brittle paper

AFRICAN HORROR

An Anthology

Edited by Tahzeeb Akram

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Content's Page

Editor's Note

Dear Brittle Paperians,

The unknown is scary, but the terrifying is found in the shadows we have named. These names are either from our day-to-day encounters, or passed down to us from a long line of people who have, out of love and obligation, warned us to avoid it at all costs. What you are about to read is not unknown, and therein lies the terrifying.

This anthology, *African Horror,* is intentionally named in a broad way. It is to encompass any tales from our African and diasporic writers. From the northern tip of Africa, to the very last bit of land in the south, we as children of the soil carry within us the names and stories that we have been told, be it in the form of warnings, or to scare us to behave. It is rare to find someone who has not heard of Bouberrak, Kishi, Popobawa, Adze, Ninki Nanka, Tokoloshe, Eloko, or Mama Wata. There are plenty more, rooted in the stories of our culture and history. But campfire horror stories are not just about mythical creatures or urban legends.

There is something to be said for the fearful encounters we have in this world. Sometimes the frightful can be found through friends, neighbours, and ourselves. And this anthology houses it all.

From Nigeria, Zambia, South Africa, Kenya, Trinidad and Tobago, and Zimbabwe, our writers have each taken a turn at the campfire, sharing tales. We have futuristic pieces, like Yvonne Aore and Akem's stories, the eerie stillness of Amani Mosi's work, Ebuka Prince Okoroafor's uncanny story, and cultural and urban legends from Bongiwe Maphosa and Mazwemzini.

And this collection has tried to contain the evils lurking within. So, if you dare, keep going and see what our writers have in store for you…

Haunted Reading!
– Tahzeeb Akram

Zuma Keeps Her Count

Samuel Kozah

I
The Harvest Is What It Is

Pressure splits the locust beans. The ready ones open with a soft give, releasing their deep, earthy ferment. The dry ones crumble into nothing but dust. Zuma's left hand holds each pod steady while her right brings the stone down in a practiced rhythm. She has been sorting beans this way since she was a girl in her grandmother's compound. Her hands know the difference before her nose even confirms it.

The morning is dry and still. At the eastern edge of the compound, a shea tree stands quiet, letting its silence drift across the space. Achan sits two body-lengths away on an overturned calabash, braiding raffia into loose knots. The girl keeps her eyes on her work, guarding the small quiet place inside her head.

"Chan."

The girl looks up. Her face carries Bvur's angles, especially that broad brow. Zuma keeps the thought to herself.

"Bring the second basket."

Achan sets the raffia aside without a word, fetches the basket, and places it gently beside Zuma's knee. Then she returns to her calabash. Their rhythm together needs no talk. Twelve years of mornings had shaped it, going all the way back to when Zuma carried the baby on her back and learned to move with the child's weight balanced against her own.

Zuma says nothing. The stone falls again.

*

The beans are good this season. The discard pile grows much slower than the ready one, a sign that she had pulled the harvest at the right moment. Her mother-in-law had taught her to trust her nose more than the count of days, and that lesson had never failed her.

Zuma works steadily through the pile. The compound air carries woodsmoke, drying grain, and the faint sweet breath of the shea tree. A small lizard scurries confidently along the inside wall, its steps nearly soundless. Achan hums a loose, wandering tune

that never quite settles. Zuma continues splitting pods with rhythmic cracks, absorbing the steady sound while keeping her gaze fixed straight ahead.

Her husband, Bvur, used to say patience was the only farming tool that cost nothing. He spoke of patience when talking about millet, compound work, or marriage. The meaning shifted each time beneath his words. Zuma caught those shifts and kept them to herself. She remembered how morning light caught the mat-weave ridges on his palms when he passed her a cup or knife, and how those ridges slowly softened back into skin. Some things you hold close so they remain yours.

Achan has abandoned the raffia. Now she herds a compound beetle with one finger, gently nudging it each time it tries to change direction. The beetle ignores her, certain of its path. Zuma watches its stubborn path. A slow pressure builds behind her ribs as the morning heat settles heavier over the compound.

She lifts the water pot from the cooking stone and moves it toward the fire's edge, a path her feet have worn so many thousands of times the ground seems to know her step. The water spills toward the stone before she tilts the pot, a cold thread running up her wrist. She finishes the pour, sets the clay pot down carefully, and returns to the cracking rhythm.

II
What the Compound Knows Before the People

Five weeks ago, Tazwan's boy, Zurum died. He was eight years old, with a gap between his front teeth and a habit of running with his arms stretched flat behind him. He lived in his family compound, two pathways east. Zuma had attended his naming ceremony in the year the rains came late and the millet grew thin. She still remembered how his mother held him with the fierce, careful grip of a woman who had already buried children. The fever took him in three days, released him for four, then returned and claimed him for good. The compound knew before anyone spoke it aloud; grief needs a place to land, and it will find one.

Two weeks ago, Nyiret's daughter died. Her name reached Zuma through Nyiret's broken voice, drifting over the compound wall in the hour before dawn when sound carries farthest.

Distance now grows in careful steps. She had seen Tazwan only twice. Once he stood in the entrance of his compound watching her walk to the well, his square hands hanging loose at

his sides. The second, he lingered at the edge of the market stalls, the space of a man making a hard decision, then turned and left. Both times, Zuma kept walking, back straight, face calm. Each time a quiet piece of her slipped away, never to be recovered.

At the common well, the other women stand one pace farther from Zuma than they did six weeks ago. The water lies still between them while their hands stay apart. Nyiret had not come to the well the morning after her daughter's burial. Yesterday she returned. She lowered her hands into the water and held them there, motionless, while Zuma drew her measure. Nyiret waited, fingers hovering just above the wet rope, careful to keep the space between them alive.

Swon-Kura's loss cuts deepest. She is already waiting when Zuma comes down the path, a bundle of locust beans in her arms. For years they had shared this same path every morning, trading beans and laughter without thinking, their hands brushing freely as they spoke of children and husbands and coming rains. Now Swon-Kura flinches when she sees Zuma, a small, involuntary jerk before she catches herself.

"Zuma," she says, forcing warmth into her voice. "I brought you some beans. These ones dried well."

Zuma stops a careful distance away. "Thank you."

Swon-Kura extends the bundle, but her arms stay stiff. Their fingers never touch. The leaves rustle loudly in the silence.

"They are good this year," Swon-Kura continues, her words coming a little too fast. "Very strong. I picked them myself."

Zuma takes the bundle and holds it against her side. "Your eyes are still sharp." Swon-Kura tries to smile, but it sits wrong on her face. Her gaze keeps sliding down to Zuma's collarbone.

"Take care of Achan, eh?" she says, lowering her voice. "These days… you have to watch them closely. The air is not always kind."

Zuma nods once. "I watch her."

For a moment neither woman speaks. The silence stretches, awkward, knowing, alive.

Swon-Kura shifts her weight. "Well. I should go back. There is still plenty grinding left."

"Yes," Zuma says quietly. "Go well."

Swon-Kura turns quickly, almost too quickly, then pauses after two steps and glances back. "May the ancestors keep her safe," she adds. She doesn't wait for an answer. She walks away with hurried, stiff steps, clutching her wrapper tightly.

Zuma remains standing there, the warm bundle heavy in her arms, watching the other woman retreat.

*

The work continues. She grinds locust beans until her shoulders burn. She washes Achan's wrapper. She joins the communal grinding, letting the warm, dry scent of millet rise around her while her body performs what it has always known.

But Achan's mat has moved.

Three weeks ago, it rested against the inner wall where it had always been. Now it sits three arms' lengths closer to the door. Achan said it was because of the morning draft that cuts the heat. The dry season had already arrived two weeks earlier. The excuse hung thin in the air. Children her age carried fear in where they placed their sleeping mat. Zuma watched the mat settle into its new position and said nothing.

*

Her left hand moves ahead of her now.

She notices it from the edge of her attention, letting it crack a pod a half-beat before her right hand commits. For three weeks she blamed fatigue. The gap between them widening.

At night, firelight catches the water pooled in the belly of the pot. Her left hand rises without permission, tracing a silent syllable in the warm air. She lowers it quickly, presses her fingers hard against her wrapper, and steps inside. She stores the gesture away with the others, refusing to examine it too closely.

Later, she sits in the dark beside Achan and watches her daughter sleep. The compound throbs with the loud chorus of beetles in the shea tree. Achan lies curled on her side, wrappers pulled tight around her small body. Her chest rises and falls in deep, trusting rhythm. Warm air drifts above her breath, carrying its own direction and weight.

Zuma's left hand rises again.

Darkness itself feels heavier above the child. Her hand finds the current, fingers tracing unseen words written on the night. She presses them firmly into her thigh and counts each of Achan's breaths, willing the air to settle, waiting for the weight to lift.

III
The Dream and the Fist It Left Behind

The dream left dark water behind. It carried the heavy certainty that something had been completed in the depths. Movement had

settled into final and merciless order. She woke carrying the quiet satisfaction of work finished in the night.

Her left hand was a fist. The nail of her index finger had dug a deep crescent into her palm. In the grey pre-dawn light, she held the hand open, palm upward, and stared at the mark. She sat that way for a long time as the light slowly turned pale gold, the color that meant the sun was still low and the compound had not yet awakened. She listened to Achan breathing behind her and waited for some feeling to arrive. None came.

Morning light found her still sitting upright. She began the review.

*

Verdicts always arrived before evidence. Bvur had built his arguments that way. She had loved him, and kept quiet. Now she built nothing, only looked.

Five weeks ago, the morning she passed Tazwan's compound brought the warm noise of life through the entrance: running feet, an enamel bowl clattering, Tazwan's wife singing, her pounding song slightly off-key. Pleasure rose in her first, bright and instinctive. Then came the sharp, cold edge behind it. The feeling fed on its own limited air, bright and doomed. She kept walking. The feeling passed. She told herself she had made no decision.

Four weeks ago, the compound fire. Her left hand rising on its own, drawing that silent, half-formed syllable through the warm air above the water.

Three weeks ago, she woke with her hand clenched so hard the knuckles ached white. She worked the fingers open and told herself it was only the tiredness of women who carry too much into sleep. The explanation held until the pattern began to crack.

Two weeks ago, Nyiret's daughter was laughing in the morning, burning by midday, and gone before the next dawn broke.

*

Then came the moment the compound finally named her. It happened at the grinding stone three days after Nyiret's daughter died.

The women worked in their usual circle, stone grinding against stone, filling the air with the warm, chalky scent of millet. Zuma moved with them, her body following the ancient rhythm, when her left hand rose without warning. Her fingers traced that same half-syllable in the air above the millet, slow and deliberate.

Swon-Kura saw it first. Her own stone stilled mid-motion.

Her face emptied, then tightened into something cold and certain. One by one, the other women followed her gaze. The grinding sounds faltered and fell away. For a long moment the only noise was the dry wind moving across the compound.

In that silence, the separate deaths wove themselves into one story. All the small absences that had hollowed out their days. They fused now into a single shape, and that shape had Zuma's name.

Whispers began before the sun had crossed the sky. By evening the story had hardened into truth no one would question again: Zuma's hand moved with its own will. Wherever it pointed, children sickened. The compound had found its answer.

Zuma laid the events out on the mat in front of her. She let them keep their own shape.

*

Behind her eyes, Zurum ran again, arms stretched flat behind him. Her left hand twitched, following the memory. The boy's nearness felt warm, heat rising off sunbaked stone. Intent and observation beat together now with the same slow, terrible pulse.

The question hovered just out of reach, tugging at the edge of her mind. Her love for Achan ran quiet and deep, built from a thousand small, wordless acts of keeping one small life breathing: giving her the smoother stone, knowing the difference between thinking-silence and hurting-silence, and feeling the exact moment sleep took or released her through the smallest change in the air. These truths were older than language.

All of this was also true.

Two facts now occupied the same space and refused to touch. She loved her daughter with everything she still possessed, yet her left hand had moved with its own will for five weeks. She had stopped searching for the place where the two truths should either join or tear each other apart.

*

In the new morning light, she opened the fist once more.

The crescent mark remained, faint but unmistakable, pressed deep into her palm. Precision had always defined her. Truth, she believed, should need no conditions. Yet this new precision sat beside her, patient and ancient, quietly searching for ground that was no longer willing to hold her.

IV
The Night Before the Word Is Spoken

Ragun Bvon came in the quiet hour after the cooking fire had died and before the night insects found their full rhythm. He was a small man who carried his years in the forward tilt of his back, the posture of someone who had spent decades closer to the earth than to the sky. In his hands rested a clay cup and a calabash of pale yellow palm wine, the kind he kept sealed against the heat. Zuma had seen him bring this same calabash for deaths and for departures. Recognition settled heavy in her chest before the clay even touched the stool.

She placed another stool across from hers. He sat without being asked.

Palm wine filled the cup. Ragun Bvon passed it to her, his eyes fixed on the ground.

They sat together as the wine cooled. He held his cup and stared at the compound wall where a gecko made its slow vertical climb. Zuma held hers and watched the same wall. The wine carried the scent of the afternoon it was drawn, warm, slightly sour, sweet at the edges. Bvur had loved this exact wine. He used to drink it with his eyes closed, fully present in the moment.

She had known Ragun Bvon since she arrived in this compound at twenty-one as Bvur's wife. He taught her the hidden logic of the place: which entrance was for family and which for strangers, how the cooking fire related to the sleeping mats. He had come to Achan's naming ceremony with his kola nut already broken, a sign he believed the child would arrive safely. He had outlived four of his own children. Grief lived inside him now, permanent and wordless. Loss had carved his silence into the very shape of his body.

His gaze stayed on the floor.

The wine reached the temperature of the evening air. He set his cup on the ground between them, rose slowly against the protest of his back, and stood fully upright. He studied the compound entrance.

"Ragun," she said.

He turned. For the first time that night he met her eyes and held them for three full breaths. Something settled on his face. He looked once more at the path she would walk, then placed both hands lightly on her head. The touch carried blessing and farewell in equal weight. Without another word he walked out through the compound entrance and disappeared into the dark path between the homes.

*

Zuma sat alone.

Achan's mat now lay close to the door, facing outward. Three weeks ago, it had rested against the far wall. Before that, it had stayed right beside Zuma's own mat through all the girl's years. The movement had happened in small, quiet shifts. Zuma had tracked each one and said nothing. To name it would mean facing what it meant.

Compound logic flowed downhill, filling every empty space. Zuma had felt it moving for five weeks. Tomorrow, someone would bring the word to her entrance. The conclusion already pressed down on the air, heavy and certain, before any cloud had appeared in the sky.

The neighbors carried their fear with them, justified by the silent places where children should still be laughing.

*

She sat with the weight. She held her ground.

The compound held its usual night sounds: beetles in the shea tree, the distant bark of a dog, a child's voice somewhere to the west cut short by sleep.

Zuma kept her feet flat on the earth. Both hands rested on her knees. The half-full cup of palm wine sat at her feet. She picked it up and drank it to the end. Ragun Bvon had brought it after making a hard choice. The gesture needed to be completed. She spoke into the darkness. Her words stopping at the threshold.

"If it moves through me, is it mine?"

The question went nowhere. The night held it close.

*

Her left hand lifted from her knee. Her right fingers seized it, pressing it down hard against her thigh. The grip was fierce, nails digging into flesh. She felt the tremor in her left hand, the restless current pushing upward, alive and hungry, while her right hand fought to keep it pinned. Her arms shook with the silent struggle. Sweat broke along her spine.

Achan slept only four arms' lengths away, small chest rising and falling in peaceful rhythm, completely unaware.

Zuma matched her breathing to the slow count of insects, desperate to hold herself together. The rhythm threaded through sleep and dark water, through every day of labor and every night of watching. It bound belief and silence, love and dread. It waited with terrible patience, certain it would outlast her.

Achan's breathing dropped into its deepest register.

Zuma's left hand fought against her grip and forced itself open on her knee, palm turned upward in offering. The cold current ran through it, steady and hungry. Her right fingers ground down harder, crushing bone into flesh and muscle in a silent, desperate war. Sweat broke across her back. Her arms trembled with the effort.

She held the violent stillness between her two hands as the night pressed down, ancient and unmoved.

Cedar and Old Paper

Amani Mosi

The cabin smelled like cedar and old paper, which Amara decided to take as a good sign. She stood in the doorway while the others carried things in from Jake's truck; her fingers traced the frame, the warped, buckled curve of wood that had swallowed too many seasons. Beyond the truck, the trees stood tall, dark, and motionless. It wasn't peace. The air was too heavy for peace, more rigid and waiting, like a chest holding a breath. As her hand rested on the frame, she became aware of how far the nearest road was.

"You going to stand there or help?" Dele called from the truck, grinning. He had a cooler in each hand, and blankets under his arms, but like only Dele could, still managed to look dignified about it.

"I'm assessing," Amara said.

"She's assessing," Jake told Claire, who laughed an easy laugh, the one that filled rooms without effort.

"What's the verdict?" Claire asked.

Amara looked at the cabin. At the trees. At the sky above the trees, the deep purple orange of a bruise healing.

"Jury's still out," she said, and went inside.

Cheng was already on the porch steps, coat on despite the mild evening. He was rolling a cigarette with the focused attention he gave to trivial things. The paper. The tobacco. The tuck and seal of it. All while the others carried bags past him, nobody expecting him to help. On the drive up, he had said that the service had dropped outside Millbrook, that the clouds were moving east, and then nothing else for two hours.

Dele laughed at something had Claire said, and glanced at Cheng, the way you glance at someone who used to laugh too. Cheng smiled through his nose rather than his mouth, then lowered his eyes to the paper. A strand of tobacco escaped. He pinched it back into place.

"Nice spot," Cheng said, not looking up from his rolling.

"You haven't looked at it yet."

He licked the paper and sealed it. "I can feel it."

Amara didn't ask what he meant. She went inside to assess the kitchen.

The cabin revealed itself in pieces. A short hallway opened

onto two cramped bedrooms with uneven floors and quilts folded at the foot of each bed. The living room held a stone fireplace blackened with old smoke, and a clock that had stopped at 3:17 years ago and had never been corrected. A brown rust bit deep into the porcelain around the sink's drain, and when Amara turned the tap the water arrived with a metallic smell, sharp as old coins. A narrow staircase climbed along the far wall toward an attic room with a sloped ceiling and a door swollen off its frame.

Jake dropped one of the bags beside the stairs. "Roy kept storage up there," he said. "Fishing gear. Boxes. Old junk." He said it the way people spoke about relatives whose histories had settled into stories before anyone thought to question them.

Claire opened the grocery bags across the kitchen counter, and held up two jars of pasta sauce. "Okay, but if we use the mushroom one, nobody can complain that we didn't use the basil one."

"You brought four sauces for five people," Dele said.

Claire pointed at him with a wooden spoon. "Because some of us believe in abundance."

Jake laughed like he'd heard the line before and still enjoyed it.

They cooked shoulder to shoulder in the small kitchen, bumping hips and elbows while rain-dark evening gathered beyond the windows. Claire argued for the superiority of bad horror films. Jake was still talking about the parking ticket he had refused to pay three months earlier on "constitutional grounds," which made Amara laugh hard enough to spill wine down her wrist. Dele uncorked the second bottle, studying the label before pouring as though the wine might feel insulted otherwise. The cabin warmed around them. Steam clouded the windows above the sink. Someone put music on low enough that conversation kept winning against it.

And through all of it, Cheng said extraordinarily little. He ate leaning back from the table, one ankle crossed over the other beneath his chair. At times, his mouth moved at the edge of someone else's joke, almost smiling. Mostly he watched. The flame of his lighter flashed once in his hands before he slipped it back into his coat pocket out of habit. At some point, between the second glass of wine and Claire's aggressive defence of terrible cinema, Cheng stood and stepped toward the door. Nobody stopped talking. The cold entered with him before the door shut again.

Amara looked toward the window without meaning to. Beyond the glass, the ember of his cigarette appeared in the dark for a moment, then moved toward the porch steps. She watched it

until somebody asked her a question twice.

"How is he?" she asked Dele, while Jake and Claire debated the film.

Dele was quiet for a moment in the way that meant he was deciding how much to say. "He came," he said. "That's something."

Amara nodded. It was something.

Through the window she could see the small ember of Cheng's cigarette in the dark, moving as he paced. Or that was the wind. The tree line was a black wall beyond the porch light's reach. She looked at it and felt the feeling again; the one she had in the doorway — and looked away.

Amara woke at 2 am, and lay in the dark listening.

She could not explain it. There was no sound. Nothing specific. Nothing she could take into the morning and defend. It was a quality of the silence more than anything in it. As if the cabin was not simply quiet but *quieted*. As if something outside had pressed its hand against the walls and hushed everything inside.

Dele was asleep beside her. She watched the slow rise and fall of his shoulders beneath the sheet. Every so often, the old bed answered his breathing with a wooden creak. She put her hand on his shoulder, and then took it away.

She lay there for forty minutes. Then she got up and padded down the hallway in cold socks, careful around the places where the floorboards complained. She went to the kitchen for water, and while she stood at the sink, she looked out the window at the tree line and told herself she was being ridiculous, but believed herself completely.

Cheng had not been to bed. He was on the porch steps with his third cigarette, the first two pressed into the dirt beside his shoe. The night was clear. He had watched the stars for a while and then watched the trees and then let his eyes go unfocused until he was watching nothing at all. Just sitting in the smoke and the dark.

He heard her at the tree line, the way you hear a familiar song from another room. Just enough to know it. Not enough to be certain.

Cheng.

Half impatience. Half smile. The way she said his name outside bars, when she had been waiting in the cold; he was late, she was not angry.

He kept his eyes on the middle distance. He took a slow pull from the cigarette and then breathed out. He counted the seconds the way he had learned to count them. One. Two. Three. Waiting

for the frigid air to either dissolve the voice or let it shatter the night completely. Between his knees, his fingers remained locked. He had been practicing for six months.

But it didn't stop.

Cheng. Come and see.

He stood up and took a long pull from his cigarette. He stared at the place in the trees where the darkness seemed, for just a moment, to be the shape of a person. Slight against the trees, her weight settled into one hip, the way Yuki always stood. He remained at the edge of the porch while the cigarette burned untouched between his fingers, and the cold crept through the soles of his boots.

When he sank back onto the step, he did not look down. He touched the dying cherry of the old filter to the tip of a fresh one, the twin embers flaring together in a single, unshaking line of light. The alignment was flawless. No wobble. No hesitation. He sat on the porch while the horizon bruised into grey, waiting until the silhouette in the trees bled back into ordinary timber, and the first birds began, one by one, to reclaim the air.

The rain arrived sometime after lunch. One moment the woods stood grey and waiting beyond the windows. The next the sky opened hard enough to rattle the gutters and flatten the clearing beneath sheets of water. It was the kind of rain that makes arguments irrelevant. Cheng came inside trailing the smell of wet tobacco. The shoulders of his coat were black with water. Claire looked up from the couch.

“Oh, for God's sake.”

