

EQUITY NET GHANA

My Body Has Dreams

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EDITORS' NOTE

As nations across the Caribbean, Europe, the Pacific, and Asia, from Dominica and St. Lucia to Greece and Thailand, extend marriage equality or strike down colonial-era sodomy laws, much of Africa has moved in the opposite direction: Ghana's parliament passed the Human Sexual Rights and Ghanaian Family Values Bill criminalising LGBTQ relationships and those who support them; Uganda enacted legislation carrying the death penalty for "aggravated homosexuality"; Senegal doubled its maximum prison sentence for same-sex relations to ten years; and Mali and Burkina Faso, countries that previously had no laws against consensual same-sex relationships, both introduced anti-gay legislation. For many queer Africans, witnessing the world beyond Africa's borders as it softens its queerphobic stance while the continent pushes back against queer liberation movements has been disheartening. Langston Hughes asked what happens to a dream deferred. For queer Africans, the answer is written into law.

This anthology, *My Body Has Dreams*, interrogates the dreams and aspirations of queer Africans, with Ghanaians at its centre. Exploring perspectives across Ghana, Nigeria, Uganda and South Africa, these contributors present quiet lyrical meditations on queering in the light and shadows, brilliant political manifestos, poignant art on the queer self, heartbreaking stories about the harsh realities of living in a world determined to erase marginalized communities, inspiring pieces on resilience and survival, and transcendent stories on the infinite liberating possibilities for queer Africans. In this Pride Month and beyond, this eclectic mix of fiction, non-fiction, poetry, visual art, and photography crackles with fever-pitch imagination.

It has been a great honour to work with these brilliant queer writers, who have created stunning art with remarkable craft. It is an even greater pleasure to engage with these works that ask, in so many ways, "What happens to a dream deferred?" In these writers' words, we experience the drying, festering, crusting, stinking, sagging, and exploding of queer African realities. But we also move beyond that to the applause of realized dreams, to the pinnacle of progress and success for the LGBTQIA+ community. Through the gory to the glory, queer Africans will be free one day. But for now, our inks flow unencumbered.

Rigwell Addison Asiedu

Delasi Sanenu

Editors

Accra, June, 2026

Contents

My Body Has Dreams – Essel	04
Prayers –AB	05
Dear Dele – Benjamin Cyril Arthur	12
Artwork – Essel . Visual Art	14
We Are Here – Robbie_ranel	15
Godly Love – BOAHEMAA	16
God is in the Rain – Abasi-maenyin Esebre	18
Artwork – Essel . Visual Art	24
To Them Whose Skin Bears Witness – Y.K. Barima	25
The Proposal – Ema Babikwa	30
Blues 3 – Queering in the Shadows – Baahwa . Photography	37
A Cacophony of Unsaid Things – Mhembeuter Jeremiah Orhemba	38
Blues – Queering in the Shadows – Baahwa . Photography	42
Fun Times in Accra – Michael Dame	43
Queen of Steel – White Dove	44
I Feel Powerful – Baahwa . Photography	46
Proper Lady – Efe	47
Artwork – Essel . Visual Art	48
Our Survival – Chidera	49
Abusua – BOAHEMAA	50
Artwork – Essel . Visual Art	52
The Best Man – P.K. Nimako	53
Artwork – Essel . Visual Art	57
The Weight of The Doubly Exiled & Doubly Present – 2-gay-2-furious	58
The Country We Left Behind – Benjamin Cyril Arthur	60
Photos – Jeric . Photography	63
The Man With the Horse Tattoo – Anathi Jongilanga	65
Contributors’ Bios	74

My Body Has Dreams

Essel

My body has dreams
it keeps under the tongue
like salt.
Dreams of walking home
without lowering its voice.
Dreams of wrists touching
in public
without becoming a warning.
My body has dreams
of soft mornings.
It dreams of dancing
without needing darkness.
Of elders who remember us kindly.

Prayers

AB

Maame Adubea's Prayer

I am a woman. And I love breasts, their fullness in my hands, the way they move, how they carry nectar, a sweetness meant only for me. I love the way a woman looks at me, her gaze sinking into my skin, making a home there. Women are beauty itself, created well, in God's image and that takes up space and leaves more cravings. I could never live without them. I wouldn't know how.

I do not fit into labels. Neither femme, nor stud; just here, tangled in the language of desire that only women know how to speak. I love the way a woman makes me feel as her own kind, how our bodies know what we truly want, how to navigate through it and how to find ourselves. There is something holy in the way fingers find skin, the way mouths confess against collarbones, the way heat builds until the world outside vanishes. Hands tracing constellations, tongues worshipping, hips pleading for more. This is what it means to know a woman, to understand yourself replicated in someone else's body, someone else's wanting.

Do you think I chose this? That I made myself into something outside of what the world expected? No. I was made this way, desire building inside me before I had the words to name it.

And I am a proud member of ICGC Church. I love church. I love the songs that are alive every Sunday. Every Sunday, I walk in, wear my best and prepare myself to be blessed by

God. But is that why I go to church?
No, certainly not.

I go because the aisles are lined with beauty, because somewhere in the congregation, a woman sits with her hands resting on her slit, her puff longer than a microphone and her skin catching the light just so. I watch. I search for a wrist moving gently in praise and a smile is exchanged. My mind set before the sermon begins. A woman who doesn't know that my body has already reached for her, even before my hands do.

And my body is never still. It thrums a restless song waiting to be sung. It wants the heat of another woman against it, the moan of my name. It wants bodies tousled in a way that feels like worship, hands clasped not in prayer but in pleasure. It wants and wants and wants.

Hmmm. You understand, don't you? This wanting is a living thing, breathing in my thighs, crawling underneath my pores. And still, I bow my head, say my prayers, pretend I am not searching for the woman who will make me forget heaven long enough to taste it right here, on earth.



The first spark of my attraction to women came the first time I met Owusua at church. She moved through the congregation with confidence, as if the world could watch but never touch her. She was gentle, carefree, and dressed in a way that made the elders steal glances and speak behind their hands. She never seemed to mind. She didn't care what

people said about her. There was a tattoo which she never hid, *love* written in black ink, on her back.

We were both part of the youth fellowship, and one day, she strolled up to me with an easy smile and asked what the sermon had been about. She didn't pay attention and needed to write the scripture.

I had seen her before in dreams and thoughts forming their own world. When I truly saw her, she was different, more vivid than I had imagined. And then something drove inside me, a feeling I couldn't name, one that made my breath catch and my pulse quicken. At first, I told myself it was nothing, just a passing thought, a trick of life and a possible crush that'd eventually fade away.

It never faded. It kept returning, stronger each time. At night, it became my dreams, and I woke up moist in my pants. The thought of Owusua set something deep inside me alight — a slow burning cinder that refused to die. Sundays became my favorite days because of the chance to see her, to sit close, to let my eyes wander just a second too long.

And then she stopped coming. Her absence left sadness inside me. My body became an empty garden that needed watering. I searched for her in every face, in every voice, but she was gone. And when I could no longer chase the memory of her, I found comfort in another woman: someone who unraveled me, uncovered pieces of myself I hadn't known were there. She traced the boundaries of my being, showed me parts of myself I had never dared to explore, filled the holes that had been left behind.

It never ended. There were more, others who played this same role of fulfilling the things that I needed. After every encounter, I felt like

a mistake. I would pray ceaselessly to God and made promises that I could never keep.

See, when my mother sighs and says, "I can't wait for you to have a husband," I smile and conceal my pain.

"Mom, there's no husband. Only a wife."

I never dare say that. I say, "Oh, Mom, stop bothering me about marriage." And I laugh, loud and forget. Deep inside, my heart beats against my ribs like a trapped bird.

I became a woman who never desired men, and the world took notice. They took notice of how I was old enough to be with a man but I never had anyone. The stares followed me, persistent, profound with implicit questions. I knelt in the quiet of my room, pressing my forehead to the tiled floor, incanting a prayer only God could hear:

"Lord, take this from me. If it is a shadow, make it disappear. If it is a storm, let it pass. If it is wrong, burn it away before it takes all of me. Make me different. Make me whole. Make me anything but this. Let me be attracted to men. Let me see men! God, I want to be the best that I can be please. Be what pleases you."

What if I had never been broken at all? What if I was a melody alien to the ears that listened, a story written in ink too new for the world to read?

That night, kneeling on the cold floor, I redirected my prayer. No longer did I plead to be made pure, as though filth was clothed to me. No longer did I beg to be renovated, as if I were shattered clay, unable to hold its form. No longer did I ask for my love to be wrenched from me, roots ripped from the earth, leaving behind roughness.

Instead, I asked the only question that had ever truly mattered and the one that had been replaying for years, drowning inside me, trapped and restless, a bird beating its wings against the walls of its cage.

“God, do You still love me? Do you see me after everything that I had done? Do I still call myself a child of God?”

A grave sentiment wrapped around me, closing in from all sides and shielding me. It was the same thing that had met my prayers before, but this time, it did not feel empty. This time, it felt present; it was watching, listening, as if something unseen rested just beyond reach, waiting. And then, something inside me gave. A thought, small but certain, rose to the surface like the first crack of dawn after a long, endless night or when the first cock crows.

Had I ever truly been cast aside? Had I ever been outside of love? Had I spent my life searching for an answer that had always been right here?

Tears ran hot down my face. I was exhausted: so tired of shrinking, peeling away parts of myself as if holiness could only be found in absence. For so long, I had stood in prayer, waiting for the Holy Ghost to take me, waiting to be made into something else.

For the first time, I did not ask to be changed. I did not plead to be made pure. I did not call myself a mistake.

“God, I am Yours. Even in this. Especially in this.”

I had never been abandoned. I had always been held.

◆◆◆

Christian's Verse of Prayer

I love men, and I love women. I love men more.

There is an allure to a man who carries his masculinity with a soundless authority, who bends over to take his desire, who takes without asking because he already knows you came to give. A man who lies without apology and not out of malice, but because he understands that every inch of you is his for the taking in that circumstance.

I am a Pentecost elder's son. I know my Bible. I have read it cover to cover. I sing during communion with a tone that soars, louder than most, as if the load of my devotion could cleanse me. I love church. I love the men in church.

It began on one of those days when lust gripped to me as a fever that refused to break. I was unusually edgy, so I scrolled through Twitter, as if distraction could offer relief. I usually watched straight porn. The videos of men taking women apart piece by piece, and that day, a series of accounts pulled me down another path. A different kind of video. Two men, lost in the art of each other. It was intoxicating. Overwhelming. I watched, unable to look away.

Before that day, I had sensed it, an omen that refused to announce itself fully. I wasn't just straight. Not entirely. Bisexual, perhaps, I am drawn more toward the side I shouldn't. I loved women, yes, up till now the thought of a man: his body and his hunger roused an intensity I had spent years trying to suppress.

I skimmed through girls as if flipping through a well-worn book. I took their hands in school corridors, let them murmur my name in church. My father's position made things

difficult. The women would talk, the men too, and eventually, my father would hear. I played the role. I played the girls. Still, the feeling persisted.

One day, I stopped resisting. It happened at someone's son's room, an enjoyable thing I can never forget about. Oh, my God! And then, God may never forgive me. I had tarnished my glory in the sight of my Maker. He saw it. He sees everything no matter how you hide it. When I went to church the next Sunday, I prayed the entire sin away, pleaded for forgiveness with a desperation that bordered on madness.

Inside the church, I felt odd, if that is the right phrase to put it. As if the ground had cracked open and the angels were watching with their eyes full of judgment. I shut my eyes when the pastor called for confession. I clenched my fists and spoke into the silence, "God, forgive me. Forgive me for lying with another man, for being the child you never intended."

My thoughts were so loud that if it weren't the cacophony of prayers ongoing, everyone would've heard me. I would've disappointed my father and the church and God, especially.

I could take women into my arms and feel nothing because God wanted it to be Adam and Eve, not Adam and Adam. That's what they say. Forget fornication. Doing it with a man is wrong and a sin. That's what I told myself when I blocked him. He was kind, gentle, submissive and damn, that ass. I had to do it. Our meetings had become too frequent, his messages too insistent.

"Are you free?" he'd text.

Yes, I was. And yes, I wanted him. In another world, I would have made him my husband. And he would have been mine.

You know what's worse than seeing someone you've blocked? Seeing them in church, sitting three rows ahead, while your father stands on the pulpit and he calls you out through the speakers for everyone to see that you are an example of his testimony to God. He knew that was a lie. This wasn't just anyone. This was him. The man whose name I had deleted from my phone but couldn't erase from my body.

"Father, father, father, let this go," I whisper under my breath, but my words are swallowed by the choir's swelling voices. The congregation is on its feet, hands lifted, swaying, eyes shut and singing responses to your father's powerful message. The Holy Spirit moves through the room like an evening breeze which was gentle, certain and brief.

And however, I am stuck in my seat, sinking into the cushion as my father preaches against my way of life. The words roll off his tongue, smooth, practised, the same sermon he has delivered a hundred times: the sanctity of man and woman, the abomination of all else. I stare at the back of the man I once knew intimately, my breath superficial. My palms sweat as memories slip through my fingers like sand and refusing to leave the brain. This is how the story goes, isn't it?

The choir erupts into another chorus, hands clapping, feet stomping, voices rising in adoration: *Holy, holy is your name, oh God!*

I close my eyes, mouth the words, but my prayers come out fragmented, torn between faith and desire, between love and fear. Maybe this is what it means to be seen. This is how to pray while hiding, to worship while disappearing in your sin.

◆◆◆

Nhyira's Call to the Earth

*Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you.
Blessed are you amongst women, and blessed are you
amongst men.
Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now
and forever.*

Holy Mary, they call me a sinner, but I know
I am not.

Inside the four walls of the Catholic Church,
I have knelt before the figure of a woman
who has never known sin, whom I do not
know and asking her to intercede for me. I
have pressed my forehead to the floor and up,
solemnizing the prayers that have been drilled
into me since childhood. I have stepped into
the holy confession box, speaking my sins to
a man behind a screen, knowing he will never
tell because the Church demands his oath.

*I have sinned in my thoughts and in my words, in what
I have done and in what I have failed to do. Through
my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous
fault.*

The words are muscle memory. They fall from
my lips like loose stones, rattling inside me.

What is my fault?

What have I done to be called a sinner?

I search for answers in the Bible, in the
sermons, in the stained-glass windows that
throw colored light onto the altar. The
answers do not come. They never arrive. They
are buried in those big robes of the priests,
in the knowing glances exchanged between
parishioners, in the way my mother crosses
herself twice when she looks at me and in the
way the building denies my feet.

Still, I stayed and prayed and waited for an
answer.

It never came.

That is why I went to Nananom because they
listened to my soul's call.

The shrine is not like the church. There are no
pews, no confessionals, no Latin prayers and
no rehearsed mode of activity. Here, the gods
are not far from us — they are near, in the
earth, in the trees, in the air that shudders with
drumbeats.

I stand before the priestess, adoring her honor
and the burning herbs that float me high to a
wonderland.

“Nananom, Asaase Yaa ne Asase Efua,
menuanom mebo wo mpaye.”

The words roll off my tongue as a petition
wrapped in reverence. The words are poetry
of prayers which may adore my life. They
know my body. They understand my body.
They see me whole. They know what to say
to me.

I have always said that I am as much a girl as
I am a boy. Confusing? It should not be. It
is the truth of my being. My spirit extends
beyond the boundaries of “he and she”, losing
a footing through the fissures of language like
water. If I feel the pull of a skirt, I wear it. If
I feel the weight of a name that is not mine,
I shed it. If my soul rejoices in pain, I lactate
it to perfection. My pronouns are they/them,
and though I say it, though I claim it, the world
sticks to what it sees, refusing to unlearn and
accept.

But here, at the shrine, the gods listen. They
allow me freedom to exist; they make me live
on the shores.

“My child, my dear child, welcome to your home. You are pleased to join us.”

The voice of the priestess is peace, a key to the fulfillment of the soul's wishes. It wraps around me like a mother's arms, like the embrace I have longed for and looks at me the way I desire to be stared at.

And so, I pray not to a God who asks for my repentance, but to the gods who have always known me. To the gods that always forgives.

Nananom, Agya eeee! Maba oh! Me daa mo ase!!!!

I press my palms into the earth, fingers dancing into the dirt as if it could open and swallow me whole. The shrine is active as moss breathes on the stones, the trees lean in to listen, the wind carries letters only the gods understand and vowels whose pitches are stronger than double consonants.

I close my eyes.

Nananom, I have come as I am. I bring my body, my spirit, my name. If the world does not know me, I know you do. You know me well. More than I know myself. You see me well, more than I see myself.

The priestess hums, her voice a river at dawn, low and unhurried.

“They have called me sinner, when I have only loved. They have named me unnatural, but I have only been myself. Do the gods not know all things? Did they not mold me with their hands, shape my bones from clay, pull my spirit from the great beyond and made me in their own likeness?”

A gourd of water is placed in my hands. The priestess lifts another to the sky, tilts it, lets the water spill onto the ground. The earth drinks it at her command.

“Take. Drink. The gods do not make mistakes.”

I raise the gourd to my lips. The water is cool, seeping down my throat to the end of my tract. It satisfies the pain that came during my fight.

“I call to you, Oboadee, creator of all things. Do you see me? Nyankopon, do you see me?”

A gust of wind pushes through. It is forceful and takes cover of all things. It starts a fire from nowhere. The Nananom show their power.

“I call to you, Nyame, whose eyes never close. Do you watch over me?”

The fire breathes like a living thing, reaching toward the sky in tongues of orange and blue. Figures dance against the walls of the shrine, lights of spirits. The wood hisses as it burns, releasing the scent of old bark and dried herbs. The flames continue with such rapid speed.

I watch the residue pound, crimson at their core, consuming the whole lot offered to them. The priestess stands beside me. She dances to the music and I join too, allowing the beat of the drum to teach me a dance I never knew. The leaves rustle again, a soft but deliberate sound, as if invisible hands are parting them. A bird disintegrates from the trees, its wings flapping through the sky and displaying its magnificence. Somewhere in the distance, an animal calls out—a howl, haunting cry.

