

**BAKWA** 08



**PAIN**

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MAGAZINE**

**08**

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# Bakwa Magazine

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Bakwa is a magazine of cultural and literary analysis where urgent and intelligent discussions on the state and direction of literary and cultural production can take place. The dearth of critical and creative writing being its impetus, Bakwa's approach is high-end creative writing, which is urgent and experimental in nature, while being at the same time a mirror of writing from Cameroon and Africa.

Bakwa 08, September 10, 2018

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# Editorial

In C.S. Lewis' words, "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world." Yet, we tend to examine myriads of things and shy away from addressing the one thing that causes us a wide range of emotions— pain. The experimental works of fiction, nonfiction and poetry in this issue seek to capture this emotion in its rawest forms.

As noted in "[A Brief History of Bakwa Magazine](#)," this issue picks up from where we left the issue-based model, and will serve as a blueprint for future issues. The goal is to release the issues both on our website, on pdf and, who knows, maybe print.

In Ani Kayode Somtochukwu's "The Bird that Fluttered Free" we realise that all pain isn't physical. "Once upon a time, a man met the love of his life. But happily ever after were only clouds he could see but never hold," Ani writes in a delicate story imprinted with painstaking sensitivity.

Olubunmi FAMILONI's "When You Burn, You Burn" tells of a different kind of pain; that of losing innocence to a fire and the vagaries of life.

Isabella Morris relates pain with questions put forth to God. How does one express pain? What language does one use to express pain? These are the questions put forth in "How to Learn a Language", the heart-rending story of a young woman struggling to come to terms with the loss of her husband. Ucheoma Onwutuebe's "Sturdy Man with Shaggy Beards" echoes this pain born of haunting loss. In her tale of longing and distance, "Love was a sturdy man arriving on countless evenings at my doorstep, looking like the aftermath of a hurricane, reeking of beer and earthiness and the stench of the world outside."

Immanuel James's memoir "Fifty-nine years in Labour" is a strong recollection of the pain of losing a mother after much sacrifice. The piece explores the

relationship between a mother and her son. Beyond this, it's a story of struggle, love, and the pain of being unable to save a loved one due to deep-seated beliefs.

Howard M-B Maximus interrogates what we assume we know about Down Beach, Limbe in “How to Eat Roasted Fish in Limbe”, and goes on to deconstruct fish-eating mores.

Far from its ineffable propensity, pain is somewhat made expressible through poetry in this issue, with pieces from poets such as Stanley Princewill McDaniels, Dane Cobain, Margot Block, Leslie Meya, Imhanguelo Angela, Chinua Ezenwa-Ohaeto, Abigail George, and Kwoh Elonge.

As a companion to this issue, especially for those drawn to audio, we recommend listening to [BakwaCast](#), a conversational, intimate and introspective podcast that looks at what makes interesting people tick— from artists, curators, writers, techies, performers, to policy makers. You can listen to BakwaCast on [iTunes](#) and [Sound Cloud](#), as well as your favourite podcast app.

Socrates Mbamalu/Dzekashu MacViban

*Fiction*

# **The Bird that Fluttered Free**

*Ani Kayode Somtochukwu*



Perhaps a good place to start would be the day he first kissed you in his lodge, shielded by locked doors and drapes so heavy you imagined they would only submit to a dry cleaner who knew his art. Or perhaps this should start like all love stories, with a *once upon a time* or something like that. Once upon a time, a man met someone whose voice sounded like a prayer, whose laughter sounded like dreams and gushing springs. Once upon a time, a man met a man who made him feel fire and pride, and shame. Once upon a time, a man met the love of his life.

It was a first, this meet on a crowded Enugu bus. It was on a yellow *danfo*, the rickety kind where passengers cramped their feet under bus seats. He sat next to you, his shoulder grazing yours. His face was the dark colour of cocoa and had a crispiness that intrigued. And his beard – God, his beard – you liked the richness of it. You thought of saying, “Hey,” or something else. But you knew, even while nursing the thought, that you wouldn't say anything. Your voice was not something you used regularly on buses or any other public place. Each time you spoke in public, you imagined people, strangers, mimicking you, and saying, “Christian, this your girly voice sef. It’s like God ran out of male voices.” Your father had actually said that to you. So you said nothing till the bus lurched to a stop at Etim Junction, and you hurried away from the perfectly bearded face.

You saw him again minutes later in Proda, in the white-walled laboratory filled with light. It was fate, or something like that. It was the first day of SIWES training. You had wanted to train somewhere far away, like Lagos or Zaria, somewhere you could be someone new for six months. But only Proda had called back. After the first rotations, you sat down to fill your logbook. The other IT students were mingling, introducing themselves, bragging about their schools, and exchanging advice on how to fill the logbooks. You saw him

approach you. You felt him before you heard him behind you, looking over your shoulder into your logbook.

"Hey," he said. And you thought of what it would feel like to run your hand through his beard.

"Good afternoon," you said, humming your voice as deeply as you could.

He said you looked familiar, like a face he'd seen around FANS. "Do you go to ESUT?"

When you said yes, he smiled. "I knew I'd seen you around. I'm Obiora."

You hesitated for a millisecond before you told him yours. You always felt vulnerable offering people your name. He held out his hand, and you took it. "Christian," you said. And at that moment when your hands met, you knew. It was not a normal handshake; he just held your hand in his. It was the tenderness with which he held you that made you so sure. You thought of that moment often. You thought of the way he held your hand, and how that simple gesture had meant so much. You thought of his beard on the bus ride back home that day, you thought again – hopefully, this time – of love.

\*

What you had with Obiora felt like a song. And singing was your thing. You had a tenor that soared, a voice that had wings. A lot of people laughed at the way you talked and the way you walked but no one laughed when you sang.

"Your voice is naked fire," your mother once told you. But it wasn't just that your voice was pure gold, no. Singing was a paradise that opened its arms to you when it seemed there was nothing else. First, it was Celine Dion. You would play her on the stereo and turn the volume up to drown the sound of your crying. On the days you came back from school ready to burst like a damaged dam, or the nights your father would tease and taunt you till your

mother said, "Daddy, leave this boy alone na. What is this? Did he make himself?" you would sit on the floor, next to the stereo, and weep till you had no more tears to shed. And with a cracked voice, you would try to imitate the softness of her pitch. When you sang, you felt free. You felt lifted from this world to a place from where you could see the smallness of the earth.

You felt the same thing with Obiora. He did not talk much in the labs, but it was fine, because he made up for it on WhatsApp, where he told you things you liked to imagine he told no one else. Like his obsession with Medicine and Surgery, having written JAMB four times before settling for Applied Microbiology. That, sometimes, he felt like a failure for settling for Applied Microbiology. Things like that. Many times you began to tell him something about your mother but tears would not let you type the words, so you ended up typing, *Life is like that*.

You marvelled at his profile picture for hours. You dreamt of his crooked smile and the perfect symmetry of his face, of the way his beard looked like something God had painted Himself. And you wondered what it would feel like against your face.

He became yours on the day you told him about your mother. It was a Sunday afternoon, and you were in his lodge at Umueze. You told him it was like the ground had disappeared from under you and you hadn't stopped falling into a hole since then. You told him about the months before the end when you mourned her while she was still alive; about the fear that crippled you as you watched the life draining so slowly, so painfully, out of her. And you told him of how her voice saying, "Chris, sing for me," still haunted you. Like always, the memories clogged your throat and made you swoon. You closed your eyes and lay back on the bed, warding off tears. He held your hand.

"I can't imagine losing my mum," he said, and you turned to look at him with swimming eyes. You had never talked about your mother to anyone before, and now you felt like all those words had been suffocating you. You were your mother's crown, the child that had come on time just before her ovaries began to slowly sap her of life. She was the only shield you had against your father. She cradled your head in her bosom when his words shattered you. On the nights when the guilt came, when the anger of God hovered above you, it had your mother's face. Perhaps you loved her more than you did God. At this point the tears escaped and waddled down the side of your face and you remained silent to gather yourself.

Obiora was quiet, so quiet you turned to look at him, to be sure he was not asleep. He pulled you close till your head was resting on his shoulder, and he let you fall asleep there.

\*

The day you first kissed, he was tipsy. It was his birthday.

"I'm getting closer to death," he said jovially as he sipped from the bottle. He offered you some of his drink but you didn't drink beer; it was bitter.

"You don't know how to drink it, that's why." He smiled. "Just swallow."

He held the bottle to your mouth and you swallowed a few gulps, then felt it rising in your throat. He laughed as you ran to the bathroom to retch. He laughed so hard you laughed too. Afterwards, you rinsed your mouth over and over with water before going back into the room.

"Guy, you should have seen your face," he said. He was staring at you with that lopsided grin of his that made your heart skip. When his eyes met yours, they held. There was something wholly intimate about getting lost in his eyes. When your lips met, it felt like a standing ovation. The tingle of his beard, the caress

of his tongue, the warmth of his breath against your cheeks, the worship of it all. It was as though all your life you had been waiting for this kiss. He held the back of your neck and pressed you closer, closer, closer still. He slipped his hand under your shirt. You loved the warmth of his palm against your stomach, against your chest. You loved the warmth of his body and the feel of his lips on you pushed you from this world. Later, you would tell him this: that the feel of his lips on your neck, your stomach, the small of your back, everywhere, pushed you from this world, from this time, into a space where only the two of you existed and the air was a river of honey, and your blood was a broth of sulfur and brimstones. Once upon a time, a man met a man that gave him fire with the power of his touch.

Afterwards, you lay face up catching your breaths.

"Damn," you said, and when he laughed, the yellow light coming from the locked window took on an ethereal grace.

\*

Soon IT was over. You were in your final year. Agbani, as usual, eased slowly into life, as though the students themselves were reluctant to step into the land of dust and stones and yellowing grass growing on both sides of the hot asphalt. You likened it to water flowing from a tap, first in drops, then in trickles, and finally in a steady flow. Again you asked your father to let you live on campus; again he said no, and again you promised yourself you would go far, far away – as far away as possible – when you graduated from school.

It was different that semester. It became harder to pretend to be someone you were not. You noticed the judgment in the eyes of your classmates, the way they stared at you as though the words were on the tip of their tongues, as though they would burst into laughter at any moment and point at you. In the

beginning they did not hold back. They called you names each time you walked by: *woman wrapper, homo, mummy*.

You shook your head, allowing yourself a small smile as though you didn't really care, but sometimes you cried, then chided yourself for letting them get to you, then practised walking and talking like a man.

With time, the name calling stopped. And though you did not want it back, loving Obiora made you feel free, like a bird in flight, with wings spread out above open fields of lush grass. Then someone took your number from the WhatsApp group to ask you, "Guy, are you a gay?"

Someone had asked you that same question before, in 100 level: *Are you a gay?*

As always, you answered with the obvious: "You don't put an indefinite article in front of an adjective unless the adjective comes before a noun."

"You are mad," the person replied. "You need serious beating to chase the evil spirit out of you."

"Who is this?" you asked. There was no picture on the profile, and the beige silhouette scared you.

"It doesn't matter," the person said.

But it did matter.

In your first year, they had made good on their threat. In the building surrounded by grass, between Access Bank and the library, they had pushed you to the ground and kicked you. You recognized only one of them, an Anatomy student everyone called Pogba. You lay there for several minutes after they were gone, holding your head, tasting the blood in your mouth. You had not begged them to stop – you were too shocked to beg – and you had not cried. You just took it silently. Your father would have been proud of you. But later

that night, you buried your face between your knees and wept. Because it hurt. You wept because when you told your father that you had fallen off an okada, he chided you for being reckless. You wept because you missed your mother terribly. She would have known you did not fall from an okada. You wept because you knew you were alone, because you were a tiny bird locked in a massive cage, and each time you tried to fly, even within your cage, you found your wings were broken.

