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UNSERIOUS COLLECTIVE FELLOWS 2023

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UNSERIOUS COLLECTIVE CHAPBOOK SERIES

**uNSeRiouS
CoLLeCTiVe**

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FOREWORD

To manage the risk of sounding like a judges' note, we begin this commentary by finally releasing our breath, held because of the breadth of the brilliance of the poems that we received for the 2023 Unserious Collective Fellowship. We held our breath while reading not because we were surprised that younger Nigerian poets are brilliant (again) but because of the firm reminder about their enduring quality, promise, potential for a renaissance in an environment hostile to them, and most broadly, the fact that language, despite its shortcomings as depicted by the collapse of Babel, is inexhaustible in the hand of a gifted poet. Thus, the process of selecting this year's fellows was difficult for that reason.

Despite our own subjective tastes, we the judges had no doubt at the end of the process that these four poets and their poems which you shall be reading in this tiny book are our fellows. Yet, given a stronger financial resource on our part, other poets from the longlist could easily join the winning ranks. We held our breath in a climate where the Nigerian poet, constantly pilloried by the critics, the dilettantes, and the 'apaths' (yes, that can be a word) who neither understands nor values the place of the literary art in their psyche due to the primal need to survive in a Nigerian society that's, frankly speaking, carrying us to *where we don't know*.

The poet has been accused of this same apathy, albeit of a different kind. The brunt of the criticism is that he lacks interests in the Nigerian society and has distracted himself with something else, something alien; and that where he's interested in his society, he's not sufficiently gifted with the language to write about it. Well, the winning entries here strongly beg to differ. It's possible that these poets may only be an exemption to the situation. But that may be where the ideal of initiatives like ours meets fruition: to offer more visibility to the work exemplary of what is quality art or what is possible. The danger with the ideal is that we may be restricting our creatives

by telling them that the winning entries are the best of the writing out there (when we've not fully experienced what is 'outside'), and for them to win our prizes, they must write exactly (like) that. It'd be too ambitious of anyone, ourselves especially to think that the poets here may be an exemption to what most critics have been harping about. What about the poets outside the spectrum of what we consider actively social (on the social media space)? What about poets that are writing quietly? What about writers that aren't actively submitting their work but perfecting their craft in their own way? What about writers who missed submission deadlines?

Reading the winning entries, we're confronted with two choices. The first was easier: to delight in beauty of their work and pretend we weren't reading for a prize. This is where we're able to confront the critics and call out their melodrama. This is where we're reminded (not that we ever forgot) that the Nigerian poet(ry) is alive and its own thing. This is where at the direst moment when all is painted bleak like the crucifixion of Christ in one of Uzomba's poem, renaissance shines through. The beginning of the poem goes:

Today, the messiah lays life down before a kitchen knife
& I see God in the yolk beaten into a pan, whisked

till angry-yellow, an evening sun. There is glory in the moment
murder segues into martyrdom, as the knife tears with devotion

The murder of the Nigerian poet becomes his moment of glory, not that he ever lacked any to start with. The poet literally cooked with this poem, relying on the cuisine imagery to ask questions about gender:

All my years, I have never seen anything walk into the kitchen
& make it out alive—not the hen, not the lamb, not my mother.

The poem succeeds because of the clarity of its vision, the brilliant conceit of the worship imagery that populates it. Every item in the kitchen becomes devotional, delighting us with their attention to its environment (which some critics will have us believe must be a particular, flashy iconography like the danfo bus). The poet makes it clear that the world immediately in the innermost sphere of their existence is enough, is capable of provoking delight. The poem does this, in agreement with the famous Nadine Gordimer's exultation that "*if you're a writer, you can make the death of a canary stand for the whole mystery of death.*" But it does this by paying homage to the Christian imagery, which 'grand' in its own right, compels an original, private pathos.

The pathos becomes communal, grander in Imossan's poetry where the speaker grapples with the perennial plague of insecurity in Nigeria. The sun, an inexhaustible life force in the staple of the poet features:

There, at Dapchi, the sun was still alive in its
golden regalia—a burning witness of what was
to come. The wind, a breathing library and every
whoosh was a book opening against history.

In Udo-Ochi's poetry, the private world circles back again, leaning on what is already familiar to the reader in Uzomba's poetry. As if directly speaking to the critic, the speaker confesses:

Each day, I window shop for affection where
the decay is constant. Where it hugs the cloth on my shoulders
& blossom the air with burning. In this verse, I celebrate
this cusp of innocence. Ready my sickle for heaven's
gift. The violet crash

of a bird into the desert.

