

ISSUE FOURTEEN

LUNARIS REVIEW

A JOURNAL OF ART AND THE LITERARY



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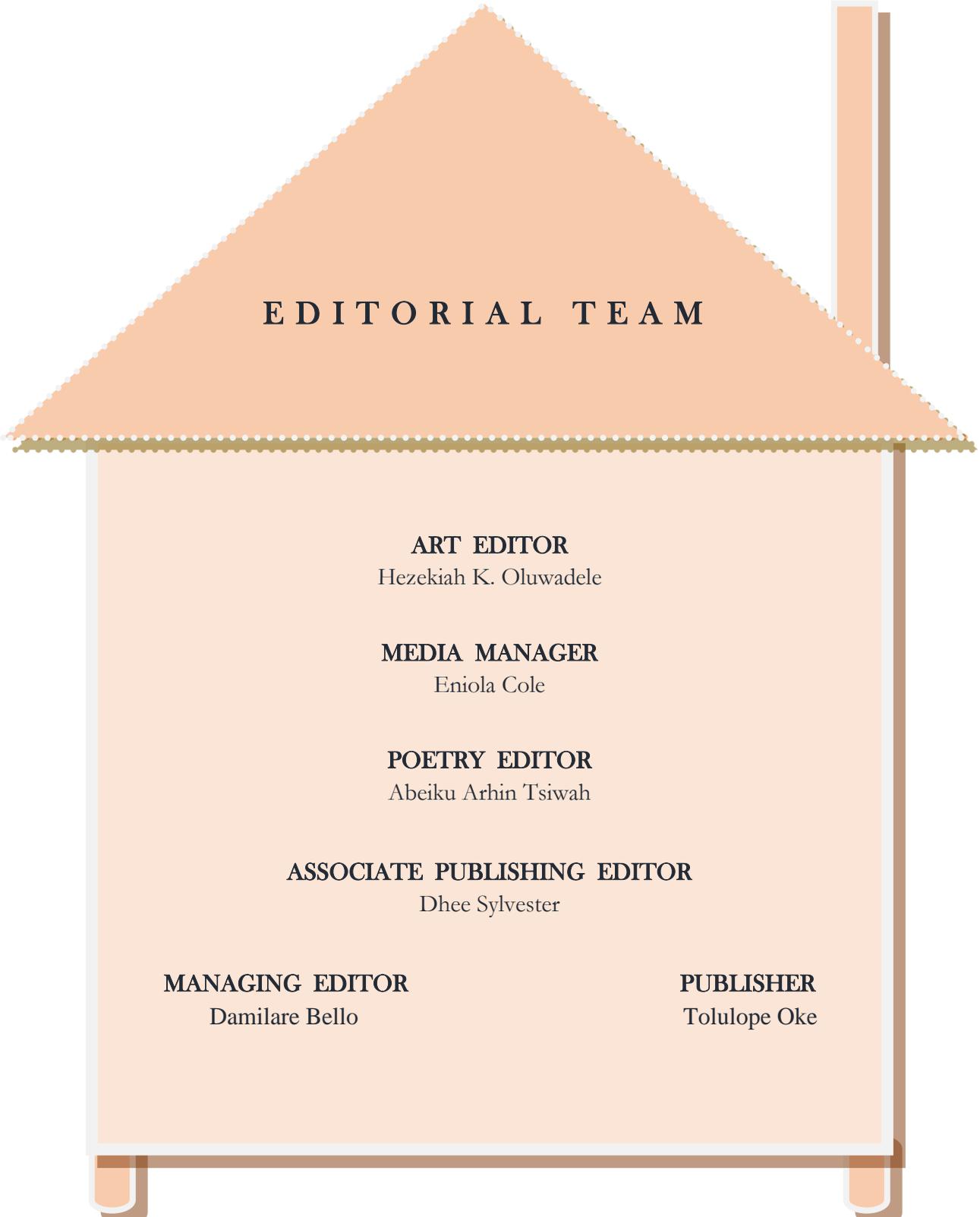
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Foreword

AS TIME GOES BY, we become more conscious of our humanity or/and the lack of it, or even perhaps the need for a post-human(ity). As we continue to strive towards rejuvenating our existence amid the lingering travails of the Covid-19 pandemic, we also endeavor to reposition our perspectives on who we are, to renegotiate our relationship with our inner spirit and others, and to reconsider everything we've established as important. In no small measure has our collective consciousness been challenged, debugged, and realigned. Like the stuffiness yet emptiness in Phola Liyena's "Some Things are Better Left Untamed," we are now more in awe and harmony with the bright, clear, and colored birds that cheerily perches on our window sills. But while in *pursuit* of its astonishment (like other things), we should not seek absolute dominion over it, "because in truth somethings are better left untamed."

Although set in a space with characters that traverse both the physical and the supernatural, Plangi Neple's "Fractured" interrogates the quests for knowledge, true-self, immortality, and divination amongst others within a relative existential frame that causes an (un)equal reaction for every measure of action. Hence, Dana'an, the goddess of knowledge, is restrained from an absolute purview of her superpower; she herself is in pursuit of answers/knowledge to create a desired harmony. Also, this astonishing narrative in the manner of a true heroic quest reminds us of the significance of pain, the enduring sacrifice or catalyst that spurs the substantiation of imagination. In essence, Neple reminds us these quests are in a constant chain of progression, although desirable (and should be), the pursuit of their absolute attainment is unending.

Ismail Bala's "The Promise of Sunrise" and John Grey's "Sunset Stroll" relapse into one another but in a distending intertextual manner: the latter reads like a

desirable and seamless resolution to the former. Where Bala’s poetic persona wrestles its pain and darkness, Grey’s simply “glide like the sun does, / [with] darkness spreading behind you”. However, Chinedu Gospel’s “Undying...” goes beyond teasing the texture of pain; the poetic voice deconstructs and is fully immersed in the journey to healing and its curative process. It’s the second year since the Covid-19 pandemic, and the world at large seems to be recovering from the scars of the pandemic, forcefully pulsing or purging through a “scuttle of ashes” “patching the soul / to the body again / like making torn flesh close/ without the scars.”

Eventually, like the poetic persona in John Grey’s “Summertime Arrives,” we can also let our hearts have a look around, and amongst other things, (re)discover that:

Now that summer has returned
from where it hibernated beneath stones,
a few instances have already scorched
like lantern flame,
and the beach has filled up with sand and water,
sketched in the piers,
as my thoughts rejoin the living.

Likewise, but more intensely, Miriam Odeyemi’s “Rain” fills our “barren and botched” mounds till we feel “Our shoots spring and sing, / blooming for life.” Not just the subject of the poem, her deft disposition through imagery is soothing, such that the sudden swishing, cascading, and thundering of the rain comes near to life. More than I can recount here, from the nostalgic ode of Nduibisi Martin’s “Songs remain instead of mothers” to the *redacted* and dark epistolary narrative of Luke Dylan Ramsey, “Dearest Love”, *Lunaris Review* #14 is a composite of diverse and alluring narratives that are sure to delight your cravings for well-curated artistry.

Wishing you a blissful read!

Tolulope Oke,
Publisher, *Lunaris Review*

Fractured

A SKITTERING SOUND ORIGINATES from the corner, tearing through the haze engulfing the room's only occupant. Her mind immediately starts to weave and unravel; her fingers tremble and sweat starts to bead on her forehead. Is it a roach? Is it a person? What person? Her father, with his condescending eyes? Or is it her pet jaguar?

Her erratic mind latches onto one of the million imagined realities and repeats it like a mantra.

It's a person.

It's a person.

It is mother.

It is mother with a new task for me.

No mind, no matter how divine, can will into a reality, unreality.

It is her jaguar, Lula.

Its little squeaks fade into nothing as her mind cracks a little more, failing to accept the unexpected outcome. Voices pass over her like the breath of a gorgon.

How can a god not know what happens next?

“My name is Shona.”

The statement reverberates through the marble room, mocking its speaker with an echo that lays bare the lie. Golden beams stream through pearlescent blinds, illuminating her reflection in her tall mirror. Her face is a perfect divine mask, beautifully blank and full, a mask that is a thousand years old. Even now, her mirror whispers insidious words that burrow deep into her mind.

Liar. Liar.

So, she tries again.

