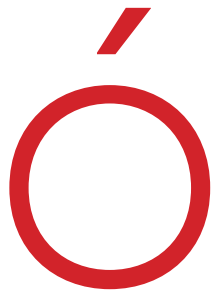


Agbowó

ISSUE 5

JULY 2022





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), the yearly Agbowó magazine (agbowo.org/magazine), the upcoming monthly publication, Monthly (monthly.agbowo.org), our arts events platform, Arts n Chill by Agbowó (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

During a guest reading at the Iowa Writer's Workshop, Carl Philip said, "the comma is an element of surprise, the stride towards something possible." This was after I had asked him about the function of a particular comma in one of his poems. Agbowó, after four years of excellent aesthetics, puts a comma—a stride forward—to its story with Reincarnation. It re-emerges with new editors and readers, with a common goal of publishing what we perceive as today's African writing. The truth is this issue has betrayed the goal because what we have collected is futuristic—a tomorrow's story—what emerges from the smoke of African Literature. In this issue, our contributors have done what the comma does, according to Carl Phillip. In what we know as the alternation of existence or the perseverance of self, reincarnation brings an ambiance of confusion or mystery to the light. However, the simplicity is in these poems, stories, essays, and drama.

In what other way can life exist after it has existed? Emergence, a synonym for being: in the hurtling syntax and uneasy metaphors presented in this issue, has rightly shown us what oblivion means without having to experience it. According to Olubunmi Familoni in What Does Half of a Rebirth Weigh, reincarnation exists outside the limits of time. The drama cultivated scenarios of spiritual exchange—what happens in the sequence of delay? What do the spirits require of the child before they let it towards its mother's womb? The father, the husband, the grandfather? What is the cost of our lives? Reincarnation as a question may not have been answered in this issue, but it has issued us light towards the tunnels of oblivion.

In Cinematic Orchestra and The London Metropolitan Orchestra's rendition of Transformation, something struck me the most—the lingering of the grand piano, or was it the reverberance? Not the chiming strings, the resonating chords, the lingering vibrato of this grand piano. The grandeur that I speak of resembles the elegant Jacksonville sun on a lazy Saturday. The palm trees outside the window sway until Bon Iver's Holocene plays from the stereo. This ambiance is what Henry Strange's poem, Procession, plants on the terrace in this issue—how the poem is in constant interrogation of sound and sonics—how it corroborates the vibrance of mastery of Anithi's storytelling. I look towards display, the magic that literature performs, the

world it builds us both in music and out of it. Procession speaks of a door unspoken of, a gateway towards exchange. And in this exchange, or rather, a transaction, because there is something sometimes snatched and not taken, there is “a father returning,” or Babatunde as the Yorubas will call it, waiting to be mentioned in Olalekan’s Rebirth.

Reincarnation as a theme is making the past available for the new world—the world where cars fly and where writers like Abigail Mengesha can alternate beginnings. While what we collect is towards the future, we also have attempted to bring you grief. Or maybe this is hope that death is not the end of things—that someone’s dead child will be reunited with their mother in the opening of the doorway—and that the door does not mistake an apple for an orange tree.

I am happy to present you with the best African writing today. An issue of prose and poetry that can withstand time & explain and reexplain grief and loss as a mere passage or a shift in time, rather than wound as we used to imagine. And by imagination, these works have put through the prisms of imagery what possibilities there are for the body & the souls that wander without it. But also, what others portals can open and can alter the concept of time? Love, family, mental illness? Maybe this issue has more light to shed than grief? Maybe what burns the house/the body isn’t the smoke but the intention to set something on fire—what emerges from the fire & does it emerge unscathed? Adabunu’s poem presents to us a different light—with a form that reminds self of the tower of Babel or at least the intention to see God. What depth of spirituality was displayed in Vimbisio? What other forms of spirituality did Nicole point us to in her poem? What wonder has Panashe done? How is Loic ending the narrative of loss? What wonder is waiting for us in the dark of his story, Incubus?

Is it true that there was a uniform intention to see [g]od—or what each writer perceived it to be, throughout this issue? What use was language put to in Ololade Edun’s Thirteen Ways of Naming My Grandmother’s Ghost? How did Chinoiso define healing in her striking story, Vimbisio? Is the journey of healing a journey towards [g]od?

I lead you into this issue—towards the seas that carry the spirits that drive these stories—towards every story, every poem—and into the heart of the writers.

Adedayo Agarau
Iowa City,
July 2022



THE REINCARNATION ISSUE
JULY 2022

PUBLISHED BY AGBOWÓ

COVER ART
WHAT IS LOVE
BY DEWUNMI MAXWELL

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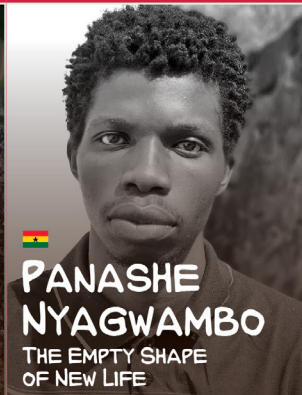
REINCARNATION

AGBOWÓ JULY ISSUE 2022 | LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS



 **ABIGAIL MENGESHA**

AMBASSEL FOR AN
ALTERNATE BEGINNING



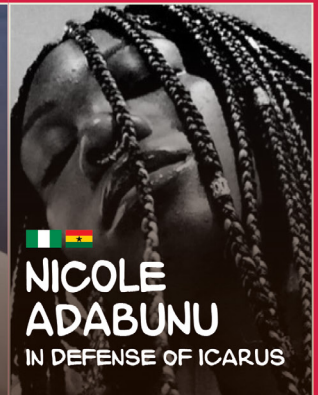
 **PANASHE NYAGWAMBO**

THE EMPTY SHAPE
OF NEW LIFE



 **OLUBUNMI FAMILONI**

WHAT DOES HALF A
REBIRTH WEIGH



 **NICOLE ADABUNU**

IN DEFENSE OF ICARUS



 **LOIC EKINGA**


INCUBUS



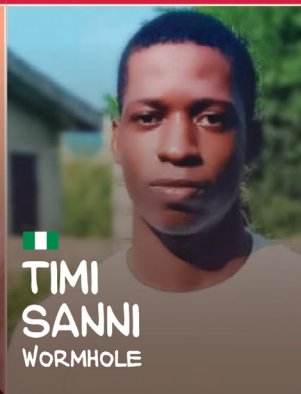
 **ROSELINE MGBODICHINMA**

FACT-CHECKING
FOR LOVERS



 **ZAYNAB BOBI**

SECOND CHANCE



 **TIMI SANNI**

WORMHOLE



 **ANATHI JONGILANGA**

THE WELL



 **CHIONISO TSIKISAYI**

VIMBISO



 **MAXWELL DEWUNMI**

WHAT IS LOVE



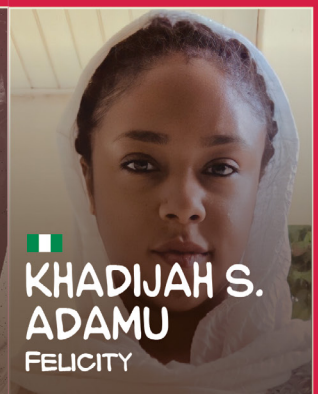
 **CHINONSO NZEH**

SHE LIVES



 **THUTHUKANI MYEZA**

ALL KINGS DIE



 **KHADIJAH S. ADAMU**

FELICITY



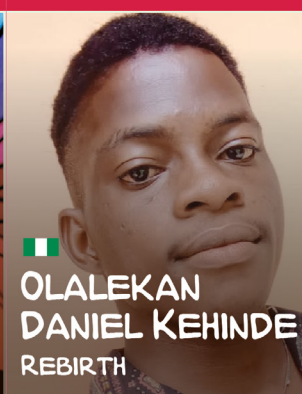
 **OLOLADE EDUN**

THIRTEEN WAYS OF NAMING
MY GRANDMOTHER'S GHOST



 **BENSON APAH**

SAND SULTAN



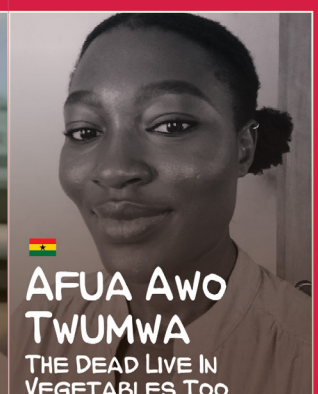
 **OLALEKAN DANIEL KEHINDE**

REBIRTH



 **HENRY STRANGE**

PROCESSION



 **AFUA AWO TWUMWA**

THE DEAD LIVE IN
VEGETABLES TOO

DRAMA

[74- OLUBUNMI FAMILONI | WHAT DOES HALF A REBIRTH WEIGH](#)

POETRY

[12- ABIGAIL MENGESHA | AMBASSEL FOR AN ALTERNATE BEGINNING](#)

[13- TIMI SANI | WORMHOLE](#)

[39- ROSELINE MGBODICHINMA | FACT-CHECKING FOR LOVERS](#)

[47- NICOLE ADABUNU | IN DEFENCE OF ICARUS](#)

[65- AFUA AWO TWUMWA | THE DEAD LIVE IN VEGETABLES TOO](#)

[69- HENRY STRANGE | PROCESSION](#)

[97- OLOLADE EDUN | THIRTEEN YEARS OF NAMING MY GRANDMOTHER'S GHOST](#)

[99- OLAMILEKAN DANIEL KEHINDE | REBIRTH](#)

FICTION

[14- ANATHI JONGILANGA | THE WELL](#)

[48- LOIC E KINGA | INCUBUS](#)

[82- CHIONISO TSIKISAYI | VIMBISO](#)

[100- PANASHE NYAGWAMBO | THE EMPTY SHAPE OF NEW LIFE](#)

VISUAL ART

[28- MAXWELL DEWUNMI](#)

[50- BENSON APAH](#)

[71- ZAYNAB BOBI](#)

[92- THUTHUKANI MYEZA](#)

NONFICTION

[40- CHINONSO NZEH | SHE LIVES](#)

[66- KHADIJAH S. ADAMU | FELICITY](#)

WORKS

Agbowó

WE
ARE
FIVE
YEARS
GONE

AND WE
KEEP
GOING.

TO THE ONES WHO REFUSE TO DIE

AMBASSEL FOR AN ALTERNATE BEGINNING

ABIGAIL MENGESHA

Play the song where I'm born without protest
and I enter smiling. How my arrival is sweet
in the way that barley is sweet: a little coarse,
a little mild. How a nation's borders won't fit
too tight around my ribs like desert locust
choking a bald stalk to splits. How I'll dance
till I forget I'm dancing and my body's pentatonic
scale is the only anthem I'll ever sing. That it's more
like a dream where the field is just a field and
I never distrust my roots: if they'll stay anchored,
if they'll stay true. That it's less like the dry season
when I'd be bewildered in a fistful of land, unsure
where the dirt ends and I begin. That there's only
my husk rising to a chorus of grains and sugar.

Writer and editor from Addis Ababa, Abigail Mengesha is a recipient of the George Harmon Coxe Award for Poetry and is currently a Jan Gabriel Fellow at New York University, where she is an MFA candidate in Poetry and a first-year writing instructor. Instagram handle: @abbymengesha

WORMHOLE

TIMI SANNI

after Kaveh Akbar; after Richard Siken; after Ilya Kaminsky

This is the season where grace is most difficult;
hunger, prominent; the body constantly running
out of fuel. Hey, wild hands drumming,
can I have that boyish zeal? Windows clapping,
red dogs barking in the streets, can I have, again,
those gone days where the only consequence
was *fun*? I am losing the heart of my youth. I am
stacking, with shaky hands, jagged rocks
by the shore of this blue dream—knowing
that every pebble is a moment balanced in time,
& waiting for the collapse. How now the wind
tears through it all. This is not how it ends. This
must not be how it ends. Tell me about that year
when I threaded the eye of a storm, how life
had only just begun, how it was cold and no one
could breathe. I was on a mare, somewhere
in the sky, & all around me the clouds were falling,
cotton fluff by cotton fluff by cotton fluff, when
at once, I pierced the fabric of the world & sewed shut
the mouth of the rogue wind. I can do it all again.

Timi Sanni writes from Lagos, Nigeria. He was the winner of the 2021 Anita McAndrews Award Poetry Contest. His works have appeared in *Black Warrior Review*, *New Delta Review*, *Lolwe*, *Palette Poetry*, and elsewhere. Find him on twitter @timisanni

THE WELL

ANATHI JONGILANGA

She knew they had finally come for her when all the cows – the ones who had calved too – went on heat. A strange morning, even to her who had orchestrated many like it in her witching years. To the east, grey clouds ringed with streaks of amethyst. Westward, the full moon waning, stark-grey. The breeze whipped with now-warm, now-chilly hues, normal enough to deceive, but the elements unsettled her energy. What went on in the kraal, coupled with the incessant barking of dogs sounding as if rising from a deep, unnameable abyss, were enough to set her chest reeling.

She had not been to her nightly *witchcapades* for almost four weeks. She'd worried about her fate – which she could now read all bare and clear, there in the rumbling in the wind and the restless milling of the cows. A liquid, wallowing worry that swam in her heart, metamorphosed and lassoed around her throat.

Liziwe knew that she was dreaming. “I must be dreaming,” she assured herself in the dream. Being a person of her vocation, she knew the language of dreams, their metaphors, their ciphered meanings, beyond the physicality of the dream, beyond its spirituality, she knew their ramifications upon the waking world of the flesh. Though she had known that *they* would come for her, she never expected it to be this heavy, though could have expected for it to be this way. She had hoped for a little mercy.

Foolish witch!

Who could expect mercy
from a brood of angry,
vengeful, bloodthirsty
witches?

She realises that she had been *waiting* for them. Still enshrouded in the prickly blanket

of the dream, she howls and screams and kicks. “Come!” she hails.

Her voice wavers, falters, wanes.

“Your day is coming,” one of them had promised her before her banishment from the coven. Was it Mala, that notorious agent of devilry?

Now the signs: the heifers, all of them, mad with lust. They mounted each other, insatiable, the bull and the oxen nonchalantly watching with lazy-tailed abandon. Then there was a gurgling sound, low and distant. Water. How dare they come by *water*? No one, not even the most powerful witch ever escaped a spell bound in water. She couldn’t tell where it came from or where it was going.

So, she *knew*, it must be the wicked women witches of the coven – the Sebeni Coven, Gwadana A – that had cooked up the spell. The men were too angry with her to do anything, save for one, the one who must have given the green light. The men would get her in another way once the women were done with her. For the men, the fetching of Liziwe would have been short, quick, stripped of theatrics: they would’ve come and be done with it; possibly end her on the spot.

The girls had decided to have their fun. They took their time, twisting and poking at her mind, provoking for a response, a test to see how far she would go to save herself. And from the flying sparks of her fight, they would find one to blow ablaze, a weakness they had always known she had in her.

Liziwe saw them now, heard their laughter – *poor thing, what have you done? Come thus, come to us and we’ll grant you the mercy you so yearn for, forgive the silliness of your sin.*

In Sebeni, and the villages in the vicinity, the amaXhosa who lived there believed cattle to be significant beings in dreams. But, witches, working in the rugged black blanket of night, could twist and toss and turn that narrative however they wanted to.

She tried jolting herself awake from the arresting hold of the dream, but—

It wouldn’t budge! Can you imagine?

Instead,

it gained its strength,

grew its hooks,

dug into her soul,

and drew her further into its depths.

Run! Run, now!

Liziwe finally awoke – and, to her horror – standing at the window of her quiet house, her head leant on the cold windowpane, the curtain slightly pulled back – realised that the dream was as true as the feet she stood on. There was the restlessness of the cattle in the pen. They weren't bellowing or fighting; just – all over each other's backs, with the exception, of course, of the bullock and the three oxen. They knocked against the logs of their enclave, the gate shook and almost fell for the mayhem. They frothed at the mouth, their udders as black as tar from the manure, their ears reared, eyes, as far as she could see, red as sunrise.

Banished from entering the coven since the beginning of the month when the moon was blue and new, and she had to make her decision by the time it was full, or they would finish her. Now she saw the fullness of the moon, round, grey and pregnant with the promise of her demise.

Her mother had no power to fight for her beyond the grave. She must have still been in purgatory, having not crossed over to the Realm of the Spirits yet – after eleven whole years! “That's the kind of price a witch pays, Daughter,” she would tell Liziwe. “You will suffer for all your sins and the sins of your mothers and their mothers' before them. And then, just when you feel you are about to give up the fight, the First Witches will come for your judgement. That's as far as I know it goes. So better be prepared.” Now her mother's words rang in her ears like the looping sound of the witches' snake cum airbus. These were the words her mother had said to her on their first night out together, before they climbed on their to-be-nightly-witching-snake together, naked as the day they had been spat into the waking world.

Liziwe's first official lesson.

She was seven years old.

Her father, dead, was now a zombie in the Dark Forest that lined the nether perimeters of Gwadana A – her sacrifice to the coven for her initiation. (Curious how unmoved she had always been whenever she saw his face, there. Why had she never cared for him so?) After all that had happened, the witches were now coming for her only son. Either him or her. The old man was of no use in the coven, thus his relegation to the back alleys of the Dark Forest. Couldn't even be taken into the choir that sang and sang and sang, or enlisted into the water fetching force, or for woodcutting. What could

the witches do with a tired old fool like Fafi, there?

They needed new blood—

Liziwe had made just the slightest, most consequential of mistakes, and—

Here she was—

A mistake could mean a life lost *back* into the Realm of the Living just when the witches had snatched it for the plans they had put forth for that specific soul or one of its ilk. It meant immense, irretrievable costs to the coven. Mistakes like that could never be forgiven.

For Liziwe's sacrifice, her son was the only one left.

New blood!

Blood, blood, we want blood!

She heard them now as she stood by the window, pondering and mulling and summoning her strengths and that of her mother's and her mother's mothers before her.

Blood! Blood! We want blood—!

New blood for the Anointing Oil. For woodcutting, water fetching. For feeding on. For new skills, for new inventions. A new voice for the choir, a new face to look at, a new face to admire. For somebody to take *her* place, somebody to transform the place – perhaps?

For – well, Mala could not do anything with a seven-year-old, he was too young.

Nascent sun to the east. Sky a milky, darkly grey with that hint of a pensive violet underscoring the mass of cloud. A lone blue flash of lightning shot through in accompaniment of the sun's rays gleaming blandly behind the murky clouds. She'd seen this before, in someone else's dreaming, right before she and her troops closed in. And, oh, she had seen much in her twenty-years of witching! From mounting Mamlambo the night-snake-cum-airbus, roving, flying over the homesteads, on to distant lands, even an overnight trip to America once, hunting for souls. Those souls commanded out of

the bodies of men and women and children, done in so immaculate a manner that those who noticed what was happening to them, deep in their sleep, only did so when it was already too late to fight, not that fighting would have helped in any way, and they would find themselves waking in the company of the zombies of the coven, veteran and new, without a pinch of a clue of their whereabouts, where newcomers were welcomed and baptised.

