

WRR CHAPBOOK SERIES 2020

# A BEAUTIFUL PLACE TO BE BORN

*poems & short stories*



DIVINE INYANG TITUS



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PLACE TO BE  
BORN

*(poems and short stories)*

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## DEDICATION

To mother Regina. To family of stars. To lover  
Rose. To soul brothers beyond comprehension.  
And to human.





# SHORT STORIES

## NWANYI OF THE WEEPING BUSH

People say you learnt how to die in silence before you learnt to suckle, and you laugh, Nwanyi of the weeping bush.

They watched your supple legs dazzle through sand on the last day of the Iri ji festival and shook their heads to your marvel. Nwanyi of the weeping bush, you alone, they thought, were spared the ubiquitous blemish of a billion aching souls. You were spared pain. Your smiles poured from your teeth like dragon fire -- soft and wild at once. They poured like you didn't know that what lay on the other side of fierce happiness was too black to give voice. They shook their heads, partly from sympathy, partly from envy - for you could not remember, they thought. And that was the only gift that surpassed the dazzle of your legs.

But do you even know how to forget, Nwanyi?

Beauty sashays, and beauty swans. Beauty may be too vigorous to notice that dead things are everywhere around it. But beauty never forgets. Beauty feels like the sun and brandishes its tail like a peafowl. Beauty sometimes forgets about vultures, with pebble heads and a hankering for the juiciness of marrow. Beauty was you.

How could you forget?

That the evening sun paled to tiny drops of greyish-blue beams, and there was no wind to be felt. That the paths were receding to shadow, and the creeping singers in the wild bushes were beginning to cede to the emboldening of darkness. That there weren't many people on the streets when Uloko called out to you.

How could you forget?

You'd turned to answer, and there was his face, watching you, and then the mild fascination his inscrutable face always birthed in you. Uloko, the strong. Uloko, the tapper of trees that kissed the sun. Uloko, the one the girls rumour fancied your dance a little too much. He beckoned you to a cup of water, and what was the harm in that?

He asked in his obi: "Are you returning from the games?"

You replied: "No, I went for a dance at Anua village."

He nodded. "No wonder you are looking like mami-water".

You blushed.

How could you forget? The tune he hummed as he brought water. And how he never broke the tune as he slipped his hand around your waist, rustling your beads. You'd shifted, turned your face away from him. He nudged closer, the resilient tapper, his hands, growing horns, now aiming for your breasts.

You'd stood up to leave. And he'd pulled you down. Uloko the strong. You stared at the gods of his Obi while you screamed, imagining them weeping with you. Or laughing wildly.

How could you forget? That with no brother like Adaobi had to go beat up her rapist and tie him up under the humongous Ukwa tree in the village square, nobody evinced more than a sigh. Nobody cried. Nobody needs to show anger for what is merely how things were. How could you forget?

Soon enough, everyone heard. And sympathy poured from their eyes. But you laughed like you didn't know what it meant to lose everything. You always were a marvel, weren't you?

Three moons later, Wilberforce, who'd been a friend to your late father, staying the night in your father's house as he passed through your village to Amaranta, had tiptoed into your room like a spider and cascaded onto you. He kept saying "Small. Small. I just want small". How could you forget?

His perfume, like blooming arusa leaves in the sun.

"Sorry, eh? Sorry"

He stood up and rubbed his earthy face, hoping you would cry. Did you? He gazed into your eyes and perused for shattering despair. You saw the anger brewing in him when he found nothing.

Mazi Ezeudu had that same look on too after he finished and you didn't cry. In his proud home. While his wife sold egusi to your mother in Nkwo market.

On the way out, you saw his daughter, your playmate and she beamed.

"Nwanyi, you came to my house!"

You smiled. How innocent she was.

"Yes, Nneka, your father asked me to bring home some fish for your mother."

"Oh, my mother told me she'll buy some at the market today." Her forehead creased. Then she beamed again. "I'm so glad to see you. You always look so beautiful."

Nwanyi of the weeping bush.

Beauty is sin only where ugliness is law. None of them knew that your beauty had died when you told them in the obi. You'd said:

"Wilberforce came to my room last night" and they understood. Your mother stifled tears. Then released a deep sigh. A deep sigh only. Do they know? That in total acceptance of ugliness, there's the freedom of nightmares?

Again, the whole world knew and shivered, and shone with sympathy while you laughed like a tickled child.

Nwanyi is blessed, they said.

Her beauty is undaunted by pain. Or evil. Her beauty is beyond us, they said, and made proverbs about beautiful spirits.

But could you forget? How long did it take for your tears to forgive you? Moons bending into moons, and suns setting into suns. Ages that went beyond memory. Counting. Counting till numbers faltered. Nights, in your room, was where the mask of the happy beauty fell, and your exposed face was muscle marinated in teary ghosts.

Nwanyi of the weeping bushes.

Iri ji festival jaunted in regally, an arrogant spate of time obsessing to be remembered forever. The whole village gathered in the square.

This was the time all the world came to watch you dance. To watch you live.

There were too many important things happening at once. And too many important people-- dignitaries, seated in front. Amongst them, Uloko, the tapper that ascended the heavens for seeps of the divine juice. Ezeudu, feathered chieftain of the realm of men. Wilberforce, the man who went to the city and back like he owned the road and the spirits that bustled about it; the man who threw the most wads of cash in the air when you danced.

And you did dance, Nwanyi of the weeping bushes, while they all gazed longingly at your marvel and perceived that you didn't know pain.

