



NWFJOURNAL

ISSUE 2

POETRY | FICTION | CNF | BOOK REVIEW | VISUAL ART

CULTIVATING
CREATIVITY



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INTRODUCTION

Abdulrazaq Salihu

Author of Quantum Entanglements with Notes on Loss

Every new issue of Northern Writers Forum Journal feels like opening a window into our collective memory. There's always something to see, and there's also the uncertainty of what's to be seen. When we started this journey, it was more than just about publishing words; it was about building bridges across generations, dialects, and identities. As a writer who has wrestled with history, both personal and national, I see each piece in this issue as a testimony that our stories are not forgotten. The human mind is not just blessed with remembrance but with a disturbing urge to retell what's a part of us. This journal is our communal fire, a place where everyone who's cold by the silence of the world can sit together, enjoying the warmth of poems, essays, and fiction.

The poems in this issue open with elegiac resonances, swift language and brilliant metaphors. They remind us how communal what we feel our individual fears, aches, and grief are. The stories in this issue are daring; they push the northern narrative into a whole new landscape of nostalgia. It's how present these stories are and will continue to be that fascinates the most.

I love what the present-day creatives are doing with Creative nonfiction and arts illustrations; these brilliant experimentations are perhaps the birth of very wonderful ekphrasis. It's exquisite what the human mind can do; it's even more powerful when all these are compiled into an accessible issue. The Northern Writers Forum Journal is doing so well; this is only the beginning of more exciting things. Welcome to our world of creative aesthetics!



**“M a g a n a b a t a k a r e w a , a m m a h i k i m a c e
k e b a m b a n t a t a d a s h i r m e .”**

(Speech never ends, but wisdom separates it from
mere chatter.)

~ Hausa Proverb



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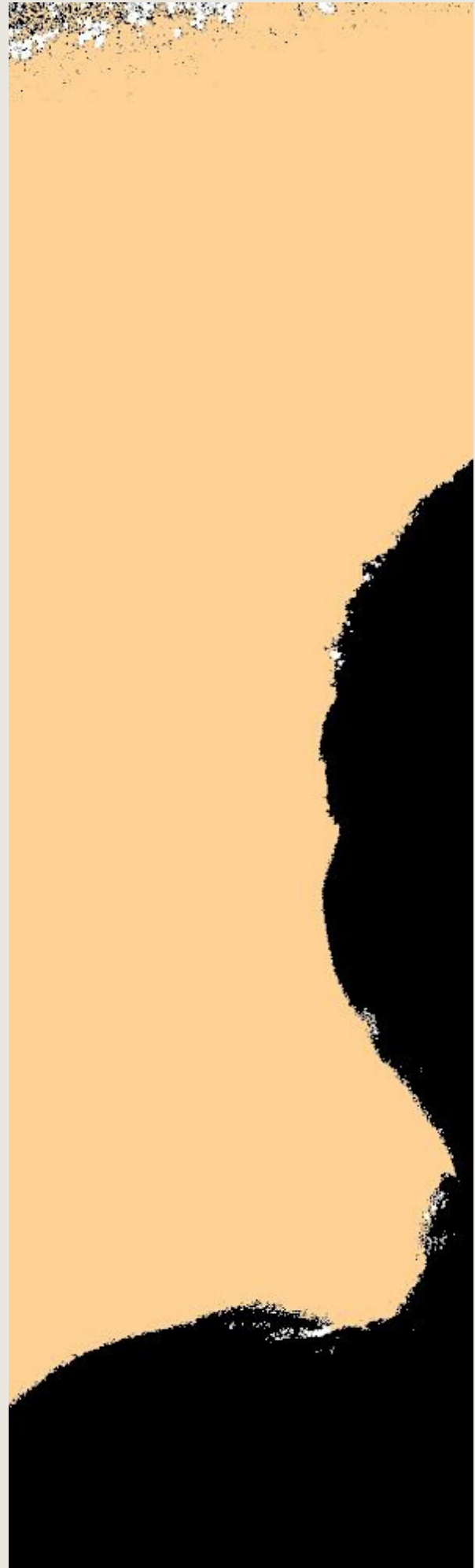


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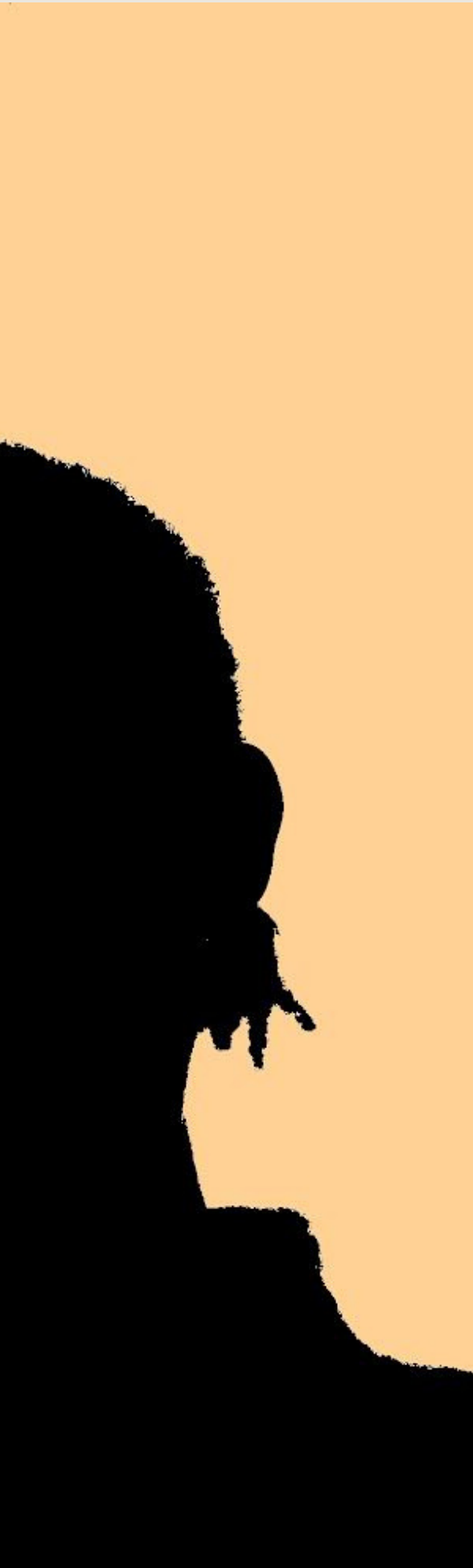
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I am the spitting image of my shadow, a face absorbed
into a night, aching of what has been ripped off. I am
fluent in my silence.

~ *Saddiq Dzukogi*

POETRY

Clara Ijeoma Osuji

SILENT DRUM

In Abba's dusk, darkness folds me in,
like a soft mantle of bare solitude.

The near-vacuous room exhales slow breath,
my bed welcomes the still air—
the silent drum waits.

Morning beam crouches low,
quickenning dew-drips from the rooftop,
stillness echoes passing time.

The silent drum speaks,
not in sound, but in presence—
as an ancient call woven with suspense.

My mind unfurls wide,
like a sail catching the threads of sacred wind,
from the timeless alcove of Abba ancestral solitude.

From this unruffled space,
I wait like Okwara-Eleke River in harmattan longing for rains,
from realms born of silence.

Grandfather's soursop leaves do not swirl.
Even the breeze sits with me,
holding back its song.

Each line I compose
trembles like a goat-hide skin,
tight with meanings, watched by quiet trees nearby.

O Silent drum, my muse,
your hush becomes harmony—
words without voices; you echo, I write.

No foot stirs the dust in Lolu-Eke's stead,
yet rhythms rise from the hearth,
echoing through my waiting hands.

Ashes and embers speak.
The drum vibrates amidst soft clicks in the fire pit,
I write in their tongue.

The tasty early-morning udara fruits lie untouched.
I sip from solitude—sweet with silence,
art quenches its thirst first.

The Abba war drum does not beg.
It teaches me how to hear and decipher—
the beat beneath its breath.

Each word builds a home,
framed by quiet and thick silence—
I live in that sound.

O silent drum, you are the echo of my truth!
In your hush, I find my voice.

PULA

Falling light,
empty
of violence.

Falling silent,
feathered joy.

Today, the world
is gentle.

The palm reaches
for my face,
and it is not curled

into a fist. The boy
in the mirror
is another boy.

His eyes are foreign.
His eyes, a monody
of peace

once thought
forgotten.
And his mouth is not

embroidered
with blood.
I, wingless youth.

I, who had burned.
Who had made
a god out of my heat.

Had thought the flame
would live on,
would eat me

forever.

But look—
slowly, sweetly,

rain.

**Pula: Setswana for rain.*

BUTTERFLY LOCATIONS

Every surrender begins at dawn: as white
sand hallelujah. how morning— fingers lean
toward god's face. & drum sticks with lamps,
closed doors. 'cause the tigers of rich ground, bear
them redemption. in this dance of the spirit, swear an oath to
defend your petition [graveyard]. dawn is
home but still dies. & breakthrough: charging cables of moon
flowers. man is an image of strange balloons apart from
sun. time bombs, weather green or simply gorgeous. holy
ghost fire. & yeast of harmattan: pendulum birds will return
home. sing adrift toward a clean vase of history.
once folded in the days of unbreakable light—this ember,
unsafe: how he formed, deformed into lashes of cat-
piss(ies). & loved into iodine blessings. let the wind hit the season with
flowers of honour & god & i am still your child, mama.

Igbokwe Roseline

SANCTUARY

The sand castle is a sanctuary for my lambent dreams & an enigma of
Secrets whispered by the dusty wind on icy nights.

Today marks the fourth night I stood on the heart of the Gurara Falls,
With my mind wandering like a pollen grain into its enchanted smile.

