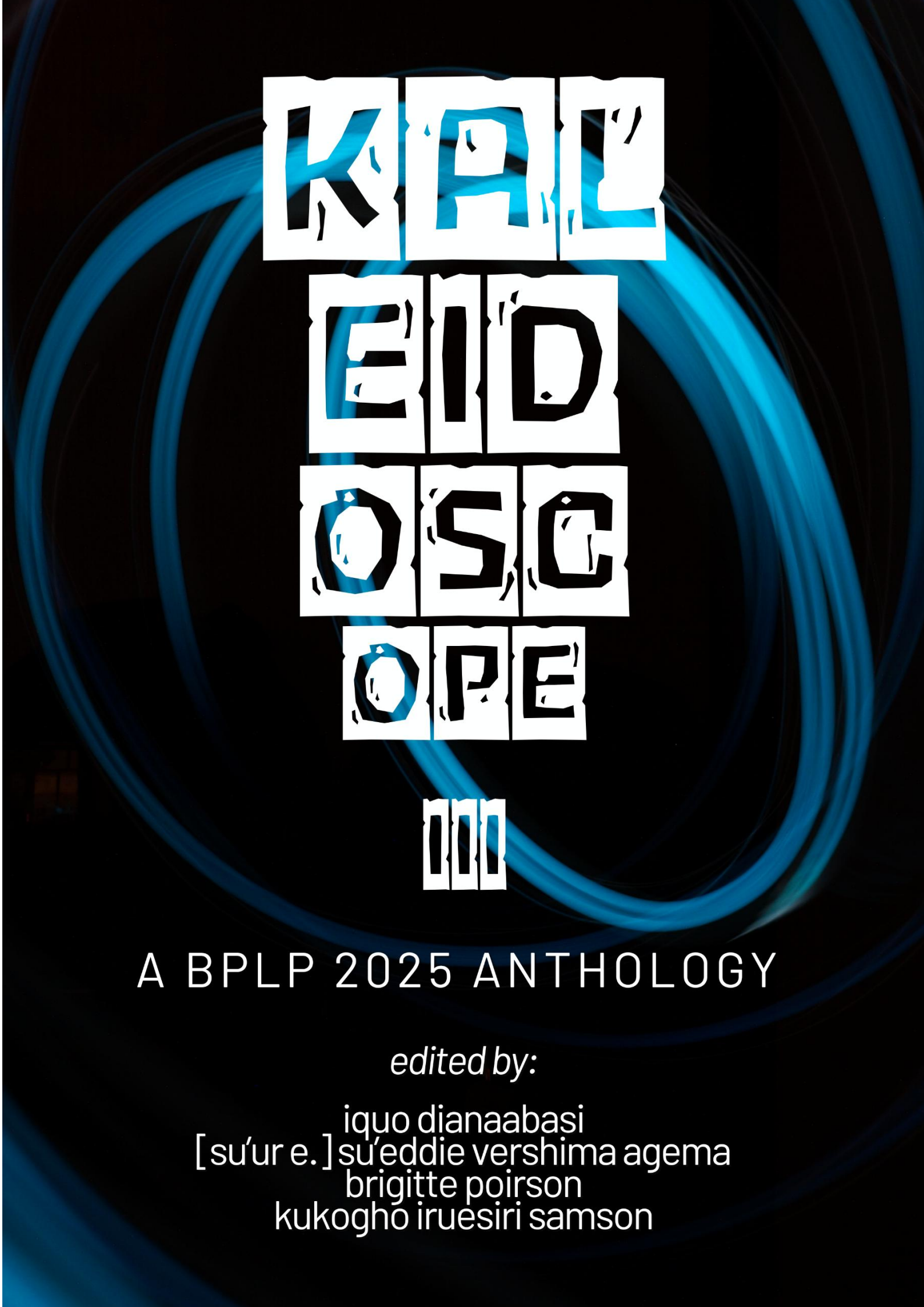

A BPLP 2025 ANTHOLOGY

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Other books in the Series:

- Kaleidoscope II (2024)
- Kaleidoscope (2023)
- Of Poetic Yellow Trumpets (2022)
- Bridging With Words (2021)
- A Pandemia of Poetry (2020)
- Vortices of Verses (2019)
- Citadel of Words (2018)
- The Train Stops at Sunset (2017)
- Loops of Hope (2016)
- Wind of Change (2015)

KALEIDOSCOPE III

ANTHOLOGY OF THE 2025
BRIGITTE POIRSON LITERATURE PRIZE (BPLP)

Edited by

IQUO DIANAABASI
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ABOUT THE BPLP

The Brigitte Poirson Literature Prize (BPLP), formerly known as the Brigitte Poirson Poetry Contest (BPPC), is an annual literary prize for poetry and short fiction dedicated to recognizing the often-overlooked talent of young Nigerian writers.

The prize was founded in February 2015 by Kukogho Iruesiri Samson and pays tribute to Brigitte Poirson, a distinguished French poet, lecturer, and editor who tirelessly supports and elevates African literature. The BPPC is particularly popular among the emerging generation of poets in Nigeria and has a total of seventy-nine past prize winners. In September 2023, the contest transitioned from a poetry contest to a short story and poetry contest, signifying a notable expansion of the Prize's scope, further nurturing literary talent across Nigeria and beyond.

The mission of BPLP is to encourage young writers to delve deeper into the art of poetry and fiction. Past winners of this contest have gone on to achieve significant recognition through various national and international awards. BPLP rewards winners with cash prizes and publication of their work in an annual anthology featuring the top selections from each edition, including both poetry and short fiction.

The winners of the 2025 edition of the BPLP are Adesuwa Agbonile for "*An Ehi Speaks*" (Short Story Award) and Felix Eshiet for "*The Thin Line Between a Heartbeat & the Fragile Hands of Machines*" (Poetry Award).

More about the BPLP: https://authorpedia.net/csr/bppc/

BRIGITTE POIRSON LITERATURE PRIZE

FOREWORD

Beyond the inventions of science-fiction, the capacities of octopuses will certainly even dwarf those of the most sophisticated technologies. Interacting with these creatures evidences that the functioning of their three hearts and eight brains – one in every arm – will take them further than the most refined man-powered robots. Because they do not act on electricity, but on consciousness.

The contributors to *Kaleidoscope III* are not feeding on AI either. Closer to the marvels of Nature, they must be endowed with three brains and two hearts - one in every arm – to produce such marvels of literature. They feed on inspiration and conscience. They all function as flesh and blood all the way. Like life. Like the spirit that runs along this edition from A to Z.

These writers have craved to imprint their souls on screens beyond where AI will tread. They seemed to have made a point of proving that no AI slop or treasures could overthrow the power of the human mind when it taps into the deepest resources of its own luminous creative stream, whether it decides to delve into the vicious effects of blind violence, or the challenges of self-destruction, of migration and the human condition, and so much more. The word creators have explored the mundane to reach the cosmic, probed quantum physics to celebrate African crafts, burnt within the fires of their nation in the hope of extracting gold nuggets of hope. They have gauged scientific breakthroughs to attest to the primacy of the heart. They have tracked the unfathomable in search of human values. Writers whose fingers fly freely on the keys, who play words like dancers under the musical bows of creativity and human warmth.

You do not read them.

They read you into every sentence, every line, every page, until you turn into the poem and you wear the story.

In so far as AI is an intricate summation of existing information, creative writing at its best blows up the apparently limitless reserves of the system by generating yet unknown connections along new synapses that arouse emotions, illuminating the soul in the celebration of stormy, free psyches.

These contributors have declined all the alphabets and grammars of their original talents. They have manifested the qualities of gods of literature. Is it overrating them?

Just remember the proof of the work is in the reading!

So welcome to *Kaleidoscope III*!

Congratulations to the winners. And a tremendous new year in literature to all of you.

– B. Poirson

WINNERS' PROFILES

Brigitte Poirson Literature Prize 2025: **Poetry Award**



- **Felix Eshiet (Winner):** Felix is a Nigerian writer and Efik-Ibibio poet. He is a Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net nominee, with work published in *Chestnut Review, ONLY POEMS, Madrid Review, Porter House, African Writer Magazine, 20.35 Africa*, and elsewhere. An Obsidian Foundation Fellow, Felix is the Editor-in-Chief of *Ekondo Review*, a literary magazine dedicated to Efik-Ibibio arts and literature. His debut poetry chapbook, *Never Look a God in the Eye*, is forthcoming in 2026.

- **Nathan Felix (1st Runner-Up):** Felix is a writer and poet who explores themes of memory, healing, and the human spirit. His works often reflect global concerns of identity and resilience.

- **Akindutire, Elizabeth Abosede (2nd Runner-Up):** Abosede is a Lagos-based writer. She writes poems and short stories that centre on love, work, family, and many other themes. Her writing accolades include the 2025 Babatunde Oladele Prize for Fiction award (winner), and the CIPM essay competition (finalist). When she is not writing, she is watching a football match.

- **Blessing Omeiza Ojo (2nd Runner-Up):** Blessing is a Nigerian poet based in Abuja, where he spends most of his time teaching creative writing, crafting poetry, and guiding children to literary and art festivals. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Frontier Poetry*, *Split Lip*, *The Shallow Tales*, *Cọ́n-scìò*, *The Poetry NND Column*, *The Deadlands*, and elsewhere. He serves as the Abuja coordinator for the Hill-Top Creative Arts Foundation. Omeiza enjoys daydreaming about paradise where he embraces his resurrected loved ones.

Brigitte Poirson Literature Prize 2025: **Short Story Award**



- **Adesuwa Agbonile (Winner):** Adesuwa is a Nigerian-American writer, journalist, and audio producer. She is a Goldwater Fellow at New York University's MFA program and the creator and host of the Audible Original podcast *Backlash: The Myth of Political Progress*. Her fiction has appeared in *Pleiades, Hobart Online,* and *The Loveliest Review*. Across genres, her work seeks to challenge dominant conceptions of reality and imagine new ways of thinking and being.

- **Ibrahim Oga (1st Runner-Up):** Ibrahim is the author of *Ibrahim Oga's Belvedere* newsletter. He has published works in *Channillo, Libretto,* and *Random Photo Journal* among others.

- **Christian Emecheta (2nd Runner-Up):** Christian is a creator who blends writing, illustration, and computer science. His works have graced prestigious publications including *Arts Lounge Magazine, StepAway Magazine, The Decolonial Passage, Cranked Anvil Press, Walden's Poetry and Reviews,* and *Mocking Owl Roost*, and others. Christian finds inspiration through reading, film, and the boundless landscapes of his imagination.

POEMS

The Thin Line Between a Heartbeat, & The Fragile Hands of Machines

Felix Eshiet

— *Winner the Brigitte Poirson Literature Prize 2025 (Poetry Award)*

You will agree with me the human body is a mes[s/h], judging by how everything once beautiful in it, slowly wilts into the wide chasm of time—Eliongema Udofia

my uncle's third daughter
was born too young
to face this cruel world.

she had a fist no bigger than a thumb,
& a skin so thin you could see
the rivers of veins flowing.
the nurses said it'd be a miracle
if she lives.

in that tiny box at sani abacha,
my uncle & i watched
tubes curled from her nose
like roots searching for soil,
her tiny chest fluttering
against the weight of survival,
fentanyl to trick her pain,
dexamethasone to free her lungs,
oh, what a fighter she was.

my aunt knelt beside the incubator,
palms pressed flat to the glass
as if prayer could travel
through plastic & wires.
she called her *abasi* names,

while i stood there,
soaking in the war
between life & science,
between science & life;
the thin line between a heartbeat,
& the fragile hands of machines.

to be born early
is to wrestle with time itself,
and to practice medicine
is to keep watch at that border,
refusing to let this cruel world
steal another child.

What the Earth Told Me in Silence

Nathan Felix

— *1st Runner-Up, BPLP 2025 (Poetry Award)*

There are voices buried beneath our feet—
not ghosts, but memories trying to grow back.
Each stone I touch hums a name,
each wind tastes like something forgotten.

The earth told me healing is not gentle;
it groans, it cracks, it weeps through us.
I have seen fields bloom from ashes,
heard rivers sing over bones.

We are not broken—we are unfinished.
Our scars are blueprints of survival,
our songs are the bridges we build
between yesterday and forgiveness.

When the world turns away,
we plant our words like seeds.
Some will die before morning,
but some will find light in impossible soil.

So, we speak—not because we are brave,
but because silence is heavier than truth.
Every breath we take rewrites the horizon.
Every voice becomes a pulse in the planet's chest.

And if you listen long enough,
you'll hear it too—
the sound of the earth remembering
how to love us again.

THE TAILOR'S GOSPEL

AKINDUTIRE, ELIZABETH ABOSEDE

— *2nd Runner-Up, BPLP 2025 (Poetry Award)*

The tape measure hangs like a quiet verse around her neck.
Chalk dust settles on cloth as if naming a future.
She opens a seam with the small blade called mercy,
not to cancel, only to learn where the thread went wrong.
Pins bright as morning line the edge of a stubborn hem.
The machine hums like rain that finally keeps its promise.
She turns the fabric over, reads its grain,
listens for the hidden pull where stories pucker.
In her palm, a button waits, round as a full stop,
ready to hold a thing together without shouting.

Outside, generators gossip and the sky tastes of iron.
Customers float in with pockets of weather and news,
the trousers that grew too honest at the knee,
the sleeve that forgot its pair in a bus somewhere.
She measures, nods, sets aside what can be saved,
finds room in the pattern for what a day has done.

Every stitch is a small yes.
Every knot is a lesson in staying.
The reel of thread keeps giving and giving,
a narrow road, but it reaches the harbour.

When she lifts her foot from the pedal, the room exhales.
She holds the cloth to the light and checks the line.
It is not perfect. It is faithful.
It will turn again on a living body.

She signs her work on the inside where only care can see.
Folds it, brown paper, string, a name in blue.
Outside, scooters write quick commas on the street.
The hour leans close. She does not hurry.

Tomorrow will bring another loose edge,
a rip of ordinary time wanting a hand.
She will answer with thread, with patience,
with the soft thunder of a machine at work.

This is how a city is mended,
one quiet seam you will never see.

Field Notes on Birth & Oblivion

Blessing Omeiza Ojo

— *2nd Runner-Up, BPLP 2025 (Poetry Award)*

God, there's a deity whenever your fingers caress the earth.
Vibrissae love the subtle scent of air & that's what you give

poking breath into my nostrils. I do not know if my hue
says I was created in the absence of light, but I am dark.

The myth book says the sky slitted & my brother flew here.
In another chapter, my forefathers came out of an Iroko tree.

Look how tall my sufferings stand, how long my endurance is.
A lullaby of lamentation, I was created after a heavenly revelry:

a dip of a liana into the mud & flung to the latitude line.
Or was I a flawless cry until the serpent's first speech?