She crossed the room, already unfolding a towel before she reached him, and threw it over his head. Cheng let her do it without protest. She rubbed the towel once over his hair before draping it around his neck. Meanwhile, Jake sat cross-legged on the floor beside the coffee table with a deck of cards spread between his hands.

“You all mocked me for bringing these,” he said. “And now look at you. Saved.”

“No,” Dele murmured from the armchair without lifting his eyes from his book. “Still mocking you.”

Jake pointed at him in betrayal. Amara was moving through the cabin the way she sometimes did in spaces, opening and closing drawers. Reading the bones of a place. Cheng stood in the centre of the living room, damp and restless, and looked for somewhere to put himself. His eyes moved over the room and caught on the narrow door beside the fireplace — half-hidden by a coat rack, which was half-hidden by their jackets now piled on it.

"What's through there?" he asked.

Jake looked up. "Roy's study. Just old junk."

Cheng opened the door. It was small. More of a large closet than a room. A wooden desk. A shelf of field guides and almanacs. The smell of old paper and something underneath it. Something mineral and unpleasant that Cheng could not name. He was looking for an ashtray. He told himself he was looking for an ashtray. The desk drawer was stuck. He worked it open with the patience of a man who has spent years opening reluctant things. Inside were rubber bands gone brittle. A broken compass. A utility bill from 1987. And beneath all of it, a manila folder. The folder rested in his hands longer than it should have. Then he loosened the flap and looked inside.

The clippings were yellow but ordered. Someone had arranged them deliberately; had come back to this desk over years and decades and added to the file with the guilt of a man building his own confession. Local newspaper reports, five of them small, buried items. A black family. The Henderson family. 1961. A fire. Cause undetermined. A photograph printed from an unknown source. An undated photograph showing a group of men standing in a field, celebrating like men who knew they would never face trial for what they had done.

Cheng looked at the photograph for a long time. At the frame's outer edge, the camera captured a young man — seventeen perhaps. Standing apart from the rest in the bottom right corner. Not celebrating. But there. On the back, in handwriting that had changed over the decades but was still, on the most recent additions, recognizable as careful and old:

I was there. God forgive me.
I tried to find the words for sixty years and I am a coward. I am now a frail man, and I have left this here for whoever finds it because I could not say it aloud.

My name is Roy, and this is my past.

Cheng rested his hand against the folder, while voices drifted from the living room beyond the door. Then he slid it back into place, closed the drawer, and stepped back toward the others.

"Find an ashtray?" Jake asked.

"No," Cheng said. "I'll use the porch."

He caught Dele's brown eye on the way past. Just for a moment. Dele's face changed in the way that understood, *later*.

Amara said it at dinner. She said it the way she said most things — without drama, with the meticulousness of someone who had

waited until she was certain.

She put down her fork and said, “I think we should leave tomorrow. Early.”

The table shifted. The specific quality of a table when something real has been said at it.

“Because?” Claire asked. Her blue eyes held the cautious hope of someone praying the answer would be manageable.

“I don't like it here,” Amara said. “I know that's not a reason, but it's the only one I have.”

“Babe…” Dele said. Not disagreement; something more careful than that. A question.

“We drove four hours,” Jake said.

“I know.”

“The rain's supposed to clear by morning, we had plans to hike–”

“Jake.” Claire touched his arm.

“I'm not—" He stopped. Breathed. “I'm just saying, it's Roy's cabin. Roy's been generous enough to let us use it, and—"

“Jake,” Amara's voice was even. “I'm not asking you to understand it. I'm telling you how I feel.”

The silence that followed was the kind that shows you, like a light switched on in a dark room, the exact distance between people.

“Maybe we all just need a good night's sleep,” Claire mused.

Amara looked at her. Something moved across her face. It wasn’t anger. Not quite. But a feeling older than anger. She picked up her fork again and said nothing, and the conversation moved on in the fragile way of conversations that have survived something they will not discuss. And under the table, Dele found Amara's hand. She held it hard.

After, while Jake and Claire washed up, Cheng tilted his head toward the door. Dele followed him outside. The rain had subsided into something that was barely a mist. They stood on the porch. Cheng lit up his cigarette, while Dele stood with his hands in his pockets; both looking at the tree line.

“There's a folder,” Cheng said. “In the study. Desk drawer. Roy's handwriting.” Dele turned from the tree line. Cheng told him. All of it. He spoke without editorializing, and when he finished, he took a long pull of his cigarette and looked at the trees.

“He was in the photograph,” Dele said. It wasn't a question.

“At the edge. Young. But there.”

Dele was quiet for a moment. “And Jake doesn't know.”

“How would he know? Nobody told him. Roy never told anyone.” Cheng paused. “He was trying to, by the end. The folder was his way of trying.”

"But he couldn't."

"No." Cheng dropped the cigarette and pressed it under his shoe. "He couldn't."

They stood in the light rain, looked at the trees, and said nothing for a long time.

"She was here last night," Cheng said. "Yuki." He said it the same way he had said everything else. No escalation. Just a fact, placed on the table between them.

Dele did not tell him he was imagining it. That was why Cheng had told him. He had known Dele would not say that.

"What did she say?" Dele asked.

"Come and see."

Dele looked at the trees. "Maybe she knew," he said, "what was here. Maybe she was trying to show you."

Cheng did not answer. But sadness crept across his face, like a question that has been given permission to remain a question.

Dele went inside and got the folder. He sat at the kitchen table and read it through while Amara stood behind him, with one hand on his shoulder, reading with him. Jake and Claire had gone to bed. The kitchen was quiet except for the rain. When he was done, Dele sat with his hands loose in his lap, looking at nothing. The grain of the table. The window. The middle distance between them. He closed the folder and straightened its edges against the table once, then again, until the corners were exact.

Then he said, "There's a marker. On the road on the way up — three miles back. I saw it from the car."

Amara remembered it. A small historical marker by the road, the kind you do not read because you are on your way somewhere.

"I should have read it," she said.

"You didn't know."

"I felt it though." She looked out of the window. "From the minute we got here. I felt it."

Dele reached up and covered her hand with his. "You always do," he said. "And I always believe you."

She rested her forehead against the top of his head. Then she straightened. "We leave before sunrise," she said.

"Yes."

"Without a long conversation about it."

"Yes."

She went to pack. Dele remained at the table, the closed folder in front of him, Roy's sixty years of silence between his hands. He sat with it for a long moment. Then he left it where they had found it. It was not his to take, and it was not his to bury.

Let whoever comes next decide.

They finished packing and loading the truck by 4 am. Jake was quiet in the way of a man who understood, by now, that he had missed something important and did not yet know what it was. Claire held his hand in the back seat of the truck. She would ask him later, and he would find the folder — after the trip. After some conversation, Jake and Claire would keep entirely to themselves. That was the future. It had not happened yet.

Cheng was last off the porch. He stood looking back at the cabin. The dark windows. The cedar walls. The tranquillity of it in the pre-dawn. He lit one final cigarette. He looked at the tree line. It was empty and dark. The birds had not started yet. Everything was at that pause that happens just before the world remembers it must begin again.

He looked up at the attic window. Someone had left the light on upstairs. He stared at it long enough for the cigarette ash to fall unnoticed between his shoes. Then the light shuttled off.

He drew a hard, final pull from the filter, the ember flaring a brief, hot crimson against the pre-dawn shadows before he let the smoke roll past his lips. In the expanding grey mist, the silence of the clearing yielded to an older, noisier memory. He did not see the shape in the trees anymore; he saw her on asphalt. She was standing outside the neon spill of a basement bar in November; her wool coat buttoned to the throat and her weight slung over one hip. Her head tilted down, thumbs moving across the blue glare of her phone, her breath pluming in small, regular clouds against the city chill. When the sound of his boots broke the street noise, her chin would lift. She never offered a full, easy smile. But her mouth would soften at the corners, her eyes narrowing in a private recognition that meant the exact same thing.

"Come and see," the memory whispered.

And he had. He let the spent filter drop from his fingers. He ground the thick rubber heel of his boot down, twisting it into the dirt until the last stubborn spark went black, before pulling open the car door. Dele shifted into reverse. The truck rolled through the black clearing, the headlights left dark so as not to disturb the suspended tranquility of the timber. They glided past the dark tree line until the chassis rocked and the tires caught the smooth, wet asphalt of the main road. Only then did the dash light up, throwing two long beams of white gold into the pre-dawn fog.

In the small square of the wing mirror, the cabin was a dark, angular knot compressed between the pines, shrinking with every revolution of the wheel until the mist claimed it. Cheng broke his

gaze from the glass. He squared his shoulders, looking through the windshield to where the headlights cut a path through the dark. The road was long and empty and led, eventually, away.

My Father's Head

Ebuka Prince Okoroafor

"Chike, here is what you should expect. When you get there, be well composed. Do not put on a cloth that will make them look at you like you fell from mars. Be simple, no shiny shoes. Your father's head shouldn't be hard to find.

"His temples are always sunken in, back then he didn't eat too much shaki meat, I bet that's why. His eyes are globes, they bulge too prominently, you won't miss them. He has a tiny neck. They say, when God gives you a big head, he also gives you a thick neck to bear the weight, but God gave your father such a tiny neck that a slight wind could easily tip his head to an angle. Also, look out for any neck that can turn 180 degrees, that should be your father. He was the only person in the whole village who didn't need to move his whole body around to get a clear view of any space.

"Your father did not own a television, so you should expect him to have big ears. He loved to listen to his transistor radio, and you know what they say about Lamarck's theory of use and disuse of body parts. It applies here. His nose is spade shaped, the ala spreads towards his cheeks until you would think they want to fall out of his face. But they can smell anything, from the foul breath of Chief Omego — who was the first man in the whole village to own a toothpaste and brush — to the distinct odor of Mama Ijebu's armpit five miles away. Be careful, it could smell you too, so douse your body with talcum powder until it buries your aura. Your father hates talcum powder. Finally, your father's head is bald. Do not forget that."

When I get there, there is a sea of heads, and it is not as Mama has described. The keeper looks at me from his sunken eyelids, the dark circle around them spread like a penumbra. He is a mixture of many races, a petit and bald headed ominous looking man in his late seventies who is rumored to have lived more than that.

"When you get there, look at his nose," my friend, Xi Ling, says to me. "People say it changes each time they visit the mausoleum to pick up their fathers' heads, it's as though they keep switching destinies."

Xi Ling comes from a Chinese family of face readers. In the old world, their reputation was established before the great wall itself. Xi Ling could look at the ridge of your nose and tell you what

you'd be at forty. But he couldn't do all these until he was of age, until he went to the mausoleum to pick up his father's head. In this new world, it is tradition that when a man dies, his body is buried without a head. A man's head keeps on living even after death, and contains a wealth of information to be passed on to the next generation. Xi Ling became a face reader the moment he tasted the stew made with his father's ears.

Looking at the keeper's nose now, it's crooked, not as aquiline as that of the Italians; the way the last visitor had described. He keeps a little distance from me, and takes me from table to table, head to head, all submerged inside transparent pots filled to the brim with diluted formalin, its thick stench diffusing to every corner of the long hall. Some of the eyes follow my movement, some tongues stick out in mockery, a nose flares but the ears are almost unnoticeable. Yet my father's head is not among them.

We stop at a stand with a large head with a small nose, and the keeper turns to look at me.

"When did your father die?" he asks.

I do not really know, and while I try to fashion out a reply, I'm distracted by a glimpse of his thin Caucasoid neck that wobbles as though it will slant any minute, leaving his head to roll off his shoulders.

My mother once said my father died sixteen days after the death of the Sun, she was not sure, because my father didn't actually die, he just disappeared and never returned. So, instead, I reply, "About twenty days after the Sun died."

He frowns, and the furrows that appear on his forehead ripple down to his chin. It's as though every expression rearranges his facial conformation like a Rubik's cube. He turns and veers off at a tangent, unlocking a wooden door, and exposing a corridor I did not know existed. "The heads here died just after the sun was lost, find him," he says and turns his back on me.

Bulging eyes, bald head, small ears, scooped nose, no. Big ears, broad nose, afro hair, no eyes, no. I keep on until I get to the last stand. Then, I make a swift turn to the back of the exhibitions. None of the heads follow me, no 180 degrees twisting, none except…

He is standing there, transfixed with eyes wide like an owl's and neck twisted like a wrung piece of wet towel. "I found it," I say, and his cheeks redden. He unwinds his neck and turns his whole body around. Then he begins to shuffle towards me, as though if he moves too fast, his neck will snap.

Mama told me, "Chike should you find it, do well to pluck the eyes out. They are all you need and are best served when

roasted. Chike, your destiny is to become your father's reincarnate. You know what they say, the father sees through the son, and the son through the father."

My father keeps shuffling towards me.

Sons of Ghosts

Mazwemzini

"Ndebele religious philosophy posits that human beings have a spiritual component that lives on beyond the grave. This spirit, separated from the body, wanders into the unfathomable abyss of the universe. It wanders in solitude until it is brought back home to take care of its earthly progeny"

— Pathisa Nyathi. 2005

*

The Sunday Gobisa turned seventy-nine, like the reincarnation of Cyclone Idai, his son flooded the thoroughfares of Matsheumhlophe with his ceaseless wailing. A seed lamenting in the presence of the graying tree was unheard of in their family. In these ends, tears were reserved for the mamas-boys and the cheez-girls.

At times, I ponder in yonder wonder if these misunderstood bedfellows, of the waterbeds that are our cheeks, are esoteric. Cathartic astral projections. A weeping of legions. Uyazi, sometimes I think tears render us phantoms, we wear them like cloaks of obscurity — they hide us, hide from us, hide with us.

With every teardrop bled, the seed stumbled into a new vertebra of spirit. Gobisa's son wailed as if choking on years of unsaid questions. Questions with branches. Branches with roots. Questions with long limbs. Long limbs that ate samp and beans. Questions like ants, moving as would growing mould. Ants that craved Ingwebu. Questions in grim forms of thought, that wore shame as drag in the shadow realms of Mother Mind. Questions that craved ezanga-phakathi. Questions with ghosts.

Sorrow leaned Gobisa's son against the bone-white walls. Stuck to the rear wall like a parasite, the mandatory teak picture frame of the genocide architect ~~President~~, swayed, nearly dropping from the room's weight of sorrow.

Gobisa's son wished he could tell his father of the mysteries of his metaphysical pacemaker. He wished he could slowly unzip himself, watch all of the pieces avalanche right in front of their eyes. He yearned to witness his father's body-language while he pointed to the left and said, "Those are my fears," and pointing to the right, "those are my anxieties." Gobisa's son craved to be asked

about the sharp glowing piece by their feet, to which he would answer, “Those are the things I prayed... I'd hear you say.”

Gobisa's son's venous left arm jerked forward with the rage of a thousand eunuchs. The apheresis machine rustled. A bouquet of flame lilies from eCity hall flower market, a bunch of Zonki'zizwe bananas and blueberries, a flip-top box of Pacific Blue, a 100ml black dropper-bottle of Bathroom Boutique lavender essential oils, and a small cream patterned third-hand weighted blanket from the bend-over market, all went clattering onto the father’s gilded cage: the fowler, a four-section mattress.

The ultrasound machine groaned. A red warm water bottle bounced on the stainless steel frame of the bed, the ringing sound an eerie ostinato as Gobisa's son continued to wail. Confusion clasped his knees, sending Gobisa's son sliding from the wall to the beige tiled floor. The pulse oximeter gasped.

Uyazi, oKhokho babethii bona
Inyembezi zendoda zehlela esifubeni,

When a son wails, intimacy eclipses performance,
bruised hearts oft shy away from the holding. But when a ghost wails, the old-sages would say,

ukufa Kwenhliziyo ngum’zwangedwa.

the heart only dies to loneliness.

Seated half-mast in a commode toilet chair, Gobisa ignored the hematuria visiting his stressed bladder, and watched stoic as an owl under the nightshade while his son heaved and hived. Agony dripped from scrotum to tip to inner thigh to commode bucket, and like a trauma-adapted captive, Gobisa ignored it.

*

Ekusileni Medical Centre
Department of Haematology & Internal Medicine

MEDICAL REPORT
DATE: 15 [redacted]
PATIENT REF: FIC[redacted]*BYO*

1. PATIENT DEMOGRAPHICS

* Name: Gobisa [redacted]

* Age/DOB: 79 Years Old (Born[redacted]/1947)

* Gender: Male

* Address: [redacted], Zimbabwe

* Occupation: Retired Security Agent (Former [redacted])

~~uGobisa waycke waba li C-1O. You see, in Zimbabwe, the security cluster is composed of four interwoven main branches: the National Army, the Republic's Police, the Central Intelligence and the Air force. amaC-1O ngabeCentral Intelligence. Brought to us via Rhodesia, iCentral Intelligence is nebulous in status and character. They say it is "an organization established in the President's Office for the protection of national security," effectively bypassing Commanders of the Defence Forces, Ministries of Home Affairs, State Security, and State for Defence. They say it was enacted to gather and assess intel related to political, military, economic and national security. They say it is them that are responsible for counterintelligence & counterterrorism efforts, providing high level security to the state from threats both within and outside the country. A Nigerian poet once said "the biggest lie is the truth," if popular opinion is correct, everything they say is misdirection. Everything the CIO is, is a lie. They say they consist of nine branches. Yi internal, external, counter-intelligence, military intelligence, training, close security unit, technical and administration. Gobisa is said to have been a civil-war battle-hardened operative who worked in the 9th branch simply known as [redacted]~~

* Genotype: HbSS (Sickle Cell Anaemia)

* Bloodtype: [redacted]

2. REASON FOR CONSULTATION

Patient reported a three-day history of a worsening waist, lower back and hip pain, along with shortness of [redacted]

3. CLINICAL HISTORY

* Chief Complaint: Vaso-occlusive crisis (VOC).

* Occupational History: 35 years as [redacted] History of prolonged standing ~~torture, abduction of activists, assassinations, intimidation, executions, disinformation, extortion, harassment and sexual assault, manipulation~~ and exposure to varying temperatures, which previously triggered infrequent pain episodes.

* Frequency of Crisis: Historically 1–6 episodes per year; increased to 9 episodes in the last 12 months, suggestive of [redacted]ion.

* Relevant Past History:

[redacted]

4. LABORATORY INVESTIGATIONS

[redacted]

5. PHYSICAL EXAMINATION

[redacted]

6. ASSESSMENT & PLAN

[redacted]

Physician Signature:

Dr. MahambaYedwaTheWise Consultant Haematologist
Ekusileni Medical Centre

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*

Retrieving his lucky corduroy hat from the blueberries, past the flame lily petals on the bed, and dusting it on his weathering knee in a feeble rendition of a muscle memorized ritual, Gobisa wondered what more the boy wanted from him.

Had he not been a present and loving father. Was he not at as many of the boys' soccer games as his brown-envelopes to the handlers allowed, all the boy's debate competitions. First romance, first heartbreak, first wet dream, first tooth fall, first steps, first words, he had been there.

They weren't just father and son, they were amatjida. They bonded over the history of Madinda, Marechera, Mthukudzi, and Majaivana, they discoursed uMama Mafuyana and uMama Winnie. *So, what more did the boy want*, Gobisa brooded. Had he not given him the same, if not better, political education as Gobisa's father gave him? Had he not taken him to Njelele, to Duka, to Manyangwe, to Khami, to eNtabeni Emnyama? Had he not given the boy chances to have lived and personal experiences with the history of his people? What of his efforts to counter the ploys plots plays of the white man's schooling? *Did they mean nothing*, Gobisa ruminated, questioning his ancestors.

Just then…

Fear jolted Gobisa's tongue into action. The words that escaped from his mouths (the seen and unseen one) were audibly imperceptible. They were words that seemed lost. Words immaturely wise. Words in crisis. Words searching for a compass. Gobisa's words slurred rhythmically as if walking with a lean. Gobisa spoke in half-finished proverbs and *says* that none understood. Except his son.

Still sobbing and attempting to wipe mucus and resentment from his nostrils, Gobisa's son responded. He spoke of love not being confined to bodies and organs. Gobisa's son spoke on the contrast

between gender and sexuality. Still heaving and hiving on the floor and in the timbre of a tired man, he thundered and swore in deep isindebele that no law, tradition, even parent would get in his way. Sniffing and snivelling, he bawled depressingly about being seen in his fullness, he explained that it wasn't acceptance he sought, but to be seen. He reiterated that there was a difference. Holding a certified blood report to Gobisa's face, Gobisa's son explained that his blood was not 'contaminated,' thus he could still help.

Grunting and cursing in vile Chichewa profanities, Gobisa grabbed at the paper, subjecting it to rigorous ocular scrutiny. It too nearly tear-ed up like Gobisa's son. Gobisa was half way through his analysis when his unseen mouth vomited, and his seen mouth, in a register very familiar to his sobbing son, spewed the question if it is really necessary for "*oSis'Bhudi*" to be in the room. This was, after all, a family matter, he proclaimed.

Immediately, almost achingly, the wailing halted, seemingly swallowed by Gobisa's remark. The desk and curtains hushed. The windows murmured. The clock apologetically ticked three pm. The defibrillator mewled. The suction machine convulsed.

Exasperation begged the knees to stand, as grit grabbed Gobisa's son off the tiles. Then he clasped onto the supple palms of his onlooking husband and wife standing at the door.

*

iMiscommunication ibuhlungu. Montages of broken telephones televise pseudo-revolutions of the heart. Corrupted bonds test time's perseverance. Okungapheliyo kuyahlola.

As if rehearsed, the Phiri's, in a monastic ritual silence, marched out of room 3 of the Haematology Ward, into the south corridor, past the renal unit, the pathology centre, the cardiac lab, the main reception and then into Esigodini road. Not once did the trio look back. Not once did Gobisa shout for his son. Ekusileni Medical Centre stood in stasis as yet another family fell apart in its walls.

A week later, it was the weekend, a Sunday to be exact. As the sickle cell anemia continued to run riot in Gobisa's depleted body, and the last of his red blood cells calcified, his last thought was a question: kambe ngiyindoda m'hlobobani, am I a good man?

When they called Gobisa's only listed next of kin, he did not pick up. Every day, for two weeks, he did not pick up. In the third week, his body was taken to the Mpilo Mortuary near the township in Makhokhoba. There, three months later, he was given a pauper's burial by the municipality.

*

A year's breath later, as it befell cadres of ZIPRA, the two-hundred bed hospital, that had been initially conceptualized by the late Vice President Dr. Joshua Mqabuko Nyongolo Nkomo in the late 1990s, was closed down. It was deserted. A dream deferred.

The waiting rooms and corridors were denuded, not even the bottle necks were curious about the vacancy. All the equipment and utensils were removed. The stethoscopes, thermometers, nebulizers, patient monitors, wheelchairs, dialysis machines, and incubators were all gone. The hospital was like a tabula rasa.

The teachings of those who study rumors suggest that in the aftermath of Gobisa's death, at three pm every Sunday, many surgeons, physicians, specialists, nurses, ambulance drivers, first aiders, medical secretaries, receptionists, ward clerks, cleaners, maintenance technicians, cooks, family members, caregivers, guardians, and well-wishers, would be assaulted by unseen assailants. As long as you were on the hospital grounds, you were not spared.

