



Daughters  
WHO BECOME  
Lovers

AND OTHER STORIES

2017  
WRITIVISM - AFRIDIASPORA  
ANTHOLOGY

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Writivism Literary Initiative, in collaboration with Afridiaspora are publishing a mini anthology of creative nonfiction titled *Daughters who become Lovers*. The anthology compiles stories written by emerging African writers. Ten of the stories were written for and through the 2016 Writivism Creative Non Fiction workshop held in Accra and the mentoring that followed. As a bonus, YKO Tetteh's *A Guide to Losing Love*, which won the 2016 inaugural Koffi Addo Prize for Creative Nonfiction has been added.

The anthology is edited by Otieno Owira. The title story, *Daughters who become Lovers* by Jennifer Chinenye Emelife is co-published by nine other digital and print publishers besides Afridiaspora including *Munyori Literary Journal*, *Deyu African*, *Bakwa Magazine*, *HOLAA*, *Praxis Magazine*, *Chimurenga*, *Kalahari Review*, *Afrikult* and *Kwani*.

The title story is important to us at Writivism and our partners in its publication not only because it addresses a sensitive subject for all of us in the creative world, but also because the creative world is not removed from society itself. Yewande Omotoso, who facilitated the Accra workshop with most of the writers in this anthology writes in the foreword to the anthology:

“When you read the title essay to this publication be prepared for deep streams of anger mixed with anger mixed with anger. If like me, like many, you have survived rape and sexual violence, when you begin to read the title essay you might wish to stop. You might come back to it in another moment or you might not come back at all. The author is brave and so are we.”

We hope that the title story will enable us to reflect on the complexity of sexual exploitation and abuse of power. As convenors of a mentorship programme, where emerging writers are paired with more established writers who are in a position of power, this story is a continuation of our reflection on the safety of emerging writers

in mentoring relationships. The bulk of the stories in the anthology were written under the guidance of mentors. We are grateful to Rachel Zadok, Tiah Beautemont, Melissa Kiguwa and Neelika Jayawardane among others for donating their time to mentor writers on the 2016 creative nonfiction programme.

We are also grateful to Saraba Magazine and Deyu African who published some of the stories in the mini anthology as part of our old partnerships. Yewande Omotoso facilitated the Accra workshop where some of the stories were discussed and developed and judged the Koffi Addo nonfiction prize. We are grateful. Nana Darkoa Sekyiamah and MAKEDA did not only handle the logistics of the workshop in Accra but also endowed the Koffi Addo Prize for Creative nonfiction and was part of its judging panel. No Violet Bulawayo chaired the panel of judges for the Koffi Addo prize. The African Women Development Fund donated money that made the workshop in Accra and presentation of the prize to the winner, possible. We are also grateful to Otieno Owira for accepting to edit this mini anthology. Joshua Rukundo designed the cover. Thank you. Sumayya Lee coordinated the publishing process. To each of our publishing partners, namely, Afridiaspora, Munyori Literary Journal, Deyu African, Bakwa Magazine, HOLAA, Praxis Magazine, Chimurenga, Kalahari Review, Afrikult and Kwani, we are grateful.

Most importantly, we are grateful to you, the reader, for sparing time for beautiful creative nonfiction from emerging African writers. Some stories may make you weep, others will entertain you, others will inform you, others will exasperate you, and we hope that some will edify.

Esther Mirembe

Editor, Writivism

## INTRODUCTION

My grandfather Nana Koffi Addo after whom the 'Nana Koffi Addo non fiction writers prize' is named loved to write. When he passed at the age of 90 he left behind two published non fiction books, two completed non fiction manuscripts, countless published magazine and newsletter articles, and dozens of notebooks and diaries documenting his life, and the various experiences he had ranging from being Editor of Chief of 'The ArkanSawyer', the student newspaper for the University of Arkansas from where he graduated (and I quote his C.V. here) "*Summa Gum Laude*, and first in class of 230 students in 1954"; to working as an administrative secretary in the Prime Minister's Office in the First Republic of Ghana, to founding Black Adam, a distilleries company.

From my grandfather I learnt the importance of telling one's own story - of putting this down in words, and speaking from an autobiographical voice. I think this is especially important for African people, and communities whose own stories have not been sufficiently documented in ways that can live on forever. This is the reason why my family is proud to work with the Centre for African Cultural Excellence (CACE), organisers of the Writivism Festival on the Nana Koffi Addo non fiction writers prize. It is our hope that this prize will encourage contemporary African Writers to keep telling their stories, and that more and more people will support African writers to document our stories for posterity.

Nana Darkoa Sekyiamah

## FOREWORD

When you begin to read the essays in this collection you would soon discover that I am implicated and so my bright idea in writing this foreword was to pre-empt this discovery and perhaps even hasten it. Maybe you read ahead quickly to see whether anything damning is revealed. Hopefully you find what you're looking for! It was however a pleasure to take on delivering the 2016 Writivism Non-Fiction Workshop held in Accra. In fact, due to challenges with my health and wellbeing, I had strongly considered cancelling but on arrival quickly understood I had made the right decision. I love a Classroom. My understanding of this space is that it is, at its best sacred, at its worst devastating with far reaching effects either way. The Writivism Workshops exist in a larger eco-system that involves many starts including mentorship writing competitions and also this book you are holding in your hand. Each year with the growing sense that time is reducing I still agree to participate in some corner of this eco-system, for me it is like ensuring I have access to the stellar; a view of Uranus; perhaps a chance to wave at Saturn.

As was my experience in reading these essays you can expect to feel amused, contradicted, entertained. Being included in the subject of the first three essays by Eboka Chukwudi Peter, Jennifer Emelife and Viviane Ogbonna I found myself, predictably, flattered, defensive and terrified, in no specific order. I don't think Feedback Forms have ever read so eloquently. Expect to be saddened and confused occasionally. To see yourself as I did in sections of YKO Tetteh's piece. Expect to be in disagreement and engaged. Karen Mukwasi writes of the ubiquitous spate of bleaching and her essay brought me back to my reading of Feminist Africa Issue 21 2016: *The Politics of Fashion and Beauty in Africa* edited by Simidele Dosekun. The edition adds the necessary complexity to our assessment of notions of beauty and, as Sylvia Tamale puts it in her contribution, reveals women's bodies as "the battlefield for cultural-moral struggles".

When you read the title essay to this publication be prepared for deep streams of anger mixed with anger mixed with anger. If like me, like many, you have survived rape and sexual violence, when you begin to read the title essay you might wish to stop. You might come back to it in another moment or you might not come back at all. The author is brave and so are we.

Of course you might feel none of the things I experienced, you might feel a myriad of other things or, it must be allowed for, nothing at all. My deep wish though is that you do feel something. My hope is that in reading the voices of these talented writers we hear all the answers to 'what's the point?' The point seems to be embedded in exactly what they are doing, in what they are writing. They are essaying, trying, attempting. They are thinking with and through words, sharing, daring to suggest propose declare. Allowing themselves to be wrong to be not good to be assessed and judged. They too are brave and they invite courage in readers.

Yewande Omotoso

## **PART I**



## **Becoming Nabokov**

**By Eboka Chukwudi Peter**

It is 5 a.m. and the power is out. Though I have showered, I can feel the beads of sweat starting to form on my forehead. My suitcase, a black Samsonite with wheels that wobble violently and a zipper that my sister has warned me is broken, stands in a corner. The day has finally arrived. I have been invited to a writers' workshop in Ghana, and though my heart surges with excitement, I can feel my fingers start to tremble.

My sister has promised to drop me at the airport and as I sit, waiting for her in the darkness, I make a list:

I will visit the mills where the wildly patterned kente cloth is woven. I will search out the local delicacy banku, about which I have heard only good things. I will hunt down also, their jollof rice, long in dispute for culinary supremacy with that of my countrymen, and test those claims. And then, with a full belly I will stand by the road screaming akwaaba at the girls with ebony skins and bottoms I am told shake like balloons that have been filled with water.

In the car I can feel the dread condense around me. It's been but a few years since I borrowed these robes, this title writer that still feels draped, far too lightly, upon me and in Ghana I fear a storm, one whose gusts would seek only to pull them free.

At the airport, the lady at the check-in counter calls me forward. There are bags underneath her eyes and her uniform is crumpled; as though tucked into some dark cubby hole in the airport is a rolled-up mattress on which she has spent the night.

'I'm waiting for a friend,' I tell her as from the corners of my eye I catch Jenny waving excitedly at me from across the hall. It will be our first meeting but I recognize her from the Writivism website. The lady gives me a knowing smile, her eyes even in fatigue, twinkling their judgment.

My seat is located beneath the wings of the small aircraft, a large engine with a feeble looking propeller blocking most of my view. Jenny is two rows ahead and has made a friend. Her shrill excitement floats down the aisle of the cramped cabin.

The plane rumbles as it propels along the runway. I shudder as we get airborne closing my eyes to the sight of a rusty receding brown.

When next I open them, the view is unchanged. Like Lagos, Accra is a rustic brown that seems applied like a photographer's filter. 'Africa is much like a coconut' a well-travelled friend once said, 'brown and fibrous on the outside, but down amongst the people, its heart is sweet.'

At the Kotoka airport in Accra, we must buy a SIM to check the currency rates. To buy a SIM we need to change our money. The woman at the forex bureau beckons at us through the holes of a translucent acrylic booth.

We will find, many hours later, that she has not been sweet.

Eric, our contact, tells us over the phone that he has arrived. His accent is heavy and smooth, like gravel mixed with honey. To get to him we fight our way through a throng of drivers who in a similar accent are offering us everything from reduced taxi fares to unbelievable bed and breakfast discounts.

