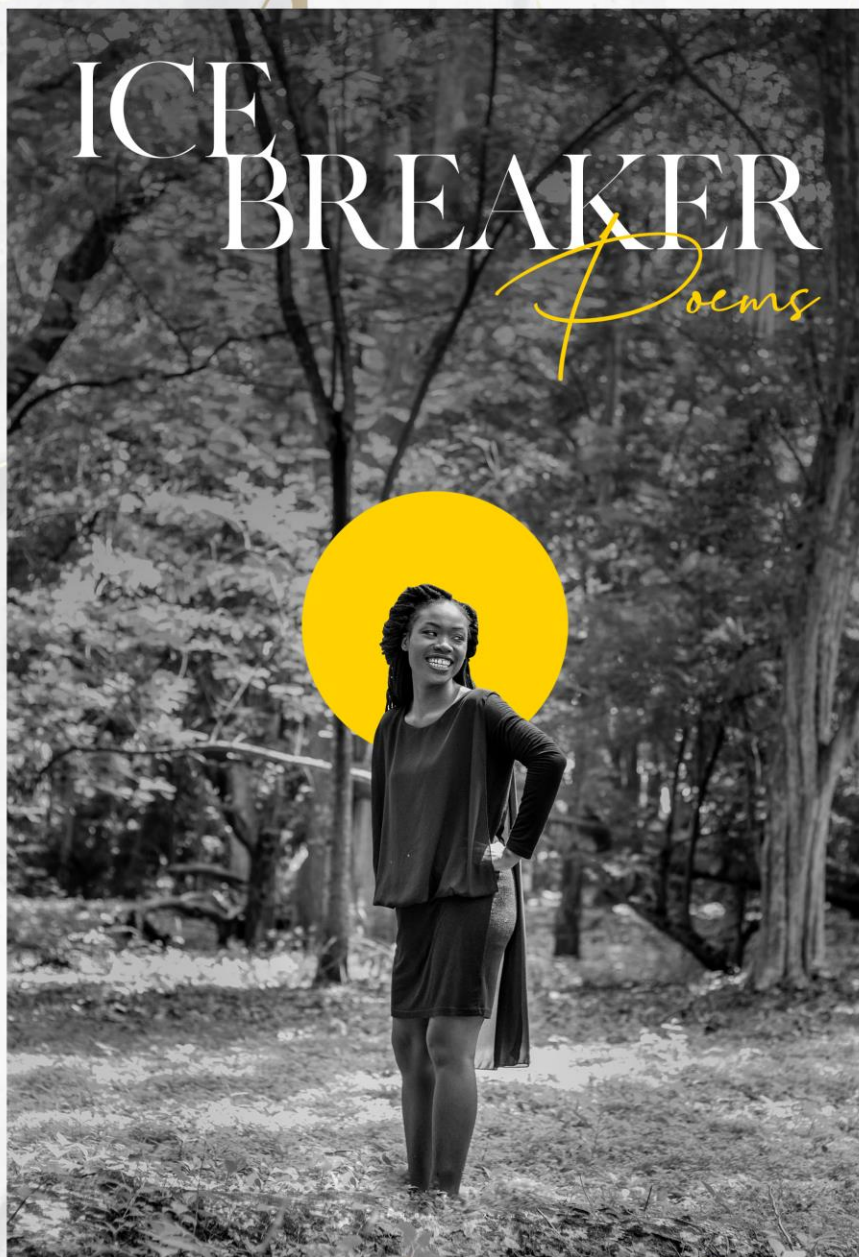


WRR CHAPBOOK SERIES 2020

# ICE BREAKER

*Poems*



Ehi-Kowochio Ogwiji



# ICEBREAKER

*(poems)*

EHI-KOWOCHIO OGWIJJ

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## DEDICATION

To Papa,

for holding my fingers to write my first alphabets in the sand...

## INTRODUCTION

I invite you to come take a riverboat excursion through the crystal-clear waters of the heart, mind and soul. Feel the wind at your back as you immerse yourself in this oasis of words. You will be at once quenched and refreshed, droplets of Summer rain on your tongue so bittersweet. Ehi-kowochio Ogwiji extracts rays of bright sunlight from the darkness as she brilliantly and effortlessly navigates the intricacies of the human condition.

