

ISSUE THIRTEEN

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# LUNARIS REVIEW

A JOURNAL OF ART AND THE LITERARY



# LUNARIS REVIEW

*A JOURNAL OF ART AND THE LITERARY*

## ISSUE 13

Published in January 2021 by **LUNARIS**

Email: [contact@lunaris.com.ng](mailto:contact@lunaris.com.ng)

Website: [www.lunaris.com.ng](http://www.lunaris.com.ng)

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## Foreword

“**T**HE FOREST / IS HEAVY FOR A CATCH,” writes Joseph C. P. Christopher in his poem, “Hunters and Love”; and true to this affirmation, this auspicious issue is indeed loaded. The first time I heard about *Lunaris Review*, I had just gained admission to study at the University of Ibadan. I had no idea of what literary journal publications were all about, so it was one of the first few literary journals I knew. My older sister (the publisher’s colleague then) encouraged me to submit but I didn’t understand the concept of ceding the control of my works to others. Years later, *Lunaris Review* continues to engage in the conversation by consistently publishing quality literature that’s friendly to new and promising writers. But this issue offers much more than just promises.

It swells with voices that subvert our expectations of what literature is expected to do, regardless of the genre. What the reader quickly notices especially in short stories like Shmavon Azatyan’s “An Erotic Pursuit” and Celia Meade’s “Bright Angel Park” are their cliff-hangers. Of course, good short stories ought to make up for what they lack in their length in a mysterious resolution—or *irresolution*, but many stories fail to do this organically and subliminally. “Bright Angel Park” is quite reminiscent of Junot Diaz’s resonance. “An Erotic Pursuit” is memorable for its narrative voice that alternates between the omniscient view and the first-person without causing too much dissonance, apart from laying bare the dissonances in the mind of the two major characters, Souren and Stella in the bustling Yerevan city rooted in a culture of misogyny.

Every literary endeavor should close a distance without losing the immateriality of the imagination itself. But when the writer goes ahead to close the gap between the characters who occupy polarized spaces (without diminishing the thematic allegiance of the story), we should be quick to praise such skill. We should be quick to appreciate the

editors' keen eyes too, and the journal's generous space. Timi Agboola's story, "My Mother's Wife" reels out a kaleidoscope that's both serious and playful at the same time. He writes such a beautiful prose executed by an admirable craft:

*"Mama and our sisters were in the kitchen, making war with the pots. Soot on their faces"*

When you unwrap this new year's gift, you should expect to be haunted by the trained melancholia that never drifts into the abyss of the maudlin or transactional emotion. As you dive from Okolo Chinua's "My Country as a Moving Burj"'s "*I once opened my eyes and saw darkness,*" you will be held "*by two tiny threadlike handles*" in Onis Sampson's "Of Tamarinds and Yearnings". To lessen the risk of reviewing this issue, we should leave it to the readers' prerogative whether this selection is foolproof. The work of reading and evaluating submissions is difficult already for both editors and writers, for the reading experience to come up short. There are no absolute guarantees here, but we can say that the harmony and sequence in this issue, the vulnerabilities of each story and poems narrated are as artistic like the substantive creative pieces included here.

**Jeremiah Agbaakin,**  
Oxford, University of Mississippi.

## Bright Angel Park

*Celia Meade*

**I**N THE FIRST PHOTOGRAPH LILY SWINGS on the rope over the river. She's let go mid-air, about to splash into the water. The Cowichan river meanders in a bend, the deep river rippling in soft green light. A girl is gliding back to the riverbank between Lily and me, and half a chubby boy stands in the water staring, cut by the photo frame. He wears red swim trunks and black goggles and his fingers splay out like fat daisy petals. The cedars and deciduous bushes obscure the sky. Blue pokes through in tiny flourishes. Lily's arms are spread on either side and her legs scissor out, one forward and one back. She faces away from me, suspended above the water. Her body shines white in summer sunlight.

I've watched Lily play in that blue bathing suit countless times. She was always moving, her head bent in concentration. She built sandcastles by the lake, revelled in making the most complicated castle, filling the moat with water, and constructing a drawbridge from twigs. I was her anchor, I literally held her in bed at the end of the day. She would struggle briefly and then melt into sleep, and I would be tired too from watching her leap into the water from the pool's edge again and again, or Lily balanced on a surfboard, or jumping ahead of a wave to body surf—tired but fulfilled, we both were.

The air is full of children's voices, squealing or crying and the sounds of splashing water. It's a hot, hot day, but the trees grow so thick that it's cool in the park where I breathe in the fragrance of cedar and damp sand. A can of root beer chills my hand and I munch on animal crackers. The poor car sits ticking in a baking hot field above the old campsite, with its playground at one end and covered picnic area at the



other. To get down to the rope swing you have to walk drunkenly across the hanging bridge and down stone steps to the water's edge.

\*\*\*

**LILY ALWAYS WADED INTO THE LAKE** to rinse off after her sandcastle was complete. She called out to me and I stood stiffly on my towel. I picked my way down the prickly beach stones, weaving between babies and their parents on family blankets and cautiously eased into the cold lake. We walked together until the stones gave way to reeds and then we'd dog paddle, shrieking when the reeds grabbed our legs. I never went in without her pleading, but afterwards I was always glad that I did because it made the day feel like we were living.

I took my other daughter to the river after school in the fall. She'd had a bad day in a string of bad days, and I hoped the natural beauty of the park might uplift her. I felt helpless— we were too much alike. The river was deserted. Someone thought the rope swing was dangerous and they had taken it down, which struck me as a terrible loss. Still, the water was a gorgeous sight. I stood there unmoving, admiring as a breeze swept yellow leaves up off the ground. Kit kicked off her shoes and drifted into the river, even though she had long pants on. She stood still in the mirrored water and waves radiated from her in concentric circles. She looked up at me and smiled with arms outstretched towards me, her body bathed in wintery light. I shivered and clicked another picture.

In the first photograph Lily is swinging on the rope over the river. She's on her way, facing away from me, leaping out into the world. In the second picture her sister stands in the deep pool, with her arms reaching back to me. *Help me mama*, she seems to say. *I'm stuck in these circles*. I wanted to help her. But I needed some sort of cue. I wasn't going into the water that day. The time was wrong, the chilly temperature, our clothes. There was always some reason that it didn't work out.

**To Be That Hand Holding on to Your  
'Unfinished Architecture' // or  
Self-Portrait as 1960-**

*Ayokunle Samuel Betiku*

Again I sit at my desk to write about you  
& again you come to me as a phonograph

relentlessly swiveling the same cylinder.  
I mean: here we are, decades after

we broke loose from a history forcing its  
name on us to carve a name with our hands

& the question is still: what have we done?  
What do we have to show for every bone

broken in the attempt to assemble a spine  
except the bottomless pit of a cavity,

a nation priding itself in the way it stiffens  
at a raised ensign while its masses fall

like empty plastic bottles in the wind:  
*starvation*. Tell me the old narrative:

the 'leash' wasn't better than these lesions  
festering in our *policies* & we are

reaching out for healing. Remind me to  
forget what it would have meant to be

a sun-lit memory. Say this again &  
convince me: we are silent silhouettes

ambling towards the light.

## Salvation

Outside, a bush wails in the wake of a fierce flare  
And through my window screen I watch the thick flame lick off the stubs  
Like an angry red tongue.  
*Could this be a poem seeking its poet?*  
*Isn't this a metaphor for the deaths worn today like livery?*  
I hold this globe where it hurts and circuit round it till I see  
That every point here is torched: a blight  
Sweeping through the continents like a holocaust.  
I walk into the distance and see time wheeling on and on, unrelentingly  
Edging the edifices of places towards the mouth of dust bowls.  
Suddenly, a blustery wind proclaims the threat of an approaching cloudburst  
And the fire shivers.  
There is something about healing and the rain:  
How sometimes the body and the welkin breathe silence like mockery.  
Then a clot creeps to the face of the burning sore.  
Then a cloud creeps to the face of the brazen sky.  
Sometimes, everything held like stars away from the hands descends in the darkest  
hour  
As in the twinkling of an eye.

## **An Erotic Pursuit: Two Stories**

*Shmavon Azatyan*

**A**T THE BEGINNING, THIS IS VERY SIMPLE, as you may have heard a similar story. About fifty, he is travelling in a minibus on his way home after work. It's evening, dark, and a bit chilly as it is usually in Yerevan in October. She is under forty, sitting in front of him. She, too, is going back home after work. Suddenly the bus makes a sharp stop – the sudden braking sends her forward from her seat. Unable to hold on to anything, she falls into him, one of her hands grabbing his genitals under his thick winter trousers.

The minibus is stopped. She pulls herself back, while he holds her hand helping her settle back in her seat. She apologizes, sits back, amidst the grunts from the passengers. Then she catches his uneasy expression, somewhat confused, or embarrassed.

During the rest of the trip, they both feel awkward. Both avoid looking at each other. And when she asks for a stop, he fishes his hand into his pocket, takes out a few coins and puts some on the driver's cash box. She gets off, so does he. She crosses the street, so does he. She walks for a few minutes, then suddenly stops, turns around and faces him.

“Aren't you ashamed, following me?” she cries in his face.

“Do you like what you did in the bus?” he says calmly.

“It was an accident! Jesus!” she cries again, alarmed now.

“Yeah, but do you understand what happened to me? How I feel...?”

She turns away and trots off.

\*\*\*

**YOU WONDER IF THIS IS IT.** Or what will the man want to do? Either the man goes home and forgets the incident, or the man continues his pursuit.

When she goes to the bus stop next morning, he is there. He only glances at her from the corner of his eye. When she gets on a minibus, he gets on it, too. When she gets off, so does he, but then he walks off in another direction. But returning home, she spots him at the bus stop again. She walks on, he follows her. Choosing a spot that is well-lit and crowded, she stops and turns around.

“What do you want from me?”

“Why did you have to do that?”

“I didn’t mean it.”

“I can’t forget what you did.”

“You must be ashamed.”

“I can’t get over....”

“And what do you suggest?”

He keeps silent, staring into her eyes. She turns around and walks off.

\*\*\*

**BUT BEFORE YOU SEE THE CONSEQUENCES** of the incident in the minibus, you need to know more. If you live or have lived in Yerevan, you know that men usually stalk women, and women aren’t easily open to relationships; and there is a certain courtship decorum that ‘decent’ men and women generally observe. You have seen and heard about men fastening themselves on women, even in public places, men paying to get laid, men who have stopped sleeping with their wives and play away because their marriage was arranged. You have seen and heard about women who have gone with different men hoping to get married only to be more disappointed; women who have chosen to get involved in affairs with married men out of love, but also out of despair; women who were married off and have become their husbands’ slaves.

He is Souren, married to a woman of his age. Like many men of his generation, he married early, somewhat under his parents’ supervision and upon their advice, had

children, and over the years his sexual life with his wife has turned stale. Now, she's not attractive, and they rarely sleep together. And when that woman grabbed his genitals in the minibus, he got aroused. He had liked her when she took a seat in front of him; she was a good-looking woman, quite sexy, a bit plump, but with the curves that excited him; he would have sex with her, yes! It was just a second, these thoughts then completely disappeared, as he stared through the window at the busy traffic, crowds, and streetlights. After all, that woman wasn't the first one he had liked and wanted; on these occasions he had acted out of decency and had quenched the flames of his arousal. He believed in morals; else, a strange man could have had his way with his own wife. Unacceptable!

But it wasn't just the touching; the woman fell into his arms, and that one hand of hers squeezed his penis and went all the way down and massaged his balls; when she made an effort to keep off, her fingers slithered through his thighs and for a couple of seconds caressed the left thigh until she finally regained her balance. And off went that ill-fated hand. Later, as he walked in her wake, in a rewind mode, he thought of that as an erotic performance, one that was hard to forget. Why such an uncontrolled grip, even for a second or so? Why massage his penis as if in a brief encounter eager for a swift sex? After the woman confronted him and then walked away, his thoughts turned into another direction: What would my children tell me? What would my grandchildren think of me?

Walking quickly home, Stella had her own train of thoughts. He looks like a decent man, but why is he following me? He's a maniac. He's one of those men who had sex with her and then dropped her. Yes, it has been hard for her to find a husband, and she had sex with men. But that doesn't show in her looks, does it? And she hasn't fornicated, nor has she touched that man intentionally. But he's following. Yes, at one moment, she was so desperate that she even got involved with a married man and stayed his sex partner for years. Despite his promises that he would marry her soon, she continued dating him. Sometimes, simply because she wanted a man's company; but

anyway, she loved him. And this man here, her stalker, is one of those who are ready to make assumptions of women right away; and even though this was just an incident, and he knows it well, he assumes I'm a whore and I wanted to touch him, or I could avoid, but I didn't.

As Stella walked up the stairs to her apartment, she wondered if her parents would see signs of her distress and decided that she must force a smile on her face. She couldn't tell her parents about the incident. Not to bother them. She thought, it's just an incident, many women in Yerevan are used to being heckled and harassed by men. She won't see the man again because he hasn't followed her up to her house. She rung the bell, her mother opened the door, they greeted each other, and she walked in. She waved at her father sitting on the couch in the living room, then walked into her bedroom. Well, maybe she could tell her best friend, Astr, about this story. That'll be something to laugh at over coffee, she said to herself.

\*\*\*

**AT HOME, SOUREN IS PREOCCUPIED** by the incident and must make efforts to respond to his wife's chatter. He tells her he had a busy day and goes to bed early. But he can't go to sleep, and later when his wife comes in and undresses, he tries and sits up in bed. She's surprised he's not sleeping.

"Still awake?" she asks.

He eagerly checks out her body, as if trying to find something new that would attract him, some curve that he hasn't paid attention to. In her sleeping gown, his wife's breasts are dried plums, the fatty flesh dangles from her underarms and his eyes can't find that shape of hip and waste that hardened his cock twenty years back when they got married.

She gets into the bed and tries touching him, but he knows she's massaging him, so he feels better. He wishes her hand would at least massage his cock – that might help.

When his wife is snoring, he gets up and goes to the kitchen for a smoke. It has been a mistake not to approach women all this time; they want sex, too; it's just that he

always wanted to be courteous, maybe virtuous, when he ran into good-looking women. But he really got cocked after this woman touched him; her perfume has been stuck inside his nose, and he has wanted her for a few hours now. He has been loaded heavily and feeling miserably eager; he must release his...

He goes into the bathroom and starts flexing his penis. He imagines him and the woman in the minibus in the missionary position, and his cock hardens. That gives him utter enjoyment. But suddenly he stops, feeling something not right. Immediately going limp, he splashes cold water on his face a few times and goes quickly to bed. He wants *her*, he doesn't want to jerk off.

\*\*\*

**IN THE MORNING, STELLA HAS FORGOTTEN** about the incident, until she spots the man at the bus stop. Even then she doesn't think he's there with an intention, awaiting her. But when he gets off at the same stop as she, she has reasons to assume he is up to no good. Though he walks off in another direction, she catches him glancing at her about to cross the street.

