



OKOYE, N.: When the Caged Bird Sings

8.559953

WHEN THE CAGED BIRD SINGS

Part I: Gather Together in My Name

[1] Who am I supposed to be?

(Starts singing from off stage. Other soloists follow her, in turn. Their solos vary, following same harmony. Setting is amorphous, as if coming from beyond. It's a theater setting.)

MEZZO-SOPRANO [AS CERISE]

Who am I supposed to be?
Who am I supposed to be?
In a world that cannot see
Anything good
For little girls that
Look like me.

Who am I supposed to be?
Who am I supposed to be?
In a world that cannot see
Anything good,
From little Black girl
That look like me.

(Cerise continues her melody as the other soloists join her. Each, as if unseen by the others.)

SOPRANO [AS MOTHER]

What will my daughter's future look like?

BARITONE [AS FATHER]

How will I protect my family?

TENOR [AS GUIDANCE COUNSELOR]

It takes a village to raise a child.

CONGREGANTS

(Congregants hum intermittently throughout Celebrant's opening.)
Hmmm

CELEBRANT

(Stands or walks onstage. She is unnoticed by the soloists. She approaches Cerise, who continues singing.)

"Poor child,
Poor little Black girl,"
So they say.
How they underestimate you.

CERISE

Anything from girls that look like me

CELEBRANT

They have no idea.

(Setting is now church-service like. Congregants are seated. Celebrant moves to center stage. She speaks grandly. She is a mix between clergy, griot, and Michelle Obama-like storyteller. Congregants interject intermittently.)

Call and Response

(Throughout the section, congregants interject, clap, etc. in call and response style. Text is provided as placeholders and should not be interpreted literally.)

CELEBRANT

"I know why the caged bird sings," wrote Dr. Maya Angelou.

CONGREGANTS

(Interject, as if in church, followed by piano interjections)

CELEBRANT

She was quoting from a poem called Sympathy.

CONGREGANTS

Mmh, mmh, well, etc.

CELEBRANT

Paul Laurence Dunbar wrote it back in 1899.

CONGREGANTS

Tell it, tell it.

CELEBRANT

Yet those in Dr. Angelou's generation felt the same frustration.

CONGREGANTS

You better tell it.

CELEBRANT

And generation after generation,

CONGREGANTS

Preach!

CELEBRANT

It continues.

Let us say, "Enough!"

CONGREGANTS

(Singing. Choir Director has them rise, as a chorus. He gestures boldly, showcasing his choir's agility, in the manner of an HBCU choir director.)

Enough!

CELEBRANT

Enough!

CONGREGANTS

Enough!

CELEBRANT

Enough!

CONGREGANTS

Enough!

CELEBRANT

Enough!

CONGREGANTS

Enough!

CELEBRANT

It's time to change the narrative.

CONGREGANTS

Yes, it is.

CELEBRANT

Glory

CONGREGANTS

Glory

[2] Devotions**SOPRANO**

Glory, Glory, Glory, Glory

MEZZO-SOPRANO

Feeling the Spirit.

SOPRANO/TENOR

Welcome, welcome, welcome Lord.

MEZZO-SOPRANO

Feeling the Spirit.

CELEBRANT

Grace and peace be unto you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

[3] Shine your light upon us**CELEBRANT**

The word of God says,
"If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sins and I will heal their land."

Let us pray.

CONGREGANTS

Yes. Thank you, God.

SOLISTS AND/OR CONGREGANTS

Shine your light upon us.
Let your mercy rain upon us.
Let Your Spirit descend upon us.
And hear us as we
Gather
Together.
We ask that you heal our land.

Tend the sick.
Feed the poor.
Guide us through the hard times;
Bring justice and restore.

As we
Gather
Together,
We ask that you heal our land.

Grant us peace,
End all war.
Comfort your people.
Open heaven's door.

Shine your light upon us.
Let your mercy rain upon us.
Let Your Spirit, descend upon us.
And hear us as we
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Together.
We ask that you heal our land.

Tend the sick.
Feed the poor.
Guide us through the hard times;
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We ask that you heal our land.

Grant us peace.
End all war.
Comfort your people.
Open heaven's door.

[4] The Beatitudes**CELEBRANT**

Mother Maya said,
"I love the melodies in the Old Testament, how preachers highlight them when they read from Scripture. But I was influenced forever by the New Testament. I love the Beatitudes, informing us that the meek shall inherit the earth."

(Introductory music starts.)

CHOIR

Blessed are the poor in spirit,
For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are they that mourn,
For they shall be comforted.
Blessed are the meek, the meek,
For they shall inherit the earth.
Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
For they will be filled.
Blessed are the merciful,
For they shall receive mercy.
Blessed are the pure in heart,
For they will see God, they will see God!

