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Message from the Chair of the Editorial Board

Happy New Year!

I am excited to finally share with you Volume 2 of the Journal of the Writers Project of Ghana (JWPG). Our original plan for the journal was to publish more than one volume every year to give Ghanaian writers ample opportunity to share their work with readers. But we have learned from experience that we would have to adjust our goals in line with some issues on the ground.

This volume was originally scheduled to be published in October last year (2023) but this became practically impossible due to some exigencies. For us, this volume is as special as our very first publication because it signals that we are gradually moving beyond the debut stage. Besides quality of content, journals are judged also by the reliability of their publication process. Thus, in spite of our limited resources, we remain committed to consistently and efficiently publishing the best of Ghanaian writing. This volume would not have seen the light of day without our hardworking writers, who exhibited exceptional patience throughout the entire process. We thank them for believing in the project and staying with us in spite of the many adjustments we made along the way. I also thank the editorial team, who—as always—worked tirelessly to make Volume 2 a reality.

This current collection consists of poetry and fictional prose of various kinds. It opens with poetry (“Home or Our Journey is Still Long” and “Goodbye”) from Anima Adjepong. At the core of Adjepong’s poems are the themes of connection and belonging. In “Home”, for instance, the persona is completely at home with the “Dark bodies” of the “fishermen”. In “Goodbye,” it is the sense of communion that the human and non-human share as they observe three dolphins at play. But perhaps, what is even more insightful about Adjepong’s exploration of these themes in both poems is the ecocentric (rather than anthropocentric) emphasis. In “Home”, we observe the contradiction

between the subliminal interaction humans have with the natural environment (e.g., “the white waves”, the “shores”, “old fish smell”) and the dominating presence of the “high rises” or “the tall gray buildings” (which could be read as symbols of capitalist modernity). While the reference to “wɔgbɛ jɛkɛ” evokes a sense of cultural pride, the “high-rises” persistently remind us that the persona’s home is not “paradise”.

The collection also contains poetry from G. Edzordzi Agbozo, Samantha Boateng, Mz Lyrx, Nenyi Ato Bentum, Afua Awo Twumwa, Lebene Abena Dompseh, Amenuvor Agbitor and Eric Tetteh. While this volume—like our previous publication—is not themed, there are clear patterns in the poems published here. Many of them explore socially-relevant themes including those related to the environment (see Agbozo’s “July Flood” and Agbitor’s “The Rains Will Come Again” and Bentum’s “Mood”), female sexuality in the face of patriarchal power (e.g., Mz Lyrx’s “My Eye and Fine Man”), body politics (Boateng’s “Body no bi Firewood”), mother-daughter relational dynamics (Twumwa’s “Not Everything is Love”) and the absence of care for the most vulnerable in society (see Dompseh’s “I Met God” and Baiden’s “A Little for Food”).

Good poetry is characterised by a masterful use of language that creates sound and sense. What makes these poems truly outstanding is their use of images that stimulate our imaginations. For instance, Agbozo’s three-stanza poem “July Flood” explores a subject that is all too familiar to us—Accra’s perennial flood problems. What makes this poem successful is its use of fresh images to explain this problem in strange new ways. The persona tells us that “Accra is a giant piano by the sea” which out of anger “brought the sea to her room”. There is a mythic quality to Agbozo’s aesthetic innovations in this poem. Readers might find the descriptions and narration out of this world but they capture perfectly the bizarre environmental catastrophe stemming from the sacrilegious actions (for “we hurled stones at patience”) of the children of nature. Agbozo’s poetics borrows from the African folkloric

tradition but it is also in conversation with the works of writers like Samuel Taylor Coleridge who remind us that crimes against nature come with severe spiritual consequences.

Two of the poems (Mz Lyrx’s “My Eye and Fine Man” and Boateng’s “Body no be Firewood”) are written entirely in Pidgin English. As we indicated in our first volume, JWPG is a multilingual journal that publishes content in all Ghanaian languages, English and its variants. We did not include these poems in this volume merely because they fit our language policy or publication politics. There are several layers to the use of Pidgin in these poems that align with some of our expectations for successful Ghanaian writing. Historically, Pidgin English has been considered as a male code and is often deployed in Ghanaian literary and cultural texts to other those who are already socio-economically marginalised¹. While there are ongoing shifts in the sociolinguistics of Pidgin English that have seen the language being used in public discourse (e.g., advertisements, political campaigns), it is still largely coded as masculine and deviant. This context highlights the poetic significance of Boateng’s and Mz Lyrx’s use of Pidgin.

In Mz Lyrx’s “My Eye and Fine Man”, the persona has fallen for “dis Fine Man” but she decides not to express this feeling because it would attract social repercussions. She would be called “tuutuu madam” (a prostitute) for being audacious enough to take such an action. But in making her feelings public through poetry and choosing to do so in Pidgin English—also, historically associated with prostitution², the persona is already within the realm of the socially deviant. The per-

¹Dako, Kari. “Student Pidgin (SP): the language of the educated male elite.” *Institute of African Studies Research Review* 18.2 (2002): 53-62; Dako, Kari, and Helen Yitah. “Pidgin, ‘broken’ English and Othering in Ghanaian literature.” *Legon Journal of the Humanities* 1 (2012): 202-230.

²Dako, Kari. “Student Pidgin: a masculine code encroached on by young women.” *Gender and Language in Sub-Saharan Africa*, edited by Atanga, L.L. et. al., John Benjamins, 2013, 217-233.

sona ultimately questions why women are not allowed to express their sexual agency. Thus, in using Pidgin, Mz Lyrx is linguistically signifying the persona's defiance against the strictures of a patriarchal society and its normative expectations of appropriate female behaviour.

Many of the prose fiction feature dynamic female characters. Not surprisingly, many of the authors of prose (and other works in this volume) are women. We celebrate this because the Ghanaian literary canon, as many elsewhere, is dominated by male writers. Emmanuella Dekonor's novel extract "How to Make Sticky Finger Soup" is set in an elite all-girls boarding school in 1970s Ghana. It contains many of the features of boarding school life—bullying, gossiping and friendship. While the intriguingly witty dialogue of the girls draws readers into the author's imagined world, it is really the final act of resistance by one of the girls—she pours a bucket of water in the face of a soldier who had taunted her with sarcastic insults—that's truly unforgettable and creates tension that would possibly sustain the rest of the narrative. At the centre of Petra Aba Asamoah's "Black Starry Eyes—Ekuba, the Enigma" is Ekuba, an independent-minded woman who had married thrice, sacking her first two husbands for respectively lying and trying to control her. At the core of the narrative is how she uses storytelling to build a relationship with her granddaughter Yaba. In Portia Dery's "Collector of the Dead", a dead woman who believes she and other dead people have been ignored by death and God becomes a freedom fighter for other dead people. Azags Agandaa's "Poka" tells the story of a girl who reports her parents to the police after realising that her sister died through circumcision.

The two other stories are unique as far as form and content are concerned. Snow's "Songs of Fire" takes us on an unusual journey into the world of fantasy. Here, school children on an excursion with their teacher turn into fire. Snow's narrative deploys mythology around the Dagomba Fire Festival to imagine a world that is both scary and beautiful. It is a good example of the sort of experimentation one finds in

the kind of fantasy and sci-fi writing being produced in Ghana and the continent at large. The collection concludes with Michael-Angello Sarbah's "Blindsided", a short story that explores how a couple, diagnosed with the Coronavirus, navigates and manages their relationship in an unusual time. In many ways, this story anticipates the theme for our next volume, which would focus on health and medicine (broadly defined). That would be our first themed collection. Please consider submitting to us when we send out the call.

In the meantime, share, read and enjoy our latest volume.

Nancy Henaku, PhD
Chair, Editorial Board (JWPG)

Poetry

Anima Adjepong

HOME, OR OUR JOURNEY IS STILL LONG

White waves crash against brown shores.
On the horizon, blue ocean meets blue sky.
To the east, high rises remind me:
This isn't paradise.
This is home.
Just ahead, fishermen set out for an early catch.
Days old fish, ocean water, and sweat
Dark bodies glisten in the early morning heat.
Red canoes, black nets, brown sands, sweat and old fish smells.
No, this isn't paradise.
This is home.
I'm everywhere with them
These dark sweaty men
In their red canoes on the brown sand.
We make our way towards the ocean
Wɔgbɛ jɛkɛ
Three strokes and a heave

Մոյ՛ն տունը

In the east the tall gray buildings remain.

This isn't paradise.

This is home.

GOODBYE

1.

On a stroll between sunset and the waxing gibbous moon, birds dawdle and waddle along the shore. The ocean, she laps the cracked shells and children's markings in the sand. Wave after wave running into one another. A fin bobs above the water. Then another and another still. It's a trio of dolphins playing in the wild, peeking up to watch the setting sun, as the wispy silver moon caresses their backs. And there we all are, sand and birds, fish and shells, seaweed and land mammals, enjoying the moments as they pass, one into another.

