

Why We Were Walls and New Openings

*An Anthology of art and writing from the
Creative Writers' Club ABU Zaria*



curated and edited by

HANEEFAH

ABDULRAHMAN

*Why We Were Walls
and New Openings*



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Published in Nigeria.

Konya Shamsrumi Press
40, 23 Crescent, 2nd Avenue,
EFAB City Estate,
Life Camp,
Abuja.

www.shamsrumi.org

Cover Design: Carl Terver

Cover Art: *Here Is Home* by Khadeejah Ibraheem Nuhu

Curated and edited by Haneefah Abdulrahman

Konya Shamsrumi Supervising Editors: Carl Terver & Suur Su'eddie Vershima Agema

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FOREWORD

This anthology is another confirmation of literature as the reflection of existence. All entries here are birthed by emotions, sacredness, motion, art, anxiety, ambitions, the need to tell tales untold, the need to set words unspoken free and all that is invoked by existence itself; the need for expression.

In this anthology are art works, photography and visual art, short stories and poems from past chairpersons, members and high profile professors who were part of ABU Creative Writers' Club, and are still very supportive when it comes to the club. Some of the contributors are as well members of the Hill-Top Creative Arts Foundation, Kaduna branch.

The Creative Writers' Club has always been a safe space for creatives. Thus, when I decided to call for submissions and publish this anthology in collaboration with Konya Shamsrumi, I decided that the contributors will not only be from my era of being the chairperson (from 2021-2023), so I reached out to past chairpersons, club members, and even those who are now high profile professors in and outside ABU Zaria, to send their entries. I am grateful to those who answered to my call. Working with the CWC's Editor-in-chief, Onah Godday has always been amazing; patience and hard work has always been qualities he has, which is evident in the impeccable work he does. Special thanks to Umar Abubakar Sidi for making the collaboration with Konya Shamsrumi on the publication of this anthology possible. Working with the Konya Shamsrumi Digital Editions Editor, Carl Terver, on this project also made it easier. I appreciate our Patrons Dr. Isah Ibrahim, Professor A. A Liman, Mallam Denja Abdullahi, and others, for their unwavering support.

Humankind can never be deprived of creativity for it is the best way to interpret life, and to communicate. It is never tired of filling in the blank spaces that seem to be unending. Here is another anthology that marks the immortality of writers.

Haneefah Abdulrahman
Chairperson,
Creative Writers' Club A.B.U Zaria
2021–2023

EDITORIAL NOTE

In this alluring anthology of literary works, we have presented a masterful blend of multiple genres and themes, ranging from artworks, poetry, stories, essays and more; with themes exploring and spinning anything interesting you can think of: family, politics, food, advice, disability, depression, (in)security, and more. Each individual work in this collection opens up a new page of possibilities, experiences and engagements, ranging from the façade that has masked and undermined our society and safety, to the pain of infirmities and depression, the horrendous thought that beclouds and accompanies the life of the disabled, to the more cheerful and appetitive nature of food and its aroma.

This anthology is sometimes meditative and sometimes free, playfully journeying you through a reading leisure. Other times, it is tense, hot like a peppery dish that threatens to blow off the roof of your mouth, yet you can't help but crave it more.

What gives the anthology strength is its variety and universality in theme and genre. No matter what genre or theme you are a fan of you will find a resonating page.

We are proud to present this anthology by CWC A.B.U that showcases the power of creativity in its most diverse, yet unique form. The variety of voices in the work reminds us of the infinite possibilities of literature and how wonderfully it can impart the reader.

We invite all, lovers and non-lovers of literature alike, to immerse themselves in this literary sojourn, embracing the unknown and revealing the sheer light of discovering the unexpected.

We wish you happy reading.

Message from the Patron, ABU Creative Writers' Club

It was about the time I became the president of the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA) in 2015 that I was appointed as a patron of the ABU Creative Writers' Club. I remember receiving a letter from the club to that effect and an announcement of that in the social media space. The explanation I was given for my appointment was that Alhaji Abubakar Gimba of blessed memory, who was once a president of ANA, was once a patron, possibly until his demise. The club felt as the sitting president of ANA then, I could step into his big shoes. Some elements, who were my opponents during my contest for ANA presidency in 2015, and who happened to have attended ABU, raised an objection to my appointment as a patron, hinging it on the fact that I never attended ABU. The leadership of the club was quick to discountenance that mischief and carried on relating with me as their respected patron.

Over the years I did my modest best in supporting the club in my own ways as a patron and as the various presidents of the club reached out to me. I may not be able to recall their names and faces today but it was a fact that successive earnest and diligent presidents of the club in the past had unfettered access to me and I gave them and the club the necessary support and encouragement I could muster. Going by the offices I have occupied in government and in the literary community for about three decades now, I have had a litany of mentoring relationships with countless literary and cultural clubs across the country and with brilliant young writers at home and abroad. I can boast today that I have mentored a lot of persons in the literary field, some of whom have become professors, notable award winning writers and remarkable theatre artists, who have, in turn, mentored or are mentoring others.

The only thing I regret not having the chance to do in my years of being a patron to ABU Creative Writers' Club is the fact that I have not physically visited the Club in the ABU campus. The last time I was at ABU Campus in Samaru was when my play *Death and the King's Grey Hair* was staged at the ABU Drama Village in 2015. By then I had not become a patron of the club

but I thoroughly enjoyed my stay in the campus overnight to watch the production and afterwards. My having not visited is for reasons we all know, our roads have become so unsafe to ply for years now; you make a journey only when it is absolutely necessary and with prayers not too far from your lips.

I commend all the past leaders of the club, including the outgoing one led by Haneefah Abdulrahman. I have watched the activities of the club and have closely monitored online some outstanding individuals within the club; including a niece of mine doing so well as a performance poet and whom I started mentoring actively before she got admitted into ABU. I will say to all of you in the club that you are on the right track; the same path most of us with names today in the field followed many decades ago as students. The world awaits your brilliant contributions to a better society through your arts and noble acts.

Mallam Denja Abdullahi, ANA, NPOM

Poet, playwright and theatre director

Former President, Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA)

Patron, ABU Creative Writers' Club

Photography and Visual Art



Ibrahim Ajani Lawal, *Flower and Fantasies*

Flower and Fantasies is a monochrome painting of a maiden with tender look. Using acrylic on glossy card; symbolically, the lady is a metaphor for natural, virginal, untouched, and well-nurtured flower in the peony. However, out of her prime, she appears completely lost in thought of hope and aspirations in her mind. Her imaginary world holds on to rainbow, beholds beauty yet, aspires to uphold the roses life tends to offer. Despite the strokes, curves, sun, chaps, cracks, and heart breaks she faces at the blink of womanhood, still she becomes tender-hearted that if she loves, she loves for real in her intuition.

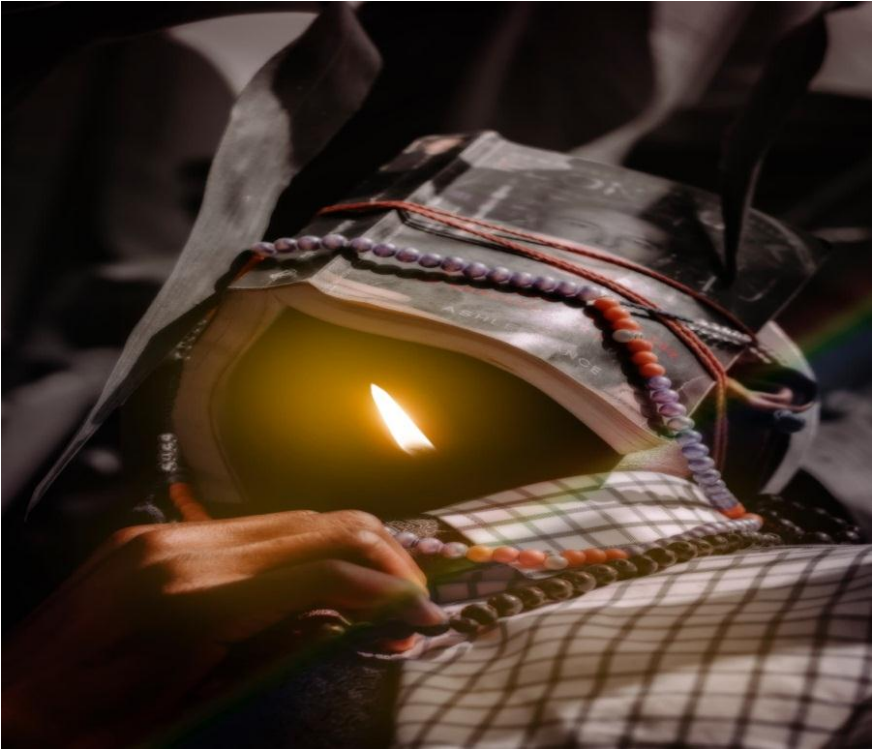
Ibrahim Ajani Lawal (known by his penname: Hajani Hibard) is a Nigerian visual artist, poet, painter, writer, freelancer and a student of the Department of English and Literary Studies, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. As both favourite and finalist of many national and international creative accolades; his works include short stories, poems and painting photographs in Paper Lanterns Journal, Wheelsong Anthology, CONSCIO Magazines, The Quills, WSA Magazine, NSPP 2022 Anthology, Fitrah Review, Feral journal and elsewhere. He loves many little things that make senses. His social media handles is @Hajani_Hibard.



Suleiman Fateh, *Ripples of Time*

Three fishermen and their canoe, casting memories into the reflections of Gubi Dam, where a lone rock stands as a silent witness to the tales of the waters.

Suleiman Fateh is not just a photographer; he's an enchanting storyteller who weaves visual tales through the lens. Specializing in the alchemy of portrait, wedding, and documentary photography, Suleiman's work transcends the ordinary, delving into the realm of emotion and narrative. With a magical touch, he transforms everyday moments into extraordinary, captivating snapshots that evoke a sense of wonder and nostalgia. His lens captures the poetry of life, infusing each image with a blend of artistry and raw authenticity.



Aliyu Muhammad Bashar, *Illumination*

Aliyu Muhammad Bashar, also known as Blackhydar, is a portrait and documentary photographer.



Yussuf Uthman Olawale, *Hidden*

*In the pouring rain, he walked alone,
Hoodie hiding his face, his feelings unknown.
Turning his back to the world so unkind,
Seeking solace, hoping he will find peace*

Yussuf Uthman Olawale is an engineering student, a poet, sketch artist who has a deep appreciation for the power of words. When he's not penning verses that touch the soul, he is often on the football field, displaying his agility and passion for the beautiful game. Off the pitch, Uthman delves into the world of novels, losing himself in captivating stories that transport him to different realms. With a heart full of

creativity and a spirit fueled by athletic pursuits, Uthman's life weaves poetry, football, and literature into a mesmerising tapestry.



Bilkisu Kabir, *I Am Mimosa*

Mimosa flower is a symbol of female strength, sensibility, and sensitivity. It is powerful, humble and beautiful just like the women.

The inspiration behind this design came from my beautiful client who is jovial and possessed a bit of authority, she asked for something alluring and attractive and I gave her a design of beautiful flowers and titled it “I am mimosa” which defines her character and her request.

Bilkisu Kabir, also known as Ameerah, is an artist born and a graduate of Air force Institution of Technology Kaduna in International Relations. She

is a landscape painter, craft, drawing and a henna tattoo artist based in Kaduna and also a member of Hilltop Creative Art Foundation, Kaduna.

Art is a talent and a hobby that brings peace and joy to her, which allow her express herself and also portray the nature.

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Khadeejah Ibraheem Nuhu, *Here Is Home*

What do I tell them when they ask of my first home?

The walks, the talks or the banter?

The gleams in the sky

Or the poems in the hearts?

Your eyes that speak of care

Or the lips that glint with love?

What do I tell them

Khadeejah Ibraheem Nuhu is a Kaduna based poet, aspiring writer and a self-taught mandala artist. She holds a National Diploma in food technology from Kaduna State Polytechnic. Khadeejah started her journey of writing in 2018 and her multifaceted interest is focused in constituting space and distance that feels like the conversant world around us.

