



WORK NAIJA

THE BOOK OF VOCATIONS

“Thought-provoking portraits.
Inspires you to reflect. The privilege of observing
some of Nigeria’s most stimulating artists of the
younger generation playing hard. Gorgeous.
Timely”

ROTIMI BABATUNDE
Winner of the Caine Prize

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Work Naija:
The Book of Vocations

AN ART NAIJA ANTHOLOGY



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edited by Otosirieze Obi-Young.

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THE ART NAIJA SERIES

The *ART NAIJA* series aims to document, in concept-based e-anthologies, different facets of Nigerian life in creative nonfiction, photography, poetry, digital art, fiction, and commentary. The series, which has so far collected the works of 51 artists and drawn comparisons to the works of Amos Tutuola, Teju Cole and medieval art and literature, is edited by Otosirieze Obi-Young and published by *Brittle Paper*.

The first anthology, *Enter Naija: The Book of Places*, explores the idea of place—where Nigerians live, how they feel about where they live, how where they live defines their view of their world. Featuring 35 contributors, it was published on 2 October 2016 to mark Nigeria's 56th Independence anniversary. Its Introduction is by Ikhide R. Ikheloa.

This second anthology, *Work Naija: The Book of Vocations*, is introduced by Rotimi Babatunde, winner of the 2012 Caine Prize.

PRAISE FOR *ENTER NAIJA: THE BOOK OF PLACES*

This volume is a gathering of unsung, young but vibrant new writers, a worthy proxy for that army of storytellers who make social media reading an addictive pastime. This they do in song, in prose, poetry and video. Many of these names are regulars on Facebook, Twitter and the numerous blogs and journals that populate the Internet...[and they] fan out across the four cardinal points of Nigeria and tell their stories, lush narratives brilliantly broken up by digital art. Each city blessed by the sensitivities of these young writers comes alive, regardless of the canvas chosen. This is an unusual collection...retro-experimental. What a concept. This collection of narratives further expands the definition of the notion of home. It is coming at a time when calls are coming for a renegotiation of terms of engagement among the nations that live within the Nigeria millions call home. It is great that this generation of writers steeped in the three dimensional ways of storytelling on the Internet (YouTube, social media, blogs) have chosen to talk about home in their own inimitable way...a new generation of storytellers talking back to home.

— IKHIDE R. IKHELOA, Introduction.

A powerful literary project that reflects on the idea of Nigeria in terms of space and place...a groundbreaking project. Nigerian literature has historically not been self-aware about space and place. Places appear in fictional works but mostly as an accidental part of the narrative. Never as the central focus. That was why a work like Teju Cole's *Every Day Is for the Thief* was so novel when it first appeared. Cole elevated the city of Lagos to the status of a character. Lagos wasn't simply this place where his story happened to have taken place. Lagos was the material and metaphorical center of the narrative. The writers and artists in this collection do something similar, but they surpass Cole on one fundamental ground. Unlike Cole, they break the Nigerian literary obsession with Lagos. Their exploration of various geographies and urban spaces takes them all over the four corners of the nation—from Uyo to Nsukka to Kano to Ado-Ekiti. In his beautiful introduction to the work, the Nigerian book critic Ikhide Ikheloa makes a powerful case for seeing these writers and artists as the brave new future of African literature. As the editor of one of Africa's leading literary sites and an avid promoter of new African writing, I am truly happy to present to you this powerful, experimental, and endlessly delightful work.

— AINEHI EDORO, Editor of *Brittle Paper*.

Enter Naija: The Book of Places is an invitation to engage Nigeria as an idea, which might not yet have materialised, but has at least begun to crystallise as more and more subjects begin to understand their power as citizens. It is a gift. A gesture made from a place of love. The book is free but priceless. It is a gambit not a gambol. The young compatriots...do not typify your ordinary Nigerian, for whom complaints usually signal strategy not noise. Individually, each stands out as an outlier whose outlook will mark the future. Collectively, they present a strategy to write about home by writing back home, from home. The bulk of them are university students or university graduates, some of whom are engaged in national youth service. [The anthology] invites readers to enter this impasse by taking a new approach. One that looks ahead instead of dwelling on the past. One that is inclusive instead of selective. *Enter Naija: The Book of Places* offers an entry point, one way of organising and building. It situates multiple places within a deeply fractured nation space...sending messages about the human condition and lived experience so that we, the reader, can mine them for meaning fleshed out of information about the plight of people(s). It allows us to join the conversation by assembling our own answers. It shows how irrespective of ethnicity/religion, elite interests lie only in the appropriation of wealth and labour for the consolidation of state power. It

shows that the solution to our problems resides in our ability to build expansive and inclusive social networks that allow us to leave home in order to discover home.

— EMEKA UGWU, *Chimurenga's The Chronic*.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

WHEN, ON 2 October 2016, we had *Enter Naija: The Book of Places* published by Ainehi Egoro of *Brittle Paper*, with a lovely, quotable introduction by Ikhida R. Ikheloa, there were no lofty expectations. We knew it was a new concept, the collection of prose, photography, poetry and digital art with special focus on places in Nigeria and how those places shape us, and we knew it was remarkable because it was a new concept, but I did not imagine that it would amass the significance it did. Not because it was not a funded project and so would not get traditional promotion aside the Facebook and Twitter links we would share. Not because we made it available for free downloads which might be perceived as an indicator of a lack of top-notch quality. I did not think it would mean anything beyond the excitement of reading it simply because the idea had arisen as a pastime, as an exciting way to fill a gap in the Nigerian artistic space, a gap I imagined someone with funding and traditional platforms would still occupy fully.

Which was why its reception surprised me: the number of people discussing it, the anthology's inclusion in African Books Collective's mailing list, and last week, a beautiful reflection by Emeka Ugwu in *Chimurenga's The Chronic* on the anthology's place in the conversation around the concept of Nigeria. We, of course, did hope, tiny hopes, for impact, no matter how small, which was why everything—including strolling on Facebook weeks ago and coming across a post by an aspiring writer listing *Enter Naija* among the two books that have inspired his young career—constituted a minor victory.

Enter Naija was always meant to be only the first in a series of anthologies we would create embracing specific facets of Nigerianness, a series which, in the retrospective words of Emeka Ugwu, “situates multiple places within a deeply fractured nation space,” which is “an invitation to engage Nigeria as an idea which might not yet have materialised but has at least begun to crystallise as more and more subjects begin to understand their power as citizens.” While, back in October 2016, I'd hoped to get its sequel published by February 2017, I was unsure what it would be. So in December 2016, reeling from a specific Nigerian frustration, I made an open call for submissions on Facebook for a *Wahala Naija: The Book of Complaints*. Even though a few submissions came in within days, I felt that the concept might struggle to establish artistry before activism, and so it was

dumped. Then in February, a Monday night I was thinking about something else, it walked into my mind how the idea and experience of work bred innumerable artistic possibilities.

Like its prequel, *Work Naija: The Book of Vocations* is built on a specific, plural idea—the experiences of work in Nigeria—but unlike it, the writing and visual art contained in this one were solicited in the space of two months. This anthology is also considerably slimmer than the first. The prose, creative nonfiction and fiction in sets of roughly 1,000 words, follow a diverse group of people: commercial sex workers, priests, scavengers, photographers, beggars, teachers, Keke Napep drivers, hairdressers, akara sellers, shopkeepers, barbers, and the unemployed. The poetry is edible: culinarians, doctors, and fishermen. The photography, in colour and in black-and-white, offer soul: hawkers, a stage actress, construction workers, okada riders. (Some of the photos by Oluwatomilola K. Boyinde first appeared in his collection, *Life Goes on in Osun*, published by *Praxis Magazine*). The digital art, colourful and expressive: musicians, morticians, cattle rearers, a desert guide. For deliberate reasons, there is no writing about writers here. If the first anthology, in examining home and how home makes us, looks inward, into the contributors' lives, then the aim of this one is to look outward, into the lives of others. Individually, these pieces are strong, often powerful, depictions of life outside the artists' skins; together, they constitute a force of immersion, an unfiltered plunge into beauty and rawness. This is exactly what I hoped for: art drenched in honesty, artists unafraid to go where must be gone.

In an interview with *Bakwa* magazine last year, after *Enter Naija* came out, I faced the important question of “emerging writers,” whether it was a conscious decision to have only “emerging writers” in our project. But the difference between “emerging writers” and established ones is sometimes more about exposure than it is about skill. In the nine months since *Enter Naija*, some of its contributors—some of whom were already published in a few of the biggest literary outlets in the business—have walked into acclaim on the African literary scene: Among them, and some others who were not part of the first anthology but who belong in the same category, they have been shortlisted for the Caine Prize, the Miles Morland Writing Scholarship, the Sillerman First Book Prize for African Poets, the Short Story Day Africa Prize, and the Gerald Kraak Award, crowned with a Brunel Prize win; and their writing or interviews appear in some of the literary world's top outlets: *A Public Space*, *The Threepenny Review*, *Transition*, *Wasafiri*. And yet the truth is that these people earned these based on writing they had done before and around the publication of *Enter Naija*. However, particularly in this time when literary prize methodologies are becoming less and less clearer, the point here is less about famed recognition and more about that most basic of

acknowledgements: seeing a work's actual quality regardless of the notability of its writer. More than anything else, this is the strongest change in perception that the upsurge of this new generation demands.

I am grateful to Ainehi Egoro: her willingness to promote new writers is unprecedented, the loving dedication she puts into it unwavering. I am grateful to Rotimi Babatunde for agreeing to write the Introduction, a gesture which has since spawned a deep essay by him on the examination of work in literature, from the medieval to the postcolonial. The introduction here is a shortened version of this essay which appears on *Brittle Paper* and *Praxis* and is contained in the final pages of this anthology. I am grateful to my 20 co-contributors, and again to the ones who were also part of the first project: Osinachi, Michael E. Umoh, Arinze Ifeakandu, Chisom Okafor, and John "Lighthouse" Oyewale. And to these friends: Henry Ugwu, D.E. Benson, Ebenezer Agu, Jephtha Ulonnam. And to Ikhida R. Ikheloa for the helpful suggestions I still haven't put in place. And to Emeka Ugwu for that uplifting essay. And to Michael E. Umoh for the adorable cover.

It is my hope that the reader, in going through these pages, finds in them both wonder and a sense of clotting in this broken country.

Otosirieze Obi-Young,
30 June 2017.

INTRODUCTION

THE LABOURS OF THE MONTHS: OF WORK AND ITS REFUSENIKS

NOT ONLY DOES *Work Naija: The Book of Vocations*, edited by Otosirieze Obi-Young, make you engage afresh with the occupations addressed by its contributors, it also inspires you to reflect on the very nature of work.

The anthology gives us the privilege of observing some of Nigeria's most stimulating writers, artists and photographers of the younger generation playing hard with the theme of hard work. Its publication is timely: in Nigeria and around the world, emerging realities are currently destabilising traditional assumptions about the connection between work and income. As the rapid advances being made in the field of robotics continue to imbue the long-deferred nightmare of the Luddites with contemporary relevance, the prospect that intelligent machines, working more efficiently and at cheaper costs, will soon make a wide variety of professions extinct has led to calls in many countries for the introduction of a universal basic income, to be paid by the government to all citizens. And in Nigeria, a freer press and more vigorous citizen journalism, deploying the new tools provided by information technology, have bared the extraordinary dimensions of corruption by public office holders, initiating a crisis of confidence in the populace about the hitherto sacrosanct belief in the correlation between work and wealth. That eroding confidence in the connection between both is being undermined even further by prosperity preachers, whose message is premised on the logic of divorcing wealth from work and linking wealth with grace, aided by "seed sowing".

Work Naija: The Book of Vocations contributes to these national and international conversations in direct and oblique ways. The anthology is gorgeous, like the Limbourg brothers' *Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*; in contrast, though, *Work Naija: The Book of Vocations* brings to bear on the discourse of work critical perspectives that are absent in the medieval volume.

In the manner of all great adventures, *Work Naija: The Book of Vocations* enriches us with many memorable encounters in the course of its unfolding: Chisom Okafor's stunning, masterly poem on chefs and their "food-universe" of the kitchen; Ada Chioma Ezeano and Joshua Omena's thought-provoking portraits of commercial sex workers and their patrons; Ife Olujuigbe's droll insights on the salon habits of hairdressers; and Otosirieze Obi-Young's autobiographical exploration of the fine qualities that distinguish barbers from one another. There is also the bold iconography of flattened shapes and vivid colours Osinachi deploys in his artworks to capture the

realities of musicians, churches, red-light districts, nomads and undertakers; Frances Ogamba's touching depiction of the quiet dignity of dumpsite scavengers; Anthony Nonso Dim's take on Roman Catholic clergy and their parishioners, with its startling ending; John "Lighthouse" Oyewale's learned investigation of the ways photographers see, concretised with metaphors from the animal world; and Michael E. Umoh's spotlighting of the self-confidence of tricycle drivers and akara sellers.

Look out for TJ Benson's celebratory, expressive photographs of working women; Tochi Eze's illumination of the hidden lives of kiosk owners; Jennifer Emelife's frank piece on society's unrealistic expectations of teachers; Gbolahan Badmus' heart-breaking story on the travails of a job hunter; fishermen and their enchantment with waters in Abdulrahim Hussani's poem; and the sacrament of maternal love in Romeo Oriogun's contribution, which draws correspondences between the Crucifixion and the daily sacrifices hawkers make for their families. And also check out the fascinating teasing-out of parallels between beggars, motorpark preachers and politicians in Umar Turaki's reflections; Arinze Ifeakandu's nuanced, ambivalent take on priests, the liturgy, and the luminous music of the church; Oluwatomilola Boyinde's compelling black-and-white photographs of workers persevering in a time of economic downturn; and Sibbyl Whyte's witty imagining of the career progression of prosperity preachers.

More could be said about these artists and their contributions to the anthology, but what's more delightful than an adventure directly experienced? Reader, wouldn't you rather wish to set out on the journey into *Work Naija: The Book of Vocations* yourself?

Rotimi Babatunde,
30 June 2017.

“...the kitcheners were less incomprehensible,

were motile works of art.

The clanging of ladle against aluminum pot

was woodland music.

...a wonderment that was science and art.”

— CHISOM OKAFOR, “How to Build a Barbecue on Saturday Night.”

they don't say nice

ADA CHIOMA EZEANO

commercial sex

Brothels are built with bricks of Religion.

—William Blake.

WE COME from the dead darkness of Regina Caeli Junction into the loudness of the three-way intersection that strides Cofi Road. Lights from buildings draw broken lines, putting an end to the long tail of darkness. It has an ironical way of echoing: “God is light, devil is the dark.” Adjacent to this road are two churches sitting side by side like quiet judges. The road spreads widely, accentuating variegated poses of too many girls in too little clothes. It’s 12 a.m. and they are Awka Sex-workers of Cofi Road.

My plan is to dress to be them. But even my gown that is several inches shorter than me, selected after hours of rummaging, supposed to make me belong, ratted on me. Maybe it’s its blackness in this place where colours battle and different songs play too loud that I wonder how the girls hear the *psstst!* that follow their shaking breasts and buttocks. I can’t even hear the *kor-kor* sound of my long heel hit the tarred road. None of the girls is wearing long heels. That is one question I forgot to find an answer for. *Do you feel the heels will intimidate your customers?* But the answer is in the way the girls are dressed in beat-down but quite colourful wears. Wears including short shorts, too slim sleeveless tops, excessively short tight gowns, everything too showy, too exposed so that only their shadows shelter their nudities. A stare will fire your desire and fan off your virtue. Yet they are not glamorous. Maybe because they are not here to intimidate, but to please. Maybe because what they wear is

As she talks to me, there’s this thing she does with her hands like she wants them to be her witnesses, especially when she says she is a student at Igbariam, says she needs money to sort out issues before NYSC.

enough for the customers—no other person is considered. Maybe because what they wear are work-clothes. Never mind that they don't work in these work-clothes.



i: Flowered, by Osinachi.

I am walking with Kudi. We walk like we are doing census. The girls are grains. They far outnumber the twelve joints too engaged with music and men and women. Kudi says hello to one. She reeks of power, would later tell me her name is Plecious. I doubt if her name is Precious. She stammered before producing this name. Yet when the name falls from her mouth, what I hear is Plecious. Lambdacism. For now, she ignores us. But Juliet doesn't. Not friendly either. She asks Kudi why he dey hello am? Dis wan you carry na stone? Kudi asks her if she is into threesomes. She masticates and grinds her gum too actively like its bone, looks away. We leave the runway.

We enter one of the joints, the one walled by a yellow tarpaulin and Davido's voice. An attendant comes to our white plastic table. He walks past me and stops before Kudi, bends towards Kudi's ears, shouts with his hands and lips. He wants to know what we will want to have.

She bends towards a passing car, waves. The way she uses her hands, her body parts, she knows her body is power.

Opposite our table a girl stands from the midst of three men. She leaves, returns with another. One of the men sips beer with his legs apart, shifts his blue plastic chair. The girl smiles too obviously as she pulls another chair very close to him. Her smiles are wider as the man holds her fleshy arms and whispers into her ears. The two men begin to dance, spray money and play with the girls like here is the bedroom. The third man still sits, sips his beer, nodding to the Wizkid song playing. There are other women behind and I wonder why they sit alone. Later, Precious would tell me that they hunt for girls too. But not every female sex-worker is ready to sleep with a woman. Except the right kind of money is involved.

Kudi leaves to meet the girls outside, like a customer. I don't observe the cars parked before the joint till a mighty stomach comes out from the green Mercedes, trousers unbuckled. Then a bald old man stands to handle the trousers. He is followed swiftly by a young girl. The man enters the joint, joins the men and women who are now saying, "Welcome, welcome, Dike." His partner, the girl, joins other girls to ask for more.

The girls don't only fear STDs and STIs; they fear ritualists. Kudi tells me this as he sits, says he talked to the attendant too who tells him of this fine girl that disappeared. A few days later, a headless girl was seen in a bush. But now most of the girls wear juju; it helps them detect bad people.

