



ARTS LOUNGE JOURNAL

ISSUE ONE

Volume One

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Arts Lounge Literary Journal
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True Nature
Yasmin Bolden

see how the river
floods? that's how I'm
meant to dance, rush,
giggle, hush, chance

To everyone who is constantly trying to find, and agree with self.

Guest Editors

Jeremy Karn: Poetry
Hauwa Shaffii Nuhu: Prose

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Editor's Note

By the time you will be reading this, I will be in my apartment, dancing. I will be dancing and singing because Arts Lounge has birthed her first child. It would be an understatement to say that I am excited. While this issue took a lot of painstaking work, it also beat our imagination. One thing the works in this issue share in common is a return to history. As if we all hunger, or seek to grasp something that was once lost. This issue remembers and ponders over history. For posterity, it documents. This is the very essence of art.

Terrible times are upon us like a sudden storm, and it seems the best we can do is wait it out. But while we wait, we will rely on Arts, Literature in our case, to lead us through. Achebe's words vividly comes to mind here and I quote,

“only the story can continue beyond the war and the warrior. It is the story that outlives the sound of war-drums and the exploits of brave fighters. It is the story that saves our progeny from blundering like blind beggars into the spike of the cactus fence. The story is our escort; without it, we are blind.”

I sincerely appreciate all contributors and editors of this issue. I am humbled by Professor Unoma Azuah's relentless support and guidance. I am pleased by Confidence Jideofor's patience and artistry. Ohia Ernest, Onyinyechi Okorie and Christopher Nwankwo brought so much brilliance and hard work and those were the key ingredients that have added greatly to the quality of this book.

I am certain that this effort to sustain the literary art will outlive us. I believe that in time, our songs and stories will be the light of the world. But before then, I encourage everyone to read this issue with thoroughness, hoping that the songs and stories here will lead us, not just through these times, but would serve as balms to our bodies and souls. We release this issue into the world, and we earnestly hope that in finding its path, it finds you when you need it most.

Thank you.
Adaeze M. Nwadike,
Chief-Editor,
Arts Lounge.

**ON LANGUAGE, WRITING AND THE
POLITICS: AN INTERVIEW WITH CHIKA UNIGWE**

Voice or the loss of it is one element that seems dominant in some of your stories. In “Saving Agu’s wife” and “Going Home,” for instance, the loss of voice does not translate to silence as tranquility, but signals overwhelming sadness fueled by powerlessness. Does the recurrence of this element draw on your personal reflections on losing your own voice when you migrated to Belgium?

No one writes in a vacuum, so the short answer is yes. I have had experience with the peculiar kind of loneliness/silence which comes from being in a place where one does not understand the language. And if language is power, then that inability to speak is a loss of power.

In the Foreword to Sula, Toni Morrison bemoaned how depressing it was that commentaries on her novels, and the works of African American writers at large, were basically “political-only” analysis. Are you sometimes bothered by this fact, that reviewers hardly look at the work as an aesthetic production?

No, the western critic (which is who I assume you mean) isn’t my audience, and reviewers of my works have commented on both the aesthetics as well as the politics. *Sula* came out in 1973 and things have changed somewhat since then, even in how African literature is read and presented. I cannot comment on the African American situation but I can on the African situation. In 1973, African literature was read primarily as anthropological works. We were found in university libraries and published by academic or dedicated presses mostly. We were very much ‘othered.’ The west wrote novels to be read for entertainment and we were read to be understood/studied (by the west). In the past 20 years (and I daresay far longer for African American literature), with our works being published by commercial presses, winning prizes, being sold in all the spaces where other regular novels are sold, the engagement (of the western critic) with it has become more educated.

In relation to that, how can a politically minded writer develop his work without the message/activism cancelling out the art?

A politically minded novelist is a novelist as well as a politically minded person. Both things exist in them at the same time. However, their engagement with both parts of themselves, even though they feed each other differ in intensity depending on what they are doing. When they are writing a novel or a story, they are thinking of plot and structure and characterization and all the other things that make fiction, fiction. When they are writing political commentary, the rules of engagement are different. It's like being a daughter and a sister and a mother and an aunt and a cousin and a friend and a writer and a teacher and a colleague, all of which I am. I am still Chika, I do not magically transform into another human being, my personality traits do not magically change but the way I interact with people on all of those different levels isn't the same.

*In many writing workshops, young writers are told, as one of the rules of writing, to write what they know. This is akin to black people asking white writers to stop writing characters of colour, or homosexuals telling “cis-het” writers to stop writing gay characters. But some people are asking, on the other hand, if fiction could still be fiction if writers didn't write outside their own subjectivity. And in writing *On Black Sister's Street* you mentioned that you knew nothing about what it felt like to be the women in the novel. As a result, you couldn't write it without first doing research. Instead of consigning writers to only what they know, is it not safer to encourage them to carry out proper research in the areas they want to represent but have not experienced?*

No, it is not akin to that, otherwise no one would ever write science fiction, or write characters that differ even in personality from oneself or even write stories set in an imagined past. One would simply not write fiction at all because fiction is all about invention. What it means is closer to what you think it ought to encourage than what you think it means. In other words, it means that whatever world one is creating, one ought to know that world well. Fiction is all about getting your readers to willingly suspend disbelief. If you as a writer create a world that makes it impossible for your readers to do so because there are holes, then that project has failed woefully. So, research where you need to, but most of all, understand your characters, their motivations and the way the world you're creating works.

What is the place of research in imaginative writing?

To fill in the gaps in what the writer doesn't know.

You are very fond of Nnaemeka Obioma's Nego-Feminism, and you have mentioned that Night Dancer is largely informed by it. You also mentioned that "at some point negofeminism is not even going to be needed any more." Do you think we have reached that point?

I said that? That was a very ambitious thing to say. Have we reached it? No. Just take a look at Naija Twitter.

Negofeminism is the feminism of negotiation or no-ego feminism. Negotiation primarily is a process of achieving agreement through discussion. By implication, one has to come under the sway of language. One has to have a voice, so to speak. As a matter of curiosity, what should the woman do whose man, acting on extreme Patriarchy's name, decides to deny the "privilege" of negotiating? Here, I am thinking of Beatrice in Adichie's Purple Hibiscus, and the other women like her in reality. Should the African woman remain inert, if the system of patriarchy that presses hard upon her refuses to enter into negotiation with her, nor create a space, no matter how minute, for her to negotiate or manipulate?

Patriarchy isn't limited to Africa, and negofeminism happens because patriarchy exists. The negotiation isn't always with individuals; it is with society because patriarchy isn't simply a problem with individuals. It's like racism. We can have friends who are not racists but racism isn't about one person not being racist but about a society that enables it, about the institution of it. Eradication of it requires our active participation, some sacrifice even. There are times when people around us would make it difficult but have you ever heard of the saying that no well-behaved woman ever made a change? I can't tell people how to make spaces for themselves, but what I can say is that no one benefitting from oppression ever willingly gives it up.

We hear from a reliable source that you have a new book coming out soon. Congratulations on that. Can you give us a peek?

It's a loose adaptation of the myth of Hades and Persephone, set in Nigeria. In the original myth, Persephone is abducted by Hades and eventually falls in love with him. And that has always bothered me. I did not want him rewarded for abducting a woman. My Persephone is a young Igbo

woman who eventually gets justice. She escapes her abductor after 7 years and ensures that he is punished.

What motivated the story, and what was the process of writing it like?

My quest for justice and my interest in women's stories and feminism. It took two months and one residency in Germany to write the first draft but the revision took many, many years. The core of the story is still the same but its architecture has undergone a drastic change. I am quite pleased with it.

Congratulations, once again. What is the best part of writing for you?

