this one side, all the way as the water bend.

OLD MA

Then move. I coming back, Hawah, I coming back soon!

HAWAH

And tell your Auntie Musu, Momo, she must bring you here every day so I can see your face, so we can talk over across water, yah?

MOMO

I hear.

*THE JOURNEY:* To represent the journey from the farm to the village, perhaps easiest and clearest is to have MOMO and OLD MA walking in place and taking tiny steps across the front of the playing area from SR to SL.

OLD MA

Momo, don't stop so. We have long way to reach Kakata, yet you stop and embarrass the footroad?

MOMO

Yes, Old Ma. I walking. See? I walking. Don't trip now. Big root.

HAWAH

And sing, Momo, to make long journey short.

*(starts singing)*

BACK IN 1822 FROM FAR ACROSS THE SEA...

MOMO (singing)

...THERE CAME A SHIP OF PIONEERS, SINGING LIBERTY,  
THEY FOUNDED LIBERIA, LAND OF LIBERTY, WHAT A PLACE TO BE,  
PRESIDENT TUBMAN WILL LEAD THE WAY  
TO A BRAND NEW DAY, SETTING THE NATION FREE.

*As MOMO and OLD MA continue walking, lights fade on them momentarily and brighten on HAWAH who waves until they are out of her sight then drops to her knees, weeping.*

HAWAH

Come home safe. Come home. (to STRANGER BABY) Oh, you! Come to the river. We wash.

*As Hawah goes upstage of monkey bridge, LIGHTS dim on her but brighten on the footroad.*

MOMO

Root again, Old Ma, big big root. Take time you not trip. Too plenty root on this footroad.

OLD MA

Mmm. Your pa disgrace, could he see this footroad now. And the grass too long again! Disgrace! Look sharp for snake.

MOMO

We see leopard again today?

OLD MA

You don't see leopard, leopard see you. Then you food for leopard, you and Meatta, also too. One bite, two bite, gone-o.

MOMO

*(watching all about nervously)*

Oh!

OLD MA

But don't you fret. Leopard can't stand old woman. Leopard see old woman with stick and he leave us. Walk hard, Momo. like I showed you. Stamp your foot each step to make snake scary.

MOMO

*(stamping each step)*

We coming like bush elephant! Oh, there snake now! Go snake, slimery away from here! Snake can hear us, Old Ma?

OLD MA

Snake can feel us coming, in his jaw, in his teeth.

MOMO

Oh, Old Ma! Butterflies on footroad, oh, too pretty! Oh, you missing your eyes today, Old Ma.

OLD MA

No time for play, Momo. Stay walking.

MOMO

But Old Ma, I too tired walking so hard, and Meatta heavy on my back again.

OLD MA

When we reach in town, you remind me to tell your Auntie Musu to send her big boys out with cutlass to cut this grass from footroad. Since your pa dead, this footroad disgrace to your ma.

MOMO

How far again, Old Ma? Meatta too heavy.

OLD MA

One hour, farm to Kakata. You know time, Momo? You know hour?

MOMO

I think I know hour. How far is hour?

OLD MA

You know minute?

MOMO

I think I know minute.

OLD MA

How many minute, one hour?

MOMO

Ten?

OLD MA

Sixty minute, one hour.

MOMO

Sixty? Oh, that too plenty!

OLD MA

You know dollar bill?

MOMO

Mmm, I know dollar bill. Pa show me one time. Pa show me five dollar bill one time.

OLD MA

Five dollar bill? Oh! I surpris! Five dollar bill!

MOMO

Oh, yes, I hold five dollar bill in my hand, self.

OLD MA

Oh, my child! You know quarter?



MOMO

Mmm, I know quarter.

OLD MA

How many quarter, one dollar bill?

MOMO

Four quarter, one dollar bill.

OLD MA

Now listen. Footroad to Kakata, four quarter, one hour. First three quarter bush, last quarter farm. So, soon we coming to finish with bush and you will see Mr. Mentee farm?

MOMO

Oh, yes, I see Mr. Mentee! (*calling beyond audience*) Mr. Mentee, Bah-ung-eh!

OLD MA

Good, we coming to last quarter now. Oh, my back!  
(*waves wearily to Mr. Mentee*)  
Bah-ung-eh, Mr. Mentee. Ku meni na?

MOMO

Kpao, meni nya fe na.

OLD MA

Icoloi pono ahi.

MOMO

Owei. Kai fe yala ma.

OLD MA

After Mr. Mentee farm, Reverend Gbalee farm, after Reverend Gbalee farm, Auntie Musu farm, Kakata.

MOMO

Reverend Gbalee, bah-ung-eh!

OLD MA

For true? Reverend Gbalee working his farm?!?

MOMO

No, he in palaver hut, all stretching in hammock.

OLD MA

No, Reverend too fat to work. He has big boys to work for him, cutting his sugar cane, cooking his cane juice. And now minute, minute, minute, step, step, step, one cent, one cent one cent...

*(as they arrive SL, and OLD MA sits wearily on a stump there)*

... and now look for your Auntie Musu. Call her to me. Oh, I too tired!

MUSU

*(entering from SL, calling behind her)*

No, you boys now, you cut cut cut, swing your cutlass hard. You not smallboys again, cut hard, one cut, two cut. And stop sucking on sugar cane. That cane for distill, that cane for cane juice.

*Meanwhile OLD MA loosens the lappa and takes MEATTA from MOMO's back.*

OLD MA

Musu, here am I. Go run now, Momo, and find your friends and play. You done too fine work today. Oh, and Meatta! Momo correct! You too heavy now for true! Musu, come take Meatta from me.

*But MUSU has stopped, speechless, upon seeing OLD MA.*

MOMO

*(running off SL as soon as he is liberated, shouting at friends)*

Old Man Beggar! Momo coming-o!

OLD MA

Musu, where you are?

MUSU

Here am I.

OLD MA

Take Meatta from me, I say. I too tired.

MUSU

My arm hurt, Ma. I cut my arm with cutlass. I have no strength again.

*(but Musu has no apparent hurt)*

OLD MA

Oh, it bad? Let me feel.

