



# LOVE STORIES FROM AFRICA

an anthology

This is a bold and  
audacious anthology.  
*-Toni Kan*

Edited by  
**Nonso Anyanwu**

With an Introduction by Helon Habila

# **LOVE STORIES FROM AFRICA**

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*To the memories of Meibi Ifedigbo and Buchi Emecheta,  
you are loved still.*

*...the Universe gives us different sources of love to unite us all as one.*

—Mbue Imbolo, *Behold the Dreamers*

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## *Editor's Note*

My idea was to feature fifty writers across Africa, to represent as many countries as possible. But when the entries started swarming into my inbox, I realised how unrealistic that was, largely because I was actually looking for a class of stories.

There were moments of new discovery, which I considered the most significant period of this production. Some of the writers here just write amazing things on their Facebook and Twitter walls for their friends to like and comment and share. Some are poets and lifestyle bloggers, and have never published a piece of fiction, never been anthologised. Some are just booklovers and readers who can tell when a story is well written; while most of the writers here have their works published in several notable magazines and anthologies around the world and have been nominated and won prestigious prizes.

This anthology is one of Africa's contributions to world literature. We are presenting to the world one of the true characteristics of African literature by deportraying the Africa which has been portrayed on international TV channels as an Africa of hunger and strive, an Africa of refugees and terrorism, an Africa of dictatorships and anti-government protests. We are portraying a romantic Africa, Africa full of healthy people and environment. We are telling stories that have been overlooked.

I congratulate all the contributors for joining me in making history by producing Africa's biggest e-anthology that deals with the theme of love.

Cheers!

Nonso Anyanwu  
Abuja, February 2017

# *Introduction*

What's love got to do with it? The stories in this collection prove that love has everything to do with it. The myth has always been that Africans are too busy dealing with the politics of things, with poverty and bad governance and Boko Haram and El Shabab and a million other micro-aggressions thrown at them by Africa to bother with love's niceties. As the saying goes, *Na love I go chop?* This worldview is best captured in the Swahili love song, Malaika, popularized by Miriam Makeba. It is the story of two lovers—the words are the words of the young man, telling his fiancée how lack of money has defeated him. He loves her, he wishes to marry her, and yet, he is brought low by poverty.

*I am defeated as I do not have wealth  
I should've married you, Angel  
I am defeated as I do not have wealth  
I should've married you, Angel*

*Angel, I love you, Angel  
Angel, I love you, Angel  
I should've married you, mummy, I should've married you, sister*

And yet, why should this be the normative view about Africa and African love stories? For every song bemoaning the death of love and the insufficiency of love, there are a myriad other love songs and stories to counter that argument. If you listen carefully, the protagonist in Malaika is actually saying that now he realizes money is not everything—*I should have married you despite my lack of money*. Our poems and folktales and epics—and yes, even Nollywood movies—are full of positive love stories if we only

care to look closely. This is basically what this collection is trying to remind us. Take the time to smell the flowers. Do not be deterred by the thorns, focus on the petals. I like the fact that not all the stories are about perfect, escapist, romantic love. They are steeped in the socio-political realities of their milieu—and that is why they are African love stories. They take every day settings: schools, offices, homes, and defamiliarize them by raising their romantic coefficient, and yet, because they were familiar settings to start with, we see ourselves in the stories and characters, and we are convinced that yes, despite the challenges of these every day scenarios, love is still possible.

Helon Habila

Virginia, February 2017

# *You Are In Love With Your Future Dreams*

**Basit Jamiu**

*"It touches the waiting imagination of the dead."*

--John Berger

SOMETIMES, WHEN YOU ARE with her, you ask yourself, isn't this love? You ask this question to affirm what you assume love to be, not that it changes anything. It has never occurred to you that love can make you feel this empty without any hope of redemption, this feeling of a fleeting past. Is it still love when it is timeless and life, worthless?

You will fight your momentary escapes because there is no reason to be engaged by your thoughts, and then you will settle in the presence of now. Strangely, love is happening to you. For the first time, it has also found the need to make up for your loss. You are happy that you have connection as to how it feels, you are lucky that you can feel the kindness of a distanced love, for that you are kind in return. You should be indebted to it for coming to you like this, not incomplete. This way you believe, you should be indebted to its kindness all your life.

Again, you are back to living in this moment, in this dream with her, and you can hear the soft sound of the rain without paying attention as it drops.

*Tap. Tap. Tap.*

The rain falls like a story—a story you would like to tell her, a story you would like to remind her of, one that comes in drops—the story of love, its seeds, and the way it germinates and then leaves you with all the emotion to grow. You watch her as she stretches her two hands often to catch the rain, sometimes her feet, her face like the smile of a child, young and innocent. Sometimes when the rain slows down, you step into the music in your heart and let its sound replace that of the rain.

Today is your birthday. You met Raihana three years ago and she brought you joy. You were born on February 14<sup>th</sup>, and your mother died on this day too. These two memories, particularly the one filled with sadness: that your life brought death to your mother, cloud some of the happiness in your dreams. But she, Raihana, is here as love, love when it is all that you want now, just the way you need it: as a living dream. Because just like your

mother, Raihana is no more. She is somewhere that you can find her. Isn't this how death owns us, like drops of dried corns picked rapidly, and sometimes slowly, by chickens?

Now when you celebrate your birthday today, you will celebrate the completeness of this love you had with her, and then if you are happy, as you are not sure that you will be, then you will be fulfilling the memories of your late mother: you will imagine that she is happy, that her memory doesn't make you cry anymore.

Raihana lives only in your dreams, and for now, you are in love with your present and future dreams.

## *Rain Dance*

### **Acan Innocent Immaculate**

Luwum HAD ALWAYS HAD a fascination with the rain. Even though he knew how the physics and chemistry came together to make the skies weep, he still felt like he knew next to nothing about the rain.

On that day, its behaviour was extra confusing; the sun had put in a snarling appearance from morning till noon, then the first tentative drizzles had come, slicing through the sunlight like shy dancing maidens, pretending they were not going to return a few minutes later for a round two which would obliterate any memory of the day's scorching heat.

The downpour was even but incessant, like a drawn out Lingala song. Luwum was trapped in the shop, staring out of the door over the heads of the people taking refuge under the shop's veranda, when he saw her.

She was a gust of wind in a vacuum - unexpected, alien and magical. Where everyone else ran, ducking to avoid the chilling touch of the storm, she danced. With bare feet and wild hair, she moved in the middle of the tarmac road to the rhythm of the rain. Her laughter was a child's innocence, but the way her wet clothes stuck to her curves told tales of decadent womanhood.

Luwum's breath seized up in his chest. How did the people who ran past her do it? Couldn't they see her beauty, a force more powerful than nature's tantrums? Why weren't they frozen in place by her magnificence?

When her gaze lifted and caught his over a raggedy yellow hat, Luwum realized that she was there for him. He moved out of the shop and through the crowd like a man possessed. He didn't feel the rain as it hit his shoulders, his bare scalp, his pointed nose which stood away from his face.

*Dance with me*, her eyes said, and her teeth flashed in a smile as she gathered up her skirt around her knees and danced. He heard the laughter behind him, the voices of the people saying, "See this man dancing alone in the rain in the middle of the road."



Luwum did not blame them. It was not their fault if they were not deserving enough to bask in the splendor of her beauty. The tarmac was warm beneath his feet, emitting the vestiges of the sun's blistering kiss. Her joy was a luminous glow in her eyes.

With the rain for a harmony and the thunder for a beat, he danced with her. He danced until his clothes were soaked through, all the way to his underwear. He danced and danced, until his legs gave and his heart followed shortly after.

The ambulance came half an hour later to carry away Luwum's smiling corpse. The people who had watched him dance clamoured to give their version of the story to the news crews which had gathered. Up above the emptied clouds, his soul danced with a woman with bare feet and wild hair, finally free of the tethers of the corporeal world.

# *You Are in my Sun*

**Nonso Anyanwu**

KOSI BECAME ENGAGED on one of the sweetest afternoons in 2014. Mid February, around the same time last year when Obinze had walked out of their marriage to his old girlfriend, Ifemelu, who had come into town from America. Emeka was also Kosi's old boyfriend. He had disappeared for three years and showed up one evening like a ghost, holding a bouquet of roses.

Your mom gave me your house address, he said at the door.

Didn't she tell you I'm married?

Let me in, at least, he pleaded.

Kosi locked the door after he had come in. What do you want? she asked, still standing by the door.

He came closer, and whispered into her ears, Your husband is in one of those exotic hotels in Abuja.

Stop it! she said.

He kissed her lips. She tried to shake him off, but his lips were smart. He pressed her to the wall, then to the sofa, then to the floor. She couldn't stand his tender touches; she drew him to herself and began to undo his buttons. In her matrimonial bed, everything changed. Kosi felt Emeka's thrusts with tears running into her pillow. The next morning, she woke up and did not find him anywhere around the house.

Four years later, in December 2013, Emeka ran into Ugochi, Kosi's mother, at Shoprite.

I'm so sorry about everything, he said after Ugochi had told him about Kosi's divorce last year.

Kosi is coping fine, but I think you should visit us anytime soon.

I will, mama. Tell Kosi, I will give her a call.

She nodded with a warm smile.

On her way home, Ugochi felt hopeful that her daughter would find happiness again. She would never forget the day Kosi had rushed into her office with the divorce papers. She had watched her daughter cry, pulling a handkerchief from her purse and bawling into it, and gasping in her grief.

Mama...I...I can't... I can't believe this is where life has dumped me.

Ugochi stood up, came around the table, sat down next to her daughter.

I... I feel like this whole thing is a dream and when I wake up, we will start all over again.

Even if you start all over, my dear, you can't make Obinze happy again. Sometimes love is like a bag of rice that you eat from, hoping never to get to the bottom.

Kosi took a deep breath and leaned back on the seat. So I'm going to be a divorcee, a single parent?

There was an absolute silent for ten seconds. Ugochi heaved a breath, took Kosi's hands and squeezed them gently. You think being a single parent is abnormal? she asked in a soft voice.

Kosi's eyes which had dried up a second before were now welled up with tears, but she didn't cry. She looked towards the windows and blinked her tears.

Ugochi loved Kosi in a certain way, the reason she had used her daughter's phone to invite Emeka for dinner.

Kosi, you're in my sun, Emeka said out of nowhere.

Ugochi cleared her throat and stood up from the dining table. Ehemmm... Buchi dear, come...come let's go upstairs.

They were alone, and Emeka continued. I will do everything I can to make you happy. We will have a good life together.

Kosi turned her face away.

He tried to pull her into his arms.

She resisted.

He went down on his knees and held her feet. Please, he said, looking up at her face, I'm sorry for everything you went through during Buchi's pregnancy.

Kosi nodded, convinced in the heart of her hearts that he would take her out of the misery that had become her life. She forgave him. But the healing

she had thought she would feel did not come immediately. It did not come when he promised that Buchi would enjoy all the fatherly cares she required, it did not come when he proposed to her two months later and brought wine to her people, it did not come to her when he paid her bride price and fixed a marriage date, knowing that she would cease to be a single mother. The relief came now, on her wedding reception, as she looked Obinze in the eyes to tell him that Buchi wasn't his biological daughter. That Buchi happened during one of his numerous meetings in Abuja. The relief came, seeing the waters in Obinze's eyes broke, how glad she was that her ordeal was over.

## *Frisson*

### **Ada-Chioma Ezeano**

SHE KNOWS I LOVE HER. She damn knows I've got every reason to stick my black butt around her life and love her to death. Sometimes, her crazy ugly friends with eyes bigger than Smeagol's lie to her ass that I stick around her because, well, you should guess. But I swear down, and with every leg I've got, that her money isn't what keeps me. The money could be my keeper, but that's certainly not why I am around Nkem.

Nkem! Her actual name is Amara.

The first time I called her Nkem was that day we kissed in her living room. I remember I heard the word, frisson, for the first time that day, because she said our kiss made her have 'frisson'. I smiled. And called her Nkem. Because she knew I meant she is mine.

What we felt obeyed us. That undefined emotion in me that jerks up whenever she calls, and her voice swallows mine. That inexplicable pound in my heart whenever we are together and our eyes meet. Her perfume. It knows how to stay like a good story.

Last month, she bagged into my room one afternoon, and banged my door, and shattered my mirror. And threw away the Swatch wrist watch she got me on my last birthday. Because of an ex-girl of mine. Her name was Nkem.

I had to call upon the ancestors and my elders and my ancestors' ancestors to convince her, to tell her that my calling her Nkem wasn't because my ex-girl's name was Nkem.