You did not tell Obiora about the threat. There were things you could not tell him because you feared he would not understand. You did not want creases in this thing that you had with him. On the days you visited his lodge after school, you came out feeling something you could not articulate even to yourself. Perhaps it was strength, or pride. You weren't sure what to call that electric feeling. Maybe it was fear. Everything was mixed. And in loves like this, fear was a given. Fear was one thing you and Obiora never talked about though you saw it in his eyes. You saw it in the awkward way he answered your greeting in the midst of his friends, with an abruptness that irked you, a forced indifference that ate at your insides. You saw it in the way he walked apart from you, as though if your shoulders touched, the skies would cave in. It was almost as if he was ashamed of you. Still, you asked yourself, "Does it matter?" Did his smile not steal your heart in the confines of his lodge at Umueze? Did his hands not take you to another world?

But the more you asked, the more the darkness settled in you. You did not tell him about this too – this darkness that kept spreading through your skin. One afternoon in his lodge he told you he loved you. And fear pressed itself so strongly into you that you struggled to breathe.

\*

Then one afternoon in early December, he told you your shirts were too colourful. The same Obiora who traced the floral patterns on your shirts as he held you in his arms. Perhaps it was the weight of the fear or the scrutiny of the stares that cracked him. It was on a Friday, and the thin, kind woman in the HOD's office had just pasted the 300 Level results. It was something of a ritual not to release the results of the 300 Level first semester exams till the first semester of final year, when they would be pasted next to the IT results. It was strange pasting everything at the same time. Every board in the department was cleared and the grades stood there in neat rows. You started at Genetics, the course you feared most, and moved down through Population Ecology and the rest till you came to IT, in which you knew you would score an A.

You looked around at your classmates. Some of them already knew your reg number and monitored your results. You could hear people murmuring your name. You half-ran-half-walked downstairs to Microbiology to find Obiora and tell him. He was sitting in his class, typing on his laptop.

"Obiora, you will not guess what I just found out!" Even as you spoke, you chided yourself for being too loud. He looked up at you, then looked around, but said nothing. "Our results just came out. Guess what I got. Just guess." This time your voice was low, almost a whisper.

"Chris, you have to stop doing this," he said. "You can't behave like this. People are beginning to suspect. Stop coming to my department. And why do you keep wearing these shirts? Don't you have any shirt that is not orange or pink? Act coded. Guys are laughing at you."

For the few seconds he talked, you willed him to stop. His words left dents in your heart. You kept your eyes on his mouth, and when he was done, you looked up into his eyes. And you knew. You knew more than anything that you

could not swallow his shame. You opened your mouth to say something but the words refused to see the light.

"Seriously?" you finally asked. You picked up your bag, slung it over your shoulder and left. You went to the faculty library and stared blankly at your plant pathology textbook till the librarian told you to leave, she wanted to lock up. So you walked down to the school library instead. There you thought of his words, of their sharpness, and of the way something in your heart had come apart in shreds. You knew that, if you went home, you would cry yourself to sleep, and you did not want to cry for him. So you sat there reading and thinking of brightly-coloured shirts, and then reading some more. Soon the librarian there asked you to leave. "Do you want to read everything in one day?" She had children to get back to, she said.

Outside, you checked the time: a few minutes past six. You would have to go down to the school gate to get a bus going into town. Your phone kept buzzing with WhatsApp messages. You switched it to silent. You took the dust path past Nomeks, past the cluster of women who sold *okpa* and bread and biscuits and drinks and called you *nwoke ka nwanyi mma*. Many times you stopped in your tracks to collect yourself, to rest your hands on your knees and try to still the ringing in your ears. At the school gate a driver told you, "Hundred naira to Garriki," and you did not haggle. You had no strength for words. At home, when you handed your father the white sheet of paper where you had written your results down, he said, "Wow! More grease to your elbow. *Jisi ike*. Your mother would be proud were she here."

You forced a "Thank you" from your throat and went inside to rest your feet. Most of the WhatsApp messages were from your department's group chat.

- *If you had an F in Animal Physiology, inbox me.*
- *Is it true Medical Entomology is 1 credit load?*

- Yes.
- *Thank God!! At least people can register Genetics and Animal Physiology if they failed both. Me I passed all. Thank God. God is my strength.*

But the other messages were from him.

- *Hey. Chris are you angry? Bro pick my call.*

*You hurt me*, you began to type and then erased it and typed instead: *Fuck you*.

Your phone rang. Once, twice, and then again and again till you put it on airplane mode. His voice stayed with you though. You heard it over and over in your head. *Act coded*. You thought of the word *coded*. You first ran into that word on 2go. After your mother died, you needed someone to love you, you needed something to be. Somehow you ended up in a room where men met men, where you could stare at naked bodies taken from flattering angles. Bodies you knew would feel warm against your skin. It was before 2014, before the Naija Gayz room was deleted because it had become illegal.

In Naija Gayz, people only hooked up.

*Enugu coded add up.*

*Awka coded btm add up.*

*Lag top indicate let me add. Coded only.*

You did not know what *coded* meant, but it sounded like something you were not. The first person you actually hooked up with was too brash and elusive. He told you his name was Joe; you knew this was not true. He blocked you on 2go after the first few days, and when you called to ask why, he told you he was gay because he liked men, *real men*, not women with dicks. *Coded* was a word you

dreaded; it broke your wings, pruned your feathers each time you tried to fly. But there was something self-preserving about the word, something cowardly but safe. You sat up and removed your shirt, brought out all of them that were pink and orange or a bright purple, and set them ablaze in the big tin drum behind the compound where stubborn grass forced their way through the cracks in the pavement. You stood there watching the black smoke rise into the darkened sky.

Your father came out. "What are you doing?"

"Burning my clothes," you said.

"Why?"

"Because they are mine and I want to burn them."

"Ahn-ahn. This boy sef. You should have given them out. I'm sure Chinasa would have liked some of them."

Chinasa was your cousin that lived at Menuiru.

"They are men's clothes," you said.

He sniggered. "Men don't wear pink. At least not that bright shade of pink."

You hissed, a long drawn-out angry sound, and turned to go inside.

"*Bia*, have you lost your mind? Am I the one you're...?"

He made to grab your shoulder, and you surprised yourself by swatting his hand away. For the second time that day, you rolled *those* words around your tongue and spat them out. "Fuck you," you said, for the boy who yearned for his approval, for the boy that had had to endure his derision till his eyes were filled with tears. "Fuck you," you said again, this time under your breath. He stood

there silent, so silent that you harboured the happy notion that you had hurt him back.

The first thing you wanted to do was call Obiora and tell him. And it was this, the very thought that you no longer had someone to call, that pushed you over the edge. You sat on your bed, buried your face in your palms and wept. Once upon a time, a man met the love of his life. But happily ever after were only clouds he could see but never hold.

\*

He texted and called and, finally, blocked your path on your way to class. "I'm sorry," he said. "Chris, please. I didn't mean to say it like that. I didn't mean to hurt you."

One Sunday, he held your hand in public and said, "Chris, talk to me. Let's work through this. I love you." It was after a youth program you had invited him to before everything fell apart. Initially, he'd said he couldn't come. You sang "Boundless Love" to a congregation of bowed heads and raised hands. Some cried and ran from their seats to kneel at the altar. You cried too; somehow, the song had taken on another meaning: *When all of you is all of me.*

You were thinking of happiness, how you kept chasing it and how it kept eluding you.

It was after the service that you saw Obiora.

"Hey," he said, and you thanked God that you wore black to church that day.

"Hey," you replied.

"You were wonderful. You know, this is the first time I've heard you sing."

"Thanks."

"Chris," he said, "won't you forgive me?" He sounded like a child, unsure of what wrong he had done. He glanced around before he said, "I love you."

You knew you would forgive him. You had gone back to 2go, to Men's Lounge, and felt bile rising in the back of your throat as you read the conversations there. You had added 042nigger, one of the guys in the room, but when he asked you what your role was even before saying *Hi*, you blocked him.

*Is it all about sex for you guys?* you wrote.

"I told my dad 'fuck you,'" you said. Obiora's eyes widened, and that smile that made your heart skip lit up his face. He would later tell you that relief had washed so strongly over him because the idea of actually losing you had scared him. Maybe he, too, had spent silent minutes in a room with a man that dressed up hurriedly as soon as he was spent from the sex. Or perhaps he just knew the right thing to say.

You looked at his smile, his beard – that carpet of perfection – and thought, surely it couldn't be that hard to bring yourself to forgive him; he was yours. He did not chase away the dread or the loneliness, but he made it easier to live with.

You followed him back to his lodge at Umueze and talked about your father, and about this thing you both had. He said he didn't know you would take his words to heart so much, to the extent of shutting him out. You thought of explaining your anger, but you knew he wouldn't understand. When he kissed you, you thought of frangipanis and ixoras and flowers blooming in trees. You thought of birds perching on high-tension wires for a moment – just for a moment – before fluttering into the sky. He pulled your shirt off, pushed you on your back, drew a trail down your stomach with his tongue, and took you in his mouth. It was hard to stay quiet as he moved above you, his sweat dripping

on you, everywhere smelling so strongly of him. Afterwards, he pulled you on top of him and held you tightly.

"I love you," he said. "I swear."

You smiled before saying, "I know." You fell asleep in his arms. Early the next morning, you woke up before daylight and left for school.

\*

Your phone had been on silent all through; you had forgotten to switch the sound back on after service. You had eleven missed calls. It was your father. You tried to call him back but you had run out of airtime. So you went to class. When you came back late in the evening, he was pacing in the living room.

"Thank God," he said when he saw you. You thought of an excuse for your disappearance but there was none, and you weren't bothered. It was the first time he was talking to you after the clothes-burning incident. "Where have you been?"

You stood silently staring at him, at the veins on his forehead. When he made to come closer, you stepped back.

"I was so worried," he said. "I thought you left. I thought you just left."

And you realized, perhaps for the first time, that you were all he had.

"My phone was not with me," you said. He nodded. Just nodded. And you thought how much his eyes reminded you of your mother's tenderness.

~

# **Sturdy Man with Shaggy Beards**

*Ucheoma Onwutuebe*



1

Love was a sturdy man arriving on countless evenings at my doorstep, looking like the aftermath of a hurricane, reeking of beer and earthiness and the stench of the world outside. With his laptop bag slung over one shoulder, and a glint in his eyes, he would ask, “Did you miss me?” I always let him in. Who was I not to? I would bury my nose in the crook of his neck, and stay there till he tickled me away.

I am yet to find anyone who smells half as heady, half as good.

2

Nothing in his mien gave away his profession. A scientist was supposed to carry himself with an air of carefulness and a precision associated with measuring things. But not this man. Not this scientist. I was sure his beards would one day be singed by the fire from his welding machine. His jeans were ripped, his hair shaggy. But his hands were strong. I had watched him on several occasions bend metals to compliance, and on those countless evenings I let him in, he showed off the gashes his skin had sustained during work, from welding pieces of iron together, or screwing a nut under a machine. He showed them off like a war man’s wounds, an old soldier’s decorations. Those nights he came to me, I too, like those malleable metals, became pliant in his hands.

3

On countless evenings, I cradled his head in my hands, took long draughts from his lips, laid his head on my lap and fondled his shaggy beards. Those nights I was Helen of Troy; I was Herodias with the head of John; I was Delilah stroking

Samson's mane. I thought, This man whose hands bent metals, who stood before a class of eager students instructing them, on whom much of their success depended; this big man who shouldered his way through life, navigating his path with cunning and a deep voice, was he all mine?

