



GOSSAMER

VALENTINE STORIES, 2016

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Anyanwu, Sibbyl Whyte, Nze Sylva Ifedibgo,
Somi Ekhasomhi, Otosirieze Obi-Young, Kingsley
Okechukwu, Lexi Akpan, Patience Dogho, TJ
Benson, Okwudili Nebeolisa, Socrates Mbamalu

GOSSAMER: VALENTINE STORIES, 2016

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Acknowledgements

After reading last year's Valentine's Day Anthology which was published by Ankara Press, and which featured Binyavanga Wainaina, Toni Kan and Abubakar Adam Ibrahim, I had thought: Since these writers are well-known, why not bring up something similar from writers like me, who are yet to attain that level of acclaim?

Writers here may not be the usual names you hear or read about, but they have done exceedingly well for themselves in self-developing their crafts. Two of the writers here were published by Harvard's *Transition Magazine* last year, and one of the published short stories was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Another writer here was a 2015 A Public Space Emerging Writer Fellow, and was shortlisted for the BN Poetry Prize in 2015. Another writer made the shortlist for the 2016 Sillerman First Book Prize for African Poets. And two writers are already published: a collection of short stories and two novels respectively.

Most of us are friends on Facebook and followers on Twitter, and have never seen each other or heard each other's voice. Some were only recommended by friends, friends of friends, and I decided to reach out to them. The responses I got from them were amazing despite the short notice. It strongly amazes me, the eagerness in us to tell our own stories, instead of having them told.

All the stories in this anthology talk about love, but in different explorations. There's a look at matrimonial woes; the danger of engaging in blind dates on social media; the lingering pain of lost love; question on

sexuality. Reading these stories again and again gives me a certain satisfaction that our aim is fulfilled. The aim of bringing to the reader's mind how different Valentine's Day celebration is to different people.

There is this strong conviction I have that in the next few years, this anthology will be referred to when our names will be mentioned for more recognition. I believe our futures are better than our pasts.

I'm immensely grateful to all the writers who contributed in making this anthology a success, despite the two days notice. Special thanks to Shittu Fowora and Socrates Mbamalu, who were so indispensable in bringing this project to reality; their advices and recommendations were useful. Otosirieze Obi-Young has been an excellent friend. Big thanks to Toni Kan who still made it with the Introduction, despite the short notice. My co-contributors (Sotonye Dan, Arinze Ifeakandu, Sibbyl Whyte, Nze Sylva Ifedibgo, Somi Ekhasimhi, Otosirieze Obi-Young, Kingsley Okechukwu, Patience Dogho, TJ Benson, Okwudili Nebeolisa, Socrates Mbamalu) and I are delighted to have this book published by Brittle Paper, thanks to Ainehi Egoro who gave it a home. I must also thank The Naked Convos team for agreeing to publicize this work.

This anthology is dedicated to the memory of Cynthia Osokogu, who was killed by some Facebook friends of hers in 2012.

Dear Readers, I present you, Gossamer: Valentine Stories, 2016.

Cheers!

*Nonso Franklyn Anyanwu
Abuja, February 2016.*

Introduction

Love, Lust and Other Stories

*“Great wits are sure to madness near allied
And thin partitions do their bounds divide.”*

When John Dryden wrote these immortal lines in his celebrated allegorical poem, *Absalom and Achitophel*, I am not sure he knew it, but he could very well have been talking about love and lust, which, as in genius and madness, have thin partitions dividing them.

The anthology, *Gossamer: Valentine Stories, 2016*, featuring thirteen young writers is a long riff on love, both agape, filial and eros, as well as unabashed lust. It can also pass as a commentary on Nigeria—ethnicity, diversity, social stratification, etc.

Last year, my publishers, Cassava Republic, published an e-anthology of love stories featuring yours truly and a slew of other established writers from across Africa. Nonso Franklyn Anyanwu and his friends seem to have picked up the baton and this year, they are offering a thirteen story strong fare which measures, in many ways, the sexual health of our dear country.

Anthologies are defined by a unifying theme and vision, and this anthology works. The themes are love and lust but that is not where the boundaries end because the stories do not shy away from once taboo subjects.

There are stories about a father’s love for his wife transposed to his two year old daughter as we read in Sotonye Dan’s *Gossamer*, a brother’s

love for his dead sister as in Nonso Franklyn Anyanwu's *The Birdsong* but the stories that grab you by the scruff of the neck and make you pay attention are the ones that ply the trajectory of the erotic.