At first some adults reported being choked by sinister camouflaged slipknot nooses. Then the children fell into inexplicable terminal illnesses, some laid in vegetative state, brain dead, others endured dual sensory loss. The elderly, perhaps out of kindness, only became paralyzed from the neck down.

For a sustained period, it was clear that those who set foot on the premises of the hospital left with weakened spirits and frail minds. The men incurred bizarre delusions and waking-walking deliriums. One security guard, after a Sunday evening shift, is said to have got home and reported to his brother that he was being followed by a wailing flying saucer. That night as they slept, he yelped in torment saying a tokoloshe was eating his testicles.

The women completely lost their wits. A nurse from Mahatshula was caught nude and strangling her teenage son with a vengeful might. When the police arrived, she denied the accusations, and cried in amnesia that all she remembered was the mtshova from the hospital where she had repeatedly told other passengers of an unnerving headache; she said it was as if she was being force-fed fists to the cranium.

With all of the suffering and torment, it was only after *Bloody Sunday* that the City Council of Bulawayo, officially clamped and bolted the doors of Ekusileni. That day, the scalpels were in mutiny. A coup d'état conspired by the surgical forceps, retractors, and clamps began at three pm as the clock hit the hour of long shadows. The needles, electrosurgical pencils and surgical scissors battled in the air as if in a fencing skirmish. The oxygen

tanks and surgical lights ricocheted and recoiled from wall to ceiling demanding not to be snubbed from the insurrection.

The hospital became a site of spellbinding horror. Only but a few managed to flee with their souls intact, while doctors, nurses, first responders, receptionists, security guards, maintenance staff, family members, caregivers, and well-wishers died gory ghastly grisly occult deaths.

Okoko babesithii bona

Ukufa kulamanyala.

*

Those who study rumors allege that *Gobisa, the avenging spirit,* still wanders in Nyongolo's blank canvas, lost, immaturely wise, in crisis, searching for a compass, slurring rhythmically as if walking with a lean, speaking in half-finished proverbs and *says* that no one would be able to understand, except his son…

Just yesterday, when my nephew and I were gleefully walking back home from the Christian Brothers College where he schools, just before the Fazak Home and Hyper but closer to the turn off to Hillside Teachers College, I was unexpectedly asked by this mkhulu wearing a red-speckled baggy-button-top corduroy newsboy hat, for a Maddison loose. When I turned to look over my shoulder to retrieve the box from my bag, I felt my nephew tug my pants. I looked down to him, and he cautiously whispered that the person I was giving cigarettes to did not have arms or legs.

Sigijime saphosa samosha amabhrugwa!!!

Those who study rumors say *isiPoko siGobisa* still wanders in Matsheumhlophe waiting for his son….

*

Mama sengihambile engcwabeni likababa
Ngikhulume laye kodwa akangiphenduli
Uthi umlomo wakhe ugcwele inhlabathi
Mama kanti ukufa yindaba lakho kungafi

Ngadubeka (Ngidubekile ubaba wafa ngidubekile)
Ngadubeka (Ngidubekile ubaba wafa ngidubekile)
Ngadubeka (Ngidubekile ubaba wafa ngidubekile)

Mother, I went to the grave of my father
I spoke to him but he does not answer
He says his mouth is full of earth
Mother, how come death does not die

I am mourning (I am mourning the death of my father, I am mourning)
I am mourning (I am mourning the death of my father, I am mourning)
I am mourning (I am mourning the death of my father, I am mourning)

Ubaba Wafa [song]. Lovemore Majaivana. 1984

A Red Famine

Charles M. Mwangi

"My leg hurts."

He doesn't reply. Instead, he presses down on the bone sticking out from her broken leg with his hand.

She screams, a scream that ends with sweat and piss.

"I want my son," he says, calmly.

Above her, the sun spins and spins and her mouth tastes of rot. She tries to hug herself, then realises she can't.

"Kimathi," she calls out. "It was the red famine."

His face reappears. He's smiling. He'd always smiled when angry.

"I know, and I'm sorry. But I want my son back."

Now he is no longer smiling. He's grinning and his lips are pulled back and his mouth is pink and his teeth are long and sharp. She's sure he wants to break her other leg. She turns her face away and sees a squirrel peering from the edge of a bush. Its eyes seem teary, and its whiskers twitch ever so slightly.

I'm sorry for your babies, Gakenia wants to tell the furious squirrel. *It was the red famine.*

The squirrel's tail stiffens, then it scurries away. Gakenia looks up. Her husband's eyes have turned red. The smile is back on his face, but it now looks twisted. His tongue hangs out. He looks beautiful.

A cricket chirps. The hesitant rumble of thunder follows. The air smells of blood and sweat and piss and rotten meat.

"I want my child back," her husband whispers in her ear.

*

The men who went away to fight the white man's war are back. The men say that the war was fought between worlds, and that in the war, white men died.

"Second World War," one man says.

The villagers mob the men, always with questions. Most of them do not believe any of what the men say. The returning men laugh at their stupidity.

Gakenia is fifteen years old when the men arrive. She's already circumcised and married to Kimathi, heavily pregnant with his child.

"It is a boy," Kimathi tells her. "A son."

She looks at his wide face and smiles. She wants to bear him a son; she knows that is what she is carrying. They make love that evening in his thingira.

One last time before the baby arrives, she tells herself.

She is right about it being the last time.

She wakes up early the next morning and joins the other women for her load of firewood. They walk in a file, the older women — the nyakinyua — leading the way. They take the path that cuts across the village and to the forest. The sun is yet to rise, but the boys are already driving out the sheep to the pastures, men smoke tobacco outside their huts, and the snow atop Kirinyaga gleams purple. The air is cold, but soon their bodies warm as they walk deeper into the forest.

They don't stop, but once in a while, the nyakinyua slow down for the others to catch up. But after a while, they don't slow down anymore, and Gakenia finds herself playing catch up. She tries to hasten her steps, but her bulging belly won't allow.

I know where the cedar grows, she says to herself.

But she doesn't get to the cedars that day.

*

This is Nduta's third season going to the forest. By now she should know the way to the cedars, but the path takes too many turns and the undergrowth is thick.

"Don't ever take your eyes off the nyakinyua," her mother had warned, "or fall behind."

Now she cranes her neck and sees the back of the leading nyakinyua. She looks back and realises she is second from last. A pregnant girl is the last in the line. The girl is losing ground.

"Hey!" she shouts at the nyakinyua ahead. "We need to wait…"

The women walk on. She thinks of slowing down herself; take the risk. But there's a buffalo's spoor on the path and the trees whistle, and suddenly she's scared. So, she keeps walking, glancing back every now and then until the pregnant girl drops out of sight.

She must have returned to the village, she convinces herself. *Or she could have gone into labour*.

She thinks she hears a scream. The women don't stop.

They get to the cedars, cut the wood and trot back. Nduta hesitates when they come to the place where she last saw the pregnant girl.

*

Gakenia loses sight of the women ahead of her. But she can't go back. The month of Gathano is not far, and her baby must keep warm, so she pushes on.

She smells the stench of stale dung before she sees the beast. The ground shudders. Curved horns bear down on her. She runs a few steps before a crushing force sends her flying into the air. For a brief moment she glimpses the backs of the women walking ahead, then she lands hard on the ground. A jolt of pain forces her eyes close, and when they finally flutter open, she finds herself in the middle of a bush, a buffalo trying to force its way inside. It snorts and digs and tears the bush with its horns. Dust and leaves fly into the air. Birds scream. A squirrel scurries away, leaving behind its three babies.

Gakenia gives a shriek, and with the sound comes a warm gush between her legs. She shrieks again.

The buffalo is tiring but it won't go away. It pauses, eyeing her with its dark eyes. She lies still. After a while, it lowers its head and lumbers away. A silence descends, then Gakenia's scream tears the forest as her belly explodes with pain.

*

The women, firewood on their backs, arrive home to the sight of tens of white soldiers and askaris rounding up the men. They see the women and chase them into their huts. The women shriek and drop the firewood as the intruders hit them with sticks. The men are forced to squat at the village square and beaten with rungus. Nduta watches the whole thing through a hole in her hut. She listens, too.

A white family has been slaughtered on a nearby farm.

One man sprints away. A crack of a gun follows. The man falls down. Nduta stiffens. More gunshots. Dozens of men are dragged away with their hands bound. The granaries are burned down. The women do not come out of their huts.

Night settles. Gakenia is passed out in a bush with her newborn still attached to the cord. She doesn't know her husband has been carted away to Manyani Detention Camp. And that the soldiers have declared a curfew on the village.

*

Gakenia regains consciousness as the truck carrying Kimathi and the other men reaches Nairobi on its way to Manyani. It's dark and she's lying on her back, the only sound is the soft whistling of trees.

"Kimathi?" she calls out. Her voice dissolves into the night air. She drags herself to a sitting position, and as she does so, something wet slips from her breasts. She reaches out to catch it.

She remembers now. Firstly, the smell of death as it charged at her: grey, curved horns with jagged edges. She's flying. She's lying in a bush and there's pain everywhere…

She gasps. The baby is cold. She turns it around and pinches its back. It doesn't cry. She pinches harder.

"Please." She's trembling and her leg hurts and her son won't cry. She presses her breast into his mouth. *"Please!"*

She shakes him even as a dread descends on every nerve in her body. She thinks she'll pass out. She wants to pass out. But she doesn't. She holds the baby onto her bosom and cuddles it and sings to it the songs her mother had sung for her when she was small. She sings until the day breaks and her voice breaks with it. Until the sun hangs in the sky and its rays fall on the bone sticking out of her broken foot.

Later, she cuts the cord, then she places the baby on the ground. Only then does she pass out.

*

The buzzing brings Gakenia to the present. Flies. They dance in the air before her. Then they fight and rub their feet and buzz more. Big flies with hair on their bodies. She cuts a twig and swats at them. They dance around it, and then land on the twig.

Her foot is swollen, that she can see. The blood around where the bone pierced through the skin has clotted. A slight movement sends pain through her whole body. "My husband will come for me," she says, then feels for her baby. Despite the sun, it is still cold.

Gakenia calls out her husband's name. She doesn't know that he is five hundred kilometers away surrounded by spiked trenches, police dogs and watchtowers. She calls his name even after the day passes and night comes and hunger and thirst and the smell of rotting flesh eats at her. She must keep calling his name, you see, even if he can't hear her.

But it is only the three baby squirrels that answer her back.

The squirrels… She had never eaten a squirrel before.

Her foot throbs in the cold and sears when the sun comes out. It is too heavy. She doesn't want it anymore.

Last night she smelt a hyena. She thought she heard it trying to shoulder through the thicket. She thought she heard it chuckling. Her husband will kill the hyena when he comes.

Kimathi will be here soon. Just wait.

*

It rains. She survives the third day.

Tomorrow, she eats the last squirrel. After that there will be nothing left but the leaves. And her baby.

*

The rustling of the leaves. Gakenia stirs. Kimathi has finally found her. His face is red like the clouds in a final sunset.

She feels the thirst creeping up her throat. “I need water,” she tells her husband.

But her husband is no longer there and all she sees are trees and she’s inside a thicket and there is a child lying on the ground with its back eaten by… a hyena?

She hears herself speak, but she cannot be sure.

“Who’s there?” a male voice says from the edge of the bush.

“Kimathi? Is that you?” she says in her head.

It is her husband, alright. He floats through the bush to where she lies on the ground. He’s smiling. He looks from her to the mutilated baby on the ground. When he looks back at her, he’s no longer smiling.

“It was the red famine,” she says to him as he closes on her.

He nears, his breath smelling of decay and death.

He wants his son.

He presses on her foot. The pain searing, enough to warm her.

Kimathi’s mouth is now covered in blood. Her blood. He lowers his head, and she hears the sound of flesh tearing. Her foot is light now. She’s happy and sad at the same time. Happy because as long as Kimathi continues feeding, he won’t look at her with those accusing eyes. Sad because the child is cold.

*

Nduta doesn’t walk the forest until the eve of Kenya’s independence. She is alone this time. She fears not even the paths of the dead. But she remembers, though it was a long time ago.

At the place where she last saw the girl with a big belly, a tiny bonpoints into the bushShe follows it and comes to a clearing. There, she sees two skulls. One big, one small. She kneels and touches the bigger one with her finger, then says, “Your husband came back.”

A squirrel scurries into a bush. She straightens up. A few steps away, inside a nest, three baby squirrels gaze at her. She smiles, then quietly walks away.

No Stairs

C. S. Odili

"John, it's me, Feima. You know me, John, come on! Why are you doing this?"

You pause to swallow, stifling a snort cough. Your voice, vibrating with fear, pleases me.

"If you let me go, I promise not to say anything, to anyone. It would be like nothing ever happened!"

My face searches yours. I don't believe you so, I walk away.

"John, wait! Say something for God's sake!"

I flash a smile. You pause again, realising, retreating.

"God? Since when do you call God, Feima?" I kick my head back in sardonic laughter.

You throw my question and mockery to the back of your mind, kneel forward and continue. "We can find a way out. Please John, just tell me what I need to do."

My eyes follow the blinking from the bulb in the corner of the room.

"John, look at me!"

I look at you, but really what I see is the you from the first day. I remember the first day you moved into the tall, half modern brown house, also known as the Strauss Apartment building on 12th Street. It was the start of a new life for you – a second new life, you were telling the doorman. You said women like you: brown, big, old, and tired don't often get the chance to pick themselves up and start over, and he agreed.

You saw brown, big, old, and tired. I saw experienced, husky, different – exactly what I desperately longed for; someone different. You had long, black hair. Hair so dark I wanted to think you dyed it that colour to hide any growing grey strands. Your face told me a story simply by looking at you. The wrinkles lined over your skin showed me the lines of a life hard lived. Your eyes were tired and sunken with dark circles underneath, and your lips were set in a tight, semi thin line.

Despite the hardships you had faced, your beautiful face radiated strength, a life seeking to get back in control. Your smile, veering to the side, was genuine and hinted at a deep, different beauty. You had not been defeated by your struggles, at least not entirely. I couldn't wait to be introduced.

"John Forrester," I said motioning towards you, joining my freshly moisturised palms with yours.

"John? Nice. I'm Feima Dunkar. Hello, John."

You tested it out on your tongue, gave it a new meaning.

You didn't look at the obvious scar drawn across my face. You weren't scared of me because of it. Your eyes didn't judge me. You said you once had a friend with the same name. You liked your old friend John. You met him when you used to teach Grade 3. He was a father to one of your best students, a widower, a sufferer of plights familiar to you and so, you became friends, you told me. You helped each other platonically navigate life. You both joined a grief support group; he raised his daughter at home, and you raised her at school. You told me that John was a good friend who unfortunately had to move away when he fell in love with you, a love that could never be reciprocated.

So, when you called my name, you liked that you had a fond reminder of your old life. You smiled and called me by my first name. So of course, you *liked* me.

You draw out more tears and snot from your running eyes and nose. And the blinking bulb bothers my eyes even more. Both distractions blind my memory of the day we met, giving you ammunition to start speaking again.

"John, you have to talk to me. Say something. Please!"

I look at you intently now, there is nothing to respond to. So, I wriggle out of the large duct tape around my right wrist. You crawl away from me as I tear off the amount I need.

"Stay still, Feima."

Surprisingly, you do. Perhaps you know by now that it is easier. I place the tape like a stamp over your mouth and walk away.

*

You cried yourself to sleep the first few nights you arrived at Strauss Apartment. Your eyes told me every morning. I guessed you were haunted by something, or running from someone, like all people who come to 12th street. I remember thinking that I could take care of you, kiss all your worries away and you need not cry anymore. I wished to tell you, but I held back, never knowing what for. So, I started to study you.

You set your old couch in the snug living room space and a depressed mattress in your room, but you didn't unpack all your boxes yet. You threw out the crucifix the last occupant left hanging on the main front door, not stopping to look. I didn't think much of it — until a week later.

The Jehovah's Witnesses group had gathered at your door, knocking with beaming faces; they couldn't wait to tell you about Jesus. They arranged themselves, rehearsing the lines on a paper, perhaps it was their first time.

Your legs danced with joy towards the entrance when you heard the rapping at the door. Through the peephole, you saw a group of three teenage strangers. You opened and stood at the

entrance, wondering what they needed.

The shortest of them walked forward with her palm stretched toward you for a handshake, but her height made it look like she was going to hold you.

"Good morning, ma'am. We are Jehovah's Witnesses. May we come in to tell you about Jesus and His love for you?"

She turned to collect a tract from the second person in the group, perhaps to give a visual representation of her words. Before she could release a breath of sound from her mouth, you pushed your hand forward, towards her, scrunching up your face the same way you would when you passed by something foetid. The one speaking stopped and moved back with haste on her toes. The boy who handed her the tract thrusted forward to explain, and that was when you got angrier.

You screamed for the first time since moving into the apartment, it sounded like the opening wail of "Sweet Child O' Mine" by Guns N' Roses — impossible to ignore.

"Leave my house now! Where was this love when my first husband and young child died in a car accident? Where was it when my second husband beat me like an old dusty chair and then ran off with the neighbour? Where was God and His love?"

The woman, who lived opposite your apartment and owned five cats, opened her door and immediately motioned the group towards the corridor from which they came, ushering them to the elevators, out of the building.

Moments later, Cat Woman returned and walked you into her home. Maybe she offered you a special kind of calming, hallucinogenic tea and let you hold her cats, because later that evening you drank the same tea alone in your apartment, smiling as you stroked your fluffy pillow. You moaned at the first sip. You didn't stop moaning after that, or maybe it was the only sound I could hear. You moaned when you had the first bite of your food, any food. You moaned when the first ten seconds of the hot water shower rained on you. You moaned when you rolled over to the cool side of your bed in your sleep, and you moaned when I caressed your foot as you slept.

Day after day, I continued to watch you. You practised yoga in your living room. You walked around your apartment and sat on your couch naked. A couch that you later threw out and I carried, just to trace my fingers where your soft skin had been. Oh, how I dreamed of tracing my fingers round every crevice of your body, of your mind. I wanted you, and I wanted to tell you the truth.

Over the next two weeks, you came out more. You smiled at everybody; the doorman, the neighbours, the staff. You smiled on your way to your spa job at the salon across the street, a perfect view from my window, a job that Cat Woman referred you to. You appreciated the pay. It bought your groceries, paid your rent, and

your service charges. While the pay was good, you needed to save. So, you asked that you expand to other parts of the salon – hair, nail art, body therapy. You started coming home later, more exhausted. Your shoulders and hips were always so tense, I wished you would let me practise some of that body therapy you gave others. I'd seen you give them; I knew you needed it.

Admirably, no matter how tired you were, you never complained. In general, you never did. Even when your toilet pipes burst and Nolan, the plumber, was dilly dallying with your time, you let it go, and he didn't come to fix it until two days had passed. You could have called me. I wished you did.

We started talking more. When we were not together, I filled my days monitoring the footage, your apartment and the hallway my favourite show. I found it strange that the first time I placed a blue table clock on your entrance console, you hadn't noticed. Your attention to detail only showed up at the salon. When you were at home, you closed your eyes, stretched your full body on your new couch, and took no mind, never noticing.

Every morning, your eyes and beam greeted me in the corridor.

"Morning, John," you'd say.

It felt like a ritual, one that I looked forward to performing with you every sunrise. You *saw* me.

You didn't think anything about the disappearance of one of your regular customers, Fred. You were relieved to not have to endure his inappropriate jokes while waxing him and pretending to smile. When you confirmed from the admin assistant that he had not called to cancel, nor picked up their reminder calls, you all concluded that he was out of town. You tried to hide your smile of relief, but your thin lips betrayed you, already spread wide across your face as you shrugged your shoulders.

Fred was taken out of your client list when he missed his second appointment. Two weeks after he missed the first. You appreciated it. It unburdened you, loosened the tension in your shoulders a bit. You laughed more, revealing the creaminess of your teeth and taking me to church with the hymn your voice produced. I loved that I was the reason. My gift to you.

You started planning a housewarming party—the party that ushered in the end. When you gave me an invite, I offered to help you set up for the event by painting and unpacking the boxes you left stacked, almost 3 months ago. You agreed gratefully; you could never have finished on your own, you told me.

You welcomed me into your home. If I weren't already familiar with every nook and cranny of your apartment, I would have felt honoured. But the mood that day, it was like waking up on Christmas morning. You handed me brown boxes of your life, to be unwrapped and seen by me. You played Minnie Riperton and danced around as I painted over the memories of the last tenant.

I smiled as I took glances at you. I knew you saw me. With wet paint still dripping down it, you brushed your arm across the kitchen wall going to make us another cup of tea.

"Oh no John, I am so *so* sorry. All the work you've done, and I go and do that."

"Forget about it, Feima. What are friends for?"

The absence of your response to my question rang across the room.

You offered me some of that special tea that Cat Woman gave you, and as we drank, you asked to feel my scar. It fascinated you. You guessed that I was a marine. I didn't confirm nor deny. Your fingers on my face felt like warm bread in one's palm.

I was not surprised when you moaned as we drank the tea.

"Would you two like a room?" I asked, gesturing to the cup in your hands, the object of your pleasure.

You laughed like it was the funniest thing you ever heard. You would later tell it to Cat Woman when she visited, and she would not think it was very funny. Then, you would also not think it very funny. She would regret that someday.

You served homemade devilled eggs, canapes and fruit punch at your housewarming party a week later. You themed it "new life" and invited everybody who shared your new life sentiment; people from the apartment complex, the salon, and anyone nearby who wanted to start over. They were hopeful, excited, new, like the first sight of freshly folded foulards.

"Some say that moving into a new home is a chance to leave the past behind and begin a new chapter in life. I have heard quotes like "home is where the heart is" or "every new beginning comes from some other beginning's end," you air quoted and bobbled your head.

Everyone laughed, you smiled and continued your party speech, "Well, a new home is a new story of who you are. It is a place where you can unpack your life and feel safe, secure and connected."

You cleared your throat with your hand tapping against your chest, and then continued for four more minutes, tales of your oldest, fondest memories. After the story you told of yourself as a young girl, sitting with your parents in your garden on Sundays, having lunch and laughing at your mother's jokes, I left. Some of us did. I returned a couple hours later, but by then, you looked different.

Your entire body sagged with the weight of your mood. Your eyes were first fixed on the ground, as if you were paused. Then you looked up, turning your neck as far as it would go, your eyes following. You turned towards my direction, so I straightened and readied a smile for you. But you looked past me. Your face printed what you felt in your heart, and I wondered what bothered you, who you were looking for. I suspected; I knew. That was

quick. Your guests started whispering, eventually leaving, including me.

The next morning, you sent me a message. *Thank you for coming to my party*. You didn't personalise it.

You didn't say, "Morning, John," when you left for work. You didn't smile. You didn't complete the ritual. You missed your step on your way to work, almost tripping on the concrete. You staggered into the road, the driver cursing what she assumed were your failing eyes. You had that same sad glower brooding over your face when you walked into the salon. You dropped your bag on the table, its closeness to the edge made it easy to flip over, meeting the ground.