“My name is Dana’an.”

This time, no whispers come forth, contrasting the dirty feeling coating her tongue. The words tasted bitter, never mind their truth.

And still, the mirror speaks.

Lies.

Deep brown eyes stare back at her. The shadows are invisible. Gods aren’t allowed to have them. Even now, she forces her unsteady hands and fluttering mind into submission. Sweat disappears in an instant, leaving behind smooth chocolate skin.

A prayer appears in a burst of flame in the sunken ivory bowl beside her, stained black from centuries’ worth of mortal pleas—just like her mind. The fire from the newest one winks out, leaving behind slightly scorched parchment. She picks it up and reads it aloud in an effort to distract herself.

“I want bigger breasts,” she murmurs.

It starts as a giggle. Then it turns into a full-blown laugh. Humans and their mercurial nature. Just last year, she’d gifted the same supplicant a flatter bust. Her glance moved down to her own bust. Just right. The laughter succeeds in stabilizing her a little. And in time too.

Her sister peeks into her room.

“It is dinner time.”

Showtime.

...

PLATES AND GOBLETS FLOAT through the air as invisible beings move about serving their extravagant dinner. Servants that were once errant humans, now forever cursed to be unseen tools.

Why they could not merely make their food appear in front of them, she would never understand. She’d tried it once before, sparing the servants the added burden. That little act of kindness and *rebellion* had earned her favorite city a hundred and twenty years of rain from her aunt. A touchy woman, that one.

At tonight's dinner, however, she does her best to not draw attention to herself. They are seated in their spacious, opulent dining room, her parents at both extreme ends. Like most rooms in their estate, ivory and wood abound with little gold touches here and there.

The clink of golden cutlery and flowing conversation around the ivory table creates a mentally disarming cacophony of sound she disappears into, letting her nods and dismal murmurs speak for her. No one gives a fig about her opinion, anyway, never mind her position as the goddess of knowledge. She is still too young.

"I found a new breed of monsters today. I didn't know humans could be so inventive," her sister says.

"I think they had a little help from your sister," her father replies with no small pride.

What help? She hasn't done anything with monsters lately.

"Hopefully, they'll use them to end their stupid war faster," her brother says.

"What do you think about the ongoing war?" her warrior mother asks.

"It's sad," she replies. Why did she answer?

Her brother—the god of love—snorts. "The only sad thing is that I'll lose a few lovers when it's over, along with so many others. All those bleeding hearts praying for second loves are no fun."

Her cheeks heat at his callous answer.

"Why do you think it's sad?" her mother continues.

Taking a deep breath, she sets down her fork. She has been asked for an opinion, and she will give it, regardless of what she knows is coming.

"They are fools. They know what to do but won't. Instead, they prefer to let rivers run red rather than be civil."

Her mother smirks, confirming her daughter's thoughts. They think her naïve, even after a thousand years. When did it become a crime to speak the truth?

Her hands find each other under the table, nails biting into her wrist. What is wrong with her answer?

She finds out when her sister speaks.

“She thinks men are gods. Do you also imagine yourself to be human?”

The derision in her smooth voice pierces a knife into her heart and elicits a laugh from her brother. Her father has remained silent since the question was posed. The latest iteration of him in the human realm has him sporting golden tribal tattoos crawling up his left arm to half of his chest and wearing a panther mantle. His glowing dark skin matches the rest of theirs.

“Do you know what the most dangerous thing in the world is?” he asks.

It is conversation changes like this that make it hard for her to keep her tenuous grasp on reality. The unforeseen question has her blanking out and forgetting everything for a minute.

“Humans with an overestimated sense of entitlement?” her brother asks.

Everyone laughs. Except her. And her brother. He fixes her with a piercing gaze. Is he calling her human? Maybe living thousands of centuries has dulled his brain.

“No.”

Everyone fixes their expressions at their father's ominous tone. Mother, meanwhile, smiles like the leopard she pets at her feet, albeit sadly. She must know something the rest of them don't. Goddess of war and wisdom. More like the goddess of haze and secrets.

“It's those little sins we commit every day,” he continues. “Those minuscule transgressions that our minds convince us are alright to do.”

Mother picks up from where he leaves off. “The ones we think do not matter or are harmless.”

Where is this conversation going? For that matter, where did it start? She should know all this. Gods like her do not 'not know.' So, what did that make her?

“Is there a point to this?” she asks. Exasperation has loosened her careful tongue.

Father’s disappointed expression has her biting her tongue till she tastes copper. Deep down, her anger at his automatic expectance wars with personal shame. And she can hear her mirror again.

Fraud.

“I know of your little...escapades.”

She is not a fool. Of course, he would know. Little passes mother by, meaning him too. To his credit, her siblings still look confused, her brother less so. Maybe one of his many paramours has whispered in his ear. Voices start behind her right eye.

“Remember our words the next time you go traipsing among the humans,” her mother says.

She bristles and the voices get louder. “Would you rebuke Maka’an too? Heaven knows how many bastards he has running about.”

“The difference between you and I, *little* sister, is I do not step into their shoes. I provide those shoes.”

The voices reach a crescendo and her already tight fingers snap the fork in her hand. Silence reigns. Keeping a cool façade while her insides dance like witches, she stands and excuses herself from the room.

Gods do not slink away. They walk with heads held high, even with eyes of molten silver on their backs.

...

HERE, SHE IS FREE. Here, she cannot know and not be a pariah for it.

“Have I seen you here before?” the man beside her asks.

The night is alive with the smell of wood smoke and boisterous native music. Women and men dressed in colorful wrappers and beads shuffle their feet and gyrate to the music, firelight making their dark skins glow. Smiles are broad, laughter infectious. Her family is forgotten.

She has been here before. She has played with the fireflies too. A hundred years ago—when her mirror awoke—and a hundred times since then.

“No, you haven’t,” she says. “But I am here now.”

The man takes that as an invitation and sits beside her.

“Why are you not on the battlefield?” she asks.

“My name is Zaki. I am a storyteller.”

He doesn’t resemble one. He is completely bald and has the body of an archer, lean and hard.

“Truly? Then you must be familiar with the Moonlight Tales. Indulge me.”

He does. He tells her of the time Kana'an, king of the gods, created the first angels. She remembers. Father had been bored and needed to dirty his hands. So, he made his 'little helpers.' The storyteller continues with the legend of Talon, the destructive golem her inventor brother had made. A brother she had never met but had managed to wipe out an entire nation before being banished to the netherworld.

They reminisce—without his knowledge—of the time Queen Mari had employed her daughter’s skills to overthrow a cruel, haughty king. She chuckles fondly. Mother hadn’t really cared about the kingdom she was saving, only her pride.

His voice is a moonbeam—soft and beautiful. His smile makes her heart pound. His eyes are stars in the darkness. They make her smile. She is happy. For now, she does not care to know, if only to hear his moonbeam voice.

“Will I see you again?” he asks.

She gives an answer she isn’t supposed to ever say. “I don’t know.”

...

“YOU ARE BOLD FOR A CHILD,” her mother says.

“A child who has seen a thousand more sunrises than an errant god?” she was ambushed on her return from the festival with her mother’s beautiful, regal figure waiting in her room. Therefore, her words are justified, having had little time to mentally prepare.

“Few would defy your father after such a warning.”

She chuckles. Why must parents be self-centered?

Silver eyes flash in her direction.

“You place too much stock in your usefulness.”

If only she knew.

“I am a goddess.” If she says it enough, it will be true again. Gods do not lie.

Her mother cocks an eyebrow. “That does not curb imprudence.”

Only the goddess of wisdom could call her witless so carelessly. Her mirror stays silent. No one dares interrupt a queen. But she can feel its presence, dark and fluid. A sudden need to apologize comes over her. Typical.

“I am sorry, mother. I just wanted to get away for a while.”

“What for?”

Tell her. Let her know how your once brilliant mind has deteriorated. Shouldn't one person understand why you seek refuge with lowly humans?

She cannot speak. If she does, the mirror will shatter, and the shards will destroy everything. So, she keeps mum.

“Is it a man?”

She latches onto that, smiles shyly, and shakes her head. Such a simple ploy should not work on a queen.

“No man is worth incurring the wrath of your father,” she says with a little smile.