She prefers Bae now.

Recently, I got a job, or better put, she got me a job. And a job meant more responsibilities. But those crazy ugly friends of hers with eyes bigger than Smeagol's wouldn't let Bae think well. She almost placed CCTV on my head, and I knew that every mouth that greeted me in the office would also go to report to her how I responded. Did I laugh too loud? That's happy flirting.

That I smiled slowly? That's gradual flirting. Did I fake my smile? Damn it! That's some underlying undertones.

This Saturday morning, I had only said, 'I am tired...' And her words silenced mine.

'I knew it', she screamed.

'Fuck!'

'You think I wasn't monitoring you, huh?'

'Do I look like a fool? Seriously do I?'

I just stood looking at her because her words cleaned out my words. Later, I would leave her sprawling on her floor there, like something I have never seen, like some unscathed goddess.

When I came in later, she looked dreadful. She was a mess. I lifted her up, and she kissed my neck. I knew she was going to say something. But it was my time to interrupt her.

'I am tired,' I began again. Of our fights. Of our hearts living apart. Of seeing you shattered.'

'I want to marry you, if you'll want to marry me.'

That night, we didn't fuck. We made love.

# *Something Burning*

## **Howard M-B Maximus**

IT IS LIKE STEALING from God. Like thrusting your hand in God's orchard, yanking out a glowing ripened fruit, aware that He is somewhere watching.

Everyone in class is sitting in pairs; giving gifts, receiving gifts; love simmering from their couplings, diffusing in the classroom like lemon-scented camphor. Harold buckles a bracelet around Diboh's wrist; Teng finds a cologne in her locker with a card that says 'Be Mine'; Fonkeng, and Fomenky eat white chocolate at the back of the classroom, red ribbons resting on their lockers, looking tired from all that tying. Even Ndive has a Valentine. A real Valentine. Last year, he wrote a love letter to himself. It opened with "Dear Baby" and ended with "Your Love, Sharon." He stuck glistening heart stickers to the edges, addressed it to himself and gave it to someone to give Sister Theresa to read in class. He forgot that you would know his handwriting even if in a coma.

When Sister Theresa brings the letters this year, her white habit flowing behind her like grace, her veil tucked neatly behind her ears, you remember why you love her. It is the gentleness, the fragility of her wrists, her smallness. It is the way the veil covers her hair as if hiding a secret, the way her voice sounds like a song, the way the neckerchief surrounds her breasts like a holy shield. Sometimes, at night, alone on your bed, you imagine how they would feel. And then you hurriedly beg God to forgive your lust for His daughter. His wife.

"Kidze Benson," she says your name. You fidget, take the envelope from her and toss it in your locker without opening. You already know it's from Mayuk; she sends you a letter every month and you can tell her handwriting even if comatose.

You run behind Sister Theresa when she leaves the classroom. You have some problems with Literature, you tell her, but you know that she knows you're lying. You caught the fleeting disappointment in her eyes when she

said your name. The icy tentativeness. She would not ask you about the letter. She never does.

The convent's living room smells of something sweet baking. Spirits are spinning your head, owning you. You brush off a cotton ball from her ear. She stands almost a head shorter, and even though she is in her twenties, she looks sixteen. Her veil is down now and you see all the secrets in her hair. Your head, without notice cocks to kiss her, but she stops you. Her fingers frail against your chest. She kisses you.

Later, you're resting on the carpet beside her. It is your first time, and by the blood, it is hers too. Her gaze is fixated stiffly on nothing; silence floats in the air like feather. You're thinking: so what if she cracks up at your jokes and brushes your shoulders and acts like a jealous girlfriend? So what if you can't sleep without thinking about her? Can't be without her? This is like stealing from God. Like thrusting your hand in God's orchard, yanking out a glowing ripened fruit, aware that He is somewhere watching.

The room now smells of something burning. She mutters something suddenly, and you half-hope she doesn't say she is leaving the convent. You half-hope she does. The spirits are spinning your head. You say nothing but stroke her hair gently. You wait for God to strike you dead beside her.



## *Roses*

### **Somi Ekhasomhi**

THE GIRL HAD BEEN crying all the way from the clinic. She had emerged after the procedure, red eyed and limping, but Monica gave no words of comfort, no shoulder to lean on. She had her own tears, raging and tearing at her insides like a wild, salty sea.

In the car, the girl sniffled and stared out of the window. She was sixteen. Monica tried to remember what sixteen felt like, youth, inexperience, and so much hope...it stung to think about it now, as she took yet another girl, another young househelp, home from the abortion clinic.

This was the third one. For the first, she had been heartbroken, the next, merely puzzled; now the word she would use was resigned. She had tried male servants, but he did not want those around his daughters. She tried older, unattractive women, but he complained and nagged and even slapped one of the women once. Young girls were easy to get. Their poor parents hoped that the host family would also offer some sort of training or education that would improve their daughters' future.

They were also the easiest to take advantage of, to rape, to impregnate, to use and discard. She had become an accomplice. How else could she describe her actions, the trip to the clinic, avoiding the knowing gazes from the nurses, paying for the procedure. She had become a criminal, because it was still illegal. And she had also become a sinner.

*Father, forgive me, for I have sinned.*

*I facilitated an abortion.*

*And another one.*

*And another one.*

*And I will do it again.*

Because I'm married to a man who has no honour and no control, and my conscience has become the sacrifice for his lack of shame.

She picked up the children from school, and they filled the car with their chatter, oblivious to anything, but the fact that they were children.

“Mummy, why is Favour crying?”

“She’s not crying.” Monica snapped, her voice harsher than intended.

Silence, then the chattering and playing resumed. Children were quick to forget.

At the house, she let the girl go to her room, made the children their afternoon snack, and started on dinner. What would she do now? Another girl? She could keep this one. He’d get bored of her after a while, but how do you trust someone around your kids, when your husband is her rapist?

He came home finally, after the children had their dinner, avoiding her eyes, his shoulders drooped as if in shame. It was his act whenever he got caught. The children gathered around him excitedly, disappointed when he went early to bed. She found him there, curled up on his side.

As a girl, when she still went for mass every day, one of the richer parishes would give all single people freshly cut, red roses on Valentine’s Day, imported roses. Now she imagined all those flowers, cut up and in pieces, like each of his children she had helped to kill.

This is what hate feels like, she thought, watching his body move with each breath and wishing, that he was the one cut to pieces instead, his blood all over the sheets, pouring through her fingers like cut rose petals.

She prepared for bed, and when she lay down on her side, he stirred. “What?” he said, his voice rough with sleep.

“Nothing,” she replied. “Happy Valentine.”

## *A Lamu Affair*

**Troy Onyango**

FROM WHERE HE IS SEATED, at the rooftop of Petley's Inn, the low, cold breeze ruffles his long, straight blond hair and flushes his puffy cheeks. Down below, on the small concrete pavement at the seafront, hurried pattering footsteps of men running to the mosque to answer the call of the muezzin to prayers. Only three days here and he is able to know, without glancing at the Apple Watch on his wrist, that the incessant prolonged braying of the donkeys tell what time it is. He is able too, by twitching his aquiline nose towards where the wind blows, to distinguish the smells of the *mahamri*, *vitumbua*, *mandazi* and the other delicacies fried by the Swahili women when dusk leaps upon the island. The wind blows again—colder this time—and he hears the ocean whisper a soulful melancholic tune, interspersed with the roaring of the speedboats as they split the waters to ferry passengers to and from Manda Island or Shela Island.

“Oh fuck!” He finds himself jumping from his seat and as a result, spills his glass of Tusker on the table. The glass, now empty, rolls off the table and shatters into a hundred or more tiny pieces. His lips tremble as he fumbles an apology to no one in particular. He does feel stupid. A single text message from her and he is wreaking havoc. He leaves a crisp thousand shillings note on the table, hoping it makes up for the trouble, then leaps out of the bar, down the steep staircase, and disappears into the dimly lit alleyways.

Until two days ago, he did not know she existed. And, however much he tries to conjure the memory of meeting her, nothing but a haziness in his mind, seems to provoke remembrance. He has tried, without much success, to retrace his steps on this small piece of rock with ancient buildings sprouting from everywhere and the endless corridors that leads you everywhere but nowhere, just so he is able to remember where he met her. It's not at the town square. Neither is it at the Museum. Nor at the donkey sanctuary. Where then?

Her name, she told him on their first night together, is Ze'ena or Zuena; that too, he cannot seem to recollect clearly. It is something towards those

lines though. Her silky hair feels like water through his bony fingers. Her scent, a delicious strawberry and maple syrup concoction, is the perfume that Jean-Baptiste Grenouille sought to gift mankind.

And tonight, as the cheese-blue light of the moon seeps into their hotel room, he stares longingly into Ze'ena or Zuena's eyes and tells her that he wants her. She whispers, in her voice which is a guitar string about to snap into two, that she has never been with a *mzungu* (or any man for that matter). He tells her they don't have to do *it* if she's uncomfortable, but she leans closer, her pointy breasts that part in the middle like in disagreement, rubbing against his clean-shaven face. The tip of his index finger trails the ridge between them down to her navel and further. Their lips lock and then she pulls away, grabs his hand and stares at his red face.

“Not there. Papa *says* that's for Hakeem when he comes back from Mogadishu.”

Kneeling on the bed, staring at her round and supple butt raised towards him, he wonders who the fuck Hakeem is and why she gets to keep the best part for him.

## *Voices*

### **Frances Ogamba**

HOW DO YOU TURN down a proposal when stares are piercing into yours with brittle smiles that could dissolve any moment? How do you turn down a proposal when the voice showers you its kindest version?

Everything you say is a button that could shut out the radiating hope brimming in the others' eyes. Do you turn away from this piercing stare that says its life could sit on your middle finger? Would you let this life go homeless? What does the Universe whisper to you as you plan your NO? Roars? Echoes of meows long forgotten? Do you smile your betrayal, quaky lips, unsteady gaze, trembling hands? Do you say, I love you too dear, but not to this extent. Or do you say, We are moving a bit too fast. Or, Let's give it time? What do you see when you hesitate? A flying broom clasping cadavers of lovers dead from heartbreak? Frustrated lovers walking into moving trains?

Do you hear the crowd chant when the cold shank of the ring hugs your finger? Do you suddenly become an outsider and drift into pieces of time, into moments, into whispers that should have been words, but never made it? Do you feel your No would alter life...trees, sand, air? Why did you say yes? Do you ever wonder? How do you plan taking back your promise to love and cherish simply because you were confused? Simply because it was a miscalculation, that the shake of your head was mistaken for a nod? Is this a game of numbers that there is room for miscalculations?

How does a person live for you and you give nothing back except your heart's bang on the frames of your chest, yearning freedom? What ties you to them and makes it so hard to say NO? Money? Beauty? Stunning potentials? Sacrifices, gifts, love... what? Why do you say, I love you too?

What makes you think of walking down the aisle to meet this person, this stranger you have locked lips with countless times, and have known their body in minutiae, mastered what ticks them off, what fixes them, yet you feel detached? What makes you leave town hours before the nuptials? Why did

you take so long, stringing this lover along on a rope too svelte to carry you both?

How do you tell this story? Would you ever tell the truth, with a matching voice, about how you wrongly depressed both the yes and NO buttons in one lifetime? Would you guard memorials of it—one year today, five years today, twenty years today?

Would you always remember?

How do you forget?

*Brushstrokes*  
**Joe Okonkwo**

“COME HOME WITH ME. I want to paint you.”

The man had approached Jake’s circle of pals after staring at him from across the bar. One pal snickered. Another’s jaw dropped. But Jake looked at the man—older, handsome, chocolate-skinned, blades of white embossing his close-cropped black hair—and said, “Let’s go.”

No introductions were made, none offered. They ambled down the street for ten minutes in midnight silence before Jake spoke.

“Jake.”

“Hudson.”

“This painting: nude?”

An ember of a smile. “Wouldn’t bother otherwise.”

They were passing a wine store.

“We should get a little bottle of something,” Jake said.

“Got lots of big bottles of something at my place already.”

An artist’s studio, but elegant, spacious, a picture window letting in plenty of moon. Easels. Unfinished canvasses. A cut-glass bowl of lemons on a mahogany table.

Their clothes dribbled to the floor, wine poured. Jake regarded Hudson’s body. Brawny. Mostly trim. Mostly taut. Muscular pecs that drooped, slightly. The brilliant imperfections and noble wear-and-tear of age. Jake smiled.