She performs a delicate ballet with her balanced and strong use of metaphors. Emotional intelligence pervades every page while she choreographs her exquisite dance of the heart. She starts with a blank canvas, painting a picture with words using every hue of the rainbow. The red and orange of the burning sun express the passion and urgency with which she writes. Ehi-kowochio uses her quill to ignite strong emotions and deep understanding within us. The finished product is an embroidered tapestry which will be etched in the reader's mind.

Take a healthy bite from this freshly picked apple, for these poems are meant to be digested slowly and deliberately. Imagine yourself peacefully sitting under the shade of a flamboyant tree on a warm Spring day, a whisper of a cool breeze in the air. Or on a loveseat bench by the lake watching the geese swim in formation. Each line and stanza are delivered with precise stealth, a vaccine for any current ailment.

Gather around the fireplace with a steeping cup of tea and feel the delightful sensation of Ehi-kowochio's lexicon coursing through



your veins. Icebreaker is the vessel and Ehi-kowochio Ogwiji is your Captain.

Omis Carter  
North Carolina  
September, 2020

## ABDUCTION

We found Omada this morning.  
Her body; a brush in a bucket of red paint,  
Waiting for an artist to fetch his canvas.  
Omada didn't want to die,  
She only wanted to deflate  
A pair of lungs filled with pain,  
But the knife sunk in the wrong place.

When we found her:  
Smoke poured from her nostrils,  
Like the exhaust of a tired truck.  
Ashes fell from her ears,  
& formed small heaps on both sides,  
Like those on Mama's farm,  
Waiting for yam setts

Omada did not kill herself.  
She didn't want to die.  
[sometimes] life self-destructs.  
If it fails at trying to choke a [wo]man  
With the smoke from its cigarete,  
It makes her/his ears an ash tray-  
Every flake of ashes, a voice of varying decibels.

Then at the [wo]man's death, life makes up this lie:  
"A [wo]man who says too little, often hears too much—  
From the gossip of gods to the snore of spirits—  
Nothing is left out. Her/his silence swallowed her/him!"

Omada didn't want to die. She only stopped perusing  
A book she didn't find interesting. Then the winds  
Came and abducted her from the library.

## THE DINNER. THE DANCE

They said it's a dinner for two  
I agree. Because I'm not alone,  
A storm sits across the table tonight,  
Clad in a glittering designer tuxedo  
Pouring a flood into wine glasses  
Proposing a toast to our long friendship:

*To the friend who died in my heart  
& resurrected in my poems,  
I still think about the brooks  
In the crevices of your heart-  
With waters, pure & sweet*

Trapped between memories and anxiety,  
A smile is wilting on the pavement of my lips.  
What if the dew misses her flight  
And the rains keep a malice with me?  
Will drought finally break into the lush gardens  
Of my heart?

The wind is rendering a number tonight  
And I seem to be her only audience,  
High on memories, tipsy on silence:

This wind is taking bits of me  
a w a y  
But I must dance till the music stops

## CROSS-SECTION OF A LOVER'S BODY

A lover's body is not the best holiday resort,  
There are small explosives hidden in its crevices  
And caves, where whispers whimper whimsically,  
Turning sweaty bodies into an expired sausage roll  
Which has a mélange of mashed pains, for filling

Your lover's veins are the roots of bright petaled flowers,  
Sprouting, running towards the sun, through the  
Pores of her skin, to attract bees, and butterflies,  
Florists, and tourists. Love is a condition.  
Only the lucky are asymptomatic

Just as the bright summer sun rears its head  
From the east; her head stretching the cervix  
Of dawn, watched by an audience of gleeful birds,  
Two lovers can become a tourist attraction.  
People'd enter their love story for sunbaths

A lover's body is a deciduous tree  
His feelings are the luxuriant leaves  
When all the leaves drop, and he stands naked,  
Under whose shade shall you rest?

## AN ECHO OF SILENCE

Because we do not preserve memories from decay  
By immersing them in vessels filled with formalin,  
I tried to remember you today- your smell, your kiss  
The beats and lyrics of the songs you said your heart  
Sang for me, but I can't remember any.