In the center of the square, you swanned, then capered, then shook your waist till the drummers themselves forgot to play. Then their muscles remembered once more and they picked up the fire. You pranced in the noise, beads jiggling, stones rattling, jewelry flourishing, villagers ululating. You capered towards the children, danced like spirits descended on you. You gambadoed towards the women, danced like the spirits devoured you. You bounded to the men; their folded hands itching, you danced like the spirits intoxicated you.

Then you sashayed to the dignitaries. All seated, their portly faces shone with light. Them, above-board elites, beyond the banalities of crude men.

You were Painless.

Blemish-less.

Nwanyi of the weeping bushes, you approached them like a whispering storm. And your smile made even them forget. So you sat on their laps and danced for them, breezing from one to the other -- and the village roared in rapture. Only Nwanyi of the weeping bush would dare tease dignitaries so. They roared and clapped. Mazi Ezeudu laughed hard when it was his turn and received your charm like a fatherly lord. Wilberforce didn't laugh too hard. He flashed a wan smile and seemed shy to receive your charm. Uloko the tapper was stone faced. Uloko the strong didn't know emotion.

It all happened in a flash. Uloko shot up from his seat, clutching his throat. Instantaneous, uncomprehending shock swept

through the crowd. Then from your bosom, Nwanyi, a small knife fell to the dust. A knife that had tasted blood.

You sashayed away from the dignitaries. Beauty swans. Beauty swans.

Uloko staggered to the ground with a slit throat. Ezeudu didn't even stand up in the pandemonium, bathed in his own blood right there on his dignified seat. Wilberforce rose slowly and begged for help. But the hands that ran to help him were seeking to aid a body deader than even you were.

The drummers stopped and the echo of their last strokes lasted forever.

Men grabbed you, while the village stared at the dazzling feet they refused to believe knew pain. But you didn't move, you were falling. Then they felt your blood on their hands and knew you'd made them come to watch you die. So they let you drop to the earth because you mustn't touch the body of a thing that disrespects the gods by taking its own life.

But what gods, you'd asked a long time ago? The ones who watched you die in Uloko's room and laughed with him? Or the ones that listened intently every time you rehearsed brilliant strokes with your mother's knife.

Nwanyi of the weeping bushes.

People say you learnt to die in silence before you learnt to suckle. They say you were spared the ubiquitous blemish of a billion aching souls. You were spared pain.

And you laugh - a laughter that rings out your pain in the deepest hells where the gods eat yam with your innocence.





## SENIOR PUBERTY.

Senior Puberty.

It was the name the juniors called him behind his back -- the suave, lanky prefect who never wielded a cane. He'd been away during my first two weeks at the new school. But I'd heard an ample lot about him; his wispy voice and his feminine gait, and how he never came second position in class. I rarely spoke at that time. The environment sparkled new and alien; large classrooms with fine trimmed hedges in front and a field speckled with weed and bougainvillea.

I remember the first day he walked into class, almost unhurriedly, his forehead glistening with oils. He'd been cheered on by the boys and the girls said his name sexily. Justin. That was his name. I'd sat skimming through an old story book at the back of the class and I'd looked up at him through my glasses. I remember thinking he was perhaps the most beautiful boy I'd ever seen -- and that was odd because I didn't quite like very fair skin. His was the colour of crisp yellow flame and seemed rightly to glow.

Then, I was the new guy who rarely spoke and who was rarely spoken to. The guy who looked like he could recite a textbook off of his head -- I heard someone say this once. Most of them probably imagined I was some pushover, or some prude, or some super-nerd who spent hours trying to get past Google's firewalls. Both were wrong. They got to find out soon enough.

I'd done some two months already by then. It was the first time I and Justin truly encountered each other. Some argument was leaving the class in flames. One guy, Sediq, had said he wouldn't mind if women married women-- everybody watches lesbian porn anyway, so what was the point. Eyes shot at him first, like skillfully

thrown darts, then the words followed. It began hotly from the start. Angela, an unusually quiet girl had said:

"May God forgive you".

And Sediq had rejoined with.

"May God forgive your mother."

Then the rabble broke out, and invectives filled the air. Then after some time, a taut sensation held the class quiet.

"But anh-anh, Sediq, how can you say even something like that? That means men should now start marrying men?" That was Rekiya, the captain of the girl's football team.

"I did not say that one oh. Me I only said--"

Then his voice was swallowed by another. Peaking above the rubble of voices, it was like a cloud stretching thin; a sound so shrill it felt like whatever vocal chords produced the sound would soon snap apart. It was Justin, speaking for the first time. A rambling Justin, leaping to the attack. I listened then, with my eyes watching his small, red lips flap like hummingbird wings. I could see then why he was called Senior Puberty. He really looked and sounded like a prepubescent boy. Justin's attack tore through Sediq. It was a walloping. It sprang out of nature -- the male and female blueprint that's made for abundant life on earth, that God designated, that was the reason why even Sediq was alive. And then weaving its way through culture, rights and wrongs, acceptance and shadows, it wedged itself in morality. When Justin was done, I could hear the silence that moved through the class like a thick, odorous cloud.

In that silence, I chose to speak. Not because I liked the topic too much, but because I loved the silence. And I chose to grace it with

my voice. Not break it. Just flow with its fluid essence. I began with what if. What if you're wrong Justin. What if they'd all been wrong; the ones who deduced the blueprint. What if this isn't a case of right and wrong, but physiology and personality. What if this was you, a natural you, immutable by any and all standards, like a lark, or a dolphin. What if...