There are few instances of actual sexual activity and where they occur, the writers are subtle and clever—"and then he held your shoulders and eased you to your knees," or "one day as he pounded yam she came to him and untangled the knot of his wrapper," as we read in Arinze Ifekandu's *Casmir* and TJ Benson's *The Mad House* respectively. There is also Somi Ekhasomi who writes in *This is not love*: "I lean in for another kiss. 'He tried, but I'm here now.' Our lips meet and I sigh in pleasure."

Social media is upfront and center and when people are in love they love in the real and virtual world and when men want to meet women they go online. There are frequent mentions of phones, Facebook, Whatsapp and BBM.

"It seemed like a the year to have a girlfriend... Since he couldn't find any in neighbourhood and in class, he decided to go on facebook and scout," writes Okwudili Nebolisa in *Blind Date* while Socrates Mbamalu tells us in *The World was Roses* that "when the time came for him to meet her after a series of chats on Facebook and Whatsapp, he was hesitant. Hesitant because pictures lied."

Aside social media sashaying across the pages as if it were a character, the most affecting stories are those that are about same sex relationships, some of which also happen to be the stand out stories of the collection.

Arinze Ifekandu's *Casmir* is a well-paced and tender love story with a twist at the end and a final line that anyone who has known heart break

will recognize – “...and yet for days you rushed when your phone rang. But it was never him.”

Somi Ekhasomi nails it in *This is not love*, a well realized tale of love lost and almost found. The surprise coupling at the end will make your eyes pop but what works best is the ease with which sex happens between two people of the same sex.

Otosorieze Obi Young’s short story, *Sunlight* plies the same-sex trajectory but it is not as well realized as the other two.

To conclude, let me return to a comment I made earlier. In suggesting that the stories in this anthology are like thermostats of our sexual health, I was alluding to the elements of the anthology that situate it firmly in the here-and-now, making it one of the most contemporary collections of love stories that has come out of Nigeria in recent times and you can find those in the constant references to phones and social media as enablers of love and lust but most especially in the direct, unadorned treatment of same-sex liaisons.

This is a bold and audacious anthology; one that pushes the envelope and extends the discussions around sex and sexuality.

Toni Kan
Lagos, February 2016

Gossamer

Sotonye Dan

AS THOUGH SHE KNEW what day it was, she offered him cone—something she would never do. Last year, they had planned for this year’s to be a big picnic of rare wine and food. But she had not made it to the year, and so it was small: sachet drinks, seasoned pop corn, an old mat, and a brown teddy bear.

He was tired already, but she still wanted to run around, sit on his shoulders, play horse girl, his ears for reins. Though she could not remember a thing, they had sat on that same spot last year, on the same mat, new then, the teddy bear white.

“Daddy, Daddy! I want another one,” she yelled when he swallowed his first bite of the cone. She was mischievous, too mischievous for her age, he thought—like mother, like daughter.

Decaying leaves layered the park benches like cushion. Gossamer barricaded the paths between lean trees growing side by side. Birds sang in whispers. Cricket chirps paused with each crunch of leaves underfoot. Since she died here, the beautiful park now seemed haunted. But beauty is an imposition of one’s mental construct on the real or imagined, differing individually, like loops on thumbs.

“We had our first kiss here,” he whispered to her. It had lingered in his memory not because it was his first—and it was not—but because it erased others before hers.

While he spoke, he wondered if he should say all that to her, fearing she would somehow understand, but she was silent, she was listening, and she did not nag for ice cream. Not all two-year olds could understand the meaning of the deepest love. Not when still two.

He slid her from his shoulders to his arms; she had fallen asleep. He wondered how long he had talked. His mind had wandered to a different time in this park, the first time with her mother behind the bamboos in the distance.

After an autopsy failed to reveal the cause of Alaso’s death after a sudden scream, Bille had changed their daughter’s name to hers. It was February 14. Exactly a year since she collapsed here. This place that had become his shrine.

Casmir
Arinze Ifeakandu

1

YOU KNEW HE WAS TROUBLE, but you loved him nonetheless. He said, “I am a time bomb,” after you watched *The Fault in Our Stars*. Hazel’s words to Gus. After the movie, the credits rolling on your laptop’s screen, he leaned into you and said it too. Quietly, as though he were in awe of the words. Your heads were pressed together, his nose touching yours, his breath warm on your face, and it struck you how intimately you were nestled, how close your lips were, how he wasn’t shaking his head and pulling away.

2

He was not into romantic gestures, made it clear the first time you complained that he never texted. And yet on your birthday he made his room look like a party hall just for the both of you, and then unveiled a painting of you which he had done himself. “Like it?” he asked, his eyes expectant like a child’s.