Is there a word for the way poets feel when  
They realize that their fondest memories are husks-  
A pile of grain chaffs- which the winds can blow away  
After poems have been winnowed from them?

Can anyone tell us why some love stories are so short  
That the reader has barely chewed the first mouthful  
Before he looks down and finds an empty plate  
With a glass of tears beside it, to wash it down?

On nights like these, when insomnia burgles my thoughts  
And questions crawl under my duvet to gangbang me,  
I whisper your name into the hollow you left in my heart,  
And only an echo of silence bounces back- no pain, no hurt

*First appeared in the Kalahari Review*

## ON THE OTHER SIDE OF HEALING

When time sucked the pus from  
My festering boils, & my deepest wound  
Grew old & died— Respite attended the funeral,  
& Wholeness signed the condolence register—  
I discovered that my wound—the bright red  
Hollow in my delicate skin—was the begging bowl  
In which a genie dropped coins [ideas]

On the other side of healing,  
I better understood the geography of my body;  
I know now, that there are many landforms on my skin,  
That wounds are valleys, like the dimples on the  
Cheeks of mountains, and boils are bloated rocks  
Begging to belch

On the other side of healing,  
I see that my muse was only  
a doctor on ward round,  
That pain held my hands,  
Guided them to write my best poems

On the other side of healing,  
I miss my wound—her company. Her loyalty.  
How she greeted me first thing each morning  
With a steaming mug of pain & buttered slices of tears

## THE ANATOMY OF SCARS

When a wound undergoes  
Complete metamorphosis,  
It is called a scar.  
A scar is a wound in its adult stage

I pull out the cadaver of a scar,  
Silence is the dissecting table,  
My thoughts, the glistening blade,  
A sickening smell fills the room

Scars are: the tattoo of a memory,  
A font type in which we write moving memoirs,  
The graffiti Survival draws on our skin,  
A body-art done by an artist who insists on anonymity,  
The fault lines where an earthquake of pain  
Erupted and left a nameless rock

Scars, the way pain writes  
“I was here” before it dies!

## HYDROTHERAPY/ WATER AS A SHRINK

How I love to sit by the grassy river bank,  
Doodling in the sand and watching  
Resolute ants travel in winding queues.

The lush gaiety trees around the river,  
Sway in a graceful dance while the waters  
Watch in quiet patience like a dance instructor.

I love the soft, sultry whisper of flowing waters—  
The way it exchanges pleasantries with the breeze,  
It lets the moon see her reflection in its glassy film,  
I see me, my soul in all its fluid nudity,  
And for once, my demons scamper into their hideouts,  
As I slowly submerge my body and my soul

Water has a warm touch and soothing voice,  
An ear for faint whispers of small decibels.  
She listens, as I count my cupid-inflicted wounds,  
And say the names of my still-birthered dreams,  
Whose umbilical cords lay buried in the  
Stomach of fate

I mutter something like: *I may lose it soon,*  
*If you don't tell me how you stay alive*  
*in between heavy downpours and dreary droughts*

The river's riveting response reverberates  
Over the sullen silence:



*Flow! Love your own sparkles.  
Don't be envious of the sun's glow.*

## LOST COIN

The preacher's sermon became  
A bowl of wriggling worms.  
I could not eat one bite of it,  
So I stood between starvation  
And salvation

The night before,  
Mom smeared anointing oil  
On my forehead, I wondered if she  
Was branding me like farmers  
Do their lambs and calves

But my head heated up like an oven, they said  
Madness was baking in it, because the voices,  
Won't stop getting louder and louder

Mom chews a psalm, puts it in my  
Mouth, asks me to swallow and I puke:  
She said: *Child, if you stab God,*  
*it is you who will bleed*

Last Sunday, the communion tray got  
To me down there in the pew  
I refused the 'body'/'blood'  
*I am not a cannibal*

Mom cups my mouth  
To silence me and the demons,  
But a legion of doubts/questions—

Roamed freely in the broad streets  
Of my mind—only colliding with  
    Mom's midnight prayers;  
The insurance scheme for my sanity

My faith, was like a lost coin  
On a dark, moonless night,  
It could not be found by my  
    Dotting eyes

## THE SCIENCE OF RETURNING

Each time I said,  
*God, Give me that gun, I'll handle this!*  
I shot myself in the leg and came back limping.

