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TSSF Journal is a yearly literary journal that publishes fiction, poetry, creative non-fiction, and essays. The Single Story Foundation (TSSF) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that provides storytelling opportunities for Africans at home and in diaspora. Submissions are accepted across all genres and within these categories: short fiction, nonfiction and poetry. General editorial inquiries should be sent to journal@singlestory.org. Other inquiries should be sent to info@singlestory.org.

Learn more about *TSSF Journal* at: journal.singlestory.org

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Editor's Note

Over the years, The Single Story Foundation has firmly stood alongside other organisations that are embracing Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's call to allow writers connected to the African continent to tell the stories they want to tell. Brittle Paper, Jalada, Short Story Day Africa, and The Kalahari Review are only a few of the many rich storytelling outlets that celebrate the diversity and breadth of tales that stem from an incredibly complex and varied continent of over fifty countries.

Yet, despite the wealth of African publications, there never seems to be enough opportunities to accommodate the exploding literary culture that is sweeping the African landscape and diaspora. Thus The Single Story Foundation decided to add two new opportunities into the literary mix, one being an annual online literary journal that would showcase established writers, such as Athol Williams and Lauri Kubuitsile, alongside less experienced writers.

For the first edition of The Single Story Foundation's online journal, no topic was selected or genre mandated. We simply requested that writers send us their best. The editors for this journal, Tolu Daniel (non-fiction), Genna Gardini (poetry), and I all agreed we'd rather publish less content and have the opportunity to work with writers, than publish numerous submissions and only copy edit the pieces. There was a cost to this decision: with over two hundred submissions, we found ourselves in the awkward position of having to reject quality work.

The positive side of our decision to publish less, however, was that it provides time and space for both editors and writers to benefit. Yes, with the

established writers, such as Athol Williams and Lauri Kubuitsile, very little editing input was required. But with the less experienced, we had the opportunity to open a literary dialogue, much like what is employed via Writivism, and workshopped the pieces. These encounters do not only benefit the writers. As the writing is exchanged back and forth, the editors, too, learn and expand their ears.

On behalf for the TSSF team, we hope you enjoy the results of this endeavour.

Tiah Marie Beautement
Managing Editor



Fiction

Moon Secrets
by Lauri
KUBUITSILE

She sits down on the sofa, exhausted, and turns on the TV. Much against her character, Goitsemanang has grown to like reality crime shows, especially ones about serial killers. So she's happy to see one is starting. She doesn't dig too deep as to why she enjoys learning about killers. Maybe it's a break from her day job. She recently got tenure at the university. She teaches two courses on the history of Southern Africa this year: Women and the Liberation Movement, and History through Oral Traditions. The last one is a new course and it takes a lot of her time. She's also working on three academic papers for upcoming conferences and trying to finish a book on the rain queens of the Lovedu people. So all day her brain works flat out, so in the evenings she finds she craves a bit of senseless serial killing.

Tonight's episode is about a married man, a truck driver, who'd been moving about at night in his truck killing women. He'd been doing it for years. No one suspected him; his wife was the most shocked of all when she found out. Goitsemanang can understand that completely. She knows people and what she knows most is that people can never be known. Your truck-driving husband, sweet as anything, could just as easily be a serial killer as a cross dresser. Secrets and deceptions are the greater part of most people.

A knock at her door. She checks her watch, annoyed. Who would come to her house uninvited at 8:30 in the evening? She has a suspicion. It's likely a continued conversation from earlier in the day she thought was finished. She switches off the serial killer show and answers the door.

"I'm really not in the mood for this tonight," she says. The look of him alone makes her feel bone-weary tired.

The man standing on the doorstep is tall. He wears jeans, red Converse sneakers, and a T-shirt with an American baseball team advertised on it, but his

hair is sprinkled with grey. He's trying hard to stay young, too hard.

"I won't take much time," he says.

Goitsemanng steps back and lets him pass into the sitting room. She closes the door and follows him. They speak standing in the middle of the room. Goitsemanng knows to sit will prolong everything and she'd wanted an early night.

"I just want to understand," the man says.

Goitsemanng tries hard not to sigh. She knows he won't like that. "What's to understand, OT? I'm a busy woman. I'm already forty-nine years old and have lived a perfectly full life alone. I like my life how it is. I don't see any reason to change things so late in the game."

"Do you love me?" His mouth shakes a bit at the edge. She can see he's scared to hear the answer.

"Yes, I believe I do. But what does that really matter?"

He runs his hands through his hair in frustration.

"What does it matter? That's all that matters."

"No, you're wrong there. I'm sorry, OT, I really am. I know you want this, but I don't. I've never wanted to be a married woman. We can continue how we've been, if you want – I like spending time with you, we have a lot in common – but I don't want you to get the wrong idea. I'm never going to marry you. It's just how it is."

The man paces back and forth, his agitation increasing. "So what? Is this some more of your feminist bullshit then? Is this you making a stand for something no one gives a fuck about?"

Immediately Goitsemanng sees he regrets speaking out what she suspects are his true feelings.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that."

"It's fine, I know you're upset."

Goitsemanng's tired. Living has become so tiring lately. Days lay upon days. Just pulling herself out of bed and getting on with it sometimes seems an insurmountable task. All she had wanted was to spend her evening investigating the minds of murderers, but here she is in the middle of another person's drama. It all seemed far away, like it had nothing to do with her, and quite unnecessary.

She walks to her drinks cabinet and takes out two glasses and the bottle of whiskey. She's been drinking too much lately, but tonight she isn't going to worry about that. She sits down heavily on the sofa, setting the bottle and glasses on the sturdy wooden coffee table. She pours herself a drink and holds the bottle over the other glass, looking up at the man. He shakes his head and she sets the bottle down. She picks up her glass. She takes a deep drink and sits back on the sofa, slumped like a teenager awaiting her punishment.

"I don't get it," he says. "We've been dating for nearly six years. It's time to get married now." He's still standing, giving him an edge over her she doesn't like.

"I told you from the first date I didn't want to get married. I think you know I say few things I don't mean."

He paces some more and runs his hands through his short afro. She watches him and thinks about how she will never understand such an emotional man. She's not a fan of such emotion. She tries to keep hers to herself and thinks it would be better if everyone did the same.

"I know you, I know you more than you know yourself. I want to be with you, take care of you," the man repeats.

Goitsemanang nearly laughs at that. He knows her like the trucker's wife knew her husband – about as much as a person could, which was very little. She normally tries not to think about things she doesn't like, things that are upsetting. Maybe it's wrong. Psychologists rant against letting things pile up inside. They warn emotions will come out – one way or another. But so far Goitsemanang has found that to be untrue. Nevertheless, she opens a little window into her mind, into the dark recesses rarely visited, and takes a peek.

She's there again, a girl, only turned sixteen the week before. She was a beautiful girl, just as she'd grown to be a beautiful woman. Already at sixteen, men coveted her. She was giddy with their attention. Too much attention had got her in the mess she was in though. Looking back, Goitsemanang sees the moment when that girl takes control of her life. A single moment when she says – I will not be pushed about by circumstances. If there would be pushing, she would be the pusher. A decision that set the course of her life.

A baby. A tiny girl. Light-skinned and noisy from the minute she was

born. The world sent out a lot of messages about women and babies; a lot of propaganda from Goitsemanang's seat. That night she did not hear any of it. All she heard was her own survival call and she answered it. Wrapping up the baby, she set it next to the railway crossing, a place where a car's lights would surely find it, and went home. Home to her life she had only just started living. A life of secrets, just like everyone else, she would have hers too. Secrets that needed a lid put upon them, a lid that needed constant vigilance to keep in firm place.

She pours herself another drink and lets the man talk. He has a nice voice and the drone of it comforts her in a way. She can see he needs to get everything off of his chest. She wonders if her secret would shut him up. If it would have him packing up his words and making a clean exit. He sees himself as a modern man, an educated man. A metrosexual, with liberal tendencies. But she knows that when pushed into a corner, when he is denied what he wants, his public face melts and his secret-self steps up, if only a small corner of it. She likes him, maybe even loves him as she has said – as much as she can – but people are people.

She checks her watch. She's missed her show. She would always wonder what happened to the truck driver's wife. She supposes being a serial killer wiped out everything else about her husband, anything good, any happiness they might have had. Certain secrets work like that. They become the only description of the person.

She feels herself getting drunk, but pours herself another drink anyway. OT sits down next to her. He's calmer now, finally.

"I don't know if I can continue in this relationship if it's going nowhere," he says.

"That's fine, perfectly fine. You need to do what's right for you."

He takes her hand and kisses it. She hopes he's not going to cry. He leans forward and pours himself a drink, swallowing it in one go.

"Can I spend the night?" he asks.

"Of course."



In bed they make sloppy, though competent, love. The man is soon asleep and Goitseman gets up, slipping out her kitchen door into the garden. The moon is full and it turns her plain garden into a blue wonderland.

It was a full moon that night, too. When she lay the baby down in the grass at the side of the road, the tiny girl had immediately become quiet and looked up at it, mesmerised by its light in the black sky. Goitseman had watched her for a few moments, wondering what she was thinking, and then she turned and walked away. Someone would love this child, she'd told herself. Better than she ever could.

Goitseman was sure she'd moved on from that night, though sometimes she wondered. With each new academic year came a new group of students and each time there was that one girl. Sometimes short, sometimes fat; sometimes bright, sometimes not so much. Always light-skinned and beautiful. Always with inquisitive, moon-worshipping eyes. Goitseman would do her best to pay her no attention. She would stop herself each time from searching for information about her. She knew it was never her, but it was always her too.

The night is cool and so quiet. The trees stand black against the clear, blue-glowing sky. She hears a rooster crow somewhere in the city. I can easily give OT what he wants, she thinks. They could have a life together. She's tired of keeping up the vigilance. Secrets require that. *Could she tell him?* The thought of telling someone usually makes her scared, but tonight in this cool moonscape, the thought gives her comfort. The idea of letting this single person see her completely, tonight it seems like such a relief. But night is like that. It's open to mistakes. It allows a person to be flawed, even in the most terrible of ways. Days do not. And there was always another sunrise, always another day.

She eases herself down to the grass. It's wet with dew. She lays back on its itchy coldness and looks up at the moon. She wonders if somewhere her daughter might be doing the same. Did the moon bring her an unidentified sadness? One she knows is always there but can never be understood? Goitseman hopes not. She hopes that her daughter will let the forgiving night ameliorate any bitterness she feels for the girl who'd given birth to her, even if only for one night.

Goitseman is tired in a way no sleep will ever relieve her. She wants to

be cut free.

The wet has gone through her nightgown and now she shivers in the cold moonlight. I should get up, she thinks. I should climb back into my bed with the man who loves me. She thinks about how she might get in next to him and kiss his neck and bite his ear until he wakes up.

And then she will say, "I'll agree to marry you as long as you listen to this first."

Then she will tell him.

She'll tell him how she'd hid the pregnancy. How the pains started and she remained quiet so her father, who so loved her, would not hear and find that she had disappointed him. How she'd crept out into the bush to give birth so no one would hear. How she'd abandoned her daughter at the railway crossing like an empty drink tin or a sweet wrapper.

Would he be forgiving like the night, or would he be the judging daylight? She lies where she is and lets the cold take her completely. She lies still and waits for the dawn.

Lauri Kubuitsile is a two-time winner of The Golden Baobab Prize, the winner of the Botswana Ministry of Youth, Sport and Culture's Botswereze Prize for Creative Writing, and a finalist for the 2011 Caine Prize. She has numerous published books, her most recent are a children's book, *Thato Lekoko: Superhero* (Oxford University Press SA, Dec 2015) and *The Scattering* (Penguin SA, May 2016) a historical novel about the genocide of the Herero people. She lives in Botswana.



Poetry

Dancing
by Efe
OGUFERE

i grew up thinking
that the body of a woman is a house.
an abandoned house around the corner,
a repository for beautiful broken things.
walk too briskly and you'd miss it.

it must have been that first night

mother neatly folded
sobs between her wrappers
and carefully placed them, locked, in a box
deep breaths and a despondent smile as
she walked out and dared a lion to bare his teeth.
she must have forgotten that she was a pacifist.

it must have been the crunching sound
of breaking bones dancing to a tune,
a marriage of fists and naked flesh or
the steel in her voice urging me to go
as she whispered,

back to bed Jethro, your father and I are just dancing

Efe Ogufere is a banker working in Portharcourt, Nigeria with a passion for written and spoken word poetry. A few of his poems have been featured in journals and magazines such as Sediments Literary Review, African Writer, The Kalahari Review, WRR, Afrikan Mbiu and Pulse Nigeria. In 2016, he was long-listed for the RL Poetry Award (International Category). He is currently working on his chapbook titled *Collecting Memories*. He blogs at theaventurine.wordpress.com and tweets at [@theaventurine](https://twitter.com/theaventurine).



