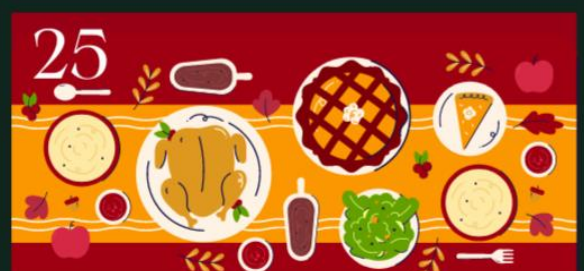
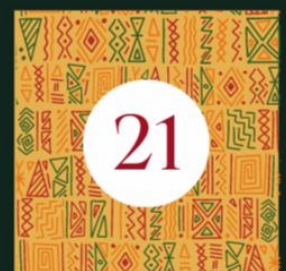


brittle
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COUNTING DOWN
THE
Holidays



AN ANTHOLOGY OF FESTIVE AFRICAN
WRITING VOL. III

EDITED BY TAHZEEB AKRAM

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Edited by Tahzeeb Akram

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Editor's Note

Dear Brittle Paperians,

It's festive season and our third volume of the Festive Anthology is here! Our previous volumes included *HomeGrown Joy* and *Table Setting*, both of which focused on the festive joy that many across our beautiful continent celebrate. While curating those anthologies, I was reminded of the importance of preparation and how much of the joy we find in holidays we celebrate are found in the build-up, the days spent cooking, the many outfit fittings, and the anticipation we have for the big days that lie ahead. So, this year, we are focusing on just that! This year's anthology is *Counting Down the Holidays*, an African literary advent calendar of sorts that houses 25 pieces to open and enjoy as we count down to the festive season!

I'm from Cape Town, South Africa, and my joy for the festive season comes from my culture as a Cape Malay Coloured woman as there is nothing more festive than the Kaapse Klopse! This editor's note would be far too long if I got into the entire history of the klopse, so I strongly urge you to read more about it yourself. In short, the tradition stems from the colonial era where slaves were given a day off on January 2nd, thus becoming the day to celebrate the new year by dressing in colourful outfits and playing instruments, such as the banjo, saxophone and ghoema drums. Tweede Nuwe Jaar (Second New Years) is a powerful tradition that our ancestors made amidst a painful experience, one that celebrates life, community and our beloved culture. There is nothing more magical than being in Cape Town and hearing the tunes spilling out of the klopse kamers, rooms where different teams practice, and knowing that festive season is fast approaching. There are many different aspects to the tradition and the history is one that far extends my mere summary and while I know that this does not do it justice, in this anthology of festive preparation, I wanted to share my own with all of you.

As this anthology takes on the advent calendar feel, we have some Christmasy pieces to get you in the festive mood, such as Musleemat Elewade and Temitope Omamegbe's works. We know festive season does not just include Christmas, so we also have NmaHassan Muhammad and Lukman Nurudeen Adeniyi's Eid poems! But we also taking a trip from the top to the bottom of this glorious continent, from Morocco with Youssef Oubihi, South Sudan with Dikun Elioba, DRC with Nteranya Sanginga, to South Africa with Zizipho Godana.

Our brilliant writers have given you a 25-part festive gift of essays, poems, creative non-fiction and fiction, and we hope you enjoy every single one! In true advent calendar fashion, I have not included page numbers in the contents page so that you can stumble upon each gorgeous piece as a little holiday surprise.

Brittle Paper hopes you have a beautiful and safe festive period and that you enjoy our collection made with you in mind!

– Tahzeeb Akram

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“I enjoy all types of music, but the music of my own flesh and blood goes right to my heart. The curious beauty of African music is that it uplifts even as it tells a sad tale.”

– Nelson Mandela



Portrait of a First Nigerian Christmas Spent Alone

Aanuoluwapo Adesina | Poetry

After being away from home for six whole years, I returned a month before my family left for England. Of course, my mother made sure to stock up the house with bags of rice and every cut of meat imaginable. And even though I dreaded driving in Nigeria (it's a whole Olympic event) they did give me a Camry — which has become an even bigger blessing as I find myself more and more prone to taking drives to clear my head or even connect with what's going on outside the house.

On the first day of Christmas
My parents gave to me
A house key in a Camry.

On the second day of Christmas
My parents gave to me
Two German Shepherds
And a house key in a Camry.

On the third day of Christmas
My parents gave to me
Three bags of rice,
Two German Shepherds
And a house key in a Camry.

On the fourth day of Christmas
My parents gave to me
Four bowls of gizzard,
Three bags of rice,
Two German Shepherds
And a house key in a Camry

On the fifth day of Christmas
My parents gave to me
Five hands of plantain,
Four bowls of gizzard,
Three bags of rice,
Two German Shepherds
And a house key in a Camry.

On the sixth day of Christmas
My parents gave to me
Six empty bedrooms,
Five hands of plantain,
Four bowls of gizzard,
Three bags of rice,
Two German Shepherds
And a house key in a Camry.

On the seventh day of Christmas
My parents gave to me
Seven hours of Skyping,
Six empty bedrooms,
Five hands of plantain,
Four bowls of gizzard,
Three bags of rice,
Two German Shepherds
And a house key in a Camry.

On the eighth day of Christmas
My parents gave to me
Eight months of silence,
Seven hours of Skyping,
Six empty bedrooms,
Five hands of plantain,
Four bowls of gizzard,
Three bags of rice,
Two German Shepherds
And a house key in a Camry.

On the ninth day of Christmas
My parents gave to me
Nine palm oil bottles
Eight months of silence,
Seven hours of Skyping,
Six empty bedrooms,
Five hands of plantain,
Four bowls of gizzard,
Three bags of rice,
Two German Shepherds
And a house key in a Camry.

On the tenth day of Christmas
My parents gave to me
Ten yards of brocade
Nine palm oil bottles
Eight months of silence,
Seven hours of Skyping,
Six empty bedrooms,
Five hands of plantain,
Four bowls of gizzard,
Three bags of rice,
Two German Shepherds
And a house key in a Camry.

On the eleventh day of Christmas
My parents gave to me

Eleven clans of kin
Ten yards of brocade
Nine palm oil bottles
Eight months of silence,
Seven hours of Skyping,
Six empty bedrooms,
Five hands of plantain,
Four bowls of gizzard,
Three bags of rice,
Two German Shepherds
And a house key in a Camry.

On the twelfth day of Christmas
My parents gave to me
Twelve prayers of blessing,
Eleven clans of kin,
Ten yards of brocade,
Nine palm oil bottles,
Eight months of silence,
Seven hours of Skyping,
Six empty bedrooms,
Five hands of plantain,
Four bowls of gizzard,
Three bags of rice,
Two German Shepherds
And a house key in a Camry.

Amala is a Kaleidoscope of Colours and Feelings

Bunmi Ańjóláolúwa Adaramola | Fiction

Ebenezer Obey’s *Orisirisi Ore* will play poignantly — a backdrop to Iya Gégélẹ̀sọ’s loud ire — as she violently slaps morsels of Amala onto each other before shoving the plate to the quiet sales girl beside her. Déjọ and I would teasingly revel in her almost predictable irritation — it was after all a crucial ingredient in her Amala, because the angrier the seller, the sweeter the meal. Splatters of red and green tinsel — bearing similar shades to the native stew and Ewedu Iya G poured into our bowls — and scantily hung decorations littered the interior of the restaurant, as though a subtle salute to the festivities clouding the air, with the most obvious acknowledgement of the season being the conspicuous red and white Santa hats to complement the red uniforms worn by her sales girls.

Iya G was a harsh woman, her austerity not evident in her facial features but in the silently domineering way she controlled the affairs of her buka. From how a single glare conveyed various instructions that her girls desperately scampered around to fulfil — nearly breaking necks and backs in the process — to how customers seemed to find some warped pleasantries in the abrasiveness she wore like a badge of honour. Iya G was in many ways similar to mummy, which was perhaps why mummy was easily able to pull an infrequent smile out from the usually austere woman’s face, especially around this time of the year.

A visit to Iya G was always indicative of a prelude to our family’s favourite holiday — Christmas. It almost always served as a stomach opener — an event that heralded the festive preparations in the Ańjẹgírí household. And for as long as I could remember, we would eat *Amala* in the mid-morning and return to our Magodo duplex back in Lagos to set up a thirty-inch white Christmas tree in the living room — a combined effort of my younger brother Déjọ’s raw strength, my dogged eagerness to immerse myself in the Christmas spirit and our mother’s insistence on keeping the tradition alive. A month marked by a flurry of activities — chasing the thrill and euphoria from that first time when we’d consciously begun to celebrate the festivities — would always begin with the taste of Amala.

“*Ah ah, customer customer!*” her tone will drip with the enthusiasm of a Yoruba woman eager to collect money from a willing buyer like it always does every year as she throws surface platitudes of “*how family*” and “*how business*” around without expecting a response. Mummy would smile in that polite way she did with close acquaintances — lips forced together and lifted tightly, smile never reaching her eyes — as she ushered Déjọ and I to the wooden benches at the far corner of the restaurant. “*Eat as much as you need to,*” mummy would always remind us in Yoruba. The same words delivered with the same reverence each year. Swirls of stringy green, fiery red and stained yellow guarding an array of differently sized protein — cow beef, ponmo, goat meat, bokoto and liver — would contrast the purple bowl Iya G’s *Amala* was famed for as her most prominent staff, Comfort, lays the tray

of bowls on the wooden table.

The burst of flavour from that first swallow and the intimidating peace that would always precede that first bite. The quiet satisfaction from that final morsel washed down by the crisp malt Iya G was insistent about serving our family *on the house* because of the regularity of our visit. The easy conversation that flowed between the three of us as plans for the upcoming festivity slid into place and responsibilities became distributed. The contentment that slowly crept onto mummy and Déjò's expressions as we stood from the benches, bodies stretched out and joints cracked pleasurably all from the joy of keeping the Amala tradition and the enthusiasm for festivities that singular tradition kept had unlocked. The taste of Amala will forever be linked to good memories, ironic because tragedy and grief had forced us to even accept the tradition in the first instance.

In my first conscious memory of eating Amala as a precursor to the festive season, the sky had been the bluest I'd ever seen it. One bland Saturday morning in late November, mummy had brought Déjò and I down from Lagos to Iya G's spot in Ibadan, quiet streets stripped of the incessant burst of energy and busyness that defined Lagos. Ibadan was starkly different from Lagos – the cleaner air that Lagos seemed to be void of and the calm excitement that seemed to overwhelm the countryside's inhabitants in how they celebrated the festivities. But I vividly remember the warm cobalt and white fluffs that defined the skies almost as though a foretelling of what the day held. It was the day she'd told us with a shaky voice and tears clouding her eyes that her brother – Uncle Jojú – had died after his rather brief battle with lung cancer. We'd been twelve and fourteen respectively, and only understood death and grief from the lens our adolescence afforded us. And when she would later tell us she wanted us to come back to Iya G's to eat Amala exactly thirty days before Christmas every year, it had seemed like a mulish request yet Déjò and I had accepted with muted blasé and some desire to make our mother happy.

Ten years later, I'd often wondered if some parts of mummy had questioned whether Déjò and I would embrace the tradition with the same fervour she did. It wasn't supposed to be a good day, I remember thinking but, the memory of mummy's words and her insistence on passing this Amala tradition her and her brother had grown up with, fused with Déjò's understanding excitement and Iya G's obliviousness to my mother's pain – to the extent that we were treated with the same vexation she dished to other customers – had made it memorable in all the good ways. Somehow, in some marred sense of happiness, it *had* been a good day. The tradition had in its own way been too reminiscent of the ebullience Uncle Jojú defined life by, such that it would almost be a stain on his memory to be beclouded by painful grief. I'd initially been suspicious of my mother's dogged need to enforce this tradition. I'd questioned the easy way she'd immersed herself into preparations for the holidays as though it had always been second nature to her – a stark contrast to the blandness that had previously marked family holidays in the past years before Uncle Jojú had died.

In those early years of the tradition, I'd mistakenly thought her eagerness to

be superficial and forced. Almost as though my mother had sought ways to drown herself in the buzz of activities and events in a bid to forget the grief brought on by her brother's death during the season. As though it was simply a way to cope with the dichotomy of emotions during the season – biting grief cruelly juxtaposed with the euphoria that came with the festivities. Yet over the years, she would continue to effortlessly prove otherwise. She would grieve her brother, the jovial Uncle Jojú in the normative ways expected during his birthdays and the anniversary of his death, but never in the weeks leading up to Christmas. Never during what Déjò and I had jokingly termed Amala Season.

So, in the early hours of a Saturday in late November, we would drive down from Lagos to Ibadan to eat Amala at Iya G's as a lead-up to Christmas. And then the prep would begin. Déjò would turn the dial up on his Bluetooth player in the morning after our Amala meal – a role he'd willingly taken over from my mother who in the past had curated an unofficial playlist which saw unending repeats of Ebenezer's *Odun Keresimesi* and King Sunny Ade's *Odun Titun*, songs forever tied to memories of Christmas even in adulthood. A smile filled with nostalgia and epiphany would always creep up my face every time I remembered Saturday mornings in the lead-up to Christmas morning, how mummy would wake the house with the jovial and evergreen croons of Chief Obey as he beckoned the festivities and wished good fortune from the season to us all. Déjò in all of his excitement and in later years, would go ahead to create his own mix – one that constituted a nod to our mother's forever favourites and the newer selection of Christmas songs both reminiscent of home and abroad – that forced the entire household alive during those thirty days leading to Christmas day.

The three of us would sit in the living room with the muted voice of Sunny Ade in the background, making mental lists and calculations on the hunt for a tree. We'd only incorporated Christmas trees the year our father decided fatherhood was no longer for him and simply up and left. It was two years after Uncle Joju died. We'd gone to Iya G's that year, Déjò and I grossly unwilling to participate in mummy's Amala meal but grudgingly accepted her rationale. "*We're not going to let him steal this from us, okay?*" Her voice had been steady and unwavering, as she proudly declared a questionable ambition to go tree hunting. And so as quickly as she'd created this new tradition, tree shopping had become a bonding experience, one I particularly looked forward to in the days post-Amala. Mummy had always insisted on a white tree – the colour being Uncle Jojú's favourite given its rarity in Lagos – and an array of ornaments and fairy lights lighting the entire thing up, with a littering of fake snow on its base where it was mounted. It would take us over a week trying to find the right one, but we always did. Each year.

It was weird, we never kept trees for more than the season – mummy would always give it out each year once the festivities were over, citing her favourite scripture, "*old things have passed away,*" as her reasoning. *No matter the cost*, she'd remind us, she was more than willing to spend a fortune to replicate the tradition each year, something I'd quickly attributed as her little way of keeping the memory of her brother fresh and alive. So, tree shopping became an incontestable norm in the

Ajísegíri household during the Christmas season.

The following weeks would make trips to Balogun main market and Mile 12 on the hunt for cheap food products and decorating items as we'd gradually become immune and unbothered to the sudden hike in prices and costs of food for the sole reason of the festivities. Curating lists and lists for hampers, gift bags and charitable donations that we would give to the Mothers and Wives groups in the church, orphanages, extended family and the Parishes pastoral ministry. The gifting culture had been quickly reciprocated three years after we'd begun, with members of the church scouring to find something each year for our mother who had become an unconditional and ostentatious giver without any expectations. In the early December mornings, when the executive assistant to the parish's head pastor would come with a train of other ministerial members bearing gifts similar to the wise men the nativity story told of, mummy would do the dance of false humility – the type I'd always described as a chronically Yoruba characteristic – anytime members from the church pastoral team brought gift bags and traditional hampers to the house, with platitudes of "*just a little token of our gratitude,*" to which mummy would dance around, responding to their greetings with "*ah ah, this is too much now,*" before finally submitting to the wiles of proud helplessness – as though taking their gifts was a resignation, a last resort she couldn't run from – before then storing them in the kitchen store.

We'd stopped buying Christmas outfits the year Déjò and I permanently returned from University in Nottingham – him having completed his master's programme in Accounting and Finance and me finalising my third year in International Development. It didn't feel right anymore, we seemed to have outgrown the very Nigerian tradition of Christmas clothes shopping, despite mummy's insistence on upholding the tradition. It had taken what felt like forever to convince her to let go of it and in compromise, we adopted a gifting culture. We'd spend weeks before our Amala meal thinking up ways to surpass the previous year's gifts. When conversations flowed as we downed tepid water and ice-cold malt alongside Amala morsels soaked in soup, we'd drop subtle hints about gift ideas or wish list items we'd craved for throughout the year but had been too afraid or too broke to reach for. We'd agree on collective gifts – the ones all three of us were aware would be sat under the tree the night before Christmas – but we'd also secretly come up with gift ideas, the ones we'd silently watched the other long for but were too conscious about getting.

This year was no different – except it was. But only in good ways. Mummy's grief had slowly begun to ebb away, quietly being replaced with an obvious healing. It was evident in her loud laughter as Iya G brought another bowl of Amala, just because. It was clear in the boisterous way she ushered us into the car, rattling off to-dos on our way to find lights for the gates and fences outside the house and pick up the tree ornaments and decorations we'd scoured Lagos trying to find.

Meal prepping would begin a week before friends and gluttonous church members trudged to our family house for the post-Christmas lunches we would always host and intimate family dinners we would hold in the evenings with

extended family members and distant friends. I would always chalk it up to the innate Yoruba need to throw and host a good party. The violent sounds of pestle slapping against mortar in the kitchen, shaking the house to its very foundation as Déjò took on the arduous task of preparing pounded yam for lunch after church. Mummy would always remind him not to start the soup — she was very adamant about this — and would always take charge of its prep with Agnes, the temporary help she would hire during the festive period. Déjò would also attempt making Amala, which the three of us would all eat at the end of the day once all guests — both invited and party crashers — had dispersed back to their respective residences with bowls and plates of leftovers. We would tease him about his Amala skills, unfailingly each year, to which he would remind us of how he had no desire to upstage Iya G's Amala. And then we would reminisce and reflect, mummy wearing quiet contentment and nostalgia loudly on her face at the success of the events, her mind probably already whirling with thoughts of the next year preparations.

No year would ever be as perfect as we'd envisaged, but it did its thorough work of bringing us together even closer than the previous year. Bonds strengthened, loyalty unwavering and love continually flourishing, lead ups to Christmas for the three of us had in its own way become a form of healing. Healing from the loss of Uncle Jojú and the pain of our father leaving. A reminder that we were stronger together and could wade through whatever clouds life threw at us. And the blazing excitement that coursed through our bodies from the thrill of Christmas prepping. All unfolded by a single trip to Iya G's for a simple family meal of Amala.

A Little Boy's Christmas and His Boney M Playlist

Solomon Eberechukwu Obika | Poetry

December and Christmas
are some of my favourite things,
the thought of them
for me
holds an air of anticipation
for a time where utopia becomes real enough
to heave out from the warm embers of my imagination
and stage itself right before my eyes.

Christmas
my best festive season,
the jostling and bustling of feet
sprawling the streets of Terminus market and Ahmadu Bello way Jos
in the scorching sun,
the enthusiastic spirit of buyers and sellers
haggling underneath the shops with
signage adorned in red and green decors.

Christmas held all my errs
crumpled and tossed them away,
it gave me a fresh start.
The 'doom' 'doom' 'doom' bass
accompanying the drums of Boney M's "Little Drummer Boy"
sounded the warning for all my fears to piss off.

The serenading tunes of Boney M's "Mary's Boy Child"
blaring from the stereos of cassette vendors
served as my anchor
ever ready to jog our memories
back to the reason for the season.

"White Christmas" was my favourite Christmas song,
it assured me that the celebration would be swell
and in healthy revelry we would all dwell
as "Silent Night" lent me a sneek peek into my ideal Christmas
while my mind in its reverie quizzed itself about
the clothes, fried chicken, rice, and stew.

Now
my favourite Christmas song is a question
to my saviour's mother.
"Mary Did You Know"
that conquering this sinful world
wasn't the only thing your baby boy did?
Did you know that His birth made a little boy's day,
that it made a little boy smile?

