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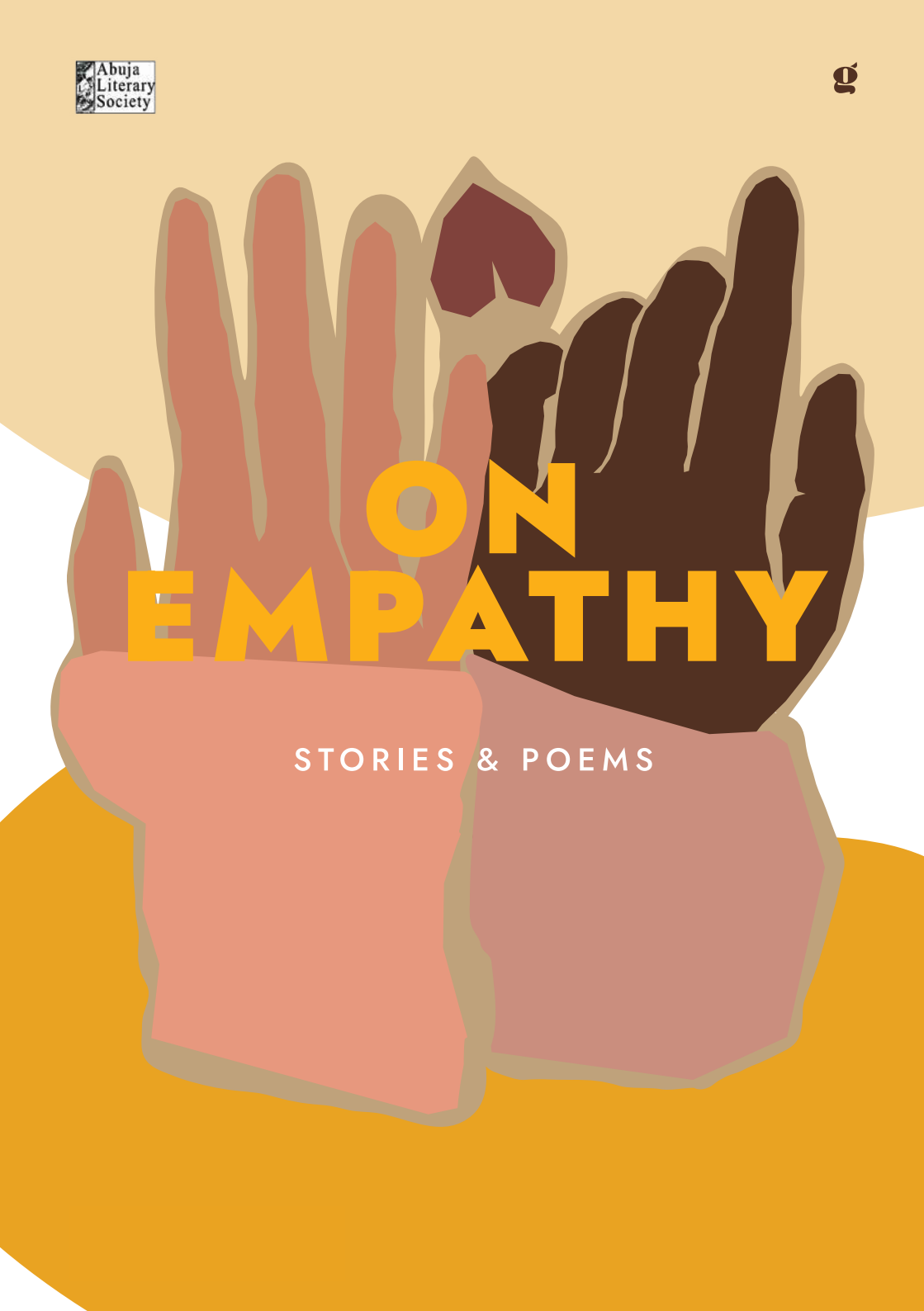

ON EMPATHY: STORIES AND POEMS

An Anthology

ON EMPATHY: STORIES AND POEMS
Various Authors

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Geko Publishing (Pty) Ltd

ABUJA LITERARY & ARTS FESTIVAL

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FUNDED BY
The production of the anthology was
made possible by the Berliner Kunster Programm (DAAD)
and is available for **free download**.

On Empathy: Stories & Poems

ISBN 978-0-620-98264-1 | First edition, 2022.

Published in Nigeria by Abuja Literary Society.
Published in South Africa, under license by Geko Publishing.

1. *Fiction – English.* 2. *Short stories*
3. *More categories – African / Nigerian*

Body text of the book is EB Garamond, 10.5pt on 12pt. Headings are in EB Garamond, 11pt. Cover font Fluerance, 40.5pt by-line Rozha One, 30pt.

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Foreword

Commissioned as a result of the annual Abuja Literary and Arts Festival (ALITFEST), ***On Empathy: Stories & Poems*** is a gentle collection of short stories and poems from some of the interesting, but powerful voices in Nigeria.

On Empathy: Stories & Poems is a bold and brave collection that should become a regular feature of the Abuja Literary and Arts Festival.

This collection ranges from poems from young poets – who write about love and loss, hope and prosperity. The poetry is full of depth and they recall the great Nigerian poets such as Christopher Okigbo; without being nostalgic, but very forward-looking.

Victor Anoliefo
President, Abuja Literary Society

Of Empathy

by Obehi Aigiomawu

I have a habit of
Wearing emotions that aren't mine.
Sometimes, they're too long at the sleeves,
Sometimes they're too tight.

Still,
When I tell you
"I understand."
It's not bland comfort,
Over an experience I've never had;
In my mind,
I have been to the scene of the crime.

You were slapped on the cheek,
I feel its sting.

You lost a friend,
I summon memories that meet this end
And, they in turn
Invite true tears.

I mourn,
I pause.
I feel like a fraud,
A counterfeit.

For now,

I rest.
I bask in the familiarity
Of my own emotions,
My perfect fitting experience.

But,
Empathy is a force
That travels ahead, beyond where
Sympathy halts.
And, I go on these trips
With it.

The Ends

by Salim Ubale

a crumbled paper of prophecies lies on my table
its content does not personify abstract notions
nor does it mention my stints with listlessness
today i feel for the dead
and what it did when it overflowed with life
its over-heartiness with cordial gestures
and surety of the sacred
today i feel for the living too
for its infatuation with the present
with all it sees it lacks foresight
it thinks vision is merely just to see
and now i feel for you too
for what you will be and not be
for how you will end

All his Scents

by Ejikem Mazpa

> *"... Suffering is one very long moment. We cannot divide it by seasons. We can only record its moods, and chronicle their return."*
>
> *Oscar Wilde, De Profundis*

1. FIRE.

If your husband, Uzoechina, wakes up right now and walks into the sitting room, he will find your naked body standing in warm sunlight – a slice of dawn that cuts through the curtains and leaves your skin gleaming brown. He will see that your arms are wrapped around your breasts as though you are cold, your gaze fixed at nothing. But what he will not know is that now, you feel a bit lighter, a bit freer, a bit readier to move out of this apartment, because yesterday, while he was out for some beer, you assembled everything that belonged to your son and you set them on fire. You rummaged through the closets and cupboards, your nose leaking mucus, your eyes heavy with tears, gathering the things that smelled of him and dumped them before the low, mossed fence at the backyard. Then you emptied a bottle of kerosene into the heap and threw a lit matchstick into it. You hoped he would not catch you stoking the fire, watching the flames lick through your son's knickers and napkins and stockings, listening as it crackled while chewing on his feeding bottles and hair combs; as you witnessed the transformation into soft ash and goo.

Now, standing there in the nude, unaware of the chattering of voices outside, the barking dogs in the distance, the occasional zoom of dashing motorcycles, you are lost in the awareness of your son's presence, your

caramel-skinned, wide-eyed, sparkling son, because even as you have burnt everything that was his and hurled the ash into a nearby thicket, you can still smell him through the brisk cold air of the harmattan, all of him. And you turn to the TV on which a dusty photograph of him still sits. You take him into your hands, in that wood-framed grayscale picture of him smiling and showing two white teeth in front. You rub your thumb over the glass, wiping off the thin layer of dirt that it has gathered over time, then you call him by his name: Ifeakandu, and you think you saw him blink.

* * * * *

Yesterday, over breakfast of sizzling *akamu* and *akara*, Uzoechina told you that he'd found a nice place in Umuojima Town and that he'd like you both to move out of this house. But you'd come to love this place; you loved how it rested on the far end of the long street away from all the city noise so that a peaceful quiet always prevailed; how it was the first place you'd been together as a couple, the first place you'd welcomed Ifeakandu.

So, surprised, you asked, 'why? Why are we moving?' And Uzoechina, reaching for your hand, said that this house was not allowing you heal, that it was important for you both to relocate, to *start afresh*. But you shook your head in refusal, 'I don't want to go anywhere,' you said, 'I don't want to start afresh, *biko*'.

'Why?' Uzoechina asked, puzzled, squeezing your hand gently in his, 'why do you want to stay here and keep feeling terrible? See, you haven't gone to work for over a year now; you haven't taken care of yourself. Look at you, Onyi, how long more will you grieve him?'

'For as long as he wants me to!' you cut in. 'I cannot…' you sobbed. And he stood from where he sat and put his arm round you, pressing your head against his belly, telling you that it would be okay, that if you moved you'd feel better. Then you looked up at him, unsure of how to explain to him that your son is still here in this house and you still hear him giggle from

time to time. You wondered if he did not perceive all his scents the way you did. The other day, you'd forgotten about the porridge cooking on the stove because you'd been carried away at the veranda, listening as your son gurgled, bubbles rippling from his mouth, only realizing that he was not really there when the thick smoke filled the house and sent you into a frenzy of cough. Many nights you'd wake up, climb out of bed only to sniff your son here and there, a reminder that he still lingers in imperceptible cracks in the walls, looking at you, reaching for you.

Uzoechina would call you crazy, you thought, so you remained silent, soaking his shirt in tears while he stroked your hair. And right there, you swore to get rid of everything that was once Ifeakandu's, to burn them all, so that if you must go, if you must turn your back on this house where he was torn away from you, you will not carry the guilt of leaving him behind, not even a whiff of him.

2. WATER

Now, you stand with your son's photograph against your chest, close to your heart, when you decide to clean this house thoroughly; since the burning would not purge this house of every smell, you will wash his scents off the floors, the surfaces, the walls, everything. So you gather yourself together, throw a wrapper around your body and march over to Ma Petu's shop which is just across from your house. There, Ma Petu is dressed in a gown garnished with many faces of The Blessed Iwene Tansi, a white handkerchief tied around her nostrils. She is in high spirits, dusting the shelves and singing a song about her enemies burning in hell.

'Ma Petu good morning o!' you greet and she turns to look at you, *'Onyinye isala chi, kedu?'* You tell her you are fine in between sneezes – the air is heavy with dust. She apologizes, looks at your face intently and asks why your eyes are swollen, if Uzoechina did not allow you sleep. She laughs, and you force your lips into a smile, a courteous gesture, and lie that it was

the mosquitoes that kept you up all night. And Ma Petu drops her duster, dramatically, like one who was just informed of a near-death experience, and recommends an insecticide. 'This one is very good' she says, reaching across the refrigerator for a canister of Raid, 'that is what I use now; *o na egbu fa pieces!*' You take it from her, squint at the price tag that reads N450, and hand it back to her with the promise that you will come back for it.

'*Odimma nwanyi oma.* Ngwanu what do you want to buy?' she asks.

'Do you have Omo, the small one?'

'Yes.' She replies, moving to the other end of the large cupboard. 'How many do you want?'

You lift two fingers in the air, 'I want two, how much?' 'Hundred' she said.

But you do not have enough money so you hand her a wrinkled fifty-naira note and tell he you would pay the remainder tomorrow. Ma Petu reminds you that credit sales this early would spoil the day's market, but she obliges anyway and hands you the plastic bag because 'you know you are my special customer'. You give her another forced smile, turn around and walk away while she continues to sing and smack the surfaces.

* * * * *

The day your son died, you did not cry. It was just before his first birthday. Just when you had begun to get used to the pitter-patter of little feet around the house. It did not make any sense. The night before, he'd been as strong as an ox. You'd fed him mashed potatoes and milk. There were no signs, no fever, no fast breathing, no nothing. So when you went over to his cot that morning to find his body as stiff as a rock, stretched hard by the frightening absence of life, you stood shocked for a long moment, mouth agape, refusing to believe that your Ifeakandu was dead. With trembling hands, you scooped him into your arms and watched closely for chest movements or a twitch of muscle or a flicker of eyelids; something

to tell you that you were dreaming, but there was nothing. And you suddenly felt a warmth rush through your body, a heaviness settling in your chest, your heart beating in your belly. You placed him back in his cot with a gentleness of a mother putting a sleeping child to bed, picked up your phone and called Uzoechina who had been away for a job in Umuahia. First it wasn't reachable; you wanted to wring the life out of the female voice that told you so. Then you dialed again and his voice came on.

'Hello, Onyi'

You were silent, undecided on how you'd say it to him. You part your lips and then put them back together. Silence. 'Onyi? Are you there?' he inquired. 'Yes'

'Kedu?'

'He is no longer breathing, Uzoechina'. You said, your voice taut like the body of your son.

'What?' Uzoechina asked, 'What are you talking about, Onyi?' You could feel worry and pressure collide in his voice. You did not say anything. 'I don't understand you, *kedu ife I n'ekwu?* Who is no longer breathing?'

'Ifeakandu' you said, holding back the tears that welled up the back of your eyes. 'Ifeakandu. His chest is not moving. Come home.'

And you hung up and sank into nothingness. He called back, you didn't pick up. He called again, you killed it. You stood there over your son, your sweet, sweet son and you wanted to scream the world to destruction, but when you opened your mouth no sound came forth. And still, you did not cry, you did not throw your arms this way and that way, you did not crumple into the ground as you'd seen other women do. Your wrapper was still tied around your breasts, your hair was still intact, shawled under an old cloth. In that instant, it seemed like the world had stopped moving and you had to stop with it.

Four hours later, Uzoechina was home, and before nightfall, family and

close friends were informed and every foot that heard marched towards your house. With arms clasped behind their backs, bowed heads and drooping shoulders, they dropped their condolences at your feet, telling you to take heart, that God knows best, that everything good will come again. And one of the men, a distant uncle of Uzoechina's whom you'd never met before that day held you tenderly and whispered with the well-meaning tone of an elder, 'it is only a child, our wife, you will have another one in not time, *inugo*?' And when you heard these words, your first instinct was to slap him hard across his wrinkled face until his nose bled. How dare he call your Ifeakandu 'only a child'? Did he not know that every child is special to its mother?

And through these moments, even as you wondered how you were going to fill the space that formed in your chest, the space that Ifeakandu's laughter once occupied, you did not cry, you refused to cry, because onye kwe, chi ya ekwe, and you refused to believe that your son was dead. You think back to the seven long years of your marriage to Uzoechina, every single day of which you'd waited for a child. Every time your husband planted a seed in you, you'd felt a baby form, but they never stayed. They would fizzle out in weeks and your happiness would disappear in a gush of darkened blood. But your Ifeakandu was different. It was he who chose to stay, to be born and be cradled in the crook of your arms; to look up at your face and smile. And so you realize that it is impossible to fill that space left by loss; you realize that it only gets wider and wider until it swallows you like a hungry river.

* * * * *

When you return from Ma Petu's, you choose to begin at the beginning. It is easier that way; to start first at the origin of a road and then follow through till the end. To flow like a river charting its course, retracing your steps so you could figure out where it all went wrong. So you start by

cleaning the empty floor in front of the TV stand; it is where Ifeakandu was conceived. Right there on that wide patch of faded terrazzo on a slightly boring Saturday afternoon when the sky was a crisp uncluttered sheet of blue and most people hid behind closed doors. That day, you were alone when the knock came. It could have been Uzoechina as he'd left that morning for an engagement in a the neigbouring town, but when you opened the door, you were greeted by a dark-skinned clean-shaven unfamiliar man. He was dressed in a loose auburn kaftan and had a steak-coloured cross-body leather bag slung lazily over his shoulder.

