

Table Setting

Recipes,
Rituals &
Resolutions

An Anthology of Festive African Writing Vol. II



brittle
paper

Edited by Tahzeeb Akram

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Editor's Note

Dear Brittle Paperians,

It's that time of year again and Brittle Paper is here with our second volume of the Festive Anthology!

Last year's volume, *HomeGrown Joy*, was a festive mash up of all the wonderful things that make up the holidays but this year, we wanted to do something a little more structured, and what's more structured than the holiday table setting! Our anthology, *Table Setting: Recipes, Rituals & Resolutions*, is all about the three iconic features of the holidays and the space where it usually all takes place. *Table Setting* looks at the family recipes we remember to ask for at the table after tasting a special dish, the timely rituals that we do for the sacred union in the way we've been taught, and it's the resolutions we make in jest and in sincerity while we are still high in the spirit of the meal we just shared.

Recipes, rituals and resolutions are what tie the holidays together, sometimes individually or as a collective. It's in the detail of memory that we share the ways we cook, perform, and plan during the festive time, such as Salma Yusuf pondering the way she would describe Eid, or the way Verah Omwocha talks about her family during Christmas. But we're not just talking about the special days that the card companies deem fit. We are also talking about the intricately created and eternally cherished celebrations that we hold dear, like the Malian naming ceremony that Eliamani Ismail writes about, or the Kenyan Eunoto ceremony that Kapante Ole Reyia describes. Sometimes, the holidays are also a mix of the two, the sacred communal ritual of performing the holidays, such as Makarov Tebogo Abotseng's telling of the Botswana Dezemba spirit, or the romantic Christmas traditions at the Palmwine Festival that Bunmi Ańjóláolúwa Adaramola writes about. More so than anything, the beauty of festivity is that it can be a special day purely because we say it is, and Osione Abokhai and Mabel Mnensa show this beautifully in their respective works.

This year's anthology includes poems, essays, fiction, and creative non-fiction from writers all over the continent, including Kenya, South Africa, Nigeria, Botswana, and Mali. Together with the help of our amazing writers, we have 21 pieces for you to enjoy, presented in three sections: Part I: Light the Stoves, Part II: Set the Table, and Part III: Wish upon the Star. We hope you enjoy our festive treat, and that it helps make the holiday season even more special!

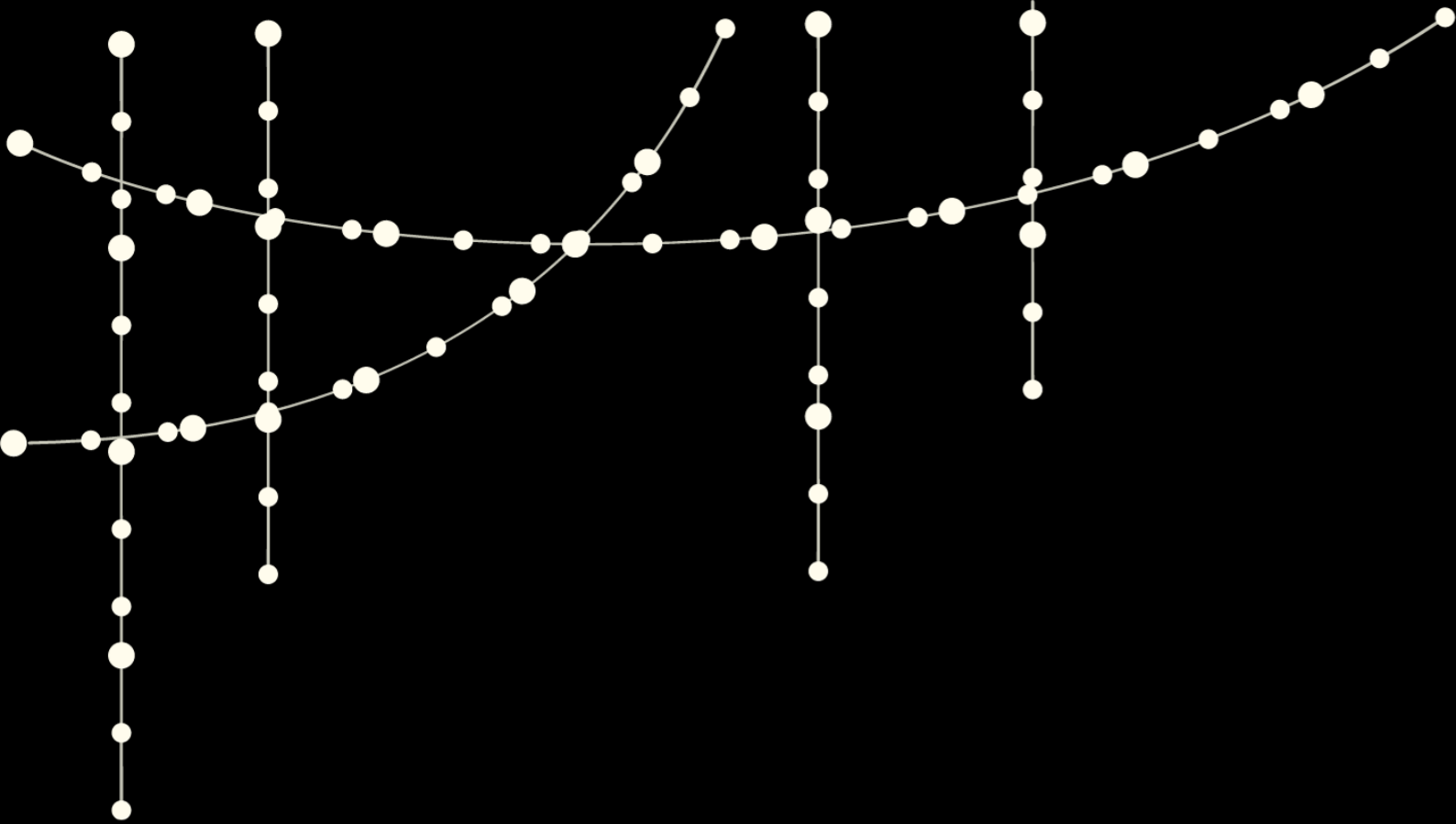
Happy Holidays and Happy Reading!

Light the stoves

Set the table

Wish upon the Star

Tahzeeb Akram



Part I: Light the Stoves

“A man who calls his kinsmen to a feast does not do so to save them from starving. They all have food in their own homes. When we gather together in the moonlit village ground it is not because of the moon. Every man can see it in his own compound. We come together because it is good for kinsmen to do so.”

– Chinua Achebe

Uzoamaka: The Beautiful Way

Osione Abokhai | Creative Non-fiction

*Of family,
home cooked food
and an unforgettable love.*

She was standing beneath the deep green leaves of an old Ube tree when I first saw her. Ube, as in the African pear tree commonly seen in the south eastern parts of Nigeria, Gabon, Cameroun, among other African countries. The tall leafy tree was not the easiest to climb but its half-palm-sized, deep purple fruit with its rich buttery, slightly tangy green pulp was worth every leaf cut or wood prick. She pointed a firm twig from one side of the tree to the next as my uncle, Kaka, reached for the ripe pear clusters, avoiding any that looked pink and yellowish brown. “I knew you were coming, my dear, so I told Okechi to bring out the big pot from the store so we can boil the corn, I ga-ata oka n’ube, you will love it.’ She did not need to ask for my permission to feed me, it was her response to my being there and I did. Her smile stood bright and watery in her eyes and as she pressed my five-year-old frame against her body, I knew I would love this woman forever.

I went to boarding school in Sha'aka Gold and Base, Rayfield. A budding peri-urban village nestled in the heart of the plateau in Jos where I was born. As a child, growing up in a home where I saw my father mostly on weekends, mealtimes were a core memory for me. We did not have much of a relationship, my father and I, but his face always lit up on cold Saturday mornings when I peeped into the kitchen with crusty eyes to find him peeling red or purple onions and slicing peppers to add to a bubbling pot of freshly par boiled black-eyed beans. “My Ada,” he would say as he stirred in the freshly cut vegetables with a wooden ladle, and topped it off with some ground crayfish and salt before covering the cauldron of memories to simmer.

I would leap for joy, half running, to alert my siblings that daddy was around and he had made beans. With me, a faithful army of three unbathed children would

sit around a stool where my father would place a huge tray straddling a big flat plate of steaming hot beans dotted with red peppers, and a bowl of garri topped with sugar and drowned to perfection in a sea of floating ice cubes. When the garri rested a few inches above the water then it was perfect to dig into, together, all at once while my father played umpire. “Take it easy,” “Don’t block your brother,” “Let your sister have her turn, you know she is the baby of the house,” “You like it abi?” I loved it. From the start of hot beans burning the roof of my mouth to finishing when we took turns slurping the water that was left after eating the soaked garri. I loved it all.

But boarding school was nothing like that. The dining hall was a zinc furnace with long wooden benches against creaking tables that pulled the thread out of my skirt when I sat down mindlessly. We took turns to pick up blurbs of corn meal, ‘tuwo masara’ and groundnut soup, rice and soya bean sauce, eba and okra soup, Bamfa bread, a single boiled egg and a steaming cup of raw cocoa, pale jollof rice and beef or boiled yam and soya bean sauce, all served from a window etched into the wooden walls.

Armed with what was believed to be the exact ration for the day, Mama Edoh, as the most prominent kitchen lady was called, and her team would slide stainless steel plates of dining hall food to our waiting hands and once the meal was served, the window would slam shut. On good days, we had thirty minutes to eat our food and leave the hall for evening prep. It was in boarding school that I learnt to eat quickly, wolfing down spoons of grub I most certainly did not like and on visiting days when my mother visited with my grandmother, she would squeal, “Nnem o, what are they feeding you here? You look so thin!” I always tried to let her know that our principal said our food menu was created by a world class dietician and we ate good in school but she would say, “that talk is nonsense, they cannot love you people that much” and we would both laugh but I always wondered what the love talk had to do with food.

It wasn’t until I sat in her vintage styled living room darkened by the musty smell of old encyclopaedias and books on the human body, the female reproductive system, mementos from her travels to the United Kingdom and grey pictures of her smiling in scrubs, waiting for her to set down a wooden mortar of *Ofe ani* – soup that is made on the ground because it did not need to be cooked on fire. We eventually renamed the meal, *Ofe Ikwe* or mortar soup. As we all sat on the soft rug around the

mortar of soup holding palm sized balls of soft white Loyi Loyi or Akpu on each left palm, I understood what she meant.

My great grandmother was from Amaagu village, Ajalli town, Anambra State in Nigeria where she ran a buka. Amaagu means the clan of the lion, and it is no wonder that all of my mothers before me fed us and their communities well. It was my mother that taught me that nothing was too small to share, she learnt it from her mother and her mother learnt it from Mama Ukwu, Theresa Eze my great grandmother. Let me teach you how my grandmother made a serving of love.

To a neatly washed mortar add:

Two Miango peppers,

A teaspoon of African Black pepper seeds or Uziza

Uda seeds also known as Negro Pepper

Eight to ten fermented Locust beans, Ogiri Igbo

Two slices of soft-boiled yam

Pounded softly and once the paste is smooth, add:

A cup of ground Crayfish

½ a stock cube

A teaspoon of salt to taste

Half a cup of boiling water

Mix gently, mix well, mix completely, and serve at once.

Love unrushed can be served immediately. Love that has been pressed to release its spicy flavours, its lingering scents and timeless juices can be shared. I still remember the fragrance of uziza and miango peppers, complementing each other, making room for each other, becoming one.

I do not remember the exact day that my grandmother died. I was in school and the frosty cold of the Plateau dug sharp sores into the balls of my feet and through cracks on my lips. My mother picked me up for the holidays. It was a silent ride to our small house on the hill at Kufang. “We lost your grandmama,” she said, sucked in breath and nothing more. That evening, I sat on the rug in a spare room full of her clothes, books and medicines, rocking back and forth because my heart wouldn’t stop

thumping and the tears refused to come out.

If I have love today, it is because it skipped a generation to guide me. My time with Uzoamaka Kaithlyn Ajaegbu was short but I would never forget her gentle hands in a mortar creating, loving, living on.

Bofrot

Alix Brobbey | Poetry

December holds her breath.

I fold a cloth across the bowl,
sticky now with sandy dough:

sugar, flour, salt, yeast.

Time for rest—

I sit down and collect
the year in my lap.

*Bold and bland blend
into honeyed bubbles.*

This August, my sister's thick hair
spilled across my legs, silver beads
tugging at her braids.

*Dough rises, flooding
the small plastic bowl.*

But today, I am frying
alone, snow knocking
at my door. My throat
catches.

*The oil sputters.
Globs hiss back.*

Tomorrow will be slick
with dew, crisp with
exhaled fog. For now,

I crunch a deep fried ball.
My teeth greet its sweet
warm middle.

The Green Dress

Verah Omwocha | Creative Non-fiction

My family members – husbands and wives, sons and father, in-laws – fought over things – big and small – throughout the year. The village chief made trips to our home often. I always thought he should have been paid on commission every time he came to our home – he would have been a rich man. Whenever he came, chairs would be taken out to the field and arranged under the mango and mpera trees that joined at the leaves, creating an enchanting overhead tapestry. I don't know why the adults chose that specific place for dispute resolutions. Perhaps it was better this way. So that when angers, like liberated froth from a champagne bottle, spills forth like liquid stardust, it would flow right into the roots of the trees and nourish them.

There were quarrels. There were fist fights, sometimes. At any and every time of the year but Christmas. Christmas was sacred. No one dared pick a fight over the days leading to the day, and a few days after. During this sacred time, there was a generally agreed upon amnesia regarding *shamba* boundaries and who deserved this and that. During the festive season, we were a 'we' family, bound by a Christmas oath. *We'll fight again next year. For now, let's recharge.*

My grandma ate up all the family problems. And for most of the year, she was bloated from the overload. Hypertension. High blood pressure. Ulcers. But during the Christmas season, she got to eat something else – family. A semblance of peace. Christmas became a symphony of reconciliation, where the melody of forgiveness harmonized with the gentle cadence of food. During the Christmas season, people seemed to like each other. It was a time of rebirth, a rebranding.

During Christmas, the women gathered, adorned in vibrant *lesos* bound at their waists, each fabric a canvas bearing Swahili proverbs and sayings: *Subira ina malipo* – patience pays; *Lisilo budi hutendwa* – whatever has to be done is done; *Ya kale hayapo, zingatia uliyonayo* – the past isn't there, focus on what you have. The women gathered and lit fires using dried firewood. They made makeshift hearths out in the

open, chopped up meats, and boiled amanagu¹ and chinsaga².

Grandma would prepare her chinsaga in a special way (usually on the 24th). After washing the veggies, she would put water in her small cooking pot, add a pinch of salt and bring the water to a boil. Then she would add the veggies and cover them with fresh banana leaves. She would then reduce the firewood and let them cook on low heat for hours. Somewhere along the way she would add fresh cow blood – bought from a kijinjio³. Exposed to heat, the proteins in the blood coagulate, making it solidify. When they're ready, she would use a mwiko, cooking stick to gently mix the veggies and the solid mass of blood and let it rest for the night. Ready to serve for Christmas.

Aunt Rose, a maestro of the kitchen, would always be making chapatti, skilfully orchestrating the culinary alchemy on her trusty jiko. We children would hover around her like African pied crows ready to pounce on chicks so as to get a piece of the first chapatti. It meant the world to us, tasting the first one. A mother gave the first chapatti (or at least a piece of it) to the favourite child, usually the lastborn.

“It looks like it's wearing a white tie,” we always said of the crow.

“Run to the tin'gatin'ga,” grandma would say to one of us, thrusting a fifty-shilling note into the palm of your hand, as if it were evidence in a CIA operation. Then she would spit into the ground and say, “This saliva should not dry up before you come back.” A measure of time. She needed an insurance that we'd be back on time as we were fond of playing along the way, only to be brought back by the descending darkness. But it was Christmas. We all took part in the Christmas preparations. You couldn't let the team down, could you? Besides, there was all this happiness that you couldn't dare ruin by being an errant child. Omwana okoigwa n'omuya. A child who listens is a good child.

At the tin'gatin'ga, – for there was only one in the village, – Atinga, the man in charge, inquired about you and whose child you are (if it was your first time there), about your family, and proceeded to the back room. When he emerged, he always

¹ Black Nightshade: My community is particularly fond of these vegetables.

² Spider plant: Another favorite in my community.

³ Slaughterhouse

brought ripe bananas with him, and he offered you one. He always had bananas for children, especially girls.

Under Atinga's supervision and help, you would feed the millet-cassava-sorghum mixture into the feeder of the poshomill. You would always be warned to start with the brown unga before grinding the white maize. The logic is that there's always some flour left in the mill so you had to 'wash' the mill with the white maize, otherwise the next customer will get half of the brown unga. Sometimes you'd be instructed to have the brown unga ground twice so as to make it finer.

Before the emergence of poshomills, grandmothers would manually grind the brown unga using two special stones. One large stone named orogena would be positioned on the floor in a slightly slanting position. One would then place the dried grains of millet on top of the stone and use a smaller stone to grind the millet rhythmically back and forth until it becomes flour. The stones were usually smooth and they would be passed down generations. Finger millet is etched into the Abagusii culture.

We all gathered on Christmas day at grandma's house – uncles, aunties, cousins, grandchildren, and a few gate crushers who would pretend to have been passing by to bring 'Christmas greetings', a pseudonym for 'what have you cooked so that we can have a taste?'. Preparation for the Christmas day also meant that the wives brought out the heavily guarded and hoarded plates reserved for special guests. During Christmas, the adults reckoned, they were their own guests. But chances are us kids will still eat from the kawaida plates.

A slaughtered goat, mbuzi, and the best and biggest chicken and cock. Meat in various forms: boiled, nyama choma, tripe. Aunties made mandazis and chapattis. Uncles chinjad⁴ the mbuzi. Ugali made from sorghum-millet-cassava flour. Children ate rice and chapatti served with stew. But I always relished at the brown *ugali*. So, I'd wait for leftovers after the men finished eating.

Protocol dictated that the men always ate first. The bell that signalled the rest of us to prepare our palates was something like this: bring handwashing water. Take

⁴ Slang for 'slaughtered'

these plates from here. Then the women would serve the children and then themselves.

Then there was ributi, a traditional fermented beverage also referred to as 'busaa'. My grandpa and his peers would gather round a small beer pot, each with a pipe fixed on their mouths, telling stories. The beverage is reserved for the elderly, and the pot is reserved for the men.