Fiction

Green Shirt
by Timi
ODUESO

You are eight years old, Nonso is twelve and you both live with your Grandmama inside her small flat where the walls are unpainted, and the floors are rough, gray and untiled. The flat is one of four in a house with no running water. And every morning there's a race for who gets to first drop the leather carrier, a buga, down the well. The undisturbed early morning water looks clean, despite the grains of sand that settle at the bottom of the bucket. After that, the water is churned, murky and brown.

Even though Grandmama's flat is located closest to the well, you and Nonso never get up early enough. Your buckets are never first; despite the alarm on Grandmama's old Nokia phone; despite the sun that will begin to shine through the transparent louvre windows and the thin red-and-blue wrapper that acts as a curtain. You both wait until Grandmama folds her wrinkled short fingers and presses tiny pieces of your skin between her thumb and forefinger. By the time you and Nonso arrive at the well, all that comes up in the buga is murky and brown.

Nonso tells you that the water in the well turns brown only when the Thing inside the well is hungry; only when it smells breakfast. The Thing that lives inside the well is said to be long, black and slimy. It has red eyes and makes no noise during the day. But should you open the metal cover of the concrete well when the stars are out, it will growl, deeply. The Thing loves the taste of chickens, rats and skinny young boys. That's what your brother, Nonso, says every time you threaten to report him to Grandmama. "Tell," he always says to you. "Just go ahead and tell. You know what happens to rats around here." And Nonso's threats would quiet you; at least until you caught him smoking again. You know you shouldn't believe Nonso; there is nothing inside the well. He is only teasing you; because it's what big brothers do. Grandmama says Nonso

loves you deep down, that teasing you is Nonso's way of loving you. But the teasing bothers you. It bothers you that Nonso whispers to you of how many slimy tentacles the Thing has – nine. He says the Thing wraps them around people's necks, dragging them down the hollow cylindrical rings of the well to a watery death. Nonso's stories bother you so much you wish that the Thing would take him away so you can sleep without your mind shrouded in fear as you dream of red eyes.

Every night, before you sleep, you assure yourself that one day, you will challenge Nonso and demand that you and he fight the Thing. Then you will no longer have to be afraid; you will no longer have to go to sleep with the fear that wraps itself around your neck at night, squeezing too tight for you to breathe.

Nonso has always told you that Mama went to heaven when you were born. So you stay in the small hamlet with Grandmama because Papa works in the big city and he does not have the time to take care of little boys. Your Papa has a big belly and his chin is full of hair and when you look inside his eyes, you can see that they are tired and red; that Papa looks like one of those men who can sleep standing upright. Papa comes to see you and Nonso sometimes. You like it when Papa comes. But this only happens in December; when the well is dry. This is when you and Nonso have to walk down the street to get water from the small stream that flows there.

When Papa comes he brings new shirts for you and Nonso. It is the only time you drink Fanta; it is the only time Grandmama really smiles. You have ten shirts now, all of them have different colors. But only the green shirt, your newest shirt from Papa, has no holes in it. The cockroaches in Grandmama's room have not tasted it yet.

This is the shirt you put on.

"It can smell you. And it hasn't had breakfast yet," Nonso says to you as you both stand by the well.

You look at your brother. Nonso isn't wearing his best shirt, but his yellow one with a big hole near the neck. You can see the delight behind his dark brown eyes, enjoying your fear. You do not want to be afraid anymore. You want to drain his delight right out of his eyes. So you make a quick decision, climbing

the outer concrete ring of the well. This is forbidden. Grandmama has told you several times that only Nonso is allowed to climb up. You look back, enjoying the surprise on Nonso's face at the sight of your newly found bravery. You move closer to the metal opening. This is the first time you have looked down the well. It is not like you thought it would be. The water isn't brown and you can't see the sand particles that always settle at the bottom of your bucket. There is nothing on the edges of the rings. No sign of the green slime that Nonso always says stays on top of the water. The only thing scary in this long and hollow well is the darkness lurking at the edges.

You look to your brother and smile. "I knew you were lying," you say.

"I'm not lying," says Nonso.

"There's nothing here."

"Of course there isn't. The Thing is a predator. It's stalking you. It knows you are looking for it. It won't show itself unless it's ready to take you."

You ignore Nonso and look down the well. "If you really want me, come get me. I'm right here and I'm not afraid anymore," you yell.

Your voice echoes back. You wait, watching to see if a sharp-toothed monster will come up. But there is only your rippling reflection floating on the square shape of light. You wait to hear the growl; to hear a sound; to see a tentacle erupt from the liquid to grab your tiny arms and drag you down while Nonso would stand and laugh at you, and as the water filled your ears; he'd say that you should have listened to him. But nothing is happening. You grow confident, minute by minute. You look to Nonso, your head high and your fear banished. "You lied. There's nothing -".

The growl cuts you off.

You turn to look down, but all you see are patterning ripples on the surface.

"Nonny," you say. "Stop trying to scare me. I'm no longer afraid."

"I'm not doing anything," he says.

You can see that he is slightly amused, yet you know that Nonso is telling the truth. You don't think that he can make the sound you have just heard. You look back down the well and watch the ripples as they hit the borders of rings.

"Did you hear that?" you ask him.

You don't want to tell Nonso what you have just heard. You know he will make fun of you. Laugh. So you say nothing, climbing down from the well. Nonso climbs up. He drops the leather carrier down the well; you hold your breath, expecting something to jerk the buga down and Nonso with it. But nothing happens. Nonso fills your bucket with brown water. You grab your white bucket; the one that has "Amanda weds Nedu" inscribed on it and walk away. You go as fast as your legs can carry you while Nonso begins to fill his yellow bucket.

"Grandmama," you say when you go through the metal door of the kitchen.

"What is it?" says your Grandmama in her scratchy voice. "Are you done bringing in the water?"

"Not yet. Nonny says the Thing can smell me and wants me for breakfast."

Grandmama gives you a wide-mouth smile. It is one of her fake ones. Nonso says she uses that smile just to shut you up. So you smile back while you wonder why some of her teeth are missing and why the rest are brown. "The Thing doesn't like skinny boys," she says. "Not ones who haven't had breakfast."

"Are you sure?" you ask. Nonso always says that Grandmama is fond of lies.

"Would I ever lie to you? If it were to eat anyone in this house, it would be either me or your brother. We have more meat on our bones," she replies.

The saliva in your throat refuses to go down. Nonso's words echo in your ears. You don't answer Grandmama. Instead, you go through the kitchen with your white bucket and enter the tiny living room and proceed to the even tinier bathroom, tilting your white bucket into the black basin, which sits in the corner behind the wooden plank door.

You take your bucket back to the well for Nonso to refill for you; you will not be climbing up the rings again. But Nonso is not waiting at the well. There is water all over the paved floor with a yellow bucket on its side. You look around. But Nonso is nowhere to be found. You pick up his bucket and walk back inside to tell Grandmama that Nonso is gone.

"Gone where?" she asks.

“I don’t know.”

Grandmama asks you to check outside for Nonso. You go to the flat right next to Grandmama’s and knock at the door. The woman who lives there, with skin like honey and straight hair, sometimes sends you or Nonso on errands. She answers. You wonder if the woman knows what the other people in the compound say about her. That she is an ashawo, a prostitute. They say this is the reason her room is always so clean, the reason she uses hot irons to straighten her hair and the reason why she doesn’t allow the sun to darken her skin.

The woman tells you that she has not seen Nonso and you go to the other two flats. They all say the same thing, “No. Nonso is not here. We have not seen him.”

It is the sentence you repeat to Grandmama when you return to her. It is the sentence you say in your head when you go to the stream to check if Nonso had gone on a smoking escapade with his tobacco loving friends. He did that sometimes. You knew. Because you watched him. It was the reason he called you “rat”, it was the secret you didn’t share with Grandmama.

That night, nobody whispers stories of young boys eaten alive to you. Nobody runs their fingers lightly across your back to scare you. You keep thinking about the growl. How you didn’t tell Nonso what you heard. But this time your fear of the Thing is gone. In its place is a different type of fear; one that chokes you up from the inside and brings water running to your eyes. It is a fear that you may never see Nonso again.

You and Grandmama sleep alone for two weeks. Then your Papa comes. He tells you to wait outside with the small sack that Grandmama gives you. Inside, Papa and Grandmama are having a talk. You do not hear what they are saying but you know what it is about. Papa will ask Grandmama what the men in uniform have said; and Grandmama will say, “They have found nothing. They say he probably ran away.”

You were there when those men came in wearing black berets. They had asked you questions like: “Did your brother tell you where he was going?” and “Do you know anywhere he might be?” Your answer was the same, “No.” They were the same men who laughed when you told them what you heard on that

last morning, when you told them to send men with big guns down the well.

You remember their laughter. You remember Grandmama asking you to leave the policemen alone. And you remember the fear you felt when you realized big guns would not harm the Thing.

As you stand outside, you begin to realize how little you remember of Nonso. Time is slowly siphoning Nonso from you. You can't recall if his knuckles were darker than his skin; how bushy his eyebrows were; if his teeth were still milky white or if they had begun to yellow from smoking. There are only two things that you remember well; the smile he always had on his face and the yellow shirt. That shirt he wore on the last morning you spent with him; the morning Nonso disappeared. The morning you wore your green shirt.

You know now that you'll never wear that green shirt again.

Papa is still inside with Grandmama. And you know the real reason he is here. He will take you to the big city. You are sure of it.

When Papa calls you back inside he does not look too sad; he does not cry like Grandmama; his eyes are not full of worry like yours. His eyes are no longer tired, but clear, almost happy in fact. Papa tells you, "Grandmama is too old to be looking after young boys." He says you will stay with him in his new apartment and that you will go to a big school. Papa says he has a new job and a big salary. He says that he will buy you plenty new shirts and that he will take you to eat chicken peppersoup; that you will drink Fanta everyday. He says Nonso will join you there when he returns from his journey. You ask, "Where did Nonso go, Papa?"

He smiles. "Heaven, Nnamdi. Your brother has gone to heaven."

"To visit Mama?"

"Yes."

"When is he coming back?"

"Soon," your Papa replies, his smile growing broader.

You know that something is wrong. Papa should not be smiling and Nonso should not be in heaven. Your brother should be by your side, smiling with those lips of his that like to suck on tobacco sticks. But you are eight and there is little you can do.

Grandmama has tears in her eyes. You wonder if she is crying because

you are leaving or because Nonso is still missing. She holds you to her bosom and you can smell the stale odour of mothballs that clings onto all of your clothes. “Be a good boy,” she tells you and she gives you a black nylon bag; the aroma tells you what it is. Fried yams.

It will be a long trip to the big city.

Before you walk out of Grandmama’s gate for the last time, you ask Papa to wait. You run back inside. But not to Grandmama for another hug. You run to the well, climbing onto the rings and open the lid. You see the red eyes glaring underneath the water now. It does not need to growl this time. It sees you and you see it and you both know what it did. You close the lid, climbing down as it dawns on you that he is gone.

You will never see Nonso again.

Timi Odueso is a twenty-year-old intending student who lives in Abuja, Nigeria. He is an epicurean who enjoys reading a little too much and thinks that the world would be a better place if people read more books. His story, “The Stump”, has been published in the October edition of an online magazine, On The Premises. You can find him at [@TyCharle](https://www.facebook.com/TyCharle) & lifeteenth.wordpress.com/.



Poetry

**Refined
Products**
by Ahmad
HOLDERNESS

Let's talk about the fate of garri
From when a cassava stalk finds
The blackness of the soil, when it's hairy
Spikes find joy in sprouting leaves after

Its roots sojourn into the deeper recess
Of the mantle in the universe of nutrients.
Let's talk about growth, the process
Of roots becoming bulbs, fattening

To seduce a farmer's smile by harvest.
Let's talk about how cassava suffers;
How it is soaked, how it passes a test
To be smoked and dried into flakes - garri.

Then let's talk about another journey.
The way each grain reacts to water,
Hot or cold, with sugar or soup, a journey
That the throat will find palatable either way.

Does the mouth refuse to chew when
There's no water? How does the eye know?
When it is lafun or starch? Yes, all forms
Of adversity refine the cassava into a delicacy.

So of what tribe or race or religion might you be,
That like garri, you weren't planted like a seed
From your father's stalk?
That your mother vomited you rather
Than push you by force or by blade through
The face or jaws of her bowels? So you came out
Flaky like a southerner, starchy like an easterner,
Or floury like a northerner, doughy like a westerner
And you forget that there is a unit in unity

That is made of you and I.

Ahmad Holderness is a poet, aspiring writer and a medical doctor. He draws inspiration from conversations with the helpless and believes poetry can be used as a medication. He is also currently experimenting with medical-Haikus.



Nonfiction

Amuse Bouche

by O. J.

NWANKWO

It was always the female writers with wavy hair in independently made films that caught and owned your attention.

You would pore over their photographs on Google images and follow their wavy hair out of character and into reality. You drank in the bliss that was their hair. Oh so soft. So weightless it rose at the mention of the wind.

