14 #2

Can you imagine the day, for which I long, when you can walk unmasked among us? Your truth our truth. Your hurt our wound.

– TAIYE SELASI

The Inward Gaze

Akola Thompson
Arinze Ifeakandu
Chinthu Udayarajan
Chisom Okafor
Chukwudi Eternal Udoye
Cisi Eze
Ebenezer Agu
Erhu Amreyan
Frankie Edozien
Ibk
Ibukun Ayobami
Karen Jennings
Kiprop Kimutai
Louis
Mal Muga
Onwubiko Chidozie
Osinachi
Otosirieze
Patrick Chuka
Saji Ahsan Dipra
Troy Onyango
Unoma Azuah

Our society, societies everywhere, say love is love but within a certain social sanction. I say love is love.

- GBENGA ADESINA

14:

AN ANTHOLOGY OF QUEER ART

NO. 2

THE INWARD GAZE

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Cover typeset and design: Osinachi

14

The 14 Team

Editor
Rapum Kambili

Fiction/Nonfiction Editors
Absalom
Nzeogwu

Poetry Editor
Ifedimma Osakwe

Art Editor
Osinachi

Publicity/Social Media Managers
Pink Panther
Laura Ahmed

Contact:

Gmail:
Rainbowanniversarynigeria@gmail.com

Twitter:
@naijaqueerart

The Inward Gaze *is dedicated to every LGBTQ Nigerian who has shown courage and humanity, refusing to shrink in the face of violence and homophobia. And to our communities all over Africa.*

Contents

09 *note*
The Inward Gaze
THE EDITOR

10 *snippet*
Dear Chinedu
TAIYE SELASI
Your real name is…
a sensory delight

12 *fiction*
Pretty Young Thing
ARINZE IFEAKANDU
His heart is acting like a man
about to cum

22 *fiction*
Tangled Ends
CISI EZE
Whatever you felt with 'Danna
was too good

34 *poetry*
Nella
KAREN JENNINGS
We were drawn to one another/
and afraid to be found out

36 *poetry*
Patience
ONWUBIKO CHIDOZIE
Attraction is what holds the eye

37 *photography*
We are Men
LOUIS

40 *poetry*
Woman
UNOMA AZUAH
Your body is the landscape that elevates me

42 *poetry*
Two Poems
CHINTHU UDAYARAJAN
Purple Rain
Sinfully

44 *drawing*
The Struggle of a Rainbow
PATRICK CHUKA

48 *memoir*
Ajar
IBK
I wanted to tell her that I was enough

55 *conversation*
Questioning the Point of Pain
TROY ONYANGO *with*
CHIKE FRANKIE EDOZIEN
Where is the outrage?

64 *painting*
Don't let the Bastards
Get You Down
IBUKUN AYOBAMI

66 *snippet*
Dear Cousin
GBENGA ADESINA
Love's only sanction should be kindness

67 *poetry*
Two Poems
CHISOM OKAFOR
A Nigerian Recipe for Queerness
You Come from So Many Places

70 *visual art*
Three Pieces
OSINACHI

75 *fiction*
The One I am Not
ERHU AMREYAN
He stands in the shadows

80 *fiction*
The Black Unicorn
KIPROP KIMUTAI
Swirls of holy-looking light skitter across his forehead

92 *photography*
The Birth of a Rainbow
CHUKWUDI ETERNAL UDOYE

98 *photography*
Komboa
MAL MUGA

102 *poetry*
Two Poems
EBENEZER AGU
Our Bodies, like Gethsemane I & II

106 *poetry*
Three Poems
SAJID AHSAN DIPRA
My Amygdala
Second Generation Air Pump
A Garden Full of Love

110 *fiction*
The man
LOUIS
These wrong places are temporary solutions

115 *fiction*
A Sheltered Life
OTOSIRIEZE
Here was a man struck by a peculiar loneliness

121 *poetry*
Rain
AKOLA THOMPSON
I'd grown grey with anger at my own fear

The Inward Gaze

THE EDITOR

The LGBTQ community in Nigeria has experienced so much since the publication of our first issue, *We are Flowers*, a year ago. 2017 saw the violent attacks on artists of queer expression, the arrest of some forty young men who had gathered for HIV sensitization, the raiding of rooms of LGBTQ students, and widespread backlash in the literary community to the emergence—or, rather, *flourishing*—of gifted queer voices in the literary space. These things, and many more, are capable of causing rage (and we *are* pissed), of driving the gaze outside and shining it on the object of provocation. And yet, here we are, with pieces that look inward, unconcerned by the Outside Gaze. Our artists are speaking a language they have spoken in safe spaces, in rooms full of queer people, and they are speaking it fluently, in works that are sometimes 'loud' and sometimes tender. They are in love, they are angry, they are heartbroken, they've just had sex—whatever stories our contributors are telling, they are confident that they will be understood.

The Snippets by Taiye Selasi and Gbenga Adesina, heartfelt wishes for people they cherish, share a common vision: That a day would come when their beloveds will be *seen*. The works in this issue reflect that longing to be seen: By a lover or a love interest, a parent, oneself. Yet, by looking inward, we have all been seen, fully and in perfect light, by one another.

—*Rapum Kambili*

snippet

Dear Chinedu,

Can you imagine that—for your safety—I am not using your real name? (Your real name which is, like the rest of you, a sensory delight. Delicious.) Can you imagine that now, still now, you feel anything other than safe here? And not because of them—the Others, who cannot see you—but because of your Own, who do. Can you imagine our blindness? That we look at you—and I call us "we" because we look *like* you—and see anything other than your radiant beauty, which is your radiant humanity, ablaze? Can you imagine the day, for which I long, when you can walk unmasked among us? Nude in the truth of your love and uncurling, free, toward the light? Your truth our truth. Your hurt our wound. Her love your joy. Our love the light. Can you imagine, my beautiful Chinedu, how safe and welcome and wanted you are? You are brave but I wish that you did not have to be, for I see you beneath your armor soft: petal-fragile and painite-precious. Worthy of our protection. You are courageous, yes, but I pray for the day when your courage is unnecessary. When all that is needed and wanted and safe here is you, just as you are.

—Taiye Selasi

fiction

Pretty Young Thing

arinze ifeakandu

1.

On a normal day, Obinna would have scrolled past the People You May Know section of Facebook, but it is a dull day today, he has piled all his work for later, when he doesn't feel a languor in his bones, and the face on his laptop screen is the most beautiful thing he has seen in a long time. It stills him. How can a smile be so perfect? he thinks, and clicks on the profile, devouring all the pictures he can find, his being not yet charged with longing but twitching with its beginning. He lingers on a picture in which the boy has his head thrown back, his mouth open in a laughter so unaware of itself, its caption throws Obinna into a state of nebulous yearning. "For you, a thousand times over," the caption says, "—Khaled Hosseini, *The Kite Runner*," and Obinna thinks:

Days later, they are chatting like old best friends who, reconnecting after years of silence, must catch up on all the years they have been apart, first in fits and starts, heys and hellos and how's work/schools thrown about like bird seed, before easing into smooth-sailing conversation punctuated by haha-s and lmao-s. Thanks to *The Kite Runner,* which Obinna ordered on Kindle right

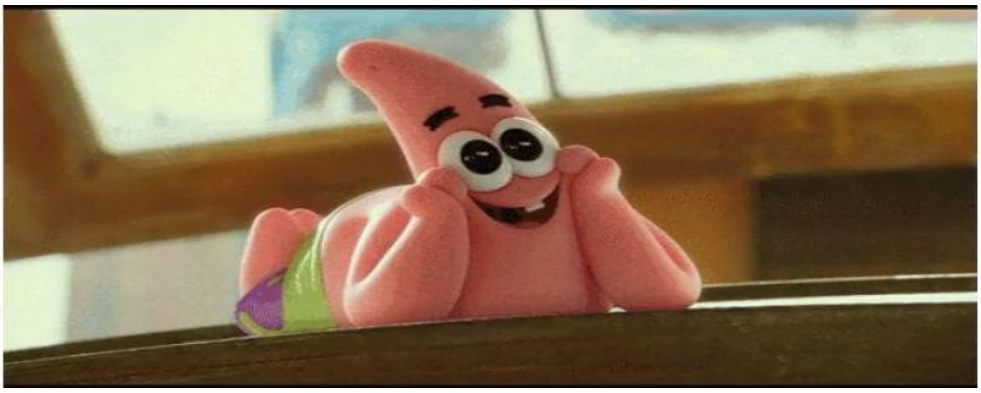
after he'd sent a friend request, their beginning had been shorn of the awkward loitering of social media acquaintanceships. So:

The boy, Essien, is a final-year student of Statistics at the University of Calabar, even though he hates his course, jeez, how come nobody suggested Literature when, filling out his admission forms as a sixteen-year-old five years ago, he had been naïve and clueless? Literature can be appreciated by anybody, Obinna tells him, Unless you want to be an academic critic, which, trust me, is boring af! 😄

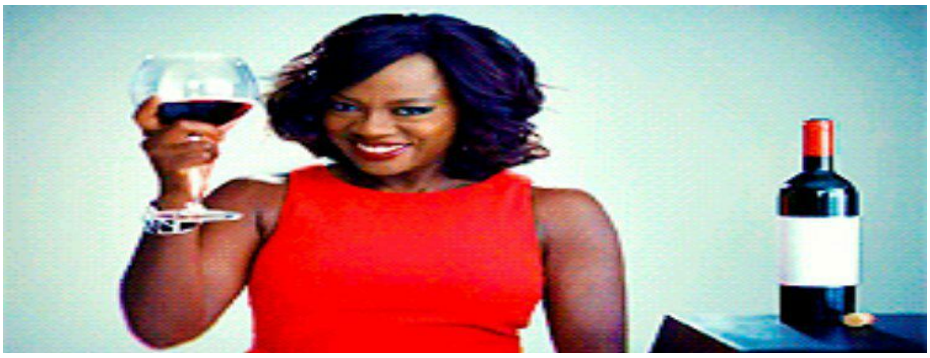
I know, right? Essien responds. ☺

Days later, they are chatting like old best friends who, reconnecting after years of silence, must catch up on all the years they have been apart.

Soon they are texting on WhatsApp and having long calls that stretch into the night. Obinna who, at thirty-two, has had years of loving and losing, lies on his bed, smiling into his phone, a teenager newly in love.



When Essien starts ending his texts with Miss you and Goodnight sweetheart 😘, when he begins calling every evening to know how Obinna's day had been (calls which Obinna rarely picks up, choosing instead to call back), when he asks Obinna for the first time, "Have you eaten?" and, finally, "I really like you. I want to visit," Obinna thinks: OMG, it's happening! It. Is. Happening. It is evening, the sun has pierced the sky with its waning light, so that Sky bleeds yellow, orange, red. After the phone call which lasts a long time, Obinna slides onto the floor, the tiles cold on his bare legs. His heart is acting like a man about to cum, it lacks rhythm, as though in a hurry to get somewhere. When he stands up and walks around the house, his feet feel delicate, cushioned by soft wool, his head swimming in the lightness of the promise of a beginning. He wants to open a bottle of André and water his joy, like:



Instead, he lies on his bed, his heart swelling and swelling, his throat perched, the fire in his body doused by an irrational fear.

2.

After that evening, Essien's texts get more and more personal, more and more suggestive, until they become bold declarations of the things he would do to Obinna, such as, fuck you till your legs give way and, make you choke on this 😜. And he sends Obinna a picture of his dick. Obinna gasps, like, wtf:

> His heart is acting like a man about to cum, it lacks rhythm, as though in a hurry to get somewhere.

He had sent the picture without warning, and Obinna cannot say for sure if his colleague saw it, although he really doubts that she did, otherwise she would have gone all, "Hmmm, Obinna, this one a guy is sending you a picture of his penis," to which he would have given the scathing retort that has been singeing his tongue ever since she became obsessively interested in his business.

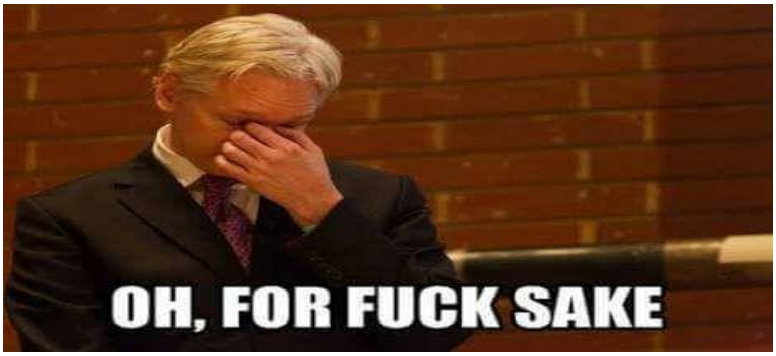
Wow, he types, not, Nudes make me uncomfortable, which is really what he wants to say.

Wow? Essien types back after a few minutes. Just wow?

It's beautiful. He hovers over his keypad, unsure. I can't wait to see you. I'd love to choke on it.

He feels like an idiot typing this. Who is he fooling, really, talking like that? He does not like being choked or spanked, he is comfortably agnostic, but in bed, he is a born again Christian, speaking in tongues if the D is good but never cursing. But he is afraid that Essien, pretty, young Essien whose pictures and posts are liked and loved and wowed and haha-ed by hundreds and hundreds of people, will sense his ordinariness and disappear.

Hours after his last message, there is no response, even though it shows that the message has been read. Obinna knows what not to do, but he does it anyway; he cannot help himself, he is totally freaking OUT. I don't want to be your fuck buddy, he types. I want to be your lover, someone you can lean on when in need. I want us to support each other. I really, really care about you, Essien. You are not just another potential hook-up to me. And then he's like, to send or not to send. He sends the message, after which he buries his face in his hands.



His phone clinks, the sound it makes when he receives a message on WhatsApp or Facebook, it is the sound of clinking glass. It is Essien: Lol, ok.

> Who is he fooling, really, talking like that? He does not like being choked or spanked, he is comfortably agnostic, but in bed, he is a born again Christian, speaking in tongues if the D is good but never cursing.

For a few days, they slip into the awkwardness that had been absent in their beginning, like teenage lovers who, having imagined what went where and how, did not factor in angles, and were now bewildered by all the undignified fumbling involved. Soon, they are worn out by all the heys and hellos and near-monosyllabic correspondences. The day Obinna sends a message—Hello, dear. I hope you're having a stress-less day? Let me know when I can call you—and Essien reads but does not respond, Obinna decides that what he had called a flame had merely been the delicate flapping of blue wings, and now the insect to which it belonged has flown away. He feels hurt, but what can a man do? He goes out in the evening and has a beer by himself.

A few months pass with no words between them. It would surprise Obinna how easily he moved on, how shallow the roots are when we've never seen a person's face in the flesh, but he is too

inundated in the exercise of living to linger for the surprise, too tired at the end of each workday, too frustrated at his boss's highhandedness. When he returns home, all he wants to do is microwave his dinner, have a warm bath and be lulled by the lacklustre mumbling of CNN. Sometimes, though, he remembers Essien. But his memories are blunt, and he remembers only the superficial things, he remembers Essien's face, so fiercely handsome, it seemed almost unreal, and his shirtless body from the post-workout pictures on Instagram, and his dick, *lord,* his dick. And he does the needful:

3.

He wakes up one morning to six missed calls. Essien? Wow. It is Saturday, late in the morning, sunlight pours in through the windows, floods the bed, the dresser. Obinna stretches and yawns, walks into the toilet, pees, brushes his teeth, mops the kitchen, the living room, the bathroom. He showers, puts on the generator, makes himself a cup of tea and settles on the couch, ready for a day of Netflix. It is only then that he turns on his data and goes on WhatsApp where Essien has sent multiple messages, each toppling the other in franticness.

How have you been, sweetheart?

So, so sorry for my silence. Been going thru a lot.

I was set-up months ago. I was brutalized, lost my phone and laptop wit chapters of my project in it.

No back-up whatsoever. Totally traumatized. Ddn't feel like I was healthy enough emotionally to talk to you.

Please talk to me.

Hello?

Sweetheart?

Obinna sits up on the couch, staring at his phone, like:

But a week did not pass when you did not upload a shirtless pic on Instagram, Obinna thinks.

He is shocked at his own thoughts. He dials Essien who picks up after the first ring. "Are you okay?"

"I've missed you," Essien says.

"Me too."

> It would surprise Obinna how easily he moved on, how shallow the roots are when we've never seen a person's face in the flesh, but he is too inundated in the exercise of living to linger for the surprise.

When Obinna asks, again, if he is okay, Essien says he's broke and almost breaking down, he might even have to defer his project since he doesn't have any money to print questionnaires. He sounds exhausted, resigned, and Obinna thinks about his years in university, the days he went to class having eaten nothing, the humiliation of asking a classmate for lunch money. He says, "How much do you need?"

"No, don't bother yourself."

"How much do you need, young man?"

"Ten thousand," Essien says.

"Send me your account details after the call."

They talk a bit more, Essien's voice bright and laughter-tinged, it fills Obinna with a sense of power, that he can cause such reaction in Essien with a mere promise fills him with a sense of power. He had meant to transfer fifteen thousand after the phone call. He transfers twenty.

For a week, they are happy again, falling back into old routines, picking up pieces of the things they had left behind.

> He has spent all his life folding into himself, a tactic against a life cluttered with hurts, a beginning sullied by need, both material and intrinsic.

Until Essien's birthday when, in a moment of unchecked mushiness, Obinna tags him to a Facebook post: I met you at a time when Silence was the only voice I ever heard, when loneliness was my bed-mate, and you became more than a friend. I was afraid to approach you, seeing how much of a celebrity you are 😁 but you made it easier, opening yourself to a person you did not know and healing me in the process. In a world where beauty and youth are associated with fickleness, you show that both are not only necessary, but can also exist alongside intelligence and responsibility. You are a gem and I am fortunate to know you. Happy birthday, man 😉.

> Obinna decides that what he had called a flame had merely been the delicate flapping of blue wings, and now the insect to which it belonged has flown away.

After clicking the Upload button, Obinna leaves his phone on the bed and wanders around the house. He feels open, exposed, a roofless house on a rainy day. This is not him, this publicly vulnerable person, it is not him. He has spent all his life folding into himself, a tactic against a life cluttered with hurts, a beginning sullied by need, both material and intrinsic. It occurs to him that his flat has only seen the bodies of his siblings who visit during certain school breaks, that his bed has not yet known the sweat of any other man but him, that his couches and curtains have never borne witness to the gossip of friends.

> They talk a bit more, Essien's voice bright and laughter-tinged, it fills Obinna with a sense of power, that he can cause such reaction in Essien with a mere promise fills him with a sense of power.

He returns to his room and picks up his phone. He has several missed calls from Essien. He calls back. The phone rings and rings, the caller's tune is a new song by Simi, *Joromi, Joromi*, she sings, *I want you to love me*. There is no answer. On Facebook, his notifications say: 122 people liked your post, 80 people reacted to your post, 91 people commented on your post. All his years on Facebook, he's never gotten more than fifteen reactions until now. It feels like a stampede, something to survive, but it feels good, too.

Scrolling down the notifications, he finds: Essien reacted to your post 😩. Bewildered, he types in Essien's ID, but nothing shows up. On WhatsApp, he has received two messages from Essien:

Dude, I have folks buzzing me to ask if you're my boyfriend. Did you go running your mouth?

