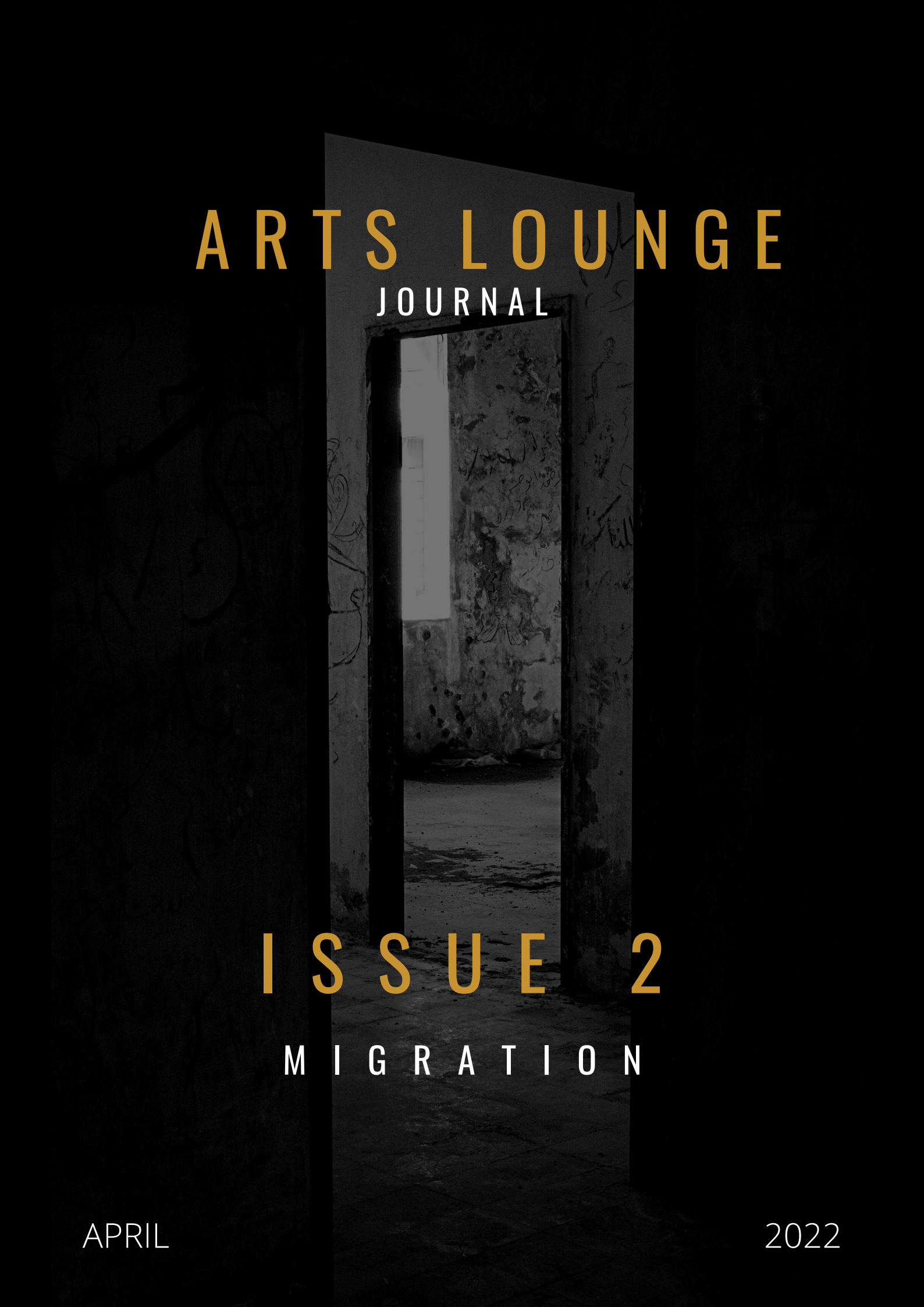

# ARTS LOUNGE

## JOURNAL

# ISSUE 2

## MIGRATION

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# Arts Lounge Journal

## Issue 2

# ARTS LOUNGE

*To Literature, the gift that keeps giving.*

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# Masthead

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## Editor's Note

Migration may be literal, a movement from one physical location to another, but it can also be psychological, a movement from one mental state to another. This richly imagined collection of poems and prose pieces leans toward the more metaphorical experience of migration. When the speaker of a poem steps across the desert or packs their boxes to move from home, we may not learn of any specific place of origin or destination. We are often asked to consider instead the state of mind that person experiences in spiritual transit. What is their loss, their hope, their inner turmoil?

As I read these pieces, filled with imagery of both the everyday and the ethereal, I was struck by the presence of mothers and fathers as the sources various speakers are migrating toward and away from. In that sense, many of these works are about leaving and returning to one's roots and the conflicts that arise in this generational journey. These are difficult travels, quite literally, when military police stand in the roadway, or because one is caught wandering, without clear identity. Sometimes you don't even know the way home. The irony may be that the desire to migrate away may lead one to return. Or, as one contributor here attests, we may follow "Reincarnated scripts / we come back again."

Erik Gleibermann.

# Part One

## Poetry

*If I turn here the rain beats me, if I turn there the sun burns me.*
*Kofi Awoonor*

## Off To Where We Shall Wade In Wonder-Waters

**Psalmuel Benjamin**

Our feet cake in dust-like chocolate and our
Dry tongues lust after the newborn dew.
Our bags ride on us like the donkeys of our
Task masters. It isn't true that a feather
Doesn't know we have a cap. At least, these
Leaves—clothed in black shirts have rehearsed
Well for this choreography how best they
Can say "bye bye"—it's an honor.
Let the earth dab her scars in this region as
We move. We want our grieves to fall like
Water droplets into her pockets, once and
Final, such that when we look back we won't
Turn a pillar of coal. If the Ospreys ask, tell
Them we have, like a foul smell, galvanized
Into the arms of the wind for filtration. If the
Millipedes ask, tell them our skins, too,
Have brewed wheels in hundreds.

But if

This dry land asks, tell her we're off to

Where we shall wade in wealthy wonder-

Waters, where we shall kiss our palms and

Spit out the venom of tedious existence.

Where we shall tell of the taste of the green

Grass of Canaan and the kisses of her milk

& honey on the carpet of our tongues & our

Aching bones unkink in obedience to the law

Of honor for the healing that comes with the

Balm of Gilead

## The Requiem of a Hobo

**Salim Yakubu Akko**

my body was eaten, like a fruitless plant by the wind.

mother sat with her perched mouth

supplicating for a safe home.

but it's never the same; the road was painted grey.

I looked into the eyes of the rumbling sky

a voice came, broke the door and chewed the Cayuse. my legs hovered, like a cursed lame.

I'd now burrow—a place I could call a home. and the winter-wind gave me a blanket of cold, and there, I read the threnody of a bum. and I wrote a requiem—how I slept in cold; how I died and resurrected in the winding wind. I wrote in silence, “If I'd have known, I'd not have stepped out from mother’s home.” I missed the soft palms of grandmother. I missed the poems of my bed.  I missed home.

## Homecoming

**Kaothar Abidemi**

My mouth has become too sour
like lime. Every prayer I take as
pills, burns in my tongue, so I take
them through incision.

The world turns around in 360°
As my sanity falls, profoundly
Into the silence of my mouth.

The souls in my eyes are there no more.
They got stuck staring into an empty spot
the way a tree steels it's root into dirt.

My eyes break into a waterfall—a clean spring which mirrors
a myriad of monsters hungry
for my soul.

But I have picked up a needle
To patch my shattered self
And I have worn the garment on a rock.

Today, I will fly with the birds,
glitter,like the diamond in the
castle of my body. Be the myrrh
at the end of the rainbow.

I have poisoned the monsters in me
with droplets of joy.
Now I reflect-the colors of an orange sun.

Look–it's that girl at the cliff
Of this poem, ready to welcome
her soul back to her body.