Hudson directed him to a high stool.

“You paint in the nude?” Jake asked.

“Tonight I do.”

Hudson began. He studied Jake, sometimes for minutes at a time before a single brushstroke. Jake liked it. Hudson's covetous gaze. No, a satisfied one. One that said, *I am having my fill.*

Jake felt neglected when Hudson looked away from him to paint. *Hmm. I'm jealous of a canvas.*

"How old are you?" Jake asked, to recapture the artist's attention.

"Fifty-three. You?"

"Twenty-eight."

Hudson squinted, then swirled some paint onto the canvas. "Age difference work for you?"

"Would work better if you were looking at me."

"I've been looking at you. All night. I'll be looking at you all morning, too."

Something strange, and nice: Each brushstroke on the canvas made Jake swoon. The strokes came more swiftly now as Hudson's stride rocketed, as his momentum soared.

Brushstroke. *Swoon.*

Brushstroke. *Swoon.*

Brushstroke. *Swoon.*

Jake's head spun. He focused on the bowl of lemons to steady himself. He became aroused. He was not embarrassed.

Hudson's eyes floated to Jake's lap. The ember-smile returned.

Jake wanted to move. But that might bruise the spell.

"I would like you to touch me," he said.

But Hudson returned to his brushstrokes. Some slow and judicious (Jake shivered); others broad and spiraling and whimsical (Jake lost his breath).

"Jake. *I am* touching you."

Hudson caressed the brush across the canvas. Long, slow, smooth. "Feel that?"

Jake shuddered. His heart sprinted. He clenched his eyes shut. Reopened them. Looked in his lap.

Moist.



Jake rose, cloaked his arms around Hudson, nestled his face into the crook of the artist's neck. Hudson placed virile, gentle hands on Jake's neck, the small of his back. Their nude skins pressed together. The warmth crackled.

"I would like some more wine," Jake said. "Then it's my turn to paint you."

# *The Doll*

## **Brigitte Poirson**

IT WAS THEN she realized these age-old walls were vectors of souls.

The three plumpy-bottomed, rosy-cheeked dolls lay entwined in their pram, legs and arms outstretched in a motionless movement that pointed to their long abandonment. All the cupboards had been forced open, eviscerated of their contents. Disembowelled of the clothes, toys, books, photos that had once been the vital organs of family life. In the living-room, the furniture was being dismembered piece by piece. Only the stony bones of the house, some of them more than one meter thick, would remain standing. They had survived centuries of man-engineered wars. They had outlived the death of those who had made them alive for generations.

Standing at the very spot where her mum had deposited her into this world, two steps from the empty-eyed dolls, Helen felt a silence draped in desecration wrap around her. The spirit was going forever.

The pain goaded her into shuffling her tired mass to the next bedroom in search of more precious books to rescue from the wreckage.

It was then her eyes bumped on the shape stuck on a bottom shelf, there, on the left. Drawing close, she recognised the dishevelled head of a sexless doll the same size as the other three.

The premature dusk of the winter afternoon was already unfolding a shroud of darkness over the room.

Frika must have been retrieved from the surrounding paraphernalia by some fumbling fingers, then left to await her sorry fate. The doll, whose sweet-smelling plastic could still be detected under the stench of dust, was bare. Not naked, just bare, as Frika had always demanded to stay. The other dolls had been vested by careful hands with educational interests. But Frika's smooth chocolate skin had always looked and felt and sniffed too nice to be hidden: the best garment ever.

It was then Helen remembered Frika had always lived in this room. This doll had never wanted to join the others in the pram or the living-room. Frika was the doll of another mother and needed a treatment of her own. The other dolls had competed between themselves for food, clothing interests and petty stories. Frika had lived her own person quietly. She had been the one telling stories, bringing sanity into the thick stuff of daily life. The doll needed attention and affection, and passion, more than care.

It was then Helen realised it would be a yes.

The darkness of the room enveloped her in a sweet cocoon. And the pupa lay beside her.

The room was her own flesh.

The room urged her to grab her phone and open her womb to South Africa.

So she touched the screen and fumbled for the number. ....00 27... to *conjure up his name. To a yes.*

*“Ke a go rata! I love you!”*

On hearing his groan of joy from the other side, she noticed the room’s dark smile. It would never leave her after this terminal visit.

# *The Pulp He Ate*

## **Yule Mbois Mndialala**

*I'm so tired of being here,  
Suppressed by all my childish fears.*

—Evanescence

*PALPITATE.* Brook recalls the first time she heard the word—a big word for a big *man*. The big man her English teacher was, in status if not stature.

It was a word her untamed teenage mind did not understand; a sophisticated clove she had ground to a pulp with overuse. For her *teacher for English*, as he liked to be known—“English teacher? Do I look English to you, Brook?”—so loved the word. Just a little less than he loved to punish the individuality of her dissent. So went on her unlubricated high-speed grind on the *palpitating* saddle.

Years later, she finally felt it—a genuine palpitation, one that collided with her head as much as it struck her core.

Her head, for every time she had abused it.

Her heart, for him.

For a fortnight, her body and soul gained true comprehension of the word. Tuzo did not so much walk into her life's rib cage as he contused it, riding her routine into a more than slightly concussed coma.

Full stop.

*Cut the cord, don't be a casualty.*

*Cut it. Cut it.*

—Shinedown

She's reading more fantasy novels today. She always read more when her life downed its tools, went AWOL on enforced inactivity. When there was

more life to live between hard covers than within herself, fantasy became catharsis. When she could smile, but had not reason for such rigorous activity.

She had smiled, in the morning, leaving the clinic. Fitting that another big man killed *its* palpitation. The tongs went in, sleeked back out, and Cupid was gone. It was the name her naive –but now, altogether, deadened—affect had given Tuzo's seed. Eight weeks back, right after that same clinic big man—bringer and executioner of life—had given her a Valentine's day due date. It had to be a lovechild, this creature feeding inside her; her sanity would allow no repose if her costly ten-week affair with him was just that.

Tuzo would stand by Brook's side at the doc's, not a month ago today, and stab that **she** would make a lovely mother. That **she** would be a lovely wife, and have a lovely *lovely* life with *any* man who *chose* to make her happy. Of all the lovelies his diction would shrink to in front of the man pronouncing time of death on his lust, Tuzo would forget to immerse his usually expressive face in one, fumble out a half-smoked cigarette, cup the end, furiously flick his lighter.

Her lips curl again, a weak stream encroaching on them down her battered left cheek. A growling memento of his love, it whispered unendingly under the heavy, tear-stained foundation. One last pouncing delivery of lovelies from Tuzo as he stuffed his inebriated love into a backpack, walked out with it; her heart the *pulp it ate*.

## *When the Silence Came*

**Tochi Eze**

SHE ALWAYS CARRIED her anger like a storm, Uju, our cousin's wife. It had been like this from the day he chirped about his new babe, then about their first quarrel, then that one time, at the University, when she flung his books across the hall and stomped out of the faculty. But he married her anyway, claiming in the soft crack of his voice that she would change. She did not. Her words remained sharp, her anger, still falling like rain, her fingers poking, daring him to as much as breathe a reply. He never did. Later on, while speaking slowly and carefully, our cousin would attempt to clean the wreckage Uju's outburst had caused, making excuses for her, telling us of how, in the quiet of their bedroom, her tears quickly followed the rage, falling without grace, telling us also about the silence he wore easily, about the patience that could cure every troublesome marriage.

We watched him pitifully in the complexity of that relationship, giving our ears when he shared his burdens, and sometimes, witnessing for ourselves, the cross he had to bear. The other day, at uncle's 70th, five years into his marriage, we were certain it would end, certain that her audacity to strike Uncle was too abominable even for his forgiving heart. Yet, one week later, our cousin arrived with his wife to plead for forgiveness. He had brought a he-goat as peace offering, as if the spunky taste of pepper soup could erase what she had done.

When the first miscarriage happened the following year, we rallied round him as relatives would, but every visit was haunted, every conversation heavy, Uju's presence sitting ominous like a bomb waiting to explode. Yet, we remained, raising petitions at mass and asking God to bless their union with a child, one who would have Uju's beauty but carry cousin's heart. And in a way God answered, but it was not with Uju; it was instead the fruit of a desperate night when our cousin had sought escape from the haunting accusations. He had gone, after three beers and an evening of brooding, to bury himself between the bony thighs of Nwando, running back to his wife after the deed was done. Except that that passionless night resulted in a child.

But again, Uju happened, inserting herself into the situation. Our cousin had entertained our arguments to take the child, to keep his marriage, but at least to take the child. But Uju had said no, and the situation was silenced. We watched him, the shock bare on our faces as he stood beside Uju, while Nwando's family pleaded.

The last time we saw cousin, he looked smaller, frail, like a thing about to break. But he said he was okay, that Uju was fine, that business was booming and that Nonso, his estranged son, had just turned three. But we should have known. The light in his eyes had gone, the one that sparked every time the ball was passed to him as a child, the same one that kept sparking through personal disappointments and family tragedies. That light was gone, yet he told us everything was fine. We should have known.

Today we put our dear cousin in the ground. He has finally found peace, the escape he had secretly been haunting, assisted by the valium overdose. At least he has turned off the anger. He has worn his silence once and for all. We wish things had been different. But this is the way he chose.

*From “A cappella”*  
**Otosirieve Obi-Young**

IN AUGUST, ENTERING FINAL YEAR, he asked you yet again to move in permanently, and you told him you’d still keep a room in the hostel, and he looked at you as if to say, “Why?” The night you packed in, he called you into his study, square and walled with books. He stood on a stool near a covered shelf in the center of the room, and slid away a ceiling board to reveal a dormer window with scratched glass through which, under a milk above, splinters of light fell in around him, settled in a faint pool around the covered shelf. He removed the cover, globs of cobweb plastered all over it: an upright piano.

“I brought it back with me. Never bothered to play it since then.” He cleaned the top, the keys, the stool, with a rag. “Can you play?”

You’d never seen a physical piano before.

“Music is like math. You cross instruments 1 and 2, tunes 3 and 4, and you have a masterpiece, or at least something worth listening to. And when you think of it, life itself is like math—life, work, happiness. The world exists on equations of nature. Hit the right formula and you’re”—he snapped his fingers—“gone.”

You sat on the chair as he played, first striking random keys quickly, then particular ones slowly, before drifting into a pattern. It was strange, the soft subsuming sounds, their lingering loudness, a whole third presence in the house. You caught the melody and began singing: *When the rain is blowing in your face, and the whole world is on your case, I could offer you a warm embrace, to make you feel my love.*

“Is this your favourite song?” you asked. You loved Adele’s sprawling contralto, the vulnerability in “Make You Feel My Love”, this song that made you think of green hills and grey rocks, an ash sky and a blue sea, rolling topography buttered by breeze.



“I don’t have a favourite song, Kosara,” he said, and you thought how odd it was for a man so particular, so exact, not to have a favourite song. There was grace in the movement of his arms, the slenderness of his fingers, moonlight on his baldness. He drifted into another melody, Sky B’s “I’m Calling”, and said, “You like rap?”

“Phyno, Olamide, Kanye West, Phyno, Jay Z.”

He stopped. “A cappella.”

You stared at him.

“A cappella. Just your voice. No piano.”

“So I’ll be the woman in your picture? No.”

“Oh, come on.”

He was grinning.

You drew in deep breaths and began: *Shine bright like a diamond...find light in a beautiful sea, I choose to be happy, you and I, you and I, we’re like diamonds in the sky.*

As you sang, he stood up and carried you, laid you on the rug. There was about him the smell of alcohol. It would become a ritual, he beginning with the piano, you singing a cappella, and in the following nights, when you would lie there, under that bare sky, moon-glow on your skin, you would feel a stirring liberation, as though things had fallen into place, as though they had, in falling into place, displaced other things. An hour later, he walked into your room with the A cappella Woman, hung it opposite your bed. “I don’t need it,” you said.

But in the morning, the room cut into two by a veneer of white light squeezing in, you stared at the portrait, at the slight greyness it had taken, and realized how refreshing it was waking up and the first thing you set eyes on was something so striking, something so beautiful and beatific.

## *Loss*

### **Andanjay Wobanda**

#### HOW DO YOU HIDE LOSS?

There is no proper way to do it. You sit in a bar, at the heart of the city, nursing the neck of a Tusker bottle. Hands trembling, you burrow for the Dunhill nestled in the pocket of your coat. The last one. You savor the bitter taste. Around you the noise rises, mingling with the smoke that curls on your lip, scotching your lungs. Your thoughts are securely hidden in the ocean of voices. The waitress saunters to your side; beckoned by the sound of notes in your wallet.