Discovering my characters and their motivations. I like being surprised by these people who do not exist until I have written them but who, nevertheless, have so much autonomy, it's as if I had nothing at all to do with them.

What and what makes it to your writing table?

Some beverage. Coffee, tea or cocoa.

Thank you so much for granting us this interview.

Poems

*And it was at that age ... Poetry arrived
in search of me.*

Pablo Neruda

Waves In Collision

Promise Akpa-Esu

What scares you is my silence,
how do I explain that there's peace in your violence?
Because then, I am rest assured
your heart is in the right place, when you bleed and
all is soaked in chaos – for love is chaos.
It's what we're made of, beautifully entwined
in all that's broken, all that's washed ashore.
For all it's worth,
we are not more than waves in collision.

Tangled

Promise Akpa-Esu

Tangled in this melody,
we are sung poetry and
written hymns- too sacred for
tongues to speak.
Blasphemous, like the last
spit from the mouth of believers.

Time Never Gets Old

Promise Akpa-Esu

If you could hold onto time just as you pin
a dice of meat with toothpick – anticipating
the different ways you can consume it,
by doing nothing.

Time is the wrinkles on your face,
wrinkling in harmony with your legs –
the dance of the ancients.

You don't laugh or talk like your descendants,
their musings become a constant reminder of
the seconds you traded your smiles for insecurities.

Time is an extension of ourselves.

We wear out too soon, yet it doesn't stop.

A Painting where my Brothers are Flowers with Gun wounds (for the victims of the Lekki Tollgate massacre) **Martins Deep**

Above the expanse of a vale, I saw lilies stiff against the rhythms of dry
season
and their woodwind were quickly carved into a sickle.
Their hands of steel plucked the sun and hung a blood moon.

My brothers were those lilies—
the ones who smelt the scent of rain from afar,
and became discontent with the spittle of peasants.

My brothers were those flowers
left to photosynthesize the tactical lights of firearms;
those who were blown kisses from the mouths of guns;
those whose petals were dyed into mother's bloodshot eyes.

And how they sang, before their fall— the song
their pipers could not sing with mouths wet with dryness.

How they sang — a song drunk with the elixir of life
from the tepid streamlets of their eyes;
one born to endlessly echo in the empty barn of our household.

With their chestfuls of granite,
it was easy to vomit obstacles against ambulances—
and to turn their signal lights into strobes
for a party of screams and shatter.
It was easy to pool — for whiteout— the milk
they sucked from their mothers' breasts
for an erasure of testimonies inked with blood,
on the white of our flags, and the black of our tarred roads.

They call it '*blank bullets*',
but in my palms are canines dug out from a body.
I dig out one more from the birthmark of a star,
and a broken dream pierces my ears with a yowl.

Calligraphy of Immortal Scars

Arthur Shedrick Davies

Beyond troubling seas
and baffling lands, I write,
a calligraphy of anguish,
that was fed in shackles
and blades to pioneers
deprived of liberation.

From the gloomy voids of cremated
monuments, I write, of how
recipes of unquenched cries
rested in the bewailed souls
of long fallen freedom fighters.

From the winding sheets
of decayed bones, I write,
where the first tomb feasted
on a slave's body as demons
hummed the angry agonies
of encaged sons and sisters,
brothers and daughters of the soil.

From the pits of unpurified
plantations, I write, a poem,
packed with pieces of pains,
peeled from the lips of wailing
tombs, where lie unheard grieves
of predecessors, to chew on
the dust of everlasting scars.

History

Arthur Shedrick Davies

There are shrines of unwavering tales,
mummified for multiple centuries
beneath the dens of history's tongue.
There are songs of valor, sketched
from the graphs of ancestors' breaths,
but rattled by whips of assimilation.
Still, there are constellations of cultures
beheaded from the veins of legendary
clans; their voices scream ablaze
like a rumbling-tumbling rocket.
There are hurricanes of traditions
lying on the lips of a limb continent
that million metaphors could never
make immortal, nor a thousand stanzas
could beckon to stability on the sanctified
pages of a sacred heart. Until the fallacies
are butchered in the eyes and
the heresies revisited; until the narratives are untangled
and retold, history will forever be
a prisoner enslaved to oblivion.

The Synonym of Peace

Eduard de Bosco

After Pamilerin Jacobs

The sky is the safest place to hide our fears,
to hide our tears - the remains of a 14-year war

& here the difference between war and peace
is in the pronunciation

Is in how, we let the 'P' drop from the roof of our mouths & roll out on
our tongues like a 'piece' instead of 'pains'

Our country is a museum of the dead. Every home a cemetery that ar-
chives our sorrows

I measured my pains in the eyes of my mother and watched her soul
drowned in an attempt to balance the scale

And on this scale were:

a) a peaceful hand wrapped around my sister's mouth, planting pains in
the hollow of her thighs

b) a little boy digging out his intestines with a knife, to measure the
length of poverty inherited by him

c) and my old mother sitting behind the house, digging a grave for her
unborn children in a land of peace

***At the Very Edge of Seventeen, There is no
Nirvana***
Olabimpe Adedamola

Fast cars and fast connections,
you are outrunning your(selves).

You like to say you were born to die young but
you have a history of cheating death.

There are scared little girls shivering in your chest and their hunger is
terrifying.

You satisfied them with validations from strangers.
Baring your body to the camera,
trauma has made you a young god. Trauma has killed your god.

Seventeen yet you 'walk these streets so mean'.
Seventeen yet you refuse to acknowledge your own inconsequence.

Seventeen and you are leaving a trail of broken men in your wake.
Seventeen and you are playing games with ancestral beings.

A little girl sitting with the elders, she's crumbling with knowledge too
heavy for her mind to comprehend.

Little girl, the universe is at your feet.
Little girl, the universe did not count on you making it this far.
Little girl, the devil created you to fuck with the Lord and you play your
part so well.

You are not a different breed.
You are just terrified.

Versions of you are taking over your thoughts and your body.
Were you born a trope or did you become one?

Peace, Be Still.

Olabimpe Adedamola

your mother says pray the sadness away. the gay away. the drowning away. how do you tell her you are no miracle? you are a storm that will never be still. that will not (cannot) bow to words.

sometimes, you lie very still in the hopes that if you are still still still long enough, you will dissolve into your sheets. spoiler alert: you never will.

you swallowed a bottle of painkillers when you were fifteen, hoping to outrun your sins.

in your father's house, every door creaks. you convince yourself you can hear ghosts fighting to be free. much like the ones in your chest. in your past. be still. be still. why can't you stop being such a whirlpool?

you keep seeing things that aren't there. you hear laughter. and moans. and sobs. a single thought grows into a labyrinth. a never ending spiral into the abyss. your mother cannot bear to see you so dislocated. be still, you thunderstorm. please. please.

your mother says pray. are you praying? she asks. why can't you feel the sadness dissipating? why can't you feel the queerness evading your blood? why are you still being dragged underwater? are you finally still? or did the painkillers get to you first?

A Journey
Abunic Sherrif

since you journeyed to the sky,

it's been hard pulling your name

from the depth of mother's mouth.

at your janazah,

the women washed you over and over

and buried you in the gaps between our teeth;

turning our mouths into graves

our family is a hungry cemetery

each headstone holds a letter of your name

caked in grief.

some nights father crashed his hands on mother's jaws

& we heard you scream.

