

Once Upon a Time

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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 word "teeth" is carefully chosen over "lips" or "mouth." Teeth are associated with biting, ripping, and danger; think of lions and wolves baring their teeth not in friendliness but in warning. A smile showing teeth can signal pleasure, but it can also signal threat. Someone can laugh in your face while planning to betray you. 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 alliteration of "ice-block cold" in the original echoes the hard sound of cold itself. "Search behind my shadow" suggests suspicion and material evaluation: what can they get from me? Human interaction becomes 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: Notice the shift in pronoun here. In the first three stanzas the speaker used "they", positioning himself as a victim of other people's fakeness. From this stanza onward, the pronoun shifts to "I." The repetition of "I have learned," "I have also learned" is a form of confession and self-accusation: he is not better than the people he described. He is one of them. The repetition of "heart" throughout the poem, laughing with hearts, shaking hands with hearts, then without hearts, marks the accumulation of heartlessness that has become the world's defining quality.

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" closes the "teeth" imagery of the poem with its most disturbing form. Snakes are the universal symbol of deception: the serpent in the Garden of Eden deceived Eve, and from then on the snake has carried the meaning of the liar, the traitor, the one who smiles while planning harm. When the speaker looks in the mirror and sees fangs, he sees a liar. 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: **"they" (stanzas 1-3)** **"I" (stanza 4 onward)**; the speaker moves from accusing others to accusing himself
- **"Teeth"** is deliberately chosen over lips/mouth; teeth suggest biting, danger, the smile that conceals a threat
- The word **"heart"** is repeated throughout, laughing with hearts, shaking hands with hearts, then the loss of both; each repetition marks another step into heartlessness
- **Snake fangs** = the snake in Eden = the universal symbol of deception. When he looks in the mirror, he sees a liar
- The ending is not hopeful; it is longing without resolution. The father asking the son to teach him is also an **irony** (fathers teach sons, not the other way round)
- Language itself becomes fake: even words like "goodbye" and "glad to meet you" have been emptied of meaning