Stella spends her day without much remembering about the man. Buried in work, serving a dozen clients, she has almost forgotten about him, when she is caught by a bitter surprise seeing him waiting for her at the bus stop. When she decides to confront him once again, and he sincerely tells her that he can't forget her, that's when she knows that she's got into a story. And she knows it is to be continued.

But can *her* story be told?

The third day after the incident she meets up with Astr after work. Stella's intention for the meet-up is to talk about the man who's been chasing after her. She is not sure that she can tell Astr much about it. Maybe she wants a consolation. Or can Astr talk about her own experiences?

"Maybe, I'll be taking you home for a few days, Astr says. "They usually get put off soon, if you ignore them."



“He can follow me only from that bus stop,” says Stella. “Tomorrow we can go home together.”

“Or go to the movie?”

Stella thinks for a second.

“What if he doesn’t stop following me?” she asks, alarmed.

“Well, if that happens,” says Astr, “then tell your father to talk to him.”

Stella has nothing to add. More than that, at the end of the evening she realizes that they have talked a lot about this and that, and only a few minutes about her story. Maybe there’s no story after all. It is a normal thing in Yerevan.

\*\*\*

**IF SOUREN TELLS HIS FRIENDS ABOUT THE INCIDENT**, it will be a funny story. If he tells them about how he has been feeling since then, they will laugh again, calling him an adolescent. If he goes ahead and tells them that he is seriously intent on sleeping with that woman, then there will be a conversation to pursue. These are Souren’s thoughts as he goes about his work the next few days following the incident in the minibus.

As you consider it a possibility, from your experience, Souren will tell different people different stories. You can easily see Souren mentioning the incident to a colleague with a smile on his face, which makes his colleague think about it as just a funny story.

“You should have pinched her ass,” the colleague says.

Souren chuckles, but the colleague’s words light a crescent desire burning his insides.

At the weekend, on a visit, he speaks about the incident, quite breezily, to his friend whose response is “you’re lucky.” But then, Souren comes back to it at a later time, after the dinner, when he and his friend walk out to the backyard for a smoke. Away from their wives.

He tells his friend in a serious tone that he is thinking about that woman all the time.

“There’s something about her. About how it happened,” says Souren. “I can’t sleep.”

“Come on, give her up,” says his friend.

“I can’t.”

“It will go away.”

Souren’s third attempt at telling his story is with his brother. They meet at a suburban restaurant; his brother brings him some fruit from their summer house in the country. After a few drinks, Souren tells his brother the story he’s got into and adds that he wants to sleep with the woman.

“Find out who she is,” says his brother.

“Works at a hair salon downtown. Not married.”

“Why her? I can arrange a woman, a really gorgeous babe. I’ll pay for you.”

“No, I want her.”

His brother takes a minute to think.

“I don’t like it,” he says finally.

“I have to be persistent, and she’ll give in.”

“I don’t think you have a chance. If you had, you’d not be sitting here and talking about how you want to fuck her in a serious tone. You’d have approached her repeatedly. Instead you’ve been watching her.”

“You see, she has forgotten about me. I will show up in her life again, by chance, and will approach her nicely.”

His brother weighs Souren’s scenario for a while.

“There’s a chance if she’s one of those desperate women.”

Souren’s eyes shine.

“But you must arrange the running-into-her so delicately that she doesn’t suspect at all.”

“Shall I apologize for what happened?”

“Of course, and explain that you were misled, because many women have done exactly the same to you in the past with an intention to get laid.”

Souren’s heart is about to leap out of his chest. He’s picturing to himself how he slings his hand around her shoulders, and they walk together into a hotel room.

“But that may take long, and she may refuse you eventually,” says his brother, ruining his momentary joy. “As I said, get the short-cut. Fuck a whore tomorrow. My treat.”

Souren shakes his head, rejecting his brother’s advice. He knows too well that the woman on the minibus is single and must be looking for a partner. He must persevere.

\*\*\*

**SOUREN TAKES A MONTH TO PREPARE FOR HIS CHARGE.** He spies on Stella, and when certain that she dates no one, he decides to go to the hair salon where she works. It’s an appropriate time, Souren believes, near New Year, when his hair has grown too long, and he hasn’t shaved for two weeks. All the way to the salon, his chest is full of tantalizing desires, and his head plays all sorts of fantasies of his and her sexual intercourse. But when he walks in the salon, and a few pairs of female eyes size him up, some reptile-like blaze slithers through his abdomen, hurting him so bitterly that he becomes tongue-tied. On their luxuriously made-up faces, sexy smiles stretch and invite, but underneath the makeup, their sneaky eyes and grinning lips are full of condescending sympathy for him. He immediately realizes that his likes don’t go to that salon.

An older woman, apparently the manager, walks up and asks if he would like a haircut. Souren can’t even look around to spot the woman he’s there for. Finally, he mumbles a ‘yes’ and quickly eyes the entire salon. He can’t find her, what is this, a mistake? He turns around, still clinging to his ardent intent to have her. A young barber, with a great build, strides in from another room wearing a muscle-fit burgundy jumper, with rolled up sleeves disclosing his sturdy hands, and invites him to be seated.

Souren doesn't know how he appears in the chair; his obsession is brimming and he's swimming in its fiery flames. When the barber asks him a question, it brings him out of his delirium. He tells the barber he just needs a simple cut, not too short. His eyes roll around the salon, but the woman from the minibus is not there. Then suddenly, a thought, like a jet in the sky, flits across his mind: Is he going to approach that woman in front of all these women and start a conversation? Apologize? And then ask for her number to take her out to dinner (as a gesture of apology)?

That's the moment when Souren sulks, his heart sinks, his hands stop trembling, his legs relax... The barber's gentle playing with his hair numbs Souren, and he falls into a semi-nap, as if drunk from the intensity of sweet pleasure emanating from the beautiful women, various vapours, lotions and perfumes, the placards featuring gorgeous women's faces with expensive eye-pencil, lipstick, and rouge... Beneath the hot blower's noise from the next station, the barber's scissors' clicking, women's chitchat and giggle Souren slowly reawakens to a truth that he has carried rotting in his heart. It was dishonourable of him to have thought about having that woman; he's an engineer, with years of respect at his job, a grandfather, a head of family. The whole story seems like a drama film. Souren can't even recognize that woman as his eyes dreamily scan the salon, and when angry at himself, he feels sorry and accepts his mistake, or maybe his delusion, he tries thinking of his regeneration. It may be up to him, now he thinks, to amend his relationship with his wife, so that they can sleep together. The barber finishes, Souren stands up, not even looking at himself in the mirror, and pays the barber. He's got the resolution.

But when he walks out of the salon, the whiff of a familiar odour paralyzes him; he sharply turns around and his eyes lock with her eyes – the woman from the mini-bus stands in the middle of the salon, gazing at him. He makes an effort to continue his way out, but in a sudden burst of perspiration, he feels a big emptiness crowding his chest. In her eyes, he can see that reproach for his continuous chasing after her that is mixed with what he feels is an inquiry about whether he has really been serious about his

feelings. This ambiguity is similar to that uncertainty that clouded his desire, as a teenager, to cut holes in doors and walls and peep through for female flesh.

Souren is outside where he has got totally unawares. He is walking down the street, his mind buried in the depths of the story he knows now he can't complete. His wife will not be good for him for the rest of his life, and the young women won't have him. So then, he will finish the story. He promises himself to stay away from picking up women. His brother will help him get laid. That's it. He vows to ignore women who may look his way. They don't deserve it, like this arrogant bitch with her glamorous makeup spending her days applying paint on her face and nails and doing others' hair.

In the meantime, Stella has occupied the restroom in the salon where she is looking at herself in the mirror, trying to reckon what it is in her looks that drew the man to her. She was shocked to see him and stood frozen for a few seconds, but somehow that nasty feeling of scare she had a few weeks ago had gone. She felt safe, even willing to come on up and talk. But he was lost like a child among adults and walked out quickly. And she was sure that was it.

## What Sets Us Off

*John Grey*

**D**ogs bark at one a.m.  
Nothing out there.  
No reason I can see  
for them to get riled up,  
eyes blazing,  
hair raised.

As far as they're concerned,  
something intruded on their space  
which is, according to their instincts,  
my territory as well.

Maybe the radiator spooked them.  
Or a floorboard creaked.  
Or a car backfired.  
Or a mouse scurried somewhere  
within the walls.

Their minds can fashion  
a threatening monster  
from the merest of sounds.

I calm them down,  
slip back into bed,  
fall asleep.

A flicker of memory,  
a modicum of mood,  
a smidgen of stress,  
my dreams get down  
to being dogs.

## Hunters and Love

*Joseph C. P. Christopher*

### *I*

The hunters are on a  
trapping spree. The forest  
is heavy for a catch.

Their frenzy is the meat  
of our lives. They clap about  
their exploits with fancy glasses  
of Champagne on daily tabloids.

We may not escape their avid  
axes when the sky is vacant of rain  
and the woodland is bare of prey.

Who is afraid of thunder?  
Okigbo is a lost bell  
chiming in the wild.

They are talking about  
pumpkin. The meat must  
be shared.

The forest quivers and its  
branches are the sagging  
remains of life.

### *II*

If I plant a kiss on your forehead, remember  
my dear. The land is fallen a sky.  
Cowards are now heroes; heroes are now cowards.  
Christmas is a piece of rag with which  
clergies have forged fires of burning sermons. Who cares  
about the magic of the pulpit when the sun is at  
war with itself? Who cares?

Remember my breath, so minty  
planted in delectable vines.

Remember the silences of speech, as we  
lay on our backs facing the heavens by the  
beach, listening to the music of distant  
waves, waiting for the world to come to an end.

### *III*

“My daughter is a bulb of hyacinth  
stem in blood” exclaimed a mad  
man dying in a root.

The river is red velvet  
sole of fleshy desires over dust. Its  
abhorrent leaves are strewn with  
poisonous pleasure.

The almajiria are nowhere to be found. Their  
hunger is expensive pendant round the  
cervixes of princes in royal silky robes and crowns.

G-wagon, Venza and Rang Rovers  
clank through the streets in queues.  
Boots of invading armies and bloodstain  
riffles burn around them like firewood.

The almajiria are lost in boneyard  
oblivion. Helpless as a flock with  
elaborate eyes of doom flipping through  
dark pages beneath the devil’s feet,  
waiting in mean roses and sweet horror.

The almajiria are themselves growing thorns.



## My Mother's Wife

Timi Agboola

**T***HIS IS MAMA'S GRAVEYARD.* This is Baba's also.

*The graves are tiled white, filled with gravel, and there are grey marble plaques with black-lettered inscriptions on the headstones. Weeds and sleepy sunflowers swirl around them like pubic hair. Another clearing has been made beside these graves and there, below the smooth hard slab of cement, in a gilded wood casket, lies the person who planted the sunflowers.*

*The earth is a dog's nose. My trousered legs are soiled from kneeling and my head is alive with an urgent swarm of stories, flipping like ants in a burning colony. These stories once filled each entombed life like the gravel on their graves. These stories were once not memories. I do not know how they matter in the grand scheme of things, but my head is a war zone and I need some relief. I must tell each story. I must recall every little one, hold their dog tags, read their names and ranks out loud, weep, and maybe then I will get to bury them. Stick in the wooden crosses. Say a prayer. Make my way across the horizon into a disappearing sunset.*

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November 1999.

**I REMEMBER THE NIGHT** Shittu Amina became my mother's wife. It was a night fresh from rain. I was sitting in the parlour with my brother. Both of us were tired from playing all day long and were watching the shadows cast by the kerosene lantern on the centre table dance against the walls like a live motif. Mama and our sisters were in the kitchen, making war with the pots. Soot on their faces. We were to keep away from the kitchen because palm oil fumes could affect the virility of a man—that was what Mama said. It was in that extended moment that our father walked in from the darkness, overflowing folds of agbada hung up on his big, strong shoulders. We sat up and prostrated — a reflex, once we saw the epochal figure of Baba before us. Baba was an

August visitor. His footsteps were strange, unlike Mama's, which were those of someone alone in a forest, crunching sticks and picking up dry shrubs, a figure of rumour and legend. They were unlike Titi's as well—our first sister—whose footsteps possessed the flat, monotonous quality of a housemaid forever at work, walking up and down the stairs in a big house. Our second sister, Wunmi, did not yet have a unique beat of footsteps — they changed from day to day, mood to mood, stomping and rough now, soft and delicate later, but she was leaning toward the small clear steps of the charismatic friend at work.

A lady, or rather a woman who appeared to have practised rather well at being a lady, followed Baba inside, walking very close to him as though she was his shadow, afraid that something might jump on her. She was beautiful, with her short-swollen body wrapped taut in ankara. She had a pair of blinking, sophisticated eyes with prominent eyelashes and luscious-smooth lips that shimmered and made us conclude later among ourselves that she had to have constantly ran her tongue over them to get that soft-and-shine effect, a practice which both Titi and Wunmi picked up and found hard to drop to our utmost irritation.

Baba nodded to us and sat in a chair. The woman sat beside him. I wondered what branch of the family tree she belonged to and why Baba had chosen to pluck her away.

Mama hurried out from the kitchen fumbling with the folds of her wrapper, one part of her face lit up by the lantern so that her thick, three-line tribal marks were visible on the left cheek. She knelt before Baba and showered him with effusive greetings, but he only nodded back even though they were just seeing each other for the first time in months. Mama backed away into a chair. She glanced at the lady and gave a polite greeting.

“Good evening, sisi.”

The woman slid down from the chair and let her knees graze the floor. “Good evening, Mama,” she said, before Baba ordered her back with a quick wave of his hand.

“I have good news,” Baba began to say, clearing his throat, his voice booming with the clarity of a preacher facing his old congregation. “We shall have a new wife in this household.”

Mama turned up her palms. “I don’t understand you, my husband.”

Baba pressed his jaws. The shadows on his face deepened and when his voice came, it was a series of deep sputters from a strange place in his chest, like a new machine malfunctioning for the first time. “Wh... what is there to understand, y...you this woman? I said... I said that we are having a new wife in this house. Or, have you gone deaf in the little period I was not around?”

I didn’t know what Baba meant by “little period”. My mind reeled back to the months during which his room would get dusty from disuse. Once or twice a month, depending on the time of the year, Titi would collect the spare key from Mama, sprinkle the room with water from a bowl and sweep it clean. Usually, when she was done, the rest of us got invited in for some play-acting. Wunmi would loudly insist on playing Baba. We often gave in to her demands and Titi would play Mama while my brother and I became disobedient children whom 'Baba' would spank for not washing the plates, for not sweeping the floors, for not taking first position, or for peeping at what adults did behind closed doors. We would play and play until we got bored with the room which had a double-bunk bed with naked steel springs that we leaped from, and two painted metal boxes filled with rattling tools with lids that had rusted shut to our prying hands. There was also a large black radio with broken cassette-tape receivers. We often twisted the pair of turning knobs and moaned at the easy pleasure of it.