4

In those days I found work as an entry-level bank clerk, and I spent my days among colleagues, with whom I had formed a strong bond—the way people who suffer together form a comradeship in the midst of their struggle. We were excited to see each other most mornings, but by evening, we were so pensive balancing our books and looking for missing tellers that we could not stand each other. The job offered the advantage of a steady income, but it was not without the drudgery of standing all day, from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. It was a job founded on capitalism: whatever profit we made was enjoyed by the higher powers which we did not see. But we showed up every day regardless. Most days we were grateful for work, other days we were full of angst and regret. I, and the other junior clerks, talked of resigning and finding work elsewhere, but we never found the courage to do so. We had unemployed friends who wished to be in our place, and their envy and longing made us hold on tighter to this job that no longer met our needs.

But my evenings were not entirely hopeless. Even if I was frazzled and spent, I knew in whose company I would find my recovery. If he and I had planned a rendezvous, those last few minutes to the close of work would have me looking at the time, willing it to tick faster, urging my colleagues to hurry up—it was against company policy to leave anyone behind. Such evenings, anticipation made me a tethered canine whimpering for release, a tied horse neighing for the fields. I could not wait to be with my man.

“Should I read to you?” he would ask. He picked up *Julius Caesar*, dramatising as he read. Before then I had never paid heed to Shakespeare, even though I claimed to be a writer. Shakespeare’s King James language gave me a headache. Why read him when I could read Achebe and Ekwensi, writers who blended the English language till it sounded like my mother tongue? But it was he, my sturdy man, who let me in on the lyrical beauty of Shakespeare’s works. It could be raining heavily, or maybe a slight evening drizzle—my zinc roof exaggerated the sounds of each, making it hard to tell whether it was rain or drizzle—, and yet he would read to me.

That was not the first time someone read to me. My mother did when I was a child; she read to my siblings and me from the Ladybird Series, and she told us of how she read to her grandfather many years ago in his last days when his sight had deserted him. She was a girl then, sent to live in the village with her grandparents who she took care of. Her grandfather, a devout Christian, listened to her read the Psalms, and in listening to her voice, he prepared his soul for the bosom of the Lord.

I had come to view reading to another person as an act of affection—towards children too young to decipher text, and towards adults who had gone blind. But, with my man, I experienced reading as a romantic sport. When he read to me, the lilt of his voice soothed me and lulled me to sleep. His favourite lines were:

Danger knows full well that Caesar is more  
dangerous than he. We are two lions litter’d  
in one day and I the elder and more terrible.

He would read these lines, his voice rising, as if he was on a stage, as if he was Caesar. Why did those lines appeal to him so much? Did he know, just like everyone did, that he carried about him a whiff of danger? When people saw us together, they looked at me from the corner of their eyes, perhaps thinking, “What is this good-natured girl doing with this type of man? Can she deal with what comes with this?” They looked at me the same way when they saw me sitting beside him at Picnics, the open space bar opposite the university, watching him drag his stout from the bottle— he never used a tumbler, said it stood in his way. But I knew what the onlookers didn’t know: I was the whistle that brought this racing stallion to a halt; I was the hand that tamed the mane of this lion.

6

It was the smoking which he did openly, that gave him the whiff of danger. The university town we lived in was a temperate one, and smoking held the aura of criminality for most of its people. Ironically, this worked in my favour. This was my mind, howbeit naive: not all women here can stand a man with such airs. They would only skitter in and skitter out, incapable of bearing with his ways. And, in accepting him in all his flawed glory, I had marked him for myself.

7

The nights he refused to come to me, especially in the first few months of our affair, those nights had me upset in ways I am too shamed now to describe. In love, there is always a more desperate partner and that partner was me. If he cancelled our rendezvous using work or tiredness or some incapability as excuse, my evening was ruined; I did not know then how to take

disappointments well, and nothing could quench the fires of my pining. I began to think of devices to pull him closer to me. I lined the corners of my house with cigarettes: I kept packs in the lowest bedside drawers and covered them with books so no one would notice. I hid some in the highest shelf of the kitchen counter, in my handbags kept in the wardrobe, in any secret corner I could find.

Perhaps this was selfish, but I did it anyway. Didn't everyone he knew— his mother, father, church brothers, church sisters—urge him to stop? Didn't they all preach the gospel of “smokers are liable to die young”? But here I was, smitten beyond recognition, bent on sticking by him no matter what. Whenever he came over to my house, our little trysting place, I offered him a pack. The first time I did, he looked at me with suspense, perhaps gauging me, trying to be certain I was ready to be complicit of his habits. But, over time, my offering and his subsequent smoking became a routine of our meetings.

The first day I went to the kiosk to buy a pack, the little salesgirl looked at me sceptically; I knew she was judging me. I could read the disappointment in her mind: “What is this bespectacled girl doing with a pack of Bensons?” I did not flinch under her gaze. I paid for the cigarettes like I would pay for a pack of sugar. Or soap. Or toilet rolls. I held the pack in my pocket; it would bring my lover closer to me, bring him home more often.

## 8

What is a love affair without a theme song? You do not think of *Titanic* without remembering the flute and violin warble and Celine Dion's vocal accompaniment.

John Legend's ‘This Time’ was it for us. It answered my frequent question: “Do you love me?” I could be in a corner sulking because he had dismissed something

I said or he had judged me wrongly over a matter, and, noticing my mood, he would play ‘This Time’ from his Blackberry, and gather me in his arms. He would sing along with gusto just like he did everything else. “This time I want it all, this time I want it all, showing you all the cards, giving you all my heart.” Isn’t it the little gestures that make our hearts trip and fall hard again and again?

Maybe this too was maudlin, but it held deep meaning for me. The lyrics of the song brought back the memories of the first time we ever had a conversation. We were with mutual friends in a hot restaurant on a Sunday afternoon. I had met him just a few hours before, but our talk was lively. I do not remember what steered our conversation to this angle, but I had casually asked him about his stance on love. He said he was not given to it. “Women come and go,” he said. And when they tired of his noncommittal ways, they left and told him to go marry his machines.

So when he sang that song to me, I felt— he didn’t say so, this was my private interpretation— that he wanted to stay, that the era of flimsy affairs was over. He did not say so, he did not need to say the words to me; it was all there in the way he gathered me in his arms and sang to me. What’s more, we were going on a year and several months. And, at each instance, whatever the need was, he sang to me.

9

“You are my kryptonite,” he said.

“I love you,” I said.

But I am broken. Can’t you see?

Desire loosens the tongue. Ask Delilah. It was not folly that brought Samson back, again, and again, and again, to her doorstep when it was plain as day that all she wanted was to deliver him into the hands of his enemies. It was not folly that made him sleep off each time she stroked his mane demanding, *“Tell me the secret of your great strength and how you can be tied up and subdued.”*

Desire. Desire. Desire.

My sturdy man told me many things that had left him broken in those nights he showed up, in the dark hours he whispered to me. I wanted to rewrite every painful tale he told and kiss it away. A loss too painful to heal and forget? I kissed him. The days in the past when fortune deluded him? I kissed him. I wanted to fix the memories. I wonder who told me kisses could mend leaking spaces. The only experience I had with mending broken vessels was from childhood, when I had to cross the streets with the other children in the compound to fetch water with jerry cans and ferry them home in wheelbarrows. Often, we dropped the containers too hard on the floor and they cracked. Sometimes the puncture was small enough to be patched with chewing gum; sometimes gum could not hold it together. And, in those times gum failed to mend the broken can, we would heat a knife in fire and smear the hot blade on the crack, and with a sizzling sound, the heat would melt the rubber and hold it in place, filling the air with an acrid smell.

With the quiet sounds of kisses, I wanted to mend him. How I wanted my machinations to work. How I wanted to mend him. But each day I saw him, met him in our small corner, our little world of passion and longing, I lay content in his arms. It did not matter how broken he was. I did not want to be anywhere else.

This is my favourite memory of my lover and me. One evening, we sat huddled in a corner of a thatch-roofed bar, a joint different from the one close to the university. Surrounding us were beered-up men having spirited conversations. The football match was making no headway and almost over, and there was general disgruntlement in the air. He lifted his bottle of stout to my lips, urging me to take a sip, then he whispered to me about a new spot where the suya was fresh and the beef was today's butchered meat. We headed there and, on our way, I don't remember what he said, but he filled my lungs with laughter and caused me to throw back my head and show my teeth to the moon. In his roadside shop, we watched the suya man stoke his fires as he barbecued the skewered meat, sprinkling spices on them. We ate straight from the newspapers and the pepper made me cry. He laughed at me and pulled me closer and said, "You're such a baby".

I loved my lover then, I love him now still. I loved him because his lust could not be contained. On some nights out, in the middle of a conversation at a table full of mutual friends, while we were all presumably lost in banter— and the talk had veered into politics, football, or any of those topics that rouse young people— and the equal complement of alcohol laid before us had loosened everyone's tongue, my lover would whisper to me, "Meet me in the car, I want to touch you". Sometimes, if the car was too far away, he would take me to a corner far from peering eyes and touch me, and in those quick but charged moments, he would be as bestial as he would be tender. His lust would possess him like a demon and, until he had found reprieve, he would not be still. It drove him like a full bowel desperate to be emptied. Those date nights, we

would have to make an early exit, leaving our friends behind and driving home silently.

And in those silent, pregnant moments, we would speed past people laughing and talking; past twinkling streetlights that could not sustain their lights due to age or vandalism; past stores with blaring TV sets; past carefree children who play in the streets.

In those moments, the car became misty with the thoughts of passion and reckless abandon as we headed to our place, mine or his; thoughts so tactile they formed a third presence in our midst. His hand would sit gently on my laps and, with certainty, I knew that, in no time, these hands of his that lie idly on my laps will rove, and roam, and feel the warmth of my body. These clothes on my back, these shoes on my feet, will all, in a moment, be heaped on the floor. This mouth of mine that said nothing, and this voice that is now silent and tucked away somewhere in my stomach, will say unspeakable things. And my body that sits so tamely in this car will no longer be mine alone. It will be bent in curves and arches, and I will move it in unfathomable ways.

And the very thought of this, the anticipation of lovemaking, would make the two moulds of my breast rise, would cause moisture to gather warmly between my legs. And the tension would keep brewing as we stood by the door while he held up the torch of his phone as I scrambled in my bags for my bunch of keys; I would feel the tension as he would tuck my braids behind my ears when they fell over my face as I kept ransacking; and, all the while, he would stand so close to me and I would hear his breathing hard and steady; then the keys would turn in their holes and we would shut the door behind us....

These days when distance has thrown a chasm between us, I carry his memory around me. I bear it about me: in the hollow of my clavicles where he has poured his kisses, in the dimples of my buttocks where he has drilled his name. I bear him in my pouch like a kangaroo carries her young. Every indentation of my body, every pore craves him. On countless nights his memory lulls me to sleep: memories of being bent over, memories of the black of his skin glistening in coital perspiration. He has loved me so hard I am hypnotised; I do not remember clearly anyone before him. Do they even exist? Every love I've had before now has become hazy, chaff. I am not even interested in making anyone from my past envious; all that matters are those memories of riding on the crest of emotions with this man.

Some nights, I wish I can fete myself for a possible séance with him in my dreams. Some nights his smell haunts me and starts me from sleep.



# **When You Burn, You Burn**

*Olubunmi Familoni*



The first time I witnessed death, I was ten. I didn't know what it was then, but it was a big event to me, like the fire crusades the churches sometimes brought to our community. The crusaders danced and jumped and rolled on the floor in mad anguish, scattering their holy madness everywhere, shouting prayers and songs, shouting about hell, shouting at us to give our lives to Jesus or we would burn in hell.

Bitrus, a drunk in our village, had asked one of the churchmen who had brought his noise to Madam Caro's joint where several men were drinking, "If I, Bitrus, give my life to this you people's Jesus, wouldn't I be dead then?"

And the man had said, "No, you would only have eternal life."

"But how can I have eternal life, or any kind of life, when someone has taken my life?"

"He doesn't *take* it, you give it to Him – so it is not death. It is life—"

"Well, if I give you something, don't you take it from me? When I give my woman a slap she has no choice but to take it from me!"