You told him to return tomorrow because your husband was not around, but he told you he did not come to see your husband, that he was Bro. Johnpaul of the Jehovah's Witness and that he'd brought the word of God with him and would love to share with you. He'd said this like the word in question were a piece of cake too large to be consumed alone. You were not interested; you never have been.

But when you've been married for seven years without a child, you learn to try things you ordinarily wouldn't, because who knows what part of the scripture might open your womb and make it a conducive nidus for a growing baby? So you stepped aside and watched him walk gingerly to take a seat, and as soon as you sat across from him, he handed you a copy of the Watchtower magazine. It read: Why Must We Have Faith? You listened as he preached, a liveliness growing in his voice, a touch of certitude and clarity.

And for a fleeting moment, you thought he was attractive — athletic, much taller than Uzoechina, a lot more masculine. And so you paid no attention when he said, 'please sister, could you read from the book of Hebrews, chapter eleven verse one to three?' offering you his bible. And you were startled. 'What?' you'd asked, not sure of what you were meant to do. But he stood up and came over to the sofa where you sat, flipped open the book and said, 'here' his index finger pointing at a corner of the page,

'Hebrews eleven one ...'

You do not remember how you moved from sharing the word of God to sharing your bodies, but it was he who first turned to you, leaned forward and brushed his lips against yours. You were too stunned to move. Then, as though taking your silence as consent, he held your face and kissed you deeply. His breath was clean, his lips tasteless, and you kissed him back. Then he cupped your breast in one hand, and let the other wander lazily towards your thighs, attempting to prod in-between, but you pulled away from him and asked him to stop. To pack his things and leave the house. But before you could repeat yourself he had thrown you to the ground. And on your back, you kicked and fought, but you were overcome by his strength, a hand firmly pinning your hands against the floor, another covering your mouth, until he was lodged between your legs, thrusting away like an animal.

When he'd emptied himself inside you, he quickly rolled off your body, pulled up his pair of trousers, wiped the sweat off his face with your clothes and gathered his books into his bag. You watched as he walked towards the door, cursing under your breath until he disappeared into the street. And now, you remember how you felt so dirty, so disgusted, and you began to cry.

3. WIND

'Onyi, what are you doing?' Uzoechina asks, walking into the sitting room and standing over you like a tower. 'What is wrong with you?'

And as though he is not there you, you wipe your tears with the back of your hand and continue to wash the floor, not looking at him, not speaking to him, just scrubbing. With each stroke of brush against the floor, you feel an intense wave of guilt strike you like a blow. You think it was all your fault. After all, you'd let that man into your house, you'd listened to him, you'd allowed him mount you like a dog on heat and you didn't fight him

well enough. And you think, also, that you should have tried a little harder to get rid of the thing that grew inside you once you missed your monthly flow, maybe visited Mama Kaswa the famous abortionist rather than depend on burying your perineum in a bowl of warm water. And most of all you should have told Uzoechina the truth.

You start to weep, silently. And Uzoechina comes to kneel beside you, rocking you gently and you feel the tension start to come loose. You turn to look at him, to his long face and bold forehead; his thin lips and dreamy eyes; and you think he looks like a grown Ifeakandu. You bury your head in the crook of his neck and let the tears break free.

Uzoechina pats your back and says 'it is well', that 'our son will come back to us, one way or another'. But suddenly, as though stung by a wasp, you pull away from him, steady your hands on the bucket and say, 'he is not your son, Uzo'. You say this slowly, expecting a reaction. An outburst of rage. A ferocity, whatever. But his face is as blank as Ifeakandu's the day he died. Maybe he doesn't understand so you blow your nose into the bucket of water and your voice croaks again, 'Ifeakandu. Is. Not. Your. Son…' and before you could tell him of the preacher with a bible and the rape on the floor on which you now kneel, Uzoechina reaches out for you and holds you to himself, tighter than ever before and you feel small. Then he whispers with a wet, nasal tone, 'I know, Onyi, I know.'

* * * * *

You have learnt that humans can never be fully known. In this world and in many worlds to come, you could never have imagined that your Uzoechina, the man whom you'd loved and respected could send a stranger to violate your body, his wife's body. And when he tells you this, when he says it was out of a desperation to make you happy because he'd seen how badly you wanted a child (like he didn't want one too); how many prayers you left at the Sacrament every Sunday; the herbal concoctions you'd

drunk to tighten your cervix; you are livid. You cannot believe your ears. He even adds that the man wasn't meant to rape you; that he just had to get you to sleep with him; that he is very sorry. And you turn to him in disbelief, spit a large plop of saliva in his face, and watch in utter disappointment as he walks out of the house.

And, as though nothing has just happened, you move to the bedroom to continue your work, to clean and scrub, to wipe off every trace of Ifeakandu. You do it until Uzoechina staggers through the door, the evening wind carrying after him the smell of alcohol and tobacco smoke. And yet through the pungent odour you can still perceive your son. All his scents: the palm-kernel oil you smeared into his curly hair; the lotion you put on his supple skin, the talcum you showered over his back after every bath; the soft smell of baby soap; the poo that sits in his napkin. Everything has come back to you and your stomach tightens in a knot of sadness. You watch your husband fall to the bed and sleeps off immediately. You rip off the wrapper from your body so that you are naked again. You start to fold the cloth into a baby, your baby. You fold, and look, and it is not quite him. So you unfold it and start all over again. And it is still not your Ifeakandu. But you keep trying, through the darkness that falls across the room, through the sounds of chirping crickets in the grass outside, through the golden yellow of the moon that casts shadows upon the walls. You do not stop until you are holding your son in your arms, softly rocking him and waiting for him to fall asleep.

The Warmth of Other Suns

by Michael Achile Umameh

As the winter of viruses rages on
We will camp here, there and anywhere
And partake of each other's warmth
And we will share in each other's courage
And share too in the milk of human kindness.
In this time let us participate with each other:
In each other's story, in each other's hopes
Each life, each person, increases the warmth,
the world needs in this time of global distrust.
Camps of faith not to give up, or ever give in
Nor yield to seemingly overwhelming might
Of the base instincts of fear, greed and tribalism.
We stand together. All earth's dusts, the saints'
potent supplications will stand with us. Let us
not prostrate in defeat, in the patient rot of winter.
There is enough sky for a thousand suns to rise.
Take your place. Rise. Shine. Give some warmth
Let us make a bonfire of human kindness and care.
And Spring's green fountains shall burst in every
heart. Even as the winter of virulent virus rages on.
Grit wins. Shared human warmth wins. You win, I win.

Of Weddings & Funerals

by Favour Ahuchaogu

There's no Igbo word for nose mask. At least, no specific word designated for it. *Ihe mkpuchi ihu.* A covering for the face. Almost a full sentence. That's what the awareness programs broadcast on the radio would call it.

Before, I had only seen doctors and nurses wear it. The young doctor that removed my appendix when I was six wore one decorated with Tom and Jerry stickers. He told me it was called a surgical mask and that I shouldn't be afraid of it because it protected him and me from germs. That was what I would remember the first time I covered my nose and mouth with a mask Mama sewed from leftover fabric. We wore it to church. Not a hospital.

Uncle Emeka was wearing a black colored nose mask in February when he called us on WhatsApp. He is Mama's only sibling, younger than her by a decade and some. The one working in Shanghai. The one that gives us money and cloth gifts any Christmas he visits. Kizito still has a Chinese won he gave him three Christmases ago tucked into his Oxford dictionary.

"Emeka, you work in a hospital now?" Mama asked, peering into the phone's camera. She was sitting on her favorite couch with her wrapper tied high on her chest. The wrapper with the bottle opener design. Kizito and I were sitting on the arms of the couch even though Mama slapped us on the head whenever we did it. But she never complained when she was on a call with Uncle Emeka. It was a concession she unconsciously made.

"No, Sister. You people have not heard? There's a deadly virus going around. It's very bad here in China"

My mother made the sign of the cross.

"God will protect you. Is it like HIV?"

"Worse than that, Sister"

Mama snorted.

"What sickness can be worse than that one?"

"I hate to say it, but this one is and there is no cure yet. *Ndi mmadu na-anwu ka ijiji.* People are dying like flies. This coronavirus is deadly"

"I si gini? What did you say? Corolla? As in the car brand?"

Uncle Emeka laughed so hard he fell off the camera frame.

"Explain to me, Emy"

"Corona. It makes it hard for someone to breathe and taste…"

It was Mama's turn to laugh. She laughed so hard her wrapper started to slip down and Kizito had to hold the phone so she could adjust it.

"Emeka, that one is ordinary catarrh and cold na. Cover yourself well at night, inula? You hear?"

Uncle Emeka shrugged and shook his head. But he told Kizito and me to wash our hands regularly and we agreed, Kizito nodding vigorously because he promised him a PS5 on Easter. Mama would later take the phone from Kizito and ask Uncle Emeka if he was coming back on Easter as planned to marry his wife traditionally.

"Let's see how things go, Sister. The city I live in is currently locked down. I hope all these ends before then".

Mama assured him that it would and we said our farewells as he ended the call because he had to go back to work. We prayed for him that night, Mama asking Jesus to protect her Emy from "Corolla" and to open the doors of the city so he would come back and marry.

By March, we were familiar with the virus. Our schools were closed and Mama sighed and sucked air between her teeth when it was announced that our church would be closed too. But she pushed out her lower lip and put her hands on her hips when Uncle Emeka called and said the wedding would be held over Zoom.

"What are you even saying, Emeka? Just postpone the wedding. You can do it in December. By then, all these would have ended"

"No, Sister. My schedule wouldn't be free by then and besides, I have moved the wedding date a lot. Amaka is already getting antsy"

"We will go to her people and tell them…"

Uncle Emeka interrupted Mama. The only time I heard him do it. He looked stressed like Kizito's dog when it had been in the cage for long. His hair and beard were bushy because his barber was closed.

"No, Sister. We will do it over Zoom. I have already told Amaka's brother how to go about it"

Mama pushed out her lower lip as far as it could go after the call but that April, a week before Easter, we went to Amaka's family house for the traditional wedding. She is a beautiful, light-skinned lady and she didn't seem to mind that the wedding was uncommon. Uncle Emeka had sent her money for a new outfit and she went all out. She was just happy to be finally married to her "abroad fiance", virtual wedding or not. The wedding was done in her father's sitting room. There were drinks, a small cooler of jollof rice, and of course, fufu with ofe onugbu and ofe uha. The few friends and relatives present sat some in the sitting room and others on the verandah (because someone said something about "sosha distancing") with their nose masks under their jaws. It looked like someone had shrunk the regular, rambunctious ceremony and forced it into a sitting room with faded pictures of Amaka's parents hanging on the walls. When it was time

to give her husband palm wine, she knelt in front of the laptop, and Uncle Emeka smiled and nodded his head. He was wearing a red outfit like his bride and surrounded by some of his friends, Nigerian guys he had met in China. He drank from a glass Kizito suspected was full of beer. He had to remind Amaka's brother to unmute the device ten times. I counted. Everyone laughed at the unusualness of the whole thing and the older relatives talked about how such a thing would not have even been imagined in their day and how "coloniavilus" and technology had turned the world upside down. Amaka's mother took Mama aside after almost everyone had left and asked her if Uncle Emeka was going to start working on Amaka's visa as soon as possible.

Mama shrugged.

"My in-law, Emeka doesn't have the key to the locked borders, the embassy, or wherever it is they issue travel documents. Let's be content with this wedding. Left for me…"

And I pinched her because I knew what she was going to say.

By May, the travel ban had still not been lifted and Uncle Emeka called us less and less because as Mama put it, "he was a married man with a wife to talk to". Kizito begged her to call him and ask if he could send the money equivalent of the game console. Mama stubbornly refused because she still bore a grudge over the "very weird wedding that did not give her room to shine as *ada*, first and only sister of the groom" (she sucked her teeth after saying it).

So we were quite surprised when a foreign number called Mama by midnight on a Tuesday in June. Kizito picked the call because he thought it was Uncle Emeka calling with regards to his gift. With halting English and an accent, the caller explained that he was calling from a hospital whose name I am sure we have all forgotten. Kizito's eyes went wild and he ran to wake Mama. She woke up, one hand outstretched for the phone and

the other holding her wrapper. She put the phone to her ear, scrunched up her face in concentration, and then let out a scream.

"*Emeka, nwanne m o!* Emeka, my brother!"

We sat around her as she screamed more and more. I picked up the phone she had dropped on the bed (because her hands were on her head). The caller was still speaking.

"You there? Are you there? We are very sorry…"

Later, we gathered that Uncle Emeka had contracted the virus from one of his friends that came to give him support during his wedding. We also learned that Mama was his emergency contact and the health workers had dialed "Sister" thinking she lived in China too. We finally gathered that he could have called us but he was lying in a hospital bed hooked to a respirator. The guilt tore Mama apart and she kept saying, "I would have called him. I would have called my brother but I was angry and now he's dead". Relatives trooped in, all safety measures thrown out of the window. But I'll never forget the way Amaka cried. She screamed from the gate, her hair and clothes disheveled, and threw herself on the floor in front of Mama mumbling "my husband, Emeka my husband". Mama shoved her and shouted that it was her desperation that killed her baby brother. If the wedding had not happened, his friends would not have come over. That was the same thing she told his friends over the phone when they called. When one of them, Tunde I think, asked if the family wanted to discuss burial arrangements, Mama jumped off the floor and her wrapper slipped to the floor revealing the nightgown she had been wearing for a week.

She shouted into the phone like the caller's ear was right next to her mouth and she wanted to deafen him.

"Murderers! Which one of you infected my brother? How am I even sure that it is that nonsense virus that killed him? What if this is a conspiracy?

I wish I could fly to China right now. Let me go and see with my two koro koro eyes. Emeka has had malaria and cold before na. How can common catarrh snuff Emy's life?"

By August, Uncle Emeka had rested in the ground for over a month. He was buried in July. After a series of extended family meetings, Mama agreed that he should be buried there. Flying a corpse from one continent to another was expensive. And near impossible with the lockdowns. His friends held his funeral over Zoom. We joined, sitting on the arms of the couch beside Mama. The priest said he was survived by his widow, his nephew and niece, and his only sister.

This Poem is an Analogy

by Michael Imossan

I

We cannot find ourselves by crawling into the shadows of our fathers,
But I tried– once, when I asked that my lover removed her dreams
Before entering into my home, just like father did mother. He said a
Woman's dream is the sun at midnight, burning the eyes of men. I do
Not know how true it is but my lover says she dreams of fireflies, piercing
Nightmares to brighten the walls of charred women painted in broken shells.
I sit at the corner of her eyes every night, waiting to squash fireflies.
The absence
of her father lurks behind her eyelids and,
in her pupil is her mother drenched in blood
plodding to resuscitate the healthy carcass of a stabbed dream. I now know
Why women dream with their eyes open, to see when men like us stretch hands to
Pluck them.

II

The eye is a funeral place and funeral places are filled with ghost leeching unto memories. I attend a procession today, another firefly is dead– to be
Buried beneath a brim of waterfall. Trace your foot marks to share semblance

With the womb of a woman and you'll walk the path where a coconut is broken -
Only to find the collective tears of women inside it. Everything is fleeting and I stand amidst
All; fireflies, nightmares, blood, broken shells, my lover dipped in night– still, I see protégés
walking around in shadows of their antecedents.