As I spoke I'd stared directly at Justin, in his eyes. I thought he had fine eyes, but that wasn't why I stared. I like to look people in their eyes when I finish them. It's far more dramatic and it preserves the memory of the rankling; for both of us really. When I finished, I think Justin was shocked to his wits. Perhaps he was used to being the final voice. The voice that called the silence. The silence no one dared touch. Perhaps no one had ever dared to challenge his intellectual authority like that before. Whichever it was, I wasn't too interested in finding out. With a grin on my face, I lowered my eyes back to the storybook and promptly lost myself inside it in the moments before the rubble of voices broke out again.

The next day and the day after, Justin did not speak to me. Or answer my greetings. Then I stopped to offer them and simply ignored him. On the fourth day after the banter, Justin came over to ask my note. He'd oiled his head again and it shone in the mellow sunrise. He smelled of talc and a certain perfume I recognized but couldn't quite remember the name. I'd given him my note with a detached smile, slightly uneasy by the way he gawked at me through his jellylike eyes. He'd said thank you and stalked off, leaving his whiff beside my desk.

By now, the earlier notions of me had been squashed. A few boys had tried to bully me and I'd resisted, with words, with brute strength. When the discussions in class veered to the erotic and I gave voice, however seldomly, it was evident that I knew way more about human sexuality than them. I remember the day I described where the male G-spot was allegedly located, how

everyone stared at me, how Victoria blushed and Angela recoiled, how Justin pretended not to be listening deeply.

The day I got my note back, I heard something had happened to Justin's mom and he had to go home early so he'd given it back through Sediq. It'd been on a Tuesday. A cold Tuesday in June after a night of wild rainfall. The morning mist still hung about the atmosphere and the grasses sparkled green with dazzling drops of water. By the end of the day, a rumour had gone round that Justin had almost lost his father to an accident. It turned out to be true for days passed and no one saw or even heard from him. Then the class arranged a small delegation to go see him at home. I remember feeling distaste at my selection; I'd wanted to walk Victoria home, probably sneak my hand around her buttocks again when we hug to part ways.

Justin's home had been smaller than I'd imagined, but still pretty. The bungalow, painted a flourishing cream, stood lonely in a group of low cost houses at the end of Alaffin street, where civil servants had taken up residence some 50 years ago. I entered the compound with the other delegates feeling slightly out of place, feeling like I should be home now, or joining Ahmed for some free games at his PS 2 shed. Inside, the parlour was dimly lit and smelled of Sunshine. Justin had come out wearing a wrapper, with some powder splashed across his neck, smiling coyly. The others taunted him testily, in whispers:

"Senior Puberty!!"

"Justin the in-law"

"Bookalical Justino"

Then we heard his mother's voice calling from amidst clacking utensils:

"Justin? Have you given your friends something to drink?"

I saw Justin's eyes were on me as he answered "I'm on it" with his sweet, wispy voice.

Then he said to me:

"Clarence, please come help me."

I got up trying to look as cheerful as possible. The leather swaddled sofa rustled beneath me and I could feel my body missing the warm comfort almost immediately. I pulled my bag off my shoulders and was going to drop it when I heard:

"-- no, carry it."

I hesitated, wondering why, then slung the bag back on my shoulders. Justin led me through the dining, past the kitchen where he took a tray, past the fridge by the store into a room so tidy, it felt too tidy. A teddy, and a large picture of Batman on the wall told me the room was his even before I noticed his schoolbag by the wardrobe. I didn't know why he'd brought me to his room; and I was in no mood to guess. Once he closed the door behind me, he put down the tray and I saw his eyes grow some glint.

"Well? Did you get my message?"

"What message?" I returned with no little surprise.

"You didn't get my message". I heard the disappointment in the sag of his voice and the drooping of his shoulder.

"What message" I repeated, feeling myself become apprehensive.

"Your note. Have you opened it since you got it."

I shook my head. An eerie curiosity gripped me. Speculations flew past my mind in storms. I wanted to see this message, and yet felt like I shouldn't. Still, I couldn't stop my arm removing itself from the straps, and my impatient hand reaching for the note. Which was it again? Science? The dimness stretched my eyes. All through the search, Justin remained calm and quiet, with his small arms folded about his chest. At last I found it. It was CRK. When I brought it out, the faint smell of his perfume scattered about my nostrils. Sandalwood. It was Sandalwood.

When I opened the book, I saw nothing at first, just my scrawny writing strewn insipidly about the page. Then I turned to the back of the note. His writing was there. The writing most people loved but often found difficult to decipher. It flowed; rather than walked. It swam, rose like waves, crested in smooth curves, and descended like steep rapids. The words they curled ripped a knife through my heart:

"...CLARENCE, I THINK I'M IN LOVE WITH YOU. DO YOU UNDERSTAND?..."

I looked up to Justin. I didn't know if I looked surprised or horrified. If I did, his face told me nothing. Inside, I think I felt weird; slightly scared for both of us, slightly snared, slightly wistful.

"Well, do you?"

I breathed.

"Yes, I think" I muttered.

