

# Agbowó

ISSUE 6

NOVEMBER 2022

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# About Agbowó

Agbowó is growing to be a foremost African art company providing platforms for African writers and artists that ensure creative Africans can concentrate on creating great art while we ensure they get the audience and the value they deserve.

Our goal is to create immense value for art lovers whether as creators or as consumers of African art as they might have not experienced before- both through the magnitude of our service and in the way we have chosen to deliver them.

Some of our initiatives include Agbowó online literary journal ([agbowo.org](http://agbowo.org)), the yearly Agbowó magazine ([agbowo.org/magazine](http://agbowo.org/magazine)), the upcoming monthly publication, Monthly ([monthly.agbowo.org](http://monthly.agbowo.org)), our arts events platform, Arts n Chill by Agbowó ([agbowo.org/artsnchill](http://agbowo.org/artsnchill)) and most recently, our platform for publishing third party publications and artworks, Published by Agbowó.

We will continue to seek new, innovative and trusted ways to uphold African artistry, craft and creativity. Whether through our own initiatives, partnerships or sponsorships, we will remain true to our purpose of providing global access to cultural and creative Africans and helping them gain value and audience for their work.

Agbowó's registered name is Agbowó Creative African Company, incorporated with the RC number 1575748.

# Editor's Note

Based on Tembi Locke's memoir, "From Scratch" followed the pedestal of an eruptive relationship between a couple with different cultural backgrounds. What started as an innocently growing love between Texan artist Amy (Zoe Saldaña) and Italian chef Lino (Eugenio Mastrandrea) soon became a daring narrative about sickness, perseverance, commitment, dreams, and ultimately, death. But something else was happening in the backdrop: the possibility of using language to scale a hurdle, connect with people, and navigate trauma.

The power lying in the stories we tell as a people resonates with the time we spend living the story. We often find ourselves reaching for memories because the story we are currently living is still fermenting. Nostalgia is both a poetic and realistic tool. For instance, December in Nigeria is different from December in Iowa. It snowed yesterday, so there is a spread of snow on my lawn this morning. The lawn overlooks the grey mansion where a man and his wife water their plants every morning. A man with a big belly mowed the sidewalk connecting Burlington boulevard with Lucas street. There are no children outside. No loud music from the barber's shop where children are gathered in the afternoon watching Wrestlemania on the 14" tv placed outside. In Ibadan, festivity is synonymous with memories of people and friends. Not a time spent with books and the distilled silence in the clear sky. Again, nostalgia is the difference in the stories we tell. I wonder about the similarities of experience in very different spaces, placing Iowa city by Ibadan.

We attempt to do this when Agbowo calls for its unthemed issues—bring writers together from the vindictory obscurity or the evanescent affluence from which they write. See who is writing "from scratch" or is telling their part of a story already told by another, like in Tope Abigail's *What it means to be born in the Niger Delta* where there is an emptying of memory:

*Their eyes emptied of memories of their  
lover's rubs. The lull of the water*

*wrung around what is left of their bodies.*

What is factored in the stories is the individuality of the characters. The story might have happened differently if Amy (Zoe Saldaña) was a singer or a dancer. What would happen differently in Moustapha Mbacké Diop's *Liberté* if the narrative was told of the 19-year-old boy from a street in Zambezi, although in another reality, *Liberté* is a different film set in the 18th century, telling the story of the libertines that spend a night of sexual debauchery in the forest. Individuality does not exempt the author. Instead, it gives them the liberty of creation. I've always wanted to ask this about the creation story—if you were the maker, what would you create first—light or music? The sea of the sons of men? Or paradise and hell? Darkness from which you draw the poetic instincts to write about the impossibilities of light?

*What do you want?*

There is no easy answer to this in this Y issue that we have collected for our readers. Ucheoma Onwutuebe's story creates a *murder board* of desires for her characters. In one breath, Nzube is asking for the liberty of self, regardless of her encroaching baldness. She wants to be desired. In another light, what Eloka wants would not matter as long as he is silent about his desires. The stories, essays and poems in this issue live in a natural world bodied by spectacle and magnificence at the brink of wonder. Again, would what Nzube desires differ if she is not going bald? If Eloka

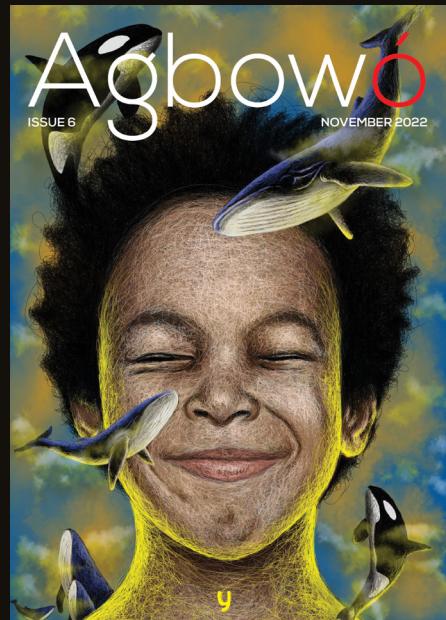
didn't like Wordle, what can words do?

In Novo Amor's *Repeat Until Death*, the repetition of *I can't breathe anymore* at the end of four-minute-long track strikes with angst, a perfect refrain to leave with the power of loss properly palmed into the slow indie. In the same spirit, the works in this issue are driven forward by the knowledge that narratives exist within us. And that it is possible to disrupt someone else's story to derive another. Although only some are storytellers, everybody is a story.

This issue also features NLNG winner and the shortlisted poets Romeo Oriogun, Su'eddi Agema and Saddiq Dzukogi, whose works highlight range and verisimilitude.

I invite you to enjoy our first November Issue, Y.

*Yours in Writing,*  
**Adedayo Agarau**  
Iowa City, Iowa.



The Y Issue  
NOVEMBER 2022

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Cover Art  
**DAY DREAMER**  
by Adeniyi Temitope Adekunle

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# Masthead

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# Agbowó

UNTHEMED

ISSUE: Y

NOVEMBER 2022



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ASSIMILATION

A BRIEF RECORD OF DISAPPEARANCE

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Adebola Makinde

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**TO THOSE WHO GO AGAINST ALL ODDS**



# Liberté.

Moustapha Mbacké Diop

On the eve of my nineteenth birthday, the man snatched me from a complicit night.

You see, I had finished high school. For good. Hours earlier, I had cried and hugged my best friend as my name slipped from the school director's thick lips and hers didn't. I had felt sad that she'd have to retake the exam next year, yet joy overcame everything. My old folks weren't as happy—it was a success with honors they wanted, not a narrow pass.

I didn't care.

When night fell, I freed myself to the streets of Liberté. Smoke clogged my eyelids; the familiar dust settled on my flip-flops. A grin twisted my lips upward as I slid between angry, bellowing cars and silent couples.

The world was mine. The night was mine.

I crashed on a public bench. Faded green paint crusted on top of the wood; it smelled like old shoes and, faintly, piss. Inhaling it all, like a junkie did their liberating poison, I let the howling of dogs, the horns, and the djinné's drums seep into my ears.

That last one, I made up. I pictured the spirits dancing on top of a pregnant hill, thick black hair kissing their ankles as they hissed the letters of my name.

Nightlife died around me, too quickly. My brand-new black T-shirt long taken off, I scratched the glabrous skin of my chest and the sharp bones underneath. Dusty leaves grazed the back of my neck as a soft wind rose. Maybe the djinné had stopped their party for a moment, reminding me to come and dance with them.

Someone sat on the bench. Scents of sweat mixed with peppery curry made me open my eyes.

There was no one but me and the man. He was smiling as if I was a puppy he was about to rescue.

Maybe he had tricked the night and my djinné friends, too. That was why they let him clamp a stinking cloth over my nose and squeeze. The man was middle-aged, but his hold and dry muscles were unyielding. He had the withering strength of those retired traditional wrestlers—the ones who defeated countless opponents in their youth and had remnants of physical rigidity to show for it.

They all let him drag me toward his car; I couldn't see if it was old, or new. It was the color of my mother's tears when they would tell her her only son had disappeared. Or maybe it wasn't. Its engine roared like my father's anger, as he would find a way to blame me for my own absence. Maybe it was like the silence that I took with me when I skulked out of their house.

I fell in and out of darkness and hid there, away from the fear. My father would be right. I was small for my age. I was never a fighter. Knowing the streets of Dakar could be enchanting at times, deadly at others, I shouldn't have been out there. My defiance was a sacrifice to the sinister hearts of men, committed as a celebration for becoming one.

When he turned the engine off, the man forced a new whiff of ether up my nostrils.

I woke up inside a room without light. My jeans were soaked and stenchy, while my tongue stuck to my palate like a dead limb. He sat across from me. Watched me struggle against dark-painted chains, against the dryness that quelled any attempt at screaming. A plastic mat unfurled under his legs as prayer beads made a click, click sound, counted through his fair-skinned fingers. His dark eyes felt almost gentle. Smiles would cross his face as he watched me and I watched him, in painful silence.

Days had passed—months, maybe—when he first slammed those beads on my neck. I had croaked ‘Water, please.’ Red I couldn’t see overtook his eyes. Pain flared across my skin and the tip of my vertebrae. I had seen a glimpse of the monster.

He cried, after that. The tips of my toes felt numb and dead. My legs were foreign bricks he rested his head on, calling me ‘little brother’. The man never told me why he was keeping me hostage—nor did the monster. Bit by bit, through my exhausted brain and through the fear, I assembled the man’s story. Shards of glass that slit my fingers and made little sense. It was a wobbly, monstrous thing.

The man would let me out of the chains, sometimes. I was too weak; hunger grew into a close friend I learned to ignore. Like the djinné, it would come and go without a sound. Leaning my head against the wall, I listened as he told me about his rakk, his little brother, who had my skin and my frail stature. The man told me about the time his little brother made him angry. With dreamy eyes, he described his fingers curling around the boy’s throat and squeezing the life out of him. No one in his family ever suspected the man, for he was close to the boy and framed his murder as an accident.

Then, I happened. He had noticed me on one of his night strolls, stricken by my resemblance with his lost brother. Through my jovial smile and bare chest, he had seen a second chance. A message the universe was sending him: the chance to have his rakk back. The man told me how he walked into a nearby pharmacy and bought the blue, burning liquid that submitted me to him. How he waited for the empty to take back the night, and stole me then, like a trapped mayfly. Manic fervor cleared the fog in his gaze as he said this to me. A prophet, whose every word dripped with honey, every gesture dictated by carmine madness.

You should never name the things that terrify you. Names held power. They shattered barriers.

Names released evil.

Fresh drops of blood pearly atop my cracked lips as I called him a monster.

A midnight wave brought the thing forward. The cockroaches lurking under my soiled mat fell silent as it slapped me across the face. Even as I curled in a fetal position, it beat my flanks, and its silver ring left marks on my skin.

The monster receded. I made a decision, that day. I would do as it did. Drowning all my feelings, my pain, my exhaustion, in the deep dark waters of my soul. I would become a porcelain doll—the perfect replica of the man’s little brother.

Days passed. Months, maybe. When the beast peeked from under the man’s eyes and left blood on me, I would tell the man that I was a painting and it, the artist. My grime-covered fingers would brush the cut, and I would whisper, ‘*how it blooms on the canvas. Hibiscus flowers, look.*’

The demon resurfaced from time to time. But the man let me clean myself, eat more. I never left the room which walls I couldn’t see the color of, apart from using the shabby bathroom next door. When I complained of the pain in my limbs, the man gave me this fatherly gaze I never got from my own father; he upheld my head as I drank expired painkillers.

Did I ever hate the man? I think I hated myself, the whole world, more. I had been ignored by them and felt the need, the defiance, to scream my own existence. My parents, were they looking for me? Did they forget their uncontrollable, feral child already?

Despite my promise to become metal, cold and lifeless, I could never suppress the anger. It was making me a monster, like him. A djinné I was, who could not get the invisibility to slip off. The man's madness slithered under my skin, too.