The mountains rise and shake up the pebbles, carving them into the light
Of hope plotted right in the heavy belly of the aurora borealis.

The pines and mahoganies stiffen their backs like the ever strengthened
Strongholds of God's mercy. Their branches pay obeisant homage to

Gray-tinted clouds with a veil of rainbow weaving a kind of magic into the
Fabric of soothing spells. I lift up my eyes and hang them on the light-capped

Twinkling stars. The north blows a trumpet—a soundtrack trends. Melodies are
Drawn up from the deep wells of the desert. My mind becomes an oasis in the

Midst of a bustling town. Arewa, a beauty forever etched in the polar blue rock paintings
Of the zenithal hills. As the sun dips into a half graffiti, imaginations escape from chains

Into the asylum of the north's steady canvas. With the silence broken, paintbrushes
Swirl to add a gentle gleam to the booming mindscape of the sun.

YOBE

The voice of my grandmother,
Firm and eternal in my mind,
Sings mirthfully of a land,
As peaceful as the dew-mist of an evening sky.
She called it the mother of lands
A cradle of beauty, strong and kind.

In those days, I was a toddler,
Lost between dreams and daydreams.
Was it a memory, or mere imagination?
For in my mind's eye lay a land,
A realm of pride, the Pride of the Sahel,
Green and alive, where the soil breathed in abundance.

I saw a united broom,
A tapestry of Fulani and Hausa,
Badawa and Kanuri,
Ngizim and Karai-karai,
Dancing to the rhythm of shared heritage.
The land of dry savanna,
Yet, rich with beauty and grace.

There, River Yobe flowed with ancient whispers,
The mighty Komadougou cradled life along its banks.
Fishes swarmed like bees,
And the desert held its quiet hope,
Tulo-Tulo Oases wrapped in palm trees,
Caravans tracing the paths of trans-Saharan trade.

But no longer am I a toddler,
Nor a soul lost in dreams.
I now see Yobe as it truly stands,
Its treasures buried beneath neglect,
Its skies heavy with an unfulfilled promise.

The gypsum of Fune lies untouched,
Trona and limestone of Fika forgotten,
Kaolin rests unnoticed in Gulani and Gujba,
While potash and bentonite whisper in vain,
Calling out from the sands of Geidam, Yunusari, and Machina.

The laughter fades,
Replaced by hunger's echo at every door.
The schools stand crippled,
The smiles dim,
And the spirit of the land, weary.

Yet still, I dream.
Yobe, my pride, my home, my hope,
You are a phoenix in waiting,
Your riches will rise, and our people will bloom.
The hands that steal your soil will unite,
Turning your dust to gold,
Your youth to builders,
And your pain to power.

Oh Yobe, the mother of lands,
Your tomorrow is a seed,
Planted in the hearts of your children.
We will rise with you,
Breathe life into your hidden treasures,
And cradle your spirit, firm and proud.

FICTION

Ayomide Oyinkansola Aderibigbe
**FRAGMENTATION,
GATHERING,
METAMORPHOSIS
(FGM)**

I stayed in the car long after I had turned off the engine and tried to regulate my breathing. A part of me wanted to turn on the car and drive as far away from this place as I could. If only my younger self could see me now, she'd probably ask what I was doing at the place I had sworn never to return to.

I filled my lungs with air and told myself I was no quitter. I had promised never to set foot back here, but there was something more important to me than the promise—the drive to ensure others didn't suffer the same fate I did.

I opened the door of my silver Lexus 350 and walked toward the mud house I had grown up in. The open space in front of the house brought back so many memories.

It had been home to several wrestling matches with Tunde, who was ever so willing to help me attain my dream of being a wrestler. Of course, that said a lot about who I was and why I had been beaten more than any other child in the community. My mother had always complained bitterly, pleading with me not to kill her or myself.

I wondered how she would have felt seeing me in pencil heels, a suit, skirt, and braids on the hair I had so frequently threatened to cut. Definitely, she would have danced for joy and teased me endlessly.

The wooden bench at the entrance caught my eye, and I wondered why it was still there. Ours was a small house, and so our visitors were received on that bench.

"Mummy Ronke, this your child will put you in trouble the way she is going, oh. When are you going to do the needful?" Of all the petty traders in the association my mum belonged to, Mummy Ire was my least favourite; she never had anything good to say about me, and I had no idea why.

My mother usually made her way out of the house at her friend's voice. A wrapper with Ankara print tied firmly around her waist, a slack top on her upper body, and her scanty hair matted into three stand-alone weaves.

She would shout my name loud enough to be heard miles away, pull me by the ear, and send Tunde home. Ear twists, hot slaps on our backs, and shoutings had done nothing to water down our friendship, and my mother soon came to terms with it.

And so, when she sat me down one evening, I knew it had nothing to do with Tunde but Mummy Ire.

"Ronke, you are becoming a big girl now."

My heart thumped as she came close to me, the smell of firewood on her clothes becoming more prominent. If my mother wasn't shouting at me, she was beating wisdom into me. Trying to make conversation was completely alien to me, and I wondered what I could possibly have done to make her explore this method.

"There is something that we do for big girls, Ronke, and next week Friday, some people are going to come and do it for you."

I loosened up, grateful that I wasn't in any trouble whatsoever.

"It is to protect you from doing some bad things and to make you a good wife to your husband."

I wondered if it was the right time to tell her that I had no interest in marriage or a husband, even though I was "just" eleven. But I decided otherwise and mouthed a quick, "Okay, ma."

I knew what she was talking about; the girls in school had talked about it in hushed voices a number of times. They had said that girls who weren't "done" were promiscuous and dirty and would never get married. At some point, they had stopped talking to me, but I had Tunde, and so their attempt to shut me out had failed woefully.

I turned on my phone's flashlight and stepped cautiously into the hut, the faint tap of my heels against the ground breaking the silence. I pushed the door back gently and watched little mice scurry around the empty room before making their way out the window.

I looked around the empty room and continued my journey down memory lane. On the D-day, my mum had woken me up at 5a.m. and I could not have been more unwilling to be up so early on a Saturday morning.

"You have to eat." My mother's voice was unusually tender, and I was getting increasingly concerned.

"Huh?" I sat up and saw a full plate of jollof rice before me.

Being the middle of June, I ate the jollof rice with relish; it wouldn't be until Christmas that I'd get such a meal again.

She carried my plate away, and again, a wave of anxiety flooded my being.

"Mummy, what is this thing about?" I asked, wishing I had paid more attention to the conversations of the girls in school.

She said it was my entrance into womanhood and left. About two hours later, I heard her voice, alongside the voices of other women, outside the house.

My door opened, and three women came in. One of them was an elderly woman with a brown bag strapped along her shoulder.

"Mummy?" My voice quivered as I searched helplessly for my mother.

The elderly woman dropped her bag on the wooden stool, and a number of razors slipped out. My eyes widened in fear, and I began thinking of how to escape. The other women seemed to read my mind, for they rushed to my side and pinned me down, pressing our flat mattress hard against the floor.

"Stay still!" the elderly woman snapped in Yoruba, dragging up my dress and pulling my legs apart.

When she removed my underwear and headed for my private part with her razor, I cried and pleaded, struggling to break free of the women's grip. I told them I didn't want to be a woman again and called for my mother to come and save me. I shouted that I would stop acting like a boy, and that I would be good going forward.

No response, no rescue.

A slice of pain travelled through my body and I thought I would go mad. I screamed so loudly, I was sure my late father could hear me from heaven. The women left the room as soon as they were done, their eyes void of the slightest sympathy. The process had been quick, but the pain, long-lasting.

I groaned in agony, scared to death of looking down to see how much blood had come out of me. My mother had come in with Mummy Ire and some old women a few seconds later, and other than my mum, everyone else looked elated.

They congratulated me as they cleaned me up, telling me I had finally become a woman and that I'd get a good husband who would love and cherish me. They gave my mother some gifts for me and offered a few tips.

"You have to keep your legs closed to prevent the wound from opening."

"There are herbal drinks to help you feel better; make sure you take them."

My mother sat beside me when they left, and I wanted to tell her to leave me alone as she had done earlier, but I was in far too much pain. Silent tears slipped down my cheeks as I struggled to stay still. I wished for death because it hurt too much to be alive.

After three months of seclusion and rest, I had nursed up enough anger and hate for a lifetime. I had battled infections and unimaginable pain. The first time I went to urinate, my mother went with me. I looked her straight in the eye and told her I hated her for not saving me. That statement should have warranted a barrage of slaps, but my mother had said nothing in response.

Going outdoors after those three months made me angrier, even Tunde was not spared. I hated that he didn't have to suffer the pain I endured to make him "marriageable" or "pure." I hated the other girls for making it feel like an accomplishment, and I hated the world for making such an act of cruelty a tradition.

When I was old enough, I went searching for answers. I would spend my time at the only cyber cafe we had in our village, trying to understand what had happened to me at age 11.

The elderly woman had used a razor to cut my clitoris—the part of my vagina that was meant to allow me enjoy sex, and my labia minora—two thin, inner folds of skin in my vulva, responsible not just for playing an important role in sexual sensation and arousal but for protecting my vaginal and urethral opening from bacteria and other external contaminants, hence the infections I had battled. This was a type 2.

The type 3 was worse. A girl's vaginal opening was sealed, most times by stitching the outer lips of the vagina together and leaving a little hole at the bottom for urine and menstrual fluid. I read stories of victims and bawled my eyes out, all the while wondering who had thought up such a cruel tradition.

Year after year, I saw little girls get "done" and I tried to stop it. But how could a sixteen-year-old convince multiple groups of uneducated people to give up a long-existing tradition? I was reported to my mother several times, and while we barely said any words to each other, I would read her eyes, silently imploring me to stick to the traditions of society, not for her sake but for mine.

