

INUA ELLAMS

Born in Nigeria, Inua Ellams is a UK-based poet, playwright and performer who has written for the Royal Shakespeare Company, the National Theatre and the BBC. His latest play was an adaptation of Chekhov's *Three Sisters* set in Nigeria, staged at the National Theatre. *The Actual* is Ellams' fifth poetry release, and first full collection, after *Thirteen Fairy Negro Tales* (flipped eye, 2005), *Candy Coated Unicorns and Converse All Stars* (flipped eye, 2011), *The Wire-Headed Heathen* (Akashic Books, 2016) and *The Half God of Rainfall* (Fourth Estate, 2019).

ALSO BY INUA ELLAMS

POETRY

#Afterhours (Nine Arches Press, 2017)

The Wire-Headed Heathen (Akashic Books, 2016)

Candy Coated Unicorns and Converse All Stars (flipped eye, 2011)

Thirteen Fairy Negro Tales (flipped eye, 2005)

DRAMA

Three Sisters (Oberon, 2019)

The Half God of Rainfall (Fourth Estate, 2019)

Barber Shop Chronicles (Oberon, 2017)

The 14th Tale (Oberon, 2015)

Cape (Oberon, 2013)

Black T-Shirt Collection (Oberon, 2012)

Knight Watch (Oberon, 2012)

Untitled (Oberon, 2010)

The Actual

Inua Ellams

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This is *still, still, still*, dedicated
to the capsules of walking water
/ sculpted by the wind

The Actual / Fuck

POEMS

Fuck / *Tupac*

for dying early / for the fields of lavender and hawthorn in which
I sat / overlooking Dublin City / though / as dusk wrapped the
sky / it could have been any creaking constellation of traffic and
tower blocks / from Compton to Clondalkin / blinking staccato
madness / into the unspooling night / Fuck you / for forcing
the criminal animal gnashing its teeth in piss-streaked alleys /
collarless priests cruising in rented hatchbacks / Protestants and
Catholics / like Bloods and Crips / brothers split along colour
lines / fuelled by racist police / who came to break our skin /
Fuck you / for ordering them / to the rank and file of rhyme /
for making sense of the Celtic anarchy / in those urban psalms
of your slim scripture / in your rich voice / explaining / this is
how it's always been / darkness / light / thin paths between / with
you leading / you reluctant messiah / as all true messiahs must
be / leading to a fellowship of souls / hunkered in headphones /
suspended between word and hard matter / fans / disciples / self-
sanctified street-saints / thrown stones of strange fruit / sour as we
are / scattered across the tar-marked planet / haloed in snapbacks
/ hooded / hidden / hollering hard / hallelujah-ring / head bowed
/ nodding in pious agreement / How we would have followed you
/ homie / to hell and back / How you had me / whole

Fuck / *Biggie Too*

I've never had a nemesis / question my manhood / never had its length drawn out / between teeth / like beef / spat out / in backyards and bedrooms / streets and stoops / from Ballycragh to Brooklyn and back / Never had kids / scowl / at the mere sound of my name / But because I've looked in the mirror and felt / unlike the man who looked back / half empty / as though my spirit found my flesh vacuous and slack / loose as a twig in a drum's hollow / I know what it is to search outside oneself / for grit and grandeur to fill in the emptiness / I know what it is / however ill advised / to swallow what pith and poisoned pasture the world fields for black men / to swell into a trembling mountain of skin and pressed silence / to guard the treacherous fragility of such girth / and swagger with it / through those same backyards and bedrooms / streets and stoops / eyes peeled for the night's glinting teeth / anxious / twitching / as if a wild thing / born again yet ready to die

Fuck / *The Mandela Effect*

#After Danez Smith

Noun / Definition / Confabulation / collective misremembering of events or details / named after an imprisoned African activist / thought deceased in the mid '80s / who when released later / lead his nation / Tell me how it is possible to forget a country sized man / how one misremembers mountains breathing / Black men are killed so often / it's assumed we've already passed / Whole white worlds imagine us in coffins / our skin the colour of stained wood / No wonder police have skittish fingers / How else would you react to a corpse / walking / Wouldn't you think yourself seeing things / perhaps the wicked metal of a gun / a knife's simmering silver smile / even in our empty open palms / our fingers splayed like an asterisk / to draw attention to our humanity / our black lives still mattering / Let them call us Nigger / we can reclaim such cruel breath in verse / Let them raze our villages to dust / we will sculpt the mud to houses / Let them burn our sugarcane fields / we are already part molasses / To be black is to constantly achieve the improbable / to drive unchallenged through your own neighbourhood / to return home safe with sweets / to keep your name intact / to be safe jogging / to breathe / to breathe / to breathe / but some miracles are better left performed once / Dear

God of language and narrative / having sent back your patched-up son / black / holy and bruised / restrict some of that which you have given / Some folks are too loose with words / Don't let them call us dead