“I call to you, Bosomfie, keeper of secrets. Have you kept mine?” I have lost energy from dancing and my voice is proof of it. I refuse to be guarded down.

The fire crackles louder, then a sudden snap. Sparks leap into the air, vanishing into the darkness. The scent of burning wood enters

my nostrils, grounding me and awakening my senses.

I feel it. Acceptance in the notes of the earth, in the way the flames refuse to die, in the way the wind moves but does not break me.

The gods have seen me. They have always seen me.

“So why does the world not see me too?” I ask, turning to the priestess.

She steps closer, the beaded ends of her hair catching the firelight, her eyes steady as she lifts a hand to my forehead. Her palm is smooth, then rough with wisdom. She touches my skin.

“Because the world is not yet ready,” she says. “But you are.”

The words settle, sinking into the ocean, letting the doubt float up and be saved by these gods. I imagine myself as one of them. The fire continues to burn and the gods continue to listen. And I,

I am.

Dear Dele

Benjamin Cyril Arthur

Dear Dele,

Someday I'll be in your city again, stepping out of the heat-hazed afternoon as if I had only gone to buy pure water and not crossed oceans and years to return to you. Accra will be waiting the way you wait for me, not patient, but certain.

In this future the streets will not flinch at us.

We will walk past the vendors near Makola, your hand finding mine with the casualness of breath. No one will look twice. The woman selling koko will wink and add extra bofrot because she has decided we are her favourite customers. A boy will ride past on a bicycle singing a love song that does not change its pronouns to survive.

The city will have learned a new language for tenderness.

The tro-tros will carry stickers that say YOU ARE SAFE HERE in three languages and in a fourth language that is only a colour: the colour of flags drying on balconies in Osu, in Labadi, in places we once moved through like rumours. The sea will keep coming in, rehearsing its long speech about return, about how every wave is the same wave forgiven.

We will rent a small apartment with a balcony just wide enough for two plastic chairs and a line of books. In the mornings, the light will enter like a blessing we no longer feel the need to question. You will make coffee and call me by the name you invented for me, the one that

sounds like home even when spoken half-asleep.

Our neighbours will know us as the couple that laughs too loudly.

They will knock to borrow salt and stay to talk. They will not lower their voices when they ask, "So how did you two meet?"

And we will tell the story without editing out the fear.

In the evenings we will walk to the beach. The sand will be full of boys playing football and girls braiding each other's hair. There will be two women slow dancing to a song from a speaker balanced on a cooler. No one will be extraordinary. That will be the miracle, how ordinary love becomes when it is allowed to live.

There will be a bookstore that keeps our letters in its back room because the owner believes in archiving beginnings. University students will write theses about the years when men loved in metaphors and women hid their girlfriends in the grammar of friendship. They will not understand the urgency of our coded language, how every "my dear" once carried the weight of a country.

But we will.

We will sit in that future and remember this present like a bad dream that the body survived. You will touch the scar where exile used to be and say, we made it, and I will answer, we were always making it.

At night, from our balcony, we will watch the city breathing, the headlights threading the roads, the music rising from somewhere we cannot see, the soft argument of waves against shore and I will think: this is what it means for a place to love you back.

And when I fall asleep beside you, the fan turning slowly above us like time finally learning how to be gentle, I will know the future is not a distant country but a room we have built with our joined hands, a city that opened its gates because we kept knocking, a morning that says our names without fear.

Wait for me there.
I am already on my way.

Love
Ben



Artwork by Essel

We Are Here

Robbie_ranel

We are here.
Not hidden, not erased, not gone.
Though fear was written into law,
We answer it with a living song.
We are the voices that rose when the silence grew heavy.
Carrying strength in our spines,
Creativity in our palms
And stories that refuse to be buried.

They speak of freedom,
They speak of justice,
Words that hang like banners in the open air.
But when we reach for them, our hands meet thin air
When do these words cover us, too?
We have lived in the margins, learned to breathe in small spaces

They drafted a bill to cage our names,
To silence love with threat and shame.
Yet, they cannot legislate a heart
They cannot outlaw who we are.
We are the people who kept going when the world went quiet
Carrying strength in our bones, creativity in our hands,
And truth in our hearts that refused to stay hidden.

So, we choose to live in our own world.
The nights we fell, the mornings we rose
We celebrate our joy in secret,
But turn it into open prose.
This is our strength.
This is our answer.
Not in spite of the silence, but through it all.

Godly Love

BOAHEMAA

that which is sexual is unclean

1861.

Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code criminalizes all “carnal intercourse against the order of nature,”

2009

The Ugandan Supreme Court rules homosexuality illegal and my people stay full of wonder.

2021

The Ghana anti-LGBT bill is introduced and monsoons erupt all over the country.

Miles away,

I read the news from my dorm room bed, holding the shattered remains of a world in my cup.

Two weeks later

I am back in my parents’ house.
The entire house is a closet.

I become a master of illusion:
false smile, false laugh, false daughter.
A beautiful performance.

But it is exhausting to remember that
I am still a mistake,
a tired secret inherited from the gods.

I cannot tell my parents about this girl I know
and how beautiful her lips are or how much I’d
like to kiss her

So instead

I whisper her name into my pillow over and
over like a hymn

I cannot explain to my mother that her
casual homophobia rips holes through all my
sweaters and leaves me shivering in rooms that
should feel warm.

I stand in the shower, angry at the faucet,
angry at God, hissing:

“Thank you for making me foreign.

For making me supernatural.

*For making me hate the way her name feels on my
lips.”*

I watch my mother laughing on the phone with
her mother and imagine myself coming out, my
parents’ heartbreak flooding all of Ghana.

This is a powerful sorcery.

One I am not ready for.

My parents are not ready for my womanhood.
They do not understand this combat-boot-
fueled rage, this desire to shave my head and
start again, how I break daily and still come
out to myself again and again.

My people have been called dirty.

Animals.

Unnatural.

Carnal.

Degenerate.

We carry the burden
of centuries of imported shame.

Watch how quickly a Supreme Court can make
an alien of you.
Watch how they light your skin on fire and call
your attempts to breathe & love inhuman.

They forget easily that your love is holy.
That it is clean water.
That it is an offering from the gods.

My parents assume I must be straight because
they do not understand that just like my
ancestors, *I love freely.*

My people are magic.

We know how to fold ourselves into survival.
How to hold each other upright.
How to exist in places that do not want us.
How to learn how little the world values our
humanity and still love.

2025.

I dream constantly of the enchantments that
make a home in a woman's mouth.
I know now how to pick my battles and accept
this body.

My people accept these bodies, celebrate them
in all their wounded holy glory.
And isn't it something, isn't it sad, how they
dangle their hate over our heads
like bait to dogs, like we will come crawling,
like we will forget what we are made of.
We are made of clean water and godly love.
And we will not stop fighting.

God is in the Rain

Abasi-maenyin Esebre

I

The saddest thing in life is that the best thing in it should be courage.

—Robert Frost, *A Masque of Mercy*

When I was 11, I smashed an empty Fanta bottle on Prince's head. Not hard enough to shatter the glass, or form a gash, or knock him out, no, but hard enough to stun him and my classmates who surrounded us at the school alley where we stood gisting. Prince—a tall, supercilious bully—held an incredulous hand to his head, the smacked spot, and stood in place, processing the violence.

He dashed after me, legs hitting their stride limit by each outrageous stretch. I ran. Fast. Up the steps. Through the crowd. Into the field. I ran. Aborted laughter fizzed in my mouth. But I ran. The breeze swept sweat away from my forehead. And I ran, and ran, until he eased off, panting and pointing, from a distance, at me.

He stood by a stump and barked threats into the still noon air. Painted with fine words and exaggerated gestures and haggard breath the gruesome things that awaited me upon capture. Our classmates guffawed at the overall performance. An empty bottle in hand, two witnesses from the alley put up a mock performance to a larger audience, a wordless opera to animate then explain the chase, and the new crowd, upon this farcical induction, offered their laughter in turn. This only helped

cartoon his rage further.

Head ribbed with veins, clenched fists blinking out by the second, he lumbered back into class, cursing in murmurs between strained stomps. I stood outside, encircled by cheers that came off as unnecessary congratulations, and basked, wholly, in the catharsis. I'd done something rare for my size—strike and embarrass a known bully—but when I encountered another bully in my fifth secondary school, when I became agnostic, when I accepted I was queer in a deeply homophobic country and world, I realized that, by all accounts, it is far easier to be brave than courageous.

II

In 2018, I watched *V for Vendetta* and *Pride* months apart from each other. Both pictures, defined by the theme of solidarity against covert and overt fascism, made me bawl for the exact same reason. They, no doubt, had artistic and thematic flaws. The first is so on the nose with its allusions to Hitler and manages a tawdry, if not laughable, attempt at gripping dystopia plus a misinterpretation of history and gross misunderstanding of revolutionary work.

The second is so black-and-white in its portrayal and largely uninterested in giving oxygen to any moral complexity to the subject matter at hand, so much so that, although based on real-life events, it unwittingly waltzes into fairytale land with a soundtrack that leaves no ample room for ambiguity.

The point, then, isn't whether they're masterpieces or not—I didn't like *Killers of the Flower Moon* by Martin Scorsese and *Lady Vengeance* by Park Chan-wook that much, even though both were obvious cinematic and directorial masterpieces—but a film doesn't have to be good, or great even, to elicit a particular emotional response, especially if it triggers a trauma or animates latent emotions that then superimpose itself over the narrative's fidelity or auteurial overtures.

In *V for Vendetta*, Evey (Natalie Portman), daughter of disappeared journalists and dissenters against the authoritarian government in place, is kidnapped and kept in a holding cell for almost a year. She's fed gruel, tortured to confess about her involvement with a Late Night TV host Dietrich (Stephen Fry), who lampoons the fascist ruler, and is forced to give up her knowledge about the terrorist in town, V.

Gripped by fear—teeth clattering, brows perpetually tilted upwards in an impotent plea—she denies involvement, and is beaten, over and over. The sequence repeats for months: gruel, interrogation, torture. One day, however, following the rat in her cell as it leaves its burrow, she finds an autobiography written on dried tissue paper. It was written by a lesbian whose love had been mangled by the new discriminatory law in town, a lesbian kidnapped and experimented on in a biowarfare facility by being intravenously fed viruses.

The discovery bolsters Evey's hope. She's a part of humanity. Others have suffered like her. This cell has held women before her. Her pain has a historical correlation. Someone out there was once someone in here, a living synonym of her, and if that woman, whoever she was, bore these baseless pains, then so can she.

Evey becomes defiant during the interrogations. Her brows now sit on their natural plane. She refuses to beg. Holds her head high. Welcomes death with unwavering dignity. The torture doesn't reduce her to tears. Evey is no longer the scared girl who slipped under the bed and watched her parents get kidnapped. She's now a prisoner of war ready for the gulag.

Then, in a twist of fate, it turns out Evey was being held by V, not the government. After the surprise wears off, the lesson remains: she's now as courageous as David. She walks out onto the roof on a rainy night. Drenched, arms stretched, she whispers to the sky, "God is in the rain."

I cried.

My tears weren't silent applause. They weren't an admission of a transcendental experience evoked by a masterfully structured narrative on the silver screen. I wish they were. That would've been grand. The truth is I cry whenever I encounter a limit of myself or a limit I haven't learned to defy myself out of duty to who I know myself to be or in regards to a desire that bypasses mere need or want.

That was what resonated for me when I cried back then. It was envy. I lacked courage. The scene threw me back into moments in my life when that same conclusion had emerged from how certain events came to a crescendo. I was a young man of lies and extremes: for example, the last time I cried those exact tears was back in secondary school when I refused to fight back against a bully, because all that looped in my head, over and over, was to shove him against the bunk and kill him. No other alternative broke that haze of whispering wrath.

I wasn't interested in injury. Wasn't interested in attrition or guerilla tactics or any indomitable act to spur respect or secure a mutually assured

destruction between us. I wanted to arrange his funeral. Bring the ache in my heart to his family's compound.

I cried because it was such a cruel thought. I cried because I had to put my future over the vendetta nagging and egging me towards revenge, towards evil I would repay in endless regret. I didn't have the courage to overshoot for partial justice. An eye for both eyes. I would cease to be a victim. I curled in my bunk and cried because I pitied myself and had to parade my cowardice before my conscience as an exemplary exercise in magnanimity and mercy for evil averted to avoid a mental breakdown.

Pride strummed, in me, the same string of hopelessness in the face of a larger, meaner force. Set amid the 1984–1985 miners' strike, the film follows a group of ragtag gay rights activists who create a group, Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners (LGSM), that raises funds to support miners in the Welsh village of Onllwyn.

The tone and directorial sensibilities undermined the film's charged potential. It bungled the tension rife in the most devastating strike in contemporary British history, the tension both in the allies' camp and that between those who opposed Margaret Thatcher's authoritarian government.

Regardless, two major scenes stung: the first, Mark (Ben Schnetzer), the leader of LGSM, falters—for once, the lips he shouted speeches with quiver, and he lashes out at a comrade with anger—when he gets diagnosed with AIDS; the second, Joe (George MacKay), a bashful, just-turned-twenty-one-year-old aspiring chef, returns home to find that his conservative, Christian mother has found his stashed away book from his roadtrips to Onllwyn, containing cutouts that snitch on his revolutionary activities, and further evidence

that outs him as gay: yet, in a moment of sheer self-acceptance and defiance, the otherwise coy young man crashes his mother's party, packs his stuff into his comrade's van, and leaves home.

Mark's death and Joe's defiance reduced me to a heaving mess because they sublimated on screen what lay at the heart of the cowardice I dragged along from childhood into adulthood: the literal and social fear of death that awaited me the day I'd choose to fully embrace my identity as a queer, agnostic man with literary and auteurial ambitions in spite of my parents' academic and corporate expectations, which were much more in step with the narrative and social demand our precarious lower middle-class status dictated as necessary to material success. I was not ready to set fireworks to my illusions, I was not ready to stop the pretense, the balancing of two contradictory selves in one psyche. I wanted to be myself and not lose my standing in society, but indecision eroded me regardless, and I was slowly brimming with envy for those who defied society to the point where I sometimes glared at sunsets until a lone tear merged pretty clouds that were far apart from each other in the horizon.

III

Tomislav Filjak and Želimir Pavlina in their joint paper *Psychological Model of Bravery*, defined bravery as a highly situational heroic behavior in danger exhibited by skilled combatants from highly cohesive units under great leadership acting with the advantage of information availability. I'm paraphrasing and stitching their core ideas into a coherent whole here, but I believe this definition, no matter how winding, is useful in getting towards the heart of courage, and a great brick for me to erect my own theoretical dichotomy from. Their definition covers a lot of ground in such an incredible economy of words and lends

itself to an exegesis that extends beyond war and into everyday situations.

The courage exhibited by dog trainers, bullfighters, and snake handlers can be chalked up to them acting as skilled combatants—skilled in accurately interpreting the behavioural cues and orthodox or novel body language from all the given animals in question—with an information availability that greatly surpasses the average person's own. They can tell what a look-away growl means in a Great Pyrenees compared to a Turkish Kangal, what charging with the right hoof suggests in an Agnus in contrast to a Wagyu, what differentiates the stripes on a king snake—which is nonvenomous—to a coral snake, which has a deadly neurotoxic venom.

Information gives insight to the level of danger in a highly situational event, which, in turn, determines, for the skilled combatant, the appropriate reaction to avert and avoid disaster, instead of falling headlong into panic or some other foolhardy behavioral variant that could prove fatal. Information availability can make temporary brave people out of usual cowards, too.

A popular example of this phenomenon, i.e. cowards acting brave due to information availability, that has infiltrated into public consciousness is the countless videos on social media where people, some of whom are deathly afraid of wasps, trap hornets under a container of petrol. Although not an ideal and recommended method, the effectiveness acts as a compass for action when one encounters a hornet—better, at least, than striking a wasp's nest with a stick.

And this is what I've been more fascinated by: civilian courage, not combatant courage. For even though the latter comes with medals and

ribbons and parades, the former can make or mar the lives we come to lead at large.

At this point, it is necessary for me to introduce a distinction between bravery and courage. While both words are near synonyms of each other, even in a number of reputable dictionaries, I prefer to make the distinction that bravery is an occasional heroic act in the face of danger, while courage is the capacity and willingness to be brave again.

Any coward can be brave: I ran away from home when I was fifteen; I smashed a bottle on my bully's head; I slapped another bully after getting jacked from callisthenics in three months; I once held open the door of a taxi speeding on the highway in protest to the driver's disregard of my discomfort; I dropped out of uni twice, the second time in final year. Brave acts that saved me. But could I repeat them again when they mattered?

Nigerian youths, in 2020, spearheaded the #EndSARS protests that kicked against police brutality, which ran from profiling to extortion to being clobbered to death. A brave act. But after being gunned to death by soldiers at the protest grounds, nobody has dared to instigate or join a march of that magnitude ever since then. It is incredibly difficult to be brave again. To be Harriet or Nina or Malcolm or Fela, chafing against the deep human desire for self-preservation in the face of insurmountable hostility; to defy fear Tuesday, Thursday, Friday; to face—in great spirits, through tremulous hands—the same poisoned arrows; to do the damn thing that reduces death to a mere inconvenience. It is hard in ways unnatural and cruel.

Everyone can be brave at least once in their life. You can cuss out your abusive parents. Refuse an illegal police search. Take a swatter to a roach in a pitch-black room. You can rebuke a

mob. You can call out a thieving politician or CEO. But how often, though, can you brave the same tireless danger? How many times can you be willing to act differently in regards to a jumping spider, a daddy longlegs, a tarantula? How long before the primal feeling of fear forces you into flight mode, yet again? How long after the jack boot finds your belly, before you conform and contort yourself and deny all that defines you and snivel and grovel because integrity requires your head in a guillotine basket? Surely, life, the life you desire the most, cannot be worth that hassle.