"It's not that kind of giving or taking. You give it to Him and He holds it, not take it from you like the devil does; that's why it is not exactly death, but life."

"And if I don't give it?"

"Then He will *take* it!" The man's chest swelled with righteous indignation. "And *that* is death. That is hell. You will burn. Burn!"

At that point, Madam Caro shooed the churchman out with sweeping movements of her hands: "Oya-oya, alele!" she clapped. "Come and be going! The one wey you sing don do. Carry this your hellfire go outside. No spoil market for me. No be for here you go burn biko. No be my shop you go burn with this your hellfire noise abeg." She spat a dry *tueh!* after him and dusted her palms together.

But I kept hearing the churchman's "Burn! Burn! Burn!" echo at the bottom of my ears, as if he had moved into my eardrums. The ringing soon grew hot in my ears. *Burn! Burn! Burn!*

"Is it like when you leave food on the fire for too long?" I asked Mama when I got home.

"That what?" she said, stirring the soup on the firewood stove.

"That we will burn."

"Who is burning?" she asked, not looking up from the bubbling red broth. "Your father has taken you drinking again, abi?"

I could smell somebody's beans burning next door.

The first time I saw death, it was a burning; a fire making a great bellowing noise like a beast, drowning out the noise of people screaming for water, for help, for their mothers, for the police, for God. They screamed in languages too many for God to catch all at once. The screams went up to heaven and fell back down to earth empty, back into the fire. The flames rose higher and higher, a billion tongues fighting one another for a taste of flesh that soon started to smell like a ram's after it has been roasted for Ileya. I didn't know people, human beings, could smell like *that* and make you hungry, so much so that you want to eat suya. But you can't, because these are *people*, real people, dying, crying, screaming, for water, for different things, for everything, and mostly, for nothing. Because when a person is burnt, nothing can be done to reverse the process. When you burn, whether at the bottom of hell or in an explosion at the side of the road, you burn to the end; there's no coming back from it.

That was the first time I saw death happen to anybody. Beside the road. I was ten, sleeping, when the explosion banged the whole world awake. You know when you're sleeping and something happens outside your sleep but you think it is happening inside your dream? That is how this explosion felt. It tore my

heart out, and when I opened my eyes, there was this brightness everywhere. Not the kind of small pathetic light we get when we light the oil lamp at night, the flame licking timidly at the darkness around it, unable to defeat it. This light I'm talking about was a great light that no darkness could conquer. It was as if heaven had fallen down to earth and brought down its host in chariots of fire, and the Lord's robe, its flaming hem, was now sweeping through the land, blinding everybody.

I had been reading too many of those little colourful magazines and tracts the crusading Christians gave out during their shouting about hell and giving lives to Christ – which nobody ever did. People here, living on the edge of a major highway like this, even though their lives were of little value, held on to these lives as tightly as they could. They woke up every morning with the grim determination to go through the day without losing their lives to the day's dangers.

Those magazines painted grand pictures of heaven and its host, and all the light and gold involved. They painted even grander pictures of hell; of the fire, and the suffering, and the gnashing of teeth, and shaking of heads and stamping of feet. And the burning, the great eternal burning of souls swimming in that lake of fire, never drowning, just swimming and swimming, fire wetting their throats and pressing their cries down so that they don't reach heaven to disturb the white, clean peace and golden tranquillity of its streets.

These were the images that played on the screen of my mind every time I read those magazines by the light of the oil lamp. When my mother blew it out and the darkness swallowed us up in its huge, black stomach, I would lie back on my mat and shut my eyes, the images now wilder and more vivid, filling the room, wrestling the darkness around me to the ground.

But *this* was not my imagination or a dream. I was awake, my eyes open, and my father was struggling into his trousers as the interior of the shack filled with

light from outside and the solid feel of faraway heat. He was out the door before his other leg had made it fully into the trousers, stumbling along while pulling the trousers up. I leapt up and hurried after him. If all this commotion was the Big Rapture those noisy Christians often talked and wrote about in their magazines (with drawings of people floating in the air), I didn't want to miss it, didn't want to be told about it; I had to see for myself how the people would go up in the air to the sky to meet Jesus. Would Mama go? I hadn't seen my mother since we were thrown awake by that explosion. She usually lay next to me on the mat in our shack. Maybe we had left her behind in the shack. Or maybe she had gone up with the rapture and left us behind.

But when we got outside nobody was going up. Everybody was going crazy instead, running mad all over the place, as if their heads had been cut off and they couldn't see where they were running to. My father joined them and got lost in the crowd. Somebody knocked me down while I waited around for my mother. Since nobody was going up to heaven, she had to be here somewhere.

Why had I even thought this was the rapture? Hadn't they said there would be the sound of a trumpet, a blast of it, to signal its beginning? There had been no blast of the trumpet – only that *bang!* And that wasn't rapture sound; it sounded like hell exploding.

The great light beyond beckoned, and people were running towards it and away from it. I rose and moved towards it, slowly, trying to weave my way as carefully as I could through the madness of bodies scattering everywhere.

The smell struck me in the head before I reached the scene. The smell of burning. Flesh burning. Then there was the sound. The sound of people screaming, "Fire! Fire! Fire!" as if calling its name would bring it to its senses and douse its fury. Some others were screaming, "Water! Water! Water!" and were throwing water into the fire, which only incensed it further; it billowed in the faces of the people who tried to come close to its raging mouth.

I tried to listen for what the people in the middle of the fire were saying. I could only make out a jumble of cries: “Allah! Jesu!” Cries of the names of many gods. Or just screams that went on and on and didn’t break to let any other sound in. Then I made out the sound of my father crying: “My wife! My wife!” Crying out my mother’s name: “Idia! Idia!” I had never heard him call her that. I had never heard him call her anything. She called him Baba and he usually just grunted in response.

But now it filled his throat, this name that had never been in his mouth, and it filled the night air. God was silent that night. His ears were shut and His blinds drawn. Women wailed. Men held my father from diving into the fire to look for his wife.

As the fire quietened down, the people’s voices dropped to the floor, their lungs emptied of screams, their throats swollen. The only thing left was water. Water everywhere around the burnt hulk of the tanker and the blackened bodies littered about it; water flowing from people’s eyes, leaking from their noses and mouths.

It rained that night.

Was that God’s response, this huge exclamation of rainfall? If only the rain had come when the fire was still a small thing, I thought.

Water filled our shacks, and swept them into the expressway, onto the path of speeding vehicles, and into ditches.

Baba sat in the pool of water inside our shack and drowned in his tears; he didn’t care if he died of pneumonia. Didn’t care if he died.

I sat on the other side of the room watching him, waiting for Mama to come back home, to come in through that entrance and kneel to greet my father, and ask me to join her in the kitchen— which wasn’t an actual kitchen but a little

space beside the shack where the firewood stove sat). I wished I was a boy, because boys don't join their mothers in the kitchen; they play football and play rough and run around and can just be boys, do boy things, but never do any work or go anywhere near the kitchen. Boys become men that become husbands that drink, make loud noise in joints like Madam Caro's, arguing about government things. They smoke and drive trailers and eat but never go to the kitchen. Because the kitchen is a woman's place.

There had been no body to bury after the fire. All the bodies had been blackened beyond recognition. Nobody knew which body was theirs. After three days, the people from the local government council came to take all the bodies away in their trucks; the smell was killing everybody. I wondered what they did with the bodies. Did they burn them again?

On the third day, my father rose and went to the kitchen as if grief had softened him and turned him into a woman. The water had dried up— on the floor of the shack, and in his eyes— and life had to be lived. Food had to be eaten. He cooked. I ate. He watched. Shook his head, wondering— I could tell— what he would do with me. That was something else that was a woman's thing: fathers didn't know what to do with children, their children. It was a woman's duty to know all that, to care for the children. Men didn't know, didn't care. That was how I knew he was wondering what to do with me now that the person who had my manual was gone.

He called me awake one night. Mama's mat had been rolled up and stood in the corner, a sentinel among her other belongings. But that night I had unrolled it and laid on it, just to feel the way she had felt when she slept on it. I had felt nothing.

"Idia, your mother was a stubborn woman," my father said to me. "Don't be like her. When that tanker fell in the afternoon and the petrol began to spill, I told her that she shouldn't go near it; that she shouldn't join the area boys in

scooping the petrol, but did she listen? No. She said, ‘Yes Baba,’ but her heart had bent away from my advice towards the petrol flowing outside. And she sneaked away to join the people scooping it. For what?” he asked.

*So that we can have enough money to eat and for me to go to school.*

“When you turn a deaf ear to wise instruction, you turn yourself towards destruction. Don’t be like that. Don’t be like your mother; don’t turn a deaf ear to the words I’m going to tell you today. . . You know that my life is on the road, driving trailers, and when I am away it is your mother that takes care of you. Now she is no more, she has no relatives that would become a mother to you; neither do I. And I don’t make enough money to send you away to school or anywhere else. And I can’t take you with me on my trips; it is no life for a child. I am left with no other option than to marry you to Alhaji Bashir, our community head; he is a rich man and he will take care of you more than I can, even more than your mother could. He will send you to school.”

“I don’t want to marry him.” I said, as if that was all it would take for me not to. My voice was small inside my throat and couldn’t give the words any power, so I knew they wouldn’t have any effect on my father.

They didn’t. He continued: “You don’t have to want to; the man has already paid for you.” Realising that this commercial detail had removed the imploring tone he had been speaking in, he quickly added, “My daughter, he will take very good care of you. Like a daughter.”

But I was my father’s daughter, not this Alhaji Bashir’s, and I didn’t want to be taken care of like *his* daughter when I would be his *wife*. I was too young to be too many things all at once. My mother had been a mother and a wife, and she had always looked as if it would kill her. I was too young to die.

When I went back to sleep my mother came to me in my dream, and she was not burnt. She was whole. She tried to tell me something but couldn’t because

all her words had been swallowed in the fire and lost. She reached out but couldn't touch me, because I was too far away in the middle of this dream.

When I woke, Alhaji Bashir was beside me. I started, then stopped the scream in my throat as I remembered the events of the afternoon: the wedding ceremony. My wedding. The singing, dancing, eating, drinking, laughing, noise of people going and coming and going mad all around me, while I watched it all from inside me. My father watched from his seat beside Alhaji Bashir. Mama watched from a corner in the back of the crowd. Were those tears in her eyes? She was trying to tell me something, but I was too far away inside myself to hear her.

It all seemed like a dream.

But now I was awake, and married. And Alhaji was awake and hard. Coming on top of me, his hot breath from his wide nostrils beat down on my face as he pressed himself into me. The pain spread through me like a fire, burning my insides up. Now I knew how my mother had felt as she burned that night.

~

# How to Learn a Language

*Isabella Morris*



The first thing the teacher writes on the board is:

“Step 1: Don’t Expect Miracles”

And hadn’t God taught Kamila that lesson? Had she not spent months staring at Fahad’s photograph expecting him to burst through the rectangle of glass in the frame and emerge, whole, warm, tender, *breathing*? A thousand prayers offered, a thousand candles lit, a thousand promises made in the tortured hours of night and a thousand more during the relentless hours of day; and then the desperate plea. If she could just have a minute more, even just a second with him, she would trade that eye-blink moment for the rest of her life. “It’s a good deal,” she said to God, and she repeated her request because she feared He might not have heard her through the breath that came thick and hot through her mouth.

The appeal to God was made during the bargaining stage; the phase when her mind simply refused to believe that she would never know the mouth-warm taste of Fahad again, never feel his toes find hers when they slipped beneath the sheets at night, never feel his hands across the space between her hips where he expected their child to grow. But God ignored the ache of her heart. Instead, her screams tortured the pillow where Fahad had lain his head, and He turned a blind eye to the way she picked holes in the places where Fahad’s hands used to touch her. She was so afraid that she would forget Fahad’s touch that she gouged out chunks of her flesh until she bled, and her patient, hand-wringing mother caught sight of the scabbed areas on her neck, where Fahad used to drop his kisses.