Or, perhaps, it would. Perhaps, mother would only see what mother wanted to—the simplest explanation. Her stomach churns a little from guilt.

Sparing a glance for the tastefully modest room, mother leaves her with one last thought.

“I’m telling your father.”

Good. They’ll all think she’s having a tryst then. She watches Mari leave and sinks to her bed in relief. She is tired.

Then she remembers.

There was a man.

...

TIME HAS PASSED. A week, a month, a year, who knows? Definitely not her sister, huntress goddess she is. They sit together beneath a tall coconut tree, playing little tricks on humans as they pass their invisible selves. Some trip and curse lesser gods, making the sisters snicker. Others fall, bind and cast evil spirits, sending the two of them into fits of laughter.

“Have you heard of the new form of weaving the humans have invented?” her sister asks.

In a flash, her good mood evaporates. Why couldn’t they just enjoy themselves without it turning into an inquisition? And why always her?

"No, I haven't."

“Oh.” Disappointment. The one feeling she cannot stand, least of all from her favorite sibling. Her mirror is back in her room, but of recent, its fibers have found a permanent home in her now fractured mind. The voices rush back, too eager to disentangle her from reality.

Impostor. A goddess with a mantle no more.

So, she stands and makes herself visible. She startles a young boy, but even his comical reaction cannot pierce through the fog. Her walk soon brings her to an interesting shop on the left of the dirt road.

“Excuse me,” she says to the harried shopkeeper. He is popular. It takes him a while to address her.

“What can I help you with?” he asks.

“May I please have a look at that bracelet?” she points at a design she has never seen before.

“Good choice.” He mops the sweat from his forehead with a cloth before giving the bracelet to her.

The man is right. It is stunning. It is made from a material as light as straw and woven in an intricate basket-like pattern dipped in gold.

“How is it made? I have never seen anything like it.”

“You haven’t?” a woman beside her answers before the shopkeeper. Her kohl-rimmed eyes radiate disdain. “Where have you been? What woman cannot weave as simple a pattern as this?”

Red spots bloom on the goddess’ cheeks, each for a reason. One for the usual shame of not knowing. One in anger at the woman’s inane question. The voices already plaguing her whip into a frenzy, pelting her with rock insults. Her hands fist, her nails biting into her palm.

Shameful woman! Stupid goddess! Which are you?

Suppressing her mind with maximum strength that causes a headache to bloom, she answers the woman’s last question.

“A woman.”

By the time she reaches her sister, she is invisible again and nursing a migraine. Her sister, meanwhile, has resorted to shooting crawling insects with pinpoint accuracy.

“You are right. Humans are stupid. Let’s go.” She doesn’t wait but keeps on past the tree. Her sister leaves her vermin corpses and catches up to her.

“What did you do?”

“Nothing you haven’t before.”

Before they leave the city gates, her sister shoots a black beetle stumbling about.

The goddess of knowledge smiles.

...

BACK IN HER ROOM, she tries again.

“My name is Nana.”

Liar.

“My name is Dana’an.”

Lula comes to her side and rubs her large head against her mistress’s cheeks as tears flow freely for both.

A crack has appeared.

...

ANOTHER DAY, ANOTHER GENERATION, another prayer.

“I want to know how to turn lead into gold.”

An excited laugh bursts out of her. Finally. Something she knows perfectly. She waves her hand over the piece of parchment and watches it burn as she feels the knowledge leave her to find its new owner. This is how it is. Knowledge, a little while, the property of humans, hers once more when they leave their mortal coil. And so, the cycle goes on and on.

Her euphoria blinds her to the crack making its way around the mirror and the slithering voices below.

...

“HOW DO YOU KNOW so much?” the woman at the lake asks.

Today, the goddess of knowledge is the storyteller. She has regaled the woman with tales from the beginning of the world, those absent from mortal minds. She has spoken of the Mysteries of the Arcani with a sure, steady voice. It is good to feel smart again. And a tiny part of her is happy to lord it over the woman.

“I know a lot of things,” she replies.

The woman snorts. Her wrapper keeps coming loose from her bent over posture and she tightens it each time.

“It seems you know everything under the sun, or at least have studied in the great library of Alexandria.”

Her favorite place on earth before the mirror woke.

She simply smiles at the woman, and they continue cleaning the fish they caught together.

“I am afraid even I don’t know how to turn lead into gold,” she says after a while.

The woman laughs. “Isn’t that kind of knowledge reserved for the gods? For Dana’an?”

Yes, it is.

The goddess smiles, masking a sharp, fleeting ache. They continue in silence for a long time. When they are through cleaning, blood and guts splatter the stones on the riverbank. The woman gathers her things and hefts the load onto her shoulder with ease.

“Do you on some days wish to know everything there is to know?” she asks the goddess.

No one has ever asked that question before, not even her intrusive mirror. Her smile slips a little.

Does she? Does she really want to spend an entire lifetime and more being a cyclic well of knowledge? Yes, she does. If only to attain the kind of faraway adoration reserved for titans and godly royalty. But at what cost? What price would she continue to pay for her divinity?

Oblivious to her inner turmoil, the woman sighs. “It must be nice to know everything.”

Yes. It must be.

It is time for a talk.

...

“WHO SENT YOU HERE?”

I am no one’s puppet or slave.

Most would call her crazy for having a conversation with a mirror. But the fisherwoman’s question had become hers. Why didn’t she know everything?

“Then what is your purpose?”

I am merely a representation of consequence.

“Enough games!” Angry tears spill out of the corner of her eyes.

The mirror cracks have spread, its surface a swirling vortex now. Her next words come as a broken plea.

“Make it stop. I want to go back.”

Not even you can revisit the past.

“I do not want a visit. I want a do-over.”

Is that what you genuinely want? You only delay the inevitable.

Twice in a day, she has been asked—two times more than she should be. And one answer that terrifies and excites her.

“Not true. The road of fate has many paths.”

Not yours...yet.

“You are no help.”

I am not here to help you, fraud.

Then she will go to someone who will. Because this cannot go on.

But she must know first.

“Why do you call me a fraud?”

Because your life is a masquerade.

...

“WHY AM I THIS WAY?”

It is her turn to startle her mother. She does so while Queen Mari tends to her precious hibiscus garden. But of course, she doesn't flinch.

“I remember when you were born. Your father was so happy. Finally, he would have a child to raise exactly as he would want.”

“But why me?” she asks.

Her mother chuckles, snipping off dead blooms. Her posture brings to mind a peasant.

“We both know how willful your siblings are, I more than you.”

“So, I am just a fulfillment of his wishes?” she feels like clay now.

“Your father wanted someone who knows more than he does. So, he begged Madame Fata to make you the goddess of knowledge.”

A ringing starts in her ears.

“I don’t understand. Didn’t he already have you?”

“I may be wise, sweet child, but I do not know everything. That is what your father wanted. And that is what you are for.”

The way her mother’s answers flow freely makes the goddess’s blood boil and her hands tremble.

“Have you been waiting for me to ask you this?”

“In truth, no. But I knew this day would come. Madame and I warned your father there would be consequences to his choice. Of course, Madame knew what they were but refused to divulge them. No one can know the future but Fate herself.”

So, her father had foregone the repercussions and forged ahead. Hurt is the least of the emotions engulfing her, betrayal being the strongest and most painful. How could her father do this to her? Subject her to a life of fractured mirrors and slithering voices just for his selfish reasons? And what did he sacrifice? She has an idea, but of course, her mirror chases it away.

Impossible.

But *if* it is true, then his warning all those years ago finally makes sense, and her mirror is right. She truly is an impostor. And she can see the path it spoke of.

She can feel mother’s eyes on her. How long have those eyes beheld a father so wicked as to sell his daughter’s soul? How long did those eyes weep in silence for her lost child? Confronting her father will yield nothing but frustration and tears, so she shelves the option. For once, she will be the one causing the confusion.

“Do I want to know what he did?”

Her mother rises from her kneeling position to her full height. They can pass as sisters. They do in villages sometimes. But not since her eyes washed from brown to silver. There is a strange light in them, like she knows what her daughter is going to do.

“No, but I’m sure you already do,” her mother answers.

She turns and walks out of the garden, not seeing the tears of an equally broken woman.

...