MUSU

It getting better again, but stay, I too weak.

OLD MA

But you can take care of Momo and Meatta, two, three, four week? Or you can get big girl from Kakata, Nyekole maybe, with milk breast for Meatta? And can-milk from Monrovia?

MUSU

Why, Ma? What you are coming to Kakata for? What news the farm?

OLD MA

No good news, Musu. Last night, in black of night come two women to our door. I told Hawah, don't let them in, but you know Hawah. She too force and fool, and she open the door to these two women. And this morning the women gone. And they leave their baby. And on the baby, pox!

MUSU

They abandon their baby in your house?

OLD MA

'Bandon? You and Hawah, your big words, your big thinking, your big big Christian brain. Yes, the women 'bandon their baby in our house. With pox! As soon as I rest my bones, I going—

MUSU

And Hawah keeping this baby?

OLD MA

And sending her own children in town for you, yes! But Musu, you must carry me back to farm just now. I don't want to 'bandon Hawah there too longtime.

MRS. GBALEE

*(rushing on from offstage L)*

Musu, that woman from last night—

MUSU

*(cutting her off)*

Look, Missy Gbalee. Ma come in town from the farm.

MRS. GBALEE

Oh, Old Ma, what you are doing in town?

OLD MA

I just bringing the children and going back to the farm again.

MUSU

Two women last night stop at the farm and Hawah bring them in. This morning the women gone, but they abandon their baby!

OLD MA

With pox! Pox in our house!

MRS. GBALEE

They abandon their baby! Dear Lord! Abandon! Where Hawah now?

MUSU

Hawah stay on farm.

OLD MA

With that baby! With pox!

MRS. GBALEE

But how you manage coming to town, Old Ma?

OLD MA

Momo carry me.

MRS. GBALEE

Where Momo now?

OLD MA

Out there somewhere, playing Old Man Beggar.

MRS. GBALEE

*(rushing off SL)*

Momo!

MUSU

Ma, why oh why you let Hawah keep that baby?

OLD MA

How to stop her? You know Hawah. She want. She take. She grab. Musu, you must—

MUSU

That baby. That baby. You should have—

OLD MA

Musu... Missy Gbalee. She know?!? She know already about those two women?

MOMO

*(in tears, rushes into OLD MA's arms)*

Old Ma, those women too brute! I playing Old Man Beggar with my friends, and those women come chasing this woman, hitting at her with their brooms. And then the children started in with humbugging the woman, chunking the woman with small small rock and stick. And she too drunk, Old Ma! I could smell cane juice on her, plenty cane juice. And the children all calling her Mommy Cane Juice, and chunking her. "Mommy Cane Juice! Mommy Cane Juice!" Too drunk-o, and falling down, and getting up, and running away, and the children too brute. And I think... Old Ma... I not see her face, but I think that woman—

MRS. GBALEE

*(calling behind her as she enters from offstage L.)*

Don't you worry for Momo, I coming to take care of Momo. You take your children, you go into your houses, you stay there. Now, Momo, you cannot stay in town.

OLD MA

Why they can't stay?

MRS. GBALEE

Momo and Meatta, they expose to smallpox!

OLD MA

They wash good before coming.

MRS. GBALEE

Old Ma, you not fool! You know pox better than anyone. Washing can't kill pox. You must take Momo and Meatta back to the farm. You must keep them there. You know quarantine.

OLD MA

Yes! I know quarantine!

MRS. GBALEE

When my husband, Reverend Gbalee, traveled to the States, they would not let him enter for fear of the cholera. They kept him in quarantine until they sure he did not have the cholera. Then and only then would they lift quarantine and let him into States. The same with you, Old Ma, the same with Momo and Meatta.

OLD MA

Pox and me can't pull again. I finish with pox.

MRS. GALEE

But you can carry pox on your clothes, in your hair, on your skin. Go now. Musu, you take them. You make sure they reach farm. But don't touch on them. Just as we drove those women from town, so must we—

MUSU

But ... but ...

OLD MA

You wait, you wait right there Missy Reverend Gbalee, sir! Those women in Kakata last night? You saw them? You saw the pox? You drove them from town? Ehn you see what footroad they taking? Why someone did not come and warn us?

MRS. GBALEE

We just wanted them out of town. We did not notice which way they were going. You not martyr, Old Ma, sir!

OLD MA

Here, Momo, give your back again. No, I not martyr, and not you, Missy, sir! I spit on martyr!  
*(angrily begins tying Meatta onto Momo's back)*

MRS. GBALEE

Musu, you carry Old Ma and these children just now back to their house, just now, yah? But don't you touch upon them, yah? Yah?

MUSU

I hear.

MRS. GBALEE

And you stop this side of the water, Musu, and you talk with Hawah over across that bridge, but don't you yourself cross. And you tell Hawah she quarantine now, she and these children and Old Ma, too, not one can come over across that bridge. Yah?

MUSU

I hear.

*(moving onto the footroad, LIGHTS changing again for the journey)*

Momo, you come now, but you stay far from me.

MRS. GBALEE

*(following them a short way, shouting)*

Pox on footroad! Reverend Gbalee, pox on footroad! Don't come near-o. Musu, you make sure that all the people hear.

MUSU

Pox on footroad! Mr. Mentee, pox on footroad! Don't come near-o.

MOMO (singing)

BACK IN 1822 FROM FAR ACROSS THE SEA,  
THERE CAME A SHIP OF PIONEERS, SINGING LIBERTY,  
THEY FOUNDED—

MUSU

No singing, Momo.

OLD MA

Save your breath, Momo. Long footroad ahead.

*LIGHTS change to show time telescoping as they arrive stage-right. HAWAH, meanwhile, has never left the area. She has busied herself in the dimmed lights pantomiming washing the soiled lappas in the river, hanging them to dry on the monkey bridge, softly singing her own tribal song. (see appendix)*

MOMO

*(on his last three steps)*

Minute, minute, minute, one cent, one cent, one cent. Ma!

