

Selves: An Afro Anthology of Creative Nonfiction

Selves

AN AFRO ANTHOLOGY OF
CREATIVE NONFICTION

Sibongile Fisher
Alithnayn Abdulkareem
Kelvin Alaneme
TJ Benson
Innocent Immaculate Acan
Qamarun Nisa
Sada Malumfashi
Hauwa Shaffii Nuhu
Umar Turaki
Kenechi Uzor
Gbolahan Badmus
Ama Asantewa Diaka
Mapule Mohulatsi
Howard M-B Maximus

"Powerful miners of personal stories: through love, politics, heartbreak, history, mourning. They read like pain-filled cuts from an eclectic, socially conscious rap album."

- OTOSIRIEZE OBI-YOUNG,
BRITTLE PAPER

Curated by

BASIT JAMIU

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and Emmanuel Dairo



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curated by Basit Jamiu.

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to *Selves: An Afro Anthology of Creative Nonfiction*.

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CURATOR'S NOTE

The Self is the origin of *Selves*.

Selves: An Afro Anthology of Creative Nonfiction was born out of the idea that we needed a narrative nonfiction anthology which would speak to people in the same way that good fiction can. The genre used to be overlooked, so that it was hard to find a collection of nonfiction by African writers in a calendar year. Due to this, our team aimed to redress this imbalance by putting together a biennial collection of provocative and personal essays by African writers.

This inaugural year, because our theme revolves around phenomena formerly undiscussed by African writers, we have nonfiction pieces that speak from a passionate place, unafraid of consequences, revealing even to the point of shame. Essays that pry open personal Pandora boxes, revealing the secrets imprisoned beyond mental bars. Essays that hold the potential for personal healing even as personal hurts are replayed on the page.

Franz Kafka, himself a representative of the global and individual selves, must have been thinking of a collection like this when he wrote, "Many a book is like a key to unknown chambers within the castle of one's own self." This anthology is our truth: a passage, a plural to lived experience, our way of showing, telling and breathing. It mirrors our journeys as human beings.

I want to thank the contributors for believing in this project and for their patience. I want to thank my team for making this project a success. Thank you: Uzoma Ihejirika, Jennifer Emelife, Tope Akintayo, Emmanuel Dairo. Thank you, Otosirieze Obi-Young. Thank you, Modupe Baba and Petra Akinti Onyegbule, for your support and kindness.

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I wish to welcome our readers to this collection with the words of F. Scott Fitzgerald. The beauty of all literature, Fitzgerald wrote, is that, “You discover that your longings are universal longings, that you're not lonely and isolated from anyone.” Our anthology, *Selves*, is a circuit of shared inwardness.

Basit Jamiu,

Lokoja, February 2018.

INTRODUCTION

THE CONFESSIONAL GENERATION

In her introduction to *Safe House: Explorations in Creative Nonfiction* (2016), the collaboration anthology by Commonwealth Writers and Cassava Republic which has become a major point of reference, the editor and critic Ellah Allfrey observes that, relative to fiction, creative nonfiction from Africa is “in a germinal phase.” It is a safe observation; but from the anthology came Hawa Jande Golakai’s “Fugee,” a witty, affecting interrogation of the Ebola crisis in Liberia. And later that year, from *Granta*, came Pwaangulongii Dauod’s “Africa’s Future Has No Space for Stupid Black Men,” an electrifying, defiant account of an underground LGBTIQ club in Nigeria. The following year, and from *Granta* also, came Binyavanga Wainaina’s “Since Everything Was Sudden into a Hurricane,” a groundbreakingly innovative rarity. These three works were shortlisted for the inaugural *Brittle Paper* Award for Creative Nonfiction, and side by side with the other shortlisted works—Bernard Matambo’s “Working the City,” a poetic tale of visa application; Rotimi Babatunde’s “Out of Germany: Traveling with the Caine Prize,” a poignant re-visitation of historical ironies; Bethuel Muthee’s “Naijographia,” a psychogeographical exploration of Nairobi; Oris Aigbokhaevbolo’s “Uniben Boy in Berlin,” a juxtaposition of cities; and Troy Onyango’s “How It Ends,” a beautiful behavioural study—reveal the promise of something more in the genre: range. So that I find myself leaning away from Allfrey’s suggestion, and agreeing with Kwanele Sosibo’s conclusion, in his the *Guardian & Mail* review of *Safe House*, that “creative nonfiction on the continent is past the germinal phase.”

But to agree with Sosibo is not to play down Allfrey’s wording: because creative nonfiction, as far as the establishment of stable literary traditions is concerned, is still growing. The skill is here,

the willingness in abundance, but the tradition, when compared to what has been in fiction and has been revitalized in poetry, is still emerging, like the newest generation of writers on the continent who, remarkably, have taken to it.

The contributors to *Selves: An Afro Anthology of Creative Nonfiction* belong to this generation. Aside from their skills having been honed on the continent rather than in the West, these writers stand out for their boldness in expressing themselves, for their lack of fear in, to paraphrase Henri J.M. Nouwen, going where it hurts. Powerful miners of personal stories, theirs is a confessional generation. In general, you will find them on social media emoting boundlessly, sharing the spoken and unspoken, their lives an invitation for participation. In particular, you will find that they write fiction well, have breathed life back into the poetry scene, but that it is in nonfiction that they are unshackled, unspooling confessions in a hitherto unconventional manner. Through emotional honesty as raw as it is brave, they are taking the genre to places their predecessors shied away from, leading important conversations about trauma, about sex and sexuality, about depression and vulnerability and private shame: Take a look, for example, at the catalogue of Nigerian emotions published in *Catapult* since last year.

Firm in this new tradition, the pieces in *Selves* flit from the flourishing creative to the tonally essayistic, but they all share one thing in common: heart. Force, intellectual and emotional, that moves: through love and heartbreak, through politics and history, through death and mourning, in depression. They read like pain-filled cuts from an eclectic, socially conscious rap album: Sibongile Fisher's sure-footed, poetic reinterpretation of Lauryn Hill's 1998 album frames a soulbreaking autobiography of love, motherhood, family, and wounds; TJ Benson affectively strings bits of personal history while tracing his fear of water; Sada Malumfashi takes us on a raving tour of both a city and a man, and in prose punctuated by memorable lines; Umar Turaki revisits, through a plural

perspective, his father's demise to raw effect; Ama Asantewa Diaka feels, in grief-laden breakups and visitations to a gynaecologist, for healing; Gbolahan Badmus elevates his teeth to character status in a vulnerable, often-humorous reminiscence of childhood and adolescence.

Mapule Mohulatsi offers an ethno-lingual survey of her South African upbringing, reflecting remarkably on the seminal power and inseparability of writing and the tongue; Qamarun Nisa probes for self-discovery while weighing depression and the meaning of resigning one's body to powers from without; Kenechi Uzor confesses literary and political disappointment, similarities and discrepancies between his home country of Nigeria and the U.S.A.; Hauwa Shaffii Nuhu deals with the pain of losing a mother-like aunt; Alithnayn Abdulkareem sums up her Muslim family's distrust of her free-spirited millennial daughterhood; Kevin Alaneme recounts the disaster-by-disaster horror of ordinary Nigerians in the face of Boko Haram's atrocities; Howard M-B Maximus recollects a childhood dominated by his father; and Acan Innocent Immaculate reclaims the beauty of her dark skin and its centrality to her identity.

That we have *Selves* is down to the rise of independent anthologies on the literary scene: projects curated without commissioning by magazines or publishing houses, by young creatives unwilling to be held back by the absence of funding or the presence of gate-keeping, but which still boast quality. The queer art group 14's *We Are Flowers* (2017) and *The Inward Gaze* (2018); Art Naija Series' *Enter Naija: The Book of Places* (2016) and *Work Naija: The Book of Vocations* (2017); the romance-themed *Gossamer: Valentine Stories* (2016) and *Love Stories from Africa* (2017); and the thematically-diverse *A Mosaic of Torn Places* (2017): these independent projects, published as free e-books on *Brittle Paper*, have all been well received, with the first four creating space, in addition to writing, for stunning visual art. In this sense, theirs, ours, is also a Fighting Generation—fighting to be seen, in a culture that grants visibility only to the privileged, fighting for their talents to be let to

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speak for themselves, against a system that mostly prioritizes class over substance. But the space into which *Selves* steps into is partly uncharted: It just might be the first independent anthology to gather only creative nonfiction from across the continent. The curation by Basit Jamiu, an editor at *Enkare Review*, is applaudable, but even more admirable is the hunger with which he pursued it for one year, that decisive hunger to fill a gap.

You may break, you may mend, you will learn: You have in your hands a clear-voiced reminder of the unnegotiable importance of personal stories, their potential for transformation, their channeling into art, into fractured, crystalline multiples of their creators' beings. Here is an invitation to partake in a ripening promise, a step into years to come.

Otosirize Obi-Young,

Deputy Editor, *Brittle Paper*.

“We have to dare to be ourselves, however frightening or strange that self may prove to be.”

— MAY SARTON.

The Miseducation of Gratitude

Sibongile Fisher

1. INTRO

I WAS NOT thought of yet. A wound in my mother had not formed yet. A wound in her mother had not been born yet. We were both not here, my mother and I, where we are now on the edges of both love and contempt. I was eight, with a tongue quick enough to catch secrets from slipping but also quick enough to spill them. She was twenty-six years old with a face growing tired of mothering and playing wife. But she was taught to always do her homework, as was I. Our democracy was four years old but walked like it was thirty. I had not known of it yet; I was covered in dust and eating up the streets for lunch when Lauryn Hill released her album *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*. I was sixteen and the album was eight when we met.

I fell in love for the first time. And my tongue softened.

2. LOST ONES

I had lost the correct way to pronounce my name behind the teeth of white teachers who wouldn't make an effort. The bell rings and, as always after our second lunch-break, a fight ensues. It is hot and sticky and we all smell like rotting heartbreaks; heartbreaks we are told to be too young to feel. So we hide them well. Today I want to be invisible. I want the 'i' in my name to be silent. The way it's meant to be. To not sound how it reads. But Mrs. Whitehead won't have it. My name crawls out of her mouth and into the air. Si-bo-ngi-le. I am somehow in a room with all the other prefects. Imagination says we are all in a brawl. In reality, it is just two girls fighting; and because we are early

for a prefects' meeting, we are also counted in. The sun has worked its temper into our skins. No one wants to apologize. I want to cry but the previous night had stolen all my rain. My mother is in the world working with one eye open, while the other eye tries to make sense of my father's fist. I long to remain invisible. It is our last year in primary school, of life as we know it. Mrs. Whitehead lists our names with pride. We are called out during assembly. Two days later I lost my prefect badge and, along with it, my love for leadership.

I lost my pride for the first time. And my heart hardened.

3. EX-FACTOR

The dream of losing your virginity to the man you love had slept on my pillow for weeks now. Today was going to be special. I had choreographed my moves and was ready to lose a piece of myself I had never felt I had. In another wound, my cousin and I are fondling each other in a way young girls shouldn't. Or they should. We watch my father's porn collection and make our way across our developing countries. She is older and parts the seas with ease. We both make it out alive—or uncaught? We grow with age and keep touching until she meets a boy and leaves me with our secret. I find videos of women touching themselves on the Internet and I join them. In this wound, my lover is a man and he is not only my first lover but also the first man to see my thighs giggling. It is my second year in varsity and I am determined to pass on my secret to this man. On the day it happens I find myself let down. It feels no different from the time I fell off a bicycle, or the time I said a poem in front of people for the first time, or the time I fought a boy and tore the skin of my palm. Or the time I didn't eat for a week because I wasn't good enough for food. Or I ate and then vomited because I wasn't good enough to be satisfied. Or the time I cried for three days because he left me for a girl, whom he later raped and asked me to believe that he didn't. And I believed him because love is a wound you love having. Until you don't want it anymore and you

forgive your ugly self and you lie in a bathtub and cry, and bathe, and cry and ask for forgiveness from the girl. And you tell her that you know he did it, that you have always known but the door was always open and you had hoped he'd leave her and come back to you.

I broke my heart for the first time. And my eyes opened.

4. TO ZION

The nurse smiles and says, "You are still far from delivering that baby but we have to monitor you because you have what we call a bloody show."

I do not contest and just nod. My lover is kept out of the room and told to go home. He will be called as soon as the baby has been delivered. We are at the maternal clinic and the nurses are filled with unusual generosity and care. I miss him. There is a woman whose face translates into pain and is doing what seems to be a dance on her bed. I, on the other hand, feel my bones reaching into another world. Another girl joins us; she is wearing a pink night dress with a brown teddy bear in the centre. She is ripe and gives birth before the dancing woman and me. She leaves the room with no scent of her presence. Her bed is wheeled out by the midwife and two other nurses, tired but moving without option. My eyes slice out envy and place it in my heart. I am growing impatient to see you. The ward is painted yellow with no sign of changing. There are four beds lined up next to one another. While the dancing woman is on the phone, yet another woman joins us and gives birth as the door opens. I am eating at everything green. I am in-between pain and waiting. The dancing woman finally gives birth after hours of her body jolting in a choreographed manner. There is a woman who leaves on an ambulance to the hospital. She has been in labour for twenty-four hours and nothing has come. It's been twelve hours since I got to the clinic and the clock has winded all my kindness out. The nurse checks me again and says that I am still far. Another two hours later, we are both tired and the nurse sees this. We are saddled on a horse of an ambulance making its way

through potholes and poverty to the public hospital where you will be born. The air is different here. There are at least twenty of us in a room that stretches no further than the wingspan of a tall man. We are hot and sticky and smell like rotting heartbreaks, heartbreaks we have no need to ask permission for. No one attends to me so I drag my body to the front desk of the maternity ward and ask to be assisted. Or demand it. At this point I am too tired to care. I am enveloped by rage and stirring the room into a cocktail. I am placed on a sheet-less bed that is cold and sticky. The wind outside is a train on its way to deliver the last dreams before twilight. It's four o'clock in the morning. The midwife induces me. They drain out the pee and my water breaks onto the nurse's face. I am made to push but I am too tired. First, it's the faeces and a pool of blood; then your head struggles its way into this world. I have been cut but feel nothing of it. Suddenly, I am cold and my bones are doing the jive. It is as though for the past twenty hours winter had worn a different face. My whole body is covered in cold-defeat. The disheartened nurse slaps my thighs. They can't keep still. She sews me up anyways. Your mouth kisses my breast and you suck on it like you have always been waiting to, waiting too.

I meet you. You are the one born soft.

5. DOO WOP (THAT THING)

I am seated at the back of my father's car when he slows down and catcalls a woman. He is saying she is beautiful but he is sounding like she is not. Like she is the reason my mother's eyes swell. Or she is one of the many. He stops the car and gets out. They talk and laugh out loud and talk some more. He is giving her a smile he hasn't given my mother in a while. I can feel my heart disintegrate. It is headed for the floor and I can't catch it, or I won't. My hands are holding my mother's heart and wish not to let go. In a wound that formed itself while I was searching, I am in the bed of a

Rasta man, in a shanty with a window no larger than my fist or my heart at this point. There is no love between us. In the morning, I pull myself from out of his bed and begin the walk of shame.

6. SUPERSTAR

I win a prestigious writing prize and I still swallow my death each morning. Or it swallows me. I don't have the courage to let go of what I know. So I stay alive with anxiety.

7. FINAL HOUR

My father has not been home for a week. My mother is ruined. It is on her face. I have been holding her heart for as long as I can remember. I hate her for this. For always doing her homework, even when my dad is absent. Weeks later he reappears only to leave again. My father left with his clothes in black bin bags. He wanted to leave. I remember my aunt and my uncle accompanying him. My mother knew what it meant as soon as they entered the house. She was tired of mothering and playing wife but she did not want to open the door. Over tea, my aunt smiled and broke our family. She wanted to. They left with a large piece of our family. My mother and I blacked out and although I remember nothing of that night, I doubt we slept how yesterday sounds. In my wound, I start writing poetry and I watch my hands become faster than my tongue. I want nothing of the world. I blame my mother for being too tired, for not doing her homework well and for inviting the poverty that comes with single-parenting into our house. My mother's eyes are hollowing. She is spending more and more time on her knees. Filling God in the spaces where my father used to live. She is drowning her heart in holy tea and her body is covered in vapour rub. She believes that God will bring him back. When the wound is older, much older, my parents' divorce is made final. And what was broken remains broken.

I bent my soul for the first time. And my hands bled.

8. WHEN IT HURTS SO BAD

Lauryrn Hill: *When it hurts so bad, when it hurts so bad/ Why's it feel so good/ When it hurts so bad, when it hurts so bad/ Why's it feel so good?*

9. I USED TO LOVE HIM

We are commonly known as black but we are a thick brown belt on the waist of history. We are holding his pants up, doing the disservice of keeping him dressed. He unbuttons his shirt like someone who has won a bet. Like a rapper who just dropped a hot sixteen over a tight beat. Like the one who survived the war before coming home to be forgotten. His chest hairs blossom into season and I am left wanting another song. He lives in a backroom small enough to be a secret, but inside it, the world between us keeps expanding. I don't want to be here but I remove my jeans like someone who has been waiting for this moment. I can still count them on one hand, the men I've slept with, and so I add him to the list while my bra finds a home on his floor. I will add others as the years grow my age. In another wound, I am in my history class and there is a small section on African Independence. I count the pages. There are twenty pages on African History covering all fifty-four countries—which are now said to be fifty-seven. Fifty-Four. I am displeased at how it took us a week to go through African History when we spent an entire month on World War I. I go to war with my teacher over this and find myself outside her classroom, which was also a media centre, with books no one ever read, books that were older than the school and that spoke about nothing we knew, books which didn't represent us. Here, however, in this wound, his dreadlocks brush against my skin in a way that I don't want them to. He's at the carnival and I at the desert, thirsting for the time when I once loved him. A time when he hid our relationship and I helped him; a time when he turned his back on me in front of his friends—our friends—and I shrunk into the word please. Once, he told me to stop talking to him. To remain a secret in his backroom and not be so

loud about our bodies touching. I wanted to contest but just nodded instead. From a distance, I watched him love another woman and I thanked him later. I lit a cigarette and danced with the smoke. In the dance, I saw for the first time that he looked like my first love. That my love for him was a shadow of the things I still held on to. That day, with my bra on his floor and my jeans on his TV, I lay on his bed loveless and thankful.

10. FORGIVE THEM FATHER

There is no man named Jesus—only Yeshua. Like my land and my identity, his religion and his identity were stolen. My heart has never been to church.

11. EVERY GHETTO, EVERY CITY

WELCOME TO THABONG, the sign reads as we enter our hometown. On the left is BONGANI HOSPITAL, where I was born. My mother was eighteen and afraid, not different from now: she is forty-three and still afraid. The dust sits on my shoulders like a childhood memory that won't stop visiting. There are still no tarred roads apart from the main road, and poverty turns the landscape into obscure antiques. I haven't been home in three years and bear no guilt. Things never change here. You can be gone for as long as the mind can hold memory and still come back to your childhood as you knew it. On my lap, my day-old son is sleeping, or living how day-olds do, enveloped by innocence and oblivion. In our house, my heart sits on her chair. She, like she has always done for as long as I can remember, sat on the chair parallel to the front door. When I was much younger, my great-grandmother who is also my heart—may her soul rest in peace—was struck on the foot with a cane by a witch who lived up the road from our house. She was never able to walk again. And up until the day she met her death, months after my visit, she sat on her chair.

I will be home for three months. My heart, my aunt and my sister will help me turn water into human. I spend three months with my heart and I am home every waking second. The furniture here has outlived mines. There are ghosts of my great-grandfather and my grandmother and my uncles and my aunts circling our mouths. The shadow of my mother's childhood is woven into a blanket that keeps me warm throughout the day. The stories are round and Earth-like and I walk through them barefooted. The red sofas have become brown with time. They were new and beautiful and modern. The white walls made me feel safe. My great grandmother made me feel safe. I am a mother now. The words swell in my mouth and are spewed out like a cuss. My great grandmother is holding a fourth generation medal in her hands; she grows tired and cries on her bed. She wishes she was stronger, and younger, to raise my son how she raised me—

12. NOTHING EVEN MATTERS

—with respect and religion, or is it love?

I arrive in Tembisa, with a friend of mine. They are having a hip-hop event where I will be performing a set of poems. I was recording one of the poems at his house earlier and we had decided to go help clean and prepare the venue for the event. Upon our arrival, a dark-skinned figurine rouses the sun by picking at the earth and letting its sweat soothe the sight in front of me. My heart—not the one at home but the one I carry with me—races to the finish line. I will only admit to this feeling two months later. I join in and help this man create a path that no one will even walk on. Or they will without noticing it exists. On the day of the event, I sleep in his car and watch his heartbreak at dawn. The event didn't bring in enough revenue but it gave us a story to tell our son when he is much older. I am in love with a river that is flowing in my direction, always arriving where I am going. It has been three years since the event, and the broad shoulders of a dark-skinned figurine helped put together this album. Afterwards, we were in his room melting into water when

he asked me to marry him. I said yes. He took my hand into his and held it. I lost nothing. He was a beautiful sentence in the perfect place so I said nothing. We sunk into his bed and only came out when the sun left.

We are on our way to the other world together. And here, nothing even matters at all.

13. EVERYTHING IS EVERYTHING

Lauryn Hill:

I wrote these words for everyone/ Who struggles in their youth/ Who won't accept deception/ Instead of what is truth/ It seems we lose the game/ Before we even start to play/ Who made these rules? We're so confused/ Easily led astray/ Let me tell ya that/ Everything is everything/ After winter, must come spring/ Everything is everything.

Sometimes it seems/ We'll touch that dream/ But things come slow if not at all/ And the ones on top won't make it stop/ So convinced that they might fall/ Let's love ourselves then we can't fail/ To make a better situation/ Tomorrow our seeds will grow/ All we need is dedication.

