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F.A. Mohammed | Hannah Onoguwe | Alvin Kathembe | Sindiswa Busuku-Mathese | Oyebola Famuyiwa | Lydia Chiseche Ngoma | Megan Ross | Paul R. Paradise | Arinola Lawal

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Lady with the Yingyang by Atilola Olubela, with model Adeola Lydia

Design & Layout
Murewa Olubela

Special thanks to:
Shaun F. Beautement

Contact
http://journal.singlestory.org
journal@singlestory.org

TSSF Journal is a literary journal that publishes fiction, poetry, creative non-fiction, and essays.The Single Story Foundation (TSSF) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that provides storytelling opportunities for Africans at home and in diaspora. Submissions are accepted across all genres and within these categories: short fiction, nonfiction and poetry.

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Welcome Back

Conflict: A Battered Life

BY F.A. MOHAMMED

"**Mawu! Run!**"

"Run fast, Mawu!"

"Faster!"

Ladan, Mawu's best friend, shouted impatiently while holding out his hand to pull Mawu onto the rickety old truck meant for transporting animals. This was their only chance to escape and leave this godforsaken place. The scorching savannah sun blurred Mawu's vision as he ran. The land was as dry as the hearts of its inhabitants. It was the height of the hot season and the rains were not expected for another two months. The hardy leaves of the Neem tree that dotted the landscape hung limply, as though they were weeping.

Panting.

Mawu's pace was getting slower. Subconsciously, he had given up. Ladan's extended hand was getting further and further away. His face contorted with emotions reminiscent of a person watching a friend dying before his very eyes. Mawu knew the feeling only too well, it was that same paralyzing helplessness and pain he had felt while watching his father and brothers mercilessly gunned down by the monstrous Boko Haram soldiers a few weeks earlier. The memories forever imprinted in his mind, always fresh and recurring.

Boko Haram soldiers ambushed their village. They pillaged, killed and razed it to the ground. Their barbaric acts had been recounted by people from other villages. Mawu's village was warned that the mercenaries were headed in their direction two days before the raid. Many villagers filed out day and night carrying the few belongings they could with them.

Mawu's father had contemplated moving the family but was reluctant to leave everything he had known and worked for all his life: his recently inherited livestock and the farm that he had toiled and tilled every day since he was a young man. The farm was an integral part of his life, tilling the earth gave him a sense of calm and solace he couldn't describe. It is all he did, season after season, year after year, until his crooked, calloused hands were no longer effective, and the soil grew less and less fertile.

He was an old man, growing poorer with every

farming season. He couldn't afford farm hands especially because he saved everything he could spare to send his sons to the nearest school in the next village. His daughters had to stay home; there simply wasn't enough money to send any of them to school and better the boys be taught than the girls.

Like most of the men with large extended families, they stayed put and prayed that somehow Boko Haram's atrocities would come and pass. No one imagined the extent of the havoc the soldiers would wreak when they finally attacked. Sporadic shooting heralded the convoy's arrival on the day. The villagers ran in turmoil, creating more chaos, but the shooting only intensified as Boko Haram closed in on the vulnerable village.

It was carnage.

Mawu shook his head to rid his mind of the horrific memories. He had now stopped in his tracks, watching the truck disappear into the horizon with a handful of villagers he knew, including Ladan, his friend since childhood. All of his earliest memories had Ladan in them. They were circumcised together at a ceremony when they were about seven years of age, nursed by Ladan's eldest sister who gave them hot fried meat to help them heal quickly and ligidi, a local sweet. The other kids teased them mercilessly as they walked about town with no trousers to allow their wounds to heal. That was a little over ten years ago. Hard to believe they ever had such carefree days. How drastically their lives had changed now.

He wiped the sweat dripping down his face and started walking back to their makeshift home, wondering if he was ever going to see Ladan again.

He only survived the Boko Haram raid because of Ladan. Ladan forcibly held him down in a corner of a hut, where they took cover when the shooting started. Mawu had tried to run off to his father's rescue when he was shot but Ladan wouldn't let him go. From where they hid, they could see the violence that ensued. When the shooting had died down and Boko Haram had left, Ladan stayed with him as he sobbed for hours, not saying a word, Ladan's presence enough.

For days after the raid, Mawu, Ladan and others who survived searched for and buried the dead. They salvaged whatever they could from what remained of the village. Everyday, a handful of them wandered aimlessly round, trying to make sense of the sudden tragedy their lives had become. Their misery was as palpable as it was unimaginable. Almost all the families were dispersed. The Boko Haram soldiers took many women and girls, as they usually do in every raid. It was as if girls were pawns in their game of war.

The surviving villagers went days without food, rest or peace of mind. Their faces blank, reflecting the sudden void in their lives. Worse they heard days after the raid that Boko Haram were on the prowl, recruiting soldiers for their army and so the villagers lived in fear of the return. Every day more villagers left in groups to find shelter elsewhere. It didn't matter how far, even as word spread that Boko Haram soldiers had attacked settlements near and far. The birth of a ghost village.

Mawu and Ladan used to have long discussions daily on how they would leave if the opportunity

ever presented itself, an opportunity like the truck Mawu missed.

"Mota! Mota!"

The villagers shouted, coming out in droves like bellowing white ants from a crushed sand hill, when they saw the truck. They jumped on, desperate. No one asked for permission. Anywhere was better than where they were. The driver flabbergasted at how quickly the truck was filling up turned it around and drove off.

Three weeks later, Mawu stood under the same scorching sun in the sweltering heat, very near the spot that he had stopped running after the truck that had taken Ladan away. Boko Haram had returned a few days after Ladan left. The soldiers arrived at dusk, no shooting this time. They just drove into the centre of the village in their usual show of power and military might with endless numbers of army trucks and vans. Every soldier was armed. There must have been hundreds of them. They surrounded the whole village in a matter of minutes and raised their symbol of victory and conquest, their black flag, in front of the only water borehole in the village.

The Commandant, a tall built man in his early thirties with an elaborate black turban on his head, stepped out of his truck and inspected the village in a haughty manner.

"We are looking for more recruits. In exchange, we will let you live in peace under the leadership of the fearless Shekau," he announced.

The village head who had been fished out of one of the huts and dragged half running before the Commandant had guns pointed to his head by overzealous, half-drugged soldiers.

"If the young men do not surrender, we will execute your Bulama and other villagers one by one till we get volunteers."

Shortly after that, many of the young men trooped out of their hiding places and gave themselves in, including Mawu.

Now, the new recruits were lined up and handed loaded rifles by one of the commanding officers who proudly wore a badly tailored army uniform with cheap, fading brass buttons. It had stripes on the sleeves and fake looking badges indicating his rank in the Boko Haram army. His head was wrapped in a not-so-clean, multi-coloured turban.

Mawu was sweating profusely from the high temperature and anticipation of the new set of instructions the new recruits would be given. The cocktail of drugs he swallowed the night before was wearing off, his vision blurred every few seconds, making him feel hot and cold at the same time. He had never held a loaded rifle before. It was a strange feeling, cool weighty metal against the hot sweaty flesh of his palms. He didn't feel the heavy rush of confidence the Boko Haram soldiers displayed holding a gun.

As new recruits, the young men had undergone 'paramilitary training' for ten days. They were made to participate in physical combat with each other, shown how to hold and shoot with guns. They ran around the whole village several times at the crack of

dawn, forced to do crude obstacle courses all day till they were exhausted and barely able to stand. At night they sat for hours listening to designated officers preach the Boko Haram ideals and values. The crack of the whip intermittently ensured sleep didn't dare overtake them. The soldiers always swallowed pills regularly which were freely available and offered to the new recruits. Most of them took the pills, not giving any thought to the intended effect or unwanted consequences.

This was the day of their initiation into the Boko Haram fold.

"Today soldiers, you become part of us fully," the commanding officer announced. His words were accompanied with a high sense of accomplishment and pride.

He continued pacing in the sun, seemingly unaffected by its punishing heat.

"And we must test your loyalty!"

"Usuman, bring them out!"

The officer shouted and waved his hand at a rangy soldier with intense bloodshot eyes. Throughout their training, Mawu, had never seen him smile or loosen up, even after ingesting large amounts of drugs.

Usuman brought out some villagers and lined them up in front of the new recruits. Mawu recognised one of them — an old man — and, judging by the surprised expression on his face, the old man did too. He wondered where they were found. So many had run away and some went into hiding. Most of the villagers assumed their family members were dead.

The commanding officer didn't miss the brief look of recognition between the old man and Mawu. He stepped forward grabbed the old man and shoved him in front of Mawu and said,

"You Soja, shoot!"

If Mawu spared the old man's life he was automatically forfeiting his. The Boko Haram soldiers would not hesitate to kill him right there. They certainly didn't need soldiers like him and they would happily make an example of him. The recruits had been warned about being weaklings at the nightly preaching. They were told not to fear anything or anyone, not even death, in or out of the battlefield. Their reward would be waiting for them in heaven when they died.

"I said shoot him!" the officer shouted at him again when he noticed Mawu's hesitation.

Mawu looked at the old man and shakily raised the gun in aim. The past flashed before his eyes. This man supported his family when his father fell ill years ago. The old man shared his farm produce between their two families when his father's crops didn't do well. Mawu remembered how the old man checked up on his father everyday unfailingly. The old man would always bring one herbal concoction or the other for his father to drink. When his father eventually got better, their friendship became stronger and they became inseparable. Mawu's father was grateful and the whole family felt indebted to the old man. He told them the only way

he could repay his friend was by joining their two families in marriage. So Mawu's sister was betrothed to one of the old man's sons. But they had another bond, the old man was Ladan's father.