IV

At fifteen I knew I wanted to be a writer. I also knew, in some conceited way, that I could learn it to perfection and master it on my own. I didn't want to do English Literature, Linguistics, Mass Comm, Theatre Arts or other related courses in the university. When I dropped out of Computer Science in 2017, my parents gave me a year to figure out what I was going to study next.

Despite being sure of a writing career path, I had no clue what I wanted to study in uni, none whatsoever. Clarity didn't stretch that far. I was just as clueless as ever. I was, also, too afraid to mention this either. I dreaded my parent's wrath, and to supplant a coda into the middle of the delirious concerto, I combed the JAMB brochure for courses to study and stumbled upon Botany. The scientific study of plants? A four year course? How difficult could it be?

Six years later—bogged down by immense boredom, a dreary feeling that I was caught in a secondhand reality imposed on myself by cowardice, studying out of diplomacy rather than genuine interest, four years turned into six by the joint existential duet of ASUU strikes and COVID-19 lockdowns—six bloody years

later, I flunked and dropped out.

No one knew I was depressed or struggling with suicide—not my siblings, not my friends, not my parents—that I grew consumed with jealousy and pity when the news of yet another undergrad who'd died by suicide got to me. I'd seen enough sunsets spilled across barren skylines in the bereft cityscape. I'd seen enough bumblebees tumbling in half-shut emperor candlesticks. I'd seen enough of my parents growing old but not aging. I'd seen enough to fancy the exit and to fancy it for life.

I felt vertically and horizontally trapped. I'd written a speculative novel-in-stories at 19 about two lesbians who suffered jilted love from familial sabotage that led one into a psychosis and the other into a revenge rampage. I couldn't show it to my parents or send it out to publishing houses because I couldn't face the fallout. Could face neither my parents nor the public. I could feel my heart rot away in my chest.

Even after sending it out and getting a request for the full manuscript, I hesitated. I refused to send it out. Partly because my fear of representing the complex interior life of the queer women and men in the novel-in-stories had forced me to self-censor and mangle the novel in a way that ruined the book's brilliance. I had internalised society's erasure, and took correcting fluid to my imagination, wiping clean what could implicate me, lest I be labelled an activist, worse a queer man with queer desires in a world that queues queer people for underpaid undertakers.

As time trudged on, I caved in more and more, I became a rankling assembly of shards, regrets crocheted into resentment, fear braided into absolute despair. I was walled into a noxious solitude. No windows creaked open in my mind. I counted my regrets by the hour.

Tallied all the things I never would become, the things I was too much of a coward to embrace. I offered myself for time itself to bloodlet me and also rid me of all my tainted desires and sordid imagination.

Regret is, indeed, the rigor mortis of the spirit. And I was too young to be caught solid in its spell. I could live without God, but I would perish without courage. I needed what made uniformed men charge into other uniformed men screaming their lungs out; I needed what kept Rosa Parks seated in place when the law came to play its dirty game; I needed, in excess, the same stern stuff that made Funmilayo Kuti the steel that corralled the Abeokuta Women against the staghorn colonial government in the 1940s I needed whatever it was that made J.D. Vance daring enough to rock that neat but awful beard.

V

The perk of being a nineteen-year-old dropout is that I had little to no shame. Fear, yes, but shame, no. At least not enough to deter me from doing the socially sanctioned things teenagers do to remind themselves and the world they are not yet adults. So, easily prone to influence from the internet, I took to pick-up.

I walked up to girls and introduced myself through stutters and false starts. I never collected their numbers. That was never the point for me. It was about learning how to ride fear. I remember walking up to a gorgeous woman at the walkover at Marian and she spread her palms in rejection before I could even open my mouth.

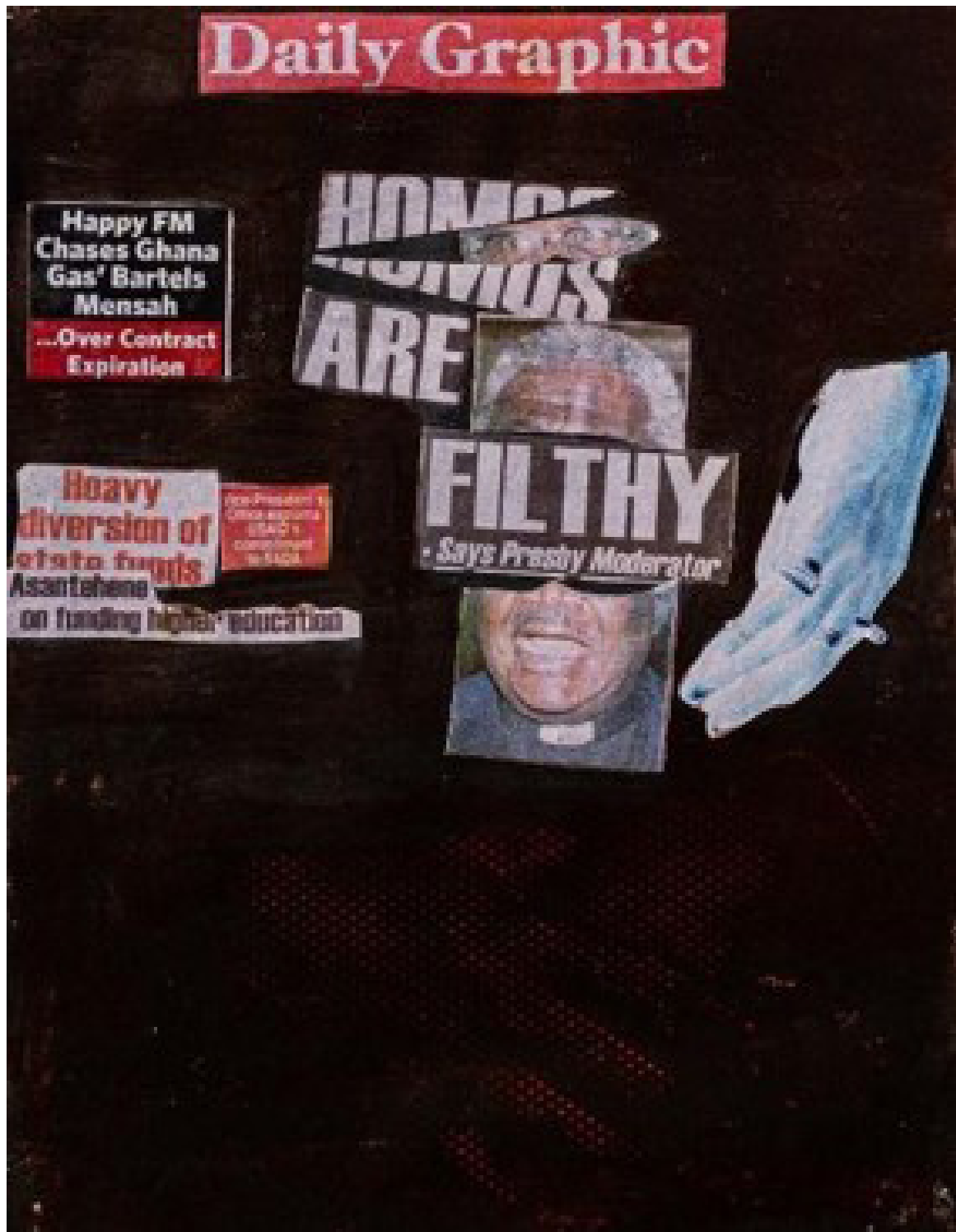
Ego shot down, I upped the challenge and approached, in almost the next stride, three women in a group: after a brief apprehension, they welcomed me with banter. We laughed

and parted ways. One month into it, I stopped. I didn't require the charade to buttress my self-confidence in regards to approaching strangers in whatever context.

Next, I learned how to talk on the phone with strangers. It was hell. I learned not to shrivel when someone called my short story shit or blew open the fallacies in my early essays. I learned to sort for the wisdom in their critique which I mistook for disdain. And yet, in all, I am still only a brave coward at heart. But it doesn't bother me as much.

I did, after all, return to the water after I nearly drowned when I was thirteen. I returned to the water and threw myself in the deep end until I learned how to stay afloat, how to match my forearm stroke to my head tilt and leg kick. I was brave again. I hope to carry that same tendency to my queerness. I remember the friends I lost when I dated a man for a month. I remember how I didn't have that many people to talk about his beauty or the grief of breaking things off with. I know, all too well, the isolation that comes with being me to the bone.

I welcome it with tremulous hands and a faltering smile. I hope to lose the fear in time. Perhaps within the decade or to purge it after watching a random David Lynch picture. For now, courage still belongs to the unabashed drag queens who die before thirty, and I, like many, am still a long way from there, still a long way from the glittering eyeshadow that belongs behind my eyelids, the acrylic nails that turn stunned eyes to sunflowers seeking the sun, the pleasers that will carry me eight whole inches above the ancient stream of fear.



Artwork by Essel

To Them Whose Skin Bears Witness

Y.K. Barima

The school clerk hits the keyboard one key at a time. *Ta. Ta. Ta.* She types with her one long nail, hitting the keys like she has all the time in the world while my time inches closer to the end.

The sound fills the waiting area outside the headmaster's office. I try to focus on the sound the way you would focus on something small when something large is trying to kill you. If I stop listening to it, I am afraid I will hear my own heartbeat tearing through my chest. My heart is doing too much inside my chest. It has been doing too much since they found us locked in each other's embrace and Mr. Ansah grabbed my collar, dragging me from the cubicle.

I lean against the wall and lift my head up to look at the ceiling. I keep my eyes there because if I look down I will see Thierry sitting across from me. I don't know what my face will do if I see him sitting across from me.

The curtain over the doorway is pushed aside and brings in a gust of wind. I immediately bite down so hard I taste my blood on my tongue. I exhale in relief when I see it is only Mr. Ansah, the senior housemaster coming in. He looks at the two of us and his face arranges itself into disgust.

"These are the *shitos*," he says, clearing his throat around the last word, an ugly combination the boys in school use for students caught doing anything remotely homosexual. *Shit*

and To, the Twi for buttocks, pressed together into something that could wound without technically being a weapon.

The clerk looks up from her keyboard. "Yes," she says. She speaks in an accent assembled from somewhere between Disney Channel and the actors in Ghanaian movies who tried to sound like Americans. "Those are the homosexuals." The last word rises the way a teacher's does when correcting pronunciation but Mr. Ansah is not listening for that. He is too busy making sure his face stays in the shape he has chosen for it.

"If they were my children," he says, making sure he looks at both of us with equal measure, "I would kill them myself."

That is what finally makes me look at Thierry. The threat of death does something that the shame has not been able to do. It pulls my eyes across the room to where he sits with his hands folded in his lap. There is dried blood near the corner of his mouth from where one of the boys hit him earlier when we were being dragged to the headmaster's office.

I remember kissing that mouth less than two hours ago. The memory makes me panic and I feel myself shivering suddenly. Mr. Ansah pushes past us toward the headmaster's office. A moment later loud laughter erupts from inside the room.

The clerk offers us a smile that never quite reaches the end of her lips before she returns to her keyboard.

My father comes in the way the weather arrives and changes the day suddenly. The room shrinks when he enters it. That is the only way I can describe how my father fills any room he enters. The room gets smaller, the walls come in a little and the ceiling drops. My father is not a tall man and not always loud but he always takes up all the space until he decides it is enough and today, he has decided on all of it.

My mother is behind him. Her eyes are red and swollen, which tells me she has been crying since before they got here. Maybe since the clerk called her and she heard my name next to the word they would have put next to it. She keeps her eyes on the floor where my father's feet are, like she is watching where he steps so she can step there too.

My father does not acknowledge anyone in the room. He sees me and moves towards me. His hand is at my throat even before I have finished understanding what is happening. I leave my body briefly and give in to the darkness that covers my eyes.

"Lord! Mr. Battor!" The clerk is on her feet. Her accent has collapsed. It is pure Accra now and full of panic. She is grabbing at my father's arm, trying to pull him away but she is smaller than he is and it is not working. "Stop, stop, you will kill him."

My mother stands still behind him. My father lets go. I know it is not because of anything anyone has said. He lets go in his own time, according to his own internal calculation, and then his free hand comes across my face so fast I see the white of it before I feel anything.

"This is what you have brought to my name," he says. He is not shouting. That is the thing about my father, the quieter he gets, the more dangerous. "This."

From across the room I see Thierry's face. He is watching with a wildness I have never seen on his face before. This is my Thierry who always laughed easily, who spoke easily, who moved through this school and this country that was not his country with a looseness that I had loved and envied in equal measure. That looseness is gone now. He looks the way I feel.

My father turns and sees him. He crosses to Thierry and the slap lands before Mr. Ansah can do anything. The sound of it fills the room completely. The clerk makes a sound and stops making it when my father glances at her. The headmaster, Mr. Faraday, takes half a step forward and stops.

"You brought this from wherever you came from," my father says, standing over Thierry. "You brought it here and you put it in my son."

Mr. Ansah clears his throat. "The boy is from America," he says, as if this explains everything and gives us a diagnosis and the sentence. "Over there they have no morals. It's the culture. They export it."

Thierry says nothing. His hand is on his cheek and his eyes on the floor. His silence does more damage to me than anything that has happened in this room. My father comes back to stand before me. He looks at me for a long time while I continue to look at the wall behind his left ear.

"God is watching you," he says finally. "He is watching and he is ashamed."

The clerk is back at her keyboard. *Ta. Ta. Ta.*

Thierry's mother arrives the way relief arrives. Her perfume fills the room before I even see

her. It smells of flowers and the moment she steps in the temperature actually changes. She has Thierry's eyes. That is the first thing I notice. She is beautiful in a way that needs no confirmation from anyone.

Her eyes go to him and enlarge as she sees the red mark on his light-skinned cheek. She sees the spot where blood has fallen from his lip onto his collar. She stares at it for a moment and then she opens her mouth.

"Which one of you morons touched my son?" Her voice is calm, but there is enough anger and rage underneath it that the room fills with it.

No one answers.

"Who?" Her eyes move to the headmaster.

Mr. Faraday straightens. He has spent his career straightening at the right moments and it has served him well. "Madam. Your son was found...he was caught kissing another boy."

Her eyes go to Thierry, but it is not the same way my parents' eyes went to me. There is something different in how she looks at him. There is anger in the room from every direction, but hers is not aimed at her son. She looks at him with a question and he answers it with a small movement of his head that I almost miss, and then she looks back at the men.

"So?" she says.

She utters only one word. It lands in the middle of the room and everyone looks at it.

The headmaster opens his mouth and closes it. Mr. Ansah shifts from foot to foot.

"So what?" she says, looking between them. "He was kissing someone. Someone put their

hands on my child for kissing someone?"

Her handbag slips from her shoulder to her elbow. She lets it hang there.

"Who touched him?" She is looking at the headmaster and she is not blinking. "Because someone touched him. I can see it. So I am asking. Who?"

The headmaster looks at Mr. Ansah. Mr. Ansah looks at the floor. My father, who has never in his life looked at a floor, steps forward.

"I touched him," my father says. My father, who is not afraid of anything, who has been teaching me to perform fearlessness since I was old enough to understand the performance. "Because your son corrupted my child. Your son brought this..." he gestures at me, "here. And if you had raised him properly, we would not be standing in this place."

She looks at him for a long time and then she swings so suddenly I gasp out loud from shock.

The handbag catches him across the side of his face. The clerk screams when she swings a second time. Mr. Faraday and Mr. Ansah both grab her arms, pulling her backward and she lets them do it the way you let people move you when you have already decided you are finished moving.

She is breathing through her nose. My father's cheek is red and he is holding himself very still with the effort of not being what he actually is in front of witnesses.

She straightens her blouse. She rolls her neck once.

"Touch my son again," she says to my father, "I dare you. If you are a man, touch him again

and I will tie you up in court until you are an old man. Do you understand me? I will make sure the last years of your life are paperwork.” My father says nothing. She has spoken to him in a language he recognizes and now he is calculating.

Then she turns. My mother is standing where she has been standing this entire time. Behind my father, slightly to his left now. She has not moved from behind him since she entered the room. She has not spoken. Her hands are folded in front of her and her eyes have been looking at various neutral surfaces, from the desk to the window, even the distance between the people in the room. Thierry’s mother looks at her.

She doesn’t say anything for a moment. She just looks and my mother, who has been successfully avoiding every set of eyes in the room, cannot avoid this one.

“He put his hands on your son,” Thierry’s mother says. “Your husband. He put his hands on your child. And you were standing right there. Men are stupid with children because they never felt their heartbeat inside, but you are stupid because you allow him to put his hands on your child.”

My mother’s jaw moves. She is going to say something. I watch her the way I have watched her my whole life but she fails to decide to be more than what she has made herself into in his presence. She turns and looks out the window.

The compound outside is ordinary in the afternoon. There are school boys cutting across the courtyard, someone is laughing somewhere, the world outside is entirely unaware of this room.

“Madam.” My mother’s voice is so small I am not sure at first that she has spoken. “Madam,

you don’t understand.”

“I understand,” Thierry’s mother says.

And she does. I can tell that she does. I can tell that she has understood from the moment my mother failed to move, from the moment my father’s hand made that sound and my mother’s feet stayed exactly where they were. She has understood and what is in her eyes now is not contempt.

She turns back to Thierry. Her whole body changes when she looks at him. She reaches up and touches the side of his face, the good side, with the back of her fingers.

“Okay,” she says quietly. Just to him.

He nods. His eyes are wet. He is working very hard to stay inside himself.

“Okay,” she says again.

I look at them, then at my mother, then at my father. He is watching all of this with a face that is finally doing something I have never seen it do. It takes me a moment to name it. He is uncertain.