14. THE MISEDUCATION OF GRATITUDE

My surname cuts through my tongue like a sharp foreign object.

My father says it's his.

His father says it's his.

My mother carries it with pride and rolls her tongue to bend into positions acceptable to the language I write in.

My heart is in a foreign world, aging into an angel.

I am dust and angry of splitting,

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I count to ten in my mother tongue and wish to spell the words right.

I hold on to the image of my mouth spilling a poem in Sesotho.

But as a child in a classroom as big as our kitchen,

I learned to speak in a way that will give my surname its rightful place,

I learn to count in the language that I write in.

At home—

—I am taught to say thank you instead.

I burn my god in other tongues and make room for the one who will speak to me in a language that I write in.

I give birth in isi Zulu but mother in English.

I catch myself and force my tongue back home.

Here, my surname remains an unanswered question.

We are landlocked with our identity between seas.

Dispossessed in the mouth of others.

It is painful to write my last name down for the first time.

It becomes my first name and I wear it like a cloak.

At home—

—I am called by the one they are thankful for instead.

If memory serves me right,

My surname is the birth of a historical wound,

And we hang off the family tree,

Having forgotten how we bleed,

How it was received,

Silenced by the privilege it offers.

At home—

—I am taught to say thank you instead.

Waterborne

TJ Benson

I AM IN Peter's tub, steaming water up to my chest, legs hanging out. Last time I was in a tub the water swallowed me whole. I was thirteen living with my first foster family. I had just discovered the word "Jacuzzi" in the dictionary (I had exhausted all literature books and English language comprehension passages and so in the absence of any other text to devour I turned to *Oxford English Dictionary*) and beside the definition in tiny print was a doodle of a man in a steaming tub holding a glass of wine with a slice of pineapple perched on the rim, a straw dipped in. He seemed to be so happy. I wanted so fiercely to be happy, to remember what happy felt like because I was forgetting my father's face and the sound of my name from my mother's mouth. I promised myself that I wouldn't wait to grow old enough to own a big house and have a big jacuzzi (I wasn't certain if I wanted to live that long back then), I promised myself that once I returned home for the holidays, I would wait for a time when nobody was in the bathroom, turn on the tap and sink.

Over a decade later I have made up my mind for hot water so I have to book Peter's bathroom for the evening because the heater in my bathroom is not working. Peter is a gentleman so he lets me. He came all the way from Kenya to join me and a Ghanaian lecturer at a writer's residency in Iseyin.

The water is almost scalding but my heat threshold has increased over the years from that day I immersed myself in cold water. On the water closet tank is a copy of Zadie Smith's *Swing Time*. In the original plan, next to the tub on the ground would be a bottle of red wine but the bottle in

question was a delicious gift I had gotten from a wedding I attended the previous weekend; so delicious I gulped it down the following day. I can't make my hand pick up the novel and read the night away as planned; my hands are making circular gestures of their own accord beneath my knees in the water, round, round, round...and I wonder why does this motion feel so true? How do you birth a rhythm? At what precise moment does it begin? Breathing has a rhythm you know. I tried to breathe in the rain once; it was like drowning. Especially because I had been crying. That evening I had felt a storm swirling in my chest then I looked out and saw the storm swirling in the dark sky and thought if I went outside I could hide my inside-chest-storm in the storm descending from the sky. I turned my back to my course mates and slipped out of the engineering faculty, my eyes getting wet just as the first drops began to fall. By the time I was halfway to the hostel I was howling out like baby, privately and shamelessly in the open field of rain and I found I couldn't breathe; there were little pockets of air to inhale but I had no rhythm. So I staggered the rest of the way, more concerned with getting enough air than exorcising myself, soaked to the bone with cold, drowning above the ground. Whenever it comes to taking my life I have always found myself to be a coward. So I have this agreement with myself: if I must live it has to be epic, damning odds, no living halfway, saying yes to things like this residency. It has been good. I got to teach photography and I loved it. I filled up my hollowness with the laughter of children. I took several walks into and out of town, swallowing as many stories as I could. Sometimes walking helps me compensate for the mental journeys I undertake in my head.

I will always remember a middle aged woman on whose wrist was tattooed *I love you Olarewaju*. Some older women I saw in the market had their lovers' names and street addresses tattooed on their skin. It was explained to me that they were traders of the eighties circuiting Nigeria and these identities helped to locate their loved ones in the event of an accident. These days you just fill your name and next of kin's phone number in the transport company's register before departure.

I have thought about tattooing the names of my parents as a sort of map home but home was lost once they left. Some people end their lives because they believe it will belong to other people and circumstances beyond their control as long as they live. But in these little moments that come unplanned and thus unforeseen I belong to myself completely and I am grateful I have never had the courage to end mine. I was glad to be alive last Christmas when I saw the look on my not-so-little sister's face as she read a feature story in the newspaper of my first runner-up award in the Short Story Day Africa 'Migrations' Prize. My maternal Grandpa, the only biological parent I have left sent my relatives to scour town that day for a copy of the paper my interview got published in. Riding the momentum of good fortune, I applied for the Ebedi Residency and so I am here in this tub, several towns and cities away from all that is familiar.

I will my hands to stop. The time should be around ten-thirty. I could fall asleep in this water and my penis will semi-float still. I vividly remember the day I realized I had one and banished my mother from bathing me, begged her to allow me bathe myself. It seemed to just hang there from my body like an appendage, an afterthought. I recall in amusement a scene where Van Damme's genetically enhanced character in one of the *Universal Soldier* installments looks at his body for the first time and discovers his penis and wonders out loud to the flustered damsel in distress he had rescued: "Is that supposed to be there?"

I try to hold my breath without using my hands and immerse myself in the water. Not possible. I am too big for the tub. I am too tired. Today is officially the last day of the residency. I am tired in advance for the journey back to Abuja. It was strange and pleasant to be pulled out, down to Kogi, through the treacherous snakelike road in Okene then spat out on the path to Akure, then finally Ibadan—or not finally because I had to enter a small rickety bus on the terrible road that led to Iseyin. I thoroughly enjoyed not knowing the next turn, the next stop. The Residency was

beyond my expectations: a large house painted white with four bedrooms, a large living room, a large dining area guarded by two wooden dogs at the entry, a smaller living room and to my delight a large kitchen. The only word I could think of was home. In the second week, I planted three bean seeds to represent the three of us. I named them the Kenyan, the Ghanaian and the Nigerian respectively. Inevitably as the beans grew and stretched to my window we bonded in our evening walks exploring the ancient town or sharing our local dishes. We cross-examined each other's politics, literature and everyday life and our laughter, a chorus of different accents, soared to the ceiling. In the third week I realized my father would have been the same age with Mr. Francis the Ghanaian were he alive. I smiled and realized even this smile was a way of mourning. Do we ever stop mourning those we have lost? Sometimes I would be walking in a market and the smell of my mother's inside-purse would hit me and it would be too strong, too much but I just kept walking.

In two days Peter will travel to Lagos then fly to Kenya then Iceland. Mr. Francis had already travelled back to Ghana to prepare for a film festival in Burkina Faso. In three to four days I will be in Abuja. I still haven't figured out what to do with our bean plants.

I hate bodies of water. As a child I froze with horror as an isle sank to the bottom of a large ocean in Aladin after waxing gold by the hand of Midas, the last survivors screaming for help. I was tormented with visions of drowning that way: finding myself in the middle of an ocean with no end in sight. When I grew older and read about the Igbo Landing, the scores of imported slaves who overpowered their masters before they got to Dunbar creek, Georgia, and returned to the sea rather than risk being caught and enslaved once more, I wondered how they were able to deal with the water, to see it as an ally— 'water will take us home'. Maybe this is the reason I am drawn to it. Because I see it as a means of escape. During my one year of mandatory national service, I strolled along the banks of the River Donga which flows from Cameroon to get inspiration for a story

ending I had been struggling with. I saw some children hop into a little boat which had an engine and launch into the great water, headed for the other side and thought to myself that this was how I wanted to escape: just drop all my certificates, responsibilities, phone, hop into the boat, and set off for another life. Start from scratch as a native of the place. Learn the language properly. I asked some children how much the river crossing cost and I was told Twenty Naira.

Instead I decided to let my character resolve his dilemma this way, to let him escape. I called the story Rio, which also means river, after the city of its setting. I gave up my freedom for his, returned to my life, the twenty-four year old man sent to a village by the government to teach Basic Technology to children who had fled from war. My pupils in the three schools I taught were the joy of my life. They warned me that the River Donga had an appetite for strangers; it had the ability to draw visitors from other lands to it and if a canoe or boat ever capsized with any stranger on it, the person's body would never be found.

Why can't I tell the woman I love I love her? Why can't I just sit still in this water and read *Swing Time*? Why can't I choose the day I want to travel and start packing? Because I would be returning to somebody's house and I have always been addicted to space—mental, physical, emotional. Every artist is single. Especially the married ones. Everyone is really alone. Being in water helps me remember that. Maybe this is because I was alone in the amniotic waters of my mother's womb.

For six weeks I had an apartment to myself. I could wake up at any point of the twenty-four hours our earth spins through and decide to write. I got to shut down my Facebook account and reactivate it and shut it down again. No, I didn't finish work on my novel. I am not sure I have written up to half of it. What I am certain of is that I have a clearer idea (ideas outlined on a large cardboard actually) of the book. I unplug the drain and watch twin baby water cyclones spin out of

it, pulling into it. This has been a good six weeks but it is over. I watch the cyclones merge into one and wait for the tub to empty.

Finding Binyavanga

Sada Malumfashi

I AM IN Kaduna, finding Binyavanga. Northern Nigeria is a complicated entity, a blurry image in black and white, and Kaduna is the epicenter of that complexity. Kaduna used to be a city of one people, one identity, but we stretched and stretched Kaduna till it became a city of parallels and faith and identity. I have not been to this part of Kaduna, the Christian part, for more than a decade now, since after the bloody crisis in the early 2000s.

A week earlier KT had sent me a message on WhatsApp:

“We will be holding a literary evening with Binya.”

“Awesome,” I replied.

“Can’t wait.”

I am in a hotel bar. A figure comes in, staggering, swaying. A colourful Mohawk: blue and a mix of cypress green on the side of his head. He is so informal. His informal is on another level.

“I am Binyavanga.” He stutters, his words elastic, stretchy and crackling; with texture and a measurable circumference. He talks with an air of nothingness, no pride, no puffed shoulders, nothing. My hands stretch to meet his. Handshake is soft. My palm feels lighter after. “It is a pleasure, Sir.” I murmur. *Sir* is short and tempered. I always wonder if it is the only word of courtesy in the English language. English does not have enough vocabulary stocked for respect. In Hausa, I

wouldn't need a word for it, the rise and fall of my syllables would be enough. Hausa is perfect for relaying courtesy. Finding Binyavanga, I learn to lose courtesy; it flows away like a feather. Binya makes you loose and free, because Binya makes you talk and chew away something stupid like rusty courtesy.

I AM IN St. Gerrard Catholic Hospital. Binya is here for a check-up, maybe some injections, due to a bout of malaria from the previous day. Sweat is boiling on his forehead, a combination of the Plasmodium parasite and humid weather. He wipes away balls of sweat threatening to drown his lips from under his nose and absorbs the surrounding. "This is a catholic hospital, no? You could pick this and place it in Kenya and it will fit in perfect."

We sit on wooden benches, creaking. We is: VT, small and thin but her golden voice occupies spaces; KT is wide with a broad laugh swelling from his mouth and his large frame occupies most of the small bench; they are flanking me. We are facing Binya and by his side is Mike, coarse and close to the earth, sitting shifting, restless. We make an awkward round table.

Binya waits for a doctor. Meanwhile we are this weird squad of five in a catholic hospital. Talking. No. Shouting: Politics, afropolitanism, corruption, revolutions, history, literature, language. We talk about things, people, and places and feel the nostalgia of the fact that these things are the little things that build us and make us, crawl in our bellies, and we talk and they become exotic. They are random sounds creasing in dirt like buried seeds and germinating into the fruits of our discussions. We talk of people and how places shape them, make them, and kill them. People intertwined with recurring issues. Painful revelations shared and shredded like dirty fat as we reveal ourselves, little dots following each other in queue.

Every so often, a female nurse protrudes her head and glances towards this odd crew, heralded by Binya with his one-sided Mohawk and three-quarter baggie trousers. We are odd being looked at. We are carefree. Intellectualism binds us. And we are one together here, the only thing existing. All five of us different, but when we are discussing, we are bound. One people. One rhythm. Huddled together. We find a new lease of life under the zinc roofing.

We leave the hospital tired and shuffling our feet. I drive us back to the hotel. Binya sits in the front seat. KT calls it the hot seat (I realize that because I have to answer every single one of Binya's questions) and Binya is like an empty well trying to fill up with knowledge. Fast. I am talking, I am learning. Slowly, finding Binyavanga....

WE ARE IN a hotel bar. Our legs are tired, soles throbbing, jaws ragged from all the discussions. We collapse into sofas like squeezed jackets.

Mike: "Binya do you want to go up and rest?"

Binya: "No. I want to talk."

And we are African-ing and literati-ing with the walls and bottles of this bar. His talk is so big, Binyavanga. When he speaks, each word, dropping steady, in a stutter, and so it makes you wait, expecting, mulling what it might be, what is it that is boiling in Binya's head, before it hits you right in the middle of the brain.

We glide into the subject of literature like a see-saw: Hausa literature, literature of other tribes from Bajju to Nupe to Tiv and Idoma. I listen. Binya listens. I chip in with bits and pieces of

Hausa history and literature: Sa'adu Zungur, Bayajidda, Queen Amina, Queen Daurama. Binya listens.

Binya: "I don't understand, I don't understand, tell me again."

His hand gyrating, making the narration to re-wind as his head shakes, confusion rattling his understanding.

More doses of rambling and unravelling are sent forward. He shakes his head and nods, confusion giving way to the joy of learning.

Binya: "I am educated."

Binya gets it, and when Binya gets it, he beams and I swear the whole of Kaduna is lighted by that smile. We are, together, a fever of language and history.

Binya digs up more buried choices. We take up issues untellable in these surroundings and slice them, dissect them into different parts. We burst them out of their dry shells. We touch the Kaduna killings and the birth of the separation of a city into Muslims and Christians, where alcohol is prohibited in so and so, but you can drink to stupor in so and so and Muslim boys are the enemy and Christian boys are the enemy; religions in a drag battle. We touch the birth of hypocrisy and then diverge, crossing the road to the many Christian populations of northern Nigeria living in silent obscurity. We are now into the intrusion of religion into Africa as we travel history. This time we are here circa 1400 AD, then we are there circa 1800, we are Christianized in the 1900s, re-Islamized later on, and religion leaves us jagged.

Words fall from Binya's tongue and he swallows them with a sip of coffee shaking his head and a smile of knowing escapes.

“So,” he says and leans forward, his eyes wide and shimmering like torchlight, and narrates in falling syllables. The words start from the back of his throat, long and slow, stuttering like brakes: the story of the Mourides of Ahmadou Bamba of Tuubaa in Senegal. He delights in revealing Africa with energy, like peeling leaves at the back of a maize husk.

THE BINYAVANGA way is the hurricaning way, the thundering way, the lightning way. Mike has perfected the art of it. So we just keep hurricaning, thundering and lightning around Kaduna, talking with no time to breathe.

I drive us through Kaduna, flying, crossing the river to the other side. But with Binya here, I now realize it is all on the same side. There is no difference. I see a singular city. The city never changes: Barnawa has the same trees in a pattern; you could mistake it for the streets of Unguwan Rimi. The difference is only in our imagination, our interpretation in fear-themed memories. On both sides loudspeakers are mounted on roofs: one side for the mosques and the other for churches, Keke Napeps speeding between them hooting. We pass people on both sides—millipedes of cosmopolitanism; pass sprinkled skyscrapers—appendages of the past—then cramped houses that ceased breathing, then sweet aluminium roofing and sour brown zincs of slums woven around glossy Government Reserved Areas and sounds and smells of markets on both sides. Everywhere the same people speeding, sweating and smiling.

We pass an abandoned industrial estate. Mike tells us the story of this place. Place of Children without Fathers. This community in Kakuri which is becoming ashes due to the crash of a once thriving textile industry, where economic recession invited truth, trauma, and death as men who were breadwinners committed suicide as machines slowed down and became quiet, one

machine after another, suicide and depression becoming deafening. We are silent, mourning, and then we are talking again, from writing to agriculture, to geography, to everything.

We drive to the famous Hamdala Hotel. Hamdala is a giant, but a degraded one. It used to be a sky-scraping beauty standing majestically in the middle of Kaduna. It is now shabby and derelict, uninspiring. One among many northern edifices lying wayward. We tell Binya that Ahmadu Bello built them, lots of them. But now they are unbearable to look at.

Binya: "What happened to them? All the hotels?"

Silence. How do we answer this one?

Me: "Basically, same thing that happened to everything else in the North."

We crack an uneasy laugh at my answer, but there is pain somewhere.

Across the driveway, to the left after the parking lot, there are old antique and artefact shops cuddled together like corridors. About a dozen cats are sprawled in front of the shops sleeping, strolling, and staring. Two open shops are by the side, and a spring of antiques within them: wood carvings, paintings, coin collections, leather bags, charms, and amulets. Anything old, smelling like grandparents. All manner of artefacts to sell, to the foreign hotel visitors I presume. Mike leads the way. How is it that I never knew this place? Binya is the collector. Wooden boxes, leather caps, leather shoes. I pick a leather shoe with a curved pointed head. I price it, the shopkeeper quotes a price: two thousand five hundred naira. I pass. Binya trundles in. He picks the same shoe. "How many Naira?" Shopkeeper picks it and examines it. "For this, you give me six thousand." He understands Binya is a foreigner. I open my mouth to interrupt, but I do not want to spoil his hustle. I shuffle out of the room away from the whiff of the eighteenth century to the freshness of a windy twenty-first century and queer cats in a staring contest.

HOURS LATER, A day maybe, we are moving again. Naziru Ahmad is the tinny sound springing from the traditional music of my car stereo: Wannan kidin mata ne / ashe zuma tana nan zaizai. Speakers releasing beats in ripples.

Binya: "Is this Hausa music?"

I want it.

We are going to buy it.

I like it."

A smile creases the edge of my lips. I turn the knob and increase the volume. Rhythms continue to bounce along the interior of the car. I sing along and alone, head swinging.

Fifth Chukker Polo and Country Club is our next destination. We are moving, hurricaning. It is a twenty-five minutes' drive out of Kaduna to Maraban Jos, a small town at the intersection of Kaduna and Plateau States surrounded by greenery and a people converged by a market. Dust from tattered roads flowing in the winds kiss you, a noising welcome.

Cars are parked in parallels. Young couples and a retinue of young girls, make-up and contours flashing, dressed to kill for the Eid Festival glowing in excitement alighting and walking towards the polo field. Fifth Chukker looks like a radiant main house thrusting up with mazes in contrast to the servants' quarters that is the town hosting it; an enterprise to service the ego of the elites out of the morass of Kaduna. The landscape is illuminating. Embedded with traditional architecture. Rooms modelled in the form of huts, like traditional Hausa city-states circa eighteenth century, cutting through modern driveways. It is a paradise surrounded by a town of dirty ponds.

We settle on our seats and are surrounded by a decoration of posh traditional attires. We are strikingly different in the midst of these flowery spectators watching a polo game.

I struggle to get the game. I try and try. I get bored. I just cannot pay a matchstick-length span of attention. It is a weird game; an army of confusion playing field hockey on horses. Frightened horses going forward and backward.

Binya is too curious to just sit and watch an amateur game of polo. He says they are not that good, and he is curious to breathe in the greenery. He gets up and decides to look around. We follow.

We are treading past fine equestrian facilities, proud horses strutting and local boys brushing horsehair in air-conditioned stables. The landscape is a beauty, a pattern of flowing green and you just have to breathe it.

It takes some ten minutes to walk round across the polo field to find the clubhouse. A restaurant and a lounge bar provide an extensive view of the polo fields. State of the art, just the way it is in fancy Hollywood movies. Binya is meeting Chef L for some recipes he seems to be collecting. There are bundles of guests. Chef L is a busy pot. His number is slid to us on a piece of paper. Binya asks for coffee. Yes, they have coffee.

Binya: "Finally I will get a very good cup of coffee."

Waitress: "Sir, we have Nescafe for you."

Binya: "No cappuccino?"

Waiter: "No, only Nescafe."

Binya: "Thank you. No Nescafe. We will be leaving now."

IT IS GETTING to dusk as I drive back approaching Kaduna. The sun is splashes of deep yellow painting a blue sky. We cannot stop talking. Not for a minute. We cannot stop laughing. We smell of dried sweat, neck muscles stiff and cracking. My white kaftan is now a shade of brown, soles of my feet dusty, and the car a bit cranky from all the potholes. I am tired, a squeezed piece of paper, but there will be a reading.

It is dark when we reach the hotel for the reading. By 7pm there is a bar room full of literary enthusiasts glowing under dim lights. We are here to drink from gourds of literary enterprises. Our tongues rediscover magic; they unroll and chat under that spell that writing and books put you in. Binya's eyes run over everyone, every detail of a story, a poem and spoken word performance, and he nods and nods and agrees to every comment unbundled. He is held by the enthusiasm of the conversation. We are held by the charisma of his pen.

WE ARE A rushing whirlwind, branching at Mustapha Bookshop. Binya asks for Hausa books in translation. There are none available.

"You can find them at the post office maybe, the ones they spread on the ground, just outside."

It is disappointing when you cannot find a piece of your language, a flex of your tongue to read from. I pick up Kojo Laing on the recommendation of Binyavanga and peep through the first lines: 'his chin was strong enough to box with, even with the sun on his tongue. He kept his science in his chin' I will be revisiting Mustapha Bookshop very soon.

The spirit of all these books upsurges up a passion in Binyavanga. I can see he is itching, trying to say this and the words are coming, pacing like a fat snail:

Binya: "I have read your story."