You returned to the movie again to follow the plot, you were interested in wavy hair's story and the tale she was trying to tell and soon enough it became apparent, female writers were independent women who never played by society's rules. In a world of charcoal grey business suits, they were the burst of colour, the gypsy skirt wearing, Ouija-playing, palm-reading, Chinese-tea-drinking protagonists. They tended to red wavy hair and as far as sexuality was concerned they were "liberals".

This piqued your interest, though it was too much for your conservative church mind to digest, but you aspired so greatly to that stereotype that you were determined to draw out the character and live the hell out of it. To succeed you must know how to become it. So you began your research.

You stood under the sun, at one of the many stands selling hair products at the Trade Fair shopping complex, carefully selecting the right type of wavy hair and the right shade of red. You found that the actual red, like the one you saw in the movie, makes a shocking contrast to your dark-brown skin so you settled for something softer – burgundy, almost pink and you contented yourself with it and bought it, after the trader had become irritable and just wanted you to leave his stand.

The hair was the greatest component of looking the part, once you had that sorted, everything else simply fell into place like the recipe for a well-done meal. The dark purple lipstick, the henna dye, the kajal, and the gladiator sandals. The Ouija board you decided you could do without – you were not a fan of the supernatural and you would rather stick to God, thank you very much.

You had to begin living the part somehow. So you came out of your shell and smashed it to smithereens to stop you from being tempted to crawl back in.

You had to find people to be “sexually liberal” with, so you start going to the likeliest places where you could meet willing partners. The club you find is an abundance of bodies and alcohol. You hate the too-loud music that drowns your thoughts so that you literally cannot think. And the smoke drenched atmosphere, which struck you as a dream dissolving into another dream like the murky ones you had after you fought your mother and fell asleep restless. Despite the darkness, your red hair was a hit. The first guy you pulled was half drunk and your first taste happened in the back seat of his car.

You imagined you picked right because inebriated or not the guy was an expert, he managed to don a condom (which materialized from nowhere) with one hand before he bled you.

“Shit I’m sorry baby,” in his sad attempt at an American accent.

You were mad with pain but you were still curious enough to try to look down and see what was going on and what was being put where.

But by the fifth guy you were dying inside, you knew this was not for you and wondered how prostitutes did it. You felt like a hocrux – one fifth of a soul, split for every lover. You had been sold a nightmare by the movies. Sexual liberation came with a price tag, one too heavy for you to pay. You vowed not once, not twice, to stop but you were here, and there was a new erection in front of you, so you thought “why not?” and took off your knickers and did a split. This one did not pretend intimacy like number three had, condom on and he was plunging your depths while you made the right noises, his hands in your hair – your effort-ful red hair. You began to count tiles, books on his shelf, again and again, anything to keep your mind from the pillaging going on below.

You became aware of the cobwebs on the ceiling and the trail of ants coming through a crack in the far left wall. You wondered why his room was so disgusting and dank, a contrast from the big airy and tidy house, you almost fell in love with when you walked in. He mistook that admiration as something for him and you could have sworn you saw his ego inflate just that little bit more. You met him at church and he had felt the need to ask you over since his parents were away on the pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

On the trip home you considered your curfew, it was a pointless rule, here you were on a Sunday afternoon, seething in the aftermath of a one-sided pleasure trip. You sighed within your soul, it was a debilitating bleak malheureuse of an affair. You began to consider your motive for all of this. You wanted sexual liberation, like the women in the movies you loved seeing. This was nothing like it, this was something almost sinister, the surge of desire in their eyes before and the distance in it after. You were unprepared for the silence within you or the numbness that enveloped you. You couldn't feel anything no matter how hard you tried, not joy, not pain, not sorrow, not elation, not the love of being in love. Your world had gone to sleep. You imagined the numbness was a sort of self-preservation technique employed by your mind to protect itself from the inevitable hardening of your heart which happens when you bend your soul for the fleeting comfort of another's arms. Your supposed amorous intrigues were anything but, it was a jumble of so much nothing.

You lost.

You were the amuse bouche, a simple sample, never sufficient enough to sate any hunger.

The God you abandoned the Ouija board for seemed silent, you couldn't even face him. How could you? After you had deliberately flouted his laws for incessant quickies? Pain was the familiar blanket you knew but you were well past its redemption; this was absolutely nothing self-harm could fix.

The Sunday evening found you in the kitchen, unable to awaken yourself inside so you settled for the banality of simple chores. When the plate accidentally slipped from your hand and crashed, something stirred inside you, like a stillborn foetus kicking back to life, so you did it again. Plate after plate after plate until it was empty. You were thawing. You head to the garage where

your mother stored plates for her rental business. She had branded them with her initials “AJK”, there, you continued your destruction. AJK after AJK until there was a small heap at your feet and the tears flowed freely.

In retrospect, you did not need to break so many plates, by the fourth the frenzy that came with the crash of crockery was lifting like a mist and the silence inside was giving way to noise, to feeling, to healing or at least the beginning of it. Right there and then you decided that if it ever came down to bleeding or breaking plates, you would find the razor and have a long think.

O.J. Nwankwo is a Nigerian journalist and writer who is passionate about changing the way Nigeria and indeed Africa is portrayed to the rest of the world. She is particularly concerned about mental health and the challenges facing it. She hopes to raise awareness for it through her writing. She tweets at @Lazeewriter.



Poetry

**Ask Me About
Love**

by Taiye

OJO

Each morning
I find
 me, sifting
through all the syllables
of love
 brimming with words i can say
and cannot spell
 half-illiterate in my mother
tongue half-silent
in my purchased f----- -luency

at the age of five
i watch my mother fold her breath
 into birds until they found
 home
 in a stranger's
 arms
 and yes
what of all the green blessings
 in my mouth – the shadows
that keep me company
 when my lover's face is a city
drowning with epitaphs
i open myself to a new kind of love–
 a beautiful prison
 where no one is burning

where no one is running
where no one is hiding

Taiye Ojo was born and grew up in Kaduna. He currently lives in Agbor, Delta State. He is a poet, essayist, and teaches Tourism in Calvary Group of Schools, Agbor. His poems and works have appeared in numerous journals including Kalahari Review, Brittle Paper, Glass Journal, Tuck magazine, Lunaris Review, Elsewhere, Eunoia Review, Lit Mag, Juke, and Praxis Magazine.



Fiction

Valentine's Day
by Torinmo
SALAU

There was love in the air; the aura of Valentine's Day was sweeping through the school harder than the harmattan, which continually harassed us with cracked lips and flaky skin. Never been my kind of holiday. People always teased me behind my back about how my butt jiggled in my brown khaki shorts, which were rather too tight. Sometimes they were bold enough to stop whispering behind my back and say it to my face. Even the senior students called me Sponge Bob and classmates thought it was cool so they condensed it to "SB." Sure, I'd try to lose weight, from time to time, by jogging round the dilapidated school bus adjacent to the incinerator where hardly anyone would see me. But food always welcomed me home.

Love was definitely *not* in the air, for me. But my friend Evans had a girl who made his heart flutter with butterflies dancing Samba in his stomach. He was still at a loss on what to buy her as a Valentine's gift. The question of what to buy was even tougher for both of us because Biola, the dodo to Evans' Jollof rice, was in SS1 while we were just in JSS3.

Two days to February 14th and we'd yet to find any gift that would melt Evans' way into her heart. Evans had been shrinking, saving the little pennies his mother gave him for lunch rather than eat. During break, while he shared my lunch with me, I asked him, "Why are you doing this for a girl who is, without doubt, out of your league and doesn't even know you exist?"

Evans shook his head and smiled, "You cannot understand, Ekene; it's called love."

"What is love?"

"Love is when you meet somebody, you think about
Every second of the day and night
Somebody so beautiful, it takes your breath away
And words are just not enough to say."

I was mesmerised. “Wow, that’s a lovely poem.” I never imagined Evans could write like that, because his grades in English language were pretty poor, despite being a mathematics genius.

“Thanks, I wrote it for Biola,” said Evans with a blush.

Evans’ poem helped me identify my feelings. That poem he wrote, I could never write anything like that about a girl. Nothing about them got me hard, even when hiding in my father’s toilet flipping through his GQ magazines filled with photoshopped naked women. But when I turned to a page with a man, dick curved like a fishhook inside his white briefs, my dick would stand like a flagpole.

It may not be love, but the man who took my breath away, who I thought about at night, was Idris Alba. He was my main crush, the sexist man alive with his chunky mounds of muscles. He was black testosterone personified, oozing and arousing through his dark narrowed eyes, razor-cut beard and warm smile. I couldn’t help salivating whenever I saw him draped in tuxedo suits, hungry to French kiss and fuck him, even if just as a one-night stand. But he’s not the only one who made my loins burn with an intense desire to offer myself to him, kneeling and sucking his balls, because whenever Cristiano Ronaldo scored, it triggered ripples of orgasms in me.



Valentine’s Day arrived and it was the same as any other year. But it took a different turn while I was waiting to buy puff-puff from Zizi. She makes the tastiest and most fluffy puff-puffs, as if they were marinated in honey and coated with caramel. So there I was in the queue when Chucks sneaked up behind me. I barely heard what he whispered into my ear, but I thought he said something about a surprise.

Chucks was a mulatto and girls in my class were always fawning over him, gushing about his curly hair, which was styled into a sporting Mohawk with a slight brown tint. Whenever he flashed his high-watt smile, I began to fantasise about his brown eyes while also speculating on the size of his dick. I thought about how exciting it would be to fuck him in a bathtub, but I didn’t

think he shared my attraction to men.

Chucks' gift wasn't unique, a bar of chocolate, not exactly my favourite. But I was surprised by his affection towards me. I never imagined anyone would have found me attractive; despite all the pain I went through to trim down my flabby waistline and sagging arms, I still looked like an amoeba. However, here I was talking to the most dashing student in the junior secondary section (based on popular opinion). It felt like I had won a jackpot of one million Naira. He held my hand and gave it a little squeeze. My heart raced faster than ever, pumping hard against my chest. His hand was soft, reminding me of marshmallows. I was mesmerised. I watched words roll off his lips, his pink lips, as he talked about his love for football and his dream to play for Manchester United.

We exchanged phone numbers. Chucks' phone was a Samsung Core, but I was too shy take out my phone, a Techno model held together with a sticky tape, so I scribbled his number on the glossy paper that had been wrapped around my puff-puff.

I never found out if Evans received a Valentine's gift from anyone, but what I do know is that he had to watch the crush of his life take flight with another student, leaving him to pick up the pieces of his heart.

"The boy is not even tall," Even lamented while we waited for our French teacher, Miss Bako. "He is just two inches taller than the minion characters, we watch on TV."

"Maybe the boy's father is rich because why would she push you aside and go for that dwarf who is so skinny he looks like he had been pulled through a keyhole?"

"Do you think that is why she tossed the gift I bought her, a very expensive perfume, under her desk and walked out on me? Later I saw her walking with the animated skeleton she chose over me and he had his hand around her waist."

"Probably, but don't let it dishearten you. She is just not into you."

"Yes, perhaps you are right. Her taste in boys is a far cry from what I ever imagined."

Miss Bako walked in fifteen minutes late, slightly earlier than usual. Miss Bako is always late for her class but she makes up for it by giving candy to

everyone, especially students who answer her questions correctly. I found French really hard to understand, but with Miss Bako's candy it had been smooth sailing with just some bumps here and there.



The lines of the integrated science textbook I was reading were slowly becoming blurry and the words were moving away from me. I was feeling drowsy and my eyelids were heavy and I could still taste the egusi soup and stockfish from the dinner I'd had. But I was startled out of my sedated state when my phone peeped. It was a WhatsApp message from Chucks, "Hey Ekene, whatsup?"

"Hi Chucks, how are you doing?"

I forgot about the test I had the next day as we chatted late into the night, with Chucks leading the conversation and telling me more about himself. He did not know who his father was, except that he was British and had been an expatriate in Nigeria. His father left the country when his mother told him that she was pregnant. His mother did not remarry, but he had different men posing as fathers to him.



"Why are you always spending longer times in the toilet these days?" Evans asked, with a quizzed look on his face when I took my mathematics set from him at the library.

"What do you mean by longer time?"

"I have been waiting here for the past fifteen minutes for you to just urinate."

"Sorry, I wanted to urinate but then the urge to defecate just hooked me and I couldn't resist it."

Evans was right. Aside from the urge to defecate, I could not resist the nude pictures Chucks sent to me. I was always sneaking to the toilet with my phone. Although the stench of stale urine mixed with Izal could be nauseating, the toilets were the only safe zone where I could touch myself, slowly at first,

and then vigorously until a muffled moan escaped from me.

At night whenever Chucks and I chatted, we sent each other nudes of ourselves. I went to bed with these images swimming in my head. My mother had also been complaining about how wet my mattress was these days, despite me trying to hide it by ironing the mattress before going to school. She probably thought I was bedwetting again.