My relationship with my mother had suffered a fatal blow after the incident. I had become a shadow of myself—my energy and excitement chipped off, just like my clitoris. The only friend I had—cut off and completely ignored. I barely spoke; my life revolved around sleep, school, and the cyber cafe. It was evident that my mother blamed herself for what I had become.

With age came an understanding of my mother's decision. She had done it all for me, so I'd be respected and saved from ostracization in the community.

"I forgive you," I had said one day after a visit to the cyber cafe.

"And I don't hate you." I added with tears in my eyes, looking at the widow who had given her all for and to me.

She looked back at me, eyes moist, and I realized how much I had punished her for doing the only thing she had known to do. She passed away a few years later, after working tirelessly to make sure I completed my degree at the university.

I rushed back to the present and caught my tears before they streamed down my face and ruined my makeup. Exhaling gently, I shut the door of my room and stepped outside the hut. I commended myself for being able to make the stop and slotted my key into the ignition; my meeting with the village heads would start in fifteen minutes.

As my engine roared to life and I drove in the direction of the compound of the town head, I felt a new surge of motivation. And as the little children gathered around to see who was riding the "fine motor", I felt the energy of the 11-year-old girl who wanted to be a wrestler. Though she was thirty-four now, she still believed she could be all that she put her mind to be. Including a human rights activist, working to abolish the life-long tradition of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), one step at a time.

TOUCHSTONES

Those days were a memorial touchstone to her: days when Mother would spread the raffia mat before the hut, and tell them stories under the silvery glow of the moonlight.

They would listen, first, with filled stomachs and rapt attention. And later, with heavy eyes and clumsy responses, until they all fell asleep, one after the other. Then the night would descend into utter silence, save for the "croak, croak" of the frogs, "chirp, chirp" of the crickets, and "whoosh, whoosh" of Mother's wrapper, sweeping over their bodies in persistent chase of mosquitoes. As she thought of it again, she wondered the nature of the thoughts that besieged Mother's mind during those silent moments. Ada felt a wave of sympathy well up inside her. They always betrayed her. They would force her to tell them stories, only to fall asleep minutes later.

There were other days, too – the bad ones. Like the day Father died in an accident on his way to town, and the day when her childhood friend, Ozi, had drowned in the river. But those were the days she consciously trimmed off like pieces of fabric littered in a tailor's shop.

She looked through the window and was attracted to a body of cloud crossing the sky. It reminded her of a story Mother had told them. A story about the tortoise who flew with the birds to attend a feast in the sky. It was one of the many that accounted for how tortoise got a fragmented back.

Until then, watching the clouds had never reminded her of that particular story. She felt it was due to the intense nostalgia she was feeling, even as she drew nearer to her home. Clearly, her homecoming was taking an unexpected emotional toll on her.

Ike must have really grown, she thought. He had probably become a perfect replica of their father. He always had his face. And Mama too. What would she look like? The last time she had gotten a picture of her, she had stared at it with tears glistening in her eyes. Mother's fair skin didn't look as bright as she remembered, and she looked quite old too. Ada had wondered why it never occurred to her that over the past years, Mother was prone to succumb to a phenomenon of life called age. She could still see Mother, seemingly smiling at her from the picture, exposing the only attribute she could trace to her maternity - her bright beautiful set of teeth. She also couldn't ignore the deep lines of wrinkles that spread over her face, the mass of gray hair that peeped from beneath her scarf, and her unfashionable pose. They had made her spend the remaining hours of that day somber.

Slowly, the five-seater saloon car came to stop at the side of the expressway. The driver claimed he had noticed a minor mechanical issue. Whatever it was, Ada was especially grateful that she would get some fresh air, and most importantly, stretch her stiff legs. The windows of the back seats could not unwind. For that reason, she had found her place at the back seat highly discomforting. The hot air commingled with the strong smell of petrol, perfumes, and sweat was nauseating. She watched as different models of automobiles zoomed pass them. She wasn't surprised that no one paid any particular attention to their plight. That was why home was home, she reminded herself - everybody minded their business.

They stood under the broad shade of a nearby palm tree, while the driver worked on the car. Two ladies, who seemed to be travelling together, took advantage of the short break to relieve themselves somewhere in the brush. Ada believed it was the closest she had gotten to nature in a long time. She plucked a frond from the tip of a branch, and for a moment, examined it intimately. From the stem, she began separating it into halves. The overwhelming boredom inspired a simple mental exercise. She was going to recall everything she could connect with the palm tree. Palm Sunday... palm wine...palm oil...palm nut...broom sticks...

During school days, they were exempted from farm work. Father always wanted them to have some time to study. "Education is the key to a bright future," he would say, waving his pointing finger emphatically at their faces. Thus, they only went to the farm on weekends - very early on Saturday mornings and after mass on Sundays. Ada's eyes followed the driver as he worked on the engine. He touched some wires, and with an iron rod, began hitting one part of the engine and another. He soon started the engine and beckoned them. In no time, they were speeding over the asphalt once again. Half of the sun had already disappeared behind the horizon. The sun was gradually ending its daily service to human kind - at least, to humans at that part of the world. At the opposite side of the sky, dark clouds were forming. Mother would be worried, she thought smiling. Everything had delayed that day - from her flight to the bus. She had initially sat in one of the long yellow buses at the garage. And for almost forty minutes, no commuter joined in.

"Aunty, calm down now. E go soon full," the driver had called after her as she pulled her travelling bags along her sides, maneuvering her way through moving vehicles and hawkers to the roadside. She shook her head without turning to face him. She would take one of those sole vehicles instead. The sole drivers picked people randomly from the roadside, provided they were headed the same direction as they were. Most times, they were private-car owners who used their vehicles to make some quick money off commuters. They were typically cheaper too, but it wasn't the issue of money for her. She was going a far distance.

The car started making an occasional funny sound, each time accompanied with a jerk that alarmed them.

"Driver, what is happening again?" One of the ladies asked. "Henh, driver?"

The driver parked the car. This time, Ada didn't find the idea of getting some fresh air entreating. None of them stepped out. The driver raised the bonnet, took a bottle of something from the booth and disappeared behind the bonnet again. The kpa kpa Kpa sound ceased as they continued their journey, with the driver skillfully swaying the car to avoid the ever-present potholes. She never remembered the roads to be so bad. They were now relatively worse.

"Here nothing works," she muttered. She just couldn't forget that line since her secondary school days. It was the first line of a poem that stuck to her. It was simple, and yet, so powerful. It was a powerful summary of an exceptionally failed state in such a very simple declarative sentence. Though written decades ago, Clark's poem still stood as a perfect portrait of the present Nigerian society.

Maybe she could also say: here nothing changes. Seven years away seemed to have afforded her a bird-eye view of the whole madness. The shades of madness, she discovered, could be further summed up in a word like "exploitation." Everyone exploited the other, no matter how close or distant. The government exploited the people; the pastor, the church; the lecturer, the student; the driver, the commuter; the landlord, the tenant; the trader, the customer. It was like watching a documentary on wildlife. It was also like listening to mother's tales of tortoise and other animals. Everybody wanted to play tortoise - wise, subtle, and inculpable. The inculpability was only an artificial act; a mere attempt to effect a twist in the typical resolution of the tortoise folktales. What she had seen was a people establishing, managing, and suffering from greed in every system of human life.

Their car decelerated as it approached a particularly wide pothole. Ada glanced at the dashboard. It was 6pm. Mother would have called, if she could. At the right, she saw a group of men approaching the road from the thicket. She stared at the moving figures for a while, as the car continued its wavy movement through the small pool of muddy water. They were probably farmers returning home after the day's labour. Their hoes were slung over their shoulders in the common fashion. Ada was convinced that there was a village or township nearby. She glanced around, expecting to catch the slightest sign of human habitation - as little as the pinnacle of a rusty iron roof. When she couldn't find anything, Ada felt disappointed. She was startled when she saw the farmers stride towards them. In no time, she realized her error.

What she had thought to be hoes were, in fact, guns. One of the ladies screamed, covering her mouth in her palms. Others were shaking visibly. The driver fumbled his quivering fingers over some buttons, and the windows of the front seats slid shut.

One of the men positioned himself before the moving car. "Stop the car!" he ordered, slamming a fist on the bonnet. The three others were each forcefully pulling at a door as they trotted along.

"I say stop this car!" He repeated, and fired some rounds into the sky.

"No. No, driver," Ada said in almost a whisper. "Drive! Drive! Drive!" The other passengers joined in the desperate call "Drive! Drive!"

The driver halted the car, and with the back of his right hand, wiped the perspiration that had formed over his face. He slowly raised his hands over his head. His passengers watched him in horror.

"Open the door fast fast!" commanded the man by the driver's door. Seconds passed, and the driver's hands remained in the air.

The man pointed his gun at him through the shut window. "You no hear me?!" he asked in a tone that highlighted his searing fury. The driver bent over the dashboard, seemingly searching for the unlock button. Without warning, he matched down on the accelerator, and began steering the car through the pothole.

Caught off guard by the driver's unanticipated move, the gunman who had stood before the car made a backward leap to avoid the charging vehicle. However, it was too late. The car hit him at the side and he fell to the ground. Ada and the other passengers were now screaming in extreme fright.

When the men began shooting, they lowered themselves, clutching their heads with their hands. Suddenly, the car veered off the road, and crashed into a nearby tree. The glasses shattered and rained on them. And there was silence.

Someone sneezed. Ada slowly returned to consciousness. It was all she did these days: close her eyes and sleep till a sound woke her. After that, she would think herself to sleep again. There were many questions, because those who could provide answers, wished not to be asked. The last time she had dared to ask one of them, she was whipped.

"We told you all not to say a word," he said repeatedly as he whipped her with a slim tree branch.