“Did you ask the girls about the juju?” I ask.

“I only bargained prices na, like a customer. Most of the girls start from 10K to 7K, then 5K. There’s a quickie. 3K.”

PLECIOUS

A MAN comes from behind and holds her butt. I observe how she takes the hands off, shakes her head and left hand. I come close, hear her telling someone to come pick her from where she stands near the high tension. I believe this call till Kudi tells me later that she had been making the same come-pick-me-from-near-the-high-tension call when he approached her. As she talks to me, there’s this thing she does with her hands like she wants them to be her witnesses, especially when she says she is a student at Igbariam, says she needs money to sort out issues before NYSC. I ask her how many customers she can have in a day.

“It depends. It depends.”

Been with a woman?

She smiles. The bright light from an opposite joint reflects on her white teeth, opposes her black skin. I ask her if a customer has ever said nice things about her smile. She ha-ha-ha-s.

“Hope you protect—”

“Some men come and cry like you are Jesus. They’re not nice, they don’t say nice.”

“I hope you protect yourself?” I ask again. She bends towards a passing car, waves. The way she uses her hands, her body parts, she knows her body is power.

“Some old people wey get money o no like condom.” I don’t know why she switches to pidgin.

“Any brothel around?”

“We get homes.”

Breeze blows. It parrots my next question on how they cope during rainy seasons. Precious says business is better at cold times, except if it’s raining. Then she gets a hotel room, agrees with the

manager from genesis. The manager sends customers, gets some cut. The manager can also help her with a lodger who wants romance.

It's 2:16 a.m. when we leave. I don't know why I forgot to ask of juju; maybe Precious' juju made me forget to remember. Or maybe it's her smile like the country is her own. A free country with no bad history.

scavenger

FRANCES OGAMBA



ii: The Scavengers, by Frances Ogamba.

UNDER THE rays of a sun too angry, a woman with long slender arms, not beautiful, not neat, clutches a forked rod. Ragged aprons of variant colouration stick out from all over her. She stands, her back to the road, facing a dumpsite. A scavenger, this woman. Ransacking through the leftovers of the society, the forgotten, the rejected. She is not alone. There are tens of men and women covered in aprons and leather boots and nylon scarves and cotton nose masks and rubber gloves. Raking and raking through generations of waste in search of something of value. Shoes to resell. Plastic containers to be recycled. She turns, this scavenger, this woman, as I shuffle closer with my camera, and warns: “Make sure my face does not come out in *that thing*.” She flings *that thing* at me. She, like the others, is aggressive, and angry.

The Government dumpsite at Onitsha sits at the edge of an aborted earthfall. The aftermath is the many long strings of flax and mustard-coloured clay streaming down the surviving highland. Every day, trucks bearing refuse from over ten local governments in Anambra state bear down to the dumpsite. Amara, a staff of the State's Waste Management Agency, says she leaves her house at 5 a.m. daily to join the refuse truck. It is their job to pick waste dropped inside baskets placed at certain junctions. They drive into the streets of remote villages and alert the communities with a bell. By midday their trucks brim with waste, and then the Agency's staff pick through the waste for things they may need before heading to the dumpsite. It is a surprise that waste that has passed through three screenings could still possess some kind of value.

Amalu has been a scavenger for twenty-three years. Through his scavenging years, he has never been to a hospital, never asked to be lent money, never tarried in paying bills.

Amalu has been a scavenger for twenty-three years. He is over fifty, and appears sturdy like a tree, something that can never be indisposed. He is the chairman of the site. Through his scavenging years, he has never been to a hospital, never asked to be lent money, never tarried in paying bills. Dozie will become an undergraduate this year, he says, referring to his son, as if Dozie were someone we both shared affiliation with and I would be happy if he fared well. His job as the chairman is to monitor trucks coming to the site to offload refuse. He wields no form of control over scavengers coming there to work. The government is not even aware of these people. Their health problems are strictly personal. Nobody cares about who stops or continues coming.

“Last year, someone picked gold here,” an elderly woman tells me.

“My friend picked 30 ounces of gold from here last month,” another woman says.

It rarely matters, the authenticity of their narrations, because the underlying fact is that such precious value can be found beneath such debris. A place seething with black smoke and burnt rubbish. Standing on the refuse heap are tents constructed from brown cartons and rice sacks. The floor is covered with carpets picked at the site. Some of the scavengers pass the night there to be able to nail the early morning trucks.



iii: Damaged Iron Collector, by Frances Ogamba.

“The dangers of working late here,” Okoro, a young scavenger, says, “are the snakes and scorpions that tour the refuse site at night.” But some of them come at night for other reasons. They do not want their relations and friends to recognize them. This is the main reason they protest against capturing photos or videos of them.

“There is little dignity associated with waste,” Sam sighs. “You wade through people’s feces, match on it, pick it unknowingly and drop it with loth when you know.” He is tired and has to wait for four more trucks before retiring for the day. He hasn’t picked anything that day. There are times he, just like the others, picks nothing for weeks and he just has to keep coming until he finds something to sell. Sam sells nylon bags and other plastic products to a company that recycles them and pays him a considerable amount. His friends believe he works with the state government so it is favourable for him to start work at dusk and close at dawn.

The waste decimates them. Some of them are as fragmented as the refuse they dissect. Their confidences are faded lines because, in Nigeria, to see any good in waste is to be impoverished. Or mad. A woman sitting on a spread out sack seems so far away in time. Her lips wear the dryness of

soil cracked in many places, with flaky layers of skin she does not bother to run her tongue on. She does not look at me or say her name. The life around us appears to be on pause and we, this scavenger and I, are closed up in this realm where her stories of a runaway husband, and abusive in-laws, and five children, and unpaid rent, and inflated cost of food, and skin infections, weave a web around us and we swing on the strands. Unpaused, life resumes. A tractor runs over the refuse, pressing it into the soil. Scavengers dart about trucks with sacks. Shoes and clothes end up in bundles. A woman places her forefinger on the tip of her tongue and starts counting a wad of naira notes. A child hawks cold water. I squeeze a five hundred Naira note into the woman's palms and she shakes her head, refusing it.

“What about tomorrow?” she asks me getting up, declining my gesture to ease her burden a little. I watch her walk away, towards the others who prance about, their only worry being not to form part of the triptych of photos in my camera. Ahead, the sun is an orange ball. I leave taking with me a pity I had long reserved for them, a pity they didn't need.

how to build a barbecue on saturday night

CHISOM OKAFOR

Culinarians

I

MY FATHER no longer chefs,
but he'd stroll, on weekends, to the next street
to sell grilled things
outside a cafe,
(because veteran culinarians have the toughest skins.
Which means they never stop,
never really die,
only they let themselves wane very slowly into smoke),

or he'd sit out at sundown (on weekdays) to journey,
with a shift of clouds, overhead
making jokes, moulding food imageries, like how
someone at the boardinghouse (where he once worked)
punctuated her words with snatches of French
and Chinese and Yoruba—a salad of racial tongues.

When he still routinely left before dawn,

his working days, sometimes, exuded warmth.

And at other times, were

Ice(-cold) crystals, dead in a mocktail.

We followed him, a couple of times,

and at lunch-time, on Day One, we strayed

into a rushing haul of white hats

and aprons, and gloves, and blistering heat, and

fierce aroma of beef-stew, and

instructions and oddities: *food-out... a la carte*.

And we were lost in the hubbub—

a whirlwind of kitchen gibberish.

Day Two (a near-decade after Day One):

the kitcheners were less incomprehensible,

were motile works of art.

The clanging of ladle against aluminum pot

was woodland music.

A man made onion rings, unable to stop the fleeing tears.

Another melted into a pantry, to soon re-emerge,

leaving a trail of tomato residue

on his wake.

A lady step-fried cuts of croaker-fish, yet
another spiced something akin to jollof rice,
configuring the recipe into a wonderment
that was science and art.

A quartet hummed in key, so that they
passed for Bach or Beethoven
or something in-between.

All stood affixed, raised their eyes when an order came.
Here, all were motion pictures and mannequins, in turn,
and each could have earned a spot in a Picasso.

Day Three:

my father *no longer cooks* at the hotel.

II

I AM a lover of distant nocturnal journeys,
but he's not.

It's sundown, four days into New Year.

I start to prep for university, three or four
army checkpoints away.

He forbids this.

Clutching tool-bags,

we stroll instead, to the next street.

He still straps an apron round his waist,

still has his Chef's Hat, weather-beaten.

A few boys gallivant, fewer watch *WrestleMania*,

peeking, moment after moment, through the café's window.

Real buyers seldom appear *this early*.

He hums as he pries the pepper-bag open,

deftly scoops up fistfuls of chili powder

for the night's barbecuing

(It's tilapia, singeing on a crisscross of metals,

not really *barbecue*).

I start to light the fire, thrice mis-lights

but the old man has a tornado in his mouth.

'Seems you've not fathomed

that business crawls,

that everything reeks of *recession*

and matchboxes don't come cheap anymore,

that the littlest inadvertence could take your

life here,

or your sight, or your job, or your customers,'

he thunders.

Then turns back to work, as if

the end of his *food-universe* would always remain out of reach.

the photographer as an osprey

JOHN “LIGHTHOUSE” OYEWALE

IF NATURE were to bestow on the stories of our lives the privilege of a reverse narrative, so that we could re-enter our mothers’ wombs and be reborn, but reborn this time as animals, then the one who works as a photographer now would be reborn as an osprey. Or as a hawk. Or as an eagle. As a bird of prey.

And why is that? Because—and perhaps this is the most important feature—no one could have keener eyes than the photographer—not the photographer who is one out of necessity or choicelessness; not the one who, a ship in distress, cast herself onto the profession because it was the first port sighted during the cloudburst and storm (to such, that port might as well have been carpentry, or shoemaking, or knitting and sewing)—no, not those kinds, but the one who is called, who is born so and, as she grows, realises that whatever else she is growing into, she is growing into photography. Not going into, but growing into.

...diamonds that, in reality, are dewdrops scattered on leaves or hanging from the needle-like leaves of ginkgos or pines; at night, a frog in mid-leap; a russet leaf in mid-fall. Only the one born to be a photographer would notice these things.

Consider the following ‘sweet nothings’: an Alsatian dog sitting sentinel high up on the steps of a gatehouse standing on concrete pillars; diamonds that, in reality, are dewdrops scattered on leaves or hanging from the needle-like leaves of ginkgos or pines; a rainbow in the sky; the ochre road to the vanishing north; at evening, a polished brown horse grazing on the verge by the highway; at night, a frog in mid-leap; on an evening in September, a russet leaf in mid-fall; an egret in flight; an east-to-west lightning flash; a sparrow on the pinnacle of a house; a three-toed sloth hugging a lichen-encrusted tree bole; market people mid-haggling; an assassin pointing ceilingwards in a dubious sort of victory, the murdered lifeless at his feet, the rest of the conference attendees cowering in a corner; a bright-headed lizard on the edge of a wall; a tendril peeping over a wall; beams of light fanning out through gaps in open windowpanes; a man

and his dog taking a nap under a pedestrian bridge; the wisps rising from a just-burnt-out or just-extinguished matchstick; a cobbler at work, bent over a sandal; a girl, her head wrapped about, her eyes firing at the world barbs of pleas and rebuke; a girl laughing, leaning on her brother's shoulder, as they share a funny story with a friend; a circle of children playing, chanting *Who stole the meat from the chicken pot?*; fountains of bamboos; the thousands of suns that are sunflowers in October by the highway through nowhere....

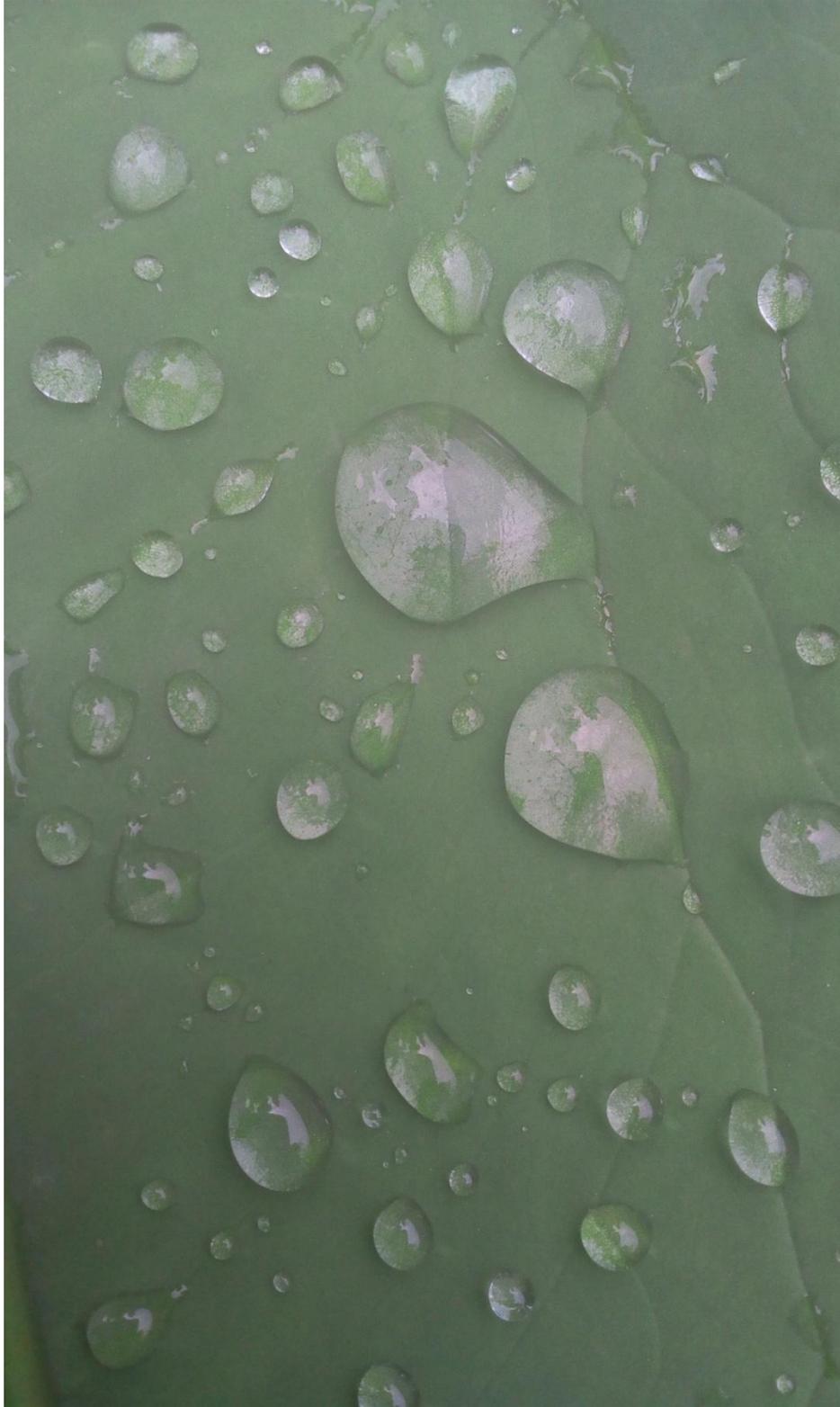
Only the one born to be a photographer would notice these things. Observation matters—especially observation of the things that the eyes of many would miss. “Fortunate,” wrote Virgil, “is the one who can see into the meaning of things.” Things being vials of augury sitting in the shadows in the laboratory that is the world.

It is not enough to see things: one must see into the meaning of things. One must make meaning of the things that they see, and see into the meaning in the hope of extracting portents and directions from them. Meaning is supercoiled in things photographed. It is not always the case that

Meaning is supercoiled in things photographed. It is not always the case that the things photographed are eye-catching: what makes them so are the meanings they hold.

the things photographed are eye-catching: what makes them so are the meanings they hold. Light rays from these things go through the lens of the eyes, hit the retina, messages bounce off and then run through the optic nerves, and then there is an interpretation of the object from which the light rays first came off, which interpretation is the image. But that is only the beginning. And there is immediacy about the beginning, the capturing of the image, the freezing of a particular action that, though striking, is fleeting, is in danger of

disappearing, of being lost forever—rather like the capturing of slippery, evasive fish by the osprey's reversible toes. The keen eyes of the photographer are made not to miss the immediacy. Eudora Welty was right: “A good snapshot keeps a moment from running away.” As was Hannah More: “The keen spirit seizes the prompt occasion.” As is Salman Rushdie in his novel *The Ground beneath Her Feet*: “A photograph is a moral decision taken in one eighth of a second.”



iv: Of Sweet Nothings: Raindrops or Pearls? by John 'Lighthouse' Oyewale.

Later, in the quiet that follows, we then see that all photographers are equal but some are more equal than others, if you like: for then, the keen photographer is not done, but begins, in the dark where meanings are born, to interpret the image, begins to open the vials seen, and in time records the interpretation in the form of a brief story, a brief essay, accompanying the photograph.

And yet she knows, as the photographer Diane Arbus knew, that “a picture is a secret about a secret, the more it tells you the less you know.”

four women

TJ BENSON



v: A stage actor at Ake Book and Arts Festival 2016, by TJ Benson.







we fly at night

ANTHONY NONSO DIM

catholic seminarians

MOSQUITOES IN St. Mathew's parish, Amukoko are disrespectful, unruly and uncouth. Unfazed. Like the missionary that I aspire to be, they are willing to die for their cause, and I can't slap myself enough in this mission house. Each night, I pray for the day to break quickly. I work in this church with Father Benny, a 72-year-old Irish priest who, like the mosquitoes, is unfazed too. His pink face is now severing into beetroot since he came to Nigeria from Ireland.

