



Arctic Ocean

Atlantic Ocean

Pacific Ocean

On the Map.com

Nigeria

Indian Ocean

Pacific Ocean

Atlantic Ocean

Southern Ocean

# Once Upon a Time

By Gabriel Okara (a Nigerian poet)

Once upon a time, son  
They used to laugh with their hearts  
And laugh with their eyes:  
But now they only laugh with their  
teeth  
While their ice-block-cold eyes  
Search behind my shadow

There was a time indeed  
They used to shake hands with their  
hearts  
But that's gone, son  
Now they shake hands without  
hearts  
While their left hands search  
My empty pockets

"Feel at home!", "Come again":  
They say, and when I come  
Again and feel  
At home, once, twice  
There will be no thrice -  
For then I find doors shut on me  
So I have learnt many things, son

I have learned to wear many faces  
Like dresses - homeface  
Officeface, streetface, hostface  
Cocktailface, with all their conforming smiles  
Like a fixed portrait smile  
And I have learned too  
To laugh with only my teeth  
And shake hands without my heart  
I have also learned to say "Goodbye"  
When I mean "Good-riddance":  
To say "Glad to meet you"  
Without being glad; and to say "It's been  
Nice talking to you", after being bored

But believe me, son  
I want to be what I used to  
be  
When I was like you. I want  
To unlearn all these muting  
things  
Most of all, I want to relearn  
How to laugh, for my laugh in  
the mirror  
Shows only my teeth like  
a snake's bare fangs!

So show me, son  
How to laugh; show me how  
I used to laugh and smile  
Once upon a time when I  
was like you





# Gabriel Okara

## About the poet

- Born in Bomoundi in Nigeria, in 1921
- Died in Yenagoa, Nigeria, in 2019
- He is known as the first modernist poet in Anglophone Africa
- His poetry is widely known, as is his experimental novel *The Voice* (1964)



## About the poem

- How do you feel after reading it?
- Which lines or words resonated with you and why?
- What would you say the main theme of this poem is?