# Is this what they mean for your land to be a cauldron of roses?

**Hassan Usman**

*after reading Danez Smith*

you walk into the streets / & there're bullets / coming
to hug you / &there're  birds with broken wings / wanting
to kiss your forehead / & there're your footprints / giving
into the sand holding them / & there's the wind / waiting
to steal your voice / you look around / it's unsafe every
-where / the rivers are carrying more bodies than fishes /
boys burn out before their cigarettes do / everything
becomes smoke / before reaching the end of the road /
but you can't see the fire renaming them / there's only the
sun rubbing its belly / is this still love / how this land
reopens our wounds / & calls it healing? / verily / whatever
we feel is imaginary / but it's as if we're blown away by
all these green / it's as if we've too much patriotism to give
out / we reach for the heart of this land / & it turns into

a gun / & it blesses our mothers with a massacre / &
it inspires another poem on grief / so I count a people
extinguished in the cravings of their own bodies / I
approach a refugee camp / & there’re so many
familiar faces / what is love / if it keeps showing you
the exit? / if it only whittles you down to dust? /

## Farewells

**Jewo Oghenetega**

The morning breeze seeps into orifices on my skin,
&it teaches my goose bumps that the taste of the wind is a landmark of home.
Jingles blare from a transistor radio, & remind my eardrums
of my mother's tongue. Father lifts his agbada above his shoulders
for the umpteenth time & his vocal cords, plaster one more proverb on my ear.
"Omo mi, remember whose son you are" resounds in my head until
it sears itself into my subconscious, & incubates in the chambers of memory.
My boxes are ready &packed full with personal belongings
that would one day transmogrify into memorabilia in a foreign land.
The trip to the airport features tears from my mother, & a stony smile from
a father who cannot afford to appear weak before his household.
I walk up the steps of the airplane, side by side with farewells, & tears fall in streams.
As the streamlined vessel takes off into the fabric of blue above;
I look through the window, at the interconnected maze of corrugated-iron roofs
& streets that curve through skyscrapers like taut elastic skin.
My eyes capture the moment in my mind, as a keepsake on my journey to another man's land.

## Black Sons

**Saheed Sunday**

not every Alcove with treacle puddings
lead to a portico where sweetness pours

like trickles of flood at the Mississippi.
sometimes, the knowledge of what you have

clasped in your hands so hard that it hurts:
kept in your pharynx but it becomes phlegm

that itches through your throat to the small
intestine where you dish out words,

massacres the small country left.
I hate history, but not one where my

father's name is the one in bold published
in Georgia font. Perhaps, the art of learning

where my ancestry originates from is the
worse idea & a dry one —a shred of leaf

opening its thingy palms to show lines
harmattan has engraved back to its
decrepitude.

how many Ernest are in earnest to
build another Babel& how many

black sons shall lose their language on
the quest to the climax? Àkàní, your

mother doesn’t wrap her arms around this.
Someone tweets with an owl, we relish

height, not that we covet the gods’ blankets
or their petty brimstones that keep us

off their scents. Perhaps, we should
tweet back—twist fisticuffs on the neck

first so hard that it forgets it has a tongue:
then stab it with a bread-knife but it

shan’t drip blood, not from its crevices.
how many times should I throw

manna off the fence into a field where
everyone is a covetous Israelite that

keep foods in-between shoulders
forgetful of worms with white lines

round their head & tail?
Harriet left a trail of grains

to the door step of each slave & every
fortnight, an arm appears on the wall

to snatch their sons & daughters from
the cocoon of their grips. The history

doesn’t end here, you should rattle
that through your left ears: not the right.

## Experiment

**Philip Abonyi**

when you gauge a sleepless night of my mother
it will be too heavy to be justified with numbers.

I calibrated her body to 1000cm^3 & everyday

pain fills her cylindrical body pouring down her feet where it
becomes a pond of aquatic carnivores swallowing every beautiful
drop in water.

I collected my mother's tears in a Petri dish as a specimen, I
cultured it for two weeks in my room
& it grew into giant algae of a broken heart
from the love, my father misplaced a long time ago
& the sorrow in watching us crave to be birds
but she cannot give us wings.

always she is trying to throw us faraway like a javelin
across the perimeter to ascertain our dreams
in indefinite digits for the betterment of lives
so that the arithmetic of life will be solvable by all
and our destines be easily factorized.

I pour myself in a test tube every night before I sleep
and put under the Bunsen burner that spurs
from the tongue of God with blue flames
I hope that it will one day turn gelatinous with success which will
taste in my mother's tongue as common salt.

## The science of Living or Leaving

**Philip Abonyi**

Like the river trees watching a boy drown,
the world will never care about this bird in my eyes
that whistles tears.  I live in a place where everybody
carries a temple of God in the mouth &
everyone prays to blow out the candle of another
&watch his breath.  These days we open our
mouths to the spread of rotten flies that perch on
our brothers' heads. Indeed we love to hate each
other.  Mother says that to enter the body of God,
we need to shatter the hinges of our dark heart
and throw sunlight in there. Truth is strong
in the ear— we will never listen to it.  We will keep
dreaming of America while we are floods
drowning our cities.

## Redemption

**Joseph O. Oluwayomi**

Oftentimes,
I hear the word penitence
gushing out from the lips
of Isreal.
It jolted & bounced like
a klipspringer into my ear.
What it does to this body
rearing iniquities, the soul
can only tell—the body
has eaten sour
grapes, & livelihood's teeth
are set on edge. But today,
I'm wearing this poem as a
girdle,
that my tongue can proclaim
how i ripped Belial's garment
with the touch of His
cloak.

## Time-Lapsed

**Ekweremadu Uchenna**

although we'd always known that

time and space could corrode our bond

and wear it till it snaps

yet armed with smartphones we

slung thoughts and feelings

across space in emojis of kisses

in flowers and hearts

in blushes

in winks

in e-sex

we danced to the bass drum of our hearts

to the hi-hats of our breaths

to the cello of our moans

and to the tom-tom of our pulses

did we not day-dream of
building our own nest where I should
spit pinches of yeast down your
doughy womb till it bulged and threaten to burst

we dreamt of sprawling at the porch
warming in the morning sun
while the cornfield swayed like drunken
men plodding homeward on a cold night

was it naivety or blind faith that
made us ignore the thorns
sprouting around us choking
our bond slowly but steadily

it’s funny now, isn’t it, how we
squat by the river
far apart yet within reach of each other

scrubbing ourselves from cloths to bones

bent on washing off every stench and stain
of mutual memories

## My Father's Prayers

**Olafisoye Oragbade**

I learnt stories from my father's silence,
how he would sit under the palm tree,
muttering words only he and the stick in his mouth understood.
He said they were prayers to the fallen,
those whose bodies have become earth upon which we climb and come up for air,
those whose dying breath were the winds upon which freedom would come,
those whose blood were spilled and became an erosion
washing off the top layer that hid a brighter tomorrow.
those whose voices weren't theirs, but an echo of the pain in the heart of the masses.

After this ritual, he would stand,
stretch and say, like an anthem;
"Son, soon you'd be offering these prayers to me".

## before I learnt to borrow strength from my dreams

**Olafisoye Oragbade**

I danced to the beat of my fears turn tormentors.
lent docile smiles to them,
swallowed my sorrow till it anchored grief in my belly,
I was a child scared of triggering the anger of the gods many did
not believe in
stepping on my shadows
until I learnt to speak back to my fears.

and so I became a miracle of broken voices making melody
of buried seeds becoming a haven of trees,
of memories hidden in the stars,
of yesterday's prayers,
of mother's exchange of tears in the night,
of father's sacrifices of sweat in the day,
of lonely bodies of water surrounded by dryness,
of lost change forgotten in a pair of jeans,
of dreams fulfilled with much blood, sweat and tears.
I became, a relic of scathed men from a victorious battle,
the day I learnt to speak back to my fears.

## my body is a museum of forgotten dreams

**Olafisoye Oragbade**

how I am the incarnation of my father's fears,

how my eyes tell the story of a distant past,

how my voice carries itself - like the Atlantic - a burial ground of

unwanted memories.

how my body is a museum of forgotten dreams,

broken promises made under the sanctity of the night,

how my skin houses history that hang the heart,

how my breath is an anchor to yesterday,

a sad song stuck on repeat,

a reminder of bitter tales.

how I shouldn't be,

how I shouldn't live,

how each day I become like the man who didn't stay - my father.

## Torrents of Thoughts

**Regina Nege**

Torrents of thoughts torment me

Demanding expression

I groan

And sneak into the orange orchard ridden with pests

To catch some tranquility

But the dried leaves and bare branches turn to themes

Thus the bleeding of my pen

And my thankless journey goes on.