When grandma would drink up, we would joke and laugh that her toothless gum where her pre-molar should have sat would show. Life has given her thousands of reasons to be anything but happy, so she has to drink up from the container of liquid happiness. The beverage also untangles the wisdom stored in her soul for her grandchildren:

Esomo n'engiya – A reading is good (better: education is good).

Soma mbaka mogende mache n'gumbu. Read until you go overseas.

The beverage unclothes her of the layers of propriety and the heavy layers of the responsibility bestowed upon a Gusii woman. Not that she 'misbehaves', as we would term anything that does not conform; something like a woman speaking her mind. She would be free. And happy. Happiness is somewhat frowned upon. Womanhood is service, why do you look happy? And she tells stories, stories we're not fans of, really, "I only had one green dress, and when people saw a green dress walking down those hills, they knew it was Birisika (Priscah), Omorugi'o Baranaba (read Barnabas)."

I wish I had observed how her jaw moved when she talked about her life experiences. When she talked about how she would run all the way to her relatives' home to escape a beating from her husband. How, whenever she had to run away, she would carry the milk guard with her – the same way one would salvage their certificates from a burning house. I wish I had asked questions about brokenness and resilience. About suffering. About the meaning of life.

Omorugi'o Baranaba – cook to Baranaba (also wife of Baranaba). Cooking and wife'ing were (still are) considered synonyms in my culture. When a girl gets married, it is said 'she has gone to cook'. When a man introduces his wife, the most honourable and perhaps endearing way he would refer to her is omorugi'one – my cook. A grown man shall not cook for himself. He marries. And a wife cooked for

nearly all the days of the year, perhaps except when she was bedridden or had grown enough children (read girls) who could do the cooking. It always struck me as a very interesting phenomena – this endless cooking. And before the cooking – the soaking of seeds, the planting, the weeding, the harvesting, the drying, the grinding, the storing – all usually done by women.

My grandma would tell us the story of the green dress many times, it's become a family myth. The green dress is my grandma, and grandma is that green dress. It would be a running joke in the family for years – a sad kind of joke. But again, we didn't see the sad part of it, we heard the story. We laughed at the story. The green dress was part of the family heritage.

Colonial masters saw our traditional brew and the words coming off their condescending lips were: dirty, bad, primitive, inferior, unchristian.

Here is our industrial whiskey. Refined. Good quality.

Ributi Recipe:

1. *Dry finger millet, then grind it.*
2. *Dry corn flour on the sun, then heat it over a moderate fire until it turns brown. Usually, a sizable steel tray would be used for this process. One had to keep turning the flour so that it didn't stick on the tray. The product would be called chinkara.*
 - *At this stage, we kids would beg and nag for some of the chinkara, to which we stole sugar and added to it.*
3. *Add hot water to the chinkara and pour the finger millet flour into the mixture.*
4. *Let it ferment for five days so that it's pure and organic beer.*
5. *Serve. The happiness. The culture.*

An entire heritage. Branded inferior. Reduced to illicit.

Grandma could do this with her eyes closed; after all, she had come to cook. And cook she had, starting from her teen years and for the rest of her life. Until illnesses

ate her up and she could no longer fulfil the one sacred duty – cooking for her husband.

In the afternoon of the Christmas day, we would wash up and get into our fine new clothes preserved for the day. Yes, Christmas was food and family, but for us children, a huge part of it was also new clothes. Clothes bought in Kisii town. The ones I loved most were dresses that had several layers, and they came with a hat and a sling bag. If you had that package, you could rule the kingdom of children.

Dressing up in new clothes also meant lining up for a family photo. Sometimes we would wait for hours on end for the only cameraman from our village – Nyakebaka, who would obviously be overbooked for the day – while trying not to get dirty. You dare not look dirty in a Christmas family photo. Perhaps because Nyakebaka, since he part-timed as a Catechist, he always kept his word. We would wait out, waiting to hear the rhythmic whir of his bicycle's spinning wheels. When he would come, he would arrange us to fit in the frame and once we had been arranged, it didn't matter if you saw a lion, you had to be still until the memory was frozen with the click of the Kodak camera. He would then print out the photos, weeks or even months later, but we were always patient. The photos always arrived with what we called a negative attached on the back. We'd pass the photos around and then hold up the negatives against the light. Smiles.

Memories of simpler times. Food. Family. New dresses. Christmas.

Now. I lie at night during the thick of El Niño rains, the raindrops drumming a lively rhythm on the roof, and I think: My grandma. My grandma's ributi. Christmases. My grandma's cooking spanning centuries, nourishing generations. And I cling to the hope that all these total up to something. They have to *mean something*.

Now. I would trade a lot to have grandma tell me about her green dress again – the shade of green, the cut, the fabric, the length, the design, the sleeves, the pattern, the details.

Now. We don't hoard for-visitor-only plates. We hoard these memories.

Now. No one cares about Christmas anymore.

We kill the best. People. Traditions.

In the Work of Faith

Isaac Kilibwa | Poetry

Gasp, the year starts with uncertain
expectation and greetings.
Tidings of yearning.

Tattoo

Ingredients:

A snare drum
a procession
a pinch of hope
three songs:
a dirge, a hymn, a war chant
a year

A Bible verse
a rainbow halo
a feather of indigo clouds
diced mercy

A Da Vinci
salt water
the sound of fading gun fire

A heartbeat.

Tattoo

Preparation:

Of love, conjure a child with the name of
clouds powdery white as dusty dermatitis
of a lep's wings
dreams

Of light, I float as in the refraction of prisms
inside a dewdrop freezing, maybe uncertain
but hardly unhappy
unfree

Malesi, gentle clouds in the eyes of someone
else's daughter with brown teeth.

Of life, choices lead us where the universe is nothing
but just, I deserve the bees that buzz round my head,
my lungs are perforated combs and tidings.

A man wagers
I feel the sentience of sea, a monster whose live skin
pulls at my eyes and fills my head with dreadful sleep,
but I do not slip

For fear I'd end up a clown trapped when the circus is over
knowing the maze trails but not to step out or how.

Tattoo

Every tattoo is a tik tok
We video call and ask when you're getting married
And no matter how much we leave the family groups,
we are reminded we don't choose these people.
At my graduation I meet my cousin Hope's mother,
pleasant surprise, a family portrait.

The college heaps them together like a woman depressed
procrastinating her laundry

And we find each other like gowns separated long ago
in a field of cotton flowers

As ravished whites now dyed the colour of life
but all things work together for good, right?

Right. Waiting like with birthdays that pass us by quietly, ninjas
afraid (as wound up as we are) to startle us into a shattering mess,
sorry

Happy belated. A year to wait, we try again next year.

Tattoo

Directions:

From a place of love venture falling forward
into a field of angel dust. White again.

There's nothing as sad as laughter deprived of joy,
look at your names.

But the brooding is the softest of words

And child of black bile, you're perfect, cursive and bold
and maybe dead on this background.

I'll walk in the work of faith, the manifestation of my resolve.

I'll wait for evening, a Vitruvian Man on the beach breathing
'even so come...'

With rumours of war children in the tide.
Dreams deferred are dreams still.

So, I'll wait until the moon fills again

And if she spills as I blink, I'll wait again twelve times over
until I catch her naked.

I will not laugh but I will be happy with a dessert of burnt sand
the smell of freedom.

And when the snow at last falls,
they won't know that it hides an obsidian wall

Etched in palm prints of a struggle odyssey
and chippings of vulnerable prayers.

Tattoo

Sigh, the year ends with quiet uncertainty
and a helping of satiety.

Soup

Chinaza James-Ibe | Fiction

It is Christmas Eve again, and you are freer than you have ever been. Nobody calls to ask if you will come home, it's been 10 years since Ukamaka called. Another 10 years since Mama called. Papa is as blind as a moonless night. You'll go home either way—you always do.

Christmas lights fascinate you—the way the entire country shapeshifts into a dainty masquerade. *Green. Red. Green.* Sometimes you roam the night, going from shop to shop in Nsukka just so you can touch the blinking lights. What fascinates you even more is the scent of happiness as you stroll—the different aromas of food colliding softly into each other—chicken, rice, plantains, and soups. Boys and girls smelling of oud, sweat, and money queue every day. You wonder how vast their stomachs must be to eat so much daily—you only eat on Christmas. The harmattan makes Nsukka look strangled; the air is so stiff and cold; the lizards are grayer than usual; the ixoras have no nectar in them; and sometimes you wake up frozen and have to wait for the sun to rise before you can move again.

The greatest of all your fascinations is traveling. In all your walks, you avoid St. Peter's Chaplaincy; the carol songs make you want to cry and pine for things you can no longer have—like a voice. The sopranos, altos, tenors, and basses all climax to form a plenary elysium. The Igbo songs remind you of Mama 10 years ago, the way the sun rose in her face each time you led the village choir in "Amụrụ Jisọs na Bethlehem." When you were done, she would clap loudly, forgetting that the mass was still ongoing. While the church wardens in boring green dresses tried to calm her, she would say at the top of her voice, "That is my child! Ada m!" Everything was quieter now; you did not have a voice, and your mother no longer went to church, not even on Christmas.

Walking towards the Faculty of Arts, you remember the two years you and your friends walked to class together, talking and dragging your fingers across the ixoras on both sides of the concrete walkway. The way you would snigger when you found someone's clothes ridiculous; the way you would passionately complain, "Why

person go wear suit and Crocs?" and your friends would laugh—strands of their knotless braids sticking to their rich spread of absolute lip gloss, "You should just quit English and become a fashion police," they would say.

You remember the 7 a.m. lectures where your African literature lecturer would stand beneath a lightbulb, his scalp gleaming, and reiterate, "African literature is a child of two worlds!" You once wrote a poem about the decadence of the lecture hall, the cobwebs that were thick enough to hold a buff human body, the shattered glass windows, and the ostrich ceiling fans that had transcended into antiquity—the dust in their necks would not let them rotate. As you punctuated your poetry, Achebe peered at you through his glass frame, and you whispered to him, "Forgive me, please."

In the little courtyard outside the lecture hall, there is a little sculpture of a woman's head under a veil. It is new and still smells of cement. You slip into the faculty hall and take a seat. Achebe, and the others whom you never cared for their names are still there, the cobwebs are gone, and the walls have been repainted. There are surreal paintings at each corner of the hall. You think of how your friends would have loved to take photos in front of them—they called it conquering—going about the school and taking pictures at every spot, not excluding the dry and crispy bushes. But they had left you here; every one of your friends had signed their names and affirmations on pleading white shirts; they had totally forgotten about you when they all left Nsukka. You had begged, telling them things were bound to change here, but they all wanted to speed into real life. Your fingers caress the glossiness of the paintings, and you whisper to each of them, "Merry Christmas." You take a seat at the front and stare deeply at Achebe—Kamsi, who was once your friend, shared the same nose shape with him. You say, "I'm going home for Christmas again; please be here when I return." His artsy silence reassures you.

You walk down Ikejiani Avenue and continue your nighttime stroll while waiting for dawn to beat dusk. The moon looks like a croissant made with too much butter. It is darker now and quieter; you finally settle under your favorite mango tree and let the dry leaves worship you. Traveling on Christmas is hectic, so you slumber without closing your eyes. You can almost hear the angels singing Hosanna. Ukamaka loved to hear you sing Hosanna.

It is morning—6 a.m., if you are still a slave to time. The leaves fall to your side as you stand and begin to walk, almost gliding towards Peace Park. You can hear the

animated chatter of people; some students who had waited to attend the carol before traveling are now rolling their boxes to the roadside to wait for okadas and kekes. A child in a red lace dress is singing a comic version of "Jingle Bells."

Jingle bells Jingle bells, jingle all the way.

Babangida open nyash everybody shout mpfmmm! Did you see that thing?

Her mother twists her lips and reminds her of her failures in the last school term. The child sulks for a while, then begins to skip. Christmas is for failures too; she was going to eat rice no matter what. You were going to eat the soup Ukamaka made for you each Christmas—it made you skip all the way to Peace Park. The park is crowded, as it usually is during this festive period. Everyone is struggling to get tickets to the first bus so they can spend the most of Christmas with their families—spending most of this day on the road was believed to be a bad omen. You eye an Okpa woman who has refused to sell Okpa to you for years now; if it were a normal day, you would have made her trip.

Without bothering to get a ticket or write your name in the log book, you board the first bus to Owerri and wait patiently for it to fill up—the students with their stuffed ears, the old women whose teeth were always chewing, the bachelors who traveled with just one school bag, the essential troublemaker who always picked on the driver, the girl who did not know where she was headed and was always on call with a relative, the yahoo boy who treated his laptop bag like a fair maiden, and the boy and girl who would embark on a talking stage for the entire duration of the ride. You love how everyone always emerges from the bus, dusty like corpses without memories of their own deaths. The keke men, the okada men, and the wheel-barrow pushers all gather around the bus; everyone disperses. In the park, a man is hawking Christmas tapes and is singing "Ekeresimesi Ogene" at the top of his lungs. His white Adieu papa shirt is drenched with sweat, and the skin of his legs is scaly and coated with dust. You try to hold your breath as you walk past him.

When you get home, mama is seated in the outdoor kitchen on a mahogany stool; a nude cluster of spider eggs is dangling beneath it; she is blowing a fire with her lips; and her eyes are red and threatening to pop out. Her hair is gray and scanty, and green veins are strewn all over her skin. Beside Mama is Papa, the reflection of a growing fire glows on his bald head. He rocks back and forth in his rocking chair, humming your favorite Christmas hymn, *Noel, Noel*. Papa smells old and musty, like

wrappers locked inside a metal box for decades. You walk towards him and tickle his nose until he sneezes.

Three of your cousins are home; Ukamaka is home too, and she is pregnant. Everyone has grown older except you. Everyone is so quiet, one would think Christ was stillborn. If you had your voice, you would have sung them all into the same excitement as crackling fire. But you don't, so you soft-walk past them and into your now dust-filled room, where you listen to the songs of your neighbors' children, absorbing a little life into your pale skin. The aromas of Ukamaka's dishes make you wish you had tears to cry—rice, roasted chicken, ofe egusi. Mama and Papa would eat the ofe egusi with the solemnity of one chewing bitter-leaves. They would ignore the chicken entirely, and Ukamaka and the cousins would chew and suck on the bones while remaining silent.

It is 10 p.m. When you walk to the backyard, Papa has fallen asleep on his rocking chair, and Mama is staring at the fire as if considering jumping in. She is in one of her trances. Under the coconut tree is a mound. You sit upon it and await Ukamaka, who comes thirty minutes later with a bowl of steaming ofe egusi and two wraps of fufu in a tray shaped like a teardrop.

She walks with her feet barely touching the earth to avoid rousing Papa and Mama, and she places your meal at your feet, on your mound. "Nwannem nwanyị, lee nri rie," Ukamaka whispers as she unclothes the fufu for you. Before she leaves, you take her stomach in your wispy hands and plant a kiss on it. A teardrop falls into your plate of soup. When you are done eating, you stretch yourself on your grave and slumber with your eyes open. You will wake up in Nsukka tomorrow morning.

A Feast of Memories

Adefemi Fagite | Poetry

November

Today is not just another ticking card for the year but the fourth Thursday in November. Waking to the discordant symphony of a lid clashing with its maternal cauldron.

Outside my window are naked trees with patches of brown wrinkled leaves sprinkled on them. The grass now donned in icy garments. The street a center of silence.

Mama in her loud voice breaks the silence as my name rings across the staircase. *Bring out the marinated turkey & place it in the oven.* The ritual of slicing a whole turkey roasted in the presence of my family only occurs once a year, on Thanksgiving.

Oya start preparing the ayamase – a delicacy that reminds us of our culture in a foreign land. Over the night I had added beef to the recipe instead of fish. Father says the smell of fish makes him sick over dinner.

- Palm oil
- Locust beans
- Bell peppers
- Habaneros

- ~~Sweet onions~~
- ~~Tripe~~
- ~~Beef~~
- ~~Ponno~~
- ~~Eggs~~

I regard today as the only special one, except for my birthday.

A day where we sit around the table giving thanks to God for keeping us together as a family even though we barely see each other, the brick of survival. As Father leads the prayer of thanksgiving, he ends with *& we continue our race tomorrow*.

A reminder for how much our lives has changed but to cherish every ticking time.

December

After I turned on the lamp it occurred to me I had not uttered a word to a soul all day.

Forgive me, Pumpkin, I mean no slight. We sang Carols together & *Mary's Boy Child* was your festive delight. While at it, your large eyes sparkled and you kept that simple, yet, smiling face. I did recall you were a gift, after a therapy session since Halloween. My therapist had asked me to do something fun & I sketched that smile on you, a reminder of what I no longer have.

I also spoke to the billing machine at Walmart. The voice guiding my hands with words so polite as I scanned the recipe for Jollof Rice, a yuletide bite.

~~6 medium of fresh roma tomatoes.~~

~~12 habaneros for fiery night.~~

~~3 medium size onions; 1 thinly sliced, the other 2 roughly chopped.~~

~~1 tin tomato paste,~~

~~1 bottle of thyme,~~

~~1 bottle of curry &~~

~~1 bottle of bay leaves to ignite.~~

I wished the machine a Merry Christmas as I retrieved my credit card.

I also talked to myself, each syllable returning as I was cooking.

Christ's birthday is never complete without Jollof. I pretended to laugh at Mama's jokes as the chicken was frying on the stove. Rebuked my loquacious sister for calling me a fake chef who learns how to cook on YouTube. It was a jolly moment as the Jollof was Jollofing on the stove.

As I sat down to eat, I clasped both hands and gave thanks—a ritual back home. Baba would smile as he removed his shirt, revealing his protruding tummy while he devoured his meal. There's something about Christmas Jollof, it does taste different. Yet, as I savored that first bite, it hit me. the difference isn't the taste but familial faces with which you celebrate together.

beef wellington

Jesutomisin Ipinmoye | Fiction

STEP 1

Heat oven to 220 degrees celsius.

Fola! Fola! Where are you? Please come to the kitchen and help me preheat the oven. I'm going to bring out all the ingredients we need.

I thought we agreed this wasn't—

Please Fola. Don't start with this again. Just preheat the oven.

Aisha, please—

Fola.

Aisha, look I know you want to make a good impression and all, but—

Fola.

Okay, okay. Preheat to what?

220 degrees. You brought out the beef from the freezer, yes?

I'll get it.