III

But because morning is wet with tears from funeral places, I am tempted to remember
The smell of death; my father's manhood, found in places unwanted– my sister's mouth,
Made mute from years of reading her mother and her mother's mother like a book.
What will make a woman learn the language of silence until her tear is found
Amongst the collective tears of others in a broken coconut?
We cannot find ourselves by crawling into the shadows of our fathers,
But I did– twice, when I told my sister her eyes were more beautiful when nude of dreams.

Famished

by Stella Chichi Obokoh

when the night smiles
and its fragrance exhumes
when we all settle in our nests
to the melodies of family tunes

what is jasmine to the one
who does not have a nest
or melody to the heart
with a rumbling belly

when the pot is stirred
and its steam rises
when we cluster, in joy
to its dousing aroma

what is charcoal to the one
whose barn has no yield
or aroma to the heart
with no hope for a meal

The Guests of Mama Nazira

by Tega Oghenechovwen

You can't miss the chalk-white bungalow by the acacia tree. In front of it, seven women in stiff blouses and wrappers lean over seven other women sitting on low carved stools, turning their dense black hair into cornrows. There would have been quietness but for the chattering of children who have come from the street to draw water, a sifting machine breaking chaff off a heap of last year's melon, bleating goats and cackling poultry. At the back of the bungalow, a mute man hammers on firewood with an enormous axe.

A woman with a light moustache prances out of the house in a billowing daraa, barefoot. Her graying hair is long, wet, and tangled like spiderwebs. Her figure casts long shadows that freeze every sound. She is Mama Nazira. Everyone greets her but she just nods. She shoots her eyes to the sun, chanting with hands held high. "It's going to be a good day," she proclaims. She touches the children on their shoulders, calling each one by name, inviting them to breakfast.

"Mama, what food?"

"Wala-wala," she replies to the bulbous-eyed girl with curly hair. The girls jump. "Mama, what of Mandazi?" a boy who escaped polio asks.

"Yes, we want Mandazi and chai," the boys chime aloud.

"Okay, there will be Mandazi and chai for the boys." She turns to the mute man, "Open the well."

The boys jump. They drum on their pails. The older ones somersault. Their

noise resurrects the other sounds. First, it is the sound of the fourteen women giggling under the acacia tree, then the mute man's axe, and then a roped iron pail falling into the well, smacking the surface of the water with an echoing keplunk.

Mama Nazira's husband, a former cab driver she met while she was making huge profits selling camels in Juba, is lounging on his bench at the mossy end of the compound.

"Sabah Alkhayr," she calls out to him. He twists his vexed lips toward his snotty nose.

His name is Mahmood. He has been weaving cane chairs since a car crash claimed his left foot. Today, he will play draught with his friends. If they do not come, he will play with himself because he would not want the gatekeepers of Ruquba to see him playing such a manly game with Mama Nazira.

* * * * *

The children return to the street with pails of water steadied on their heads, only to rush back with gurgling stomachs. Those for Wala-wala clap and sing. Those for Mandazi and chai drum and dance. Their music is an ode to the beast of hunger. They push each other when the foods arrive in steaming enamel bowls, weapons for striking the beast.

"No struggling," Mama Nazira yells. Their single-minded anticipation drowns her voice.

Yaqub, a ruddy-cheeked boy with crescent eyes, blows a whistle. They listen up. "There is enough."

They nod. Their assent is as useless as pushing green flies from fresh dung. Life has wired them to be wolves at hunt. To them enough is just not enough. They eat in advance.

A fistfight breaks out. Mama Nazira tears the two fighters apart. One points to the other. "Mariam has not washed her mouth. It smells like shit."

The children laugh.

"Janna, how dare you say that about your sister?"

Before Mama Nazira receives a reply, the boys smell one another's mouths and point out those whose mouths stink. Yaqub blows his whistle again.

"Who has not washed their mouth?" Mama Nazira asks. Hands shoot into the air, all of them. Yaqub fetches a giant tube from the house and presses pea amounts of toothpaste on their fingers. The children gargle, and spit like gargoyles. Yaqub blows his whistle again, then they plunge their wet hands in the bowls.

* * * * *

A few months after Mahmood lost a foot, he came home with a ruddy-cheeked baby he had fathered elsewhere, and said to Mama Nazira, "Take." With only a puzzled 'oh? 'she lifted the baby by the armpits and named him Yaqub. Joy pulses through Mama Nazira when she is with Yaqub and the other children. She forgets her womb has never felt a baby's kick. Instead of making her pot the smallest, she makes it the biggest, and opens her gate for the children to troop in, as if for an Olympic.

Mama Nazira cares for a different crop of children too – battered and broken, forcefully matured girls inside the house. They don't jump in the air or dance with the other children or talk children talk. They don't know if they are still children. Like ghosts, they come out only at moonlight to inhale the smell of freedom. Then, they gyrate and carol in the voices of polluted rivers and dispossessed queens.

Nadia, one of these girls, tiptoes into the front yard and shades her eyes. The pensiveness in her face twists into fascination when she sees the other

children slurping as real children slurp, and playing as real children play. She turns her face away.

"Mama!"

Mama Nazira gapes at her. "Nadia," she says in a hushed tone, "what are you doing out here?"

"Shamma is restless."

* * * * *

Nadia is supposed to be wife to Baba Nonsense, a loose-limbed man with warm threads of saliva dangling from his mouth. He was fond of throwing himself on Ruquba girls on their way home from school, and squeezing their breasts. Ashamed of this, his family arranged Nadia for him.

On their first night together, Nadia whipped Baba Nonsense on the head with a bamboo stick and ran to Mama Nazira's compound. To justify her action, she recalled in grisly detail how the man tried touching between her legs, his mouth frothing like sour melon soup.

Mahmood sent her back but Nadia returned some days later with three of her teeth missing. Mama Nazira circled the trembling girl with her arms. Both of them cried into each other. Their tears lit the fire.

* * * * *

Mama Nazira enters the basement room, which has borne witness to countless passages of kindred girls. She moves to one curved like a question mark on a bed in the corner, and places her palm on the girl's hot neck. "Shamma." The girl slowly raises her swollen eyelids. Shamma was married to the blind baba Hashim at twelve, just after she saw her first menstrual blood. During that time, she slept all through the day under the acacia tree. When she walked, she pressed the sides of her head with both her hands, as if to keep it from exploding. On questioning, she told Mama Nazira that her nights were bereft of sleep. She played hide-and-seek with baba Hasim

who groped about, looking for the knot of her wrapper.

One day, sick of hide-and-seek, the blind man stirred rat poison into Shamma's pot of okra soup. In the dead of the night, she writhed her way to Mama Nazira's compound like an earthworm assaulted with salt, leaving a trail of blackish things she had vomited. Nadia whispers to the other girls as Mama Nazira bends over Shamma. They all start a song. Mama Nazira lets out a long sigh. She shakes her body even though the song is nothing like the songs the daylight children sing.

From a chest, she takes out a white contraption she bought in Juba, after a nurse used one to check her temperature. She holds it like a gun to Shamma's forehead. Ping. Ping. The girls have never seen a thing like this. They express their astonishment in bursts of loud cheers that, still, are nothing like those of the daylight children. Mama Nazira fumbles with the contraption, then flings it into the chest.

* * * * *

The gatekeepers of Ruquba summon Mahmood.

"In the form of a joke," a man with shark jaws says to him, "fools are told proverbs."

Mahmood flicks sweat off his forehead. He knows exactly what the man means, but hunches his back and says, "Ehm, brother, I don't understand this bit of wisdom."

The demented laughter of the lot thunders in his ears. The man grunts and jets a greenish gob from his mouth. It lands on Mahmood's only foot.

"You should tell your wife something." He points a dagger at Mahmood. "She has too many things on her table, things that don't concern her."

Mahmood's eyes alternate between the sticky nuisance on his leg and the flies buzzing around it.

* * * * *

Mahmood comes home bellicose. "Get rid of those people you are hiding," he bawls at Mama Nazira, his trembling forefinger poking the air, "or else –"

"Or else what?" she rails in a broken voice. "They could have been my children. In fact, Mahmood, they are my children."

Mahmood twitches stormy eyes at her. He will remember her look – a picture of a lioness yelping before an antelope. He hobbles away with a frustrated droop to his shoulder.

* * * * *

Mama Nazira would have been more circumspect after encountering Mahmood's furore, but just then Asim appeared behind her gate with a Nikon slung round his neck. He asked for a room to rent in her house. She asked him about his journey. And what of his people? What had he done with his young life? What was he planning to do after the mandatory one-year youth service to Nigeria?

"You have come well. You will stay in that room without a fee." She pointed to a room near the outside kitchen. "But for now you must eat ground maize and mashed beans prepared with cow milk—without a fee too. You must eat."

A sense of discomfort soured Mahmood's face when Mama Nazira informed him about the terms of Asim's tenancy. "What do you mean no rent?"

"It is my house Mahmood and I decide what to do with it," Mama Nazira said.

* * * * *

The next night, she informed Asim about the girls and led him into their room.

"Thirteen." Leila said with labored precision when he asked of her age. He

couldn't lift his eyes from the heavy belly jutting out of her small body.

"What are you expecting?"

She made a circular motion with her hands on her belly. "I don't know, maybe it will be a brother, maybe a small sister." A ghost smile flashed on her lips.

"This one is Farida." Mama Nazira's voice came from behind. She was beside a girl whose hands tightly tied her folded legs against her chest. "Farida is sixteen, and already widowed." She tutted. "Now, her late husband's brothers pursue her."

A long gasp escaped Asim. He didn't know what to say to the sadness blazing in Farida's eyes.

"How—how are you, Farida?" he ventured inaudibly.

Farida heard him as she had heard others ask about her, even though they knew how crushing the weight of life must be on her body.

She fixed her eyes on the only window in the room, which now ferried in the kreek-kreek of crickets. "I am scared they will come for me," she motioned to the other girls, "for us." She took a deep breath, then motioned toward Mama Nazira. "For her."

* * * * *

Mahmood glowered noisily while Asim and Mama Nazira had a conversation in the front yard. Mama Nazira knew her husband was smouldering but it was too late. He could not put out their fire.

Mama Nazira waited for the women's meeting to come. When it came, she put the fire in her tongue.

"Our men deny us our daughters!" she said. "They snatch them from us even before they are able to crawl out of their cots. Then, they marry them.

The act is like looking at heirlooms and saying, 'gather them and burn them.' The women stared at her blankly.

"What do you have to say about this nonsense?" she thundered. "How many more shall we allow to slip away from us during their childbearing?"

They heaved loud breaths of sadness. Some of them felt she had been smoking her husband's bhang because they couldn't believe that a woman could speak in that fiery way without some bhang. She pressed her palms together and in a plaintive voice cried, "Women, please answer me." They looked away.

* * * * *

Soon Mama Nazira's commitment to the fire became absolute. With her go-ahead, Asim took pictures of the girls and brought the tip of his quill to touch the inks of their lives. He wrote little notes about their experiences and dispersed them like seeds. He sent emails to children-oriented organizations of pictures showing the girls in their bunker, imploring the recipients to stop the abuse. In one, he wrote:

"We need not be barren like Mama Nazira or brave like her to feel the way she does about this. We should only have blood flowing in us to give a quick response to their consternation, wherever they are, wherever we are."

His camera clicked, and clicked. He wrote some more. Many editorials fed into his narratives. And like a virus, the fire engulfed many hearts. It spread across the country. Demonstrators marched through the streets of the capital and other cities carrying placards reading, "Say NO to kid-mothers!" "Underage Marriage Is Infanticide!" "Seventeen-Year-Old Divorcée? HELL NO!"

A BBC journalist interviewed a shaggy-haired pundit wearing a T-shirt that said, "Crush Corruption in Africa, Not Children's Vulvas!" She said it was not a matter of faulty religious or cultural ethics, but a strain of pedophilia that had hit the crotch area of some African men and made them have a vile

affection for children. Her statement ensured a dialogue between the mouths of Africa and the outside world. That, too, was the fire.

* * * * *

Ruquba women closed their stalls for two weeks after watching Shamma's body placed in a minute grave, and hearing that Mama Nazira narrowly escaped a cutlass wielded by an infuriated man whose child-bride-to-be had jumped in front of an oncoming truck.

Mama Nazira shrank into the darkest part of her house, tearing her hair, escaping food, rebuking an eerie dream she'd had—a dream where she fell and drowned in choppy water gushing from Shamma's grave—thinking of the girls, wondering how they were able to wear flowery smiles in the pictures taken by Asim despite their agony. She blessed and prayed for them in her parched voice. She also prayed for Asim who dashed into the dusk when bullets whizzed at him while taking his kind of pictures, somewhere else. Yaqub and his friends would chirrup at her closed door:

"Mama, hooray! We heard that a van from *Al Jazeera* and a van from Amnesty International are coming with other NGO vans. Is this true?"

"Mama, hooray! They said you are protecting girlkind. What of boykind?"
"Mama, hooray! They say you may be collecting the Nobel Prize. What that?"

When she would not answer except with a doleful sigh, they would forsake their jubilant hoorays, and in quiet voices say, "Mama, please! Open and eat."

* * * * *

Now, the sky is a murky expanse thick with long-lost bats. Yaqub sees the bats while rearranging the crates the street children sat upon to eat that evening, all of whom have left now, bound for bed. The bats are like black leaves rioting in the sky.

He runs into the house and pounds on Mama Nazira's door. "Mama, the bats. The bats."

Yaqub's words remind her of the dream again, of Shamma in the water-filled grave. After it, she had awoken soaking wet. She opens up and scampers out. "How many are they?" Yaqub asks.

She lifts her eyes. "Infinite like worries," she says rubbing his head. "You should not think of counting them." The boy trudges into the house to find his bed and go to sleep. Alone now, Mama Nazira spreads her prayer mat under the acacia tree, and says the A'uzu billahi, seeking protection against the dark forces which she has told Yaqub turn into bats when something evil is about to happen.

Before too long, the rumblings of motorbikes die at her gate. Urgent knocks rattle her bones and loosen her headscarf. She gets up from the mat.

"Ahlan bik," she says in a crumpled voice, asking the night callers in after she pushes back the latch of the gate. She knows why they have come. She has no regrets.

"Salam Aleikum!" They say to her.

The most hateful thing about them is their salaam. It sends a sickening report down her bowel. "Why bring peace with a cudgel?" she says to their leader. He circles her with the unhurried rhythm of a cat, gazing at the well and orders that the lock on its lid be broken.

The men pass loaf-size stones to waiting hands. This whole time, the leader keeps donning a feral smile, his hands running over his bearded chin.

In the entombing darkness of their room, the night girls breathe in the evil boiling the air. Blows on the well and the rattling of its lid freeze their senses for unending seconds. They huddle together. "Sisters, the end has come" Nadia whispers. They don't cry. Even if they do, it will not sound like the cries of the daylight children. It will sound like a joke cracked in a funeral parlor. They wish they could choke themselves to death.

* * * * *

Mama Nazira returns to her prayer mat, adjusts her scarf, and clutches her prayer beads so tightly the veins in her hands creak. She is no longer able to give sounds to the words of her prayer. Her heart is a horse in flight. She snaps the beads, baring her teeth in a growl.

The men stand two paces from her. They hold their fists high in the air. Hypnotic chants follow. Sticks and stones drum on her body. Strangely, her galloping heart stops racing. What she hears above the bashing is not the cracking of her bones or the squelching of her flesh. She hears only her husband's crutches thumping outside the compound.

After some minutes, the night quakes to a horrendous splashing from her good old well:

Keplunk!

Loves-Radarscope

by Mark Andrew Heathcote

Empathy caring compassion sympathy understanding kindness
You wish to be seen on loves-radarscope-
As a solid Ark, passengers embark.
Your arms trestle out with the weight of hope
And keeps your head above a watermark?
Every voyage is a journey of faith.
Staying just above the next tidal wave?

Yes, one act of kindness can change the world.
Don't we all need rescuing from dark despair?
Like sea-going birds, a-little-too whirled-
On wings near folded commit to prayer
Our souls need buoyancy a terminus,
A harbour our hearts can be of service.