“Casmir...” was all you said.

3

The day you moved into the lodge, he had been standing in front of your window smoking a joint. He had been in boxers, his chest bathed in black curls. His friends, boys who visited him every evening to smoke and whistle at girls, paused their loud talks to stare at you.

“I know you from somewhere,” he’d said, his handshake firm. “You are Mike, right? No? Maxwell then. And you stay in Enugu.”

You’d laughed. “No, I am Obiora. I stay in Lag.”

“Taa! You don’t look like a Lagos guy at all,” he said.

He was still holding your hand, and you’d felt in your stomach the sensation of things gathering.

4

He was an asshole. The first time he came to your room, he said, “Nice,” pacing slowly round the room, as though trying to memorize its spaces and corners. And then he added, “But this colour is too girly.” He sat on your mattress and said he loved it too and you asked him what. The thing on your phone, he said. The gay thing.

You stood by the door staring at him. He stood up, shut the door. And then he held your shoulders and eased you to your knees.

He didn’t suck, didn’t kiss, didn’t anything. You were good at this, he said often, his hands on your head. Sometimes, you wanted to say fuck you. Wanted to extricate yourself from the complication that was loving him, from the things you wanted him to do and say. But you were happy in the warmth of his presence: when he slept off on your bed, in that careless, sprawling way of his, you remembered your happiness. Doesn't happiness come at the price of small sacrifices?

5

You remember him like this: drunk and passed out on the rug, incoherently sing-songish. He drew and painted and got stoned. You called him My Time Bomb and he called you Hazel, not because of *The Fault in Our Stars*, he said, but because the word sounded like something beautiful.

“Something beautiful like what?” you asked.

“Something beautiful like you,” he said.

One morning you woke up and found his door ajar, his room bare. There were whispers. Three neighbours had lost their laptops and several people couldn't find their phones. Your school fee was gone, the envelope at the bottom of all your clothes intact; flat but intact. He had been merciful: your laptop, which sat carelessly all night on your table and on which you wrote your project was there. You felt as though someone had flung your windows open, letting in brash sunlight, and yet for days you rushed when your phone rang. But it was never him.

The Birdsong

Nonso Franklyn Anyanwu

IT WAS MID-SEMESTER BREAK. I was occupied with school work—lots of assignments—and could not travel home with my sister who had already arranged a few clothes inside her school bag. Two days was already gone from the one week break. We walked to the motor park, close to our school's main gate. As we waited for more passengers to fill the bus, I told her I would miss her, and she said she would be back two days before resumption because home would be boring without me. She was only travelling because she wanted to spend the Valentine's day with her boyfriend, the guy she met on Facebook. We hugged, and she promised to call as soon as she got home.

I had never stayed a whole day without my sister. As I walked back to the hostel, passed the tennis court, the school library, I felt the absence of a part of me. I relaxed on bed and fell asleep. That night I received phone calls from my parents that my sister was not home. It was a three hour journey, and she left in the morning. Her phone was switched off and messages could not deliver. Our hearts were unsettled. I went to the motor park the next day, and reported a missing person. But there was no recent case of accident; every yesterday's journeys were safe. Two days passed, and the third day, still nothing. My parents had already posted her

pictures on the social media, and it was trending on Facebook, Twitter, and blogs, announcing a missing person.

Only a few students were in school. The emptiness made the swaying of the leaves of the trees audible, as well as the birdsongs. It was as if the world was a clot of wax that was melting as days passed without any sign of my sister. I lost concentration on everything. The room suddenly became busy with invincible activities. Little things scared me. I stayed awake all night, consumed with panic as I stared into space. My sister's framed picture in her matriculation gown smiled at me. Two years ago, she was the youngest student in the faculty of medicine, and was given a standing ovation on our matriculation ceremony.

The day the news about my sister finally came and spread the whole nation like a flame, a bird came to my window, singing a dirge song. It was about how the rest of my life would be like a shadow, something without substance.

Love Story

Sibbyl Whyte

YOUR HANDS ARE MOIST. His can't get the key in the lock fast enough. You are both trembling. Leaves rustled by the wind of desires.

Stumble into the room lips-locked. Flick switch, chase the darkness while the silence scampers at your moans. This is heady, champagne-y. Unburden yourselves of clothes that fall to the ground with cautioning whispers. Ignore the voices in your head and go at it like Israelites catching manna in the wilderness. Baptize every corner of his apartment with the liquids of your lust. Call the name of your gods in vain. This is Valentine's Day: twenty four hours of licentiousness mistaken for love. Drained, fall asleep as spoons and dream into tomorrow.