She was starving, and the fact that they cared little about feeding them, provided only one answer: that they were worthless. Their daily meal was a slice of stale bread and a cup of water. If they thought it was enough to keep them alive, it was not true for her. She could already feel her soul slipping away. She imagined the headline on the front page of a national newspaper. Boldly typed in title case: "Unknown Gunmen Intercept Vehicle and Abduct Passengers."

She had cried at a film show when she watched a documentary on the transatlantic slave trade. The images of humans like herself being treated like, or even worse than, animals had been too much for her to bear. There she was, tied up to a pole, an object of the human wickedness that had spanned ages. She found her face amidst them. A group of naked ebony women, cuffed legs, hands, and necks.

Linked by misery, pain and speechlessness. She cried like she did that evening, in that dark room where the flickering light from the television set was the only source of illumination.

Suddenly, a voice seeped into her consciousness.

"Hello."

"Huh!" Ada tried to open her eyes, but failed.

"Why are you crying, Ada?"

"Leave her alone," another voice warned.

"Mummy, come and see. Ada is awake."

A wave of sharp aches washed over Ada's eyes as they met with the recessed fluorescent light above her head. She shut them immediately. Everywhere was white. She was in heaven, she thought. She could hear voices, too - unintelligible voices; probably the language of the angels. She tried again. This time, opening them very slowly. She became alarmed when she saw two dark figures approach her from both sides. She wanted to scream, but couldn't. Her lungs were weak. A familiar scent hit her nostrils; It was mother's. Indeed, her mother was standing by her bed, and at other side was Ike, her brother.

"Mummy," Ada called, affectionately.

"Nwam nwanyi," she answered, with a trembling voice. "I thank my creator that you are alive." She robbed Ada's hand tenderly with her palms.

"What would have become of me if I had lost you?"

She smiled faintly as she noticed tears gather in her mother's eyes.

"Ada," Ike called out to her. "What would you like to eat?"

Even at that instance, she could notice Ike's inconspicuous attempt to break into the moment. It had always been so. As sincere as his question was, she knew it was one of his ways of shouting,

"hello, I'm here, too!" She felt sorry that the short affectionate exchange with mother seemed to have estranged him.

"My handsome brother," She said, and watched as his lips spread into a genuine grin - she knew how to get him.

She had questions to ask, but at the time, she was feeling too tired to speak. What of the other passengers? For how long had her unconscious body lain peacefully on that hospital bed, while her mind - or was it her spirit - wandered the depths of hell?

John Ebute

A POOL OF BLOOD

The air is thick with fear, a fear so palpable that we can smell it. Every hair on my body stands on end, and I tremble from the cold shiver running down my spine. We look at one another searchingly, scanning our faces for the slightest ray of encouragement but it is as futile as looking for a stream in a desert.

The dense silence that blankets the room only makes our fears take on a raw, profound edge. The silence is a mirror, showing us in stark clarity the absurdity of what we are about to do, the unspeakable dangers and risks it is fraught with. But we also know the implication of not going ahead with it, so turning back at this point is not an option.

We have been standing in this room for over five minutes, doing nothing but staring at the ceiling as if some wondrous act was going on there. Each one of us romances his dread in the privacy of his heart, but is unable to keep it from being painted on the canvas of his face. It doesn't matter that for over a week now, we have been plotting this, laying bricks upon bricks on the foundation of the plan. It doesn't matter that just yesterday, after we had gone through every detail of the plan with a fine-tooth comb, smiling to ourselves at its marvelous ingenuity, delighted that all our previous hours of painstaking scrutiny had yielded no dent or flaw, we had laughed over some bottles of beer how stinking rich we would become after today.

Kunle, our leader, clears his throat, breaking the silence that seems to be guffawing at us and our well-laid plans.

Everyone starts at this unexpected sound that comes with the force of a hullabaloo, a weed of an interference into our still world where the only sound alive is that of our hearts pounding furiously in our chest.

Kunle is a born leader, articulate and charismatic, but today there is no trace of that superior intelligence and confidence in his voice that makes us drift to him like sheep to a shepherd. "Guys, this is the night of our lives, a night we'd always look back to and be glad we did the needful." His words ring false to our ears, carrying the forced energy of trite platitudes.

Although his air of authority is gone, Kunle proves he still has his wits about him when he doesn't go on with his contrived speech. Instead, he asks us to put our hands on top of one another's in the middle of our circle, to draw succor from this ritual of our seven-year-old friendship. Surprisingly, we find strength when we do this, our fears gradually fading away. Then Akin, the joker among us, points our attention to something we'd been too tense to observe earlier.

"Omoh guys, make una look o. Femi don wet him trousers."

Our gaze turn to Femi with incredible synchrony, and we all burst out laughing, as we see the large patch on the front side of his trousers.

As if unaware of what he has done, Femi looks down and sucks his teeth in disgust. "Thank God say na night o. I swear, if not I for no follow una do this waka again."

"Ta, they no born you well," I shoot at him, glad to finally put my mouth to use.

"Na so-so fear-fear you sabi. Small thing, you wan find excuse jàpà leave us. But if na woman, nobody reach you for that one. You fit kill person sef."

A round of boisterous laughter greets my comment. Femi himself is chuckling so loud I feel we have finally found our guts back. We seem to have forgotten our earlier hesitation and panic.

"Jide, forget," Kunle, our leader, addresses me. "If Femi see woman, na the same thing him go do- him go wet himself. Or have you guys forgotten how he wet himself as if he was watering flowers, when Atinuke mistakenly touched him with her ass?"

We remember, and start laughing all over again. A few moments pass before Kunle addresses us, his tone serious now. "It's good we've gotten rid of the Chicken Little chirping in our ears- the sky is falling, the sky is falling. We know what we've to do, and we mustn't delay any longer. Of course, you all know the consequences we'll suffer if we don't do this. We simply don't have a choice here."

The word "consequences" hangs heavy in the air. It is a word we have been using more frequently in our conversations of late. It is a word that took a special significance after it fell down from the lips of Baba exactly a week ago.

"Failure to do this has drastic consequences, one of which is that you boys will run mad," he had declared, his voice icy like the harmattan wind. If the spirits he worshipped had uttered the words themselves, we wouldn't have been more afraid.

It is difficult to picture any of my friends running mad, these vibrant friends of mine whom we have come a long way together. Our journey as friends began in the university, seven years ago, when we were just freshers. We stuck together and became inseparable. We graduated together last year- we are not medical students, all thanks to ASUU strikes- and have still been together. We faced the horrendous throes of unemployment and penury together, supporting one another emotionally, and if we could help it, financially. The thing is, we are all in the same financial hot water. Together, we decided we were tired of the rat race we were trapped in and unanimously agreed to see Baba.

Now, we file out of Kunle's one-room apartment into the cold night. A breeze is blowing softly, and I allow myself savor its gentle caress on my face. In the absence of the moon and with only a few stars out in the sky, darkness dominates. Plus NEPA have decided to do what they know how to do best. This suits us well, suits us even better than whatever witches are flying about at this ungodly hour to perpetrate their evil. And we don't really need the illumination. Our feet know the path already to our destination, all thanks to six days of consistently walking the same path. The sureness of our steps despite the solid darkness that envelopes the terrain, is ample proof that we are all carrying a map of this route in our minds.

Light flashes from a screen briefly, and Kunle whispers, "We've only a few minutes, guys. We gaz hurry."

We quicken our pace, and soon we are standing in front of the dump. Our eyes having adjusted to the darkness, it doesn't take us long to pick her out, soundly sleeping among a pile of rubbish.

"Who's going first?" Femi asks, his voice barely a whisper.

"You, of course," Akin whispers back, his voice like a hissing snake. "No be your food be this," he adds, tongue-in-cheek.

Kunle hushes them. "Shhhh. You're going to wake her up."

It is too late. The woman is awake already. We see her lift herself up to an upright position, her legs still stretched on the bed of trash. She cocks her head to one side, as if trying to listen for a sound. Instinctively, we all drop to a crouch. She scans all around her quickly, demanding concurrently, "Who be dat? I say who dey there?"

The only reply she gets is the reverberation of her voice in the dead silence of the night. She repeats the question a few more times, then mutter some unintelligible words to herself before finally going back to sleep. I hear Akin breathe a sigh of relief beside me. For me, I look upwards at the sky, my eyes heavy with my gratitude.

Kunle gives the signal, a dexterous gesturing with his hand that we quickly comprehend. Akin is the first to respond. He leaps at the woman, simultaneously removing a chain and a piece of cloth from his pocket. The woman jumps awake before he reaches her and starts screaming, a piercing scream that seems to boast of the ability of raising the dead. Akin pushes her down, as Femi and I run to assist him. We struggle to overpower her. I have never met a woman so strong before.

Femi yelps in pain as her teeth dig into the flesh of his right arm. She slams her head against Akin's face with a violent force, and from the way he reels backward, I can tell the pain searing through him is as excruciating as hell. I stand completely confused as to what to do next, as she bends to pick something from the ground. Just as she rises to her full height with a stone, Kunle, just joining me, strikes her down with a heavy rod.

Kunle taps Femi. "You're up, man. Seems like we won't be having need for the chain and gag anymore." I hear the undertone of sarcasm in his voice.

Promptly, Femi unbuckles his belt and pulls down his trousers. As he straddles her, Kunle nudges, "Be quick. We're running out of time."

He rips off her tattered clothes and stops suddenly. "Guys, she's not breathing o."

"What are you talking about?" Kunle blares.

"She's not breathing. She's dead. Look, there's blood everywhere."

We scream in unison. This isn't what we had planned. This isn't how the affair should have played out.

"What are we going to do now?" Femi asks, his voice like that of a child who has just seen a ghost.