Then, I broke free. I had waited a long time for the monster to be on a leash, while the man slept on that mat beside me. It'd been hard to inject life back into my porcelain muscles. I knew he kept the key in the front pocket of his faded yellow shirt. Without missing a breath, my porcelain fingers fished the old key out and locked the man inside.

It was moments before dawn when I walked out of the barrack he kept me in. I staggered into the streets of Liberté; everywhere I looked, I saw the man's face. Fear had long left me, heeding my command to stay underwater. Old homes loomed like giant turtles over my head. People who all had the man's face, coming from nearby mosques after the Fajr prayer, looked into my eyes and did not see me. My t-shirt and jeans were in shambles, filthy. The only thing they saw was another dof who roamed these streets.

Asphalt grew cold under my feet. Yes, I was crazy, was I not?

The man found me sitting under a cashew tree as I watched the sunrise. Painting the trash flying here and there, the people, and the treetops in fire, the rays refused to get through me. He parked the colorless car, prayer beads in hand. The man's shadow covered me—or the monster's, maybe—before he joined me in silence. I knew it was him, this time. No haunting could mimic his particular curaay scent.

Not once did I wonder how he'd freed himself from the locked room. Maybe the beast had come out, once and for all. Maybe it had torn down the door, and it would, at last, strangle me with those beads until my tongue and eyes swelled. Until I joined the man's little brother, wherever he was.

I still rose up and followed him when he went back to the car. There were more people now, watching me walk to my certain death. Women wearing his face wedged empty calabashes in the crook of their arms. Through fair-skinned fingers, taxi drivers leisurely swung the wheel.

This wasn't far from the Rond-Point Jet d'Eau, where we first met.

I had never really been far from my home.

And among the people who ignored me as my hand trembled around the door's handle, I saw a girl. She looked at me and screamed. She screamed like that time, months ago, maybe, when we heard my name in the admission list and not hers.

My best friend called the name I forgot I had. Tears flooded her cheeks, and only then did I notice that she wasn't wearing the man's face.

Piecing the puzzle together, her tears turned into anger as she cursed the man. Calling him all sorts of names, she drew the attention of everyone who was passing by. Everyone who thought I was a dof that this good man wanted to help.

Fear swelled in his gaze. People cornered him, and they were getting angry, too. A part of me—the porcelain rakk—wanted to drown all the voices and flee with the man, even knowing that he was gone and that the beast would kill me.

I saw the exact moment when the beast took full control. Not to attack, as I expected it to do. Like all cornered beasts did.

The man, or the beast, maybe both, shoved me off and climbed inside the colorless car. Ignoring the onlookers' angry shouts, he started at full throttle and left in a puff of black smoke.

He abandoned me, and I wondered if he had been real at all.

My mother kept crying, days and days after that. It had been eight months since I was taken away. In an effort to survive, I had drowned myself too deep. The feelings, the emotions, all were lost. I could only see the man's face, in every nook and cranny. The sound of his prayer beads clung to my eardrums and left room for nothing else. Despite all my mother's pleas, my father refused to let me see a psychiatrist.

"Only the dof go there. That is no place for my son," he would say. Then he stared into my eyes as if I was the monster that had abducted me; I stared back. His disgust plummeted down the infinite pool where all my emotions laid.

That night, I went to sleep and saw the monster. I watched as it cut the blanket he used to cover me with. I watched as it tied it around its neck and jumped.

I woke up smiling. The smile never left me as I dug out the thick belt I had once stolen from my father. It went broader as I secured the belt over the ceiling fan and around the skin of my neck. The buckle was cold—metal against my metal.

My djinné friends danced around the bed in silence. Their hair shone under the moonlight, their faces being their own demonic ones. I wondered if we would meet there again. The man, his rakk, and me: the other rakk he imprinted madness into.

The djinné froze.

I soared to freedom.

**Moustapha Mbacké Diop** is a Senegalese writer living in Dakar. He is in his fifth year of medical school, and is obsessed with African folklore, mythology, and animated shows like *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. When he's not writing, he can usually be found stressing over hospital rounds or binge-watching horror movies. His fiction has appeared in *Omenana*, *Fractured Lit*, and is forthcoming in the *Africa Risen* anthology.

# What It Means to Be Born in the Niger Delta

Tope Abigail Larayetan

You were flung from between your mother's legs  
into the snaking of waters blackened with waste-oil

fish carcasses drunk on the juice of peeled paint  
from floating oil rigs.

Their eyes emptied of memories of their  
lover's rubs. The lull of the water

wrung around what is left of their bodies. You  
never knew the music of the *chekeleke*,

children flying to call the birds,  
children running for the mark of white. You

never saw the skip of skittish armor-headed catfish  
and long-legged Titus. They were Papa's favorite. You

never knew him either. None of us left did. We only know  
his body washed to the step of our house with legs

that danced to the tune of waves. His  
bloated body did not have a mouth.

They never spoke of who did it but their  
shifting scleras, the colour of the perpetrators, answered.

**Tope Abigail Larayetan** is a poet and writer studying for her MFA in Creative Writing. Her works have appeared in The Shallow Tales Review, Kalahari Review, The Nigerian Students Poetry Prize anthology, and the maiden edition of the International Sisi Eko anthology. Social media: Instagram - @tope\_abigail. Twitter - @ahhbeegal

# Sinnerman

Kwame Boateng

*For Otuoo Acheampon*

my skin has been properly flayed  
Its ebony still swallowing light  
a photosynthesis of worlds surviving on little  
I've eaten the roasted eyes of my suitors  
and now God averts his gaze  
but you are divinity shoved in a flesh bag  
ethereal is messy  
What we have my priest calls sin  
by this I mean what I have for you  
is what a dog has for its master  
or a young man stitching himself into a wife

**Kwame Boateng** is a Ghanaian poet and artistic activist of human rights with deep love for performance poetry and theater. His work is forthcoming and has featured in the Contemporary Ghanaian Writers Series (CGWS) an organization that publishes anthologies of new Ghanaian writers, Ta Adesa Magazine, Maroko Magazine, and Olongo Africa. His works explore the themes of grief, protest, and loss. Twitter: @AGodcalledBoat



**Day Dreamer**

Adeniyi Temitope Adekunle  
Digital ART (2022)

# Unfurling

Chiderea Ike-Akaenyi

What are the words you do not yet have? What do you need to say? What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you sicken and die of them, still in silence?

—Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*

What are the words you do not yet have? What do you need to say? What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you sicken and die of them, still in silence?

\_\_\_\_\_ Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*

April, 2022

We often lament that *ana eligo ife*, an anguished exclamation, expressing our helplessness in the face of an earth that is insatiable, that keeps taking and taking from us until it rips life out of our throats. I do not find the strength to spill these words. On some days, I wake not believing the reality of this. Is it okay to say that *onwu* has swallowed her? *Onwu* was not the collision that rocked the cars, thrust them in the night air and watched as they became flaming balls of yellow. It was not in the ravaging flames that turned their car to charred metal and sizzled flesh from bone. It was in the little choices, or better still, minions that set the stage for the merciless pillager that death is.

“I went to pick your mother’s bones”, she says, “We sorted her bones from the ashes of the car, the wreckage left.” My mother burned to bones. Photos of blackened metal and skulls, wailing nuns and priests. Sort, sort, sort them out. The large bones are the driver’s, the small ones are the nuns. We can’t find anything of Monica’s, she burnt to ashes, they said. I listen to the nuns cry, to my birth mother as she kneels and wails.

I am broken, torn apart by grief, undone by the cruelty of it. I am unshackled and bound, my chest palpitates, emotions pool in my belly as I scramble for sanity, for a good reason to make sense of this. Everything spins, like thread caught on a nail, tearing through. I am wracked by loss; it snatches my breath. Burial dates are announced and I force a foot of steel into my spine. I bite down on a rock, pack my clothes and prepare to meet the others at the park.

The air that Wednesday morning is chilly, or perhaps my body chooses what to feel, dis-

regarding the burning ball in the sky. We sit at the crowded bus station, waiting, wanting to go to Akwa Ibom, to bury my mother's bones, pay our last respects. They make jokes. How each of the nuns' eyes were a gleaming red when they cried, how my mother would be missed. I want to clamp a hand over their lips and shut the noise out. My chest is heavy. I am not crying, not tired, just numb, fighting whatever may come in the next hours, praying that I do not collapse. I want to cry at them to shut up, to not argue over getting grilled meat to eat, to not laugh. Do they not feel it? The tightness in my chest that refuses to unfurl. The regret that sits heavy in my head. I get on a bus.

Five miles from home, a long way from Akwa Ibom, the tears I have been guarding slam into my gut and holds my breath in a tight fist. I cannot cry, I can only whimper at the pain. Shaky hands motion to the bus driver and he drops me at the next bus stop. I go home and collapse into my birth mother's arms. It is on that night, seeking reprieve in my head, that she inhabits my head, the little Gollum I had dumbed for months with work and school.

*You have failed her, she hisses.*

*You are no true daughter of your mother.*

I have failed her, I moan. I am not deserving, not if I cannot be there as they lay my mother's bones to rest. I am not there for she who funded my education, pushed me to limits and praised me at every turn. Food is sawdust in my mouth. I want to apologize, for not living true, for not being the perfect daughter – loves God, attends masses, avoids boys and make excellent grades. I do only the last bit. For the others, I oscillate between extremes, devout Catholic to discerning agnostic, from obedient handmaid to fire-spitting, unapologetic feminist.

*No grateful daughter of her mother sleeps in on Sundays.*

*Only ingrates read books by women who bear fire in their eyes and tongues, denouncing everything your mother stands for.*

I wanted to be both a year ago; woke every morning to read at mass, compiled mass intentions, spent hours with the fold, dousing the fumes that swirled when Father said snarky things about women and young girls. Mother was pleased. I bristled with anger, and longing and a yearning. I pulled myself up until I wearied and reach for more books – Lorde, Eltahawy, Woolf. I subsume myself in schoolwork and find a worthy excuse to stand before God only once a week.

I do not fear hell anymore. All my fear has been drained and contracted, deposited in the Gollum that sits on my shoulders. I shudder at the sights of habits, dodging behind cars and people to evade explanations.

*You cannot condemn servitude and be bankrolled by it, she hisses again, pulling the hair at my nape until she leaves a shiny spot.*

**May, 2022**

A priest cousin invites me for a fortnight and gifts me an envelope. "You have made us proud," he says. I do not think so. I may have graduated summa cum laude but my beliefs do not fit the bill, the prescription, the laws that say who should be or not be a good daughter. I do not think I have. I have avoided a confessional all year. I drag my tired body into church every Sunday. I no longer say the rosary.

She lists these out and then some, kicking at my head, gripping my heart and shredding it to pieces. Remorse wishes for a portal, some leeway out of this. Perhaps I am all that she says and then some, perhaps being raised by nuns and men in robes mean one thing – I am their dream child. A task I try to achieve at every turn and excel in only one, the stench of my failure following me after the Tuesday of Holy Week, the night of the day that my mother burned. I tried to be good, the one that they wish for. Becoming the picture of obedience, hair cropped close to the scalp, no trousers (at least in her presence), saying little, sleeping and waking in the study and library, downing mugs of coffee as I trudged to ace my quizzes and exams.

A month and a half finds me on the floor in my room, sweating and straining in a half plough pose and failing. It is then that my birth mother calls. “Today is Sister’s funeral in her ancestral home. You must go.”

“Yes, I will,” I croak, feeling my hands pool with sweat. Gollum snarls again.

*What will they say, these nuns? That she spoilt you for three years less than a decade and you could not spare a tear, did not come to the burial?*

I cry in the bathroom, punching the tiled walls until my palms throb, loathing this being that I am – one that benefits from charity but gives nothing back – a typical scoundrel. I take a pill to calm my nerves. You need to be strong, I mutter as I hurl my unwilling body into the next bus and inside the church, where my mother’s ancestral home is.