To the left, a girl with cheap synthetic hair stares. Her unblinking eyes are hardened by the Nairobi sun. She awaits the showers of a sponsor – you – to fall on her. You buy her a drink. One! To show her blessings trickle slowly like dew in the dawn.

‘Why did you call me?’ You glare at the weave. It is a bleeding red.

‘I missed you,’ she says angling her succulent body towards you. In your head, you know it’s money she needs. You push her aside. This surprises her.

The viceroy kicks in. You hope it will numb the taste of regret. You order a second drink for the girl, to shut her up. You are silently grieving. No one should know your wife, Pam, has left. The phony hair next to you was partly to blame.

‘I am pregnant,’ Pam said three days ago, her sunken eyes accusing. ‘I was pregnant,’ she corrected, the tubes sticking out of her arms like colorless vines. That got you. It had been two decades of trying. You studied her form on the metal hospital bed and noticed she had lost too much weight. You walked out, without a word, to mourn the death of a son who would never be.

You came home that morning from a night of debauchery to find her ashen face on the pillow. The pistol you kept on the side table caressing her temple. She had checked herself out of the hospital. You watched in growing horror the poetic splutter of her blood on the white sheets. Her last valentine

present to you. 'Goodbye.' The note read. It was sticking from the mahogany drawer, next to the four-poster bed.

'Are you ok, sir.' It is the waitress. You finally notice the gap between her teeth. It reminds you of your wife; of her cold corpse waiting for you in the empty house. You feel the pain sear your insides. Collapsing on the bar table, the hurt gushes out like sewer water. Men don't cry, you tell yourself. But the tears don't listen. They gather in fat droplets and roll unbridled down your face.

The girl is slumped on the table. The substance you had slipped in her drink earlier already taking effect. Your breath comes out in little gasps. This is how Pam must have felt. Suffocating. You smile as the darkness takes you

Perhaps the waitress will alert them of your death. Of her death.

# *The Photographer*

## Moso Victor Sematlane

ALL SHE'S DONE SO FAR IS TALK. The more she talks, the further away she drifts from who I thought I had fallen in love with.

“I’ve never seen your photos” she says.

Her tin-colored sunglasses reflect the world around her. I see my reflection in them. We are seated at an outside table at Lancer’s Inn. Maseru is humming with taxis, with beggars—Summer announcing itself in that quiet way it has; days stretching longer, fragrant lawns, hearts beating faster.

“What, of course you’ve seen my photos” I say, fiddling with my camera, “You liked one on Instagram just today”

“No, I mean you never take photos of *you*.”

“I’m a photographer, not Kim Kardashian. What you said right now shows a great misunderstanding of how photography works. Thing is--- photography should look outward, not inwards. It’s about how you as the artist perceive the world. And it should be truthful, that’s always important. It’s very difficult to take photos of yourself and still be truthful”

She looks away. Her mouth grimaces in that way I know means she’s upset. Anger fills my veins. Why can’t we be interested in the same thing? Why can’t she see things from my point of view?

“You’re so passionate about this stuff” she says.

“Yes. Our generation will be one remembered for its authenticity. Everywhere you turn, people use filters to----to---- art is something that asks for nakedness. It *is* naked! People need to underst— “

She takes her glasses off and looks directly in my eyes. Her pupils have a slightly green hue, even though she’s black, “That’s no different from taking a selfie”

“It’s shallow!” I spit, “And that’s the problem with this generation. We’re shallow, and we look into all these stupid things to fill the holes in us!”

“And that’s my problem with you right there” she says, “You act like you’re not part of us. And when we go to these parties, or I agree to have sex with you, you’re happy to do it then come back to criticize us again.”

“Who’s us?”

“Us. You know, quote-unquote millennials. The people you act like you’re not part of”

I put down my camera. “Of course I’m not part of them. I’m just a passerby. An observer”

She sighs, “Maybe that’s our problem right there, and this time, I’m talking about me and you. I wish you understood me as well as you do all those...art things. Why can’t you ever see things from my point of view?”

“Excuse me?” I say, laughing “You make it sound like we’re in a relationship”

A glare. God, what have I done? She puts her sunglasses on.

She is leaving.

I look down at the image on my camera. In photo-speak, we call this a ‘*phuck-up*’. My fingers must have slipped when we were arguing and captured the shot; her face is a blur. Her mouth is open to say something. I look at her green eyes, frozen in the photograph. She will never be mine again.

## *Two Minutes*

### **Sibbyl Whyte (Onyeocha)**

NAKED, CALLISTA LEANS against the bathroom door, smoking. I walk over; she passes the joint.

Inhale. Exhale ...senses sharpen.

Headboard thumps against the wall betray my neighbour's activities. Ed Sheeran on repeat filters in, pleading, *gimme love*. Burnt-leaf smell of kush drifts, mingling with the stink of sex and sweat. Steady red of wall sockets and flickering orange of blunt glow, *alien eyes*. Goosebumps erupt, flesh resurrects as Callista traces something on my chest.

"Watchu spelling?"

She giggles. "Guess na."

"I love you?"

"She scoffs. "Which kain? I'm spelling my name."

"Kuku just tattoo it on my forehead."

"Gerraway you." She goes to sit on the toilet, releasing piss. "I still don't get why you smoke only twice a year. I mean, who does that?"

I chuckle, puff.

Inhale. Exhale ...memories magnify.

*He's locked himself in the bathroom, smoking, kush clouding all else. The constant criticisms and the rejection from a crush who doesn't think he is a worthy Valentine, being sixteen and four years younger. It fails however to silence the argument streaming from the living room. Sighing, he lifts himself from the toilet seat and stalks the noise. The man is bent over the woman, kicking, dealing punches. Usually, he screams and drags the man off while fending blows, but not today. He watches, mentally removed from the scene.*

*It is perhaps, her legs thrashing against the table as though finding a way to hold onto something—anything—that galvanizes him. His eyes alight on the flower vase planted on the table. This, he uproots, and smashes against the man's head. Glass shatters, plastic flowers tumble out and the man keels over. It's only when she has gathered him in her arms in teary thanksgiving that they notice the man, now still. A shared glance and they crouch - mother and son - to inspect. From a gash in the head, blood seeps into the red rug. The body moans but neither mother nor son moves till the last breath escapes.*

The toilet flushing draws me out to feel Callista brush past into the room, wet fingers grazing my dick. She giggles at my gasp. *Tease!*

A phone rings. Mine.

The blunt, too small to grasp, lands in the sink. Callista passes the phone.

Mum is on the other end of the line, a scratchy soprano. Hullabaloo in the background, someone shouting, "Hol' it dia!"

"...Happy Valentine's Day, Mum."

"Same to you, Junior."

For both of us this exchange is a seven year old memorial. We cram our love into a conversation that spans two minutes before the blasted beep. The one that says she's shuffling off for another inmate to spend bought minutes with someone on the outside.

I lie to Callista, "Mumsy says Hi."

Callista smiles, her lips seeking mine. I fear she will taste the lie but she straddles me instead. When my hands reach for her breasts, I wonder; can she tell that these hands have killed? Can she?

# *You Have No Flame*

**Michael E. Umoh**

YOU SEE LOVE EVERYWHERE, don't you?

At your old faculty, the long walkway close to those dreadful plants you hated, you see a boy listening to a girl talk. Everyone calls her Sharon, but he reduces it to “Sha”. She finds it adorable. But they are just friends, they claim. When they walk, you drift with them. Minutes later, when she hugs him and enters her hostel, you listen and hear the love in his unsteady breath.

Love is there in that mad man’s eyes when you sit beside him. Insanity has cut up his love and given it away as little gifts to rust and the dirt. And each time he gathers the refuse, he gathers his love back. Once you tried to help him, but your hands phased through the stones. That was the first time you had tried to hold anything. It was the last time.

The people at the junction call him 'Awara'. Although they say he’s a weak, damaged, thing, but he has more than you do.

Then there’s the club. The one you and your husband once cursed. You are there now and people dance and walk through you. You no longer bother. The first time this had happened, you had felt like those tomatoes you used to blend.

That girl grinding away at that guy’s crotch holds her love in her hips. Then, afraid it might fall off, she moves it to her lips as they melt into his. See how he rises to meet her? But his love is held back by his jeans.

Did you like jeans when you were alive?

You see love again as you see your parents. Your mum came down from the car you bought them and winced.

“Take it easy,” your father says. And then he comes over, and his hands hold hers and their love is their calluses touching. When she finds peace in the question, “How are you?” you are pain screaming to be heard and seen.



You return to the street you once lived. You are a child going back to the safety of your cradle; only this time, there is no cradle. You see your husband leave. He puts his love and yours in suitcases and drives away. His grief was the fuel pushing him away from the memories here. Your grief is your anchor to the world. But you're tired, so tired. The next time the bright light comes for you, you will make a choice.

You will let go.

## *Chances*

### **Maureen Wambui**

THREE YEARS, TWO DAYS, ten hours, thirteen minutes and twenty nine seconds. That is the measure of time from the moment I first saw her.

Every day I see her. For one hour, I can bask in her glory and pretend my life is perfect. Pretend I live in a world that a guy like me can talk to a lady like her. Pretend to have the nerve to.

It is another busy day. The rush hour crowd is streaming in and out of the small cafeteria at regular intervals. Young men in dirty sweat-stained vests and torn pants rub shoulders with elegant ladies in dresses and men in suits and ties. The hustle and bustle is a symphony of the rhythm of days.

I sit at the corner, my usual table. It is especially hot today; the weatherman has been very vocal with dire warnings about exceptionally high temperatures. I sit at a window, but that doesn't make much of a difference. The air is still and muggy, making individual dust motes visible. It seems that many have come inside to escape the oppressive heat outside. It smells of stale cooking grease, sweat, perfume, and cologne bought at 100shs at Muthurwa. It settles like a warm blanket around us.

In the crowd I lose sight of her at times, though her voice still carries to me as if she were speaking in my ear. Her voice. Like the melody of wind chimes, guiding the weary traveler in me home. Like the refreshing first glass of water after travels. For me it was like finding the treasure where once was marked X.

"Hallo, my name is Sharon, what will your order be today?" She asked me the first time, and it was over for me.

Dare I show her the desire of my heart? Can she see the way my eyes are drunk on feelings for her? Can she possibly know that my stomach cannot hold down anything right now, for the butterflies that have taken up residence there and keep reproducing?

I don't know what to say to her. My tongue is not stuck to the roof of my mouth solely due to the heat. What do you say to the future you know you will never have?

A horn blares from outside, and the scraping of chairs on the floor is heard as half the people get up and walk out. Someone across the room signals for her attention and she walks away. As I stand up and pull at my dripping sweat vest where it's stuck to my skin, I mourn that I have lost of her.

Never mind. I still have my one hour tomorrow.