Eric is young, with soft kind eyes and a chipped tooth. His car is musty and overwhelms us with its heat, and its smells, lingering, of dust and stale air freshener. It is a short drive to the hotel we have reserved online. It is expensive but it is clean. There are fresh towels in the bathroom and, in a small makeshift shed just outside the gates, a woman has a pot on a fire where we can take refuge from its steep prices.

It's an hour's drive from our hotel to Alliance Française, the venue of our workshop, and at 7 a.m., Eric is at the hotel to pick us up. Making our way through the light traffic, he points out excitedly, sights of interest. On our right, the President's face plastered across the body of a municipal bus. On the left is the old presidential palace — a large building that looms like a mountain, of brick and steel, modern yet with the distinct recessed whorl highlights I have noticed in their more rural dwellings.

I ask about the numerous food joints, little shacks of crumbling zinc and wood snuggled between large cosmopolitan buildings. He laughs, a light gravelly tinkle that

fills our space. He does not respond. Like a birthmark present all of his life, he hasn't given them much thought.

The anxiety crawls from my belly and into my head as we draw closer to the venue. We ride the rest of the way in silence.

At Alliance Française, we find our facilitator has arrived. She is a writer of considerable repute and Jenny surges forward, awe and marvel of the gushing kind like waves and waves of the strongest Hausa perfume.

I stand at a distance, watching the exchange of hugs and scented pleasantries, my suspicions an anchoring root. Her appearance screams African Writer, dreadlocks, print dress, and wrists that are dripping with African themed charm bracelets. I do not doubt her prowess or success. I am skeptical only of what she is, what she represents: gatekeeper holstered with the yeas and nays to a club I so desperately want to belong to.

She will hate me, I tell myself when the hellos are done. I do not do well with authority it has often been said, and I fear that my writing is of the style I know in the coming days will cause much dispute.

The room fills up with the twelve other participants and our day is started. Besides Jenny and I are two other Nigerians; Vivian, mild and soft mannered, who is attending the workshop for the second time, and Ndi Charles who is half Nigerian-half Liberian, and is too tall, too loud, too present to pull off with any conviction, his act of grumbling disgruntled writer.

As the sun rises in the sky pulling the day along in its ascent we bond over words, sentences, style and find solidarity in our shared disgruntlement at the fact, newly learned, that lunch will not be provided by our hosts.

Over the next few of days I find little time to be a tourist. Ghana becomes a series of sights, witnessed through the dusty windows of the beat-up Hyundai.

In spite of my dread, the day comes finally when my story will be reviewed, and though we have agreed that they are to be read anonymously, across my prose are littered too many hints, too many chequered flags that draw the group in my direction. Knowing smiles dance across the tables when the critique starts and I sink into my seat

determined to not say a word, to not defend my art though it be, before my very eyes, torn to pieces. In her eyes I find my fears founded. I can tell she does not like my work though she insists, in a voice shrill and chirpy, that she does.

‘It’s too wordy, too verbose, not enough restraint,’ she says. The rest of the class agrees.

‘Less is more, always less.’

And it is almost abominable they think, that I should question this.

I get to the hotel room that evening ruffled. Unsatisfied. I do not wish to come off as brash, and unyielding, but I refuse to submit to the idea of a defaulting minimalism, that less is always, without question, more and that there can be only, every couple of eons, one Nabokov. I fire up my laptop and trawl the internet for articles to defend my position. I find two: ‘The Audacity of Prose’ by Chigozie Obioma and ‘In Defence of Purple Prose’ by Paul West. Perfect.

I send them off to the group, hoping that they will find time to read. They do.

In the morning there is some squawking, and on both sides eventually, a slight shifting of positions. Subtle and barely noticeable, but for me, it is enough. With the validation I need, I go now to die.

And though I have done none of the things on my list, I go home grateful for these robes, secure still on my shoulders.

## **Are You Sure You are Supposed to be Here?**

**By Jennifer Chinenye Emelife**

I was in the staff room working on my pupils' lesson notes when I realised that I hadn't checked my email in two days. My Android tablet had had issues so I wasn't getting email notifications. Putting away my lesson books, I switched on my laptop and looked through my mail box hoping to see what interview request had been turned down and which writer friend was sending me their piece to 'look at'. Then I saw it. An email from Writivism; *Congratulations: Your Application to the 2016 Writivism Nonfiction Workshop Was Successful*. I remember my head reeling as I read through the email. I could have broken out into unrestrained laughter, but my colleagues were watching. I held it all in like a fart and excused myself.

In the rest room, I fell into hysteria. It was, finally, an opportunity to attend a writing workshop. Something I had long yearned for. I remembered the sadness I felt when in 2014, I applied for the Farafina Creative Writing workshop and was rejected. I remembered the reluctance with which I applied for the same workshop in 2015 and the satisfaction I felt at being on the shortlist, even though I didn't make the final cut. The Writivism selection came as my redemption; evidence that I wasn't such a horrible writer after all.

Why the workshop? Is it a wise thing to travel out of one's country, with all the expenses involved (in these hard times) to attend a writing workshop? Doesn't the internet teach these things?! I will say, yes, it is. And yes, it was worth it. The 2016 Writivism Nonfiction Workshop taught me so much that I may never have learnt on my own. First, there is the comfort that comes with being with people who have the same interest as yours. Secondly, there is the exposure and honesty that comes with talking about your passion and fears with people who understand because they go through the same thing; in an air-conditioned room, over coffee and biscuits.

But people don't just wake up and leave their country for workshops. Not with the economic situation in Nigeria. After the euphoria of being selected had died down, I asked myself: do you have wings to fly to Accra, Jennifer? And will you sleep on the streets when you get there? I could hear my mother's voice in my head: 'Chinenye, are

you all right? You don't realise how difficult things are now abi? There is no money now o. Miss the workshop. You won't die. Next year, when you have money, you will go'.

I didn't have to wait till next year, though. African Women Development Fund (AWDF) came to the rescue and I was awarded a travel grant that covered my trip. Beyonce wasn't joking when she sang *Run the World (Girls)*.

The facilitator of the workshop, Yewande Omotoso, had said on the first day that we should all be relaxed. She was particular about each person's need. What is it that bothered you most about your writing and what do you intend to take out of the workshop? She kept asking each participant as she took notes. I had forgotten all the nervousness I felt earlier as I looked into her eyes and explained my trouble with writing.

'You see, Jennifer, this is a serious challenge and you have to learn to get past the fear.'

'I know. I just find it hard to go back to what I've written. I loathe my work after writing it.'

'But we all feel the same, don't we?' she turned to the class and they nodded and chorused 'yes', narrating their personal encounters.

During the masterclass on editing, she gave us an exercise to write an opening paragraph suitable for a nonfiction piece. Then she asked that we rewrite it. Which reads better? She asked me. The second, I replied. She explained the importance of working through one's work and likened writing to architecture. It is fine to have an editor, she said, but writers should also be able to pay attention to their works, seek out errors and work through it, if they desire growth. The actual writing is in rewriting, in editing, and if one is not willing to labour through their work, then why are you writing? I took the question personally and asked myself: Why are you writing, Jennifer? Same question I ask myself now each time I get overwhelmed and try to abandon a piece I'm working on. Same question that drove me to finish a 4,500-word short story I had long abandoned because every time I tried to work on it, I felt I was horrible. But listening to Yewande that afternoon talk about writing and editing one's

own work, about ‘understanding the power you have’ as a writer, I realised fear was not an excuse. And to be a writer, I had to write.

There were other things Yewande shared with us. She showed us a TEDxvideo of Elizabeth Gilbert talking about writing and the doubts and fears that come with it and how to overcome them. She read a nonfiction piece by Ernest Hemingway. There was a discussion on structure and what exactly constitutes a nonfiction piece. Should writers bother about being vulnerable? How much truth can be revealed in nonfiction and what is the place of ethics in writing? I may not be able to capture exactly how I felt during the five-day workshop, but I do remember not wanting to leave when it ended with the International Women’s Day celebration organised by AWDF. I have great memories of the robust conversations on feminism. I read a short nonfiction piece I wrote on objectifying women and I saw from other people's contributions how similar the 'woman experience' is everywhere.

I attended the 2016 Writivism Accra Non-fiction workshop with the feeling of a novice. When I heard some of the writers speak about themselves on the first day, I asked myself; ‘Jennifer, are you sure you are supposed to be here?’ but I returned to Nigeria a confident African woman. Did I become a better writer? Yes. And more importantly, I know now why I (should) write.

## **Looking for the Badge of Honour**

**By Vivian Ogbonna**

Accra beckoned to me from below. Her lights looked like stars sprinkled across an expanse of pitch blackness. As the plane descended, the lights grew bigger. I started to make out the outlines of houses and moving cars.

It was my first visit to Ghana and, I looked out for quirks that defined the country and its people, as I do on every first visit. I also started to worry that I looked different; that I was standing out. But the staff at the airport could have been me: their smooth, dark complexions, their casual motions as they checked our travel documents; the almost irritating familiarity with which the immigration lady said to me, ‘Ah! Mama Vivian, why are you punishing yourself? You can go.’ I had my Yellow Card and shouldn’t have been on the line. I walked away, smiling at her use of the appellation ‘Mama’. It was so familiar, so Nigerian. I felt safe at once — that kind of safety that is born out of sameness, like when you’re far away from home, in another time zone, and you hear a stranger speak your first language.

I cleared my luggage and stepped into a very warm night and a sea of faces. Voices called out, ‘Taxi? taxi?’ Reluctant to pick up just any cab, I shared my worries with an immigration officer. She beckoned into the crowd and a middle-aged man in a white shirt, black tie and black trousers emerged. Mr. Asafo was his name and he would be my unofficial chauffeur for the next few days. ‘That hotel is far,’ he said when I told him I’d already made a reservation. He knew a good place close by and he took me there. About one and half hours later, hungry and tired, I fell into a listless sleep.