MADAME FATA’S HOME is not pleasant. Iridescent spider webs cover almost every inch. What little space is uncovered is filled with eyes, some closed, some open. Madame herself is nowhere to be seen. But her soft, wet breathing can be heard. The whole place smells like wet sand.

“What is it, girl?”

“You know who I am?”

“Everyone knows the goddess of knowledge.”

“Then, you know what I want?”

“Yes.”

The word hangs in the empty space.

“No warnings? Discouragement?”

“If a goddess of your age and stature does not know what she is doing, what hope is there for the rest of the world?”

Well then.

“How do I get my soul back?”

“Are you truly ready to give up immortality in the minds of mortals and divine recognition in the annals of history?”

“Yes.”

“Then let the mirror shatter.”

“That is all? I simply have to break it?”

“Let it shatter.”

Oh. So, not so simple.

“Nothing worth having comes easy, least of all, to a god. But be warned. The shards will cause untold, irreparable damage.”

She knows. But at least she will be free. Determination fills her heart. Even if it takes years or decades, one day, she will leave. But until that day, she and her mirror will continue to crack and shiver until there is nothing but dust.

“Do you not want to know your name?” Madame asks the goddess’s receding figure.

“I’ll make one.”

...

THE PEASANT WOMAN approaches the man’s shop timidly.

“May I please have a mirror?”

The man hands her one absentmindedly and continues his work.

The woman looks into the mirror and stares at her brown eyes.

She can see the shadows now, and they are beautiful.

Summertime Arrives

Now that summer has returned
from where it hibernated beneath stones,
a few instances have already scorched
like lantern flame,
and the beach has filled up with sand and water,
sketched in the piers,
as my thoughts rejoin the living.

This refugee from February
has acquired insects and frogs,
and not just as gestures...
they're all here by choice.

The outline of the hills is green.
My face is tanned.
My sleep is choice, not need.
From a month that forbids entry
to one that absorbs –
the medium is air,
bronzed but clear.

By this, even the heart
has had a look around,
and the marble of my eyes
has melted.

So, here's to time wasting,
none of it's regretted.
And the sun's sorcery.
The bitterness leached away.
The tinkling when I step outside,
make myself known to others.

Sunset Stroll

A sparkling tiara
and a gilded dress –
that's what you get
from walking through
the woods at dusk.

Gold face,
moon eyes,
you sit on the stone wall,
dye your hair red,
your cheeks orange.

Then homeward,
you glide like the sun does,
darkness spreading behind you,
but the last of the glimmer
in your care.

No need to shine
but, in light of day's end,
you can't help yourself.

Undying: What bird songs have become to me

Sometimes / to heal / I become a preacher of pain / to the things / that have become
my shadow/ even after the night / when I threw my dreams / into a scuttle of ashes /
I began to uproot the whiskers / of my black cat / & like the strings of a violin / I
stretch them from the tips / of my fingernails / through the bottom of my palm / that
area where my blood pulsates / like dark hymns / sour on the taste bud / of a red
tongue / I split them into tonic solfas / watch them rise & fall / like ocean tides in the
fall / how my blood pressure rhythms / through the night / silent sea breeze / &
rustling of sycamore leaves /

On my waterbed / I thaw like ice / patching the soul / to the body again / like making
torn flesh close / without the scars/

My Muse

A message to my muse:

Come swiftly to the runes of my ink,
come thither to your lover's bidding.

For we have traversed the ends of the earth together from the tip of my quill,
our bond forged with sweat and blood,
we bled and burned like candles lighted on both ends
till our aura combust to fill these blank pages.

Fix my lyre and possess me again
that I may gather your beams on my brows,
and ululate to the fire in my marrow.

Singe my hands with the fury of your flame;
Take me! Touch me!

Lift me to the pinnacle of fame
that I may be made one with you,
For my muse and I are one: body, soul, and flesh,
Let us consummate this Love!
I am my muse and my muse, I.

Rain

Suddenly, swishing and pouring silver tears,
silvery drops of water,
cascading, weeping, and howling,
thundering upon us.
We cried and mourned for this rain
to bleed on us
for we are dry and parched grounds.
Writhing at the smell of the rain,
with mouths open wide, we waited,
our bowels and bowls empty:
barren and botched,
We call your name with trepidation,
clinging to the patter on our rooftops,
kneeling before the cloudy altar spread above,
your name on our lips
fills us with awe,
drenching us without mercy,
chilling our mortal souls,
and freezing our mounds.
Our shoots spring and sing,
blooming for life.

Dearest Love,

I AM REAL FUCKING SORRY it's been so long since my last letter. I've been hiding from you. An exile left afloat on the soporific rivers of my many daydreamt manias (so, so many, yeah?). Admittedly, um...I was kicked out of the Rocket 5-0 program after all that...well, you know I never wanted the job in the first place, that Weiss, he [REDACTED]. But there I was anyways, facing the abyss of unemployment even after giving in, selling out, whatever, and you...and everything going [REDACTED] between us...luckily, I was assigned to a Seafort at the mouth of the River Daemon, following a kidnapping into a stint in basic.

Usually, I awake with a notion of where, what, when, how, why? That day, however, my head tore thru its ailing foggy wilderness into a true blankness devoid of clues as to what the fuck was going on, where exactly I was conscious in that all too brutal moment. Last I could recall, I was locked in a speeding van, smelly hood being placed over my head...

Eggshell-white walls greeting me from every direction. But shadowy movement impugned the distance. Shifty. Running cross brain, *Where's breakfast?* Keeping sanity from bouncing out this formless room was but one thought, *Sleep*. I escaped back to a skeletal beach much laden with moonlight and occupants I shan't describe, given how you get when I describe these kinds of dreams. Nonetheless. *Whither body be, mind always free.*

– *Thub-wump – thub-wump – thub-wump* – went soap softened just slightly by cloth into my abdomen. “Beat the new meat, maggots.” – *thub-wump – thub-wump –*

thub-wump – “Refresh yer newest jail mate on when t’a wake up.” – *thub-wump* – “Four.”
– *thub-wump* – “In.” – *thub-wump* – “The.” – *thub-wump* – “Morning.”

I rolled over for a harsh back massage, hoping these terrors were but nightmares. Most of the rest of my first day was tangled up in exercise—athletic primates spearing cross undulating shadows, roars greeting games playing success, lifting faux-guns over heads like bayoneting plasticine army men as we forded the River Daemon’s riptide currents, slithering into and out from combat boots like guttersnipes as leeches jettisoned from piranhas to battle for our territory—but then yawning down food, so much.

I stood in line. The clatter of pots onto pans; wet lips smacking; scratching accumulated sweat away, away...sloppy we stood in line gaping afore a vast mess of eggs, golems standing slackjaw over trays of meatloaf fried in truffle oil, soon to swoon whilst we mindlessly fed each Other bacon, sausage wafers, using off hands to slap fistfuls of scrambled fluff into our own all-consuming mouth voids, and next, like you just wouldn’t believe, Love: toasted delicacies oscillated above us soldiers only to kamikaze down between our malformed grins, then licking digits and into a magician named [REDACTED] flashing out odd spews of chewy peach candy, dark, oozing chocolate candy, orbs of hard sugar with chambers of secrets brimming with everlasting gum, polychromatic sugar dusted sour candy, tricky candies still worth a bite, a whole performance worthy of the [REDACTED] (this was the big time, babe), really, a blur of more muscly idiocy, I dunno, I just vibed, then back to the mess where castrated POWs were intoning, “No. 7 Mille volte il di moro” from *Madrigali, Libro VI*, accompanied by the screams of boiling lobsters as candles flickered wan halos for [REDACTED] barmaids serving boots of Shiner Bock™, said lights all casually suspended by flaccid chandeliers setting crepuscular tomfoolery to play over the relaxed unstained visages of actual Veilian [REDACTED], who knife game [?] or play Russian [REDACTED] in preparation for feasts hopefully heavenly.