I saw his eyes brighten again and his arms loosen about his torso. Apparently, he'd been anxious; catching himself. He smiled warmly and I couldn't help but admire the aura of pure glee that filled him; admire the fact that I could give him that, yet wondering what it would mean for us. It felt strange, like a form of music

from which I'd not been granted full comprehension. I was unraveling the strangeness when I felt something. A wetness. A warm wetness on my lips. It'd happened in a flash - Justin edging closer to me on the bed; the diving in for the kiss. I'd pulled back in shock horror, and in the tremulous silence that seemed almost harshly broken by the sounds of disgust that broke free from my mouth almost of their own accord, I saw tears.

Somehow, I felt pity for him. But it was not greater than my own shock and peculiar disgust. I'd been kissed by a boy. A boy I liked but did not love. A boy I feared would be forever scarred by that one time I flinched, and drew a horrendous damnation from my throat.

"I'm sorry" I said on instinct. His red lips gleamed with the stain of spit, trembled with whatever gases blew him cold. In that moment, I stood up and left the room, straight back to my place on the sofa.

My mates chattered in low tones. I thought the parlour had brightened a bit. Of course, there was more sunlight here, let in through undrawn curtains. After what seemed like a long time, Justin appeared with the drinks. He laid the table and said with an impressive attempt at humor:

"I'm definitely not going to serve you guys."

The others laughed. I think I laughed last, my voice ringing out the final note, drawing his eyes to mine for the first time since he entered the parlour. Just then, Grace was asking:

"So Justin, tell us what happened na."

His eyes were still fixed on mine and he began with a rather heavy sigh. I didn't hear anything he said when he started. My thoughts had seized me; the strangeness that spooked me, that needed me

to go outside and clear my head. But I still saw him speaking, pausing to brush fleeting glances through my glasses.

When he started crying. Only I knew why he truly cried.



## SCORING POINTS

You and I know that if I slap this policeman now, we won't sleep in our homes today. How much do you have in your purse? 1k? I have 3k distributed in the pockets of my jeans. When they take us, after I've professed my Bruce Lee to the pitch black policeman that looks like black soup, they'll shake us from head to toe. From up, to down, to up again. Every last naira will fall to the ground, or the ceiling. There's an unspoken street rule about the sanctity of the last card you must not have heard. This 3k is my last card. I should not do this.

But I might; because you're egging me on, and I'm stupid. You're so beautiful, I have the constant reminder of your face in my eyes. You know what that means? I can't fuck up. I have to prime my fist. Puff up my chest like a freaking toad and deepen my voice while I threaten the law.

You know your rights very well, I see. I find that I'm nodding to your assessments and echoing sentiments about rights I never used to care about.

"Don't you know it's against the law to collect bribe from motorists? What arrant nonsense!" You're yelling.

The policeman who looks like black soup is not paying any attention to you. He did at first; said "Madam shut up!" then turned and faced me and said "Oga, oya coordinate sharp sharp, no time." That time, I should have just pulled out that old 50 bucks Dami left in my glove compartment. But you were staring at me. I heard you screech:

"Divine!! Are you just going to sit there and let him extort us?!!"

I thought, "Extort!!". It was strange. We almost never use that word for situations like these. The words we use are milder. More accepting. Some would even say enabling. We'd say "they collect", or "we give", like it's a community service thing.

Perhaps it is. At least, that's how they see it. But that's not the point now, is it? We should be getting on with our date. I really want to zoom away from this place, but I find myself stepping out of the car. The policeman that looked like black soup had said something you found insulting. I think he said "madam, you dey make noise for my ear". I remember your "what?" because it's the loudest "what?" I've ever heard in my life. You'd turned your face to me, wide mouthed and bewildered beyond your senses. I knew then that inside the car was not safe. So I kicked the door and bounded out.

You were screaming "how dare you!!"

My feet were shaking. I swear. But if you ever get to know that, you'll gather your things and leave me after calling me a pusillanimous twerp. And do you know how long it took me to get to this place with you? 4 months of steady scoring points, ascending the ladder to which a hundred other guys cling to like their last breath. When I roll with you, people think I'm rolling with some imported doll. Neither they, nor I, understand how you can have such a perfect body; boobs and ass, and hair like corn sill. It is upon this lack of understanding that my aggressive front is based.

You're egging me on still, with just a "how dare you??" and you're holding your chin as though he really slapped you.

I'm not incensed but I'm ready to show you that I'm the god of chivalry. I bound to the policeman.

"Oga, how dare you insult my wife??" I yell.

The policeman that looks like black soup laughs for the first time. It's so weird because his was the kind of face you never imagined laughter on.

"Oga this woman dey use your head" he says to me.

I feign more flames: "What??" I scream even louder than you. "Now you're insulting me??" I see you nod eagerly and I know I've scored another point.

The policeman is looking like his patience is about to die. In my head, I plead with God for a miracle. But it is that time I see you easing beside me, and barking:

"Officer, if you say that rubbish again, I'll slap you!!"

The policeman who looks like black soup turns sharply to us, eyes popping out their sockets, face squeezed into a squelchy frown.

He roars: "What?? Slap me?? A police officer??"

You roar back: "Yes! You disrespected me!! I'll slap you!!"

He turns to me now.

"Oga, your madam dey talk anyhow oh. Tell her oh. I go beat her ooh"

I know I must react angrily too, but I need time to process the way I'm going to deliver my reaction so it satisfies you but doesn't cause further trouble. Something like an "enough both of you, let's be civil here for God's sake!" delivered with a powerful voice.