2.

A wispy thing, hanging in the eastern sky. Is that longing with which you stare at that heaving yellow orb? She nestles into the clouds just there, across from you, burning bright in her descent. You wave, beseeching the ocean to channel your message. Hello, goodbye. The sands, still and bright, silver and gold, touch the waves and roll into the sea. They swallow your greetings.

3.

There is nothing left.

Anima Adjepong is a multidisciplinary scholar-artist whose work examines themes of embodiment, belonging, freedom, and what we owe to one another. They are the author of the 2021 book, *Afropolitan Projects: Redefining Blackness, Sexualities and Culture from Houston to Accra*. Anima lives in Cincinnati, OH.

Prose

HOW TO MAKE STICKY FINGER SOUP

Emmanuella Dekonor

An excerpt from the novel.

BASIC INGREDIENTS

The revolution came to school on a washing day wind. It was the first Saturday of the term and the beginning of a more confident Blessing. There'd be no more shyness in her demeanor. No hesitancy at all. A senior now, juniors would jump when she called: Sister Blessing, what can I do for you?

Her peers too would notice the change in her. She wouldn't give anyone her small money after they'd finished spending theirs. Mama had warned her: 'You're taking O'Levels now. Stop allowing people to push you around. Especially Ama!'

Mama was right. Her best friend should respect her.

It should have been a good washing day. The sky was misty, tricking like big sunshine wasn't inside that dullness. She'd pushed her head

out of the only window in the second-floor dorm, congratulating herself as she always did, for choosing this bed, this view.

The school's courtyard spread out like a worn-out kente formed of weeds and potholes. A row of too-often-repaired benches perched on the edge like matchstick figures. The kente grew smoother as it unfurled by the Head's office and the Sick Bay into the newly tarred driveway rolling down to the Point of No Return. From there only Small Ankoma the school's watchman, and a fruit tree boundary shielded the girls from the world outside.

She closed her eyes to conjure the scent of sun on ripe fruit. Fill her lungs and hold it in until her fingers tingled with the effort. She felt her face tighten. Eyes open, her nostrils twisted in disgust. The scent of the new driveway, like pepper, like petrol, filled her throat. Gossips said Small Ankoma had cheated a trader for cheap tar but the joke was on him because this tar was spoilt.

Her stomach turned. Her mouth filled with saliva. She ran for the bathroom, a hand pressed to her mouth.

Over the balcony she heard the *ka-lang ka-lang* of aluminium buckets swinging in the breeze.

Girls were crossing the courtyard to do their washing at the playing fields at the bottom of the driveway. She spotted Ama carrying her yellow plastic bucket alongside – she felt her eyes bulge in surprise to see her - Rose Mensah.

Ama looked up. 'Hey Blessing!'

She waved through pursed lips holding back spit.

'Are you washing today?'

She gave an indecisive shrug.

'Come, we need you!' Ama turned to Rose, 'Can you sing?'

Rose shook her head.

'Come on.' Ama said. 'Washing day last week was so dry without any singing.'

Could she open her mouth to give Ama an answer? Swallow? The thought filled her cheeks with more bile.

Ama put a hand at her hip. 'Rose, is she just watching us?' It was strange to see them together like that. Ama often derided Rose for coming from Edolemodzi, a village famous for a large hole in the middle of a road where thieves and prostitutes robbed those whose cars broke down there.

'People only say Rose is pretty because she is half-caste.' Ama said. 'Blessing, if she was dark like you, they wouldn't mind her.'

Ama certainly minded Rose. She was different around her. Her accent changed. She called everyone love and said she was going to spend pennies when she needed the toilet.

'Blessing! Pretty please with cheese?'

She attempted to signal yes, throwing a hand in the air. Her throat opened; her body folded in disgust. She rushed to the opposite balcony, spat onto the bushes below. Up ahead, an armoured truck was speeding down the road to Kakumdo, trailing red dust.

Everyone said there would be a second revolution. Six months had passed since the last attempt. Still nothing. Girls like Ama whose parents knew politics said the revolutionaries' ringleader had the correct passion to help people in the rural areas. He didn't realise that people in the cities were also hungry. Now he was locked up facing a death sentence.

Behind her, the sound of girl chatter swelled.

'Blessing? Love? You're beginning to tick me off.'

She rushed to stuff her laundry into her aluminium bucket and flew down the stairs.

'Wait for me, oh! I'm coming!' She'd known the sky was tricking.

That when it came out the sun would burn fierce. She didn't know it would cover her like a blanket. That the air would smell of fresh tar,

ripe fruit and sweat. The driveway was sticky underfoot. Everyone walking slowly. There was a throng of girls behind her. At least twenty in front.

She took in a deep breath; it was now or never. 'Rinse!'

Ama and Rose swung their buckets as though they'd not heard her start the singing for the first time ever in her life. She, Blessing Mawuli. Girls around her were chatting as though they'd also not heard. Was her voice not loud enough? The key was wrong? Maybe they hated her. She couldn't think. The sun was too hot, the air sweet.

Behind her, someone responded in perfect alto:

'Rinse Oh, Rinse!'

Up to thirty, maybe one hundred hands clapped. Girls danced or cartwheeled down the driveway. Others beat out a *gbeng-gbeng* rhythm on their aluminium buckets as they sang:

*our troubles will be as water
trickling down a drain
and so with joy and laughter
we will be new again
sweetie your tears will vanish
all sorrows we will banish
all we have to do is
rinse and rinse again
rinse oh, rinse!*

'Look at that smile!' Ama said. 'Silly moo! Aren't you pleased you came?'

She could barely feel her face. Even her ears were smiling.

‘So, you can sing.’ Rose eyed her. ‘I thought you would just be flapping your lips like do-re-mi blah blah!’

Ama squealed. ‘Rose! Honestly love, I’m cracking up!’

Blessing shaded her eyes to look for washing spots along the fruit tree boundary. Girls with the same idea were running across the racing track where the school’s five houses – Ata-Aidoo, Baldwin, Compton, Davis and Equiano – competed on Sports Day. The most coveted washing spot was out of bounds, a large mango tree with foliage like a giant afro and mangoes dangling down like earrings.

Neither Ama nor Rose seemed concerned about the mango tree, so Blessing held herself back from running to reserve a spot. There were plenty of trees around but even the broadest leaves could not provide enough shade from this heat.

The earlier mist had dissipated. The sky was now blue, now golden. Between serene and searing. Only birds and monkeys had energy enough to flit and pitch between the trees as they did. Blessing felt the grass crackle underfoot where increasing patches of bald earth had overtaken the green. The single goal post and volleyball bar stood in fallow earth at the top of the field.

Blessing went to place her bucket at the end of the queues for the tap.

‘Relax love. My Fosuwa is at the front of the queue.’

Rose winked. ‘Important people have juniors fetch their water.’

Blessing wondered how Ama had grown so close to Rose who generally kept to herself. That was part of the mystery about her. No one knew anything about her apart from the gossip they heard. People said she was the prettiest girl in school, but they also hated her. Rose was supposed to be a poor scholarship student, but she had nice things like her blue plastic bucket, imported soap and softener. Some girls said it

was Rose's mother who pushed her to accept school fees from an older man. Others swore that Rose had encouraged the man herself. As she recalled the gossip, Blessing realised with a jolt that it was Ama who had told it to her.

'Ah, here's darling Fosuwa.'

Ama waved at a skinny junior carrying a large bucket of water in each hand whilst a third bucket balanced on her head.

Fosuwa rolled her eyes in the direction of the mango tree at the far end of the field.

'Smashing! We're under the mango! Come! Before somebody steals our spot. Fosuwa will go back and forth until she has filled all our buckets.'

'It's okay, I'll fetch my own water.'

Rose said. 'Ama, see how she's smiling from her nose. She doesn't approve.'

'Blessing, love. You don't think I'm taking advantage of Fosuwa? I protect her so others don't bully her. And one good turn deserves another. Any fool knows that.'

She wrenched the bucket from Blessing. 'Fosuwa! One more.'

Fosuwa nodded. The bucket on her head wobbled, spilling water.

Rose shouted. 'I dare you to drop that bucket.' Ama squealed with laughter

Fosuwa turned towards the mango tree, but she was laughing so hard the bucket leaned to one side, spilling more water. Then she tried to make a dash for the tree. Blessing gave chase and caught the bucket before it fell. Everyone laughed.

Ama put her arm around Fosuwa. 'Poor love. You need to go back. We need more water if we want clean knickers!'

It was only when they stepped over the big mango roots that Blessing smelt the stench.

She squeezed her nose at the others. 'Hydro sulphuric acid.'

'Not acid darling! Rotten eggs!'

Rose laughed. 'See why you failed biology!'