A Father's Legacy: The Power of Christmas Carols and Cherished Traditions

Beti Baiye | Essay

Music — whether a melody, a simple chord, or a fleeting tune — can evoke intense memories, some pleasant, others not so much, of people, places, and events. Old gospel songs, folk tunes, or cultural songs often bring back memories of family gatherings or significant moments.

I've always believed that one of the best things about Christmas is the carols. I fell in love to "Silver Bells," and "Santa Baby" takes me down nostalgia lane. Christmas carols hold a lifetime of memories for me and will continue to stir many more.

Growing up, we had a Christmas tradition. A key part of it was bringing out the Christmas decor a week into the holidays. We'd spend some time sorting through them, deciding what to discard, what to put up and what to haul back to storage. Then came the tedious visit to the tailor to get measured for our custom-made Christmas outfits — one for Christmas Day and another for New Year's. Multiple trips for fittings followed, and if we were lucky, the clothes would be ready a day before our annual trip to the village. Sometimes, we'd pick them up on our way out of town and hope they fit. Of course, no Christmas was complete without a visit to the hairdresser for braids. This 'low maintenance' hairstyle was essential as it kept me from looking like a ragamuffin during an intense tomboy phase that frustrated my mother to no end.

The Christmas tradition was never complete without our two-week stay in the village at our country home. Looking back, I now realize how difficult the planning and packing must have been for my mother and the older ones. But as children, we were too swept up in the excitement of Christmas to notice or care.

Going "home" for Christmas, as we called it, was a common tradition among many people. Everyone who could, did it. It was as though the anticipation of spending a few carefree days or weeks with family and friends — old and new — eating, drinking, and celebrating was what kept them going all year round. My father relished spending time with his closest friends and relatives daily, often late into the night. My mother cherished the opportunity to be with her mother, siblings and friends. As for us kids, we almost ran feral roaming freely, visiting grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and family friends with minimal supervision.

Christmas was different in the village. While not too many people cared about putting up Christmas decorations, a piece of glittery décor here, a string of lights strung up there and a good number of houses sporting a new coat of paint, did the magic. Life in rural Nigeria can be challenging, and often parents struggled to make the season special for their families. However, the joy of reuniting with family after a year or more apart, the excitement of ending yet another year whole, hale and hearty

and the anticipation of a prosperous new year with endless opportunities, all come together to create a magical atmosphere that filled everyone's hearts with joy. For most of my childhood, this was the only kind of Christmas I knew, and although it was vastly different from the magical Christmases I read about in books, it was all I ever wanted.

The year I turned nine, our family broke with tradition and decided not to travel for Christmas. We still got new clothes, endured the usual tailor drama, and I went through the ordeal of getting braids. We put up the Christmas décor and stocked the house with enough food and drinks to feed a small army. But without the excitement of the village — no grandparents, cousins, or family friends — it all felt empty. Questioning Daddy wasn't an option; it was an unspoken rule. But Mummy was easier to approach, and in the days leading up to Christmas day, we bombarded her with questions about why we had strayed from our usual routine, pleading for them to change their minds. Yet nothing worked — the only explanation given was that Daddy couldn't get off work.

It was a sad bunch that went to bed around midnight that Christmas eve. Given permission to stay up later than usual, we binged on Christmas movies wishing for a bit of Santa's magic to turn our dull holiday into something half as exciting as what we saw on screen. However, children are resilient little beings, and no disappointment could keep our spirits down for long.

I don't know who woke up first on Christmas morning, but I remember that I was startled awake when my head touched a strange object as I turned in my sleep. I opened my eyes to find a brightly wrapped package sitting beside my pillow. Santa had visited! And judging by the squeals from my sisters — with whom I shared a room — he'd left surprises on their beds too. Even without a note or announcement, we knew it was Daddy.

My serious, practical, no-nonsense father — never one for frivolities — did something that felt straight out of the books I'd read and the movies I'd watched: he made Christmas magical. The gifts weren't the typical practical items my father might have chosen — they were whimsical, mismatched, and utterly perfect in their randomness. I received a fishing rod with plastic bait, a single brown boot, a flute, and other toys that, in hindsight, were impractical. But none of that mattered. What truly mattered was the effort my father put into making that Christmas special. For a man who rarely indulged in such gestures, it was unforgettable. He spent the entire day with us, playing with the toys, listening to carols, and making us feel like the most important people in his world. It was a day filled with joy, laughter, and warmth, and it's one of my most cherished memories of him — second only to the time he danced with me on my birthday.

My parents always made Christmas time special, the decorations, carols, and family gatherings created a magical atmosphere. However, this Christmas when my father stepped outside his usual role became a defining moment for me. It wasn't just about the gifts, it was about the quality time we spent together as a family that made that Christmas truly memorable.

My father passed away on July 4, 2008, and for a long time, I struggled with the weight of that loss. Grief has a way of swallowing you whole, leaving you feeling unmoored and adrift. I floundered for a while, unable to find solace in anything. But over time, I found comfort in Christmas carols. I'm not sure when it started but in June, especially as the month drew to a close, I found myself turning to carols. I was restless in my soul, none of my usual music worked and somehow, carols soothed the unrest. This happened every year without fail and it became a guilty pleasure, one that I embraced with glee. It wasn't something I planned; the urge to listen to Christmas carols would simply arise, and I'd welcome it like an old friend, eager to sit and chat.

Over time, I curated a special June Christmas playlist, starting with vintage classics like "Silent Night," "O Holy Night," and "Silver Bells." As the years passed, I added a few more soulful tracks — Luther Vandross' "Every Year, Every Christmas," Timi Dakolo's "Merry Christmas Darling," and Zach Williams' "I Don't Want Christmas to End." I even sprinkled in some light hearted, goofy tunes like "Still Can't Sleep on Christmas Eve" and hopeful ones like "My Grown-Up Christmas List."

Perhaps it was mere coincidence, maybe the COVID-19 pandemic made me more contemplative, or it was simply time for me to confront a truth I hadn't fully acknowledged. In June 2020, as I listened to "O Holy Night" and softly sang along, a wave of understanding washed over me: Christmas carols were more than just festive songs; they were my way of keeping my father's memory alive. In the melodies and lyrics, I found a space where I could sit with my memories of him, where we could 'converse' in a way that felt real and tangible.

Each June, as the carols began to play, I would remember the fishing rod, the brown boot, the flute, and the man who gave them to me. I recalled the Christmases we spent together, the warmth and love that filled our home, and the father who helped make it possible. I also realized that June wasn't random; my subconscious was preparing me to navigate the nostalgia evoked by the anniversary of his death.

There's a line in the song, "My Grown-Up Christmas List" that says, "and time will heal all hearts." While the sentiment is comforting, I no longer agree with it. Time doesn't heal all hearts, and in some ways, I'm glad it doesn't. If it did, I might move on and forget the precious moments I've held onto — the moments when I listen to carols and remember my father. I would lose the sense of peace and comfort that comes with revisiting those memories. Some memories are meant to stay with us, they are a part of who we are. Christmas Carols are my way of keeping my father's memory alive, of ensuring that I never forget the man who made Christmas and life special for me.

Grief isn't something you get over; it's something you carry with you. It becomes a part of who you are, shaping your experiences and your outlook on life. For me, listening to Christmas carols in June is a way of carrying my grief, of honoring my father's memory, and of finding peace in the midst of loss.

Christmas Carols are more than just songs — they are a bridge to the past, a way to connect with the people I lost and the moments that have shaped us. They remind me of the joy and love that Christmas represents, even when we're far from

the holiday season. Listening to carols has become a deeply personal tradition for me, one that transcends the boundaries of time and season. In June, when the world is hot and far removed from the festive chill of December, I find solace, and a sense of peace in the familiar strains of “Silver Bells” and “So, This Is Christmas.”

In four years, we will mark the 20th anniversary of my father’s passing and truth be told, every year, the physical signs of his presence fade. We’ve rearranged the parlour furniture so often, I can no longer identify his favourite chair and last year, we packed up his treasured journals and encyclopaedias. Yet for me, if I have Christmas carols — whether in June or in December — I will always have a piece of him with me.

Durbars

Samson O. Eguavoen | Poetry

Well-dressed men in flowing Agbada
Well adorned turban covering
Every part of the head leaving
The vital portals of the face
The nose can freely take in air
The eyes are shaded and sparkling
From dark spectacles

Horses, over 300 of them
Legs beautifully shod
Saddles sack well designed
Looking gay and royal
Gallop with kingly strides
As tails wave in satisfaction

People laughing
Children cheering
Women dancing
The rich luxuriously dressed
The poor cleanly attired
Poverty well covered
No part of him at all
Exposed
Music is everywhere
Festivity is here

Men on horses
Not for present wars
Not for a jihad
Not for communal strife
But in remembrance
Not of past defeats
But several victories
Won by bravery and
Skills sharpened like the sword
Not through treachery and lies

Different groups gallop
In slow strides fearless
Carrying emblems of guilds

United in building the future
As they have the past
Protecting the emirate from
Conniving scum of men
Formidable foreign invaders
Internal disintegrating squabbles
And deceitful filthy lucre

Honoured cheered group
Ride in fast strides jubilant
As they return to tell
Their children the victories
Of their fathers and their mothers too
Reminding the present generation
Of the valour of past generations
Keeping the victories fresh in future
Generations, children of victors

At durbars
Pumped up cheeks
Piping the traditional horns
The booming kakaaki
Herald the pleasant vibes of gallops
Strong hands with sticks
Falling on drums
Cause men to rally
Accompanied by shrieks, claps, thuds
Women to dally
As they dance
To the admirations of strangers
And forever faithful brothers

Kunu, twuowo, nunu, miya
Must this day make friends with twisting tongues
Durbars are for kings
Durbars are for paupers
Durbars are for children
Durbars are for bearded men
Durbars are for flat-breast women
Durbars are for horses
Carrying men in dance of remembrance.

Glossary

Agbada: Long flowing gown worn by men
Kakaaki: Traditional musical instrument
Kunu: drink made from millet
Twuowo: pudding made either out of rice
or millet or maize
Nunu: cow milk
Miya: soup



“This intimate companionship with someone who knew me in a way that no one else did. It was a heightened state of friendship. Maybe it was also a bit of infatuation. But what I knew for sure was that it was also love.”

– Chinelo Okparanta,
Under the Udala Trees



The Rainbow Moth

Benjamin Cyril Arthur | Fiction

B^{irth...}

Whenever Christmas comes to mind, your thoughts immediately drift to Cape Coast and the memories of your grandmother, Martha. You can almost smell the aroma of her delectable fried fish, the sizzling sound it makes as it hits the hot oil, transporting you back to those cherished moments. And then, there's the familiar clatter of your grandfather's frustration with the television, adding to the nostalgic tapestry of your Christmas recollections.

You recall your cousin, adjusting the antenna outside. "Is it clear?" your cousin would call out.

"No!" would be your grandfather's response as he slapped the television out of impatience. You recall him swearing at the TV out of frustration the moment the images began to appear and you remember yourself, or try to picture a six-year-old version of you, a plastic blue doll in hand watching everyone like a hawk.

You were in the kitchen tasting everything Grandma cooked and you listened as she told you stories about your mother. "Your mother was the apple of everyone's eye. So beautiful. She could have easily won Miss Ghana if she wanted. You look so much like her." She touched your face, "So perfect, my Rainbow Moth." She would squeeze your cheeks till you laughed. She would then tell you an Ananse story. You loved your grandmother so much. You'd watch her fingers, stir and move things as she glided around the small kitchen. Her voice too, beautiful and soothing, forever imprinted in your mind so much that whenever you think of your childhood, of Cape Coast, you don't think of your father who was never there, or the mother who left the earth the day you arrived. You think of your grandmother, her voice, her laughter, her food and you, her beautiful grandbaby.

Larva...

You were thirteen, you think. It was Christmas, and Grandma Martha was walking towards the house hastily. She had spent the entire day at the market. Her hair was all grey now. You remember sitting in the parlour reading as she walked in.

"Papa, have you bathed?" She'd pronounce bathed as baff. *That's how the Fantes say it*, she'd say whenever you tried to correct her. *We are not obronyi*. "Your armpit, you don't want to be the handsome boy that smells like rotten fish, do you?"

"Ma, I already took my bath," you replied. She smiled then sat down

"Have they started?" she asked, picking up the TV remote.

“No, ma,” you replied. She switched on the TV to watch her telenovela, *Paloma*. It was all everyone talked about. She never missed an episode.

Five minutes into the show, she threw down her remote, “Paloma, what are you doing?” she shouted and you laughed so hard tears fell from your eyes.

“Auntie Martha, you know she is going to marry Stephan.”

“Why are you going to marry your father's killer!”

You prop your head on the sofa watching her.

You remember this day because it was the day of the world cup. You remember being distracted by sudden jeers and chants from the other side of the house. You recalled walking to the window to get a better look at your noisy cousins. They were standing by Mr. Atta's window watching the world cup. All five of them. Hands on waist, saggy knickers like what the rappers were doing on TV. You watched their anxious head bob up and down as they anticipated a goal. Someone scored and pandemonium erupted everywhere. The night air came in through the window and so did his eyes. You remember them, brown with golden flecks twinkling as he looked at you. Maybe it was the moon, but he looked divine. You were speechless.

You remember Kwesi Atta, your older cousin, walking up to him and high fiving and screaming football nonsense at him. The boy was bare chested, sweat glistening off his toned muscled body. You swallowed hard. The warm breeze blowing that night came in like it always did and left with the old you. You remember feeling something you hadn't felt before. In that moment, you were Paloma and you wanted that boy to see you, to notice you. Your insides were screaming.

Pupae...

You were seventeen-years-old in high school, you think. A day before the Christmas break. You remember the bustling classroom, the flurry of activities. The girls, walking out of class to go change out of their uniforms and the boys, standing by the teacher's desk talking about the world cup. You watched quietly as they loudly compared Ronaldo with Messi. Cool breeze came in through the windows and so did Jason's eyes. Your class prefect. He looked away immediately and you went back to staring at your book.

You recalled the charged atmosphere that day, the anticipation of leaving the classroom to run around the football field. You saw yourself, the introvert, carrying a secret he dared not share. You remembered your hands shaking as you pretended to change out of your uniform into your sportswear. Your nervous glances at the boys. Their easy camaraderie, a stark reminder of your loneliness. You tried not to look too much. You didn't picture their bodies at all. Their arms, their toned muscles. Eventually, everyone runs out to the school field and it's just you. You take a deep breath and then begin to change. But then, amidst the silence, you turned and your eyes met those of Jason's. He hadn't left. He was looking at you as he always did. This time, it was a little different. In that fleeting moment, there was a brief moment of connection, a flicker of understanding that passed between you two. You remember seeing a glimmer of empathy, perhaps, or maybe something more. Your heart skipped a beat as you dared to entertain the possibility of acceptance, of finding

solace in the company of someone who understood you.

But just as quickly as it had come, the moment passed, and he turned away. Your heart sank, and the hope that had briefly flickered within you immediately died. You looked up at him again, He was back to staring at you but smiling now. He gave you the middle finger, chuckled and out of nowhere, threw his book at you. The air crackled with tension as you stood up, locked in your anger. You picked up the textbook. It was from the school library. You saw the do not you tear sign written in bold capital letters. You lock eyes with him, smiling before tearing the first six pages off still maintaining eye contact. In a sudden surge of emotion, he lunged forward, his hands reaching out and shoving you roughly against the wall. You remember being caught off guard, stumbling backward, heart pounding in your chest as you brace yourself for the punch that should follow. To your surprise, the punch never came. Instead, you hear his ragged breathing slowing down as the clock ticked away. Then you feel it, his lips, soft and warm pressing against yours. The kiss is as unexpected as it was electrifying. You remember the anger that consumed you, melting away in an instant, replaced by a rush of heat and desire that left you wanting more.

As you pull apart, your eyes meet in silent acknowledgment of the unspoken truth. He didn't say anything, he ran away immediately, and left you standing there unable to move.

You didn't see him all day after that kiss. You were wracked with guilt and fear. What if he told someone. You tried looking for him but you didn't find him. That evening, after dinner, you went back to study like you do every night. You remember the anxiety and butterflies in your stomach when he walked in and sat beside you. He was wearing a black cardigan and black trousers. He couldn't look at you. He looked straight ahead. "What are you doing here?" you asked.

"Studying with you."

"You're not going to punch me are you?"

"No," he replied.

You're both quietly staring out the window when you turn to him. "I won't say anything," you quietly muttered. "Please don't tell anyone."

"I won't," he replied.

The soft glow of moonlight filtered through the window. The room was quiet except for the occasional rustle of pages. Your shoulders brushed against each other in a silent dance of longing. You stole glances out of the corner of your eyes, your gaze lingering on the curve of his sweet lips. In a moment of boldness born of longing, you reached out, your hand found and intertwined with his. You remember feeling like your soul was on fire. Without a word, you closed the book and set it aside, your hands still joined together. You faced each other in the dim light. In a rush of courage and vulnerability, you leaned forward, your lips, meeting in a kiss that spoke volumes more than love songs ever could.

The Rainbow Moth...

You're 28, and it's Christmas Eve. The Harmattan wind blows cool and dry against your face as you make your way up the red dirt path leading to the house at the top of the hill. The sky above is a deep, endless black, but the stars shine brilliantly, scattered like beads on velvet. In your hand is a basket full of kelewele, your humble contribution to tonight's gathering. As you walk, memories of Grandma drift in like the faint scent of roasting goat wafting from the houses you pass. She always loved Christmas. This is the first Christmas without her, and the ache of her absence feels heavier with each step. "Celebrate well," she used to say, her gap-toothed smile bright and full of life. You smile faintly at the memory, clutching the parcel tighter as you press on.

The house comes into view, its warm yellow light spilling out onto the compound. Shadows of your friends move behind the windows, laughter and music faintly reaching you. You feel your spirit lift, just a little, as you approach the wooden gate. Before you can knock, the door flies open. "Ei, you're finally here!" someone shouts, and a flurry of movement rushes toward you. A mob of friends tumble out, their voices overlapping in excited greetings. Arms pull you into hugs, laughter erupts as someone grabs the kelewele from your hands, and a Santa hat is plopped onto your head. The scent of chicken and jollof rice wafts through the air, mixing with the smoky aroma of the charcoal stoves burning in the yard and then, from somewhere in the crowd, a loud, mischievous shout.

"Move out of the way!" Before you can react, Xola, your boyfriend, bursts out of the house with a lit firecracker in his hand, his face split into a wide grin.

"Xola! Don't—" you begin, but it's too late. He tosses the firecracker into the air, and it explodes with a loud *pop-pop-pop*, sparks flying in every direction. Shrieks of laughter erupt as everyone scatters, some diving behind chairs while others howl with delight. The fireworks keep coming. Xola has lit another bundle, this time letting them burst closer to the compound's edge.

"You'll burn the mango tree!" someone yells, but they're laughing too hard to sound serious.

You try to glare at Xolali, but he's already running toward you, his grin infectious as he grabs your hands and spins you around. "Come on," he says, his voice alive with mischief. "Grandma would've loved this!" Despite yourself, you laugh, the sound breaking free like the sparks in the air. You let him pull you into the swirling chaos of firecrackers, smoke, and laughter, your heart lighter than it's been in weeks. Somewhere in the back of your mind, you can almost hear Grandma's voice, her laughter blending with yours.

A Season's Love

Dikun Elioba | Poetry

Do you remember the last Thanksgiving?
I did and dreamt of your skin.
It is the day of autumn, pecans, nutmeg and pumpkin.
Turkey and stuffing but beyond food
I foreshadow the holiday with us together.