Everyone looked at Mawu who shook visibly, sweat running from his forehead into his eyes, making him blink profusely. His cheap khaki shirt already drenched. Mawu couldn't bring himself to shoot. The commanding officer walked towards Mawu, gnashing his teeth, trying to control his seething anger. He had high hopes for Mawu and had praised him in their circles; he even bragged to the other recruits about Mawu's quickness to learn and show of promise throughout the training.

Usuman's eyes deadly cool as usual watched intently at what was transpiring, only a twitch at his temple betrayed his emotions. He was ready to kill Mawu the instant the Commanding officer ordered it. One flick of his finger and Mawu would be dead.

The officer had come up behind Mawu without him noticing, his mind was still swimming in a variety of emotions.

"Soja!" The officer shouted, and Mawu, still aiming at the old man, lowered his head, but the Commandant caught it between his palms and held it up firmly."No! look at your victory. An infidel's life is not worth anything," he told him with firm reassurance.

But Mawu's eyes were shut, he didn't look. He couldn't look. All he could see was Ladan's face as they parted. His life would never be the same if he did this.

Mawu was shaking so hard the rifle was rattling. The harder he gripped it the more the rifle slid from his sweaty hands.

From behind, Usuman saw the officer crook his finger in a secret code and he raised his rifle in aim ready to kill Mawu.

The officer moved closer to Mawu, his mouth only inches away from his ear and screamed with a sense of finality. "Shoot soja!"

Suddenly a single shot rang out in the silence of the afternoon. The old man crumpled to the ground in a heap, dead before he hit the ground.

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F.A. Mohammed, is a lawyer and passionate entrepreneur. She comes from the Northeast of Nigeria, Boko Haram's stronghold, and writes stories about the war that has ravaged that part of the country and its effects on her ancestral land. She runs other businesses including a publishing company. Its publication, *The Draftbill Magazine* focuses on raising awareness on legislations in her country and its effects on the lives and livelihood of citizens. An avid charity worker, Mohammed is part of a small, active family NGO targeted at helping internally displaced persons, especially women and children.

Looking for Uncle Daniel

BY HANNAH ONOGUWE

Uncle Daniel never came to my mother's funeral. She died in 1994, long before the mobile phone made its appearance in Nigeria, so word took longer to travel. We had to wait ten days to bury her, as I had to make my way down from Jos, where I was in boarding school. You would think, after being absent at his sister's funeral, he would make an effort to come and see his niece later. But no.

Over the years, I imagined different scenarios of our eventual meeting. There is a particular favourite: like a celebrity I would appear, hair blowing in the breeze, glamorous, *loaded*, with my successful husband beside me, with or without a couple of beautiful kids. I would be gracious and polite as I give answers as to what has been happening to me over the years, even though deep inside I questioned his right to ask. There will be no accusations, but somehow Uncle Daniel will get the underlying message: *See, I made it without you! I turned out just fine, despite your inattention.* But my reality is quite different from my fantasy: I am not loaded, not quite married, no kids but I still want that message to bevery clear. Before this scenario can play out, however, my fiancé and I have to find Uncle Daniel first.

My maternal grandfather, a proper Edo man, had married more than one wife and my grandmother was the first. My mother and Uncle Daniel were the only children she had. But I don't have any grandparents left, maternally or paternally. That loss aside, today I'm wondering who's left on my maternal side and can provide information. The purpose of this trip is to find a contact address, so I can locate Uncle Daniel who, the last I heard, lived in Benin. He worked with Guinness once, ages ago. Since then, I don't think he's held down a steady job. He and his family apparently move pretty often.

Today I'm dressed in jeans, a T-shirt and flat shoes, almost identical to what my fiancé is wearing. Glancing over, I meet his eye and summon a small smile. He returns it without a word; I sense some reassurance in it. The conversation has dried up, as if in deference to the weightier matters on my heart

and emotions. For a moment I fish around in my head for some thread of something to talk about, but eventually abandon the effort. He's looking out of the window at the passing scenery, the green-green of wild, uncultivated land, the occasional town, the sheds we pass with women underneath selling jerry cans of palm oil, yams, garri, snails and crayfish. I pull out my phone and dig out my earphones. In a few minutes I'm feeling better, singing along softly to the music coming from the earphones. When he glances at me in amusement I tone it down a bit, hoping I'm not warbling.

Like many of the roads in Nigeria, the potholes are teeth-jarring. As the driver swerves to avoid them, I alternately grab the headrest of the passenger seat in front of me or the door handle beside me for balance. On the plus side, I am glad that the driver of the taxi we hired is a bit familiar with the area. I would have been lost trying to find this place on memory alone. I had asked my father what he could remember by way of directions and requested he send me an SMS. There wasn't much to go by from what he sent but at least I knew we were headed in the right direction: Oke-Old, Sabongida Ora in Edo State. The last time I was down this way I must have been about ten. If I recall correctly, at that time I was more concerned about my feet, which were swelling in the totally inappropriate pumps I'd worn for the trip, than the route.

So, Uncle Daniel didn't come for the funeral—none of them did.

Years later, even my grandfather who was still alive at the time would travel to Ibadan to see us with one of his wives, a younger addition. It was somewhat awkward, seeing as my dad had remarried at the time.

Grandfather (in halting English): Sorry about your wife, my daughter. Sorry I couldn't make it to the funeral.

Father: Oh, that's okay, I'm recovering quite well from the loss. You must have noticed the woman in the house?

Grandfather (nonplussed): Oh, the one who just...

Father (a little abashed but proud): Yes, that's my new wife.

It didn't happen quite that way, but after the initial greetings, I hadn't hung around to make conversation. Sometime later, a half-aunt, who I'd never seen before, visited from Lagos, apparently to catch up with the family her half-sister left behind. My problem with polygamy, especially in a situation like mine where second and third generation families grow up far apart, is that you never really know your half-cousins, half-aunts or half-uncles.

They sometimes appear seemingly out of the woodwork, and you're not quite sure what to do with them. Hug? Smile? Attempt to feverishly fill in the missing years?

After my mother's death, I did see a couple of her family members. Not Uncle Daniel, though. I once came home from the University of Ibadan to be

told by my father that Uncle Daniel had visited. I was surprised, and a bit excited, but all that fizzled away when he continued in almost the same breath that Uncle Daniel had left. At first I was nonplussed. Then irritated. After not seeing me for over a decade, he hadn't tried to wait or look for me? The university was just about thirty minutes away from the house, not in another state. So, why had he come? My father was rather subdued when he informed me my uncle had been asking for some 'assistance'. When I recently asked my father for the address Uncle Daniel had left on that visit, my father said there wasn't one. I wondered if my father had bothered to ask, or if Uncle Daniel had been vague.

With my uncle's non-appearance in my life, or his apparent apathy, some may wonder why finding him was important. But in Nigeria, it is customary to inform both sides of the family when you plan to marry and present your intended to them—usually with a bottle of wine, schnapps or a similar drink. With the paternal side taken care of, we were working on the maternal side. Left to me I wouldn't have bothered. However, my fiancé brought it up. I brushed him off. Then my stepmother brought it up and I brushed her off in a similar fashion. After that, the father of one of my closest childhood friends sat me down and talked up the importance of contacting my maternal family. A few months later, so did my sister-in-law's boyfriend.

Each time it came up I weakened a little further, reluctantly and a bit angrily. Especially when in each case, the advice came with a warning: you never can predict how external family members will react to being sidelined. Displeasure can metamorphose into enmity, which can manifest in a number of ways, some of which have been curses of some sort to ensure an unhappy marriage or no children or death of some sort. Nollywood isn't always wrong, Nigerians — and Africans in general — can be quite superstitious. I am modern enough to think I don't believe in such things, but African enough not to want to take any chances. And there's that verse in the Bible that comes to mind: "A curse without cause shall not alight (Prov. 26:2)." It's both comforting and ambiguous. Comforting when you search the recesses of your mind and past and realize you're innocent of any wrongdoing. But ambiguous in a situation like ours. What, exactly, constitutes 'cause'? Murder? Adultery? Theft? Not presenting your intended to your maternal family? A whole exegesis has probably been written on that, but surely it's just easier to look for them? We decided it wouldn't hurt to try.

The town is quiet, laidback and not as busy as I expected. I see no market, but maybe it's on the other side. Or maybe they still have market days and today isn't one of them. The compounds are almost identical: square or rectangular sandy areas cordoned off from the main road and the neighbours by a few shrubs, humble bungalows with tin roofs plopped down right in the middle. I imagine they have remained unchanged in the last twenty years, except maybe for a new coating of paint. There are even some mud huts. Make that the last thirty years. The only modern structure we see looks out of place. It likely belongs to a politician who, by

building this house, has done his duty to save the area from total backwardness.

My late grandfather had a popular printing press in Ubiaja. We decided the best way to begin was to ask where the press was and about the man who owned it. I ask the driver to stop a couple of times to query people who look like they would know. I feel a little foolish as they look at me speculatively; one middle-aged man goes as far as to ask if I am so-and-so's daughter who came at so-and-so time. I almost wish I were, but shake my head with a smile. At the back of my mind is the tiny desire to feel like I belong, to prove I have roots in this place, to shake off the feeling that I am an imposter.