I didn't like libraries. The grave silence that permeated the air made me feel uneasy, but exams were fast approaching and I had to read. My father had promised to buy me the latest Play Station 4 game, if I had more As than Cs in my second-term results. I wanted to boast to my neighbours, Akin and Dayo, who refused to let me play with theirs because they said I would spoil it.

Chucks had offered to explain algebra and simultaneous equations to me in the library. I found these topics in mathematics quite challenging. Midway through the tutorial, he paused and placed his right hand under the table, on my thigh, and began to stroke. Not long afterwards, I felt wet.

"Do you know why I find you irresistible?" Chucks said, licking his lips. "You remind me of one of my mother's boyfriends, Walter. He was the one I liked the most. Bought me chocolate, gave me money, and usually poked me."

"Poked you? I don't understand," I said, slightly confused.

"When my mother travelled, she often took me to his house. Walter said poking is a sign of manhood. He would ask me to take off my pants, then run some Vaseline in my butthole and poke me with his dick."

"Was it not painful?"

"Yes, it was at first. But after some time, it gets sweeter and you forget all about the pain," Chucks replied, still stroking my thigh, his hand moving towards my genital area.

"Sadly my mother had a fight with him and they broke up, so he travelled out of the country. But he warned me not to tell anyone about the poking, 'our little secret.'"

"Do you miss him?"

“Yes, I did. But not anymore since I met you.”

I blushed, unzipping my khaki shorts for him to stroke my dick. It was hard to stifle the moans as his fingers touched me. Then he asked, “What are you doing this weekend, I mean, Saturday?”

“Hmmm, nothing. I will just be at home probably playing video games or reading for the exams.”

“Why don’t you come to my house, so that I can explain these calculations better to you, and I have some nice video games we can play together?”

“Cool.”



I did not know when she drove in and turned the ignition off because his face was cupped in my hands as I softly kissed his pink lips; his lips were juicier than I imagined. I did not know when she opened the door, even as it creaked noisily on its rusty hinges, as my ears were copiously serenaded by the way his mouth vibrated as he moaned into mine. By then I was rock hard and I felt Chucks’ crotch bulging up steadily, chafing roughly against mine.

He rested my back against the black leather sofa, slowly licking and kissing my chest, down to my legs and inside my steamy hot thighs. My dick began to bounce up and down with signs of precum running down my piss slit. We switched positions and Chucks put his legs up on my shoulders, so I ran my tongue into the opening of his puckering butt, taking his hard balls one after the other into my mouth.

We were startled by the shattering sound of glass and I almost jumped out of my skin. Chucks and I were butt-naked waist down, with our dicks protruding like waving flags; Mrs Dike, Chucks’ mother, stood by the sofa staring at us as if she had seen ghosts. The broken pieces of the glass casserole dish were scattered all over the coffee-brown rug in the living room. I took my denim trousers and schoolbag, forgetting my green polka-dot boxers, and ran out of the house, heaving heavily and yet regretting not having climaxed.

Monday, I searched for Chucks in school but he was nowhere to be found. His classmates said he had not come to school. His phone had been switched

off since Saturday and I was afraid to go anywhere near his house. Two weeks later, I overheard some girls in class saying he had travelled to London to complete his education. But he had never contacted me.



I always wondered if it's just me or if everyone was only pretending to enjoy the vicar's sermons. It was Palm Sunday, two months since Chucks disappeared, and the mood was sober. "Repent for the Kingdom of God is at hand!" shouted the priest through the speakers. Despite the racket, two pews away from me were people snoring, their heads tilted at an angular position moving in rhythmic nods.

"Brethren, we have to be on our watch and pray harder because the days are evil!" He said the last word, "evil," with so much grit – painting the picture of a horror flick with aliens taking over the planet earth.

"My brother and sisters, what is the world turning to? I read the newspaper yesterday and it was reported that the police arrested four men who were caught having sexual relations in a bar. . . . Can you imagine, homosexuality?!"

People who had been snoring jumped to their feet.

"All gays will go to hell!"

Everyone in the chapel was nodding in affirmation. Some people were praying in tongues, while others were waving their bibles in the air as if to bind and cast the demon of gayism.

Later, while I waited for my father in the car, a decades-old, greyish black Volvo that was in dire need of a replacement, my phone beeped. It was a WhatsApp message from Chucks. The first time I'd heard from him since he disappeared. I couldn't reply; he went offline right away. The message began, "I love you," but before I could read more, my father opened the door of the car and got in, followed by his friend, Papa Kelechi, who lives on the same street as us. I quietly slipped the phone into the back pocket of my trousers, message still unread.

When my father turned the ignition on, the car let out a cough, as if refusing to start. But my father just smiled; a little pressure on the accelerator

and the engine roared to life, ready to hit the road.

When my father turned the ignition on, the car let out a cough, as if refusing to start. But my father just smiled; a little pressure on the accelerator, and the engine roared to life, ready to hit the road.

My father was fond of putting me through a Q&A after church, like what the title of the sermon was, which bible texts supported it, if I remembered the hymn the choir sang, and the first and last prayer points the pastor read out. But he was unusually quiet that day. I enjoyed the silence until Papa Kelechi cleared his throat. Whenever he cleared his throat, you knew he was about to ruffle some feathers. “I still find it hard to believe what the pastor talked about today.”

“Do you mean the gay cankerworm, which is silently eating away our moral fibre in broad daylight?” my father replied.

“Yes. Why would a man want to fuck another man? It is grossly disgusting.”

My ears perked up when I heard the word “fuck.” These men were hypocrites, telling younger people not to use vulgar words, “Because anyone who does it will go to hell.” A small chuckle escaped my lips.

“What’s funny to you?” asked Papa Kelechi, facing me.

I pretended to be interested in a sports newspaper that was hanging out from the pouch behind the passenger’s seat, burning to read my message from Chucks.

When I finally got home I read the message over and over again. *Does he still really love me?* He apologised for not staying in touch. His mother, apparently, believed studying in Nigeria was influencing him negatively and led him to gay behaviour. He was presently going for counselling for what his mother hoped would exterminate any traces of gayism from him.

I couldn’t imagine the emotional turmoil of being subjected to a shrink who hoped to change him rather than help him accept himself. But my heart melted at the final lines of his text: “The thought of you sets my bosom on fire, the taste of your kiss, warm with soft wetness. I can’t wait to have you in my arms again.”

Torinmo Salau is a writer and her works have been published online and offline in literary publications and anthologies. She blogs at <https://torinmo.wordpress.com/> and tweets at @torinmo__.



Poetry

Spitting Image
by Fahima
HERSI

When Eedo Laki
saw me for the first time,
her mouth robbed me of my name
and replaced it with my father's.
The Arabic sat sweet
between her tongue and teeth.
She addressed me
with glee and haunt
fencing in the nucleus of her eyes.

Wails filled the humid air.
Nameless faces
that looked like my own
approached the girl
whose belly hung full,
who fashioned half-broken
spectacles that dangled
on her nose
like frankincense farmers
on mountain tops.

Abo said he'd never return home
but today my face became a vessel.
I became a poem.
Transcended colonial border lines.
Spoke a language with all the wrong grammar.

But *sorry* and *thank you*
sounds the same in every tongue.
I'm rectifying relationships lost
in communication,
connecting those stood above
and those sleeping below the soil.

Fahima Hersi is a young British-Somali who resides in East London. Her poetry typically focuses on her struggles with reconciling her Somali culture with her British background. She talks a lot about the women in her family, as they truly embody the traditional Somali woman. She juxtapose this with herself, as she's adopted English and British customs whilst living in the UK.



Fiction

**The Monkey in
the Middle**
by Rešoketswe
MANENZHE

Even after I explained twice, Matome still didn't get it. He tried, though. But he struggled to grasp how someone could be both lively and suicidal at the same time.

He violently coughed before saying, "So it was you?"

"Yeah," I said. "I mean...yeah."

"I still think it's strange. Maybe you should explain one more time."

"See," I said, "I had just celebrated an uneventful twenty-fourth birthday and realised that all my achievement could be summarised in less than five sentences. I was a finance graduate; I was not unmarried and pregnant; I was not a drug addict; and most importantly, I was somehow still alive. And so, unsatisfied with my mediocrity, I started exploring things I hoped would improve my list of achievements."

I stopped, giving my leg a scratch. "I always thought I was a fair writer, and I was familiar with the cliché of artists being prone to madness and poverty. So I tried navigating the well-trodden path of degeneracy as a way of achieving creativity."

"You wanted to be a degenerate?"

"Yes, Matome, but that's not the point."

"Then what is?"

"Maybe if you listened –"

"I *have* been listening."

"I will tell it differently this time, I swear. You'll understand when I'm done."

He shrugged, dabbing a tissue at the corners of his mouth. "If you say so."

"I do." I gave him a small smile. "See, I found a website with contact

details of a few literary magazines. I then quickly composed a query letter and, finally, submitted works I'd been writing since I was nineteen. In my eyes, everything I wrote was absolutely marvellous. I was sure that only a fraction of my submissions, if any at all, would be rejected. But alas, they were all rejected."

"Did they tell you what was wrong? The editors, I mean."

"Most don't that."

"It might be helpful if they did."

"I don't think it's practical for them. They get too many submissions."

"I see." But the way he frowned made me uncertain he understood.

"Yeah. Anyway, I received several rejection letters after that."

"That's the reason you attempted suicide?"

"No." I took a deep breath, trying to rein in my frustration. "I've always been suicidal. The letters just made it easier for me to acknowledge my failures. I mean, someone had finally quantified my shortcomings. The letters, in their bluntness, were something physical I could point to and say, 'See? It's not all in my head.'"

He studied me carefully.

I waited – waited for the slight heat in my temples to subside; waited for him to say, "It's not all in your head, Nsuri." But he only sat there, with his unblinking stare.

I raised my hand, planning to feign a cough when he shifted his gaze to the window. "Continue," he said.

"The suicide part is more complicated than that." I folded my arms over my chest, trying, once again, to rein in my frustration. "Your understanding is very important to me. I don't want you to think I just gave up on myself without fighting."

"I think I get it." He began to shiver and pulled his blanket closer to his chest. "Not really, but I want to. It's just that—"

"You think it should be easy to explain."

"Yeah. Maybe it's my ignorance—"

"At least you're trying to understand."

He smiled. “I suppose. Anyway, please go on.”

“Well, the letters, the physical proof of my failures, produced the sort of pain I’d come to believe was necessary to groom me into an artist. I wanted to be Wilfred Owen, Bessie Head – broken and genius – not just a degenerate. So I mourned and celebrated the pain because I believed I was finally on my way to artistic brilliance.”

“Just another dreamer.”

“That’s what I thought.”

“How do the seedy bars and parade of questionable sexual partners factor into all of this? That’s another part I still don’t understand.”

“One editor was kind enough to hint that she didn’t find my portrayal of the human condition to be authentic. In response to that, I tried living a tortured experience so that when I finally wrote about it, it would be authentic. There’s an adage about writers writing what they know, and I was merely trying to live up to that.”

“What the fuck is the portrayal of the authentic human condition?” he asked.

I laughed for what felt like an hour. By the end, Matome had joined me and I think I ended up laughing because he was laughing, and he laughed because I was. Then I forgot the question and he had to ask it again. “What does any of that gibberish mean?”

“Don’t look at me,” I answered. “All I know is some people claim that sci-fi and fantasy lack this condition. Hence, according to these critics, sci-fi and fantasy are ‘mindless diatribe.’ And, might I remind you, that’s the kind of diatribe I’m passionate about. Every single story I write ends up as either sci-fi or fantasy. But I was strongly advised to steer my focus away from them. To be ‘real’, ‘authentic’ – to dare explore the ‘human condition.’”

“I don’t even know what diatribe means,” he said, between fits of laughter.

“I don’t think I’m using it correctly,” I confessed, between fits of my own. “But when you’re trying to crack the industry, you have to speak like the powers that be.”

“I know, I know, like the time I started using ‘algorithm’ every time I got the chance.”

“Exactly. And you weren’t even a programmer. It was funny as hell. I remember when you put on your private school accent and said to Shola: ‘Much like my heart, the algorithm of the universe is entering the entropic state of its existence. Thus we must break up, my love.’”

“And he punched me in the face.”

“Because none of the crap you were spewing made sense, and you broke his heart.”

“Probably the biggest regret of my life.” He gave a sad little smile. “I thought he was holding me back. I even tried to force him out of the closet. I know I shouldn’t have done that, but I got tired of being his secret. Now here I am, still pining for him, still missing him.”

“You could still call him, you know. There’s still a cha—”

“Let’s talk about something else.”

“Matome—”

“Not now, Nsuri. Not today. One of these days we’ll talk about everything that happened, but today we figure out your shit. Okay?”

“Okay.” I held his free hand. “I’ll be here when you need me.”

“I know, and thank you.”

“I love you. You know that, right?”

“That’s it. If you don’t stop with the sad stuff, I’m calling my mom to kick you out.”