Steam glistening into [REDACTED] rainbows. Wet hair shaken out, creating luxurious ripples that whistle above bending spines. The rubbing of ridged bars onto [REDACTED] produced raptures into paralyzed states (I missed you so much in there). A palace of cleansing thru inundating liquidities where riches nor military status meant [REDACTED]. Primal desires stewing, stirred onwards by our overwhelming panorama: a forever uplifting visual feast. Eyes locked with Others' cross steamy boxed up stone bursting with wet [REDACTED] bottomed by drainhole floors, an emotional rectangle rendered blasphemous by the [REDACTED] crowds of wiry [REDACTED], ruddy medics, stocky [REDACTED]... a [REDACTED] installation rendered profound by the girth of [REDACTED] bodies, all topped by waterfall roofs. A [REDACTED] appeared; [REDACTED] in my nostrils, nary a [REDACTED] in sight...gonna fail the [REDACTED] anyway.

Villainously honking lizards caroused round, bringing forth reptile dysfunction, gifting true names to privates, breathing dryness onto drill sergeants, laying eggs in showerheads so scaly baby villains could fall like manna from ceiling sky wilderness to spill onto spindly [REDACTED] and air traffic controller bodies, scrubbed nurse, and doctor bodies. Hopefully, a mere figment, 010 X [Who?] crept about the steamy vicinity, fast and loud as lightning thru thunderclouds, soaring tiptop frothing seas of [REDACTED] bodies waving as if fields of flaxen grain beset by dustbowl winds, crashing into beckoning belles swelling from biceps, buzzing the skulls of [REDACTED], enlisted women and men, the [REDACTED]. Noisily flailing about drainage pipes, challenging all available comers, there emerged octopi, giant squids, clawed crustaceans.

I digress, but I feel important again, at the very least. That's good, right? Finally. Sucks I have to be here to feel that way. At least, one of the higher ups must not have been too mad at me—or us. I haven't wanted to inform you of what's ultimately a severe career disappointment, nor of the rank conditions born of my life's current station.

I am so sorry. I love you so much. I have so much I need to work on. I can change, baby, I can change. A lot of that [REDACTED] is getting pounded out of me, here, enveloped in the actual shithouse that is war. About all that [REDACTED], I am so sorry—[REDACTED] stuff like that will never happen again. I think I know who possessed me: [REDACTED]. Lucky you got so much pull round WV.

Life here is even worse than it was in the rocket program. The Seafort is a quivering, weather-beaten structure made of steel, plastic roofs and floors, bulletproof windows. It's one unforgiving locale; it occupies the River Daemon's mouth like a tab of [REDACTED] just sitting there on your tongue, indigestible yet still ticking away at a mind-numbing doom. I don't know how closely you follow the right news or what the [REDACTED] are up to, but these waters are stabbed at [REDACTED] the time by more players than I can rightly [REDACTED]. A short list: [REDACTED].

Machine gun nests, leaning sniper towers, heavy artillery form a bristling crown for the Seafort, a crown reminiscent of your half-brothers Javier (unofficial) and Jesus' (divine) own. A few weeks before I arrived, my fellow Veilian soldiers trained their guns on the River Daemon itself. A noxious sheen comprised of dead fish and bloated enemy bodies coats the seafort, even now. So... there's that.

The plainspoken yet bereaved waters surrounding the seafort are riddled with sharp as shit trip- and razor-wires. Barbed mines float all around us, too. These don't do us [REDACTED], however: our enemies possess the [REDACTED] to [REDACTED] these [REDACTED]. Destruction from our guided rockets is usually complimented by explosions sourced from whistling mortars aimed by our coastal reserves. Proximity mines fly from each path to the seafort: shrapnel shotgunned into probing faces, ending lives in an explosive blink. [REDACTED] we are outfitted with all types of vision: infrared, night, heat—the Americans steal thru our defenses in the dead of night with a [REDACTED], their gilly suits, pontoon boats, sharp daggers agleaming in flaring neon hues. Non-coms and officers punish [REDACTED] and/or

[REDACTED] night guards (I have not been so unlucky, as of yet). Our enemies [REDACTED], here to sabotage, maim, [REDACTED].

Sometimes, they will set off a trap; a blooming ball of fire then stains the stars' swirled reflections; their screams rend our nocturnal solitude; our guns blaze away; and the broken cityscape surrounding us lights the fuck up much like a county fair (except no funnel cakes... believe me, I've scrounged thru everywhere). We climb down from the Seafort thereafter—to grab prisoners or war curios.

From the prisoners, we've figured out that our [REDACTED] enemies view the Seafort to be of unspeakable importance to their efforts towards taking the whole of WV. There's perhaps no place of greater import for our breaking (or [REDACTED]) of this siege.

Attacks have been [REDACTED] in [REDACTED] as in violence for a minute here now. One longass minute. I feel my time may be [REDACTED]. I love you; love Harold; think of the both of you always. Pictures of y'all spangle my room's [REDACTED] facades. I feel like the seafort is a [REDACTED], so yr letters (which somehow found me here, thank the Unknown God) and yr transgalactic love are all that make life tolerable for me, anymore. I know that you wait for me just as I do for you.

I feel yr curiosity about the seafort's unwieldy specifications, even now... psychic vectors crisscrossing a kinda cool tangling of astral wires. She's a jackdaw's nest of awkward additions. The Seafort (that seabitch) is seventeen stories of barracks, gun emplacements, communication equipment (we must confer with seafort's further down the River Daemon, as with WV itself), all kinds of military shit. Loud cargo elevators shoot up, down the Seafort's core. But two staircases twist thru it like a wooden helix stabbing into steel.

Ammunition, food, water are kept in the basement, where the officers conduct Hold 'Em games... and the enlisted men fuck the enlisted women, or other enlisted

men, or the enlisted women fuck other enlisted women, every combination thereof, into the hundreds... everybody is so, so bored. Except when the fighting begins.

Every room in the place is coated with a noise cancelling foam, sometimes a bluish green, at others a deep crimson, lonely occasionally a shimmering pink. I bunk with the Post-Structuralist Prof (here on research, *supposedly*) and Jules Erving Senior (his son goes to school with Harold; they were both involved in the [REDACTED] which led to our [REDACTED]). Jules placed a translucent covering over our swinging low light fixture; our room is forever bathing in a warming malaise the color of WV shekels. Our beds are arranged along 3 doorless walls. These spread further apart every day. We get in or out thru hatches.

Jules has a bounteous stash of [REDACTED] hidden beneath his bunk—ain't no [REDACTED] out this way. His area is littered with half-smoked [REDACTED], ash, food crumbles. I do not [REDACTED] with him, haven't indulged even once since that singular silly time in the showers enduring my first day (I'm too stressed out to even think about it overly much, I promise) but I do, admittedly, feel the urge to, a strong tickling impulse, exponentially increasing by the day... to [REDACTED] away the days just as we used to, before li'l Harold came along.

The Post-Structuralist Prof masturbates to lewd pictures of himself all day, that fuckwad shaman—completely disgusting, right? Being within sensory range of this war has changed him, even if he doesn't ever fight. He just ain't that upbeat cool guy fella who helped me thru City College no more. Probably won't ever regain that sweetness, that painstaking naivety.

I fear the same for myself. Life keeps on stretching past all foreseen boundaries, into previously unknown worlds of uncertainty, pain, hate. You know what I'm referring to. There's something stirring withinside me... a hunger... a need. Retribution.

I was heading back to my room after a long fucking night of guard duty when the latest attack began. There was this massive explosion—seemingly far away... it's

hard to tell in the Seafort. I flattened myself to the floor, then crawled to the nearest room, even though I was in the officers' section: the [REDACTED] for trespassing are [REDACTED].

The electricity was cut. But the backup generators started thrumming away. Klaxons tore thru my ears; flashing lights starred my eyes. My comrades' footsteps pounded up then down the hallway. But I covered there, collecting the thought processes which had been so rent by the concussive boom, this subsequent stimulus overload. You remember what that's like?

The big guns on top opened up. *Oh shit*, I thought. The vibratory hum of Huey blades became audible. Country fried guitar heroics sizzled from someone's sat-phone. And the *brap-brap-brap* of small arms fire filled the hallway. I peered out, mind settling for this new surreality, saw muzzle flashes splinter the darkness, searched thru the room's drawers for a weapon. I had only come up with a switchblade, a small luger when I heard the door open.

I jumped behind a bunk, peered over the messy blankets, eyes on the entryway. Flaring explosions popped all around. But a skinny little militia fucker nudged his self-augmented AR-15™ into the room, shoving it this way and that as if he expected our shared landscape to brim with enemies both blasphemous and obscure.