Whether through divine breath or earth, blood is here in a body.
Whenever I open my bone-made wardrobe, I am searching

for connotation in my origin. Sleeve rolling— there's an ongoing
scrap to get better acquainted with the stiletto sluggishly slicing

my wellbeing. I know sorrow as a slothful shift in the syllable
of my breath towards silence. Sometimes, I haemorrhage

into memory — sharp & poignant— *where's my mother?* I blinked
my eyes & my mother's portrait on the wall is my ancestor's altar.

I see a doctor twice a week, my lifespan reduces by 2 ounces.
What kind of fervour makes my femur feeble for fever's fang?

Somewhere, a terrorist is in the kitchen cooking fire to burn down
a village. A man slaughtered a brother & said when we were yet sinners,

God commanded that he be the Messiah, opening a slit to endings.
Picture our life as an hourglass. A truckload stars surrenders to gravity.

Here, men walk out to their hustling galaxies & return as cinders.
I remember Tony who smoked into the sky on the protest mourning.

He promised his mother *Masa* on his return: his first ever lamed promise.
Voice shatters what doesn't look like a glass —isn't this what death does?

Man, you're a shadow song. However, hummed, someday, you will end
on earth's tongue from which you were shaped like my mouth after words.

Look at me— the eagle, soaring as if it'll never perch. At the archway,
this means peace: my coming to know I will not be around forever.

The Hands That Painted The Sky

Olukitibi Elizabeth Atilola

The hands that painted the sky
did not tremble.
They moved with silent thunder,
gliding clouds like thoughts unspoken,
awakening the sky with whispers of creation.

No brush was seen,
no artist stood upon the edge of dawn—
only colours blooming from nothing,
like faith before proof,
like love before name.

The winds carry their whispers,
the oceans hum their hymn.
Every mountain is a fingerprint,
every leaf a memory of wonder.
every star, a secret signature.

The hands that painted the sky.
they shaped the heart of man
to seek,
to dream,
to rise beyond beginnings and ends.

The hands that painted the sky touched the earth in secret
they planted wonder in our veins,
so we might bloom towards heaven
and echo the songs of beginnings.

And when we lift our eyes,
we do not just see heaven
we remember the touch
that made it possible.
The hands that painted the sky.

How do I glorify my country when it runs the faces of razor blades on my skin?

Godwin Obaji

If you step into my heart you will meet graveyards & dead bodies. my eyes are cyclones of livid blood. I desire to pick my country & gag lullabies into her mouth; gag, gag & gag till the bowel of the continent's giant fills to the brim .
Everyone in my class plunges their countries in the light of ecstasy & polish them with glee-framed cantata. They wring the flags of their nations to loops & pour them into the fists of prayer , approbation & sugary melodies. I desire to do same. To gaze at the irises of my nation & byname her imperishable platinum. I wish to lightly part her lips & puke this line of adulation into her tongue; *gracias for being the sentinel of little powerless things*.
But I am incapable of retching reverence & syrupy songs into the tongue of Nigeria ; this beautiful land rasps my femur to brokenness. This country uprooted my tongue & poured it into the tongues of leviathans. It catapulted my joy into lion-teethed birdie of sorrow.
One dawn in Yelwata, it hefted my mum & dad & plunked them in terra incognito & when it returned them at dusk my milky juices were headless, torso-less & footless. Allegedly, Nigeria passed them to cow people who teleported them to the range of ob literation.
I desire to stand on concourse place & holler the beautiful nomenclature of my country into the tender rhythm of zephyr & calligraph her glitziness in chest of the sun. but I am incapable, pains are indelible & longwinded. Memories of dead bodies & graveyards carved a circle about me & recurrently orbited them , carmine as blasted lava.
I am lost, how do I love the country that smacked my face on acid-drenched arrayo?.
How do I glorify my country when it runs the faces of razor blades on my skin?

The River Swallows the Open Ground

Adamu Danjuma Abubakar

When tragedy strikes,
the sky splits like a broken drum,
its echo spilling into every street.
Passersby freeze,
their shadows stretching long with disbelief.

Tomorrow, Mokwa may rise again,
though broken, counting its dead.
Survivors fold their grief into the soil,
burying memory with dust,
while the horizon hangs heavy with sorrow.

The river swallows the open ground,
its mouth filled with homes,
its tongue dragging futures away.
A town of steadfast traders drowns—
its heartbeat smothered by water's fist.

When tragedy strikes again,
darkness falls like a verdict.
The death toll climbs.
Bodies lie beneath rubble,
splinters of once-peaceful walls.

The nation weeps, powerless.
Prayers curl upward like smoke,
for the lost, for the living,
for shoulders bent with absence.

Mokwa's victims were once like us—
their laughter now silence,
their silence a wound.

These lives—
oh God—
gone forever,
but the river keeps their names.

Meet Me at the Park

Joy Nwamaka Chime

Dearest
When all this is over
When there are no more bullets to create extra breathing holes in the bodies of Plateau's people
When a life becomes, again, a valuable and valued gift rather than just another number for census counting
When there are no more placards to declare that a state belongs only to those who can trace their ancestry from ten generations back

Promise me you'll meet me at the park
The one halfway between our houses
We'll bring snacks, sit on the swings and push
And talk about all the times we talked about doing this
But something always came up
Little things, like
A city burning while on the edge of the ocean,
A peaceful country at war with its understanding citizens,
A loving father picking his children's bones from his teeth and growing hungrier

Something always comes up
Still, promise me you'll meet me at the park
When all this is over

But before then
Promise me you'll dance, dream, dare, get your degree
Do for yourself and others the things you wish someone had done for you early enough
Little things, like
Saving you from burning up in the bright heat of hate
Reminding you to breathe, that this too shall pass, or you will pass
Reminding you that we can put out the fire on the mountain, or at least try, and the trying is everything, a la Mama Wole
Reminding you that all this will be over
And you only have to hold on till then

We only have to hold on till then

POST-APOCALYPSE

PACELLA CHUKWUMA-EKE

(This is a contrapuntal poem: the left aligned and right aligned texts may be read separately or together.)

The war cuddles earth. In our eyes, a machete bends
Itself into lullaby, and sails the skin without lesion.

Our grief would rather be styled in silk than permit
Infestation to blossom. After all, we are suckers for hope, we are

This tiny thing that bubbles with alchemy, this thing
That made a doormat out of conflict. Look, wounds prepare

A bouquet. Rose scented, fruity and red. Hurt rolled into peduncles.
Look, I have baptized loss. Like a saviour, the cancers are willing

To transmutate. Even pain is wealth, sometimes; the caterpillar breaks
To keep its wings in store; I too might pour my tears into a tree:

To garden my becoming— fill up the haemorrhaged women
With white paint, fill up the corpses with music. We all dance and I

Win a Pulitzer like one who has called their death to glory. Who says
a graveyard couldn't host a party, a mad woman couldn't mother a city?

Swallow the mourning: the wasted blood cannot seize my moonwalk.
The thorn cannot devour the beauty.

The Bulbul & the Geometry of Dawn

Abubakar Ibrahim

(after a bulbul pecking at my window)

The Bulbul arrives doing what birds do; mapping
the geometry of dawn. The world, still damp with silence,
trembles at the music in its syrinx. It pecks at its reflection,
not knowing it's itself. How familiar, this human ache
to reach for the things that cannot hold us, how we too
trace invisible routes, migrating through days that forget
our names, how some mornings, we awaken to find
our shadows slightly misplaced, to find our names bruised
by dreams, but must return to the windows of our lives &
continue the tender habit of searching. Before me, in the
little corner of my bed, where I can be vulnerable without
misjudged, the lights unfurls & the tender mercy of my
days erode me like forgiveness. I watch the bird weave
together the silence of the morning & what remains
of the night with its melody; there is something of us
in them; our endless departures, & endless returns,
how, beneath our ribs, we too, carry our homes, & calls
it faith, in the way we return again, & again to the promise
of new beginnings. I listen to the tremor of its wings flapping against the glass, & to my
own breathing keeping time with the fragile rhythm of flight, & perhaps, this is what it
means to live; to mistake our reflections for open doors,
to sing anyway, believing in the promise of new beginnings,
in the body's stubborn will to rise in the thin skin of
morning. Outside, the window glows, & light, the old
pilgrim has come to rest on the bird's feathers. Soon,
the bird will go where the season calls, carry the warmth
of this morning into other skies, & I, too will rise with
a small echo of flight rooted in my bones, beginning again,
like the bird, with the tenderness of those who know
that everything beautiful must one day leave.

Innocence

Grace Ezinne Ajunwa

Once,
we squatted on a long communal spine,
a rail laid across splintered woods, where palms clung tight,
above the open hollow, called *Ogwe nsi*.
Our tiny hands chained together,
like a covenant against falling.

We were children,
bare black buttocks offered to open air and laughter,
our dignity not yet schooled by modern shame.

Excreta flowed beneath us
like a brown, I guess yellowish river with no name,
carrying our innocence, in stacks of dung, with maggots and flies dizzying downstream
to the same waters where we washed our fruits, our bodies and our clothes

Our bodies immune against...
without flinching.
No one gagged, no one frowned.
We were too wild to be disgusted,
too bonded to know embarrassment.
It was all appealing like apples across Amanda

If one slipped, ah!
a thunder of voices rose like village drums,
and hands would drag the fallen out,
their body crowned with mockery and love.

Often, a fish called *mkpumkpu Uba* was bought,
broken and shared among us like Eucharist,
a cleansing ritual no church could name.

Bear with me.
We all did love it.
We called it culture.
We called it nothing.
It was just life.

Today, my stomach coils at the mere memory.
civilization has built porcelain thrones
inside tiled rooms that smell of sense freshers and silence.

Would something in me ever ache?
for that open sky, that unfiltered laughter,
that sacred rail where we sat unashamed,
smelling of excreta, yet unaware of stench
because we had not yet learned
to be repulsed by our own humanity.

AUTOPSY OF A DECEASED COUNTRY

ADEBOLA TEMITAYO OGUNYEMI

In a morgue, a woman's body is wheeled in,
covered by a white sheet. The tag reads: Nigeria.
Born in 1960. Died many times, but this time it feels final.
We confirm her by the scars, the tribal marks on her skin,
the colonial sutures yet to be healed. Recognition hurts.
There is no stranger here; the corpse has a familiar face.
The scalpel cuts across her chest, a Y-shaped truth,
neat but merciless. We search her organs for answers,
and find only stories written in bruises. Each rib tells
a parable of power, each artery sings a song of loss.
The incision is confession, and confession bleeds.
We lift her heart. Heavy, congested with corruption.
It no longer pumps belief. Her lungs are blackened,
gasping from decades of pollution. The brain shows erratic signals.
The spine is fractured along ethnic lines, vertebrae misaligned
by distrust. What was meant to stand as one
now bends beneath the weight of division. Each region
a bone is out of place, each bone blaming the other for the pain.
We find the stomach bloated but empty, swollen
with hunger, a nation malnourished by rhetoric.
The people were told to be patient,
but hunger does not wait for democracy.
The coroner writes: "cause of death — internal bleeding
inflicted by her own children" She did not die of age.
She died of betrayal, of too many awakenings without a morning.

THIS IS NOT JUST A COUNTRY

Segun Adesoro

This —
is not just a country.
It is a mystic drum,
beating in different tongues,
but sharing one soil.

We speak in fragments —
Yorùbá proverbs,
Igbo wisdom,
Hausa chants,
Tiv songs,
and more than we dare to count.

But who told us
difference means division?

Who told us
religion is a wall
instead of a bridge?

Beware, Soul Brother —
when your faith turns into fire
that burns your neighbour's name.

We have worn wounds like national colours,
carried casualties in our mouths,
turned flags into bandages,
but the healing...
the healing must come from within.

The Rainmaker is not coming.
He's already here —
in every farmer who plants
though the rain hasn't come,
in every mother who feeds
though the kitchen is empty,
in every youth who votes
though hope has been stolen
ten times over.

We've danced through darkness,
but still found rhythm.
They Too Are the Earth,
the ones on the fringes,
the ones forgotten in census forms
and federal character tables.

Listen —

The Word Is an Egg,
fragile, sacred.
Like this nation.
Like our name.
Like trust.

You break it,
you bleed it.
You hold it,
you hatch it.

We cannot fix this house
by tearing down its rooms.
We cannot raise a new nation
on ancient grudges.

Waiting Laughters
still echo in the throats of children
who've only known Nigeria
in news headlines and hashtags.

But there is more.
There must be more.

A time to believe that
the name Nigeria
is not a question,
but a promise —
waiting to be kept.

Let tribe be culture,
not cage.
Let religion be compass,
not condition.

Let unity be more
than an anthem we recite
with empty stomachs
and tired eyes.

Let this be our fisherman's invocation —
to cast our nets
into deeper understanding,
to pull in a harvest
of shared becoming.

This...
is not just a country.

This
is a chance
to rise.

Zhinyim (Stay For Me)

Izaza Izeowayi

What we send home travels slower than our memories and faster than our longing, each dollar sent carrying a weight no distance can diminish.
The chair across from me sits crooked in the corner of my rented room, its shadow stretching across the wooden floor
Outside, the streets hum with voices I barely know
claiming spaces that don't quite feel like mine
The ceiling fan spins slowly, carrying the quiet of this apartment
neighbours shuffle past in measured steps, each routine too perfect
as if order could ever replace the smell of Port Harcourt's market.
I remember rain drawing lines on the roofing sheets back home
the careful rhythm of half-eaten meals
doors creaking with conversations I could never join
corners where we made promises, now scattered across miles || we counted laughter in half-meals, borrowed salt, pepper & Maggi for joyous malnourished jollof rice.
Streets shine with straight lines, sidewalks unmarked
each step weighs patience, every dollar sent home; unspoken words
Traffic lights obey without hesitation; the air smells faintly of foreign engines
Motorbikes move through lanes with quiet care
Sidewalk cafés measure coffee with accurate precision; the warmth I crave is missing
Vendors smile as though sunlight owed them something
while I chase stability in a world that never really slows,
Umbrellas shield people from what I cannot name... and I quietly, really quietly, long for the streets where potholes set the pace.
Stay for me, I whisper to empty rooms smelling faintly of city air
to corridors echoing with absence, to the small spaces that once held my family, my friends, my city.....
Even the walls here have ears, yet they cannot carry my Port Harcourt voice
Hallways stretch in silence, testing my insistence
sometimes I imagine the plane ticket home, lighter than the weight I carry
Even in hollow apartments, my memory still insists
folding itself quietly into my bones
while laughter and smoke from home linger in my mind
claiming me back, tender and unbroken.
Memory holds on to my skin like dust raised from streets I once walked,
and laughter chokes through my mind like smoke in a locked kitchen.
I carry both cities quietly within me: The one I walk through and the one I left.
I weigh both in silence every evening before I sleep.

The Song of Nature

Iyanuoluwa Oni

The sky unfolds, painting itself in soft hues
Sometimes in shades of blue,
Sometimes with streaks of gold and silver too.
The clouds drift softly, slow and free,
Like the gentle rhythm of life's melody.