But you beat me to it, imported doll. I'm only beginning my diplomacy sentence and my voice has grown some more depth. That is when I hear your own voice peaking above mine. And I

know if you say the wrong thing, we're finished. We both know. But you don't agree that you do. So like that, this is a disagreement of a novel kind. Already, I can see myself far away from here. At home. Sleeping naked, with a half finished bottle of coke on the nightstand. But it's one of those sad what-could-have-beens we imagine when the story has hit the fan. Your peaking voice was saying:

"My man will slap the hell out of you too! He'll beat you to pulp!!"

The policeman turns to me, shocked. I'm seriously praying that he doesn't believe you, but he does. I can tell because he whistled to his comrades just now. And he's gripping my arm now, so fiercely I can feel my bone shifting. I look at you, still yelling. I don't know if I've scored points but I know they're not useful anymore. The other policemen are here. One looks like spoilt okro soup. The other, like black amala.

It's already too late.

## OMA

They found Oma's body with her heart in her hands. And that's not a poetic expression. They say the little lump of muscle was throbbing noiselessly in her hand, swaddled by the very blood it gave beat. They'd found Oma dead in the kitchen. They think Oma died staring at her heart; something about the way they found her empty body lying on its side, with its ghosting eyes cast in the direction of her palm..

We wonder how it feels like to hold your heart in your hands; to feel your own life force pulsating in your palms, fragile, and wet, and deadly. We are awed. What Oma has seen, is beyond eyes.

But even more awing is the story behind Oma's dare. See, they say she was in pain. Such pain as would cause one's heart to become the enemy of its own soul. They say Oma used to cry a lot and smack her chest for hours. They say she would sit staring at stones, listening to her heart palpitate. Oma used to say it wasn't blood but poison that crawled through her veins. We don't wonder what that feels like. No one should.

But we know you will. Because you're creatures like Oma. Cursed of love. Cursed to love, like she was. For how else does anyone find pain?

They say Oma loved a man. They never say his name. They talk about him with milky sadness in their eyes, because they saw when the story began and where it ended. They saw the first kisses that tasted like nothing, and the following flurry that deified time. They saw the first time their bodies became one piece, and all the times they lost their souls sharing dreams.

They also saw when the man began to slink through the darkness to someone else. When he cuddled Oma in his hands thinking of

another. And finally, when he screamed the other's name in his orgasm.

"I--fy!!!"

Long drawn out like that, and with so much longing. The man had begun to love another. We wonder how these things can happen. But we are scared of wondering too much. We think there's nothing pleasant to be seen at the end of that road.

They say Oma's pain climaxed with the man. She wept till her soul began to shrink from the dryness. She told him. Begged him. That his heart was hers and hers alone. How could she share? But the man was in his own puddle, drifting away into his end. Staying in his quietude, confused, pained, alone. What choices did he have? Did his heart leave him any choices? Did he leave himself any choices?

The answers to all those questions remain with the man; who never came out of his darkness. They say he was found dead at dawn one day, with a note in his hands that said:

"For I loved. And I suffered too much for it."

It was this that made Oma do it, for Oma was never suicidal. She heard the news and her already hurting heart burst into overdrive. You know those moments when you're in so much pain, say you're on fire, or pepper entered an eye, and you blindly and almost choicelessly run to find water to stop the pain? That's what happened with Oma. Oma didn't even like knives or blood.

But she needed for the pain to stop for, as she put it, her heart was beating poison from its depths.

It took only a few seconds. She plunged the dagger deep into her chest and dug open. Such was her emotional pain that she felt no

pain on her body. Next, her hands delved, guided by the sensation of immortal hurt, she traced the spot. Then finally she grasped it. And in her bones she sighed: Finally, so it is you who wants to kill me.

They say Oma held her heart in her hands for a few seconds before her soul left her body, expecting to see black venom pumping out of it. But it was rich, red blood that dripped; that scorned her.

We wonder if Oma's last moments were painless; if she had even if only a little peace with her heart out of the way. If she did, then we imagine she died laughing, and that's a better death than the other possibility; where the pain still blossomed in her chest, where her body still quaked with salt, where she died with no peace, staring at her heart with all the confusion in the world in her eyes.

Sigh. The story ends here. Inside all this pain. We've wondered so much we are tired of wondering. And we still don't know what happened to Ify. Someone said she has children of her own now. We don't know how true this is. But we know her story didn't end like the others. Or perhaps it did. And we'll never know.

They say every night, they can hear the voice of Oma wailing in the wind and the man echoing her sorrow in the darkness.. They say Ify doesn't sleep at night. They say many things...

## TO THE SOUND OF SILENCE

In the morning, you wake to the sound of silence. Your cell is dark and brutally cold, like the iron bars that barricade your existence. You scan the walls, the ceilings, the floor. It's covered with artworks; the thoughts, curses, and remonstrance of a million men before you. Now the drawings are growing old, falling into irrelevance.

When you first arrived the cell, they were everything to you. You felt as though every previous prisoner in that cell had each lived a life for you. Their art, was your soul; every line, every color that was their pain was yours too. They connected, like sea and sky.

The day you were imprisoned, the first art that had called your name was a palm-print on the wall made by a bloody hand. Long since dried, it looked like a warning; then a protest, then a promise of vengeance. All of that was you -- then, when everything mattered.

On the ceiling, there was a charcoal drawing of an emasculated man lying care-freely on a bed of guns. You related because what else were you? The bed of guns made sense. It was the reification of your rage. At the time you wished desperately to replace the voices in your head with the laughter of lead and dying men. But not now..

