

# 14

(An Anthology of Queer Art)

## WE ARE FLOWERS

*Introduction  
by  
Binyavanga Wainaina*

*"Gorgeous. A collection of  
breath-taking beautiful  
works. Stuns with it's in-your-  
face courage and sadness.  
Comforting and nurturing."*

*- Ikhide R. Ikhehoa*

*"Another gemstone..."*

*- Unoma Azuah*

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(An Anthology of Queer Art)



## WE ARE FLOWERS

*Introduction by Binyavanga Wainaina*

*"We Are Flowers is another gemstone..."*

- Unoma Azuah

*"...not just an anthology of queer art...  
a collection of breath-taking works of art..."*

- Ikhide R. Ikheleoa

14:  
AN ANTHOLOGY OF QUEER ART  
NO. 1  
WE ARE FLOWERS

14: AN ANTHOLOGY OF QUEER ART/*We are Flowers*

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**Let the Flowers Bloom!**

*14: An anthology of Queer Arts: We are Flowers* is a rich mix of lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender narratives, artworks and sketches. As titles of the different entries reveal, these works are indeed flowers sprouting in a desert of hate and homophobia, but they are watered by the rains of hope and dogged determination. The audacity of this collection is carried through the chronicles featured. Its risqué slant gives it an alluring edge that delivers defiant blows. These strikes more or less tell homophobia to shove it down its constricted throat. This trend is seen in the blatant masculine objectification of Nzeogwu's "Black Testosterone," for instance, where he celebrates his fantasies about the grandeur of black male bodies, albeit sexually charged; the conveyance is raw and sassy. Additionally, the assorted artistic mediums utilized in this book are yet another angle that makes it a distinctive anthology, from poetry to collages, to sketches, stories and reportage techniques. It also does not fail to capture the tension with which the Nigerian LGBT community navigates its rather hostile terrain. And the extremities they are dealt is reflected in Ice's story "Fizzled." Hence, when lesbians, for example, cautiously gauge territories of love and romance, they usually have to contend with the possibility of being attacked, outright rejection, or most likely share a woman with a man. When Ice's "Fizzled" is compared to Salimah Valiani's "The Girl Next Door," a contrast is seen in Salimah's tale, especially in the setting where an open transaction of love and desire is freely conducted. Though this creates a forlorn feeling, it is buoyant. Hence, *We are Flowers* continues in the tradition of *Invisible* from Kenya, *Blessed Body* from Nigeria and *Queer Africa, new and collection of fiction* published in South Africa, among others, as textual tools for dismantling homophobia. The task of the anthology moves beyond enlightenment and entertainment. It delves into the topography of advocacy and activism because as Human Rights Watch maintains in its report for the World Economic Forum, "Anything that helps to increase the visibility of LGBT people, to move beyond past stereotypes and ignorance, to show that gays occupy the same range of positions in life and society as everyone else," is a highly welcomed development. So let these flowers sprout across plains of revulsion, and bring forth the bloom that is represented in the diversity of human sexuality. *We are Flowers* is another gemstone that has sprouted through the slabs of ignorance and through the concrete grit of hate. It is a must read: an exquisite compilation.

—Unoma Azuah.

In much of Africa, to be gay is an expensive and unsustainable existence, one spent furtively trying to live in spaces that are designed to humiliate, maim and in some instances kill the innocent. There are few safe physical spaces for those whose crime is to live the life they were gifted with but the brave soldier on, creating safe havens away from a judgmental hateful world. Art for the vulnerable is a way of creating physical and psychological space that is comforting and nurturing. *We are Flowers* is not just an anthology of queer art; it is a collection of breath-taking beautiful works of art, every piece stuns with its in-your-face courage and beauty. And sadness. Many of the names are pseudonyms of real human beings who wisely must remain anonymous because to be out could be a death sentence. But no, this is not a time to be sad. Enjoy this gorgeous body of work and marvel at the gift and resilience of beautiful people who refuse to be ugly in an ugly world. Fond Memories of this collection will comfort me for as long as I live.

—Ikhida R. Ikheloa

For the victims of the February 2014 Gishiri (Abuja) homophobic attacks.  
And for all those who have suffered homophobic violence.

# 14

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## Contents

### 0<sup>8</sup> *note* **We are Flowers** THE EDITOR

How beautifully delicate:  
bruised, red flowers that we  
are.

---

### 0<sup>9</sup> *introduction* **African Queers Have Agency** BINYAVANGA WAINAINA

### 1<sup>3</sup> *nonfiction* **Black Testosterone (or: What to do with Famous African Male Bodies)** NZEOGWU

It began where it simply has  
to begin: Idris Elba.

---

### 1<sup>7</sup> *memoir* **Fizzled** ICE

Her words were small, rolling  
balls she threw under my  
feet.

---

### 2<sup>4</sup> *memoir* **The Girl Next Door** SALIMAH VALIANI

Was she the girl next door?  
No and yes. Yes, if doors were  
degrees and time was  
distance.

---

### 3<sup>8</sup> *painting* **Lez Love** Anonymous

IRISY N'C  
The sensation of erotic love  
can bypass the build-up of  
familiarity.

---

### 3<sup>8</sup> *poetry* **Writing on the Wall/Rolling in the Deep** KELECHI EZEIGWE

Nightingales gather in the  
grey atmosphere.

---

### 4<sup>4</sup> *poetry* **Ero-manga** AYAÒBÀTÁLÁ

Sealing calcified want and  
night dreaming/of you

---

### 4<sup>6</sup> *poetry* **How Can I Forget to be Nigerian Around You?**

NNANNA IKPO  
You laugh like a baby giggling,  
licking *nzu*

---

### 4<sup>8</sup> *visual art* **Kito/Ada-Obi/May the Rainbow be with You**

OSINACHI  
It results in long-term  
depression

---

### 5<sup>4</sup> *nonfiction* **After the Law Was Passed**

PINK PANTHER  
The world is full of  
unknowns, most of them  
dangerous and potentially  
hurtful.

---

### 5<sup>8</sup> *poetry* **You Think You are Fucked/Coming Out/How to Survive the Fire**

ROMEO ORIOGUN  
The woman on the bar stool  
knows your body/is a journey  
into songs

---

### 6<sup>3</sup> *memoir* **The Thing You Do for Love**

DEJI PAYNE  
The thing you do for love is  
survive.

---

### 6<sup>8</sup> *fiction* **Opprobrium** OSINACHI

Eyes were glued on him with  
hate and judgment.

---

### 7<sup>2</sup> *essay* **Time to Marry. Or Not**

CHIKE FRANKIE  
EDOZIEN  
Was this clandestine living the  
best they could hope for?

---



77 *poetry*  
**Bodies: how to keep  
 a distant**

**relationship/ghosts  
 /suicide note**

CHIBUÌHÉ OBI

I'll begin by teaching my body  
 the language of grief

---

82 *photography*  
**Here I Am/Not Yet  
 Buried**

OJO OGBOM

They sometimes throw  
 caution to the wind

---

86 *conversation*  
**Broken Body: An  
 Interview with  
 Unoma Azuah**

ABSALOM

LGBT bodies are not cursed;  
 they are blessed.

---

92 *fiction*  
**Rebellion's Rebirth**

KARANJA NZISA

We had loved without limit.

---

101 *photography*  
**Petals for Wale**

EGHO DANDELION

I love another man, and it  
 makes me feel like a pretty  
 flower

---

103 *photography*  
**A Story to Live For**

NNANNA IKPO

My story isn't over.

---

105 *nonfiction*  
**Gay Wars: Battle of  
 the Bitches (or, The  
 Tops and Bottoms of Being  
 Out in Nigeria)**

RAPUM KAMBILI

He is a bitch, this classmate of  
 mine. Perhaps the bitch of  
 bitches. His role model? Lady  
 Gaga.

---

111 *essay*  
**A Straight Boy's  
 Manifesto: Queer**

**Folk are the New Africans**

IFEDIMMA OSAKWE

I was a Straight Boy  
 Crusader.

---

119 *memoir*  
**Friends in a Ship**

AMATESIRO DORE

He listened to my past like a  
 priest.

---

122 *poetry*  
**Lost Pride**

SEUN IDRIS

And the tenderest of swaying  
 moves

---

123 *poetry*  
**Placards**

CHISOM OKAFOR

Dreams are variegated  
 things/like arithmetic

---

125 *painting*  
**Istanbul Pride 2017**

JAY RECHSTEINER

It does not look like the  
 authorities will allow that  
 march soon.

---

127 *mixed media*  
**Nigerian Lesbian  
 Forum**

POGAY

Points to the progressive  
 struggle of Nigerian  
 lesbians—how far they have  
 come

---

129 *pictograph*  
**The Mannequins**

NEEC

These giant dolls can be so  
 sexy without their pants and  
 clothes

---

132  
**Notes on  
 Contributors**

---

## We are Flowers

THE EDITOR

The idea came to me on a languorous evening, incomplete, hazy: I wanted to collect an anthology of art works to be published on the anniversary of the ‘anti-gay law’—as a middle finger to our homophobic society, but more importantly as a coup. “That date will become our Pride Day,” I said to Absalom, who had injected faith and excitement into the idea. He had been thinking about something like this, he said. Before midnight, we had created a group chat on Facebook. Everybody was excited; suggestions flew around, roles were assigned. A search for female allies was mounted. In the meantime, five gay men and one straight man buried their heads into the task ahead: How do we compile an anthology in the space of three months?

The pieces didn’t really start to come in until late in November, and it was a little

surprising, and heart-warming, the volume of works coming into the email, considering the smallness of time. *Nigerians, only*, we had said. But an email from South Africa came in. Another from the UK: *I am not gay*, the artist declared, *but this does not stop me from fighting for equality, does it?*

It doesn’t, and neither does space—we *cannot refuse these acts of solidarity*, a 14 team member said. And so, as I stared at a photograph in which a guy sat, shirtless, limp-wristed, his face masked by bleeding-red roses, I thought how delicate we all are, in our sweeping anonymity and in our little pockets of non-anonymity—some of us angry, some of us merely sad, many in love, many heartbroken, some hopeful, some wildly in lust with Idris Elba and Teju Cole; many of us Queer and some of us, well, not queer. How beautifully delicate: bruised, red flowers that we are.

—*Rapum Kambili*

## African Queers Have Agency

BINYAVANGA WAINAINA

THERE IS YOUTH in queerness in Africa. Truth is most African societies believed that one must have children. Queer people were special. Still are. Since coming out I have met many, many queers. One thing that stands out is the horror of being alone. African queers, apart from queers in the West, have a horror of being alone. Which means complex relationships, often secretive. What is not true is that African queers do not have agency. I have met many with much agency. I think what is most important is to find names for ourselves in our languages. All our languages. I am very proud to make this introduction to one of the first anthologies of queer art from the continent.

You will love again the stranger who was your self.  
-Derek Walcott, "Love After Love"

Love  
Is that giant  
Bag Of Everything  
Into  
Which  
We  
Might  
Disappear  
Without  
A trace  
&  
Be found  
again

**-Alice Walker, "Love Is That Giant Bag"**

## Black Testosterone

### (or: What To Do with Famous African Male Bodies)

By NZEOGWU

I DO a healthy dose of white men: blue-eyed Gerard Pique and slim-butt Michael Fassbender whose water bottle-dicks constantly silhouette against their pants (Fassbender actually has a full frontal nude scene in *Shame* which got the whole of Hollywood paying tributes!); bald Pep Guardiola whose tight trousers keep me tickled; Daniel Day-Lewis who is my favourite actor of all time and my favourite sugar daddy; *CNN*'s out Anderson Cooper, even if I respect him less for once writing, because he fell ill in Kenya or wherever, "Africa is a place to forget and be forgotten in," information that has now been deleted from Wikipedia; the billionaire Jon Stryker who's out; Arsenal forward Alexis Sanchez whose body is *art*. I do white men, they were the ones I first did, but if you're acquainted with the thick, edible poetry of black male sexiness, you'd know.

There is Usain Bolt whose shapeliness in his tracksuits makes me high. There are the

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*I do white men, they were the ones I first did, but if you're acquainted with the thick, edible poetry of black male sexiness, you'd know.*

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*Moonlight* actors, Mahershala Ali who I pray wins an Oscar and Trevante Rhodes who owns my favourite photo of 2016. There is Viola Davis' hunky *How To Get Away with Murder* boyfriend Bobby Brown whose body is carved into delectable mounds of muscles: *glory*. There is my first football crush, Rio Ferdinand. There is Jay Z, Kanye West, 50 Cent, Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson. These are some of my black flames across the Atlantic. In Africa, though, they are five who I find not merely sexy but erotically-motivational.

French-kiss Teju Cole.

Suck D'banj at a one night stand.

Fuck Idris Elba.

Date Chiwetel Ejiofor.

Cheat on him with Didier Drogba.

I have the scorching hots for these five but if it came down to choosing, if I can't have the same thing with more than one person, then it would be that, in that order. But ignore all of that because it began where it simply has to begin: Idris Elba.

It is 2004 or 2005 when I first see Idris: a huge dark-skinned man whose presence means gravity, whose arms are as huge and capable, who is sitting on a chair, sadness in his eyes. I first see Idris in *Sometimes in April*. Then, I do not know his name, only that he makes me want to urinate, makes me need to use my small prick. I am a child but my imagination is already riotous. It is 2011 when I know who he is, when I ask Google because his name is the LCM of Sexiest Black Men lists. In *Pacific Rim*, he keeps me holding my heart and my groin. In *Beasts of No Nation*, he makes me want to tear off my clothes and run through the bloody, green forests and offer myself on his bed, legs torn wide. The testosterone. Too much. Oozing. Gushing. Flushing. Rousing. Arousing. He is the only man I Google every other day. FYI: I Google more women than men, some women daily—Cate Blanchett, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Viola Davis, Rihanna, and at least once a week: Genevieve Nnaji.

I first experience D’banj in 2004 or 2005, whichever year it is that his “Tongolo (Remix)” came out. But I don’t see him, don’t know how he looks, until 2006 or 2007, when his video for “Why Me” is on constant replay everywhere I turn. It helps that one of my secondary school involvements—a gay boy who becomes the worst mistake of my life—name-drops him like mad. But I first like him in 2008 when I hear “Fall in Love” and realise that it will be my number-one favourite Nigerian song—“Shoki (Remix)” don take over sha, and “Connect,” and his own “Oliver Twist.” And so I begin loving D’banj in 2010 after that song’s video, the one with Genevieve Nnaji, came out. I begin loving his assurance, his swagger, his unadulterated maleness, his maleness like cake, like milk, calling to be tasted. On the Nigerian music scene, D’banj is the most charismatic thing on two legs since Fela Kuti, and arguably the sexiest since Sexy became a thing. When he opens his legs in the “Emergency” video, I imagine kneeling there, sucking, swallowing.

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*If Idris is the alpha of male masculinity, black testosterone calcified in its rawest form, then Chiwetel Ejiofor approximates the evolution of male cool, that thing that also makes Obama thick.*

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This serenading is in order of first sight. In order of conviction, though, it is Drogba. 2006. Cote d’Ivoire knocks Nigeria out of the Nations Cup semifinals and Drogba is the bile on Naija tongues. Hated fiercely by other Nigerians. Loved fiercely by Chelsea fans. 2006 when, because of Frank Lampard and Jose Mourinho, I become a Chelsea fan. Soon, it all becomes about Drogba. His chest, his turn-and-shoot. His sweaty, shiny laps, his strides with the ball. He scores and my heart jumps, and my loins burn. Didier Drogba consumes me. He plays football like one making love, with intensity—he will make love like one playing football, with aggression. He becomes my

first role model. I Google his wife, imagine how she lies in bed for him, or on the floor, or on the table, or on his balls, sitting and soaking in all that *Man*. Imagine the contraction of his muscles in thrusting, in releasing, the contortion of his conventionally unsexy face. For a long time, Drogba is life, in its rawness, in its beauty.

If Idris is the alpha of male masculinity, black testosterone calcified in its rawest form, then Chiwetel Ejiofor approximates the evolution of male cool, that thing that also makes Obama thick, makes me glance between his suit-trouser legs each time he sits and crosses and re-crosses legs. I know about Chiwetel in 2014 because *12 Years a Slave* is on every lips. I see the film. I see nothing. Still, I follow him, Google him each time I can. Until *Half of a Yellow Sun* drops and, suddenly, Chiwetel becomes a miracle cast in bronze. Partly because he plays Odenigbo, my ultimate fictional crush, and partly because I realize how erotically composed he is, how the wrinkles on his face while thrusting Thandie Newton's Olanna and Amala trigger in me spasms of squeezed orgasms. I revisit *12 Years* and ask myself how I managed to not notice that bathing scene where his buttocks are in the firm glare of morning light, tight and rounded and hairy and edible. I fall in love with Chiwetel, his face, his beard, his eyes, his accent, his classiness, *that* composure.

Look, I want to lick Teju Cole. Of these five, Teju is the only one whose bare body I haven't seen. He's a writer, after all, not an entertainer. Still, for homo boys and hetero girls, he's also managed to do something unprecedented: become the first conventionally crushed-on male writer with an unconventionally attractive face. Dude is The Sexiest Male African Writer Ever! So I imagine: beneath his cap, beneath his neck-scarves, behind his camera, beyond his American accent, inside his genius skull: what does Teju Cole like in bed? How do his lips taste? How does he fuck? Missionary? Doggy? Does he like to be sucked? Considering his elevated moral neatness and hygienic sentences, I'd say no to the last. I am swept off as much by his unseen balls as by his gushing brain. Because I am obsessed, I argue to my friends that he looks odd, looks consistently out of place, grants me gay vibes, is either non-hetero or asexual. I imagine I am some negligent slut spread on his reading/typing table, his slim, tapering fingers combing these hormones brewing beneath my skin. *Do with me what you will*. Teju is where my fascination with male Yoruba faces begins: my friends Demola and Demola, my friends Yemi and Ade.

"You're obsessed with masculinity," a close friend points out once. An innocent observation. Of a worrying trend. Male Charisma. It moves me, drives me, propels me, fucks me.

I rarely do conventionally handsome: Desmond Elliot; Majid Michel who happens to be my favorite male African actor; Ramsey Nouah who happens to be my second favourite; Van Vicker; Uti Nwachukwu. I do rough: Diamond Platnumz, the sight of whom drains pre-cum out of me; Djimon Hounsou; Akinuoye-Agbaje. Rough turns me on. I do activists: Olumide



Makanjuola. I do writers: Uzodinma Iweala, Abubakar Adam Ibrahim. I do a lot of actors: Daniel K. Daniel, Alexx Ekubo, while being in limbo about John Boyega and David Oyelowo. I do rappers and singers: Phyno, Lil Kesh, Tinie Tempah, Fally Ipupa, and Iyanya's body and Patoranking's groin and legs and the idea of Olamide—the idea, not the man. And of course I do sportsmen: Michael Essien, Samuel Eto'o, Andre Ayew.

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*"You're obsessed with masculinity," a close friend points out once. An innocent observation. Of a worrying trend.*

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I fancy fucking some politician, some governor or ex-governor: Chibuike Amaechi, Sullivan Chime, Olusegun Mimiko. Some president: Jonathan, bony grandpa Buhari. Some billionaire: Dangote. Some billionaire kid: Davido, Ahmed Indimi. I fancy bending down for these money-pots even though I don't like Anal, don't understand how Anal works. And it works for me because I have no issues with pot-bellies, because I like what I like and it's often not muscled. And it's not for the money, it's just for the fancy. The satisfaction in saying: *I fucked that man on the cover of Forbes Africa!*

## Fizzled

By ICE

WE, HUMANS, are books. Some people will come along, run their fingers on our covers, patient enough to skim only through parts they fancy, before dropping us. Others will come, read every page, and probably fold the parts they find interesting. Only a few people come, read us, cherish us, and keep us.

I am not certain what category Funmi belongs. You be the judge.

## &amp;

WAITING IS pleasurable with company. Were it not for Funmi, boredom would have dealt with me that hot afternoon in September as I waited for a BRT from Ketu to TBS.

“These BRT guys here are watching empty buses drive by without making effort to stop them,” her voice barged into my thoughts. Irritated, I bit my lips and tasted my red lipstick, ran my fingers through the locks of my hair, and turned to look at the intruder.

For the first time since standing next to her, I took her in. A thin sheen of sweat glistened

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*This is the thing with love: it happens the moment we find ourselves in another person.*

---

on her forehead. Her eyes were warm, smiling, and the first thought that crossed my mind on seeing them was *Killer Eyes*. Although her nose was slightly crooked, it didn’t make her less comely. Instinctively, my gaze drifted to her dark lips, which formed an *m* on her oval-shaped face. She was beautiful. Why didn’t I notice her earlier?

The frown on my face must have segued into a lopsided grin. “We should get angry and stand on the lane.”

Without breaking eye contact, she beamed into my eyes, and that led to us talking.

Every word she spoke, every smile gave me, was a lure. She enticed me into her intelligent mind and I fell and rolled in its depth. It felt as though Funmi were me in another body. This is the thing with love: it happens the moment we find ourselves in another person. That day, we got to TBS in two seconds. Time flies at jet speed when you are having fun.

“Can I have your number?” I asked tentatively. Without hesitating, she took my phone and tapped its screen. She dialled her line and smiled when the call went through. As a parting shot, she giggled and said, “I’ll call ya later.”

“Waiting!” I called after her gleefully.

True to her words, she called me later at night. Before hanging up, Funmi asked if we could chat via Blackberry Messenger, to which I said, “Yes, sure.” Anyone hearing me giggle would have imagined I were a teenager.

Chatting with her, I learnt she was in a romantic relationship with some guy named Ryan. My hopes, like soufflé, fell before my eyes. Had it been that we were not chatting, she would have known I was disappointed. *Annnnn... Nice, dear*, was the reply I could type to her. Deftly, I steered the chat in another direction.