The sharp sting of iodine could not stop her self-inflicted wounds, and eventually, when the doctor could stand her mother’s anxiety no longer, he prescribed the pills that sucked every bit of colour from the world, so that she woke one morning to find herself in a black and white movie with a delayed

soundtrack. During those anaesthetised weeks, she came to know that miracles were not real.

Kamila knows she can take this class, improve her English, and find something that excites her more than the perfumery where she should be working, but she hasn't worked there since Fahad died. The teacher calls Kamila's name and asks her if she can think of a strategy that will make learning English easier. The blush radiates across her face and down her neck and she wonders if she might need reading glasses, because she cannot read Step 2 on the board. *Stay focussed, Kamila*, she hears her brother Osama's gentle voice become her own as she repeats his words to the English tutor. "Exactly, that's an important thing to remember. You cannot hope to learn, to overcome your old mental blocks if you don't focus on the task at hand. Take the lessons one at a time, be kind to yourselves, but be dedicated," he says. Kamila expects the teacher to smile then, but he doesn't, and she is so relieved that the redness in her cheeks subsides.

Kamila has discovered that there is a special smile for young widows, and she despises both the smile and the word that will remind her for the rest of her life that in an unforgiving minute God punished her and took Fahad away from her. The widow smile is a facial gesture of pity, hardened and rendered insincere by lips that do not show teeth, as if the showing of teeth is indecent. The widow smile is a gesticulation of fear given by women clinging to the arms of their own husbands, as if a stiff smile sacrificed to a widow will delay the summoning of their own men to the afterlife. Sometimes Kamila has to draw her tongue over the top of her teeth because her own teeth and gums have fused since she stopped smiling.

The background noise has dissipated; Kamila's eyes zoom out of the nightmare of widow smiles and zoom in on the teacher who is standing at the door, his finger poised on the light switch. They have both just noticed each other; it is a paused moment, a hiatus that concedes the awkward presence of each other.

“I’m sorry, I thought everyone had left,” he says, and Kamila is on her feet and scuttling through the door, and she is so aware of herself that she can feel the rub of her sock between her boot and the arch of her foot. She is suddenly so conscious of herself as an entity that she dares not speak, for she is afraid of the sound of her own voice, afraid that she will not know it; and that if she does recognise it, its familiarity will restore brightness into her deserved darkness.

The days segue into each other without differentiation and before she knows it, it is Thursday night and her mother is driving her to the English Laboratory. Last week was the introduction, but tonight is Module 1, Lesson 1. When she steps into the class, the teacher has his back to her and she slips into the desk nearest the door, so that if her mind drifts off, she can slip out of the classroom as soon as she becomes aware of the other students pushing out of the door after the lesson.

The class only gets underway seven minutes after seven o’clock, Kamila knows because her eyes have trailed the second hand around the clock. The teacher writes his name on the board: Jawad, but Kamila does not remember it from the last lesson. Then he turns to face the class and, this time, he smiles and Kamila sees that his left front tooth overlaps the right one ever so slightly. “Today, we are going to start with Module 1, Lesson 1 in which you will be expected to write a short text of about fifty words. This text should be short sentences that use your existing vocabulary to make simple statements or commands. You will create these sentences using familiar topics such as your family and your hobbies or interests. The exercise should help you to produce short messages, such as lists or emails to friends,” he says as he places a sheet of paper on each student’s desk.

Fifty words, the teacher said. Kamila has not uttered fifty words since Fahad stopped breathing. Kamila’s current vocabulary is limited to perfunctory greetings and polite words of thanks to her mother or brother, who try to coax

her out of Silence who is such an agreeable companion. Complete Solitude is Kamila's preferred companion, but after she took a handful too many of the grey-world pills, the doctor advised that she not be left alone. Her mother moved into her bedroom and every night Osama carries their mother's mattress into Kamila's bedroom. Every morning, it sighs against the walls as her mother drags it back to her own room.

Kamila stares at the paper on the desk; it is divided into three black-framed, blank coffins in which she is to inter her fifty-word exercise. She picks up the pen.

The doctor admitted her to the hospital on the morning she woke up and realised that she could not ~~remember~~ remember Fahad's face. Her mother had taken his photograph ~~apart~~ away. She said it was to replace the glass in the frame, but she could have left the photograph on the table next to Kamila's bed.

Osama ~~suggested~~ proposed that Kamila listen to the voice messages Fahad had left her. Under her bed sheet, she held the phone to her ear so that the blue light created an atmosphere in which Kamila felt that Fahad was ~~presence~~ present. She replayed the messages ~~againandagainandagain~~ in an endless loop.

When the mobile phone battery ~~dead~~ died and her charger would not work, Kamila became hysterical. The doctor gave her an injection in her bottom, right through her stiff, new nightdress. "It will not ~~go on forever~~ continue, she will ~~forget~~ get better," he said.

“Good, you are showing progress Kamila,” Jawad says as he places another sheet on her desk. “In the first column, make a list of items and, in the second column, list your associations with that item. A list of about five should be sufficient,” he says.

Kamila starts to write and then she pauses; Jawad notices her hesitation. He clears his throat. “Step 4 of the introductory lesson was to make a point of trying to embrace one new concept every lesson, perhaps try to attach feelings to your list of items in the first column,” he says.

Kamila regularly sleeps with an item belonging to Fahad; in the intimacy of her bed she can embrace the memories that are as elusive as shadows.

HAIR	The sun loved Fahad’s hair.
WEDDING RING	Kamila & Fahad forever.
TIE	Knotted by me every morning with love, if not skill.
GYM SHIRT	The spike of his smell catches in my throat.
WATCH	Hairs trapped in the strap. Time. A slow hand.

The lesson is over, the teacher smiles, Kamila notices that he has forgotten to shave a spot next to the dimple on his cheek. As she walks to her mother’s car, she decides that she will not return to her job at the perfumery; it is still too early to be trapped by bouquets of subtle demands from her boss.

At home she practices English at every opportunity. She remembers Step 5 and practices new words every day. The English word for a woman whose husband

is dead is 'widow'. Kamila plays the sound of the word again and again; to her it sounds like an incomplete sound that is carried away by the wind before it can be completed. "You should try some words that will make you happy," Osama says before he slams the balcony door and goes outside to smoke. He is not allowed to smoke near Kamila because she cannot afford to have her delicate nose compromised by cigarettes.

Kamila types in the word 'Happy' on her online translator even though it is a familiar word that she learned at school. It sounds like the narrator is using the soft Arabic "Ha", but Kamila can only manage the harsher Arabic "Haa". She decides that 'happy' requires too much effort. She reaches for her English dictionary, lets the pages fan through her fingers so that the air from it fans her face, then she stops, rotates her finger above the page and stabs it on a word. 'Avitaminosis'. Kamila thinks the word sounds like a Pharaoh's name. Her finger leads her into the definition: "Condition resulting from deficiency of one or more vitamins." The dictionary drops from her hands and she closes her eyes.

"It must be something in her blood; this cannot be grief, not after all this time," her mother said. The doctor yielded to her mother's pressure and the nurse flicked a vein on Kamila's arm until a thin thread of blue appeared beneath her skin. The needle burned through and Kamila's blood poured into the test tubes and flared into tulip blooms. Kamila waited for days for the strip of her blood on a glass slide to confirm what she already knew. And as she waited she wondered which cocktail of amino acids, proteins, and markers in her blood could mark the longing for Fahad, which test would corroborate the agony and confirm the desire that would live in her blood forever.

Osama picks up the dictionary and mumbles some words and then aloud he says, "Gobstopper" and Kamila feels a bubble ripple up her chest; the gate of her throat tries to prevent it from entering her mouth, but it squeezes through the tight bars and the sound surprises her. Osama stares at her, her mother shuffles

through from the kitchen. Kamila cannot stop herself, she laughs, drawing her knees up to her chest and heaving with laughter until her throat aches and the tears come again and her mother raises her eyes to the ceiling and holds up her hands while Osama puts his arm around her. “No, no,” Kamila cries. “I’m laughing. Yes, I’m crying too, but I am laughing,” she says.

When her mother picks her up from the pen-ultimate lesson at the English Laboratory the roads are chaotic. Her mother looks at her, drumming her bony fingers on the steering wheel. Kamila knows that her mother is thinking that if they took another road they could get home sooner, and she knows too that her mother will not take that road because it will take them past the perfumery. “You can go the quicker route,” she says to her mother.

There are no lights on in the shop, but in the snapshot in her mind Kamila can pick out which shelves hold which essences, and she knows the recipe to almost every perfume. When customers come into the shop, eight times out of ten, Kamila can guess what they will choose. Her boss always sends the mature women to her and Kamila invariably steers them towards a scent with lavender, even though she has no fondness for the popular essence herself; it loses its top note, and its body note is its dry-out note, unlike vanilla that has no top note and holds true to its body note throughout its life.

Once her mother and Osama have gone to bed, she takes her own kit of essences from the cupboard and sits down at the dining room table. Instead of opening the kit, she takes Fahad’s photograph from her purse, and the words she hears are his. How long she has waited to remember his voice! “If you want to learn the language, you must teach yourself to feel the word without always seeing it,” he says. She does not understand why he is teaching her how to learn a language; she thinks she must be over-tired and stumbles to her bedroom. She is surprised and immeasurably pleased that she does not trip over her mother’s mattress; she can sleep alone.

But she is not alone, and she immediately recognises the soft, sweet, woody scent of sandalwood that is present in the room. Her beloved sandalwood; the scent infuses less-intense notes without overwhelming them; it simply supports them. Yes, Fahad is sandalwood, an aphrodisiac, but also calming and quieting, the scent that remains constant on the skin for a significant length of time.

Next week she will participate in the final Intermediate English lesson, but tonight she has learned the lesson of letting go of Fahad without forgetting him.

~

*Nonfiction*

# **How to Eat Roasted Fish in Limbe**

*Howard M-B Maximus*



*Photo credit: Inna Lazareva*

## 1.

Choose a place.

That Limbe is a coastal city means it is literally surrounded by fish. Most people love the proximity of Down Beach, which translates into the nearness to raw material, and comes with the sight of the sea, the sound of waves hitting the shore, the tame breeze caressing their faces, and the vulgar moves of the lanky, dark-skinned man who pretends to be Michael Jackson, as they eat. Most people love to watch the former abode of their victims as they devour them with extending smiles of pleasure. Most people love choice; Bar fish, Tilapia, and what is generally called “Sea fish”, and the women and young boys reaching out to beckon and call them as they dither between fish stalls. Most people love this, the power of choosing, and the availability of so many options that you are unable to choose. This is why Down Beach is the somewhat unofficial capital of roast fish in Limbe.

But there are other places too, so many of them. Little individual stalls lining almost every street corner, standing in front of bars as night falls, littering junctions, sending out heady fish flavours, embedded in the smoke, to market their products and bring back customers.

## 2.

Call a friend, or two.

In this roast-fish-eating business, three is not a crowd. So unless you are fagged out and starving and are just buying to take home, eat and crash, do well to call a few friends. Roast fish is a meal for bonding. When you haven't seen a friend in a long time, you take them out for drinks and fish; when you have visitors from out of town, you take them out to sample the fish. Know that the eating

of roast fish is not so much about the fish as it is about the experience, and the stories, and pictures of and around it. Nobody wants to make memories they can only share with themselves.

### 3.

Decide your complements.

