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LIBRETTO Magazine

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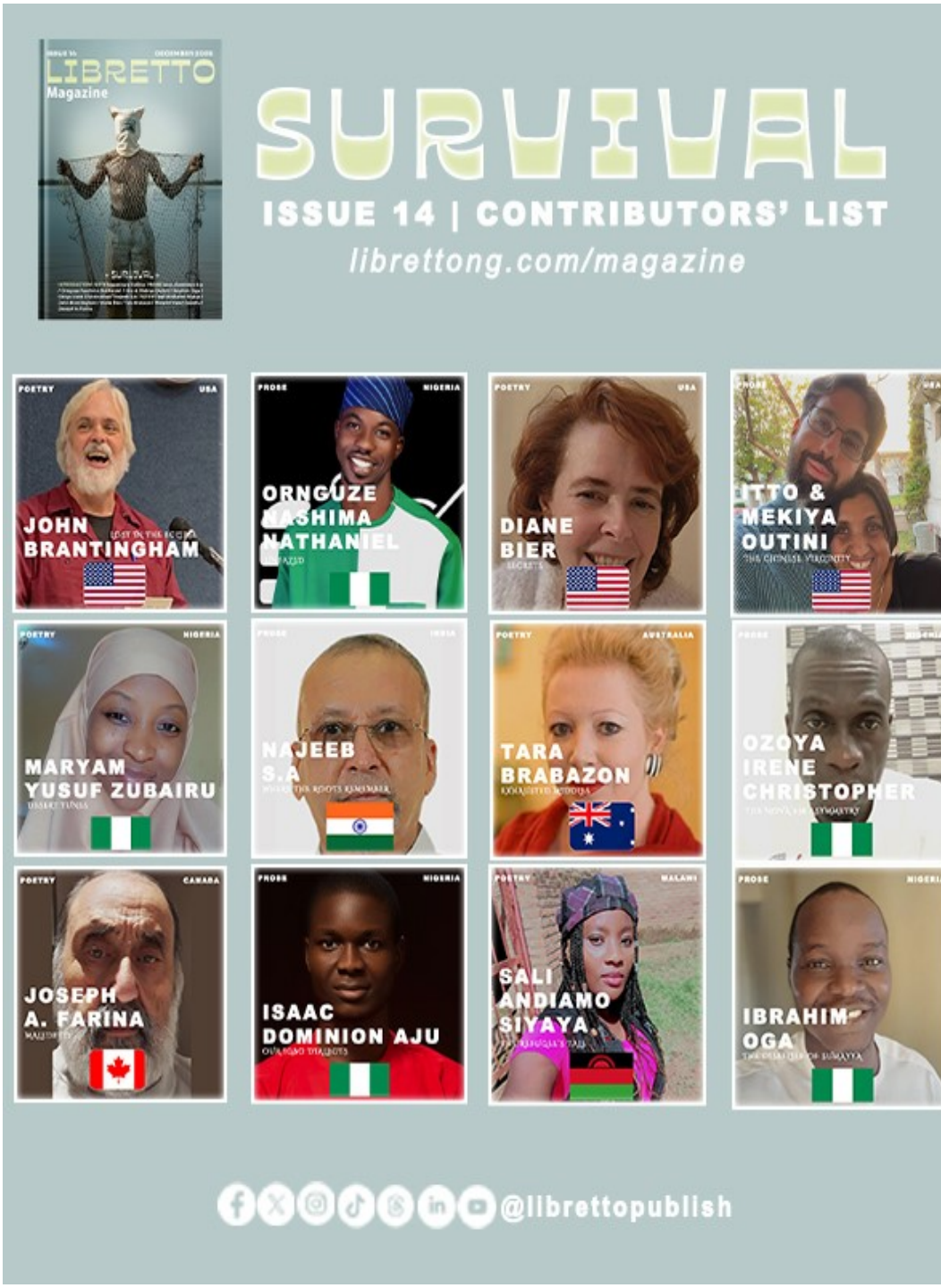

List of Works

December 2025 Issue
Issue 14: Survival

Editor's Note

Welcome to Issue 14 of Libretto Magazine, an issue shaped by endurance, voice, and the quiet courage of those who continue to write through difficulty. Titled Survival, this edition stands as one of our most compelling and thoughtfully curated issues to date.

In this issue, we are proud to present the works of twelve remarkable writers and poets whose creative visions speak directly to the theme at hand. The issue features six prose pieces and six poems, each distinct in style, tone, and perspective, yet united by a shared interrogation of what it means to persist emotionally, socially, culturally, and spiritually.

The prose selections navigate lived realities with honesty and depth, exploring survival as resistance, memory, hope, and renewal. The poems, on the other hand, distill survival into lyrical moments sometimes tender, sometimes raw reminding us that poetry often carries what cannot be said plainly. Together, these works create a rich balance, allowing narrative and lyric to converse across pages.

Issue 14 is a wonderful issue not only because of its thematic strength, but because of the courage and clarity of its contributors. Each writer and poet featured here brings a necessary voice, proving once again that literature remains one of our most enduring tools for understanding ourselves and the world around us.

As you turn these pages, we invite you to read slowly, reflect deeply, and recognize fragments of your own survival mirrored in these works. This issue is both a testament and a celebration of creativity, resilience, and the enduring power of the written word.

— Nosakhare Collins
Editor-in-chief | Publisher,
Libretto Magazine.

Lost in the Eclipse

John Brantingham

You get an eclipse in April, the whole
of the sun gone for a little while, the earth
turned to night right here and you look and watch
and think about how you are very small
in this universe and how comforting
that is. How painful, how anxiety
driven it would be to have everything be
about you. You feel your world softening.
What a respite from ego you have
in the dark of the eclipse, blocked from light.
How you wish you could take this feeling
with you everywhere. Just up and leave
your identity and be a creature in the night,
to be an animal just floating, dreaming.

John Brantingham is currently and always thinking about radical wonder. He is a New York State Council on the Arts Grant Recipient for 2024, and he was Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks' first poet laureate. His work has been in hundreds of magazines and The Best Small Fictions 2016 and 2022. He has twenty-two books of poetry, nonfiction, and fiction.

UNFAZED

Ornguze Nashima Nathaniel

You wake up to the sound of a generator humming outside your back window. It is not yours. Your own generator stopped working last week, and the electrician you called has been "on his way" ever since. When you decide to check at his workshop, you find out he is gone. He is truly *gone* because a boy you meet tells you Mr Electrician had left for his village due to the lack of money to renew his shop and house rents. And in the village, he had been killed by herders in a farmers-herders clash. *He is really gone*. Yes! But he is free from Nigeria's prison. Then, farmers had no issues; they farmed freely and slept peacefully. Today's case is sordid. Absurd. Barbaric. Drunken cows raid farms and eat the crops like Indomie noodles. And when the farmers fuss, their throats are slit and homes are given the baptism of fire by marauding herdsmen.

You check your phone. The battery power is red. But there is no electricity. No fuel. No hope. There was a time the situation was similarly bad but better. You are thinking of going to recharge in your neighbour's room. But then, his tired generator coughs and dies like the economy of the nation. *Phew*!

Outside, the street is awake, but no one seems truly alive. A mother drags her son towards a school that may or may not have teachers today. Last week, the teachers had demonstrated against the drought of salaries. The kiosk woman by the junction arranges loaves of bread with the same tired hands she uses to fan herself through the night's heat. A few yards away from her, the town's marquee *Mai Shai*, a white *kufi* on his head, is complaining about the cost of eggs to one of his Muslim brothers. ". . .dis used to be seven pipti. Now it is tiri tauzen," he is saying. His English amuses you, but you know he is not lying.

Things have changed, drastically.

A yellow *danfo* screeches past, a conductor hanging from the door, shouting the names of places that sound like promises but mean nothing to you.

You step out proper, joining the slow procession of the indifferent. A beggar taps your elbow at the junction, rubs his belly, and takes his hand to his mouth; you ignore him. You are not wicked, just exhausted and helpless. As a matter of fact, you are as broke as the beggar.

You cross the road, dodging okadas and potholes like a game you never wanted to play. Someone is arguing with a policeman at the checkpoint ahead. The officer slaps him. The man protests. But you don't stop. You have seen this scene too many times. Then, you used to get angry when you saw injustice. You will argue, protest, and even post your outrage online. You had believed it mattered. Does it matter now? You have been a victim. Your case had even been pathetic. The policeman had stopped you and asked you to bring your phone for a search. Why? You were a *yahoo boy*. No. You looked like a yahoo boy. When you protested, he slapped you across the face. The slap had stayed with you for weeks.

You turn into the street leading to Hub House. Even from such a distance, you can see the neon sign of your workplace shining in the dull light of the misty morning. The name of the street is Freedom Way. (But ten innocent protesters were shot dead on this street a month ago. Their only offence was coming out to protest against police brutality and other governmental failures.) By the side of the street—not too deep into it!—stands a colourful, high-vis campaign banner of a politician. His political moniker is Mr Project and his four fingers on each hand are up in the air. On the banner, there are words like *honesty*, *accountability*, and *transparency*. "Old story," you say to yourself and begin to fold the legs of your trousers up to your shins to save them from the kisses of mud. There are craters of puddles here and there. You heave a sigh of capitulation and begin to sidestep puddles.

At work, the internet is slower than before, the boss is absent, and your salary remains a rumour. You scroll through the news—a senator just bought a mansion in Dubai. A governor has taken his dog to Germany for medical checkup. Another factory has shut down. There are plans to build the biggest church in the world to replace the dead factory. ASUU and doctors are threatening to embark on an indefinite

strike. Herders have killed twenty people in a suburban close to the town you are resident. You drop your phone to give time to the wall television. Someone in government is speaking of hope, but even the TV screen looks unconvinced.

Evening comes. You use the tip a customer had given you to take a bus home, squeezed between bodies that smell of frustration. Lagos traffic reminds you that time is not yours. A man beside you is talking about leaving the country, but you actually know he won't. He thinks the man in power is a *taxman*, eating fat from the sweat of an impoverished populace.

"It is better to die than remain in this country," Mr I-Want-To-Leave-The-Country says in response to a fellow passenger who prefers death to living in an economically and politically deformed nation.

"Do not say that," a woman in the back row says. "Once there is life, there is hope."

"You are right," he agrees with her for the sake of peace.

The driver negotiates a bend in the road that the bus almost skids, and passengers are tossed in their seats, hitting their heads on the roof and sides of the bus. There are religious voices in the air. Each passenger is covering the bus and the road with the blood of whatever they worship and believe in. The moment the bus settles, the passengers snap out of their prayerful trance and burst into fierce rage. Is the driver trying to kill them?

"Did anybody give you money to kill us?" someone asks.

"I tink sey to die better pass," the driver jokes.

The streets are dark when you arrive, but no one is afraid. Fear is for those who have options.

You enter your room, light a candle, and stare at the inert, dusty ceiling fan. Outside, the nation breathes, unfazed, unmoved. Indifferent, just like you.