I smiled, wiping away the tear squeezing from the corner of my left eye. “I promise not to do it again. Anyway...where was I?”

“You were pursuing the authentic human condition so as to more authentically portray it,” he said.

I noted a sense of playful mockery in his voice. I rolled my eyes at that.

“First, we have to promise each other not to say the word ‘authentic’ for the rest of the conversation. Whoever does, owes the other lunch for a month.”

He laughed. “Done and done.”

“Thank you. Now, the first bar I visited was filled with students who wanted some fun while waiting for their next batch of assignments and exams.”

“University students at a bar?”

“It was a club, then.”

“Bar, club, whatever; the first time you told the story you said you didn’t fit in – I don’t understand that. You were,” he tugged on the blanket, “what, at least two years older than most of them?”

“Yeah, but at the same time, worlds apart.”

“That, you have to explain.”

“I no longer belonged with them. Yeah sure, I was twenty-four, but at twenty-four people are already working towards a retirement fund. There was nothing after that, absolute jackshit, except the retirement fund and a peaceful death. Sometimes, when I’m lucid from my medication, I think that is the thing that pushed me over the edge.”

For some reason, it felt like the hairband keeping my braids from my face was suddenly tighter than it needed to be. I took it off and flipped my hair over my right shoulder. “I wasn’t a child anymore. I was finally a part of ‘the real world,’ and I had been preparing for that real world since childhood. That’s what they tell you in school and you start thinking adulthood is something grand and you should feel lucky to achieve it.”

“I hear you.”

“But for me, it turned out as nothing more than an oscillation between hating Monday mornings, celebrating Friday evenings, being in denial of Sunday evenings, and then returning to hating Monday mornings. All just so that someday, near the end of my life, I could reach that retirement fund and dignified burial. No one tells you that. We all silently agree to perpetuate the deception of a desirable real world.”

“You’re telling *me*.”

“Yeah.” Feeling irritated by my braids brushing against my cheek, I pushed them back and retied the hairband. “I couldn’t handle it. I fucking hated that job. I felt like I was fading a little every day, like I couldn’t breathe and no one cared. I was slowly dying, not physically but in my soul, in my mind, and in every way no one could see. It was another failure, another point of difference between me and the students in that club. It frightened me.”

“Do you still feel like that?”

“Sometimes, but not as often as before. It comes and goes.”

He nodded. “So you tried the second kind of bar, the one without university

students.”

“Yes. As soon as I walked in I knew I wasn’t the only failing artist there. I met a forty-seven year old woman who had been an English teacher her entire adulthood. Her dream was to be a novelist. She told me, quite proudly I might add, that she possessed a high pile of rejection letters to prove her dedication to her craft. Forty-seven years and all she had to prove she was a writer was a pile of rejection letters. That was it – the entirety of her literary footprint.”

“You must have met someone more successful than that,” he said, in between coughs and wheezes.

“I met a playwright who had guest-lectured in New York, directed a show in London, played a small role in a German series, and done several other artistic things. Yet even with those milestones of his malleable career, he’d never lived a day without the worry of bankruptcy. And that didn’t make him more creative or successful; all it did was give him sleepless nights, a messy divorce, and a strained relationship with his daughter.”

I shook my head. “There was nothing romantic about any of it, nothing desirable or inspiring. I never asked his age for fear that he might be another forty-seven year old or older. When he finished his story, we all drank vodka and feigned humour at our variable struggles.”

“That’s very sad,” said Matome.

“I suppose it is.” I shrugged and poured him another glass of water. “It feels funny enough when we laugh about it. You get used to it after a while.”

“You tried to kill yourself, Nsuri. There’s nothing funny about it.”

“I don’t think it matters. I mean, look at you; you’re thirty-seven and dying from heart failure. Fucking heart failure, Matome, at thirty-seven.”

“As opposed to dying of what glamorous disease, may I ask?”

“I don’t know,” I said, shaking my head again. “But honestly, I think anything would make more sense than freaking heart disease at thirty-seven.”

“You’re saying there’s something funny about this?”

“There should be. Otherwise it’s too sad and pointless and just plain nihilistic. We just need to find the joke in there somewhere. There should be one, right?”

“There isn’t one. I’m a dying man and that’s all there is to it. There is no

meaning, no moral of the story – just a defective heart and premature death. That’s life.”

“See,” I said, pointing, “that’s what frightens me – the futility of it all. We’re staying alive just to stay alive, knowing full well we’re going to die. Can you really wonder why I’m suicidal?”

“I can, actually. But I think you should continue with your story, Nsuri, before we get too morbid and stray too far from...from whatever this,” he waved his hand about, “is.”

“That’s what I’m trying to say: the morbidity isn’t something I can escape by simply changing the subject. I’ve always been suicidal. The first time I tried to kill myself I was thirteen. I drank a full bottle of my mother’s nail polish remover. All it did was make me feel uncomfortable for a few hours. After that I hated myself even more because I had failed. Living felt like a cruel sentence.”

He opened his mouth but I cut him off with a wave of my hand. “Before you ask, the answer is no, there wasn’t a specific reason I did it.”

“Okay.”

“It’s just that sometimes I spend so much time living – smiling falsely, repressing every pain I feel, making myself small so no one can pity me – I do all these things, and it becomes too much.

“Sometimes the mere thought of getting out of bed cripples me with fear. It’s not a fear I can explain, yet it’s always with me. I carry it everywhere and no one knows it’s there because they can’t see or quantify it. And sometimes people don’t understand what they can’t measure.”

“That’s what you meant when you said the letters quantified your shortcomings?”

“Yeah. The failed artists, too; meeting them made things clear.”

“Yeah? How?”

“They reminded me of my father.”

“Oh.” He blinked, stunned.

“Mostly I was just trying to develop a drinking problem or promiscuity. You know, to elevate my depression so I could write an ‘authentic’ story about the freaking human condition. I tried to plot the trajectory of my life, to see where I would be in five years, ten, forty-seven. After I met the artists I knew

exactly where I would be. It didn't seem right to keep living even after I knew where it would end. It was the same with my father."

"I didn't know your father wanted to be a writer."

"He didn't. I don't think he wanted to be anything, really. He just tried to stay alive, and dignified, and still alive."

He shook his head. "How can someone not want to be *anything*?"

"I don't know *how* it happens or when it happened with him. But it did."

"He told you this?"

"No. I saw it."

"How—"

"I found a picture of him that was taken when he was twenty-four. It was taken shortly after he was hired as an apprentice at a mining plant. In the picture, he looked both elated and dejected. At first it didn't make sense. Yet there the emotions were – coexisting on his face."

"And so from that, you –"

"That's why I thought he might have never wanted to be anything. It wasn't that he was lazy or lacked ambition; he just had a disability of not wanting to be anything, which wasn't truly a disability, yet it limited him and his life. I know it doesn't make sense—"

"It makes sense to me. It's like the monkey in the middle."

I tilted my head. "Is that a psychological term?"

"No, never mind, I'll explain later."

"My father was dejected since he had recently been retrenched from another plant. He was familiar with the insecurity that came with dwelling in the outskirts of respected society – stuck in a cautious state of existence where no one dared dream above achieving mediocrity because some dreams simply weren't meant for people like him. So he settled there, where he craved prosperity but when he found it, he was sceptical of its longevity. But he must have dreamed once, he must have wanted to be something, right?"

Matome only looked at me with exhaustion. He gave a saddened, weak smile. Even he, a dying man who would soon be beyond enquiry and possible prosecution for propagating another deception, could not bear to feed me another lie.

“Anyway,” I waved him off, “in that moment when my father had just been hired, he was content. My aunt told me that he spoke of building a house for his mother and buying a car in a few years when he had saved enough money. In the meantime, however, he bought my mother the ring he hadn’t been able to afford when they were married. He figured that two years later he would graduate from apprentice to qualified electrician. Roughly twelve more years and he would be a shift supervisor. Then a foreman. And finally, his crowning glory would dawn when he became manager.”

“I see,” said Matome.

I nodded. “He would be old then, ready to collect his retirement fund and settle somewhere near Tzaneen with my mother and their car. He dared dream. I think he did in that picture.” I smiled, not with mirth but to keep myself from crying. “He dared dream,” I whispered, unsure of my own assertion.

“What happened to him?”

“He, um.” I cleared my throat. “He...soon after that picture was taken, hundreds of people were retrenched from the company; my father was one of them. He was a taxi driver for a while, then unemployed, then a street vendor, then he just did anything that was available.”

“Like the playwright you met.”

“Yeah.” I swallowed and looked out the window, blinking away the tears threatening to mar our conversation. “Anyway, what’s the monkey in the middle?”

“Nsuri?”

“What?”

“You shouldn’t feel sorry for him. At least he had that moment, the one in the picture, he had that broken smile,” he shrugged. “And he had you and your sister, and your mother.”

I cleared my throat one last time and busied my hands with straightening Matome’s blanket. I then poured more water for him and stood to straighten the curtain, to widen our view of the splendid garden outside. “You still haven’t explained what the monkey in the middle is.”

Matome smiled and shook his head. “It’s from back when I still worked as an engineer. We had to do compulsory eye tests every year in order to comply

with safety regulations. One day,” he sat forward and clapped his hands together, “they brought the nurse to the production building so she could do our tests there, since that way, there’d be no loss in production hours. You know, safety first, but don’t compromise production – all that stuff.”

I nodded.

“Some of us were already done so we just sat in the control room while the rest of the guys did theirs. This guy – Lee – he was one of those tough guys who would tell you he’d been in a thousand fights and slept with a hundred girls. He was one of those annoying people. Anyway, he steps up and has to do his colour blindness test and animal pop-out blindness—”

“His animal pop-out what?”

“That’s the whole point of the story so be patient.”

“Ha!” I mocked. “Now you know how it feels to be interrupted.”

“Yeah, but shush.” He coughed. “So Lee steps up for the colour blindness test and it turns out he isn’t colour blind. We all cheered since we’d been doing it for everyone. But then the nurse takes out the animal cards. Before you interrupt, the animal cards are these silver strips of...let’s say paper. These strips have five animals drawn in black ink on them: a pig on the left side, a rhino next to it, a monkey in the middle, a giraffe, and an elephant on the extreme right. Got that?”

“Sure.”

“One of the animals is supposed to pop out such that the observer sees that animal as being closer to his or her eyes, same way as a 3D movie. Finding the right animal means passing the test. Lee couldn’t find it; the animals looked the same to him. The nurse tried three cards and Lee still couldn’t see the difference. She told him to wear his safety glasses and he still couldn’t see it. Nothing.”

He shifted in his in the bed. “So the nurse told him he couldn’t see 3D; well, the-monkey-in-the-middle kind of 3D. And the thing is, if Lee lied the first time and said the monkey was closer to him, he would have gotten away with it; but he didn’t, so the boss got involved and Lee had an early retirement. The other thing is that Lee’s disability didn’t matter. I mean, obviously he could see normal 3D; he just couldn’t tell which animals popped out from the paper.”

“What happened to him after that?”

“I think he got stabbed in a bar fight or something. And get this: he got stabbed in one eye. He even collected disability checks for it. But before that, he couldn’t collect the checks for not seeing the monkey in the middle.”

I had moved away from the window and reclaimed my seat near Matome’s bed. “He lost his job because of the monkey, but he couldn’t be compensated for it?”

“Yes.” Matome nodded. “It’s fucked up.”

“Yet somehow it makes sense to me.”

“Yeah, it makes sense in a fucked up way.”

“Agreed,” I said, nodding profusely.

“I have one last question about your story.”

“Ask away, my friend.”

“The story that was criticised for not being authentic, what was it about?”

“It was about a thirteen-year-old girl who drank poison so she could kill herself. She failed; so she spent the rest of her life trying to prove that she could fly. That was the only way her failed suicide would make sense to her. Otherwise, why did she live if there was nothing special about her?”

“I see,” he nodded.

“Do *you* believe it? I mean, do you think it’s *authentic* as a human experience?”

“Of course.” He took my hand in his. “I just wonder why the editor didn’t.”

“I think it had something to do with my age. She found the story pretentious because she didn’t believe someone my age could have lived all those things. She thought I got the idea from some Hollywood movie and then reproduced the material poorly because the experiences lived by my protagonist simply didn’t reflect what she understood about chronic depression. At least that’s what she suggested in the letter.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Why are you sorry?”

“I know what it’s like to open yourself to someone and to be completely dismissed. That’s how I felt with Shola. And before you ask, the answer is no,

we're not talking about him today. I'm already tired enough as it is. One of these days, though, I promise."

"I'm going to hold you to that."

"I know you are. Also, I don't think I fully get your pain, but I think I'm starting to."

"The third time was the charm?"

"The third time was the charm." He smiled that beautiful smile of his. "Plus you owe me a whole month of lunch."

"I know, but you owe me too. How is that going to work?"

"Seeing as I'm the one who's dying, I'd say *you owe me*."

"Whatever," I huffed, smiling back at him. "We'll see about that."