My father, who knows exactly what God thinks, what a man should be and what this family owes the watching world, my father does not know what to do with this woman. She does not fit any space he has built in his mind for women who should know better. She is not performing anything. She is not asking for his approval or his understanding or even his acknowledgment. She is simply here, in full, with her son, and she is enough.

The clerk has gone back to her keyboard.

Ta. Ta. Ta.

I allow myself, very briefly, to look at Thierry. He is touching his collar where the blood has dried into the fabric. He looks up and finds me immediately, the way he always does, the way that started all of this, how we could always find each other across a room.

He looks at me. I look at him, I study his face because I know this is the last time I will see him. His mother's hand is still on his face. I know there is a version of love that is different from what my parents give me.

I turn to look at my mother. She has gone back to looking at the window.

The Proposal

Ema Babikwa

“I would rather die; I would rather kill myself!” was quite the pivot from the day before. A grave one. Dark! Leslie didn’t intervene immediately with questions as that would be most indelicate. She watched from the other end of the room, sighing from time to time to puncture the silence that was thickening the air. Katie went about her usual business in the house, vacuumed, then dusted, then mopped—did the dishes as breakfast bubbled on the stove.

Leslie got up from the bean bag and hovered about the kitchen to make sure Katie didn’t get time alone to fulfill her morning threat. Leslie watched her pour the ingredients, only offering to stir the oats. Only because she made them the way Katie liked. Right thickness. Right amount of milk. Just the right sugar and she could tell when to cut fruit into the pot. This was one of those mornings. She cut one banana, not too ripe, as she liked.

Katie sat at the kitchen counter and ate voraciously. Leslie was not hungry. She went to the guest room where she had hidden the surprise. She opened the surveillance app on her phone and zoomed in on the kitchen. Katie was having a second bowl of oats, lathering peanut butter over the bread slices she had just seared over the skillet. She bit around the corners. Leslie imagined the crunch. It was one of her favourite sounds. Katie’s crunch.

Leslie opened the guest bathroom which had transformed into a kind of store. The shoes had arrived the previous day. The black Miu Miu pair, matching purse and gloves—also black. She ran her fingers over the material to

feel the rubbery luxury of the expensive new items. The leather filled her nostrils and all of a sudden the ache of the expense disappeared from her body.

She tiptoed with large strides back to the kitchen bumping into Katie who saw the open phone in her hand, spying. Katie rinsed out the breakfast dishes noisily, a hint of her disposition.

The doorbell rang twice.

“Yes?” Leslie peeked into the keyhole when no one replied. It was the gateman.

“Mzee is here.”

“Who?”

“Madam Kate’s Mzee,”

“Do not open for him!” Katie shouted from the kitchen.

“Do not open for him.” Leslie echoed and moved away from the door front.

“He will not leave.” The voice at the door returned.

There was no response to that.

*

Previous day

“Hello Father.”

“Hello. Are you good?”

“Yes, you?”

“No complaints.”

“Good.”

“Good.”

“I sent you something yesterday.”

“I saw it. Thank you. Do you want it back?”

“No, that’s not why I called.”

“Okay?”

“Did you receive my other message? The invite?”

—

“Hello?”

“What do you want from me, Katarwa? What do you want me to say?”

“Something. Anything. Decline the invite. Acknowledge receipt? Shout at me. Insult me if you want. This would not be the first time.”

“Hmm...this your madness is actually serious.”

“Madness?”

“Yes, madness. What else do you call this?”

—

“You think any of this, any of what you are doing and planning to do—any of what you are asking me? Do you think any of it is normal? Do not even answer that. You will annoy me. I need you to hear me, Katarwa.

I need you to hear me and hear me clearly. I have tolerated your nonsense for a while. I have watched you turn from my most beautiful baby girl to whatever creature this is you are becoming and it is an abomination really. An abomination to me, to God...it is a shame to this society and worse, it is an abomination to your mother. Don’t go quiet on me now! You are still listening?”

“Yes.”

“I received that invitation and wanted the Lord to take me immediately. I was ready! That can’t be something you want me to be part of. Surely! Me? A whole me? Reverend Canon Professor? Huh, Katarwa! I actually had thought it was an error with the name or with the mailing list until I turned the card over and saw the picture. You are so annoying! Let me first ask, that your flatmate, is she a man or a woman? Does she have parents? They are alive and let her walk around like that? Does it want to turn you into what it is? I am an old man and since you realised that, you have made it your mission to kill me. I am not stupid. I will not be taken advantage of.”

“Father—”

“Shh! This is what you wanted. I am talking now. Do not shush me. I will not be a part of this circus. I will not come. I do not support you. You do not have my blessing. That is the long and short of it. You have broken my heart, Katarwa. You have made me a laughing stock. But I tell you now, you will not break me. I will not die. So, have a nice life with your Sir-lady. Listen to this, there are two things that are impossible in this world. I have said this to you before; one, going back to your mother’s womb. Two is coming back from the dead and now I’ll give you a third; me coming to your ceremony. Call me when you come back to your senses. It better be soon.

You will not kill me! I shall not be returning the money. Good day!”

*

Leslie was never one to be caught pants down. Everything was ready. She was never unprepared. The suicide watch on Katie didn't deter any of the plans, in fact, Leslie had prepared for this sort of unforeseen mess and a few others. Nothing had stopped the proposal. Absolutely nothing would stop the wedding ceremony. No one knew how long she had waited. No one knew how perfect Katie was. How perfect they were together. No human word, no sting or choice of insult could disband what they had built from scratch. No one else could fathom how long Leslie had searched, returning to the same place each time. None but Leslie could grasp the intensity of Katie's devotion. Leslie could not let this happy ever after slip from her now that it was close after so long.

From the love notes back in school when they felt how they felt but were afraid of its name but continued to feel certain it could not be wrong. To the long distance—the calls, the blocked calls, tears on the webcam, the last weekend of the month screen-time that they enjoyed together with a chosen bottle of wine.

The 'let's try'. Let's try again. Let's keep trying. I shall be home again. The back and forth Katie did within her spirit was hard work. Titanic labour but who would hate a labour of love? The devil maybe; God was love and God loved love and God loved them and it was true as it was perfect. It was true and it was theirs.

The venue didn't give refunds. The wedding gown, all black lace, was already fitted and paid for fully. The black rosettes were already glued onto the hem and the sequins stitched onto the bodice. The pussy willow sticks were

in their vases alongside the pampas grass. The order for blue hydrangeas had been confirmed and the florets were to be cut and preserved tonight. The chicken throats had been cut. The nyama choma goats were eating their last grass so fuck Katie's father and fuck the stupid suicide watch. The cow ribs had marinated for two days in the freezer like Chef John had asked. The TATA truck had docked at the venue already and left behind both receipts, the original and its carbon copy. The custom wedding rings embossed with their names had arrived. The cake fondant had set.

Leslie's socks were washed and the pants crisp, shirt sleeves pressed. The blazers, the one for the vows and the one for changing into, were steam ironed. No lint in sight. Katie's changing dresses were snug but she could still afford to eat. Girls like her were lucky. No grand portion of food could budge her frame.

At 2pm, Leslie had to drive Katie to the salon and then herself to the foot spa and to the waxing lady after. At 1:30, she began to clear her throat. At 1:40, she began to hum. At 1:45, she started the car outside, phone in hand still zoomed in on Katie. At 1:50, Leslie dusted both their Birkenstocks and arranged them next to the door mat outside. At 1:55pm, the camera system zoomed in on the gate and Katie's old man had defused his own threat. He was not there.

“Come. Let's go.”

Leslie held out her hand for Katie to hold and led her out of the house. Locked the door behind them and drove out with a caution to the gateman not to let in anyone. “Yes,” he nodded.

*

Letter to St. Jezebel (in lieu of St. Valentine)

There is no female equivalent of St. Valentine. Maybe she exists or existed but we know how these sort of things work; men, men, men. It's all about men. So many revolutions since we could write but none of those a woman-saint of love, which is a shame because when I think of love it is not men who pop up. It has never been. I have no experience with that kind of love. My body, my soul and spirit will not allow it. I am not ashamed of it. Not anymore. But I love the idea still; a papal incarnation of cupid with little red love hearts at the end of his arrows shooting love into the unlucky.

In the legend, I identify with Julia, daughter of the jailer, the blind girl, the beloved whose eyes the miracle of love opens. St. Valentine was a martyr. I have no martyr bones in me. Pushed to gunpoint, I'd crack and besides, there's a manliness in martyrdom. The bravado makes it unsaintly if it were by such standards saints are canonized. Ego is shaped like a man. And it is difficult to believe in a rebel who fought for a love he himself did not experience. Secret matchmaking and officiating marriages of Rome's elite, as a single man himself? Suspicious.

Dear Saint Jezebel, patron saint of whores, girl-crooks and wicked women, women ill perceived, treacherous, too treasonous for the state's conscience to carry. I know. I am like you, defenestrated queen. Tyrantess, Iconic slayer of men, would you slay some men for me? How I would love to hand them over for your judgment! For their endless rules and cruelty. Would you feed them to the dogs for me? Would you, really?

My father-in-law for one. I hate him. I hate him like he hates me. I hate him like he hates himself. I hate how he makes her cry. I hate

the garbage he feeds her. Hateful filth about herself; a day to our wedding? I do not wish him well. I hope the dogs lick his toes. I hope they devour him from the feet up in his dreams so he cannot run from himself, so he cannot run from all of his darkness. So he has no legs to escape the hate he has created in her for herself—FOR HERSELF. There is no woman like Katie. Katie doesn't know this.

I know you, St. Jezebel. I know your sweet mist of chaos. I know your eyeshadow blue as sky above your brown eyes, striking as a gavel, resolute as judgment. I would rather he die than she lose herself. I would give his life for hers. Is that a wrong thought to think? Is that a wrong wish to have? Well, I am not ashamed of it. I would rather live in a world where she is and where he is not, him and the whole lot of them. Hateful scumbags hiding in the sacristy. Wine drunk on the pulpit.

I shall continue to love her. It is my birthright. I shall be her peace in this world. She will be comfortable. I will make sure of it. She shall eat my money. She shall raise our plants and our cats, with me. We'll rear goats on our new plot and grow all the plantain trees in the world. As many as she likes. I shall make dinners when she lets me and wait up on her night shifts. I will cut fruit for her oats. I will make her laugh, with my dad-jokes. I will nurse her back to health.

I shall be her law. I shall fight her foes. I will beat them. One by one.

Signed,

Your Valentine

*

"I didn't think I would have to do my own makeup."

“How can I help?”

“Zip me up...”

“Breathe in, a little bit.”

“Babe, don’t try to be funny.”

“But you are laughing...”

“Doesn’t mean I am happy with your insinuations.”

“Apologies, Miss Madam!” Leslie kissed her shiny shoulders and retained on her own lips some of that gloss.

“No plans to die today? Cause we could postpone the event, maybe for an hour or two but no more?”

“I am ready. If not today, then never.”

This was what Leslie had wanted to hear all along. Her Katie was back and all was well with the world. Leslie had organised this event for about a year, even longer. She had planned it all in excruciating detail and followed up, with utmost vigilance so no, cancelling was not an option. She had let her leave days accumulate so she could spend them all on a month-long honeymoon in Malindi, Bali and Mombasa at last, then return home first before reporting to her new work stations in her new role as Head Engineer at the nuclear plant. First in the Eastern region then West and South Africa.

“How many spritzes have you used of that cologne?”

“Four.”

“But I told you, just two are enough...”

“Not for this big day...by 1pm it shall be half

its strength, you know that.”

“But it makes my stomach hurt.”

“Just breathe...in.”

“Ah!”

“Hehehe!”

Katie slipped on her tights before slipping on her shoes. This was the type of surprise she could not be mad at. Expensive new shoes that fit perfectly.

“Peep yourself in the mirror. Peep!” She swung her fresh braids out of her face.

“Wow!” Leslie exclaimed, a pendant bobbing side to side in her hand. She brushed the braids to the back of Katie’s dress, and sat the emerald on her chest. Katie held the hair up as the stopper clicked shut. She let her hair back down, tucked a bunch behind her left ear and popped an onyx stud into her earlobe. She repeated the ritual on the right side.

“Wow!”

Leslie pulled gloves out of the box as Katie stretched her arms forward for them to be slid over her nimble fingers first, all the way across her arms ending at the elbow.

“Wuch!”

“Stop it!”

“I’m not even started. Pose right there for me.” Leslie drew the curtain for more light. Katie’s head leaned to the right. “Like that, don’t move,” Leslie instructed. The big camera Leslie had bought for this very moment was whipped out of their shared duffel bag. Squinting into the lens, Leslie moved around

the object of her capture, long-awaited life partner, soon to be spouse who was standing tall and statuesque in her shoes, all her charms showing.

“Smile!” Click. Click. Click. Click.

“Stop! Lemme change a little bit.”

“Just one more.”

“Mkay!”

“Wow!” Click.

As they walked down the hall—Leslie had booked the whole building—their hands tightened inside of each other. It was finally happening. A dream fulfilled. Them in their best clothes, in the best shape of their lives, walking to the podium to say their vows to each other and before their loved ones.

Seeing no one in the hall as they walked through, Leslie’s chest tightened. No one at the pool. No one in the gardens where the tents had been erected for their ceremony. The sky grew dark and for a flash it was like she and Katie were in another world. Both in black wedding clothes, it looked a lot like they were at their own funeral procession—black was a wrong wedding colour, Leslie had thought to change it months before but had consoled herself saying no colour on Katie could ever look wrong. The aroma of roast beef revived Leslie and her hand regained grip on her bride’s.

It was ready. The sermon on the hard drive. The church minister they had asked to officiate the ceremony had cancelled because of a family issue that came up last minute on his end but had pre-recorded a sermon to be projected over a screen in his absence. It was to be played before the vows. This was

what she had not told Katie. The guests were cancelling. They had been cancelling all week. It was paranoia. Leslie was sure. She could have been mistaken and it might have been something else...maybe someone had gone through the guest list and called the guests with some untruth. But which untruth?

Katie on the other hand was frolicking like a baby goat in the field. Ecstatic to be at her wedding. Guests or not. Her shoes beating on the grey pavement in hoof fashion.

Cemetery silence was not at all what she had envisioned for this day. Now no guests? How could she narrate that to Katie? With what words? Would she ever be ready? Probably not but this was an inconvenience Leslie had foreseen. There was no universe in which this wedding did not happen. While her mouth was not ready to break the news to Katie, she was ready with something else, a plan. An order. She dialled and let the phone ring for a while.

“Hello?”

“Detonate.”

“Hello??”

The call was staticky. Leslie yelled the order again, “Detonate!” but the static continued to rub on her eardrums—fingernails on chalkboard sound—no real reply came.

“I already did...” Katie interjected.

“Huh?”

“I already did.”

“What?” Leslie laughed a sheepish laugh.

“Detonated...”

There was a ring bearer waiting for them at the tent's mouth. A prepubescent child. Also dressed in black fully. The orchestra, far back, began a sort of crescendo. The violins first. They were on the other side.



Blues 3_ Queering in the Shadows, 2025 by Baahwa

A Cacophony of Unsaid Things

Mhembeuter Jeremiah Orhemba

It has always seemed like a miracle that the beginnings of us came from something as inconsequential as a hello on a hookup app. A hello that, like every other hello on Grindr, was most likely headed toward becoming another brief story for each of us: another guy we chatted with, perhaps met once, and eventually lost to time.

Right from the beginning, ours has been a tale of almost, time always in between us, ever shifting, returning us to each other slightly changed from the last time we met, and in rooms that are not ours. Always, it is a disorienting experience to find ourselves revealed in the flesh to one another — this other man whom we know so much about from voice notes and video calls, but do not quite know how to breathe around. Once again, we begin learning to exist around the other.

Hey.

Hey.

So this is you.

Yes, this is me.

Like before — a different room, a different place, years ago — we sit side by side, our breaths catching in our chests, the silence in the room palpable and aware, our hands lost on what to do with themselves.

“Did you come straight from your brother’s farm?” I ask — as it’s our way of using the incidental to bridge the gap between us.

His response is a story.

Even though we already know stories of each other, stories we mostly only share with each other, we find ourselves laughing anew at the eccentricities of our lives, at how much stranger they could become, passing between us archives of texts we would never show anyone outside of here.

Careful, these walls have ears, one of us whispers to the other in the thick of an engrossing conversation.

We talk about so many things and nothing at all, the nothing none of us know how to put to words, the nothing we are left with after night comes too soon — nothing but the knowledge that time with each other is worth more than rubies, and that our schedules are too misaligned for us to meet again soon. Time, we are beginning to accept, would forever stand between us.

*

His name is Kris. My name is Mhembeuter. This is what we first learn of each other after our first hello.

He is twenty-one. I am nineteen. While we are both at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, he is currently pursuing the JUPEB program, and I’m in English and Literary Studies, in my second year.

When he sends me his picture, I am pulled in immediately, a quiet familiarity about him that settles something in me, and I wonder if he is feeling the same way looking at mine.

Want to meet? I text him.

Sure, he says.

At our designated venue, I wait and wait. I am swollen with ache at every passing second that promises his presence only to return more of his absence. I text and text. Evening falls. I walk back home.

Inside the chatbox, I continue waiting. Even his absence seems to hover with promise, something palpable, or perhaps only something I invent in my head. By then, I am certain I will never hear from him again.

Then one morning, I come online to his apology. He'd run out of battery. Something urgent had come up earlier. He is at his uncle's in Enugu and unsure when next he will return to Nsukka.

On my end, school is closing and the holidays are fast approaching. In the face of this realization, I wonder, pained by it even, how long we had existed within reach of each other, how close we had come to running into each other or missing each other by a second, of having sat in a seat the other had vacated after their lecture earlier, only to return home and find each other on Grindr. Yet we were only just learning of each other.

I text him: "The call number you sent me earlier, is that your WhatsApp number? Can we keep chatting on WhatsApp?"

Sure, he says.

On WhatsApp, response begets response. Our curiosity about each other gives way to the unfurling of a long chat thread.