The Girl Doesn't Like Morning

Yuu Ikeda

A girl
with her hair
dyed in the evening glow
tries to swallow night desperately

The girl stands solo
on world
where goes to darkness,
and tries to fill her lungs
with night

The girl doesn't like morning

The girl doesn't like morning
that yawns with boredom

The girl doesn't like
the beginning of momentary weight

So,
the girl tries to swallow night
to soak in it
even when
she is in the morning glow

The girl tries to swallow night
to be it
even when
she is in the morning glow

*Untitled Poem for Self-Love, Written After June
Jordan*

Yasmin Bolden

holding is the wildest flood we can brook
the loudest quiet, the most permanent
impermanence our hearts can handle
we are such temporary hands. we grasp
so tightly. how terrified we
are at letting go at frost. at
the end of an embrace. oh, i
am
cold, thinking of coming home
to myself to find that i've given
her away. did i hold her long
enough?

Black Girls in Space with Space Buns,

Written After Danez Smith's Dinosaurus in the Hood

Yasmin Bolden

let's make a movie about black girls wearing space buns in space
the aesthetic is star wars meets interstellar meets hidden figures
i want a the supremes type beat playing in the background as
future meets past and where we girls last and laugh because space is
star-studded blackness without white boundaries, i want high teas
on the moon and i want black girls to survive the odds every time
climbing throughout their spaceship with ambition & executive
decision:

there should be aunties on board & in every center of mission control,
rolling out words of wisdom and rhythm in service to black futures
& falling in love with with the sounds of women in charge

so during the search for directors ya better keep ron howard & george
lucas & theodore melfi of hidden figures fame out of the discussion just
because

the percussion of our piece will not play off of imperialism; in their
imposing

star dramas we are only wise, wisecracking aliens creature or some-
body's future

baby mama or the body used as a map of fascism-inflicted trauma
i don't wanna do another story where the black girls get the glory only
because a white man worked up the guts to help her get off of the ground
i want thandiwe newton's character to come back to life and kick butt and

i want issa rae to awkwardly ascend to the lead alongside coco jones and
brandy

i just know that this movie can be more than what it is not, more than
just the black star wars, win more battles than

the ones we can name in one breath, i want the odds to be existential
odd and not

the earthly ones we're bound in, i want this movie to be more than a
metaphor

for all the grief this ground has given us and all of the escape pods we
were

never given, i know the incels will cry that it's leftist driven propaganda

but i honestly just want to stand up slowly in a dark theatre in sync with
a crowd
wondering aloud if there'll be a sequel to the movie i just watched, the
one devoid
of space cops, where debbie allen makes a cameo teaching the lead of the
melanated
space crew how to dance in zero-g, preparing her for a partner dance
romancing the
other black lead, floating over the spaceship windows that reveal earth far
beneath their feet.

*And when, in the morning sun, we tied knots as seats
against the tree branches to swing & Tarzan into the
air & back*

Chisom Okafor

& photosynthesized in the first shower
of sunshine, the verdant foliage, waiting

to carry your full weight, in the event
of an interlude, when you'd fall into a silent

gaze, your eyes same as the hand
of a river god, the wind sailing across the distant field
of olives bent to your command as we watched

a journeying drove of cattle tread softly
after your eyes, which from this angle, were the hands
of the wind, waving a magical wand

to the pastures spread across the distance.

You said something in connection
with the warriors of the Tuatha Dé*
but forgive me, I was in deep awe of your hair

of shimmering gold & my ears were deaf
to the soothing baritone soft spilling
from your throat. Did you know
that I once dreamed of making an invisible incision

in the chest of a sleeping walrus, just to know
if it shelters a lover in the space
beneath the skin? Did you know
I once caught a kingfisher with enough room
in its abdomen for all the people I ever loved.

* gods of pre-Christian Ireland from Irish mythology.

On Heartwreck

Njoku Nonso

Tongue-sweet, blue
like a desert

wind, you wrestle through the ripe fruits
blooming & blooming
inside my bones,
as red

as disgrace. An unspoken language.
Pontius Pilate washing
his hands before

committing murder.
The wooden plate is licked empty:

two different worlds collide
in space, emptying
into the still and dark

like sharply torn love letters.

Milk of the sea, milk of the heart,
rapturous in its glooming,

will you boat me home alive?

Sampler

Onyenekwe Chiamaka

The first word from a motivational story read
'stretch.' Another said, 'break.'
Then, 'become'.

I want to ask how you stretch and break and
become. Instead, I hang all the dates that I
never become

- 1- New
- 2- Girl
- 3- Waiting
- 4- First choice
- 5- Happy

I swear on the life of the soil beneath my feet,
that I am a fragment. A hiss within a storm.

I wrap a towel around my knee and bend far,
far into a night that will never become day.

I lock hands with my fears on a sunny day. I
sing a song to commemorate the beginning of
my resistance.

That is how I stretch.

And stretch.

My calves take the shape of a bottle suspended
in air, ground calling.

I begin to understand.

Then I break.

I brace myself for the crash, pieces of baked

clay I have to mend.

I gather them in plastic buckets and iron pots
for the labelled bins. But I crush them into fine
grog, into a paste.

Hands, clay, water, wind. Fire.

I am what I become.

Home remedies

Onyenekwe Chiamaka

If
the room, wall, walls
rush in, cement, rough skin
grinds against your cheek, cream
slashes muscles hurt, or don't
fight it, with wool, dunked in spirits
you store on racks, with milk
If
your hands, loops, like these
grab a machete, another
pulls, swings, cuts lemon grass
its scent wafts, climbs into your
nostrils, chokes your cry, like comedies
spread it, on earth, hot bright, sun
like carpets, mutes the proud smell
If
you say a prayer, its answer,
fights your name, calls you, wrecked
second thought, scum, like a mother's
scowl, opposite of home, reactions,
sad song, binge
Take your god to a river
dunk her head in it

PROSE

The story is our escort; without it, we are blind.

Chinua Achebe

The Witch of Heping Street

Edoziem Miracle

The first corpse on Heping Street belonged to Simon. He was twenty-nine, six foot one, dark, and worked at the robotics firm where I worked. His body had been found hanging naked in a warehouse three blocks away from my apartment building.

The police established later that his penis was severely bruised, and they'd found particles of rubber stuck in the bruises. The depth and angle of the bruises, they said, pointed towards an external influence. Simon had been murdered. It had disturbed me that I had just spoken to Simon the day before, though he made me feel uncomfortable. What was worse, however, was that I'd seen how he died in a dream.

More corpses were discovered. All of them, men who lived in Heping Street. Men I'd known. And I'd seen all of them die before their corpses were found.

Heping Street had its own serial killer. Eye witness accounts said the killer was a woman, and they described her as a witch.

I had no idea why I was seeing her kill.

It's 10.am in the morning, and I've already downed three cups of espresso. I had a bad night – nightmares. Not the premonitions about death —haven't had that in a while— but a recurrent nightmare from an incident in my childhood. I'm by the office's espresso machine, trying to get a fourth when Bob walks up to me.

“Ulimma.”

I turn.

“Hey, Bob,” I say, and try to smile at him.

Bob's the customer agent, two cubicles from mine, who's been asking

me out relentlessly.

He comes closer now, and I almost flinch. He's towering over me, flooding my nostrils with his cologne. My heart begins to pound. I get the sensation of wanting to shrink away.

"Uli", he starts, "just come have dinner with me. Just once. Please?"

His nearness becomes overwhelming. My skin begins to prickle as sweat breaks across it. I can't find my tongue.

Suddenly something beeps, and Bob backs away.

"Ah, that's my pager. I've got a customer to cater to. Just consider my request, okay?"

"Yes", I blurt, then wait for him to leave, before I go back to my cubicle.

In that small space, I feel safe again. I'll have to leave quickly after office hours. I have been doing that to avoid Bob ever since he started asking me out. I sip my coffee and try to put blankets over the thoughts of Bob.

Just then the phone on my desk rings. A customer's calling. Quickly, I take a huge gulp off the coffee mug, collect myself, then pick up the receiver.