I am afraid. I am afraid he will roll his eyes and spit doom. I cannot write. I have failed.

"You are talented."

My heart somersaults back into its chamber.

"But you are writing about war. It is a difficult territory. The Caine Prize has already been won for this. Write something. New. Fresh perspective. It is too cynical."

I hear Binya, but my heart wants to disagree. I want to go to the dictionary and find the true meaning of cynical. Maybe it will come out in a good way. I am disagreeing, cynical is not so bad. Cynical = arrant nonsense. No, he did not say that; the curved smile on his face did so. I am afraid. I am resilient. What is Binya thinking? No, no, my story isn't changing. He might have noticed the reminiscence of his smile, a mirror image spreading outward in my own face. I am afraid. But I am thinking, creating, changing.

THE LAST FEW days are magic, electrifying. Oomph, passion. Literature finds a purpose. My writing finds its purpose. Another world just got unlocked from mazy clouds. I realize that years of reading books—every book in my father's library—is a constant accumulation and stocking of knowledge and that when required I will be able to divulge every word, story, and discussion and chew it all out. All it requires is Binya knocking, and my brain clicks, my tongue roll and details pour out. I talk like I am shuffling pages, talk of the 1804 Jihad like I am a warlord, of the history of the Hausa people. I know this not because I want to. Not because I force myself to know them. To be honest, I never realized I knew this much of my history, but I am glad I read every single old book

sleeping on my father's shelves. If you cannot tell your own history, then what is your purpose? All those years, I never needed to write out anything, I did not bother. I just read and read in Hausa, and it is beautiful when you read in Hausa, it flows subtly across your tongue. I read and watched my society with keen interest, listened to my father talking, talking, talking and my imagination is fire. And I see things I read, and if I don't see them I read and ask Father and he will talk and I will see them. A lot of times I want to bring these things out, strip them naked, to make people see them, but it seems they are invisible little threads. Today, I make Binyavanga see them, the way they are, not the way they are projected. Binya finds the North, this North and not a cocooned pillar, not a closed coconut shell, not the North he is promised that is supposed to be a beast, to lynch him, bottled hungry hyenas released to eat him. He was promised demons but like a creative, he came prepared, digging for the other narrative and he unearthed it. A bristling Northern Nigeria without pinching fingers looking for blood, no large group of people rotten, stinking of fear and scowling at non-conforming aliens. This North is tender, singing in coherence.

We host Binya, this diverse collective of open minds in open space. An oddity forms a brotherhood within twinkling lights of literary exploits. That's what Binya does to you: makes you channel your oddities into a uniform background and share them in piece meal then serve them in plates on a simple platform.

We all reveal little pieces of ourselves in few days. We are a laughing orchestra, understanding our unique situations in our societies. While finding Binya, we find ourselves. VT wants an escape for solitude, but so do all of us. Binya invites us to Kenya, I think so, I dream so, one day, someday. We are already imaging it, painting it into a billboard and hanging it to dangle in our arteries, like the creatives we are: we are packing and leaving, there is fire in our eyes: we are

planning and scheming to get away from worries and be buried in literature, finding literary heaven, boiling with talks and laughter and writing.

We talk and laugh, laughing fireflies, deliberately oblivious. With Binya leaving so will the four walls of this bar disappear, and this city will separate again, and a horizon of uncertainty and fear will re-establish itself and Kaduna will be separated by a river again.

WE ARE RIDING to the airport. I am not driving. We are sardined in the back of a yellow taxi. The heavens open their mouths and rain falls heavy and battering. It rains and we all look out at the wet kiosk of an airport in front of us.

We drive into teary clouds, and between the clouds, the rain dries up. Fresh clouds reveal themselves, a constellation of white smiles and wish Binya a safe trip. We bottle little pieces of ourselves and pass it in little hugs into the soft chest of Binya.

The road back from the airport is dry and lonely. Even the wind misses him. We are streams of quietness. Music from the cab is digesting across the vacuum. We stare forward and brace up to embrace new experiences. It is not every day that you get into an adventure.

The Shapes of Loss

Umar Turaki

NIGHT, CIRCA 11 pm, Silver Spring, post-dinner and this has never happened to you. You are crying in front of your sister and her husband. It is the kind of weeping that shudders your shoulders and shakes your core, and sound and water are gushing out of you in unstoppable torrents, and you know you are crying in front of your sister and that you must look like a maladjusted, self-pitying adult, but you can't stop. You bury your face in your hot palms. Is this an attempt to hold it in? Because it can't be stoppered, and you have no idea why you are crying, why there is a rawness deep, deep inside you that has suddenly uncoiled itself and here you are, unable to rein in your emotions, which have gate-crashed the scene, and you are angry at everything that happened even though you tell yourself you are not, and you are angry with yourself for crying so shamefully in front of two adults.

This is how you came to find yourself in such awkward circumstances, your sheen of mature calmness and composure lost, yourself on a slab cut up and exposed. Prodded open by questions, questions tracing the trail back, like breadcrumbs, all the way to your first true loss, and the way the losing of him was a broadsword being fashioned in a furnace before your very eyes. Hammered and smithed in all manner of ways. Announcing itself from a distance. But by the time it arrived, it was still a surprise, the way it took him away and gouged something into you, an illegible script that defines and devolves into something you never were, into something you don't understand, into something you are still becoming.

Sometimes, this is what loss feels like.

IT IS A Sunday morning just before dawn with the wind howling outside and you wake up to the sensation that your soul has had one limb amputated. Incompleteness rages through canyons deep inside your being.

You retrace the steps that brought you here. On the phone the night before, cornered by the pain of loving someone into their wilderness, your back up against the wall of cold decision, metaphors became your refuge, traded back and forth: I've reached the end of my rope. I can't be a mule for your imperfections. You've sucked all I have to give. There are metals that can't be alloyed.

Goodbye.

It came out of your mouth, small and timid.

After hanging up, you fell asleep almost instantly and the surprise of such ease in such an affair made you dream you got off clean. But you barely slept three hours and now, irreversibly awake, panic slowly betides you.

You feel like a place that has lost half of its self. Like this city, Jos, where the neighbourhoods were divided in the blood-drunk wake of killings, where old neighbours looked at each other and saw strangers. They drew lines saying you cannot pass until the city became a patchwork of dualities. They used knives and cutlasses and machetes to carve up the city, to carve up their very selves. Now each half of the city dwells in isolation. Now, wide awake, you think you can understand the kind of pain the city must have gone through in enduring such a splintering because you too are splintering.

In the pre-dawn stillness of your room, under the weight of this loss you are parsing, you want to reach out into the darkness in front of you and undo it all, unsay it all, take back everything, all the metaphors in their stupid, self-assured brilliance. You want to take it all back.

But the spilling of water is a thing that cannot be undone.

HEARTBREAK, LIKE bereavement, is a function of loss.

Your first heartbreak was experienced, not within the walls of a relationship forged and lost, but on the doorsteps, the door gently closed in your face, the hope folding into itself, growing smaller and smaller, until it squeezed itself into thin air. In a way, all your heartbreaks have been like this. Breath held in the face of a beautiful promise, held there in defiance of life and biology, in the head rush of daring to hope, and, finally, exhaled in defeat. All death is exhalation, air leaving the body. And so when you perform a final exhalation with each heartbreak, you feel as though you are dying, one heartbreak at a time.

Your last heartbreak was different. You were allowed through the door and into the foyer – welcomed even—and the door closed behind you, shut you inside the warm room with an aroma coming in from the kitchen. You stood there acclimating to your new surroundings, holding yourself back from relaxing lest it turns out to be a sham or a mistake. And you had begun to take off your shoes and your jacket when a hand touched you and you heard something about a mistake having been made and the door is opening and you are stepping out onto the doormat and the door is closing with a gentle kiss and you're standing there with the faint trace of a meal you will never have in your nose.

What does this heartbreak, in the wake of all the other heartbreaks, say about loss? That no matter how much you have experienced it and no matter how much you shield yourself from it, you shall never be immune to it. You are ultimately and irrevocably defenceless against it.

But you mustn't be mistaken, for you yourself are no saint—you have also broken hearts, you have also ensnared others in the dragnet of loss simply by your actions. To break a heart is a thing that requires clinical determination. Bono sings about the poet killing for inspiration and singing about the grief. That is what it has meant for me to break a heart. To kill, and to sing.

And somewhere in the centre of that lies the spectre of loss.

AND WHAT OF other losses?

You have lost your faith many times. And each time you have found it again. Yet there is no certainty with each losing that there shall be another finding. Each losing is a kind of sheer drop, inside which moment you don't know what to do or how to be. The world and its hues and colours—who would have thought there were so many—is constantly grating against this faith, rubbing it raw, testing it, finding it wanting, baptizing it, re-birthing it. You have no idea what your faith will look like by the time you are seventy, or if it will even be there at all. One lesson living and fucking up has taught you is that there is no such thing as certainty, there is only experience, and you take what you can from that and move on. Faith to you is a pliable thing, designed to withstand pressure, not to resist it (for it may break), but to absorb it like a buffer, and to bounce back stronger, reinforced. Even as you write this, you fear you don't know the end of this sentence, don't understand the ways in which your faith will surprise you as it contracts and expands in response to the pressures of this world.

LOSS IS VIOLENCE. Loss is deprivation. Loss is violation.

Even when you lose something as mundane as a set of keys, there is a sense in which you feel that the trajectory of your very existence has been altered in some fundamental way. You were going to go home and have a meal, and now you're not, because you can't. It is always against your will. It is a crippling of your ability to get what you want when you want it.

Consider getting lost on a road in the middle of the night in an unfamiliar neighbourhood, pitch blackness surrounding your car like a blanket. Panic leaps on top of you as you realize that something—in this case, your sense of purpose and direction—has slipped like a rein from your grasp, and the fabric of your reality changes shape and adjusts around you. Like the sensation of being lost at sea, or space, drifting with no tether, no lifeline. Like losing your mind without actually doing so.

PRONOUNS ARE USEFUL for equipping language with the tools of delineating existences, of separating entities without necessarily naming them. And they are equally useful as diversions or disguise. They allow us to speak about ourselves without appearing to do so.

In the course of this essay, I have been hiding behind the second person singular. A device so unoriginal that it must be obvious by now. I don't know. Bottom line is that I have been hiding and perhaps it's time for a little plain speaking.

It begins with this sentence, a simple sentence about loss that strikes at the heart of all the losses I have ever known: My father died.

His death was a thing that began with the loss of his job a year earlier. I remember seeing our cook Ibrahim—a large man with a generous gap between his front teeth and a booming voice, a man who seemed so fortified against the dangers of this world because of his bearing and bulk—crying with a rumpled face and a runny nose and big gasps. My mother cried too. A few other adults also came to the house and cried. I simply watched.

As a child, I wanted for nothing. I had never had to worry about lack or the possibility that my parents might not be able to provide for a need. It was something I took for granted. To my mind, we were quite wealthy. With the loss of his job, I saw my father at home more often, I overheard him confessing to a friend how my mother's shop was sustaining the house, I saw him begin an attempt at becoming a geological consultant, even though I didn't understand what it was he was doing at the time. I began to fear that we might no longer be wealthy, that we were, in fact, becoming poor.

At that age, I didn't understand the implication of overhearing my father tell another friend, "I have been battling with liver cancer," nor the concept of a terminal illness. So at my moment of discovery, I failed to suspect that the end of the story might be the bodily absence of him, and then the mourning of him. The gradation after that was slow, almost imperceptible. I went from simply knowing about his illness to beginning to consider the possible meanings of that. It may have been adult whispers in the house, or an invisible shadow that seemed to cling to my mother as I saw her worrying. This time was fraught with tiny fears I had never before considered. They haunted the corners of my mind. I didn't realize it, but I was encountering the mortality of my father. What I also find curious is that my sense of my father's mortality was wrapped up with my fear of impending destitution.

My father died in the season of my life when my mind was just beginning to engage with the world in a different way. For the first time, I was living away from home, in boarding school in another city. I was called out of class by Matron and my form mistress. They explained that I had to go home because my parents wanted to go on a vacation out of the country with me. A family friend had sent a driver to pick me up. This was just a few days before school broke. They knew. Everybody knew. Except me. They explained that the trip abroad was urgent and we couldn't wait until the official school break. I packed my things up in a hurry. If I had been more aware, I might have noticed the broken look in Matron's eyes.

I hope you never experience a homecoming in which you arrive at the house expecting to see your parents hale and hearty, only to see vehicles parked outside and people gathered for no apparent reason. I hope you never walk up to the front door, buffeted by people on every side saying hello and watching you with sad, searching eyes, realizing that you don't know. I hope you never have that slow suspicion that spreads through your mind like urine soaking your clothes as you sleep, creating a lump in your throat that won't go away no matter how many times you swallow, telling you that something is wrong. I hope you never enter the house to see your mother seated there, looking like a statue of brokenness. I hope you never see her drag her eyes away from you like a dead weight when you ask, "Daddy fa?"

The idea of time being a river, the way it ferries us away from our past and towards our future, away from things we wish to forget, is a myth. If the years have done anything, they have opened my eyes to subterranean strata of my psyche as it pertains to my father and the way he left the world. The injustices connected to that event. Some of these injustices may be perceived or even imaginary, but the most important thing is that they were felt, that they felt real. I think I convinced myself that the injustices were, ultimately, inconsequential; that they could be swept under the rug

and be forgotten. I appeared to be a happy adult with emotions in check. I really thought I had managed to come away clean from that singular event that happened nineteen years ago. Until everything came tumbling down in the space of one night.

“IT’S NOTHING PERSONAL, but when I’m getting married, everything is going to happen in Jos,” I said. “I don’t want to have any ceremony in Bida.”

My sister looked at me across the table and asked, “Why don’t you want to have a ceremony in Bida?”

“Because it’s not necessary. My life is in Jos; my friends are in Jos.”

“But you also have family in Bida.”

“They can come to Jos. The best I can do is to take my wife-to-be so they can see her and give us their blessings.”

“It doesn’t have to be a big ceremony.”

I shook my head.

“I don’t get it,” my sister said, pressing on. “If it’s nothing personal, why don’t you want to go to Bida?”

“Because, as far as I’m concerned, nobody in Bida has earned the right to have such an honour. My mother raised us single-handedly. That honour rests with her and her alone.”

Until the answer came out, I didn’t know it was tucked away in a corner inside my head.

“I see,” she said. Understanding had washed over her face.

My heart was pounding inside my chest, raging, and I wished it wouldn't. But I was getting angrier and I couldn't say why. The word 'BETRAYED' kept pulsing in my head. When I finally blurted it out, my brother-in-law said he didn't think that the fact that my father's side of the family essentially left me, my little sister, and my mother to ourselves after my father's death was necessarily betrayal. He said it's what people did, with a heart-of-man-is-desperately-wicked tone. I insisted that it was a betrayal of my father and everything he was to the family: a pillar and a unifying force; what his brothers failed to do for his children, he would have done ten times over and more had they been the ones rotting in their graves; and his so-called friends, the people closest to him, who shared a childhood with him, who came to his house and ate at his table and ruffled the hair on the head of his children with a practiced fondness; people whose children he cared for, sheltered, fed, and sent to school. Where were they? I was angry with everyone: with my brother-in-law for disagreeing with me, with my father for dying, with my father's relatives and old friends for betraying him, with God for allowing it all to happen, and with myself for feeling angry and betrayed.

In the months to come, I would unearth the understanding that an emotion, no matter how ugly, is a thing designed to be felt. An affront is to be embraced, absorbed. You must hold it with two hands, you must wrestle with it, you must run your fingers along its length and know the shape of each contour. If you are hurt, you must not make any excuses for the perpetrator. You must feel the full magnitude of your hurt.

Only then can you begin to speak about forgiveness.

But at that dinner table in Silver Spring, I was stubbornly holding on to the fact that I had forgiven and moved on, that I wasn't petty, that I wasn't the kind of person to have so high a sense of entitlement that it could be so deeply wounded. I was insistent that I was cool with everybody, that when I looked at my uncles and cousins and smiled, it was with a wide-open and ventilated

heart, free of bitterness and resentment, that I had no ounce of self-pity in me, that I didn't have a victim mentality. But everything was becoming heavier and a rawness was opening up in my chest, buried so deep that I couldn't believe such a layer existed inside me, a rawness tethered to my father across the span of nineteen years and his sudden disappearance from my life and the medical missives I found bearing the words, "There are no scientific reasons about the progression of the intrahepatic metastases. May be the psychological trauma Dr Turaki got a short time ago (he lost his job) decreased his immune system" and "I have talked honestly with the patient and his wife about his condition and prognosis...I have suggested to the patient another communication by phone call in about 8 weeks" – he would be in a coma in eight weeks, dead in nine – and the picture I saw of him and his best friend and his best friend's wife at a lunch table smiling to the camera, my father unaware that this same best friend would sever all communication with his wife and children after his demise because of a matter as nebulous and personal as faith, and the memories of my mother selling jewellery, fretting, worrying herself to death over every facet of our development as children. It was all there inside that rawness, which was becoming so heavy, so so heavy, and my false smile was threatening to crack even as I sat there with my sister and her husband looking at me.

I bent my head and wept the weight of years.

Missing Wombs and Closed Wounds

Ama Asantewa Diaka

1.

3 A.M. HAS become a recount of things heaving in the pit of my stomach. Sometimes, it's the defiant stare of my handprint-stained walls, daring me to let out the unsaid words growing algae in my throat. Sometimes, it's the memory of pretty sentences from a past conversation echoing in my head, drawing out a smile only the darkness can see. But today, it was my body that was keeping me awake, attempting to kill me without prior notice. Inciting a pain so sharp I was too stunned to scream out. My left hand marched the skin across my abdomen in a frenzied motion, one would think I was looking for something in my own body, but it was a bulge the size of a two-year-old's fist protruding from the left of my abdomen that had me wishing I could live outside my body on a Thursday dawn

2.

I LAY ON my side, close to the edge of a bed so old that if it were a dog, it would've been put down by now. As I clutched at my lower stomach, I thanked God that this pain was intermittent. That even though it was sucking my life away, it gave me some seconds in between to catch my breath and cuss him out for being subjected to this pain. Between bated breaths and squinted eyes from suppressed pain, I stopped a taxi to the hospital. There was something depressing about the morning sun, or my countenance was rubbing off on it. Neither of these stopped the taxi driver from muttering incomprehensible prayers all the way to the hospital.

3.

THERE'S SOMETHING about hospital rooms that leaves you with a desire to not have to visit the same room again. It must be the strong smell of disinfected floors, or the long queues of both sickly and healthy looking people. A poisoned silence floats through the room like a bad smell. The cry of a young boy whose torso looks like raw meat slashes through the silence. His mother does not touch him for fear of aggravating his pain; she's whispering words only he can hear but he is not consoled. His pain is so heavy that I can feel it hanging over my shoulders like an oversized jacket.

4.

THE DOCTOR who asks about my symptoms is an old, nice-looking man in glasses only old people wear. It feels as if the worse off you are, the nicer the doctor assigned to you. He tells me I'd have to do an ultrasound scan to see exactly what is going on with my body.

"Go and drink a lot of water until you feel the urge to pee, and let's do this!" He smiles at me as if he's expecting me to smile back.

5.

WAITING FOR your bladder to fill up after drinking three bottles of water is unsettling. And it gives you enough time to think about third world problems. Should I drink one more bottle of water? What if the urge to pee comes with a rush and I can't hold it long enough to do the scan? Why is my bladder not full yet? How many bottles of water can my body take before I feel the urge to pee? When is Jesus coming? Why aren't these nurses smiling? Do Nigerians really believe their Jollof is better than ours or they're just being patriotic?

6.

THE NURSE preps the table and pulls the curtains around the table. She puts a white cotton sheet around my midsection and asks me to pull my dress above my tummy, leaving my abdomen exposed. She asks me to push my panties slightly down and tags the sheet into my halfway-pulled down panties. She steps away from the table, making way for the doctor. The doctor squeezes jelly on my belly. It's surprisingly cold. I'm not quite sure what I was expecting it to be. He spreads the jelly over my abdomen with a device that looks like the first microphone ever created. He pauses over the left side of my abdomen and asks if it hurts, I nod at him and he goes back to rubbing my abdomen with the device. After a few minutes, he places tissue on my abdomen and asks me to wipe the jelly off. He pulls a pair of gloves on and asks me to pull my legs back and open them apart. I cannot see the instrument, but I feel a thin cold metal being inserted into my vagina. It's uncomfortable and I shut my eyes and count to thirty. But I can still feel the coldness and being rummaged around as if someone was looking for cutlery in a drawer. I think of my boyfriend, and his navy shirt that says "I'm not a gynaecologist, but I'll take a look." And I wonder why boys think being a gynaecologist is a fun job. Nobody really wants to touch food they can't eat.

It's been five minutes now and I can't hide my discomfort anymore. He can tell, because he lifts his head up and says,

"I'm sorry this is taking long, it's just that I can't see your womb."

Jesus.

He can't see my womb? Is that supposed to make me feel less uncomfortable? Where did my womb go to?

I feel the cold breath of panic creeping up my neck, but he pulls the device out before I can react and tells me I can dress up now. He drops it in a metal bowl and takes his gloves off.

7.

“YOU HAVE TWO ovarian cysts, one in your left ovary and one in your right ovary.”

Oh great. They’re two now. How fantastic.

There used to be four of those bastards, two in each ovary. And even though doctors said it was “normal” for women to have cysts at any point in their life, and mine wasn’t dangerous, the masses of Satan’s spawn caused me great pain.

But I don’t tell him that. I just nod at him

“The cyst in your left ovary is a fluid-filled cyst. It’s not dangerous or cancerous, but the mass has grown so big that it is pressing down on your bladder”

I can hear my heart beating in my throat. An image of a nasty boil ripe for bursting clouds my vision.