Sit across from each other, bodies stiff as new book spines. Scatter the grains of rice on your plate and ruminate over the reason why you are both here. Feel your heart somersault into your stomach. Imagine it knocking against your womb asking, *is anybody in there?* Hear the answer in the clenching of your insides. Tell him the three words that built a new world in you. Whisper the three words that snatch both your dreams right before your eyes. Watch him transmogrify into a stuttering liar. Watch him stalk out. Remember how your fingers clutched and

marked his back in shudders of climax. Replay it all and drown your lunch in tears. Mop your face with serviette and wonder whether love like water evaporates under heat. Walk out and scan the skies for rain. Finding none, know that love is not going to return in drops or torrents.

Stare at the ceiling, notice the rain-damaged boards and the lizard peeking from one yawning space. Imagine what it sees; a man sticking his hands between feminine legs splayed apart like doors. Feel alien fingers probe you, eliciting pain. Pleasure is a feeling forgotten on the floors of memory. Feel the metal brush against your cervix, unlike the hot, pulsating appendage of love that filled you months ago. Watch the lizard nod its head through the haze of anaesthetic consciousness and wonder if it mocks you too, like the voice in your head. Hear the plop of cells hitting enamel bucket and realize this is how your love-story would end; dead, zero chance of survival.

Say goodnight and leave, keys stranded in the moist, unsteady hands of lust.

Campfire Night

Sylva Nze Ifedigbo

WE WANDERED AWAY that night, Farida and I, from the pack of corps members dancing around the fire in a circle. We walked hand in hand towards the far end of the football field which also served as the parade ground. As we went farther away, as the music from the speakers grew fainter, our bodies pulled closer together. My hand grabbed her waist like I owned it, her head rested on my shoulders.

We walked slowly, talking about the people in our platoon, the boy who almost fell from a tree during the Man-o-War drill out of fear, the Miss NYSC pageant contestant who did not know the name of the vice president, the army commandant, Mad Dog, who made one enjoy the early morning drills because of his racy humour.

We finally settled under a baobab tree, making leaves from nearby shrubs into flat seats. Initially, we sat side by side, our bodies touching, my breath picking up the smell of the onion we had eaten in the suya at the campfire ground. Later she bent over, using my laps as a pillow, her legs folding at her knees.

We talked and laughed, deep laughter of friendship, of freedom, of wanting. The regimental life in camp had not allowed us such time to ourselves since that first day during the registration when she had approached me to smuggle her into the long queue. I had felt sedated by

her beauty, by her eyes which were a rare colour - somewhere between yellow and orange-, by the way her nose sat pointing like that of a baby rhinoceros, by the way her thin lips, coated a mild red met as she spoke, and formed what resembled Cupid's bow. I promptly took a step back and she squeezed herself into the queue. The softness of her backside on my crotch, the smell of her perfume filling my lungs, drowned the shouts of disapproval from the people behind me on the queue.

“You know, my friends back in Enugu said that I will fall for a Fulani damsel in camp.” I said looking down at her, gently pushing away the scarf she always had on and stroking her hair.

She pulled my head down to hers and whispered. “No boy has ever touched my hair”

“I am sorry” I said “Should I...”

“Please don't stop” She said before planting her lips on mine.

This is Not Love

Somi Ekhasomhi

I'VE JUST DELIVERED the last gift, a brand new iPhone and a hamper. The recipient, Yemisi, is the nicest of my boss's girlfriends. She thanks me cheerfully, her pretty face lighting up in a sweet smile, and I almost ask her what on earth she's doing with my married boss.

But I don't. Instead, I head back to the office. I have delivered four packages, three to universities across the state, because my boss likes them young. One, to a slightly older girl about my age who kept me waiting in the reception of her interior designing firm for an hour before she 'allowed' me into her office to drop off her package.

It's demeaning, these things I do for my boss. I was hired as a project assistant, not an errand girl. But he makes me do these things, to shame me perhaps, because I didn't respond positively to his advances.

Back in the office, I ignore the pitying glances from my colleagues. My desk phone rings almost immediately. "Come to my office," he says curtly.

He's seated behind his massive desk, smooth-skinned and handsome. It's a shame, I think, how the ones who make your body light up with just one look, are always the ones who see women as sport.