I remember when young and eager

I heard the call and picked the pen

And set out on this rough route

I've earned more foes than friends on here

They do not see what I see in the sky, the sea

The newborn screaming at birth

The umbilical cord thrown into the river

The endless waves of the river

Why can’t I live without a care like them?

I groan

I see no comfort in sight

For though my sight dims

And my hands wobble

I must go on

I look at the scorners

I look at the loathers

I look at those men

Those women

Who live freely without a care

Their appetites insatiable as fire

To whom the world can go to blazes

Once they are not consumed

And wonder why I am on this road

I long to return to those days of bliss

Before I heard that call

Where blind to deeper meanings

I lived in blissful numbness

Never stung by the cries of humanity

I long for an end

To these torrents of thoughts

## Eulogy to dirt; a door to many stories

**David Solomon**

At the very edge of a man's breath,
    is a salaam to earth.

A spine sits down with the soil
    listening to the cursed tales in
the wheel of time.

    it spoke of
thunder claps in arms of men,
    that pulled stars

out of other men's throats. It is
    always a man that starts it,

     you see.

War of tomatoes, dances of souls
    on water; red sea.

Bowed breaths and brittle legs
    under a wall

with a pencil,

drawing a future out of a life.

Forgive my pun. I am trying

to

shake off the dust in their bones.

I still remember how those children

held my fingers in their fists.

Their cheekbones, grazing

my silent lips, says the earth.

Over

and

over and over.

The face of water, traveled on the spine

—

because water is memory; a type of

language that pulls towards the cold

which fell from his eyes

into a silent night.

Now, I too, sit with my spine
    taking the shape of my father.

listening to the things I would
     tell my son and him,

his son

## //Unearthly//

**Mahbubat Salahudeem**

It often happened at dinner

the whistling, then came the blast

followed by an expulsion of breath and knowing

that I have been spared-

but only just-

while somewhere, amid cries

and choking clouds of smokes, there

was a scrambling, a barehanded digging

of pulling out debris, what remained of a sister, a brother

a grandmother

I wasn't at all surprised

when father said _

fate is what is beyond man's control

in every book, everyone has a chapter, we are

are mere words in pages

of reincarnated scripts

we come back again

we are mere characters

entertaining God

but then I wondered

if God was smiling

or sobbing when our

breaths were rinsed by death

while we entertain

## Fiery Dis-attachment

**JLF Maikaho**

I like to set photographs on fire

Watch memories burn to ashes

As flames engulf paper, eating up colors

Smoke rising into the atmosphere

Carrying memories along

There is a way fire lets me go

Frees me from the cages of regret

From constantly looking back

And wishing to have done something differently

I often cry while setting them ablaze

Praying silently that it's the last time

The people and moments they captured

Would deny me sleep

Mother thinks I'm just sad
That one day I'll look back
And wish I had not destroyed them

She doesn't know that the flames reach my heart
too
Burning away the emotions that could
Make me reminisce or regret

She only sees me gathering the ashes
mournfully
She doesn't know that when I throw them in the
sea
They dissolve and disappear forever
As if they never existed

And every time I walk away from the sea
I know that I won't look back
I know that I have let go
Because this is how I make peace with endings
This is how I make peace with death

# An Ad Placement

# Part Two

## Interview

*No one leaves home unless home the mouth of a shark.*
*- Warsan Shire*

# Unoma Azuah in Conversation with Uchechukwu Umezuruike On the Effects of Migration and the Roles of Writers in a Time of Mass Exodus

Unoma Azuah, poet, teacher, editor and activist, interviews Uchechukwu Peter Umezurike, the 2021 winner of the NLNG Nigeria Prize for Literature in the category of literary criticism. Uchechukwu Peter Umezurike is a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Calgary. He holds a PhD in English from the University of Alberta, Canada. An alumnus of the International Writing Program (USA), Umezurike is the author of Wish Maker (Masobe Books, 2021) and Double Wahala, Double Trouble (Griots Lounge Publishing, 2021), and a co-editor of Wreaths for Wayfarers, an anthology of poems (Daraja Press, 2020). His poems and short fiction have been widely anthologized online and in print magazines, and he has interviewed over forty writers for Brittle Paper, Africa in Words, Read Alberta, and Prism International.

**Unoma: Uche, your very important and insightful essay entitled "Self-Publishing in the Era of Military Rule in Nigeria," published in the Journal of African Cultural Studies (JACS) just won the Nigerian Liquefied Natural Gas (NLNG) sponsored Nigerian Prize for Literary Criticism category. Congratulations on your win. How does this win make you feel?**

**Uche**: Thank you very much, Unoma. I am grateful that the essay caught the attention of the prize jury. Naturally, I felt good about winning the prize, but I had good support from my professors, especially my supervisor, Dr. Lahoucine Ouzgane, at the University of Alberta.

**Unoma: Part of your premise in this essay is to highlight the damages military leadership inflicted on the book and intellectual industries in Nigeria during the military eras. Do you think the book industry in Nigeria will ever recover?**

**Uche:** The military rule remains one of the worst tragedies to have befallen Nigerians. Yes, it devastated much of our book industry. I don't know whether the book industry will recover easily from the devastation, but I know that some local publishers, such as Masobe Books, Narrative Landscape Press, Parresia Publishers, Ouida Books, to name a few, are doing their best to thrive in the face of political apathy, adverse economic policies, and poor corporate support for the arts. They invest so much to make books available to Nigerians. I admire their doggedness. Time will tell how far they will succeed, in any case.

**Unoma: One can rightly point out that even with democracy, corrupt politicians have continued to do damage to the book and intellectual industry in Nigeria. No?**

**Uche**: Sadly, we have a venal class of politicians who care nothing about the growth and development of the educational system or intellectual environment. Instead, they continue the plunder the military had instituted in the body politics, leaving Nigeria much worse off than ever. I don't know if we have politicians of integrity these days because they are not only overpaid, but unfortunately, they have no interest in transforming the country. Instead, I feel they are content to watch millions of Nigerians grovel and grope in poverty.

**Unoma: While writers and those in the book business in Nigeria are constrained to get innovative by resorting to self-publishing, this alternative, however, could be quite problematic. Do you agree? If so, elaborate.**

**Uche:** I agree with you, Unoma. Self-publishing has its challenges, such as lack of rigor and painstaking editorial work, but it has proved helpful for many aspiring and established writers in Nigeria. Writing is hard and more challenging even for those in the global south because they have no access to the publishing infrastructure, such as publishers, editors, agents, grants, funding, libraries and writing centers. So, self-publishing provides such Nigerians with no access to traditional means of publishing to publish and share their work with the public. I don’t take for granted the benefits of self-publishing for a writer who has little hope of ever getting published.

**Unoma: Inept leadership in Nigeria created an avalanche of chaos in not just the book and intellectual industries. It brought about situations where citizens no longer depend on the government for basic things like water, basic education, security, good roads, employment, etc. Traditional publishing, for instance, cannot be sustained in a stagnant or decaying economy. Lately, unemployment sky-rocketed in the country because money meant for job creation and human/infrastructural development was, and is still being squandered by crooked politicians. This has consequently caused "brain drain" and the mass exodus of intellectuals from the country. Can you speak to the issue of migration and how it pertains to you on a personal level?**

**Uche:** It breaks my heart to see that Nigeria is not getting better. I remember the first time I traveled to the United States in 2008, and some Nigerians living in the US advised me not to return to Nigeria because the economy would worsen. I ignored them and believed that things would improve under the YarAdua government. But things never got better; rather, the condition of living in Nigeria grew frightful and is now abysmal. From 2008, I kept believing that change would come, and many Nigerians would get to enjoy the good life.

But, alas, almost fourteen years on, I can't believe that we have slid into a deep, deep rot than ever before. I don't even think things got this worse during the hellish days of the Sani Abacha regime.

**Unoma: There are those who may not be able to migrate physically, so how would you look at "migration" as a metaphorical concept?**

**Uche:** I like this aspect of looking at migration as a metaphor. I think this is where imagination plays a part. Imagination offers me the opportunity to migrate from one place to another. This is where fiction plays a role. To want to visit other places and see what one can get in or from those places appeals to me. What fiction offers me is the means to travel through time and space. To imagine what is possible, what is desirable within the scope of what is possible. And that's something we have the power to imagine, to travel through a borderless mental landscape, our imagination. Anyone open to the ebb and tide of the world would realize that even if we cannot travel physically due to one reason or another, we can still do so with the help of our imagination. So yes, imagination makes our living a little bearable and moments more enjoyable.