No no no, man. Fucking delete that post. WTF!

He goes back on Facebook, re-reads his post. Re-reads it again. Reads the comments, all of which can be summarized in four emojis: ❣□🎁😍☺.

> For a few days, they slip into the awkwardness that had been absent in their beginning, like teenage lovers who, having imagined what went where and how, did not factor in angles, and were now bewildered by all the undignified fumbling involved.

He deletes the post. Comes on WhatsApp. Types: I'm sorry my post offended you, but you should know I meant no harm and could have communicated your objection to me like an adult. Now that you've blocked me on Facebook, what have you gained? Is this how you throw away friendships?

The message does not deliver. He sits on his bed, looking out the window, his head full of confusion, his chest swelling with the sadness-dampened anger of the betrayed. He falls on his bed, like:

fiction

Tangled Ends

cisi eze

You had gone to the salon that Sunday evening to let go of your weaves and wash your hair. You could have used a razor blade to cut the thread the hairdresser used to stitch the weaves to your hair while staring at the mirror in your bedroom. After that, you could have washed your hair under the shower. When you were done, you could have put on your generator, turned on your hair drier, and dried your hair. You could have taken out the flat iron, partitioned your hair into segments, applied hair cream that promised to prevent hair breakage, and used the beauty device to straighten out the curls of your hair. It would hurt when the edge of the steaming device touched your sensitive scalp, but beauty in a Black woman's hair has never come easy. Like your mother, you had learnt chemicals and artificial heat were the penance for the sin your natural hair was. You could have arrived at beauty's door all by yourself, but you decided to go to the salon.

On stepping in to the air-conditioned salon, you took it in with one sweeping glance. Albeit it looked the same every time, it *felt* different, because different women came with different stories. That evening, the salon was filled up as expected. Luckily, there was an empty seat beside another woman. She had fair skin, with a dark-brown afro that framed her face, like a mane. You felt the six-inch afro was unruly, and suddenly, your fingers itched to comb through it. In her hand was a book. *Audre Lorde. Zami.*

> ...beauty in a Black woman's hair has never come easy. Like your mother, you had learnt chemicals and artificial heat were the penance for the sin your natural hair was.

Your arm brushed hers as you sat in the seat. She did not flinch. Out of curiosity, you let your eyes follow the lines of her face. She was beautiful. Somehow, you felt it was impossible for her to look this good with her natural hair. While in junior secondary school, you and your bestie would place your palms on each other's forehead to pull back your hair. "This is how you'll look when you start making hair," she would say as she watched your ephemeral transformation, and in wonderment, she would tell you, "You'll be fine."

Because this woman looked out of place in the salon, you were intrigued, and you had a burning desire to talk with her. Why was she in the salon with her afro? Some women had started a social media trend. #*TeamNat*. They would take pictures of their afro puffs, and post them on Facebook and Instagram. Attached to these pictures, the women would make lengthy, "narcissistic" posts about their "hair journey," and you thought they were trying too hard.

"You're here to relax your hair," you stated in a voice that crossed the line between accusation and observation.

The woman raised her head from her book, and stared ahead of her, in the direction of the mirror, where five women were sitting, with their hair in different forms of transformation. "I'm here with my roomie," she turned to look at you and added, "She dragged me here." A pretty smile showed off perfect white teeth.

"I love your hair," you said, just to start a conversation.

"Thanks," she said, almost condescendingly, as though she meant to say, *I know my hair is gorgeous, because I hear it every time, duh.*

You learnt her name was 'Danna, short for Adanna. She lived at Opebi, with her friend, Ose. She was a lawyer. She loved everything ever sung by Ella Fitzgerald. Because you liked her, and wanted to see her again, you asked that she give you her number. This she did excitedly. In your elation, you could not see the eye daggers Ose threw at you through the mirror.

"*Custo*!" The hairdresser's rough, would-have-been-attractive-if-she-sounded-more-cultured voice broke the spell between you and 'Danna. "Oya, na your turn," the woman said, furiously flapping the pink cover cotton cloth she had used on the woman who stood from the swivel chair a few seconds ago.

As you sat, you caught 'Danna's eyes staring at you in the mirror. She smiled at you, and in response, you smiled back at her. Butterflies fluttered in your tummy, tickling you into a giggle that threatened to rumble out if you did not purse your lips. You turned sideways to find Ose glaring menacingly at you, as though to push you to the floor, slap your cheeks, and claw out your eyes. You believed she was angry, but you did not understand why she would be angry. It hit you hard in the guts as you turned to face the mirror.

She was a lawyer. She loved everything ever sung by Ella Fitzgerald. Because you liked her, and wanted to see her again, you asked that she give you her number.

You and 'Danna texted via Whatsapp, as days morphed into weeks. Something about the way she strung words together enchanted you, pulled you in, and you could not get enough of her. You had it so bad that whenever you two were not chatting, you would scroll up your chat, and read the words you had typed to each other. Her words seemed to have a life of their own.

Once, she asked if you would love to go dancing. In response, you informed her you had zero sense of rhythm.

Men are so not it for me. After my first time with a girl, I knew it was women. You don't go back to soft drinks after tasting champagne, right?

You'll learn how to dance, she typed. *The kind of dance that looks like foreplay. You'd learn how to place both hands on your bended knees, while you jut your backside into your partner's crotch, and grind against them slowly. You'd also learn to share space with them, how to stare into their eyes, and how to run your fingers on their arms.*

You read those lines again and again, and every time you did, you could not help but see yourself dancing with her with unbridled lust. *It is sinful*, you thought at first; however, with each passing day, as the idea took shape in your mind, you reminded yourself you could always make use of the sacrament of penance. *No sin is too big for God.* You had never been with a woman, never had a "real life" girl crush, but inexplicably, this woman had gotten to you.

Your excitement grew in leaps when she divulged to you how she preferred romantic relationships with women. *Men are so not it for me. After my first time with a girl, I knew it was women. You*

don't go back to soft drinks after tasting champagne, right? Her honesty inspired you, and you told her about your struggle with curiosity. 'Danna assured you that you would find yourself in the end.

You did not find yourself in those three weeks; instead, you found lesbian pornography, and it filled you with revulsion. Still that did not quell your interest. You also found Audre Lorde, Chimamanda Adichie, Maya Angelou, Zora Neale Hurston. At her suggestion, you found yourself listening to Nina Simone, Sarah Vaughan, and Billie Holiday. You wondered if you truly loved this kind of literature and music, or maybe you loved the person who introduced you to them. Was it even love? You might have exposed yourself to all those only because you needed common ground when talking.

Three weeks of soaking up feminism and jazz passed by like three decades, and 'Danna called you, asking if you could come out that afternoon. "Just movies," she said. She had turned down your offer to hang out twice, claiming she had work to do. *We are just hanging out, nothing much.*

Something about the way she strung words together enchanted you, pulled you in, and you could not get enough of her.

The movie ended, and you two went downstairs to one of the fast food restaurants. You knew you would love to spend all day with her, even though a voice was nagging you to go home, back to your laptop, to complete your e-learning.

"Why not come over?" 'Danna smiled, as though trying to lure you.

"And your roomie?" you asked. "She does not like me."

She leaned back in her seat and laughed. "How did you know?"

"That day at the salon, the way she looked at me." You lowered your gaze to look at the half-eaten burger on her plate.

"It was just that day, Kachi," she said softly, her head tilted, as she stared at you through her lashes.

You lifted your chin to hold her gaze, and miraculously found the courage to ask the question you were scared to ask. "Are you two dating?"

"It's complicated," she said, sounding mechanical.

You wondered if you truly loved this kind of literature and music, or maybe you loved the person who introduced you to them.

You looked at the mass of hair around her oval face. From where you sat, you could see the curly strands as they intricately ran into each other. *As complicated as your hair?* You almost asked. You were hurt, yet hopeful. "She has feelings for you? Did you have anything together before?"

"No." Few seconds passed, before she asked, "Why do you ask?"

You did not know why you asked, and so you kept mum.

Against your judgement, you acquiesced to go over to her place. *It's just indoor stuff. No big deal.*

'Danna fell on to the sofa nearest to the door the moment you both got into her flat. She sensed your reluctance to sit, and she giggled. "I wasn't lying when I told you Ose went to visit her parents this weekend. We are home alone."

You sat on the seat next to her, threw your head back, sighed, and blinked your eyes. She took your palm in hers and caressed your knuckles with her thumb. As she turned to smile at you, you saw the laugh lines at the sides of her mouth. You noticed her lips were red without lipstick. That explained why her burger did not have lipstick stain.

"You went to Ikeja to make your lips like this?" you asked, your gaze lingering on her lips.

"No," she said, licking her lips. "It has always been this way."

You swallowed. "Sure?"

"You could verify."

"How?"

She did not only stare at you, she stared through your eyes, into your soul, and somehow, you felt she had accessed your secrets—those dark thoughts you kept to yourself and did not dare to share with the pages of your journal for the fear someone might pick it up someday.

"Kiss me," 'Danna muttered.

You tilted your head towards her, your eyelids fluttered close. It would seem as though you had no control of yourself as your head moved towards hers to reduce the distance between you. Her warm breath fanned your face, your toes curled.

Just as you fantasized, her lips felt warm, so warm the electric in them coursed through you, and you felt a jolt shoot through your system. You gasped. You were feeling so much at so many

places in such little time, you thought you would lose it. All your life, you had been in a slumber, and this kiss woke you. In the past, you had been with men, and if you were to be truthful, you would admit those kisses were meaningless, empty. You had told your bestie about not having orgasms through penetrative sex, how you faked those orgasms with your ex and the other men before him. "Why fake an orgasm? Let them know they ain't shit," she had retorted.

Kissing 'Danna, you knew you were never going back to men. If a meeting of two pairs of lips could cause you to feel so much, how would it feel if...?

She broke the kiss, and muttered against your lips, "I want to make love to you."

You were feeling so much at so many places in such little time, you thought you would lose it.

Your past lovers had tossed that line at you at various times, and your mind recognised it as a banality. Nonetheless, coming from 'Danna, it was the sexiest invitation to sex you ever got. It was in the way she said it—softly, compelling, almost commanding. It was in the way her soft lips moved against yours when those words escaped her lips. It was in the way her voice was calm. It was in the way her nose nuzzled yours. It was in the way those words hovered in the space between you two.

You felt her smile against your lips, and you smiled back. She got up from the sofa, stretched her hands out to you. "Come with me."

She was like a sweet smell that smelled so good you kept on inhaling and inhaling.

Her bedroom, painted a light shade of blue, reminded you of the clear sky that afternoon. Opposite the door, just above the bed, you looked at a large painting of a woman—caramel skin, thick afro, full-lips, wide hips, and ample bosom. 'Danna followed your gaze to the painting. "If Venus were black," she chuckled. "I called it *Black Venus*. I paint when I am not busy with work."

She painted this? You were impressed. "An interesting hobby. You could make money out of it."

"And be like those talentless artistes who commercialise their art?" She said "art" like it's some profanity.

"What would happen if you give yourself credit?"

She kissed you. "I'm not overreaching, Kachi." She licked her lips, pressed her forehead to yours. "But there are things I can reach," her warm palm slipped beneath your chiffon blouse in a gentle caress. Then, her fingertips moved slowly up on the hollow of your spine to stop at your bra hook. In a split second, she had undone the clasp.

"Wow!" you gasped, your eyes widening. "So quick. How did you?"

Warm lips met yours and you whimpered. As though you two were dancing, you moved to the bed. Gently, she nudged you. You landed with your back on soft sheet and mattress. She smiled at you. You propped your elbows. She leaned in, cupped your face in her palms, her face hovered two inches above yours, a teasing smile dancing on her lips.

> Your past lovers had been rough—they forgot that your breasts, like other parts of your body, did not deserve rough handling. They probably tried to imitate porn stars. Too bad they did not know pornography is nothing erotic.

Once more, you felt her lips on yours. When she traced circles on your earlobes, it felt too good, and you thought you would pass out from pleasure. You pulled her head closer, because you wanted her so much. So much, you wanted her to fill you up. She was like a sweet smell that smelled so good you kept on inhaling and inhaling. Even when your lungs were filled, and could not take in any more air, you hated to exhale, because that would mean you would be deprived of that scent.

You felt 'Danna kneel before you. Her arms encircled your waist, pulling you closer to her. That move seemed possessive. Her palm moved up your side to stop on your breasts. She squeezed gently. You sighed into her mouth. With your mouth open, she traced the tip of her tongue on your upper lip. You moaned and moved closer to her. Soft breasts pushed into you.

Damn! She rasped against your lips.

You slid your tongue into her mouth. You met hers. Gently, she stroked yours, and it seemed as though your bones were melting. She teased the roof of your mouth with the tip of her tongue. You moaned some more into her mouth, your arms tight around her shoulders. It seemed as though you would fall off the brink of sanity if you did not hold on to something, anything.

Whatever you felt with 'Danna was too good, too good that if discovered by all women, men would be relegated to the sole purpose of procreation, not pleasure.

She broke the kiss. You missed her, but not for long. 'Danna cupped your chin and kissed your nose. She left a trail of warm, electrifying kisses from your nose to neck, and then to your chest. In doing so, the top of her hair grazed your lips, and you sighed in pleasure and shock. You could not believe that contact could make your body come alive, and your heart beat so fast.

Her lips found the hollow between the crest of your breasts. She teased you with her tongue. You grasped her arm for support, pressed your face into her baby-soft hair in a failed attempt to stifle a groan, and inhaled the scent of her hair. You looked down at her hair. Now that you looked closely, you were able to see each strand of her hair. The curls seemed to run into themselves until it seemed as though they were tangled. Together, they looked beautiful. You imagined you two would look like those strands lying in her bed in the aftermath of lovemaking.

Through the fabric of your blouse, she took your nipple in her mouth. A slow, drawn-out *ah* escaped your lips, as you threw your head back.

Soon, your breasts were in her hands, and she stared at them in reverence. "You're gorgeous, Kachi," she said. The manner in which she knelt before you, the way she looked at you, as she uttered those words in adoration, made you feel like God.

'Danna flicked her tongue on your nipples, one at a time. She squeezed your breasts applying the right pressure to cause pleasure. Your past lovers had been rough—they forgot that your breasts, like other parts of your body, did not deserve rough handling. They probably tried to imitate porn stars. Too bad they did not know pornography is nothing erotic. You did not know if you should resent those women in those videos for their lies. They lied that they felt pleasure with those moans. Then again, you wondered, what if those moans were cries of pain?

> The manner in which she knelt before you, the way she looked at you, as she uttered those words in adoration, made you feel like God.

Your train of thoughts were broken when you felt 'Danna's fingers in your crotch. Sensations shot out from your nether region to every part of your body in an instant. "Even your jean is wet," she chuckled. She paused, and whispered, "I want to take it off."

Sitting on her heels, she took off your trousers. She smiled, and looked away shyly. This gesture, you found adorable.

You giggled, and asked, "What?"

In response, she shook her head. She moved closer to you, took off your pant, and let it dangle on her index. "This is ruined. That was why I was laughing."

"It's all you, woman. You made it happen."

'Danna bent her head to kiss your inner thigh. With each kiss, your body ached with need. She nuzzled you, and you gasped in response.

"I love your scent," she murmured.

You arched your back, licked your lips. What was she waiting for? Unable to hold it, you dug your fingers into her hair, and pulled her head closer.

Her lips pressed against yours and you thought you would lose it. When her tongue parted your lips, you held on tighter to her. With languid, long strokes, she moved around your sex. Everything you imagined about this moment paled in comparison to what you were feeling. You felt a finger at your threshold. Slowly, gently, it slid into you effortlessly.

You cried out. "'Danna!" This was not like those few times you called out your lovers' names. This time, your soul cried out. How was it that you had gone through life without ever having felt this? Nonetheless, just when you thought there was nothing more to feel, you felt her brush her thumb on the distended organ between your lips.

You screamed before you could hold it back. Unable to hold on to her, you fell with your back to the bed. 'Danna's tongue played with that part of you, as though she were a virtuoso.

She nipped.

You quivered and gasped.

She sucked.

You shuddered and moaned.

She licked.

You quaked and cried.

You two went on like that—she giving you unimagined pleasure, you receiving it in awe. Your hips thrust wildly against her mouth and fingers in heedless abandon, demanding more. Your body was a stranger to this magnitude of pleasure. You needed this feeling to continue, yet you needed a release.

Her lips clamped on your clit, and she thrust her fingers forcefully into you.

In that moment, it seemed as though the earth stopped moving; your heart stopped beating; everything went still. Pleasure surged through your receptors, your nerves, all at once. Every muscle in your body stiffened as you squeezed her head between your thighs. You did not care if that would hurt her.

How was it that you had gone through life without ever having felt this?

You cried out a sentence of expletives; you did not know you had it in you to stitch those words together. For the first time, you had an orgasm. It was like hearing people talk about ice cream, and finally tasting it. In a wry twist, you thought it made sense that Nigeria had put the anti-gay law. Whatever you felt with 'Danna was too good, too good that if discovered by all women, men would be relegated to the sole purpose of procreation, not pleasure. Would women being sexually independent be a threat to masculinity? You would later ask 'Danna.

She crawled up the bed. You wanted to taste yourself on her lips, and so you kissed her. Soon, she rolled off you to the other side of the bed, placed her palm on her face as though to hide from you. You reached out to her, took her palm off her face, held her chin, and turned her face so you could look at her. Your gaze raked her face, searching for an answer to an unspoken question.

"Wow," she said, with her voice barely above a whisper.

"That was a dumb thing to say."

Her eyes scrutinised you, and you felt you had said something that angered her.

"Some people are so mean, so rude," she slowly exhaled, running her fingers through the coils of her hair. Your fingers itched to touch those soft curls again, but you felt it would distract you from what she was about to say. You reasoned you could hold off the distraction for a while and listen to her.

Although you knew she was referring to your latest utterance, you asked, "How do you mean?" You stared hungrily at her lips.

Her lips quirked into a smile, and she sighed. "You were rude, Kachi. You think I'm not sensitive, because I don't need makeup and moisturizer to look this stunning."

You laughed at this. "Narcissistic much?"

"Allow me unravel my feelings, please." You caught a whiff of sarcasm and laughed hard.

You looked at her hair again. That was the first thing that drew you to her. You wished you could be as daring as she was to go about with your own hair. But some messages are deeply etched on the psyche in a way nothing can erase them.

A moment passed with you swimming in her coffee brown eyes, the heat in them warming you up. Her fingertips traced lazy circles on your upper arm, and you trembled at that contact. She kissed your chin.

"I love this," she said, waving her hand between the space your bodies had created from being so close. "This is my favourite part of being with someone. Lying in bed, not saying much, just being there with them. I love it."

This time, you leaned in to kiss her eyes. Light, feathery. It was an unspoken veneration. You did that, because you were scared to tell her you loved her. The words could run out of your mouth, fall into the bubble of bliss you two were trapped in, and ruin the moment. She might get scared, because she would think it was too soon. You wanted to tell her how she caught your fancy from the first moment you saw her at the salon; how talking and texting with her had intensified the emotions you felt.

"What is it?" she inquired when you retained that cryptic smile on your face.

...you were scared to tell her you loved her. The words could run out of your mouth, fall into the bubble of bliss you two were trapped in, and ruin the moment.

"Nothing." The smile grew wide, so wide it seemed as though the ends of your lips had touched your ears.