Part II: Now Sheba Sings the Song**[5] Cerise's Story, Part 1 – You gave me a baby girl**

(Music starts with "Who am I supposed to be" and becomes the "Let her know that she is loved" theme)

CONGREGANTS

Let her know that she is loved.
Let her know that she is cherished, cherished.

SOPRANO [AS MOTHER]

Dear Lord,
Thank you for this child growing inside me.
After years of praying,
You gave me a baby girl,
A baby girl
To treasure.

Let Paul and I be good parents to her.
Let her never be in need.
Let her live to her potential.
Let her know You.

Most of all,
Let her know that she is loved.
Let her know that she is cherished.

My baby will face obstacles, just as I have.
People judging her because of her skin,
Trying to tether her with their expectations.

Dear Lord,
Give me the wisdom to guide her through them.
Give her the strength to overcome.

And most of all,
Let her know that she is loved.
Let her know that she is cherished.

I think I'll call her Cherish, no.... Cerise.

CELEBRANT

Of what is the value of a woman?
She is above fine rubies.

"Dark am I, yet lovely," said the Queen of Sheba, to Solomon.
She said, "Do not stare at me because I am dark,
because I am darkened by the sun."
Yet, he loved her.

CONGREGANTS

Yes, he did.

[6] He Saw Her Beauty**TENOR**

He saw her beauty
In bronzed splendor,
And said, "How beautiful you are!"
He prized her, valued her, adored her.
Against convention he loved her.
Against tradition he loved her.
He loved her.

Against convention he loved her.
Against tradition he loved her.
He loved her.
He loved her!

[7] I am Thine, O Lord**CELEBRANT**

I am Thine, oh Lord.
I have heard Thy Voice,
And it told Thy love to me.
But I long to rise
In the arms of faith,
And be closer drawn to Thee.

CONGREGANTS WITH SOPRANO

I am Thine, oh Lord, I have heard Thy voice,
And it told my love to Thee.
But I long to rise in the arms of faith,
And be closer drawn to Thee.

Draw me nearer, nearer, blessed Lord,
To the cross where Thou hast died;
Draw me nearer, nearer, blessed Lord,
To Thy precious, bleeding side.

Draw me nearer, nearer, blessed Lord,
To the cross where Thou hast died;
Draw me nearer, nearer, blessed Lord,
To Thy precious, bleeding side.

Draw me nearer, nearer, blessed Lord,
To the cross where Thou hast died;
Draw me nearer, nearer, blessed Lord,
To Thy precious, bleeding side.

[8] Sometimes life gets ugly**CELEBRANT**

Sometimes life gets ugly,
And it's all she can do to hold on.

CONGREGANTS

I've been 'buked, and I've been scorned,
I've been 'buked, and I've been scorned,
I've been 'buked, and I've been scorned,
I've been talked about, sure's you're born.

CHOIR

Too Dark
Too Poor
Too Ugly
Too Broken

Unworthy
Subhuman
Unwelcome
Shut her down!

CELEBRANT

Unworthy. How they can make you feel so unworthy.
Subhuman, I see it in their eyes.
Unwelcome, despite what they say.
I can feel it in their speech.
Contempt!
Fear of what I represent,
Fear of who I am,
Fear that I might overcome!

CHOIR

Unworthy
Subhuman
Unwelcome
Shut her down
I've been 'buked.

CONGREGANTS

There is trouble all over this world.
There is trouble all over this world.
There is trouble all over this world.
It won't stop this Black Girl.

CHOIR

Too Dark
Too Poor
Too Ugly
Too Broken

Unworthy
Subhuman
Unwelcome
Shut her down

CELEBRANT

It's no longer enough to be tolerated;
I will go where I am celebrated!
And if there is nowhere,
No place to affirm me
To go,
Then I will stay,
Stand my ground,
And celebrate myself!

CHOIR

Unworthy
Subhuman
Unwelcome
Shut her down!

CONGREGANTS

I've been 'buked.

CELEBRANT

Black mothers crying out for their children.
(Lord have mercy!)
Don't know if they won't ever come home.
Made to stand in the back of the bus.

Loud
Angry
Mammy figure
Welfare queen
Criticized for my hair,
Criticized for my skin,
Criticized for my strength,
Criticized for my weakness!

Just 'cause you think I'm economically depressed,
You presume I'm incompetent.

CHOIR

Unworthy
Subhuman
Unwelcome
Shut her down

CELEBRANT

But this caged bird is gonna sing!
She's gonna sing and press on.
And I'm going to rise!

CONGREGANTS

Been to the river and I've been baptized...
Been to the river and I've been baptized...
Been to the river and I've been baptized...
You can oppress me, I'll still rise.
World might oppress me, I'll still rise.

CELEBRANT

I'm going to rise!
I'm going to rise!