*Aurora*  
**Carey Baraka**

*DECEMBER 28, 2016*

Bruh 10.35 PM ✓✓

Hey yo. Who dis man 10.40 PM

This nigga! 10.56 PM ✓✓

Losing my number all the time 10.56 PM ✓✓

Smh 10.56 PM ✓✓

It's Mike 10.57 PM ✓✓

Yo nigga, me I got this phone today. Me I don't know what you're talking about 10.58 PM

You got the phone today? What phone is it? 11.02 PM ✓✓

It's a s7 edge bitch 11.12 PM

Mehn!! I see the nigga ballin 11.14 PM ✓✓

Early birthday present? 11.14 PM ✓✓

Mehn, you know the guy is balling. The guy, the guy, the guy, the guy is balling. Anyway how you doing man. You, you potead on us like serious man. Me I'm in Thailand right now, you guy. It's 3.15 am. Me I want to go to bed. I'm meant to be waking up at 5 am to go to a fucking market man! A market! Yoh man, me I don't know what's wrong with your hommie, wallahi he's not normal 11.15 PM

Hahaha you are going to the market at 5 in the morning? 11.18 PM ✓✓

Wait, that's Bangkok right? 11.18 PM ✓✓

The Bangkok of all the prostitutes? 11.19 PM ✓✓

Yeah, man, Bang-cock! You guy man, there are too many prostitutes here man. In 2011 there were prostitutes. You guy right now there are prostitutes. Bro by the way there is a way me I'll fuck one of them 11.20 PM

Haha! Look at him. Bangkok has him 11.24 PM ✓✓

I feel sorry for \*\* 11.24 PM ✓✓

Insert name of current girlfriend. 11.25 PM ✓✓

Who will be dumped for a Bangkok mamq 11.25 PM ✓✓

Bro, hahaha, you know thinking about it I broke up with another girl when was it today is, what's the day today? I broke up with a girl on 26<sup>th</sup>. On Saturday man. I broke up with another girl, who had only lasted like a month hahaha. But then there is another girl called Aurora I'm making moves on right now bro she's already telling me she wants to date me you guy she has everything. Let me send you photos of her. 11.28 PM

Aurora.png 11.28 PM

Odessa.png 11.28 PM

FB\_2638.png 11.28 PM

FB\_273733.png 11.28 PM

Vlcsnapshot3.png 11.28 PM

Aurorashower.png 11.28 PM

Auroragym.png 11.28 PM

FB\_odessa\_739393.png 11.28 PM

Snapchatimage16.png 11.28 PM

Auroraimage10.png 11.28 PM

On Boxing day? You horrible person!! 11.29 PM ✓✓

Wharrathese Aurora has in her trousers/shorts/dresses 11.30 PM ✓✓

Bitch putting sponges in there 11.30 PM ✓✓

Or mattress pieces 11.30 PM ✓✓

Ain't no way her booty that big 11.30 PM ✓✓

Bro imagine it's her! Imagine. Let me tell you bro, I've felt it, I've squeezed it bro. Me I've been through this girl before. I'm telling you that's all natural imagine. 11.31 PM

Bruv! And the boobs mehn! Look like the typ'a boobs ✓✓

that make you wanna put your face in them and go,"brrrrrrr!!" 11.37 PM ✓✓

Felt those too? 11.37 PM ✓✓

Bro! That's what I told her. I told her, her boobies just make me wanna do that. Whatchyu mean I've sucked on her titties whatyu talking about bro

motherfucker. I'm gonna fuck her. She's gonna let me fuck her on my birthday 11.39 PM

11.44 PM ✓✓

Someone save your soul! 11.44 PM ✓✓

These kids 11.44 PM ✓✓

Smh 11.44 PM ✓✓

Yoh listen, me, me I just have game. Let me tell you. This shorre is turning 19 even, 19 bro. Me I'm just a bad man. I've fucked a shorre who is twenty I'm about to fuck this shorre. I've fucked so many shorres. This shorre I'm gonna fuck her bro wait you see. Aiyayaya she's gonna learn my name mmmm cheza cheza cheza. 11.46 PM

## *Brews of Abstract Attractions*

### **Ciru Njuguna**

IT WAS GAKENIA who'd suggested an online dating site, as I had been single for two years. My last relationship was bad, so bad that it landed me into a coma. At first, I was hesitant, but I decided to give online dating a try.

You'd think creating a dating profile is easy. Good picture here, snappy bio there, and you were good to go. You weren't me. First, I couldn't decide on a picture; they either looked like I tried too hard or I did not try at all. Second, the words to describe myself were elusive. How do you describe bubbly, yet laidback? Outspoken, yet quiet?

With my profile, complete, I waited. A few messages came; these were mainly one liners and a few naughty ones. I never could stand those-one liners. They were usually a 'Hi'. A safe, but boring way to initiate conversation in real life. But this was the internet; the last thing I wanted was safe or boring.

So, when he texted, Ndegwa, I could feel some genuine enthusiasm in his words. Maybe it was the picture or the bio or maybe he was just good with words. I took time to respond. I wasn't scared but men need to be kept waiting. Create suspense. Intrigue. Anticipation. Play with their ego a bit. So Ndegwa had to wait.

Ndegwa wasn't the only one waiting. The longer I kept him pending the longer I had to wait. I don't like to wait, no woman does. I shot him a well thought out reply, subtle but laden with hints. If he was smart, he'd pick up on them. He did. Damn him. As expected endless chats turned into endless calls which finally became a date.

There's no such thing as the perfect lady. All you see is the beautiful dress, well-applied makeup, matching shoes and a charming smile, but never the hell what we go through to get there. Questions that run through our minds, insecurities, and the body that threatens to fall sick. It's the same hell I went through before settling for my long, black, body-hugging dress, maroon heels and a matching clutch.

We met at my favorite restaurant, where he had arrived half an hour earlier. I spotted him first, laid back on his seat, tapping the table. He was in a grey pressed suit and his hair, which was neatly trimmed, accentuated his brown eyes. Our eyes locked and I turned away momentarily. He rose from his seat as I walked towards him. Standing in front of him, I didn't know what to expect; he pecked my cheek. I hadn't realized that I was holding my breath, and it took a moment to find my voice. "Thank you." I said as he pulled out a seat for me.

That was three years ago, tomorrow will be our wedding day.



# *Labyrinths of Babylon*

**Eric Atie**

I

ON THE BACKSEAT of a car parked deep into the darkness, you fuck a boy who had walked up to you with his name on his lips, Emeka. The music, finding escape from Babylon gives rhythm to your movements. You push his face away when he tries to kiss you. You are done. You buckle up and you head back to the light.

II

"I am happiest with you"

It is as you moan, your thighs making clap sounds against the cheeks of his rear that he tells you this. He tells you his heart has found home inside of you, this home, he calls it Happiness.

But happiness had never been yours to have or to giveaway. How then could he have found it in this body you constantly seek an escape from? He tells you you seek it too- home, in the naked warmth of strangers, in the burning heat of alcohol and the deadly adventures of coloured pills. He tells you that you search for it in the wrong places.

III

"I love you"

He says it again. Nights after he found you unconscious in your room, a needle sticking out of your arm. It was the last accident before he begged you to move in with him. You did.

As you both lay on the floor, your naked frames absorbing the cool from the tiles, you would yet again not understand it.

"Aren't we all broken people, just yearning for a fix" he yawns.

"But some are more broken than others. Some just can't be fixed" you'll reply, but only the walls will hear.

You would take up your things gently as he sleeps and you would leave. He will come searching, this boy, but you had never been his to have.

#### IV

Weeks later, a strange number and a drunken text—"I'm drowning"

One pathetic text and he comes finding you. One hour, the drive from Ajah to Ikorodu that bleak morning, another hour locating the hotel you had mumbled to him over the phone. The headlight of his Van finds you passed-out in a corner beside the building, the folds of your palm pressed tight, leaking rainbow from the mixture of coloured pills and sweat.

#### V

You wake up at the back of his truck to a sky with no stars.

—One day, you just might end it and I pray you find what you are searching for, Segun... I won't be there.

—Then don't!

—I don't know how not to! He yells back into the darkness. I have held you and now, now I can't let go.

He adjusts himself closer to where you sit. In his eyes, you see all the love the universe can hold; you see God.

—Why don't you let me in, why don't you let me, let me...fix you?

You want to reach out to him, to let him stroke the darkness away as he promises. Instead, you think of the ones before him who had tried, the ones you had left with bits of your damage.

The pack of cigarette flying from your palm finds landing on his face asking for a light.

—Stop saying these silly things, you say to him.

He looks at you with tired eyes, this boy, this boy whom you had met on the dance floor of Babylon. This boy you let kiss you.

# *When You Lose Something You Can't Replace*

## **Hajara Hussaini Ashara**

REGRETS ARE INTERWOVEN with huge chunks of love, affection and disaffection, hatred and confusion: intertwined with heavy musical notes wrapped in despondency, in a chronic hatred of the present. I live in invisibility, worshipping my inward views of people, of actions, both mine and of others. I feel because of this loss, this pain that has cracked my heart into various angles that reek of regret and exhausted hope, I cannot love anymore.

I remember the different men I had turned down because I was waiting, *looking* for love, the kind I'd feel in every bone of my body, to the depth of my soul. I think and re-think my many thoughts: of how perfect this love was, of the first time we kissed. Because you were first to touch me, and I vowed to never let anyone else besides you come that close. Hot tears flood my eyes; pain strikes my insides when I think it is over.

I try to listen to some music: Coldplay's *Fix You*, *In My Place* and *The Scientist*, Maroon5's *Pay Phone*, Boys II Men's *Pass You By*, and ABBA's *The winner takes it all*; without knowing all these songs have *me* as their inspiration and my broken love engraved in the lyrics. Now, food tastes like bile, people disgust me. I search for deception in every action, past and present, from everyone. My feeling of worthlessness heightens; erosion has overwhelmed the pool in my heart, this pool that housed my low self-esteem, my self-hatred and unhappiness. This gully depression stretches and consumes everything good and hopeful left in me. I'm filled with an irredeemable sense of loss. I've been stabbed, and when I stand naked in front of a mirror, I painfully watch the thick crimson slowly sweep itself down my ribs.

I am a deep thinker, a discoverer of problems in every situation, a brothel prostituting fear, sadness and perfection. I am good-natured, quiet and patient; a sacrificial lamb. I can cross the Red Sea for you, transform myself bit by bit in the hope that I come to be your definition of perfection. I can swallow bouts of extraordinary pain, of all your misbehaviours. I am a firm believer in the

sanctity of love, of truth, of eternity. I ask for everything simple and plain, disregarding my complicated mind. I believe, strongly, in my thoughts: I am a deeper thinker of reality and deeds, of people and of me.

Listen to Coldplay: *When you try your best but you don't succeed, When you get what you want but not what you need, When you feel so tired but you can't sleep, Stuck in reverse/And the tears come streaming down your face, When you lose something you can't replace, When you love someone but it goes to waste, Could it be worse...When you're too in love to let it go, But if you never try you'll never know just what you're worth...*

I'm moving on, going to do other profound things with my heart and energy. When I feel too lonely, I'll get a daughter artificially inseminated into me, and I'll call her Noor, *Light*.

# *World Apart*

## **Jacob Katumusiime**

THE PAGES WAILED AT the blazing hut. The palace guards rushed to put off the fire. Kiiza clasped Nyamate's left hand, sprinted across the compound, and like wild rats, they ricocheted through the reed fence into the king's kraal. The kraal was yawning; the herdsmen were still in the grasslands. The two hurried to the hedges. He pushed her to climb over the kraal and thrust himself over it. The marathon began. They had to leave Kamukuzi before the sun cast its last smile.

A few farms from the palace, Nyamate collapsed. She couldn't resist it; since when had a Hiima lady last run? It's only love's wings that could narrow her that far. Kiiza gripped his goat skin and vigorously fanned her. Her eyes resurrected. He knelt, lifted her head and placed a gourd of milk on her lips.

'Enoughhh...' She fizzed, pushing the gourd away with her right hand.

He smiled.

'We have to leave,' he said. 'The new moon must find us across.'

'I can't move further.'

'You can't do this to me.'

'But you see...'

Her words found Kiiza on his feet. He pulled her up and they waddled among the anthills to the royal cemetery. The half moon peeped from behind the royal palace where a caravan of white smoke was ascending to the skies. At the sight of the staggering light rays that appeared several huts away, they threw themselves onto Mbaguta's grave, not minding the pythons that guarded the king. He was heaving and she was making sporadic screams as though rapt by labour pains.

He had refused to let his beer, butter and back-cloths waste away just because Prince Kaine had annulled his partial marriage-fee and compensated his parents with the two cows they had given to Nyamate's family. She had

been betrothed to him. She had given him her maidenhood, and she was pregnant. For the sake of their serf families, and for the sake of their own lives, they had to flee.

But how could it be heard that the prince's wife was carrying a serf's tot? She had to go down river Kagera's throat with a stone tied to her neck; he had to be roasted from the Kakyeka wrestling oval.

The light rays closed in, accompanied by voices. 'The royal guards are here.' Kiiza whispered.

He held her hand and they lay to the ground. They swallowed their breath to let the guards pass.

'Let me stay behind, they might still be within,' said one of the guards. And the susurration proceeded.

The guard surveyed the graveyard. His torch landed on the two. Like an antelope trapped in a lion's claws, they lay inert.

'Nyamate and Kiiza, what have you done to us?' Kale, Nyamate's elder brother, cried. 'We must leave now before they come back,' he added.

# *Bloody Valentine*

## Amanda Madunere

YOU ARE TICKLED BACK to consciousness by the dropping of liquid on your face, the banging inside your head and the taste of petrol in your mouth. You try to open your eyes but they sting, like every other part of you. When you eventually open them, you do not see beyond the mating clouds of dust and smoke that have now enveloped you. A limb is sprawled across your bended neck. A blooded limb.

\*\*\*\*

February 13th. 05:30pm.

A woman is reeling off a set of phone numbers over the radio. Her singsong voice makes you listen.

‘The lines are now open. Call us and tell us how you plan to spend your Valentine’s day’, she says.