Completely nescient of everything else around, you took a coworker, your friend, outside. You whispered into her ear. She retreated and gasped, you flinched. You realised that she was not the best person to tell your concerns to. You were crying, rubbing off the tears from your eyes before it finished forming, realising you were still at work.

Word dispersed like the wind on 12th street. One of the guests at the party, a younger colleague, was missing. You could have talked to me. I would have told you that I saw her, that I have her – *had* her. You wouldn't have cried so much. I could have trusted you with my secret. If we'd spoken, you wouldn't have called the cops, and they wouldn't have identified that one of your regulars, Fred, was also missing and has been since he missed that first appointment. They wouldn't have gone about asking everyone questions.

The police officers told you that they were looking for a white man, mid-to-late thirties with a fading scar across his face — "according to witnesses who saw him with the missing colleague." One of them gave you a sketch. Your mind swiped across the ten thousand faces it had seen over the last forty years, and none had a scar like that. Except one.

Your muscles were tensing, and your breath came in short, ragged, choking gasps as you stood facing the officers.

"What?! Is he a suspect?"

My swallowed spit had no place to settle. The officers turned to each other, then to you.

"Was he at your party, ma'am?"

Your mouth was dry, your eyes wide, the weight of the moment crashing down. You couldn't find the words.

"We need you to think carefully," the officer continued, voice low, serious. "Call us as soon as you remember anything that might help. We'll be back." They handed you a business card, and without another word, they left, their steps heavy in the quiet.

You stood frozen, the air thick with unspoken fear. And then you collapsed onto the lobby chair, unblinking as you stared at the life before you. Your face was ashen, your lips parted in a

constant silent gasp, your hands clenched tightly at your sides, and your knuckles white with tension.

Watching your chest rise and fall rapidly, as if you couldn't catch your breath, made it all clear. I could tell that your mind was a jumbled mess of thoughts and emotions about to erupt.

As you got up and walked towards the stairs, I called your phone. If you were afraid, your eyes didn't show it. You glared at the phone, turning sharply back to the lobby, eyes fixed to the entrance of where the police officers just walked through, searching through your pocket for the phone number they gave you.

You picked up when you realised they had driven off. The sound of my voice was like ice water down your legs. You stopped, frozen.

"Feima, I can explain everything. Please. I will be in front of your apartment. Use the elevators. No stairs."

You never liked to use the elevators. No matter how tired you were, you took the stairs.

You stopped by the vending machine, clanking coins and fiddling with the bottle of water it gave you. You finally steadied your hand and drank small gulps until the bottle was half empty. Again, you walked towards the door with the large handles, then you remembered, stopped, and turned right. When the elevator door finally opened, you hesitated for a second before stepping in. You made to turn, to push the button and prepare yourself, but your mind must've been whirring so loudly that you didn't hear when I came up behind you.

When you came to, you wept, the sound bouncing off the damp, concrete walls of the basement. Your throat stretched out of your mouth, and with each wail, thick veins zig-zagged over your neck. You went quiet for a moment, when you saw her propped up in the corner, the harsh, cold floor beneath you scraped against your limbs as you shuffled quickly away from her. Your hands would have flown to your mouth had it not been tied behind you.

"Why her, John? She was so kind, so young."

"She saw the bugs," I mumbled. "And the cameras… But you know what she was like at the salon, Feima. What she was actually like, always prodding. You don't need people like that."

*

I gave you some space, three hours, to settle in a bit.

When I walk back in, you are sitting, calm, even as I pull the duct tape from around your mouth. You are quieter, your screams no longer echo, they are now gasps, like the gradual waking of a baby.

For the first time, you realise the smell of death hanging

thick in the air, and you feel bile rising in your throat. You are gagging, stretching your throat, forcing the stench out of your nose. You stare at me; dried tears have stained your cheeks.

"I hate that you are reacting like this, Feima. You know I would never hurt you on purpose."

You force a friendly smile, opening your mouth and realising that those questions you asked me earlier were the wrong ones. You know now that I know you, intimately. You have an idea why I am doing this, but you are scared to confirm. I wipe your cheeks and mouth with the handkerchief in my hand. You recoil at my touch, a touch you once moaned for in your sleep.

"You are hurting me, Feima. You say we are friends but indeed you are just like the rest of them. You're no different after all. You claimed to love me yet you turned so fast. You should've let me explain first, before you went to the others."

You are crying more. Your eyes are like the top of a mountain high waterfall. Like I did with your colleague and that awful client, I hold your neck firmly with both hands, massaging deeply the veins that keep you alive, betting against my mind to see what can disappear quicker: your eyes into the socket or my fingers into your bones. The latter is winning.

I regret your behaviour, just like I regret those salon urchins' behaviours, and those women—four had moved into this apartment, all of them unkind.

You attempt a final struggle as you hit my belly with the edge of your knee, but you miss. The look in your tired eyes, lets me know that you are aware of what will happen. As my hand releases across your face, my alarm beeps. 3:30 pm. You pass out again, and I press a fresh duct tape over your mouth.

I hope you will not wake up before 6 pm. I'd hate to kill you sooner than scheduled.

Black Flames

Rita Chioma

I was never afraid of the dark. I need you to understand that. I was never afraid of it. I loved the dark. I felt safe in it. Invincible, even. The dark was the one place where I could hide and pretend and dream, and I never thought anything could change that. And then they came.

I need you to listen to me. I need you not to do what everybody else did. Please stay.

*

My room was as dark as it always was. So dark I could pretend my eyes were closed and there would not be a difference.

My body jolted awake and I felt something I had never experienced before. I do not think there is a word for it. Even saying I was afraid would not suffice. I could not blink. I could not open my eyes or move my body. I felt like I had been placed inside a coffin and buried alive. I was trapped in darkness. I could not see a thing. But I could see them.

Three of them.

Black flames. That is the only way I can describe them. They moved like flames on a candlestick, but darker than anything I had ever seen, hovering over my bed. My body was heavy with a weight I could not see, let alone describe. I felt cold and heat at the same time. My tongue grew heavy inside my mouth and my head pressed further into the bed.

I felt a fear so deep it swallowed me whole. Like a void sucking in all the bad and letting loose the good. I tried to close my eyes, but I couldn't. I couldn't blink. I couldn't move my fingers. I couldn't move any part of me. It was like being trapped inside a nightmare. Except I was fully awake. Awake for all of it. Caged in a body which couldn't produce any hint of a sound, and I felt a fear I had never felt before.

So, I did the only thing I had left. I prayed. Deep in my mind, I began to say the Lord's Prayer because that is what you do, right? That is what they tell you. When evil comes, you pray. When you see something you cannot explain, you pray.

"Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name," my mind speaking the words but lips could not.

Then, they joined me.

Inside my head. Word for word. Perfect.

And for one second, one terrible, hopeful second, I thought maybe they were good. Maybe I had been afraid for nothing. Maybe…

Then, they laughed.

They were inside my mind. They heard the thought the moment I had it, and they laughed at me for it.

"Did you really think that was enough?" they spoke at once.

"What do you want?" I replied shakily.

*

They said they came to give me a message. Another death was coming. A new death, they said.

I was eighteen. Lying in my bed in the dark. Eighteen, having a premonition of my death in so many scenarios that I lost count. I saw every member of my family. My father. My mother. My brother. My sister. My friends. My colleagues.

They showed me each one like they were giving me a choice, like I was supposed to pick my death. And they showed me where I would be buried. The ground of the house I had spent my whole life trying to escape.

And then they were gone.

I do not know how long I stayed there. It felt like years. When I could finally move my hand, I reached for my phone in the dark. My whole body shook violently. I felt exhausted, like I had been running for hours. Sweat soaked through my clothes, and my heart beat so loudly I thought I would go deaf.

Three in the morning, and I had been awake since before midnight. I lay there trembling until the sky turned blue. And when morning came, I ran to my mother and told her everything. She looked at me like a lost puppy who needed pity and said I needed to pray more. She reminded me that I had not been going to church for a while, always saying God had no use for me.

"There are terrible evils in the world," she said, "and you gave them an opening."

I wanted to tell her I prayed. I prayed to God like I always did, mostly to beg God to let me step inside a church again, but the shadows joined me, they said the words I said. I wanted to tell her it only made them laugh harder, but I could see in her face that she had already decided what this was. So, I swallowed it.

At first, I tried to believe it was a nightmare. I tried. I had nightmares before. This was not new. Although my nightmares never made sense, and nobody ever had faces in them, they never scared me. I usually forgot them seconds after waking up.

I felt a sharp headache and pressed my fingers against my

temple. A split second of closed eyes, a split second, and I was back on the bed. And they were laughing. I have had nightmares before, and this was not one of them.

So, you need to believe me when I say this. There is something after me. Are you still listening? Please believe me.

*

After they left, I became a different person. I don't know how else to say it. I looked the same. I ate, I moved, I spoke. But something had shifted underneath all of that, something I could not name and could not explain to anyone who asked.

I became afraid of my family. I know how that sounds. I know. These were the people I had lived beside my whole life, people who knew my name, who had fed me and held me. But I had seen what I had seen. I looked at my father across the dinner table and all I could think about was the image they had shown me. My mother in the kitchen. My brother. My sister. I could not look at any of them without a vision of them doing something horrible to me, without the voices mocking me and counting down the days.

I tried to tell people. I was a sad person before this but now I was just hollow. I would open my mouth to explain and watched their faces go the same way my mother's face had gone that morning. *You need to pray. You need to sleep. Are you sure it wasn't a nightmare? Stop dwelling. Why do you always think something bad is going to happen? Why can't you ever be positive?*

So, I stopped telling people. I folded it inside me and carried it alone.

But the voices didn't stop.

*

Are you still there? I need you to still be there.

First, it was one. Just one, low and certain, commenting on everything. The food I ate. The way I walked. The things I said and should not have said and should have said differently. I thought maybe this was just my conscience. Maybe this was just anxiety. I had been to therapy. I knew what they called it. Anxiety. Depression. Offering me means to get well. So, I breathed in. I breathed out. I read books and tried to fill myself with light things, and told myself I was healing.

Then the second voice came. Then the third. Three voices. The cycle completed.

I tried to tell someone. Please, I said, there are voices in my head and they will not stop. But when you say that to someone,

something closes in their face. I watched it happen every time. The stepping back. The invitations that stopped coming. The careful silence where a friend used to be. *Why are you always like this. Why can't you just be normal. Why are you always so sad?* One by one, they went.

And then, it was just me and the three voices.

So, I decided I would fight them with light. If they came to me in the dark then I would never be in the dark again. I kept every light burning. And when I slept, I slept with the brightness pressing through my eyelids, and for a while, a small merciful while, it worked. They stayed at the edges. They muttered but they couldn't reach me all the way.

Are you still listening? Please, keep listening.

But the light alone could not hold them forever. I could feel them pressing, testing, looking for another way in.

So, I gave them other noise to fill the silence. Sitcoms, always playing, always loud. I would laugh at the same jokes I had heard a hundred times before, and for a moment, one small moment, I would forget. I needed it the way you need water. When one episode ended, I pressed the next immediately because the silence in between was when they came closest. I played so many games. I opened every social media app I had and scrolled. Scrolled and scrolled through other people's dinners and holidays and beautiful smiling lives. As long as I was inside someone else's world, I was not inside mine.

I understand now that this is how they found their way in through the light. I was lying on my bed one afternoon. Sun coming through the window. Phone in my hand, sitcom playing, every light on. I thought I was safe. And then I felt the cold. That same void, that opening in my chest, that unmistakable weight. But it was afternoon. The sun was out. This was not supposed to be possible.

And then the chains.

They closed around my ankles first. Then my wrists. Then my neck. Cold and heavy and invisible, but unmistakeably real. I could stand, I could walk, I could go through the motions of a day, but every step pulled against something I could not show anyone, something only I could feel dragging behind me wherever I went.

I told my mother. *There are chains on my legs*. She was tired by then. I could hear it in the way she breathed before I had even finished speaking. I told my father. *There are chains on my hands, there are chains on my legs, I need you to listen to me.*

He looked at me the way you look at something you have tried to fix too many times. *Go to church,* he said. *Read your bible. Stop this.*

So, I stopped telling them. They noticed the way I walked but they stopped asking why and I stopped offering the answer, because it led nowhere I had not already been a hundred times before.

*

They took my eyes next. Not literally, I need you to understand that, not literally. But every mirror became a place their voices lived. Every reflection, every surface, every idle moment. *Look at yourself,* they said. *Look at what you are. Look at what you are not*. They stole the protection I had obtained from my phone. Watching the people's lives I had been hiding inside, they turned that against me too. They pointed at every screen. *Look at her. Look at how much better she is doing. Look at how alive she is. Look at everything you will never be*.

I tried eating less. I tried eating more. I stopped going outside. I forced myself outside. They were getting through all my defences.

Then they took my ears. The sitcoms that had kept them back before, they slowly ruined. The laughter began to sound stretched, wrong, like mouths opening too wide. I would press play and underneath the hideous laughter, I could hear them, mocking me for thinking any of it had ever helped. One by one, they closed every door I had built. They took my voice soon after. I would open my mouth and what came out was not mine. I could hear the difference. Something else wearing my words and saying them wrong. I watched people's faces shift when I spoke, that small frown they couldn't explain, and then they would leave too. Of course they would leave. Even I would have left.

Then it was only me. Me and the chains nobody could see and the voices nobody could hear and the body that did not feel like mine. A shell. A container.

One day I got so tired and brave, I said out loud to the darkness, to the empty room, to the chains and the voices and the void in my chest, "Why don't you just kill me? Kill me and be done with it. I have nothing left. I have nobody. Take everything, take it all…"

And they laughed. "We cannot kill what is already dead," they said. "We cannot kill what has no life."

Something cracked open in me when they said that. Not broke. Opened. Because somewhere underneath all the fear and the chains and the years of being slowly emptied, I had always known. Something had always been wrong, not with me, but with the ground I had been standing on. The life I had been trying to live in. The realisation sank deep in me.

"When did I die?" I asked.

"Before you turned eight," they laughed, happy that I could finally catch up.

And then they opened the memories.

*

Somehow, I do not even think anymore. I might be in hell. Who knows, maybe I was a vicious person who had killed millions, because none of whatever I would say now will make sense to you. So, maybe accept it the way I have accepted it.

I am in purgatory, going through punishment, one after another.

My mom always said I was a miracle, having survived a deadly sickness when I was eight. She never told me what it was. But I almost died and then I was healed, but that was all lies. I died.

I had been defiled so badly that I bled into the ground. They had found me all alone, cold and bleeding, and I had died. That was my first death. Mine was not the worst. My family had all died before then. My mother was not my mother, neither was my father, or my brother, or my sister. The shadows had been taunting me before I was born, feeding on the pain they inflicted on me, watching me cry in pain and having feasts. Every defilement had been planned by them. Every betrayal. Every heartbreak. They made sure I found no peace. I could not enter a church or confide in anyone. I always had voices saying I was not welcome. Their voices had always been there. I could finally see the faces behind my family, the shadows that had pretended to love me while they killed me over and over again, just to resurrect me again.

I stood no chance. I was nothing. A soulless being. No thought I have ever had has ever been mine. My voice had never been heard. They showed me my pain. They made me relive each death. They showed me the babies they took from me. They showed me the people I had hurt, the people who would never trust me again. And they had their feast while I relived it.

Why. Why. Why.

Why me. This is what I have been asking, and this is my conclusion. None of this is real. I am in hell. I have lived and sinned and I was being punished for something grievous and they wanted me to know I was being punished. No matter what I say. No matter what I do. My chains will never come undone. My darkness will never lift. My void will never close. I am trapped in my coffin, burning alive and left to stay alive, my tormentor's belly will never fill and I will walk this earth for eternity.

Help me.

My mind is broken. I cannot speak or think. I can write to you, and hope that deep down you will believe me. Maybe you are stronger. Pieces of me are being shared and soon nothing of me will ever remain, and I will cease to exist.

Free me.

The darkness is scary. The light is empty. I have no feeling. I have no soul. I am becoming what I fear most, a black flame who needs pain to eat, but I cannot eat for I was born different. I was born with light and I cannot exist in darkness. I am being dimmed. This is not me.

"Believe me."

Do not believe her.

"Save me."

Do not save her.

"I am worthy."

She is cursed.

"I am good."

Then why does she suffer.

"Pull me out. There are only pieces of me left."

She is dead. You cannot save what is dead.

The Gravedigger's Wife

Sogolon Jaya

Archibald Hector was the senior gravedigger in Brickcamp Cemetery. And he was a cheating bastard of a man who horn he wife, Glenda, till the day she dead.

Archie and Glenda lived in a little square of a house right across the street from the church run by Leader Ambrose – this worked well for Archie, as he didn't have to walk too far to go to work since the cemetery was right dey behind the church. Was just him, Glenda, and a little girl Glenda had adopted; the child mother was one of them woman who wasn't ready for mothering, but did tell sheself different, till the child born that is.

*

"Maureen, leave the child with me. I will take care of she."

"You sure, aunty?" The tears in Maureen's eyes was like boulders. But she wasn't even looking at the baby when she asked Glenda the question. Matter of fact, she was already stretching out she hands to give up the child.

"Yes. Is better you leave she with me, than have she all over the place behind you."

Glenda took the baby. And the next week, they find Maureen dead, stiff like board, and wrap up in a white cloth covered in all colour candle wax in the middle of the cemetery.

Glenda took care of the little girl she called Bernadette till she passed away last week. As an old church mother, Glenda spent most of her time in the Lord's house, and she used to take Bernadette to *everything* the church had – every service, thanksgiving, baptism, mourning, everything, everything, everything. Whenever and wherever you saw Glenda, you saw Bernadette, till Archie used to call them 'church mouse' and 'church rat.'

He did even tell Bernadette one time, "Doh worry, Netty, when you come big woman, yuh go be a rat just like Glenda." Bernadette had only stared at him quietly, blinked, whispered under her breath, and walked away.

*

Now, saying it was hot the day they buried Glenda wasn't enough to describe the weather; it was as if hell had sprung up in

Brickcamp. Which didn't surprise anyone.

They knew Glenda as a good, honest church-going woman who, for all the years that she was married to Archie and all he do, she never once showed anger, animosity or wickedness. She used to wash, cook, and clean the same way as if he was the most faithful and honourable man ever. So the sun wasn't strange; it was the sweltering heat that came with it.

The cemetery and the church were on top of a hill, and were bordered by some massive teak and cedar trees. So Glenda's neighbours, friends, Archibald and Bernadette had expected sunshine, but had been looking forward to the usual cool breezes that graced the hilltop. Under the swaths of cloth that made up her spiritual attire, Bernadette swayed. The gown and broad head-tie on her head grew heavy, trapping the heat, making her feel as if someone was holding a flambeau to her skull. She blinked, wincing when drops of sweat dripped into her eyes. Reaching down, she grabbed her apron, but Sister Agnes stretched over and handed her a towel.

"You come out in all this heat without a towel, child?"

Bernadette accepted the towel and wiped her face, beseeching the Lord to send a cloud and spare them from the heat. Reaching over, she tried to return the towel and almost kilkitay into the hole meant for Glenda. Hot hands, sweaty hands, and hands that were oddly cold and clammy grabbed at her.

"Sister Netty, yuh ok?"

Bernadette stared in the direction of Agnes's voice, but saw her mother, Glenda. Closing her eyes, she shook her head, and when she opened them again, Agnes was Agnes.

"Thanks, ah ok. Thanks"

The hot hands receded, but the cold ones remained. She pushed at where they were on her arm but touched nothing but the skin of her own.

The interment ended some hours later, but even as the men had long finished settling the grave, Bernadette stayed on, looking at the grave and whispering. The cloud she had prayed for had come, and just before they had had the chance to drop the first handful of dust upon Glenda's coffin, it had broken, emptying water into Glenda's open grave.

Bernadette sighed. It wasn't till about a little bit before six that she turned to leave the cemetery, bible in one hand, a little black pouch in the other. She walked home, walked past the lines of blazing flambeaux, meant to lead Glenda's spirit home.

When she reached the house, a tinkling laugh sailed out from behind the curtain through the open front door. She dropped the pouch into her apron pocket and reached for the little bag of

salt in there as she walked up the porch steps, noticing the small women's shoes just outside the door. Pulling back the curtain, she was just about to turn around to back into the house when the tinkling laugh, she heard drew her eyes to the couch, where Archie sat wrapped up with the shoes' owner.

He was still wearing his work clothes and boots.

Bernadette blinked at the sight. Glenda had never ever let him in the house with his graveyard clothes. The boots he wore when digging graves, she used to make him leave outside.

She used to say, "If dead man is to stand up in them boots, they will stand up in them outside." And the clothes he used to have to drop in a basin by the wash sink around back. Glenda would always make sure a bucket of water and blue soap was in the back for him to wash before he could come inside.

Archie used to laugh at her, "Allyuh church people doesn't tired with this *jumbie* nonsense?!" But he had never gone against her word; he could play all the old mas he wanted to, but outside. The inside of the house was Glenda's.

Bernadette dropped the salt back into her pocket and stepped face-first into the room. She looked at the woman.

"Doh leh night come and meet them shoes stand up outside dey eh."

The woman twisted her mouth, and Archie laughed, "As one gone a nedder one born eh."

Bernadette shrugged. "Well, allyuh big and have allyuh sense," she said as she walked straight through the house with her shoes on, tracking cemetery dirt across the living-room floor.

At her bedroom door, she bent over, took off her shoes, grabbed the salt from her pocket and spread a line across her doorway, straightened up, threw a bit over her shoulder, spun around and backed into her room, leaving her shoes just outside her door.

*

The evening wore on, and the woman stayed with Archie in his and Glenda's room.

At around two in the morning, Bernadette heard the woman creeping across the living room and got up just in time to see her walking barefoot through the thin line of cemetery dirt left on the living room floor, and Glenda in Bernadette's shoes trailing behind her on her way to the door.

A deep, gangrenous, coloured darkness surrounded Glenda. And Bernadette sniffed at the square camphor in her hand as she watched the woman ease the door open, bend over and start

to slide her dirty feet into her shoes she'd left standing out on the porch. Remembering the words Glenda had taught her to use in these moments, she whispered them into the camphor and watched as madame la and Glenda both slipped into the shoes.

The breeze that had avoided them all day showed up suddenly, shifting the curtain, allowing Bernadette to see Glenda slide up the woman's back and shuffle into place on her shoulders. The woman hunched over; the weight of Glenda's spirit was too much for her, but she couldn't utter a word as Glenda hitched her ankles under her armpits and put her hands over the woman's mouth. Bernadette whispered into the camphor and watched as Glenda turned the woman to face the side of the house, pulled back on her head and gave her a swift kick under her ribs.

The woman shot off like a derby horse, running along the outside of the house. When they made it to the side of the house where Mr Norris' pot-hounds were, the dogs started barking, running, chasing after Glenda, who was sitting on the shoulders of this young woman riding her around the house like jouvay jackass.