Ama gagged. 'Oh Ghana! Why dump rubbish near a private girls' school!' She was so disgusted she slipped back to her Ghanaian voice to say, *kai* which *kwasia* did this?

From behind the tree, a high-pitched voice mimicked her. 'Oh Ghana! See how they've spoilt our lovely private school!'

Blessing stepped back.

Ama shouted. 'Who's there?'

A male voice replied, 'Who are you?'

'How dare you mock me?'

Blessing said. 'We're already out of bounds. Let's go back.'

Rose said. 'Please Sah, we only want to wash our clothes.'

'Darling, don't beg him!

The man laughed. 'She should beg-oh! Does she know who is behind the tree?'

Fosuwa looked about to cry. 'Sister Ama, I don't want trouble.'

Ama dismissed her with a flick of her hand, shouted. 'Go and bring Small Ankoma.'

'The school watchman?' Rose replied. 'With that black dog?'

Blessing added. 'They say he threw an intruder like he was smashing coconut.'

The man sounded amused. 'So Small Ankoma is coming to beat me?'

'We're only advising you.' Rose said.

'So you can leave safely.' Blessing added.

'I didn't know the pupils from Methodist Girls' could lie like that.'

Blessing looked from Ama to Rose. 'Let's wash somewhere else.'

'Or you can stay and help me wash some things.'

There was a sound like feet shuffling, a snapped twig and there he was: standing bare-chested before them. He was a soldier by his patch-coloured trousers, his black boots. He held a chewing stick at the corner of his mouth, leant his tall frame against the tree. He might have been an ordinary man without that soldier confidence. His skin was translucent. His features... he was handsome. This last thought frightened Blessing so much, she shouted.

‘We’re not here to wash any soldier man’s clothes!’

He raised his chin at her. ‘Is that so?’

She bit her lip.

‘But of the three of you, you are the one who looks like someone’s housemaid.’ He turned to the other two. ‘Isn’t it?’

She hated them for staying silent and him for that stupid grin.

The soldier hooked his thumb into a loop at the top of his trousers. She should look away. He was nothing. Shirtless and jobless after a failed revolution. What at all could he do?

He folded back his trouser waistband to reveal a gun.

‘Please Sah,’ Rose’s voice. ‘We don’t want trouble.’

He pointed his chewing stick at Blessing.

She stared at the gun.

‘What’s your name?’

She searched his face for something to make him kinder. There were scars by his eyes, on his chin. Should she just drop to her knees and beg him not to shoot?

‘Her name is Blessing.’

Ama’s voice.

The soldier laughed. ‘Of course. That will be your name. Blessing, this is what the white man calls irony. Three private school girls are standing in front of me. You are the one whose skin is black from bending in the sun to wash clothes, the one walking with a heavy aluminium bucket when her friends are using plastic.’ He smiled as though

she could also appreciate the irony. ‘And yet you are the one who is too big to help a soldier wash some things.’

‘I am sorry.’

Ama stepped forward. ‘We’re out of bounds. Our caretaker Small Ankoma will be looking for us.’

‘Out of bounds! So, we’re no longer on private property?’ Ama’s face fell.

He scratched his head. ‘But you’re still talking of this watchman.’

Rose said. ‘Everyone is afraid of Small Ankoma...’

‘Finish with this nonsense lying!’ He pulled the gun from his waistband.

Ama screamed. ‘Please!’

He waved the gun in the air. ‘Blessing, today you will wash for a soldier. ‘You two, run and I’ll shoot your back. A very painful death.’ He gestured behind him to the other side of the tree walking backwards.

‘Blessing, bring the bucket.’

The mango tree seemed broader and wider. The bad scent intensified.

She rounded the curve of the tree to where Small Ankoma’s red canvas shoes lay, their laces tied in neat bows against his upturned feet. His faded blue jeans were orange around the groin area where he’d soiled himself and spoilt the air. His hand was pressed against his blood-stained t-shirt. One eye was vacant, the other swollen shut. She felt her breath stop. Small Ankoma’s dog whimpered beside him.

The soldier laughed. ‘I like you, Blessing! Me too, I don’t know which animal to help.’

‘He’s dying!’

‘Are you sure? From what sickness? Corruption? Do you know how people talk about security at your school?’

She stared at the gun.

‘They say the only criminals who enter this school are the ones who pay fees. Your friends, who are their parents?’

Ama's father, PB Owusu was famous for his hatred of soldiers. He would discipline this one properly for setting his foot near the school. The thought made her smile inside. Then she remembered the gun.

'I don't know.'

'Do I look like I wash my face from the chin up?' Saliva sprayed from his mouth. 'The half-caste one: WHO IS HER FATHER?'

She was trembling. 'She - it's her mother who looks after her.'

'The father is the white?'

She nodded.

He paused. 'It's like that with our leader. The white men think they can drop their load in Africa and go. They too, their time is coming.'

He took a step towards her. 'There are other parents, or have you forgotten?'

She shook her head. 'Please. I don't know anybody's parents.'

He sneered. 'Methodist Girls' School. Best school in West Africa. Those who spoilt Ghana sent their children here. But you?'

She could laugh at the idea that Dada who didn't have a fixed job could spoil Ghana. Or that Mama whom he sent to beg the landlord whenever rent was due could be responsible for the country's problems. She could kiss her teeth and call him a fool for pointing the finger at her poor parents. But she was trembling and could not speak.

She felt him stare at her, taking in the shrunken afro she didn't plait last night, her faded weekend dress with the torn pocket down to her dusty chale wote slippers.

'Your mother prepared ètor the day they gave you scholarship to come to this school, isn't it?'

She gave a quiet nod, unnerved at how easily he pictured her family celebration. The yam came from Boafri at Kete Krachi. Her brothers brought the eggs straight from the landlord's chicken coop. They'd crowded round Mama as she mashed the boiled yam with spices before mixing in the delicious palm oil. Dada said the scholarship letter

from Methodist Girls' High School was a sign her life would be meaningful for the whole family.

'You ate it with peanut?'

'No.' She lied.

'Ah, you missed. When they sprinkle peanut on top, it's like the ètor is the only food you can ever eat. Next time tell your mother.'

She lowered her eyes.

'For me, your parents didn't do proper calculation. You can be here in this school, but the rich girls will never accept you.'

There was no air between them. He stood so close; she could see chewing stick residue around his mouth. Soldiers were evil. Ama's father was always mocking them on the television. This one had seen her life so clearly. She hated him.

'Why did you kill Small Ankoma?'

He crouched down to look at him setting his gun down as he did so. He peered into his face, 'He's alive-oh!'

He thrust his fist into Small Ankoma's face. She wasn't prepared for Small Ankoma's scream. She felt it as though she was the one who'd been struck.

The soldier pointed to the liquid running down her legs. 'Madam Blessing, are you a baby?'

She wanted to cry.

His face softened. 'You can go, eh? Leave your water.' He gestured towards a bloodied shirt next to Small Ankoma and the gun.

She could run back and try to forget the day. But he'd insulted her and made her hate herself. She raised the bucket to be sure of her aim and threw it in his face.

Emmanuella Dekonor is a British-Ghanaian writer. Her work has been short-listed for the 2019 Myriad Editions Daughters of Africa prize and the Mslexia Novella Prize and the Paris Literary Award. Her unpublished novel *How to*

make sticky finger soup won the Jacaranda 2020 prize. Her poetry has been published in Visual Verse, an online anthology. Her short stories have been published in the Mechanics Institute Review and Thames River Press anthologies. She is an Almasi League mentee and holds an MA in Creative Writing from Birkbeck University.

Poetry

G. Edzordzi Agbozo

JULY FLOOD

Accra is a giant piano by the sea
and we are fingers of the sky in search of a plaything
so, we rise each day pounding the keyboard by the sea.

Patience is a bird with three wings
and we were bored children in search of a plaything
so, we hurled stones at patience, clipped its wings.

Accra lost patience, brought the sea to her room
and now we run for higher grounds in search of a plaything
but the Sky is boiling corn in her room.

NECRO-COLOR

The color of autumn is not
leafy-brown, barbecued in pinky disco black
crazy camel,

it is not marigold-round rounding up Joburg gold
for royal caravan
matching purple Lizzy into queendom gone,

it is not jewel teal splashed on Carolina beach
wild blue yonder the Cape of Fear
laced with GenX.

The color of autumn is
half a dose of genocidal blood mixed
with little litters of nuclear waste

and quarter truths of babies trapped under rubbles
and Black migrants pushed out of war-zone taxis
and long telephone calls of silence

barricading us from the
flames from Donetsk
in the Necro-Safety of Clean-Conscience.

SLICES

For Selasi

Your light is on tonight—as usual,
and your sniff-in-sleep is loud across my AirPods.