HAWAH

Momo! You back so soon to visit? Musu, why you carry them back here? They to stay in town with you.

*The following dialogue takes place over MOMO and OLD MA crossing the bridge, OLD MA finally sinking fatigued onto the stump at left edge of bridge and untying MEATTA from MOMO's back.*

MUSU

The farm quarantine, Hawah. The people all know about smallpox here.

HAWAH

Then the people know these children can't stay here. They will catch pox. You must take them back, Musu. Momo, don't cross that bridge.

MUSU

They can't come in town, Hawah! They expose! And you keeping that baby. You fool, Hawah, you fool. Why?

HAWAH

Don't bring that here, Musu. I had sufficient from Ma this morning. I don't need more from you. Momo, go back to your auntie.

OLD MA

Go, come, go, come! Now I stop!

MUSU

Hawah, maybe there stay time. Give that baby to Ma. Ma, you carry that baby deep in bush, no one to see, no one to know.

HAWAH

We will know!

MUSU

Turn your head, Hawah! You don't have to see.

HAWAH

That what they teach *you* in mission school, Musu? That what Reverend Gbalee teach? Turn your head?

OLD MA

I told you, Musu. Hawah too force. She not bend. She not listen.

MUSU

Hawah, you feeding that baby from your breast? Where Meatta will eat from? Meatta hungry. She crying whole time from Kakata.

HAWAH

I can wash good, breast all two. Plenty soap suds and wash them downwater. Musu, you can bring me more soap tomorrow? And cane juice! Plenty cane juice for washing on my breast. Pox can't stand cane juice.

OLD MA

Cane juice can't win pox.

HAWAH

Cane juice help, Ma. Ehn you always told me, cane juice help. Musu, you sure you can't keep—

OLD MA

But cane juice can't win pox. Hunh!



MUSU

No, I can't keep them! Ehn I told you! They quarantine! And where your children will sleep tonight, Hawah? They not sleep in town. They sleep with that baby?

HAWAH

I ... will ... put them on far side inside house, put down fresh lappas to cover any pox, and I will build fire between us, big fire to kill pox from jumping over across.

OLD MA

Fire can't win pox. Hunh!

HAWAH

Yes, fire can win pox. I sure that I learn fire can win pox. We got plenty firewood for tonight. And Musu, you can bring more firewood tomorrow? And can-milk for babies, if any be in Kakata. And tomorrow I will build new room for the children outside the house to keep them safe from pox. I will build the room here, use this wall of the house. It will be fun, ehn-eh, Momo? Easy and fun.

OLD MA

You think easy? Hunh! Ehn you can remember your husband building this house, and all the people in town, not helping?

MUSU (*excitedly*)

Oh, but tomorrow the people will help! And you will see, the people will be too good this time, but they will not cross over. My big boys, they will chop down the poles and make them sharp, and we will bring everything to build the room. You will see. We will build this room. We will all build it together. You will see!

OLD MA

And Musu. tell your big boys to cut the grass from the footroad, and beyond too, so that Hawah not disgrace before people coming from Golata, yah?

MUSU

I hear! You wait, you will see!

*MUSU runs back up the footroad, hiking her skirt, body all a-jiggle.*

HAWAH (*laughing*)

Oh, Ma, you missing your eyes today! That my first time seeing Musu run since she was girl. Ehn she was funny, Momo?

MOMO

Boo-loop, plop plop, boo-loop, plop plop.

OLD MA (*laughing, too*)

Like cow in race.

MOMO

*(coming forward now to address the audience, as LIGHTS change)*

And my children, the people, yes, were too good that next day. By the time Old Ma was up that next morning, making her morning groans, already the people were arriving over across their side of the bridge, already with sharp poles all cut the same long, already with piassava strip cut from piassava palm tree and ready for cross-weaving, and my job? To carry, carry, carry.

MUSU

*(having returned on the run down the footroad to SR of bridge)*

Momo, carry over the poles so your ma can pound them into the ground.

MOMO

Ma, I want to pound also too.

OLD MA

You just smallboy. You don't have big arm for digging and pounding. You just carry the poles over across.

MOMO (*to audience*)

And I carry, carry, carry, but not too plenty the poles. Much more plenty, the piassava strips for cross-weaving through and between the poles. Carry, carry, carry.

*Meanwhile HAWAH and OLD MA pantomime building up the walls.*

MUSU

Momo, come now for the piassava strips. I coming back with food.

*(going off up footroad again)*

OLD MA

Momo, I can weave faster than you can carry?

MOMO

I want to do cross-weaving, too.

OLD MA

No, your job to carry, you just smallboy.

MOMO (*to audience*)

And after the piassava strip, the mud. Oh, the mudding. The people making the mud along the bank of the water and putting the mud into banana leaf for carry.

HAWAH

Momo, we coming now to mud the piassava. Bring the mud.

OLD MA

Momo, more mud.

MOMO

Oh, the mud.

OLD MA

Momo, more mud.

HAWAH

Ma, I coming to feed the babies now. You have sufficient mud?

OLD MA

Momo, more mud.

MOMO

I want to eat, too, Ma.

HAWAH

When your Auntie Musu bring the food, but now Old Ma must have more mud.

OLD MA

Momo, more mud.

MOMO

And, oh, the mud. Momo, Momo, Momo.

MUSU (*returning*)

Hawah, I bringing food now, all pack in banana leaf. Here jollof rice from Missy Gbalee, also too palm butter that I myself cook, also too bitter ball and rice, one and one and one in banana leaf. Momo, come for the food.

MOMO

Oh, Ma, less eat now! Palm butter-o!

HAWAH

Palm thatch first for the roof, night coming. Then we eat, you and Meatta safe in your new room. Bring the palm thatch, Momo.

MOMO

Momo, Momo, Momo. Oh, the palm thatch, scratching my arms so, splintery so.

MUSU

Night coming, Hawah. The people back in Kakata now. I must go.

HAWAH

Look, Musu, look to see our new room. It too hampsun, ehn-eh, Momo?

MOMO

Oh, Ma, it too ugly, all crookedly.

MUSU (*laughing*)

Yes, Momo, ugly for true.