"Kachi, will you spend the night?" she asked in a voice so soft, so delicate.

"Just this night?"

Her brows furrowed at that question. "Do you want to spend every night with me?"

You shrugged your eyebrows. "Do you want me to?"

She traced your lower lips with her thumb, staring at the patterns she was making. Each stroke caused you to feel so much. As though on autopilot, you grazed the pad of her thumb with your teeth and sucked it into your mouth.

Fuck! She gasped.

She kissed you, but it was not like those languid kisses from earlier. This time, it was forceful; it was as if she was taking you, claiming you as her own, and branding your lips for eternity.

When you two stopped for air, she pressed her forehead against yours. "I want you to stay," she said, smiling into your eyes. Those words had more weight than any other thing she could have said. It held a promise.

poetry

Nella

karen jennings

We were both teaching then
and more than half afraid
of what the pupils thought

as we wandered the cracked
tar of the schoolyard
in hot summer during break,

making our rounds to
see that they behaved.
Yet mostly we avoided them

where we could,
stood beside a large tree,
noisy with crisp packets

in its branches.

On the field boys
played football

and we watched idly,
speaking of things
we had in common.

They laughed at us,
those teenagers, seeing
clearly what we couldn't

say out loud. That we
were drawn to one another
and afraid to be found out.

poetry

Patience

onwubiko chidozie

Attraction is what holds the eye
it's what starts the fire.
Heartburns need no medicine
but only patience to heal.
A wagging head says no
but denial is self-inflicted pain.

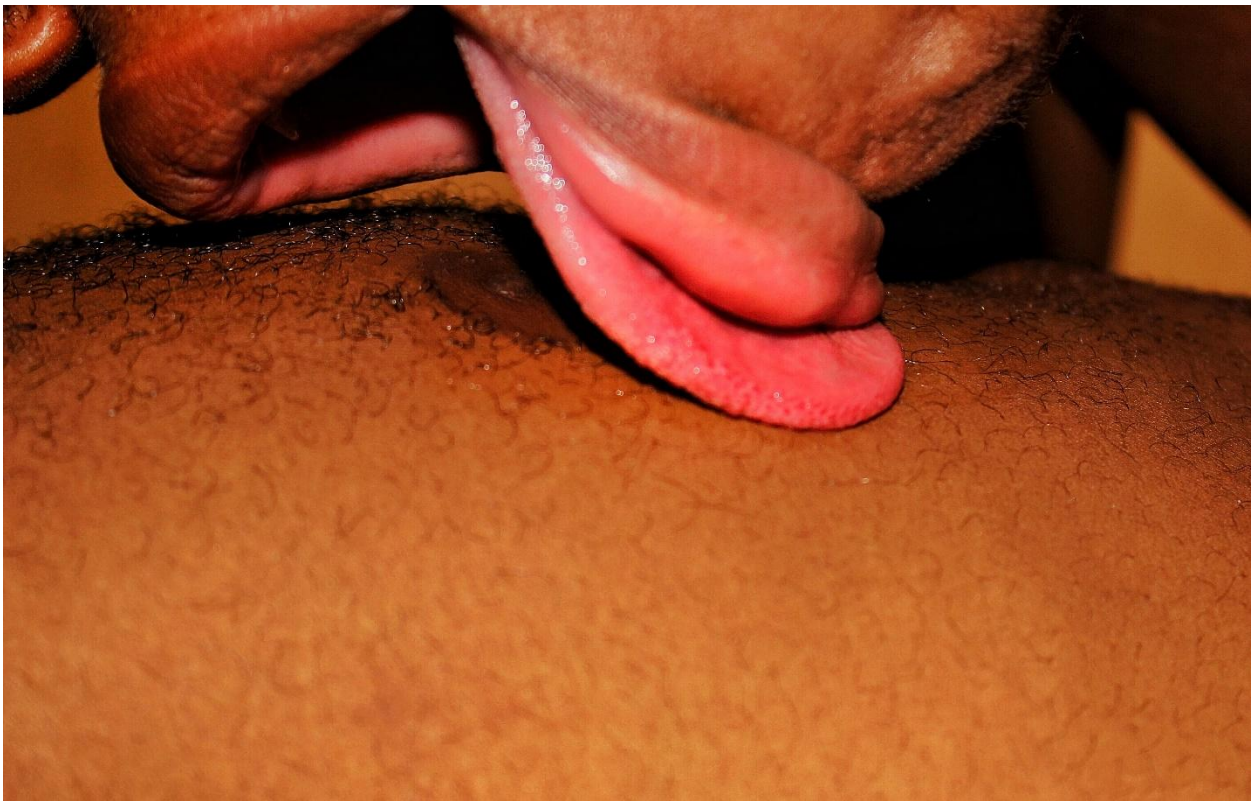
You say none and you don't lie
but one day the heart will tire.
Nod your head on the day you know
the time is right & this way you'll gain.

We are Men

louis

we are MEN
with petals falling from our lips
oceans drowning between our thighs
softness in our height
trembles in our skin

we are MEN
broken into the language of our bodies
pieced together to form one word
love. sex. magic.



poetry

Woman

unoma azuah

I eat your sacred scriptures
Tonguing through each page
A devout supplicant
Feeding on your divine
Fuel
Devouring this body of worship
Your neck
To
Your toes
Each flicker, each lick, each suck
Hangs at the tip of my tongue
Lithe
Nipples
As supple as mango juice
Your navel is
The rose bud sprouting wet bubbles
In this mound of mine
Bulging at your every breath
Down your legs
Where your calves shudder

I gather your toes in a squeeze
Before we merge in multiple moans.
Your belly is the landscape that elevates me
And lowers me
Down to your confluence
Where babbling brooks sooth our quiet cries
But we explode:
A hurricane in paradise.
And in the midst of this waterfall
Woman
I speak in strange tongues
Testifying to your splendor
I will spread your gospel
To the ends of the earth.

poetry

Purple Rain

chinthu udayarajan

Sounds of Prince
Melodies of Purple Rain.
A crowd dancing on deck.
My music is in my backpack.
I remember a friend from the past;
We'd found moments of magic
Intrinsic to mushrooms and chemical logic.
We'd swayed to our sweetness
And played smooth moves.
Today I pray and reminisce
And light sacred incense.
Jasmine scent fills my air
And I dance again to Purple Rain.

Sinfully

As we lay sinfully amidst China roses,
Your cat raised its eyes at us
And its soft cry was almost a smile.
I would run as the flowers began
To shed their petals but you held me.

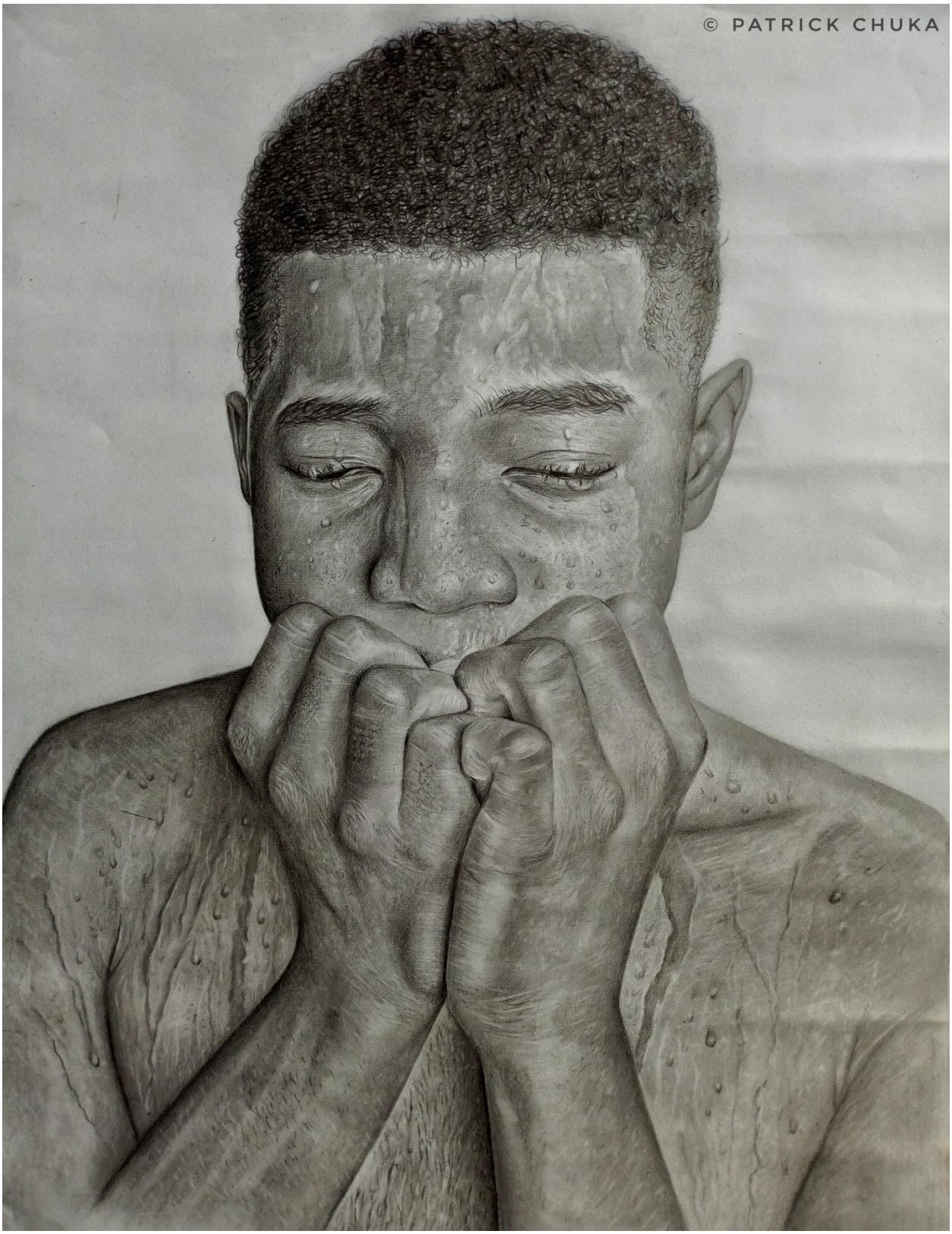
It wasn't lust, it wasn't love.
It was sheer curiosity
To know each other as bodies.
We were thirteen
And what did we know?

drawing

The Struggle of a Rainbow

patrick chuka

The Struggle of a Rainbow: this series documents the process of being queer in Nigeria. From being aware and self-conscious to the suffering and praying the gay away. To losing yourself and letting the ugliness from within reveal itself on your body and clouding your eyes from seeing any beauty in your uniqueness.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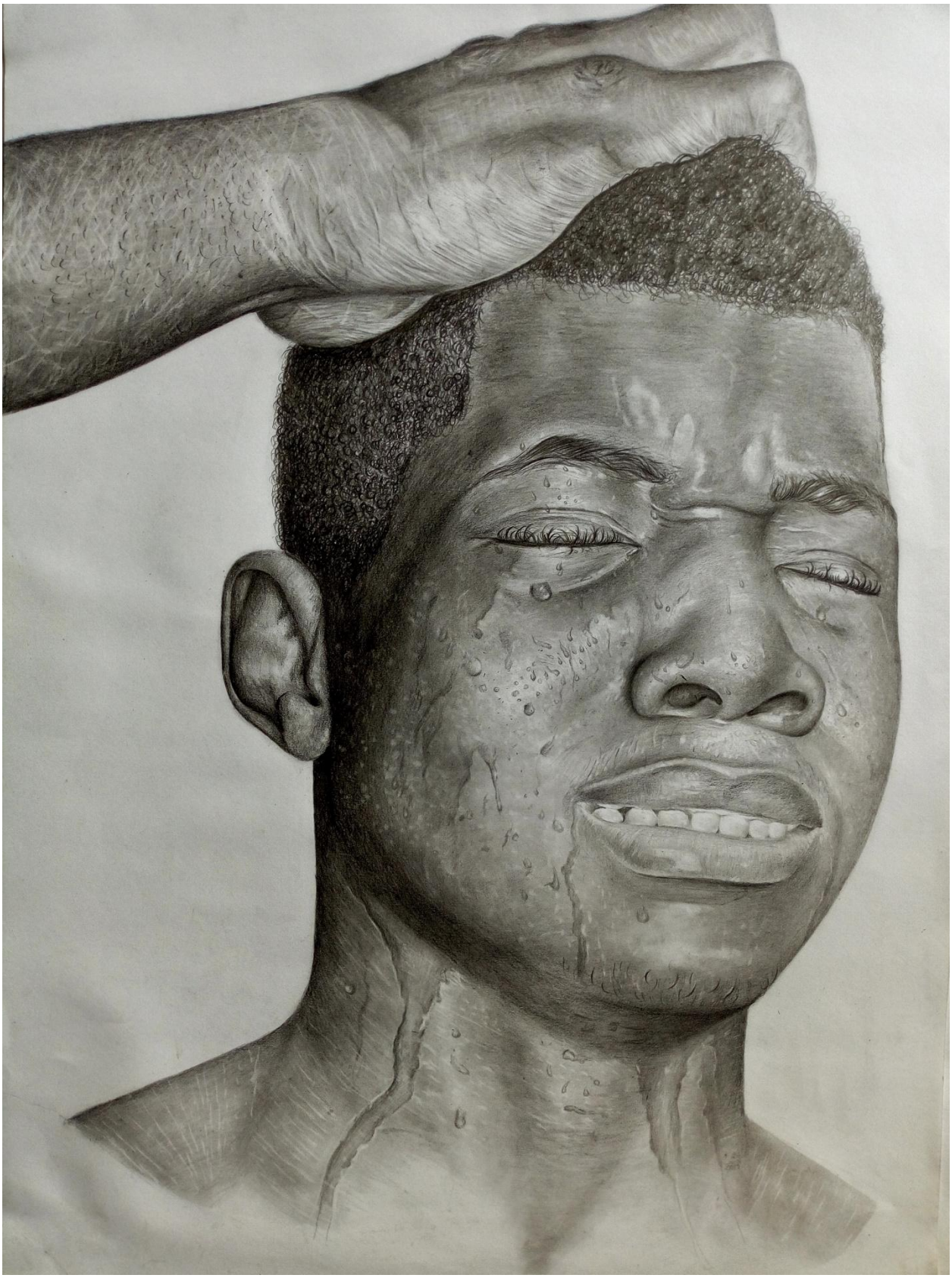

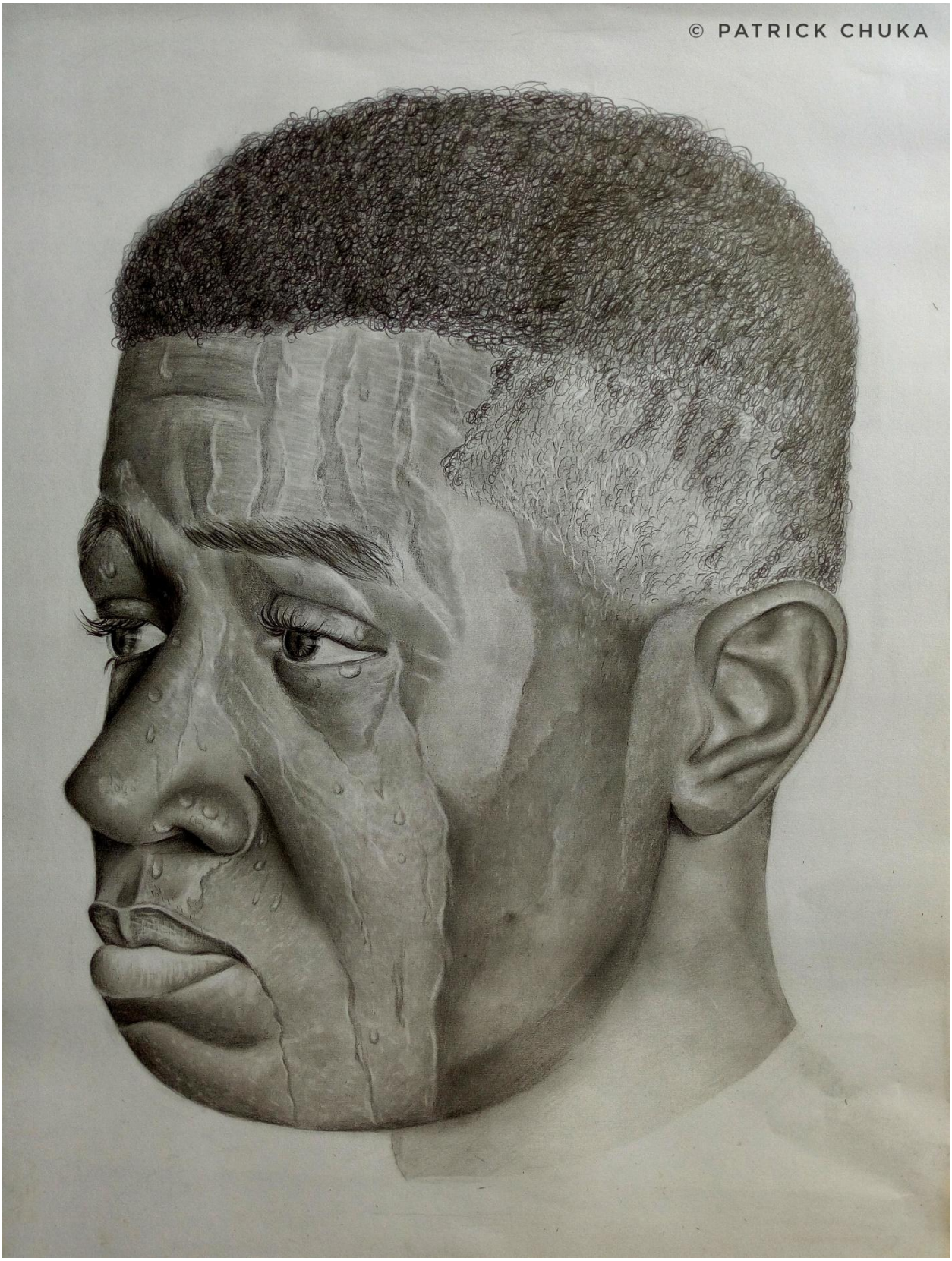
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memoir

Ajar

ibk

I met my boyfriend, Idris, when I started to explore sex. I was seventeen and on a break from my A-level studies, had managed to convince my mother to let me stay with my older cousin in Lagos. I wasn't interested in staying with my cousin at all; I just wanted to meet someone I had been chatting with on 2go. My mother had too much faith in me so she allowed me go.

I met my 2go friend the day after I arrived. Until that moment, I had only met one other gay man, so it was pretty exciting. We fucked. It hurt, so I didn't enjoy it so much, and yet I asked if we could see again the next day. He said yes. The next day, someone was seated at the spot where 2go guy and I had made out the day before, someone whose face shifted something in me. Thinking about it now, I imagine in that moment every delusion I had of 'becoming' straight flew out the window. He told me his name was Idris.

I abandoned my 2go friend (who didn't seem to mind), hanging out with Idris for the one week I had left in Lagos. We would eat out at different restaurants each day, sneak kisses wherever we could and hold hands under the table and when walking down the street on cool evenings. He had such soft hands and even softer eyes that turned mahogany when the light hit it right (I googled different shades of brown till I found the right one). I was in love and I wanted to share it with everyone. Most of all, I wanted to share it with my mother.