"Hello, good day, this is Wong Robotics. How can I help you?"

It's dark. I can't see anything but the thin strip of light at the bottom of the door. My eyes are closed, my hearing keen. My breath is coming out in loud whooshes. My heart wants to be let out of my chest.

I hear the shuffle of feet just outside the door, and I jerk, bumping my head against the bottom of my bed. Everything is silent now. I blink as sweat crawls into my eyes. It takes so much to not scream.

Maybe he won't find me if I remain silent long enough, I think.

With an ominous creak, the strip of light at the bottom of the door spreads

as the door opens. My heart pows! Like a firecracker. A single thought plops into my head. The door!

In my haste, I had forgotten to lock the door.

From under the bed, I see a pair of legs walk in, and stop. My eyes begin to water. Snot slithers uncontrollably out my nostrils. My lips are shaking so much I don't trust them to keep to the vow of silence, so I place a palm over them.

"Where are you!" he gives a throaty roar. "Come and give me my daily medicine!"

Bolts of fear spear through me, causing me to flinch. A tiny squeal escapes my mouth and everywhere becomes dead-quiet.

Suddenly, something begins to clink. And then there's a thud, as something drops on the patch of light on the floor. It's a belt. He gives a throaty chuckle. And the lights come on.

"Stupid girl," he says, and comes closer. "It's going to be double for making me go through this."

I can hear the weight of his breath, and if I stretched my fingers, would touch the tip of his boots. My mind taunts me with occasional flashes of me in his grasp. The images begin to come in a spate, and utter hopelessness becomes my blood. The mental barricades I'd put up could withstand only so much. The sound of my weeping drones out everything. Almost immediately, I'm drawn out from under the bed with such force I bang my forehead against the underside of the bed. My mind is ablaze with terror now. I begin to squeal, to struggle and struggle. He backhands submission into me and bends me over the bed.

"Daddy, please," I beg. It's like someone's croaking through my subdued voice.

He rents my skirt.

"Please."

I feel his fingers graze the surface of my pudenda through the fabric of my pant. And even that goes in a sequence of rips.

Something's crawling down my forehead, and it soon seeps into my eyes, making it scream in peppery hotness.

“Please, Daddy.”

He rams into me from behind, and groans.

I open my eyes, and I'm someplace else -- my room. I'd been dreaming. I feel streaks of wetness running down my eyes and nose. I get up from the bed and trudge towards the kitchen for a cup of coffee.

Coffee keeps my mental retardation at bay for as long as I take it.

The scar on my forehead, a puckered line, itches. I soothe it with my fingers, before taking a sip of coffee.

Two cups of coffee later, I am on my bed, feeling like sheets of glumness had been unwound from my head.

Then I begin to hear the voices. A sibilant buffet of whispers, like the entire world, was speaking all at once. As expected, the things in my room begin to move, floating in the air, and knocking into each other.

The first time this had happened to me was some months ago. I'd had the nightmares for one week straight, after Simon had argued heatedly with a female colleague I was with. He'd threatened to 'burst her head' for making a witty remark while he was asking me out. I'd gone home frightened by his outburst, and deed into a train of nightmares. I'd woken up everyday feeling like I was in a black hole. The nightmares stopped the night I'd seen Simon die. They continued after that, only stopping whenever I saw the other men die.

All of a sudden, something unexpected happens. A speck of fire appears at the side of the door. It flickers there for a second, then it crawls like a snake, growing, until the edges of the door are all lit.

What's going on? I ask myself. I've not seen this before.

I'm still pondering on what to do when the door swings open, and a woman walks in. My heart jumps.

For hair, she has flickering tongues of fire. And her irises are like little round smoldering coals. There are webbed lines of fire running over her brown skin. Despite all this, she's astonishingly beautiful.

"Uli." She calls, her voice soft like dew drops. "Kedu?"

A wave of calm bathes me, sluicing off the feeling of panic.

"Who're you?" I ask.

Her lips crescents into a smile.

"You don't know me?" she asks.

I shake my head in non-placet. I get the feeling she's indulging me.

"I know you, Uli. I've known you for a very long time. You can say since birth."

My brows cock in surprise.

"You know me?" I ask, half a cube of doubt seasoned into my voice.

"We're the same, you and I. We want the same things."

"What things?"

She points to my head, and a panorama of memories begins to play. I see my father ripping out my sense of personality as he shreds my cloth off my body. I see the men who've died on Heping Street, and all the times they made me feel uncomfortable.

"For you to be free again. And I'm doing just that."

Suddenly, a seed of suspicion falls into my head, and it's growing rapidly.

“What are you doing?” I ask her.

She smiles. “Setting you free.”

“You?” I say with as much accusation as I can muster. “You’re doing this. You’re killing them You have to stop it. You...”

She disappears.

I fall to the bed shivering. I’ve just found the murderer. And the killings in Heping Street are far from over.

It’s nighttime and very cold outside. I’m in one of those dreams again. The one where someone gets killed. I know because as usual, it is very realistic, and has me seeing through the killer’s eyes.

Red rubber-gloved hands come into my vision, grasps a metal rung and begin climbing a fire escape.

She stops at a window, lifts it gently, and gets into a bedroom. The lighting here is a sleepy gold. Her brown-booted feet step on a sand brown woolen rug. The walls are clothed with damask wallpapers, which the wardrobe, and a cupboard obscure at the far left of the room. At the far right is a king-size bed. And someone is in it. She walks towards the king-size bed, and Bob comes into view.

Bob! I scream. Bob! But it is all in my head.

His chest rises and falls in slow, easy rhythms. His face is cocooned in the peace of sleep.

Stop! I yell in my head, hoping that the fiery woman will hear me. Please stop!

The fiery woman feels a rush of desire like she is building towards an orgasm. She reaches into a pocket of her backpack and comes out with a filled syringe.

She runs her gloved fingers across his face and hums slowly. Bob mutters, then his eyes flutter open. At first, there's just that empty sleepy look, then surprise swoops in as he stares at the fiery woman. It looks like he's looking at me. Before he moves his lips, she sinks the needle into his neck and presses hard on the plunger. Bob goes back to sleep.

The fiery woman pulls off Bob's clothes, then ties him, spread eagle, to the bedposts. I want to look away from Bob's slouching member, but I can't. She gags him.

After making sure that he's properly restrained, she brings out a piece of cloth and places it over Bob's nose. His eyes fly open almost instantly. And he begins to struggle.

I watch as his protests become muffled screams. As his body glosses over with sweat. As the fiery woman strokes his penis till it becomes bloody.

"How do you like being a man now?" she asks. "Do you feel any lordly? How do you feel now that you're at my mercy?"

Bob's pain, his helplessness, is a tantalizing meal. And she's gorging herself on it.

When Bob begins to whimper like a dying dog, she gets up, and stabs him methodically, with a kitchen knife.

I called the police in the morning, after a long bout of weeping. I knew who the next corpse was, and where it could be found. I felt like I'd been dunked into a bag of sorrow, and tied up. The knowledge that the serial killer killed because of me was depressing.

I had downed three cups of coffee and was preparing for work when my laptop binged. I had a video call.

Now, I'm seating in front of my laptop while the detective, Nonso Wu, asks me some questions.

"How did you know the corpse's location?" he asks.

I feel a pang of frustration.

“I said everything when I called the station. I saw it in a dream.” I tell him.

“Can you describe this dream for me?”

The memories start to build up. I close my eyes and push them away.

“I’d rather not,” I tell him. “It’s too painful to revisit.”

His eyes bore into mine for some seconds. Then he blinks and sighs.

“And you say this killer is the, uhm, fiery woman that visited you?”