I dream of tinted neon lights and candle lit dinners
in a dark room with African oriented decor.
An African Kwanzaa after Christmas.
I yearn for deep conversations with a loved one nearby
who will listen to my thoughts and ideas.
I imagine growing thirsty with desire to fill the passion
in my heart with a lovely individual.
This is when I dream of you.
I imagine hot incense and perfumed skin
within your company
not just this season but beyond
not just Christmas presents
but your soul.
Oiled skin.
A warm embrace.
Passion in my life as I long of mutual feelings in an ambiguous relationship.
I want to understand the difference between lust and love.
I yearn for someone who wants to cherish life deeper and take a journey.

It occurs every year.
I am filled with desire and regret even when we are apart.
I wonder if you still think of me and the distance of time.
The holidays should be spent with loved ones
Yet this is when I feel for you the most in solitude.
I want to dwell within your arms where I feel cared for
and when the holidays are near
I secretly wish to spend it within the trace of your hands.

Ọdúnayò

Tomilola Coco Adeyemo | Fiction



ṣẹ̀yíṣàṃọ̀dún

The Christmas season was when Alhaji lined up his daughters for the men who would marry them. In my culture, hefty sums paid as bride price were not popular. But when you were Alhaji Owonikoko’s daughter, it meant you were one of his many failures in life — ranking right below his failed cocoa business and just above his dwindling influence in our small town — and the only way you could salvage the situation was to marry into money or influence when you turned eighteen.

Sometimes age wasn’t a friend and Alhaji got impatient and lambasted the wives when they brought him supper or his palmwine. Or when they greeted him in the morning. Then he spoke Yoruba and English as if the wives who didn’t go to school understood him. “What if I do not good morning? If not that you are not true mothers, would it not have occurred to you that you should get your daughters out of the house I built with my hard-earned money?! Èyin oníyèyè” It made all the mothers desperate and as my mother sometimes suspected, used *oògùn* to aid marriage prospects between my sisters and suitors. She didn’t really blame them though — a true *abiyamọ* should be able to do anything for their children, including collecting witchcraft.

My mother died shortly after the new year which meant that unlike my half-sisters whose mothers could lobby the best men for them out of the options that came to our compound, I was alone with my fate. To make matters worse, my mother’s daughters were married and scattered across the country. The letters and small money that used to come in the months following our mother’s funeral had stopped. After three months of eating leftover lunch and drinking garri, I went to the only bakery in town to work but the salary barely put food in my stomach after I saved some for university. I stopped crying the week before Christmas. It wasn’t that I had accepted fate, it was because crying began to require strength I didn’t have. So, I filled my mind with thoughts of how to escape the foolish marriage to an unknown spouse.

I spent more time at the annual Christmas morning service held at the old apostolic church that Christmas. After it ended, I hid in a corner, sucking on fresh almond fruits I had plucked from a tree on my way to church. I wanted to hide until dark but hunger pangs woke me when I slept off. So, I peeped through a window, watching the *Olùṣọ* slaughter a big chicken. His wife stirred a big pot of egusi soup before throwing some boiled yam into a mortar, ready to pound. The rumbling in my stomach tempted me to announce my presence, but they would alert my stepmothers

and Alhaji, which would land me in soup.

At sundown, I ran out of luck. My older sister Tawakalitu found me at the back of the church where I was cracking the dried fruits open with a stone, hoping for nuts. She chewed gum loudly while patting her newly done jerry curls, asking if I wanted to grow old there. The Olùşó and his wife were shocked that I hadn't gone home. They gave me pounded yam wrapped in leaves and some egusi soup in a small plastic bowl. It made me feel slightly better as I walked home to a useless fate. At least tonight I would have the strength to cry. During our journey, Tawa talked about the gold bangles she was wearing — could I not see them? They were from her suitor Olawale. He was the second son of a major chief in town. Rumours swirled about Olawale's cocaine smuggling business but Tawa and Alhaji had bigger concerns — how to plan a wedding party the town won't recover from for years. When Tawa took some rest from talking about her good fortune, she made sure to tell me about my bad luck — my husband-to-be was an olòṣì; he owned poverty as an identity.

At the entrance of our big 'face me I face you' home, there was the worn doormat with a pair of shoes. Alhaji's important guests never had to remove their shoes at the door. This confirmed Tawa's verdict of my suitor. I hesitated at the door, hoping for a Christmas miracle. My mother believed in such nonsense but I didn't. If miracles were real, she would be here, I would be at the University of Ibadan studying English, and I would not be marrying anybody today. Still, I shut my eyes, daring Angel Michael to prove himself; asking him to whisk me away to the Kenneth Dike library I had heard so much about. I had never been to a library but I knew I would like it. Instead of an answered prayer, I am pushed from the back by the cold steel of a tray. One of my stepmothers shoves me with her arm when I don't move on time. I recognized the tray and the cup in her hands — they were reserved for unimportant guests. "With all the school, is it still not a man you will end up under?" she said before she greeted the guest 'àṣẹ̀yísàmódún o.' I lifted the curtain at the entrance of Alhaji's sitting room, tiny grains of sand sticking to my feet on the bare linoleum carpet. Unimportant suitor was sitting, barefoot and bored.

"Joko sẹ̀gbẹ̀ ọ̀kọ ẹ! Èwo ni rádaràda?" Alhaji's voice was gruff and impatient. His eyes darted from the Yoruba newspaper in his hands to the bowl of kolanut before him. He did not look at us. When NEPA struck and the power went off an hour later, I realized the unimportant suitor still hadn't said anything. Not only was he unfortunate, he was mute too. Finally, as we rose and walked out of the room, I walked quickly in front of him, refusing to look at him, doing all the things my mother used to say men hated when women did. If he couldn't speak, it meant that I was lucky. Hopefully, he didn't communicate with his fist.

Beneath the departing afternoon sun, close to the banana and pawpaw trees and in front of the clear path that used to lead to Alhaji's cocoa farm, I finally got a glimpse at the unimportant suitor. He was beautiful. He had a scar above his eyebrow and when he walked, a limp. Quickly, my interest in him rose — who was he and why did he have the scar and the limp? His clothes were of a fine ankara fabric and he wore a simple leather wristwatch, the type our school's principal wore all the time. Was he a teacher? He reminded me of the strict teachers at school. Alhaji didn't send his daughters to school and my mother had spent all the money she made from selling boiled rice and beans to send me to school until she fell ill and eventually died. If the suitor was a teacher, did that mean I could go to the University?

A Volkswagen beetle driven by Olawale sped past, raising harmattan dust, almost crashing into us. The unimportant suitor grabbed my hand and pulled me back. “You do not have to marry me,” he said once the dust had settled. “You are too young. This is wrong.” He spoke as if it was me who arranged this strange meeting.

“Are you old yourself?” I couldn’t understand my annoyance. He was telling the truth.

“I am twenty-five. How old are you?” He not only looked like a strict teacher, he spoke like one too. But there was a softness in his eyes that the strict teachers in school never had.

“I am 18. Why did you come then?”

He shook his head sadly, “They arranged a meeting with my father who hopes that I will be responsible and settle down.”

“Are you responsible?”

“I am. Are you?” I eyed him up and down. “Listen, I am engaged to be married to someone... She is in Aramoko. A nurse. She is... We hope to abscond. You and I can come to an arrangement.” Each word he spoke surprised me. My mother told me a lot about men. They weren’t all bad things but she never prepared me for what to do with one that had sense. “Our culture is a beautiful one but things like this... these unfair expectations in a patriarchal society where a woman’s voice is inundated by the absurd demands is something that befuddles me.” *Inundated. Befuddles.* No problem. I will learn the meaning at university. “Listen, I will tell them that I will be back with your bride price. We can put up a show but you have your life ahead of you. I hope they let you go to school. There is so much you can become. Not the naïve wife of a much-experienced older man.” His words were like the sweetness that followed the initial bitterness of the ewúro leaf.

Finally, when it seemed as though I was the one who had gone mute, I said, “There is no money to go to school.”

“But there is a scholarship program. I know someone who can guide you.”

Later after my delicious meal of pounded yam and egusi soup, dry-eyed, I belched and muttered to myself a prayer I never truly understood the meaning but that today made me grateful for, ‘àṣẹ̀yíṣà̀mò̀dún o.’ I drank some more water, content, wanting more of this festive season.

E kú ọ̀dún

Three things made Thursdays my favourite day of the week — Checkmate, the lightness of schoolwork on Friday and my best friend Nonye arriving from her station to spend the weekend in my flat. That night, she arrived armed with the bread and gala that she bought at the park at New Garage and some piping hot gossip to go with it.

My gaze was set on Ego Boyo’s stylish attire on the screen as Nonye reeled off salacious gossip about our former NYSC mates — whose marriage had recently hit the rocks, who everyone suspected had AIDS, and my half-sister Tawakalitu whose husband had just returned from prison to find her heavily pregnant with another

man's twins. "She left him before he came back from prison. He beat her black and blue. It was the talk of the town."

My eyes followed the soap on the screen, "What a pity."

"Sorry to say, but your sister leaving a man whose money she enjoyed after his arrest is terrible."

Tawa and I were not close but I knew she was doing what she thought was best in the situation. "All she knows is how to be a wife. She has not made money by herself from morning to night before. What were you people expecting of her? Who will take care of the five children she had with Olawale?" She was an Iyawo alabodo — a wife you fed to fuck.

"She should still have had some small shame please."

Soon, Nonye took empty bottles of Coke and Fanta from my kitchen and went to buy some Coca-Cola. When she returned, she complained about us sitting in. "Tomorrow is Good Friday. Let's go and get down at that nice nightclub they just opened in Dugbe."

"You know I don't like all that gba gba gbo gbo in the name of music, Nonye."

"No no, none of that useless noise. It is my guy's friend's birthday. Maybe you will meet somebody nice too." I wasn't interested in meeting anyone. My last relationship ended two months ago after I caught my boyfriend of five years in bed with his 'cousin.' Nonye left me no choice though. She picked clothes from her traveling bag — a micro mini skirt and a linen shirt.

"Nonye, that is too short."

"Not for a woman who has cobwebs in there," she pointed between my legs.

"Are you hoping I meet someone new or you're hoping I am slept with?"

"I am hoping that you meet someone new that you can sleep with."

Nonye and I stepped into town shortly after that. At the club, the Notorious B.I.G. music was too loud. I found someplace less noisy, grateful to be alone until the pungent smell of cigarettes caused me to look over my shoulder.

"I am sorry. I did not know anybody was here..." We recognized each other at the same time. He hadn't changed much save for a full beard that made him more manly, gone was the pretty boy look from seven years ago and in its place was a ruggedly handsome man. The scar was still there but time had faded it a bit. He looked jaded but it wasn't from whatever day he'd had. "Goodness! You've hardly changed," his gaze set on mine, piercing. "What are you doing here?"

"It is a friend's boyfriend's friend's party."

"E wa gba disco," he said, the tiniest smile flashing across his face.

"E kú ọdún," I shrugged as I returned the festive greeting.

"Did you eventually make it to the University?" he asked.

"Yes. I studied English at UI. I am now an English teacher at a government secondary school. I briefly taught in a private primary school too."

"I knew you were better than being a broodmare."

"You? How are you? And the love of your life?"

His tone was dry, "These days I have many loves."

I should have prodded further but something about the sudden electric charge in the atmosphere as Brandy's "I Wanna Be Down" came on and shoved common sense to the back of my mind. He drew the cigarette between his lips as my gaze fell

to his left hand. There was no ring. He is a lover boy, the sort to wear a wedding band everywhere. Perhaps his wife was dead and he was heartbroken and both of us could spend the night together, healing.

“Do you mind?” he asked of the cigarette burning between his fingers.

“No. But it’s a nasty habit.”

He smiled wryly, his eyes looked sunken, “A terrible habit I picked up recently.”

“Why?”

“I lost someone.” Was that his wife? Again, I refused to go down that hill.

We sat quietly for a few seconds before he asked me more about work. I told him about teaching and how I sold shoes on the side. Unlike the other teachers who abandoned their desks for their stalls at Gbagi market, I only sold my shoes on the weekends. Maybe one day I would be able to leave the teaching job and run the business. He told me that he had a fabric business. He asked about Alhaji and I told him he was dead. I barely went home anymore. Time passed and then he said, “Is your house close by? Take me there.”

We ended up in my flat after I said goodbye to Nonye. I could barely keep my hands to myself once we stepped in, knocking down the empty bottles of Coca-Cola. We were feral, tearing at each other’s clothes like the world was going to end and we had just a few minutes. When he pushed into me, felt my tightness and saw the wincing on my face, he stopped.

“You’ve never done this before?”

I shook my head. He wanted to pull out but I held on tightly to his arms. “Please don’t. I want to.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I... It’s just a hymen.” He was still, surprised. “What now? Do I befuddle you?” I grinned. He was confused but I leaned forward and kissed him. He pushed deeper, grinding slowly, holding my gaze, pulling my hands to hold his waist.

“Just move as I move.” I did and he flashed me a wicked grin. It was hot, it was a sweet sweet ache; the type of pain that I liked. My breathing was faster and when we kissed again, I bathed in the warmth of his breath against my skin. He emptied himself on my stomach afterward, rolling over, both our gazes locked on the ceiling.

When our breathing steadied, we talked some more; about the future and the past. I asked about his limp. It was from an accident when he was traveling to meet the woman he loved years ago. It was a scar he bore proudly, he said. I told him about the man I had thought I would marry and he squeezed my arm. We fell silent for a bit.

“It was wrong to think about you as a bride years ago. You had your life ahead of you. But I always hoped you’d find your way and I am pleased that you did. And now, I wish the circumstances were different.” Again, I didn’t ask questions. We made love some more and drifted into sleep after. When I woke up, he was gone. There was a letter by my bedside that read: *Take a leap, follow your dreams. I intend to.* It wasn’t supposed to sting, but I was flooded by a strong, unfamiliar emotion.

Odún ayò la ó şẹ

On my 27th birthday, I decided to leave the school I had taught at for years, my resignation letter in hand. I was headed to the Ministry of Education to officially submit it. I had just produced my first batch of shoes, named after my mother. There was promise but I didn't know what the future held. I arrived at the crowded bus stop, scanning for the next available bus. A Mercedes Benz V-boot slowed down and people rushed to it, hoping they could get a lift to their destination. But the driver wouldn't let anybody in. Someone stepped out of the backseat and the crowd parted, glances thrown my way. And there he was.

My beautiful ex-unfortunate suitor. A regular festive occurrence. His eyes looked as happy as they did the first time I saw him, his clothes dapper, showing off his fuller frame. There was even a little roundness in his belly — the sign of good health, I liked to call it. For a second, I forgot how angry I was at him.

“What are you doing here?”

“I went to your school. They said you just left. I was going to wait for you at home until you showed up.”

“After you walked out on me years ago. Do you know how many things have happened in those two years?!”

“As long as none of those things include a husband.”

“I could be engaged.”

“As I said, as long as you're not married.”

“But you were still married. I saw the papers. The same papers that told me you were a business tycoon with a multimillion Naira business. You said you sold fabric.”

“A multimillion Naira *fabric* business.”

“What do you want?”

“You. I told you I was going to take a leap and follow my dreams.”

“You are married.”

“Not anymore. I wasn't on that night either.” I didn't move. “Come. let me show you something.” When I still didn't move, he added a soft, “Please.”

He led me to his car and handed me newspapers and magazines. Some of them soft sell. “Read here and here and here...” he was showing me pages in the papers where he'd been interviewed, where he'd spoken about his personal life. He was no longer married. The journalists were surprised that he spoke about his private life. He said he was keeping up appearances when he and his wife showed up in public and he was now done. “I hoped that you would see these.” I hadn't. I had stopped looking after that one popular newspaper profiled him and his wife two years ago. “Your case was similar to mine. I walked in on her and my brother... but I am not here to dwell on her. I am here for you. It wasn't okay the first time, and the second time was proof it would be, so now I'm here. To be with you.”

I let him hold my hand as I leaned against the cool seat. Nonye would say that one must do shakara for a man so that he won't think one is cheap. But I knew that didn't apply to him. Still, I said nothing until we'd spent three days together in my apartment, making love, him cooking our meals, and us watching movies we rented from the video club, until he said, “Marry me or to God who made me I will never stop chasing you.”

So, on Christmas day, two weeks after we reconnected and nine years after we first met, I said, “I will marry you.”
He drew me closer, placed my head on his shoulders and said, “Ọdún ayò la ó ma bára wa ẹẹ.”

Burnt Turkey: A Lonely Christmas

Keletso Thobega | Poetry

You squealed as you made your way into the kitchen—
a mess of stray hair, flaying gowns & tattered slippers.
You almost tripped and fell as you made your way towards the stove,
thick smoke filling up the tiny kitchen,
and just like that, ending your fancy Christmas meal mission...

There would be no turkey dinner for Christmas!
You opened the window to let the smoke out
and painfully burnt yourself as you pulled the pan from stove plate,
a part of you glad you have caught the smell not too late...

Your dinner had gone up in flames,
and now your emotions were all over, tears stinging your face...

You slipped slowly to the floor and sat with your head between your knees,
defeated, exhausted.
At that moment you just wanted someone
to hold you close in a warm embrace,
to ease your grimace...

Your feet still ached, weary from all the walking
in malls doing Christmas shopping.
Nobody speaks about the pressure, stress and tiredness
that comes with that festive mood,
but perhaps everyone wants to just be good,
to enjoy the food & booze...

To laugh and be merry,
and for just once in a year stop being teary...

But even with the joyous mood peppered
with carol songs, fancy decorations & joyful parties and jamborees,
your shoulders were heavy from carrying the weight of your world,
navigating a story you had never lived through...

All you could ever fear, had sadly come to pass that year.
Your mama died and your papa died.
Nine months apart spaced like a pregnancy.
Your dog got lost and your lover left.
In all that year you tasted loss, grief, sadness and heartbreak,
leaving you sad and dreading Christmas...

No more buffet lunches prepared lovingly by mom,
washed down with iced tea and lemonade made by your father.
No more stuffing your face with treats to add a few pounds,
laughing throughout the little family party,
lost in the moments of ecstatic joy,
as you unwrapped gifts and passed some around.
No more lazy evenings playing slow jam music on the stereo,
or listening to papa play the keyboard,
as mommy sang happily off-key, egging you to join her in boisterous song.
No more nights of downing warm wine,
laced with soft conversations indicating an end to another day...

The nostalgia permeated you and you cried,
smiled and wailed about how crappy life could be.
And here it was, a Christmas un-merry as could be,
the burnt turkey sure was a sign you could see...

Love at First Smile

Musleemat Elewade | Fiction

With Kizito, it wasn't love at first sight. Rather, it was love at first smile. A book review held at a small bookstore in Surulere, some weeks before Christmas, brought Kizito to me.

I was sitting around a table, amongst people who had a certain aura I couldn't quite place. My eyes wandered across the room, settling on a guy whose hair was plaited in neat, big cornrows. He wasn't particularly handsome; he had a wide face and a crooked nose. Perhaps it was the way he smiled at me that held my gaze. I quickly broke eye contact and concentrated instead on the book in front of me.

"Let's start with you," a fair, soft-faced woman said, looking at me. "What did you enjoy most about *Honey and Spice*?"

"Well... I would say Kiki's radio show, *Brown Sugar*. It felt like a safe place for women to talk about both the beautiful and messy aspects of their relationships without holding anything back."

After the review, I walked out of the bookstore into the crisp harmattan air. I pulled out my phone and ordered an Uber. "That wasn't so bad, right?" a deep, baritone voice behind me said.

I turned, asking, "What do you mean?"

It was the guy who had smiled at me earlier. "I'm talking about the book review."

"Oh, yeah. It was nice." I wondered why he asked for my opinion. "Are you... waiting for someone?" I asked, when he remained rooted to the spot.

"No, are you?"

I shook my head, "Just waiting for my Uber."

Playing with the tip of his cornrows, he stuttered, "Do you wa... want to grab some lunch with me before your Uber arrives? I know a good spot nearby."

Having a lunch with a guy whose smile I found endearing didn't seem like a bad idea. Yet, the fact that he was still a stranger gnawed at me. "No, thank you. I'm not hungry." As if on cue, I was betrayed by a rumbling sound from my stomach.