Mum and I had a perfect relationship. I was the ideal son, thoughtful and caring. Even when my brothers began to untangle themselves from her, as one begins to do at a certain age, I clung to

her, sending texts that said "I love you", buying her cheap gifts with my pocket money. In her eyes, I suppose, I was perfect.

> **We would eat out at different restaurants each day, sneak kisses wherever we could and hold hands under the table and when walking down the street on cool evenings.**

So, when I returned and she noticed how much time I spent smiling into my phone, she wanted to know who I was talking to. I really wanted to tell her who it was but I could not bring myself to tell her; she was a devout Christian, the only book she ever read was her bible and the only thing she ever sat down to watch on the television was Africa magic. I wanted her to know that someone was making me happy but how could I tell her that it was a boy?

I created Doyin, a girl I had met at the Sweet Sensation eatery at Ketu, told her we were dating. I thought she believed it, I think she might have if I wasn't such a terrible liar and had I not gotten excessively protective of my phone. I would freak out if anyone as much as touched it without my permission. I installed a lock app because I knew sometimes my mum liked to snoop.

The day things changed was a Sunday, months after I met Idris. We were still together and I was getting my first lesson on how much long-distance relationships sucked. There was a constant yearning to be with him and hear the rich timbre of his voice, a yearning phone calls could never really satiate. I was in the car with her on our way to church and texting when, suddenly, she said, "Se won le phone yen mo e lowo ni?"

"No, ma."

"I am sure you don't even listen in church any longer because you are becoming very wayward. In fact, give me that phone." The fierceness with which she spoke to me left me without the will to argue. I handed the phone over and she flung it into the glove compartment. The air steeled in the car, and we remained silent all through the drive.

There was a constant yearning to be with him and hear the rich timbre of his voice, a yearning phone calls could never really satiate.

I did not make much of it, her attitude towards me. She often dipped in and out of moods; my brothers and I often waited out her anger or became extra helpful in the kitchen or just avoided her entirely until she was warm and sunny again or grew tired of shouting.

I returned from church and found my phone sitting on a yellow medicine box we used to have. I figured she had asked one of the older guys I called uncle to drop it there. I picked it up and went on with my texting. She wasn't back from church yet, my mum, but my uncles were, and, when they thought I wasn't looking, they looked at me strangely. When my mother returned she hadn't turned warm or fuzzy and I noticed she wouldn't even look at me. That was when I began to worry. I couldn't think of anything I had done wrong that would warrant the coldness I received from her. It couldn't be the incessant texting, after all my brothers texted a lot, too, and her complaints about it had never been too strident. When I tried to talk to her she gave me curt replies, scowling at me; she didn't even let me help her with the chores or cooking.

When my mother returned she hadn't turned warm or fuzzy and I noticed she wouldn't even look at me. That was when I began to worry.

Later in the night, when she still hadn't warmed up, I told Idris that I thought something was wrong, narrating what had happened throughout the day. He thought it was strange but said not to worry too much, maybe something else was bothering her and it wasn't me. We were still texting when she called my name.

Something in the way she called me triggered off the niggling suspicion I had, and I texted Idris in all caps, asking him not to pick up any call from me for the rest of the night. I logged out of 2go, went to meet mum in the room I shared with my brothers.

The lights were on, yellow bulbs that cast an annoying glow on the room, making the walls look orange and the room feel hotter than it was. She was sitting on the edge of the bed, bent over, hands clenched, her chin resting on them.

"Close the door," she said without looking at me. I did.

"Come and sit beside me."

I sat away from her

"Where is your phone?"

"It's here, ma." I could feel the weight of it in my pocket.

I was like someone who had just finished the last lap of a marathon, the way my heart hammered.

"Bring it out and unlock it and show me your messages"

I swallowed. It occurred to me to delete the messages from "Doyin" but before I could, she repeated her command. I handed her the phone.

"Who is Doyin?" she asked.

"I told you about her, she is the girl I met in Ketu."

"Are you sure about that?"

I nodded unable to speak

"Then call her for me." She handed over the phone.

I was like someone who had just finished the last lap of a marathon, the way my heart hammered. I hoped Idris would refuse to pick the call. He didn't answer. We tried a couple of times and he still didn't answer. I had begun to breathe easy when my mum brought out her phone and dialed the number, turning on the phone's speakers. She didn't copy it, she just dialed. Shit!

I remember thinking, *Please don't pick up, please don't pick up.*

"Hello. Hello?" his deep voice rang out from the speakers

"Hello, who are you?" my mum asked. The line went dead.

She turned to look at me and there was so much hurt and betrayal in her eyes, I felt I had shattered before her eyes. I felt a shattering within me.

"James, tell me, are you"—she hesitated— "gay?"

I shook my head, no, unable to utter a word. If I spoke, it would be a lie, and if I lied right now, it would show.

"Then why is a man sending you love messages?"

"He's not a man, he's my age!" I couldn't contain my mortification, that she would think that I was seeing an older man! Thinking of it now, it must have been easier for her to swallow that particular detail; I would not be complicit and would in fact be a victim of the seductions and machinations of a pervert.

"Why is he sending you romantic texts and you sending him romantic texts, too?" Her tone had become urgent.

I am not sure what point tears started streaming down my face. I don't recall why, exactly, I was crying, either. Perhaps it was fear, perhaps I wanted her pity. Maybe it was relief, I must have thought, *Now she knows, nothing will change between us*. So, I told her everything. She listened. She asked questions, wanted to know when the whole thing began. I tried to explain that it didn't *start*, I had always been the way I was, had always felt something for boys.

"When you started developing those feelings, why didn't you come to meet me?" she said. "I thought you knew you could tell me anything?"

Thinking of it now, it must have been easier for her to swallow that particular detail; I would not be complicit and would in fact be a victim of the seductions and machinations of a pervert.

I said nothing.

"Ehn, James? Now the devil has started to use this thing to take root in your life. He knows you are supposed to be someone great for the glory of God, that's why he wants to use this thing against you. God does not create anyone this way and we must fight it!"

I still remained silent, even though I felt shattered and raw, even though my stomach felt empty. Then she asked a question I didn't expect her to ask: "Have you had sex?"

"No!" I gave her a reproachful look, like, how dare she imagine such a thing about me? Weighing what her reactions so far, I knew that the truth would be disastrous.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, ma," I said, injecting my voice with as much certainty as I could.

"What of the person you went to see in Lagos?"

I fumbled for a lie. She stared at me for the longest time as if I was changing into someone unrecognizable in front of her.

She sighed, asked me to give her my hands, that we were going to pray. I listened to the prayer, saying *amen* at the appropriate times. It was earnest and heartfelt. I could hear a mother's pain in it and it made my eyes well up because I was the source of that pain. I was disgusted at myself for bringing such a heavy burden upon her and adding to her worries. I was supposed to be the shining one who would do great things and make her proud. Now she was praying in earnest for the salvation of my soul, a salvation I knew deep down I didn't need. I held her hand tight, maybe my

synapses would link with hers and she would understand me and what it meant to be me and that I was okay. But with every word she spoke in prayer, hope vanished. At one point, her voice stopped, she choked, but she regained composure—I could tell she was trying so hard to be strong because breaking down in tears would mean she too did not believe her God could heal me.

I held her hand tight, maybe my synapses would link with hers and she would understand me and what it meant to be me and that I was okay.

She took away my phone that night, telling me that the first step to recovery was to dissociate myself from the sources of my temptation. She also said that God wouldn't be able to help unless I helped myself and that we would fast for two weeks. My throat felt heavy with the words I wanted to say to her. I wanted to tell her of the years I spent in emotional pain, in broken-spirited prayers, because I believed that who I am, what I felt, was an aberration. I wanted to tell her that I no longer felt that way, that I had found love and it had made me feel complete. I wanted to tell her that I was enough.

I didn't tell her.

That night has stayed with me for the past six years. It was the night the shadows crept out of my mind and soiled my reality. I became depressed, began imagining ways of taking my life.

What kept me going however was the little hope I had left that I would transform again in her eyes and become the son she used to dote. It hasn't gotten better, but it's different now.

I didn't fast. I knew, from the years I had spent fasting and praying, dejected in my solitary anguish, that it was pointless. I did not need healing, not with Idris there, not with what I felt for him. I used to think that God had closed his ears to me, or that he had given my gayness as a burden to me, something to carry with faith and fortitude. Being loved by Idris made me realize that my prayer had been answered and I was fine. I still called Idris at phone booths because I had memorized his number. Mother knew I wasn't trying hard and it made her hot, then cold, towards me; she'd flare up one day, she would cry and beg on another day and she would ignore me on other days, looking past me as she went about the house as though I were a mild inconvenience. It became unbearable, home became unbearable.

University became a pause to the insistent heartache. I read up all I could find about myself, about the gay community, my identity. I was wedged by knowledge, so that whenever we talked, I did not sink too deeply into depression.

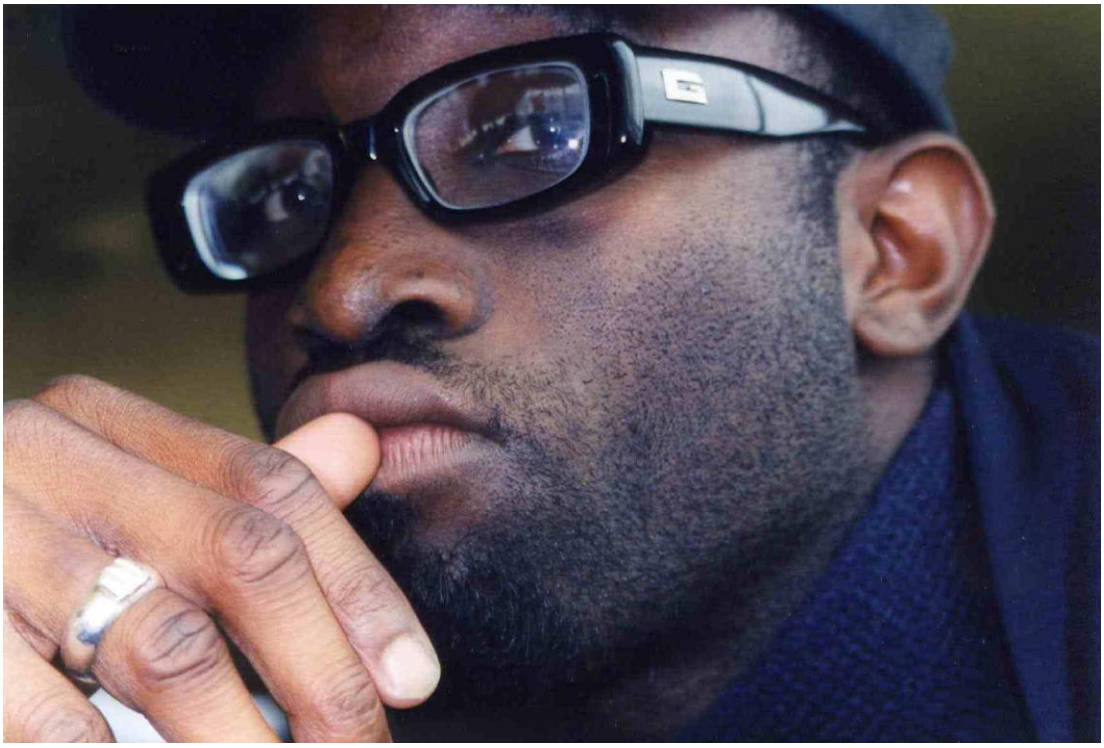
I wanted to tell her that I was enough.

I still feel responsible for her happiness, a heavy load, because she has been very unhappy lately. I returned from school one of those rare times I wanted to spend a weekend at home and was surprised to find her thin and older. She had been fasting; when we had our family devotion that night, I knew it was still because of me.

I guess a lot of things went wrong when I got my first boyfriend (we broke up a year after by the way) but it did set me down a path I am in many ways grateful for. At least my mother knows now and so does my family, thanks to her. You have no idea how much weight fear carries in your mind until what you fear comes to pass and you feel lighter. My brothers are cool, even the very homophobic one doesn't say shit around me. My dad treats it as a nonissue and although we never talked about it after that one time my mum forced him to say something, I knew that in him I had a place of unconditional love. I will admit I still harbor hope in a corner of my heart, hope that one day she and I can talk about man troubles while she fries plantain and I steal from the plate.

Questioning the Point of Pain

troy onyango



Chike Frankie Edozien

When a friend I was living with waved a copy of Chike Frankie Edozien's memoir at me, saying, "You have to read this!" I dropped something else I was reading and started on this book. Edozien, a former New York City Hall reporter and recipient of the New York University's prestigious Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Faculty award, teaches journalism at the NYU, and has been

a journalist for over twenty-five years, covering big events such as the aftermath of the shooting of Amadou Diallo, and the 1992 Democratic National Convention which saw Bill Clinton's nomination for the US Presidency. In 2001, he co-founded the AFRican Magazine and continues to serve as its editor-in-chief. He has travelled the world reporting on the impact of HIV/AIDS particularly among Africans and is a 2008 Kaiser Foundation fellow for Global Health Reporting. The result of that fellowship was a critical look at slice of healthcare outcomes in Uganda and how the rest of sub-Saharan Africa was learning from them.

Although I was worried that Lives would turn out to be like most memoirs—self-indulgent and narcissistic—my scepticism was unjustified. From its beginning when Edozien recounts his days with his lover in Nigeria, the book, which has been called "Nigeria's first gay memoir", makes a proclamation: "I am different." And true to its proclamation, it stays different, with Edozien's chronicles oscillating between his childhood in Nigeria and his adult years in the US, UK and other countries while living openly as a gay man.

ONYANGO: Upon picking up *The Lives of Great Men*, one is met (from the onset) with such raw honesty and a voice that is at once present and bold. The urgency is felt from the first sentence and maintained throughout the whole book. It's as if—if I can put it this way—your memoir is a rallying call, or a response to something. What made you write with such urgency?

EDOZIEN: The times we live in necessitate this urgency. For too long, our stories, our hurts, and the fullness of our existence as queer people have been continually diminished. Something needed to be done, and in my primary vocation as a journalist, the only thing I knew how to do was to tell the story. I'd done bits of this from the daily harassment and humiliation of a trans activist in Kampala to the open derision of men and women who dared have some measure of openness about their lives in Accra and Takoradi. But it wasn't enough. The few nuanced articles come and go and get drowned by louder, fearful voices with the bigger megaphones. I had to do something different. And the result of that was to momentarily 'kill the journalist', and turn the mirror on myself, and ask the hard questions of me, and of my friends. I toyed with the idea of a documentary, and I may still do that at some point. But when I kept hearing—repeated by those who refuse to see their African sisters and brothers in their full humanity—some variation of "There are no gays here", or "It was brought here by the colonizers", or "Not in our culture", the work became more and more urgent. I never want an African to feel like there is any place on our continent where their full humanity is

diminished by the loud voices of those who would rather not see them. That we are losing our most precious resources—our own magnificent minds—is urgent and, hopefully, *Lives* helps to change the conversation, and give people a sense that our diversity isn't a thing to shy away from.

> I never want an African to feel like there is any place on our continent where their full humanity is diminished by the loud voices of those who would rather not see them.

ONYANGO: Part of the book chronicles your childhood in Nigeria, growing up as a gay boy in a country that has been plagued by religion. The situation was worsened in 2014 with the signing into law of a bill criminalising same-sex relationships, imposing a 14-year jail sentence to all gay people. This violence has unfurled like an oil spill, and the people in the arts have not been spared too—Chibuihe Obi and Romeo Oriogun have been attacked for their writings which centre on queerness—and social media is rife with that hate. How then, do you decide, as an artist to defy the hate and create art even in the face of persecution?

EDOZIEN: I believe there is a direct correlation between the signing into law of Nigeria's Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act and the vicious attacks on Obi and Oriogun. Sadly, these attacks haven't ended with these two brilliant writers. There have been others, and what should have been the catalyst for change seemed to have been met only with shrugs and pitying looks. Where is the outrage? How can the lawmakers and their enablers who pushed this bill, and the ex-president who signed it, not see that attacking, beating, kidnapping, and terrorizing writers and artists isn't a legacy to be proud of? This is the result of pushing a bill no one asked for. Nigerian sexual minorities have never agitated for marriage equality. They just don't want to be hunted down and attacked, and they, rightfully, expect their government to extend protections to all its citizens. The status quo—silence in the face of oppression—will lead to death, and as journalists, writers, and artists, we must tell these stories.

This work is not all about me. It's about us queer people. And we are not always good. Sometimes we are bad. Sometimes we are devious, and cunning. But often we are just awesome.

ONYANGO: The title of the book—I remember telling a friend this—sounds very rebellious. Even more interesting is how the title came about, from Henry Wadsworsth Longfellow's poem, *A Psalm of Life*. What stands out, for me at least, is how the title is a middle finger—and this is my own interpretation—to a society that constantly ignores, belittles, disregards or sidelines the achievements of certain people just because of their sexuality. The title reminds me of people like Alan Turing and Oscar Wilde. Was this your intention when choosing this title?

> Where is the outrage? How can the lawmakers and their enablers who pushed this bill, and the ex-president who signed it, not see that attacking, beating, kidnapping, and terrorizing writers and artists isn't a legacy to be proud of?

EDOZIEN: That's a very interesting interpretation—one that is not at all surprising. When the title was settled on, I hoped it would be a conversation starter. I hoped this would make people think of the great people in their lives they may not have realized are truly great. Some folk are quick to judge, quick to marginalize, and quick to throw up Abrahamic texts as justification for their bigotry. Bigotry they sometimes don't stop to think twice about. What does it say about us when we can trip over ourselves to fawn over an openly gay international broadcast journalist who visits us, or be enamoured with a technological titan who is also openly gay, but fail to extend the courtesy of leaving our own people alone who dare to be open about deviating from heternormativity?

ONYANGO: I have always thought that memoir writing is, essentially, about confronting the past, and documenting it in a way that is palatable to people who were not present at the time of the event. This confrontation almost always involves reliving pain as well. How did you decide what pain to give a chance and immortalise, and which one to downplay?

EDOZIEN: I ask myself all the time, "What is the point?" Does this revelation serve a greater purpose, or is it filler, or "pain porn"? I have no problems with cutting things out, and I'm not in love with the sound of my own voice. I took care, in writing *Lives,* to not do anything that, ultimately, didn't serve a purpose to the story I was trying to tell. I'm grateful for anyone who picks up this book, I don't want to waste their time. They should have a sense of what I'm really about by

the end of this book and why it is so urgent that we change hearts and minds. Some bullies, I hope, will read *Lives*. Pouring my pain on the pages won't get them to ponder. But the projection of our strength just might. I wrote a bit about painful experiences but tried to show how that forged the steely strength some of us have and why we won't back down ever again.

> When the title was settled on, I hoped it would be a conversation starter. I hoped this would make people think of the great people in their lives they may not have realized are truly great.

Photo from Brittle Paper

ONYANGO: Gore Vidal says, "A memoir is how one remembers one's own life." Most of us want to remember our own life in good light, and that is why most memoirs you read are either

narcissistic or self-indulgent. Or both. However, *The Lives of Great Men* departs greatly from that, and one finds a balance of good Frankie and not-so-good Frankie. Was this deliberate?