So here he is after morning Mass on Tuesday, sitting on a bench under a tree in front of the parish office, body lousy with golden hair, rosy cheeks and bulging tired eyes after celebrating a vigil Mass the previous night. He has no choice. I fling a 'good morning' as I walk past him. With a half smile he asks me whether the insecticide works, I say yes, even though the ambitious mosquitoes still found a way to fulfil their dreams despite the poisoned air. Fumbling in my pocket for keys I notice a large lump of saliva at the door step. Perhaps it is that angst-filled woman who bounded into the office yesterday protesting that she wanted to change her child's baptismal name from Juliana to Uchubiyoyo. As a seminarian who tries to feign subservience, I politely told her that Uchubiyoyo was neither a saint nor a gift of the Holy Spirit, and we argued back and forth, and so she left with a furious snarl and stopped at the door to drop this saliva, in memory of her anger. I swallow my own anger, the way Father Benny likes it.

"Oh yeah, I'm coming," Father Benny is saying to a caller on the phone. Someone is dying, he tells me, he's leaving for anointing of the sick, so anyone who wishes to see him in office would have to wait until he is back. I nod. As his old Corolla eases out of the cool of the churchyard, I think of other places and objects upon which those tyres will screech today: the chunks of road outside eaten by erosion, the unapologetic ditches, arrested house rats flung from windows to the road, looking guilty as charged as they await their final death sentence by tyre screech.

For a moment, as I unlock the doors, I wonder what drives Father Benny. I think perhaps it is the awareness that many churches in Ireland have been emptied of believers, turned into pubs, bars, basilicas become art galleries. And here he is in Lagos, in a booming church where every

weekday was half a Sunday, and he is a custodian of these souls who believe that God's small universe, the Church, would remain as they imagined it from childhood.

I take my seat at the reception in the parish office. I like this gorgeous space because here, outside Holy Mass, that Catholic Solitude still exists: the musty scent of books plus Lysol hang thick in the air; a large frame of the sagacious, tearful smile of Pope John Paul II as he leans on his crosier, waving to a cheerful mammoth crowd, his hair flinching in the wind like an Olympic torch; the Archbishop of Lagos in his full regalia, wearing a fatherly smile. But my attention barely rests on these as I always have to review bans of marriage on my table, write announcements for Sunday Masses, and attend to each person who walks in. Now there are four people who want to meet Father Benny and he is not back yet.

I wonder what drives Father Benny. I think perhaps it is the awareness that many churches in Ireland have been emptied of believers, turned into pubs, bars, basilicas become art galleries.

Perhaps he has received other pastoral calls, this man who is not entitled to having missed calls, who has no rights to a schedule book of his own. He has been doing this for thirty years, without a wife or a child, reserving every ounce of his time and attention for God's people.

At half past twelve a lady walks into the office in flapping oversize dusty slippers, her completely shaved head like a sucked-until-small lollypop, her silky scarf unveiling it slowly as it unwraps and separates from her head and slowly slips down to her shoulder, hanging across her breasts, dropping on the floor, and she steps on it as she approaches my table. Now I fear she is unhinged, her eye-catching eyes are glistening with a desire to cry. She rests on my table, my chair squeals an inch backward. I invite her to sit, she refuses, insists on standing, quiet, now keeping faraway looks, and a nervous tic resumes in me.

“Hello?”

“We want to see Father Benny,” she says; her voice is like a chorus of two girls speaking at once. I ask why she wants to see him and she says she is not alone; then I notice another young lady, a mediocre version of the first, standing outside the church office. I am scanning and matching the two of them to see whether they are twins. The one outside is looking bitter, stretching to yank at leaves from a tree. “How can I help you, Sister?” I say again, feigning undauntedness.

“We are both evil spirits, the two both of us.”

I feel suspended in the air from legs to buttocks as she gestures to the girl outside: “Me and her.” My brain is still rebooting, it is praying a fast Hail Mary.

“We fly together at night.”

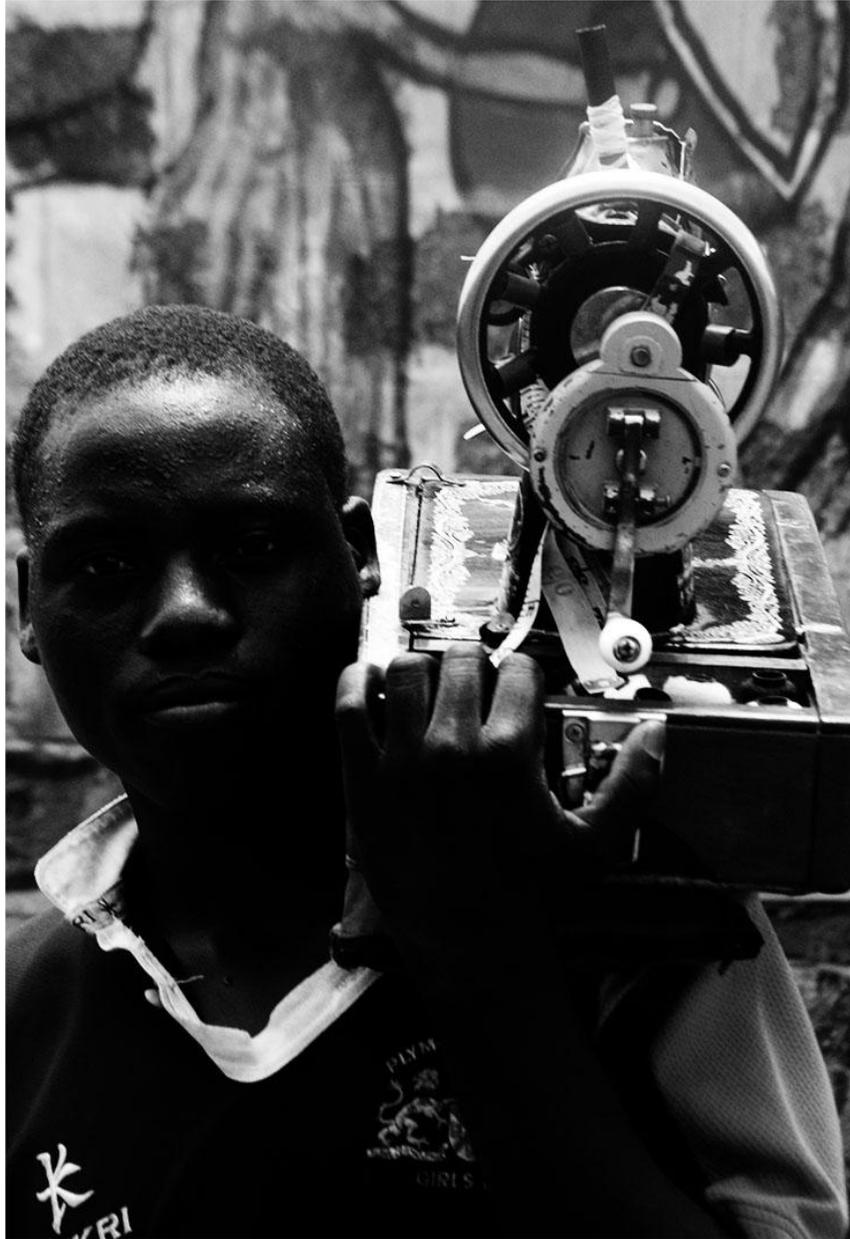
My heart flies, the office’s solitude vanishes, Pope John Paul II’s smile seems to melt away, one of the visitors on the waiting list is trembling.

“I come do deliverance.”

After a hard swallow, long silence, my eyes are starting to see clearly again. I tell her Father Benny is not around, and I beg her to join her friend outside as they wait for him. In my fears, I cannot feel more alone, as I think of how he is a man of everyone, even those who fly at night.

life goes on in Osun (Part 1)

OLUWATOMILOLA K. BOYINDE



LIFE GOES on in Osun is my ongoing documentary photography series in Osun State. It focuses on the people's struggle for survival, against all odds, in this period of economic crunch and great hunger which particularly plagues the State.

For a period close to seven months, the State government was incapacitated to pay the salaries of its workforce; and now that the government pays half of their salaries, it is not even as at when due. Due to this, things have become very tough owing to the backlog of unpaid salaries, arrears and pensions. The people are facing a lot of hardship, their lives in a tenuous balance. The commercial activities are suffering and survival is difficult because everyone is connected directly or indirectly to the salary earners, the civil servants.















a circle of kekes

MICHAEL E. UMOH

IN UMUAHIA, keke drivers are linked telepathically. Umuahia is a giant brain, and each driver is a neuron, firing away on his keke. The quickest way to confirm this is to annoy one of them. Do this and for the rest of the day, you'll be the unfortunate human receiving looks of disgust from his buddies. That this might all be in your head is a different matter entirely.



vi: Inside Keke, by Otosirize Obi-Young.

THE KEKE driver is annoyed. He says he hates the governor. He hates this useless road. He hates the road construction. When a FRSC officer tells him that the road from Apricot Hotels to Stanpo Junction is blocked, and urges him to take an alternate route, he yells at the man. “What can you do? You can do nothing! I will tear your uniform!”

It’s an odd reply to give to “Oga, road no dey. Take that side.”

Mildly amused, I try to breathe through the body odour from the woman next to me, and the anger, and the cheers from the women in the keke. One, the woman whose glasses are a wrong kind of a fashion statement says, “Why una no increase money?”

“Everybody will suffer for it,” the driver replies.

I AM the only passenger in the keke. It's morning, a bit cold and the driver, a man strong enough to wear a shirt with the words, *I Love Arsenal*, has been talking about the government for a while. I nod because it's polite to do so but, I am only half-listening. Every driver here talks about the government, or a football club, or, when an incident happens, the incident. Like that time some people died at a brothel and it was the highlight of keke gist for days until it became tedious.

Then at Apricot Hotels, a woman stops us. She's using a crutch, and for some reason, I'm uncomfortable.

“Gate,” she tells him. He tells her to enter.

We are past Bank Road junction when she asks him if he can take a different route. The request itself isn't fishy, it's the way she says it. She's aware that telling him now is wrong; still, she says it. It comes out in that tone most people use that's three steps from begging and a step towards manipulative. But he, the driver, is immune.

He tears into her with his words. He tells her that this is why drivers always have issues with people: people are never straightforward. They shift anyhow. “After, you'll say we are radical.”

“YOUR SISTER no go pay for you?”

She looks at him, steady and irritated. He doesn't realise it so he smiles. I sigh.

“He's not my brother. And who says he needs me to pay for him?”

The man looks hurt; like his good intentions left his mouth and, with poorly made wings, crashed to the ground.

When she leaves, and we are moving again, he says. “Women na fire, abi?” I ignore him with a smile. He nods. My smile is permission. “Innocent thing wey I talk.” The man beside me launches, headfirst, into a long tale of how his mother, his sister and then his wife, all in some way, constantly misunderstand his intentions. Afterwards, there is talk of Oha soup, a bit about Nigerian movies, and something about the price of wrappers in Aba.



vii: Photo by Otosirieze Obi-Young.

THERE'S A festival of sounds behind my eyelids. It's Tuesday. The sun: someone annoyed the sun. I am at Uchenna Junction. The straight route to the junction close to where I stay is blocked again. These are the facts.

I have Malaria. My eyes ache.

The truth.

I do not want to faint. I have a white shirt on. The road is a partnership of orange dust and grey tar.

I stop keke after keke, but they are all headed to World Bank, Olokoru, or Low Cost. Paulicon junction is a stressful place to live when the road is blocked.

Then I stop a keke. He, too, like the many before him, is headed to World Bank, but he doesn't join the crowd. He tells me, "Ah ah. Paulicon is just there." The words he doesn't add: "Can't you trek?"

I say nothing. The sun is still annoyed. Malaria still has me. I don't have the strength.

But strength looks for me when a man standing beside me says, "Are you not a corper? Can't you just trek?"

"I can't just trek, I tell him. Because I will faint. And how is it your business if I want to trek or ride or fly. Won't I pay him? Please, sir. My eyes are hurting, and I'm very annoyed. Please, just respect yourself."

He moves two steps back and says, "Sorry."

The keke driver who takes me home welcomes me with "This road rubbish sef."

"I think you're all hypocrites," I tell him. "One thing is feeling bad about the stress, another thing is insulting them for doing something. If that road is bad, you'll complain. They are fixing it, you're insulting them."

He doesn't say anything until we stop. "It's true sha."

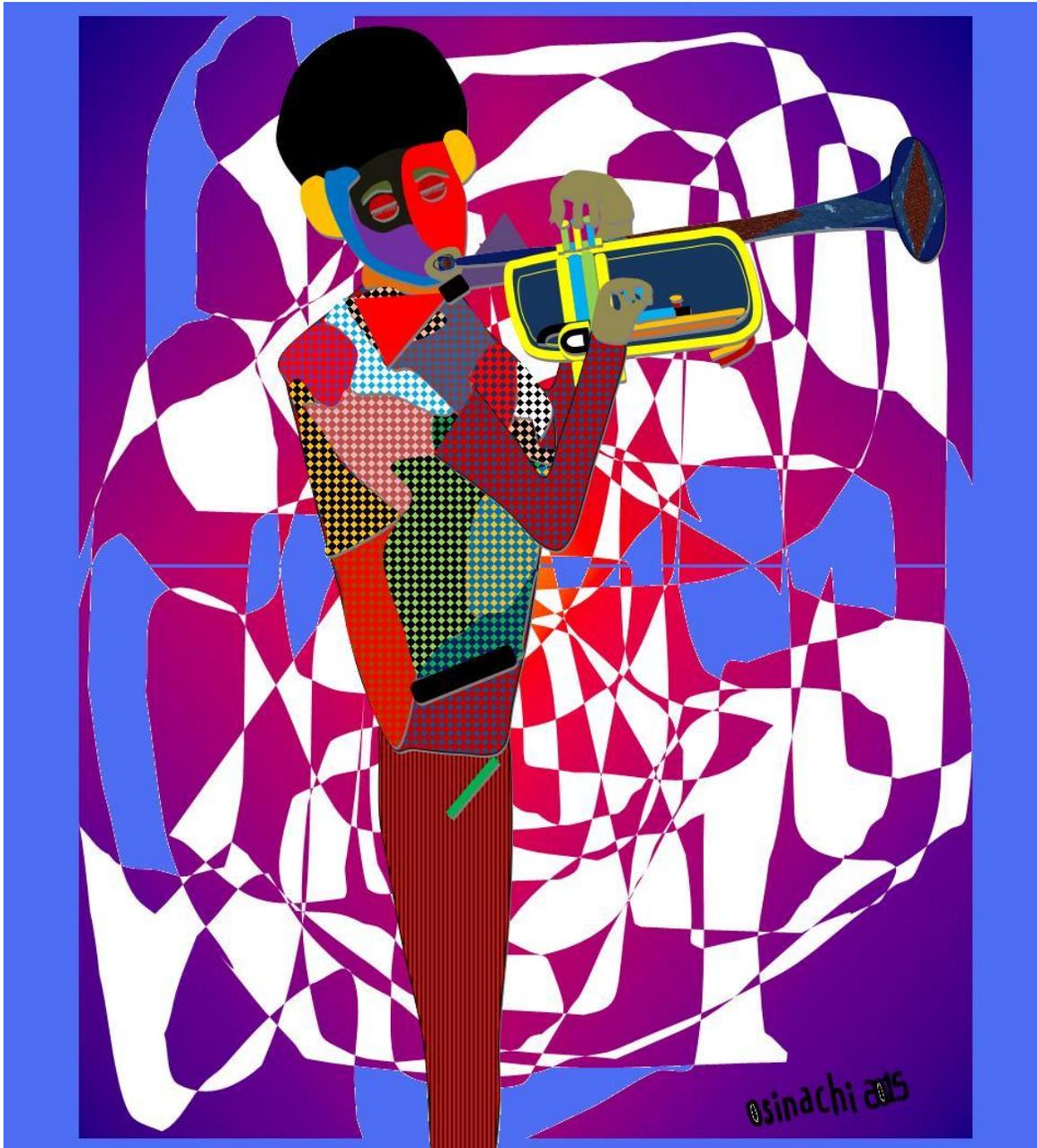
The "sha" is like a car moving forward, and then reversing. It's a grudging acceptance of the truth, but it's also the stubborn denial that the truth really matters to him. He'll forget it soon. At least, I think so.

But I say nothing. I am tired. That's my own sha.

neon soul

OSINACHI

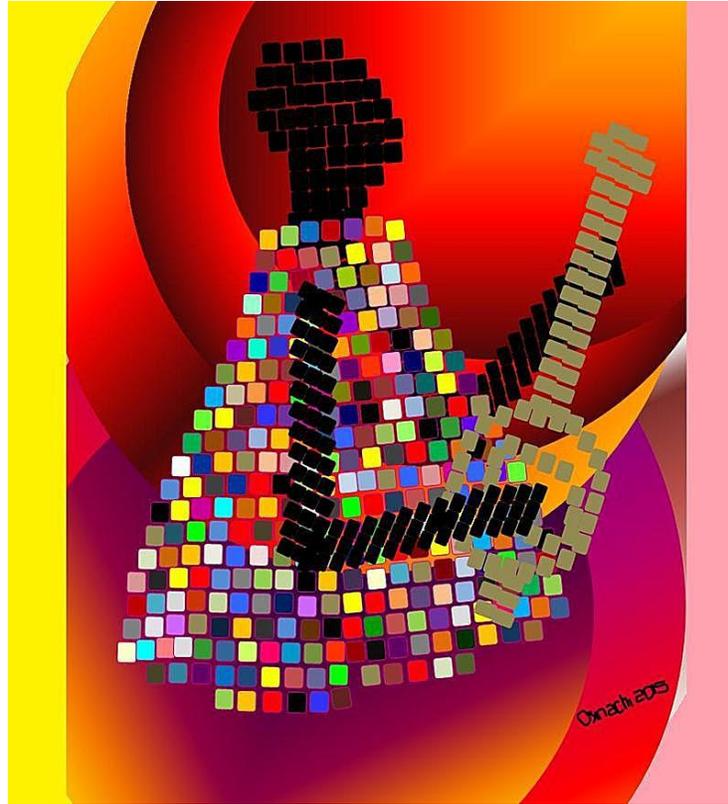
musicians



viii: Neon Soul, by Osinachi.



ix: Colour to the Ears, by Osinachi.



x: Grumi Player, by Osinachi. A traditional musician in Northern Nigerian.



xi: In the Air, by Osinachi. A dance group in precolonial Igboland.

walls

GBOLAHAN BADMUS

unemployment

THE NIGHT before your first job test, you ate a plate of jollof rice, fried plantain and chicken laps in a dream. You knew what this meant, so you used your prayers to nullify its effect.