After mass, people dance and share their grief, with limp handshakes and teary eyes. Some dance, to honour her they say, to guide her soul on a peaceful journey to the underworld. I cannot join them, not with the prickliness I feel, at the stares I receive for refusing to be there when my mother was laid to rest. It haunts me, like shadows in dim lights haunt their owners.

A nun saunters up to me as I go around, greeting everyone, trying to absolve myself of this stain. Her white habit is a dizzying glare in the sun. “You have forgotten us. Your mother died and you forgot us”.

I leave that afternoon, a wreck. I wanted to sob and wail like the girl whose head I bore on my shoulders for most of the afternoon as she cried. I wanted to sob and curse careless drivers and fires and roll on the hot loam of the church’s field, something to convince them that I did, indeed feel this hurt. To stop them from seeing me as unfeeling. I want to but I do nothing of the sorts. Everything gathers in my head, seals my lips and numbs me only enough to sigh at intervals. I go home and say prayers for their souls:

*Dear God, if you’re there, please have mercy on the soul that lived to serve you. Do not do it for me, I am a lost soul. I must journey to myself to find my truth. I pray, a tremor in my voice. God is silent, as always.*

I return to my apartment and submerge my body and mind in work, books and studying – a few online courses here, a few books there. Mother’s smiles haunt me, the wide parting of satisfied lips as she posed for the camera at my convocation, slipping naira notes into my bag as she left, telling other nuns that her daughter made her proud. I miss you; I whisper and the silence of my room echoes it back. I try to go to church, must honour her memory, I goad. Robes are washed and ironed, readings are practiced, heels are cleaned, outfits are chosen. Nothing works. The void in my chest spreads, claiming more land, more space with a taunting obstinacy.

*You must go and confess your sins, she whispers again, jarring me into numbness when I*

least expect it.

What sins, I ask.

*Forgive me, father for I have sinned. I have been a feminist and murderer. I cavort with queer people. I think women should be allowed to murder their babies.*

I try to shut her out, spray anti-Gollum wherever she pops up, seek peace in the stillness of my mind, in the calm that being alone brings.

I go out with friends, let liquid fire burn down my throat, fantasize about fingers raking over backs as I explore my partner's body. Getting drunk would be nice too, I think. I never finish well, hurrying home, scathed by the idea that Mother would want better for me. Mother's better meant keeping myself until someone nice and "responsible" desires me for a wife, gets her blessings, receives my birth mother's blessings and be wedded, to their joy, before God. My core contracts, clenches... whatever it is the tightening of muscles is called. I do not think I want it – Mother's dream – the perfect Catholic wedding. I wish to study – a master's, a PhD in writing, own a dog or two and when and if, the desire grips me, share my body and space with a lover.

June, 2022

The month slips in like a thief to heal. I do more yoga, think less of Mother, more about the grimness of my future – the strike drags on. When my birth mother calls, I say "Don't worry, I am well" Until I wake one morning and like leaves in sunlight, begin to unfurl.

They say something about a law being repealed, decisions about wombs and unwelcome inhabitants are thrown open to states. I am angry and tired, enraged and hateful.

*It is not your business. Face the problems in your home country,* Gollum hisses again.

I don't listen. Fingers clack over keyboards, retweets and denouncements. WhatsApp status updates, shares on Facebook. I wait for the deluge...it is a trickle first, bewildered emojis, shakes of the head and finally, epistles on how much I have disappointed the ones who expected more from me.

A twinge. Trembling fingers hover over my screens.

*Delete those things. You could lose respect in the eyes of people.*

My fingers reach, tap but retreat, curling back into my palms. I freeze the apps and slide into bed with a book.

Mother has not visited. Others speak of her being in their dreams, forgiving them, promising to always be there but I see nothing. I desire to, I want to.

The next day is a Sunday. Mass is at 7:30. I am in the kitchen preparing a meal at 7:45, jamming to Prince's *When Doves Cry*. I have begun to believe that she'd want me to be honest and true. When I log in, later in the afternoon, the gold shaft of light from the window streaking a line on my skin, I feel like cotton, with little weight. I ignore the texts, delete those I can and type some more. I eat a soursop and write a little. My chest is no longer heavy. My voice, hidden under Gollum's screams and condemnation, emerges, wrings her neck and tosses her into oblivion. Like a

scared, rain-beaten puppy, my voice returns to me. I reach out, wrap a warm towel around her, dry her fur, whispering sweet nothings. I hold her close, in the space between my shoulders and neck and listen to her sated whimpering, music to my ears.

THE END

**Chideraa** 's short stories on enuresis, trauma and being bi-racial have appeared in Itanile, Ngiga Review and Kreative Diadem. She holds a Bachelor's degree in English & Literature and was a finalist for the Awele Creative Trust Prize for Fiction in 2021. At the moment, she wishes to experiment by writing about whatever catches her fancy, or subjects she feels deeply about. An Assistant Editor at Isele magazine, she splits her time between her day job, seeing wildlife documentaries and working on her craft.

# Birds breaking from trees

Farai Chaka

In uptown streets and markets my English fails me on the tongue  
and melts away like butter kissed by heat all my life I've been  
cradled by language made to go to brick churches where God's words  
shifted into my native tongue and became stunning like birds breaking from  
trees English was fed to me like thick porridge  
from a dirty bowl shoved down the throat and commanded  
to return as orchestral song as beauty as dazing  
like azaleas bursting out of a mouth we were made to believe  
that God's face was the colour of the moon and his language  
only pushed out through the nose my ancestors lived to see  
their mountains and caves treated as unsacred I try  
to remember this each time I face an altar of inscribed brimstone  
and pray in a language that was birthed elsewhere today  
I have taught myself to not write in Shona and  
the guilt is like the shape of God moving through a corn field -  
present and heavy on drunken nights all my friends  
make confessional monologues in curled English accents and  
I am the only one who slumps on mud grey floors and wonder  
why language fails when I need it most today  
I am moved by phonetics say *zvirokwazvo* and I'll burst  
into cascade everlasting say *musikavanhu* and the night  
will uncurl itself into brightness I pride myself in this  
dazzling movement of sound of a tongue bowing to submission  
to history to heritage no one else understands this  
as a child the first phrase I memorised was *Vongai Jehovah*  
*nekuti wakanaka* and that sweetness cut away my tongue

until I was a tangle of light and glory      in uptown streets and markets  
everyone speaks English flowing smoothly like oil running down  
an anointed's hair      no one feels guilty for it  
I am the only one who slumps down into silence      and chew my tongue  
until I am calm again

**Farai Chaka** is a twenty year old writer from Harare, Zimbabwe.  
He enjoys long walks and horror shows during his free time.



**Fusion of Hues**

Adeniyi Temitope Adekunle  
Digital ART (2022)

# Wants

Ucheoma Onwutuebe

1. All Nzube wants is someone in whose presence she can take off her wig. Like most wig wearers, she pulls at hers once she shuts the door and kicks off her shoes, flings aside her bra and unplucks her faux lashes. Wigs are for the outside world and once you get home, you must let some fresh breeze touch your scalp. But Nzube woke one morning, looked at her hairline in the mirror and saw the onset of alopecia. She panicked. Her mother, Jachi, at fifty, still relaxed her full, jet-black hair without consequences. And here was Nzube, about to go bald at 31. So she went to Kene, the barber downstairs, and asked him to cut off the relaxed parts of her hair, leaving out the under-growth. She felt better after the cut, even cute, and on Sunday she went to visit her mother to show off her new hair. But Jachi took a look at her daughter and clicked her tongue. She grabbed Nzube by the chin to have a better look at the disaster. Why don't you ever consult your mother before making these life-changing decisions, eh? So Nzube panicked a second time, and on her way back to her apartment, she opened her Instagram and ordered two wigs from TheHair\_Merchant. Each month-end, as her modest salary hit her account from her HR manager job in a small consulting firm, Nzube grew her collection: three bone-straight wigs: one in black, one in maroon and the other in brown; two Anita Bakers in blonde and deep-chocolate, three Omotolas, in the same colors as the bone straight wigs, one very expensive Naomi Campbell, and one hard-to-comb Tracy Elliot Ross. Yet when she takes off the wigs at the end of the day, she remembers Jachi's disappointment at her shorn head and wills her 4C hair to grow back in the empty patches of her temples. Relaxers are out of the question now, says the dermatologist who leaves a gaping hole in Nzube's savings. When Will Smith slapped Chris Rock at the Oscars, Nzube was #TeamWill, even though Dumebi her best friend was #TeamChris. It was such a harmless joke, Dumebi said as they ate popcorn and scrolled through Twitter, following the mayhem. She turned to Nzube and asked, Why are people so sensitive these days? Nzube endorsed the slap because she

understood what it meant to touch your temples every morning, massaging castor oil+almond oil+jojoba oil+ori+coconut oil+avocado oil in vain, your mother on the other end of the Whatsapp video call trying to comfort you while masking the alarm in her eyes, telling you don't worry Nzube, it will grow back, we don't have baldness in our family. And now as she combs through her closet, debating between an Omotola or her very expensive Naomi Campbell, what wig would make a perfect statement for a first date, she wonders what she would do, when the time finally comes for her to take off her wig. She takes a picture of the two chosen wigs and sends them to Dumebi. The expensive Naomi Campbell is Dumebi's pick because it's good a man knows early that you like good things so he's aware of the kind of babe he's toasting.

2. All Eloka wants is someone to play Wordle with. No one introduced him to the online word game. As an ardent reader of the New York Times, he caught the bug when he saw it on the newspaper's Twitter page. He plays it every midnight, he plays it sitting on the toilet in the morning, he plays it when he's anxious, even in traffic. One time, without cheating, he made the genius mark when he got the right word—PLOTS—on the very first try. But there was no one to show his feat. He wished he was the type to post on social media, the type to transmit every bit of his life to friends and followers. He only used Twitter to keep abreast with gossip and world politics. And even if he grew the courage to post his win, none of his 334 followers would have cared. A month ago, he replied to Nzube's tweet on the Oscar incident as she vehemently supported the Smiths. He believes that women can be defended without the display of masculine bravura. He liked that Nzube engaged him without malice. Soon they were in the DMs and he enjoyed picking her mind. He is yet to ask if Nzube likes Wordle because he fears he'll be disappointed by the answer. However, he takes screenshots of his wins just for archival purposes. When he tried to introduce the game to Kamso, his younger sister whom he shared a two-bedroom flat with, she played it once, ignoring the yellow and green clues, mindlessly filling the letters. No, Eloka said, taking her phone from her. You don't use the letters with grey highlights. They are not part of the missing word. Kamso yawned and picked up her remote control and resumed watching *Blood Sisters*, a Nollywood hit on Netflix. Eloka knows she isn't a rude girl. She was just tired. She loved her big brother and was fiercely devoted to him, but sometimes Eloka's taste in entertainment was lost on the girl who made a living writing low-budget screenplays for Nollywood. And this evening, as Eloka opens his closet, searching for the right shirt and trousers that look relaxed but serious, he remembers he hasn't played Wordle for the day, so he sits at the edge of his bed and completes the puzzle in three

minutes. The right word is TEAMS.