25 years in a cell does things to you. You spew forth all your bile and rage to cold, unanswering walls; walls that feel as much emotions as God, walls that give you their voice only when you strike them -- because in return they will give you pain.

After a few broken wrists and knuckles, you'll determine that their voice is not worth it. 10 years down, their apathy will disgust you and you'll stop complaining to them. They do not care and do not



care that you know that, period. 25 years down you realize the world is all one big wall of spirits and bodies; a twisted and complex one at that. So you let your anger become disillusion. And your disillusion, emptiness.

25 years before, you could never imagine this happening. You felt like your wrath would outlive forever. But why not? I mean you'd only gone out to buy suya for your wife, right? And a wedding night should be free of demons right? But at the suya stand, they'd come to take you and a host of random people because someone had reported a knife fight in the area. You told them you were only there to buy suya for the woman you married barely 5 hours ago. Perhaps you didn't look like you had a newly married wife at home. How do men with newly married wives look?

You hoped you'd get out of it the next day. But, hope is a distraction, is it not? You should have known F-SARS were not friends with hope. But you couldn't have known they would take you so far across the blackening savannah. Any place can be hell, you know. It just has to be far enough from love. But you didn't know that yet.

You found out 5 years in-- when you got news that your wife had remarried. All you had to talk to was the walls again. And the rage you reported to them broke your bones the worst. People used to see you punching the wall with bleeding knuckles and think you're crazy. You knew you weren't. You don't blame a man for crying the only way he can.

Well, like everything, the emotions fizzled away with the years. You let the darkness in. That was the first and only friend you made-- and all you needed. It was darkness that convinced you that nothing else mattered. How could you not agree, when in the last decade of your life, all the lights have done is lie.

Today, you wake to the sound of silence. They say you've completed your sentence. You laugh. It seemed funny till the lights were turned on. Your cell flooded with electric light is unfamiliar. It felt like your home was chasing you.

You're now four steps away from the prison facility and it's now you begin to cry. Life is a lie when there's nothing to go home to. This freedom, so unrecognizable. So shackled. So vast. So uncertain. From where do you begin to look for 25 lost years? With no anger, no wife, and no light.

You turn around and ask them to take you back in. You put sand on your beards and bang the gate. When they open up the gate, you pull the first gun your eyes meet and shoot at the first person you see. It wasn't a matter of sin. Or crime. Just that a man will instinctively defend his home from them who try to take it away.

Then with arms outstretched, you give them your spirit to bind again.

Alas, this freedom, you know and know well.



# POETRY

# HOW WE BURY OUR DEAD

1.

How we bury our dead is no matter.

The land is fouled already;  
Satan creeps,  
Nose hounding over the perfumes,  
Smelling for spilled brains  
And guts

Alas--

We have come face to face  
With him who dared God and lived.  
Let us laugh our fear away,  
For when we die, the trumpets would all have fallen  
Into a soundless death.

For we are not kings

And our names have no business  
Inside of mighty scrolls  
Or on the lips of great poets.  
Hence, it is mighty fine that you will fail to remember  
That we are more than just numbers.

2.

I wish--

To tell my children of a time  
When a warm handshake could bear  
A tide of tiny, murderous things.

It will be my hefty story.

The one with which I'll use to scare them to bed.

I'll say:

"Corona is coming"

And imitate the breath of an ominous wind.

Their feet will scamper to warm sheets

And I'll laugh at all the lies I told them.

For in my stories, I am prodigious hero;

Never the seventh body

In a room that should hold two.

3.

I, like you, hope to see the reminisce.

But you might get there before me--

I hear there are limited spaces in the future.

Aye; unworthy as I am, the skies bear witnessing

That once again, God has chosen

To douse the poor from his glorious footstool.

I do not know how to count

But I know our bodies are more---

Purge, father

We are tired of the rain already.

4.

Satan crawls, outstretched nose hunting.

'Salute the reaper or die--

Pass to it

Your coins, your coins, then live'.

Ah, face to face, I will tell my kids

I wrestled, bravely with the hooded thing

But hunger defeated me.

I wish--

But to tell my children a better story.  
One that does not have in it  
Too many bodies  
Flourishing in odor--

I wish to tell them--

It should matter how we bury our dead.  
Only,  
We were running out of space.

## BEFORE THE LOSS

I felt the laughter of the world.  
Then its sneering fingers in my throat.  
In the end, all things dizzy to the same sleep.  
But before the loss, there will be seasoning.  
Then pride.

My eyes taught me how the truth could lie.  
Like how they say hell is hot;  
When it is really a desert of iced out souls.  
And the devil is only our collective reflection.

I was no longer friends with my breath.  
Because it joined the world to laugh at me.  
I know because it dared to deceive me;  
Tiptoeing away from my shadowed frame  
And planting a fraud in my nostrils with a deft hand.

While I breathed lies, what did you do?  
You watched and scowled, and thought you knew too much.  
I was hurt, at first, my tears poured, then calcified.  
Then I forgave you because you did not understand.

I began to learn to laugh with my exhausted soul.  
We shared those moments in cold, liminal spaces,  
As we talked about destiny.  
It made jokes about whips.  
I made jokes about crosses.

Before we left, it told me  
That the manger is a beautiful place to be born  
When you are god.



## ARMAGEDDON COME!!

The ruins of men peer at skies  
From behind soulless eyes;  
Upon the fall of a sacred darkness  
Wherein the blood of sight  
Is splattered upon the altar of end.

Cants to the heavenlies;  
All men remain blind.  
Armageddon come!!!