Her works have appeared in Dreamy world anthology, Kaduna Hilltop Creative Art Foundation's INKED anthology, Willi Wash magazine. She has performed at Kaduna Fashion and Art Exhibition (KAFART) 2021. She is the assistant Secretary of Hilltop Creative Art Foundation, Kaduna branch and also the member of JCI Kaduna Polytechnic chapter, Poets of Tumbin Giwa, Stogie words and Nations Peace Foundation.

Poetry

Farewell to Set 2017

by Professor Edward Abah

The Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria
The Behemoth Citadel in the sprawling Savanna
The foremost seat of Knowledge south of the Sahara
This Ivory Tower in the tropics
Spanning its colossal expanse
In full glare of the tropical sun
Performs what is supposed to be a yearly ritual
Scores of eager looking and feisty
Youngsters
Have come to the end of their programmes
Now the toga of graduate has been foisted on them
Thousands are to be unbowelled into the embrace of the society

Taking stock and gazing backwards
2017 was a year, fresh, green, eager and promising
It was a mixed bag and a roller coaster journey
Long and windy has been the trajectory since
Perplexing, even confusing was the terrain
Frustration was not far from the surface
The unending classes
The C.A Tests and Assignments
The carryovers, the good scores and grades.
Then the nebulous COVID 19 pandemic
With the ASUU strike right on its heels
The many months and years out of school

Three years or four years
The admission letters embossed categorically
Five it became for some, six it was for most
Through the long, uncertain years
The instructions on creative and advanced compositions

The lessons on creative lying and fiction
The engagement with theories and the philosophers
And the moral philosophizing and Nationalism
The term papers and the long projects
Then the semester examinations

Now the adventure is at its end
The long journey is at its terminal point
Now exiting the shores of ABU
Sometimes you wonder
So much do you ponder
What is yonder?
At the end, will you wander?

Is the Hons degree, the reward, a trophy for all the toil and effort?
Is it a piece and baggage for all seasons?
Is it a magic wand?

Let me beat the drums for you
Like the town crier of old
Let me prepare your mindset
For the sight to behold
Outside of the campus, outside of its precinct

The world is bemused at your sudden appearance
It gazes at you, the graduate, in a strange way
So uncomfortable it is at your sight
You, full of knowledge
Knowledge from book learning
Of long hours in class and on campus
But are you worldly wise?

In place of the warm embrace
Even encomiums, even ululation for conquering ignorance
For furthering the barriers of knowledge

Then will come the thunderous response
“Not now was supposed to be your return”
“Not now?” You ask in befuddlement,
“When?” your innocence is unmistakable
The answer is hesitant, almost inaudible
“We thought we will prepare for your return”
“How?” you will ask.
“With jobs, with gainful employment” the answer is bellowed
“This sounds encouraging, even noble” you will retort
“But what is stopping this from happening”
Long silence is all you will get in response
And then feebly comes the reply
“You came back too soon”
You are impatient, your body begins to convulse
You could only stammer
“You wanted us to...to remain in school forever?”
“No!”
“We thought you will give us more time
We wanted to plan, to strategise
See what the situation of previous graduates have been
Their presence has given us visual constipation
What we devour as meals has refused to digest
Our hairs have gone grey and our heads even bald
We seek, agonise for answers to their never-ending stares”

“What then should we do”
Silence! Silence!! Silence!!!
When silence is loud
When loud silence is the unspoken response
When mum becomes the norm
It is also unequivocal as an answer
What then do you do?

You cannot fling your hands in the air
You cannot just succumb to despair

There has to be another way after the storm
A confluence of thoughts, of musings, of inspiration
Find and meander their ways
Like a stream through your consciousness
Put into words, they are forming a clear pattern of thought
A line of action is crystalizing

“Go back in time to your varsity days
Become everything that school taught you about
Be creative, be imaginative, be resourceful, be resilient
A quick-fix solution is never in sight
Should not even be an option
Take one step at a time
Could be a business endeavour
Could be an exploration of a latent talent
Even a teaching appointment for a start
Not minding so much the remuneration
Do not break the chain of friendship
That years at school have caused to fruition
You never can tell
Where an opening, a meal ticket, a destiny changer will come from
What about taking the universe as your canvass?
What with the internet
This can unhinge unexpected doors
Whatever the case do not court idleness
Manna will not come from heaven in this age and time”

“Good things don’t come easy
Delayed gratification should be your watch-word
Pray, often, it does not harm you in anyway
Do not despair
Befriend self-belief, in all cases
Have faith
Your Bachelor’s degree can be your meal ticket for ever
More schooling will be welcome

But whatever comes after this attainment will simply be a bonus”

Crest-fallen and downcast

You ask

“Is this some sort of warning or what?”

“No! Not at all” is the rebuttal

“But there’s still the NYSC programme to be attended to” you press
further

“Oh! That is, nice” is the soft reply

“Does that not present a viable outlet?”

Or is it merely some kind of palliative?” you are unable to mask your
eagerness

“Exactly! a stop-gap measure at best” is the succinct reply

“One last thing” the voice jolts you to attention

“This is only sounding a word of caution

Some kind of admonition

It is only tampering your unbridled excitement

Take this session as a companion for the long, long, journey, ahead of
you”.

Farewell set 2017

Edward Abah

Professor of English (LITERATURE)

Ahmadu Bello University

Zaria-Nigeria

In Silence

by Isah Ibrahim (Phd)

In silence the wickedness
of Man is licensed at the
Checkpoint of arrogance
In silence the pain of patience
Drinks the ink of intolerance
In silence the whirlwind of love rests in the ancient gourd of marriage
In silence the moon of love deflowers the sky of hatred
In silence, equally in silence, the traffic light of accident
Okays the embers of death
In silence the siren of death
Devours the candle of life
Oh! In silence my days are gone
So as my world of poetry
And death oh lord! In silence my dirge would be sung so as the seeds of
my non-existence
In silence, oh in silence, all will tread my silent departure

Mama's Name

by Hassana Umoru Maina

I will remember to teach my children my name
To make sure they feel the weight of it
Watch their little tongues swirl as they pronounce
Not Umma or Mummy
But my name
So, when I get erased by surname
And lineage
When history is not kind to me
And my heritage erased with one question
'Where are you from?'
They will remember their mama's name
My existence will not be reduced to the softness of my back
The warmth of my arms
The smile in my eyes as howls escape through my lips
I will not only be found through stories of sacrifice and pain
Of undiluted adoration and sainthood
It will be said that through my name
I lived!

Crippled Barracks

by Ogasele Sese Clement

I'm a bloody civilian on watch
At the peak of the mountain, standing tall with my armour
Watching dramatically, one eye opens
The bloody bulldogs ride in with their motorcycles
In hundreds, they skillfully display
Speaking in the language of apes
Gently they attack the punishment house
Freedoms to hyenas, there I stumble on cracked rock.

I'm a bloody civilian on watch
At the top of Zuma Rock with my arse cracks
Fantastically, those beasts drive in
Carefully and tactically bring down our men on khaki
Perfectly doing and going!!!Tears flow, blood flow.

I'm a bloody civilian on watch
Sitting at the echelon of granny's thatch hut
Smiling at the moving train
There come the iguanas
Sprout out their automatic firearm
Blood flowing south-west
Marching towards the deepest uncultivated track of trees
Thrashing with bulala!

I'm a bloody civilian on watch
Sitting at the electric pole, solo songs from the electrify
That tiniest ant snappishly passes, van of foodstuffs offloading
Cry of cries, tears of pity flow.

I'm a bloody civilian on watch
Resting on my grandpa's couch

Like cartoons of shrimps, we the school munchkins detaching and
flagellating
The unfortunate on the verge of not returning, oh ransoms!
The banter of chest and sipping of fingers
The armoured bearers' siege.

We Want Everything, We Want the Grave Or Why We Should All Be Dead

By Isah Saleem

we have a proclivity towards self-hurt.

give a people a torch with which to
guide themselves and it would lead
to their immolation.

everything
with us is a chain reaction.

examine that these boomerangs
only fly forward to knock down
its thrower.

every
instance of an apocalypse
begins with a thumb on a button.

the saying “give
a man fire and he uses it to torch other
people’s houses” has to be a thing.

the wrongness has gone in circles
only to feel right—fallen sculptures,
napalm-sunscreen, firewood for the flame.

it is unhealthy, but
if truth is health, i have given everything up.

this morality purchased on shores
of hearts caged in like birds, let free
like birds.

it wouldn't even be as depraved if we were
born with it.

once, we were angels. cupidous
cherubs robust with goodness and fluff,
until we reached for it.

we were created to reach
for the terriblest stuff.

psychology teaches that the human
mind attaches more to broken things.

that is it.

that is all
i have to say about humanity.

today,
a century after the theory of evolution
we still learn
that we switched skins but are
still reptilian—our brains shouting,
just me only me death to you and
life to me.

what does life matter
without the next person?

it is why we have to die.

Serenade of Sizzles

by Tijani Farida

In the realm of culinary wonders, behold a tale I weave,
A poem of love for food, where tastes and sounds conceive.
From kitchen to table, where passion's flame ignites,
Let's celebrate this cuisine with flavourful delights.
Sizzle and crackle, hear the palm oil's dance,
As it meets the hot pan, in a vibrant romance.
Plantains, golden and ripe, with a hiss they fry,
Their caramelised melody, a treat for the eye.
Pounded yam, pounded with might and grace,
Thuds on the mortar, like a rhythmic embrace.
Egusi soup bubbling, seeds popping in delight,
Creating a symphony of flavours, morning 'til night.
Jollof rice, my heart's anthem, a sizzling sensation,
Tomatoes and peppers, in harmonious collaboration.
Each grain speaks softly, as it dances in the pot,
Whispers of smoky aroma, a taste that hits the spot.
The sound of suya sizzling, on the open flame,
Meat and spices mingling, igniting the taste buds' acclaim.
Skewers turned with care, their sputtering tune,
A chorus of flavour, beneath the vibrant moon.
Ginger and garlic, chopping with a rhythmic beat,
Their aroma fills the air, a fragrant retreat.
Stirring taushe with a spoon, a melody of swirls,
As the soup thickens, harmony unfurls.
Okra, sliced with precision, with a gentle snap,
Into the pot it goes, with a tender tap.
The sound of laughter, as friends gather near,
Sharing glasses of zobo, with a joyful cheer.
In the kitchen's embrace, where memories are made,
Different flavours sing, an orchestral cascade.
For food is more than nourishment, it's a cultural art,

A harmony of tastes that stir the soul and heart.
Let us revel in the sounds of this melodious cuisine,
A vibrant palette of flavors, a feast fit for a queen.
From the clinking of pots to the sizzling stews,
My love for food and cooking forever renews.

Intimation

By Hajani Hibard

Panion who partakes or takes part in a ship
On the voyage to an utopic rejuvenation.
So life is another means to become a hopeful itinerant
Who retreats inherited destitution for a crumb of looming remnant
Or shall we find another destination back to our former state of nature?
In this about-to-famished land of our desert dreams
Amusement foregrounds. Anguish sprouts out. Both turn perennials
Petals are rotten. Butterflies fend in vain.
The cactus stands still in our swamp, ready to pierce the blooms-
Every Spring's moon that comes, comes with sky tearing cries
And there are always lively seeds burried to germinate
Without a scarecrow, never to hurl the birds
To a different fields, and the uppermen ambush – fluttering
To make their nest, and emptiness out of our new harvest.
Outside, there are lowmen swinging beyond the roadmap
As every epoch demands for their breaths and curses their bread
Thinking that if hope is renewed struggles won't continue...
Now another callous quota has been put in place. And yet
We move towards a stale destiny that has no distance
To final abode.

A Daughter's Wish

By Bilkisu Aliyu

I will tell you a story of a young woman,
With every clock tick,
Her mom and dad would argue.
Their quarrels faded the orange painting
Of their home to blue.
Each day, the flames grew intense,
Once she thought of scaling the fence.
Isolated with her siblings in a cell.
Devastated and powerless.
To her distress, she could not showcase her bluntness.
Led to the final they departed.

The egg and sperm that fertilised her,
Sailed on different boats.
She sailed behind her egg despite the waves,
To a far island with several caves.
But her egg's cave was not welcoming,
He calls her mom names of diverse meanings.
Tattoos of frustration on her mother's skin,
yet she ignored it.
The saltiness of her tears was like ocean water,
Many times she tried to quit.
The zygote situation is disheveled like puzzle pieces.
Each time she tries to voice out, her words freeze.