3. Nzube wants consistency. A heavy want, Dumebi points out to her, as they comb through Yaba Main market, looking for secondhand but solid electronics such as hand driers, hot combs and pressing irons. The brand new ones they bought from the Super Store Mall did not last longer than six months, and they learned the second-hand electronics were tested and tried. Nzube wants an iron that doesn't blow up just because the voltage is too high, something with an insulator that works. And as she demands from the iron for her clothes, the hot combs for her wigs, she demands the same from love. Dumebi shakes her head at her friend. You're setting yourself up for heartbreak. Manage whatever you see. The streets are wild. But Nzube wants what she wants. She has suffered at the hands of inconsistency and she will not go through that rough path again. Not on her watch. Even though Celestine has crawled back to her DM, singing the blues again, she only responds because she loves to see him grovel as he made her do in their three-year tumultuous relationship. Nzube loved Celestine, the kind of love where you can part with one of your kidneys with alacrity just because your lover demanded it. Celestine said I love you back to her, but when a man tells you, I'll call you by five, and by five o'clock, six, seven, eight, he still hasn't called, at first you'll be worried and even call him to check if all is well with him. When he finally picks up his phone the following day and tells you he slept off, you'd be annoyed but forgive him. However, if this happens throughout the span of three years, same pattern, same excuses, same forgetfulness, you know you're not rated and the I love yous are just another empty salutation at the end of a call. She's re-talking to him after their breakup but she hasn't told Dumebi, who thinks Celestine should be banished from the land of the living for all he did to her best friend. To Nzube, it's not that deep, but she enjoys Celestine's need. *I heard Sia's Fire Meets Gasoline and thoughts of you stopped me in the middle of work*, Celestine texts. *I miss you*. Nzube doesn't reciprocate the vulnerability. During those three years with him, she could hold a masterclass on Being Vulnerable and fill out a hall. It's a pity he came to it after she left him. She replies, *Dissect how much you miss me*. And he goes, *Your smell, your love, your food, your warmth, your kisses, your patience, your patience, your patience*. Two nights ago, she dreamt of him and the dream was a vivid reenactment of their relationship: her groveling, the anxiety that lodged in her belly like undigested food, of waiting for a call to be returned, the cheap excuses, the flattening of her grievances to "drama and over-reaction", her massive insecurity, him threatening to leave, his leaving, her running after him, her begging, his reluctant return, press replay. She woke up and her chest was heavy from reliving the events of three years

in the span of thirty minutes. God must be showing me something, she said to herself, as she went to the bathroom. God must be reminding me why I left him. Leaving Celestine was no cheap accomplishment. It needed the intervention of an affair. As Nzube loves to narrate it, God sent Philip her way. Philip taught her that a man can say, Good morning, and you didn't need to look out the window or at your watch to confirm if it was indeed morning. Good morning was Good morning with Philp, not Good afternoon, not Good evening. A man can call by five if he says he'd call by five, and if unforeseen circumstances withheld him from calling by five, he apologized quickly and made up for it. One day, high on Philip, she picked up the phone, rang Celestine and delivered herself from the three-year-old spiritual, emotional and psychological bondage of a relationship. Of course things didn't last with Philip, he was just a forerunner to her liberation and she was fine with that. Tonight, standing before her dresser, Nzube grabs a bottle of Tom Ford's *Fucking Fabulous*, two dashes behind the right ear, two dashes behind the left ear, two pumps in the air before walking into it. She hopes that this Eloka would be a Philip-incarnate and not another bloody Celestine.

4. Eloka wants his person. His personal person. He is a good sharer,a good older sibling. When they were little, he shared his toy cars, his Batman and Superman collectibles with Kamso. His parents, The Chinwetelus, had little to worry about when they left their last baby with her big brother. Eloka gave up his Johnny Bravo for Kamso to watch Teletubbies, gave up his soccer for Keeping up with the Kardashians, his basketball matches for The Voice Nigeria. From his NYSC days till date, he gave her an allowance. He asked her to move in with him when their parents refused to see she was no longer their little baby but a twenty-five-year-old woman in need of privacy. Eloka shared clothes with his friends back then when they were all hustling and finding their feet in Lagos. When he resumed work as a product manager at UAC, making him the first among his pals to find a job, he still let them rummage through his wardrobe for what to wear for their own job interviews or what to wear when they needed to impress a girl on date nights. He believes in giving, in the love and bond that comes with sharing. But when it comes to love, and by love he means romance, Eloka does not want to share. He's strictly monogamous and he doesn't care about the aggressive connotation the word carries these days. He is a man who knows himself, and one man, one woman does it for him. That's what he's been trying to tell Jovita. *If you want me*, he wrote in his last text, *you have to leave him*. And she replied almost immediately, *It's not that simple, Elo. It's not that simple*. This problem, called Jovita, entered Eloka's life on a sunny September afternoon last year as he watched

Real Madrid vs. Chelsea. Jovita is one of Kamso's friends and Eloka didn't fancy himself as someone who would date his baby sister's friends. In his mind, her friends were automatically his baby sisters. But there are only three years between the siblings and Kamso wanted her brother to consider Jovita. She likes you, Kamso said to him after Jovita left their house. She's been begging me to hook you guys up after she saw the post I made on your birthday. At first Eloka would hide out in his room when Jovita came over—she was coming over too frequently these days. But the girls lured him out with the smell of okro soup, and Eloka doesn't joke with his okro soup at all. Finally he began to relax around Jovita. She was a fine girl but he wasn't convinced about dating Kamso's friends. After waiting for three months, Jovita moved on. She still came around and the atmosphere between her and Eloka became more relaxed, void of the expectation to date or hook-up as Kamso called it. But one Sunday evening, months after the failed match-making plot, Jovita came around looking for her friend. She's not home, Eloka said. She traveled to see our folks. Then he noticed that the girl had been crying. He pulled her in. What happened to you? Amidst hiccups and tears she said it was her new man. We fight alot. Small arguments escalate and in no time we are saying mean and unforgettable things to each other. Eloka microwaved some pepper soup for his guest and urged her to eat. She cried some more as he gave her a glass of water and painkillers for the migraine that came after one has cried their eyes out. He drew her close and shared his shoulders with her. But she wanted more than his shoulders, so she reached for his lips. He didn't think it was a big deal but something in him shifted, that instinctive need to be kind, to protect a woman in distress, when she said it was him all along, it's you I wanted all along. Why didn't you see me? Why? Sorry, Eloka said, pulling her closer. I see you now and I would never unsee you. The plan was simple: she would leave the boyfriend and they could try. She typed the breakup text in his presence and when she hit send they sealed it with kisses. What followed was three months of peace and tranquility, of swaying to Celine Dion's *Right in front of you*. Of asking, what took us so long? Three months of Kamso teasing them, calling them shameless lovebirds whenever she found them cuddled in front of the TV, three months of gifts, of failed attempts at teaching her Wordle. But old boyfriends are not things you shed like old skin. Jovita went back to her previous man. This hurt Eloka like it would any man who carefully curated his inner and outer life, a man who eschewed everything that bore the whiff of drama. Eloka grieved briefly, sweated out his pain at the gym and carried on with his life. UAC was testing a new snack bar and samples had to come out right and there were many long meetings with the quality control team. To cut a long story short, he got back to his pre-Jovita self . Then it got complicated. Jovita would

call at night and beg. I need to see you. And because he felt a need to protect her, he met her in restaurants. The new man wanted them to relocate to Australia. It's too far from home, Jovita said, her voice heavy with regret and sadness. But my parents want me to go, to establish the family line elsewhere, in a better country with constant power supply. In his car when she cried, he lent his shoulders, his lips, his hands. This rigmarole continued for another three months. Why don't you leave him? He asked her in his car as they held each other. I can't. My parents are now involved. Soon the Jovita problem became a distraction and Eloka reprimanded himself one morning as he brushed his teeth in front of the mirror. Guy this is rubbish, he said to his reflection. Get your act together. He picked up his phone and saved her name as DONTPICKJOVITA. He muted her on all social media. He couldn't wait for her to leave the country with her man who she doesn't love. Kamso is not aware of this new episode. There's no point telling her and losing his respect in his younger sister's eyes. One day while he ate his lunch at the office canteen, a +61 number called him. He was tempted to answer, to say, Jovita, how are you coping in a new country? But he watched the phone ring and ring, and with all his might, he blocked that number. And now to confirm that he is serious about new beginnings, he texts Nzube: *Are you nervous?* Her reply chimes in two seconds later: *A little bit.*

5. Nzube wants affection. The tender, touchy-feely kind. The type that wears itself loudly like a coat of many colors. The kind that is unafraid to be looked at in public. Growing up, she didn't see affection between her parents. Her father, Ejindu, who passed away four years ago, was a dutiful father and a kind husband but he rarely touched Jaachi in Nzube's presence. When Nzube saw people kiss on TV for the first time, she giggled and covered her face. Jaachi quickly changed the channel but the image never left Nzube's mind. She loved how Uncle Ifeanyi and Aunty Franka, the neighbours downstairs, held hands and wore matching ankara to church. She loved how they called each other Mine. Mine, the baby is crying. Mine, come and scratch my back. Mine, what did you cook today? Mine, did you see my car keys? Nzube babysat for the neighbors where she got a front row seat on their display of love. It was neither cloying nor obscene. Just tender. The love in the neighbors' home was an aroma that permeated every crevice of their apartment. They were both teachers in a secondary school down the street, where Uncle Ifeanyi taught music and Aunty Franka taught home economics. Nzube's father Ejindu smirked when he heard the neighbors call out to each other. Mine, Mine, Mine, Ejindu muttered. Why is that grown man allowing his wife to turn him into an object she can fit into her pockets? Even Jaachi agreed. They're still doing young love, she said. Life would soon humble

them. Nzube and her folks moved out of the apartment and years later, she saw Aunty Franka and Uncle Ifeanyi in the market. They hugged her. The couple wasn't aging well. Teachers were no longer paid their salaries on time and the hardship told on their faces. Yet they were jolly. When Nzube told them of her job at the consulting firm, they said, We are so proud of you. Nzube asked about Baby, and she learnt she was now in boarding school, getting straight A's. As they traded stories and consoled Nzube over the death of Ejindu, Nzube observed the way they still touched each other, completing the other's sentence. The way they still looked at each other as if they were two toys that came together in the same carton and required the other to function. Nzube wants that, a love untouched by hard times. She hopes that this Eloka, who woke her up each morning with a well-crafted good morning text was the kind to not tuck away the ends of affection, was not the kind of man who believed a woman calling him by an endearment was an act of emasculation.

6. Eloka needs rest, enough room to flex his shoulders. A day or two off from being "a responsible guy." To lay down the burden of being the only son of Chief and Lolo Chinwetelu. You know, as the only son, Lolo Chinwetelu tells her son, you have to set a good example for your sister. You cannot let my enemies laugh at me because I have a useless son. His mother has always said this, right from the moment he could remember himself as an older brother. As an only son of an Igbo household, Eloka ticked all the boxes. He was close to his parents, he was smart in school, he got a job right after youth service, a well-paying job at that. He footed the hospital bill when his father had a stroke, he puts money in their retirement account because, as former civil servants, they rarely received their gratuities because the current governor, who was still a boy when Lolo Chinwetelu was a headmistress, refused to pay pensioners. Eloka makes sure his parents never lack and also pays the woman who comes to clean their house. Eloka is also re-roofing the family house and when the rains stop, he'll repaint the building. He isn't complaining about all the money he spends, he saves and plans his life well, but sometimes, being "responsible" was a log on his shoulders, a log he felt physically at night when the pain would not let him sleep. Eloka wants someone to look at him and say, Relax, it's enough; someone to knead his shoulders softly like dough when another request comes from home. Eloka wants to occasionally take off that garb of first-sonship and be, just be. Late-ly, his blood pressure has increased and though Kamso has stopped cooking his meals with salt, he feels his heartbeat racing sometimes. He noticed this after the breakup with Jovita and he misses his hearty laughter, the idle afternoons without deadlines where he

can enjoy the company of someone he truly likes. Now as he sees Nzube in that bandage dress and that beautiful hair, her smile looks like it holds the cure to his inordinate heart. He looks at her tiny lemon purse, sparkling with sequins and he wonders what can possibly fit into it. When he hugs her, her perfume hits his nose and he senses he's with a woman assured of her place in this world, total in her demands from it. His heart flutters but not in the way that would alarm his doctor, but in a way that alerts him that he's come in contact with a challenge he should take. After he pulls the chair for her to sit, after they say, It's so good to see you in person and after he tells her she smells like magic, the waiter skitters towards them with practiced smiles, eager to jot their orders. He asks her, So what do you want? Wine, she responds smiling. White wine for now.

**Ucheoma Onwutuebe** is a Nigerian writer. She is the recipient of the Waasnode Fiction Prize and has received residencies from Yaddo, Art Omi and The Anderson Center. Her works have appeared in and are forthcoming in Catapult, Bellevue Literary Review, Prairie Schooner, Off Assignment, Bakwa Magazine and others. She is currently an MFA student at the University of Nevada Las Vegas.