The Welcoming and Baptism involved a series of rituals where new souls were blown back into physical bodies, copies of the ones they once belonged to in the Realm of the Living. This – the Welcoming – could take a few minutes, depending on

- how nubile
- and elastic

a soul was,
how strong
its fighting spirit.
Days, if it proved
difficult to budge.
Weeks.
Months, at most.
Never years.

Once the right body received the right soul – that breath of life! – the person *lived* in the coven, a Welcomed and Baptised soul. Forever. *Ha ha ha*, the witches of Sebeni rejoiced when the Welcoming was complete. Sikufumene! *We have got you!* And golden goblets would overflow with blood wine. On the long tables were toenail-encrusted kidney pie, heart and lung soufflé, small intestine soup, pumpkin roasted over sizzling skin, brain chunks sautéed with dried blood crumbs, a thigh on a spike, pit-roasted, femur and all. To these gatherings or feasts the choir was summoned to entertain, their voices ringing louder than the Singers of Belmar, a cacophonous harmony never to be contended with.

Then the Baptism began. A delicate undertaking not performed by just *anyone*, for accountability was paramount: should something go wrong, a witch would pay with his or her soul, and trust Mpiyakhe – that one who must have given the green light for the girls to come for her – a witch never wanted that. The Baptisms were to be performed only by a select troop of witches, those women whose powers could not be questioned. The ones whose stare bore holes into your skin.

Liziwe was in training with the twelve Baptism Witches. Part of the reason for the circumstances she finds herself under today was that she had, during the last stage of the training, got cold feet – literally! – and she turned back. That was her second mistake, the turning back. Shirking the duties of a trainee, whether out of a lack of knowledge, or in her case, fear, was as unforgivable as losing a soul.

So—.

A soul was lost that morning. Luckily it belonged to a boy who tended to be spatially ignorant, never had the mind to take in detail, always, always in some sort of trance or other, such that there was no chance of telling, when he went back to, was retrieved by his family, what he had seen, for, had he seen anything at all?

Still—

The witches of Sebeni, Gwadana A were livid.

“You bwitch! You stupid bwitch!”

Liziwe had missed the boy right when she had to finish hammering the nail into his forehead. Just one, two, three last hits and it would be done.

“I can’t do it,” she cried. “There has been a mistake. I did something wrong.”

“What do you mean you can’t do it? What do you mean? Do it! Do it now!” shouted Mala. She was one of the fiercest of the brood. Mala never missed a single nail – as the years went by and she honed her skills, it only took one aim and one hit on the nail, quick, efficient – and once she hammered it in, it *never, ever* came out. (Was that why she was a favourite? Was that all it took? *Of course not*, Liziwe snorts as she shifts from the window back to the bed where she sits.) Sangomas, amagqirha, tried to bring those souls back to the Realm of the Living, but if Mala had held the hammer, they all failed.

“Your mother was one of the fiercest and strongest witches we have ever had here. What do you mean you can’t do it? Did she never leave you with anything? Did she never teach you anything? Are you as stupid as you seem? How can you miss such an important step?” Mala writhed with fury and the eleven other witches, and the three other initiates with them, reeled too with fury at the anticipation of the trouble that was surely coming.

They huffed and snorted and clapped their hands in disbelief and anger.

How could she—!

Then as sudden as Liziwe's balking from the body-copy, blew a roving, leaf-blowing breeze from the Black River below the Dark Forest. The trees swayed, seeming on the brink of cracking.

"Now look! Mpiyakhe is on his way here," said another, Notho, standing next to Mala, staring at Liziwe with green, lizard eyes. "We better get these zombies finished quickly or else... you do know of his punishments, no?"

He'd never punished Liziwe in all her witching years, but the stories her mother told her, the exhibitions of his punishments for the whole coven to see, made her blood rush and her shins melt, her heart sink to the floor of her soul's core.

She picked the hammer and nail and went again towards the boy tied to a tree trunk, the mngcunube tree in the middle of the Dark Forest, a sole tree in a circle of a clearing where dry leaves crackled and floated with the whipping winds. This is the only tree where the ritual was to be performed. "Stay!" she shouted. "Stay seated!"

The boy fumbled and struggled, crying ugly tears for fear of the black and the white hissing, slithering ropes holding his body onto the tree trunk.

But...

oh, damn—

She had forgotten that one should hit the nail three times and she'd already given it two blows. She placed the five-inch rusty nail in the middle of the boy's forehead, tapped it in with the rock-and-femur hammer and the boy shrieked as it bore and cracked further into his skull. The zombies in the coven stirred and grunted and cried in response, loud feral cries that rose to the heavens but could not be heard by anyone else – Tabitha and Hecuba could have flown all the way from Maine had it not been for the intervention of the masking spell by the Baptism Witches thrown up to the tree tops and spread like a spider's web, closing in the noise, closing out all external interference, concealing all business here. Witches elsewhere could tell the strength of the zombies of a certain coven by the strength of their cries, and the Witches of Sebeni, Gwadana A could not risk losing any of them, for other witches could invade and kidnap some. For

the first time in a hundred years, they were regaining the strength of their coven as was originally gifted by the First Witches but had been sucked, little by little, cunningly, by the Witches of Auch, all the way in Lagos, years ago, with that sly Doreen leading the pack, now turned all saintly and helpful to humanity, *ugh, that two-faced bwitch!*

The zombies had been in the boy's position before, they knew what happened, but for the invisible spider-web-thread shackles that held them back from any heroic action, they could not come to his aid, their skulls emptied of the essential functions of the brain save for controlled movement (by the witches, of course), drinking, eating – for one had to be sustained somehow – and singing, oh the singing!

For the second time Liziwe hit the nail and it went in three quarters of its length and the boy writhed silently with intermittent grunts and painful moans. But at the third time, she remembered that she had not, before the hammering, dipped the nail in the Anointing Oil of fresh blood and herbs that was kept brewing over woodfire behind the mngcunube tree. She was forced to pull the nail out, she thought, and—

That's when the mistake was made.

The witches shrieked and hailed: AHLILILILILELELELELE AHHH! WENZANI?!

“You stupid bwitch, wenzani?”

Mpiyakhe inched closer to the lot then, and observed the blunder quietly.

That was a definite loss. Panic and fear – of what? making exactly the kind of mistake she had? – had made her forget, firstly, the Anointing Oil. Fear made her want to do things right, took from her mind the knowledge that they had the power to fix these things, for a small price, a sacrifice of a lamb or an old ewe from her kraal. But she had none of these; she only had cattle, her legacy, her inheritance.

“BLABARAPAPEPEPE! LI-LI-LI-LI-LIIIIII!”

The witches were hysterical!

She knew what she had to do. Those sounds were *spelling it out* already. In some way, the witches were trying to protect her, a kind of mercy, for they knew what would happen once Mpiyakhe, who still stood by quietly, left the scene. Havoc would follow, already they could hear the winds whipping through the treetops, felt it pelt their faces, turning up a whirlwind of the dry leaves on the ground.

Hence the mad cows, now, amok with hormones—

Now a sole, lucid and elongated ‘S’ of lightning like a snake in languid motion, flashed to the east, tore through her thoughts like a sickle. It was a glaring red; it only meant her demise. *Who will I leave my son with? Who would take care of him? I have not given him—*

His father was unknown to her or to the boy. Like Jesus, he came out of nowhere, out of a ghost. But Liziwe was no Mary. Mary *knew*, at least, was told who the father of her son was.

But Liziwe?

She started praying to the First Witches—

Oh, Great Ones, who came before. Great Mother, Great Aunt, Great Father. You who give us life and bless us with flesh, blood and soul. Spare—

The flash came again. Stronger in strength and brighter in colour, with a blue streak alongside it, accompanied by a single ear-shattering bolt of thunder.

Then—

Water.

Drowning.

A vision of drowning
in black water.

Ah, they had arrived.

Her head slipped
into the beginnings
of a haze.

still

She held her balance. She turned her head, the rest of her body still, and the whole house was simmering with white mist from the floor rising incessantly to the rafters.

She knew how this went.

Hayibo ndiyathwetyulwa, she thought, they are bewitching me, but
still

she kept,

and, before the sound came – which would be any minute from now – that

unmistakable sound of the snake-airbus, a sound like a wire string turned and roved over and over and over three hundred and sixty degrees a thousand times per second. She would choke on the mist. It wasn't the witches' doing, though she could trust that evil bwitch Mala to be in collusion with the cooker of this spell – unmistakably Mpiyakhe's spell, this.

The mist, the black water, the whipping wind outside—

He had armoured the girls with the gift of his spell and sent them out hurtling, hunting. How manly of him, how chivalrous, to let the girls have their fun with her.

How angry must he have been to choose this course of action, not to come do his work himself? Again, the answers come to her mind with Mala's face: she must have cooed her way into being assigned the task with her girls, seduced him to let her do it.

Black Water brewed outside the house, filling the whole yard, in small trickles, little streams and puddles, pooling to a brooding ocean, as dark and broody as the sinking feeling of foreboding that panged in the pit of her spirit. She could hear the gurgling, soft as a lullaby, but rising like the mist inside the house, to swallow her whole, not to leave a single loose strand of hair.

The cows broke the gate to the pen and leapt out of their sacred enclave in twos and threes, impatient, impenitent, and danced in the yard, stewing mulch, kicking up mud, roving chaos.

Ah, the witches had arrived. She felt them in her flesh, in the chill of the marrow in her bones.

Meanwhile, the river that had sprung from the belly of the earth was slowly welling up around her yard, yet never leaving its boundaries. If the mist inside the house would not make it easy for them to catch her, the water would take her right to where she was supposed to be. In a moment, she would find herself tied, inextricably, to the trunk of the Baptism tree with the moving, hissing, angry ropes, for they, too, knew when a witch had fumbled and was up for retribution, the eternal and irreversible kind.

She was never told what Mpiyakhe had said or done when he left the scene on the night she took the nail out of the boy's forehead, but she knew in her gut that she could no longer go on nightly witchcapades with any of the deployed troops for a minimum of

seven days, let alone set foot, show any of her three faces, at the coven.

They came to her instead.

“Liziwe,” Notho had started. It was exactly midnight when they’d arrived, not a second longer, that first night following her mistake . “We have been left no choice but to take you to the Chambers where you will stay with the rest of those stupid weaklings who befouled the sacred Baptism like you did.”

The ten others had grunted and hissed in agreement, save for Mala, who stood staring Liziwe in the eye as Notho spoke, unlike the rest who hovered in the air, their legs crossed in front of them. Her belly flesh sagged, her breasts sucked lifeless by the serpentine zombies she was known to fuck whenever she felt famished, quiet as it was kept.

Liziwe had never been to the Chambers. Her mother had neglected, it seemed, to let her in the know about what happened there. It seemed, now, that her mother never loved her as much as she had claimed to. Why had she hidden so many things from her? That could not have been out of love, could it?

“There,” Notho went on, smirking, shaking her head, trying to find her voice, but quickly recovered. She looked at Liziwe with her green lizard eyes. There you will sit in benches of fire, with no water, no food, and only the breath of Dlazonke for air.” Dlazonke was the oldest and, in his day, fiercest witching snake of the coven, but now he spent his days in the Chambers with the witches who had soiled the sacred tradition , licking them wherever and whenever he desired. His breath, trickling from the tiny pores in his skin only five times a day, and on some days never at all, was as putrescent and as hot as an atomic bomb.

“Notho, Mala, my great witching ones,” Liziwe had pleaded, “I—”

“You will have to hand over your son as a sacrifice to save yourself,” Mala declared.

“That is the only request the coven makes.”

“Are you insane? Not a lamb, like everyone else?”

“You decided to run away rather than stay and help us finish the job. You know the

price for that.”

“Or does she?” cackled one of the witches.

“Does she ever know anything?” chimed another, and they shook their hands in the air, reeling with laughter.

“I gave my father *just* three years ago—”

“For yet another mess.

“Or miss.”

The laughter rose again.

“You know your father is a useless old rag. Can’t even turn serpentine like the other old men we took over there. Shut up and give us your baby.”

Everyone kept silent, their eyes exchanged looks, *knowing looks*.

Of course, you would say that, Liziwe had thought.

“I am not giving up my son,” was Liziwe’s final word. “I am not! ”

“Have it your way then. We have been instructed to convey this message: Should you not give us the boy, don’t even think of setting your wretched foot in that coven. Your judgement will be in four weeks,” Notho had said. “Godspeed.” For somebody who was Liziwe’s age, she was as fierce as Mala (or at least pretended to be), as loved and praised as if she were a first descendant of the First Witches, as respected as Mpiyakhe, *but* not as feared as any of them. But on that morning, when they had come with the news of her banishment, Liziwe felt hot blood dripping from the base of her skull, a single trickle coursing down her spine. That was when they had started executing the spell. Notho had kick-started it, Liziwe knew.

They had mounted Mamlambo, naked and dancing and chanting their Disappearing Witch Spell, an invisibility spell that rendered them out of sight in seconds, and just like that were out of Liziwe’s home.

Why had she never thought of protecting her boy? Arm him with a spell, even if it were a flimsy, sketchy thing to keep trouble away from him? Had she inherited from her

mother that silly streak of negligence, one that would cost her at the last minute? Just like how the old woman had remembered the minute before she took her last breath to tell her that *Zim-Zalabham* meant that she could put on her second face and no witch would be able to detect her anywhere, let alone defeat her in a fight, if only the spell was said right, and followed by a licking of the right thumb and small finger and a bite-and-quick-chew of white chalk. When she discovered this secret, by way of a slip of the tongue from Notho, that duplicitous bitch, and wore its truth like the armour it was, it was easy for her to discover her third face.

Now, when she remembered the spell, so simple yet so powerful, it was too late. The water welled up on all sides of the house, the floor inside was a swamp, and the whole house was like an ominous hot spring, water underneath, mist and smoke atop, cloudy, milky, darkly grey. Outside the cattle were frenetic, amok all around the yard. The sun shone with a magnificent brilliance but very distant, so distant she longed for its heat. In her yard, it was cold and dark, the clouds down to a few meters above the roof of the house and an ominous brooding rumbled through them, her name called by something, somebody she could not see, a voice she did not know.

She waded the water, struggled at the main door on her way outside. She would leave the boy sleeping. She would rather die and be damned for eternity than *see* him in that coven. He would drown if he drowned. And if they got him, she knew there was no chance that they would see each other at the coven. Besides, once they had her, they would never come for him because they would not need him anyway. Once a witch was in the Chambers, he or she never came back, Mala had informed her, with a sweet delight on her rotten-tooth face that morning. But how could she trust them?

She could see the bolt coming.

Ah,

so it wouldn't be the mist

or the water,

but the lightning

and the water.

Damnit!

The mist was to get her out the house. How could she not figure it out all this time? She finally accepted how much she didn't know; how gullible and naïve she had been. A product of being 'protected', of utter ignorance and neglect. Her mother had hidden so much from her, all in the name of love, and now look! She looked to the corner of the

garden where the graves of her parents were and could not see a thing, the clouds, now merged with the blackness of the water, had closed the world off from her.

She started running, wading water, towards the gate, on her way to seek refuge. She slipped and fell on her chest, her breasts pattering with a thud on the mud. Alone, sliding in the black mud, the cattle kicked at her head and her body. She slid down the slope of the yard towards the source where the water now sprang up as if from a fountain, down there by the gate.

Dear God—!

Wasn't it sacrilege for a witch to utter that name?

The bolt, now orange, blue and red, flashed and struck her, sliding, sliding, the cattle now laughing audibly, laughing as if possessed, like a troop of Jokers, accompanying her to her eternal damnation—

She opened her eyes, and the world was as clear as the first rays of summer light, all the cattle sleeping peacefully in their pen, all four calves by their mothers. She saw Bhongo, her son, with his hands now cupped at his window, now beating at the glass, screaming,

Mama!

Mama!

Mamaaaaaa!

Liziwe was as quiet as midnight, the only sound in her head coming from the gurgling in her ears; and there was the insistent sting in her eyes, the black water pulling her down, down, deep into the belly of the well.

Anathi Jongilanga is a teacher from Ngqeleni, South Africa. His writing has appeared at Transition, Lolwe, The Kalahari Review. His essay Return to Art appears in the anthology Through the Eye of a Needle, published by Praxis Magazine Online. He is the founding editor of The Blood Beats Series, whose second anthology Something in the Water is out at Brittle Paper.

MAXWELL DEWUNMI

Maxwell Dewunmi is a Creative designer and Digital artist based in Lagos, Nigeria. He mostly uses 3D software to express his otherworldly ideas and surrealist visions. Maxwell studied Physics at the University of Jos. He is an ardent lover of music, balance, simplicity and beautifully designed things.

INTERVIEW WITH

MAXWELL DEWUNMI

THE STORY OF FINDING PASTURES-NEW IS NOT ALIEN TO THE AVERAGE YOUNG NIGERIAN/AFRICAN, MOST OF WHOM MAKE THAT LEAP TO FIND NEW OPPORTUNITIES OR, IN HIS CASE, A NEW CHALLENGE. MAXWELL SPENT MOST OF HIS LIFE IN JOS, A CITY IN THE NORTH-CENTRAL NIGERIAN STATE CALLED PLATEAU. TO ESCAPE WHAT HE CALLED MUNDANE, HE HAD TO MOVE SOUTH TO THE CITY OF OPPORTUNITIES. A FEW YEARS AFTER THAT MOVE, HE IS NOW A WELL-SOUGHT-AFTER DESIGNER AND DIGITAL ILLUSTRATOR, MAKING THE 3D MEDIUM HIS FORTE.

IN THIS CONVERSATION WITH [SHEYI OWOLABI](#), MAXWELL DISCUSSES HIS DECISION TO MOVE FROM JOS TO LAGOS AND HIS PECULIAR REALITY AS A DIGITAL ARTIST IN THE AGE OF WEB3 AND NFTS.

Agbowó: Can you tell us about yourself?

Maxwell: My name is Maxwell Adewunmi. I'm a Creative designer and Digital artist based in Lagos, Nigeria. I've always been an artist at heart, trying and experimenting with different art forms and mediums, ranging from music to poetry and even graffiti. I work mostly with 3d software. I studied Physics at the University of Jos. I love music. Also, I love simple and beautifully designed things. That's a little about me.

Agbowó: Did you grow up in Jos (Plateau State, Nigeria)?



HOLLOW
MAXWELL DEWUNMI
3D ILLUSTRATION

Maxwell: Yes, I did. I was born and raised in Jos. And I moved here (Lagos) like three years ago.

Agbowó: What prompted your move to Lagos?

Maxwell: At some point, I got tired of the usual mundane and complacent style of life up north. Imagine being in one place for over 20 years. My main motivation was for a change of environment. I didn't have much of a vision of what I would do in Lagos then. But I just knew that I needed to change my environment quickly. So that was why I moved to Lagos.