You will accuse me tomorrow—I know,
it's all my fault—kept you staring at my longer eyebrow

until you suddenly dozed off—as usual.
Then you will swear over groundnuts and bananas,

on good days, some yogurt too,
that you will switch off your light, even if I eat your screen

and choke on your cheekbones.
Tomorrow, another slice of light. Sure.

G. Edzordzi Agbozo is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English, University of North Carolina Wilmington. He holds a Ph.D. in Rhetoric, Theory and Culture from the Michigan Technological University. His poetry has appeared in *Prairie Schooner*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Dunes Review*, *Oakland Review*, *Drift*, *Kalahari Review*, *According to Sources*, and elsewhere. He recently co-edited *Resilience: A Collection*, published by the Writers Project of Ghana. His poems have been nominated for the Pushcart Prize.

Poetry

Samantha Boateng

BODY NO BE FIREWOOD

Body no dey feel
E no heal from flint or match or
The labor of ash
Body no fit give
E no comot from words
E no die or burn

Body no be 24/7 petrol mart
E no be target or small chops or
Ei sista please anything for the boys

Body no fit pass 200GHC application fee
Formalities wey no see am reward
HND or degree wey no fit serve am

Body no be victim of system
E no suffer politician pockets
No comot from chair for aunty at church

Body no burn
Body no feel shame
Body no be problem
Body no suffer

Body fit move
Body fit do

Body no die

E no come this life to suffer

Samantha Boateng Habadah is a Ghanaian-American poet, creator, and educator. She is the founder of Read 2 Lead, a literary-focused nonprofit organization that operates in the US and Ghana. Since 2016, Read 2 Lead has built 3 libraries in Ghana and serves 10,000+ students. Samantha is completing her MFA in Poetry at Emerson College. She is the author of the children's book *If You Give a Girl a Book*. Her poems primarily deal with immigration, race, and home. She uses poetry to critically point-out corruption, discrimination, and other struggles faced by her and her contemporaries. In her free time, Samantha reads, bakes, and dances. Her website is www.samanthaboateng.com.

Poetry

Mz Lyrx

MY EYE AND FINE MAN

I see dis Fine Man!
My eye catch'am!
My eye spy twice!
My feet stop climb!

My heart start jump
Like pump action gun!
My ear close for sound,
My Eye carry matter come!

My Eye bring me wahala!
My moff just dey smile.
My Body turn clown,
Chai, I fall for de man!

No be say I dey fear,
See the shadda I dey tear,

Dis Chic dey represent,
Ba'wahala too dey near.

How you all go take am?
If I go tell Fine Man
Say me I dey tross am
Say I dey feel am?

Chai! trouble go come!
U go call me tuutuu madam
My respect? I go lose am!
So I go waka pass Fine Man!

But...
Make I ask if ibe crime,
Cos I no fi' understand,
If fine girl fall for Fine Man,
Why she no fi' tell 'am?

Sophia Amisah Laryea is a lawyer with a strong interest in the creative arts. She writes short stories and uses poetry to comment on national and social issues on social media. She was a participant in the 2021 edition of the Pa Gya Festival. She has also read some of her poems on radio. She writes her poetry under the pseudonym of Mz Lyrx.

Prose

SONGS OF FIRE

Snow

PROLOGUE

On every ninth of Bugum Goli, the month of Fire according to the Daggomba lunar calendar, the trees of evil awaken to hunt the sons of kings. It is whispered that only sacred flames can burn these trees that awaken, reducing them to dust and ash. Few are known to conjure this Fire.

ONE

“Bugum Chugu!” you bawled into the still air, and the whispers ceased, drawing attention as we murmured and whispered in the moving bus. Our ears were foreign to the word you just yelled. Our minds were lost. Our faces were blank.

“Bu... bu... bugu?”

“Bugum Chugu.” Your tone was calm now, since you already had our attention with that very strange word, a word we could hardly

pronounce, a word so foreign, a word so blank, it had us wondering. “Bugum Chugu?” Werpia scratched at her corn row.

“Yes Bugum Chugu... who can tell me what Bugum Chugu is all about?” You asked, staring us in the eye with those strange di-colored eyes of yours, one brown and one blue.

Our minds did wander searching for some answer while some of us thought of nothing at all. We’d never heard the word before let alone know about it.

We stared as you moved to and fro in the aisle of the bus, your hands clasped neatly behind you, waiting for an answer.

The bus was silent. The only sound was that of your shoes knocking against the metal floors. Then you paused on your feet realizing we knew nothing about this Bugum Chugu you mentioned. So you chose to clarify, like all teachers do.

“Bugum Chugu is the very first festival celebrated by the Dagomba tribe every year.”

Murmurs roamed amongst us.

“The Festival of Fire?” Ato’s voice called our attention to the back seat of the bus. We knew he caught your attention as well because we saw you smile thinly. “Exactly Ato! Exactly. The festival is celebrated on every ninth day of the lunar month of Bugum Goli.”

Your words kept growing strange, suspicious and mysterious. “Bugum Goli?” some of us whispered.

“Yes. On that day, all ten of you shall awaken.” You smiled, your di-colored eyes shifting from student to student. Indeed, you were strange, Sir Yayra. There was no doubt about that. Your eyes told it all and those thin smiles as well.

“What do you mean by awaken sir?” Ama, the fairest amongst us asked, her daunting blue eyes fixed on you for an answer, for we were lost, misplaced at this new knowledge coming from your lips.

You sighed and bit your lower lip. Your eyes roamed the ceiling. Then you fixed your hands in your pockets as we stared, expecting an

answer with eager ears, eyes and heart.

“It seems you’ve all forgotten your history lessons on the Dagomba tribe.” You raised your chin. “And why you were chosen specifically for this particular trip.” You brushed your palms against your face. We were lost. We had no memories of these Dagomba history lessons you talked about.

The air shifted into a great silence, our eyes watching, waiting for you to free us from the cage of ignorance.

“What about the mechanics of fire? Do you remember that one?” your eyes roamed.

“Yes... yes... yes.” The answers came from our lips. We did remember that one very much.

“Good.” You spoke with some relief.

“The Yaa Naa, the Paramount Chief of the Dagomba, is expecting you all.” You remarked, our eyes shot open, then murmurs and whisperings burst throughout the bus.

“On every ninth of the month Bugum Goli... we turn to fire.” The voice from the backseat was hard as rock. Your face curled into joy.

“That is why sir keeps teaching us about the mechanics of fire like our lives depend on it.” He added.

We gulped. Our hearts hammered, cold licked at our skin and fear crawled through our hearts. Some of us prayed, whispering in tongues. Others called on our ancestors. What did he mean by turn to fire?

“You told us nothing about this, sir!” Ama frowned. She frowned so hard, beads of sweat began to form all over her face.

“Oh, he has. He always tells us and we always forget. The scene, always like an unending loop.” Asebu, the boy with the thick voice, the boy who never smiled, the boy who always had a scowl on his face, rose to his feet.

It seemed he remembered perfectly what we had forgotten.

“Wait... what do you mean we turn to fire?” Ato pushed his glasses up, thirsting for an answer as the car sped on, lush green bushes to the

left, lush green bushes to the right. Anthills stood like tall castles to the left, some to the right. They were castles forged out of clay by mighty ants. “And why don’t we remember anything?” he asked.

“Ha-ha... Just like a loop. The same reactions always. The same questions. Do not worry you are completely safe. After all, I’m your teacher. It’s my responsibility to watch over you. You are all extremely special to this festival. Failure on my part to watch over you leads to my death,” You remarked, then sauntered towards the driver. All we could do was stare with sagged mouths and bewildered eyes.

TWO

Nine to ten hours on the road until we reached our destination, the sun sizzled with heat, glowering at our faces as we stepped out of the bus. It was noon and we’d arrived at the largest town teeming with people, old and young, tall and short, neat and ragged, jabbering here and there, minding their own business.

Nalerigu they called it. It was in the northeast of Ghana. Prying eyes glared at us as we stepped out of the bus. People started whispering and pointing fingers at us. They were not minding their business anymore. You led us through the crowd of people. We followed until we reached our final destination.

“NaYiri.” He pointed towards a vast palace sitting at the center of the crowded city of Nalerigu.

Some of us had grown nervous, some afraid, some bold, some pretending to be bold, some whimpered and some cared less. Asebu was not surprised. From within the palace entrance came an old man, his batakali flying here and there as he ambled towards us with beaming smiles.

“Antire” he greeted in Dagbani, showing his yellow teeth as he smiled warmly at us. His perfect kufi cap sat neatly atop his small head. “Nnaa...” You responded.

“A’maraba.” He welcomed us, as we forced smiles on our faces. He was a nice old man, with beaming smiles and all. But we understood nothing he said. You did.

“N Gomina.” You responded back holding his hand in respect, smiling warmly.

“Kawula Hafiz?” you were fluent.

“I’m perfect, my son...” The old man Hafiz smiled. “Do they remember?”