I hadn’t built up any expectations about the workshop, because expectations are the bane of reality. My mind was, therefore, a blank slate that yearned to be written on. The next morning saw me up and early at Alliance Française, two hours ahead of schedule. The rustic ambience of the expansive compound — old-style buildings covered with murals; outdoor seating of wooden benches and tables; well-tended lawns, plants and trees; a fence of traditional mats — melted my exhaustion away. A restaurant and bar was tucked in a corner and nestled beside it was the exhibition hall, the venue of the workshop. It was a low concrete structure with wooden beams, steps and rails. Ndi Charles, one of the workshop participants, was seated on a wooden bench, reading. We quickly became acquainted. Yewande Omotoso, the workshop



facilitator, arrived accompanied by Ama, one of organisers of the workshop. We watched as they bustled about, setting things up.

I escaped briefly into the restroom and when I emerged, Jennifer and Chukwudi were there. ‘Hi, Vivian!’ Chukwudi called out, as Jennifer and I embraced. She had sought me out on Facebook after we received travel grants from the African Women’s Development Fund to attend the workshop. In the weeks that followed, we’d share bits of gossip and exchange information about our grant monies and travel plans. Soon, our Ghanaian counterparts started to arrive. There was Fiifi, Nana Busia, Billie, Nana Boateng, Joseph, Richmond, Kwabena and Aisha.

Yewande’s brilliance came to the fore as she handled the sessions with a mix of firmness and conviviality — sessions that were often heated up by Ndi Charles. We talked about ethics, respect and restraint; about perspective, especially as different people would give different accounts of one incident. Yewande urged us not to wield the big stick when presenting an argument but, rather, to present the reader with different shades of the problem to show the complexities in it. This undid all my notions about writers as people who should be all-knowing, who should come at things with certainty, else they’d appear unintelligent.

Like me, most of my co-participants juggled day jobs with literary preoccupations. I wondered how much space it occupied in their hearts. Could they shun the lure of pay checks and regular incomes for full time writing? In my quiet moments, I have asked myself these same questions. I have no answers. Yet.

Each day, the ice thawed further. We talked about our future plans. We suggested reading lists and literary resources to each other. Yewande gave us names of publishers and agents. We pooled monies together so Richmond would provide breakfast and internet service. At break times, we lounged under the shade of the gnarled but leafy trees. On March 6, Ghana’s 57<sup>th</sup> Independence Day, we asked our Ghanaian friends what special treats they had for us. We urged them to display the special Ghanaian hospitality — the concept of akwaaba we had heard about for so long. They, in turn, chided us for coming to Ghana without bearing gifts from Nigeria. Ndi, who Yewande had dubbed the renegade, riled Nana Busia to no end. Afterwards, he’d be seen helping her organise her files in her computer. Ama organised lunch for us, the (in)famous Ghanaian Jollof, served with fried chicken. Yewande and I would share a big pack and she’d leave the bigger portion for me. It tasted just as good as Nigerian Jollof and I wondered what the long-standing rivalry between the two dishes was all

about. On two occasions, I ate Acheke, an Ivorian dish, surprising even myself who's notoriously unadventurous about food. One evening, pining for 'swallow', I bought bitter leaf soup and eba from a restaurant. But it didn't taste the same, neither did it have the same smell — that badge of honour that sticks to your fingers even after many washes.

I had planned to explore Accra, so I'd taken the tro-tro, Nigeria's version of danfo, a few times. Yewande, Billie and I had scoured the Art Centre for gifts. I had interacted with the staff at the hotel where I stayed and the taxi drivers who ferried me around town. Yet, I hadn't felt the pulse of the people as much as I'd have loved to.

As the workshop drew to an end, sadness tinged my excitement. On the last day, Yewande brought apples for us and, while we were feasting on them, the Nigerian writer Elnathan John arrived. She offered him one but he said he'd rather not accept it, considering a certain incident in the history of Christianity when a man had accepted an apple from a woman and the consequences that ensued. Our roar of laughter was a fitting tribute and closure to five days of learning and growing.

## **PART II**

## **When Brothers Become Sons**

**By Jennifer Chinenye Emelife**

1.

I stood in my parents' room on a December afternoon, face puffy, eyes bulging, pleading like a pupil trying to convince her teacher that she didn't need homework.

My father turned to my mother, who turned to me and threw the burden of their eyes at me. 'What exactly are you whining about, Chinenye?' The heaviness in her voice hit me in the knees. I stamped my feet, my tears flowed.

'I can't do it! I can't do it!'

I pranced around the room. I wanted to plunge deep into the mattress, or hit my head against the mirror on the wall until its shards bruised my face.

I loved my life. After I completed my National Youth Service in Lagos, a compulsory one year program for Nigerian graduates, I settled back in the city, refusing to return to Sokoto, to my family. I became the girl who left for work at dawn and returned late at night to eat an apple or two, bathe and collapse into bed. The girl whose weekend meant sleep and write and read. Whose Sundays didn't need rice and stew to be complete, but rather an evening walk to a friend's or a café. I became the girl who walked around the house naked, clothes strewn all over the floor. At twenty-two, I was still adapting to the indecisive and independent life of a young adult. I did not want to be saddled with my younger brother.

'But you should be happy, Chinenye. You won't have to be lonely anymore,' my mother said.

'It is not his fault that you are older, nne. It is the cross you carry as a big sister,' my father advised.

Until Chimezie came along, everyone thought I was the weird one. My sullenness irked my parents and relatives. My fashion sense — flat sandals or sneakers while my peers went girly with high heel shoes — baffled my sisters. The big head that sat on my neck stunned my peers, and I bounced when I walked. Then Chimezie came along and gave weirdness a new definition. Here was a child who spent his early years wearing dresses and wigs. He cried on Sundays to tie a headscarf to go to church. He insisted on lining his eyebrows. All that dissipated with

time, revealing a strong, resolute and disciplined teen. He had strict quiet time we all adhered to. He didn't talk often, but when he did, his words were irrevocable.

But one day in 2014, he woke up and said: *'No more school.'*

He quit his pre-degree studies and said he wanted to be a filmmaker.

My parents sighed and let him go.

He was 17.

'I can't do this, Mummy! I can't even look after myself. Why can't he just stay home and go to the university like everyone else?'

When we were growing up, my father would don his best-starched kaftan, a red cap and traditional beads for our school's Speech and Prize Giving Day. We often came top of our respective classes, my elder sister, me and Chimezie. My father would limp to the podium, leaning on his walking stick, and pose beside us for pictures. He'd never been to university, but swore we'd all hold at least a first degree.

'Why doesn't he just go to school, Daddy?' I repeated, when my mother didn't answer.

His face turned into a blank sheet, perforated only by the words: 'He said it's a waste of time.'

On the flight back to Lagos, I tried to draft a new plot, one that would welcome another character. Hard as I tried, my head couldn't take it. I was a girl with her dream. I wanted to be the writer of my story, and the only character in that story.

2.

Wincing from the pain of a stressful week, I stretched and dashed to the kitchen, mumbling and taking note of the food items that were finished. It was my first Saturday with Chimezie. And the kitchen had to be restocked.

At the market, women nudged me out of the way with their large arms. The prices were strange to me. I questioned the sellers who tried to shoo me off with mocking words and my tongue, alien to bargaining, gave in to their intimidation. By the time I was done shopping, my cumbersome load showed off its ignorance by hitting the behinds of women who turned, warning and cursing. By the time I got home I was drowning in sweat and praying that this new life did not suffocate me.

One night, barely two weeks after his arrival, I was in the kitchen making tea when a loud voice frightened me. I turned to find Chimezie sitting there. I exhaled, still not used to company. He announced that he had a meeting the following morning.

‘Do you know how I can get to the venue?’ he asked, casually.

I put the kettle down gently, and turned to face him. ‘You’re barely here two weeks. Who are you meeting with?’

He laughed, his usual way, shoulders brushing the sides of his neck. ‘I’ll be fine. Just give me the directions.’

My stomach became a river with four words swimming in it: Lagos, frauds, newbie, kidnappers.

At work the next day, I stumbled on the stairs. When I sat down, my legs trembled. My eyes were fixed on my phone, waiting for my calls to be returned. I counted out the hours on the wall clock.

Sometime after that, Chimezie fell sick. I was asleep when he tapped me. Yawning, I looked groggily at the figure before me. ‘I think I’m not well,’ he said. Rubbing my eyes to fully awaken, I examined him. I noticed that his full cheeks had vanished, his collar bones stood out, his arms felt light as I shook them and his legs had lost some flesh and hair.

I remember gasping and muttering *I have failed, I have failed.*

3.

It is two years now since Chimezie moved in with me. After six months studying at the Royal Arts Academy, he worked hard to build a brand as filmmaker. He’s made some influential connections, shot a couple of films and is living his dream. He turned nineteen in January.

‘Well done o,’ my mother said when I sent her pictures via the family Whatsapp group of the gifts I had gotten him. ‘I’m so proud of you, Chinenye.’

I envy Chimezie: his freedom, focus, determination and passion. I feel like I’m saddled with the duty of looking after him; like watching an unplanned pregnancy sprout into reality. I feel the quiet joy of a new life springing out of me; the feeling of a superhero, of an extraordinary being ushering another into life. But I also feel like the sacrificial lamb, or the comma in a sentence; a mere means to an end. At such times, Chimezie would look at my exhausted face, sigh and say, ‘don’t worry, one day,

one day' *one day* being an expression he coined to mean when he would be 'rich and famous.'