The first caller is a man. An angry man. You conclude he is an angry man when he responds to the radiowoman’s please-tell-us-your-name-and-where-you-are-calling-from with a quick, angry forget-about-valentine-and-listen-to-me. He goes on to fume about corrupt politicians. About bad governance and bad roads. How the Enugu-Port Harcourt expressway is a tragedy waiting to happen. You scoff and turn down the radio, whip out your phone and text her: *Hey baby, I’m driving us both to Port Harcourt tomorrow for a Val getaway. I’ll pick you up at 9. Be ready.*

\*\*\*\*

You strain your neck a little and find her sprawled on the tumbled roof of the vehicle, her head stuck outside the broken windscreen. Her head must have broken through it during the impact. Her neck is now mangled flesh, blood and pieces of glass.

The stench of petrol is getting heavier, so you start to tug at the seatbelt clasped firmly around your torso. It does not budge.

\*\*\*\*

You've been driving for nearly an hour now. Your eyes are heavy. It must be the anti-malarial medication you just started. She is holding up her phone to you; a phone photograph of the Farewell From Enugu stone casting she had taken from the vehicle. You do not know she has said something to you until she puts her palm on your thigh and slowly says 'You are not even listening to me'. I'm sorry, you say and lean in to kiss her. You kiss her for so long that you do not see the pothole early enough. One wrong swerve, the vehicle skids off the highway, down the steep roadside. The first bang of the car's roof against the earth knocks you out.

\*\*\*\*

You hear fast footfalls and loud voices approaching, so you muster all that is left of you and begin to shout for help. But the ripper gets to you first, coming as a little spark in the engine and growing and growing, until it consumes the whole vehicle.

You wake up to your own screams, drenched in sweat, hardly able to breathe and not recognizing where you are. Just then, your phone beeps. It's a text from her.

*OMG! I can hardly wait. This Val is going to be bloody lit. See you tomorrow at 9. I love you. Kiss emoji.*

The radio presenter is signing out now. 'Thanks for tuning in. Have a safe and lovely Valentine's Day tomorrow,' she says.



## *Dispossession*

### **Chukwuebuka Ibeh**

RUMUIGBO HAD RECENTLY worn a sort of heady newness. It was not the newly tarred roads with chipped edges and smooth surface that never seemed to lose its heat and scalded the feet of people wearing footwear with thin soles. Nor was it not the brightly-coloured streetlights that lined the streets in perfect rows like disciplined school children and transformed them into mini-glorious ghostly scenes at night, a momentary sophisticatedness that was all too flattering, all too ironical. It was, perhaps, this new feeling for Folake.

I met Folake in the bank, where I worked. She had come to withdraw money from her account and had ended up in a heated argument with a staff who could not match her signatures. I was in the habit of not interfering with people's business, especially as the said staff was not particularly a pleasant colleague, but I stepped in and confirmed the signatures weren't so different, and I noticed Folake looked at me briefly in surprise.

As she walked away, I felt a sudden possessiveness overwhelm me, a strange irritation towards the young men who turned to give her prurient glances. The slip of paper in my pocket with her phone number warmed me.

She was not my kind of girl, with her unabashed voyeurism, or her uncouth vulgarity, the flimsy dresses she wore that barely covered her cleavages, and the deliberately brazen air about her, but I found her interesting and I sent her a text afterwards requesting for a date.

She was outspoken, in a way that was not very comfortable. Her ordinary phrases were lined with bawdy undertones. She would stare at me intently, unflinching, not even when I faltered under her gaze to make her look away.

The very first time we had dinner together, at an eatery along Ada-George road, with bland, over-priced food, she reached out, while I was speaking, to grab my crotch. I was stunned into silence. I held my breath, sick with apprehension, slightly expecting her to realize what she was doing and stop, and slightly hoping nobody would look in our direction. She did not pull

away, not until she had traced several patterns along my bulge and smiled at me with unabashed fulfillment.

She would repeat it again in a crowded supermarket, while I spoke with the cashier to make payments for the clothes I had just purchased. Folake watched both of us, her expression bored, and spontaneously, she leaned close and grabbed my crotch, making me come to an abrupt halt. The cashier watched us from where she sat, stunned at first, and then she coyly lifted her handkerchief to cover her face.

The day she left, a few days after we met, I woke up to a sticky feeling in my underwear, the sign of a blowjob, and a small note with wrongly spelt words that said she had found my engagement ring in the drawer and was not interested in getting married to me.

## *Change of Reaction*

**Monique Kwachou**

YOU STEP BACK, admiring the dinner table now set for two with your best dish set. You move to the room to make sure everything you have bought for the romantic weekend is set.

It was in Lower-sixth that you first contemplated what you would do if your husband cheated on you. On that sticky afternoon, your classmate, Bessem, had returned from Commercial Avenue with a Nigerian magazine. Even though she had claimed that she hadn't seen any American magazine your group usually chipped in to buy and pore over, you and your other friends, Sandra, Laura and Eposi had suspected that Bessem, being the Nollywood addict she was, had bought the magazine because her favourite Nigerian actresses, Stella Damasus, Genevieve Nnaji and Omotola Jalade were on the cover page, advertising a film, *Games Men Play*.

The magazine wasn't bad. It was just as glossy as the American ones and contained similar information. There were tips on how to lose weight, which you had all heard Bessem read, even though she paused regularly to take a bite from a loaf of bread dripping with chocolate paste. There were glamorous pictures from celebrity events, an advice column on what to do when your love is not of the same faith as you, a quiz to determine what kind of lover you are, based on your favourite colour, and the vox-pop section which asked women to imagine what they would do if they found out their husband had an affair.

You remember it exactly. After reading the responses featured in the magazine, you had each taken turns. Bessem had sighed, she was from a polygamous home and couldn't be bothered, she claimed. As long as she was financially comfortable, the man could go and live with his mistress, just as her dad had moved to the house he had rented for his second wife. Eposi rebuked it in the exaggerated way of Pentecostal Christians.

“That shall not be my portion ooo! Not all men cheat. I'll give my man all what he needs, what will he go looking for outside?”

You all had laughed. Laura mentioned ‘facing the homewrecker,’ and Sandra reminded her that it was the husband who had made vows and promises. When Laura had turned on her demanding her response, Sandra had said it would depend on how much she felt betrayed. “But I could actually hurt the man, like pour hot water on his genitals”. You had all burst into fits of laughter, clapping your hands as you imagined it. When it was your turn, you had said you would divorce the man. Cheating meant he wanted someone else. Why would you hold on to someone who wanted someone else? If you truly loved him, you would let him go.

You were undoubtedly high on Harlequin-type love at that time. Here you are now, on a Friday night, on the eve of Valentine’s Day, waiting for your husband to return from his business trip. You have sent the kids to his mother for the weekend. You have cooked his favorite meals, and planned a romantic weekend escapade. You bought him a watch similar to the one he had admired on your boss’ wrist at the office party you both attended just after New Year.

You are determined to make it his best Valentine weekend ever. You have planned all this, knowing the trip he is returning from wasn’t quite a business trip. Knowing he is cheating, knowing exactly who he is cheating with. You look at yourself in the mirror, assessing the way the lingerie you plan to strip out of later looks on you. You avoid looking at your face. Lowering your eyes out of shame and fear that your 37 year-old self will see that self-confident 17 year-old Lower-sixth girl mockingly asking: Is this your reaction?

# *The Thing that Made you Feel like Water*

**Ebenezer Agu**

JIDE HAD CRIED FOR four straight nights about his affection for another person, a much older woman. It was about Regina Askia, brought home by his mother in a black VCR cassette, invading his life and pitching a haunting presence.

From an earlier time in his childhood, his mother had introduced a line of actresses into his life, in the same way the doctor who managed his asthma introduced a new medication after every attack. They were pretty women he had come to admire: Hilda Dokubo, a demure princess, and Shan George, who was a charmer, but just a charmer. None was like Regina whose corrosive beauty played a role alongside Segun Arinze's obtrusive ugliness, as if it was an intentional move by the director to heighten whatever effect her beauty would have ordinarily had. And over a ten-year-old boy who knew feelings, not by their terms, but by their characters – the ferocious ones dashing about his heart, ramming into corners, dominating the tickling, calm ones – Regina had an absolute sway. He had once spoken to Okwadike about crying for things because they made him feel like water.

—On a scale of one to ten, how bad do you feel?

—What does that mean?

—Just pick a number if I am to help you.

—One.

Jide had said 'one' because Okwadike had mentioned 'how bad,' and he knew it was not a bad feeling. It was, rather, like the onset of an attack, a tightening in his chest, which did not result in panic and spasms, because what made his chest tighten was lithe and heart-warming. Okwadike did not help Jide, but he'd made his experience more personal, something Jide knew, understood deeply, but could hardly express. Each night, when Jide sat behind the centre table, his chin resting on his arms folded on the table, his eyes latched onto the TV, it was to feed his desire which only needed a clue, an

exposed thigh or the outline of a clavicle, to make his heart sink. On those nights, he was first a child feeding a bitter-sweet feeling, because he knew of no other way to deal with it, before he became a crumpling ten-year-old, crying and crying because he madly wanted something locked within the screen of his coloured TV.

# *The Thing*

## Wairimu Mwangi

SHE SAID: It was the fun, the renewal and the comfort that he brought to my soul. Serenity from the painful past I had lived. It was the hope he rekindled that I could be happy. Happiness. The only definition I knew was solitude. Solitude that was readily available to me in my work, in my music. Suddenly, the meaning of happiness changed. His words, his smile and even his smell became happiness.

She said he said: You are beautiful, a pearl in the dark. Your aura brings forth renaissance. You surpass the stars on a blissful evening. Let's make memories like footprints on wet cement. Our love, like a gush of wind, will dry the imprint and engrave it forever.

She said: It was love. I believed it. In a bit, my skin was glowing, my breasts became fuller. The smell of the rose became revolting, but it was love. A little being was growing inside me. I could not wait to bare the news to him.

She said he said: What is that thing? Back date the events.

She said: Suddenly, he was suffering from selective amnesia. He could not remember my beauty, my touch or my kiss. The fruit was now but a thing. Just a thing! Torrents on my face left gullies in my heart; I died.

I say: When you see her shuffling her feet on the streets with tears in her eyes mindless of the strange stares she elicits; when you see her trying to feed for the thing; when you see her trying to get back her self-esteem, judge not. She may not have understood what he said, or she would be a better person.

## *Dark Garden*

**Douglas Obinna Osuala**

THAT WAS THE FIRST TIME they were meeting since the day she snubbed him at the school park, though he had gotten over the embarrassment when he got to know that she did it because some of her Muslim brethren were standing with her that day.

That night, in the quiet lonely garden where he usually studied, he sat, anxiously waiting for her like an expectant mother. The garden was always dark and deserted by that time of the night, so dark that the only thing that could give away his presence was his reading lamp. At around 11 P.M., he noticed a strange figure coming towards him. From the way it walks, he knew it was her; she was as usual wearing her hijab, which concealed everything but her angelic face to his imagination. He had lost count of the several occasions he had spent hours in the hostel bathroom masturbating with only the image of her erogenous face in his head or the several nights she had been the subject of his wet dreams. Despite the darkness she was able to walk confidently to the bench where he was sitting.

Her coming usually signified that it was time to walk back to the hostel, but tonight was different. It was a special day for lovers. Yet what they shared wasn't love. He knew love was his last intent for her, it was a full-blown lust and this she also knew, but pretended not to know.

For the first time, she hugged and placed a warm peck on his cheek, as she said "happy valentine, lover boy." The darkness helped hid his astonishment and the smile that serrated his lips. They sat down, surrounded by the darkness of the night, with a few stars as their witnesses.

He knew that night was the night to make his wet dreams and fantasies a reality, to know the mystery hidden inside the hijab she always wore, to discover the taste of her lips, to feel the texture of her buttocks and uncover the actual size of her breast. The peck was the sign he needed. As time was passing, he could already feel his trousers swollen with his own erection. She was talking, but didn't know what she was saying. "Let me shut her mouth



with my lips, I must make the move, it is now or never” he said to himself. And immediately, he moved closer and forced his lips to her mouth to give her a kiss, but to his disappointment his lips caught her nose and she withdrew herself, increasing the distance between them on the bench. He could feel her staring at him in the darkness, but to his surprise, she said “if you need me, all you need to do is ask like a gentle man.” Just then, they noticed some security men coming towards them with flash lights. He knew immediately the night had come to an end for both of them.