My pulse quickened to a breakneck pace; sweat impugned brow and palms; vision pixelated unto impure distortion; pangs contorted stomachchild (that which controls my controls); an ethereal tingling assaulted extremity. I knew it was only a matter of time before my cowardice was discovered by friend or foe. But still I sat there, just staring at my enemy: transfixed by frosty tendrils.

I began visualizing my assault on this human. He poked around with his bayonet; announced the room to be: "Clear!" then turned away. I breathed deep, sprung over the bunk, tackling him with a heavy *thud!*

He stank of chewing tobacco, urine, river water; was yelping already. I slid the switchblade between his ribs, twisted, forcing it deeper, deeper. My other hand

dropped the pistol—don't remember why—and reached for his mouth. I pulled the knife out, stabbed amuck his chest. The stock of his rifle *bang-bang-banged* against my forehead.

My vision blurred red—I've told you all about how shit goes downhill after that. His own eyes were crazy wild, yellowed, bloodshot. Mouth was ululating perfect nonsense. I could feel his hot breath on my hair. His skin was smooth yet aflame: paired bloodlust.

The rifle's stock was now hitting my shoulders repeatedly. His grunts and yawps grew heavy on my ears (those big boys). So they drooped with fatigue. Still, I stuck my fingers in to grasp his tongue.

My fingers soon grew sticky with his saliva. Our lifeblood poured forth from untended wounds. We struggled for a while. Then I pulled on his tongue. He shut right up. But his struggle grew delusionally fierce.

He was beating away at me. I started to calm down some—there I was, on top of him—so I suddenly dropped the switchblade to reach for the luger. *Pop-pop-popped* him in the face, a hellish triptych depicting my damnation's infinitude.

His blood fountained onto me. My first confirmed kill. Shit, baby. My hands were covered with gore—the rest of me as well. His death rattles were earthquake-like in their effect on my body, my psyche. But I could not roll off him... or what remained of him. I felt stuck there by a maligning force. Even though the stink of his feces filled my nostrils, our grasp on each other was lightened only by his ascent into that nothingness awaiting us all.

Shouts filled the hallway... the noise, the rending volume of dirty Americans. Get 'em the fuck outta Sovereign TX, 'n 'specially WV, am I right? So I grabbed his rifle; stood myself up. I couldn't stay in the room, with its fetid stink, its deathly air. Stepped into the hallway, I fired 3-round bursts at every camouflaged figure I saw arranged like hieroglyphs all over everywhere. My enemies flopped to the floor at

random. I dropped to a crouch, firing more, eyes questing for the avenue of my escape.

I advanced, discovered the staircase. There I descended lower into the seabitch's belly. Dripping from brow onto eyelids, stewing in spatters of gore, sweat watered my sight, transfixing me with indescribable visions. There amongst [REDACTED] masses upending the central helix, large caliber munitions harrying any stragglers, a ruckus all in all, I shuffled along as best I could. The fire system was going. But the water cleansed my body of the blood, the sweat, also my mind of its prior calcification. I know, right? Somehow.

A score of mutilated bodies blocked my way; I exited into level six, an [REDACTED] floor. A grenade blew the door off its hinges behind me. I ran like a blinkered horse, no finish line in mind.

I tripped to crash into a stockroom. Jules was standing there in an officer's uniform he must've stolen. A Glock™ in one hand, he held a dead woman of uncertain origin by the hair in the other. He seemed a giant, talking fuckin' obtuse (too much even for me), conversing with plus for the dead woman. Darkness swamped up the cavern, both cosmic and literal.

I skirted around him—he was ignoring me—to search the rest of the nightmarish setting, and there lay the enemy's point of entry: a tunnel constructed beneath the river floor. It was low-ceilinged, patchwork. Water *drip-drip-dripped* from wooden beams. But there were no enemies. I crawled thru it, found myself at a fork, took the leftmost passage, was on the shore of the River Daemon within seconds.

A fog was rolling thru. I just sat there, pinging rounds off the seabitch, smoking the occasional cigarette. I meditated on my inner emptiness, focusing on you and Harold when shit got to be too much. Then passed out into an enveloping world of bloodwork teeth, ever new bullets, an oasis planet above which I was suspended, hovering midair, overlooking a sea boiling with abyss, a sentient ocean constructed of atomic evil. But islands appeared. Gravity pulled me down into an obsessive simpering

for the tropical birds trenching this enveloping yet tenebrous (lack of) air. Jungle cats mewled greetings to one another and to me, fixedly staring as if personified omens sourced from unexplored deeps, stalking vociferous prey thru corporeal forests expanding into hazy horizons here and there interrupted by fields of rice serving as moats for remote enclaves with six, maybe seven thatched huts constructed to swell atop bluffs hidden by exponentially receding tree lines, the BASED GOD climbing trees to shoot platonic arrows at flying orichalcum shotfeed swishing from native slings, hooting and hollering all his/her/its livelong while. And thru that subconscious jungle I floated. Dark clouds of insects impounded my skull of skulls. Legs humping along, doing all the work but flying even so ever towards the sound of burbling enlightenment, never fated to succeed, wasps were my sole followers, and they bit every bit of exposed flesh.

Yes... as always, but even worse, somehow: I fought off wakefulness with a fierceness I only just then found I possessed. I was discovered by the Post-Structuralist Prof a full day later. He had been out wandering these scarred liminalities. "Been interviewing the dead," is the infotainment he led with.

Neon tracers cut fine contours into a starless evening, as always. Picking thru wreckage, on our way "home" (home is really wherever you and Harold find succor), he recited the following poem to me, an audience distracted by the bombers whooshing above the tree carcasses enfolding us (forests round here have been [REDACTED] all to Tophet) and guided missiles impacting on bunkers built into hotly contested ridgelines ostensibly to distract from the Veilian commandos I could see [REDACTED] these hermetic defenders of embattled boulders cuddled against sheering cliffs. Speechifying was the Post-Structuralist Prof, seemingly off the top of that egg-shaped head (each star signifies a minutes-long journey into some mindful (or mindless) night during which we talked little or not at all):

Acid-Green Scalping Machine

been thinking lately in washes of oracular colors
connoting lucidity's most chrome visions
no tangible sunk cost to be discovered however
clarity reigning above shared pasts
poison oily upwards Rothko-black spoiled rotten delight
nacreous skintight flashing spotlight skyline
under where we shared bodily
communion ourselves out blotting time
reactive fusing together
I was just a fix up job
for you I was work
easy in abounding worst ways
obtuse yes for hilarity but never now
unjust to see yr toothy abyss
sanguinary frying unto meaning
—let's get together you 'n me—

Mailed [REDACTED] a screed yesterday. Been pining myself
for a dearth of idiots
in this life a strange weekend long malingering long I say long.
[REDACTED]... he has yet to—reply, my guy. Come back
to me I set you free. Bastards
exponential. Oh, you found some Other body else?
I've had mine.
But fever tumescent
coursing held withinside.
There is no one else.

Admittedly to display gaping teeth work void
In the flesh ours this nakedness
— (minute babbling burbling right on...
To write is to fire is to unspool
Leave ashen wrack all behind as off
Walk away ‘n I love it
Baked dark—unto oblivion—fructifying nonetheless

you did lie to me
every undead complaint all over again
you never apologized no
away to what little remains
of the Rothko Chapel’s unholy sundering
yr homey hinterlands
you always lied about us
verbally digitally tangentially
I can lonely trust myself

you now ensconced by balding nirvana
encouraging FOMO guileless
you date Trump supporters!
you lack shame in total!
I can see y’all—each, the two of you—splayed
beguiling round the news cycle’s meat wheel
every day I malign this imagery
daily I hide inside there even more

you a nobody some footnote
distracting away my story
me a skullboy goodtime
oh fuck it all!
me a woowoo queen
I curse you
akin to the multiplicity of witch doctors
that have cursed me
unto pestilence obscene

you an a righteous blaspheme personified
walking caricature meathead groupie
a swallowing vice unto yourself

you don't deserve him
him a Sovereign Texan jet daddy
you'll fuck him wrong up
gun me down bb!
he looks about as normal
as you clearly so needed me to be
no more methinks not a thing more
I'd kill myself for normalcy
but never again—you

ever just more to document
our dead possess much to say!
my erstwhile love my god my obscenity

mine temple of cathexis
but I'll leave you

What a fucking weirdo that guy is. Yes? What did I formerly see in him? He's been everywhere, yeah, but that's the only impressive aspect of his resume. Whatever—I think he was talking about [REDACTED] in the poem, myself, word round the barracks is they're in an open relationship. He thinks that'll serve as an appetizer for a feast he'll never even see, let alone taste: he's out here, not back home with [REDACTED]. But you can come up with your own interpretation, of course. Don't mean nothing by including it here, BTW, just thought it was more interesting than most of the [REDACTED] I wade thru out here.