Her clouds mustered the courage to make rain.
A single soul was ready to hear her complain.
So calm not with disdain.
He sat like a snowman,
Mute as the graveyards
And she said,

I wish my mother bore a lion before me.
One that would defend its territory,
One that when he roars, it trembles the family.
Oh! I wish my mother bore a lion before me

Vertebrata

by Bilkisu Aliyu

She is the strength of the home,
Nourishing with her milk,
She nurtures each flesh and blood.

The home's blanket, soft as rabbit fur,
The garden scented with roses,
She wipes windows, paints walls,
Her buffet delights taste buds.

Not like every woman.
She informed me how I was formed from within,
Inheriting every gene,
Why do I have sugar groups
And molecules inside my DNA
telling me the hidden secret behind my adrenaline
That's why when I nudge danger
I am seen running.

She is the backbone of medicine,
An art piece woven by scientists,
But the kernel of discipline offered by the three musketeers.
Her homesteads flow with the currents of Ganji and Nile's arteries,
She is an artist, bringing symphony to the home.

She embodies physiology,
Without her, the puzzle remains incomplete,
A woman of intriguing beauty and explicit simplicity.

This Malady

by Ogala Theodora

This mind is troubled with quest of desperation
Her soul is puzzled by the waves from passions
She had grown to liberate her dear spirit from hell
But what she ran from hunted her to her own well

Daily I am disguised by the ugly surface of failure
In this dilemma with no path I could have secure
I lived in fears that bewildered my soul with hate
I swam in the pool that overwhelmed me to date

Just as my eyes sees through her way in the dark
I'm placed in the desperate pool that only barks
This wholesome liberty is nothing I could taste
As my self pants after the race that ran in a haste

This malady polluted my joy by her stinky sound
She gave a box of fear unwrapped to her ground
Where I am slayed by this her antagonising force
Where I am eaten by the bugs without a resource

I am a prey devoured by her for her race ran after
My downfall which triggered this pained laughter
That scorned me to her fate with no remedy I see
That mocked me to her feet in threatened degree

I became the prisoner of heart with no freedom
Captured in this odd rules of her stinky kingdom
Where my failure increase to the fault that arises
Where my fears sought after me as the dawn ices

Now afflicted by her thunderous voice of doubts

Drenched by her rain that stops from my mouth
Riding over my life without a consent or an ahead
For her yield has tampered the good of my bread

A servant to her rod with no mercy I could have
A master to no seeds of peace that I could carve
For this body is rumped in pieces that made all
My efforts for stability worthless even to her call

I became a stench to this same idea I created
Conspired by her deeds to wipe me the rejected
I became the haunted for going for what I hunted
I became an enemy for seeking my desire wanted

This malady stole this goodness with not a spare
I could rely on where this boundaries I try to dare
She took the scent that instilled the peace I crave
For I'm not willing to fall or be marred to her grave

Her Eyes, the White Portion of Our Flag

by Aboo Haneefah

The flag of our Nation flaps in her eyes,
Like the blooming of the rain lilies,
That alarm the arrival of the rainy sky.
In Zamfara orphanage, Asma weeps,
And prays for the peace and unity

Her nectareal sweat attracts butterflies,
On the days she penetrates the sunbeams.
But I blanket myself with her scent,
Away from the ones who call me a saint.

And away from the people of her town,
Who walk with naked bleeding swords.
So I tremble for my hyena heart,
But her gait gestures my legs to halt.

Her voice, the morning flute of our state,
Which scratches the ears of Wazobia.
She wears Paradise and extinguishes hell,
With thick comforting stylistic veils.

Berceuse

by First Lady

Dedicated to Michael Echeruo

i.

Now the moon goes down
into the canyon
beyond the hills
the broods will be going.

Soon the first cock will crow,
The first clay-pot be laid out,
And the first finger ready to be licked.

Kids and dogs and sheep
Beside the hearth
Wake before all reproach.

ii.

Let the cock crow
In your ears
By the playground sands
Under a quarter of the sun.

As the moon had died again,
In the dark canyon
Beyond our loves;
Beyond the high arched origin
Of the short demon tree.

iii.

Then it was your mid-night ,
And silent love was in your eyes.

Now the moon has set;
The shining sun is set to shine again--
A Most maidenly quarter sun.

Nomad

by Musa Bin Ibrahim Newland

Tell the sacred dust
Who welcomes me
Despite griminess
Of my sinful soul

Tell the pathetic sun
Who smiles on my path
And say nay to dullness
Of the sporadic guest

Tell the modest companion
Who hangs out with me one in glove
And tranquilises me to feel at home
Despite alone and alone I walk

Tell the reliable map
Who bolds his contour
So even when I'm lost
I'll be found safe

Tell the blowing airs
Who whisper their cold breeze
Through harshness, calmness of my days
Grateful all I'm to them!

For Sinners and Saints

by A.A. Labaran

she is a conquest
for sinners and saints
a snip to their insincerity and faith
which
have them conclude
that if there be anything really like fate
then it'd be losing her at the end
after all highs have been attained
and all wounds have been sustained

Almagyri

by Adams Apan Philip

Under the nude sky you wake with
Soft smiles stripping into depression
Your bowl grumbles greetings
It is starving

Your rags you wish you could again grab
For some more nap
Under the ripped nets
Ripped sheets
Ripped roof
Ripped life

Your mind outpaces
You to the streets
Scouring for divination
Your stomach itch for scratch
Nothing to live on

Visibly obscure to sight
You tread the sun and the rain
Gold and rust you know not
Piteous
You wait a Jesus to pass by
Has no one power to heal you

Hunger you chant
Chirping like late night drunks
With salivating livers
Haunting your anthems again and again
Just in case you were not loud enough

You brood proudly on rejects and remnants
Stumbling at any queue
Lice breed comfortably at your fingertips
You can hear your stomach grumble
It is big from nothing
It cannot even carry the weight of your pants

You eat anything that does not kill now
Your body is finely decorated
With bones protruding
Coated with sweat and dirt
Striped by patched rags
That undauntedly display what you veil
Carcass of a concertina chest
Your pads are horny from your daily trudge
Leaving your soles with holes
Like the handles of a tower pot

Are you not supposed to be in school
Where you could learn to marry humanity and religion
And Now
The eyes that feigned not to see your plight
See your plague as terrorism

Blood Brother

by Onah Godday Ejiofor

First published in WSA magazine, September, 2019

Dear brother,
Peace be unto your family
This peace which for years eluded us all
For the sake of our greed and pride.
We fight and foam, we course and hate
Over this soil, that before us was here,
And after us here shall be.
This tiny plot worth no more than our tiny graves
Must surely, our bitter blood drink,
and upon our swollen skulls feast.
Why kill one another, brother?
For the sake of boundaries put forward by men,
Who builds no bridge but bridges our vain
Come home brother, come home blood
Let us meet under the family tree
There we shall eat the Kola nut of peace
And drink the palm wine of reconciliation.
Bring home our kids and your half,
I shall bring mine too.
Let us laugh to the glory of the gods
Let us quip to the betrayal of our foes
Who among us, planted this tree of hate.
Come home brother, let us take not an oath
But a step towards repentance,
towards reconciliation and understanding
That this blood that flows in us shall transcend
And flow beyond this soil
upon which we stand and fight each other.

Prose

Dawn in Dune

Nasiru Taofeeqat Temitope

“Even now, Evelyn’s delicate, vibrant touch can still be felt in the swamp. Since no snow has been let to cover her sculpture, it has been ten years, but the sun still burns in her honor. She will be remembered because her story is one of light in the presence of fire. Instead of a ghost, there is a living creature in our hearts,” Sally concluded.

She closed the book and looked at the ceiling before turning to her disabled daughter, whose face was already covered in tears. Just as the last line was punctuated to signal the conclusion of the story, every night when “Evelyn’s Touch” is read to her, Falak, was born with hemiplegia, would cry. Yet, despite this, she had a wellspring of beauty and kindness that few people can stand.

Seeing how thoughtful her daughter had become, in her usual gentleness, Sally stated, “The story hour time is over; now my perfect daughter can visit her dreamland.” Sally kissed her daughter on the forehead, wished her a restful night, and then carefully tucked her into the covers. Since there was no light, she blew out the candle while keeping her eyes closed. After that, she went to her own room, where the embraces of tiredness awaited her. Sally frequently and occasionally unwittingly found herself in the lake of self-debate and conflict as it looked like Falak was the only breathing soul around her. She stayed up late and never got up early as a result, so Falak continued to be Sally’s daily alarm.

Dawn flashed its glints to announce a new day. As often, Falak was the alarm that awoken Sally to a new day. “Mum,” she would say, “it’s morning. Are you sure you’re awake? It’s morning. Mum, I’m famished. I had to leave this bed, Mum. Muuuuum!” She would keep trying.

After being jolted to life, Sally’s room typically responded, “Okay, I’m up. Quit shouting. I’ll soon be with you.”

Falak decided to check on Sally this morning because she had declined her daughter’s calls, unlike every other day. She used her mouth to pull back the covers as she sat up in bed, exposing her delicate yet immobilised

lower body. As her mother instructed, she got out of bed and crawled over to Sally's room, which is next to hers.

To her astonishment, Sally was nowhere to be seen, and her bamboo bed was already made with its customary blue sheet, indicating that she must have been awake. This left Falak speechless and confused. So, Mum already got up to make breakfast? She mused. I better join her in the kitchen then.

She crept to the living room which was only few paces from Sally's but nothing give a clue as to Sally's whereabouts. Confused again, but relieved that Sally 'wasn't sick in bed, which could be why she didn't respond to her calls as her bed was even made.

She then crawled in the direction of the front door but was unable to turn the knob because her hands were too short and she had never done it before. She sat perplexed. She wondered where Sally might have gone.

If she's not in the bedroom, bathroom, kitchen, or living room, then where was Sally?

As fear took over her, she became dejected. She worried for the first time that Sally might have abandoned her to her fate, just as her father had. It was 2:00 PM. Choked by the room's silence and hunger, she fought to push the half-broken plastic chair in the living room to the door and try to use it to crush open the knob but her weight couldn't carry her as she was rather obese.

She did everything her 5-year old brain could think because she couldn't find Sally and when all failed she became genuinely afraid. She started to scream, and because it was so frantic and loud, she could hear an echo of her own voice in response.

The message of death through hunger caused her to roll on the ground like every other 5-year-old child would.

Falak had the strange impression that Sally had left her on purpose because she was nowhere to be found. She must have abandoned her to die slowly, exactly as the paralysed girl who was sentenced to go on a hunger strike in her favorite book, "Evelyn's Touch".

She finally started to consider whether she was ever a burden on Sally, much like Evelyn was to her parent. Tearfully, she ruminated on the thought that Evelyn wasn't placed behind a locked door. After finding that

Evelyn would only be useful for death, her parents poisoned themselves and allowed Evelyn pass on her own.

Seeing the severity of Evelyn's fate, she thought, I'm not Evelyn, though. I should have a life. Despite my disability, I am able to read, play, and socialise. I am not Evelyn to be abandoned to perish. Evelyn was born disabled, yet her hopeful parents raised her to be radiantly young. She was unable to speak, move, or let alone scream, but I can. She sobbed, "Mummy shouldn't have left me like this."

There was no Sally when night fell gradually. Falak fumbled to get back to her bed.

"Sally must have deliberately made sure I knew how Evelyn's story ended; she must have waited until I was older so I could experience the misery of dying and the pain of having a disability. Then thought to herself, "But is death vengeance?" she asked to the agonising silence before dozing off.

**TEXT OF KEYNOTE DELIVERED AT THE 2022
NORTHEAST FESTIVAL OF LITERATURE, CULTURE AND
CREATIVITY THEMED "INCLUSIVE GOVERNANCE IN
NIGERIA: THE PLACE OF WOMEN, YOUTH AND CHILDREN"
BY USMAN NURAINI MUHAMMAD, FIMC, CMC, ANIPR
(CEO/TEAM LEADER, PETALS INFO LINKS) HELD AT
MULTIPURPOSE AUDITORIUM, GOMBE STATE UNIVERSITY,
ON TUESDAY, 15TH NOVEMBER, 2022.**

PROTOCOL

I must admit that the theme for this year's annual festival has been carefully selected ahead of the 2023 general elections. For the purpose of this presentation, I choose not to go elaborately theoretical with conceptual definitions and analysis since the subject matter is very much clear. However, emphasis is laid on prominent issues explained by aid of current statistics in a practical format.