In Oyekanmi's more experimental poetry, the speaker pushes the sphere both within and without by a geolocation, more psychological than spatial. They write:

10 am. i sit in a café – 6.4314° N, 3.4203° E
& text my father in my mother tongue.

in Yorùbá, the word for *grief* & *loss* only differs with their diacritical marks.

say grief: ọ̀fọ̀ / say loss: òfò

tell me which incantation [ọ̀fọ̀] could bring back all my dead.

o wounded poem.

look/ words are shapeshifters & they can morph
into different meanings depending on the tone.

The second choice was to decide who should be the winner. This means who was not the winner. This is where the institutional limitations of prizes come in. Not everyone who 'deserves' to win is going to win. It's our ambition that these four poets will represent our best attempt to show our readers how talented Nigerian poets are.

The Unserious Collective

Dec. 2023

Yet when we have said all our fine things about the arts, we must end with a frank confession that the arts, as we know them, are but initial... He has conceived meanly of the resources of man, who believes that the best age of production is past.

- Ralph Waldo Emerson

ELIAS UDO-OCHI

Elias Udo-Ochi (He/Them) is a queer writer from Nigeria. They write about their queer body as a sacred intersection of religion and trauma, both personal and of place. His poetry has been nominated for a Best of The Net; longlisted in the 2023 Alpine Fellowship Poetry Competition; selected by Diane Seuss as a Black Warrior Review Poetry Contest Finalist; selected by Dan Lau as 2nd place winner for Death Rattle / Oroboro's '22 Penrose Poetry Prize while his manuscript FLOWER BOYS was selected as a finalist for the Kissing Dynamite Micro chapbook contest in 2021. Their poems recently appeared in *Olùmo Review*, *Agbowó*, *FifthWheel Press*, *Maine Review*, *Black Warrior* and *IHRAF: Queer Voices of the World Anthology*. They have received fellowships from Wawa Book Review as a Young Literary Critic Fellow. Their poem 'Candlelight' is Agbowó Magazine's 2023 Editor's Prize winner. Elias is currently a Program Manager for Benin Arts and Book Festival (BAABFEST) which connects writers and book lovers to the vibrant artisanal history of the Benin Empire for a weekend of insightful conversations and workshops. They are a member of The Deadliners, a collective of daring Nigerian creatives. He is @eliasudoochi on all social media platforms.

LORD, SEE WHAT YOU'VE MADE OF ME

With fine care, I pick the way
I breathe, the wings of my smile,
the waltz on my hips so each morning
does not metastasize as sorrow &
barrel into me dressed in the ghost
of a lover. In this city where a boy
can be stranded in a painting & in the evening,
walk his shadow into a confession,
I am careful to not forsake every gospel
in my body. Brother, I see how your scars
flourish into an array of wings.
But the sin is that I made a man in my image,
after the colours of my scars & so, heaven
unhooked his heart. What if I stare god
in the eyes—will rainbows sprout
from my wrist, will zion be a garden of stained
glasses & burnt cathedrals? The truth is,
I am an exodus of light. White streaks & cloudbursts
of water lilies. If you knew the entry point
sadness besieges a body before it is laid to rest,
before it goes scathing across this city
of waters, will you still say the sea & her moon
kissing its saline-blue into your skin—
is where your grief begins? I know why
I chose to sweat off the ceremonial ash of a lover.
Because nothing—since the first microbe
skittled past our dear star—has really died.
& nothing still really has ever lived.
Lord, I see what you've made of me
in this unholy hour, plucking dying bats
from the sky. When the sun slumbers
into twilight, does it know
what it gifts us are nightmares?

WILD NOSTALGIA

The man I love is standing beneath the gaze of a crucifix.
A hole petrified in his chest.

Fields of wild nostalgia & bloodshot tulips.

Each day, I window shop for affection where
the decay is constant. Where it hugs the cloth on my shoulders

& blossom the air with burning. In this verse, I celebrate
this cusp of innocence. Ready my sickle for heaven's
gift. The violet crash

of a bird into the desert.

Into a nest of pyramids. Into the iris of god—oceans of stars
dying to dance.

What the priests
do not say— god is
the boy who calls into the dream of a lover.

A man hides from a ghost in his father's house—a chrysalis
unripe for spring. A spark retreating.