“Ovarian cysts usually shrink on their own. It will be too risky for us to do a laparoscopy now. So I’m going to give you some antibiotics and something for the pain. Then we will watch and wait for a month. Hopefully, it would’ve shrunk by then and there will be no need for a surgery.”

8.

“DO YOU HAVE a boyfriend?” he asks

I had heard this question before. Somehow, the popular remedy for getting rid of cysts was to get pregnant at an early stage of diagnosis to prevent any complications that a further growth might cause. I knew what the next question was going to be.

I summon a half smile and nod my head.

“Is he ready to marry?”

It was always if he was ready to settle down. Never did they ask if I, Asantewa was ready to get married.

I smile and ask for the prescription list.

9.

IF FREEDOM had a smell, it would be of the gentle wind blowing outside the hospital walls. J calls right after I step out.

“Everything is fine babe; the doctor said I’ll be fine in a couple of days.” I don’t tell him the doctor asked if he was ready for marriage. Why should I when I wasn’t ready for marriage myself?

He asks if I would like to go out of town for a weekend away. I want to so badly. But my bladder is not in a good place. And bladders are known to take the piss in unknown places so I ask for a postponement.

10.

AFTER SEVEN days J tells me he feels himself changing, and he knows if he changed who he was to please me, he would hate himself. So it’s better if we break up.

I have always seen breakups as terminal illnesses. The symptoms dig at your insides till you can no longer avoid it. And then, the body dies. But this, this end to a disease I had no idea existed, was something I did not see coming.

You think you're too good to beg for anything—a phone call, an answered text message, an explanation, another chance to fix a wrong you don't know of yet to even attempt fixing it.

You think you're too good to beg for anything, until love pushes you down on your knees.

11.

WHEN MY little brother was seven, a car hit him as he crossed the road with my elder brother. The accident didn't do as much damage as the tiny sharp stone he smashed his forehead into when the car struck him down. He needed surgery to take out the stone. Taking out the stone didn't hurt as much as the time it took for the wound to heal.

Healing of a wound comes in three phases: inflammation, tissue formation and tissue remodelling. Inflammation is when you rip your skin off, tissue formation is when new skin starts forming to replace the damaged skin, and tissue remodelling is when the wound contracts and the new skin is strengthened.

A wound can heal fast and well when there's surgical wound closure. Surgical wound closure is like having a magical wand used on you, except there's no magic; just a surgeon with years of training working hard to ensure your wound heals fast and well. The alternative to surgical wound closure is spontaneous healing—allowing the body to heal all by itself.

It's the 21st century, would you rather take a pill to get rid of a blinding migraine in 24 hours, or wait for 7 – 10 days for the migraine to go by itself?

Closure.

I never thought I'd thirst for it.

It took one lover leaving me for unknown reasons for me to cherish an old lover who left me for another girl. That was an obvious reason, hurtful, but reason nonetheless.

"Let's end this because I don't want to change who I am."

Ok darling I cannot make you stay if you want to leave, but please, tell me, what it is about being with me that is changing you.

Is it that one time I told you my farts smell like roses?

Is it because I touched the roasted plantain on the grill instead of just pointing at it?

Is it because I didn't want our kids to have anything but traditional names?

Or is it because I think Manchester United fans are too full of themselves?

Closure.

12.

THIS IS how I deal with grief.

I don't.

I smile, and make jokes out of my pain.

I print my pain on t-shirts and sleep in them.

I toss thoughts around so much they make me sick,

and I question if the thoughts I process are sick,

or if I'm seeing a view of another version of myself.

I make gods out of distractions.

I make imaginary friends and reintroduce myself to them

I sit pretty and wait for it to seep out.

Because that's all the witchcraft I've ever asked for

But grief has always been a game you can only win when you've played all the levels.

Grief is the bus stop at the end of the long road I have no desire to travel

Grief is a team game I practice alone

And so it festers.

Like a wound that looks healed on the surface but it's rotting inside.

This is how I deal with grief.

I don't.

13.

MOTHER SAYS that if I take care of my body, it will take care of me. After eighty days, I can no longer tell what my body wants. There is a hard mass growing inside of me that baffles everyone, and so my mother drags me to the country's biggest hospital, with the best doctors in the country. There are many women in the waiting room: old, young, tired, in pain, impatient—all waiting their turn. When it is my turn, my mother takes my hand and we walk into the doctor's office together.

You would think that after several visits to the hospital, I would be used to the overwhelming smell of disinfectants and drugs and sweaty bodies mixed together. But the smell still makes me dizzy for a few seconds. There are about sixteen student doctors in one corner of the room. To them, this session is a learning experience; to me, this is a terrifying moment. I try to mask my uneasiness with a smile.

“Big girl like you, coming to the hospital with your mother. Are you a baby?”

My mother laughs softly and tries to make conversation with the doctor; but suddenly, I can't wait to get out of his office. I want to ask him if there's an age for a mother's love to be dispensed in doses but I can feel my mother's eyes burning into the back of my head so I sniff and pretend to remove something from my left eye.

After a series of tests and investigations on my body, he tells me he will have to cut a sample out to figure out what it is. My sister tells me it won't hurt much. She tells me it is like discovering you scratched yourself in your sleep; the only reason your mind registers pain is because you can see the bruises. I wonder why she's softening the truth like I hadn't gone numb already.

Mother says that if I take care of my body, it will take care of me. But sometimes, bodies are blind.

14.

AFTER NINETY-ONE days Tee tells me I am handling the loss of you well. She asks me how I teach myself to cup joy and disregard my pain. She says to me, “You harbor no ill feelings and handle your pain so well. God must be proud of you.”

I laugh.

As if I hadn't already embarrassed myself to God by begging him to tell you to return the fuck back home—to me.

15.

BODIES ARE objects that bounce back into shape after being stretched. Maybe a little deformed, or not as new as before; but bodies are resilient.

There are home remedies for everything: for coughs, tummy aches, almost dead laptops. A common home remedy for a broken heart is time. Two hundred and fifteen days after you're gone, I wish I didn't know it has been two hundred and fifteen days since you left. Where is all the time that heals?

My mother said she's praying for me. I smile, because at the place where our pain meets, we're both praying for someone. At the end of the day there are no candy bars given for good intentions and earnestly whispered prayers. And God doesn't scribble my name across the clouds for the familiar taste of your name on my lips.

At the end of the day, this shit still hurts.

Like Rambo's Bullets

Gbolahan Badmus

I. THE END WHERE I BEGIN

Once you are conscious of it, you don't smile. In any of your pictures that require one, what you do is stretch your lips, taking extra effort to reveal no teeth. But if your smile has to be wider, no thanks to the photographer's persistence, the camera must be far away so that your teeth come out as a block of white, sparing viewers the details.

II. COLOURS

Your father was a spectrum of colours:

Yellow for his airglow skin, skin that could light up a dark room, making room for comments like, "Are you sure he is your daddy?"

When he turned red, you curled into your shell seeking invisibility. You remember when he was driving you to school and a car almost rammed into yours. How he got down from his car, engaging the other driver in a hollering contest, fists poised for action. Until a pause, a head-tilt, then a squint before realizing they were old university mates. Anger faded to joy, then a constriction of each other in the name of embrace.

Behind every red, there is a blue for the coolness of his humour. Unfortunately, you don't remember any of his jokes; all you have left is this mental image: friends sitting, holding their bellies and laughing; he standing, arms gesticulating and mouth moving. This colour was your favourite—it

opened doors, it melted icy hearts into pools of compassion. Just like the skin, this was another thing that never got transmitted into your gene.

However, one downside about this colour was when he tried those jokes on you. Your belly would rumble and your mouth would open to let out the laugh, revealing your teeth in the process. But he would immediately wear a stern face, tighten his lips, and tell you to shut your mouth. That was when you knew something was wrong with your laughter, and perhaps your smile, each time your teeth showed their faces.

That was also another shade of red, like that of a traffic light.

III. SHIFT AND SPACEBAR

If you are given a keyboard and told to choose two keys, whose names best describe your teeth, you would go for the Shift key and the Spacebar.

Spaces lie between and inside your molars. You do not have to chew meat before requiring the poking services of a toothpick. Bread, fish, chicken, in short anything that enters your mouth, has a certainty of getting stuck inside and between them. When there are no toothpicks your fingernails comes to life. A stab here and a poke there for the stuck piece to get evicted. In their absence, your tongue steps in—that red serpentine creature, twisting and turning, and forcing itself between molars to eject foreign bodies. The aftermath of every meal signals the beginning of evictions.

It is almost impossible to expose the molars in a smile, so this brings us to your Shift keys. We say hello to your canines and incisors.

Normally, when the mouth is passive, the bottom part of the upper incisors and the upper part of the lower incisors touch. In other words, place them on each other and they align. But your case is different. Your upper incisors are slightly outward—instead of being vertical, they prefer to be diagonal—such that when you close your mouth, the back of your upper incisors rests atop your lower incisors. And any slight parting of your lips could reveal your poking incisors. The Yoruba call it ‘eyin samuga’.

As for your upper canines, instead of standing straight, they look like what has been forcefully pushed forward. The spaces left give the illusion of a missing tooth.

IV. A GAME OF MESS

There’s an image you have of you sitting in a public bus, where a funny video catches you off guard, causing you to laugh.

A child taps his mum and says, “Mummy, see that Uncle’s teeth.”

Mummy looks at Uncle’s teeth, smacks the child and offers you an eye-apology. But you only focus on your screen and make a mental note to stick to your father’s instruction—the red of traffic lights.

Kids, unlike adults, are not restricted by niceties to keep their mouth shut. As the child grows he learns restriction—politeness. But there comes a time in a child’s life, even after s/he has learned politeness, s/he would have to ditch them for something better like respect/reverence/adoration. And there’s no place this is better manifested than the burgeoning days of secondary school.

They called it ‘mess’. It was a befitting name, giving what occurred to the loser’s psychological state. ‘Let us mess ourself’ was an invitation to engage in verbal assaults. No holds

barred. Some could go as far as verbally striking the other's parents. It could be the simple hand gesture of pointing outspread palms and uttering these two words: Your mother. And a battle of fists was sure to follow. So the unwritten rule was this: restrict all insults to your opponents; even when in the zone, never involve the opponent's parents. Unless, of course, you have superior physical strength.

Some of the clichéd mess of those days were: “You mess Babangida repeat Primary one.” “You mess and all the fish in the river say, ‘Are we safe?’”

Others were quite lengthy paintings of the opponent's stupidity vis-à-vis the protagonist's wisdom, climaxing with the remix of a popular song/jingle. Sometimes, what stung most was not these assaults, but the stings of laughter accompanying them.

As far as you were concerned, you were immune to all these stings. Who cares, you would think, if you fart and an old Head of State repeats primary one? Or you said cokecastic after drinking Coke because you blindly copied your friend who after drinking Fanta said fantastic? You were smart enough to know they were plain lies incapable of hurt. Even for the laughing arrows, you had a shield of nonchalance to protect you from hurt.

U. was the uncrowned King of Mess known for his white-shirt-turned-brown. At the centre of the shirt was the faded image of a shirtless Sylvester Stallone as Rambo, muscles everywhere, carrying a machine gun scattering bullets everywhere. U. had a large head that seemed too great a burden for his slim frame to carry. Add this to the colour of his white shirt and he looked like a red carpet invitation for insults. But fire U. one and U. would give triple in return, his thin raspy voice throwing invectives laden with sting. He was the Rambo of mess.

U. was quite creative with his mess. A short person became one who needed ladders to be of equal height with a razor blade; a dark person's sweat became raw material for black polish. The bigger boys in your class always loved to have U. around; better an ally than a foe.

It happened on a Saturday afternoon (or maybe a public holiday). You remember because it was midday and you were in your dorm, not in class or church service. Dark clouds slowly swallowed the sun as rain threatened to fall. Cool breeze swept through the dorm strengthening the magnetic power of beds. But your dorm mates had other plans.

At the centre of your dorm's quadrangle was a circle of cheering boys mostly in their boxer shorts, paying little regard to clothes spread on clothing lines. In their midst was the legendary U. locked in a verbal spar with another boy, whose name or face you no longer remember. Sights like these were not uncommon, but the specialty was U., hence the massive crowd. Rooms were practically empty. Not wanting to be given a secondhand report, you squeezed your way to the front of the cheering crowd.

Within a few minutes after your arrival, the unknown boy was laughing and pointing at U. U. wore a shocked expression and kept touching his neck. For a reason you now wished you had not thought of, you had also laughed along with the boy, pointing at U.'s neck. Your laughter was among the few heard in that moment, a mid-pitched hahahaha. If only you had adopted the crowd's wisdom in keeping silent and waiting for U.'s retort. But you did want to have fun, didn't you?

U. paused, scanning the crowd to pick the easiest target among the daring laughers. And there you were: mouth wide opened, teeth on full display in its uneven glory; the proverbial sitting duck. U must have looked at his shirt and then your teeth, immediately finding a link before saying: "See your scatter-scatter teeth like Rambo bullets."

The first thing that seized was your laughter, and then your lips folded themselves to conceal your teeth. But it was too late, the shots had been fired. Target eliminated. The crowd also attested to the fact that your teeth, because of its scattered dentition, must have been fired by none other than Rambo in an adrenaline-fueled rage. Laughter erupted.

You once thought you had a shield of protection, but that day U. found your underbelly and stabbed with unrelenting vigour. That night, in the privacy of your mosquito net, you would place your thumb on your protruding incisors and try to push them in, back to normal.

V. GENESIS

In the beginning, while two of your siblings chose to suck on the secondary sweetness of their fingers, you chose the primary sweetness of your tongue. Back then, its comparative discreetness made it a good idea. The only evidence was the rhythmic throbbing of your tongue causing your lips to slightly pulsate. While others sucked in the dark, all you had to do was place your palm over your mouth, and you were good to go.

Since your throbbing tongue rested against the back of your upper incisors while sucking, it must have caused their outward push overtime. You scanned your old pictures, but the ones you found revealed no teeth. The ones that did were not clear enough to prove or disprove the theory. But even if the theory was true, it could not explain your canines or the spaces between your molars.

VI. BETRAYER

Days after the Rambo's-bullets incident, after you had failed to push your teeth back to normal, you were thankful that at least your teeth were not perpetually brown like A.'s due to a blood tonic prescription as a toddler, and also the incident never gave rise to any nickname, thanks to the proximity of vacation that swiped the memory from everyone's head on resumption. What if from

that day onward you were called ‘Rambo’s bullets’ or ‘Scatter-scatter teeth’? A tiny part of you used as a label to capture your wholeness.

Sometimes, you would argue with yourself that you should have retorted to U. about Ronaldinho, whom in spite of his cringe-worthy dentition was still a football legend. Later, your pride would wither off after you discovered Ronaldinho fixed his teeth. Betrayer, you would call him over and over again.

VII. IN THE AGE OF INTERNET

The Internet came and forced our dear coveted/beloved privacy to the realms of mythology, or optimistically speaking, a rarity. Hidden flaws—recreated by Photoshop, packaged into memes, transported via retweets and likes, complemented with lol, lmao and their variants, are constantly being loaded into public domains. Full lips are photoshopped into comfortable cushions, or bouncing castles, or parachutes; a fat person walking is edited to cause earthquakes and tsunamis; a slim person’s legs become chopsticks or toothpicks. This is how the world we live in tell people how not to be and try to confine them in the cages of what they should be, hiding under the veil of humour.

Maybe that is why each time you take a picture, whether on your phone or on a friend’s, you had to swipe through every one of them, and if per chance one captures your teeth, it gets deleted. If they ask, “Why you delete that picture na?” You would apologies and say, “Na mistake.” Most times they don’t notice.

Sometimes, you imagine being a musician, opening your mouth to take a high note, and then an ambitious camera zooms in to steal a picture. And the next day, you become an Internet

sensation. Not for your powerful performance but something else—worse than Rambo’s bullets, given the new arsenal of digital weaponry ready to slaughter you before the world.

You remember a lady called M., looking at you in that way that made your belly a home of fluttering butterflies, asking why you hardly smiled in your pictures. You had never been asked this question and you wondered whether to tell her. Caught in the hold of her alluring presence, you did. She kept silent for a moment, then smiled and said, ‘You know we like you like that.’ Unbothered about the vagueness of ‘we’, you smiled before her, a conscious display of teeth, and your heart feather-light, free.

VIII. HOW IT ENDS

You always had friends who were blind to your teeth. On the days you all gathered and the analysis of passers-by came up—girls as flat as chopping boards, to find curves you would need the help of microscopes; muscular calves like tubers of yam etc.—you would contribute your quota of laughter, yours being the loudest. Maybe you laughed because it was a mask; maybe you laughed because your friends were funny; maybe you laughed relishing the peace of forgetting what it meant to be a recipient of ridicule. But you laughed, not bothering if your laughter were stings in the making. When they picked a target and started with the teeth, you would crash into reality, suppressing your laughter to a closed-mouth smile, hiding anything that might remind them of you; aiming for giggles with difficulties, trying not to draw attention to your silence. Sometimes, you tried changing the topic: “Guys, how weekend go be?”

You hope a day comes, when you would be brave enough to stop making stings with your laughter. Maybe it will have to start with you—seeing your teeth as gems, perfect in their imperfections. Or maybe you will have to wait till the day the world starts seeing like M., becoming the definition of her ‘we’ and universalizing her ‘you’.

Until then, you wouldn't consciously smile; and in any of your pictures that requires one, you would stretch your lips, taking extra effort to reveal no teeth. And if your smile has to be wider, no thanks to the photographer's persistence, the camera must be far away, so that your teeth would come out as a block of white, sparing viewers the details, and you, from any impending sting.

The Nervous Conditions of the Mother Tongue

Mapule Mohulatsi

“I know nothing that has as much power as a word.

Sometimes I write one, and look at it, until it begins to shine.”

—Emily Dickinson.

1.

I WAS BORN on the edge of South Africa’s national freedom—it was on the 4th of December 1993 at the Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital in Soweto. This hospital, my first (not so humble) abode on earth, was opened in 1942 as an Imperial Military Hospital for the black population after the Second World War. It became known as the Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital in honour of Chris Hani, a former leader of the South African Communist Party (SACP), after his assassination, also in 1993. It is the largest (and probably the bloodiest) hospital in Southern Africa. In the enigmatic year of my birth, the Sunset Clause: South Africa’s peaceful Walk to Freedom, was already in motion, introducing an oncoming and negotiated democracy. By then, the tabula rasa of what constituted African literature had already been smeared by debates on the language question by the bearded thinkers of our continent.

The sweet promise of democracy convicted my mother’s womb, and the other women who were also pregnant at the time, to an electrified rejoicing, a roused ululation at the idea of us: the children “born free”. To the heavy women at the Baragwaneth maternal ward it had already been

unanimously decided that these children, with the fruits of freedom and education waiting for them, would learn to pray in their mother tongue(s); escaping the wrath that had been imposed upon their mothers by Bantu Education. Many of us were christened with African names, but of course, our second names were English, just in case. Yet, despite the aesthetic of our names, secretly, our mothers, or at least my mother, also fantasized of the crystal-clear English I would grow up to speak in the New South Africa.

Writing this, I am actively imagining the frustration my mother must have felt when a pre-school report I brought home praised my confidence and creativity; yet, the blue report card also briefly advised that it would do me a great good to practice speaking English at home.

P-r-a-c-t-i-c-e:

The actual application or use of an idea, belief, or method, as opposed to theories relating to it; Repeated exercise in or performance of an activity or skill as to acquire or maintain proficiency in it—Oxford Online Dictionary.

At the tender age of six my mother and I tried to practice speaking English at home as advised by my pre-school teacher but often reverted back to our home language due to the alienation our tongues felt—slipping and falling, seeking the right word, losing the idea—until we eventually gave up this practicing of English at home.

However, good schooling, avid reading, and the racially-mixed friendships I maintained, became practiced enough as I grew up. I am still practicing. My tongue seeks escape routes the entire time. My mind however, has learnt to grapple and hold onto those lingual sentiments that pertain to the lunacy I will discuss here.

Most of my affiliations with language and writing are deeply rooted in the English language. And I am okay with it. It is uncomfortable that my country has now changed the course of its aspiration and has forgotten the dream of the blue report card.

2.

WRITING RELIES on language, yet it also has the ability to erase language. When Emily Dickinson writes a word, and then ‘looks at it, until it begins to shine,’ it seems that the particular word ceases to be a word; it becomes insignia of [her] meaning; as if the word itself, the visual delicacy, exists solely to represent what is hidden underneath it, which is the thing ‘that shines’.

Pity then, that language and meaning have become the paraphernalia of the discourse of writing in Africa.

Firstly, to write any word is already an achievement the many who belittle you for your chosen career path should know about. But then again, illusions aside, you are in the modern African state where things aren’t as easy as they appear.

You are the oral, primordial, wo/man.

Orality has often been defined as the quality of being verbally communicated; many still believe that orality is the first phase in the pyramid of human history and literacy. The oral man is the primordial figure—the beginning of history. Orality, as Ruth Finnegan preaches, is seen as “representing the fateful development out of ‘primitiveness’ through our acquisition of writing—together with all the supposed properties that have so often been assumed to go along with that division—‘the Great Divide, between Us and Them’—a division which is thus so easy to associate with orality and literacy respectively.” [What is Orality, If Anything? 1990] In the context of the African literary and cultural production aesthetic, orality has often played the role of not diminishing

this divide, but rather, extending it. The construction of national identity through the oral narrative mode, evident in post-independence African writing, has set values of authenticity for individuals and how they should use ‘traditional’ conventions. This divide of the oral as traditional, and the written as modern, is a false concession to modesty and development; it devalues the relationship between storytelling and temporality, simultaneously degrading the temporal paradoxes of modernity.