But just as a loving father on his death bed  
Doesn't forget to mention his prodigal son in his will  
I'm ever in God's plan. My name, written  
In His asset column in the ink of mercy

I look back on how I often made God a variable,  
In the equations Life presented to me,  
And wondered why I never got them right.  
No one told me that God's a constant, Like  $\pi$ , and  $e$ :  
Not to be found, already given, waiting to be taken.

I'm saddened by the thoughts of returning in shards,  
But if the alabaster box does not break,  
How would that sweet fragrance trapped in it,  
Diffuse to a world reduced to a stench by sin?

These days, my daily prayer is a compound  
Of 2 elements— 3 molecules of thanksgiving  
And 2 molecules of supplications,  
When God sends me mails, they no longer  
Go to my spam folder because I subscribed  
To the redemption newsletter and He added  
Me to His mailing list

## BRITTLE

my father's voice is a dark hole.

when I was six, I fell into it,  
tasted his liquid darkness

and I became a light-  
too bright for the prying  
eyes of dawn.

In my sojourn, I have climbed  
seven mountains of tears

and crossed ten rivers of pain;  
but for the map on mother's palm

I would have been long lost  
in this forest of uncertainties.

So each night when my mother clasps  
her palms to allow the meandering lines  
rub against one another,  
she is telling an angel

to carve out another conduit for me,  
one that leads to many places.

mine is a brittle story,

and on days like this,  
it breaks into pieces  
and scatters around  
like the lines in this poem-  
some white, some black  
but all coated with gratitude.

*Longlist Babishi Nwe Poetry Prize, 2018*

## TELL PAPA

Ujunwa, have they told Papa that  
I am a story wrapped in a parcel,  
Held in place by a colorful ribbon of tears?

Did papa believe them when they told him,  
That I am the ashes of burnt dreams,  
Waiting to be whisked away by wandering winds,  
From the fireplace of broken ambitions?

I know Uju, I know that I am the shadow  
Of a lost wonder, tiptoeing through  
The thick forests of fears,  
Without a map to guide me home.  
But I hope this secret has not leaked from  
The lips of the gossiping evening winds-  
That's sits by the window of Papa's thoughts  
Idling until the break of an unbroken day.

Uju, tell Papa that I am the wandering smile  
He sought in the wilderness of frowns.  
Tell papa that I am the 'female son' who will  
Mop the distasteful stare that trails a man  
Who has nothing but daughters.

*First appeared in the Gyroscope Review*

## A MEMORY MOSAIC

My Physics teacher said light walks pretty fast,  
& I ask: *how does darkness always manage to catch up?*

They said our dreams must not be such as  
Needs a magnifying lens to be seen,  
That they must be bold, big enough to  
Bully our fears & break their spines.  
But my dreams are incapacitated.  
Like an invalid, they always need a hand

After who should a war be named?  
The victor or the vanquished?  
I have asked Papa to teach me  
How to christen wars,  
For my body is a war-torn zone,  
And Silence has declared  
It a State of emergency

When this war ends, will peace stand in the corner  
While I harvest the bullets lodged in my thighs?  
Or will peace be shot in the war and its carcass  
Left for the feasting of voracious vultures?

Yesterday, I was a giddy kite, dancing on the leash of fate,  
Dreaming to kiss the sky's blue lips, before  
The sudden arrival of a hurricane

Today: I am a handpicked flower on a grave's chest,



Drinking the stillness of the cemetery.  
I am a thirsty paper boat, ready to set sail  
The tide is my sailor. But must I drown to  
Quench my thirst?

## ICEBREAKER

The color of every first hello,  
Should be a bright yellow,  
But a poet's, might be a fiery  
red,  
Like the blood bled  
By a wounded soldier  
Whose body has become  
Home to bullets

Silence is not the wall that  
Stands between two strangers  
'cos a smile weaves a bridge  
Across a river of differences  
But a poem must wear its  
Lifejacket and swim  
Across cultures to meet  
a reader whose mind-port  
Might be closed

Tell me, how should a  
Poet open a conversation  
With her readers? Does she  
Write lines adorned with  
Rhythmic rhymes or drop  
Blood-stained metaphors

In the tarmac of their minds?