What is it about our bodies cawing for sparks in the dark of our solitude?
Homesick ravens pecking at the seam of the moon's light.

In the end, I'll kneel in the eye of a love song,
trebles shimmering. Desire caked in the language
of a room's silence.

Love should never ache this beautiful. So I pull a gun.
From my mouth, I silence the darkness
in your eyes. Where do you go

to unleaven your trauma? Where
could I go to tame your undying lights?

**WHAT BURNING THE AIR MEANS FOR A MAN WAITING TOO LONG ALL
THAT REMAINS OF HIM IS DUST AND SHADOW**

I hear you can set the air ablaze,
watch it dance from your window
or phone screen, whichever frames
the tragedy of your life. I hear
we can turn the carnage up a notch,
flower the city square with ash & leave
a shadow in place of a man sipping
a cuppa. What can a body bent on
its own demise tell you about living?
In my library, a book says dying is personal,
unlike war. On the lawn across from
where I'm buried in the gyrations
of a tik-toker, a bird sharpens its voice
against the wind. Burn, burn! Burn,
wild world, so we'd stay alive. In the hands
of a god, silence can mushroom
into a vacuum of misery. See how bowels
hinged on trees & a limb flung
halfway from its owner tell more
about the dead than the sound
of air burning away?

CHAOS THEORY

In the beginning, I could have been a rush
of ecstasy over the waters.
But god fashioned for me wings
they filled with lead.
There is a standing decree that my body
will ruin me.
That I will ruin the boy next door who walks
into town every night & grinds his teeth
into ghosts that won't die.
How do I forget memories thread
through the larynx of a storm?
Through the salt of my hunger?
O lord, water my mouth so it does not wither.
Teach my tongue to war when there is a fight.
Do you know on the wings of a butterfly,
this world is only a razor cut
away from tragedy?
One time, I kissed another
boy & a hurricane fluttered out of his chest.
I'd like to tell you how I survived
but here I am, taking lessons from the notes
of a morning bird on how to let
my body breathe.
Someday, when I am sane,
I wish to remind myself why it sings
out of tune.

[PETALS + HEADSTONES + SANDCASTLES]

My heart sits ever so quietly as it collects dew,
petals poised for a drop of heaven & in my mouth,
every day is a morsel of stale prayers—*the sun
shall not smite who by day?* I ask, what is the sum
of a boy if he's eroded into headstones
I cannot piece as collage, if he is a ritual my body seeks
out in the aftermath of a desert storm? I know why
we wear unspoken words like scars, wrought
in the furnace of our need. On the network news,
they say the thrill of two men ground the sun to dust
but I'm buried in the skin of a lover, the sparkle
of my eyes more likely to snowdrop than sprout
constellations. What makes us forget that in practice,
the moon is a she-wolf howling at the sea where
her voice begins as a fret homing through
these sandcastles—by the teeth of the atlantic,
by guineamen washed with bones & bones
whitewashed with grief? I hear a song is good
only for its last note, but this present echo, this stretch
of silence, wears me out. What is this romance
with death where I am a mummer fielding for lilies
in the husk of a miracle?

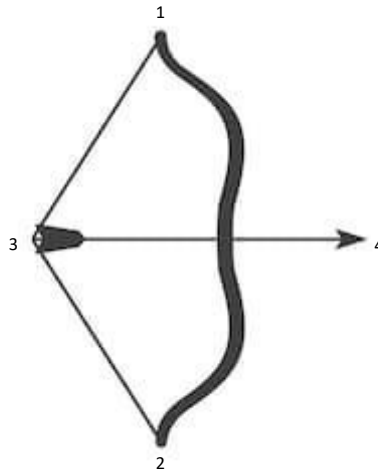
A POETRY OF ABSENCE

The men who waltz into my chest
smile as my father would before he walked
out one morning and crashed
into a swollen thigh. What we truly
know—dying is somewhere between ejaculation
and a sigh. If he ever returned, we'd fill
the empty china still on the dinner table
with boisterous laughs he'd no longer
give us. We've aired our hopes in the sun
and now, the night goes quiet with its own kind
of grief. Unwashed and never yielding,
small giggles appearing on the walls where
his portrait watches over our silence.
It is true what the stories say about ghosts—the tenor
of their affection is how to become familiar
with the tragedy of their past. I may have chosen
to fold into origami, balance the ache
of the world in-between my spine. But when a man
at the roadside bar hooks a smile into his face,
I see my mother's husband, wiggling into his finest suit.