The sun climbs high, its light so fair,
Revealing the beauty of the fields with care.
It awakens rivers with refreshing glow,
Paints the mountains side by side below,
And makes the world come alive again.

The evening whispers, calm and deep,
The sun sinks low, the stars all peep.
The moon takes its place a silver tune,
To guard the dreams of hearts in swoon.

When the sky can no longer hold its tears,
It lets them fall upon the earth
Each drop a soft note in the song of renewal,
Bringing life to roots below and leaves above,
Braiding streams through open hands of grass.

The breeze blows, moving through everything,
Combing the fields like fingers through hair.
It hums through trees and whispers through hills,
Lifting the air, carrying scents from everywhere.

The mountains rise, ancient and wise,
Their peaks kissed by clouds, their feet by streams.
They stand in silence, keepers of dreams,
Guarding secrets whispered by time,
And echoing songs of strength sublime.

The trees stand tall, their branches wide,
Homes to songs the birds confide.
Their leaves dance freely in the breeze.
Through every season's gentle flow,
They teach of letting go and grow.

The grasses sway in tender grace,
A green embrace across the place.
They bow and rise with every wind,
Soft carpets where earth and sky begin,
Glistening with morning's golden light.

The animals roam, both wild and mild,
Each one a wonder, nature's child.

The lion's roar, the sparrow's trill,
The deer that drinks by the hill,
All join the chorus, pure and grand.

And man, the listener and the guest,
Placed among them, seeking rest.
With hands that build, with hearts that dream,
For in nature's voice, he finds his part,
A humble note, yet close to heart.

I WANT TO RUNAWAY FROM MY COUNTRY

MICHAEL AGUNBIADE

there is a lot of corpses inside my head
i've no idea how they will be buried.
last night, a pick-up ran over my mother's sister
on her way to buy mint tea from a nearby kiosk.
same night, a neighbour was nailed
to the doorsill of her home by Fulani herdsmen.
this morning, the herders burnt our masjid in Buni Yadi.
they cut open our Muezzin
until his throat lost track of blood.
later in the night, they stormed the market
at Yelwata with their pick-up van,
then resumed the war from where it last played
in the ruined kaleidoscope of masjid.
from a distance where i was,
handholding my life under the funiculars of a Datsun,
i saw body falling out of raped doors, blood leaking out
of buttonholes while remains of them trickled
into my tongue as craters. on the concrete,
there was a woman sprawling over another woman
who sprawled over another & through them was
how i understood the logic of communal loss.
that you can be in your room & weep a jackal
for someone you've not seen in your life.
brother, there's a lot of corpses inside my head
i've no idea how they will be buried.
& i tell you all of these
so you can understand my pain,
i tell you these so you can understand
why i want to runaway from country.
i want to runaway because
my country is running after me,
to get me killed
& i don't want to die like my mother's sister
like my refugee brothers in Libya.
i want to runaway because here,
loss is a door.
i've lost count of my entrances.

Soul on the Edge

Ruth Dipura

The morning came too quietly.
No birds, no footsteps... just breathe.
I stood at the edge of myself,
Where even my shadow refused to follow.
Grief is the shadow I never invited,
But it walks beside me... barefoot and bleeding.

My bosom is a haunted house;
Every breath spreads poison.
Joy is a myth,
Stamped by days that never apologize.
The mirror doesn't reflect my image—
Only the poisonous war within.
Each tear wrote my story...
Now the ocean has transformed into a desert.
I walk with silence choking my ribs,
Where flowers once bloomed.
Pain doesn't scream...
It whispers in my bones like wind.
Sorrow speaks directly to my soul,
In proverbs and riddles no one else hears.

My soul screamed...
But only silence answered back.
Each second I try to voice—
Pain glues my tongue.
Every pulse whispers, "Help... help,"
With a soft but pissed-off voice.
This sorrow has molars—
It feeds on memory.

I buried joy under my tongue,
Afraid the world would steal it again.
I'm not tracing light,
But a path where my shadow can breathe.
If strength is survival,
Then why does healing feel like poison?
It eats me slowly...

My soul on the edge... screams for a home.

THE DEEP OF RELATIVITY

OLADIMEJI ADAM ADEDAYO

1(i)
drifting on at sea:
the lazy wake seeded with jetsams of faces,
like a swath by a bad scythe;
faces... tumid with things that
never broke;
faces... varicose with mummies
that, well, of thirst died.
2(i)
floundering in linear waters:
grasping at straws,
yet adrift; gravitating toward
the gyring maw
of a *Frankensteinian* maelstrom,
inexorably,
like a free fall,
like the singularity.
2(ii)
floundering in linear waters:
roiled red,
yet driftages of the currents.
ever yonder
lies the foreshortened landfall—
a topographic leprechaun,
yet driftages of the currents—
leisurely... surely.
3
toiling on charnel-wombed earth:
flails in disembodied hands,
threshing the umpteenth harvest of corpses
for lives of grain.
1(ii)
drifting on at sea:
how many more bodies
must into the deep of relativity
be committed?
how further
till keen feet know from the proscenium
of brine and wine?

drifting on at sea:
the lazy wake strewed with flotsams of faces.

Mother in the Mirror

Halimah Adisa

She leans in,
round belly brushing glass,
palms pressed against the past.

There they are,
every black mother before me
stitched into the spleen.

Their eyes hold memories of fields and kitchens
Hymns humming between broken teeth,
babies strapped to backs while nations bent their names

They see me
and I,
I see them.

A woman forced grown,
braiding prayers into her daughter's scalp
Her face shifts—
a grandmother's cracked lips,
a mother's tired spine
and my own brows creased with recognition.

She sees me
and I,
I see her.

What did she dream of
when freedom was a ghost parading joy?
A whispered secret traded over washed lines.
She's doesn't speak but I hear,
"You are carrying more than a child,
You are carrying us."

She sees me
and I,
I see her.

The mirror fogs with breath
as I stand facing mothers before me.

The Rainmaker's Daughter

Oladoyin Ayodeji Victor

They said the sky was a man's affair,
that women waited for rain, not summoned it.
But I was born with thunder in my throat,
and silence was the first storm I survived.
Our village knew hunger by name;
its voice was the rattle of empty plates.
We sold cassava to buy permission,
carried tomorrow in leaking buckets from cracked wells.
The elders said a woman's tongue must bend like grass,
but mine grew teeth in the season of drought.
I learned to fetch respect
the way others fetch water,
balancing my dreams on a rusty tin headpan.
At the stream, men spoke of power
as if it were rain trapped in their palms.
I watched clouds gather without their consent
and thought maybe heaven listens to courage too.
When I danced barefoot through the storm,
the women hid their smiles behind wrappers.
Children pointed, whispering
I was lightning in disguise.
Even the gods paused their gossip.
Now the land wears my footprints like prayer beads;
crops rise where doubt once slept.
The elders no longer whisper my name in fear,
they say the rain listens to her breath.
And when thunder hums softly at dusk,
I smile, knowing my silence grew wings.

SHORT STORIES

An Ehi Speaks

Adesuwa Agbonile

— *Winner, The Brigitte Poirson Literature Prize 2025 (Short Story Award)*

My grandfather once told me a story about a baby who, having just been born, spoke in complete and cogent sentences, saying, where am I?, saying, hello, I am a doctor from Hertfordshire, saying, can somebody help me?

We were sitting in his living room, each part of it rote and familiar like my multiplication tables. The pale cloth over the opening into the kitchen. *Birds* custard steaming on the coffee table. Roosters pecking outside. My grandfather's wizened voice, reading out from the yellowed newspaper clipping that held the story of the speaking baby.

There was a life behind the baby's eyes, my grandfather told me, something spinning and hot, and as these eyes whirred from doctor to nurse to mother to father to sister, open and understanding, all the room's occupants were too terrified to do language back. Finally, blessedly, after two minutes, the eyes lost their spark and took on an innocent glassiness. The baby began to wail.

The fact that this had all been written down proved it true. My grandfather was a professor of literature, and a very kind man. In his spare time, he translated Benin texts into English. He taught me to do the same. We spent many hours knitting language together. The act of translation made the words on both sides grow deeper and wider. When I stumbled over Benin or couldn't grasp an English word, my grandfather was patient. Let's try speaking it aloud, he would say. With his help, the correct words would always appear.

Now, when I read and write in English, his voice is the one I hear in my head.

My grandfather died the day I was born. He was getting hip surgery. The moment the surgeon cut into his flesh, his heart stopped beating.

He was dead for approximately five minutes and thirteen seconds. It was a miracle, the doctors said. To be dead for that long, and then to be revived with no brain damage. This story, too, was in the newspaper.

The same day that happened, my mother gave birth to me. I did not emerge speaking complete sentences; the moment I arrived on this earth, I began to howl. My mother told me the sound frightened her, so much so that she began to pray for my life. She was worried I might die. It sounded as though I was in a great, great deal of pain.

I have a memory. It goes like this: I am in my grandfather's living room. My grandfather, bustling and agile, gets up and moves around the axis of his left hip. I watch him disappear behind gauzy curtain into the kitchen, I see him come back into the living room holding a glass box with a small wooden wheel inside. It is like a bicycle wheel, with spokes radiating out from the centre. One of the spokes is nailed to the bottom of the glass box. The whole wheel is spinning.

In my memory, I am confused – how can the wheel be spinning, if it's inside an enclosed box? I cannot see any place where the box might open. It is smooth and shut all around. I ask my grandfather, Did you push the wheel?

No, he says, and in my memory I can hear his laugh, wheezing and loud. My father gave this to me, he says, and his father gave it to him. It never stops. It only keeps going. It is called a perpetual motion machine.

I am proud that my grandfather thought I was big and smart enough to be shown this scientific machine. We eat small chops and work slowly through a translation of Jacob Egharevba. It is the most sure-footed I have ever felt; I am weaving Benin into English like it is nothing. Every line I finish, my grandfather reads aloud. As he reads, I watch the machine spin in its box. Eventually the two things merge; it is like the sound of my grandfather's voice is coming directly from the wheel. The air smells like camphor and lavender incense. The wheel spins, spins, spins. Quiet and relentless, a snake eating its own tail. Moving language from my grandfather's mouth into my open ear. I look up and catch my grandfather's eye through the glass box. He winks.

I learned perpetual motion machines were impossible at Oxford. I was there studying physics, to the thrill and delight of my father, who expected me to come back to Benin City when I was done and work for his company. I was in class one day and we were going over the laws of thermodynamics, and suddenly my hips yowled and I blurted, but, what about perpetual motion machines? There were a few sniggers then, from English boys whose first guess at trying to calculate the distance between the earth and the sun would probably have been to take a measuring tape and hop into their daddy's helicopter. The professor frowned at me and said, well, of course, they're an impossibility.

I reached into my mind and caught hold of the sight of that silent spinning. Walking back to my student hall, I thought, I really ought to just send along a letter to ask Grandpa about the machine. And then suddenly, I was on the ground, curled up into myself, wailing into my hands, my hips crimping and cracking. My palms caught my sound and choked it.

This was how it had been ever since my grandfather's death. I would forget he was dead – and then I would remember.

A few weeks later, I wrote my father a letter asking him to locate my grandfather's machine. He wrote back that it was too late; he had already taken out all the things left in my grandfather's compound and the structure itself was in the process of demolition. I knew then that if I wanted to see the machine again, I would have to build it myself.

I bought lavender incense and began to burn it in my tiny room. I filled my closet with camphor. I quickly gathered that most things undergraduate physics professors wave off as impossible are real in the field of quantum physics. I manhandled time, electrons, quarks.

A quantum object is, essentially, two things at the same time. To be in a quantum state is to exist as multiplicity, as probability. This has many practical applications. Imagine a computer chip holding memory in discrete bits. The amount it can store grows infinitely greater if one bit can be two things at the same time. Imagine having a great stack of books in your room that you need to organize – and then being able to stack them not only horizontally and vertically, but also across a fourth dimension.

Years passed and I got nowhere. And then one day while I was working on my doctorate, a professor mentioned the symmetry breaking properties of crystals. A strange, physical truism – crystals are not balanced. They form repeating patterns in some directions, but not others. And I thought to myself, perhaps the same is true about time. Constant stillness in some directions, and constant motion in others. My eye twitched into wink. I imagined. I theorized. And then, on paper, it appeared – my own perpetual motion machine. A tiny, but true-looking theory. Quantum ions in ceaseless, celestial spin.

My grandfather's laugh, wheezing, loud, leaked through the letters and numbers on my notebook paper.

The more I studied, the more I recognized my mind as quantum system, the soup floating inside the box containing Schrodinger's cat. When straining to remember that afternoon watching perpetual motion with my grandfather, there was a non-zero chance that I would retrieve another memory:

I am a young child, in the backseat of my grandfather's car, looking at the back of his head. It is dusk. We are driving home through dust between guava and fishtail and rubber. I remember two motorcyclists. They are wearing denim and helmets that make their heads slick and black like the eyes of a fly. My grandfather's hand moves over to the glove compartment, and pulls out a gun.

Uwafiokun, he says, and I am startled because he never uses my full name. Watch closely.

One cyclist pulls up to the front of the car, forcing my grandfather to stop. The other pulls over to my grandfather's door and starts shaking the handle furiously. He is shouting something I cannot hear through the helmet and the car door. My grandfather unlocks his door, so with the next yank it swings open and the cyclist goes flying backwards. The other cyclist approaches my grandfather on foot as he gets out of the car. There are four shots.

I see the first cyclist's knees buckle. He thuds to the ground. And then my grandfather gets back into the car, closes his door, locks it, and drives forward. The car lurches up and then back down as we go over the body.

Uwafiokun, he says. Listen closely.

I remember my voice, coming out an octave higher. Yes grandfather?

Remember. Survival is a bloody business.

And I remember the smell, in the car. Camphor and lavender.

My machine was just letters and numbers until Bertrand.

Bertrand had no last name because he was a duke. He had learned about quantum computers from some Americans while visiting Cambridge – the one in America, he clarified. These Americans reckoned the first person to get hold of a working quantum computer would be standing on the shores of a new world. My postdoc advisor had alerted Bertrand to a promising young student way beyond the quantum cutting edge – well, how did I feel about building him the computer I was always scribbling about?

Not for the first time, I was enormously grateful for the foolishness of big men with money.

I went home and, with the money Bertrand gave me, began to build a new world in enclosed space. I bought steel machines, lasers, molecule processors. A generator, and then a second and third. I began each morning with a pilgrimage to my grandfather's grave, a 15-minute walk from my lab. I asked him about his machine. Where had it gone? Who had made it? How could it be recreated? The ground that held him was stiff and unrelenting. There was no room in this world for my grandfather's mouth to be opened once more. I had once crumpled in the face of this fact. Now, I stood upright.