One of his friends is with him in the office, but that doesn't stop him. "Why can't you do anything right?" His silky voice has a derisive,

mocking tone. He won't go home tonight, I know. I booked the hotel suite where he'll entertain the 'model' he invited from one of the more progressive middle-eastern countries. "Apparently, someone's friends saw you delivering gifts to someone else, and now I am being accused of having multiple mistresses." He looks bored. Of course he knows that issues with his women can always be settled with money.

You have multiple mistresses, I want to reply, but I stay silent.

"You have nothing to say?" He flicks a hand to dismiss me. "Think of something Retta will like, return tickets to somewhere nice, and send to her before CoB."

I hate my life! While my mates work on real jobs, I'll spend the next few hours compiling a list of possible destinations for one of my boss's mistresses.

"You should let her enjoy her Valentine," the friend says, not even giving me the courtesy of letting me leave the room before starting to talk about me.

"That one?" My boss laughs. "She likes small boys who can't give her anything. She has nothing to enjoy."

That hurts, because he knows. He knows my fiancé died in a robbery incident a few months ago.

By the time I get home, I'm exhausted. I've purchased and delivered the placatory gift, and watched my boss leave the office for his rendezvous. Outside my house, a familiar car is parked on the curb, and for the first time in the whole day, I have something to smile about.

She is upstairs in my flat, and she opens the door for me before I have a chance to knock. When she kisses me, I melt into her warm curves,

loving the feel of her soft lips. She smells like flowers, and she's the most beautiful thing I've seen all day.

"I hope he didn't stress you too much today," she asks, concern and desire radiating from her face.

She's talking about my boss, her husband.

I shake my head, wondering how he can cheat on someone so perfect. I lean in for another kiss. "He tried, but I'm here now."

Our lips meet again and I sigh in pleasure. This is not love, for me at least. It is the knowledge that everything she gives me is something I have stolen from him, and that, is the best Valentine gift.

Sunlight

Otosirieze Obi-Young

OUTSIDE, IN THE JEEP under the udala tree, they sat for some time, watched the drizzle die out. Due to the heavy rain earlier, the badgering on the zinc that drowned all else including the raised match commentary, they had said little to each other throughout the night in the bar. They said nothing now as Lekwanna lit a cigarette, staring out the window as the smoke rose in light coils. The beads of water on the windscreen reminded him of mornings when he watched Ulonna work out, watched him jog around the small compound, around the slender, thorny orange tree in its centre, his muscles, the beads of sweat rolling down, an ode to the stark sunlight.

“What are you doing this Sunday?” he said.

“Valentine?” Ulonna shook his head.

The evening they first met, Ulonna had gone into his shop to sign the receipt for the TV and when he came out, Lekwanna noticed his shirt had been buttoned up, his hair combed, beard brushed. He couldn't help noticing also that Ulonna had not examined the notes he gave him, had not held them up against the sun to see if they were counterfeit. As though he hadn't due to some tacit trust. It had been only a fortnight ago.

“We broke up, me and Nneka.”

Ulonna stared at him. Only a week ago, he had told him he would propose to her on Valentine.

Lekwanna looked out the window. All his life, he had always looked out windows, doors, openings to be happy—always looking out but never mustering the courage to enter.

Now he could.

He would.

He felt an ache to explain, to be sure of himself, of what he was doing, but didn't. Partly because he had never imagined himself much of a factor in someone else's life, and partly because it was their way: saying little to each other about the world, saying nothing at all about their place in it.

“I just want to be happy,” he said. He sneezed. A bittersweet sensation in his brain. He was thinking of that first evening when they had somehow ended up in his flat, how after keeping the new TV they had simply undressed each other, his hands roving on Ulonna's chest and abs and laps, tracing the glow of the orange sunlight from the curtain, knowing it was showing him the way.

The Heart of Man

Kingsley Okechukwu

HE REMEMBERED HOW his father would talk about dead people who were not yet buried. The dead who roamed the streets, talked like humans, with humans, live among humans, but whose spirit had since forsaken them, whose body was just a hollow frame, and who would trek on earth until a point when they were carried and lowered six feet. Feeling Priscilla lying asleep by his side, Jide saw clearly his father's walking dead.

He couldn't place a thumb at the cause and time of demise, but he could feel it, breathe it, their love had died quietly but their relationship walked, talked, made love, awaiting interment.

Jide sighed, resumed his nightly role of a coroner to a death that hadn't happened, digging for physical signs for an unseen disease. Priscilla, he had unearthed, no longer put her tongue in his mouth. When they kissed, she kept her tongue in her mouth, holding back affection. She no longer explored. Their kissing which was a passionate bond now tasted stale, a passive obligation.