Bernadette stood in her bedroom doorway listening to the sounds of the dogs and the muffled cries coming from the woman. She looked in the direction of Glenda's bedroom; silence.

Another gust of wind pushed into the room, forcing the edge of the curtain to the ceiling as Glenda and the woman went past the door again. At the same time, a spirit floated into the room, wearing a stupid look on its face. Bernadette folded her arms over her chest and leaned into the door jam. She wasn't afraid; she and Glenda had done too much spirit work for her to be scared.

"Is what I have to fear? The amount of lives mammy and me–"

The noise of the dogs pulled her back to the moment. Turning around, she grabbed the cocoyea broom from the corner of her room, and returning to the living room, she swept every spec of cemetery dirt outside, covered the front threshold in salt, then got what was needed. She returned to the doorway just as Glenda and the woman broke the corner and came into view.

The woman was dripping with sweat; she looked tired, almost broken, and worn. But Glenda, Glenda looked young and fresh, the skin of her lips, which had before been pulled back, was now full. Her signature seven long plaits were loose, and the tight coils were blowing in the wind. Her eyes and teeth were white against her dark skin, and her hips moved back and forth as she rode the woman almost to the brink of death. Glenda looked as she did in the pictures Bernadette had seen once. She looked the way she did before she'd come to know that Archie had cheated on her.

Before she came to know how many times. Before she figured out that one of those times the consequences of his sin had come to extend its arms across her door, child in hand, eyes full of tears, thinking Glenda was too stupid to know. Before she covered herself in shame, cloth, and dirty spirit work.

Bernadette stood in the doorway, calabash of water in one hand, ixora flowers floating across the top, the other hand gripped mixed grain, and a bottle of kananga water was tucked under her armpit.

Whispering to the wind, she aimed and pitched the water on the woman as Glenda drove her past the doorway. The holy water hit Glenda squarely, causing the colour behind her smile to change from blue to a sickly yellow, and her body to emanate the same heat from earlier that day. The smell of the wet skin on the woman's back being singed touched Bernadette's nostrils. The woman's steps slowed, her face, covered in a mix of holy water, sweat and tears, was twisted.

Glenda looked at Bernadette; the coldness in her eyes made its way through Bernadette's blood, and Glenda silently dared her to step outside. As they disappeared once more around the house, she marvelled at the fact that not one person had lit a light or pulled a curtain to observe the commotion.

When they came around again, Bernadette dispensed with the handful of mixed grain in her palm. Glenda reared up and back, forcing the woman to a stop under the mango tree, pulling at the woman's head, digging her fingers into the flesh of her cheeks, lifting both their faces to the sky. There they stood, both their mouths open, eyes closed, faces contorted, screaming silently to the heavens.

Glenda lowered her eyes and looked at Bernadette. Her face looked swollen again, and the black-green skin was stretched so tightly over it that it shone.

"Just one more lap and ah go done. Just one more."

Bernadette knew it wasn't really a request, but she nodded anyway. And so, as slow as death, Glenda took the woman around the house once more. The woman's feet dragged across the hard, naked red dirt, and as her shoes had begun to fray, blood smeared a path behind her.

Face to face again, Bernadette bestowed the kananga water, and Glenda slid off the woman's back and went in the direction of the cemetery, dragging the spirit of Archie, that had floated through the house, with her.

The dogs barked after them as the woman kept walking. She made another full round of the house before stopping in front of Bernadette, head down, back bowed.

Then a piercing scream as Bernadette hit her with the cocoyea broom. She looked up at Bernadette, who paused and shifted her gaze in the direction Glenda had gone. When she looked back, the woman's head went down in silent acquiescence; Bernadette hit her a second and third time, then dropped the broom inside the door.

Just before she closed the door in the woman's face, she whispered, "Make it home safe, eh. And this time make sure and put your shoes them inside."

My Mother's Face

Akem

My mother's face has changed again. All the mistakes of the first facelift were erased. The too-stretched facial look that pinched her features upward is gone. The almost joker curve of her lips has settled back into a slight smile, and the neck wrinkles have faded into almost nothing. At sixty-five she looks about forty. Her body is toned and curvy with pilates and moderate weight lifting.

She's the kind of person that lists all her procedures on social media, posting before and after videos with the hefty price tag in sparkling text. Her gestures, walk, and speech patterns are the only familiar things about her.

On her arrival, my home feels crowded with her presence, and cheap with mismatched furniture bought in different decades. Her high heels tip-tap over the scored, warm, wooden floors that I had rubbed walnuts into to minimize scratches. Jewels dot the surface of the shoe and a flash of red shows on the soles.

The two-level, mid-century bungalow was the house she lived in before she moved out. It is spacious, with two-bedrooms and a half-sunken basement. She never called it home even though she lived there for twenty years. She'd given it to her daughter when she left for good.

I wonder which fashion trend she's emulating this time. A celebrity? An obscure social media personality she's latched on to? Or a filter on an app that she has played with like a game, customizing her features on a selection screen.

She whirls in and sits down gracefully on an old, thinly stuffed couch. The cushions behind her are pillows, the original couch backings trashed long ago. Her flowing dress flares as she crosses a leg over her knee. The dress is delicate and fully crocheted. It reminds me of those old, white doily patterns that doubled as coasters. Except this dress is colourful. Her nails swirl with beautiful designs and are as long as her fingers.

In the sunlight that streams through the bay windows behind her, her skin gleams a shade of blue-black through the crochet. The skin-tone is different, bold. The brown paper bag skin tone she'd worn for years, abandoned. Her hair is tight with auburn curls about an inch high. She doesn't let herself slouch. I mentally call the new look, *Unapologetically Black*.

She's morphed into someone new since she left this house five years ago. Her old job, friends, and community were cut off ruthlessly. Her personality changed from timid to bold and beautiful. I am the only connection tethering her to the past.

I set a mug of black tea in front of her. The liquid swirls in a bright yellow cartoon mug, a duck's beak thrust out from one end, a handle at the other that looks like a bird's tail. Her brow twitches but she picks up the cup and sips from it, heeled foot fluttering up and down in discontent. I notice the large diamond ring glittering on her ring finger.

"It's pretty," I nod towards the rock. "Who's the new man?"

She smiles and her posture relaxes a bit. "A Bitcoin millionaire."

I don't need to speak for the rest of her visit. Her man has paid for her new face, of course. She turns to show me a jawline that is as sharp as a Nike swoosh. Her eyes are larger, keeping her appearance child-like. She says that her new man wanted her to minimize her fuller lips but – she kisses her teeth dismissively – *What do men know*?

The shape of her body is slightly altered. Her breasts are smaller. I calculate how much time she must have spent healing from all the surgeries. Weeks? Months?

She doesn't mention her man's appearance. Her previous beaus are a dizzying variety of ages and looks.

"You've got to kiss a lot of frogs to find a prince," she says. "The most important thing about him is that he spends money on me." She holds the diamond ring out for me to admire.

The run-on sentence of her fabulous new life runs out. Her heavily lashed eyes flick to me, and she sets the duck cup down, firmly.

"What happens to the clothes I send you? Do you go out like that?" she says, making circular motion with her open-palm, encompassing my matching grey track suit from Walmart. "And what happened to your hair?"

I pat my hair surprised. I had put quite a bit of gel on it before her arrival. The curls are tamed, slicked back, and in a nice bun. My edges swirled like waves.

She doesn't let me answer as she begins a catalogue of the rest of my physical faults.

"When will you freshen up your face? Get a suitor? Move from this house? You can't spend your life in the rat-race like I did, slaving away for pennies you get taxed on until you're ready to die. I wasted 40 years of life thinking small."

"I'm rich enough," I finally get a word in. "You paid the mortgage off. And I have a job that brings in more than what I

need."

I retreat from the barrage and take her cup into the kitchen. The home doesn't have an open layout but she has a voice that can follow you through doors and around corners. The kitchen is filled with mismatched appliances, tupperware and dishes bought randomly when needed. I quickly wash the duck cup and set it in the overstuffed drying rack.

I love this home. It looks and feels like it's been around longer than even my mother has been alive. The walls are uneven with paint and unskilled patched up holes. The dish towels are faded and thread bare. There is a real fireplace, and solid appliances with no interfaces that could connect you to the internet, or break at any inconvenience. The backyard is large and fenced, and every item used a thousand times over.

It had to be mine the moment I saw it.

I take a fortifying breath and leave the secure walls of the kitchen. I trudge back into the living room, passing a small dining room with faded paint in squares where old pictures hung.

I try to recall her old face but there are no physical memories of her in this house; she's erased herself completely. She didn't want anyone to remember who she used to be. This house and every object and scratch in this home are land mines of memories. The couch she is sitting on was where she found her husband, passed away peacefully.

It is only my presence that drags her back to the subdued, grid-lined, stability of Pacific North West suburbia. I pull her back into her old life like a reverse fairy tale. Her glittering carriage turns back into a pumpkin wherever she remembers my presence. I am an unpleasant memory that she keeps trying to change to fit into her new life.

I understand completely. Once you decide to discard your old self, you must distance yourself from anything that reminds you of your old you. Unfortunately, I am her daughter. I care nothing about fashion, prefer to be invisible, and dislike change.

"What's the use of having the face you were born with?" she says. "That face brought me a life that slowly killed me with overwork and being a servant in my own home. When your dad died, I was free. I can now live the life I want with the proper face and the correct man to pay the bills."

I nod agreeably. She is whip smart and has a master's in accounting. I'm sure her calculations are right. Man or not, she would never lack for anything. She just prefers life with a rich, doting man on her arm. She never speaks of love. She had loved my father, she says. And what did that get her? Stress and fibroids.

I sit down and she diverts the conversation and tells me

more about her new man. She jets around the world in first class flights and hotels. He doesn't own a company like the last one, or have an inherited family fortune. He is a crypto billionaire, the dumb luck kind. He'd gotten in early because his friends were doing it, and ten years later he found the password for the crypto his teenage self had gifted him.

I let the words pour through me to puddle on the scarred wooden floors as I wait for her to leave. My mother's lifestyle works for her. In every picture she uploads to her social media, her revolving door of men look like the happiest in the world. She sparkles on their arms with energy and a beautiful smile. She takes some input, she says, but men are generally attracted to whatever version of herself she was that day.

My mind drifts from the conversation and I startle as she rises from the couch. A thick, folded card thumps on the glass center table between us. A gold embossed invitation shows the names Samantha Achebe and Omar Ali entwined in a heart. The date is a month from now.

"Congratulations," I say weakly. I grab the card and flip through quickly as she narrows her eyes at me. A plane ticket falls out of it and I scramble around on the floor to snatch it up.

How long will this marriage last? I don't know. The last three had been between years and months. I had never attended any of them as the weddings were all out of the country. It is safer staying in one place. I find the first-class plane ticket and look at the number. The single seat is in the front of the plane.

I rise and follow her to the door but she's already walking gingerly down the stairs. I hurry out and ask her to send her new face along next time, before the visit, so I can recognize her.

She waves me off, hops into the backseat of an expensive driverless car, already flicking through her phone. On some signal, the car drives itself away.

The next day, a package is delivered by drone and left at the front door. A high-tech mask. Its design is abstract on the outside and the inside glows a neon red. The package boasts that it has the latest skin smoothening technology. The card that came with the box reads, *AT LEAST CLEAR YOUR SKIN TERA. — MOM.*

Why do older people write like the caps lock button is jammed?

I put the mask on and fall asleep. In the morning, my skin is noticeably less textured. The hyperpigmentation, acne scars, and random scarring are lighter too. I feel exposed and repackage the mask. I'll sell it online for someone else to put to good use. I had worked too hard to become this version of me. I comb my hair

and braid the strands into two neat cornrows, and leave the weathered bathroom quickly.

*

My mother visits a year later.

Four months ago, she still had the face she'd visited me with. On the face call, her husband was in the background of a hotel room. A shining Dubai skyline gleamed outside the windows. His paunch was out and hanging above his pajamas as he laughed comfortably with people in the background. Her diamond ring still gleamed on her finger.

I didn't go to their wedding. It's risky going through airport security. Many countries go through your phone, take fingerprints, and do blood tests as biometric systems were failing in large numbers. Biometric facial recognition algorithms barely work in an age where people chisel their faces into the fashion of the moment.

Fifteen minutes earlier, I received a text that my mother is at my door. I hurry home from the bus that drops me off a block from my house. I arrive rattled and sweating at the front door. My mother stands on the steps like a model posing on stage, scrolling through her phone.

"Why don't you just get it delivered?" She eyes the groceries and me when I push the trolley up to her. If her brow could wrinkle, it would.

I catch my breath before gasping out, "It gets me out of the house. Also, I like to choose my own produce."

My mother's face changed again. Her voice has too. It's deeper and sultry, like a femme fatale movie star from back in the day. She is almost too curvy, like Jessica Rabbit. She doesn't speak about her crypto husband. Her hair is in a thousand tiny white braids, flowing down to mid back, that she plays with constantly. Her nails are blood red. She kept the blue-black skin tone. The diamond ring is gone.

There is a small voice coming over the security speakers asking questions. The alarm hadn't gone off yet, but had alerted me with a text. So, she'd managed to answer some security questions correctly, but just wrong enough to trigger extra security measures. Her face and voice have changed too much for the biometric scanner.

I press a button and stand in front of the security camera. I breathe in and out like I'm doing yoga. The doors seem to hesitate before sliding open. I stride in confidently, like I own the place.

She follows me inside. While I'm putting the groceries away, she launches into the tale of the travels her new beau has

taken her on. *Venice is so charming. They've left it untouched: no cars, no robots, nothing mechanical floating at all except the boats.* She doesn't need me to speak. So, I just listen from the kitchen, putting groceries away until she finishes.

She never comes further into the house than the living room. She prefers I serve her like she's a stranger, even though she knows where everything is placed.

I bring the tea in its duck cup to the living room center table. She frowns at me but doesn't say anything and talks some more. She switches to my appearance again.

When she's ready to leave, she gives me that discontented look again and strides out. A few days later, a driverless scooter gets delivered to my door with a grocery delivery service gift-card. A short note with a phone number. *CALL AND THANK FRANK. — MOM*

I do.

*

It takes a few more years before my mother is unrecognizable. The face she was born with is fully erased. She visits less and less and I feel alone. Her visits were disruptive but not unwelcome. She was a connection to the outside world, to another human being that I spoke to on a semi-regular basis. She reminded me of a mother that I never had.

I stalk her Instagram accounts to keep up to date on her. She doesn't bother to get married anymore and just posts pictures online of whoever her latest beau happens to be. Every facet of her life is out there and consumed by the world. Hundreds of thousands of strangers follow her account, many openly envious of the luxurious life of first-class flights and trips she's living. She posts in real-time and her account is not private, so anyone in the world knows where she is. Her visibility makes me nervous.

When she visits this time, I meet her at the door. She's changed too much, the security system doesn't even attempt to work with her as she tries to get in. I open the door half-way and peer out.

Nowadays, it's hard to find a face that hasn't been reshaped in some way. A beautiful face in today's world is fad-shaped by the famous or a digital filter. The longing for heart-shaped faces, big ears, small lips can get flipped around months later. If your face hasn't been edited, it's because you're too poor or a woke nut that insists on keeping your natural face out of respect for your parents, culture, or religion.

But who are you then if your family and friends can't recognize you? What makes you real? If you can change your

appearance and personality like clothing?

"I'm going to need a blood sample–" I begin. I had stocked them after the last time she came back.

She pushes past me into my home. "Don't be silly. I'm your mother." She kicks off her shoes and makes her way to the couch. A waft of perfume fills the air and I feel disoriented. I look down at the expensive, heeled shoes that she's left by the door. A chill runs through me before I slowly close the door and turn around to face the stranger in my home.

The stranger had done her research. I am alone with no hobbies outside the home. I leave the house only to go for groceries. Otherwise, I stay inside and take care of the house by mowing it, watering plants, and keeping things neat. It is a life I love.

It would be easy to replace me, just as the stranger had done for my mother. My mother had no family other than me. Just a string of husbands and old coworkers that occasionally commented on her social media with barely concealed jealousy. It was not enough for my mother to live a fabulous life, she must be seen living it. It's easy to be adored by millions yet be absolutely friendless with no one to call. Constantly online, she celebrated birthdays, weddings, and talked about her life freely. She was an open book, with every security question that a person could want easily answered through her daily posts. She was the perfect target for a body switch.

It's been a concern for years. That your life could be imitated, to the point of actual existence, binary code turned flesh and bone. What's new is that, a stranger could show up at your door with a full surgical body change, a familiar voice, and acting skills that fool family members better than the real thing. You were the subject they studied, their textbooks, decades of online videos that taught them how to be you. Your voice, face, body and mannerisms learned until it was time to graduate by becoming you.

My mother was an easy target for a determined someone who wanted to change their own lives. Like everyone else, I had watched her online until I found a crack. Her life was too visible for my personality, so I replaced her daughter instead.

I go to the kitchen and make some tea. I make no changes in my routine and come back to the living room, offering the yellow duck cup. I sit on the chair across from the stranger, fully attentive to her words. It's a familiar rhythm when she speaks. A run-on sentence of what she's done since she last saw me, flinging herself from topic to topic, speaking of every adventure, which the world can see on her social media.

There is only one flaw. When she runs out of words, she asks about me.

She actually listens when I answer, cat eyes gleaming. She wears thick glasses she doesn't need. Is it capturing notes to study later? It's possible.

I say that my skin looks clearer now after using the smoothing gel she gave me. No more scars.

She nods and smiles as says, I look perfect.

I grasp my heavy mug on the table. Whatever I was in my mother's eyes, perfect wasn't it. I was a homebody that liked to be comfortable in well-worn clothes from the bargain bin, that liked napping, watching movies, and staying at home. I wore no makeup. The ultimate offence.

The stranger is good. They had spent years studying to become my mother. But there is one flaw. My mother rarely spoke about her imperfect daughter on social media, and I never appeared on it. The stranger has no information about me. She has to do some field work, and that has given me a forewarning.

The stranger casts a measuring eye about the house and stands. As they put on their shoes and leave, there are no parting words of censure from her lips.

The stranger had come to steal a life I'd stolen first.

A week passes and no package arrives. I adjust the security system to let no one in.

The Nights That Dreams Are Scared Of

Mabel Mnensa

I

Always have your hands and feet tucked into your sheets as you sleep…

The nightmares shove and punch each other for breathing room, before they crash out of Iggy's mind, thudding into his Stoneybatter apartment, shaking him awake. His eyelids flutter once, twice, before stiffening back shut. And he is plunged back into another peaceless sleep. Dreams — —nightmares —– have become restless ever since he promised Zee refuge at his place.

A scream. It pierces through the night, more panicked than the rest. Pulled back into the room, Iggy's eyes snap open.

Zee.

He reaches for her but she jerks away from his caress. A chill drags its wet tongue along his body. His hair pricks up. No denying it, something is in the room with them. An absence sucking at their essence, their sleep, their dreams.

A few huge breaths and his heart soon calms. He will not feed Zee's fears.

He wraps her in his arms. A few seconds pass. Her heartbeat and breathing slow into a calmer trot. Fear's grip relents, the air trapped in her chest escapes. An exhale, and then the room unclenches. One by one, the leaked nightmares fade. Zee relaxes into his embrace, finally, her clasped hands nestle in the hollow of his chest.

The nightmares, now a blur confined to the corners of the room, Iggy can surrender to the pull of sleep.

Just as his body plateaus into an almost calm, an angry shudder jerks him awake. Zee is up, again.

"Her maggots! They're sucking at my soul again," her hands reaching into the darkness as she wails.

The banshee cry drags Iggy out of slumber, and he jerks up to sit alongside her. She is gone before he can reach her. ____ _____Zee fumbles around the bedside table. With quiet thumps, it all falls down; first her Vaseline, then the adult colouring book, and finally her phone. Iggy shivers, he cannot breathe. The

absence is creeping around and over them, sucking away at the air. Her wails have set the nightmares free.

Iggy cannot be scared. That role has already been taken.

"Zee, it was just a dream. Relax."

And then there is brightness. Zee has found the lamp's light switch, finally. She returns to his side, the anguish behind her bloodshot eye is as harrowing as the absence.

"Okay. Let me check." He stumbles to search under the bed for any movement. He sighs, patting at the carpet with a trembling hand. Four seconds, ten. Something pink and black catches his eye. He squints and in spite of himself, he groans. Another one of Zee's many many stray clothes.

"Nothing. It's safe here. She can't get to you anymore, trust." Iggy climbs back into bed, his limbs not as nimble—one of the after effects of her night terrors.

Like all her little trinkets and dresses and notebooks and coats and scarves and boxes of stuff, his space cannot contain all her anxieties. Zee is not responding to anything. Therapy sessions, the pills, his love—useless.

He brushes Zee's trembling back, to still her terror and hopefully his own anguish too. Pulling deep breaths in and out, he calms his thoughts. He plants a butterfly soft kiss on her shoulder: *There is nothing under the bed. Nana said evil only becomes strong enough to harm you when you give it energy.*

His rhythmic motions on her back knead away the gif that has been stuck on loop in his mind; the writhing creamy white shaggy mat.

Now that he thinks about it, ~~peace did not leave the day Zee moved in. ,~~ ~~left on~~ the night he shared take-cares with Zee and Betty over red wine ~~, that~~ was the last time he had peace.

II

Do not whistle at night, or you will beckon bad spirits

The chilly Dublin evening is begging, *demanding*, to be let in, its howling whine the unintended but appropriate mouthpiece for Iggy's frustration.

Zee and Betty, unfazed, are delving into memories of the homes they left. Iggy is focused on the wallpaper; wilting and curling at the corners. Sweat drips down the fading flowers, they are suffocating, just like him in Zee and Betty's sweltering apartment.

With the help of some wine, thirty minutes of small talk with Betty in the sweltering lounge might have been doable. But an hour and three mugs of Tesco's Merlot later, the heat and Betty's animosity are only increasing.

Zee's hand finds him, luring him out of his sunken thoughts. He sits up and settles onto the edge of the couch. She squeezes his hand once, and he is back in the room. He returns Zee's embrace with a peck on her hand.

"Talking of home. What's the one take-care you'll never forget?"

"Take-care?"

"Superstition... The cautions elders share, like it's bad luck to open umbrellas indoors."

Zee and Betty both nod.

Duppies, tokoloshes, ghosts, spoek. Bad spirits. They all have different words for those brought to life by evil, but if any one of them were to ever cross an old woman muttering curses and pointing in their direction at night, each of their hearts would plummet to the bottom of hell at the same immeasurable speed.

Zee curls her feet behind her, settling into the warmth of Iggy's body.

"If you want to collect bad energies, walk in between people having a chat," she says.

Both Zee and Betty are from South Africa and Iggy's lineage traces back to the Caribbean...

"Don't step over people's legs or they'll stop growing."

...but Iggy feels it: they were all raised by the same community, kept in check by the same superstitions.

"You are beckoning tokoloshes if you whistle at night."

Iggy gets up, walks across the room to the counter by the sink, grateful for his box of Chilean Merlot. He rolls a block of ice across his forehead and peels his sweater off. He gulps down half a mug of wine before refilling it and returning to his seat.