I look forward to that day. I will don my best outfit and like my father, pose beside him for a picture on the night he wins an Oscar. I will wave and grin into the camera and even as I write this, my skin is almost leaping off my body with the thought of me being able to walk around my room again, naked.

## **Finding Kira**

**By Eboka Chukwudi Peter**

I picked my way along the cigarette butt strewn streets of Birmingham like an old bull elephant among the charred white remains of its fallen mates, its body and mind long whittled away by the mean of the passing seasons. The night was cold and the wind tore insistently at my clothes as I crunched through the melting snow, unburdened of purpose, searching for the perfect spot in which to set myself down beneath the faux warmth of this alien sun.

It seemed not too long ago that I had been locked up in a cage, a grey sterile thing on the far side of the world that had for three years past become the embodiment of my angst, the pock-riddled body of my mental anguish. Through the hum of the central air-conditioning and the soft whirr of dust-clogged PC fans, the scratching of corporate drudge filtered towards me from the other cubicles scattered about the vast yawn of our office space. I swivelled distractedly in the black mesh chair I'd picked up earlier in the day when I had gone walking down the long fluorescent lit hallway, with its terrazzo floors, walls the sinister shade of crashing dreams.

At the supply room, a large windowless space nestled within the bowels of the building, I'd met Bulus, our gap-toothed maintenance man who spoke with a strong Igbo accent and seemed to carry about him, always, a lingering smell of roasted nuts. He'd been mid-breakfast, a meal of beans and a peppered stew that was laid out, half eaten, on the table before him, thumbing his nose at our propriety. Rubbing furiously at what I imagined to be oil stains on his shirt, he'd escaped through a door partly hidden behind a large stack of dog-eared files to an inner room, pulling from the darkness beyond the black mesh chair, still draped in the tatters of its transparent wrapping.



‘This one na from the new batch’ he’d said. ‘Dem bring them yesterday, strong kakaraka, with lumbar support.’

He pronounced his *lumbar* as *loom-bah*, revelling in the vowels, garnishing the last syllable with a conspiratorial wink that almost slipped by unnoticed as I scrawled my signature across the sheaf of papers he’d thrust towards me with grubby oil-tipped fingers. I wondered about that as I rolled the chair silently out of his office towards my desk. Delight at his grasp of a word as complex as lumbar? Or some meaning wrongly ascribed, a secret to have been shared in the instance?

Back at my desk, I sat staring at my reflection in the blank monitor before me, the clacking of keys coming from the other cubicles soundtrack to my pause. I was too scared to look away, knowing I would almost certainly be able to make out the stale resignation of middle class existence slowly rising around me to gather near the ceiling, thin milky tendrils of a content mediocrity I feared would reach down from their idle hang and seizing me by the throat, choke me in ways that would have made the tie around my neck unfurl in envy.

In Bulus’ world, people such as I had come to roost, nesting in the snug embrace of an easy fortune. A small Oga earning many times his own scant wages, coming to work decked out in the smart clothes and shiny watches, driving the big flashy car, things he could only reference in prayer, wistfully and in the musky darkness of the one bed accommodation he shared with a wife, three children, and a TV you had to smack on the side to get the sound to come through. To be young and free. To be important enough to request and have delivered within the hour an expensive new chair. One that came with *loom-bah* support.

I ought to be content. Be grateful for the things that I had. And yet, it had for a while now become increasingly difficult to be grateful for these things that I had, for the two-hour drive in a leased flashiness, making my way through gridlocked traffic in searing heat to a job that had become mind-numbingly dull and a boss who had become the industry cliché of mean and self-serving: puffy cheeks that choked his eyes into a permanent crimson; a ridiculous guffaw that rolled around the room as he chatted on the phone. A dark, too-long-in-the-industry, corporate whore of a man of

whom I'd spent many hours fantasizing about force feeding the stack of papers in his in-tray.

The highpoints of my days had become the hour-long lunches I took, the first five minutes of which I would spend in the staff restrooms, picking at the scabs of my grief, watching them bleed as I bounced screams off the antiseptic smelling walls.

For beneath the veneer of my content was a trapped animal that longed to be free, nursing a yearning for the dark of the woods, the rich earthy smells of a fresh wild, and howling; deep mournful howls at the moon as it railed against its restriction. Trudging through odious chores, I'd sat day after day dreaming of another life, away from here and, full of adventure. Of time spent with strangers on distant shores exploring a world of art, literature, and history. Of evenings filled with numbing brews and scenic views of wild and glorious sunsets.

No. What Bulus in his effusing admiration could never know, what few people did, was the inheritance buried within the genetic strands of my being, that nestled at the core of my malcontent. A curse I hadn't—in my three decades—learnt to bear with any sort of ease, laying claim already to a sibling before me, one which in my advancing age I could feel starting to take a hold of me.

That night in bed as I lay surrounded by the trappings that had become the fur-lined chains of my self-enslavement, it came to me as though in a dream: visions of me as a sojourner, a traveller of lands, one day standing on the lip of the Grand Canyon, and the next, reclining on a gondola weaving its way along the urban canals of Venice; tossing coins into the hats of street musicians as I wander the side streets of Paris; out of breath swatting at the insects as I plod through the swampy paddies of Vietnam. That night, in the warm longing where I woke, I made a choice between, at dawn, pointing my car at the railings of the Third Mainland Bridge, or walking away and leaving this life, all of it behind.

## **PART III**

## Two Pink Stripes

By Charles King

‘One pink stripe means HIV- and two pink stripes means HIV+,’ says the squat, bespectacled and business-like doctor in the air-conditioned consulting room at the Meldene Medicross in Melville.

It’s late in November 2006 and he’s peeling back the seal on the 5-minute HIV test that bears some irrelevant clinical name.

In five minutes, the course of my life might have to drastically alter. My stomach knots and I’m flooded with nausea. How will the doctor tell me the bad news? Will he put his hand on my shoulder and say, ‘Unfortunately you’re HIV+ and I would strongly suggest you see a counsellor,’ while reaching for a card on his desk? Or maybe because we have some sort of a relationship, he will ask me how I’m feeling.

How many times has this doctor had to tell the person in front of him that their health status is changed, forever? I’ve never been a great one for statuses. Then to lift yourself from the chair and walk out of the consulting room bravely, strongly, fighting back tears. To the receptionist: ‘Do I owe you anything (for confirmation of my death sentence in writing)?’

I mutter a quick prayer. This is a religious moment, one where my life and my choices flash before my eyes. My sense of humour is failing me.

I’ve put this test off since June 2003. A lot has happened in two and a half years since. For one, I’ve just read local journalist and writer, Adam Levin’s book *Aidsafari* and, before that, Judge Edwin Cameron’s *Witness to Aids*. So, it’s very clear in my head that in this span of time, I could have developed full blown AIDS and would have been suffering terribly by now, if not dead.

Levin’s book is what finally got me here, into the doctor’s room: Adam is strikingly courageous and honest, and he *has* suffered.

It's my fear of suffering so much, and wondering if, and how, I would cope with the implications —both physically and psychologically — if I had his CD4 count. Especially as I know from reading his book that he suffers excruciating pain in his feet, that every step is a misery. It was just one of the side effects, other than three different cancer types, and TB, of his particular version of the virus.

I'm overwhelmed, also, by his courage to write this book, and most of all the courage to live his life without compromise in full view of a harsh, critical and very scared world.

If it were me, would I want to live?

Suddenly, it's numbingly clear that all the billboards have failed. Instead, it was the gut-wrenching fear of suffering and the contemplation, through reading a book, of a possible and prolonged death so awful that got me to the test. And to making personal promises to never again get myself to this place through my own slackness, and of taking life (already so cheap in this city) for granted.

'Fucking idiot!' I think to myself as I taste my own emotion, it's that strong. I owe it to myself to know my status and I owe it to all the people in my life. I meditate on this as the doctor jabs my left thumb and a bright scarlet pearl blobs onto the surface.

'Five minutes ...' the doctor reiterates as he smears the pearl onto the pale plastic receptacle.

I've had unsafe sex during this period, numerous times, sometimes by choice with people I trusted. Once, by accident. The condom came off. Never knew it until the show was over.

Now, there is nothing to say. Five short minutes feel like five long hours as we both sit in silence; me staring at the tester, him pretending to be interested, over his silver-rimmed spectacles, in something on his computer screen, both of us waiting for one stripe or two.

Have you ever held a revolver to your head with just one bullet in the chamber? Now I know that I have. A few times. It's called Russian Roulette.

I'm just out from the doctor and I'm sitting at one of my favourite joints in Melville having coffee and most grateful for the thin, but single, pink line across the otherwise elephant grey western horizon. Yes, I'm celebrating being alive, young, thus far HIV- and filled with anger that I should have got myself into this situation, so easily, by the choices I've made.

I want the people in my life to know that I'm going to strive to do all that I can to fight this virus, both in my own life and by not shutting up about it in theirs. I'm not going to contribute to the abyss of silence shrouding this disease.

I could just as easily have been writing now about my tears and HIV+ status. Maybe I will still be doing that in a mere three months' time, when the window period is over and I'm tested again?

The billboards didn't impact me in any way whatsoever: *HIV: Face it! HIV loves skin on skin. HIV loves sleeping around. HIV loves pelegi go supa bosadi.* So what? Although I can identify with most of them, their impact has been zero.

The judges for the 2006 Alan Paton Non-Fiction Award couldn't choose between *Aidsafari* and Edwin Cameron's tale of his own HIV journey, *Witness to Aids*. So, they awarded both books the shared prize, divulging that '...Levin and Cameron displayed exceptional integrity and bravery in laying bare the intimate details of their experience, their struggle and the resolution of their personal crises, as public testimony.'

The impact of their writing, for me, had been life-altering in the perilous world that existed before PrEP (Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis).