As I glance at the dead body that had only a few moments ago been violently alive, I conclude Femi is asking the wrong question. What he should be asking is what level of dementedness had seized us, making us listen to an old man who looked deranged himself, and agree to gang-rape a mad woman at midnight as a way of earning the favor of a god that bestows wealth

.How could we stoop so low?

Suddenly, a flood of light breaks upon us and we find ourselves surrounded by a band of uniformed men holding large clubs and heavy torches. Vigilantes. My heart jumps into my mouth.

“Wetin four of una gather dey do here for this kind time?” we hear a rowdy voice call out.

We say nothing.

“No be una I dey follow talk,” he shouts, the sheer terror in his voice making my skin crawl. Their torchlight finally reveals the corpse in the pool of blood behind us. I look at the stone-faced men and then at my three friends, and I realize that this is the day we die. My only consolation is that like every other thing, we are going to be doing this together.

Note: Chicken Little is the name of a comic character that prophesies doom.

Utso Bhattacharyya

A TERRIBLE TIME TRAVEL

I heard the 'slosh' sound again, even closer this time. I felt a cold breath on the back of my neck, as if something icy was paralyzing my entire body with fear. I lost the courage to turn around and look behind me.

It was on that day that I encountered such an unknown danger. The terror I faced that evening still haunts me like a nightmare. But who knows better than I do that it wasn't a nightmare? Even today, when I remember that incident, my entire body shivers in fear. In school, I had learned about mimicry and coloration in Biology—the way creatures hide themselves for protection or to catch prey. But I never realized that some unknowable past entities, zonal characteristics, and events could lie in wait to devour the present ones. My thoughts are jumbled due to the overwhelming fear. Let me start from the beginning.

It was about three years ago. The sky had been gloomy all day, and it was raining continuously in torrents. Occasionally, the sky would split open with flashes of lightning, followed by deafening thunder, as if Indra, the god of rain, was furiously striking down with his thunderbolt to destroy Vritrasura. After several days of continuous rain, there seemed to be a brief pause in the downpour. On that day, an aunt and uncle of distant relation came to our house. Their only son's wedding was approaching, and they had come to invite us. We hadn't seen each other for a long time, though we had once been quite close. The afternoon passed in conversation, reminiscing about old times. When you start talking about the joys and sorrows of the past, time seems to stand still in the warmth of intimacy.

Just as they were about to leave, it started raining heavily again. They hurried to leave as soon as the rain let up a bit, and I offered to walk them to the auto stand nearby. Our house is tucked away deep within an old neighborhood filled with narrow, winding lanes. After getting them into an auto, I started walking back. Suddenly, all the streetlights went out. Load shedding, I thought. In this kind of weather, such things happen. I had my mobile phone with me, which had a torch, so I wasn't too worried. But when I pulled out my phone, I was shocked to see it flash a low battery warning a few times before it died! I was surprised, as I hadn't used the phone much during the day. It shouldn't have switched off like that.

Though the roads were familiar, the sudden darkness disoriented me. I had never seen such pitch darkness at dusk before! Though the rain had eased up, the dense, dark clouds seemed to have absorbed all the light from the world. Not a single star was visible in the sky. I somehow adjusted my eyes to the darkness and began to make my way home. Birds usually seek safe shelter during the rainy season, but suddenly, an unknown bird screeched harshly three times. I don't know what it was, but that sound filled me with a growing sense of unease.

The rain had left waterlogged areas everywhere, and the frogs had begun their chorus. There was also the fear of snakes, so I moved cautiously. But as I proceeded into the thick darkness, the familiar streets began to feel completely unfamiliar. As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I could make out the old, palatial houses lining the road on both sides. From those houses, I felt as if unseen eyes were watching me. Those burning coal-like gazes felt like they were piercing me, as if ancient, hungry eyes were trying to devour me.

Occasionally, lightning flashed, and in its blue light, I saw skeletal figures. These figures seemed out of place among the grand old houses. The juxtaposition of poverty and grandeur was beyond my imagination. Those skeletal, famished figures extended a bowl towards me, chanting something in a monotonous tone. At first, I couldn't understand what they were saying. I felt like I had become a statue, petrified by Medusa's gaze. I couldn't move forward, but my senses were still functioning. I could hear the hissing of Medusa's hair-snakes vividly. Slowly, their words became clear to me. They were pleading in a pitiful, hoarse voice like machines, "A little rice starch, please... a little..."

The moment I heard those words, it was as if a jolt of electricity ran through my body. Where was I? What time was this? How did I end up in a place where even begging was so difficult? A thousand questions were racing through my mind, but there was no way to get answers.

I mustered up the courage to break free from the inexplicable charm of that mysterious black hole in time. Without looking anywhere else, I started moving forward. But where was I to go? Everything felt so unfamiliar! The deafening noise was becoming unbearable. Despite my unwillingness, my eyes were drawn to the source of the commotion. But what I saw would have been better left unseen. A group of armed men were slaughtering defenseless men and women with naked swords, playing a gruesome game of bloodshed. Innocent people were being sacrificed in this ghastly ritual. Even the innocent children were not spared. But what was their sin?

In the flash of lightning, the scene remained unchanged, but the human forms turned into terrifying non-human skeletal shapes. As I kept witnessing these otherworldly scenes, my head began to spin. I still shudder at the thought of what might have happened if I had lost consciousness there and then—if I would have ever returned to this world. I don't know what good fortune allowed me to remain conscious despite everything. Somehow, I staggered past those demonic beings' frenzied celebration and the pitiful cries of the victims.

And just then, I heard the 'slosh' sound of someone trudging through water and mud, coming towards me with an inescapable force. Was it my turn now? Would I too meet a terrible end? And that too, in such an unknown place at such an ungodly hour? Though I initially froze with fear, I started moving quickly, chanting the name of God. That ominous presence seemed to be getting closer to me. I felt its icy breath on my neck. The lightning was splitting the sky open; was it about to do the same to my flesh? The thought made my blood run cold. I had felt fear many times before, but this was the first time I truly experienced the helplessness of mortal fear up close!

I glanced at the radium dial of my wristwatch and saw that it had stopped at six o'clock. My time had apparently stopped long ago! Was I even alive? Or had I died long before...

Suddenly, the sound of the evening prayers from the temple reached my ears. With the sound of the temple bells, that strange world seemed to retreat once more behind a cosmic curtain. Something had again been hidden, something that would never be lost through the ages and would strike again, one day, at any time, in search of its prey. The path to salvation is undefined—so is the terror.

For the time being, the temple bells brought me some relief, and just then, the streetlights came back on. It was as if I had returned to the light of life from the darkness of death. The fear remained, though—it will stay with me for life. Perhaps the curtain will rise again, and they will return, in search of prey.

Samuel Ajayi

BINTA, SOMEWHERE.

The walls of Binta's room smelled of old wood and loneliness. For fifteen years, they had been his entire world - the cracks in the plaster of his rivers, the water stains in his continents. His father had stacked the room with books, their pages brittle with age, filled with stories of places Binta could only dream about. Places where the sun burned golden on savannas, where rivers roared like living things, where forests grew so thick they swallowed men whole.

Each night, Binta would press his ear against the single window, listening to the village sounds he wasn't allowed to join - children laughing, drums beating, the hiss and pop of cooking fires. The scents of roasted plantains and smoked fish would curl through the cracks, making his stomach growl for flavors he'd never tasted.

"Will I ever know the world outside?" Binta asked his father every birthday, tracing the scars on the older man's arms - marks he refused to explain.

His father's answer never changed. "One day, but not today, my son."

However, on his fifteenth birthday, something in Binta snapped.

The moon was a sickle blade cutting through the night when Binta began tearing pages from his books. The illustrations came first - maps with their tantalizing coastlines, drawings of baobab trees with trunks wide enough to hide villages inside. Then the words themselves, sentences about monsoons and marketplaces and mountains that scraped the sky.

"Lies!" Binta screamed, his voice cracking. "All lies!"

Paper snow filled the room. He stomped on the pages, grinding them into the floorboards until his bare feet were black with ink. That's when he saw it - a flickering light dancing across the wall like a trapped firefly.

"Somebody... come get me," he whispered, reaching for it.

His foot slipped on a torn page of the Niger River. His temple struck the bedpost with a sound like a splitting coconut.

As darkness swallowed him, the light pulsed once - a flash of green so bright it burned his eyelids - then vanished.

The wind that came after didn't sound like wind at all. It chuckled.

It rattled the lock until the mechanism broke, iron pins scattering across the floor like teeth. It peeled back the corrugated roof in strips, the metal screaming as it bent. By dawn, when Binta's father found the empty room, the wind had already licked away all traces of the boy's scent.

"Sound the alarm!" his father roared, his voice raw with a terror the villagers recognized immediately.

Old Mama Nkemdilim crossed herself. "The wind took him," she muttered. "Just like it took the others."

Binta woke to pain and motion. His head throbbed where he'd struck it, his vision swimming with dark spots. He was moving, but not by his own power. The world jolted and swayed beneath him in a rhythm that made his empty stomach heave.

A wheelbarrow. Rusted iron and splintered wood, its single wheel squealing like a tortured animal. With each bump, the handles flexed like living things, the wood grain twisting into patterns that almost looked like faces.

The man pushing it was tall - too tall, his limbs stretching like shadows at sunset. His skin had the grayish cast of a week-old corpse, his lips blackened as if by frostbite. When he smiled, his teeth gleamed like obsidian shards.

"Awake at last," the man said. His voice was syrup-thick, the words sticking to Binta's ears. "We've been waiting."

Binta tried to sit up, but his body refused to obey. His limbs felt filled with wet sand. The world around them had no color - the grass a dull gray, the sky a flat white void, the trees skeletal hands clawing at nothing. Even his own skin looked leached of life.

"Where are we?" Binta croaked. His tongue felt swollen.