Anyways, Love. About halfway thru the writing of this letter I realized I was achieving a higher form of typing: enlightened catharsis. I did not know that I needed to unburden myself quite this much. Now that I have been so clear with you, I feel much better. I hope that all is well with you. And that all will be well with me (as with us) once I reach yr fructifying embrace once more. My love to our son.

Salutations,

Sloth

(June 27th, The New Age, Sam Houston Seafort)

Songs remain instead of mothers

At dawn, you are wet clay and mother could have crafted you a bouquet of verses tossed onto daylight, flung free but needing a form, asking the run of airs that the night could have heaved us on, as last dust to her earth.

the shrinking figs stay as relics of a mother who wore the colour of night before we went to bed, whose welcome hands turn stilted smiles of her photos on our walls.

you can't be adult at dawn. you can't skip the milky teeth of childhood and lift the burdens slung over the shoulders of noon. you become children when you wake songs too low in the stomachs of errant drums; you who were sung to by mothers, you who know now the echoes of lullabies, beseeching the cold mouths that had made them. now, as a songless tribe, you await the rebirth of chimes from outsiders who claim the tongue of night.

Let me not tell my story

Do I need to tell this story?
Or let this story tell me?
If the flutter of the green leaves
Tell the harmattan's tale,
Should the dry lips whimper?
What rooftops of memory tell the present is silent
In the scribbles on your face, I see mockery and
To give voice to my deep pain
Is to tell a story, repeat the known story
Told by the writhing silence that speaks
Let me not tell my story
Creviced in the narrative of the wind
The whipping gyre of my thought
Has its story, the pain I bear has its tongue
Its ink or buccals are enough anguish
To write is to double-tell
To double –tell
Is to scratch iodined skin for newer pains
The newer tale is the obituary, reenactment of pains
For the Easters of mangled memory
Better the story is left in its story
Than I in the story or the story in I told again and again.
So, let me not tell my story, the tinctured tale.

The Promise of Sunrise

(after Ifesinachi Nwadike)

I

My body is an ambulant morgue
My skin is but a duct tape
On the putrid manikin of my inside

The cicatrices on my body
Are coordinates, maps of agony
Each, an anagram of pain

The calluses on my hands
Are topographies; the lines pain burrowed
Into my being and blood vessels

My face is a black pictogram
On which are dark hues of sorrow
Trampling on the detritus of broken hopes

II

Several times, I have faced hazards
But Poseidon's blood boils in me still

Tomorrow, I shall blot the sun
And hold it in the crevices of my hands
For I am impassive to fusillades

I, in the trails of biblical darkness
Loitering, the promise of sunrise, recess.

Consecration

(for Obi Nwakanma)

I ascended the mansard roof
to see immortality at sunset.
A silly dark cloud appeared at
the door steads. It was my mother
leaving—
for ordaining herself, a deity,
from the holiness of an over-anointed life.

As her forbearers before her,
she saw the end of the world
as a door its frame;
from eternity unto eternity,
waiting for sunset,
and the immortality of the mansard roof.

Wilted, trunk of the *neem tree*,
her remaining stem has become a vessel,
with which to transverse to the
other life.

Whoever doubted their dubious intentions,
when we were fetuses
staring into their stilted eyes, these—
and till the crypts open again
are our mothers: timeworn, purblind,
aged as only fibrilled places.

these are fetuses, leaving the uterus once more,
to a perilous,
stringent nature. A
firm, primeval desire—

to reckon with faith at the deathhold.

To rise in curl-shaped light,
transverse a fictional realm, into exile,
to the consecration of a final gaze,
blazing my eyes.

Some Things Are Better Left Untamed

I STOOD OUTSIDE IN SILENCE, enjoying the cool evening air. Looking beyond the fence, all I see are tall buildings, parked vehicles, and night lights. Suddenly, I start to feel claustrophobic; I look up into the sky in an attempt to distract my attention from the stuffiness of the city, and there's not one star in sight; it is an empty sky, a lot like the emptiness I feel in this concrete wilderness. I sometimes fear that civilization is robbing the world of its beauty.

And this is why, although civilization enables us to appreciate the magnificence of man's creativity, as is evident from the machines, technologies, and structures of architectural genius that make up many Megalopolises, this human development in all its brilliance is incomparable to the riveting and yet rustic beauty of nature. Have you ever just stopped to think about how delightful the color contrast of the blue sky, white clouds, and green flora dovetail together like a lovely collage? It is for this reason that I am exceedingly grateful for my eyes and ears. With them, I have seen scenes worth a hundred hearings, and I have listened to such sensational music; not to mention nature's soothing sounds that often pull me into a deep sense of serenity.

Nature is Poetic – Alan Watts

Allow me to share a personal experience I had with nature. You see, I love birds, and through the window in my room, I have an amazing view of three towering trees that accommodate different colored birds. Every morning, I am greeted by the sweet songs of these flamboyant warblers; sometimes yellow, green, pink, brown. One ordinary Tuesday morning, I saw an orange one - an intense sunny orange-colored bird. I find myself mesmerized by these beautiful creatures. I often pause and stare in

the biblical hope that one day they will perch on my windowsill, long enough for me to paint an image; one that I can frame for appreciations sake.

One lonely night, I had the great idea of capturing some birds and putting them in a cage; that way, I could look at them more freely without any interruption. I woke up bright and early the next morning before anyone was astir and decided I was going to catch a few birds. I knew a forest that was home to a diverse variety of birds. Aware of the nature of the trip, there were a few essential supplies I had to purchase, so I made my way down to the supermarket.

Untamed like musical notes piercing through the silence.

Ari lived on the other side of town. She walked across the street; the roads were empty like the grand church building along Maple Street during the week. She hadn't been out in weeks, just seeing the openness of the outdoors was more thrilling than the marijuana she had grown accustomed to during the lockdown. She entered the store and found two men arguing about music. She felt a concealed feeling of excitement because she was finally experiencing a normal life again, two men arguing about nothing, whose egos wouldn't let them back down. With no regard for personal space, the men were blasting at each other trying to emphasize their points.

"I hope these two sanitized," she thought to herself and laughed discretely. Ari had a tendency of overthinking things. Soon thereafter, a blind man walked into the store and stole their attention, for a moment there was peace, then one of them said, "okay, but you cannot deny the fact that Ray Charles was a better musician than Stevie Wonder." And just like that another argument erupted.

I walk into the store in haste, moving like a man on a mission. In "isle 6," there is a man meticulously fingering the items on the shelves as if he were a merchandise examiner searching for minute defects in the goods. I almost shove him out of the way until I espy Ari. She had her phone in her hand, a pen in her mouth, and a yellow paper tucked between her ring-finger and her little-finger. She was looking at a tub of ice-cream; she then put it back in the fridge, let down by the price and her meagre

budget. She wheeled her trolley toward the fruit and vegetable section moving slowly to avoid bumping into anyone.

I wave, to draw her attention; she smiles, revealing her perfect teeth. As I approach her, she tucks her phone in the back-pocket of her jeans; it barely fits. We embrace; my shyness kicks in, and my heart starts racing.

“It’s been a while,” Ari says to me. “Sorry about your brother. I heard what happened – how have you been?”

“I’ve been good,” I respond reflexively. “Sorry about your grandma. How have you been?”

“I’ve been good too,” Ari frowns then forces a smile, pulls out her phone and tells me to put my number in it. I do it. Then there’s an awkward silence.

“Have you ever been cycling?” I blot out, with a slight quiver in my voice.

“No,” Ari grins with surprise.

Her smile gives me confidence, so I make the offer, “Let’s go cycling.”