A morning hardly passed, in the coming week, that we did not chat. Some days, chatting wasn’t enough, and so we called each other. Two weeks of Funmi-induced euphoria fluttered by and I wanted to be with her for one weekend. As this was not a chatting matter, I called her to inquire what plans she had for the weekend.

“Mostly Ryan. We’ll be hanging out this weekend.”

I felt as if I had been punched in the stomach. For a moment, I lost grip of my emotions and stuttered, “T-t-that’s chic. *Tres chic*.” I tried hard to conceal my disappointment. Staying on the call with her was painful, so painful I felt I would yank out each lock of my hair. To stop myself from breaking down, I rasped, “You know what? Let me call you back. S-s-someone’s is talking to me here.”

I was full of jealousy; it swelled in my chest to the point of bursting. I knew, that evening, that I should control my emotions, should stop wanting her. However, as days bled into weeks, my young, foolish heart pined for the unattainable. Occasionally, there was mild flirting between us. It never went past that until one evening.

As usual, we had been chatting about how the day went for us. Before I knew it, my thumbs got wild and ran off without my senses.

*You should abduct me if you want that sleepover. I’ve got no excuse not to sleep at home. My folks would totally freak out*, I typed.

She replied, *I’ll take you up on that offer*.

I smiled at the screen as her words tickled my insides. Of course, Funmi wasn’t coming to whisk me away from home. But knowing she was interested warmed my insides.

*I sleep nude, though*, I went on.

*I sleep in hijabs*.

*I’d probably...* I was about to type something lewd. Not like we hadn’t chatted about risqué things. Only that this time, I meant it. *I was going to type something naughty but I changed my mind*.

*What did you want to type?*

*No. You won't make me do that.* I laughed, rolled in my bed.

She didn't reply for two minutes. She was probably peeved at me, I conjectured. In the dark, I bit my lips in exasperation at my stupidity.

*Hey*, I typed. It showed that she had read the text, but she did not reply.

My phone began to ring. I picked it up, exhaling. It was Funmi.

"Hi, hi," I said brightly. "Did you fall on your face? Was that why you didn't reply my text?"

"What were you going to type?" Her tone was serious, demanding. I replayed her question in my head to find a trace of humour. I found none.

"Are you mad at me?"

"On the contrary, I'm waiting..." She trailed off.

Phone screens empower us. They make us drop our inhibitions and type words we dare not speak. I was not an exception to this. Without the screen, how was I going to *tell* Funmi the lustful thoughts in my head? I dangled along the rim; I was painfully shy to tell her anything. Funmi prodded.

When I didn't say anything, she went on to tell me what she was thinking. How she wanted

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*Phone screens empower us. They make us drop our inhibitions  
and type words we dare not speak.*

---

to kiss me, the things she would do if I were with her.

I was nonplussed. Her words were small, rolling balls she threw under my feet—I would fall if I didn't stop walking into whatever it was I imagined I was walking into with her. The voice in my head reminded me she was seeing someone. Impulsively, I asked, "Ryan? Wouldn't you be cheating on him?"

"I've told him about you." Her voice was firm.

I pursed my lips, took a deep breath.

My silence probably got her uncomfortable, so she added: "We understand each other. He knows I've been with other women since we've been together."

I swallowed the truth with my saliva, as if it were a pill, and felt a sharp, biting pain in my guts.

"Wow"—the smartest word that came to mind.

She continued to talk, about what she wanted. On and on she went but my thoughts had taken flight. I wasn't going to be *just another girl* to her. Pride would not allow me. I turned in my bed, weighed down by options.

“You know what?” I found my voice but it was not firm enough. “I want something with you. I can’t do flings. You are not leaving your boyfriend.”

“But, does it matter?”

“I’d keep having a crush on you. You’ll be my girlfriend in my head, I guess.”

Silence.

“Is that what you want?”

“I don’t know what I want,” I replied, which was true.

I was absent for the rest of the conversation. Still, her words were like roaches crawling and running around inside my head, laying eggs, eggs that would hatch into lurid thoughts of her. As predicted, my mind went to work and conjured up images of Funmi and me in different stages and states of passionate lovemaking.

The next morning, before I left my bed, I sent her pictures that bore a lot of semblance to my desires. I captioned the last: *Haba! You think it’s only you that can plant ideas in someone’s head? You haven’t seen anything yet.*

Imagining how she was going to reply got me excited. As soon as I had settled in at work, I dug into my handbag to get my phone, my heart leaping at the notifications. I swiped my screen to unlock my phone. Sadly, there was no message from Funmi.

*I was crushed.*

I shrugged it off, thinking it was too early for her to reply a text. Then again, we texted each other at 0700HRS every day. Did something terrible happen to her earlier in the morning? I resisted the powerful urge to call her.

While at work, there were times when I chased after my thoughts, to snatch them away from her shores. Even my to-do list was not enough distraction for me.

Afternoon came. Still, no reply.

Unable to contain my feelings, I texted her. When she didn’t reply, I decided to call. My hopes were balloons and the dialling tone, helium. With each ring, my hopes of talking with her went up. But, her silence, like a pin, punctured those balloons and I heard *pop* sounds in my head. The *pop* might have been the sound of my heartstrings snapping.

I was about to dial her line again when Pride sashayed in and held me back. Breathing on my nape, she whispered, “She ain’t worth it.” Nodding in a zombie-like manner, I repeated, “She ain’t worth it. She ain’t worth it.”

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*My hopes were balloons and the dialling tone, helium.*

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I was lying to myself. But, I felt this lie, like other lies we tell ourselves, would become true if repeated. Soon, it became my mantra for the rest of the day.

After dinner with my parents, I did the dishes. The sound of pots and plates was a noise I embraced as they chased Funmi out of my head. Nevertheless, when I returned to the quiet of my bedroom, Funmi, like a deluge, rushed into my mind and dissolved my resolve not to call her. That is the thing about silence: it creates a void our minds desperately fill with thoughts.

“Hi.” She sounded smug, casual even.

“I thought an ogre had snatched you up.” I sounded blithe, I knew—the opposite of how I felt. What I meant to say was, “Sweetheart, where in perdition have you been? You refused to answer my texts and calls.” Something along the line of what a disgruntled lover would say.

“I’m good,” she said in a sing-songy manner. That irked me. She wasn’t in a bad shape and yet she had refused to talk to me.

On asking why she ignored me, she said she was mad at me.

*Mad at me?*

The text I sent her earlier in the day got on her nerves, she said. “You made it seem like I was doing something wrong, like making you do what you don’t want.”

She made me feel juvenile, like a child whose mother had chastised. I hated her for it. “I’m sorry about that,” I muttered.

Certain that she had accepted my apologies, we went on to talk about lighter issues. I hung up with many conflicting feelings swirling in me. How could she think my texts were intended to spite her?

It might have been in my head but something changed between us after that evening. Everything became... *contrived*. Despite chatting via Blackberry Messenger and the few I-Called-To-Check-Up-On-You phone calls, I felt an ice wall materialise between us. I wanted her. Still, I wasn’t going to be just another person she had been with. I was willing to be “just friends” instead, if I wasn’t going to have her all to myself.

As a teenager experiencing unrequited love, I had learnt that the best way to get over a person was to allow their thoughts, not fight them. Fighting away the thoughts of someone you are crazy about is akin to swatting at sunray to stop it from falling on an object.

With that in mind, I let myself think about Funmi. If thoughts of her were fatty food, I indulged myself and binged on her. I dreamt of her almost every night. The first night, she was focused on some chore that she wouldn’t acknowledge my presence. The next time, she was talking with me. There was a night she walked away from me. I dreamt of her so much that she fizzled out of my dreams.

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*...the best way to get over a person was to allow their thoughts, not fight them. Fighting away the thoughts of someone you are crazy about is akin to swatting at sunray to stop it from falling on an object.*

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Days trudged by. Then she sent a text. My heart did several pirouettes in excitement. But, that ice wall wouldn't let us communicate. I asked how she was.

*Great* was the only word she typed. Just *great*.

Later in the evening that same day, 'I made an effort.' I texted her: *Now that you guys are part of Independent and Busy Gang...*

An hour had gone by before she called.

"Is there anything you want to tell me?" she quizzed.

"No, no." I sighed. At the time, many things weighed on my mind, mostly work-related, and I went off to yap about them. How foolish of me to think she would be interested in my ramblings. She probably rolled her eyes through it.

"That isn't what I'm asking about."

"Oh? What were you asking about?"

"What did you mean by being independent and busy?"

"Nothing. I was teasing you. Everyone is busy nowadays and there's really no time to talk much."

"There's nothing on my mind about that," I stressed, after she kept insisting that there was more to the text.

"Call me when you want to talk," she said and hung up.

Mouth agape, I stared at my phone. Why was she insisting I had something on my mind when there was nothing? Maybe there was and I did not want to acknowledge it. For some reason, I find it difficult talking about my feelings.

I screamed into my pillow that night and that was the end of my pining. Isn't it stupid to want something out of your reach?

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*Isn't it wonderful how strangers become friends and go back to being strangers?*

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MONTHS HAVE gone by since we talked; I think of her sometimes. Isn't it wonderful how strangers become friends and go back to being strangers? There are times I want to call but Pride holds me back. It might be cowardice or self-preservation—it is a thin line between cowardice and self-preservation.

Now that I think of it, maybe I meant nothing to her. Or, maybe I meant a lot to her, the same way she meant a lot to me. Maybe she wanted a fling. Maybe she would have fallen for me. Maybe I could have persuaded her to be with me, not him. Maybe she still wishes I call or text her.

The sad thing about *maybes* is that they throw possibilities at you while raising and crushing your hopes to dust in one breath. These days, whenever I get tempted to hope that she calls me, I remind myself that hope is irrational. She's never going to call, the same way I'm never going to.



## The Girl Next Door

By SALIMAH VALIANI

**W**AS SHE the girl next door? No and yes. Yes, if doors were degrees and time was distance. If my boss had sent me to Cancun rather than a colleague (who hadn't been doing the



work), we would have met at the meetings happening parallel to the World Trade Organisation Fifth Ministerial Conference—where the Korean monk had stabbed himself to eternal sleep on the deadly wire gate protecting the makers of inequality. We would have met at the Asian Social Forum had I been to the one in Hyderabad the year before or had she been to the one in Jakarta the year after. We would have met in South Africa, her home country, where I worked for a year, had she not been

based in the Americas at the time. And had I not been based in Africa at the time, we would have met in the Americas—Montreal specifically, one of my hometowns—where she was attending meetings every few months.

After these near path crossings we finally did meet some ten years later. It was at The Ant, a pizza place in Melville, Johannesburg. It was the last night of my book and travelling tour touching on Western Europe, North Africa and South Africa. And it was thanks to Lishan, a woman I had connected with at a feminist conference in Barcelona, the first stop of the tour.

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*Was she the girl next door? No and yes. Yes, if doors were degrees and time was distance.*

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I was at the conference to receive an award. That flash moment on stage brought me meetings and greetings with women at the conference whom I otherwise would have not come across or even noticed: the fringesters, or, the young women, racialised, or/and Southern women folded in the waves of light-shaded, feminist old foggies. Lishan was one of these fringesters. Speaking at the reception afterwards, we made plans to attend each other's sessions in the following days, and Lishan showed immediate interest in my new book on care work and the trade in labour.

After my presentation the next day, Lishan, myself, and another fringester we had met went out for lunch. I could tell from the conversation that Lishan was a thinker, a creative one, keen to traverse beyond the churn of facts, figures and politics. She was also an outsider—a migrant from East Africa living in South Africa and able to step aside, peer inward and outward as a result. The previous book I had written, a collection of poems, had been inspired precisely by such a positioning. A letter to many worlds, the collection was born of reflections from my time living and working in South Africa. It was a book I had never presented in South Africa; I had not even been able to arrange to present it during the South Africa leg of my book tour. Winging it, I gave Lishan a copy of the poetry book and waited to see if or how she would read it.

The next day when I met up with Lishan she was glowing even more than her usual statuesque, ebony self. She had read much of the poetry and through that, ventured to share a grating experience renting a flat as an African *kwerekwere* in Johannesburg.

"I am dying to present these poems in South Africa to push for some introspection on exactly these issues," I said.

"I will help you," said Lishan.

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*I could tell from the conversation that Lishan was a thinker, a creative one, keen to traverse beyond the churn of facts, figures and politics. She was also an outsider—a migrant from East Africa living in South Africa and able to step aside, peer inward and outward as a result.*

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She committed right there in Barcelona to arranging an event in Johannesburg where I could present my poetry. Though Lishan was in and out of Johannesburg over the course of the two (broken-up) weeks that I was there, and despite the fact that her friend's art gallery where she had hoped to organise the event was not available, Lishan kept her word.

The event was the first in a month-long programme organised by Lishan and her friends in honour of Women's Month in South Africa. A crowd of some fifty students had gathered for the launch of Women's Month. The stage was angled, broad, low to the ground and warmth-emitting, in contrast to the austere outer shell of the building at the University of Witwatersrand. Sporting as a headband the black-maroon-and-cream patterned stockings I had bought in Barcelona, I was the final and international star of the show. Collectively, we were a line-up of singers, dancers and poets rapping the walls of the age-old institution with our equally old but unsung curves, tongues and pitches.

Unlike many readings where the audience awkwardly claps after each poem, this audience, adept to taking in poetry, unobtrusively snapped fingers in appreciation of poems or even particular lines. I coasted through the poems I had selected, dropping each page to the floor once the words were out.

After the show, there was a bustle of people mingling, marvelling at the evening and making plans for after-show outings. Lishan was urging her good friend Ayanda to call Tandra and ask her to join us for dinner at The Ant. Gyamfua—the friend with an art gallery and Lishan's girlfriend, I would soon find out—was intently giving a neck massage to Ayanda, who had a migraine that was seriously getting her down.

I observed all of this, reflecting on the big-hearted, frank mood of the evening's reading. It was similar but different to the mystical mood of the Jozi House of Poetry a few days earlier, where I had shared 'silver and stones' from my first poetry collection. I made a mental note to pass it to Lishan as I knew it would move her like my other poems had.

Arriving at The Ant, our party was seated around a long dusky table at the back, pretty much in pairs. Going counter-clockwise, it was Lishan and Gyamfua, Tsedey and Zola, my travel companion and myself, and Ayanda at the end. Just after we had ordered, a somewhat stern, black-cap-and-black-jacket-clad woman appeared at our table.

"I am sorry I am late, I have been summoned to join you this evening," she said smoothly with a tinge of sarcasm.

Lishan did the introductions which were really for the benefit of Tsedey, my travel companion and me; everyone else knew Tandra. As I would recall later, even I had already 'met' her. Earlier that day at the Africa Museum, I had seen a life-size photo of Tandra accompanying other photos and a write-up about one of South Africa's most popular contemporary lesbian leaders. The display was part of an exposition of eight South African queers—an attempt, in my reading, to humanise queers within the context of gruesome hate crimes being perpetrated against lesbians, gays and trans people.

“Safia, this is Tandra,” said Lishan. “She also works with unions.”

Turning to Tandra, Lishan said, “Safia works for a nurses’ union in Canada.”

Our interests were perked. Lishan likely knew this particular brief intro would spark conversation. As Tandra took a seat beside Ayanda, who was on my right, I said, partly still in my head, “Well then, I should tell you about my other book.”

Starting again, I explained, “I have been touring my new book about the political economy of healthcare and nurse migration.”

Tandra raised her eyebrows. “Tell me, in a few sentences, what is the main point of your book?”

*Neat and tidy*, I thought to myself. *And rare*. Throughout this book tour, when I mentioned to strangers the topic of my book, I received a long speech about *their* take on the issues. This would usually be a summation of news clips and personal experiences with nurses. Few wanted to listen to someone who had actually researched the topic.

Smiling my appreciation, I delved in.

“My focus is on nurse migration from the early 1990s. Before the ‘90s, nurses and other workers migrated to rich countries and immediately gained permanent residency. Now they mainly come on temporary work permits, which means far less rights and usually abuse and more than the usual exploitation. I wanted to know why.”

Listening closely, Tandra studied me for a bit, making me self-conscious of the stockings I had earlier so confidently tied around my head as a hippie headband.

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*Collectively, we were a line-up of singers, dancers and poets  
rapping the walls of the age-old institution with our equally old  
but unsung curves, tongues and pitches.*

---

“And what did you find?”

I continued, stimulated by this woman’s challenge to summarise my 197-page book.

“The US and Canada were the first rich countries historically built on permanent migration to make the shift in the late 1980s. Other rich countries then followed suit. In the US and Canada stories, I show how the work of nurses was undervalued in different ways in the attempt to solve cost problems in healthcare. Employers bringing in nurses on work permits was part of that process because temporary migrant nurses are typically paid less than local nurses and have less say over their working conditions.”

“And in the poor countries?”

“I look at the Philippines, which is the largest global supplier of temporary migrant nurses. The government there actually looks for countries in need of nurses and then trains Filipinos to fit the bill. When the nurses and other workers go to work abroad, they are obliged by law to send the bulk of their pay cheques home. Most do so anyways because they cannot take their families to countries of employment with only temporary legal status. This whole system brings foreign exchange into the Philippines, which the government needs and can better control than foreign exchange coming in through business transactions of the rich. Now the Philippines is seen as a model for other impoverished countries. This is a disaster for health systems and people in poor countries where there is already a shortage of nurses.”

“We lose a lot of nurses to England. But the nurses’ union here is quite conservative so I doubt they are very active around these issues,” said Tandra.

“I actually did present to one of your nurses’ unions. It was the national leaders of the union. They gave me lots of time to speak, and asked me some very good questions.”

Tandra was inspired—by the fact that I had presented to national union leaders or by what I had revealed about the union, I wasn’t sure, but I continued.

“Our nurses’ unions in Canada are also known to be quite conservative but I can tell you, the questions put to me by your national nurse leaders were far better than anything I can imagine coming from our union leaders. The union I work for has never even given me a space to speak about my book! But as I say at the end of the book, unions are key if we are to defend all workers as this trend continues.”

“I would like to get a copy,” said Tandra, “I will go to the ATM a little later to get some money.”

Luckily I had a copy with me. I signed it comradely, including my work email address, and passed it Tandra.

For all this time Tandra and I had been conversing more or less over Ayanda, who was sitting in between us. Ayanda seemed to be listening but without much interest. Tandra now turned to chat with Ayanda and I reached for a slice of pizza. Ayanda’s migraine had anything but gone away and Ayanda started filling Tandra in about it.

“Why don’t you come spend the night with me,” said Tandra, “it will be easier for you than going all the way home tonight.”

“But I have a doctor’s appointment in the morning and I need my things,” said Ayanda.

“Well, what do you need, sweetie? I can lend you a T-shirt, a toothbrush...,” said Tandra sympathetically, but Ayanda was resistant.

Overhearing Tandra and Ayanda, I thought to myself, *Wow, sounds pretty high maintenance—* wrongly assuming the two were a couple like virtually everyone else at the table.

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*Dancing was a touch of wind and lightness in my heady book tour which was coming to a close. As I coasted through the sounds I was a tad aware I hadn't danced salsa in ages, but Tandra was a strong lead.*

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A salsa song came on, brightening the dim Johannesburg restaurant with a dash of passion rarely found in this African country, in my experience. Tandra perked up.

“Would anyone like to dance?”

I thought to myself, *Sure! I have been back in South Africa for two weeks and haven't had a single chance to dance.*

“Sure, I would.”

Dancing was a touch of wind and lightness in my heady book tour which was coming to a close. As I coasted through the sounds I was a tad aware I hadn't danced salsa in ages, but Tandra was a strong lead. It recalled a night in a London jazz club where a Cuban band had kept me and a stranger on our feet the whole evening. In that single night, I learned how to salsa with a skilled partner who did not utter a word to me.

Suddenly, I felt a strong tug at my waist.

“Come let's sit down, the song is over,” said Tandra, somewhat urgently.

Walking back to the table, which was only a few steps away in this quaint-angled restaurant not made for dancing, I said, “What? Really... I didn't even hear it end!”

As I would find out later, Tandra got antsy because she felt my companion's eyes peeled on us. And because she was worried I would feel her lesbian erection. As she would find out later, she wrongly assumed my companion was my partner.

When we sat down, everyone at the table was engaged in a conversation about the disappointments of post-apartheid South Africa.

“The grants are helping a lot of people who are in need and who have no other income, but I don't think they are the answer,” said Tsedey.

“When I returned from Ecuador,” said Tandra, “I was shocked to find young men in the townships telling me how they *had* to get HIV to qualify for grants because jobs were out of the question.”

As we slipped toward the inevitable topics of co-optation and political will, I flipped to a poem in my collection that I hadn't shared at the event and read it to the group.

politics is politics  
at times true and just  
most times not.  
but to come here now:  
20 years after  
this country's history and politics  
became world-renowned.  
10 years after  
this country's struggle  
was won by the true and just.  
to come here in days  
when remaining leaders are tarnishing  
and new voices are raw,  
where opportunists move swiftly  
and the independent present is begging  
for the rewriting of that renowned history –  
what is undeniable and universal  
is that the current of politics is interrupted only extraordinarily and the morality of  
human decency  
is the sole basis for mass action and unity.

The conversation froze as we all took in the words. Even for me, speaking and hearing the poem within South Africa, the words struck hard. The sense of defeat struck even harder.

As we broke into smaller conversations I said to Tandra, "How long were you in Ecuador?"

"I left South Africa in 1999 and lived there for eight and a half years."

"Why did you go?"

"For revolution and love."

As I savoured this colourful answer, Tandra leaned toward me. Suddenly I realised my neck was no longer straining and Tandra and I were sitting side by side. Ayanda had gone to the toilet and Tandra had wasted no time in sliding into the seat beside me.

"I am really sorry I missed your poetry reading tonight," said Tandra. "I love poetry and would have been there if this one had told me where she was going," she said, gesturing to Ayanda.

"*This one,*" I thought to myself, *yikes, what a way to refer to one's lover.* And without a second thought or an inch of discretion I said, "Maybe you should be with someone more your age."