Then, he is returned to Abuja, and I am returned to Makurdi. And because exchanging words feels too small for what is unfolding between us, we begin to video call every day.

During laundry. During walks. Taking breaks to attend to a call from a parent or to quickly go on an errand. If he is merely going down the road, he carries me along with him, earpiece in, to properly hear me against the noise of the outside world. We grow familiar with the ordinariness of each other's lives, even if it is

behind a screen. We tag each other in TikTok videos.

And then, a year later, he is returning to school and it happens that my degree program is in session, the schedules of our programs aligning for the first time, even if only for a few days.

I am full of excitement — not only at the thought of leaving my own part of town, but at moving toward another for something that feels worth it.

Outside Hilltop Gate, we see each other for the first time.

It is surreal. This face I have encountered again and again through shared pictures and video calls, this voice I have heard in voice notes and late-night calls, suddenly standing before me in the flesh. To know a person so intimately and yet not know them at all. Marvelling at how tall he stands above me, looking down on me as I look up at him, something that is never there when behind the screen.

A silence holds between us, a held breath, an awareness that the man before the other seeks desire in the body of men, and it does not matter whether we seek desire in each other but that something tender exists between us, something unnameable, an excitement that for our safety is best kept in the wanting of our eyes and the twitching of our gestures, from the world's unforgiving gaze.

Inside his lodge compound, I follow on his heels. We climb stairs to his apartment. Although I am excited at arriving at his door, at entering into his world, worry soon crosses his face.

"Sorry, my roommate is inside," he says.

Disappointment stings me immediately, but I understand. Even though we live separate lives, we know almost everything about each other's lives, enough for me to know that this roommate has simply taken Kris in. Enough to know that there are many things that irritate this roommate easily, and my presence inside might become one of them.

We sit outside then, Kris full of apology, and I full of hurt. We talk. He passes me his laptop, unlocked, the screen still open to whatever he had been doing moments earlier — and I receive this with gratitude, a trust placed in my care.

Minutes segue into minutes. We talk about many things and, somehow, about nothing at all, every now and then breaking into laughter at how surreal it is to finally see each other.

I must have told him then how I also found it disorienting how tall he stood over me, and he must have shrugged in the way of someone long accustomed to towering over others.

Night comes too quickly.

When we look into each other's eyes, our wanting is bare. There are words left unsaid between us: how heartbreaking it is that after tonight our separate worlds offer no certainty of seeing each other again. The knowledge that once we return to the haste of our lives, the chatbox will be all we have.

He sees me off.

*

And then, after years of more video calls and voice notes, years following up on each other's lives and discovering how much our belief in the other bolsters our belief in ourselves, I finally have a reason to come to his city — Abuja.

When he emerges through the gate of my uncle's lodge — the same uncle whose place I was staying, and who had agreed to let me invite Kris and did not mind going to pick him up — it feels fucking unbelievable to see him in the flesh. Even more unbelievable is how quickly we fall into each other's arms, my

head against his stomach, his hands unsure where to lock around my body, telling of how disproportionate we are in height to each other.

My uncle leaves us to our privacy. Tucked under the man's blanket, giggly yet contained, the gratitude for each other is stark in our eyes, gratitude for the walls around us, for the aligning of time and circumstance.

Minutes pass. We repeat stories. Share the plans for our dreams. Share how proud we are of the other.

Night, once again, comes too soon, threatening to return us to the obligations of our separate lives as swiftly as it had found us. It does. And when we find each other online again, it is to text the other: I wish we had more time.

*

As you must have grown familiar with the rhythm of this story, it should come as no surprise that time passes and passes again, and we keep up with each other across video calls, voice notes, and endless messages.

His name is Kris, and my name is Mhembeuter, and while he is twenty-five, I am twenty-three. And after two years since we last saw each other, I have yet another reason to be in his city, even if for barely two days.

We meet in my hotel room. The next day, he comes again, having snuck out of the house to keep me company until my flight out of Nigeria, in a few hours. He calls the cab, helps me with my luggage. Smiles at me when, outside the hotel as we wait for the cab, I look up to him and let him see the anxiety growing inside me.

Because I return through Nnamdi Azikiwe

Airport, I am in Abuja a few weeks later. But this time, he is at his brother's, quite a distance from where I am with my brother. He is choked with obligations.

So when the chance opens up, it is at a time when his brother is driving past my area to the family house, and Kris can briefly stop by before rushing back before his brother is ready to leave.

It is a fleeting meet, and beneath an overhead bridge, the world around us engrossed in its chase for survival yet sharp-eyed enough to catch anything unbecoming between us.

Kris hands me the bag I had left in his care. Because we have a bit of time, he tells me that he has gotten the scholarship, the one we'd dreamed about years ago in my uncle's room, a scholarship key to his future dreams. He hands me his phone so I can read the mail itself, and not a screenshot. When I hand him back the phone, I confess that I wish I could hug him.

Wish.

In previous meetings, it was our custom to embrace before and after, and within the cover of walls. Now we are in the glare of an open space and we could only hug in restless gestures and sidelong glances and hesitant smiles, the silence between us swollen with things unsaid, something we speak to each other only with our eyes.

And when time elapses, his brother persistently calling, we exchange handshakes and he moves towards the stairs so he can cross the overhead bridge. I turn in my own direction, the distance between us growing, an approximation of how long before we see each other again.



Blues_ Queering in the Shadows, 2025 by Baahwa

Fun Times in Accra

Michael Dame

I was high, young, and dumb,
Running stark mad through the streets
of Accra.
Solace was all I had been searching for,
But madness and disaster were all I found.

My father's arms closed around me,
Foreign to their touch
Those mounds of flesh,
That widened the gap
Between the man he wanted me to be
And the man that I was.

I cried my frustrated eyes out,
My worth no different from a stray dog's.
My emotions seeped out like maggots,
From dead roadkill on these ghost-ridden
streets.

You think you've seen it all,
Until you map the ways your life could end.
Every map leads far from home,
Face down on a wooden floor.
I stare into the mirror as my eyes turn starry.
This body keeps its own quiet records.
I wonder what the end would be like,
If the barber had run home appointments at
the time.
You can't crowdsource your self-esteem;

When the nights stretch into weeks
And the only thing left to face is you,
Even the vices get tired of you.

My card declined at the Pantheon Bar.
My tab was closed,
And it was time to pay
A sentient wall named Frank told me,
"Everything is okay, the worst is already here,

I'll only have to meet it a few more times, give
or take.

When you're a quarter of a century old,
And start worrying how time will set your
laughter lines,
You'll look back on these moments,
Not shamefully, but with bruised reverence.
The hardest person to forgive is yourself.
You learn that slowly."

Is this just love or serotonin?

I really hope this isn't just serotonin.
You only call when your heart is empty
And the weight of living presses down,
And the clouds hang gray and rainless.
I still pick up,
For even the silence of the void has a faint
echo.
Is prayer what we call the aching within us?
When Life's ice-cold chains hold us down
And we require some solace?
Your fears wake the ghosts,
Buried long ago without ceremony.

Emptiness calls and you're my telephone to
the other side.
I am suffocating,
And this feeling only grows heavier each day,
Night stretches into eternity.
I wish someone could be my phone:
A doorway out of the void into a place,
Where my mouth doesn't taste like ash
And love is love, not just serotonin.

Queen of Steel

White Dove

They tried to fold me into silence.
There were nights so lonely even the moon looked away, yet somehow, I remained.

I know what abandonment feels like.
I know what it means to lose the people who once made the world feel safe.

I lost my parents.
Not long after, I lost my grandparents too, the people who carried what was left of my comfort and belonging.
Grief became a home I did not know how to escape from.

When the people you love keep disappearing, the world begins to feel cold.
I was surrounded by pain, but still felt completely alone.

Family abandonment deepened the wounds.
At a time when I needed support the most, I often felt unseen, forgotten, and left behind.

There were moments I almost lost myself completely.
Moments when survival felt heavier than living.
I began searching for ways to silence the pain.

Substance abuse became an escape, a temporary numbness for grief I did not know how to carry.

What started as a way to cope slowly became a cycle that pulled me further away from myself.

There were days I could not recognize the person staring back at me.

Days filled with loneliness, shame, and exhaustion.

Days I wondered if life would ever feel light again.

But even in my darkest moments, something inside me refused to die.

In the middle of everything, I met community activists who saw beyond my pain.
They did not judge me for my past or abandon me when I was struggling.
Instead, they reminded me that my life still had value.

They encouraged me to begin therapy and for an entire year, I stayed committed to healing even when it was difficult.

Therapy forced me to face the grief, the abandonment, the trauma, and the pain I had buried for so long.
Little by little, I began to find myself again.

I stopped the habits that were destroying me.
I started rebuilding my life slowly, one step at a time.

Healing was not easy, and it was never perfect, but it was real.

Eventually, I got a job in a different community, a fresh start in a place where I could grow beyond my past.

For the first time in a long time, I began to feel hope instead of fear when thinking about the future.

Today, I am still healing, still learning and still carrying scars.

But I am no longer ashamed of my story.
My pain did not destroy me.
It shaped me.
It taught me compassion, resilience, and the
importance of community.

Now, I am living life to the fullest.
Not because everything has been easy, but
because I survived what once tried to break
me.

This is not just a story about grief, addiction,
or abandonment.
It is a story about endurance.
About healing.
About choosing life even after darkness.

And after every loss, every lonely night, every
battle I thought would end me.

I am still standing tall!



I Feel Powerful, 2025 by Baahwa

Proper Lady

Efe

I learned early
How to make myself smaller in dresses that scratched my skin,
How to sit like a “proper lady” while my knees begged for freedom,
How to survive aunties clicking their tongues at my short hair
And church women staring too long at my button-up shirts.
But masculinity sat on me naturally,
Like red dust on sneakers after walking through Sunyani roads,
Like confidence growing quietly in my chest
Every time I caught my reflection and finally recognized myself.

Sunyani called me stubborn before it called me queer.
Men laughed when I walked with my hands in my pockets,
Women asked who would marry a girl like me,
Preachers tried to scrub me clean with prayer.
Still, I kept showing up exactly as I am.
In loose jeans, fresh fade, quiet swagger.
At drinking spots with highlife playing softly in the background,
I watched myself become someone unafraid of taking up space.
Not a man. Never that.
Just a woman untouched by their rules.

Now I move through this town without apologizing first.
I let my voice sit deep.
I let my clothes hang loose.
I let girls look at me too long and smile when they do.
Because there is nothing shameful about the way I love,
Nothing broken about this hard-soft body of mine.
I am still somebody’s daughter, still Ghanaian, still whole.
And every day I live openly, without bending myself smaller,
Feels like winning a fight they thought I would lose.

@Efepoetry_2026



Artwork by Essel



Artwork by Essel

Our Survival

Chidera

Nobody really teaches you anything about life.
You realize that along the path of growth,
especially when you're special.
By special, I speak of queerness.

Blessed are those who discovered themselves when they were old,
for they know not much about the curse of the closet.
But to us who were self-aware from childhood,
we have survived what no one, whether child or adult, must experience.

The closet is dark and hideous,
but some of us were blessed in the curse of it.
We hid in plain sight and witnessed the ridicule of those who couldn't hide.
The unlucky ones, I thought them to be.
Maybe they should tone down their femininity,
I reasoned with concern, but it was fear. Only fear.

We grew up fabulous and unique,
the effect of the curse of the closet, maybe,
but society continues to hate us.
It indoctrinates us with self-hate using religion,
then criminalizes our existence using laws.
Blessed are the queers who break free from religious chains,
for only then can they truly love themselves.

It has been a long time coming:
surviving hate, violence, and death.
To our fallen heroes of homophobia's war,
you will forever live on with us.
To those yet to love themselves:
you are not a curse, but specially different.
To those who hide in fear, be it for safety or any other reason,
persevere, for there is hope.
And to those who live in freedom:
never forget those who fought for it,
and never forget those who are yet to be free.

Abusua

BOAHEMAA

What We Keep

Nobody tells you that love in Ghana is mostly logistics.

Who's driving,
Who's lying to their mother tonight.
Whose name do you save under a fake contact.
Which parties are safe to hold someone's hand at,
and which ones you do keep your hands in your pockets for and pretend you came alone, even when you didn't, even when the person you came with is standing three feet away and you can feel them.

You learn a whole second language here. Not Twi. Not Ga.

Something older than both, the language of I see you, and you learn to speak in glances, in Uber rides home where your friend squeezes your knee for just a second before getting out because you cannot kiss, and you become fluent without ever being taught, you just... know.

The way you always know here, survival has made poets out of us all.

That's the first thing the chosen family teaches you.
Recognition.

I used to think *chosen family* was just a beautiful thing. And it is. It is necessary though, before it is beautiful... I think about my chosen family a lot.

How strange, human and holy it is that people who did not raise you can become the ones who keep you alive.

There are parts of you that can't survive certain dinner table conversations, certain Sunday mornings, certain silences that stretch too long when you say the wrong name in the wrong tone. And so you find people, or they find you. It happens quietly at first: the girl who sends you "*text me when you get home*" after every night out. The roommate who leaves food outside your door because you have not emerged all day. The ex-lover who still checks if you are drinking water during a depressive episode. The community organizer who introduces you to a room full of queer people and suddenly the world expands.

The GAYS who share lipstick, cigarettes, Uber fares, strategy, rage, soft playlists, and exit plans. One day you look up and realise: *these people are my proof that I exist, that I existed on the days I wasn't sure I wanted to*. That's not a replacement for blood. That's something else entirely. Something that doesn't have a word in English.

But in Twi, *M'ABUSUA*
In Ga, *WAKU*

There are nights in Accra where the music is loud enough to drown out the law for a few hours. Nights where queer souls dance with their whole bodies like the government is not watching, like we are not criminals. Nights where somebody's partner is arguing over aux cord privileges and someone else is curled up asleep on a couch while the rest of us debate feminism and whether love should feel as

peaceful or consuming like it did with an ex. Those nights feel revolutionary in ways people outside of here may never understand.

I've cried in this city more than I've cried anywhere else. I've also laughed harder here than I thought my body was capable of. Both things are true and I've stopped trying to reconcile them. I'm still learning how to just be here, not perform being here. Just be. Present. Unguarded. Without the mental background processes running, calculating risk, translating myself into something more digestible. Some days I manage it for an hour. The music is right, the light is the particular gold it gets in the late afternoon, someone is laughing at something stupid across the room and I think: this is it. This is the life, not in spite of everything but alongside it.

That feels like the most radical version of living I know how to do.

Loss here is strange because, who do I tell? Not just losing people — though that too. That too is its own country — but losing possibility. The future you were building in private. The apartment you almost rented together. The country you joked about running away to, the joke that wasn't really a joke. Sometimes a friendship ends and it feels like a death no one will attend the funeral for. Seated at kitchen tables eating kelewele at midnight while somebody cries over a breakup and somebody else rolls their eyes and says, "You will survive this too."

And usually, they are right.

How do you grieve something the world won't name?

How do you explain that a situationship held the weight of a homeland?

You explain it to your chosen family, that's how

Or you don't explain it at all. They just know. That's the whole point.

I think being alive as a queer person in Ghana requires a specific kind of faith. Not necessarily faith in institutions or governments or even the future, but faith in each other.

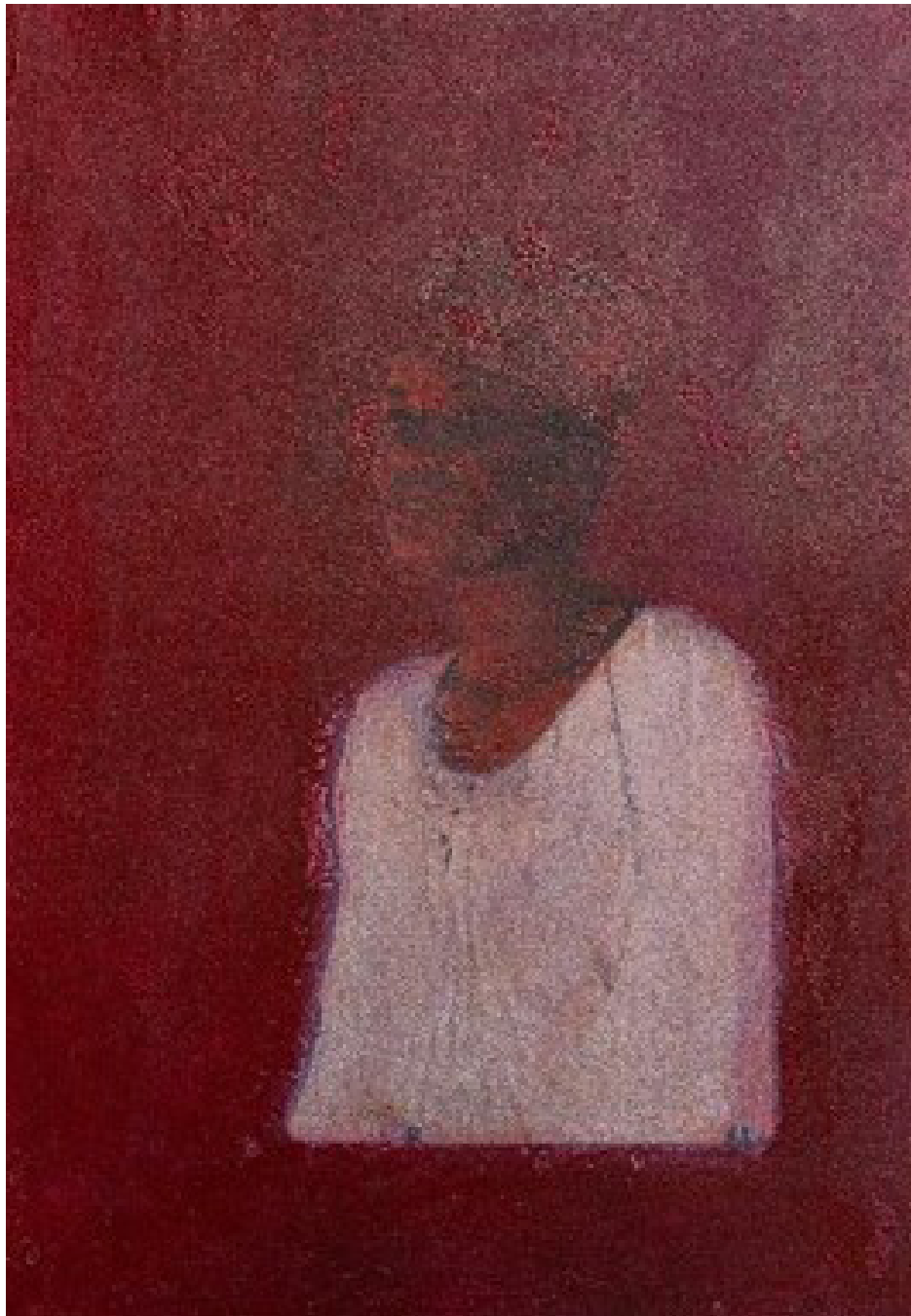
Faith that somewhere in this city, another person is scanning a crowded room, searching for someone who feels like home.