“No... only a few of them,” you muttered.

“I see. The Yaa Naa awaits us. We wouldn’t want to waste his time. You know he has a temper.” He sniggered and led the way. You followed and we followed, still feeling those prying eyes watching us, and those fingers pointing at us.

Some admired us like we were some gods or something.

THREE

He was very old, the Yaa Naa of the great Nalerigu town. Yaa Naa Yumzaa, he was called. He glared at us with those half-closed eyes.

“A’maraba.” He welcomed us and we all nodded. “We are happy to have you here once again oh children of fire!” He muttered, with legs crossed beneath him.

You bowed with a smile on your face. We did the same thing.

“The Night approaches. The tree shall come to hunt us. They shall come after our sons. Are your children of Fire ready for the festival?” We gulped, broke sweat.

“Yes, My lord.” You bowed. We did the same thing. Yet, we feared within our hearts.

“You were absent last year. Lots of your kind were murdered by those trees.” He frowned. The air rippled round us and fear knocked at our hearts once again.

“We deeply apologize, great lord.” You bowed. We did the same thing.

“The lives of our sons are in your palms. Do watch over them for us. Oh Children of Fire, we shall give you a place to lay your heads as you await the coming Night.”

He remarked and the other chiefs who had surrounded us, dressed in bright colored batakali gave agreeable nods.

“My warriors are prepared to assist you... prepared to lay down their lives for you.” His voice was ragged, old and weak.

We had questions, lots of them, but you answered none, only giving us gentle smiles and calm nods like you always did.

We did receive a lot of gifts from the townspeople. A special kind of soup to feast on before the night was awoken, soup made with some leaves called puhuga by the townspeople. They whispered to us that it was necessary for our strength for the night. Many of us were unable to sleep, glaring at the skies as it slowly inched its way into darkness. As the hours ebbed away, our hearts beat harder. But you seemed so calm, so collected, so cool.

As we stared at the skies, talking drums slit through our thoughts. We watched as the moon slowly rose into being and the sun faded away hiding behind those clouds.

The drums alerted us and we followed you as you had commanded. The festival was to start in a few minutes.

“Do not be afraid.” You turned to us with those eyes of yours. We stood before the great chief in the cold, the darkened skies jeweled with silver dots of light above us.

The night had awoken and came with a strange coldness. The old lord rose to his feet as we stood in his vast compound. The palace was crowded with townspeople, all of them holding dry grass with warm smiles on their faces.

“The Nocturnal Trees have awoken to feast upon our sons. This Festival shall prevent them!” his voice was loud and clearer now. He spoke

with more grace and power.

“Let there be Fire!!!” He growled, spreading both arms open, then his palms lit wild with angry dancing flames. Our eyes gawked, our mouths sagged.

Like a magic show, the entire crowd bellowed and screamed in excitement at the dancing flames crackling from the Old Lord’s palms, glowering at our faces. Our minds began to glitch, our heads ached wild, our teeth gnashed in pain, hands brushed against our faces, memories flashed as all of us including you went on our knees, the sight of the flame calling to us.

He waved his palms here and there; the flames flickered and danced. The townspeople kept screaming loudly in excitement, while we were on our knees with memories flickering in our heads – memories of fire, memories of ourselves.

“BUGUM!!!!” The old man bellowed and all the dry grass held by the crowd lit into fire illuminating the night. Their screams grew louder as the sound of fire sizzled and crackled through the night. We scratched our heads as memories flashed through our minds. With our eyes set ablaze, our hair flickered into dancing flames. The colour of our fires differed. There were orange, scarlet, green and blue. As these bright colourful flames burned from our heads and our arms, the townspeople screamed louder and raised their fires high as we slowly rose to our feet. We stared at each other.

The memories came back. Our memories of who we truly were. Flames danced from our palms and our hair. We could feel the heat coursing through our body. It felt like drinking hot water in cold weather. We felt so warm inside. With beautiful fires coming out of us, we remembered everything.

All eleven of us moved and waved our flaming palms in arcs and circles. Then holding each other’s hands, we formed a big circle. The townspeople surrounded us with their flaming grass. Colourful fire twirled and swirled like a gathering hurricane. Within the circle we

formed, flames burned and charred, slowly growing tall into the skies.

The flame of multiple colours burst wild into the shape of a burning tree, flickering and crackling, illuminating the entire town in grace and beauty. Souls ran all round with their flaming grass rushing through town. We teleported in a burst of fire and sparkles, reappearing high above in the skies, all eleven of us. The town Nalerigu spread vast beneath our eyes. Torches everywhere were running through the darkness.

We bolted through the air as the winds bickered at our flaming hair. Our flaming palms streaked through the night sky and while the people screamed happily below, we flew in circles moving through the wind. Through it all, you led us. Our flaming souls could only awaken when we saw the old lord's fire. Like birds we flew through the night, the thousands of stars jeweled against the night sky above us.

We displayed our prowess in speed and flight, trails of sparkles and fire as we danced through the air. It was fun, it was free, it was wild. The giant flaming tree still burned and cracked at the night. The nocturnal trees had not come yet. Maybe they were afraid when they saw the giant tree of flames. We streaked downwards, flying low through the maze of houses, bolting through like lightning.

We cast illusions of fire into the night. Dancing flame horses and flame birds formed things with our flames. It was beautiful. Then we heard the loud sound of gunshots. Our hearts struck. Our eyes turned to you. You were shot. Then a couple of loud shots followed, all directed at you. Our eyes quivered. Then, we bolted towards you as you came falling from the skies, hissing smoke trailing from you. There was panic, and screaming. We rushed to save you as you came falling. The trees had awoken. Some of us could see their army from here. Creaking humanoid trees, tall and green eyed, were coming from afar towards the town, towards Nalerigu.

As for who shot you, we knew it was no nocturnal tree. It was but a traitor. Panic reigned. The festival was over, and the traitor lurked.

Snow is a creative writer who intends to create a new writing genre he calls Umbra science. He says, “As a writer, I intend to spotlight African lore and myth through my stories.” He has written ten fantasy novels and is currently working on an Akan- inspired novel titled *Villain’s Apprentice*. His short story “A Song of Fire” was inspired by the Dagomba Fire Festival.

He was long listed for the Quramo Writers Prize 2023 and came second place in the Afrotoons Content Creating Competition

Prose

BLACK STARRY EYES – EKUBA, THE ENIGMA

Petra Aba Asamoah

Yaba looked intently at her granny, Ekuba. She was enthralled by her. She loved her, loved the sound of her voice. She loved the feeling of her palms, and the softness of the skin on her face as she hugged her. Yaba liked to hug her granny. Her granny loved her too.

At sixty-six, Ekuba was aging gracefully. She was a natural storyteller. She had worked as a journalist in one of the nation's leading print media houses for most of her adult life. She had seen so much, heard so much, and was constantly sharing those stories with her children and grandchildren. She often joked as she told her stories, "I am as old as Ghana, you know. I can even say I am older than Ghana because I was born in January and Ghana gained her independence in March. I have been around for a very long time." She would extend the vowel sounds in the word, long for emphasis. She said those words with a lot of pride. Pride that she represented the nation that she loved. This pride was rooted in her belief that she had had a good life so far. She was enjoying her retirement.

Yaba was the youngest of Ekuba's six grandchildren, and six years old. Her father was Ekuba's second child, Ekow. Niella, Yaba's mother, was an administrator of a school, and Ekow was an entrepreneur.

"You want to be a businessman. Hmm, that is a risky thing to do in this country, Ekow. Are you sure you don't want to get a regular job?" Ekuba had tried to sway her son when he declared to his family that he was quitting his teaching job.

"Mama, it's risky, but so is everything else in this world. If I don't try, how will I know what is possible? I don't like this teaching job. It doesn't pay well, and I don't think I can continue like this for the next ten years. Besides, I only went into teaching because you wanted me to."

"I know, Ekow and I just wanted the best for you. At least, it was a stepping stone."

"Exactly, Mama. And now I want to step into other things."

"Have you told Niella?"

"Yes! She's okay with it."

"Are you sure she wants to be married to a businessman?"

"Mama, an entrepreneur!"

"Okay, entrepreneur. You are just using a fancy word for what we all know is buying and selling."

Ekow laughed. He knew arguing with his mother was an effort in futility. He wanted to preserve his energy for something else. He was sure of what he wanted to do, and he was going to do it.

A decade passed; Ekow's business started to thrive and continued to do so. He made some mistakes and lost some money, but overall, he made progress. Niella had a steady income and supported the family. Together, they were happy.

Yaba enjoyed being with her granny. On this occasion, she was on her mid-term break from school and was spending time with her granny.

"You're my favorite grandma!"

“I am your only grandma, my dear. All your other grandparents are in eternity“ Ekuba would lovingly respond.

“What is eternity, Grandma?”