The job test was for one of the two foreign law firms in Nigeria. Soon you'd be travelling the world, starting with a three-hundred-thousand-naira monthly salary—in this recession. Was it not just last month, two months after your Youth Service, that you were crying to God about joblessness because all the *big* firms you applied to didn't get back to you?

ON YOUR way to the test, the Keke Driver, apropos of nothing, began telling you his life story. How he sponsored himself through university and finished with a 2.2. Only for his two-year job search to lead him to his present job. To prove this, he spoke all through the ride without the customary misuse of tenses and pronouns.

It may be true, you thought, or was it an ingenious way of getting a tip?

“But I'm happy with this job. See, I don't steal. In fact, if not, I wouldn't have known my true calling: to deliver youths from the bondage of unemployment. Take my flier,” he said. “I know our meeting is no ordinary coincidence.”

You knew you'd never need it, but out of courtesy....

TO SUGAR your tea, the test seemed like someone was whispering the correct answers to you, but the other two invitees had different stories. Listening to them, you knew it would be unfair to further sadden them with your joy, so you did your best to mirror their grief and fill the silence with “It is well.”

In your University WhatsApp group, you posted “God is great and will never fail.” Hundreds of “Amen” followed. Back then in the university, if you had typed such, they would have typed “Why this one dey preach again?” But then you became the only first-class student; Law school: 2.1 plus one-third of the prizes. Since then, each of your post had a 100% chance of getting a positive response. Your opinion on their legal arguments became authority. The scarcity of jobs further solidified your status and made them gobble up your prayers.

TWO WEEKS later, you got a response: *We regret to inform you...*

After a few months, you’d realise that those other two invitees bore the same surname as two top politicians, but for now:

You switched off your phone and went to bed. Hours later, pondering over what went wrong, you remembered the endearing smell of burnt jollof rice, then the Keke man.

HIS FLIER led you to an area badly eaten by erosion. At the depth of a valley, you found his church—a sheet of aluminum held by wooden pillars, shielding rows of white chairs. At the altar was a poster of Jesus nailed to the cross, staring skyward.

The Keke Man approached you, grand in his whitish robe. Of course, he remembered you. After hopping on one foot and speaking in tongues, he proffered a solution to break down the walls preventing you from reaching your glory. Read Psalm 91 to a bucket of water every midnight, and on the seventh day, bath with it. All this while, fast, and before the seventh day, you would receive good news.

You didn’t want a situation where they’d ask where you worked and you’d become an object of pity or an example of how Nigeria doesn’t appreciate merit.

You thanked him and was about to leave when he asked, “Won't you drop something for God?”

YOU DIDN'T even have to wait for seven days. The next day, Monday, you got another job invite from the other foreign law firm. What were the odds? You called the Keke man.

“It is the Lord’s doing, but don’t break your fast.”

The night before the job test, you had another dream, but all you remembered was seating on a peach cushion chair feeling satisfied. You woke up, 11:59 p.m. You rushed to the bathroom and concluded the ritual.

THE RECEPTION in the firm had a peach cushion chair, like the one in your dream. You were also the only invitee, and thank God, the test was as easy as reciting John 3:16.

On your way home, you stepped into a cafeteria, but the smell of fried meat took you to the forgotten part of your dream: you had sat on that chair after downing a plate of jollof rice and fried meat. Your hunger vanished.

You called the Keke man. He said the dream was the enemy’s way of breaking your fast. But you would get the job.

HE BATHED you with spit and showers of sweat as part of the prayers.

“Anything for God?”

THEN YOU waited.

But nothing came.

You called the Keke man. From “Be patient,” to “Number switched off,” to “He has travelled to the mountain.”

Every evening you scrolled through the WhatsApp group. You had stopped posting. You didn’t want a situation where they’d ask where you worked and you’d become an object of pity or an example of how Nigeria doesn’t appreciate merit. Yet more mates had gotten jobs, but based on

their firms, you knew they earned an average of forty-five thousand. But once they stepped out with their suits, polished English and pride, who would know?

Finally you began sending CVs all over, irrespective of the salary range. What mattered was experience, and you were certain money would come.

But even at this, no firm bothered to invite you. To worsen things, Keke man was still at the mountain and his number switched off. You deleted his number.

ONE EVENING, in the WhatsApp group, a colleague posted that a lawyer was seeking the assistance of a fresh law school graduate; salary: twenty thousand. You didn't bother if eighteen months post law school still qualified as “fresh,” you applied. And the lawyer invited you for a chat on Tuesday at 10 a.m. in his office. Maybe this was the divine plan, to start from the very bottom to get to the highest top.

But on Monday night, you dreamed of someone forcing a plate of jollof rice and three boiled eggs down your throat. Your alarm rang at 7 a.m. You switched it off and went back to sleep.

silence, we need

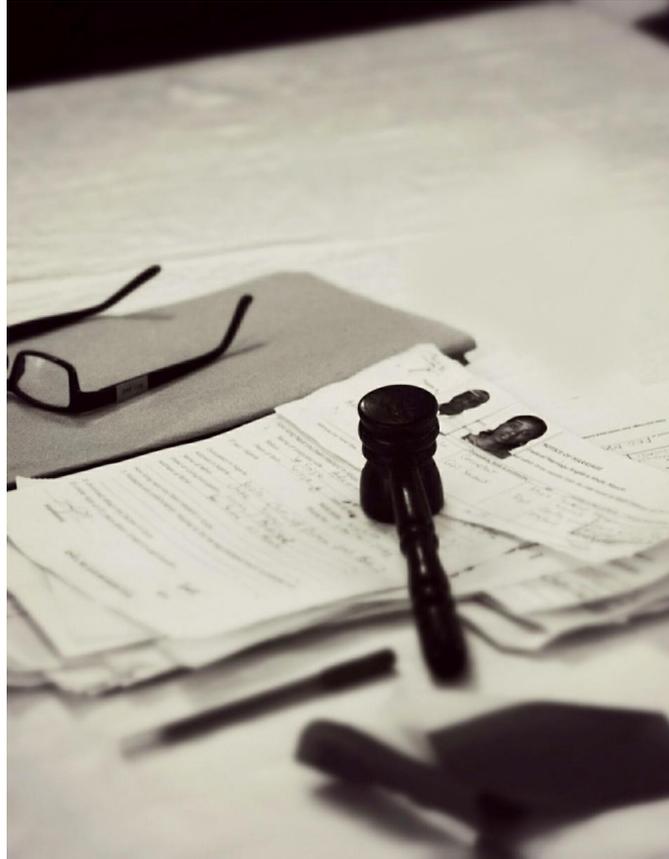
MICHAEL E. UMOH



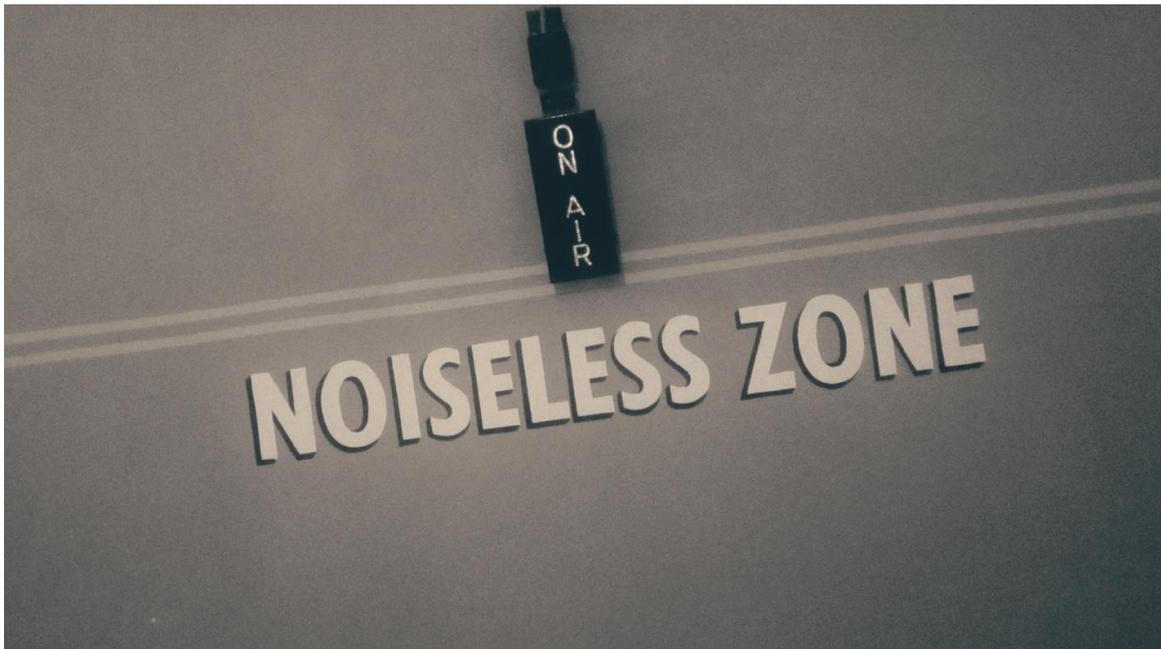
xii: The Yellow Monster, by Michael Umoh. Road construction.



xiii: The Many Colours of Progress, by Michael Umoh. Road construction.



xiv: Authority, by Michael Umoh. A judges's papers.



xvx: Silence, We Need, by Michael Umoh. What you find in a radio studio.

prognosis

SIBBYL WHYTE

church owners

1.

TWO A.M., Friday. A banner strung outside invites you to “One Night with the Lord” in The Light of the Word Ministry AKA Burden Bearers Battalion. Cymbals clang, tambourines tremble, the air steams with praise and worship. Prayers dart out of mouths and slam against the roof, walls. Trapped in an atmosphere of miracles, people pray for divine encounters. Pastor Magnus weaves amidst the crowd dispatching demons to hell in tongues, while some people crumple like houses built on faulty foundations.

START OUT with proper dreams. When asked about future ambition, say doctor, lawyer, engineer, etc. Mention ‘pastor’ if you are a pastor’s child or a precocious one who has learnt that offerings and tithes belong to the pastor of your church. Get involved in spiritual affairs with evangelism, choir practice, soul winning, fasting, speaking in tongues, bible study, etc.

IN PURSUIT of proper dreams, go through the rigorous, dysfunctional education system 6-3-3-(4/5/6/...) where number of years enclosed is dependent on course of study, strikes, spillovers, insufficient funds, rustication, etc.

IN UNIVERSITY:

Join the Scriptural Union, become a spirikoko now addressed as Brother/Sister (name). High level of spirituality might anoint you as PaPa or MaMa to hundreds of brethren-in-the-Lord who would trip over themselves in service of you. This will come in handy if/when you become a pastor with thousands of flock waiting on you.

GO IN the opposite direction: Join a cult/gang in school. Swagger around, feel invincible. Accumulate your sins. Fuck around all you want.

BE AN average CGPA-accumulating individual studying to be a doctor, lawyer, banker, engineer, Someone Important, etc.

VOCATION: AN inclination to undertake a certain kind of work, especially a religious career, often in response to a perceived summons; a calling.

Biblically, men were called by God thus:

Before birth: Samuel, John the Baptist.

Out of the blue: the Twelve Disciples.

In moments of ~~Sin~~Madness: Saul who became Paul.

If you do not hear the call, do not panic. These are end times, they say, when everything known turns on its head. If God doesn't call you, call yourself.

Pastor Magnus weaves
amidst the crowd dispatching
demons to hell in tongues,
while some people crumple
like houses built on faulty
foundations.

NOW, YOU may or may not be armed with a certificate in something important. Go ye then, into the job market and be successful.

Note: this should be the point where you take your calling seriously by going for an apprenticeship in pastoral ministries established by forerunners in the business. Serve under them because every job requires practice under supervision.

AFTER THE apprenticeship, you might be appointed to pastor a branch of your mother church. In this new position, you may or may not receive the call to break out on your own and start a brand new church. Warning: this move may (not) be supported by your father or mother in the Lord.

CHOOSE a niche: Prophecies, Miracles, Salvation, Prosperity-gospel, propagation of The Word, etc.

UNSUCCESSFUL IN the job market, you've arrived at the conclusion—based on physical evidences of private jets, mansions, multi-million-earning empires—that being a pastor is a lucrative business; remember to appoint yourself to the role of Shepherd if God refuses to summon you.

**Choose a niche: Prophecies,
Miracles, Salvation,
Prosperity-gospel,
propagation of The Word,
etc. Start small: in a room or
shack, underneath a canopy,
any available space, etc.**

IF YOUR country is traumatized by poverty and peopled by individuals who believe Satan is the sole orchestrator of everything evil, you will intuitively know the niches that best serve your interests. Remember, you were not called by God, so think like a business man!

START SMALL: in a room or shack, underneath a canopy, any available space, etc.

Or go big: lease a hall, build a new church completely roofed to protect prospective members from the elements.

Warning: You may struggle if you have not been called by God.

IN THIS business, upward progression is dependent on the visible sign of God's manifestation in your ministry. Its effectiveness will lead to exponential growth of members which will ultimately yield greater return on investments.



xvi: Gangways of Faith, by Osinachi. A preacher at work on his congregation.

Note: There are other ways of accessing powers. Although not scientifically proven, as with the notion of God, people are convinced that Satan is also a repository of powers. If you have not been called by God, decamp and sell your soul to the devil. In return, receive powers that rival those exhibited by men called by God. Your miracles will be dramatic, prophecies accurate, but salvation will be—as it should be—a personal realization as you will definitely tailor The Word to fit your interests. See: Malachi 3:8-10, 2 Corinthians 9:7, Leviticus 27: 30-32, etc.

IF THE business is successfully run, membership growth rate will skyrocket, forcing the need for expansion. You will of course have members who would be ready to part with earnings to ensure that a state of the art auditorium is built to accommodate the steadily growing population.

As with other ventures, personal growth is often tied to business growth; therefore, it will not be unusual for you to fall in the league of top richest pastors. The following are accepted S.I. units of affluence:

1. Massive potbellies.
2. Picture perfect family.
3. Classy cars.
4. Landed properties.
5. Miscellaneous investments, e.g: schools, hotels, superstores, etc.
6. Luxurious vacation destinations.
7. TV station ownership, etc.

NB: While this is only achievable at a certain level, ownership of private aircrafts are the ultimate indicator of success.

ADVANTAGES:

Become god, untouchable.

Availability of soldiers willing to catch grenades for you, chanting Psalm 105:15.

Sins will be promptly excused, forgiven and forgotten.

DISADVANTAGES:

Nil.

SUMMARY:

End up dead, await Judgement Day.

2.

OUTSIDE PASTOR Magnus's office a queue grows. Inside, a consultation is underway.

Name: Matina Uwawuahuhu.

Age: 37.

Marital status: Single.

Occupation: Banker.

Complaints:

Nightmares of being chased by a machete-wielding stranger, eating in dreams, wet dreams, etc.

Diagnosis: Ancestral curses, marine husband.

Prescription:

Four bottles of church-bought olive oil to be applied thrice daily.

Twenty-one days' fasting and prayer aided by prescribed Psalms.

Sow a seed of faith in multiples of one thousand naira.

Prognosis: 91.4% rate of deliverance.

no. 4 marina street

ROMEO ORIOGUN



xvii: Photo by Oluwatomilola K. Boyinde.

EVERY DAY I watch them walk back home
wet with the smell of the market,
trays balanced on their heads.

It will rain. It will not. The truth is here:

nothing prepared us for the moment when
their bones shivered like lovers ready to part from each other.
By the door they peel off their dirty skins
and compare history and money.
In another room in this house filled with rooms,
another woman walks into the arms of ten children;
we will hear the sound of hunger in the music of tongues.
Until you are there you will never know how the ground breaks bones,
how bodies search for seeds only to find the ground mocking them.
Mother will gather us into her bosom and tell my sister to bring down
the tray, from it she will take the bread and say, this is my body, Eat,
she will pass the cup and say, Drink of me and be filled.
At night when the stars are singing of paradise,
we will lie still and listen to her cry in the dark.

letter to my hairdresser

IFE OLUJUYIGBE

DEAR HAIRDRESSER,
Well done.

This is what you say to me every ten minutes as I sit and you stand behind me, twisting and weaving and tying and working hair magic. You also say, Straight your head, and while I am not sure what that means, I sit up, and you work on. Till the next Well Done.

Our relationship is smooth as the skin of a baby rat. I can see in the mirror the mighty work of your hands, and I am oh so loving it. Until the talks begin, those talks that pour out like a drink offering. Sometimes it starts out light.

You say, Aunty, this your hair don due. I sigh, like I have resigned my hair to the Lord's hands to do with it as he pleases. I say, Na so I see am o. You say, I get this cream wey you fit put wey no go dey make am due quick quick. Then you take a break from my hair and dig your hand into a drawer. It returns clutching a plastic container of assorted colours. This mousse, you say, na just five hundred naira. E go make your hair soft, full, strong kakaraka. E no go make am break, and e no go dey due every time.

You say, Aunty, this your hair don due. I sigh, like I have resigned my hair to the Lord's hands to do with it as he pleases. I say, Na so I see am o. You say, I get this cream wey you fit put wey no go dey make am due quick quick.

I say thank you, I feign interest, scrunch up my nose and give it an intense look. Then I give it back and continue tapping away on my phone. You resume your magic, but I feel the heat from words in your throat, threatening to fall. Ten seconds pass, and then they do. Aunty, you no go buy? I will check it well after I finish with the hair, I say, and lay the matter to rest.