All right.

STEP 2

Set the 1kg beef fillet on a roasting tray, brush with 1 tbsp olive oil, and season with pepper, then roast for 15 mins for medium-rare or 20 mins for medium. When the beef is cooked to your liking, remove it from the oven to cool, then chill in the fridge for about 20 mins.

Ah, so we roast it, then bring it out and put it in the fridge? See how these oyinbo recipes never make sense?

...

Sha. Those are your people. Let me not talk too much.

Aisha—

See, it's the first time she's coming since we started dating. I wanted her to feel special.

STEP 3

While the beef is cooling, chop 250g chestnut mushrooms as finely as possible so they have the texture of coarse breadcrumbs. You can use a food processor to do this, but make sure you pulse-chop the mushrooms so they do not become a slurry.

Please, what are chestnut mushrooms?

There should be regular mushrooms in the fridge. I couldn't find chestnut mushrooms anywhere in Ebeano.

Ah okay o. Shey it'll sha taste the same?

...

...

See, there's something I need to tell you.

Fola, help me chop this thing now.

Aisha, seriously, it's important.

You can talk as you chop. Please multitask.

STEP 4

Heat 2 tbsp of olive oil and 50g of butter in a large pan and fry the mushrooms on medium heat. Add 1 large sprig of fresh thyme, and cook for about 10 mins, stirring often until you have a softened mixture.

What time is your mother coming again?

Uhh, around 3 PM.

It's 2. I'm not sure we'll be done in ti- oww!

Oh fuck, sorry. Hold on, lemme get the pan. You put some honey on that.

It's just a little oil. I'll be fine. Leave the pan and check what the next thing in the recipe is.

STEP 5

Season the mushroom duxelle, pour 100ml dry white wine over the mixture, and cook for about 10 mins until all the wine has been absorbed. The mixture should hold its shape when stirred.

*Is it okay to substitute the white wine for red?
The white in the fridge is basically finished.*

Should be.

*But won't the taste be different? Sigh.
I don't want the meal to be tasting somehow.*

...

STEP 6

Remove the mushroom duxelle from the pan to cool, and discard the thyme.

So, I was saying, I have something to tell you.

What's the next step?

STEP 7

Overlap two pieces of cling film over a large chopping board. Lay 12 slices of prosciutto on the cling film, slightly overlapping, in a double row.

Are you listening?

Where's the cling film?

Here.

STEP 8

Spread half the duxelles over the prosciutto, then sit the fillet on it and spread the remaining duxelles over. Use the cling film's edges to draw the prosciutto around the fillet, then roll it into a sausage shape, twisting the ends of the cling film to tighten it as you go.

Help me bring out the beef thing from the fridge.

Please, listen, Aisha

Walk and talk, Fola. Walk and talk.

STEP 9

Chill the fillet while you roll out the pastry.

Okay. What did you want to tell me?

I need to go back to the UK.

STEP 10

Dust your work surface with a little flour. Roll out a third of the 500g pack of puff pastry to an 18 x 30cm strip and place on a non-stick baking sheet. Roll out the remainder of the 500g pack of puff pastry to about 28 x 36cm.

Hmm? With your mom? Is your dad sick or something?

No, no. Not that.

*Hold on, I'm done rolling out the dough.
Do these sizes look right? I'm not about to get a ruler to measure 28 by 36 centimetres*

STEP 11

Unravel the fillet from the cling film and set it in the centre of the smaller strip of pastry.

So, like I was saying—

Ehen. Explain biko.

*I need to move back because
I don't think this is working.*

STEP 12

Beat the 2 egg yolks with 1 tsp of water and brush the pastry's edges and the top and sides of the wrapped fillet.

Hm?

This relationship. It's not working...

STEP 13

Using a rolling pin, carefully lift and drape the larger piece of pastry over the fillet, pressing well into the sides.

...

*I'll just wait for you to put down the
rolling pin before I continue talking.*

STEP 14

Trim the joins to about a 4cm rim. Seal the rim with the edge of a fork or spoon handle.

Look, you can stop cooking.

Wait. Why's your mother coming then?

STEP 15

Glaze all over with more egg yolk and–

We're going back together.

Fola, I'm not sure I'm understanding you.

The problem isn't you. I swear it isn't.

Kindly shed the light on the problem then.

*It's my mother.
She's always complaining about–*

*Ah, so the woman doesn't like me and
you've NEVER told me?*

It's not like that, Aisha

*No, please tell me, why am I making
this yeye food?*

Well, I–

In fact, don't answer.

STEP 15 (cont.)

– using the back of a knife, mark the beef Wellington with long diagonal lines taking care not to cut into the pastry.

Aisha.

...

Aisha.

Turn on the oven, I'm going outside for air.

Okay.

STEP 16

Leave the Wellington to chill for a bit. Heat oven to 200C/fan 180C/gas 6.

Did you turn on the oven?

Aisha, see I promise you, it's not like that.

...

*The woman is mad. She's been convinced
that the only reason why I'm still in Nigeria
is because of you.*

...

*And, like I thought she was coming round.
That's why I invited her over.*

Oh, so what is she coming to do instead?

What?

*You thought she had come around.
But instead, what is she coming to do?*

Aisha—

Is she coming to cast and bind me?

Aisha—

*Or, she's coming to arrest me for detaining
her son in Nigeria?*

Come on Aisha—

No, oh. Tell me, what is she coming to do?

Aisha, be reasonable.

*I should be reasonable. I should be REASONABLE.
You are telling me, after a year together, that
your mother is flying into the country because
she cannot STAND the thought of her son with me,
and I'm the one that should be reasonable?
That's how she'll come with a wife for you.*

...

...

...

Fola, your mother isn't coming alone. Is she?

No.

Very good. Have you turned on the oven again?

Yes. Aisha...

*It's 3 PM. Your mom and your new girlfriend
should be here soon.*

Aisha—

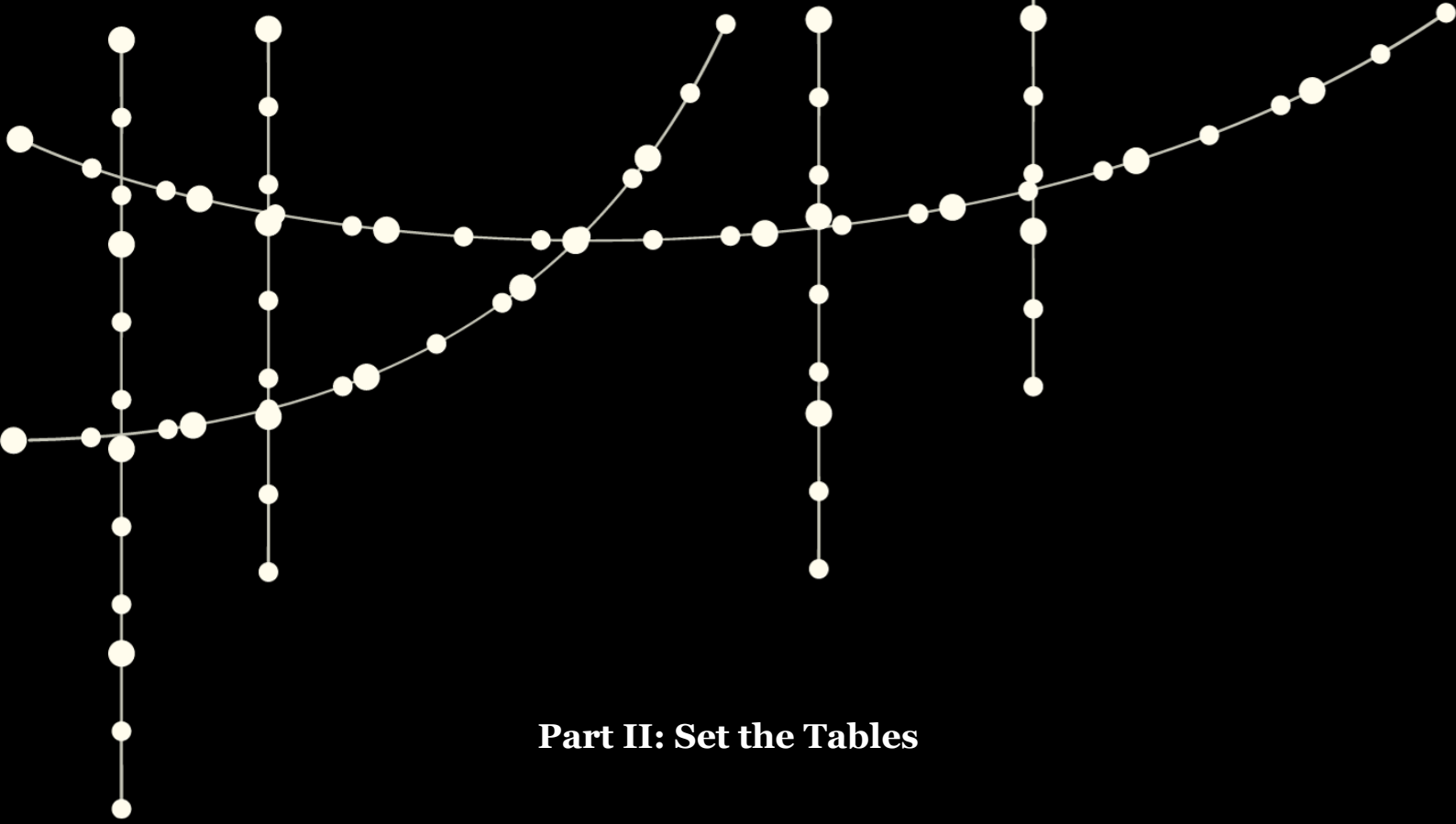
*What's the last thing on the recipe? So, we can
get this godforsaken meal over with.*

I'll read it.

STEP 17

Brush the Wellington with a little more egg yolk and cook until golden and crisp. 20-25 mins for medium-rare beef, 30 mins for medium. Allow it to stand for 10 mins before serving in thick slices.

Great. The Beef Wellington looks great.



Part II: Set the Tables

“We need ritual because it is an expression of the fact that we recognize the difficulty of creating a different and special kind of community. A community that doesn’t have a ritual cannot exist.”

– Malidoma Patrice Somé

Rituals: A Bonding Tool

Elohozino Okpowo | Essay

*If you don't know the kind of person I am
And I don't know the kind of person you are
A pattern that others made may prevail in the world
And following the wrong god home we may miss
Our star.*

*For there is a small betrayal in the mind,
A shrug that lets the fragile sequence break
Sending with shouts the horrible errors of
Childhood
Storming out to play through the broken dike.*

– From “A Ritual to Read to Each Other” by William E. Stafford –

And on and on and on the poem goes. I enjoy the thrill of intentionally creating moments too much, to have them by chance or experience them sporadically. Waiting for life to give me a time to fill with the reverberating sound of laughter from my siblings and friends, the echo of their voices, images of their faces when they allow themselves to be free of the consciousness of self and just be, feels careless. Loving them is loving me and all this loving (I think) requires the intentional creation of a bank of memories, reminders and promises, for the thing itself I am trying so desperately to preserve – love. When it feels as though love is about to fail, I draw from this bank, and when this bank begins to take on hollowness as a characteristic, I make deposits.

I believe in the power of traditions and rituals. I believe in their ability to preserve and strengthen connections. I believe in their powers as recipes for love, their effectiveness as bonding tools for relationships. They are to me standing orders for automated deposits to my bank. It facilitates the need for intentionality in love and relationships catering to at least one of the five love languages. Rituals may demand quality time for its fulfilment from us, it may require the exchange of gifts, the use of words for assurance, the body's desperate need for touch with another, or

the rendering of oneself in service. Sometimes, it will cater to all five and leave us wanting for nothing.

Most of my family, and some of my friends, are too religious and superstitious to see the activities we engage in periodically as rituals. A quick google search of the word may justify their beliefs and dispositions. Words like religious and solemn are used to describe the mood for the atmosphere of their practice, the phrase 'prescribed order' suggests a compulsory rigidity and style and should not be broken. It suggests a must and a lack of flexibility, and so, my people are suspicious of things that limit and control their autonomy, even things they enjoy, even things they love. So, in practice, I do not use the word to request the performance of the things we have come to love as a group, I do not use it in description. I do not allow my tongue stumble on its first syllable, much less the first letter, when I am upset about one or the other's inability to show up, be there, make time or participate.

When they inquire into the reasons for my blow ups and anger, I limit my responses to the need to show up for each other as friends and the necessity for love so strong amongst siblings it seems a non-negotiable thing. I insist on the uncertainty of life, how we are all running out of time, how things will change in the blink of an eye, how age is catching up on us, how soon, we will not be able to whine our waists and move our feet and hold our liquor as strongly as we once did. I say I am lonely because it is easier. I say I miss them because it is understandable and expected. I do not say that it is necessary because this is what sustains us. I do not say we must engage because for me, not engaging feels like the beginning of the end of our love.

Our rituals are simple, lacking in procedure and standing more on the sentiments they invoke. The results are why I choose to carry them on my head, place some of it in my hand and force it down their throats.

For the past six years since I graduated from university and moved back home, I have visited my siblings in boarding school in Ogun state, every third Saturday of the month. Through stressful work weeks where I have dealt with all genres of people, had mental break downs, and typed countless memos, I look forward to the early morning Saturdays when I am running through supermarkets and eateries, purchasing all that I can on their shopping lists. I empty mine and my father's bank accounts just so most of what they want, is guaranteed. I am waking up at 7 am on

Saturday, after a night out with a headache strong enough to blast open the corners of my head. I am giddy and excited because I know that I will soon see the people whom I love the most, and who make me feel most loved. The three-hour drive to and fro does not threaten my joy, it does not affect or displace it. For me, it is a means to a worthy cause, a worthy end. My friends do not believe that I have made it for every visiting day since I moved back home. But how do I explain the sanctity of this practice?

Every month, I speak to my brother in heart about the new things we have produced with language. It is important for me to read about him in a poem he has written, to know how he feels about his skin and the weight it carries. It is important to me, that in my words, he sees how I am dealing with life today. It is important for us to tell the difference of how we feel through language. In the months where I do not engage with his literature, he feels like a stranger and the light in his eyes become unfamiliar. If I were to place my head on his chest, I would not know if it were his birth heart pumping blood.

When the clock strikes twelve, every thirty-first of December, I am searching for restaurants with good food, willing to accommodate ten loud individuals for a New Year's dinner. I am certain that in this one moment of the year, most of my friends will be in one place, gathered round a table, eating different meals but breathing the same air. There is a picture taken at the end of dinner that will be sent to the group chat at least twice that year reminding everyone of what a great time we had. We will talk about doing it again because of how fun it was. Our hearts and minds will remember what it feels like to be in a room doused with the laughter and love of friends. We will remember not being able to contain our joy, we will remember it leaking out of our mouths in volumes we could not control, afraid the restaurant manager will kick us out.

In my father's house, we are gathered together every morning at half 6 to give thanks to God for the dawn of a new day. The gathering lasts a maximum of 15 minutes, if led by my father, 30 if led by my mother and 10 if led by any of the children. There is praise and worship, opening prayer, reading of the bible text and devotional, and benediction. My siblings and I don't keep on when our parents are not home, but it is an important feature of our family. Recently, I realized that I could go a whole week without seeing my brother at home because of the chaos of our lives and when we do see, our communication will sometimes feel strained and

other times like catch up. When we pray together every morning, engagement, communication, and discourse is inevitable. Morning devotions in my father's house is a ritual I don't particularly enjoy – it takes from my time, and I don't pay enough attention for it to matter – but on days where I seem to forget my brother's voice, I miss this ritual.

Rituals are sacred things. They also make the subjects of their existence sacred. Think of the breaking of bread as flesh and the drinking of wine as the blood of Jesus in Christianity. Think of the ritual of ablution in Islam. The Bar/Bat Mitzvah in Judaism. I am not certain, but I am sure the Buddhists and Hindus also have rituals that make the practice of their religion sacred. The potency of our religious beliefs is thicker because of the rituals we attach to them. I count and consider my relationships worthy of being as sacred as my faith. I am no island, not a woman in solitary confinement, not a woman exiled, not a woman without heart. I believe in the preservation and strengthening of my relationships as with my faith. I believe in giving it meaning with actions, however frequent, however traditional. So, I plan and create situations that become practices for my community and myself.

I ensure the celebration of birthdays in specific ways. I encourage nights out and plan theatre dates as often as they hold. I welcome my people to my space to drink and eat and laugh, to be themselves and, if they have forgotten, to remember what it is like to be themselves. Sometimes, I want to cook with them, take long walks or drives with them, go to church with them, read to them, sing for them, pray for them. I want to make living with them be as natural and frequent and as much of a tradition as praise and worship is in my church on Sunday morning. For these things to be so normal, so part of us, their non-occurrence makes life seem out of place for them. As though they have misplaced themselves.

I like to think of myself, body and mind, as a sacred thing too, and for many reasons. One, I am the embodiment of a person loved by many, especially my own self. I am presented to the world to work and love whilst living. I must remain grounded, I think, first for my creator, then myself, and then for the world. I must practice rituals on myself, to ensure the affirmation and sustenance of my humanness and spirituality, the working of my mind and regulation of my nervous system.

Twice a month, on any Saturday of my choosing, I wash my scalp tenderly with shampoo that smells like coconut and apples, like it is the crown of my head,

because it is. I shave my legs and armpits to have the skin of palm touch that of my legs directly – smoothness meeting smoothness. I take myself out to the cinema, to experience the magic of visuals and motion pictures alone. To feel my heartbeat rapidly for light coming from a large box, to cry freely because I am certain no one is listening.

I pour out the contents of my mind on paper – sometimes coherently, sometimes incoherently – to better understand it, to see all that it holds materialize and create room for more. Sometimes, I write a thought ten times, till I have clarity on it, till I understand it better in relation to myself. I write till I see it just as my mind sees it so that when I read the words, I feel it just as much as she does. This is a ritual for me. There is also the magic of quiet time with my creator, fueled by a desire to experience stillness and elevate my spirit but also, settle it in my body, let it occupy me well, take control of my weak flesh. All these are rituals for me.

Rituals are everyday happenings, some more frequent and sacred and complex than others. In an interview with Echezonachukwu Nduka, *On Rituals, Transcendence and the Otherworldly*, Gaamangwe Joy Mogami, the interviewer, says she thinks “life is a performance of ritual.” I think rituals are necessary for living well. I encourage it, try to preach it in a way that does not scare people away, try to preach it without using the word itself.