Finally, we strike gold. A tall young man at a house we are directed to says that he can take us to the compound, which is only a house or two away. It is a bungalow with an open veranda and there is a young woman with a child sitting outside. I wonder if I might be related to her as I make inquiries. Looking at me curiously, she says she hopes there is no problem—the way most Nigerians do when they have struggled to place you, can't, and wonder if you're a bearer of bad news. I tell her no before she goes in. She returns with an elderly woman, hair cut low, wearing a sleeveless white cotton blouse and a wrapper tied around her waist.

Another man joins us and he and the young woman introduce the old woman as my late grandfather's sister, not his wife as I'd assumed. When I tell her my mother's name, Priscilla, I buttress the point by also mentioning her native name, Izegboya, to which the old woman embraces me, exclaiming words in Esan which are vaguely familiar but incomprehensible to me. The tone of her voice, and the sorrow, get to me, and I fight tears. My mother, after all, had been her niece; my Uncle Daniel had been her nephew. I am told, without ceremony, that he died a year or two ago.

The world takes on a sense of unreality as I try to absorb the shock of this news. Dead, just like that? I feel short-changed, cheated. I wonder, illogically, why he had to go and do that without my knowledge. Meanwhile I am given the phone number of his nephew, David (a half-brother or sister's son), my cousin in actual fact, whom I have never met. I am informed that he's the one who had been in touch with Uncle Daniel and his family. That he is away at school, somewhere, but only comes home on some weekends.

I save his number carefully. I avoid looking at my fiancé, who waits in the car with the driver. All of a sudden, I can't wait to get away, and I press some money into my grand-aunt's hand, feeling it is inadequate. I wish I had thought to buy a few things to bring with me. Foodstuffs, maybe. When she thanks me profusely in broken English, with what sounds like prayers alongside, I worry that when I leave she will be resentful that I came so late.
Back in the car, I deliver the news clinically. Silence reigns as the driver turns the car around so we can head back to Benin City. Turning my head to look out the window, I am confused as to why I am fighting to keep the moisture in my eyes from falling. Yes, it is such an anticlimax, but why tears? For lost and wasted opportunities, perhaps. For

holding a grudge against a dead man. So useless. For no second chances.

The last time we visited Uncle Daniel and his family, my mother and I had boarded a luxury bus from Jos to Benin City. It was an exciting trip. We were received at the too-small flat with lots of smiles and inquiries as to how Jos people were doing. As an only child, I found it a different, noisy world with a slew of seven boys running around. Some were dressed in just briefs with distended belly buttons that looked moulded on, as if when they were born the midwife's assistant had been away and the umbilical cord cut by a half-blind carpenter. I heard later that they eventually got a girl.

I struggle to remember Uncle Daniel's features from that last encounter. His was a handsome face with skin a bit lighter than my mother's, a trim moustache and a wide smile as he and my mother talked rapidly in that lilting dialect. Today, with reluctant understanding, I see that trying to provide for his family would have kept his hands full, especially with schooling in the face of his employment issues. I don't know if that exonerates him, but all that's left are speculations.

I call David, my never-seen-before cousin, and introduce myself. He never knew my mother—he couldn't have, and it's not clear if he knew she existed. When I ask about Uncle Daniel's widow and children, he tells me he hasn't seen them in a long time, and that they've moved from the last address he had visited. He does say he will do his best to discover their whereabouts and let me know. I thank him and end the call.

I wonder about my cousins, Uncle Daniel's children, my only full cousins from my mother's side. If we walked by each other, we wouldn't even know. I hope they are doing well. One part of me wants to just forget the whole thing and let the chasm grow even wider. The other part—the saner one that still gives a hoot about family—protests. Do I want the cycle of apathy to continue, become worse with the generations? I think of my future children and their right to know. Relatives will mess up—that's what they do. But surely family is family, after all?

I get a Facebook message from one of my maternal relatives, weeks after the trip to Sabongida Ora. We exchange numbers and talk over the phone. My mother was his aunt or half-sister, he says, and he remembers how nice she was. He says he knew me when I was a tiny thing. I don't remember him at all and the initial question at the back of my mind was: Where have you been all this time? But he did make the effort. We still talk occasionally but with the blocks of time in between, each conversation seems to rest on a constant loop of banality. I wish we could get to know each other a little better than the time before.

Weeks later I get another Facebook message and friend request from someone who says she's my mother's younger, half-sister. I am both glad and confused to hear from her. That inner question pops up again. It takes me two days to accept the request and ask how she is. But she made the effort.

I wonder if, when I eventually, hopefully, get in touch with Uncle Daniel's many children and their mother, that same question will be at the backs of their minds. Will they, ironically, feel the resentment towards me I had felt for their late father? After all, showing love and concern isn't a one-way thing. The last time I called my never-seen-before cousin, David, someone totally different picked up the phone and said his name was David. Yes, he lives in Kaduna, but no, he wasn't my cousin. How does one reconnect with long-lost relatives when things like that happen? I don't have all the answers. All I know is to keep making the effort.

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Hannah Onoguwe's work has appeared in Adanna and BLACKBERRY: a magazine, and online in Litro, *The Missing Slate*, Cassava Republic, *African Writer*, *The Kalahari Review*, Lawino, *The Stockholm Review* and *Brittle Paper*. Others are in Persistent Visions, *Eleven Eleven* and *Drum Literary Magazine*. She was longlisted for the Saraba Manuscript Prize and is one of the contributing authors to the speculative fiction anthology, *Imagine Africa 500*. *Wine and Water,* published by Bahati Books, is a collection of her short stories available on Amazon and Okadabooks. She lives in Bayelsa.

Day Zero

BY ALVIN KATHEMBE

Please
restrict yourself to two minute, stop-start showers.
Collect your bath and basin water
and use it for flushing.
Only flush when you really need to.
Wash hands less frequently – use sanitizer instead.
Don't leave the tap running while you brush your teeth.

Evenings, in the townships,
children's feet skip in the street
weaving through the queues forming
outside the communal taps.

In the hotels,
all the bathtub plugs have been taken out.
The taps in restaurant bathrooms are blocked.

At the GrandWest Arena,
where a troupe of world-renowned illusionists
are putting up a show,
audiences are disappointed that they will not get to see

maestro escape artist Krendl
due to the logistics of his performance.

Summer's feet drag,
kicking up long plumes of dust.
The disas are in bloom;
pretty redheads dot the side of the Mountain.
All the lawns are blondes.

All the cars in Cape Town are dirty.

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Alvin Kathembe is a writer and poet from Nairobi, Kenya. His work has appeared on Omenana and various other publications. Find him on Twitter: @SofaPhilosopher.

Visiting

BY SINDISWA BUSUKU-MATHESE

What happened before this, I cannot tell you because I cannot remember.
I can tell you I was with her.
In the metallic green Nissan Skyline driving up Sparks Road, passing Johnny's Roti.
Up the road then down and around the corner passing Overport City, arriving at McCord Hospital.

← PUBLIC PARKING TURN LEFT
PRESS BUTTON FOR PARKING TICKET
0-1 HOUR = FREE
1-2 HOURS = R 8.00

PARKING LOT

She found a spot and I waited for her outside the car while she shook her handbag listening for coins. She turned in her seat and looked at me leaning on the boot, then rubbed her fingers together and her mouth said something like, "Do you have any change on you?"
I tapped my pockets, "Nope."

GROUND FLOOR

We entered through the sliding glass doors and found the lifts, joined the male nurse who bent over to rest his elbows on the handles of his patient's wheelchair. A woman sat in a thin hospital gown with fluffy satin slippers, white thinning hair smoothed back and twisted into a low hanging bun. With a jumpy jaw she nodded and raised her eyebrows in conversation with the door.

FIRST FLOOR

Sellotape held down a small cotton ball in the crease of her arm, but the purple patch beneath told me she wasn't doing too well. He turned his face left to look at me and slowly dragged himself upright.

Smiled and winked at me.
One gold canine and his nametag read Nathi. He looked about thirty and didn't mind my school uniform.

SECOND FLOOR

She didn't notice, she was still thinking about the R 8.00.

THIRD FLOOR

We got to the third floor and walked into the Men's Section, passing rows of tall powder blue curtains framing each bed, some partially open, allowing glimpses of families huddled around husbands or sons.
And there we were, a mother and daughter searching for our father.
He was there, right at the end, now no more than 50 kgs, white beard more shaggy than I have ever seen in all my twelve years. Catheter hung off the side of his bed with a milky sediment building below dark urine.
Same sellotape on his arms, same bruising, same jumpy jaw.

ONCOLOGY UNIT

He can't speak much anymore, so now he cries when we arrive. Every Monday, Wednesday and Friday for one hour we sit quietly crying holding his cold hand.
We've stopped asking, "How are you today?"
The response is always loud crying, head shaking and followed by him using my arm to pull himself upright, grabbing me by both shoulders and bringing his face secretly to my ear, "Babyshoes, bring me my gun."
"Dad. I can't. You can't ask me to do that."
"Please my girl! PLEASE!" on and on.

Nurses rush in, the other families stare through the curtain gaps. We're pushed aside, they increase the morphine drip and he begins to fall asleep. Nothing left for us to do but leave and if we leave right now the parking will hopefully still be free.