“Baba Tunde,” I heard a quiet voice say. “Why are you doing this to me?” Mama retied her wrapper and sank to her knees. Her eyes were soft, misted with emotion. She fixed those eyes on Baba’s bare arms and her voice began to tremble.

“Please, the owner of my head, don’t let me come to shame before my detractors. Don’t let them point fingers at me in the market. Don’t let the devil turn our home upside down. Baba Tunde, I beg you in the name of God. I beg you with Iya

Awero Oniyan at Oke-Ode's, I beg you with your mother's head, I am enough for you. One wife is enough."

She heaved, tied her hands into a pleading knot and continued. "Have you ever had a cause to complain about me? Has your food ever been served cold? Do you lie in rumpled sheets and wear dirty clothes? Please, my husband, you don't need another wife. One is enough for you."

As if by the intensity of her stare, Baba's agbada folds fell down his shoulders and he sagged into the chair, clicking his tongue, and shaking his head.

"You women *shai*! You do not know what is good for you, do you? Who told you I needed another wife? Tell me, who? Who needs a wife when one does not even sleep at home?" Baba asked, bemused, and looking to the sides for some audience that was as equally bemused at the strange inanities of women.

Baba sat up, cleared his throat, and began to gesture with his hands. "See, Mama Tunde, the only reason I brought this girl home with me is for your sake. Look at your children. Look at them. None of them are yet old enough to help you with this house, so how do you cope? None of them can wash your clothes or cook the food. The brunt is all on you, so, you see, I've brought this girl home to be your wife." He ended his statement on a high note and sat back with a slight, satisfied smile. "She will sweep the compound, clear the grass and tend to the house. She will do all the housework and you will be left with more time to take care of the children and your business. What else could one ask for in a wife?"

Mama sniffed and put a slow, bewildered hand on her chest, as though she had been accused of a grievous sin. "I, Baba Tunde, want a wife? Then what am I?"

"You are the new husband!" Baba said and let it out. He started to guffaw in that special way of his, with both feet off the floor, jaws open, and a hand slapping the armrest for rhythm. Mama began to sob on her knees, her tears dropping to the cemented floor like ointment. My sisters were hanging at the door that led into the kitchen like extra weight the room didn't need to hold and we, the children, stared at the

yellow bulb of kerosene-fuelled flame, not looking elsewhere, knowing that something was about to change.

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*June 2014*

**I CAN'T FIND THE REST OF THAT NIGHT.** Whether Mama ever stood up from that spot she knelt in or whether she is still there, crumbled to the floor like a toddler's biscuits, whether I heard her sob long into the night or not. My memory is blank. I can only remember everything that happened afterwards mostly because of Wunmi who led antics against the new addition to our family.

\*\*\*

*November 1999*

**WUNMI IS A BEAUTIFUL, SOFT-AT-HEART LADY** now and it would be presently difficult for anyone to imagine that her soul hid Baba's prized brown leather shoes so he wouldn't go out visiting friends with his new bride the next day. Nobody would believe that she locked up his room and threw away the gold-hued keys just to frustrate them for one night, and that she refused to attend the traditional marriage of my mother's wife to Baba, which, we agreed later on, was the bravest thing she ever did.

Baba didn't like his daughters too much. Me neither. My brother was his boy. Baba would use *last-born* as a pretext to spoil him silly until we all wore frowns on our faces. My brother soon grew into his privilege and began to accept sweets and succour from my mother's wife. We badgered him about it, but he didn't care. And when he finally reported us to Baba, with stern repercussions for my sisters, Mama took him by the ear into her room, locked the door and flogged him until his cries rang sharp and high, enough to bring us to the locked door crying for his release. "*Mama! Mama! O ti to! E jo! Mommy! E jo!*"

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*May 2000*

**MAMA'S ROOM WAS MADE OF LOVE.** It had a thick, down-to-earth mattress that could take all of us children and our play. It had a wardrobe, too, with peeling white furnish, that was full of treasures. Titi once found a bowl of cowrie shells stowed in its stuffy depths and the noise from our newfound play had lasted in the house for weeks.

Mama's room smelled of her and became an extension of her persona. If you couldn't run into her skirt and cry, you ran into her room, made for the soft pile of laundry at the corner and sobbed into it, convinced that she would feel your tears wherever she was.

Mama's room loved us back. Whenever we remembered to taunt Shittu Amina and she came running after us with an exasperated broom held high above her head, we would fly into the room and lock it behind us. Sometimes we didn't need bother to lock the door: my mother's wife simply avoided her husband's room, especially in her absence. Instead, she would return to the parlour and wait until she forgot about her intentions to deal with us.

The parlour, once a hub for our activities, became the personal space of my mother's wife. She slept on a mattress on the floor—which she rolled up and stowed away every morning—until her belly swelled with a baby. We didn't eat there again except on the days Baba would come back, sometimes with guests, and we all had to pretend to be one big, happy family.

\*\*\*

*August 2003*

**WHEN MY MOTHER'S WIFE GAVE BIRTH,** it was her husband who delivered her right there in the parlour. Mama chased us all out of the house one sunny afternoon before we could remove our school uniforms. I remember standing outside, my nose pressed against the window netting, a fly buzzing somewhere close. I remember being transfixed by the splayed laps of Shittu Amina as the baby slipped out in a magical moment: head first, all wet and slimy like fish, born into the world with a frown while the new mother groaned and huffed and cursed Baba for bringing so much pain upon

her. Naturally, I fell in awe with the baby whose birth I felt I had played a magical role in by the mere fact of witnessing.

Baba came back home and donned a shiny new agbada made of thick-woven ofi with Shittu Amina. Mama would have worn the same thing were it not for Wunmi who took the sown outfit, hid it and herself until it was too late. The rest of us had agreed not to be one big, happy, outfit-matching family except, of course, for my brother. And, so, only Baba and the new mother and my brother took a photo together with the newly christened baby wrapped in swaddling whites. The photograph, now framed and hanging on the wall of our parlour, coloured and bright, became iconic almost immediately. It stands out from the rest of the monochrome family photos like an orchid among trampled, chemical-dried weeds. My brother was grinning at the camera with Baba's arm of love sloppy around his shoulders. Shittu Amina stood in her position in the family: besides Baba. She had a tired smile and her lips were shimmering in the sun. In the background of the picture, if you look behind the flower hedge, you can see Mama talking down at a disinterested, stubborn-faced girl with her head-tie about to come loose from her head.

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*December 2005*

*"Family is a set of china. If a fall occurs, some might crack, and some might not. And some, if not all, may shatter into jagged memories."*

Baba died in an auto-crash. I heard the whispers. They said his windpipe got torn out of his neck like a chicken with a slit throat. Like the one Brother Jacob who lived in the next house prepared every Christmas morning, holding up the badly-feathered little-big thing in his hands before dumping it in a basin of bloody hot water that we all proceeded to pick from like a pack of wolves.

I can't forget waking up one morning in early December and finding a white casket surrounded by a crowd in our front yard. I stood there on the pavement watching the strange, almost ceremonial procession. My siblings joined me, yawning, and rubbing

their sleep-drunk eyes. Then there was Mama trembling out of the front door to let us know everything was not alright, her face aghast, shocked white like a ghost's, the scarf loose on her head. When she saw the sickly white thing waiting for her, she threw off her scarf and spun into the ground with it.

Pandemonium broke out. The compound became a large living thing of sighs and moans and raised voices tripping over one another. We were pushed aside, lost in the shuffle of the crowd. We watched as the sun waxed bright and Mama was carried to the community clinic. My brother began to sob and the rest of us stood there, stunned, our collective foreheads burning under the sun.

\*\*\*

*January 2006*

**WE VISITED MAMA AT THE CLINIC** every day. She was mostly inert on her bed. Her arm was tied to a drip and her eyes were dark, burnt crisp in some past life, fixed on the ceiling. On our fifth visit to the clinic—a procession of all four of us and our mother's wife on a morning arrested by harmattan—she was no longer there. Her bed was bare, the sheets rumpled as though she'd just got up to use the bathroom and would be back any minute. We stood staring at the sheets until a nurse came in to ask us how we came in before pulling my mother's wife aside.

We knew — Titi, Wunmi, and I. As they talked and the facial expression of our mother's wife changed, we simply knew. This knowing fell from a tall, empty sky into the crevices of our hearts and landed without a noise.

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*July 2008*

**THE BABY DIED OF CHOLERA** before she was five years old. It came running through us like a train at night. She got worse and worse and we just watched until she was taken away from us by two light-skinned nurses from the clinic. A profound effect replaced her presence in the house. It became too quiet: devoid of baby cries, baby



powder, baby toys, and the fussing of us trying to keep her placated, distracting our own selves in the process.

We changed. It seemed wrong to stomp or move about in the way we previously did, so we tiptoed, keeping our feet quiet, trying to fashion a comfort we did not understand. Titi started cooking for us. Wunmi worked the laundry every weekend and my brother and I helped as much as we could. My mother's wife wept into each night and we pretended not to hear.

Life became a pair of dark spectacles. We got passed around between relatives like photograph copies. My brother planted some sunflowers around the graves in the backyard — he was the only one that stayed back home with our mother's wife. When we visited during the holidays, carrying gifts and static smiles, he would come running out to throw himself against us as soon as we got out of our paternal uncles' or maternal aunts' cars. Then he would pull us into the backyard where he pointed at the graves and reminded us of how small his little flower bed had previously been and how Mama would have liked it. I thought he was trying to tell us something else behind that enthusiastic white smile of his, but it never came out and I never asked.

My mother's wife was the beam around which we anchored ourselves. She called during exams and sent me silly things like handwritten Valentine cards which embarrassed me to no end among my mates. During the annual family meetings, we had in our parlour—with all those portraits of Baba and Mama surrounding us like old sores—we sat around Shittu Amina and blinked at whatever was being discussed. In a way, she became a substitute for our parents, stepping out of Baba's shadow to become something like a stick-version of Mama. And without knowing exactly when it happened, we came to love her back.

\*\*\*

*June 2015*

**WHEN THEY CALLED TO TELL ME** my brother had hung himself from the ceiling fan in our parlour, I was busy at work. They said it was done by some old twine

rope from the store. I put down the phone and finished marking my students' second C.A. test, thinking about the feel of pen against paper. When I was done, I went outside and called Wunmi. Students were out in the school's playground and her phone rang for a long time before she picked it.

“Hello, dear.”

I listened to the background noise. She was at work. I could hear laughter and the shuffle of paper in the background. I imagined her table, filled with files and journals, her place in the university's hierarchy. It seemed that the moment was perfect for this sort of news to come hurling out of the skies like a big, black alien object from the subconscious.

“Sister *mi*.”

“Are we fine, Bighead?”

“Deji *ti ku*,” I spat, steeling my jaws.

“Deji *ti ku*,” I repeated, and I became overwhelmed by the lunging of a boulder up my throat and a dam, or something that felt like a hornet's nest, erupting behind my eyes. I heard my sister rasp over the phone and the rest of that moment collapsed into blankness.

\*\*\*

**MY MOTHER'S WIFE SHED MOST OF THE TEARS** for us. Grief had so ravaged her, and she had so mourned that her once shimmering lips had lost all colour and vigour, assuming a constant shade of grey that swallowed light like some piece of chapped old mud. And unconsciously, slowly, like the ceremonial unfurling of a flag, the rest of us, now grown enough, detached our anchors from her feeble frame and tucked it back into our hearts. We couldn't afford not to. If the beam went under with our anchors still in place, she would have pulled the rest of us along.

Titi, now a secondary school teacher like me, and Wunmi were exceptionally strong. At times, during those family meetings in which we sat silent and stolid like abandoned facts, our eyes would meet all at the same point on the centre-table where

the kerosene lantern had burned brilliant yellow a lifetime ago, like space-rovers from different universes come to worship the same God of pain.

\*\*\*

June 2015

**WHEN I ARRIVED LAST NIGHT**, our compound was a haze of darkness. My mother's wife was on a mat in Mama's room with her feet placed atop one another. Her loose native wear as misshapen as a tossed rag. After an embrace that covered little for the years of physical absence, I found my sisters on the mattress with pursed lips, their eyes the only bright spots in them. We exchanged slight nods and I sat. It was past midnight, around that time new ideas come out from the underbrush and walk around like little people when my mother's wife showed up her ragged face.

"I am leaving next week, Tunde."

I looked up, stunned. "Ehn?"

"I am going back to Iseyin-Ekiti." Her head wandered around the room. "I can't stay here anymore."

I swallowed. Wunmi shifted her legs on the floor. Titi just hung her head. Neither would look at me. *They already knew.* They *knew* and had accepted this shift in our family. I felt some resentment for them—*how can they sit there, my big sisters, and just accept everything that is being thrown at us by the universe*—but it was no use: we were all helpless little things in a bigger thing, laundry in someone's washer, destined to spin and fall like leaves and rain and stars and everything else in a dying universe. And then the darkness would triumph over light.

*Shittu Amina.* I wondered who the Shittus were, why I'd never known any of them except for this short stodgy woman with small feet who came, once, for the traditional marriage. What had Shittu Amina done to get so isolated from the rest of her family? Or were they all non-existent, also wiped out by death? Was my mother's wife caught between two worlds of grief, permanently plugged into funeral blues, lost in an

endless landscape of jagged peaks, empty valleys and a sepia-toned sky brightened only by some occasional caws?

Titi sniffed and timidly asked for her address, which, of course, I couldn't bring myself to ask. None of us really listened as she mentioned it. Our minds were dwelling on other things. Vague grey things without boundaries or shapes.

\*\*\*

June 2015

**I WOKE UP NEAR DAWN** and couldn't remember a moment of sleep. My head felt like a radio left on for too long. The house was deserted, and the morning light came in blunt and dull. Everything looked like part of some forgotten crime scene.

I listened and it seemed that everyone was gone, probably to the mosque, where the muezzin was calling out like a bird into the dark.

*Allahu Akbar.*

*Allah-hu Akbar.*

I had the entire house to myself. So, I stepped out and tried to remember when it all seemed as smooth as a dream.

\*\*\*

January 1998

**WALLS AND FLOORS SOAK IN A LOT OF THINGS.** *They absorb sounds, scenes, life, and thoughts. If you care to stare long enough, they can piss out these memories, bring back the light and blur the present out of focus.*

Our parlour still has that flower-patterned curtain draping over its windows. Wunmi broke the glass panes one Saturday morning when she insisted on climbing up and fixing the curtain herself despite Mama's vehement objection.

The three-seater is still there, brown and tired, the old coach we rode to London and back in five minutes; the old coach on which we sat and ate, fought and played.

\*\*\*

**THEY HAVE REPLACED THE DOOR** to Baba's room and cleared it out. But the dimensions remain the same and I can still hear laughter from our play-acting on the bed, still feel the mid-air glee of leaping from the bunk springs, the exhaustion from exerting our arms on those rusty trunk boxes.