A handful of people may prefer having their roast fish without any, but the remaining body of people have quite a few of these complements to choose from. You could ask for your fish to be served with plantain, ripe or unripe, roast or fried, or smashed and deep-fried into what is called “tapé tapé”. You could also have it served with cassava, miondo, or bobolo, nicely arranged on the side of the tray like white whips. Mostly though, the bobolo –which is usually about 70 cm long–, is cut into shorter sticks and the miondos are wrapped into a circular shape before serving with the fish. Miondo and bobolo are tasteless-to-sour rope-like cassava dumplings wrapped in leaves and cooked by boiling. They are greyish-to-white in colour and bouncy between the teeth, with bobolo being longer, thicker and harder than miondo. One, therefore, could either prefer the sweetness of ripe plantains, the chalkiness of cassava, or the sour bounciness of miondo and/or bobolo, which all blend deliciously with the spiciness of the fish.

### 4.

Hone your bargaining skills.

The price of roast fish could vary depending on the seller’s location, the size of the fish, and your accent. The roadside stalls are generally cheaper, with prices ranging from CFAF 1,500 right down to CFAF 350 a fish. When bargaining

here, do not go too low; take off CFAF 50 or 100, depending on the initial price. It may seem small, but do not waive it. Do not ask for the price of fish and say “Ok, I’ll take it”; not without cutting down at least CFAF 50 in a bargain. The sellers expect you to. It is in the Roast Fish Buying and Eating Constitution of the Limbe people.

Fish at Down Beach is more expensive. For all the reasons in (1) above and because, here, you probably also pay for the air you breathe. You may find a really small fish at Down Beach for CFAF 1,000 (you would be told it’s CFAF 1,300 and expected to bargain the price down to CFAF 1,000), while CFAF 12,000 would seem a fair price for fish deemed big enough. When buying here, if you have some pidgin English stowed away somewhere inside of you, whip it out and pocket your foreign accent. In fact, the price of a fish can leap from CFAF 2,500 to CFAF 5,000 just because of the ring to your “Hello”; here, foreigners and those who have stayed in foreign (and especially Western) lands get to pay more for the air they breathe...

## 5.

Know your fish-talk.

Is it too dry or too moist? Did the seasoning penetrate the cuts, seeping through; such that you can taste it right in the bones? Are there too many bones? Talk about the onions and grated carrots sprinkled on the fish like toppings. Are they too much, or too small? Crack a joke: tell your friend(s) visiting from out of town that you love some good head... of fish, of course. Then, go ahead to methodically disembody the head.

Lastly, remember to comment on the pepper... you must talk about the pepper. It is usually said here that, “Fish na e pepper”. This means, basically, that a good roast fish meal is dependent on the pepper sauce it comes with. Is

the pepper sauce too raw and hot, and lacking in other spices? Is it too much of a sauce with little or no biting pepper? Is it perfect?

Bonus Tip.

Do not use cutlery to eat roast fish, please: put your fingers to good use. Wash your hands clean to savour the delight and avoid becoming a pariah amidst the fish-loving people of Limbe. Bon appétit!

~

# **Fifty-Nine Years in Labour**

*Immanuel James*



*Photo Credit: Immanuel James*

My parents had a lot in common: temper matched temper, hate met hate, and stubbornness kept intact their mutual antagonism. When contact happened between them, it was mostly for battery. Conversations ended in arguments; only indifference kept the peace. The year I turned 14, their 15-year-old union ended. Yet, for us the children, its afflictions continued.

We faced the stigma that followed. Children of divorced parents, we were candidates for condescending sympathy or outright scorn. Falling out with people was because of hereditary ill manners or lack of proper upbringing. Later in life, the stigma would birth the stereotype that one was likely to make a bad spouse.

In one city lived Father, leaving us with his mother in another. Drive-by parenting brought him home once a month, yet we preferred it. The few hours he spent with us were filled with anger, beatings, and hate. We loved our mother, he said, and by that had chosen animosity towards him— had chosen to excuse him from our development. Mum, herself too autocratic for affection, was not even endearing. She only became so after she became the one that cared, her partner basking in a permanent parenting holiday.

To raise three sons alone, Mum plied all manner of trade, her hopes for a bright future lodged firmly in God, in the energy and exaggerated brilliance of her first son. She was saving for my university education when ambitious manhood demanded I intervene and relieve her of the burden. I left for Lagos to find my place in the world. I was 21, first of her three sons.

May 2, 2004.

Four months later, an envelope roughened by the stress of migration arrived my Lagos address. The seal was a local adhesive, crude—even overzealous—in keeping content from possible escape. The glue ran through the entire length of

the envelope's lip. I recognised an overkill that could only come from Mum. Inside the envelope was a flat wad of twenty naira bills totalling ₦120—worth less than two dollars. Mum had sent that money, rightly assuming that I was in financial distress. I wept. Deeply religious then, I preserved the money as a spiritual accessory, a point of reference in my petitions—that God should bless it and reverse my situation of receiving help from a woman that needed it instead.

The decade that followed was marked by major developments: besides getting a degree and setting up a business, I had also started building a house for her. Business was not exceptionally successful, but was fair enough to earn her a monthly pay. When she visited me in Lagos, I took her to fun places, and she also tried learning to drive. A proud mother—her son was beginning to have an illustrious standing in his community.

My trying to deepen financial stability put the building project on hold. More so when my two younger brothers were also capital projects on my table; one getting a degree, the other setting up a business. It was twelve long years of the family developing capacity and getting a direction.

May 27, 2016.

Mum called.

“My legs are paralyzed. I can't stand.”

Her voice was normal and alive, belying ailment. A quick visit was inconvenient given work and other inhibitions. Besides, the urgency was medical above anything else, hence I wired money to my youngest brother living close to her, to rush her to a hospital.

About two hours later, I called him for inquiries.

“Mum has refused to be taken to the hospital. She’s saying it’s a spiritual problem.”

I asked that the phone be passed on to her.

“They don't treat stroke in the hospital. You people should take me to a church.”

“How do you know this is stroke? Don't diagnose yourself,” I said.

“Take me to Pastor Nwayo!” she insisted. “He heals with prayers and native medicine. Nobody survives treating stroke in a hospital.”

“Mum, everything is spiritual to you.”

“Even honest doctors will tell you stroke is spiritual. Spiritual problems are not for hospitals.”

Mum’s basic formal education was captive to her religiosity. Having lived in the city and run some complex businesses, she was no stranger to modern civilization. But she believed in prophecies and visions. Over the years, I had given up on efforts to unseat her exuberant spiritualism.

I called her siblings and people who had a stake in our family’s matters, reporting the insane headiness. Stroke is a spiritual problem, they all affirmed, shocked at my naivety, mentioning people they knew who all died by its orthodox medication. My brothers and I were a helpless minority, up against powerful ignorance endorsed by Mum’s friends and family.

Minutes after the first call that ended in a stalemate, I called Mum again, this time calmer. “How do you know this is stroke, Mum? I’ve spoken to my doctor, he says you should go to a hospital—”

“I’m not going to any hospital! For the past three months, they have been prophesying this in church. You don’t believe these things because too much reading has made you ignorant.”

“Well, I’m not sending money to any pastor.”

“I’m not a child! I don’t have faith in a hospital. You need to believe in your remedy for it to work.”

For minutes, the telephone eavesdropped on our sobbing silence. I prayed for her while she was still crying, groaned “Amen” proving her participation. It was my first prayer in about a year.

She arrived the healing centre the next day. Upon her registration at the centre, I demanded to speak on the phone with Pastor Nwayo, asking to know if he had any means to ascertain it was a case of stroke.

“I have been treating stroke for 20 years. Look, you can take your mother back if you don’t have faith in this place.”

In the background, Mum was pleading that I suspend the interrogation and “allow God to work.”

Pastor Nwayo assured me that in less than a month, she would walk again.

The first week, she claimed gradual recovery, yet she could not use her legs. My suspicion was that her recuperation was psychological, a placebo effect.

A visit to her confirmed my fears. She had lost so much weight and there was no remarkable sign of a cerebrovascular accident. I threatened to withdraw involvement if she didn’t let me take her to a clinic. My voice had lost restraint, with patients in the centre pleading with me to calm down.

“God will heal me here. Please don’t make things more difficult for me. You are my favourite son, don’t abandon me,” she cried.

I asked to see the pastor. He could, perhaps, see reason and support my position. Mum would listen to him because he spoke for God. The man materialised, chanting his competence. He had handled worse cases of stroke, had encountered worse Doubting Thomases with a white-elephant intellect. Mum looked at me in a way that warned me not to upset the divine agency through whom her healing would come. I returned to Lagos defeated by sheer illogic.

Two months went by, yet she and her maiden family—with whom she lived—remained adamant about their choice despite her deteriorating health, claiming gradual recovery. There would be consequences if I forced my way in the matter. It was unclear how to abduct an adult to a hospital and get a doctor to treat someone under duress: how would her body respond to medication to which she was psychologically opposed? If she lost her life in the process, people would say I had killed her—for money rituals, perhaps.

The bills were mounting. It felt preposterous paying fat bills for what was no more than fictitious care-giving. Felt worse watching her suffer. Each time we were on the phone, she spoke with groans she tried in vain to suppress, wanting to hide her agony. She was still being a mother even with her life slipping away.

My second visit revealed that her rumoured recovery was merely “faithed.” She sat on the floor, her back against a wall, with legs that now looked crooked stretched out. Her wrapper was hemmed into a loose fold around her thighs, to ventilate a sore on her left leg. A hand fan was resting between her thighs, indicating a sore whose pain demanded constant placation. It was a young boil with a burst tip filled up with a powdery substance in apparent self-medication. Ointment shone around a vast tumescence, marking the boil’s territorial

influence. Hair unkempt, nails uncared for, eyes sunken from persistent crying and physical emaciation. It was a woman living the way she never did, in whom ailment had conquered beauty, good judgment, and a sense of hygiene. Again, she firmly refused hospitalisation.

Two weeks after my return to Lagos from the second visit, she called, saying she was now ready for medical care. That Pastor Nwayo said he had cleared the spiritual obstacles that would have turned medication fatal. It was not a time to get angry. Over the flurry of arrangements for her hospitalisation, I remained positive.

\*

“You waited for too long before bringing your mother to the hospital. You sound educated, you should know better than that.”

“She doesn't stand a chance?”

“Most of her internal organs have broken down. We'll do our best.”

We kept in touch on phone, the doctor and I. In his voice was apparent neither reassurance nor dismay. Tests. Drips. Blood transfusion. My two brothers who brought her to the clinic were on ground, manning the personal aspects of the intervention. The youngest, 25, had kept a daily tab on her from the beginning. He bore the physical brunt of Mum's entire health burden.

By the next day the doctor had stopped picking up my calls, tired of the pressure. I had been too impatient for good news, restless at work and at home. He however replied to my texted inquiry about test results.

“Your mother has complications from bacterial meningitis. She's in a coma.”  
She. Did. Not. Suffer. A. Stroke.

It was evening. I found the edge of my bed, knelt by it and wept my prayers. Second prayer in a year. My throat ached from prolonged sobbing. A message alert. Draining eyes too flooded for visibility, I pounced on the phone.

“All hope is not lost, my brother. Our God is a miracle worker.”

It was the doctor again, supporting and breaking my heart at the same time. His sudden spirituality meant empirical despair.

My life became a daily ritual of living intermittently on the edges of hope and desolation. Of making calls that made the heart beat faster with the emptiness of feedback. Of kneeling to pray and crying instead, without a word in supplication.

Sixth day of coma, my youngest brother’s message came, heightening my panic in a moment.

“Opee, Mum has woken up!”

Joy had come in the afternoon!

I called him immediately, desperate for details, but he wouldn’t pick up. Repeated calls ignored. Calm. They must be busy nursing the life that just returned. Give them time. Praises to God.

Suddenly another text message popped up on my phone screen from my immediate younger brother.

“Our mum is gone.”