EDOZIEN: My goal was never to shine a particular light on myself; I only cared about portraying myself in *accurate* light. I haven't always been good and I don't even know if—outside of my family and close friends—if people think I'm "good". I am a multifaceted Nigerian who happens to recognize that many of the people I come across and befriend are also complex, with good and not-so-good sides. It's an odd thing to say about a memoir, and it might not make much sense, but I'll say it anyway: This work is not all about me. It's about us queer people. And we are not always good. Sometimes we are bad. Sometimes we are devious, and cunning. But often we are just awesome.

> Some bullies, I hope, will read *Lives*. Pouring my pain on the pages won't get them to ponder. But the projection of our strength just might. I wrote a bit about painful experiences but tried to show how that forged the steely strength some of us have and why we won't back down ever again.

ONYANGO: One thinks of auto/biographical writing in Africa and most of them are by politicians or businessmen/investors. Although there is a gradual shift towards literary biographical writing—with books like yours, and Binyavanga Wainaina's *One Day I Will Write About this Place*—there remains the lament that not enough autobiographies and memoirs are produced on the continent. Why do you think this is?

EDOZIEN: It is a difficult question to answer, but I can take a guess. And my guess would be that the brokers in publishing want work that will be "sure bankers", sell a ton. But, thankfully, for every ten, twenty or even thirty people that say "No", there will be an Ellah Wakatama Allfrey (Indigo Press) who will see your vision and say "Yes." We have the stories here, not just the great poetry and fiction, but also creative nonfiction; and I believe we have the readers to support the work, if only they can just find it.

painting

Don't Let the Bastards Get You Down

ibukun ayobami

Bloodied, tripped, rolling in pain, in dust. But here, still. Inspired from bone and disco lights, it represents the resilience of the LGBTQ community in Nigeria. A time must come when we must rise from the dusts where we have been tossed and fight back. Reveal the fire that surges, rages, in our veins. A fire of many colours.

snippet

Dear Cousin,

I have always thought kindness will lead us toward what is true. Our society, societies everywhere, say love is love but within a certain social sanction. I say love is love. And love's only sanction should be kindness, mutual value, enthusiasm and private will to be with each other. So this is me reaching out across the ignorance and fear that separate us and a world in which you are truly free. I send you Love.

—Gbenga Adesina

A Nigerian Recipe for Queerness

chisom okafor

For every action

There is an equal and opposite reaction

— *Newton's Third Law of Motion.*

X

Start with the other boy acting out a scene

in a clubhouse shanty,

how he must gamble love

with the wrong bidder

before he lets his body be chiselled

into the shape of a lightning bolt.

He knows how to survive here every other night—

by silence—against choking on strands of hard fingers;

the way each suspicious eye comes with a crisscross

of edible and inedible catcalls

like rotten teeth breathing through tight lips.

Here is how he'll recall last night:

his back on a bench

hard as the deck of a marooned motor dinghy:

two eggs defy hawks to make love at tables unreserved for men,

one stays, is beaked to unnameable imaginations,

one breaks into wings, manoeuvres several crash-landings on the other side.

You Come from So Many Places

beyond the power of words to describe:

from wind, the colour of baked cinnamon…

from water, with the gulls, screaming *unman us*…

from a distance where heads are cracked easily as sunflower seeds...

from the bicarbonate I sip before wearing out your lips with kisses.

I suppose if the world were a kinder place, where every story was a sacrament —

one swiftly metamorphosing into the wetness-tale of another —

we'd be two tiny specks on a hill, in another time,

left as children to their dreams; you, the dreamer, waiting

like one last stranded lady at the railway terminus,

to herald the end of what seemed, before now, an infinity of *weariness,*

of all things hidden within dunes, done in secret places,

of love unloved the way it comes and of hormones held back for fear

of (un)familiar monstrosities lurking on the way.

but we'll still love in the dark and I'll strive, each time, to recall,

which words or moment first came slithering,

to uncork the alchemy that renamed us?

Was it when I sought to know

which other assurances of God's love would become ours:

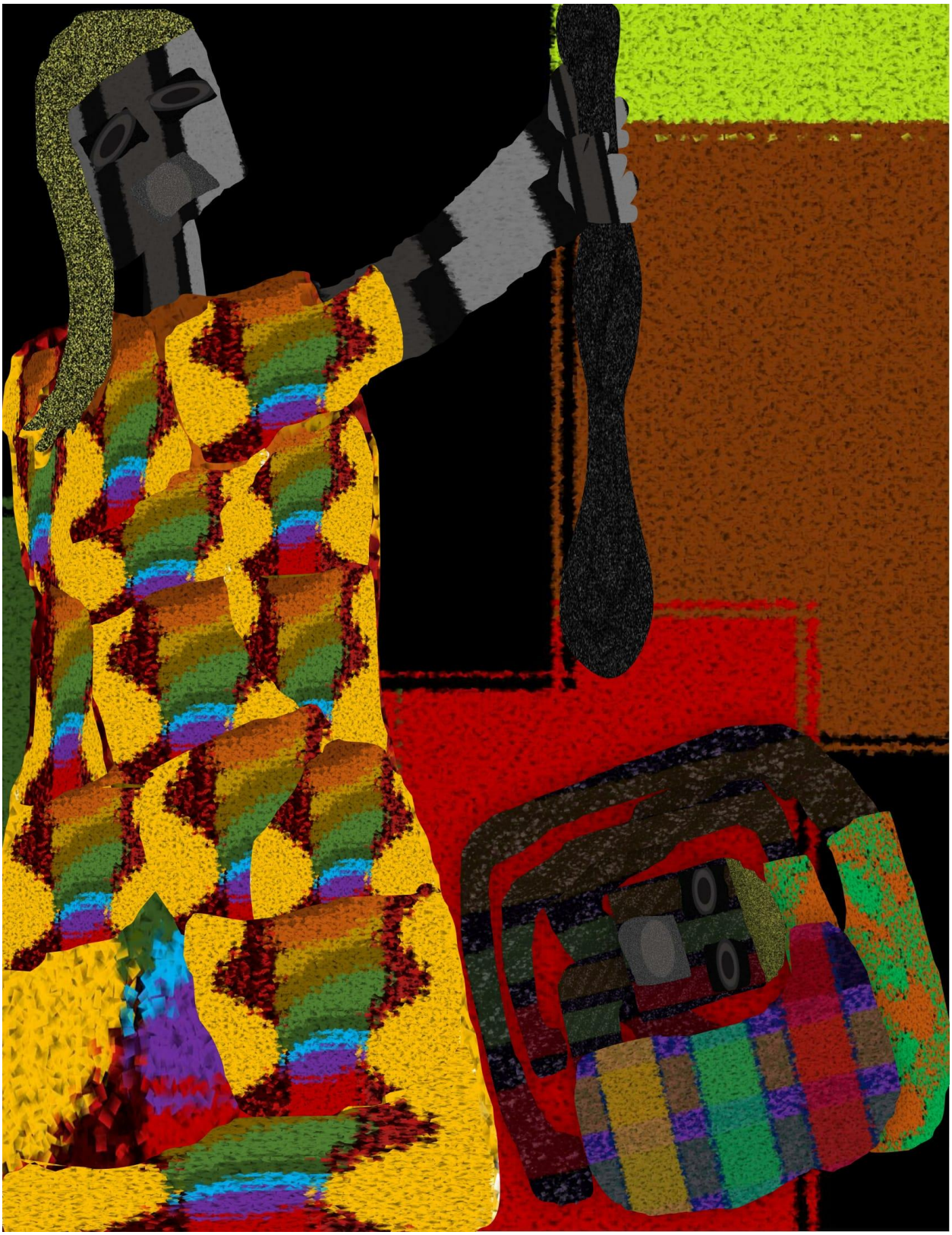
the parable of the lover or the loved or of love himself?

visual art

Three Pieces

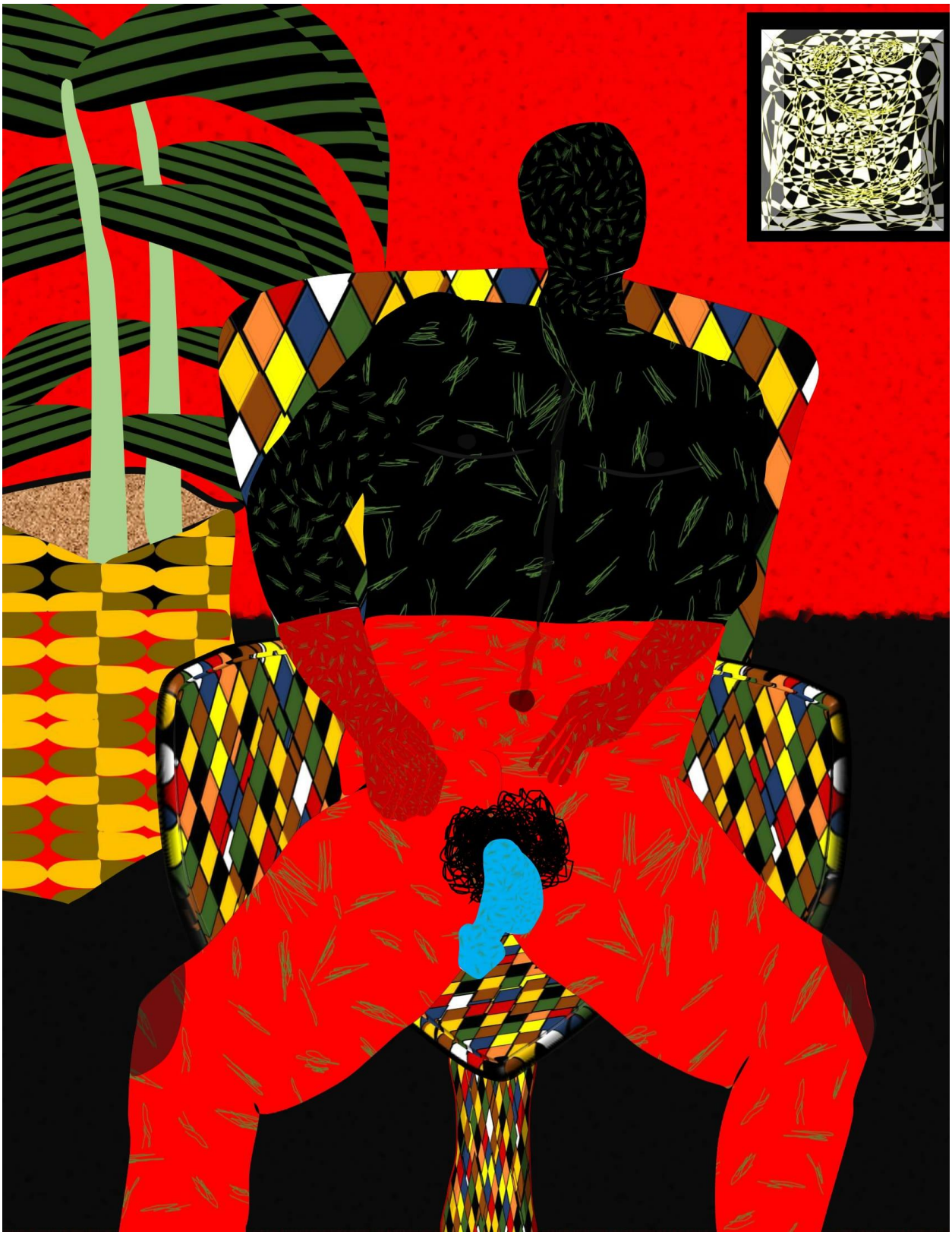
osinachi

In these works, Osinachi captures the troubles queer bodies face in the society because they're often wrongly seen as spiritually sick – a perception that blocks out the beauty in their humanity and leads homophobes to hunt them.



Let's Heal Him

We're Hunted Because We're Flowers



They Say I'm a Hoe!

The One I am Not

erhu amreyan

I meet him again after many years at a crossroads in Cape Town. It is raining, yet it is warmer than most sunny days. A sign, surely. If I hadn't raised my umbrella when I did, I would have passed him unnoticed. But here I am staring right into his eyes. I doubt it, but he is actually there. He walks closer, and takes shelter in my umbrella, his shirt slightly soaked by the rain. I do not know what to say. My hands are on fire, I am sure, as my heart beats rapidly against my chest. He is saying something to me. I cannot hear him. I watch his mouth move, and my chest tightens harder.

He is leading me somewhere. A bar, I think. I can hear the music and the small hissing sound as he opens a beer for me. I still cannot hear him. He is smiling now—that boyish smile that weakens me. Nothing has changed about him—not even the way he chews on his lower lip, seductively, at random moments. My hands begin to tremble, and I quickly hide them under the table. I hear him say the word, *Father,* and I am transported back to our living room in Nigeria.

x

I am a boy again. My father is there standing between two sofas, with his arms on his hips, chastising me. His loud voice is like the sound of thunder before a terrible storm. I am sitting down on a side stool with my head down. He tells me boys do not belong in the kitchen—only women. I look up at my mother standing in a corner. She is obviously tired from all the housework, but she agrees with my father.

𝒳

I am in our church now. They are making my father a deacon. They do not know his true nature, his hatred for women. And even if they do, they will not acknowledge it as a sin. They do not see what he does to my mother. He hides it well. I hate him, I hate the church. There is no God, I say to myself. If there is a God, He will save my mother from my father, as I am too afraid to stand up to him. His fists have done enough damage to my psyche.

𝒳

He tells me boys do not belong in the kitchen—only women. I look up at my mother standing in a corner. She is obviously tired from all the housework, but she agrees with my father.

My father calls me to the balcony where he smokes his occasional cigarettes. He says I must go to an all-boy secondary school to avoid the distractions that girls pose. He says I will be in the science class, that I will be a doctor. I almost tell him I do not like science, that I very much prefer art. I almost say I want to be an artist, or a poet even. But I do not tell him this. I nod and smile. He is happy. I hate him, but I bury that hate deep down.

𝒳

I try to make friends at school; it is impossible. No one wants to be friends with the boy who doodles onto every piece of paper and only talks about mythology and ancient deities. I am a fan of occult mysteries. I like to talk about it and weave stories about it. The other boys like to talk about girls all the time and how they would exert their sexual prowess on them. I am not fascinated by these talks; they bore me. It does not make it any easier that I am top of my class. Haughty and vain, my classmates call me behind my back, and sometimes to my face, with the words, 'No offense' attached.

𝒳

No one wants to be friends with the boy who doodles onto every piece of paper and only talks about mythology and ancient deities.

I take a test in a magazine. The test says I am depressed. I think I am. All the signs are there. My father is proud of me, though. He says I will be a great doctor, and, in a way, I believe him. He boasts to his friends about me. I do not want to be a doctor, but I cannot say this to him. I am too afraid.

ϰ

Sitting on the side-lines, watching as the other boys play football, I think about how they manage to do it. I do not like sports. All that running around leaves me no time for my art. I concentrate on the drawing in front of me. A shadow falls over it. The owner of the shadow says, "You are very good." I look up at him, and say nothing in reply. "Ganesha, right?" He is right and I tell him so. He smiles, and touches my head before running into the field. I stop drawing, and watch him as he plays. He is brilliant with the ball.

ϰ

I find out his name is Remy Ade. He is a new student, and one class ahead of me, but three years my senior. I continue to stalk him, not knowing why. He intrigues me, just like mythology does. He notices me one day and calls me. He tells me I will be his friend, and I am happy—happier than I should have been.

ϰ

"Remy's boy," I am now called by my mates. I help him with whatever errands he needs done in school, and he helps me with my studies. We talk a lot. He is funny and knows a lot about ancient cultures. I forget I am depressed. He comes to the house often to visit. My father is happy to see I have a friend, my mother, too.

ϰ

Remy is in my room and it is evening. We have wasted so much time playing games. He stands in the shadows while I stand in the rays of the filtered sunlight, with a textbook in my hand. "Do you like me? I mean, really like me?" he asks.

I nod, slowly.

He comes to stand in front of me. I realize how sweet he smells, how beautiful he is. He does not waver in what he is about to do. He lifts my chin so I can see his eyes. His lips meet mine, and all reasoning escape me. He holds me tighter as he deepens his kiss. I am in love with Remy, I realize.

He stands in the shadows while I stand in the rays of the filtered sunlight, with a textbook in my hand. "Do you like me? I mean, really like me?" he asks.

𝒳

My father is dead. I do not shed a single tear. I am relieved. My mother is relieved too, but she hides it well behind big droplets of tears, of false wailings. I believe I can change my life now with Remy by my side, but Remy no longer returns my calls. Upon my return to school, I do not find him there. A friend of his tells me he is no longer in the country. I weep for days.

𝒳

I am a cardiologist in Cape Town. It is our new home. My mother pushes me to marry Lani, the girl who lives next door. "She is well mannered and beautiful," my mother says. I like Lani. She is a nice person, but I am not in love with her. I try to be happy, I really try, yet I only think of Remy. When I am with Lani he is on my mind. I can see him clearly, I can feel his lips on mine and his tongue on my flesh.

𝒳

"Erin."

I hear my name, and I am back in the bar. Remy is not a dream because he is right in front of me.

"Do you want to come with me?"

I take more sips of my beer and nod, enthusiastic. I follow him with unsteady legs and a hazy vision, although I can see him just as clearly as I had that day, years ago, when I watched him run across the football field with a smile as illuminating as the sun.

I can see him just as clearly as I had that day, years ago, when I watched him run across the football field with a smile as illuminating as the sun.

X

We are in his hotel room. Remy is telling me he is in town for business. I want to ask why he left me years ago. I want to tell him to go to hell but I listen when he explains. He stops. He is vexed. He orders me to say that something. I do not. I feel a wave of emotions take over my senses like a psychedelic drug. I rush over to him and begin to take off his clothes. His hands encircle my face as he kisses me fiercely. He tells me he has missed me. He tells me he loves me, and always will. He lets me do whatever I want to him until I am satisfied. He holds me in his arms and kisses my forehead. I am happy again, but for how long?

fiction

The Black Unicorn

kiprop kimutai

"There was a unicorn on the Isle of Man," Father Colum told me, right after I told him about my intention to be a priest. He leaned forward, eyes closed, and tapped his feet on the floor. "But she could only be found by one who was pure of heart, Kigen."

I felt shadows crawl over me. Naturally, I turned and looked. But the living room was what it was when I entered—tiny and neat. Just a wooden bookcase pressed to a corner, the grey sofa we sat on, and a wooden table before us, our mugs of tea placed on zebra-painted coasters.

When I looked back at Father Colum, his eyes were still closed. But this time, his mouth was shaking as he held back words that threatened to tumble out. Then he hunched, in the same manner I would, when I wanted to hide my shame.

This was not to be expected. At church, that same Sunday morning, he had been a god. When he took short steps to the altar, with the choir's high voices shredding the air, he had my tears falling. By the time he lifted the white, round sacrament bread and prayed, I was seeing swirls of holy-looking light skitter across his forehead.

Later, when the service had ended and he had changed to the Manx man he was, who wore brown khaki pants and plodded silently on the ground, I followed him. When I reached his house, I tried to hide in the spread of avocado trees that surrounded his compound, but he saw me and beckoned. I walked to him with English falling in lumps from my mouth.

"I want to become a priest."

He laughed and spoke back in Swahili.

"Karibu kwa nyumba kijana."

> By the time he lifted the white, round sacrament bread and prayed, I was seeing swirls of holy-looking light skitter across his forehead.