IHEOMA J. UZOMBA

Iheoma J. Uzomba holds a BA degree in English and Literary Studies from the University of Nigeria Nsukka. She was the Editor-in-Chief of *The Muse Journal* No. 50. Her poems have been published on *Palette Poetry*, *Rattle Magazine*, *Chestnut Review*, *The Shore Poetry*, *The Rising Phoenix Review* and elsewhere. She was a recipient of the Undertow fellowship hosted by the Poetry Translation Centre in the UK and one of the Lagos/London 2022 cohorts. Find her on Instagram where she puts up spoken word poetry @iheomauzomba.

FOOTNOTES TO BEING NIGERIAN AND AN ARROW AT FULL DRAW



¹ in the beginning was the war & the war was with us & the war was us. My grandmother knows the beginning is yarn that loops and loops and loops; the beginning never ends. This is why at the top limb of the bow, my grandfather's back is the sun slouched beneath the sky of a white man's whip. The welts on his skin grew into an extension wider than my family's tree. Do you know what it means when a black man dreams to be the white beam at the end of the tunnel? One day, my grandfather climbed to the highest coconut tree for a leap and he became the first ever gymnast to win a suicide medal in my family name.

² a father's shame is the base of every triangle, the root of every family tree. My father hides the truth of our lineage in every glass of beer, swallowing the light of a new language to drown the evil of our past. To be Nigerian is bad enough, to be *osu* is a sin.

³ & i am the bowstring, clinched to both sides of the bow by the history of forefathers, suturing the graves of two generations in my mouth. In every poem, my body is a vile thing where i exorcise the god in my bones with morphine. i too have shelved shame long enough to envy the moon and its naked core, piercing through every dark street with ease. i too have stayed silent with the skeletons long enough to hear bliss whispering from without the cupboard. Do you know what it means to be ocean in a wine-glass? When i walk into a room, my body becomes a blur & the first thing a stranger fears is my Nigerian hue of black skin. They do not say *killer*, *drug-addict*, *swindler* out loud but they clutch their purses a little tighter and stiffen into the background of my shame.

⁴the history behind me has ruined me. My shame propels me to run naturally. i am at once the arrowhead, seeking home in a man's chest, seeking a means to my end. The beginning would not stop beginning again.

THE KITCHEN AS SLAUGHTERHOUSE WHERE CRUCIFIXION IS JUST ANOTHER PERMUTATION OF LOSS

Today, the messiah lays life down before a kitchen knife
& I see God in the yolk beaten into a pan, whisked

till angry-yellow, an evening sun. There is glory in the moment
murder segues into martyrdom, as the knife tears with devotion,

as the blood spills & the kettle whistles in prayer, as the fire
throws open its lips to wring & swallow. I believe all knives

are bloodthirsty & the stove, devil's blue crown, is just one flicker away
from hell. When I stir the Banga soup with a ladle and it sours, I realise

how salvation impairs the soul too. When the buttermilk meant
to sweeten the dish spoils it, I learn how lactose-intolerant grief is.

All my years, I have never seen anything walk into the kitchen
& make it out alive—not the hen, not the lamb, not my mother.

Beneath my meal, I find a grave where something once alive & bristling now lies,
buried, beneath pressure pots & bellies—say animal, say my mother's dream.

MANSLAUGHTER

a fisherman's laughter is the last miracle/ at heaven's seashore/ as he rows home
with the day's catch & the glory of devotion/ tucked somewhere in his boat/ The sun
dies with a smile stuck in its teeth when the day returns swollen/ with promise/ of a
greater catch/ Where I come from, we say it is our ancestors laughing when the sea
ripples/ Once I saw my grandfather's face in a wave/ & he was still smiling/ black
skin on blue canvas/ I imagine God as a very fat man possessive of laughter/ because
who else puts a man in a garden/ and puts a serpent too to tempt him, if not for
comic relief/ My professor once laughed before saying it was possible for a whole
class to score all zeros in his course/ These days it is hard to tell where laughter ends