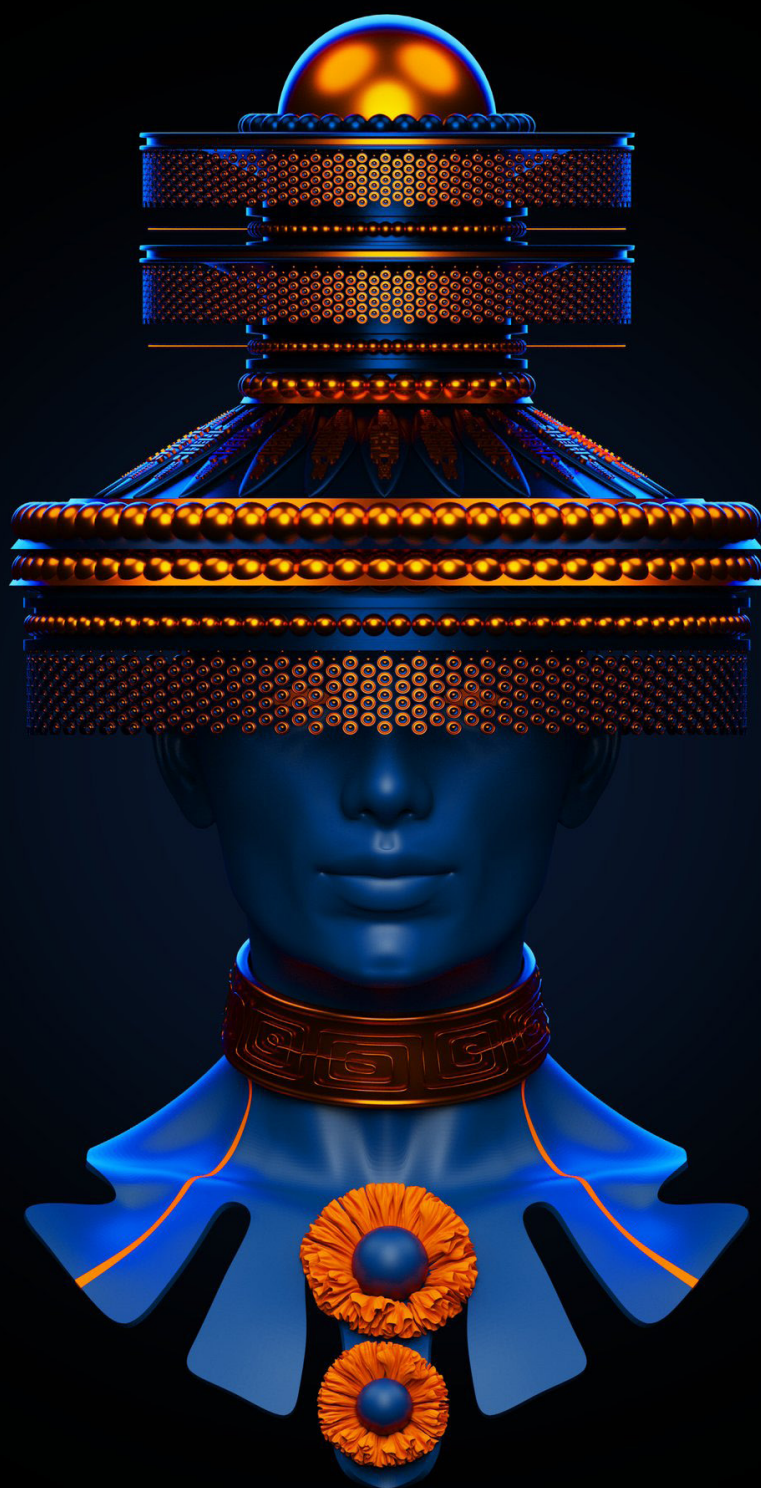
Agbowó: How has that move paid off for you?

Maxwell: It's been great. It's been great because I feel like it's one of the best decisions I have made in my life so far. I've been learning a lot. Moving from one thing to the other has always been in the positive direction. I've gained skills since I came here. Before Lagos, I was a writer, but it became insufficient to express my ideas. But I just didn't know what else I wanted to do. I was also into music at some point, but I had to stop that too because I didn't really love my creations. I moved to Lagos, and it's been up and up since then because I've gained skills and confidence in myself. I can pitch myself to anyone. I can talk to anyone.

Agbowó: You mentioned that you are a creative Designer and 3D Artist. Can you take us back to your earliest memory, when you realized or thought to yourself that you wanted to become an artist?

Maxwell: Okay, so I'll say my art journey started as a kid, and I used to draw. But at some point, I stopped for a reason that I can't really remember right now. I got busy with life and school, but even then, I tried to go back to drawing, but it was so difficult. I felt like it was a skill that I had lost complete touch with because I stopped for a long time. So I then went into music, but even while I was into music, I was still sketching and doodling. A few ideas here and there.

I used to write poems and rap verses for a music duo that I was part of, but I had to stop music at some point because I wasn't really impressed at the stuff that I was making. And so, I started graphic design when I came to Lagos. And it's been a progressive build-



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THE MONARCH
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3D ILLUSTRATION

up of skills and software from that point. I learned how to make vector illustrations on CorelDraw and Adobe Illustrator. Then I leveled up to photo-bashing and digital collages, album cover designs, and posters and finally stumbled on 3D.

Out of my love for music, I gained a deep interest in album cover design, so I started designing album covers for artistes and getting commissions. People started reaching out to me, saying, “We love your designs. Can you help design this album cover?” And so that was when I felt, okay, maybe I have something here. Maybe this could be something that I can get better at. And who knows? This can be something to make money from, and I can wholeheartedly call myself an artist.

So I started learning about 3D. I started learning Cinema 4D, but I then moved to Blender. And then it was when I started using Blender that I started seeing that, wow, I’m quite good at this stuff. And so I just kept making art. But it was for fun. At that time, it wasn’t anything serious, but I was still collecting jobs; I was still doing covers for artists. And then after that was when NFTs came and started learning about it.

Ever since I got into NFTs, my art has improved a thousand times. Because this time, I wasn’t just doing it for fun; I had to make really good images that people would like and would want to buy. So I had to make my art more aesthetically pleasing to people without compromising my voice as an artist. That broadened my mind and my imagination.

When I sold my first artwork, it dawned on me that I could actually make a living from making digital art.

Agbowó: You mentioned selling your first artwork as NFTs. Can you tell us how exactly you got into NFTs?

Maxwell: When I first heard of NFTs, It was from an artist I follow. His name is Beeple. He sold a collage of his work for around 68 Million Dollars. I can never forget that (laughs)

What? One picture? One image? And so I started learning about this. I got curious, like, how can one person sell one image? And it’s not like it was a traditional piece; it wasn’t an acrylic or oil painting from the 50s, it was a digital art piece. And so that got me curious, and I started asking questions. I started meeting and talking to people; they saw my work and testified to how good it was. That was how I began my NFT journey.



TWILIGHT
MAXWELL DEWUNMI
3D ILLUSTRATION

Agbowó: How has it been so far? What's the journey like, so far?

Maxwell: It's interesting because since I started, as I said, my work has improved. I've met a lot of people, and I've talked to lots of people. I have friends now. Before this, I didn't really have friends, but now I have many people I can reach out to. So I can say it has positively impacted me and my work. It has its ups and downs. There are times when you make sales, there are times when you do not make sales, and sometimes imposter syndrome kicks in, and then you have to overcome it again. But overall, it's been a positive experience.

Agbowó: Do you see any future potential with NFTs in disrupting the African art space?

Maxwell: Yes, of course. I see. In fact, it's already happening. Before now, nobody knew that such great art would come out of Africa. The boundaries of what African art should look like have been pushed significantly. So we're definitely changing a lot of things out here. People are coming out of their holes. I didn't know many digital artists or creatives in general before NFTs, but now you can see many of them emerging out of the shells they have been hiding and hoarding their art. Creatives are getting known for their different expressions and styles.

The perception of African art is changing because more creatives are drifting away from the conventional or predictable look of African art. We are beginning to see that Africa has more potential than what it's usually known for. And also, a very strong memory for me was during the 2021 Art X Fair, where they featured a couple of digital artists and their work. They had spaces and big screens for digital arts. A lot of things are changing. People are beginning to accept digital arts as a thing and the value it brings.

Agbowó: What do you think about the NFTs space in Nigeria, Africa in general? What are your impressions?

Maxwell: It's great. I can say it's great because, for the first time, people are now banding together and creating communities. We now know ourselves! And like I said, people are coming out of their shells to showcase their eccentric art styles. Before now, I didn't know many digital artists. I knew maybe one or two, maybe like Niyi Okeowo or HubrisKing. I did not know many of them, but now I know a lot of them. I know lots of photographers, and I know lots of 3D and digital artists. So it's a positive experience for most Nigerians because we now have people around us. We now have a community of

VOID



SEVERED

MAXWELL DEWUNMI

3D ILLUSTRATION

artists, and we can finally have conversations about the works of creatives.

Agbowó: Your work can be very colorful. They can also be dramatic and cinematic in terms of their composition. What inspires your work?

Maxwell: I am inspired by beautiful things. I watch a lot of movies, so I get to see a lot of shots from movies, and I gain inspiration from them too. I also love simplicity. I said this before, I love when things are simple, but you get the message. Not simple in the sense that it's easy. No, it's not easy, but it looks simple and striking.

And in terms of who inspires me, do I have any specific artist that inspires me? I would say I am inspired by the clean aesthetic of like 3d artists Catelloo and Rory Bjorkman.

At some point, I was obsessed with the idea of making my art look African. I thought that was a marketable idea. But at some point, I realized that maybe that is my biggest strength. The fact that my art doesn't exactly look African. So I forgot about the whole idea and focused more on what inspires me, which are things that don't look like they are from this world. Things that look unreal but at the same time they are beautiful to look at.

Agbowó: What's your creative process like?

Maxwell: Generally, I'll say my creative process starts with an idea sometimes. And other times, it may not start with an idea. And what I mean by that is, for some pieces, I may have a clear idea of what I want to do. And sometimes it comes out well; sometimes it does not come out well. Other times my process is mostly intuitive and spontaneous, and I just follow the voices in my head, and most of the time, they lead me to a very good place. I mostly enjoy the intuitive moments because I am able to surprise myself.

But yeah, I just sit down at the computer, and maybe I go through Pinterest, I look through a few of my boards. If I find any image fascinating, I try to see how I can express that idea with my own voice, with my own style, with my own colors, and stuff like that. Because I don't want to exactly copy anybody. I hate the idea of copying anybody at all. So whenever I see something I like, I then try to make my very-personalized version of that image.

I look at my old work, too; when I'm trying to make new pieces, I look at other things

that I can add from old pieces and bring to new pieces so that I can stay consistent because certain textures and colors are consistent in my work. So I try to bring some of my old stuff to the new pieces so that it doesn't look too different from the old ones.

Agbowó: Finally, going back to the conversation about NFTs, do you see the NFT surge as a way for African art to reemerge into the global art space?

Maxwell: Oh, yes, it's already happening. It's already happening. We already have like a bunch of high-profile artists who have sold pieces for remarkable amounts.

We have artists that have been through Christie's, black artists, not necessarily Nigerians, but we've had Anthony and some other people. So, as somebody said, this is a new creative economy for us as creators is an opportunity for Africans to change the narrative that has been associated with Africa or Nigeria specifically. We're changing things, man, because before now, there's a regular expectation of what a Nigerian is, probably a fraudster or something. But we are coming out here with all this creative energy, all this creative work, and we're changing the African story, the Nigerian story. This is new, and we're still learning the tricks of the trade. But this is definitely an opportunity that Africans did not miss out on because we came in early, just as the world came into it, too. And yes, we will grow bigger and bigger in space.

Agbowó: Thank you very much for this conversation, Maxwell.

Maxwell: Thank you too.

FACT-CHECKING FOR LOVERS

ROSELINE MGBODICHINMA

A burning bush is a language
And a shoeless foot is as naked as the back of a newborn
Rolling words into the fire
Is how we give birth to the world
& flee from it.

I cannot marry this boy that shares my tongue
Because our mothers mothers mothers mother
Shared a lover.

I have come to a life where love needs fact-checking, Ask;

- Was this birthmark inflicted or did you grow it from another life?
- When you sleep with your eyes open, who do you look like?
- How often do you think of a grave?
- Is it a coincidence that you find sleep in my great grandfather's armchair?
- Is your grey hair a gift or a prophecy?
- Where do you go in your dreams?
- Are those sandcastles you are digging up in our backyard or is it your life?

Today, I heard my ancestors in my lover's moan
I may carry children for a body that started my birth
And deliver myself again,
Any type of love you loose
Any type of love that feels like home
has existed before.

Roseline Mgbodichinma is a Nigerian writer, poet and blogger who is passionate about documenting women's stories. She is currently pursuing a law degree and actively freelancing. Her work has been published on Isele, Native Skin, Down River Road, Amplify, JFA human rights mag, Blue marble review, Indianapolis review, the hellebore and elsewhere. Roseline Mgbodichinma is a Nigerian writer, poet and blogger who is passionate about documenting women's stories. You can reach her on her blog at www.mgbodichi.com where she writes about art, issues and lifestyle.

SHE LIVES

CHINONSO NZEH

1.

The mauve rays of early dawn on the 21st of July, 2021, met me awake, gawking at my laptop, unable to type, words refusing to come. The few words I typed were bland, lacking rhythm, and soulless.

I felt a nudge in my spirit, lethargy swaddling me. I shut down my laptop and glanced at the clock. It was 5:56 a.m. I had been awake since 2 a.m. and had nothing to show for it. I slumped into the bed, doleful, and slept off.

The blinding morning sun woke me up. I picked up my phone, and strolled to my Instagram app. Three new messages from Rita, a junior student from my ex-secondary school. It took minutes before I opened the message. Did she need advice from me? I thought. She had come to me for advice a few months back because, in 2019, I won the Best Graduating Arts Student award. I was not in the mood to advise anyone. My writing was not going well, and that ruined my day.

While scrolling through other messages, I mistakenly opened the message. It read:

—*Dear Senior Nonso,*

We lost a beloved teacher this morning, Miss Oge.

I read the message once more. A flush of adrenaline throbbed through my body.

Did she mean Mrs. Okeke, the aged Catering Craft teacher who limped?

—*Did you make a mistake with the name?* I asked

—No. Our Miss Oge. Our literature teacher. Low blood pressure.

—How can you even say this? I asked.

A lump formed in my throat.

She did not reply again. I sat on my bed, numb.

My phone rang. It was Alabi Mercy, an ex-classmate.

Her voice was unsteady, each word rising and falling without tempo.

—Miss Oge, she's dead. Our literature teacher don die.

I cut the call immediately. A certain kind of heat was surging behind my eyelids; the world began to spin fast.

Die. Dead. Lost a beloved one. Those words were not presumed to be compatible in one sentence with Miss Oge's name. She was life itself. But now, this young, vigorous, and fiercely brilliant literature teacher was dead.

2.

Drama, a mini subject in the Cultural and Creative Arts department, was the first subject that I took on the first day of secondary school in 2013.

That morning, I sat in the last row of the class, timid, glaring at my new, hyperactive classmates who walked around. The boys in their well-ironed white shirts, blue trousers, and shiny black shoes. The girls in their well-ironed blue pinafores, white socks that reached their knees, and shiny black shoes amplified with peacock gaits.

She ambled into the class, her pointy-heeled shoes making clicking sounds on the ground. She wore heavy makeup with eyelashes that made me imagine, when she blinked, a blackbird flapping its wings. She did not smile. She held a thin, flexible cane that she swung in the air at intervals. A cane that would land on my back one blustery morning, months later, when I presented an incomplete note to her.

My name is Oge. Miss Oge. Your new Drama teacher. Miss, not Mrs.

I feared her. My stomach churned whenever we had Drama classes every Monday and Tuesday. I found her terrifyingly intriguing: the way she spun her eyes, the way she roamed around the class with her shoes making click-clack sounds, her flowery cologne, the way she talked—measured words with a steady voice. Everything about her.

Her exams were easy because they were multiple-choice questions. No theory. You just had to pick the correct answer. I aced the exams for the whole session she taught us.

3.

Moving to senior secondary school, I chose the art class because I wanted to be a lawyer and because I loved art. Seniors trooped into our class to warn us of a literature teacher whom they called Bloody. *It was Miss Oge, they said. She often gave surprise tests that she called Bloody. You would write and write, but you would not pass the exams. Nobody got anything higher than a C in her subject because it was just the way things were. If you read too much, she'd make you fail. Only God could help.*

Again? I thought.

However, she was a little different this time. She grinned often. She was detailed and immediate. She knew our names and our faces. And she made sure to let us know that she did, identifying us by our names from time to time. *Opeyemi, right?* She would say, pointing at Opeyemi, a scrawny girl who wore braces. She told us personal stories. She had a distinct sense of humor.

Bloody tests trudged upon us. I have this memory sharp in my head:

A dingy, rainy Tuesday morning. Miss Oge was complaining about how unnecessary the rainy season was and how her roof fell off a week before because of the heavy wind that came with rain. She made a joke about how God wanted to punish politicians with the rain, but the citizens ended up falling victims.

The class rumbled with chuckles, and, while we were still laughing, she stopped, wore a straight face, and said: *Tear out a sheet of paper, write your name, and answer the following questions.* Stillness followed.

The next morning, she came with the scripts and the highest score was 9/20.

The result for the first term Literature examination came, and I had a C. I was not surprised. I did not expect anything more. The second term came, and I got a C.

The third term came, and I wanted to be daring. I read very hard for the tests and the exam; I aced them. I got an A. This was new, acing her exams. She called me to her office and said well-done. And from that moment, I debunked the stories our seniors told, worked hard, and had excellent grades all through.

4.

She caught me scribbling a short story at the back of the class, and she seized the paper. *I cannot be teaching and you're doing something else!* She yelled.

The story meant so much to me (even though, now, I cringe at the sight of it).

I went to her office to plead, told her it was an important story, and she said, *so you are a writer?*

I said yes.

She told me to go, that she would call me when she'd read the story.

I was in class when she sent someone to call me. My heart was pulsing fast, and my senses heightened. I knew she would like my story. When I entered, she smiled at me and said nothing for a while.

I get the concept of what you're trying to write. You'll make a good writer. But for now? Hm. You need work. This story is badly plotted and too cliché.

My heart shrank. I said nothing.

I want you to read Purple Hibiscus by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. I think you'll find clarity in that book. I know the kind of person you are, and I know what book fits you.

I knew that name, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, but I was not sure how I knew that name. I went home and I cried. My precious story was called 'badly plotted'. I loathed Miss Oge for moments.

During the weekend, I went to the bookstore to ask for the book. The salesman, a smiling man, brought a book from the upper compartment of the shelf. A lavender-coated book burnished with white layouts; a dark girl on the cover, wearing an African cornrow, her hands on her cheek: Purple Hibiscus.

That night, I opened the book, the first sentences pulling me to Enugu. I saw myself in Kambili, as shy, innocent, observant, and intelligent. Through the pages, we went to Nsukka, fell in love with Father Amadi; Unraveled fierceness from Auntie Ifeoma; laughed with Amaka, Obiora, and Chima. Papa's whipping was intense. Mama and Jaja shared solace with us. We sucked the Ixora nectars and planted purple hibiscus.