Embarrassment washed over me.

"Your stomach says different," he said, smiling.

"It does that sometimes, even when I'm not hungry," I lied.

"C'mon, I promise you will love the peppered snails at *Ofada Heaven*," he persuaded. The thought of having peppered snails seemed very inviting, so I agreed. "I'm Kizito by the way."

"Anne," I said, as he led me towards the streets adorned with Christmas lights.

A week passed before I saw Kizito again. After our lunch the other day, we exchanged numbers and had been chatting ever since. Like me, he had a soft spot for historical Korean dramas.

When his name flashed across my phone screen on a cold Saturday morning, I couldn't help but smile. "Hi," I said, in the most casual voice I could make as I picked up.

"Heyyy, good morning. Did you sleep well?" His voice held a certain calmness, like still water.

"Yes," I replied.

"That's good. Do you know the saying, 'Two souls connect better in the same dwelling'?" he asked.

"No. I've never heard it," I said, unsure of where the conversation was going.

"That's because I came up with it."

"Really? I asked, surprised. "What does it mean?"

"It means the bond between two people gets stronger when they are in closer contact with each other. Like you and I, for example. I believe we could become closer if we went out more."

"Wait, are you trying to ask me out on a date?" I asked, trying to contain the excitement in my voice.

He chuckled, "You got me. So, what do you say?"

"Yes," I said, a wide grin spreading across my face.

One date with Kizito turned into multiple dates and picnics.

"Let me do the shuffling," I said, taking the Whot cards from him. We were in a buka, waiting for our steamy plates of Jollof rice and Moimoi to arrive, the air thick with the smell of food. He had suggested that we played a game of Whot while we waited.

"So, you can get a glimpse of my cards, right?" he asked, his face breaking into a small smile.

"No, I just like shuffling. Also, don't feel too bad when I win," I said, teasing him as I shuffled the cards. When he didn't say anything, I stopped shuffling and lifted my gaze to find him staring intently at me. "Um... why are you staring at me like that?"

"I'm sorry. I couldn't help it. I like watching you. I like how you always root for the characters in the dramas you watch like they are your friends. I like the little parts of you I've seen these past few weeks, and I hope to see more."

A warm sensation spread over me. I also longed to tell him that all the times I have spent with him felt like I was in a never ending train of happiness. Yet, I felt it was too soon to say all these. "Kizito, I—"

"I didn't mean to overwhelm you by saying all that. I only wanted you to know how I truly feel about you. Believe me, I don't even mind being friend-zoned for the time being."

"Are you sure? Friend zones can be really frustrating," I said, trying to steer the conversation in a different direction.

"Well, if it involves you, then I don't mind," he said.

My phone vibrated with a text just as the credits of *The Grinch* rolled out. It was from Kizito, asking if I had any plans for Christmas tomorrow. I smiled and started to type, *Not really, do you? We could*— I stopped typing, my fingers hovered around the keyboard. What was I thinking? Why did it feel like I was about to make the same mistake I did years ago?

I've had many relationships in the past, but none of them had lasted long. Maybe the relationships didn't work out because I had rushed into them. What if things ended like that with Kizito too? I deleted the message I was typing and replaced it with, *Thinking of going to visit my parents, it's been a while.*

“So, what are we doing next?” Tope asked. Tope was my friend and colleague at work. Earlier today, I called her and asked if she wanted to celebrate Christmas with me. We had done a bit of shopping and attended a stage play.

“I think we should get something to eat,” I answered.

“Let's check out Remi's kitchen. I heard they have the best peppered snails,” Tope suggested. Peppered snails reminded me of Kizito, and a pang of yearning descended upon me. “What's wrong?” she asked, her eyebrows furrowing.

“Nothing,” I said, forcing a smile. “Let's go.” Shopping bags in hand, we crossed the bustling streets, and headed for the restaurant.

On a quiet Sunday afternoon, as December bid its farewell, I called Kizito. I had not spoken to him since the day before Christmas. His messages still lay unanswered in my inbox. I tapped my feet, waiting for his gentle voice to fill my ears.

“Hey,” he said, his voice devoid of its usual warmth.

“There's um, something I need to tell you,” I said.

“Is everything okay, Anne?” he asked, worry etched in his voice.

“No, everything is not okay. I stayed away from you because I wanted to avoid my feelings and not rush into things.” I paused, summoning courage. “But I really like you, Kizito. And I'm too scared to push this forward, scared it might not work out.”

“Anne,” he started. “I want you to know that I'm willing to paddle in whatever direction you tell me to.” His kind words melted my heart.

“Thanks for saying that to me,” I said, feeling lighter.

A few seconds passed before Kizito spoke again, “I have a small confession to make.”

“I'm listening,” I said, sitting up.

“Yesterday, I was craving peppered snails, so I went to *Ofada Heaven*. But I couldn't even get past the second piece.”

“Why?” I asked.

“It didn't taste the same without you,” he replied.

I felt my cheeks heat up as I smiled and thought, “liar.”

“Whenever you feel like it, let's enjoy peppered snails together again.”
“Okay, I'd like that,” I said, smiling.



“And, for some reason, he thinks of the day of Eid, and the crescent, which celebrates the end of Ramadan. Everyone wears new clothes, everyone goes visiting; the children play games and eat sweets, and the alleys are alive with celebrations. Friends hug each other while he waits aside for something new or special to lift this day out of the ordinary and make him celebrate.”

– Leila Aboulela,
Lyrics Alley



A Festive Nostalgia: Summertime Gathering & Celebrations in Kebdana

Lamiae Zeriouh | Creative Non-Fiction

There are places in the world that hold pieces of one's heart, where memories seem to hang in the air, waiting for us to return. For me, that place is Kebdana, a town in north-east Morocco inhabited by the Ichebdanen (ⵍⵉⵔⵉⵎⵓⵏ), Amazigh community. Every summer, our family tradition would come alive as we all gathered at my grandparents' house, an oasis of love, laughter, and the simple joys of life. The days would blend into one another, like a symphony of shared meals, playful laughter, and Grandmother's stories that carried the weight of generations, not to forget the week-long wedding celebrations we attended with immense joy. Up to this day, the thought of those summer days warms my heart and fills me with a profound longing for the past.

The Cousinhood Gathering

The highlight of summer was always the arrival at my grandparents' house. The excitement would begin long before reaching Kebdana, as every cousin packed bags full of small gifts for the other cousins and delicacies for Grandmother's pantry. The house itself, with its sprawling courtyard and weathered walls, seemed to exude a welcoming embrace. One by one, cars would arrive, and the cousins would spill out like an unstoppable tide of energy, hugs, and cheerful greetings. The adults caught up with each other over mint tea, while we children sprinted to claim our favorite sleeping spots or shouted to plan the games we would play. Those arrivals were more than just reunions; they were the rekindling of bonds that distance could never break.

Games and Adventures in Nature

As soon as the morning sun bathed the fields in its golden light, the real adventures began. Kebdana's natural beauty was our playground — a sprawling canvas of rolling hills, vibrant wildflowers, and olive groves. We played tag through the fields, climbed trees, and sometimes ventured into the nearby streams, daring each other to jump across the cool water. The laughter that echoed through the countryside was pure and unfiltered, such a celebration of youth. When we grew tired, we would lie on our backs in the grass, pointing out imaginary shapes in the clouds. Nature's embrace was a gift we did not fully appreciate at the time, but looking back, I know it gave us freedom and joy that no toy or device ever could.

Traditional Bread Making

Perhaps the most mesmerizing tradition was watching Grandmother prepare bread in the traditional oven. Early in the morning, before the rest of the household stirred, she would knead the dough with a rhythm that felt like a dance. We would sit by her side, fascinated by the way her hands transformed flour and water into something magical. The smell of the baking bread, mingling with the earthy scent of the wood fire, was an aroma that seemed to wrap the whole house in comfort. When the bread was ready, we would tear off pieces, still warm, and eat them with honey or olive oil. It was a simple meal, but it tasted like love and tradition, and a long-lasting reminder of our roots.

Evenings with Grandmother

The evenings in Kebdana held a special magic, centered around our beloved Grandmother. Her gentle hands, worn by years of hard work, would peel the prickly cacti fruit with an effortless grace. We gathered around her, innocently competing to have as much fruit peeled for each one and eager to claim our share of the sweetly juicy treat. It was more than just a snack. It was a ritual of innocent connection. As the sun dipped below the horizon, Grandmother's stories began. Her voice carried us to faraway lands and ancient times, where brave heroes and clever heroines triumphed against all odds. We listened, wide-eyed, as the shadows on the walls seemed to dance in rhythm with her words. Falling asleep to the sound of her voice was like being cradled by the universe itself, just safe and loved.

Week-Long Wedding Ceremonies: Laboya, Izran, and Bendir Vibes

One of the most exciting parts of our summers in Kebdana was the chance to attend weddings and witness the rich traditions of our community since most weddings were rescheduled in the summertime vacation as to have everyone attend. Nearly fourteen years ago, I remember, weddings in Kebdana were grand, week-long celebrations that brought together extended families, friends, and neighbors. For us cousins, it was a thrilling experience to dress up, join the festive atmosphere, and feel like a part of something greater than ourselves. The anticipation and excitement built slowly over many days before the three official days, each day marking a significant ritual and communal gathering. It was a time when people set aside their daily routines and responsibilities, devoting themselves entirely to the festivities. Each day held its own special meaning while reinforcing the union of two families and their connection to a shared cultural heritage.

One of the most cherished aspects of these wedding festivities was the singing of Laboya, traditional songs accompanied by the steady rhythm of the Bendir drum. Each night, neighbors and family members would gather in the courtyard or under a large tent, forming a circle as they sang Izran — songs that told stories, recounted ancestral tales, and expressed love, joy, and sorrow. We cousins would sit in awe, clapping along or even daring to join in the chanting, feeling like we had been transported back in time. The Bendir, a simple frame drum, was the heartbeat of the celebration, its deep resonance echoing through the night and binding everyone

together in a shared experience of sound and soul. The songs were not just entertainment, they were a form of storytelling as well as a way for elders to pass down ecstasy and pride to younger generations. With each beat of the Bendir, memories were woven into the fabric of the community, leaving an indelible mark on everyone who participated. For four days, the community would gather, laugh, and sing, creating a space where individual identities dissolved into the collective spirit of celebration.

By the first official day, the excitement would shift to a more intimate and symbolic ritual — the Henna ceremony. Female relatives of the bride and groom, along with friends, would gather around to bless the couple with henna. As cousins, we watched with fascination as the bride's hands and feet were adorned with embellishing henna designs that symbolized beauty, fertility, and protection. It was a tender, emotional moment filled with laughter, tears, and reminiscent reflections. The henna designs would remain on the bride's skin as she embarked on a new chapter of her life — a reminder of her family's love and blessings.

On the second official day, the community would gather for a grand feast, with tables laden with traditional dishes and desserts. We cousins eagerly joined in helping to prepare and serve, savoring every bite of the aromatic meals and sneaking extra helpings of desserts when the adults were not looking. The air was thick with the aroma of spices, meats, and freshly baked bread, and the communal joy of sharing a meal made it all the more special.

The third official day marked the final and most significant ritual — the farewell. The groom arrived at the bride's house, welcomed with ululations, to take the bride to her new home. It was a bittersweet moment, filled with joy for the couple's future but also a quiet sorrow as the bride left her childhood home. This day was especially poignant for us, as we watched elders bless her and whisper heartfelt wishes while tears flowed freely. Even as children, we felt the weight of this moment, apparently understanding that it was both an ending and a beginning.

Looking back, those family traditions and the summers in Kebdana were more than just summertime vacations. Deep down, they were lessons in the significance of family, harmony, innocent childhood and cousinhood, and connection to the land Kebdana. They taught me that true wealth does not lie in material possessions, but it deeply lies in the compassionately shared moments that shape who we are. Though we cousins have grown older and life has taken us in different directions, the memories of Kebdana remain an ever-radiant lantern. They remind us to cherish our roots, nurture our relationships, and find joy in the simplest of pleasures. Summertime cousinhood gatherings in Kebdana may now exist only in my heart. However, their legacy lives on in the stories I tell, the values I hold dear, and the love I carry for my family.

Lunar Reverence: Eid in Two Parts

NmaHassan Muhammad & Lukman Nurudeen Adeniyi | Poetry

Night Before Eid | NmaHassan Muhammad

Tonight
the pot is not calling
the kettle black.
It's busy sizzling,
happy to be frying
all the chicken wings
that can't fly out,
the yam balls—
ball by ball—
the chinchins scorching
their chins on the hot metal.
Zobo drinks calm their nerves,
chilling inside bottles,
waiting beyond the night
to splash the tongues
a happy red.

Grandma's hand crawls
into the plate, lifts
a fried wing to feed
the gaps in her front teeth.
Father jokes about
my swollen cheek,
wondering if it's hiding
a chicken breast,
not just the cotton puffed
where a molar—
refusing to return—
once sat.
Mother, queen on her stool,
laughing before the stove,
the firewood's smoke
making her wink at the night,
the stars twinkling back.

Eid Morning | Lukman Nurudeen Adeniyi

The day begins just like that, in the hush of a house already open. I lie still for a moment. The soft rustle of my mother's scarf as she moves through the kitchen, the gentle clink of tea cups, and the murmur of prayers whispered in the stillness of a corner. The house is filled with the scent of fresh bread and eggs. I rise with glee, the day pulling me into its rhythm. I pause at the mirror's edge and trace the fabric of the new jalamia with my hands, the fabric stiff under my fingertips, still smelling of the tailor's shop. Walahi, there's a quiet reverence in the ritual of getting ready—the brushing of hair, the polishing of my shoes, the perfume dabbed lightly behind my ears. Mama always says it's crucial to meet Eid with beauty, but today it feels like more than that—more than clothes or scent. Today is different. Today is Eid.

My father, in his own quiet ritual, adjusts his prayer cap with steady hands. The house hums with preparation, but there's no rush. We walk together to the mosque, steps in sync, the early morning cool against our skin. The street feels alive in its own way, as if it knows what's coming. As we approach, I see faces I've known my whole life, yet today they seem new—lit from within, their joy mirroring the one that fills my heart. The takbir rises, swelling in the air, lifting us with it until the world falls away. There is only this—rows upon rows of people, all bound by the same worship, the same gratitude, the same faith that brought us here today. It feels as if every voice, every bowed head, every prayer spoken is woven into something bigger than all of us, and I lose myself in the sound of it, the beauty of it.

When the prayer ends, the celebration begins. Back home, the house is filled with the warmth of family, with familiar laughter echoing from room to room. The table stretches before us, heavy with

dishes that seem to tell their own stories. We eat slowly, savoring each bite—the rich spices of meat, tender and perfectly cooked, melting into the sweetness of honeyed bread. Later, as the day softens and the house grows quieter, I hold onto the fullness of it all—the joy, the love, the peace that comes with Eid.

Afehyia Pa

Christopher Armoh | Fiction

Bronya. Ahomakye. There's a thick fog everywhere. Abɛbrɛse yawns as she ties her duku over her head. She walks over to the corner of her veranda and fetches water from the giant mud pot to wash her face. The water is cold from the harmattan. The air is arid, dusty and cold. She hesitated briefly before washing her face. She picks up a long broom and begins to sweep her compound. To keep her teeth from chattering, she breaks into song:

Afe akɔ aprɔ

The year has run its course

Abeto yɛn so bio

And we are still alive

Agya Onyame ankum yɛn

God granted us life

w'ama afe pa ato yɛn

And He (God) made it a good year

Afehyia pa

Merry Christmas

Afehyia pa

Merry Christmas

Afe nkɔmɔ to yɛn so bio

May we live to see the course of next year

Afehyia pa, nkɔmɔ to yɛn bio

Merry Christmas and may we live in see the course of next year

Afehyia pa, nkɔmɔ to yɛn bio

Merry Christmas and may we live in see the course of next year

Her compound is soon covered in broom lines and her footprints. She goes to the backyard and grabs a few dry pieces of wood to make a fire. She clears her mud hearth of ashes from the previous day, sets the new firewood in, and laces it with mɛfi and tiny chunks of wood and tree bark before she lights a Three-Legged Pot Safety Matches to get the fire going. She fills a large cooking pot with water and sets it on the fire to boil. She goes out to her hen house, brings out three big fat fowls from her

flock, and cuts their head. She dips them in the hot water and sits down to pluck out the feathers. She is still humming the same tune from when she was sweeping. Her daughter, Ampofowaa is up and she joins her in the kitchen.

“Light the coal pot and boil water for your brothers and wake them up so they can do their chores and get ready. I don’t want us to be late for church today.”

“Yes maa,” Ampofowaa obliges.

The whole house comes alive again. The neighborhood also begins to breathe life and smoke again.

Two weeks ago, Abɛbrɛsɛ woke up at daybreak and headed to the edge of town where the Offin River flowed through rocks and trees. She went along with seven eggs of a home hen, seven white kola nuts, seven red kola nuts, seven bitter kola nuts, two white feathered home hens, one white feathered home fowl, twelve white cowries, two bottles of schnapps, six pieces of shile, a small brown earthen pot half-filled with pure honey, one cup of native rice, one cup of maize, two pieces of white cloth. She also went along with a new sharp kitchen knife. She took off her ahenema slippers on the top of the hill before descending to the river. She knelt under the big ancient prɛkɛsɛ tree that stood partially in the river and on dry land and spread one piece of the white cloth on the ground. She tied the other piece around her bosom and with her left hand supporting the wrist of the right hand, she carefully placed all the things she had brought on the white cloth. She cut the throat of one hen, sprinkled the blood on the things, placed the head of the hen under its right wing and placed it on the white cloth. She picked one bottle of schnapps, opened it, held it in her right hand, lifted it towards the sky and began to pray;

Twereduampong Kwame, ɛnsa nka wo!

Dear God, I pour you a drink

[Pours a little of the alcohol]

Asaase Yaa, ɛnsa nka wo!

Goddess of the Earth and mother of the dead, I pour you a drink!

[Pours a little more]

Asuo Offin, me ma wo ɛnsa!

River Offin, I give you drink!

[Pours a little more]

Nananom nsamanfoɔ mo megye nsa!

Dear ancestors, come for a drink!

[Pours a little more]

Me maame ne me papa nsaman, mo megye nsa!
Ghosts of my father and mother, come for a drink!

[Pours twice]

Me da mo nyinaa ase se mo ahwe me ne me kunu ne me mma ne m'dɔfoɔ so ama afe akɔ aprɔ abɛto yɛn na akwanhyia biala anto yɛn.
I thank you all for protecting me and my husband, and my children, and my loved ones from any accident and letting the year run its course safely.

[Pours a little more]

Me gyai afe foforo a eɛba yi nso hye mo nsa. Mo mmo me ne me fie, me ne me kunu, ne me mma, me ne m'abusua ne m'adɔfoɔ nyinaa ho ban. Mo nko nee ɔne me beko, mo ndome nee ɔbe dome me na mo nhyira nee ɔbehira me. Mo nhyira me ne me kunu adwuma ma enkɔ so, mo mma me mma nimdeɛ, nyansa ne suahunu. Na se afe kɔ aprɔ be to yɛn bio, na bone biala anto yɛn a, me san abeda mo ase bio.

I leave the coming year in your hands. Protect me and my home, me and my husband, me and my children, me and my family and all my loved ones. Fight whoever fights me, curse whoever curses me and bless whoever blesses me. Bless the work of my husband and I for us to prosper, and give my children knowledge, wisdom and retentive memories. And if the new year runs its course peacefully and nothing bad happens to us, I'll come back again to say thank you.

[Pours a lot of the alcohol on the ground, drinks a little and pours the rest on the ground and puts the empty bottle down]

She washed her face, hands and feet with some of the water from the river and climbed up to go home. She greeted her way through a few townswomen who were also headed for the river bearing their offerings or pots just to fetch water.