**Unoma: What would you say are the advantages and disadvantages of migration?**

Uche: On the surface, migration has the advantage of providing the migrant with more options to a better life or economic prosperity if they are from a failed or war-torn country. Migration offers opportunities and possibilities if one has the fortune to follow the right financial or academic path to the host country. Yet, there is a flip side to migration, for it can come with a cost, such as homesickness, discrimination, and marginalization by citizens of the host countries. Any part of the world that an African chooses to live as an immigrant, they cannot escape being exposed to racism. And if you are Black, then you would have to learn to live with routine anti-blackness, especially in Asia, Europe, the Middle East, South America, and North America. But then, anyone who opts to live outside their home country must be ready to live with the conditions, challenges, and limits of citizenship in their host country.

**Unoma: Would you consider treating the theme of migration in your children's books? As a saying goes: "catch them young." This could be a way to give Nigerian children, for instance, early exposure to the issues of maladroit leadership and its consequences in a nation. This will put them in a better position to weigh whatever options they may have with regards to them being the future: future leaders.**

**Uche:** That's an interesting suggestion, Unoma. I don't write with a preconceived idea to "teach" children or write according to a theme.

Instead, I begin with an image of a character and see how it goes from there.For my latest children's book, *Wish Maker*, I created this character known as the Stranger, though he calls himself an angel; he meets Ebele, the 9-year-old, at the well, and a friendship develops out of that meeting. Although the story deals with peer pressure, friendship, forgiveness, kindness, and bravery, it presents the Stranger as a migrant and visitor. Sometimes when we migrate to countries, we may be treated as strangers by native citizens. So, in that sense, *Wish Maker* is also about strangeness and migration.

**Unoma: Can you elaborate more on your children's book, especially with Wish Maker being about strangeness and migration?**

**Uche:** I try to explore the idea of what is strange/ness and who a stranger is, and of course, I am aware that there are instances where strangers have harmed people or taken advantage of people's openness. In writing Wish Maker, I was trying to find a way to think about how we react and relate to strangers in our community, how strangeness easily evokes fear and repulsion, and how strangeness seems already a condition of alienation. Perhaps the stranger is an alien. I thought it was helpful to explore that in a children's book, so we have this strange man, wild-haired, stinky, and annoying, who comes to a village and meets two boys,  Odi and Ebele.

While Odi is unkind to the stranger, Ebele appears a little kind. The stranger later visits Ebele at home when his mother is out hawking plantain; Ebele is wary of the stranger, but they soon become friends. So, I hope readers of Wish Maker will reflect on how we form ideas of strangeness and how moving from one place to another brings about a condition of strangeness to the newcomer and the host community. This, for me, is important, especially when we think about our “home” outside of our native homeland and how citizens of the countries we now live in perceive us.

**Unoma: Do you have any advice for that frustrated, young Nigerian writer who has neither the option to self-publish nor the traditional publishing outlet?**

**Uche:** I wish I have solid advice, but I can only offer a couple of tips. First, I'd say just to keep believing in yourself. Some years ago, I eagerly shared my first short story with a professor, and he said I should quit writing because he thought I didn’t have any potential or talent. Ever since, I have proven to myself that I have what it takes to write short stories. The professor is now confounded and has nothing more to say to me. Second, they should keep working on their craft and read as widely as possible. The more one reads other people's prose or poetry, the more one learns how to master the art.

Third, they should find a way to network with other writers and learn from them. There's strength and energy in the community, especially among like-minded people. Finally, one should never give up. Hold on to your dream. Never let it go. These are what I live by, and I hope they resonate with anyone in the doldrums.

**Unoma: This is the COVID-19 epoch. How has this "apocalyptic age" affected your writing and the promotion of your writing? How has it torched migration? Any last words?**

**Uche:** This is a demanding and challenging period for everyone, I suppose. The angst, the ennui, the gloom, and the fatality that the pandemic has brought about; the restrictions, the lock downs, the continued wearing of masks, and the caution that follows one everywhere, even with friends are all terrifying. I have managed to do

some writing, mostly in 2021, but right now, I am at the University of Calgary, working under the supervision of Dr. Clara Joseph and researching the archive for my project on African Canadian writers and filmmakers.

# Announcement

This is to inform the public that our secondary school poetry contest,

formerly known as

the Cradle Poetry Contest,

will now be called

**ARTS LOUNGE'S CRADLE LITERARY CONTEST,**

and shall rotate between poetry and prose.

This takes effect from the

**1st of April, 2022.**

# Part Three

Prose

*At the end of my suffering, there was a door.*
*- Louise Gluck*

# A survivor going Home

## (Non-fiction)

**Eniola Abdulroqeeb Arowolo**

The bus inches forward, swerves from the grimy park to the road and drives off. You are in the front seat, your school bag in between your legs. You raise your butt a bit, slide your hand into the back pocket of your trousers and fumble out earphones. Traveling alone without a song booming loud in your eardrums is in itself boring, as journey is to you. Heaven knows how old people find it easy to just sit and watch vehicles whizzing past on highways, roadside traders running after vehicles to sell their goods, and the exchange of insults between drivers through trips. No wonder many of them nod off halfway through journeys, you conclude.

It's a break from the first semester. At least, you won't get to work your ass through a pile of projects and ridiculous group assignments. The two-week holiday is to celebrate the forthcoming Eid al-Adha. Two weeks isn't that bad to spend some quality time with your family; besides, you are not planning to resume school on the stipulated day. Lectures don't begin as they often claim. So, you may just wait until--since this month is already upon its end--the middle of July or towards its end before going back to school, and enjoy the festive season. You have missed a lot of people from home, especially those boisterous siblings of yours.

They never get tired of frolicking around the yard, badgering you to collect your phone so they can play games, bickering over petty stuff, but all that gives you a kind of joy, shows that you are there again in the midst of your much loved ones. You have journeyed half a mile away from Ogbomosho, heading towards Oyo. Your bus turns to an expressway and speeds up. Up ahead, some policemen are talking to a taxi man or shouting rather at him. The man looks exasperated to you, and you believe such exasperation that made him bang his bonnet must have been borne out of the officers' compulsive want of bribes. This is not some rainbow that visits the world seldom. Bribery is rife in Nigeria. People see it every day on the road, and no one ever dares to confront this vice. Some men have done it; and people have watched their lives fizzle in the mouths of guns.

"Those unfortunate police officers, they never get tired of this nonsense as if the government never paid them," a woman behind your seat says, her voice croaky.

"We can't blame them that much," the driver says as he slows the vehicle down in front of one of the police officers waving his hands. "If we look at it, how much does the government even pay them? They get by with this chicken feed we give them every single day."

The driver intones, "Good afternoon, officer. How una dey?"

The officer does not answer. You look at his sweat-stained, wrinkled face under his black cloth cap: there is a mole right beside his nose, close to his lips. He clears his throat and rests his opened fist upon the driver's window. The driver opens the glove compartment, picks a hundred naira note and hands it over to him. He smiles and says, "Go on."

No one talks after this as though the air was toxified with a kind of silence you've never experienced. Then the journey continues.

Brown roofs of houses appear in the distance. You are moving closer to Oyo. A car has broken down beside the road where two men stand, fussing with the engine. You gaze on, wondering if they will ever fix the car. They must have called a mechanic to repair it, you conclude. You hum along the lyrics of the music blasting in your head from the earphones when something like the droning sound of a punctured tire bursts out. Fear courses through your blood like a body jolted alive by electric shock. The woman behind you holds onto your seat, shouts 'Jesus!'

The driver—an expert—stays calm as he brakes slowly until he glides the car to the side of the road and brings it to a halt. You and the other passengers troop out of the vehicle.

Some are giving thanks to God while the driver, you and a couple of boys inspect the popped tire: the rubber has ripped off, revealing the rim. It is the front one on the right, the exact place you've sat.

The driver brings out a spare tyre from the boot and fixes it to the vehicle, after which you all hop in and head out again. Is this how terrifying it is when they say people die from shock in an accident? You wonder. The shock was so much you couldn't even mutter a single word. Your mind races through a wide range of possibilities: what if the driver had not been so good and calm to handle the situation and you had died, what would have happened? The headline of the news would have been "Driver and student die, others injured in a road accident a few days before the Ileya festival" or something like that. Your family would have stood over your grave, cried for what cannot last a lifetime and gone back home. But you have broken free from death this time around, a survivor going home.