"Yes, we will." With his eyes watering either from the sudden wafting of the breeze or the heaviness of our talk, he slowly nodded, smiled even wider, and said: "You know you're going to be fine, right? One of these days everything is going to work out. I might not be here to see it, but I know it's all going to work out."

"Okay," I said.

It was nearly time for him to take his medication and for me to go. It made me sad because I realised there was nothing left to say, even if there had been more time. In the end, I explained thrice and he still didn't get it. He tried, though. But I suppose he just couldn't grasp how someone could be both dead and staying alive at the same time.

Rešoketšwe Manenzhe is a chemical engineering masters student at the University of Cape Town. She has previously worked as a junior process engineer with Pretoria Portland Cement. Some of her short stories and poems have been published in The Kalahari Review, Review Americana, Bunbury Magazine, and Scholars and Rogues, among others. In the interest of separating the different genres in which she writes, she occasionally assumes the pseudonym K. T. Marcus.



Poetry

Spring
by Athol
WILLIAMS

I saw two men holding hands, in broad daylight,
in public, as only lovers do. I stopped and stared
as one stops and stares
at spring's abundance,
lakes of rippling daffodils, plains richly green,
as one stops and stares, entranced by beauty.

Athol Williams is a South African poet who has published three poetry collections and had his poems published in literary journals in South Africa, USA, UK, France and Sweden. He has been awarded the Sol Plaatje European Union Poetry Award twice, won the Parallel Universe Poetry Competition at Oxford, and has been a runner-up for the South African Literary Award for poetry. Athol holds five degrees and is currently a research student at Oxford. His website is www.atholwilliams.com.



Poetry

**When You Say
Akata**

by Helen

NDE

When you say Akata
Remember
You are speaking of a brother,
A sister, a child,
Mother, father
Kidnapped from home
Raised on far-off shores
Chained and beaten
Until hope became a faint glimmer
Until home became a weak whisper
Until humanity tasted bitter

Remember
You are not speaking of yourself
Because you had Africa's forests,
Her mountains, deserts and hills,
Her rivers and other waters
To hide in when snow fell in the tropics
You had ancestral breasts to suckle on
Food for that long winter
And grandparents who remembered to teach you
The language of your people

Remember
That the white man used porters
Your own uncles

Willing servants, joyful warders
Who helped them draw that border
That split your father's compound into two countries
And made your cousin a stranger
And started the wars that have left you an orphan
And started the quarrels that have driven you from home
To the place where the Akatas
Have labored and fought
So you have a place to come to
After your father's house burned to the ground

Helen Nde is a lover of wildflowers, coffee, cats, and words. She was born in Bamenda, Cameroon where she spent the first 21 years of her life, and now lives in Denver, CO where she fights diseases by day as a hepatitis epidemiologist and by night curates findpalavawoman.com, a blog where she delves into the lives of Cameroonian women with essays, poems, short stories, and rants. She hopes to present a more nuanced account of what is contained in the hearts and minds of the sisterhood of women of which she is a part. Her goal is to present alternate possibilities.



Nonfiction

**My Country is a
Crying Child**

by Ané

**BREYTEN-
BACH**

I wrote an email to a friend the other day that began like this:

When I was a kid, I used to say quiet thank yous to the universe that there were no tsunamis or earthquakes or tornadoes where we are from. Like I had luckily been born in the one safe place on earth. Every day now I read about something terrible; about how one girl was grabbed and choked and raped in Tokai forest on her run. About a little baby girl being raped and murdered three blocks from her mamma's home. About Hannah, right in Bird Street. And I wish I were naive enough to think, again, that I was from a safe place.

I am from a place that began fighting with itself almost four centuries ago when Jan van Riebeeck founded the first colony at its very tip. It has many names, but you would know it as South Africa. It has still not arrived at the quiet peace that both people and places tend to come to with age.

Up until recently, I knew very little about what went into the making – at foundation level – of South Africa. I didn't learn these things at school because a thing happened in the middle of the twentieth century; a harrowing thing that turned everything that came before it into trivial unimportance, and will continue to be the only thing too many people know of this beautiful place. Apartheid came, and with it a kind of pain that has blinded us to most of what led up to it. I knew, of course, that Bartolomeu Dias came first (if by "first" you mean not first at all, but first to begin documenting), but about how exactly my country arrived at the point where the law began to dictate personhood, I have never known much.

The thing that we get the most wrong, and we get so much wrong, is thinking that what happened before doesn't matter, and can be forgotten. If there is anything I know to be true at twenty-three, it is that nothing exists by

itself, nothing came about by itself, and nothing will be resolved by itself.

Because I teach young children every day, very few sets of twenty-four hours go by without me having to act as arbitrator to some form of disagreement. And because my students and I do not speak the same language – save for the bastardized language that is the amalgamation of their limited English and my severely flawed Korean – it is not often that I am able to get a clear understanding of what has transpired before one or both parties involved are already crying.

I have two little boys who profess to be best friends but cannot sit next to each other for twenty minutes without one of them making the other cry. Theirs is a tumultuous friendship. A few days ago, I made the mistake of telling the littler one that he could sit next to the curly-haired one for the last fifteen minutes of class. Just for the game, he reasoned. I was bone tired at this point and hadn't the strength to say no, so I didn't.

Not very long after, the curly-haired one had his hands over his face, his tiny shoulders shaking. His little friend was back in his original seat in a flash, his back straight and resolute, and without anyone having to speak I knew that neither thought they were in the wrong. When children fight, there is no ignoring it and moving on with anything, so I kneeled by their desks and began trying to determine what had happened. Neither my Korean nor their English has the capacity for nuance yet, and so, in exhausted desperation, I asked all I knew to ask with the language available to me: 나쁜 사람 누 구야? (Who is the bad guy?)

What a question to ask. And we ask it every day, in all earnest, and nowhere more than in this complicated country of ours. So complicated that a question that is inadequate in even the most harmless situations could not even begin to skim the surface of the well-hidden pain that is our collective lot to bear.

I have been reading of how my country came to be what it is now – sad, beautiful, violent – in a book by Martin Meredith, a Brit who has written many books about my tumultuous continent, despite not having been born on it. Maybe that's exactly right; maybe what history needs is precisely someone not too blinded by and preoccupied with their own scars to look the truth in the eyes and tell it like it needs to be told.

But maybe that isn't what we need at all. Maybe, if we are to understand history right, all of us with our scars and our stories need to tell them; tell them quietly and seriously, without raising our voices and our fists. Maybe that's how we heal.

My question is this: how have we not gotten better by now? We have had many years to learn and mature, and still we are no better, collectively, than one tired teacher who doesn't speak the language and wishes more than anything for her lesson to go smoothly. The thing is, for the tired teacher, the stakes are low. Something has transpired and for things to move along, I ask the most time-efficient question I am capable of. That the question is lazy, and that it ignores all the nuances that come along with the privilege of human interaction, is almost unimportant, because the lesson will proceed smoothly after it is answered.

But the same is not true when the stakes are as high as they are for my country, and her people. We do not, I fear, have enough left to lose to still be wasting our time asking otiose questions like "who is the bad guy?" Because the frightening, freeing, realisation that comes about when you look at human relationships – past and present – with the sort of distanced curiosity that comes from living away from your country for long enough, is that there is scarcely ever a bad guy.

I understand how soothing it is for us, as human beings, to believe that there must be because it is easy, isn't it? It is cosy to rest securely into our ingrained notions of who has wronged us without seeing gradation, without noticing how things influenced other things and how those things toppled over other things and how big messes could have been made without a collective bad intention.

But resting in the comfortable hammock that is the myth of 'the Bad Guy' isn't salving our wounds. It is a little Band-Aid over a cut so deep you can see right to the bone.

History is a silk carpet, spun together from millions of strands of silk from millions of cocoons, in turn spun by millions of silkworms living every kind of life in every kind of weather on every kind of day. It isn't an overly designed or controlled thing; it isn't, say, a mathematical theorem. It is the

colourful amalgamation of every kind of person doing, for the most part, the best they could. How pointless of us, how base, to have taught ourselves how to do almost every other thing except listen to one another and look at our shared history with the kindness any one of us should show a crying baby; a quiet kindness, a forgiving kindness, a kindness that heals skinned knees and broken hearts.

We walk around with broken hearts, we South Africans, we citizens of the world. We are dogs with thorns in our paws, growling and biting at the hands that want to soothe us. Our broken heartedness manifests as rage for much of the time, and our rage manifests in a thousand different ways. The striking of a match to light a library on fire. The hand over the pleading girl's mouth as her jogging shorts are pulled aside. The dehumanization of the crippled man at the traffic light.

I have thought, ever since I was too young to understand much, that if a person stands hungry and shivering right in the middle of two lanes of BMWs and other shiny vehicles without being looked in the eyes for days that melt into years, that person will no longer think of white-teethed take-away coffee drinking car owners as people. That person will have been taught that it is possible to make, in a mind, an object out of a living breathing person. And that person will be a product of what a broken society succeeds in producing best: a broken, angry, hateful thing.

I used to think right and wrong were easy to understand, but now I think that there are few questions more difficult to answer than "who is the bad guy?" because I have stopped believing in bad guys. I am an exhausted teacher, kneeling by my grief-stricken compatriots, asking:

What brought you here? What are the things that went wrong to make you cry? How could you have been complicit? How was I? Would you mind me saying sorry once I've understood what for?

How can I make it better?

Ané Breytenbach is a twenty-three year old writer. She also teaches English to Korean children, runs, bakes, and reads, but she is essentially that: a writer. Born in South Africa, she has a brain made up of two languages (English and Afrikaans), and wouldn't know what to say if you asked which was her first, because she has forgotten. She thinks grace is the way sunlight flickers on the kitchen wall in the late afternoon. She studied English Literature at the University of Stellenbosch.



Poetry

Foreigner
by Muwanwu
SIKHITHA

i.

Because of the foreign language foaming at his mouth,
Uncle plays Kenyan and Ghanaian marimba music in
His car. This, he says, is what you do when your own country
Does not want you. You fall in love with girls on the other side
Of the border, girls raised by single mothers with tongues like
Knives. Single mothers who have forgotten how to smile.

The night of my grandfather's funeral, we stood in prayer
Rooms with people who did not want to hold our hands.
Grandfather, buried under a lemon tree.

ii.

I fell in love with a man who does not say my name right,
With passport numbers memorized, war in his throat, his eyes
A light house. He says mudiwa (beloved) with a gun for a tongue.

iii.

On the drive to the Zimbabwean border, paralyzed with nostalgia,
My mother says, Remember that boy from Bulawayo? The one with eyes like
wells.

This, I tell her, is what you do when your own country does not want you: you fall in love with boys on the other side of the border.



Muwanwu Sikhitha is a Muvenda writer. She lives and writes in South Africa.



Nonfiction

**Grandpa's
Cupboard**
by Ifeanyichukwu
EZE

I don't want to remember. No. I don't want to keep remembering. But shouldn't I? His face keeps popping up here and there, in my dreams, in my wakefulness, smiling his familiar assured smile, inciting me to come and play, as if he was here. He doesn't say anything, only the smile. The last smile.

We played. Sneaking away from home, hiding and seeking, jumping and scampering under the sun, basking our passions in its scorching light, in the embrace of twilight, in the wetness of the rain, naked, half-naked, without shame, dancing our dances in the night's moon, kicking an improvised round object on our dirty narrow streets, painting them funny.

And I want to ask him if he is fine where he is. He doesn't say anything. Just the smile. Maybe he wants me to know that he is fine where he is, and he wants me to be fine, to wear a smile, always, and be happy. We were always happy in the innocence of our boyhood.

We were happy because time didn't matter. Time didn't count numbers but unfolded as wrappers of moments, moments buttered by events. The cockcrow cooked us a dawn of voices – the melodic utterance of the muezzin was spiced by the rendering of the preacher that smelt of rebuke from a distant wilderness. Our shadows grew shorter like dots under our feet to announce the movement of the bright lone eye of the cloudless northern sky to the centre, inviting our stomachs to cry for food. When the lone eye went to sleep, its mild colleague crept in to usher our game-tired bodies home.

Weekends fed our eyes with Indian films. We crowded a tiny parlour of the only owner of a twelve-inch black and white screen. Or we huddled and struggled for space to look through a glint in the window. Or we passed broomsticks through the window net to part the curtains for our yearning eyes to see.

We fought wars to reenact the Indian films we watched. Our regalia were

green leaves from mango trees. Our swords – maize stalks – were sharp with playfulness. Our guns shot out bullets of sound – the torrents of our shrieks. We killed. We died. We resurrected with laughter.

When alarmed voices shrieked and yelled, death noises boomed, and clouds of smokes, black and adamant, swallowed houses, climbed into the sky, covered the horizon, we scampered in horror for safety.

Young boys and fathers – armed with machetes, bows and arrows, sticks, and spears – shared out in groups to defend the town. Their faces, darkened with soot. He was one of those who went off to defend at the border. I didn't join. Mama wouldn't allow. But would I have mustered courage?