## *Being A Flower*

**Jennifer Chinenye Emelife**

I WANTED TO WRITE the story of our love. Of that day we hid behind my house, leaning against the neem tree and admiring the colours of the flowers and fruits that hung carelessly from its branches. You plucked a flower and fixed it on my hair. ‘My flower,’ you whispered and kissed my lips. I giggled and stroked your face, tracing the lines on your forehead down to your dimples. My favourite part of your body. You took my hand and rubbed it on your chest. Your chest full of hair. And while I played with them, you rubbed my breasts. And I moaned. ‘Do you like it? Say you like it.’ I opened my eyes and looked you in the face. You smiled and slid one finger down my thigh, ‘you’re so different, my flower. I’m helpless.’ ‘Will you come see my parents then?’ I asked you. Your face fell and the dimples vanished. Fire in your eyes. You pulled me and we sat on the foot of the tree. ‘I can’t marry you,’ you said, your eyes resting on the roof of the house in the next compound.

You know, sometimes I wondered what I was doing with you. Even though my lungs screamed no inside. Perhaps it was in the way you touched me. The way you peeled me, the way you cut yourself. Until we were both bare. You know I could tell the colour of your soul. Not grey, as you liked to tease yourself. But yellow, like the neem fruit. Yellow, like the sun you brought into my life. Like the bed sheets in the hotel room that night you first entered me. Yellow like the bulbs flickering in rhythm with every thrust. Perhaps it was how you sat me up in bed, a pillow at my back and asked me what my plans were. And I said I wanted to elope with you. And you laughed that loud laughter that made your breasts shake and the hairs on your chest rise. ‘But you love me, don’t you?’

You see, I remember now that you never answered that question in words. You either kissed my forehead or pressed my palms, as though to smother the inquisitiveness in me. So when Deola came to me with that bump in her tommy, her eyes red and bulgy, and I told you... of my friend who got pregnant, you hissed and said she was bad company...

I wanted to write the story of our love, but here I am, at Deola's bedside, writhing in pain. Listening to her tell the tale of a forbidden love with a man with a hairy chest. And dimples. And a heart so large, he took her in as a daughter and then a lover. 'And now, he's become a stranger,' she sighed, her tommy shooting up in protest as she touched it and added, 'this baby has no father' and my eyes straying to the frills of the yellow dress on her body...

# *The Ritual*

## **Agogho Franklin**

THE JOLLOF RICE and dry meat cuddled in a polythene bag which rested on the back seat of the taxi made her feel twenty years younger. Its aroma brought back memories of a man she couldn't forget. She was determined to recreate the ritual which epitomized his love.

As she gazed out of the taxi's windows at young lovers in twos plying the dusty streets of Bamenda, memories of University days materialized in her mind:

Hand in hand, they would walk through the streets of Buea and laugh like electrocuted souls, with no shame, to the heaven-like garden in the heart of town. He would buy yoghurts and pastries. She would smile and cling to his arm like a chick under the wings of a rooster. They would find a spot on the scenic grass and picnic in the midst of other couples who weren't ashamed to show the world what they shared. They would laugh at old jokes and chuckle at the guard who wore ugly shoes. She would pull him to a bench and sit on his lap. He would say a bad poem and she would laugh hysterically. Then they would kiss until the angry lady guard would howl at them to find a room. In a corner of her room and, on a portable kerosene stove, she would cook his favourite Jollof rice. They would eat from one plate with bare hands, singing their dreams for future kids and a home full of glee. In the middle of their song, they would seek each other's lips and kiss languidly, and slip out of their clothes and make love on the plastic carpet.

That was twenty years before. That was their Valentine's Day ritual, until Peter came into her life. When they met in town a week before, and he told her that he came to relax after years of pulling out oil from the sea, she felt like kissing him again, but decided to cook Jollof rice.

Expectation filled her as she stepped out of the taxi and walked into his compound. His door was semi-closed and she led herself in. She dropped the polythene bag and spilled the Jollof rice when she saw him on the sofa with a girl, half-naked.

They couldn't find the words to say anything.

# *How Did Love Find You?*

**Deborah Oluniran**

## **1**

THE RAIN IS PERFORMING a lazy dance with the wipers on your windscreen. You see hawkers and pedestrians scrambling for cover save for some guy posing on the side walk. He is drenched; his clothes clinging to his body, and his neat afro, dripping. But he doesn't seem to care. Maybe he's modeling. You look around for cameras and find none, save for the small Nikon in his hand. His other hand is serving as shield as he snaps away. You slow down, tailing him. He's smiling at a private joke, perhaps at the people across the road, trying to squeeze themselves under a small MTN canopy. He doesn't realize how funny he looks.

You notice you've been smiling, and with a mischievous glint in your eyes, you wind down and honk.

"You're distracting me." You frown and watch him roll his eyes at you. Like, 'Rubbish...we both know that's a lie.' You suspect he's probably not older than twenty-three.

"Are you going to give me a lift or what?" The way he says it, one would be forgiven for thinking he is a friend, and you actually came to get him. The drive was short.

You both sit in the car, talking and laughing out loud. And when it is time for you to part, he lets you look at his photos, subtly telling you he doesn't want you to leave just yet. You see what he was doing with the pictures; looking for perfection amidst chaos. Every 'mistake' looks deliberate.

"That's the idea." He smiles like a child, pure and original.

## **2**

You stir and open your eyes, and find him lying beside you, supporting his head with his elbow. He answers your silent question with a wink...

"You really have no idea how much you affect me." It's 2.57 a.m., for Christ's sake!

You cradle his fist; some friend of his got punched for saying something derogatory about you.

Days like this reassure you he loves you as much as you love him.

Last month, he won an award with a naked silhouette photo of you and right there on the stage with lights, cameras and reporters, he went like, "Over there is my girl. My number one model."

You were in the spotlight. Literally.

You were embarrassed at first, wondering what must be going on in their minds. But his pride gave you confidence, and you beamed at the crowd.

### 3

He was leaning against a balcony; he needed a perfect angle for a shot, when he fell down the three stories.

You're here now, staring at his closed eyes, willing them to open, if only to close again.

Your hand strays to your stomach because of memories, bed sheets and multiple orgasms, because Valentine's wasn't spent in church.

You pray again that he opens his eyes, to tell him of the miracle he has performed; you carry his child. Something your ex-husband could not give you.

*Confidential*  
**Innocent Chizaram Ilo**

DEAR GOD,

We talked a year ago, on a Sunday, during the Thanksgiving Service for my husband's successful prostate surgery. My husband Dele, my sons, Ade and Bolu, and myself were kneeling on the altar. But I was not thanking you, I was pleading that you make Dele's *kini* work again.

The newspaper articles I read made it clear that some plugs are pulled during prostate surgeries, but I continued hoping. I waited for the guests who came for the Thanksgiving Reception to leave before we retired to the bedroom. I needed to see things for myself.

"Dele, help me unhook my bra," I said. It was our usual sex anthem—Dele would unhook the bra, cup my breasts in his firm hands and begin to squeeze my nipples.

Dele unhooked the bra, sat on the bed and began to read a copy of *SuperSports* that has been lying on the bedside stool for weeks. Sometimes, Dele and I played hard-to-get before sex, where we feigned that we were not interested to further arouse the other person. I walked up to the bed and sat close to Dele. His breathing was muffled like someone who was being stifled. My left breasts nudged against his back.

"You come dey do like say 'e no dey hungry you," I teased and kicked off my shoes.

"The thing no gree stand."

Dele froze in stark horror. He slumped on the bed, holding the flacid *kini* in his right hand.

Dear God, we talked again, last month, when I visited Quilox. I never wanted to go clubbing. Marriage had sealed that chapter of my life. But Funmi insisted that I needed *some action*.

"I'm not sex-starved," I had protested.

"Abeg, make we hear word. We all know what happens to men that undergo prostate surgery." Funmi said.

After a few glasses of Hennessy, I was digging to Lady Gaga's *Do What You Want* on the dancefloor, when an unknown hand slapped my backside. It felt slutty; a good kind of slutty. I met Shuga that night. He is a twenty-two year old Uni Lag undergraduate. Tall, dark, flat abs and he kept pubic hair. I mean, the sheer arrogance.

"I call it the ladies' cushion," Shuga said as I helped him slip on the condom later that night.

This sparked a series of comparisons between Dele and Shuga. It was just sex with Dele, but *something close to fuck* with Shuga. I started noticing that Shuga lasted longer than Dele. His thrusts were more intense, and how he could muster the courage to go down on me!

Dear God, my wayward chickens have come home to roost. I am hiding inside Shuga's wardrobe as we speak. His girlfriend came over so I have to stay here until she leaves.

Can you hear me. Talk to me. Say something...



## *Love In Lagos Traffic*

### **Mbasughun Ukpi**

“COOKIE JAR.”

He turned and asked what I had said. I shook my head, unwilling to look like a foodie who wanted cookies and cake on the first date.

He asked again.

“We passed cookie jar,” I whispered.

“Is that your favourite place? We could go there if you want.”

His eyes lingered on me briefly before it swung back to the road.

“I stalk them online,” I said, “never been there but it doesn’t matter, we’ll get stuck in traffic if we go back.”

“Traffic will give me more time with you,” he said and made a U turn.

\*\*\*\*\*

We had chocolate cake.

I told him I wanted it because it reminded me of the nickname I had given him, melanin. He smiled and made me think of what Idris Elba and Michael Ealy would look like if they were one.

The seconds skipped into hours. We were lost in conversation when my eyes brushed against the clock on the wall. It was late, a Cinderella story. I had to get home even though being with him felt sweet, felt like home.

We got in the car and eased into the road. It was a long line of millipedes, each car adding to the chain. He turned the radio on, and an unfamiliar song came on. I started singing to it after a minute, bobbing my head in agreement to the rhythm. He asked who sang the song.

“I have never heard the song before,” I replied. “It just sounds easy to get into”.

He laughed softly. “This woman, who are you sef?”

I looked at him and batted my eyelashes.

\*\*\*\*

He switched lanes, the traffic moving fast to our right. I was lost in thoughts of how perfect the evening was going when the car from behind bumped into us. The driver quickly switched lanes and got lost in the traffic. He stopped the car and checked. It was a scratch.

We drove in silence for a few minutes, his face brewing anger.

I coughed.

He looked over and said, “You know you should have kissed me when that happened—an instant calm potion.”

I laughed. “Uncle you like film too much. We should have kuku stopped the car and made out on the bonnet. Then we would have called this love in Lagos traffic”.

We both laughed.

“It’s not too late, you know.”

I removed my seat belt and reached up to him, leaning my body into his as our lips met and introduced our tongues to the perfect rhythm of each other.

\*\*\*\*

I blinked my eyes, back to the present—my room.

I clicked on his message icon. He had no idea of the future I had already planned for us.

I sent the first message

*Hey Stranger...*

*Aroma*  
**Kingsley Okechukwu**

EVERY FRIDAY NIGHT, Aroma returned to the restaurant. He would sit at a table alone, not the table where he usually sat with Finya playing at their food, until she asked, 'My place or yours?' They spent the weekends in his place, but she never ceased asking 'my place or yours?' She must have picked up the line in a movie and now used it every time, to impress him. Finya was that kind of person. Aroma would sit at a table far from the usual one, his face set in the cusp of anger and detachment that discouraged people from joining him. Even when every other table was occupied and people had to join his, they ate hurriedly and left. It made him feel powerful seeing that he dictated how long people ate dinner. At ten, Aroma would get up, his diet coke half-drunk, tip the waiter with a crumpled one thousand naira note and leave. He knew that the waiter was impressed and looked forward to his weekly appearances. This made Aroma feel important. He had become that kind of person.

At home, Aroma would spend half the night watching porn, his hand inside his boxers, exploring. To distract him from thinking about Finya. He ended up thinking about her more than he should and hurting as much. The night he picked up a prostitute from Otigba Junction he didn't touch her. He slept off on the couch. She woke him up by five. 'You forgot to do.'

He hissed. 'Ok.'

'Fuck na.'

'Get out.'

Last Friday, a woman joined him at the table. She was fat with enormous eyes, smiling coyly.

'Hi.'

'Hi.'

'You look handsomer on Facebook,' she said.

'You look less fat,' he said.

The woman frowned for a second. She had heard harsher compliments.

'You have bad mouth. Surprised to see me?'

For a moment, he wanted to tell her to go to hell, that he was the wrong person, but he allowed an invisible shrug. 'I knew you would come. When I saw your friend request, I knew you were trustworthy.'

She beamed with restrained happiness. 'You actually sent me the request.'

'Same thing. What will you take?'