Tandra smiled.

"And how old do you think I am?" she asked.

"You must be about 40."

"And how old are you?"

"I am 42."

Tandra leaned in closer.

"Do you like sleeping with women?"

"I do," I said, feeling simultaneously stripped and dazzled by Tandra's boldness.

"I would really like to make breakfast for you."

In my country that meant a lot more than breakfast, considering it was only about 10p.m. at this point.

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*Tandra leaned toward me. Suddenly I realised my neck was no longer straining and Tandra and I were sitting side by side.*

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"That would be great but I am leaving for Canada tomorrow and this is my mum," I said, gesturing subtly to my companion.

Tandra did not let up. "Please come. Even just for an hour."

"I will think about it," I said, feeling the need to assure Tandra.

As we sipped our seventh and final bottle of Pinotage—ordered mostly on the insistence of Tandra—Tandra passed me a piece of paper with her phone number on it.

"This is for you to call me in the morning. I will come and pick you up for breakfast."

I put it in my bag without saying anything.

When the bill arrived, Tandra got up and went to a nearby ATM. On her return, she placed a small beaded lizard in front of my mum and one in front of me.

"A small gift to take home from South Africa. My friends from Zimbabwe make these."

I had bought such wire and bead crafts from Zimbabweans in Cape Town when I lived there, but the familiarity did not reduce the charm of it all, especially given Tandra's choice to gift my mum as well.

Tandra paid for the nurse migration book and my poetry collection and as we were preparing to leave The Ant, she said, "Now the ball is in your court. You have my number, I don't have yours. Call me in the morning."



“I will.”

“Do you promise?” Tandra pressed with that same uncanny boldness.

“I told you I will call you,” I said firmly, rattled but intrigued by this demand that I promise something to someone I had just met.



THE NEXT morning, my mum and I were slow in waking up, thanks to the wine and late night. We rushed to catch the hotel breakfast. The workers graciously pulled out food for us that had been packed away for the next day. We took some extra pastries and rolls to share with Zola who was coming to spend time with us before saying goodbye.

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*There was a sense of énouement about Zola—the bittersweetness of arriving at the future without quite being able to embrace it.*

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Zola had come to us many times during the trip, and my mum had taken quite a liking to her. Zola had counted the days for some 20 days prior to our arrival. It was the first time Zola and I were meeting again after seven years. Her longing was related to that, and some virtual flirting that we had engaged in a few years before. Between the flirting—which hadn’t amounted to anything non-virtual—and my return to South Africa, Zola had met Tsedey and together they had had a child. But there was a sense of énouement about Zola—the bittersweetness of arriving at the future without quite being able to embrace it. The tension of it all was a thin continuum like the back and forth of 1990s’ drum and bass.

After breakfast, as my mum and I walked into our room, the phone rang. It must have been the first call we had received in the entire trip.

“I thought you were going to wake me up this morning,” said Tandra coolly.

“I was going to call you. We—”

Tandra cut me off. “Can you give me 30 minutes? I will be right over.”

“Sure,” I said, puzzled at how she had figured out how to reach me. I was also somewhat relieved. Tandra would come to the hotel, find Zola with us, and finally grasp that breakfast in bed was out of the question.

After packing our suitcases, my mum and I went down to the guest office to check in online and print our boarding passes. As usual, I had a hard time getting the printer to cooperate with me. Just as I was approaching the front desk for help, Tandra walked into the lobby and immediately stepped in.

In no time the boarding passes were printed. “Very capable,” I thought to myself. Just as we finished, Zola arrived. We all moved outside to picnic in the garden with our snacks from breakfast.

“I read the foreword of your book which you translated from the French,” said Tandra. “Very impressive.”

I was impressed she had found the time and headspace to read in the short time since we had last met.

Midway through the conversation, Tandra started speaking to Zola in Zulu. They had known each other from years before, so I didn’t make much of it because switching languages is common in South Africa where everyone hears the language of the other, but only so-called *African* South Africans and a few random others actually speak languages other than their own and English.

Suddenly Zola stood up. “I have to take my leave now, ladies. I must go to the airport to pick up a shipment which has just come in.”

I was taken aback. It was barely noon and we were not leaving the hotel until about five. Zola knew this.

“You are leaving already?”

“Yes, I have to go. Things are picking up now with the new business Tsedey and I are starting and I need to get to the airport and do a few other things before picking up the baby and the traffic starts.”

As I would later find out, Tandra had asked Zola to look after Mum because she needed at least an hour alone with me. Zola’s gut reaction was to remove herself quickly from the situation, for fear of disrespecting Mum and to do her best to hinder Tandra’s pursuit to move in on her old flame. Of course, Tandra would only find out later that there had been some sort of romance between me and Zola.

With Tandra’s strategy foiled, she now started to accept there was little else to do but hang out with me and Mum until our departure.

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*As we approached Tandra’s car, I went toward the backseat expecting my mum to sit in the front, as one generally would out of respect for an elder. As we approached Tandra’s car, I went toward the backseat expecting my mum to sit in the front, as one generally would out of respect for an elder.*

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“Have you been to the Women’s Prison at Constitution Hill? It is not far from here and I know it well. I could take you around and we would be back in time for your ride to the airport.”

“I actually just heard about it yesterday,” I said, relieved Tandra seemed to be going with the flow.

As we approached Tandra’s car, I went toward the backseat expecting my mum to sit in the front, as one generally would out of respect for an elder. My mum gestured for me to sit in the front. She was quite aware of what was going on.

At the prison, one of the first displays that we came upon was on the anti-Apartheid, feminist activist, Fatima Meer. Tandra spoke about Fatima Meer in a familiar way, assuming we also knew her. I didn’t know much about her, but I remembered then that my Sierra Leonean friend Justice had talked about the Meer family after he and his boyfriend—formerly a lover of one of the Meers—had stayed in their Johannesburg home during a trip to South Africa in the mid-1990s.

My mum was totally absorbed when we got to the prison cells. Preserved as much as possible as what they were when the various political prisoners stayed in them, biographical information was also displayed on the walls.

Most striking for my mum as well as myself were the cells where the black activists – *black*, as defined in South Africa, meaning all racialised people without regard for Apartheid categories. Less than half the size of the cells for white female activists, and without windows and furniture, the cells and general make-up of the prison mirrored life outside the prison under Apartheid. Because all of us, non-South African Africans, had observed the boycott of South Africa from the 1950s to the early 1990s, an experience like the Women’s Prison was the closest we could get to sensing physically the segregation of Apartheid South Africa.

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*“Yes, but people like putting chains on others.”*

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As we wandered through the cells, Tandra and I mostly chatted while my mum mostly read.

“So, what did you do in Cape Town?” Tandra asked.

“I had a book launch there and then a seminar the next day with community-based health activists. At the launch my former colleague, Pearl Sanders, did a great introduction and the next day, The South African Communist Party health person did a response to the book which was very in depth—Cecilia Something. She actually read the whole book, it was clear to me, so what

she said about it was very meaningful, especially her interpretation of the analysis for the South African context.”

“Oh, that’s Cecilia Blooms, I know her well. She is an old comrade of mine,” said Tandra smiling.

At some point in between cells Tandra stopped, grabbed me and kissed me on the lips. I immediately whipped my head around trying to spot my mum.

“She’s gone to the toilet, don’t worry,” said Tandra, knowingly, but likely thinking I was at least a bit crazy.

At forty-two it wasn’t that I thought my mum thought I was a virgin. Was it being with a woman around my mum? I had come out as *fluid* to my mum years before, but since then she hadn’t actually seen me with a woman. But more than anything, it was that she hadn’t seen me romancing with anyone, almost ever. I was forty-two, a good girl, committed to my mother, and rather uptight in this respect. You could say, the classic definition of a lesbian.

“I really wish you had come for breakfast,” Tandra said.

I thought about a new way of approaching the subject.

“Yaaaah, but I hate rushing.”

“And what else do you hate?” probed Tandra, making the best of my candidness.

“I hate chains.”

“Ah yes, but everyone hates chains.”

“Yes, but people like putting chains on others.”

“I hate pain,” offered Tandra.

“Oh pain, I can handle pain,” I replied.

“Do you like penetration?”

“I do,” I replied, with my flashiest smile. What could one do with such bluntness but match it? Tandra flashed a smile back and the conversation drifted.

As we continued through the prison, Tandra pulled out her mobile and called Cecilia. “Cecilia, guess who I am walking with? I am with Safia Saikali whose book you gave a response to in Cape Town last week.”

They chatted for a short while. As I listened in, I felt we were back to the days when everything had to be checked and double-checked about seeming comrades/lovers because the struggle was so intricate and the Apartheid State had mastered the art of infiltration.

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*What could one do with such bluntness but match it?*

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BACK AT the hotel we all sat down to some lunch in the garden at the same place where we had started the day together. Tandra ordered a beer and I helped myself to a sip, remembering the taste of South African beer which I had forgotten to drink during the trip. My mum twitched somewhat disapprovingly as Tandra ordered a bottle of Castle for me.

As we started eating, a long-lost uncle of mine appeared at our picnic table. The ex-husband of my father's cousin-sister who had somehow ended up trying to do business in South Africa, we had accidentally stood him up two days earlier.

"I heard that you were staying here and I happened to be driving by and thought, let me check to see if they are still here," explained Uncle Majid.

"Good to see you Uncle Majid," I said, feeling guilty about the other day, "and sorry about dinner the other night."

"Yes, I had cooked for you and was waiting."

*But you never called to give us your address or arrange transport for us in this oh-so-safe city,* I thought to myself.

"We better go collect our bags from the room," interjected my Mum, practically.

Tandra jumped on the opportunity immediately.

"Yes, Safia and I can go pick them up."

Once in the room, Tandra embraced me and engaged me in a long sizzling kiss. The room offered two inviting double beds.

"I really wish we had had breakfast together," she said, again.

I thought about how to respond differently from the last time.

"What would have happened if we did?"

"Well, you would have come over. I would have sat you down on my bed, and served you croissants, cheese, smoked salmon, bread, fruit and mimosa. We would have eaten together, and then, if I was lucky, you would have bonked me."

I balked at Tandra's choice of words but didn't make an issue of it.

"But then I would have missed you."

"Ah, you are that type."

“Yes, I am. I am old now.”

“We have to meet again. Come back to South Africa. Come for five, ten days. I will arrange for you to meet people in the Department of Health, to present your book. And we can play.”

“I have just taken five weeks off from work. I don’t have any more time to take.”

Tandra paused and considered her next tack.

“Well then I will come to you. I will find you.”

*Ya sure you will*, I thought to myself, *long way to come for a bonk.*

---

*But it was only in Barcelona, during our stop-over, waking from a nap to scribble a poem, that I acknowledged I was aroused. It had been two years since I had been aroused—touched to the core by another being: spirit, heart and loins.*

---



AS WE were getting into the taxi, my mum and Uncle Majid chatting, Tandra kissed me smack on the lips again. Though this was very South African, Uncle Majid, not to mention my mum, likely didn’t know it. His eyes popped out and I tried not to notice. South African or not, I knew my mum could sense the sizzle in the air. Feeling shy and extremely exposed, I avoided looking over to check her reaction.

But it was only in Barcelona, during our stop-over, waking from a nap to scribble a poem, that I acknowledged I was aroused. It had been two years since I had been aroused—touched to the core by another being: spirit, heart and loins.

Pulling out the scrap of paper on which Tandra had written her email address, I went to the hotel guest office and emailed Tandra the poem from my personal email address. To even out the playing field, I added my home phone number in Toronto.

Upon returning home, among several dreary administrative messages I found one personal message waiting for me. It was from Tandra.

“Hello, Tandra Gumede calling from Johannesburg. This is a message for Safia Saikali...to welcome you home. If no one else has done so, take this as your welcome.”

And here is where I opened for the girl next door who was already walking in.





*Lez Love Anonymous* (Irisy n'C, 2016)

**Size:** 23x45 inches (horizontal)

**Medium:** Acrylic on Textured canvas, with palette knife.

*painting*

Intimacy is always an expectation in the cauldron of erotic love. It may not be a default ingredient; sometimes, the sensation of erotic love can bypass the build-up of familiarity yet still reach the stratosphere of explosive excitement.

This piece narrates that story of two female lovers whose identities are anonymous (without faces), who don't meet the facade of familiarity with each other; but whose soul has been yearning hungrily for each other

despite the hostile environs for such love in Nigeria. Separated by time, culture and societal expectations, their paths finally collide in a chance encounter.

That experience is the crux of this surrealist visual narrative experience which propels them into the gripping orbit of passion, sexual excitement and love expression unbridled by the drag of anonymity and culture.

— Irisy n'C



## Writing on the Wall

By KELECHI EZEIGWE

You can remember here so clearly  
Once upon a time it was *home*  
You can feel every pulse of memory  
As you walk right through the garden  
And run your fingers on the wilted hibiscus and lilies  
The way you used to do many years back  
When you walked with him in the early hours of the morning

You are a painter  
You remember you had sat here and made paintings  
His favourite about two men lovers sitting in a vast darkening shore  
He was a writer  
And on the walls are faded graffiti, poems, clichés  
About you and him, about difference and love  
You look away at the broken window  
Now embroidered with cobwebs and dust  
You remember you had stood there with him  
And watched the orange sky tinge the atmosphere with solitude  
You'd told him you loved the colour of dusk  
It made you want to paint something about him gone so soon  
So the day you had finished a painting of him  
The day dusk came so quick and fierce  
You'd stood alone by the window and watched  
Nightingales gather in the grey atmosphere  
A rekindling of a deceased past

14: AN ANTHOLOGY OF QUEER ART/*We are Flowers*

Now you stand alone in this dusty room where you once felt loved

You are wondering why you returned

Nostalgia tickles you

You smother a smile

Although you had not found love once again

You are happy one writing on the wall has not faded

*This is the place we embraced who we are*

## Rolling In the Deep

By KELECHI EZEIGWE

Sex could be fair on a Saturday night  
Downtown Coker Street the amber glow of lights  
Cast soft rays upon adventurous faces  
Ambling to the clandestine bar away from the stringency of the world

Amidst excited chattering of tipsy men  
You find me aloof — effete with a daring look  
A cigar stuck in-between my lips  
Parting to diffuse rings of grey smoke dissolving into sensual cologne  
Background hip hop blares, blending to the pulse of your tapping feet  
In time to the rhythmic sway of effeminate waists  
This is where you come to embrace your truth  
To take in with calm gusto the moves of mild boys stuck in-between firm grasps

Later the night will listen to our gibberish whispers  
Straddled legs are dark silhouette in a solitary room  
Busy bodies relishing queer desire from lustful selves  
Roving hands shivering deep down perspiring torso  
Damp ass held down against firm thighs  
A tireless thrashing of moistened depth  
Then you will hear your own raspy voice crack the silent night  
Wearingly drenched of sex and lemonade — a deep resonance  
You are caught in a whirlwind of ecstasy  
Of what it means to *have* another man  
A thing truer than just imagination  
A throbbing passion that binds transcendently

I make a rewind and it begins again from the start  
With us lost in a disco ambience  
I find you hungry for a hidden passion  
I make the move to deflower you  
Puffing into your face a wisp of smoke formed into a heart  
We share between locked eyes a *different* desire  
This means sex, one way to affirm our gay selves  
Like the end of a blue tale  
We went rough into the night  
While the world listened to the beauty of my male moans

## ero-manga

(in a danfo, on my way to confess to my unrequited love)

By AYAÒBÀTÁLÁ

bodies seated in yellow boxes

in that moment I am

a body

- of metallic onions-
- in sweat ferment-

of (un)said words that swallow space

- of pocket bubbles-
- of wishing letters-

sealing calcified want and night dreaming

of you

in ero-manga clarity

in that moment i am

on (un)becoming

say

that you want

- me without flowers-
- me without shawarma-

say

that you want

- me without weaves-
- me without call credit-

i will

say

that i want

- you with mirror breasts-
- you with hymened lips-

## How can I Forget to be Nigerian around you?

By NNANNA IKPO

How can I forget to be Nigerian around you?

*Baybi m*, you break down these walls like they are cornflakes

And you make me long for simple things like *akara*

You touch on issues that only a Nigerian would care about

Yet your Caucasian skin confuses me

You laugh like a baby giggling, licking *nzu*

Our orgasms are like the taste of well cooked *moi-moi*

But you are nothing like an Emeka or Okwudili

You wrap your arms around me and hold me firm

You kiss and your lips clasp my lower lip, warm and soft wetness

How can I not be Nigerian around you?

You make the dark seem like the magic of the night of New Year's Eve

When your whiteness spreads like the display of fireworks in the dark sky

I'm crazy about you

Your eyes that are the colour of the sea

That heart that has refused to age

How can I forget to be Nigerian around you?

You are home, family.

I imagine one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with pain.

**-James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time***





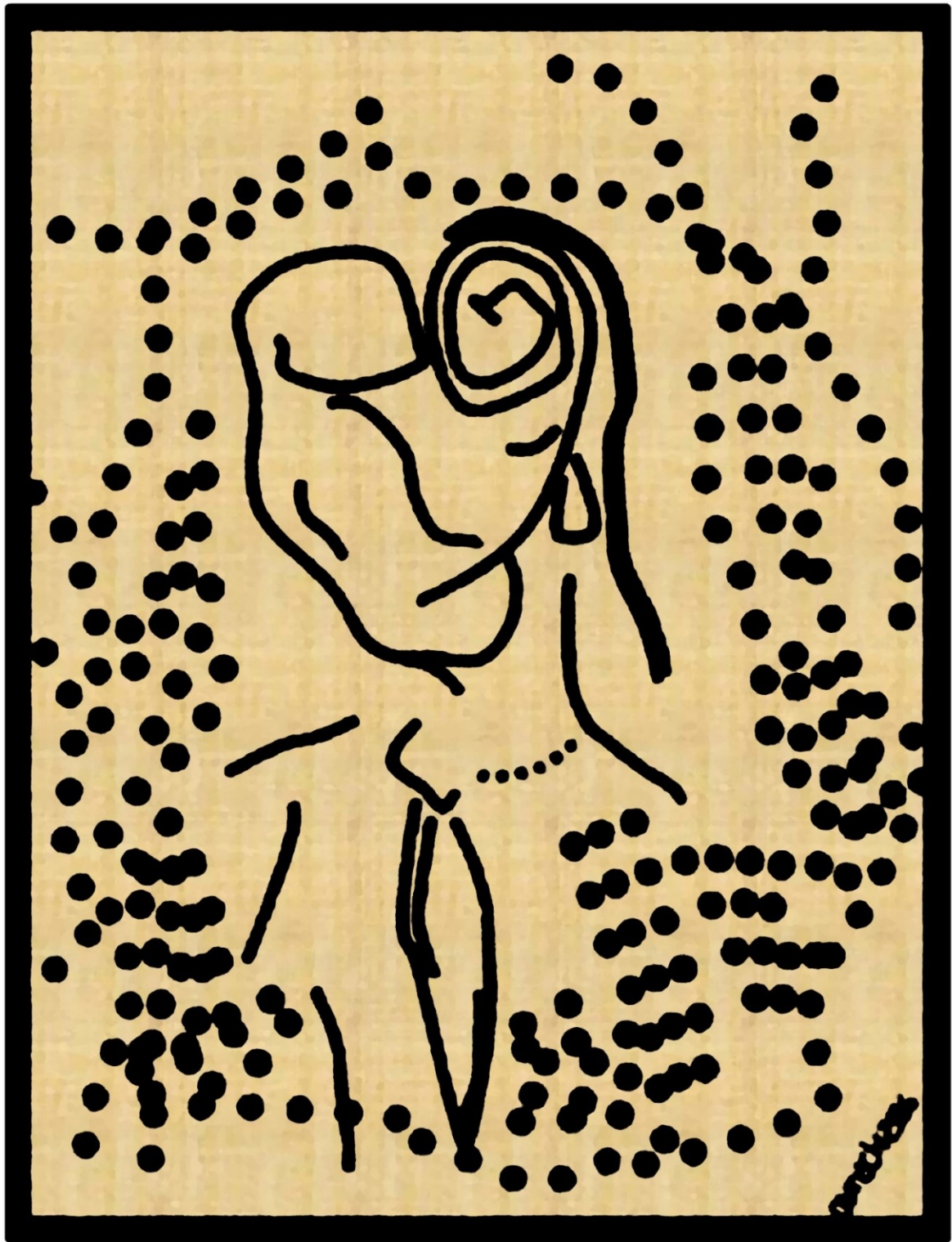
*Kito* (Osinachi, 2016)

In the Nigerian LGBT community, the word *Kito* is used to refer to a gay person falls victim of a set-up. In most cases, the gay person is forced to pay money with the threat of his sexuality being made public. Kito situations always leave the victims ashamed and withdrawn. For some, it results in long-term depression and ultimately suicide contemplation.

The word *Kito* owes its origin to a pair of sandals which were once popular in the late 1990s. These sandals were mostly worn by school children. In those

days, one was said to have been 'worn a Kito' if they made a pass on someone and got rejected. From this metaphor for rejection, the word metamorphosed to mean setting up a gay person.

—Osinachi



*Ada-Obi* (Osinachi, 2016)

Gender fluidity is a common theme in the LGBT community all over the world. To most people, including members of the community, it can be a confusing thing. As some people choose to be gender non-conforming, others seek to embody both the masculine and feminine genders at once, and to be sexually defined that way.

—Osinachi



*May the Rainbow be with You* (Osinachi, 2016)

Being gay in Nigeria is tough. From escaping the everyday dangers posed by the Anti-Gay Law to living a lie in the faces of family and friends, gay persons in Nigeria often find themselves helplessly depressed. They face a society that spits at them and they cannot help but open their ears to the horrors that this same society has meted out to some of their counterparts – gay persons who have been lynched just because of their sexuality. As they manage to pull through in their lives every day, gay persons find ways to form

cliques and encourage each other while sharing in the humor and sadness that abound for them. Always, they are seen to be there for each other no matter how tough things are.