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When you get home, outside in front of your mother’s shop, one of your siblings, S., is playing with a couple of kids. The parents of these children are your flat mates.

One of the kids who has been fiddling with a Spider-Man toy sights you and calls on others that you’ve arrived.

They scream and hurry towards you for your bag. You hand it to your brother and he rushes inside the shop to inform Mother about your arrival while you stand in the middle of his friends, your hands draped across their shoulders.

“Welcome back, my dear. I’ve been calling you since you told me in the morning that you will be returning home today, but I couldn’t reach you,” she says as she pushes a small stool to you. “I hope there’s no problem.”

You sigh, want to tell her about the accident. “Nothing is actually wrong. I think it must have only been the issue of network.” You change your mind.

“Ok, then. Go inside the room quickly to freshen up. Your brother will give you the yam porridge I’ve prepared for you, your favorite.”

You enter the compound of your house which still looks the same except for the flowers that have been sheared to a much lower level. You know Daddy must have done it in preparation for the people who will visit on Eid. How much you also look forward to the day.

Ileya—a Yoruba name for Eid al-Adha.

# The Lifetime of a Pixel

## (A memoir)

**Chinaecherem Obor**

A dog's crazed barking haunts my nighttime shadow when I walk home. Ikejiani Avenue slits through one of the sleepiest staff quarters in Nsukka campus. Half-working streetlights and stray dogs are the length and life of the street. Together with the quiet, and the many confusions of small bushes lining the half-paved streets, Ikejiani shares with the other adjoining streets a haphazard, disorderly beauty. The stray dogs are of more immediate concern; my roommate had a visiting friend who got bitten by a particularly menacing dog. He swore the dog would die. Weeks later, the dog was found dead in a gutter, poisoned. Our afflicted visitor, already in Enugu by then, was laughing as my roommate asked him over the phone if he had telepathically killed the dog.

I am rattled by the fact that this one is a house dog. A curfew has been imposed after series of robberies at different parts of the school. But as I walk the street alone, post-curfew, my discomfort is not from fear of apprehension; I am disturbed because house dogs around here lack the habit of harassing passers-by; you have to step on to their owner's turf to attract their attention first, then wrath. I walk on, expecting the dog to exhaust its excitement as I move beyond its radar. But even after I've gotten home, I could hear its persistent rage reverberating through the empty streets.

The haunting feeling I get from hearing an animal express canine rage over such a distance wears off with the night and by morning it has given way to curiosity. I wish I can go back and ask it some questions, and maybe, take a picture of it.

A week later, I tell my former roommate about once perceiving a uniquely pleasant aroma wafting from food cooking in one of the lecturers' apartments. The moment I caught the scent, I knew this was something I'd want to capture, the same way we collect with a camera moments and scenes we deem memorable. There are technologies that can record the things we see, hear, but none for the smells we perceive. None for the dreams we have, nor for the fears that quake us. There is no way to register for posterity the sensation of our nerves going cringe. The senses of smell and feel, the grand potentials of our skin and our nostrils, they are short-changed by our age's technological dearth.

Yet, at what point in human evolution will civilization visit what needs it most? Truth. Will the human species ever attain a level of technological or spiritual advancement where there is a scientific method, or ritual for cleanly separating truth from every other false claim to truth; cleanly and without residues of the one on the other side?

I had a teacher in primary school, whose pleasant, motherly face I was rather fond of. Yet, I was never able to recall same face the moment I left her presence, and trying too hard caused me great anxiety.

Similar to how I suffer short-term devastation anytime a newly-conceived idea is lost. Maybe the existential panic I feel in those moments compares to the tragedy of national amnesia. A Twitter mutual made a post one day, and it gave me an idea I felt I could write about. Before an hour had passed, I'd forgotten what that idea was. Panic-stricken, I ran back to the poster's timeline, but she seemed to have deleted the tweet. My heart thumped. She had a new, innocuous tweet, the tone of it, calm and collected, irritated me greatly because, I thought, how could she sound so casual when she is the cause of an active, ongoing catastrophe? I made desperate comments on the new post, asking her what the previous tweet was about, how I needed it to remember something important.

Moments later, I deleted the comments. Something else had occurred to me: What if I wrote about the chaos I was feeling at this point? After all, I felt this more violently than the initial idea the post had inspired. I thought that recovering the lost idea would take some punch away from whatever I eventually write about this panic. But it was all merely manipulations to appease a chaotic mind. I know this because this is the only time I've recounted that experience and I feel no punch writing it.

For this is the thing with memories: your need for them sustains them, gives them life until they become independent of you; until they have the power to stay beyond your grasp, already inoculated to your summons.

They learn how to tease, how to manipulate. They never entirely leave you; instead, they only manage to list precariously in the tentative distance between your reach and oblivion.

I like to think as when we're at our barest as humans the half-naked moment we sit down to shit. It is when we are most shorn of our pretensions, even more than when we take a bath, because in the shower, we still have the capacity of becoming impromptu pop stars.

I'm coming out of a bank. The face of the security man stationed at the entrance is vaguely featureless. Some minutes ago, I barely glanced at him when he said "Welcome to Diamond Bank" as I stepped through the revolving door. I am not actively thinking it, but the truth about him as it forms in my mind that instant doesn't include his capacity for danger. Should I get home, however, and see his face on the news with the headline: "Diamond Bank security officer assaults a rude customer," the featureless face I had seen earlier will progressively develop a grotesque quality about it. Perhaps, he is going to look like he has always been destined to appear on the news with the face of crime and punishment and, should I look upon his face longer, I might go on to imagine myself being stretchered to the ICU had I been having a bad day and visited on him the same provocation as did the victimized customer.

*It takes the littlest of what constitutes a second for life's plot to change monumentally.*

To quantify this absurdity, let me talk about the day, pre-2019 Nigerian General Elections, when on a short trip from Ezzamgbo to Abakaliki, we sped past the remains of a Sienna car still freshly disfigured by a recent accident. It sat by the roadside, bearing election posters for different political parties. Nigerian elections, like in most of Africa, have an impeccable history of bloody violence along party lines, so that it is almost impossible to see opposing posters existing side by side without either or both of the politicians' faces, or names, ripped out. The remarkable coexistence those rival posters achieved then, I believe, is only because there is solidarity in being on the same side this one time while the victims of a fatal tragedy make up the other team. At the same time, I remembered an accident I survived on the Enugu-Nsukka Highway in 2015. Had the crash been fatal, would our vehicle then be for such improvisations as hustling votes, or would it be allowed the role it had earned for the rest of eternity: a monument to the dozen or so souls it ferried to the wrong destination?

The ability of an instant to hold the questions to a significance much larger than itself is vaguely proportional to its capacity for error.

Like the eternal error of photography, an error it is helpless against, but which yet manages to define severe narratives in totalistic measures. In a paragraph from Open City, Teju Cole's character, Julius tries to highlight the weight of this helplessness: "Photography seemed to me, as I stood there in the white gallery with its rows of pictures and its press of murmuring spectators, an uncanny art like no other. One moment, in all of history, was captured, but the moments before and after it disappeared into the onrush of time; only that selected moment itself was privileged, saved, for no other reason than its having been picked out by the camera's eye."

But Julius's emphasis on what is lost with the onrush of time is undeservedly too generous, whereas the fate of the amorphous, borderless factor of space holds greater importance. There are only so many clicks a camera can make in a second and yet there are already several changing moments in that second. This, which I think makes the significance of those lost moments minimal given that the simple rules of probability dictate that they barely stand a chance in the first place. As against what is less arbitrarily lost in the instant when a photographer presses the shutter: the stories outside the frame. Those scenes that do not make it into the four corners of the picture could easily become the central stories with only a slight shift of the camera's lenses.

The stories that become inaccessible might remain stuck outside the frame, but they are not lost to time. The many pixels that make it up are passively collected by the different eyes that have dwelt upon them, past and present.

But then every artist craves access and sometimes I have to caution myself against the ableism of feeling envious of people who use sign languages, a whole system of communication I'm not privy to.