We are quiet again. Until this woman comes, who is your customer and ‘cousin-sister.’ The talks begin, the gossip, more like. You laugh out loud at something she says and I feel it echo in my bones so bad I wince. You say, Sorry, Auntie, and you would replace Well Done with Sorry for the next one hour. I would pick a few things from your gossip: Mama Bomboy has moved to her new place with her husband. Agnes’ husband still beats her, she has lost her third pregnancy. I would hear you curse in your dialect; my ear for language is chaotic, but I know a curse when I hear one.

The woman stands and says she is leaving. You say goodbye. Then you return wholeheartedly to my hair, and ask me to straight my head, and resume the Well Dones, and tell me about the woman who just left, about how she has been looking for a child for six ‘yehs.’ That popular man of God, you say, The one wey im church dey Rumuobiakani, big church laidis....

I say I don’t know him.

You describe him some more. E get show for RSTV, e dey wear eyeglass, e get one big banner wey e wear army cloth for inside....

I say I don’t know him.

There is frustration in your eyes.

What happened to him? I ask.

She dey attend im church.

Oh okay.

They don do deliverance many times, but nothing.

Okay.

You go on for another five minutes, and I am torn between concentrating on my chat with my friend on Whatsapp and listening to what you are telling me, your high-pitched voice seeping right into my eardrums. Eventually, I give up.

Has she considered adopting? I ask.

Who?

Your cousin, or is it sister?

My cousin-sister? No o. God no go gree bad thing. Arm robber shide. No. God go give am im own pikin.

Okay then.

My hair is done. I turn left and right in front of the mirror, inspecting

You sure sey this thing no go loose, Madam? I ask, touching a part of the hair.

Ah, no o, Aunty, lailai. Na laidat e go be till you ready to lose am, you say.

Okay. I pay. You collect the money, beaming. Thank you o, Aunty.

I am about to leave.

Aunty, you call out, you no go buy the mousse again?

I go buy am next time madam.

Your countenance falls, but you mask it with a toothy smile. Okay. Bye-bye.

The next morning, I wake up to find a part of the hair already loosening. I remember it as the part you made when you were talking to your ‘cousin-sister.’

Can I really blame you? You are with one customer for maybe four hours, listening, taking in the entire baggage of her life. That’s already too much burden for one person, but you’re strong. The next customer comes and does same. You do this for fifteen hours every day, and when you finally find that one person who can listen, like me, you become gabby Gabriella. I dare not blame you, dear hairdresser/listener/therapist. Rather, I applaud your strength.

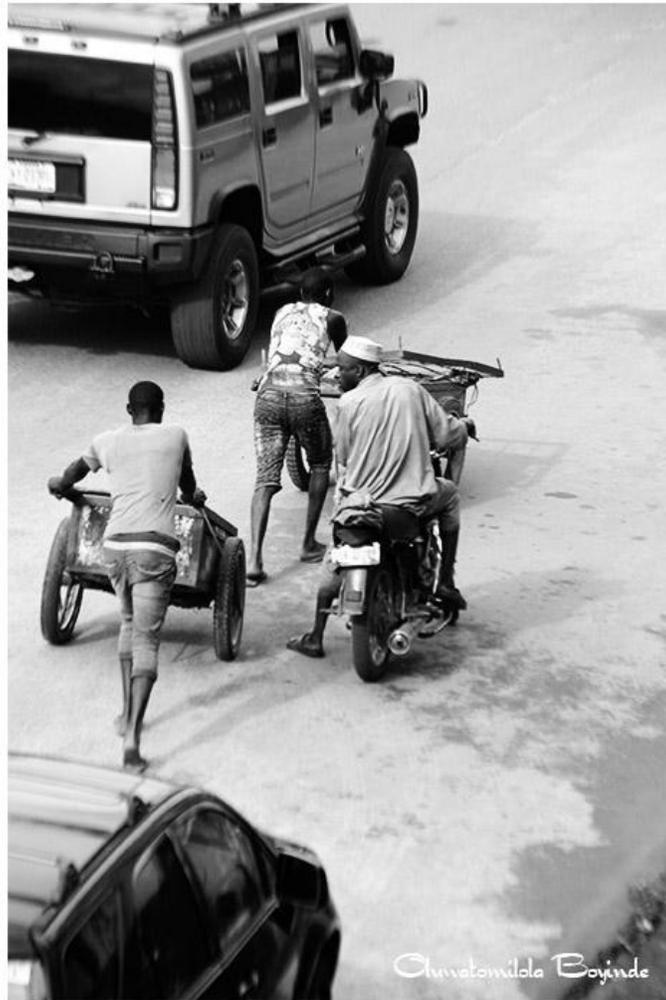
I have decided; I’m coming with my stories next time.

Well done.

Yours Truly.

life goes on in Osun (Part 2)

OLUWATOMILOLA K. BOYINDE





THE GOVERNOR of Osun State, Ogbeni Rauf Aregbesola, who was sworn into office on 27th November 2010, attributes the unpaid salaries to the state's dwindling allocations from the Federation Account due to tumbling oil prices at the international market. Meanwhile, political analysts state that the genesis of the economic crisis began in 2012 with the increment in the state's expenditure due to the huge wage bill occasioned by the implementation of the minimum wage for all junior workers, a development later extended to senior workers.

Osun State came into existence on 27th August, 1991, carved out of the old Oyo State, as one of the then nine newly created States was by the General Ibrahim Babangida's administration. It covers an area of approximately 14,875 square kilometers, lies between longitude 04 00E and latitude 05 558", and is bounded by Ogun, Kwara, Oyo and Ondo States on the South, North, West and East respectively. The State runs an agrarian economy with a vast majority of the populace taking to farming.













Grandma Grace (An Excerpt)

OSINACHI

hawking

MY MATERNAL grandma, her name was Iye Nwaemeto, but I never heard anyone call her that. She was always addressed as Grace, which I suspected to be her baptismal name.

It was in my penultimate year at the university that I got news that she had passed.

Grandma Grace was the closest older generation person that I and my siblings had in our lives. When I was in primary school Arthur, my elder brother, was already hawking goods for her every Saturday. At that time, she sold *akilu*. As a child, all I was aware of was the reality that whenever we trekked from Constitutional Crescent Primary School to grandma's shop in Ndoki, near Ahija **Ọhuru** Market, there was always food waiting for us – a kind of encouragement for us to finish up the walk to our Mother's shop in Igwilo Street. And as a child, I was aware of the tension that arose between Father and Mother concerning Arthur hawking. Father had found out when, out of the foolishness of a child, Arthur had appeared in his shop in York, Park Road, carrying a tray of *akilu* and a face overflowing with smiles. Father counted the dangers to Mother: There were thieves who could waylay my brother for money.; there were drivers that did not care about child hawkers; most of all, he did not want his child – any of his children – exposed to money at such a tender age. They had school to face. I do not remember if Mother made any attempt at making the conversation a debate, but I remember that my brother stopped hawking for some weeks. But after grandma came and spoke with Mother in her shop and later with Father in the house, Arthur resumed his Saturday hawking. I also remember that when I joined Arthur in hawking *akilu* and soap and detergents—as grandma had expanded to the latter two—I always had fear turning round and round at the bottom of my belly. It was not the fear of thieves. It was not the fear of drivers. It was the fear of meeting Father on the streets of Aba, a tray on my head, “*Ncha!* Soap!” in my throat. Of course, Father knew that every Saturday we would follow Mother to her shop and, from there, proceed to grandma's shop to hawk, but we never talked about it in the house.

Grandma wanted to make tradesmen out of us, all of us. I was told that she had lived somewhere in present day Rivers State with her family, trading in various things until the civil war

broke out and, having lost many of her children, returned to the east with her husband where she gave birth to three girls and a boy. She instilled commercial discipline in her children, taught them what it meant to be responsible for capital. When her husband died and Sister, her eldest child, left home to become a nun in the Catholic Church, she struggled with her other three children to keep the family. I do not remember what Mother and Auntie Vero traded in then, but I remember that Uncle Joe, the last of them and the only boy, weaved in and out of traffic selling sausage. Grandma also took her younger brother's children under her wings. Before my brother and me, they hawked for her, and from there earned the spirit for trades. Today, Uncle Joe and grandma's nephews are doing well in business.



xviii: Photo by Oluwatomilola K. Boyinde.

But forgive me, no matter how much I tried to put interest in that hawking thing I always found it boring. Sometimes I would set down my tray on the steps of a locked shop in Ahija Qhuru and just sit there, playing in my mind. Traders would have to shoo me away like a stray cat. Other times, I forgot that I had a tray on my head until someone touched me and called me ‘Obu ahija ebughi nti’ – hawker without ears. Sometimes I lost money. Other times I was enticed by certain things like meat that I grudgingly shoved a hand in grandma’s money and got myself some. On days that I came back with the tray almost the same way that it had been set on my head, grandma frowned. She murmured and complained whenever she saw me already on top of the flask, scooping food into my mouth. She clawed and cursed whenever she counted her money and it was not complete. “Udele,” she would call me. My singular excitement those days came in the evenings which in turn came with a swarm of people – roadside traders setting up their tables, shop owners streaming out of the large market gate in the direction of their homes. I would hop home, the twenty naira that grandma had given me in my pocket.

As Arthur stopped going—I don’t remember what made him stop—I started becoming discouraged. On some Saturdays, I said no to going and then I hung around the streets like a restless spirit. There were other kids, of course. We did things that have made me realize why Mother insisted on us getting busy at grandma’s shop. We rode tires, built sand castles, and launched kites. We hunted for *nta-nta olugbu* on bitter leaf trees. We got dirty, and we brewed the kind of trouble that made other Mothers complain to our Mothers, fume in their mouths, until I saw grandma striding like a terminator, her back bent as though the anger stored in there. I would hide until she had entered Mother’s shop and I would return after she left, Mother eyeing me as though I were a wasted child. Most times, grandma did not come to drag me away. She came to give me the food she had kept with the hope that I would come around, a compassionate way of showing her displeasure.

I failed at becoming the tradesman she wanted to make out of me.

the silence of sales

MICHAEL E. UMOH

akara seller

AROUND PAULICON Junction, three women sell fried yam, potatoes, plantain and akara. The first, who's technically the closest to the junction, never fries enough. So every time I'm there, I have to wait for her to fry a new batch. Every. Single. Time.

She's the only one who smiles.

The second woman, who I think of as Frowning Woman, is okay. My flatmate, Abdul, prefers her fries. I do, too. But something about the way she waits several seconds before responding to my “good morning” grates. Delay might mean a million things, but add to the frown and her flat tone when she asks, “What do you want?” and the painting of a grudging response is complete.

The third woman who fries opposite Living Word Academy is fascinating for two reasons. The lesser: everything, except her yam, is sold for fifty naira. The greater: she can't speak.

I discover this—like everyone else, I presume—the first time I go to her shop: a thing of dark brown wood and roof, beside a church. She looks at me, points at the akara and plantain, flashes five fingers and makes a fist. She does this to everyone she doesn't recognise. If you have been there before, she doesn't bother. I smile. She is secure here; certain and in control. I am fascinated by the way her actions seem to say, “Hurry up. Make a choice. I have things to do.”

That first day, she looks laid back. She isn't.

I've always believed that anger, true anger, rips words from you, and reduces you to a lesser form of yourself. But with her, anger seems to elevate her, and since it can't take words from her, it climbs out of her, using her grunts and the fire in her eyes as a ladder. It climbs out, and breathing the free air, it attacks.

This is how it happens.



xix: Photo by TJ Benson.

I go there too early that morning. I have woken by past six and negotiated with hunger until it won and I have to get something. Frowning Woman isn't around, so I walk over to Living Word Academy Woman. Her shop is open but she is just setting up; akara balls frying, plantain slices being peeled and washed.

Three men, who like me must have lost their talks with hunger, are sitting on a bench, discussing. They talk about the road construction, about the dust this progress has brought with it. They prophesy that since this is Nigeria, the road will not be finished before the rains come. And when the rains come, it will make progress messy and annoying. One, who is wearing a red cap, talks about the governor. He says the man is good. "He's trying." Then they switch to Igbo and their words and the meanings they carry walk away from me.

When the akara and the plantain are ready, a man walks in. This man is different from the rest. He is dressed in a dark polo and dirty jeans. He greets the rest, tells the woman he needs a ball of akara and gives her a one thousand naira note.

It is a thoughtless thing to do. Nobody wakes up with that amount of change. And even if they do, it will be foolish to give it all to one person.

The woman, she understands this. She shakes her head. No, she doesn't have change.

“Find change na,” the man replies, smiling.

The three men seated are not smiling. I am not smiling. The woman smiles. Then she unleashes her rage. It comes out as grunts and pauses, as limits and struggles, but it comes out and makes itself known. She insults him. That is there, too, in her sounds and in her eyes. When she is tired, she waves him away. Get out. Get out.

We wait for him to get out. He does. But he looks hurt. He is the fool who doesn't understand why he is thought foolish.

Several minutes later, I buy some akara and plantain with the realisation that she isn't merely secure here; this shop is her kingdom—she is queen here.

skin, gallas

OTOSIRIEZE OBI-YOUNG

barbers

IT WAS in a barbing salon, in the fourth month of my National Youth Service in Akure, that I first felt a belonging in that small city. The salon sat in a part of the town called Ayedun, on a lean tarred street that fell quiet in the evenings even as it was frequently crowded, on a route I often took during my evening walks. I'd discovered the shop out of frustration, on a night I'd almost given up on the haircutting potential of a city I was otherwise inclined to like.



xx: Decency, by Michael E. Umoh.

There was nothing remarkable about the room I'd entered: no air-conditioner, no 3D mirror, no white tiles on the floor or walls. On the cushion sat a woman, flanked by three children. Beside me stood her husband, a fiftysomething year-old man who never smiled; who, in the forty minutes I sat in front of him, I never had to correct, never had to tell to maintain the level of the hairline, never had to frown at for not having a steady hand. When he finished, and I stood up and peered intently into the mirror, I saw a version of myself I had not seen in months: rousing afro, clinically thin side buns, a reassuring beard, a satisfied me. This man was the sixth barber I had tried in Akure, the first I liked for knowing his job.

The first barber whose shop I'd entered in Akure had, after two months in which I resigned myself to fate in his seat, become a stranger I devotedly disliked.

I THINK of barbing as an art. I consider it as bearing, in its conventional banality, palpable artistic value. So that I often Google hairstyles and beardstyles I have no intention of getting.

During childhood, when my nameless hairstyles where signed off with a long line at the side of my head, I'd disliked having a haircut: the barbers were often rude in the way they snapped at you on the seat, they were passive-aggressive in the way they turned your head, and most frightening of all, their clippers were almost always too sharp for my scalp. By the time I became an adolescent, and now had the luxury of choosing between a low-cut and a punk, my problem with having haircuts changed: it was no longer much of a discomfort as it was a chore, something I needed to get done so as to avoid being harassed by teachers in school. As an adult, one now fortunately harassed by the luxury of choosing from among a Mohawk or afro or baldness, I find myself perched at the exact opposite end of my earlier worries: I had come to look forward to having a haircut, to sitting before a mirror, wrapped in a fan or air-conditioner breeze, watching someone draw patterns on my head with mathematical precision.

I think of barbing as an art. I consider it as bearing, in its conventional banality, palpable artistic value.

THIS IS how I like it:

I sit. You ask what I want, how I want it, if you should follow the existing hairlines. Most times, though, I sit and tell you everything before you ask. So you begin. Your clipper is sharp enough for me to feel it running on my skin but not too sharp as to make me wince. You scrape me bald, or you reduce my hair to the barest level before baldness. You trace my side buns with devotion, treat the beard as though it were a customer itself. Assault my vulnerable head with strong after-shave that itches, that continues to itch.

The first barber who left me bald finished and said to me, "You look ugly. Skin doesn't fit you. Leave it to grow well so you can barb Gallas."

It takes a lot to discover an exceptional barber, weeks and months of touring salons. It is a gamble in which you might end up with Anything, including people who—without asking, sometimes without listening—shave off your beard and then stand, stilled, hoping that you don't explode at them. But the brilliant barbers I have met have been simply brilliant: the man in Ayedun; another man with unkempt beard whose tattered shop lay behind my apartment in Gbogi Street; the handsome young man in Fiwasaye, Akure, who'd told my friend and me that his fiancée was converting to Islam so they could marry; the bald man whose shop rested on a hill just outside my hometown and who touches my head too much; the even younger man in my hometown who refers to my beard as *our beard*.

“I would like to learn to barb,” I'd told him once, the young man in my hometown, and he shrieked, “What? No!”

“Why?” I asked, a bit surprised.

“Nawa o. No.”

It was afterwards, thinking of it, that it occurred to me that his profession, to him, was something tied to social class. That to disagree would be to appropriate his class experience.

ONE OF the last barbers to touch my scalp, a yellow skinned man with homely manners, shares his shop with three or four or fifteen others. Each time I am there, he happens to be the only familiar face. I am seated, following from the mirror the hand of the young man barbing me, when he comes in, taps me on the shoulder, his smile like a condom blown into a balloon. I smile back. He says, “How far?” I nod. I continue following my present barber's hand. Minutes pass before I glance at the yellow man, and then I am forced to stare. The yellow man is standing behind his own seat, his face flinched, his lips moving slowly in prayer. I stare. By the time I turn to my present barber and turn back again, he has finished praying, his eyes opening with a smile. A spark. My present barber finishes with my head, unleashes an aftershave I instantly know has been watered, followed by powder, a dipping of my face and neck with a piece of foam dipped in powder. As I stand up, feeling that sudden, familiar need to leave, my eyes meet the yellow man's and I raise a thumb. He nods, that smile. I step out of the shop, earphones in my ear, my palm feeling my scalp.

It was afterwards that it occurred to me that his profession, to him, was something tied to social class. That to disagree would be to appropriate his class experience.

anesthesiology

OKWUDILI NEBEOLISA

doctors

PIXELS OF blue light taper into
the cornea, a dilating area:
a dense darkness becoming extinct.
An overburdened pupil, his eyes closes.