—Osinachi



## After the Law Was Passed

By PINK PANTHER

I READ about it on Linda Ikeji's blog. I was at work that day and I spied something about it on my friend's Blackberry pm, and I just knew the gossip queen, Linda, would have the full gist. So I checked her blog and there it was: the signage into law of a new status quo. One that had instantly turned folks like me into potential criminals and jail prospects.

As the day drew to an end, as I monitored the blogosphere and observed the virtual war that raged between the self-righteous majority of heterosexuals and the indignant minority of gay activists, I fell to the clutches of depression. The opinions were flying with rapid-fire intensity across the internet.

*The sick bastards, this is what they deserve!*

*Judge not that you may not be judged...*

*Go to hell, gays! But first of all, go to jail!*

*If it is your brother or sister who you discover is gay nko...*

*This is an abuse of a minority's human rights!*

*Jonathan doesn't realize what he has done!*

*God help us! God help Nigeria!*

Melancholy, dark and heavy, descended on me as the sun set. I started questioning my existence as a human being, as a Nigerian, and as part of God's creation. My country thinks I'm a criminal. My Christian brethren think I'm a sin. My countrymen think I'm an abomination. What was the point of living, really? It was like my early university days all over again, that period when I struggled to make peace with my sexuality.

And then I started to withdraw. With news of rampant gay lynching came trepidation; I started looking over my shoulder, and seeing accusations in every stranger's eyes that looked at me a little longer than was necessary. With news of impromptu police searches of the phones of young male pedestrians came the sense of self-preservation; I deleted all the gay porn in my phone, right along with the gorgeous pictures of Tyson Beckford (#sigh: I'd always prayed I would one day have sex with that guy) and the sleek, segzy photos of a well-built friend of mine (#grin: Now him I have had sex with).

But then, the good thing about self-preservation is that it pulled me out of my depression. Because the will to live is birthed only when one has developed the instinct to protect life, to keep life—yours—at all costs.

---

*Melancholy, dark and heavy, descended on me as the sun set. I started questioning my existence as a human being, as a Nigerian, and as part of God's creation.*

---

And then time passed.

And Boko Haram struck.

And public officials mismanaged funds.

And as the outrage of Nigerians was split, life went on.

I gradually regained the courage to get back on the dating sites. After all, I was still looking for love, wasn't I? And somewhere beyond all the other gay men looking for a quick lay, beyond all the conniving straight men looking to entrap the gays, beyond all the good, the bad and the ugly, there had to be someone whose fuck—sorry—love would be my final bus stop.

So I reactivated my profile, and dived into the dating pool again.

It wasn't long before he caught my eye. Well, actually, I caught his. He said hello first. And I clicked open his profile pictures and proceeded to check him out, to know if he was worth my time.

He was.

Quite good looking. High cheekbones. Full, pouty lips. (Gawd! I have a weakness for kissable lips.) Plus his sense of humour wasn't so bad.

And he was married, too. Yes, he dropped that nugget of information, and I had to pull the brakes on my designs of happily-ever-after with him. Oh well, if there was no love to be found with him, there was always sex. I took comfort in that, and promptly changed the tone of my responses during our chats. I went from mushy to flirty. From nice to naughty. From romantic to outrageous. My online Sasha Fierce was on full throttle.

He reacted to my new persona the way I knew he would. *Oh baby, I'm so hot for you. Baby, I want you so bad. Baby, do you know what you're doing to me, you're making me hard. Baby, I want to fuck you till you say my name. Baby, when can we meet?*

Ah yes, the ultimate hook-up question: *When can we meet?*

And if it were during my university days or when I wasn't employed, I would have hastened to fix a date with him, so much was the free time I had on my hands. But you see, I have a demanding job. One that leaves me beat at the end of every week day. One that makes me crave the solitude and relaxation that weekends have to offer. I am very selfish with whatever free time I get during the weekends. Which is why I find it hard to acquiesce to any arrangement where I'm



required to go and meet someone. Don't get me wrong, I do go out for hook-ups. But often times, I quite simply cannot be bothered.

---

*I went from mushy to flirty. From nice to naughty. From romantic to outrageous. My online Sasha Fierce was on full throttle.*

---

And so, when I asked him what sort of arrangement he had in mind, and he replied that I would have to come to his area, for us to have a sleepover at his cousin's place, I had concerns.

*Is your cousin gay?*

*No.*

*Does he know you are?*

*No.*

*So how will this work?*

*What do you mean?*

*Where will he be while we're busy shagging in his house?*

*He's my little cousin. I'll send him off to spend the night elsewhere.*

There was something wrong with that answer but I didn't dwell on it. But the days that followed saw us repeatedly rescheduling our date, because of me. I had excuses. I'd had a long day at work. I had a migraine. I had another engagement with family. NEPA blessed us with light all weekend. A cousin came around to spend the weekend. I had a huge laundry to do. Excuses, excuses. It wasn't as though I had a bad feeling about him. There were no alarm bells ringing, no niggling sense of unease, no still small voice warning me to stay away from him. I just simply couldn't be bothered to make the effort to go see him.

And then, that afternoon, he called. I answered his call, already bursting with profuse apologies and promises that I'd surely make the next date. But he coolly brushed aside my words and said, "I'm beginning to suspect that you already know."

*Already know what?*

"That I'm not really gay. That I'm actually a policeman, and my mission on the dating site is to catch stupid gays like you and make sure you go to prison."

I froze where I was. My eyes widened with shock and my mind silently screamed, *What?*

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*There were no alarm bells ringing, no niggling sense of unease, no still small voice warning me to stay away from him.*

---

“You’re very lucky,” he continued. “All this time you kept on posting me and posting me, I began to think that you already suspect who I am. At a point, I discussed the operation with my wife, and she told me to just let you be. She said it wasn’t worth it, and I finally agreed. So count yourself very lucky, young man. I would say God is truly watching over you, but I know God hates your kind. I’m telling you all this because I’m crossing you off my list. Goodbye, and stay away from trouble.”

And he hung up, leaving me stupefied and angry and grateful to Providence who made sure I had my excuses, that I had no reason to walk through this particular valley of the shadow of death. The world is full of unknowns, most of them dangerous and potentially hurtful. But I’ll continue to live and love and pray to God—you know, He Who Watches Over Me and Yet Hates My Kind—to deliver me from them all.

## You Think You Are Fucked

By ROMEO ORIOGUN

Wait until you write a poem  
about your father asking what it means  
to be bisexual.  
I think my heart is getting ready to fly again,  
horses do that to me.  
I don't mind if you smoke.  
I was once in love with a boy  
who owned ten faces  
and talked me into a telephone;  
we hid behind knobs  
and shiny plastic as we found love  
across wires.

Long distance sex is a house on fire  
and I go into it again.  
I'm always loving people who will accept a part of me,  
that's how fucked up I taste.  
What is the truth of love?  
Everybody burns.  
Ask yourself what falls from your eye.  
I cry at cartoons and allow her  
hold me so close till we become  
one universe.

I think the earth is going haywire:  
Grandma bought a parrot from a homeless man,  
he has a face that looked like Ahab  
and everywhere he goes  
a rabid dog follows him.

He swore the parrot knew how to say faggot  
in a thousand languages.

Papa says that serves me right;  
he forgot love holds no language  
and sex is fire, it burns the tongue.  
You shouldn't ask what I told him  
before he chased me out of his house.

I really can't explain why I love trees,  
maybe it's because they don't hurt me  
except when they fall  
and I'm left alone  
to look into your eyes  
because I don't know what hides  
behind you.

## Coming Out

By ROMEO ORIOGUN

The woman on the bar stool knows your body  
 is a journey into songs,  
 the door into a moth flirting with fire,  
 which means there's a pretty boy  
 living under your skin.  
 I do not wish to come to you  
 but I can't help it and you look drunk like a man  
 seeking a way out of himself  
 or a way into the beginning of his voice.  
 The city knows how to kill a man like you  
 and on the face of some men  
 I can see you burning.  
 Tonight you take your first step into music,  
 saying your body knows how to beat a path  
 through hell and back,  
 saying angels do not die in songs,  
 you are daring like a throat accepting the fire of tequila.  
 Across you in a dark booth, I want to scream  
 silently, do not dance,  
 do not give in to the wild beat flowing through your heart.  
 But you are dancing like a boy drowning inside  
 his blood and all my body  
 can do is pray your soul into a bird's wings  
 and hope the winds call you home.  
 Do you know the first thing about fire?  
 Have you seen a mouth calling God  
 only to find a body rising in smoke?  
 The city does not want  
 to hear your song flowing through a bird,  
 they don't want you dancing inside a rainbow.

Come into the dark before a man  
greet your body with violence,  
come into dark, let me sing  
freedom of the moon through your body  
like a man learning how to worship God  
in a strange land.

## How to Survive the Fire

By ROMEO ORIOGUN

The first rule of survival is to Run,  
I tell you this to understand how memories  
are floods drowning a lonely man,  
how the sight of a man burning  
in a park stays with you;  
his voice becoming yours at night.  
There's no boy hiding in my throat,  
I tell you the truth, my mouth is clean  
but on my tongue are cities  
where boys are beaten to death.  
Say Lagos; say Onitsha; say Lafia;  
say cities where the only freedom  
for a man who loves another man is to leave.  
I tell you this to understand my silence,  
to understand why I crawled into my voice,  
I do not want to die.  
There is no where safe in this city of mine  
and songs of freedom are just what they are.  
You have to see nails drawing blood  
from a swollen head  
before you understand why God turned  
his face from Christ and whispered, run.

## The Thing You Do For Love

By DEJI PAYNE

YOU, MY friend, can still remember your days of shiny brown leather sandals and white cotton socks. The days when breakfast was a bottle of Pepsi and five oily balls of buns wrapped in old black-and-white newspapers that had headlines like “UN To Suspend Nigeria Over Ken-Saro Wiwa’s Death” or “Trouble In Kaduna As Herdsmen Clash” emboldened in Arial Black Font across the front page. The days when your rumpled white shirt would smoothen itself as you buttoned it up so that the spaces between two buttons looked like “o” and your torso would have the appearance of a fat brown egg. Those days when you would come back from school and sneak into your father’s room to pick up his Nokia C3 phone so that you could upload your Facebook status and be the only person to click on the white thumbs up button to your “Inbox me, anyone?” posts. The days when silence was forced upon you and solitude began to accompany you everywhere.

Even now as you sit at the end of the pew listening to Pastor Marcus list the criteria for being a “BFF” to God, you can still close your eyes and picture the glass pulpit of the chapel in school with the drawing of the dove frosted upon it; you can picture yourself trying to force your body into the handholds of the wooden bench, silently wishing that your gelatinous edges would behave themselves and gently enter the bench so that when the prefects came with their stern faces and ironed clothing to look for spaces to seat incoming students, they wouldn’t notice the huge blob at the end of the bench; so that they wouldn’t exclaim and open their tight lips in false surprise like they always did and ask how it was possible for one person to take up the space for three; as if they didn’t say the same thing last week; as if they hadn’t threatened to beat the fat out of you; as if they hadn’t said, “We will help your parents economize their money.” You open your eyes when you hear Papa’s voice gently whisper into your ear, “Are you sleeping while the man of God is talking?” You look at him and you can see the anger brimming in his brown eyes through the conclave glasses that he wears. “No, Papa”, you reply and you put your face forward and try to concentrate on what Pastor Marcus is now saying even though your fingers are itching to go down into the dark pocket of your trousers and bring out your phone to check if Kene has replied your message.

“If everyone else is stealing, if everyone else is taking what does not belong to them, if everyone is coveting, you must not. Because you are aspiring to be God’s best friend and His eyes do not behold iniquity,” shouts Pastor Marcus’ through the speakers. You can hear Papa scratching



away on his notepad so you open the red Bible on your lap and pretend to be interested in the chapter of Proverbs that Pastor Marcus' voice has just rang out. You continue to browse through the black words on the page, even though you are still wondering if you had made a mistake, if your fingers had been too quick to text *I love you* to Kene. You don't look up until you hear the whole church shudder and make hissing sounds at the word that Pastor Marcus has just said.

"Yes," he says, as the woman who sits in front of you begins to speak in tongues silently; an act that irritates you in the way that it has become routine, banal. "The Gays are iniquity before Him. They are ingrates. If you are a gay, you cannot have God as your best friend." You listen as people start to voice their opinions. Some of them have stood up with their Bibles waving in their hands speaking in hushed voices; they begin to "banish the spirit of gayism from the house of God" while others shout, "All gays go to hell".

You do not join in the vocal hunt against 'The Gays'. Instead, you stare at the pages of your Bible and wonder how a single word could ignite so much hatred and passion in the supposed Christians who are supposed to spread the love of God. You look up and see Pastor John who sits at the left side of the altar making a histrionic display of banishing demonic homosexual spirits from the house of God; the same man of God who comes to your house every Friday to down glass after glass of Schnapps mixed with Fanta. When you ask Papa why Pastor John drank alcohol even though he always tells the congregation that they should treat their bodies as the temple of Christ, Papa looks at you with his glasses sliding down his shiny oily nose. "The Bible does not condemn alcohol, only the abuse of it. And pastors are human beings too, so they can drink a little bit of it", he says. But you see the truth hidden behind the lie in his eyes, the truth he knows you know. The truth that the orange soda in the gin will not be enough to dilute the strength of the alcohol; the effects that begin to bubble to life when you hear the pastor's voice from your room singing Fela in high notes that do not glorify the lyrics and tune of the song.

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*You stare at the pages of your Bible and wonder how a single word could ignite so much hatred and passion in the supposed Christians who are supposed to spread the love of God.*

---

Papa has turned his lips into a thin upside-down smile; the expression he uses whenever he found something that he condemned; the expression he used when you brought home your report card with the B's and C's in front of all the subjects; the expression he always had on his face when your form wasn't defined, when your chin had a twin and your body wobbled every time you moved a muscle. He nods in quick successions at the words that spew out of the speakers,

like a lizard trying to catch the bait on a fishing pole. The usher who stands right beside you make a long hissing sound; the one who always wears the same red moccasin which looks bright and attractive from afar but has begun to peel in the front with the black rubber soles coming undone. You hear him mutter, “What is this world turning to? Why would a man want to fuck a man? Immoral pigs!” And you let out a low chuckle that only he can hear. You can feel the usher’s eyes boring through the back of your skull, anxious to ask what you are laughing at. You know he wants to say, “Bros, hope everything is okay eh? Wetin dey make you laugh?” But you know he won’t because he knows that you will not reply him. That you will simply stare at him and give another scathing laugh. That before you turn away, you will give him a knowing look that meant you amongst other people in the high-ceiling rectangular church know the open-secret of how many times he had fucked the different choristers on the pews in the dark back corners of the church during night vigils.



KENE HAS still not replied your message; and you know for a fact that he has seen it—the tick signs have turned blue, not just for *I love you* but also for *Well, say something*. You put your phone back into your jeans pocket and wait inside the car for Papa to finish greeting the pastors. You can see him through the windshield of the Tundra as he slips crisp notes to the usher who has begun to bow down in ostentatious respect. The drive home is almost the same as every other Sunday. Papa asks if you enjoyed the service and you nod and say yes. He asks you of all the Bible texts that Pastor Marcus used and if you can still remember the song that the choir sang, answers of which you already have memorized. You, however, don’t expect it when he says, “Can you imagine? Those gays. Can you imagine the level of immorality and sin they must have gotten themselves into? Only God knows what can make a man sleep with another man. Ehn, what do you think?” You feel your heart begin to beat fast and you look down at the brown seatbelt across your chest and try to calm down. “Yes Papa,” you finally manage to say and immediately, you know you have said something wrong. The back of your neck stings as your father’s rough palm lands hard on it. “What is ‘yes papa’? Ehn?” he says, “You were not listening to me, *gbo?* Have I been exchanging words with the air since?”

“I’m sorry, Papa,” you say.

“Don’t tell me sorry. Tell God sorry. Because God may forgive you for not listening to His words through his prophet, but He has already ordered that you obey your father.”

You don’t reply. Instead you look down and trace the veins across your arms, the lines that were drowned when fat covered your arms instead of the dense muscle that lays there now. The

sting on the back of your neck does not hurt as much as it used to. When Papa's frown used to follow you everywhere, he would give you a 'love tap' on the back of your neck and you would feel the pain after even though you could never bring your palm to caress the spot because Papa would have his eyes fixed on you.

The *I love you* message now reads 'Sat at 9:39p'. The other messages below it have various dates from Sunday to today, Wednesday, all with the tick signs turned blue. You decide that you will not text Kene anymore; that you will not dial his number and listen to the ring-ring sounds tire themselves out. Your chest feels like it is on fire and you are now sure that you should have texted *I like you a lot*, instead.

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*The thing you do for love is survive.*

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YOU DON'T hear the door open because your tongue is in his mouth and your ears are occupied with the way his mouth vibrates as he moans into yours. You do not see Papa come into the room because your eyes are closed as he continues to grind himself into you. You don't see the horrified look on Papa's face as his jaw unhinges and his silent screams fill the room. It is the spiteful way that the black leather belt bites into your hand as it caresses Kene's back that brings you both back to reality.

The Mountain of Fire Church where Papa drops you off does not have a water closet. Instead, there is a pit latrine shed made of silver aluminium roofing. The shed is the only place where you can get peace. Even though you can see, **through the tiny space beneath the shed**, the worn blue rubber slippers of the boy who the pastors have assigned to follow you to the shed twice a day, you still sit down on the concrete floor and enjoy the quiet smell of disinfectant because the shed is the only place where you can think. The only place where you can remember how Papa whipped Kene out of the house with his heavy leather belt; the only place where you can escape the pastors who Papa dumped you with after he told them you had been possessed by filthy homosexual spirits; the only place where you aren't forced to shake your head in quick successions and shout 'fire-fire' prayers; the only place where you escape the biting hunger from the eighteen-hour fasts you go through every day after which you are doused with anointing oil that have 'Goya Olive Oil' written in black on the yellow stickers of the glass bottles; the only place where you remember how your insides felt like the rainbow after Kene showed up to say "I love you too"; the only place you discover that Papa will come to get you soon thinking that the spirit

inside you has been banished to hell; the place you decide to pretend to Papa and act like you are renewed, like you feel like God has changed you, like your body doesn't quiver when you think of Kene's lips on yours; the place where you realise that the thing you do for love is survive.

## Opprobrium

By OSINACHI

IT WAS Wednesday and Yusuf had received a call from Malam Ibrahim to come around and help him put his shop in order. He had not been told that there was someone else coming for the same purpose; so when he arrived there and met another young man, though much older, who introduced himself as Musa and as Malam Ibrahim's cousin, he did not feel at ease. Musa had his eyes on him as he walked and as he talked. Everything about him felt off. He even chewed gum.

"You dey do like woman," Musa finally said to him, a smile on his face.

"You dey chop chewing gum," Yusuf returned to him.

It was probably the laughter that peeled from Musa's throat at that moment that made Yusuf hand his phone to him when he begged for it, saying he wanted to go online and check live scores. After releasing the phone, Yusuf went on discussing other things with Malam Ibrahim until Musa was done and gave the phone back to him.

On Friday, Yusuf had gone to pray at the mosque. He had gone alone since his brother left early in the morning. His mother was too busy applying henna to her feet to be bothered with questions about his elder brother's whereabouts. And strange enough to him, something about that day made him constantly feel as though he were in danger. This occupied his mind more than any other thing. As he continually bumped into people at the mosque before the prayers started, this feeling clawed on at him. Immediately after the prayers that evening, he did not hang around to greet his friends as he used to do. Rather, he hurried home to occupy himself with something distracting.

Having taken off his clothes, he strolled into the kitchen, picked some oranges from the refrigerator, took a knife and went into his room. It was then that his phone rang. He looked at the incoming call. The contact's name was *My Musa*. He could not remember any Musa. As he was pondering on who *My Musa* could be, the phone stopped ringing. And then started again.

"Hello."

"Yeah, Yusuf, how you dey?"

"I'm fine. Please who am I speaking with?"

"Don't you see the name? It's Musa. We met on Wednesday."

"Okay. I now remember..."

"Yeah. Can you come out to *House-Too Inn*?"

"*House-Too*? For what?"

“It’s important. Just come out there. You will know.”

“Okay.” And he hung up. He knew the restaurant that Musa was talking about but he did not know what he was calling him out for.

When he came outside, his mum asked him where he was going and he said he was coming back quickly. It was not the first time she was getting such response from her son. So, she let it go and asked him to return quickly to get some things for her in the market. Yusuf wanted to ask her where Gimba had gone but he decided to do that on his return. He had to hurry and find out why Musa wanted to see him.

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*Something about that day made him constantly feel as though  
he were in danger.*

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Musa was already seated in the restaurant with a bottle of Coke before him. Yusuf walked straight to him and they greeted. Musa ordered a drink for him and another bottle of Coke was placed on the table before Yusuf.

“How is school?” Musa asked him.

“Fine o. We are on strike.” Yusuf was expecting him to get to the point of why they were there, having a drink together. Before Musa could say another thing, his cell phone rang and cut.

“Flashing,” he said, bringing it out with a frown. When he looked at the screen, surprise took the place of that frown.

“Please can I use your phone to bring out something?” Yusuf handed it to him and he went outside with the phone. For close to thirty minutes Yusuf was sitting there, waiting for Musa to come back with the phone. He began to drink the Coke before him, hoping that it would quell the apprehension in him. That feeling of danger had not left him. Worried, he went outside to check on him. And out there was Musa discussing with another guy. When Yusuf walked over to him to ask for his phone, what he got was a slap on his face that made him partially blind.

“So, you want to come and sleep with me, eh?” Musa was barking. “See as you dey do like woman.”

“Me? Sleep with you?” Yusuf was confused. The words were swarming in his head, the syllables jamming like steel against steel. Musa and the unknown guy fell on him, hands and legs beating and kicking him. Soon, passers-by were drawn to the fracas. They held back Musa and his friend.