Ornguze Nashima Nathaniel, also known as ONN, is a Nigerian writer from Benue State. He writes in his self-coined literary style called Acheyinka, which is a style that centres on the dynamic use of language, combining the clarity and accessibility of Chinua Achebe's prose with the poetic richness, strangeness, and symbolic depth that characterise Wole Soyinka's writing. His short story "Emerencia" won the 2024 Author Zigo Prize. He was the runner-up in the 2023 ANA Short Story Prize for Children's Literature, and was shortlisted and longlisted for the DKA Short Story Prize and the Quramo Writers' Prize, all in 2024, respectively. He also won the Publisher's Choice Award in the 2025 July leg of the Publish'd Afrika Short Story Competition. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in Lọ̀unlọ́un Journal, Pawners Paper Magazine, Afrocritik, Writers Space Africa, Asemana Magazine, and elsewhere. He is the author of "Profiles: The People I Crossed," a compelling memoir-in-profiles published in 2025. When he is not writing, he watches great films and listens to good music.

SECRETS

Diane Bier

For years my secret kept like a good boy scout.
He's a talker. Drugs, drink kept me quiet. Grief filled.

Talked me into showing my scarred heart.
For money. Fed me beer and gin. Grooming begins.

Playing "Truth and Drink" with gin shots at ten.
Alcohol with my cop friend, I'm flying high.

Alcohol and a badge raped me.
At twelve, I was screaming stop—stop—stop.

Man-child incited. When does the screaming stop?
Barred from preying on one more child. Cop screamed—stop.

Stabbed non-stop. Blood red rage drips on the floorboards.
Relived the anguish in court—tears tumbling like a child.

Courtroom wept and applauded. Served my time.
For years my secret kept like a good boy scout.

MD Bier is a binge reader who always has a book or camera in hand. Her writing reflects her passion for social change and social issues. She is an MFA candidate at William Paterson University, participates in several writing communities where she writes and studies. Her work has been published in various literary journals. MD Bier resides in NJ with her family and dog where she enjoys gardening and walking.

The Chinese Virginity

Atto & Mekiya Outini

Abdulillah was away on business for the weekend, so I finally did what I'd been thinking of for some time: I called Soumaya and asked if she would come and stay.

Up to that point, my life had been divided neatly into thirds: first my fifteen years of innocence, which Hamid, the traveling musician, had cut short beside the spring; then those three grinding decades in the brothel, which felt like a bad dream; and then, finally, my beautiful life with Abdulillah and his sons. Buzzing Soumaya in, the feelings that I'd felt with Hamid echoed in my bones—transgression and exhilaration. Never before had I permitted any comingling between these episodes. But I reminded myself, Soumaya was no mere vestige of the brothel years. She was the reason I was where I was.

"My God!" she exclaimed, hoisting her little suitcase over the threshold. "*This* is where you live?"

She smelled just as I remembered: vanilla, sandalwood, and labdanum.

"When I'm in Rabat," I said. "He's got another in Tangier. And one in Casa. Oh, and one in Marrakesh."

Didn't she think me worthy of these luxuries? I wondered vaguely, shutting the door and leading her past the kitchenette, where a servant was fixing drinks, and down the steps into the sunken sitting room. She was the one who'd helped me get them, wasn't she?

"This husband of yours," said Soumaya, leaving her suitcase and making a circuit of the living room, examining the potted plants, the hand-stitched covers on the cushions, and the oil paintings on the walls, "is the old man you met in that coffee shop?"

"The very same."

"What was he doing in a coffee shop, anyway?"

"Why," I said, "it's obvious, isn't it? He was drinking coffee!"

Something was making it rather difficult for me to take her seriously, though what it was, I couldn't say. She was dressed well enough, in a midnight blue kaftan with elegant gold embroidery along the seams, and her heels were showing off her tightrope walker's poise, but her usual gravitas was…well…simply missing. Maybe it was all the images swirling in my head, of her in compromising poses, emitting those exquisite little grunts and moans we'd practiced day and night till we'd achieved perfection, suddenly set against a new and less flattering backdrop, where they were no longer proxies for talent, authority, pride—but, of course, she could look at me and call to mind the same.

"Couldn't he simply have had that coffee made at home?" she wondered aloud, running a finger along a snake plant's frond. It came away gray. I made a mental note to speak to the maid.

"He doesn't like to stay cooped up all the time," I explained. "He likes to be out in the world. He says he learns more about import-export in the coffee shops and hammams than he ever does at conferences. He's a real man of the people."

"I see."

The servant brought the drinks.

"Oh!" she cried, accepting hers. "You remembered!"

It was a Marrakesh Mule. Her favorite. One of her international clients had introduced her to the drink some years ago, and they'd both thought it very funny that he should introduce her to something Moroccan, not the other way around.

"Of course," I said, taking a seat on a divan. "I'll never forget you."

"It's strange." She sat across from me, sipping with evident pleasure while studying me carefully over the glass's rim. "You don't look ten years older. You look ten years younger."

"The salon is like a second home to me," I said. "And he's always buying me creams."

"It's nice to see that one of us is being taken care of. It raises the spirits."

I couldn't think of anything to say to that, so I said, "Yes."

"Your anniversary's coming up, isn't it? You must be planning something special."

"Oh, not really." I waved the question away. "He's the one who

plans things."

"But this is your tenth, Siham."

"You've been counting?"

"Of course," said Soumaya, setting her drink aside as if it didn't matter anymore. "We're all keeping count at the brothel. The girls, you know…well, let me put it this way, Siham. They're not exactly happy for you."

"Oh?"

"They want to see your marriage fail."

"What's the point of that?" I snorted. "It's not as if they'll get my husband if I lose him!"

"That's true," said Soumaya, "but you remember how tedious life gets to be. It's a way to pass the time."

"I suppose."

"They're all hoping that ten years will do it," she said. "They're even placing bets. Oh, no, don't worry—it doesn't mean anything. Half of them had to change theirs after five. I'm just letting you know."

"That's disgusting."

"Don't let it get under your skin," said Soumaya. "It's all just projection, if you ask me. None of them can imagine a man sticking with them for ten years. Or even five. You remember how it is. We're judged by our beauty, but beauty fades. We're judged by our charm, but charm wears off. We're judged by the quality of our deceptions, but now and then, a little truth slips through."

"That's in the brothel," I pointed out.

"Some of them have experience with life, too. But," she added hastily, "you're right to say it's nonsense. None of them knows a thing about your Abdulillah."

* * *

That night, Soumaya slept in the guest room, while I lay awake in the king-size bed that I share with my husband. Even with the servants in their quarters and my old friend snoring soundly down the hall, the house felt uncannily empty. Abdulillah's sons had been small children when we'd married. Whenever he'd gone away on business, I'd looked after them. Now they were in Tunis with him, old enough to join his meetings with the multinationals and learn the tricks of his trade—and here I was, at home, left alone with my thoughts, remembering the tricks of another trade.

I'd never really given the matter much thought, but suddenly it occurred to me that if my husband left me, I would have no way to support myself. My former clients wouldn't take me back. Neither would my former colleagues. I would be helpless and alone.

There, in the darkness, I resolved to do anything, everything, whatever it took, to keep my husband. To prove those jealous gossips wrong.

* * *

In the morning, over a spread of hard-boiled eggs and baghrir and olives and jben cheese at one of my favorite restaurants, I asked Soumaya's advice.

"This anniversary should be really special," I said. "He always treats me. I want to treat him for a change. I just don't know what to do. I've been thinking all night, but I can't seem to come up with anything. Maybe there's something wrong with my imagination."

"Well," said Soumaya, putting a corner of bread in her mouth and gnawing thoughtfully, "there's always what you did last time."

"What last time?"

"When you got married."

My cheeks must've gone red. "I can't do that!" I said. "Are you kidding?"

"Why not?"

"Because he'll know it's Chinese this time."

"Really, Siham." Soumaya snorted. "Twenty years in the brothel, and you still don't know men."

"He might even guess that it was Chinese last time," I said. "The last thing I want is to go and put those questions in his head. It's a risk I can't afford."

"You don't understand," said Soumaya. "You don't know how common it's becoming these days. Remember how we had to come all the way here, to Rabat, just to find you a doctor? Well, now they've got those doctors on every corner in Kenitra. I'm not saying you should go to Kenitra. People will know you in Kenitra. And I wouldn't have it done here, either. I'm just saying, there are options."

"I won't do it," I said. "Options or no options."

"You're missing the point, Siham. It's simple economics. Supply and demand. Ask your husband. There are more doctors offering it nowadays because there are more women wanting it. Not just desperate

teenagers anymore. I'm telling you, even married women are having it done. Widows! Half of us at the brothel are having it done every month. Do you think those guys don't know it's fake? Sometimes, one of them will take the same girl's virginity five or six times in a row and pay her extra for it every single time."

"That's not true," I said.

"It is! You can ask anyone. You've got to understand the psychology behind it, not just the facts of the operation. It's not about what's real. It's about what a man believes. Men care more about their fantasies than about reality. They experience the world through their senses. If his senses are telling him that you're a virgin, why not believe them?"

"You're the one who doesn't understand," I said. "You weren't there to see how happy he was the night he deflowered me. Afterward, he went around telling everyone, 'I've found the only chaste woman in the country! Forty-five, and still a virgin! It's a miracle, you wouldn't believe.'"

"Exactly," said Soumaya, laying down her fork and reaching for the tea. "You're proving *my* point. It's not about what has or hasn't been between your legs. It's about the story that he gets to tell."

My expression must've been skeptical, or maybe I just looked stubborn.

"You asked my advice," said Soumaya. "You don't have to take it. I'm just saying, if I were you, I would give him an experience. Not just the same-old, same-old. Something special to bring back good memories."

It was true that I'd asked her advice's, not once, but twice, and both times, she'd given it freely. Without her, I never would've escaped the brothel, much less been happily married for a decade. Why shouldn't I trust her?

"If I do it," I said, seizing her hand as she reached for the butter dish, "will you go with me?"

"What?"

"Like last time," I said. "Only this time, we won't have to be ashamed. Right? This time there's nothing to hide."

"You'd still better keep a low profile," she said. "Just because it's becoming more normal doesn't mean it's something you should go around advertising."

"Yes, yes, I know. I just mean that we can have an adventure together. Like last time, only not like last time. Don't you see, Soumaya? It's not just my anniversary with Abdulillah. It's also ours."

"That was a month ago."

"But will you go with me?"

"You want to go…when? Today?"

"Why not?"

"Not here," she said. "Not in Rabat. You might run into someone. That nurse may still be there. Remember?"

"Good thinking," I agreed, suppressing a twinge of shame. "But where, then?"

"We'll have to go at least to Fez."

"That's all right," I said. "My schedule's open."

"You really want to up and catch the train to Fez?" Soumaya gawked at me across the breakfast spread. "Today?"

"What? Is there a waiting list or something?"

"There may be."

"Then I'll pay," I said. "Whatever it costs, I'll get to the front of that line."