He was brave. He had a machete, the one he took to the farm and his catapult – his pendant hung down his neck. Always. When we went hunting for birds in the fields, he was always accurate with his target. I had mine. I was never his match. Once, when I struck and missed – and I usually missed – I scared the bird away. He was furious, but his face was smiling. I asked him why he was smiling. He broke out laughing. I laughed sheepishly. Then we laughed heartily. They say he had a smiling face.

I saw him. He saw me. He smiled. I smiled back. The group marched away.



In the year two thousand, Kaduna was awaking from the rubbles of a religious crisis. Malali, one of its towns, was a swelling of people, other than her inhabitants, who tramped into Unguwan Godo, who had run away like endangered species, away, away for life, away from burnings, burnings dark as dread, away from lynching, lynching common as air, escaping attacks if luck embraced you, from the burners, burners bloody with intent, from killers, killers mean like beasts, loving it with lust, lusting over our end, besieging us, feeding on our helplessness.

Life went on, a recessive pull of consciousness. Everybody now belonged to a body of Tribes conscious of their identities as Christians and Muslims, Southerners and Northerners, Natives and Non Natives, Pagans and Believers,

like nooses tied around our necks.

It felt like I had suddenly grown up. I was no longer the boy who played about the streets, on the dirt roads, and in the fields.

People had died. Friends, relatives, fathers, mothers, babies. Dead. Families were wiped out. Bodies were charred to black soot. Bodies were lost. The dead were buried in graves real or imaginary. Lucky were the bodies recovered and recognized. Lucky still, if given burial, let alone found.

Fear hung in the air like a bad omen. Movement was regulated with curfew and uniformed men stationed here and there. No more street play, hide and seek, cards games, moonlight tales, aimless scampering about. No more Tema?

Trespassing bodies didn't wake up at dawn. The order was: Gun them down.

Business was low-keyed, if not at a standstill. Some traders had relocated, or had lost their business apparatuses to burnings and lootings. Some others had not survived the crisis, let alone their wares. The marketplaces were bare. Who will buy? Who will sell? Mama lost all her wares. She was alive, at least.

Vengeance of this, vengeance of that, was mused. Our schools were closed down till further notice. We resumed to complete the life of the nascent third term, cut by the crises. For exams only.

Paranoid was the air we breathed. Relatives and friends in other parts of the country kept asking us to leave the state. It was not safe. Grannies wondered why we remained in the North. We should come home.

Papa pondered the possibility of life elsewhere. Mama didn't see the likelihood.

Our family, like most families from the southern part of the country, succumbed to the pressure to travel for the first time in many years.



The red sand of Nsukka, its soft green hills and green trees welcomed us to the East. We stayed at our grandparents' place. My mother's. Their old mud house was still standing. There was the 12-inch black and white TV, and the roof

without a ceiling that howled when the wind blew. The wall clock still ticked, ageless. Photo frames hung on the walls. There was one of Grandpa's large face staring at you like it was daring you to do anything silly. The seats with their foamless arms still sat around the spacious parlour. The parlour housed the door that led to Grandpa's room, inches away from the entrance door. It was always ajar. Another door led through to the back door. Within the passage were Grandma's room by the left and another room by the right that served as the store.

Everything seemed familiar as when I lived there years back. We had travelled home for Christmas. Grandma requested that I be brought to stay with them. I was three or four years old. I was driven in a Volkswagen by their neighbour from my own father's house. I was naked. I held my clothes in my hands, crying. My clothes were still in my hands when we arrived. I had not stopped crying. Grandpa was lying in a camp bed, in front of the house, reading a newspaper or was it a book? He didn't move or say a word to me. He was too engrossed in his reading to notice me, perhaps.

Now, having spent much of my growing up in the north, my Hausa was fluent. Better than my Igbo. Though we spoke Igbo at home, it was an exclusive preserve of communication with my parents especially Papa who would never want me to speak anything else. Igbo was my mother tongue. I should speak it. I should be a master of it. Hausa was not. He wanted me to be good at English too.

I was glad to effortlessly switch to Hausa, once Papa was not there. Mama was not strict about it. With her I was flexible – Hausa mainly, bits of Igbo, some English, mostly Pidgin. With Tema, I didn't have to worry.

At the village, the task of conversing in Igbo alone limited me to just few utterances. The words felt heavy on my lips. They sounded like I was learning the language anew. I listened more than I spoke. I didn't want to be laughed at, let alone be rebuked by Grandma when I pronounced the words wrongly. There were times when I was caught off guard. When I didn't know which words to use – the appropriate words. I'd utter the Hausa or the English equivalent. They came easily. And readily.

Once or twice, I went to Grandma to request for soap to wash the plates.

The word had skipped me. I didn't say ncha. Instead, I said sabulu, soap. She said she didn't understand. She went about doing what she was doing – stitching our torn clothes. My cousin who came along told Grandma what I needed. I was relieved, but disappointed. Grandma looked at me with a knowing smile.

There was also a growing feeling that had crept into me, clothing me with sensitivity – that felt like the whole world was staring at me, at my every deeds, expecting me to be flawless, and I responded by coiling back into myself. I could hear it said that I was quiet and shy.



The room I occupied was Grandpa's. He had passed away a few years back after complaining of chest pain. There was a cupboard of books, a table by the window. From the window I could see the flowers that adorned the entrance to the front door, and the wide path that met the colonial heritage – the market road whose asphalt surface had thinned away into patches here and there. On one end, it led to the University of Nigeria, and the major town of Nsukka, while on the other, it led to Nkwo market. On market days, Nkwo especially, the road was busy with users who avoided police checkpoints on other roads.

Across the road was the primary school where Grandpa had taught. As a teacher, he was a strict disciplinarian, and was nicknamed “Masquerade”. His moral strength, they said, scared away its offhand neighbour. If Grandpa had been loose morally, his mud house would have been a mansion of wealth his family would be living off the cake of his millions by now. If they had not been flogged or disciplined, they wouldn't have become the credible men they were, they claimed.

Mama said she was his pupil at some point. She made a face to indicate that the privilege didn't spare her anything. My last encounter with him was a hard thrashing I received for not feeding the goats. The night whined of their hunger.

The cupboard of books in Grandpa's room was of red wood. It was taller, bigger, and housed more books than my own father's. If my appreciation for books and reading had so far been a hidden trait, the books in Grandpa's

cupboard baited the trait out. It was like I had been waiting for my soul mate and I found her. The meeting was irresistible. I occupied myself leisurely with the books. And they were good company. I took solace in them. They saved me the discomfort of facing people, speaking to them, speaking Igbo to them, or being accused of avoiding them.

Some books I read willingly. Others, I felt, were very deep. I left them to read later, like Gilbert Ryle's *Concept of Mind*. When I read it, I didn't understand anything. But I read it anyway. When I was a Philosophy major at the University of Nigeria, years later, I was intrigued by his famous "ghost in the machine" metaphor – a critique against Cartesian Dualism. But I liked Descartes' Dualism, not so much because of his subtle approval of modern science, as because of his style of writing. And the famous Cogito Ergo Sum was a standard I personalized in some other ways. I read, therefore I am. I write, therefore I am. I sleep, therefore I am.

The cupboard was dusty for lack of use since its owner had gone. I would take out the books and beat off the dust or blow them away. I liked the smell – their musty perfume. When I flipped through their pages, the buzzing rustle tickled my ears. Sometimes I would hold a book in my hand just to enjoy the feeling of its weight.

The ones that tickled me were *The River Between* and *Weep Not, Child* by Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, *Mission To Kala* by Mongo Beti, *The White Man of God* by Kenjo Jumbam, *Chike and the River* by Chinua Achebe, *African Child* by Camara Laye, *Zambia Shall Be Free* by Kennet Kaunda, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* by Ayi Kwe Aemagh, *Toads for Supper* by Chukwuemeka Ike, *Fresh Start* by Helen Ovbiagele, *Sammy Going South* by W. H. Canaway, *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë, *The Dignity of Man* by Russell Davenport, *Murder in the Cathedral* by T. S. Eliot, and *Remove the Heart of Stone* by Donal Dorr.

There was a collection of short stories, enriched with the wisdom of the tortoise, like the ones we were told. Most of the books presented me with a world similar to the one I lived in – dirt roads, cornrowed hair, black skins, and straw beds.

I was hungry for more books. I would strip the cupboard of all the books

just to find something new to read. Some books had lost pages, even their titles. I read them like that. A copy of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* was like that. There were James Hartley Chase's *Tiger on the Tail*, and under the name of Raymond Marshall, *You Find Him, I'll Fix Him*. I read Grandpa's lesson notes, letters, and marvelled at his handwriting. There were the old black and white photos of his not quite younger years.

I learned new words and expressions. I wrote them on sheets of paper, which I later transferred into a notebook. I would pause my reading to circle a word or underline a phrase or sentence. I read more. New words came my way. I became obsessed with the dictionary. An old *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* was handy. I wanted to know every word. I thought I could. But there was always something new. One new word. Two more. A dozen more.

I would later be called Dictionary in senior secondary school by my classmates. I was at ease with words and their meaning, vocabulary oriented. It was an honour to be looked up to in class, or approached to explain the meaning of new or unfamiliar words.

As a daily chore, after Morning Prayer, I swept the compound with a broom of palm fronds. I swept the leaves that littered about; I washed the plates before and after meals. These were chores I was familiar with. I did that every morning before I went to school back in Kaduna. Mama was an early riser. Sometimes, it was she who woke me. There was farm work too. We went to the farm particularly on Saturdays. It was a new experience, tilling the soil, weeding, and making ridges. We brought firewood for cooking meals after such exercise.

Then I looked forward to reading and so remained locked up within myself, digesting words, sounds and voices, and replaying them on my mind, retaining new words, Igbo words too, quietly, dialoguing with myself.

While Grandpa's books fed me, news from Kaduna was that life was getting back to normal. Business was beginning to bubble. People who had left had returned. Some displaced persons had found their way back, back to safety among their tribes, Christians among Christians, Muslims among Muslims.

But I was excited. I hoped Tema had returned. Returned from wherever. I wanted to go back, to be with my friend, to laugh, to play again on the streets,

under the Northern sky, holding hands, to behold the city again, to bask under her sunset without fear. We would make traps. We would go hunting. We would lay our traps. My trap would catch nothing. He would catch a dozen bush rats. We would make kites; we would fly them. They would take our dreams to the sky. His would fly higher than mine. We would slice tins, empty tins and make cars, our dream cars. We would build houses, our castles, not building them in the air, but in the sand.

And I would tell him of the books I had read, of the new words I had learnt. I would show him my notebook with many words. He would smile at my accomplishment.

I wondered what he could have been up to. Reading like me perhaps, or going to the farm. Hunting? When our teacher asked us what we wanted to be in the future, Tema said he wanted to play. Just to play. We laughed. The teacher looked at him steadily. I didn't know what I wanted either. Play was the most feasible thing to do.

Mama said, "Happy Birthday." It was November 23. I had turned sixteen. But Tema didn't return. Tema was never found. The last of him was the last of my childhood.

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Fiction

**Things Yet Not
Au Fait**
by C. J.
NELSON

*Let us kiss fire with this stakes too, as we bite from these,
Colossal apples of self-sacrifice.
Cold and certain.*

You are beginning to lose words, just as you have been told. You are forgetting how to mentally arrange things, to carve the least mundane routes through this maze.

You have turned lumpy, like three days Eba, arctic and stodgy.

On your way to the bakery, if you spare yourself a look in the front glass of one of the many lofty stores knitted into Rue Sainte Catherine, you will see that your eyes are moribund.

You will see, what they told you, about not giving them rein, to shine, sparkle, and immerse in unrealities. You will see like their symbolism: charcoal. That they have burnt for use, into transitions of fiery gold, red, tinges of green, orange, and now ash.

Fluffy, immaculate, and breakable into lighter powder, by a touch from this town's scourging fingers of strain.

Ash.

You forgot or chose to forget, letting the three hands you render all day, all week – at the bakery, the drug store, and the library – to be your mind's perpetual memory duster, swiping constantly at the dust of things now forgotten. Except Sundays. These are spent at Saint-Andre Cathedral, where you eat of your own sacrifice.

You understand that you wear the skin of the women before you.

You understand you must care for Nasir by yourself, nor expect any affectionate neighbour to help you lessen the burden of care for your child.

You have to fatten Nasir up, and suck joy from his being as healthy as possible. You know that you'll grow thinner than a strand of igbale if you allow him to become sick. Not that there is a You. That You faded away, as you slug to, fro, and into jobs. You make sure to stampede any emere of vanity, no longer to find anything fancy, no longer wanting for yourself.

You understand to get by, to fend for your son, that you must pretend you comprehend the instrumental flow of French here in Bordeaux. You look away from willing men, beaming as you shake your behind about the drug store, leaning on the counter, and stringing niceties in broken English. You can chance the light-skinned ones for a while, but you have to know that they might think Nasir a burden. However you refused to give those black-as-night ones any chance, believing they don't have ample financial security, and that their affections are inexorably prone to quick death.