Faith that we can still exist beneath all this pressure without disappearing.

Faith that we deserve the lives we dream of, the ones we whisper about, repost, and imagine for ourselves.

Maybe chosen family is just that:

a group of people agreeing, over and over again, to keep one another alive long enough to experience joy.



Artwork by Essel

The Best Man

P.K. Nimako

A man tells you he loves you in one breath. In another breath, he professes his love for some woman at the altar.

You are 6 when your father tells you he loves you.
“That’s my boy!!!” he bellows.
Your mother died when she was having your younger sisters - twins. So all the love he has for her, he doesn’t allow decay, he showers them on you and his twins - good luck charms he calls you.

Six years later, the neighbour catches you with her son after a football game. You are playing with your penises.
You don’t remember how but his penis ends up in your palms and you squeeze it.
Your knock-kneed, gari-selling neighbour screams,
“Ah, herh! What are you two doing?”
You are not startled, just mildly confused. There is nothing wrong with what you are doing.
Your friend says his penis can get hard and you asked to see because you had never experienced that.
But the other boy shakes as the woman berates both of you.
She tells your father when he gets home from work.

That night you kneel before the photo of Virgin Mary so she may carry your father’s desires to Jesus. You hear when your father mutters,
“I will not love this boy if he “turns out to be a woman.”
“Father Lord, I have 2 daughters. I don’t want

three. I only have love in my heart for 2 and some for a boy. Give me my son back.”

It’s the prayer that births the fear within. It’s your father’s fear that seeps through the cold floor and enters your skin through your knees, rising upward and coagulating inside your chest.
That prayer sinks deep deep into the core of your soul.
You would’ve preferred that he had beat you and warned you not to put another boy’s penis in your palms.
Sticks, towel, belt wire, his fists. Anything other than that calm, tearful, violent prayer.

A man tells you he loves you in one breath. In another breath, he professes his love for some woman at the altar.

You are 16 when you pass your BECE and get into St. Augustine’s College.
A year later, your friend’s fingers find their way onto your thighs and into your shorts as you chat on the lower bunk bed in the dorm.

It’s been 4 years, the fear that sank deep into the core of your soul slumbers,
Its roaring desire makes you realise why your knock-kneed gari-selling neighbour screamed years ago.

This desire was supposed to be for women only.

You are the only two in the room and you don’t stop him. You stare sheepishly as your penis hardens between his pudgy fingers and moan when it disappears into his mouth.

You're in ecstasy, your body quakes. As you throw your head back relishing the pleasure, you don't see the eyes peeking through the window of your dormitory.

That same evening both of you are arraigned before the Disciplinary Committee.

The fear birthed by your father's prayer is stoked by this boy who calls you 'demon!,' 'incubus!,' as he confesses.

You, the prefect, told him to "suck my dick, else I will punish you."

His body heaves with repentance as he nails you to the cross. "I didn't want to do it. I didn't want to do it. It was him".

He falls on his knees, spittle spraying the feet of the headmistress. Amidst gasps and sobs he tells her he loves her, he loves this school, he is sorry.

You fold up again. At least this time, they don't tell your father.

They demote you and you become an outcast until you leave school.

A man tells you he loves you in one breath. In another breath, he professes his love for some woman at the altar.

Years zip by. You are gay and grown and you've started healing from your trauma.

You're 26. Good job. Good looks. Raging homo.

You meet a boy on the Yellow App.

He is winsome and refined and striking.

The first time he kisses you,

you forget to breathe not because his breath stinks of onions but mostly because you are shocked by the intensity with which his hands encircle your waist as he drags you to him.

That kiss is the first time that the fear born by your father and nurtured by the boy in high school doesn't threaten to shatter your heart.

You both fly onto the sheets and your bodies fold into each other.

Saliva, sweat, moans.

Until after rapid shallow breaths, you both lay spent.

You know you love him then.

Your fingers trace their way along his clavicles and trail down the thread of hair onto his stomach. Your hand pauses at his navel, his penis does another bop and you ask,

"Round two?"

Round two becomes round three. You tell him if you guys continue your penis will turn to water. He responds by asking you on a date. Then sleepovers. Then you are his boyfriend.

Three days after your first anniversary. You go to church. You haven't done that in years, but you sit through the sermon and you sing.

As your body sways to the music, you imagine his arms around your neck and yours around his waist, grabbing his butt.

The wedding invite comes from your friend accompanied by a text on WhatsApp,

Ah! Isn't that F*****? Your boyfriend's name.

Tears pool in your eyes as you stare at the screen. It's him professing his love "till death do us part" and then he kisses the woman.

Your body quivers and shakes, and a mangled cry rises from your throat. Heads turn, but you are immune to their stares. You text your friend to meet you at home, then you race out of the church and straight into the silky comfort of your bed.

A man tells you he loves you in one breath. In another breath, he professes his love for some woman at the altar.

His betrayal broke you. It revived that fear that was almost dead and magnified it in volume. So you decide to profess your love to a woman, like all the best men in your life had done. When you do, your father decides he loves you again. Your sisters begin to call you big bro.

The woman is a thing, you reduce her to a thing. You say your vows, hump away on your honeymoon and then you begin your nightly trysts with different men.

At first you try to be discreet, but soon you don't care because you married a thing. Dutifully, it listens to the mad elders who counsel it about how men are cheaters and that BS that you snorted at years past. In a year, it gives you a baby. This baby finds delight in tormenting you. Shrieking whenever he ends up in your arms. As if to ask it if its mother doesn't see your betrayal.

In the fourteenth month, your wife turns from thing to human. She figures out that she was a vagina to you. An object to give you a baby. And so two weeks after she turned human, she takes her baby and flees. She picks your call only once. So you can profess your love and plead dishonestly. She remains silent like the elders had advised her about your mistreatment. Then she cuts the call.

And with that, your father and sisters once again, cut contact.

A man tells you he loves you in one breath. In another breath, he professes his love for some woman at the altar.

It takes 10 years until you find yourself again. 5 of those you spend in Dr. Dowell's office. He uses the magic of talk to heal you, pulling out memories and tears and stories. So you begin by telling him how you decided to get help.

You had seen an ex at a board meeting – this one forced you to choose between him and your best friend. You chose him. Then he cast you aside for your best friend.

In the conference room, his eyes swept over you, pausing in a nanosecond of recognition. His presence, unexpected, yes, shocked you harder than you had imagined. You stumbled through your presentation but he merely watched, seeing the PowerPoint but not you. When you approached him at the end of the meeting, he directed you to:

“Please give your details to my assistant. I will reach out if it's important.”
You did. Then you waited through the night, waiting for a text from him. When you realised you were an idiot, you decided “Therapy”.

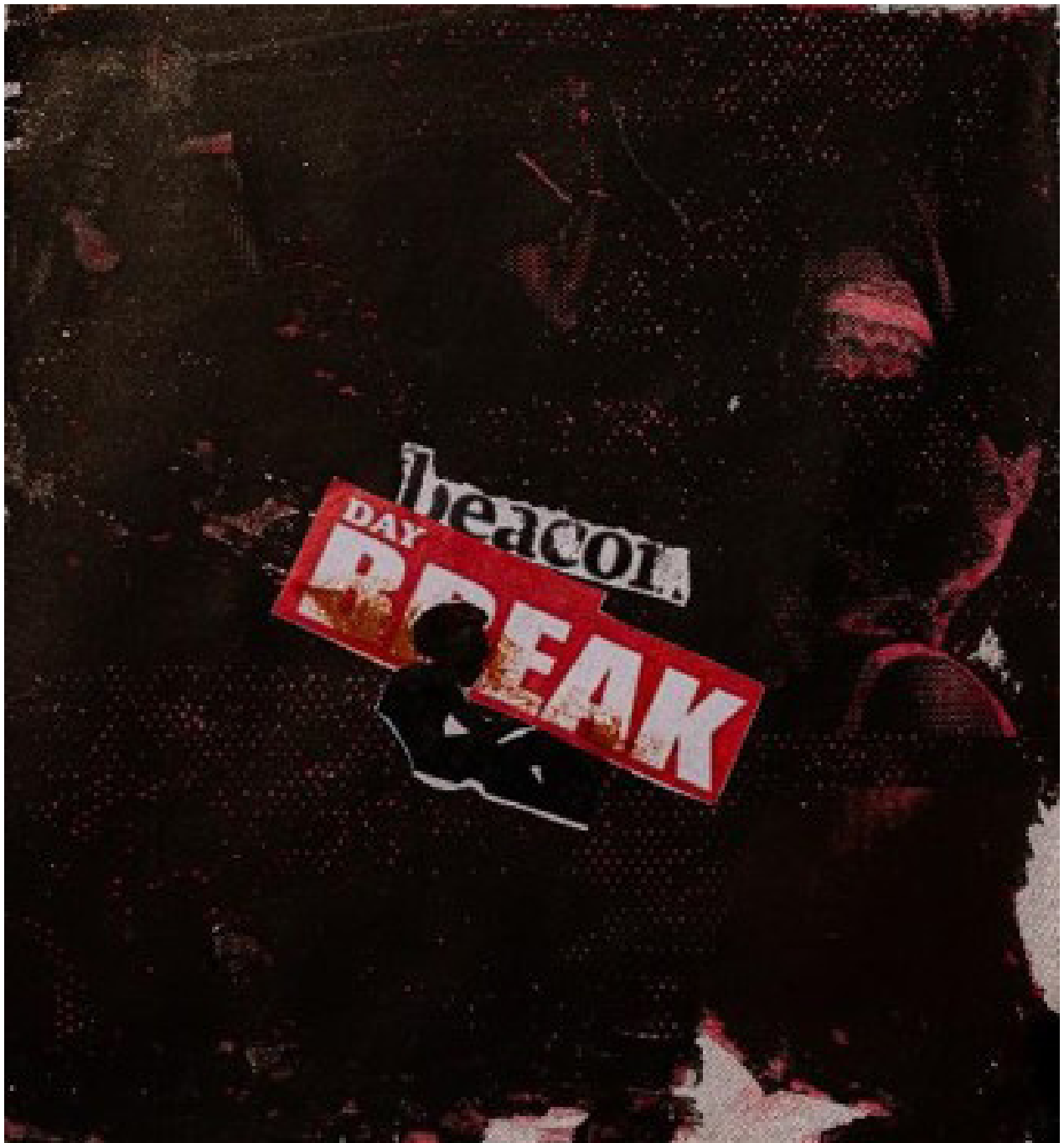
You remember thinking during the first session “I will seduce this straight guy, especially if he's a homophobe.”
But he had seduced you instead with his easy eyes and soft voice that massaged your throat and forced words out.

And as you spoke in later sessions. You unraveled. Peel after peel after peel. Until the fear birthed by your calm, tearful, violent prayer, nurtured by being outed in SHS, solidified by your ex's betrayal, and decades of flimsy trysts, was revealed. Lodged in the middle of your chest - calcified.

And so you worked with him to make a; To
turn stone back to flesh.

*A man tells you he loves you in one breath. In another
breath, he professes his love for some woman at the
altar.*

You meet him at 45, he's 50.
He sweeps you off your feet and into his arms,
then into his bed and through the skies.
To a small venue in Brasilia where his daughter
– the only woman in his life – is getting married.
You watch as he gives her off, professing his
love for her.
A love that he can share with you too.
When he returns to his seat and wraps his
hands in yours, you know that.
He's told them about you.
Because he had promised you that this love
will be one that won't live in the shadows.
So, even as you hold hands and hum together
on the return trip to Ghana.
You realise that your happy ever after is here,
A love that will be everlasting.



Artwork by Essel

The Weight of The Doubly Exiled & Doubly Present

2-gay-2-furious

For the Black queer subject, gay erotica is rarely encountered as mere entertainment. In a world where Black same-sex desire is doubly exiled from heteronormative culture and from the predominantly white visual grammar of queer representation, explicit material is something more urgent than arousal. It is a site of recognition that reflects and confirms your body exists, it is wanted, and it reaches for other bodies like its own.

This confirmation is an active process. The act of searching, finding, and reading or watching is itself a ritual of self-construction, an initiation into selfhood that mainstream culture abhors. Each clip, paragraph, and archived erotica carries a condensed ideology of longing, one that is at once racialised and erotic. To see a Black queer body desired on-screen or on a page is to receive a transmission that Blackness and queerness can coexist as identities and as objects of hunger, sources of beauty, and agents of pleasure. In the absence of this image elsewhere, erotica absorbs the weight of an entire ontology.

That absence is intentional. It is the product of compounding legal, cultural, and algorithmic erasures. Censorship has never been a neutral instrument. Historically, it has moved with precision against the bodies most threatening to the dominant order: the queer body, the Black body, and most relentlessly, the body that is both. Obscenity laws, content moderation policies, anti-LGBTQ+ legislation, and heteronormative regimes do not fall equally

across all desires. They tend to land heaviest where desire is already most policed, where the erotic is already most illegible to power. For Black queer subjects, censorship is not new. It is a continuation of a longer historical suppression: the suppression of Black sexuality by religion, ideology, nationalism, and capitalism.

To persist in this image-making is an act of resilience. The Black queer creator who places their work before an audience and distributes it across a hostile network is doing something that exceeds the erotic. They are bearing witness to themselves, insisting against the grain of erasure that their desire has shape and deserves to circulate. And yet this transmission is not without contradiction. Gay erotica operates as a memetic system that encodes power as it circulates desire. Its archetypes spread with viral efficiency across pages and screens alike, mutating slightly with each iteration while preserving a core grammar of eroticised difference.

For the Black queer subject, this grammar can be both mirror and distortion: a space of recognition that simultaneously scripts Blackness as spectacle, excess, and the exotic variable in a broader cultural imagination. To be seen is not always to be seen whole. Resilience is not only the act of appearing but the harder work of appearing on one's own terms, refusing the depictions that diminish, and insisting on the complexity that exists beyond the page or screen.

What persists, nevertheless, is the necessity of Black queer erotica. It is a counter-archive: fragile, contested, perpetually under threat of removal, and yet stubbornly reproductive, spreading through the networks that seek to contain it. Each piece is a capsule of something that must not disappear: the fact of longing, the fact of beauty, the fact that Black queer subjects desire and are desired in return, in bodies that are entirely and undeniably their own. That fact will persist.

The Country We Left Behind

Benjamin Cyril Arthur

I fall asleep in Norwich on a Tuesday in February, and wake up in a Ghana I don't recognize.

It happens the way dreams happen, without warning, without transition. One moment I'm in my flat on Unthank Road, listening to the radiator tick and the wind rattling the windows, thinking about my essay on postcolonial theory that's due tomorrow, about the seminar where I couldn't speak, about home in that abstract way you think about places you've left. Then I'm standing on Oxford Street in Osu, and everything is wrong.

Not wrong in the obvious ways. The street is still there. The heat is still the same suffocating embrace I remember from childhood. The red dust still rises in clouds. The tro-tros still belch black smoke. But the prostitute standing by the street corner in the short dress and high heels, the one who used to be called Ama or Akosua or Sister, who used to call out "hey, handsome boy" in Twi or Ga or broken English, she's Chinese now. Her skin pale in the streetlight. Her dress still short. Her heels still high. But the language she calls out in is Mandarin, and I don't understand it, and something in my chest clenches like a fist.

I walk faster. Past the bar that used to be Kofi's place, where Papa used to drink his four Sunday shots of akpeteshie. But Kofi's not there anymore. The sign above the door is in Chinese characters I can't read. Inside, I can see through the open door, there are no plastic chairs and tables. There's a karaoke machine, its screen flashing Chinese music videos. The boss behind the counter is Chinese, middle-

aged, arms crossed, watching the street with the territorial gaze of ownership. The bottles on the shelf are still there: Club Beer, Guinness, akpeteshie in clear bottles, but they look wrong somehow, like props in a play about a country that no longer exists.

I keep walking. Down the street where I used to buy kenkey from Auntie Adjoa's stall. But Auntie Adjoa is gone. The stall is still there, but the woman serving is Chinese, and the kenkey doesn't look the same or smell the same, but when she quotes me a price, it's in yuan, and I don't know the exchange rate anymore because this is a dream and dreams don't follow economic logic; they follow fear.

The buildings are hung with red banners. Gold characters I can't read. Lanterns swaying in the evening breeze. It takes me too long to understand: Chinese New Year. They're celebrating Chinese New Year in Osu. In Accra. In Ghana. And no one seems to find this strange. The few Ghanaians I see on the street, and they are few now, I realize, far fewer than there should be, walk past the banners like they're normal, like they've always been there, like this is just how things are now.

I walk past an apartment building where my cousin used to live. The landlord stands outside, smoking a cigarette. He's Chinese. Young, maybe thirty, wearing jeans and a polo shirt, talking on his phone in rapid Mandarin. When a young Ghanaian couple approaches him, I can see them hesitating, rehearsing their English, he waves them away without looking up from his call. They leave. They don't argue. They just leave.