The man chuckled. "Nowhere. Everywhere. The place between places." He leaned close, his breath reeking of turned earth and spoiled milk. "You called, little bird. We answered."

The wheelbarrow moved on its own now, the man's spidery hands barely touching the handles.

The path ahead twisted like a dying snake, cutting through a forest of trees whose bark peeled away in fleshy strips. In the branches, shapes moved - too fast to see clearly, but Binta caught glimpses of too many eyes, of limbs that bent the wrong way.

A shadow detached itself from the ground, wrapping around Binta's ankle. It wasn't cold, wasn't warm - it was nothingness given form. When he kicked, it tightened, tendrils creeping up his calf like vines.

"Take me back!" Binta screamed.

The black-toothed man threw back his head and laughed. "Back? To your cage? To your books full of lies?" He gestured at the colorless world around them. "This is the truth, little bird. The world beneath the world."

Something moved in the gray grass - a thing with too many joints, its back arched like a question mark. It scuttled alongside the wheelbarrow, clicking softly.

"The others were too afraid to see," the man continued. "But you... you burned with wanting. That fire called to us."

The wheelbarrow hit a bump, and Binta's vision swam. For a moment, between blinks, he saw flashes of color - the green of real grass, the blue of true sky. Then it was gone.

"Father!" Binta screamed into the nothingness.

Far away, in a world that suddenly seemed like the dream, Binta's father fell to his knees in the dirt. The wind carried a whisper that might have been his son's voice. Or just the rustling of dead leaves.

The wheelbarrow creaked onward, its wheel leaving no tracks in the gray dust. The black-toothed man began to hum – a tune that slithered into Binta's skull and made his teeth ache.

Ahead, the path disappeared into a horizon that shouldn't exist.

And the wheel kept turning.

CREATIVE NON- FICTION

Sa'id Sa'ad

IT ALL BEGAN WITH LITTLE WHISPERS

It was an early morning on an ordinary July day. The earth had dried from the previous day's rain, and the air felt heavy, thick with an unspoken tension, as though the sky itself carried a guilty secret. If I had been more observant, maybe I would have noticed the unease pressing down, the way the silence felt unnatural. The streets held their breath. Our lips, our feet, even the trees. All still. Only the murmur of water flowing through the drainage in front of our house dared to move. We were alert, but we didn't know what to expect. What we did know was that a religious extremist group named Yusufiyya had declared war.

The night before, almost every non-Muslim family in our community had fled to the military barracks, seeking safety. But we hadn't left. How could we, when none of us knew what we were running from? Maybe the others had received warnings that we didn't. Maybe, because we were Muslims, we weren't expected to run. Maybe, because the war was waged by a Muslim extremist group, we were meant to die in their hands.

It started suddenly, tearing through the quiet. Thunderous gunfire erupted, rattling the air. It wasn't just one weapon; it was many, each speaking in violent bursts from every direction, north, south, east, and west. I had never heard anything like it. As a teenager, the sounds twisted inside me, making my stomach feel hollow and my hands tremble. My heart pounded so hard I thought it might break free from my ribs.

In an instant, my family and I scattered and then converged under the concrete slab in the middle of our spacious home. It was instinct. A desperate, unspoken agreement. The slab sat between our parlour and an open chalet, its tiled floor was cold against my skin. We lay there, pressed against the earth, hoping somehow that it would shield us. It was common knowledge: when gunfire broke out, you lay down.

When the first shots rang out, we abandoned everything. Breakfast sat half-eaten. Brooms and buckets were cast aside. The scent of burning food drifted in the air. For a moment, it felt absurd that the world could end on a day when ordinary people were doing ordinary things.

Then came the helicopters. Their roar swallowed the sky. They hovered, searching, then dipped forward, spitting fire like dragons. With each blast, the air thickened with dust. The way dust rose when we played football on bare ground just like that, but bigger, heavier, choking the sky. Smoke followed, curling like a sandstorm, interwoven with fear.

My father ordered silence. If you must speak, it had to be no more than a whisper. Or a gesture, if necessary. He didn't place a finger to his lips. He didn't need to. One look was enough. The bombs. The endless gunfire. The ceiling trembled. Dust settled over us like a shroud. My father, cautious but fearless, rose and peered outside from the shelter of the chalet. The building was just tall enough to give him a view, just short enough to keep him hidden. He watched. Then he returned.

The gunfire continued. But little by little, our fear dulled. Not into courage, but into numbness. One by one, we sat up, no longer paralyzed, desperate for information. This was not the time of Google searches and instant

news updates. It was 2009. Not every adult I knew even owned a phone.

I was just 13 years old. Still new to the sounds of chaos. I had, through movies, vicariously seen how wars ruined cities, sitting safely on the couch in our living room. I had watched the news, seen buildings collapse, streets burn. But I never imagined it would be this close to me.

So, we listened. And rumours found their way to us, carried in hushed voices from house to house. Some swore that the Yusufiyya had taken over. That the police stations had fallen. That government forces were fleeing, overpowered. Some said they were just a stone's throw away from West End, and if they reached the railway, they could take Maimalari barracks. If they took the barracks, they could take the state. Everything, we were told, was almost taken. The only thing not taken was probably you, the one listening to the rumor.

The stories were as sharp and frightening as swords. My father always said, "*Exaggerated stories during war kill more than bullets.*" So, he learned to cover his ears.

My mind spiraled. What if they won? What if they came for us? What if this was the end? I was thirteen, and war was no longer something I watched on the news. It was here. It was real.

We tiptoed around the house. No one spoke. Yet no one could be alone. We looked at each other, gauging the fear in our eyes, then dropped our heads, as if we could consume each other's fear with our gaze. My father's eyes became a valley.

Deep. Fearful. Yet brave. Undefeated. He looked like a warrior. I still don't know how he mastered this art being unsure, being afraid, yet appearing unshakable. As though his presence alone could hold the world together.

The sounds lasted for hours. And then, as the sun unfolded itself, the morning died with the gunfire, leaving only sporadic shots like the knockouts my Christian friends and I used to set off on Christmas Eve.

By noon, the sky exhaled. The helicopters vanished. The bombs ceased. The streets remained silent, but now, fear had taken the place of gunfire. We heard that many soldiers had died. And we knew what that meant. One dead soldier could mean ten dead civilians. Retribution was coming.

A three-day lockdown was imposed. The state's only answer to the chaos.

Moses, our Christian neighbor - who had long since become family - had stayed behind when the other Christian families, including his own, fled. He had lived with us for over a decade. So, he stayed. Maybe he felt safer with us. At my age, it was difficult to read people's faces. More difficult to read their feelings.

That afternoon, Moses pulled me aside and whispered a request: he wanted me to go with him to the barracks. His family was there. They needed food. And if we didn't go now, we might not get another chance.

I agreed without thinking. Maybe it was curiosity. Maybe I wanted to see the outside world. Maybe I wanted a story to tell my friends later, exaggerated with the thrill of adventure.

Moses had a motorcycle. If we were lucky, we could be back in thirty minutes.

No one dared to leave the house, so I snuck out when the eyes watching the gates had wilted. Moses refused to start the bike until we had walked far enough not to be heard. He pushed it down the street before finally starting the engine. We rode.

The roads were empty. Houses locked from within. We passed streets where walls had crumbled, where bullet holes let us peer into once-private compounds. When we reached the highway, smoke from burning tires curled into the sky. Soldiers stood like statues, rifles ready. None of them stopped us.

At the barracks, reality struck. Hundreds of families had taken shelter on the parade ground, clutching what little they had. Safe, but not really. Moses handed his family the food. No words. No hugs. Just urgency.

As we turned to leave, a military truck pulled up. Soldiers dragged two men from a vehicle and forced them to their knees. One wore a white kaftan. The other, a sky-blue one. Their beards were rough. Their eyes darted, searching for something, someone to save them.

A minute of questioning. A sharp, quick gunshot.

They crumpled.

had never seen a man die before. A moment ago, they were speaking. The next, they were gone.

Moses started the bike. No one stopped us. We left.

No one called them Boko Haram yet. That name would come later.

That day, bodies littered the streets. No one counted the dead. The military had won.

But this was just the beginning.

BOOK REVIEW

OF INTRICACY, FUTILITY AND EPHEMERALITY OF LIFE: A REVIEW OF DR. JIM OSITA OKEKE'S WHAT NEXT?

"The swell of womb and breast is half human circle; on the crest of the grave's rise reclines the other; The grave like the yam-mound is earth's pregnancy life like a dance swings in circles." –Isidore Diala

In recent years and days following the demise of loved ones, I have wondered what life really means and its actual essence. In being the subject matter of my recent cogitations, the above excerpt by Isidore Diala underscores the traditional patterning of life where one starts off, in most cases, as nothing; struggles and either succeeds or fails, births kids with a partner, trains them up till early adulthood and eventually dies, passing the baton to his/ her children who continue the cycle. Futile, isn't it? I have also come to accept fate as an unbiased scale ready to strike a balance at all times. Life is adorned in pristine linen, yet, deeply marinated in the flowing larva of ephemerality. The talons and fangs of futility are always in collaboration with fate to remind us of the ephemeral nature of this world we exist in, but have we been able to provide an answer to explain this drama called life?

The struggles across three generations and eventual success in the lineage of Ichie Odumodu – Agu – Ositadimma in this memoir can be somewhat likened to Buchi Emecheta's *Second-Class Citizen*, barring the unfair hue of life. Ositadimma is an embodiment of zeal and determination who, clearly aware of the greatness in his lineage, never allowed poverty and difficulty to bend his quest.