STATISTICAL ISSUES

Gender (2011-2021): In 2021, Nigeria's female population amounted to approximately 104.25 million, while the male population amounted to approximately 107.15 million inhabitants. —Statista 2022.

Age distribution of population in Nigeria 2021, by gender: In Nigeria, half of the population is aged under 19. People aged up to four years old made up the largest age group: 8.3 percent of males and eight percent of females were less than four years old. Similarly, children aged 5 to 9 years held the second largest share of population. On the other hand, people aged 60 years and older represented a small part of the population. Nigeria has one of the youngest populations in the world. In the whole of Africa and in the world, Nigeria records the lowest median age. Nigeria ranked 18th. -Statista 2022.

Put together, young people both male and female are majority. As caregivers, Women give birth to children and will defend their interests in policy formulation if given the level field. They are pillars. Now let us focus on Women and Youth (male and female).

Current statistics has it that we have a paltry 11.2 percent of women membership in both chambers of the 9th assembly (seven females in the Senate and eleven in the House of Representatives). This is very poor, juxtaposing it with 479 members of the federal parliament, because women participation in governance leads to higher responsiveness to the yearnings of citizens. —*The Cable*, May 2022.

“However, women constitute only 5.4% in National Assembly, 4.6% in State House of Assembly, and 16% in Federal Executive Council. This episode is clearly evidenced in the Kano State house of assembly which has no female representation in all the 40 seats in the assembly.—ActionAidNigeria.

THE REAL ISSUES

Increasing numbers of women in public decision-making will act as an incentive for policy-makers to respond to women’s interests. A new report by the World Bank has lent credence to this view and concluded that closing this gender disparity gap will be of immense benefit to the Nigerian economy. The report titled: “Closing Gaps, Increasing Opportunities: A Diagnostic on Women’s Economic Empowerment in Nigeria,” was launched in Abuja, by the World Bank Country Office in Nigeria. The report sought to establish that women’s empowerment in the economic sector should take centre stage as a policy agenda if the nation intends to increase its domestic earnings which it projected should yield additional gains of US9.3 billion dollars or up to US22.9 billion dollars simply by closing this gender disparity.

How do we achieve this? Simply by systematic and representative inclusion of women in governance and politics. Research has it that when women are involved in peace processes and conflict resolution, the resulting agreement always stand the test of time and this agreement is well implemented to the letter. Higher levels of gender equality and inclusion engenders peace in the nation. An international peace institute study of 182 signed peace agreements found that when women are involved in peace processes, there is 35 percent possibility that such peace agreement will last for over 20 years.

World History is replete and filled with outstanding, distinguished and accomplished female political leaders around the world that have proven their mettle and sagacity in governance, thus becoming the cynosure of all eyes. They include: Angela Merkel, the first woman to be elected as Chancellor in Germany and the third longest Chancellor in Germany; Jacinda Arden, New Zealand's current prime minister — she is widely credited with formulating policies that helped to promptly and drastically reduce the spread of coronavirus in her country; Sheikh Hasina Wazed, the longest serving prime minister in the history of Bangladesh, who graciously opened the doors of her country to Rohingya refugees fleeing the onslaught, massacre and genocide in Myanmar; Kamala Harris, currently serving as the first female Vice President in the history of the United States of America; Magdalene Anderson, the prime minister of Sweden; Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, a Liberian and the first woman to be elected president of an African country — she led Liberia through a laudable and enduring reconciliation, following the nation's long, and tortuous civil war; Nancy Pelosi, Speaker of the United States House of Representatives. We have good examples of women on the global stage from Nigeria; our own Amina J Mohammed is now the United Nation's Deputy Secretary General, Ngozi Okonjo Iweala is the Director General of World Trade Organization.

BARRIERS TO WOMEN AND YOUTH PARTICIPATION

Several factors restrain women from actively participating in governance and politics in Nigeria. These include, but are not limited to the following:

- Patriarchy in case of women; dominance of the old in case of youths
- Financing /in-sufficient resources.
- Lack of viable information/ Meeting Schedules affects women.
- Dis-proportionate access to quality education.
- Political Violence/harassment of youths and women.
- Cultural barriers; diversities affect women.
- Stigmatization/discrimination tendency is set back for women.

RECOMMENDATIONS: ROLE OF GOVERNMENT, DEVELOPMENT PARTNERS AND CITIZENS

Government has a great role to play in reversing these retrogressive practices. This can be achieved through:

1. Political parties should create a support network for prospective aspirants by pairing them with established women and youth politicians who will be playing key roles as mentors and provide capacity building for the young or aspiring female politicians in order to enhance and develop them ahead of subsequent elections.

2. Building mass Coalition of women and youth support and advocacy groups using NGOs and grassroots women/youth associations to coordinate support and advocacy for fellow women/youth aspirants.

3. To create enabling environment that allows women/youth to engage meaningfully in decision making process in a sustainable and effective way that is free from violence and harassments of any kind. Providing incentives to these women/youth will encourage them.

4. Establishment of legal funds to assist women/youth politicians to challenge electoral malpractices of any form at all levels of political processes.

5. Implementing the right mechanisms by Introducing quota system at all levels of government and identifying and engaging relevant stakeholders such as Independent National Electoral Commission and political parties to ensure strict adherence to it.

6. Reserve some elective political positions only for the female gender and youths and ensure to make the political space less violent.

CONCLUSION

All relevant stakeholders are advised to advocate for the protection of women from abuse, empower them economically and politically and review the necessary legislations to accommodate the growing interest of women in politics both elective and appointive positions.

Thank you for your rapt attention

All Our Lonely
Abu A'ish Mk Albani

First Narrator: Bandit

Name of Bandit: Ayoob Tajir

In my line of business there's one thing you don't do: doubt yourself.

In this little place called life, the most important thing is knowing yourself. Even better if you are willing to drive the dangerous needles of life into your skin and your core just so you can be the best version of yourself at the worst of times. It requires discipline of the highest order and not many are willing to do that. And I'm not like most people. I'm as disciplined as I am doubtless.

And the fact is, you don't exist, only time does. Knowledge of oneself balances the equilibrium - it makes you live to your fullest in all timeframes. And growth is the abundant proportionality of you in a scarce resource called time.

My name is Ayoob Tajir and only half of that is true.

* * *

It's fun sitting and watching every character play their role. The kings being kings, the peasants being peasants and the thieves being thieves. The predictability of existence is in the name: exist - survive, no matter what. We all do that, just on different levels. I do it on the level of kings and thieves. I give and I take. To give, you have to take.

"Taj, it's done," said Cee Jay. "They've agreed to send the ransom money for two more people."

I smiled on hearing the news. This was just business: money for life.

In the little expanse that holds us, we are divided into two: Us and the kidnapped - three school children, a middle-aged woman, an old woman, and three men.

Usually, I don't kidnap. I'm more into bank robbery. I've made a name for myself in that area. But I'm here because they've been a problem and I

make a point of being in places where problems leave carbon footprints. The mastermind behind this operation died and before he died he requested me to fill his shoes. The thing about filling shoes is you keep your identity to be another without losing yourself.

“I want to go home. Sir, please let me go... I don’t have... nobody can pay for my ransom. Let me go home. I’m not supposed to be here, sir! I don’t want to be here!” said a middle-aged woman.

“That’s a stupid thing to say,” I told her. “You want to go home. Let me tell you something: Seeing the world from what you want and don’t – what you like and don’t, is such a myopic way of seeing the world. It makes you illogical and stupid. You are supposed to be here that’s why you’re here. So stay put. Be comfortable. If you need food, water, just let me or any of my men know. We are at your service. Not completely, but it’s true. We are.” I laughed.

“Sir, I say we kill her,” said an overeager Farook cocking his gun, ready to waste her. “Let me teach her a lesson. Or better yet, there are other ways you could be of service. There are other ways you can save yourself,” he said licking his lips. What an animal he is! An undisciplined kind.

“You do no such thing,” I said sternly.

“You are too soft. If Ayoob was here, he’d have shot her. I knew it all along, it was a mistake having you on board,” said Farook.

This statement was an exposition, an introduction to insubordination – this was defiance from him to me, served hot. The thing about assuming power is that some old dogs always want to question your eligibility. So I pushed him off the cliff to his death – to meet his creator. I told you the one thing I don’t do is be indecisive in the face of swift decisions that need to be made.

“Anyone else wants to defy me?” I said, my eyes darting from one to the next, waiting to catch an anomaly of order; an anomaly from my rule. All I got was silence from my men and shivering, and some whimpering from the kidnapped.

Remember I told you my name is Ayoob Tajir. That was a lie. My name is Tajir, not Ayoob. Ayoob was my best friend and the leader of this freak show. He died some days ago. He was the most formidable kidnapper Nigeria had ever seen. He’s dead and I’m alive. He’s Ayoob and I’m Tajir.

So put two and two together it'd give you Ayoob Tajir. And that's what and who I am.

It had to happen this way because it doesn't end until it really ends.

The world mustn't know he's dead. This makes this my first rodeo. Hence, the likes of Farook want to undermine me. But there's nothing much to this line of work compared to my former line of work: bank robbery.

"Call their families. If they are willing to pay fifty million, set them free."

"For all?" said Cee Jay.

"No. for each individual," I said.

"That's a lot. We are going to be ridiculously rich. Taj, you're the best!" Cee Jay said laughing.

The truth of the matter is we are only entitled to forty percent of the money we acquired. The rest goes to our sponsors, informants, ammunition, logistics, among other things. Can you believe it? – even bureaucracy is present in the kidnapping trade; dividends, rules, hierarchy are all present in an innately chaotic environment. "But do you think we can get that much money?" asked Cee Jay.

"The game of profitable business is hinged on the power of bargain. And we have that. It'd take time, of course. So you have to motivate their family. We'll kill anyone unwilling to pay. Period."

"Consider it done, Taj."

"I need to head back to the city. It's almost dawn and I need to open my provision store by seven a.m.," I said.

"You still do that? Aren't you going to give that up?"

I turned and left him without giving him an answer. The answer is keeping appearance. I also do it 'cause I'm incurably a businessman.

Let me tell you a little about my old trade. Bank Robbery. Bank robbery requires more planning than kidnapping, and it's more saintly if you ask me. Yes, saintly.

You don't agree? Look at it this way. Money is like a commodity. It is subjected to the law of demand and supply. But whenever its value shoots up or down it's you and me that suffer for that change. The common folks. Dollar goes up, we suffer. Dollar goes down, we suffer all the same.

You and I work for that costly change to pay taxes catering for the loads and loads of money the government borrows from other countries. And from the conditions of that borrowed money, subsidy is taken off the table. The government tells us it's in our interest; they tell us it's for the capital projects, our bright future. But in truth, they plunge the common folks into further poverty while they become richer and richer.

Bank robbery keeps things in balance. Because I'm stealing from the government.

Let me give you an idea of how that works. For a bank to operate, it must deposit a large sum of money to the government. And how that relationship works is that whenever there's a bank robbery or non-performing loan, the government takes from the deposit and replenishes the taken money. So bank robbery is fair game. I'm Robin Hood. The only difference is when I steal, I don't do charity like Robin Hood. I invest. Every man for himself.

* * *

It's been an hour since I opened my store and the city wakes up an hour later. A cat came in and I fed it. It's annoying but it has its uses. One thing I noticed is, in this little cage called life, the kindest and most loyal creatures that won't hurt you aren't people. It's creatures like cats and also babies. The rest of us are all bound to hurt each other at some point and on multiple occasions.

"How much for a carton of spaghetti?" a customer asked. I told him and he gave me the money. Then left.

Hours did what hours do. They passed. They passed with me selling my commodities; with me waving to someone or the other as they smile and say hi; with me noticing the city gradually swelling with people under the scorching sun.

It also means the coefficient of tension the kidnapped families are in is growing too. And more tension, more money – quick money.

"Alhaji Taj, do you mind plugging my charger? My phone is out of juice," said a man who usually comes over and keeps me company while

we talk about the number one topic of the common man: the problems of Nigeria.