So you want to pilot alone at times.
Ignore dangerously all warning signs
But something always turns those bleak-dim-tides
And has you reaching-out where love resides
An anchor in a port you can never-
Raise or plot a course-from move-propeller.

The Other Sides of the Sun

by Musa Khalid

NAFEESA

Re: What color is the sun today?

The sun is white, pale, clearly not in the mood and I hope this finds you well, Basheer.

It's been a while, you know. It's been a while I read the first letter I sent you. It's been a while I sat with the first goodbye we shared as a married couple. As I sat with you in that unforgivable afternoon seventeen years ago, I remember hearing an orchestra of nature ushered in by the sunset. I remember the wind playing, the trees sighing to a beauty that'd end, and then the bus… the bus? Well, the bus came too early taking you away from me and that'd only be the first of many times. I thought I'd get used to it but there's no getting used to goodbyes.

That first goodbye: we'd been married for just fifty-two days but you had to go. Your country needed you; but then doesn't it always? A country with unkenneled peace. And so has developed an unsympathetic and incessant habit of separating its caregiver from his loved ones for the sake of sewing together the strewn pieces of that peace. We had only been married fifty-two days! But I forgive it.

You said we should write to each other until you return. I thought that was odd when we could just call. You said you weren't allowed phones throughout your mission. You spent three months away that first time. I won't say I'm used to your constant short presence and unavoidable long absence though being incurable pen-buddies in a digitally-oriented world has proven to be plenty fun, plenty beautiful.

I mean we've been doing this for seventeen years now. And even though "fate makes queer uses of all of us sometimes" we have to make the best use of it.

Oh yeah, I almost forgot. Book to read: *The Great Secret by E. Philips Oppenheim*

PS. The quote above is from the author.

* * * * *

NAFEESA

Re: What color is the sun today?

The color of the sun is like the inside of my palm, and I hope this finds you well.

I've received your last letter and the necklace. It's beautiful – not as beautiful as you coming home finally and with finality. I know! I know… It's just that, it's been two months now. It's been two months since you've been away.

I've also read the book you recommended in your letter *[The Midnight Library by Matt Haig].* As always, I love it. Although I'm starting to think you recommended it to ruin the wish I told you I had when I was younger: an ability to time travel. So keep in mind that I'll have my revenge, Basheer.

But no matter, I made a review about the book: I love that the time-travel medium is a library filled with books of the main character's varied pasts. And that when she takes a book from a shelf and opens it, she meets unventured paths of her pasts. And she doesn't just meet them, she becomes that past– hence, the time-traveling – and see how life would have turned out for her had she done this or that differently. Who wouldn't love to visit their past and correct all the wrongs they've done, correct the lazy and childish choices they've made?

But in the end the author cunningly, but with love, showed me the illusion of time travel doesn't guarantee happiness (thus shattering my wish all

thanks to you). And that a person's present moment – no matter how boring, if I may add – is the best version of one's tale.

In other news, we have new neighbors. The fact that the thin wall we share with them divulges new names, low-pitched conversations, and no screaming match between children and their parents as it was with the previous occupants confirms that we have new neighbors.

Hurray! We are no longer the newest member of this neighborhood.

Sarah – Mr. Hassan's wife from down the street – said the new neighbors are newly married. How very nice! Do you remember when we were newly married? The timeless mornings, the nocturnal afternoons, the soulful nights, and the lazy weekends. How time flies… Now we are old, Basheer. An old married couple with two teenage kids, a thousand travelled letters, a thousand colored sun travelling with those letters, and an obstinately young love that, thankfully, has no sense of time. We are all the yesterdays we allow in the now-ness of us, don't you agree?

About the new neighbors … I think there's something strange about them. I can quite put my fingers on it but for some reason, I think, it spells trouble … Well, time will tell. But I do pray it tells the opposite of what I think it is.

It's almost 2p.m and I have to go pick up the kids from school lest I keep them stranded like last time (FYI: the kids and I agreed: last time was your fault.) I do look forward to receiving your next letter. Even more, I look forward to your return.

Book recommendation: *I'm The Messenger by Markus Zusak.*

* * * * *

NAFEESA

Re: What color is the sun today?

Today, the sun is too intrusive. It cuts open the leaves and branches and

curtains and forces its way to our room waking me from sleep I didn't have and I hope this finds you well.

It is said, the artist not the art. Your forte for writing the right words that always find me shouldn't preclude your physical presence to relay them to me firsthand. I have received your letter. I've read them multiple times but when are you coming back?

I also love your review on *I'm The Messenger.* "Sometimes people are beautiful. Not in looks. Not in what they say. Just in what they are"– Markus Zusak.

It rained yesterday. A little drizzle then a downpour. All night long but I didn't sleep all night long – don't worry too much, I will get to the reason why soon.

Your mom was here two days ago and she took the kids with her and she really misses you too. So this morning, I drove to your mom's to pick up the kids and take them to school. I dropped Hajara and Jabir an hour ago. Hajara is turning sixteen in a few weeks. I know you said you are going to get her a phone. I don't think you should. A phone is an invitation to problems for a girl her age. If the kids must use a phone, when they do, they can use mine.

Also, attached to this are two more letters written by Hajara and Jabir (full disclosure: I almost didn't want to send their letters and use it to blackmail you so be very grateful I didn't and do the needful.)

So the new neighbors… I have been planning to go round the building and welcome the bride to the neighborhood but I haven't gotten around to it.

You know, the thing about living in a neighborhood like ours is that the people here are incredibly nice, fences are almost unnecessary, nighttime comes late, the neighborhood's pulse is in its benign greetings, guidance, and gossip. And most of all, words poke the fine fibers of the wall we share with our new neighbors.

And what those thin walls spilled last night about our new neighbors was

that the groom hits his bride. He has made her his punching bag. They haven't been married for more than a week.

Something must have gone drastically wrong. Truly, the scariest thing ever is a love that has turned to hate. And this is worse than that.

Lately, this has been the case whenever the husband is home, except when he brings visitors.

I hear his laughter threatening to bring down our wall. The laughter is always from him and his visitors, but never from her. I don't think I've ever heard her voice (I don't mean her cries, and screams but her voice when she talks). It is always his voice screaming her name and I feel sad because she has a beautiful name: Asma'u.

Before I continue, I should tell you that I called your friend Engr. Umar to see if something can be done about this damned thin wall of ours. I don't want the kids hearing this craziness.

Engr. Umar said he's unavailable but he'd take care of it as soon as he can. Therefore, the kids have been with your mom and will remain there until it is fixed.

Last night, I was awoken by Asma'u's screams. He beat her so much that I thought he had killed her. I couldn't sleep. So this morning, after going to your mom's to take the kids to school I went to the new neighbors' house. I said salam but no response. I peeked through the window and saw Asma'u trying to hang herself. Luckily, the front door was open. I rushed in but tripped over her suitcase that was by the door. Then I saw the fear in her eyes. I stopped her from hanging herself. I was lucky I was there the time I was.

I wonder how many moments brought her to this. To this point, to this decision– a decidedly final act that I interrupted.

I brought her back to our house. She said she was never going back. And as I held her and walked her to our house she clutched her suitcase that was by the door. I think she had wanted to leave him when she decided to end her life instead.

I asked her if there's someone from home she wanted me to call for her and she said nothing. I switched on her phone to search for her mom's number when she snatched it and said, 'please no. No one can help.'

"You know that things aren't going well for you when you can't even tell people the simplest fact about your life, just because they'll presume you're asking them to feel sorry for you. I suppose it's why you feel so far away from everyone." Nick Hornby, *A Long Way Down*

I must save her, Basheer. I don't know how but I must. That monster of a man that is her husband is going to be back later in the evening and meet an empty house. It won't be long before he finds her here. It won't be long before he knocks on our door.

Book to re-read: *A Long Way Down by Nick Hornby.*

* * * * *

NAFEESA

Re: What color is the sun today?

For the most part of the day, the sun is nowhere to be found and I hope this finds you well.

A person "who wants to die feels angry and full of life and desperate and bored and exhausted, all at the same time; he wants to curl up in a ball and hide in a cupboard somewhere. He wants to say sorry to everyone, and he wants everyone to know just how badly they've all let him down."– *Nick Hornby, A Long Way Down.*

And I don't want to let Asma'u down.

Basheer, if our story– you and I together– makes hours and minutes run like seconds, I don't think Asma'u knows how that feels like.

She slept like a baby at the end of the day I found her. It was a beautiful thing seeing the calmness in her face. The face of someone who found no meaning in life.

I don't think her husband bothered to search for her when he returned and met an empty house. He returned a few minutes past midnight, opened the front door, then shut it and that was it. He didn't care what became of her. I don't think he was startled when he saw a rope hanging from the ceiling of their living room. The rope his wife almost hanged herself with.

The following morning, I made Asma'u tea and we sat at the dining table. She doesn't say much.. she doesn't talk. In your last letter, you did say I shouldn't push her, she will open up eventually. Well, she did.

She told me she doesn't have a single family in this city. She doesn't tell me whether hers was an arranged marriage or whether she never knew how he really was when they were dating. I suggested she goes back to her parents and she told me they said she dared not return. That she should be patient she'll eventually "understand him" and only then will the beating stop.

Can you believe that? That's the thing about domestic abuse– it's always taken lightly by the parties that can fix it at an early age before it worsens or become fatally unfixable.

'Everything is going to be okay, Asma'u.' I said calling out her name for the first of many times. There is life in her name. I call it time after time to remind her there's life in her name.

I don't really know how to help her. How do you help a person whose own parents deny the existence of her pain, a person who prefers to die than to continue living with her so-called "soulmate".

Basheer, you have to come back now more than ever. The kids haven't been home for almost three days. I talked to your mom about Asma'u and she said, this is a delicate issue especially since we are practically strangers to her. She suggested we take her to her parents and make them understand she needs to leave this city. She needs to leave this man. She needs to be free before she's gone.

Book recommendation: *Gone Girl by Gillian Flynn*

* * * * *

BASHEER

Re: What color is the sun today?

Nafeesa, the afternoon here is impossibly sunny as always. It's like I live in a different world with a sun that's different from your sun and I hope this finds you well.

Work here is, for the most part, perfunctory so I won't bore you with that. But guess what? I'm on my way back home. I'll probably return home before this letter gets to you but I couldn't help but write to you anyways.

So I've finished reading *Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn just a few minutes ago. It was a scary book and I'm starting to think that the books you recommend capture or exaggerate the content of your letters. Nafeesa, is this your way of having your revenge?

For the record, I've sent you two letters (this inclusive) after your last letter. You gave me quite the scare when you didn't write me back within the timeframe you usually do. I thought that maniac has harmed you in trying to get back Asma'u. It was through Mom's letter that I understood all was truly well even though I'm not overly thrilled by all that she told me.

I can't believe that lowlife dared forced himself into our home. Mom told me you screamed when he entered and the whole neighborhood gathered

and gave him and I quote her "the beating of his life". Is that why you didn't write to me because you don't want me to know?

Or is it because you and Asma'u had to also move in with mom to avoid that man thus didn't receive my first letter as it sits in our mailbox?

Whatever it is I assure you this: what the neighbors did to that jackass is just a prelude of what I'll do to him when I get back. Though I'm happy that, with dad's and mom's help, you took Asma'u home and made her parents listen to you. To her.

I don't know what to tell you but some stories are just that bad. We all like to think our story is all that is happening in the world. I think a person's story means things happening in his/her life similar, or different than others. Maybe even in adjacent, but definitely among and in conjunction with other stories. The difference is in the perception but we are still required to have empathy.

The similarity is in the spark of connection and we need to keep it alive. And the adjacent, the conjunction is the places we find ourselves with each other; defining ourselves with each other a little more, a little better each day. But no story is entirely different. And nothing is completely new. The only uniqueness plastered to that is the fact that it is your story.

So what do you do? You try to make it better and you help others make theirs better.

We tend to look at people like Asma'u and fail to see, let alone understand, the battles they are fighting and that it isn't easy but they must keep fighting. And "hard is trying to rebuild yourself, piece by piece, with no instruction book, and no clue as to where all the important bits are supposed to go." – Nick Hornby, *A Long Way Down.*

But still, she must.

It's a good thing Asma'u met you. It's a great thing the world has you. And I can't tell how happy I am to have you. I thank Allah every day for the gift of you.

Book to read: *The Hate U Give by Angie Thomas*

Right now, the sun is the size of the afternoon and a little past that, and I really -really– do hope this finds you well.

Nafeesa, see you when I get back. I bet I'll arrive before this letter does. Will you take that bet?

Grief's Hole

by Aisha Kabiru Mohammed

(For Ajifa)

I have learnt that sometimes
pain comes with the pit pat splash of rain.
And when it passes
it leaves a petrichor of loss and realization.

On a Monday afternoon when the rains
were a siren for mourners and condolences.
I watched you break into a million
Pieces when we you heard that death had visited.

My lips heavy with doubt
Couldn't offer a word to calm you
What are words? compared to the
Vortex grief leaves in it's place

The tears cascading down my
Cheeks felt wrong
What are tears ?
Compared to the lack of a mothers
Warm hug and guidance.
I could only follow you into that hole
that you were slowly falling into
Offer you a silver necklace; a gift, a message that read:

I understand my heart has not felt a pain like this but I will carry this load with you if you would be relieved of it.

This Tied Tongue

by Odafin Odafe Okoh

Nobody knew what the sun had foreseen when it continually went to hide behind lakes of opaque clouds and from there shut its eyes against Omole Street this afternoon just after Juma'at. Not even you, with the fragrant whiff of fermenting wisdom oozing from your greying bristles could have guessed that one plus one equalled insanity. And insanity is the same cocoon you re-wrapped words of steel every morning and tucked beneath the eyes of a squinting moon every night being cracked open by the hot prodding of eight cold fingers and the translucent, wiry corpse of a caterpillar being held out for the stars to see and sigh and regret creeping out for the night.

Leaving home for work this yellow morning, the daybreak sun brought its soft lips to your face and kissed you into further wakefulness. Its heat was a caress, warming into unaccountable spasms of joy that could only come out as smiling salutations to your compound people.

Iya'beji barely acknowledged you. Her knotted face was for either of Jamila and Jamilu, her five year olds who had a daily fascination for the brown rampage seeking to bob out of her pan of sizzling oil. The fascination for you contained in the gradual upheaval of its aroma and the intimacy with which it courted your guts, yet quickly back-flipping you through a thirty year old Saturday mornings with Opeoluwa in the kitchen and the spilling of saliva the scent of her food brought behind one's tongue. As for all of hungry Omole, that *ka-ka-kam* of metal spoon against the bowl of bean paste and *shshshsh* of browning *akara* was the going bell for a miser-friendly breakfast. Not even you could wait to send your apprentice all the way.

'Ehen, Bab'Oyin ekaaro,' she said, seconds later.

Madam Justina had not looked up from her laundry. Her singing filled her mouth such that the response she flung your way did not distort her rhythm in any way. Her nonchalance was understandable, even pitiable. By this morning, the battering she had received through the midnight match against her man had re-described her features and the contrast of black and red against the slippery yellow of her face; too prominent to be seen and ignored. It was not the first time you would be woken by such sounds as the thudding of wall and the slapping of flesh. It was not the first time you would sit them down to narrate your years of peace with Opeoluwa. And it was not the first time you would manage to slip in a sentence about the bleakness of the futures of unschooled children, ignoring the disdain in her eyes for the subject.

Nura bared the rusty brown of his teeth, propelling his truck of yellow gallons by the force of his slender waist. He drew a crooked finger over his forehead and nose to erase the blisters of sweat running riot before returning your wave of hand.

'Ya'yara?' – *how are your children?* he asked.

And you laughed, nodding, because your tongue had indeed tired of reminding him that you had none and this one girl is a grandchild.