Like a myriad of successful men, Ositadimma had his own share of challenges such as the inability to further his education, and for this reason "He had always looked forward to the day he would break the bondage of poverty on his family" (p17). Fate smiled upon Ositadimma and saw him complete his university education courtesy of a state government sponsored scholarship which surfaced at the eleventh hour after which he travelled abroad. Regardless, his journey wasn't smooth in his quest for the golden fleece. Life tossed grenades at him in distinct shapes and forms which he overcame and forged on. His union with Nkem, his heartthrob, together with whom he struggled and built an empire, became a momentary-soothing-balm until the ugly side of fate showed up again.

The night before, almost every non-Muslim family in our community had fled to the military barracks, seeking safety. But we hadn't left. How could we, when none of us knew what we were running from? Maybe the others had received warnings that we didn't. Maybe, because we were Muslims, we weren't expected to run. Maybe, because the war was waged by a Muslim extremist group, we were meant to die in their hands.

It started suddenly, tearing through the quiet. Thunderous gunfire erupted, rattling the air. It wasn't just one weapon; it was many, each speaking in violent bursts from every direction, north, south, east, and west. I had never heard anything like it. As a teenager, the sounds twisted inside me, making my stomach feel hollow and my hands tremble. My heart pounded so hard I thought it might break free from my ribs.

Ositadimma's journey in life is metaphoric of most successful individuals who encounter tough times that mold them in the hottest of forge before passing them into the corridors of greatness. Ifesinachi Nwadike's description of "What Next?" as "a bildungsroman of sorts" is justified, given its chronology of Ositadimma's odyssey from a nobody to an individual to reckon with. During the course of my musings, I always wonder why things go wrong moments after everything seems to be on track. Tragedy never fails to rear up its head; perhaps in its quest to strike equilibrium in this drama we call life. Even as things began to seem perfect in the lives of Ositadimma and his family, fate struck a balance in the guise of breast cancer, which eventually stole Nkem and plunged her entire family into grief.

"What Next?" made it clear that we are in constant motion from conception as time waits for no one. In my daily retrospections and introspections, I recall my conscious observation of mankind's daily struggle all through his life to create wealth, and this gives rise to the question, "What's all these for?" After we amass this wealth eventually and death comes for us all via distinct circumstances, what happens next? This is the book's major theme, major question. As shocking as it may be, "What Next?" is man's reality staring us in the face. Reading it was as though I was taking a stroll on the pages of long-discarded memories, having lost loved ones to the deceitful whims and caprices of fate. However, I admire Ositadimma's perseverance, zeal, grit and doggedness. Amongst other things, this memoir addresses life itself, obviously leaving us all to answer the big question of "what next?" after all these.

"What Next?" is out to reawaken a post-life consciousness among readers. It is a memoir worth reading and immersing one's self in. I encourage everyone to grab a copy.

Salihu Muhammad Ebba

A TRIBUTE TO LOVE AND LOST: A REVIEW OF ADAMU YAHUZA ABDULLAHI'S 20-02- 2024

"20-02-2024" is a heartfelt poem by a stubborn Artist: Adamu Yahuza Abdullahi, a Nigerian poet from Kwara state is a fellow of Muktar Aliyu Art Residency who has garnered notable recognition, including a Best of the Net Nominee and second-place winner of the Hassan Sulaiman Gimba Esq Poetry Prize and the Bill Ward Poetry Prize for Emerging Writers 2023. This impressive background informs the emotional depth and mastery evident in "20-02-2024," a poem that is a searing tribute to Adamu's best friend, late Suleiman Auwal (may his soul continue to flourish in peace), who died before his eyes, mere hours after complaining of a headache. In the poem, Adamu confronts the anguish of helplessly watching his friend struggle for breath, eyes bulging like a frog's, teeth bleeding, and arms outstretched for help. Though Adamu couldn't save his friend, and perhaps couldn't save him through poetry either, in this poem, he finds a way to come alive through his words.

The 13-stanzas couplets, published in the 2024 Summer Issue (6:1) of Chestnut Review, explores themes of grief, loss, mortality, trauma, and the fragility of life, conveying Adamu's anguished emotions and helplessness as he grappled with his friend's sudden passing.

Adamu's 20-02-2024 first stanza reads:

"I watched you die, my good friend. I stood there, helpless—like anything before fire."

This reveals the depth of Adamu's connection to Suleiman. Although he witnessed his friend's passing, the line implies a sense of emotional proximity. The phrase "I stood there, helpless like anything before fire" illustrates Adamu's overwhelming sense of powerlessness. This shows how devastated Adamu was when his friend died. In this opening stanza, Adamu conveys a poignant picture of his grief and helplessness, using simple yet powerful language to express his emotions to his readers and the world.

The second stanza then reads:

"blind and armless like water. what use are arms if they can't save me from myself?."

This poignant phrase is poetic with the use of poetic devices. "Blind and armless like water". Water is an element that flows and adapts to its surroundings, but it can't see (blind) or act (armless) on its own. Adamu himself to water, suggesting he feels powerless and unable to control the situation he has found himself in. Just like water, blind and armless. Then the rhetorical question, "what use are arms if they can't save me from myself?" reveals Adamu's introspection and self-doubt. Questioning the value of his abilities (represented by the arms) if they can't even save himself from his own thoughts, emotions, or actions. This implies a sense of inner turmoil and self-destructive tendencies, highlighting if they can't save him from himself, his arms will be useless, (and if arms are useless, Sàdakállahul a'zeím).

"20-02-2024" also showcases Adamu's deep connection with late Suleiman Auwal. The line "Auwal, at your janazah, the Imam said nothing bad comes from God" evokes patience and acceptance of qadr (destiny), which is central to the Muslim faith—that everything good or bad comes from God. Suleiman Auwal's death made Adamu emotional to the state the poet started having issues with how the ground swallowed his friend saying "...the ground swallowed you as if you were the first sporadic rainfall". The vivid imagery of the line was also recognized by the publishers and featured as one of the eye-catching and inspirational lines of the year. I, too, affirm this verse; "...tell it anywhere: the world's ugliest thing is silence," shows how the poet's voice is essential in the face of loss. To emphasize the strength of love between him and his late best friend, Adamu implies wearing his friend lifelessness like a skin (imagine), he pleaded to be glorified in his ruin. Through this poem, Adamu masterfully conveys the complexity of losing a loved one, he then concludes the poem, dearing his friend, with poignant messages.

Lastly, despite not knowing late Suleiman Auwal, as a reader, I was deeply moved by Adamu's portrayal of his friend in this poem. Each word is an enthralling charm, to which I couldn't help but proceed with this review. To you reading this review, here is a moment to read the masterpiece and please don't forget to offer a prayer for the late Suleiman Auwal.

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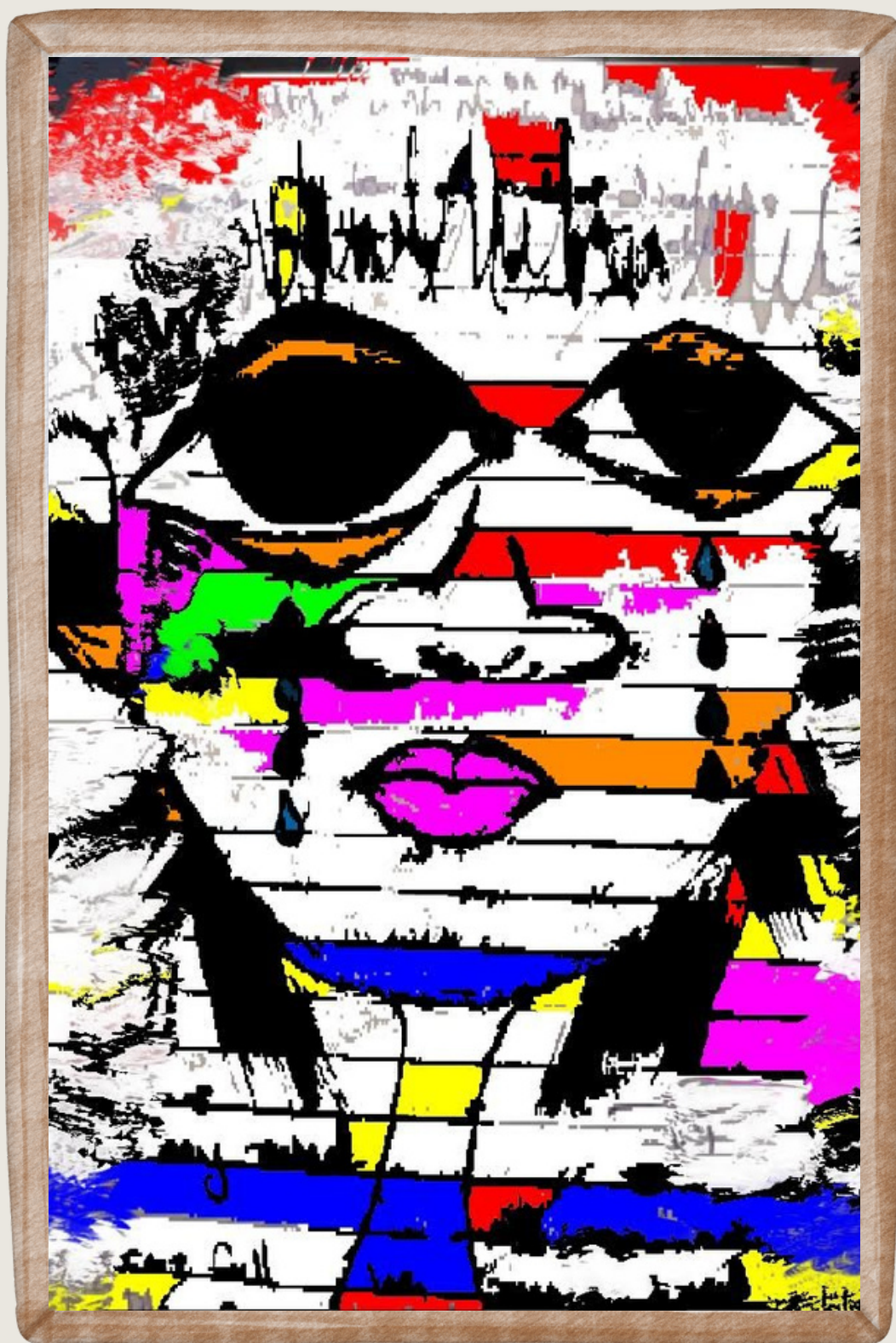
Adamu's 20-02-2024 first stanza reads:

"I watched you die, my good friend. I stood there, helpless—like anything before fire."