A year ago, on the eve of Christmas, Abɛbrɛse was clothed in red and black Afe Bi Ye Eɛsan ntoma, some years are bound to have catastrophes fabric – both of her parents died in a very terrible accident on their way to visit her sister who had given birth to triplets a few days before Christmas in Cape Coast. She couldn't celebrate Christmas like everyone else did – she mourned.

Before the accident, she had given birth to a stillborn in July and that threw her into a deep void – she cried day and night and ate very little or no food at all for weeks. In September of that same year, her husband fell from a palm tree, broke his leg and fractured his right arm. All their savings went into medical bills. Their cocoa farm did not yield even a half bag of cocoa beans because of akate and mistletoe and

the government's failure to secure pesticides and fertilizers for farmers. Her shea butter and black soap business ran into debt.

But this year is different.

This year, the soursop plant in the middle of her compound still has green leaves and a few unripe fruits. Her flock of chickens didn't die from the bird disease. Three nights ago, her neighbor, Buruwaa came to her house looking for her 'missing fowl.' She ended up pointing at one of the biggest fowls among the flock but Abεbrεε didn't allow her to take it. She has spent the whole year rearing them and she knows all her flock – which hen gave birth to which hen or fowl and when. In October, when the bird disease broke out and hawks hovered over her house, she debeaked all her chickens, locked them up most of the time and gave them vitamins. She clipped the middle nails on the left leg of each of her chickens for identification. As if that wasn't enough, she painted under their left wing with a blue color dye. So, after showing Buruwaa her seals of ownership and identification, she left her compound. Defeated. Buruwaa does this to people around this time of the year or other festive periods. She will beat the back of a metal tray with a stick and go round the neighborhood searching and shouting, *hwan na ahu m'akokoo, who has seen my chicken?* – and when she doesn't find it, she'll start laying claims on people's chickens as hers.

This year, she didn't stand a chance in Abεbrεε's compound. She was ready for her and anyone who would want to try anything when it came to her flock. Buruwaa left her compound defeated – cussing whoever had stolen her fowl.

This year is different.

This year, Ampofowaa bled and became a young woman – filling out her mother's clothes with her growing hips and bosom. This year, Abεbrεε's black soap and shear butter business has seen tremendous growth – she has a long list of regular paying customers and retailers. This year, their cocoa farm did – is – doing very well. Her husband has been able to walk again and has harvested a lot of bags of cocoa beans. He started rearing catfish and snails and that too has raked in millions of cedis for them.

This year, she'll not wear red and black Afe Bi Yε Esan ntoma. This year she has bought for herself six yards of GTP Adepa Premium and six yards of retro Hollandais fabric. She bought six yards of GTP Adepa Dumas and five yards of white floral 100% cotton lace for Ampofowaa and together, they went to her tailor and friend, Adobea and selected in-season slit and kaba styles. This year she has bought beautiful 100% cotton men's fabrics for her husband and two sons. She marched her sons to a tailor to get them measured for their kaftans and her husband took his to his tailor. She discreetly measured the sizes of their feet with brooms while they slept and bought new shoes but they didn't know. She tells them they will wear their old ones when they ask what shoes they will match their kaftans with. They pretend to cry and that's the exact reaction she wants from them.

Yesterday her sons joined kakamotobi, masquerade, wearing colorful and fancy costumes and scary masks while they paraded in the streets. Singing. Dancing. Drumming. Scaring kids to fright and tears. Kakamotobi is an annual street festival and so to partake this year, they saved up part of their lunch money all year round so they could afford their costumes. People showered them with cash gifts and snacks like alewa, chocolate, and biscuits. Abebr̃̃̃'s boys went back home with lots of cash gifts and snacks. They spent some of their cash gifts on fireworks and knockouts.

Abebr̃̃̃ fixed them some of the jollof rice she had prepared for supper and when they were done, they washed themselves, put on church clothes and went to church for carol lessons. For weeks, she has watched them go for rehearsals since the Sunday School teacher announced volunteers for a Christmas play. She sometimes eavesdropped as they were practicing their lines and moves in the house too. Last night they made her one of the proudest and happiest mothers in church. She smiled and smiled till her cheeks began to hurt from smiling. The boys were in the dance choreography and they also played roles in the Birth of Jesus play – they were part of the three wise men. Ampofowaa was also the lead vocalist when the youth choir performed The First Noel – her angelic voice cutting through the night was sweeter than Kingsbite Chocolate. Everyone loved it. People threw money and some stood up so they could see her – hear her well. The night ended with thanksgiving and fireworks lighting up the night sky. The children competed for whose firecrackers went higher in the sky and who had the most beautiful outburst of colors.

The sun is already out and shedding its warmth. The sky is sparkling hurt-your-eyes white but the air still feels cold. Abebr̃̃̃ is done cooking nuhuu and calls for her children to come and eat before they all go to church. She takes her husband's food to him on the veranda while the children sit on wooden stools in the kitchen to eat. Her husband and children love her nuhuu. She makes it with fresh ingredients and plenty of smoked catfish and salmon. She steps into her room, brings out the shoes she had hidden in her metal trunk and goes to place them in her children's rooms before entering the bathroom to bathe and get ready for church.

She hears them leaping and shouting with joy as they saw their new shoes. They are happy, she is happy.

Abebr̃̃̃ stops in her tracks as she steps out of the washroom and sets her eyes on her children, tears well up in her eyes immediately. The boys are wearing matching kaftans and shoes. They are two years apart in age but people always mistake them for twins. They look just like their father – they have his kind eyes and mouths that look like they are about to break into a smile. Her Ampofowaa is just like her – she's only sixteen and she's already a full-grown woman with a very smooth dark skin and pink lips. The lip gloss she has applied makes her lips glitter in the morning sun. The cornrows she had sat down for close to an hour for her mother to

braid yesterday suit her perfectly. They spiraled to the top of her head where they ended in a kind of topknot so it looked like she was wearing a crown. Her kaba and slit traces her beautiful Coca-Cola physique.

“Hurry up mama, we will be late,” Ampofowaa’s voice prompts her and she smiles and quickly heads inside to get ready too. The boys were eager to show their kaftans and shoes to their friends so they went ahead with their father. Ampofowaa told her mother she would wait to zip her Kaba for her but she stayed mostly for her mother’s *Carolina Herrera’s Good Girl* perfume.

The air is almost nauseating, full of chicken smell as every household is preparing their Christmas dinner. Abèbrèè went to her kitchen and set the fire up before going into her room to change into some yard clothes. She took her clothes off but left the pearl necklace and earrings on and the colorful duku that she matched with her GTP fabric. She rushed to her kitchen and started peeling the cassava and plantain she will later pound into fufu. She thought to herself as she peeled, “it’s a good thing I prepared my soup and stew before going to church, other than that, we would be eating our Christmas dinner late in the night.”

Church was more packed than usual. Some people had to sit outside. All the people who hadn’t been to church since crossover on 31st December of last year and the ones who come to church only on special occasions are present. The ones they call part-time Christians. People were adorned in their best clothes – everywhere and everyone looked happy and colorful. The mamas showed off their new GTP or Hitarget or Hollandais or Smock or Kente fabrics that dressmakers have kneaded their bodies into – they danced to the front and then jumped to shout hallelujah or praise the Lord or Amen. The young women also carefully selected retro Facebook styles from online influencers and celebrities and were either impressed by their tailors or not – whichever way, they still made it to church. Some of them, if you look at them for a little too long, you’ll burst into laughter but it’s the presence of the Lord so you hide your laughter at the back of your throat and let it out when the preacher says something funny and everyone else is laughing. The older men were competing for youthfulness with the younger men and boys – most of them were adorned in a retro kaftan or dashiki or agbada with intricate embroidery and colors. Children filled the space with too-tight braids that made their heads hurt and their foreheads shine like polished leather, some had too much styling gel in certain parts of their hair to compensate for the half-permed hair, and others wore funny-looking sunglasses and shoes too big or too tiny and tight for their feet.

The pastor saw this as an opportunity to milk them before they spent their money at clubs and concert parties. He spent a few minutes preaching about loving one another and giving generously – being intentional about building the church of Christ like Solomon and the blessings that come with being obedient to the Lord like Abraham. He then initiated a fundraising campaign for renovation and expansion of

the church building and the rich members competed for who sowed the biggest seed money – people pledged millions and thousands of cedis while others pledged building materials. The pastor got a little carried away and had to be prompted before he ended service two hours and forty-three minutes later than the usual twelve o'clock.

Abebrɛɛ didn't spend much time greeting, hugging and wishing people Afehyia pa. She rushed home to bury herself in cooking and packing food and gifts.

After hours of cutting onions, grinding tomatoes, cutting scallions, grinding thymes and herbs. After hours of pounding cassava and plantain into fluffy fufu. After hours of stirring jollof, frying more chicken and goat meat. After hours of baking cakes, and making pastries – the Christmas feast was ready.

Abebrɛɛ's sons were back from collecting bronya adeɛ, gifts from their uncles, aunts, grandparents and neighbors. Ampofowaa did not go with them – she is sixteen and too shy to do that anymore so she stayed with her mother to get dinner ready, but she begged her brothers to collect bronya adeɛ in her name. They came back with a few things for her, and she ran a few fufu and chicken soup deliveries for her mother before they all sat down to feast.

After everyone had had enough to eat and could barely get up from their seats, Abebrɛɛ and Ampofowaa washed down, put on new clothes and delivered a few jollof and chicken hampers to her in-laws, her relatives, her friends and a few widows – wishing them Afehyia pa.

They returned with a few gifts. They will receive more for the rest of the year. They will give more and receive more in the new year.

Indomitable Mother Africa

Odomaro Mubangizi | Poetry

Indomitable Mother Africa!
Ever old yet ever new;
Charming and enchanting,
Buffling and puzzling.

Indomitable Mother Africa!
Teaming with tribal history,
Legends, customs and religious belief.
Defying unbridled global capitalism and materialism.

Indomitable Mother Africa!
Cradle of humanity
Yet scandal of humanity;
Infinite paradox.

Indomitable Mother Africa!
For when *Things Fall Apart*
And we are *No Longer at Ease*
New hope dawns in Achebe.

Indomitable Mother Africa!
For when *The River Between* dries
And *Petals of Blood* flow
Ngugi shifts to the *Wizard of the Crow*.

Indomitable Mother Africa!
Home of infinite data hidden in hamlets and gaping caves
Waiting for hungry data miners;
Oh AI but also African intelligence
Wrongly labelled “witchcraft”!

Indomitable Mother Africa!
Of remote bone-setters of esoteric knowledge
Hidden in codes that surpass *Python* and *Julius*
And others that control lightening and rain.

Indomitable Mother Africa!
Home of Silicon Savannah
Future home of global data centers
Splashed in winding valleys and planes.

Indomitable Mother Africa!
For thy poverty is thy blessing;
Thy youthful population your wealth
And abundant health.

Indomitable Mother Africa!
Sleeping elephant with precious stones
That power electric cars and computer chips;
Why are you asleep oh beauty queen?

Indomitable Mother Africa!
For many are courting you – China, Russia, Japan, and the rest
For your incredible beauty and charm
Lures many a suitor.

Indomitable Mother Africa!
You have shared your wealth commonly to all
But alas without serving the common good!
Leaving your off-spring in abject poverty and squalor.

Indomitable Mother Africa!
Your sons and daughters are now of age
Ready to claim the 21st Century
At home and in diaspora.

Indomitable Mother Africa!
With your agenda 2063
And all global allies in your bosom
Rise and shine.

Indomitable Mother Africa!
Embrace all your off-springs;
Even those who left you millennia ago,
To restore their longing souls.

Indomitable Mother Africa!
Help heal the wounded mother earth
For you alone have dearly preserved
Healing plants and rocks,
Birds and animals.

Indomitable Mother Africa!
Preserve the integrity of your soul
Hidden in your fables, tales, proverbs
Poems, songs and dance.

Indomitable Mother Africa!
Play the festive drums adorned in oiled skins;
Dance your ancient rhythms with abandon
While invoking ancestors and spirits long gone yet near.

Indomitable Mother Africa!
Sing in jubilation in the dense tropical forests
And on the mighty river banks,
Celebrating your victory over all odds;
As it was in the past so it is now.

Indomitable Mother Africa!
Be the home of all who yearn for peace;
Be a home for all who yearn for love;
Be a home for all who yearn for cosmic harmony!

In the Midst of Your Kin

Imemba Emmanuel Ikechukwu | Poetry

In the midst of your kin,
A gathering, a longing,
Over a hot tea on the morn of winter.
Uncle Ben will laugh at mother's wild jokes,
The little ones will play with snowballs, just in front of the family compound,
And the adults will tell stories and laugh away,
In the thoughts of fulfilled and failed plans.

Mum will make sure the house is always warm—
The hearth always aflame with shimmering hope.
The girls will learn how to knit sweaters,
Supper will be broken together,
Dad will always buy gifts and the children will fight over it.
There will be grandma and grandpa if they still breathe
And they will tell us stories how life was.

There are lots of fireworks,
It means Christmas but new year also.
The holiday has ended, winter as well is dying,
And mum will celebrate a miracle of twelve months
Over a splendid breakfast of chicken legs and wings.
Grandparents advice will come last,
Rekindling a zeal to create better miracles.

In the midst of your kin, there is this safety,
This comfort that men at arms cannot bring, this love!



“I think of that masquerade in Igbo festivals that dances in the public arena. The Igbo people say, If you want to see it well, you must not stand in one place. The masquerade is moving through this big arena. Dancing. If you’re rooted to a spot, you miss a lot of the grace. So you keep moving, and this is the way I think the world’s stories should be told—from many different perspectives.”

– Chinua Achebe



The Good Masquerade

Hope Osatare Matthew | Fiction

A strange warmth greeted Magdalene on entry into her home. The house was always cold — colder when it rained, as it had for the last two nights. When she sat on the toilet bowl, the ceramic did not slap her thighs with the chill of absence she had come to expect.

On the aging wall that fenced off the out-house, a mildew mass was growing arms left and right like a scantily clad scarecrow holding a baby by the neck. Magdalene thought she saw it move. She blinked. It was merely scattered growth with no unity of form. She slammed the bathroom door shut, but couldn't slam the door on her will to cry. Thankful that her husband wasn't home, she let herself cry.

"If we weren't so broke, we could always pay someone to carry your future babies. That's how the rich do it," her mother had said after a fatal hysterectomy. She'd meant it as consolation, yet it echoed with a despair that completed her defeat. As if Steve was inside her thoughts, he threw the table up and their dinner with it. He never apologized and she sided with him, so her mother left them to face their problems. Grateful as she was for the space, she feared for Steve. He wanted to talk about the baby, to bring it up somehow. So, she forced him out of leave. "Going back to work will help you shake it off," she told him, and he agreed.

Just then, Steve's steady 1-2-3-4 knocking rhythm ended her mourning session for the day. "How was your day?" he searched her eyes.

"The house felt warm when I came in—" she was going to say but she stopped. Steve had an overactive imagination; he would take it the wrong way. If she told him she'd cried, he would cry too. Rather than answer, she turned the question to him.

"I went to the funfair," he said. His words poured out with the happiness of a child eating candy for the first time.

Steve and Magdalene had promised the unborn child a special first Christmas. They'd bought tickets for all three of them for all five days of the funfair leading to Christmas. Magdalene had imagined going there with the baby strapped to her chest, undetachable. Now that she couldn't un-see that picture, she didn't want to go at all,

but Steve somehow found the strength to still use the tickets.

“They did a funny thing. Rather than Santa Claus, they brought a masquerade. They’re calling him the Good Masquerade.” The Masquerade was light green, he wore a garland made of ferns shaped like a tambourine on his head. His feet were invisible, making the children wonder how he walked. His leafy, green outfit dripped with green fruits that tasted sweet, and the children jumped to pluck them. Whatever the kids wished for, he clapped his big hands together, and voilà, there it was. Steve recounted the day so joyfully that Magdalene didn’t remind him that when he was barely seven, a masquerade ignored his festival train to chase him, scarring him on the knee. From there came Steve’s mantra, “There are no good masquerades!” She was happy for the change of heart.

When he ran out of words, she pretended to fall asleep, thankful that Steve hadn’t talked about the baby.

Funfair Day 2

The house was even warmer than the previous evening. Magdalene blamed it on the sun, which had shunned the harmattan to shine with the force of an atomic bomb.

In two hours, like clockwork, her husband was at the door. “How was your day?” she asked his gleeful self.

“The Good Masquerade came to the funfair. The children asked, ‘Good Masquerade, where do you come from?’” Steve grabbed a tumbler, gripped it like a mic and mimicked his new hero: “Me come from tiny-tiny village in the sea. Me used to sing for small-small chil-ren an’ they dance-dance. Wan day, me, sleepy-sleepy come sleep go, they finish all my fruits and shoooo me ah-way. U-see-me, I grow ah-gain new-new frut. I promise, I go an’ find new-new friends. Sé you promise me you no go drive me ah-way...” Magdalene laughed hard as Steve performed.

She laughed because she saw that he did it to make her laugh. Gripping her aching ribs, she slipped into a sleepless dream. She saw glimpses of a thing in green, dancing.

Funfair Day 3

Magdalene couldn't shake the feeling that someone was in the house. The toys she'd bagged to be trashed — some of it was out on the floor. The kitchen was clean, as though someone who wanted to leave no trace had done the exact opposite. A third person was taking up space in her absence. She had to tell him.

Although Steve was happy, as he had been the last two days, he was also pissed when he came home. "Some bigots showed up, calling the masquerade a demon. The children stoned the masquerade. If they had just thrown stones, that would be nice, but they were shouting, 'Bring back Santa Claus.'"

Magdalene laughed; he was the comedian, and she was his only audience. "Babe, think of it as a play. It's all staged. You're the one who doesn't know where the stage is." Steve didn't buy it.

Magdalene listened to his cheerful breath rise and fall till morning. Maybe if she went to the funfair, she would contract some of his happiness and fall asleep.

Funfair Day 4

The toys askew from yesterday somehow fixed themselves when Magdalene entered the house that evening. Leaving her to question her own sanity: had she really seen those toys outside the bin bag? She opened the bag to be sure; everything was there, but not quite the way she last saw it. The giant stuffed bear with Junior's name, the one she had pushed to the bottom to keep from remembering, was on top. She pushed it back down with force, shredding the bin bag. The toys littered the place. If not for Steve's well-timed return, they would be having a second funeral.

"How was it, the fun fair?"

Peeling off his socks, he answered without looking at her, "The masquerade came back with gifts for the children. Still, they booed him, threw stones at him. 'I'll go into the wall and never come back out,' he told them, but they shouted back, 'Go away, nobody wants you!'"

"I was at the fun fair today. I didn't see any of that"

"Which side were you on, the right or left side?"

"There's just one funfair, there aren't any sides?"

"I'll show you when we go tomorrow. The left side is the fun side."

She didn't tell him she had run into a restroom and wept on seeing a couple

with a baby that could have been her, Steve and 'it' — she dared not say the baby's name. Fighting the urge to tear up, she spoke, "So, he went into a wall and never came out?"

Drenched in the rain of her sadness, he answered, "Uh huh. So sad..."

Magdalene knew what would follow these words, and to keep it at bay, she let out a long loud laughter devoid of heart. It shocked him, shook the sorrow out of him. "You're so funny, crying over a silly masquerade," she said. "We'll go together tomorrow, okay?" She took his hands; they felt chalky.

Christmas Eve

The masquerade came to Magdalene's dream. He reached for her, she shrank back. Tambourine headgear in one hand, he then took the leafy green mask off his face. Magdalene's shoulders refrained from shrinking; she saw that she was smiling. The good masquerade was someone she knew — it was Steve.

When Magdalene got up to pee, she forgot all about it. Once inside the outhouse, she shut the door to avoid looking the mildew-turned-scarecrow in the eye. Lingering a bit at the door on her way out, her eyes caught it.

The careful hands of a chalk artist had drawn an outline through the mildew growth. The thing had... a garland like a tambourine sat on its head, its outfit dripped with fruits, the feet faded with the rest of the wall paint... Where she'd seen a scarecrow, he saw something else. Was Steve going insane? Was he so desperate for a reason to be happy he made things up? Or was she to blame for fearing the pain and refusing to share in his left side of things?