\*\*\*

**MAMA'S ROOM REMAIN UNTAINTED**, love spilling out of everywhere — even from the threadbare mattress. It was where my brother and I practiced all the WWE wrestling we saw on Brother Jacob's TV while our sisters watched and clapped for the victor, which, invariably, was always me: The Rock over Undertaker.

The backyard once smelled of upturned earth and decayed flowers, but it now reeks of silence like an abandoned old estate. We played football here, threw things in the air and drew on the soil. We got dirt on ourselves here.

\*\*\*

**A FEW MORE STEPS AND MY CHEST BEGINS TO POUND.** It feels like the primal rap of bracelet-adorned arms against skin drums, like a rising and rhythmic call for an ancient spirit. Death appears at the end of the compound, just before the fence, dancing to the beat of my heart over the graves, and I couldn't stop moving towards it, this thing called Death, because he owned it all and demands to be worshipped.

\*\*\*

June 2015

***THIS IS MAMA'S GRAVEYARD.*** *This is Baba's also.*

*The graves are tiled white, filled with gravel, and there are grey marble plaques with black-lettered inscriptions on the headstones:*

[Chief (Mr) Alhaji Arowolo Kayanju, 1951-2005]

[Lady (Mrs) Alhaja Arowolo Elizabeth Kafayat, 1958-2006]

*There is a kingdom of weeds and sleepy sunflowers growing around them like pubic hair. Another clearing has been made beside the Graves and there, below the long slab of cement, in a gilded casket, lies the person who planted the sunflowers.*

*Beneath me, the earth is damp, and the sun is a sorrowful thing, still in bed, covered up in sheets and blankets. The sky starts to weep, first in little persistent drops on my shoulders, then increasingly hard, until my frame is hidden by a screen of thundering white noise.*

## **Last Memory of a Fallen Soldier**

*Okolo Chinua*

**G**od's voice here is the silence found in the morning wind,  
And each breath breathes red on a dusty field.  
In your hands, you hold life in a long gun,  
Every sound casts a shadow beneath,  
Sunsets come with the fall of shadows that do not rise in mornings,  
Every day is the same and tomorrow is a day that never comes.  
Here, we don't bear names, we bear tags.  
A mother at home sings her prayers for a son here,  
The son here becomes the shadow found at sunsets.

## **My Country as a Moving Burj**

**I** once opened my eyes and saw darkness-- Yes, it's possible to find emptiness in a closed box.

Does the land bleed water when it's struck?

My country is a pipe with rocks, you can walk through from the mouth, but you won't find an opening.

In my country, you don't walk through, you walk above.

These days, every post I click on my feed describes men as weeds and women as plants, which is why I do not question a growing boy's fascination towards weed; because somehow to see above weeds, plants, vegetation you need to be high...

But can you go higher than gravity? -- We all have something that pulls us down.

A tree grows tall and produces bent branches, and tall buildings have roofs that seal their height as if to say this is as far as you go.

My country is three men making up the thousands,

One still argues that rocks can fly, another spends the day with a bent back and the last with a smile running across his face,

And one woman, a plant in between three weeds.

Are weeds not plants racially discriminated against?

My country is not a painting.

An orchestra of minorities spring me up every morning, I am not a fisherman, but I rise before sunrise.

Here anybody waking with the sun is associated with laziness; my country is not made of snails,

It's block on block, brick on brick, incomplete... but with potential...A Burj...

My country is a moving Burj.



## Of Tamarinds and Yearnings

Onis Samson

**A**N AGILE BUSTY LADY WALKS INTO ROOM 107.

Mid-twenties. Skin, the colour of the brown pulp surrounding *icheku* seed. She's draped in yellow-brown *buba*. There are images of red boxes on it. Like the ones on a ludo board.

The *buba* hangs on her shoulder, held on by two tiny threadlike handles. A good portion of her back is bare. The slender shape of her shoulder blades gives her a style *owambe* woman are sure to applaud. The front is simple. Not orthodox. Rather the type you would see at a Mercy Aigbe showroom. Her cleavage pours out to a light fabric front that keeps it in check.

"Good Morning, 'Edu. How was your night?" she says.

You pause and look at your wristwatch. It is 11:17 a.m. You are not facing her. The digits on the excel spreadsheet have been hard for you to crack. Gently, you draw the laptop screen toward you and leave it hanging. Forty-five degrees in air.

She drops a plastic bottle of *zobo* on the shiny surface of the mahogany table.

Then she walks up, standing behind you, one hand on your shoulder.

"I brought you your favourite," she says.

"Thank you, Bisola, but not today. You would have called to know," you say.

"Never mind. That's the thank you I get for being a little kind," she says, pulling away from behind you.

Bisola—the last child in a family of six. Bisola who is only twenty-six but looks thirty-something to you whenever she wears heavy makeup. At five feet eight, her soft and succulent face reminds you of the taste of chilled orange juice. And then with eye lids that are big and rounded, those eyes you teasingly call *obojo* eyes. While you think

she is not stunningly beautiful, you are quick to describe her as a pretty woman whose heart you aren't ready to own.

The loose ends of the bottom of her *buba* sashay around her knees.

“What do you think is in that refrigerator?”

“You never change, *oremi*. This is why I hate 107.”

“There she goes again, jesting. Meanwhile, every minute she comes bumping in here. Be pretending *sha*.”

“So, you think it's cool not having a single juice in this fridge? Come to think of it, Edu—you're the sole occupant of this office so who would be fighting over drink with you, boss man? Why not stock this place?”

“Ah, this babe. Must you remind me? This your mouth, *sef*.”

“Just like your own. Well, now that you don't have anything juicy in here what will you offer me?”

“I don't know,” you say, gently pulling out hair from your goatee.

“Since you have nothing here, perhaps, I'd think of guzzling you down like Coke,” she says with one hand holding the door of the refrigerator and the other rummaging through assorted canned drinks.

“You never get tired of your crazy girl talks, do you?” you say.

“What do you always do with these soft drinks?” she says, avoiding your question.

“I'm no drunk. And you know that.”

She takes a canned Malt drink.

“You look cute today, 'Edu.”

“Thank you,” you say trying to avert her gaze.

She unlocks her phone and begins to scroll through.

You walk round your office briefly and go back to stand at the palatial see-through window.

You know what is about to come— or perhaps, what’s likely to follow next, having known Bisola for some time now. You try to evade the threatening thought of what she has to offer but all you hear in your ear are soft pizzicatos of her voice. Voice that has mesmerized your being for long. You are still standing by the window, your head bowed down, a hundred and something indecisions numbing you. In your hesitation, your options have dwindled.

You look to your left, your eyes settling on the tamarind in a flower vase by the window. How enticing it is this moment. Like those mornings when the sun hides itself, and a feeling of drowsiness takes hold of you, this morning too is lustreless. It is on days like this you wish it was weekend, so you’d sleep a little longer. And wake up to assume your bohemian nature—listen to jazz from the Harlem Renaissance and put some Duke Ellington tracks on loop just like those characters you often see in the American movies you watch. Pick Amu Nnadi’s *a field of echoes* volume and recite “shadow.” You wonder if you have become a shadow, holding onto an existence where you deny yourself pleasures of a carnal kind to pursue austerity which brother Nkem says will win you a place in heaven.

You stand looking out the translucent glass wall partition through which you could see your colleagues criss-crossing the small patio leading to your office and other rooms in your department.

Looking through the see-through windows on the east side of the room, you see Port Harcourt’s main town traffic dragging downstairs along Aba Express Road like a beast of burden laden with load more than it can bear. This is what Water Lines axis was known for during evening hours. A time when workers are returning home, or when secondary school students from private schools are coming back from school, tired and exhausted with bloated backpacks. You have known these abiding moments for long since you started work here twelve months ago. These see-through palatial windows have become for you an easy escape from the humdrum of marketing analytics.

You think about your job as a marketer. Although a trained Psychologist, you have since become a marketing juggernaut at Gilbasconi. You had graduated at the age of twenty-three, finished your mandatory National Youth Service Corps programme at twenty-four. You had been unlucky getting a job for four years even with a Second-Class Upper Division in Psychology. You had applied for the marketing job here in Gilbasconi with little or no hope. However, you were overjoyed hearing you came out overall best at the job interview, the very first time you were a recipient of a merit-based recruitment.

You recall your previous applications that never worked out because you knew no one at the companies you had applied. It baffles you how you had risen so fast to head a Department in Gilbasconi. Was it a divine blessing or a subtle give-and-take contrivance by the lady sitting in your office whom you could not find a place of affection for?

“What are you thinking?” Bisola’s voice brings you back to the room.

“Oh... nothing...” you say, clearing your throat as if there is a phlegm stuck there, and adjusting your red tie at the same time.

“Is your dad on seat now?” you say.

“Were you thinking about him? Please, let’s not talk about him. Whether he’s in the office or not, will he come tying me down to my desk? Of course, he knows I’m not his little girl he could scold back then. Anyway, I’ll soon be going back to my office to round up with my paper presentation for the Petroleum Downstream training next week in Lagos.”

“Yeah. How is it going? Are you done with the recommendation stage? Perhaps, I could add one or two things to the FDI aspect.”

“You want to cross-carpet? That’s got nothing to do with your Department” she says.

“Just as Psychology has nothing to do with Marketing, Bisola. I still love my Psychology field. I still struggle to fit into all these marketing stuffs and analytics.”

“Ok. Why don’t you just resign, then? May be that will help.”

She drops her phone on the table. And then she takes you on a time train back to what happened six months ago.

Six months ago, on a Friday morning, the Marketing Department which you head was rowdy with voices shouting and protesting someone could've sworn this was Ariaria market at rush hour.

She reminds you of how you had helped quell the protest of your aggrieved colleagues after the management had sent a notice stating that rather than increase staff pay and better their welfare as they had demanded, a layoff of half the workforce will be underway in few weeks to come.

After intervening and acting as mediator between the workers and the management and resolving the dispute you became something of a star. The next day, the pulses were in good range, the faces held joy measured out in smiles jumping from desk to desk in the open workspace. What you did made her have a soft spot for you, she says.

Recycled story— she just wouldn't stop telling it, you muse.

"So, why don't you resign, 'Edu?" she says.

"Are we back to the resignation question?" you say as you manage a chuckle.

"Well, I'm not complaining per se."

"Neither am I," she says.

She picks up her phone, settles into one of the two visitor chairs and resumes scrolling.

You feel a strange sensation rush through your spine and nerves, inviting and edgy. You know the spiritual drawbacks of this. You stand imagining her pulling off... then you curse the illicit thoughts.

On two occasions, she had impliedly made advances at you. You had stood your ground.

You recall the Holy Scriptures warning against sins of the body. You recall heeding to the call of salvation exactly twelve months ago, the same month you were

employed. After heeding the call, two weeks later, your employment letter was sent. That was a miracle, no doubt, you always tell yourself. To yield to sin will be an act of ingratitude to God. So, you keep thinking of your spirit and eternity.

You had told Bisola about Adenike your fiancée who is a Final Year student studying Microbiology at the University of Port Harcourt. You had hoped that doing so would scare her away but rather than putting her off, it had made her become vibrant in her chase. She had become jealous when she had seen Adenike at your office and called her an opportunist interested only in having your money to aid her education. That had not gone on well with Adenike as she was incensed by the demeaning, offhand description. Adenike had bolted off your office that fateful afternoon when she had heard the ignominious words.

“Is this what you do behind my back, Chinedu? Playing office romance with a colleague and telling me you love me and would want to spend the rest of your life with me!” she was shouting at the top of her voice, while standing by the roadside trying to flag down a taxi.

“I can explain...”

“O spare me those over-used movie lines! You watch her call me names and all you could do was watch and stare,” she said, trying to manage her tirade.

You went after her, but she gave you no attention.

For three days she refused picking your call.

You had sternly warned Bisola against such acts next time but she had coaxingly sought your forgiveness.

After much persistence, you were able to get Adenike back again.

\* \* \*

## **BISOLA NOTICES THE AMBIVALENCE IN YOU.**

She crosses her legs in the American fashion, letting them dangle, revealing fine-looking full legs.

You watch the embarrassment rising up from the steamy moods floating in the chilly office, so you attempt changing the discourse.

“I just called one of the Managers at Creek Point Oil and he told me there is a high chance they’ll approve our contract.”

“Edu, we’ll see later. I have to go.”

“Just like that?”

“What do you mean, *just like that?*” she says.

You walk up to your chair and sit down. She announces her departure again. You nod, your head bent while you scribble something in a green voucher booklet.

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**DAWN ON SATURDAY MORNING.** You wake up in a dark room, feeling a chillness so strong you wish you are holding someone in your arms. You shove the blanket to a corner of the bed as you try getting up.

It is 5: 50am. You switch off the A.C and then switch on the incandescent bulb. It is drizzling and you can hear ticking drops of rain on the roof above your stay.

Light drops of rain continue in the dusky morn. Their diminutive start belies the wind that accompanies them with puissant move from inland, from the heavy clouds of Port-Harcourt.

The morn is changing from dark to grey in the far horizon. Silence is giving way to intermittent cock crow.

Weekend is here. You can rest from the monotonous drudgery of paperwork at the office.

You are yet to be done with sleeping. You wobble back to the bed and lie down. Before your conversion, your evenings during the weekend were exciting moments you always anticipated, particularly on Fridays. You often went clubbing at the GRA clubs and bars and several others in Port-Harcourt, night-crawling from Cheers Bar to Casablanca. Several ladies took to liking you and no sooner you succeeded in having them all to yourself.

At six feet, five inches tall, with an afro punk haircut, lovely brown eyes and handsomely set masculine face, you dazzled your women. You seem quiet from afar but have an uncanny grace in conversing with women in subtle and congenial ways without any smugness of attitude which left them concluding you were after all not as quiet as you looked. One of them, Lillian, a Canadian expatriate nicknamed you “The puzzling conversationalist” particularly due to the surprisingly poetic ways you exploited words, a name you had always protested was not apt for the qualities she noticed in you and was trying to describe.

Little wonder he always had them surrendering to his will, one of your school friends often joked around your group of friends.

On few weekends, you visited Christian friends. But in your transformed state, you stayed indoors, relaxing, watching movies or reading some academic treatise. You had always dreamt of becoming an erudite academician one day. So, you always read. Your shelf is stacked with series of voluminous textbooks, sheer volumes that left your visitors awed at such collection.

Your phone rings. Without turning, you stretch your right hand behind you, rummaging for the phone. You feel it. You check the caller. Bisola.

This is just too early, you think. Why doesn't she take *no* for an answer, you wonder.

She had never called you at such a time like this in the morning. Perhaps, something is wrong, you think. To think, both of you are just colleagues, you find it abstruse seeing her call by this time. It could be for something urgent. You pick, your voice sounding concerned and panicky.

“Hello, Bisola.”

Your eyes settle on the tamarind in the flower vase, placed on a brown wooden stool close to the wall.