You are not sure if Oga Magnus had seen you coming, the way he fixed on unlocking his beer stall and would not look back. It was not lost on you that he still begrudged your attempt at embarrassing him the other day when you came running your mouth, requesting your money, in the presence of his revered associates and customers. Were you the first to be owed money? It did not surprise you either that when you tossed a number of *oga-mag-good-morning*s to his side of the gully nothing came tottering back.

From where you emerged into the junction, where Obadiran Police Station

sits collecting squabbles and dust, you caught the blackened blue of your apprentice's Chelsea Yokohama jersey flitting between open bonnet and doors – evidence of a full stomach, assurance of today's breakfast. When you straightened the last of your change to Oyindamola this morning, you did not let her see on your face; the pernicious contortion in your belly that lashed itself whole upon your innards and summoned malicious growls from the worms in it.

When she frowned at your generosity, wondering how you would eat from an empty pocket you smoothed her fleshly cheeks, smiled and said, *'My dear, your school dey me more important right now. When you become engineer graduate and turn my workshop around, my belle go full.'* And even at that moment, your stomach had filled, being empty.

She has a very bright future, this your Oyinda, you are sure. There is a reason God spared her life in that automobile accident that zapped those of her parents and two older siblings four years ago and left its memory in this ten year old by the hyper-trophic scar running down the mid-thigh to calf of her left leg, and by stealing through her voice box to leave her incapable of speech.

But it neither matters to her now that your apprentice did have some change nor does it to you that you filled your belly with Iya'beji's bean cakes. Worse, you are wont to throw it all up if this would restore your Oyinda.

You are huddled by the door, chin dipped between the knees which try but fail to steady your quivering head. And even if they succeed, inside of it judders. It judders such that your thoughts are haphazard, piecing blank squares of a rowdy puzzle. It is to undo this haphazardness that you have squinched by this doorpost, it being the last place you saw her. The glint in your eyes could not hide itself when she turned back to wave at you, smiling and revealing the magical beauty of her lower gap tooth. With tears bothering your eyelids, you knew you would empty the essence of

your years into her. You make to speak, to ask for a cup of water, but inanities drenched in saliva and mucus and tears gush out of your mouth.

* * * * *

The Doctor hesitates at the door handle. He says, for the last time, that he expects you to maintain your composure. You nod, upsetting the ache in your head, a small price to quell the throbbing of jaw worsening with usage. The door opens without a creak and a morgue-like cold rushes onto your face. You see her still, little, helpless body and this cold sharpens into a chill that stabs at your nose and eyes into picking from where they dropped, dripping. She is uncovered, save from between her thighs to her navel where fat strips of plaster run through. Explosions of cotton produce from the plasters. An oxygen tank connects to the transparent plastic nose mask on her face by a slender hose.

As the Doctor begins to jabber on how she came to be admitted and later, something about a vaginal something something and later, on a fifty-fifty, you distract yourself with figuring which of these monstrous machines in the unit is responsible for all the beeping and the whirring and the rise and fall of her rib cage and which to placate to return your Oyinda, the apple of your life and substance of your existence. Your fingers twitch to touch her, to transfer the life in your remaining years and in the emptying of the last minutes commit your belief in her to her. But you refrain for fear of its impossibility and the repercussion of such impossibility.

She is gone. You hear it from the throaty wailing of woman, the stamping of shoeless feet and the slapping of wall down the corridor. Iya'beji. And Nura, who had made it a matter of duty since he came running to your workshop this afternoon, his prayer mat flaying on his shoulder, to remind you and everyone over and again that it was eight men! Eight men! Kai! From the reception where you sat supplicating and staring at the blurry characters on the television you will the woman to pull herself together,

before slinking out of LifeFirst, the crack in your chest spreading like a seismic force, more than capable of crippling you.

You take the highway home. You are a ghost, in white robe, solemnly drifting through a noisy world. Thrice, the screech of vehicle tyres retrieve you from my grip. Thrice, drivers scream obscenities at your absent presence. At the turn into a semblance of Omole Street, where the distance between you and the half moon is an ascending clear path, you rehash a query for the moon, aloud, loudly. The remnant of your saliva sours upon your taste buds while at it. It thickens and even begins to slow your tongue. Your eyes scout for a remedy. It appears. You squat beside a tiny field of tall grasses, uproot a bundle and begin to chew on each blade from tip to middle as you walk and hop homewards.

You cannot get past the door-frame. Your eyes were wide open when a film, thick and black, bumped into them and became all that you see. Its darkness reels before you with the speed of light such that it whorls forward, a grungy form of that face, same rapturous smile, even cackling, only now her lower gap tooth juts forward from the whirling and the shiny black patch of it enlarges steadily till it is as big as the doorway in front of you. It is the doorway in front of you. You take a brave step through that blackness but your brain singes with a rude pain akin to supersonic activity and shrinks like a ball of wax fretting at the smell of furnace fumes.

You unzip your denim overall, step out of it and try to use it in thwacking this illusion obstructing. All of this turns your eyeballs around till you are woozy, reassuring yourself that what is before you is not a ditch. You refuse to be tricked into plunging yourself into this miasmic realm already welcoming you with its audacious inklings of insanity. It is as you stretch your hand, groping about for the door-frame and then toppling over on your bad leg that you find that this is neither the door to your room nor a door to anywhere.

* * * * *

My ears start. All the people have been laughing at me. All the cars are shouting at me. Even if their headlights are inside my eyes I can see that I am in the middle of the road on a street with houses and shops I don't recognize. But I raise my head and see that the moon still sees me, full in its halfness, very able to memorize. I decide I must tell it, while I still can, all that I know, while I still know, while I should still know.

* * * * *

It is a week before you are brought back home, in slack chains. The bandage winding from your thigh to your calf is just as slack and the redness of the unsightly gash it conceals peeks out. You do not remember doing this to yourself but you remember the scuffles; first, they, successfully wrestling the knife from your hand and not without the bliss of your teeth anyway and then forcing these metal links up and around your limbs while you barked in rage into the deaf walls.

You are trapped in this state – slapping thighs and shuffling between freedom from the torture of being in your own skin and the prized but unforgivable forgetfulness insanity comes with when the gash on the inside of your thigh tinges awake and blood runs out with renewed vigour. Your mind slackens. Your eyelids, heavy, drop. Borne horizontally in the arms of a muscular athlete, you are bounded off.

* * * * *

But for the cuffs holding each wrist and ankle to a separate bar, you would have disappeared from here. All that jutting edges of crumpled tins at Omoale dumpsite and the cool sandiness of shallow and receded gutters provided just adequate coarseness against this itching back. The moist mushiness of this hospital bed pampers the itch, even providing for it a circular path so that it is not only useless that you begin to rub your back

against it. None of this people in the room can make any sense of the wiggling and whimpering. How do you even tell them that this tied tongue is not intentional. You are least worried about their sighing and shaking of heads and sobbing because at this point, from when you first blacked out, you are no longer sure of what is and what is not, who is and who is not, where is and where is not.

When you first came here, you were not here. You were at the scene, throwing ghostly punches at the eight of them; first at the one who pinned both of her wrists to the stony earth with one arm while he shoved her red beret into her mouth with the other, then to Oga Magnus who ran into her in one direct thrust that had caused her muffled scream to sink right back into her throat and drew tears from her closed eyelids.

You slapped and screamed and kicked but it did nothing. It was as if you were not there with them in the uncompleted building, the way they went on ripping the life out of her. But you knew you were there, pleading with your girl to fight for her life, reminding her of the future you had agreed upon. And yes, she even did fight for that life. If you were not such a weakling. You were drawn away from the scene by the prick of a needle.

Now you dream too much. See too many faces you would rather not confront. One with Oyindamola and that open teeth smile. Then her mother's, Opeyemi's, with the deafening wail. Her own mother, your wife, Opeoluwa, came frowning. You tried to explain to her, but again your tongue had not given in. This one is the sixth in the past hour. You are on a roof. The roof of a familiar house. Your head pulsates at the direct glare of the sun. There is noise coming up from the house upon which you are. It rises and rises, louder and thicker. It becomes of a commotion. None of the other houses around reflect this noise. There are no people on the street. The noise, of men and woman, transforms into the kicking of bodies, the slapping of faces and the punching of heads. Soon the punches

begin to taunt the roof just beneath you. One thick blow rips the zinc apart and you drop straight through the opening.

For what counts as minutes, you are not landed. There are no faces in the room through which you have dropped, just walls of concrete blocks, moist and beset with algae. But the noise persists, even if no longer as loud. It pitches, screeches and then becomes metallic. It becomes the rattling of your cuffs against the iron bars of the bed.

When your eyes pop open, the first face peering down snaps at your breath. The strangeness of the smile is familiar. You flip a few pages back on the recent dreams. It's the fourth. No, second. It's anyone. You had just hit the floor of that uncompleted building – which one? Can't remember – when the sound of a familiar crowd sped by.

You got up to the window and recognised Omole Street with its islets of dilapidated flats and gutters, overflowing with rubble, snaking about these flats. There was no sign that a crowd had gone by. When you turned around it was no longer the uncompleted building with its upper black of weathered blocks and lower green of moist algae. It was a sitting room, familiar in its grotesquery. You had sat on that cane chair before. Yes. To settle a couple's fight. That night. How all that thudding on walls and slapping of flesh drove sleep from you. A curtain flung aside and a heaving woman sauntered in, only to halt in shock on discovering your presence.

You do not remember all that happened in-between, but here now, staring at you is the woman who walked back through that curtain and returned with your girl's corpse, smiling. The red around her left eye has quietened. You make to point at her and say her name and tell everyone that this is who you have just dreamt of, who had said, while dangling her corpse, 'How bright is a dead future?' and that the police must stop wasting their time. But your wrist is cuffed so that your finger can only wag and your tongue is tied so that you can only groan. Anguish ransacks the entire

length of your wiggling frame as an image of that buzzing fly flashes twice at your face. The crack in your chest spreads and bobbles you about till the legs of the bed dance and squeak against the tiles.

Before the nurses rush in and the sharp lip of an eager needle kisses you to sleep, you catch the sight of a full moon through a non-existent window as a thin screen of cloud wafts pass it. It has winked at you. A knowing wink, easing. It tempts you to trust in it, to count the pain and bid the days till with the truth, and a tongue for it, it comes around again.

Liquid Essence

by Chisom Umeh

The running current of humanity
touches the Niger and Mississippi.
It is a raging sea of emotions, senses,
sensibilities and colours.
To find the ocean they run into
is to find the beating heart of our kind.
And to drink from it,
is to know our stories
and sing them in your heart.
To wade into it
is to know that place
where history becomes art,
and where masters and slaves
were once humans, first.

Tulip: The Girl Flower

by Kathryn Olushola

When he called you Sunflower, you interjected. You said you were a Tulip. When he asked why, you told him; Tulips don't grow in these parts. I am rare.

That was how it all began. A sweet beginning it was. Like the one in the *Book of Genesis* where Adam and his beloved, Eve started life out happily till they weren't happy anymore.

Your relationship with him, in the beginning, was like, an endless cascade of petals until it wasn't anymore.

"I don't need a girl in my life right now."

You laughed. It was most likely one of his jokes, you reasoned. The starter to the climax of the comedy show he was putting just for you but, there were no finishers. It wasn't a joke.

"Wait, you're serious?"

His eyes answered what his mouth couldn't muster to say. He looked pained like he wasn't the one calling it quits in the first place.

Then you asked; Why are you doing this? Who is she? Is this going to be the end of our story? Nonso, answer me! Who is she?!

Then he said; It is a man! Tulip, a man like me has stolen my heart. I cannot continue living in denial!

Then you held him by the collar of his Polo shirt. You were devastated, in agony, anguish. "Take it back! Take it back!" you cried.

He held both of your hands and peeled them away from his collar, away from his life, far away. Then he left. He left without taking back his words. That was the last you saw of him. Weeks later, you would hear from mutual friends that Nonso had traveled to Finland for his Master's degree. He had left for good with the face of another man in his heart but, you did find comfort in the fact that wherever he went to in Finland, he'll always be reminded of you. You're after all a tulip flower and tulips grow in Finland.

* * * * *

You began catching yourself staring absentmindedly out the window above your kitchen sink. The one that led to the back of your home through to the route which cornered the path leading to the spot where you and Nonso previously used to meet under the moonshine. You stretched and tiptoed hoping you'd see old memories of the two of you walking out of the backyard. Oh, yes! You saw them! You saw his chubby black arm holding firmly to the small of your back and your slender body leaning to his build as you both walked. People always said the both of you were no good together. That you were a pictorial representation of the copulation between a giraffe and an elephant – if one were so unkind to himself to think about it.

It was in November, when the harmattan wind blew its trumpets louder than the Israelites in Biblical times, that the youths in the community where you lived, decided to take a stand against bad governance.

You joined in the dissents against your parent's wishes without batting an eye. They said; Tulip, please don't leave your house. Stay indoors. These government people are crazy! They would kill all of you without thinking twice. You are our only child. Please don't make us lose you!

Anyway, you were out on the streets the next day. You were at the forefront. You were willing to take the first bullet too. It was going to be their perfect suicide – giving your life up for a good cause because you were going to

take it yourself anyway. It was better to die a hero at the forefront of a good fight rather than dangling on a ceiling fan in your bedroom.

On the fourth day of the MARCH AGAINST BAD GOVERNANCE, the government released its most fierce soldiers. People said that these were more or less like zombies. They had no heart or human emotions. That they were blood-thirsty, lifeless men but that didn't stop you from mounting at the forefront. You were prepared for the worst. Already, you had left a letter containing your Last Will and Testament in your bedroom. You didn't leave a suicide note, no one must know you want to die. It was only going to be between you and God.

The soldiers threw tear gas into the crowd, people were scouting for an escape route but you stayed back. Amid all the chaos, you felt someone grab your right arm and pulled you away. It was an agreeable male. He was standing on the very thin thread that distinguished a boy from a man. As he pulled you away, he didn't speak or even spare a look at you. He was shirtless and had the appearance of a ruffian.

"Wetin dey worry you? You wan kill yourself?!" he shouted angrily at you the moment you both got to a quiet spot.

"And I thought you were even going to kill me!" was what you wanted to say but instead, you said, "What is wrong with you?! Is that why you pulled me here?!"

"Wetin this one dey talk? As I save your life, na bad thing I do?"

"And who asked you to save my life? Did I tell you I needed help? You better mind your business next time!"

"Oh oh oh," he did the thing people did when they understood something better. *"So you wan die ehn???"*

"Oh please, shut up," you said turning to leave, but he grabbed your arms

again, this time firmer than the last. "Let go of me!"

"Calm down," he said dismissing your cry. *"Where you dey stay?"*

"What's it to you?"

"Just tell me where you dey stay. I get okada. I go drive you go house."

He rode you to your house in silence. The aftermath of the chaos that took place that day was still visible in the streets. The boy-man had introduced himself as Seyi and when you told him you were Tulip, he didn't laugh or ridicule you as most people would. He said, "ok" and kick-started his bike.

You muttered a "thank you" when you alighted at the front of your house. *"Wait fess,"* you heard him say behind you. *"If you still wan March tomorrow, just tell me now. I go come pick you, then drop you back for here."*

"Why do you even care?" you asked puzzled.

"I nor want make you die na. You too fine to die so I just wan take you as my own responsibility. Before bullet go touch you, e suppose touch me fess," he declared giving a half-smile.

The days that followed turned into a routine. Seyi would pick you at your house, you would march round the town with a placard, Seyi would bring you back home, the next day, you would repeat the same procedure.

It was towards the end of November now and the harmattan wind blew stronger than ever but it didn't stop the youths of your community from taking the Walk Against Bad Governance. They were out with their cardigans and lip balm there was no stopping them well, except the zombies of course.