On Zee's other side, Betty leans over, hands on her knees. "Listen..."

Betty tucks herself tighter into the pink and black checkered blanket she is always wrapped in. Iggy, nose scrunching, moves away, a reflex. Betty bends her neck so her head is resting just over her knees; wrapping her voice into the character of the muttering, cursing witch, she croaks, "Always have your hands and feet tucked safely into your sheets or else..."

From the corner of his eye, Iggy notices Betty's ashy hand scuttling across the couch, reaching for Zee's feet. Zee shrieks. Her nails dig into Iggy's arm. He gestures at the retreating fingers, Zee following his eyes breaks into a broken giggle.

"Let's be honest. These are really for naughty kids, right? Or else a ghost will tickle me if my hand dangles out of my sheets?"! "Oooh Zanele, must be nice. Wish I had your privilege to be so *I don't care about things* that have the rest of us in a chokehold."

Zee crumbles into Iggy.

How does Betty's forever slipping mask still catch Zee off guard?

Iggy rubs Zee's shoulders, shrugging, unmoved. This is his forte, before he escaped to join his mum in Brixton, his nana used to stir in eerie 'take-cares' with the tales she spun for them left-behind small ones every night. _____ _____Iggy leans forward, a bead of sweat drops into his almost empty mug. He locks them both in a stare and whispers, "Never, ever..."

For a moment, Iggy falters. He drowns in Zee's eyes, wide in anticipation.

For take-cares to have a real impact, you need to bring it close to home. Up the ante.

He stalls.

Let it go. Maybe this take-care is too cruel.

A grunt from Betty brings him back to the moment.

"..._never ever accept food from a foul soul or you will forever be trapped under the cook's spell, nightmares or duppy."

"Euwww!" Zee, shifting away from Iggy's sweating body, pretends to retch.

Betty used to pester Zee to eat her awful cooking. She only stopped once Zee announced she was moving to a strictly plant-based diet. *The GP gave me no choice*, Zee had added to snuff out the nagging that would have most definitely followed. Betty throws a look of disdain at Iggy. He chuckles, his nana would be proud.

Zee gulps, "Duppies? Ghosts? But the cook is alive as they have to prep your food, right? Then where does this ghost come from?"

"Not all ghosts are dead." Iggy whispers the rest of the explanation, "Some duppies are just extensions of some people's dead dreams or evil spirits. Betty, tell us about the duppy, *ahem* the tokoloshe, under your control."

Betty glares at him, a shiver flees down his spine. Zee shoots him a look.

"My bad, I was joking. I'm sorry Betty, please don't let it come for me. But for real, you guys just don't get take-cares."

They both roll their eyes. Zee smiles, resting her head on Iggy's shoulder. Her fingers brush along his thighs. Just one glass

of wine is all Zee ever needs. Her touch, his salve. The heat is a little less oppressive.

A loud sniff and the dragging of phlegm pulls Iggy back to the room. Betty coughs. Her stink eye sears into him. Caressing Zee's back, he ignores her. And then the first warning shot for Iggy to leave is fired. Betty yawns, stretching her hands above her head. A pungent odour drifts towards Iggy. He overrides his reflex, he needs to stop reacting to the heaviness that follows Betty's tiny body, lingering in the tiny hairs of his nostrils long after she is gone. Iggy is certain her breath, armpits, shoes, room and blankets carry with them the remains of generations' worth of decayed dreams.

"'Time for our beauty sleep, Iggy. It's a school night."'

How is Zee unable to smell Betty's bullshit?

On his first night with Zee, months ago, he had wanted to say, 'Your housemate is weird as fuck.' But he instead committed to get along with Betty even though she does not veil her disdain. She low key threatens to tell their company that Iggy is spending nights in their apartment, but Zee stresses that she needs to keep peace, for her job. "My company has really come through, you can't deny that. This apartment and, if I pass probation, they will sponsor my visa. And anyway, this, just like Vegan Zee, is all temporary."

Iggy gets it. It is nearly impossible to find a liveable room in Dublin without having to give up your unborn children and all your dreams. Their company had suggested Zee move in with Betty from Payroll in an available apartment in one of their Rathmines residential properties. They had bought the house, already sliced up into tiny Dublin sized apartments to help Ukrainian refugees settle in Dublin. Betty and Zee, as everyone called Zanele, were both young, from the same place, and both needed to find themselves in the city. It made sense.

But does it? These chaperoned visits are childish.

But the patient bird gets the fattest worm. The situation is suffocating but temporary.

"'Don't leave yet, young man. Come." Zee's whisper lifts Iggy off the couch, guiding him to her room.

III

Doorways are portals. Stand idle in one and risk inviting evil, unworldly spirits in.

Iggy, again, shrivels in their shared space~~heat~~, but a smiling Zee stands at the door, and the heat feels different now.

Iggy takes a step towards her but his foot is stalled midair by the clink of a spoon against ceramic. Iggy and Zee's eyes are both drawn towards the sound. Betty stands by the sink, holding out the same brown mug Iggy was sipping wine from earlier. Lips pursed, Betty lets out a soft whistle, "You guys have to taste this." Iggy's answer, an instinct, an instant, "No thanks. I'm cool."

Zee falters. He loves and hates her empathy. He wishes he could knock her mum's sensibilities out of her head. The voice is probably the reason why Zee refuses to spend a night at Iggy's. "What is it?" Zee takes timid steps towards the now beaming Betty. Also curious, Iggy follows, against his better judgement.

"I got this in the African shop today. Give it a taste, it's divine."

Iggy and Zee peek into the mug. A murky, brown swirling mixture. Iggy recoils, but it does not matter. Betty has decided he no longer exists. Her smiling eyes focus only on Zee.

"Try it, Zanele. It's spirulina. Drink, you'll wake up fresh, no traces of the wine or a hangover."

Iggy smirks, "Why is it brown though?"

Zee's face bunches up into a scowl. Betty, frowning, dismisses Iggy with a swing of her arm. The whiff conjured by the movement leaves him breathless.

"It's spirulina mixed with some other vital herbs. It's a superfood. Africans have used this for centuries. Guess you guys must have forgot about that on your transatlantic trip. Do you know that even astronauts drink spirulina to stay fresh and on top of things?"

Iggy remains unconvinced. "But that smell though?"

Zee shrinks. Betty's eyes lock onto Iggy, her plastered smile not creasing. Her hand with the mug is still up, held out towards Zee.

"Zee, you don't have to drink it if you don't want to."

"Damn, Uncle Iggy, the seventies called. Jirre, Zanele, does he talk to you like this all the time?"

Iggy kisses his teeth, "Careful Zee, remember what happens

if you eat food prepared by a foul soul…"

Zee sighs, glaring at both of them. She grabs the mug from Betty and gulps the mixture in one go. She swallows it fast, Iggy can feel the wince that flickers across her face. Before Iggy or Betty can say anything else, Zee is back at the door. This time there is no sultry whisper enticing Iggy to follow her.

IV

Never eat in the dark, you will not know who you are eating with

Blue ticks. On the morning after the take-cares, all Iggy's messages to Zee are met with blue ticks.

She's pissed off. She wants her space. Cool. Iggy can be a reasonable man.

After work his heart warms at the thought of her voice. The phone rings and rings and rings. It rings until it goes through to voicemail. An angry vibration, Iggy stares at the message.

Iggy. we need a break. i need space

They have shared about one thousand messages ever since they first matched on Hinge, and he has never seen a message with so many typos from her. No matter how turned on or mad she is, she would never disrespect grammar like this.

The phone does not even ring on his next attempt. Straight to voicemail.

Grey ticks. The next day. And the day after that. His messages, not read, not delivered. On the third day, instead of taking the bus home after work, Iggy takes the 140 to Rathmines.

He knocks twice on the worn door of the red brick three storey house. Someone from one of the other apartments lets him in with a smile. Iggy has that effect on people, with the exception of Betty. His knocks on Betty and Zee's door are swallowed into the blue worn carpet on the landing. Nobody answers.

Zee *cannot honestly still be mad. Of course not, she had even kissed me good night.*

Iggy returns the next day. And again, the door to their apartment remains unanswered. Knuckles lifted, he bangs on the door.

Betty.

Her stench, stronger than ever, surges out the door's keyhole, an angry swarm of bees carrying with them the apartment's suffocating heat. Sweat scampers out of Iggy's pores.

A shadow dances in the space between the door and floor.

"I can smell and see you, Betty. Open up!"

The door opens slightly, Betty's face pops through the small gap. She hisses, "Go away Iggy. No one wants to see you."

"I want her to say it to my face. Let me in."

Iggy is not fast enough. His fist hits the door as it shuts in his face. Down on all fours, he bends his head to look under the door. A creamy white shaggy rug rests outside Zee's bedroom door.

That is new.

The creamy white rug shifts left and right. And then as one writhing mass it scuttles towards him. As it gets closer, Iggy realises a restless mat of tiny white bodies is creeping towards him.

Maggots!

He gets up and bangs on the door. An angry buzz lashes out, striking at his wind pipes.

"Leave us alone!"

Gasping, he stumbles out of the house. The crisp autumn Dublin air is unable to flush out the sight of the writhing mass. He ruffles through his pocket. His phone. Zee's work and then her mother.

Maggots!

He bends over the yellowing grass in the front yard, his hands on his stomach, as disgust tremors through him.

V

Do not accept gifts from just anyone, that's how some people share their bad energy

Zee's mother was delirious in the latest video call.

"Where did you say this housemate is from? Heh! Those people! You do not mess around with their muti, it's the bad kind. Do not eat anything from them. Burn everything she has touched. They find clever ways to work their evil. Do you have a Bible? Do you know someone who has powerful muti to counter her spells?"

My nana

Zee, still recovering from the five days she spent locked in paralysing darkness, still has the same soft heart and squashed the conversation before Iggy could reply.

"They do not have muti, juju or evil spirits in Dublin, ma. Betty just wanted a friend, she aint bad."

On the call, Iggy nodded. Zee is still ranking her own needs last. She does not want her mum, a pending-visa and fourteen-hour flight away, to panic over anything else. So, he did not mention the smell of decaying dreams or the swirling brown mixture or the slithering maggots or her banshee wails piercing through the night.

But in the reality of their four walls, still reeling from the emptiness of those five days, he ignores Zee's denial. Every evening, he sprinkles salt around his bed to bind any bad spirits. She might try to disregard it, but a murder of nightmares followed her into his apartment. And he promised to take care of her.

This evening, he had searched under the bed. There was nothing. Nothing but that pink and black cloth.

Tonight, like every other in this past week since his wish was answered and Zee finally moved in, his nightmares smash against each other. Shoves. Punches. Grunts and kicks. They all barrel out of his mind.

Iggy blinks. Something is crushing deeper and deeper into his chest.

Zee.

"Babe."

But he cannot turn his body to his side.

"'Babe, this ain't funny. Get off me."

When did Zee *get so heavy? Move.*

The only sound in the room remains his shallow breathing. The heat in Zee and Betty's apartment is but a flicker compared to the growing burn in his chest.

Move.

His head creaks up and forward. A growing dark halo pulses around his eyes.

"You took her from me."

A dark heaviness perches on his chest. He falls into a sleep, the kind that dreams are scared of, the kind that feels heavy, like quicksand engulfing a victim that has already lost its will.

Move. Just move.

His eyes open. That pink and black something under the bed. Pink and black. Betty must have slipped it into the boxes when he was rescuing what he could from that sweating Rathmines apartment.

Iggy groans.

But the salt.

His hand scuttles around to find Zee's, he squeezes it. A tear

rolls from his eye. He will keep on fighting, for her.

"Zee."

His voice is swallowed by the absence. He sniffs around for Zee's calming energy. But the stench rushes through his nostrils and clogs up his chest.

Not Zee.

And just like his rhythmic motions on Zee's back, Iggy is stuck in a loop.

The Sink

Yvonne Aore

"This heat, man! Feels like we're in the middle of Hades."

"Well, technically we are in the middle of the Equator."

The dashboard flickered. Then went blank.

"And that wind? Blowing all that sand. This feels like purgatory."

"Quit your whining," a deep voice came from a burly man seated at the back of the car. "Is the signal back on?"

"No, sir," the driver said. "Ever since we turned into this… desert, nothing is working. No signal on the phone either."

The huge man at the back exhaled, his voluminous stomach bobbing as he shifted in his seat. The AC was full blast, but it did little. All five occupants had stripped down to their vests. Even the female companion. Sweat ran from their faces into the shallow pools that had formed on their chests. The woman fanned herself with a sweater. Their water bottles were empty; irritation was setting in.

"Look! Straight ahead. Is that a person walking towards us?"

Through the swirls of dust a figure appeared, dark against the sky. At first, he looked like a mirage, but as the car drew closer, the image sharpened. They came to a stop beside the road, waving the man to come over.

"Excuse me, sir, would you please help us with directions? We're kind of lost. Looking for a town–"

"Say… why are you dressed like that? Can't you feel the heat?" the woman asked.

The figure's clothing was odd for such heat: head-to-toe dark fabric, a gear-like contraption on his head, protective glasses and a mouth guard. Nothing of his skin showed. His feet were wrapped in some sort of footgear tied to the calves. He lifted his glasses and dropped the mouth guard to reveal the partial face of an old man. Wrinkled, but healthy.

"Pardon my arrogant assistant," the big man interrupted. "Hello. My name is Senator Jonas Muli."

A strange pause followed; he seemed to expect the old man

to acknowledge him. When the old man did not, the senator cleared his throat and continued.

"We're here on official business but we're not sure if we're on the right track. This is Nanyuki, right?"

The old man nodded.

"Well, we're looking for a town called Isibalo. Is it near?" the senator asked.

Again, the old man nodded. Awkward silence. The five in the car exchanged glances, then turned back to him.

"Could you please direct us?" the driver asked.

The old man faced the direction he had come from. Dust fell from his clothes as he lifted his right hand. His voice was deep and deliberate, "Go straight ahead. At the end you'll see a signpost. Turn right. Follow that road till the end. You'll come to a service station. That is Isibalo."

The occupants thanked him together, but the co-driver couldn't help asking, "What are you doing in the middle of the desert? There's no housing, no vegetation, no roads. How are you surviving?"

The old man dug his foot into the soil and shoved aside a chunk of sand. Dark grey earth showed beneath. "You're on a road," he said, pointing at the asphalt. "Without the soil covering it, your tyres would have melted already." He turned his head to the direction he was heading. "To your left, where you came from. Beneath all the sand, people live. I thought the kind senator knew his constituency."

Senator Jonas cleared his throat again and stared at his knees as sweat darkened his trousers.

"Is the sand why you are dressed like that?" the woman asked.

"Yes. Otherwise, the dry wind will eat my skin." He turned back to them, "I will end up looking like you."

Indeed, all five were powdered with fine sand. Even the interior of the car, windows half-rolled, carried a film of dust. Their lips were cracked, eyes red, noses raw. By the time they'd finished surveying themselves, the old man was gone. They restarted the car and drove on.

The queer old man watched until the car turned right at the signpost, then smiled, adjusted his mask, and went home.

At his doorway he undressed carefully – never track the dust inside. He unhooked a pouch from his waist and tossed it on the desk with a heavy clang beside a family photograph. In the portrait, his late wife and their two daughters stood in front of

their house. One daughter had already died.

Nostalgia softened his face.

"Oldman Gary," he said to himself, "we sure did have a blast, didn't we?"

Before the storm, before his home became a desert, Woodvale Grove had been one of the most prestigious places to live. That was ten years ago. First came the heavy rains that brought floods. Hundreds died, but they did not complain. The neighbourhood had been built to withstand floods. Then came the famine.

The drought was so bad the silos were opened; yellow maize and dried grain were distributed to those most in need. It wasn't enough. Thousands died. Woodvale Grove was fine, until it wasn't. Gary remembered it as if it were yesterday.

The sun intensified, as though fuelled by a furnace. At first people cranked up their Acs, but then the fires started. The flames consumed vegetation — trees and shrubs — and the wind spread the blaze. Houses caught fire. People began to spontaneously combust: wrong cloth in the sun, a static shock, a long stint in an overheated car – ignition. Shells of cars, scorched vegetation and hollowed houses littered the neighbourhood. But the sun grew harsher.

Wind carried dust that settled in every crevice. People tried to sweep it away but it returned. At night, the sandstorms were worse; whirling gusts smashed shutters, stripped roofs and buried fences. Visibility fell to zero. Those caught outside were found at dawn, their bodies shifted miles from where they'd last been seen.

The people of Woodvale begged the government for aid. Officials pretended to care, offered token solutions and followed through with none. They were on their own. The heat and storms worsened. Skin blistered and cracked, taking on a crocodile-like texture; eyes reddened and many went blind. Hot air corroded throats and wrecked lungs. The same fate that befell Gary's wife and youngest daughter. The doctors called it cancer.

Many left. Where could Gary go? This was his home. He couldn't abandon his wife and daughter in the yard. So, he stayed, sending his eldest to the city and adapting as best he could.

A population that once boasted five thousand fell to a meagre one hundred. Gary told the remaining few that the only way to fight fire was with fire. Let the houses coat with sand during the storms. When the wind passed, it would carry the excess; over time the sand would build up into a protective layer. It worked. The houses — now eerie, like sandcastles dropped in a neighbourhood – stayed much cooler.

They came together and bought huge black tanks. During

the day, condensation gathered; precipitation from the heat and wind. And a lot of water collected in the tanks. Now they had drinking water. Solar panels powered their homes, especially during the night storms. They designed gear for walking outside, special shoes, the opposite of snowshoes. Sand shoes. Eye gear and masks were distributed too. Yes, they looked like they lived in a dystopian world, but it worked. This was the same gear the good senator and his assistants had found peculiar.

Gary sat by his desk and opened the small pouch. Six medium-sized oval stones rolled out. He held each one under the light, examining their clarity.

"Little to no marbling," he muttered. He opened his laptop, placed a dollar note beside the stones, took pictures, and uploaded them online for sale.

Description: Black Opal
Clarity: Pure
Marbling: Faint

He had earned quite a bit from this trade. Enough to sustain himself, his community, and his daughter in the city. At first, he'd tried pawnshops, but the returns were poor. Then he discovered the direct buyers. That was where the real money was.

Oldman Gary switched off his desk lamp and flicked the main switch. Outside, the wind had changed, it now whistled with intensity. The storm was coming. That night, it was especially angry. Sometimes the storm brought a faint shower, but more often, it arrived with massive lightning strikes that split the air with static. With nothing left to burn, it always passed by morning.

Gary stood before his bathroom mirror. He looked ancient. Eighty, maybe, though he was younger by two and a bit decades. The wind and sand dried their skins so badly they cracked with deep lines and wrinkles. Everyone in the settlement looked that way. His neighbour, Ron, was only forty-five, but everyone called him *Oldman Ronnie*. The same wasn't said of the women; they didn't find it funny.

Gary put on his mask and eye gear, adjusted the straps of his sand shoes around his calves, pulled on his gloves, clipped the pouch to his waist, and headed out.

The early morning was deceptively calm. The madness hadn't begun, but the air had that hum. The warning before the storm. Ronnie's wife was sweeping their porch. Their little ghost town showed signs of life. People did everything they could before midday.

Their houses looked eerie. Sand-covered from roof to floor, with only the tips of their windows peeking out. But since no visitors ever came, no one cared. From a distance, when the air was clear, the place looked like a field of giant anthills carved by human hands.

Oldman Gary left the neighbourhood and followed his usual route, trudging through the dunes. His breath rasped inside his mask; sometimes his glasses fogged. But even with his eyes closed, he knew the way. He was used to the heavy gear that protected him from the elements. There was no moisture left in his body. He couldn't remember the last time he'd seen or smelled sweat. His pores had long since dried up.

He turned the corner at the old road sign, and within minutes reached his destination. Just as he'd expected, there it was: a partially buried car sinking slowly into the sand. He called that place *The Sink*. It wasn't exactly quicksand, but close enough. Anything caught in it would disappear over seventy-two hours.

He approached slowly, his sand shoes sinking but steady. The driver's side window was open. Inside, the five bodies lay preserved in layers of dust, as if encased in glass. Their forms were perfect. Even the one's round belly had kept its shape. Oldman Gary smiled. "The storm doesn't disappoint."

He brushed away the sand and opened the back door. Dusting the senator's face, he found what he was looking for: eyes dark and glassy, glinting like jewels. He pulled a screwdriver from his pouch. The extraction was easy. The storm and wind dried the flesh so completely that the eyes popped free without resistance. He didn't need to hold them up to the light; the red and purple marbling shimmered clearly. Gary let out a deep, guttural laugh and dropped the first two stones into his pouch. Then he did the same to the others.

When he was done, he stepped back. The Sink was vast. An endless graveyard. He had discovered it years ago when a group of service providers had lost their way and vanished there. A rescue unit was sent out, but Gary found them first. At the time he was terrified — they looked like victims of a plague — but the eyes had drawn him in. A bit of research, and he found himself dealing with precious minerals.

Back home, he switched on his desk lamp. The stones glowed beautifully. He let out another guttural laugh, which dissolved into a coughing fit. He thumped his chest and spat out grit. The sand had gotten into everything. Even him. The more marbling, the higher the value. All ten oval stones before him shimmered richly. The storm had done its magic. Its intensity determined how the eyes crystallized. The stronger the storm, the

finer the marbling. That, Gary had come to learn.

He reached for his directory. “These politicians,” he muttered. “Call them to fix drainage or water systems, they’ll ignore you. But tell them you’ve found a gold mine, and they’ll come running. Greedy fools.”

He flipped through the pages. “Minister Ezra Kenga… no,” he murmured. “A woman this time. Yes, Jane Karani.” He grinned as he drafted an email. “How would you like to pay a visit to Woodvale Grove?”

Tea, Please

Owen Habel Lwanda

To the world, the white envelope in Kamau's hand was a DNA result. But to him, it was a death certificate for the last eleven years of his life. He held it against his ribs on his way to Kayole, terrified that the rain would seep through and dissolve the only truth he had left to hold.

For eleven years, he braided Baraka's school ties, chased fevers through endless nights, and sold his boda boda after floods ruined his business so the boy could remain in a private school. By evening, neighbors along Kayole corridors heard laughter from his apartment. They assumed a football match played inside. Nobody imagined a father could smile while something terrible awakened within him.

The rainwater followed him upstairs in muddy footprints that slowly dried along the corridor tiles. Children skipped rope beneath flickering security lights while women exchanged gossips through half closed doors. Nobody noticed how tightly Kamau clutched the envelope against his chest. Nobody noticed his mouth trembling between laughter and something darker. Thunder rolled slowly across Kayole like furniture being dragged through heaven.

Kamau locked his door carefully and stood silently in the sitting room while the telly muttered evening news. Baraka emerged from the bedroom wearing oversized shorts and carrying homework books against his chest. The boy smiled automatically, innocent from routine, unaware that one sheet of paper had shattered his father's mind. Kamau stared at the child's face searching for traces of himself and finding none. Not the nose. Not the eyes. Not the stubborn jaw his own father carried into burial.