“You’re joking right - What’s in it for me?” she asks me.

“The unadulterated beauty of the outdoors,” I say confidently. To my surprise she agrees.

Wild like thoughts, civilized like the law.

During my quarantine, I tried to find ways to keep my chaotic mind at ease, so I took to cycling. I would set off in the afternoon when the sun was at the nadir, just before sunset, when it’s bright enough to navigate and cool enough to enjoy the physical exertion. I did this almost every day; one would argue that I was addicted. However, it wasn’t long before the same daily routine began to feel monotonous. Being isolated for such an extended period everything was beginning to feel like a distant memory. A lot like the feeling when you’re trying to recall a song you once loved. You hear a sound or instrumental that brings the song to mind; however, you cannot remember the title of the song, but it’s right there on the tip of your tongue, you can actually hear it, subconsciously, you nod your head at the recollection of the

melody, but you simply can't remember the title. You try as hard as you can but to no avail. Until finally, you remember! You then rush to *YouTube* or *Sportify* to play the song and you can't stop the unruly memories that flood your mind, dragging you to the past, reminding you of the exact emotions you felt when you first listened to the song. The feeling's exceedingly gratifying: you sit there motionless temporarily sated.

As we cycled, we played music using Ari's *Bose* mini-Bluetooth speaker, technology at its best. Imagine life without Bluetooth. Picture having to connect an extremely long cable to a socket in your home so that the speaker stays connected while you cycle and play music. Perhaps, that's an absurd thought, but still, you have to applaud the creativity of the inventor.

At every stop, Ari would remove her *Kodak* camera and busy herself taking pictures. One time, while she was working out a difficult angle to take a picture of some antelopes, I asked her, "Do you know that taking pictures reduces the chances of you remembering that moment or even recalling the thing in the picture?"

"Do you know that I earn over 1,000 bucks for every picture I take?" Ari responds with a cheeky grin. I laugh, return to my bike, ring the bell, and start cycling.

And so, we went along. At the back of my mind, all I could think about were the birds cooped up in a nice big steel cage for me to admire every morning. For some reason, once the sun was at its zenith was always when we seemed to be on an uphill path. The heat slapping the skin like fast paced fountain water against a rock, except not as refreshing. Ari dreaded cycling uphill, but she pressed on. At no point did I mention to her the reason we were on this trip, and she never asked. I suppose she was simply pleased to be outside again. It's like the further into the wilderness we cycled the lesser she felt the need to take any photographs. The experience was teaching her to use her eyes because, in truth, the rough and rustic of the outdoors cannot be captured by a camera but by the mind. I have no doubt the scenes she saw were undoubtedly etched in her memory. I know they were for me, considering they were my last.

As I mentioned earlier, Ari was a thinker, and conversations with her were very deep. One that was particularly striking was when she said, “the wilderness can either be like the crowdedness of the forest with all its unpredictability and peril or it can be like the emptiness of the desert, vast and unending.” I nod my head in pensive agreement.

“A thought that constantly bothers me, is why humanity appears to be at war with nature, in a seemingly relentless pursuit to alter nature. Perhaps that’s why the natural world has been given the connotation of “wild”, we are so afraid of the uncertainties lurking out there that we attempt to demonize the wilderness.” Ari continues to speak.

Upon hearing this I almost fall off my bike, so I signal her to stop under a nearby tree next to the old sunken lake so that we can rest for a while. We do it. She continues speaking,

“Civilization and the wilderness should not be perceived as two contradictory phenomena but rather as complementary realities.” I ask her what she means by this.

“Take gravity for example, like any other natural force can work with us or against us. We could jump off a tall building in the sheer hope to fly but gravity will pull us down and possibly kill us, but we must always remember that it is also the same gravity pull that keeps our planets in orbit and our universe in order. Nature is poetic; I wonder whether you have thought more about it.” Stung by the profoundness of what she says I drink some water, get on my bike, ring the bell, and start cycling again.

We rode along until we reached a tree that only seemed fitting to mark the end of the peregrination. The sight that met my eyes was truly amazing. It was a bird’s sanctuary. After soaking in everything I started setting up a trap. Ari decided to rest under the shade of a nearby tree. As I was looking down trying to find a stick to finish the trap, I direct my gaze to the tall tree to see if I had measured the distance accurately. The sunlight’s almost blinding, and just at that very moment a bird flies straight into my left eye, as if to say because you do not like to see nature as it is,

instead you want to tame it and put it in a cage, live your life blind since you are not content with seeing the world as it is.

That was the last thing I remember because I passed out in anguish. Having attempted to penetrate the fog of time elapsed between the day I went blind and today, ironically, I find comfort in the words of Picasso that “painting is a blind man’s profession, he paints not what he sees but what he feels, what he tells himself about what he has seen.” I used to be a good painter and bearing in mind my goal was to paint some birds, what I do feel like... is like a fool.

Like cycling with no hands, my arms stretched out, legs mechanically moving and the wind beating against my skin, I feel liberated, free, and unencumbered by all the problems of the world. I guess that’s how birds feel when they fly, gliding effortlessly in the wind, without a worry in the world. I wonder why I decided to try to capture some in the first place because in truth some things are better left untamed. Civilization like my expedition is an attempt to tame the wild, when the wild is perfect just the way it is.

That we’ve gained from civilization is undisputable. But what have we traded away?

ABOUT CONTRIBUTORS

Chinedu Gospel is a Nigerian poet. His works have appeared or are forthcoming in *Fabmidan*, *Praxis magazine*, *Eboquills*, the *Rising Phoenix Review*. He listens to inspirational songs when his pen is resting.

Damola Adeyemo is a native of Oyo State, Nigeria. He trained informally under Oyebanji Banjo in Ijinle Art Studio from 2009-2010 and Dotun Popoola, the Nigeria born international scrap metal sculptor and painter, from 2012-2016. Adeyemo works within the borderline of African traditional aesthetics, especially the Yoruba culture. His style of painting is unique. With few years of practice, he has gained the mastery of art in creating paintings and drawings using geometrical shapes and effects. He has participated in many arts exhibition and art competitions.

Ismail Bala writes in English and Hausa. His poetry and translations have appeared in the UK, the USA, Canada, India, and South Africa, in journals such as *Poetry Review*, *Ambit*, *New Coin*, *Okike*, *A Review of International English Literature* and *Aura Literary Arts Review*. Born and educated to university level in Kano, he did his post-graduate studies at Oxford. *Line of Sight* (2020) is his first collection. He is a Fellow of the International Writing Programme of the University of Iowa.

John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in *Orbis*, *Dalhousie Review* and the *Round Table*. Latest books, *Leaves On Pages* and *Memory Outside The Head* are available through Amazon. Work upcoming in *Lana Turner* and *Hollins Critic*.

Luke Dylan Ramsey is a poet, fiction writer, visual artist, screenwriter, and academic who lives and works in Central Texas.

Ndubuisi Martins is a poet, teacher, essayist, and literary organizer. Apart from having his work appear in *African Writer*, *Ngiga Review*, *Communicators League*, *Wreaths for a Wayfarer*, *Poetry Hunter* and elsewhere, he has published two collections of poems – *One Call, Many Answers* (2017) and *Answers through the Bramble* (2021). As a literary conversationalist and organizer, he has been on the panel of literary discussions and curated literary events. He was Judge and Lead Judge for Okigbo Poetry Prize, University of Ibadan, between 2015 and 2019.

Miriam Odeyemi is a graduate of English who writes about identity crisis, migration, trauma, and life as a Nigerian. Her other interests are early childhood education, drug abuse sensitization, Gender-Based Violence, and mental health advocacy.

Phola (pronounced as POLA), like to think of himself as a simple man who appreciates all forms of artistic expressions. He grew up in Ndola, Zambia, and have been there his whole life. However, he has a burning desire to explore, and it is for that reason that he reads a lot. Books are the means through which he escapes the confines of his physical borders and briefly enters the writer's world.

Plangdi Neple is a Nigerian graphic designer, writer, and student at Covenant University, Ogun State. His works are primarily fantasy and draw inspiration from Nigerian mythology and folklore. When not reading or writing, Plangdi prefers solitude and can be found watching old movies. His work has appeared in *Afritondo Online Magazine* and more can be found at <https://noelneple.medium.com/>.

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