The Bible says; "There is a time for everything and a season for every activity under heaven: a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot…"

It was in broad daylight that the zombies opened fire on the youths. The laughter of gunshots going off was unpleasing and stomach crunching. People were taking off and surprisingly, you were running as well. Seyi held your hands as you both ran, he didn't want to let you go but when a bullet hit his thighs, he suddenly dropped and sat on the road, groaning in pain.

"Seyi! Seyi!" you cried.

"Dey run dey go! Leave me, dey run! Tulip, run!"

"But I can't leave you!"

"I say dey go. Na today I go die. I don already know before… just dey go, dey go!"

"Seyi, no! I'm not leaving you!"

Two of the zombies were approaching you. You had heard stories of them taking away any injured or dead youths they found on the streets. You dropped on Seyi's torso and hugged him tightly.

"This girl, why you get strong-head?" his voice shook as he complained. *"Open our hand fess,"* you released him and opened your hands. He extracted a folded sheet of A4 paper from his pockets and placed it in your hands.

"What is this?"

"Just take am, later you go k--"

Blood splashed on your face. One of the zombies had aimed right at the back of Seyi's skull.

"NO!" It was a scream. One that had pain tattooed all over it. The zombies dragged Seyi's corpse away like a bag of hay. They threatened to shoot at you if said a word or make an attempt to stop them.

* * * * *

In the A4 paper, Seyi had scrawled a letter in his bad handwriting. It read;

"Tulip I nor know the wey body take do me this morning wey I wake up but somtin dey tell me say bad thing go happen. So if anytin bad appen to me today I nor wnt make u fear or cry sef. Remember say I nor get anybody for this life. If I die, nobody go miss me. I hapi say I meet u for this lyf o. I nor wnt make u die na make me say before bullet go touch u e go touch me fess.

Yestiday night I ask one guy wey get android phone say make he help me find a d meeaning of Tulip. E con check am, con tell me say na name of flower na I con say no wonder u dey do mekemeke sef. If small breeze blow you go dey do like say you wan fall. D guy tell me say that flower nor dey grow for this side sef. So if I die today I no go miss you because I go still dey see you for heaven because e sure for me say Tulip flower dey grow for heaven and you be the flower gaann."

Widow

by Nadith Hoffman

There is a widow I've known for two months now,
About a year ago did her husband die.
It was good he was not sick for long,
It was better he left his widow and children,
With a bungalow, a waterwell,
They sold the Toyota four months after his internment.
She mourned for nearly a year,
But her children serenaded her with presence.
All four adolescent and males.

This morning, I saw her proud tall silhouettes,
High kicked heels, and a bursting frame.
She swayed equal parts modesty, and dripping heat,
A real woman can turn on the style if she wishes.
Black suit,on Ankara head gear and earthy skirt barely touching the knee,
Her dancing earrings and bangles, models of fire?!
A three inch stiletto heel that propped up her regal hips,
A woman can turn on the style the way she pleases.

Delightful was her peachy painted lips,
That surely deserves a long unbroken kiss.
And you weren't there, you weren't there,
How her perfume rose above holy incense!
It was a new day, and her wrist watch,
Suggested advancement beyond past misfortune,

Having ticked past the five sacred hours of grief,
At long last,acceptance and relief!
A woman craves the affection that raptures a man to heaven.
More than mere belief, more than the wooing gestures.
Beyond presence and tease,
To awaken repressed instincts
That turns on style the way she deeply feels.
I wonder whether she misses the human touch in the places that ache with desire,
I wonder if the night summons upon her an irresistible passion,
Or the prancing advances of another lover has caught
Those strong, blood filled calves that march and swim in air at once.

SK

by Isaac Rejoice

I.

She lay on a heap of flour bags in the dark, moonlight illuminating one part of her face from the air vents above, thinking about how wonderful it would be if this hellhole she dwelled in, belonged to, swore allegiance to, would let her, and people like her, walk on the road without looking over their shoulder every split second. Talk about how she, as a woman, loved men, and how she as a woman, loved women, sometimes both at once, she knew, she knew it would never happen, since the day she was slapped across the face by the woman who birthed her for daring to claim what was not accepted in these parts.

They would never understand, she knew, their minds so set on doing things the old way, so she let those happy scenes happen in her head, enveloped in the smell of urine and dirt and fear, expecting the dreaded knock to come, willing darkness to last a little bit more so she could remain happy, for she ruled with the moon, they ruled with the sun. So she let those thoughts of freedom from them go away the same way it came, in dream clouds, and waited for them to come, she thought about the things they would make her do when the sun came up. Goosebumps grew, her teeth chattered, a lump grew in her throat, it refused to go down, tears came as she thought of Chike, how they made him drink dog piss when he was thirsty, when they had thrust a red hot iron rod through him, mangled his shaft with the blacksmith's working tools and shaved his head halfway, the other half contorted with colours, brown for mud, red for blood, black for hair, white for the brain

matter threatening to seep out through the deep gash on that same side, pink for the hair dye he used during the party before his fall from grace.

He was leaving, he was leaving her here, she knew, the same way Zoe did, and she would be left alone, not for long, because when the sun came up, her time would be over, her breath would seize, the frozen whites of her eyes would be a testament of a life that abused it's giver. Her bloodied corpse would be a brazen reminder to those like her in hiding that they were next, but the sun had not started it's journey yet, the moon just arrived; it was full, and it was hers, it was her anchor, for now she ruled, her eyes let her see the happy times encrusted with rose-coloured edges.

II.

She felt warm, babyish hands on her face and woke with a start, dark brown eyes looked down on her, the one who bore those eyes moved back, sat on a heap of rice bags and let her come to. She recognized him in the semi-dark storage room and let her ragged breathing slow down, how did you find me ? She wanted to know, if he could find her surely the others could. *Na SK send me come,* he assured her, saying the words slowly so she could understand, they both whispered, the walls had ears, the air did too, but they had no choice, speech could not be done away with, he was whispering the instructions given to him hurriedly, Lade the Yoruba contractor had sent him – the incentive was good, that was why he sacrificed his sweet sleep anyway.

He knew they were coming for her when the sun came up, he knew what it felt like, he loved men as a man too, only he married a wife, had children and hid it well. He admired her courage, and was sad things were like this, he could not do much, he was Yoruba in Igboland, acting out of the expected would cost him his business, so he sent the *akara* boy instead. He would take her on his bicycle to the Main Park, she would board a bus to Lagos. He had a poet friend that welcomed all sorts, in his self styled

solitary house filled with art on The Island. He handed over a parcel to her, *he say make you open am when you enter bus.*

She stared at the boy for a long time, his head stopped at her waist, and he smelled faintly of firewood and spices, took the parcel and put it in her satchel, he gestured to the door, *make we dey go, your ticket bus go soon comot.* She felt her pulse double it's speed again, the door held freedom, the door held death. She looked around, feeling the bags around to see if she was leaving anything behind, the boy was impatient now, jumping lightly from one feet to the other, raising little clouds of cement dust from the unfinished floor, she counted to three and walked into the dark, after the boy.

III.

As the boy cycled through walkways and people's backyards, she saw glimpses of normal life; a newly wedded couple waving their fairly drunken friends goodbye, a mother scolding her boy, twisting his ears for bruising his knees, a girl tasting and re-tasting her pot of soup, teenagers sharing tentative kisses in the dark, the boy running off when someone opens the kitchen door – and the smells, fresh fish soup, fried plantains, burning jollof rice, odours that brought home to her. It ceased to be a place of comfort a long time ago, since the slap that made her deaf in the left ear, and the curses from the man who fathered her, no child from my loins will become a sodomite and remain alive, never! I'd rather kill you myself!

He was not the kind of man that ate his words, and so it happened, he stuck his wife's kitchen knife in her back when she was doing the dishes, die, *ogbanje di ka gi*, he had hissed, as he stood and watched her blue school shirt turn purple, disbelief had stunned her, made her helpless in the face of the man who showed her how to use sanitary pads, she had stumbled out of the kitchen door and ran to the Teaching Hospital in a daze; the sun making her see cars and motorcycles in threes. You're a miracle; the nurses had said afterwards. You mean you came here yourself? God is good. She

survived, and began to live, to really live, memories from the house now a musty; the smells brought them back now sharply. Her eyes misted and she almost fell from the bike. *No dey sleep o, focus.* The boy rebuked after a short hiss, having lost balance himself.

IV.

The Park was eerily quiet, the crowd having moved it's base to Ama Calabar, where the city had it's fill of *suya*, weed and women, men and everything in between, she felt it pull her in as they rode through it, dodging drunken bodies that swayed to one side to let them pass, *uzo, puo n'uzo,* the boy yelled, though he knew it was fruitless. They only moved when the tires of the bicycle touched them or climbed their feet. Now the boy had parked the bike and chained it to a tricycle, *no dey look me dah kain eye, nobody normal for this place we dey so,* and shrugged.

He led her to a bus, told her to wait in front of it, *make I call Driver, no loss o, if you loss, oyo,* she laughed at this and nodded. The driver came almost immediately, munching meat and licking his fingers loudly, *na she be dis,* the boy gestured. She greeted. He nodded, *drop bag for moto, you na front seat, SK pay plenty money for your head. No bag,* she replied. *Ohhh, you na runaway soja, no wonder.* The man laughed loudly, using his fingers to pick his teeth. *Come chop. SK say make you chop small sontin.* He led the way to a food shack just ahead, florescent lights shone on the name, One Family Pot, the boy grumbled loudly, *me nko, I don suffer this night o. Ebuka the boy, you na strong man, oya come, come gist me,* the driver held the boy by the shoulders as they walked, the girl trudging behind, as the boy told the man everything he knew.

By the time he was done they were seated and done with their meal, the boy talking in between spoonfuls of pepper-soup. The man looked at the girl with new eyes, the way a pet owner would if the vet said the pet had blood-sucking tendencies. She looked down at her plate and willed dawn to come so the man could focus on his steering wheel, not her story. The

air grew unbearably hot, and she began to sweat, under her arms, in between her thighs, her palms.

Finally the man sent the boy to the kitchen, *she go give you take away, begin dey go house, tomorrow na school, Baba o,* the boy hailed, lifting both his hands in the air, he turned to the girl, *baby yo, e go be,* and walked towards the counter, it was just the man and the girl, *how many years you dey?*

The man looked really curious, his eyebrows furrowed in a funny, confused way, as if she were an experiment. *Seventeen,* the girl mumbled, strangely wishing the boy did not have to leave. *Na wa*, the man said, picking his teeth with a toothpick from the table, *five o clock sharp we don comot this place no too waka*, he waved her away from the table as one of the girls brought him a sweating bottle of Heineken. She went outside the shack, grateful for the driver's lack of interest, and sat on the short fence. The parcel. She undid the bind carefully, lifted the top. Her jaw slacked as she felt the money, freshly minted one thousand naira notes in one bundle, hundred dollar bills in another, and a note, penned in cursive.

v.

You are a miracle. Don't let anyone make you feel less…

Here's the address, the driver has a copy too, just in case you lose yours. The money is for your essentials, Chinedum will provide everything you need, I'll make sure of it. And he's Igbo, more for you! Here are my numbers, call me when you get there.

I go tell SK say you na strong woman.

Lade.

She replaced the parcel the way it came, and stared at the full moon, listening to the High Life from One Family Pot, giddy with many things she could not name.

When a Person Yearns for Prayer

by Aisha Kabiru Mohammed

Do not judge a man until you have walked two moons in his moccasins
~ Native American proverb.

I

Sing them the songs
The Jews sang when their
Lives were chained to Babylon

II

Make for them a noose
to hang their agony
Summon their worries,
to your lips
On holy mountains, let them possess you until
Your exorcism is their peace.

III

Let compassion wash over your
Tongue like wine
Take their spirit in your hands
And deliver it
Unto gray skies soaked
With blessings
Sip from the cup of intercession
Let the taste of its power cleanse you

IV

Weave them a tapestry of understanding
And sew it around their frayed edges

V

Watch their fears burn in the fire
You kindled .
Watch the river of yearning
filled with their tears
dry up.

Drongo Bird

by Mabel Aghadiuno

Chioma jumped off the yellow rickshaw into the sea of people storming its way through the market. The aroma of barbecued goat tickled her nostrils and saliva filled her mouth. The memory of her craving during those nine months followed. Her still leaking breasts ached. Tears moistened her eyes and she forced them shut. *No more tears. This will be a happy day.*

She almost collided into a scrawny man, bearing on his head a tray of pyramid-stacked oranges. He scowled at her as he preserved graceful equilibrium. Bunches of plantain beckoned her. Flies blackening slices of pineapple and pawpaw promised sweetness. *Later. Shoes now.*

"Recharge card! Recharge card!" a youth waved various tokens at her. *Think I've enough airtime. Even if I don't, no wahala. Have to manage.*

She stopped to buy three lollipops for her girls. Same colour of wrapping or there'll be war. Don't want scenes when I get home. Lucky *pikins*. Biggest trouble for them is the colour of a sweet wrapper.

Distinctive laughter soared above the crowd and she elbowed her way to a stall opposite. In the shade of a shabby umbrella Chike and Musa the cobblers were signing jokes to each other. They threw back their heads in pleasure. Marvelling as usual at their silent repartee, she laughed with them. She was not deaf, unlike them. Unlike them she could not understand. She left her shoes for re-heeling. An engine revved and she stepped aside abruptly before the tyres of an *okada* laden with three passengers ran over her toes. *Hey you could have hurt me!*

People jostled closer and a surge slapped into Chioma's back. She felt as if

her feet lifted off the ground. Stalls exhibiting recycled mobile phones, old television sets and rat-killer flew by. Like jetsam she was deposited beside a clutter of bargaining customers surrounding slabs of bright *ankara*. The vendor flaunted his skill in maintaining the price of his *genuine quality* goods. Women parried his onslaughts with price-lowering counter-manoeuvres. Chioma fingered the fabric and lifted the edges to look at the designs on the reverse. *Probably fake.* Still she lingered to fantasise about unborn outfits with towering *gele*. A lithe woman bent over into a gap between two buxom forms to adjust her wrapper. The woman shot up. The tiny body glued to her back did not stir. *Hair thick as a black bush. Chubby cheeks and long curly eyelashes. Like his. Chioma sighed. Labour for twenty hours wasn't normal. Should have known better.*

"Keep still, ma."

"There's something wrong. I told you before – the others didn't take this long."

"Ma, each pregnancy is different. Pains you had before were probably a false alarm."

"But the baby should have been out hours ago."

"We want this baby out before we switch off our generator. Everything's under control."

Nothing was under control. Stupid doctors and midwives. Didn't know what they're doing. Why didn't they do more? Why did I listen to them? Why didn't I fight for my child? …"

"You're fully dilated now so push! We don't keep that gen on after nine."

She had him just before. She held him for five hours in the dark. They had to get her husband to pull the lifeless boy out of her arms.

A hot tear surfaced and this time she let it burn her cheek.

"Fine baby, ma," Chioma remarked, touching the child's hair.

The mother turned a resplendent face. "He's my angel gift from God. The Lord is good."

"All the time," Chioma responded automatically. She forced a smile.

"I'm happy with girls but you know my husband is like other men," the mother continued. "He said, "My wife this time make boy, a boy-oo!""

Again, Chioma relived fingering her babe's spongy bush in that bleak room. She stroked his chilling flesh and held each dainty finger waiting in vain for a thawing that never came. Her son … It was then she felt a hand rustling like a rat in her bag. She looked down and saw an unzipped gaping mouth. Her purse was missing! She looked up to see a red back slaloming through the crowd.

"Thief! Thief!" she roared.