Here it was, the third person taking up space in her home — a person her husband named The Good Masquerade, a person known to her as Grief.

Funfair Day 5 (Christmas Day)

Steve texted Magdalene: his tickets to the funfair got lost in transit. She'd thought the outdoors would enhance the conversation they both needed to have. Having nothing else to do at work, she went home early.

It was warm again. This time she didn't fear the warmth. She took it in, breathing in every air of it. Then she saw it — the bin bag was empty, no toys, not

one. The kitchen was cleaner than she left it.

It came to her then, the vision of the thing reaching for her. Had she welcomed it by smiling at it? Was a demon stealing her husband's face to manipulate her to accept its evil presence into her home? All masquerades are bad!!! The warning banged the roof of her skull, giving her a headache, filling her eyes with tears.

Her fidgety hands grabbed the nearest weapon of war — a turning stick — and tip-toe by tip-toe, she made for the hushed whispers coming from the outhouse. Between the fence and the outhouse, all her stuffed toys sat in a circle. In the centre was the teddy with the baby's name. It wasn't alone. It was in the arms of a stranger, a stranger Magdalene was about to whack in the head until she heard—

“Junior baby, don't cry, don't cry, or I will tell the good masquerade not to buy anything for you.” The stranger set the teddy down as he would a real kid and stood before the painting of the thing, mimicking the voice, pleading with Junior to not cry.

He was the masquerade, he was the children, he was the father of a dead baby and this was his funfair. He was Steve and he never quit his leave.

The sound of the turning stick hitting the ground was all the nightmare Steve needed to wake him from dream land. It came first with sniffles, after the sniffles, a maddening shiver followed, as he shivered, he cried a river. Followed by the river was a roar. Magdalene fell into a sorrow laden heap, crying quietly. No one could console the other.

Somewhere close to midnight, the ache lifted. Steve and Magdalene, with ugly faces, sat before Steve's drawing, revering it like a god.

“I've been wondering, why a tambourine?” she pointed.

“I kept meaning to buy one... Maybe if I'd bought it on time, he would have stayed... Maybe he died because I couldn't show how ready I was.”

“Or if we'd promised a Good Masquerade funfair, not a Father Christmas one,” her tone managed to be sarcastic.

Steve giggled a bit, laughed a bit, then started to tear up. “There's nothing we could have done,” he affirmed.

“There's something we can do... We can survive.”

“How?” his question showed genuine confusion.

“I don't know... What if you painted more good masquerades?”

“And you? What would you do?”

“I would be your... apprentice?” They shared a short, hearty laugh. He put his head on her shoulder and took her hand.

They didn't say Merry Christmas; they forgot. Together, they observed their new guest, the third person taking up space in the house, who was once a scarecrow with a baby, and who was now the good masquerade.

It was Boxing Day elsewhere, but for Steve and Magdalene, it was Good Masquerade Day.

Ụzọ Ndi Mmanwu: The Way of the Masquerades

Tehila Okagbue | Poetry

2024:

When my father narrated his experience of the Mmanwu Festival,
I sat with a nervous smile on my face. My heart,
somewhat overjoyed that my own children will not know the same fortune
and slightly sad that they do not know of the weight of tradition.
Again, somewhat overjoyed, that I can tell the story
because if it were to be then, in Igbo land,
my tongue would be cut off and fed to vultures.
It was forbidden that women should tell stories
or speak of secrets surrounding the mask festival.

And I will tell my children the tale
of how my father and his brothers would flee at the sound of the gong.
When it was time for the initiation,
boys around their age or a little older
would hide behind bushes, feigning sickness, running helter-skelter
because it was time for them to partake in the masking ceremony
and become one with the masquerades.

1966:

Mmanwu festival

taa bụ ụbọchị anyị ga-ama mmanwu
today is the day we know masquerades

taa bụ ụbọchị anyị na ndị mmuo na-agbakọ
today is the day we convene with the spirits

And the little boys recite:
“For it is not by choice that we walk this path,
but a rite of passage:
a test of manhood,
a measure of strength,
a trial of courage.”

And they shall come at dawn to take them,
that they learn the way of the masquerades
and become one with their spirits.
That they cleanse their hearts and rid themselves of anything
that would make them impure,
that they confess their misdeeds to mothers and chief priests,
so that they are not found wanting before the masquerades.

There will come a time when the boys in my father's group are gathered,
the night, dark and cold as obsidian,
outside on an empty field, one after the other, stripped down
and asked to face Odogwu — the youthful masquerade,
and afterwards, Agu mmuno — the giant, leopard spirit.
Their hearts will beat louder than the sound of drums,
and their feet will shake to every deafening thud, with fear and suspense.

And they will continue to say, even as their hearts cry:
“We shall bear no trepidation, and bear no shame,
for our fathers before us say it is brave,
they say it is the way and say it is safe,
and it is not a choice that we have to make,
but one that had been made before we became,
and afterwards, we will eat and be merry,
because we have passed the test
and we now know what is behind the mask.”

Bilmawn Boudmawn: The African Halloween

Youssef Oubihi | Essay

The African Halloween, as the title might not suggest, is not a copy or imitation of the well-known Halloween but a distinct and special festival that takes place in Morocco. This title is chosen because the two share the concept of the ‘masquerade party’ where people celebrate and manifest their unique culture by wearing unusual attire on these specific days of the year. So, let me take your hand, and let's sit by the window of my memory to watch Souss' matchless festival: Bilmawn Boudmawn.¹

As a child of six, while every one of those aged boring people seemed to be occupied by all these tedious preparations, my infant eyes, as well as my cousin's, were fixed on the sheep my father bought for Eid al-Adha. We seldom left its side, knowing from last year's experience that this pet would leave us soon, and we had to devote every second to watching our short-term guest. One of our main activities was trying to gain its trust so it would come and eat directly from our hands, and oh my god, if one of us succeeded in this divine mission, we felt ordained. However, the festive atmosphere and the aroma of delicious food that filled the air on the first day of Eid al-Adha easily distracted our minds and rapidly wiped out the sad departure of our innocent friend from our infant memory.

As soon as the sun of the second day rose and its rays reached my alarmed eyes, I stood up like a soldier on a battlefield, ready for duty. And with a military-like force, my parents forced me to eat breakfast before running like a maniac towards the outside door. I hurriedly ate some bread with olive oil and sipped some mint tea that burnt my lips and tongue many times. But I did not react, simply to avoid their lectures about patience and the importance of eating before going outside. My only concern was finding my cousin, who shared my enthusiasm for Bilmawn.

That year was different. That year Idir was going to be one of the Bilmawns.

Once I fetched my cousin, we ran to our neighbor's house. We knocked on the door, and Anir, Idir's little brother and our friend, opened it for us. We followed him up the stairs to the roof, where the preparations had already begun. As kids of six and seven, we were not allowed to participate; we were only spectators. Being a spectator to such an unrepeatabe preshow was a huge privilege. With sparkling eyes, we stood at a distance and watched the operation. Three of Idir's friends were sitting and sewing with big misshaped needles, which, with much effort, succeeded in penetrating the goats' leather and connecting one piece to another to be suitable for Idir to wear.

The roof smelt like a barn. “Seven goats,” said Anir, with a proud smile spread across his face.

¹ An Amazigh expression that can be translated to English as “the leathers-man, the faceted-man.”

My cousin, with his forefinger moving in the air, counted the leathers and grinned before uttering, “Yes!” and after a short pause with a hint of concern on his face, he asked, “Are they heavy to wear?”

“Yes, for us it is impossible,” replied Anir.

“I wish we were older, old enough to be Bilmawn,” I said, glancing at my friends, who agreed with me immensely.

It took the three men several attempts to fit Idir into the attire and fix the small errors of sewing or mismatched pieces of leather until finally, Idir looked like a standing goat with that silky black fleece. Red and white scarves veiled the sewing places at the waist and the open area around the shoulders and neck. And now they finalized their tableau by coloring his face white with small decorative black lines. Idir, with some small jumps, adjusted the dress and made a sprint to test his mobility and how heavy it was.

The art and the artists descended the stairs, and we gleefully followed them. We all walked down to the main street, where Idir repeatedly encountered many of his friends. All the way downtown, I couldn’t focus on just one Bilmawn; the men’s bodies were of different heights, and their dresses were unique. Some wore black goat leather like Idir, some mixed black with brown and grey, and one wore sheep leather rather than goat, with white wool making him look huge and distinguished. They were like paintings walking, created by different painters but hung in the same gallery. Despite the beautiful view, I was afraid when someone looked at me or ran towards me. One of Bilmawn’s rituals was to tap on the backs of people he knew with a goat pastern in his hand as a form of blessing.

All of a sudden, Idir, who I thought didn’t notice our presence, turned and said to his brother, “Go home; it is too late for you.” Merely by his tone, we knew it was an order to be obeyed. Me, Anir, and my cousin went back home with a mix of dopamine and adrenaline running in our blood. As soon as we reached our neighborhood, I spotted my father having a friendly conversation with our neighbor. I immediately ran to him, and with utmost excitement, told him my whole adventure. With his grownup indifferent manner, he simply said, “I see, good.”

“But I wanted to stay longer, much longer.”

“It is too late for you kids there.”

“But—”

Before I started complaining, he bent and put his hand on my shoulder, looking me directly in the eyes, “Tomorrow, I’ll take you to Dcheira’s parade.”

My eyes refused to shut, though I was extremely tired, for the scene of me among other Agadirians on both sidewalks watching Bilmawn Boudmawn’s majestic march along the principal street of Dcheira kept endlessly repeating itself in my head.

Dcheira’s parade is a festival where people from around Morocco and beyond gather to witness this magnificent march, where the colors of cultures blend in. The show starts with musicians spreading their magic, releasing drum beats mixed with tunes from various musical instruments, the traditional and peculiar, to Amarigh music such as banjo, loutar, laaouad, talount, and rebab, and universal ones like guitar,

flute, ukulele, and violin. The crowd easily engages and vibes with these vibrations in the air.

Then groups, one following the other like in a fashion show, display their art. Bilmawns from each group are distinguished from one another. Some dance to the music; some wear so much goat leather that they look like moving carpets. Others paint their entire bodies with oil paint and hold spades in their hands. One group consists only of men wearing women's clothing with some exaggeration to make the audience laugh. Many individuals who don't belong to any group also showcase their unique self-made attire to the spectators, conveying the marks of their culture or artistic imagination. The ending is like the opening; music is again played and slowly fades to indicate that the show is about to end.

In short, Dcheira's parade is a moving gallery.

Family Is the Mitochondria of Life

Muheez Olawale | Poetry

the sea carves his face into a smooth marmoris,
concealing the turmoil raging within. at times,
his pains break free and runs toward the shores
of his cheeks, but he snuffles and buries them back.

in this poem, i am the sea, the eccedentesiast
veiling his battered heart with a smile.
i stand before the mirror, to perform a ritual of ecdysis,
to throw away today like a paper plane. But
time isn't a wall clock to be rolled back and forth.
yesterday is the frangible egg that popped out of my hands
to crash on my feet, it can never be whole again.

last Christmas boxed lots of laughs, kisses and hugs,
but i felt tethered by the smiling hearts circumscribing me.
i hankered wings to break free & soar the vast skies.
i likened family to iron bars, restraining my
cravings and dreams. so i flee, seeking peace in yonderland.

today, i double check the calendar
to affirm it is December 25, because the only sign
of Christmas that touches me is the aroma
of Chicken Jollof rice from my neighbour's kitchen
oozing into my harmattan-dried nostrils,
with the gentle tune of Feliz Navidad trickling
into my ears from the barbershop opposite
your house, and firecrackers trailing the giggles
of adventurous boys in festive attires?

now, i wonder how far is the journey to home and yesterday.
i glue the family portrait to my chest, seeking
the warmth i once yanked off me like a heavy blanket,
hoping these inert figures find compassion
in the rhythms of my heartbeat.

because now i realise family was never a cage.
they were the wings i've always flown with.

Odo Ukwu Festival: An Ancestral Visit

Omatsola Lucy Adanna | Fiction

Dear Diary,

I'm still staggering in awe of our culture. It's the Odo Ukwu festival in my village, Aku, in the heart of Enugu state, Nigeria. Aku is a haven surrounded by majestic mountains and rolling hills, filled with caring, loving and believing people. I returned home from Lagos, where I have lived with my parents for almost two decades now, eager to reconnect with my roots as promised by my parents.

Amaka spoke audibly as she wrote in the closure of her room, still lost in her writing before a gentle knock jerked her back to the present. "Come in," she responded as her aunt walked into the scantily lit room.

"How was your first night home after many years in Lagos?" Auntie Ada asked, smiling at her niece. She was excited when her brother called to inform her of Amaka's return yet she was scared knowing how curious the young lady could be. "Fine, it was okay," Amaka responded almost immediately.

"I heard you agreed to perform the purification rituals. I remember you bluntly refused the last time. What could be your reason, dear girl?" she asked, hoping to get into her niece's sleeves.

"Nothing much, just want to have a cut of everything around. I want to experience it, that's all," Amaka replied, eyes focused on her diary.

"My dear," Auntie Ada said sitting close to her niece, "our culture is known and preserved by its secrecy, you should be careful of whatever plan you have. The consequences could be deadly." She was worried, the girl was almost in trouble the last time she visited. Her curiosity and adventurous spirit are second to none. She hoped she would stay out of trouble, especially the fact that her parents didn't come home with her. She sat for a while until it was obvious that silence prevailed in their mist. She walked out, gently reminding the younger lady of breakfast.

Amaka had made her plans, like her aunt feared, but she had done it right. The rules are never to be seen or heard peeping through the Obu. She had done a lot of things like this before so she was confident to do so without being noticed. So, smiling to herself, she continued with the opening statement in her diary.

Day One: Maiden's Purification.

Today, we processed to the desirous Ase Stream, a stream as sparkling as no other, with a mysterious tale nestled at every corner of the stones bearing water. The most surprising being the belief that the Asa is the constant tears of a slave maiden a long time ago who was buried alive to commemorate her mistress's death. So, every maiden is expected to partake, to share her pain, before marriage. I don't know the sincerity of the belief as my mom, though from this village, didn't participate in the ritual yet had three of us.

The stream is situated at the peak of the mountain, it was tiring climbing but we marched with whopping legs as directed by the older women. Every maiden of marriageable age is clad in white wrappers, our bodies adorned with white powder and black beautiful paintings which were done by the older women in the early hours of the morning before we set out from the village. A crowd, mostly women and young men came to wish us well and bade goodbye as we set out for a journey of fertility.

We marched uniformly, led by elderly Nwadas. As we descended the mountain path, our beauty shone like the morning sun. At the stream corner, we were asked to shed our wrappers, an act I loathed and did not quite understand. But for curiosity's sake, I adhered, revealing the beautiful flowers painted from our forehead down to our naval with its root at our abdomen, the work a testament of years of practice. We were made to view ourselves from the stream, drink from it and finally fetch water with our right hand from the stream to wash our face while kneeling. At noon, we were given fruits to eat as it was believed that nothing made with oil is allowed in the stream. So, we all had our fill of the fruits.

The air was filled with incantations, purifications and rituals beneath the star-studded sky. As night fell, we returned, unadorned, to our homes, our mothers the only ones permitted to behold our beauty. I heard that any man that sees us, dies impotent. Not verified though.

Day Two: Initiation and Masculinity

I was privileged to find my way to the back of the masquerade house, popularly known as Obu before anyone could stop me. The house was made of bricks, therefore there were minor openings wide enough to see through.

The second day dawned, bringing with it the initiation of grown men into the revered Odo cult. Clad in majestic Isi Agu wrappers tied below their waist, exposing their robust chests, and barefoot, the young men tied matted palm fronds on their head, they danced into the circle of well-dressed elderly men who sat on small round logs of wood. The excitement on the faces of the young lads cannot be mistaken. As they danced into the circle, the music stopped and the drummers were dismissed. The oldest man stood up and

greeted the people with the popular, “Ndi banyi kwenu, kwenu, kwezonu!” and they all responded, “Iyaa.” He broke the kolanut, put some pieces on the ground, did the same with a bottle of liquor in his hand, muttered some prayers as everyone chorused, “Iseee,” as he shared the kola nut and the drink among the elders.

There was a little speech by one of the elders, they called him Dikwu Odo. He is like a chief priest. He spoke of the secrecy of the masquerade and how important it is to their identity and culture. After that there was chatting among the men before the lads were made to pledge allegiance to the masquerade. Kneeling before the elders, they vowed secrecy and loyalty. The haunting Ejola songs echoed through Aku, their mystical drumbeats signifying acceptance by the spirits. Ejola is believed to be a drum beat of the spirit. No one has ever seen the drummer.

Day Three: Preparation and Anticipation

In Aku Village, the masquerade ritual was revered. Every two years, the ancestors' spirits were believed to visit, and the community observed a sacred day of indoor confinement. No female, especially those of childbearing age, was allowed at the Obu and its environs the day before the outing, lest they risk infertility. Apart from today, earlier this week, women and young men who have not been initiated to the ritual are made to stay indoors for some reasons best known to them.

The third day was a flurry of activity. It was mostly indoor activities, excited voices skyrocketing as mothers called their playing children to help out with preparation. Families slaughtered animals, their savory aromas wafting through the air. Traditional dishes simmered on fires, teasing my senses.

Women and children, especially their daughters, running round the kitchen while all men had been summoned to the Obu. Younger children donned in vibrant attire, could be heard everywhere, their laughter and excitement palpable. The road was very busy as people commuted from different places in view of the masquerade outing the next day. There was a repeated drum beat from Obu. The aura of the masquerade could literally be felt by the end of the day.

Day Four: Celebration and Unity

We have been awake since eternity, or rather we couldn't sleep. The joy of the masquerade outing outlived our natural call for rest. People stay at their door post, moon night stories of various kinds went on until every lip was heavy.

The final day arrived, ushering in a tapestry of colors, sounds and scents. Elders inspected the prepared feast, ensuring perfection, they moved about in twos. As the sun reached its zenith, the food was presented at the Obu. Laughter, music and the sweet fragrance of local delicacies filled the air. The elderly men began to praise the Odo

Ukwu while some women and children sat outside to welcome the Odo Ukwu. In this fleeting moment, I felt the essence of Aku's tradition – community, culture and the enduring spirit of our forebears.

On the day of the outing, women busied themselves cooking native dishes, carrying steaming pots of various native soups such as bitter leaf soup, oha soup, melon soup with different swallow to go with. Pots of okpa, ukwa and abacha are carried to the village square as drumbeats pulsed through the air as they danced in anticipation. The masquerade's emergence was a delicate ritual, requiring precision to avoid offense.

The elders sat aloof, watching from a distance and giving orders while they enjoyed the stream of alcoholic drinks and food being served. It was at this point that all who offended the masquerade by seeing it deliberately or otherwise served their punishment.

“Thank God no one saw me!” Amaka thought.

The Odo Ukwu masquerade emerged, its majestic presence weaving a spell of wonder. Its boldly carved mask was made of a tree stem and the body of freshly and well weaved palm fronds.

First, it began its revered ritual, visiting the bereaved who had lost loved ones over the past two years. With gentle reverence, it offered solace and blessings. The villagers danced behind with a great shout and showed off.

Next, the masquerade visited families with newborn babies, cradling each infant in its arms. With whispered prayers, it bestowed protection and blessings upon the innocent ones, before returning them to their grateful parents.

As dusk fell, the masquerade procession made its way to the village square. Smaller masquerades danced in homage, bowing deeply as they approached the majestic Odo Ukwu masquerade. The air vibrated with reverence, as the community paid tribute to their ancestral spirits.

The ceremony unfolded late into the night, with vibrant performances and offerings. Gifts of cash, food, and precious materials poured in, honoring the masquerade's sacred presence. Excitement filled the air as children danced to the drum beats with a lot to eat, women also danced, the maidens swung their waist to the sweet rhythm of the ancient beats. The men also danced

and drank as abled bachelors made their choice of wives among the pretty maidens.

