

PRECIOUS OKOYOMON: The Joy of Being

As a poet, artist and performer, Precious Okoyomon works with a freakishly intangible and elusive material: the joy of being. Her poetry is like a pail of raw milk that has curdled under a beating sun: it is thick with clumps of life and complexity. *Ajebota*, her debut chapbook published by Bottlecap Press in 2016, is a stream of confessionality in which the poet meditates upon the plasticity of language and the self, melting both. In her first full-length volume, *But Did You Die?*, forthcoming from Birds, LLC, her observations sharpen, and her blade has gotten, wickedly, a little rusted. Some lines sting. Others are infectious. I didn't die, but I was humiliated, and it took my breath away.

Vitality, in Okoyomon's poetics, is unstable, and bonded with mortality. In many poems in *But Did You Die?*, the end of the world is happening—not due to the Second Coming, but because the world has already been ended, numerous times, through the reckless logic of colonial modernity. This shit is recursive. The voice drifts. The poet eats ass for breakfast. She daydreams at the threshold of the void. The narration is distracted but immersive. The apocalypse is within us, and is of us. Yet, while embracing “the jerky orgasmas of the hysterical life,” we learn that we can laugh, get kinky, get lost. We are one with the earth, so we are dirty. We can grow. We can be late, too, if we were born too late. “If you think you took something from me / I am flattered and u can have it,” the poet sings. There is joy in this, and empathy.

In “A Drop of Sun Under The Earth,” Okoyomon's debut institutional solo exhibition, on view through 21 April in Heimo Zobernig's modernist schwarzescafé at LUMA Westbau, Zürich, angels hang from the branches of wintry trees. Raspy, crunchy leaves litter the large mounds of soil that support these trees, and mushrooms sprout out. The angels are dolls and stuffed animals that have been rendered angelic through the addition of taxidermied bird wings. Heads drooping, they stare downwards. Gazing at them, I recall a phrase from Okoyomon's poem “It's dissociation season”: “Then Sam is reminding me cuteness is it' own violence”. The installation evokes the lynching of Black bodies in the American South, a violence that is irreconcilable with the language of contemporary art. Yet angels can dismiss gravity, and their terse suspension highlights, again, the difficult and eternal paradox of living: that it is, in this world, also death. White cotton and cottonwood seeds circulate through the air conditioning, and are scattered across the gallery's floor.

The exhibition's title derives from Frantz Fanon's declaration that “I am black, not because of a curse, but because my skin has been able to capture all the cosmic effluvia. I am truly a drop of sun under the earth.” A black sun smiles at a bear who smokes a blunt in a brook in a canopy in a forest in a scratchy animated video that is projected upon one of the schwarzescafé's imposing walls. The audio track contains a voiceover of the artist's brother recalling a time that he and a friend got pulled over and ticketed by the police for weed. Between the sound of smoke being inhaled, we hear how her brother feared for his life as the cop walked over with his hand on his gun, before declaring the possession of a roach to be a crime. Arrogant and delusional, the officer surmises that the two men must be drug dealers.

Okoyomon has a savvy and irrepressible knack for detailing how biopolitics are necropolitics in an institutionally racist world. Her descriptions of happiness, and her invaluable humor, make her perspective insurrectionary. “Exhaustive celebration of and in and through our suffering, which is neither distant nor sutured, is Black study,” writes Fred Moten. Okoyomon's work teach me about more than joy—it teaches me about the conditions for joy. Destroy the syntax of this world, but love and protect your body and its many wrongnesses. Sometimes what the sun does is what the poet does, and what the artist does, too. **K**

words by Harry Burke

POET, ARTIST AND PERFORMER PRECIOUS OKOYOMON (BRITISH, B. 1993, LIVES AND WORKS IN NEW YORK) WILL DEBUT A NEW PLAY AT THE SERPENTINE GALLERY, LONDON, ON 5 JULY 2019.

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