I want to scream from the rooftops, *get tested so that you know your status.* Then do all that you can to stay alive and to keep this disease in people's faces. It's no

joke. It's certainly not a protracted bout of flu. I have too much I still want to do and life is too beautiful to die young and stupidly.

## **The Coconut**

**by Winnie Ivy Cherop Kirui**

I have an image of a coconut in mind. The shell on the outside is hard and rough and has prickly fibres. Its inside has a lot of water and a little white flesh. It sits high above the ground and is rare in Kenya because it only grows in the coastal area. When the coconut matures, people come from far to have a taste of its delicacies. Those who cannot have to contend with the unfairness of the middlemen.

In most coastal areas too, you find big, tasty mangoes. While not all people may enjoy the coconut, I am yet to hear a disclaimer on the mango, except rotten ones. Everybody loves the mango. Unlike the coconut, it is fleshy and easy to peel. It is juicy too. Although mangoes are generally available, as they are grown in other parts, mangoes from the coast are more popular because they are bigger and juicier.

Compared to the coastal mango, the coconut knows it has little to offer aesthetically. I imagine that it is vulnerable to low self-esteem. Unlike the mango which is beautiful and attractive, it has to work hard to be noticed. And so, it sits high above the ground to be easily sighted. But that is not the only frustration it has; the coconut worries constantly that even after it has been spotted, the suitor will soon realize that it only has a little flesh that is also plain white, hard and barely tasty. The water that constitutes most of its middle space is also far from the label 'sweet'. The coconut knows that though it will have many suitors, they will soon dump it and settle for the mango instead. For that reason, she is an insecure being and months of worry, fear and discouragement eventually see it fall onto the ground. When that happens, she is sold for a small price while the mango, fleshy and attractive, fetches more.

The coconut must realize that though it can easily be abandoned, it has advantages over the mango. For example, while the mango has a thin skin, the coconut was given a hard shell to protect it from pests and impurities. It has extra security in the narrow opening because harmful things are censored. The hollowness and lightness of the mango makes it a good swimmer. Although the mango is sweeter



and more attractive, the coconut serves a bigger and wider purpose as it has multiple functions and generally is a great team player. Combine rice with coconut milk and you'll see what I mean.

Rosamille Wendot is the Coconut I had in mind. Everyone called her Rosa. In her personal search for greener pastures, she arrived one Tuesday morning from a local public school. Word had it that she had brought herself to the new school without the consent of her guardians, and so nobody would pay her fees. She insisted on staying and they let her be. But the cross would be hers alone.

Seated quietly at the corner desk, you never could tell what she was thinking. Perhaps, she felt alone and different. Perhaps she wondered why they beat her so much. We all knew that she owed the school money. Almost every Tuesday, Teacher Moss called her name and sent her home to bring the fees. And almost every Wednesday morning she rolled back to school neither moneyed nor receipted, even when the harassment seemed unbearable. When she went home the eighth time and didn't come back as usual, they sent for her themselves. But in the weeks that followed, they picked on her mercilessly. In this plantation where profit and grades were the over-glorified output, the slave drivers used the cane without reservations. As a debtor, she became the sacrificial lamb.

I sensed her need for belonging even though she didn't say much. She wanted to be like the other girls. To be carefree. To share in the fun and seemingly juicy chats. I had a glimpse into her grey world through her forlorn thoughts. In this new world where more moneyed parents brought their children, she wondered what it took to be like them. Subconsciously, she searched for approval. For assurance. For stability. For a formula up. For certainty. For popularity. And when she finally found it in high school, she wondered why the thrill of it was so fleeting.

I know this because I lived with her. In her. For her. I was there when she struggled with questions about the world. I read her lonely notes. I raced along in the search for meaning and understanding. She yearned to belong, I knew that. I saw her chop herself like wood to fit. And when she couldn't, I witnessed the misery first-hand. Undeterred, she took the blows with humility and tried again. So much for approval. For assurance. For popularity... And then the puncture happened and I saw

her world crash and gallons of tears follow. Gradually, acceptance seeped in and she swallowed induced insight like a bitter pill. Rising from the floor was the hardest, most daunting task ever. But she did.

I still see those sad eyes from time to time, but this time I have something to say. In life, there are mangoes, coconuts (and more). Mangoes are the popular and more attractive ones. The ones everyone thinks are “cool” because they have personalities that match the part. Coconuts, on the other hand, are the plain and simple ones, the nerds, the ones people consider boring because they generally don’t have what the crowd wants. This latter group receives less attention (until much later in life when there is need for more substance). They are vulnerable to esteem issues. My heart goes out to the uninformed teenage coconut girl who suffers an identity crisis and wonders why she simply cannot fit in.

## **I am Beautiful Too!**

**By Karen Mukwasi**

“Merely by describing yourself as black you have started on a road towards emancipation, you have committed yourself to fight against all forces that seek to use your blackness as a stamp that marks you out as a subservient being.” – Steve Bantu Biko, *The Definition of Black Consciousness* (1971).

Nicely said Mr Biko!

A trader approached me on the street. She wanted to sell me a miracle product that would change my life forever. The cream she had could lighten my skin in just 7–10 days. ‘I like my skin exactly as it is,’ I said. She looked at me as if I had just told her I enjoyed going to work naked, at times. Being the diligent saleswoman, she made more promises. Chinese skin, being one of them. In Zimbabwe, the skin lightening cream has become a sought-after commodity.

I am not Chinese. I am a black woman. So what’s wrong with that? I asked myself later. I was born with a dark skin. Is that supposed to be a disease? Why do I need a miracle cure that will make me a yellow bone?

The Yellow Bone syndrome has become a pandemic in Zimbabwe. It is fuelled by the notion that beauty is based on the lightness of one’s skin. Thus, being a light-skinned black woman has become a status symbol for most women, and having a light-skinned lady on your arm is the dream of several men I’ve met. In local Zimbabwean pop music, a significant number of male musicians pay tribute to the “Yellow bone”. Business in skin creams and soaps that can make this dream come true are flourishing despite the prevailing harsh economic conditions. The ironically named “Lunch Box” is one of the most popular creams. It guarantees bleaching within seven days. In addition to this, more invasive measures such as injections and pills exist on the market, at an exclusive fee.

Not many of my dark sisters can afford the skin lightening creams that have been approved by the medical authorities. As a solution, they visit the Robert Mugabe road in Harare, to buy affordable yet harmful products. Walking down this road, you cannot miss the boxes of creams with ingredient lists that state various forms of mercury; mercuric iodide and hydroquinone. For as cheap as a dollar one can get a pot of cream. Despite the ban placed on these creams by government and the warnings in the media, women are still compelled to slip into an alley to complete a transaction. They risk side effects such as liver and kidney damage, permanent pigmentation loss and skin cancer.

It has been properly instilled in young women, that black skin can never be beautiful. Popular culture presents the perfect black women as one with light skin and long flowing hair.

Zimbabwean medical practitioner and author Dr. Brighton Chireka blames the phenomenon on, ‘The idea that beauty equates with white skin and that lightening dark skin is both achievable and preferable. In many parts of Africa and Asia, lighter-skinned women are considered more beautiful. They are also believed to be more successful and more likely to find marriage.’

I had not appreciated the depth of this problem until I listened to Kenyan actress and Oscar award winner Lupita Nyong’o’s speech while accepting her Essence magazine award in 2014. On struggling with accepting her dark skin colour she said;

‘And my one prayer to God, the miracle worker, was that I would wake up lighter-skinned. The morning would come and I would be so excited about seeing my new skin that I would refuse to look down at myself until I was in front of a mirror because I wanted to see my fair face first. And every day I experienced the same disappointment of being just as dark as I had been the day before.’

This speech was relatable to many dark-skinned young women. It is a fact that many black women begin to struggle with their skin tone from when they are small children. If they are lucky, they’ll become wise enough to understand and critique the culture around them. If not, they’ll succumb to the pressure to attain light skin.

In film maker Ng'endo Mukii's short film 'Yellow Fever', she talks to her nine-year-old niece in a beauty salon. The little girl relates to her how much she hates having been born with a dark skin. When young girls go through childhood despising their own beauty and desiring lighter skin, some grow up with a desire to go out and change it. Many will do anything to get a fairer skin even if it eventually kills them.

My mother always called me a black beauty. And I grew up proud in that knowledge. I consider myself lucky, so many times I have heard women use their daughters' dark skin to insult them.

'Get away. That's why you are so dark,' you hear daughters chastised now and then.

Now if a child is shocked into believing that darkness is her handicap, she will grow up believing that she is not beautiful. Her damaged self-esteem will lead her to risk everything, including all forms of ill health and skin cancer in order to treat that perceived handicap.

To me this is not only a health issue, it is very political. I've always wondered why our women reject the skin colour they have been blessed with? Rejecting your skin colour is just as good as rejecting the person that you are.

Where does one get the courage to take a drop of cream labelled 'White Girl', to rub on their skin?

It's impossible to be a white girl, or in my case a Chinese girl. No matter how much pigmentation you lose, you'll simply become a lighter version of yourself. Those who profit from selling skin lightening creams understand this self-hatred perfectly. It brings in money. Perhaps this is why my Nigerian trader promised me Chinese skin.

Why is it so hard for us to get on with the business of loving being black? We may start with an appreciation of the fact that black women come in different shapes, sizes and different skin tones. Our beauty should never be based on the tone of our skin. Black people on and off the African continent have had complex struggles and triumphs over the powers that have tried to suppress our understanding of what it

means to be beautiful. It would just be good to celebrate our diversity and to find pride in our heritage, which is never allow colourism define our standards.

It's already challenging enough, that as women, most of us tend to occupy second class citizen status in our various communities. But do we really have to feel inferior because of our pigmentation as well?