Even her laughter had changed. Before, when she laughed, she thrust firm breasts forward, open her mouth and revealed strong teeth, white like the keys of the piano. Now she barely opened her mouth when she

laughed; nor did she laugh with him. She laughed for him, short polite laughs that sounded like a distant cry.

He missed her laughter, the old Priscilla. Last night while watching the television in the sitting room, he became bored, brought out his phone and got into Facebook. There, at the top of the timeline was a job advertisement that was designed with him in mind. Chartered accountant, second class upper degree, no working experience. Excited, he rushed to the bedroom to show Priscilla the good news, he would soon get a job and ease her financial burden. But when he grabbed the door handle, her laughter hit him and stopped him. She was talking to someone on the phone and laughing like the real Priscilla, the juice in her voice which he didn't know still existed pricked his heart. He walked back to his seat, his head lowered.

Priscilla moaned in her sleep. Jide hissed. No more sleep for him tonight. He reached for his phone on the rug. The red light of his BBM notification got his attention. He got into BBM. Priscilla had updated her status, "Jeremiah 17:9".

It was a familiar verse; as he recalled it, his heart crumbled. "The heart of man is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?"

Four Wheeled Love

Lexi Akpan

THIS IS A LOVE STORY about trucks.

I've always loved trucks. It's an old love; tread-marked onto the chambers of my heart. Hearing one rev makes my heart leap with excitement like a frightened caged bird.

So it was no wonder the day I looked up from my novel to stare out the window of the bus I was in, my eyes saw only the truck.

It was a Tundra—black and gold beauty; moving smoothly, barely purring. I pressed my nose against the window, gawking at its gleaming tires in awe. New tires meant it was either new or well taken care of. After running my eyes over the truck one more time and sighing in pleasure, I began to look away and then noticed the driver of the truck.

He was staring at me, an amused smile dancing on his lips. Perhaps he wasn't used to women admiring a vehicle so closely; they don't notice its hot driver.

Oh, did I forget to mention that I'm female? Well, I am.

We stared at each other. I felt like a boy who had been caught staring at cleavage till I had fallen into it.

So I did the first thing I could think of.

I ducked.

One year later, I was leaving a bank when someone stopped me. He looked vaguely familiar.

"Do I know you?" I asked warily.

"Yes and no." he replied, "Just to be sure..."

He held up a car-key stub and pressed it.

Beep Beep!

I turned towards the sound, and gasped as I saw a certain gleaming black Tundra.

I could hear the grin in his voice, "I thought that was you..."

We're getting married next year.

I guess I discovered something I love more than trucks.

A truck driver.

... Lingerin Cupid

Dogho Patience

IT FEELS LIKE FOREVER since I stood at the fork in the road where our hearts first grazed, yet you feel as much a part of me as the warm breath dancing around me on this cold lonely night as I try to hold on to your laughter as it were, the day you reluctantly left me wrapped in a cocoon of warm hugs and playful kisses.

You remember my stubborn refusal to give you my number don't you? I must have been quite a sight, huffing and puffing in righteous indignation.... I remember everything. I called you arrogant when I actually wanted to say beloved, acted defiant when actually my heart was turned to mush from your very first hello... I wasted so much time playing the game men and women play, and dancing to the tune of courtship's love worn song... why did we follow the motions when we already knew where our hearts belonged; I was yours and you were mine. I loved how our hearts knew what our brains refused to process... I loved you, beyond reasoning, beyond the walls.... I still do...

I know it is the same dream again as I navigate through mind and consciousness to get to you, to remember your face, to breathe in your scent... here they are, the faces, the names but none resounds with the uniqueness that is you... But it is here where I am alone but not without

you.... Here where dreams merge, I can slide into the warmth of your arms... So I come again and again, hoping everyday is the day...

But I am not here, I am there, and too soon the chilling warmth of this lover's tears call me back to the present where with pen kissing paper I say goodbye to you again like I have a countless number of times before the hallow moon ... this moon that shed light on the gateway where love first found freedom on the eve of lovers' day... and red, red roses swept us into love's embrace. Happy Valentine's Day my heart she echoed into the night....

From the novel in progress

The Mad House

TJ Benson

Morning

SHE HAD COME to recover from a man. He would never know who the man was; just that she had spent all her savings on this abandoned pre-colonial house full of books to run from the man and her family. She couldn't tolerate his presence at first, a vagrant who walked about the house with an old wrapper knotted about his waist and a book in the hand but after perceiving his egusi soup as she washed her plates one day she decided he could stay.