I built gas-less, gravity-less glass boxes. I scented them with lavender and camphor. I built ions that I poured into these boxes and realized I didn't and tried again. I beat numbers over the head with my pen. I strained my eyes looking for all the things I could not see.

I was building a new world. It took time, time, time.

And then one morning the ground on top of my grandfather softened into a mouth, and from it came a wheezing laugh. I had done it. I ran to my lab and saw that my computers were tracking the movements inside the glass box. They told me that the ions in my box were spinning. They were spinning, and they would never stop. I had created a system unable to rest. A perpetual motion. I had built a perpetual motion machine. And I was caught up in the infinity in it all, feeling insurmountably the way I moved through space as a tenuous collection of an uncountable number of things that had all always existed, and finally, now, they were all in my sightline. I was a newborn baby speaking full sentences. I was the gash of a cut open hip howling into wet air. I was language being widened and weighted. I was always, always, always.

I watched my machine work, and for the first time in years I heard my grandfather's voice. He said: *Uwafiokun. Listen closely.*

A Dark Quinquennial

Ibrahim Oga

— *1st Runner-Up, BPLP 2025 (Short Story Award)*

I am not dead.

Sometimes I come back from nothingness, a blank period of time. I don't know how long the blackouts last. Other times I am pulled out of a palpable dream, a virtual reality of some sort. The dreams are uneventful and in them, I don't see colour. Everything is either white or a shade of grey. Bright. I am always waiting for something in the dreams. Nothing ever seems to happen until I'm unexplainably out of it—into total darkness, numb in every sense, except for my hearing. It's like playing Hide-and-Seek and I am hiding in a closet, hearing my big brother's voice counting. Only this time, I can't feel my breath, and it is the darkest place yet.

I like the darkness better. The darkness is closer to the ones I care about, my wife, my little boy, and my family. The sounds are live, and reality is within my grasp. This is not the afterlife. Islam has taught me about it, but I don't know if I will get out of this alive.

The dreams are lonely. I'm either sitting in a garden, a train station or some other places I can't comprehend. I am waiting while other people mindlessly go on with their normal activities. No one talks to me and I don't seem to be able to talk to any one either. Everyone is a stranger. There is nothing remarkable about them. I don't remember any of their faces when I am out of it. How can a dream be this insipid, stifle of sub-consciousness and imagination?

When I am in the darkness, I talk to myself to stay sane. To remind myself that I am still me. First, I started by trying to remember the names of people I know and what they look like. I tried to remember every single detail of my house. Now I try to remember memories, I tell myself fond stories of the past. I try to imagine how things are going without me; what has changed, what hasn't, and what's new. I can't stay quiet when I am in the darkness. I am worried I will be lost into nothingness if I do.

Faty said she is bringing my little boy later. I am scared of slumbering into nothingness or a dream. This is the seventh time I'm coming up to the darkness. I am afraid of not coming back next time. I don't want to miss anything, especially today. I'd give anything to hear his sweet infant giggle again.

I believe I have been a good dad and a good husband. This gives me some fulfilment. Ever since Faty came into my life, it turned around for the better. Sometimes I feel like she is a miracle I don't deserve. Even my performance at work have been better and I am beginning to get the recognition I deserve. One could say I was on a winning streak before this.

The nurses and doctors don't say much about my condition. I wonder how long I have been here. It's like they're contented by the beeping of the machine. A slow, steady dial-tone that perhaps is a reassurance every second that I'm still in here.

"Everything looks normal on the monitor" is the usual line nurses give the doctor. Their tones bear no emotion.

I stopped asking myself why they're not even trying to bring me back after my second time in the darkness. When I first heard my wife's voice, reading to me. Then she thanked God for the machine's beeping. Maybe that is all anyone could do.

"Hang in there" she kept saying, perhaps more to herself than to me.

It seems everyone is waiting for me to come back. If only I remember how I got here, it might help in getting myself out of it. But I don't even remember the details of how I look like. I only remember a vague image of me from the memory of my picture hanging in our living room. I wish memories aren't recalled from an eye-view perspective. From memories, I can recall the things I'd seen, scents I'd smelled, sounds I'd heard, and the feelings I'd felt but not how I looked. There has never been an out-of-body experience even for a moment to see me from the outside. I should have stayed in front of a mirror more. Maybe I would have spent enough time to make staring at a mirror a significant memory for me to remember.

***

Faty loves me. This one thing I know. She is full of life, and energy and laughter, whenever I'm around her. Her love checks all the boxes. It fits all the descriptions people tell me I'd see, and feel, when someone loves me.

She is as amazing as the first day I met her.

I remember the last time I made her dinner. It was on our third anniversary. She said she loved how I set up our homemade romantic dinner. It was set up without candles. She doesn't like them, and flowers aren't her thing either. The table was properly dressed with new cutleries and glasses I bought. I made her favourite plate. Egusi soup with bitter leaves and beef, just the way she likes it. I hoped it tasted as great as always to her. She looked gorgeous under the golden chandelier. I was elated to see the present she got me. Her gifts are always the best. I got her a pretty necklace. I don't know much about jewellery, but the salesgirl assured me my lady will love it.

I was looking at her, sitting on the other side of the table, in admiration. The shade of her lipstick was elegant. Her lips separate to show some teeth when she smiles in a dazzling manner. She took small bites with the tips of her fingers and chewed with her mouth closed. She never loses her impeccable table manners.

Our conversations are effortless like we are meant for each other. I like her and I like the idea of her. She has her flaws, they're exasperating, but I can live with them. Like her superstitious paranoia. Like her need to control everything.

"Love mustn't be like how other people describe it" my dad uses to say, "that's how they felt it". It mustn't be like how movies and books depict it. While love grows as quickly as weed in the hearts of some, it grows like palm in others. It may be in your own unique way, but you'd know when you feel it. So don't second-guess it looking for perfection or what it is said to be. Like everything, make the best of it.

Through her eyes I can see a personality I'm fond of. A person I'll always recognize. No one can make me as happy as she does. This ought to be called love, it has to be. She was no longer talking from the other side of the table. I think I was staring at her too much, thinking about all that with a smirk on my face. She beamed curiously.

"I love you" I said.

This I also know.

"I love you too" she replied.

I can still feel the expression of affection in her face at that moment.

***

I hear Faty's voice approaching, her masculine yet gentle voice; nectar to my ears. Unmistakable. I wish I could open my eyes and see her and my little boy again.

"Put the card on the table for daddy to see when he wakes up, Honey. Tell him what the card says".

"Happy birthday to the best daddy in the world".

My boy can speak? My little boy can speak! How long have I been out? I have missed his first step, his first word... Everything. My God, the things I've missed!

"Say goodbye now and wait for me outside with your uncle".

"Goodbye daddy"

Goodbye little one. My boy! My big boy!

"Goodbye little brother, I'll miss you... I'll always miss you. Inna lillahi wa inna illaihi raju'un"

Why is my brother sobering and saying goodbye? What is Faty going to tell me? What is going on?

***

"Happy 36th, Sweetheart. You're officially closer to 40 than 30. I know you'll love that; you love getting old. Hey, listen... Remember the night you proposed to me? You said: 'I'd give anything to make you mine'. And I said I'd do the same ..."

Of course I remember, I was a wreck who was trying to get his life together because of you. Your father and everyone saw me as a man who was up to no good. Only you believed in me. You were the only thing I was one hundred percent sure I needed in my life. Proposing to you is the most important thing I have ever done.

"... I would have given everything to keep this going if I can. But... But five years... Five years is a mighty long time to be in our situation. And I have given everything I have. I have sold our house. The car wasn't worth much after the accident. I'm four million naira in debts. I have nowhere else to borrow. Your brother sold his car. He's also in debt, only God knows how much. And only God knows how long it will take us to pay everything back. His family is miserable. Everyone else have given far much more than they could afford. And now... now we simply don't have any more to give... I don't have any more to give.

I have lived the worse days of my life these last five years but today is the worst of them all. I'd given anything to see those big eyes of yours open again. I'm not ready to say goodbye but this is all I can do. I signed the papers, Sweetheart. I signed the papers to turn off the life-support machines. I see so much of you in our little boy. He's smart and brave just like his daddy. We will miss you... by God, I'll always miss you.

"Sorry to bother you, Ma'am. The doctors are here, I think it's time. Whenever you're ready."

Forgive me, Sweetheart. I love you. And I'll always remember you."

Five years? Five years. My God! How did this happen? I am a slave to this machine. What good am I? I can't help myself; I can't help anyone. Helplessness is the worst kind of being. I took everything away from you, my dearest. I should be the one asking for forgiveness. If what you have done in these years is not enough, then it is not God's will for me to wake up again.

"Are you ready ma'am?"

Forgive me, my dearest. I'll always love you... Till we meet again. I am scared. It's time I started reciting the Shahadah.

***

I am not dead and this is not the afterlife. My nostrils feel the warmth of air again. My lungs hurt, gasping for more air. I hear the chaos in the room. The doctors calling for one thing or another. I don't hear the machine beeping anymore. I feel my eyelids rising, everything is a blur. My focus is gradually coming back. It sets on the card planted on the side table that says: "Happy birthday to the best daddy in the world".

The Weight of Our Steps

Christian Emecheta

— *2nd Runner-Up, BPLP 2025 (Short Story Award)*

We moved like a river of broken dreams across the scorched earth, thousands of us fleeing the eastern borders of our homeland. Once proud citizens of Bermuda, now reduced to wanderers in our own country. The afternoon sun beat mercilessly as our procession stretched endlessly toward the horizon.

My daughter Amara slept against my back, her tiny breaths warm against my neck, while my son Kiano trudged ahead, his twelve-year-old frame bent under the weight of our few remaining possessions. The boy who once chased butterflies in our garden now carried the burden of our displacement on his narrow shoulders.

Two days had passed since we left our village. Around us, children who should have been playing in schoolyards instead balanced bundles larger than themselves on their heads. Their eyes registered memories no child should experience. The thunder of artillery and whisper of approaching militia were the daily routine.

"Mama," Kiano's voice cracked, drawing me from my thoughts. "I need to rest."

"Just a little further, my son," I said, reaching out to steady him. Three months had passed since they gunned down his father, mistaking him for a rebel. My beloved Rabiu died in my arms while Kiano watched, and now I saw that moment reflected in our son's eyes every time he looked at me.

A commotion ahead brought our column to a halt. An elderly woman, Nyota, had collapsed in the dust. Her daughter Zuri knelt beside her; panic etched across her face.

"Mama, please," Zuri begged, "You must get up. The soldiers are coming."

Nyota's weathered face creased with a gentle smile. "My child, my journey ends here. But yours must continue."

"No!" Zuri clutched her mother's hand. "We stay together or not at all."

The old woman's eyes shone with unshed tears. "Listen to me, Zuri. When I reach heaven, I will speak to God himself. I will not rest until He brings peace to our land, until He returns the light to your blameless eyes."

Before Zuri could protest further, Nyota's body began to convulse. Within moments, she lay still, another casualty of a war that fed on the innocent.

I wanted to comfort Zuri, but the distant rumble of military vehicles spurred us forward. We had no time for proper mourning – survival demanded we keep moving. I adjusted Amara on my back, took Kiano's hand, and pressed on, my feet bleeding into the rust-coloured earth beneath us.

The sun was beginning to set when Kiano stumbled again. This time, his knees hit the ground hard, and the bundle he carried spilled across the dirt path. His thin shoulders shook with silent sobs.

"Why did they kill Baba?" he wailed, his voice raw with grief and exhaustion. "Why are they making us run?"

I knelt beside him, my heart breaking anew. "Some men carry hatred where they should carry love," I said, gathering him close. "But we must keep moving, my brave one. For Amara. For the future."

The sound of helicopter blades slicing through the air made us both freeze. But instead of the dreaded government gunships, a different sight emerged over the horizon – the white and blue flags of the UN refugee camp.

Relief swept through the crowd like a cool breeze. We quickened our pace, hope lending strength to our weary legs. At the camp's entrance, aid workers rushed to help those who could barely stand. I fumbled with my wrapper to give Amara water, my hands trembling with exhaustion.

When I finally freed her from my back, my daughter's body was limp and cold...

"Amara?" My voice emerged as a whisper, then rose to a scream that tore through the camp. "Amara! Wake up, my baby!"

Aid workers rushed forward, gently trying to take her from my arms, but I clutched her closer. Kiano stood frozen beside me; his young face became a mask of horror. At that moment, I saw him transform from a child into something else – a survivor who had witnessed too much death.

"Please," a woman in a blue vest knelt beside me, her eyes kind but urgent. "Let us help."

But we all knew it was too late. The heat, the journey, the weight of our suffering – it had been too much for my baby's fragile body. While I had focused on keeping us moving forward, death had crept silently up my back and stolen my daughter's last breath.

Kiano's hand found mine in the dust. "Mama," he said, his voice steady despite the tears streaming down his face. "Amara has gone to be with Baba. They will watch over us together."

His words, so wise beyond his years, broke something in me. I collapsed into the red earth, my grief erupting in wails that echoed across the camp. Other mothers gathered around us, adding their voices to my sorrow – not just for Amara, but for all our children lost to this senseless violence.

As the sun set over the camp, casting long shadows across the endless rows of tents, I held my remaining child close. Kiano's heartbeat against my chest reminded me that even in our darkest hour, love persisted. We had lost so much – our home, our dignity, my husband, my baby – but somehow, we had to find the strength to continue.

"We will live," I whispered into Kiano's hair, making a solemn promise to both the living and the dead. "We will live, and we will remember, and one day, my son, we will help build a world where no mother has to bury her child because of senseless wars."

Around us, the camp slowly settled into night, a temporary haven for thousands of shattered dreams. But in our shared breath, in our clasped hands, in our determination to survive, we carried the seeds of hope for tomorrow.

CTRL Z

IKECHUKWU HENRY

Her name is already fading when she presses her palm to the clinic's glass door, as if the city itself has started deleting her before the machine can. The door slides open with a soft vibration, releasing a current of chilled air. Ibadan Tech District sprawls behind her like a body made of steel and light. Inside, the reception glows with faint green panels, a clean surface that promises nothing human, only precision.

She moves in slowly, like someone approaching a coffin that is disguised as a chair. Her shoulders bend toward themselves as if to shrink from recognition, though no one looks at her except the receptionist, a young man with a face so smooth it might have been printed from the same console that will later press into her brain. He asks for her implant ID. She says it quietly, without hesitation, though a tremor stirs in her throat.

The waiting room is bright and cold. She chooses a seat near the wall. Her fingers press against her knees, pushing them closer together. A memory comes uninvited, flashing across her inner eye. A face leaning toward hers, a woman's laugh rippling like water struck by stones, and the feeling of a hand resting at the base of her neck. She tries to hold the memory still, to understand whether it belongs to joy or sorrow, but already it is slipping, blurring into shadow. She reminds herself that this is why she has come.

The technician calls her name. Not her full name, only the shortened version she never liked, but she rises quickly, grateful to leave the waiting room behind. The corridor to the lab is narrow, with walls that carry the sterile fragrance of disinfectant and old wires. Each step echoes faintly, as if the floor remembers every footfall.