It felt good to say that and mean it.

"You're something," said Soumaya. "When your mind is made up, you don't let anyone change it, do you?"

"Why would I?" I smiled. "My life is my own."

* * *

In the same way that Soumaya's perfume had brought back memories of the brothel, the rocking motion of the train brought back long-forgotten sensations from an earlier time, when I'd been helpless, and my nerves had failed me, and I'd vomited sludge onto a train car's floor, and Soumaya had held me like a mother in her arms.

There are no memories of my mother in my head. My grandmother raised me until I was fifteen, when Hamid tore through my life like a bullet. Soumaya is the only mother, sister, and friend I've ever known.

Without her, I wouldn't have lasted a week in the brothel. She taught me everything: how to know what each man liked and didn't like, and which ones could be reasoned with, and which could only be submitted to. Whenever I'd been sick, she'd taken me to see the doctors; and when I'd come down with a bad case of another kind of sickness after my chance encounter with Abdulillah in the café, which

had left me unable to forget the quiet way he'd looked at me, as if I were a human being, and how that look had rendered me incapable of selling what I'd been there to sell, or even letting on that I was selling, she'd taken me to see another kind of doctor.

Of course, I'd heard people call all sorts of things "Chinese," from jewels and clothes to cars and phones, and I knew they didn't always mean that they were made in China. Usually, they just meant that these items were knock-offs, like the Chinese-made Goucci Bags and Ban-Ray sunglasses that vendors hock on every corner. Still, when Soumaya announced that I needed a Chinese virginity, I'd had no idea what she was saying. I'd taken it to mean that I should try and find a Chinese virgin—that such a man would, for some reason, be more accepting.

Because I'd wanted her to think me capable and worthy of respect, I'd pretended to know exactly what she meant. Now, for the same reason, I tried to hide my rising apprehension. Luckily for me, Soumaya herself was finally getting into the spirit of our adventure. Every time a vendor came by our compartment, she insisted on buying. We did, with my money. We gorged ourselves on hard-boiled eggs, and cakes, and fruits, and tea. We crunched sunflower seeds between our teeth, spat their spent shells out the window, and laughed like madwomen when they were blown back into our laps, as if we hadn't a care in the world. We were like schoolgirls. We were like thieves, pickpocketing youth from time's cruel jaws. We were like actresses, both auditioning for the same role in the play.

Then we arrived in Fez. Men stood on the corners, dirty and dazed, tracking us with their eyes as Soumaya led me from alley to alley. One man squatted on a doorstep, presumably not his, hands pressed together as if in prayer, peacefully shitting. Another was ambling in a zigzag down an alley, knocking his fist against his forehead, muttering oaths.

In the middle of one street, a dozen men seemed to be trying to resolve a dispute. They were all shouting over each other, sounding like a pack of seagulls. Their eyes flashing like teeth. Their teeth flashed like knives. Their knives flashing like…well…knives.

Suddenly, one of them spotted us. He broke away from the group and came shambling toward us, dragging a damaged leg behind him as indifferently as if it were a suitcase.

"Marwan!" said Soumaya, sounding pleasantly surprised. "It's been

a long time, hasn't it!" She drew something out of her purse: twenty dirhams. "Go and buy yourself something nice," she whispered encouragingly, pressing it into his.

"You're something," I said from behind her, where I'd taken refuge, once the ragged man had finally finished his elaborate series of groveling genuflections and gone on his way. "Weren't you frightened?"

"Frightened?" She let out an astonished laugh. "Of Marwan? Why should I be frightened?"

Her tone left me entirely without rejoinders.

"Come," she said sharply, taking me by the arm—the upper arm, as if I were a child—and steering me along the street and toward a large, brick building. "Let's get out of the sun."

Had the streets always been this this? I found myself wondering, stumbling along. Had I simply failed to notice? Was that how numb I'd been?

Or was life on the streets really deteriorating?

The edifice to which Soumaya led the way was one of those buildings that looked very small from the outside, but nonetheless contained an endless labyrinth of cavernous rooms. Twenty-five years ago, it would've been old. Its occupants would've been squatters, including, most likely, a band of schuwaffas, who'd been in high demand those days, when people relied on witchcraft for everything, even for what I was going to do. Now, the building had been taken over by a clinic. We have entered a scientific age.

Soumaya had been telling the truth, I discovered as we entered the waiting room. Some of the women were dressed like me, others like her. Some were even in full hijab. There were young girls and middle-aged matrons. One was even old. They sat about haphazardly on metal chairs, each with the air of someone anxiously guarding something—perhaps the empty patches of wall and floor on which they fixed their eyes. If an expert mathematician had been recruited to devise a formula showing where each woman would have to sit to maximize her distance from the others, he couldn't have been able to do a better job than they had done themselves.

With my head held high, I crossed the waiting room and spoke to the nurse, an old, gap-toothed woman who looked just like a grape left too long in the sun: "Monday is my tenth anniversary. I'd like to give a

special gift to my husband."

Her eyes grew wide. For a fleeting moment, another nurse's face was superimposed over hers: eyes wide with a mixture of uncertainty and pity as she'd accepted my three hundred dirhams— "But this isn't even a tenth of the cost"—and the childlike trust in her face when I'd clasped her hand and told her, fervently, "Sister, I'll make it up to you. I promise. Just give me a few months to pay."

I've never returned to that clinic. I'd never paid.

"This is to cover the cost of the operation," I said now, to the old woman, folding my ten thousand dirhams into her wizened hands. "And this is to hurry things along. I've got a full calendar. I need to be next in line."

I gave her another thousand.

Quickly, she counted the money, nodded with satisfaction, then slipped through a door and was gone. Perhaps I'd given her too much, I thought ruefully. Had the price come down since last time? It was possible.

It didn't matter, I reminded myself. I could afford it these days.

Moments later, she returned. "The doctor is ready for you."

Glancing back over my shoulder, I met Soumaya's eyes. She was still standing by the door where we'd entered. She flashed an encouraging smile.

Shivering with unexpected joy, I turned and let myself be led through the swinging door and toward the operating room.

* * *

How can I describe the feeling? It's not comfort, exactly—really, there's nothing comfortable about it, not if you're considering just the physical sensations—but sometimes the psychological sensations overwhelm the physical ones.

Renewed. I felt renewed.

I *was* renewed.

The first time, I'd been full of fear. On my back, beneath the cold fluorescence, I'd been possessed by awful certainties: that he would know, that he wouldn't accept me, that he wouldn't believe that I'd been chaste, that someone would gossip, that he would find out that I'd worked in a brothel, that the doctor would send someone after me to collect the money that I owed, that I would get an infection…so many things could go wrong. Just being there, breathing in bleach and

despair and knowing that I was worse-off even than the others in the waiting room, who at least could pay the full ten thousand, had put me on edge.

This time, everything was different. It was no act of calculated need or desperation that had brought me here. It was a gift freely given—to the man I loved, and also to me, by the woman I loved. My first and only friend.

In that hospital bed, knees hugged to my chest like a newborn, I sobbed.

* * *

Late on Monday, Abdulillah returned. I was waiting for him. There were crimson petals on the bed and a bottle of champagne on the nightstand. I'd lit scented candles.

"What's all this?" he asked, surprised, coming to a halt in the bedroom doorway.

"It's our tenth anniversary," I said from the bed, where I stretched like a cat beneath the covers. "I've prepared something special for you."

"I didn't expect this!"

"Of course not," I said. "You haven't even gotten to the surprise!"

It took no time at all before he was on top of me. Though pushing eighty, he's still an energetic man. He shed his pants, but not his Western blazer. His swinging tie tickled my nose as he mounted me, causing me to sniffle and laugh and turn my head aside.

He began to push into me.

Then he hesitated.

My pulse quickened.

"What's this?" he asked. "You're still getting your period?"

"Oh, no," I said. "That's been over for years! No, my dear. Tonight, just tonight, I'm a virgin all over again. Just for you."

Until that moment, I'd had my eyes closed. This was a habit I'd developed in the brothel, and since then, I'd turned what had once been a coping mechanism into a game, drawing on all my past experiences whenever I was with my husband and stitching together a pleasing collage. What mattered was motion. As long as he was moving, the identity and nature of the man above me couldn't be pinned down. He was like a lover in a dream, for whom it was impossible to lose respect, of whom I would never grow tired.

Now, though, all at once, there was no motion.

My eyes fluttered open.

There was Abdulillah's face, all right—but it wasn't the one that I knew. The familiar palimpsest of expressions that made him who he was—the tenderness, the hunger, the urgency—had gone with the motion, and what was left…I can't describe. I haven't words.

All I can say is this: I've never seen anything even half as terrible as my husband's understanding.

"You never were…" he began.

Then he gave up on words.

Somehow, though I couldn't shut my eyes, I found that I was spared the trial of gazing at my husband's understanding—though there still was a face in the dim light above me, and it was no less terrible than his.

On that face—Soumaya's—was a rictus of triumph: a sight that I'll never unsee.

END

Itto and Mekiya Outini write about America, Morocco, and all those caught in between. They've published in The North American Review, Modern Literature, Fourth Genre, The Good River Review, MQR, Chautauqua, CommuterLit, The Stonecoast Review, New Contrast, Eunoia Review, DarkWinter, Expat Review, Lotus-Eater, Gargoyle Magazine, and elsewhere. Their work has earned support from the MacDowell Foundation, the Steinbeck Fellowship Program, the Edward F. Albee Foundation, the New York Mills Cultural Center, and the Fulbright Program. They're collaborating on several books, running The DateKeepers, an author support

DESERT TUNES

Maryam Yusuf Zubairu

Slowly-
almost unnoticeably-
we learn to keep warm
with the flames around our hearts.

We sing along
to the silence of the night
and unravel in the secrecy
Of unknown seas at dusk.

Come morning
we patch our torn skins
in graveyard tunes
and lend our hearts to the sun

Maryam Yusuf Zubairu is a school teacher and poet. She writes from kaduna, Nigeria. She has keen interest in the art of hosting book chats and a number of her works can be found on her instagram page @emwhyzee__.
She was the second runner up of the Gimba Suleiman Hassan Esq Poetry Prize 2023. Her poem "My ancestors wildest dreams", got long listed in the Brigitte Porson Literature Prize 2023. She has performed on cozy stages and before roaring audiences at For the love of poetry, Kano and Kaduna Hilltop. She is passionate about her deen, words, the moon, taking long walks

WHERE THE ROOTS REMEMBER

Najeeb S.A.

The monsoon didn't whisper; it roared like an enraged beast. Wind tore at Khulna-2's fraying edges, and the floating settlement—a once-proud climate adaptation project—pitched dangerously, its polymer pontoons buckling under refugees and ruin. Below, Sundarbans' black waters gnawed at the settlement's support beams, each wave carving decay like rings in a dying tree.