I did not know that people like me could be characters in a book. I did not know that my language had a place in literature. I did not know that literature, African fiction, could be this cadenced, this elegant, this robust. I gained clarity. Miss Oge asked me how I felt, recommended more books, and scrutinized my writing.

I see something in you, Chinonso, she would say often. That's why I'm helping you. And she would supervise my stories and criticize them.

I would later remember, on the day Miss Oge died, Kambili's statement when she heard that Papa died: *He was different from Ade Coker, from all other people they had killed. He*

had seemed immortal.
She seemed immortal.

5.
She became a milder version of herself in the second term of our second year in senior secondary school. More vulnerable, genuine.

Bloody tests no longer happened. She laughed even more.
She hosted a play, Othello by William Shakespeare. I played Cassio. Often, she told us how she loved us dearly, and how she did what she used to do because she wanted to be taken seriously, and not because it was her nature.

Nobody took her seriously. She was young—probably the youngest teacher then. She wore well-patterned dresses and designer shoes. She was brilliant and full of grace. Most of the teachers, especially the women teachers, did not like her. It was obvious, and it felt as though they begrudged something in her that they no longer had.

I remember when we were having a literature examination, and Mrs. A came to supervise us for the examination. Something went wrong with the scripts and we needed Miss Oge to rectify it. When Mrs. A asked who our teacher was, we told her Miss Oge; she scowled and said: *That one? She don marry? She likes making mistakes, she's never good at anything. That's why she cannot get married.*
A couple of times, I heard teachers make a similar statement.

6.
In our final year, we were told that Miss Oge would no longer teach us because our predecessors failed literature woefully. It was common for most art students during the West African Senior School Certificate Examination to fail literature. The school authority queried her and told her to teach only Drama to the Junior students. That she was not qualified to teach literature.

But it was not her fault. Literature is a subjective course. Three people could analyze a poem or a prose work differently, and still, be plausible. The examination council has a marking script that is objective. If your view does not go with what they want, you might not be awarded a full mark. I like to think that this was (and still is) the reason why people failed literature.

Even though she no longer taught us, we visited her often. She gave us advice. She chose

the dress code for our valedictory service and our dinner night.

The last day I saw her was when I went to collect my testimonial two weeks after the valedictory service.

Her last words to me were: *I cannot wait for you to happen.*

Truly, she did not wait for me to happen.

7.

A week before the 21st of July, I wanted to send her an email because it was her birthday. I hesitated because I thought I would wish her some other time. Now, I regret it. I regret not sending her that email. Sometimes, anger sprints deep inside me; I want to self-harm because I regret it.

On the day she died, I scrolled through her Facebook page; the posts on her timeline were gloomy: *Rest in peace, Oge. Dark Tuesday. We lost a sister. Sleep well, beloved. Rest well, Soyinka's junior.*

I saw a comment from Mrs. A: *You were a treasure to us, I hope you're sleeping in hallowed peace.*

I was so close to typing: *You fucking old pretending bitch, why are you wishing her well?*

I was a disgruntled lion wanting to eat Mrs. A up.

I became tired of the calls and text messages that came in. They were trite: *Chinonso, Miss Oge is dead.*

I spent a few weeks believing and disbelieving. On some days, it felt true. On some days, she was still alive, somewhere in the world.

It has been almost a year since she passed away. I have not cried. Whenever I think of her, I compel myself to cry, but the tears do not come. I feel like a fraud. Guilt drapes me whenever this happens.

Gradually, I am forgiving myself because I know that wherever she is, she understands why I feel this way.

8.

She lives. Miss Oge still lives. Whenever I pick up Purple Hibiscus from my shelf, I feel her presence. Warmth jolts through my body as I nibble the sentences. I know it is her. Sometimes, my spirit jerks me when my writing is not going well. I know it is her.

Sometimes, it's a muse coming to me like a revelation. I know it is her.

Right now, I am sitting on the couch, typing this essay on my laptop. I think of her; her presence is in the coolness that trickles inside me.

She lives. Miss Oge still lives.

Chinonso Nzeh is Igbo, and his works have appeared in Isele Magazine, Black Boy Review, and elsewhere. He has forthcoming works in Evergreen Review and the Kilimanjaro voices anthology. He thinks of storytelling as a way to comprehend the world's wonder. When he's not writing, he's reading or listening to old-skool music. He hopes to dump his law degree and become a professor in writing.

IN DEFENSE OF ICARUS

NICOLE ADABUNU

down
kill me to come
you'd have to
if i too ever got that high
to understand Icarus 'cause god
the red of reality is when you start
imagination shivers you back into
water between the eyes of your
singing until you sober the ice splash
and for once the mind singing all of it
enough to postpone suicide
into the light suns the insides
it made of me devoted i breathe
cheded but didn't stop the moth
& so i did and i didn't stop flame
no you have to inhale like this
worthy of inhale *inhale inhale*
the heart in everything felt
the lung out of me but i saw
the first time i got high it chased
you do not run from smoke
when the mind is always on fire
i chase whatever suns me.
the light. sorry dad.
i spark a blunt and sip

My name is Nicole Adabunu and I am a 22 year old Nigerian-Ghanaian writer who is interested in the kind of work that devastates. Previously, I have been published by the Writer's Digest and The Greensboro Review. Currently, I am a first-year poetry MFA candidate at the Iowa Writers' Workshop as an Iowa Arts Fellow. I am best reached at nadabunu@wesleyan.edu.

INCUBUS

LOIC EKINGA

It would be reassuring for you to have proof that what you're experiencing right now is a dream, like the many you have had since your husband passed. The heaving, the longing and the sadness that fill and swell inside your eyelids like thick fog. You reach under the blanket—your hand knows its way across your body. The nights that came before broke every inch of your love and threw away the debris, every inch of your heart, dumped inside the mouth of your grief. But tonight, what wakes you doesn't seem to want you dead. The night isn't humming around you, the darkness isn't heavy.

So you push your hand farther down, past your navel and place it between your thighs. Nipende leo. Nipende leo ¹, you whisper. The phallic form inside your vulva squirms. With your fingers, you sense wet hair and lips. You look for eyes, but there aren't any. No nose either, just hair and lips. This tenderness feels familiar. He's returned to you. You stroke his hairy body; he squirms and recoils inside. It's really him! So you call out Mpenzi. And almost like a larva, he re-emerges. Ni wewe, Mume? ³. And as a response, he wraps his lips around your middle finger, you push it further in, and your body turns into a live wire. You pull away. Mungu wangu!⁴ This is strange! How can so much pleasure inflict so much pain? You need to steady your breathing, so you try. This is your husband. The last time you felt this way was when he made love to you, how good it felt every time he meant it. Your body still remembers his hairy chest and the cadence of his hips and breathing. Your body remembers him, all the lessons it absorbed from his skin, the hours of drilling and revision. Your body remembers his lessons and all his science by heart. This is him, there's no reason to fear. You stroke his head in a vertical motion a couple of times before taking his entire body in your hand and squeezing. The pleasure stings like a swarm of bees and breaks out of your throat. There's more sucking and now even nibbling on your finger. Your entire being is slowly bending forward, down this declivity, and you want nothing but to let it fall. You didn't know that your

hand possessed such power, you didn't know that pleasure could come in that form too, you have never touched yourself like this before. Your husband's body begins to swell between your legs and your hips sway like a body of water. Your eyes roll to the back of your skull, you plunge your teeth inside your lips and fire proceeds out of your flaring nostrils. He is slowly pushing his way out of you. First is his right shoulder. Then his abdomen slithers gradually, and your thighs quiver. By the time his last foot makes it out of you, the pleasure has consumed you in one giant bite. There is water everywhere and your husband crawls on all fours, scurries toward the corner of the room, away from the light and growls.

¹ You love me today, you love me today.

² Husband?

³ Is this you, husband?

⁴ My God!

Loic Ekinga is a Congolese writer. He is the author of the poetry chapbook *How To Wake A Butterfly*, published by Odyssey Books. His works of fiction and poetry have appeared or are forthcoming in *Type/Cast Magazine*, *Ja. Magazine*, *Poetry Potion*, *A Long House* and *Kalahari Review*. His experimental mini chapbook *Twelve Things You Failed at As A Man Today* was an honourable mention by JK Anowe for *Praxis Magazine Online*. In addition, his short story 'Loop' has been adapted into a short film by Vivanation. He is a finalist of Poetry Africa's Slam Jam competition 2020 and the Fiction Editor for TVO TRIBE.

APAH BENSON

My name is Apah Benson. I'm a poet and fine art/conceptual photographer from Nigeria. I started photography in 2017 after graduating college and experimenting artistically with words two years before. I needed a visual canvas to express my thoughts and emotions and though words offered an appeal to my desire for self expression and representation; it just wasn't enough for me at the time. So, naturally I moved toward another medium to find whatever was inside. I started out photographing everything I could lay my eyes on; from people to objects until I gradually found myself drawn to the portraits, faces and expressions. I wanted to represent dark skin in a way that exudes pride and grace. In a way that eliminated fear and prejudice for dark skin. I created portraits that focused on strength with strong contrast and powerful colours. Infusing concepts that tell stories from time to time in the images I created. Over the years, I have won a couple of awards; been featured on Vogue Italia, exhibited my work in a few galleries in Nigeria and outside of Nigeria. I have also sold a couple of my pieces as NFTs with the introduction of the technology. Overall it has been a great journey and there are many more to come.

Twitter Handle: [benson_apah](#)

Instagram Handle: [benson.apah](#)

INTERVIEW WITH

APAH BENSON

“WARRI NO DEY CARRY LAST” IS A WELL-KNOWN AXIOM THAT LENDS CREDENCE TO THE RESILIENT AND DOGGED NATURE OF INDIVIDUALS FROM WARRI, A CITY IN THE OIL-RICH SOUTH-SOUTH REGION OF NIGERIA. BENSON IS NO EXCEPTION. A GRADUATE OF INDUSTRIAL CHEMISTRY TURNED PHOTOGRAPHER, BENSON’S WORK IS AS ARTISTIC AND EXPRESSIVE AS THEY COME.

IN THIS INTERVIEW, HE SPEAKS TO [SHEYI OWOLABI](#) ABOUT HOW HE FOUND HIS VOICE IN THE EVER-GROWING PHOTOGRAPHY SPACE AND WHY MOST OF HIS PHOTOGRAPHS ARE EDITED WITH HIS PHONE.

Agbowó: Who is Benson Apah?

Benson: I’m still trying to figure out that “who are you?” question. I guess we are all figuring out who we are. That’s how I see it. But on paper, I’m Apah Benson; I’m from Delta State (Nigeria), a graduate of the University of Benin from the Department of Chemistry, Industrial Chemistry, to be precise. I think that is who I’ll be on paper; however, who I am *out of paper* is what I’m still trying to figure out.

Agbowó: What was your earliest memory of making art, and what precisely about art pulled you in?

Benson: Well, I don’t know. I was a very erratic person growing up, and I did a lot of things that you could consider art, like breakdancing, drawing, and acting. But I wasn’t



SAND SULTAN III
APAH BENSON
PHOTOGRAPHY

really self-aware at the time that I was doing these things; I was just doing them. It just came easy. So I just did what was natural. So I wasn't thinking about it. I wasn't introspective at any time to figure out who Benson was.

Then I started taking notes on what I was interested in more when I started poetry. I think that was when I got more in touch with whatever artistic side of me. Poetry is something that you can't be erratic about. You have to think about the words. You have to think about how you want to place the words. You have to think of their shape, as crazy as it sounds. You can write poems that become this sort of figure that you're shaping out over time. So I think poetry was the beginning of genuine introspection for me. Looking in, sitting down, being patient, and listening, I believe poetry started all of that for me.

Agbowó: How did you get on the path to Photography?

Benson: I decided to take on photography, I think, immediately after university. Then, I needed something to express myself more than just words, as powerful as words are. I just needed something to sort of paint on, So I couldn't go back to drawing again because my life was busy, and there were so many things that I thought I needed to do.

I was thinking of a skill that would probably keep me within the art space and still be able to provide some means of funding or some of the things that I needed.

So, all those factors made it easier for me to switch to photography. And it was really easy. It was somehow seamless for me. The crazy thing is, before then, it was not like I was studying photographs or something. But I just found it easier to do. So I think it was around that period that I decided to take on this form.

The style that I'm currently doing took some time. It happened over a period of time because I was still erratic with photography when I started. I shot everything. Sports, events, weddings, streets. I shot everything at the time because I was still trying to figure out exactly what I wanted to do.

Gradually, with time, I think a couple of people may have influenced my work. I love black and white photography a lot. The crazy thing is that if you go to my page, you may not see much black and white. Though, I've developed my kind of black and white through a body of work I recently shared on Instagram. I think there's one that is on



SAND SULTAN II
APAH BENSON
PHOTOGRAPHY

Instagram right now. The style I'm doing right now is not fully defined yet, but it's a combination of me trying to sort of "*hide*" things and staying in the dark in some way. And a lot of influences are there. Their signatures are there somehow because it's not one person.

There are a lot of artists that I like. There are people like many Ghanaian artists and photographers, such as Derrick O Boateng, Prince Gyasi, and Michael Aboya. There's also Rafael Pavarotti. He is a Brazilian. There are many people that have influenced me. Even my friends that we shot together, how they edited and played with style. I think I owe a particular friend that I have this style more than I owe any of these people. I remember when he was experimenting with it, and I was like, why are you doing this thing like you're not sure? It seemed like he was only playing around. But then, I saw something that could be developed and worked on. Eventually, we started sharing notes, talking, and looking at other artists. It just happened.

There are a lot of influences and a lot of reasons why this style just happened. So, it's hard to say that this was explicitly the reason. It was a lot of things.

Agbowó: How long have you been experimenting with this style?

Benson: Well, I've been particular about this style for the past two or three years. I think everyone is susceptible to change and transition. So I'm not saying this is going to be a permanent thing. I'm sure it is going to be my signature style because I'm very comfortable with it. Every portrait I take gives the message I want or whatever I need to express. I think what will change is my tone of expression, how I want to express myself, where I want to shoot, and how I want to shoot. My ideas will probably change. But there will always be this whole strength, darkness, shadows, contrast, and colors, even in black and white, that I do inside this form. So it's going to be there for a long time.

Agbowó: Your photographs have an ethereal and almost spiritual feel to them. How do you come about these compositions and ideas for the photographs you create?

Benson: Well, I think I have the style I feel comfortable with for every piece I do. I have how I edit the images. So style is the composition or a combination of so many things. How you shoot, what you shoot, the framing, the editing, I already have how I like to shoot my models, I don't know if it's that consistent, but I think it is to an extent because it has to be or else it's not your style.

The tricky thing is, when it comes to the editing part, sometimes, what I want to tell for



SPECTRA II
APAH BENSON
PHOTOGRAPHY

each image, even though, I may have the baseline of the edit that I already have, and I then paste the preset that I already made on it. So that makes it easier for me to see if it fits in or if I should use something else. Because not everything is going to fit into what you want to say sometimes. So you have to develop something else. And then you have multiple presets you've developed over time from the main preset or three or four other main presets. So that's how you have several images that build up to the extent of having a style and feel.

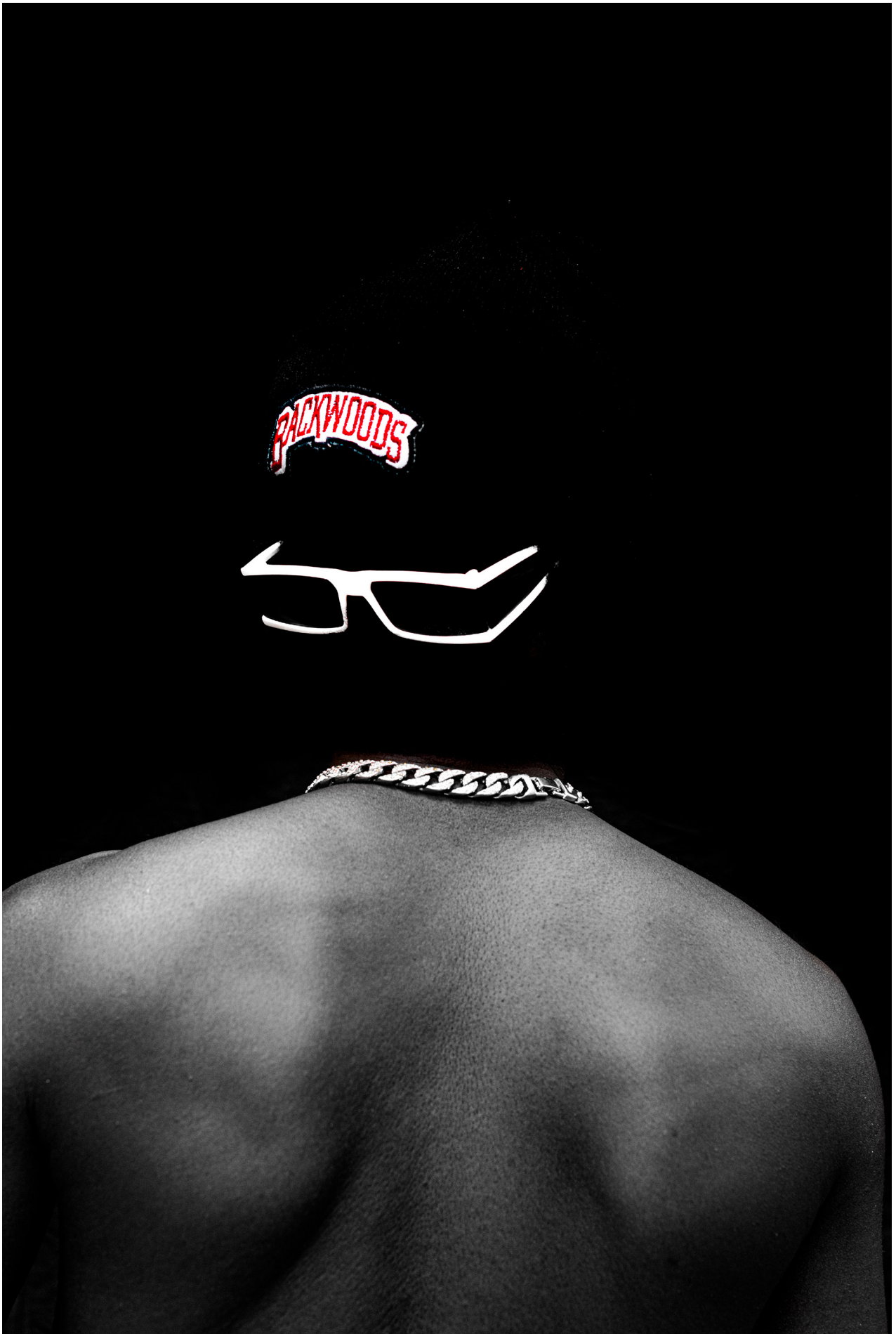
What I do is that each image has a statement they want to make. It's different for every image. My job is to find it in the best way that suits my style, and that says what it needs to say in the most powerful way possible. Sometimes a series of images have the same statement. Still, they have different poses and expressions, and they could speak differently to different people but have the same style. I have a couple of images close to my heart, which I took a while back. When I was working on those photos, I was thinking of heaven. I wanted them to look like something out of heaven. It took me a while to get to that point because, at the time, all the images you see now were edited on my mobile phone at the time because it was difficult. There were limitations. I didn't have a laptop at the time. I just got a laptop this year after many years of shooting.