& slaughter begins/ do you know, in every gunfight, the gun wins/ what we call
gunshots are the guns quaking with laughter as the losers press the triggers against
themselves/ i swear/ i learnt the phrase reverse psychology when a lover called me
untrustworthy/ for finding the kiss stains on his shirt/ the honest-to-god truth is
that/ the best thing i ever did to my mind was lose it/ all my life, i have learnt to
capitalize the almighty god in writing/ but there is power in reducing the status of
god in a poem/ call it slaughter/ character defamation/ but each time a smile cloys
onto my face, i remember/ that laughter is only one letter away from a knife in the
throat/ slaughter/ it is no coincidence/ that man's laughter becomes manslaughter/
when the apostrophe is taken away/ good grief/ is it a lie/ that the grave laughs/ with
parted lips/ as each body makes its way home/ to darkness/ a poet once said: *in
death we laugh the hardest*/ & i knew it was true when i saw a man's body on fire &
thought/ his skin writhing in the flames was a beautiful piece of art/ man on flames/
i swear/ all i could see was his skin drawn backwards/ like curtains/ like parted lips/
& the more he yelled in pain/ the more i saw a body full of mirth.

MICHAEL IMOSSAN

Michael Imossan is an activist writer with an award-winning poetry Chapbook “For the Love of Country and Memory” (Poetrycolumnnd, 2022) as well as the gazelle “A prelude to caving” (Konya Shamsrumi, 2023). He is a recipient of the PEN INTERNATIONAL Writers at Risk Grant, 2023. His manuscript “Broken in Three Places” was named semi-finalist for the Sillerman Prize for African Poetry, 2023. He was awarded an honourable mention by International Human Rights Art Foundation, 2023 (IHRAF).

WITH WHAT HEART WILL SHE FORGIVE?

—For Leah Sharibu

*What do we mean when we say
survivor? Maybe a survivor is nothing
but the last one to come home, the final
monarch that lands on a branch
already weighted with ghosts. —Ocean
Vuong*

songs after songs, the girls sang. Their voices
soaking into the walls of a half-built college.
There, at Dapchi, the sun was still alive in its
golden regalia—a burning witness of what was
to come. The wind, a breathing library and every
whoosh was a book opening against history.

There were herders carrying their herds through
shallow grasses, donkeys and camels leaning against
the edge of satisfaction. There were farmers, those
who knew the music the earth carried in its belly.
Those who knew that the buried were only seeds
waiting for wings. There were parents at home who
Offered dua for the safety of their children.

Because a girl running towards knowledge can be a taboo,
Because some men claim there is a place in the Holy Book where
a woman must surrender her dreams and follow a man home,
they came, bled the air with their guns and took the girls with them.

What song can a girl in captivity sing?
What story will you peel from her skin when she finally comes home?
With what heart will she forgive a country that abandoned her,
dug a hole into night and watched silently as she trickled inside?

When her captors asked her to renounce her beliefs for freedom,
I imagined her voice a sacrifice to the night. Her faith hardened in
moth wings. Her teeth, clenching tight the fluttering—following it towards light.

THERE WAS NO FORGIVENESS

—For all the victims of the Owo church
massacre
that has been recently reopened.

At Owo, I knocked on dead flowers and tabernacle
was opened. What welcomed me was what welcomed
me: the songs that held paradise in tiny pelts. There was a pastor
who, after the choir had pulled heaven to the shores of my
ears, preached about resurrection and the death of things.
About dry bones that waited until they were touched by the
Lily hands of God.

I have known no miracle except the sacredness of clean air
running through my lungs. I hold no allegiance for
things of the spirit. All I seek is to be exorcised of grief. A woman,
from behind, with blood dripping down her chest whispered
to me, in the sweet quiet of the church, there's nothing for you
here but sorrow. I felt intimate with loss: the dead running
through me like lovers running through burning Pompei.
Here, where once the faithful sang hosanna, blood swallowed
the podium. There was no forgiveness, only the weight of
machetes on flesh. Only the wide mouth of wounds opening
a body towards death. The shy scents of ghosts prowling the isle.
From underneath the pew, a girl tugged at my trousers, pointing
me to the dead bodies. To the bullets guilty of everything.
To a mother who held tight her child before the machete cut
through her Bible and then, through her. To the prayers that had no
safety rooms within their walls. *In worship we were killed and in worship
we are still alive*. I had nothing to offer. All I wanted was escape.
I turned my back on tabernacle the way tabernacle turned its back on them.
I walked out of dead flowers. Blood followed behind me.
I held God by the neck, are you seeing this?

DEBORAH

I see it circling your eyes, that proneness to reduce my bones to ash.

You can go on. Pick up the match; begin from my thinning hair, where

A flame is quicker to be conceived. —Samuel Adeyemi.