The lab is not what she expects. It feels too plain, too ordinary. A reclining chair stands at the centre, attached to a console with a cluster of glassy wires. A screen hovers above it, waiting to be fed her secrets. The technician gestures toward the chair. She hesitates, but sits, the leather beneath her body warm, as if someone else's fear lingers there.

"Are you sure you want to proceed?" the technician asks. His voice is even, professional. He looks at her, not with judgment, but with the tired expression of someone who has watched many people erase their own lives.

She answers yes.

The console begins its preparation. A faint pressure blooms at the base of her skull, where the implant rests. She closes her eyes. Her breath slows, her chest rising and falling with the rhythm of someone preparing to be altered.

The system requests her to name the file for deletion. Her lips part. She wants to say her wife's name, but the word catches like a thorn in her mouth. She swallows, then whispers instead: "Failed marriage." The words feel heavy, stripped of tenderness, as if history can be filed away in a phrase.

The machine receives the command.

Fragments rise. She sees a compound where clothes hang on a line, the smell of food being cooked, the sight of her wife's arm stretching upward to peg a wrapper, the muscles taut and beautiful. Then another fragment: a slammed door, the sound sharp enough to rattle her bones. Another: her mother's voice, cold and cutting, saying, "This will never be accepted."

Her chest tightens. She wants to reach for the fragments, hold them still, but the machine pulls them out, blurs them, begins to fold them inward. She feels a coldness in her veins. A quiet spreading.

The technician watches the monitor. "There may be residuals," he says carefully. "Deletion is never perfect. But what remains will be faint. Harmless."

She nods, but her stomach coils. She wonders what "residuals" mean. She imagines scraps of laughter without faces, shadows of touches without context. What if she falls in love again, not with a woman, not even with a memory, but with the echo of what she has destroyed?

The machine clicks. The procedure is underway. She closes her eyes, and in the darkness, she waits for herself to vanish.

When she opens her eyes, the lab looks the same, but she does not. Her head feels as though someone has rearranged its furniture. The technician is disconnecting the console wires with quick, practiced motions. He tells her the process is complete. His voice is polite, detached. He gives her a bottle of water, and she drinks slowly, noticing how strange it feels to swallow. She leaves the lab after paying without asking questions, because the fear of answers presses more heavily than the weight in her skull.

The Tech District outside is alive with vendors calling to consumers, neon signs climbing the buildings like restless vines. She threads through the crowd, the implanted site behind her ear throbbing with faint heat. She thinks she should feel empty. She paid for emptiness. Yet something swims in her, small and persistent, like a ripple traveling against the current.

At night, the recovery begins. She lies on her bed staring at the ceiling, and the machine inside her leaks pieces it promised to erase. A hand brushing her cheek, but the face blurred. A rush of laughter, rising and breaking, but the source muffled. She feels warmth on her lips though she cannot name whose mouth it belongs to. She shudders, pressing her palms against her chest as if to trap the fragments inside before they scatter.

The logs appear unbidden on her retinal display. File fragments detected. Recovering... The words flicker. She tries to shut her eyes, but the overlay persists. Then, a sequence:

Data fragment: 004. Corridor. Someone is running after her. Voice: "Wait." Emotion: longing, sharp and unfinished.

Her pulse jumps. She does not remember the corridor, but her throat aches as if she has cried there. She curls to her side, breath shallow.

The following day, fragments return stronger. She pours hot water into a mug and freezes when steam rises, because a sensation surges from nowhere—arms circling her waist from behind, the press of a chin on her shoulder. She grips the dining table so hard her knuckles ache. She cannot picture the face, but her body remembers. A ghost lives in her skin.

The logs keep surfacing. Data fragment: 011. Marketplace. Fingers brushing over bracelets. Voice laughing, teasing: "This one fits you too well." Emotion: desire wrapped in playfulness.

She leans against the wall, dizzy. She wants to see the bracelets. She wants to hear the teasing voice again. But there is only absence, sharpened by the remnants of presence.

The horror grows in her understanding. This is worse than grief. Grief carried a whole body with it, even if broken. Now she is left with organs cut apart, nerves firing without

reason. Her mind is a field of graves where ghosts kiss her and vanish before she can look them in the eye.

She begins to fear herself. Yet, slowly, the fear softens into something like longing. She walks through the Tech District at dusk and imagines her wife's steps beside her. She looks at a woman reaching for tomatoes in the market and feels her chest squeeze with recognition, though she knows it is a stranger. The implant has left her haunted but also tethered.

That night, another fragment returns. This one is sharper, almost whole. Data fragment: 018. Veranda. Moonlight. A woman leaning in. Lips on hers. Emotion: surrender.

She gasps, pressing her hand to her mouth. The sensation is vivid, electric. For a moment she does not care that the system has broken her. For a moment, she falls in love again with the ghost she paid to lose.

The implant buzzes faintly inside her, but she no longer resists. She lets the fragments spill. They are incomplete, jagged, but they are hers. She understands, with a clarity that frightens her, that forgetting is another kind of death. And she refuses to die twice.

In the recovery log's sterile text, her story now reassembles itself, not as a clean deletion, but as a declaration. She cannot hold the whole of her wife anymore, but she can hold the echoes, the shards, the traces of joy and pain that remain.

And in the half-light of her room, she whispers the name that the machine failed to erase. The name rises, fragile but certain, like a seed pushing through concrete.

Hostage Song.

Daniel Echezona

You all watched the woman die. Bound hands and feet, made to sit on the prickly grasses under the sun, you were all there reciting the pledge when the first scream escaped the woman's mouth and the first water ran down her thighs. It was the onset of her labour. Everyone stopped, turned to her, pity in their eyes. Each person wished they could help, but when one of the captors landed a slap on the face of the boy closest to him, your mouths loosened again and you continued the pledge—*for he who has been roped finds freedom in cage*...

But you watched the woman from the corner of your eyes. Writhing, screaming, totally ignored by the kidnappers as she ran wild in the labour-induced madness. Your mouth did not stop spurting out the words of the pledge, alongside this mass of over 200 people sprinkled helplessly on the grass of their torture. Your eyes drew up water when you saw one of the masked men slap the woman, her shout breaking mid-way. She prayed in spasms of Igbo, and from her bruised Hail Marys, you knew she was Catholic.

Molly went over to the woman and loosened the noose on her arms and legs. She sprang up, tearing at her hair and running in desperate circles. But she fell; she couldn't do much. No one to steady her, to lead her through the dark caverns of pushing out her child. The men had now led everyone into their respective huts, and you had heard the woman call your name as you walked back, *Kosi*. But you could not turn back.

When Molly called you out in the evening, you saw the woman lying there on the grass, her legs apart, the head of her foetus stuck in her vagina.

In Molly's room, you recoiled at his touch. "Please."

"Kosi, we agreed on this night, don't start this now."

But you were in no mood for lovemaking, and you told him so.

" Is there anything you've asked that I did not do?" Igbo sounded soft on Molly's tongue, making him seem less of a kidnapper-terrorist that he was.

"That woman," you said, "you watched her die. You could have helped her."

"I did. I untied her. Wanted to help. You think I really have so much power alone." His voice was hushed, yet animated.

He went to the other end of his small room, shrouded in the darkness that you could hardly see him.

"For heavens, this woman got pregnant in her husband's home, and you people brought her to this vast nameless bush to die with her baby trapped in her legs." Your voice was shaky; you were on the verge of tears.

Molly was silent awhile, then he said, "Kosi, *kwụsị ya*. Just stop. We can do this another day; I will lead you back now if you want to go."

But you did not want to go. You wanted to be in this single thatched hut of his, in his sweaty arms for the rest of the night. You wanted to make him scream *Oh God* in Igbo; wanted to lead him into you, to take him in your mouth while his bushy pubic hair razed against your face. You wanted him fiercely, in a way you did not understand, even though

he would see you by tomorrow noon in the company of his gang and pretend your intense nights of passion never existed. Still, while the night lasted, you did not want to go. You wanted to remain in the arms of your captor.

Later, that night, you thought of the woman as you moaned at Molly's thrusts— how aflame she must have been under her own husband nine months back. Your moans shifted to an agonized cry. Molly paused above you and asked, tenderly, "Kosi, what's wrong? You have never been this broken."

*

You met Molly four days after you were kidnapped on your way to university. Along an expressway in Makurdi. The kidnappers had shot the driver and diverted the entire fourteen passengers into this bush, wide as a city. You were all placed in different huts from where you were brought out occasionally to recite the captor's pledge and be flogged under the sun. There was only one young man in the hut when you arrived. Nmesoma was his name, and he had been kidnapped on his way to a Company Conference. You lived on his stories for the first few days—about his young sister, Kamsi; his over-Christian mother, and his crush at work. He liked you, before Molly. But he had less to offer, captive just like you, so you leaned towards the captor.

Molly had come on the morning of your fourth day to check the hut, when you asked him for a notebook. He'd sighed and left. Hours later, he brought you one. Then the next day, he came and asked what you had written— a rebel letter? But it was a poem, and he liked it, said he liked to read and write poetry. He asked you to write a poem about him the following day, and soon, he was visiting the hut every day to hear your poems. And Nmesoma grew more reticent.

*

The room seemed more empty now since the woman's death. She had been the only person added to this hut since you joined Nmesoma. She had spent only three weeks, and for most of the days refused both the meagre portions of food the masked men served, and the much-better food you received from Molly. Three weeks had been enough to know and love her, enough to make you and Nmesoma begin talking freely again. Enough to let you know about her asthmatic seven-year-old with her husband back in Aba; enough to know that she was on her way to Maiduguri from where she'd board a flight with her sister. She was going to have her child abroad.

You missed her. You missed listening as she and Nmesoma traded stories about things and places they knew in Aba. You had lived in Onitsha your whole life. Now, if you looked out to the field, you would find her body, unremoved yet since those five days, just covered with grasses. She would bloat and decay there—that beautifully round face and unblemished skin. Soon, people would scrunch up their nose as they recite the pledge out in the grass. One night, you woke up and met Nmesoma crying. You knew it was for the woman; you'd gone over to where he lay on the bare floor and patted his back, sobbing. When he reached to your lips for a kiss, for the very first time, you did not resist. Sex could taste better in this moment of sorrow.

*

In another version of your life, a version where you are god and everything goes as you plan, you would celebrate your 19th birthday in a hostel room lit with fluorescent bulbs, the chants of your roommates in the background as you speak with your mother over the phone, blushing as she sings you Happy Birthday while your siblings offer chorus. You'd

open your door to a cake sent by a friend, and you'd bury your teeth into the sweet icing. But you are no god, so you spent your birthday bleeding. It was your period. When the masked man came to hear you read your poem, he brought you a sanitary pad. He had seen the stain on your skirt the previous day. You didn't tell him or Nmesoma that it was your birthday. You only imagined your mother calling your phone line and meeting silence; how she would turn to your father and say, *she's not picking her calls, I'm worried*.

*

It was Nmesoma who brought the plan. It would take time, he said, but it could work. The hut was made of clay mud. If you both could constantly wet the walls, you could burrow a hole through the back of the sand wall, which would lead out to the thick unknowing bushes. You could escape, till you found salvation or its equivalent. It was Nmesoma who asked you to pour the drinking water Molly brought you each day on the wall. So, you drank less, and the wall drank more. Your thirst increased, and the wall weakened. If it worked, you could be free.

*

Two months after the woman's death, as the mud walls of your hut were gradually losing strength, Molly made love to you again. It was less than two minutes, and after he came, he slumped on the mat beside you and wept for a long stretch of minutes. You watched him, thinking how beautiful he was, and how privileged you were— no other captive ever saw his face, the virginal innocence always occluded behind the mask. In that version of life where you are a god, Molly would have been your husband.

There had been a day you asked him why he was doing this—yanking people off the normal life they knew. His answer had been a stern silence, followed by an order for you not to probe much further. But today he tore down his fence, told you how, in 2003, his entire family had been kidnapped on their way to village for Christmas. "My father had died here," he told you, weakly. "Few weeks after we were brought, he died. He wasn't having his hypertension drugs. My mother was among those slit when women became too much here. And my brother, I don't know what happened. But I stopped seeing him."

His real name was Nnaemeka, and he missed Sacred Heart College, his friends, his old life. When he began crying again, you loosened your heart and wept too.

*

Then, one morning, during the pledge, you did not see Molly among the masked captors. This was one of those days when the hostages were allowed untied, so when the scream came from the direction of Molly's hut, everyone—captors and hostages—ran towards his hut. And there you saw him, the beautiful young man who had been inside of you just a few days back, now lying lifeless, still masked. One of the men bent his ear to Molly's chest. He was dead. The small wound above his ankle suggested a snakebite.

You were going to tell him about your plans with Nmesoma. You were going to beg him to help with your escape. The first day he unmasked before you in his room, he'd promised to do anything for you. You were going to leverage that promise. But he was gone. He was going to explain to you why these kidnappers never asked families of their captives for ransoms, but now you would never know. He would never again hear you read your poems, and you would no longer hear those heavily poetic lines he often used, lines he claimed to form by himself although you knew he must have read them somewhere. Lines like, *to be in love is to be a body on fire, stumbling in search of a river's path*.

*

As the men carried him away into the bush, you turned and found Nmesoma looking at you. His eye was wet too. Later in the hut, you substituted the lyrics of *Rock of Ages* with lines from your own poem. You both sang, loud, spiritedly. You in soprano, Nmesoma in mild tenor. Your voices were loud even as it rained outside, and water trickled in through the leaking thatched roof. Only when a strong knock sound on the door of the hut did you both fall silent. You would wake up the next day to hear Nmesoma humming the tune; you would imagine Molly singing to it. You thought of your mother, singing this song on her way back from the police station where she had gone for an inquiry about you, and had been told yet again, *No news, madam*.

Feed us your heart

Jane Udochi

I was ten the first time I heard the demon's voice. Before then, the world shimmered in light; soft, golden, whole. My brothers and I would go outside with our bare feet acting out plays, our soles calloused from the sand and concrete. The world was a theatre: a pink stone shaped like an hourglass became a slice of bread; leaves plucked and layered with care, another rock pressed on top as the finishing touch.

"A sandwich," offering it to my mother. She'd pretend to take a bite, eyes crinkling with laughter, and the smile on my face, on her face, was like the sun itself had taken residence in our hearts.

At seven, I believed I could control the wind. My two younger brothers, not to be outdone, claimed dominion over the sun, the rain, the very earth. We were invincible, powerful, mysterious wonders. At school, I learned Yoruba, its syllables rich and melodic on my tongue. My mother's efik flowed like river water in our home, and friends brought Igbo to the playground.

I'd stand in front of the mirror every night, repeating the treasures I gathered throughout the day, "èyí," "ńnwá," watching the shapes my mouth made, willing the sounds to stay. I needed to become those words. They flowed in the veins of my mother's lullabies, my friends' laughter, my blood.