These days, I find myself eager to create rituals with a lover I do not have, to have our rituals become habits. I desire to read and be read to a minimum of five days a week, because there will be no better way for us to see literature in the same way. To cook and create recipes together, so that our stomachs speak the same language of food, and if they refuse, we know at least, how well the other likes their moin moin done and how thick they like their soups. I think of us taking hour long walks in the morning, holding hands, talking about the things we dreamt about the night before and long drives at night, talking about the things we want to dream about. I think about how frequently I would like our bodies to become one, how well we would know each other because of this, how easy it will be to know what touch works best at the nape of his neck and just below my belly button. I think of us together in our home, just before the beginning of a new year, writing down all of who we want to be like I have done alone many times before, because we understand the importance of newness and what it means for hope to be renewed.

All that I want is to practice living so intentionally and flexibly well with my

people that I recognize the texture of their skin and beating of their heart with my eyes closed. I think there is no better way, to see the many layers of the people we love or see the many versions than with rituals. Engaging in them demands a certain level of knowledge and understanding of the people we choose to engage with. It strengthens bonds and generates an invaluable amount of wealth for the mind. There is no fear of familiarity because every day is different, and every knowing is novel. There is only seeing and seeing and seeing, until there is nothing left to see.

Dates / التمر

Salma Yusuf | Poetry

When Aadi asked me two years ago
hal tsadiqni if I tell you that I have never touched eid?

I shuddered at the thought of not feeling the flavor of eid on my tongue
the taste of dates hovered on my lips like my ancestral homes:

the laughter of my nieces and nephews as they received eidiyyah
the udhiyyah of lambs and goats for three days of dhul hijjah
the two-hundred-and-sixteen sacred hours away from
cutting our nails or trimming our tailbone-length hair
the reconciliation of Yusuf and his eleven brothers—
cries of families once divided by Iblis's weapons
the scent of oud burning itself away to ashes
the spray of perfume on the back of waxed-moon palms
the wet heena on our hands and feet fanned until the stains parched and
cracked like soles of nosy women's feet rushing to collect gossip
the colored dishdashas and hijabs placed neatly at the center of
parted hair like shells set ablaze

the minal aideens and minal faizeens echoing like the
clanks of iron-mongers
the vishete and tamar and asabiyyah zeinab and donasi on plates
placed in louvered kitchen cabinets only accessed during celebrations
the brewing of steaming hot kahwa and vanilla-soaked chai in gold-plated kettles
the recitation of takbir in the nightingale voice of Saad Al Qureshi
the filling of nana's yard with her grandchildren swinging on *الديرفة*
made from wood and metal that has eaten away with age and
playing hide and seek with cats whose paw pads are jagged
the al-hayaa nights with aunties roasting us as they roast laham on the grills
the slicing of potatoes for dinner served in large copper sinias
shining even in moonless dusks
the eid prayer at Tononoka where the whole ground is splashed
in white and black in black and white in white and white and black and black

when Aadi asked me yesterday
hal tsadiqni if I tell you that I have never touched eid?

I placed one of my sunflower heads in the sink
my hands touched the spiral florets to feel the flavor of nostalgia
the taste of the one-seeded fruit hovered on my lips as I said
*I now know that pining is a nest of thorns, like the pruned
stubs of dates, like dates on *الديرفة**
the sunflower head like a dead body floated on the water
swinging its yellow petals as if longing for the sun.

Breaking, A Ritual

Mabel Mnensa | Creative Non-Fiction

We sit around the artisanal beauty, a long wooden dining table coaxed to life by two gods. The gods—a duo of Congolese craftsmen who toil on the pavements of Woodstock, conversing with maple, birch and oak. The citrusy and mouth-watering aromas from the candles and the waiting dishes of dombolo, beef stew, pap, fish, vegetable casseroles, chakalaka, boerewors spread across the table rise to titillate. My friends, their faces; cosy in the Wynberg dining room; are animated by the flames. I sip from my chilled glass of crisp, dry white wine. I need to weave together my thoughts and feelings on the various day to day phenomena for which I am grateful so I am ready to share when we begin to give thanks. This is the pause in between the chaos. This is the inhale in between this afternoon's photoshoot and the moment we get to break bread together. This is not a special occasion.

Stills from the photoshoot we made earlier in the afternoon reel through my mind. Melanin skin, popping under the Cape Town sun's soft kiss. As per my invitation every one dusted off that special black outfit they have been saving for a special day. Deity crafted then cosmetic perfected faces, in various shades of black—skin and clothes—stare down the barrel of a camera, defiant, happy. This is not a protest. Although the forest, mountain and the intrusive man-made structure dedicated to Cecil John Rhodes in the background whisper of an insurrection.

This is Cape Town, I know the whispers will creep beyond the colonial memorial. A couple of days later I will have to field an unsolicited comment from a distant acquaintance puzzled by the social media posts I am tagged in. *Were you celebrating something?* Weary of Cape Town's reputation for eating its brown and black young, I will know that she is actually wondering how dare we be unapologetic, happy, comfortable in Rhodes's Cape Town.



Images by Afulele Mashalaba @afu_mash



Images by Afulele Mashalaba @afu_mash



Images by Afulele Mashalaba @afu_mash

Staring at the image that will grab her attention from her feed, she will grimace at our fists raised in the air. She will swipe left, smirking at another still where we laugh— perfectly framed and captured.

She will wonder how much we paid for such a talented visionary photographer, unable to fathom that greatness manifests within us. Swiping left, she will spot the looming Rhodes in the background in another image. Thumb and index to the screen she will zoom in to see a middle-aged couple before Rhodes, bucket and cloth in hand for the statue's weekly wash. She will empathise with the couple that probably belongs to the group that have dedicated themselves to the upkeep of the statue. "There is a time and place," she will mutter. She will remind anyone who dares to listen that she would have baked and taken cookies to Mandela's Robben Island if that had been possible. But we know, if she had been there, she too would have taken turns to throw disdainful stares at us. Their stares speak volumes. *Loud. Not supposed to be there. Refusing to bow under greatness. The disregard.* I will want to ask, "Ungenaphi?" But I will probably choose to save my words, my energy.

How can we not celebrate being alive, not in some drug fuelled stupor, but happy in Cape Town right now? The same Cape Town that devours its brown and

black young along with our dreams, hope and aspirations; trying to not gag on our unruly strands of 4c hair; spitting us out as a tattered broken half human thing to also retreat into the shadows of Johannesburg or Eastern Cape or wherever we dare to crawl from.

This is not a special occasion. She will never get it. All of my friends understood the memo and each one also came with ready-to-prepare food for the celebration. In our WhatsApp group—*Thanks Giving Dinner*—each of us confirmed which of our special recipes we would prepare. At my dining table, with our monthly feast before us, it is almost time. Time to break, give thanks. I am overwhelmed. Intoxicated by the love in the room, my actual safe space.

I am at a crossroads in my life, scared and weighed down by the stress that I am taking the wrong detour and might end up down the wrong course. A friend, across from me, looking like a million bucks, is back in town for a second interview. In town because she had had to go back home after being retrenched at her previous job. A friend next to me is struggling with his health. Another is going through heartbreak. Another is struggling with a flaky partner. But today, at the Colonial Memorial and now at my dining table we choose gratitude. This is our monthly ritual. This is how we survive Cape Town. Outside my window, beyond the candle light, the sun, like us, is refusing to be chased away by Cape Town's darkness. Just like we had earlier stood our ground under the shadow of Rhodes, the sun refuses to dim its light. This too is neither a special occasion nor a protest.

We will no longer let dust settle on our special plates or wait for invitations to grant us permission to drag out our best dresses or wait for a brief's permission to unleash our creativity. Birthdays, too far. Life, too short. We appreciate the minute moments, especially as black bodies in Cape Town. It is time to break bread. By breaking, we refuse to be broken and devoured. Each moment each dinner grants is our celebration of being. This is our monthly celebration of surviving soulless work; of managing to not curse back at shitty bosses; of not affording to live out our dreams; of being alive. Persevering is our special occasion. Every hour, every day we celebrate life. By breaking we are healed.

This is What Happens

Akal Mohan | Poetry

this is what happens
on every christmas morning

1.

we hear two... three noises in our house – noises,
of simmering stew,
of steam drifting from one room to another &
of ma, jabbing her fingers, trying to
eliminate the air that will invite neighbors.

2.

this day, no cock wakes us.
the fresh, delicious smell clouds our noses,
dreams are all laced with visions of plates filled
to brim, discarding when baba always says:
an overly satisfied man is a stupid one.

3.

later on,
as we wait,
we recite poems; she –
ma – says that a poem is a prayer;
delicious, solemn, delicate &...
same to the stew simmering.

4.

so, in ritual,
our hands are raised: to surrender, hearts humble, souls polite,
we thank god for providing yet another christmas morning for
us to hear these three noises.

A Festivity of Fire & Song

Makarov Tebogo Abotseng | Creative Non-fiction

For the most part of the year, my days follow a familiar and somewhat mundane script. The weekdays are dedicated to work, while weekends bring forth leisurely moments. Usually casual get-togethers, joyful weddings, and at times, the solemnity of funerals. This routine, though ordinary, are part of me.

Then *Dezemba* makes a dramatic entrance.

The thing about *Dezemba* is that it doesn't patiently bide its time until December, contrary to what the corrupted name implies. No, it's a celebratory force that moves independently of the calendar. It sneaks into life in November and continues to impose its lively dominance until the second week or so of January. With a cunning finesse, it skillfully relieves me of my hard-earned *Pulas and Thebes*, my Botswana's currency, as I merrily celebrate towards the only begotten son's birthday.

It brings with it good tidings in the form of a nice song that gradually transforms into the pounding pulse of the whole country. This beat repeats itself ceaselessly in cabs, on all radio frequencies, and composes the melodic background for every festivity. More than just a note on the musical spectrum, it's an enthralling anthem that defies any attempt at containment. Should the lyrics pay homage to the divine, referencing God or if it's a spirited adaptation of a beloved African hymn, there's no apprehension to let it reverberate even within the solemn halls of a church or the somber setting of a funeral. With that, an enthralling transformation ensues as the nation immerses itself into the festivities. This is never more apparent than on Sunday afternoons, particularly in the capital city, Gaborone's, jubilant embrace. Here, the city dons a mask of merriment and transforms into a vibrant carnival where revelry reigns supreme. It is a tapestry weaved with the threads of vibrant get-togethers, belly laughs, and the pervasive scent of decadence.

This is not a casual soirée; instead, it's an extravagant feast, a carnival of pleasures where delicacies and Babylonian cocktails mingle in the vibrant nooks of neighbourhood hangouts. Within this atmosphere of unbridled joy, the Batswana people's unwavering commitment to a cultural feast – a timeless love affair with

meat – remains etched deeply in our collective heart. No indulgence is spared in this gastronomic homage, whether it be the succulent allure of chicken, the fragrant emanations of pork, the hearty essence of beef, or the indescribable nuances of goat. We Batswana like our meat, in huge offerings. A thorough examination might reveal a curious correlation. This being the possibility that many of the now-extinct mammals that once graced Southern Africa's landscapes have likely become extinct purely on the reason that they ended on our sizzling fires and pots across the vast expanse of Botswana. Thus, the vibrant tradition of grilling meat – affectionately known as braai – flourishes, particularly during *Dezemba*. In huge offerings like I said.

Across various braai-places, the crackling sounds of open flames and the aroma of perfectly charred meats envelop the air. These braai places manifest in various forms. It could be a repurposed car wash, the bustling parking lot of a spirited bar, a vacant expanse of land long abandoned, a disused borrow pit, or even the intimate embrace of someone's homestead. The form matters not; what matters is the presence of firewood, for everything else falls seamlessly into place after that. As the sun dips below the horizon, the *braai* spots transform into vibrant theaters, where the enchanting dance of flames meticulously crafts raw meat into visually arresting masterpieces that enthrall the senses. Strangers become friends amidst the shared joy of indulging in the meaty as Gaborone becomes a pulsating epicentre of merriment, where the boundaries between strangers' blur, and the spirit of celebration unites all.

All in all, a good old time, save for the fact that my craving for meat is never fully satiated. I worry not. Knowing that soon I will be undertaking the annual pilgrimage up north to one of my two home villages. Here I rest assured that I will eat to my heart's desire as, if there is one thing that is abundant in Botswana during the festive season, it is meat.

As it is, *Dezemba* is in full swing now. As I partake in the fun and countless braais, a sense of nostalgia envelopes me. I am taken back to the times when my grandfather, now departed, would ritually butcher an ox in preparation for the festive season. Together with my family, friends and neighbours, we would enjoy a hearty communal meal, dominated by meat of course. The nostalgia goes beyond the carnivorous urges. It is more of the ritual that goes into preparing for the festivities –

primarily the slaughter of the ox for the pots and eager bellies. When I was younger, I was excited about every part of this show, something that I still enjoy today, my sort of *Dezemba* ritual.

The thing is that Batswana prefer their festive season in huge dollops. Hence, they cram as much activities as possible into the festive calendar: workplace end of year parties, traditional marriage proposal ceremonies, sometimes one or two funerals and, of course, weddings. Therefore, you can count on meat being central to all this festivity. One thing that I should make abundantly clear is that in our culture, we don't purchase traditional feast meat from the butcher. That would be scandalous. We source it ourselves.

It was for this reason that a couple of years back when my uncle's wedding date was announced, I was more thrilled than usual. This was due to the fact that the wedding fell right in the thick of *Dezemba*. With that delightful intersection of festive fervour and matrimonial union, I found myself and other so-called able-bodied men entrusted with the grand task of slaughtering the mandatory ox for the festivity. However, soon upon our arrival at the cattle post, our heightened spirits were swiftly tempered by a significant hurdle – the selected bovine turned out to be a renegade character, untouched by kraaling for the past decade. What ensued was a grueling and exasperating two-day odyssey in the wild.

This unwelcome revelation compelled us to venture deep into the untamed wilderness, navigating the dense bushes in search of a determinedly elusive creature. Eventually, a unanimous decision emerged among us, the magnificent seven of sorts. We agreed that the engagement of expert assistance was necessary. That's when we enlisted the unparalleled skills of Cruiser, the renowned tracker in and around the local cattle posts where our Houdini was playing hide and seek. Even Cruiser, conceded that the cow in question was a truly elusive rascal. After all, he reminded us, that this wasn't the first time we found ourselves embroiled in a quest for this cunning bovine; a similar episode had unfolded during my other uncle's wedding a few years ago. Back then, the difficulty in the search prompted a shift in strategy, leading us to seek out a more manageable and docile option, an old cow, which kind of required merciful reprieve.

Nevertheless, this time around surrender was not an option. The anticipation of the crowd, eager to savour the meat back home, fueled our determination. Thankfully our relentless pursuit reached its climax in the afternoon when we

managed to corner it amidst a bunch of mopane trees. A hush fell upon us all, a collective silence, as the marksman prepared to bring the elusive saga to a decisive end. Only for a go-away-bird to startle it and off it went back into the wild wild east. With heads hung low, we retreated to our home to regroup and devise a better strategy. The atmosphere upon our return was one of solemnity, our shame palpable as we meandered through the womenfolk. They, in contrast, had triumphed in their culinary endeavors, having skillfully baked an array of breads and prepared a medley of salads and other delectable offerings.

The next day, our quest resumed. Once more, the elusive cow proved challenging to locate, prompting us to prostrate ourselves once again before Cruiser, beseeching the expert tracker for his assistance. Now a new complication surfaced – the rifle's muzzle seemed to be out of alignment, though the importance of that seemingly small matter eluded me. Frankly, at that point, I couldn't care less about the manner in which we dispatched the beast. Whether we resorted to fisticuffs or any other means was inconsequential; I was fed up with winding through tributaries and fighting with thorny obstacles. All I yearned for was to return to the village, where a luscious mahogany bottle awaited, begging to be poured. After all, it was *Dezemba*. Mind you, only a few days earlier, I had reveled in the capital city's nightlife, pulling an all-nighter in its vibrant nocturnal haunts.

Anyway, off we went to look for another expert – Diamond, a grizzled coloured character renowned for his knack in gun repairs. Not only was he a skilled gunsmith but also a distinguished marksman. Our plea to him was crystal clear: not only did we seek his services in repairing the disappointing rifle, but we also earnestly desired his sharpshooting skills too. Furthermore, we insisted he bring along his own cache of firearms, just so we add an extra layer of certainty to our mission. Turns out this was the best decision we ever made.

What a marksman! With his gaze steely and unwavering, he crouched cradling a .30-06 rifle, fixated on the distant horizon where the ox stood restlessly. Its powerful form a testament to the resilience of life in the harsh embrace of the unforgiving wilderness. Its hide bore the scars of a creature which had faced the wild's trials and emerged unyielding. In the skilled hands of a marksman, the .30-06 rifle becomes an extension of his will. Its stock worn and polished from years of faithful service, it was a vessel through which he channeled his expertise. The cold

steel of the barrel gleamed with an understated elegance. The scope, perched atop offered a window of focus.

Then the fingers caressed the cold steel of the trigger. Time seemed to slow, the outside world fading away, leaving only the marksman, the rifle, and the distant stubborn ox. As the trigger was gently squeezed, the shot reverberated through the air, a testament to the controlled fury that has just been unleashed. Time seemed to stand still as the bull, a monument to the wild, crumpled to the earth. The marksman lowered his rifle, a silent salute to the dance between life and death.

Done with that, we quickly immersed ourselves in the ritual of mothobiso – a communal pot brimming with offal and various cuts, a feast reserved for men intimately part of the kill, the art of skinning and dismembering a cow's carcass. It marked the unapologetically indulgent bite of our festive celebration. This dish though, is not famed for its hygiene standards. It boasts a primal allure, comprising slices from the liver, lungs, stomach, ribs, and other less savory bits. The concoction simmers over an open flame, right beside the place of slaughter, infusing each morsel with the raw essence of the hunt. It is undeniably a dish crafted for men, a culinary homage to savouring the triumphant taste of the hunt.

Thus, as we entered home, this time carrying the carcass and with our pride restored, the mood was high, even without the fortification of the bottled mahogany stuff on ice. We immediately allocated amongst ourselves the cooking of the Tswana traditional meat pot, seswaa. The beauty of preparing this dish lies in the camaraderie it fosters. There have been moments when I've been so immersed in the cooking process that I barely catch a glimpse of the bridal couple. Cooking of the meat it is more than a culinary task; it's a social endeavor that transforms the yard into a lively hub of activity. The robust laughter emanating from the crackling fires becomes a symphony that reverberates throughout. This convivial atmosphere is often fueled by a tapestry of stories, some spun with a touch of exaggeration and a sprinkling of gossip, creating an ambiance where the act of cooking becomes a shared experience.