# Assimilation

Romeo Oriogun

It was not the green of trees that welcomed me to spring. It was not the resurrection of dead fields that showed me that the way through life could be green and tender.  
It was a little dog, a terrier mix, running around the park, yelping into the nothingness of air, daring even God to stop her. I stood for minutes outside the fence, watching her, wondering about my life. In the Midwest of America I have become domesticated against the beauty of rainforests. Everything has slowed down. The antelopes in my dreams have stopped gliding over fallen logs, instead they are strolling through the grasses, kept out of the wild by a row of wooden fences like I have been kept out of my country.  
Is the end of my life the slowness of wonder?  
I have forgotten the colony of bees,  
I have forgotten the wild goats  
chasing me on broken bridges as I ran  
to drink sugar filled coffee in roadside kiosks.  
It is a thing of terror to stare into the lights  
of your past, to fall to the ground, a broken being  
trying to root his belonging into the depth  
of a new world, becoming like a little dog  
waiting for its first rain, staring at the clouds  
with no knowledge of what it feels like  
to surrender fear to the solitude of rainfall.

**Romeo Oriogun** is a Nigerian poet whose poems have appeared in the New Yorker, Nation, Poetry, and other journals. A winner of the Nigeria Prize for Literature and the Poetry Society of America Fay Di Castagnola Prize, he lives in Ames where he works as a Postdoctoral Research Associate at Iowa State University.

# A Brief Record of Disappearance

Romeo Oriogun

*after everything I rely on confusion*  
– Dionne Brand

Before the house of God lies the path  
the old men walked on, songs in their bones,  
bottles in their hands, stories left to wander  
in the footprints of their past.

I had walked slowly behind them, an apprentice  
inheriting that which is left to loss.

The orange trees in the school yard holds the dove  
monotonous song, competing with a boy  
who is summoning rain with his whistle, holding  
the sky to the ransom of his desire.

And before clouds become the soft drizzle  
on grasses, a child sings this song of awe:  
*what are you eating? I am eating the eye of history.*  
*I am seeing the dark places of my life.*

What is hidden from us demands the ceremony  
of our lives, asking us to sing it to light – and within  
the red sands of this village flows the blood of those  
disappeared into the industry of empires.

I walk down the unpaved road, the houses made  
out of mud bricks speak of the old ones within them,  
the sheep with their dirty wool bleats their abandonment,

and from the end of the road, the beginning of the old  
forest reserve, young men with faces coated with charcoal  
sing of disappearance, sing of those whose graves hold  
plantain stems, whose bodies are still trapped within ships.

The benediction of my life confuses me.  
Once before a full moon, the old ones told us  
the stories of burial, saying, *because of slave raiders*  
*we swore to see the dead before committing them to the earth,*  
*we swore to count those the sea took, burying plantain stems*  
*in place of bodies.*

I am given to wander history and its many branches,  
I am given to silence and its many voices.

It is almost nightfall and I am ready to pray  
to my ancestors, and though the night will be crowned  
with stars, and though clouds of deer will move  
from one life to another, I do not know who will hear  
me in the darkness of death – do those who heard  
the solemn voices of the sea belong to us?  
Do they also accept the libation of our lives?

O old ones, the rain is alive, the sun is here too,  
and somewhere an elephant is pushing out new life.  
I am before the origin of wonder, watching the doors  
of all the houses, waiting for someone to speak into me  
the answers, lighting those who were disappeared

into the sky, making them known to us who'd inherited  
the gaps of history, the last voices left on our shores,  
the haunted reserve of our collective shame.

**Romeo Oriogun** is a Nigerian poet whose poems have appeared in the New Yorker, Nation, Poetry, and other journals. A winner of the Nigeria Prize for Literature and the Poetry Society of America Fay Di Castagnola Prize, he lives in Ames where he works as a Postdoctoral Research Associate at Iowa State University.

# Black Tax

Masimba Musodza

As she emerged from the main entrance at Sotherdon Hall Care Home into the dark winter morning, Petronella remembered to turn the volume on her mobile phone. She would need it if she had any hope of hearing the alarm when it was time to return later today for another 12-hour shift. There were twenty-six missed calls on WhatsApp, all from an unknown Zimbabwean number. Her heart lurched. It had to be bad news from home.

“This time you won’t have to wait for me oh, ‘Nel!’” said Chimaobi, emerging from the home and falling in beside her. “Fred is asleep. I made sure he was dry, though.” She hugged her shoulders as she became aware of the biting cold. “Where’s Cat?”

“Her turn to be late, I guess,” said Petronella, absently. “It sounded like the second floor was very busy all night.”

As they sank into the snug Kia, Petronella turned the engine on to warm the vehicle, and returned her attention to the mysterious number on her missed calls list and wondered what it could be a harbinger of. Steeling herself, she called it back. It was answered almost immediately by a familiar female voice. “Hello, Mai Paida!” Being addressed as the *Mother of Paida* only heightened her trepidation, and the breath caught in her throat. “It’s me, Gogo VaPaida.”

Paida’s grandmother. Paida’s paternal grandmother, to be exact. Petronella’s mother-in-law. She had never called her directly before, Petronella usually got a perfunctory greeting before the end of an hours-long conversation with her son, Greg. Petronella knew from their relationship- or lack of it- that if she had bad news, she would have called Greg and told him. “Oh, it’s Amai!” said Petronella, hoping she sounded pleased to hear from her mother-in-law.

“Mmm, you are very hard to get hold of, my daughter,” Paida’s Grandmother said. Petronella could visualise her shaking her head reprovingly. “I was beginning to think I was given the wrong number by Baba VaPaida.”

“I was at work all night, Amai,” said Petronella. “I have only just finished, and seen the missed calls. Is everyone OK in Zimbabwe?”

“Everyone is fine, my daughter,” she said. “I don’t have a lot of time, you know how expensive data bundles are here. Yesterday, I was in Chitungwiza, our church committee was at a conference. I called on your parents, seeing as I was in the area.”

“Oh, how are they?” said Petronella, trying harder to keep her voice buoyant. Six years of being married to her son had taught her that Paida’s Grandmother did not just call on anyone.

“I couldn’t help noticing that they have a new solar power system installed,” said Paida’s Grandmother.

“Oh..” Petronella found herself faltering. “Yes, Amai, you know how it is in the high den-

sity areas, the power supply has become more erratic over the years, so....”

“My daughter, all I want to know from you is how much of the cost of that installation was my son’s contribution, that’s all.”

There was a stunned silence. In the distance, Petronella heard Chimaobi welcome Catalina, the third member of their car pool.

“Amai Paida, was I not clear?” her mother-in-law’s harsh, termagant voice cut through the silence in her mind and jarred her back to the present. “How much did Baba VaPaida give your parents for their solar panels?! ”

“Amai, where is this coming from?” Petronella sensed Chimaobi and Catalina looked up in reaction to the tearful edge in her tone.

“It is coming from a family that is tired of your husband’s antics!” said Gogo VaPaida. “A family that is disappointed by your failure to reign him in. A family that is angry as we see now the reason you have let him neglect his duty to us as the eldest son; because your loyalty is still with your people!”

When Gogo VaPaida started like this, it was best to let her carry on.

“My daughter, I told Baba VaPaida his siblings here are now tired of him not pulling his weight in the family! The money he sends us is not enough. It is not fair on Gulliver. His wife is so patient, she has never complained about the money that he spends on us..”

Neither have I, Petronella thought.

“Your husband has been telling us that he has not been able to get enough shifts to enable him to send more money,” Gogo VaPaida said. “But, when I saw the solar panels on your parents’ roof, you could land a helicopter on those, I realised that the reason he is neglecting us is because he is now carrying your family! Do you really think that is fair? My son works like a dog to bring you to the UK, and you cannot wait five minutes before you start sending pounds to your family! Yes, they live in Chitungwiza, but life is hard for everyone in Zimbabwe. What do you think your neighbours say when they see your bright new solar panels, but your in-laws are in need? How does that reflect on you as a daughter-in-law?”

The words seared through her whole being, and she stored them away with the rest. Later, when she got home, she would have a good cry. She had cried many times before, and it looked like she would cry many times more in the future. The only salve to this torture was that Greg, Baba VaPaida, never took his relatives’ side or stayed neutral when they attacked her. Such occasions were far and few because she never told him about them. But she had heard him shout on the phone, even to his mother, when they called to complain.

Mercifully, Gogo VaPaida was done. “My daughter, you are a mother like me, so even if you are upset at my words, you understand the pain behind them. I just want my son to remember the woman who carried him for nine months, gave birth to him and nearly died while doing that, and raised him while putting up with his father and his relatives. God who is watching, and those who are in the ground are watching. After opening the way for you to enter the UK, they will be angry if you repay them this way. I do not want to invoke such anger, so I never complain, but sometimes, it is too much. I need just US\$200 for my new project. Your husband has been avoiding the issue, and I am losing my patience.”

“I will speak to him when I get home, Amai,” said Petronella, resignedly. The phone/broadband bill would have to wait another week, but there was the risk that they would be disconnected

before then. That would impact Greg's work, but there was nothing she could do about it right now. He could tether his mobile phone to his computer, like he did the last time. That last time, poor Greg had not been able to meet the deadline and lost that opportunity. With demands from back home persisting, he was not able to keep up with the bill until nearly a year later.

"Yes, you speak to him, because I want to see change! I thought with you and Paidia joining him last year, things would improve, but they are worse! Thank you for listening, my daughter. I shall not hold you up any longer, you will miss your bus or train."

Petronella thanked Greg again for enjoining her to never mention to any of their relatives that he had bought her a car.

"It is well, Amai," said Petronella, sighing resignedly. "Have a good day."

As she hung up, she sank back in her seat and composed herself.

"News from home, *querida hermana?*" Catalina asked, leaning over from the backseat to offer a comforting squeeze of Petronella's shoulder.

Between sobs, punctuated by expletives of shock and indignation, and soothing words in a mixture of English, Igbo and Spanish from the other two women, Petronella relayed the conversation she had just had. Since she had never shared this much of her personal life with the Nigerian and Honduran, Petronella gave them the back story. She had met Gregory online while she was living in Harare. He had come down to see her, and Paidamoyo was conceived. However, they could not meet the financial requirements of a spousal visa. Petronella got a job with the Namibian government and relocated to Windhoek, where Paidia was born. Gregory flew over whenever he could. Sally, one of his sisters, visited and reported back to the family in Zimbabwe that Gregory was keeping Petronella in a very expensive apartment. They crowded about in Whatsapp messages that eventually came to her attention when she could not renew her work permit and had to return to Zimbabwe. Gregory took up care work, and, after a year and a half, finally had enough in the bank to meet the visa requirements.

"If only they knew that nearly every penny that they get from him is really from me," said Petronella. "When I came over, Greg quit care work so he could focus on his writing."

"So he did not get your parents a fancy solar power installation?" said Chimaobi.

"No, the money came from my father's outstanding pension, which finally came through last month," said Petronella. "But Greg's family thinks that any signs of prosperity in mine come from their son in the UK!"

Catalina muttered to herself in Spanish, while Chimaobi shook her head in commiseration. "Black tax is really something, oh!"

"Black tax?" said Catalina.

"That's what we call it when one person is seen as having made it and is obliged to support all the less well-off relatives, no matter how distantly related," Chimaobi explained. "It has its positive side; it can be seen as the African values that emphasise family looking out for each other."

"Oh, we have the same in Honduras," said Catalina. "But you know, part of our ancestry is African! But we have it in the indigenous culture too, and in the European one."

"The downside of the system is that it can create a cycle of dependency and entitlement," said Chimaobi. "At the other place where I sometimes pick up shifts there is a lady, I think she is Zimbabwean like you, 'Nella. She came over in her late teens, she is in her 40s now. All she has

done the past two decades is work or attend church. She has no husband or boyfriend, and rents a council flat. With the money she has sent home, her five brothers have each had several marriages in succession. She is looking after some seventeen children, two at university in Malaysia. In another twenty years, she will be too old to work. She will have nothing to show for the years she has been here, and she will be nowhere closer to alleviating the poverty back home.”