His mind wanders back to the 9-1-1 scene:
A man jumping out of the skyscraper
to salvage his life; a woman calling
her loved ones before the smoke chokes her;

once a beauty, now the tallest mass
of ruin in one terminal of summer.
He breathes in the anesthetic and sleeps.
An open field, suddenly acres of corn,

and a girl in a pinafore dancing
to a song only she can listen to.
When the doctor makes an incision
in his skull, the field burns and the girl flees

on incredibly large wings;
a ray of light blots out everything
like a red curtain falling on a stage.
It gets suspicious when they take out

the pod-sized tumour and place the bean
on a silver tray and he can almost

hear the soft plop sound and the light
is smothered and then another deep sleep.

dunes

OSINACHI



xxi: Amongst the Dunes, by Osinachi. A desert guide in the Sahara.



xxii: Fulani Herdsman, by Osinachi. A cattle rearer.

for the men who greet us at home

TOCHI EZE

kiosk owners

DRIVING HOME from work every evening, I make a stop to buy oranges and watermelons from the sun-burnt fruit seller at the estate gate. From there, I crawl my way through a maze of un-tarred streets with a carefulness learned from experience with bad roads. Always, from the end of my street, I see my apartment building sitting just below the receding sun, but the excitement of being home after a hectic day is never fully anticipated until I make another necessary stop.

About nine buildings from mine, a washed-up grey edifice stands tall and isolated; the only activity there seems to come from a small, cell-like opening east of its gate. On the other side of this opening sits Zachary, a stout, dark-skinned man with uneven brown teeth. Often, he has a manual radio with shaky transmission sitting on the open pavement, just beside the spot where his head rests. And always, he wears the same blue jellabiya, faded and frayed at the edges from years of use. When he sees me, his eyes dance, and he stands up, sharp and quick, his thick frame seeming a little out of place in the already crowded store. We make our usual exchange of how-you-dey and then, I ask him to give me eggs, or milk, or the small sachet of Golden Morn, depending on how lazy I intend to be that evening.

I have spent my life living in Lagos, so I am quite used to the roads that are dotted with mega stores and mini marts; the city swells with near-combustive energy: foreign investors and local businessmen, shop owners and petty traders, neatly polished aisles of Shoprite or Spar, then many market places, real-time and online, all simultaneously pulling at you with colorful signposts: *Here, here, come in for a buy!*

Yet, despite the web of spinning alternatives and competitive discounts, some people, like me, prefer to do their shopping in piece meals, a prudence imposed upon by a mix of budgetary restraints, nonchalance and accessibility upon impulse. In this sense, Zachary and his kiosk are extremely functional in my daily existence. It is to him that I run in the middle of cooking when I realize I have exhausted the spice cubes at home, and it is to him, at the appearance of uninvited guests, that I often go to get extra drinks.

When Zachary tells me he is returning to Niger Republic to see his wife, I am both surprised and anxious: surprised because I had mentally placed him in a stereotype of Muslim Hausa men; anxious because it occurs to me that life would be difficult to navigate without the usual accessibility to my daily grocery needs. When I tell him of my surprise, he dazzles me with his French. Then he explains that it has been eight months since he last saw his wife, and he risks her being taken away by another man. He says this part with his eyes twitching a little, and for a moment, I do not know if it is how he carries his fear or if it is a nerve dysfunction. But he also assures me that he has made plans: a brother to arrive the week before he goes, to ensure that the business is still open.



xxiii: Onion Seller, by Frances Ogamba. A man pushes his wheelbarrow in the market, selling onions.

MY FONDNESS for shopping in small, humid kiosks predates Zachary. I remember small, scattered details of my childhood in the rundown streets of Mushin. There, just in front of our brown-painted block of flats, was Abu, a skinny boyish man who ran a kiosk where everything imaginable was sold. In the evenings, he would bring out a makeshift shack and a small stove, where his brother would sell Indomie and eggs and tea. In exchange for permission to sell, Abu was tasked with the security of the inhabitants of the compound. This meant he had the key to the gate and had

to concern himself with the logistics of scrutinizing strange-looking visitors. He also had to run up to open the gate whenever a tenant wanted to come in or leave.

As with Zachary, my memory of Abu is of a man stunted in his experience of the world, and this because of the seemingly-bare life most kiosk owners lead. Often, they are so visibly poor, wearing the same clothes, eating the same bland looking food and entertained by the same battery charged radios. But now, with the perspective of adulthood, I am able to take in more details. When I enter any such local kiosk, my eyes drink in the assortment of goods. Of course there are the few people, starters, whose stalls are empty, growing in the trickles of beginners, and then there are others like Zachary, whose stores are so clustered with goods that they are nearly falling over themselves. Yet they almost always look the same: wearing jellabiyas, prayer beads and crooked brown teeth.

As with Zachary, my memory of Abu is of a man stunted in his experience of the world, and this because of the seemingly-bare life most kiosk owners lead. Often, they are so visibly poor, wearing the same clothes, eating the same bland looking food and entertained by the same battery charged radios.

As Lagos pursues its ambitions of aesthetic appeal, tearing down illegal structures and refining buildings and architecture, thoughts of Zachary trace its way to my mind. And by habit, I begin to wonder if the bulldozers would one day make their way into our sleepy streets. I wonder about the specifics of the life that Zachary leads in Niger. I wonder about his options in the instance that his kiosk is beaten to dust. I wonder what would happen if I had to drive down to a mall every time I ran out of sugar. But above all, I wonder if there is any store that can beat our experience of the brown-toothed men who greet us when we get home.

untitled

OLUWATOMILOLA K. BOYINDE

















so much tenderness

JENNIFER EMELIFE

teaching

I

I CAN'T GET over the look on Gbotemi's face that afternoon in class. Gbotemi, big round buttocks and chubby cheeks that earned him the name 'Gbots' from me. Gbots, not just a shortened form of his name, but a perfect word for the sound of his laughter; or the flapping of his skin when he tries to do the break dance: cheeks sucked in, one hand in the middle of his ballooned stomach and his legs and arms breaking forward. Gbots, for when he gets a grammar exercise right and attempts a backflip.

"Ms Jennifer!" he repeats in shock. "How can you say you don't watch movies?"

"I don't have a TV, Gbotemi."

"That's what you have a laptop for," he says, his hand pointing to my laptop bag on the teacher's desk.

"Listen, Gbots. I write with it. That's what I do with my free time: read and write."

Gbotemi's eyes widen, his nine-year-old mind trying to picture what a life without TV and movies would be like. When he sees nothing fanciful, his chin drops and he announces to his friends, rather mournfully: "Everyone, Ms Jennifer lives a boring life."

Now his friends circle around us, heads and hands stretching out, inquiring what the issue is. Gbotemi takes time to explain. His friends sigh in disbelief, some asking me to be *serious* as they're sure I'm tricking them. But Gbotemi isn't done yet. He taps my shoulder and in a still, disappointed voice, he says, "I can never visit you, Ms Jennifer. You live a boring life."

Teaching sometimes feels like running and dressing up for a runway all at the same time. So much energy dispensed with so much tenderness. Like fixing a puzzle on a burning board.

Sometimes, that is what being a teacher is: being in a class of little pupils who're so sure they have the manual to living an enjoyable life. A class of pupils who teaches you to be *like them*.

II

OTHER TIMES, it is being besieged in a class of nine-year-olds, chatty mouths and strong-willed spirits.

“Be quiet, everyone!”

More noise. So you're there, standing before the kids, fallen shoulders and face, thinking about when discipline meant whipping an offender. How times have changed, you think, and the words involuntarily fall from your lips, “I'm tired.”

Silence.

Tomisin, the one with the sharpest tongue cuts through the silence, “Ms Jennifer, did you say you're tired?”

“Yes.”

“Of teaching?”

“No, of teaching kids. You all give me a headache with your noise.”

“But that's how children learn,” he blurts, looking to his classmates—who're already nodding—for support.

Teaching sometimes feels like running and dressing up for a runway all at the same time. So much energy dispensed with so much tenderness. Like fixing a puzzle on a burning board.

III

BUT THERE are light, therapeutic moments. Like when seven-year-old Tosinmile comes cuddling you so early in the day with “Good morning, Ms Jenny.” Or when Anjiola sends a handwritten note saying you're her best teacher and wishing she could move in with you so you can teach her forever.

There are days when you laugh out so loud at the naivety of these kids. Like Ayomi, also seven, who thinks that, because you're a teacher, you must have a child or be married at least:

Ayomi: *Ms Jennifer, did you just say tomorrow is your dad's birthday?*

Me: *Yes, Ayomi.*

Ayomi: *You have a father, Ms Jennifer?*

Me: *Of course, Ayomi!*

Ayomi: *I thought you had a wife?*

Me: *A wife? 🙄*

Ayomi: *Sorry, husband.*

Me: *I'm not married, Ayomi.*

Ayomi: *How can you not be married and you're a teacher? How many children do you have?*

Me: *I don't have any.*

Ayomi: *So you mean you only have a father and a mother just like me?*

Sometimes, it's how smart and bold they're:

Me (pointing to a picture): *That's my younger sister.*

Ayomi: *How old is she?*

Me: *22.*

Ayomi: *And your older sister?*

Me: *26.*

Ayomi: *And you?*

Me: *I'm not saying*

Ayomi: *I could guess.*

Me: *Guess.*

Ayomi: 24?

Me: *You're smart!*

IV

THERE'S A picture of a boy—call him David—sitting before a desk, his hands trembling. Now David must get all his answers correct because his teacher is yelling. His teacher is yelling because the principal is threatening. What if David doesn't know how to solve a mathematical problem because Mathematics isn't his forte? What if David draws cartoons and writes fantastic stories? And the teacher knows this. But how can she guide David in that path when there's a million and one voices pressurising, threatening her, pushing for his success in Mathematics? David's parents want David to be an 'A' student, in all subjects, at all costs. The management is interested in producing 'A' students to save its name. The teacher is the magician who must make sure that David, at whatever cost, gets a distinction in all subjects. So she, in turn, puts a lot of pressure on the poor pupil and eventually shuts the creativity in him. In the end, the teacher is blamed.

Formal education has its many issues. Sometimes they wear me out and I feel like quitting. A teacher is hardly free to do what works for her, what she knows works for her pupils. *Oh, if their notebooks aren't filled up with handwritten notes and scores in red ink, it means the teacher isn't working. If they're not coming home with brain-tasking, plenty homework, it means the teacher isn't working.* I've had my colleagues say to me, "Ms Jennifer, give them lots of notes. Let them copy, let them copy, so the parents will know they work in class." Damn standards! The world is evolving, education should, too.

V

BEING A teacher is like being a woman in a misogynistic world, where women are merely helpers. Where the weight of the right upbringing, of doing it right is dumped on teachers. And they must not falter, let alone fall. As a teacher, you're expected to save the day, be perfect, bring peace. Love. Sacrifice. Restraint. Patience. Persevere. Add understanding to that, plus every other virtue. Else you're a failed teacher. No one remembers you're human.

untitled

TJ BENSON





praises, prayer, blessings

UMAR TURAKI

beggars

A BEGGAR never begins his appeal with a request for charity. He begins with a prayer, he begins with a blessing. It took me sitting in a small town on a rest stop between Maiduguri and Jos and trying to eat some balango in peace to realise this. This little roadside town was crawling with beggars: old beggars, child beggars, women beggars, all possible manifestations of beggary that exist along the spectrum of human age and gender. You were sure to encounter a beggar every ten steps, in any direction you turned. As the old beggar who had made me his quarry opened his mouth, I remembered another elderly beggar I had seen at the park in Maiduguri that morning, who was so intrepid and boldfaced that he had turned into art his ability to make you ashamed for turning him away. This man would brazenly speak English or Hausa, depending on his reading of you, and he was usually accurate. He would ask God or Allah to give you every good blessing and keep from you every wicked curse. He would tell you how handsome or beautiful you looked. He would bless your ancestors and descendants to the third and fourth generation.

I remembered another elderly beggar I had seen at the park in Maiduguri that morning, who was so intrepid and boldfaced that he had turned into art his ability to make you ashamed for turning him away.

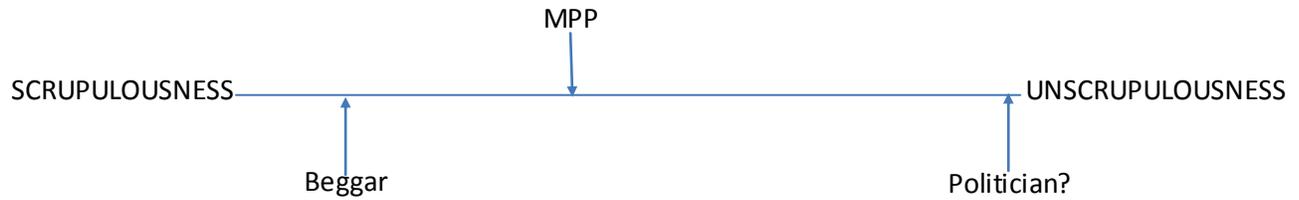
All of this put me in mind of another creature who, I also realised, exists very much on the same spectrum as the beggar, if a little closer to what one may deem respectable: the motor park preacher, or the MPP. This is a misnomer, because the motor park preacher doesn't really preach. He waits invisibly on a perch somewhere, until the bus is full and the door is about to be shut, then he miraculously appears as if from thin air, a vulture or a guardian angel, take your pick. In a perfectly rehearsed homily, which he has delivered countless times before and will deliver countless times more, he warns you of the dangers that attend travellers, the evils that lurk in potholes and bushes, and enjoins you to bow your heads with him in prayer so as to avoid all of the above. He ends with a big amen, hands out evangelistic tracts while speaking about the "work of God" and

how anybody that feels “led” is welcome to support the work of the vineyard. I am yet to understand how this industry fully operates, as I am not privy to the accounting details, but I’ll wager that our MPP can make as much as three hundred naira for each vehicle he covers and sanctifies with the blood of Jesus. And hundreds of vehicles leave the motor park each day.

The MPP and the beggar employ the very same tools in carrying out their trade: praise, prayers, blessings. It’s a delicious little discovery, that the beggar understands that you can never get something for nothing in this life. When he steps up to you, bowl in hand, and smiles, he is hoping to initiate a transaction. He is only too aware of this. He must be aware and intentional about it before he sets his foot out the door, for the success of his venture depends on this awareness and intentionality. However, success equally depends on his client’s utter obliviousness to this fact.

All of this put me in mind of another creature who, I also realised, exists very much on the same spectrum as the beggar: the motor park preacher.

This raises the question: Are the beggar and the MPP conmen? It certainly requires some level of coordination and manipulation to do what they do, considering that they don’t impart to you any object of particular substance in the transaction, depending, of course, on which side of the fence you situate yourself, faith-wise. It might be more accurate and helpful to see the conman as existing on the same spectrum as the beggar and the MPP, only much further down, far away from scrupulousness (and speaking of scrupulousness, the MPP doesn’t come far behind—forgive me, my brothers and sisters of the fold). As for the beggar, and I mean the able-bodied beggar, I shall make no blanket judgement as to the moral weight of his character lest I be accused of being a cold-hearted bastard. What I can confidently say is that there are honest beggars and there are dishonest beggars, just as there are honest politicians and dishonest politicians, even if I find the latter classification hard to believe myself. Also, speaking of politicians, perhaps the politician may indeed be a distant cousin of the beggar and the MPP, on the far end of the spectrum, where he need only reach out a hand and he shall find that he is caressing unscrupulousness in the backside. Also, while we’re at it, and for gender equality purposes, the beggar and the MPP must not only be a man. Women are just as capable of getting you to part with your hard-earned cash.



Whether or not you must help the beggar is an entirely different matter. As you grapple with the question, however, it might be worth remembering that you aren't helping as much as engaging in a business transaction involving the exchange of two things of perceived equal value. In return for your fifty naira or one hundred naira or two hundred naira—it rarely ever goes up to five hundred—you are expecting something in return: a good feeling, a sense of piety, a sense of spiritual fortification, a boosted ego, a specially gilded spot in heaven, or a simple thank you. No need to kid ourselves any further. Nothing goes for nothing.

when a man loves a river

ABDULRAHIM HUSSANI

fishermen

WHEN A man loves a river,
he memorizes the spirit of taking
from it

and learns to shy away from looking back.

This is how a man keeps his head above water
in a settlement of rusty stilts & shacks in
calabar:

His aged hands believe not in a trawl

but in a rusty net the size of his expectation;

and after a thousand tugs, kickings and
squirmings,

he lifts his bounty with smiles of satisfaction.

And when you think of men

who know the colour beautifying fertile
waters

whose gazes pour into a river like vomit,

like libation magnetizing their hearts to the
sea,

carrying it wherever they beseech like a heavy
mother,

do not wander far: say, Argungu!

And this is how an Argungan

puts his ego in baskets of ceaseless triumphs:

he casts a net the size of his popular pride,

for he has become versed and sated with
expectations.

That moment when he closes his eyes

and whispers like a giddy lover,

wind drenching the echo into pores of water,

he becomes an enchanter caressing the sea
with a white cock;

a whisperer pouching secrets in fish-tongue;

a bait in which alluring kindness is found.

His whisper is the yearning of a needy
conjurer

telling wrought iron to warp beyond
redemption.

His sweat & strain becomes justified
when a score of hearts can't bear his catch.

A little boy too holds his own calibre of love
for pliant waters thus:

Under a sullen sun, with a brimming hat

down the peaceful Niger, rowing in a tiny
yacht;

he throws crumbs of sugar and bread,
fishes claw at it; he then leaves, satisfied.

At twilight, they both sit at a table—

the man who killed and the boy who freed,

and love elapses in consummation as proteins
in intestines.

the gift of melancholy

ARINZE IFEAKANDU

clergy

SO. I thought I'd take a deep breath and let this feeling slide. But it's been almost 24 hours and I still feel it, a crashing of tidal waves. It comes and then it goes and then it comes again. I am a rock on the beach. I am being bathed, again and again, by sea-water.