So crush yourself, your needs, your wants, and think always, only about Nasir, because as it is now, this isn't about you.

Insidious, and consuming, this toil leaves you tired.

Tired of taking those feet-achy walks at Le Jadin Public, the tingly glory of the colourful arena pre-eminent in your being, one of Nasir's hands cupped in yours, and his other liberal enough to nibble at a Canele. The ones you'd learnt to make from the bakery, when Monsieur Phillippe had been lost in flour, whistling to an indiscernible French melody off the radio, and you had craned your neck at his activities from the sparse kitchen window.

Tired of smuggling bread-sticks, flour, and pastry knowledge from the bakery, slipped into your workbag, and out the back entrance every Friday night.

Tired of pretending that you don't know that Monsieur Philippe knows about it.

Tired of slipping antibiotics, or milk, or antiseptic into your service apron at the drugstore during frenetic working hours.

Tired of knowing that it is only the library that you can walk with the loosest of minds. Where you clean, dust, singing softly amongst the vintage shelves, and are allowed to take books home, and un-bolt yourself in the words.

These words that many times have left you crying to oblivion.

Tired of knowing that nobody speaks to you at the night classes, although

they all look like you. Dress like you. Eat their homemade meals from warmers like you. Itch their stringy hairs at complicated texts. Yearn to share their native stories with hastily made friends, because like you, they also struggle to come to terms with soul, body, mind, and self.

But nobody there approaches.

And that would be because of that incident when you brought Nasir, like you always do, but this time he had cried so much that your seat neighbour volunteered to hold him so you could fetch his feeder from your bag.

You flinched.

Noticeably.

As though to sub-consciously buttress your strangeness, too quickly you said, “No, no don’t take him, I can manage.”

You are tired of breathing in Bordeaux with a protracted strangeness, yet to be au fait.

You are tired of this tiredness.



The woman, before you, called her gang of friends of splintered women, deported from the back corners of London, with ungraceful home-comings from Italy’s rustiness, with compulsive Islamic adaptation from the majesty of the Arab, with haunting pasts as Au Pairs in the longs and shorts of France, and with America’s streaks of defiance still in their wilting hairs, almost to their scalps. But breathing antiques of great wisdom, of priceless experiences, are now tales forever stuck in their learned throats. All of them converge to dish out advice, at the eve of your leave.

Was it not this woman’s two-day-old breakfast that you fed Nasir and yourself, while twisted into an amoeba in your allotted corner of the Mediterranean crosser? Whilst trying not to think about the boat’s wanting to impress the ever-demanding waves, with front flips, without care for its bearings, nor its passengers.

In the absence of all these things, you began to pray.



Here Bordeaux is a sketch of modernity, glass, spices slipped into the atmosphere, which peppers you to pray, for one last strength.

You finger your rosary seated in the Cathedral's hall, even after many Mass comers had gone, probably already at their homes. You allow yourself to forget, moulding into a liberal yet peaceful being, with each Hail Mary, Mother of God, from your scathed lips, you make certain they hit certain rusty notes inside of you, as you mute from your ears Nasir's loud running through the sanctorum.

At home, sometimes, you try to do same, but with your Tesuba. Reclining on the only chair in the room close to the window, your ears attuned to the hive from the street below. You try not to misplace Allah for Subriy' an Allahyi. The way Nasir's fountain taught you, in that undecided life.

Don't say you cannot recollect that cramped warehouse after school, those humid rendezvous hours, when there seemed to be too much sunshine, too much ecstasy, too much perfection, for a bump on your bowel to have had him out of your life, burnt with all the things one vows to obliterate into the settling sunshine.

It is a good thing that you forgot not. Perhaps all those years of not saying much, not having much to say, has come to help oil your memories into wellness. Nonetheless, keep praying for that strength. The one to help you reach where you had thought you should leave.

Home.

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Nonfiction

Roots
by Carey
BARAKA

Disclaimer: Please note some aspects of this story have been fictionalised both to protect the innocent and for artistic reasons.

When I was in campo, pretending to get an education and having a good time at entertaining the fountain of youthful rebellion, I was friends with this fellow called Roots, “friend” here being a rather benign falsification of the nature of our relationship. I was a first year and had precious few friends outside my fourth-year roommates. This being around the time when Roots, being a legend along school corridors, and for reasons that had nothing to do with the education we were ostensibly there to obtain, had a bunch of fellow fourth years coalesce around him in a rather poor copy of what they no doubt imagined a gang. My roommates were part of this abstraction of boys, and so naturally, it is with them that my earliest campus interactions took place.

I was living in a hostel considered a fourth-year enclave, and even I must admit that my admittance into this hostel had not been attained via entirely legal means. There were precious few juniors in this particular hostel and only one first year and it so happened that Roots noticed me and took a liking to me.

Roots, 6’1”, thin as a rake, was trying for a Bachelor of Science in Mathematics and it was impressive how he even managed to keep up with his classes considering all the running around he involved himself in. In fact, it was his borderline criminal activity that eventually got him expelled from the university, but I am jumping ahead of myself here.

Roots and I had gone to the same high school, a Catholic boys boarding school somewhere in Western Kenya, and even then he had displayed the same appetite for vagrancy that would become his hallmark in campo. Of course,

back then we had referred to him by his real name. Because of this, I, measly first year that I was, could address him by his government-issue name, which I did. I could have switched to Roots like the other fellows from our high school who were in the same hostel, but I guess I was too stubborn, and proud even, to train myself to call him Roots.

I never found out why the lads called him Roots anyway, but I conjectured that it was a reference to his nefarious life as what the school administration labelled bhang peddling. Bhang, also known as marijuana was the main reason why Roots seemed to have a somewhat inexhaustible supply of money. He did have several other business ventures, certain nebulous activities that were conducted within, or at least from the confines of his room.

Roots' room was number 520, only two doors away from mine, 516. The entire hostel, Hall 9, sometimes called Tom Mboya Hall, had acquired an unsavory reputation as the centre of bhang peddling, and a set of more serious illegal activities that the school authorities knew nothing about. Every day, in the evening, from six till around midnight, but sometimes as early as midday (such brazenness), there were to be observed a motley collection of boys on the rooftop of Hall 9 drinking, having cigarettes, and smoking weed. The one access point to the rooftop was through a doorway right next to Roots' room, creating an unspoken tradition: buy weed from his room, then go and smoke it outside.



The thing about watching mafia movies like the *Godfather* and *Goodfellas* is that you realise how generous guys in these social structures are to each other. This was particularly true of Roots. None of that no honour among thieves bullshit or the Robin Hood nonsense of robbing the rich to feed the poor. It was more of seeing a guy and deciding whether he is a good fella or not, whether he is alright, whether he is a wise guy. In fact, Roots called us his wise men, though whether this was in reference to Henry Hill and Jimmie Conway and Tommy DeVito I strongly doubted (though all things considered, with Roots you could never know). I suspected that this was a shady reference to Jesus

and *The Three Wise Men*, and I always found it funny that Roots saw something in common between himself and *The Lord Jesus Christ*. He would say something along the lines of *Hii life lazima mkuwe wise, mkuwe wisemen* and take a puff of weed and allude to it being the source of his wise-ness.

And so we were his wise men, his cohorts, his men. There was Arturo, 5'8, built like a generator, heavily tattooed, dreadlocks, Chelsea fan. Then there was Gidi, an aberration of Gideon, a stocky guy who spoke with a thick Ameru accent and was in charge of food preparation. We ate together, our merry band of men. Iano came next in this nefarious hierarchy, a tiny guy, Roots' trusted confidante, in charge of all our money. Roba, who in spectacles didn't look like the sort of fellow one would expect to drown bottles of makali without feeling a pinch, and who with his Dickens-esque manner of speech and behaviour hinted at a privileged background. MK and Olwang', both of whom would be expelled together with Roots and Arturo. Peter, also called Scrum, because of a brief stint as a rugby player. Michael, also a rugby player, a star even. Nado Sugar. Binui. My roommates and I. And all the other hangers-on, the faceless nameless ones.

One time we were in Roots' room, no, actually in Arturo's room (the very next door, 521), preparing supper. Most of the time we ate our nighttime meals together, one big happy family, Roots and his wise men, a conglomerate of college boys with ruffian-esque habits and manners, so there was nothing odd about our preparing supper together. Gidi was in charge of getting the groceries, condiments, unga ya ugali, and rice, chapatis, and whatever else would be required for the meal. Iano was in charge of making sure that the dishes were clean, and because none of us ever saw the need to eat/cook in the day, this meant that at eight, or nine, Iano would be found at our floor's taps washing last night's cutlery, a tiresome task especially when no one had bothered to soak the ugali sufurias immediately after the ugali was cooked. On this particular night, Roots and I were in charge of the cutting: tomatoes, onions, kitungu saumu, dhania, potatoes, and everything in between. This was not a task I was adept at, seeing as I had hardly had to cook before joining campus. Every couple of minutes, Roba would butt in and laugh his head off at my inadequate attempts at splitting the potatoes into four. Roots would laugh too, but then labour to

show me the right way, to hold the potato in this manner, peel like so, and slice it at this angle. And on and on.

So on this night we were to have a meal of plantain and Irish potatoes – interposed with periodic sips of makali – and we were in our kitchen – a part of Arturo’s room partitioned off with a flimsy sheet – and Roots and I were slicing and dicing the tomatoes, waiting for Gidi – who was late – and Ian – very late – and interrupting our silences with brief remarks about the state of Arsenal’s season – Roots and I supported the same football club. It had been a good day business-wise for Roots, and so he bought a few Tuskers and Guinesses – a welcome change from the harsh reality of spirits – for our indulgence. Arturo was on his bed puffing away and Reggae was playing from the stereo; Ziggy Marley and the Melody Makers, Peter Tosh, Johnny Cash. I remember Roots singing along Sly and Robbie’s (presenting Tre’jur) Everything I Own and Arturo asking Roots how high he was. It was all happies at this point, that brief of moment where two boys are cutting potatoes behind a curtain, and a third is hotboxing the room, and the three are screaming that they are Mr. Bombastic, so fantastic, a nirvana, when the door burst open and two SWA officials stepped in.

In those days, unlike today, SWA officials were largely incorruptible, fellows with respect for their jobs and the integrity that behoves them. With the sole exception of Mr. Guba, who was your go-to guy if you needed to get anything done, these men – they were mostly men – kept a stern eye on things and naturally, Roots figured in every list they composed on the nefarious activities commonplace in the school hostels, and Hall 9 in particular. Furthermore, these SWA officials in a bid to hasten the effectiveness of their work, actively sought ways of catching their listicle celebrities in the act, so as to lessen their chances of getting off when they were subjected to a hearing. As it so happens, Roots was their number one target, and Therefore, they kept on coming into his room, and the room of his known allies, at odd hours, which is the very reason they were stepping into Room 521, Hall 9 at 21:05 hours on this particular night, the 29th day of October.

Step forward Roots, junkie, dealer, businessman, trader, randy man-

about-town, Goodfellow. Roots, cool as you please, stepping forward and embracing the two SWA officials, hugging them and pecking their cheeks in a badass manner, turning to Arturo and I (frozen in our acts, Arturo not even bothering to stub out his joint, me pausing with my knife suspended comically above the potato) and asking me to bring forth a couple of chairs for our guests, and me, in the manner of Peter confronted with the presence of Moses and Elijah at the transfiguration, asking stupidly whether our guests are staying for dinner; yes, they are, cut more potatoes, and to Arturo, can you please open those windows?, a little more fresh air will be good, and to the SWA officials whose noses can obviously decipher the pungent odour of marijuana in the air; pushing them into the two chairs I have brought forward, bidding them sit, and from the cabinet in the corner Arturo's, nominally, but really Roots', the way everything in it is his, extracting two Tuskers, cold, I've never known how, popping the two bottles open with his teeth, proffering one to each SWA functionary, taking a third and in a devil may care way, asking them what they think of the economic stimulus plan unveiled by the president last night?

This night will always stand out to me as a peak of a certain form of excellent think-on-your-feet-ness, of badassery, and honesty. Even when I got the news that Roots, along with Mark and Arturo and a host of other boys had been expelled from the university, and I conceded to myself the obvious guilt of whatever it was he had been accused of, I queried whether it was worth it, this punishment, for one with such promise. And now, as I try to fashion this new exciting life for myself as a writer – new talent, they call us – sometimes I wonder what became of this man and whether he still thinks of us, his goodfellas. I know that these words ring with a certain modicum of selfishness, this wonderment of us, of me, but aren't we, all of us gathered here tonight, all of humanity, aren't we inherently selfish? Isn't thought of self, otherwise called self-esteem, what we preach to our progeny? And when we find he who, with all his faults and vices, is selfless about all else, have we not the right to think, to ask, to have a general wonderment about how our lives would be any different, were he still in our lives?

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