“Hmm, I don’t know how to explain. Ask your mummy when you get home, okay? She is the book-long one.”

“Grandma, what is book-long?”

“Nothing. She is educated and understands big words. She can explain to you.”

“Okay Grandma.”

Yaba climbed into her granny’s lap and instinctively hugged her.

“I love you, grandma.”

“I love you too, Yaba.”

Ekuba was always amazed at how easily she expressed her love for this grandchild of hers. She credited this to Niella. Niella was expressive. She was a hugger. She had hugged Ekuba the first day they met. She hugged and kissed Ekow whenever and wherever they met. Initially, Ekuba felt it was awkward, but she had grown accustomed to it as she grew to love Niella. She was certainly different, raised differently, but for Ekuba all that mattered was that she was good for her son, Ekow.

“That my daughter-in-law eh, she behaves like an obroni o. Ei! The last time I went to their house, they were eating something they called spaghetti bolognese. It was nice mmom, but I wonder if Ekow was satisfied.”

Ekuba had intimated this to her daughter, Dela. Dela was the last of Ekuba’s eight children and was the only one who still lived with her. She was her mum’s number one gist partner, but also the recipient of her excesses. Ekuba, the storyteller, was also considered very critical by her children. Her first daughter, Ama, would often say, “There is nothing Mama will see that her mouth will not say.” Dela, being the baby of the house, had unfortunately learned rather late in the game what information not to repeat elsewhere. She had found herself in

hot waters a couple of times. There was an incident when she had told Maxwell, Dzifa's boyfriend "My mother said your mouth is as big as the hanging garden of Babylon." Maxwell's relationship with Dzifa, her elder sister fell apart after that. Dzifa cried her eyes out. Ekuba was nonchalant; Dela was distraught. Dela had since learned that her mother's comments and opinions were not to be passed on to other people.

"Mmmm, Niella was not born in Ghana, you know. Ekow says she was born in Germany and only came to Ghana to start Junior high school."

"That's why. She is an obroni in dark skin."

To prevent a further discussion, Dela concluded, "Yes mama."

"Grandma, you did not finish telling me the story about Samson the Giant. Please finish it."

"Oh okay. Do you remember where I got to the last time?"

"Yes, you said Samson had very long hair and was very, very, big and tall and very strong."

"Oh true. Okay, let me continue from where I left off..."

Ekuba would go on to tell Yaba the rest of the story. Her stories were usually quite winding, but always ended with her asking the child, "So what did you learn from this?." She told stories about life, observations she had made of other people and their lives, and things that had happened in Ghana. She made up some stories too. Her imagination was very productive. But despite the many stories Ekuba told, it was the story of her life that was the one truly worth telling.

Ekuba had been born around the time Ghana gained her independence. She grew up learning patriotic songs and got sucked into the patriotism of the day—Nkrumahism. She developed a natural dislike for anything that was tagged 'imperialist'. As a young lady, so com-

mitted was she to the ideals of a free Africa as espoused by Kwame Nkrumah that she had vowed never to benefit from the ‘imperialist world’. Nkrumah was, unfortunately, deposed by a coup d’état when she was only nine. She insists that at the time she was fully aware of the on-goings and was very sad indeed.

“They waited for Nkrumah to travel o... why didn’t they do it when he was in town?”

By the time she was old enough to go away to boarding school, she had developed her worldview; shaped by Nkrumah, Reggae music (thanks to her older brother), her desire to be a writer, and her dislike for anything ‘imperialist’.

Then she met a young man and married him. She was twenty-two at the time, and he was twenty-eight. The young man was in the army, and she had begun working as an officer in the Information Services Department. She loved him dearly but one day she ended her marriage. Abruptly.

“He had two children and did not tell me. Who does that? He was a pathological liar, that your father. I am sure even if he makes it to heaven, he will still lie before he realizes that he is before the judgment seat.” She had said this so many times to the two children she had from that union – Kwame and Ekow - whom she ironically referred to as her “soldier boys”.

It did not take Ekuba long to settle down in her second marriage to a “seaman”. Hailing from the coastal town of Axim, she had interacted with a lot of sailors, mainly from the twin cities of Sekondi and Takoradi. At the time, she was struggling to raise her two boys who were eighteen months apart and were both under the age of five. She was looking for a good father for her boys, and Kojo “Seaman” wanted a wife in his “base” for the days he was home: Ekuba was the perfect wife. She was great with the children and able to manage them on

her own. She rarely referred to him for anything including the financial sustenance of the family and seemed to be completely in control of everything. Kojo admired her and often told his friends about his “strong woman”. What he did not realize was that she was not prepared to be the quintessential ‘housewife’. Therefore, when he asked her to quit her job and take care of their children, she vehemently refused. By then, they had had two more children.

“Ei, Kojo, my father paid for me to go to school. He paid for me through his sweat. My mother had to sell some of her clothes for me to be able to finish school. Yet, now that I am working, you want me to stop and do what?”

Kojo “Seaman” was no match for Ekuba, and after five short years, their marriage fell apart. Ekuba took her four children and left Kojo “Seaman” with a broken heart. He never remarried, remained a remote presence in his children’s lives, and continued to refer to Ekuba as “my Nzema wife”.

After four children and two marriages, Ekuba decided she was done. Marriage was not her thing. She threw herself into her children’s lives and her work. She became one of the first female news editors in Ghana. She traveled across the nation covering social interest stories and saw first-hand the impact of economic hardship on the lives of women.

She had gained subtle notoriety for being “un-marriageable”, and she secretly enjoyed her reputation. Whenever she was asked how she was going to raise four children without a man, she would retort, “I am not the first and I won’t be the last. I have my soldier boys. Very soon they will be old enough to help me with their sisters.”

One day, whilst working in a remote part of the Volta Region, she met the son of a wealthy farmer. She was covering a story about a family in the Peki area, who had been instrumental in the founding of the

Presbyterian Church in the Volta Region.

Komla, after a short courtship, became Ekuba's third husband. He had two children from a previous marriage; together with Ekuba's four, they had six children. Then they both had two – Dzifa and Dela. So Ekuba had eight children by the time she was forty – six of her own and two from her blended family. Her friends who had bet that her union with Komla would not last were pleasantly surprised. She was once asked, by a friend of hers,

“What is different with Komla?”

“He is truthful. I trust him. He doesn't want to change me and I don't want to change him. We have accepted each other as we are.” Of all the stories told about Ekuba, it was not her success in her work that was most intriguing to many; it was her “united nations” of a family. She was a legend: she had married thrice and had eight children from three fathers. She “sacked” her first husband because he fathered children he had not told her about. And she “sacked” the second because he asked her not to work.

She had Nzema, Fante, and Ewe, children. Whenever anyone commented on the fact that her children had multiple fathers, she would respond, “Children belong to their mother. There is no question that these children are mine.” I should have married a Ga man as well so I can also have Ga children. Or maybe a man from the northern part of Ghana... ei, I don't have an Ashanti child either.” Everyone in the room would burst into laughter.

Now well into her years, she was narrating a story to her grandchild. Her grandchild was born to a woman who worked full-time and did not mind being considered different. Ekuba loved Niella. She saw her younger self in Niella and prayed that Ekow, her son, unlike his father would be able to “maintain” his wife. Because like she told her “soldier boys”, there was too much that my black starry eyes desired to see. No

man was going to limit me, and do not ever think you can limit any woman.”

Thankfully, her “soldier boys” listened. Ekow was married to Niella, and Kwame was married to Brigit, a medical doctor.

“Yaba, so you see, even though Samson, the giant, was very strong, a little woman was able to make him lose his strength. This means that it doesn’t matter how little you are, or whether you are a male or a female, you can achieve whatever you set your mind to. Have you heard?”

“Yes Grandma.”

“Good girl.”

“Grandma, I want ice cream.”

“Okay, let’s go.”

Petra Aba Asamoah is a Ghanaian writer. She started her writing journey by writing poems and reading them on the radio. She has two publications. She wrote *Sales 101* as her contribution to the marketing profession as she has spent most of her professional career as a Marketing Practitioner, holding senior management positions in the airline industry, media, and textile manufacturing. Her second publication - *Jungle Dance*, reflects her over fifteen years of experience in the corporate world. She tells the story of two women and how they navigate life, love, corporate politics, and their own internal struggles. Petra is a Chartered Marketer by profession, holds a Post Graduate Diploma in Marketing from the Chartered Institute of Marketing, UK, an MPhil (Marketing) from the University of Ghana Business School, and a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Political Science also from the University of Ghana.

Prose

COLLECTOR OF THE DEAD

Portia Dery

Dozens of people line up on the street. They circle something on the floor. A car stops and then another. There is now heavy traffic.

An impatient policeman waves away some inquisitive kids, “*Go away you, just go!*” Excitement and fear spreads on their face. They pretend to run but sway right back to the same spot.