Yesterday, we, the J-Clef Chorale, performed at the Solemn Profession of some friars of the Discalced Carmelite Order. A lovely compound on a hill, tarred, adorned with trees and flowers. The air is distilled, smells and feels soft and pure, and the noises of the town are suspended.

It was a lovely Mass, complete with candles and incense and harmony of movements: four, five people in dirty-brown soutanes under some sort of milk hood; they step forward, one, two, three, four, hands on chest, genuflect, step backwards, one, two, three, four; sit: they are a Holy Quatrity or Quintity or Octity, one body yet so many.

The chapel is small and beautiful. Round, with gold letterings on the white walls. The names are poetry: St Jude of the Little Flower, Joseph-Marie of the Word Made Flesh. If the chapel were a person, it would be a little boy or a little girl in white, with neck ribbed with gold-coloured beads. A melancholic child, prone to deep thoughts and quiet intimations.

The statues are pristine. I am seated in front of our accompanist, Innocent, a Catholic. I turn and ask him, nodding at the little statue beside him, "Who's that?"

He laughs.

"Is it Jesus? Why does he look like a girl?"

"It's Mary."

"Why's she so small?"

The congregation is controlled yet free. You know from the way they sit, calmly, that nobody will burst into sudden ululations or gibberish or something called Tongues. And yet, out of

the blues—or rather out of the gold-specked whiteness—someone shouts, “Jesus, Igwe! Igwe!” The second ‘Igwe’ is inflected downwards, so that instead of King, it means Iron or Something Firm and Unmovable. A Rock. Laughter.

We usher in the priests to a song I first sang in secondary school, but not as beautifully. J-Clef Chorale is good. That gliding in the verses, from the fourth note to the fifth to the sixth: I have never heard it executed so finely. It's like ascending a staircase with smooth and slippery edges. Wonderful sopranos, but I love that the altos join in, so that Sonorous holds Soaring in a firm embrace and the soaring doesn't break the ceiling, but rains back down, a blessing.

The sermon, or homily as they call it, starts and I don't even know it. You rarely hear sermons begin this way: “I was traveling from Malawi to Kenya and along the airspace of Tanzania the alarm for announcement went off, and the announcement came from the cock-pit, ‘Look to your left and behold the beauty of the Lord.’ All eyes turned left, and behold, the peaks of the Mount Kilimanjaro.” The priest has a steady gentle smile and a voice for other things, intimate things.

Yet when I am washed all over by this after-sweetness, I remember particularly the Litany of Saints. Chanted as a duet by two friars, George and The Cute Fair Bespectacled One. I was Raised Anglican, still am an Aesthetic Anglican, but this vies with the “Veni Creator Spiritus” of my own upbringing. Maybe because Latin has wings and can soar and cover you in shawl-like tenderness. Maybe because, instead of invoking the Holy Spirit as the Veni does (in English), the Litany of Saints invokes men and women who lived and have now been lost into that darkness that brings us all to our knees. Maybe it is the repetition of *Ora pro nobis* in the reply, the infrequent intermissions of *Orate pro nobis*. Or the Y-ing of the J in such names as Sancte Johannes. Or the duet voices, blending in silky softness, milk in warm-water, melding, a dilution: three simple notes, or six, as you like it: d:- d: r: t:- riding the waves above l, :- l, : t, : s, :- // Or the interminable hum of the reply from the congregation that fills the church with such dark-light, faces shining with grace, hands clasped in transportation: Behold, the beauty of the Lord.

II

GROWING UP, I wanted to be many things—a lawyer, a doctor, an activist—one ambition sliding, in the way that childhood obsessions do, to give way for another. It was the early years, the years of

simple things, and we had become possessed by the demon of *becoming*, a demon fed by our parents' desperate optimism. *You want to become what?—a teacher!* Destiny was not a matter of what one did but of what one became: a leap from nothing and non-action into something concrete and full.

I was not yet ten when I finally decided that I would become a priest, an ambition—no, a longing—that would linger, refuse to be shone of its childish innocence. On Sundays, I wanted to be in the adult church, to watch the priests, spectral and cerulean in flowing whites, walk up the aisle, radiating a calm and contented grace. I loved the deftness of their gestures when they forgave sins: *May the Lord who forgives all who truly repent have mercy on you*—the depth of their voice, it told of a certain untouched sadness.

In their presence I embraced the gift of melancholy.

THERE are different kinds of priests. There are Anglican priests and there are Catholic priests. There are traditional priests and there are Evangelical priests. There are suave priests and there are boisterous priests. Despite being Anglican, as I grew up I found myself fascinated by the sweeping grace of Catholic priests. When they lift the Host, a gesture small and insignificant, I am fully aware of the dramatic effect of subtlety. I want to lie on the altar and be bathed in the incandescence of their glory.

WE once had a vicar in my small-town parish, a young firebrand man who skipped the liturgy on Communion Sundays and replaced it with searing gospel music. Searing, in other contexts, but in the context of Eucharist anything different from the traditional was noise. On such Sundays I felt a crippling dissatisfaction: if my stomach was a well, and you dove into it, you would hit solid ground.

But on weekdays he filled me: “Go to The Lord’s Store House,” Mum would say, and I would grumble, ashamed to be seen by him, by anybody, in my physical emptiness. But I went, anyway, and sometimes we talked about school, about what I would become and could become. Which was anything I wanted.

I HAVE a love-hate relationship with my church. I want to see women ordained and gay men accorded the full dignity of their humanity. For four years I stayed away from the Communion table, first in conflict, and then in protest. Because sometimes we begin battles and forget why we began them in the first place. I cringe during sermons and yet when I listen to the hymn tune, “Slane,” I

see myself standing in a marble white altar, decked in white, lifting my hand deftly and tenderly, to
bless: *The Lord Bless You and Keep You!*

who are these women?

OLUWATOMILOLA K. BOYINDE







in their bodies

JOSHUA OMENA

commercial sex

L AGOS IS a youth's chest—the rapid rise and fall of the upper torso of a restless young man. I presently live somewhere in Surulere, Lagos, and I am new to this city. I did my National Youth Service in a village in Plateau State and, there, I wrote and took pictures of beautiful things and scenes. The quiet and sanity in rural places can restore direction to a lost human. It was one of the best times of my life.

I followed my dreams and, as a rabbit follows a trail of cabbage to a cage, I found myself in Lagos. Lagos is like a man that promises heaven and all its glory to a woman, and then when they finally marry, he gives her hell and its flames. This city gave me a job less than a month after my first night, and then showed me yellow and black traffic, Yoruba curses, and how fast the earth truly spins. Coming home every day, I felt like an old tyre—worn, but still rolling. I think of old age, whether I would still be standing after slouching through my twenties.

Their faces carry no expressions—you see whatever you want to see. Lust. Love. Disgust. They reflect the minds of their customers who are bus conductors, Area Boys, passing soldiers and male teens finding a way to quench the new fire in their loins.

Nothing catches my attention on my journey home from work but for a bar at the beginning of my street. I don't drink alcohol, nor do I enjoy the ambience of cigar smoke and neon lights. So I don't know what calls me in that bar. Plain curiosity? Or was it the ladies that spoke like men and wore clothes that made them seem naked?

They are young girls, likely in their early to mid-twenties. From weave-on to fixed nails and lashes, they look synthetic, like rubber dolls. I never see them outside the bar, not even in shops. I hear of a Madam who owns the bar. I hear also that they sleep on the torn couches in the VIP area, that they have no home. Their faces carry no expressions—you see whatever you want to see. Lust.

Love. Disgust. They reflect the minds of their customers who are bus conductors, Area Boys, passing soldiers and male teens finding a way to quench the new fire in their loins.

I have always placed sex as sacred and intimate. Even after my experiments with porn for self-pleasure, I still think of sex as an exercise for lovers, an exchange of love. Maybe on days of lust and one night stands, sex could be something else. But imagine everyday as a one night stand—having sex with different people in exchange for money? How do they keep up with the diverse sexual needs of every customer?

I remember seeing one at the corner of the bar on my way to work. It was morning and she sat with her head buried in her exposed thighs. And as I passed, she raised her head and met my eyes. It lasted for about three seconds but I saw years of damage and pain.

**When sex is an occupation,
your needs no longer matter,
just those of your customer.**

Dealing with clients in business requires a skill in human psychology. People are like a rectum full of shit and, at any slight provocation, they mess up the air for other humans. Lagos is full of walking bottoms and they don't just fart when provoked—they dump the whole shit on whichever head they deem fit.

Having sex involves meeting the emotional and physical needs of your partner and having yours met. But when sex is an occupation, your needs no longer matter, just those of your customer.

In her eyes, I saw needs that have become weights and depression. How do they keep giving when they are mostly empty? Most men who visit brothels are not just looking for sex but for a way to channel anger, betrayal, and all kinds of bullshit. They are just looking for a head to dump the shit on in exchange for a feeling of satisfaction.

Lagos feels like the worst place for a sex worker: a place where people are always in a hurry, always frustrated, rough and angry. I wonder how these men treat the girls when seeking pleasure in her body after a rough day or week.

I think my mind is curious about living and seeing life in their bodies. To understand where they are coming from, what has broken where.

the undertakers

OSINACHI

morticians



xxiv: Evening Shadows, by Osinachi. Morticians bearing a coffin.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

ADA CHIOMA EZEANO is finishing up a postgraduate course in English Literature at Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka where she researches on Female Dependence in African Fiction. She teaches English Language and Literature. In 2014, she conducted a short story competition for secondary school students in Enugu State. She has two reviews in *9jafeminista*, another in *Critical Literature Review*, and flash fictions in *Deyu African* and elsewhere. In 2014, she participated in Writivism.

ANTHONY NONSO DIM, from Imo State, was born and raised in Lagos. He holds a B.A in philosophy from St. Joseph's Institute, South Africa. He is presently a student of the Congregation of the Missionaries of Marianhill where he's training to become a Catholic Priest. He also works as content supervisor for *Afreecanread* literary community, Kwa-Zulu Natal, and is working on his first novel.

ARINZE IFEAKANDU was born in Kano and is a graduate of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka where he edited the university literary journal *The Muse*. A 2013 alumnus of Farafina Creative Writing Workshop, he was a finalist for the 2015 BN Poetry Award. His short story, "God's Children Are Little Broken Things," won him a 2015 Emerging Writer Fellowship from *A Public Space* magazine, has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize, and is on the 2017 Caine Prize shortlist.

CHISOM OKAFOR studied Nutrition and Dietetics at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. He claims he was inspired by his father and an uncle (who were culinarians at some points in their lives).

FRANCES OGAMBA desires freedom from something she is not quite aware of. She writes to find out. Her stories appear in the *Afridiaspora* and the Writivism Prize 2016 anthologies, *Dwartonline* and *Ynaija* websites, and in *Enkare Review*. She is a workshop alumnus of Writivism 2016, Ake Fiction 2016, and Winter Tangerine 2016. She lives in Port Harcourt, Nigeria.

GBOLAHAN BADMUS is a lawyer writing stories. His works have been recently published in *Kurating*, *Saraba*, *AFREADA*, *Litro UK*, *The Missing Slate*, and *Omenana*. His short story "A Day in a

Life, A Life in a Day,” was shortlisted for the 2016 ACT Short Story Award. He is also an alumnus of the Writivism Creative Writing Workshop. He resides in Nigeria. For now.

HUSSANI ABDULRAHIM is a writer, born on 7 March, 1995, and bred in Kaduna State. Presently, he is a 200 Level student of Usmanu Danfodio University, studying Pure Chemistry. He has written a host of poems and short stories. He jointly won the Green Author Prize in 2016 and co-authored *Rainbows and Fireflies*, a collection of poems. So far, he has greatly been inspired by the works of the late Chinua Achebe, Gabriel Okara, Oswald Mitshali, etc. He is really passionate about poetry and literature as a whole.

IFE OLUJUYIGBE is a writer, editor and film critic. A Chemical Engineering graduate, her works have appeared on *Brittle Paper*, *Akoma*, *The Naked Convos*, *Short Sharp Shot Literary Magazine*, and *A Mosaic of Torn Places* anthology, to mention a few. In 2016, she won Flash Fiction Competition: Blackout and the SGNT Media Short Story Prize. She has been long-listed for the Writivism Short Story Prize, 2017, and was first runner-up in The Critic Challenge, 2017.

JENNIFER CHINENYE EMELIFE is a graduate of Literature in English. She teaches Literacy in a private school in Lagos and works as lead correspondent at *Praxis Magazine for Arts and Literature*, an online literary site. Jennifer writes fiction, nonfiction and poetry. In 2016, she participated in the Writivism Creative Nonfiction Workshop held in Accra, Ghana.

JOHN “LIGHTHOUSE” OYEWALE’s works are in *What’s On Africa*, *Short Story Day Africa*, *ITCH*, *Sankofa*, the anthology *Enter Naija: The Book of Places*, among others. A short story of his is longlisted for the 2017 Writivism Short Story Prize. In February, 2017, he, alongside 28 other African writers, was selected as a Writivism Creative Writing Programme mentee. An alumnus of the British Council, Ake Arts and Books Festival, and Goethe-Institut creative writing workshops, he now serves as fiction editor at *Praxis Magazine for Arts and Literature*.

JOSHUA OMENA is a Nigerian who grew up in the urban settlements of Lagos and Abuja. He thinks of himself as a daydreamer and a night crawler. He writes to find his way and to breathe his air. He is published by several literary sites and anthologies including *Praxis Magazine*, the Easter Anthology, *Brittle Paper*, *Afridiaponu* magazine’s *My Africa, My City* Anthology, etc. Joshua recently released a poetry chapbook titled *brave*. He currently works in Lagos as a Content Developer and a Freelance Writer.

MICHAEL E. UMOH is a graduate of Mass Communication from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. Obsessed with rock music and most things written, his works have appeared on *Brittle Paper*, *Afridiadora*, *Afreada*, *Expound* and in several anthologies. He created the cover for *Work Naija: The Book of Vocations*.

OKWUDILI NEBEOLISA's work will or have appeared in *The Threepenny Review*, *Commonwealth Writers*, *Cincinnati Review*, *Transition*, and *Salamander Magazine*. He was shortlisted for the 2016 Sillerman First Book Prize for African Poets. He currently lives in Plateau State.

OLUWATOMILOLA BOYINDE is a graduate of the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, Ladoke Akintola University of Technology (LAUTECH), Ogbomoso. He's a documentary photographer, photojournalist, photo analyst, journalist, columnist, publicist, brand strategist, social critic, public affairs analyst. He is the founder, publisher and editor of *The Masterpiece*, a visual art-centered media organization committed to bridging the gaps between contemporary Nigerian artists' world, the media, and the community. His photography chapbook, *Life Goes on in Osun*, is published by *Praxis* magazine. He won 'Most Active Campus Journalist/Best Campus Writer' at the Outstanding Students' Choice Awards of Recognition (LAUTECH 2014). He has been nominated for a host of awards: 'Media Personality' at the Think Oyo! 30 Under 30 Youth Awards in 2013; 'Best Campus Writer' and 'Most Active Campus Journalist' at the Annual Nigerian University Crest Awards (ANUCA) in 2014 and 2015; and 'Most Active Campus Journalist' at the Outstanding Students' Choice Awards of Recognition (OSCAR National) in 2015.

OSINACHI is an Aba-born poet, playwright, short story writer, essayist, and visual artist. His works have appeared in various literary outlets in Africa as well as in the United States and Italy.

OTOSIRIEZE OBI-YOUNG was born in Aba and attended the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. He was shortlisted for the 2016 Miles Morland Writing Scholarship. His short story, "You Sing of a Longing," was shortlisted for the 2016 Gerald Kraak Award. His first published story, "A Tenderer Blessing," appears in *Transition* magazine and was nominated for a Pushcart Prize in 2015. His second story, "Mulumba," appears in *The Threepenny Review* and has been translated into the German. His essays appear in *Interdisciplinary Academic Essays* and *Brittle Paper* where he is Submissions Editor. He is the editor of the Art Naija series: *Enter Naija: The Book of Places* and *Work Naija: The Book of Vocations*. He teaches English at Godfrey Okoye University, Enugu. When bored, he blogs popular culture at naijakulture.blogspot.com or just Googles Rihanna.

UMAR TURAKI is a writer and filmmaker living in Jos, Nigeria. His short fiction has appeared in publications such as *Afreada*, *Five on the Fifth*, *Ake Review*, and the Short Story Day Africa anthology, *Migrations*.

ROMEO ORIOGUN's poems have appeared in *Expound*, *Brittle Paper*, *African Writer*, *Afridiaspora*, and elsewhere. He is the author of *Burnt Men*, an electronic chapbook published by *Praxis*. He is the winner of the Brunel International African Poetry Prize 2017. He lives and writes in Nigeria.

SIBBYL WHYTE (ONYEOCHA) is a Nigerian writer subject to her headstrong chi. Her works have appeared in magazines, anthologies and other hideouts on the Internet. She is a pharmacist whose drug of choice is the Arts.

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THE LABOURS OF THE MONTHS: OF WORK AND ITS REFUSENIKS

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BY ROTIMI BABATUNDE

Not only does *Work Naija: The Book of Vocations*, edited by Otosirieze Obi-Young, make you engage afresh with the occupations addressed by its contributors, it also inspires you to reflect on the very nature of work.

Work, like piety, has long been championed as a divine duty, though that duty has needed to be fulfilled more by common folk than by the privileged. Illustration of that can be found in “The Labours of the Months” gallery of the medieval illuminated manuscript *Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*, commissioned by John, Duke of Berry, and mostly executed by the Limbourg brothers. On the gorgeous vellum pages of that calendar cycle, peasants are shown dutifully tilling the earth and shearing sheep, harvesting grapes in September and shivering before a niggardly fire in the wintery chill of February. But the Duke of Berry and other royals are only seen cavorting in the vicinity of their numerous chateaux and revelling in the blood sport of falconry and exchanging lavish gifts on New Year’s Eve. Very rich hours, indeed—until the plague, apparently, came in 1416, and death, without discrimination, swept away the art-collecting Duke and many of the peasants he considered his and the artistic geniuses that were the Limbourg brothers, leaving unfinished the illuminated book of hours that connected them all.