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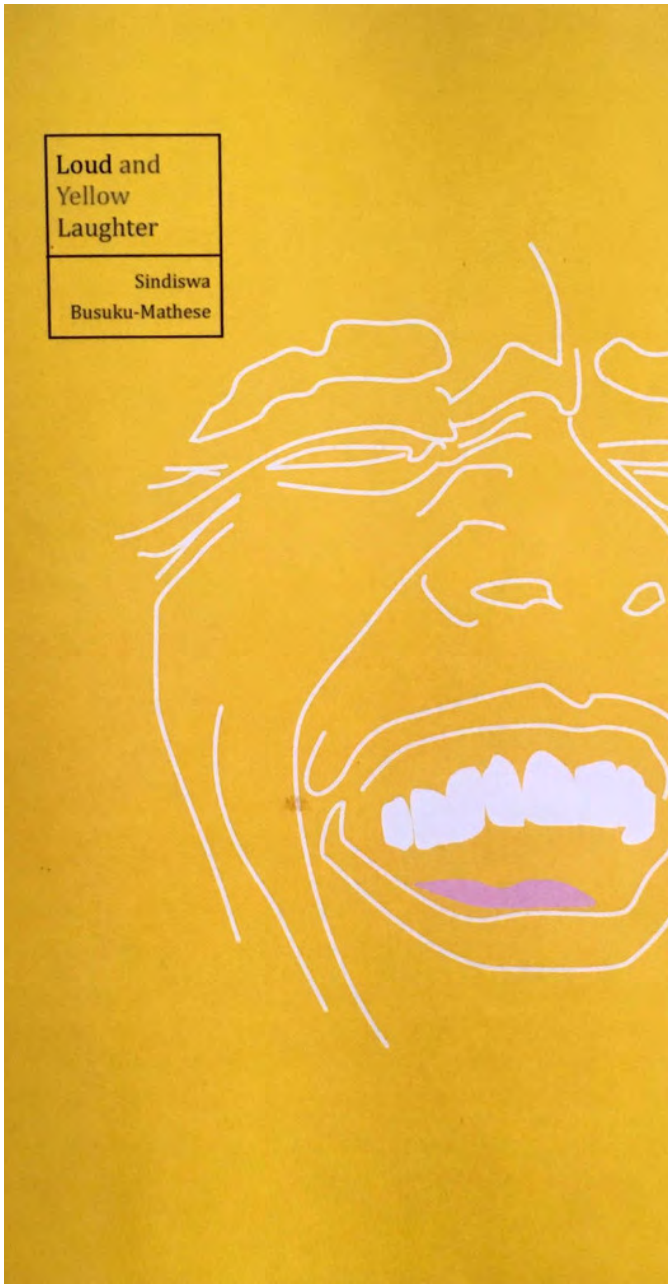
Sindiswa Busuku-Mathese is an award-winning poet from Durban. Having been awarded a doctoral scholarship by the Graduate School for Arts and Social Sciences, she is currently reading for a PhD at Stellenbosch University. In 2016, she published her debut collection titled *Loud and Yellow Laughter* (Botsotso), a cross-genre assemblage of photographs, prose and poetry experimenting with memory and documentation. The poem 'Visiting' is from *Loud and Yellow Laughter* (Botsotso, 2016). Sindiswa Busuku-Mathese is the Interviews Editor of *New Contrast: The South African Literary Journal*. She has published various poems in local and international poetry journals such as *New Coin*, *New Contrast*, *Prufrock*, *Ons Klyntji*, *Aerodrome*, *Sol Plaatje European Union Anthology*, *Illuminations* and *Dryad Press: Unearthed Anthology*. She was awarded second place for the 2015 Sol Plaatje European Union Poetry Award and was shortlisted for the 2016 Gerald Kraak Award for African Writers and Artists. She was also shortlisted for the 2016 University of Johannesburg Prize in the Debut category. Most recently, *Loud and Yellow Laughter* won the 2018 Ingrid Jonker prize for poetry.



Travels

BY OYEBOLA FAMUYIWA

Location: Lagos, Nigeria

Art is very satisfying and this is one of the many reasons I keep creating fine art photographs. I count it a wonderful privilege recreating my visual experiences this way.

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Oyebola Famuyiwa is the owner of Potterclay Photography. His romance with photography began when he was in secondary school, The International School of Ibadan. He was a finalist in the "Life In My City" and "This Is Lagos" competitions, and was an exhibitor at the 2011 edition of the Creative Expo by The British Council. His works have been published in magazines like Allure by Vanguard, Island Explorer, amongst others. You can follow him on social media at either @potterclayphotography or @artbyoye.

AUNTY JOYCE

BY LYDIA CHISECHE NGOMA

"**Pack and go! Pack and go!**"

The man in the house next door was shouting at his wife — the third time this week — and she rattled back profanities in high pitched Bemba. The first time we heard it, I was with my sister, Nomsa, and we'd giggled nonstop. Dad, after hearing what had transpired, went to speak to them the following day, but it didn't really change things. It was amusing the first few times, but when you listen to the same thing every other day for four years, it tends to grow old.

The green gate slid open a crack and my Aunty Joyce slipped in before sliding it shut behind her. She was wearing her brown and gold chitenge suit, with a flamboyant headscarf to match. "A woman always needs to look beautiful," she'd say.

My aunt was a beautiful woman: medium height, willowy and that fair complexion that was the envy of many. She was also very nice: polite, gracious and graceful; she was a "living doll" as my grandmother would say.

Aunty Joyce was never out of hugs and kisses and kind words for anyone. Since we were young, she'd called us her "angels". She brought us fancy gifts from her conferences around the world and let us stay up past our bedtimes when Mum tried to send us to bed. Aunty Joyce lived in Kabwe with her husband, Uncle Peter, a pastor. They would often stay with us when their church conferences were in Lusaka, and sometimes we would go to their house during the school holidays. But these days, Aunty Joyce seemed to be having more and more church conferences that her husband, the pastor, was not attending.

"How are you my angel?" Her voice was warm as the day.

"Fine," I replied. "Just hot."

"It's the Lord's blessings upon us." She made a fanning gesture with her dainty fingers and walked to the house. It was a wonder she did not break a sweat underneath those layers of material.

Decembers in Lusaka are hot.

I don't remember it being this hot when I was younger. There was more rain then, I think. The Christmas tree would stand tall in the corner of the living room and Boney M would always be

playing somewhere. At church, preparations for the big pageant would begin and Dad would drive my sisters and I there three times a week for the rehearsals. Anne and myself would be angels, and Nomsa the narrator- she was always the best reader.

Then, there would be Christmas candies, movies on television, and shopping for new outfits for the Christmas Mass. Mum would let us stay up late to see the fireworks, and the smell of baked treats filled the house early Christmas morning as a light shower of rain fell outside. Now, Christmas is often hot. We would sit outside, in the middle of a neighbourhood-wide power cut, on a mat under the mango tree listening to the neighbours behind us re-enact their screaming battles.

Suppertime came quickly, and we were all at the dinner table: Dad, Mum, Anne, Aunty Joyce and me. Nomsa was still at college; she only ever visited on weekends these days.

As usual, Dad and Aunty Joyce were soon in roars of laughter; she always seemed to bring out the laughs in my parents. She was telling us a story of how a pastor tried to exorcise a man who overpowered him and stripped him naked. "This is why I tell Peter," she said, between bouts of laughter, "if you don't have the anointing, don't try these things!"

"Indeed!" Dad roared as he poured more pure juice into her glass; he'd come home with it from work, like he'd been doing every day since she arrived.

Anne and I were quiet. Anne occasionally looking over her shoulder, catching a glimpse of the telenovela that was playing on the muted television in the living room.

"This chicken is delicious," Aunty Joyce announced. "Who prepared it?"

"The maid," Mum replied. "She left it in the oven before she left."

"Now when will these girls start helping?" She looked at me with her disarming smile, before turning her gaze on to Anne. "You know, they need to start preparing to be good wives and mothers."

Anne released a groan beneath her breath.

"So Anne" Aunty Joyce said, "what are the plans for your exams?"

"I'm studying," Anne mumbled.

Anne was a year older than me, and she was in 9th Grade. The National Exams were coming up, and everyone she knew kept asking her how she was faring on. I kind of felt sorry for her knowing that next year was going to be my turn.

"You'd better be," Dad said, pointing at her with his chicken bone, "we don't pay small money at that school of yours."

"Ala!" Aunty Joyce exclaimed. "Schools these days are expensive for nothing. I was just telling Peter the other day, because paying for Junior now is like paying for three people!"

"Really?" Anne asked. "When did you talk to Uncle?"

Everyone at the table went silent. Dad cleared his throat to speak, but Anne beat him to it.

"Where is Uncle, actually? You're here on a

conference for the church, but he isn't."

"He's with the ministry in Kabwe, where he's supposed to be," Aunty Joyce replied, but her tone was different.

"Well then the church must be growing - with you here on conferences every two weeks-"

“Okay who wants ice cream?" Mum slid out of her chair loudly, her eyes fixed on Anne.

"Is it that vanilla one that I love?" Aunty Joyce gave her trademark radiant smile.

"The very one," Mum replied, wrapping her chitenge tighter around her waist.

"Like we have the money to afford it," Anne murmured. Only I heard her.

"I'll help," I volunteered. I got up with my plate and followed Mum to the kitchen.

The rest of the evening went smoothly. The power did not go out, and they actually played one Christmas song, signalling that it was right around the corner.

Aunty Joyce's neatly braided head bobbed to the rhythm. "Peter loves this song."

"This was the music," Dad agreed, as the old tune played through the TV screen.

"Come and help me with the sheets," Mum said to me. I followed her to the corridor, where she'd been doing the folding.

She held up a satin sheet in the fluorescent lighting. "I'll need to tell Mercy to stop ironing these on high, it's really damaging the threads."

When we'd finished folding them, she placed a pair of matching silk sheets – hers and Dad's – telling me: "Take these to Aunty’s room."