Does she need to tell the  
Reader about the number of  
Times, she tugged at the  
Backspace button before she  
Finished writing a poem?

Does anyone need to know  
How her fingers froze  
In fear each time  
She imagined  
If every piece in her book  
Would be received  
Or left like an  
Unwanted baby  
By a dumpsite?

This debut is a wink,  
A colorless *hello*  
From an uncertain poet  
Who wants to have

A wor(l)d with you

## PIERCINGS

when a beautiful girl writes about hu(r)ts,  
the embrace of silence on cold nights  
the music of croaking toads,  
& the medley of crickets  
Swallowing her assaulter's grunts  
they say to her:  
*that can't be true!*

but when a quagmire quibbles  
about the corpse of the rain  
resting too heavily on its shoulders  
do we expect a desert to understand?  
tonight, a black girl thinks about the plants  
whose roots met rot in her moisture. she asks:  
*is there one (hu)man suited for all this mire?*  
a tear, drops. another drops, then another.  
she begins to become waterlogged.

piercings: [a noun] /'præsɪŋ/  
little drainage vents.

a jewelry here. a jewelry there  
there are tales, tares, traumas  
hiding behind some glitters.  
or, piercings: /'præsɪŋ/  
exhaust vents  
for smoke

## HOW TO DETOX YOUR MIND

Drink in every ray of the sun seeping in,  
Swallow the very last drop of sunshine,  
So that Darkness meets you intoxicated with light.

When the stars in your lover's eyes go dim  
Throw open your window at night. Look up!

Remember that dawn is a grain.  
Darkness, its husk, & Time, the best winnower.  
So, wait! For, waiting is winnowing.

Climb till you can touch the rainbow,  
Feel the texture of its every hue,  
For when your days are blue,  
The memory of her bright colors  
Will cheer you

And if you forget that lightning is  
How the earth winks at you, remember that  
The rain is nature's hit song. Dance to/with it!  
Enjoy the *ton-ton* beats of it on your roof,

Smile cheek-deep,  
Till your lips reach its elastic limit  
Laugh hard, for happiness is a thesis.  
& a rich, full laughter, its abstract

## SOCIAL MEDIA AS A PATHOGEN

Patient:

Darkness is a hawk. I, her prey  
The glimmer of my phone, is a flash  
Of lightening for dark days. A meme  
or a selfie. A healthy dose is great!

Tweet/Retweet

I do not want to live & die  
As a hashtag. Yesterday, I made a thread  
Today, I might choose between living & trending

Like/react

We clean the streets;  
Our minds, become the new dumpsite!

Edit/filter

Your cellphone camera is the new measure  
For social stratification. *To what stratum do you belong?*  
Never mind. I don't know mine either.

Screenshot/ you-have-a-memory-to-look-back-on notification,  
The past has been immortalized, it no longer dies, don't be  
Deceived by how still it lies in a coffin, one morning it would  
resurrect

“What's on your mind?” The question  
Anxiety asked before it moved in with me.  
Utopia dreams. Envy. Keypad wars—the tripod

On which depression sits,  
Waiting to boil

My head is like a talking drum,  
Clutched in the armpit of a drummer.  
My eyes are running back into their sockets  
Like an athlete determined to win a race  
Doctor, this lingering headache  
Is about to slitter my skull,  
My body is a congregation of aches  
And my sleep ration is so small

Medic:  
Diagnosis: Migraine. Insomnia. Anxiety.

Prescription: SM hiatus

# LOVE, AS A COURSEWORK

## **Objectives**

By the end of this course, students should know:

- That love is not an invention of chance
- That friendship is the pilot project of love
- That love is the prototype of a deadly weapon

## **Introduction**

Our hearts are planets, love is the sun.  
many do not learn how to measure the distance  
between their heart and this sun until someone  
comes into their lives, with a tongue leaking vows  
and lips heavy with promises. until they become a  
field of sour kisses and blighted orgasms.  
until their eyes become rivers rebelling  
against the banks which hold them together