Outside, music drifted upward from a nearby kiosk selling counterfeit liquor beside drainage trenches swollen by rain. Kamau removed his soaked jacket slowly and hung it beside the doorway. Baraka kept speaking about school examinations and football scores, but every sentence sounded distant, warped, as though spoken underwater from another world entirely.

Inside the cramped kitchen, Kamau moved with frightening calm. Sukuma wiki hissed inside hot oil while a sufuria simmered beside charcoal smoke drifting through cracked windows. Baraka sat near the sink, frightened by the silence

swallowing his father's face. Kamau spoke gently, asking about school, about arithmetic marks, about whether the boy loved him. Outside, matatus screamed along the avenue and drunk men argued over betting slips.

Later, the apartment fell quiet except for chopping sounds and the scrape of metal against wood. The corridor cats meowed restlessly near the doormat. One by one, the neighborhood murmurs faded until only rainfall remained. The bulb above the kitchen kept blinking. Kamau continued preparing supper with ritual patience, washing utensils carefully, humming old church melodies beneath his breath. Baraka watched his father constantly now, sensing danger without understanding its shape.

At midnight, electricity disappeared across the estate. Darkness swallowed the apartment block whole. Angry voices rose from balconies. Kamau lit a single candle and placed it between himself and Baraka at the kitchen table. Wax dripped slowly across the plastic surface while moths battered themselves against the tiny flame. The child's face flickered between shadow and gold.

Kamau remembered carrying that same boy through Pumwani Hospital during malaria season years earlier, begging nurses for treatment while Miriam cried beside him. He remembered teaching him how to tie shoelaces. He remembered tiny hands gripping his finger while crossing flooded streets after storms.

Every memory now curdled into humiliation. The paper remained folded inside his pocket like a second heartbeat. Baraka finally asked whether something was wrong. Kamau smiled softly before answering that sometimes, grown people discover truths too heavy for ordinary hearts to survive without breaking apart completely.

When Miriam arrived from her shift at a gambling lounge near River Road, Kamau welcomed her warmly, almost tenderly, wearing the same checked shirt from their wedding anniversary. Hunger conquered curiosity. He served stew rich with garlic, pepper, and unfamiliar sweetness. Miriam ate greedily, while Kamau watched every bite enter her mouth, his eyes glistening beneath the flickering bulb. Somewhere within the apartment, water dripped steadily from a bathroom tap, sounding almost like tiny footsteps pacing through flooded corridors.

Miriam complained about drunk customers and losing bettors who threatened workers after midnight losses. She kicked off her shoes and laughed tiredly while scraping the bowl clean with torn chapati. Kamau barely touched his own food. He only watched her with unbearable attention, as though witnessing judgment descend from somewhere beyond the ceiling. Outside,

dogs barked wildly toward the drainage canal behind the apartments, then suddenly fell silent together.

After the meal, Miriam asked where Baraka had gone. Kamau answered that the boy slept at a cousin's house in Umoja. Then he placed the paper beside her plate stained with oily fingerprints. Miriam read slowly, confusion hardening into terror while Kamau opened the sufuria once more. A small school bracelet floated near the surface among onions and broth.

Miriam's scream tore through the apartment block, sending tenants rushing into corridors. Kamau only smiled and whispered that she finally tasted the truth she had hidden for eleven years beneath marriage vows and bedtime prayers. The scream continued long after her voice cracked apart. She staggered backward until her body struck the refrigerator, knocking magnets and unpaid electricity bills onto the floor.

Neighbors hammered against the door demanding answers while Miriam clawed desperately at her tongue as though trying to rip memory itself from her mouth. Kamau remained seated calmly beside the steaming pot, almost peaceful now that horror finally belonged to both of them.

People later argued over what happened next because terror rearranges memory. Some neighbors claimed Miriam crawled into the corridor vomiting violently while others insisted she collapsed inside the kitchen beside the overturned sufuria. An elderly watchman swore he heard Kamau singing lullabies while police climbed the stairs before dawn. Another tenant claimed the apartment lights kept flickering although electricity across Kayole had vanished hours earlier.

What everyone agreed upon was the smell. It rolled through the corridor thick and unforgettable, clinging to curtains, clothes, and skin long afterward. Days later, residents burned incense near their doors trying unsuccessfully to erase it. Children refused using the staircase beside Kamau's unit.

Rumors spread through nearby kiosks and bus stages before sunrise fully arrived. By morning, vendors selling mandazi near the road already discussed the horror in whispers, each retelling more frightening than the last, each version somehow still insufficient to contain what waited inside that apartment.

Police found Kamau seated beside the empty pot, singing an old lullaby while flies circled the kitchen sink. Miriam remained curled near the doorway, vomiting until blood streaked her chin raw. Officers later claimed the apartment carried a smell none of them forgot afterward, a mixture of spices, sewage, and mourning trapped beneath humid walls. Newspapers named Kamau "The Father of Kayole," yet readers remembered another horror more

vividly: Miriam begging nurses to help her cut open her stomach, believing her son still cried somewhere alive inside her body. She fought off anyone who tried to stop her from clawing open her skin with her bare nails.

At the police station, Kamau answered questions politely and even apologized for wasting everyone's time. Detectives described him as strangely ordinary. He requested tea twice and asked whether morning traffic around Jogoo Road remained terrible after the rainfall. Only once did his composure fracture. When an officer referred to Baraka as "your son," Kamau began laughing so hard tears streamed across his cheeks.

Within two days, television vans crowded outside the apartment block. Reporters stood beside muddy drainage trenches delivering dramatic updates while residents pushed closer hoping cameras might briefly capture their faces. Pastors arrived carrying Bibles and bottles of holy water. One woman claimed evil spirits entered the building after construction workers disturbed forgotten graves nearby years earlier. Another blamed unemployment, humiliation, and the growing madness swallowing Nairobi estate life.

Children whispered Baraka's name at dusk like a forbidden chant. Nobody entered Kamau's apartment anymore. The landlord chained the door shut, yet tenants still claimed sounds escaped from inside during heavy rain. Some heard soft footsteps crossing the kitchen after midnight. Others heard water dripping steadily although police had closed the pipes. An electrician sent to disconnect power refused climbing the staircase alone. He later confessed that while standing outside the unit, he smelled fresh stew drifting beneath the door despite the apartment remaining empty for days.

Miriam survived physically, though nurses at the county hospital said something inside her mind had ruptured permanently. Sedatives barely calmed her. She scratched her stomach until orderlies restrained her wrists with cloth strips. Every few hours she demanded to see Baraka, insisting he remained somewhere nearby, cold and frightened, waiting for her voice. At night she screamed whenever hospital workers served meat to patients in nearby beds. One intern later resigned after Miriam grabbed his arm and whispered that children never truly disappear because mothers continue carrying them even after death.

Her relatives transported her briefly to Machakos, hoping countryside silence might heal her thoughts. Instead, she wandered roads at dawn calling Baraka's name into empty fields. Villagers avoided her afterward. They said grief surrounded her

like smoke. Flies gathered around her constantly even when no food remained nearby, and dogs whimpered whenever she passed their compounds beneath evening darkness.

Kamau's trial became a spectacle that infected radio stations, churches, and betting shops across the city. Courtrooms overflowed daily with curious strangers hungry for details too horrifying to fully hear. Journalists described Kamau entering proceedings as unsettlingly calm, wearing neatly pressed shirts and carrying himself like a tired office worker attending routine business. He rarely spoke. Yet during testimony about the DNA results, witnesses noticed his expression changing slowly into something broken beyond repair.

Psychiatrists argued over betrayal trauma, suppressed rage, and psychological collapse. Religious leaders called him possessed. Internet commentators transformed the tragedy into memes, jokes, and arguments about masculinity. Through everything, Kamau maintained the same chilling explanation. He insisted the envelope destroyed reality itself. According to him, the moment he read those results, the apartment walls began breathing, the kitchen whispered insults at night, and Baraka's voice no longer sounded human inside his ears. Even silence became unbearable after that evening.

Months passed, yet Kayole residents continued avoiding the apartment block after dark. Tenants moved away quietly, abandoning furniture rather than returning upstairs alone. New renters never lasted longer than several nights. One university student claimed he awoke repeatedly hearing a child reciting multiplication tables through the wall beside his bed. Another swore greasy footprints appeared across the corridor whenever rain fell heavily after midnight.

The landlord eventually painted the apartment entirely white, replacing tiles, cupboards, and plumbing, but workers complained the smell always returned before sunset. Priests prayed there. Traditional healers burned herbs there. Nothing changed. Cats gathered constantly outside the door, scratching the wood until their paws bled. Nearby shopkeepers noticed birds avoided resting on the balcony rails above the unit. Children created games around the legend, daring each other to knock against the chained door before sprinting downstairs screaming. Nobody admitted believing the haunting stories, yet nobody tested them twice.

One rainy-day, nearly a year afterward, a cleaning woman hired by the landlord disappeared briefly inside the abandoned apartment. Neighbors found her sitting alone beside the kitchen window hours later, staring into darkness while whispering

lullabies repeatedly beneath her breath. She refused speaking for three days afterward. When relatives finally coaxed words from her mouth, she described hearing soft footsteps behind her while scrubbing the floor. She claimed a child's voice asked whether fathers could stop loving suddenly like electricity during blackouts. Doctors dismissed the story as stress, yet rumors spread again across the estate with renewed force.

Years afterward, Miriam still awoke vomiting whenever storms rolled across the city. She moved between relatives' houses carrying plastic bags filled with Baraka's exercise books, old uniforms, and faded birthday photographs. Sometimes she visited bus stages simply to watch schoolchildren returning home during evening traffic.

Kamau died before sentencing, after inmates attacked him inside remand prison during a blackout caused by flooding. Officials released few details publicly, though rumors spread rapidly through Nairobi estates and market stalls. Some claimed prisoners forced him to confess repeatedly until his voice vanished. One officer later resigned after telling friends he heard lullaby singing echoing through the flooded corridors shortly before dawn.

Newspapers treated Kamau's death as fitting punishment and quickly moved onward toward fresher scandals. Yet the story refused disappearing completely. Taxi drivers still mention it during late-night rides through Kayole. Mothers invoke it while warning children about betrayal and rage. In quiet bars after enough alcohol, men still argue whether heartbreak alone can transform love into something monstrous. Nobody ever reaches an answer satisfying enough to silence the room afterward.

But with every retelling, the tragedy is pulled farther from truth and deeper into nightmare, until Baraka became less child than restless ghost wandering endlessly through Nairobi rainfall searching for home.

What Breathes in the Darkness

Bongiwe Maphosa

In the town of Sonxele, parents don't warn their children about strangers or monsters in the woods; they tell them to watch their heels. The shadows here have a predatory hunger, waiting at the edges of sunset for the town clock to strike the curfew.

But the worst part about being a child in this town is hearing the clock count down your final moments, and accepting that you are yet another child who won't get home in time to keep your body.

*

iThunzi cannot be in the sun. Were it not for the small mercy of being able to meld in with the shadows of trees and items who hold no life, we'd be chained to the darkness of the night.

During the day, I am one with the shadow of the Jacaranda tree in front of my house, watching my body and its hijacker play soccer with my friends. How can they not tell that it's not me? Then again, any one of them could be an imposter shadow that's possessed a body that isn't theirs.

Some days I find myself pining over the February heat that would have my friends and I racing to the lake, close enough to hear the curfew warning over the frantic calling of parents to their children. But the heat of February has long since burned out.

Today, the winter air is crisp, and my flat, two-dimensional chest aches with a phantom chill as the gravel driveway of the estate next door begins to crunch. A black car rolls into view, its roof rack stacked high with cardboard boxes and taped-up suitcases. It pulls up to the overgrown garden of Baba Sosizi's old place.

Everyone in Sonxele knows that house is haunted, though not by ghosts—just by the vacant, left-handed things that Baba Sosizi left behind when his own thunzi finally dissolved into the foundation boards.

The car engine dies with a heavy sputter. From my vantage point within the tree, I watch the doors swing open. A man and a woman step out, squinting at the late afternoon sun, completely oblivious to the heavy, predatory stillness of the valley. Her belly hangs low, heavy with a new life that will now be tethered to a town

that chooses its victims. But it's the backseat door that makes my breath catch, if I still had lungs to hold it.

A boy of my age steps onto the bone-dry grass. He looks around the quiet street, a bright, innocent smile breaking across his face, totally unaware that the sun is already beginning its treacherous dip behind the western ridge. Down in the grass by his sneakers, his shadow is short, and still perfectly aligned with his heels. For now.

Across the street, my body suddenly stops dribbling the soccer ball. The imposter who stole my skin turns his head slowly, his eyes locking onto the new boy with a sickening, vacant curiosity. He shifts the ball from his right foot to his left—that familiar, inverted glitch that makes my stomach turn. He smiles at him, and the shadow children hidden in the hedges with me seem to shiver all at once, watching a lamb walk straight into the slaughterhouse.

The sky above Sonxele turns the color of a fresh bruise as the final hour approaches. From my prison inside the Jacaranda shadow, I watch the automatic streetlights click on. They do not bring safety; they only cast long, skeletal geometry across the dirt, stretching the eviction windows wide open. The digital clock in the town center begins its low, rhythmic chime—a five-minute warning that sounds less like a clock and more like a funeral toll. By that time, the neighbours were already settled having dinner in my parents' house, their son—Yezi—sitting in my chair.

My heart leapt with a sudden, foolish hope earlier, thinking they'd look down at the grass where I am pinned. But they don't see the dozens of us sulking in the flowerbeds. Instead, they hurriedly carried their belongings toward Baba Sosizi's old house. It chose them. I wonder if they will stay or succumb to its curse like the last families did.

Now, standing on our top step, holding the front door open with a welcoming, hollow smile, is my body. The imposter watches the little boy approach. He extends his left hand in a greeting, his fingers twitching in that reversed, sickening glitch. My parents are so focused on saving the new child from the dark outside, they don't realize they are walking him straight into a house run by the evil ithunzi.

I watch through the living room window while the thing wearing my skin uses the wrong hand to cut the food. The lawns are crowded with us — dozens of flat, featureless shapes pinned to the dark, weeping, mourning bodies that live without us.

Inside the warm house, the boy who stole my face laughs at a joke I didn't get to hear, his flipped, left-handed movements a sickening telltale glitch of a changeling my parents are too blind to

notice. I am just a silhouette stretched helplessly across the porch, watching my mother plant a goodnight kiss on a forehead I can't feel, watching an imposter sleep in my bed while the real me hardens into the asphalt.

Once she leaves, his shadow peels from my body and flows through the room radiating an ink black vapor that regenerates as soon as another tendril burns out. His two-dimensional form taunts me. He knows we shadows are forbidden from entering houses without a body. The heaviness is palpable, so intense my shadow feels it. He sits on my body's chest, pinning and paralysing it so it does not make the mistake of stepping outside. He knows I'm watching, waiting for an opportunity that may never come.

How foolish I was not to notice the signs of the one I befriended. I wonder if my body can feel the regret that my shadow can.

*

I followed the rule religiously. Had it down to a science. On my birthday, instead of a new toy, I asked for a digital watch I could set to alert me every hour.

Every day I woke before the sun stretched its arms, and from that moment, every interaction was on a strict schedule. My friends, though they knew of the non-negotiable curfew, sighed every time my alarm chimed to remind us of the time we had left.

"Khanya, could you cool it, just for today?" Bami sighed frustrated, cocking her head to her side.

I would have stood my ground, refused like I did with anyone else. But her hand was on my shoulder, chipped orange nail polish as warm as she made me feel. And her smile, as I turned off my watch, was worth it. For the moment. What was one afternoon anyway. The town would still warn us, no matter how far we ran across the valley during the day.

I faltered then. And then once more, no, twice more. I forgot all about the crosses on the fridge calendar, counting down to the day, the one where the sun sneaks away before the town can call its children back while they were whole. Winter solstice, a falsified time that made curfew bendable, estimated, a suggestion, and no longer law in the eyes of children.

Then the last time I faltered, it was because *he* asked to stay there a little longer, the boy who lingered at the cemetery. Mute until this moment. I stayed. Sympathised. I could see my shadow after all. We sat in silence skipping stones on the small lake.

"Do you know the story about Baba Sosizi?" A deep gurgle

sounded from somewhere behind his throat, ancient and villainous. His eyes looked like a dark, polished sheet of obsidian.

Of course I did. Every child in Sonxele has been dared to touch his gravestone and done it at least once. They say he arrived before the town ever needed a curfew, during the summer of '76. A sour-faced man who reserved his kindness only for his wife and young daughter. The little girl stayed out one night, fooled by the sun's late retirement. Something was wrong with her after that. The townspeople shared rumours that built houses on the foundation of a lie. Suddenly, she was 'cursed' and 'a bad omen.'

Then, she fell ill. She died mysteriously and her parents never recovered. They took their child to be embalmed out of town, buried far from this place of hatred, somewhere she'd rest peacefully. The Sosizis returned to the town one member short, but it would only last until sunset. The town would deprive them of the mourning they deserved.

As the lights in their house came on, so did a guttural wail from Mrs Sosizi. She didn't know whether to run towards or away from her daughter's corpse sitting on the dining table. She was a grey mass, bloated, and oozing embalming fluid on the wooden floors. She told her parents that Sonxele's children always return, dead or alive. She sat there, almost eager for her second burial, the proper one. At home this time. She was dead again by morning.

Mrs Sosizi was buried days later, having taken her life while waiting for her daughter on the porch. But Sonxele had kept her this time.

Back in the valley, the boy mocked, "You children never learn." Then lower, "You should've been home by now. Your parents are worried sick."

The sun had started dipping below the ridge, bleeding a cold violet across the valley. My watch hadn't beeped, but my shadow was still there, a sharp black silhouette anchored firmly to my heels.

"I should go," I whispered.

He didn't move. He just stared at the ripples in the water, his face entirely blank. That was when the warmth hit me. It wasn't the freezing bite of the winter solstice; it was a sudden imposing heat of danger pooling deep in the marrow of my bones. At my feet, my shadow was stretching forward trying to outrun the darkness, begging me to follow. I did.

I almost made it home, almost. I could smell the faintly sweet scent of the trumpet shaped flowers littering my street even though the valley I was flying through had no trace. By the time I could see my house, my mother crying on the porch, my throat was dry from the excessive panting while I ran. Fear turned my head

to witness an impossible scene. The shadow confined to the mute boy's skeleton pared itself off with surgical precision. This was no shadow of a teenaged boy. I slowed involuntarily, awed and petrified, until the thud of the shell that remained warned me of the inevitable eviction of my own shadow.

"Khanya!" my mother called desperately, as she ran to me. But the shadow was faster.

It felt like throwing up — the volatile contortion of the body. So, this is what the shadow children experience when their body begins to change and accommodate another thunzi. My limbs felt loose, heavy, euphorically numb. It was so intoxicating that I didn't notice the silent glitch happening beneath my feet.

I finally looked down. My breath caught. My shadow wasn't short anymore. In the strange, deceptive slant of the solstice light, my shadow had stretched, widening into an asymmetric, monstrous shape that no longer matched the movements of my body. It was ungluing itself from my heels. Panic flooded my chest. I turned to sprint toward the road, but not all of me followed. *I* stayed. A homeless shadow pinned to the lawn's edge. The body that had made it into my house wasn't looking at me. He was looking at his own hands with a vacant, terrifying curiosity. He raised his left hand to touch his cheek—a clumsy, mechanical movement. A perfect, sickening mirror-image of the boy I thought I knew. I was left behind, a flat stain on the earth, watching my own boots march back to my house without me.

*

What is it about danger that calls to us? Who do I blame for the disaster unfolding before me? The ancient thunzi in my body with a monstrous appetite for carnage, or the neighbour's boy for succumbing to the dare of Sosizi's gravestone? I watched the imposter lure the new boy to the cemetery. I know what follows and he knows I am here, in the shadow of a tree. He is taunting me.

Perhaps the new boy does not deserve his body. Perhaps it is divine intervention, an opportunity to get my body back. No. I can't. I'm not like the evil thunzi. I let his shadow keep its home.

I watch until sunset and trail behind as they head home, but that's when the real danger starts. The entity in my body commits an act of betrayal with my hands, shoving Yezi off the raised curb. His right ankle rotates his foot inwards with a sickly squelch, bone protruding outwards like it never belonged. He screams, as agony throws his body to the ground. But his shadow doesn't follow. It

stretches, willing him to stand and run before it disappears.

My mouth, on the other hand, smirks. “There’s your chance. Quickly now.” My body points behind me to the countless shadow children salivating and eager to fight for Yezi’s vulnerable body.

The town clocks blares. Yezi’s head whips from his shadow to the setting sun to the boy who betrayed him as he skips down the street.

“Come on,” I urge half-heartedly.

He rises to his left leg clumsily and forces himself to hop home. He screams through the pain. He will make it. He has to. His house is not that far, but Sonxele’s shadow children close in out of desperation. Hostlessness has turned them into hyenas circling dying prey, and I am the closest one.

“Yezi!” his father calls. A whisper of realization at first, then a wail of desperation.

He seems like a good father. Almost like mine. I bet his mother gives warm hugs too. Like mine. Sensations feel like false memories now. I just need a reminder. Just until I get my body back. Just until…

My shadow tears forward, not like light or anything human, but like something being pulled through a space too small to contain it.

Yezi gasps.

It begins at his chest. A rupture without blood. A tearing without sound. His shadow resists, only for a moment. Then I take hold. I do it without thinking. I swear. I just want to get closer to my own body and Yezi’s is right there. If I don't, another shadow will. I will take care of it until I give it back.

Something unearthly takes over. A malevolent, pitch-black mass tears out from the center of Yezi’s chest like an inverted birth, radiating a suffocating, ink-black vapor. The transition is an act of violent contortion. My shadow clamps its flat, two-dimensional fingers around the throat of Yezi’s own. With a sudden, bone-snapping wrench, it flips him. And I enter. My shadow forces Yezi’s joints to accommodate its inverted anatomy. The body doesn't rise smoothly; it jerks upward in a series of mirror-image convulsions, the spine arching until the bones click into a horrifying, left-handed symmetry.

His shadow’s orientation is violently reversed as he is thrown backward and flattened into the cold asphalt. Where his feet had just been anchored, a pair of elongated, shadowy fingers sprouted upward from the dark, clawing at the air.

He watches from the dirt, entirely powerless now, as his fingers twitch and snap backward into place. He follows the wet,

nauseating sound — his left foot fracturing, and his right knitting itself back together and swallowing the protruding bone as if the injury never happened.

I don't look back to his emptied snakeskin of a silhouette — chained to the darkness behind me. I can't bring myself to look at what I helped do, and thankfully, I'm not given the chance to. His father reaches me, scooping me up in his arms and sprinting into the house, locking it behind him. He is completely oblivious to the imposter that has borrowed his son's body.

Yes, borrowed. I promise.

They don't scold me, not yet. I learn that Yezi's mother is a nurse and she promises to take me to the hospital tomorrow. She patches me up gently, telling her husband Sonxele doesn't feel right and she can't have the baby here.