Shall he find an empty house,  
A greenless tree;  
Black spittle and grey seas?

Indeed. Ruins. The ruins;  
Like rubbles riddling the earth;  
Say, what has life but does not live?  
What has death but does not die?  
And the gods know not the answer.

Chants from hells; all men have lost victory!  
The battered men weep for joy; the shovel readies for use;  
Earth from earth to darkness;  
Armageddon come!!

The night of days is lighted with old lamps;  
Old creaky lamps like the aging fireflies..  
Whom then shall the gods see and be appeased?  
Stones and bones, stones and blood.  
The temple stills for the requiem.

Choruses from earth;  
All voices of a zillion despair.  
Armageddon come!!

The valley rises to kiss the black bird;  
Before the ashen bodies grope

For the most pleasant grave spot.

Armageddon come!!!

## A CAVEAT IN FLAMES

Fire, lover, is only beautiful from afar.  
Do not say you must touch me.  
Or breathe my scent.  
For I too will stretch my hands  
And not know when you begin to burn.

What if by then, my love, I can no longer let you go?  
I will hold on to your skin, to the scent of roasting flesh,  
To the sound of my cackling soul mocking my passion,  
To the curses you'll scream as you writhe in my arms..

What happens when you become ash?  
Cold to fire, dead to my heat,  
Will you not hate me then, and loathe the sound of my name?  
And will I say I blame you?  
It was I, after all, who stretched to reach you.

I am beautiful, young lover, but only from a safe distance;  
The flaming tongues, the flowery iridescence,  
The passionate vigor, like firestorms in harmattan,  
The light I shed, the heat that is my stern fragrance.

But it is not in my nature to leave the things that come close unburnt;  
No lover, this is what I am, a breathing destruction.

Young lover, eyes of stars, you boundless dreamer,  
Your breath of hope is truly ravishing; infectious even;  
Your optimism, lover, is sweet.  
But your hope is that you seek to grasp the sun  
And expect not to see God.  
But everything perishes in fire; even sweetness..

## WATERY SON

In the watery deep of Kwa, there is a mirror.  
Pure, glossy reflector of amber sunset;  
Foreteller of golden dawn, where Kwa kisses the sky.

I am watery son,  
And I seek to see myself.

Show me, Kwa, the lives I have lived  
Before my spirit settled in this brown skin,  
Before this wandering soul bonded to ephemeral flesh,  
Where did I go?  
What did I like to do?  
Show me, Kwa, the deaths I have died.

Let me drink of your old, enduring peace, Kwa,  
Like my ancestors before me.  
Let me dance to the tunes of their prides  
The tunes the leaves sing, the wind hums along..  
I can see, Kwa, their whispers along your banks,  
Their footprints waving to mine.  
I am here.

Clothe me  
In masks of ancient water;  
In the furs of my pasts.  
Carry me aloft, and show me to eternal moon;  
Child; offspring of the purest rocks,  
Son of dewdrop, progeny of blue rays.

I am watery son  
And I wish to know myself.

Show me, Kwa, the origins of my becoming,  
Before I understood the language of birds  
And learned to build scars out of time,  
Show me, Kwa, the becoming of my origin..



## GROND. GROND.

I do not know how to scream to a nameless pain.  
Today, I will muffle my fire, but the smoke might choke you.  
I am here, where words grow stale with stories--- ticking;  
Expression is the last thing you want from a bomb.

Ash for me. Dust for you. May the waters know peace.

If I raise my voice, it is only because I want to talk over myself.  
If I grow as mute as God, it is only because I no longer feel my voice.  
It has nothing to do with a fall, or rise, of you.  
Or the way we do that romance of thorns.

Ash for me. Dust for you. May the waters know peace.

I fight many darkneses; so let not my light deceive you.  
Sometimes, I fight to grow a glow, if only so I can see myself.  
What does a man do when his own walls close in on him?  
And takes a different name-- say, depression, or orgasm.

Ash for me. Dust for you. May the waters know peace.

Abating the end is what I live for now; to say 'easy now' to a wildfire  
Or to soften the tide of worms that stroll in when the decay is born.  
All who know the story of the dead saviour must agree--  
Even if all is I alone, and I alone is all; like a multiplied singularity.

Ash for me. Dust for you. May the waters know peace.

I will not forget to say Amen after the last morsel disappears.  
Even though the next meal does not know where to find me.  
In the end, what fires the different hungers bring, I will muffle.  
For blessed is I, if I know not to break the raging silence in my soul.

Ash for me. Dust for you. May the waters know peace.

## TODAY BEGAN WITH AN ANGEL

Today began with an angel  
At pinnacle of sleepless dawn, a face  
Unveiling itself like a blossoming flower.  
I look to the heavens and I agree  
To the drums measuring out the footsteps  
Of an incumbent peace—  
And oh, that face in the cloud  
Smiles for the world I love to dream of.

Today began when the nightmare faded  
And I woke to lick the wounds  
Of all the dead bodies I saw in my night.  
The sun saw, and had pity;  
Rained down the spoils of another battle  
In a moment of rays  
That I shall never forget.

Today began with angels  
Beginning where the sky ends  
And falling like stars into the deepest voids of us.  
I gazed and my soul churned the words  
Of a poem that smiled, like the face in the clouds--  
To say perhaps  
Happiness might not have forgotten us after all.

## EXOR.

What I'd do if my former demon barges through my door  
Wearing satin skin and dusty hair from long travels?  
I'd pick up my gun and cock it --oh the way I sexualize death--  
And make sure to confirm the kill with holy water.