## **Topics:**

- **Crush/Attraction**

1. A heart as a bar of magnet
2. Learning the law of magnetism
3. Exceptions to the law of magnetism

- **1<sup>st</sup> -n<sup>th</sup> Dating Experience**

1. Trying out a glass of adventure
2. A hike away from innocence
3. Learning to read the map of fantasy

- **Furs or/and Cuddles?**



1. To grow your own fur
2. Or wait for a cuddle

- **The heart as a muscle**

1. Its elasticity/elastic limit
2. Young's Modulus:  $\text{Stress} \div \text{Strain}$

- **The chemistry of love**

1. The chemical mystery of love
2. Miscibility of black bile/ blood
3. Incompatibility and separation techniques
4. Love as an irreversible reaction:  
(fondness/feelings are indestructible  
But second chances = reloading your  
Oppressor's gun)

- **Pure love as a rehab facility**

- **Assessment: Snap Test/Quiz**

If you slept in the warmth of your  
Lover's mouth and awaken in the  
Belly of a grave, how would you  
burrow your way out?

## REGENERATION

Ujunwa, I wanted to tell you about the night when love breathed its last in my arms. How my sobs didn't delay its death. But some love stories must stay trapped under the tongue, behind the enamel cage of our teeth, else its sourness stings the cheeks of the storyteller and burns the ears of the listeners. I know that tomorrow when Mama does not hear the clattering of my typewriter, as it gnashes its teeth under the weight of another poem, she will ask of my whereabouts. Please, tell her that I have gone for a holiday outside my body. To sunbathe my soul under the rays of self-love. Tell her that I have gone in search of the parts of me which went away in a love poem and never returned. Tell Mama that it became necessary for me to make peace with the fact that my body is a holy city where love only visits on pilgrimage. And you, Ujunwa, you have to forgive me because I lied when I said the wounds you caught me dressing with metaphors were not mine. I lied, every time I told you that the blisters on the small of my back were bubbles, ballooning with the fluids of pleasure. I didn't mean to keep any of those from you but I was just giving my lover, Efe, time to pass his carryover papers on anger management and emotional intelligence. That's why I renamed my scars and called the stamps of love. I fantasized about my body becoming a bestseller romance novel, co-written by Efe and I. But instead, my body was gathering smoke. Uju, I am so full of smoke and this holiday is the only way I can save myself from choking to death. I am going under the surgical knife of solitude, to let Time exorcise the tumor of frozen smoke growing in me. When I shall return, I do not know but I'd wander the vast orchard of silence until my heart uses its regenerative powers. I'd learn how to titrate my pain against darkness until the endpoint is light. I'd

dispose of the wilted flowers in the vase of memories and grow my own garden of jasmines. So Uju, when you weave flower crowns with bright red ixoras, and do not find me to model them for you, know that I miss you as much as you miss me. But how else can a woman prove that her dream of healing and its reality are not rivers without a confluence? Is it not by going out with the map of hope to find the town where these two rivers meet?



## AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Ehi-kowochio Ogwiji is an award-winning creative writer whose writings examine womenfolk issues, mental illness stigma, and environmental realities. She blogs at [www.eboquills.com](http://www.eboquills.com) where she shares her thoughts on writing and makes room for fellow creatives to share their craft with the world.

Her writings have been in the Upper Room Devotional, Gyroscope Review, Fitila, ANA Review, and elsewhere. Her poem, “An Artifact of a Groin War” won third place in the 2019 Nigerian Students Poetry Prize. She is also the winner of the 2017 Albert Jungers Poetry Prize.

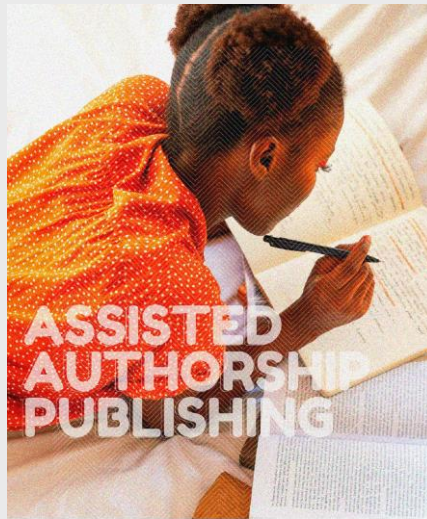


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