"We're leaving soon," she says to me. I nod, afraid my voice may give me away.

But I am going nowhere. Even though Yezi is not native to the town, I am a child of Sonxele. I cannot leave. I will not. I'll keep them here. Just until I get my body back.

*

I sit at a dinner table for the first time in a while. Has it been weeks? A month? Time moves differently in the shadow world. I'd forgotten the smell of a hot meal. Spices in the oxtail stew, steamed corn, lathered with butter, fluffy white rice gathered in the centre of the plate. I inhale deeply, still acclimating to my temporary skeleton. I dig in, failing to keep my food on my plate, scattering pieces of rice on the beige tablecloth.

"Yezi. Manners. Hold your fork with the right hand," his mother scolds gently.

I am right-handed. I always have been. But I wasn't in my body now. I was a thunzi. Flipped on an axis no one understands. And I don't know how to flip back.

She tucks me in later, and plants a kiss on my forehead. I shut my eyes and pretend that it is *my* mother who kisses me on *my* forehead. I imagine I am in *my* bed, under my dinosaur covers, and in *my* pajamas. Not in an imposter's. Not as an imposter Not like the one who stole my body.

*

I can't sleep. Guilt won't let me. I don't need to hear Yezi's voice to know he's at the edge of his house's lawn cursing and begging. That is where I spent my nights.

I walk to the window anyway and peel his curtains to the side, and my eyes are drawn to the menace who started it all. In my bedroom window is an ancient shadow, with evil where his face should be. Obsidian smoke rises and dissipates from the entity. He lifts his tendril-like fingers to wave at me. They leave a trail behind as they lazily follow him as he sits on my body's chest, pinning and paralysing it. He leaves my curtains open so I may watch helplessly. Senseless evil. What kind of a person steals another person's body and—

My conscience drags my eyes downwards, to a boy, a shadow without his body. A body I stole — no, borrowed.

"I will give it back," I whisper "I swear. I just have to get my body back."

His shadow radiates a fury so dense it borders on flesh. Seeking to grant him a minor mercy, one my imposter withheld, I pull the curtains shut. He does not need to watch my shadow bleed from his body and reassemble into a column of dark smoke. Yet, the malice is identical. He will still feel the sudden, deadening weight of my shadow on his chest—the inescapable paralysis anchoring his body to the mattress. I know the terror intimately; I have felt it every night myself.

It is the curse and birthright of all the children of Sonxele.

When the Sun Wakes up at Night

Ikenna Igwe

Dele awoke with a start, unleashing a piercing cry. Thrashing around on the bed, he covered his face with both arms as if trying to protect himself from an invisible, vicious assailant.

"Please, don't… I beg you… please, don't hurt me…" he said, his forehead crinkled, his breath shaky, his heart thumping wildly.

Powerful hands reached out of the darkness and grabbed him.

"No! Please! I'll do whatever you want… I promise I will… just don't kill me… please, don't kill me."

Dele struggled to break free from whoever was now fighting to hold him down by pinning his arms to his sides.

"Calm down, Dele," a rich, deep voice said. "You are safe here. No one's trying to harm you. Please, calm down. You'll hurt yourself further, if you don't. After what you've been through, that's the last thing we want."

Something in the voice sent a soothing wave through Dele. He relaxed slowly. As the swirling fog dissipated, he found himself staring into the kind, smiling face of Dr Roland – his childhood friend.

As the mist fully lifted, Dele realized he was lying on a hospital bed, and beside him stood the doctor. Two nurses – on either side of his bed – repositioned him properly, pulling him upward and placing his head back on the pillow.

"How the hell did I get here, Roland?"

"Your wife called… and the hospital quickly dispatched an ambulance to your house."

Dele's confusion deepened. "I don't understand, Roland, why on earth am I here?"

The doctor sighed, then straightened up. "It's a strange one, Dele." Stroking his grey beard, he continued, "Adaora called and told me you had slumped on your way to the bathroom and lost consciousness. She felt for a pulse, but was faint. By the time you got here… you were already dead. Adaora passed out, of course. When we revived her, she gave us permission to do an autopsy on you. I was in my office, preparing your death certificate, when the medical examiner rushed in, frantic because you had… woken up. We did comprehensive tests, but there's nothing wrong, you're in excellent health." Dr Roland paused. "You, my friend, cheated

death. That's something we don't see every day."

Still dazed, Dele looked around the room. "How long have I been here?"

"Three days," the doctor said.

Running his hands over his face, then his arms and chest, Dele started feeling the blood rush to his head, with it memories he can't pin down.

"What's wrong? Does something hurt? Roland asks, watching Dele become flushed.

"I don't know… One moment I was in this strange place… in front of a shrine, about to be murdered, and the next moment I'm… *here*."

Dr Roland glanced questioningly at his nurses. When they both returned the look, he gently asked, "What are you talking about?"

Dele stared at him, his mind churning, but the words failing to grasp the whirling fragments.

"Dele, it's okay. I'm here, and we'll go through it step by step, there's no rush. Do you remember falling to the floor? On your way to the bathroom?"

Dele shook his head. "No, Roland, I don't."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I am."

"Okay. What is the last thing you remember?"

"Like I told you, I was in a shrine – about to be offered up to some… god."

"But your wife told me…"

"Damn it, Roland! I heard what you said Adaora told you, okay?!" Dele shouted, angrily.

Roland, seeing his friend's struggle with reality, chose a softer approach. Pulling a cushioned chair closer, he sat down. "Okay, Dele. You have my attention. Tell me how you ended up in a shrine… in the first place.

A momentary silence permeated the hospital room.

Dele, his eyes narrowed in concentration like he was actively trying to grab hold of a memory, finally said, "It all began with a job interview."

*

Days after he turned thirty, Dele had been fired from his job as the assistant branch manager of a new generation bank over a case of financial fraud. He had been dragged into the scandal by people who envied him, and despite his protests of innocence, the evidence had been compelling.

Failing repeatedly to find another job in his field, he

broadened his search and soon found one. The HR department of a private oil company wanted a senior administrative officer. A generous remuneration was offered, and relevant training would be provided. Adaora encouraged him to apply for the job. Dele did, and, to his surprise, got a call inviting him for an interview.

As he left the house that morning, Adaora had straightened his tie and kissed him. "Don't worry, darling," she whispered. "This job was literally made for you."

Of all the things Roland had done for him, introducing him to Adaora was the one Dele cherished the most.

*

The oil company's HR department was housed in a magnificent three-storey glass building. In front of it stood a gigantic iron statue of Ogun – depicted as a stern warrior gripping a cutlass and a blacksmith's hammer, its presence both imposing and unsettling.

At the reception area, Dele saw three other people, all men, also there for the interview. Before he could question it, the receptionist – an attractive, fair-skinned lady in her mid-twenties – ushered him to a seat. Dele noticed she wore an iron pendant with a miniature spearhead dangling from it, and around her wrists were red and black beads.

A few minutes passed. Then the telephone on her desk rang.

"Sir, they're all here," said the receptionist said into the receiver. She listened, then said, "All right sir, I'll do that."

She replaced the receiver and addressed the men. "Gentlemen, the HR Manager will see you all now."

The men exchanged looks of astonishment.

"Yes, the interview will be conducted simultaneously," she continued. "Please, come with me."

Soon, they were ushered into the HR Manager's office – massive and lushly furnished in various hues of red and black.

Seated behind an intricately built iron table was a sturdy man dressed in a black suit and an open-collar red shirt. Clean shaven, he was square-faced with hawkish eyes – dark and haunting. On the other end of his table were four red cushioned seats.

"Welcome, gentlemen. Please, sit down," he said, his voice thick with authority.

The four men sat, intimidated by their surroundings. Dele caught sight of two iron rings on the man's middle fingers. The rings were shaped like dogs with their teeth–

"I'll keep this interview short and simple," the HR Manager

said, snapping Dele into attention. “Each of you has three minutes to tell me something about yourself that isn’t in your CV.” The man pointed at Dele. “I’ll start with you, Mr Oluwole.”

*

After his interview, Dele surreptitiously observed his immediate environment and noted that the office walls held various bizarre and disturbing portraits. They were graphic images of naked men and women with heavy chains around their necks, hands, and feet – their faces contorted in pain.

“Impressive!” the HRM suddenly bellowed, after the last person finished. “Congratulations! Gentlemen, you all passed!”

The men exchanged another round of surprised looks.

“You’re all qualified,” the HR Manager continued. “Therefore, you’re all employed. Working together as a team, I believe we’ll achieve extraordinary feats.” He paused briefly. “But first, you need to sign your appointment letters.”

He picked up the phone, “Alice, dear, please come with their letters. Thank you.”

The door opened almost immediately, and the attractive receptionist came in and placed a red sheet of paper on the table before the four men. Then she handed each man a red iron pen. Before exiting, she – much to Dele’s surprise – shot him a suggestive wink.

“Sign on the dotted line at the bottom,” the HR Manager instructed.

Dele and the others signed. The pen felt unusually heavy between Dele’s fingers.

“Excellent!” the HR Manager said.

Then, out of nowhere, an open red suitcase materialized on the iron table.

The four men could hardly believe their eyes. As they watched, the HR Manager collected the signed letters and pens, and placed them in the suitcase. He shut it, relaxed in his chair, and clapped his hands three times.

The last thing the men remembered before losing consciousness was a pall of thick smoke engulfing the entire office.

*

The men opened their eyes to find themselves in a gigantic, rounded chamber that looked as though it had been hewn out of a massive rock. Strategically positioned along the wall were lit lanterns.

The four captives had been stripped to their underwear and lay sprawled on the cold stone floor, each man positioned carefully

in a circular marking drawn in a chalky white substance.

At the far end of the chamber stood an altar. Fashioned of stone and iron, its surface bristled with rusted blades, worn tools, and heavy chains. The lantern light dimmed around it, and the air gave off a sharp smell of iron. It held no god – but there was an unsettling certainty that whatever reached that altar was never meant to return.

Dele tried to rise, but a sharp pull at his wrists stopped him. Like the other three, heavy iron chains pinned his hands and feet to metal rings embedded deep in the stone.

A few feet away stood ten figures. Six sturdy men were dressed only in loincloth. One of them was the HRM. The other four were clothed in red hooded robes. Barefoot, each balanced a small red calabash draped with black cloth on their right palm.

As Dele watched, the four robed figures stepped forward and placed the calabashes on the floor. Then they straightened and stood side by side. Lifting their left hands, they gently tugged at the neck bows of their robes. The garments fell away, revealing four beautiful and completely naked women. One of them was Alice.

The HR Manager stepped forward and handed each woman a well-crafted metal cup. Then he turned to the four captives, his deep voice reverberating around the chamber. “Do you know why you all passed the interview?” He paused, giving the helpless an attempt at partaking, then continued. “Look at your right wrists.”

Dele strained his head, barely making out the mark under the chain. A faint jagged mark, he had it since birth. The other three men had it too – some like a lightning bolt, others more like a scar from a forge.

“Each of you is the firstborn son of your family,” the HR Manager continued. “Your mothers, unable to conceive, sought Ogun’s aid – but such help always comes at a price. Consecrated to Ogun, you were all marked as tokens of sacrifice – a covenant set to take effect on your thirtieth solar return.”

The HR Manager paused, his hawkish eyes glinting. “From Ogun you came. To Ogun you now return.”

Clutching a dagger, he advanced, the four women following closely behind.

“As before, we will begin with you, Dele Oluwole,” he declared.

As they neared him, dread overwhelmed Dele, and he began pleading for his life – crying and promising to do whatever they wanted, so long as they didn’t kill him.

But to his captors it was nothing personal. His death had

been set in stone three decades earlier. As the HR Manager was about to slit his throat, Dele blacked out.

*

"Then when I woke up, I was here."

Dr Roland and the two nurses listened in astonishment as Dele finished.

"That's one hell of a story, my friend," the doctor said with a warm smile. "But I think you had a nightmare."

"I don't know, Roland," Dele said, scratching his head. "The entire episode felt so real. It didn't feel like a bad dream – it felt like I was *there,* literally feeling everything."

"Some nightmares are like that," Dr Roland replied patiently. "The human mind is an extraordinary thing."

"I… don't know what to say, Roland…" Dele hung his head in confusion, only to have it jolted up when he heard the cackling.

His friend and the two nurses were laughing – convulsing with hysteria.

"What, Roland, what is happening? Dele asked, surprised. "Why are you all laughing?"

The room's door flung open, and two more nurses walked in, laughing as they slammed it shut behind them. As the pitch of their laughter rose, Dele wondered if they had all lost their minds.

"Roland…"

"Shut up, you senseless fool!" Dr Roland roared, the laughter different, his features icy. The tone made Dele's skin crawl.

As the sterile white light in the room began to flicker, the smell of antiseptic was suddenly replaced by metallic heat – the scent of a blacksmith's forge.

Dele watched in horror as Roland's face began to shift. The skin around his jaw seemed to tighten and darken. His grey beard retreated into a heavy square chin. His white lab coat tore, the fabric charring and falling away in ash to reveal a muscular chest.

Rising menacingly, he said, "Do you think you can escape your fate? You *are* a marked object of sacrifice!"

"Roland, stop this!" Dele scrambled back, his heels dragging against the bed-sheets.

With fluid, predatory movements, the nurses stepped out of their uniforms, as if stepping out of old skin. They were naked save for the red and black beads around their wrists and the pendants around their necks.

The room walls began to bleed white paint, the plaster dissolving to reveal the lantern lit walls of the chamber.

"Ogun is a patient creditor," the HR Manager thundered,

"but your time is up!"

Armed once more with the dagger, he advanced, his eyes the colour of death. Dele screamed – and the world vanished again.

*

Dele was still screaming when he awoke. This time, he was lying on a couch in his living room. Adaora leaned over him, worry etched across her face.

"What's wrong, darling? Are you alright?" she asked, gently wiping the sweat on his face with a handkerchief.

Astounded, he looked at his wife, then around the room.

"Baby, what is it? Adaora asked. "Please tell me."

"How… did I get here?" Dele finally asked.

Adaora gazed at him in surprise. "I don't understand…"

"Please, just tell me how I got *here* – on this couch."

"What is this, Dele? Some kind of joke?" Adaora said, smiling faintly, but after seeing his sombre expression, she humoured him. "Okay, sweetheart. After a game of squash with Roland at the club, you came home tired. You had a bath and decided to rest a bit. You must have slept off. I was in the kitchen making dinner when I heard you scream."

As she spoke, a tidal wave of familiar memories washed over Dele. He sighed in relief and pulled her into a warm embrace. "I'm sorry, darling. I didn't mean to upset you. I think I just had a nightmare – no, two nightmares. The strangest thing is, one was intertwined with the other."

"It's all right, baby," Adaora said softly. "You have nothing to worry about. Everything is exactly as it should be."

She smiled…

…and then she was Alice.

"From Ogun you came. To Ogun you now return."

You, Giver of Life

Lynn Nyaera Onywere

The first time you saw me, I was nothing but a speck held for centuries, for nearly a millennium, in a book passed around from across the sea, to your continent, then your country, not by those who wished to break bread and commune with their dead, but by those who chose to instead try to control death.

But this is not about that, this is about you.

We were given to you in a box filled with old religious texts, old books, still in the boxes they were packed in when this new man took over from the old man. A donation from the church or a way to get rid of old books that they felt too guilty to burn, you didn't know, but you still had to sort them and inventory them and put them on the shelves.

I know now what made you wonder about me, about us, and the home we were forced into when we were written into the pages of this book. I know what made you run your hands so carefully over the spine, touching us delicately as you put us on your desk.

Curiosity.

You were curious about what material we were made from, then you were curious if they knew what they had given you, because I looked old, and not even your mind, dedicated to archiving for nearly five decades, could comprehend the language I was written in. But even still, you cradled us, and let curiosity guide your hand as you flipped through the pages that held us, fingers careful on our delicate pages.

We felt it, you should know, your eyes on us as they ran over the words we were trapped in. We heard as you said goodbye to your colleagues, heard as the students trickled out and as the guards trickled in. But your eyes remained focused on us.

Over and over, you reached the end, and over and over you started again, tracing our lines, from the curves of the words that made up our names to the pictures of what we can do, bound for eternity in an unbroken string of words and pictures. Over and over, until you could probably follow the lines with your eyes closed.

You did not know it then, that you did what no man in millennia had done. Though they've bled entire armies for us to feed on, though they have given us innocent and guilty people to

feast on, though they've given their lives for just a glimpse into the knowledge we hold, they never gave what you did.

Not one single person has ever given life to us. Not a single person since good and evil existed together, held in a perfect balance by vows of love and marriage. Not since they sought the answers of the universe, found them, and decided to bind them, so no one may find us again.

How does it feel, I wonder, knowing you are a giver of life to death? A rebirther, with good and evil held in perfect balance by vows to curiosity?

Curiosity enough that when you finally looked up and away from us, it was to the guard at the door, telling you that it was 11.30 and they needed to close up for the night, kinder to you than they were to the students that even we could hear being chased out of the library.

You put us aside and away from the books that would go on the shelves tomorrow morning, telling yourself it was so you could give us back. But that wasn't it really, was it? It was so you could find out more, so you could learn. You wanted to look at us until you understood. Understood.

And that's the secret there. When evil knelt and let the flesh be carved from its body, when good used its own blood to bind us away, when love was enough to lock away the secrets it had sought to find, curiosity was enough to undo and unlock it all. But you didn't know that, not yet.

So, when your sweater caught on the jagged of the metallic shelf, and when you, in your agitation, cut your palm ripping your sweater free from the hold, when you used the tissues on your desk to wipe off the blood, then picked us up to put us on your shelf in your office, you didn't realise.

When we tasted your blood for the first time, and finally, finally after millennia, felt a balance as equal as that first pair of lovers, we woke up.

I was the only one to remain with you, but what can I say, I have always been the most greedy of us all. I latched on to you, small from the centuries I have remained hungry, light enough that you did not feel me as you picked up your bag and walked out of the room, a mere itch when you finally left your office and had to let the guard check no one had remained in your office, slight irritation at the idea that you would leave someone in the library unobserved, overstimulating enough that once you saw people waiting for the lift, you turned around and headed for the stairs.

When you ran into the second guard, who tried to yell at you for not leaving fast enough, you raised your hand to point a finger at him and ask him just who he thought he was, and if he

knew who you were.

That is when you finally noticed me, finally as big as a worm and stronger than I have been in eons. You yelled and threw me, but not far, just until I landed at the guard's feet. He looked down and grabbed me, laughing at me and at your fear of me, a worm. He tried to swing me at you, and you were afraid, even though you should not be afraid. Ever. But this… man.

He wanted to make you fear. He wanted to make you tremble at the idea of me. He tried to dangle me in your face, and you took a step back, but he kept swinging me, trying to intimidate you by shaking me, causing such a scene that one of the young ones had to step in and tell him to stop.

I could not let it stand, you understand, I'm sure, because I think now that he would not have had a job in the morning had he lived. But I didn't want to take a chance, a chance to have him near you again. So, I swung up and into his eye. I wanted him to be mine. I wanted to eat away at him, at his life, until nothing of him existed.

And so, I did.

I heard the boy screaming and screaming, but you were silent. I still don't know what you were feeling, or what you were doing. But I heard footsteps, yours going down the stairs to the ground floor in urgent strides, and the guards as they ran up the stairs to look at what's happening.

When I was finished with my consumption of him, I was bigger, and there were guards there. What could I do? Now that I had a taste of life after so many centuries of going without, I had to have more. You understand, don't you?

I must admit that I gorged myself. The guards just kept coming and the hunger did not stop.

It's still there, but I will be mindful of you when I feed next.

When I was finished, I came slithering down the stairs to look for you, my skin coming back to me with every movement, my mind and memories also. Memories of the things I've touched and memories of things that have touched me.

The other three joined me also, all of them in a similar form to me, though they did not have to be.

When you finally looked up, you thought we were snakes, but we are not really. We are older than the ancestors of snakes ever were. And you were afraid, and you were screaming like the young ones, who you had taken and barricaded yourself with inside the glass covered receptionist booth.

But that curiosity was more than the fear, wasn't it? Your mind is so beautifully curious.

My others went to deal with the guard frantically trying to

open the door, but me, I came to you. The young ones were afraid and still screaming, but you weren't.

You held them and you looked at me. You looked right at me as I moved up the glass enclosure. It annoyed me that I had to move slowly, but your shellshocked mind was convinced it was to get to you specifically. You thought I was coming for you.

You were correct, but I also came from you, my giver of life, I cannot harm you, you should know that.

You were shaking as I climbed on you, thinking of snakes that squeeze their prey before they eat. One of the young ones started to try and stop me, but I hissed at him, then the remaining sounds were the sounds of my others coming to join me and the sound of urine dripping down to the floor.

When I set myself on your shoulders, you had finally managed to convince yourself I was not real, that I was a dream, a nightmare, curious at when the dream would stop, curious at what made you dream up something like this so vividly.

You closed our eyes in preparation to jolt awake.

I look into your eyelids, and I am sorry it hurt, and may continue to hurt, but still, I meld into you.

Your eyes open, and you are me, and I am you, and you finally understand that this is as real as you and me, my giver of life. We look out the door into the moon lit outside as the campanile bell strikes 12.

About the Authors

Akem is a Nigerian-Canadian writer and artist based in Vancouver, BC. She has been published in Canadian Spec magazines like Augur magazine, Pulp Literature, and Polar Borealis. She studied creative writing at The Writer's Studio at Simon Fraser University under Hiromi Goto, and is currently enrolled at the University of British Columbia for an MFA in Creative Writing.

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Charles M. Mwangi is a Kenyan author whose work has previously appeared in Brittle Paper, African Writer Magazine, and Kalahari Review. He is the author of *Unsettled,* a collection of horror stories, among other publications. He is currently working on his first novel.

C. S. Odili is a Nigerian-Dominican writer, poet, and educator whose work explores the intersections of faith, identity, and the human psyche. Her fiction often delves into the darker corners of obsession, examining how our need for connection can twist into something monstrous. Her debut poetry collection, *All Beautiful Things Start With S*, is forthcoming in 2026.

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Lynn Nyaera Onywere is a Kenyan writer of fiction and nonfiction. Her mission is to tell the stories of Africans as they were, are, and as they could be.

Mabel Mnensa is a Dublin-based South African writer, drawn to the quiet power of family stories, forgotten histories, and futures that reflect our present. Her work explores how identity, memory, and legacy shape the way we live, across generations and imagined futures.

Mazwemzini is a writer, indigenous researcher, emerging scholar-activist and a spirit distilling life through art. Mazwemzini refers to his practice as memoryWork—an effort not only to tell stories but to actively and radically resist forgetting.

Owen Habel Lwanda is a Kenyan writer and poet, born. He is best known for his evocative short fiction and poetry that explores complex themes of identity, memory, and resilience. Lwanda was shortlisted for the 2026 Afritondo Short Story Prize for his work "The Sun of God." His work has been published in Brittle Paper, Penned in Rage, Roughcut Press, and elsewhere.

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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.

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