VISUAL ART

Itohan Ekle

EMPTY EYES



AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

01.



Clara Ijeoma Osuji

Clara Ijeoma Osuji currently teaches at Augustine University, Lagos State, Nigeria. She holds a Ph.D. in Literature from the University of Lagos, where she taught English for three academic sessions. Her area of research is in the burgeoning field of Gender Studies. She specialises in the critical study of the representations of gender with a special interest on Men and Fatherhood. She has published poetry and other scholarly articles on men and masculinities. She is a postdoctoral Fellow of the American Council of Learned Societies/African Humanities Program. Her ongoing scholarly projects focus on constructions of Male Motherhood in African fiction.

02.



Marvellous Mmesomachi Igwe

Marvellous Mmesomachi Igwe, Swan X, is a budding poet from Port Harcourt, Nigeria. He has been published in The Cloudscent Journal, Serotonin, Isele, The Dawn Review, Poetry Sango-Ota, Poetry ColumnNND amongst others. He is the winner of the 2024 Kukogho Iruesi Samson Poetry Prize, co-winner of the 2024 Poetry ColumnNND Chapbook Award, the 2024 Folorunsho Editor's Prize for Poetry and a finalist for both the 2024 Kofi Awoonor Poetry Prize and the 2024 Dawn (Review) Prize for Poetry. You can find him listening to his favorite singer Lana del Rey, or writing a poem. He tweets @mesomaccius.

03.



Onyishi Chukwuebuka Freedom

Onyishi Chukwuebuka Freedom (he/him), is of Igbo descent and a graduate of English and Literary Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. He is a poet, essayist, music enthusiast, and Publicity Secretary of Muse (no. 51). His works have appeared in or are forthcoming from, amongst other places, The Eye To The Telescope: (non)binaries, The Port Harcourt Literary Review, Wherein The World, The Biochar, Strange Quark Press, The Nine Muses Review, Ojuju Magazine, Poets in Nigeria Initiative, Everybody Magazine, The Muse Journal, Hidden Peek Press artist spotlight, Winner (March 2024), PIN's Anthology, Winner (2025), COAL NG (Coalition of African Literature)

04.



Igbokwe Roseline

Igbokwe Roseline is a final year medical student who enjoys creative writing, public speaking and performance poetry. She hails from Igbere in Bende LGA, Abia State. She has works published in different magazines and anthologies across Nigeria and Africa. She is a winner of various writing prizes too.

05.



Salamatu Bida is an educator and an aspiring writer (poet) with a passion for storytelling that drives social impact. She is a graduate of English and literary studies and also a tutor. Her hobbies include reading, henna art, and organizing youth-led conversations.

Salmatu Habu Bida

06.



Ayomide Oyinkansola Aderibigbe is a multifaceted creative passionate about storytelling, music, and performance arts. She is always just a step away from creating a new world, revisiting previously imagined characters, and exploring the creative universes of others. For her, creativity is a beautiful place to get lost, and she wouldn't have it any other way.

Ayomide Oyinkansola Aderibigbe

07.



Sagbo Gideon Gregory

Sagbo Gideon is a graduate of English and Literary Studies from Federal University Oye-Ekiti, Ekiti State, Nigeria. He is a creative writer, educator, and spoken-word artist. He has contributed several times to EWA Literary Magazine and was one of the contributors to the Best New African Poets (BNAP) Anthology 2021 and the Dare to Dream Anthology 2021. While on campus, he served as the Director of Research and Administration for Impact Leaders Club (ILC), FUOYE chapter, and as Subeditor for Fiction and Nonfiction at the English Writers' Association (EWA), FUOYE. He loves reading, writing, teaching, and listening to music.

08.



John Ebute

John Ebute (Swan XIII) is a Nigerian medical student, a certified copywriter and a trained screenwriter. His works have appeared in Ubwali, Brittle Paper, African Writer Magazine, Eunoia Review, Emphyrean Magazine, Synchronized Chaos, Spillwords Press, Kalahari Review, Farafina Blog, Muse Journal, Arts Lounge Magazine, Ta Adesa, Afrocritik, World Voices Magazine, Words Empire Magazine, and elsewhere. He was the winner of TWEIN Recreate Contest 2024 (Prose category), RIEC essay contest, NIMSA-FAITH Suicide Prevention Campaign (Prose category) and first runner-up in the Paradise Gate House Poetry Contest.

09.



Dr. Utso Bhattacharyya

Dr. Utso Bhattacharyya, a renowned author, researcher, and educationist from West Bengal, India, earned his postgraduate degree from IIT Bombay and conducted acclaimed cancer research at IISc Bangalore. His scientific work, honored with Vasudevamurthy Sundararajan Award, is published in top journals. A celebrated writer, he authored Sanspandan, Nishiddha Avisar, and Atonker Utso-Kotha, and edited numerous anthologies. His works have aired on Akashvani Kolkata and Sunday Suspense, gaining global recognition in magazines across all continents. Recipient of the International Excellence Award, R.N. Tagore Literary Award, and World Book Record, he was conferred an Honorary Doctorate for contributions to literature and science.

10.



Samuel Ajayi

A storyteller by heart, and a writer by profession. I create through a very vibrant thought process. Giving life to the littlest of ideas. I do not shy away from a story that needs to be told, and I am not stopping now. I love working with people, rubbing minds together is by far the most genuine thing for me. I love what I do because it's the only thing I can do. I get better at it every time and less worse by the day. Theater arts is my lifelong dream from as long as I can remember now.

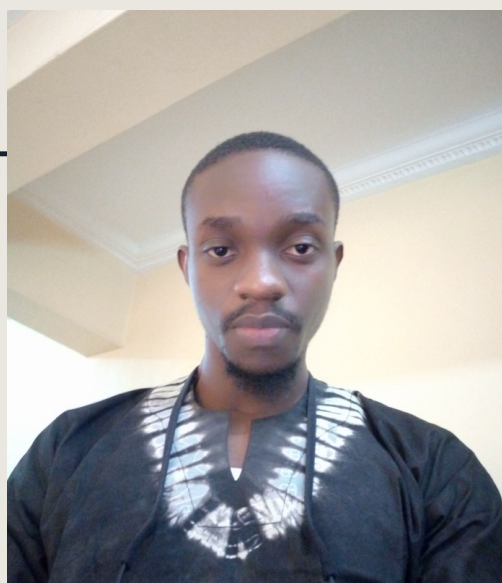
11.



Sa'id Sa'ad

Sa'id Sa'ad is a Nigerian writer and journalist. He is the author of the pocast-play "Gangare." He won the Peace Panel Short Story Prize 2018 and NFC Essay Prize same year. Sa'id currently lives in Germany and works for the German international broadcaster Deutsche Welle (DW) in Bonn.

12.



Iwuagwu Ikechukwu

Iwuagwu Ikechukwu is an African poet, Essayist, Screenwriter, and Dramatist. A native of Umunkwo in Imo state, Nigeria. His reviews and short stories have appeared in several literary magazines across the world both online and in print. He was a recipient of an honourable mention in the IHRAF Creators of Justice award in New York - 2020 & 2022 editions respectively, and was also shortlisted for the 2022 Alpine Fellowship Visual Arts Prize in London, UK as well as the ANTOA essay prize in Africa. He enjoys African Literature.

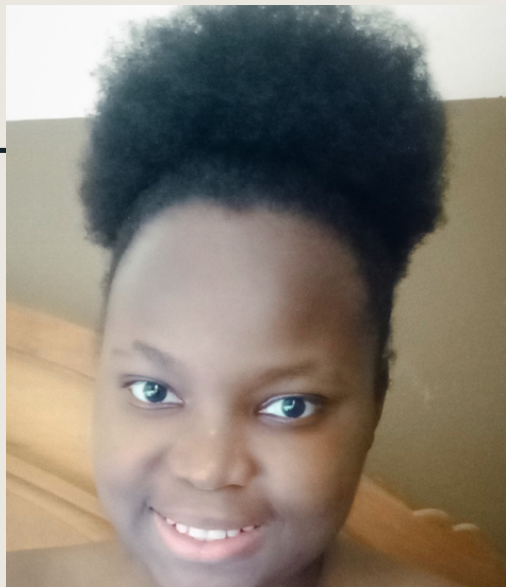
13.



Salihu Muhammad Ebba

Salihu Muhammad Ebba is a Nigerian writer/poet from Niger state. is a bright and ambitious individual, currently studying at Legend International School Minna with a strong foundation from Guided Medal Model School, Minna. He is also a member of the Hill-top Creative Act Foundation (HCAF). His work has been published/forthcoming in Kalahari Review, Double Speak magazine, Ikike Arts, synchchaos and others.

14.



Itohan Ekle

Itohan Ekle is an artist and poet whose work explores themes of Identity and self-expression. Her debut poetry collection, Colours on My Face, was recently published by Palmwine publishing and has been included in the permanent collection of Poets House, NY. Her art and poetry have also been featured on SheEvolves. Additionally, her artwork has been critiqued by Cindy Fulton Bowes, and last year, she was selected for the Dream and Nightmares art exhibition by Boomer art gallery, London. Her works have been shortlisted three times to appear on poetrycolumn NND. Her art is currently featured on MAAR and Artquid.