Meghna caught it first in its scent—rotting kelp from dead fish farms, acrid fumes from the drone graveyard, and beneath it all, the ozone tang of distant artillery. Her fingers hovered over the radio's dial as it crackled with hollow promises: "Ceasefire holding in Brahmaputra Valley." With a sharp click, she silenced the lies. The war wasn't over. It couldn't be, not while water rose faster than hope. And memory.

Through the haze of rain, a flicker of movement caught Meghna's eye. Noor, the wildest of the delta orphans, darted across the rope bridges below like a marsh fox. Rain plastered her oversized 'lungi' to her thin knees, but she moved with unshaken purpose. It was her only constant. Something glinted in her hand—a medkit, its red cross barely visible under grime. Meghna's chest tautened. Stolen medkits meant Federation soldiers were close.

Noor materialized from the rain as if conjured, her wiry frame wrapped in a tattered fishing net that doubled as a cloak and cargo hold. Droplets cascaded from her braids as she upended her scavenged treasures onto Meghna's warped workbench: a military ration pack, three battered drone batteries, and—most precious of all—a vial of broad-spectrum antibiotics still within its expiration date.

“You’re bleeding,” Meghna said softly, reaching for an old jam jar filled with antiseptic paste. The neem-turmeric poultice was her mother’s recipe, its bitterness a relief. She dabbed the antiseptic-soaked cloth at the deep gash on Noor's forearm. The girl didn’t flinch—delta children never did.

Noor’s voice was a murmur beneath the rain’s drumbeat on the corrugated roof. “Federation patrol boat at the western docks. They’re loading the wounded.” Her gaze flickered to the back room, where a fevered soldier lay. “They’re looking for someone.”

Outside, the storm hesitated as if the world itself held its breath. Meghna’s fingers paused over the bandage, her thoughts tethered to the laboured breaths seeping through the partition. The cool pearl earring in her pocket grounded her against the storm building within.

In the feverish haze of the back room, dreams clung to Lt. Arif Rehman like smoke, fragrant with jasmine and scorched with gunpowder.

In Lahore’s Vertical Blocks, recycled exhaust mingled with synthetic fragrances. Saadia had guarded a single vial of jasmine oil, dabbing it onto their daughter Ayesha’s pillow to preserve the memory of flowers. Now, infection seared through his veins, twisting that sweetness into torment. His fevered mind filled with phosphorus bombs, and the scent of his wife’s jasmine oil became an unbearable irony.

A jolt ripped Arif from oblivion. The laboratory’s stained ceiling swam into view. Through the doorway, Meghna worked at her bench, biolume light gilding her profile in liquid gold. She was at something small and delicate—a child’s toy perhaps, or lab equipment. Her movements were deliberate and careful, reminiscent of Ayesha threading beads onto a string with her tiny tongue poking out in concentration.

Pain stabbed through him as memory and verity collided. The rustle of his bedding betrayed him, summoning Meghna to his side. Her cool fingers pressed against his fevered brow.

“Fever’s broken,” she murmured, adjusting his bandages. A strand of hair escaped her braid as she leaned closer, smelling faintly of salt and mangrove saplings—the same saplings she nurtured with the tenderness she reserved for survival.

Outside, the storm sulked into a drizzle. A distant wind chime made of shell casings tinkled faintly, and the laughter of children floated

nearer—Faria and Farid, chasing crabs in the tidal pools beneath the city.

"You've been gone three days," Meghna said, handing him a clay cup filled with bitter herbal brew. "Noor says the Federation is searching the western docks."

Arif's fingers tightened around the cup. Captain Zaidi wouldn't stop at the docks—the man hunted deserters with the relentless focus of a bloodhound. Arif tried to speak, but Meghna silenced him with a look.

"Rest first. Then we'll find a way to keep you alive."

History named it the Second Partition, but for those who survived, the division had always been about water, not borders.

In 2142, the Indus Waters Treaty collapsed—not with fanfare but through bureaucratic decay. As glaciers vanished, Punjab's wheat fields turned to dust, while Bengal drowned beneath surging seas. Lahore's desalination plants devoured power, and Dhaka's levees crumbled like sandcastles. By the time new borders were drawn, the only constants were bullets and blame.

In Unit 47B of Vertical Block 9, Arif had watched this disaster unfold on a flickering news screen while Ayesha arranged plastic tulips in an artillery shell casing that served as their vase.

"Why can't they share the water, Baba?" she'd asked, her small fingers precise yet innocent.

Arif had no answer then. He had none now as he lay in a sinking city, Meghna's pearl earring brushing against his fevered hand. The fading laughter of children, who had never known peace, drifted into the distance.

Captain Zaidi's boots reverberated through Vertical Block 9 like gunshots. Families behind flimsy doors fell silent mid-conversation as he passed. He savoured the way fear tarried in his wake.

The locker in Sector C was precisely as described: small, unremarkable, its biometric lock disabled by years of rationing restrictions. Zaidi inserted the override chip and smiled at the click. Inside, three relics of a life he'd been ordered to erase:

A child's drawing of a tree, labelled in shaky script: "For Baba who fights the water monsters."

A single pearl earring—cheap, possibly costume.

A pressed kadam flower, petals brittle as old parchment.

He crushed it in his fist. For an instant, his mother's rosewater lassi

bloomed in memory, only to curdle into Lahore's dying roses.

He'd find his deserter. He'd make sure Rehman watched as he burned that damnable tree to the ground. A cleansing fire. Meanwhile, in the Brahmaputra trenches, the air reeked of wet earth and rotting dreams.

Private Rafiq adjusted his gas mask, trying to ignore how the mud sucked at his boots with each step, as if the earth wanted to swallow him whole. The night buzzed with the sounds of a war that had forgotten its purpose—the whine of mosquito drones, the static-laced voices on the commands, the distant cough of artillery.

"Movement at two o'clock," hissed the Bengali conscript beside him, whose name Rafiq could never remember.

Through the rain, he saw them: children picking through the wreckage of a supply drop, their silhouettes ghostly in the predawn light. One paused, holding up something metallic—a harmonica, maybe. Rafiq imagined its notes cutting through the damp air, a moment of music in this endless silence.

A shot cut through the rain. The children scattered like startled pigeons. The one with the harmonica crumpled into the mud. Captain Zaidi's voice crackled over the radio: "Clean lines of fire, gentlemen. No exceptions."

Rafiq looked down at his rifle, its barrel dry beneath the rain slicker. He thought of his sister in Dhaka, who sent him letters filled with pressed flowers. How light they felt in his palm. How fragile.

The dawn came; the war dragged on. Somewhere, a lone wind chime tinkled faintly, almost mocking.

Hours later, at midnight, the storm broke. Rain hammered the corrugated roof like gunfire as Meghna worked by biolume light, splicing genes into mangrove saplings. The generator had failed again, leaving the lab bathed in the eerie blue glow of algae swirling outside the cracked windows.

Then the door burst open on screaming hinges.

A man collapsed across the threshold, his Federation uniform black with rain and blood. A service pistol skittered from his grip, coming to rest against the shattered remains of her gene sequencer. She recognized him—Lt. Arif Rehman. Punjab Regiment. Wanted for desertion. His lips moved, shaping words drowned by thunder. Then his knees buckled.

For three heartbeats, Meghna hesitated. Sheltering a Federation soldier meant execution. But the delta had older laws—ones written in tidal patterns and shared hunger.

She dragged him in, sealing both their fates with a single motion.

Fever dreams plagued Arif for days.

He thrashed against visions of Lahore's Vertical Blocks—synthetic jasmine scents masking overcrowded squalor, his daughter Ayesha's small hands arranging plastic tulips in a spent artillery shell. "Baba, will we ever see real flowers?"

When consciousness returned, he found Meghna at work—splicing roots, grafting mangrove saplings, her silhouette gilded by sunlight slanting through broken windows. It highlighted the scar along her jaw—a souvenir from the bombing of Khulna-1.

"You're not what I expected," he rasped.

Meghna kept her focus. "What did you expect?"

"A nationalist poisoning me for Greater Bengal's glory."

The corner of her mouth twitched. "I save plants, not kill soldiers."

A silence stretched, filled only by rainwater dripping through the roof. Then, softer:

"My daughter loves flowers."

Meghna's hands stilled. Without a word, she tossed him a small, wrinkled sphere—a kadam seed from the last grove near Barisal. He cradled it like scripture, tracing its ridges as if they foretold a fate still unwritten. The gesture stirred a memory in Meghna—her brother's pearl earring, lost in the Karachi floods, its twin still tucked in her pocket like a talisman. A silent anchor.

The crabs felt it first.

Knee-deep in tidal pools, Noor noticed the crustaceans freeze, antennae twitching in eerie unison. A deep vibration, too deep for human ears, rippled through the water. Then they vanished into the murk.

She knew before she heard the engines.

Above her, the laboratory's stilts trembled. Meghna's voice cut through the dusk: "Noor! Inside—now."

But Noor didn't move. From her vantage, she saw what Meghna couldn't—the black shapes of Federation skiffs slithering through algae-choked canals, their running lights doused. Soldiers moved like shadows, helmets reflecting the last bloody streaks of sunset.

Inside the trembling lab, Arif was already on his feet, his body jolted awake by instincts his fever had dulled. He tossed the twins a rusted machete and a fire extinguisher—pitiful weapons, but weapons all the same. Raju's hands flew: "Tunnels beneath the floor. Leads to the old shrimp farms."

Meghna shoved a satchel into Arif's hands—seed pods, data chips, the last vials of antibiotics. "Go with them."

His fingers closed around her wrist. "Come with us."

A crash from the walkway, shattering glass.

"No time," she hissed, pressing the pearl earring into his palm. "Keep this safe."

Then the door exploded inward.

Noor watched from the reeds as the soldiers dragged Arif onto the skiff.

He didn't struggle, even when Captain Zaidi's backhand split his lip. The twins and Raju were already gone, swallowed by the labyrinth of half-sunken tunnels. Only Meghna remained, her arms wrenched behind her back, face a mask of cold fury.

Zaidi held up the harmonica Noor had salvaged—the one Arif had played just the night before. "Sentimental," he sneered, crushing it under his boot.

But he missed the true treasure.

When the skiffs vanished into the smoke, Noor slipped into the ruined lab. Smoke curled through broken rafters as Noor hesitated beside a loose floorboard—every second a risk. But her fingers scraped against splintered wood anyway. If Arif had left something, it mattered. She pried it loose.

A single kadam seed, wrapped in synth-paper.

A child's drawing of a tree (Ayesha's, though Noor didn't know that yet).

And smeared in charcoal on the wall: "The roots remember."

Outside, phosphorus rounds lit the sky, painting the delta the color of old bruises.

The Interrogation Room stank of fake sandalwood and fear.

Meghna's wrists chafed against the restraints as he paced, his shadow stretching across the bloodstained floor. A fan overhead ticked sluggishly, pushing heat in slow waves. Somewhere beyond the steel door, a chair scraped—a sound too deliberate to be careless. "Where is

he transferring the data?"

She smiled, a crack in the mask of the delta. "Ask your children in twenty years. They'll know."