So, it is for this reason that in a couple of weeks I will be making a yearly pilgrim to my home village, where I will surely be part of a team of cattle assassins or seswaa chefs. For the latter, anyone can do a fairly good job of this meal, it is after all not that complicated or that strenuous. The fact of the matter is that this staple of ours

embarks on its culinary journey as red slabs of flesh, with bones intact, only to transform into a mesmerizing brown mass. This meat undergoes a slow dance with the flames, cooking slowly until it reaches that sublime state of tenderness where it effortlessly slips off the bone. This delicate interplay sets the stage for the true artistry of *seswaa*-making.

First things first, you need the proper tools. Knives for carving the raw meat. Tomahawk axes to shutter bones. A three-legged iron pot. Plenty of firewood. And coarse salt. Of particular attention is the knife; the blade you wield is not just any run-of-the-mill knife; it's the *okapi*, a blade steeped in a notorious legacy that echoes through the vibrant streets of Sophiatown in South Africa. This knife, with its distinctive design and sharp edge, has become more than just a tool for culinary endeavors – it's a symbol of a darker side, a talisman of street ruffians and the infamous gangs that once roamed the labyrinthine alleys of Sophiatown. To carry an *okapi* is to carry the weight of its history, and I, for one, choose not to bear that burden. So, having borrowed the knife from someone who does not have qualms about the associated infamy, we get on with preparing the meat.

To start, we cut the meat into large chunks, before putting it in a heavy stewing pot and cover with water. In the world of *seswaa* cooking, it's customary to have more than one cook tending to the cast iron pot. After an hour or so, with the pot undergoing its rhythmic dance a crucial moment arrives. One of the cooks takes center stage and, with a flair of culinary finesse, adds salt to taste. However, this seemingly straightforward act carries an element of peril, particularly in the absence of effective communication. The salt may find its way into the pot twice over, especially if the alternate cook has been partaking in the fiery waters from the nearby drinks' cooler, after all it is *Dezemba*.

We then boil the meat on low heat over a slow fire for about four hours, stirring occasionally, until the meat is tender and easily comes off the bone. The cooks, succumbing to the deceit of festivities, may vanish to the nearby drinking spot, leaving the meat vulnerable to the unforgiving flames. Yet, amid the revelry, a saving grace emerges – the ever-ready reserve team, poised on standby, ready to step into the culinary fray should the risk of burning meat rear its smoky head.

Once the bone marrow is carefully removed, we lay it aside like a priceless potion, waiting to be added to the culinary composition. An enticing suspense grows while the pot simmers and the fragrant *mélange* fills the kitchen. The time to reveal

the velvety richness of the reserved bone marrow is just right when the pot dances on the verge of parching. Bone marrow drops into the heat-kissed pan with a sizzling crescendo, bringing with it a savoury alchemy enchantment that turns the outdoor kitchen into a paradise. This is the sweet prelude to the next chapter of our culinary journey, the sputtering symphony of heat meeting marrow accented by the aromatic murmurs of the simmering pot. A taste of harmony develops as the marrow works its magic, gently browning the tender flesh. The kitchen turns into a place where flavours and sensations converge to create a dish that is more than just nourishment. Now that they've done their job to add depth, the bones can quit the stage with grace.

From there, we debone the soft and alluring meat with culinary grace, exposing a tapestry of soft meat and succulence enhanced by the marrow. The rhythmic ballet of simmering ingredients fills the makeshift kitchen once more, but now it pauses for the grand finale. The cooks take advantage of the chance to sample the symphony of flavours after setting aside the bones. They set off on a sensory expedition, tasting the suitability of salt still clinging to the bones.

Next, we use a large wooden spoon or forked stick to pound the meat. The meat should crumble into tiny fibres. The cooking procedure is a rhythmic dance in which the cooks alternately pound the meat until it reaches a consistent texture. This culinary ballet offers a release from time constraints; the beating continues until the last bits of tendon and bone have been elegantly parted, revealing a canvas of tender, thread-like meat that mutters of its passage through the gentle embrace of fire. And as the final notes of this culinary symphony fade, the kitchen is filled with the glorious perfume of a masterwork that resulted from the painstaking fusion of flesh, bone marrow, and perfectly seasoned perfection. The meat is ready and we are ready to eat *Dezemba*.

The transformation from chunky pieces of meat to mushy strands in a way symbolizes the way the city life gives way to the rural home come festive season. Through our annual *Dezemba* pilgrimage to our simple rural homes, we partake in this transformational dance; where the lively rhythm of the city fades into the peaceful whispers of the countryside. During this festivity, the palette as a whole takes a pleasurable diversion, losing itself in the flavorful tapestry of slow-cooked meats that tell the stories of bygone eras.

The constant beats of city chart-toppers are gone. Rather, the soundscape is drastically altered, turning into a blank canvas for spontaneous conventional choir

acapellas. Even though they are sometimes off pitch, these tunes convey the unadulterated delight of spending time with others. The raw voices, singing from the bottom of their hearts, flow through the village squares and open areas, forming a symphony that captures the spirit of *Dezemba*. The break from the glossy facade of the city does not negate the divide between the metropolitan sophistication and rural simplicity, but rather, it reinforces it in a mutually beneficial dance. Festive is no longer just a gourmet and sonic occasion; it is now a unifying factor that spans the divide between the busy city life and the peaceful simplicity of rural living.

Malian Naming Ceremony

Eliamani Ismail | Poetry

we extend our short nomenclature // 7 days after birth // women ululate under
perfumed smoke // Cisse and Diallo // Diarra and Sow // all present & dead
like festival lamb //

still warm and smelling of sweet bread // *my nephew* // is named // for several
woman's dead husbands // backward bending branch // his bride in a stiff white
bazin // shimmering, noble lady //

cries // long, ancient tears // women ululate under gentle ghosts // proud,
present // i don't tell others why we call our babies *our husbands, our fathers* //
the answer is too simple // instead i'll say //

once i called my nephew, *my nephew* in english // and his mother sucked her
teeth // and asked were her children not good enough to be my own? // or
in english: *everything about my body*

is shared with every woman here // our one name // our single womb one
ballooning mouth // there are no corner-children in this language // we are all
begotten and beget // one single child //

in bamako, in segou // i extend the nomenclature // 20 years after birth // from a
dying man with a spine curved like a question // a face that frowns and hiccups
on my foreign father's tongue //

i am given *Aminata* // name of my many mothers' many mothers // and to be
named is to arrive and never truly leave // to be loved enough to be loved again //
to insure our mothers

become daughters once more // how the nation sustains // still so tightly
braided with war // so much unburning left to be done // smoke plumes still to
be perfumed // so many namesakes //

so few names // and all this // the answers // will be paid its due // and we have
forever on our side // countries, gods, and time have all come to kill //

// but never has any Malian died.

Seasons of Hope and Despair

Kapante Ole Reyia | Fiction

To think that no girl would chase him to stroke his flowing red-ochre stained hair affectionately again filled Lemuta with nostalgia. He also had to dispense with the tantalizing smell of the esonkoyo warrior perfume. But above all, he rued shedding off the aura of power that was a magnet for the girls but which he had to trade for the lackluster life of an elder. The Eunoto ceremony, during which warriors graduated into junior elders, had finally come. He realized too late that the moments of glory he had so relished as a cheerful young man had begun to filter away like sands through the hourglass. He was always besotted with Nemuta, his childhood friend, and now he assured himself that, once the ceremony was over, he would settle down with her to start a family. It all seemed a bit of an anti-climax.

He thought of this as he decorated himself with red and white ochre. They had woken up in the wee hours and walked seven kilometres to the only point in their country where the ochres could be found. It was on the banks of a stream with verdant green riverine vegetation. Usually, a lonely place which teemed with wildlife, it now harboured about two dozen warriors. Their raucous voices reverberated through the meadow. They gathered copious amounts of the ochre and used it to paint their dark bodies. Lemuta methodically drew the alternating transverse patterns on his limbs.

“Everyone, lift up your flag and let’s get going,” came the voice of Kishoyian, an elderly man who led them. He was flourishing a feather, a sign of fruitfulness on his right hand. Immediately, the warriors formed into a file, and Lemuta found himself in the rearguard. Kishoyian raised up his feather, and the sonorous voice of the soloist rose above the chanting.

Niniyio mekintoki ajo enkerai

Call me a child no longer dear mother

Tejoki olowuaru keru onya ilmuran

*Call me the fierce lions who attacks
the warriors*

Neilo olowuaru olutu osinoni

*There is a lion crawling stealthily
through the bush*

Oloya enker nalepo neya esupen.

*The one that steals the ewe and the
lamb*

Aeoyeeee!

Aeoyeeee!

“*Hoyehoyiayio heoyiaaa!*” thundered the young men and with that began the long steady march to the manyatta.

Back in the manyatta, expectation had built up to a frenzy. Their approach was announced by the blare of the great kudu horn. Suddenly, they bustled into the village, their flags tied on herding sticks flapping tardily in the breeze. They marched in a circle around the village three times. It was already overrun with people. Everyone wished the borders of the village were extended. The women were too overcome with emotion. Most of them burst into tears of joy at the sight of their sons arrayed in their eunoto best.

The young men went on singing for hours. Lemuta vigorously swung his pigtailed capped with two ivory carvings as if spurred on by the knowledge that he was doing it for the last time. After a while, they dispersed and he went to eat meat. As he walked past knots of women, Lemuta looked around for Nemuta but she was nowhere to be seen. He entered his mother’s hut and removed a piece of rump steak above the fireplace. He sliced it into small pieces and began to eat. Through the open door, he could clearly see the old men who stood next to the huts chewing on the softest tenderloin steaks.

Unbeknown to Lemuta, the old men were casting furtive glances at him. Ever so slowly, like dark clouds gathering to unleash lightning and thunder, tens of muscular men had joined them and surrounded the hut. But he took no notice of it. He chased the meal down with milk and placed the cup down. He was in a relaxed mood before the second round of the singing started. Then his mind wandered to Nemuta. Why didn’t she come to see him dance? But she had assured him that she would become no one else’s wife but his. As soon as the ceremony was over, he would go for her. In good spirits, he reared up to his feet and stepped out of the hut.

Hardly had he come out when they grabbed him. He fought to free himself with might and main. The tens of men had formed an unbreachable wall around him. In a split second, he knew that they only had one mission which was to crown him the Olororu Enkeene of his age-group. This was the last of the ceremonies to be

performed before the young men would be shorn of their flowing hair and baptized into junior elders. Oloru Enkeene had to be someone without defect but no one ever wanted to become one because the bearer of the position was also the man on whose shoulders would be heaped the sins of his age group. Lemuta wondered just what had made them to settle on such a wretched man as he.

His mother was drawn to the commotion and inched closer to her hut to investigate. She was inconsolable when she realized what was happening. She wept bitterly, flailing her arms in despair. Her cries bolstered him. With Samsonian rage, Lemuta gathered the last reserves of his strength and summersaulted backward into the air landing safely behind his adversaries' backs. The next thing they saw was the soles of his feet as he scaled the thorny fence reinforced with Mauritius Thorns. The elders gave up and retreated to the shade of a nearby strangler fig to discuss their next target.

Two kilometres away, Nemuta was a nervous wreck. She had been left to do the milking while everyone trooped to the festivities. She couldn't concentrate on one thing for long. She hurriedly separated the calves from their mothers. There was a jug of milk in the ladle but she felt no appetite. Instead, she entered their tiny bedroom and changed into a garment made from a bright red floral fabric. On her neck, she wore a silver brooch set with rosy Taveta rubies.

As she preened herself in a small piece of a broken mirror, she heard the bleat of a sheep. She craned her neck out and saw her younger brother Saidimu pushing the animals into the pen. Before she was done the boy came. She poured some milk for him before she bade goodbye to him.

She made her way to the manyatta and could barely fit in the compound. What a large gathering of people! It was as if the whole of Maasailand had camped there in that small compound. The singing of the warriors, the clatter of knobkerries against sheaths as they jumped into the air in the adumu dance and the voices of excited women combined in a soothing symphony. She jostled her way through the crowd wanting to cast her eyes on the love of her life. Suddenly, there was a commotion. She caught site of Lemuta wrestling to set himself free. Her heart missed a beat when he saw him break free and leap over the hedge.

When darkness stole over the plains and she realized she was powerless to do anything, Lemuta's mother went to her hut and cried herself to sleep. However,

Nemuta followed her lover into the jungle. His footprints led her through thick forests and valleys. Undaunted, she followed his trail on the damp earth for two days.

On the third day, an exhausted Lemuta was bent down to drink water from a brook when the scrunch of dead leaves startled him. He rose up and his eyes immediately widened with wonder.

“I... am I imagining things?” he asked with a dry voice.

“I followed you since the day you escaped,” answered Nemuta, her ample frame filling the space between two trees making her resemble an apparition. They walked toward each other and locked into a tight, lingering embrace. “Let us go back to the village,” she said naively after she had had enough of his kisses.

He stared at her in disbelief, “Were you sent to lure me back to the elders?” “No,” she said hesitantly, “I mean... they must have chosen someone else it being the eve of the shaving ceremony. Go and have your hair shorn then bring the heifer to my father.” But he could not bring himself to step foot in that home again.

“Let us elope to Kajiado town. I will shave my hair in a barber shop,” he said holding her hand and pulling her out of the grove.

Notes

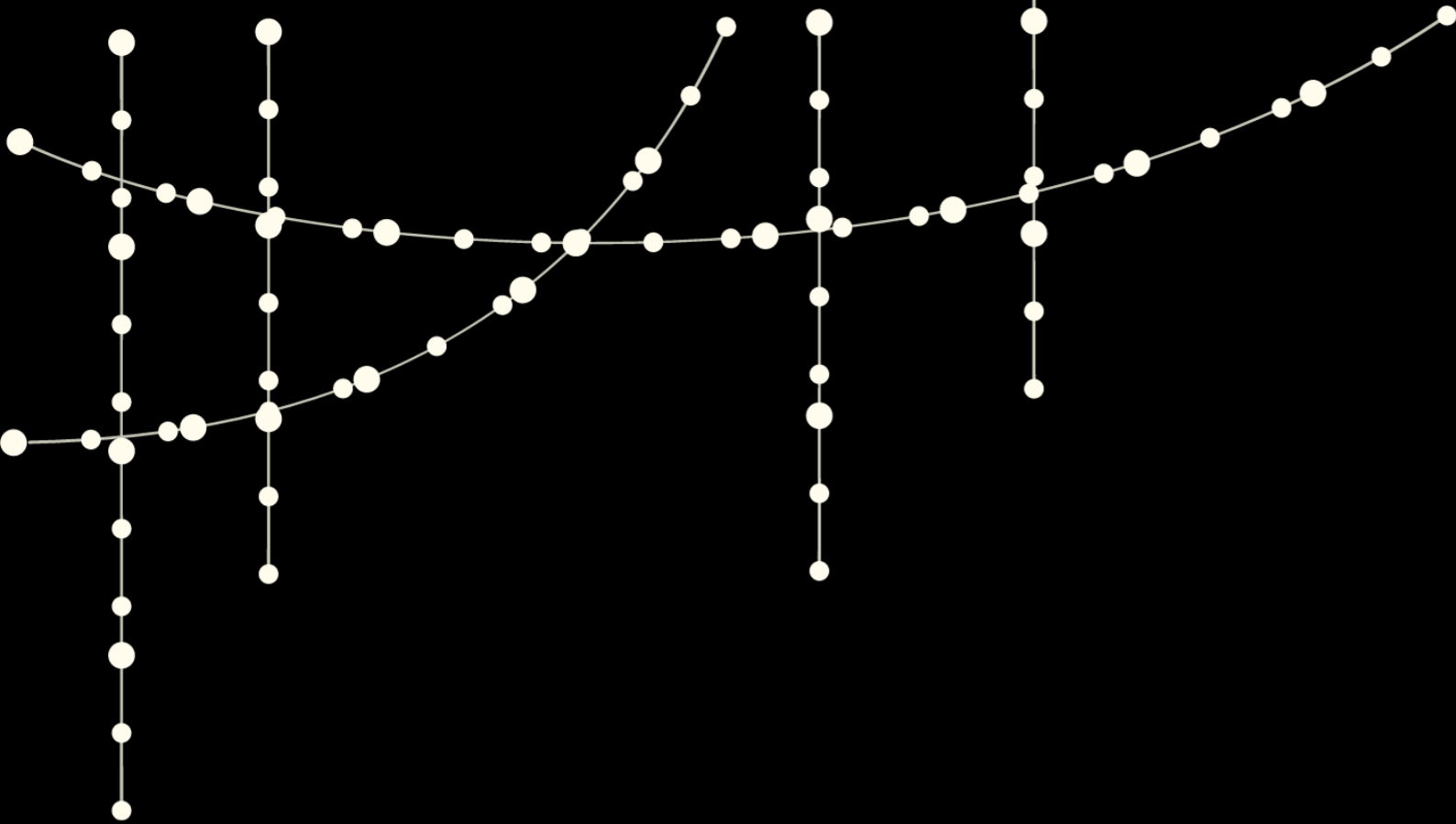
Eunoto – The Maasai ceremony in which warriors transition to junior elders.

Oloboru Enkeene – A traditional leader of an age-group among the Maasai people.

Adumu – A warrior dance that involves jumping into the air severally.

Esonkoyo – A small green plant which gives a strong scent used by warriors as perfume.

Manyatta – The traditional settlement of the Maasai people



Part III: Wish Upon the Stars

“Whatever you are looking for is also looking for you. You see, don't only look. Be available and ready when it shows up.”

– Sahndra Fon Dufe

Every Christmas

Damilola Olowe | Fiction

Every Christmas ends with a pot of steaming Jollof rice and chicken laps or so I thought, until I travelled down to Auntie Yinka's in Osogbo, Osun State last year. My braids were fresh from the salon, swinging and bouncing left and right, long and elegant with a rich lush kind of black. My fair skin was glowing extra fine from the skin essentials cream I had ordered from Oriflame.

