

Abiku (1967)

By Wole Soyinka (Nigeria)

Wanderer child. It is the same child who dies and
returns again and again to plague the mother.

--Yoruba belief

In vain your bangles cast
Charmed circles at my feet
I am Abiku, calling for the first
And repeated time.

5 Must I weep for goats and cowries
For palm oil and sprinkled ask?
Yams do not sprout amulets
To earth Abiku's limbs.

10 So when the snail is burnt in his shell,
Whet the heated fragment, brand me
Deeply on the breast-- you must know him
When Abiku calls again.

15 I am the squirrel teeth, cracked
The riddle of the palm; remember
This, and dig me deeper still into
The god's swollen foot.

20 Once and the repeated time, ageless
Though I puke, and when you pour
Libations, each finger points me near
The way I came, where

The ground is wet with mourning
White dew suckles flesh-birds
Evening befriends the spider, trapping
Flies in wine-froth;

25 Night, and Abiku sucks the oil
From lamps. Mothers! I'll be the
Suppliant snake coiled on the doorstep
Yours the killing cry.

30 The ripest fruit was saddest
Where I crept, the warmth was cloying.
In silence of webs, Abiku moans, shaping
Mounds from the yolk.



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