“Hello, *ifemi*,” she says.



You maintain your cool, unwilling to say more and expecting her to continue. Receiving a call from her by this time implied a necessity, you assume. She doesn't continue, expecting you to lead the conversation.

“Were you already up before my call?”

“I was lying down trying to catch more sleep,” you say.

You wait for her to reveal her purpose.

“How about breakfast for two this morning, ‘Edu?’” she says, a question that takes you by surprise.

“Perfect idea. Cool.”

Then you realize that isn't what you wanted to say because you had only replied without giving a moment's thought to your words.

“But there is no place for the breakfast?” you say.

“Your place of course. After that, I can help with your laundry. So, before I come, you'd have to sort the clothes out and stack in a corner. Forgive me, ‘Edu—how was your night, dear?’”

“Oh thanks, Bisola. It was lovely. Except for the cold from the A.C. I wasn't aware it was on before going to bed, so when PHCN restored power late in the night, I was already fast sleep. I've switched it off though and the room is gradually getting warm.”

You realize your answer to her question was in the excess and you feel bad. A voice inside of you is telling you that you need companionship—you need real love. Adenike your fiancée is always in school busy with her studies.

Bisola's reply cuts off the voice within.

“Yeah you will, my dear. But you sure need a hot water bath. Have you put water on fire?”

“Not yet. Too tired for that now,” you say.

You stand and walk up to the television set and switch it on.

“Bachelor! Too lazy or tired this morning? I think you’re just being lazy, ‘Edu. What have you done this morn? Any work? Of course, it hasn’t been long you woke up. Well, that’s why you have me as a friend, to be there always whenever you need help. Don’t worry, I’ll help you with that when I’m at your place,” she says.

“Not my place, Bisola. This place is so unkempt.”

“That’s why I’m here, *ifemi*. Always here. Expect me by...well expect me this morning.”

“Alright, then.”

You hang up.

You rise up from the bed. It is way past six— a quarter past six precisely and it is a Saturday morning. You stand by the bed, sensing the flow of blood down your legs, realising moments after that the dizziness you felt is gone.

It is time for your morning devotion. You are not in the mood to pray, besieged by passions that wake suppressed yearnings of your loins. You fight them back as you utter some words of faith, shutting out the desires that have become strange companions of your subconscious lately.

The devotional you use, “The Divine Garden” is on a stool by your bedside. You pick it up and flip through to the 22<sup>nd</sup> of October. A feeling that this day is not the 22<sup>nd</sup> crosses your mind. You tap a button on your phone to confirm the correct date on the screen. You were right and had missed the date by a day. It is the 21st of October. You pray and then read through the devotional and meditate over some scriptures given in the lesson for the day.

You pray again. You feel a lease of newness settle on your mind, strengthening and reviving your spirit. Then the voice of Bisola, sweet and inviting echo from time to time in your mind, encroaching the truths you are determined to keep.

“That’s why I’m here, *ifemi*. Always here...,” her voice echoes in your mind. How well does a man say “no” to offers of this kind without appearing callous?

So, you kneel down to pray by the side of the bed.

This flesh of mine is playing tricks on me, you think. The act of supplication, once a passion of yours, now becomes a task, a challenge, and a hill to be ascended.

Strange are the powers of lust... mysterious are the ways of the flesh!

You remember that sometimes you think of getting married quickly as a way of ending these flights of fanciful imaginations but each time you had to wait because Adenike had told you she had to round up her studies before going into marriage.

So, you court, shared moments together, prayed together and visited friends. Save for the squabble at your office when she caught you kissing Bisola, you enjoyed each other's company without wrangling.

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**YOU PRAY FOR LONG** you don't notice the time skipping by. The doorbell rings. You stop praying. Someone is whistling but you cannot pick out who it is. You check the time again. It is quarter past seven. Caught in a frenzy of prayer you don't notice over an hour spent praying. You rise up and saunter to the door at the entrance to your flat. The whistling stops. You ask who it is.

Bisola.

Ambivalence returns. You sigh. You turn the key in the knob.

She hugs you. You frown. She walks past you into the sitting room. She is putting on a tight fitting, blue jean trouser and a white Giorgio Armani sleeveless top revealing a good dose of the side cleavages of her bosom. She has an Italian fragrance. She wears no makeup on her eyes yet, perhaps since it is early in the morning and because she has come over for some domestic chores. A medium size red Jimmy Choo bag is hung on her left wrist.

You cannot hold your scowl for long. She giggles when she sees a smile bud on your face.

She takes a cursory look at the sitting room. It is still the same way it was the last time she visited three weeks ago. A coffee brown square stool in the middle, a black forty-inch flat Tv screen on the wall, two coffee brown settees—one facing the

television, the other adjacent. Above this second one is a window covered with blinds. Around the edge and close to the wall is a flower vase of tamarinds. The tamarinds look real as if she can pluck them to savour their taste.

“You don’t know the stress I went through just to be here with you.”

“I wouldn’t know.”

“Don’t talk that way ‘Edu. Anyway, what foodstuffs do you have in our kitchen?”

She goes into the kitchen while you follow.

In the kitchen, she suggests preparing jollof rice with fried egg which you agree is a good choice for breakfast. She sets about it immediately. She picks some eggs from the egg tray in the kitchen, and places in a bowl. As she brings out other ingredients, she asks you if you have taken your bath. She discovers you haven’t, and so she puts some water in the kettle and sets over the fire.

You observe these things and recollections of your past life before conversion become vivid in your mind again. You remember nights of ecstasy in hotel rooms and several rendezvous and trysts with your women. You find yourself longing for those days again. This is not right; a part of you tells you. You go into the bedroom and sit on a cushion chair, trying to fight off these emotions.

Some minutes later, Bisola calls from the kitchen to say she has poured the hot water into a bucket in your bathroom sink.

You go into the bathroom. After adding some cold water to get the desired hotness, you pour the water over your body. It makes you feel at ease, and at peace with a seemingly distant past.

The sensation is fulfilling. After taking your bath, you enter the kitchen to give Bisola company. She tells you she finds your body lotion romantic and appealing. You laugh it off, saying it is only a cheap article.

The aroma of the cooking and frying fills the kitchen. The meal is ready. She is yet to dish it out. She needs to change her clothes to a stay-at-home wear because of the

laundry she will handle in a while, she tells you. You shake your head. She should eat before that, you advise. You both argue over this. You succumb. She goes in to change up.

While she is gone, a sudden fear comes upon you that Adenike might call or come to your place unexpectedly. You push aside the fear. Giving in to fear was never a part of your nature.

Bisola stands in front of the mirror hung on the wall above the dresser table in your room. She admires the charm in her eyes and moves her eyeballs with a practiced ease that could entice a man.

She finishes changing up. She wears a short blue flay skirt and a yellow skimpy cotton sleeveless top. Her massy flesh of hips is conspicuous slightly below the bottom of the skimpy top, baring portions of her belly and back.

She sees the devotional on your bed. She doubts if you've really changed. Not the 'Edu I seduced into kissing me last week at his office in Gilbasconi, she thinks. Although you felt remorseful after the act and decided not to let it happen again, she would not budge.

Men don't change overnight; she says to herself.

You hear her calling you to show you where you stacked your clothes. On your way into the room you explain you were yet to sort them out. You stop at the doorway stunned by her appearance, and worried that it stirs something in you. She stands still and watches until a knowing smile appears on your face.

She studies it with much equivocation, apprehensive of its genuineness. She calls you, but you stand transfixed, the smile steadily dropping down till it settles on your lips. Is that a message?

"You shouldn't be wearing this! Not here, Bisola." Your change of expression leaves her dumbfounded. On impulse, she almost lashes back, but then she keeps her discombobulation under control.

"I know Edu, but don't you like them?"

You are disconcerted.

You walk toward the window. You watch the pedestrians from your first floor flat. A tall young man, his hands on his woman's shoulder and hers above his waist, walk past.

Nature is giving me a hint, you muse. So, you turn your gaze to the woman in the room with you, letting the tranquillity of your neighbourhood heighten the tension and feeling a quaking of manliness course through you.

"I wore these because of the clothes I have to wash for you, 'Edu,'" she says, taking slow dreamy steps toward you.

"I understand but..." she places an index finger on your stammering lips, gazing at you with her eyes breaking your temperance bit by bit, letting them roll and then rivet at your lips.

"I...I...I understand..." you stammer, your will giving way to an old obsession. You bring your hands forward and place them on her face like someone about to lift up a trophy. You move in the direction of her lips. You try to fight back but it seems a vain attempt. Your instincts take over. Your hands descend to the clustering recesses of flowers even as a light of reasoning shone on you, exposing the thorny spikes and prickle concealed in your venture.

Guts come from the bank of memory in you submerging the moral walls of defence and weakening their base. You advance. She holds your hands while she retreats toward the bed.

You look at the yellow sheets and your longings are reawakened. Slowly, slowly you advance to the moment of a slow commensal act, with the vigilance of the passionately overwhelmed. She sits on the bed, and moves back to the head of the bed, and you follow.

Shirts and short and skirt go down.

You think of Adenike. You're far too gone to be apprehensive, the thought of her evaporates almost as soon as it had come.

You see your primal energy rise to a place of splendour. Risen, it occurs to you that certain things must not be denied a being. There must be a purpose, a higher one that fashioned these compulsions to which gave existence its meaning, its true meaning. For in your meditations, you often came to terms with bland ascetism. Your mind revolves around a community of scholarly philosophical treatise where several question marks hung. Strange are the qualities of nature!

The sun descends momentarily, gleaming through the curtain linen to rest in patches on the yellow sheets, and casting on a part of the walls of the room shadows of the bougainvillea that grow by the exterior of your window. Your eyes are locked in close range, oblivious of the brightness.

With the adroit move of an old timer, you let your world mingle with another's, where the other's like a dark and unlighted cave gives way.

“Goodness! Why did I forgo this freshness for long,” you say.

You open your eyes to see your chest and stomach and arms glistened in sweat.

You feed your desires, commingling a communion of mutual passion. Your eyes are opened to a new truth.

“Bi...sola” you say her name like a man resigning from a course.

“*Ifemi*,” she says, afraid you are about to say something of grave importance at a most inauspicious moment.

“If this is breakfast, then I need no other meal. Of a truth, this is food for the soul and body.”

“You say such wise things, *ifemi*.”

“Let us dine on this meal not of bread, nor meat, nor water. Let us dine. . .”

So, as the sun rays sparkle and throw poignant shadows haphazardly across your bare oneness, you ascend to the summit of a phenomenal joy.

You speak again to her:

“I have tasted from the garden of tamarind...time seems not to exist anymore.”

“I’m glad you’re happy,” she says rolling her tongue around the circumference of her upper lips.

“I love you, Chinedu.”

You place one hand on her tender and lusciously, indulging bosom and say:

“Love? That is a word—I’m afraid—we’ll define after now.”



## Peregrination

*Osho Tunde*

**M**y father consumed me many times,  
with all the missiles in his mouth  
after losing my dream for the fourth time.  
After his friend's son clocked his fourth year in the varsity,  
“You are a good for nothing boy” he said,  
after each imperfection in the boy's quarter.  
My eyelashes soaked with depression.  
I took sadness for dinner.  
Every morning, I closed the doors of my eyes,  
wiped yesterday's failure off my face,  
searching for God's face like lost pin.  
Every day, I became water—  
poured myself into my books—  
Reading and reading like a replayed music,  
reading and reading,  
as if the world's salvation were in my books,  
hoping that someday, I will look back  
and see the water Christ turned into wine was me.

## Open Day Flooding

**T**o begin this flooding,  
a boarding book will open itself for visitation.

This means the light of the day  
will be replaced by parents and guardians.

This means pupils will swiftly run  
into their parents' tenderness,  
with their faces trapped in sunshine.

This means a boy will stand by a past  
in his hand—

A photograph bearing his parents' smiles.

This means his eyes will stand on the edge  
of falling—

Of flooding the colourful past.

## The Shortest Way Home

*Russell Doherty*

**I COME TO BECKETT'S IRISH PUB** every Sunday night to forget myself in the music.

The pub is in tribute to odd Samuel, who never tired of *Waiting for Godot*. Iconic, sepia-toned photos of himself in his dark-eyed prime line the walls. I'm the guitarist, not the focus of the trio. I set the soundscape for the flute and violin players—the actual stars. So, my mind tends to float as the sun darkens outside. Strange thoughts pop up in the middle of “The Butterfly,” a gorgeous tune. What am I waiting for?

“Niall.” Kirsten bumps me with her hip; I've drifted too far from the rhythm of the music. I catch back up to stay in time. Why is it when you are in a thoughtful mood, you mentally shift into thinking of other moments, good or bad? I can't seem to leave well enough alone and just exist happily, always comparing our current performance against previous Sunday nights to determine if this one is as good as the remembered ones, the best ones. Scientists say brain scans show no emotional difference between real and imagined scenes. I sometimes wish my dreams didn't seem so real.

Kirsten bumps me again; we transition to the next tune, “Dever the Dancer.”

Why do the other musicians still put up with me? Since Therese's death a year ago, I've lost my hold on reality. Work is a blur, home to be avoided, and even music is a challenge at times. I'm surprised nowadays whenever I arrive somewhere at the expected time or place. Last week, I missed rehearsal because I forgot and went camping. I needed the head-clearing that comes from a walk in the woods.

That's not all I need; I could use one of those sci-fi brain erasures, a life reboot. “Dever the Dancer” ends with a little flourish. The applause is tepid.

Kirsten taps me lightly with her silver flute. “If I didn't know better, I'd say you

were daydreaming again.”

Therese used to say I never knew myself, always holding myself distant from others because of growing up in an orphanage. I still dream about being abandoned.

“Play ‘Green Fields of Home’” is yelled at us. The guy hollering has been eating free peanuts straight out of the wooden barrel for half an hour, throwing the shells down atop the other debris on the floorboards, but he has yet to order a drink. There must be hundreds of Irish songs with the words “green” or “fields” or “home.” I can’t remember one.

I turn to the girls. “Let’s do ‘Paddy Fahy’s’ and ‘Reel on the Ha’penny.’” They nod.

We start playing. These tunes are a little trickier, employing more of a formal accompaniment. I smile at the peanut guy as if we’re playing the exact tune he requested.

The pub’s ripe smell of Guinness mixes with sharper winter air as the door swings open. An older, dapper-looking man strolls in, smiles at Kirsten, and limps backward to the bar, eyeing her. He has a goatee on his pinched face and uses a walking stick.

The loudspeaker playing out onto State Street lures in different tourists each week, though few of them wear a green wool suit with a Tyrolean hiking cap like this guy. He is really out of place in Southern California, even if it is the middle of December. His brown eyes are intense. The groups of tourists who drop in usually praise the music, saying how beautiful it is, how they never get it at home. Invariably, when I talk with them, they live near an Irish music pub they never visit.