I sat on the bathroom floor crying, letting the shower squirt all over me, as if to purge both mind and body, sorrow and dirt, into the drain. Sorrow—for my new, motherless state, and for Mum’s wasted endurance of pain. Herself

motherless at 2, she had mothered three boys into competent manhood. A lifelong existence in sacrificial labour, it ended at the fruiting of its own work, to my eternal grudge against Fate. “You are my favourite child”—a piercing, heartbreaking recollection, a lived truth that, in its own merit, renders any acceptance of her death a betrayal. I love my mother and my mother loves me. It has been nearly two years now, but I still spend lonesome nights grieving until sobs become the lullabies of a reluctant sleep. Philosophising. Rationalising that Mother is free, unaware of her death.

A week after her death, I travelled home to go see her corpse—also to see Father and discuss burial arrangements. Now in his seventies, age and a faded prosperity had consumed his animation. In the intervening years after I assumed leadership of the family, I had brokered a flickering peace between him and Mum. When I got home, I looked at him with a curiosity that probed his emotions. The man’s face was vacant, save for eyes cloudy with pterygium. He spoke with a detachment that belied bereavement.

At the morgue I saw Mum’s veins riddled with needle marks. The corpse is the summary of the life.

“She suffered too much!” I said to the mortician.

My mind keeps visions of that body, imageries of its mutilation by life. The image sits cross-legged at the edge of memory, quick in exacting sympathy, in sensationalising the injustice of a woman dying at 59 after onerous parental labour.

This laid to rest my belief in God. I opened my eyes to life and saw Mum working without a break. Each time we spoke, I would beg her to stop worrying and be happy, that my mandate was to wipe the tears of her turbulent marriage. She was always worried about me failing and, if I succeeded, she would worry

about the success slipping away. She fought hard for life; even her refusal of prompt medication was fuelled by her desire to live! It was so unfair for God to watch and let her die.

My drive for success suffered—there was no point striving for dreams anymore. Actualisation without her basking in the glory held no motivation. Being mostly indifferent to life and its material effects, I had been labouring for her and for family.

Living alone helped me cry uninterrupted by consolation, without siblings seeing the family's strongman cry. An exhaustive cry is the ultimate compassion.

But my drive is now revived, and with it my belief in God. Mum lived and died so that our family could amount to something. We have resolved not to let her down. For turning a truant into a bookworm, she gets the credit for my love of learning. Yet that learning carried a contradiction: at once a legacy to which she was totally dedicated, it was also a refinement to whose counsel she paid but occasional heed. My business drive came from my scholarship of her enterprise—from watching her extract value from fruitless trades. I have also inherited her discipline and refusal to keep silent in the face of inequity.

Her statue shall sit prominently in my compound as a monument of motherly heroism—in memory of that gap-toothed woman from Mbaise, two parents in one, who built a family for a man not in love with her, who loved me by habit, who could have brought down the sun for me. A woman resolute at all times, sometimes even when ill-advised, she lived and then left.



**An Eternity in Tangiers:**

**A Review**

*Agogho Franklin*

# An Eternity in Tangiers

Faustin Titi and Eyoum Ngangué

Translated by André Noffis-Sahely



At a time when much ink has been spilled and an abundance of news broadcasts dedicated to the demise of African ‘migrants turned slaves’ in Libya, *An Eternity in Tangiers* by Eyoum Ngangue and Faustin Titi serves as an adequate depiction of the plight of the African youth seeking to materialize their dream of a better life in the developed world. It is a sincere depiction of the dark side of migration, told the African way, and doing so in a graphic novel brings the entire affair to life in ways which other mediums cannot.

*An Eternity in Tangiers* is the story of Gawa, an African youth from the imaginary West African capital of Gnasville, who is stranded in the Moroccan seaside town of Tangiers, on his way to a ‘better life’ in Europe. How he gets to this situation constitutes the core of this story, which is told in forty-five illustrated pages.

The story opens with Gawa, gazing at the town of Tarifa in Spain from a balcony in Tangiers then reminiscing on how he got there. The rest of the story is narrated through flashback, depicting his journey from Gnasville to Tangiers, with momentary returns to the present.

While this narrative technique creates anxiety in the reader, it also hints at the fact that parts of the story were rushed. Consequently, some characters are not well developed. In a way, this graphic novel feels more like the work of the journalist that Eyoum Ngangue is, than that of a novelist.

Faustin Titi’s illustrations, on the other hand, are expressive. His style, which can be regarded as ‘African,’ deviates totally from popular styles like those of Manga, Franco-Belgian, and American comics. His illustrations shun the simplicity of manga, the cartoony look in Franco-Belgian comics, and the exaggerated anatomy in American styles for a realistic take that does a good job of depicting African characters and cities, such that they truly look African.

Titi's work is reminiscent of the cartoon illustrations one would find in African newspapers, but with a touch of realism. As such, one easily identifies with depictions such as the Hausa hawker selling watches and belts, street kids playing football on dusty roads, congested streets with narrow roads and ghetto-like neighbourhoods in sub-Saharan Africa, veiled Arab women and old men in turbans in the streets of Tangiers, and even colonial structures. Also, the decision to colour panels which recount the present and leave those that recount the past in black and white gives an interesting touch to the narrative. Moreover, the use of pale and sombre water colours gives a dark hue to the book, which falls in line with the seriousness of its subject matter.

Faustin Titi and Eyoum Ngangue's graphic novel relates issues that are very peculiar to contemporary Africa. Spurred on by poverty and political oppression amongst others, and full of lofty dreams, the protagonist and a host of other characters embark on a journey that lands them in an impasse on the shores of the Mediterranean, a boat ride away from the town of Tarifa in Spain, the land of their dreams.

It is a pity to see these characters sink deep into despair, just to survive while hoping to one day cross over to their chosen promised land, engage in activities that they would normally loathe. In their little room in Tangiers, one clearly sees the fatigue and melancholy on the characters' faces which mirrors poverty, despair, and the perilous situation in which they are soaked. The striking part of it all is how these characters' lives quickly move from manageable to scary.

In Gnasville, their hometown, the characters are oppressed, duped and forced to escape, and in Tangiers, they are exploited by other Africans and imprisoned. This leaves them with no other choice but to trek to the Mediterranean and drown in its waters. Life on these shores raises the question of the responsibility of the West vis-à-vis migration and the dangers thereof, as far as Africa is concerned. As Faustin Titi and Eyoum Ngangue insinuate in *An Eternity in*

*Tangiers*, it is always an easy ride for the Caucasian in sun shades who cruises into the Eldorado and leaves with natural resources, while for Africans who wish to travel to Europe in search of greener pastures, the story is always that of visa rejections. The precariousness of life!

*An Eternity in Tangiers* is not the first work to portray the demise of young Africans seeking to brave the odds for a better life in Europe. However, compared to other graphic novels by Cameroonians dealing with the theme of migration, like Christophe Ngalle Edimo and Al'Mata's *Les Tribulations d'Alphonse Madiba dit Daudet*, *An Eternity in Tangiers* succeeds to show the reader both sides of the coin: the difficult life back home and the danger which awaits those who attempt to migrate to greener pastures on foot. *Les Tribulations d'Alphonse Madiba dit Daudet* looks at the inner struggles of a protagonist who aims to leave his poverty-stricken life in Africa and fulfil his dream of migrating to a European country for a better life. Like *An Eternity in Tangiers*, this graphic novel highlights real problems faced by African states and warns prospective migrants that it is not always better in Europe. These graphic novels sound a warning to African governments to effectively tackle serious issues like corruption and nepotism and build better countries to prevent youths from cutting their lives short in the sands of the Sahara or the waters of the Mediterranean in search of greener pastures.

Although it is a fast read (it takes about fifty minutes to go from cover to cover), *An Eternity in Tangiers* succeeds to depict the dark side of immigration in ways which are interesting and profound, making the graphic novel a highly recommended read.



# *Poetry*

*Stanley Princewill McDaniels*

# Therapy

Sometimes,  
I wish there were more pictures  
on the wall, I wish there were more  
flowers, more  
colours.

I wish my world were more than  
sad poems & silence & walls, I wish  
my world were beautiful,  
like the image of an imaginary lover  
asleep  
on my chest.

My days are nothing  
but grey.

The car won't start.  
I'm not sure the wounds  
are truly healed but, I bless them  
with a prayer anyway,  
until the prayer grows into a road open  
like a mouth to the belly of a beer-parlour,  
& I drink to find my way  
out of the hospital.  
I come home to the walls.  
There are words on the walls  
instead of pictures.  
Ah, the walls! Always the walls!

I can't stand the walls.  
I thought I was out of prison?  
The car won't start.  
This is bad tea. This is really  
bad tea.  
You must first heal within  
  
before you heal without. &  
when you think you're okay,  
you begin to feel the after-taste  
of that wound – bad tea,  
I told you this was bad tea.  
Bad teas have residues at the bottom  
of the cup. They taste like bile.  
Sometimes, I wish there were pictures  
on the walls  
instead of words.  
I begin to write sad poems again,  
& do  
my own therapy.

## What's Left of a Broken Man

Welcome to the city  
of broken men, where  
our crime – our only  
crime, for which we are  
never forgiven – is to fall in love with another without a soft landing,  
then our broken pieces  
are gathered, & put in an  
ambulance. We tell the  
paramedic to head straight  
to the beer-parlour, because in this city, beer-parlours are hospitals,  
after all, alcohol stops  
the bleeding of wounds.  
Welcome to the city  
of broken men.

There are voices all over your body.  
Be quiet & let them sing, or talk.  
Let the voices become louder.  
Let the pain wear itself off like a drug.  
Feel its full reach. Let it ruin & comfort  
you because,

you will, first of all, lie to yourself,  
after which the truth begins to hit you  
like stones as if you were Stephen. Then  
you break accordingly, emotion by emotion, until  
there's nothing left to break except

your body. You are an empty building ready  
for demolition. The body truly remembers.

The body has a way of dealing with pain.  
It is like a warehouse. In this city, each day  
is a long & dry road without curves.

My room is brown & lifeless.

My room is dead! Dead! Dead! Dead, like a  
cellphone. From the bar, a voice without a body  
calls me into the mouth of the long road.

I take the last gulp of beer, & begin.

*Dane Cobain*

## The Sun Goes Down on Desborough

Finding time isn't easy,  
and talent goes to hide  
at the bottom of a well  
with rats and the skeletons.

We will all turn  
to chalk  
and be crushed  
at the centre of 100 suns,  
and I lie awake at night  
full of fear  
and convinced  
I'm going to die soon.

Well,  
I probably  
will do.

On the plus side  
I have free will  
and I can press my foot  
to the accelerator  
until the car rolls off  
the street  
into the sea.

It's stressful,

so stressful.

Sometimes  
it's not worth  
the effort.

I give up.  
We all should.

We're all just specks  
of dust  
in the darkness  
as the sun goes down  
on Desborough.

## Bang

A beautiful line

or two

split up

two to three

words per line

and then a

semicolon;

the refrain

from a

popular song

(yeah, she

loves you)

and then

a sudden

inexplicable

sensation.

Love!

Love

with a capital L

and an

exclamation mark!

A new stanza,

three lines

long.

Then the ideas  
die  
and all that's left  
is a slow  
descent  
into madness.

And of course  
a one-liner  
because you'd rather  
go out with a bang  
than with a whimper.

Bang

*Margot Block*

## Winter Drown

I am in the middle of two broken oceans  
as they cover my salted skin where I forget I am naked  
can I stay here forever in an act of limbo  
here in winter's cold  
the body all but dead  
my heart is thick  
ice trying to drill through  
to touch toughened pain  
I am falling away  
trying to breathe without choking  
somewhere in middle territory  
I am torn by my hurt and your hand  
bewildered by sounds that stretch my ears  
I drown softly, letting sounds fill me  
I conclude with a soft breath and a dream

*Leslie Meya*

## Tell Me Sorry

I don't know if they realize how much

I want them to tell me sorry!

I want them to tell me sorry, because

Their destructive words, and fights

affected me

It still does.