“Yes. Absolutely.” I say.

He looks at me again, like he’s trying to discern if I’m telling the truth.

“You know, Ulimma, we’re this”, he makes a pinching gesture with his fingers, “close to catching the murderer.”

I feel a flush of relief.

“It was difficult at first, seeing that the killer did not leave much in the way of forensic evidence. But the Investibots discovered boot-prints at all the murder sites. They’ve been running projections ever since, trying to determine the density, weight, size, and sex of the person.”

I was amazed.

“You can do that from a boot-print?” I ask.

“Yes. And more. We can also determine the make of the boot, how long it’s been worn, where it was bought, and cross-reference results with that of the identity search of our fiery woman.”

“Well, congratulations, detective.” I tell him.

He looks at me like he’s wary of accepting my congratulations. But he says a ‘thank you’ finally, and it’s goodbye.

There's so much talk at work today. First Simon, now Bob. Two killings from the same company were enough to raise fears.

I'm at my cubicle, sipping coffee, when I hear a knock. I swivel on my chair and face two police officers. My heart makes a beat out of rhythm.

Calm down, I tell myself. You've done nothing wrong.

"Miss Ulimma?" one of them ask.

"Yes?" I reply.

"Come with us, please."

I'm taken aback.

"What? Why?"

My heart's marathon-ing now. "I spoke to the detective this morning," I tell them.

"Miss. Ulimma, you're under arrest for the murder of seven men in Heping Street."

My spirit drops.

"Wait. I don't understand. How am I responsible for these grisly murders?"

The detective looks at me, then gets up from his chair and paces about the spacious room. The walls are soundproof. The ceiling, full of boards of light.

"I told you that the fiery woman did this," I tell him.

He walks back, and sits, and very calmly, looks at me.

"Please, you have to believe me. I can't hurt a fly."

“Hmmm. Says the girl who killed her father at thirteen.” He says.

My eyes narrow. My mind begins to cloud with suspicion.

“You’re not supposed to know that,” I tell him. “You have no right to dig into my files.”

“I have a right when the person involved is a suspect.”

“Suspect? Do you have any idea, what that man did to me?”

“I know, I know.” the detective says. His voice is soft. I almost think he cares. His shoulder rises as he sighs.

“You’re not well, Ulimma.” He tells me.

“What?”

“Remember those boot prints I told you about?”

“Yes,” I reply, not sure where this is going.

“Well, we analyzed them, and your name popped up, among others.”

“So why am I the only one here?”

“You’re here because we went to your apartment.”

“Did you get a warrant? Because if you didn’t I’m going to...”

“You’re a suspect, dammit!”

I flinch, and my heart begins to race. I’m suddenly aware of how enclosed this place is. The detective puts a hand over his face. He is silent for a while, then he brings his hand down.

“I’m sorry.” He says.

After a shot of silence, he continues.

“We found evidence of the murders in your apartment. The gloves, a syringe, the boots, vials of smelling salts.”

“What?”

It’s like I can’t hear my voice. My head feels like it’s bowered in Styrofoam.

“I’ve never seen those things,” I tell him. “Never.”

“Uli, the bots analyzed those materials. They were like vaults for your fingerprints. Plus you washed off the blood from the gloves, you didn’t care to change syringes. You used the same syringe to put your victims to sleep, and the same cloth soaked with smelling salts to wake them up. The bots also picked up the exact boot prints at the murder location, running from your house, and back again.”

My mind is like a sponge. It’s floating, not retaining much, not processing much.

“The fiery woman. She did this. Can’t you see she’s trying to frame me?”

The detective looks at me, like I’m broken, and beyond fixing. Something is welling inside me. Some kind of force yearning to be released.

“There’s no fiery woman, Uli. Sorry. It’s all in your head. You’re not feeling well. And we know it. That’s why we’ll be taking you to a...”

Everything mutes. I look up, and then the detective is my father. He is smiling at me in that victorious way he always did after he had used me.

“No!” I scream and lunge at him, my hands reaching for his throat. My father grabs my wrists, and we struggle. I begin to laugh. He doesn’t look so intimidating now.

Suddenly, it’s like it’s raining footfalls. Hands grab me, and I begin to scream and struggle. I’ve almost finished him off.

Something sinks into my arm, and I yelp and try to turn. But it’s like I’m wrapped air-tight by walls. My strength begins to ebb, and my eyes droop.

No! I scream, in my head. Please, No! You don't know what he'll do.

The last thing I see before I know darkness, is my father rising from the ground, and flashing me a taunting smile.

MEDLEY OF PAIN

Ifesie Ozichukwu Chimezie

“Bless me father for I have sinned. This will be my last confession.”

“How do you know it is your last, son?”

“I know. May I continue?”

The smell of incense dug unpleasantly into my nose. It couldn't mask the smell of sin that rose off the confessional, my nose could pick them all out and I wondered why they hadn't been swallowed up by incense. The futility of my task dawned on me and I got up to leave, walking right up to the chancel. Then I paused and returned to the confessional.

“This place reeks of sin,” I said.

“It is only the heaviness of your heart that you perceive, this is not a collection box for sin. Would you like to continue?” the priest replied. I still could not see his face.

“What use is it? I will die anyways”

“Forgiveness is even more useful to those who are condemned to death; whatever the afterlife is, you will want to put your best foot into it”

“Here are my sins...”

“Start again, son”

“Bless me father for I have sinned...”

It had all began when I bashed Uzuegbu's head with a pestle. It was the summer break after my first year at the university. I spent my first day back home listening to his pregnant wife wail and moan.

When I had him at the mercy of the pestle, I asked him “why?”

“A man’s wife must respect him. It is how the world was made,” he had said.

I smashed his head twice. A head that daft needed another smack. As I walked away, I recalled father saying a man cannot come back if he did not return to the afterlife with the face he had worn on . I picked up a kitchen knife and tore the skin off his face. No woman would have to feel his hand in this life and the next.

The neighbourhood was agog with the gory tale for weeks. But like everything else, it quieted down soon enough and life returned to its inane circle.

“I smothered a prostitute in her bed, pressing my hand over her nose until she stopped writhing,”

“Why did you do that?” the priest asked me.

“Her moans were too fake, she was telling a lie.”

“Aren’t we all liars?”

“Maybe, I didn’t want to hear her lies. I made her wash off her makeup before we began,”

“Why,” the priest asked.

“Isn’t it obvious?”

“Tell me more,” he said, his tone the same as that of a teacher who was fed up with a student.

“Last night, I killed a priest”

“You what?” this time priest sat forward in the confessional, it was the first time i was seeing his face throughout the proceedings.

“I killed a priest. You know him, the one who did a lot of damage with a tool he wasn’t supposed to be using carelessly”

“I don’t know him”

“Sure you do, he was your friend. You helped him cover up some of his devilry.”

“When did you become the righteous arm of God?”

“I am not. I am not even sure there is a God”

“You took away their chances at redemption.”

“While you kept watering the grasses of redemption, father, unfortunate people fell prey to him and had their own lives derailed. Why are you shivering Father?”

“Have you come to kill me?”

“No father, I have only come to confess my sins before it all ends”

“Why are you so sure it is all coming to an end?”

“Is it important? The end comes when it will.”

“Father, the craziest thing happened this morning.”

“Tell me about it.”

I recalled the images of the morning before this, the morning when I found out that I too was just like the things I fought, a sin, a blot on the conscience of others. When I woke up, I was ready to step into the shadows and become one with the night. I had it all planned out, I will lay on my bed and pass like my grandfather did, noiselessly.

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conscience of others. When I woke up, I was ready to step into the shadows and become one with the night. I had it all planned out, I will lay on my bed and pass like my grandfather did, noiselessly.