Writing in Africa has generally been surrounded by such behemoth myths and rumours, in fact, the one myth that has been circulating since the advent of Social Darwinism is one that has infiltrated the literary course of a continent: Africans have no (written) history. Foolishness! It is this excavation of the skull of a continent that has led to ideas such as “since Africa has no written history, then all history that is African is oral”; that “since literacy in Africa was afforded by the colonial project, writing in the colonizer’s language perpetuates something.”

3.

I SIT AT the local bar, scared witless, trying to write. I imagine the entangling web of cutthroat opinion pieces that hover above those that can write—the ‘critical eye’. Then, before I can even take the next gulp of beer, the shadow of the consummate reader also loiters before me. Relax, I say to myself. I remind myself that writing is the holy practice where I can, and should, acquaint myself with the sentiments and instincts of writing; those early morning gut reactions, along, of course, with the varied contradictions of what really constitutes humanism and lingual lunacy.

I ask myself whether it is the tongue or the pen that writes.

My tongue is not wholly separate from the business of writing, especially, writing in English. In writing this, I am adhering to Karin Barber's sermon in her 'African-Language Literature and Postcolonial Criticism' (1995), that:

Writing in English can be understood more richly if we abandon the picture of the colonial language as an all-enveloping blanket of repression, and the indigenous languages as stifled, silenced sites of muted authenticity and resistance. Instead, we should perhaps see English as one available register among others, in specific scenes of cultural production.

The evils of the discourse concerning language and writing in Africa linger ceremoniously above the shaking pen of the pundit-in-training (myself) as government of this true self that language supposedly ministers.

It is becoming uncomfortable to cringe in self-hate because I have little aspiration to write in my home language.

For me, writing often results in my tongue rolling in and out in rapid movements. And even though there is no scientific study of the tongue's relation to writing, it is a definite side effect to have the mind roving endlessly in the jungle of jargon, wisdom, pronunciation, and witticism—not to mention the benchmark that hovers over the disfigured author of colour: History.

When I write, or at least try to, it seems that my tongue has a certain level of control over my mind; often, it looks as if the two have a cozy relationship, without me; ever so often leaving me out in the cold, meandering both my mouth and mind into battlefields where the landscape of cultural, linguistic, and postcolonial history glistens like an Egyptian mirage on a hot summer day.

I no longer think what I cannot touch is real,

Mawkish tongue lost in a mouth of poverty,

I have to bite myself before I'll heal—Kelwyn Sole, *The Blood of Our Silence*.

And bitten myself I have: the language of the colonizer rests easily on my tongue, it dances. It is simultaneously bizarre and a triumph to know that at first my mawkish tongue bent to it, this language, but now it is this mawkish tongue of mine that bends it. English.

This is the nervous condition of the tongue, of the mother tongue, this feeling of triumph and desolation, of gain, and loss. There is a certain desperation to it since my mind has grasped the English language and has held it captive, more than English has held it (my mind) captive. Or maybe both are happening at the same time.

I cannot say the same for my tongue, my tongue is completely colonized, and as Marechera puts it, I too played an active role in this colonization:

I took to the English language as a duck takes to water.

4.

MY MOTHER tongue, Setswana, has always been foreign to me. Being a ‘detribalized’ African born and bred in the township, there was already the first-hand experience of alienation from the rural Setswana of “my people”; that is, my father’s people. I remember when on school holidays we visited some of our family who lived in the Free State, there was often lingual confusion between the township children and the children of the rural areas. We were teased for the way we spoke and we teased them in return for the way they spoke. A game of jealous children, each group jealous of what the other had.

The township tongue has no loyalty since the township is a hub of patois converging in a place of no space. Language is a thing that happens in the same way that sexual exchanges take place. I am able to merge isiZulu, Sesotho, and English in the same sentence. The ghetto language of Tsotsitaal, a language game of a much older generation, is a perfect example of the township lingual trajectory.

I don't know what can I do with myself—Thembi Seete.

The post-colony has bred an effervescent gathering: the dream-making machine that is my generation. We inhabit dreams more than we smoke marijuana, actually. We tease white people. We dress cool. We want. This is bold, and it is beautiful, yet, there is also the many-headed Medusa that is our sheep mentality. One does, we all do. Writing in our own languages is cool, again. The bubble-gum factory of the '90s is ebbing from the consciousness of the black poet.

We want Biko back! We want our languages back!

Wait.

I will confess, for the purposes of revolution, and tell you: I do not know where to find mine.

Enmeshed by the literature and the aspiration, I have no actual location as to where I could find it.

Help! I too want my mother's tongue back.

It appears to me now that to write is also to specify location since writing, in its various forms, can replace a dotted map—dismissing the laws of visual cartography and replacing them with the mental flag-posts of delirium. So it is noticeable (in my case at least) that language, the tongue,

madness, and writing, are not wholly separate; hence it is imperative then to imagine what it is to be a black (female) millennial who writes and happens to be African simultaneously.

For the African writer writing under the guise of the nation state, or even trying to write independently of the nation state, writing is not only tedious, it is also the aftermath of a completely personal perplexity and internal turmoil. It starts slowly, like the unravelling of a prophecy, and ends with the shattered amphora that is identity. And then comes the angst, the small jealousies concerning those who write better and those who do not, in and outside of the nation, yet always, something remains the same for all writers: writing involves a dramatic amount of sitting down and facing the blank screen, or even the naked page for the embryonic black poet.

This writing thing is the Borgesian labyrinthine forest where Narcissus (whose reflective faculties habitually rely on mirrors) walks blindfolded in the naive attempt to emulate—and brood continuously—on the inner self; self that is easily saturated with the vanity and self-consumption of the society at large. Playwright, dramatist, poet, I plead that you reminisce on the simplicity of the business of writing: it is deeply personal. Also bear in mind the ill-fated misfortunates of the writer: his/her lot commences when he/she assumes to be his/her audience's marionette.

Fellow Kafkanian, whether you even have an audience is highly questionable!

At all times, remember Papa Achebe and the Igbo proverb he recollects: *Where something stands, something else stands beside it.*

5.

I IMAGINE that Mother God stands silently before Mother Tongue; that her love is the deep valve of incoherence and the beginning of all that ends. Like a sentence. When I cannot breathe a word onto page, I will think of Mother Tongue as Mother God—of the tongue as a silent deity, and the

word as the blood red and not-so-clean God. In any language she is not clean. I imagine that Mother God is the one who demeans colour and remakes it in the face of all that we have scorned of her, of human expression. She is the one who hides behind the patriarchal notions of language, of writing, of our tongues, our minds, and then shames us for believing in them.

When I write I imagine the sacred womb that is my mother's and how it allowed me to rest in the placenta of her hurt, and then live to describe the experience in words that supposedly do not belong to me.

I write what I like—Steve Biko.

So tell Mother Tongue that Mother God has just salvaged her own salvation from the rancid spawn of a world with a million faces.

Tell her I know now, tongue to pen, that all the secrets rest under the tongue.

The Efficacy of Goodwill

Qamarun Nisa

I. A LOVE AFFAIR WITH TIME

TIME SWEEPS FROM Heaven, dissolves into bits of flourish; infinitesimal portions of eternity compounded, compressed into strands of air, breathable and fresh. On a cold Wednesday night, I am reborn, transformed from my heavenly self to a new and unfamiliar earthly being destined to live an unwanted life—at least for the time being. There is dew, a palatial splatter of reality on my forehead and when I am held, my name whispered, “Hala,” I stare in abject bewilderment, my senses scattered before me. I know, at that moment, that I will live without record, live as if I am not, live as if I need no memories, a mop stationed in my vast mind to clean up events, silent and inconsequential happenings. So that the ones that remain are those that matter most, those that change everything.

At the ages between three and six, I discover sin. Bint, my very first best friend by virtue of us being born on the same Wednesday, she by morning and me, by night, are experimented upon by boys resident in Area 0, where I lived. Area 0 is a long bungalow of semidetached one-bedroom apartments. I would live in one until I was five, almost six, sharing the space with my parents, three siblings, an aunt and an uncle.

These boys explored our bodies, between our legs and our empty chests. I can’t now remember if I enjoyed it but it led me to discover myself. I began to ask, to pollute my mind with questions my conscience invented. Who am I; why am I here? Questions whose answers I remain skeptical about.

I believed strongly I'd turn pregnant once I was ripe enough to have a period, an evidence of my sinful childhood spanning patches I can never ever forgive or forget.

II. THE BI-GI-NNG OF DREAD

I want to pluck out my heart, march on it a million times and then bury it back in its cage deep inside me. But I can't; my heart isn't mine to have. My heart is an investment; Providence has planted seeds in it: of compassion, humility, servitude, a strict and unbending obedience to conscience.

At eleven, sad, confused and hopeful, standing on a school assembly ground in a queue, I raise my right palm and notice, for the very first time, the letter H just beneath the third finger after the index finger. H for Hala? H for Heaven? H for Hell? It was here, in secondary school, that I shattered all the pieces of me and scattered them into a puzzle. A friend, who I tried hypnotizing, would tell me although the words weren't hers but her demon's that I have supernatural powers. Another unpossessed friend would say I was a course to be studied at university.

But the genesis of it all lies in two things: my unquenchable curiosity about the unknown and undying hope in death. My greatest desire has been many things, shifting from invisibility to motherhood. But underneath it all, now I must confess, lies a deeper craving for death, to become completely invisible. From age six to the present at twenty-two, I have craved death and still do. My mental, emotional and physical inability to associate, this overwhelming sense of self-hatred that's been eating me up for years must bury me. I had tried periodically at the ages between eleven and sixteen to take my life. My family, all except my father, had excused it as some supernatural manipulation. So one night whilst I sat in the dark living room, my back facing a pretentious 'holy man' who had come to pray for me, I believed in my heart that healing had found me. He asked that I strip before him so he could rub some ointment on me. I told myself, a man of God would never

cheat me, could never cheat me. An inherent shadow of shame called shyness, that has followed me since birth lurked its head and I failed to strip; had only raised my dress and felt his flesh hurriedly rubbing off mine in seconds. Thighs. Belly. Chest. And it was done. I washed between my legs with some black substance he had given me.

His verdict: a male supernatural being had taken possession of my mind, willing himself to drive me mad bit by bit. I told myself that explained my crazed curiosity over the Psyche, explained my obsession with depression and mania. I sunk myself into the pit of this new reality and lived in fear while fate sustained my transience into early adulthood.

The pitfalls came fast and lasted long. My relationship with others died an umpteenth time but Providence kept me alive. I was a loner, an introvert by choice, willing myself to only speak when spoken to.

III. I HAVE COME UNDONE

I see me digging fast, deep, uncontrollably. Tears—warm, straight and countless—stroll down my cheeks. The soil is brown, a thick red brown that forms a puddle around me. Before me in the fine ditch I have dug is a caricature of my being: plastic, glum and ugly. I cannot move; a pile of red-brown covers my legs, locking me in my own dirt.

My first major sin happens when I am twenty, four months from twenty-one, naïve, and an idiot in love. It is a moment that kills me with each remembrance of it. It pierces my heart and squeezes bile in it, and when this hole gets full which might be soon, very soon, I'll kick the bucket. To console my conscience, I begin to believe that it is a remedy as stated in the Qur'an: a fornicator shall marry a fornicatress. It is God's way of guiding me but I want to die; that is how bad this betrayal feels. This guidance has locked me in a cage and thrown it just a few steps from Hell's Gate.

Now, my days are fuelled with an unquenchable feeling of dread and my nights are a baptism of intense self-disgust, humiliating regrets and an undying desire for my Creator's forgiveness. I have always been obsessively prudish, had vowed to let only one man behold the most vulnerable part of me. This promise I try my utmost to keep despite the fornicator's incessant failings, despite his blunt laziness to make us stay happy together, despite the sin that lurked above us, a thick dark cloud withholding millions of raindrops inside it. I must not relent; God's forgiveness and my self-worth lie in our union.

A fateful day comes when I can take no more; I know I have been dragging myself to live. There's no passion left for life—has really never been. I board a rickshaw heading to the market, walk past people oblivious to my suffering, preoccupied with their versions of living. A big beautiful purple knife catches my eye. I buy it, my heart broken, still breaking with every breath. I consider marking the day, the month, the year but there's no need, I'll be dead soon and it wouldn't matter, at least not to me.

IV. THERE IS GOODWILL AT THE BEGINNING OF EVERY DARKNESS

I am placed on an imaginary pedestal; the world in her blind worship of me confines my being to a box. I am Hala and no one else, acting out my mind's translation of my chapter in fate's manual. This is a story about confused hope, about persistent yet restless faith, about the darkness that sits in the mind, that penetrates the soul and settles at its depth, eating it up bit by bit. It is more about self-condemnation than self-discovery, about a sad soul's quest for happiness, for self-worth.

It is a time in Ramadan of a certain year, my body swells with ill health, convulsing with bouts of malaria and typhoid. I haven't been this sick in years; it is an unbearable feeling that sticks to my forehead, a bulbous infection boiling with anger desperately seeking relief or death even. I haven't fasted for a day or two. This night, I lay awake sleepless, tired and expectant; it is Islamic

belief that illnesses are a means of atoning for our sins, Allah forgives us with each passing moment of suffering and pain the body endures.

My suffering is of a different kind. This night and a few times after, I shall be visited by the devil. Everyone else rests with the night, languishing in their versions of Wonderland. I watch the dark; it takes a dubious form and begins to speak. Who is Allah, it wants to know. I begin to think of the creations of my Lord, their flashy bright images appear one after the other before my mind's eye. Birds. Mountains. Rivers. Streams. The sky, in its beautiful shades. Man. And in the end, a brilliant, almost blinding light covers the scene in an attempt to show me Allah. It is impossible and with words I cannot now remember (probably foolish, stupid) the voice curses Allah, my Creator, my Cherisher, the One I have sworn to live and die for. I am overwhelmed with grief, with this evil that has clouded my innocent and unadulterated heart. I cry till my lungs run out of air and choke me. The voice persists.

Have I done wrong, is this my last day on earth? What happens in the morning, will it never come? It is yet again an Islamic belief that the devil, Shaytaan and his agents are locked up in Hell all through Ramadan. How could one have escaped Allah's watch to torment me with disbelief, with an aching blasphemy that's almost shredding my heart into tiny faithless pieces?

The devil visits me; I know he does. I have learnt, still learning how to completely ignore him and ease my fear. Once or maybe more times than I consciously know, he has taken the form of a gecko. In secondary school, he haunted me for a while, especially when I was twelve and thirteen. I used an iron bunk bed, and on this night I had lain down to sleep when he winked at me from the wall facing me. I jumped down and began to walk out of the hostel into the dark. I walked and walked until some friends and classmates trailed me and brought me back. It used to seem to me to be an act. The day I experienced my second catatonic state, I thought hard about myself; whether I

was playing some dirty trick on others or establishing some fantasy about how mysterious and supernatural I want to be. I had placed my head on my desk in the classroom and remained there, like that, mentally conscious yet immobile. I heard my name being called severally but never answered. Our Islamic Studies and Arabic teacher was immediately summoned; he put two of his fingers upon my forehead, flipped through a book and began to pray. I heard it all, recited the verses from the Qur'an in my mind before pushing his hand away from me, my eyes still closed. He held my grip and didn't let go. When I became calm, he closed his recitation and left, saying I'd be all right. And that no one should dare mention what had happened to me. But I had heard it all, I was present, controlled unarguably by a force beyond my control—the devil, depression, fate? And it was the second time. The first had been worse; I had been carried to the school clinic. Upon getting there I awoke, afraid of discovery.

By the age of fourteen I had a reasonable knowledge of depression and so the devil became it. Depression: my explanation for the excruciating sessions of peace-happiness and grief-death. The times for joy and bliss came, and I'd jump around with inexplicable agility bursting within me. And the end came, days that dragged on like a slow death, the tears pouring. The power to think reasonably ceased, suffocating with each passing dead day. On these days, truth fades and all I see is dread, pain and unanswered questions. And an overwhelming sense of ingratitude floats in the sea of my existence.

On this day, I am sixteen. Whenever I start to sink in the pool of depression, I complain of stomach ache. Is it the easiest thing to lie about, the commonest pain? I say it is stomach ache again, with some headache and fever. I am made to go visit the school clinic. I do and return to the classroom after being forced to swallow the drugs I don't need. I remain restless, the tears want to keep pouring down but too many people are around me. I have to escape. I ask to be excused from

the Math class and walk to the edge of the six classrooms, slowly and holding back tears, a fake smile rests on my lips till I get to the side and quickly sit. I hate myself; I have said this to myself more times than I have said I believe in Allah. I look up and stare at the half-completed fence. I should run away. That is probably the best, the only solution. The more I watch the fence, the more I know that I will not run away. What happens after I do? I'll destroy my life, living on the streets forever. Or meet bad people on the way who would unleash their evil upon me. Or worse, I'd be found. Or worst, my mother would be broken, eternally. My answers always lie in my fears, always.

I have an avid interest in goodness; my suffering is rooted in the worship of goodwill. I understand this fully when, a few days before I finally leave university, a close friend who had constantly proclaimed his undying, unconditional love for me rapes me. This act, I must confess now, was born out of my complacency, an abject pity and tolerance for his predicament, living with an unrequited love. I let him know that I love him, knowing full well the fornicator has stolen my heart forever. I play along, acting out his every indulgence, not considering the physicality of love until it shoots out its gory and sinful head. Although I complain that we'd be sinning, that I would be cheating on the fornicator, he does not listen. On the night of the rape, out of goodwill and abject pity and chronic foolishness—things that I curse myself for now—I agree to indulge him. To let him visit my body with his hands, this only, a horrible mistake that turns to an entire night of forbidden pleasure mixed with unbearable anguish and a bit of unrequited love. When the tears fall from my eyelids, I am assured of Allah's understanding and my innocence. I have been validated.

V. THE EFFICACY OF GOODWILL

My days are bathed with tears, fury, more tears and regrets. I am so angry with Allah. He should have known. He knows. I am good; I sieved all the goodness in my father's bloodline, all the goodness in my mother's when I was being formed. Now, Allah, my Cherisher has betrayed me;

failed me an umpteenth time, allowed things to happen contrary to my intentions. Out of goodness and innocence I am cursed to wallow in pain, feeling guilty for sins and mistakes committed.

These days my faith dangles, unsure where to belong, who to belong to: me, my Creator, or no one. I pray lazily, compulsorily because my heart still wants to stay. I cannot betray Allah, deep down I confirm this. The efficacy of my goodwill lies in my faithfulness to Allah, to life, to goodness. I do not know any better. I wake every morning, learning with each breath to live with my mistakes. Suicidal thoughts come and go but I know I can never do it, might never try again. I am doomed to live.

When I am told about truth by my Quranic teacher, after I had vented out my anger for and distrust in fate, faith and Providence (they might all be the same for all I care. I can use them as I like, just so I am able to avoid the mighty name Allah) I begin to see things differently. I come out of the myopic bubble that had consumed my existence and accept that, some people are allowed to suffer, sometimes born just for it, to teach others lessons. It is true, this is the efficacy of goodwill, the might of goodness; that you believe you suffer for a lesson, to further Providence's good works. Think about one who is born blind, crippled, or insane. Think about the many wrongs that have been done to you without reason. Lessons underlie each, always. There is no such thing as unfair in life—unfair is life. This is my consolation.

VI. AN ENDLESS TALE

Grace, Nana, Ni'ima and I are playing chef, we walk down to a neighbour's house and gather tiny poisonous fruits dangling on the flower trees; some are dark green, some less green with yellowish tinges and the rest orange bubbles. We grind them on gravel floors, toxic fluids soil our hands, the tiny pounding stones, causing a near permanent scar to rest on the hard floor. Ni'ima and I let the

other two keep pounding while we stack up piles of sand. Rice and stew is ready. This will, for a while, be our best expression of adult cooking.

“It’s going to rain.” Someone, who I can’t now remember, tells us. We jump up and begin to run. The sky is swollen with tears, and we hear it cry a distance away. The tears are running at the speed of light, faster than our slim legs. Our homes sit beside the other with mine in the middle. Grace gets home first, then the two sisters, Nana and Ni’ima. I am last and just as I am halfway home, the sky begins to bathe me with its tears, showering me with an intense sense of awareness. Whether it’s of myself or Allah, I cannot tell. At that moment I fall in love with rain, I am nine years old. Days later I’d be struggling with a man years older than I am, a neighbour, the first male I ever get close to. I’d be struggling to escape his drunken yet firm grip even as he moved on top of me, even as I heard him moan. But he is too drunk to find an entry between my legs, and after that night I convince myself to hate men.

If you are possessed, your life becomes about finding healing. Possession is of a higher nature, a science that filters itself of any suspicion. Possession, in its ideal sense, is inhabiting a body for a time; unauthorized possession is what is demonic. I have suffered both, ideal and unauthorized, at several points in my twenty-two years of living on earth. I know that this will continue for as long as I live. This only makes me human, occasionally alters my perception of reality but I’ll manage. If the prophecy, of me going mad which I have abandoned for years now, comes true then it might just stem from being possessed by my inability to contain reality.

I am twenty-one when I go, against my mother’s wish, for a second exorcism. Now, at this point, I am convinced that my ultimate healing has been unearthed and I would finally find myself, find a satisfying direction. I am instructed to sit before two men; one places his hand on my forehead and recites from the Qur’an while the other holds my hands and watches. We are in a large

room half of which is almost empty, there is a man by the door who is mixing concoctions to be used for spiritual deliverance. I stare at him occasionally and at some point some persons come at separate times to get some mixtures from him.

This exorcism is not as I had expected; I remain calm and recite the verses the exorcist reads from the Holy Book in my mind knowing it is not me reciting but some being from within me, my eyes are closed and sometimes it feels like my soul is trying to get out of my body. I tell myself this feeling is true, that the demon(s) is/are leaving, finally. I almost convulse from the smoke I am made to inhale. My eyes stare at the little oval burner, the smoke swirling around in rolls, up into my diaphragm causing me to choke. Aside this, I physically do not react but I feel strongly that an inward battle is being fought.

