

Hot flashes of eternal return:

A past reincarnation triggered in a Sahelian backyard (Nigeria, 1978):

Sanusi, my part-time helper, wielding his machete, was clearing the weeds near the banana plants behind my bungalow. The garden hose, connected to the bathroom tap and strung through the window, was oozing water down upon the banana fronds.

I was standing over the garbage pit near the fence, tipping into it a load of wastepaper. Thoughtless of the gusty wind and the dry vines around the blackened rim, I tossed in a match.

Heading back to the door, I turned to see flames curling up at the dry weeds of the edge of the pit. In the few seconds it would have taken to smother it, a snake's tongue of fire darted up from the edge of the pit into the dry grass near the wire fence. I glanced nervously round at the hose, dripping feebly. Then in a stiff gust, the fire leapt up into a swath of tall grass, burned through the wire fence and whooshed towards the taller grass of the empty field between the teachers' houses and the boys' dormitories. As the grass fire advanced, a line of students in brown work uniforms, watched passively. Then Audu, the school labourer who had been directing them in collecting trash, came racing up...

"Wuta ba kyau! Wuta mai hadari!" [dangerous fire!] he shouted.

Jabbed into action, I motioned to Sanusi to help drag the dribbling hose towards the burning grass. From across the fence, Audu shook his head ruefully.

"Kawo guga!" [bring buckets] He shouted towards the students.

Kawo guga da sauri!" [quickly] Audu repeated, clicking tongue and shaking his rake.

Snapping out of momentary fire-trance, the boys trotted to the back of the dormitory and began filling a row of laundry buckets from the standing tap. Audu dropped his rake and moved towards them shouting orders. Sanusi leaned over the fence and sloshed water from the orange plastic bucket into the crackling flame.

Watching from the side of the garbage pit, I was suddenly transported to a windy spring day, 13 years ago:

Along with a bubbly-nosed boy from my Grade Six class—not a usual companion—I was picking my way along the shoreline of the lake at the edge of my native village. We had come to see the open water unlocked just the day before from six months of ice.

Still, when we reached the back of the cove behind the boathouses, we were startled to see one of the rougher Lake Road boys. He was sitting on a bike looking out into the blue-grey lake. Half-turning and cupping cigarette from the wind, he spat.

“What are ya lookin’ at, ya little fuckers?”

We shrugged shoulders and looked out at the white caps pushing groaning ice chunks onto the shore.

After a few moments of awkward silence in which the older boy spun his back tire in a patch of melting ice, he suddenly pulled out his Zippo. Clicking it open, he leaned down and held it under a tuft of yellow grass. After a few flicks he snapped it shut. For a moment we watched mesmerized by the struggle of the flickering fire against the wind and dampness. Then in a sudden gust, the flame whooshed into the tall grass behind us.

“Holy ole Jayzus!”

The Lake Road boy dropped his bike and pulled up a rotting plank from along the shore. With ciggie bobbing in mouth, he made a few swipes with the wet board which only seemed to fan the flames. By then the fire had gobbled up the tall grass between two rocks and was sweeping up into dry brush. In alarm, we looked towards the thick coniferous on the hill behind.

The Lake Road boy heaved the plank into the water and jumped on his bike.

“OK, you two keep yer little mouths shut,” he growled. “Unless you want yer fuckin’ heads kicked in.”

With that, the Lake Road boy shoved off and pedalled furiously out of sight along the path towards the Lake Road. My fellow urchin and I were left staring at one another in rising fear. With scarcely a backwards glance—we bolted into the woods.

Several minutes later, stumbling through dirty snow and shin-deep bog, we heard the siren. That siren, mounted on a tower amidst the train yards, was the alarm for summoning able-bodied villagers for train wrecks, search parties and fires. At that moment, its rising wail could have been the poking finger of Jehovah Himself, piercing our viscerals. With a smell and pall of smoke deepening our panic, we struggled on through icy muck just out of sight of the Lake Road. In reaching the bank of the eponymously named Shit Creek that emptied into the lake, we were jolted by a shout from the culvert bridge a hundred yards below.