When I arrived at my auntie's place, my cousins circled me like hungry sharks, thirsty to see what 'Oyinbo Pepe' had brought them. See, my love language for others is giving gifts and being generous for a living, so children like me loads. Rich woman that can spend, haha. The 'Oyinbo pepe' my cousins and niece said had alerted the neighbors and soon the compound was filled with laughter and surprised expressions. I am a black woman with no ounce of western gene in me, but my light skin complexion makes people assume I am biracial, Jamaican or a Senegalese woman.

"Where's my own?"

"Auntie, what of me?"

"Show us, please." I laughed at their childish tantrums and lowered my red Ghana-must-go bag for them. Plantain chips, Minimie Chinchin, Nutri-milk, sweets, Oreos biscuit and coconut bread tumbled out of my bag. The children jumped in the air, screaming my name in frenzied excitement as they happily hugged their gifts to their chest.

I greeted the neighbors, waved and thanked them for their warm welcome. One of them, whom I would later find out to be Mama Rukayat sneered, "So Oyinbo, where did you come from? You speak so much like us, have you been here for long?" "No ma, I'm actually Nigerian," I laughed in courtesy. My niece, Midun, as if sensing my discomfort, tugged my index finger and drew imaginary lines on my left palm. "You're Nigerian? Ah, it's either you're lying or you bleached your skin like those Instagram girls."

"I'm not..." It was at this exact moment my auntie poked my head outside her apartment, rescuing me from my assailant. Auntie Yinka is my sister, but only from

my father's side. She is tall like me but dark skinned and ten years older.

"You're already back? Why didn't you come in? I was in the laundry room, so I didn't hear you coming in."

I knelt down to greet her, "I was just about to enter, ma." I dusted my clothes and stood up, taking in the house structure as she led the way.

I had never been to her house before because they usually came to ours during the festive period. My family has been hosting Christmas dinner for thirteen years now, but because my aunty had taken in, she decided not to travel. Her house is cozy, with bright baby blue curtains and a sky-blue sofa. There's a large dolphin teddy bear on the couch, which I assume belongs to Inumidun. The living room is spacious and the rugs are soft like dummy plants. The walls are white and she has flower pots everywhere and lots of diffusers.

"When I didn't see Midun and the others, I knew something was up," she strides to the kitchen and brought back a glass of water.

"Thank you, ma. You didn't have to with your condition."

"I'm pregnant, Pelumi, not sick." We shared a laugh.

"Mummy can I watch Cocomelon with Oyinbo on my iPad?"

Aunty Yinka gives her a stare, "She's the reason we uninstalled the television. Every day, shark dududududu." I laugh and watch my niece in amusement, as she mouths the song and shakes her butt in sync. She's brown skinned, with pearly white teeth and a ponytail. Her pink dress says, 'Team Barbie.' Aunty Yinka yawns and sit on the sofa, only after she has propped her back with a fluffy pillow. "I'm joking, the current last week blew something inside the television. My husband took it out for repairs."

I let her rest and took my bag inside. Midun pokes her head in, "Mummy gave me the iPad." She smiles and I swoon a bit, immediately wishing for a cute daughter like her. I shook my head and mouth 'priorities' to myself. We watch baby shark for hours, munching on some cheese balls until we both fell asleep and Aunty Yinka had to wake us up for dinner.

Aunty Yinka ordered Chinese rice and fried beef for dinner. I swallow hot spit as I wait for her to say grace, even the meat was calling my name.

We finish the grace and bow slightly, "Where's uncle Thomas?"

"He traveled to his hometown this morning. He might be there until Christmas. His mother is sick."

“Oh! May God heal her in Jesus’ name.”

“Amen, thank you, dear. Let’s eat before the food gets cold.”

We settle into the food, biting and chewing. The rice disappearing quickly from my plate from how succulent and palatable it is.

“Midun? Will you be a good girl and get some juice for mummy?” Aunt Yinka says. Midun gets down from the dinner table and walks towards the fridge.

I stare after her, smiling, “Will she reach?”

“Don’t mind me. She likes doing it, just wait and see.” I chuckled at that, as Midun pulls out her baby chair towards the fridge, bouncing back with a five alive carton in both hands.

“She’s six, right?”

“Five,” my sister corrects.

“Mhmmm, cute! So, how many people are coming on Christmas?”

“Like twenty. Honestly, I don’t think I can survive being around many people right now, but you know how people are.”

“Aunt Yinka, it’s the quality of the people around us that matters. Christmas is all about showing love, right?”

She stares at me in surprise, before bursting into laughter, holding her back. “When did you get so wise, Pelumi?”

“Ever since I started reading.”

“Hmm, so any boyfriend or boyfriends?” she flicks her eyebrows at me, with a mischievous glint in her eyes.

I cover my mouth in embarrassment, “You’re not supposed to ask that, aunt Yinka. You’re not even a Gen Z.”

“So? I need to know, give me details. Gist me or how do you people say it?” I laugh and drink the last drop of my juice. Midun is playing with her food and I’m tempted to spoon her meat in my mouth.

“There’s someone I’m talking to.” She moves closer in interest, resting her chin on her palm and I laugh some more. “No, it’s not like that, we met a month ago on campus. He’s so handsome, dark skinned, dreamy and plays basketball.”

“You like better thing,” Aunt Yinka interjects in pidgin.

I give her a side-eye, “Who doesn’t?”

“Ehn, tell me about this boy.”

“We talk sometimes, that’s it. I like him a lot, though.”

“But?”

“He makes me feel special but I’m not sure he wants to commit. Aunty Yinka, do you know how many girls fawn over him?” I ask incredulously.

“So?”

“So, I’m stepping back. If he wants me, then let him do some work. I won’t throw myself at him, you know that.”

“Nobody is asking you to throw anything but use your head, Pelumi. Do you like this boy or not?”

“I do.” I scowl, crossing my hands.

“Does he excuse other people to talk to you?”

“Maybe, but not every time...”

“Then show him what he stands to lose.”

She’s caught my attention, I sit up straighter and wait for her to remove Inumidun’s plate, before dabbing her chin with a napkin. When she finished, I raise my brows, “How?”

“Have you been to his games before?”

“Only when he invites me.”

“Then go, but this time with another boy. Maybe someone else that actually likes you.”

“Isn’t that wickedness, playing them?”

She gives me a glare, “Use what you have to get what you want. Men can be slow sometimes, so make him jealous. If he isn’t bothered, at least you can have your answers that he’s not into you.”

“Ugh!”

She rubs my arm, “You’re a total package, don’t worry. He’s yours.”

I fight back a smile, “Thank you, aunty.”

“You really like this boy, it shows on your face.” I looked away, suddenly shy.

“Aww.” My aunty coos.

“Aunty, please stop.”

“Never, never ever,” she sings and I pack our plates, running off to the kitchen.

Friday, Christmas Day, the living room is a mess. The tree light is glowing blue, red and green colors, warm and cheery. Uncle Yomi has made tea for everyone to keep us all warm. There is so much noise bustling in and out of the house, someone took someone’s toothpaste, someone did not flush, someone needs slippers, someone

needs peace and quiet, is the food not ready yet? Just so many complaints already in the morning of Christmas. Children are everywhere, running and shooting water guns. I try my best to organize them and give them a useful distraction, but they are determined at turning the house upside down. Midun and two girls are playing Powerpuff Girls while the boys are diving from the bullet of ‘ice and water police’ game.

Aunty Yinka sights me and I could see the instant relief in her eyes. “Pelumi, please come to the kitchen. I think I’m losing my mind,” she tugs my arm before I could even object or wish her a merry Christmas or even good morning. She shows me some cabbage to dice, “The caterers were supposed to be here by five am. I said twenty people, Pelumi, twenty. I have more than that and some people are still on their way.” Aunty Christiana and her son, Bayo, and Aunty Evelyn are also in the kitchen. I wave to Bayo and greet my two aunties. We start cutting and cooking, mixing this and that together until Aunty Sola came in, with her rich accent and Instagram followers on live. She’s streaming all of us online, introducing everyone, with a kiss to the cheek (which we never do by the way) but it’s Christmas so we let it slide.

“What are you people cooking? Let me and Pelumi do it. I have my secret ingredients to spice things up.”

Aunty Yinka claps her back and smiles for the first time since I saw her, “It’s a lot of food, are you sure?”

“What? Please. I’m an influencer for a reason. Bayo, go and call your twin sister.”

“Stella can’t help, Aunty. She has menstrual cramps.”

“Oh! Let me check on her then. I trust you, Sola. I will call the caterer again.” Aunty Yinka waddles off.

Aunty Sola turns to me, “What are you waiting for? Chop chop!” I continue to dice the vegetables.

Aunty Evelyn and Aunty Christiana has moved outside to fry the chicken there, to give Aunty Sola more space. “So, the first thing to do when making party Jollof is pour your onions inside hot groundnut oil,” Aunty Sola is saying to her phone, as her followers fill her screen with comment and likes. Aunty Sola is halfway through with the Jollof rice when the caterers come in. “Pelumi, pass me the Ata rodo, ‘red pepper’ on the cabinet.” I do and go back to frying plantain with Bayo. Bayo has been gisting me for the past hour about his ex-girlfriend, who he’s not over

yet. I listen to him rant since we are in the same age group, though I'm five months older than the twins.

"You can't believe it. I let her talk down on me and treat me anyhow because I love her. She even called me the b-word in front of her friends." Love, that's new, I thought.

"What's the B-word?" Aunty Sola faces us, still filming on Instagram.

Bayo and I share a look. I quickly replied, "It means Banana head."

"But Bayo does not have a banana head, if anything orange, Abi?" she asks her fans.

"It's what they say now." I glance at her screen and see laughing emojis, with hashtag B-word."

We continued cooking as Aunty Sola does not want to hand over to the caterers, who want to make their money for their own family dinner. Aunty Veronica, our big mummy, says the salt and Maggi is not enough, the caterers say the sauce's consistency is too thin. Aunty Christianah and Aunty Evelyn say the food is not spicy enough, the stew is undercooked, the fish too tender. Aunty Yinka is not in the kitchen, so they all start adding this one and that one, tasting it, putting something else, and another, squeezing their face in distaste, claiming to be the better cook. I'm at a corner with Bayo, watching them. I did not understand their arguments in anyway, Aunty Yinka hired caterers for this exact thing. Bayo gets tired and throws his arms in the air, "Man, I'm over this. Want to come, Pelumi? I brought skittles." "One of us has to stay, but keep them for me oh." He laughs, I yell his name, "Bayo, I'm serious, keep some for me. You know those are my favorites." "Okay, okay. Damn, you're feisty."

By nine 'O clock, it is a different drama. All the bathrooms are occupied. I knock on Aunty Yinka's door, and she's on her bed crying. "Oh my God, what happened? Are you okay? Is it the baby?" I fawn over her, worried.

"No no," she cleans her face. "It's just different, Thomas isn't here, the adults won't coordinate themselves. I know I should be excited that they came out of love but it's still overwhelming. My hormones are killing me, I can't believe I just cried because of them." I did not know what it felt like to be pregnant, so I give my sister a hug and ran a bathe for her.

Midun is styled by Aunty Dara, elegant red dress with a halter neck, a gold scarf, sunglasses, gloves and a suede green bag. Aunty Dara has her own fashion line, Aunty Yinka used to work there in her teenage years, but now the business has grown

to international levels. I dress in a simple kaftan with embroidery and dab my face in light makeup. Aunty Dara sees me and flashes a camera in my face, “Will add it to my collection,” she winks and slaps my butt.

At ten thirty, my four aunts have not stepped out from the kitchen. I go over to check on them but noticed the door is locked. I knock and hear hush whispers, “What do you want?” Aunty Sola’s voice call out to me.

“Is the food ready?”

The answer comes out strained, “No.” Something tells me to wait, so I use the dining center door to enter and I gasp as Jollof rice trailed from the gas cooker to the center of the kitchen.

“How? What happened in here?”

Aunty Veronica points to them, “They were arguing about the spice. One thing led to another, and the pot dropped.”

All I could think of was, “What are we going to eat for Christmas?”

The caterers are standing at one side, trying not to laugh as they shred the chicken to make kebab. I could hear the voice of the DJ from outside, booming through the speakers.

I leave the kitchen in silence. Aunty Sola says, “she will kill me if I tell anyone,” but I pretend I did not hear her. They eventually came out and kept a padlock on the door. I could feel their eyes burning holes through my skin, anytime I faced Aunty Yinka. I avoid looking at any of them in the eye as we sang Christmas carol songs together as a family. We played games, that ‘name of name’ one, you know. We used a Christmas theme for the place, thing and animals. It was fun and Midun really enjoyed it. We danced and did our Christmas rendition of everything we were thankful for throughout the year. I spoke about the quiz and debate award I won and family. Aunty Yinka was grateful for her husband, Inumidun, her makeup business and for the baby coming. Everyone had something to say as we toasted to some red wine, the children with fruit juice instead. We shared our gift for each other. I got human hair, twenty dollars, a spa voucher and tampons.

The atmosphere of the party dimmed when Aunty Yinka asked them to dish the food. The kebab came in, looking sumptuous and mouthwatering but only the kebab, nothing else. “Where is the rice?” she asks and I fiddle with my wrist bangles, munching on my chicken kebab.

“There is no rice,” big mummy says.

“Is this a prank?” Aunt Yinka laughs and the rest of the family joins in laughing along. The caterer brings in garri, sugar, groundnut and some water, then distribute them in front of us.

“Why is there no rice?”

“There was an accident in the kitchen.”

Aunt Yinka walks to her kitchen and screams, everyone walks towards it as well.

“What happened in here?”

“Sola said she was a better cook, the two did not agree. They were fighting over the camera Sola shot in their face, that’s when they collided with the pot,” big mummy explains.

“Mummy, I don’t want garri, I want rice,” Midun says.

We all return back to our seat, eating the kebab with a sour mood. Some of my uncles began to drink the garri and because I was angry, I did the same, and someone else did as well. We spent our afternoon chewing groundnut, garri and kebab, in the place of Christmas Jollof rice. Aunt Yinka did not drink the garri because of her baby but just as we were about to call it a day, Aunt Yinka’s husband came in with a large cake which we all devoured in no time.

The day was such a whirlwind that I needed to tell someone, so I looked at Aunt Yinka and then grabbed my phone. I called Leke, the boy I like. “How is your Christmas going?”

“Really good, why?”

“Mine is a long story.”

“Really? I would love to hear it if you don’t mind.”

Though I didn’t eat rice, I now have a boyfriend thanks to my experience.

Christmas in the Manger of Dreams

Joshua Idowu Omidire | Poetry

I was the kid who made a habit of
fetching water from empty rivers.

I know how earth cracks
when the sky never weeps.

wise men know they
have to be buried before they grow –
common knowledge
in the country of seeds...
so, I buried myself in the grave of my dreams.

I dreamt rice & chicken
I dreamt firecrackers & fireworks
I dreamt adulthood & freedom

I dreamt of making castles & boxes
adorning my body in new attires
and playing with plastic mother hen
laying eggs and transforming them into live chicks.

my dreams were big but my hands were small,
so, I sat in the sand and turned my hands into a womb
where I moulded my rice & chicken...

my fireworks. my new clothes.
my adulthood. my freedom.
my castles. my boxes. my hen & chicks.

and wait for December
to help me daub them in living hues.

mother steps into my dreams and tells me of kids
who never wait for the Christmas of things
to make living souls of their dreams, because –
it's always Christmas in the manger of dreams.

Palmwine Promises

Bunmi Ańjóláolúwa Adaramola | Fiction

“Tell me about the Goo Goo festival, Grandpa!” my five-year-old son, Olúwábámiró, climbs onto his grandfather’s lap, his little legs wiggling excitedly. I smile softly, shaking my head at whatever antics he’s up to again as I trudge over to the kitchen. My parents had come over to Jímí and I’s place in their usual fashion during this time of the year and Bámiró was the most excited one out of the three of us. Every December, my parents rotated spending a week with each of their four children—my three older brothers and I—during the festivities. And my son loved that. I’d never experienced my parents in the way he enjoyed them, and while it made me sad for the little girl who constantly craved deep-seated parental affection, I was happy that my son could experience all of those things and more.

The holidays for me as a child were littered with church activities and family commitments. Growing up in what I’d always described as a largely illiberal setting, where basic forms of self-expression constituted rebellion, my family had no care for festivities and traditions. While both my parents had grown up in rural communities before moving down to Lagos for school and enjoyed communal celebrations, they’d also seen the horrors and unpleasant realities it boasted of and vowed to give their children a very sequestered upbringing. And so, we’d spend most parts of any national holiday cocooned in the church. And on days we were not in the church, we were tending to my uncles and aunt whenever they forcefully came visiting “just to greet us,” my mother and I slaving away in the kitchen tending to their unnaturally ostentatious needs. I’d always gone back to school jealous of classmates who had grandiose tales about the Christmas holidays and I could never relate to stories about large family sleepovers, playful quarrels with cousins and the passive-aggressive conversations that flowed at the dining table every day.

The holidays were usually quiet and uneventful, with no intentional festive meals. It had never been a pleasant experience for me until I’d chosen to rebel that night and stumbled into Jímí. He changed everything.

Jìmí and I had met at the Palmwine Festival down in Muri Okunola Park on Christmas Eve. I'd been a naive twenty-one-year-old back then, fresh out of Covenant University with little to no foreknowledge about boys, sex and relationships. I'd grown up extremely sheltered, seeing life through rose-coloured glasses and having a very romantic understanding of how the world operated. And with Bólájí returning to Nigeria for the first time after three years in Durham studying law, we'd made the rebellious decision to foray into the world of adulthood, starting with a concert that ended so late in the night that we knew our parents would disapprove of. None of that mattered to us—the thrill of venturing into the unknown for the first time was greater than our fear of disappointing our parents. It was Christmas in Lagos after all, a season of unbridled passion and wild romance, even if only for a short season. And it was this confidence I'd worn when I'd boldly told my parents that Bólájí and I were going out for a late dinner, after which I'd spend the night with her.

Palmwine Festival was arguably the biggest Christmas event tailored towards our generation. It embodied everything about Christmas—from the statuesque white Christmas tree mounted in the centre of the park, with large rose gold and silver orbs and ornaments, to the multi-coloured lights, bunting littered all over the park and the low hums of an AfroPop version of *Joy to the World*. I'd spent all of my Christmas locked up in my room at home or on campus because I didn't want to come home, hoping and praying there'd be a time I would experience the beauty that was the Palmwine Festival. And being there that first time, everything about it felt like what Christmas was about. The inner child excitement that it evoked forced anyone to experience the season's euphoria, whether they wanted to or not. Ushers dressed as elves with their red fluffy Santa hats made me giddy with excitement, feeding the nostalgia-starved parts of me. And while we stood in line at the ticketer waiting to be wrist banded, with Bólájí chatting away about seeing an artiste she'd spent the better part of the year listening to, my eyes roved around the space, until they landed on him.