HAWAH (*laughing*)

Yes, ugly for true, Momo. Your pa shame. But with just one woman with two babies to feed, one old ma—

OLD MA

With no eyes.

HAWAH

...with no eyes, and one smallboy—

MOMO

To carry, carry, carry.

HAWAH

...we done good work.

MUSU

And we people from town, Hawah. The people too good.

OLD MA

Hunh!

HAWAH

Yes, Musu, the people too good today. You run home now before black night catch you on footroad. And you tell the people for us our thank you.

*(MUSU goes back up footroad.)*

And now, Momo, crawl inside and less see.

MOMO

Oh, it small so.

HAWAH

But not too small. You can sit? Tall boy big so, good. And in black of night... here, you see, with palm thatch covering the door to keep out spirits...

*(pantomimes putting a palm branch in place to cover the doorway)*

MOMO

Oh, it black-o.

HAWAH

...but you can see, stay sufficient daylight? And small small moon tonight?

MOMO

I can see moon, small small moon.

HAWAH

Yes, now you can see small-small, but soon small-small moon be gone-o, but then— oh thank you, Ma, just coming to ask...

*(OLD MA has gone into the hut and returned with a box of matches and a candle in an empty bottle)*

... you see, Momo, Old Ma bringing you matches and candle. And can-milk, Ma, open the can for him, yah? And can-milk, Momo, for when Meatta cry in the night, and you keep that finger clean for her to suck the milk, like I show you, yah?

MOMO

I hear.

HAWAH

And last before you crawl in tonight, into the bush and pee-pee. And if you must need, poo-poo? Yah?

MOMO

I hear.

HAWAH

And wash your hands good with soap. And if—

*(must stop and swallow back sobs)*

And if you must need to go in black of night, then here by your door, just inside the palm thatch, but not outside with spirits walking, and use only the one bad hand like your pa show you, and don't fret for in the morning I will come and clean, yah? you stay inside, yah?

MOMO

I hear.

HAWAH

You must not come outside, yah?

MOMO

I hear.

HAWAH

Even to knock on our door. You yell, if you must need, if trouble, you yell. Ma, go inside and listen you can hear Momo? Yell to Old Ma, Momo.

MOMO

Old Ma! You can hear?

OLD MA

Oh, my child! Break my ear!

HAWAH

And... and if—

MOMO

Ma, less eat!

OLD MA

The boy wise, Hawah. Less eat.

HAWAH

Yes, less eat.

MOMO *(to audience)*

And oh, my children, we did eat that night! The food! Oh, that palm butter! Oh, that bitter ball and rice! We too tired, work so hard all day, and when that night I crawl with Meatta into our new room, oh my man, did sleep and me pull together. When Meatta woke and crying, did I find the matches, did I find the candle, did I find the can-milk, and again to sleep with Meatta sucking the milk from my finger, time and time and time. But sleep, oh my children!

*(MOMO has come down to the fire pit where now he sits.)*

And then ... two weeks, maybe I think two weeks, some many days ... somehow... Meatta, my small-small Meatta crying in the night, crying crying crying, and now start coming the bad news.

*(lies down in a tight curl)*

MUSU

*(coming again to stage-right)*

Hawah, what news? I bring more can-milk. Missy Gbalee bring by moneybus all the way from Monrovia. But tell me, first, Meatta getting better again?

HAWAH

Oh, Musu. No, Meatta worse. She much worse. She hot, she cold, she crying, always crying.

MUSU

Oh, Hawah, I too sorry. But she will get better again, no mayah. She strong, little girl strong so, and here, can-milk, I leave it here. And how stranger baby? She stay improving.

HAWAH

Oh, yes. Seatta. I calling her now, Seatta, sister to Meatta. She our family now. And, Musu, she so sweet, much better now, too strong. Scab, hard now with crust and some scab even coming to drop off each day.

MUSU

Oh, thank you, Jesus, for that one.

OLD MA

*(stoking the fire in the fire pit, near MOMO)*

She ugly now, her long life, but yes, she will live. We can only hope for Meatta. And Momo.

MUSU

Oh, Momo, look what your Auntie bring for you, red rubber ball, all the way from Monrovia. But wait. What you mean, Ma? And Momo, too?

HAWAH

Momo start with fever in the night.

*Hawah breaks down sobbing, for the first and only time in front of MUSU and OLD MA.*

MUSU

Oh, no, Jesus, no, not our sweet Momo.

OLD MA

Screaming through the night. He bad-o.

MUSU

Oh, no, Jesus. So now you bring Momo into the house again?

HAWAH

Mmm. I thought the room would keep him safe, keep Meatta safe, but—

MUSU

Hawah, how you could keep that baby! Now, you see what you did?

HAWAH

Musu, don't bring that here again! Her name Seatta! She my baby, too!

MUSU

Inside your head, Hawah, inside your head! How you can make this seem right inside your head!

HAWAH

Musu, pox sleep with my children already one night. Maybe pox catch them already that one night.

MUSU

But one night, Hawah, one night. I don't think only one night—

HAWAH

But you don't know, Musu. And that first morning, Momo playing with the babies, all two in his arms together, face to face, and maybe the pox catch them already then.

MUSU

But you don't know, Hawah. Maybe they safe one night, one morning, but you kept that baby here, pox all over, and nursing all two babies from same breast, day in day out, and Momo sleeping with Meatta in that small-small room. How you can— !!?

HAWAH (*screaming*)

I don't know! I don't know, Musu! I don't know, Ma! I don't know, I don't know, I don't know!



*HAWAH is staggering now, obviously in full delirium. Upstage of the monkey bridge, she slips on the edge of the bank and falls into the river with a scream.*

OLD MA

Hawah! Hawah! Where you are? Musu, Hawah in the water. Mommy Water taking her. Musu, help.

*On her side of the river, OLD MA worries up and down on the bank unable to tell just where HAWAH is. MUSU, on her side of the river, rushes up beyond the monkey bridge but does not dare enter the water.*

MUSU

Hawah, Hawah, you all right? Hawah?

