

Tusk
Inua Ellams



Inua Ellams was commissioned by Manchester Literature Festival and Manchester Museum, The University of Manchester to write a new series of poems responding to a Tusk from Benin in Manchester's Museum's collection. The Tusk was part of the loot taken by British soldiers during the bloody 1897 punitive expedition during which Oba Ovonramwen was exiled and Benin City was destroyed. Inua performed his Commission in the Living Worlds Gallery at Manchester Museum on Friday 15 November 2019 as part of the 2019 Manchester Literature Festival.

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Tusk /

Inua Ellams /

1/

1840 / This was the year the British Empire snuck thirty thousand chests / of purest
Opium across the Chinese border / When the 12 million they had hooked on the drug /
so decimated their brittle lives / shrinking to ghoulish spectres of thin skin / the
Emperor saw beyond his own greed / to crack down on the drug he had already made
illegal / When he refused whatever bribe the crown had offered / turning down the
white men who came cloaked in darkness / preferring the health of his people / over
the wealth of their world / when he refused them / stuffing the white powder / down
the nostrils of the sleepy string of villages / that bejewelled the borders of his country /
the British Empire attacked / musket fire rattling the hills / valleys and bones of clouds
/ mowing the Chinese soldiers down among the thickets of bush / their bellies scattered
open / such that the clear streams of melting snow / ran red with blood / Whether or
not the British soldiers danced in their blood is unconfirmed / but what I know is
bloody bootprints were found / from India to Nigeria / in shrines and holy places / from
mines to precious spaces where kings meet / the paths and patterns of violence playing
out / across the world

2/

1884 / This was the year the British Empire sunk thirty thousand troops into Africa /
clawing for its land / thirsty for its rivers / famished for its flesh / When the Berlin
conference that year / so decimated any false pretence / of development / humanity or
basic respect / the Empire flat out demanded monopoly over trade / along the broad
Benin River / When the governor refused / turning down the white men who came with
hearts of darkness / rebutting their watery offers / convincing local chiefs to follow suit
/ preferring the health of his people over the wealth for their world / the British Empire
attacked / warships sailing up river / maxim guns and cannon-fire shuddering the
shores / inlets and shallow pools / crashing through the governor's war boys along the
banks of the river / bursting open their bellies / their crushed skulls / such that the
water grew thick with bodies / thickening with blood / Whether or not the British
soldiers danced in their blood is unconfirmed / but what I know is bloody bootprints
were found / down river / inland / in the clearing where the chiefs gathered to meet /
the paths and patterns of violence playing out / across the land

3/

1896 / This was the year the British Empire snuck three hundred men up river / into the forest / towards Benin City / After the millions of men and women they had snatched into slavery / so decimated the beautiful city / reducing its precolonial majesty / to a clutch of tattered huts / The king / the Oba of Benin / banned trade with whichever white men came looking / letting local chiefs know / the vehemence of their unwelcome / They came regardless / soldiers disguised as merchants / again cloaked in darkness / the forest gloom thick on their necks / their hunger for black flesh / for black wealth / like a self-imposed curse around them / The King / preferring the mental health of his people / over the wealth of the world / attacked / the spears and shields of his men rattling the soil / leaves and canopies of the forest / mowing the British down among the mounds of hot mud and foliage / such that only two survived to tell the tale / Whether or not the king's men danced in their blood is unconfirmed / but what I know is the story that was told / so roused a vengeance in the heart of empire / they would return to the forest / their hands loaded with flames

4/

1897 / This was the year the Empire struck / There were boys play-fighting in the soft grass / girls with half braided hair snoozing beside their mothers / There were infants trying to catch flies idling by in the heavy heat / fathers working the wide fields / young men distracted among them / watching the young women drawing water from wells / all immersed in the glowing minutiae of their lives / all ripe with laughter / their lips plump with love / All must have turned towards a trumpet's sound / all must have gathered / excited at the spectacle of marching soldiers / spectacular in their red coats / curious to the kids / who were deaf to their strange oaths / blind to their intentions / Did toddlers count their silver buttons / gleaming like flat stars / until the first volley of musket fire / Who stopped smiling first / Who was sprayed with blood / Who smelt the gun powder / When the others turned / scattering into city / screaming through its streets / as the soldiers gave chase / Who was too shocked to move / When the empire came to crush the kingdom / to turn its town and villages to ash / to hang the king wherever he was captured / when they touched their hands to the walls of the city / wrapping its clay in flames / who stood by / Who could watch the world burn