Because I can swear that there are ongoing stories among supposedly random sculptures, that with a level of attention, anyone can be granted access to these stories, told as they are in esotericism, in stillness and in quiet. If you walk towards Block A of the Faculty of Arts, University of Nigeria, through the Department of Fine Arts, there is a man with a bow poised to shoot, a loincloth the only covering on his sculpted body. If ever he releases the pull on the string, a harmless arrow flatly shaped from plywood will be released. Right in the crosshairs of the archer is an intellectual clad in academic regalia, having been positioned there unwittingly by another sculptor. He seems blissfully oblivious of the danger forever aiming for him.

Someone recently placed that arrow in the bow. Before then, the emptiness of the bow had made me imagine a more fatal, metaphysical arrow on it. I had recognized its symbolism of the self-aggrandizement of global intellectualism eerily clueless about the steady onslaught of retrogression.

I've been writing in this room for two years, looking through a window that caught an inelegant landscape in a frame. The scene receives a makeover once a year, during harmattan, when the dust settles on the dourly painted buildings and gives them a more aesthetic aspect, a rather cosmetic one. The room I stay in is part of the topmost floor of a two-story building. On the second floor's landing, there is an *Alumaco* window opening northwards through which the brown zinc sheets of a low-cost school can be seen, one edge flush against our fence. The walls are made of wooden planks nailed horizontally to upright beams. They have no band equipment for the daily parades common in most primary and secondary schools.

One day, their assembly ended at, coincidentally, the same time as that of a neighboring but more prestigious school. As the sound of drums coasted in from that other school several yards away, the pupils excitedly marched to their classes to the rhythm of it. It caused great amusement to all around: me, the pupils, the teachers.

I was looking down at this school's brown roof the first time I experienced spatial disorientation. I was walking up the stairs when, on seeing it from what I thought was the southern window, I halted. Thoroughly confused, I went back down the stairs, and slowly walked up again to see where I misjudged the staircase's turns. Slowly and carefully, I walked up again, confident of getting it right this time, but I still found myself looking out the southern window at the school.

I had to walk all the way out of the building before I could get my faculties back.

It is an experience that resulted in me trying to take a stance on the psychological question of how we see the world. To pose it in the words of Siri Hustvedt: Do we see the world directly or do we see an internally generated representation of the world? The sort of disorientation I experienced can only happen because I already have a perception of my surrounding space experientially preserved, a mental storage unit that can get corrupted as if by a virus, even if temporarily. Just like a time during my childhood when I woke up one morning with a problematic sight that caused written text to double and triple themselves for my eyes' benefit, and their confusion. I was momentarily sure it was a secondary dream inside a more primary one. But it continued for the rest of the day and I had to skip school.

The fun of skipping school doubled the excitement I already felt about the novelty of a different way of seeing, and I was immuned to the panic felt by the grownups around me. I think now that I would probably have enjoyed going to school in that condition, so that I get to be helplessly unable to see, in a place where the ability to see is taken for granted.

Similar excitements occur when I find myself shielded by darkness from where I can see the rest of the immediately visible world illuminated, from where I can make faces at the world and not be held accountable. Or my obsession for screenshots; I am intrigued by their ability to communicate other details beyond the screen's main content, details such as the phone's battery level, the exact time at the place where the screenshot was grabbed, whether or not the Bluetooth or WiFi is switched on, 3G or 4G, and other notification icons that might be visible.

The fact that the owner of that screenshot is probably oblivious of the extra details he has fed me leaves me with a pleasantly voyeuristic feeling. Screenshots unwittingly catalog a moment's lifetime in pixel. It's especially so, when someone shares a screenshot of the final WhatsApp chat they had with a now deceased person.

For someone still unburdened by grief, envying the dead comes easy, because the idea of death at that point has barely more substance than a piece of unconsecrated bread. During a period of time when my obsession with the idea of death was reaching a crescendo, a classmate I was quite friendly with died. In a dream I had of her soon after, I was begging her to come back with me, but she dragged at me and I ran right back into consciousness. I write this last sentence the morning after I've had another dream of her teaming up with me for a train race against some faceless persons.

# Nana

## (Fiction)

**Oluseye Fakinlede**

*Auchi.*

On weekends at Eatwell, I tend to cleaning the windows, the wooden slabs, and the plastic rectangular tables as a full-time job, and joyfully attend to my favorite weekend customer I knew just as, Nana.

Nana always sits alone, close to the west window, scribbling lots and lots of notes. After I have placed on her table the ordered bottle of water and a plate of boiled yam and sauce which often times would be left untouched, I move to the other tables to attend to other customers or to clear their tables.

Like Nana, we had other customers who frequent Eatwell because of our special treats on weekends and to spend time with their families, lovers, or just to eat out. In my case, I work here to augment my savings for my trip abroad. It had been my third attempt at trying to secure admission, but seeing the amount of money I had to pay, I resorted to seeking the help of the agent, whose contact I got from Mama Kate, my neighbor. Her daughter, Kate, is now in Romania. She said all she paid was between 500,000 naira, and the other expenses could be sorted out once Kate began to work. So, while I teach during the day, I retire to Eatwell at noon, work full time on weekends, and I do my laundry work on Sunday.

Mr. Utomi is nice to me.

He was my late parents' friend and understands that I have been putting my best foot forward towards this traveling. So, when I told him that I wanted to travel, and how much money I had raised, he suggested I work for him, not just to save up, but to get other work experience aside from the teaching and my laundry skill.

The first day I spoke with Nana aside from the usual *here is your order and all* was when I spilled coffee on the note she was scribbling. She didn't look embarrassed or enraged at me, despite the slurs that were coming from the lips of some customers whose flirtations I had previously rejected. Seeing that I had begun to tremble, she asked me to calm down, tapped the chair opposite her and requested that I sit.

I sat and quickly resumed apologizing. She took the damp wrapper from me, and soaked up the liquid to stop it from trickling to the floor. She gently pushed the scribbled note away from the coffee pool, and then called *Taibat*, which was the name on my name tag. *Taibat?*

*Oh*, I forced a smile, *Zulaika*! I intercepted. *The apron isn't mine*, I said, forcing out a peal of laughter. She laughed too. I left her side still curtsying in apologizing for the spill.

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The next weekend she was there. And when I asked her if I should get her usual, she refused, saying she would like to speak with me. It was past 3'o clock when I finally had the time to settle at her side. She raised her brow, paused her writing, and tore off a page from her jotter which she dropped in a Liz Claiborne tomato red bag.

She recalled my name as Zulaika and said she had keenly watched me for months and I just reminded her of her daughter. Her face had a brightened look then felt sourpuss. Then she bowed her head and flipped to a page, rummaged through her bag, fiddled through lots of folded papers, and finally brought out a squeezed note that had dog-eared pages.

*See*, she said as she placed a finger on a paragraph. I tried but could not see because of the incoherent letterings.

I wrote about her here, and the description fits yours too.

*See.* I pretended to see, slouching forward towards the note, then I looked keenly and saw that it was a diary entry.

*So where is your daughter?*

*Zulaika*! Mr. Utomi called me.

*Excuse me, ma'am I have to go*.

*It's okay*. She said and gazed as I went away to have a conversation with Mr. Utomi.

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U*tomi and my late husband were friends, and it was he who suggested that I write ever since I stopped hearing from my daughter*, Nana began as we walked home that evening. Her steps were quick short steps, yet, she complained of backache.

*Sorry, I think it is because you spend all your time writing, seated at a spot all the time*, I said as I followed suit in the short steps.

*You are not totally wrong, Zulaika*.

She giggled and signaled that we take some rest from the long stroll.

The street, honks from cars, and chattering from other passers-by kept our company, and at every interval, whenever a person holding onto their daughter passed by, she would gawk at them for what took eternity.

We resumed our trek, and finally we arrived at a small gate along an untarred road.

This is my home, she said and requested I come in for dinner.

*It's almost 7. I have to rush home*, I lied.

*Kennedy already told me a few things about you, Zulaika, and to rush home wasn't one of them.* For her to have referred to Mr. Utomi as Kennedy told me how close they really are.

I kept mute afterwards. She rummaged through her bag and brought out a bunch of keys that opened the door after several attempts.

*My daughter always knows its key without any attempt.* She said.

She disappeared through the dark room, and I heard a click, and the electricity brightened up the room. It was a small sitting room, with three old leather chairs and old lace curtains. There was a bell on the center table, a Bible, and several containers for medicines. On the walls were pictures of herself and her daughter. Her kitchen can be seen from the entry door post, and I could tell she doesn't have much in it. Three other doors, which she later told me, led to the toilet, her room, and her daughter's room.