*MOMO, in delirium, begins crawling upstage from the fire pit trying to reach his Ma.*

MOMO

Ma! Auntie Musu, help my ma, please!

OLD MA

Musu, you must help her. For your Jesus, self, you must help!

*MUSU and OLD MA both go into the water at the same time, disappearing above the monkey bridge, MOMO still crawling, weaker and weaker until he passes out.*

MOMO

Ma! Ma!

*LIGHTS change slowly. MOMO, in his own pool of light, slowly turns over, very weak, and gets to his knees, then to his feet to face the audience.*

MOMO

From that day, my children, I can't remember. Two, three weeks, I can't remember. All black. Swirl and curl of black in my eyes, behind my eyes.

*MOMO comes down to the fire pit and sits back down on the ground. Out of darkness behind him, OLD MA comes down and kneels beside him, takes him in her arms and stretches him out to tend to him. Also in darkness HAWAH goes into the hut and lies down, very sick. MUSU takes*

*her place on a stump outside the door of the hut, SEATTA in her arms,  
MUSU singing a Christian song: "Just As I Am" (see appendix)*

MOMO (CONT.)

And then one day I wake to pain, Old Ma face above me, and burning, pain, pain.

*(cries out as OLD MA pantomimes pouring from a bottle)*

Stop! Old Ma stop!

OLD MA

Oh, so you wake now, ehn-eh? Good boy, you strong boy.

MOMO

What you are doing to me?

OLD MA

The same thing I doing every day, only just today, you can know it. Good cane juice. Good pain. That tell us you getting better.

MOMO

I been sick?

OLD MA

Oh, yes, too sick, my sweet. Fever very high, too hot. You know week? Seven day?

MOMO

Mmm.

OLD MA

Two week, three day. And each day I pour cane juice on your sores. But you strong to the pox, you keep it only on your arms. You strong to it, like bush elephant! And now fever gone. You can feel good pain?

MOMO

But the burning, Old Ma. And the itching! I want to scratch my arms off.

OLD MA

You don't touch your fingers to those scabs! You keep your fingers from your arms until the scabs ready to fall off. Pox under scab, alive and waiting to come out again and spread. You scratch them scabs, you spread the pox again. Yah? I say, yah?

MOMO

I hear, Old Ma. I hear.

OLD MA

You stay from them scabs! Now bring your arm again. I pour cane juice there again.

*(taking his arm roughly, pantomimes pouring, MOMO crying out)*

Oh, strong boy so, good strong voice. Show you getting better, every day. Poor Meatta—

MOMO

Where Meatta?

OLD MA

Oh. Don't you fret for Meatta. She out of her pain now. Spirits take her.

MOMO

You mean ... you mean Meatta dead?

OLD MA

Mmm. She join with your pa.

MOMO

Oh, Meatta, oh, my little sister.

OLD MA

Your ma did all she could able but—

MOMO

WHERE MA !!?

OLD MA

Tss tss tss tss tss.

*MOMO makes incoherent sobbing noises for a long moment, trembling in OLD MA's arms but accomplishing no utterance, until her hushing calms him enough to speak.*

MOMO *(softly)*

Where Ma? Ma dead?

OLD MA

No, not dead. But your ma, she too sick, Momo. She sick like no one ever was.

MOMO

But she alive?

OLD MA

She too sick, Momo. You must know.

MOMO

But she alive?

OLD MA

Mmm. She in the house. Your Auntie Musu taking care of her.

MOMO

Auntie Musu? On this side of water?

OLD MA

Mmm.

MOMO

Auntie Musu sleeping here? In the house?

OLD MA

In your room, behind the house. You been sleeping in the house, you and your ma, and my self and that stranger baby Seatta, we four.

MOMO

The pox can't catch Auntie Musu?

OLD MA

Not yet. Maybe she has ... somehow ... maybe from my blood, when I carry her. But ehn we are lucky to have her, Momo? To help your Ma?

MOMO

Can I see Ma?

OLD MA

Your ma too sick, Momo. You don't want to see her. You too weak.

MUSU

Oh, Momo! Oh, I be praying for you and singing to Jesus, and look now, you wake! Jesus, answering my prayers.

OLD MA

Hunh!

MOMO

Auntie Musu, you on our side now?

MUSU

Well, Old Ma can't able by herself! Of course I here! Ma, you must save some of that cane juice for Hawah. I have only one bottle left until Missy Gbalee bring more.

OLD MA

*(getting up and heading toward the hut)*

When she coming again, your Missy Reverend Gbalee sir?

MUSU

Ma, you must not speak with disrespect. Missy Gbalee too good to us.

OLD MA

Disrespect? Ehn I say sir?

*(going into hut)*

Hawah, I coming now with cane juice.

*A little cry escapes HAWAH from inside the hut as OLD MA kneels beside her.*

MUSU

*(with SEATTA in her arms)*

See your new sister, Momo, Seatta. She finish with the pox.

MOMO

That stranger baby bad-o.

MUSU

Not stranger baby now, Momo. Your ma give her name, Seatta. She your new sister.

MOMO

She kill Meatta. Maybe she coming to kill Ma.

MUSU

No, now, she too sweet. She only baby. She not know.

OLD MA

I will do your arms first, Hawah. Then your legs. Then your front. Then your back. We will do your head and face last. You ready?

HAWAH

Mmm.

*OLD MA pantomimes pouring cane juice from the bottle. Hawah's screams are horrible, hoarse, like an animal's cry. MOMO rolls onto his side and cries out loud, covering his ears. MUSU covers her ears and flees to the edge of the stage.*

MOMO

No! No! No! Oh, my ma!

MUSU

Oh, Jesus, Jesus!

*(begins singing loudly "Just As I Am")*

*As LIGHTS slowly change, with OLD MA continuing to pour and HAWAH's screams slowly lessening to tiny cries, MOMO gets to his feet and addresses the audience. Meanwhile, MUSU moves upstage to the new room and deposits SEATTA there, then continues to the river to wash.*

MOMO *(to audience)*

Days and nights and days and nights, Ma would scream and scream as Old Ma would pour the cane juice. And Auntie Musu, she turn her back, she who spend all her time in the water, with soap making suds to float away. Missy Gbalee too good. She bring us cane juice, more cane juice, more cane juice, and can-milk. Time and time Ma screams, somehow, not so bad again, and one day she say to Old Ma she want sun.