CONGREGANTS

She's rising!

Part III: And Still I Rise**[9] Cerise's Story, Part 2 – I thought this life would protect us****BARITONE [AS FATHER]**

Pass me not, O gentle Savior,
Hear my humble cry;
While on others Thou art calling,
Do not pass me by.

BARITONE [WITH CHOIR]

Savior, my Savior,
Do not pass me by.
While on others Thou art calling,
Do not pass me by.
Please don't pass me by.

BARITONE [AS FATHER]

Dear Lord, my, my Lord,
I thank you for the loves in my life.
My wife is lovely, and a true delight
To anyone who meets her.
And our beautiful daughter Cerise takes after her,
She's so sweet and bright.

My, my Lord.

You blessed me with this job
As a junior Vice President.
It let me move my family
Into a nicer house than I could ever imagine.

And ev'ry day, with these Ladies You put in my life,
I let them know that they are loved,
Let them know that they are cherished.

I thought this life would protect us, Father!

Go to church, Say my prayers!
Get good grades, Go to college!
Wear a nice suit, Be a good Black Man!
Love my wife, Raise our daughter.

And it's still not enough!

In the Sea of Milk that is our neighborhood,
I've been stopped and frisked for being Black
And driving!
Just for driving!

And I can bear it...
You help me bear it.
But there are sometimes,
sometimes...

My little girl was sent home from school today.
Not because she talked back, she never misbehaved.
They didn't like the braids in my baby's hair.
Tell, me, how am I supposed to live with that?
How am I supposed to live with that!?
How am I supposed to live with that!?

CHOIR

Live with that, live with that, live with that, live with that!

BARITONE [AS FATHER]

How am I supposed to live with that!?

(Breaks down into sobs, as music continues.)

BARITONE [AS FATHER]

Spoken

Cerise wants to do well. Oh Lord, for high school,
Help me find her a better place.

Sung

Father, help me,
Help me –

[10] Pass me not, O gentle Savior

*(Congregants with pianist sing traditional version of "Pass Me Not".
Time signature is 12/8, as in Baptist/Pentecostal tradition)*

CONGREGANTS

Pass me not, O gentle Savior,
Hear my humble cry,
While on others Thou art calling,
Do not pass me by.

Savior, Savior,
Hear my humble cry;
While on others Thou art calling,
Do not pass me by.

Savior, Savior,
Hear my humble cry;
While on others Thou art calling,
Do not pass me by.
Do not pass me by.

Part IV: I Shall Not Be Moved**[11] Cerise's Story, Part 3 – It takes a village****TENOR [AS GUIDANCE COUNSELOR]**

Well, well,
My,
Bless me Father,
for I have sinned.
It's been two months and six days since my last confession.

I broke the laws of man, Father.
I broke the laws of man, Father.
Our new student at the high school,
Poor Cerise,
She was the first of us
They'd have to see as equal.

Janitors, cafeteria workers.
Even me, the Guidance Counselor,
To them, we
are all invisible people.

But then there was Cerise.

They picked on her,
 Called her everything but a Child of God.
 But she made friends, made them by and by.
 She never caused her Mama a moment of sorrow.
 Then she joined the Future Business Leaders of Tomorrow.
 For better grades,
 They took drugs,
 And Cerise did too.

I advised,
 She wouldn't heed,
 Was nothing I could do,
 Or so I thought.

Drugs rumored throughout the school:
 Cocaine, Adderall, Whatever.
 To fit in she broke all the rules.
 And for Cerise, I did, too.

Early one morning
 I raced to her locker to retrieve a vial
 Right before the police made their arrival.
 I knew those White kids would never face jail.
 But a Black child...

Was I wrong Father?
 Too many of our girls get locked away, caged for a single bad
 moment.

I told her parents, to put her in rehab.
 I pray she'll know that she is loved.
 I pray she'll know that she is cherished.
 It takes a village to raise a child.
 God put her in mine.

[12] Interlude – She shall not be moved

CONGREGANTS AND MASS CHOIR

Even in the darkest hour,
 She shall not be moved.
 His hands will hold her 'til the morning comes;
 She will not be moved,

And she dresses herself in strength
 And she works harder than any.
 And she reaches herself to the needy
 And her work was not in vain.
 And her work was not in vain.

She is clothed in Solomon's splendor;
 She shall not be moved.
 Strength and dignity are upon her;
 She will not be moved.

And she opens her mouth with wisdom
 And she teaches kindness.
 And there's nothing to compare to her
 And her hope is not in vain.
 And her hope is not in vain.

God is watching over her,
 God is watching over her,
 God will answer her prayers.
 God will, for He cares for her.

He will see her through.
 He will see her through.
 He will see her through.
 He will see her through.