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*He began to drink the Coke before him, hoping that it would quell the apprehension in him. That feeling of danger had not left him.*

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“Wetin be dat?” they asked.

“This boy here called me out here and said he wanted to sleep with me. Him na homo!”

“Na true?” a passer-by asked, an undeniable glint of belief in his eyes.

“No o! I no be homo o! No be me call am! Na him call me o!” Yusuf’s head was spinning with disbelief.

“You wan lie now? See, I get evidence. I get the evidence o.”

“Show us. Make we see,” the people demanded.

Musa brought out his own phone and went straight to the messages. He opened one message and started reading out to the crowd. The message read that Yusuf would like to have Musa in his bed and have him be his boyfriend forever. It was at this stage that Gimba arrived at the scene. Someone must have tipped him off. At that point, Musa dialled the number through which the message was sent to him and the call came into Yusuf’s phone right there in Musa’s hand.

“You don see am? No be him number send dis message? I don call am now. You wan deny, *fa?*”

Before Yusuf could say another word, it became hell for him. Hands were striking him heavily from all directions like a storm, making him stagger from left to right, right to left. Eyes were glued on him with hate and judgment. Gimba fell on his knees, begging the crowd to let his brother live. His pleas had no effect. The man who had asked Yusuf if Musa’s accusation was true picked up a log of wood nearby.

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*Before Yusuf could say another word, it became hell for him.  
Hands were striking him heavily from all directions like a storm, making him stagger from left to right, right to left.*

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“Allah!” he swore, “we go send you go burial ground before government go come send you go fourteen years for prison.” He struck Yusuf’s back with the wood, causing splinters to fly in the air. With that force, Yusuf’s face struck the tar road.

“Dis boy go settle me before I go give am him phone. I want settlement!” Musa was trying to raise his voice above the hullabaloo going on already. Gimba heard that and hurriedly dug his hand inside his pocket. He had five thousand naira there with him. It was not his, yet he forced it straight into Musa’s hands, grabbed Yusuf’s phone from him and went straight for his brother on the ground. By now stones had joined the rain of hands. Several fell on Gimba. Immediately he helped Yusuf up, it was as though a spirit overcame him. Yusuf took off in a frenzy. It was a miracle that the crowd did not follow. They hurled more stones at him and spat endlessly on Gimba.



## Time to Marry. Or Not.

By CHIKE FRANKIE EDOZIEN

GROWING UP in Lagos, I don't remember our contemporary leaders ever conceding that perhaps they just might have got something wrong. Often our leaders prefer to focus on what they feel are their positive contributions to Africa's largest economy.

So when Goodluck Jonathan, Nigeria's most recent ex-president showed up in London in June 2016 to defend his governance record to the international community, I only expected a spirited defense of his stewardship of the country.

And of course more bluster from his surrogates. After all, his successor, Muhammadu Buhari accused Jonathan and his team [of leaving behind an empty treasury](#).

As I watched Jonathan go on about how that was not possible at a roundtable organized by Bloomberg News, I started to reminisce about how I found my métier. Story telling.

It seemed like just yesterday I was crouched on floor of the old English colonial in Ikoyi, reading a stack of newspapers. I devoured them every time Dad returned from work carrying the bunch. The newsprint had a stale smell that I couldn't get enough of.

In truth it was four decades ago that I was asking Mum what those words in the Daily Times meant. I knew big words before my classmates knew the complete alphabet. So naturally I wanted to write stories. I wanted to be a journalist.

Like many Nigerians, I abruptly found out telling stories could be fatal when I was sixteen. Dele Giwa, a writer for Newswatch, had a letter bomb sent to him at home. My folks talked about it for days and fear gripped the city. It was 1986.

Few years later, I left that increasingly politically charged climate and gallivanted abroad, holding on to my love of storytelling, particularly the African ones. As the years passed my frequent visits to Lagos provided occasions for me to write about us. But, as I was no longer a young man, I would steel myself for the inevitable question.

"When are you getting married?"

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*Like many Nigerians, I abruptly found out telling stories  
could be fatal*

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I didn't always know how to answer truthfully. Do I open up a can of worms with strangers and say, "I'll get married when marriage equality is the law of the federation?" Or do I continue with my boilerplate response, "When I find the right one I'll let you know."

One of my Nigerian pals, Dike, is over forty and gay. He now lives in London and it's unlikely he will ever move home for good. But on his last visit to his hometown, Owerri, he told me how an aunt worried so much that he hasn't brought home a bride. He thought he'd escaped the dreaded question until he went over to give her money before departing and she fell on her knees wailing.

"Please, please find a wife. Please I am begging you in the name of God, please."

Dike replied: "Please Aunty, get up. I have heard you. I will see what I can do."

Suddenly hopeful, she said: "Oh, are you looking for one over there in England?"

"Ah, ah Aunty, does it matter where she comes from?" Dike said.

"That's true but it is better if she hails from these parts," she replied.

"But aunty at my age, I don't think I want to get married anymore."

"Eh?!" she screamed. "Don't say that oh. There is a seventy-year-old man in the next kindred who is looking for a young wife. You are a man. You can even marry at seventy. I have been praying for you. I prayed for you this morning that a good woman will come your way, in Jesus' Name."

I feel Dike's pain.

Recently, a friend from secondary school called me up to ask that I donate to a fund to refurbish the school's kitchen. He expected a substantial donation and said: "you are not married and you have no kids."

His reasoning was I ought to have more to give since I'm only responsible for myself. I was flabbergasted since my friend knew of my long-term relationship and I had to gently remind him that my male partner of close to a decade is my family. And no, I may not be conventionally married, but I'm not single.

Sometime ago I decided to try and tell the story of folks who are either burdened by the weight of the dreaded question or work around it by jumping into unhappy matrimony. I began researching in Accra, Ghana. I found men who were so in love with each other but then married women because it was what was expected. I found women who were routinely dating other women who were married to men.

Was this clandestine living the best they could hope for?

"This is Africa. Why are you asking questions you know the answers to?" one told me. I moved on to Lagos, where I wanted to get answers to the same questions.

But earlier that year, January 2014 to be precise, the president, (Goodluck Jonathan) had signed into law a bill criminalizing gays, adding even public displays of affection.

Clearly it was an Election Year gambit that while popular, yielded few votes for him. He

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*His reasoning was I ought to have more to give since I'm only responsible for myself. I was flabbergasted since my friend knew of my long-term relationship and I had to gently remind him that my male partner of close to a decade is my family.*

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lost by a landslide. But his actions opened the floodgate to beatings and harassment by police and unscrupulous citizens. Just the suspicion alone could land one in trouble. And who wants to risk a 14-year-jail term?

So even though I'd had high hopes for good reporting, my writing was stalled by the paranoia in Lagos and the sheer refusal of folks to speak on the record, or even off sometimes. Those who did were so afraid, it seemed that shadows freaked them. I could barely hear their whispers.

Still I found men and women in love or looking for love despite the cultural anchor on their necks. Jonathan's action spurred open homophobia and shaming in spaces that ought to have been safe. Violence spiked and it was easier to be scornful and derisive of sexual minorities in polite company. All of this in a country that often condones pre-pubescent brides marrying elderly men.

No Nigerian space was truly safe.

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*Those who did were so afraid, it seemed that shadows freaked them... No Nigerian space was truly safe.*

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In 2015 my sister had a milestone birthday party and all my brothers and a trove of cousins gathered to celebrate. My cousin Henry was there with his wife. I'd never met her but knew of her. I eagerly asked him to introduce me.

"I've heard about you," she said. I smiled big and said, "Good things I hope."

But all that came my way was a small, tight, cold smile that ended at her lips: "Not really."

Then she laid into me.

"Where is your family?"

"Where is your wife?!"

"Where are your children?!"

It was aggressive. Menacing even.

In full view of my siblings and even my mother, she tried to shame me. I was dealing with an angry emboldened homophobe. (Thanks to Goodluck Jonathan, women of her ilk feel no compunction to go on the attack in public and I wish I could say it was an isolated incident but others have told me similar tales.) So I smiled and said my partner was at home. “He couldn’t make it.” And I left her company.

So I was truly caught off-guard when Jonathan, in the middle of defending his government from corruption allegations and bilking the Nigerian treasury, told Bloomberg that the anti-gay bill he signed into law may have to be revisited.

“When it comes to equality, we must all have the same rights as Nigerian citizens,” Jonathan said at a forum at Bloomberg’s European headquarters. “In the light of deepening debates for all Nigerians and other citizens of the world to be treated equally and without discrimination, and with the clear knowledge that the issue of sexual orientation is still evolving, the nation may at the appropriate time revisit the law,” Jonathan said.

That only took thirty months. But from 2015 to 2016 he may have evolved but being out of office he’s not in a position to stop carnage.

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*Jonathan cannot undo the damage caused by that law, but stories from those affected matter.*

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Days after his pronouncement, there was a grisly massacre of forty-nine gay people by a deranged gunman in Orlando Florida. Jonathan, who as president ignored his gay constituents, sent out a condolence message to the grieving families via twitter.

[I condole with the victims and I pray that Almighty gives us the wisdom to deal with terror whether in #Florida or in any part of the world](#) — Goodluck E. Jonathan (@GEJonathan)

But even that message also prompted controversy from the Nigerian ‘twitteratti.’

Jonathan cannot undo the damage caused by that law, but stories from those affected matter, and could change the reflexively antagonistic environment in Nigeria. Every Nigerian story will be told. And I have to do my part to tell our collective story. And that includes those who some want to shame and shunt aside.

I can start by answering the marriage question honestly. When will I get married? Maybe when we have marriage equality in our federation. Or maybe just when Scott, my partner wants to.

*This piece was first published in July 2016 by Commonwealth Writers blog, [www.commonwealthwriters.org](http://www.commonwealthwriters.org)*

Once upon a time there was a little boy who wanted to love another little boy. One day, he finally found that love. It was wonderful... You cry and you cry until you think you can't cry anymore, and then you cry some more. Not only for yourself and Felix, but for all the little boys who finally found their other little boys they wanted all their lives now that they're men.

***The Normal Heart***

## bodies: how to keep a distant relationship

By CHIBUÌHÉ OBI

1. I'll begin by teaching my body the language of grief; how to love liveness like black coffee or black chocolates or black suds or soda  
(/add/ black/ naked/ bodies/)
2. how to make myself so small, break into infinitesimal bits, tiny enough to fit into chats and text messages
3. how to make and unmake images of my nudity and the spot on my laps where I've cut your first name like an epitaph on a tombstone
4. how to float in the bathtub and watch my penis rise and fall beneath soap bubbles willing your mouth to bring me home
5. how to carve intimacy out of space, ship myself whole without the fear of being dumped halfway or getting lost in the tube of an aircraft
6. how to look at your pictures twice until your oval eyes burn into my own eyes  
until i cannot stay myself from digging Cheerios out of them
7. how to incise silence and cut open your moans coming through the phone  
as if they're plum or Onion or the mouth of a porn star
8. often times, what makes us bleed is not love, but the fear of being in love again  
after all the wars we've waged with our bodies
9. how to love loneliness from the patio straight into an old music box where I let enya croon  
her soul into blank pages seeking home in my body
10. but I'm a wine house, an inn, good for visits but unfitting to be lived in

11. so I love the strangers who drop in at night and walk away at dawn with their bones and luggage...leaving nothing except stale memories behind

12. how to arc my body into shadows and pretend to be a ripple or whirlpool or water bending into dance

14. how to fold my demons into emoticons and pretend to be excited while my heart breaks in two:

(i) bits of shrapnel ...

(ii) a bomb waiting to go off

15. that distance is a bird with broken wings and migrating south in summer will not save a body bent on burning out itself with the naked images of strange men  
(add/black/naked/male/bodies)

16. how to love boys deep and my own body deeper

17. how to not let this love close in, or break us, or wreck us  
or unmake this distance between our two /black/naked/male/bodies.

## ghosts

(for boys who are beautiful in unmanly ways)

By CHIBUÌHÉ OBI

we grew up hating our bodies  
because they came in tender fragile  
shapes -  
they had finesse. had layers of feathery grace.  
had charm. had miracles that were rare and strange.

because we were beautiful in ways that shocked;  
in ways that raised dust.  
ruffled water. drew rage from other boys.  
and stones and sticks and fire from men  
of this city.

so we retreated like spy grasses.  
withdrew into buildings with darkrooms.  
smashing our bodies into walls and wars as mirrors  
until we emerged: ghosts,

    marooned

        lost

            b

                r

            o

                k

            e

                n



## suicide note

BY CHIBUÌHÉ OBI

*for b*

what our eyes conceal  
as we sleep away the shadows -  
a sweet death, baby  
    a sweet death.

miles and lines of dodging diverse deaths  
until the roads end on  
the nails of your finicky toes

the full moon ease  
through the ridge of your dick  
like a train circling a tunnel,  
i count all the apple seeds that may  
never take root in us  
how the world hates itself by hating us  
because we are part of the world baby,  
we are the world.

hate builds a wall around us  
surrounds us with bars of wood and reed  
but here, your lips against mine,  
our breaths unify.  
we push these barriers baby,  
we pull down walls

loving you is a risky, risky deal -  
a suicide note i've written with my  
own blood and stuck to my chest

“to love you in turbulence,  
against tide, through war,  
till death & rage & hate fall exhausted at our feet”

perhaps, baby, it might be us going down,  
us floundering, drowning, sinking, hurtling down  
this abyss

for love was never meant to be cheap,  
was never meant to be plain.

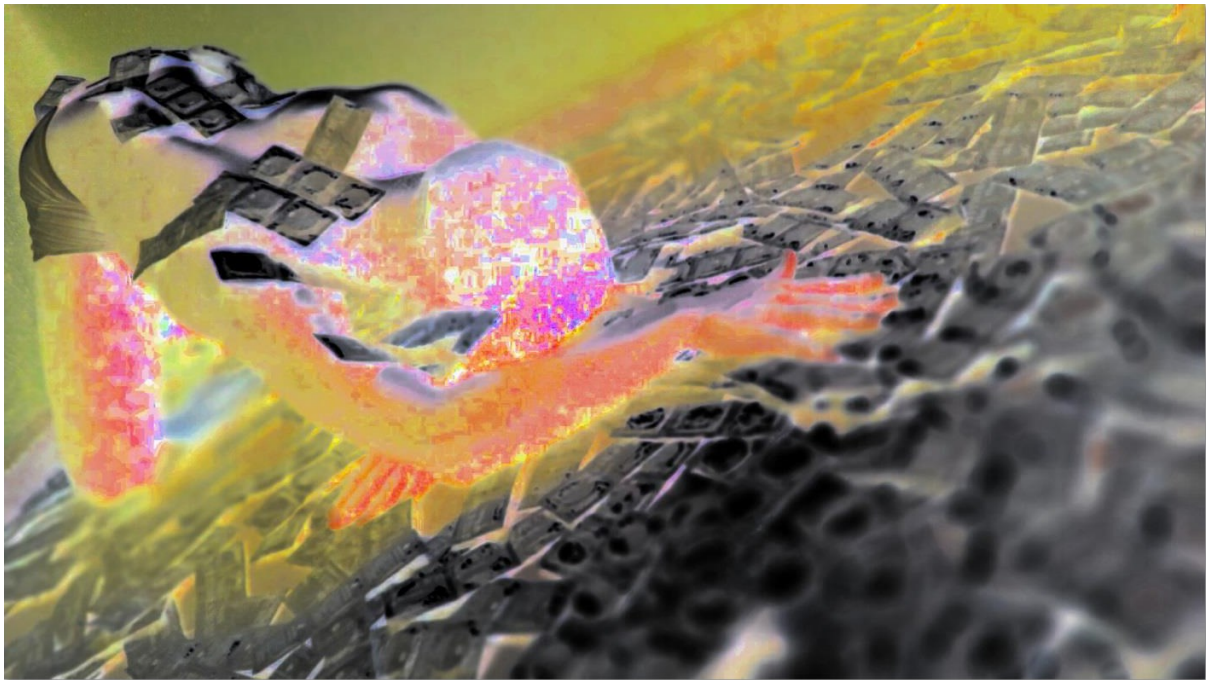


*Here / Am* (Ojo Ogburn, 2016)

*photography*

Coming out to your friends and family can be many things: scary, depressing, funny and even torturing at the end but most of the time it is relieving. Also, discovering that one is HIV-positive could be demoralizing. Those who eventually pick themselves up face the lifetime demand of using protection during sex. Accepting oneself as gay and HIV-positive is a tremendous accomplishment.

—Ojo Ogbom



*Not Yet Buried* (Ojo Ogburn, 2016)

*photography*

As much as accepting someone's sexuality in Nigeria can be hard, avoiding the risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases as a gay person can be a tough one too. This is brought about by the way the Nigerian society looks at homosexuality. Because of the fear of being found out, some homosexuals, especially the

effeminate ones, find it hard to come out in the public and purchase condoms. Hence, they sometimes throw caution to the wind and engage in unprotected sex. This has made the gay community prone to HIV and other STIs.

—Ojo Ogbom

## Broken Body: An Interview with Unoma Azuah

By ABSALOM

A FEW years ago, rights activist, poet and the novelist behind *Sky-High Flames* and *Edible Bones*, Unoma Azuah, began what seemed like a daunting project: to gather the stories of lesbian, gay, transgender and bisexual persons in Nigeria into a book. In June 2016, the anthology *Blessed Body: The Secret Lives of Nigerian Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender*, was launched in Nigeria. Azuah, who is also a college professor in the US has contributed research to pop-cultural depiction of and attitudes towards LGBT persons in Nigeria. She spoke to Absalom about the stories in *Blessed Body* and LGBT activism in Nigeria.



**Please walk me through the journey of *Blessed Body*. How did it all begin?**

**Unoma Azuah:** I had focused on texts—and not movies—for my research, as per creating queer scholarship, as a way of responding to anti-gay policies and sentiments exemplified in the Nigerian parliamentary policing of the body. Including movies as part of my appraisal of anti-gay laws came to me by accident: I had visited a friend one lazy Saturday evening and met her watching a Nollywood movie. I didn't particularly pay much attention to Nollywood movies. However, my eye caught a scene that seemed out of the ordinary: two women lovers. I think the name of the movie is *Emotional Crack*. Consequently, my eyes were glued to the TV screen. I wanted to see the end of it which, of course, was predictable. Nevertheless, the positive side was that I started studying Nollywood movies to track the number of same-sex themed movies they produce, and to see how the movies depict same-sex-loving people. This led to the comprehensive article I wrote with Lindsey Green Simms called, 'The Video Closet: Nollywood's Gay-themed Movies.' The fates of LGBT persons in Nollywood movies were sealed: always vilified as evil. This is very much consistent with the homophobic and hostile environment they find themselves in. So I see *Blessed Body: The True Life Stories of LGBT Nigerians* as a continuation of refuting the lopsided narratives Nollywood presents on the Nigerian lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender themed scripts. Thus, to gain any form of audience that might empathize with LGBT stories and LGBT people in Nigeria, I decided to collect their lived experiences. Perhaps, if the Nigerian society can see the detailed lives of LGBT Nigerians, they would be less adverse.

A friend of mine read the anthology and wondered if its title *Blessed Body* in any way alludes to the Holy Eucharist in the Catholic Church: he was worried that this might pose a problem.

**Unoma Azuah:** No. The title does not allude to the Holy Eucharist, even though in a broad sense, for Christians, we are all part of the Body of Christ. The title actually defies the notion that, as a sexual group that does not tow the heteronormative line, gay people are cursed. Most anti-gay Nigerians will defend their stance based on what they understand the concept of homosexuality to imply in the [Bible] books of Genesis, Romans or Leviticus, etc. Hence, the point is to dismantle that negative Biblical impression which many fundamentalist Christians use as a weapon of hate. In other words, LGBT bodies are not cursed; they are blessed.

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*The fates of LGBT persons in Nollywood movies were sealed: always vilified as evil. This is very much consistent with the homophobic and hostile environment they find themselves in.*

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Violence—emotional, physical, mental—is a running theme throughout the anthology. I sometimes had to set the book aside to catch my breath; it was like holding so much pain in my hands. Did you deliberately seek out stories that were harrowing?

**Unoma Azuah:** Don't forget that the anthology chronicles the lives of the Nigerian LGBT community. Their stories are not without violence, emotional and mental abuse. It's unfortunate. I have faith that bringing awareness to these sorts of abuse and injustice would help curtail the unfairness directed at this minority group. At least, it is my hope that giving the issue some kind of attention will stir some to act in their own way to stop hate and homophobia. The larger picture though, per 'broken bodies' is that in spite of the attacks, hate and death inflicted on this body, it stays strong and resilient. It continues to survive and thrive.

Stories like 'Wait for Life to be Perfect', 'Deliverance' and 'Purple Square' reaffirm a theory we have in the LGBT community that our families often know or sense our 'difference'; yet they live in denial, afraid to confront the elephant in the room—perhaps because of social stigma. Is there an easy way to get the average Nigerian family to have this uncomfortable conversation?



**Unoma Azuah:** I think the best approach to this issue is to come out. The process does not necessarily have to be aired on live TV. Coming out to family, and close-knit friends, for instance, gives a face to the word 'LGBT'. I think that through such small steps, quiet, and even aggressive, LGBT allies and advocates would begin to gradually emerge. The more we put a face to sexualities, the more people will begin to take the reality that people have different sexual orientations seriously. Invisibility gives teeth to the stigma and the loathing. In this context, when the idea is not seen or attached to the possibility that our loved ones and family members or anyone can be gay, then it does not exist. However, when it hits close home, it would be taken more seriously. The initial reactions of kicking against it, doling out threats, screaming, cursing and even disowning are expected. But it does not change the reality at hand. Gradually, I believe, families will learn how to accept it, and become advocates at some point.