5/

1898 / This was the year the tusk entered the Empire / When the soldier who smuggled
it across the ocean / strapped to the creaking ship's hull / tells how it came into his
possession / his tongue will glow with heroism / his throat thick with valour / He won't
mention his spine / shuddering as Benin City burned / that he watched infants suffocate
/ that whole families died clinging to each other / their hands clawing the smoke for air
/ that flames he had lit licked the sky / turning the night to day / that when the looting
began / he crashed into the King's palace / and stood / stupefied by its majesty / that in
the throne room / he felt spirits of past kings weighing heavy on him / that they sized
up his soul and found its honour lacking / that this shamed him / that he shamed
himself / that the elephant tusk gleamed as if conscious of its royalty / that his hand
shook as he reached to touch the figures and inscription carved in its curve / that he
sensed a century of history beneath his fingers / that he knew he was unworthy to
touch / so torched the palace as he left / dragging his plunder / that he could not bear
its weight to the ship / or from the ship to the shore / or from the shore to his home / so
dragged it again / through the streets of Salford and Manchester / with fragments of
ivory / breaking against the cobbled stones / splintering into snow

6/

1903 / This was the year the elephants struck the Empire / Because they do not forget /
because they are the whales of their world / custodians of its land / forefathers of
forefathers / who sat with kings / who wore ancient history like living skin / from the
world beyond / they watched news / wild as the fire that ate Benin City / spread /
heard tongues wagging salacious with stolen riches / saw that those who had plundered
their kingdom / who turned its palace to ash / carried three thousand other items
across the ocean / to hawk to the highest bidders / These thieves greased their hands /
with sacramental benches / ceremonial masks / stone necklaces / bronze plaques /
ivory pendants / envious of what art their tusks could hold / these parts of their bodies
/ indeed their very bones / to trade / to display / in Monday meeting rooms / to bury in
cellars / to hide in sheds / to leave in toy chests / to poke and prod like curiosities /
evidence of a land of cannibals / a world of the weird / They were dissected /
mishandled / misrepresented / mislabelled / misused / misremembered and forgotten
/ The elephants came like frost settling on cities / their fragments of bone like talismans
/ drawing them from the world of spirits / asking they march again / They came like fog
in the night / like clouds of conscience / like continents of questions / and swarmed
into the spaces where men bury answers / and began to push them out

7/

1914 / This was the year the palace was rebuilt / when survivors of the burned Benin City returned to its carcass / still crushed / still scarred / still touched with flames / They came picking through its scorched fields and crumbling courtyards / gathering fragments of ivory / fist fulls of bits of brittle jewels from the ruins / piecing back memories of what was lost / Mothers spoke of their fallen infants / Soldiers of their fallen men / Young wives of their missing husbands / All about their friends / Some sat on the naked soil / trying to root themselves in their ancestral past / raising the dead in song / Some swayed in dance / their bodies like smoke / like sweat / like greased bones / cleaving the air in two / clawing at themselves / Some cried into the parched fields / their tears salting the earth / The new king wanted to speak of passed dynasties / of how the British Empire had sunk its claws deeper into the land / had lined its borders with blood / had formed Nigeria / into a factory / to further steal from its people / but said nothing / for the crown had officers / posted / watching / He waited for the wise ones / at the old clearing / who whispered about empires / as dusk took the sky / that such is their destiny / to crumble and fall / and even their powerful enemies / time would consume them all

Footnote by Inua Ellams:

So much of my life has been governed by immigration and subsequent attempts to reconnect with my Nigerian heritage and identity. Working on Tusk was an opportunity to do just that, but through another lens. My father is an Edo man, born in Edo State which is where Benin City was located. Writing this series of poems meant I could explore this part of my world, of my heritage, my father's ancestors, and the cultural riches that were stolen from them.