But even in these my last hours, peace eludes me. You see, my parents aren't exactly model citizens. If they were, wouldn't they have noticed this person I have become?

Their squabble today had been on something mundane like all the others. They will fight, break whatever glass they did not break the last time, then my father will go out and stay out until the end of the day. I think he does it to escape his responsibilities. My mother will sit in their unkempt room throughout the day and always, I am left to myself.

"Father, I finally chose to sit in on their bickering."

"Tell me how it went," the priest prodded gently.

My thoughts returned to the events of that last morning or was it the morning before the last one?

"What are you doing Ikeakanna?" My father had asked as I waltzed into their bedroom.

"I really want to know what it is you two fight about always" I replied. His eyes were sunken from all the drinks. My mother slipped into the corner.

"Get out of here, child of the devil!" My father spat.

"Tell me father, what is it you and mother are always fighting about?"

"Get out, just get out!" he said again and again and slumped to his knees. Then the funniest thing happened, my mother went to him and held his head to her bosom and they cried together.

"What is going on?" I asked completely non-plussed. There was no answer from either of them, only the tears that flowed uncontrollably.

I walked away. They were already dead to me.

“Goodbye father, penance won’t be necessary,”

“Why is that?”

“What does a dead man need penance for?”

As I stood up to leave, Ugochi, the girl who lived a floor below us, came running into the church.

“Father, you must come quickly,” she gasped

The priest tore out of the confessional like a crazed man and ran with her to the car. Over at my house there was wailing. The priest would walk up to my mother whose eyes stared wide and unflinching.

“What happened to your husband, Sarah?”

“My husband?” my mother would ask incredulously, “Nothing, he is over there with his friends. It is Ikeakanna, my son, who stuck a knife into his own stomach and died on his bed.”

The priest would stand upright, making the sign of the cross over and over.

“But he was with me at the confessional only moments ago.”

“He has been dead since last night.”

The priest would make more signs of the cross, standing still until they hand him the note.

“It was all for nothing. See, I became the thing I fought and my life was an elaborate lie”

MOON-SOON

Jeremiah Orhembra Mhembuter

You are not conscious of what you are thinking, but I will tell you. Oryiman, you think that this time will be different, that Kelechi would certainly scale all the first hurdles, and come around finally. Your head has housed fascinations that you are looking forward to, that soon enough you and Kel will be linking fingers and rubbing toes under tables, stealing kisses in hidden places. But it is always a girl, always a girl sliding in her bony self, head thrown back in laughter, shaking you, pleading you to please talk your ‘friend’ out of dissent.

Friend, that’s where you were relegated to. Kel and Oryiman are undoubtedly buddies; an awesome duo. Buddies. it squeezes air out of your lungs, Jesus! Now, Kel has a magnetic field fiercer than Terna and all the girls in your department can’t help but throw their thin arms around his neck, or tug and link arms with him, while you are the ‘very good friend’ standing beside, flashing the customary smiles of approval. Remember, ‘the very good friend.’

It cuts, you know. But this pain isn’t new. Cliché: but it keeps repeating itself, at least for you: queer guy falling for straight guy. “But how are you totally sure he’s not queer?” Chukwudi had asked you. “In the same way that he could be very straight, he could be very queer as well, except he’s repressing it.” And now you want to rely on that? Cut the bullshit, man. God help you don’t go over heels for this guy or I promise you, you are a goner. I love you, Oryiman, and that is why I am telling you the truth: just because Kel rests his head atop your back occasionally, that your thighs press against each other during classes, and that he aids you from time to time in a teasing way, doesn’t mean anything. Hey, I know: being queer has its heavy load of bullshit!

Come on, you are trying to read meaning again because Kel has laced hands with you and swings your hand. “Uweh!” booms ahead, but those of you behind are barely chanting, just simply walking. Your legs tremble, but you are whispering: For Uweh. In honour of Uweh...I’ll keep to the end of this procession. Kel holds you still and rubs away at a stain on your black shirt—a shirt you earlier nursed disdain for except that Chukwudi—this morning—had stood back, hands apart and scanned you this

this morning. “What is visibly wrong with this dress? Nna, If you don’t appreciate it, you can pull it off and give it to me, biko.”

You twitched your lips. “The sleeves are too puffy!” you said, but you slung your bag and walked out into the breaking dawn. Your department had made it a compulsory wear to pay last respects to a deceased of the department, thus the point in the scheduled procession.

Kel pulls you away furiously. You jerk. Lifting your eyes, a man with a sweaty face yells into your face. It is so loud that on instinct you reach to cover your ears. Everyone within your range replies in vibrant tones now, urged on by the riled voice of the lead chanter. You shake your head.

Kel’s arm around you, a voice calls from behind. Both of you turn. Sonia hastens over, her customary black dress just over her knees. Ah, you groan under your breath. Sonia again? Why wouldn’t she just let Kelechi be? Isn’t it obvious that he is not into her?

Shut up there now, young man. You should ask yourself the same question too. At least Sonia has a liking for him. You can smell it. True or true?

But you?

What you have is a fascination, you and Kel involved, boyfriends. It’s all that has been your primary aim—ever since you successfully moved on from your unreciprocated love for Terna—to find a lover. And every boy now, especially the fine ones, has become potential lovers.

Sonia takes a peck on Kel’s cheek and slings a hand around him. “Kel, how far na? Why have you been avoiding me since morning?”

Kel crosses his hands behind him and raises his brows. He speaks in a solemn voice. “You know what you did yesterday.”

“How many more times do you want me to apologize before it gets to you that I am sorry?”

She widens the space between her thumb and index finger and plants it under his chin. She squeezes mildly. “Relax your countenance, abeg.”

Kel shrugs her off, but she holds onto his hands, pleading.

And that's how the three of you would walk abreast, in the middle of an aggrieved, chanting crowd. You holding your cool with a perpetual grin, grunting at the appropriate moments—both of them engrossed in their scuffle. Before you would realize, Kel would bless her with a peck. You will get that sinking feeling again, hearing Kel ask her: “Now, is that enough?”

Sonia will blush. She will rub Kel at the back of his head, and you will catch the longing in her eyes again. Startling it will be, but the two of you are vying for this guy—in your own ways. Kel will then scrunch his lips at her, as if in dismissive disdain. And you will wonder if she knows, knows that you are actually her competition—“the very good friend” whose duty is to always talk Kel out of dissent.

2 missed calls: Mumsy.

Your stomach tightens as it does anytime your mother's call comes in. A sense of despair and failure envelopes you, and you wonder for the umpteenth time why God would lay upon your kind-hearted mother a burden like you. Stirring upon your bed, you stare through the window. Daylight is growing stronger. Chukwudi slaps a hand on your bed. “Get up, sleepy head. Are you not the one who has an 8'o clock class this morning?”

Your eyes fall on the hairy moustache under his nose. You drawl “I'm tired” and slump to the bed. A light thud filters into your ears. You turn. Amos stands akimbo having jumped from the upper bunk, naked but for the short briefs shrouding his nakedness. You rise up, grab your phone, and jump down before you get an erection. Amos is very fond of walking around in briefs, and while it sends thrills all over you, you loathe him for that.

Outside, you slip a hand under your billowy red shirt, yawning. Sending a call to your mum, you place your phone over your ears and look down the railing bordering the corridor. Two boys in boxers walk past you with kegs of water, the veins in their hands like taut ropes.

The first thing you say to your mum is an apology. She says it's okay, asks after you, wishes you a pleasant day, and pleads with you to remain modest and keep out of trouble, to read voraciously and bring back home a First class. Only if she knows that you are rather pursuing a degree in falling in love. Sigh. Memories sneak on you, drawing you to the moment of the procession yesterday. You recall Kel's indifference to Sonia, not just yesterday, but with every moment she hangs around. The pity you always feel for her, even amidst your mild jealousy, emerges again. Her plight reminds you of those days when you were in her shoes, pinning for a guy who did not feel the same way and never will.