As Mr Biko said, if you are not proud of your blackness it will be used to oppress you. Rather embrace it and revel in it.

## **PART IV**

## **Daughters Who Become Lovers**

**By Jennifer Chinenye Emelife**

The duvet swells over his body. He shivers, in spite of its warmth, and coughs so hard the hairs on his chin rise and fall. Air swirls out of the air-conditioner, spreads above him like a tent then collapses on his broad chest.

‘Achoo!’

His arms fold behind him supporting a pillow under his head. I sit beside him, toes curled up under the duvet, knees pulled into an oversized polo shirt; an attempt to hide my body. I can feel my heart thumping inside my chest. I try to straighten my shirt, creased from our struggles, hours ago. My eyes refuse sleep as they will on every other night I spend with him.

He sneezes again. I stand on the bed to reach for the remote control stuck high up on the wall. The air-conditioner whimpers and dies. He pulls the duvet over his body and stretches to touch my feet, his hairs caressing my skin.

‘Thank you,’ he whispers, closing his eyes.

‘Do you want something hot?’

‘Yes, please.’

On the other side of the room I empty a bag of cinnamon tea into a mug and pour boiling water over it, my hands shaking. I carry the tea across the room to him, staring at my feet. My toes curl with every step, my thighs part in pain.

‘Here, have some tea.’

He sits up against the wall and smooths the hair on his stomach. ‘Thank you, my love. You are so kind to me,’ he says from between gritted teeth.

I plant a kiss on his forehead, holding my chest to suppress the pounding. He slurps tea and I lie on my side of the bed and stain the sparkling sheets with tears; ashamed.

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On a bright day in October 2014, I waited in the blistering sun, sweat trickling down my face.

‘Hi Jennifer.’ A tall man stood before me, hands in the pockets of his jeans. His fitting polo shirt bulged—his stomach fighting to hide inside his denim jacket, making his chest pop. His dark glasses contrasted sharply with his light skin.

Social media has its benefits: strangers become friends, friends become family. Through it, I have had the privilege of learning from writers more established than myself and interacting with a network of literary enthusiasts from different parts of the world. Mr C was one of them. He’d sent me a friend request months before our first meeting and tagged me, like many friends of his, to his poems which he shared almost daily on his wall. His timeline was like a class, where many gathered to praise and sometimes critique his work. On some days, he’d reach out to me directly with comments about my writing. So when he informed me that he was in Lagos to print his new book and asked that we meet over lunch, I didn’t think it would be a problem.

‘Good afternoon.’

He took off his glasses. He wasn’t as young as I had first thought. The pigmentation around his eyes seemed to reprimand me. ‘Good afternoon, Sir,’ I repeated.

Mr C smiled and shook my hand. We walked to a car parked across the road and sat in the back. He took off his jacket and then straightened my shirt when he saw that I was struggling with it.

‘You may take off your jacket too. Feel free, okay?’

I shook my head and mumbled that I was fine.

‘You are so shy. But I understand. Here, high five!’ I clapped into his raised hand.

After lunch, Mr C spoke of the troubles he’d had as a young writer as though he was talking to an old friend. Every so often he would sigh and place his arms between his legs like a timid child. I could see the pain come alive on his face. He tugged playfully at my cheek. ‘It is a difficult path for the young writer,’ he said.

‘Let me read you a poem I wrote,’ he added. He picked up one of his books from the stack beside him. The lines fell from his mouth in deep whispers; musical, sad and imploring.

‘It gets tough, but we survive, don’t we?’ he said, rubbing his eyes. I reached for his palm, drawn in by the lines and troubles of his past. ‘I’m sorry,’ I said, afraid he would cry.

‘I’m fine, my dear. It’s you that I’m worried about. How do you survive?’

I lit up when he turned the subject around to me. I told him about the stories that I never finished writing and the poems I forgot before finding the right words to commit them to the page. He laughed and rubbed his eyes again, an action I came to associate with him. I smiled, happy that I’d made him laugh.

‘I want to mentor you,’ he said.

The smile left my face.

‘Calm down, I have no ulterior motive,’ he added. ‘I could be your father and even if I wanted girls, I know where to get them.’

‘Trust me, please.’

‘You can call me father now, okay?’

The way he said ‘okay?’ reassured me. I could feel the sincerity in his tone. I looked into his teary eyes and I was filled with compassion. I saw purity. I saw kindness. I saw myself in him and I called him ‘father’.

He spread his arms and wrapped me up, gently, like a new-born. ‘Thank you for accepting to become my daughter, Jennifer. I feel so honoured’.

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The first time he kissed me, it was on the forehead.

Mr C was leaving the city soon after that first meeting, but we arranged to get together again before he left. When he texted to cancel, saying he was unwell, I scurried out to buy a recharge card for my phone. I tried to call, but he didn’t pick up.

Mr C called the following day. He was still ill and couldn't leave his hotel.

‘It’s fine. I just want you to get well.’ I stuttered into the phone.

‘I’m leaving tomorrow. Won’t you come see your sick father?’ My mouth dropped open, I was too stunned to reply. ‘It’s okay if you don’t want to. I see you don’t trust me after all and that’s really sad. I’ll see you when I return. You just take care, okay?’

‘Wait!’ I blurted. ‘I’ll come.’

Shortly after I hung up my phone beeped with a text message bearing the address of his hotel.

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‘Hello dear, tell them you are here to see your father,’ Mr C said when I called from the reception.

At the door to his room he opened his arms and I hugged him. He kissed my forehead and then led me in. There were sachets of pills on the bedside table and books scattered over the desk. His laptop was on the bed. Sitting, he drew the laptop to himself.

‘You should be resting,’ I said, looking through the books on the table.

He shut the laptop. ‘And you are going to keep standing?’

‘I’m just uhm ... uncomfortable. I haven’t visited anyone in a hotel room before.’ I asked if he’d called home.

‘I just spoke to my wife,’ he said, patting the duvet next to him.

I sat on the edge of the bed and lifted my legs gingerly on to it. He shook my body, laughing. ‘What are you scared of? Stop being naughty now, you little baby!’ I laughed then and he smiled. ‘Don’t you feel better now?’

We lay on the bed, talking. He spoke about his wife and kids and I told him about my parents and siblings. ‘It would be nice to meet them,’ he said, pulling me on top of his bare chest. I stiffened and he smacked my bum like a teacher would do to a pre-schooler. When had he taken off his shirt? I hadn't noticed.

‘Can you just be free with me? You this child!’ he said, kissing my cheek.

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After he left Lagos, Mr C maintained a steady communication with me. He would call to find out how my day had gone. He wanted to know if I spoke to my parents regularly, if I had been writing. He wanted to read me his poetry or hear me read mine. He wanted to send money for my upkeep. He asked after my boyfriend. When I asked some friends if they knew Mr C, they all agreed he was an affectionate, kind and generous man. He had a bevy of young people for whom he was responsible. This knowledge expunged any ill thoughts I bore and I grew fond of Mr C. He could tell what was in my head before I spoke and he trusted me with the intimate details of his life; a colleague at work who pissed him off, his son's preparations for an exam, his daughter snuggling up his wife when he wanted to make love to her.

‘My books are ready. I’m coming to Lagos soon to pick them up,’ he announced one day. I screamed with excitement. ‘Why are you shouting? Do you miss me?’ he asked.

I counted the minutes until his arrival, then I bounced to the hotel, my eyes sparkling as I waved at the ladies in the reception. They let me in without question. ‘Dad!’ I shouted, jumping into his arms when he opened the door.

‘I missed you so much,’ he kissed my lips. We sat on the bed and talked about my writing. I’d sent him some of my work and we went through it together on his laptop. Hours later I looked up at the window and saw darkness had enveloped the sky.

‘I think I should leave,’ I said.

He pulled me closer to him. ‘It’s late dear, perhaps you spend the night?’ My eyes darted around for my phone. He cupped my face and tried to kiss me.

‘This is not right,’ I said, pushing him away.

‘Relax sweetheart. Be free with me.’ He took my hand and rubbed his nipples with it. ‘You see? Doesn’t mean anything.’

‘You’re supposed to be my father. Please. Stop it.’ I stood to leave and he blocked my way, saying he loved me. He forced his tongue into my mouth. I fell back on the bed. He fell on top of me, rubbing my breasts. I hit him repeatedly, legs kicking, but he caught my hands and pressed them against the wall. ‘Calm down,’ he said, his face sinking between my thighs. ‘It’s nothing,’ he said, his mouth on my vagina. I felt his tongue slide in.

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When I left Mr C, his poetry sessions and his ‘love’ I lived many months in shameful silence and guilt: I was the adulterer the street preacher spoke of, the girl responsible for that woman’s tears every time her husband was away. Mr C became the man complimenting me at work, the stranger sending me a friend request on Facebook, the nice woman giving me counsel.

Mr C. became nameless musty air that choked me everywhere I went.

My memories of him swim in and out; the day he spoke to my sisters and the day he became friends with my friends. The first day he kissed me and the day he touched my breasts. The night he fell sick. Lunch at the restaurant. And all the days he wore sorrow on his face, apologising. I remember walking back to the hotel with him, before anything happened ...

‘Have you ever thought of us making love?’ he asked.

‘I’d be stupid to do that with you,’ I replied.

‘Why are you so mean? Don’t you love me?’

The day a friend, younger than I am called. Her voice shook as she recounted:

*‘I called him father. He spoke to my mother. She trusted him. He took care of me. He was nice. Then he wanted me to lie on top of him. He said I was a big girl and I was pretending. He tried to pull me. But I ran out. He stopped talking to me. He told my friends I was bad influence. They don’t talk to me anymore.’*

The day I heard another girl cry ‘*He shoved his tongue into my mouth*’ and another, ‘*I’m so ashamed. He sucked my vagina. It’s all my fault. I should have left.*’

‘Why are you doing this to me? You have a wife,’ I said as he climbed up my body.