After they started talking she told him that the man was a man of God who told her parents he had seen her in a dream. She told him how worthless she felt when she discovered the harem of other Christian sisters the man had used and disposed. Another cliché. She even told him about the abortion. But never asked him who he was. Or how he came to live in the house. One day as he pounded yam she came to him and untangled the knot of his wrapper.

He couldn't think of the white robes he had abandoned at the seminary. He couldn't think of the pure love of Christ. Just the madness her tongue stoked in his mouth and the feel of her body on his body. Fire.

Noon

Its Saint Valentine's Day he tells her today, still naked with her in the bed. Do you know his story?

She squirms in his arms, turning to face him eyes closed, stoking fire.
He remembers she came in the morning.

Evening

In their hammock of old fishnets hanging between the two palm trees their children would name when they have children, she recites her favorite words to him like endearments.

Latch. To hold on to something.

He smiles at the sky, hands behind his head. Her right cheek is on his chest, each word from her lips tattooing itself to his heart.

Serendipity. An unexpected adventure.

Night

She is reading by of the candle on the shelf, he listens on the ground, legs in front of him, eyes chasing a moth courting the candle flame behind her head as she reads. She is on a high stool and the moth descends from the flame to her crossed legs with the grace of a small warplane, angling for the best path between her legs. He smiles. He can understand the moth's frustration.

Blind Date

Okwudili Nebeolisa

IT SEEMED LIKE the year to have a girlfriend, or more if you could disguise yourself as a ‘freelancer’. Ade’s friends, Obi and Musa had already gotten female friends who were interested in a relationship. But the more he tried, the more it seemed he was running out of luck, all the girls he met physically said they didn’t want him. Only one girl politely told him she had a boyfriend already.

Since he couldn’t find any in neighborhood and in class, he decided to go on Facebook and ‘scout’.

He sent numerous friend requests to girls, mostly people he didn’t know, some of them who didn’t even live in Kaduna the state he lived. A few accepted, and he sent them messages to ask for a serious relationship. The messages were the same: *Hi, please can we better friends?* Only a few of the few who accepted his friend requests, replied. Most of them said they were in relationships, some of them opened up to him that they were in several relationships.

Only one girl accepted to be into a ‘serious friendship’ with him. Ajoke. He looked at the screen of his phone in disbelief. Moreover, it was February 7th, and Valentine’s Day was close at hand. Her profile pictures were pretty, she was a slim girl with an appealing pout. He imagined kissing those lips one day. Ajoke was nice to him, she replied his

messages immediately. She agreed to be his date on Valentine's Day. The eatery she chose for their date was relatively affordable. Ade announced to his friends that he had found a Val. He showed them Ajoke's pictures and they all agreed that she was pretty, that he should hook up with her before another boy would.

On the day of their meeting, Ade put on his best clothes, wore perfume, checked his reflection on the mirror for what seemed like eternity before leaving the house.

When he got to the eatery, he ordered for a cup of ice-cream and waited for her. He called her after waiting for twenty minutes and she said she was coming already. He felt pressed and went to use the gents. It was in the gents his phone beeped. A message from Ajoke: 'I'm already in the eatery, where r u?'

He walked out quickly and recognized her, but she wasn't pretty as she looked in the photographs. She was fat and had fair and reddish skin, as if it was bleached all her life. He turned and left the eatery.

The World was Roses

Socrates Mbamalu

WHEN THE TIME CAME for him to meet her after series of chats on Faceook and Whatsapp, he was hesitant. Hesitant because pictures lied. Because beauty was falsehood. Because he wasn't sure of what to expect. She was a plump lady and he guessed her to be in her thirties even though age was something they'd never discussed. It was better that way. To avoid some topics. But other topics, they talked about. Like when she asked him, Breasts or butts, which do you prefer.

And he didn't know what to say, so he said, All of you. Because earlier she had sent him pictures, those pictures that created mental images through which he stimulated himself in the bathroom. Those images that flashed at improper times and made him, as if held by a feverish urge, take out lotion, remove his boxers and stroke away.

He was twenty years of age and sex seemed to have eluded him all the while. But when he met Chisom on Facebook through a strayed friend request his hope was resurrected. She had laid down the terms and conditions, I don't want anything permanent. And he had replied, Neither do I.

Sex was a healing process for her body. It was what took her inside and outside of worlds. She had fallen in love so many times that love got

tired of her constant foolishness. At the end of the day we fuck and just go, she had reasoned. And what was love without the completion of sex? Fuck what the priests said about consummating marriage, it was just license to fuck as you pleased. She would also consummate a Facebook request. She had liked that the young boy was honest. Of course she was older than him. Not old enough to qualify as a sugar mummy. But when she had sent Olisa a picture of herself clad in a black miniskirt against her fair skin, with a smile powerful to deceive a king, he said, If you were a flower, you'd be a rose. She had laughed and asked, Why a rose? Olisa had said, To pluck a rose the thorns must injure you. And she had burst louder in laughter, I won't injure you I promise, she assured him.