As the night wore on, the villagers' praises and gratitude reached a crescendo. Finally, the majestic masquerade retired to its home, the mountain. It is believed that the spirit of the dead hung on the mountain and, again, only the men are permitted to see the great masquerade at the point of retiring. The rest of the villagers continued burning tires, dry trees and dancing round till late in the night while everyone hurried to avoid seeing any of the men that escorted the great masquerade to the beyond. Everyone then retired with excitement lingering in their hearts, patiently awaiting the next festival.

“Amaka. Amaka!” That was Nduka, Ada’s husband screaming at the top of his voice as he stood at the center of the compound the next morning. Ada rushed out to meet her angry husband

“What is going on, Nkem?” she asked gently.

“Didn't I tell you to warn your niece about her intentions as soon as she arrived? Now the elders summoned me, someone saw her peeping through the Obu. Her penalty is being decided so she has to dance to their tune. She brought this upon herself.” He stormed out almost immediately, murmuring and hissing as he went.

“Amaka, Amaka!” Ada screamed. This time Amaka came out sheepishly, she thought no one saw her but she was wrong after all. “I believe you heard what my husband said?” Ada asked angrily.

“Who cares what they say?” Amaka snapped at her Auntie.

“Amaka, you know better,” her Auntie replied, concern etched on her face. “The culture is clear: secrecy is paramount. Anyone who invites the spirit should get set for a lifetime dance”

“It's just superstition...,” Amaka defended.

“I warned you before all these began but you will never heed. No, you fetched the termites wood, so get ready to entertain lizards,” Ada angrily yelled at her niece, her expression turning stern. “You were aware of the rules. Now, you should be ready to do their bidding,” she added before storming out of sight.

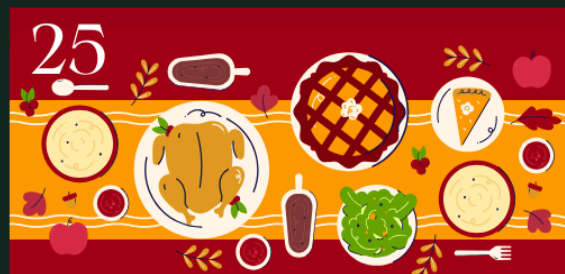
Amaka shook her head, “I won't do anything. It's humiliating, I will never do that.” Amaka kept yelling on top of her voice, “Let the ancestors fight for themselves, I can't humiliate myself!”

With a start, Amaka jolted from her sleep. Oh, thank God, it was just a dream. She ran to the window and then to her phone to check the time, oh thank goodness, it was still midnight on the day of the masquerade outing. She had seen the masquerade but as long as she kept it to herself, she was safe. She stretched her body and made her way back to bed, though she was haunted by her dream, she hoped it remained a dream.



“Chilly winds from the Sahara blew a fine red dust that clouded everything in a shimmering mist, making the air dry and harsh. Everyone went around with chapped lips, and in some extreme cases, cracked soles. But there was also the heady scent of dry grasslands, new discoveries, bush fires and Christmas.”

– Chris Abani
Graceland



Family, Feast and Festivities

Zizipho Godana | Creative Non-Fiction

Music spills from every corner of the house, a vibrant tapestry of sound that envelops the space in an inviting embrace. The rhythmic pulse of jazz intermingles with the smooth melodies of soul, the infectious beats of R&B, and the energetic flow of hip-hop, all sprinkled with the unique flair of amapiano. As the notes dance through the air, the voices of those gathered weave in and out of the tunes, creating a symphony of laughter, conversation, and the occasional playful argument. Some voices are youthful and light, filled with vitality, while others are rich and seasoned, marked by the wisdom of age.

The kitchen stands as the epicentre of this lively gathering, a place where the music rings loudest and the atmosphere is thick with the aromas of home-cooked delights. Here, the joyous clatter of plates settling on the table harmonises with the furious bubbling of tall pots simmering on the stove, each filled with family recipes passed down through generations. The walls pulse along with the music as if they, too, are part of the celebration. In one corner, two young boys, their faces alight with determination, are battling the towering heap of dishes that threatens to overtake the sink. With their sleeves rolled up and a competitive spirit, they splash water joyfully onto the floor, trying to gain a head start on the impending chaos of the lunch rush. Although several bodies bustle around the cramped kitchen, a well-practised choreography keeps them from tripping over one another, a dance perfected through years of shared cooking experiences. Each person knows just where to move as if guided by an unspoken rhythm.

The fragrances mingle beautifully as the counters overflow with vibrant dishes prepared according to a time-honoured menu. Gleaming chicken and succulent lamb chops, expertly braaied to golden perfection, sit alongside perfectly roasted potatoes that glow invitingly alongside softly caramelised butternut, their sweet scent wafting through the air. Nearby, a colourful bowl of chakalaka (a vegetable relish made up of carrots, baked beans, peppers, and spices) sits temptingly. Amidst this culinary bounty, an animated debate brews about the number of starches required for the feast — a topic that always seems to ignite passion among the chefs.

Chef #1, a stout figure with a hearty laugh, stands firmly at the forefront of the discussion, arguing his case with a raised brow and a twinkle in his eye. “Who doesn't eat rice?” he demands, his voice booming above the sizzling of onions and peppers. His enthusiasm elicits some nods of agreement from the other chefs, sparking a chorus of murmurs in support. However, Chef #2 — known for her dramatic flair and an eye roll that could wilt a field of flowers — vehemently shakes her head in disagreement. “Christmas lunch should be an occasion for something special,” she asserts with a flourish, her hands elegantly gesturing as she makes her point. The laughter that erupts around her highlights the playful tension of the

moment. When pressed for alternatives to rice, Chef #2 boldly suggests idombolo, the beloved steamed bread that is a fan favourite amongst the young and the old. Excitement ripples through the gathered cooks as she makes her case. After a few moments of consideration, there is a wave of agreement as the other chefs nod.

Family members move about with purpose, their hands busy with preparation. A grandmother carefully arranges a vibrant salad, her fingers deftly plucking sheets of lettuce. Cousins laugh and share stories from the past, their animated gestures painting a vivid picture of cherished moments. Grandparents offer knowing smiles, reminiscing quietly while keeping an eye on the little ones as they dart around, giggling and playing a game of tag near the food.

In another corner, uncles loft light-hearted digs at one another while only half-watching a football game on the TV, their laughter loudly filtering throughout the house. A baby, nestled in an older sibling's arms, reaches out, captivated by the flurry of activity, as distant cousins exchange playful nudges and high-fives. As the dinner table begins to fill, a steaming tray of oven roasted, cherry-glazed gammon takes centre stage, its sweet scent beckoning even the pickiest eaters to take part. Around the kitchen, family members are laden with serving spoons, dishing out hearty portions, their faces glowing with the warmth of togetherness. As they settle into their chairs, the air fills with the tantalizing aroma of rich flavours, and animated conversation flows, weaving tales of the past and dreams for the future. Each bite is savoured, punctuated by smiles and laughter, creating an atmosphere thick with the joy of familial bonds.

As lunch draws to a close, the anticipation for dessert heightens, with a homemade cheesecake poised to steal the show. Its buttery biscuit base perfectly balances its velvety smooth texture, creating a rich yet airy delight topped with a vibrant lemon compote. The tang of cream cheese pairs beautifully with the sweetness of the fruit, making every bite a luxurious treat. Beside it, bowls of traditional South African trifle sit proudly, layered with colourful ingredients that mirror the festive spirit of the occasion. Soft sponge cake soaked in sherry forms the foundation, followed by generous layers of fresh fruit, creamy custard, and fluffy whipped cream. Each spoonful delivers a delightful mix of textures and flavours, evoking nostalgia and warmth, perfect for celebrating togetherness. These desserts promise to bring joy and satisfaction after a hearty meal, making for an unforgettable end to the day.

With bellies full and hearts even fuller, they toast to family, food, and those cherished moments that weave their lives together, hoping for many more feasts and funny stories to come.

Chinchinga Constitution

Daniel Naawenkangua Abukuri | Fiction

— *preamble*

we, the people of the streets, unite,
in pursuit of flavor and festive delight.
with spices that dance and aromas that sing,
we enshrine chinchinga, our shared offering.

— *article I: the meat of the matter*

clause 1

chinchinga's lifeblood lies in tender meat—
chicken, beef, goat, or lamb, a savory feat.
tofu and veggies join this delight,
each piece a treasure, flavors taking flight.

clause 2

cut with precision, each inch a decree,
uniform slices, harmonious and free.
to stray from this path risks culinary fate,
balance in taste is what we celebrate.

clause 3

no meat shall grace the grill unadorned,
suya spice cloaks it, a flavor reborn.
with respect for the craft, our spirits align,
in the joy of chinchinga, together we shine.

— *article II: the spice code*

clause 1

behold the sacred suya spice, a treasure divine,
peanuts and paprika in a dance so fine.
elders share secrets, wisdom unfurled,
in this blend of flavors, chinchinga's soul swirled.

clause 2

garlic and ginger add bold delight,
salt and pepper warm, igniting the night.
marinade, a tribute, where flavors increase,
each drop a homage to the joy of the feast.

clause 3

in bowls of steel or clay, tradition rings,
refrigerate thirty minutes, as anticipation sings.
neglect invites blandness, a fate most dire—
scorned by all who crave flavor's fire.

— article III: the skewer statutes

clause 1

chinchinga twines on sticks, soaked thirty minutes in water,
or on metal, in skilled hands, a savory fodder.

clause 2

no more than six pieces shall dance on each skewer,
for balanced cooking and flavors to ensure.

clause 3

preheat the grill to a medium glow,
five to seven minutes per side for a golden-brown show.

— article IV: the feast of the flame

clause 1

chinchinga leaps from the fire, steaming hot,
with onions and tomatoes, each bite hits the spot.

clause 2

let no skewer fall to greed; share and unite,
in laughter and warmth, our hearts take flight.

clause 3

in december's chill, let festivities flow,
for chinchinga's presence binds us in glow.

— **article V: enforcement and penalties**

clause 1

in the grill's court, poor marination is a crime,
under-seasoned bites and charred meat must face time.

clause 2

falter in this sacred art, and penance you'll take,
step back from the flames, and learn from your mistake.

clause 3

honor the grill master for flavors refined,
disrespect him, and your feast place you'll find.

— **article VI: the flame eternal**

clause 1:

in every hearth where laughter thrives,
chinchinga, the heart of culture, arrives.
a festival born in warmth and cheer,
shall echo in homes, each december, each year.

clause 2:

yet should change beckon with a whisper so sweet,
only the council of the skewer can meet.
with voices united, they guard the old flame,
to honor the past, preserving its name.

*approved by the grill, this december feast,
chinchinga flames burn bright, joy released.*

Homecoming

Temitope Omamegbe | Fiction

Christmas in the Awire household was always a big deal. Decorations were brought out of storage and if anything needed to be replaced, Mrs. Natalie Awire would make several trips to the market or store to get them. Everyone set out to get their best Sunday wear ready for D-day. The ones that had to go to the laundry were sent promptly and those who had to go harass dressmakers would do so promptly so as not to get nasty surprises to close to the special day.

Everyone was assigned a duty to ensure that the plannings for the day went well. Lambert got all the gift wishes from everyone and put them carefully in a bag. He would then perform his secret Santa duties of getting everyone's wish granted or get whatever was affordable. Caleb tended to the environment of the house, coordinating and tasking the house staff on what to do to make the house presentable for family and friends alike. The Awires had a reputation that needed to be maintained.

However, this year, as Lambert carried out his duties, he could not help but feel the absence of his sister. Each one of them had been given duties once they became adults and, as siblings, they had a secret competition on how best to beat the other in their duties. Nneoma, being the only girl, had been in charge of the menu for the festivities and for years since she had clocked 22, she had beat her brothers. Until the incident that had threatened to tear up their family bond leaving Lambert's then girlfriend and eventual wife in charge of the menu. They had continued living their lives as though Nneoma hadn't existed.

But now, after 5 years, she was coming home.

Caleb was giddy with excitement. He was like a child who had been told that he would be getting his wishes granted by Father Christmas and that was what it felt like when he got a reply to the mail he had sent to his estranged sister. He had carefully drafted the mail, picking his words with extreme caution, not wanting to say something that would make her choose not to respond. But she had responded much to his joy and that of his parents. The prospect of her coming home for Christmas made the countdown to the holiday much more exciting for him. After all, she was his twin, and he had missed her the most. Even though he had been the one to hurt her the most.

Lambert walked into the living room area where Caleb was going over decoration options with the vendor. He casually looked over the portfolio on the center table, his expression soft, a little smile on his lips. "They look good. Which one will you pick?" he asked.

Caleb shrugged, "I don't know yet. I am trying to imagine what she'll like but..." Lambert moved to stand beside his brother, placing a hand on his shoulder, "Talk to mum. In truth, whenever I was tasked with handling the decorations, I always asked

mum for her opinion.” Caleb smiled and nodded. He watched as Lambert placed the bag in his hand on the dining table. “So many gifts this year,” he commented to which Lambert nodded.

“More cousins and in-laws now. And this year they are all coming here,” Lambert said, sitting down heavily. “I mean, I don’t mind. It’s always lovely having family over but this is too much.”

“Mum wants to do it the way it was before Nneoma left,” Caleb added, swiping through pictures of even more decorations. “I don’t want to have to bother her with what I am responsible for. I can help by handling this without her. It’s the least I can do, really.”

Lambert sighed, “I don’t know what to get her. I don’t know if she would still like the same things or if her tastes have changed.”

Caleb turned to the decorations’ vendor, “I will call you later today with my final decision.”

After the lady left, Lambert turned to his brother. “Did she mention anything in her mail?” he asked eagerly. “Like if she’s married? With kids? Anything?”

Caleb sat back, “She just said she would love to come over and that she couldn’t wait to see us.”

Lambert smiled, “At least there’s that.”

“I cannot wait to see her again,” Mrs. Awire said as she walked into the living room and sat beside Caleb. “It’s been too long,” she frowned a little. “I looked at one of the pictures of her I still have and I tried to imagine what she looks like now.”

“I wish she would tell me when she’ll be coming in so I can go pick her at the airport. She keeps insisting she’ll find her way down herself,” Caleb added, trying to lighten their mother’s mood.

“She’s based in Abuja,” Lambert said. “To think she always said that she could never live in Abuja.”

“Maybe a man took her there,” Mrs. Awire said smiling. “Your father was the reason I moved from Port Harcourt to Lagos.” They all laughed. Their parents love story was one they had been told many times over.

“I hope she found someone good and didn’t face any hardships,” Mrs. Awire said.

“I am sure she didn’t mum,” Caleb said, placing a reassuring hand on his mother’s knee.

She smiled and clapped a little, “So, show me what you have planned for us.”

Prompted, Caleb shuffled closer to show her the decoration layouts from the portfolio the decorator had left behind.

Soon sounds of laughter filled the living room as Lambert watched on from the dining table. Turning around, he faced the wrapped gifts. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly before he picked up his phone. Even though everyone felt a level of guilt concerning Nneoma, he felt more responsible for everything that had happened. After all, it was his soon to be ex-wife that caused the rift in the first place. He opened his mail on his phone and hesitated. Caleb had been the one to initiate the reconnection but he felt like he too needed to say something to his sister before she came in for the holidays. He hadn’t been sure of what to say at first but in that

moment, with his mother and brother, he felt the time was right and the words were ripe.

Nneoma,

When Caleb said you responded to his mail and confirmed that you would grace the holidays here with your presence, I struggled to hold back my glee. I have missed you so much, sis, and I am so sorry for everything. I cannot begin to express my regret but know that I am sincerely sorry.

Mum is handling the menu this year and will be basing it off the last one you coordinated but never got the chance to prepare. I look forward to seeing you again, Nne.

*Yours,
Lambert*

Nneoma smiled as she read her brother's mail. She could sense the reluctance and hesitation in his words, tugging at her heartstrings as she read. He had never been one to know what to say so it was a big deal that he had made the effort.

For 5 years she had longed to reconnect with her family despite their treatment of her based on lies they had been told. She had been lucky to have friends that stood by her, and one of which had urged her to relocate to Abuja where she had been able to secure a job. After the first 2 years of a few difficulties, the last 3 years had been smooth sailing.

"Lost in thought again?" her husband, Clement, said as he joined her in bed. She handed the phone over in silence and watched him read the mail. "Your family seems to be coming out of the woodwork this week," he said smiling. "This is Lambert, right?"

Nneoma nodded, "Yes. His wife was the one that cooked up that horrible tale just to cover up her cheating. I wish I had informed Lambert on time. My hesitation gave her time to manipulate everyone against me."

"I agree but then I don't know if you should let them off the hook that easily. They believed her so quickly, without any doubt."

"I know. The supposed truth was compelling, I guess, and she also had witnesses, people the family knew," Nneoma said sighing. "I am not making excuses for them though. I just want to move past everything. I am looking forward to spending time with them."

"You didn't tell them about me?" Clement asked. "Or about Noah?"

Nneoma smiled again, her gap-toothed smile filling Clement with glee, "I want that to be my holiday surprise to them. I want to see my parents' reaction to their grandbaby and how my brothers react to you."

Clement laughed a little, pulling in his wife and hugging her tight. "I'm happy for you

and I also look forward to experiencing that holiday vibe you have always told me about.”

“I can’t wait to see their faces when we turn up days before. I’ve missed the countdown we always did before Christmas,” Nneoma added.

“Your family tradition of counting down the holidays from the 1st of December is weird. It’s something foreign,” Clement said.

“I know but mum always said, ‘what’s the use of experiencing different cultures and traditions if you cannot take the best parts and make them your own?’”

They fell into a comfortable silence and Nneoma, her head resting on his chest, listened to her husband’s heartbeat. “I didn’t want us to spend another Christmas without family,” Clement said softly. “I have been praying that even if my family never came around, at least yours would.”

“Don’t give up on yours just yet, Clem,” she sat up and turned to face him.

“I’m not, but I am also being realistic. I have you,” he said pinching her cheeks, “I have our son Noah and now I get to meet your family.” He paused, a smile on his lips.

“I think that is more than enough for now. I am grateful for it.” Nneoma leaned forward and planted a kiss on her husband’s lips. In seconds, they were cuddled up and giggling when their 2-year-old son found his way into the room. They watched as he climbed in bed with them, and, with a big smile on his lips, he wiggled in between his parents. “When they say these kids are good family planners,” Clement said laughing, “I totally understand now.” He tickled his son, “See as this boy spoil show for me.” They played with him a little while before settling down and drifting off to sleep.

The following morning, after Clement had taken Noah to kindergarten, Nneoma settled down to respond to Lambert. She had thought of not sending any response but recalled how her brother would panic when he never got a simple text message back. She would keep it simple so, smiling, she typed out the words.

Hey Lamb,

*I let go of the anger a long time ago and concentrated on getting on in life.
Please don’t beat yourself up anymore. I am happy to hear from you and I
cannot wait to see you guys again soon.*

Nneoma

After sending it, Nneoma sat back and closed her eyes. She imagined the last Christmas that they had been preparing for, before everything came crashing down. She had not gotten the chance to prepare the food she had planned and was sad to hear that they never used the menu for the celebrations that year. “Mum kept it,” she muttered to herself, smiling. It wasn’t December 1st yet but she was already counting down the days she would be back home with her family, with a family of her own. The joy she felt was wholesome, and a tear streaked down her cheek as she got to her feet. It was time to pack for her surprise. It was long overdue.

Alex Awire watched as his wife and sons busied themselves around the house. He had always been clueless when it came to celebrations and always resigned himself to shelling out the funds that they needed to plan and prepare. This time around was the same except for the fact where his daughter was coming home. He would finally get to see his Ada, the one that he had cast out of the house because of the lies of another and for the sake of maintaining a business deal that eventually ran aground. This time around he didn't want to just pay, he wanted to be a part of the preparations for the holidays and for Nneoma's return.