But I only see opportunities where people see problems.

“Sure, big man. Whatever you want. I’ll be right back,” I said while taking his phone to my small office.

I take a minute to go through his phone. It’s locked but nothing is ever locked with me.

It’s sad, really. You know more about a person through his phone. Phones are inseparable best friends of most people in the twenty-first century. And this makes my work a lot easier.

* * *

In my experience, most people’s conversations are almost always bordering on apology or promises; an overcorrection of what was or what could be. Like the phone, this reveals a lot about a person. But as a rule, I don’t steal from my people. Home is off-limit. But I’m now Ayooob Tajir so even that will have to change.

Our conversation with this next person drifts from one thing to another.

“What do you think about the people who have been kidnapped?” he asked me. I think his name is Fareed or Faisal. Can’t remember. I don’t give much importance to a person’s name until it’s important. Also, because they are plenty. Nonetheless, it’s important to remember names. Very important.

“Do you think the government will intervene?” I asked in response. It’s always better to have people do the talking. They love that.

“The government!” he scoffed. “The only thing that will save them is if their family paid the ransom money.”

“Yeah. It’s just sad,” I remarked. But really, sad for who?

* * *

It’s two p.m. and I haven’t heard from my men since the time I left them. Cee Jay was supposed to text me and tell me what was going on.

“No phone calls. Just text, then delete text. The text must be coded too.” My predecessor, Ayoob, used to tell me in our younger days.

I turned on the radio. Sometimes the media aren’t completely useless, they give real-time truth. What’s the point of news that’s not true or timely? Having no hidden agenda or vested interest but the interest of the common good?

Radio: *...Much has happened since the notorious Ayoob Tajir gang made their latest ransom demand: a sum of fifty million for each captive. The most unbelievable demand ever.*

However, we have just gotten confirmation that three of the captives have escaped. Two were shot in the process, only one is alive. A schoolboy. An eighteen-year-old boy whose name must remain anonymous for the time being.

There’s more: One of the bandits has been caught. The second-in-command known as Cee Jay has been caught.

When I heard that, I was startled but tried hard to hide it. How the hell did this happen?

Fact: Cee Jay won’t speak.

Fact: The impending threat of the boy escaping isn’t all that bad even if the boy speaks and reveals where we are. Even if the government gets off its lazy ass, brandishes its rusty weapons against us, and comes after us. We have precautions for that — firepower, lawyers, and two-step-ahead precautions.

But I need to assuage it before it gets out of hand. I need to leave here.

“Do you hear that, Alhaji Taj? That’s some great news, isn’t it?” said Fareed.

“Yes, I bet,” I said feigning a smile. I waited twenty minutes then announced I had to go home and have lunch – which is a lie, obviously. So I closed my shop and headed back to my area of operation. I needed to get this under control.

Sure, this was a small problem, but a problem just the same. And only fools drown in overconfidence and complacency. I’m Tajir – an astute merchant. I’m too disciplined to be anything other than an astute merchant.

* * *

This is the first part of “All Our Lonely.” Scroll up to read the next chapter.

Narrator: School Boy

Narrator’s Name: Clay

“Clay. Can you hear me, Clay?” said the police officer addressing me. “Can you remember their faces?”

My father once told me, nobody remembers a face the way a photographer does. It’s his job to remember faces and freeze moments. I wonder how he’d classify my acute memory of my tormentors. All I see is their faces, all I see is the statically frozen moments. If I had one wish it’d be to forget — to slip into the time before all this and never return to the looping painful memories nor the ugly faces inside them.

“Can you remember the place you escaped from?” the police officer asked. These words cut the reality in front of me so that the ugly memories assume their place, becoming more than words.

* * *

I remembered a few days before the kidnapping when my mother pleaded with my father, for the umpteenth time, to take me out of school. It’s too dangerous, she said. With the rate these people are kidnapping, I don’t want Clay to suffer the same fate.

But my father wouldn’t hear it. Taking our children out of school means they have won, he said. Their winning is the death of us. What will become of a nation in which thugs dictate what they want and get it? What will become of a nation whose youth can’t get educated because of fear? Don’t forget, I named my son Clay so that he can be molded in the best of form. Therefore, he must go to school and that is the end of this discussion.

What do you think went on in my head when I heard that? What do you think goes on in the head of a kid who is told to stay home?

Let me tell you: the kid becomes exhilarated by the idea, the possibility of having plentiful time to play and loaf around with other kids; the never-ending fun devoid of headaches of homework, stern teachers, waking up

early to go to school. He has a shot of being Peter Pan – the boy that never grows and has fun ad infinitum.

Therefore, I didn't care much about what my father was saying at the time.

It's not that I don't love the physics of relativity, the geography of expanses, the biology of living, the history of forgotten or unsung heroes, or the religion of morality. I do love them. Especially since it was the last year of secondary school.

* * *

The morning I got kidnapped was like any other morning: The hot tea and a loaf of bread ready to go; the good mornings and goodbyes swiftly dispensed; with mom worrying and praying; with dad giving me some pocket money; with me and my two friends climbing the front seat of a bus and then . . . And then began the anomaly of that morning. The last thing I remembered was getting on the bus and the driver smiling and I saw his yellow teeth and then nothing. Nothing.

I remembered nothing afterward except waking up with my two friends beside me and a bunch of strangers in a bushy-and-stony nowhere. I saw the fear and sadness in their eyes. I didn't properly wear the insurmountable fear and sadness until I saw the gunmen hovering over us like clouds; smiling, laughing, and pointing guns at us. This can't be happening, I thought. We have been kidnapped.

"Are you okay?" a middle-aged woman whispered slowly, crawling towards me. How could anyone be okay in such a situation? "Don't worry it'll be okay? Just . . . Just keep quiet, my boy. And whatever you do, don't look at their faces."

It was then I noticed the gunmen weren't wearing masks. I saw the yellow-teeth driver from the morning. Later, I'd learn his name was Cee Jay. We locked eyes with Cee Jay and he said, "Oh good, you're up. Come over here, schoolboy." I felt weak as though my legs couldn't hold me. "Name? — I said your name," he screamed.

My mouth moved, my tongue searched the air in it and I muttered, "Clay."

“You have no phone with you?” I shook my head. “Yes, I know you don’t. I checked. So I got your father’s phone number from your friend’s phone.” Cee Jay brought out his phone.

When my father picked up they made him do something I had never seen or heard him do: they made him cry. He cried and when I heard it I felt more paralysed, my insides tearing apart.

“The price of seeing your son again is seven million,” said Cee Jay. I heard the amount and I was sure we didn’t have anything close to that. I wondered how long it took before my parents realised I had been missing. I wondered if my father would inform my mother about this phone call. The state of mother!! The state she’d be in on hearing that I’ve been kidnapped — I’d rather die than picture it.

* * *

The second day in that bushy-and-stony nowhere was worse than the first, then came the third, the fourth . . . and I realised worse is an understatement with every passing day. They don’t give us food and water except in small amount. And when it rained, most of it fell on us. And our number — the number of captives — kept increasing than decreasing. Now we were eight: an old woman, three men, the nice middle-aged woman, my two friends and me.

It is said that sleep is a great escape but for me, it was hardly an escape. I always had nightmares. It was always terrible — always amplifying our situation than offering an escape to the grotesque reality. Sometimes I dreamt of being killed, or of my two friends or the nice middle-aged woman, or my parents. It was always someone dying, or my home turning into ash.

There was some solace seeing the faces that looked like mine — desolate, tattered, and lifeless. We weren’t allowed to talk to each other. We were together but every single one of us was in his hell. Prayer was second to our diminished breathing.

Prayer was all we had to all our loneliness.

Then ourselves.

* * *

One of my two friends was released on the ninth or tenth day. His parents paid the ransom money. I was happy for him. But I felt lonelier. I started losing count of the days. The only reminder was when the gunmen turned on the radio.

Radio: *...It's been twenty-six days now...*

Twenty-six! The number shattered me. When will help arrive?!

From what I can vividly remember, were the days all of us, one by one, completely lost hope. Everyone had his or her day.

For my friend, it was on the tenth day when our other friend was released. For me, it was the twenty-sixth day when I heard the number of days we had spent on the radio. For the three men, it was much earlier and for the old woman, it was the twenty-eighth, when the gunmen made the ransom money to be fifty million. And for the nice middle-aged woman, it was the twenty-seventh day.

She lost her hope, her strength and she lost her cool. She stood up saying she didn't have anyone who could pay for her release. One of the gunmen walked over to her and threatened to kill her. But their leader, known as Taj, stopped him from touching the nice woman. The gunman was upset about that and protested. Taj kicked him off the cliff for that. I think he killed him! It was dark, but I think he killed him!

Taj spoke to Cee Jay in confidence then left. Afterward, Cee Jay started making calls informing our families that they were to pay fifty million or else they can start preparing for our funeral. There was no way my father could pay that. Not in a hundred years.

"I don't have . . . All I have is 2.3 million, sir." my father said. "That's all we have in the whole world. I had to sell my house, sir. Fear Allah and release my son." These words fell on deaf ears. "There's nothing more I can do now than pray Allah puts his fear in you. To let my kid go. To let them both go. To let them all go."

"Clay, say goodbye to your father. This is the last time you'll hear from him," said Cee Jay.

I think that was when I decided I wanted to escape. The escape happened a few hours later at dawn. It couldn't have happened at all if it weren't for the nice woman. Her name, now I remember, was Aunt Samira.

My friend and I had started running when Cee Jay started shooting at us: One shot to the sky; another, in our direction. My heart kept pounding more than ever. From the corner of my eyes, I saw Cee Jay aiming directly at me. I had wanted to stop then I noticed Aunt Samira pushing Cee Jay away. There was a struggle and I wondered where she got all that strength. I guess I was wrong when I said she lost her strength. After the pushing and pulling, the other gunmen yanked her away from Cee Jay and shot her. They killed her.

I killed her. My guts to escape killed her. Her blood is on my hands. That was the second worse thing I've done after making my mother weep. How can I ever come back from this? How?

Cee Jay gave his gun to his men and came after us. I think the gunmen stood behind making sure nobody else dared to escape.

My friend and I kept running for hours. Falling, bruising, constantly looking behind us, weeping, and running for hours.

I don't really know how it happened but we found ourselves at a bus stop. And a few minutes later we were in a local hospital. That was where my friend's heart gave up and gave out.

Poor Suraj! That was the end of your suffering insha Allah. The end of the hurting. O Allah, have mercy on your soul, Suraj. May your tired soul find eternal peace.

* * *

Waking up and seeing mother beside my bed, weeping then hugging me when she saw I was up made it a little easier. She opened her mouth but the words didn't come. I looked at her eyes and saw that these past twenty-eight days took as much from her as it took from me. Maybe even more. Father smiled, said something but I didn't hear it. I think he said it's all over now, my son. It's all over now, Clay.

I don't think it'll ever be over.

On that hospital bed, I kept drifting in and out of consciousness. I made little sense of what was going on around me. I remembered hearing that the body of Aunt Samira was discovered. And that she was thirty-two years old. What they didn't mention was her kindness or her bravery or the fact that I killed her.

I also heard that Cee Jay had been caught, and jailed and something about him being bailed out.

It had always been like that. Evil being acquitted. And us? We are always guilty of living. We are all alone in this cruel world.

* * *

The policeman said something about my bravery and asked whether he could allow the press to interview me. "They are thinking of getting a thing or two about the incident. I know you won't mind."

It'll make a good story, he added. Like mine was one for the world dying to cut through, poisoning in the literary world. Some hero-themed story and the hero's great escape. Like my story was some English essay that must be submitted before school closed. Like I owed it to the world to not miss their weekly ten minutes leisurely read ending with or capsulated on the front page: *I survived it and tomorrow I'd resume school' said the promising schoolboy.*

* * *

Author's Note – Final Act

Should I begin by apologising to the dead future inside the schoolboy? Or should I appeal to the humanity that no longer exist in the bandits? Should I pull the blind eyes of our nonchalant government and fix it closer to the ruins growing before our feet?

If this was merely fictional, I'll give you an end that seats close to the seven heavens. Alas, hope is not the death of me here. Because this is the Nigeria you and I know. But if you're reading this, then maybe — just maybe — it's not too late.