The words echoed like a call in a cavern. The swirling, multi-directional mass of human energy halted and then galvanised at one point like a spearhead. Descendants of hunters, their instinct rarely failed. *Why didn't I think before I shouted? Foolish woman!*

She pushed her way through the crowd towards a clamorous circle. She broke through. A multi-fisted hydra gripped a red T-shirt, distorting and pulling its front *Bob Marley* face. No woman, No cry. She shook the refrain from her head. Someone tossed a tyre into ready hands. *Why is there always one of those around?* The arms and legs of Red T-shirt flailed, the whites of his eyes expanded and he bleated like a goat. Tendrils of smoke tickled Chioma's nostrils and the sound of whining intensified. She heard the sickening slop of what she knew was petrol. Red T-shirt started to scream.

"No! Not that," she grabbed the tyre.

The hands of the hydra reclaimed it. They placed the tyre over the thief, knocking him to the ground.

"No! No! I beg," the young man cried. "Please God, I beg."

A hard slap shocked him into momentary silence. He then continued his litany of frantic pleas.

"Let him go! Let him go," Chioma cried. "I forgive him!"

A chorus of teeth kissing followed.

"Drongo bird tried to fly. We caught him!" a short man kicked the thief's feet. The man whimpered.

"Drongo! Thief bird!" the crowd howled. "Drongo! Drongo!"

"Let him go, I beg!" Chioma pleaded. "It's my purse. There wasn't much in it. I don't care about the money."

"Go away, ma," a voice said with authority, placing a hand on her arm. "You don't have to stay."

Chioma scanned the eyes of that voice. She looked at the orbits of the people around her. They flashed fire. Each a burning coal. She winced. Then she leapt. She hardly noticed the painful impact of the tyre on her belly. She encircled her arms around the thief's chest. She felt her skirt ride up behind her and almost reached to pull it down with one hand. *Doesn't matter. Don't let go.*

"Get off the vermin! Get off, now!"

"C'mon ma! You're in our way!

She held the pickpocket tight in an unholy seeming embrace. At first, he struggled beneath her. Then he kept still. She smelt the rancour of his sweat. Her arms were clammy with its moisture. She sensed his wild heartbeat coursing through her body. Arms tried to pull her off the thief. She thought they would rip her shoulder out.

"Don't be an idiot! Get off him!"

"No! I'm not going to let you do this!" Chioma shouted. "It's not right!" She felt her heart beat like the thief's. Calm. Calm. Deep breaths in and out.

"Get off the Drongo or we'll burn you too!"

Chioma lifted her head. She now saw inferno in the eyes of the vigilantes. She recoiled in revulsion only to meet the wild terror in Red's stare. Red was a mother's son. *I can't let you die! I can't let you die!*

"We'll count to five!"

Chioma closed her eyes in an attempt to shut out the background shouting. She had to think. *Wait to the last moment then roll off him. But if I leave him, he's gone.* She opened her eyes and scanned him. Midnight bushy hair. Eyelashes too long for a man. Bound wrists. *Beautiful hands. Long fingers. Not made to steal.*

"One … Two …" said the voice with authority.

Oh God. Please, no! She smelt petrol and wanted to vomit. The vigilantes as one stilled to silence.

"Three …" Eternal seconds.

Sudden unbroken laughter pierced the sky. Enchanting, golden, honeyed and amplified. At first Chioma thought it sounded like Chike and Musa but this was the laughter of children. Chioma waited for "four." Instead the children continued – she judged from streets away – their blind laughter interspersed with speaker echoes.

Chioma dared to look up. She met the eyes of the voice with authority. His eyes were spent.

"Get up Drongo! Get up ma!" he ordered.

Chioma raised herself and knelt beside the thief, poised to reposition herself if necessary. It wasn't. Two of the men lifted off the tyre as the thief struggled to his feet.

"Clear off Drongo but if there's a next time …" one of the men swore.

Red flew through the circle and did not look back. The spear – point and handle – splintered into fragments. Each dispersed to his business of the day.

Chioma tried to still her body's trembling. Her fingers convulsed. Perspiration dripped down her back. She fought the urge to cry at the wonderful terror of those minutes. *Did I really do that?* A gnarled hand forced Chioma's purse on to her wet palm before disappearing into the market. She smoothed down her skirt and reached for her bag at the roadside. No one talked to her. No gaze met hers. No one marvelled.

No wahala. This is truly a happy day.

by Samuel Oladele

YEAR 1

Michael tucked a one-hundred naira note into his pocket. Narayi wasn't that far. He would trek and buy Indomie for lunch. He crossed the express road, over to the post office at Sabo, his eyes on the approaching Kaduna buses that parked without warning, and those mad *okada* riders that hurtled on the sidewalks. They were high on something, those *okada* riders. They had to be.

"You don't have presenting experience," he said to himself, the exact words the Zoom TV manager had said to him few minutes ago. What presenting experience didn't he have? He represented his secondary school in Abuja in a speaking competition for all Federal Colleges, and won second place. And what about the other speaking competitions he won? Wasn't that experience enough? He would stop going there and that manager would run after him soon. He'd shout his stage name, M-Star, after the release of his mad single. They should wait, those people. Mad idiots. He pulled out his shirt from his pencil trousers. He shouldn't have dressed up, neither should have worn his ten-thousand Naira long-sleeved shirt.

He rubbed his stomach. Maybe he should call one of his entourage to ask if they had prepared lunch. That was if they'd pick his call. Everyone was now ghosting him. He would go home and manage Indomie. He trudged on, mopping his face with his white handkerchief every so often, the afternoon sun burning his face. At his gate he exhaled, pushed the gate open, and right there at his balcony was Ayo, his brother, with three muscular-armed men in fitted shirts.

"What happened to your phone?" Ayo said.

"Nothing. Who are these?" He opened his door.

"Your landlord called me, said your rent has been overdue for over six months. He threatened to kick you out next week."

"I will pay next month."

"With which money?" Ayo hissed. "Boys, *oya* start packing."

One of the boys picked up the flatscreen TV from the wall. Michael stood before him, arms wide open. Just a nudge and Michael sank into his leather sofa.

"Stop," Ayo said. "You prefer to be thrown out?"

Why were they treating him like this, as if he was a nobody? They should give him a month and see if he wouldn't produce a hit. He was working on something, a new chorus. *Baby, baby, don't leave me...* All that was left was to write it. He bit into his lower lip, pressing harder, blood coursing into his mouth, and stood up, breathing like a marathoner. He wiped off the blood on his lips. One of the boys lifted the sofa he stood from, and he stood in the way.

"Stop. Mick, stop," Ayo screamed.

He got out of the way and sat on a stool, biting his lower lip. Since he was little Ayo had always acted like his father even before their father died. He'd leaf through his notebooks, check if they were up to date, check his classwork and assignment scores. And sometimes he flogged him if his notes were incomplete or if he failed an assignment.

Michael would not fight back or attempt to argue. Once, he had tried to fight him, and Ayo silenced him with three slaps. Grown now, he loathed remembering that day. Perhaps that was what repressed his home-leaving resistance or he was just fed up with life and music and now hadn't written the lyrics of his new song.

Maybe a great part of him realized there could be no song like his first single that played for months on top Kaduna radios, that took him to big shows, even outside of Kaduna. He had imagined that that was how his life would be, his songs ever being hits, sizzling on everyone's lips, his picture used for adverts. But the success was fleeting, only lasted for a year. The only good he did with the money was his two-year rent in Narayi High-cost. The rest he lavished on girls and parties.

Every show he was there, singing the same song over and over, girls jumping on stage to dance with him, sometimes half-naked, offering to go home with him. Then he released his second single. Two radio station played it for a week or two. No show invited him to sing it. All the show organizers preferred the old song. Afterwards came his album, which received no good comments.

He sang that first single until Kaduna spat him out. From then on, he stayed at home, munching and guzzling while watching TV shows like Empire, wondering why his life wasn't like Hakeem's or Jamal's. Sometimes he went to the studio to see if someone would sell him a song on credit, or to radio stations to ask if they would like to have him on air. Everyone began to ignore him, even his producer and entourage. They all knew he was broke, that he was managing himself. He thought of getting a job but was reluctant, didn't even know the job to seek. Ayo suggested he come work for him at his tailor shop or to get a site work, since he hadn't gone to the university but he refused.

* * * * *

Ayo handed him a blanket and left him in the cramped sitting room of his one-bedroom apartment that night. On the sofa, he lay, the blanket covering to his neck. *Baby, baby, don't leave me...* Why would he write that song? Shouldn't even sing anymore. His life was over. He pulled his blanket over his face, and fell asleep. By six A.M. the next morning, Ayo woke him

up and they went to his shop, a short walk from the house. Michael perched on a high stool, looking around. *"Your shop is big oo, bigger than your house."*

"It's God oo."

"So you have all these electric and manual machines and you couldn't pay for my rent."

Ayo pedaled his sewing machine. "Emeka." He turned to one of his apprentice.

"Is aunty Favour's clothes ready?"

"Yes, I just need to iron it" Emeka said.

"What about the school uniforms?" "We have finished twenty."

"Ok, good. Coordinate the other boys, make sure they are ready before five."

Emeka nodded. Sewing machines jangled, the floor shook, the smell of new clothes soothing Michael.

"Do you want to spend the entire day looking around or you want to learn?" Ayo stopped pedalling.

Michael dragged the stool next to him, by the entrance.

"Watch and learn," Ayo said.

He gazed at the moving needle, watching how Ayo held the *ankara* in place, how slowly he turned the material as he sewed a round neck. His eyes shut and opened. He shook his head, eyes wide open, the cloth now raised up in Michael's hand, the neck stitched.

"Shine your eyes," Ayo said.

"Be a man, don't sleep."

"Does sleep recognize dick?"

"Be speaking English. Hunger never fire you."

For days he watched, his mind sometimes wading off into his past lives—the girls he'd danced with, the money and the sex, nightclubs hot with his song, his entourage who had abandoned him. Each time he drifted off, he bit his lip and pinched his knee to keep himself awake. After a week, Ayo allowed him to use an old machine to sew waste pieces first, then customers' torn clothes. After, he measured customers, and some, like the young ladies, stayed a while to chat with him.

"Are you not M-Star?" they said.

"The singer."

"Yes." He'd smile open-mouthed.

"God, your song was fire."

Some even jumped and hugged him so tight he thought his former life was back, that he could be M-Star again. What had happened to him? they'd ask. Why did he stop singing? What was he doing here? A sudden coldness would descend on him and he'd sit on one of the high wooden stool.

"Music wasn't just my thing again," he'd say.

Some asked for an autograph on a paper or cloth, except a lady, Rebecca, who wanted it on her waistline.

"Michael." Ayo shook his head.

"She wants it, she gets it" he said.

YEAR 2

"See you later," Michael said, outside the shop.

Rebecca hugged him. "I prepared jollof rice. Want to come?"

"I can't."

She peeled off him, eyebrows furrowed. "Why?"

He scratched his head, then stared into the shop, at the unsewn gown on his machine. The owner would come this evening.

"I will love to but I have unfinished work. This evening after work, I promise."

She hugged him, pressed her chest against his tightly, and left. Walking backward into the shop, he stared at her curvy hips, her big waist, and fingered his beard. All these for him? So he still had a life?

"*Abeg, dey release those girls sharp-sharp*" Ayo said.

"They crowd the shop."

"Wherever I go, crowd go. My head is just too big not to get attention." He sat at his station.

"Just take them outside and don't crowd the shop." Ayo's voice peaked.

"I have a name to protect."

"What name? You mean M-Star?"

Michael wiped off the sweat on his forehead.

"Guy, that name died before you started music. If you had gone to school, won't your life be better now?".

"I loved music."

Ayo laughed. "And you failed."

"I didn't fail."

"You are a fool if you don't know that."

"Do you…" Did he know who he was? But why would he waste time convincing someone who thought he was a failure.

"Can you teach me that yesterday's cut?"

"Let me finish this trouser first."

Michael shook his head, and pedaled the machine, straightening the fabric underneath the needle so the stitch wouldn't bend. Anyone, even Ayo, could call him whatever he wanted since he was a nobody now. Wasn't that what he was, a nobody? Because he didn't have money yet. Maybe he should get his own shop, his own boys, and become a real fashion designer and not what his brother was. He would become a brand, have his name tagged on clothes, become like Gucci, like Prada.

So he began to keep vigils in the shop, sewing, a kerosene lantern hung on a nail behind him when there was no electric power. Sometimes, he went home at midnight.

Other times, he fell asleep on the machine, and when Ayo came in the morning, he'd rush home to get ready for the day.

He took on more clients, made a business card, shared pictures of his designs on social media and during his lunch he googled top fashion designers and read their biographies, all the while clutching onto the hope that he would be great like them. He grew so addicted to reading them that while walking on the road, his eyes would glue to his phone, reading and reading what made them better, their styles, their differences. Seldom, a car, a motorcycle, a tricycle, almost knocked him down. Fool, they said, couldn't he watch where he was going. He'd gaped at them and move on, eyes back on his phone. They didn't know who he'd become, if not they wouldn't curse him.

* * * * *

A drizzle turned into a downpour outside the shop. Beside him, Rebecca perched on a stool, holding his arm, shivering.

"You didn't iron your shirt?" She straightened his collar.

"No time."

"M-Star, you have changed," she said.

"I have told you, stop calling me M-Star?"

"Who—"

"My name is Michael." He nudged away her hand.

"I will build a fashion house— Michael's fashion house." She chuckled.

Holding a gown, he went over to the ironing table. "Ayo, you will teach me that style after I finish ironing."

"Can we make it tomorrow?" Ayo said. He shook his head.

"You just want to learn everything. You even have more customers than me."

He spread the gown over the table, pressing the electric iron over it. This shop was so crowded. Maybe he should look for his own place.

"You don't even ask of me." She was now at his side, leaning on the table.

"See, na money I dey find, no be woman."

She went back to the stool, and after a while, she left. "You broke that girl's heart" Ayo said.

"Don't mind all these girls. She will leave me when I don't have money again. Come and teach me that style."

YEAR 3

Sunlight streamed into the shop. Micheal raised his hand to shield his face. "How long will you sleep here?" Ayo said.

He stood on his sleeping mat. "Until I'm no longer a failure."

"You aren't a failure." He stared at him.

"God! Hope it's not because of what I said then. I didn't mean that. I'm sorry."

Michael tossed a lace dress and trousers into a black poly bag, and carried it over to the ironing table.

"I'm sorry. Michael, please forgive me."

"No bad blood. There's update though. I'm looking for a house and shop."

Ayo stood in front of him. "Don't leave. Let's build an empire together." Michael went to sit at his station.

"Thanks for everything you did for me."

"Hope we are good?"

"Yes. You gave me another chance at life. Only a fool won't appreciate that."

"You sewed all these clothes." Ayo pointed at the pile of lace trousers and *buba* under Michael's machine.

"Yes," Michael said. "I got a contract to sew for a movie wedding."

"I can help oh!"

"I know, but I need the money to get some materials for my place." He sprinkled water from a sachet on his face and pedalled his machine. By noon, he was yawning like an elephant but kept pedalling on until each trouser and *buba* came out well. Before six, he finished ironing and left with them in a polybag.

* * * * *

He sat on his stool, dropped a Chicken Republic leather bag on the machine.

"So you went to enjoy yourself since morning, you forgot we have customers to attend to" Ayo hissed.

Michael handed the leather bag to an apprentice beside him. "Please, give it to him."

"Because you now have money, you want to show yourself." Ayo untied the leather bag, brought out a white takeaway and canned Fanta.

"What are we celebrating? The only time you brought me anything was on my birthday."

Michael pulled off his shoes, then massaged his feet. They were so tight,

the shoes. Next time, he'd buy forty-four and not forty-two.

"Michael, what's up now?"

"I'm moving out," Michael said.

Ayo squinted, staring at him, as if waiting for him to say he was joking. "I got my own shop at Narayi High-cost."

"So fast!" His mouth opened, then closed. "Congratulations."

His shoes on, Michael stood up, plugged in his earpiece. "I have to go and rest, tomorrow's a big day." He fingered the hand wheel of his machine, then stared at the ironing table, at the boys, waved them goodbye, and walked out of the shop.