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*Coming out to family, and close-knit friends, for instance, gives a face to the word 'LGBT'. I think that through such small steps, quiet, and even aggressive, LGBT allies and advocates would begin to gradually emerge.*

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Of the 37 stories in this anthology, it seems there are only two stories from transgender persons ('Beyond My Skin as the Butterfly', and 'Stephanie's Fears')—both of them women; and in the section titled 'Unwanted Marriage' there are just three stories—all, again, from lesbian women. Were there segments of our community that weren't forthcoming with their stories?

**Unoma Azuah:** There are actually three stories from transgender persons. The third one is entitled, 'Aduro: The Journey of a Thousand Heels'. Its focus is on being trans and the exploitations, not just trans people, but LGBT persons face when they migrate to another country. Perhaps, you were looking at the stories from a tapered perspective. There are also stories like Kite's 'Blur' that speak to the turmoil and struggles a gay man deals with up to the point of psychosis because he did mostly what was expected of him. He married a woman he never loved just because he needed to fulfil family and societal expectations. With regards to women transitioning to men, I did find a transman who agreed to share her struggles with gender identity, starting her female-to-male transition to the point where she panicked. This was at the stage where she was almost fully transitioned. She realised that if she was going to return to Nigeria as a man

and not a woman, she would not be able to face her family. Therefore, the whole process had to be ‘undone’. I started working with her on drafting all these experiences, but half way through working with her, she stopped and changed her mind.

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*I did find a transman who agreed to share her struggles with gender identity... She realised that if she was going to return to Nigeria as a man and not a woman, she would not be able to face her family. Therefore, the whole process had to be ‘undone’.*

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**Sad.** There must have been other challenges you faced while putting the anthology together.

**Unoma Azuah:** The gathering and editing processes were quite daunting. But I believed in the project right from the start, so I was determined to face all challenges with patience and courage. For example, some contributors were not too willing to relive traumatic emotions. I kept prodding them to dare to relive it and to face it because it can be part therapy and ultimately a healing progression and victory. On the other hand, some could not verbalize their experiences. They had erased it from their memory bank as a survival technique. But I encouraged them to walk through those dark tunnels and shine some light on the ‘grit’. There were those that felt ill equipped to write. They felt they needed to be professional writers before they could tell their stories. I had to convince them that they needn’t be expert writers to have a voice. Additionally, for some who didn’t want to write, I resorted to interviews and recreating their stories with both a broad to a detailed brush. Inserting the intricacies took me a while because I had to run the stories by them as many times as it took us to ensure that I represent their lives and stories genuinely. All these were time-and labour-intensive. I also worked with a lot of patience. There were those who got emotional and withdrew. I waited and returned time and time again. Also, to have an extensive and diverse representation, I took risks by travelling to remote areas of Nigeria where I knew no one; I was working based on recommendations and second to third person points of contact. Some were suspicious of the project and refused to talk to me until I reached out to those who made the connection between us to assure them that I was not working to ‘out’ or blackmail them. Additionally, this is the most intense project I have ever done. I found myself shedding tears right in the middle of editing. Though at some point, some of the stories made me laugh out loud. In all, often, I got angry and wanted to lash out at the world for hate, for hypocrisy and for wanting to play God. At the end, it was quite fulfilling.

Looking at LGBT rights and politics in Africa, in August 2014 Uganda overturned her antigay law—within just six months of passing it; Mozambique and the Seychelles have done away with their colonial sodomy laws; and even Malawi almost held a referendum on gay rights until she backed out in 2015. Yet, Nigeria’s ‘Jail the Gays’ law remains one of the most stubborn pieces of legislation on the continent. Is there something we are not doing right in Nigeria as regards this clamour for LGBT rights?

**Unoma Azuah:** Part of the problem may have something to do with the fact that coordinating a huge populace is a daunting task. Additionally, I think our policymakers are some of the most corrupt, hypocritical and hyper religious in the world. Imagine using the Bible and the Quran as the bases to create and enact civil policies. So, we do need to step back and re-strategize. We are, nevertheless, doing the best we can under these strenuous circumstances.

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You spoke at the book launch about the need to re-educate children on matters of sexuality and gender. How is it possible to orientate a child in a way that deviates from what his/her parents teach him/her at home? Isn’t this the kind of thing that would infuriate any parent? I don’t think an adult should have this talk with a child without their parents’ permission.

**Unoma Azuah:** The idea is not to impose sexual education on unsuspecting children and parents. Frequently, teens or growing boys and girls get curious about sex and the development of one’s body. They may approach one with questions about sex/sexuality. It is at these moments that they need to be educated on the human physiology, sex and sexual orientation. As a brother, a cousin, an uncle, an aunt, a mentor, a teacher such opportunities usually present themselves.

**Now that our anthology is here live, how do we get it out to millions of Nigerians out there—those who are, as it were, not members of the ‘LGBT-choir’.**

**Unoma Azuah:** The book is sold online, as well as from distributors from countries across the world. The e-version of the book both in the Kindle and NOOK format makes it very accessible to Nigerians and anybody else who might want a copy or copies. Most importantly, Queer Alliance, the LGBT advocacy organization I collaborated with to get the book done, distributed loads of free copies in Nigeria.

*This interview was first published in August 2016 by Kito Diaries, [kitodiaries.com](http://kitodiaries.com)*

## Rebellion's Rebirth

By KARANJA NZISA

THE YEAR I met Enajide began ominously. Another election. Another circus orchestrated by the perpetual president; an insufferable profiteer who made promises loosely and governed tightly. Some skirmishes here, a disappearance there, the cloak and dagger swearing in, monoethnic cabinet announcement, and before the ink was dry, the United Independence Front was firmly at the helm of the state. In mockery, footage of Clinton's second inauguration filtered into our homes from golden America. Purveyor of death America. War mongering America. Land of the free America. The image of Hillary standing beside her husband in a ghastly pink coat became a fixture in our minds those first few months of 1997. Watching the big TV screens in the stuffy cigar lounges where I worked, I wondered what it would be like to *chow* the First Daughter. Ugly cow that she was then. At home our own new political dispensation elicited little reaction. The country was shrouded in an atmosphere of general apathy coloured slightly in some places with despondence. It was as if those who voted for and against both knew they were fucked.

So the months went by, slow and vapid like the Sunday Mass mother could no longer forcefully drag me to. "Son, please come with us to church next week. There's a visiting priest from..." And she would mention whichever parish she imagined bore the most allure at that moment. The conversation always ended with her extolling the wonder-working power of God and me assuring her that on the day I felt it, we could talk. I can't help thinking today that maybe Jesus was really out there, and I would have found him if my family was not so effectively off-putting in their insistence.

It was not long before my parents stopped going to church. Not ones to give up something altogether which they had once defended so fiercely, they spent Sundays before the TV screen watching a Filipino televangelist command demons out of the possessed faithful and scream healing into the Nations of the World. No longer mattered that he was not Catholic, and it was all I could do not to snigger when I'd go downstairs to find a cure for my hangovers and catch ma in the middle of a *praise Jesus*, with dad hissing lazily, *Yesss!*

Stagnation gripped the country, creativity floundered and commerce dwindled. Dad had to close his bookshop as the only thing selling were Bibles and those could not make the rent. A shrewder businessman would have stocked erotica but who needs aptitude when they have Jesus? We lived on whatever my elder sister, Koki, brought home. She worked as a secretary in the

Ministry of Public Works; something of a comedy, where the rumour mill had it that she did a lot less typing than she did the service of wives (among which cooking is not) with her superiors.

One morning as, I locked the gate behind her, I teased, “Tell me, sis, are you fucking the minister?” She had just returned from a party, and she struggled to straighten eyes made heavy by whatever hung on her breath before saying, “No hunnnnnnyyyy. At least not yet.” We both laughed in hushed tones.

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*Stagnation gripped the country, creativity floundered and commerce dwindled. Dad had to close his bookshop as the only thing selling were Bibles and those could not make the rent. A shrewder businessman would have stocked erotica but who needs aptitude when they have Jesus?*

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Once inside, I stopped her. “Listen sis, I really don’t need to join a college. Let me help you with things around the house. Cover some bills to ease the pressure on you.”

“Fuck you, KJ!” The ice in her tone stabbed me. “You are judging me because of how you think I make my money? I don’t hear you complain when you are eating food with *nyama* in it? Do mum and dad grumble when they are glued to the TV stations I pay for? Don’t ever question me again, you little fucker.”

Wounded, I embraced her and whispered, “That is not what I meant, Koki.”

I could feel her soften up as she muttered, “You are keeping your money for school. End of story,” before she promptly passed out on my shoulder.

We were wasting away from the inside out, a generational malaise eroding everything within us that clung to hope, rising to the surface with a malevolence so wretched that its manifestations evolved. Criminal gangs proliferated with the virulence of a gonorrheal rash, religion was abandoned for far more potent portions. In retrospect, it is curious how things fell apart around us, drowning us in a silent despair while the centre appeared to hold firmly still. Ambitions and dreams remained the stuff of a fool’s paradise. The purses of public institutions were raped by their very custodians until operations ground to a halt; executives auctioned office furniture, stationery and mechanical machinery, packed their fat households into boxes and relocated to the south where fledgling economies found the wisdom to import technocrats. The smoke from factory chimneys thinned into sparse wisps before finally sputtering their last and subsiding into that repository where hazy memories of departed grandeur were locked and forgotten by all of us who had celebrated the new democracy not many years before.

Everything was going to shit and I refused to stick around and smell it. So, one day, in the still air of yet another Saturday with scheduled power outages, I convened my family in the den, cleared my throat and announced, “I am leaving for Lagos in a week.” Ma instinctively extended a knowing grip on Pa’s withering thigh but it was he who spoke first: “I’m not sure I understand.”

“I said I’m going to Lagos, Pa.”

“Lagos? *Yaani* the one in Nigeria?” he mocked.

“Have you known there to be another?” Koki said. If this information interested her in the slightest, she did not show it. She clicked her tongue in that patronizing way she did to show irritation and returned to her copy of *British Vogue*. Second hand. Seasons old. Faded by age and bent from thumbing. An almost poetic juxtaposition in the way it hung from between her expensive fingernails with chipping polish.

“I might start to take you seriously if you found Lagos on a map, KJ.” Again, mockery.

“Good thing I won’t be flying the plane, Pa.”

When she spoke for the first time, it was barely above a whisper. “Why Nigeria, and when will you be back?” Even with matters of the cross, Ma dearest had always known when not to test my resolve.

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*The smoke from factory chimneys thinned into sparse wisps  
before finally sputtering their last and subsiding into that  
repository where hazy memories of departed grandeur were locked  
and forgotten*

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It took all I had to respond with civility for her sake. “Nigeria because I want to visit Fela’s shrine. I have a pen pal there and it’s as far enough from this mess as I can afford to get. How long depends on when my money runs out.”

Ma’s face disappeared into her husband’s thighs, muffling her wailing; there was something primeval in the way her body convulsed against his. Koki stood up and shuffled her feet in the way of someone without a care in the world towards her downstairs bedroom and that was that. It’s as if they had known I was never going to college and had all been nervous about what I would do with the money I had been saving from working odd jobs. Now they knew, and they kept silent, for the alternatives were too scary to think about.



I DIDN'T pack my camera. It would have been foolhardy after the frightful tales I had heard about this place. Unsolicited nuggets of wisdom from broody aunties who leaped at any opportunity to remind you of this or that time they travelled 'to abroad'. I vaguely remembered a show which aired on the Discovery Channel called "Lagos Airport" about, well, the airport in Lagos. A shoot on sight policy had been enforced against trespassers on the airfield to curtail runway banditry. Not long before my trip, a childhood friend had had his hand luggage liberated from him along with passport and money. The horror. Actually, this happened in Accra, but you never know with these West Africans. And so for good measure, I did not pack my Yashica Electro 35.

It was thus with only one hard case stuffed with clothing and a rucksack I clung on to like dear life that I arrived in a humid Lagos. It felt the way it did when as a child *cucu* Ruguru would embrace me tightly, burying my head in her gargantuan bosom which smelled always of old bank notes, sweat and poultry feed. There I was, clueless twenty-two year-old from Kenya, a tourist in Lagos. Return ticket open.

Outside the airport, the streets were manic. Money changers and sweet vendors darted between cars in dizzying trajectories while *okadas* weaved unsteadily through the traffic, carrying on their two wheels anything between three to five people whose luggage was everything from shopping bags, cement, cans of paint, pieces of furniture. And I swear I saw a woman clutching live chicken in both hands, leaving clouds of feathers and streaks of shit in her wake. The uniformly decrepit yellow tin public minibuses remain perhaps the most astonishing fetes of motoring I have ever experienced. These *danfo* (mostly Volkswagens from a time way before I was born) are designed so that the front is nearly identical to the back, making it hard to tell if they were coming or going. If there was one whose paintjob was intact, I did not see it. There was a larger kind of bus, one whose name is lost in the fog of my mind; together, these mangled, rectangular hot boxes on wheels were something to behold. Missing side mirrors, backfiring exhaust pipes, hanging bumpers, bleeding radiators and slanting bodies, the rattling vehicles would lug out of their stops with startling screeches and bursts, and when they finally caught enough pull, their drivers would shoot murderously into the traffic, going over pavements and forcing other motorists out of their way.



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*These mangled, rectangular hot boxes on wheels were something to behold.*

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My taxi driver was insufferably chatty, with a strong handsome face and the largest feet I have ever seen on a human. In the stifling Lagos heat, he stank of three days' hard labour. Soon enough, his speech drew me in. At the airport, all I'd heard were the clipped barks of sour-faced immigration officers. But this chap spoke to me at length in that famous 'Nigerian English' peppered with the musical lilt every Kenyan with a T.V set had come to know and love.

"You be stranger for Lagos abi?"

I answered, that indeed it was my first time, and rolled down my window, hoping to catch

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*My taxi driver was insufferably chatty, with a strong handsome face and the largest feet I have ever seen on a human. In the stifling Lagos heat, he stank of three days' hard labour.*

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a whiff of any smell which could weaken his own. His voice strained and reprimanding, he snapped at me, "Abeg! Close the window. Here is very criminal." I later learnt that we had been driving through Oshodi, a bustling locale apparently overrun by armed miscreants who terrorised motorists. I did not share in my driver's anxiety, so I shrugged and took in every little colour, sound and motion of Lagos that could reach me from behind a window darkened by years of city smog and the brushing past of street merchants with their wares. Eventually, I dozed off and only woke up when we arrived at my hostel in the Lekki suburb of Lagos Island, adjacent to the posh Ikoyi and Victoria Island neighbourhoods. When I discovered the rank of my address I placed a call home and speaking rapidly to stretch my coins said, "Finally here. Putting up someplace I am not entirely sure about called Lekki very near Ikoyi. Look it up." I clumsily added "love you" and did not offer up the details of my accommodation.

My first days were spent smoking a diabolical strain of hash with the hostel staff and devouring the volumes of second hand James Baldwin texts I had brought with me. There is something about change that can be lonely, and Baldwin is great company for that brand of misery. My pen pal, Jide, was going to be four days late to meet me as he'd had to travel upcountry for a funeral. When eventually he upon me, he was like nothing I had ever known. For his was a spirit that burned and burned and burned, untamed, without fear, unwavering. Casting warm light on all who opened themselves to him and singing anything that dared oppose him.



THE NIGHT I met Jide was anything but ordinary. I can't remember what National celebration there was that Friday night but at the hostel bar, Star beer was selling at half price; and going by how many there were in the drinking hall, so were the hookers. When I had drunk myself into a slurrllrring, lithping, sta-mm-mm-mmering mess, I retreated to my bleak room where I passed out. It was lit by a solitary bulb of such low wattage, I imagined it to be how the famed whorehouses of River Road in Downtown Nairobi were like. The walls were rich in efflorescence where the garish paint hadn't peeled off, and the rattle of the ancient air conditioning unit was debilitating in its consistency. That night I slept like a log until something gripped me by the ankles and dragged me clean off the bed, arms flailing, too astounded to scream. When my eyes adjusted to the light, I recognised the bastard from the photo booth pictures he had sent me in the time of our correspondence. He did not care to apologise for letting himself into my room. Making a mental note to complain at reception about the lock, I pulled myself shakily into a standing position. When I remember those first days, I laugh at my own squareness. I hadn't known then how quickly my life would change. After giving me an almost-hug hug and quickly exchanging pleasantries, he quickly scanned the shelf where I had arranged my meager possessions and demanded I wear something 'nice'.

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*The walls were rich in efflorescence where the garish paint hadn't peeled off, and the rattle of the ancient air conditioning unit was debilitating in its consistency.*

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"Listen well-well, my friend! I am about to show you the real Lagos, so you best not disappoint me"

"Will jeans do?"

"I no know, you're a foreigner. The heat might get the best of you."

And so I wore a pair of baggy shorts and a flashy t-shirt and followed my new friend out into the night. Jide, who was a little older than I, had a car which looked like a hand-me-three-generations-down mobile and moved like the wind, not wanting to disappoint its master who never seemed to have, want or need a moment's rest. We arrived at a club, which looked calm, at least from the outside; quite unlike the others we had driven past with revelers spilling out into the streets. At the doors, Jide whispered on his tip toes in the ear of a goliath who fist bumped him playfully and ushered us in, the sly smile of a Cheshire cat sneaking up on his face. I faltered and then followed Jide in. Once inside, their subterfuge became clear. I was standing smack in the

middle of a strip club. I had heard about them, read about them and even seen a few in the more risqué films of the late eighties; maybe even dreamed of being in one. But in that moment the foolish sensibilities of my upbringing rooted me to the floor where I watched in disbelief the choreographed madness that took place right before my eyes.

In this meat market where orgasms—however duplicitous—and coitus were traded, Enajide was at home. A band in the corner performed a frenzied cover of the Lijadu Sisters' hit song 'Danger'. I thought of dashing out but my friend's firm hand held me on the small of my back and urged me farther in.

"Now, now, Johnny boy, do not spill it all just yet. Reserve some for Rosa and her cousin," Enajide said, leading me to one of the corner booths furnished with U-shaped not-really-leather white leather sofas.

"Who is Rosa? What have you.....?" I resigned myself to my fate, knowing it would have been easier to ask what he had *not* done in this selfless display of welcome he was putting on.

Close to half an hour after Rosa and I were introduced, gagging and coming up for air, I pleaded with her: "Please let's take a break."

"Yes, even you, Martha."

"No, no, nothing is wrong with your dancing. You're perfect," I lied.

The cocktail of heat with the smell of synthetic hair, old sweat and cheap perfume churned my stomach, and it was all I could do not to get sick all over the lady bits which were in my face. The girls grunted and hissed in disappointment but I had no time to stick around and make nice. I was on my feet and running to the bathrooms before I could stop myself. It's amazing how Jide noticed my predicament with all the mounting that was happening his end of the couch but he came into the bathroom just as I sent bits of dried fish and sprays of Star beer, gall, shame and confusion all over the bathroom stall.

Hollering like he had just witnessed the funniest thing, Enajide rubbed my back patiently in surprisingly gentle circular motions and, when I was done, led me to the wash basin and propped me up while I rinsed my mouth.

"Aai Johnny boy, her dancing could not have been that bad, my man!" Jide said, teasing.

"It's nothing like that, bro. I just think I may have drunk too much."

"Enh, then it must have been Marta. She's still very new. Even her hygiene is questionable."

I tried to explain that it had nothing to do with the girls and immediately regretted my decision. Jide contorted his face into a mask I could not read. "Ai!!! I had been warned about you

people! Fruitcakes instead of men. Acting like *oyinbo*. White men hunting for dick with all this pus...”

I spun around so fast it caught even me by surprise and lent a jab to the bottom of his chin. Only when I saw the blood from his tongue was I able to contain myself and start to apologise, half scared he was going to return the punch. But when his arm stretched out it was to grab me by the waist and pull me in so close I could smell the tobacco on his breath. I have never known a tighter hold. And then it happened; a quick swipe of the blood and his lips were on mine, exploring places I did not know my mouth hid in ways none of the girls I had fucked did. I remember trying to break away but so weak was my attempt it seemed in itself an admission of longing, and Jide fed my body its desires. Right where we stood.

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*“Ai!!! I had been warned about you people! Fruitcakes instead of men. Acting like oyinbo. White men hunting for dick with all this pus...” I spun around so fast it caught even me by surprise and lent a jab to the bottom of his chin.*

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I HAD moved into his apartment soon after that night and we had loved without limit for two months. One day, Jide was arrested for peddling crack cocaine. I never saw him again. The charges were not offered to neither him nor myself and they didn’t need to be. I had never asked how he got by. Where he earned his meals and mine. It did not matter. To be desired so wholly by someone you desire intensely is a suspension of your sensibilities. The part of my guard that shielded my heart, my mind, my bodily safety, gone and replaced with just pure maddening desire.



STEPPING OUT of the aircraft at JKIA I could smell it. A Nation in decay; and I did not care. I was reborn. I knew things of myself now that allowed me to feel a readiness to take on the world. Ma could not have seen it through the tears in her eyes and Pa was too ill to notice but Koki did. She confirmed it with a squeeze of the hand that lasted longer than it should have.

Because we were not using our languages we said things we did not mean; what we really wanted to say remained folded inside, trapped.

**-NoViolet Bulawayo, *We Need New Names***



*Petals for Wale* (Egho Dandelion)

*Photography*

*I love another man, and it makes me feel like a pretty flower. How can I be sorry?*

'Petals for Wale' was inspired by a painful story I heard about a gay Nigerian, Abdulquadri, who during his NYSC year escaped death in northern Nigeria. The piece is dedicated to the LGBTIQ community in Africa, a way of standing by those in hiding, people scarred by the terrors of coming out/ everyone who didn't survive it, and to the ones who survived. I hope you find courage in the small joys of life, and in the love that chose you.

—Egho Dandelion





*A Story to Live For* (Nnanna Ikpo, 2016).