I had to make sure I could tell what I needed to tell in the best possible way with the device I had. And I was just using Lightroom. I wasn't using Photoshop, and I'm still not using it (Photoshop). The tool you have also sort of matters and how you use it. For me, each image sometimes has the kind of statement they want to give. The most challenging job is finding the voice of that image. If it's were a commercial job, you just know you need to make it clean, edit it and make it 'fine' (beautiful). That's all you need to do. You don't need to do more than that. But if it's something that has to be artistic, you need to listen to it and take your time. I think that's how it works for me.

Agbowó: Do you predetermine what you want the image to say? Or you shoot and then start looking into the image and figure out its message.

Benson: So some images come to me before the shoot. For example, the photographs from Spectra series with the umbrella. I'd already seen that image long before I went into the shoot, but I was still amazed when I edited it, and it came out the way it did. Because although I saw it in my mind, I didn't exactly see the whole thing.

I see some images before the shoot, while others happen on impulse. The two are different in the same way; seeing the blueprint of a house and you entering the house feels different. You can feel the walls and all for the latter.



SPECTRA I
APAH BENSON
PHOTOGRAPHY

Agbowó: How do you see the images? In your mind?

Benson: Yeah, of course, the thing is, sometimes I've been so busy, so I'm kind of lazy right now. Usually, there are many ways to go about it. You could decide that you want to write down an idea of what you want to create. That's the whole idea of conceptual photography. You have a concept in mind, and then you go shoot the concept. But sometimes, you may just have an inkling or thought.

Thoughts are going through your mind every single minute as we're talking right now; thoughts are going through your mind. But you're not aware because you're distracted by what I'm saying, basically, because you're trying to focus on what I'm saying.

So the kind of music you listen to, the type of environment you are in, the sort of movies you watch, the experiences you have with people, and the places you travel to all allow you to be creative. All you have to do is listen sometimes because if you're too busy with life, life is passing you by. There's no time for your brain or your mind to hold an image.

Some of the things that seem to come out from my mind sometimes and just pop out. Probably due to images I've seen before or emotions from a song I've listened to. Any of those things may inspire them, but they are in my mind, just that I'm not listening to them. But the moment I decide to pay attention, I have a shoot, or I have an idea of what I want to do. Sometimes you do not write them down, forget or write them down, but you never go shoot them.

So there are a lot of things that happen. Other times you just have a model, and you have suitable accessories. You go out, and then you shoot.

Some of the portraits that I have taken felt like that. I thought of the portraits in my head during the shoot. I took the portraits, and then I turned them into my style, and they no longer looked like regular portraits. People see them, and they're like, bro, how did you do this? How did you do that?

A great photo usually doesn't happen by mistake. Sometimes, people think it happens by mistake, but at the end of the day, it's an accumulation of every experience, everything that has led up to the shoot. So that's what I would say.

Agbowó: Riding on what you just explained, can you walk us through a typical day in your life when you are creating? What's the process like from start to finish?

Benson: Yeah. My process is quite simple, though. So I have a very limited number of people I work with because if you look at my images, you usually find one or two subjects across the board. I don't take photos of different models. The guy I work with, mostly, we have this chemistry. We understand each other. Sometimes he has an idea that he wants to shoot with me, and sometimes I have an idea that I want to shoot with him. So we come together, we talk about the shoot. Sometimes we talk about a pre-proposed idea we think we would do when we get there. And then we go out to shoot. We pick a location, as usual, and then we go out to shoot. During the shoot, we do the idea we discussed before and also do new things. We discover. We let ourselves just flow. I like playing music during my shoots. It clears my head. I like being free during the shoot. Sometimes, the images that even stood out eventually were not the ones we initially discussed; they were the ones that we just decided to go with the flow and keep shooting.

After the shoot, it takes me a lot of time to edit. I sometimes get home, I relax and take my eyes away from the images. For studio images, It's easier to just shoot and edit them immediately. Because you already have a style, it's a studio. What else are you going to do to the images?

So when you shoot outdoors, and there are other elements involved, sometimes you have to take your time, and it's best to step away from the image and, you know, lose that connection that you think you have with that image so that you can pick what is best amongst several images that you took. I do that, and then I start editing them. It takes time. Sometimes it just depends on the image. Some images just work. In one click, everything works, and you just have to make a few adjustments.

As I said before, I already talked about how editing works, and it takes time. Some others need time and care. You need to take a lot of time to do that. So that's usually the process. I work entirely on Lightroom mobile. I've been working on Lightroom mobile my whole career. I just started working on Lightroom on PC because I just got one a month ago. So all the images right now were done on Lightroom mobile. I don't have anything out there that I did on something different. So that's been it.

Usually, I'm guilty, though. I'm a hoarder of images. I haven't put much of my work out because if you check my Instagram, you probably see maybe 50 photos. So there's so much work that I do have. I guess I'm still attached to them. Probably when I go out and shoot more, when I finally have a camera of my own, and I shoot more, I might be able to let them go.



THE QUEST
APAH BENSON
PHOTOGRAPHY

Yeah, that's exactly how my process works.

Agbowó: Tell us about Chaos DAO*

Benson: Chaos DAO is a funny one. What happened was we were just looking for a place to have fun and laugh because sometimes the Web3 space can become chaotic, and there are a lot of crazy things happening on Twitter, people who are trying to cancel people or trying to do this or do that. So we just need a place to not be serious and just laugh. And that was how the Chaos DAO started. And soon, it quickly became something different. A lot of people wanted to be part of that whole '*chaos*.' So, we decided, why don't you use this energy to change the narrative?

Because there are so many artists people never look at because they tag them as small artists, but the work they are creating, you can put them side by side with the works of some of the people you'll call OGs in the space. So that was my concern. Especially if you're from Africa, it makes it much worse for you sometimes because of where you're from, on top of the fact that you haven't, for example, had a deal with Adobe before or you haven't worked with Vogue before. So you'll just be tagged as a small artist even though your work is outstanding. So we wanted to '*chaotically*' change that narrative to put the artists, those artists, and give them the spotlight in any way we could. That was the reason for the DAO eventually, and it became something much bigger.

Agbowó: How did you get into NFTs and Web3 generally, and how has it been so far?

Benson: Well, the journey has been crazy, I would say. There have been a lot of downs, and there have been some good times. And, sometimes, you think you've been here for years because of the energy it takes from you. You have to be there every day. You have to try to be around and be committed. I think I started in August or September; I'm not sure. At that time, a friend of mine introduced me to NFT. He had heard about it and was still trying to figure it out. So when he told me about it, I wondered, what the heck is NFT? What are you talking about? How can someone make money from that?

It was all new to me because I was not a crypto person before that. So he showed me the ropes and told me about it. I've had a Twitter account since 2017, I think. I don't use it. I think I have just like 10 or 20 followers; I'm not really sure. So I was like, okay, let me try this. Then, I came in, started sharing some of my work, and began understanding how the space worked. It took some time; it took two or three months before I got my first sale there. It was great. A lot of communities started during that time. That's how it all

started, and that's how it has been.

Agbowó: How many works have you sold so far?

Benson: I've sold around 15 pieces.

Agbowó: Based on your experiences selling your works, NFT and Web3, what are your thoughts on the NFT space in Nigeria and Africa, and what are your hopes and aspirations for that space? What would you like to see?

Benson: Well, the thing is, like I said something about people tagging artists as small artists, even though the work that they create, obviously you can see the talent and you can see technical prowess. You can see the understanding of the craft and the work. Yet, they still tag them as small artists because of where they are from, don't have the connections they should have, or because of any of those reasons. So I would really like to see that change, I guess. I think that's the number one thing.

The number two thing is to get more collectors in the space. Because I think at the moment, there are more flippers, people who are into crypto but just usually want to flip, like make cash and leave, which is fine. Still, it would be great to see people who appreciate art, who are ready to collect, and who have been collecting, like in real life, coming to this place and doing that.

And as far as Nigeria and Africa, we hope we can be united because I feel we need that to stand and stomp whatever wave is coming. Because this wave right now of like whatever dropping, a lot of people would not have survived it alone. Yeah, I like to see people grow in space, and be able to stand alone because it's not sustainable to depend on anyone for bread.

It's not sustainable. So being able to get to that point where you build a name for yourself, we can all get a place where we can stand and help other people coming into this space. I think that's the best thing that could happen to every one of us.

Agbowó: The last two years, there's been a surge in the NFT space. A lot of artists are putting their work up for auction. Would you consider this surge as a way for African art to reemerge and re-present itself in the global art space?

Benson: Definitely. 100%; NFTs have made it possible to bridge the gap in a way, in a sense, so people who would normally not be able to see your work can see it and not just see it. Because you could do that on Instagram, right? They can see it, and then they can

interact with you. They can interact with the artist and have conversations. And that has never been the case before. These spaces and all these things are more interactive compared to Instagram. So, yeah, I would say it's a place where people can see African artists and see what they can do and appreciate it and put the art at the forefront once again.

Agbowó: Thank you very much, Benson. This conversation has been very insightful.

Benson: Thank you for the opportunity to speak on this. I appreciate it.

*See here to know more about what DAO means: <https://www.investopedia.com/tech/what-dao/>

THE DEAD LIVE IN VEGETABLES TOO

AFUA AWO TWUMWA

i taste the sorrow in spinach
i swallow the sorrys whole
it is my grandfather thinking he should have done my mother better
i would have named my eggs after him
carried him whole in my womb
when I say
“no waitress, no waitress this salad is fine
i just need some more cream”
i mean everything set before me can bring bad memories home
if grown in the mountains of the Krobo
this carrot may have grown from my grandfather’s eyes
his sockets falling into dead soil to wake it
there is no end to what the body was made to do
we live even in our death
if this green pepper grew from his limbs
what becomes of mine moving forward
do i forget what i am sure my mother has already
about forgiveness, we cannot guarantee what those born with our pain will do
i choose not to let him off easily
to say she grew up fine anyway is to say i will let the same thing happen twice
in memory you have the choice to hold on
so i am stuck to the remembering

Afua Awo Twumwa is an accountant, a writer and has a keen interest in the performing arts. Her works have appeared in *Tampered Press*, *Kalahari Review*, *AFREADA* and some anthologies. Find her on all socials @awotwumwa.

FELICITY

KHADIJAH S. ADAMU

I like that I was named after you; it's one of the things we share in common. Mummy says I look like you, I don't see it, though. I wonder how you're doing, if you're okay, if you miss Mummy like she misses you, and if there truly is life after death so that you get to see each other again. I wish I had gotten the chance to know you, and you, me.

There's so much I have to tell you, Felicity, so much. I don't know, would you have liked the woman I've become? You see, I grew up determined not to make the mistakes and choices you made; the same mistakes and choices Mummy made, but along the way, I ended up making a few big ones.

Felicity, you chose wrong, and the universe decided to punish you for that. It wasn't your fault, though. You didn't know he would hit you. You didn't know he would threaten to keep your children away from you if you left him. You didn't know he would marry a second wife and force you to take care of her with your own money. You didn't know. Mummy told me she asked you to leave him, but you couldn't bear to be separated from your children, so you stayed.

The time you wanted to travel to Delta state to see your people, he said you could only take three children out of six with you. That way, he was sure you wouldn't leave him. I'm sorry you had to live that way for years. It took him dying for you to feel free. So free that you left the home he forced you to share with your co-wife and moved to a different city, and you went back to being a Christian; I know you only practiced Islam because of him. Khadijah, that was the name you took when you became a Muslim, that was the name my parents gave me. I prefer the name Felicity, it describes you perfectly.

Felicity, I was with a man who hit me. Sometimes I wonder what you would have done

if you were still alive. Would you have supported me? Taught him a lesson, maybe? Or would you have shamed me for finding myself in that situation?

Your other daughter was married to a man who hit her. She stayed, until she died. That's not entirely true, she did leave him, but the elders at the church she went to reconciled them. Then she went back, then she stayed, then she died. Did she think that that was a semblance of a normal marriage? Maybe she did because she watched you endure yours for years. Mummy misses her every day. I cry whenever I think about her.

Felicity, I can't count the number of lovers I've had. Do you know why they're so many? I am determined to not be like you, so I end things at the slightest sign of abuse or disrespect. I hope that doesn't sound harsh, but it is the truth. Sometimes I think I'm incapable of loving anyone, because I go into these relationships searching, scratch that, hoping to find a flaw so I have an excuse to leave.

Felicity, I left religion and broke Mummy's heart. I asked if she would've preferred I converted to Christianity, like you, and she didn't have an answer. She thinks I'm being woke and that it's a passing phase, yes, she uses the word "woke". I bet if you were here you would've been so confused by the concept of being woke. Do you want to know why I became agnostic? I wish I knew, so that I could give Mummy a definite answer because she's always asking.

Felicity, not long ago, I missed my period and had to make a tough decision. I was afraid, with no one to hold my hand and tell me it was going to be okay. It reminded me of how you had a hysterectomy without asking him after you had your last child by caesarian section. Of course, it's not the same thing, I just like to draw parallels so I can feel close to you.

You wanted better for yourself. I know that because you had to secretly write your WASSCE without him finding out. You passed but didn't do anything with your certificate because you couldn't risk him knowing about it, so you gave it to your friend to help hide it for you and what did she do? She stole your identity and used the result to get a teaching job for herself. You couldn't fight her because, again, you couldn't risk him finding out. Mummy says she's a lecturer in a federal university now. I'm sorry she did that to you.

Mummy went back to school, she has her masters now and intends to get her Ph.D. You would've been proud of her. She's one of the reasons I work as hard as I do, I intend to

make sure she lacks nothing. I told her she shouldn't expect marriage or grandchildren from me —I can't afford to be distracted. She thinks I'm going through a rebellious phase, but I'm not rebelling against anyone or anything, I'm just not conservative like she wants me to be.

Here's a secret: I got a tattoo! It's a beautiful butterfly just above my left lower rib. You definitely would've disapproved, just like your daughter, that's why I kept it hidden from her.

Felicity, you were so young, 52 years young. You deserved to live till at least 80. I curse the illness that didn't give you enough time to truly live.

Mummy says we share similar mannerisms, she calls me Felicity sometimes. I don't know, maybe we're the same person, literally and figuratively. Maybe, you came back as me to take care of Mummy and live unapologetically because the first time wasn't a success.

Felicity, Khadijah, Dora, beautiful names for a wonderful woman who I never got to meet, yet I feel like I've carried a piece of her with me my whole life. You did well, Felicity, and I'll do better for you and me, for us. Continue to rest.

Khadijah S. Adamu was born and brought up in Kano, Nigeria. She is a practicing pharmacist who enjoys writing in her spare time. She also enjoys reading, though she barely has the time to do much of that anymore. On a regular day, she loves to stop for a cone of ice cream and a slice of cake (preferably chocolate) on her way home from work. She has two cats, loves dogs and hopes to get one when she moves into a place of her own. Her all-time favorite shows include Friends, The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air, and Grey's Anatomy. On her day off work, she binge-watches any good show she can find on Netflix. She enjoys music from the 90s more than music from any other era, only that from the early 2000s comes close.

PROCESSION

HENRY STRANGE

“death is an end to one life only & a gateway to another; man must be reborn, for reincarnation is a spiritual necessity. “ (rooke)

when great narratives die from
wrong endings there is still
music

but this is not so in our story
this is circuit this is
border-crossing this is
the igbo cosmologythe great
pilgrimage between life
& death
& life again this long history of
a people nameless holding onto
each other within arms reach
this trembling in the dark before the
aftertime

 these songs
of the mourners at our deaths
& the ululations at our births these
many names we were called by
in our previous lives that died
with our memories before our last breath
before the great procession
before rebirth before me
before you before us
before tomorrow

i dream of keys without lock
death is not the end
death is not—

caterpillars die & are reborn
as butterflies birds go into the earth
to become songs

do you even understand this
this science this carbon-cycle

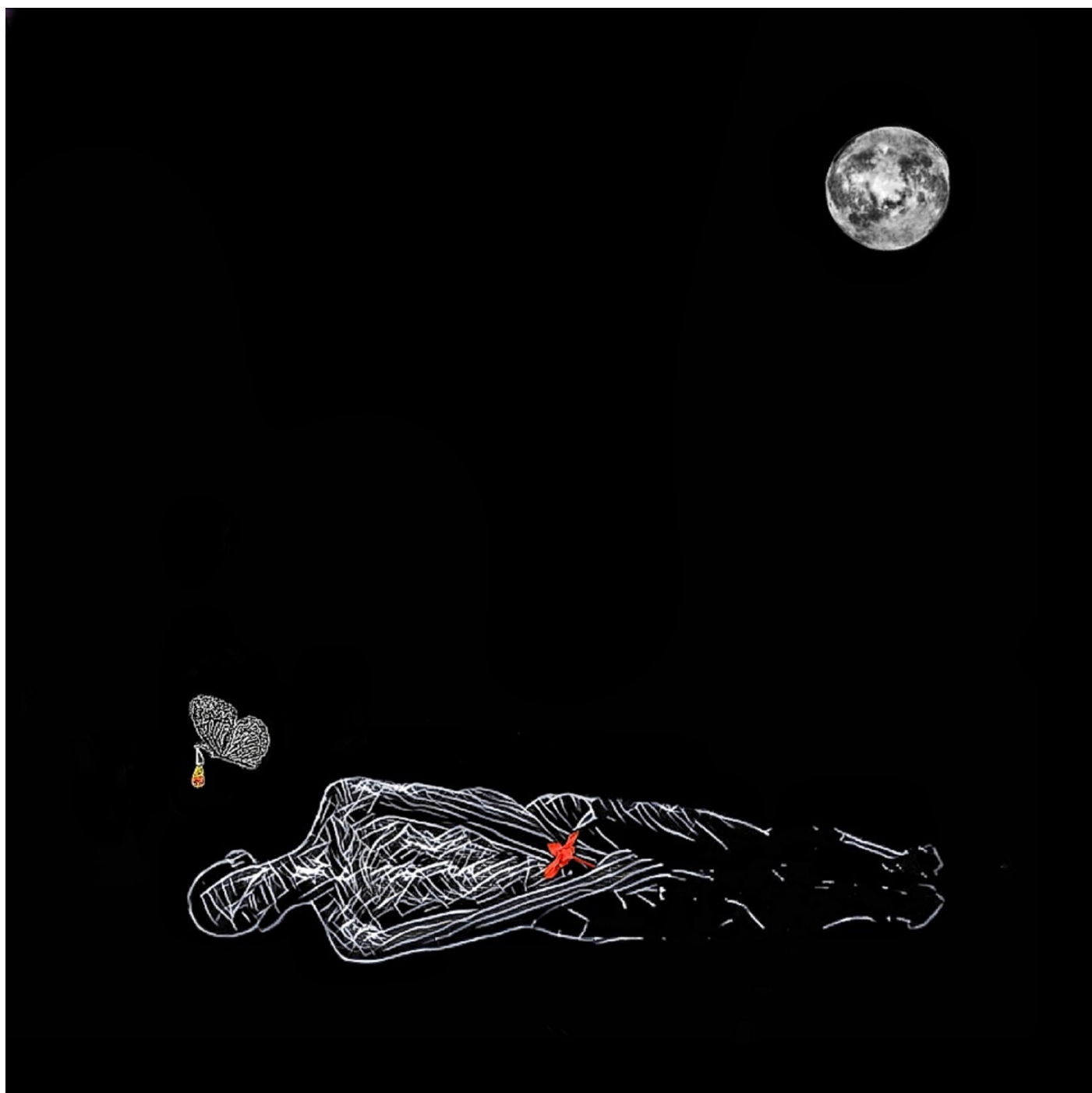
our people call this *ìlọ̀wà*
this intermigration between
two realms this flesh
become dust become
molecules become foetus

this an old death
a new beginning

Henry Strange, born Liberian, is a versatile Nigerian artist. He has pieces of literature published or forthcoming in Eboquills, Brittle Paper and elsewhere. When he is not in the company of people, he enjoys the solitary of typing away behind his laptop & smoking his favourite brand, Chesterfield. You can find him on Twitter @hxnry_strxngx

ZAY NAB BOBI

Zaynab Bobi, Frontier I, is a Nigerian poet, digital artist, and photographer from Bobi. She is a member of Hilltop Creative Art Abuja branch, Poetry Club Udus, Frontier Collective, and a Medical Laboratory Science student of Usmanu Danfodiyo University Sokoto. Her artworks and photographs are published and forthcoming in Blue Marble Review, Barren Magazine, Isele Magazine, Type House Literary Magazine, Night Coffee Lit, Wrongdoing Magazine, Rulerless Lit, Harbour Review, B’K Magazine, Olney Magazine, All My Relations, Salamander Ink, Anti-Heroine Chi, Acropolis Journal, and more. She tweets @ZainabBobi.