His fist connected with her jaw—a pain as familiar as the Khulna-1 bombings. For thirty-seven days, her body had been a map of his failures. She spat blood at his boots.

Outside, the tide turned. The making of Captain Zaidi was not that of a monster. Once, he'd been a boy who loved his mother's rosewater lassi and the way monsoon rains turned Lahore's streets into mirrors. Then the Water Wars came, the roses died, and the Federation gave him something thirst never could—order. A purpose. A reason to be ruthless. And with that, he learned three truths:

Thirst makes animals of men (he'd killed his first at seventeen over a dented canteen).

The Federation never forgets (his promotion came stamped with his deserting cousin's blood).

Arif Rehman had what he could never have.

It wasn't just the wife and child—though Zaidi resented those too. It was the way Arif still believed in things: in duty beyond orders, in flowers that weren't plastic, in the stubborn fantasy that some wars could be walked away from.

When he crushed the harmonica, what he really wanted to break was that belief.

The charcoal on the wall held more than words.

In Chakma refugee camps where Meghna's mother had worked, the phrase was murmured as blessings over seedlings. In the Vertical Blocks, Ayesha's drawing of the star-rooted tree echoed a Punjabi folktale about memories buried deep in the earth.

The mangroves knew. Their roots stored more than toxins—they held stories in their rings, the way Arif's harmonica held songs in its reeds. When Noor planted the hybrids in the shrimp tunnels, she wasn't just growing trees. She was writing a letter to the future:

We loved this place.

Find us in the leaves.

In shrimp farm tunnels reeking of rotting shellfish and diesel, Faria's lungs burned as she hauled Farid through murky water. The abandoned aquaculture complex housed mutant prawns with too many legs and refugees with too few choices.

"Left here," Raju signed, fingers cutting through the gloom. The twins followed, bare feet finding grooves worn by decades of tidal flow—nature's escape route, carved before humans ever thought to use it.

A splash behind them. Faria whirled, machete raised—but it was Noor, braids dripping with algae, Arif's satchel clutched to her chest.

"They took him," she panted. "But they didn't get these."

The bag sloshed as she opened it—not just seeds and medicine, but vials of Meghna's mangrove hybrids, roots coiled like sleeping serpents in nutrient gel.

Farid touched one with reverent fingers. "Will they grow here?"

Noor grinned, all sharp edges and defiance. "Only one way to find out."

Above, phosphorus rounds turned the sky the colour of a fresh bruise. Below, the roots were already reaching.

Ayesha Rehman knew about the locker because she understood everything.

She knew Zaidi smelled like gun oil and regret. She knew her mother cried in the shower, where the sound wouldn't carry. And she knew her father had left something in Locker 9C before vanishing into the war.

The override code was easy—her mother's birthday, reversed. Inside:

Her childhood drawing of a tree with star-reaching roots.

A pearl earring, cool against her palm.

A pressed kadam flower that dissolved into dust when she touched it, just as Lahore's real flowers had.

"Looking for something, little Rehman?"

Zaidi's shadow darkened the doorway, but Ayesha didn't flinch. With steady fingers, she dropped the earring down a ventilation shaft, watching it spin into darkness.

It fell for a very long time—long enough for roots to reach for it.

Arif's cell smelled of rust and regret.

Moonlight striped his swollen hands through the barred window—hands that had once cradled a kadam seed like a promise. Now they hung limp, aching from interrogations that always circled back to one question:

Where did you hide the mangrove data?

He coughed blood into his palm.

Weeks had passed since Zaidi last mentioned desertion. The war's priorities had altered, and so had the Federation's focus. Desertion no longer mattered—only the mangroves, creeping through the delta and purifying poisoned waters with terrifying precision.

A scrap of synth-paper fluttered through the window—Noor's latest message, wrapped around a pebble:

"The trees are singing where the shrimp farms were. Zaidi's men can't find the entrance. Come home."

Arif pressed the paper to his lips. Somewhere beyond these walls, a pearl earring was falling through darkness, and roots were remembering.

By then, word had arrived to end the interrogation.

On a Tuesday, they pushed Meghna into the alley behind the Federation barracks. No charges, no explanation—just the sharp shove of dismissal. Noor was there before she could catch her breath, arms locking around her waist.

"He's alive." Noor's whisper barely carried over the hum of generator lights. "They took him to the prison barge near Chandpur."

Meghna's fingers brushed the ridge of her jaw, tracing the scar like a map of the days behind her. Thirty-seven. Thirty-seven days in that room. Zaidi's questions. His fists. His rotting-sandalwood breath. And in the end, all he'd gotten was blood and silence.

"Did the vials survive?"

Noor grinned, the shape of victory cut into her cheeks. "Better," she said. "They grew."

In the meantime, the pearl kept moving.

Ayesha didn't move when Zaidi blocked her path in the Vertical Block corridor.

Instead, she lifted her hand, letting the pearl earring catch the hard fluorescence.

The pearl had travelled farther than all of them: born in Andaman Sea oyster beds, lost in Karachi's floods, traded by a refugee for rations, caught in Noor's fishing nets, tucked to Meghna's palm as a talisman, and slipped to Arif as a promise.

Now it rested in Ayesha's open palm, still scented with salt.

"You want it?" she asked, voice honey-thick with mock sweetness. "Take it."

Zaidi reached.

The pearl slipped from her fingers.

It fell past the floors where families bent over ration cards, past hydroponic farms thick with synthetic jasmine, past sublevels where Lahore's pre-war dirt lay vacuum-sealed like contraband.

When it landed, the sound was too soft for anyone to hear.

But the mangroves remembered.

Then, the Harmonica had a second life.

Private Rafiq was haunted. The harmonica he'd fished from Zaidi's trash, its dented steel warming his pocket, echoed through the Brahmaputra trenches like a restless ghost.

Some nights, he swore he heard it playing on the wind, though no one dared step into no-man's land after dark.

Tonight, under a swollen moon, he pressed it to his lips and blew.

A single note drifted over the barbed wire.

From the ruins across the river, an answer: first a child's laughter, then the opening notes of "Dil Dil Pakistan" on a bamboo flute. Rafiq froze. The enemy trenches had been abandoned for weeks.

Yet the song played on.

The vertical blocks cracked too.

Ayesha watched the first vine crack through Unit 47B's wall.

It crept along the ceiling like a green serpent, leaves unfurling in the sterile emergency light. Outside, the kadam tree's roots had begun their assault months ago—quietly at first, then with terrifying resolve.

Zaidi stormed into the room, uniform dishevelled, eyes blazing. "You." He jabbed a finger at the vine. "This is your doing."

Ayesha touched a leaf. "No, Captain. This is yours."

The roots remembered everything.

Then it was reunion time at Jadui Bagh.

The shrimp farm tunnels had transformed into a cathedral. Meghna stepped beneath the arches of mangrove roots, their intertwining forms dappled with the soft glow of biolume algae.

Five years of tending had transformed the flooded tunnels into Jadui Bagh—a subterranean forest where mutant prawns waltzed with refugee children, and the air smelled of salt and blooming kadam.

She heard a splash behind her and turned.

Arif stood waist-deep in the central pool, prison-pale skin gilded by algae light. In his hands, a sapling grew from a broken shell—a pearl embedded in its roots like a teardrop.

No words passed between them. None were needed.

Above, the war raged on. Below, the world was being remade.

What the tides left behind was the last letter.

Noor found it in the hollow of a mangrove root, its synth-paper gone soft with brine. The initials A & M were barely visible, eroded by time like the names on the Karachi flood memorials.

If you're reading this, know that the trees endured. Plant this seed where you need memories. The roots will carry the rest.

—A & M

She didn't cry. The delta children had forgotten how. Or had simply chosen to grow instead.

Around her, the tide murmured through the roots, carrying the echoes of a harmonica's last note, a pearl's endless fall, a lullaby hummed to a ghost. The ache was not the kind that faded. It was the kind that grew.

END

Najeeb S.A. is a former journalist whose storytelling journey spans India, the Middle East, and Australia. His short fiction has appeared in multiple anthologies and literary journals. In 2022, he edited two collections—Bitter Almonds and Ether Ore. The latter received the Reuel International Award and an honorary mention in the Journal of Commonwealth Literature, affirming his commitment to emotionally resonant, culturally rooted narratives.

EXHAUSTED MIDDLES

Tara Brabazon

For those who speak of 'happy endings'
Please don't.
Stop.

For those who speak of 'the one'
Please don't.
Stop.

For those (of us) who have lost our 'happy endings'

Have lost 'the one'

How do we continue?
How do we care?
How do we live?

We don't.

Instead, we summon the satisfactory.
Banal. Predictable. Boring. Often ridiculous.
Saturated with hope of one last great romance.

Why hope?
Without it, we die.

That's a lie.
We are dead already.

This is the ending.
Our middles are exhausted.

We are the one.
The only one.
At the end.

Tara Brabazon is the Professor of Cultural Studies at Flinders University. Her previous roles have included Dean, Head of School and Head of Department. She has published 22 books, 12 audiobooks and over 350 refereed articles and book chapters. Tara's two most recent books are How to embrace academic failure, and Ten drafts to complete your PhD. She is a writer for the Times Higher Education, and creates podcasts and vlogs. Tara has won six teaching awards, having worked in ten universities in four countries. In 2019, she was awarded a Member of the Order of Australia for her contribution to higher education.

THE NOVA 238 ASYMMETRY

Ozoya Irene Christopher

There was a wild media frenzy with reports of the first case.

It started with a sniffle arising from a flu. Next, a rush of blood from the nose and ears. And then the inevitable - death.

Within weeks, the top brass of the World Health Organisation (WHO) attempted to play it cool. But with the proliferation of the pandemic, they resorted to the fifth realm of the estate, escalating protocols to stem the tide of the emerging global pandemic.

Their effort triggered a global panic. Many people thronged the hospital at the slightest hint of a flu.

Europe experienced the first cases and soon, Asia caught the flu. Starting with China. Then - Africa.

A global lockdown was implemented.

Airports closed shop.

Social distancing laws were enacted leaving people basking in the melancholic confines of their homes.

Quarantine centres were established in prominent cities.

But the spread continued, unabated.

Save for the relevant health personnel, other citizens were cooped up. Indoors.

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For Dr. Abimbola Akinde, the world was changing fast. Especially with the emergence of a virus that was gradually rewriting the script on how humanity could navigate their way in the face of a pandemic-stricken world

As she soared through the deserted streets of the city, a sense of melancholy hung in the air. Her thoughts spun. It felt like a dervish.

Towering billboards flickered with footages of WHO briefings and

stats on mortalities arising from the virus. No one made mention about advancing a cure for the virus. It was all data. Briefings. Endless talk and no action.

As she pulled up before the sprawling hospital complex, a subtle hint of apprehension hung on her shoulders. Everyday , health workers like herself were at risk. A potential contact with death.

She slipped on a facemask before walking gingerly through the sun drenched driveway and onto the crowded ward of the hospital.

