

# Once Upon a Time

Matthew Williams • English Literature • March 24, 2026

## Once Upon a Time

Once upon a time, son,  
they used to laugh with their hearts  
and laugh with their eyes:

*Analysis: The phrase "Once upon a time" frames the past almost like a fairy tale, suggesting that genuine human connection now feels distant or even unreal. "Laugh with their hearts" and "eyes" implies emotional unity, where inner feeling and outward expression were aligned. This establishes sincerity as something holistic, not performative, immediately setting up the contrast with the present.*

but now they only laugh with their teeth,  
while their ice-block-cold eyes  
search behind my shadow.

*Analysis: The metaphor "ice-block-cold eyes" implies more than lack of warmth. Ice is rigid and lifeless, suggesting that emotional responsiveness has been replaced with calculation. The separation between "teeth" and "eyes" creates a fracture between appearance and reality. "Search behind my shadow" suggests suspicion and material evaluation, where even superficial presence is not enough. Human interaction becomes investigative and transactional, reinforcing societal distrust and loss of authenticity.*

There was a time indeed  
they used to shake hands with their hearts:  
but that's gone, son.

*Analysis: "Shake hands with their hearts" represents trust and sincerity embedded in simple gestures. The repetition of past-tense phrasing emphasizes permanence of loss. "That's gone" is blunt and final, showing that this shift is not temporary but systemic.*

Now they shake hands without hearts  
while their left hands search  
my empty pockets.

*Analysis: The metaphor "search my empty pockets" exposes hidden motives. The handshake, traditionally a sign of trust, is now paired with opportunism. The detail of "left hands" implies secrecy and dishonesty, suggesting that exploitation occurs simultaneously with politeness. Relationships are reduced to economic assessment, linking directly to materialistic societal values.*

'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.

*Analysis: The repetition of polite phrases reveals performative hospitality. The numerical progression “once, twice... no thrice” mimics a pattern of conditional acceptance. The sudden closure of doors exposes how quickly inclusion turns into exclusion once the speaker is deemed unworthy. This reflects a society governed by utility rather than genuine connection.*

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.

*Analysis: The simile “like dresses” suggests identity is something worn and changed depending on context, implying loss of a stable self. The listing of different “faces” shows fragmentation of identity across social spaces. The simile “like a fixed portrait smile” conveys stiffness and artificiality, where expression is controlled and frozen rather than natural. The speaker is no longer authentic but curated.*

And I have learned too  
to laugh with only my teeth  
and shake hands without my heart.

*Analysis: The speaker admits full assimilation into the very behaviour he criticizes. This is not just observation but transformation. It highlights how societal pressure forces individuals to abandon sincerity in order to function.*

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.

*Analysis: The repetition of polite phrases exposes language as a tool of deception. Words are detached from meaning, turning communication into performance. This deepens the theme of appearance vs reality, where even speech is no longer trustworthy.*

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.

*Analysis: "Muting things" suggests that societal behaviour suppresses genuine emotion and expression. The desire to "unlearn" implies that insincerity is acquired, not natural, reinforcing the contrast between childhood innocence and adult corruption.*

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!

*Analysis: The simile "like a snake's bare fangs" associates his smile with deceit and danger. The mirror introduces self-awareness. He recognizes that his outward expression no longer reflects his inner self. The transformation is complete and disturbing, as he has become what he once despised.*

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.

*Analysis: The ending reverses authority, placing the child as the source of truth. The repetition of "show me" conveys desperation. Returning to "Once upon a time" reinforces that sincerity now feels unreachable, closing the poem with unresolved longing.*

## About the poem

**Author:** Gabriel Okara (1921–2019)

**Context:** Postcolonial society shaped by Western influence, materialism, and shifting social values

**Core idea:** Society has replaced genuine human connection with performance and self-interest, forcing individuals to fragment their identity and lose authenticity.

- **Main themes**
  - Hypocrisy and insincerity
  - Loss of innocence
  - Appearance vs reality
  - Identity fragmentation
  - Societal pressure and materialism
  - Childhood as authenticity
- **Mood:** Nostalgic but increasingly disillusioned
- **Tone:** Critical, regretful, and ironic

 **Remember**

- Structure is everything: **past 'present 'adaptation 'regret 'desire to return**
- Teeth vs eyes is the central contrast
- Speaker is complicit. That's the tension
- Language itself becomes fake
- Ending is not hopeful. It's longing without resolution

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