Here's the thing: We live in a prison made with what we think people's opinions of us are. Whenever someone says people are to be blamed it always seem like people are some entity that live in a room cooking problems for us. It's not so. People are you and me. The ignorance in you and me.

I could tell you that the solution is simple even though it is fairly so. I could tell you that we can find deliberate ways to shorten Ayoob Tajir's strides, take away his direction, and, well, cut off his feet so that he doesn't hurt anyone anymore.

Maybe that'd work. Or maybe that will be like killing a hydra: cut one head, another pops up.

Or that we could also consider the schoolboy, Clay: the boy must live, we might argue. But how, really. How? There are so many levels to living and each is important. Each is clay carefully softened, kneaded, molded into its best form. Done wrongly, and he ceases to live — to grow, to become, to feel, to fill, and to form — properly.

I could tell you that Tajir was once a kid. That he was probably once a lump of clay tossed into the air and time to dry and die. Tossed out of the appropriate touch of parents, society, and government. Tossed to break and let out all the contents of the hellish Pandora's box that is our present. That may be the case because the truth is, our lonely doesn't end until we make it end.

Insha Allah.

Tort

Musa Bin Newland

Saturday, 17th October, 2022 was bright for everyone in the family except Halima who wished she had not been born before the day. She passed out million times before they arrived home. She had been a victim of asthma for decades and it reached an extent where using an inhaler was not a choice.

A nephew of her husband, Hanne, who married in a not so far village, had recently blessed the family with an adorable baby girl after a successful CS. For the newest mother in the village to recuperate well, the naming ceremony of the baby was extended by two weeks. Glad, as she' was such a lucky woman; her delivery was during the weekend, Saturday to be precise.

Halima was a willing woman; always took her inhaler in her bag wherever she went. Despite the number of things she took while leaving for the occasion, she didn't forget her inhaler. But, this attack was so huge that she exhausted the whole inhaler while they were returning home; inside the car. Maybe because of the crowd. Maybe because the air she breathed there was contaminated or because of the much engagements she had that day. Those with asthma go through a lot. And, hers, was different, as she' was eight months' pregnant.

She was shaky, barely conscious and helpless. She tried her husband's number but he didn't pick nor send an excuse message. She logged into her Facebook account and typed a message telling him her current situation.

Her man, Ibrahim, was a very hardworking and focused man. He didn't feel or think of something—nothing came to his mind at that moment. He was at work and put his phone on silence. He, therefore, didn't notice when calls came in. He was working at a construction a site.

It was later in the evening, about 7:30 pm, when he had closed for the day, that he noticed her uncountable unanswered calls and messages. He called back, again and again but she didn't pick.

“Does this mean baby is asleep? But she doesn’t go to sleep early.” He wondered.

After some minutes, he called again and fortunately, she picked. He talked to her for five minutes without a single response from her. Then, the tree of fear grew painful branches in him. He didn’t give in, but sent all his calmness into his ears to learn that it was the volume of her breath that had restrained her voice. She finally aborted the call and sent a message:

“Oga. Inhaler, my inhaler is finished and we’re still on the way. I’ve spent all the money with me. I left my ATM card at home. The phone with the SIM I use for transfer is also at home. Else, I would have pleaded with the driver to stop by any store I could get it in, if I had them with me. Wayyo Allah, I’m dead, Oga. Only Allah and I know how I feel now!”

Ibrahim’s sense travelled a million miles far away, reading the message.

“Go to the shop. Pick the inhaler. Tell them to send me their bank details. I’ll transfer their money to them, please!”

Alas, Halima fainted shortly after sending him that message. She didn’t even read his notes until she was about to reach home, when she awoken.

Hauwa, with whom they went to celebrate with the nursing nephew of her husband, was a stepsister to her husband and had been taking care of her while whispering her prayers for her resuscitation. Soon she learnt her body had been weaker. They finally got home, and Hauwa quickly picked the ATM card to a nearby business centre and withdrew some money. She rushed to the store in their community where inhaler was sold. “Assalamu alaikum,” Hauwa greeted the person in the store. She greeted him the second time but he still didn’t respond until the third time and in a low tone.

“How can I help you, madam?” he asked.

“I’m here to buy inhaler for my sister. Are you the storekeeper?”

“Actually, as you can see, I am closing the shop now. I have been here since morning. I am tired and need to go and rest. Why didn’t you come since?” he answered with some aggression in his voice.

Hauwa described to him her sister’s condition and even knelt, begging him to sell her the inhaler but he didn’t even look at her and continued what he was doing. She broke down in tears and walked helplessly back home.

Halima was rushed to the General Hospital which was a bit far from their vicinity, but before they reached there, she had given up the ghost.

Dr. Gareeb

Abu A'ish MK Albani

He is late. Youth these days and their hallmark of being late for everything. Even for things that will help their lives.

When he shows up, I check the time and note that the time allotted for our session is up. He makes the final step and stops by the door but doesn't open it. I can hear him breathing on the door. He is probably thinking of going back. He is rethinking his decision to enter my office. He is probably so drenched in thoughts that he doesn't see the words written on my door: DR GARBA GAREEB – Therapist.

I don't tell him to come in; I give him time to make that decision himself.

Seconds later, he walks in – eyes down, hands in pocket, greeting barely leaving his lips. He sits on the chair opposite me.

“Welcome, Mr. Ahmad Musa and thank you for coming.”

He seems pleased but he tries not to show it. What he doesn't know is, I'm thanking him for deciding to come in. What he doesn't know is he is pleased to be appreciated.

I take a long look at Ahmad. He cleans up nicely with a headphone hanging on his neck. His eyes are sunken making him older than he looks – the kind that comes from sleep deprivation. A beat-down innocence forms a colony on his face and his walk is quite possibly a fabrication of what it naturally was. He doesn't move his chair away from the center table to sit comfortably; almost as if he is afraid of disturbing it – to change the status quo of how he thinks things should be. If anything, he has a punctured confidence and he slightly compensates for it by hiding behind imported trends. But it's too early to affirm my suppositions.

Minutes pass and I say nothing. He expects me to say something but I don't and the silence eats him as he plays with his fingers nervously. I don't know why most people don't choose to enjoy silence – it's impossible for them. I wait to see what he'd do: is he the apologetic type who thinks he must live up to others' expectations of an image of

perfection? Is he the haughty type who will stomp out or make a scene when faced with an anomaly? Will he try to show me he's smarter than me as I try to read him? There's not always a straight line to these things so there's not always one answer to what or who a person is.

His phone keeps beeping and I let it. Because I need him to show me who he is unfiltered, unedited. If all works well I wouldn't even have to tell him to mute his phone during our sessions. But that's if all works well.

"Tea? Water?" I say breaking the silence.

"What...?" the twenty-two-years old Ahmad Musa says a bit confused. "No, I'm good. I'm good," he says echoing the last two words to make it sound good – to look good – as if to say he is comfortable but I know better. That's why he's here after all: he is not good; he's not fine. So I advance to push him until he reveals that to me. To himself.

"Mr. Ahmad, why are you here? Why are you in my office? What do you want?"

"Um... um, I thought..."

One of the hardest things is answering obvious questions. Some take offence because answering honestly makes them admit their vulnerability. Others just can't find the words to express themselves. And others lack the patience for it.

"I think I should leave," he says finally.

"Are you asking for permission to leave?" I say, smiling smugly.

"I thought you're supposed to help me get better. Is this how you help people? Being rude and insensitive?" Ahmad fumes and stands up. He is no longer hiding himself. Finally, we're getting somewhere.

"Mr. Ahmad, there's nothing I'd like to do more than to help you. But you need to be able to open up. We must be honest with each other. That's the only way this works."

He doesn't say anything for a while as his anger recedes. "Okay," he says.

"Please sit," I say, and he does, sluggishly. "Now, I'm afraid our session is over; your time is up – long before you walk in. I apologise for that but I'd have loved it if you had come earlier. But I'd give you a minute. If you have any question for me you can ask. Any question at all."

If he had come early this probably would have been how I would have begun our conversation: me giving him a chance to see me as he thinks I see him. Me showing him how very human I am and that I'm no better than him. I'm a friend who really wants to listen and help if I can and if he allows it. When he allows it.

Ahmad folds his arm across his chest, glares at me, and asks his question. "So tell me, how much do you get paid for this? For trying to fix me?" – smart kid. He is testing me to see if I'd really be honest as I said I would. This is his way of telling me that this whole setting is devoid of honesty. Because he believes this is a mere transaction: I'm simply trying to help him because that is what I'm paid to do. Will I evade his question and prove to him I, myself, am not being as honest as I want him to be with me?

I scribble down my answer to his question in my notebook, tear out the page, fold it in three then hand it to him. He starts unfolding it with a smile on his face, a faint smug. How typical! The smug is his act of defiance to me. I don't know why youngsters worship acts of defiance.

I stop him from unfolding it by presenting some context to his action. Everything needs context, after all. "Don't unfold it. You can unfold it when our session is over. However, if you choose this will be where it ends then by all means: unfold it and read its content." He says nothing. "Whatever your choice is, I think I'll know it by our next session: your attendance or lack thereof. It's nice meeting you, Mr. Ahmad. My name is Dr. Garba Gareeb. But you can call me Gareeb," I say proffering my hand to him.

"Gareeb means weird, odd, strange," I say with a wink. There are many stories to that nickname/name/surname 'Gareeb' but I choose to say this to patients so that they will feel, even if minutely, safer. That whatever their labels are - crazy person, moody, OCD, DD, suicidal etc - I have mine too. I am Gareeb; I'm odd. Growing up, people have called me names that scream that so I thought I'd turn it into a name.

Ahmad shakes my hands. He takes a second to read the words from the framed wall quote:

"... And give glad tidings to the Guraba' (strangers)" – Muhammad Abdullah

He then leaves. I don't think I'll be seeing him anytime soon. But only time will tell.

* * *

I walk home to have lunch with my family. Whenever I can, I have lunch at home – because the little, seemingly mundane things do matter.

I always find the walk home very refreshing and because my house is not very far from my workplace, I hardly take my car out of the garage. Sometimes I take a bicycle. The world seems small on a bicycle and the roads brush their long locks that are the wind on my face unobtrusively like a lover's wink. Riding or walking gives me the chance to think and actually see the world around me. Driving, however, offers no room to get familiar, only to get going.

By the time I get home, I see my five-year-old lovely daughter Halima by the door apparently waiting for my arrival. She runs to me, and I pick her up.

"You are late, Dad," she says between chuckles then pulls me and I let her. She pulls me to the living room and I see my wife, Firdausi, and I hug her.

We are sitting cross-legged on a mat as we eat. I get a call from a pharmacist who works downstairs from my office. I don't answer. Instead, I mute my phone and put it face-down beside me. I make a mental note to call him after lunch. Because this is time for family, not work.

Blessed are the minutes that I eat and talk with these two beautiful people. I like how their relationship has grown. It sometimes makes me forget that Halima isn't Firdausi's biological daughter. My first wife, Zee, died giving birth to Halima. And her death took a toll on me. I'm a person surrounded by a lot of sad endings – from patients who lost loved ones to suicide or are suicide attempt survivors, to my parents who I've never met and would probably never meet. But losing Zee... I didn't think I'd recover from that. And this is coming from someone who gets paid for getting people to recover from such psychological traumas. I know, but it's not hypocrisy; it's just being human.

Zee left me with two kids. The first, Muhammad, is a teenager studying abroad. We talk on the phone at least two times a week. And the second, Halima, is sitting right in front of me telling Firdausi to open her mouth so that she can put a spoonful of rice in it. I listen to her talk about all she's been doing since morning after I left for work.

It is amazing how a child's mind works. How inquisitive they can be because everything is new to them so they exhaust all interrogative pronouns required to connect dots, proving again and again that the mind is the most expensive thing we have. I love how they try to absorb their environment without compromising that innate disposition to truth and the inclination to fine attempts at beautiful expressions. I don't know how we, grown-ups, lose that along the way and become creatures that only see what the world wants us to see while missing out on life itself.

My wife, Firdausi, asks me about work. The thing is, it's almost impossible for people in my profession not to take work home with them. Because it revolves around the home – what happens when home doesn't feel like home, and the heart doesn't feel at home. When I was a kid, professions such as mine were practically not needed because life was simpler and people could easily talk about their problems with loved ones. Get advice from elders of the society. Now, there is this glaring gap between elders and youth.