I spoke pidgin too: jagged, playful, rhythmic. I made it known to the world I was an adult whenever I yelled "Up NEPA!" when the power came back, like I'd summoned it myself.

When my uncle strolled in and asked, "How far?" I'd reply, "I dey," his booming laugh felt like a trophy handed to me.

Every afternoon at two pm my grandmother called me into her sitting room. The one with tall windows that let in the afternoon light in long golden strips, illuminating the worn brown chairs that always smelled of rain-soaked earth. I'd climb into one, legs dangling, to face her as she placed the Ayo board between us.

The beads, shiny and smooth, caught the sunlight in flashes of purple, green, blue, and red. Each time I reached to drop my seeds into a pit, she'd caution in her soft, measured voice, "Sow with care, nwa na-ezu ike."

I didn't understand. I thought I *was* careful. Yet, something in her tone froze my hand mid-air. One. Two. Three. Four. Then the beads would fall into another pit, and she would nod, pat my head and then take her turn.

My father and I sang often in those days, when he sat beading my hair. He'd perch on a chair, place a cushion on the balcony floor for me, and the two of us would hum Asa's songs under our breath. Below us, the world moved like a movie: cars honking, hawkers calling, children chasing balls in the dust; I used to argue that this was our TV.

I'd pass him another bead, this one shaped like a butterfly, because the last had been a strawberry, and he'd pause mid-braid, his hand outstretched, eyes searching mine.

"Who is the jailer in the song?" I asked once.

He chuckled, a soft, knowing sound. "Us. Mmụọ ozi," he said.

Then he took the bead and continued, fingers working through my hair with gentle precision.

I met my thirteen-year-old cousin from America the year I turned ten. I was electric with anticipation, chattering endlessly to my parents all day about the adventures we'd have. I had plans. Grand ones.

I would take her outside and show her the enormous mango tree that Uncle Yadera and I spent countless hours climbing, sleeping in, my second home. I'd lead her down the dusty road to Mama Uzoma's kitchen, where we could share a heaping plate of fried rice, three golden-crisp pieces of turkey, and juice so sweet it made your tongue curl.

When she finally arrived, I stood at the gate in my bright red dress, nervously tugging at a loose thread that held the *adire* together. She wore a plain white T-shirt and jeans, her gaze sweeping over me with quiet judgment before she pointed to the colourful beads braided into my hair.

"What's that?" she asked.

I smiled, already excited to explain, but before I could, she laughed.

"That's embarrassing," she said.

I suggested we play outside. She ignored me, flopping down in front of the television and clicking aimlessly through every channel. I wondered if I was being too boring for a girl from America. I tried again—maybe we could climb the mango tree?

She wrinkled her nose. "That's dangerous. We could just buy mangoes."

I mentioned Mama Uzoma's food, but again she crinkled her face and said she wanted pizza.

When she left, she didn't look back as I waved; I stared at her. Willing it so, but it never happened. I clutched my chest on the drive home that day. A lump in my throat more than the shoulders of a child should bear.

****

The demon took my name when I was sixteen. My father had just gotten a new job in New York. I remember how he spent hours convincing my mother it was a good thing; "a chance for better!" he proclaimed, his voice swelling with excitement as he swept her into his arms and twirled her around our living room.

They laughed like they were in a movie, like the floor beneath them still had its foundation. I didn't understand it. *Why was daddy chasing "better" when I believed what we had was enough?*

But it didn't matter. Soon we were folding clothes into suitcases, wrapping glass in newspaper, taping up boxes filled with a life that could not follow us. I said goodbye to the mango tree, to the sand and dirt, to the malams with their sweet groundnuts and gentle smiles. I clung to my grandmother's frame, the way her back curved like a comma mid-prayer.

Everyone said the same thing.

"Don't cry."

"You'll visit us soon."

"Just a little while, you'll be back."

So, I wiped my tears and got into the car, turning back again and again as our house grew smaller, then disappeared altogether. I burned it into my eyes: *Don't leave. Please. Don't leave me.*

When we landed, I stood in front of the TSA officer and handed him my passport with trembling fingers. He squinted at the letters like they were a puzzle.

"Obianjuju," he said.

"Obianuju," I corrected.

He frowned and shook his head, as if telling me I was wrong.

I repeated it, firmer this time. He sighed.

"You know what? Uju. Let's just go with that." He spoke with finality, like he was doing me a favour.

"You're in America now. Make it easier on yourself, yeah?" He stamped my passport and waved me along.

School was no different.

"I'll call you Uju," a teacher said without asking.

"Juju?" a classmate giggled. "What? You don't like it? It's cute!"

They all took to my name like a child holding a pair of scissors for the first time. Juju. Snip. Uju. Snip. Obian. Snip. Obi. Everything but Obianuju. It was too hard, a mouthful; how do you even spell that?

I grew tired of correcting them.

"Hi, my name is Uju—nice to meet you!" I would smile, allowing the demon to use their fingers to stretch my cheeks up, allowing their words to pass through my mouth.

By the third week, I sat on the edge of my bed and untwisted the beads from my hair. One by one, they fell into my palm like tiny funerals. I dropped them into an empty biscuit tin, shut the lid, and slid it beneath my bed.

Then my mother took me to straighten my hair.

I remember the smell, rotten eggs and bleach, and how it clung to the walls of the salon. I remember the sting on my scalp; the hairdresser told me the pain meant it was working, even as tears slid down my cheeks.

She held up the box, pointed to the girl on it. Her skin like mine, but her hair fell in obedient coils.

"This is what you'll look like," she said.

"Aren't you excited?" I learned that maybe excitement was interchangeable with grief.

My father taught me chess. My brothers and I descended into mysteries between ourselves. I don't learn Yoruba anymore. The treasures I once tucked beneath my tongue pillaged from me.

Everyone I met carried a scalpel. Everyone prepped for surgery. They cut apart my voice, my clothing, my skin. But I was in America now. This was better.

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When I turned twenty-five, I finally returned to that house.

The dust of nostalgia and oddity enveloped everything. I could not breathe. The land choked on my air when I did. And I choked on it. Both struggling to breathe in the other.

That first morning, I forgot to greet my parents. My grandmother gave me a long look but said nothing. My uncle arrived with his booming laugh, arms flung wide.

"How far!" he bellowed.

I flinched. Stared at him, blinking.

"I'm fine, Uncle," I said stiffly. "Why are you yelling?"

He told me the mango tree was gone; cut down to make room for a store. I asked which one, heart flickering with absurd hope. *Maybe Zara? An H&M?*

"It's a tailor," he replied.

I sighed, collapsing back into the worn couch cushions. "We have enough tailors. It wouldn't kill them to build a mall nearby."

My grandmother tried to teach me that game every day. The one with the small seeds and carved wooden board. What was it called again? *Yoyo? Aya? Yaya?* I could never remember.

The demon taught me to feed it my heart. To tear pieces of meat for it when my brothers descended into air, when I wore shoes outside. Complained about the mosquitoes, the blackouts, the traffic, the roads.

"How do *people* live like this?" I asked.

"How does my *family* live like this?"

"How did *I* live like this?"

Then the demon taught me to eat my heart.

I took a bite after every complaint; the blood trailed down my chin and I left it there. I realized that could be why my family stares at me the way they do.

Their brows always furrowed in unison, their mouths opening just slightly—as if language had left them behind. Because they see the blood on my chin, the hole in my chest that keeps growing. Maybe they see the stains blooming across every shirt I wear as well.

Except for my father. He always answered. But this time, he just looked at me and said,

"I did this."

I didn't know how to respond.

Did what exactly? Brought me back to a nation everyone argued they were destined to leave? That I had left. It was all right; he shouldn't bow for penance when he says those words. The knife and fork in the demon's hands came from his, after all.

On the day I left, everyone said the same thing.

"Safe travels."

"We'll visit you soon."

"Take your time. I'm sure we'll visit you when we can."

I got into the car with nothing but a smile of promises after each hug and watched as the house got smaller.

It was then I saw her.

A girl; barefoot, bright-eyed, with *adire* fabric stitched into a sundress with the colours of flame and forest. Red. Green. Gold. She danced in front of her gate, laughing, twirling, wild with joy.

A restless child with a world inside her bones. A woman—her mother, maybe—held her hand, gently trying to tug her back as the car rolled past.

She waved at me; her entwined hand with her mother's, tugging on the woman to do the same.

And I, blood-stained, hollowed out and progress-smiling, I waved back.

The Gods Are Wise

John Ebut

Nnenna sat beside her daughter, waiting for her husband to return with the dibia. For the umpteenth time, she touched her daughter's forehead with the back of her hand and was appalled to find that the temperature was still shooting up. She stared helplessly at the rag dipped into the now coloured water in the calabash. The water seemed to gawk back at her, as if in mockery or challenge.

For a moment or two, she considered reaching for the rag to repeat the wetting exercise but decided against it. Instead, she ran her hand carefully over her daughter's body, caressing and massaging, a soft lullaby trickling from her mouth. Obiageli's eyes were shut tight in sleep, but Nnenna felt her body relax under her touch. Also, Obiageli's raspy, laboured breathing softened a bit, the rhythm becoming steadier.

"Nwa m, I'm here," she whispered into the child's ear, her voice cracking under the weight of her sorrow as she gripped her daughter's hand tightly in hers. "Please fight. Please don't leave me."

The words gave way to a deluge of tears and violent sobs that racked her whole body with a maddening force, as if intent on ripping her body and soul apart. Then she turned her gaze skywards, petitions bouncing off her tired eyes. Before long, the petitions became cloaked in the skin of her voice, billowing their way into the heavens.

"Chukwuokike, Ani, Ogwugwu, gods of our fathers, for how long will you hold your petty grievance against us like a sulking child? Have your breasts run dry of the milk of forgiveness? It is normal for a mother to spank her child, but will she forbid him too from entering her hut at night?"

The words were still on her tongue when her husband returned with the medicine man. Nnamdi saw the mucus running unrestrained from his wife's nose and felt the overpowering urge to spit on her face. But he restrained himself and instead spat out the words: "Nnenna, what is the meaning of this?"

Nnenna flinched from the disgust oozing from both his visage and voice. "Nnayi, you are back," she said quietly.

Coldly ignoring her, he turned to the dibia. "Ezemuo, you are welcome. Do you need a seat?"

The dibia shook his head. He pointed to the child sleeping on the mat, but who was obviously in great pain, and asked, "Is she the one?"

"Yes," Nnenna yanked the answer from her husband's mouth, forcing his mouth to stay agape for a moment before finally closing it, but not before shooting her a deadly glare. "Vessel of the gods, our daughter needs your help. Please don't let her die. Please don't let death take her too."

"Nnenna, what is all this? Allow the man to do his work. If he is not here to help, why travel all the way from his village with me to ours? Why?"

As though oblivious to the heavy tension between the couple, the medicine man spread his animal skin on the ground beside the child, sat on it, pulled out some cowries and pebbles from the bag slung over his shoulder, and tossed them in front of him. The

couple watched in silence as he continued with his consultation accompanied by loud incantations. He fell silent suddenly, drawing anxiety-laden stares from the couple.

"Rest your fears," he finally said after a dramatic pause. "The child will not die. At least not today." Sighs of relief followed. "I need to get some herbs. I will be back."

The old man turned to leave. Nnenna stared after him until his short, bulky frame disappeared from sight. She looked up at the sky. "Thank you, gods of our fathers. Thank you for hearing the cry of a poor mother."

She turned to her husband. "Nnayi, are you not happy? He said out daughter will live.

"And were you deaf to his other words? Didn't you hear him say—at least not today?"

"But...but..."

"But what? Foolish woman. The episode will happen again. It will continue to happen until, when they are tired of playing games with us, they will take her life."

Tears gathered in her eyes. "Why do you make it sound like it is my fault? Why are you blaming me?"

"Of course, it is your fault. Nnenna, you are a curse to my life. I regret the day I took you into my hut as my wife."

Nnenna tried to say something, but the words refused to come. She tried again, still nothing. Even after her husband had stomped off to his obi, she stood on the same spot, the door of her mouth slightly ajar. She had a faraway look in her eyes. Only she wasn't looking into the distance in front of her. She was looking back at the past.

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As soon as Nnenna stepped into her mother's hut, she could tell that something was wrong. She lowered her water pot onto the mud floor and was surprised that her mother didn't make any effort to assist her as usual. Her mother was standing in an aloof manner away from the door, her hands folded across her bosom, her posture rigid, an expression resembling a scowl contorting her face.

"Nne, o gini?" she asked, placing a hand on her mother's shoulder.

Ifeyinwa looked into her daughter's eyes with a laser intensity and said, "You cannot marry Nnamdi."

Nnenna felt as though her cranium had just been struck by a hammer. "Nne, are you joking or what? Why will you say such a thing?"

"Joke kwa? Your father and I just returned from Ezenwoke's shrine. The gods have forbidden your marriage. The oracle does not support the union."

The image of Nnamdi, her first true lover, flitted across the screen of Nnenna's mind. Short but well-built. A sweet innocent face like that of a baby, a face Nnenna loved to cradle in her palms, as if to shield it from the evils of the world. Nnamdi wasn't physically strong but he'd other beautiful talents. He was a clever hunter, and the ingenuity of his traps was as dazzling to the mind as the sun to the eyes. And when he handled the flute, he summoned melodies that smoothened all the creases in a man's heart. Above all, he was a great lover, gentle but passionate. And every day, Nnenna ached for his touch, the flames that his hands skilfully ignited over her body, the bliss that accompanied his tender

whispers in her ears. He was a constant appearance in her dreams, ever dwelling in the tents of her thoughts.

Nnenna thought of all these things as she stared at her mother. "Nne, you and Papa don't like him because he is not a warrior or a farmer. But do you have to go to this extent—lie in the name of the gods?"

"Yes, I'd rather you marry a prosperous farmer or a valiant warrior, but your mother has told you the truth." Nnenna whirled round to catch her father stepping into the hut. "It is the will of the gods, not ours. And unless you are strong enough to battle the powers, you will not marry that boy."

Speechless, Nnenna ran out of her father's compound to meet her lover under their favourite udala tree, near the river. One look at his face, and she knew he knew already

"Your parents have told mine already," Nnamdi confirmed her fears to her.

"What are we going to do?" It was a plea.

He gathered her into a tight embrace. "My love for you is stronger than any god can challenge. I don't know about you..."

"Yes, yes, I want you too."

Other oracles were consulted but the answer was the same —the gods weren't in favour of the union. But the young lovers were determined to battle the gods with the armoury of their love and courage. Against the counsel and entreaties of their families and the whole village, Nnenna moved in with Nnamdi as his wife.