So, what is their truth? Perhaps they love this music only when outside of their ordinary lives. Or they hurl accolades at us because they hope to make a social connection. Then maybe some are lonely, simply wanting a drink and company.

The slower “Paddy Fahy’s” notes give way to my own composition, “Reel on the Ha’penny.” Can a tune be called traditional if I wrote it only three years ago? Most of this Irish music is 150–200 years old, and even after twenty years of playing these

tunes, I still can't believe how many people like the sounds. "Ha'penny" catches the attention of the dapper guy. Or maybe it's just Kirsten and Emily. Performing with two young, good-looking girls means the focus is usually on them. I'm basically a wallpaper.

We pick up the tempo, though the trick is to keep the nuances clean. The slides, vibrato, the grace notes, all need to be in place, to give the music its proper emotion. Music without feeling is sex without love; it feels good in the moment, but it's hollow; no real communication is possible. The tune ends with Mr. Alpine Hiker swaying in front of me, tapping his cane in time to the rhythm, his Robin Hood hat about to fall off. Kirsten gives me a sidelong glance; she's not spent much time in bars, and it's her way of letting me know we have a real character on our hands.

"What was the name of that tune?" he says with an accent I can't place.

"Reel on the Ha'penny," I reply with a smile.

"Never heard of it." His voice is clipped, fast, East-Coast-sounding.

"Niall wrote it," Emily says, flicking her bow in my direction.

He looks Emily up and down, eyes taking her all in, then back to me. "I thought the sign in the window said, 'Traditional Dance Music of Ireland?'"

"I've been to Ireland."

Why did I say that? I never felt the need to defend myself when Therese was next to me, singing and playing the violin. We really had fun. We were partners; the music just flowed. Then her accident shattered our lives.

"Are you married?" He's staring at me, but I'm sure the question is directed at the girls, because guys all want to know if the girls are single, even if the guy is old enough to be their grandfather. He's still staring at me.

"No, I'm a widower." Where did *that* come from? Usually I just say no. Ever since Therese's death, those words don't come easily. But they stumble out just now, like lost children. Where did twenty-five years disappear to?

Emily and Kirsten are packing up on either side of me. I look at the clock; it's time to go. Sundays usually end like this, the two hours flying by in a blur of tunes and

thoughts. I wish I could spend every night forgetting the past in this fog of ancient music.

“Can we talk?” He hasn’t left. He throws a hundred-dollar bill in the brass spittoon we use as a tip jar. It’s got to be a bribe. He must want one of the girls’ phone numbers. Fortunately, they are not watching him as flute and fiddle are packed away.

“Sure, give me a minute while I pay the band.” I motion to Kirsten and Emily. He nods and strolls back to the bar.

I get Finbar, the barkeep, to pay me, then give the girls the money. I don’t take any, playing only for tips—which admittedly look pretty good tonight. They are out the door together after we agree to meet again on Tuesday for rehearsal. I start packing up my equipment. With the girls gone, I usually manufacture some lame excuse about them having to be home with their boyfriends. I don’t know whether they have lovers or not—it’s none of my business—but that’s easier than saying a flat no to customers when the phone numbers are requested. Always have to be considerate of a drunk’s feelings.

When I get everything squared away and stored in the corner between the upright piano and the bar, I clean out the spittoon and act surprised at the hundred-dollar bill. I pocket \$121, much better than normal, and walk over to the intense stare. Maybe he likes guys; this could be harder than I thought. Life was so much easier when I was married.

“Yer a feekin’ lesbian, that’s what you are.” Finbar is berating one of the male customers for touching his hand while paying for his drink. Finbar’s bartending skills tend toward the slanderous variety. By verbally assaulting the customers, he somehow thinks they’ll give him more money.

My Tyrolean tipper is now giving Finbar the once-over as I approach. “Thanks for the help,” I say, holding up his hundred-dollar bill.

He turns to me. “I knew you were a widower.”

Something that couldn’t really be called a smile appears on his face. Why is he repeating my words?

“I have a proposition for you,” he says.

“And I have a CD for you. I thought you should get something for your hundred bucks.” I hand him a copy of our recent CD: *Reel Music—Live at Beckett’s*.

“I don’t need your CD, but thanks.” He takes it anyway. “What I want to know is whether you’re interested in getting married again?”

This conversation is heading off the rails. Where did this guy come from? “Of course; I was very happy as a husband.”

“That’s good, because my daughter needs a husband.”

We both stare at each other. I’m counting the grey moustache above his lip while trying to figure out what one says at moments like this. Thank you? Do I get to meet her first? Is she younger than 80? He doesn’t look crazy, but he certainly isn’t acting normal.

“I’m serious.”

He’s serious. Ohmigod.

“I don’t know what to say.” At least that is the truth.

“She’s lost.” He shakes his head, like this is something he shouldn’t be telling me.

“Aren’t we all?”

“No, I’ve heard about you; you’re a very solid man, even if you are small.”

What a backhanded compliment. “Who the hell told you about me?”

“I don’t wish to divulge her name.”

“So, some unnamed woman told you I wasn’t big, I wasn’t a liquid or a gas, and I should marry your daughter?” This is weird.

“No, it wasn’t like that. She just described you as being a good person who had lost his wife and would probably benefit from being married again.”

I’d probably benefit from lots of things: money, more sleep, less pinot noir. But right now, getting married to someone I’ve never met doesn’t seem like one of them. Still, at least I’d be talking to someone else instead of myself when I’m home.

“So, you’re in the social service industry? Or is she?”

“No, and I’m not a matchmaker either. My daughter needs a good husband, and after conversing about my daughter’s needs, your friend recommended I come down and talk to you.”

“This is absurd; you don’t know me at all. And the nameless woman who recommended me has got to be crazy also. I’m sorry; it’s been a long day.”

“Here’s my card. Sleep on it and give me a call.”

Too late, I realize my name, website, email address, and phone number—*For Reel Music Bookings, Call*—are all printed on the back of the CD I just gave him. His business card is done up in fall colors, with red-and-green-tinted leaves in various combinations. “Autumn Interiors” is the name of the business—Jesus, he’s a designer—Anton Kant is his name. I briefly wonder if he’s related to the philosopher Immanuel Kant.

“Thanks, but don’t expect to hear from me.”

“If I don’t, I’ll stop by next week.”

Great, now he’s going to stalk me. I wave goodbye to Finbar, grab my equipment, and slowly head out for my empty house to relive this day all over again tomorrow.

Samuel Beckett’s biography comes to mind. As a resistance spy in Paris during World War II, he was almost captured by the Nazis. Smuggled to Southern France and hidden on a remote farm for two and half years, he waited every day for the war to be over; no phone, no TV, internet, or letters; no trips to town. His publisher was convinced that was the genesis of *Waiting for Godot*—the endless, day-after-day wait for something to happen when he himself could do nothing.

Every one of my nights at home feels like those two and a half years.

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**SIX DAYS LATER**, I’m having lunch with Esther Kant, the daughter. Nowhere near as European-looking as her dad, she is considerably younger than I am, with a healthy



appetite. Taller than me, wearing an under sweater and cardigan my mom used to call a twinset, she's sporting black pumps like a schoolteacher from the sixties. She is also much better-looking than her father, an Aryan blonde with striking hazel eyes and enough hair for three people. The noon warmth is unusual but welcome, as is her company and the delicious bottle of flinty French Chablis she ordered.

"I'm sorry if my father gave you the wrong impression; I'm not looking to get married."

That's somewhat of a relief, though I can't help thinking what sleeping with her would be like. We're on the sunlit patio of the Paradise Café, she's devouring her burger and fries, and I'm pushing my salmon salad around on my plate.

"He sure seems to think you are. Did he tell you he tipped me a hundred dollars?" That's what's paying for this lunch; the wine alone is thirty dollars.

"That's terrible, bribing you to go out with me." She smiles.

It can't be too terrible if the thought makes her happy.

"When your father called and told me the time and day to meet you here, I assumed it was your idea. Did he lie to you also and tell you this was my idea?"

"He did."

Like most fathers, doing whatever it takes to push the child in the direction they think necessary for happiness—even if the child is a beautiful adult. "Sorry, I guess I should've kept that truth to myself."

"You're doing fine. My father said your music was lively."

She's got to be making fun. Why is she here? I must be twenty years older than her. "I gave him a CD; did you listen to the music, or even look at my picture?"

"No, he didn't give it me."

"Do you always do what your father tells you?" How can anyone this healthy-looking and sure of herself allow her father to arrange lunch dates?

"No, but the way he described you was intriguing."

"How did he describe me, larger than a breadbox, smaller than a refrigerator?"

She laughs with a full throat and her body shakes, like Therese used to.

“He said you were full of energy and happiness; he thought I needed some of that in my life, so I took a chance. The food here is good.”

*Happiness?* “Have you been married before?”

“Once; he left me for a shorter woman.” She gives me the same almost-smile her father used.

“You are pretty tall. By the way, is your family related to Immanuel Kant, the philosopher?”

“My father thinks so, but I understand the connection is very tenuous. Kant is not someone I know much about. I’m a healer, myself. Ram Dass is more my style.”

“Kant is known for his Categorical Imperative, sort of like the Golden Rule on steroids. You know, ‘Do unto others—’”

“Now you sound like my father.”

I can’t tell if that’s bad or good.

“Kant also wrote something that made a lot of sense to me. I’m paraphrasing, but it was along the lines of: Imagine a large painting on a wall. Now, think of a tiny square down in the corner of that painting. If the large picture represents the entire universe, the tiny square is all that we know of it. He wondered how we could possibly determine the meaning of life when we know so little.” Looking down at my food, I think about the past, when I knew so much. Then Therese died, and I wonder now how little did I really know, even of my wife? Does the future ever understand the past?

Looking up, I see she’s staring at me. Her eyes, up close, are amazing, shifting color from green to brown. I feel I’ve never been looked at this way before; it’s as if I’m being looked at for the first time in my life. It’s scary.

“I almost understand that,” she says. “I do massage therapy, and the window into each person’s soul is very small. But without at least a glimpse, it’s very difficult to address the hurt.”

It’s strange, I think, how for a moment it seems as if there’s only the two of us

on this patio. The other patrons fade away. This tall, blond-haired, strangely lovely woman is looking at me with such calmness. Talking to her is so easy.

I reach back for my train of thought. “Do you think relationships are like that? You know so little of the other person, you can’t possibly understand the whole, and yet you let yourself partner up with them based on what you see and hope for the best.”

“Is that what you feel about being with me, that you hardly know me?”

What I feel is I’m in over my head, no matter who I talk to, nowadays. This woman obviously has no trouble talking about what’s inside herself and examining her feelings. She probably does this all the time with her patients. I can’t remember the last time Therese and I discussed our feelings. We liked movies and books, Thai food and traveling, and we loved each other, and we got along and we were comfortable. But we certainly didn’t discuss our relationship or why we felt a certain way. I look in Esther’s eyes and see that she’s aware I’m mentally somewhere else.

“Sorry, I was thinking over your last question. Are you trying to heal me?”

“Are you hurt?”

*More than I can say.* “I don’t think I’m fine, that’s for sure. Sometimes, when I wake up in the morning, I don’t even know where I am. I don’t sleep in the same room each night; I’m afraid of where I’ll wake up. I grew up as an orphan; I never knew my parents—no brothers or sisters.”

“Would you like to go home with me?”

A slow, wavelike spasm moves in my stomach, something heavy and warm. Am I going to burst into tears? The feeling lasts a few seconds. I let myself breathe. A woman’s voice, a kind word, a shoreline sunset; anything seems to cause this feeling now. There is such a longing, a sorrow, which sneaks up on me, bringing back the emptiness, the orphanage, bringing back Therese’s death.

I’ve never known myself, and I’m so tired of being lonely.

Maybe Godot has arrived.

“Yes,” I say.

## The House with the Stolen Rooms

*Srinjay Chakravarti*

“Stories have no conclusion.”

— Alberto Dines

“OH, NO! IT’S THE LOQUACIOUS CHATTERBOX AGAIN! Drat it!” groaned Ranga Naidu.

Lokeshwar Chatterjee, (un)popularly known as The Loquacious Chatterbox amongst us geriatric morning-walkers at Rhododendron Park, was approaching with an ingratiating smile on his face. The other morning-walkers sitting on the circle of stone benches—Sambit Rath, Milind Bisht, Satadru Ghoshal, Hardik Desai, Jyoti Kalita, Ravi Menon, and Achintya Kumar Tapadar—looked as glum as Naidu.

There we were, the nine of us, sitting peacefully on the park benches, watching the setting sun play hide-and-seek among the white flowers atop the *kurchi* trees. It was a lazy evening in early spring, and the children were playing cricket and football and hopscotch, and the vendors were busy hawking balloons and groundnuts and ice-cream.

After the customary round of pleasantries and greetings had been exchanged, a wistful look appeared on Chatterjee’s face. “There he goes again,” said Bisht, in a stage whisper. Chatterjee ignored the hint and launched into yet another one of his interminable narratives, a dreamy, faraway look in his eyes.

“Did I tell you about the time I was the Forest Officer in the jungles near Gulshanpur?” he began.

“Yes, you did,” I hastily interjected, in a last-ditch attempt, even though I had very little real hope that I could stop him from monopolizing the conversation.

Naturally, he was not to be put off by such amateurish interruptions.

“No harm in telling that tale once again, eh?” There was a knowing smile on his face. “Particularly since this was such a bizarre episode...The Mystery of the Stolen Rooms, as I called it—do you remember?”

That got us all. Even the most blasé amongst us could not conceal the fact that his interest had been aroused. Ghoshal made a half-hearted attempt to stifle a yawn, but even he, too, was hooked, I could make out.

But—as you will see—his tale turned out to be rather too tall this time, even by his standards.

“There I was, the forest officer—I retired as the Divisional Forest Officer, as you know—” this, with an admonishing shake of his finger, in case we had forgotten (not likely, given the umpteen number of times we had heard his life history).

I grunted noncommittally, hoping against hope to discourage Chatterjee once again, but of course he was not to be put off so easily.

“A rum thing happened to me there in Gulshanpur,” he went on. He then glared at Desai, who was making a final bid to sabotage the narrative. Desai subsided like a pricked balloon.

“It was 1953 or 1954,” said Chatterjee, warming up. “Just a few years after Independence. I was fresh out of college, in my early twenties. Not many have heard of the princely state of Gulshanpur — it was quite a piddling little kingdom, now lost somewhere in the vast spaces of Maha Pradesh. But lush green and dense were the jungles near Gulshanpur, where all kinds of wild animals roamed — elephant, nilgai, bison, sambhar, chital, bear, boar, and carnivores like tigers and leopards and wolves. Sadly, little of the jungle now remains, what to speak of the wild fauna.” He bowed his head for a few seconds, possibly to mourn the passing of another age.