People are shouting over each other.

“*She’s dead!*”

“*What’s happening?*”

“*She’s dead ooh!*”

“*The poor woman is dead!*”

But how can I be dead? I am alive and kicking in my new green jeans. I had my hair braided to the latest *cornrow* just an hour ago. How then can I be dead? These people must be sick or insane!

“*Move away! I know her. She’s my... was my friend.*” Gloria is shouting to the crowd.

Finally, someone with some common-sense. I push towards her beckoning with a laugh. I know later the two of us will have a laugh

over this sick joke. After all, who jokes with death like that? But she ignores me and starts shouting again with her hands on her head. "*She's dead. It's over for her.*"

An ambulance is speeding towards the now thickened crowd. Two more policemen have joined the circus, and some *borga* guys are snapping photos, updating on instagram and Facebook. Now, I know something must be terribly wrong. I too must see for myself this madness that has caught the city of Tamale. I keep walking, but no one looks my way. They are all glued to this one spot on the road. I see her, a woman in her late twenties is lying on the floor. Her legs are spread apart, but lucky for her, she is in jeans. Her womanhood would be protected. The greedy eyes of these men will have nothing to devour. They will have to go home to women. Her face is hidden; someone had thrown a dirty cloth over her head. How can Gloria think that this woman without a face is me? Doesn't she know me after ten years of friendship? The late night outs, the snatching of husbands? I am offended. I will go home, and wait for her to come, and then I will insult her like the market women do to their *loading boys*.

"Do you know her relatives?" One of the policemen is asking Gloria.

"*She has no relatives. I'm her only near-to-relative.*"

A brutal lie! How can she be my near-to-relative? It is she who has no relatives; a destitute. I rush to pull her long braids. Perhaps, that would teach her a lesson but my hand slips, I try again but it's useless. She must have smeared her body with powerful charms. I would tell the policeman; he should know the truth. But my hand slips too.

"*This one is dead, kaput. Nothing can be done for her.*" The ambulance man in white overall shakes his head and walks away.

"*This thing is beginning to smell ooh. Since she has no family we would bury her like that.*" The police take over with their van. They haul the faceless woman into the back. They actually throw her into the car like ripe pawpaws falling off their tree. Just like that, no respect for it.

I ran to the van, I must validate this nonsense. The policemen do

not stop me. In fact, they do not care about me. I peep, I see why the cloth was used to cover her face, her face is like a bowl of Spaghetti Bolognese prepared by someone who can't even fry an egg.

Gloria is still standing in the crowd, explaining something. I do not understand this madness. I look again at the body. I see the huge hips. I touch mine; they are still intact. I consoled myself because people do look alike. And by the way, what shows that this mutilated body is me? But, I see my sparkling gold necklace on her neck. It was given to me by my grandma last Christmas. I realise this madness can actually be true. I try to remember something, but my head is light.

Gloria is shedding some tears.

"What is her name?" A policeman asks.

"She's Gloria Atia."

What! I am not Gloria Atia. This liar is provoking me. I would slap some sense into this her empty head.

"And your name?"

"Charlotte Mensah."

Goodness! Today must be a twisted day of madness. I am Charlotte; Gloria is Gloria. What sick joke is this? I don't understand what's happening but one thing I am sure of is that Gloria needs to check into a mental hospital.

"Poor girl with no family, I was helping her small small, but now look," she goes around in a circle, crying heretically and chanting.

People start to console her. "Take it easy sister."

"That's life."

"All is well."

One of the policemen offers Gloria a ride while caressing her buttocks. She accepts, gliding like a cobra into the car but not before pocketing my gold necklace. The car sped off, knocking a goat into the gutter. I know the car will stop at a cheap motel regardless of the fact that there is a body at the back.

The thick crowds melt, the nosy school children find a new hobby and the *borga* guys soon get weary of taking photos. Even the perverts move on with their itchy eyes. Everything goes back to normal, except for me. I start to walk off the road, so that a car doesn't hit me. But then I remember I am supposed to be dead. What more can frighten the dead? Is it death, the death people fear that makes them useless? I look around, and wonder if I am the only dead woman on the streets. Or is the *-yet-to-die* still preparing to die. But why are the children giggling as if there is no care in the world? Why are the market women shouting the whole town down as if their wares are the only concern? Don't they know a dead woman is lost and searching for a home? Why should everything be normal, like the way the sun is still shining brightly?

"Charlie! Today we go catch some fine babes." A smartly dressed man says to another.

"Let's drink the whole bar down!" A high school boy says to his group of friends.

"I'm leaving my boyfriend for this rich dude." A girl says. "I must buy this latest iphone by all means!"

All this vanity talk. Don't they know death would come, take them and leave them stranded on the road. I listened to more and moved on. I don't know how I am walking but I could be floating because I can't feel my feet. I suddenly noticed I am at the teaching hospital. I don't know why I am here, but the urge to see other dead people like me is strong. I want to talk to someone even if it is a *-yet-to-die* person. I am desperate. If the bus for the dead has gone and left me, I am determined to find the driver and write him an angry note. There is a piece of paper and pen on a bench; I reach for them, expecting my hand to slip through but it doesn't! And so on a bench at the hospital, I sit to write;

Dear driver of the bus for the dead,

You've made a grave mistake which would cost you your job.

~~Your negligence has left me (the dead) stranded in the land of the living. You're an impertinent brute!~~

I cancel. Perhaps, the driver has no power; he may be under the authority of someone. I start another note.

Dear death,

You're a mean stupid tormenter. Your negligence in doing your job has left me (the dead) stranded in the land of the living. How dare you play such an expensive joke on me? You gave me no notice of my death. Even my landlady who is a bitch gave me hints before ejecting me. If you were in my country under normal circumstances, I would have asked my sugar daddy 'Mr. Power' the news editor to carry an awful front page story of you, and I can guarantee you, Ghanaians would mill you like they did to their footballers who missed the world cup because of bonuses wahala. Or some smart lawyer might sue you in court and ask you to produce pink sheets. Please, I don't fear you, for what is there to fear when one is dead? Can I die the second time again? All I am asking is for you to come pick me up, you-retarded fool.

Signed

(An angry dead woman)

Very angry stranded dead woman.

I realise there is nowhere to post my letter. For how do you post a letter of the dead to death in the land of the living? A priest walks past me. Suddenly, I remember God. Is there God or hell? Or is this the hell; my punishment for snatching potbellied husbands? I stand up with a new vigour and aim. I would not search for death or his driver. I will look for God. I don't know if he exists, but if there is something like death, then there should be something like a God.

I run after the priest. I have a gut feeling he would know something or maybe he might have some powers; because he looks different. He

doesn't look like the other men of God who hire Gloria and me to perform all night service for their little men between their legs. I am suddenly hopeful. If there is a God almighty up there in the skies like they say, then this was the time for him to prove his power to me. And I swear by Gloria's messy head that I would team up with this God to fight death! I promise to wear long skirts and never let a man touch me again. I will give back all the money I stole from the bank where I worked for five years.

"Come in Father, he's taking his last breath." A nurse says to the priest.

I am ecstatic. I will finally get to meet my colleague-dead. The priest ran into the room the nurse was indicating. I follow him. There are whispers everywhere. I hear low hissing sounds. I look ahead and I see the dying man. He is breathing heavily. His eyes are heavy with fear and pain. Did I look this way when I died?

"God have mercy on your soul!" The priest whispers softly. He sprinkles some oil.

The man rises up and looks at his dead body on the bed. I wave to him happily and I try to explain, *"Don't worry. The driver of the bus is late; I will explain everything to you."*

He stares at me.

"Sorry, I am Charlotte, a dead woman."

He still stares.

"Hello?"

He stares.

He must be in shock; he must think I am a crazy woman. I walk to him and hold his hand.

"Come. It's ok. We will find God. We will fight for our rights!"

I see more dead people: children, women and men. They are coming towards us and the priest is shaking his head.

"God grant you peace!"

"Wait! Help me, help them," I shout.

He ignores me, but I know he can hear and see us.

“Tell me where God is!” He is leaving... I don't know if I should follow and persuade him to show me where God is. But more dead people are coming; they all look frightened. I know what I will do. I will collect the dead people, and care for them till death and his driver or God decide to stop playing games with us. I will become a freedom fighter for the dead. Taking a bold step forward I shout,

“We will fight for our rights; we are the new freedom fighters!” I feel like a Martin Luther King.

Dear God,

Today is day four since I died. I have collected 500700 dead people. I am caring for them, and inspiring them on. We will not stop fighting demanding for our rights! We will keep on! I will not stop looking for you. (By the way this is my 50th letter in a row).

Signed

‘Collector of the dead’

(now a freedom fighter.)