Patients lay in pain. IV tubings visible by their bedside. The sound of electrocardiograms pulsed rhythmically like a metronome. It was a grisly sight. Chills rippled down her spine

A voice over the radio embedded in one of the wards she was superintending, chimed. "The Nova 238 virus is on the increase with 400 new infections, 50 deaths and no recoveries. The WHO along with the CDC are making frantic efforts to end the pandemic...."

The stats were frightening. It spiked her heartbeat uncontrollably.

The hospital sound system crackled, cutting off the news transmission instantly. A female voice emitted almost immediately. "All doctors, nurses and laboratory personnel are required to be present at Hall C for an emergency briefing. I repeat Hall C for an emergency briefing. Nurses are advised to remain at the wards."

Abimbola nodded at the nurse seated at the far end of the expansive ward. A gesture suggesting she was on her way out of the ward.

She scuttled through the winding, sterile corridor. Other medical personnel funneled through the corridor to the hall.

She took her position at rear of the hall and observed attendees to the briefing, all donning facemasks, eerily.

At one end, running the entire length of the wall was a platform. Atop its surface, a gray-haired man stood. Diminutive and bespectacled, the man let his eyes sweep across the hall that was so silent you could hear a pin drop.

Abimbola sensed something about the man's demeanor. It was something striking. Almost like an aura over him. Everyone was focused on him like a bee stuck to a rose flower.

He cleared his throat before speaking. His voice gravelly. "I am Dr Efe Omage. A virologist with the World Health Organisation. I was in Geneva months ago when the virus struck and didn't pay any attention to it till when I visited my family here and was restricted. I have been

in consultations with your Chief Medical Director and I shared some useful hints about my findings concerning this virus.

"Years ago, I had published a paper on the biological properties of virus and just like every other paper published by an African, the world never took notice.

"But right now, I think I could advance my ideas using this Nova 238 as a case study.

"Virologists like detectives tend to profile or map viruses. And for one, the Nova 238 which sounds like the name of a spaceship..."

A roar of laughter resonated in the hall.

"...appears to be evolving just like every other organism. But why this is different is because of the rapid rate at which this phenomenon is going."

The lights in the hall were suddenly muted.

A holographic interface sprang to life behind him, flooding the hall with an Iridescent glow.

A translucent RNA image materialized.

He gingerly stepped aside, enabling his audience catch a glimpse of the holographic model.

"I have friends. Virologists as well who have profiled or rather mapped this genome and surprisingly, we realise that it is responsive, adaptive to every therapy or treatment. Even with the introduction of drugs, it seems to be inactive for a while but suddenly it seems to re-emerge. Resilient and better adapted to fight any treatment whatsoever. Hence the difficulty in finding a cure."

Murmurs erupted across the vaulted hall.

A gaunt man stood up. His voice, flat. "Thanks Dr. Omage. I am Doctor Adeshina Danre. We know viruses are very funny organisms to deal with. But the question should be how fast this virus is mutating. We should be looking at how to slow down its rapid rate of evolution and double up on our therapeutic efforts."

"My thoughts exactly." Dr Efe replied curtly. "Obviously, what we suspect is the presence of a sequence within the virus which enables this to occur."

His fingers darted over the interface, highlighting an area between a constriction of the RNA strand. It pulsed with a crimson glow.

"While mapping the virus, we found the part of this RNA that possesses such a tendency. It is called the Sigma coil. We couldn't find

it in the samples collected from the first patients in Europe but now its in virtually every strand. Think of it as the virus' seat of consciousness. Something like its brain. It's like a feedback funnel that recalls anything thrown at it and with that, it's adaptability component is triggered."

Another murmur buzzed through the hall. This time longer than the first. Lines of apprehension creasing the foreheads of the health workers.

A surgeon spotting thick bifocals was on his feet. Clad in green scrubs. "I am Dr. Maurice Ibe. For us to really deal with this virus, we need to think the way it does. Survival is its primary instinct and if we must defeat it, we must block every opportunity of survival at its disposal."

Dr Omage pursed his lips thoughtfully. His fingers stroking his stubbled jaw.

Abimbola listened raptly. An idea sizzled in her head like a muted bulb that was just switched on.

A virus that was acted like the human species was bound to have a weakness. A soft spot. An Achilles heel.

Abimbola was on her feet. "I think the solution to the virus should have a bilateral effect. One that adapts like a predator and defends like a soldier. We could carry out an appraisal of the RNA strand, seek enzyme pathways in order to obtain its weak spots and possibly trace biochemical maps. All in a bid to ascertain its weakness. It may take some time but with the right team, ascertaining its soft spot could just be a way of defeating Nova 238."

Dr Omage adjusted his glasses. A smile tugging at the sides of his lips. "If I get you correctly ma'am, we really do not need a cure to defeat the virus. We just need something it is unable to learn from."

Abimbola was beaming. "Exactly, sir. We need something asymmetric. Something that could confuse the virus and possibly misdirect it."

An applause erupted. And it rent the once still air like a salvo.

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Her shift was over.

As she headed back to her car, a voice called out: "Hello ma'am."

She turned around to find Dr Omage racing after her.

She smiled broadly. "Your findings were indeed insightful."

He nodded, adjusting his glasses. "Indeed. And your response was even more interesting."

She arched her eyebrows. "You made us put our thinking caps on."

"If you say so." He said, jamming his hands in the hip pocket of his trousers. "I was on the phone with the Director General of the CDC in Geneva and he thinks our idea is pragmatic. So I would like you to come work with my team. What do you say?"

She paused. It's been a lifelong dream to be part of a groundbreaking research. The type that could define new and uncharted frontiers in the sciences. And the dream of having one's name forever printed in gold.

And what else? The Nobel Prize?

After a seemingly lengthy margin, she replied with an even broader smile. "I accept."

Ozoya Irene Christopher is a trained architect and creative writer in Benin City, Edo State, Nigeria. He have several online publications. His preferred genres are science fiction and thrillers.

MALEDETTI

Joseph A. Farina

septembers' songs are only for the chosen
In school yards and their halls-
not for those too thin
too fat, the gimps, the lame
the geeks, the different, the lonely-
not for those whose year of fear
and loathing begins on schools return-
not for those who must learn
survival skills, camouflage
avoiding the radar of the merciless
who hunt them -
not for the introverted who
avoid mirrors without friends
or confidence -
not for the trembling braniacs
whose books are sport
for those too dumb to understand them -
not for the silent poetically inclined
who steal away early,
hiding in their rooms
one more island rock, among
the archipelago of losers
waiting for summer to release them,
behind their fortress of solitude
made of comic books and dreams
that border on the darkness
and the allure of blue gillettes.

Joseph A Farina is a retired lawyer in Sarnia, Ontario, Canada. An award winning (Sicily) poet. He draws inspiration from his Sicilian and Canadian roots. Internationally published in Europe and Middle East. first prize in PREMIO CITTA' DI ARONA 2025, published in Quills Canadian Poetry Magazine, Ascent, Subterranean Blue and in The Tower Poetry Magazine, Inscribed, The Windsor Review, Boxcar Poetry Revue, and appears in the anthologies Sweet Lemons: Writings with a Sicilian Accent, canadian Italians at Table, Witness and Tamaracks: Canadian Poetry for the 21st Century. published in U.S. magazines Mobius, Pyramid Arts, Arabesques, Fiele-Festa, Philedelphia Poets and Memoir and in Silver Birch Press Series. He has had two books of poetry published— The Cancer Chronicles and The Ghosts of Water Street and an E-book Sunsets in Black and White.and his latest book,The beach,the street and everything in between.

OUR IGBO DIALECTS

Isaac Dominion Aju

In honor of all the political conversations which were held at 45 Nepa Line, Aba, every evening, by ordinary citizens whose power did not exceed the walls of the compound. This essay is written in remembrance of the spirit of community that swept through the compound from 2015 till 2022 when we moved out.

I grew up observing our many Igbo dialects. I grew up in Aba where there is a mixture of many Igbo dialects, and now I think of how distinct and beautiful these dialects are. Despite the existence of these many Igbo dialects, there is an effort by all the Igbo people in Aba to speak the Aba brand of Igbo, irrespective of their own original dialects, as long as they live in Aba.

Aba is a developing town in Eastern Nigeria which holds many Igbo people together. The original owners of the land are the Ngwa people, but many other Igbo people from different parts of Igbo land migrated to Aba in search of jobs and businesses to do after the Biafran war ended. The Ngwa people had spacious lands, and so they made good fortune by selling parts of their lands to their fellow Igbos who had migrated from different parts of Àlà Igbo. The war had just ended, and people needed to find new ways to survive, and one of those new ways to survive was the immigration of many Igbos from their remote villages into more known and more urbanized Igbo communities like Aba. Within the space of ten years after the end of the war, many Igbos had stood up again on their feet in their businesses, and today, most of the houses and top-performing businesses in Aba are owned by these non-Ngwa people, people who came uncertainly, people who are not the original owners of the land. The Igba-Boi system also thrived during that period, and it helped in the expansion of many local

businesses. Igba-Boi is a practice in which young men who have no opportunity to be in school are sent to men who are established in businesses. They live with the men for many years, learning their businesses. After some years, the master would settle them by helping them establish that same business somewhere else in the same market or city. It does not always end well for some people; their masters might accuse them of stealing, or accuse them of a very disturbing crime, and then chase them away. It is depicted in Chukwuebuka Ibe's 2024 novel, *Blessings*. Presently in Igbo land, there are also many stories of young men who became frustrated and depressed after being chased away empty-handed by their masters.

I grew up in a home where we were raised with the Abiriba tongue. There is a way we say, "Go and take your bath" which is very different from how the other Igbo dialects say theirs. I'm still grateful that my parents unapologetically spoke our mother tongue to us as children. There was no English. English was what happened in school only. Even now, we speak the Abiriba dialect in my family, both in public and at home. My parents are semi-educated, and I don't think that is the reason why they only spoke our mother tongue to us, because even today, parents who aren't educated at all are speaking a mangled, terrifying English to their children, instead of grounding them in the Igbo language. My parents' decision to speak our mother tongue to us stems from their love for the Abiriba Kingdom where they were born and raised, a kingdom they often talk about and defend only in glowing terms. It stems from my father's awareness of the destructive power of politics, that one of the ways through which greater powers disarm people of lesser powers is by slowly eradicating their language, the very thing that made the Kenyan writer, Ngugi Wa Thiongo to stop writing in English, and then began to write in Kukuyi, his native language. It stems from his belief in the equality of all peoples. Even if they were well educated, I strongly believe they would have still raised us with the Abiriba dialect. My father is an unknown activist. You should see him soliloquizing to himself on the daily news of killings in Nigeria. You should see him talking about Biafra. You should see the yearning in his voice, a yearning for things to be in order, a yearning for global justice and peace. You should see him singing Bob Marley and Lucky Dube's songs line by line, songs I find difficult to understand because of the generation I'm born into, songs that my father consider as very

prophetic. I have no doubts, my parents are real Africanists, my father especially, and that was why they only spoke our mother tongue to us.