The affinity between work and piety was recognized as far back as antiquity by Hesiod. He said in *Works and Days*, “Both gods and men are angry with a man who lives idle, for in nature he is like the stingless drones who waste the labour of the bees, eating without working.” That Hellenic sentiment is shared by diverse societies across time and space. The apala bard Haruna Ishola begins his song “Oníṣé Nṣiṣé” with this line: “The worker is up and about, but the indolent sleeps on, behaving like a king”. That mockery is in line with this proverb from Haruna’s Yoruba culture: “The sluggard says that on the day Death comes, happiness will be his. But Death replies that he’ll delay his coming to compound the sluggard’s misery.” In the sixth century, Pope Gregory I enshrined sloth, which inevitably broadened beyond its initial emphasis on the spiritual, among the Seven Deadly Sins. And several centuries later, Dante, in the *Divine Comedy*, imagined shirkers like the

Abbot of St Zeno being compelled to run in penance around the Terrace of Sloth, recounting the deeds of the diligent like a playlist on repeat.

Not even ostensibly secular societies have found it unbecoming to participate in the consecration of hard work. The Soviet Union, as if run by a politburo of pious red Calvinists, turned the champion miner Alexey Stakhanov, despite the queries raised about his feats, into an icon of national veneration. And in 1964 the Soviets put the future Nobel Prize in Literature winner Joseph Brodsky on a show trial and sentenced him to five years of forced labour for the crime of “social parasitism” (defined by Article 209 of the Criminal Code as “evading socially useful work and leading an antisocial and parasitic way of life”). The Nazis also invented a similar category of criminality. They condemned thousands, including people of Romani ethnicity, to hard labour in concentration camps after labelling them *arbeits-scheu*. Workshy. And it must not be forgotten that the stereotyping of people of non-European descent as lazy was one of the pretexts for colonialism.

In the face of work’s widespread valorisation, the question needs to be asked: Beyond possibly increasing the chances of basic subsistence, what percentage of the diligent does hard work lift from one economic class into another? Or to put the same question, using Nigerian Pidgin, bluntly: *Who work help?*

In an attempt to answer that question, a 2015 study of the Pew Charitable Trusts, “Economic Mobility in the United States”, concludes, “The analysis makes it clear that children born into different economic circumstances can expect very distinct economic futures. The degree to which family advantage is transmitted suggests that opportunities for economic success are very unequally distributed. Although no one would be surprised that children from higher-income families enjoy some advantages, this report reveals them to be dramatic.” The same study states that “not only are the earnings of men higher than those of women at each level of parental income, but the average IGE [intergenerational elasticity] for women is more than 40 percent lower than that for men. It follows that, although men and women both benefit from being born into higher-income families, men secure this advantage disproportionately via their own earnings.”

That’s not all. A 2016 survey by the Pew Research Center on the economic realities of black and white households in the United States makes this grim observation: “In 2013, the most recent year available, the median net worth of households headed by whites was roughly 13 times that of black households.” It also notes that “even among adults with a bachelor’s degree, blacks earned significantly less than whites”.

These studies show that other factors are more critical to the attainment of comfort and affluence than hard work. (That dreadful sound you are hearing is nothing strange: just class, gender and racial discrimination hammering nails into the coffin of the American Dream—that myth of equal opportunity.) Numerous studies in other countries have, adjusting for context, arrived at findings that agree with the ones above. In the light of that knowledge, one cannot but think that the tragedy of Okonkwo in Chinua Achebe’s trailblazing *Things Fall Apart* would have been averted if the character had realised that neither hard work nor masculine bravado could have ameliorated his true impoverishment: the second-class status foisted upon him by the Europeans who reduced him and his people to mere subjects of the British Empire.

“Leisure is better than occupation and is its end,” wrote Aristotle in Book VIII of his *Politics*. But if, for the reasons outlined above, hard work does not guarantee the attainment of leisure, we must shed a tear or two for the much-loved, hardworking characters in literature, belief and folklore. John Henry, whose victory over the white man’s steam drill threw no spanner in the wheels of his country’s racist political and economic machinery. Long-suffering Joe Gargery, blackened by the forge, henpecked by the combustible Mrs Joe and abandoned by his food-wolfing pal Pip in Charles Dickens’ *Great Expectations*. Martha of Bethany, patron saint of servants and cooks, put down by Christ with words that were little different in essence from the ones he directed at the devil: “Man shall not live by bread alone.” And, of course, *Animal Farm*’s Boxer, who confronted every challenge with the motto “I will work harder”. Ultimately, after working himself into terminal exhaustion, Napoleon and his porcine gang promptly dispatched Boxer to the knacker’s in exchange, hints the novel, for a case of whisky.

As we empathise with these hardworking heroes of literature, simultaneously celebrating its true rebels—the loafers and wastrels who subvert the suspect burgher morality of hard work with their delinquency and mischievousness—is necessary. Notable among them is Oblomov, the eponymous antihero of Ivan Goncharov’s 19th-century novel, who spends his days lying in bed and bickering with Zakhar, his likewise apathetic manservant. “Lying down was not for Oblomov a necessity, as it is for a sick man or for a man who is sleepy; or a matter of chance, as it is for a man who is tired; or a pleasure, as it is for a lazy man: it was his normal condition,” said the narrator in Goncharov’s novel.

And there is Nkem Nwankwo’s Danda, one of the great comic characters in literature, whose notoriety as an *akalogholi*, a good-for-nothing, earned him the nickname Rain. His father

Araba had charted a respectable path for him, but Danda, typically dressed in a cloak adorned with tinkling bells, preferred playing the flute and dancing, flouting communal taboos and getting drunk on palm wine. Talking of palm wine drinking, mention must be made of literature's foremost aficionado of that art, Amos Tutuola's the Palm-Wine Drinkard. Here is the Drinkard telling us, in his inimitable voice, about his lifelong aversion to hard work: "I was a palm-wine drinkard since I was a boy of ten years of age. I had no other work more than to drink palm-wine in my life.... My father got eight children and I was the eldest among them, all the rest were hard workers, but I myself was an expert palm-wine drinkard. I was drinking palm-wine from morning till night and from night till morning."

Among literature's famous slackers, Unoka, Okonkwo's father in *Things Fall Apart*, deserves special acknowledgement if class is taken into consideration. Oblomov, Danda and the Palm-Wine Drinkard had the considerable wealth of their different families as safety nets, but Unoka did not have such resources to call upon: he had to survive by guile and debt (as demonstrated by his encounter with his creditor Okoye) since the poetry of his musicianship could not put food on his table. Unoka's daring rejection of the goals prescribed for men by his society—numerous yam barns, wives and titles—is anti-materialist rebellion of the purest kind.

Let us imagine Oblomov—who does not even move from his bed to his dressing table until well into the novel that has him as its central character—arriving in Dante's afterlife and being told to explain why he shouldn't be made to undergo the dizzying penance of running round and round the Terrace of Sloth. And let us also imagine Unoka docked before Mme Saveleva, the judge in Joseph Brodsky's 1964 trial, attempting to defend himself against the charge of social parasitism. The excerpts below from the proceedings of that trial, transcribed by the brave Frida Vigdorova and translated by Michael R. Katz, leave no doubt about what Unoka's fate in Mme Saveleva's court would have been.

JUDGE: What do you do for a living?

BRODSKY: I write poetry. I translate. I suppose. . .

JUDGE: Never mind what you "suppose". Stand up properly. Don't lean against the wall. Look at the court. Answer the court properly. (*To me* [Vigdorova]) Stop taking notes immediately! Or else—I'll have you thrown out of the courtroom. (*To Brodsky*) Do you have a regular job?

BRODSKY: I thought this was a regular job.

JUDGE: Answer correctly!

BRODSKY: I was writing poems. I thought they'd be published. I suppose. . .

JUDGE: We're not interested in what you "suppose". Tell us why you weren't working.

BRODSKY: I had contracts with a publisher.

JUDGE: Did you have enough contracts to earn a living? List them: with whom, what dates, and for what sums of money?

BRODSKY: I don't remember exactly. My lawyer has all the contracts.

JUDGE: I'm asking you.

Mme Saveleva—hardworking judge that she is—harasses Brodsky some more, demanding for details of his employment history. And then she goes for the jugular.

JUDGE: And, in general, what is your specific occupation?

BRODSKY: Poet. Poet-translator.

JUDGE: And who said you're a poet? Who ranked you among poets?

BRODSKY: No one. (*Unsolicted*) Who ranked me as a member of the human race?

JUDGE: Did you study for this?

BRODSKY: Study for what?

JUDGE: To become a poet. Did you attend some university where people are trained . . . where they're taught . . .

BRODSKY: I didn't think it was a matter of education.

JUDGE: How, then?

BRODSKY: I think that . . . (*perplexed*) it comes from God . . .

Judge Saveleva would have found Unoka guilty of the allegation levelled against Brodsky, just as Oblomov would have been subjected to the same penance the Abbot of St Zeno had to endure in Purgatory. Evidently, sloth and social parasitism, conceptualised centuries apart, are just two sides of a coin: the devil always invents crimes for idle hands. But Brodsky was busy writing poetry, Oblomov reflecting on existence as if he were a precursor to Paul Valéry's Monsieur Teste, Unoka playing the flute, Danda causing mischief, and the Palm-wine Drinkard traversing the realms of the living, the dead and the unborn in search of his tapster. So they were employed in activity of some kind. Rather than convicting the aforementioned of sloth or social parasitism, a judge with a penchant for fine—even if ultimately immaterial—linguistic distinctions might find it more fitting to convict them all of another charge: play.

Play, like sloth, is oppositional to work. However, unlike sloth, play and work connote engagement in activity; the key difference is that play, unlike work, is activity directed towards ends that are not utilitarian. Play is an adventure undertaken for its own sake, without any functional purpose and without material profit as an objective. Play seeks to contribute nothing to the GDP of any country. Play, as conceived here, is not, as some might presume, a rest or holiday from work.

Aristotle, in *Politics*, considers such interludes mere “medicine for the ills of work”, not “leisure”. Play, even if it sounds less pejorative than sloth or social parasitism, is broadly synonymous with them in the transgressive sense that Chinua Achebe, in his essay “Work and Play in Amos Tutuola’s *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*”, brilliantly captures thus: the raising of “pleasure to the status of work or occupation”.

If play is transgression, many of the best minds in history stand guilty of it. The modernist artist Paul Klee found nothing more worthwhile to do with his time than dreaming of “taking a line for a walk” in his bid, like Kandinsky’s, to wrench out novel realities from the abstract. Benjamin Franklin’s fooling around with a kid’s kite in the storm and Luigi Galvani’s gross play in the lab with frogs’ legs were so economically worthless that the story had to be invented of England’s future Prime Minister William Gladstone asking Michael Faraday, decades after Franklin and Galvani had died, if electricity had any value. The daunting wordplay and formal ambition of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* had attenuated the novel’s commercial prospects even before its sexual frankness, by the standards of the day, caused it to be banned in several countries, including the United States where the Postal Department routinely burnt copies of the book. And Bernhard Riemann’s thesis on the geometry of higher-dimensional spaces was so devoid of practical value at the time of its formulation that it could have been the rumbling described in this line from traditional Yoruba poetry: “All to no purpose is the rumbling among the elephant-grass bushes.”

Ironically, it is the very purposelessness of play that enables it to enrich our world in ways that transcend the quotidian. In “Work and Play in Amos Tutuola’s *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*”, Chinua Achebe’s earlier-mentioned laudatory essay on Tutuola’s novel, Achebe says that the Drinkard’s “refusal to work cannot be a simple ‘self-regarding act’ but is a social and moral offence of colossal consequence”. Achebe goes on to say that, after the novel’s opening sentences, the Drinkard “proceeds to spend the rest of the book on the punishment he undergoes in atonement for his offence and then a fairly brief coda on his restoration”. But the Drinkard’s journey in search of his dead tapster reads more coherently as an extension of the Drinkard’s commitment to play—even a celebration of it—rather than as a “punishment” for his “offence”. The novel provides no evidence that the Drinkard’s journey to the Deads’ Town reformed him into a conscientious worker. After his return from the journey, the Drinkard says, “I sent for 200 kegs of palm-wine and drank it with my old friends as before I left home.” A few pages later, he adds, “I had become the greatest man in my town and I did no other work than to command the egg to produce food and drinks.” The Drinkard’s “restoration” advanced by Achebe is not vindicated by Tutuola’s novel.

Without the Drinkard's devotedness to the "offence" of play, he would not have embarked on the adventure that enriched him with marvels like the kind Faithful Mother, the red inhabitants of the Red Town, the Spirit of Prey with its mercury-coloured eyes, and the 400 dead babies marching towards the Deads' Town—experiences that the conventional lives of his seven hardworking siblings could never have thrown up. The Greek poet C.P Cavafy's sings about the beauties of such adventures in his "Ithaka": "May there be many a summer morning when,/ with what pleasure, what joy,/ you come into harbours seen for the first time;/.../Ithaka gave you the marvellous journey./Without her you would not have set out."

The benefits of play, though, are not only intangible. Because play's free-spirited explorations lead to "harbours seen for the first time", it often lays the foundation for the creation of material benefits that those who dedicate themselves to it cannot envisage. Paul Klee could not have foreseen that his ruminations on line and colour—which formed the bedrock of his pedagogy at the Bauhaus—and the equally rarefied meditations of such colleagues of his like Kandinsky would have an influence so ubiquitous on the design of buildings, furniture and industrial products around us that we have almost stopped noticing it. Nor could Joyce have anticipated the huge tourist draw Bloomsday would become in Dublin and other cities around the world. Or Galvani and Franklin that their messing around with frogs' legs and kites, respectively, will one-day usher in our electricity-dependent world. (This, apocryphally, was Faraday's response to Gladstone's question about the usefulness of electricity: "Why, sir, there is every probability that you will soon be able to tax it.") And Riemann could not have predicted that his seemingly redundant conceptualisation of the geometric properties of spaces unfamiliar to human reality will not just remain a mathematical curiosity but will, decades later, become crucial to the emergence of Einstein's Theory of General Relativity—a gravitational model of the universe that makes possible the existence of the GPS satellites that navigate our planes and cars and make location-based services possible on our smartphones. All work and no play makes the world a stagnant place. Playing hard turns out not to be as useless as it might appear.

Work Naija: The Book of Vocations gives us the privilege of observing some of Nigeria's most stimulating writers, artists and photographers of the younger generation playing hard with the theme of hard work. The publication of the anthology is timely: in Nigeria and around the world, emerging realities are currently destabilising traditional assumptions about the connection between work and income. As the rapid advances being made in the field of robotics continue to imbue the long-deferred nightmare of the Luddites with contemporary relevance, the prospect that intelligent

machines, working more efficiently and at cheaper costs, will soon make a wide variety of professions extinct has led to calls in many countries for the introduction of a universal basic income, to be paid by the government to all citizens. And in Nigeria, a freer press and more vigorous citizen journalism, deploying the new tools provided by information technology, have bared the extraordinary dimensions of corruption by public office holders, initiating a crisis of confidence in the populace about the hitherto sacrosanct belief in the correlation between work and wealth. That eroding confidence in the connection between both is being undermined even further by prosperity preachers, whose message is premised on the logic of divorcing wealth from work and linking wealth with divine grace, aided by “seed sowing”. Let somebody shout hallelujah.

Work Naija: The Book of Vocations contributes to these national and international conversations in direct and oblique ways. The anthology is gorgeous, like the Limbourg brothers’ *Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*; in contrast, though, *Work Naija: The Book of Vocations* brings to bear on the discourse of work critical perspectives that are absent in the medieval volume.

In the manner of all great adventures, *Work Naija: The Book of Vocations* enriches us with many memorable encounters in the course of its unfolding: Chisom Okafor’s stunning, masterly poem on chefs and their “*food-universe*” of the kitchen; Ada Chioma Ezeano and Joshua Omena’s thought-provoking portraits of commercial sex workers and their patrons; Ife Olujuyigbe’s droll insights on the salon habits of hairdressers; and Otosirieze Obi-Young’s autobiographical exploration of the fine qualities that distinguish barbers from one another. There is also the bold iconography of flattened shapes and vivid colours Osinachi deploys in his artworks to capture the realities of musicians, churches, red-light districts, nomads and undertakers; Frances Ogamba’s touching depiction of the quiet dignity of dumpsite scavengers; Anthony Nonso Dim’s take on Roman Catholic clergy and their parishioners, with its startling ending; John “Lighthouse” Oyewale’s learned investigation of the ways photographers see, concretised with metaphors from the animal world; and Michael E. Umoh’s spotlighting of the self-confidence of tricycle drivers and akara sellers.

Look out for TJ Benson’s celebratory, expressive photographs of working women; Tochi Eze’s illumination of the hidden lives of kiosk owners; Jennifer Emelife’s frank piece on society’s unrealistic expectations of teachers; Gbolahan Badmus’ heart-breaking story on the travails of a job hunter; fishermen and their enchantment with waters in Abdulrahim Hussani’s poem; and the sacrament of maternal love in Romeo Oriogun’s contribution, which draws correspondences between the Crucifixion and the daily sacrifices hawkers make for their families. And also check out

the fascinating teasing-out of parallels between beggars, motorpark preachers and politicians in Umar Turaki's reflections; Arinze Ifeakandu's nuanced, ambivalent take on priests, the liturgy, and the luminous music of the church; Oluwatomilola Boyinde's compelling black-and-white photographs of workers persevering in a time of economic downturn; and Sibbyl Whyte's witty imagining of the career progression of prosperity preachers.

More could be said about these artists and their contributions to the anthology, but what's more delightful than an adventure directly experienced? Reader, wouldn't you rather wish to set out on the journey into *Work Naija: The Book of Vocations* yourself?