 **ONCE UPON A TIME – GABRIEL OKARA**

This is a poem by the Nigerian poet Gabriel Okara, in which he laments the lost innocence of youth. In it he condemns the hypocrisy of adults – hemmed in and constrained by rules and conventions – adopting masks for different occasions: for lying, cheating and betraying – whereas childhood is portrayed as a time of honest laughter, and spontaneity.

**Once Upon a Time**  
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 learned 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

Who is talking in the poem?  
What assumptions can you make about the kind of life he has lived and his present circumstances?  
What kind of person do you imagine him to be?  
What has he learnt to do with his own feelings?  
Who is the person addressing?  
What does he hope to learn from him?  
What does he mean by wanting ‘to unlearn all these muting things’?  
Why do you think the poet has given it the title, ‘Once Upon a Time’?