This is when the fear really sets in. Not the surreal fear of finding yourself in a dream that's gone wrong, but the deeper fear of recognition. Because this isn't entirely a dream, is it? This is extrapolation. This is looking at what's already happening and following the trajectory to its logical conclusion.

I wake up.

Norwich. 3 a.m. The radiator still ticking. My heart racing. I reach for my phone, open WhatsApp, scroll through the family group chat. My mother has sent a photo of Sunday dinner. My brother has shared a meme about Ghanaian mothers. My cousin in Kumasi is complaining about the power cuts, DUMSOR is back, she says, we've had no light for three days. Everything is normal. Everything is as it should be.

But I can't shake the dream. Can't stop thinking about what I saw. What I already know but don't want to admit.

Here is what I know about the country I left:

The Chinese have been coming for decades. First for the gold mines. Then for the timber. Then for construction, building roads, bridges, stadiums we didn't ask for with loans we can't repay. Then for fishing, illegal trawlers decimating the waters our fishermen have harvested for generations. Then for retail, shops selling cheap goods that undercut local businesses. Then for everything else.

I know this because my uncle used to work for a Chinese construction company before they fired all the Ghanaian workers and brought in their own people from Guangdong. I know this because my father's friend lost his shop when the Chinese store opened next door,

selling the same goods for half the price. I know this because my cousin who studied engineering can't find work because the Chinese companies building our infrastructure don't hire Ghanaians except as day laborers.

I know this because it's not a secret. It's not a conspiracy theory. It's just economic reality dressed up in the language of development and partnership and South-South cooperation.

But here is what I also know: I left. I got on a plane and I left, and I'm writing this essay in Norwich, in a country that colonized my country, in a language that isn't my first language, in a flat that costs more per month than my mother earns in three, and I'm one of the lucky ones because at least I have a student visa, at least I have a degree program, at least I have a path to staying that doesn't involve overstaying and hiding and working cash-in-hand jobs that pay less than minimum wage.

I left because there were no jobs. Because the government is corrupt. Because the schools are underfunded and the hospitals have no medicine and the roads have potholes big enough to swallow a car. Because I'm gay and it's illegal and I was tired of hiding, tired of performing straightness like a second language, tired of watching my friends get beaten or arrested or shamed into marriages that would kill them slowly from the inside.

I left because staying felt like drowning.

And I am not alone. Every week, someone else from my secondary school posts photos from Dubai, from London, from Toronto, from anywhere but home. Every month, another brain drain statistic. Another doctor, another engineer, another teacher, another programmer, another young person with talent and education and ambition who looked at Ghana and saw no future.

So we leave. We scatter across the world like seeds thrown into the wind, hoping to take root elsewhere, hoping to send money home, hoping that somehow our leaving will make things better for the people who stay.

But who's watching the country while we're gone?

In the dream, I'm walking through Makola Market. The stalls are still there, the metal tables piled high with tomatoes and onions and yams, the women sitting on low stools with their scales and their calculators. But the women are Chinese now. All of them. And the goods on their tables are imported from Guangzhou, from Shenzhen, from Yiwu. Nothing grows in Ghana anymore. Nothing is made in Ghana anymore. Everything is brought in, sold by foreigners, bought by Ghanaians with money they don't have, money they borrow, money that flows out of the country like water through cupped hands.

I try to speak to one of the women. Try to ask her in English where all the Ghanaian market women have gone. She looks at me like I'm speaking nonsense. Like the question doesn't make sense. Like there have never been Ghanaian market women, like this is how it's always been.

I wake up again. 5 a.m. this time. Too early to get up, too late to fall back asleep properly. I lie there thinking about my mother, who still goes to Makola Market every Saturday to buy vegetables from Auntie Mercy, who has been in the same stall for thirty years. I think about how Auntie Mercy complains that business is bad, that people buy from the Chinese stores now, that the young people don't want to sell in the market anymore, that her daughter is in Germany, her son is in Dubai, and who will

take over the stall when she's too old to sit there anymore?

I think about my friend Kojo, who studied computer science at University of Ghana, graduated top of his class, couldn't find work, spent two years doing odd jobs, teaching himself coding languages at night in internet cafes, finally got a job offer in Lagos, left, sends money home to his parents every month but hasn't been back in three years because he can't afford the plane ticket.

I think about my friend Ama, who wanted to be a doctor, who passed all her exams, who couldn't get into medical school because there weren't enough spots, who married a man she met on the internet, moved to Texas, works at a nursing home wiping old people's asses for \$12 an hour and sends half of it back to her family.

I think about myself. About sitting in seminars in Norwich, unable to speak, feeling like an impostor, feeling like I'm pretending to belong in this world of British accents and casual references to things I've never heard of, feeling like I'm paying thousands of pounds to learn how to think about my own displacement in academic language that makes it sound theoretical instead of visceral.

I think about all of us, scattered, displaced, sending money home, calling ourselves successful because we escaped.

But what are we escaping from? And what happens to the thing we left?



Photos by Jeric



Photos by Jeric

The Man With the Horse Tattoo

Anathi Jongilanga

She hears him as her mind turns and treads focus on the day that's been, drifting, gradually, to sleep. When she realises he's there, the heaviness of his presence like a magic potion, insinuating itself upon her consciousness, filling the space of her bedroom, a sigh leaves her body. She twists, stretches, turns over, and lets herself away to the familiar charm of his spell.

He has a horse tattoo on the left side of his lean neck. The horse in full gallop. Like how now he dances on the black sea, as they dip and soar in the night; the way he surfs on the kind waves with the ease and comfort of a child on a loving mother's bobbing knee, showing off his deftness at flight like a peacock flourishes the magnificence of his plume in the sun. She straddles his back for safety, arms wrapped around his chest like a saddle.

No more now lives in her bones the reluctance with which she had met his invitation when he had first come to her. Just as she had balked at first, released her fingers to the welcoming hand and encouraging words, she would do more so freely in nights to come. Known to her now, she slips easily out of the bed whenever she feels him, hears him, at the very moment as she drifts off to sleep.

When, later, then he endows her with her own wings, and gives her a password, she wonders not, confusion and question in the language of their acquaintance no longer, but knowledge tacit as if by telepathy. It is a thing she does not yet know will be as intimate to her as the arm that wraps around him – and herself – for safety.

He would have such a tattoo, she thought to herself, slipping into bed some few nights after that first one. Wings so wide she must focus with might to see their full span. The confidence with which he brushed on the waves, parting them, swooping up in flight, she could have witnessed his silhouette beautiful against the moon had she been observing his flight from down below, while all along her hand he held so carefully, so gently onto his chest, so assuredly that whatever fear for her safety she might've harboured, whatever doubt she must've had of his intentions, were banished as soon as they reared their heads.

—

Before he came, Melinda had been a woman of her own.

At some point in her life, she had found herself positioned at the edge of the world, far-flung from the centre, of her own doing this, and that of others, which inevitably, in some warped sense, led back to hers. She had wound up with nothing but herself, alone and wanting, stymied.

She had tried to relegate to unimportance the brutality of the world around her. It was inescapable. That ugly feeling of feeling unwanted. She had taken it all too personally, her mind sucking like a sponge the language of the brutes, whether she understood it or not, though the former was truer, more real than the latter. The community of others she had relied on had started falling away here, there, here, never there again. She was too much, they said, just too much.

Eventually, the centre became a place not easily reachable by the clamour of her hands, let alone the push of her body, the very body that she believed hindered her from there. Where she stood, the world would not come to meet her. On television she saw the news; from the papers, she read the same; in the movies the stories screamed back.

In this time, the landscapes of her dreams had been coloured with muted tinges of longing, an insistent angst that haunted her days, harbouring feelings of flailing belonging. For her, those images coalesced into pictures of her teetering on the precipice of life and death, that sharp edge of a dangerous blade that'd almost toppled her over once.

Later, years later in her pursuit of freedom from this cage she couldn't find her way out of – dropped in her mind a ruinous realisation, for going either ended up with her undone. Either she lived and defied the inescapable feeling that *she did not belong* and should take herself out “or”. she went elsewhere entirely. Both finally ended up becoming the same thing. The only feasible possibility was the most ridiculous: she could stay here and fight it out.

So she began to contemplate the *leaving*, so often was this at the fore of her thoughts that she became obsessive. The question had at first was *how*. Steeling herself against her dying's uselessness, the question slowly morphed into a defiant *why*.

In this wicked tussle, out came who the victor?

—

She *wasn't* the problem; it was the other way around. That, at least, for some time, was enough. If the world wouldn't meet her where she was, she would chase the world.

The woman that she was, the kind of woman that other women didn't want in their midst: queer, unnatural. Since Melinda was a child, she had known, so deep a divine knowledge she knew not whence from it came – would not share it with anybody for she understood, from observation and experience the ramifications of such speak, what they would do to her – but held on to its sustenance, built a wall around her heart by its steely, unwavering assurance, that nothing was ever wrong with her from the go.

That, too, was enough.

—

That first night with him—

She could go, leave and never come back. Was it possible that she *could* never come back?

Upon pondering this inviting coming above her bed, inviting her as it stirs out of sleep – it could be the coming true of dreams! – Melinda is *curious*, reluctance, questions eating at the folding seams of that eagerness, such ambivalence as she had never encountered, never cradled in her hands like the wavering certainty – here today, gone tomorrow – she had before of her position in the thick of things; and above all, of who she really was, *that* certainty not even god could question with all god's might and mighty cleverness and knowing

.

'Where? Take me away to where?'

'Trust me,' came his word.

Before the budding trust, that would later become apparent, comes reluctance. *Is that what she wants to call it? Is it more than that?* Slowly she yields, withholding still, sceptical. *What bad could come of it?*

She extends her right hand.

It is first from the touch of his fingers between hers, the long, tapering phalanges boasting a quietness borne of his soul, a tranquillity she is yet to discover, a duality that lived in one—

It is a silence that tells of storms long gone wild adventure many years in the morrow, that she feels alive, the doubt rears its head again—

—Why had she given him her hand? She beats it down and closes her eyes. The hot and coldness of his fingers, existences in the extremes, in-between and nowhere at all, grey, hazy, inducing in her an ease she had hitherto yet to know, a vast calmness in her soul that almost transforms her. In time, it will.

She acquiesces – relaxes – and basks in the newly-acquired knowledge that everything has now changed. For all she can fathom, all understanding leans that way.

she breathes...or at least, she thinks she does, balks suddenly, draws her hand back.

‘You don’t want to go?’

The answer is in her eyes rather than her voice.

She wipes the wretched tear from her eye, wrapped in melancholy, as clear as fresh spring water. That teardrop is only a microcosm of a much larger thing, dripping from the waters she had always felt engulfing her, a raging sea, at turns calm, mirroring both what lived within and what without, the magnitude of its depths remaining knowledge still unknown to her though she plunged – it had been so long, wallowing in its depths, rarely coming up for breath, like a whale in the deep. Searching, a ploy of her mind’s own – she would surmise shortly after that first night, after she had received his gifts – to keep her afloat lest she drown and perish forever.

It is better to look, to search, even to languish than to throw one’s hands up in the air, altogether collapse onto one’s knees and be consumed. Life was worth more than that. It was *within* her, not without. The melancholy that had laced her days shaped itself around the salty water dripping from her eyes. It must have come from somewhere. But it *would* end somewhere.

Surely, somewhere, it had to end.

Where were they going?

‘Trust me,’ he says again.

Hand in hand.

Destination?

‘Let’s go.’ He smiles, wings expanding.

—

Not only does she hear him now, but sees him. By the flutter of her eyes drifting off, he is there.

—

Never in her dreams had Melinda traversed a land like this. A place as vast as it is dwarfish. She thinks she can see its horizons reaching near, that she need only stretch her hand to explore its ends, touch its quiet vastness, almost sublime, still is its atmosphere’s ambivalence. A pristine world, awash with hot and cold springs, lakes deep and naked as lucid dreams, quiet waterfalls with their sprays of cool water.

It *is* a dwarf planet, ringed – *embellished*, she thinks of it – with a crescent moon at the time of their arrival.

She takes a deep breath. Exhales. Turns her

head this and that way. She feels the boast of the quietness of his fingers intertwined with hers and catches a glimpse of a smile across his lips. From here, it feels as though she is walking on air, still as concrete and familiar as the ground beneath her feet from back where she comes. She sees clearly the blue, the green and white of her home planet across, the glittering litter of Africa's lights.

From her belly rises a wave untamed of a feeling of fullness, a satisfaction as at the realisation of dreams.

Melinda was disillusioned when she first learned of the murder of a woman like herself in Cape Town back when she was a teenager. This brought with it a dread for the days that awaited her living, a dread that deepened with time into a resentment she couldn't yet name.

This country had been notorious for killing its own children. For decades. What gave them the right to decide who was *right* and who not? The callousness with which those who lived outside of the woman-man binary – who got to have a say? Those who simply sought to live their lives had the door shut on them, were spoken about and decided for by people who hadn't a smidge of what it meant to be this *queer thing* they so despised. It wasn't callousness then; it was something far more sinister, far more dangerous: the beliefs of stupid people in large numbers.

Devoid of the love they so spoke of, they unsheathed their knives, cocked their guns, and with righteousness in their hearts, pointed at the stain in their society. It was such puzzling irony. Doing it for love: love of the people, love of their children, of themselves, the nation, humanity. Hadn't this country done exactly that just under twenty years ago, before the new flag was finally hoisted?

The more of these stories she learned, the deeper her dread became, and that resentment bred fear, which grew so heavy for so long that she began to forget the heaviness, became accustomed to walking in shadows. They wouldn't understand her back where she came from. In a township like hers, she knew what happened to people like her. She continued wearing the pants she so hated, hushed the yearning for the skirts and colourful shirts she wanted to wear. Growing her hair began to be inconceivable even as just an idea. She turned up the macho in her walk.

Somewhere else, somewhere away from here, she would lose all these things, assimilate others and begin the excavation of her true self once again from all that heap she'd buried herself in. Somewhere, there might be home. And it did, eventually. University was a saving grace.

But once one knows fear for so long, it takes just as long to rid oneself of it. and she cowered, took longer than she wanted to, and here she was, heart wallowing in longing of a life that *could*, and, my god!, it seemed so far from her plucking! She plodded on year in and out, taking small steps along the way, the hair this time, the clothes another time (and wardrobes demand attention and time), there was a contemplation about therapy at another point, but this she never really saw through. And time waits for nobody, by the time she reached thirty, she still found herself wanting.

Somewhere along the way in those days before she decided to *do* something, make changes, Loneliness – a mature and assured version of the one she had known in her growing up – knocked on her door. She contemplated jumping out of the window before allowing it in, that tenth-floor window that looked out onto a sprawling view of Cape Town and gave a sneak peek of the university avenue outside

the building, with the swaying trees from the corner of her eye.

Undeterred, Loneliness morphed into its air-self and blew into the room through the thin gap between the door and the floor, rose in a whirl of grey smoke, assumed its surly, unyielding persona, smiled, happy to have survived, and said:

Hello, again, sweet girl!

It stayed. Befriended her and promised never to leave again, laughing until its last tooth showed at her desperate attempts to rid herself of it.

You called me here, sweet girl, It said.

No, I did not, she cried.

Oh, but you did. It sat on the chair by her study desk next to her bed, folded its legs, leaned in and peeled the sheets from her face, smirking at her tears. *Am, poor thing. Look at yourself.* It wiped her face gently with the back of a finger and licked it afterwards. Sweet.

Go. I don't want you here. I never asked you here. Please go!

Oh, but you did. That toothy laugh again, an irksome chortle.

Go away, she screamed.

Not so easy, now, It shook its head, rolling Its eyes. *And watch how you talk to me, I might add, or I may just stay here forever, for godsake. Both you and I know neither of us wants that, mostly me.* It groaned. A deep breath. *Anyway. So, you—*

No, you won't!

Oh, but I could.

No, you could not!

I might just. It smiled, not a very looksome smile.

Oh, dear God!

Loneliness laughed again. *You will have to do better than that, sweet girl.* It pulled the sheets further down her torso and watched her sit up on the bed with the bedding folding upon itself on her lap. She sat there like one anticipating a good serving of a delicious breakfast in bed. The meaning of that word was not to serve her in this case, only It. Served her everything she never wanted.

Get up, sweet girl, It said. *Forgive me my insolence, but I really do not enjoy you, especially when you are like this. You're not like the others, you know. Something quite unsuited about you I can't put my finger on. Almost as if I should not be with you. Why ever did you call me here? Which makes you unpalatable, again, please, if I am brash, do say, but why do you keep me around?* It breathed out, *I am bored, honest to the truth. I have better things to do with my time, if you care. Better company to keep.*

Melinda was quiet.

Like I said: better company to keep.

Still no word from her. Then: But no one wants me out there. I would go, she said, but—
Oh, please, it rolled its eyes. *Do shut up.* Loneliness squeezed its eyes with thumb and forefinger, sighing. *Ugh! If I could kill for the number of times I have heard that!* It stood up, walked about as if anguishing, slapped Its thigh. *When will you start living, Melinda? Really? And maybe then you can stop bothering me so much!*

There is no place for people like me here. You should know that.

This again! Yes, woe is you. Blah blah! Ugh! But the world is not as terrible as you think it is, you know.

Actually

What about all the people who love you? And whom you love? I know you're capable of that, at least.

Do they?

How else will you know?

But, if

Well, it shrugged. According to... what you know? Yes, yes, I know. Many times I have heard that one before. Loneliness yawned for a long moment, tears squeezing out of its eyes, which were bleary and had taken on a haemorrhagic red when at last the yawn ended. I should send someone your way one of these days, don't you think? Question is, sweet girl: are you going to stay and rot here, or are you going to get up and live? Live your life?

