The publication of Kofi Anyidoho’s latest collection of poems, *The Place We Call Home*, should be an exciting moment for those of us who enjoy poetry. It is the second book of poems that he has released with accompanying audio CDs, the first being *Praise Song for the Land* which came out in 2002. The CDs are a welcome addition; the poet’s own rendition of the words in his deep, vibrating voice will delight even the most casual listener.

*The Place We Call Home* is divided into three ‘Movements’ which begin with a backward plunge into earlier times, proceed to an engagement of events in the more recent past and end with a contemplation of current happenings. In his preface, Kofi Anyidoho remarks that the poems, variously inspired or originated, constitute ‘an endless yearning to pay homage to ancestral time and seek guidance into a future beyond the mirages of our daily human existence’. Accordingly, the title poem, ‘The Place We Call Home’, presents the spatial and ideological concepts of ‘place’ and ‘home’ upon which this (re)collection of memories is constructed. These twin concepts invite us to recall the appropriation and exploitation of our ‘home’ and our ensuing ‘unhomelessness’, and to reflect on the author’s ‘decolonizing’ mission of remembering our story and of establishing ‘home’ as an anchor against the storms we have weathered.

Anyidoho is already a celebrated African poet with seven collections to his name. In all his poetry, memory is as much the grand theme as the guiding metaphor by which the poet transforms our collective experience into his distinctive voice. In *The Place We Call Home*, memory is the leading light in what he terms ‘This Dance into a Future/That ends in the Past’. Through memory, he transports us on a psychic journey into time and space, into the very beginnings of memories. In the rhythm of drum beats punctuated by pauses pregnant with the pain and torments of the poets, we are soothed, overwhelmed by the austere evocation of horror and suffering. We are soothed, even enchanted by the tremolo of the poet’s voice, his words in his deep, vibrating voice.

From this point, we are ushered into a middle passage where the speaker stands still for a moment and throws a ‘backward glance’ at the ‘million agonies’ suffered during the dark journey to slavery and servitude, before turning his gaze in MOVEMENT TWO to the more recent past of war and terror, particularly the September 11 events and the several invasions of Baghdad as well as its resilience through it all.

It is however in the intimate stories of loss and longing in MOVEMENT THREE that the emotional energy in this assemblage of memories can most fully be felt. The most noticeable feature of this Movement is that, of all three sections of the book, it has the closest affinity with the Ewe dirge. More than simply complaints, these poems are songs of sorrow, and the sorrows involved are immense, touching all humanity. As Veronique Tadjro remarks in the ‘Afterword’ to this volume, ‘suffering has no borders’. In poems like ‘Waiting in the Shadows’, ‘Gifty: The Girl Died’, ‘A Song for Fo Willie’, ‘Daavi’ and ‘Post-Retirement Blues’, the poet’s passion and lyricism tighten our nerves like the strings of a banjo on which he plays notes that soar into the air, sink down low and sad, rise up hopeful, rise and sink, dance and weep. In ‘Daavi’, for example, we encounter one woman’s determination to defeat death as ‘She tackled Death Up/the mountain slopes Down/ to craggy foothills of Hell’. Then:

Death kicked her in the ribs;
She clutched her sides and staggered back to health.
Death jammed her spinal cord;
She stretched her neck and danced her way to wealth.
Death choked her breath with trembling hands;
She sneezed and sneezed with scornful smile.

*The Place We Call Home* picks up thematic threads from Anyidoho’s earlier work, including racism and Pan-Africanism which should be familiar to readers of *Ancestral Logic and Caribbean Blues* and *Praise Song for the Land*. Also well known is the self-effacing bard who deems himself unqualified to speak on the weighty matters he recounts. Yet, in this new collection, there is none of the humour in his earlier works like *Earthchild or A Harvest of Our Dreams*. Instead, *The Place We Call Home* is more serious in tone and mood, more meditative in its recall of the terror and horror of man’s inhumanity to fellow man. The tone and mood are as much a part of form as they are integral to meaning. Consider, for example, the following lines from the poem, ‘nine-eleven’ in MOVEMENT TWO, where the destruction of the towers of the World Trade Centre is captured both in the meaning of words and in the misalignment of lines:

As the towers burst into flames
The future crumbles into ruins
And O how our soul’s being
Is heavy laden
With rage and ruin and Smoke.

But we are not allowed to become overwhelmed by the austere evocation of pain and endurance. We are soothed, even enchanted by the tremolo of the bard’s voice as he stands in the eye of the storm, singing, contemplating the future, with great hope.

Memories Out of Time / Recalling Home

Helen Vitah

The Place We Call Home

by Kofi Anyidoho

Ayebia Clarke Publishing Limited (Oxfordshire), 2011, xxvi + 94 pages

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