Aunty Joyce was already in her room when I knocked and entered. She was in her white night slip, and her head was wrapped in a cotton scarf. In the harsh power-saving lights, I could see the lines in her makeup-free face. There were dark pink marks on her cheekbones, and her eyes had fading greyish looking bags underneath them. Her breasts sagged to near her stomach and her slim fingers looked claw like.

"You brought sheets for me?" she said in a delighted tone. "Thank you, angel." She walked from the other side of her bed to give me a kiss. "Put them over there." She pointed at the chair in the corner.

I put them where she asked, feeling light and special, as I always did when she paid me attention. After, I opened the door to leave and said, "Goodnight Aunty Joyce," and for a reason still unknown to me, I added, "and I'm sorry about Anne earlier."

She looked up from where she was now sitting on the bed. "You know, for someone who's not his, you sure do look like your father."

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Lydia Chiseche Ngoma is poet and writer based in Lusaka, Zambia. Her interests lie in philanthropy, film, and the exploration of humanity through literature. She currently co-runs a small social

enterprise, which is focused on empowering youth through poetry and creative writing.
She has written for *The Guardian*, *Glow Magazine*, and blogs at eyewoke.wordpress.com, and chisechewrites.wordpress.com.

Origin Myths

BY MEGAN ROSS

I should have guessed I would always take to mourning like religion.
I swallowed the loss of my mother's father inside her womb,
death sampling my blood /
lumped with absence. My futures bloomed in some prior-ticking heart

& I forget this (when it's my turn to swallow the world)
I think it should show in some mark, believing myself
hemisphered & tectonic, wanting the bliss of tides,
not his emerald eyes, craving love but not the sapphire of morning song

while in a ruby-winged autumn, under my skin, a butterfly changes shape.
Why do I contemplate my life as if all my mothers
never sewed dreams into my eyes, as if all my time
isn't a blade bleeding someone else's thigh?

/

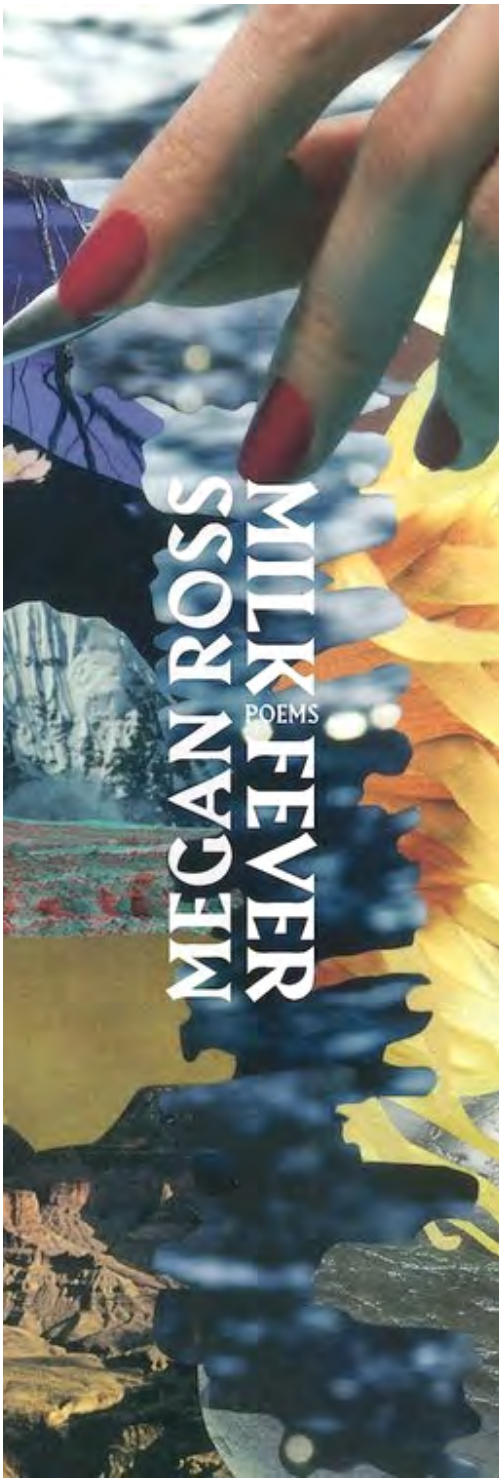
I've spent too much time in parking lots I think
tasting tar all I shouldn't *my nails are never clean*
who I would have been if I had Instagram at 13? I miss
videos & presticking posters to my wall surf wax sticking
to my garden path wishing my breasts were bigger.

The tooth fairy took my teeth but my mother hid
my molars with her pearls threading
my pupil through her mother's iris
whose death planted Sahara
between her daughter & granddaughter. how to flood a
desert? You can't which is the curse of alleles
and the sum of loss grief's sweet weight
a haunting we shall go, a haunting we shall go

in this shop of horrors: where daughters know
their mother's mother only in photos
only in second-hand memories knowing she would have
loved you only by the
echoes in your mother
how lonely
is this:

calling someone a name when she is a stranger
when she does not know mine
when her daughter clasps her compact longing to touch
the face locked inside glass,
her scent less potent
each time it opens
/

like a mother a writer must have knowledge of necromancy
she must be crowned clairvoyant



In the old back room that my parents fixed for me, the one with the naked bulb I thought romantic, where the paint chipped like old nail varnish & the roving damp was hair set alight I watched my legs disappear as if they were twin Disprins dropped into the fizz of a glass. I'd lost my toes in Bangkok, on a winter's day in mismatched pumps, the air so thick it hurt to breathe, and then my feet snapped apart in stirrups, moon-faced gynae & her no options (but to keep the baby *the baby*. it's just a –.) My ankles went then, next my nerves, on a plane between here *& the DMC will cost you 20,000 Baht*, maybe after *I don't want to do this*. By July my thighs were a soggy streak, my torso an aeroplane weaving chemtrails, as if all that mattered was the abattoir blade of my middle carving clean the meat off my bones.

***

Megan Ross is a writer, poet and journalist from South Africa. She is the author of *Milk Fever*, a collection of poetry published by uHlanga. "Origin Myth" is one of the poems published in *Milk Fever*. Her work has appeared in *New Coin*, *New Contrast*, *Prufrock* and *Aerodrome*. Megan is the winner of the Brittle Paper Literary Award for Fiction for her short story, *Farang*, as well as the winner of an Iceland Writers Retreat Alumni Award.

CROCODILE TEARS

BY PAUL R. PARADISE

Imam Ibin Saud wore a grey business suit and matching tie, instead of a traditional Islamic attire. He was a tall, sturdy man who had been born in the Bronx to a working class African-American family. He was well known to the African and Caribbean residents who lived in Le Petit Senegal, as the Harlem neighbourhood was called. Many of the residents prayed in the Malcolm Shabazz Mosque and sought his advice on

spiritual and secular matters.

His destination was the mosque but first he planned to visit Isia Lumier. She was overwhelmed with worry for her husband, Jean-Paul, who disappeared two weeks ago.

The Imam rode the C subway line to the 116th Street Station and walked up to the street level. Two women wearing hijabs were walking up the block in his direction. He recognized them, two sisters from Ghana.

He stopped to pay adab, the tradition of courtesy, "As-Salaam Alaikum."

Both women smiled. "Wa alaikum salam," they replied in unison.

"Are you on your way to work?" he asked.

"Yes Imam," the woman named Dofi answered.

"Have you said the Fajr?" It was a baited question.

"Yes, we have. Allah give thanks for your guidance," Dofi replied.

The Imam blessed them and continued on his way. It was seven-thirty in the morning and already the local street peddlers were setting up their wares on the sidewalks. Several men were unloading a van and filling up a table with incense, art work and hand carved wood figures. Next to them, a man was using a fold up stand and had laid out rows of Gucci sunglasses and Polo by Ralph Lauren sweatshirts that he suspected were knockoffs. Many of the vendors sold knockoff apparel and risked having their counterfeit goods seized. Although he disapproved of them selling knockoffs, he knew the men's motives for selling the fakes were to send money home to support loved ones in their native countries. He passed an unfamiliar face and paused. The man was dressed in khakis and a sweatshirt. The Imam presumed the Prada sunglasses the man sold were counterfeit.

"Bonjour, Imam," the man said. "As-Salaam Alaikum."

He guessed from his French accent that he was from Senegal. Every day, he saw new faces in the neighborhood.

He blessed him and continued on his way. In the middle of the next block, he greeted the man known as Quaco. He was from Nigeria and his birth name was Johnathan Dankur.

"As-Salaam Alaikum Quaco. And what are you today? A beggar?"

Quaco was wearing jeans with holes at the knees and a raggedy denim shirt. He was using a knit cap as a kashkul, a beggar's gourd.

"Wa alaikum salam," Quaco replied. "No, I am not a beggar. The money people give me is for Allah."

"Do you plan to give money to the Mosque?"

Quaco smiled slyly, "Is it not Allah's wish to sustain me so I can continue to pray at the Mosque? That is the same as giving to the Mosque."

The Imam chuckled, amused by his self-serving 'alms for Allah' explanation. He gave Quaco a dollar in observance of zakat. A week ago he had seen Quaco handing out flyers; before that, he was reading palms and telling fortunes. Quaco's moving from job to job was in the tradition of the Hausa from Nigeria. Quaco was a shrewd businessman but also a scoundrel.

"Is there any news of Jean-Paul?" Quaco asked, as he pocketed the dollar.

The Imam sighed. "I have heard nothing. I'm on my way to comfort Isia at the market."

"Give her my blessing," Quaco said.

The holy man admired Quaco's concern. It was hard to believe he and Jean-Paul were once bitter rivals.