OLD MA

Musu, Hawah say she want sun on her skin. She say it pure. Momo, you stand over across bridge. Now, you must be strong when you see your ma.

MUSU

*(going with trepidation from the river toward the house)*

Your ma in black of house too long, Momo, and her eyes not custom to sun.

OLD MA

Do not make crying, Momo. That not help your ma. You stay there. You bite your tongue. You bite your hand, but do not make crying.

*With excruciating delicacy, MUSU and OLD MA help HAWAH to her feet and across the hut and out to the stump just outside the door where HAWAH slumps to a sitting position. It should take the three women*

*several minutes to accomplish this, with HAWAH emitting little screams of pain throughout, try though she may to contain them.*

*The audience can see little because of the darkness inside the hut and because OLD MA and MUSU have their bodies in between the audience and HAWAH as they help Hawah off her matt, pulling the matt away from HAWAH's scabs and sores, scab by scab, each scab a cry from HAWAH.*

OLD MA

Take care, Musu, the scab sticking to the matt. You hold the Matt down on the floor. I pull Hawah up. Hawah, take time, take time, not too fast. Or rip. Oh! Rip! Oh!

*All three women scream, as that first scab rips off onto the matt. And the next scab. And the next. MUSU rushes to a dark corner of the hut, heaving with vomit she cannot release, then returns to help OLD MA and HAWAH who meanwhile take a breather from the pain.*

OLD MA

Take time, Hawah. You sure?

HAWAH

Mmm. I want sun.

*For his part, MOMO stays outside the hut watching, wanting to help but not able to go forward, not able to retreat, his hands empty as his arms jerk helplessly to the screams. He hides his face and turns away, but he cannot keep himself from turning back to the door of the hut and watching the progress of the three women.*

OLD MA

You ready again, Hawah?

HAWAH

Mmm.

*Relying entirely on the strength and support of OLD MA, HAWAH manages first to roll over off the matt, get to her hands and knees, then pushing up with her hands, into a kind of standing position, on her feet finally, but stooped.*

OLD MA

Musu, get fresh lappas. Hawah, here, take time.

*MUSU, sobbing outright, coughing and choking, gets fresh lappas from the pile in the corner which she drapes carefully over HAWAH's shoulders and head.*

MUSU

Hawah, here. Here, Hawah.

*By the time HAWAH does make her progress into the light of the outside world, MUSU has her completely covered with the clean lappas so the audience can see nothing of what MOMO describes to the audience below.*

*OLD MA helps HAWAH to a sitting position on the stump on the hut just outside the door of the hut, facing up the river where MUSU has retreated, her face contorted into a mask of horror as she stares at HAWAH.*

*MOMO has backed to the other side of the bridge now, biting his hand to keep from crying out.*

OLD MA

You fine here, Hawah?

HAWAH

Mmm.

OLD MA

The sun feel good? Musu, bring a cup of water to your sister. Musu! Musu!

*MUSU finally comes back to the moment and numbly does as OLD MA instructs. HAWAH makes short inaudible questions that OLD MA answers.*

HAWAH

Momo?

OLD MA

Yes, Momo here. Yes, he can see. Yes, he fine. Momo, tell your ma you fine.

MOMO (*struggling*)

I ... fine ... Ma.

OLD MA

Momo too fine, Hawah, too strong.

*MOMO turns finally to address the audience, but looking down, no actual contact with the audience this time; it is too difficult for him, this memory.*



MOMO

My children ... my ma ... monster. All over running sore. Her face swoll up with scab covering over her eyes shut, her nose hill of pus on the front side of her head of scab, no hair, the pox eating the hair from her head, the holes of her nose block up with scab, scab growing into scab, one scab of so plenty scab, Ma breathing heavy, hard, but breathing yet.

OLD MA

The fresh lappas feeling good on your skin now, Hawah? Musu, don't you touch on the bad lappas, or the mat. I coming to wash them, take time.

MOMO

The lappas on the ground covered with bad skin, scab, rot. Her breast and arms covered with scab and rot. Her legs, her feet, scab and rot.

OLD MA

The sun not too hot, Hawah?

HAWAH

Feel ... pure. Momo?

OLD MA

Oh, don't you fret for Momo, he feeling good, ehn-eh, Momo? Tell your ma. But stay there.

MOMO

Oh, Ma. It hurt so much when Old Ma would pour the cane juice. So I know, Ma. I know.

HAWAH

Mmm.

MOMO

And to find which way to sleep? And the itching? Hoping to die?

HAWAH

No, Momo.

OLD MA

Hush that, Momo. You all better now, tell your ma.

MOMO

I all better again, Ma. No more pox.

OLD MA

And Momo strong to the pox to keep it only on his arms. And he keep his eyes, all two.

MOMO

And today, last of scab come off in the water. I free again, Ma.

HAWAH

Mmm. Musu?

MUSU

Hawah, your lips!

OLD MA

I not tell you, Musu. In black of house, you can't able to see. But scab growing together, coming to cover over her nose and mouth to stop her breathing. So each day I take sharp knife, morning and night, to cut small hole, this corner of her mouth, that corner of her mouth, morning and night. And so she can able to drink small-small can-milk. All inside her mouth ... scab ... also too.

*If OLD MA ever were to weep, this would be the moment. But she regulates her voice and manages to keep from breaking down. It is MUSU who breaks down, falling to her knees before HAWAH.*

MUSU

Oh, Hawah, I did bad bad thing. I did not know you were sick so bad as this. Oh, forgive, forgive, forgive me.

*As MUSU weeps a long moment, there is no other noise.*

OLD MA (*finally*)

What, Musu? What you did?

MUSU

That woman!

OLD MA

What woman?

MUSU

That Maima Kiawu. And her ma.

OLD MA

Oh, Musu! What you did!