But before we could get a word in, he had resumed his tale. “I had been posted there for only a few months. I was a bachelor, of course, and lived all alone in a forest bungalow deep inside the Gulshanpur Forest Reserve. My only companion was an old

manservant, who was high on ganja half the time and sozzled on arrack during the other half. Old Kadam was quiet, quite useless, there was nothing I could talk about with him the whole day through. He somehow completed his chores every day, though I must say he was not a bad factotum. We managed to get by.”

Here, I must add that Chatterjee, as a raconteur, did have an enviable cache of stories, anecdotes, and narratives, but—as his moniker indicated—they were so longwinded and verbose that even the most patient amongst his listeners soon lost interest.

That is why I have summarized this tale of his to make it more readable: if I were to retain every word of his verbatim, it would have made for a bad novelette, and not a short story!

Now, forgive this digression: let us return to Mr Chatterbox.

“Gulshanpur, the nearest town, was more than a couple of hours’ drive from the remote forest bungalow. The nearest hint of civilization was a small hamlet, but that, too, was at least an hour away. The place was very beautiful, of course, with a pristine loveliness, and there was a craggy mountain range and a pretty little waterfall nearby. But I was bored to death. Nothing much to do, nobody to speak to. I spent most of the time travelling and touring, or, when in my quarters, reading and rereading the few books I had brought with myself.

“The bungalow was set at the end of a rutted track that branched off from the main road to the capital. I only had a few sticks of furniture—a small bed, a cupboard that doubled up as a wardrobe, a writing desk—apart from my clothes and my books. Not even a radio set. A simple, spartan lifestyle, with simple, spartan meals.”

“My quarters, ah! Now that’s the crux of this tale. The double-storey bungalow was made entirely of wood. Yes,” he went on, looking with relish at the looks on our faces, “of the finest Burmese teakwood. A small wooden house, without any of the modern amenities.”

“This detail is important, as you’ll soon realize,” Chatterjee added importantly,

with the air of one divulging an invaluable secret.

“As I said, my work took little of my time. Once a week, I went with Kadam to Gulshanpur to get my supplies. Kadam was all alone in the world, and he cooked for me and kept house for me, generally sleeping in a little outhouse near the bungalow. When he was not high on cannabis or hooch, (which was rare), it was very difficult to have a civilized conversation with him, the old fellow was so hard of hearing.”

“Then, one day, the telegram came. Mind you, this was before the spread of telephones even in the big cities—and the postman had to come all the way from the town to deliver the express message. My mother was seriously ill, it turned out, and I was to rush to Calcutta urgently. I still remember the words in that terse telegram: MOTHER SERIOUSLY ILL STOP RUSH HOME AT ONCE STOP.

“Naturally, I was very worried. I hurriedly packed my bags, left Kadam in charge of the house and the rest of my belongings, though not without my misgivings—God knows what the poor sod understood, with his befuddled brain—and boarded the next train from Gulshanpur. It was a bleak journey, and it was not before a day-and-a-half that I reached home.

“Imagine my consternation, then, when I found my parents in fine fettle, a little older than last time, of course, but otherwise in the pink of health, especially my mother. I looked again at the address of the sender. It had been dispatched from our local post office all right, and purportedly sent by my father! Whoever they were, they had done their homework well. If it was a practical joke, I thought it was in very poor taste. Someone had decided to play a trick on me, and a nasty one at that!

“What to do, I spent a couple of days at home, savouring my mother’s fish curry and fried rice, since I had come all the way, and then left for my posting. I hadn’t given many details in my leave application, just that my mother was ill and so I was going home for a short trip and would be back soon. And I decided not to say anything much to my boss when I went back. Mr Tripathi would have thought me a gullible fool!

“I went back to the lonely bungalow in Gulshanpur—and what a shock it was

that awaited me there!” Here, he paused at last and looked around expectantly. We pretended to suppress yawns, but I could well make out that we were now all absorbed in his story.

Then, with a flourish, Chatterjee said, like a magician pulling a rabbit out of a hat: “Every room in the house had been stolen!”

“Huh? Come again?!” Now that made all of us sit up, astonished.

“What do you mean? How? What? What for? But why?” we chorused.

Chatterjee smiled gleefully, enjoying the sensation he had caused. “Got you there, eh?” His delight was quite apparent.

He started again, as we waited with bated breath. “That is to say, all the floors and doors and windows inside the house had been carefully and meticulously dismantled and taken away, all the rooms. Someone—or, rather, some people, as no single person could’ve done it alone, without any help—had worked very diligently and had unassembled the entire house. They had separated the wooden walls and floors of the rooms, leaving behind only the shell of the bungalow. From outside, looking at the façade, it wasn’t readily apparent, but when I unlocked the door and stepped inside, it was totally empty, bereft of the wooden doors and windows, floors, and walls. Even the staircase leading up to the second storey had been pulled down and taken away. Only the outer walls and the roof had been left intact. The house gaped yawning and empty, from the ceiling to the floor.”

“Impossible!” Naidu exclaimed. “How could anyone do such a thing? And what for?”

“And your manservant?” asked Tapadar.

“Kadam? That good-for-nothing fellow was in his outhouse, snoring on his charpoy. He had not seen or heard anything at all! Not surprising, given the quantity of narcotics and alcohol he had succeeded in hogging in those few days!”

“Wait a minute! What do you mean, the rooms had been stolen?” asked Rath. “What about your belongings? Your clothes, your books, pots and pans, other utensils,



your bed—"

"Nothing of those had been taken. They were all arranged neatly, stacked in rows, in the empty hall. But the rooms were all missing. Very strange sort of thieves, who had stolen nothing but the rooms."

"What happened then?" asked Rath.

"There was a great to-do, of course. The district collector came, and the superintendent of police, and they took an inventory of my stuff. They checked the telegram, which I had luckily kept with myself. No clue was found!"

"And the thieves? Weren't they caught?" I asked.

"A chowkidar on the outskirts of the town had noticed a large van going towards the forest the day I had left for Calcutta, but that was all. He hadn't seen it coming back. It was an unusual occurrence by itself—a van going in the direction of the forest bungalow—and so he had remembered it."

"Hmmm."

"The officer-in-charge of the local police station said to me that day, 'Well, I suppose you'd better return to your quarters for the time being, Mr Chatterjee. New walls would have to be built, and doors and windows, a new staircase, a new ceiling. But that'll take time. Talk to your superiors in the forest department and see what can be done.'

"I returned to my stripped quarters and sat down on a chair, wondering what to do. The whole thing seemed fantastic enough. I wondered if I was dreaming. But there it was, in front of me. How would I explain it all to my bosses?"

He stopped for breath. But before we could gather our wits, he started again. "But that's not the end of the story! Oh no!" said Chatterjee, savouring all the attention he was now getting.

"About a week after all the hullabaloo died down, I got another telegram, an official one this time. A wild tusker was running amok in a nearby jungle, attacking villages and damaging croplands. I was told to rush there AT ONCE."

“And when you went there—” asked Kalita breathlessly. Kalita himself had worked for many years in the posts and telegraph department.

“Nothing. Another fake telegram.”

“And this time the thieves—”

“*Came back and restored the rooms.*”

“What?! What the hell do you mean?”

Chatterjee smiled cherubically. “Yes siree, you heard me right. That’s exactly what I said.”

He went on: “They came back and put back the walls and the floors, the doors and the windows, in exactly the same manner as they had been. They rebuilt the house and put back all my belongings in exactly the same way as they had found them.

“Every wall, every door, and the staircase had been expertly put back, returned to their rightful places on the walls, and arranged just as they earlier had been. The same pieces of furniture, and a few paintings on the walls, which they had earlier taken down and piled neatly on the ground. The house was exactly as it had been.

“Was I hallucinating?”

“The O-C came again, as did the district collector, and sat dumbfounded for a few minutes. Senior forest and other government officials also came the next day. Nobody had anything to say, any explanation to offer.

“Why did those mysterious thieves return at all? And why did they go to so much trouble?”

“Who were they? Didn’t you ever find out?” asked Naidu.

“Not me! They left behind no trace of themselves.”

“But why? Don’t you have any idea?”

“Well, yes, as a matter of fact, I do have a theory of my own,” said Chatterjee modestly.

“What is it? Tell us!” we clamoured.

“I think the thieves were looking for something concealed inside the wooden

walls. They knew it was hidden away inside the house, somewhere in the wooden walls or floors or ceiling, but not exactly where. So, they took them all apart, one by one, to find it. The house had been built during the British Raj, you know, and who knows what secrets it had held! The local forest ranger had last lived in it, a British gentleman named Farquhart, before Indian officials were appointed.”

“But why did these strange faceless thieves restore the—the—wooden structures? It makes no sense at all! It’s bizarre...” exclaimed Bisht, the retired official from the Mercantile Banking and Thrift Company.

“Isn’t it?” asked Chatterjee. “There, too, I do have my own theory. I think they had found what they had been looking for, and so they had put back the walls and floors, so that no-one would have any inkling, any suspicion. Or, maybe, they hadn’t got what they had been looking for—and, so, they’d thought it better to rebuild the internal structure of the house, to give the impression that nothing had actually happened. Between these two possibilities, though, I favour the first one.”

“Didn’t the government check the building after that?” asked Kalita.

“Didn’t they! Experts were brought in from New Delhi, they took apart the building, including its outer shell, looking for secret compartments, hidden crevices, false ceilings, anything of that sort. They even dug out the foundations.”

“And they found—”

“Nothing at all.”

“Nothing?!”

“Absolutely nothing, of course. They were very clever thieves, you know. They had taken only what they had needed.”

“It was all very meticulously planned,” mused Desai, who had retired a few years ago from the comptroller and auditor general’s office. “But—but—what beats me is this—what *was* in that house?”

“I know!” exclaimed Bisht. “A treasure! Gold! Diamonds! Rubies! Pearls! Emeralds!”

“Or secret documents! A will, a letter, or perhaps a map! A guide-map to the treasure!” I interrupted.

“Some sort of weapon!” offered Naidu, who had been in the army. “A concealed gun—maybe a murder weapon—”

“Or it could have been a family heirloom, something that was valuable only to a particular family or individual...” This was from Ghoshal, who had worked in the Museum of Ethnoarchaeology.

“You think so?” Chatterjee smiled. “But we all looked very carefully and found nothing, no trace of anything remotely like that. No gemstone, no map, no will, no pistol. Not even a case or a pouch or anything of that sort.”

“Unless they were all new walls and floors, freshly built—” suggested Kalita.

“Not at all. It would have been very difficult to replicate those old wooden walls and doors and windows within so short a time. I might be mistaken, of course, but it looked very much that the restored wooden walls and floors were the same as the old ones, the ones that had been stolen.”

“Mmm.” I thoughtfully stroked my beard. “What about any scratches or marks on the wood, which could have given you a hint?”

“Not that I know of.”

“What about that chap—what’s his name now—” asked Rath.

“Kadam?”

“Yes. Didn’t they interrogate him?”

“Of course, they did. But they couldn’t get anything useful out of him. The first time he was high on ganja and the second time he had gone to Gulshanpur. Saw or heard nothing.”

“Most convenient for the thieves, eh?” smiled Tapadar, the retired professor of Psychology at Oriental College. “They only had to get you out of the way. No witnesses at all!”

“True,” replied Chatterjee. “Which is why I think it was a very well-organized

gang.’

“Do you think—do you suspect—something supernatural?” Menon whispered, his eyes wide. (We knew the insurance agent’s fondness for the occult and his membership of the Theosophical Society, and, so, we were not very much surprised by what he said.)

“Ghosts and such stuff?! Oh, come on now, you surely you don’t believe in all that hogwash!” Chatterjee gave him a pitying look. “And in case—I forgot to tell you this—a van was seen both the times, the second time returning from the forest. And not by the same man. It could well have been the same vehicle.”

Menon would not give up so easily. “There are aliens who visit our planet in UFOs, you know, they could’ve done it...”

“But—but—surely there must be a rational explanation. How did they do it? More importantly, why? What for?” insisted Rath the physicist, formerly of the National Standards Laboratories.

“I can’t explain it. It’s a great unsolved mystery,” said Chatterjee flatly. “And your guess is as good as mine,” he added, for good measure.

Yet, even now, sometimes, I wonder—did Chatterjee go to all the trouble just to spin a yarn? Just to grab our attention? Was it just a product of his fertile imagination, this astounding story of his? Just to go one up on us?

Do *you*, by any chance, have any idea of what could have happened?

## Insane

*Zainab Abubakar*

**W**rist!  
The allure you wear, how do I,  
Ever resist. they say I am insane,  
but I hear the gushing  
Of your wind, the yearn  
Of your veins, to swing.

I hear your mocking laughter,  
You too call me a coward,  
Just you wait,  
I shall find my sanity,  
And escape, from this vanity.

Soon I shall,  
Pry your silence apart,  
And they will hear you speak,  
Your wail,  
They will see the gushing,  
Of your thoughts.

Then they will hear, then,  
Will they believe.

## Sunburn: A Meditation on Self Worth or Memories of Forgone Cities

*John Chizoba Vincents*

**I ALWAYS THINK OF THE BRIEF INSANITIES** that are in you, not just the ones that blossomed as you grew into a ghost hunting the hearts of little children in the dark. I'll like you to think of more sinful versions of yourself, not the versions that glorify the peace in Nigeria, but the ones you were born with, tucked behind your kidney. Take me, for instance, I do not like looking at the roads in Aba. They remind me of my mother. Maybe because she was beaten somewhere around Ngwa road or somewhere in Cemetery Road where the streetlights have been damaged by armed Robbers, or maybe she had an accident during my pregnancy on that same road because of the potholes a car was trying to drive through carefully.

That night, she came home with bruises all over her body. It was my brother who cleaned her up. My father could not bring his ego down to look at his brutally injured wife. Then, I used to think or I still think that my father was a hard man for not looking at my mother's bruises, but the last time I visited Aba, I vomited after seeing a body of a boy killed on the street. They left him on the street to rot. We do not kill a hungry boy like that. We do not let them see how much their country hates and despises them. *We do not naked a youth for stealing meat when we have not questioned their leaders*, my spirit said to me, or maybe it was a demon that said that to me I can't remember now. If poetry heals a land and its errors quickly and quietly, why then do we find it hard to cure this land?

Then, all the beer joints in the hood were home. I remember a day I sat in a beer joint and spent over eighty per cent of my salary. That day, my spirit almost left my body. I needed to answer my name. However, I got my first kiss in a bar. I had my first sex in

a bar. I had my first fight in a Bar. I had my first break up in a bar. When a girl kissed and fondled my man for the first time in one of the bars in my hood, I almost died of ecstasy. I allowed her to stroke my beards and looked into my eyes. She was one of those girls my father called "WIRE". I don't know why he always called them WIRE, but I do understand that girls are far countries, countries bound out of grievance and envy and freedom. Water do not hold its enemy to its mouth. it has a way of vomiting him to the ground, and these girls have a way of letting you go and never come back to their mind. This world was meant to bend, bend to your taste, and feel the warmth the way you want to feel it, and girls are synonymous to the way we bend the world.