Jean-Paul Lumier was a street peddler from Senegal who sold Kente cloth and knock off apparel at the corner. Quaco had also sold Kente cloth, the Cloth of Kings once worn only by Ghanaian royalty, and knockoff apparel, but Jean-Paul's Kente cloth, excellently woven by his wife Isia, put him out of business. Quaco's cheap prints could not compete with her hand-woven work. As he continued on his way, the Imam recalled Quaco's involvement with the 'Nigerian scam.' He had been outraged when he had learned how Quaco used the computers at the library to send emails in search of victims who would believe he was a Nigerian military ruler seeking a connection to help deposit money in a United States bank. Quaco promised a generous reward in return for various fees connected with the transaction. The Imam called him to the Mosque and demanded that he repent and change his ways.

The Imam got to the Malcolm Shabazz Harlem Market, located on 116th Street near the intersection with Malcolm X Boulevard. The market was identified by two multi-coloured minarets set atop green pillars that flanked the entrance corner. He was greeted by the spicy scent coming from the hundred and sixty open stalls. The vendors were dressed in their native attire and most were fluent in English, although others were more comfortable in a native tongue that could be Wolof, Igbo, Ewe, or Fulani.

As he made his way down the aisle towards Isia, he stopped to greet a craftsman from Côte d'Ivoire seated on a stool and selling bolts of Ndop fabric from Cameron and silvery Barkcloth made from fig trees in Uganda. In the next stall, he greeted a woman from Liberia who sold rare brown mud cloth from Mali and hand crafted teak sculptures, earrings, silver necklaces and cowry shells.

Isia sat upright and deftly wove wefts of coloured fabric through a rare vertical loom, imported from Ghana, to produce Kente cloth.

"Bonjour, Imam," she said. "As-salamu alaikum."

"Wa alaikum salam," the Imam said. "Has there been any news of your husband?"

"Non," she said. "I hear nothing from police. They worse than the police in Dakar."

The Imam felt the frustration in her voice. "It is in the hands of Allah."

"I believe Allah has chosen you to find him. C'est bon."

The Imam was silent. Up until now, he had tried everything at his disposal without luck. But there was someone whom he believed might offer assistance. He took leave of her and headed to The Parisian, a restaurant that served Halal foods for breakfast. While dining, he considered this option.

Afterwards, he walked to the Mosque. He entered and walked up the stairs to the second floor. His office was a tiny room with three filing cabinets

and a desk. He sat down behind the desk and reached for his rolodex. What was the man's name? He flipped through the rolodex until he found it. Theo Jones, President of the Chameleon Detective Agency. The Imam picked up the phone and called Jones. When the private investigator answered, he feared he might refuse to help him. They were not the best of friends.

"Hello, Imam," Jones said.

"Do you remember Jean-Paul Lumier?"

"How could I forget?" Jones chuckled. "Is he in trouble again?"

"I hope not. Jean-Paul has been missing for two weeks. I was hoping you might have heard something."

"I've heard nothing."

"I'd like to hire you to find him."

"Hire me? What about the police?"

"The police do nothing."

"I deal in intellectual property—knockoffs and infringements. Not missing persons."

"You have dealt with the immigrants of Le Petit Senegal for many years," The Imam said. "You are familiar with their customs and habits. I trust you can make inquiries among the local residents better than the police."

After more discussion, he convinced the investigator to meet with him that afternoon. The Imam was relieved. Although he had connections with the NYPD and the mayor, he suspected the police were hesitant to get involved because of the recent murder of Amadou Diallo, an African street peddler who had lived in a high crime area in the Bronx and was mistakenly shot by an NYPD street crime unit. The police officers thought he was reaching for a gun. But Diallo had no gun. He was reaching for his wallet, likely to produce identification. What horrified everyone was the fusillade of forty-one bullets that took his life. The murder had resulted in anti-police demonstrations that ripped through the African-American community. The Imam had expressed outrage and agreed to testify in the lawsuit filed by Diallo's mother. However, in doing so, he had taken a stand against the NYPD and the Office of the Mayor.

The holy man worked on a speech, writing down his thoughts on African unity and peace. He was no stranger to violence. When he was younger, he had been influenced by Malcolm X. He had taken the Arabic name Ibin Saud and worked as a plumber, while observant of Salah, praying five times daily. He was rocked by the assassination and became involved in the Mosque Malcolm X had founded after separating from Elijah Muhammad. Twenty years passed and then the dying Imam Ali Rashid called him to his bed side and told him that henceforth he would be the spiritual leader, the new Imam. Saud was terrified and considered fleeing to another city rather than accept such an obligation.

One of his first tasks as Imam was to protect the African street peddlers who were being targeted by the new mayor, Rudolph Giuliani. The Mayor's clean-up campaign was fueled by store owners who complained that the Senegalese street peddlers were hurting their businesses. The Imam established the Malcolm Shabazz Harlem Market and arranged for

peddlers to obtain licenses and to relocate. It was a brilliant solution. The market soon became a tourist attraction, prompting Mayor Giuliani to pay a rare visit to the Mosque where he addressed the Imam as a 'messenger who unites people.' This was before Diallo was killed. Now his calls to the police and the Office of the Mayor on Isia's behalf went unanswered.

Theo Jones took the subway to 116th Street. On the way to the Mosque, he came to the street corner where he had met Lumier last year. He had been working undercover on behalf of his client, Rolex, at the time. His backup was two officers from the precinct's peddler squad. Lumier was using a fold up table to display knockoff Rolex watches and bolts of a brilliantly coloured African fabric with a finely woven geometric pattern. Jones was wearing western cowboy boots, a bandana, and wrangler jeans to complete his ruse as an out of town 'dude.'

"Howdy, now looka here." He inspected a knockoff Rolex to ensure it was fake. "This looks interesting. Nothing like this in Tennessee. How much?"

"Fifty dollars, Monsieur." Lumier was a small man dressed in jeans and sneakers. "Special today. Mon Dieu, what a bargain."

"Mighty nice. You from France?"

He laughed. "Non. From Senegal."

Jones asked where he obtained the knockoffs, but the peddler winked. The investigator used his cell phone to notify the backup, waiting for his signal on an adjoining street.

"I'm a private investigator," he snapped, as the officers charged into view. "I'm seizing these watches."

As the officers surrounded Lumier, Jones demanded to know the source of the knockoffs—but someone intervened. "Leave that man alone. He's doing no harm."

He thought the distinguished black man looked familiar. "It's none of your business. Back off."

"Do you know who I am?"

Jones recalled seeing him at a televised press rally.

"That's right. I am the Imam Ibin Saud."

By now a crowd of people had gathered. Some were tourists—but the majority was angry Africans.

"Leave that man alone," a tall, burly man said.

"Yah, leave 'im be," another one yelled.

Jones took the Imam aside. "Imam, this man is breaking the law."

"He's also sending money home for his family."

"Fine, let him get a decent job. We have no plans to arrest him. He'll be served with a summons after we confiscate his fake Rolex watches."

Jones realized they were now surrounded by seven tough men. He knew from experience they were street savvy. One, who was tall and stocky and wearing faded jeans and a Gucci sweatshirt, protested, "Imam, we got to stop this. They are takin' our stuff."

The Imam walked over to him. "You need to go home, my brother."

"Why? Why let them take our livelihood?" The

man's anguish spread to the others. "We got to stop this," another man said.

The Imam calmed them with a wave of his hand.

"We'll have no more talk about this. Everyone leave."

After the men had departed, the Imam walked over to Lumier. "Nothing will happen to you if you surrender the watches." A dangerous situation was diffused. Afterwards, Jones formed an unlikely acquaintance with the holy man, who remained sympathetic to the street peddlers selling knockoffs.

Jones walked up the Mosque steps. At the top were two sturdy doors. He tried the door handle and it was unlocked. Inside the walls leading into the interior were sparkling white. He moved slowly, awed by the immense silence. He came to a table where a woman, wearing a blue silk khimar, was seated. Several hard-cover books were stacked before her, while behind was a winding staircase. To the right was a prayer room with straw mats lining the floor.

"My name's Theo Jones. I'm here to see the Imam."

She smiled. "Second floor, first office to the right."

He walked past her and ascended the stairs. He found the holy man sitting at a desk. Jones took a seat. Lining the walls were photos and paintings of men, nearly indistinguishable one from the other because of their full beards and turbans.

"I need your help," the Imam said.

"Yes, a missing peddler, Jean-Paul Lumier." He reached inside his pants pocket for a pen and notepad to take notes. "When did he disappear?"

"His wife, Isia, came to me two weeks ago. I went with her to file a police report."

"Any idea why he disappeared?"

"His wife cannot account for his absence. He left to meet a friend and never returned. After another sleepless night, she came to me."

"Have the police turned up anything?"

"The police have done nothing. They questioned her for twenty minutes."

Jones presumed foul play. "Did Jean-Paul have enemies?"

"None. He was well liked." He paused. "Except for Quaco."

"Quaco?" Jones looked up. "How do you spell that? First name or last?"

"Neither, his real name is Jonathan Dankur. And it's Q-u-a-c-o."

Jones stopped writing. "Where does Quaco live?"

"I don't know. He had a dispute with Jean-Paul."

"Does Jean-Paul have a cell phone?"

"Yes, but it's been disconnected."

"Disconnected?"

The Imam shrugged. "I get a message that the line is no longer in service."

"I need Jean-Paul's and Isia's cell phone numbers, if you have them."

Jones wrote down the numbers. "I'd like to talk to Isia."