*photography*

Meet Tani. He is a brilliant African human rights expert in his 30s. He works for the government of his country. Unfortunately, it is a 'taboo' and crime to be like Tani. He is gay. A few years ago when Tani discovered his sexual orientation he tried to take his life but was unsuccessful. The photo above is his left arm which was inscribed in 2008 with 'My story isn't over' as a reminder of the hurtful things he must never do to himself again and the opportunities that come with life, courage, hope and continuity. It is a reminder that his life, his human rights, are worth enjoying and fighting for. His is like the stories of the millions of sexual and gender minorities across Africa and the world who

thrive in the heat of pain, discrimination, humiliation and oppression from state and non-state parties simply because of how they are and who their hearts have chosen to love. In a broader light, his story is like that of human rights at global, regional and national levels.

Today, Tani writes his story, working tirelessly to realise the human rights of others in his country even as he is reminded by his tattoo to stay alive and continue his story.

—Nnanna Ikpo

## Gay Wars: Battle of the Bitches

### (or, The Tops and Bottoms of Being Out in Nigeria)

By RAPUM KAMBILI

1.

I WOULD like to begin by saying that if you are visiting me, and you don't want to be *outed by association*, then don't bother. Add to that: I am not asking anybody to visit me; my city has just about enough people for that. Disclaimer: I am not trying to be bitchy, whatever that means.

The deal is, I am out. By out, I do not mean that I came on NTA or Channels TV wearing a huge pink sweater. I do not own any pink clothes. Pink requires a certain fastidiousness, a certain flair: It is for boys who know what to do with colour. A little cliché: I could have tried pink in secondary school, when I still glided through corridors, all feminine grace.

"Stop doing like a girl," a classmate once said to me. "Don't you know you make some of us high?"

What the fuck?

In secondary school, I fought a total of two times in six years. Cried a handful of times. Lashed out a million times: "Yes, I be homo. Na your father fuck me. Idiot!" I was a hell of an angry bitch. Still am. Back then, my anger hadn't crystallized into the calm, insistent dissatisfaction that it is now. It had been a huge roaring flame. I was still praying to God to change me, not necessarily because I was tired of all the cat-calling and snide remarks, but because I loved God terribly, hopelessly. So, where did that anger come from? Did it stem from the fact that those boys, who were mostly sweet on good days, had no right whatsoever to *tell me* what to do, how to be?

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*If happiness is the end of all our journeying, then why do we  
often choose misery?*

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Fast-forward a few years later, and I am in my final year in university, and my friend Ken has told me that "Louis said he likes you but the only problem is that you're out, even to the girls in your class." Louis is a boy that I had asked out, a boy who knows I know he's gay, and yet told me, "Guy, I don't know what you're talking about." People think he's sweet and kind, but all the bitches I know say he's a bitch (see definition). He will not talk to you if you are *obvious* or *out*. In

other words, you are fuckable insofar as you can disappear in the crowd and become like People (see definition).

Fast-forward even further, and this guy whom I fuck out of a lack of options (I'm not trying to be a bitch. See Bitch [2]) tells me that, "The reason no serious person will date you is because you're out, and it's so childish, coming out to every guy you think you like."

I cringe. "So I'm out to the girls too because I *like* them?"

"It's just childish. UC thinks you're a bitch, that's why he stopped visiting."

I like to think that I have pretty thick skin, but even the thickest skin melts under intense heat. Alone finally in my room, I cry. I have not fixed my bulb, and the darkness covers me, fills me with a profound loneliness. This is not the place for me, I think. I am too real for Nigeria.

(Definition of Terms: **People:** *Men who fuck women or women who fuck men.* **Bitch:** *A man who rolls his eyes, dangles his wrists, or simply says, "I am."* Do not use this word if you do not self-identify as one. **Bitch [2]:** *Annoying prick. Asshole. Doesn't mean his prick is big or his asshole tight.*)

## 2.

- i. I HAVE a theory about love: We accept the love we think we deserve. (*The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, Stephen Chbosky.)
- ii. I have a question about gays: Who does the chores? (The movie, *Pride*.)
- iii. I have found the answer to life's problems: We love to choose misery. (Plain fact.)

## 3.

THE GUY Whom I (used to) Fuck Out of a Lack of Options is kind of right. Or, better, he would have been right a few years ago. I started coming out, actively at least, after secondary school. I had not yet taken up a boring job washing bottles at a pharmaceutical company in my neighbourhood. I had been self-diagnosed with a case of Post-Graduation Nostalgia, which meant that I watched and re-watched *High School Musical*, and cried. In the evenings, I went for keyboard class or choir practice, depending on what day it was. There was a girl and a handful of boys, my second family, with whom I walked home from church. On my way home, I branched off at Greg's to chat. Greg was a year my junior in secondary school, and he had about him the air of someone for whom the world could bend. I told him I liked him. No, not in the friendly-hug-and-pat-on-the-back way. Like, really liked him.

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*We accept the love we think we deserve. (Stephen Chbosky,  
The Perks of Being a Wallflower.)*

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Happened, dude was as straight as an arrow (even though I've never touched an arrow to make sure, and who else has noticed how suspiciously like a dick an arrow is shaped?).

He was surprised, he said. I was so into God, so spiritual.

Yes, I said. But some things cannot be changed. (On my uncle's wardrobe door, the Serenity Prayer of Reinhold Niebuhr: *God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, etc.*)

But it's unnatural, he pursued.

I was born this way, I argued. (Thanks to my father, I recently had a phone. Thanks to Iomfats.com and the life-saving stories of Grasshopper et al. Thanks to Nifty.com, strangely.)

But still....

You don't know what I've been through... (My mother told us stories as kids, and I happened to tell them as well, perhaps better, my brothers thought. *The gift of a man maketh way for him.* God is good that way.)

4.

REPLICATE THE conversation in 3 above maybe dozens of times, add a few girls, then more, to it. At this point I just couldn't stop, not with the reactions I was getting. In first year, when someone asked if I was gay, I told the same story: *I was born this way*. An apology of sorts.

*What if I wasn't born this way—so fucking what?*

Someone once asked, "Have you ever faced rejection upon coming out?"

The worst I've gotten: "We have to pray about it. It's not of God."

The bad: "I don't believe you."

The good, from an older friend, a spiritual mentor when I was still in the spirit, a wise lady: "I will listen just as you have asked me to."

The better: "I kept thinking about it, and you're still Rapum."

The best, from my brother, Ulonna: "Is that your boyfriend @ dp?"

Maybe, one day: "Guy, get lost. I fit kill you."

And I won't give a fuck. Maybe a little fuck, but not too much; I would hate to make them sore.

5.

A LITTLE fact about coming out: There are two kinds of homophobes—those who will say what everybody else says because they have no head. Until you come along and give them brains. And

those who will hate you no matter what. You will know before you decide to tell. Your guts will tell you.

Also: A point will come when none of these will matter. You will not have to make speeches, or give long lectures. You will *be*. And your *being* will give the haters nightmares.

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*There are two kinds of homophobes—those who will say what everybody else says because they have no head. Until you come along and give them brains. And those who will hate you no matter what.*

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6.

- i. IN THIRD year, a classmate of mine stood up like other people to talk about his “unrequited love experience”, and it was for another boy. He is a bitch, this classmate of mine. Perhaps the bitch of bitches. His role model? Lady Gaga. Lecturer said, in response, “It is also a love experience.” On Facebook later, where a “female sister” had put up a subtle post about it, our classmates came on to say, “He’s so brave” and “It’s his life” and “Some people will come and be judging now,” etc. Not to be outdone, the homophobes and As Yet Undecided came on to sputter and mutter, “Hmmm” and “I comment my reserve.” For once they were swallowing it and not spitting out a drop.
- ii. I have a number of pictures on my phone that I took with the two most special friends I have in school. Leonard and Oozy. They like to call me the Slut of the group, but it is only because I take it up the ass, and a lot of straight men can only define a slut in terms of who takes it in. Leonard is the real slut, however, and when we don’t have work to do, I pose as his Bitch and he my Slut, my arms around his neck, his around my waist, our bodies meshed together, and Oozy takes the picture. “And you say he’s straight?” bitches ask.  

“I know, right?” I say.
- iii. “God, the girl was mad. I came like in minutes, and she made me hard again.”  

“Wow, when I come, it gets painful. He has to stop.”  

“You come when they fuck you?”  

“Sit down here, guy. I listened to your own.”

- iv. When I came out to my brother, I did my best to look him in the eyes. He was teaching me to ride a bicycle, holding the bicycle to keep it steady because I was a little scared and a little too excited, because I kept wobbling off-course. I was a little sad, too, because my third brother had been making homophobic jokes all morning. We were riding up the sleepy road of our mother's village, edging towards the junction where the tarred road gave way to glorious red earth. I said to him, "So, if I'm gay that is how all of you will reject me."

"No," he said. "But you're not gay na."

"My friends accept me the way I am," I said. "It would be so sad if my own family doesn't."

- v. Third Brother: Rapum, I go soon start to wear iron pant.

Bicycle Brother: Shut up!

Leonard's Girlfriend: This film is nice, but all these gay stuff are weird. Okay, see these guys...eeew.

Leonard: There is nothing weird about this, baby.

7.

I AM afraid of dying too soon. I am afraid of loneliness. I am afraid that I am too lazy to write a novel. I am afraid that someone I love might die. I am afraid of the day when I'll come out to mum and dad, and to uncle Okwi and aunt Nneoma. I am afraid of kito.

8.

PEOPLE THINK I am not bad looking. Some people think I am in fact cute, but if the opinions of our family and best friends counted, we would all be hot. I think I am okay. I like to say funny things, to make people laugh, and most times I succeed at that. I am not Albert Einstein, but I can hold a conversation. (Albert Einstein wrote *Oliver Twist*, right?)

The world of movies wants us to believe that these are all we need to find love, or at least get laid. Good looks, wit, intelligence, kindness. God, in his infinite mercy, has given me teaspoonful of each, so that, no matter how little my intelligence, or no matter how ordinary my looks, I can, with a little kindness, purchase happiness for myself in this world. But why, after hanging out with my friends on some days, do I return to my room hollowed out, full of the emptiness of the lonely?

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*I finally worked on my wrists and my gait years ago, before university, because of the things I saw in gay forums online: If I wanted a girl, I'd find a real girl. Or, I want a man, a real man.*

---

"I am discreet," I once typed, and hated myself immediately.

"I don't out people," I say often, too often, but already I know I have lost him, the object of my disclaimer. Sometimes, I try not to let it on that I am *not really in the closet*, but they always know, somehow. It ought to be tiring, to go through life always watching one's back.

I finally worked on my wrists and my gait years ago, before university, because of the things I saw in gay forums online: *If I wanted a girl, I'd find a real girl. Or, I want a man, a real man.* Ironical, that the scared, ignorant boys in secondary school who were my family and my nightmare for some six years couldn't get the message across, despite their numerous jabbing.

If happiness is the end of all our journeying, then why do we often choose misery? And why do we cause misery for others?

In plain English, Why are we such bitches?

Sometimes, I get mad at Achebe's generation. I ask my friends, "Are you saying there were no gay artists and intellectuals then?"

I know they had a different war to fight, but it is the right of children to blame their parents for their woes. Zadie Smith: *generations are known for the projects they undertake together*. Why do I feel so strongly that this is our project—to make the bed, not necessarily for ourselves, but for our nieces and nephews and children?

Instead, we fight wars within ourselves. "He's such a bitch," Ken, who has fucked half the boys in school, says. "He's all over the place." If I were not Ken's friend, he would have given the same verdict on me. After all, I meet the specification: I say, "*I am.*"

## A Straight Boy's Manifesto: Queer Folk Are the New Africans

By IFEDIMMA OSAKWE

**T**HIS WORLD does not belong to us straight people; it has never really belonged to anyone. But there seems to be a negative genetic factor about us humans that drive us towards making undue claims on space and morality. In most cases, these claims are usually backed by populist power where they cannot be easily granted. Hence, there is the case of whites over blacks, the privileged caste over the Untouchables in India, the male gender over the female one, and in this essay, straight people over Queer folk.

This discourse is not about support; it is about resilience and subtle defiance in this world that has gone crazy with a crass sense of its self-relevance, a notion that it has to lend a hand for anything to work out. Sometimes you wake up and you realize that things are changing and if anything, you're the one who has some catching-up to do. This is the sense straight homophobes of our communities have refused to accept concerning the diversity which is innate in society.



EVERYTHING STARTED in secondary school, so did the idea of homosexuality; *gay* was still a word for grownups, and *lesbian*, *bisexual*, and *transgender* were vague ideas. I had a classmate we all called 'homo', and dislike—or better said, *hate*—was a common feeling we directed towards him. Expect him to be diminished, but he wasn't. It seemed he felt, was confident, that he was above our brutishness in ways that would take us years to realise. It was in the way he carried himself and was so quick to flirt with boys who flinched at his touch: he contested our right of place in a world that was clearly ours. His swifty manner announced its presence; petite and slender-framed, his eyelids batted on repeat, and his arms seemed to flutter nonstop. The rumours were as dark as our bile:

—He once wanked in class, and the way he smeared the sperm between his fingers, dirty! And that boy, he sleeps with older men for money.

Laughable? Yes. But I was a Straight Boy Crusader, just like the other boys in my class, and all I wanted was to cleanse the world of homosexuals. It didn't matter that in junior secondary I didn't know how gay boys fucked. My friend had told me that, somehow, they used their stomachs or their laps, whichever style the copulating couple considered preferable. One partner



strokes his dick against the other's stomach or between his laps. Outright stupidity that I questioned until I learned the truth: that gays can also pass penises up the butt hole and it's a wonderful thing.

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I still saw this boy on my street after high school. It seemed he was determined to follow me wherever I went; he didn't live in my neighbourhood which was far from his. Our indifference to one another was mutual—I, righteous; and he, perverted. We couldn't possibly be yoked together. But he was a consciousness that tracked me. It didn't matter whether or not I thought of him as something, a kind of human, I would later come to confront: knowing him sowed a knowledge in me—one about diversity—which waited patiently for the rain, the catalyst which would make it blossom.



THE HATE against homosexuals cannot be excused. Every human community has its own warfare but there is a similar pattern to all of them. It is always a question of human animalism, because nothing else can explain the unreasonable fatal aversion human beings readily feel for one another. This is the reason a white police officer can feel so uncomfortable about blackness that he would point his pistol at a black teenager and pull the trigger. There it is racism, but here, in Nigeria, where everybody is of the same colour, the deal is sexuality; and the inability to admit this difference is what commands *sexualism*, a first cousin of its relative in the U.S., racism.

We love and hate in ignorance yet unhate and unlove with the coming of awareness, of knowledge. It always turns out that it becomes more difficult to unhate than to unlove, which says something about the insufferable nature of close-mindedness. There is always a time of disillusionment but it is usually difficult for hate to let go because it is an emotion that is entrenched in a wilful blockade on right sense, and sometimes it turns inward against itself. So, it is not unimaginable that some of those who discriminate against LGBT people do so out of a desire to diminish that part of them which they rather would not have.

University was a load of disillusionment awaiting my arrival and it did not hesitate, upon my coming, to modify notions which I had brought to its stables. Throughout university, I existed

as the odd number in a wide community of gay boys and always saw myself as an embarrassment to those who mistook me as one of “the fold.”

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*When a gay person is everything a straight person would love to be, the reaction is usually—No, there must be a mistake somehow.*

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In university I met a boy who is gay. I was initially unaware of his sexuality and unsuspecting of it because I knew gayness as a femme thing. Being gay, to me, was everything ugly and disgusting: a boy who was gay was not supposed to be good-looking or the most intelligent and progressive person in class. Keeping his place in the rubbish pile of humanity granted him a bit of tolerance because then he was an assurance that being gay is the other side of being. Finding out the falsity of this notion normally has one of two effects: it aggravates the hate one feels for the gay person or it makes one rethink *common sense*. When a gay person is everything a straight person would love to be, the reaction is usually—No, there must be a mistake somehow. And then the alarm goes off for enemy offensive and the need to build an equal defence. It was a response I witnessed in school as deep friendship would bloom between me and this boy who is gay and yet all the beautiful things about being.

Our common love for literature was the first thing we learned about one another, but my distaste for homosexuals and his intolerance for homophobes were yet unrevealed. But then, we both belonged to the same group of writers on campus and, apart from improving creativity, being in a writers' group smoked out the homophobia in me. This happened after a group member read a queer piece which drove us into a conversation about queerness. It quickly became an argument and our rank was divided. It was the first time I felt that homosexuals are generally more knowledgeable about complexity than straight people. Maybe there is something knowledge-imbuing about not being accepted; maybe it makes one introspective and curious.

As usual, it was the same irrational vehemence familiar with my rejection of homosexuality—No, there's no way this thing can be right. In fact, it is unnatural.

But my gay friend had a better argument: he spoke of the complexities of people, of diversity, of mainstream and social dynamics, of nuance, of internalized conflict, and many other things I never heard of before then. But convincing me was not a piece of cake; and then he asked—What if I tell you I'm gay, would you stop being my friend? Because I had mentioned I couldn't even be friends with a gay person. For the first time, my protestation ceased because the question stilled my tongue, and I knew it was one that was deeper than it seemed. It was a revelation

that spoke so much about how sexuality differences would not matter if society did not raise people to see it as something that should define whom to make friends with. We were already friends and I could approach him without suspicion, which might not have been possible if I had known he was gay the first time I was introduced to him. Ignorance was power! But about his question, I had no ready answer until another member intervened—No, it can't be the same. You're already friends. But then, as much as I knew I was not ready to lose his friendship, I wasn't thinking, either, of the possibility of him being gay. What he said about being gay was as best as I understood it, a hypothetical statement.

During one of my constant visits to his room at the boys' hostel, he wanted us to go out to the balcony. Thinking about it now, the conversation is blurred, but he turned to look at me at a point and said—I'm gay. I had left my defence back in my off campus room, and so it was a straight score, kicking off the exercise of my reformation from an ignorant homophobe.

—But how did you become like that?

—I have been this way from as early as I can remember. Normally straight kids crushed on the aunties, but as a gay kid I crushed on the brothers. And those times we would play mummy and daddy games, I never minded playing the mummy role. And when it came to kissing, I could kiss a boy and it felt normal.

The next thing I remember he said touched me—Once, I told this boy I was gay and he suggested maybe I needed to see a pastor to pray for me.

And then he scoffed—As if homosexuality is a spiritual anomaly.

I looked down from where we stood on that balcony, at all the boys entering and leaving the hostel, and wondered how many of them were also gay. My friend wasn't as assertive as he would be by the time we got to our final year, and it was mostly of the pressure of being gay in a society as ours that he spoke about.



EMPATHY IS not a given emotion for human beings; it is like taking up another person's grief; it counters individualism and selfishness. It requires a leap of the imagination and an open mind, and it is a gift for the person who feels it when it sprouts. There is peace to empathy, soberness, a better understanding of the human condition and the helpless situation in which we are all entangled. It is about seeing your fragility in others. It is a gradual process.

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*...he turned to look at me at a point and said—I'm gay. I had left my defence back in my off campus room, and so it was a straight score, kicking off the exercise of my reformation from an ignorant homophobe.*

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I was shedding my old skin and inhabiting new spaces. And when my friend told me how he felt each time he came out in the morning to brush his teeth and saw a variety of boys, mostly dark-skinned, bathing outside, a range of organs and a collection of body builds, I could imagine it. They made him brush twice a day because he hurried over his teeth in the morning. Later, when he told me a boy had been beaten at the hostel because he'd fondled a roommate while said roommate was sleeping, I already knew better not to apportion blames. I knew the gay boy had offended but I felt he was more of the violated person than the boy he touched. Nothing could be more difficult than being different in a world where nobody cares about your difference; it means there is no provision for your comfort.

Imagining him in the midst of all those boys who did not understand that their bodies rather aroused him, I thought of myself, a straight boy, in the midst of girls. It is more than just being in the midst of girls; it is being exposed to their privacy, their naked bodies, the tender things about them that could make you the vulnerable person, and the indifference that accompanies it.



THERE IS a way in which aggression is the result of fear, and understanding is meant to dispel such tension. The aggression hurled at queer people springs from this same cause, that if they are not diminished, they may tower everywhere and mess the pure human race. But this thinking shows how much we are unaware of history and of ourselves, especially in the way we tend to make sexual difference a Western ill coming to infest Africa. Being queer is not a new world order. It is truly the old world coming back to reclaim its place. Queer folk are the Africans who will remain when we straight fellows are drained off the surface of the earth. It doesn't matter how much they are oppressed now: the oppression teaches them resilience which means the eventual crumbling of the dictatorship of straight folk.

Queer people have always been a part of the world, a part of Africa. They are the ancestors whom our grandparents poured libations to and our parents denounced as pagans. They are the priest who weds straight couples in church knowing he is not allowed to do the same for people who are like him. They are the young girl born to homophobic parents in a patriarchal society. They are the wife who playacts her desire for the husband. They are the husband faithful to his

wife and determined to die with the secret of his self-denial. They are among the souls in heaven, dipping and raising their heads in eternal worship.

In our final year, shortly before we left school, after our final exams, my friend told me about another friend who was entrapped. (By now our friendship had grown deeper and we were like hybrid lovers, so I knew many of the gay boys around us, including the boy he was telling me about.) I was familiar with entrapment stories, but it was my first time knowing it could happen to someone I knew.

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*Queer people have always been a part of the world, a part of Africa. They are the ancestors whom our grandparents poured libations to and our parents denounced as pagans... They are among the souls in heaven, dipping and raising their heads in eternal worship.*

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It was staged by another boy who was gay, and this got me befuddled at first. I didn't know such internalized cruelty existed. The knowledge was numbing for the few first seconds, and then I asked him why the boy would do such a thing to a fellow gay person and he said—Yes, some gay boys do that, maybe for money. He certainly will get a share in the loot they'll make of the victim. But later I realized it's a human thing, this dark will to inflict pain on others, and that until the end of time, humans will only be judged right based on their character and nothing else.