We lived close to Anambra people while I was growing up and their dialects are quite very similar to each other, and so we simply classified them as "Ndị Anambra". Having heard people speak in the Anambra dialects, I was so happy when I saw the dialects used in writing, in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, and then in all of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's books, an act she had confirmed to be very deliberate as her way of returning dignity to the Igbo language, and its people. After the defeat of the Igbos in the war, a subtle shame hung over every Igbo person living in Nigeria. More Igbos started giving their children English names, to make them less Igbo. More Igbo parents started speaking English to their children at home, to make them become as European as possible. More Igbo people became interested in education, just to meet up to whatever the war might have taken away from them as legitimate citizens of Nigeria who rebelled against their country, and then became reintegrated back into the same country they fought against. The average Igbo person living in Nigeria became a dire hustler, making sure to occupy his space, making sure to survive. If a family owned any lands, they would be very happy and satisfied to sell the lands just to make sure that their child or children had university degrees. More Igbo people began to send their children abroad to study. In Nigerian civil offices, the Igbos began to minimize being Igbo. They made sure to only speak English to you, even when it was very evident that the person they were talking to was also Igbo. Igbos began to perform a certain kind of forced Nigerianness, a refusal to be reminded for whatever reason that they were the defeated people.

Both Chinua Achebe and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie are from Anambra state, Eastern Nigeria. Renowned Nigerian writer, Chukwuemeka Ike, author of *Sunset At Dawn,* was also from Anambra state. Discovering this familiar Igbo tongue in their books was blissful. I remember feeling so joyful after reading *Purple Hibiscus*. I had read so many novels before *Purple Hibiscus,* but there was something different about this particular novel. The blend of Igbo and English languages in the novel resonated so deeply with me because I had been yearning to read such work in Nigerian literature, and so *purple Hibiscus* came as an answer to my question. To me, *Purple Hibiscus* was a great work of art because it mirrored the way many Nigerians spoke: in a mixture of

many tongues. And to discover that the book garnered great international acclaim was also very thrilling. *Purple Hibiscus* was not just a book. It was the evidence of what it meant to be a Nigerian living in the post-Biafran war Nigeria, especially as an Igbo who was formerly a Biafran. According to Adichie, her editors told her to remove the Igbo dialects and she totally refused. As a young Nigerian writer trying to publish her first novel in the early 2000s United States, it was the most audacious and risky thing to do. I still respect her for standing on her ground: Igbo language is also a language worthy of respect and dignity.

Here in Aba, there is the Bende dialect, which includes people from Ùgwùeke, Alayi, Igbere, Ozuitem, and Item. Their dialects are very similar, and so they are classified under the *Bende* dialect. If you are not careful, you wouldn't be able to differentiate between one from the other. I can differentiate between the Ùgwùeke and Igbere dialects from anywhere, but they are very much similar to each other. I've been close to people who speak them. Because I've always been a lover of words, I was observing the differences in tones and meanings when people speak in their dialects. There is a huge difference between the Abiriba and the Nkporo dialects, both in the same state – Abia state – where I come from. History has it that the Abiriba and Nkporo people had once been together years ago before the creation of Nigeria, until they set boundaries for themselves. They still live a bit close to each other, but now as different communities, with different dialects.

The strangest Igbo dialect I know is the Ohaozara. If you are not attentive, you won't even know that they are speaking Igbo. Their words run faster into each other. Their words are more in a hurry, like an impatient driver desperately wanting to arrive at their destination as soon as possible. They speak too fast, words rushing forth, very musical. Later, we would live with the Edda people in the same compound. Their dialect stands on its own. They live in groups in Aba, and are very communal, always looking out for each other. I can speak a bit of it. I love to listen to them when they speak. And it's beautiful. My family once lived in a compound steeped in the love for Biafra when Nnamdi Kanu was still very active on Radio Biafra. The Edda people who lived in the same compound with us were very vocal about their support for Nnamdi Kanu and about their dream for a separate country. It was a very heated period of killings in the Northern Nigeria. Nnamdi Kanu would come on air every other evening and lambast the

Nigerian government for being so ominously quiet toward the killings. The Edda people would rant in their Edda dialect and I would sit down and listen. It was very beautiful discovering them. If we had not lived in that compound, perhaps I wouldn't have known how distinct and peculiar their dialect is. Living in that compound shaped how I would later view the world. I didn't know it at that time, but hearing the ordinary Nigerians air their grievances to nobody in particular planted something in me which I wouldn't discover until I started writing years later. It was also in that compound that I reread Adichie's *Half Of A Yellow Sun* over and over again. I was eighteen, and I wanted to understand Biafra. I wanted to know in full what it was that Nnamdi Kanu was fighting for. I wanted to know the origin of his agitation. It was painful and heartbreaking hearing about the injustices happening in Nigeria, the killings in the North, the attack and the killings of the IPOB members. It was too painful, the voice of Nnamdi Kanu. On some days, he simply restrained himself from crying. I couldn't see him live because it was a radio, and not a television, but I knew when someone was trying all he could not to break down. There were days when he came on air with a very heavy heart, and his voice always drew my attention, even though I never joined in the conversations going on, even though I did not understand everything that was being said as I do now. I would sit in their midst and listen to them analyze whatever Nnamdi Kanu was saying on radio. I would listen to them bemoan the silence of the world toward the present agitation for Biafra, and more importantly the killings perpetrated by bandits in different parts of Nigeria. I would listen to them talk about the 1960s Biafra, and my curiosity enlarged. After the radio broadcast each evening, I would go inside our house and continue reading *Half Of A Yellow Sun.* I wanted to know and understand everything, right from when it started.

Nobody pays attention to these dialects because on formal occasions we only speak the Igbo Izugbe - the standardized Igbo, which can be very clumsy in the mouth, especially the type they write books with, in the few Igbo books we have. And they speak it on radio too. A very formal, rules-abiding Igbo that every Igbo person can understand no matter the dialect you speak in your house. But sometimes it can sound so bland because it is not what people speak with in their homes. A new US journal – Purple Stallion Review – recently published my poem in their very first issue, and the poem is

about language. I called it "*Outside The Niceties Of Formal English*". In it I talked about how I speak the Aba brand of Igbo every day in my life. I do not go about speaking English, although recently I've started having more English words slipping out of my mouth. I guess the more you study and read in English, the more difficult it becomes to completely speak your mother tongue. But I'm trying. It's a hard fight. When I'm out in public, I speak the Aba brand of Igbo, because that's what everyone speaks. And this Aba brand of Igbo is simply a mixture of many things. It's a mixture of the ancient Igbo, modern Igbo street slangs, many Igbo dialects, and different Nigerian languages. All these things came together and became the Aba brand of Igbo, which has never been used in formal writing. I see some people on Facebook who write with it sometimes. It's very informal, very casual, very breezy. It doesn't have the heaviness and seriousness of the Igbo Izugbe. But we speak it, and we understand ourselves. That's what the poem is about. The editor loved it so much, wanted to send me a hard copy of the book all the way from the US to Nigeria, but I said I was okay with the pdf.

I listen to different Igbo dialects and marvel at what God has done. Is it the Ngwa and Owerri dialects? I love the Ngwa more when they are having arguments. I love the sound of 'gbo' which features in their speech every now and then. I'm familiar with the Owerri dialect through songs. It seems they are too blessed by the spirit of songs. Their songs are very beautiful. There are many popular Igbo singers who only sing in the Igbo Izugbe, but the Owerri people sing in their Owerri dialect. Because there has been many successful Igbo songs which have been beautifully recorded in the Owerri dialect, many more songs are being done in this beautiful dialect, and the rest of the Igbo people have given them a pass. We all understand the Owerri dialect of course, but they don't have this tendency to restrain their dialects in songs like many other Igbo people do. Popular Igbo gospel singer, Paul Nwokocha, is from my hometown, Abiriba, but he sings in general Igbo. If you sing in the Abiriba dialect, it wouldn't be considered as 'mainstream' because it hasn't been popularized. Maybe only you and your village people would buy and listen to the song if you tried to record a full song in the Abiriba dialect. It wouldn't attract a large market. The Abiriba dialect still needs more heft in musical popularity and acceptance, which the Owerri dialect has successfully attained. And

maybe the Abiriba people and other Igbo people of minor dialects should try singing in their own dialects, whether the songs make great sales or not. I suppose it must have been the way by which the Owerri people attained their solid musical acceptance and recognition in Eastern Nigeria. I suppose they sang the songs in their own dialect because they were passionate to sing, and not only about making money, until the Owerri dialect became known and recognized, and also began to generate income for the singers or performers. Maybe one of the greatest problems of being a human being living in the 2020s is that everything has become about money. The success of everything is now determined by how much money that is made.

There is this popular album beautifully done in the Owerri dialect which my parents love so much. The most popular song from the album is "Oge chi ka mma" – *God's Time Is The Best*. My parents love the song, and we once owned the plate when VCD was still a thing. We are not from Owerri, but we played the songs in our house, songs deeply steeped in the Owerri dialect that some meanings elude us, but it was a work of art, very artistic and beautiful, which means we can do and achieve many more things if we were given the tools to do so, if we try more. If the Igbo language was given more value, it would have done better than it has done today. People would have read more in Igbo, people would have written more in Igbo, people wouldn't be ashamed to speak Igbo to their children in public. And It's time we begin to place more value on our dialects and not feel ashamed of them. Our language and dialects are valid too. Just like English.

Isaac Dominion Aju has appeared in international journals such as Poetry X Hunger, Flapper Press, Asemana Magazine, Steel Jackdaw Magazine, All Your Poems Anthology. He lives in Nigeria where he works as a fashion designer.

THE REFUGEE'S TALE

Sali Andiamo Siyaya

I once had a home filled with laughter,
Where children played under the sun.
But war came, and soon after,
Our peaceful days were done.

The skies grew dark with smoke and fear,
The streets were torn, the walls were gone.
We gathered what we held most dear,
Carrying only a photograph and a name.

We walked in silence and in fear.
The sea ahead was so wide,
But still we climbed into the boat.
The waves were wild, we couldn't hide

Hope was all that kept us floating.
Till we reached a land that is so strange,
I speak a language that's not my own.
And everything about me have changed,

This key in my hand opens no door,
It's from a house that stands no more.
Yet I keep it close, my only companion,
And I'm not lost, just far from home.

Sali Andiamo Siyaya is a Malawian writer and engineer with a deep passion for storytelling. Though trained in engineering, she spends most of her time writing poems and stories that reflect real emotions and life experiences. Sali has appeared in both poems and short story anthologies and has touched many readers. She has also published novels on different platforms and continues to write with the goal of inspiring others. In her free time, she enjoys reading, singing, and playing chess. Sali believes that words have the power to heal, connect, and bring light to the world.