—For Deborah

I enter memory through
its mouth—that round, purple
orifice where God is nothing but
a shift in language, a war for
supremacy. I see you gap-toothed girl.
Your flesh lit with fire. Your bones
brimming with napalm—a casualty of
this war. At sermon, the pastor said we
must burn for God. I cannot help but
imagine this was what he meant.
The way your hair melted in the fire.
The way your bones crackled like drywoods
in the gust of yellow flame.
I am sorry I could not do anything.
I had nothing to give to you except poems.
What use is my poetry if it cannot save a life?
I hid behind the sun-kissed tree and watched.
The birds were silent. The air was black and quiet.
Everything was mourning. The dust, laced with
marigold fear, did not lift a finger.
I waited for rain. For the merciful tears of God to wash
your flesh into gold—something beautiful
enough to survive fire.
A friend once told me life is a sentence. If to end
a sentence, a punctuation is required, then the
fire was a full stop, the way a full stop is closure. Deborah,
look how they ended you. Look how they closed
you like how a sickle cuts through a sprouting pumpkin.
Like how the moon eclipses the sun and the day is
no longer day again.

WHAT WOUNDED LAMB FALLS OUT OF DARKNESS' MOUTH AS PROOF?

When the city slept—kissed into dreams
by the moon's lurid lips, I, wanderer, awoke.
I held a mirror in my hand. I wanted to see
what secret survives the night; what wounded
lamb falls out of darkness' mouth as proof.
opposite the toll gate, close to the place
where our voices were stolen from us, I saw a
dead tree waiting to be touched by whatever
will give it life. I said to it: do not leave,
do not go where there is water. Wait here and be
a pointer to the place where history was carved
out of blood. The wind began its violence.
The gate coughed out blood. The dead, in their numbers,
with bullet holes, walked backwards out of shallow graves
dug behind military cantonments; out of cemeteries
behind SARS offices. All of them holding my country's flag.
I wanted to run. The night was opening its mouth.
An owl perched on its tongue. A man with a national
anthem stuck in his throat held me by my maroon shirt,
*Ghosts at toll gates do not care for h(a)unting, they come to haggle
the price for life: a few silence-hundred for one cup of breath.*
My eyes became an ocean. A boat of dying dahlias
floated in its centre. Dawn sidled against me.
From the left, a butterfly broke out of a bullet hole in a
dead boy's chest. I followed It. Lead me towards Hibiscus.
Lead me towards Lilies.

THE NIGERIAN DREAM

400 killed in Benue State and the club flames with
bodies dancing to Asake's music because like an overplayed song,
we have gotten used to it. A man standing beside me at
the newspaper stand calls it *old news* and the
oxymoron scares me; how two opposing
words are placed side by side, so close,
so tight there's not enough space to feel.
O beautiful reader, look how I am crying. There are no
snowflakes here, no winter to harden the liquid sadness in my eyes.
A collage of blood and bodies flood my television.
I switch the channel and there's the man setting himself
on fire to *make a statement*.
Who knows? Maybe Jesus wanted to *make a statement*.
My country, with its body full of gun wounds, is dressed in
sun-flowered clothes. Somewhere, there's a coffin
yawning, there's a grave hungry for our
dreams and no one is saying a thing. All of us complicit by
silence. In America, a friend of mine voted for Trump
then two years later asked me how we got here.
My uncle brought home a wolf and called it a puppy
until it ate his child. Sometimes we point a loaded
gun to our faces then wonder how the bullet entered
us. I imagine the Knight in a chess game does not know
that if *k* (no matter how useless) is taken from its name,
its entire existence becomes dark but I know what my
country has taken from me to make the daisies in my heart
purple. Last night, a dog died in my compound.
I know it has nothing to do with this poem,
I just want to go to bed knowing all my loved ones are safe.
What I meant to say was, O Lord, I want to labour and
labour and labour until my body
b r e a k s out of vinegar.

THE PHILOSOPHY OF ESCAPE

Whereby I escaped. Whereby I left my
country on foot, shuffling through the darkness,
through the blood seeping into earth to become
history; the violence of men and their machetes,
through the sad road of Mombasa to a land that will
not hold my name.

Here, in Rwanda, I have lived on the road; a man
counting his losses, begging the world to show him
mercy, to show him where a child presses his tongue
against a cone of Ice-cream in the heat of summer. The
purpose of legs is journey and all I seek is tenderness.