He seemed both out of place and comfortable in his own skin, a large contrast to the types of people who attended these festivals. His eyes were the first thing I noticed, a deep caramel shade that I couldn't help but become enraptured by. He had all the tells of an *IJGB* – an I just got back, a term jokingly used to describe the incessant influx of Nigerians based abroad returning home for the holidays. Wearing a tie-dyed oversized short-sleeved shirt with a pair of rimless sunglasses deftly

tucked in the crook of his shirt over ripped baggy jeans and Converse, he easily exuded the theme of the festival we stood in. He wore a curious type of intensity that scared and thrilled me so much that the little extroverted part of me wanted to march over to where he stood on the far corner of the field and demand a conversation with him. And when he lifted his mouth in a playful smirk, winking back at me before turning down to his phone, I almost did. *God help me I almost did.*

“If you had to choose only one artist here tonight to listen to forever, who would it be?” A velvety voice had called out from behind me, causing shivers to run down my spine. It was him. This was the singular thought on my mind the moment I turned and locked eyes with him.

“That’s an unfair choice you’ve given me if you think about it,” my voice had a lilt to it, slightly teasing and partly serious because of the varying emotions that enveloped me.

Jìmí had stormed into my life with eyes shrouded in intrigue and a bourgeoisie accent indicative of his privileged background and I’d fallen hard. Jìmí was different from my parent's typical expectations for who I should be dating—he could be extroverted when he wanted to be, crass when he needed to be and his intelligence surpassed being merely book smart. But right in the middle of this, everything about him fit perfectly with who I was. He was everything my romantically jaded heart wanted, upending everything I thought I knew about life and love. It was obvious from the way we held each other’s attention in rapt conversation just before the festival started.

We wandered the park aimlessly, finally settling on a makeshift seating area beside one of the many mobile palmwine trucks, talking and laughing about anything and everything. For the first time since finishing uni, it felt like my soul had easily found its resting place. As we danced to RayFayò’s Afro version of “Mary Did You Know,” Jìmí’s arms wrapped around me from behind, repeating the lyrics with his whiskey-like baritone softly in my ear, I never wanted him to let go. So, when it began to rain heavily, cutting the music festival short, and Jìmí grabbed my hand in my attempt to run out with Bólájí’s eyes begging me to stay, I did. No matter how hard the rain had poured down on us, it never deterred the intensity of our conversation. We’d spoken about anything and everything until they were chasing us out of the park in an attempt to close down. When the sun came up, neither of us wanted to let go, so we didn’t.

“Tell me this makes sense,” he’d whispered against my ear as he pulled back to watch my expression. In less than 24 hours since I’d come to know him, I realised he did that a lot. He watched and stared, doing it so frequently that it no longer made me self-conscious. If anything, it made me elated—that he cared enough to want to watch me every second. “Tell me I’m not the only one feeling this, that this is as real for you as it is for me, Íre,” I loved how he was the only person to this day who adopted an unusual connotation of my name, calling me Íre where almost everyone called me Mo.

And when we’d finally decided to begrudgingly part ways after he dropped me off at Bólájí’s, we’d exchanged contacts and planned outings for the duration of his stay in Lagos for the holidays. We’d turned Christmas Eve into a love language, easily forming a tradition around that date. Every year—especially since he had now officially moved back to the country—we would make a trip out to the place it all started. We’d spend the week before attending theatre performances down in Terrakulture before ending the week with the Christmas Eve Palmwine Festival. He proposed on Christmas Eve three years after we’d been dating and then we got married the next Christmas Eve. There was something utterly beautiful about declaring our love for each other on the cusp of the most celebrated holiday in the world.

Daddy laughs heartily at Bámiró’s words, the sound full and relaxed, drawing me back into the present. I pause washing the oranges I’m about to slice up for him to take in the scene in front of me. I didn’t think I’d hear Daddy laugh as often as he did every time he stepped into my house. It was easy to conclude that it was the Bámiró effect. My son had a way of lighting up every room he walked into and leaving rays of happiness in the hearts of everyone he encountered.

“You mean the Egungun festival, *eh?*” Daddy asks, wrapping his arm around Bámiró’s back as he settles him on his right thigh.

Bámiró giggles, “Yes, Grandpa! That’s what I said. GuGu festival!”

“This your son and my husband *sha*,” Mummy laughs as she walks out from the guest room, moving towards the kitchen sink and running the tap.

I laugh, “Well, Daddy loves telling the story almost as much as BamBam loves hearing it. A match made in Lagos if you ask me.”

“Are you not supposed to be getting ready to head out with your husband *sef?*” Mummy raises a suspicious eyebrow at me before she turns towards the fridge to

remove the pepper mix she had blended yesterday morning. Even though she wasn't intentional about celebrating the holiday, the traditional parts seeped out of her subconsciously, that for the past twenty-nine years since I'd known her, she always made jollof rice and fried rice every Christmas Eve, to be eaten on Christmas day, though she didn't realise this.

"Mummy..." She knew the current state of things, yet, each year, she continued asking, hoping my answer would be different.

She eyes me knowingly, "Where is Olujímí, Modésíre?" Mummy's eyes are knowing, sharp, and able to see the growing cracks in my marriage.

"You know he'd be here if he could..." I try to cover up for him, but I know she sees right through me. It's obvious from how I constantly fidget, picking up and dropping the knife.

She sighs as she walks away from the sink. "This can't keep going on, Mo. It's not fair to you, it's not fair to Bámiró. Can't he work from home? In fact, work should not even be the thing on his mind now—it's Christmas for God's sake, Mo!"

The knife in my hand clanks noisily against the tiled floor as I grab the edges of the kitchen counter, hands shaking violently. "Mummy, please!" The hitch in my voice draws Daddy from the story he was telling in the background, bringing Bámiró's confused attention back to me. I hated it when she did this. Even though a deeper part of me knew she was worried, I didn't like her reminding me how much things had changed since that first festival.

My first experience down at the Palmwine Festival had solidified Christmas as a season for love, evoking feelings of nostalgia whenever we approached the season, feelings I never got to experience as a child due to the lack of holiday celebrations. Because of this, Jímí had been intentional about creating traditions and establishing family rituals when we eventually got married. Armed with concerted effort and sheer determination, the holidays slowly became a thing of comfort in our home. In the first week of November during the first year of our marriage, Jímí had scoured Lagos in search of an appropriate Christmas tree. I'd been heavily pregnant at the time, and been in a spree of moaning bitterly about experiencing yet another era of loneliness during the holidays. Jímí had regaled me with tales of the holidays he'd experienced with his family as a little boy which he eventually replicated while he was in uni, and I wanted the full experience.

For the first time, I'd been intentional about putting in the effort to make our

home as lively as I wanted it to be, especially during this time of the year, but my pregnancy and the lethargy that came with it forced me to stop. But that year, Jìmí had come home with a rare white Christmas tree—one difficult to obtain in Lagos—intent on replicating the massive one that stood in the centre of Muri Okunola Park every year during the festival. He'd made a spread of fake snow made from cotton wool, mounting the tree on top of it and littered the tree with red, rose gold and silver ornaments and decorations. It made me love him more and wear an obsession with the life we were slowly building for ourselves. And it was in this atmosphere that Bámiró was born into.

We'd continued the tradition of lighting up the interior and exterior of our home, making it cosy and warm to reflect the holiday mood and emotion each year. At the start of December, we would wake to the quiet hums of orchestra accompaniments of carefully selected Christmas tunes, ending most nights—whenever we could get out of work early—with a cheesy hallmark romance set around the holidays. We'd take Bámiró to the Christmas Wonderland down in Lagos Island days before Christmas, mingling with the elves and faux Santa with joy. And when we'd safely tucked Bámiró into bed at the end of the day, patting ourselves on the back of yet another memorable holiday experience, Jìmí and I spent the rest of the night in each other's arms sharing memories from our annual Palmwine Festival sojourn.

Our favourite joint memory had been sharing our first kiss under the mistletoe that stood at the arches of the entrance of the park that night, Ariana Grande's *Santa Tell Me* bellowing loudly from the speakers of a passing car. I'd always told him how much that night confirmed so many things about my belief in love and romance, searching the innermost parts of my desires and bringing them to the forefront. It ultimately changed a lot of things about me, which was why I held that experience on a high enough pedestal. It was why Jìmí had created what we'd jokingly referred to as the *Palmwine Promise*—that we'd attend the annual end-of-the-year Palmwine Festival every year while we were married.

It had been three years since he began breaking his promise. And consequently, he'd been breaking all of the other promises since then, forcing us to eliminate our newly curated rituals. The house no longer felt as warm, I no longer looked forward to the nostalgia and giddiness that came with the festive season. Perhaps it was the stress and busyness that came with being new parents while balancing full-time careers or

maybe it was simply disinterest and the accumulation of new responsibilities. Whatever it was, the magic of Christmas and the evocation of love I always felt during the period no longer seemed to exist. Now, it was as though Jìmí and I were simply going through the motions and the pretence of happiness. We'd stopped getting trees, decorating the house, cooking large meals and going to the festival on Christmas Eve, rather opting to simply go to church—on days we remembered—and call it a day. Soon enough, we'd easily turned into my parents and life as I thought I knew it drifted into what I'd suffered through during childhood.

“È kú’ròlẹ̀ Sir. Good evening, Ma,” Jìmí’s voice rings loudly throughout the living room and kitchen, halting my mother and I’s raised voices and Bámiró’s little giggles and hums of appreciation as my father excites him with tales. I try not to turn. Jìmí had always been highly perceptive, able to pinpoint whatever emotion he could see on my face before I could even recognise it. And I knew that whatever he would see on my face this evening had the potential to throw us into another fit of arguments.

“Hi, Daddy!” Bámiró bellows excitedly, jumping from my father’s lap and into my husband’s arms. “Grandpa said you and mummy are going out soon.”

“Let me talk to your mummy real quick, boy wonder, okay?” Jìmí was an expert at that—deftly avoiding loaded questions.

“Hey, baby,” Jìmí’s voice is quiet and measured behind my back but still makes my heart race as hard as it did the first time I heard it.

“You promised, Jìmí,” my voice is quiet, but the sound of my heart breaking is the loudest thing in the room as I move around the kitchen, trying to keep my hands busy. This year was supposed to be special. It was the last year of our twenties and he’d promised me that it would be different. That we’d make the most out of the Christmas holidays, as a middle finger to the illusion of life being over at thirty. So, I’d planned a trailer load of activities in the week my parents were around, from mundane pre-Christmas games and meals with Bólájí and her husband and a Carol service at the Anglican church we normally attended, to pretending we were twenty-one again and partying all night out down in La Casa. Most importantly, we would start the week with our end-of-the-year ritual, returning to where *we* started—the Palmwine Festival.

He sighs as he turns me around in his arms, moving us deeper into the crook of the opened pantry and away from the prying arms of my family. “I know I’m late,

Íre, but I'm here. I'm here. I didn't think I would end up being that guy who was so sucked up by work and my career that I'd lose sight of you and our son. I never wanted to be that person, but somehow, I became that guy and I hate that. I hate that I've turned this season into something you no longer love with the intensity you once did. I know that nothing I say now would significantly change anything, but I'm asking for another chance. Let me prove how much you and this season mean to me. I love you. I love this life we're building. I know... I haven't done a good job of keeping my promises these past couple of years, but I want us to try again."

He pulls out two tickets from the breast pocket of his jacket, alongside a printed reservation for the Christmas Wonderland down in Lagos Island for the three of us tomorrow. While a part of me was elated that he remembered, another part was scared—scared that I'd be lulled into what was only a false sense of remorse from him, and I'd wake up the next day and things would be the same. But a part of me wanted to believe in the magic of the season and the love we'd curated for ourselves because of it.

"Let's go to Palmwine Fest."

Next Year

Yinka Parm | Poetry

This year is slowly creeping to an unfulfilled and eventless end.
The last few days of the year are looming over like a threatening omen.
Next year, I have my new year's resolutions stored in my heart, like a precious gem.
Next year, I wonder why I feel butterflies in my stomach,
Because it's still the same resolutions I had about five years ago...

Next year, I say to myself, will be different,
I am older and wiser now, the burning fire within me
Has scorched any lingering doubts.
Next year, I am taking control of my path, and my destiny.
I am no longer the woman whose voice was soundless,
The woman too frightened to pursue her soaring dreams,
The woman who felt everybody else was better than her,
The woman who lacked confidence even at the sound of her voice.

Next year, I will smile as I ruminate on all the adventures still awaiting me,
The world is your oyster, they say, well how very true that saying is.
My imagination is going to explore the faraway lands I have only read about in print,
And gorge myself with delicious mouth-watering cuisines I've only dreamt about.
I want to live my life for the very first time for myself...
And not carry the burden, guilt, or shame
Of being a daughter, a sister, a wife, or a mother.

Next year, my resolutions will emerge and rise like a phoenix,
No dark clouds will cast a shadow on my five-year reflections.
The time has finally come for me to celebrate the wonders of this life.
Life is too short, they say, well how very true that saying is,
Life is for the living, not when you're dead and buried six feet under.
Life is to be celebrated, let the festivities and dancing start now.

Next year, my resolutions are set in stone,
I will not change my mind,
I will not put my dreams on stand-by,
I will not fade into the background like a wallpaper.
I will not nod my head silently even though I am raging to shake my head,
I will not allow anybody to tell me, to wait for another year...
I have waited and years have slipped by, years of being a wife and a mother,
both I have done very commendably,
Years of hard work and pain but wearing my contented mask very convincingly.

Next year, my resolutions will not be a figment of my imagination,
It has been for so long and I wonder if next year will be any different.
The doubts first creep in silently on the peripheries of my thoughts,
Snuffing out any breath of hope I may be desperately leaning on.
My mind has been held hostage for too long,
Shackled and bound in darkness, the rays of light too far to reach.

Next year, I am ready to soar and touch the sky.
Next year, my resolutions, five years delayed, will emerge,
To realise I can do anything I set my mind, heart, and soul to.
Next year will be the beginning of my adventure,
One day at a time, they say, well how very true that saying is,
Next year, my resolutions are to give wings to my dreams to soar higher,
Believe anything is possible with perseverance and continue to put my words down
as a storyteller.

A Reunion's Recipe

Temitope Omamegbe | Fiction

P^{art I}

I had a dream.

In the dream, there had been a crisis in the town and I had lost friends and family, young and old. Just as it seemed like all hope was lost and I had lost everyone dear to me, the crowd that had gathered around me as I grieved, parted. I found myself turning around and realizing that someone was at the other end of the parted crowd. I walked towards him slowly, still crying. By the time I stood before him, my sobs had died down enough for me to utter the words I held dear, “Are you alive? Are you waiting for me?”

I have never been a firm believer in dreams to the extent that I made decisions or choices based on them but this time around was different. The one I fondly called my Prince was someone I had thought was long dead, lost to the turmoil that I had escaped from. I had never dreamt about him since I left [insert town name]. My sister once said it was because of the trauma we had experienced and a way for our minds and hearts to heal but not knowing was equally traumatic.

“I am going back.”

“Where to?” I turned to my sister and glared at her. As usual, her eyes were glued to her phone and I felt like planting a slap on her face.

“You aren’t even listening. What do you care?” At that, Obehi looked up at me and smiled sheepishly as she slowly placed the phone on the center table.

“Sis, you have that scary look on your face again.”

“No, I don’t. I am expressionless.”

“Exactly. Sorry, I was distracted.”

“I said I am going back” I watched her cock her head, as she waited for me to continue. “Back to Idu’bugbe. I need to know for certain.”

“Because you had one dream?” Obehi smiled softly. “If you have to, I guess we can

go.”

“We?” I asked. “I thought you never wanted to return?”

“I can’t let you go alone and besides it would be nice to know how everyone is doing.” I understood her perfectly. For us, it was more than a trip back home. There was no way of knowing what we would meet or if anything was even left. The only way to know was to go home.

“Do you think that is wise?” My mother was pacing and my father was quiet. “We barely made it out alive and you want to return there because of a dream? Because of a man?”

“Not just any man, mama. You know that,” I frowned, “Haven’t you ever wondered what happened to Iye? Your mother? Or what happened to Elijah, or Kose?” I watched my mother start to shiver. The memories were not easy on any of us but time treated us kindly. “Once and for all. I need to close that chapter. I cannot go into another year without knowing.” I turned to my father, his eyes brimmed with tears, a vein popping on his forehead as he fought to hold them back.

Two weeks later, I was behind the wheel and an anxious Obehi stared out of the window at nothing in particular. Idu’bugbe had changed. A decade had gone by since the horrible events of that week that had changed the lives of many. There had been no warnings to the trouble that had been brewing. Gunfire and loud explosions rocked our surroundings, leaving us no choice but to run blind and try to escape in the dark of night.

Obehi and I rode in silence the minute we turned off the main highway. With each building we passed, the tension moved up a notch and fear tightened its hold on us. We saw no familiar faces that we could ask questions and only hoped that the answers we needed could be found at the main house if it still stood and if anyone was still there.

And it was. We turned the last corner and came face to face with the house of our childhood. “How?” Obehi asked. The question was directed at the fact that the house was freshly painted. Save from a side building in rubble, everything was pretty much the same, even the mango trees still held their ground. We got out and walked towards the house, cautiously minding our steps as we looked around at the familiar environment and trying to see if anyone was around. “Someone is peeping out of the window,” I stated. I had seen the curtains move and felt my heart skip a beat. We waited, half expecting total strangers to walk out to meet us and accuse us of

trespassing.

Instead, the familiar faces we longed for came running out of the house. Relief washed over me as Obehi ran into the arms of the first person to come running out of the house. “JESUS! God ooooo.” cries of joy rent the air as two more people came out. They were all here. Iye was alive. Elijah danced in circles around Obehi as she hugged our grandmother. Kose had a limp I did not remember her having but that did not stop her from squeezing herself in for the hug as well. I looked away from them and towards the person that had remained in the doorway.