REBIRTH
ZAYNAB BOBI
DIGITAL ART



SECOND CHANCE

ZAYNAB BOBI

DIGITAL ART

WHAT DOES HALF OF A REBIRTH WEIGH

OLUBUNMI FAMILONI

CHARACTERS

AGBA

ARIBI

ARIRE

BABA

AWE

SCENE. – Oritameta Oke, the junction where the journeys of the beginning and the end of life meet; the curtain that separates the world we know from the one unknown, where all forms of life pass through on their way to becoming and unbecoming bodies.

It is a point that exists outside the limits of Time, so it is neither day nor night in this act, nor do we know if it is yesterday or tomorrow.

AGBA, the ageless Judge of All, sits at the head of this junction, flanked by his twin advisers, ARIBI and ARIRE. Before the trio are the souls of two men, BABA and AWE, which had previously occupied old and young bodies respectively.

AGBA: (*Looking down at scroll.*) The first case to be reviewed for consideration of *atunwaye* this day is that of a young woman, Aduke. (*Turns to ARIRE.*) You give a curious description here, Arire: you say that her womb is a clenched fist.

ARIRE: (*Somberly.*) It is, our lord. Years had climbed upon years after her marriage, and in all those years the womb never opened to hold life inside it.

AGBA: Not even for one day out of all those years?

ARIRE: Not for one morning in a whole day... It seemed that as the years grew longer behind her, the womb grew tighter inside her, and it looked as if it would never receive that sweet burden of a child's body in the woman's lifetime.

AGBA: (*Shakes head in pity.*) Hmm, the greatest tragedy that could befall a female body – to have all the parts that make you woman but not be able to carry another life inside you; to look like woman on the outside, but be wood inside. Such devastating tragedy.

ARIRE: (*Nods*) Hmm, yes, our lord. And the years! The years have no mercy on a woman – while they're pushing her time further away from the edge of the closing window of motherhood, they are also pressing her spirit to the ground as one year mounts another.

AGBA: But what was the woman doing in all of this time? Hiding her rotting hands inside her pockets?

ARIRE: (*Sadly.*) No, she was throwing herself before the faceless deity.

AGBA: Ah, I see, she is one of those who have missed their way and followed the stranger's god.

ARIRE: It took her a very long time to realize that she had been pressing her voice unto ears that were stone.

AGBA: (*Shakes head.*) What a pity!

ARIRE: When she did not get any answer, and the silence that filled her womb became too heavy for her to bear, she peeled the 'faith' from her eyes and sought out Fatona.

AGBA: Ah, the great one whose work never turns back on him.

ARIRE: Yes, him – the one who sends fire on errands. It was he who brought the matter to my ears. (*Lowers voice.*) So, he says that he has finished his work, but he doesn't want to place it inside her yet.

AGBA: (*Furrowed brow.*) Why? Does the woman owe him money? Is she one of those who you do a great deed for and they pay you with air in their mouth?

ARIRE: No, our lord, that is not what it is; it is the opposite instead. Fatona says that she has been good to him, very kind indeed, and he would like to give her a gift that would make her heart burst with joy.

AGBA: Isn't a child enough gift to burst one's heart? What does he want to do – put a god inside her?

ARIRE: No. Her father's soul has just completed its final transition unto our side, but Fatona wants us to send the old man back through the son he has prepared for her.

AGBA: Why? Has the man not lived enough? He grew to be of many years on that side, didn't he?

ARIRE: He did, he did grow to be old and grey – touched the grand mark of ninety even, then five more.

AGBA: Then what more does he want to live for? Does he want to live the lives meant for ten people?

ARIRE: No, our lord, it is not the old one that has requested to go back, it is Fatona that wants us to send him back, as a gift; a double gift in fact, as it is not just for his daughter, but also for the man's wife. And since the young woman, Aduke, is the apple of her father's eye, it would be good to have him return to her in his grandson, close to her bosom, so as to be able to watch over her and protect her from evil.

AGBA: Hmm. Father, son, and guardian spirit, all for one woman. That is a very hefty present Fatona plans to give this woman; she must be of considerable weight in his hands, for him to go to such length for her.

ARIRE: Yes, our lord, but the situation has become caught in a twist.

AGBA: What is the thing that twists it?

ARIRE: (*Casts look at ARIBI.*) Her husband...

ARIBI: (*In a dark, heavy tone.*) Yes, her husband. He had also been translated from his bodily state unto our side, and he has now requested to return to his wife in the form of a child.

AGBA: Hm, a twist indeed.

ARIBI: It twines even tighter... The man does not have such noble intentions of returning as 'gift'; he wants to go back into that world as a curse on the wife.

AGBA: A curse? We do not deploy the goodness of *atunwaye* for such evil! You know that, Aribi.

ARIBI: Not if it is to counter the evil that had been initially wrought; then using it in that manner can't be judged as 'evil', but as justice.

AGBA: (*Leans forward.*) What do you mean?

ARIBI: The purpose of the man's return is to exact vengeance on the woman who was responsible for his unbodying. That is an act of justice, not of evil.

AGBA: (*Incredulously.*) Are you saying that it is this woman who sent her husband on this journey into the dark?

ARIBI: In the plain terms of their tongue – his wife murdered him, yes!

AGBA: (*Leans back in his seat, in low voice*): One can never know the bottom of the wickedness that the people of that world can reach; you think you have seen the deepest of its depths, then you realize that it is a black abyss of devilry that only their minds have the capacity to accommodate.

ARIBI: It is because of this wickedness that there exists the instrument of justice, to maintain a balance.

AGBA: The balance is supposed to be provided by goodness.

ARIBI: (*Snorts.*) Goodness? That exists only as an oppositional idea to evil, it does not provide adequate balance, because it is subjective. You might say that a thing is good because it has its good side turned towards you, but I can't see it, so I don't think it is. But justice does not concern itself with the dichotomy of good and bad, it seeks to achieve fairness. And justice is what the husband seeks, not to do evil, or to do good like (*Turns a side of his eye to ARIRE.*) our dear friend, Fatona.

AGBA: (*Sighs.*) Fatona is a good man, yes, and has only good intentions towards this woman; how do we accommodate this your man's dark request within the ambits of this good, Aribi?

ARIBI: Think about it strictly in judicial terms, not morally. The husband is seeking to restore the scales of justice to their state of equilibrium and we're only helping him to do that.

AGBA: It is not that simple.

ARIBI: Doing the right thing never is. If it were, everybody would be doing it.

AGBA: Speaking about doing the right thing, how could this woman have done that to her husband? Didn't they say she was a worshipper of the stranger's faceless deity? Isn't murder one of the ten things they are commanded not to do?

ARIBI: (*Raises eyebrow.*) Those ones? Ohhh the many, many dark things they do

underneath that nice ‘religion’ of theirs; don’t be fooled by the clean, white surface of their holiness, turn it over and you’d be hit in the face with a stink straight from the devil’s anus.

AGBA: But, why – why would she do a thing like that to her husband if she was looking for a child? Does she plan to come about the child by magic? Or through that questionable manner the virgin got their deity’s son inside her?

ARIBI: Now, the answer to that question is where the knots get tighter, where the plot twists into a noose. We know that she had been scattering herself at the faceless deity’s feet in prayers and tears for years, asking for a child; but that was not the sole subject of her desperate supplications – she was also praying for great wealth, as she had always had her sights set on the sweet parts of life as a young girl, but Fate had laughed in her face and cast her in the path of a man who could give her neither riches nor child, and then she had broken herself to pieces before a deity who couldn’t give her either of the two as well; so, naturally, she turns in the direction of the deep parts of the world, and finds Fatona, or Fatona finds her. He convinces her that he has all the power in the world, and has the power to give her the two things she most desires. But the price would be heavy – her husband. It is cheap for her. She doesn’t think of it as a murder, she sees it as getting rid of the obstacle in her way to acquiring the desires of her heart. So she pays the price, and Fatona collects. But he has other intentions, amorous ones. Hence, the removal of the poor husband from the way is also beneficial to the strong medicine man.

AGBA: So Fatona giving this woman a child is not just a spiritual act, he would also be involved in the physical activity.

ARIBI: Yes, he has replaced the dead man in his wife’s bed.

AGBA: (*Shakes head sadly*) Fatona has misused his power, because of a woman.

ARIBI: They have been known to bring the strongest of men to their knees.

AGBA: And he has the effrontery to request that a soul be reincarnated in a child he wants to give to a woman whose husband he conspired against.

ARIBI: You see why it is the husband that we have to send back? Justice weighs more than all the good intentions in the world.

AGBA: But would it be wise to leave the burden of justice in the hands of the one to whom evil has been done?

ARIBI: No other hands would understand better the enormity of the evil done than those of the body to whom it has been done, hence the primary responsibility of

administering justice should rest with the soul that has had contact with the evil; as it is in the traditional system of *oku riro*, where the victim has the responsibility of delivering vengeance as a form of justice, so should it be with *atunwaye*.

AGBA: But in this case, wouldn't leaving the responsibility of administering justice entirely to the victim lead to an abuse of that power?

ARIBI: I think it would be unfair to the victim, considering the level of injustice that has been suffered, to restrict the limits of how the powers of justice can be exercised.

AGBA: But justice without boundaries is chaos.

ARIBI: Justice with confinements is injustice in disguise.

AGBA: So, you're advocating for a man to be reincarnated in his wife with limitless powers to wreak havoc on her; you have to take into consideration that households do not exist in isolation, some of the troubles this son intends to bring on one family could have ripple effects on certain parts of the society they exist in, which could result in social upheavals.

ARIBI: (*Laughs.*) That is merely an exercise in stretching the limits of imagination, Agba. I doubt that the scale of vengeance in this case would have that kind of reach. Besides, he wants to go back as a daughter; how much influence do women have in contributing to destruction of such magnitude in that world of theirs; their men have the monopoly of all the wars and riots and general carnage.

AGBA: (*With narrow eyes.*) He wants to return as a daughter? Why would he want that?

ARIBI: The woman had always wanted a son, because in their society, only a son is considered a whole child; it is a son that makes a father a real man and a woman an accomplished mother, and Fatona had assured her that he would give her a son. Giving birth to a daughter would reduce her joy and show her that the man's powers are limited.

AGBA: Hmm. But how does the husband intend to achieve this vengeance?

ARIBI: He should answer that himself. (*Turns to AWE.*) *Ngbo?*

AWE: (*Bows.*) Greetings, Great Judge. In reincarnating as Aduke's daughter I hope to retain my distinguishing body marks and mannerisms, which she would recognize instantly, and which would haunt her as the girl grows and these familiar markers become more pronounced, then I would begin to unleash various shades of terror on the household as the years on the daughter's head increase and she becomes a young woman.

AGBA: (*Sighs.*) If evil is paid back with evil every time, there would be nothing but

darkness in the world. Now, what kind of world would that be?

ARIBI: A fair and just world, where the workers of bad deeds get a refund everytime they pawn their soul off to the Chief Devil for power to harm others. And this is the opportunity for Aduke's husband to make her pay the debt of justice that she owes.

BABA: (*Plaintively.*) Great One, my daughter is a good woman, a good wife, she did not intend to do evil; she only wanted a good and full life and did what any woman in her position would – look for somebody who has the power to help her; it is this man that took the innocence of her deed and twisted it into something evil.

AGBA: So, you're saying it is Fatona that should be blamed for this man's death, not his wife, your daughter.

BABA: I am saying that it would be wrong for my daughter to be the recipient of the judgment for an offence that wasn't her intention.

AGBA: Even if she was manipulated by the medicine man, she is now joined to him through this evil, and whatever falls on his head will definitely touch hers too.

BABA: I am just asking that you be merciful.

AWE: (*Snorts.*) I had asked for mercy too, as life leaked out of my body while the two of them watched; where was Mercy then? She was laughing at me inside their eyes. Instead of mercy, her medicine man had taunted me, saying, when next I come back to this world, I should steer clear of their surroundings, or I would face the same fate over and over again. But Aduke does not believe in the dead returning to life and she had responded confidently that I could not even come back, since what is dead is dead, and death is final, an end.

ARIBI: (*Smiling.*) Ah, well then, I guess it is our responsibility to show her that sometimes death is the beginning of another life. More than justice being served, it is important that she is shown this lesson about the continuity of the spiritual link between life and death.

AGBA: (*To BABA.*) If you ask for mercy, on what grounds should it be given? Because your daughter couldn't have claimed ignorance of Fatona's intentions; she entered into this Faustian relationship with him with her two eyes wide open and her heart fastened upon doing evil. There is no room for mercy in there; she had shut the door to it.

ARIRE: Let the judgement be served cold, as their evil deed was, with no mercy to soften it.

AGBA: Well then, that would bring us to the juncture of judgement. And this is what I have decided: we will send both souls to be reincarnated in the child.

ARIRE: How?

ARIBI: How are you going to do that?

AGBA: Half of one, and half of the other.

ARIRE: But they each want to go as different genders.

AGBA: Then the two souls would be reincarnated in an androgynous body. The couple will not know what to make of it; half a son, the other half a daughter.

ARIBI: Then how do we balance the good and evil, to attain justice.

AGBA: The first ten years will be a period of bliss, followed by another ten of sorrows, the child responsible for both, before it returns to us, in ghastly circumstances, as culmination of the torment. Fatona gets his request for a gift granted, the husband gets his request for justice granted, the woman gets her request for a child granted, and our job as the administrators for reincarnation is fully done.

ARIRE and ARIBI: So shall it be.

CURTAIN.

Olubunmi Familoni is a dramatist who has written plays for stage and for radio. His debut play, *Every Single Day*, was selected by the British Council for production as part of the Lagos Theatre Festival; his second play, *Big Masquerades That Dance Naked*, will be published this year. His works have appeared in *Ake Review*, *Jalada Africa*, *Kikwetu Literary Journal*, *Bakwa Magazine*, among other publications. He lives in Ibadan, Nigeria.

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Twitter: @OFamiloni

VIMBISO

CHIONISO TSIKISAYI

I am squatting in a blue dish of hot water inside my mother's living room, feeling akin to a freshly slaughtered chicken, naked and plucked raw of its feathers. Exposed. Ambuya chants fervently to the ancestors, pouring a strong smelling concoction of potent herbs over my head, my back, and my breasts. It trickles down to the base of my spine, forming a rivulet that takes up the shape of my bare ass and saturates the geography of all my intimate parts. Life is being spoken over the tortured vessel of my body. Water fills my nostrils. I open my mouth to inhale, and water floods the basin of my mouth. I choke, spurting herbs. I try to focus on my breathing, the slow rise and fall of my chest and the beating of my heart in tune with it all. It's an orchestra of all my organs. The expansion of this ribcage, the sound of fear being digested inside my stomach. The smell of candles burning in the room, lighting up the pitch blackness of the night. Silence, it shrouds the entire house. Induced by the absence of electricity.

"Get up," Ambuya commands. I rise out of the murky water, obediently and my mother wraps a towel around my wet body. The floor beneath my feet is cool, polished wood board. I shuffle awkwardly towards the dining table and take a seat. The clock on the wall reads 8 o'clock. Her one hand is stretched open gesturing a handshake. The other carries a ticking pistol. It's as if she is brokering peace with me while holding a gun to my head. The offer is still on the table, the *timetable*. A chance to start again. To start over, afresh without the remnants of this fragile existence or the pain of being held hostage to my own thoughts. I stare at the TV screen, blank and lifeless. A mosquito sinks its proboscis into my skin. I do not bother to smack it away. I let it draw out blood. Perhaps the ancestors sent it to take out the bad blood in me. My grandmother and my mother speak over me like I am merely a piece of furniture decorating the room. A piece of furniture with legs and a heartbeat.

"I told you not to let this child deny her gifts, now look." Exasperation punctuates Ambuya's tone. There is a sharpness to her tongue as she speaks, acute and direct like

the fine point of a new knife. My mother holds the sharp end of this verbal blade with her callused hands but I can still see the look of being cut open embedded in her facial expression.

“Ma, we don’t believe in these things. Christ is our savior.” She sounds defeated. “We’ll pray about it and we’ll ask the priest to come over, sprinkle some holy water over this house.” At this sentiment Ambuya sucks her teeth noisily. “Vana vemazuva ano.” She spits. “I pray too and I can tell you now that God’s word says, *“My people die because of a lack of knowledge.”*”

“Ignorance will kill you first before any spiritual affliction ever will. Sprinkle holy water on who, her ancestors?”

“No Amai,”

“So then? She is not being attacked by evil spirits. She has a supernatural gift and it is our duty to help her navigate this season of her life. To teach her and guide her so she has control over it instead of it being in control of her.”

The first time I fainted at work, a co-worker found me slumped up against the toilet in one of the rest rooms I was cleaning. I came to in a brightly lit room, the putrid smell of detergent on my work clothes and a pounding in my head so painful that I couldn’t fully open my eyes to see. It happened a couple more times in different places, once when I was stationed by the chip fryer and a second time behind the cash register at the main entrance. According to Itai, a customer walked up to me to place an order and I simply zoned out. I stared into the nothingness surrounding them, hands limp by my sides barely moving. *A standing corpse*, are the exact words she used. She found me a seat from one of the back rooms and served at my cash register for the rest of the day while I remained in that corpse like state.