A friend of mine, Kelenna, used to say that each time he is leaving his house in Lagos, he leaves his smile behind the door. He would wear a serious face because it is war he was going to fight on the streets of Lagos. Everybody does that too, including my brother, Ikechukwu. He would always leave his laughter at home and enter the market to buy goods. You see, many things escape your mind because you want to tell Lagos how beautiful she is, or you think of how to hold Lagos in your arms and whisper to her ears how tender her caresses are, but Lagos ripped you off your sanity the day they stopped you at Jibowu. She held your hands and taunted you around like a lost child.

Lagos knows your names even when you have not told her anything about you. She is a brutal lover. She is a brutal armed Robber. A harden criminal. A herdswooman. A hungry girl. A goat in its heat period. A dog tearing a bone. A sky with rain and sometimes with no rain. A sunburn. She is a mad woman chasing nothing. Lagos is a little woman who thinks that her breasts are full of milk until a child takes them into his mouth. Lagos is a prostitute— She has more than one bedding mate. I am here in Ojuelegba under bridge, I am hearing echoes of different laughter; some are in chaos and some are in peace. It seems everybody in Lagos has no time to wear their laughter to work. Every house I am seeing here has a figure of a sharp shaped laughter of a boy or a girl or a woman or a man standing on the rooftops, some are playing while some



are watching the passer-by. I am not sure if this city has sense at all. The way she allows people pull her breasts, hold her hands, troll her, beat her and make her cry; I don't think she is as sensible as Port Harcourt or Kano. A police officer is fighting a driver for allowing a man without a face mask enter his bus, but a man without a face mask just passed him by the roadside and he said nothing. A boy is arrested by SARS for carrying an Iphone X-Max while a boy that tainted his hair and killed a teenager just passed him freely and he said nothing. I am not sure if this city has to be renamed after the coming of the Messiah or we are leaving her name.

I do not know how to name many things that do not have an impact on me. I do not know how to look at my sister's smile. I do not know how to hide from seeing her nakedness. I usually comb my thought around how beautiful it is to look at her breasts especially when the nipples shoot out in the morning. Even the curly black hairs on her vagina is a forest that can consume many soldiers. The hairs are fortress of pleasure. My grandmother was like a little secret I held dear until her death. Once or twice, she had caught me naming the hairs on my sister's armpit and those on her vagina. I took turn to oil them and pattern them to style. The other day, she caught me showing my sister how to wear sanitary pad. The day she first saw her menses, I was there. I painted her fears on the cardboard with me in the room. It was to remind her of her first period whenever she becomes of age. I made sure she was relaxed before painting her while Grandmother was asleep. When Grandmother woke up, she scolded me a million times. From her words, I learnt that prayers do not end with full stop. They end with commas or ellipses. The one who prayed today would surely pray tomorrow. I do not have you here anymore, Lagos, I am leaving you to your name. I am leaving you alone, not with a curse.

Tonight, I return to you like the prodigal son, Aba. Hold me to your bosom and I will carry my scars home. I will build a castle for them in your temple. I have known you like the sky. When I look at the faces heading home in that city, I know which house belongs to each person. I know how to solve their Problems with words. I know how

to decipher every word and let them have a taste of what words are. We always remember home when the time to sleep or relax come, but we do remember that those zincs in Aba that cover the heads of people under it do not hide their faces always. Sometimes, when they leave the house, they wear the same old face outside. Aba does not tell you which or who has the highest brain to education. Aba does not tell you who is to come or those who are to go with a template of misery. Aba does not tell you which of her roads will be constructed soonest. Aba does not tell you how to look into your wife's vagina in the night and see that a man has sucked it in the afternoon just like Lagos always remind you how many men have whistled or whispered to your wife's ear, you see that? Aba is a holy merchandise. A holy harlot. A holy cathedral. A purified coffin that detests a corpse. Aba is a mad woman with pride. Aba is you trying to hide and watch your mother's nakedness. Aba is a glorified thief. Aba is a jealous woman. Aba is a dirty woman. Aba is a little child who knows nothing of cleanliness. Aba do not tell it all but only thrive to protect its own. Howbeit that father forgot to remember to take away his sins while he chased the birds singing in his throat? Aba is a dirty Princess whose mind always think of a Charming Prince on the eve of the month of August. Can you still remember the last thing that your brother said to you before he was killed?

When I left my skin to burn under the sun, I was trying to recite the last page of pains a friend wrote to me about Lagos, about the life in Lagos. Then, I visited Elegushi Beach. I sat under the sun far from humans. I let my mind wandered about because freedom is the only name that people pronounced with a sore throat. I watched shadows fought for breath. I watched souls who have been swallowed by the salt water in argument— heated argument. I recycled my thoughts and picked a chapter where I was a boy playing in the mind of my mother. I was part of her daily prayers and the amen to every word she said. Then she held me like a child holds a toy, and each night, her bed felt her absence, father did not mind. I worth nothing to him and likewise my brothers. It was by the bank of this kind of ocean she used to go. She would wear white rope and garment and a prophetess, or a prophet would always be by her side, praying.

As I meditate on her life, a man came to me. He said he's Ebuka Ojinduemenu by name. He was from Imo state. he wore a different smile. He said he came to burn his skin under the sun to purify himself of his sorrows. He said his wife was sick at home. He said his children were killed on thursday in Southern Kaduna in their school. He said each time he wants to sleep, the scream of his last born comes to wake him. He said he was tired of drinking their screams and eating their pains. He said he was tired of tearing himself up in the middle of the night after everyone has gone to sleep, which was why he came to burn his skin. He had tried to burn it a day before today but failed to do it to his satisfaction. Perhaps, he would burn it better today while I'm sitting beside him looking at the sun.

“We are dying. No need to stay alive. Life does not profit any man,” he said to me. I allowed the water between my teeth to remain. Grandmother once said that when we feel like keeping quiet to some certain problems, we should pretend that the water that sticks between our teeth refuses to go out. In life, we don't always come from different places, we come through one place— an opening and each time you look at the houses in the city of Aba, you should ask yourself if those who live underneath the roof of the houses are as happy as you are. If they have eaten like you. If they have had sex like you had last night. If they have had the opportunity to look at the sun. Life is a bitch— it is not balanced. It has many concubines and poetry is healing antidotes to a soul that travails. I am not sending you away with my thought. I am not telling you to go and hang yourself. I am not sure if there's a need for that anyway. As I watched Ebuka disappeared, I plugged in my earpieces. This time, I am listening to Alan Walker's “Faded”. My brain swallowed more thoughts as I walked on like a forgotten doll. Another shadow is leaving me with a thought that won't last for a day.

I can't remember how much I needed us to feel us. I can't remember how the shadow to my light is sharpened. I can't remember you as a different star, but I think our aim is out of our sight as we burn into different things that tomorrow would present to the world. I can't remember you as an option or alternative to every heartbeat my

heart takes to survive. i know that the same life that shuts the door opens the window. I can't remember you always, Ivara. But I do remember your smile.

I am meditating on Romans 8:1—39. When I opened my Bible this night to read, I could not locate Romans. I think I forgot where it used to be, after Revelation. It took me time to see it. Before then, I had checked the Bible table of contents to know the page number where I could find it. This is what happened when you are far from your God. When the only thing you could do daily is to curse God and tell him how unfaithful he is. When you looked into his eyes the day before, you blasphemed and said you are becoming a pagan. I don't think you know who you are anyway. You have always wanted God to open his mouth for you or for him to spill fire, but he has not. You see him always in your iniquities, but from the institutions in your head, God is a sin to avoid. One day, you will refer to your scars and say: *This is how life has treated me and then you'll smile to yourself.* I do not know many things about going to church likewise religion, but I will tell you, those things I know about them hold no water or breath to me.

Make me a night I have not died in before and let me see the way it burns. Make me an afternoon that has no woman's smile in it and let me die like a fish taken out from water. i used to think of many things before. Like owning a car. Like going back to school. Like kissing a girl and wrapping my hands around her thighs. Like going to the graveyard to see the remains of my father's body. Like climbing into a room full of naked girls and watch them scream of fear. Like why mad people carry loads up and down. Like how a baby grows. Like how a baby forms in the womb. Like how this body we treat with care end up as a dust. I used to think about many things that have no answer and you are one of them. You have no answer to everything about you— your life, your misery, your existence.

I have the tendency to envy everything with broken wings and broken songs in them. I've once envied my body. I do not remember how I got there. I do not remember how I came into my body. But mother said she knows how I was formed the last time we spoke about it. Before, I used to wake up in rooms with chandeliers, but my God, I

was born thirsty and naked. I was taught how to make a night only me can see me. Each time I dream of writing more night poems, I am reminded of dust. I am reminded of a certain six feet where my body would finally mix with water and become vanity. Vanity, that is who we are!

Five days before my body begins to grow into a house full of sadness. I visited my village to look for my grandfather's grave. I understood correctly how much I'm to my root. So, I have learnt how to outgrow the brown color of the earth — to be larger than life. I have visited many people in their houses. I have let many things slide and hope I don't become smaller by holding to many grudges. Life says I'm a little smaller than my thoughts and my tongue blisters and there's no city with water in my heart even if I allow a smile spreads to my forehead, I may not be able to stand tall.

I will allow you to mistake my silence again as a weakness before you catch yourself lusting in the flames. When I rise tomorrow, I am rising like a phoenix or like an eagle. I will not be so unlucky to see our bodies burn into slow song of fireflies. I will always look at the broken mirror on my wall anytime Kelenna looks at me on the face and says I am more of a monster than a human. I will always ask of my name and its meaning from the men in the beer parlour, to learn more about the smell of dust which are things to come written all over a body. I am a dust, ashes, a body on a journey to nowhere. Tonight, I am teaching myself how to live, how to live my life, how to look after myself and be happy for the man I am becoming. Tonight, I am leaving my life in the hands of tomorrow to take off. Take care, mother's son, take care, father's daughter for when the sun burns you, it burns your skin and heart for a purpose of purification.

## ABOUT CONTRIBUTORS

**Abiodun Badejo** was born at Idanre, a quiet southwest Nigerian village, to a traditionally inclined parenthood, humble and well-disciplined family. He is an up and coming Nigerian visual artist who is prolific and hardworking. His works cut across boundaries, and mainly address the activities of nature in his homeland, Nigeria. He studies applied art at the federal college of education at Abeokuta, Ogun State.

**Agboola Timi Israel** is a semi-writer who thinks of inchoate things at all times. He's written three novels, including a short story collection, won the Man Booker and Pulitzer prizes for fiction, and sits writing salty letters to restaurant owners in a small house by the sea: all in his mind. He's 20, a member of Afro Anthology editorial board, and author of several pieces on the internet.

**Ayokunle Samuel Betiku** writes from the city of Ondo, South West Nigeria. His works have appeared in journals and anthologies, including *Parousia*, *Monus*, *EOPP*, *BPPC*, *Kalahari Review*, *African Writer*, *Ngiga Review*, *Praxis*, *Libretto*, *Kreative Diadem* & elsewhere.

**Celia Meade** is a poet, novelist, and painter attending Sarah Lawrence for an MFA in poetry. She is presently studying under Marie Howe. She has studied writing with Kathy Page and Pauline Holdstock, Trevor Cole, and Joan Barfoot. Her work has been published or is forthcoming in *Boomer Lit Mag*, *Brushfire Literature and Arts Journal*, *Euphony Journal*, *Lake Effect*, *The Louisville Review*, *(mac)ro(mic)*, *Paragon Journal*, *Perceptions Magazine*, *Plainsongs*, *Sheila-Na-Gig*, *Streetlight Magazine*, and *Whistling Shade*. She also has an MFA in painting from the University of Calgary and studied at the Royal College of Art in London. She enjoys oil painting, traveling, and dogs.

**John Chizoba Vincents** become the names of three people who deliberately see through each other. Sometimes, they are at war with each other and at times, they are the ties that never got broken. They: Them: Us: We represent Boys and their Anatomies, Men and their vulnerabilities, and Humans and their imperfections. Between them are rosy track roads that are rough and tough. They live in a lonely room in Lagos, Nigeria. They have been published widely online magazines and offline magazines. They are the founder of *Philm Republic Pictures* and Co-founder, *Boys Are Not Stones Initiative*, an organization that uphold the love for the Boy-Child.

**John Grey** is an Australian poet, US resident. Recently published in *Soundings East*, *Dalhousie Review* and *Connecticut River Review* with work upcoming in *West Trade Review*, *Willard and Maple* and the *MacGuffin*.

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**Russel Doherty** attended the SCBWI Regional Conference, 2015; Writer’s Digest Annual Conference, 2016; SCBWI Midyear Workshop, 2017; Santa Barbara Writers Conference, 2018; and Kauai Writers Conference, 2019. He has studied with Greg Iles, Whitney Scharer, Priya Parmar, and Kit Frick. He has a double BA from the University of California Santa Barbara in Film Screenwriting and Music Composition. My Irish traditional folk music group, Dannelsair, has recorded numerous CDs and has dozens of videos on YouTube. His work is forthcoming in *Sunsets Review* and has been nominated for the PEN Award: Best Debut Short Story.

**Shmavon Azaytan**, born in Yerevan, Armenia. After his studies at the Yerevan State University, he served in the Armenian Military Forces (1998-1999). He began writing while at Yerevan State University, influenced by John Updike’s prose. His early fiction was about social and political issues in the 90s, when Armenia became independent again after 70 years. In 2005, the Writer’s Union of Armenia published his novella from his MA thesis “Big My Secret” in English and Armenian. In 2011, Paper & Writing published his short story “God’s Messenger,” and the New-York based Ararat Magazine published his short story “His Pet Frog.”

**Srinjay Chakravarti** is a writer, editor and translator based in Salt Lake City, Calcutta, India. He was educated at St Xavier’s College, Calcutta and at universities based in Calcutta and New Delhi. University degrees: BSc (Economics honours), MA (English). A former journalist with *The Financial Times Group*, his creative writing, including poetry, short fiction, and translations, has appeared in over 150 publications in 30-odd countries. His first book of poems *Occam’s Razor* received the Salt Literary Award from John Kinsella in 1995. He has won first prize (\$7,500) in the Dorothy Sargent Rosenberg Memorial Poetry Competition 2007–08. Website: [www.srinjaychakravarti.com](http://www.srinjaychakravarti.com).



**Zainab Abubakar** hails from the northern part of Nigeria and was born in Kaduna state. A budding poet and an avid reader, she aspires to overcome her fears of the stage, and to write many poems on mental issues. Currently a member of the Kaduna poetry hub, and E writer's blog, an upcoming Poetry forum. More than anything, she enjoys solitude. Zainab has a fascination with mother tongue, as a result of the chance she has missed in acquiring her ancestor's lineage, and thus, poetry is a language she holds dear, and one of her favourite way of communication

## CALL FOR SUBMISSION

Art is sudden, almost forceful in creation; its offerings are subtle, but never transient. –

Dami Lare

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Either write something worth reading or do something worth writing. – Benjamin

Franklin