MUSU

Maima Kiawu came in town with her ma and baby and wanted to stay at my house, saying they cousin to my husband in Monrovia. She said she come on moneybus to live now in Kakata. She too nice, and the baby too pretty. Women from in town there to welcome them, and while Maima Kiawu was cooking, did they play with the baby. But then did they find the pox, and then did they cry out and shout and then did they go for their men to drive the women from town. Maima Kiawu looked at me with crying. "Where I will go?" she cried. "My poor baby," she cried. They drove me from Monrovia. Now will they drive us from here. Help us. I beg you. You must help us," she cried. What to do, Hawah? People coming, men with big sticks. Old woman, she with her wicked voice ran and got my Bible from my table. "Look at this Book!" she cried to me. "You call yourself Christian and let us beg you without Christian help! Heathen!" she cry at me. "Jesus spit on you!" But I could not keep them at my house! Men with sticks coming. But I could not let them go without Jesus, with night coming, to die in bush. All I could think was you, here on the farm. I told them how to find you, but I said to stay one night only. One night, then go. What to do? I did not know she would abandon her baby so. I did not know you would keep the baby. I did not know you would catch sick so. Hawah, forgive me. I did not know.

*Again a gaping silence as MUSU weeps. MOMO crosses over the bridge to the hut side. To do what? He seems not to know but must move closer to his ma during this quiet as his ma endures and gathers her strength to respond, barely able to say the words.*

HAWAH

Musu. If I not sick so ... if I could find strength ... I would kill you.

MUSU

I know! I know! And you *should* kill me!

OLD MA

Hawah, you ready to go in now. Momo hearing too much.

HAWAH

Mmm.

*OLD MA helps HAWAH to her feet and they start into the house. MUSU starts forward but stops when OLD MA directs her.*

OLD MA

We can do it, Musu. Ehn-eh, Hawah? We two alone. Tomorrow and tomorrow be time for such talk. Take time now, my sweet, and sleep again.

*As OLD MA and HAWAH go into the darkness of the hut, MOMO goes to the edge of the new room where MUSU deposited SEATTA. He picks up*

*the baby, contemplates her for a moment, makes a sudden decision and starts for the bridge to throw the baby into the river in the deepest part, upstage of the bridge. But MUSU is quick to head him off, and she fights to wrest the baby from his grip.*

MUSU

What you are doing with this baby?

MOMO

I giving this baby to Mommy Water and the spirits so they leave Ma.

*MUSU succeeds in getting SEATTA out of MOMO'S hands and pulls him off the bridge. Inside the hut, OLD MA hears the scuffle, intuits what is happening and begins singing "W'loh W'leh" (see appendix) to keep HAWAH from hearing anything as she continues to put HAWAH down to rest on a fresh sleeping mat and lappa.*

MUSU

*(putting her arms around MOMO leading him away from the door)*

Oh, Momo, Momo, you must stop such talk. Don't you worry for them spirit. Spirit not going to take your ma. Spirit and Mommy Water for bush people, not civilized like you and me and your ma. And if your ma be taken, it be Jesus our Lord who take her. And if Jesus take her, she be too happy to go because Heaven too fine place.

MOMO

Hunh!

MUSU

You hush that hunh! Your pa, maybe even your pa, he rest in Heaven, even Mandingo self, even now with Meatta, you disgrace him. You don't want your ma and your pa happy together again, if Jesus ask her? And all she suffer for this sweet baby, Momo? Here now, you hold her, hold her close. You see, Momo, love.

*MUSU leaves MOMO with SEATTA, trusting him, but warily as she goes upstage of the bridge to resume her washing.*

MOMO *(to audience)*

Auntie shame me. Love. The love I have for my ma and pa and Meatta. Yes, and for Seatta, too, now, sister. Time and time, my ma, she grow stronger again. Even laugh. Laugh at Auntie Musu again, laugh with Auntie Musu again. How this can be? But so it be.

*Meanwhile OLD MA has come out of the hut, the lights have brightened, and HAWAH has gotten to her feet, quite strong and upright now but still*

*not fully well. She wears a veil so her face cannot be seen. The family joins together outside the hut.*

HAWAH (*laughing*)

Musu, will you never stop washing yourself? I sure the pox gone from here now.

OLD MA

Not until your last scab gone, Hawah. Musu, you wash.

MRS. GBALEE

*(approaching from the footroad)*

Hawah, how good to see you up and laughing. What news?

HAWAH

Nothing strange-o. Pox gone. Sun, wind, air I can feel again.

MRS. GBALEE

And you, Old Ma? You well?

OLD MA

*(sitting on the stump by the bridge, keeping her back to Mrs. Gbalee)*

Hunh! Trying, Missy Gbalee.

MRS. GBALEE

Hawah, people in town missing you, all saying, "How Hawah can let the pox work on her so?" Do you pray, Hawah?

HAWAH

Missy Gbalee, all people pray ... somehow.

MRS. GBALEE

But my dear, you must have committed very bad sin for pox to hold you that way. You marry that Mandingo man. Why you did not come to Reverend Gbalee for confession? You must thank God now that you are well. God is mercy. He can forgive the greatest sins.

HAWAH

I thankful to be living, Missy Gbalee.

MRS. GBALEE

Look at Musu. She there all this time taking care of you, and pox all around, yet never catching. Musu, your heart must be deep and good. God must love you. If I have your heart, I know I will always be happy and safe.

MUSU

I try, Sister Gbalee. I try.

*OLD WOMAN approaches haltingly from offstage right.*

MRS. GBALEE

Take time, old woman. Footroad hard for you? How far you coming from?

OLD WOMAN

Golata.

OLD MA

*(on her feet in an instant to face across the bridge)*

I waiting to hear that voice again! What you want here, devil?

OLD WOMAN

You have good ears to remember my voice, old woman.

OLD MA

You hear snake hiss one time, you know the sound. What you want here, devil?

OLD WOMAN

They say pox gone from here now.

OLD MA

May be. But I see disease stay walking in the world. What you want here, devil?