Even in the darkest hour
 She shall not be moved.
 His hands will hold her 'til the morning comes;
 She will not be moved.

And she dresses herself in strength
 And she works harder than any.
 And she reaches herself to the needy

And her work was not in vain.
 And her work was not in vain.

Part V: A Song Flung up to Heaven

[13] Butterflies – Be Transformed

CELEBRANT

Maya Angelou said, "We delight in the beauty of the butterfly, but rarely admit the changes it has gone through to achieve that beauty." It is the ugliness in life, that is the impetus to transform.

[14] My friends,
 Be transformed by the renewing of your minds.

CONGREGANTS

Yes.

CELEBRANT

I said, be transformed by the renewing of your minds.
 Together: "Be transformed..."

CONGREGANTS

Be transformed...

CELEBRANT

...by the renewing of your minds.

CONGREGANTS

...by the renewing of your minds.

CELEBRANT

Be transformed! Can I get an "Amen?"

CONGREGANTS

Amen.

(In the theater, congregants as community members encourage Mezzo-soprano [as Cerise].)

[15] I'm so glad I found me

MEZZO-SOPRANO [AS CERISE]

(humming)
 I'm so glad that I found me

CELEBRANT

(to Cerise)
 Little Black girl is all grown up.
 Look at you,
 Married, and a baby on the way.

(Mezzo-soprano [as Cerise] continues her melody as the other soloists, join her. Each, as if unseen by the others.)

SOPRANO [AS MOTHER]

You gave my daughter back her future.

BARITONE [AS FATHER]

You showed how faith protects my family

TENOR [AS GUIDANCE COUNSELOR]

I'm in the village who raised that child.

(Mezzo-soprano continues humming)

CELEBRANT

Opening today,
 The Paul and Nina Walker Center in memory of your parents,
 With programs for at risk teens.

You've been told that you're too dark, too ugly.
 People assume you're too poor to be something
 And that you're just not enough.
 But honey, this is your moment.

(Celebrant, returns to her lectern, and closes her book. The Butterfly theme starts.)

[16] Cerise's Story, Part 4 – You sheltered me

(Cerise stands. She sees the imaginary butterfly and sings a duet with it, using scat syllables. Her music begins.)

MEZZO-SOPRANO [AS CERISE]

Dear Lord,

Verse 1

I thank you for this moment.
I thought it would never come.
I thought I'd blown my chances;
I'd fallen so low.

And the way to redemption
Is a long, long road.
And I came this far
Just because.

Chorus

You sheltered me from all my foolishness,
You sheltered me when I had made my own mess.
You loved me so,
And you never gave up.
Like the woman at the well,
You gave me a cup.

Verse 2

Looking in the mirror,
It all comes clear.
I'd made so many poor choices
I nearly disappeared.

And the way to redemption
Is a winding road,
And I kept pressing on
Because you were there.

Chorus

You sheltered me
When my faith had lapsed.
You shut the door
When I would have gone back.
You loved me Lord,
And You never gave up.
I am the woman at the well,
And You're giving me a cup.

Bridge

You said be strong and courageous,
You said believe in all goodness.
When it seemed everyone left,
You showed I could trust You.
You said, "hold on," and the dream You gave me
Would come true.

Chorus

You sheltered me
When my faith had lapsed.
You shut the door
When I would have gone back.
You loved me Lord,
And you never gave up.

I am the woman at the well,
And You're giving me a cup.

CELEBRANT

(whispering to Alto [as Cerise])
It's going to be a girl.

[17] When a Caged Bird Sings – Night turns to day
*(Congregants hum)***SOLOISTS/CONGREGATION**

When a caged bird sings...
Captivity
I think that she can see
And find
That beyond the bars
And beyond her tears,
And beyond her scars,
And beyond her fears,
She is transformed
She is transformed
And set herself free.

(Music reprises Beatitudes.)

CELEBRANT

May the Lord bless you and keep you.
May He shine His face upon you.
May He grant you peace,
May He bring you joy,
And may He instill in you the spirit of transformation.

CONGREGATION

Amen.

CHOIR

Night turns to day
As the sun bids goodbye.
After the rain,
A band of color fills the sky.

Reminding of a promise from the Most High:
Be transformed, be transformed,
by the renewing of your mind.

Diamonds from the earth beam like
Stars up in the sky.
Shedding its cocoon,
Bursts a stunning butterfly,
Reminding of a promise from the Most High:
Be transformed, be transformed,
By the renewing of your mind.

If you will endure your tears,
A smile appears.
God will hear.
Just Persevere.

Set yourself free like a butterfly.
Set yourself free and float to the sky.

Winter turns to spring and the
Summer becomes harvest.
Seeds become flowers
After soil has a rest.
Reminding of a promise from the Most High:
Be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

Nkeiru Okoye

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