“My in-laws are well-to-do, actually,” said Petronella. “Gulliver, who comes after Greg, is a successful businessman. One of the sisters lives in Dubai, the other in Sandton, Johannesburg. The two other brothers, one of them is in the States and the other in Australia.”

“So, why are they bothered that your husband sends your parents money?” Catalina asked.

“It’s not just my parents, but our daughter and I,” said Petronella. “Greg himself summed it up nicely; Zimbabwean men are not allowed by the extended family to love their wives. It is all about control. If he takes up responsibilities elsewhere, he is no longer theirs to control.”

“You are lucky Greg does not give them that room,” said Chimaobi.

“He says he saw how it messed up his father, and he vowed that he would not let the extended family have that much power in his own marriage,” said Petronella.

“If he stays like that, you will be fine,” said Catalina. “We also have bossy matriarchs in our society. I have learnt to count on my Jorgé to stand up to them!”

“We all have that struggle with our families,” said Chimaobi. “You are not alone, my sister, oh! Chin up, take us home now. This is life. See, you look better now than when you started telling us about your situation!”

Petronella felt as if she had just poured a burden out of her soul. The Black Tax would always be a feature of her generation’s life. There would be many hurtful calls such as the one she had received from her mother-in-law. Feeling fortified, Petronella pulled out of the car park. It was still dark, but the sky to the east was imbued with shades of purple and gold.

By the time she got home, Greg had taken Paidi to school. Petronella showered and breakfasted quickly. She was eating when she heard him come into the house. He would head straight upstairs to look for her. “I’m in the kitchen, babe!” she called.

He stood in the doorway, a triumphant grin on his face, his eyes gleaming. She had seen that look before. Many years ago, in their flat in Windhoek. He had received the news that a publisher wanted to buy his novella. “La Noire called last night,” he said.

La Noire Hume was his US-based literary agent. Petronella felt a flutter rise in her stomach. The last time she had felt that same flutter, she had seen the words *Your application for a Family Reunion Visa has been successful....* in an email.

“A publisher, I forget the name, is offering two hundred thousand dollars in advance royalties for *He’s Not Dead Yet*, and La Noire thinks she can get a separate European sale!” said Gregory. “She also thinks that later in the year leading into the next, she can get the movie people slobbering. She’s fedexed the contract already.”

The cup fell from her hand, bounced off the table, its contents sploshing all over the granite finish, and landed at her feet. Greg moved towards her. “This is it, babe. After all those years of frustration and disappointment, you are looking at a successful writer!”

She was sobbing and laughing when he swept her into his arms, their relief and joy mingling. “We must tell no one just yet, babe,” he said.

Petronella pulled her head back and looked at him, a puzzled frown on her face.

"There is an article in the paper about Gulliver's business empire," said Gregory. "Seems my poor brother has been in trouble for a while. No one saw the need to tell me, because no one expects me to be in a position to do anything about it." He laughed. "Gulliver needs two hundred thousand American dollars soon or a sheriff will attach his property, including the family home our mother put in his name so he could get a mortgage on his. They think I don't know about that little arrangement. Two hundred thousand dollars, the money that is coming our way, is what they need urgently! This wouldn't be just black tax for them, this would be serendipity!"

The good daughter-in-law in her began to ask him if they needed all of it at once, and maybe if they sent some of it to bail the family out, that would bring them all closer. What she did not tell him, what she knew he would never understand was this was an opportunity to prove to her mother-in-law that she was on the same team, that she could be counted on to keep Greg in line. Surely, if she could persuade him to send this much money, they would finally accept her as a member of the family?

Greg opened his mouth to reply, and they both felt the vibration in his tracksuit top's inside pocket as his phone came to life with a shrill tone. He reached into his pocket, and held it out for her to see who was calling.

Gogo VaPaida.

## THE END

**Masimba Musodza** was born in Zimbabwe, and has lived most of his adult life in the United Kingdom. His short stories, mostly in the speculative fiction genre, have appeared in periodicals and anthologies around the world. He has written two novels and a novella in his first language, ChiShona. His collection of science-fiction stories, *The Junkyard Rastaman & Other Stories*, was published in 2020. Masimba also writes for stage and screen. He lives in Middlesbrough, North East England.



**Minotaur**

Adeniyi Temitope Adekunle  
Digital ART (2022)

# Letter to Self

Saddiq Dzukogi

You must love exactly how they want  
to be loved, even if awful, even if with abandon.

Your shadow has no window for light to enter.  
And *nostalgia* is the cousin of grief. Remember

a road is a snake that holds you beyond its teeth,  
a two headed snake that can swallow you

from either end. By a swing you see a man  
pull out a cigarette, his mouth makes him his own

clouds that the air is quick to swallow. Think,  
in its foggy hands, what else can take hold of us.

In a tree a bird flies out of another bird's nest,  
you wonder why things not ours appeals to us the most.

why do you keep your lips sealed?  
Words are creatures with teeth

wolfiging inside your guts. Life is kneaded with  
pain, grief and love. Know this.

**Saddiq Dzukogi** is the author of *Your Crib, My Qibla* (University of Nebraska Press, 2021), winner of the Derek Walcott Prize for Poetry, co-winner of the Julie Suk award, and finalist of the Nigeria Prize for Literature. His poems can be found or forthcoming in spaces such as *Poetry Magazine*, *Ploughshares*, *Guernica*, *Poetry London*, *Ninth Letter*, and *The Georgia Review*. He is an Assistant Professor of English and affiliate faculty of African American Studies at Mississippi State University. He lives in Starkville, Mississippi.

# Waka VI

Saddiq Dzukogi

In a lagoon of silence that is his room,  
as sunlight rushed in, his face emerges from the formless

details of the dark. His voice sings to my ears.  
How eager I am to furrow into that symphony.

At hundred years plus, his knees have seen it all,  
Nigerian Civil War, the crumbling value of naira, military juntas,

yet, at dawn, he calls out every one of us, flesh of his flesh  
committing us to the virtues of heaven.

I turn towards his stack of perfumes. It's a storm  
of fragrances, paradise creased into half finger-sized bottles.

Once, standing over a dead butterfly, his fragrance  
woke it up, he said. I think of many of his jests

and miss him more. Now a butterfly himself,  
I did not learn his craft of mixing scents.

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# Like my Dreams Weren't Made of Glass

Saddiq Dzukogi

—feathers intact, a butterfly flies out  
of my nightmare. Monsters spiraling down  
out of a sky of my own imagining,  
possessed, achingly tortuous—I see  
things, things no one else saw, hunting me down  
as I try to catch my breath walking  
a profound mark between fear and curiosity.  
In the fossil record of my evening walk,  
close to a quiet lake, my mind waffles up  
and down the *rolling grasslands* of Nebraska.  
Nature brings stability to mind. Beneath an effigy  
of a tortoise, a seashell gathers the filth of time.  
I imagine the sea nestling in a landlocked  
earth. Wherever I go, *wilderness* follows.

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# Through My Window, The Demons Within

S. Su'eddie Vershima Agema

Through my window, there is a view— a dying tree, an oil plant, and a vast canvas of darkness beyond.

An owl hoots and stares from a withering branch, I stretch out and glimpse a fat moon beaming over a patch, refusing to illuminate a dark world.

I see a vision— leagues of fallen angels assembled at plants, as felled rigs crash on the back of the bald eagle, whose wings are ravaged by the giant panda of the East;

A mother rummages through a refuse dump in the frantic hope of a meal for her dying son. In the ashes of that child, a million miseries grow on capitalist crap.

Somewhere, a dog barks, a gun rings, one final yelp and an army of nearby frogs enjoin in a chorus, alternating notes like a dirge.

A stench slaps me in the face, and I shut my window blinds, safe from everything but demons who pull me ceaselessly from within.

**S. Su'eddie Vershima Agema** is a husband and father, multiple-award-winning writer, cultural activist, and development consultant. He is the author of three poetry collections, including *Memory and the Call of Waters* (Shortlist, NLNG The Nigeria Prize for Literature 2022); *Home Equals Holes: Tale of an Exile* (Winner, Association of Nigerian Authors Prize for Poetry 2014; Nominee, Soyinka Prize for African Literature 2018); *Bring our casket home: Tales one shouldn't tell* (Nominee, ANA Prize for Poetry 2013); a short story collection, *The Bottom of another Tale* (Shortlist, Association of Nigerian Authors' Prize for Prose 2014 and Abubakar Gimba Prize for Short Stories 2015) and a children's book, *Once Upon a Village Tale* (Shortlist, ANA Prize for Children's Literature 2018).

Su'eddie was listed among Nigerian Writers Award's 100 Most Influential Nigerian Writers Under 40 (2017 & 2018) and EGC's Top 50 Contemporary Poets Who Rocked Nigeria (2012-2017). He was previously the Black History Month/Project Curator and co-founder/president, African Writers, at the University of Sussex, where he earned an MA with distinction in International Education and Development as a Chevening Scholar. He was also a Chairman of the Association of Nigerian Authors (Benue State Chapter) and Council Member of the Association of Nigerian Authors National Teen Authorship Scheme.

Su'eddie blogs at <http://sueddie.wordpress.com> and [@sueddieagema](http://sevhagereviews.wordpress.com) on Twitter. He lives in a couple of places internationally with his wife, daughter, and members of their clan.

# Here, Where This Wall Stands

S. Su'eddie Vershima Agema

A house once stood here  
—where this single wall stands.

A man and woman once kissed on many a night  
and after a while, this house grew  
filled with children laughing and fighting  
playing and scattering the rooms, growing while glowing.

Friends once visited and laughter was the music here.  
Yes, music once played above a fireplace here.  
Adults danced slowly to happiness and melancholy  
seasons changing the tunes as hope accompanied sighs.

Over here, a family drank from hope's calabash at dawn  
and used the blanket of night to forget all sorrow.  
This house was us, and we were this house  
Within whose warm walls were adorned portraits of joy.