The Imam told Jones to follow him across the street to the Harlem Market, which Jones did. Jones was conscious of the vendors watching them as they walked down the aisle.

"Isia, this is Theo Jones, a friend of mine who has agreed to help find your husband."

Jones looked at the frail woman seated behind the loom. "The Imam told me what happened. I'd like to help."

Isia smiled, a glimmer of hope shone in her eyes.

"Mon époux left to meet someone. I expect him in four hours. Then call on my cell phone. Mon Dieu! The line dead. I call mon amie, Chinua. Perhaps she knows where my husband is. Non. I call other friends. Stay awake all night."

Jones pointed to the bin next to her, filled with bolts of brilliantly coloured fabric. "I remember Jean-Paul sold fabric like this." He picked up a swatch and rubbed the cloth between his thumb and index finger. "This cloth. Does it have a name?"

"Oui. Kente cloth."

"Kente cloth. Is it from Senegal?"

"Non. Kente cloth is from Ghana. The Cloth of Kings. I learned to weave Kente Cloth when I was little." She demonstrated and deftly threaded a strip of fabric through the double heddle loom, while her left foot gently pressed against a pedal. When Jones was done talking to her, he followed the Imam through the market and departed.

The Imam was seated in the office the next day when Jones called with interesting news. Jean-Paul had four phone calls with a man identified as Johnathan Dankur on the day he disappeared. Dankur has made calls to Isia. Five since the disappearance.

"Five since Jean-Paul disappeared? How did Quaco get her number?"

"That's a good question. Maybe Jean-Paul gave it to him before he disappeared?"

"No, it is unlikely. Isia must have given it to him—although I'm not sure why."

"Sounds suspicious. I'm going to fax you my report. I suggest you contact the police."

The phone calls between Isia and Quaco were troubling. Something was wrong. He doubted Jean-Paul had given Quaco her number. Unless something was going on between them.

He called Isia and told her he had news of her husband.

Isia gasped, "Mon dieu! Where is he?"

He asked her to come to the Mosque to discuss it. When she arrived, he told her to be seated.

"Do you remember Theo Jones?" the Imam asked.

"Oui, the bon homme," she responded.

The Imam told her Jones had discovered the phone calls between herself and Quaco.

A look of horror flashed across her face. "Mon dieu! How did he find out?"

"He's a private investigator."

Tears of anguish flowed down her cheeks as she told him Quaco called her the day after Jean-Paul disappeared. He claimed to have received her number from him and said they'd entered into a partnership to sell Kente cloth. Quaco told her she should honour the agreement. She refused but continued to talk with Quaco for news of her missing husband.

Now the Imam realized why Quaco was always asking him questions about the police and the

results of his inquiries. He wanted this information to bait Isia. He shook his head sadly as he recalled being fooled by Quaco's seemingly genuine interest in Lumier's safety. He remembered an African fable. Crocodile tears – false tears shed by the crocodile before it devoured its prey. He suspected this miscreant knew what happened to Jean-Paul. He took Isia's hand and told her not to mention anything to Quaco.

He contemplated Quaco's role in the disappearance. Was it possible Quaco had murdered Jean-Paul? He said a prayer and recited verse thirty-two from Chapter Five of the Koran.

If anyone slew an innocent person it would be as if he slew the whole of mankind and if anyone saved a life it would be as if he saved the life of the whole of mankind. The Imam was convinced Quaco posed a threat to the residents of Le Petit Senegal. Having grown up in a rough neighbourhood himself, he had known many street hustlers who preyed on the weak and were skillful liars—and he knew how to deal with them. He called Quaco on his cell phone. After three rings, Quaco answered.

"Yes. hello? Who is this?"

"Quaco, its Imam Saud."

There was silence on the other end.

"Do you hear me? This is Imam Saud."

"Yes . . . Imam? How did you get my number?"

"I'll tell you when we meet. You must come to the Mosque."

Another pause. Finally, "I'm busy right now, Imam. Perhaps—"

The Imam cut him off. "I need to see you. It's urgent."

Another pause.

"Quaco, the police are after you."

That got his attention. "The police? What—what for?"

"I cannot discuss it. The police might be listening to our conversation."

"The police! You mean my phone is bugged?"

"I cannot discuss it further."

Quaco agreed to come to the Mosque.

When he arrived, Quaco appeared nervous and fidgety. The holy man told him to be seated. The Imam fixed his steely gaze upon him. "The police know you spoke to Jean-Paul the night he disappeared. You've called Isia several times. What's going on?"

Quaco turned pale. "I only wanted to help Jean-Paul sell Kente cloth. The night he disappeared I met him underneath the George Washington Bridge to discuss his proposal. He offered me a finder's fee for any buyers of his wife's Kente cloth."

"A finder's fee? How much?"

"Fifty dollars."

"The George Washington Bridge? Why there?"

"This was his idea, not mine."

"The police will never believe this story," the Imam said. "Why didn't you tell me this? Now tell the truth."

Quaco put his hand to his chest. "It is the truth, so help me."

"You killed him, Quaco. You killed him for the Kente cloth."

"No, I did not. You must believe me."

"No more lies, Quaco! You know how the police treat African vendors, don't you? Amado Dialo was shot forty-one times. Do you remember?"

"No! No!" Quaco rose from his seat, ready to flee.

"Sit down. You must trust me."

Quaco sat. His body shook.

"Now tell the truth, Quaco. No more lies."

Quaco started to sob. "It was an accident."

"An accident?" The Imam shook his head. "What happened?"

"I wanted to hurt him just as he had hurt me by taking away my business. After some talk, I convinced Jean-Paul to meet me near some trees underneath the George Washington Bridge, and I would introduce him to two gentlemen who wanted to buy a large quantity of Kente cloth. The three of us ambushed him. We only wanted to beat him up- but he fought like a tiger and one of my friends struck him on the head and killed him. It was an accident, please believe me."

"How did you get Isia's phone number?"

"From Jean-Paul's phone."

"What happened to the cell phone?"

"I threw it into the Hudson River."

"Where is Jean-Paul now?"

"We dug his grave behind one of the trees. It was a miracle no one saw us."

"Murderer! You had the nerve to call Isia and ask her to sell you Kente cloth? Is this true?"

Quaco started to sob again and cried like a child in pain but did not answer. The Imam suspected this was more crocodile tears.

"Answer me," the Imam said angrily.

"I'm sorry. Please forgive me." He continued to sob and cry.

"You must turn yourself over to the police and show them where Jean-Paul is buried. There is no other way. The police are looking for you. If you run, they might shoot you like they shot Diallo. Do you understand?"

Quaco dried his tears but did not answer. He sat with eyes downcast. When he looked up, the Imam noticed that a profound sadness had overtaken him. He seemed remorseful for what he had done.

"Yes, Imam. I'll turn myself in but I need a favour from you."

"What do you need, my son?"

"Please come with me to the police station."

The Imam agreed and together they left the Mosque.

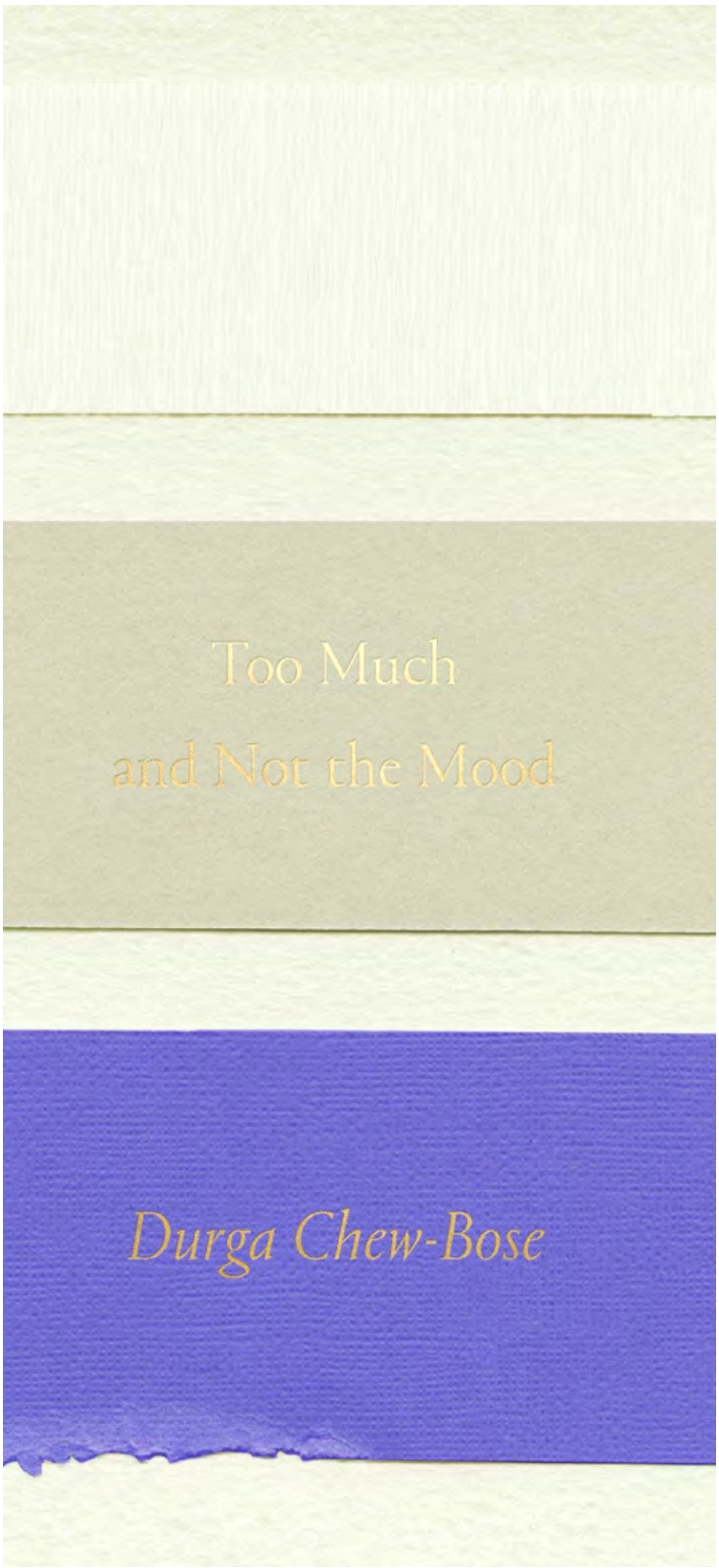
***

Paul R. Paradise is the author of nine nonfiction books and a novel, *the Counterfeit Detective*. Crocodile Tears developed from research into his forthcoming novel, *Truth Is Always Changing*.