I want to say that this has never happened to me before. I want to express shock and outrage and possibly dissolve into a pool of tears, anything, any real emotion other than this prevailing feeling of indifference. A part of me is closed off and numb. A part of me is unfazed by the theatrics of it all.

I knew something was wrong with me at sixteen.

And you might argue that most sixteen year olds generally feel that something is wrong with them at that age. Puberty is an alienating experience. That’s nothing new. But my feeling of otherness did not stem from acne breakouts or starting my period later than half the girls in my stream, neither was it a product of my bra size or lack thereof. My feeling of otherness began the day I started seeing lions walking past the chalkboard in the classroom. Large, rugged looking creatures with wide fleshy torsos and low

rumbling growls. It was two of them. A male and a female. Simba and Nala, I had come to call them although they looked nothing like their sweeter and more gentle animated counterparts from the 1994 classic.

I walked home by myself that Friday afternoon. The sun was a football in the sky, rolling over a clear blue pitch into the soft net of white clouds and time was the skilled player moving it along deftly, with his feet. The world was my stadium and I was a confused little girl standing in the midst of it shouting out into the void. How does one become the goalkeeper of their own destiny? I thought about my girlfriends and how most of them were getting their hearts broken for the first time, obsessing over pimply faced teenage boys who had just discovered the power of their voice boxes. I pondered all the nuances of teenage life in the mid-2000s, the bedazzled low-rise, denim jeans and Nokia mobile phones with the cute jingles, the emergence of urban grooves in Zimbabwe, my obsession with Roki and how every girl braided her hair like Alicia Keys and secretly hoped to become bootylicious like Beyoncé.

I wondered how the world around my age mates was pulsing and vibrating with colour and promise and hormones while mine was morphing into something strange and inconceivable. Something out of a JK Rowling novel. Some real Harry Potter type shit. And as I came up the corner of the bus stop leading home flanked by two lions on either side of me that only I could see and the rest of the world could not, I felt sick. I was not a white, British boy with a scar on his forehead who had some divine, magical purpose to save the universe from doom and destruction. I was Vimbiso, a black teenager living in the middle class suburbs of Bulawayo with a particular weakness for Piccadilly Peanut Bars, whose favourite TV show was Studio 263 and whose only desire was to have clear skin and make it through high school.

I told my mother when I got home. She got up, lifted her navy blue Bible with the letters Holy Bible embossed on its side and frantically waved it over my body like she was Carrie's mother from the Stephen King horror. I had only told her that I could see lions and not that I had telekinetic powers.

"Are you on drugs?" she asked, grabbing me by the arm.

"Ma, really. Where would I get drugs from?" I asked outraged. My only addiction as aforementioned was to Peanut bars. "Maybe I'm schizophrenic." I concluded tossing my satchel onto the sofa, although I was fully aware that something as severe as schizophrenia could not be self-diagnosed. And the way this goes in my part of the world is that depression and mental illness are not things that black people can claim. It is the inheritance of white folk and yet, so is the religion we use to wish away the things we do not fully understand.

“In Jesus name, you are not schizophrenic or depressed or anything of that sort.” My mother dismissed irritably. “No child of mine.” My mother does not have any other children. I am her only child.

My mother comes from a long line of healers. Her mother is a healer and her mother’s mother was one too. But when my mother met my father, a conservative Christian man, she fell in love with him and fell out of love with who she was and where she came from. When I turned six mama found out my father was cheating on her and had another family in the capital city. She divorced him but she never divorced his faith. Christ was her new husband.

“You never brought her home to be introduced to the ancestors when she was born. What did you think was going to happen after all this time?” Ambuya had come down from her rural home in Wedza that very same day. She had boarded the midday bus round about the time I knocked off from school, arriving at our doorstep in the evening. “I had a dream. They are seeking her out now. It’s been *sixteen years*.” She said, placing her small suitcase at my feet.

My mother was already on the offensive but I could not have been happier to see my grandmother. She was so beautiful and strange to me, sometimes I wondered if she was real. As I laid out fresh sheets for her in the guest bedroom, they continued to discuss the details of my ‘condition’ at length. It was a heated discussion, so heated in fact that I prepared some tea and hoped the steam rising from the cups would be a worthwhile distraction. I watched Ambuya as she took a bite of her Marie biscuit, chewing contemplatively, and imagined that she was trying to do the same with mama’s words, trying to digest them.

“Amai, she is my daughter and I have the right as her parent to choose what I believe is best for her until she is old enough to decide for herself. Her christening certificate is there in my bedroom. She belongs to the Anglican faith and that’s that. Besides I didn’t have my child out of wedlock so it’s not like her father had to pay damages or anything. I did everything right.”

“You know very well that’s not how it works.” Ambuya retorted, taking slow, thoughtful sips of tea. “He never brought cows home for you. So according to custom the two of you were never *actually* married. This child belongs to the maternal side of the family, not the paternal one. It does not matter that you put her father’s surname on the birth certificate. We do not know her father’s ancestors but you are *our* daughter. She needs to come home so we can perform a cleansing ceremony and introduce her properly.”

“Amai, I will *pray* about it to my God and this thing that is plaguing her will go away.

Please.” Silence, a momentary breath lingered between the two matriarchs. Ambuya opened her mouth to speak again and this time with more conviction,

“Chipo, the things of the spirit world cannot be understood with human eyes. I am telling you this now, this child’s life is not a thing to debate. I’m not trying to compete with you in the Olympics of faith. I’m simply asking you to look at the facts. The ancestors sense your hostility. Perhaps that’s why they never imprinted upon you.”

“Oh and so you’re saying they skipped a generation and landed upon my daughter.” Mama laughed but it was a mirthless laugh. The evening ended without much resolution. Ambuya snuck some herbs into my underwear drawer and went on the bus back home the following day, promising to keep me in her prayers. Of course my mother threw out the whole drawer and burnt the underwear with it too which I thought to be a bit extreme. I didn’t see the lions for quite some time after that initial encounter and thought that perhaps my mother was right and indeed it was a passing phase, until O level exams came round. I passed out in almost every exam I wrote and for the ones where I managed to stay awake the words would crawl across the pages like ants scurrying across a carcass’s skin.

By the time I was seventeen I was on extremely heavy prescription medicine, with a faulty memory and a deep sense of paranoia. November rains had fallen the previous year, green mealies emerged from the soil sweet and ripe for cutting. Exam results were ready in January. A different harvest. Where others would relish the delicious fruits of their labour, I was to reap a quiet devastation. In a deep, twisted sense of irony I had come from a brilliant crop of students, only to be turned into the chaff separated from the wheat. The thought of writing O level again in the same school, while my peers sported new, crisp A-level uniforms with the senior court shoe devastated me. I asked my mother to change schools.

It didn’t get much better after that. It got a little worse.

Seventeen is the year that men followed me home. Men I did not recognize. Men who claimed to have an intimate knowledge of me. I would get off the bus after school, walk down the dusty potholed stretch of road fifteen minutes from the bus stop to my house and a shadow would always linger behind me. At some point I would start running, fear enveloping my chest and filling my lungs to a point where I was convinced that I could not breathe and would die right there on the spot. As soon as I stopped I would feel a masculine hand on my shoulder and the concerned voice of someone asking me if I was alright.

Vee, are you okay babe?” I’d look up to a guy, maybe three or four years older than me staring at me like I had horns growing out of my head.

Genuine shock written all over my face, I would ask why the fuck I was being followed home by this stranger.

“What? I always wait for you by the bus stop at this time and we walk home together,” was the simple response.

“I don’t know who you are and I need you to stay away from me, fucking pervert.” I always tried to sound more threatening than I actually felt, venom dripping from my tongue.

“Stop making me out to be some kind of creep. You said the age difference didn’t bother you.”

I said. What did he mean by, I said? Was there something taking over my body without my knowledge or consent? Was I some kind of sleepwalking serial dater?

It took me a while to figure out that I had been existing in a very strange, alternate version of 50 first dates. To Drew Barrymore’s credit, at least she knew the script and got to read it beforehand. Even if her character suffered memory loss, she knew the lines to her story as an actress. She knew what came next. I felt like I had been handed a movie role I never asked for and I wasn’t entirely sure where the direction of this particular storyline was headed or who was scripting this storyline for that matter. There were moments where I felt like standing up in the middle of class and just yelling, “Cut!”

Rumours as fat as juicy, parasitic-looking flies were flying all over the school infecting every student’s perception of me. I had a couple of screws missing from my head. I was loose. I hung out with too many older men. I had daddy issues.

This is the part that’s never really mentioned in books or movies, how spiritual or mental “gifts” don’t always arrive on our doorsteps in convenient and pretty little packages. Spider bites in reality are simply that, spider bites. There isn’t always a manifesto or a secret kingdom waiting for the return of their magical queen or king to come and set things right. Sometimes there is no snowy wood in the back of a wardrobe, just a sea of messy clothes, and old bras lost in the midst of them. Sometimes, just sometimes the protagonist of the story stumbles through life hoping it all goes away.

I remember the times Ambuya would come to the house when I was a little girl, bearing carrier bags of lush fruits and vegetables from her plot. She would find me glued to the television screen watching videos of my favourite Disney movies on the old, noisy VCR. On one particular visit mama had rented *Mulan*, and as I sat there bemused by Mushu the red dragon, Ambuya had laughed heartily following the storyline of this rebel Chinese daughter who had smuggled her way into the army by pretending to be a man so she could defend her father’s honour. We both watched, Ambuya in quiet awe and I

enamored as any child would be by the magic of Disney movies as Mulan's grandmother prayed to the family ancestors in the local temple, asking them to keep Mulan safe after she had run away. Something had struck a chord within me. I looked at my grandmother.

"Baby," she said quietly. "We have ancestors too, just like in your cartoon. We call them *vadzimu*. And you see that dragon, Mushu." She laughed. "Sometimes our ancestral spirits can appear to us in the likeness of an animal. It can be a baboon or a lion, or any other animal depending on the family name and their *Mutupo*."

And it went on like that, we would watch Disney movies together, my grandmother and I, and hidden within the stories were all these cultural references similar to our own. Exploring the deeper meanings behind them became her way of passing on the baton of knowledge to me without actually stepping on my mother's toes. I grew older, and read the origin stories of all my favourite Disney characters, soon discovering the fictionalized and sometimes exaggerated elements of the true life details to my TV heroines. Their lives in truth were marked by real tragedy and pervasive loss.

The difference between Pocahontas and Mbuya Nehanda, is that the former got a TV adaptation, was glamorized throughout history while the other was captured, beheaded and had her remains transported overseas among 27 other heads as war medals for the British.

Hers was a sad ending in reality and in fiction.

I am twenty eight now. I work at a fast food joint or at least I used to work at a fast food joint. Chicken Inn, the branch sandwiched between the Academy of music and the ZITF centre was my former place of employment. I had been there about six months. ZITF Week brought an influx of new customers from the capital. Businessmen, democrats, politicians and university lecturers, sometimes the occasional climate activist. I had been designated to the drive thru slot. It seemed pretty simple. Take orders and pass those orders back out the window when they were done.

The first order I took in the opening week of trade fair was from a business man in his mid-40s driving a blue Mercedes Benz. A purple rosary hung around his rearview mirror, but his aura did not exude a pious spirit. He was good looking for his age, a silver haired fox with a gold wedding band on his right hand and a gold crucifix peering out from his open shirt collar. I couldn't help but think of the irony in that, a symbol of suffering being worn around an expensive neck as an accessory to an outfit. I tried to envision Jesus bleeding on a gold cross.

By His stripes we are healed.

The stripes on my uniform are blood red. The stripes on my legs are blood red.

I took the man's order; 4 boxes by 2 piecer chicken and chips with a can of Spar letta, Cherry plum soft drink. The man's lips looked like cherry plum, like someone had kissed his mouth and left them stained on purpose. He had come down from Harare for more than just business ventures and exploits. My coworkers were in a steady rhythm, scooping deep fried chicken onto the grill and packing chips into takeaway boxes. His order came through, the cash machine spit out his receipt and displayed on the single sheet of paper was a list of all his promiscuous activities and transgressions.

Name: Samuel Zuva

Village of Origin: Mutare

Current City of residence: Harare

Married, unfaithful and father to 3 children within wedlock.

Number of sugar babies +5

Number of babymamas+2

Spiritual balance= -negative

Danger alert: Inform Mr Zuva not to use the main road leading to the hotel he plans on staying at tonight or he will be involved in a car accident at the intersection between the robots.

I handed him the receipt, with a lump in my throat.

"Sir, are you alright?" I asked watching him skim through the piece of paper.

"Yes, why wouldn't I be?" he asked in a gruff tone as I handed him the boxes of food.

"Uhm, the receipt. I just want to make sure everything adds up." I knew from his reaction that the madness had come back. There were only numbers and food items on that receipt, nothing else.

"Yeah, everything's fine. It says here, the total is 14 US dollars."

Some people are tasked with throwing bones on a grass mat in order to see the future or travel back into the past of someone's life. Ambuya sees things with cowrie shells inside of bowls of clear water. She says her paternal ancestors were water spirits. But I, on that day had seen it all. The ancestral spirits had resorted to using technology to get my attention and send their message across.

I stood there, not quite knowing where to begin.

A few days later the businessman would return, armed with an apology, to thank me. He would recount how, on his way to the hotel after an evening marketing conference he had pulled over to the side of the road to have a lengthy argument with his wife on the

phone. At the end of that heated phone call he would use the road he had been warned not to use hoping to pick up an escort and come to discover that two kombi drivers had smashed into each other at the intersection in another taxi feud. The space between the two kombis guaranteed that had Mr. Zuva been there a moment earlier, his remains would be compressed like a toasted sandwich between the two metal beasts.

29 April 2017

The headline on Saturday's newspaper read, "Drive thru Sangoma causes spiritual frenzy in Bulawayo."

I was asked to return my uniform and name badge to the front office. Shortly after I was dismissed from work for operating under false pretenses on work premises, whatever that means. A long line of cars snaked the circumference of the street all the way from the Coghlan robots to the entry sign of Chicken Inn. I had become something of an anomaly.

I walked home by myself that Saturday afternoon. The sun was a football in the sky and this time I stood as a woman in the centre of the stadium of life. How did one become the goalkeeper of their own destiny? I thought about my girlfriends and how most of them were wives and mothers now, pregnant and flourishing on instagram. I thought about all the nuances of adult life in a world of smartphones, slay queens and twitter and how every girl had gone from chanting "to the left, to the left," to "Bitch, I scratched out your name and your face," from Beyoncé's lemonade.

Ambuya and mama are still bickering. I watch one of the candle flames flicker in the dark and press a finger to the burn mark located on my left wrist. There are a couple of similar scars all over my arms, all of which I have no recollection of how or where I got them.

"Ambuya." I interject. Silence falls between them. "Ndoda kuenda kumusha nemi. Ndaneta." My words sit in the air pregnant and heavy. My mother looks at me abashed. "Vimbiso, you know if you leave this house you can't come back." It is a statement and not a suggestion.

"I know," I offer in a defeated tone. "I know."

"Then don't do it."

Vimbiso, my name. It means promise. If I am a promise, surely I have broken myself enough times to fit into the mold of expectation. I have broken myself enough times to know that a calling is not always received by the people around you because we aren't all connected to the same spiritual network. I have broken myself enough times to know

that God is too big for me to understand, too vast to fathom, too multi-faceted to limit to a time or space or context in history. He is outside of our understanding and we orbit fleetingly within the confines of a perceived reality.

Perhaps it's not so much that we're dying from a lack of knowledge as it is that we die from knowing too much of the inconsequential, gathering superficial data and logistics to feed into the algorithm of our lives without ever really stopping to replenish the impoverished parts of our souls.

I know that I can never be a Moana or a Mulan but magic lives outside of the cinema, outside of the Marvel Universe. Magic is ordinarily a fact of human life. It is boring and mundane and unremarkable. It happens all around us and in the biological processes of our bodies. In the perspiration of rainclouds and the falling of snow. In bleeding oceans and menstrual cycles.

I cannot claim to be phenomenal. Neither can I claim to be simple. I am not a scientist or an expert on religion. I am only an ordinary woman existing with extraordinary gifts. Isn't it enough to be just that? Isn't it enough to wholly accept that being human is as much a physical as it is a spiritual experience, that the two are simply transcendental crossroads at the stream of consciousness?

Does a bird ever take the time to consider that it opposes gravity or does it simply spread its wings, gliding from one destination to the next without stealing a moment to wonder or marvel at the miracle of its own existence?

Maybe the true rebellion is not in the opposition of everything we do not comprehend. Maybe the true rebellion is accepting that we do not need to understand everything to live a meaningful life.

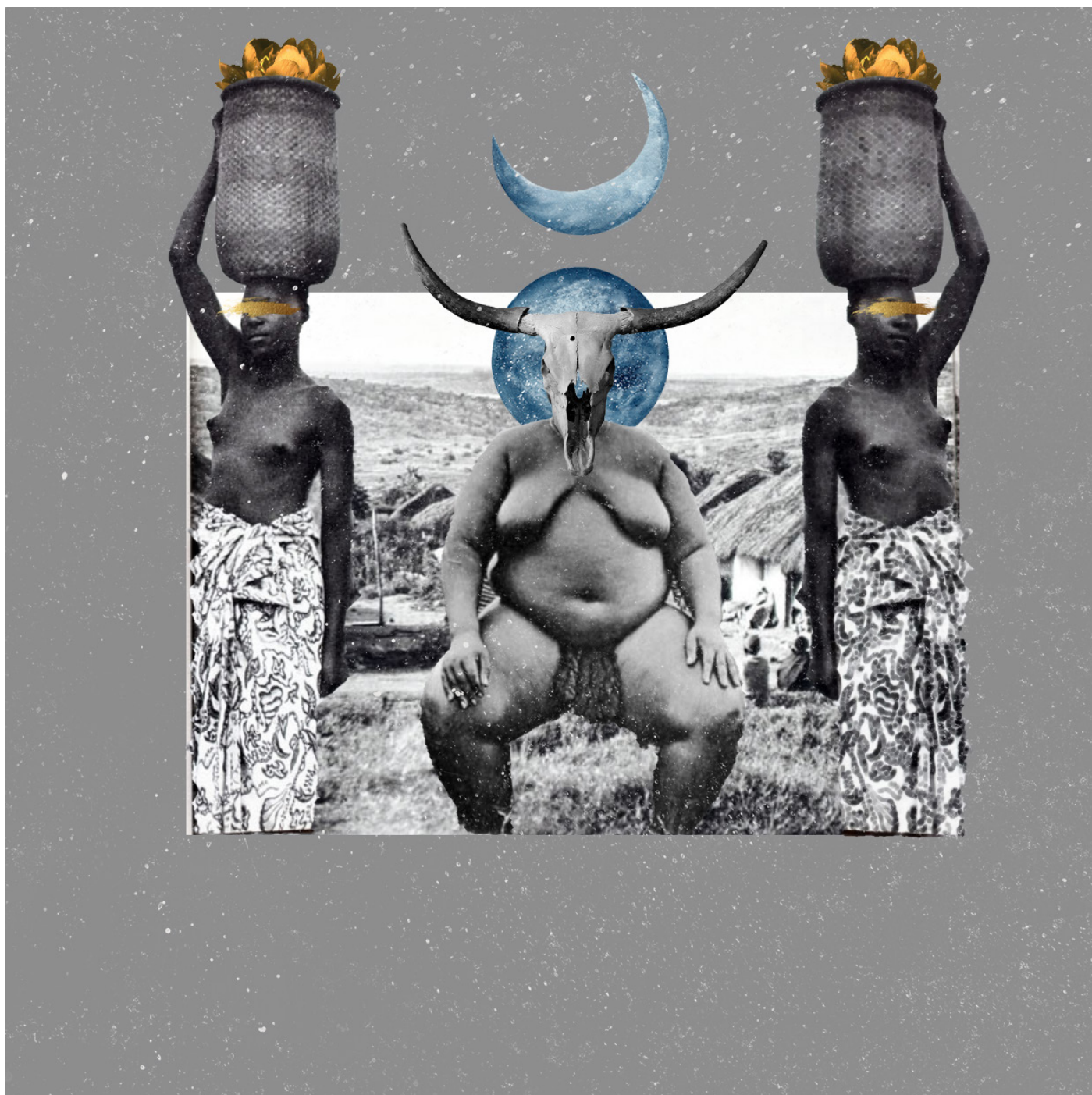
Ambuya and I catch the bus first thing in the morning.