I don't know for how long,

I didn't realize how much.

We are told that it is

our tradition,

our bloodline is bound to

be violent

aggressive;

it is called home training

it is called submission

it is called respect

it is called love

Lies, all lies!

I am not any of this

Maybe I would have.

I didn't ask for this mental torture

I've tried wiping it out

But it still hurts me, it won't go— the pain wouldn't go.

I want them to tell me sorry,

They owe me that

My words testify the tumult in my heart  
In tumult, I tell myself I am not beautiful,  
My skin is too dark  
That I am not worth the wait  
And I have to compromise my moral values.  
I learned this from you;  
When you called me harlot  
When you called me irresponsible  
When you said you wouldn't accept my bride-price because I will be returned  
When you belittle my job because I don't sit in an office like most of my miserable  
friends.  
I didn't ask for this,  
I want you to tell me sorry  
You owe me that.  
These hurtful words broke me.

When I had a "D" in Maths, you said I was inattentive

You say why do I have too many male friends?  
Dear parents,  
You owe me for not allowing me build self-confidence like my brother  
He's a man and must succeed. Men must work,  
You said

Here he is, still working hard for your approval 10, 15, 20 years gone

No self-satisfaction, nothing to show for his hard work.  
You owe me for making me believe that at 25, I must be married and have kids  
If not I've failed.  
I fight everyday with myself as my biological clock ticks in my head,  
I panic and get depressed and you ask me why I am sad.  
You made me sad, you make me sad  
All I wanted was your love  
A pat on the back  
A firm manly grip  
It isn't that bad, huh  
God's time is the best  
Maybe  
Or Not  
I am doing just fine  
Tell me sorry you owe me that!

*Imhanguelo Angela*

## Unity in Diversity

As we gazed at the silvery moon  
Washed clean by the waves of time  
The four of us  
We sat on the shore  
Building a giant sea house  
And as we built  
The world stood still  
For she was amazed  
At the wonder we have created  
Even the moon, with its silvery lips  
Smiled faithfully

And then suddenly  
So suddenly  
The waves blew towards us  
It was so strong that we backed away  
It moved forward and then backward

And then  
There was nothing left  
Of our giant invention  
We were shocked  
The four of us

And as we dived towards recovery  
There was nothing

To remember of our giant sea house

For all that was left was the wave

That swept away our memories

Then

Each of us

With our different recollections

Began to build our sea houses

Separately

And as we built

The moon began to fade away

From the skies of hope

Even the world stopped staring

And continued to spin

And then

I began to ask myself

Where did we go wrong?

*Chinua Ezenwa-Ohaeto*

## **The Girl Who Taught Me How to Kiss**

The girl who taught me how to kiss

Drowned perfumes in her mouth.

Each of them was a memory.

The first was about a boy

Who raped mothers and killed the night with smokes.

The second was about a woman

Who caged her sometime ago

And rode her and then gave her water to wash off.

The third was about her other self

Who visited in her lonely nights and shared her bed with her

And weaved her hair into straws, covering a side of her stare.

*Abigail George*

## The people are first out in dawn's light (for the Dutch poet Joop Bersee)

Sometimes is it better to let it go. The  
glamour of early morning. Mother is  
summer rain. Father is a collection of  
burnt diaries. Photographs have been lost.  
Perhaps they're the real survivors in  
the end. The ocean, the light of day, the  
river, the moonlight is holy. The artist's  
sacred vision. I am long thin legs. Slender  
frame standing in the empty space of a  
bright green garden. I slice the red and  
green peppers. Red and green chillies  
alongside my brother in the kitchen. That night  
holding my pillow tight, tears taste metallic,  
and everything was a mantis-dance. I  
think of the Portuguese man in Johannesburg  
who gave me the eye. I don't want to  
be in this home. Perhaps it's time for me  
to leave again, and soon. The universe  
in which I lived once was better than this. I'm watchful.  
Concentrating on the invisible blue map drawn  
near winter-fingertips in the cold air. I  
think to myself that a bird's flight plan  
is intricate, but you're not here to hold  
me anymore. Perhaps it's time to leave soon.

I'm waiting for the storm to come. I pick the  
book up. I'm reading John Updike. I'm still waiting.

## After coming out after a long depression

(for the Eastern Cape poet Cwayita Hlohloza)

I wanted to say this. Just because we don't talk  
all the time on the telephone, or that we haven't  
seen each other in years doesn't mean I  
don't thank God for you in my life. For  
distributing my work among your cool friends.  
It doesn't mean I don't pray for your life  
Everyday. You're faith. You're faith. You're  
faith to me. You mean something to me.  
You've given my life a novel meaning. I  
write with purpose now. Because of you.  
Because of you, my friend. My beloved friend.  
Sometimes I think of you, faraway, knee-  
deep in your work. Loving a small child.  
You've been good to me. I want you to  
know that. That I've never forgotten your  
kindness. In the open air I'm reminded  
the rituals that you follow as a sangoma, and of course  
your writing rituals. Nature reminds me of  
you, your work. The images of ochre, earth  
and divine water spilling into the air. You  
don't know about the times I was a wreck  
in despair. A wreck in freaking-hardship.  
You don't know when I've been at my worst.  
Perhaps you only see the phenomenal-me.

The me that doesn't seem to get hurt by anything. For me everyone is phenomenal at something in their life. Smart at something. You gave me something I've never forgotten. Life. Freedom. I met this Catholic nun at Tara. She was in her eighties. There for the same reason I was. She was depressed. Her brother was the curator of a museum in Germany. She still had the German-accent after living for most of her adult life in South Africa. After supper at 5 o'clock we would go for a long walk. You're like that nun to me. She (like you) gave me a new lease on life. She taught me how to live again after coming out of another long depression. Now, I rinse the noble grains of rice clear. So focused on what I am doing and I wonder if you perhaps are doing the same thing. I rinse the rice under the cold-water tap, and I want to tell you this (but you're so far away). That you're an amazing poet and that you your life inspires me.

*Kwoh Elonge*

## Where We Are

They came here sometime in the dawn

Cocks could not crow

Necks clogged by mucus

From eating ashy bodies

Buried in the smog of fire and dust.

They came in trucks

Marching in a single file

Spurting petrol on flesh, wood and concrete

We flee like ash

Blown by wild winds

You feel light

You feel heavy

Foam doused in a pot of water

Waiting for time to come to the rescue.

We die before we die.

When we die,

There will be hope

There will be anarchy

Perched on vast plains of ashen earth

Where elephants moved like cargo

With chains at their angles

Rifles pointed from behind

# Contributors

Pushcart Prize nominated **Abigail George** is a South African blogger, essayist, poet, short story writer, and aspirant novelist. She briefly studied film at the Newtown Film and Television School in Johannesburg. She has just completed her first novel. She is the writer of e-books available for free download from Ovi Magazine: Finland's English Online Magazine's bookstore ("All About My Mother", "Brother Wolf and Sister Wren"), poetry books ("Africa Where Art Thou", "Feeding the Beasts"), collections of short stories ("Winter in Johannesburg", "Sleeping Under the Kitchen Tables in the Northern Areas"), a young adult experimental novel ("A Soul On Fire"), and novellas ("The Scholarship Girl", "Chapters and Parts of a Young Girl's Life").

**Ucheoma Onwutuebe** is a Nigerian writer whose work has appeared in Brittle Paper, Prairie Schooner, Lip Magazine Australia, Sentinel Nigeria, Y!Naija and a bevy of other outlets. She blogs at <http://www.ucheomaonwutuebe.blogspot.com>.

**Howard M-B Maximus** is a staff writer at Bakwa Magazine. He is currently working on a short story collection and novel.

**Stanley Princewill Mcdaniels** is a Nigerian poet and a 2016 Ebedi International Residency fellow, whose poems have appeared on Brittlepaper, African Writer, Bakwa Magazine, Kalahari Review, Lunaris Review, Tuck Magazine, Praxis Magazine Online, and elsewhere. His poetry chapbook, Entrapment, is available for download on Praxis.

**Chinua Ezenwa-Ohaeto** (@ChinuaEzenwa) is from Owerre Nkwo-orji in Nkwere, Imo state, and a lover of literature. He has won the Association Of Nigerian Author's Literary Award for Mazariyya Ana Teen Poetry Prize, 2009; Speak to the Heart Inc. Poetry Competition, 2016. He became a runner-up in Etisalat Prize for

Literature, Flash fiction, 2014 with *I Saved My Marriage*. Recently, he won the Castello di Duino Poesia Prize for an unpublished poem, 2018. And some of his works have appeared in *Lunaris Review*, *AFREADA*, *Kalahari Review*, *Praxis magazine* and *Elsewhere*.

**Agogho Franklin** is a holder of a Master's Degree in International Relations and a Bachelor's Degree in English Modern Letters. In 2016 he won first prize in the national short story contest organised by the Ministry of Arts and Culture of the Republic of Cameroon. An avid lover of fiction and creative non-fiction, Agogho Franklin writes short stories, poetry and comic book scripts.

**Dane Cobain** (High Wycombe, UK) is a published author, freelance writer, book blogger, poet and (occasional) musician. His releases include *No Rest for the Wicked* (supernatural thriller), *Eyes Like Lighthouses When the Boats Come Home* (poetry), *Former.ly* (literary fiction), *Social Paranoia* (non-fiction), *Come On Up to the House* (horror) and *Subject Verb Object* (anthology).

**Leslie Meya** is a Cameroonian with a passion for words and sounds. Less than a year on stage, she's been able to deliver outstanding performances at spoken word events around Cameroon. She dreams of taking the world to her feet with nothing but her voice and words. She is the host of *Bakwa Magazine's* podcast, *Bakwacast*.

**Isabella Morris** is an award-winning South African writer who holds a Master's degree in Writing from the University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa (2007). She has contributed feature and travel articles to mainstream South African newspapers, was a contributor of short fiction pieces to "Looking for Gold" on Radio Cairo (English Service) during 2011, and a contributing editor of *African-Writing Literary Journal* (UK). Her numerous short stories have been published widely and are currently being translated into Arabic.

**Olubunmi Familoni** writes plays, screenplays, and short fiction. His debut collection of stories, *Smithereens of Death*, won the ANA Prize for Short Stories in 2015; his play, *Every Single Day*, was part of the Lagos Theatre Festival in 2016. His works have appeared in *Afrdiaspora*, *Kikwetu Literary Journal*, *Ake Review*, *Outcast Magazine*. He works on radio in Ibadan, Nigeria, and he is working on a second collection of stories.

**Ani Kayode Somtochukwu** is a short story writer and poet. His work has appeared in magazines such as *Tuck Magazine*, *Enkare Review*, *Getrude* and *After The Pause*. His flash fiction, 'Dope Delivery' was a finalist for the Dublin Brilliant Flash Fiction Contest and his poems were shortlisted for the 2017 Erbacce Poetry Prize. He is currently studying Applied Biology at the Enugu State University of Science and Technology.

**Margot Block** has been writing since the age of fourteen and has been published in *Zygote Magazine*, *Contemporary Verse 2*, *Juice*, *the Collective Consciousness*, *Grub Street Literary Magazine* and the online journals *BlazeVox* and *Kaleidoscope Online*. She participated in a high school mentorship program sponsored by the Manitoba Writers Guild, working with Canadian poet, Carol Rose. She won first prize in a poetry contest sponsored by the Writer's Collective and an honorable mention in a context sponsored by the Lake Winnipeg Writers Group.

**Imhanguelo Angela** was born in Lagos State, Nigeria. She is currently studying English and Literature at the University of Benin, Benin City, Nigeria. She is a satiric poet and a nationalist who hopes to become the President of her country someday.

**Kwoh B. Elonge** is a Cameroonian journalist, writer and researcher. He runs the Cameroonian online magazine "Unfiltered". When he is not writing, he googles Christopher Hitchens!