A REVIEW

Too Much

BY ARINOLA LAWAL



Durga Chew-Bose writes the way I wish I could: lots of commas, full-stops and, short sentences with structures unlike those you learn as a child coming to grips with the use of the English language. Sentences that make more sense now after speaking the language for years. She describes her style of writing as, "Starting somewhere, ending elsewhere. Testing the obnoxious reach of my tangents." It is true. She pulls you in with writing that provides no closure but touches on so many things in such little time.

I didn't realise that *Too Much and Not the Mood* was a collection of essays until I started reading it. This is because it was a purchase inspired by a YouTube favourite's video and there was somehow no mention of the genre. Despite the speed with which I bought the book, it spent quite a bit of time on the

top row of my shoe rack, where I put all the books I want to read but cannot seem to find the time for just yet.

I finally started reading *Too Much and Not the Mood* on a train after carrying it around in my handbag for several days. It was going to be a long journey and I was beginning to feel like a poser for taking a book I had not even attempted to read everywhere with me. I remember getting to a part of "Heart Museum" where Chew-Bose mentions getting ready for a dinner, trying to find her friend's address that she had scribbled down somewhere and her boyfriend calling out the address off the top of his head. She mentions not wanting to probe despite the niggling feeling she got. I paused and smiled, just held that moment. The moment in a book that marks the true beginning of that book for you.

Chew-Bose writes of feelings I have not yet felt, songs I haven't heard by artistes I may or may not have heard about, art and movies I've not yet seen, places I've never been, written in a way that makes me wish that I'd experienced all of it. She describes Karin Mamma Andersson's painting Leftovers so vividly. I had looked it up online. The way it captured my ordinary daily activities made me understand why it is one of Chew-Bose's favourites.

I want to share Chew-Bose's sentiments about Sharon Stone's shoulders in Basic Instinct, Giulietta Masina's face in La Strada, Tom Hank's Soho loft in Big and her fascination for young Al Pacino. I have no love for big cities because London scarred me; too many people in a hurry to get somewhere. However, reading about Chew-Bose's travels around New York led me to believe, briefly, that I would like to be a New Yorker too. Or at the very least, be driven around Mumbai in an auto-rickshaw for hours.

In Chew-Bose's second essay of the collection, she writes, "I am sick ... Sick for my body before. Before full-lengths. Before I knew anything about valleyed collarbones, a stomach's fold, smooth legs, small wrists". This spoke to me. There's a summer from my childhood I hold dear. My dad bought me a short jean skirt that I took along with me on holiday with cousins. I wore the heck out of that skirt during summer and beyond. Now, the thought of wearing a jean skirt that short in daylight makes me laugh. A 'not-gonna-happen' type of laugh because now, my thighs are too this and my legs are too that. I too am sick for before.

"D As In", starts with Chew-Bose mentioning her casual acceptance of the mispronunciation of her name. Last Saturday, I was telling a group of people I'd just met at my part time job that they could call me Ari, short for Arinola. Other times, I introduce myself as Arinola but say it in a way that it loses its real meaning, but is easier to pronounce. These are my go-to strategies to save time. I have tried to break my name down into similar sounding English words. It was a futile effort to demonstrate the enormous difference between what I was (or am) allowing and the real version of my name. I have heard people say that the bearers of names may be part of the problem by providing alternatives or not bothering to correct pronunciation. I have never

cared. Now, I wonder if this signals a bigger issue. I think about my name, how much I love it, being named by my grandmother. The meaning of my name is 'middle of wealth'. Somehow, "D As In" evoked a sentiment towards my name that makes me wonder if providing a short and completely meaningless form of my name to strangers matters at all. Does it mean that I am eager to assimilate and have no care or respect for my origin?

The essay, "Summer Pictures," is really beautiful. It is an ode to one of my favourite escapes, the cinema. You get the idea that this book was written by someone who really enjoyed movies very early on, but the small pieces that make up this essay make you appreciate the why. It communicates–better than I ever could–why I love going to the movies. It makes me want to spend a huge chunk of my summer away from the sun, enjoying the incomparable thrill of escaping into different worlds.

Too Much and Not the Mood seems to span Chew-Bose's entire life. A child observing the before and after of her parents' divorce, an adolescent understanding the difference her skin colour makes, an adult navigating relationships with friends and lovers, and introspecting even more than usual. I sense that readers are getting a close, honest look into her life which is narrated tastefully.

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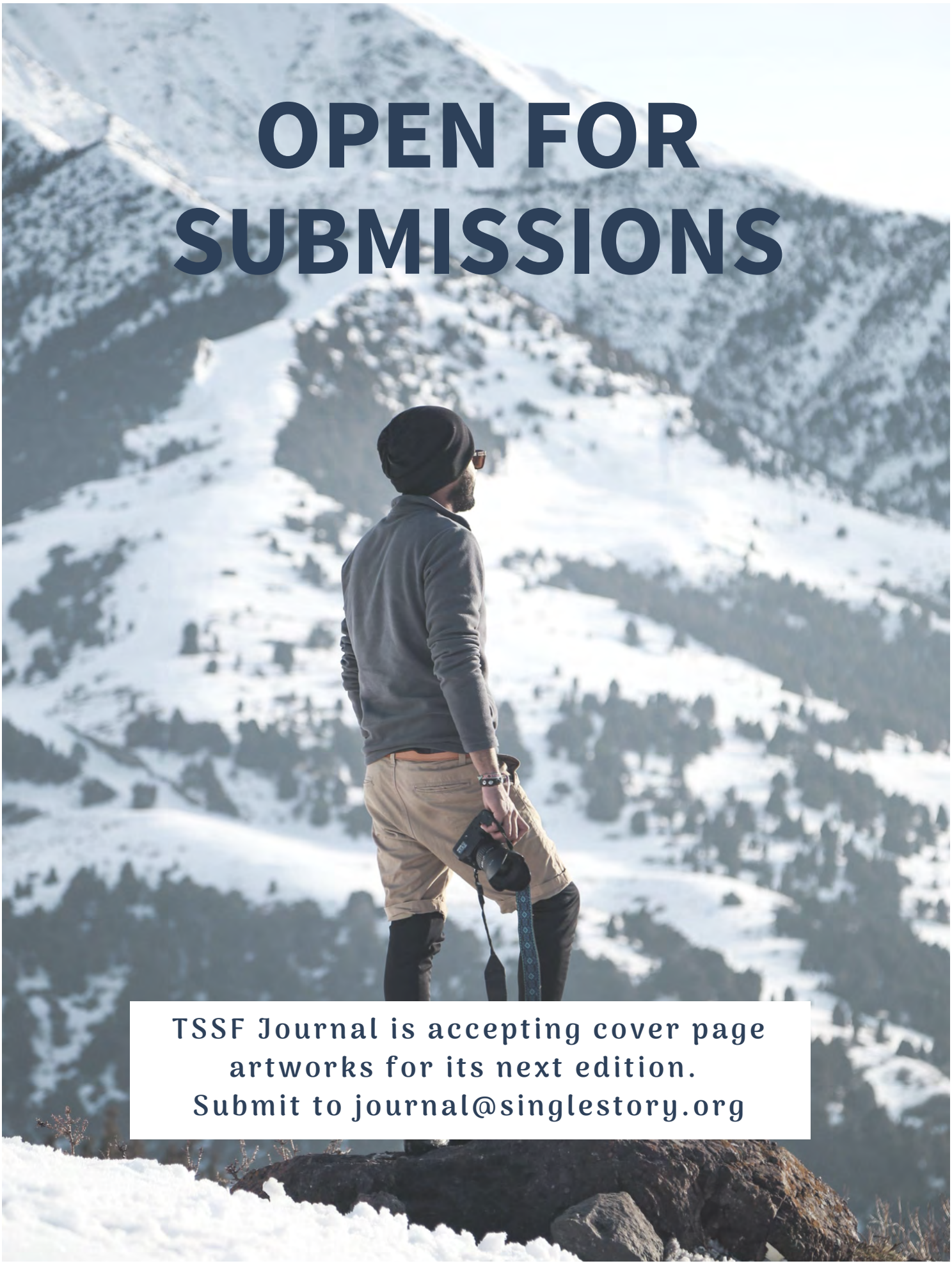
Arinola Lawal is a student with an unhealthy obsession with more than a few TV shows to the point of being viscerally affected by the characters' actions. Most times, she is either self-reflecting and feeling unimpressed or looking so far into my future that she is at the risk of missing the present. Find her rambling @TheBrontide.



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