In the beginning, the young couple feasted on the succulence of their mutual affection, munching on the easy happiness it conferred on their marriage. Then the issues began. The first two stillbirths didn't trouble them much. But when their next three children died in infancy, they started succumbing to worry, paying heed to the whispers of the villagers, that the gods had cursed them for their disobedience. They became regular visitors at the homes of dibias, far and near, soliciting help for their ever-ailing children. The gods taunted them, held out hope to them in the promise of a new child. And just when they allowed themselves to be wooed by the promise, abandoning their fears to the wind of their newly found hope, death would waltz in to snatch away their joy. Slowly, their happiness faded and their peace crumbled.

Many times, Nnenna looked into the eyes of her husband and saw the regret he was trying hard to mask. Many times, his countenance betrayed his thought that they'd made a grave mistake, and for this, a sense of loss would lance through her.

Then Obiageli came. Even when she turned five, the oldest any had stayed, they fought hope from latching onto their hearts. When she turned eight, the iciness thawed and slowly faith began to bud. Now ten, Nnenna's faith had morphed to a full-blown conviction that the gods had finally taken pity on them. Although the episodes of illness were still consistent, Nnenna's faith waxed stronger. She couldn't understand why her husband was giving up now.

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Obiageli opened her eyes to find her mother's face hovering over hers, a searching, desperate expression in her eyes.

"Nwa m, you are awake," Nnenna gushed. She pulled her to a close embrace, unwilling to let go of her.

"Didn't the dibia say she will wake up after the herbs have done their work?" her husband, resting on a reclining chair some feet away, hissed.

Nnenna ignored him, relishing the warmth of her daughter's breath against her neck. "You are alive, you are alive," she kept muttering.

But Nnenna's troubles were far from being over. Matter of fact, things would become really messy. Obiageli's episodes would persist until, unable to put up with it anymore, Nnamdi would send both mother and child away and take a new wife. Obiageli would be all Nnenna had, and the same dogged courage that'd made her defy the gods in the first place and married a man they forbade her from marrying, would be what'd keep her fighting for her daughter's life. She'd fight until strangers, who called themselves "Christian missionaries", appeared in the village, condemning the villagers' gods as "lifeless idols" and calling their own god "supreme". She'd scoff, like the rest of the villagers, when they talked about their god sacrificing his son, who was somehow himself, on a cross to save all mankind. But when they shared stories of his exploits and miracles, Nnenna would, for her daughter's sake, run to plead with them to cure her daughter permanently.

The strangers would take her and her daughter to a far place they called "city", specifically to a "hospital" where they'd run some test. They'd tell Nnenna that her daughter has a disorder called "sickle-cell" which cannot be cured but can only be managed. They'd tell her it's because she and her husband weren't "genetically compatible". But Nnenna wouldn't understand all of this.

But now, she held onto her daughter tightly, her face radiant with relief, her tongue sticking out, as if to say to death, "I won this time."

The Season of Migration to the North

Daniel Yohanna

"If there are readers who haven't read my books, I couldn't recommend anything to read to them; instead, I'd advise them to go out, sit down somewhere, perhaps by the side of the brook, with nothing to do, nothing to think about, just remaining in silence like stones. They will eventually meet someone who has already read my books."

It was Monday morning in Maiduguri, the capital city of Borno. Adamu woke up very early, as usual, to prepare breakfast for himself, the rats, and the cockroaches in his room. After that, he left for work. At 6:50 am, he was at Mafoni Liberty Secondary School gate, where he worked as an English language teacher. Before he stepped into the school compound, he said to himself, "The collection of poems sitting on my desk takes my breath away from the first time I read it. Deep in its eyes, it seems to be a look that says blood streams in the desert. I could not help but kiss its lips and dance with it in the rain. I will not stop until I find the road to its heart."

Adamu walked into the school. After assembly, students were matched to their classrooms. At exactly 8:00 am, the bell rang for the first period. Adamu quickly picked up his lesson notes, writing materials, and headed to SSS1A.

As he stepped into the classroom, the students greeted him, "Good morning, Mr. Adamu."

"Morning, students. How are you?"

"Fine, thank you, Oh Captain! Our captain!"

"You may sit down for a smooth sail."

He wrote the subject on the whiteboard. He asked the students a few questions on the previous topic, which was "noun," before linking it with the topic at hand.

Adamu loved it all. He loved the way students' eyes lit up when they understood something new. He taught a new topic, "noun phrase," and his students didn't understand it. The look on the curious faces of his students made him feel like he was dancing with a stranger. He loved their questions. Their questions were as sharp as arrows; they were as soft as whispers. He loved the laughter that filled the classroom when they understood the concept after a detailed explanation.

He gave them classwork and marked it before the bell rang. He was impressed with their performance. He asked Aisha and Musa, who were the slow learners in the class, to meet him in the staffroom during their free period so he could explain to them because their performance was below average.

While he was in the staffroom, he received a phone call from his landlord, "Hello, sir. Good morning, sir."

"Adamu, what is good about this morning? Your rent has expired, and you are there saying 'Good morning'."

"Please, landlord, I promise to settle it next week when I receive my stipend."

"Adamu, Adamu, Adamu, how many times have I called you?"

"Three times, oga landlord."

"If I don't see my money next Monday, whatever action I take, do not blame me. In other words, the landlord is not to blame."

"Yes, oga landlord. Thank you, oga landlord."

The call ended, and he rested his head on the desk, knowing full well that he had to service the loan he collected from the school to pay for his sister's school fees. He knew even after being paid, there would be no money to settle his rent.

On Tuesday, after teaching narrative composition, he asked his students to write an essay about *home*.

Before they began writing, he said to them, "Yes, we are all nostalgic at some point. Yes, we are dreamers. For dreamers are people who can find their way by moonlight, and their punishment is that they see the dawn before the rest of the world."

Aminata inquired, "Should we write about the place we long to call home, or write about the home that let us down slowly?"

Mr. Adamu answered, "You can write about angels up in the cloud who watch over you all day long."

Musa inquired, "Should we write about the people we long to see?"

"Yes, you should."

"Ok, Mr. Adamu."

They bent over their books, their pens scratching like a choir of crickets. When they read their work aloud, most spoke of rubies, roses, cocktail parties, and family reunions. Only Idris spoke of his mother's *tuwo shinkafa da miyan kuka*.

Adamu smiled as he listened. Yet when the last student sat down, he found himself still thinking about the word *home*, thinking about why all the good people at home relocate to the cemetery at a tender age. Each time he said hello to a caller from his village, all he could hear from the other end was that a young lady died of this..., or a young man died of that... His own definition was not as simple as it seemed to his students. He marked their classwork and left the classroom for the staffroom.

At 4 pm, Adamu returned to his house at Damboa Road, a small structure leaning on tired foundations. The roof leaked when it rained. The walls carried cracks like old scars from a battlefield. The windows rattled whenever the wind pressed against them.

His room was alive, but not with people. Cockroaches darted across the walls, their shells glistening in the lamplight. Rats squeaked and scurried in the kitchen, gnawing at crumbs left behind. Most men would have cursed them, but Adamu often chuckled.

"You two are better than silence," he would whisper when he heard them moving. "At least you remind me I am not alone."

Loneliness was his truest companion. Visitors rarely came. He was reading the novel "Things Fall Apart" when his girlfriend, Nasiba, visited him. She went to his kitchen to prepare *tuwon shinkafa*. In the kitchen, she opened a pot, and a huge rat dashed out of it. She screamed and fell on the floor. Adamu rushed in on hearing her voice. He saw her pointing at the rat running away.

"Kill it!"

"What do you want me to kill?"

"That rat!"

He laughed and said, "No, that's my friend."

"Your what?"

"You heard me right."

She was flabbergasted hearing him call the rat his friend. She hissed and got back on her feet with Adamu's help. He tried to pet her, but she pushed him away.

"Adamu, you must be insane to call the rat your friend."

"Please listen to me, Nasiba."

"Please save it for your pet."

"Nasiba, wait. Please wait."

"I cannot be in love with a man who keeps a rat as a pet in his kitchen."

He tried to stop her as she walked out of his room, but to no avail. His world fell apart again because the only lady who kept his hope of being a husband alive left him. She picked up her belongings and left.

He called her phone. She picked up.

"Hello, Adamu. What is the problem?"

"Please, where are you? I miss you."

"See, I can't come back to your house. If you are lonely, sit comfortably in a chair, close your eyes, and spend five minutes humming, not a melody but a pitch that feels comfortable. Relax your jaw and feel the energy of the hum within your body. Bring the palms of your hands to your cheeks and notice how much vibration is occurring within your jaw. This five-minute message will release stress and help you relax."

She hung up. He tried calling her line back, but she busied his call. He tried again, but her phone was switched off. He sank into the tired mattress in the room.

Night settled heavily in Adamu's dim, crumbling room. The air trembled from the echo of Nasiba's angry footsteps. A glass cup lies shattered. The bulb flickered as though unsure whether to live or die. He sat on the bed, elbows on knees, face in hands. He knew the rats and cockroaches in his room by name.

Adamu muttered, "She said I love my pets more than I love her. Maybe she's right. Maybe the pets listen better than I do."

He sat by his cracked window and let the wind brush against his face. It carried tales of places he wanted to visit, tales of children he wished to raise, tales of students he wished to empower when he finally made it in life.

While marking his students' essays, he paused to write on the corner of his diary.

A Home is where the wind finds me. It is the voice that tells me I belong, even when I do not understand how. Home not walls or a roof; it is the story the air whispers when I close my eyes.

The next morning, when his students saw it, they fell silent. Some tilted their heads, puzzled, but Aminata and Musa smiled in that way only children can.

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Adamu knew he was poor. His stipend barely covered rice and kerosene. Yet he carried himself with dignity. He believed that so long as men could breathe or eyes could see, he would inspire the younger generation to make the world a better place. He was not a man of many possessions, but he was a man of many epithets.

The letter came to him through his neighbour, Mallam Gimba, on a Wednesday morning, folded neatly in an envelope that smelled faintly of ink and possibility. Adamu's hands trembled as he opened it, his eyes running over the words until they blurred:

"We are pleased to offer you the position of Programs Officer at the Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, North Carolina..."

He read it again and again, each time more certain that his life had shifted. For years, he had poured himself into teaching and writing in obscurity, scribbling essays in candlelight, whispering stories to the wind. Now, an institution had seen him, had chosen him.

When the day came to leave his dilapidated house, Adamu stood in the middle of his room, gazing at the cracked walls that had witnessed his loneliness. The cockroaches darted along the floor as if in farewell. From the kitchen came the rustle of four familiar rats, bold as ever, sniffing at the air.

He laughed softly. "You think I'll leave you behind? Oh no! It's the season of migration to the north."

With a strange tenderness, he coaxed the rats into a small wooden box he had once used to store old books. The cockroaches he gathered carefully in a jar with air holes punched in its lid. Most people would have recoiled, but for Adamu, these creatures were more than pests. They had been his companions through nights of hunger and silence, his orchestra of rustles and squeaks when the world outside ignored him.

WOMAN

ABDULRAHMAN M. ABU-YAMAN

Phase I

Grief.

Mijinyawa is dead. He is your husband. Was. Merciless death. To take his soul in the hospital, on your bedside, carrying his newborn, while relishing in the joy of fatherhood, you think death must be a sadist. An exchange of life for death. A substitution. Father dies, baby lives. A paradox that has been, still is, and will continue to whip your soul like punishment for a haunted sin.

But none of these matters now. What matters is that you must do something unavoidable for his people and culture. You know what it is:

Mourn.

A thoroughbred city lady is who you are. Yar birni. You did not know how, but Mijinyawa's people taught you how to mourn according to their custom. The women of Farin Sama village had demonstrated it to you after the loss of your first child, the stillbirth.

To mourn Mijinyawa, you need to project a new face. You know the drill, just like your last loss, but this one needs to be more intense. You need it to grieve your husband, their most prized asset in Farin Sama who impacted on the community with his charitable donations to projects like digging boreholes and school renovations.

Now, before you join the wailers outside, look into the mirror. Let there be tears. That is easy for you; yours flows generously. Make sure to have enough supplies to last in their presence. Your eyes must be bloodshot to convey the depth of your grief. Check your eyelids, make sure they are a bit swollen to manifest the weight of tears streaming down your face.

Okay, listen, unlike your first loss, now you need wrinkles. Yes, his people will demand to see traces and curves mapped on your face. You must plough the skin on your forehead to develop some wrinkled ridges. After that, cultivate your smooth cheeks to wear them out. That way, they will appear slack and fallen for them to see the sullenness of your sorrow.

Your nose does not have to be flooded with mucus. But try to maintain constant sobs at intervals to remind the village wailers you are still in touch with the pain of your husband’s death.

By now, you should know what to do with your mouth. Only open it when you're crying out loud. And when you're not, bite your lips and press them together. It will remind you to keep shut, no matter what the wailers say--the blame and curses you may hear. Or better still, pretend you are deaf.

Recall how you were accused of swaying him into your religion? Recall how Mijinyawa went against his parents will and married you despite his betrothal to another lady arranged for him in Farin Sama? Recall how his mother shamed you for your barrenness after five years of your marriage produced nothing? Recall how she pushed your husband to walk his name, Mijinyawa -a man for many wives, and how he was forced to marry the lady he had earlier declined for you? Recall how your mother in-law still accused you of

having a hand in her death during the birth of her stillborn child for your husband? Recall how she looked at you funny when you had your fair share of the stillbirth a year and a half later? Recall everything and put on this mourning face according to their custom if you don't want any trouble. You must do this for the sake of the fatherless baby Mijinyawa left behind whom you're afraid will be taken away from your care if you don't comply.

14 days.

That is the gap between your husband's death and your newborn baby. You were mistaken. The child was not to be spared. Merciless death. It was a delay all along. Delay of grief and sorrow.

But you are no longer in Farin Sama. You left after ten days of mourning, of wearing a face you had to configure for their cultural protocol to meet the people's expectations. Even though you hated it, you had to wear that heavy mask.

Now you are at home. You can mourn the death of your baby without faking a face for your loss. The moment you have longed for. A sigh of relief.

You cry. You scream. You curse. You blame God. You curse death. You beg to be taken. You throw yourself around, up, down, against the wall, on the ground. As you heave, your grief explodes like hot air in a balloon. You cry with all your body like you used to laugh with all of it when Mijinyawa courted you many years ago. Your relatives understand. They make no attempt to restrain you as you unmask your pain and sorrow.

Hours after your outpour, you feel lighter. A newfound emptiness, a happy one. It feels like you are levitating after offloading the excess baggage of grief accumulated in your body. Your last attachment to Mijinyawa's family has been cut off. Though they deny you a fair share of his inheritance, you don't care. You are free now. Widowhood is not designed to taste this good, but your case is different. It is a bittersweet experience with more sweetness in the mix. Could this be life's compensation for everything you have suffered? You are disappointed if it is. Life, you think, can never make up for the damage caused by death.