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E*ver since she stopped communicating with me, some 5 years ago, I stopped entering her room*. Nana broke the silence after the hot soup drink.

I*t all began after a testimony I heard from my church about a woman whose daughter recently traveled out of this country*. She signaled that I look outside of the window. *Can you see that house over there? Can you see it?* She continued, while I kept my gaze at the house.

The lady of that house introduced me to an agent in Benin. She told me he helps Edo children to move freely abroad. I wanted a better life for my daughter. I believed she could have an easier life if she left the shores of this country for another.

*For a few years, we spoke via an international number and she told me she owed some money and needed to pay back. She claimed she needed to gain her freedom back home. I wondered what she meant by freedom. That was the last time we spoke.*

*I wish I had known better, Nana said. I have people here in Auchi whose sons and daughters relocated recently without meeting any agent. Some even left via some study abroad route and it all looked credible. It was comparison and counting my chicks before they are hatched that made me lose my daughter.*

*I began a memoir after some days and I have lots of pages filled with regrets.*

I paused and looked at her after she had finished talking. I didn’t know what to say. She stood, took my plates and hers and went over to the sink in the kitchen. I walked over to a picture on the wall, and starred at the picture of her daughter, Judith.

The girl in the picture must have been 14 years old, I thought. Then I saw other pictures of her in her late teenage years.

She was 16 in that picture. I got startled as Nana spoke behind me. I was not aware of her presence in the room.

*When Kennedy told me of your plans I felt I needed to speak to you and tell you to take caution. She paused for some seconds. In my regrets, I have learned of better ways to leave one's country, and the transatlantic route is never a good path.*

*While I can't tell whether my Judith is dead or alive, I can prevent such uncertainty when I hear one's quest to leave the country through a familiar route.*

*What about them? I asked pointing to the direction of her neighbours.*

*Their girl calls home once in a while. She doesn't know when she would be coming home. When I asked her about my daughter, she said they don’t know her whereabouts.*

*I checked my watch. It was some seconds to nine. Mrs. Nana, I asked. Can I read through your note?*

*Yes, it's a bit jumbled up with my letterings. You can read it, or I could read it for you. I hope to type them soon, perhaps if I get the computer my daughter promised me.*

# Port Harcourt: Living Through Spaces

## (Non-fiction)

**Chigozirim Favour Egumba**

I came into the city khaki-clad and with the ingrained idea of coming into one of the Nigerian cities listed for its volatility. The driver requested that I sit at the front of the bus to probably keep the constantly begging policemen and law enforcement agents on the road at bay. I was very sure it would do nothing to abate their begging syndrome, but I chose to sit. As soon as the journey began, the man sitting next to me started to converse with me and to advise me on my religious inclinations, which in his opinion, veered off the right way.

Google did not seem to have a map for the NYSC Place of Primary Assignment (PPA)I was supposed to sign up at—the directions were strange and frankly; the city's inhabitants were very bad at giving directions. I ended up going round and round the city on an involuntary tour of unnecessary *wakaboutism*, trying to find my way with jeers and salutes of *Kopa shun, Okoro, Ajuwaya, young kopa*; the baggy green trousers and crested vest making me the heroine of a story I was only willingly participating in.

One trait I discovered was the feigned ignorance from market women when I sought for direction from them. An older friend explained that the reaction was based on a superstitious belief that responding to a stranger who seeks direction equates to giving him or access to your luck. Although irrational, it appeared to be the only probable reason why some of the city residents showed hostility towards me.

Pidgin English had an alté vibe to it. It was spoken widely by the people and the little children spoke it with such fluidity that amazed me. Even at my age, I speak it like I'm clamping my teeth on uncooked groundnut. My tongue is inflected with the English language and it reflected heavily on my version of Pidgin English; it blew my cover of not wanting to be viewed as a 'butter eater.'

There was a rough edge that accompanied day-to-day informal conversation such that it came off as brash. In my first few weeks in the town, I was afraid of retorting when insulted or brashly spoken to for fear that I might be harmed; even when my upbringing in Lagos said otherwise. Like a meek lamb, I employed gentility in situations that would involve serious confrontations. It only lasted for a while because after weeks of taunts of acting '*like say I no dey shit*,' I decided that it was time to return *gbas* for *gbos* when the need arose. But this was not without watching out for hand movements, especially in places where harmful objects could be outsourced from.

This was one very important trait to possess in this city to prevent being taken for granted; the ability to switch character in different spaces; to be jagged in the edges and smooth in the surface as well.

Then there was the moneyed essence of the rich whose money walked their talk in tinted glasses and police escorts. A friend of mine once told me of how he had had to abandon his cars and learned to dress shabbily to prevent being spotted by kidnappers as a special target.

It was where I would learn how, even with the privilege of being accompanied by police escorts, a person could still be vulnerable. Because when a house is on fire, nobody can truly sleep, or else it spreads to your own plot.

Insecurity was at an all-time high. This place could only be described as its own Republic. The election campaigns were ruthless mafia wars, and stories of daylight attacks were told by people eager to buttress how bad the situation was with exaggerations that were in fact not really exaggerations.

“Na so dem kill person for Eleme junction yesterday as I just been dey come back from market. My leg almost touch the blood sef,” a woman in the taxi I was boarding to work said so casually I had to hold myself not to stare deadpan at her.

This was where I learned that my heart could race faster than my feet; that my body could hold tension so static—I realize now why electricity is one of the greatest inventions ever. I could be awake and hallucinate and see things nobody else could.

And instead of using the NHIS scheme, I would consult Google with questions like “Why does my heart race so fast? Am I dying?” I learned how anxiety gave perspective to the fear of something more perceived than seen.

But I would also learn how my heart could melt into a puddle and my tongue could reach inside my lover's warm mouth and expertly guide him in perfect symphony; how I had never thought of holding any iota of power in the game of eroticism because my body had not been able to leave the boxing of piety to eat the vetoed apple. Like a little deviant, I watched my body do fascinating things with a thrill.

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There is a beautiful symphony that comes from the fusion of the tongues spoken, and it reflects in Port Harcourt's area names: a testament to the richness of culture and deliberateness at naming.

The city is a melting pot of different Nigerian tribes. Most of the languages from regions close to and within the city sound very much alike. A language map could distinguish between the boundaries of their towns, but despite this divide, Ogoni somehow sounds like a language I can understand with a little more patience at learning.

There is Ikwerre which sounds very much like Igbo but has constantly been refused to be identified as a dialect of Igbo by its speakers; Andoni and Ndoni, two different places with similar names that confuse me; Kalabari, the tribe that I can't help but wonder how they chose to use as native attires heavy clothes in such a hot climate; Yoruba, Efik, Ibibio and a long trail of cultural mash up from the rivers across.

Like Lagos, the place of my birth, Port Harcourt holds in itself what a blend of humans can grow to be. Tribe in this case extends beyond the shared language. It is something a lot of people seek in this city of many faces to identify with and be identified as. Although it is slightly easy to sniff from conversations a familiar undertone of tribal beef, the stereotypes of each tribe flies around, not like missiles, but in the way you would sense that a bullet could whiz past your nose from your neighbor's window. This could be because they possess a sense of understanding amongst the different tribes and a fluid effort at co-existence.

Perhaps, it is that in their individual representation, each tribe hold a small piece in the collective feeling of PTSD from the injustices they face and the damages wrecked on their homes—The Igbos with the trauma of the civil war, the Ogoni with the trauma of pollution and the gruesome murder of prominent people in their town, and the presence of the Nigerian army deployed by the government to dispel any attempt at revolution or opposition in local towns. We are all victims and survivors migrating in our different ways.


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# Part Four

Biographies

## Guest Editor's Biography

**Erik Gleibermann** is a social justice journalist, literary critic, memoirist and poet in San Francisco, California. He has written for The Atlantic, New York Times, Washington Post, Guardian, Los Angeles Review of Books, Black Scholar, and World Literature Today, where he is a contributing editor. He teaches writing in the Stanford University Continuing Studies program and is a 2022 U.S. Fulbright Specialist. His book-in-progress is Jewfro American: An Interracial Memoir.