'Nothing. I am so nervous. I've never cheated on my husband before.'

'Everyone does.'

'I never did.' She sighed. 'But when I caught him, I knew I must revenge.'

'Why did you choose me?'

'I don't know. Perhaps because you promised to give me oral sex. That's something Joe never does.'

'Who's Joe?'

'My husband. I told you before.'

'I forgot.' *I won't give you oral sex.* 'You're sure you don't want anything?'

'No. Let's go. My place or yours?'

Those magical words. 'Pardon?'

'My place or yours? I—'

'Let's go!'

Aroma shot to his feet. For the first time since he had lost Finya to a man twice his age, he felt alive.

## *You're the smoke to my high*

Mimi,

I found it hard to understand in my mind what it meant to continue to be in love with you and still move on with life. Now, nearly a year on, I have come to understand that it's a realization captured perfectly in this quote: *"Love is stronger than death even though it can't stop death from happening, but no matter how hard death tries it can't separate people from love. It can't take away our memories either. In the end, life is stronger than death."*

So our love story continues. This beautiful book of love stories by a crop of brilliant young writers is aptly dedicated to you. It is a celebration of you. And even though there will be no cupcakes or red roses today, you can know that you will never be forgotten. We only move on because we have to, not because we want to.

I took the title for this ramble from the beautiful song *Perfect Two* by the artist Auburn. It was our song. Or rather, your song to me on our first Valentine together. Today I dedicate it back to you and I want you to dance to it. Dance for me one last time, Mimi. Dance until the other angels are green with envy and raise a protest to God.

Happy Valentine!

Nze.

*Listen Martha,  
when they say you smell like midnight fun,  
and warm kisses, and wet sin on rumped sheets,  
tell them a girl got to love too.  
Forget shame, Martha,  
when you go crazy and have fun,  
forget their sneer,  
when they quarry for grabbing a man's ass,  
say, "a girl got to love too."  
And when they hiss for staring at a lad,  
draw him into a kiss in their presence,  
and give no fuck,  
Martha, a girl got to love too.*

\_\_Nonso Serah Uchechukwu

## Notes on the Authors

**Basit Jamiu** is a Nigerian writer. He has been published on several literary journals; recently the *Afridiaspora* Maiden Anthology on the theme "My Africa, My City." He writes from Nigeria.

**Innocent Immaculate Acan** is a third year medical student with the spirit of writing in her blood. She was the winner of the 2016 Writivism Short Story Prize and has been published by *Omenana* and *Afreada*. She's currently working on a collection of short speculative fiction stories.

**Nonso Anyanwu** is a poet and a prose stylist. His work has appeared in various publications including *Sunday Sun Review*, *Africa Book Club*, *Afreada*, *New Contrast* and *Open Pen magazines*. He edited the e-anthology *Gossamer: Valentine Stories*, 2016. He lives in Abuja where he divides his time between writing and working.

**Ada-Chioma Ezeano** is finishing up a postgraduate course in English Literature at Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka where she researches on Female Dependence in African Fiction. She teaches English Language and Literature. In 2014, she conducted a short story competition for secondary school students in Enugu State. She has two reviews in *9jafeminista*, another in *Critical Literature Review*, and flash fictions in *Deyu African* and elsewhere. In 2014, she participated in Writivism.

**Howard B-M Maximus** is a PhD Microbiology student at the University of Buea, Cameroon. His work has appeared and is forthcoming in *Howie Tell It*, *Art Becomes You*, *AERODROME* and *Afraase*. His short story, Ref 32, received a Special Mention in the one-off Bakwa Short Story Competition. He is currently working on a debut novel.

**Somi Ekhasomhi** lives in Lagos, and has been devouring books for as long as she can remember. In 2012, she started publishing the story that became *Always Yours*, as a blog serial at [www.lagosromanceseries.com](http://www.lagosromanceseries.com), which later became a novel. Her other books include *Hidden Currents*, the stand-alone sequel to *Always Yours*, as well as a short story, *Jungle Justice*. You can find her at [www.facebook.com/somiekhasomhiauthor](http://www.facebook.com/somiekhasomhiauthor); Twitter @somiekhasomhi.

**Troy Onyango** is a Kenyan writer and Lawyer. His fiction has appeared in various journals and magazines including *Transition Magazine Issue121*, for which his short story, *The Transfiguration*, was nominated for the Pushcart Prize. His short story, *For What Are Butterflies Without Their Wings?* won the fiction inaugural Nyanza Literary Festival Prize. He has been shortlisted for the Miles Morland Foundation Scholarship. Currently, he is the managing editor of *Enkare Review*.

**Frances Ogamba** writes to free herself from something she is not quite aware of. Winner of the 2016 Ake Fest, she has been on the longlist and shortlist of prizes including *Writivism*, *African Poetry Voices*, and *Ynaija*. She has stories on *Afridiaspora* and *Writivism Prize 2016* anthologies. She lives in Port Harcourt.

**Joe Okonwko's** debut novel *Jazz Moon*, set against the backdrop of Harlem Renaissance and glittering Jazz Age Paris, was published by Kensington Books in 2016. His stories have been published in *Shotgun Honey*, *Best Gay Stories*, *Cooper Street*, and *Storychord*. Upcoming work will appear in the *New Engagement*. Joe serves as Prose Editor for *Newtown Literary* and Editor of *Best Gay Stories*, 2017, published by *Lethe Press*. He lives in Queens, New York City.

**Brigitte Poirson**, a former lecturer, is an award winning prose and poetry writer. She has published seven books in French and English. She has created, edited and published poetry anthologies in South Africa, and organizes poetry contests with *WordsRhymes&Rhythm*, a Nigerian publisher, to promote young African authors.



**Yule Mbois Mndialala** is the pen name of a Kenyan writer who has spent the last ten years putting off a novel in pursuit of grand things, like unemployment. He now attributes his profligacy to Kenya Power: two more power outages and a bestseller would be out. He **can** also dance, sing, cook, wash, clean... but doesn't.

**Tochi Eze** is a non-practicing lawyer who has refused to drop the title solely for the inconveniences she went through in school. She works as a Media Content Developer, and enjoys writing and making new connections.

**Otosirieze Obi-Young.** “Mulumba” in *The Threepenny Review*. “A Tenderer Blessing” in *Transition*, nominated for a 2015 Pushcart Prize. “You Sing of a Longing” shortlisted for the 2016 Gerald Kraak Award. Shortlisted for a 2016 Miles Morland Scholarship. Edited *Enter Naija: The Book of Places*, a 2016 anthology of writing and photography focusing on Nigerian cities. Submissions Editor at *Brittle Paper*.

**Andanja Wobanda** is a lover of everything art. She works as an editor (Fiction/Non-fiction) for Lunas Review. She was a contributor for Storymoja Hay Festival 2015. Her fiction and non-fiction have been published in the *Storymoja* publishers' blog, *Story Zetu* and *True Love (Ea) Magazine*.

**Moso Victor Sematlane** is a 21-year old aspiring Mosotho writer who was born, and lives, in Maseru, a city in the tiny kingdom of Lesotho. Though small, the country is bursting with big ideas and a creative energy that tends to foster expression in all forms, whether music, film, or poetry. It's in this milieu that he has gravitated towards the written word. He has also been published in *Brittle Paper*. You can follow him on twitter @Moso\_Sematlane, and on Tumblr, mvdarko.tumblr.com

**Sibyl Whyte (Onyeocha)** is a Nigerian writer subject to her headstrong chi. Her work has appeared in *The Kalahari Review*, *Sankofa*, *Afridiaspora*, and in fiction and poetry anthologies such as *A Basket of Tales*, *SEVHAGE Flood*, *The Rainbow Lied And The Promise This Time Was Not Flood*, *Gossamer Valentine Stories, 2016*, *Tales From The Other Side*. She is currently resurrecting the stories buried in her head.

**Michael E Umoh** is a graduate of Mass communication from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. A fan of rock music and most written things, Michael believes his friends are right when they call him ‘weird’.

**Maureen Wambui** is a writer from Kenya who enjoys creating stories that tug at the heartstrings of her readers. She blogs at [wakarindimaureen.wordpress.com](http://wakarindimaureen.wordpress.com)

**Carey Baraka** is an editor at *Enkare Review*. He lives in Kisumu, Kenya.

**Ciru Njuguna** is a Kenya writer. She studied Procurement at Daystar University. She is a blogger, singer and part-time photographer. She is a lover of books and music. Her passion for writing was ignited by her parents’ love of books. Some of her work can be found at [cirunjugunablog.wordpress.com](http://cirunjugunablog.wordpress.com) and on Facebook: Ciru Njuguna.

**Eric Atie** is a graduate of the University of Lagos, Nigeria. He is a creative photographer and a short story writer who is passionate about African Literature. He is currently working on a short story collection.

**Hajara Hussaini Ashara** is a Law graduate of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. She loves to read, write, think and travel. She's been writing since childhood and was shortlisted for the Saraba Manuscript Prize (Fiction Category). Her biggest dreams are being widely read, becoming a devout humanitarian and having her beautiful daughter who she'll name Noor.

**Jacob Katumusiime** is Emeritus President of Makerere University Literature Association (LITASS). He is graduating on 23 rd February, 2017 with a First Class Honours in Education; English Language and Literature. He is passionate about contemporary African Literature and its interaction with tradition. He writes short stories, most of which mirror the African family. And often, he experiments with literature. He has a collection of unpublished poetry and he has performed his poetry on several local platforms in Uganda. He is currently a teacher of English Language and Literature at Hana

International School-Uganda. Seeing the secret tears of his people being shed on paper is his desire.

**Amanda Madumere** is a documentary photographer, writer and creative artist. She can be found on instagram: @amanda.madumere, on Facebook: Amanda C. Madumere, and Twiter: @amanda\_madumere.

**Chukwuebuka Ibeh** was born in Nigeria. His short fiction has appeared in *New England Review of Books*, *New African Writing Anthology*, *Dwartonline*, and other publications. He is an editor at *dwartonline*.

**Monique Kwachou** is a Cameroonian writer, a youth advocate with Better Breed Cameroon, and burgeoning educationalist specializing in gender, African feminism, and education for sustainable development. She published her first poetry collection in 2010 and has since published several short stories in various international anthologies and magazines. She blogs at *moniquemusings.blogspot.com*

**Ebenezer Agu** is an Igbo who loves reading as much as he loves writing. He's not a photographer but he enjoys seeing beautiful shots. He's attracted to older women, and loves love stories.

**Wairimu Mwangi** is the Founder and CEO of Literature Africa Foundation. She has published six educational books. She is also a motivational speaker who delights in inspiring upcoming writers and youths.

**Douglas Obinna Osuala** holds a degree in English and Literature from the University of Maiduguri, Borno State. He is a poet, a teacher, and a religious critic. He has published in *Naijastories*.

**Agoho Franklin** holds a Bachelor's Degree in English Modern Letters from the University of Yaounde 1, and a Master's Degree in International Relations from the International Relations Institute of Cameroon (IRIC). In 2016, he won the National Creative Writing contest (short story category), organized

by the Ministry of Arts and Culture of the Republic of Cameroon. His writing has also been recognized by Global Dialogues. He has been published in an Anthology called *Heaven's Hell*. He wishes to publish in the nearest future.

**Deborah Olunniran** writes fiction and poetry whenever she's in love which is almost always. She is the author of *Ewa*, a novella, a student of Psychology at University of Port Harcourt, and a fierce lover of afros and ice cream

**Innocent Chizaram Ilo** lives in Nigeria, in a cabin overlooking a blue lake, where he hopes to find love one day.

**Mbasughun Ukpi** came out of the literary closet in 2016. She is crazy about the different forms of art. An ardent lover of sunset, she allows words to take a larger space in her heart. She refers to herself as a culture preserver and time treasurer.

**Kingsley Okechukwu** has written both fictions and non-fictions online and offline including *Buzz Nigeria*, *Answer Africa* and *Per Contra*. He is a digital analyst by day and writer by night.

**Jennifer Chinenye Emelife** is a graduate of Literature in English. She teaches Literacy in a private school in Lagos and works as lead correspondent at Praxis Magazine for Arts and Literature; an online literary site. She writes fiction, nonfiction and poetry. In 2016, she participated in the Writivism Creative Nonfiction Workshop held in Accra, Ghana.

**Sylver Nze Ifedigbo** is a fiction writer and op-ed columnist. He is the author of a collection of short stories, *The Funeral Did Not End*. He lives in Lagos, Nigeria, and tweets at @nzesylva.