You open Whatsapp and tap on Sonia's contact. You type: Can I ask you something quite personal? If it intrudes, do tell me. And hey, don't be afraid to tell me the truth. Anything we discuss would be entirely confidential, okay?"

Hmmm...What do you think you are now? Expert in matters of the heart? Indulge me a little laughter please. I, however, don't mean contempt, okay? It's good though, lending help to Sonia on her romantic cravings for Kel, despite your own agenda.

Recall when Sonia told you that you make a good husband material? It's what I am saying to you too now.

Get moving. You have a lecture by 8 a.m and still have some pages in your GSP 101 to complete before the time of submission at 10 a.m .

And begin to rack your head for what to say when Sonia views the message and confronts you. Prays she continues the conversation online, or else I can already see you stuttering.

Pentatonix's version of Blinding Lights pounds in your ears as you admire the picture Kel persuaded you into taking immediately after your class at the Faculty Hall. You are thinking, aren't we just sweet together, when the notification bar slides down, displaying a number of messages. Sonia's name tops the list: No probs, na. Ask me anything. You na my man.

Nervousness ruffles your mind as if you are the one to whom a question is

to be asked. You drop your phone onto the open textbook in front of you and glance around the dilapidated walls of the reading room. Then you rub your palms together, your very wet palms, and run your fingers over the keyboard of your phone. For the goodness of humanity, you breathe. Bomb loading, you type. I think you are in love with Kel.

Stupid, you think. You bit hard on your lips.

Kinda, Sonia writes back.

Kinda or yes?

Yes, then.

I am sorry to point this out, but it is the truth. I don't think Kel is into you, though.

Really?

Yeah. Haven't you noticed how irritated he gets when you are around him?

Hmmm...nah. If he felt irritated, he would have let me know. You know Kel.,He always voices out his mind.

Girl, I have been in your shoes before, and if you keep chasing after this guy, it will be heartbreak you are chasing after o.

But I love him...I can die for him. You really don't understand.

Moon-soon.

What's moon-soon?

You know, after my first heartbreak, it is a code I have been going by, meaning one day my dreams of watching the moon, whilst embraced in my lover's arms, will come soon, at the right time.

So, I should just let go...just like that?

Yeah. It's not going to be easy, I understand. But it will be chasing air if you continue down this path.

Seriously, Oryiman, I appreciate the talk, but I can't leave Kel. I LOVE HIM.

OMG! Is that a streak of a tear crawling out of your eye? Oh, your own memories are flying back to you.

Sonia sends in a crying emoji.

I gotcha, baby, you write.

Network dwindles. You close your textbook, rise and walk out of the reading room. From time to time, you have to reach out to your face and rub at your dampening eyes. It's all complicated, isn't it? Your act of kindness is seemingly like a tactic to get Sonia out of the way, and while it isn't so and Sonia is your deemed 'rival', you feel her pain. You want to be there with her right now, your arms enclosed around her, comforting her. And it's marvelous too, that you now want to relinquish your desire for Kel. Wouldn't keeping on with hoping he will come around be chasing the air too?

Moon-soon. Wait, my dear self. Prince Charming is taking the whole time to arrive, but he will definitely come. And I assure you, he's close, very, very close.

FRAGMENTS

Sharon Onyinyechukwu Okey-Onyema

That was not the first time Sochi was seeing a movie where people were killed. Hit, mostly stabbed to death. But he had never seen a movie that detailed; the stabbing in the stomach that continuous, in and out, in and out, in and out. It all felt familiar, in and out, the look on the white victim's face, the feeling of the knife digging into the flesh of his stomach, in and out, the taste of blood gathering in his mouth, in and out, his knees failing him, his falling to the ground, his tongue feeling heavy, his hands glued to the stab wounds. He did not miss the blurriness of his eyes before the memory blacked out. It felt like a *déjà vu*, or a past life, or a death that was to come. The first time he saw the movie was on a friend's phone, so he collected the movie and watched it again from start to end, slowing down the stab scene to see things. Each time he watched it, he felt more, remembered more, became more convinced that he had experienced the same thing sometime ago.

The first time he saw the movie alone, after slowing down the stab scene and trying hard to pick what his memory was trying to say, he remembered a dimly lit hallway and the tag '124' on the door of the room. He remembered opening and scanning the room – he did not remember anything in the room except for a bright yellow bulb – barely closing the door before the knife dug into his stomach and he tasted blood in his mouth and his knees failed him and he fell to the ground, felt his tongue growing heavy, held his stomach tight and closed his eyes.

After the movie, he walked into the bathroom and stood in front of the mirror. He took his shirt off and placed his hands over the right side of his lower belly, tried to feel the pain, but he did not feel anything. Then he fell on his knees and then on his stomach, but he could not remember anything else.

Still, there was a feeling in his mind, this heaviness, like vomit that hung in the throat and refused to come up.

The second time he saw the movie, he placed his laptop on the table, dragged his chair closer and plugged in his loud headset so he could listen for familiar sounds. Instead, as the white man with blonde hair fell to the

ground, his right hand holding his stomach, he remembered curling up inside himself, feeling heavy and weightless and full and empty, yet he stayed inside his body. It was silent and peaceful and dark. He remembered laying still over his blood, his hand still holding his stomach, his eyes completely shut, knowing he was dead, yet holding on to that peace.

Later, he got a bag of weed and stuffed them all in his mouth. He lay on the green rug in the centre of his one room apartment, his dreadlocks teasing his neck, and closed his eyes to listen for the dark.

* * *

Kosi's curry stew filled the room by the time he opened his eyes. It was already dark outside and the curtains were hung on the burglary proof to the left and right. Bakers kneaded heavy dough on his head as he dragged himself up from the green rug. He walked to the window and looked outside for a while. He saw nothing. The traffic forming below him on the street meant nothing to him. As he pulled down the curtains, the aroma of the curry stew disappeared. He wanted to panic but a scene of his dream flashed, the scene where Kosi was preparing curry stew, so he raised his eyebrows and sighed and fell into the nearest sofa. Kosi walked out of the kitchen with a tray of white rice and curry stew.

“Exceeded again, okwa ya?” She said, as she sank into the seat beside him, her butt bones hitting the sofa skeleton. The aroma of the stew came back stronger and Sochi felt the urge to itch his eyes.

“What is it? I came in at first and met you sleeping on the ground. I went out and came back and you were still lying there like ozu”.

Sochi let his eyelids succumb to their weight. He lay down and placed his head on her thin laps.

“I'm sorry.” His lips told her, because he was too weak to tell her of how the aroma disappeared, how the house went still and silent, like a deleted file. He wanted to tell her of how she, in his dream, played out before him as the house went silent. She was there in his kitchen, preparing curry stew and humming and the kitchen had a bright yellow bulb. The kitchen door slammed and ‘124’ appeared on it. He was not sure if she was the one who screamed or it was his head but he rushed to open the door and a

knife dug into his stomach. It went in and out the first time and his eyes shot up in shock. It went in and out the second time and his mouth filled with blood. It went in and out the third time and he held his palms over his open stomach and he fell to the ground and he was a white man with blonde hair and the room was not a kitchen anymore. But Kosi sat up on the sofa and rubbed his shoulder across.

“When is your next appointment with your therapist?”

“Mmm?”

“Hapuwa. Rest your head.” She said and took her fingers to his hair. She stroked it gently and watched steam rise from the plate of food in front of them.