My exorcist ends the recitation, he has read out specific portions from the Holy Book; those designated to wriggle, burn and evict the demons. I am cleansed of evil, almost a new-born, set to go back out into the world and rediscover my being.

This Hell Not Mine: On Moving from Nigeria to America

Kenechi Uzor

THE THING WITH hell is that often it is not. When its fumes are your air and its flames the light you see by, hell is the existence; your everything that is and could be. You become such a part of the inferno that you no longer see it, feel it—it becomes subliminal. In this hell one boils, like a toad in cauldron, oblivious to the end. Except if the have-beens get to you. They are the escaped chinks of light who have been out to other realms, have seen better things, better promises, but now are back with tall tales of other hells closer to heaven, sowing questions. Misery results from listening to them.

We were the shackled miserables in Plato's cave. Because there was no difference to know, we abided our chains and shadows, confident and moored in our illusions. With the have-beens came knowledge and possibilities of doubt, and pain. And as our existence became branded, our air became fumes and our light scorching flames.

Down there and farther back in the Nigerian hell, the seeds the have-beens planted did what seeds do and on their tendrils I clung till they grew me out of our hell and into the searing, naked light that is America. And the light burned through me in waves of depression: How could we not have known that our hell had wheels too and could have been moved up the rail toward heaven?

America, at first, did not look like hell. Its heat was subtle and creeping and polite with smiley pretensions, and its light a dazzling distraction, inoculating all to an indifference toward demise. But it was outside and ahead of Nigeria, which is what heaven always is to the inhabitants of lower hells.

I lived in Lagos, a haven of have-beens and once-weres, of pockets of light that give claws to darkness and red eyes to gloom. To live in Lagos is to want, forever grasping, groping for opportunities that blink away; a city of near-misses that keep you trying, reaching, harpooned by hope. Lagos is a tease. Hope is its curse. The aroma of food to the famished who cannot feed

I had enough. I and others. We had enough.

So we sought escape, convinced that to leave was to live. We fled for dry eyes, for a sigh, for firm handshakes and raised heads, for two closed eyelids, we fled. For our babies and grannies. For light. We fled for those we left behind. In search of a better country whose builder and maker was God. Millions now we are, half dead: trekking through the desert, on foot through Morocco, Libya, on congested floats across the straits of Gibraltar to Spain, Italy, to jails and through refugee camps.

And all for this?

I'd never needed pills to pull the shade, nor lacked excuses to want to live. I had no doctor in Nigeria. My doctor in America said many informed things. Nice dude. But I wished my money back. Adults with responsibilities seldom wake up at dawn adorned with joy. I am fine. I guess I am fine.

But America kicked harder with those questions that open archways to depression: meaning of life; now what and what next; thoughts of time missing by; of luck and determinism; the pointlessness of all things; doomsday. What's wrong with suicide? We wrote on this and forgot in

philosophy classes at the University of Benin. At first, I thought it was a change-of-scene syndrome that would pass. Then I was sure it was a depression caused by the twilight of America clashing against my home country. The offending news bites I thought would be easy to nix: mute, block, unfollow, unsubscribe.

The obscenity of humanity is that we often seek heaven to find hell.

It is impossible to avoid the flames of America. In this new hell were more unique pains than Nigerian demons could ever conjure. In America, apocalypse ticked minutes away. Here, suicide, homicide, and wrong sides blindside millions. Misery climbed out the news to hug you close: My friend's nine-year-old, normal kid, shot himself and left a note; one minute we were playing Call of Duty: Black Ops, the next minute the police were hefting Jared to jail life; this week at a wedding, a month after the honeymoon, the groom's got cancer—terminal, only twenty-one years old.

These tragedies used to happen to some other people in distant places twice removed. Drugs, the busts and the overdoses, were reserved for screens and pages. Everyone in America seemed to have a diagnosis and a prescription. Everyone was in debt. And then cancer, of race, of politics, of offenses. And all these little kids at home in hospitals, suffering ailments with names long as paragraphs. In the hell I just left, lives thrive beneath a dollar; here, one hundred dollars is a sentence, with hard labor.

There may be freedom in America but it is not for me. In Nigeria I could do anything, drive wherever; here, there are eyes on my shoulder ready to sue, to pull me over; there are offenses on every corner waiting to be incensed, illegalities known and ridiculous, triggers ready to be tripped, pulled with no warning. Should there be this many consequences to freedom? I miss Nigeria, the land of the free and lawless, where the police are your friend and you can hand them beers and bribes as you drive by with no papers. You might be disturbing the peace if you laugh too loud in

America; you might be in trouble if you keep too straight a face. America is a tightrope and even the best slip sometimes. Every day I feel like a boy again, in the presence of a heavy-handed parent with good intentions. How would I offend today? These are my chains in this land of the free.

I flew into America on the wings of literary promise. I was chasing literary heights that all the lights said were closer this way. But fantasy is a genre of fiction, and wands are hard to come by in any hell. I think now, daily, of what death said to the drowning girl: “You drown in three feet or in six, matters not to me.”

But would they listen, those beer-clad young writers in Lagos’s Freedom Park, when we tell them that where the grass is sparse means more could grow? Would they believe that the *New Yorker*, *Paris Review*, *Best American Shorts* that we burn to have in Lagos, lie here in the library, issue after issue, year after year, unopened, unread? That the American writers we worship, we alone worship? Would they believe, those dear unschooled, unpublished, and uninitiated writers in Lagos, that their level of literary discourse and engagement is on par with grad and postgrad literature degree holders in America? They would not. I did not. What does it mean that I, yet alive, now speak the words of long-dead Dambudzo Marechera? “I was now actually on the soil where all these writers I had been studying had lived and died, and the reality was so disappointing.”

In this new hell exists white denizens and black spirits, brown souls and unknown bodies, and trans and cis and more. All suffering from the other. These were not brands where I came from, but now here I am, suffering the consequences. Now that I am black, I have found that there are different shades of this hue, some to honor and others to dishonor.

To the well-adjusted whites in this hell, my accent means I am the other kind of black, the perhaps safe, exotic Mandingo warrior raised on a tree but good in bed and fluent in lionese. I am a closer breed to nature, can understand thunder and divine rain. I am the aww, and sometimes the

cool. I am the vast arid plains, the grass. I am the Serengeti. They will cry for me and storm Twitter and the school senate on my behalf. All out of pity informed by the likes of CNN and encouraged by my kinsmen who come here spewing yarns of being former child soldiers, sex slaves, of being gay and hunted by an entire village. You cannot pour sand in the garri of your own kinsmen because their lies are almost true, if not to them, to some back in the motherland. But it hurts to be pitied and sorrowed over by people, some of whom are no better in health, wealth, and mind, on account of the single story.

In Nigeria are many who believe that white people are constructed of missionary parts and can be trusted to be kindly and benevolent. And there are premises for their conclusions—J. D. O’Connell, my secondary school principal, was turbaned last week for ‘fifty years of meritorious service as principal’. In all that time, since 1967, O’Connell must have left Minna four or five times to visit his country Ireland. Black missionaries saving white worlds are not well known.

Every African visitor or immigrant knows of that white family who would seek your adoption and treat you like their own. This magnanimity they also extend to stray dogs and cats and iguanas. But an African with tales of woe stands a better chance of getting a room in the basement.

There are no reasons left to be a proud Nigerian, but still it is hard to suffer the indignity of pity. Especially as an artist. Art revels in its appreciation and acknowledgment, but there’s nothing so diminishing as validation tainted or expressed from a place of pity. The gushing emails from some of your professors, shocked and awed by the quality of your output, soon begin to grate because you suspect you are being viewed through the lens of pity, appraised with considerations as an “other.” There is such a thing as excellence despite being African. It is not a good thing. To the usual uncertainty and self-doubt of most creatives comes this new one: Are you a good writer because you are, or are you a good writer for an African? These depressives turn malignant in America.

In the American hell are many burdens new and unique to the fresh Nigerian. As a Nigerian in a place like Utah, I am the voice of the underworld. My opinion must be heard in every class, sought in every discourse, because ideas from the underworld are necessary for robust thoughts, for balance, for the edification of the white mind. It is very easy to succumb under the weight and tell people what they want to hear.

This is where I confess that I too have disgraced the ancestors by telling some unpalatable truths of Nigeria and Africa. For this, I die daily, reviving somewhat only to enjoy the shock and trauma that these African tales extract from my white listeners. I have told about the fourteen-year jail term for homosexuality in Nigeria. I have retold the testimony of Julius who claimed to have been a child soldier in a Nigerian city with no war. These tales move America.

The legend is that one of every four black people on earth is a Nigerian. The ship of the black race, therefore, cannot sail, the flag of black pride cannot fly, without Nigeria. Hundreds of blacks returned to their roots, to Africa, to Nigeria during the black pride movement of the '70s. They could not stay. The ship was sinking with Nigeria at the helm. "I am not happy with Nigeria," said Nelson Mandela, "black people of the world need Nigeria to be great as a source of pride and confidence." This sentiment is still shared in the black world, especially these days when no good news is Nigerian. I am burdened then, with the guilt of much that is wrong with the black race.

In conversations with African American friends I try to defend, to explain Nigeria away, to argue that, no, we are not a scourge to black pride. I sound sillier each time. And each night after these conversations, after another display of shame from my home country, I weep for the race, I mourn for the era when the black pride would be more of fact than blind faith. I know my country is an idiot, but I do not know what excuse other black nations have. Were I an African American, I too would be resentful of African nations.

I have yet to learn the dangers of the American inferno. How do I learn to feel black? How do I not treat Black Lives Matter like All Lives Matter? When the American blacks rage about their black experience, do I have any rights to speak? How do I remember to react when a white person uses the n-word in my presence? When is a white person just doing their job, or having a bad day, or just being drunk and not being racist? When are whites just being kind? How do I know that my failures and denials had nothing to do with my skin color? Would I need pills to shoulder the knowledge of these answers? The other blacks, the African Americans that have been here longer, they know the rules and see the threats coming. They have extra oil in their lamps. I am not angry enough to fight this war I just woke up in; I may yet embrace the enemy as a friend.

So I am sitting on a long thing—on the colored fence dividing America—buffeted upright by the shots from both sides, and I cannot fall to any side.

This was not the dream.

Oh, that life would be lighter. My nights would be shorter and my mornings would come adorned with joy. I long for the recent old days when there was no excuse to wake up and no reason to fret about it. Bring back the days when suicide was inconceivable and as distant from thoughts as the instances of its occurrence. But I see now that I am still harpooned by the curse of hope. And I do not want its pain.

This is where we've come, the legion that escaped one hell for another. This is where I've come, to the America of lights and dreams. And if I am better off I cannot tell.

Coffee and Guinness

Alithnayn Abdulkareem

CHET IS COMMONLY mistaken by a large number of Nigerians who meet him as Thor. He's not as large as Chris Hemsworth's onscreen representation but he has long beautiful blonde hair he cuts at will, which grows back almost as quickly. He has blue eyes and a stubble that makes me want to sit on his face, something I discovered I enjoyed doing at twenty-one to Mohammed of lush beard and filmy eyelashes. There's something about the way hair that missed the shaving stick tickles one's bones that bend into a bracket and protect your pussy. Chet is also closer to my parents' age. I find myself often seeking his counsel and perspective.

This time it is in form of furious letters typed from my phone via WhatsApp, my angst dialled up to match the temperature of the room I type from. Whenever the power goes out—a regular occurrence—the air balls into a size small and spreads itself over the dusty netting on the window where it promptly whooshes out. Nothing ever comes back in. The air in my small street in Victoria Island swooshes under the ankles of children and cars, running till it reaches the BQ behind my window. It splats against the white wall of the BQ and spends all its time finding a place to move. It cannot bend or find its way around to my dusty window. In three minutes, my skin leaks out water and toxins. My guardian arrives from work and opens my door to say hello. All her eyes register is a naked young girl on the bed with eyes on a phone and fingers moving speedily. Petit brown skin with unreadable brown eyes.

“Good evening ma,” I say.

Selves: An Afro Anthology of Creative Nonfiction

“Are you travelling?” She gestures at the strewn clothes around the open box.

“Yes ma. Abuja to see the family.”

“Okay. My regards to them when you leave.”

“Thanks ma. I’ll drop by your room before then.”

She shuts the door and I return my attention to my chat with Chet.

Me at 12:13 PM:

Hey Chet.

I’ve been summoned home by my parents.

Mum hasn’t spoken to me in days.

Dad called to scold me and says she’s been crying since the news.

He told me to fly home this weekend for a talk.

She has apparently been crying since yesterday, can you believe that? She won’t even call.

I wish I could just run from this country.

Chet replies at 2:01 PM:

Ndo.

I’m sorry you have to live with this.

So what can you do?

I’m really sorry.

Me at 2:04 PM:

They say they are afraid my mum will develop BP.

Chet at 2:04 PM:

Hahaha. BP as a condition doesn't just develop like that.

They are saying it because they want to emotionally push you into changing your lifestyle.

A lifestyle which could be storyboarded as clichéd millennial entitlement. A sexually frank unicorn with shiny skin. Private schooling all the way, an attention span the length of short YouTube videos. Degrees in Communications and Politics & Culture. Bilingual approaching multilingual, and breasts that defy the logic of gravity versus size. Symmetry in my face so I can get away with wearing little to no makeup. Come-hither eyes. I make requests and watch men play the part of fools in their enthusiasm to understand my intrigue. I know all these things because of all the constant reminders. Society constantly validates the visible and ignores the insidious flaws.

LIVING AWAY from everyday reminders that one should pray more, worship more and stay indoors more, I have finally been summoned to explain myself due to neighbourhood gossip that read like a tabloid release:

The 'Free Spirit' has been summoned to report to the country's capital for a family meeting. The meeting, as drafted in a press release by her mother, will cover issues of her presupposed Lagos lifestyle. According to sources near her VI residence, 'free spirit' has been seen frequently keeping late nights with an assortment of men. She has also been seen on multiple occasions clad in outfits ranging from scandalous to unworthy of her Islamic upbringing. Stay tuned for details.

I accept that I will go to Abuja and confront the misunderstandings by nodding and staying silent, suppressing the miscommunication and rage and showing anger symptoms only via a vibrating left hand. While I practice silence, my mother has flexed her muscles and refused to call me. Having grown up to the sounds of her voice taking a backseat to everyone, her decades of silence, playing the respectful dutiful wife and mother who condemned actions with a low voice, I fear being out logic-ed, out prayed and smoked out with the light shining on all my flaws.

Even from this far away, I feel my mother's withdrawal of affection the way a cold leaves the body. There one night, gone the next morning. In all the years of petty fights and silent treatments, even those few times I had to sleep at the neighbour's house when she would not let me in the house, she always called to scold, to cry. The years have even fine-tuned the conversations into an orchestra performance. Sheet music goes:

Ring ring. I pick and exhale.

"Mummy!"

"Bawo ni."

Strings come into play, lines of indecipherable affection hidden between "hums" and "ahems" and "ehens."

And then rapid fire question and answer, akin to two sticks on a side drum.

"Did you fast today?"

"Yes."

"I hope school and work is fine?"

“Yes.”

“I hope you are praying?”

“Yes.”

“Are you dressing well? Just because we can’t see you—”

“I am.”

“Shey o kin jade lale sha?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. How is daddy?”

“He’s fine o. How will you know when you never call us? This bad habit of yours, this nonchalance—”

“Mum I have to go. I love you.”

I press the end call button with the same force as a bass drum’s last note. The stream of lies stacks like smoke in my chest. Then I look for the closest source of air, mostly my window, and release the static inside me to the leaves. It’s a consuming process, these masks of goodness children are expected to don their whole lives. To practice how to lace their lies with love and smiles.

I had a cousin, Ayoola, who with her mother lived three streets away from us. Once, her mother travelled and I was summoned to sleep over and keep her company. We spent the early evening watching *Gossip Girl* and preparing dinner to place in the oven. Hours later, we looked out the kitchen window to a street that had stopped making noise, and strolled out, taking the back

entrance and walking on tiptoes for five minutes, to see a friend of Ayoola's who lived further down the street. I remember the streetlight cast its orange glow on our hunched shadows as we bent our heads and pulled our scarves further over our heads. Ayoola's friend fed us chips and beers which I placed in a corner next to the chair I sat on the entire night. I watched people banter and share laughs while training my eyes and lips for the alternative version of our night, the one we would recount the next day when her mum asked "So how was yesterday? What did you guys do?"

It's a fascinating diplomacy. One I denied for years, cloaking myself in prime righteousness. I rallied against these lies. Once I pleaded with Ayoola to teach me the confidence she used to lie and appease her mother. It toyed with my logic of prime honesty.

"It's so stupid. Why should I lie to my mum if I want to go out?"

"Because she would never let you, otherwise." Ayoola smiled

"But you realize that sometimes they know we are lying."

"Babe, they want you to lie to them. Nigerian parents are begging to be lied to by their children. They can't handle anything else."

I mull that line in my head a lot. Every time I have slipped into short shorts and wore bright red hair or gotten auburn wool twists, Ayoola's declaration has hung itself on the top of my spine and flattened itself all over my back. I can't shake off my own instincts that tell me lying is such a contrivance. Ayoola's logic acts like a painkiller to my guilt.

Like the night with Lerato. A Wednesday, when a harmless meet-up at The Palms turned into vodka-based cocktails at Bottles and dancing with the two men we picked up. Lerato stopped

in the middle of dancing, plopped on the chair beside me and leaned to whisper, “I think we should hook up.”

I said okay and we told the nice guys who had been paying for our drinks goodnight.

When we got to her apartment Lerato and I were too drunk, too wet in our insides to make it upstairs to her room. I had my tongue on her nipples briefly, then fingers took over before I used my teeth to shift her damp panties and let my tongue touch her pussy. It tasted like salt and Guinness. I hadn’t prayed that day.

The thought struck me as it interspersed with the sounds of the air conditioner and the soft sounds from her mouth. It grew hands that dug inside my head, causing me to itch briefly. I stopped kissing Lerato. In the dark, I flexed my fingers looking for them. I saw only shadows on the walls. My spine itched for a minute more then I let my hands find themselves on Lerato’s body, till two fingers were inside her, slippery and soft. I don’t know when either of us fell asleep. The last thing I remembered was my mother. If she found out what would she do?

Twenty-three years into being her daughter, silence is the answer I was looking for.

A year before I could have speculated any answer. I assumed outrage, followed by faux tears. Like the day she was reported to, by another source in my small neighbourhood, that her firstborn child left the house wearing pink short shorts. Mother recounted the story to me while she cried. I always remember it; it was the first time her voice broke. It turned into a husky wail as if my actions had seized the happiness right from her vocal cords.

It was also the first time I encountered Muslim guilt. I found it in the face of my mother.

People always say a good way to gauge your future is to look at your mother. I always wanted to, but I have never asked if mothers look into their daughters and see their past. Did she bend for her father as she bends for my father? Did she stay out late and practice lies to recount when she got home? And did Grandma ask the same questions she does, her cataract-affected blue eyes peering over gold Ankara. If mother looks at me, at our matching side profiles, at the right eye that crinkles more than the left when we laugh, and at our straight noses and crooked chins, does she relate? More than once she has said, “I don’t know where you came from, I never gave my own mother this much wahala, and God forbid I have a crazy child, I forbid it.”

Muslim guilt wakes up at 5:30 AM and struggles to get the sleep that pins your shoulders to the bed. Muslim guilt shakes sleep to pray two rakha first and another two after you have worn your exercise clothes.

Muslim guilt is the mucus-like sensation you feel when 30 minutes running and one hour dancing still feels exponentially faster than the fifteen minutes it takes you to combine Zuh, Asr and Maghrib on the days you get home by 7 PM. Muslim guilt is trying to find that answer and being silenced by the sensation that your shame will only bring derision and not help.

Muslim guilt wears a scarf out of the house and takes it off inside the taxi. It looks like a twenty-three-year-old millennial who hides her white flared skirt under a large pashmina and ignores the widening of men’s eyes when she takes her top off to reveal an orange bikini with the classic accessories of hard nipples.

Muslim guilt is at Murtala Muhammed airport where I have ordered a Guinness as I wait for my flight to Abuja to be announced. They announce it and I request my stout to go. The server pours it in a coffee cup. Before boarding, I look at my reflection in the glass doors: laptop under

arm and rucksack across shoulders in my long sleeved black t-shirt and jeans, hair tied in a large scarf, drinking beer in a coffee cup.

Mother still hasn't called to ask about my arrival time or if I want to get picked up. I don't know what I will face in Abuja; whose eyes will carry blame, whose eyes will reveal shame and if word will break any new grounds or reaffirm old standards.

All I have is guilt and a mild buzz. I swig the rest of my drink, bin my cup and submit my passport.

Maybe someday mother will read this, and we can have the long overdue conversation.

Violent Punctuations

Hauwa Shaffii Nuhu

THE EARLIEST LESSON you learnt in this transit of yours called life is that there is the grief that astounds, the one whose full effect hits in tiny but devastating measures in undefined moments (and this is the type we carry for the rest of our lives like a hidden terminal illness). And there is the type we get over with time.

The grief that Ma's death evoked carried the second form. When your younger sister called you that day after class to say that she had died, you were stunned into silence; a momentary choked silence, holding your phone to your ear long after the call had ended. You did not cry then in school even as you leaned on a close wall, crushed and internally distorted. You carried the shock and pain in your throat like a trapped scream and went home, feeling bloated with things unnamed, pondering the fragility and unfairness of life. Asking yourself, is this some dream? How can she die? Why would someone so widely and deeply loved die? But then again, why not?

The reality of her death would come to you during the subsequent weeks in the most awkward moments. During a test in class, as you walked the streets of Sabon Gari market with your friend; as you took a bath, or when you saw a bowl of Amala with colourful soups on Facebook. Amala was her favourite meal.

Most families have that one aunt or female relative who is so motherly, so central, that everyone refers to her by the name her children referred to her as. Ma was that person for your family.