Inside, he made me tea, then told me that he had seen me somewhere. That was easy. He had visited Mama and I two weeks before, in the shed of twigs and ripped tarpaulin that we now called home. He'd come with a tilapia as long as his arm, three new blankets, Exe all-purpose flour, a kilo of Mumias sugar and sachet of Ketepa tea. I told him how he sat down with us that Saturday and read a verse from the bible to explain his visit: "Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction." I did not tell him that after he left, Mama threw the fish on the muddy slope our house stood on and said, "Who is he calling a widow? My George is here in Limuru. I just need to find him."

Father Colum smiled as I refreshed his memory. His eyebrows gathered into a small furry animal while crow's feet multiplied and ran down his face. When he told me that he had fished the tilapia from the swamp inside the cedar forest, I frowned. I had never heard of anyone fishing in Limuru. That swamp was an excavation site that filled up with water after the murram was mined. It produced nothing more than the thickest scourge of mosquitoes to bite us at night. But Father Colum stretched his hand and held my shoulder.

"There are miracles in this world, Kigen. Many wonders we never get to see!"

I tried asking about priesthood then, about my wish to put on a white cassock under a green chasuble. But he was now talking about unicorns.

"Do you know what they are?"

He looked at me intensely with his liquid-grey eyes and I couldn't answer. I remembered other things instead; the way water slid brown and thick over our feet in the shed when it rained; the sufuria at the corner, in which Mama cooked everything other than what was familiar. *"Kigen, how do I find kisakya and isochot! They call them with Kikuyu names here!"* I remembered her gazing east of our home, at the brick houses that stared down on us. How similar they looked, to the one she once owned!

Seeing that I was not answering, Father Colum pulled a book from under the table and opened it wide. Inside, he showed me a drawing of a tall, white horse with muscles as solid as slabs of granite. The horse had a long horn on its forehead that ended in a sparkle of light.

"Kigen, it is not only the gospel that brought me here to Limuru."

He laughed and lifted the book, then pressed it on his chest.

> I remembered other things instead; the way water slid brown and thick over our feet in the shed when it rained; the sufuria at the corner, in which Mama cooked everything other than what was familiar.

"But love. That is what I wanted."

He closed his eyes once more and became so stiff that I was tempted to touch him and see if he could still move. But I remembered my shame and held my hand back. In Iten, four months before, when men with machetes invaded our home and forced us to flee, Mama had seen how I looked at them, how my hand had trembled, eager to join.

Inside the lorry provided by the police, which ferried us to Limuru with eight other families, Mama had carried that shame alongside the sack of clothes, the sufuria and the small knife she had managed to grab. She sang loudly about having given birth not to a man, but to a shadow of a man. Her words were so poisonous that I expected the world to have dissolved the moment we stepped out. Instead, she had grabbed my arm tightly as if her hand was a metal vise and told me, "You will not shame me here among your father's people. This is our new start. Make me proud." When we were allocated land down the slope by the Limuru chief, and had built our shed, I would try to look her in the face but she would turn away.

I moved forward on Father Colum's sofa and noticed the candle wax stains on his table had joined in a manner to resemble a map of Kenya. Iten was a splotch of brown wax near the table's edge. I pressed my finger on it and closed my eyes. I wanted to feel the guava tree Mama had grown at home, whose fruits I loved to eat.

"I once thought just like you, Kigen," said Father Colum, interrupting my thoughts.

"How do you know how I think?"

He didn't reply, but took his time to sip the last dregs of tea from his mug.

"The solution is not priesthood I am afraid. At least it has not been for me."

Inside, he showed me a drawing of a tall, white horse with muscles as solid as slabs of granite.

He squeezed his thighs as his skin paled.

"But there is a unicorn in the forest. You will find her if your heart is pure."

X

I could not wait for night to come. I walked down the V between two ridges. Brick houses lined the eastern slope while a tarmac road crossed the ridge to the west, with our shed of twigs and ripped tarpaulin lying at the bottom. There was just enough space for our bed and the clutter of utensils besides it. I sat on the bed and waited, trying to ignore the stultifying heat and the scourge of mosquitoes that bit both day and night. But then I saw the gunny sack we had placed on top of the bed, in which we had stuffed all we could when our home was invaded. I pulled it out and untied its sisal knot. I dove my hand inside and sifted through the piles of clothes, till I touched a soft, white belt that I had been unable to leave behind. I took it out and stretched it in my hand.

Back in Iten, I would tie the belt round the leso I had wrapped round my waist, imagining that I had wide, swaying hips. I searched again inside the gunny sack and came out with a small, folded, black polythene bag. I opened it. Inside were the soggy seeds of the pink cosmos we grew in Iten, whose petals I would pluck and lay over my fingernails. I wondered if they would sprout here in Limuru. But evening had come and shadows were stretching down the slope, signaling Mama's return. So I put the items back inside the gunny sack, tied it shut with the sisal string and placed it back.

Twenty minutes later, Mama walked in. Limuru had turned her darker than usual and removed soft flesh from her face, leaving behind tough skin that tightly defined her skull. She was dressed differently from early morning, when she had stepped out in a long black skirt and an oversized, brown sweater that had swallowed her form. Now she was in a long white robe. Her eyes shone red even in the impending dusk and she held a Bible firmly in her hand.

"Did you talk to the priest?" she asked.

Back in Iten, I would tie the belt round the leso I had wrapped round my waist, imagining that I had wide, swaying hips.

I watched her mouth curl as her eyes roved about. She was looking for something new. At times, this had been a comb I had picked along the road; a blanket received from church; a small sack of maize flour that a shy woman had walked with, down the eastern slope, eyes curious to find out who we were. Mama would stare at each new item for long as if ready to thank me. Then she would silently pick it up, and place it at a corner of the shed she considered hers. Today there was nothing, so she just slapped her thighs.

"What did the priest tell you?"

She walked to the edge of the bed where we lay our firewood on ripped carton boxes. She scooped a few logs and lay them in the fold of her arm, and with the other free hand picked up the black sufuria, a mwiko, a paraffin lamp, and a knife.

"If I were you, Kigen, I wouldn't even go to the Catholics," she said, before pressing her lips. "I found a new church today. They gave me this robe. They say they are going to teach me how to pray in tongues. They say they will make me worthy of the promise Jesus gave when he said, ask and you shall receive."

Her eyes swelled. She had more to say. But the manner in which I hunched made her tighten her mouth instead. In Iten, Mama still insisted on being Catholic. In the evening, she would light a cigarette and place it in George's mouth, then kneel beside him and twirl her rosary beads. George would laugh at her, his voice loud and terrifying.

"What are you doing, Kigen?" he screamed. "Today, I will make you a man."

"I met Father Colum," I said finally.

Mama lifted her eyes as her jaws relaxed. This was my chance. I had practiced the speech. *"He said I can register for seminary on Monday. They are willing to sponsor me because of my situation."* That would make Mama release the shame. I would be the man she expected me to be, who could stand in honour at the pulpit, and be respected by a congregation. But Father Colum had only told me about a unicorn, so I kept quiet. Mama narrowed her eyes.

"You are killing me without reason," she said and marched out of the shed.

I sat and listened as she made fire. When it finally crackled, night had fully come. I moved to the door and peeped. I saw Mama pluck leaves off the nderemia that crept over the slope. She boiled them and the odour filled the shed with hopelessness. It turned worse when she began to sing a song she had learnt at her new church. The words and images were pleasant—*Jesus will never leave you, God holds you wherever you are*. But it was how she sung it, her voice twisted and malformed, as if the song fully belonged to the darkness that held tightly over the land. I walked back to the bed shaking.

> That would make Mama release the shame. I would be the man she expected me to be, who could stand in honour at the pulpit, and be respected by a congregation.

Thirty minutes later, she walked in, the paraffin lamp swinging from her elbow. She had plopped the ugali she had made inside the sufuria, and it had sunk under the green muck of the nderemia she had boiled. She walked to the edge of the bed and placed the sufuria down. Her hands moved in a flurry, before emerging with a piece of the ugali and lots of the nderemia placed on a cracked piece of a plastic basin. She handed that to me.

"These are tough times, Kigen," she said. "You have to adapt to a hard life."

Her voice was soft then, just as it were in those days in Iten when George was far away with his transport trucks and it was just the two of us in the house; those days when we would hear neighbours pass by saying, "These Kikuyus are not like us. They are so hardworking. Look at this man George. He lives in a better house than all of us."

> The eucalyptus tree...looked sad at night, as if grieving the native trees in whose space they stood.

I closed my eyes and forced the food in. All the time, I thought of Father Colum seated on his sofa, about his kind, grey eyes, about the honey he had mixed in my tea. I held onto those thoughts so that time would move. Mama sat on the edge of the bed, faced away from me. She ate quickly as she talked to herself. I gritted my teeth to avoid listening to her utterances. Luckily, she made her nights in Limuru short. There were no flowers to water outside. No lights for her to cut her nails or read an old copy of *Reader's Digest*. As soon as she finished, she wiped off her hands,

blew off the paraffin lamp and crawled into the bed. I sat as still as I could beside her. When sleep finally curled her like a baby in a womb, I grabbed the paraffin lamp and a matchbox, and walked outside.

Surprisingly, the texture of the night had turned pleasant. All that was unnerving had been hidden—the mud we stood on, the brick houses up the eastern slope, the absence of flowers outside our shed. I lit the lamp, afraid at first that it would flicker and die. I lifted it high and it lit well the path on the west-side of our shed, which went up a ridge where eroded soil revealed jutted eucalyptus tree roots. The eucalyptus trees were at the top of the ridge, lined to seal the tarmac road that stretched between Nakuru and Nairobi. They looked sad at night, as if grieving the native trees in whose space they stood. I crossed the tarmac road that now shimmered like a river, to the other side where the cedar forest began.

There, in the morning, it was common to see old men herding sheep, or to stumble on lovers torn between hiding and holding tight. At night, it was a place to wonder whether my heart was pure enough to find a unicorn; a place to recall how I got an erection when our barbed wire fence in Iten was ripped off and our fields of millet, maize and beans flattened underfoot. So I kept moving, eager for this mystery that was this night, even when each turn only revealed trees and flickering bats. Then I heard Father Colum's warm voice whisper in my ear, "If you have faith as small as a mustard seed."

I turned, waiting for the lamp to reveal his face; his yellowed teeth and compassionate eyes. Instead, the wicker blew out and I was swallowed by the dark. I held my hand out before me but only felt a biting cold. Then I stepped into water. I had reached the swamp. It was then that I saw the unicorn standing before me. A black mare who illuminated from within. She gracefully bowed and pointed her horn at me. I touched the tip and felt myself dissolve in sparkles of light.

X

"George used to love you, Kigen. But then you turned different. He used to carry you on his shoulders and walk you down to Viewpoint. Now you smile too much. Now, you walk as if you are carrying a woman's breasts."

Mama told me those words in Iten. Our barbed wire fence still stood intact, shielding fields that grew millet, sorghum, pyrethrum, maize, squash, and beans. Our house was made of brick, the roof painted green and the floors inside carpeted. Outside, our compound was awash with pink cosmos. But George had not been seen for six weeks. For the first two weeks, there were phone calls to make us understand that he was a busy man. *"My trucks are stuck in mud near Marsabit." "I am*

waiting here in Kitale to close this maize deal with this idiot." Then those stopped. Mama panicked as the cash he left us dwindled. On the fourth week, I had to go to the shop and ask for sugar on credit.

She gracefully bowed and pointed her horn at me. I touched the tip and felt myself dissolve in sparkles of light.

I knew George was leaving us though. The light in his eyes had changed as if he no longer needed us. Happiness seemed to wait for him outside our fence, among those girls who sold milk in kiosks, who would call themselves daring when they took off their plaid jackets to reveal blouses without sleeves. Among them, George would relax his shoulders and put his hands in his back pockets like a young man. He would smile and trade jokes, when all he had for us was a solid silence accompanied by far-away eyes.

Even more strange, he stopped bullying me. In the sixteen years of my life, I had gotten used to his habit of punching me, painfully and spontaneously, on my upper arm. *"That is to make you hard, you softie!"* Or him forcing open the bathroom door when I was showering to pour icy water from a bucket on me. *"Look at you cringe like a little, delicate girl."* The worst was that Christmas when I was thirteen years old. Mama had left for Eldoret to buy fairy lights. I was arranging rose stems on a glass vase on the dining table, with my blonde-haired, plastic doll beside me, when he staggered into the living room, his eyes a livid red.

"What are you doing, Kigen?" he screamed. "Today, I will make you a man."

I remember being lifted as if I was a rag. I remember my hands being bound tightly with rope. I remember being suspended over the door. I remember that scent of cheap alcohol on his breath and the tap of his steps as he walked away. I remember holding back my tears as the veins in my hands began to swell and my feet itched to touch the floor. That was the last time I called him father.

The morning he left was an ordinary one. There were no shouts or unexpected grimaces. The sun was fully out and the pink cosmos outside waved excitedly to the slight wind. He dressed well in a white, pressed shirt and black trousers that layered easily over his polished shoes. He walked out of the gate without turning back and I smiled in relief, almost as if I knew he was not coming back.

But his absence turned Mama's words sharper.

"How can you sit in the house just like that when you can see that I am all alone?" she would ask, even when I had washed the curtains and folded the napkins in the kitchen according to colour.

By then, the 2007 presidential elections were fast approaching. Boys would walk in gangs outside our gate. One even pointed at us and said, "Remember you are Kikuyu. Tell your president not to dare win this chair." I tried shouting back at him, to tell him that Mama was Kalenjin; that I grew up in Iten and spoke as good a Kalenjin as he. But my tongue was never swift and he had already gone.

Days passed by and Mama began walking faster, a constant frown on her face. She would walk to weed-choked fields with a kiondo and pluck chepkarta, kisakya and isochot. These she would boil, squeeze out the water, then place inside the freezer. When KPLC came to cut our metre because we had delayed on our electricity bill, we locked the gate and hid inside the house. We never opened the gate again and would leave our home by walking to the sorghum field, where we would squeeze out through the barbed wire fence.

"Do you think I am a bad person?" Mama asked one evening, when George had disappeared for three months and Kenyans had begun to vote.

I looked at her and she was shaking. I didn't want her to cry so I answered no. She cupped her hands in her thighs and began rocking back and forth.

"Why did he leave us? What are we going to do with this big house?"

I tried to recall George's face but I couldn't. He had left like a shadow.

I was outside our maize store the next day in the afternoon, removing husks from maize cobs, when Mama rushed to me, her face contorted with fear.

"It is Kibaki who won. Not Raila. Not Raila."

Her face froze as if the word Raila had turned solid and choked her in the mouth. I looked over Iten and saw angry men froth thick like molten lava. They flowed to our land and melted our fence. They scorched our land as they poured in; fire wherever they stepped.

"Kigen, our house," Mama screamed.

I followed her inside. She already had a sack in her hand, in which she was shoving everything she could. I just stood and waited for the men. They tore away our roofing. They kicked our brick walls till they caved in, were quick to take away the fridge, the cooker, the sofas, the TV—every valuable thing that could be damaged by falling brick. When they pointed at me with their machetes, asking if I was Kikuyu, I would repeat, "I am a person of the mouth! I am of this land." They would walk past, leaving behind a sharp, manic scent that made me grow hard. When they left,

leaving our land bare of every effort George had put on it, I came hard. My semen trickled warm down my thighs as I stood beside Mama.

"We are going to Limuru, Kigen Kimani," she said. "That is where George is from. That is where you belong."

They would walk past, leaving behind a sharp, manic scent that made me grow hard. When they left, leaving our land bare of every effort George had put on it, I came hard.

Then she turned and saw my wetness, and her mouth curled.

X

The unicorn healed me. In her eye, I found truth. Not just mine but everyone else's. I rode with her across the cedar forest. At dawn, we stood at the tallest point in Limuru, the wind a pleasant bath to my skin. I looked down the land and saw the church where I met Father Colum. I also saw the market at the edge of the forest, which was still bare of people. Limuru seemed small then, almost as if I could close it in my palm.

I had lost my clothes. I was now dressed in a long, flowing, black robe which was tied with rope around the waist. Whether it was the unicorn that stripped me, I cannot tell. I felt like a priest. The unicorn took me to places where wild flowers grew. I stuck clematis, leopard orchid and spiderworts to my hair. I plucked a blood lily and stuck it on my goatee. The world was what I had always wanted it to be—a flighty, thrilling rush.

When it was time for me to go, the unicorn walked me to the edge of the cedar forest where the market was. A few women were already up, dressed in woolen leg warmers and thick sweaters, unwrapping sacks of vegetables they would sell for the day. They couldn't see us because, as Father Colum had told me, a unicorn chose who saw her.

I slid off the unicorn's back and she bowed to let me touch her horn once more. When I did, I felt myself swell, as if all my life I had been a flaccid ball and now I was fully becoming. She disappeared then. I didn't even see her gallop away. I hid behind a tree and waited for the market to fill up. By 9 am, it was bustling with hundreds of people, who squeezed through narrow spaces left by tomatoes, onions, capsicum, carrots, and potatoes piled onto waterproof, plastic sacks. Their voices sounded excited.

The unicorn took me to places where wild flowers grew. I stuck clematis, leopard orchid and spiderworts to my hair. I plucked a blood lily and stuck it on my goatee. The world was what I had always wanted it to be—a flighty, thrilling rush.

When I walked in, I was not afraid. I parted through the people and walked to a woman at a stall, who was dressed in a pink, polka-dotted apron. She looked at me with wide-eyed wonder, her nose flaring as if she had seen a ghost.

"I want a kilo of shelled peas and carrots for forty shillings," I said.

Her hands fell slack on her sides as she saw her truths in my eyes; how she lay beside a snoring husband at night and reached for her pudenda; how affectionless she felt when her grandson was laid in her arms, even when she had smiled and said, "Waa! Si he is handsome!" But it was the truth of the child she had strangled and buried secretly in a patch of arrow roots that had her break down and cry.

The other market women gathered. But even before they could inquire, they met their truths in my eyes—secret lovers, fetuses flushed out with malaria medication, truant children, skin infections that had them scratch surreptitiously, doubts on whether God existed or not. They were hit in the gut and began to wail. But I had to tell them what was important to me.

"You have not been kind to Mama. She feels so alone here in Limuru."

I paused and licked my lips, surprised that they were enthralled.

"Yet my father, George Kimani, is from here."

They threw the name George Kimani about. But there were many George Kimanis; George Kimani who left for Marsabit twenty years before to herd camels; George Kimani who was in Mombasa, trapped by the sexual ploys of Mombasa women; George Kimani who was a pastor in Kawangware and seemed to have gone soft in the head. But then they spoke of a George Kimani who had moved to Iten and married a Kalenjin woman, and I nodded. A woman, whose eyes were swollen from fresh tears, stepped before me.

It was impossible to grieve.

"You are one of ours—a child of this land. You are very special and have been sent by the One above to punish us. Ask Him to spare us from our sins."

The women ululated as I prayed. Later, they carried their selection of pumpkins, potatoes, carrots, onions, tomatoes, and shelled peas, then followed me across the road, and down the slope to our shed. They lay countless leso over our shed as we prayed some more. Some even rushed to their homes and came back with pots of mukimo. They held Mama's arm and swirled her around as they sang. But Mama looked dense, even when she smiled back. In the evening, when the women left, their gifts piled in front of our shed, I saw her sit and hunch. I reached over to hug her but she pulled back.