So, most youth suffer in silence.

I tell Firdausi a little about my only patient for the day, Ahmad Musa. I tell her about the note I gave him. "I wonder if he has read its contents. I wonder if I'd see him again."

* * *

After lunch, Firdausi offers to drive me to the office and I let her. Firdausi takes the car out of the garage and I ride shotgun with my little Halima on my laps constantly pointing at the window, the trees, the people, and the beauty in ordinary. When we arrive, I get off and wave them goodbye. They smile and wave me back as Firdausi drives off. Who said happiness is hard to find?

One of the most beautiful things is having a second chance. When all things, all hope seem lost you get another chance. And I can't tell you how hauntingly beautiful Allah joins expanses. Because the sky and the sea meeting is ridiculously infinitesimal compared to how Allah brings two hearts together for eternity. When I lost Zee I thought that was it until I met Firdausi. It meant everything to me when I met a woman who agreed to be a full-time housewife just so she could be there for my little Halima. That woman is Firdausi. Her name means the epitome of paradise. She's my epitome of paradise.

The first two years after Zee died were the hardest. I found it difficult to juggle family and work. Halima was only three and needed to be taken care of. I was more than grateful when Firdausi agreed to do that. I let her run a small home business using online platforms and it doesn't get in the way of her being there for Halima.

Believe it or not, the root of most problems comes from the home. First of all, I have nothing against working women. But here's the fact... One of the most oppressed things a woman can wear is the trendy thing they call feminism – the flawed type, that is. Women who wear it, extricate themselves from their natural roles of being half the population and molding the other half. An unliberated liberation just to get bruises and scars same as men; to get emotional and mental heartache due to that flawed redefinition. And as a result of this, they displaced their true power and the pure beauty of being worshipped by the other half of the population they mold – be them men, be them children.

* * *

It is a few minutes to two p.m. and I'm in my office. Before my next patient arrives, I open the Quran and read from it. I find it soothing reading this book even though I read it every day. For a fourteen-hundred-year-old book, its ink never dries, its stories are profound, and its miraculous reach never ends.

After reading, I put the book away. I remember I didn't call the pharmacist back. I decide I will walk downstairs and meet him instead.

As I open the door to leave I see my next patient. She is fifteen minutes early. I can tell her to wait for me till I get back but I don't. Because I like punctuality and so I give her the extra fifteen minutes. I will check on the pharmacist later. *Insha Allah*.

"Ms. Maryam, how have you been lately?" I say to her.

"I'm doing great, Dr. Gareeb," says the eighteen-year-old girl. I have had the pleasure of meeting this young lady five times – five sessions, in five weeks.

"Why didn't you come with your mother today?"

"She couldn't make it. I've been trying to call her but it's not going through. I think she's still at work."

That has been the problem: growing up, her mom is rarely there for her let alone her father. So she misbehaves to seek attention; she gives her all to anyone who gives her the semblance of care and a promise of love – things she didn't get enough of from her parents. So she's very susceptible to suggestion.

And like most youth, her life revolves around her smartphone. It's a wonder for a youngster not to give in to millennial distractions.

"I'd have loved it if you came with your mother. It'd be nice if she showed as much dedication as is needed," I say intentionally sounding disappointed as I pour her a glass of water. She takes it with a smile. She takes the glass of water the same way she takes my disappointment: with grace. And I'm proud of that for this proves that she has come a long way. If it was before, she would have read meanings into it. She'd feel suffocated and think I'm judging her over something she has no control over.

And I insist on a guardian's presence, especially for women, or patients with histrionic personality disorder. Whatever the case may be, having parents, spouses, siblings coming with the patient is essential. It makes my work easier and the patient's progress sustainable. Because in the end, after my last session with a patient; what the patient will incurably turn or return to are his loved ones. That is why they need to be here. I teach them one of the loftiest currencies out there: language, and communication. And nothing trounces silence in this crazy world of ours like language.

"How would you rate your progress?" I say to Maryam.

“A little better than last week. I feel a little less smothered.”

“Good. Little makes all the difference.”

I let silence envelope us for a whole minute. It is nice to see how easily she now basks inside of the calmness that is in silence. This is a step forward from our first session.

“Any new friends?” I ask.

She shakes her head. Maryam shared a secret with her friends and they betrayed her trust and that caused quite the scandal. “I just needed to disconnect from anything, you know. It was so... so exhausting. I’m just enjoying some quiet time with the book you suggested last week: *Enjoy Your Life*. I read a lot of the Quran and I have never found better companions. *‘Verily, in the remembrances of Allah do hearts find true comfort.’*”

“Excellent! And your smartphone addiction?”

“No more. I only use it to check time, make a few calls, and write notes. I’m detoxing.”

What cases like Maryam’s brings to mind is how we are all creatures of needs and connection. If you don’t put those needs in their rightful places, and connections aren’t founded on truth there will be problems.

For almost an hour, we talk about Maryam’s days – the heaviness and the lightness of them. We talk about plans for the future. What Maryam doesn’t know is that this is our final session. And telling her it will be her final test. She won’t like it – saying goodbye – but I think she’ll take it well. I want her mother to be present for it to be final. Her mother needs to be here before it is over. But truth be told, I don’t want to stop seeing this kind soul. It’s always difficult to say goodbye to a patient.

Our session for the day is over and Maryam gets up to leave. She says goodbye and lingers at the door staring at the framed wall quote:

“... *And give glad tidings to the Guraba’ (strangers)*” – Muhammad Abdullah

She then says, “Is that why you’re called Gareeb? Who’s Muhammad Abdullah? The three dots suggest there’s more, so what’s the first half of the quote?”

I smile. “So many questions, Ms. Maryam,” I stand up and walk towards the framed wall quote. “This is the only thing I have of my parents. It is said the man is nothing without his root. Well, this is my root: This quote. It is a quote from the prophet.”

“That’s nice.”

What I don’t tell her is the quote was written on a cardboard paper I was wrapped in as an infant when my parents left me on the front steps of a foster home. I don’t even think my parents knew the contents of the cardboard paper they wrapped me in. And that’s the story of how I got my surname.

I smile at the quote. I smile at the last word – the strangeness, the oddity in me.

“As for the missing part of the quote...”

“No no! Don’t tell me,” Maryam says. “I want to check it myself. I want to... then we’ll talk about it in our next session. Goodbye, Dr. Gareeb.”

She leaves before I could say a word. Strange girl, she is. Promising strange thing, she is.

* * *

“And Yusuf’s brothers threw Yusuf in a well because they were envious of Yusuf. For a minute there, his brothers were lost – may Allah forgive them – that’s why they did such a bad – *very bad* – thing.” It is night time and I’m in bed narrating the story of Prophet Yusuf to my little Halima. Her head is on my chest and her feet are on Firdausi’s stomach.

“Then what happened?” Halima asks, even though this is the umpteenth time she’s heard this story.

A few minutes later both Halima and Firdausi are asleep. I gently pick up Halima and take her to her room. Before I come back, I call my son, Muhammad. We talk for a while then I go back to bed. Just before I go to sleep I remember I didn’t call the pharmacist back or check on him. I hope all is well.

* * *

It’s morning. I wake up to nine unanswered calls from the pharmacist.

I call back and he picks up on the first ring. “Dr. Gareeb, we have a problem.”

Apparently, the reason he called me yesterday is because a patient came to him with a prescription for certain questionable drugs in questionable amounts and that prescription had my signature on it. The pharmacist called to confirm if it was really from me. When he didn't get me on the phone he gave the patient the drugs. And the patient went home and overdosed in an attempt to end his life. Now the patient has been hospitalised since last night. His life hangs in the balance.

"What's the name of the patient?"

"Ahmad. Ahmad Musa."

I can't believe it. He's the patient I saw before I went home yesterday; the one who came late. I can't believe he wanted to kill himself. What went wrong?

"Were you the one that gave him the prescription?" the pharmacist asks.

"No, I didn't." *Then why do I feel guilty!?*

"That means he forged it. Just unbelievable! Kids these days... you want to help them and they don't see it. They just want to put you in trouble."

"Don't say that," I say. "He tried to kill himself."

"Don't worry about that, Dr. Gareeb. It's not your fault," the pharmacist says missing my point. I don't blame the pharmacist for missing my point. It's no easy job to see things from another's point of view. The pharmacist is like this because he's afraid of losing his job: for giving those drugs without verifying first. I may also lose my job. If all doesn't go well, I could go to prison. But all that doesn't matter now. A kid almost died is all that matters now.

"The police are asking questions. His father is coming after us. Can you believe that? He blames us for his son's quest to kill himself... that's how I even know the kid has been hospitalised. Now, all we have to do is prove he forged the signature. How did the boy even know how to write a prescription? How did..."

"What hospital is he in?" I say cutting him.

"There's no need to..."

"Just tell me what hospital he's in. I need to visit him. I need to see that poor kid."

He tells me then I hang up. I kiss my wife and daughter goodbye, take the car, and leave for the hospital.

* * *

Before I walk into the room, I see his father by the door, but I don't think he knows me. I think he'd have stopped me if he did.

I see Ahmad on the hospital bed and a woman, who must be his mother, sitting close to him. I can see the worry in her eyes as she holds his right hand. Besides her are his two older brothers – they resemble Ahmad as brothers do. I wonder if Ahmad has ever talked to his brothers about his mental well-being. Most brothers don't talk to each other about each other. They only talk to each other through subjects – school, soccer, cars, celebrities or even girlfriends. Remove those subjects, they don't really have anything to say to each other.

However, all I see suggests that Ahmad has a lovely family who loves him a lot and would be devastated if they lost him. But then all I am seeing is a unit of his life in a given time and a given circumstance. Be that as it may, it's still admirable. I'm not just saying this as a therapist but also as a thirty-five-year-old man who grew up without parents but met the kindest of people and the worst kinds of people growing up.

I greet his mother and she answers without looking at me. Ahmad is conscious, he sees and recognises me. He whispers something to his mother and suddenly she turns to look at me for the first time. She stares at me a tad confused, a tad startled. I'll be lying if I say her look didn't make me a bit scared.

She turns her gaze to Ahmad and asks him who I am.

"He is my therapist. Please, I want to talk to him alone," he replies calmly.

A minute later we are alone, Ahmad and I.

"What did you tell your mother that made her startled?" I say starting a conversation.

"Dr. Gareeb..." Ahmad says trying to sit up. "I thought you were going to say something about me almost being *late*. Get it? Late – dead. We keep

meeting on that point. On that word.” He’s trying to hide behind sarcasm and a hint of guilt-tripping.

“How are you feeling?” I ask, smiling.

“I don’t know. Who knew dying would be this hard and painful.”

“And foolish. Well, I suppose the experience has taught you something. No more trying to be *late*.”

He smiles back. “I don’t know Dr. Gareeb. Right now, I’m a big bowl of I-don’t-knows.”

It’s almost hard to believe that the reason he walked into my office yesterday was so I could facilitate his demise. The room is silent for a while. I notice he wants to say something but doesn’t. And finally, he talks.

“Look, I’m sorry for getting you in trouble. I’ll come clean... I’m trying to but my father... My father is a difficult man to talk to. I almost succeeded in killing myself but all he... I just don’t know.”

“Don’t worry about that. Just focus on getting better. You want to get better, don’t you?”

Before Ahmad answers, his father enters the room and bursts out:

“You have some guts coming here.”

Ahmad’s mother is behind his father trying to calm him down.

“You tried to kill my son and now you’re here... To finish him off? To shut him up?”

His father is in denial, to say the least. Denial is a coping mechanism that people put on in order not to see or admit the truth in front of them. The truth in front of him is his son is unwell. Everything else should come second. I wonder how many telltale signs of his son’s condition he has ignored.

“Mr. Musa...” I begin.

“It’s Alhaji Musa!” he corrects me.

“Your son tried to kill himself and you know it. I lay the blame at your feet,” I say.

“How dare you! How dare you say that to me!?”

“Alhaji Musa, your son has a lot of potential. I tell you this not because I know him well, but because I know it takes time, ingenuity, and planning to book an appointment with me, then show up late, steal my

prescription form without my knowledge, and forge my signature. All so he can end his life. What does that tell you?"