## Contributors' Biography

**Uchechukwu Peter Umezurike** is a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Calgary. He holds a PhD in English from the University of Alberta, Canada. An alumnus of the International Writing Program (USA), Umezurike is the author of Wish Maker (Masobe Books, 2021) and Double Wahala, Double Trouble (Griots Lounge Publishing, 2021), and a co-editor of Wreaths for Wayfarers, an anthology of poems (Daraja Press, 2020). His poems and short fiction have been widely anthologized online and in print magazines, and he has interviewed over forty writers for Brittle Paper, Africa in Words, Read Alberta, and Prism International.

**Unoma Azuah** is a professor of English at Wiregrass Georgia Tech., Valdosta, GA, USA. Her research and activism focus on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) rights. Her recent book is, Blessed Body: the secret lives of LGBT Nigerians. In 2011 she was listed as one of the top professors in the United States in the online publication, Affordable/Private Colleges and Universities in the United States. Her writing awards include the Aidoo-Snyder book award, the Urban Spectrum book award and the Hellman/Hammet award. Her latest work, a memoir, Embracing My Shadow, is described as powerful by the prestigious Ms. Magazine.

**Psalmuel Benjamin** is a young Christian sentimental scribe of 22 years from Nigeria. He has written and published a whole lot of poems and other writings. EskimoPie mag, Lion and Lilac, Allegro, Shuf Poetry, Communicators' League, MixedMag, Nanty Greens, Kalahari Review, My Woven Words, FieryscribeRevie,w, and others are places where you can find his works. Aside from writing, he draws, paints, teaches, edits videos, and designs graphics. He is the Vice President of the Godly Steps Family. He also made it to the 5th Stage of POF4 (Pen on Fire2021).

Salim Yakubu Akko is a writer and poet. He is a World Voices Magazine's Nigerian correspondent and a guest contributor at Applied Worldwide. He has his works published/forthcoming in Upwrite Magazine Nigeria, Scratch Poetry Magazine and Calabar Poetry Magazine.

**Agboola Abidemi Kaothar** is a young emerging Nigeria writer and a student of Obafemi Awolowo University. She finds serenity and joy in writing. She wishes to make the earth fertile with her ink, and be the voice of the voiceless through her writings.

**Hassan Usman** pen-named Billiospeaks, is 2/4 of Next Generational Poets. He studies Counselor Education at the University of Ilorin, Nigeria. His works are/forthcoming in SprinNG, IceFloe Press, Five South, Kissing Dynamite Poetry, Lunaris Review,

The Shallow Tales Review, Arts Lounge, and elsewhere. He's on Twitter @billospeaks and on Instagram @Billio_speaks.

**Jewo Oghenetega** is an emerging poet, creative writer, and spoken word artist. He is an undergraduate of Medicine and Surgery, who writes from Lagos Nigeria, on themes of hope and faith. He was joint winner of the PIN (Poet's In Nigeria) 10-Day Poetry Challenge (Feb 2021), third place winner of the Brigitte Poirson Poetry Contest (Aug/Sept 2021), winner (writing category) of the CreativeNaija blog's IAMNIGERIA contest. His works have appeared on WSA magazine ( November 2021 & January 2022 editions), Brittle Paper, Spillwords, ChristApoet.

**Sunday T. Saheed** is a 17-year old Nigerian writer and a member of Hilltop Creative Arts Foundation. He is the 1st runner-up for the Nigeria Prize for Teen Authors 2021, and he was one of the 84 finalists for the WSICE (Wole Soyinka Cultural International Cultural Exchange) program, 2018. His works have appeared or are forthcoming on Open Leaf Press Review, Rigorous Mag, Cajun Mutt Press, Kalahari Review, Cruzfolio, Gyroscope, Spirited Muse Press and Applied Worldwide.

**Philip Chijioke Abonyi** was born at Nsukka in the eastern state of Nigeria. He is a writer and photographer. He was shortlisted for EriataOribhabor Poetry Prize, 2018.

His works have appeared or are forthcoming in African writer's magazines, Agape review, Even magazine, Better than Starbucks Journal, Praxis magazine, Kalahari review, etc.

**Olafisoye-Oragbade Oluwatosin David** is a 400 Level medical student of the University of Ilorin Teaching Hospital, Kwara with the pseudonym "King Davey." He is a poet, and spoken words artist who enjoys playing with words. He won the ILUMSA Malaria Day Poetry Contest in 2021. His poem was also longlisted in the top 20 entries for the Nigeria Students' Poetry Prize in the same year. His works are published /forthcoming on African Writer, Shuzia and elsewhere. He has performed on different platforms across the country including online, and was awarded the Best Poetry Content at Poeton Season 4.
When he's not complaining about Manchester United, he's either making puns or learning to save lives.

**David Solomon** is a Nigerian poet and student of Human Anatomy in the University of Maiduguri. He is passionate about all things art and understudies Ocean Vuong. His works have appeared or are forthcoming in various magazines, including Kalahari Review, African Writers, MadSwirl and others. He tweets @DavidSo12673615.

**Ekweremadu Uchenn**a writes from Kaduna, Nigeria. He has been shortlist for a number of prizes including Saraba/PEN Nigeria Prize for Poetry, Erbacce Poetry Prize, and RL Poetry Award.

Apart from poetry, he also engages in other literary forms. His works (poetry and short stories) have appeared in Transition Magazine, Jalada, Parousia, Grub Street Journal, Coe Review, The Write Mag, Afreada, Saraba Magazine and elsewhere.

**Mahbubat Kanyinsola Salahudeen** is a writer, poet, spoken words artist who resides in South Western Nigeria. Her works have been featured or are forthcoming at several places including Spillwords magazine, Fiery Scribe Review, Ice Lolly, Neon Magazine, Down in the Dirt, Ice Flow Press and elsewhere. Besides storytelling, she is intrigued by music, sports, catering and historical movies.

**Regina Achie Nege** is an independent editor, prose writer and poet. She was the second runner up in poetry in the 2021 Association of Nigerian Authors literary awards. She is the vice chairperson of ANA, Benue State Chapter. Her major published works include Ad Finem Fidelis: A History of Mount Carmel College Makurdi from 1979 till Date (2017), Dog Tales for Children (2017)and Let Me Die Another Day (Poetry). Regina has also co-edited several books including Season of Laurels and Thrills (2021)and Ace Booksquare Literary Reviews (2022). Her poetry, articles and book reviews are published in several journals, anthologies and dailies. She is a doctoral student in the Department of English, Benue State University, Makurdi.

**Eniola Abdulroqeeb Arówólò** (he/him/his) is a Nigerian emerging writer, frontier V and an undergraduate of Mass Communication from Kwara State University, Kwara, Nigeria. He is passionate about inequality, politics, domestic violence, and child rights. His works have appeared or are forthcoming in Brittle Paper, Rough Cut Press, Poetry Column ND, Rigorous Magazine, Afreecan Read, Ice Floe Press, Rise Up Review, Inverse Journal, Lunaris Review, B'K magazine, In Parentheses Art, Rulerless Magazine, and elsewhere. He is the August winner of PIN-10 DAY POETRY and has been shortlisted in BPPC's June/July Anthology. In his leisure time, he is either writing, reading or binge-watching cartoons.Twitter Handle: @eniola_abdulroq

**JLF Maikaho** is a nocturnal empath whose life revolves around writing, mysticism, rain, Aljazeera and dogs- with regular bouts of ennui. Her works explore diverse themes and have appeared or are forthcoming in Poetry Pacific, Trouvaille Review, Nnoko Stories, Kalahari Review, Literary Yard and Caritas Newspaper. She writes from Gombe, Nigeria.

**Chinaecheram Obor** is a Nigerian writer with works published in Brittle Paper, Saraba Magazine, Prufrock, and in Selves: Afro Anthology of Creative Nonfiction.

**Oluseye Fakinlede** is a writer and journalist living in Nigeria.

**Joseph O. Oluwayomi** (he/him) is a Nigerian writer. His works have appeared or are forthcoming on Poemify Magazine, Brittle Paper, Kalahari, and elsewhere. He is an aspiring novel writer. Whenever he is not writing, he is probably scoring some musical piece (piano or voice) or making research on history. You can reach him on Facebook @Joseph O. Oluwayomi and Telegram @Joepoetry

**Chigozirim Favour Egumba** is a Nigerian basic school teacher of literacy instruction in Enugu and a burgeoning poet. She is interested in language of motion, especially of the body. This is one of her first published essays.

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