‘I just want you now. It doesn’t change anything. I love you, Jennifer. Please, relax.’

I remember the feeling of his fingers crawling over my skin. How he kissed me and I pushed his face. How he took off his shorts and stroked his penis, trapping me between his thighs. I shut my eyes and pleaded, every thrust fire burning my thighs.

‘Tell me you love it, baby. Tell me you love it.’

I peered at him through my eyelids, clouded with tears, and could not recognise the man on top of me. By the time the heat fizzled out, I knew I had gone to hell. I hugged my knees and hid my face in the pillow. He caressed my bare legs and lifted the pillow off my face.

‘Don’t worry, it will be our little secret,’ he said.

‘How long will you keep doing this to me?’

‘As long as you remain unmarried,’ he answered, his eyes, wide and piercing, me, clutching the bed sheets, wondering how I had crossed the line.

**Lost Futures,  
or A Guide to Losing Love**

**by YKO Tetteh**

‘The real beauty in life is that beauty can sometimes occur.’

— Colum McCann, *Dancer*, 2003

‘We tell ourselves stories in order to live.’

— Joan Didion, *The White Album*, 1979

There is still time for something to be salvaged.

I make a drastic move, take a chance with a boldness I don’t feel, and place myself awkwardly in his lap. His long body could swaddle me up; his legs lift to bring me closer into an enclosure completed by the doughy flesh of his arms.

He has the soft skin of older men. It’s textured like chicken skin, but also smooth and sanded, drawing my fingers to it, and my cheek.

He says nothing, keeps his eyes on the game, legs outstretched towards the TV. I bring my elbow to his left shoulder and put my fist to my chin in a gesture uniting boredom and expectation.

‘Can I ask you something?’

Hearing my voice is uncomfortable to me. I don’t know how to feel so can’t regulate it – it’s strained slightly, and almost childish. He sighs, lifts his glasses and rubs his eyes with the fingers of one hand. It hurts me, but I need something to happen.

I panic though, in the silence, not knowing how to tell him I’m lingering because I’m waiting for the moment that makes it worth it. Or how to tell him I’m trying to ignore that the feeling between us is not love. That I know it. That when I say, ‘I have love for you,’ it’s because I don’t think I have — but I want to. Though I

can't say why.

I don't know how to say these things, but we both know another reckoning is inescapable, so I grasp at something, start somewhere:

'Will you think of me when I'm gone?' I ask.

'Why would you ask that? What do you want?' He lifts me off his lap, leaves the room, returns. 'I honestly don't know if I will. That's just the kind of person I am.' The words come out forcefully, determined rather than attacking. 'I can't predict these things. I've tried to be honest with you about who I am. I just don't know, and I just can't feel bad about these things anymore.'

He had told me. He'd told me he was 'stuck.' I knew he had four 'elite' academic degrees, and little sense of himself. I knew he was depressed. I knew he was jobless and without hope. And that I was young and dreamy and ambitious — in love as much as in life.

He talks, I talk. We hug, and he walks me to the subway station. On the track I think about the quiet, pulsating sadness in me. I'm tempted to ask, 'How did I get here?' But I resist, because I know how I got here.

I grew up on a potent mix of fantasy novels and anime. On infinite afternoons spent soul-deep in stories that were both epic — and reassuringly predictable. On hours sat swallowing into myself thousands of pages of love stories, journeys and supernatural worlds saturated with meaning. On a bread and butter of crucial quests: for selfhood, and for love. Which is to say I grew into fantastic and deeply compelling (and disastrous) ideas about love, and into a long-enduring faith in the triumph of the human spirit.

I wasn't even nerdy, or particularly withdrawn. I didn't have a bad childhood. I had a large garden, and went to private school, and won all the races on Sports Day. Yet there was something that drew me endlessly into the refuge of lives that were not my own, lives of Protagonists with Great Purpose — and that made sense.

That's something: my life didn't make all that much sense. And because we don't talk about things in my family, I was left to decipher nonsensical happenings alone in my youthful head.



Things like being a British-born Ghanaian girl in post-apartheid South Africa, and being woefully unqualified to decide how to interact with the black housekeepers in my white friends' houses. Things like my father being in my life only sporadically from when I was four till twelve years old; years he spent mostly as a weekend visitor, or the invisible subject of my mother's sneering comments, or an occasional voice on the phone. After which he became an unspoken absence — and that has not changed.

And other nonsensical things like my mother's love. Unfailing, and punishing; the intense love of single mothers who've had to make it work, for years, by themselves. The kind of love that has had to burn relentlessly against hard times and loneliness, so it needs your love for fuel. Sometimes beyond what you might be ready to give.

In this kind of nonsensical world you need cohering life-narratives like, 'We have it together; we are a family.' But, unlike the extensively woven narratives I read, these ones were fragile. Such unwieldy, disruptive things as emotions could never be felt on the surface — only secretly.

So it was on the powerful tides of all those many epic fantasies that I learnt there is an ocean of feeling. That there are capital 'C' characters whose emotional strength is so great it moulds destinies beyond even their own lives. In every one of these emotional movements, in every awakening of hidden magical power, I learnt what it is to feel. And for those feelings to be felt so completely they manifest outside of you in rolling balls of energy.

You can feel everything in these stories.

And that's how I grew up — feeling everything in stories.

Sometimes I narrate my life to myself; matching my narration style to whichever author I happen to be reading. I'll move my mouth around words over and over again until they resonate with some deeply felt truth I'd struggle to define. Sometimes the stories move beyond my body and draw into themselves the stories I've read. To help me, I think, escape, or keep calm.

Like the time my mother stood sobbing in my room, crying that I didn't talk to her — that I didn't love her — and how I tried not to cry. 'And instead shut her eyes and felt the broiling force of her emotions so intensely they burst her skin and

escaped her control as a wild, untamed magic.’

I’ve been worried many times that I’m crazy. I worry now and I worried when I was eleven, and fantasising frequently about a reincarnated Xena Warrior Princess. The mythic lesbian heroine always appeared, with a dazed and darting expression, in the parking lot of a London council estate. And I appeared, shocked but cognisant, from the door to my uncle’s ground-floor council flat. In each iteration I changed some small detail: the words I said, the size of the steps I took, how quickly she came to trust me. Even then, I knew it was not make-believe. It was preparation. Anything could happen, and I wanted to be ready.

When Fantasy is your mother’s milk, such things are as much unremarkable, commonplace even, as they are worrying. To believe the churning monotony of your life can be broken by a sudden and wondrous apparition is the natural movement of the mind. An attitude of belief is its natural state. Which is possibly how my well-stocked imagination came to believe in the shifting, formless thing that was the relationship between him and me.

How I came to be sitting in the same coffee shop, watching for the same man, holding the same yearning desires.

‘Hey, how are you?’ He always exhales this. A short, sharp breath for the greeting, a longer for the question.

He shifts off his backpack, sits next to me on the bench in the wall. I hold myself away from him, imperceptibly, but willing him to note my resistance.

‘I’m well, thanks.’ I smile, taking in the café’s warm, shadowy light, and its small made-for-one tables, before moving my eyes to meet his face.

I almost move my hand to his when he laughs in the middle of our conversation. His lips pull back and he shows his front teeth, giggling in shorter exhalations. His boyish face looks lit and youthful. I’m buoyed and grateful, and realise I was sinking in the swirl of my thoughts and half-aborted feelings. I want more.

But more is not forthcoming. A man having trouble loving himself cannot love me. So I let us talk about food and editing software and how cold it is in New York

City. I don't press him about how he's doing, or whether he's found work, or whether he feels hope. His answers rarely soothe me anyway, and to question would be to belie my longing for him to be well, and grown, and loving finally.

In the books I read, man-boys (lost, weak and slightly dull) go through trials — they are orphaned, or their village is ransacked; they are often poor. But then they emerge as men (cripplingly beautiful, mature, brave, rich). In real life the outcome is far less certain. But hope is birthed in that uncertainty — and dies hard. So that these flailing man-boys of our physical reality, lost on their way to manhood, are always, in some way, utterly absorbing. And, as the flesh-and-blood extensions of the stories that have nourished us, they cannot be fully dismissed.

In their state of empathy-inducing powerlessness, our living forest rangers inspire all the love and faith and support we have given to their fictional counterparts. Their need compels, such that helping them progress in their journey feels like we're progressing in our own. Feels like we are creating meaning in both our lives, so that experiencing their life becomes an important part of ours. Or, put another way, our narrative needs to be an important part of theirs.

As Laurie Penny, writing on *Manic Pixie Dream Girls* (MPDG) and sexism in stories, puts it:

*If we want anything interesting at all to happen to us we have to be a story that happens to somebody else, and when you're a young girl looking for a script, there are a limited selection of roles to choose from.*

If attaching your life to that of someone who doesn't love you is a special type of madness, the literary phenomenon of the MPDG is the closest I've come to a diagnosis. The Manic Pixie Dream Girl term, Penny explains, was coined first by Nathan Rabin. He described her as existing 'solely in the fevered imaginations of sensitive writer-directors to teach broodingly soulful young men to embrace life and its infinite mysteries and adventures.'

Reading this for the first time was deliciously satisfying; it was familiar. Moulding my narrative to that of 'broodingly soulful' men had become, by the time I

reached the doctor's office of Laurie Penny MPDG, a chronic condition.