I don't look back.

Chioniso Tsikisayi is a spoken word poet, writer, singer, and filmmaker from Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. She is passionate about creative arts and conscious storytelling. Her work has been published in Brittle Paper, Isele Magazine and Litro Magazine. Her first body of music titled Heaven Is Closer Than You Know was released in November 2020 in collaboration with award-winning media hub Cottage47. She performed at The PiChani (a Pan African lifestyle and networking event for young creatives) as well as at the opening ceremony of the European Film Festival in Bulawayo. She was a finalist for Grand Slam Africa 2021 hosted by Kenya Poetry Slam and Cre8ive Spills and placed third in the Intwasa Short Story Competition 2021. Brittle Paper named her their November Spotlight Artist.

THUTHUKANI MYEZA

Thuthukani Myeza also known as “The Neo Zulu” is a 24-year-old poet and content creator. Born in Johannesburg and raised in the little town of Welvenkop on the outskirts of Mpumalanga. Inspired by love he started writing in the 6th grade. Thuthukani has shared the stage with poetic heavyweights such as Lebo Mashile, Xabiso Vili and Zewande Bk Bengu. Winner of the Cuddle Sessions slam in 2015, CSP Provincial Slam winner in 2017, current national South African slam champion and runner up in the first African Cup Slam in 2018. Thuthukani is also the co-founder of World of Words poetry session- a platform that cultivates young aspiring writers and performers giving them a platform to showcase their craft. Thuthukani defines his writing style as ballads for broken boys .A part-time dreamer, a full-time dreamer.



ALL KINGS DIE
THUTHUKANI MYEZA
DIGITAL MIXED MEDIA



GATES

THUTHUKANI MYEZA

DIGITAL MIXED MEDIA



INDODA

THUTHUKANI MYEZA

DIGITAL MIXED MEDIA



IRRELEVANCE OF FORM

THUTHUKANI MYEZA

DIGITAL MIXED MEDIA

THIRTEEN WAYS OF NAMING MY GRANDMOTHER'S GHOST

OLOLADE EDUN

After Gbenga Adesina

I

My grandmother's ghost held on to love like a sore tooth.
Everything felt like home on her skin.

II

Twice, inside a korope, a girl flashed me a smile,
& instantly I knew it was my grandmother's ghost.

III

On some days, Saturdays, the late evening breeze
is my grandmother's ghost. I wear her like solitude.

IV

When my lover is touching me, creating cartogram of God
on my body, my grandmother's ghost joins me.
She brings in darkness as a date.

V

Once, on a street in Lagos, afraid that boys will rename
my body with fire, I howled my grandmother's ghost back
into my head. I told her not to come out of my body.

VI

I am the son of light. My grandmother's ghost is the light.

VII

Sometimes when I am in surgery, the anesthesiologist
asks me to hurry & gives me another chance
to save my grandmother's ghost.

VIII

On the stage, Lata Mangheskar's voice is supplicating music to God.
She is my grandmother's ghost.

IX

I sat beside a fat man at Agodi Gardens; his beautiful beady
eyes were my grandmother's ghost.

X

I love rough sex. It reminds me of my grandmother's ghost.

XI

The old woman in the market is my grandmother. She's dead.
Her body is an ellipsis. Where I come from, the son
leads the way home with his grandmother's ghost.

XII

Once, at a club, I let two boys plant soft kisses on my lips;
my hands trying to find a way to hold the night.
The loud music was my grandmother's ghost.

XIII

*"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son,
that whoever believes in him..."*
Yes, he is talking about my grandmother's ghost.

Ololade Edun is a contemporary Nigerian Creative, Microbiologist, and a medical student. His pieces are experimental and they dissect societal themes. His works have been published or are forthcoming on The Kalahari Review, Lolwe, Brittle Paper, Voice Lux Journal, Melbourne Culture Corner, The Shallow Tales Review, Mixed Mag, The Scribe Post, EBOquills, Afro Lit Mag, The B'K, Pawniers Papers, Parousia Mag, Neuro Logical, & elsewhere. Ololade is an editor for AWS, TVO TRIBE, and a podcaster for The GhostPen Project. When he is not writing, Ololade is reading or drowning in Indian/Pakistani playback songs. Say hi on Twitter @OloladeWrites.

REBIRTH

OLAMILEKAN DANIEL KEHINDE

There is yet no death for a soul buried
in the cry of a newborn; the seventh day

is not the day of rest for an ancestor.
The earth ingresses whatever won't die,

vomits it from fleshy dust and christens it
*Babatunde*¹—the father returns from bones

to life. Death, where is your sting? Grave,
where is your victory? The son says in his

cry, *My father and I are one, he works in
me. Babatunde*—the child is the father of

the man. Don't you know whoever will
not die will wear the name and the body

of the living, after he has forsaken his old
skin like a serpent? The child's eyes have

seen from afar—on seat, the tallest palm-
tree which the father cannot see even from

the top of a roof. An ancestor shawls him-
self with the tenderness of a newborn and

dances to the whims of *Olodumare*² when
He pleases to wrap His glory in mystery.

¹ [Yoruba] the name given to a male child assumed to be a reincarnation of a dead father/grandfather

² [Yoruba] one of the many names of God in Yoruba

Olalekan Daniel Kehinde is a writer and an undergraduate in the University of Benin where he studies English and Literature Education. He has been longlisted in NSPP 2020, shortlisted in FPC, PIN 2020, 2nd Runner-up PIN 10-Day Challenge March 2022, and a finalist in NNDP 2020. His poems have appeared (or forthcoming) in PIN Anthologies, Peace Exhibits Journal, African Writers Magazine, Inkspired, Woven Poetry, The Shallow Tales Review, Upwrite Magazine, BPPC Feb-March anthology and lots more. He is on Instagram and Twitter as @dapenmustgrow

THE EMPTY SHAPE OF NEW LIFE

PANASHE NYAGWAMBO

247 seconds.

She counted. Each one connoted by the tick of the second hand of Bernard's watch that came to her like a heartbeat from the centre of a frantic cosmos. The sound echoed in spaces inside unknown, unexplored parts of her that felt raw. It shut out everything else, blurred it almost to nothingness, drowning her in a hollow world. All that remained was the smell; odd in this vacant, foreign echo of a home, the smell of guava with the faintest hint of something nauseatingly metallic. She clung to it, pulled on it desperately, hoping that it was tethered to something on which she could find her footing, something to anchor her and stop her floating deeper into a darkness that threatened to rip her apart, on one side, pulling her back to the past, bitter, screeching obscenities at her for not knowing any better and another one, predatory, silent, malevolently obscure, sought its pound of flesh from the future. The baby, *her* baby, getting colder and more limp with each tick, stood in between those two doomed parts of her and enveloped her in a mist through which she could not find herself, only vaguely felt her own presence somewhere far away, far below. She gasped for air and the guava and metal filled her lungs. With each second, the small bundle in her arms felt heavier until her arms began to cramp. After 247 seconds, a figure cloaked in white prised her arms apart and plucked the empty shape of new life from her arms. No matter how hard she tried, she could not remember what it looked like. It felt like something that had loomed on the periphery of a particularly bad dream, haunting her, always out of sight. All that was left to remind her of it was the phantom weight in her arms and that smell of guava and metal.

There was no ceremony to ornament her grief. There was no gathering to wrap her agony in the sympathy of fellow mourners, to serenade her suffering with the keening

wails of women who wept, not for what she had lost but for her loss. The closest thing she got was a vague recollection of the other children that had been born in the ward, that had opened their little mouths and felt, for the first time, the weight of oxygen in their lungs, something hers had not done, would never do. There was no wooden box in which to fold her loss, twice, thrice, four times, and squeeze it in, so that she could bury it in the ground and let time putrefy it to a memory. There is only the emptiness that her tears cannot fill, carving out her insides until there is nothing left but a withered exterior that deflates and is carried by the wind through days that she cannot distinguish from one another, feeling as if she has lived each one before and barely able to withstand the thought of having to go through another one. She mourned alone. There are no funerals for those that never lived. But what they could not understand was that he had lived. He had lived inside her for seven months, two weeks and five days. She had nourished him, had felt his powerful kicks, felt his strength, a mirror of his father's, in the vigour of his movements. She had sung to him and spoken to him. She had listened to the sound of his heartbeat at the ultrasound scans where the doctors had told her that she had a healthy baby boy. *Healthy*. Can you say that of something that was not alive? So how then could they say that he had never lived?

Searching amongst the rubble of her mind for some respite, she found a saying, something she had read in her university days that had struck her and she had written it in her journal when she still had time to keep one, when the naivety of not yet having sunk to the depths of true loss where even the sun could not reach, assured her that words could heal, "Grief is felt, not so much for the want of what we have never known, as for the loss of that to which we have been long accustomed." She turned it over in her mind. She analysed its smooth surface with the stark clarity of newfound perspective, one born of suffering, and saw for the first time, the thin cracks, the notches, the dirt. She crumpled it and flung it furiously back amongst the rubble.

The sun set and did not come out.

She went to sleep.

Something startles her awake. Reluctantly, she emerges from a dreamless slumber, and the dimness of an unfamiliar room slowly blurs into focus, causing her mind to reel in panic until she finally recognises the framed ultrasound image on her nightstand. Suddenly, there is a sound from behind her. Initially, she cannot place it, but gradually, as the confusion of waking wears off, comprehension dawns on her. An invisible hand grips her heart. It is the soft cooing of a baby. At first, it seems to come from right

behind her and her hand is instinctively drawn towards it. As she reaches out, it retreats from her. She feels a wetness on her chest and when she looks down there are two dark circles on the front of Bernard's t-shirt that she sleeps in. She looks on his side of the bed and doesn't find him. A thin column of light beams from the slightly open door of their ensuite bathroom, casting a pale glow on the room in which shadows dart in and out of sight. *Bernard?* He doesn't answer. The cooing becomes a cry. She slides out of the blankets and winces at the coldness of the floor on the soles of her feet which makes her instinctively curl her toes. Dragging each heavy, cold foot, she follows the sound towards the bathroom door, the crying getting louder with each step, each fluttering heartbeat. She tentatively pushes the door open and a blinding white light floods her eyes.

Babe?

She whirls around, blinking rapidly. Bernard is sitting up on the bed and has turned on the bedside lamp. The veil of a shadow on his face fails to conceal the worry in his eyes. She turns around to face the bathroom again. Darkness. And silence.

Are you alright? His tone suggests that he has already decided she is not.

A warmth collects itself in her tired eyes, drowning the world around her, Bernard, the framed ultrasound picture, even the darting shadows, before it finally trickles down her cheeks, washing away any strength she had left.

She shudders and wraps her arms around herself. She is only distantly aware of herself as she silently walks into the darkness of the bathroom, not bothering to turn on the light, and closes the door behind her.

When dawn finally comes, it is tinged with a luminescent melancholy that renders the world bland. It finds her in a near catatonic state, crumpled among the broken shards and torn pieces of the ultrasound picture.

The days that follow go by like the faded memory of a dream. In it, she feels his presence just beyond the scope of her vision. Even though she cannot see him, the charge in his accusing glare makes her hairs stand on end. She remembers all the small things she had done during her pregnancy, thinking they were harmless. She recalls the night that Bernard had come home and she had been feeling particularly prurient. She had followed him into the shower and when he gave her a questioning look, she had reassured him that it was ok for couples to have sex during pregnancy. The doctor had said so. The same doctor who pronounced him dead before she could hear his first cry. She recounts the single glass of wine she had on their anniversary when Bernard took her to Manna

Resorts and to his eyebrows that rose in question, she smiled and said the doctor had said that a little bit of wine was harmless. The same doctor who took his lifeless form from her to dispose of like some unwanted waste. She thinks of all the luggage she had carried, insisting that it was not heavy when Bernard offered to help. Every 'I'm not that pregnant', 'The doctor said it's ok', 'I can still manage' rang out in her ears until they began to ring, a high-pitched tone which crescendoed into sobs that she only realises after a while, are her own. *You did this*. She is not sure whether the voice she hears is her own or that of his figure looming behind her.

From somewhere far away, she hears Bernard's voice. It is a continuous hum through which she only manages to hear her name. She feels his hand on her shoulder and recoils. When she turns to face him, he is dressed for work. Work. Yes. She must return to work. It will take her mind off things. She does not know whether she has said it out loud or in her head but Bernard shakes his head and says something. It sounds as if he is speaking underwater. He takes a step toward her. And then another. He always kisses her on the cheek before he leaves for work. He gets close enough for her to smell the woody musk of his Dior Homme cologne that she had gotten him on their anniversary. Instead there is that smell again, and she feels the contents of her stomach rise. She closes her eyes as he leans forward, and waits for the feel of his soft lips against her cold skin. There is no kiss. Instead, she hears a whisper. *You did this*. She gasps and opens her eyes. Bernard is waving at her from the door, smiling. He turns around and leaves.

She gathers what little of herself she can salvage and collects it into an imitation of salubrity before she gets ready.

On the day that she goes back to work, a limp sun sits like a dying fire in the sky, hovering purposelessly. The day is draped in a thick fog that turns the shapes and figures around her into phantoms. She had not been able to find her car keys, so she decided to walk the distance from their home in Strathaven to their offices in the Avenues. In the city centre, the ghosts of work goers shuffle around her, sinking her with their gazes that are clouded by something that unsettles her, a knowingness, as if they could see something on her that she wished to hide. The figures speak in hushed tones as they walk past her and she feels their pointing fingers and judgemental eyes on the back of her neck.

Even without turning around, she feels him close by, watching through the crowd, waiting. A cloud passes overhead. Someone in the crowd laughs. And then another. The laughter spreads like a contagious disease and soon, everyone in the crowd has caught

it. She, too, catches it. She beats her chest and keels over and laughs until tears fill her eyes, until her ribs begin to hurt. The sun too, joins in the laughter, the clouds, even the trees sway wildly as the mirth possesses them.

When she walks into the office, she sucks all the sound from every room she passes, leaving vacuums of pity that, more than anything else, feel professional. They watch her like a fragile, precious artifact that is hurtling in mid-air, part of an act by a daring juggler, visibly holding their breaths.

Someone she does not recognise comes up to her. The person speaks to her in a commiserative tone, their head weighed to one side by their sympathy.

How are you feeling? Are you sure... It's okay if... Just let me know...

She nods her head in response to their questions but her tongue is unable to extract words from the void her mind has become. The figure raises its arms and embraces her. They tighten around her until she can no longer breathe.

She pushes the intruder away and runs to the bathroom, the world whirling vertiginously around her. As she slams the door behind her, she hears them shout, *Murderer!*

She comes to a sudden stop when she hears the honking of a car from a distance. She is standing in the middle of the road. She looks around disconcertedly. The driver of the car is gesturing at her angrily through the window. She stammers and then stumbles to the edge of the road.

Through the fog, she makes out the silhouettes of two figures sitting under a tree. She inhales. Guavas. She approaches the makeshift roadside stand of cardboard and stones. An assortment of fruits and vegetables is laid out on top in pyramidal heaps. There are apples, bananas, tomatoes, onions, collard vegetables... and guavas.

Without looking, she knows he is behind her. Even though he has no form because her memory cannot fashion one, she knows him from the scent he carries, that odd mix that had filled her nostrils when she held his lifeless body to her and kissed his head. He is a void in the ether, a hole in the threadbare fabric of her world, a heaviness in the air. He comes closer. She is paralysed, tethered in place, helpless.

He reaches for her.

She shuts her eyes and waits for something she does not know but that she is ready to accept.

There is a tug on the sleeve of her blouse. When she looks down, a pair of small eyes are looking up at her. One hand is on the sleeve of her blouse and another one is stretched out towards her face. Even standing on tiptoes, the small figure can only reach as high up as her chest. Its little hand is wrapped around an object that it is offering her, a partially eaten guava.

Don't cry, you can have it if you want.

It is only then that she feels the tears on her face. She hurriedly wipes them with the back of her hand.

The small figure is still looking up at her expectantly. She holds out her palm and it hands her the guava. She brings it to her nose and takes in its scent.

Are you ok?

She is startled at the sound. She lifts her head to see an elderly woman staring at her, the little boy's mother. She notices that the fog has cleared.

"Yes, I'm alright. Everything is alright."

Would you like to buy anything?

"How much are these?" She gestures with her hand.

The little boy smiles at her. She smiles back and takes a bite of the guava.

Lazarus Panashe Nyagwambo is a Zimbabwean writer and freelance editor. He is the author of the short story collection, 'A Hole in the Air.' His works have been published in several literary magazines including AFREADA, Omenana and The Shallow Tales Review. He also contributed to the anthology, 'Brilliance of Hope.' He writes from betwixt the four walls of his solitary bedroom in Harare, which unbeknownst to his family, is a portal to many worlds. He is currently flirting with the idea of a full length novel and tweets as @LazarusPanashe.

THE NEXT FIVE YEARS

WHILE WE HAVE SET OUR AMBITION TO KEEP GOING FOR THE NEXT HUNDRED YEARS, WE ARE TRAINING OUR LENSES ON THE NEXT FIVE YEARS. THE FIRST IS THAT WE WANT TO BE THE BEST AT WHAT WE DO, THE SECOND IS THAT WE WANT TO BUILD THE STRENGTH OF OUR TEAM AND RESOURCES THAT WILL DOMINATE OUR GOALS, AND THE FINAL IS THAT WE WANT TO WIDEN THE SPACES WE EXPLORE, THE RANGE OF OUR PLATFORMS, AND THE PLACES WHERE OUR ECHOES ARE HEARD - ECHOES OF AFRICAN VOICES, STORIES, CREATIVITY AND ARTISTRY.

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