There are others like me: the man with one arm
and a torn mouth pleading the night with stories of war,
of how he fled Khartoum, leaving behind his
wife, his two children and his right arm, how guilt has
raised a sanctuary in his bones.

there is the boy carrying his dead on his tongue, his mother's
name folded softly over its blade. What about the professor?
The one staggering at the tip of despair, the one who said
to me, I have seen the unfolding of terror in books;
the Romans and the Greeks and the sadness of violence.
I have read how men, in time, have been blinded by fortune
and I tell you, do not call a spade a spoon, do not wait till
it digs your grave before calling it what it is.

I, unconcerned with the crafting of books and their warnings
followed the first light of dawn to an open park flanked by a lake.
The destiny of thirst is water and all I sought was mercy.
In my hands, I held the remnant of yesternight's bread,
seeking to offer what is left of my life to the creatures of flight.

In the faint light of dawn, a Tutsi girl swallowed by the

loneliness of the park cut open her palm to show me what is inside of her: the slaughter, the harshness of war running in her blood. What stays behind after the darkness, after the slow closing of wounds? I did not cut open my body to show her what had built a home inside of me, to show her that, I, too, have tasted terror, that I was chased from Lagos by my fellow countrymen.

I tossed the last crumb of bread on the floor, the pigeons swaddled over it. From behind, the smoke of burnt bodies in Oshodi market choked my nostrils—and I was made to understand—that in escape, there is no freedom,
only the guilt of leaving. Only the guilt of living.

SODIQ OYEKANMI

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THE HALO OF OUR DREAMS

our bodies lighten into soft music / our dream / a dance / a tango / a calendar
of dotted faces / say dream / say divine / say desire / say dream so divine / our
desire is to reach into the depth of God's heart

//

i stand / in a fogged meadow / in a field of petals / & sepals / your
memory / hangs on the sill of my eyes / like a self portrait of an artist /
as a white sky / before rain / like a good life / set in dream sequences /
fluttering / in / & out of the universe / like a beautiful dream in a loop

//

tell me if i'm wrong / or right enough to paint us / so tenderly /
on these canvases / tell me / if this is a facade / a smokescreen /
a pie in the sky / if everything is nothing / but the fuchsia dream
of a moth / stretching towards flames

//

o sweet desire / come / let me teach you / the patience to
dream / caterpillars into butterflies

because God understands every language.
every sign & symbol. every sigh—

because death is a door & the threshold is everywhere.
& they walk right through it.

PAPER BOAT

v.

the bullet wound on the wall clock
refuses to heal. here, life is in a loop.
someone is always dying.

iv.

& my brother is dead. *dead.*
there's no euphemism for that. grief is not something
one can ferry with a paper boat for too long. & there's
always an aperture in every pra yer my mouth chants
towards heaven...

iii.

at 11 / father returns home soulless / he returns as a jacket
/ a ripped jeans / & a bottle of gin// / mother becomes
the body /b/ in tomb / silent / so silent she can't say āmin
to my prayer / asking God to revert everything /everything
He has plucked from us // there is enough rafflesia keithii
growing in our floral garden / as if to tell us that *no more
daises no more roses no more lilies no more orchids no
more living beings just ~~corpses~~ ~~corpses~~ ~~corpses~~ corpses!*

ii.

the bullet wound on the wall clock never
heals
there's a boy 2 minutes away from
drowning
a poem won't save him perhaps a poem &
is just another paper boat
sailing away to
nowhere

i.

i rip out all the pictures in the photo album
& make a papier-mâché boat
the colour of whisked rainbow.

[GLOSSOLALIA]

"maybe we pray on our knees because god only listens when we are this close to the devil"

—Ocean Vuong

& what if i miss my cue again—
will you be waiting in the wings to prompt me?
Lord/ i'm a failed thespian—

my body repels your grace on this magnetic
—field—a bleak theatre—void of applause.
it is mid—winter. i stand at the centre

—stage of my life—sticking to the script.
Lord/ you dramatist—you director of my scenes.
if i try hard enough this time—

put my faith in you & speed into the night—
blindfolds on—will the melody rolling
from the orchestra's tongue be enough

remedy for the wounds in my heart—
that small organ—purpled with desires?
when the lights dim—i'll dance towards

dénouement. Lord/ i'm down
—stage. i'm down on my knees—knocking at the trap
—door.

Lord/ look. it's me. it's me—
it's me & my purple heart—pulsating.
open— []

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