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*...we were like hybrid lovers*

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Although the set-up failed by an unprecedented lucky chance, I identified with the victim's hurt in a strange way. I had always felt anger about such incidents but this time I felt a pawing coldness, caused by the fear, that homophobia could grow into vicious palpability.



WE ARE lazy Africans, scar-face-black-ass hypocrites, always at odds in recognising our priorities or the demons which we ought to be fighting. Homosexuals have never been among our challenges but here we are, expending our strength into suppressing a vital part of our communities. It is a shame that the government of Nigeria, under the administration of Goodluck Jonathan, proved

to be most ignorant of its main obligation to protect its citizens when it signed the Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act (SSMPA) on 13 January 2014.

Today, we would rather lynch homosexuals than make good economic policies, or improve our education system, or provide steady power, or stop the corruption that will not stop short of draining the last drop of goodness from us. We are most glad about this—after all, we are keeping our place as the most moral of the world's continents. Salute to our idiocy.

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*Homosexuals do not seek our attention as much as we seek theirs; we are like the child throwing tantrums.*

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REFORMATION IS the battle we fight against the crude aspects of our nature; it is holding down that part of us that belongs to the wild, and it is a continual struggle. Sometimes we think we are done with the fight, but then a trial whiffs across and we are back in the jungle, snapping teeth and baring fangs.

I love playing the keyboard, that savvy coordination of ten fingers dancing on black and white keys was many wonderful things to me, and the passion they make me feel can be sensual when they all fuse their beauty. When a boy, a graduate student of the Department of Music, agreed to teach me to play the instrument, back in university, it was joy that thrilled me like tickling touches at the tip of my heart. I was determined to be attentive even to passive instructions. But affection took over him after a few lessons, which became the end of our tutorial and the closest I got to romantic involvement with a gay person. I had to leave the day he wrapped his arms around me, from behind where he once instructed my pace on the keys, and told me to stay a while after our lesson.

I wanted to give myself reasons why he shouldn't have touched me but none was strong enough to sustain the anger I felt. They gave way to better reasoning when anger seeped away: that was his way of suggesting desire, as inexperienced and internally conflicted as he was, and he showed good sense by not trying to hold me back when I said I had to leave. The following weeks were difficult for the both of us; we were next-door neighbours and in the same faculty; and I could feel our steps become irregular and our greetings clumsy each time we crossed paths. But soon, our tension relaxed and although the lessons couldn't continue, we were able to exchange regards and have a firm handshake like we used to. That was the spirit of sportsmanship.

Sometimes a gay person mistakes a straight boy for gay and the feeling is always the same as when the straight boy mistakes a girl—buxom with a moulded butt, in a black satin gown outlining the shape of her body—for interested.



TO BE at home with the fact that there is an LGBT person right next to us is to be at home with ourselves; it is a testimony to an understanding of the diversity which humans have turned into a point of conflict rather than gain. There was an exceeding number of LGBT people in university and they did not end there. They abound in our markets, in our ghettos, on the streets, in religious places, at the motor parks as touts: the very ones that *maja* us at motor parks, under whose ferocity we cower. They are the solemn voices in the neglected corners of the world which do not neglect their parts in the glorious song of the earth. They are the new Africans, even though they have been around from the beginning of time.

The fuss straight people make about homosexuality is a wonder of the world; homosexuals do not seek our attention as much as we seek theirs; we are like the child throwing tantrums. And the question is, how much longer can we keep this up?

## Friends in a Ship

By AMATESIRO DORE

1.

### Tesiro

ALL MY mates are married with children. They have made human connections to last a lifetime. They have formed partnerships with people who have chosen to be with them. They have begun their journeys into mid-life crisis, legacies and death. They know their friends who will lend them money and who may take care of their children in their absence. They have moved into the secondary worries of life while my soul wrestles with primary emotions like love and companionship.

Decades of camouflaging the nature of my heart and erections has robbed me of pleasant opportunities to honestly connect with other souls. Throughout my years of academic learning and societal upbringing, I never had a friend who knew my thoughts, the candid details of my escapades and how I felt about guys. I disguised the identity of my heartbeat and the footsteps of my spirit. Even my shadow was not my own.

It was a lifetime performance of lies and false living. I played the role of a homophobic

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*My friends...have moved into the secondary worries of life while my soul wrestles with primary emotions like love and companionship.*

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straight guy while I craved to hold the hands of a guy. I worshipped at the temple of homophobes while I prayed for a man to call my own. I encouraged the affections of women but preferred the hugs of a man. I wasted decades of my life building connections with people who hated my kind, my heart and the things that made me whole. I discriminated against effeminate guys, badmouthed gay love in straight circles and avoided people with homosexual inclinations. I killed every honest emotion in my heart and disavowed everyone with the ability to fall in love with my soul. Because the Bible said so, I agreed to hate myself.

Everything changed when I lost an old friend in 2015. He discovered the duplicity of my character and chose to cut me off. That was when I realised that my friends were acquired based on false pretences. I didn't give them the choice to evaluate my soul and decide if they liked me for who I was. A friendship based on a misconception is a fraudulent acquisition. Like fake jewellery, it will fail every examination and test of time.



In 2016, I renounced the acquisition of fake friends and fraudulent relationships. I began to build real ships based on truth, trust and total honesty. I began to entrust honest people with the truth about myself. And I have started accumulating friends who love me as I am, men who understand the nature of my affections and have connected with my soul in ways I thought was impossible.

2.

Prophet

I MET him on the bench where wise-inhalers relaxed beside our neighbourhood canal. His fingers were beautifully crafted, his nails ripe for biting and his hand drawing a splendid sketch of a futuristic African man in a rural setting. His bad boy grin emanated from white teeth in burnt-brown gums. I loved his lumps of Nazarene locks and would later enjoy digging my fingers into his bed of virgin-black dreads. I was stunned by his neo-liberal intelligence, non-conformist opinions and free-hearted disposition. I never expected to find someone like him at an impoverished bunk in an under-developed suburb of Lagos.

I was days away from completing my memoir, in need of a neighbourhood confidant who appreciated literature, and chilling by myself in a ship without friends. Our conversations were easy, laughter was plenty and our encounter seemed like a case of artistic serendipity. He was uncommonly generous with his smokes, respectfully considerate of my age and genuinely impressed by my literary hustle. His validation restored my waning confidence in my art and I began to see myself through his dotting eyes at a time when my hopes were dependent on the success of some grants and residency applications.

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*He has made me believe that every gay man will find straight friends who understand them...in a bold new ship where all men are free to express different shades of masculinity*

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I tested our friendship by reading portions of my memoir to him. That was how he learnt about my sexuality. He was flabbergasted but our friendship continued. I fell in love with his mind and the way he permitted the rights of my soul to co-exist with his heterosexual heart. He was confident in his masculinity and wasn't threatened by my homosexuality. He listened to my past like a priest and wasn't disgusted by the nature of my sexual expressions. He accorded me the rights of a fellow human being, the respect of a fellow man and he dignified our fellowship. I felt no shame or embarrassment discussing my same-sex affairs with him. He did not sneer at my

sexuality or try to condescend to my emotions. Affairs of my heart were simply affairs of another heart. It was the strangest friendship in my homophobic world. His honesty was very strange.

I'm jealous of his girlfriend and make no attempt to hide my feelings. He doesn't give a fuck about my jealousy and has probably told her about my existence in his life. Maybe that's why she calls him every bloody second to speak for hours. At this stage of my life, a good friend is better than the best lover. I do find him sexually attractive and wouldn't mind exploring his body. But that's because I'm a bloody motherfucker. And I think he knows this and that everyone has a friend who wants to fuck them. Hence the creation of the friend zone for safety purposes.

I feel safe with him, in spite of my sexual stirrings for him. He has made me believe that every gay man will find straight friends who understand them, heterosexual men who are not threatened by homosexual love, in a bold new ship where all men are free to express different shades of masculinity, and where everyone has acquired the grace to love gay men with no strings attached.

That is why I call him Prophet. He's my gift from Ago, the Lagos suburb that robbed my soul.

## Lost Pride

*By* SEUN IDRIS

When you wake up to the sunshine  
Feeling positive of the fresh dawn  
Less expectant of the activities that would run through the day:  
That is valid pride.

When you can stand by your bed  
Getting into your clothes and shoes  
Feeling the thrill of refreshment:  
That is valid pride.

When you have to say, “Hi, my name is blah”  
Searching for opportunities and requests  
Without looking at what you wear and how you walk:  
That is valid pride.

When people won't have to say, “Hey man, you're so gay!”  
Scoffing at your femme curves  
And the tenderest of swaying moves:  
That is valid pride.

When your parents can call  
And happily ask, “Our son, how's your husband?”  
Feeling relieved and all:  
That is valid pride.

## PLACARDS

*By* CHISOM OKAFOR

Your mother's hair used to be a mass of fine threads  
that touched the back of her shoulders,  
curving into a cluster of curls.  
She fed them thick portions of cheap oil each morning,  
scrubbed hard then softly, with hair brush.  
Once, she said,  
"when yours grow, Miriam,  
a man will find it attractive,  
then he'll buy you lavender cream."

But somewhere on the toilet wall  
you made and re-made sketches  
of two happy stick-girls  
because you'd rather have Susan  
than Mike touch your hair.

You stopped attending Sunday School  
the day the teacher mentioned Sodom  
and the girl from the next street  
(who always thought you had  
the queerest evil spirit)  
looked sideways and whispered  
like a female exorcist,  
"how do you *crush on* a girl?"  
And your eyes narrowed into  
a needle, piercing its way through  
tissue paper, and your skin became a city under siege,  
and you fortified your defenses  
and whispered back,  
"you...how do you *crush on* a boy?"

Then you realized  
you had nothing to defend, *by the way*.

You loved placards  
but they wouldn't let you raise them  
at home,  
or on the street  
or at Sunday School.  
So you held them inside you and  
in your many dreams,  
of which you've lost count,  
for dreams are variegated things  
like arithmetic.

At school, you realized you were  
no more or less  
like your mates,  
that you aspired like everyone else,  
dreamed the way others did  
and that, like everyone else, your placards  
had inscriptions that told of *becoming*,  
until an end-point was attained - *yourself*.  
Because someday, you had stopped 'wanting to be'  
and simply 'became'.



*Istanbul Pride 2017*(Jay Rechsteiner, 2016)

*painting*

This painting depicts the gay (LGBTQ) pride in Istanbul in 2017. The march got banned in 2016 '*for the safety of our citizens, first and foremost the participants, and for public order.*' Read more: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/06/27>

[/turkey-police-fire-rubber-bullets-at-banned-gay-pride-parade/](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/06/27/turkey-police-fire-rubber-bullets-at-banned-gay-pride-parade/)

It does not look like the authorities will allow that march soon. This painting is inspired by James Ensor's 'Christ's Entry Into Brussels in 1889'.

—Jay Rechsteiner





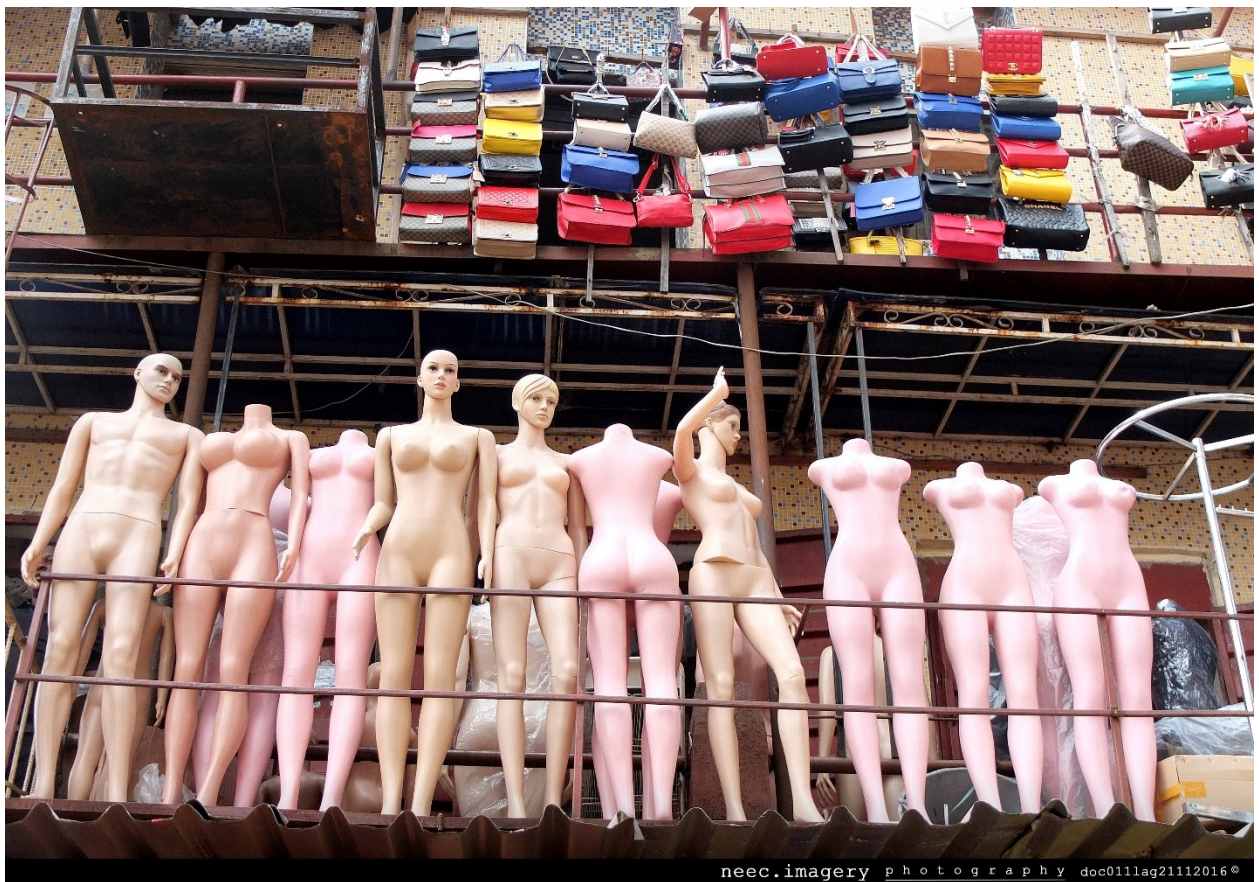
*Nigerian Lesbian Forum* (Pogay, 2016).

Size: 25 x 45 inches  
Medium: Mixed media



This abstract expressionist work is produced with oil paint, rope, glue and other natural materials on a canvas surface and framed with pure hand-made wood. 'Nigerian Lesbian Forum' points to the progressive struggle of Nigerian lesbians—how far they have come, and how hard they've worked to come together through various mediums, especially online, as a body and a formidable angle of the LGBT community in Nigeria, a country where the existence, freedom and operation of Lesbian groups is forbidden and termed 'criminal'.

—Pogay



*The Mannequins* (Nec, 2016)



*The Mannequins* (Nec, 2016)

*pictograph*

My pictographs—the mannequins—were inspired when I noticed that these giant dolls can be so sexy without their pants and clothes, and they can be piled together and not pay attention to their sexes. But we humans, we talk about ours, even overate them, place brutal laws on them, and unquestionably lynch people because of how they choose to live their sex lives...

—NeeC



## Notes on Contributors

**Absalom** is a Nigerian writer, mass communicator and freelance editor based in Lagos.

**Amatesiro Dore** is a winner of the 2016 Reimagined Folktale Contest, was shortlisted and is currently under consideration for the Saraba Manuscript (Nonfiction) Prize and the Gerald Kraak Award.

**Ayaòbàtálá** is a self-proclaimed agbejoro. An expert weaver of the whispers in her head with the tales she borrowed from màami. She is also an òrìsà worship enthusiast who is convinced that òbàtálá is the ultimate man crush. The only way to win her heart is through her oriki. She is a drinker of palm wine, lover of music, and collector of strange words.

**Chibùihé Obi** is a poet, memoirist and creative photography enthusiast. His writings aim to interrogate language, identity and memory; to probe silence and confront stereotype. His works have been published in places like The Kalahari Review, Praxis magazine, Expound magazine, Brittle paper, Black boy review, Sun newspaper and other places. A Babishai haiku prize finalist, he has a photo/poetry chapbook coming from Praxis magazine, and has been nominated for the 2017 Pushcart prize.

**Chike Frankie Edozien** was raised in Lagos, Nigeria. His work has appeared in the *New York Times*, *The Times* (UK), *Quartz*, *Vibe* magazine, *Time Magazine*, *Out Traveler*, the *Advocate*, and on various broadcast news outlets. He is a contributor to Safe House: Explorations in Creative Nonfiction (Cassava Republic Press 2016). He co-founded the *AFRican* magazine in 2001 to tell African stories overlooked by international media.

**Chisom Okafor** was studying Nutrition and Dietetics when poetry discovered him. His works have appeared or are forthcoming in various literary outlets.

**Deji Payne** was born in Nigeria. He is bisexual, loves art and literature and food. He likes to write in the second person.

**Egho Dandelion** is a research analyst, aspiring writer and visualjournalist. She works with Gladius Commodities, where she researches, creates content and has written publications for magazines and photographers market. Dandelion, who is also a passionate supporter of queer rights earned a degree in French and Italian from Ambrose Alli University graduating in 2014. She currently lives in Lagos State, Nigeria.

**Ice** is a Lagos-based writer with many hobbies. She loves every form of art, especially spoken poetry. She feels they are “just too intense”. This explains why she loves spicy food, too.

**Ifedimma Osakwe** is a straight man who feels he would be having more sex if he were gay. He was born and lives in the Nigerian east. Alongside his liking for photography, he tries creative writing and essays on things that interest and annoy him. He loves love stories.

**Irisy n ‘C** are two women, both are Lagos-based lesbians who work well together as a team on many projects, in and outside the arts. Both women came up with the concept while ‘C interpret it on surface. ‘C owns an art gallery on Lagos mainland, has participated in many solo and group exhibitions and belongs to several art groups. ‘C was trained in Nigeria.

**Jay Rechsteiner** was born in Basel, Switzerland in 1971. He is based in London, UK. After his graduation from the School of Economics, Basel, he studied Business Administration as well as Marketing Planning & Product Management at the Institute for Management Training IFKS in Basel while simultaneously taking a painting course at Neue Kunstschule Zürich. In 1996 he

emigrated to Fukuoka, Japan where he became an active member of a new generation of artists. He established *The Washroom Projects (TWP)* which was an instant success in terms of press and artistic merit. He then developed TWP into *the Washroom Talks* which was presented twice at Tate Liverpool. In 2007 he joined forces with Portuguese Punk musician, Victor 'Torpedo' from the Parkinsons, and Tedio Boys and began working under the pseudonym Sardine & Tobleroni until 2012. Since 2012 he has been working solo again.

**Karanja Nzisa** is a (slightly adrift) writer, editor, proof-reader and humanist. An alumni of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Farafina workshop, he hopes to one day publish an anthology of short stories to be translated into more languages than he knows exist. He vows daily to challenge the systems and structures that create room for social injustices meted out especially on women, sexual minorities and children.

**Kelechi Ezeigwe** is a queer feminist and poet. He believes in individualism, gender equality and fluidity. He advocates for self-expression and the equal rights and respect of the effeminate man not only in the heterosexual world but also in the homosexual world where they are likewise condemned and prejudiced.

**Neec** is a photographer and an artist at neec imagery... a butterfly and humanist. His favourite colour is black and his favourite band is rock. as a human and artist, he believes that people should be left alone to live their life the way they want to live it as long as they are not violating anybody's space.

**Nnanna Ikpo** is a Nigerian lawyer and storyteller resident in Port Harcourt, Nigeria. He holds a Master of Laws degree in Human Rights and Democratisation in Africa from the Centre for Human Rights, University of Pretoria, South Africa. He runs a personal blog titled 'Letters to My Africa' (<http://nnannaikpo.blogspot.com>).

**Nzeogwu** is a Nigerian writer.

**Ojo Ogbom** is a pseudonym. He is a creative photographer who loves plantain and fish. He believes in a world as free as the fish in the ocean. He likes achieving fantasies.

**Osinachi** is a Nigerian poet, play writer, short story writer, essayist and visual artist. His works have appeared in various literary outlets within and outside Nigeria.

**Pink Panther** is a writer and blogger, and the founding admin of Kito Diaries, a virtual community of LGBTQ Nigerians.

**Pogay** is an ally of the LGBT Nigerian community; a full-time studio artist specializing in mixed media painting and based in Port Harcourt City.

**Rapum Kambili** is a Nigerian writer. His short stories have appeared in an anthology and a magazine in Nigeria and the US.

**Romeo Oriogun's** poems have been published on Brittle Paper, Expound, Afridiapora, Kalahari Review, and others. He's the author of *Burnt Men*, an electronic chapbook published by Praxis. He lives and writes in Udi, a small town in Eastern Nigeria.

**Salimah Valiani** is a poet, activist, and researcher. She has published one research monograph, *Rethinking Unequal Exchange—The Global Integration of Nursing Labour Markets*, and three volumes of poetry: *breathing for breadth*, *Letter Out: Letter In*, and *land of the sky*.

**Seun Idris** is a twenty-year-old gay man from Lagos. He is currently studying media and performing arts in university. He writes short stories and poems based on his daily encounters as a gay man in Nigeria, and has been out since 2015. He seeks to tell LGBT stories through his writing.

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The *14* Team

## *About 14*

A group of Nigerian artists came together to start this anthology of Queer art as a medium for resistance and self-expression. LGBTQI people have a long history of reclaiming experiences and names that were meant to denigrate, of turning them into something empowering—the word *queer* is a perfect example of this reclaiming. ‘14’ refers to the number of years in prison that the Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act stipulates for LGBT persons. January 13 2014 was a bleak day in the lives of LGBTQI Nigerians. *14* seeks to reclaim that day as a day of celebration. *We are Flowers* is *14*’s first publication.