OLD WOMAN

I finish waiting now. You have my grand-baby. Give her to me.

OLD MA *(gasps)*

You have no shame!

HAWAH

Where your daughter?

OLD WOMAN

She stay in Golata. Send me for my grand-baby.

OLD MA

So she has shame, but you have none!

OLD WOMAN

I came for my grand-baby. Give her to me.

MOMO

This baby for us!

HAWAH

What you left here to die ... is dead. She buried just over there. Bring shovel and take her.

OLD MA

And take your own dead flesh from this place.

OLD WOMAN

There the baby I talking! That boy holding my grand-baby.

MOMO

No! This baby for us!

MRS. GBALEE

Old woman, I remember you now.

OLD MA

Hunh!

MRS. GBALEE

I saw you when you and your daughter first come in Kakata. I saw your grand-baby then. That baby there not your grand-baby.

OLD WOMAN

You lie! If you not give me that baby, I will bring police.

MRS. GBALEE

My dear, police chief is my brother and was there when my husband christened this baby. I sure he will be happy to tell you. That baby for Hawah.

OLD WOMAN

I will bring Monrovia police.

MRS. GBALEE

Listen, old barbarian snake, and understand! Every person in Kakata will witness against you. We know what you did, and we will drive you out like we did before.

OLD WOMAN

It hard, too hard. Always drive me like animal. I did nothing bad, why God hate me so? Give me the child, I beg you. I all alone. I lied. My daughter gone. Dead from pox.

HAWAH

Where she died?

OLD WOMAN

There, somewhere in the bush, out there.

HAWAH

Like she left her baby to die, so you left your daughter to die, leopard to take her.

OLD WOMAN

Maima was sick, dying. How to help her? I just old woman. Give me the child. Please. Please, let me have my grand-baby. I all ... lonely.

HAWAH

What you left ... is dead.

OLD WOMAN

*(looks from stony face to stony face, comes to MUSU)*

You, you there, you Christian woman.

*(MUSU turns away in deep shame.)*

But ... where I will go?

OLD MA

Where you came from, devil?

*Old WOMAN turns and starts back to the footroad, but all freeze as MOMO moves downstage to address the audience.*

MOMO

My children, only one last word for you, so you can know, happy ever after, ehn-eh?

*(laughs a small laugh)*

In Liberia, when story teller begin his tale, he say, "Once upon a time..." and you the listener say, "Time." So. Once upon a time...

*(HOUSE LIGHTS come up a bit, Momo gestures for us to say, "Time.")*

...Ma grow strong again, maybe one month, maybe two, maybe three, hard now to bring to mind. And she carry me to market in Monrovia, my first time going in moneybus. Oh, my man! Oh, the wind in my hair. Oh, and the market! The food there? All about, all about. Ma buying seed for farm next season. And the people all looking at my ma, scary of her because she all somehow, you know... monster ... stay monster, her face full of scar, and red hole and deep pit from the pox.



And with now only one eye, her other eye empty from the roots of the pox digging into her eye and empty it of water, as with Old Ma, so that now that one eye just red slit under beneath her eyebrow. But better than Old Ma, my ma keep one eye good. And her hair coming to grow again back now, small small, and you know, she my ma, and she beautiful, all same to me. And one woman, one stranger woman, Mandingo woman come to Monrovia to make small market, all the way across the market, she see my ma, and her eyes open wide so, and her mouth open into big smile, big big smile, and she coming walking to my ma. And my ma look up and see her, waiting, not knowing, you know, why this woman coming to her with big smile so. And the Mandingo woman, when she reach my ma, she lift her hand up and with her finger, the tip of her finger, she touch so tender each red hole and deep pit on my ma face, each one, touch it, gentle so, and she look deep into my ma one good eye, deep even to see her soul, it seem. And she say, "Oh!" "Oh," she say to my ma, stay smiling, her white teeth big in her face. "Oh. You must give me your heart."

*Momo extends his hands to the other cast members, all of whom join him downstage, extending their hands to each other. MAIMA KLAUWU comes from backstage, taking her ma's hand and joining with the family.*

MOMO (Cont.)

And so, my children. The End. We thank you.

*THE END*

## APPENDIX

HAWAH and OLD MA's Song: "W'lo W'lay"

W'LO W'LAY, KRO YO MAH (4 REPEATS)

NYI KA W'LE W'LAY SE KUN KRO YO MAH W'LO W'LAY, KRO YO MAH (2 REPEATS)

NADIE-E, NADIE-E-E (2 REPEATS)

NA MO ME-E NADIE, NADIE-E (2 REPEATS)

MUSU's song: "Just As I Am"

1. JUST AS I AM, WITHOUT ONE PLEA,  
BUT THAT THY BLOOD WAS SHED FOR ME,  
AND THAT THOU BIDST ME COME TO THEE,  
O LAMB OF GOD, I COME, I COME.
2. JUST AS I AM, AND WAITING NOT  
TO RID MY SOUL OF ONE DARK BLOT,  
TO THEE WHOSE BLOOD CAN CLEANSE EACH SPOT,  
O LAMB OF GOD, I COME, I COME.
3. JUST AS I AM, THOUGH TOSSED ABOUT  
WITH MANY A CONFLICT, MANY A DOUBT,  
FIGHTINGS AND FEARS WITHIN, WITHOUT,  
O LAMB OF GOD, I COME, I COME.
4. JUST AS I AM, POOR, WRETCHED, BLIND;  
SIGHT, RICHES, HEALING OF THE MIND,  
YEA, ALL I NEED IN THEE TO FIND,  
O LAMB OF GOD, I COME, I COME.
5. JUST AS I AM, THOU WILT RECEIVE,  
WILT WELCOME, PARDON, CLEANSE, RELIEVE;  
BECAUSE THY PROMISE I BELIEVE,  
O LAMB OF GOD, I COME, I COME.
6. JUST AS I AM, THY LOVE UNKNOWN  
HATH BROKEN EVERY BARRIER DOWN;  
NOW, TO BE THINE, YEA THINE ALONE,  
O LAMB OF GOD, I COME, I COME.