“There they go!”

Catching sight of kids on bikes pointing from the road, we jumped across the orange-tainted creek like convicts fleeing in the bay of bloodhounds. Finally emerging from a ditch onto a village back street, we wordlessly separated. Burdock-scratched, besmirched—and dumb-stuck in shame—I made my way home...

“Malam!”

Jolted back to the moment, I turned towards Audu jogging up to the fence.

With one hand on the wire, he gestured back towards the line of students flailing with neem tree switches. Some took almost leisurely swings at the few remaining patches of smouldering grass. Sanusi, leaning over the fence, doused the last fire spot while a few of the boys flicking switches, drifted back towards the dormitory. The students on work detail were already back to gathering up blown bits of plastic and trash...

What if Audu hadn't been nearby or the wind hadn't died down?

Hand over hand, Audu slid the hose back through the fence. Pulling off his cap and wiping forehead, he pointed at the smouldering garbage pit.

"*Mallam*—" he shook a stern finger, "*—ba wuta chan. Ba kyau, ba kyau!*" ['be careful with fire. It's very dangerous!']

"Sorry," I mumbled, coiling up the hose, head turned away. Amid the tingle of embarrassment, I recalled the aftermath of the Lake Road fire, thirteen years ago:

Because it had been early in May, luckily, the woods were too wet to burn. Despite the conflagration of brush on the hillside above the cove, the village fire truck crew arrived in time to douse the flames before they spread to the boathouses.

Meanwhile, I faced my mother on my front porch—jabbed no less by the finger of a vengeful Jehovah. I sobbed of my innocence, realizing that due to previously stolen cigarettes and matches, she was unlikely to believe me. Without committing herself to support, she demanded that I tell my story to the village cop. Moments later, she stood behind me when I lifted up the heavy black telephone...

Within hours rumours had spread faster than the fire itself. Not only was it ascertained that I had started the Lake Road blaze, but in one account, I was severely burned by gasoline that I had used to light it. While my fellow urchin was thought to be "easily led" there was no doubting that I was guilty:

"Hey, if I give ya a quarter will ya burn the school down?"

Yet through the following day's school yard taunting, I had to keep my mouth shut. The warning of a Lake Road boy was not to be taken lightly.

"Firebug! Firebug!"

In reaction to the jeers and whispers that continued through the next week—I could only duck head in shame...

"*Ba wuta chan. Ba kyau, ba kyau!*"

Back at my living room table, I tapped my red pen on the scratch pad. Lighting my garbage pit in the gusty wind—what else was to be expected? Were the Indian neighbours, Mr. Beg and Mr. Abraham,

watching from their back windows? Could Audu resist telling his boss, the Vice Principal, about the recklessness of *Mallam bature* [the white teacher]?

Ignoring the pile of unmarked tests, I doodled spirals on the scratchpad. I could not deny the hypnotic effect of a struggling flame. For the first few seconds after lighting the trash, I was drawn in as much as were some of the students watching the fire spread over the fence. Though that momentary hypnosis may be akin to the drowsy pleasure of watching a crackling log in a fireplace, as Audu warned: '*ba wuta chan!*'

Perhaps the fire-trance in the village cove thirteen years ago was not quite so innocent. As I watched, was I not almost wilfully urging on the struggling flame?

Even in the anguish of unjust accusation (it would not be the first time) in the heart of the 11-year-old there had been a strange sense that a deeper justice *was* served. Although I did not start the fire, I had been just as *capable* of such recklessness as the Lake Road boy... Was something of that same recklessness not borne out again today?

Still making spirals on the page, I thought of the strangeness of mobius strips... Then I thought of Nietzsche's idea of 'eternal recurrence': that our worst moments—our unconquerable fears and weaknesses—repeat themselves in a mobius-like life cycle... At some point, I would have to pursue that idea to its roots in Buddhism...

In that avowal I turned over the scratch pad and pulled up the neglected tests.

-1978, Hadejia Emirate, Nigeria (from light green ring-bound notebook)