Back in your house, far from home which was about seven hours away, you had recollected memories of holidays spent in Ma's house with her kids. Ma with the smile so soft it reminded you of a retreating moon. Ma with the pierced nose. Ma with the plenty stories that surfaced only when she returned from the market. She loved to cook Amala, she could cook a large quantity of it without a single tiny lump. Whenever she spoke Hausa, it was with the right accent. When she opted to speak Yoruba, it was with the right accent. And when she decided it was Nupe she wanted to speak, it would also be with the right accent.

You had spoken to your father over the phone the previous day and he had said he was with her in the hospital as she was ill. You had asked to speak with her but were told she was asleep; you had spoken with her first daughter who was present instead, praying for her mom's recovery before hanging up, and having no doubt that it'd be answered. Your father would tell you later that she had not been asleep spent the whole day answering calls from well-wishers and he thought it was beginning to tire her. And you would wish you had heard her voice one last time.

You made to call her daughters but what do you say to a person who had just lost their mother when the pain would still be trapped in disbelief like a needle in a wound? What words do you offer? Her children were the liveliest and funniest people you knew. They knew what family was. You were assailed by memories of weekends spent with them. They are way older than you but you all blend so well. You remember one time when they had come to visit. You were still in secondary school and there was this girl who was giving you a tough time in school. You had told them about the girl and they had wrestled her phone number from your phone and called her, giving

her a stern warning to stay away from you. The girl never disturbed you again; she would shrink into herself at your sight.

You called your father instead. He did not answer the call. You tried imagining what his heart looked like at that time. If grief had a colour and it was red, his heart would be a dense flaming red.

You called your elder sister who told you that she and your mom and younger sister were on their way to the house of the deceased. Your dad, your elder sister told you, was in a different vehicle on his way to the hospital, where he and others would transport the corpse back home. The corpse. How did one go from Ma to ‘the corpse’ in such a short time? How? How more treacherous could life be?

John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars* is the great love of your life and every sentence of that book is perfect in your eyes. However, there is a part, a description that seemed odd to you. Hazel Grace had described her conversation with Gus's parents after his death as a feeling that resembled “stabbing and being stabbed.” But when later that day your mom had you speak with one of Ma's daughters, as you struggled to not cry while you offered your condolences, and as she struggled too to not cry while she sighed and called your name hopelessly, that part of the book became clearer to you and you knew then that Hazel Grace knew exactly what she was saying.

When your younger sister came to visit you in school for a few days a month later, she would tell you in detail how the whole procession went, and you would cry for the first time since Ma died. You would ask how her daughters held up during that terrible time, and she would say, “They are so strong. But at first, they could not face her corpse. None of them could undo her braids. It was someone else who did it. But they washed her body, performed the ghushl bath on it

and then prepared it for burial. It was only when the corpse was lifted up and was about to be taken away to the burial ground that they broke down and cried like there was no tomorrow.”

And you would hold your head in two trembling hands and will your heart to be still. You would ask the dreaded question, the hardest question, the one whose answer you knew would be devastating.

“How is Ba holding up?” Ba was her husband and theirs was one beautiful journey.

“Hmnn. Ba said she was still breathing, that they should not cover her like that. He wouldn't let anyone touch her but the doctors had to take him away. He fought the doctors, and you know he's blind. It was only then that Daddy began to cry. Daddy cried so much. So much.”

And it was at this point that the first tears would come for you.

“When they brought him home before the corpse came home, he performed ablution and went to his room and began to pray. So that nobody could talk to him. He prayed for so so long and his presence was needed badly, he had to say goodbye to her as is customary, but he wouldn't stop his praying. When he was finally interrupted, he said to be left alone as he was talking with his wife, and couldn't they see her?”

THE SEMESTER had shuddered to an end and you were home. Sitting with everyone in the sitting room, you offered your condolences to your parents again. Your father sighed heavily and turned his head away. Your mother shook her head and sighed too.

“Ba is in a mess. A total mess. He stands in the sun for hours and speaks to no one,” your father said. He told you too that Ba tells everyone who cares to listen that Ma has not died: she had

simply gone off to the new house he has built. And that he would be joining her soon. Your father said when Ba stands in the sun, he would refuse to leave. He would say he was waiting for ‘them’ to come take him. Sometimes he wept and asked whoever was close at hand to take him ‘there’. “I no longer visit often. I have never seen him like that and not wept. It takes days for me to normalize after each visit,” your father said.

“But he needs you now more than ever,” you said.

“Hauwa, you do not understand,” your father countered in a tone that assured you that truly you did not.

You nodded.

“It is hard to talk about this. But I need to tell you so you are not taken unawares when you get there,” he said.

You nodded again. Your heart felt like it was flailing and crashing from a storey building—only that it would never quite land.

The following morning, you went with your father and uncle to Rahmatu’s house. Rahmatu is Ma’s second daughter; she is married and has a child. She had had an accident. Her right eye was swollen and bloodshot. She had bandage plastered across her right shoulder, extending around her neck. You were not prepared for this sight. You sat on the side of the bed, shakily. You asked how she was doing; your father asked what drugs she had been taking and if the swell on her cheek was affecting her teeth.

Her teeth don't hurt, she said, but her lips did. Yes, she was her taking drugs and no, she wasn't feeling better. The pain intensified every day. You told her you were sorry, and she would be fine.

When enough silence had passed, and it was clear that the lump in your throat had no intention to leave, you said in a very low tone,

“I am sorry Ma died.”

She looked away and nodded. This was nothing like the usual conversations you had. You likened Ma's death to a violent punctuation put wrongly in a sentence, so that even though the words remained, their individual and collective meanings did not. Because you were uncomfortable, because you did not have the right to cry when she herself had managed not to, despite the weight of the situation, you told her you had to go. You will return later, you said. She nodded and lay back in bed.

Your father and uncle stood up and you all left. Outside, the gate opened into Rukayya.

“Auntie Rukayya!” You both exchanged hugs. It was easier to offer condolences to this daughter because she was smiling, and had the ability to make jokes out of grave situations. You told her you are sorry Ma died. Still smiling, she shrugged.

“What are you doing with such a big bag?” your uncle asked her. The bag wasn't so big and it was clear that she had come to stay with her ill sister, but he asked anyway in a teasing manner. They have always gotten along very well.

She gave him an amusing look and said, “I am selling clothes ne.”

Everyone laughed.

“We'll come back later since you're here. Where's Auntie Aisha?” you asked, hoping she'd be here later too. Perhaps a whiff of the good days before Ma died could be invoked.

“She traveled to Bida. She'd be coming back today, though,” she said.

You said your goodbyes and hugged her, and left.

YOU DID not go back later as you said you would. But the next day, your mother drove you and your uncle to Ba's place. You all sat in the car for a few seconds, pretending to fumble with the doors, just to delay your going inside the house. Eventually, everyone alighted. On getting inside, you felt the quietness of the house rest heavy on your chest. Ma's last child, Abbah is drawing water from the well. He turned to you and his face opened into a smile.

“Auntie Hauwa,” he called.

“Abbah, how are you?”

Your mother and uncle asked the same question. He said he was fine. You did not say anything else. Later, when your uncle asked him about school, he said he had not resumed yet. He had to stay home and help Ba around the house, especially as he can't see.

“Won't you offer him your condolences?” your mother whispered.

You did as she asked and Abbah thanked you.

“Where is Ba?” You asked.

“He is in the bathroom.”

You all sat and waited for him. About twenty minutes later, he emerged. When he was seated, you knelt in front of him and greeted. You waited for him to extend his hand, searching for your head, so you could move in the appropriate direction. He did not. You were wondering how Ba who talked and gesticulated with so much vigour, who called you his wife and asked about your grades constantly, who somehow found humour in everything could be reduced to such sorry state. How?

A favourite line comes to mind here: “Life changes fast. Life changes in the instant. In the ordinary instant. You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends,” Joan Didion notes in her memoir, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, in the aftermath of her husband’s death.

“Kuluwa,” Ba called out. It is his special name for you and hearing him say it gladdened your heart so much you wanted to cry. Your own name had never given you so much joy before.

Your uncle spoke too. Ba called his name on recognizing the voice.

“You guys are back from school then,” Ba noted in English.

“Yes,” you said.

He was staring into space. He did not say anything else. Long minutes passed.

“The semester has ended?” he asked.

“Yes,” you said.

“I wish you all the best.” He was still speaking in English. More silent minutes passed. Your mother stood up and you all followed suit. You told Ba you were leaving. He thanked you.

Outside, your mother pointed to a spot, told you it was Ba's favourite when he chose to stand in the sun. You stared far beyond the hills absentmindedly, an image of a punctuation put wrongly in the midst of delicate words refusing to leave your mind.

The War Within

Kelvin Alaneme

25TH DECEMBER, 2011. A church in Madalla, a city in Niger state, was bombed, killing over forty persons. A family I knew was wiped out: father, mother, two beautiful daughters. I was shocked and unhappy for days.

14th April 2014. Two bombs exploded at the crowded Nyanya bus park, leaving over seventy people dead and more than two hundred wounded. Everyone knew who was responsible. As I sat down at my consulting table, waiting for the nurse to call in the patients, I felt empty and sad again.

Hours later. I called a senior colleague doing his housemanship at National Hospital, Abuja, to inquire of his safety. He sounded distraught. I had ended the call deeply worried. The group, like a stubborn cancerous tumour, had grown.

“LIKITA SAANU!” Abubakar's greetings interrupted my thoughts as he entered the consulting room with his wife. ‘Likita’ was the Hausa word for ‘doctor’.

I smiled and motioned them to sit. Abubakar was tall and dark with sharp facial features. He spoke fluent English and was a graduate of Bayero University, Kano. He taught Geography at a Government Secondary School in nearby Kuduru. He was an amiable fellow, jovial and soft-spoken. He usually dropped by the hospital after the close of work just to chat.

“Likita, I came to register my wife for antenatal care,” he said, smiling.

I attempted an almost absentminded tease with Abubakar about his wife's pregnancy, calling him ‘sharp shooter’ and proceeded to ask his wife some questions while writing in her folder. She answered freely with an occasional laughter.

“Did you hear of the bombing in Nyanya?” Abubakar asked as they stood up to leave.

I nodded, letting out a sigh.

THAT EVENING. I drove to GSS Kuduru to see Abubakar and his wife. I met him at the school gate and we entered the compound, heading towards the Staff Quarters. Their house was a one-bedroom flat, with a large living room. Their wedding pictures hung on the wall and just above the television, a picture frame with letters in Arabic. A shelf filled with books was at a corner of the room. I scanned through the volumes.

Our conversation was long and exciting. We had a robust discussion on a plethora of topics: religion and extremism, the economy, education and the rise of social media. We agreed that every religion had extremists, the few who would twist sacred Scriptures to suit their personal agenda.

Two days later. News broke that the insurgents had kidnapped two hundred and seventy-six school girls in Chibok, a town in Borno State. About six weeks earlier, the insurgents had gone into Federal Government College, Buni-Yadi and slaughtered over fifty young boys in their sleep. The female students were said to have been sent home to 'go and marry'. The cancer had metastasized.

In June that year. The horror reached a crescendo. Multiple suicide bombs exploded in Kano, killing over two hundred persons. I felt goose bumps as I watched their charred remains on

the news, bare skulls and arms lifted up as if in surrender to an inescapable fate. Bodies burnt beyond recognition.

1ST OCTOBER, 2014. I left Abuja to take up a Residency position at Imo State University Teaching Hospital, Orlu. The Independence Day celebrations were on as I drove off, past the mountainous terrain that flanked the express and past occasional sights of a large number of cattle being herded by small Fulani boys. Their faces were set like flint, their bare upper bodies showing little sinewy muscles. I remembered my patients who were herdsmen and wondered if they would gladly put on explosive-laden vests at the prodding of some jihadist Imam and at the promise of seven virgins in the afterlife. I slowed down as I approached a military check point; security appeared to have been beefed up at the capital city. After two hours of driving, I stopped at Lokoja for breakfast and feeling refreshed, I continued my journey to the eastern part of the country.

I MAY have changed jobs but the cancer eating away at the fabric of our nation, the war within, raged on. Bombings became a weekly occurrence, a huge anomaly for a hitherto quiet country like Nigeria. In the Nigeria of my childhood, bombings were what we saw in Hollywood movies, not something we ever dreamt of experiencing in our lifetimes. The insurgents had turned the country on its head. Every child in Northern Nigeria knew about bombs and the horrors following the loud, booming sound. A distant cousin who relocated from Maiduguri told me over the Christmas holiday that bombs go off so frequently that residents of the city had grown used to them.

CIRCA 2014. I was online following the discussion when I stumbled upon a video that brought bile to my mouth. The video, released by ISIS showed the jihadists, dressed in military camouflage, leading a group of men in black jumpsuits to an open ground. Each jihadist led one man and in one deft move, picked a kitchen knife with serrated edge from an elevated black metal bucket as they passed. They stood in a line, their captives kneeling, the jihadists standing behind them, knife in hand. One of the jihadists spoke in English, his message promptly translated to Arabic on the screen. The camera panned to show the faces of the jihadists: young men, fresh-faced, with eyes looking murderously cold. Some of the captives mumbled something; probably their last prayers and I saw in their eyes looks of abandonment. They had been caught in the crossfire of global politics and religious extremism and were about to pay the ultimate price for something they would never be able to explain. I watched as the jihadists put the knives to their throats and in many cutting moves, beheaded them. Their heads with bloodied, truncated necks were placed next to their bodies, eyes closed, looking peaceful.

I thought of the loved ones they left behind; young children that will grow up watching their fathers slaughtered in front of the camera like goats, wives that will become emotional wrecks and battle depression all their lives and parents that will die of heartbreak. It was a ripple effect: the decapitation of our collective humanity and the rape of our fragile innocence.

JANUARY, 2015. The New Year started slowly with nationwide prayers for a peaceful year and hitch-free elections. Politicians went from one religious congregation to the next, kneeling for prayers, seeking for votes. Then, out of the blues, it happened again. The town of Baga was run over by insurgents between January 3rd to 7th and western media reported that over two thousand persons were massacred. The military debunked the news saying that the death toll was about a

hundred and that two thousand people were 'unaccounted for'. The town was sacked and survivors fled to nearby Chad as refugees. Death and depression was to me a combination of dark colours.

NOVEMBER, 2015. Beirut was hit. Paris was hit. Yola was hit. Kano was hit. All within a space of eight days. Amidst the heated debates these bombings and killings have generated and continue to generate, one thing is clear: terrorism is our collective enemy.

A man deliberately drove a truck into persons during the Bastille Day celebrations, killing over eighty persons and injuring hundreds. While the world mourned with France, Germany also suffered a string of violent attacks in Berlin and Munich. In Iraq and Syria, bombs go off almost weekly leaving various numbers of persons dead each time.

On Friday, December 24, 2016. The Nigerian president declared the war against Boko Haram 'technically over' after the army captured Camp Zero, the group's main stronghold in Sambisa forest. But the carnage of the seven-year war has been enormous. More than twenty thousand lives have been lost and over two million persons displaced from their homes.

Evening, January 8, 2017. Boko Haram launched a surprise attack at the 27th Task Force Brigade, Buni Yadi, killing five soldiers. One of the soldiers killed in the attack was a senior colleague and the husband of my classmate. A bright, gallant officer, he had been recently promoted to a Captain and was transferred to Buni Yadi as a Brigade Medical Officer, just few weeks before his demise. I thought of the young wife he left behind and his three little children. I thought of all the soldiers lost in this senseless war, families torn apart, livelihoods destroyed, towns razed to the ground and I knew, as always, that I would be shocked and unhappy again in the coming days. Death was in my thoughts. Depression was living in my bones.

Before We Grew Up

Howard M-B Maximus

OUR HOME WAS a jungle and Daddy was the lion.

Every morning, we gathered in the living room for morning prayers, all twenty of us: Daddy, Mummy, Zac, Pride, Joan, Drew, Lindsay, Kelvyn, Sho, Ivan, Sumpta, Frederick, Derrick, Jojo, the dog Beethoven, the four cats we called Minus or Meows, and me. Every morning, Daddy made it clear, hammered it down our ears, that the only thing more important than praying in the morning, was praying together as a family.

If it was a dandy morning, Zac would play the piano and any two people would play the band set and neighbors would hear the music bursting out of our windows like water from a running tap.

If there was trouble, like the day Zac went to a nightclub to emcee a school party without telling him, or the day Sho slept out of the house, or when he was fighting with Mummy, he would wait until after prayers: 10 Hail Mary's; 3 Glory be to the Father's and intentions that almost always began with "Heavenly Father" and ended with "Saint Beethoven, pray for us." He would wait until we had crossed ourselves, until we attempted to shift from our seats, and then he would say, "Everybody, sit down. There is something we need to talk about as a family." When we were all ears, resettled on our seats, he would start, first by reminding us that this was a family it had taken a lot to build and in case we had forgotten, he was the head of the family. We had not forgotten. We

could never forget. He would tell us again about his parents and his siblings, what his mother taught them, the things they would never have done as kids. We would hear about his sacrifices for us, he would teach us about respect for hierarchy for the umpteenth time, and then he would lay the problem at hand on the carpet for everyone to see. Soon, he would lay problem after problem, problems once dead re-gifted soil and resurrecting, until the carpet was heavy and dirty, everyone's sins in front of them like filthy rugs, until Mummy would jerk up suddenly and say there was too much dirt in the living room she had to clean. And Daddy would feel offended because there were still more problems to be laid, and our home would become a rowdy jungle of roaring lion and lioness, of pouting preys, meowing cats, and a loud barking dog.

Before we woke up, Mummy and the girls were usually awake, so that by the time we were having breakfast, lunch was almost ready. They cooked every day like it was a feast: 25 cups of rice a day was the norm, and Daddy was always happy to provide the money. It physically pained him to see anyone hungry.

Daddy's job was funny. It took him away from us to Congo and Gabon and Angola and South Africa, and he would share his time, spending 5 weeks in these places, 3 weeks at home. His come-home signal was Koki beans. Whenever we saw Mummy turning the bean mush in the mortar, we knew Daddy was flying back from work. Sometimes, we'd go out to the junction where rough bike riders parked and yelled to prospective passengers, and we would stand there waiting.

ONE DAY, when Mummy cooked Koki beans, Pride and I went to the junction and stood there, eyes darting expectantly, watching everyone who looked like they had just come down from a plane. We jumped on a man wearing a baseball hat almost pushing down his suitcase. He hugged us as we

screamed, “Daddy, Daddy,” and walked with us. A few meters later, we looked up to realize it was not our dad. When we told Mummy the story she said something about ritualists stealing children.

DADDY CAME later that night. I hugged him so tight his smell remained in my head: lemon shampoo with cocoa butter and something else. My hands don’t hold the words to describe this. Years later, in Bangladesh, I would tell my cousin, “This bag smells like my dad,” and she would hug herself and say, “Aww, that’s so cute.”

“Why is a bag smelling like my father, cute?”

She’d look at me, chuckle and shake her head.

Mummy told Daddy we hugged someone else thinking it was him and he laughed and asked if we did not know our father, and then gave us more roasted cashew nuts and chocolates and I knew the story had been saved in his box of family history.

What was definitely in his box of family history was the fact that I wrote the Common Entrance Exams in class 4. When he had first suggested it, I had been skeptical, and so he had convinced me that failure did not mean I wasn’t good enough. “Just try,” he said, “if you don’t make it, there is next year, and the year after that.” Daddy’s confidence in me was a calming fortification. It solidified my spine when it was turning to mush. “You started reading the newspaper when you were 4,” he told me often, but I could not remember.

Pride who was in class 6 was my tutor. Daddy liked telling this story: he walked into the living room at 2am to see if the house was all properly locked up, to find Pride and me naked at the dining. He was teaching me Bases.

THE DAY the results came and we both scored List A, Melvin carried me on his shoulders and ran around the neighborhood; Ferderick joined us, and then Zac joined us. Soon, we were running round and round and people were staring and we did not care because success tasted like sugar. And what tasted even sweeter was the thought of how proud our parents would be.

I REMEMBER the first day Daddy flogged us. Pride, Ferderick and me. One chilly Sunday. It had rained so much we forgot to wake up for mass. Since we were many, those who followed Daddy in his car and Mummy in hers was on a first come first serve basis. The rest had to either go by foot or public transport. We did not go by any. Daddy walked in after mass, asked if we went to church. Ferderick said yes, and then Pride said yes, so I said yes. Daddy looked at us. Asked again, but it was too late to change the answer. Daddy said nothing. We just stood there fidgeting until he went in and came out with a belt.

“So, who made mass?”

There was silence.

“Howard, which priest celebrated mass today?” I stuttered, “Father Stockman.”

He looked at Pride and Frederick. “Is that right?” They said yes. I don't think they had much choice. It was not Father Stockman who celebrated mass. He stretched his belt and gave us six strokes each. Later, in the evening, when the pain was gone, Frederick would tell the story to the rest of the house and they would laugh and laugh. Frederick did that a lot, recount scary situations of the past, to the humor of the rest of the house. Even his.

The second and last time Daddy flogged me was the day he saw my tattoo. Everyone in the neighbourhood was doing it, and me, I had to keep up. I remember the day I got it: scratching my wrist with a broomstick until it bled the letter H. That's how my friend Tom had told me it was done. It was the wound that later healed, leaving the scar that would seem like a tattoo.

I remember the day Daddy saw it. Actually, it was Mummy who saw it on our way back from church. She yelled so that daddy heard and I knew I was dead meat. I got the flogging of my life that day.

Our home was a jungle and Daddy was the lion.