I felt myself swell, as if all my life I had been a flaccid ball and now I was fully becoming.

"I saw you take the lamp outside at night," she said. "What did you find?"

I wanted to tell her about the unicorn. But when I looked into her eyes, I saw that all she wanted was George and that her desire for him was drying her soul. I closed my eyes and searched for George. I saw him four ridges away, drunk as hell, in soiled jeans and a tattered shirt; a different man from the one who left our home in Iten in the morning. Mama thanked me for the first time in my life when I told her where to find him. She fetched water in a pail and wiped soil off her bare feet. As she skipped up the ridge like a little girl, I wondered if I would see her again. But the sun was sinking west and spraying its orange light over the eucalyptus trees up the ridge. It was impossible to grieve. When I heard a different set of footsteps behind me, I didn't have to turn to know that it was Father Colum. He grasped my shoulders and I sank inside the curve of his body. I trusted in the soft timbre of his voice when he said, "You are now free."

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photography

The Birth of a Rainbow

chukwudi eternal udoye

All the years I hid my fragile soul from the world
All those years made me see the light within.
All the nights I cried and groaned myself to sleep
All those nights watered my search to fruition.

Now I step out and I stir the air wherever I go
They have rain and sunshine, but I bring them rainbows
They love colors, and they just can't do without them
Unknown to them, I am the variety they all seek...

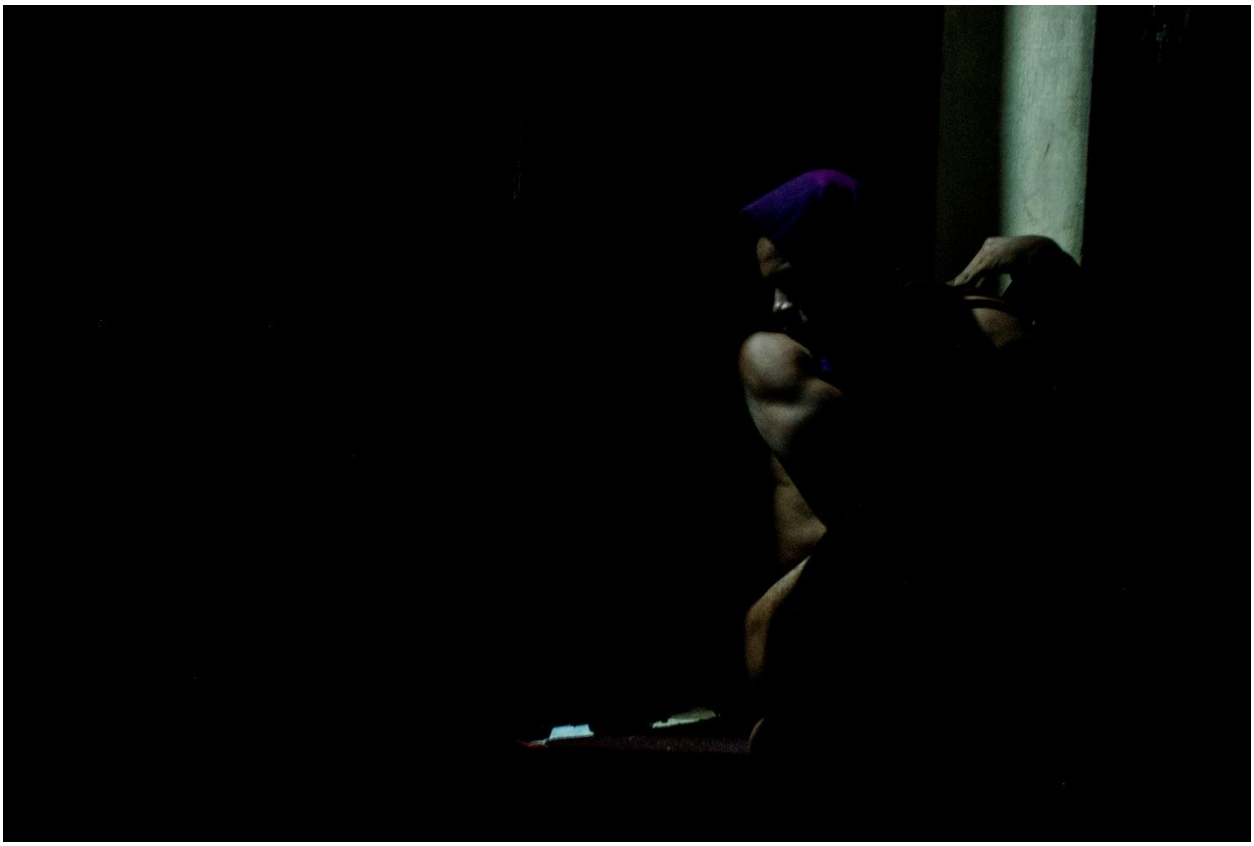
I am the spice of their lives.

Untamed

So I Dance

Beauty Beneath

Inner Light



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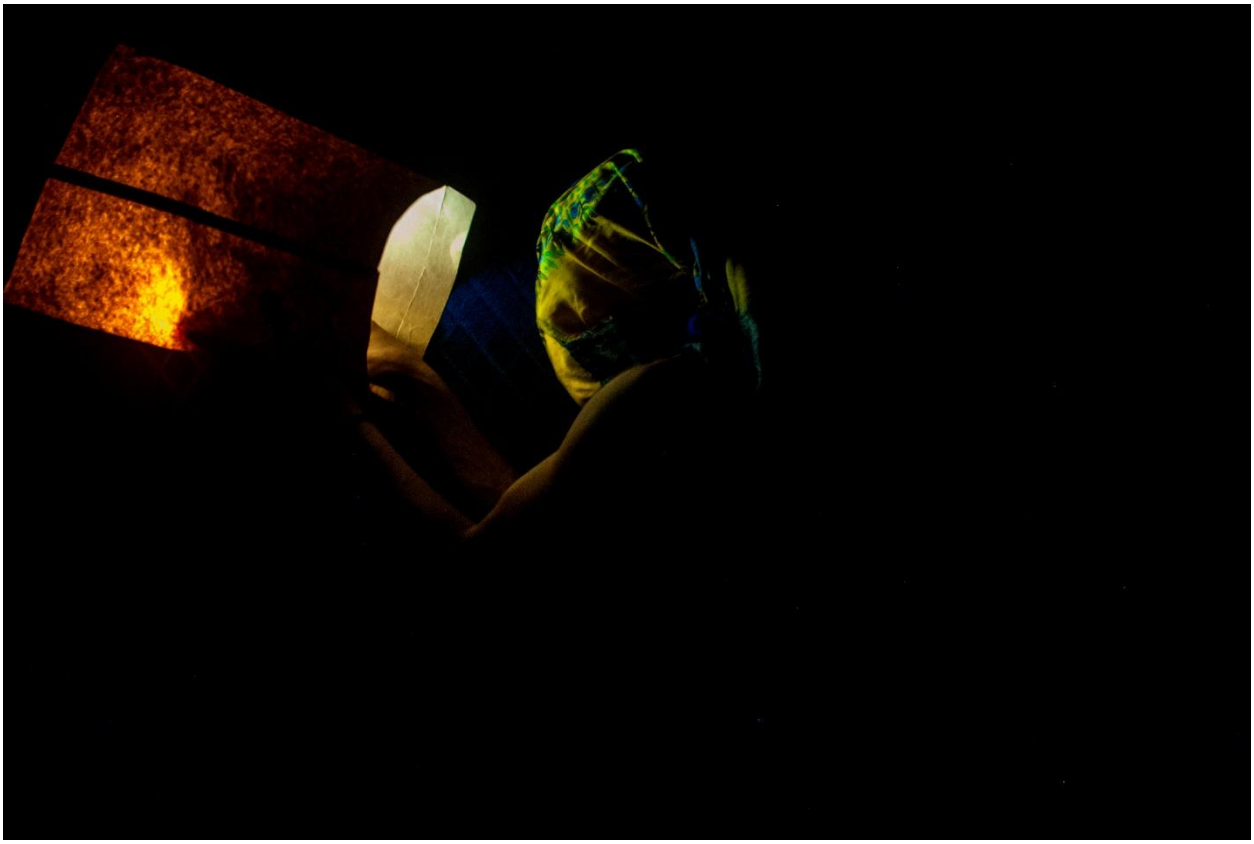


The Search

photography

Komboa

mal muga

This series is called Komboa. Komboa is a Swahili word that means *to redeem*. The series seeks to celebrate sexual vulnerability in the African gay male community. My intention is to help gay African men see the beauty in giving themselves fully to their partner with no shame or doubt and allowing themselves to be open and to release. I took inspiration form Kinbaku which is Japanese bondage art because I believe allowing someone to bind you is fully surrendering to them, giving them full control over your body and your emotions and trusting them completely.

VI

VII

VIII

poetry

Our Bodies, Like Gethsemane I

ebenezer agu

We are in the moment of imitation,
borrowing supple from a branch bending
with little effort under harsh wind,
to learn how the body folds 360 in the wrong direction.
It is the moment of two souls gushing and pleading rescue,
each holding the other at the wrong place
—sex translating into drama of the absurd
—with only the actors knowing what story is in each act.

We call our play Boy & Boy Romance
and rehearse at the place the heart sings
on behalf of a multitude that suffered sorrow and found glory.

In the middle of our act we cry.
We do not know whether we cry because our nudities
are black in the dark, the way fleshes singe black in fire.
But when we stand behind each other, so close our
bodies share sweat, we learn that body orifices share
in the nature of potholes—some are deeper than others.

And then your fingers trace my body.
You say you are counting my bones,
how many it would take to break my soul.

We know how to go into a boy's naked body,
through ways more than one, greasing ourselves over,
to enter the narrow place where a boy keeps his treasures.

Sometimes our bodies are like Gethsemane;
a place of flowers where we go to, first, agonize
and then dance, in full naked bodies, the weak dance of seduction.

When Christ comes,
he'll ask what we have done with our bodies
and we'll tell Him we have found spouts in them
that taste like vinegar.

poetry/ agu

Our Bodies, Like Gethsemane II

Once, I made love to a boy with a spiteful ghost;
it had been the mark of my sin for the day of reckoning.

Once, the boy disappointed me twice in one night
and then rolled over into sleep.
It was in the season we would cross from boyhood
and the sun refused to rise upon where we lay.
Each time he had come to me (after Block Rosary)
we recited the parody of his faith:
Come father & son, come holy ghost
the one that sets little boys' tents on fire.
Then we became Shedrack and Abednego in amorous flames.

Many times I despaired because my body would
not open up to answer questions I asked it.

Once the boy was broken, and then learned to walk
across the street with the swagger of a naughty boy.
He'd said that (like a boxer) he knew parts of his body
most cut in all the challenges he'd fought.
The night after that, I faced the wall to read how a
boy walked across a desert barefooted and then turned blue.

Once, he prayed to God (before he paid with his presence,
and an extra pain, for whom he was). And I despaired
against the God who received an unpaid service from his extra pain.

All day, I have made supplication to loneliness,
learning how a boy grows into a grown man
dancing in the scarred body of Christ.

poetry

My Amygdala

sajid ahsan dipra

Naked scales
and serrated wants
fall around me like
inlets of a vertical body of water.
Sound is the lizard in me,
anhydrous its eyes;
slide a finger down its lizard tail
and feel irate grooves—
centuries old—rising away from fear
under its violent epidermis.
Take me to your calm place and
I will sink my lizard fangs in you,
each gash a flight from unquiet thoughts.

poetry/ dipra

Second Generation Air Pump

i.

What domestic image are you scrutinizing
this morning, Carlos Williams?
What line break have you devised
on your carriage, hastening from a measled simp
to the hospice gent who attempted,
more than once, to so rudely slide
into your work through your
breathtaking enjambments?

ii.

I am changing the tire this morning
and I too am the alchemy of burnt rubber.
I too have come derailed
and tried to leave a little of me
in someone else's story.
I too am the physician of my best self,
in love with my health.
I mete out my poems in slivers
and measure emotions in thimbles.
Maybe I'll say red wheelbarrow
but really, I'll mean I miss the sun on your back
interspersed by window grills.

iii.

I'll write poems
with too many sentiments
bracketed between alveolar syllables,
so when you read my bilabial words
your lips will form my favorite shape—
inflated bluing tube of a red wheelbarrow
worn from muddy promises
filled with a second-generation air pump.

poetry/ dipra

A Garden Full of Love

A heavy lower jaw
and a burning heart has convinced
you you're a dragon
Free to lift up my roof
a hundred feet and light it into
a bright red cloud
From which soot,
black as intent,
falls with a little bit of abandon and a little
bit of indecision.
The floor is revolting like
the sky—they have each other
why need I be sorry?
When you moved me you really
knocked me
off these blades of coal
about to premiere
a swift combustion
edited for frailties,
hidden, witless, forgotten.
This room without a roof
would never call to the sea
and ask to be drowned
to be buried and gone.

fiction

The Man

louis

The man who sits at the other end of the club knows your body. He knows the slender thrill of your waist as they sway to form hips, the beads of sweat that gather in the hollow of your navel, the ones that make their way to the crack of your butt. He knows, too, the way you like to be treated: soft, tender, ravenous. He knows, because you show him.

There is a haze in the air. He's seated at the far end of the club where the 'Ballers' lounge, but you can see his eyes boring right into your body. By the minute, the club thickens with people, male, female, and everyone else in between. Oxygen is greedily sucked up. Everyone is dancing, drinking, laughing, clothes clinging to our backs. The air conditioners—like most things in Nigeria—are not functional. Red, blue and orange lights spiral above, casting dim rays, enough to make out faces.

Places like this make it easy to unwind and suppress forlorn memories. They make it easy to not feel. There had been a time when your vision of your future wasn't so bleak. Memories mock you every morning you wake up on the right side of the wrong bed, fling your thoughts back to events that led to such places. These wrong places are temporary solutions, numbing the pain that accompanies reliving.

> These wrong places are temporary solutions, numbing the pain that accompanies reliving.

You sashay to the bar. Order a drink you know he will pay for. You have done this several times. It always works. The bartender arches his eyebrow. He wants to know what's up, if you have found someone. You smile, shy, and shake your head, not in negation, because you are certain you will. You look away from the mirror behind him, your reflection nauseates you. You sip your drink which tastes like apples.

The man is taking longer than you'd expected and you worry he might be somewhat apprehensive to walk up to you in a club full of people. Men don't just walk up to other men and buy them drinks, not when the other man is wearing bright shorts and a chiffon shirt tied at the base to form a crop-top. You have been around enough men to know how to make yourself approachable, so you loosen the bow and let the fabric fly.

A whiff of musky cologne cruises over you as he makes his way to the bar. He's talking to someone behind you and you feel an uprising between your legs. His voice is coarse and crude, almost arrogant; you begin to imagine his groaning as he fucks you. You cross your legs, tucking your erection between your thighs.

> Men don't just walk up to other men and buy them drinks, not when the other man is wearing bright shorts and a chiffon shirt tied at the base to form a crop-top.

He laughs in barrels at someone behind you and trips against your stool, placing a massive hand atop your exposed thigh. The grip makes you shudder, he apologizes and pulls up a stool beside you. There's something about the way he says, "Oh, my," something suggestive.

He orders himself a rum and coke. And another of whatever my friend here is having, he says to the bartender, rubs your knee in apology. The touch lasts a second, maybe two, but in your mind it lingers for a little more. He says it's the least he can do for saving him from tripping in a club.

You smile what you imagine to be an aloof smile, looking away from him. In the dim light of the bar, you have made out his face in full. Narrow-nosed and dark-skinned, with well-tended beards

and straight eyebrows. He looks like a man who has been catered to his whole life, a man who knows how to look pretty in the right shade of light. You steal glances at him through the tip of your glass, conscious to not give yourself away. This business has taught you to analyze men, the worth of their shoes, their wrist watches, their keycards.

It is as a result of these analyses that you are roused on different mornings in places you struggle to trace your steps back from. And it is men like him that make it possible for you to pay rent for a flat you do not sleep in, since your family cannot accept what you are—who you are.

He looks like a man who has been catered to his whole life, a man who knows how to look pretty in the right shade of light.

Crazy night, yeah? he asks. He has an accent, a refined one, unlike yours. You congratulate yourself—you picked this one well.

You sip your drink and say yeah. There is brief silence, and you hope he says something more. The music is loud, too loud, and you sway your waist slowly on the stool to remind him that you are sitting before him.

He starts to say something to you, his face softened by an awkward smile. You nod, you do not know why, but a nod seems to be the inappropriate response to his endless talking. You are neither disagreeing nor agreeing, but merely giving him a vague sense of your interest. His words begin to take shape.

He is saying, Nigeria is not my primary base. The vague expression on his face triggers something in you, a kind of excitement.

You smile and sip your drink. You are doing this now, more frequently than usual, sipping your drink.

He asks if you heard anything he said, and you make a face that suggests you didn't, smile and shake your head. You blame the speakers, the sound blasting out of them. He knows it's a lie, you can see it in his eyes, but he laughs and you laugh along with him. Finally, you are both on the same page.

You lean in and whisper into his ears. You want to know if you can go someplace quieter. You allow your lips brush against his ears.

Yes, please, totally, he says, too quickly, flushes, apparently embarrassed at his eagerness. You laugh, but not meanly; you cannot be too mean.

In the dim light of his headlights, you see the distant trees, darkness swooshing and rising until it coats everything a dense black.

He reaches into his wallet and pays the bartender, and you both walk out through the soundproof doors. The bouncers whistle and make sly comments. He tips them one after the other. They hail him, cheerful, "Baba D!!!" "Oga for the boss!!!" You hear one of them call him Damien and you assume it's his name.

You are not in the business of exchanging names, but something about Damien makes you want to tell him your name. In the car, when he asks your name, you tell him to call you Quasi Boy. It is a name you have adopted in the months since you started this business. Someone had called you that on your first night at the club, and you liked the it enough to adopt it.

Damien, he says and starts to drive. He seems excited, which surprises you. You'd expected him to be disappointed at your name. Again, the urge to tell him your name tugs at your throat.

He asks where you want to go and you arch your eyebrow to let him know that it is his decision to make. He says he's driving you to a hotel, says he's sorry, he would have taken you home were his wife and children not currently in the country. You reach between his thighs. He is a shower. A massive shower. He shudders in excitement, reclining the car seat and spreading his legs to make room. You unbuckle his belt and pull his cock out and start to feast on it. Your mouth trails it deep down your throat and back.

He groans—the exact way you had imagined—and you feel your precum start to trickle. You can taste his in your mouth too.

When he parks, after what seems like an endless drive, at an area around town you have never been to, you pull up from him, hold your breath and look out the window. The streetlights do not extend to this part of town. In the dim light of his headlights, you see the distant trees, darkness swooshing and rising until it coats everything a dense black. You look into his eyes which seem to have absorbed the darkness around. He grabs your head, forcing it to his penis.

At first, you convince yourself that it is desire. But you have seen desire enough to know its tracks. You drag your head away, tell him that you are uncomfortable with where you are, you want to leave. He stares at you, saying nothing, and then he grabs your head again and forces it down. You struggle, fighting off his hands.

The slap dazes you.

> This business has taught you to analyze men, the worth of their shoes, their wrist watches, their keycards.