I had already, in the twenty-three years of my life, devotedly sought to nurture intimacy and hope in that of a disillusioned and penniless Ph.D. I had also, and to much chagrin, dated a 'misunderstood', roguishly beautiful, Jack Sparrow-esque homeless man in Hawaii. And I had certainly — and frequently — heard myself explain in long, circling monologues that such-and-such love interest 'just needed time' and 'a little help' to be in touch with their feelings. (A necessary precursor to transforming into the loving, thoughtful partner I so desired.)

This disease of Manic Pixie-ness is deeply unflattering, and worrying, but also wonderful. It makes things make sense. 'There's a reason why I act this way!' I can cry. I can clutch this information to myself and explain, 'I'm not the only one who does this; it's not just me!'

But also, it's not me.

There's something that's never quite fit: I'm black. And neither in the books nor in the many (many) dreamscapes of whimsy-seeking men are Manic Pixies black. Or of any colour. No, they are cute waifs with sparkling eyes; fragile, yoghurt skin; and delicate bodies.

I should have remembered that we black women have already been assigned our narratives — and they are not the type to inspire affection in the hearts of sensitive men. Our narratives — the ones largely designated by men wanting to map their thoughts onto our bodies — are of a different calibre. We're not excitable, endearingly strange, sensitive or cute. We are 'strong' and 'athletic' and, of course, 'exotic'. Thank you for the compliments, Mr [white] Man.

In the market of romantic exchange, your narrative affords (and robs) you certain allowances and rewards. Manic Pixie Dream Girls are robbed of a full personality, of strength and of agency but they get the hearts of sweet, deep-thinking boy-men and soft-boys. Not really a win, but such is love. Strong black women with thighs and thoughts get to have power. Or whatever you might call that intimidating veneer to our persons. What we don't get are emotions. Or that lovely ethereal quality. We are, indeed, some of the most solid-form human beings you will meet, and we are meant never to waiver; we may be enticing, but never ungraspable.

How we are grasped, as has been the fate of women of our gender, is not up to us. And if how we are grasped is our social currency, then how worrying to feel my actions have no apparent sense or structure — no obvious narrative. I do not fit into either of the categories, or rather, I fit into both. I exhibit the core MPDG behaviours ('Here, suffering man, let me help you'). But my actions, without the context of the MPDG body, situated in a strong, black and dependable woman's body, are even more absurd. I am rendered just a person making inexplicable decisions. And inexplicable decisions often look like stupid decisions.

Like dating a man who prefers solitude to intimacy and does not subscribe to holding hands. A melancholy, tired man, in every single way unsuitable for a dreamy, physical young woman with precisely enough verve to stay in a lifeless relationship for two years. It's not that I haven't known; I know you're not supposed to be afraid all the time of the unpredictable moment. The one that topples the good feeling you work so hard to construct in the short time things are going well.

I suppose I've been waiting, I imagine, just as I waited for dozens of storied heroes before him, for this male protagonist to come into his best self. And for our relationship to evolve along with him. I've been holding, most importantly, onto the hope of such a future.

The hope that I could have something approximating love in something approximating a relationship with someone approximating a mature emotionally developed partner. The hope that I could grow into love with someone. That hope, to a love-naïve, fantasy-reared, dreamy-but-solid young black woman, feels crucial.

If I let him go and rid myself of those alien-seeming manic pixie dream girl tendencies, if I gave up on him and gave into realism, if I abandoned the fantasy of an improbable love, what would the collateral damage be?

I know what I would gain: comprehensibility. Often called by another name: maturity.

I think of this whenever I remember the drive to Honolulu. I'm not with him; I'm with a friend. In the car, I put my feet up on the dashboard, stick my right foot out the window, and curl my toes in the passing wind.

'I have to say, Y—, I think that's pretty immature of you.'

I sit up and bring my feet down. ‘What makes you say that?’

‘I just feel like it’s sort of immature that you want to be with this guy just because you want to be the girl that “reaches” him. He’s pretty weird.’

I start talking.

Pushing out words I already know are failing to make him understand. But I continue, hands moving in useless gestures alongside my voice, because I don’t want to believe I’m defenceless against the settling weight of his judgment. I don’t want to be left alone with the fury of being reduced to such a damning flaw. Or with the hurt of being misunderstood. What seems simple to him seems impossibly complicated to me: why don’t I just . . . not?

So I should be relieved, sitting a continent away in the lounge of my uncle’s house, when I get the text from the man.

‘Hey Y—. I have crazy news. I got married last week. Everything happened really quickly for various reasons. We actually only started seeing each other in the Fall and even then, tentatively. It’s crazy and strange, especially for me, but I was stuck in every way and my life had to change and so I let it. It’s been a hard thing to figure out how to share this with you. Maybe we’ll get a chance to talk about it sometime.’

I move to another room. Clutching my phone, I scramble to exorcise myself of all the hopes at love I had invested in him. I want to be rid of him, and quickly. And to be rid of that extra thing: the sharp, suddenly inescapable feeling that there will be many other people I will never love.

I feel the loss of him (and the others) keenly and abruptly, right in the spot between the bottom of my ribs and my belly button. I wonder if I should cry. I hope I do, and instead feel the pressure of a silence of emotion. I consider cancelling my drinks date with a local artist, but recognise, disconcertingly, that I’m composed enough to go. Instead, my hands move and my feelings grasp at anger. I delete the text and block the contact. His punishment is never to hear from me again.

‘Uncle, I’m headed out!’

But there’s an aching residue of something that feels like sorrow. It’s in my

chest and my throat, and it makes me clench my fingers. Would that I could scour myself of this feeling. Perhaps this is precisely the time to do as people have been calling for me to do: exorcise myself not of other people, but of that irrational, compulsive part of me that pursues poor prospects. Life would probably be easier. Perhaps I should try to find a way. Perhaps those same people calling for change could also tell me whom I would be left to be?

I grew myself up on stories and feelings.

If the risk of getting hurt goes, if the 'bad' decisions and inappropriate men and incomprehensible impulses go, then so do my daring and positivity. So goes my dogged belief in the triumph of the human spirit — and in love. The imagination that has me believing in futures where love is mature (and so are the men) is the same imagination that envisioned what life might be like in other worlds and in other bodies. It is the basis of my empathy. It is the basis of my hope.

Which is what continues to be so disturbing about the text from the man I had hoped to love, who got married. His moving on — so drastically and so swiftly — undermined my imagination and my dreams. I felt him close a door and leave me with a cold new hardness to the undulating, dreamy way I feel through life. Things end.

I have learnt a lesson. I'm cautious. I've said flippantly and spitefully 'all men are liars'. I subscribe to the belief that straight cis men are the worst demographic. I am hurt. I accept the painful but mundane reality that I am not special. I am not exempt from loss. I am not special.

Which would be harder to swallow if not for the stories that got me here in the first place. I suppose a by-product of a near-constant and multiplatform consumption of narratives about Awesome Beings will fast-forward the realisation that you are, by most measures, unremarkably average.

Which is precisely why you live and feel in stories to begin with. Yes, fine, the misery of your own mundanity is painful, but at least you also have dreams. I say that even now. In the midst of the pain (any pain), hope and triumph and love become these tenacious and elemental forces — forces upon which you draw in the process of creating your narrative. One replete with Significant Moments and a sense that you

might just be, or at least experience, something more.

It's actually pretty . . . hopeful.



## ABOUT THE WRITERS:

**Eboka Chukwudi Peter** is a writer of Literary Fiction and Creative Non-Fiction. In 2016 he was announced winner of the Saraba Manuscript Project for his collection of short stories *Mosaic: Stitches of stories lived, stories learned, stories told*. He attended the Farafina Creative Writing Workshop with Chimamanda Adichie in 2008 and in 2016 the Writivism Nonfiction Workshop that was held at Accra Ghana. He has had works published in Saraba Magazine, Blanck Digital, Happenings and The Africa Report. He lives in Lagos and is currently at work on a novel. He is an avid aquarist.

**Vivian Ogbonna** has a Bachelor of Arts degree in English Language from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. She was a Goldman Sachs Scholar at the Enterprises Development Centre of the Pan Atlantic University, Lagos, and currently an alumnus of the Cherie Blair Mentoring Women in Business Program. Vivian is an Interior Decorator by profession. In 2015, she participated in the Writivism Creative Writing Workshop in Lagos, Nigeria. Her short story, *A Ball of Thread*, was long-listed for the Writivism Short Story Prize. She has also been published in The New Black Magazine, Olisa TV, Sahara Reporters, Premium Times Blogs and My Mind Snaps/Blog.

*A man with a beautiful mind:* **Charles King**, who's still alive with idealism, is a lecturer and writer in Cape Town where he teaches journalism, including the reporting of climate change and homophobia. While he knows the world's not perfect, he's adamant that it can be improved and strives to do just that via (Achebe's) words of 'meaningful optimism'.

**Karen Mukwasi** is a social entrepreneur and women's rights activist. She is the coordinator for Women Filmmakers of Zimbabwe, and runs the International Images Film Festival for Women in Zimbabwe, Uganda, Somalia, Malawi, and Kenya. Her short story *Before Dawn* features in the anthology titled *A Family Portrait*. Her work has also been published by Her Zimbabwe, a web based platform that promotes the voices of Zimbabwean women. She is an alumnus of the Mandela Washington Fellowship where she studied civic leadership at Indiana University.

**Yvette Tetteh** (b. 1992) is a British-born Ghanaian artist, yoga teacher, and aspiring farmer. She holds a BA in Cultural Anthropology, and French, from Stanford University (CA, USA.) Her work is centred on the black body, and the intersection of intimacy, reserve, and performativity. Her astrological signs are: Cancer Sun, Aries Moon, and Gemini in Ascendant. This sums her up perfectly. Yvette is based in Accra, Ghana and is the winner of the Koffi Addo Prize for Creative Non Fiction.

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