

Lesson 5

“XLV” (from “The Pipes War”)

Ogaga Ifowodo

They scrap for a living
where the land’s promise was boundless ease.
The fisherman throws his net, rejoices

for a single meal’s catch, as trawlers
haul in schools of fish. Tankers, 5
whose docking and leaving make his canoe

rock to the wild tune of their wakes, sail away
with Bonny Light¹ crude. And far
from the lighted Jetty, he paddles home

by the flame of Iron-Dragon – 10
the gas-flaring stack² whose awful mouth spits fire
without cease near his village. Born before

the first built by Shell, he too had cursed
the dragon, called it Hell’s Gorge,
sure to retch on every head afflictions and deaths 15

sucked from the depths of the earth;
till the women found its oven heat perfect
for drying tapioca. Till he – in the absence

of eletiriki³ – renamed the red tongues snarling
at the inky skies, Oil Lamps of the Delta⁴. 20

¹ A light-sweet crude oil grade produced in Nigeria, with good gasoline yields, which makes it a popular choice for US refiners.

² Flare-stacks are used to burn off gas produced during oil-extraction operations.

³ Refers to electricity / electric lights.

⁴ “Delta” refers to the Niger Delta, Africa’s most important oil-producing regions and one of the most polluted on earth.