It's my first time, teach me slowly, Olisa reminded her. She loved everything about him and told him, I will unfurl you slowly. She dipped her head between his thighs and told him, Don't touch. Keep your hands away. She worked with her tongue and let Olisa release fumes of moans. Your turn, she told him. She still wore a miniskirt. When she spread her legs open, Olisa didn't see a hole. He saw exactly what looked like his own hardened organ.

Notes on the Authors

Sotonye Dan is a writer and On-Air-Personality at Orange 94.5 FM. He studied philosophy in Niger Delter University, Wilberforce Island. His essay appeared in the anthology *Philosophy and Logic: An Introductory Study*.

Arinze Ifeakandu is a final year student of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, where he currently edits *The Muse*, a student journal of the department of English. He was a 2015 A Public Space Emerging Writer Fellow. He was shortlisted for the BN Poetry Prize in 2015. His short story will be out in *A Public Space Magazine*.

Nonso Franklyn Anyanwu was born and raised in Northern Nigeria. He is a graduate of Ahmadu Bello University, where he earned a degree in Literature in English. His work has appeared in various publications including *Writing Tomorrow*, *Africa Book Club* and *Sunday Sun Review*. He divides his time writing his first novel and working in Abuja, Nigeria.

Sbbyl Whyte is a Nigerian writer who is subject to the whims of her headstrong *chi*. Snippets of her imagination appear on *Gypsiana*, her laptop, *Aquammarine*, her phone and Facebook. She's been published in several anthologies, blogs and magazines she could mention if you ask.

Sylver Nze Ifedigbo is a fiction writer and op-ed columnist. He is the author of a collection of short stories, *The Funeral Did Not End*. He lives in Lagos, Nigeria, and tweets at @nzesylva.

Somi Ekhasomhi lives in Lagos, and has been devouring books for as long as she can remember. In 2012, she started publishing the story that became *Always Yours*, as a blog serial at www.lagosromanceseries.com. It was later published as a novel. Her other books include *Hidden Currents*, the standalone sequel to *Always Yours*, as well as a short story, *Jungle Justice*. When she's not writing, she pretends to be an Architect at a Lagos firm. At other times, she feeds her obsession for TV series, movies, music and books. You can find her at www.facebook.com/somiekhasomhiauthor or Twitter @somiekhasomhi.

Otosirieze Obi-Young grew up in Aba and attended the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. His writing has appeared in *Transition*, and *Interdisciplinary Academic Essays*, and is forthcoming in the *Threepenny Review*. His *Transition* story, "A Tenderer Blessing", nominated for a 2015 Pushcart Prize. He is currently completing a collection of short stories.

Kingsley Okechukwu studied Literature in Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, where he served as the editor of the department's magazine. He is a public critic and believes his works must reflect this sentiment. He has written for publications including *per contra* and *Bambara*. He rambles in kingkingsley.wordpress.com

Dogho Patience grew up chasing the stars in the backwater streets of Lagos mainland, Nigeria, where she used to live. She is a medical doctor,

blogger, poet, a lover of children and an amateur counselor in her spare time. She draws inspiration from mundane happenings of life through the lens of the white coat; the power of words hold a surreal beauty for her and her mind's perusal into the cause of many sleepless nights spent abed has yielded numerous poems and stories.

TJ Benson is a short story writer and creative photographer whose work has appeared in publications including *ANA Review*, *The contemporary Indian Literary Review*, and *Transition Magazine*. He recently won the Amab-HBF Prize, and is currently nominated for the Awele Creative Trust Prize. He shares his photography on Instagram via @TJBensonNG

Okwudili Nebeolisa has his work featured in *Ambit Magazine*, *Yaun Yang Journal*, *Kalahari Review*, *The New Black Magazine*, *Munyoru Literary Journal*, as well as national dailies. He won the 3rd place in the 2011 ASiS International Writing Competition in the poetry category. He was recently shortlisted for the 2016 Sillerman First Book Prize for African Poets.

Socrates Mbamalu is a young writer who is still building himself in the act. He seeks to keep outdoing himself. His work has been published in magazines including *Jalade*, *African Writers*, *Kalahari Reviews*. He lives in Nigeria for now.