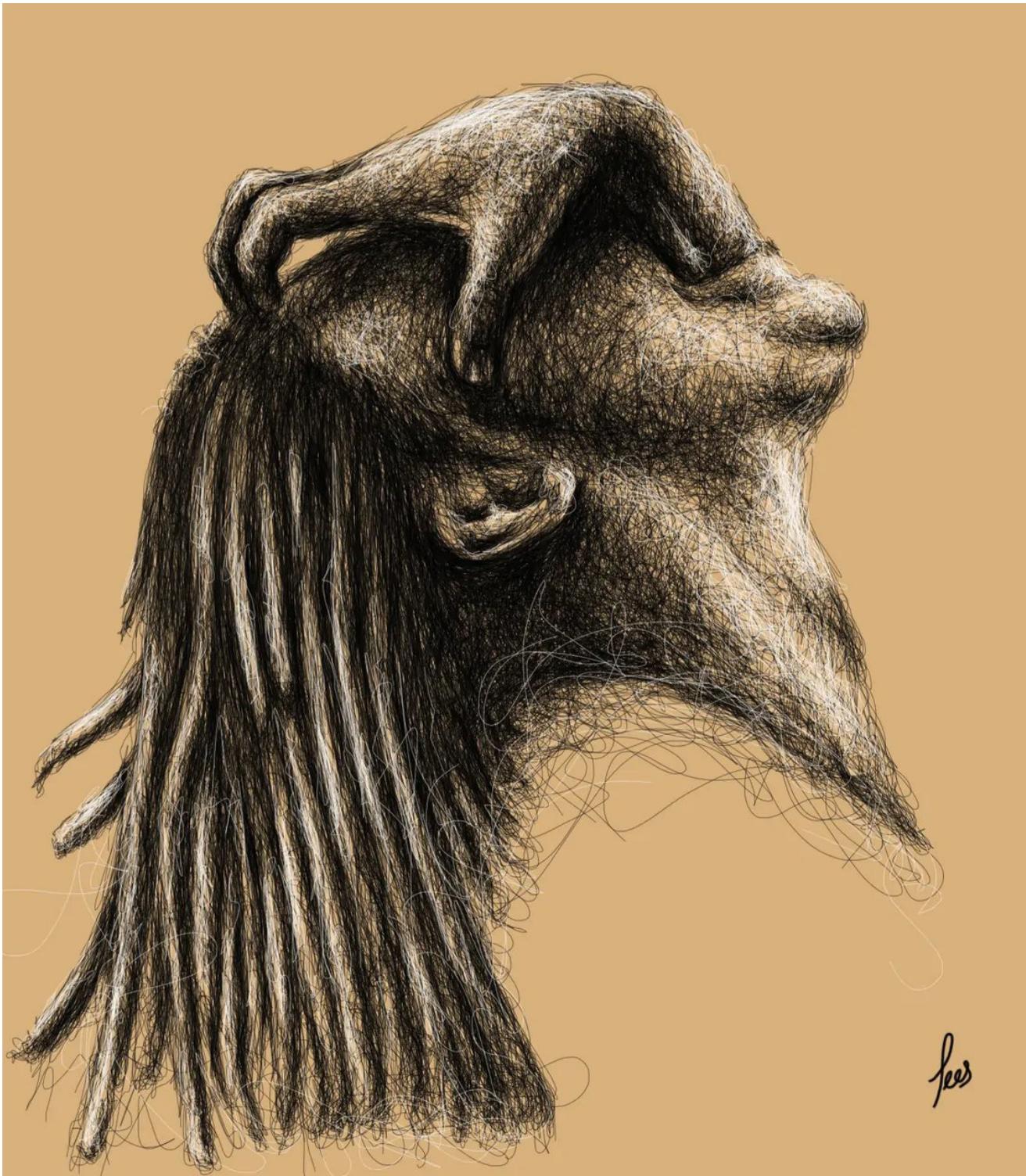
Nightingales, rock firefinches and sparrows once sang on the trees here  
where now vultures wait, nodding, while crows caw...  
In this land, guns were used when voices should have been employed  
This house was destroyed and the soul of this land was cut short.

A house once stood here  
—where this single wall stands.

**S. Su'eddie Vershima Agema** is a husband and father, multiple-award-winning writer, cultural activist, and development consultant. He is the author of three poetry collections, including Memory and the Call of Waters (Shortlist, NLNG The Nigeria Prize for Literature 2022); Home Equals Holes: Tale of an Exile (Winner, Association of Nigerian Authors Prize for Poetry 2014; Nominee, Soyinka Prize for African Literature 2018); Bring our casket home: Tales one shouldn't tell (Nominee, ANA Prize for Poetry 2013); a short story collection, The Bottom of another Tale (Shortlist, Association of Nigerian Authors' Prize for Prose 2014 and Abubakar Gimba Prize for Short Stories 2015) and a children's book, Once Upon a Village Tale (Shortlist, ANA Prize for Children's Literature 2018).

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### **Evil From Within**

Adeniyi Temitope Adekunle  
Digital ART (2022)

**Adeniyi Temitope Adekunle** (Tee's Art) is a Nigerian digital artist, content creator and writer. He is a multidisciplinary artist whose traditionally and digitally created works focus majorly on the use of lines in an erratic fashion (scribbles) to create captivating forms which convey expressions and emotions. His works are distinct and well known from a glance across several platforms like the Hive Blockchain. Several of his works have been collected as NFTs across many reputable NFT platforms and have also been exhibited across Nigeria, Africa and so many international virtual spaces. He has been a core member of art communities like the Visual Art Visionaries and the Hive Art Community where he's an active art blogger.

# Market roads

Chinaza Davina

*It's only us market roads that can tell you of your mother,  
Of the tattooed dither on her lips.*

*The shrieking aches that caress her folding skin and  
Suck the sleep from her jelly bones*

~Cristael

Thank you very much, we are not tattletales, we have nothing to tell you if you don't ask. Eke was the day you crossed the sea; away from your mother and her devolving hut, when you got there, you tried so frantically to scrub us off your feet, maybe your mother didn't tell you that mud is thicker than water. We are not just mud, we hold the caking blood of the dead, the sweat, and spittle of market women, the shit of mad men and toddlers, tell us how you intend to wash away a lifetime of identity. We will let you try sha.

While Mama's feet were swelling with pain and loneliness, your big head was swelling with emptiness and lust, you got lost in the sparse-haired blonde breasts of your neighbors' daughter, feeling like Joshua in a Canaan land. Mama searched for you with every shuffle of her feet, in every cup of rice and porous bags of millet;

'I sell rice and beans, but I can give you a basin of stories if you just sit with me...'  
'You have the eyes of my son...always searching for something.'

We watched you brush out chunks of your accent every morning, brushing your tongue until pieces of last night's dinner creped out of your throat, we blamed your mother for this one, she should have told you that an exposed buttock was the same as a fucked one—Akara and Moin-moin all na beans, and they'll all smell the same when shat. You have forgotten those nights you stooped on a dirt road with mama keeping watch—releasing your atrocities while we—out of love, took it all in. Tell us why you crunch your nose at the smell of your shit. It's okay sha.

***The stench still follows you. We follow you.***

Orie was the day you told your neighbors to call you Paul, your effort to shroud your accent evident. You invited them over, bribing them with crystal glasses of foreign. Mama was running around in a game of *kpakpangolo*—hunger chasing her with a whip as she divided her sole

sachet of peak milk into three portions, but you did not ask, so we did not tell you. Your neighbors too did not tell you; that you looked like a man who had feasted so much on hunger that it left tattoos of ownership on your bony face. They did not tell you that your aura reeked of mud, decaying blood, morning spittle, and shit, but you saw it in their sad eyes, and you plucked the whispers from thin air;

‘Sad black man, trying so hard.’

Orie was the day you wondered why you were ‘black man’ and not ‘man.’ You learned, quickly, to call yourself black man too, even though it made you feel like an object; black shirt, garbage bag. You let your water boil, and you unlearnt yourself in the shower, picking at your skin like you were a huge pussy wound.

### *The stench still follows you, we follow you*

Afor was the day you were caught fucking the neighbors’ daughter, she called you all sort of things as she bobbed underneath you and your stinking aura;

‘Animal,’

‘Fuck monkey.’

You went in even harder then, as if trying to prove her right. Fucked her like an animal until her moans cracked open the boiled egg of a night, fucked her still when she began to beg, maybe you were trying to make her smell like you, fucked her with the years of rage and hunger boiling in you, until she lay lifeless in your bed. Then you would remember Mama, right before someone called 911, but she now lay like chalky dregs of milk at the bottom of your mind, A woman wielding a flashlight as you exposed your buttocks for the wind to penetrate. A black woman.

Blue

Red

Blue.

### *The stench still follows you, we follow you.*

Your whole life was a race, and nobody told you that black men don’t run when they are caught, especially not in their thrift-store checkered boxers. Mama should have told you that running from a crime was not the same as running from hunger; Though both were after your existence. Both would catch you. Moin-moin is Moin-moin, and Okpa is Okpa, or maybe she told you, and you scrubbed it out of your throat. Black man.

Thank you very much we are not tattletales, but we’ll tell you this; Mama died the same night as you, she died of solitude and hunger, you died in your thrift-store checkered boxers, drowning in your blood, flooding from your broken dam of lungs, ripped apart by sixteen bullets. You did not die a man, you died a black man; smelling of mud, decaying blood, morning spittle, shit and a little of crystal glasses of foreign — still like us.

**James-Ibe Chinaza, Davina** is currently an undergraduate of English and literary studies in the University of Nigeria Nsukka. She lives in Imo, with her Mother.  
Facebook @jameschinaza  
Instagram @yellowing\_teeth

# for those we cannot truly know

Judyannet Muchiri

there is no life between you and Rafike.  
only fragments of conversations  
and instances.  
few and far between, but still instances of delight.  
you spend hours after night shift learning hair  
the more complicated the better  
the more time you have.  
as if one can truly have more time  
in a world that constantly asks and asks and asks.  
this is important  
the time and the hair.  
this is how you get to know Rafike.  
every two weeks you visit to make her hair beautiful  
again.  
she gathers herself next to the fire burning lazily  
as if gathering the things she wants to say  
before they escape and roll down her chin  
into a life of their very own.  
she tells you the story of her name  
a story you have heard many times before  
she tells it anyway. you listen anyway.  
of course it starts with her mother's mother before her.  
this is a story of love  
which is not to say that Rafike's story is one of love  
but that it is birthed in love.  
you braid her hair and she tells you of great loves and loss.  
and in those conversations  
which are really conversations between Rafike and herself  
everything makes sense.  
the brittle pieces that have been sat in your heart all these years  
slowly fall into place  
and you are your mother's daughter  
again.

**Judyannet** is a creative writer who writes from different histories, experiences, and geographies. She writes with the hope that her words will bring you home to yourself when days are long and dark. Her most recent work has appeared on Africa in Words, FIGS, Salt Pages, Down River Road, The Magunga and Will This be a Problem. When she is not writing fiction, she is doing advocacy work, reading and/or having dessert.  
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# Infidel

Overcomer Ibiteye

“when you pass through the waters, I will be with you..” – Isaiah 43:2

and when you start sinking, I will sink with you.

because god is an elegy  
that stays through thick  
and thin and slippery

& we are drowning parables:  
deterrent to the next generation.

Someone overhead takes a snapshot of us  
and I can assume that the first picture is that of a stream

floating  
hundreds of us in white  
linens

& this is prophecy fulfilled.  
For it is written that out of our bellies shall flow rivers  
of living things:

prawns  
sea crunches  
fish teeth

and I can assume that the second picture is that  
of a placard bearing *keferi*  
in salty red.

When you ask us where the water comes from  
we choke  
& our throat cells fold into extinction  
for we do not know how to tell you that our country was built

for this kind  
of baptism.

How do we tell you the ancient chronicles  
of a space designed  
to gulp down flesh  
and curve bodies into immortality?

Another flash  
and I know this is the killer picture  
that'll make tomorrow's headlines

the shot zoomed to reveal  
tiny wooden crosses round our neck  
crosses of an un-nailed Christ  
fleeing the grave.

Say, we are a packet of boys refusing to burn in religion  
we are pairs of feet tiptoeing around faith  
scared that the walls of Jericho will fall on us.  
Or say, we are a bundle of hearts held by lullabies of disbelief;  
a colony of pagan tongues longing for revival.

In midair, we flap our hands helplessly & beckon on the faith  
to see if it would deliver us  
and allow us to scoop salvation from its collarbones  
but every trial shivers us back into the water.

*This faith turns its back on last-minute followers.*

All we want is a yellow ray shafting down these dark clouds  
telling us it's okay

to not believe  
sometimes.

All we want is a trinity of truths  
kissed from the lips of doubting Thomas.

But no.

All we get  
is water  
& an inheritance of bloated remains:

deterrent to the next generation.

**Overcomer Ibiteye** is a Nigerian writer and an alumnus of the SprinNG Writing Fellowship. Her works have appeared in anthologies and magazines like Apex, Land Luck Review, Iskanchi, Scrawl Place and others. She's a finalist of the African Writers Awards (2021), Calanthe Collective Prize (2022) and Spectrum poetry contest (2022).



**Floral Soul I**

Adeniyi Temitope Adekunle  
Digital ART (2022)

# At First, There Was No Blood: *Unlearning Afro-womanism*

*Adebola Makinde*

Your mother was puzzled. “Which blood?” she asked.

Your father surveyed your fiancé’s face to find answers. His curiosity ate deeply as his looks made your yet-to-be confirmed husband uneasy. You imagined the questions roaming in his mind. “Did they have sex already? Was she pregnant? Why is she talking about blood?” but your father didn’t utter any of those words. Instead, he pulled up his trousers made with Atiku fabric by the waist and laid back.

“Did you miss your menstruation?” your mother asked again. This time, she came to sit beside you and you started sobbing.