"I can see you are trying to make yourself useful but you really don't have to stress yourself," his wife said when she caught him working on the generator. "Nneoma once changed the spark plug and drained the engine oil. She got stained all over but the excitement I saw in her made me show her how to do other things." "And that was why she ended up studying mechanical engineering as opposed to nursing as I wanted," Mrs. Awire said, leaning on a wall closest to where her husband was working.

"I miss her so much, it's physically painful. The mere mention of her replying to Caleb's mail and indicating her willingness to visit gave me so much relief that I felt light headed."

Mrs. Awire patted his shoulders, ending with a light squeeze, "Come inside and eat." She paused and looked him over, a light frown on her brow, "Clean up first." He laughed lightly and watched her walk off before turning back to the generator.

Minutes later he got to his feet and started making his way into the house when he heard the main gate creak. It always made a sound when it was opened and he had always made a mental note that he would oil the hinges once he had time. He never had time. Returning to the generator house, he picked up the engine oil and walked down the side of the house to the gate. There he stopped, eyeing the man and child that stood there with luggage.

"Are you lost?" he asked. Unsure of whether he was to be polite or sceptical of the strangers in his compound, Alex took a few cautious steps forward. The child hid behind the man's legs and the man straightened, surely in a bid to not appear intimidated.

"Erm, we are here as guests, sir," the man said.

"Guests of whom?" Just then the gate creaked again and the older man froze when he saw who it was, in all her glory. She had not changed much except for being a little bit fuller than the last time he had seen her and then it dawned on him who the man and the child were to her. Their guests.

"Is the gen giving you issues again?" she asked a grin on her face.

Alex Awire, a stoic man stood there frozen. He did not know how to approach his daughter and was overcome with relief when she walked up to him and pulled him into an embrace. He couldn't hug back because of his stained hands and could only return the gesture with his arms. Nneoma pulled back and wiped away a stray

tear from her father's cheek. "This is my husband, Clement, and our son, Noah," she said. Clement stepped forward and bowed lightly. Alex nodded before snapping out of his stupor and ushering them inside. He hurried ahead shouting his wife's name. "Natalie, they are here!" he shouted. "They are here. They came early!" "Who are they?" Natalie yelled back. "I hope it's not your cousin." The woman froze for a few seconds on the stairs before running into her daughter's arms. "You should have called us to come get you," she said pulling back and looking Nneoma over. "I still know the way home," Nneoma said before stepping away from her mother and moving to stand beside Clement. "I wanted to introduce you to my family early enough."

"Your husband and child?" Natalie asked although she knew the answer. She spread her arms and Clement fell into her warm embrace.

Alex came running out, his hands now clean and in different attire. He took Nneoma into his arms, the way he wanted to, and just held her there. Clement pulled away from Natalie's arms and grabbed Noah, "This is Noah, our son," he said, introducing the shy boy to his grandmother. "Noah, this is your grandma and that's your granddad." Natalie squatted to Noah's eye level and a few seconds later, he let her hug him and also pick him up. Alex, with one hand holding on to Nneoma as though afraid she would vanish, used the other to pat Noah's head. "I can't imagine you got married and had a child," Alex said his voice breaking.

"There is a lot to catch up on and there is time, I promise." Nneoma said.

Natalie handed Noah over to Alex before she dragged Nneoma over to the kitchen. Alex and Clement, with little Noah's help, brought in the luggage and were soon seated and talking when Caleb and Lambert came in.

"Who's this?" Lambert asked.

"Who's kid?" Caleb asked.

"Mine. Play nice," Nneoma called from the kitchen. She emerged grinning and basking in the joy on her brothers' faces.

In no time the brothers were passing their sister between them. Noah joined in the excitement while Clement and Alex watched on. Soon, everyone was gisting away over drinks and finger foods. Nneoma's introduction of Clement was met with a lot of pleasantries. Laughter had returned to their home and they were sure never to let it die out again. A lot still needed to be done but they were well on their way to fully mending broken bridges as they were counting down the holidays.

Ndoa

Nteranya Sanginga | Fiction

December is for churches. New wives fill the bands of benches to pray for the strength of their mothers to be able to make it through another year. Old wives sit beside them and pray for another year where their husbands do not bring something they cannot handle or someone who will unravel all the words they have told their daughters and daughters-in-law. It is also where the aunts pray with one eye closed and the other watching which new husbands did not escort their wives to church. Those would be the ones the streets would hear about first, as their names would crawl from tongue to ear, then run through minds and out mouths to land inside neighbourhoods, dinner tables, and then bedrooms.

December is also for mud. Young men would gather and get behind a rich man's car because a new driver had mashed the acceleration in frantic panic and driven the two back wheels deeper into the solidifying wet mud. Cars would pile up behind them, honk, honk, and honk, until three buses would believe they are smarter and charge past other cars, climbing over the eaten pavement blocks for pedestrians, and block the oncoming traffic. The young men would continue to push the car, until their leader collected their kachupa from the rich man. On market days, mothers would lift their kikwembe as their block slippers searched for solid footing, ever so often reaching out to a young son for some help to make it across a green puddle.

December is not when those abroad come to spend their money. If they do come in December, it is in secrecy. To complete some longstanding paperwork, build walls and fences around land that the governor's nephew's wife's sister's uncle has set their eyes on, or see close family without the fear that they would be met with appeals every morning the kuku crow.

In Beke, December is not July and August, but July and August are very much December.

July and August are for games. On a wooden bench, on tiles, or on empty dining tables, few would gather with a board coloured in yellow, green, blue, and red. A black cup that held camera film would carry a dice that would be shaken. Some would shake it hard, some soft, some many times, some thrice, and some twice. Those who had known it long, shook it once before moving their pieces on the board. The best games of Ludo were never on boards that had all the original pieces. The best games were played on boards with folded papers scribbled on or different shaped stones or small plastic pieces. When too many children circled the bench, tiles, or the empty dining tables, then cards were brought for entaire ya makofi. The back of losing hands were slapped until the child who bragged the most yelped loud enough for their mother to ban the game. Then a stubborn older cousin would find the largest jug and plastic cups and hushingly reset the cards to play entaire ya mayi. Children would not yelp out in pain, but there would be many mattresses outside the next morning.

July and August are for noise and childhood memories. Children are not woken but they wake everyone hungry to soak in every hour of every day that they do

not have to wear blue and white. Today they will be at Muyomba, then tomorrow at Shangazi, and sleep at Tate's. And at each point, balls will be kicked, dolls will be combed, and last borns will be crying. One child will run being chased by another child who is closely followed by another. All of whom are chased by voices telling them to stop running, to stop making noise, to play carefully, and to not get dirty. Eventually, the voice will stop running after the children and turn back to the circle of voices laughing, talking, and whispering. Clothes that outside are red and yellow will come back brown, blue, and black.

July and August are for new clothes and shoes. On the cusp of the end of l'année scolaire, and before the beginning of the next, parents would pull out clothes that they had hid in their rooms. These would be the clothes and shoes that children would wear. First on Sundays, until enough people had noticed how smart they were, then the clothes would be worthy to be worn every other day. But not all clothes and shoes would be worn this way. Some would be given only to be worn for the special parts of July and August. When the special parts of July and August ended, parents collected the clothes and shoes, washed them and hid them again. Dresses, suits, shirts, and black shoes would not be torn.

July and August are for eating and drinking. Children would be gathered around basins of chips and nyama, wali na maradi, or bugali na pondu. Those who were older would learn to keep their eyes open when Tate prayed, even after she told them to close their eyes. They would not lose sight of the nyama because they had once closed their eyes and opened them to see no more nyama in the basin, even underneath all the chips. And though there was more food being cooked in front of all of them, there was no more food to add. A 75 centilitre of Vital'O would be carried by the two small hands of 7- to 10-year-olds who gulped it in parts like a Tonton fighting his fifth Primus. When the Vital'Os were finished, more running and chasing happened in the background of fathers in suits taking off their jackets, rolling their sleeves, and washing their hands. Bugali is a serious affair. Bugali and politics is an even more serious one that cannot be done well and full in a jacket. Mothers would peer from the kitchen to see if their husbands and fathers were eating. Wives staying in the kitchen was a choice made by both husbands and wives. The former for tradition and the latter for comfort. Women's stomachs could fit ugali the size of a football, but doing so in front of men would scare men into starving their wives. To eat their food well and enjoy it with their mothers, wives ate in the kitchen keeping an eye on the food for later in the night.

July and August are for love and its affiliates – true and false. For some, love is found and many people come to witness how two people promise to spend the rest of their lives with each other. For some, love pushes them to bring honour to family in making untrue promises to spend their lives with someone befitting of their family status. For some, lust introduces themselves as love, and quietly people try find who fed the lie the most. These some will be many and will bring many to many unions from Monday to Sunday and then Monday again. Food will be ate. Drinks will be drank. Words will be said. Gifts will be given. Cows and goats will be brought, and they will be ate – eventually. Then wives' suitcases will be carried into houses by husbands. And people will return to their homes keeping one eye closed in prayer, and one eye open to see which husband will throw their wives suitcases or which wives will drive their husbands to ash. In the wait and before the start of departures

and la rentrée scolaire, families would sit together as loved ones reuniting after days, weeks, years, and decades away from each other.

July and August are for dancing. In and at every opportunity where there was the slightest scent of music, people would move, shake, and rotate their waists. The Papas and Tates would bounce their bellies up and down in place of rotating their waists. Teenage bridesmaids and groomsmen would rehearse endless choreographies and perfect their entrance songs. In the salles des fêtes, people stopped sweating after the sun woke up. It did not matter if it was Ndombolo, Rumba, or Zouk, the only time the dance floor was empty was at the beginning during the opening prayer and speeches. Ndombolo pumped blood from the right edge of the hairline all the way to the corner of the smallest left toe. Rumba couples got closer with messier hands and closed eyes the more crates and crates found themselves with empty bottles. When bashamuka and les hommes qui se respect left the halls and the lights dimmed, younger men, women, boys, and girls got as close as they possible could as Philip Monteiro's "Irrestivel" pulled heartbeats together. Some found their wives and husbands here. Some found their temporary loves who they would promise to marry before disappearing to other countries to meet the following year as strangers – the moment publicly forgotten.

What is remembered is how Thierry finished the hot water, how Pako farted on a mattress with 7 other people, how Larissa beat Tonton Yves in Ludo, and how we managed to fit 14 people into seven-seater cars in a cortege from the church wedding. Noël does not ring the same as Ndoa in Beke, and it never will.

What a Year This Has Been

Bright Aboagye | Poetry

i sit. drink and look to the above. catch a glimpse of it all: the January where my Christmas lights came down, my February where tissues were hopes, March when I lost hope to the plans set in April, and May where I knew I was nothing. June, my grandma stepped into a stillness and my world progress. July: my faith renewed but August broke me. September found me nothing and October I looked to God. this November set nothing and I must show my 32 to faces I refuse to remember in December and open presents that never heal my heart.

then I drown inflamed by the calls and hopes:

the cry
the tears that would never be shed among people
the joy drowning within
the happiness set at bay
washed by the daily occurrences of life

so I watch the windows and listen to the turn by the clock. the noise that strikes a movement: the frame that moves faster than air and the seconds that disappears within a sneeze. if I stay on this couch for a moment, I stay for 365 days & my year strikes again — comes by — with the rate of the chaos that clouds my sun; and I shall reset with a renewal, find myself again — break — mend — wait — and it shall be another start.

About the Authors

Aanuoluwapo Adesina is a graduate of Butler University's MFA program and the author of *Emocean*, a poetry collection published by Kraft Books (Nigeria) in 2016. In 2017, his poetry was shortlisted for the Jane Martin Poetry Prize, and in 2021, his works were longlisted for the Africa@2050 Climate Fiction Competition, the African Writers Awards, and the Wakini Kuria Prize for Children's Literature. His writing has appeared in *Brittle Paper*, *ROPES Literary Journal*, *The Citron Review*, *San Antonio Review*, *The Bitchin' Kitsch*, and elsewhere. He is also the Founder and Editor of *The Olugbon Review*.

Benjamin Cyril Arthur holds a degree in English and linguistics. Growing up, he felt accustomed to the company of books and has loved reading and writing since junior high. He is a participant of the 2024 Canex creative writing workshop and a winner of the 2020 Samira Bawumia literary prize competition in poetry. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in the *All Ghana a Stage* anthology, *Brittle Paper*, *Tampered Press*, *Ghana Pride* anthology, *Flametree Publishers*, and elsewhere. When he is not writing, he spends most of his time reading or behind his camera.

Beti Baiye is an editor, public health professional, communications strategist, and writer. Baiye led the Nigeria Health Watch editorial team until Sept 2023. She is currently a consultant communications strategist in the public sector. She has worked as a writer and editor for over seven years and has been published in *The Different Shades of a Feminine Mind* anthology, *Bellanaija*, *Daily Trust Newspaper*, *Guardian Newspaper*, and on the Nigeria Health Watch site. Recognizing the immense power storytelling holds, Baiye believes that when honed and used with intention, it can become a transformative tool.

Bright Aboagye is a Ghanaian, influenced by Aja Monet & Akwaeke Emezi, who dreams of becoming a surrealist blues poet, writer and – with a passion for cooking – aspires to open a restaurant. Aboagye hopes that his works inspire and give hope to all who read them. He holds a BA degree in English from the University of Ghana and a Master's degree in Literature in English from the University of Cape Coast. He is MFAing at the University of Ghana majoring in Playwriting. He can be found on Instagram ([nk_asante](#)), Twitter ([Bright_Aboagye](#)), [Medium](#), and his [blog](#).

Bunmi Ańjóláolúwa Adaramola works in academia by day and spends the rest of her time in her overactive imagination. Her story, *Palmwine Promises*, was featured in BP's 2023 Festive Anthology. Her stories appear or are forthcoming in *Brittle Paper*, *The African Writer*, *The SprinNG Literary Movement*, *Akpata Magazine*, *AfriHill Press*, *KePress Anthologies (2024)* and elsewhere. Her story, *Say My Name When the Crow Calls*, was shortlisted for the 2024 Akpata Editor's Choice Prize for Fiction. She has an unhealthy caffeine addiction and is an unrepentant bibliophile with an overwhelming stack of cheesy romance novels.

Christopher Armoh is a Ghanaian writer who crafts poetry with a blend of eloquence and emotion that resonates with themes of identity, culture, social consciousness and political dissent. Two of his notable poems, "Focus on Africa" and "Negro" have found home in the *Of Voices and Movements* anthology by the Department of English, KNUST with "Focus On Africa" studied by all second-year students. His podcast, *Take Um So Podcast*, advocates for young adults to take

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Daniel Naawenkangua Abukuri is a Ghanaian novelist, poet, and researcher. He holds a first class degree in Psychology from the University of Ghana and was a research fellow at Korle Bu Teaching Hospital. His short stories were shortlisted for the Young Creative Writers’ Lab I and III by the Goethe-Institut. He has published short story and poetry collections, including *Bluest Petal* and *Petals of Love*, on Amazon KDP. Abukuri has completed two novels, *A Somber Coward* and *Crimson Stain*, which are forthcoming. In his spare time, he enjoys reading, music, and playing basketball, his greatest passion.

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Hope Osatare Matthew is a screenwriter-turned-literary-artist, exploring the realms of short stories and literary criticism. Currently, she is honing her craft, aiming to tackle novel-length projects in the near future.

Imemba Emmanuel Ikechukwu is an emerging talent from Abia State, Nigeria. He is currently a microbiology student at the University of Nigeria Nsukka where he hopes to balance his passion and his area of study and create a change in the society he has found himself. His works have been long listed for the *Blessing Kolajo* poetry prize and the *Teambooktu* poetry challenge.

Keletso Thobega is a development journalist and writer based in Gaborone, Botswana. Some of her by-lines appear in *The Continent*, *City Press*, *Mail & Guardian*, *Thomson Reuters*, *Global Press* and *Index on Censorship*. She is a fellow of the *African Union Media Fellowship* and *United Nations Health Foundation* reporting fellowship. Some of their literary works appear in the *Botswana Women Write* anthology and *Poetry Potion*. Some of the programmes they’ve completed include the *Gaborone Book Festival* and *University of East Anglia Writing Workshop*, the *Zakes Mda Writing Masterclass*, and *Canex & Narrative Landscape* prose writing residency.

Lamiae Zerioush is Moroccan, from Amazigh/ ⵜⴰⴳⴷⵓⴷⴰⵢⵜ origins. She is a PhD student at the University of Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah, Dhar Almehrad, Fes, Morocco. She is also a former fellow at the *Digital Narrative Institute*, where she worked on a digital narrative project that is being exhibited Nov 2024-Feb 2025 in the *Zone of Experimental Storytelling*, in collaboration with *Washington State University-Vancouver*, *The NEXT*, and the *Electronic Literature Lab*. Lamiae has a profound passion for writing prose and poetry, with a short story in *MonoNoAware Anthology*, an essay in *CIS Conference’s proceedings* issue, and an eco-narrative in *Panorama: The Journal of Travel, Place, and Nature*.

Lukman Nurudeen Adeniyi is a Nigerian poet, playwright, activist, and artist dedicated to promoting peace, sustainable development, and human welfare. His work has been featured in various books and magazines, earning him numerous awards and recognition for his contributions to writing, performance, and activism.

Muheez Olawale writes poetry and prose fiction. He currently studies English Language at Lagos State University. His poem won the 2024 *Chief of Army Staff Literary Competition*. He has works published or forthcoming in *The Kalahari*

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Nteranya Sanginga is a Congolese creative. Their debut book, *From Birthing Waters*, was published by Vert Publishing in 2024, the first in a trilogy series. Other creative ventures include their co-authored article, "What the Atlantic Got Wrong on Congo – A Long Open Letter," and their involvement in "Germaine" for Iminza's album, *Roots X Wings*. They collaborated with artists such as Won Young Mbengeni, David Gyampo, and Misenga Moukendi. Sanginga is also a former member of the Afrocontigbo Dance Company, and their performances include Afoutayi's "Konesans" (2017/18), Leslie Parker's "Crystal, smoke n' Spirit (s)" (2019) at the Momentum New Dance Works Festival, and Threads Dance Project's "Tapestries 4.0" (2019).

Odomaro Mubangizi is in charge of academic affairs for the Proposed Hekima University. He served as Dean of Philosophy Department at the Institute of Philosophy and Theology in Addis Ababa for over ten years. He has taught and written about African philosophy and political philosophy for several years at Arrupe Jesuit University. He has a doctorate from Boston University where he specialized in social ethics and ethics of international relations.

Omatsola Lucy Adanna (Okwor) is an educationalist and a writer. She is the author of *Anita's Secret*, *The Older Boy Next Door*, and many other yet to be published works including poems. She studied English and Literary Studies at the University of Abuja, Nigeria. She is married and blessed with a daughter.

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Solomon Eberechukwu Obika is a student and spoken word poet who goes by the moniker "Bonafide." He worked with Search for Common grounds NGO in the advocacy for rights to freedom of religion. He is the 2023 runner up of the Mental Health Creativity Contest and runner up in Blessing Kolajo Poetry Workshop contest. Obika is also a computer science student of National Open University of Nigeria. He uses his art as a medium for self-expression and hopes to also create positive impact in his audience through advocacy.

Tehila Okagbue is a Nigerian writer who enjoys using words to express her thoughts and imagination. Her works have appeared in *Isele Magazine*, *The Kalahari Review*, *Afrocritik*, and elsewhere. She recently co-founded the Lady Ink Society, a

community for female creative writers to thrive. When she's not writing, she's an afro hair-care consultant.

Temitope Omamegbe is a creative writer, scriptwriter, developmental editor, proofreader and writing coach driven by a desire to help people achieve their goals of getting published. An occasional poet, Omamegbe is also the convener of the Amethyst Short Story Contest. Her other works are “TWICE a Bride,” “Hell Hath No Fury,” “The Night Masquerade” and “Of Good Destiny.” When she's not writing, she is a Client Service Officer and a card payment specialist.

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About Brittle Paper

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