Alhaji is quiet, so I continue:

"He needs help and I can give him that. Please, let me."

Alhaji leaves the room. I don't know whether I've convinced him or he left to call the police on me.

"Nobody has ever talked to father like that. That was so cool!" Ahmad says, reclining on his bed.

But it isn't cool. I don't blame Alhaji. Cases like this make me fear for my own two kids. Because no amount of good parenting, no amount of knowledge can guarantee such a thing won't happen to your children. All you can do is try your best but worrying is always part of the job description.

"I have to go," I say and turn to leave.

"I have a question," Ahmad says sitting up. "Yesterday, the note you folded and gave me before I left your office... what did you write in it? Did you really write your salary?"

"Didn't you read it?"

"No. I threw it the moment I left your office. I figured you wouldn't really write it. You'd probably leave it blank to make me curious or write something profound to pique my interest so that I'd come back the next session. Writing your salary would be like you're admitting that you're only helping me for the money – whether the amount is encouraging or not. Isn't that the case, Dr. Gareeb?"

"You're quite smart, aren't you? So why waste it all? Why waste your life?"

"I don't know. It's just that I... hate my life. I'm a total mess. I keep letting people down. I have these dark thoughts, these dark moods that... it's hard to explain. I do know that I don't want to make Mom cry the way she... oh God!"

He's quiet and I give him that.

"I heard they will discharge you today. Apparently, they have no reason to keep you. Mr. Ahmad, I'd like it if you come see me."

"Where? In prison?" he smirks.

"Funny kid. No, my office."

Before I leave, I hand him my phone number. “Make sure you come.”

“I won’t be *late*,” he says smiling with his sleep-deprived eyes.

I smile back. “Yes, please. Don’t be *late*. We wouldn’t want that, would we?”

Neemah, The Walking Chaos

Ummuhani Onize Musa

Neemah, I thought about you last night, so much that I couldn't sleep till the early hours of this morning. In vivid detail, I could still recall how, on that day, you stood at the doorway with a Ghana-must-go bag clutched in your arm, begging for a last chance to live with me in my family's house.

"Aunty Onize, I don't have anywhere to go, please, don't send me away," you had said, brimming in tears.

These words weren't what chilled me to tears, but your history that I knew. You were a young girl, 8 at then, when life came so fast at you. On several occasions I had seen from my window how your mother was at the mercy of your alcoholic father, enduring punches and hits because she wanted to stay for you.

I remembered how my mother would rush to intervene in your parents' fight and I would quietly follow her behind to be a witness, too.

"Neemah is my only child," your mother would say wetly, looking purple in all her body. "Leaving the marriage is hard, Mamah Onize."

The domestic violence went on and on, leaving your mother looking grey and sick, until she had cancer and her slow death began.

At 11 you became orphaned by her, death snatched her away from you, from us, and I doubted if you knew she was your only true love and nothing would ever be like her, that your father would keep choosing those bottled intoxicants over you.

At 13 the street began to claim you, use you, and it later turned you into a strange, lost girl that would nod at every call for sex by street perverts.

"Not my beautiful Neemah," I exclaimed, shocking myself when I heard of what you had become. I would later advise my parents to bring you to live with us.

I saw light return to your eyes just few days after you moved in with us, you were going back to become that little girl again—13, free and happy, and gradually, you were shedding the dirty skin the street had forced on you.

I was happy, and for the first time I felt your mother was finding peace, too.

And, just like a flip switch, you started going back to become what I wanted to save you from: from sneaking out, to stealing, to deserting school for sex, and to compulsive lies that could have people spill their blood.

We tried to save you. My mother forgave your wrongs many, many times. I would call you inside the room to advise you and we would cry together, seeking God to save you for me, for us.

Neemah, we did try for you, you know? Until you became a walking chaos in my family's house and severing the family ties.

"Let her leave," I told my mother on that afternoon after you told the lie that had three women in Ohu Variki Market fighting themselves.

The next morning, I knew your stay with us was over, that my strength and willpower couldn't tame or save you. How could I save you when you were raised in a broken environment from infancy, and had stayed long watching the chaotic actions of your parents—parents who should have taught and shown you love?

"God will help you, Neemah," I said, trying to hold back tears. "You can't stay with us anymore."

I watched you fidget in the doorway, as if you were unsure of your steps, and then I felt my world split before my eyes. I never knew you were so much a part of me until that day.

Neemah, you were 14 when you left and I still wonder what has become of your tender body that still needs love, motherly care, and protective arms to snug into when it's cold.

Neemah, I miss you, and I pray life turns softer for you. You left a scar in my heart and it still aches. Maybe it will heal only when you heal and become whole.

My Dear Neemah, I hope you are not feeling so lonely in life?

With Love,

Onize.

Contributors

Biographies for artworks and photos are on the same page with the works.

A.A Labaran was born in Kaduna State, a writer, poet, literatus, once the Financial Secretary of Creative Writers' Club, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Samaru Chapter, and the Best Writer of the Year (2019/2020) of the National Association of Students of English and Literary Studies (NASELS), of the same school, Ahmad Ayyoub Labaran is a literary enthusiast, and has written more than enough works.

Aboo Haneefah. Musa B. Jibril (alias Aboo Haneefah) is a graduate of Bayero University, Kano. from the Geography department. He is a resident of Kabala Costain, Kaduna State, Nigeria. He is a poet and the author of *The Heirs*, a fact fictional English novella.

Adamu P. N. Laifsmith is a graduate of English (Literature) from ABU, Zaria. He's usually a leftist, and a humanist; and as brooding critic and writer, he's interest in postmodern theories and his writing pushes to the frontiers the course of/for humanity.

Bilkisu Aliyu is a poet. Her writing journey started in late August 2023, Writing has helped her with expressing herself and taking up responsibility of being the voice of the voiceless.

Professor Edward Ochigbo Adah Abah attended St Luke's Primary school, Jos in the 1970s. He had his secondary education at the Boys' Secondary School (BSS) Gindiri, Plateau State, earning his GCE in the early 80s. He proceeded to the School of Basic Studies Makurdi where he obtained the IJMB. Afterwards, he went to Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, where he read English, specialising in Literature. He served in FCT during the mandatory National Youth Service programme between 1989 and 1990. In 1990, Edward Abah, was employed as graduate assistant in the Department of English and Literary Studies, Ahmadu Bello University,

Zaria. He was awarded an M.A. degree in Literature in 1995 at the Department of English & Literary Studies, ABU, Zaria. Also, he was awarded a PhD, Literature in 2008 at the Department of English & Literary Studies, ABU, Zaria.

He has since 1990 been lecturer in the Department of English and Literary Studies at Ahmadu Bello University, where he is involved in teaching, research and community service. He has presented papers at local and international conferences. He has also published journal articles in academic journals both at home and abroad.

Edward Abah was promoted to the rank of Professor in 2017. His special interests include Comparative Literature, Postcolonial Discourse, African American and African Diaspora Studies, Cultures and literature. He has travelled to a number of countries and universities either as Visiting Lecturer or resource person. He was at the University of Louisville Kentucky in 2010; the University of Berkley, California, USA, in 2010; the University of Ngaoundere, Cameroun, in 2013 and 2014; the University of Yaounde, Cameroun in 2015; the University of Bremen, Germany in 2016. Within Nigeria, he has been Visiting Lecturer at the Kaduna State University, Kaduna (KASU) and Federal University, Gusau (FUGUS).

Edward was a resource person and part of the Ahmadu Bello University team in the DIES/DAAD collaboration between the Universities in the North and South from 2013 to 2016. He is an alumnus of the United States' Department of State funded programme "Study of the United States" Institutes (SUSI) on Contemporary American Literature. He was commissioned by Jerry E. Abramson, the Mayor Commonwealth of Kentucky on 1 June, 2010 as an Honorary Citizen of Louisville, with all rights together with the responsibility of furthering to all the good name and tradition of warm hospitality found in Louisville and the Commonwealth of Kentucky.

Edward Abah organised a one-day symposium following the death of Mohammad Ali, the African American boxing legend with the theme:

“Muhammad Ali: Celebrating the Boxing Legend” at the Faculty of Arts Ahmadu Bello University, in June 2016.

He has chaired the Local Organising Committee (LOC), of the Department of English & Literary Studies/University in Collaboration with the Embassy of the United States, Nigeria, to commemorate the Black History Month (BHM), in February 2017, at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria.

Edward Abah speaks the English, Idoma and Hausa Languages. He has a working knowledge of French and Deutsch (German). His hobbies are football, reading and mentoring young minds. He is married with children.

Farida Yahaya Tijjani is a talented 17-year-old poet, essayist, and ardent food lover. Writing under the captivating pen name “The Authoress,” she skillfully weaves together her love for food and literature within her works. With a unique voice and a passion for storytelling, Farida hopes to make waves in the literary world.

Hassana Umoru Maina is a lawyer, poet and Gender Consultant with over 3 years experience. She coordinated a standstill rally across eight northern states in Nigeria to push for the domestication of VAPP Act under the NorthNormal platform. She runs a weekly program on her Instagram, the #ABCsOFSexualViolence, where she invites guests from all works of life with the aim of normalizing the conversations on sexual violence and breaking the culture of silence and shame that surrounds the topic.

She was also involved in the #SecureOurLives project as the research and documentation officer, with a job description that included documenting the profiles of people that have died in Nigeria due to the ongoing insecurity. She won the Future Africa Awards Prize for activism in 2020 among other recognition. She’s holds a master’s degree from SOAS, University of London in Law with specialism in development and globalisation and a certificate from the Women transforming leadership course from Saïd Business School, University of Oxford.

She is also the Executive Director of ASVOIL Support Initiative, a non-governmental organisation committed to ending sexual violence through massive awareness campaigns and also the Special Assistant on SDGs to H.E Atiku Abubakar GCON (former vice president of Nigeria).

Isah Ibrahim is a Senior Lecturer Dept of English and Literary studies, Head of Literature Section and Project Coordinator. Also Assistant Dean, Postgraduate, Faculty of Arts.

Isa Saleem Adam is a Nigerian poet and freelance content writer. His works explore the grey areas between opposites, mundane, unnoticed occurrences, and the dystopian crevices of the human mind. You can reach him on Instagram (@saleem_adam_) and Twitter (@tales_paper).

Musa Bin Ibrahim Newland was born and raised in Katsina state, Nigeria. He is a poet and also a short story writer. His works have appeared in different magazines and Newspapers. He is currently a 300 Level student of English Literature in the prestigious institution, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria.

Nasir Taofeeqat studied English Literature in Ahmadu Bello University. She was the Chairperson of Creative Writers Club in 2019-2021. Her poems and essays has been published is several anthologies and websites.

Ogala Theodora is a poet, a writer and a spoken word artist that hails from Kogi State. She is Igala, and a great lover of art, nature and music. She is a 200l student of the department of English and Literary studies, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria.

Onah, Godday Ejiofor is a final year student of English and Literary studies at ABU Zaria. He was once the editor of the Creative Writers Club and has published few books and poetry.

Ogasele Sese Clement holds a bachelor degree in English Literature from Ahmadu Bello University Zaria, Kaduna State. He is from Katsina-Ala local government of Benue State. A native of Etulo from a small village called Otsaazi. He is a teacher, a creative writer, an actor, an artistic

director, an editor par excellence, a human right activist, and a self-acclaimed political activist. He is still single.

Sa'adatu Aliyu's writing journey started in 2017. Recently, she has published a collection of short stories titled *The Last Passenger*, and a book of poetry. To her writing is a means, of not just expressing her innermost feelings, but also a tool for liberation of the underprivileged of society.

Sofiat Oluwadamilola Oladuntoye (also known as First Lady) is an undergraduate student at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria-Nigeria. Where she is studying English and Literary Studies. She's passionate about exploring the world of literature and discovering new ways to tell stories, one of her work is a poem titled: *BERCEUSE*. Her goal is to use her writing to inspire others and make a positive impact on the world. She's a dreamer and a creative, always striving to grow and improve.

Usman Nuraini Muhammad is a media entrepreneur, public relations professional, consultant and strategist. He holds bachelor's in English (Language) from Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, with credible background in Protocol, Events Management, Content Creation and PR/Strategic Communications. He is goal oriented and idea driven with passion for arts, literature and creative innovation.