You were twelve when you had your first menstruation. That day, your father had an accident that would be an issue in court. It lasted two years but a ruling is still yet to be announced as is typical of the Nigerian judiciary. Your mother, the one you barely had any connection with was the first to get informed in your nuclear family. You saw the tears behind her eyes, so heavy and willing to travel down her cheeks but she immediately began to roll on the floor just before you could confirm you weren’t suffering a terminal disease. For a moment, you saw a smile creep on her dusty cheeks. She, in five minutes, had told you of how you were born and how you’re her only daughter who’s fast growing to become a woman – the *African* kind.

You knew those stories. They usually came up on Sundays. Your mother had a delay before she gave birth to you as her surviving child after the first. They were clichés but you grew fond of them. It helped you imagine they were your actual parents at times they had chosen to be inconsiderate.

At that instant, you knew you could tell your friends that you’re not entirely different from them. Unlike them, you had a low haircut at intervals and preferred your brother’s oversized clothes. The environment had successfully helped you view yourself as one of the guys’ (men) fold. You

were majorly masculine except for the breasts that had sprouted as early as the previous year before your menstruation. You had felt like an outcast when feminine conversations occurred. You always had inaccurate opinions or inexperienced judgements. For once, you could talk about the pain you felt when blood came out of the innocent vagina. But yours wasn't for seven days like our friends complained about. It was lesser.

The excitement was short-lived. Someone familiar rushed in. He worked at a bar your father frequently visited and asked for the whereabouts of your mother who was right in front. He had no clue she was whom he sought but he instantly exploded like a bomb. Like the first time you got scared of being fatherless, you, at this time again relieved yourself of the pain that came from witnessing your father beating your mother. The first time, he was arrested unjustly right in front of your house. He was only on pants and had gone to settle a dispute that disturbed the neighborhood. The news broke your grandmother's heart but you hoped he never came back. He should stay far away from your mother who in turn visited him with food and clothes.

When the police came around for an investigation, they asked you as the older one at home at that time about your father's suspicious moves. You said nothing and didn't intend to share even if you knew. Then, you wanted him to be safe. You maybe loved him. Somehow.

This one could have claimed his life. The strangely familiar individual announced that your father had fallen from a motorcycle when he tried to catch a debtor who owed your family a huge sum of money. Your father was unfortunately dragged on the tarred stony road by the cyclist who had no idea that he was already off the seat. Onlookers would eventually call his attention but your father had lost consciousness and his nose was chopped off with bruises in asymmetrical patterns on his face.

When your mother heard the news, this time she cried uncontrollably. The tears flowed freely down her cheeks. You pitied her especially but got caught up in a knot of emotions. You couldn't be happy knowing that you already became a 'woman'. You weren't sad that your father didn't die. You weren't happy that he didn't get to know what a big day it was for you. And you wished again that he gave your mother peace.

She hurried to prepare ragged clothes for you as she tore them in rectangular patterns. She held all of them together and ordered you to pull your pants down. She soaked it and gave you another pant already joined with the homemade pad.

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"Do not tell mummy..." It was late at night and you just woke because of the palm covering your mouth. You wanted to protest but it was a household voice. You were frightened. "...and daddy", the voice lowered. You cooperated. As the offender reached for your 'private part', the feeling of a body glued on yours left you without comprehension. You were about seven and that was the first night of the other experiences.

The next morning approached but you were the last to get off the bed. There was no one beside you and everyone had resumed their daily activities. No one acted as if something occurred overnight.

You couldn't explain it to your mother since she talked to your brothers more. You didn't even understand what happened so there was no suitable definition for the painful night experience.

Some visitors had occupied the empty rooms in your house but they slept downstairs. It was impossible for your parents to not hear the sound of doors creeping in case any of them was the perpetrator. You were unsure of whom it could be. The visitors were a family friend who came for an event but your dad invited them over since they were stranded for the night. They were nice people.

In school, you wanted to ask your friends if they had experienced the same thing. When their glances met yours, you turned away because of the unwritten misery on your face. They had smiles and were alive while you looked lost and curious. You told no one but longed to hear a whisper from someone saying "it's going to be all right."

\*\*\*

It was a month after your birthday. You had clocked 18. That was your best birthday to remember. Your boyfriend was all sweet and chill. You felt special and didn't need stories. The atmosphere was tense between the both of you. Your eyes were luring and his silence was romantic. The absence of any noticeable action generated scenery of adoration as you stared at each other occasionally. He sat at a distance while you were on the bed.

The room was spying and neither of you wanted to announce whatever happened after. The bed was well laid in a fine spread. He reached for you and you laid down. His body covered yours while you smooched. Your mind ran through the painful experience you've had in the past. You still proceeded. It was love and you were doing it willfully. For the first time. And it was good. You would have thought your mother had lied to you about romance by not telling you how good it was but your horrible experiences justified her.

\*\*\*

When you were eleven, your aunties sat down to interrogate you. They had been startled by the heap of dirty clothes in the room. "*Here, we value our cultures. One child cannot be a disgrace for us especially that you're even a girl, you'll have no choice*", one of them had said.

"As a girl, you have to help your mother. It's customary."

Another wondered if you'd started menstruation. "A dirty girl!" they rebuked you. Then, you had to wash the underclothes of your younger brothers while you learned to wash your clothes clean. It was the hardest thing any adolescent could do – taking responsibility. They began to lecture you not to allow anyone to touch your 'private parts' after your mother said you didn't know what menstruation was – at that time.

Your mother chipped in. "Your private parts are for you. Do not let anyone implicate your destiny."

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“Your body is your property.”

You were 15 and done with high school. The anxiety you had was about how to cope with new friends in the university. You had aced all your exams and everyone was proud of you, even your extended family. You also got several honors and recognitions. Leaving home at that point was a sober moment for your parents while you could kill just to get away from the place you called home.

Eventually, you would have to go to school. An entirely different geographical area. Everyone had their ways of proving they’d miss you but your father was surprisingly the softest of them all.

“Shout.”

“Shout thief! Thief!!”

He held your hands firmly to let you know that he’d miss you. He told you to scream for help if a guy tried to assault you. You wish you had a perfect father. The one who cared for his children in his way but was not mean to his wife. You tried not to let yourself think he was a saint. You attempted to stand and he gave his last advice.

“Men are smart. Do not have privacy with any of them.”

\*\*\*

Many other girls would have received the same advice from their parents or anyone who cared about them. You knew the importance of these admonitions as it is essential to African homes especially matters that dealt with sexuality, gender roles, and the making of a perfect ‘wife material’ – your parents were no different when it came to that. Like the exaggerated reaction of your mother when you told her about seeing your menstruation for the first time and the advice that your father gave you before leaving for school.

Your aunts were no exception. That’s the way a family structure is built in that, it takes a village to raise a child.

\*\*\*

It was hard to make friends in school. Many had stern looks and had already formed their groups in which you had reservations to fit in. You were not sure you wanted friendship with girls. They were rather intense for you and too emotional in your honest assessment. Your folks didn’t want you around men but you’d lived with them your entire life. You decided to be a rebel. They had no clue what the new world was like. People were rational in recent times.

Your first friend became your boyfriend and you thought it was safe. You shared previous experiences and you both had petitioned against your fathers. It was great to have been understood.

He told you he watched porn and got addicted to masturbation. You told him porn wasn't good for his health. You hid your knowledge about porn. You had found it on an aunt's phone. Your younger brother showed you while he was ignorantly looking at cartoons until the next video happened to be a sex tape. You seized it from him and told him to skip all other sexual content meanwhile, you looked up the website.

He invited you to his house on a sunny afternoon. You made out with him. He talked you into it but you had nothing against him. It was best not to dig up memories of your struggles against rape and assault.

You already had different sexual histories. From different guys. The feeling that aroused after the foreplay was fear. You realized that you may not be ready to explain that there may be no blood – the proof of being a virgin. You were unsure yourself. And it was never your fault. You were afraid that every road led to sex. Nonconsensual sex.

Anxiety had seized you. Your thoughts were invaded by his creepy tone. He wanted sex. As you reached for the door, he held you back and loosened his belt.

He gazed at you as though you were an object he could own to himself.

"Would you shout?"

"You know you have a reputation and you do not want to be caught..."

He paused as he lowered to kiss your neck and held your fists tightly.

"...having sex with a man," he derided softly.

You gave in to his threats and got contained with spite. He was manipulative and you didn't want a bad name in the new solace you had worked hard for. Being away from home was a big-time achievement for you – the regular night drama of a couple's wrestling you now missed but didn't want to watch anymore. You had sex with him and your relationship was dented by repetitive coerciveness. You ended affairs immediately.

\*\*\*

"How does a woman get pregnant?" You asked, staring at your mother's tummy. You were scared of having another sibling. The family in the next house had so many kids and they never stopped having a naming ceremony. You deeply wanted a sister but, you were more concerned about not being like your neighbors.

She laughed hysterically.

“You’re still young.”

“When you eat too much, your stomach would get big.”

At that moment, you were worried and didn’t want to eat too much. She had however just explained why her tummy was bigger than usual.

“Just make sure you keep yourself.

“Your husband would be proud to see blood in your vagina.”

This conversation was between a mother and her yet-to-be-teen daughter.

\*\*\*

The generator in the house had developed a fault. Usually, your elder brother sorted that out but it wasn’t in his control since he wasn’t technician. Your rebellious capacity started when you became a teenager. You poked your nose into books, people, and the slightest change in the neighborhood and why you had to take responsibility for your *lame* brothers.

The generator repairer asked you questions about your friends, school, and everything a teenager jawed with their parents. He was the definition of a friend but he always was awkward. Your world was small and everyone understood what you said even when you mixed English with Yoruba, your indigenous language. He barely understood English neither did he speak it. You casually chit-chatted in your inaccurate sense of Yoruba.

He summoned you over to the yard where the generator was. He dropped his sack which made a loud noise of clattering metals. You identified the spanner. He walked up to you licking his lips. Big. And black. He attempted to kiss you until he was interrupted by your younger brother’s approaching footsteps and you revolted. You retaliated with a thunderous slap and settled to cry after you left.

\*\*\*

You’re 23. Sober and self-reflecting among your female friends. It was a girls’ time out and you frankly didn’t want to be there. Your seven years relationship had just ended and you needed to feel alive. Your friends discussed work, marriage, and fashion trends – it was quite fine by you. You played along until you burst out crying.

They helped you drink and assured you the best start was 23! No teenage relationships but more mature ones. You told them about your sex life with your latest ex and you had doubts if you were still a virgin. Even after the numerous body counts. Coming out strong made your friends gratified although you didn’t tell them about the other horrible experiences and particularly, your first boyfriend. You may live with it forever.

Your father had said there would be a *blood feast* after your wedding. That only happens when your husband tells them you're a virgin. Only then would they be fulfilled. Your grandparents were proud when your father's sister got married. Her husband testified she was a virgin to your grandparents.

As far as you could remember, no one noticed your first sexual experience. There was no blood. You now lived with the hope that there'd be blood when your husband calls for sex, else, tell your parents of your sexual history. Painstakingly.

\*\*\*

You're 25. They were devastated. They looked at you with disgust and regret. And they disowned you. It seemed as if the only value you are to them was giving you out for marriage whereas, you've failed to keep yourself.

You snapped out of the imagination. They were overjoyed that you wanted to discuss "something important" with them. After you dropped the call, you reckon they had an inkling about introducing your fiancé to them. But they wouldn't be entirely wrong.

They were right before you. You sat with your boyfriend you had met a year ago and intended to shock them all. You were about to tell them about your sexual history. You started, "At first, there was no blood."

**Adebola Makinde** is a Nigerian creative writer and journalist. She writes about gender, tech and society. Her works have been featured in Nigerian national dailies, Document Women and a forthcoming investigative debut with Minority Africa. She is driven by equity and inclusion of minorities such as women, People with Disabilities and the diaspora. She hopes to attain an appointment with any of the United Nations, Nigeria Ministry of Foreign Affairs or the World Bank. When she's not writing, she's analyzing global economic trends, ego-surfing, reading autobiographies or binge-watching historical series. She tweets @just\_debola.

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