ART WORKS

A picture is a poem without words

Horace



Girl Slipping out of a shadow



Boy Be Brave

...but boy is no god, Boy is human with blood too, Boy cries, boy gets depressed and boy rises

Intimacy and erotic love making between two bodies bypasses familiarity and that is the crux of this visual narrative.

I break myself into infinitesimal bits, tiny enough to fit into each of this four piece, my body understands the language of love, I know intimacy and I embrace it without fear of being dumped halfway or getting lost in between. I make and unmake images of my nudity to fully propel myself into this orbit of passion, sexual excitement and unbridled love expression.

⌚ | AIR



A different surge run through me, the prints your fingers left on my skin is still hot like you seat them. Such strong feeling, same old song and the curvy tender lips on me. Kissing away my strength.

REIGN
The Muse Of Pain.

⌚ | WATER



Your lips draw on my skin a line of wetness, raining wax and soft claiming bites on me. My bones are weak. My legs can't carry me and here I lay clinged and screaming away in orgasmic delight. My hands are in your hair, knowing I will never get enough of you.

REIGN
The Muse Of Pain.

⌚ | FIRE



I'm under this beautiful body, slipping through walls of chaotic fury and melting rain. I'm under this touch, every part of me yelling in ecstasy and driving me to the cliffs of orgasmic madness.

REIGN
The Muse Of Pain.

⌚ | EARTH



I'm laying claims to the edges and curves of this body, I'm devouring every piece and leaving no side unfelt, I'm riding on the thin line between now and never and I'm marking my territory.

REIGN
The Muse Of Pain.

Night of Erotica

Contributors Biographies

Chika Unigwe is a renowned Nigerian writer and author of *On Black Sisters Street*.

Chisom Okafor's poems have somehow, managed to find their way into the list of finalists for the Brittle Paper Award for Poetry (2018), the Gerald Kraak Prize (2019), the Jack Grapes Poetry Prize (2020), the Frontier Award for New Poets (2020) and the Stephen A. Dibiase Poetry Prize (2021). When he is not engrossed in his duties as reader for Frontier Poetry or editor for the Libretto Chapbook Series, you may find him sipping decaffeinated coffee while contemplating on suitable meal plans or thinking of the science and art of re-imagining and modifying the Sahara of the body, with the lens of Jorge Luis Borges.

Njoku Nonso writes from Ojoto, Nigeria. His work has been featured in Bodega Magazine, Momento: An Anthology of Contemporary Nigeria, Palette, Rising Phoenix Press, The Shore, Brittle Paper, Kissing Dynamite and elsewhere. He's a Pushcart nominee, 2x Best of Net Nominee, and most recently a finalist for both Open Drawer Poetry Contest and Inaugural Lumiere Review Writing Contest. He's currently working on his first poetry chapbook, and still loving stray dogs.

Akpa-Esu, Promise is a Nigerian creative writer who is also interested in photography, mostly nature photography. He sees the two as being mutually compatible. They heal him. Whenever he's not taking shots of nature, he's writing short poems. He is a student of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. He studies in the Department of English and Literary Studies.

Yuu Ikeda is a Japan based poet. She loves writing, reading mystery novels, and drinking sugary coffee. She writes poetry on her website.

Onyenekwe Chiamaka is Igbo, Nigerian. She is very interested in unifying things, anything from religious views to cells and processes. She studied Archaeology at UNN, wants to supervise an archaeological excavation and would probably disappear for a while if there was a button for that. She also is very inquisitive about how people give names... Some of her poems have been published on Praxis Magazine, The Muse (UNN), Malimbe Magazine and Arts lounge.

Arthur Shedrick Davies is a voice from Liberia, a poet with budding emotions to be echoed; a stalker of literature, and a studying scientist. He writes about African scenes, humanity, moral values, and core principles of life. Some of his poems have found home and are forthcoming in *The Ducor Review*, *Powerpoetry Publication*, *Breaking The Silence: Anthology of Liberian Literature*, and elsewhere.

Martins Deep (he/him) is a budding African poet, photographer/artist, & currently a student of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. His works deeply explore the African experience. His creative works have appeared, or are forthcoming on *FIYAH*, *The Roadrunner Review*, *Barren Magazine*, *The Sandy River Review*, *Eunoia Review*, *Agbowó Magazine*, *Surburban Review*, *Twyckenham Notes*, *FERAL*, *Kalahari Review*, & elsewhere. He loves jazz, adores Amanda Cook, and fantasizes reincarnating as an owl. He tweets @martinsdeep1

Eduard de Bosco writes from somewhere in the world. Born Edward Boateng, he is an honoree of the Gujarat Sahitya Akademi Award in collaboration with *Motivational Strips*, for his literary excellence. His works have appeared in: *Spillwords*, *Praxis Magazine*, *Eboquills*, *We Write Liberia*, in anthologies and elsewhere. Eduardo finds his peace in poetry, historiosophy, advocacy, education, music, and in nature.

Olabimpe Adedamola are a law student in Lagos, Nigeria. They like fantasies and heavy metal. You can find them on Instagram @borednigerian-girl.

Abunic Sherif II writes from Liberia, Monrovia. His work has been published in *Spillwords* and elsewhere.

Yasmine Bolden is a Pushcart Prize and Scholastic American Voices nominated Black American poet, part-time creative writing coach, and racial justice advocate dedicated to nurturing the voices of and creating accessibility for young BIPOC involved in the arts. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Love Letters: To the Mothers and Fathers of the African Diaspora* anthology, *Perhappened Magazine*, *Salima Magazine*, and *Ghost Heart Literary Journal* among others, and she'll be attending Johns Hopkins University in the autumn of 2021 as a Writing Seminars and Sociology intended double major. At heart, she's still the voracious reader who talked her way into getting more than the five book limit from

her elementary school library. You can find out more about her in the about tab, on Twitter @blkpunningpoet, and on Instagram @blackpunningpoet.

Mhembuter Jeremiah Orhema is an aspiring 18 year old writer with works published on FictionWrit Magazine and The Shallow Tales Review. Currently a first year student of English and Literary Studies at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, he is always on the outlook for “love” in its many forms. You can find him on Facebook @ Mhembuter Jeremiah Orhema or via his email address: orhembajeremiah@gmail.com

Sharon Onyinyechukwu Okey-Onyema is a third year student of the Department of English and Literary Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. She moves from Lagos to Owerri to Port Harcourt to Nsukka and writes wherever she finds herself. She is the author of Hunting Tears, shortlisted for ANA 2017 Short Story of the Year Award. Her works are published and forthcoming in print and digital magazines such as The Muse Journal, Nantygreens Magazine, Liminal Transit Review, amongst others. Sharon is currently serving as the associate editor (prose) for the **Muse Journal No. 48**.

Ifesie, Ozichukwu Chimezie is a student of English and Literature at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. He believes beauty can only be found in little things like being human. His works appear or are forthcoming on The Muse Journal, Panacea, Lunar review and elsewhere.

Ijeoma Anastasia Ntada is a Nigerian Writer and Mobile photographer. With my photographs, She tells stories. She has works published on The Ducor Review, The Praxis Review, Visual Verse and some forthcoming ones on The Lumierre Review.

Ohakem Augustus-Reign Chukwuma (*The Muse of Pain*) is a writer, creative non-conformist, concept creator, activist, and content analyst. He is presently doing a major in Theatrics at Imo State University. He is a critic for some Art firms and has had works published by some of these firms. Quite the sensualist, he loves to read, write, travel, and swim. Reign loves Creative Arts and Theatre Aesthetics, and spends most of his time editing, curating and proofreading literary works, as well as creating contents, ranging from writings to pure art. Recently, he was selected to work with an African cinema and has authored a book titled **Graveyard**.