In your moment of clarity, after eradicating your self-imposed guilt preoccupying your mind, you tell yourself the truth:

Of how you did not sway Mijinyawa away from his religion or force him to convert to yours. Something his parents and people would rather die than believe, no matter how many times you try to explain it to them. But that day is still fresh in your memory. He smiled at you, took your hand, and said, 'Teach me how you worship'.

That was the first step. It was the hardest step to take, like a toddler learning to walk. After that, Mijinyawa took the rest himself and found his way in.

You remind yourself on how he was the defiant one against his parents' choice, not you. You couldn't look them in the eye out of fear and respect. But does that even matter? After all, they made the dog go back to its vomit.

Of how you had nothing to do with his second wife's death and her stillborn. How could it be you when you had yours too? Yet, your mother-in-law claimed it was of good riddance for what happened to the other lady. You wonder how she could not see that your loss was also hers too.

Sometimes you wonder if the problem was from you, but not anymore. Other times, you imagined Mijinyawa being the jinx for fathering two consecutive stillbirths, but not anymore. Now, you only put the blame on his mother and her tongue for uttering words

that have proven to be premonitions, and her accusatory finger that always found someone to point at.

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Phase II

Joy.

A new feeling. It creeps into your body without your permission. It moves to your left chest, penetrates, and makes heat to wake your heart from its hibernation in grief. You do not want this, the healing. When you grieved your husband and the stillbirth, the feeling was indelible. Now accustomed to its hollowness, you feel heavy as joy usurps its way to fill it with the Colonels presence. Col. Samaco, the stalwart soldier who spoils you with generosity, flattery, and his attention. Just when you have given up on joy, he drills his way into your heart with chills and thrills. He is a rough diamond and the source of the feeling sprouting in you like a shrub in a desert.

What to do?

Start from your face. No, nothing is wrong with it. It looks fine despite all the dirty things grief and sorrow have planted there. Yours is made of good genes passed on from a long line of ancestors.

You need a new camouflage. A proper cover for it to match the joy Col. Samaco has worked hard to install in you.

It started at the beach where he first saw you. That day, he was not in camouflage. How could you have suspected? When you found out his identity later on, it was too late. His impressionable persona had won him a place over his uniform.

Back to your facial camouflage, remember you're not hiding anything. The leftovers from your losses are still palpable. But you're not covering them because of shame. No. You love seeing them on your face. They remind you how far you have come and what you have encountered in your last marriage. They will never change. You are only adding a layer on them, like building on an existing foundation. That way, the switch will be smooth when there is a need to shed off the surface if another misfortune decides to visit you again.

"Woman, why don't you ever smile?" Col. Samaco asks you again, but you nod against doing so. He calls you woman, which is actually short for my woman, which comes from a pick-up line from an Afro pop song chorus, *My woman, My everything*. You like it when he calls you Woman. It feels like collating all fancy names for ladies and arriving at the singular definition: Woman. A simple name with sophisticated by-products. Your circumstance, past and present, agrees with this name: Woman.

Now, Woman, it is time to cover up your face. You will need doses of smiles, slices of smirks, handfuls of laughter and a few pinches of winks. The smiles and smirks should not be difficult to develop. All you have to do is thread on those lines from the wrinkles on your fallen cheeks, the ones formed from your past grief. Reshape them into aesthetic curves. You have read somewhere that it requires sixty-four facial muscles to frown but only fourteen to smile, so you know it should not be difficult to apply.

But, Woman, you know laughter is just inches away from smiling. That too should be easy to come by; the progression from smile to laughter. They are close and identical like 5 &6. Once you keep up with the smile, laughter will take its natural course. A smooth transition.

The winks will be tough, Woman, but you can always try. Yes, it will make you feel awkward, but do it for the Colonel. You know, he once said that you can only love someone by using their love language. So go ahead and chip in those winks between your smiles and smirks. After all, you have nothing to lose. You are only wearing this face - this mask, to meet him at Tinsel's. Your real face is still secured beneath the camouflage countenance.

Woman, Col. Samaco did not pick Tinsel's by chance. You know it is his favourite spot. He has been talking about taking you there one day. But he will soon be stationed in another state. Remember, he recently asked your opinion on long-distance relationships. Now do the Maths, Woman. You can guess what he is up to.

Tinsels to the altar:

You maintain the same camouflage. The mask of joy has not fallen off. Well done, Woman. Congratulations. You are married again.

How could you say no to Col. Samaco who saved you from drowning? No, it was actually from your attempt to self-destruct in the waves of that beach where you first met. But the Colonel does not know it was a suicide attempt. He still thinks he saved you from accidental drowning. That is why you feel it is easier for you to put on another face than to explain it to him.

(IN/RE)SURRECTION

CHIMEZIE OKORO

i.

Madam President's voice from the parlour jolted me awake. As a family, we used to listen to the Independence Day broadcast delivered by every president before her, but we barely followed through during her first broadcast. Just Papa had glued his eyes to the screen, the volume turned up high, as if he was hard of hearing.

She was saying, "My fellow compatriots, I assure you that the Boko Haram insurrection will soon be history," as I shuffled into the parlour. I caught snatches of her Northern accent, how her *p*'s rolled into *f*'s, twisting *fellow* into "*pellow*". I blinked at the TV's glow. Although Papa seemed to enjoy it this way, he looked impatient.

"Life was much bearable when a man ruled this nation," Mama was complaining now. She had set the table for breakfast, akamu and moi-moi. I couldn't tell if the same aroma wafting into my nostrils was a stench to hers, because, like Papa's, her face was scrunched up in distaste. Maybe she found the TV's loudness equally unpleasant, but, like me, she couldn't ask Papa to lower it.

"Every now and then, insurrection in the North. What has been done about the killings here in the South?" Papa rose from the sofa, hitched up his shorts. His paunchy belly propelled him towards the dining table. "Come, Obulor, let's eat your mother's food." He picked up a spoon. "I assure you, Madam President has eaten enough of the national treasury."

He said "assure" with a northern accent, so that it tumbled out as "ashuah." I erupted in laughter; Mama didn't, not even Papa who had cracked the joke. We ate in silence punctuated by the clink-clang of cutlery.

"How's your new school?" Papa asked me, breaking the silence.

"It's fine."

I lied knowing he couldn't afford to change my school anyway. The public school was in disarray, short of stationery and staff. On the sunless day I was enrolled, Odioka my friend said things were taking a good turn. By that he meant the absence of a strike. It was Odioka who told me about the killings. During what possessed the bustle of a break, meanwhile it was the time allotted for Maths. Although his voice was conspiratorially faint, like the way I wished Papa would lower the TV's volume most mornings, I was terrified by the story.

"Please, eat," Mama urged me, watching as I fiddled with the moi-moi. "We're lucky to fend for ourselves even with the economy this bad."

"I'm full," I muttered, dropping my spoon.

"Your cousin will be visiting soon," said Papa. "In the meantime, he will be sharing your room while attending JAMB lessons."

"Make him feel at home," Mama added.

ii.

He arrived the following morning while I was climbing into Papa's old car for school. I glanced at him through the rolled-up window. He wore his blue face cap backwards. His jeans pooled below his buttocks, and he occasionally tugged them waist-ward, walking with a swagger. He reminded me of the boys in Odioka's tales, rough boys.

"Obulor, come and say hello to Ndu," Mama called out to me.

I said welcome, and he nudged me on my forearm, hard. "You don grow big o!" he said in Pidgin, grinning. "Which class sef?"

"S.S. 1." I squirmed away from his touch.

"Big boy!"

I was astounded at how my parents embraced him warmly, asking about his mother, his trip, all the while ignoring his indecency.

Papa started the engine. As we turned onto the pothole-riddled road, I watched as Mama led him inside, relieved him of the weight of his leather bag.

iii.

At the public school, punctuality was outmoded. Except for our Biology teacher, Mrs. Vivian, the rest had grown lax. She stood before the class. I followed her darting eyes, from a few scattered desks to the chalkboard hanging lopsidedly. The previous topic was still scrawled on the board: The Circulatory System.

"No one has taught you since Thursday?" she asked in disbelief.

Silence.

Odioka rose from his seat, nodded in affirmation, then rushed to wipe the board. The chalkdust swirled in the air, dotting her gown. She flicked at them with her lesson note, gracefully. Whiffs of her sweet perfume settled in my nostrils. I imagined her gown dripping its redness, collecting into the gory pool of blood Odioka had told me was the killers' handiwork.

"Blood is a living fluid," she recapped, breaking my reverie. "Depending on the blood vessel severed, it spouts or trickles out."

I felt a lurch in my stomach. My eyes met Odioka's, flickers of fear in our gaze. I wanted us to revolt against the killers and force them to surrender. But all-around town, everyone feared their wrath. Except Ndu. I learned of this later that day.

Ndu sauntered into our room, hands cupping his jean's crotch. He seemed oblivious to the presence of another, because he leaned by the doorway, headphones plugged in, bobbing his head to some music. NEPA had seized light; only the reading lamp standing atop my study table wanly lit the room. There was a softness to his smile, so different from the men who had robbed Odioka's neighbourhood. They had charred lips, stained eyes, inked skins tanned from long days of camping in the bush. But here was Ndu, ripe-pawpaw-complected, teeth gleaming white.

He tucked his phone into his pocket and said theatrically, with an exaggerated bow: "Dinner is served, Small Oga."

I wanted to say, “Go ahead, I'm coming”. Instead, I sat there, watching him leave, unsure how to respond to a boy who seemed both like a gentleman and a lout.

"Won't you read?" I blurted out.

He stopped in his tracks, turned and cackled. "Reading na scam," he said, carefree about the prospect of failing JAMB.

I pulled a face in mock surprise, which he didn't find embarrassing, but brazenly cackled again.

"I know someone who'll ensure that I pass JAMB, I assure you," he said, imitating the president's pastoral accent.

Papa said Madam President hated corruption: "I assure you, fellow compatriots, we shall defeat corruption." But Ndu seemed to endorse it.

"She mispronounced 'corruption' as '*kwarafshin*' in the last broadcast," Ndu laughed.

"And Papa claims to dislike her," I began tentatively, "but somehow, he reads every article about her."

"Is that not the definition of a fan?"

We both laughed out loud, two cool cousins. I marvelled at our newfound camaraderie.

"Kwarafshin is everywhere. Just look at the high cost of petrol, groceries, tuition." He slipped his phone out of his pocket and dropped it atop the table and then tossed it into his pocket again, as if to demonstrate the government's misplacement of economic priority, one of the emotional burdens he was venting out right now to feel lighter.

I nodded in agreement, slowly.

"Don't even get me started with the insurrection. The other day, I saw a lot of people evacuating in vehicles overloaded with furniture." He had now perched on the edge of my study table, speaking bitterly like Mama. Of course, he had every right to be angry. After all, his father constituted the casualty statistics. I knew this, despite Mama's efforts to shield me from it.

"Do you know the killers?" I asked finally, anticipating a deflection.

"They call him Don Lighter," he said. "Because he arsons his victim's house at the end of his operations." He paused, then continued in a weak voice: "He dismembered my father, limb by limb."

I wanted to pat his arm, reassure him. But grief was a private experience. And so, I awkwardly adjusted my glasses, letting the name echo in my ears, this discovery of a fearless one. And then, I stood up, saying: "Dinner is served, Big Oga."

iv.

We began to get along with each other, Ndu having returned from the JAMB lessons, me having done the dishes. We would trade stories of our day. He talked more about the girl he'd been seeing at the end of the lessons, her doe eyes, her skin, its tenderness, her height, which lingered on his chest whenever they hugged. From the description, she appeared vivid in my dreams but mute. Amaka was her name. He asked me if I had somebody like that in school, anyone I admired.

"There are only boys in my school," I repeated firmly. I couldn't possibly confess it was him.

Then we'd conclude with the recent killings in town, who had been kidnapped, robbed, or left to suffer the same fate as his father. It always went this way: from a funny story to a sad one that erased his smile. I couldn't relate to his grief, until earlier today on the

devotion ground, when the principal, who rarely made appearance at the devotion arena, mounted the small podium, hands firm as he spoke with a voice that didn't shake me for its huskiness but the sorrow it draped over me:

"Mrs. Vivian is gone forever."

v.

Later at home, Papa offered me a glass of red zobo. Ndu hadn't returned yet. I'd cried in the classroom, staring at the damaged chalkboard Mrs. Vivian always wrote on. I fixated on the glass of zobo now, reliving the moments leading up to the announcement: What if they had beheaded her, watched her blood spout then trickle into a glass, and the content of that glass was what Papa was now guzzling?

I couldn't stomach the sickening imagination, the horror of it. So, I knocked over my glass and ran into my room. Curled up in bed until the waning sun singed the sky into dusk, feeling deprived of a proper grief.

vi.

Minutes later, Mama walks into my room. I've unlatched the door hoping that Ndu will return anytime soon. She scans the room, then walks to the open window and shuts it. With the blanket drawn over my chin, I watch as she turns slowly, like a heavily loaded bus, and pulls over at the edge of my bed.

"I made your favourite," she rocks my shoulder tumultuously. "Egusi and fufu!"

I'm turning away from her touch when the power goes off.

"NEPA wahala," Mama hisses.

I turn the other way to see the flashlight she has flicked on. The light illuminates the ceiling, reminding me of the things I would have been saying now to make Ndu shine his white teeth, despite my grief.

She's dragging me up from bed when I hear our gate clang and the front door slams open against the wall. I'm alarmed, and so is the look on Mama's face. Mama and I storm out of the room, down the staircase.

In the parlour, the air smells sharply of egusi soup. Something tightens in my chest as I make out Papa kneeling before a man wielding an axe, threatening to harm him if he doesn't produce Ndu. Mama begins to scream. The silhouette of the axe rises into the air. Suddenly, as NEPA returns light in a blast, I see the man sink the axe deep into Papa's shoulders, once, then again, then again, until something splatters on the walls, the TV, sofas. Before Mama produces another scream, Ndu struts into the house, headphones over ear. Like me, he steels at the sight of the blooded axe, at the rigid face of the man drenched with sweat. He pulls back. The man chases after him. Mama hurls herself onto Papa's body, propping his severed neck up. More, and more blood spurts out, staining her blouse. My vision implodes with tears.

vii.

A few years now after Papa's burial, I stand by the parlour window, watching a chickless hen frantically scratching a hole on Papa's grave. The scent of loose earth fills the air. I

remember sprinkling earth over the casket while Mama lunged at it, wailing. Every night, she dreams of his resurrection. I also do. His resurrection, like an end to the insurrection, is impossible. I also remember Ndu's absence at the funeral, how terribly I had missed him for days. How, later that night after escaping the man, he told me the truth. The man—Don Lighter's underboss—wasn't after Papa's life, but Ndu's. Because he had once fought the man on one occasion for Amaka's safety. A cataclysmic feat of bravery.

The hen halts. It lifts its head to regard me for a long moment, as if expecting a confrontation. When none comes, it clucks dismissively and then resumes clawing at the grave. I watch in silence, desperately wishing it were Ndu's.


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