My father’s brother stood there, shock and relief evident on his face as he started to cry. I remained rooted to the spot, overwhelmed by everything. They are all here. “Olosen,” he called out, his voice as deep as ever and shaky. “Uncle,” I finally managed to say and as though jolted out of our states, I found myself running into his arms just as he opened them up. There were tears all around and in no time, neighbours came calling. Brother Ambrose walked with a cane but his wife was as lively as ever. Ola came shrieking towards me and even though we had not been that friendly, our embrace was like that of long-time friends. Papa Imeh lumbered in as fast as his ageing legs could muster. Tears flowed freely all around, of joy, of relief, of happiness.

Uncle turned me around at one point, a serious look on his face. “Where is your father?” he asked. I smiled and that made him light up. “Oh, dear God, thank you!” he exclaimed.

Minutes later, Obehi and I were hosting video calls with our parents. My cheeks hurt from the constant smiling and my eyes were red from crying. In no time, as was our way, a familiar aroma filled the air. Food was soon being served as more people flocked in to see those who had returned home. It was one unifying front that no one could deny. The recipes have been passed down and even mum kept those she could remember close to her heart. She had always wished her mother was around to teach her more, and now that was possible.

Food had also been how I had met him. It had been what had attracted us to each other in secondary school. He, as the only boy in the food and nutrition class, and I, the granddaughter of the one woman that the town’s king would always call to cook during any, and all, occasions held at the palace.

Just as Mum’s hope had become a reality, I too started to hope that God would also be merciful to me and my heart’s desires.

Part II

“Have you asked anyone about him yet?” Obehi asked.

I shook my head, “I have not discussed him with anyone yet.”

“So when? We have been here for two days already and you say we will only stay for a week.” I did not respond and I could feel her eyes on me. I was sitting by the window, staring out at the mango tree with the missing branch. I remembered how the branch was infected by something and how my uncle had insisted it had to be cut off to prevent the whole tree from dying.

“Olosen, answer na.”

“I saw Joy,” I said as I turned to my sister. I could not help but smile at her reaction.

“When?”

“Last night when we hosted Uncle Williams and his family,” I shook my head. “She must have heard and then come to confirm.”

Obehi shook her head and hissed. “How does her showing up relate to your quest?”

“It doesn’t but she may have gone to tell him already,” I said hopefully.

“Really? Olosen, you want to wait here with the hope that he will come to you when you don’t even know if he is still alive.” My face fell and she quickly backtracked with an apology, “Sis, let’s just go there and see for ourselves.”

Her words made me shiver. I looked up at her and managed a smile, “I will go on my own. Don’t worry.”

I barely slept that night and had the same dream again. We were standing in an opening. A frown on my face and a smile on his and as I was about to reach out to him, my annoying sister’s voice filled my head and, still dreaming, I found myself alone. “Olosen! Olosen oooooooooo,” Obehi practically yelled in my ear, startling me awake and almost causing me to fall off the bed. I frowned at her and she fell quiet, a grin still plastered on her face. I eyed her before checking my smart watch and frowning again.

“It’s just 7 am. Seriously Obehi!”

“I didn’t think you would want to still be in bed at this time with what I know.”

I eyed her again, “And what do you know?” She passed me a folded piece of paper and I hissed. “Three days here and you already have admirers dropping love notes for

you.”

“It's not for me sis,” she said, still holding out the paper. “It's yours.” She waited patiently for me to sit up and collect it from her. She hung around while I hesitated before unravelling the neatly folded paper and taking in the neat handwriting on it.

It was unmistakable. His handwriting had been one of the best in the school we had all attended. I took in the handwriting before I even realized what it was he had written. Our best-kept secret was neatly written out in front of me. There was no mistaking it and he made no error in the ingredients listed or the process. I remembered it as though it had been yesterday that we had created it. “Where did you get this from?” I asked absentmindedly.

“He gave it to me.” If looks could kill, Obehi would likely have passed out before me there and then.

“Where? How?”

“Since you would not go look for him,” Obehi said, pausing for dramatic effect, “I guess he came looking for you.” I watched as she used her head to gesture at the door of my room and beyond. It had to be that she was gesturing beyond the door. She was still smiling when she caught a stray tear that wandered down her cheek.

“Do you mean...” I could not finish my sentence and she nodded in response to the incomplete inquiry.

Paper in hand, I rushed out of the room and down the corridor. It was a small house and in seconds, I was standing in the living room, face to face with the one I had come looking for. “Took you long enough,” he said softly. He waved from the chair he sat in and I watched as he struggled to stand. One hand hung limply on one side while the other held on to a cane which he used to walk a little closer. I looked him over. In two steps, I met him mid-stride and caressed his limp arm. “Am I less of the man you left behind?”

Staring into his eyes, afraid to look away, I smiled, “That there is a man still standing in front of me is an answered prayer in itself.”

“I may not be able to cook for you like before. Especially that one meal that we had worked on together.”

I laughed lightly and held up the paper. “As long as there is a recipe to follow, there is no need to worry. I can do all the cooking.”

His was the embrace I had been longing for. The one I needed and the only one that mattered. The crises had only delayed the inevitable. I was back in the arms

of the one I held dear and, in that moment, the one resolution I had for the new year was to never leave him again, no matter the circumstances.

November

Akumbu Uche | Poetry

Elsewhere, my birth month is associated with the shedding of rusty leaves and sheets of black ice; family meals around a turkey, pumpkin scents and gifts of topaz and citrine; a night of bonfires and explosions, another for dead souls and a morning for all the saints in Heaven. This side of earth, fresh mangoes and black walnuts disappear. Overeager udara start to ripen. Pitanga cherries blush yellow, orange and red. The ground is less cream, more powder. As the scent of damp earth and wet grass retreats into memory, flies disband and become shy and solitary. November is a sigh of relief. Daytime heat loses its stickiness and the night air starts to crisp. Finally, you can leave your clothes out to dry for as long as you like without fear. Be warned, this is when the highest number of fire outbreaks happen. It's a miracle when the fire service shows up with more than one drop of water in their tank. November is anticipation. Boney M songs from long ago reappear on radio and market prices for rice and meat shoot up as the festive season draws close. Tailors have never been busier, their clients never more anxious. A month of wistful resignation. Thirty days of stillness before the red Saharan dust surges in and hazes up the horizon. November is birth and death and the pause in between.

Discarding the Old for the New

Omobola Osamor | Fiction

The day started with father's baritone humming, a step or two behind Ebenezer Obey, Sunny Ade, or Jim Reeves on the gramophone. In his black and red checked pajamas, he oscillates between roasting red bell peppers, tomatoes, garlic, and onions in the kitchen and the living room to change discs, pausing only to sway before the turntable at the beginning of each album. The roasting of ingredients in the oven was his only contribution because mother was picky like that.

Mother's cooker was a six burner and oven glimmering black; no matter how many meals she cooked, and she cooked a lot, feet planted on each side, vigorously shined after each use. Above the cooker were four rows of identical plastic cylindrical containers bearing the names of the contents in capital letters. She often joked the words were for their father's benefit, "I don't need a label to know the difference between nutmeg and garlic."

Different colored animal-shaped ceramic pots – a monkey, giraffe, lion, kangaroo and their favorite, a yellow swan – held upright a bamboo plant and cradled rosemary, sage, thyme, and aloe vera on the long windowsill overlooking the backyard. The same backyard where they skipped, mimicked their mother's cooking using plastic bowls and twigs, where they often caught her watching through the window, or where they watched her stirring the ladle, face barely visible through a haze of steam.

There was a square table in the kitchen corner with a chair on each side, where father arranged the seared peppers and onions on a silver tray to cool. Beside the door to the backyard was the food pantry, where two wooden rows carried different bags of food in varying sizes, and at the corner was a white freezer containing perishables.

Opposite the freezer, close to the door, sat a grey cast iron pot. It was wide at the base, standing on three short legs fashioned from the same heavy metal, with two handles. Mother said it was a family heirloom, a gift from her mother when she got married and moved away. Whenever she brought it out for use with the help of their

father, she would regale the girls with tales they had already heard. The day their grandfather bumped his foot against the pot in his haste to greet a neighbor. How he yelped in pain and hopped around with his foot in a cast after returning from the hospital. It stood in the kitchen corner for almost a week before her brother returned it to their grandmother's pantry to gather dust for a season.

It produced the best jollof rice and goat stew; her brother, the children's only uncle, was the only living person able to carry the pot without assistance. This detail is reiterated while playfully eyeing their father, who huffs and haws while heaving the monstrosity on one side with the mother on the other.

Mother's recants came with jubilation and theatrics, making their time in the kitchen fun. Abike's excited reimagining of their uncle lifting the heavy piece without assistance, a pantomime of how he caught them by the armpits and threw them up thrice to be baptized in laughter. "How did Grandpa hop when he hit his leg... show us again," mother would oblige, hopping around the children, hands clasped over a suspended knee, mouth open wide, and eyes squeezed shut in mock pain.

Their great-grandmother bought the pot just before her first child was born after several miscarriages. A seer told her she would have a successful delivery and to have a celebration of thanksgiving after his birth. She didn't have a big enough pot to make the cooking convenient, hence her buying a set of three.

"There were three?"

Yes... I got the biggest. Your Aunties Bunmi and Sola got the other two."

"Why did you get the biggest?"

"Because I am the first daughter."

"So?"

The Mother stood with arms akimbo and sighed, slightly irritated. The girls waited, steadily returning her gaze. "The oldest daughter gets the biggest pot."

"Why?"

"That's the way it was done."

"Why?"

"It's our family culture."

"Who gets the pot between us?"

Mother realized she had unwittingly opened a can of worms.

"I guess that would be me since I'm ten minutes older."

"That's not fair! It's just ten minutes!"

Tears gathered and spilled in one's eyes while the other was doing a victory dance, "I get the pot! I get the pot!" Mother wrung her hands together and tried placating one while chiding the other.

"Don't worry Abike, you don't need that pot... I will buy you a beautiful new set. Anike can keep Mummy's ugly pot," their father chimed from the living room behind his newspaper.

The victory dance came to a screeching halt, "I don't want an ugly pot... I want new ones," fresh tears followed.

"How about no one inherits the ugly pot, and you both get new pots?"

"But mummy says it's the family culture...'

The newspaper is slowly lowered. The Father removes his glasses and beckons his daughters towards him. "If a practice causes pain, it serves no one. It's time we change that culture for a new one."

"But it has been in the family for years... it's important."

"Says who? It's ugly." Mother bristles and is about to protest but thinks better of it.

"How many people do you know have that type of pot?"

"Mummy says Aunty Sola and Aunty Bunmi have smaller ones."

"But, have you ever seen them use it?" Silence. "Your Aunties inherited the pots but perhaps decided against using them because they don't find them convenient. You are seven. Many years into the future, when you have your own house, you may choose a different type of pot, you may even decide you don't need pots, and even if you do, I will buy two identical sets of pots that won't weigh a ton. Nothing must cause pain between you. Let Mummy keep this one since she likes it so much." The tears stopped.

"My pot is not ugly," mother hissed through clenched teeth before stomping off into the kitchen, while father chuckled and returned to his newspaper.

About the Authors

Adefemi Fagite is a recipient of the Jordan Goodman Prize for Poetry. Currently pursuing his MFA at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. He is the Event Coordinator for Oxford Magazine, and presently contributes as a reader to Frontier Poetry and Miami University Press. His works have appeared in Parousia Magazine, The African Writers Review, Apex Publishing, Ebonylife Media, Oriki Podcast, and elsewhere.

Akal Mohan is an emerging Kenyan writer and poet. He is a 2023 recipient of the inaugural Idembeka Creative Writing fellowship. Akal reads in trust and writes in faith.

Akumbu Uche is a Nigerian author and filmmaker. Her writing has been published in Bella Naija, Brittle Paper, The Kalahari Review, Nowhere Magazine, and elsewhere. She is the Publications Manager at the Library of Africa and the African Diaspora (LOATAD) in Accra, Ghana.

Alix Brobbey spent portions of her childhood in The Netherlands and Ghana. She has a B.A. in English from Brigham Young University, and she is currently a law student. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Blue Marble Review*, *Segullah*, *Inscape Journal*, *The Albion Review*, *The Susquehanna Review*, *The Palouse Review*, and elsewhere. She has also been nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

Bunmi Ańjóláolúwa Adaramola was born in Lagos, Nigeria, and is currently a PhD Researcher at the University of Leeds. She studied Law at the University of Leeds, and has an LLM and MSc from the University of Leeds and the University of Law, respectively. Keen to develop her writing, she completed a Creative Writing Specialisation course from Wesleyan University, and a Transmedia Writing course at Michigan State University. Her fiction and non-fiction short stories appear in *The Three Boats Magazine*, *The African Writer*, *Kalahari Review* and her personal blogs.

Chinaza James-Ibe is undefined, but most of the time she is just a girl who loves food, books, music, and viewing the sunset from different angles.

Damilola Olowe is an African writer who hails from Osun state, Nigeria. She has written numerous stories and poetries which have not been published yet. She is an active volunteer, and she loves to travel, listen to music and read.

Eliamani Ismail is writer and filmmaker from Washington D.C. via Mali and Tanzania. Ismail was a youth poet with the DC Youth Slam Team, and has performed at the Kennedy Center and the National Planned Parenthood Festival. After earning a B.A. in Film and Africana, Ismail was named a Watson Scholar where she explored how writing and art create national identity and encourage non-punitive criminal justice practices. Ismail is a Pan-Africanist child of the diaspora dedicated to telling stories from and about the global African world in hopes of fostering a diasporic familiarity and responsibility for Africa's children everywhere.

Elohozino Okpowo is a practicing lawyer and writer living in Lagos, Nigeria. Her short story, “Silent Night,” was recently published in Omenana Speculative Magazine.

Isaac Kilibwa is a Kenyan lover of poetry. Some of his poems are forthcoming in Mystery Publishers' Strange Water anthology and Hawakal's Wives anthology. His work has been published by Dreich, The Kalahari Review, BNAP, IHRAF, and elsewhere. When he is not writing, he teaches in Vihiga.

Jesutomisin Ipinmoye is an alleged author and unserious engineer who now, for some reason, works in Education and Advertising. He's unreasonably passionate about writing and storytelling, and dreams for the day when moguls return to tradition and start hiring their own personal weirdos (read: artists, jesters, and storytellers) to do nothing but make them laugh and make weird and beautiful shit. He calls the genres he writes Nigerian Weird and Afro Depression – terms that are NOT a reflection of his own personality and current quality of life (he swears).

Joshua Idowu Omidire is a poet, editor, publisher, and digital media strategist. His poems have appeared in SpringNG, Shallow Tales Review, Nnoko Stories, The Sky is our Earth: Anthology of 50 young Nigerian Poets, Essays And Artwork on the Sudanese Civil War, and elsewhere. He was the winner of Professor Eruvbetine's poetry prize. He also won Professor Hope Eghagha's Drama prize in 2012. He loves reading books, listening to music, and tapping inspiration from ordinary sights. He toys with lines, colours, and shapes in his quiet moments.

Kapante Ole Reyia is a Kenyan writer, translator and Economist working in the National Treasury in Nairobi. His stories have been published in Lunaris Review, Itanile, Ituika Literary Platform and Queenex Publishers. His short stories, “Memories of Archers” and “Flames of Vengeance,” were both longlisted for the Inaugural Toyin Falola prize and the December Collins Elesiro literary prize.

Mabel Mnensa, a recent Creative Writing Master's graduate (UCD, 2022), is a reader, poet, writer and dreamer. Her diverse works span children's tales to rebellious prose. She is currently working on her debut novel, *Undocumented Secrets*.

Makarov Tebogo Abotseng is a writer from Gaborone, Botswana. He first embarked on his writing journey as a business writer, and later as a public relations practitioner, he established and edited publications in the public sector. He has also served as a columnist and has founded a regional digital media house. He curates a series of columns under the banner of The Mak Randoms on Substack.

Omobola Osamor writes in multiple genres and has been published in several spaces, including Brittle Paper, African Writer, Afritondo, Shallow Tales Review and omobolablog.wordpress.com She lives in Chicago.

Osione Abokhai is a writer of creative nonfiction with essays in Mårøko Magazine, Kalahari Review, The Naked Convos and Thrive Global. Telling real

stories with a touch of magic is her strategy for healing and possibly taking over the world (the last bit is one of Osione's many microwaveable jokes). You can find her on Instagram @sioneohai.

Salma Yusuf is an award-winning civic leader and multilingual writer. Three of her short stories will be published by Catalyst Press and Karavan Press in March 2024, and others have already appeared in *Lolwe, Ink, Sweat & Tears, Arts against Extremism, Kalahari Review, Brittle Paper, Isele* and *Doek*, and elsewhere. She has performed poetry in Toast Poetry UK at the Norwich Arts Center sharing the stage with Inua Ellams and Buddy Wakefields, and at the Sainsbury Center where her work was broadcast live at BBC Look East.

Temitope Omamegbe is a writer, published author, scriptwriter and writing contest organizer. She has a bachelors in Science and has built a career in the Card Payment and Customer Excellence. Born, raised and residing in Lagos, when she's not writing, she likes to crochet and read. She also takes one on one tutorials in creative writing, scriptwriting and story development.

Verah Omwocha is an award-winning Kenyan writer, editor and reviewer. She has co-authored four books for the Kenyan curriculum for primary and secondary levels, and published four children's books. Her most recent publication is her memoir, *Diary of the Miaha*. She won the 2017/18 Tito Livio Award for Historical Fiction for her short story, 'The Crescent Moon'.

Yinka Parm, a proud Nigerian, has found a second home amidst the literary treasures of Dublin for the past eighteen years and her curiosity for knowledge has led her to work in a public library as a librarian. Having recently discovered the exhilaration of writing, she has ventured into the world of poetry, hoping to tell stories of her African heritage interwoven with discovery, passion, and culture.

About the Editor

Tahzeeb Akram is a South African literary editor and curator. She has an MA in contemporary queer Nigerian literary where she focused on anthologies published by Brittle Paper. Now, she is publishing literary works and anthologies under Brittle Paper and loving every minute.

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About Brittle Paper

Brittle Paper is an online literary magazine for readers of African Literature. Brittle Paper is Africa's premier online literary brand inspiring readers to explore and celebrate African literary experiences in all its diversity.

AINEHI EDORO, Founder and Editor-In-Chief

KUHELKA GHOSH, Assistant Editor

ALESIA ALEXANDER, Social Media Coordinator

TAHZEEB AKRAM, Submissions Editor

Visit the Brittle Paper website: brittlepaper.com

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Email: info@brittlepaper.com

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