THE DISBELIEF OF SUMAYYA

Ibrahim Oga

For most of us, the writing life is not a real life. You can be serious and write a ton but if nobody is publishing or reading them then you can't say you write for real, can you? If we're honest, your seven readers on Substack, Medium, or whatever don't count in the grand scheme of things. Writing life becomes real life when you can answer the question "What do you do?" with "I'm a writer" and be able to direct people to published works that are making you enough money to live by.

My name is Sumayya Khalil and I am not a writer. However, I have been constantly writing for about a decade and a half now. This will be my last short story if it doesn't get accepted. I won't be quitting writing. Rather I will simply move on with my life by becoming an online content writer. Mid-thirties, with no breakthrough short story, my novelist ambitions have faded away. Novelists are not poets; ~~we~~ they don't get better with age like poets do. I figured if I'm doing one last hoorah at fiction, I may as well make myself a part of it. So, this is a story about this author and her struggles with finding the right story to tell in this capitalist writing industry.

I envy people who have had a formal creative writing training like at a university. The access to the inner workings of the industry and being a part of a serious writing community has to be impactful in one's career. Meanwhile, my husband doesn't read. The closest he comes to reading is skimming news pieces on his phone. He doesn't even read long WhatsApp messages. I envy people who have spouses who are also writers. I imagine it's very nice to have a spouse who has literary insights. Someone who has great taste and recommend awesome books to you. Someone who gives you useful notes after reading your draft

and genuinely encourage you to sharpen your craft. William Carlos Williams wrote an awesome poem THE RED WHEELBARROW and Mary Reufle in turn wrote a retort poem RED which is equally awesome. They're a generation or two apart, but imagine if such great writers were married together. I wonder how many of their respective poems would have been messages to one another and how many of their poems would have been inside jokes between them. Imagine how much fun it would be to fool the world into thinking of all the meanings to a poem except for one truer meaning known only to you and your spouse. I wish my husband wrote stories too. We could have had characters in our stories after each other or something. Anyway, my husband says he "loves my use of words". I try, from time to time, to find some positive utility to this compliment.

As an adult writer, your community can only support you for so long. People close to a writer are quick to praise them in the beginning. It may be insincere at first, but they might later come to see the writer's potential and those praises become genuine. Then they'll start offering the writer help. They'll become their proofreaders, beta readers, promoters, recommenders, and scouts for magazines and publications. But the truth always prevails. No one likes a loser. The writer has to win worthy publications fast and have people outside their community become their helpers and carry them like a baton and keep passing them until they get to the finish line of fame and a bestseller career. The writer's community won't root for the writer for more than ten years. Ten years is the minimum years any writer needs to have something of a foundation for their career. However, ten years is a mighty long time for civilians who aren't writers. The writer must then spread their needy tentacles outside of their community before their community begins to let go. This writer missed that window. No one wants to support the author who no one wants to read. My community have simply moved on. And I understand.

I recently saw a movie called THEY CLONED TYRONE and I can't help but think that writers are just like the main characters in the movie. We're a carefully selected sample, copied, and strategically placed in our communities to play the role of "talents" but never to achieve success. I remember my friend who died young and left behind an unfinished manuscript. He was very good and he would have made it. The death of my friend Tyrone, not his real name but you

understand, made me realized that one of my biggest fears is dying and leaving behind an unpublished manuscript. His dead made me question whether the long-time commitment of writing a novel is worth it. Especially when you're not represented and you just don't know how you're going to sell it. As I said, it feels like we're cloned and placed in our communities to speak of the presence of potential talent albeit an almost successful talent, a-would-have-been success story. I feel strongly about this now more than ever. It inspires hope to glimpse at something of a talent in your neighbor because then people will begin to believe that perhaps they're capable of possessing some talent of their own too. Perhaps, they simply need to find it. Secondly, it is inspiring to see the possibility of success in your neighborhood because then you begin to believe that your community is capable of breeding success stories. And they keep this belief going by introducing younger talents every decade or so to show that even if success is not possible for you, then maybe it's possible for someone else coming up.

I've always wanted to carve out a niche of interesting, fun, ordinary, and everyday stories in African literature. I want to help bring something else to the table. There has always been a certain expectation about African literature, isn't it? The expectation used to be that publishable stories had to be in relation to colonialism and slavery. Then it became stories of hardship in relation to system failure and bad governance. Poverty porn is still a thriving theme because Africa isn't short of these materials. I can't write poverty porn because even though I'm poor, I'm not that poor and I'm vain. Now the concentration is on the individual, personal tragedies and emigration. I hoped to write a story about my miscarriage instead of this, but I'm not good at Tragedy porn either. Perhaps I don't have a lot of practice because I haven't experienced a lot of tragedies in my life. Then again, this can be a tragic story of an artistic failure if it isn't hilarious or insipid. Surviving to tell the story of a tragedy that befalls you is happy ending enough, isn't it? No one queries the author about how they're really surviving. And I hold Surviving stories with contempt. The author has to sugarcoat and downplay the struggles of surviving lest they cease being "surviving" stories and fall back to being Tragedy stories. I was good at writing heartbreak stories, but then I realized early in life that princes and not all heroes. In fact, most of them are villains and my readers didn't appreciate that realization as much as I did. I felt they were conditioned

to love the fairy tale princes more. Romantic stories without happy endings don't sell. So, I stopped. The customer, they say, is always right.

It is also demoralizing to notice the constant disappearance of God from literature. I was listening to a podcast the other day where they were discussing how Christianity is big and solid enough in the Western world to withstand all the bashings thrown at it. Unlike Islam which started off on a wrong foot in the West so every Muslim must be a saint and its bashing should be minimized to help its acceptability. While listening, I remembered my former Editor-in-Chief once rejected a poem I loved and wanted to publish because it had insinuations of praying to a Christian God. I fought hard for it to be published and lost. They said the magazine wasn't a religious magazine. The thing is, a writer can say "f*+k god" but not "praise God" because then it becomes "religious". It's high time we accepted the efforts of disbelief in God as a religion. The religion of Disbelief says the writer can have a religious character but the writer must not have a religious voice or POV because then it's indoctrination. Meanwhile, the religion of Disbelief doesn't indoctrinate, it liberates. Most times I feel like no one wants to hear my indoctrinated Muslim voice. In thinking about it, this section shouldn't make it to the final draft. Kolwe Lit might also be an "irreligious" magazine and reject this story entirely.

It is funny when you find it hard to pronounce the name of your favorite Lit magazine, isn't it? I can understand a puzzling name and the aesthetics of finding a unique name but I struggle to understand decisions behind names that are a mouth full. I can understand when this is personal, like for your baby or some business, but not a magazine. You'd have to spell it out to civilians when you tell them where you got published for them to find it. Anyway, the great quality of their content absorbs them of all naming sins.

My good friend May just got his novel published. The book is all about the suffering of his people. I am happy for him, I really am. It's just that I'd rather read something uplifting, ordinary, and exciting about Africa and African lives. Sometimes, suffering seems to be all that the literary industry publishes. I'd say the religion of Disbelief has something to do with this because joy and happiness are also religious for Africans. Having fringe things like joy, happiness, enjoyment, and excitement in our picture creates an atmosphere of religion, authority, and God. Africans find serenity and tranquility in their deities. And

we're trying to disappear God.

A writer has to see their life as a story. It's the only way it makes sense. Writing is a cult for people full of disbelief for their work and success; a people full of disbelief for their luck even. The personification of the writer is a tortured artist, remember? Notes, feedback, comments, reviews and everything else lethal are the initiation rituals to disillusion me of self-confidence. It is easier to see humor and silver linings when my life is a story. Seeing myself as the protagonist makes a lot of things tolerable. The protagonist is someone who wins at the end or dies a noble death at least. My life is a story, this I manifest.

When my husband tells people that I write, he says it in a way that clarifies that I'm not a writer.

"My wife writes stories" he'd say, as if to say, She's a normal person. Writing is something of a serious hobby for her. She's not some hopeless person waiting for the miracle of success.

It is hard to tell people that your partner is a writer if they're not successful, I get it. When you introduce someone as a writer, people quickly think of the Stephen Kings or J. K. Rowlings and then look at that person. That person doesn't stand a chance, do they?

On the other hand, when you say your partner writes, it instantly instigates words of encouragement and they go "Oh, really?! That's so cool. You should try and get published" or they'll be like "You should write a book".

I always want to scream, "Cousin…what the hell do you think I've been trying to do?!"

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Here goes nothing. After months of waiting in torture, this story was rejected by Kolwe Lit. However, they rekindled the novelist spark in me with their rather awesome rejection letter. It wasn't one of those boring template rejection letters. This one had that editor's personal touch to it that is palpable on one's shoulders. The kind I'd written to that poet a few years ago. I imagine that my editor also fought hard for my piece and sparked a debate that forced the Editor-in-Chief to call for a vote but my editor narrowly lost by a vote. I am beginning to believe that my work is important for literary debates and I can't help but think that my work can in fact find its place in the literary world.

My real name is Aisha Muhammad Bello and I still want to be a

writer and a novelist. My husband is looking at me. He recognizes the pensive look I wear when I'm writing stories. He thinks I'm inspired, renewed, and writing something new. He'll be disappointed to find out that I'm here adding this section and some initially deleted sentences to give this story an extra layer and perhaps fine-tone it into completion for the next editor to have more reasons to accept it. Perhaps that editor is you and this story gets accepted. Perhaps that reader that I'm writing for is you and you're reading this now and saying to yourself "This is the next best thing since sliced bread". Then my dream would survive. Then I'd survive as a writer.

Ibrahim Oga is the author of the Ibrahim Oga's Belvedere newsletter. His short story is selected for The Brigitte Poirson Literature Prize 2025.

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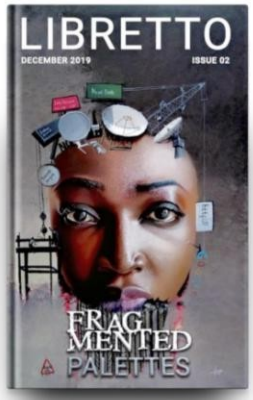

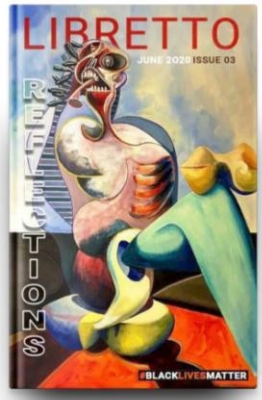

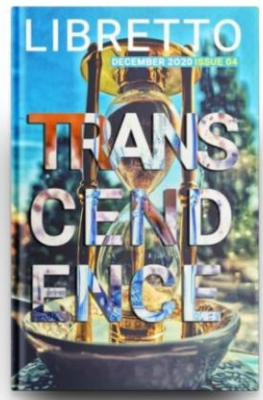

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We are a fiercely independent, vibrant, and accessible literary brand committed to the growth and impact of art in all its diverse forms. At Libretto, there are no artistic limitations and creative barriers; there are only possibilities as inspired by the freedom of imagination.

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