Sprinkle!

Watch her writhe, sensually, and turn black eyes to me in fear.  
"I am not your enemy" she'd say with her forked tongue.  
I be damned if I believe a snake; all things that creep, lie.  
"I was only searching for answers as you are" she'd moan in pain.  
We are still sexualizing death; holy water wets.

Sprinkle!

If it is love you seek, why look for it inside a heart filled with pain?  
If it is answers you seek, shall you find it in a house roofed in questions?

We have holes here where the rats make home.  
Do you not wonder too? The safety in little things  
That you, demon, and me, human, never have?  
Holes--- receptacles of penial secrecy.

Sprinkle!

Forgiveness! All the pain you vomited upon my soul!  
Forgiveness! Is how I fit burning irons into your eyes!

Writhe!

Turn your breasts lose, free of bland garment.  
Show me. The mound that nursed my brokenness.  
Sour milk that spill. Sour milk we cry for.

Sour milk!

Sprinkle!



I need to learn to forgive. But only after I have sinned in murderous kind.

"I am not your enemy" she'd moan again.

"I am not your friend" I'd moan back into her ears.

Oh how we are making wetness out of all this dryness,  
Boners out of broken bones.

"You should never have come here, demon".

"But I have come. I knew the price before I bought this idea."

"Welcome. Let us start from the beginning."

"The beginning. Yes."

"When you left me, demon, where did you go?"

"Away".

"Away? Where is away?"

Sprinkle!

"Away is the place where you go to mourn!" demon cries.

"The one who kills mourns the death too?"

"Like the one who throws the ash to the winds tastes it first."

Sprinkle!!!

Sprinkle!!!!

Demon? Can you still breathe?

Human? Can you?

Exorcisms go wrong very often.

## DREAMS IN THE DEPTH OF RUBBLE

Come with me,  
I will show you beauty in a pile of rubbish  
and love in the sanctuary of dirt.

Walk with me;  
Through paths intended for forsaken feet,  
Beyond the polished streets that smile  
And the streetlights that mourn at night.  
I'll show you dreams in the depth of rubble  
And memories where all that is needed is to not remember.

Do not close your eyes  
Or scrunch your noses in disgust;  
Those odours you detest are the very perfumes we wear;  
They hang onto our skins like hairs  
And bless the morning with a reminder of things that never freshen.

Do not throw up;  
The contents of your vomit might just be taken for food  
Gushing out of one who is too full  
For here, we dream of these things  
In cold, dark moments of hot spittle swallowing  
And dirty nails chewing  
And regurgitation of unappetizing, spent food.

Come with me.  
I will show you strength in a fallen heap  
And laughters that sound as wailing.  
I will show you fear behind blank, hungry eyes  
And courage in the shine of broken skin..  
I will show you the scars of wounds that would never heal  
And the silent waterfalls over the cliff of our eyes.

## BUT TO WHOM, IYAMA

But to whom, Iyama, shall we report God to  
When he fail us in cold blood?

Walls? Aloof trees? Or dead children?

For I sit beside one, Iyama, waiting for him to stir, and he isn't.  
I hate to cry, so I begin to whisper dreams to myself,  
Reinventing the story of my breathless boy  
With the same tongues I used to sing him to sleep.

In my fiction, God had swooped down like a raptor  
And carried him away from the on rushing truck,  
And now I'm scolding him for overly playful feet  
And he's trying not to laugh.

I have no anger for the excesses of an ignorant child.  
Nor for the brake of an old truck  
That doesn't know when the play is too much.

Tell me to whom I must report God to;  
For it was he who should have seen, but didn't.  
Or chose not to, which is it?  
How easily pain ripens questions  
Into piles of creamy pimples, smarting, ready to spew.  
We waited for too long to hear the heavens open  
And the crack of thunder that means glory.

After the pastor tired, he shook his head.  
God would not answer, his face said.

Tonight, they will say God knows best too many times--  
Like I disagree, or like I am dragging knowledge with him.  
They will also say God loves my son more than I do.  
Again, I will not disagree. Nor will I drag love with him.

Yet, I have no magic to birth stars out of dust.  
I have no miracles to fashion children out of eggs.

I have no breath to give; no skin to extend to fragile wonders.  
But I would've protected my son with my life, Iyama.  
With my small, life.

## AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

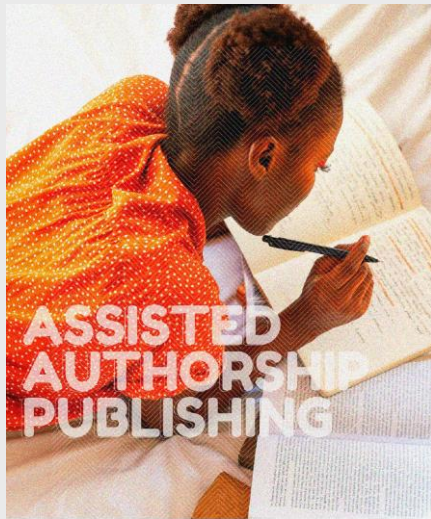
Divine Inyang Titus is a writer, performance poet and singer-songwriter, keen on exploring the nuances of the human experience through art. His works have appeared in Eye To The Telescope magazine, Seven Flowers of Gratitude Anthology, Journal of the Beautiful and others. He deeply enjoys reading, making music, and observing the rudiments of excellence.



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