Our five-bedroom house had become this small box that was always filled to the brim it almost overflowed with people. Bunk beds were built and the older boys crashed on mattresses in the living room. There were always people; there was always noise. When we walked, bodies touched; when we slept, bodies touched. We would spend the mornings doing chores, watering mummy's flowers, sweeping the compound, scrubbing the house; and in the afternoons, we would sit watching the Nollywood movies Daddy had rented. Neighbourhood children would hang on our windows to watch, until Daddy would yell and ask them to either walk in and watch the movie properly or leave, because they were destroying the mosquito nets on the windows. They would buzz in like bees and sit on the carpet knee-up. Someone would start reciting the movie until Ferderick or Pride yelled that if they had watched it already they should go out.

When Daddy was in the Congo or some other country and there was no movie to watch, we broke into clusters playing cards, video games, draughts, dodging and ball. Sometimes when he was home, flipping through books in his study, we would make so much noise, screaming, running until he yelled and asked who in God's name was swinging on the gate?

Our home was a box of people and noise.

I always wondered if Zac ever felt like the first born, or if Joan felt like the only girl, because there were always older boys in our house who knew Daddy as Daddy and other girls so that Joan could not have grown up with just her four brothers.

In case you were wondering, Daddy and Mummy had five of us: Zac, Pride, me, Joan and Drew in that order. Mummy's younger sister Lindsay was basically our sister. She was barely a year older than Zac and was already living with us when I was born. She called Mummy, Mummy and called Daddy Daddy.

Kelvyn was Mummy's younger brother who called her 'star' but what he really meant was 'sister', and then there was Ferderick and Derrick and Ivan who were Daddy's godchildren and Sumpta who was Drew's nanny, and Jojo my cousin, and Beethoven the dog, and Minus or Meows, and the two rabbits Daddy had bought for Zac (they later ate their children and died after them).

It was his thing, Daddy, to pull people from all around, cram them in a house and show them that they were all one. He was a people's person and he had a t-shirt to prove it.

THERE WERE days we had nothing. Or in a grateful person's voice, almost nothing. Like when Daddy fell ill and could not travel to work. A steadily piercing pain had crept in his back and remained there. We started living on the money Mummy made from her shop. Three square meals was a luxury. We stopped having pocket money at home and when it was school time, Daddy would squeeze 5,000 francs each in our palms and ask us manage until he got more. It got worse as time went by; the car he had bought for Mummy had to be put on sale to pay school fees.

Grandma stormed home from the village with a medicine man. He smelled of herbs and concoctions. The man walked around the compound with authority while we followed tentatively. He put his hand in his bag, brought out some little little things and spread them on the ground, the way Daddy used to spread our issues on those mornings.

When the medicine man got in the firewood kitchen, he shook for some seconds, sang some incantations and said something in Esu. Grandma asked us to get him a digger. We watched him dig the cemented kitchen, digging and digging until smoke started oozing from the hole, we ran to the other kitchen, the one with tiles where the gas bottle and oven were kept. Soon, the medicine man brought out some things from the little pit he had dug; they had been buried there by a distant uncle, he said. We watched in horror at the buried items: a 10 francs coin trapped in a transparent perfume bottle with such a little mouth, we wondered how the coin got in there; there was also a bundle of jagged bones tied with red cloth. We were staring at one another, each hand holding the other tight. It seemed like a scene in the Nollywood movies we watched.

The medicine man wanted to cut us—three lines on our wrists with a blade, apply some of his medicine on the cuts. For protection, he said. Grandma said it would ward off evil. I remember Joan crying so much Daddy said it was okay; they were not cutting any of his children.

MOST OF the time, we would stride about in pride that Daddy was our father. Some other times, we would gravitate in small disgruntled groups, grumbling about how difficult the man was.

Like the time he stopped at our film rental store, the one he had opened for Zac and Pride and me, and found a customer chatting with Sumpta; how he scolded the man and told him to go home if he had rented the movies he came to rent. Like the time he told Mummy angrily that he did

not like the customers who came to drink, talking and talking about vain things that held no meaning, and Mummy told him it was a bar, he could not expect it to be filled with priests and other religious folk. Or the time when he slapped a man on the road for almost causing an accident; how Zac had grumbled and grumbled, asking me what it meant for a man to slap another man because of bad driving. “He would get in trouble thinking he can correct everyone in the world anyhow he liked. So what if he is the head of this family? Is he the head of all the families in the world?” And I held my laugh tight in my chest.

I remember the day he fought with Zac, yelling that we had no morals and he had wasted his money sending us to the best schools in the country thinking we would learn something, and Zac told him that he had not sent us to those schools because of us but he had done so for self-gratification—so that he could tell himself he sent his children to the best schools in the country, and Daddy had looked at him, mouth open. And then Daddy told him that when he was his age he had left his father’s house and built this house he was living in, unlike him, Zac, who had graduated two years now and had refused to get a job. Zac then told him it was true he had left his father’s house but he had not built this house at his age—that he was squatting with Mummy and her parents in their small house, and that was when Daddy lost it and asked him to get the hell out of his house. We watched Zac throw things in his suitcase saying he would go, he would go, and Mummy tried to stop him, and Pride tried to talk to Daddy but Daddy was screaming and throwing things and Zac was yelling and there was war in the jungle.

That day, the day Zac left, Daddy left the house too and acted like he did not care. Zac called to tell us he got to Yaoundé safely, but that we should not tell anyone where he was. By anyone, he meant Daddy. The next day, Daddy still acted as if he did not care. The day after that, he asked where Zac was. We told him we did not know. After a week of not hearing from him, he

started yelling at us about how we did not care for our brother enough to know where he has been for the past one week. We were quiet. Later, we called Zac and asked him to come home before his father got a heart attack.

THERE WERE many good days too: like the family picnics we had at the botanic garden with family friends, eating Myondo and Ndole and fried chicken, running around the garden, drinking Top. Like the days we went out on family trips to Down Beach and hotels and Hot Spot, where Drew would order a hamburger and then look at it for minutes, contemplating how to eat it because it was too big. There were good days like the days SONEL snatched their electricity and everywhere was dark and all fourteen of us, and the pets, would sit on the veranda telling stories as Daddy went to rest his back. Ferderick and Zac would recount past events that could be laughed about; Pride would impersonate uncles and aunts, and we would laugh and laugh until SONEL would give us electricity again and one by one we would disappear to the living room.

I AM sitting in the living room now. Bangladesh was great. I start my PhD program in some weeks. The house is empty and no one is running around. The old pictures on the wall stare at me and my room seems too big. Because Zac is in South Africa with Kelvyn, and Pride is on set shooting a drama series he wrote and Sumpta is married and stays with her husband and children in Bamenda. Because Lindsay moved out to fend for herself and I have not seen Derrick in so many years. Because Ferderick is in Russia and Joan and Drew are in the university. Because my cousin and his friends ate all our cats, because our neighbor poisoned our dog, because Tom is dead and the world is, all of a sudden, a silent place.

DADDY WALKS in and shakes my hand, asks me how my day has been so far. We start talking about Chimamanda. He likes how she talks. The lemon shampoo of Daddy's smell is gone, the cocoa butter is fading, but the other thing, the thing I cannot explain, is still there. Silver sprouts from his head like something exotic; his voice is deeper and mellower. The lion is tired.

Mummy calls me to come to her shop. I am in her shop asking why there is so much food in the kitchen when no one really eats, but she is used to cooking heavy pots of food like there is always a celebration. We are chatting and laughing. She is grumbling about young mothers who leave their children running around naked in the cold when my phone rings. It is Daddy again.

"Hello Doctor, wetin dey happen?"

"Nothing dey happen Daddy."

"Where are you?"

"I'm with Mummy at the shop."

He pauses. "I am here alone," he says.

I smile, get my things to go home. He too is tired of hearing the silence.

Dark

Acan Innocent Immaculate

COMFORTABLE. IF, TEN years ago, someone had asked me to describe my skin tone, I would've called it that. Comfortable. Just the right shade to allow me to fade into a dark-brown-hued background while the lighter and darker tones stood out at opposite ends of the spectrum. Nothing to write long romantic paragraphs about. Not golden, not bronze, not creamy. Just skin.

See, ten years ago, I'd have been too young for the shade of my brown to play an important enough role in my society's perception of my value. Now, however, I know I'm dark-skinned; somewhere between the colours of chocolate and coffee, if I'm in the mood to be romantic. Now, I know that because of the intensity of my melanin, I have been and will be discriminated against, thought of as less.

It's a little difficult to speak about colourism in Uganda without being brushed off as just another bitter dark-skinned woman hungry for the privileges light-skinned women are accorded. We have a history of downplaying or downright denying social issues like sexism, tribalism, and racism. What's another social issue but a nuisance that must be squashed and mocked into obscurity? It's not like colourism is costing people their lives or jobs, right? Wrong.

My first brush with colourism came when I was just eleven. My primary school was holding elections for the students' prefectorial council, and I'd decided to compete for the post of Council President. We all knew that the voting was just a formality to keep up the farce of a democracy; the

teachers always decided who made it onto the council and who didn't. However, in cases where one candidate had the overwhelming support of the student body, the teachers went with the students' choice. It was a foregone conclusion that I would win. I'd been a prefect before and was well-liked by the student body. My opponent, on the other hand, was a soft-spoken newbie who didn't understand the dynamics of the school. But when the time to select the President came, one of the teachers took me aside and told me they had decided, against the students' vote, that my opponent would be the Student President while I would be the Speaker. The post of Speaker was a measly consolation prize, another formality. I knew, without having to ask, why my opponent had been selected. She was light-skinned, in that luminous way that caught the eye and refused to let go. She was pretty. She would represent the school more favourably. It didn't matter that I was smart, that I had experience with public speech and leadership where she had none. The impression that made on my young mind was that my dark skin would never be good enough for first place.

I grew up, and society's predilection for light skin became more blatant. I wanted to think that it wasn't important. The boys thought the lighter girls were prettier—big deal. Right? Right. Life wouldn't let me think it wasn't important. I was dark for the central region, and light for the northern region. Whenever I travelled up north, my relatives would comment on the tone of my skin, compliment it. If I came home from school with a tan, my family would ask me why I'd become darker, and I'd spend the entire holiday holed up inside the house, hiding from the darkening rays of the sun so my melanin could back down a little. And when I returned to school, my friends would smile at me and tell me I was lighter, and the teachers and matrons would punish any transgression a little more kindly until the sun did its thing again, and then I was another of those wicked little black children who'd get beaten more ferociously than their light-skinned counterparts.

Unconsciously, I began to do things that would ensure I stayed an acceptable shade of brown. Don't stay out in the sun too long. Always wear a hat and long-sleeved tops, even on the most blistering days of the dry season. Buy sunscreen. None of it was ever enough though. One day, a few days after I'd joined high school, I was walking to class when an older girl standing with her friends commented, "Oh my God, that girl is so black."

It hurt; that accurate description. Looking back, I can tell you now that I know my reaction was foolish, that I am a black girl, and I take pride in my blackness. But then, it was an insult. It was said the way one would talk about a dirty room or an ugly dress. Eight words made me painfully aware of what years of conditioning had forced me to accept as truth. Black was bad; white was right. It was everywhere. The Bible called Satan the prince of darkness, and the depictions of God and the angels on the ceilings of the cathedrals were blindingly, dazzlingly white. White was the colour for celebrations, for weddings, for baptisms. Black was the colour for sombre events, for funerals and sadness. And here I was, wearing a permanent skin that was black. I tried even harder after that to avoid the darkening kiss of the sun. I'd liked sports when I was in primary school but I couldn't participate here because I didn't want to get any darker. Two years later, I bought my first tube of Fair & Lovely. I told myself that all I needed it for was to make my face shine a little less. According to the Eurocentric ads on TV, having a pale face was fashionable, even if it made my dark skin look like I'd dived face first into a heap of ash. I didn't want to be that bright light, just brown enough to get by. But I'd seen the Fair & Lovely commercials: the transition from unattractive darkness to coveted lightness was so convincing. I wanted to be that more confident girl who got the job.

Pale face didn't suit me well, thank goodness. I tossed that unfinished tube of Fair & Lovely away and resigned myself to my darkness. It didn't hurt that I was in a single-sex school either. Boys

were a rare occurrence, and the girls were too busy with life to actively remind me that my skin was a disability. Sure, there were a few cases like that one male teacher who gave the light-skinned girls preferential treatment and higher marks, but it was hard to take that personally. I was simply a carefree girl with no thoughts of her complexion. I played sports with no inhibitions and walked in the sun with my arms exposed. For the most part, high school was bliss. That sanctuary didn't last forever though.

University was like a new planet to someone who'd been in a single-sex school throughout her adolescence. Lightness was still the highest standard, but now, it spilled over into the world, into places I'd never been. At the marketplace, women with faces the colour of sand sold me wares with hands that looked like deep fried plantain—yellow in some places, black in others. Most of the adverts on TV featured light-skinned women, and all the female TV presenters were that precious high yellow. They're easier to shoot onscreen, someone tried to tell me, but they had nothing to say when I pointed out that the male presenters came in all the shades of brown there were. Downtown, billboards advertising the best bleaching creams straddled entire streets shamelessly. Friends who'd been a warm deep brown a year before emerged from the cocoon of vacation with new nearly translucent white skins. Reputable clinics covertly sold magic pills that could make you light from the inside. A dark-skinned woman became Miss Uganda and had her beauty and eligibility for the crown questioned in every corner of the country because everyone seemed to think she should've been a little lighter-skinned. Wearing makeup that made you a few shades lighter was perfectly acceptable.

Once again, I found myself in that middle ground on the skin tone spectrum where my shade of brown was nondescript. Comfortable. I'd had six months on holiday to cultivate that perfectly unobtrusive shade of brown, staying in the house all day and wearing my long-sleeved tops.

I was alright for the first two semesters of university. Then the sun did its thing, and I was black again. I didn't notice it until a bodaboda cyclist called me Black Beauty.

I was transported back to that year in high school when the older girl had called me black. It stung, once again, but in a good way. Like the bite of a raw mango eaten without salt. Good, but it brings tears to your eyes. Black Beauty. For all its good intentions, the phrase sounded like a backhanded compliment. It felt like it was fuelled by surprise. Hey, you're black, but you're beautiful. You're a rarity, because darkness and beauty are usually mutually exclusive. Well done!

I was back in that place. That place where I realized that my lighter-skinned girlfriends had life a little easier than I did. That place where I decided that I would marry a white or light-skinned man simply because I hoped my children would have it easier than I do. It was so common, this line of thought, that it didn't strike me as strange at that time. Women everywhere were doing it. I knew someone whose entire family was dedicated to 'diluting' their blackness by only marrying outside their race. We sat together and fawned over pictures of mixed race babies and hoped that our own would look just like that: curly-haired and light-skinned. With time, however, those thoughts became ineffective shields against my feelings of inadequacy.

My first defensive reaction was the development of a superiority complex. My skin was magic; it didn't burn under the glare of the sun. I didn't need much makeup to cover my flaws. Science said my dark skin was an evolution to combat the ferocity of the sun, so I had to be superhuman, just a little bit. I looked down on the women who bleached their skin, wondered how low their esteem could be that they would damage themselves that way. All truths but, coming from a place so fraught with feelings of inferiority, ultimately empty.

Finally, I turned to the Internet for consolation. It was the age of black girl magic. The Internet was celebrating black girls in all their shades. I looked for pictures of girls who looked like

me with a feverish sort of desperation, breathing a sigh of relief when I found one where all the comments were saying she was beautiful, feeling a piece of my self-esteem return to me. And when society would remind me that lightness was still the highest standard, I would run back to the internet for a refill of that self-love. It didn't matter that there seemed to be limitations on what kind of dark-skinned magic was palatable for the public. It didn't matter that most of the women celebrated had to have a certain body shape, or skin as blemish-free as a baby's. We were being celebrated for once, and I would take those baby steps with everyone, even if the chameleon's pace frustrated me.

Like all things, though, the internet had its bad side. For every post praising the darkness of a black woman, there were five more disparaging it. Dark skin versus light skin comparisons were the norm on Twitter. Dark-skinned women were manly, lower class, deserving the bare minimum of respect. Light-skinned women were delicate trophies, Crème de la crème of blackness. All the picture filters strived to make the subject lighter. I mastered the art of taking pictures in the best lighting to make my skin appear as light as socially acceptable. The last thing I wanted was to become the victim of trolls looking to attack my complexion. Any attempts to bring to light the unfairness of judgements based on complexion were quickly rubbished by men on whom such issues have little impact anyway, because the social success of a man isn't tied to his attractiveness as intricately as a woman's is.

I looked for answers everywhere I could. This hatred for dark skin seemed to be spread far and wide. There was no sanctuary for darkness, not even in its own home. The internet threw ever-rising statistics of the usage of bleaching products in many countries at me. Maybe colourism was one of the effects of a global white supremacist system. Maybe light skin looked more appealing because the eye is ostensibly drawn to bright things. Maybe all those scientific "facts" placing

whiteness and lightness at the pinnacle of beauty were right. Maybe they were wrong. It took me a long time to understand, accept, and love my complexion.

I'm still a work in progress. I'll probably be till the day I die. Some days, I look in the mirror and see someone who isn't good enough because her skin is too dark. Some days, I want to rip off my clothes and run around town celebrating the gorgeousness of my skin. Some days, I feel pretty. Some days, I think if I were lighter-skinned, I'd be prettier. I'm still afraid of getting too dark for society. Even now, with all I know, with all this love for myself I have swelling in my chest, I still watch my arms and face and scowl at the mirror in displeasure at the appearance of a tan. But I know that one day, I'll be strong enough to be comfortable with whatever shade of brown I will be. I'm a work in progress.

I know I've had it easier than millions of dark-skinned girls who didn't have the luxury of being comfortably brown. I know I've had it easier than other comfortably brown girls who aren't considered 'pretty' or funny or intelligent, or whatever perks a woman should apparently bring to the table. I know the hardest of my days are ahead of me. I know equality for humans of all shades is hundreds of years beyond our grasp. I know that, for many people, colourism may seem like a trivial issue, especially in a place like Uganda where, despite the fluctuations of the richness of our melanin, we are all brown. I know that it hasn't invaded our society to the extent it has in places like India or the United States. But that doesn't make it any less dangerous as a cancer. It will spread if those of us who have the means don't speak up about it, and make an ailing society even sicker.

The most I can hope for now is the courage to love myself as best as I can. One day, I'll have children of my own, and I hope that by then, I will be wise enough to teach them that each shade of brown holds as much merit as the next.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

ALITHNAYN ABDULKAREEM is a writer and development worker based in Lagos, Nigeria. Her nonfiction covers art, film, and memoirs. Her fiction covers mental illness against the backdrop of millennial culture. She is an alumna of the 2015 Farafina Workshop. She recently was longlisted for the Short Story Day Africa Prize, and has been published by *Transitions*, *Nataal*, *This Is Afria*, *The Africa Report*, *Saraba*, and *Brittle Paper*. She always has henna on her hands, and resting bitch face if you're trying to find her in a crowd.

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SADA MALUMFASHI is a writer living in Kaduna, Nigeria. His works of fiction have appeared in *Transition Magazine*, *New Orleans Review*'s "African Literary Hustle" Issue, and *Bombay Review*. His essays and creative nonfiction have appeared or are forthcoming in *The Africa Report*, *Saraba Magazine*, *Enkare Review*, *This Is Africa* and *Music in Africa*, amongst others. He was shortlisted for the Kofi Addo Prize for Creative Nonfiction administered by Writivism in 2017 and was among the

participants in the Goethe Institute Nigeria-Cameroon Literary Exchange Program. He has been selected for a residency at Sylt Foundation through the Literary Exchange Program. He is interested in the intricacies of languages and works on translations bilingually in Hausa and English. His poem and translations from Hausa have appeared in the National Translation Month Issue of 2017.

SIBONGILE FISHER is a poet, writer and drama facilitator from Johannesburg, South Africa. She holds a BCom degree in Marketing Management and a higher certificate in the Performing Arts and wishes to pursue an MA in Creative Writing. She is the co-founder of The Raising Zion Foundation, an arts organisation that focuses on promoting literature, poetry and the performing arts in high schools. Her short story, “A Door Ajar,” won the 2016 Short Story Day Africa Prize and was shortlisted for the 2017 *Brittle Paper* Award for Fiction. Her short story, “A Sea of Secrets,” written for young adults, was published by Fundza under their mentorship program and it appears in their “it takes two!” volume 2 anthology.

TJ BENSON is a Nigerian short story writer and creative photographer whose work has appeared in online journals like *Jalada Africa*, *Munyori Journal*, *Brittle Paper*, *Praxis Magazine*, *Sentinel Literary Magazine*, *Bakwa Magazine*, and in print magazines and anthologies like *Panagram UK*, *ANA Annual Review*, *Contemporary Literary Review* India, and *Transition Magazine*. His chapbook of photography, *Rituals*, was published as a downloadable PDF by *Sankofa Magazine* in 2015 and his collection of Afro-Sci-Fi short stories, *We Won't Fade into Darkness*, was shortlisted for the Saraba Manuscript Prize. He won the Amab-HBF prize with his short story, “An Abundance of Yellow Paper,” and his short story, “Tea,” was the first runner up for the 2016 Short Story Day Africa Prize and finalist for the 2017 *Brittle Paper* Award for Fiction. He was a Writer-In-Residence at the Ebedi Residency Iseyin, Nigeria from January to February 2017 and he currently lives in Abuja.

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UMAR TURAKI is a writer and filmmaker based in Jos, Nigeria. Umar has written, directed, and produced several short films, which have screened in festivals around the world, including the Durban International Film Festival, the Pan African Film Festival, the Zanzibar International Film Festival, and the Africa International Film Festival. His short story, “Naming,” was longlisted for the Short Story Day Africa Prize in 2016 and subsequently appeared in their prize’s anthology, *Migrations: New Short Fiction from Africa*. His short story, “Her,” was selected and edited by Chimamanda Adichie for Olisa.tv’s “Special Literary Supplement” series. In 2017, he was shortlisted for the Miles Morland Writing Scholarship. He is an alumnus of the Farafina Trust Creative Writing Workshop.