Snails

Dikeogu Chukwumerije

That's the thing about life. If you think about it, you'll never start; once you start, it's hard to stop. She couldn't turn back now. It was like being trapped on a conveyor belt. Bumper to bumper; starting and stopping; leaning intermittently on the car horn. Uju's head ached. A Friday afternoon was the worst time to be driving to Wuse market. Even with the a/c on full blast.

She had enough time to study faces. The man in the car beside her picked his nose constantly. The one behind her was on the phone. People passed between steaming cars, hurrying to the next oasis, whatever it was, whatever relief it offered from the exuberant sun.

Her foot ached too, working the tango between brake and accelerator. The other one permanently stretched out, holding down the clutch. Sometimes, it trembled from the exertion. Or, maybe, it was the nervousness she didn't think she would ever be rid off, at the hair breath spaces between manoeuvring cars. Everyone was either trying to butt in or keep out intruders. Every inch of asphalt contested; minutes of stalling followed by frantic seconds closing gaps. She was already exhausted.

The car park was full, the official one behind the barricaded gates, where the men in white and blue uniforms were collecting tolls. So, she forced a tyre over the kerb, tapping on the brakes. When it landed safely on the other side, no sound of undercarriage crunching against anything, Uju breathed out. Four tyres safely over, now amongst those parked across

the sidewalk, as illegal as the itinerant traders with makeshift stalls that dismantled quickly. But they were everywhere, and there was safety in numbers. Uju locked her doors and trudged off.

The market swirled around her like rough seas. But she was an old hand, skilled navigator, not easily driven off course by petulant winds. She knew where everything was. Green vegetables. Melon seeds. Fresh tomatoes. Palm oil. Her regular suppliers waved at her the minute they spotted her, *Customer! Customer!* They knew her proportions and chipped in the obligatory extra. Sometimes she haggled over it. *Is that all you can add? Eh? You are not treating me well o. I'll find another customer o.* Faking offence. *Haba customer!* Faking concern. *Why you go talk like that? Okay, take.* The so-called '*jara*' was always insignificant – one more red tomato, maybe half-a-handful of *egusi* – but it still tickled.

She knew where everything was, everything except snails. It had been a while, and there was a provisions store where she used to see them in the past. She bought some spaghetti off the cuff, and tins of corn beef, but they didn't know where the snail sellers had gone. Nobody seemed to know where they'd gone, till someone waved a hand with wriggling fingers in the general direction of the older section. "Madam, go that way. When you reach you will see a woman with a wrinkled hand, selling pepper. Ask her. She will show you from there."

Off the main road, here the foot gathered dust. Uju went past rows of stalls. They were loaded with fruits – pineapples, oranges, mangoes – and their minders sprinkled water over them to keep them wet and shiny. She ignored the boisterous solicitations, calling her over to take a look at *foreign banana, wonderful coconut, watermelon wey get enough wata for 'im body*. The little boy followed her closely, pushing the things she'd already bought in his rickety barrow; his smile like a partly open garage door. She'd counted at least four missing from the upper row.

Rice pyramids now. And mountains of beans. They rose out of iron basins on either side of the narrowing path. It was as compact as concrete, beaten solid by trampling feet. There was barely enough space for two lanes of traffic, so you walked behind the person in front of you till you had to overtake them. Uju was hesitant. Those behind started swinging past. She'd never come this far into the market before. A woman looked up over a mound of yellow *garri*. "Yes, madam? You wan buy?"

She moved closer, out of the way of streaming traffic. "Please, do you know where I can buy snail?"

"Wait!" The woman dusted both hands on her thighs. "I have. Just wait. I coming. I go bring it."

She dashed off before Uju could react, legs moving like skittles underneath her faded wrapper. Uju sighed in relief. There was a wooden stool beside the basins of *garri*. White *garri*. Yellow *garri*. Red *garri*. Packets of cassava flour hung from nails across the top beam. Another woman had a screaming baby on her back; she was bent over sweeping, rocking the child at the same time. A tiny cloud of dust travelled down the path, coating everything. Uju turned her face away and leaned as much of her body as she could manage underneath the stall's protruding zinc roof. But a stab of sunlight still pierced her shoulder.

Where the hell was that woman?

She re-appeared, like she'd heard the thought, a scraggly looking dog trailing behind her, waving a black plastic bag. Uju was already reaching into her handbag, when the thought occurred to her. She looked up. "Let me see."

"Eh?"

"Let me see it."

The woman came nearer and held the bag open.

Uju jumped back. *"Jesus!"* Her hand flew to her throat. "What is that?"

"Snail…" The woman waved the bag again. "Snail."

"Snail?" There was a winged creature of some sort in the bag. "Is that not a bat?" And it wriggled as well.

"Oh…" The woman looked into the bag. "Not snail? Okay, okay. I have. Wait, just wait- I go bring it."

Uju didn't. "Madam!" She ignored the pleas. *So you want to use bat hand and bring me snail? No o, please.* After a good distance, as far away as stamina allowed, she stopped at another stall.

"Please, do you know where I can buy snails?"

"No."

This one sold tiger nuts and seemed to be having a bad day. From the way she slouched on a low stool with her chin in her hand. Hardly even looked up.

"Okay. Do you know the woman with the wrinkled hand that sells pepper?"

"Mama Tom George?"

"I don't know her name."

Now, the woman sat up straight. "Why are you looking for her?"

"Somebody told me…"

"Are you Police?"

Uju stopped. "What? No, I am not Police."

"Does she owe you money?"

"No."

"So, why are you looking for her?"

"Someone said that she knows where I can buy snails."

"It is pepper that she sells. Not snails." The woman squeezed her brows. "Who is this person that sent you? Is he Police?"

Uju put her hands on her hips and looked up. There was a crooked corridor of bright blue sky visible between the edges of extended stall roofs. The tiger nut seller was still scrutinizing her. Her barrow boy was standing with some other barrow boys under the shade of an abandoned stall. Uju sighed.

They left the grain sellers behind, now deep in the underbelly of the endless market. Many abandoned stalls here, wooden wrecks with collapsed roofs, amongst tables of yams and cocoa yams, sweet potatoes and gold-skinned plantains. They were much cheaper than the ones you found at the entrance. Uju filtered her search more carefully this time. She walked up to a woman that looked as distinguished as market conditions allowed.

"Mama Tom George?" The woman nodded. "Yes, she's just over there."

"Ah! Thank you!"

The old woman sat on a low stool. There was a small hill of red pepper in front of her, with four rusted tins. One still held the ghost of a Peak milk wrapper. She used her good hand to spread the pepper evenly across the tray and then wiped the red stain on a rag around her waist.

"Yes?"

"Good afternoon, mama", Uju said. "Please, do you know where I can buy snails?"

She scooped up a tin of red pepper and emptied it into a plastic bag. Then she tied up the bag and held it up to Uju.

"No, no", Uju shook her head. "I don't want pepper. I'm looking for snails." She raised her voice slightly and spoke much slower. "Do you know where I can buy snails?"

"Ah! What kind of nonsense is this?" The old woman's voice cracked like a

dry whip. “Please, pay me for the pepper now. Which one is this?”

“God.” Uju rolled her eyes skywards and gasped. “I don’t want pepper. I’m looking for…you know what? This is not worth it.”

She threw her hands up and turned around. Then she felt a tug, it almost ripped her skirt; Mama Tom George had caught a handful of hem in her wrinkled hand and pulled her back. “Where do you think you’re going? You make an old woman like me shovel pepper into a bag for you and now you refuse to pay for it!”

“Eh?”

Do you struggle with an old woman, grab her diseased looking hand and prise it off your skirt? What if she snatched it off completely? Do you then tiptoe out of the Friday market with your designer blouse and cream-colored *pant*? Mama Tom George started screaming. Uju looked around alarmed, struggling to rid herself of the wrinkled grip. But other traders came quickly, faster than a rapid response unit. And they had no ears for explanations delivered in graduate English. She was still arguing. Someone shoved her in the back. She stopped arguing, started pleading- *fine, okay bring the pepper, I go buy am*. But they marched her down a side path, to a beaten shed where three dusty looking policemen were seating.

After listening, one of the policemen flicked an eye over Uju. “You look like a dignified person, madam. Why are you here stealing pepper from this old woman?”

For God’s sake, is nobody sane in this market? But Uju kept that thought to herself; focused on getting out with life and limb intact. “I didn’t take any pepper from her. I was just asking her if she knew where I could buy snails!”

The officer studied her face as if he was a lie-detector machine, as if he was reading her vital signs and decoding it for the truth. Uju tried to look upright. Then he said, “How much?”

"Eh?" Were they already negotiating bail?

"How much snails do you want to buy?" He reached behind his colleagues and dragged out a bucket full of snails. "It depends on the size."

Uju clawed her way out of the market – with her snails, and a portion of Mama Tom George's red pepper. When she couldn't find a bin anywhere, she threw the latter in the gutter. Back on familiar roads. The barrow boy had stayed faithful. As he helped her load the things into the boot, Uju watched to make sure it all went in. Someone was working a sledgehammer in her head. And the car stuttered twice before it came alive. She sat down in it, head against the headrest, windows down, till the a/c started blowing chilled air. There was graffiti on the wall in front of her. She could barely make it out, wobbly letters scrawled in white chalk between torn posters.

Take am easy...

She honked once and Ben flung the gate open. Lydia came running from the back of the house. As soon as she put feet on the ground, Lydia scrambled her paws up and put her head in Uju's lap. There was that smell of freshly cut grass.

Home.

"Ben!"

Ben's face appeared from behind the boot. He was helping Ada unload, and two plastic bags dangled from each fist.

"Yes, ma!"

She traced the ridges of Lydia's skull with her fingers.

"Have you been eating this dog's food again?" Uju glared at the gateman. "I've warned you!"

Ben's jaw dropped. "Ah! Madam! No o! I swear. Ever since that time you told me before, I have never..."

Uju got up and slammed the car door shut. Lydia sat down, looking up

at her. Uju squatted, and they stared into each other's eyes. Two women. She patted Lydia's head. Let me rest first. If that man has been maltreating you, I will show him pepper. Lydia barked. Uju nodded. I know. You wish you could do the same for me. But don't worry. I'll take care of both of us. I nu go? We shall fight back. Uju pulled herself up, using the car as support. Then she walked into the house.

"Ada."

A hot bath and a soft bed…

"Ada!"

"Yes ma."

"Come and help me."

She waved a heavy hand, tried not to think. Just do it. The whole time, Ada stood in a corner in the kitchen watching her, unused to having so little to do. Uju was tired. But she was even more tired of letting things drift. The days had turned to weeks. The weeks, to months. The months, to years. And still they slept with backs to each other. No talking. It had been a long time since she'd cooked…for him. This was a peace offering. Uju turned to Ada. It was not yet dark. "I'm going to sleep."

Finally.

Like someone drugged. She climbed up the stairs, dragged herself through a shower. Slumped into bed. Sam must have been unusually noisy, because he cracked the warm cocoon of deep unconsciousness. Vaguely aware of him slipping into bed. What time was it? She was already falling asleep again.

"There was an accident on Gwagwalada road today."

Uju's eyes snapped open.

Sam's cough rumbled in the darkness. "This country …" He sighed. "They need to fix that road. I can't count the people we've lost …"

Uju was wide-awake. “It’s … a tragedy”, she said quietly. It had been a long time since they’d made small talk.

“A travesty. That’s what it is.”

Then, he fell silent. Uju lay very still. Was she dreaming? If she moved her legs, would she wake up? But he didn’t say anything else. So, Uju let out the breath she’d imprisoned in her lungs.

“The snails were a bit too hard”, Sam said.

After a while, Uju smiled.

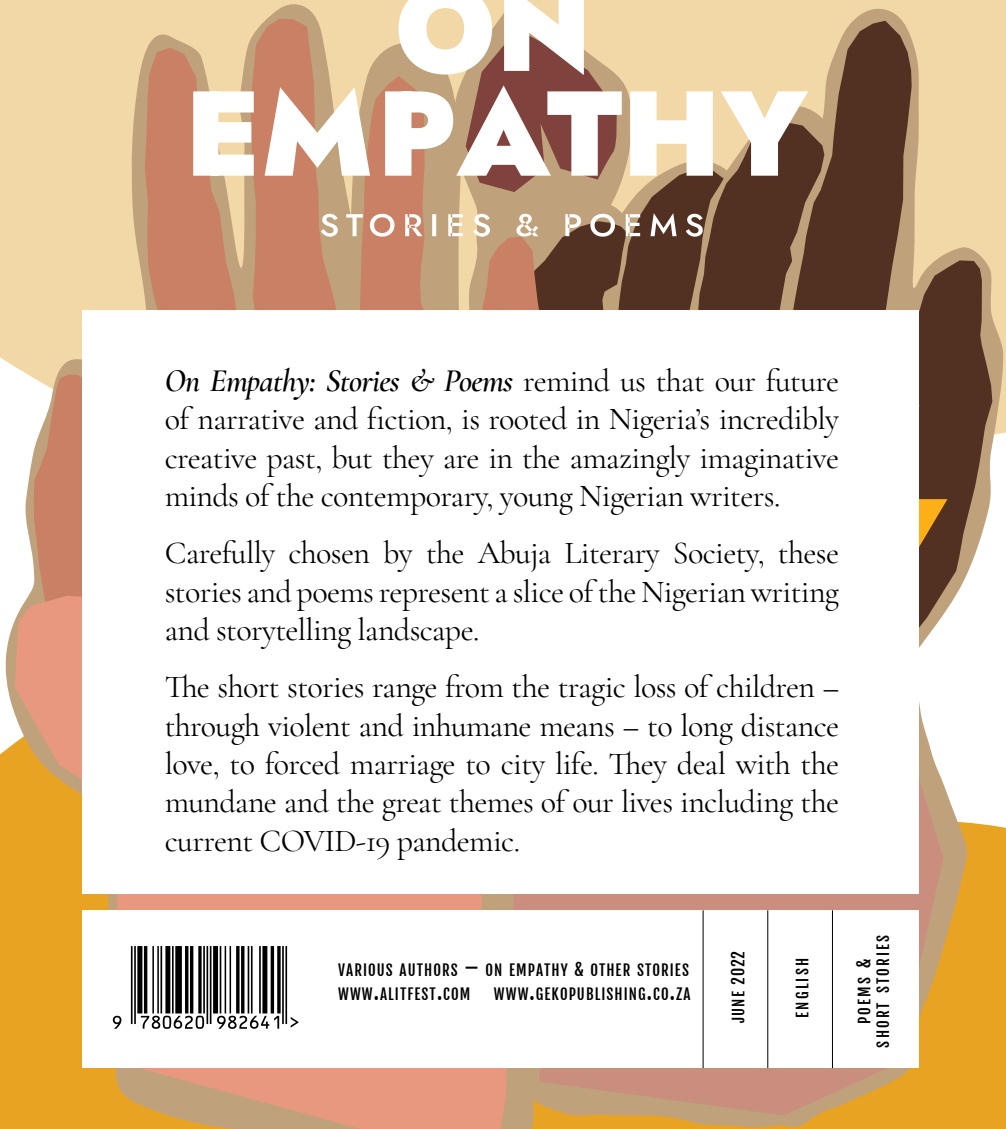
“They were, weren’t they?”

THE END.

Abuja Literary Society

ON EMPATHY

STORIES & POEMS



On Empathy: Stories & Poems remind us that our future of narrative and fiction, is rooted in Nigeria's incredibly creative past, but they are in the amazingly imaginative minds of the contemporary, young Nigerian writers.

Carefully chosen by the Abuja Literary Society, these stories and poems represent a slice of the Nigerian writing and storytelling landscape.

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JUNE 2022

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The production of the anthology was made possible by the Berliner Kunster Programm (DAAD) and is available for free download.

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