—

Now that she was here, the stone was starting to chip, chip, chip away and her heart could beat easy and free as the flight she had taken to this place, the fear within seeping out of her skin with the hate she had held close to her chest. She would glow like the stars above, that ancient glow of a million years ago.

She couldn't believe that it was happening to her. The man with the horse tattoo next to her. Standing together in that quietness. Hand in hand, in their own world, in their own time, living in the rise of midnight.

Crescent moon and waterfalls. Hot and cold springs. Starry black blanket of space up there, the swirl of the Milky Way and the dazzling colours of distant nebulae.

How could it all be contained in this one little body?

'That's just the way it is,' he told her. 'Don't you worry about that. You'll know all you'll have to know in due time. For now, come with me.'

'Where exa—? We left the planet long ago.' She said it out loud for the first time and the truth of it sank into her like a breath of life: 'In this strange place that feels so much like home.'

'I am taking you to *your* place of refuge, Mel. Yours.'

She smiled, then, at the beautiful inflection of his words. Her name, there, somewhere there.

She noticed how his teeth gleamed when he spoke, how his wings fluttered softly when he smiled. On his forehead protruded two equidistant bumps like loci for muted horns. He wasn't a creature like any before known to her, he who'd jumped out of — into? — a dreamer's dream in the night to blunt the knife that sickled through her withering soul, taking with it what remained of the ties that kept her together.

But — why now?

Dwell not there. What mattered was that he had come. It didn't matter to her that it had to be some kind of saviour who came — the world was too preoccupied with itself to solve its own problems. It kept making them worse instead, making more of them, and those even the worser. It mattered not, too, that it was a *he*, for later, much later, Melinda would learn that he stood on the other end of the spectrum from her, yet the language referring to both of them would have been similar back where she came.

She wouldn't ask him about his *only coming now*, wouldn't dare taint their Eastward walk where the tallest waterfalls flowed, moving with the pace of snails and their billowing clothes swept the white ground, white as if carpeted by snow. They were barefoot, no need for shoes here, nature's protection certain against all that threatened.

'What is this place?'

'Devil's Pool.' He produced the answer readily as if he had been anticipating her question.

'No, I mean this place,' she indicated a circle of the space with her hand.

'Where did I just say I was taking you?'

She looked at him as though he had asked the strangest question, an inquisitive smile growing on her face.

'This is it, Mel,' he extended a sweeping hand in front of her. '*This place* is called ML57821. But you can call it whatever you like. It is yours. It was once an uninhabitable rock that just floated in our solar system' – she noted the inclusive pronoun – 'but Monáe fixed it up for you, made sure it stayed in a good revolution on this orbit, had water and all that supports life in your world. Your place until you are ready for the Sun.'

'Oh,' barely an octave above a whisper.
The what?

He laughed then.

Even if he had forgotten, Monáe the Mother would have whispered it to him from that distant star where the sustenance of life originates, where she sat on her gleaming throne, watching them. She was the one who had dreamt him up and had him for a son,

cradled him in the nest of her arms and stayed with him in his dreams.

'Devil's Pool,' she ruminated on the name, satisfied with the lettered-numbered name of the place, its obvious meaning. But this Devil's Pool? It came from another extreme. Came now the question of how he knew her name.

'I knew you long before you knew me. Like Monáe knew me long before I knew myself. You think I would have met you like this, brought you here if I did not know you?'

'What is your name?'

He laughed at the perplexed look on her face.

'HT,' he said.

'Eish-Tee?'

'Yes,' he laughed again. 'Yes, you can say that.'

'What does it mean? What does Eish-Tee stand for?'

'Nothing. It's the name she gave me.'

'Who is *she*?' she asked with a curious crease of interest on her forehead.

Their hands parted. She sat down by the running stream, and gazed at the reflection of the swirls of water in his eyes.

He told her the story of his life then. He lived in the Sun with the goddess, she who had inhabited that place since years too many to count or name. He liked calling her She Who Looks After Us by the Grace of Her Generous Hand.

'I am you, and you are me. Only different. And

She is us. Our Mother.'

Following a duel with her sisters – whose contention nor unfolding HT wished now not to elucidate (there was time yet for that) – Monáe had taken residence in Sun. 'All that is in creation comes from her hand and her sisters.' Whom, it turned out, she was still in dispute with – one chose the Moon as her place of residence, and the other, Venus, after who it is named. HT lived on the Sun with his mother, the goddess.

'She sees all, you know. She knows.'

All the prayers that Melinda had uttered and whispered with her heart had been heard by her, HT said. Sometimes he would tell her when someone on Earth had said a prayer that was so stupidly funny that they laughed so hard, nuclear fissions doubled. Sometimes, she would tell him about a prayer so sorrowful that their tears washed over the Milky Way. There were those too that she wouldn't tell him about, those too sacred, too personal to share. He had to force himself to give up guessing what they could have been, or could have been about.

She had known Melinda since she was a child. Knew that this day would one day come.

'It is night now.'

'No matter.'

And though Melinda had thought herself alone, she wasn't. As he told her, she came to really understand it; the thoughts and fantasies about her un-aloneness living before her eyes. Just as she had known that people like her existed long before her time, he didn't need her to say it to her, but he was doing so now. That her generation had all sorts of names for

this and people; they complicated the simplest things and simplified the complicated. Why did they do that?

Melinda could only shrug.

'Listen,' he said now, and gently reached for her hand. 'I must go. The time is nearing the hour of waking in your world, and I must let you go. I have said and showed you as much as I could and was asked to. It is up to you to know what you do with it.'

She wouldn't have him go yet. This constituted so much of what she wanted. She could stay. Bring people. So many people. She knew in her heart of hearts that she would never be alone here. Would never, ever have to live as she had before. Why show her, give all this to leave her so briefly afterward? What point was there in it?

'You keep forgetting one important detail here: this is yours. I have told that twice now. Remember that.' And just as she was about to speak, he placed a finger over his own lips. 'Do as you wish. You and I are not done, however. We will be meeting again, Melinda. Again and again. You are yet to know me and Mother very well. I must go now.'

—

Melinda awoke with a jolt. Sitting up with such haste in her bed, in a perfect right angle, from her mouth out came his name: 'HT! HT!'

The first thing she noticed was the dawn, which further confirmed she had indeed been dreaming. 'Oh God, oh my God,' through stunned lips, touching, lightly smacking them, one finger, two fingers, her eyes looking around the room with a searching quickness, confirmed, disappointingly, her the only occupant. The dream was too vivid, too real

to believe now what her eyes showed her. Through the thinness of the curtain the bright redness of the summer dawn began to bloom upon the dull greyness of the sky outside, transformed the darkness of the room, and with it came like an explosion the feeling that she was not of this world anymore, woken up in it as she did. For the first time in years, she could hear the soft thuds of her heart beating in her ears. For the first time in years, the woman awoke a free woman, knowing in her now-easier heart and mind that there was a place for her in the World.

Why had she ever doubted that?

She touched between her legs and her fingers confirmed she was still as she had been the day before. But the feeling she had felt upon her waking remained. Melinda smiled. *There are many ways to exist as one.*

But did she have to dream it for it to be true?

Her shoulders were lighter than she'd first expected. What with the exertion from the wings? The certainty that she had woken up in a world that did not want her, sank in her, still, just as the buoyant feeling that came from the knowledge that she had found her freedom, had been given to her by the mercy of a goddess, an ancestor, hitherto unknown to her and a man unlike any she had ever met, with a leaping horse tattoo on his neck, in full gallop like the man's dancing upon the vastness of the sky as the light shimmered in the distance, so full of life, bobbing as a child might on a loving mother's bobbing knee, and she smiled, resting in the knowledge of the sanctuary she had been given, a gift no one had ever dared give her, the peace of an esoteric knowledge, where she knew with a knowledge that only the gods must possess, that nothing, *nothing*, nothing at all could ever taint it. All she had to do was live. Live her life *damnit!* so fully that

her past self would be conflicted whether to be proud or jealous of her.

And if it meant dreaming it up for it to be true, well, then, so be it.

Contributors' Bios

Ema Babikwa (he/him) is a writer based in Kampala. He is editor for fiction at Isele Magazine and he writes experimental and speculative fiction alongside poetry.

Jeric (she/her) is a Ghanaian activist.

The hardest thing I've always found difficult to write is myself. But if you're asking, **Efe (they/them)** is non-binary intersex person. Irony right. A single parent to two beautiful human beings. I'm a nurse studying to become a PA. My whole existence is dedicated to my baby, my parents and helping queer people understand that we deserve to exist, because we are the most priceless piece of art the creator made. Because we're human. I work with a few organisations, Rightify, JustRight Ghana and Nurse Alliance. I'm also passionate about helping intersex people get the right healthcare in a positive environment. Poetry on the other hand is my therapy. My escape from reality as well as my confessions. It is where I can say everything and nothing, and you'll still agree with me. So when you ask me about myself, I'll say Efe is a human, who enjoys being human.

AB (he/him) counts Aja Monet and Akwaeke Emezi amongst his influences. He dreams of becoming a surrealist blues poet, writer, and restaurant entrepreneur.

Mhembeuter Jeremiah Orhemba (he/him) is Tiv and Nigerian. When he's not fiddling at a short story requiring more time than he negotiated for, he is resurrecting his memories and ponderings onto the page, some of which have taken root beyond mere drafts in Lolwe, Tahoma Literary Review, Chestnut Review, with another forthcoming in Evergreen Review. Beyond the page, he has served as Custodian for The Writers' Community at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, and as Assistant Editor for The Muse Journal No. 51. Mhembeuter is an alumnus of the Iceland Writers' Retreat as a grant winner, as well as the 2024 Voodoonauts and CANEX Writers' Workshops, where he studied under writers including Zukiswa Wanner, Hawa Jande Golakai, Richard Ali, and Eghosa Imasuen. His writing has been recognized by the SEVHAGE Prize for Creative Non-Fiction and the ALITFEST Short Story Prize. He is fiddling with what might become his first novel.

Chidera (he/him) is an emerging writer whose work explores themes of equality, identity, and social justice. Through art, he seeks to amplify overlooked voices and examine the complexities of the human experience with honesty and compassion. Although new to publishing, Chidera is committed to using storytelling as a means of fostering empathy, challenging prejudice, and inspiring meaningful conversations.

Benjamin Cyril Arthur (he/him) is a queer Ghanaian writer who is the recipient of the 2025 Global Voices Scholarship at the University of East Anglia, the emerging voices scholar for the Geneva Writers Group Conference 2025 and was the winner of the 2020 Samira Bawumia Literary Award in Ghana. His short stories have appeared in Lolwe, Brittle Paper, Flametree Press, Tampered Press, Lounloun journal, and many others. He is currently finishing his MA In Creative Writing at University of East Anglia and working on his debut novel.

Anathi Jongilanga (he/him) is a writer from Ngqeleni, South Africa. His work appears at Transition, Agbowó, Lolwe, Tahoma Literary Review, The Kalahari Review and elsewhere. He is the editor of The Blood Beats Series, a series of anthologies of African short fiction: 'Go the Way Your Blood Beats' (2019) and 'Something in the Water' (2022), both published at Brittle Paper. He lives and works as a teacher in Johannesburg.

2-gay-2-furious is a writer based in Ghana whose work focuses on culture, film, music, philosophy, and contemporary questions of masculinity and identity. His essays draw connections between popular culture and critical theory, exploring how desire, technology, politics, and aesthetics shape modern life. He has written on topics ranging from experimental cinema and digital music to bodybuilding, pharmaceuticals, and online subcultures, combining close cultural analysis with broader philosophical inquiry.

Influenced by traditions in psychoanalysis, postcolonial thought, and media theory, 2-gay-2-furious is particularly interested in the ways bodies, images, and myths are produced and circulated in contemporary society. His work often moves between academic discourse and accessible cultural criticism, seeking to uncover unexpected relationships between seemingly unrelated subjects.

Alongside criticism, he writes speculative fiction and essays that explore alternative political, social, and symbolic worlds. His current projects examine masculinity, desire, and the body in an era increasingly shaped by technology, consumption, and global cultural exchange.

Essel: My work serves as a visual dialogue between queerness in Ghana, familial relationships, and cultural histories. I am fascinated by the interplay of memory and absence. The “ghosts” of what we leave behind and what we live with. My photography navigates existence in Ghana’s shifting social climate, exploring how our histories are both illuminated and obscured. Central to my practice is the act of archiving and preservation. I document to create a safe space for younger queer identities and also serve as validation of queer existence.

Y.K. Barima (he/him) is a Ghanaian writer.

White Dove is a Ghanaian poet.

BOAHEMAA is a Ghanaian creative non fiction writer, feminist organiser, and advocate whose work sits at the intersection of digital culture, gender justice, and queer storytelling. Working across writing, program coordination, and creative strategy, she builds narratives and spaces that centre marginalised voices particularly queer, Black, and young women across Africa.

Baahwa is a Ghanaian multidisciplinary artist and visual activist who combines photography with archival practice and installation to explore beauty and the nuances of relationships that shape individual and collective identities. Her artistic practice is rooted in a commitment to humanize and reclaim narratives that have been silenced or mythified.

Baahwa’s works have been shown internationally at exhibitions such as Bloom By The Hearth (Accra, 2025), What If We Love And Protect Each Other (Kumasi, 2025), I See Everything You Can Be (Accra,

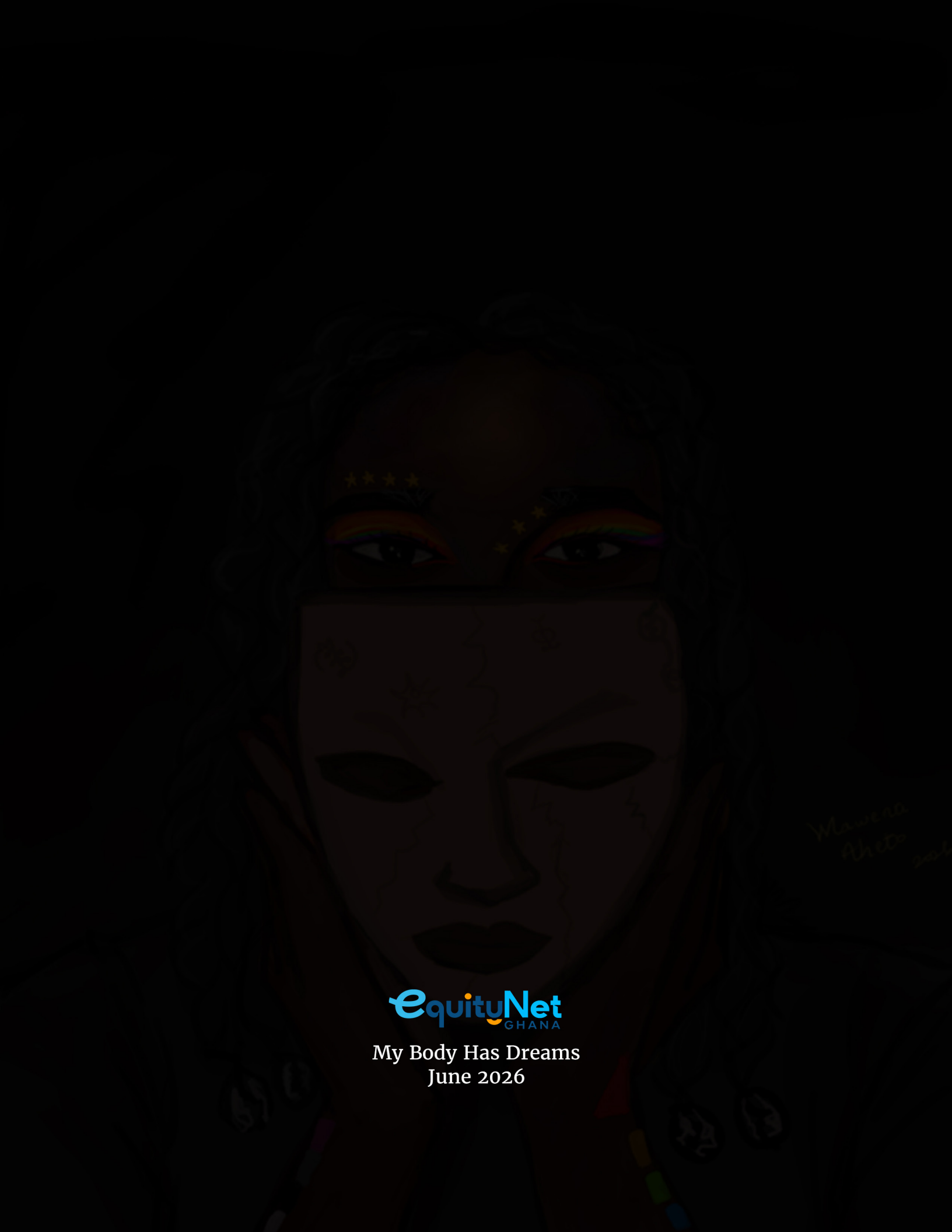
2024), *Voice, Power & Soul* (Accra, 2024), and *Ɔsa Nti* (Frankfurt, 2023). She is a ZK/U Residency fellow (2026), Va-Bene Scholarship and Mentorship Residency Abroad (VS-MRA) recipient (2026), alumnus of perfocraZe International Artist Residency, Kumasi (2025) and Africa Prime Initiative (API) Grant recipient (2024).

Michael Dame is a writer and poet based in Accra, Ghana. His work explores self-alienation and the complex patterns of avoidance it can create; he explores the ways a person learns to step back from intimacy, from belonging, and most importantly, from themselves, often as a form of protection that outlives its purpose. Writing in poetry and lyric essay, he traces what the journey away from oneself must be like, and what it might take to find the way back.

P.K. Nimako (he/him) writes about queer Accra—its intersections, nuances and resilience. Think documenting survival but make it literary. He loves to watch anime and TV series.

Abasi-maenyin Esebre is a Nigerian writer, historian and auteur.

Mawena Aheto (she/her) is a Ghanaian photographer and artist.



Mawena
Ahetu



My Body Has Dreams
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