Don't dare make a sound, he tells you, and you hear the central lock click. People in your line of business encounter things like this from time to time. You have heard stories about it: where to go if something breaks, what to take, how to fix a mess that you get yourself into, what to do when you are assaulted.

But nobody teaches you that your lungs would close up and your limbs wouldn't even rise to smack him. That you would will yourself to move away from him, to evade his hands as they rip apart your shirt and press against your nipples, but they would remain still. That the fear would leech across your skin, creep into your bones and make them docile. So you sit there and wait until the memories return. You allow yourself feel, once again, the familiar feeling of a man's hand pressing through your body against your will. The memory hurls at you—shakes you. The clenching tightness in your stomach, the fear that has stiffened even your fingers, the particular crispness of his cold hands, the insertion into you, the silence of the night.

That night, as he shoves you out the car and a sharp cold wind descends on you, you fold your arms tightly and weep.

A Sheltered Life

(Excerpted from "Memories, Like Photographs, Black and White")

otosirieze

One's individual history is an amalgamation of the lives of others, his life a crucible of their distinct histories. Before the children grew, before his wife knew, before the evenings he, cigarette in hand, stared through his window netting into his compound at his vehicles being washed, at Suleiman, at his bare body of skin like a black mirror, at every contour of sweat trickling down those thighs, at his gleaming smile when he looked up to shout "Good morning, sir!" Before the afternoons he watched him bow beside his kettle, wash his head, hands and feet. Before that first Sunday morning, his family out at Mass, that he walked into Suleiman's room, the man jerking out of bed in surprise. Before he sat on that bed, felt the unclad mattress between his fingers, Suleiman standing at the door in suspense. Before he said, "You can sit," and, because there was only one seating space in that room, the bed, his gateman stared at him as though he had gone out of his mind. Before the second Sunday when Suleiman said quietly, "But you are married and I am married and I can't do this kind of thing to Madam. Una two be very good people to me."

One's individual history is an amalgamation of the lives of others, his life a crucible of their distinct histories.

Long before subsequent early mornings when he'd go down to Suleiman's room and go back up before daybreak. Long before the cold Christmas his family travelled and, because he did not come down that whole weekend, Suleiman knocked on the door of the main house, continued knocking even though he was unsure what he would say was his reason, until he opened the door and stepped aside so Suleiman could step into the house for the first time. (Solum and Chukwuma would have been eight and five then.) Long before they sat in the dinning-room and he shifted the jug of tea and loaf of bread to Suleiman and they ate in silence. Long before that line of tear crawled down his cheek, that line of tear that Suleiman saw and said, "Sir? Is anything wrong?" and leapt to the chair beside him, and sat there pondering whether to touch him, to wipe it. Long before Suleiman said, "Oga, I think you suppose dey go visit your friends, just go out get fresh air because e no good how you dey stay for house every time you no go work." Before he replied, "You, you no be my friend?" and Suleiman, surprised, slowly brought himself to slow nods. Long before Suleiman began coming for books, returning the ones he'd read with questions, and he, in one of his clarifications, asked him, "What are your plans for school?" and Suleiman said with that smile, "But oga I fit go school any time. I still dey decide."

Long before he found himself writing words:

The people we love are like green plants,
To live and grow with us, they have to be watered
With affections the colour of red
Not left to wither in a presumption or indifference neither white nor black,
In something disturbing,
Like the colour of grey.

Confessing:

On the first page of our story, there was a fire in my chest
You clothed your skeletons when I bared mine
In my emptiness where I fall apart, words have no meaning
Only this past glowing in blooming flames
This future that I do not know whether we will have

When I will look back to now and either laugh or grief
Haunted, haunted, by the searing silence of your eyes.

...he said, "You can sit," and, because there was only one seating space in that room, the bed, his gateman stared at him as though he had gone out of his mind.

Long before these things, it was at the suya joint down Obohia Road that he met him: a young man in brown who, despite his own six-feet-two, was two, three inches taller, whose eyes and teeth and knives competed to out-glint each other in the halo of the gas lamp. Who had innocently told him his life in those twenty minutes, talking as he cut onions and pepper into the chopped-up roast beef. Who when he asked his plans said he had a wife but "must travel overseas to be an astronomer." And he found it intriguing, odd, that this young man had not gone to secondary school but knew about astronomy. "How did you learn to speak English so well?" he had asked him, enamoured at how, in his manner of talking, English tagged along with Pidgin. And Suleiman had looked at him, not hiding his surprise that this stranger was surprised he could speak English. He came the next evening, his jeep parked on the other side of the road, and Suleiman told him with that grin, "I put extra for you because say I like you, Oga, and because say I wan get money like you one day." The third evening, he came even though he didn't want suya, only wanted to be sure of what it was that now propelled him: a much younger man not particularly good-looking but so full of life, of graceful energy, of a promise of profundity. The fourth evening he asked him if he would like to work for him, be his gateman and housekeeper, and Suleiman stared, stilled, before saying, "Thank you oga, but if you no go vex, I go like think am first." And so he did not come the fifth evening, the sixth, the seventh. When, on the eighth morning, a sunny Sunday that his family had gone for Mass, that there was continuous knocking on the gate and he opened it to find Suleiman smiling in ironed blue caftan, clean-shaven, looking even much younger, even more striking, he had asked him, "How did you find my house?" and Suleiman had brought out the complimentary card: "You gave me that day." That evening, he drove him to the unpainted one-storey down Mosque Road, watched him put his bags in the jeep's boot, both of them surrounded by smiling neighbours, watched the oldest among them utter words in Hausa, words that, when driving back, he would ask Suleiman what they meant and Suleiman would say, "He said that Allah will continue to bless you if

you continue to be good to me." And he would comb Suleiman's cadence for the subtlest irony, the slightest hesitation in voicing those words, and find none.

He had done all these knowing it was Madness, that it was not what he ought to, and yet he knew too well that only a few unbearable urges do not demand this unconditional relief. He continued doing them, never stopping to ponder if it was anything more than it appeared, if it was what he sought, Affection, convinced as he was that it could never be realised equally on both sides: We either loved more or were loved more, or we loved only for reasons, circumstances without which our love would fall away. He did not want a subordinating affection, one that would convert reciprocation into duty, an insulating affection that would keep him safe from Suleiman's realities, keep him unruffled. He did not want him to love him as his benefactor, with only that loyalty we give they who have given us new lives. He wanted to be loved with bareness, rawness, with all the lack of comfort that a relationship between equals had. He wanted to be immersed in this man's existence, to be loved intoxicatingly and excruciatingly, unconditionally. Sheltered by his fear, he knew that if at all he felt anything more, it would never be returned. And still he continued. And so after the riots, he asked him whether he wanted his wife and children to join him, whether their being close to him wasn't better than sending them back to Kano, and Suleiman said no, that *he* felt it was time to return to Kano.

The third evening, he came even though he didn't want suya, only wanted to be sure of what it was that now propelled him: a much younger man not particularly good-looking but so full of life, of graceful energy, of a promise of profundity.

It had been a quiet afternoon, it had been upstairs, a dreary song on radio, Suleiman standing near the plugged boiler in the bathroom, boiling water for his bath. He was sitting on his bed, the door into the passage slightly open, but open enough for him to catch Suleiman's white each time he passed, a roving archangel's. "Is there anything I can do to make you change your mind?" Mr Ekeh asked. He knew now about his gateman and his wife: it was in the nascent coldness in his touch, the careful avoidance of his eyes, his frequent flaccidity when they lay, a dousing of desire borne of guilt, and yet Suleiman did not yet know that he knew, and Mr Ekeh would not ask him, because he, cocooned as he was in a passion that could not be sheathed, was ready to settle for a compromise. He had known and yet his history with him had remained of that different nature, that subterranean, confessional nature: he telling him his life, Suleiman listening like a father when he could so easily be

the son. Of course it was what it had always been: sheer insanity. He could not stop wondering how Suleiman felt, how Suleiman *felt* things, what was going on in his head, and he craved to know, knowing already that it was why he was leaving, that he feared the complications in himself. He had thought about him in the day and thought about him in the night and now, faced with the enormity of distance, the fear and inevitable scar of it, he was overwhelmed. This was possession, to be entangled in the other.

You are the sea in my head, the tsunami raging inside
The earth under my feet, the rock I fall on
The air I breathe, the calm in my lungs
You are the fear in me, the fire in my heart singeing its walls.

A minute later, Suleiman appeared at the door, his head bent as he was taller than the door, a steam of white faintly visible behind him. "Your water is ready, Oga," he said.

"Is there anything I can do to make you change your mind?" Mr Ekeh said.

He could not stop wondering how Suleiman felt, how Suleiman *felt* things, what was going on in his head, and he craved to know, knowing already that it was why he was leaving, that he feared the complications in himself.

Here was a man struck by a peculiar loneliness, hindered and motivated by that loneliness that had become single-mindedness. "You can start school here, sit for WAEC and JAMB, get into the polytechnic, or you can even come with me to Nsukka every week if you like. I can make arrangements for your accommodation if you wouldn't like to live in my quarters there. Or if you choose to stay in Aba. I can rent and furnish a flat so you'll live there with your family."

> Here was a man struck by a peculiar loneliness, hindered and motivated by that loneliness that had become single-mindedness.

In many ways, they were men alike, men with their sense of perception intact, their awareness of the world scorched in hope, their definition of their own needs relatively simple. But like water, there are things we cannot hold tight in our grip, things destined only to grace our palms, to dry off when they must. Like happiness, there are overlookable things we cannot buy, decisions like staying, holding on to supposedly profitable things. It took long before Suleiman replied. "My family needs me," he said, slowly as if for emphasis, his fingers running on the sofa as if gauging its lushness, its plush feel. He had moved from the door, was standing in the center of the bedroom as if taking in the last of all he was giving up. "Your family needs you, too, Oga."

Rain

akola thompson

The rain is falling here.
You remember how it rose and fell—
First in heavy drops, and then in pitter-patter—on our zinc sheets in Berbice?
Yes, just like that.
It falls now against red stained earth, not far away from Boa Vista;
That place you had asked me to take you that one time
And I'd said no, I had family there;
I couldn't be seen with you—
Alone—
Not after all the rumors were finally retreating.

You had stayed with me at Berbice,
Listening to the rain fall
As I tapped on your naked back.
You'd breathed deeply to show that my fear affected you
And I'd grown grey with anger at my own fear,
Feeling your fingers move stiltedly against my skin
Almost as if they were growing weary of being there.

The rain is falling here.

Through the drops, I listen to
The sound of ripe mangoes falling,
Falling,
Landing to be skinned or left to rot,
Forgotten as one falls right beside another.

Ever so often though, there's a sound,
Still of mangoes, falling against the earth's hard surface;
But
It lands softly against the earth,
Nestles there.
And I can't help but wish that you were here
Beside me,
Listening to mangoes falling against the coarse slope.

Notes on Contributors

Akola Thompson is a 21-year-old writer living in Guyana. She is a mother of one and is currently in her fourth year of university where she is pursuing a Bachelors degree in English Literature.

Arinze Ifeakandu was shortlisted for the Caine Prize in 2017 and was a 2015 *A Public Space* Emerging Writer Fellow. He is working on a book of short stories.

Chinthu Udayarajan is a poet, painter, and novel writer. She holds a PhD in Food Science from the University of Wisconsin, Madison, USA. She is the author of more than 100 poems and one novel which is currently being edited. Chinthu currently lives in India.

Chisom Okafor temporarily lives and writes in Lagos, Nigeria. He has had works published in various literary forums, and is currently working on his debut chapbook.

Chukwudi Udoye Eternal is a photographer. He studied Fine and Applied Arts at the Institute of Management and Technology (IMT) and the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, both in Enugu State, Nigeria. In 2012, he was awarded the Burgeoning Musician Award at the Anambra State Books and Craft Festival. He was also awarded the Most Creative Photographer at the same festival in 2014. His initiative, One Million Visuals, is an art content-providing firm.

Cisi Eze is a journalist, blogger, writer, comic artist, graphic designer, and 2D animator. She has been published in *Kalahari Review*, *Holaafrica*, and the queer anthology of love poems, *Mounting the Moon.* She is a guest writer on *BellaNaija*. Besides, writing, she plays the guitar. Cisi resides in Lagos, Nigeria.

Ebenezer Agu is a Nigerian writer currently living in Kano. His works (both poetry and nonfiction) have appeared in different literary platforms. He is currently compiling an anthology of African poetry called *20:35 Africa: An Anthology of Contemporary Poetry*. He shoots photos in his free time, which he publishes on his Instagram page.

Erhu Amreyan believes in a slightly more magical world, with a moving castle, and another in the sky. When she is not creating worlds through words, she is binge-watching anime, and/or learning new things.

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

(Dundurn/Cassava Republic), an anthology of nonfiction from Africa edited by Ellah Wakatama Allfrey. When he is not teaching journalism at New York University, he is travelling across Africa.

Ibk's writing appear in the Kalahari Review and Kito Diaries. He loves to paint and sing cheesy songs on his guitar. He has three dogs.

Ibukun Ayobami is a writer, painter and singer who loves cats.

Karen Jennings was born in Cape Town, South Africa in 1982, but now lives in Goiania, Brazil. She holds a Masters degrees in both English Literature and Creative Writing from the University of Cape Town, as well as a PhD in English Literature from the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Her debut novel, *Finding Soutbek* was published in 2012 by Holland Park Press (UK) and was shortlisted for the inaugural Etisalat Prize for African Fiction. In 2014, her short story collection, *Away from the Dead*, was longlisted for the Frank O'Connor International Short Story Competition. Her latest book, *Travels with my Father*, was published in November 2016 by Holland Park Press and was longlisted for the Sunday Times Barry Ronge Fiction Prize for 2017.

Kiprop Kimutai is a Kenyan-based writer. His fiction has been published by Kwani? Trust, Jalada, *Painted Bride Quarterly*, *No Tokens*, *Acre Books*, *Caine Prize* and Farafina. He is currently working on his debut novel, *The Bantam Chicken Project*.

Louis lives in liminal places. He records stories that matter to him.

Mal Muga is a photographer and film producer whose work allows him to bring to life abstract ideas in an aesthetically pleasing fashion. He is currently focusing on spirituality and male sensual expression, and is fascinated with juxtaposing unexpected items on physical body-scapes.

Onwubiko Chidozie is a poet and short story writer. He is currently studying Pharmacy at the University of Benin, Nigeria. He has written several poems and short stories and has had one of his works featured in one of the *Pharmavoice* bulletins.

Osinachi is a Nigerian writer, poet, play writer, and mixed media artist. You can connect with him on Instagram @__osinachi

Otosirieze is Deputy Editor at *Brittle Paper*. His fiction has appeared in *The Threepenny Review*, *Transition*, and in an anthology of the Gerald Kraak Award, for which he was shortlisted. His work has further been shortlisted for the Miles Morland Writing Scholarship in 2016 and a

Pushcart Prize in 2015. His conversations appear in *Africa in Dialogue, Bakwa, SPRINNG,* and *Dwartonline*. He is the curator of the Art Naija Series, a sequence of themed e-anthologies of writing and visual art exploring different aspects of Nigerianness. The first, *Enter Naija: The Book of Places* (October 2016), focuses on Nigerian cities. The second, *Work Naija: The Book of Vocations* (June 2017), focuses on professions in Nigeria. He is completing a postgraduate programme in African Studies at a Nigerian university and teaches English at another Nigerian university. When bored, he just Googles Rihanna.

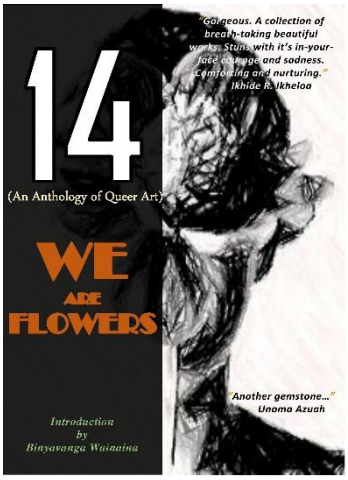
Patrick Chuka was born in Victoria Island, Lagos. He is a self-taught visual artist and illustrator whose work attempts to tackle social and cultural issues like gender equality, feminism and marriage rights for sexual minorities.

Sajid Ahsan Dipra is a writer and electronic music producer. His first book of poetry, *A Fireside Chat with Lucifer,* was published in 2015. He has been published in numerous anthologies and online journals. His work is best described as confessional, colloquial, and concise. He has released 5 EPs and 2 full-length albums. His music has been featured in *Resident Advisor*, *Border Movement*, *Wild City*, *Frequency Asia*, *Tse Tse Fly Middle East*, *Safina Radio Project*, and *Dhaka Art Summit*.He works in public relations and advertising, and his hobbies include fishing, cooking and solo camping.

Troy Onyango is a Kenyan writer and lawyer. His fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in various journals and magazines including *Ebedi Review, Brittle Paper, Afridiaspora* and *Transition* Issue 121, for which his short story 'The Transfiguration' was nominated for the Pushcart Prize. His short story 'For What Are Butterflies Without Their Wings?' won the fiction prize for the inaugural Nyanza Literary Festival Prize. His nonfiction piece, "This Is How It Ends," was shortlisted for the inaugural *Brittle Paper* Award for Nonfiction. He was shortlisted for the 2016 Miles Morland Foundation Scholarship. He is a Founding Editor of *Enkare Review* and the Fiction Editor of the East Africa issue of *Panorama: The Journal of Intelligent Travel.*

Unoma Azuah is a Nigerian writer and activist whose research and activism focus on LGBT writing in Nigerian literature. She has published three books, two of which have won international awards. She edited the personal essays collection, *Blessed Body: Secret Lives of LGBT Nigerians* (2016).

Feedback on We are Flowers



We were moved by the response to We are Flowers, 14'*s debut issue, and have picked out only a few here.*

…I can't put the book down. I am reading it for the fourth time. Finished it then go [*sic*.] back to the writings—I feel I missed something. And then start[ed] from the beginning. I love the book like crazy.

—T.M.

It was a thrill reading 14: Anthology of Queer [Art]: *We Are Flowers*. Made me feel a deep sense of connection with my friends and family of the LGBT world. Journeying with each of its writers and artist through is story, I couldn't deny the feeling… Our lives has [*sic*.] really been touched…. Thanks so much.

—J.F.

It's been 13 hours since the Anthology has been published. And it took me three hours to read the book cover to cover and another six hours to digest the words over and over in my head; in nine hours, I have laughed a lot and if years of silence and solitude didn't turn my heart cold, I would have cried too. You have done a truly beautiful thing.

Suffice to say, I had no sleep at all because I kept reading Tesiro and You Think You're Fucked over and over. So now I'm going to go by my week, happy, and I'm raising a mug of coffee to you (because even by my standards, it's much too early for wine and I need all the help I can get to stay awake) and I'm also going to get drunk on booze in the evenings because I will wallow in the misery of how the homophobe world we live in will refuse to read this beautiful work and acknowledge those who deserve to be appreciated.
But to those who have worked on this, those who contributed and those who compiled and edited it, Cheers!!!. And let's all grab a drink sometime; perhaps in a future where our dreams come true, a future where we no longer have to keep on surviving to love who we want.

—C.O.

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Thanks to all the artists who submitted their work, for making this possible.

We at 14 are deeply grateful.

The 14 *Team*

About 14

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

The contributors have come from other countries on and outside the continent. The editors are grateful for the solidarity received from non-Nigerians.

The Inward Gaze is 14's second publication.