Portia Dery is a Ghanaian writer, development worker and a researcher in Literacy. In 2013, she turned her passion for reading and writing into an innovative social venture called the African Youth Writers Organization (AYWO) which helps school children from low-income communities improve their literacy skills via a bespoke literacy mentorship program called the ‘funky read-write clinic’. Her debut book *Grandma’s List* has won the 2014 Golden Baobab Picture Book Prize, the 2018 Children’s Africana Book Award and a Ghana Association of Writers (GAW) literature prize award. As a researcher, Portia is interested in exploring Reading for pleasure (RfP). She deploys African stories, arts-based and participatory tools to improve the reading skills of children in low-resource communities in the Global South.

Poetry

Nenyi Ato Bentum

MOOD

I am too young to feel sad:
Sadness is for the older folks.

Oh, how old trousers used to commune with NON LIVING THINGS:
Stones. Trees. Air (fresh one). Animals. The earth. The sky...

Yet never lived happily thereafter
As they bow down their heads now to see us

Give the left middle finger to felling the trees
That surround the lemon grooves
That once upon the time contained the water for all the LIVING THINGS.

I am not sad:
Sadness is for the older folks.

HOW TO MOURN A THING YET TO DIE

Take note:

- a. Sing it as a redemption song -
- b. Punctuate each verse oozing out of your mouth with a past tense
- c. & never bother about the appropriate modal to mark its future time.

While at it, recite these:

Persecutors are as scared as their victims
Just that the former snares
& the latter stares...

& in order not to make way for amnesia:

To mourn a thing yet to die
Stir studiously at its soul that shall come before the body
& when the spirit peeps its head to see the ensemble
Cover its face with your knuckle

This way, you see in your palm
That everything that has a soul will die
& that some will be mourned
& others mongered

OF DREAMS AND MIRAGE

I dream dreams:
Of people coupling;

Of floras going green;
& of faunas being assertive.

I wake
And I see hungry men murdering their own souls!

Nenyi Ato Bentum writes about the environment because that is the only paradise we have. He also writes about people because their complex approach to simple things excites him. His writings have appeared in *Contemporary Ghanaian Writers' Series*, *Praxis Magazine*, *Lunaris Review*, and elsewhere.

Poetry

Afua Awo Twumwa

NOT EVERYTHING IS LOVE

but some are
because what else will you call this:

because (see)
when your mother calls you names

because (see)
your father left

& you're the burden
bastard mango she swallowed

& you see your own left lass
leashed at your back

you understand this mama
& you want to pull her into your chest

& what do you call this?
if not love.

Afua Awo Twumwa is an accountant and a writer with keen interest in the performing arts. Her works have appeared in Agbowo, Tampered Press, Kalahari Review, AFREDA and some anthologies. Find her on all socials @awotwumwa.

Poetry

Lebene Abena Dompkeh

I MET GOD

I met God today.
She had reddish brown kinky hair.
Her eyes, glassy orbs
like yellow bulbs behind stained glass,
reflecting the edges of a once sharp dagger,
journeying in a zig zag
To get a glimpse of my soul-
maybe a month or two above six years old
yet a derelict.
I Met God.
She stretched open a brown palm
in hopes to beckon me.
I looked down at my Creator in awe,
for beneath each nail of a crooked finger
lies a content being,
strong enough to debilitate the strongest.
A cedi was all the tithe she demanded,

for her baby brother needs to quench his thirst.
As I dropped my widow's mite,
I lifted my eyes to the preacher around the corner
singing of the sovereignty of the mighty One,
to whom all waters belong.
But I passed by her a moment ago,
and asking myself what then she needed a bottle for,
I heard her whisper with the strolling breeze saying,
Man breached his contract.
She told me so, when
I Met God today.

Lebene Abena Dompseh (Rosina Antwiwaa Dompseh): “My knack for writing poetry and stories began at an age I can hardly remember when I felt I had to learn to read to keep up conversations with my older siblings who read and discussed books all the time. At around twelve years old, I discovered a poetry book in my sister’s archives which fascinated me so much, for never had I read words so beautifully arranged. I believe this was the turning point because I was inspired to develop my talent for poetry. I began writing and reading at various school events and at a radio station before I got to Junior High School. I have never opted for the norm, and I wholly believe writing and reading poetry has and will be my route to understanding my way in life.”

Poetry

Amenuveve Agbitor

THE RAINS WILL COME AGAIN

Originally published in the "Daily Graphic" of 23rd March, 2023

While you roll in noble duvets,
And saw logs into the morning,
In magnificent buildings,
That pose elegantly,
On fine rocky hills,
The mats of your subjects,
Float atop flood waters.
Mother Earth is dry now,
Creating an illusion of normalcy,
But remember,
Remember the rains will come again.

You! Yes, You!
While you continue to litter,
And choke the drains.
While you build on waterways,

With the consent of the officialdom,
Who trade their Authority for envelopes,
Remember the rains will come again.

Good job!
Engineer-in-chief!
Engineer himself!
You dishonour your métier,
and build jokes of drains,
You and the Cut-eaters,
Ate the entire food,
Meant for the baby.
Clap for yourselves!
Remember the rains will come again.

The rains are on break.
Certainly, it will be back.
To continue work,
To nurse and heal the Earth,
Make way for it,
Get the hell out of its way,
Remember the rains will come again.

We dread the coming of the rains.
The rains! Water! Life!
Yet, 'bread and long life'
Is in every prayer verse.
Mother Nature is indeed a Mother.
How else does She take this?
Remember the rains will come again.

The rains will come again,
With the singular intention to bless.
Is it impudence or ignorance,
That makes you sit in its way?
In its wrath,
It will eat you up!
The culprits and the innocent alike.
Hence the dire need for this fight.
Remember the rains will come again.

The school is littered!
Imagine that!
Yet, you dare point accusing fingers,
As if you did not make us.
On your walls,
You choose to scribble:
“Speaking vernacular is prohibited.”
Vernacular?
I mean, who Indigenous Languages kill?
Remember the rains will come again.

The temple dwellers,
Explain the filth!
The filth,
After a religious activity.
Goodness!
You profess undying love,
To the Creator,
Yet you destroy the creation.
Remember the rains will come again.

The voice of the people.
You are distracted already?
Are you on break with the rains?
Don't hibernate the campaign!
The disaster is at work,
Scheming punishment for our misdeeds.
Revamp the campaign, now!
Remember the rains will come again.

The guidance body,
There is work to be done,
Ensure the work is done,
And done well,
And always remember! Yes.
Remember the rains will come again.

Amenuveve Agbitor is the pen name of Grace Agbitor. She is an MPhil student in the Department of English, University of Ghana, Legon.

Poetry

Jeffrey Baiden

A LITTLE FOR FOOD

With rehearsed lines, she waits
Patiently.
She waits patiently on a tree stump,
Her little one tottering around.
And as they walk, approaching her,
Her rehearsed lines pour from her lips:
"Sir, Sir, a little for food."
A little to feed the child,
A little for warmth,
A little for medicine,
A little to keep the hunger at bay.

And we pass and pass and pass
And we bow our heads and look away
The sad sight is frightening, disheartening.
"Sir, Sir, a little for food" all day long.
A little for food all day long.

Jeffrey Baiden loves to write about issues that would otherwise have no place for open conversations in African communities. He believes that even sensitive issues need to be talked about and re-assessed if progress is to be made among Africans. For Jeffrey, to begin to write is to set yourself on an inexorable path to self-discovery and, since he started this journey, he has found joy in writing all genres of literature. His literary works have appeared in Literary magazines such as *Brittle Paper*.

Poetry

Eric Tetteh

HAUSA KOKO

Secured on my mother's laps,
Resting across from left to right
I cupped in my palm her breast
Like a fully ripe pawpaw that has
The magic of frightening and
Banishing hunger away to decorate
my face with sunshine-smile.

Embalmed in the joy of it, and
Conscious of the freedom from hunger,
I raised one leg, swinging it up and
Down, and with my hand on one,
Like a proboscis, I siphoned sustenance,
from Nature's ready-made meal

I did not see me do it
But I've seen them do it
And I know it is even so I did it

But every morning, and sometimes
In the evenings, I see them—bearded
And breasted babies—queue up at Amelia's
Joint, buying 'koko kε koose'
On their way to school, to work, to town...

Millet flour liquefied with boiling water
Is the breast milk of many adult-babies,
Sucking from the bottom proboscis,
For the survival of their innocent souls

It did not need plenty coins to own
A breast-full of Hausa koko
This, together with its unique taste,
Makes koko and koose a delicacy
For all – from four wheels to bare feet

But Abotsi increased the prices of
Millet and sugar in his shop. Baba Moro
Also raised the lorry fare. It was the time
When oil price was taking gold medals
At the Olympics, and the Cedi had a

Muscle pull at the start of the race and so
Was lagging miles behind the Dollar. Since then, Amelia pinched hard
at the quantity
Of milk she put into everyone's breast,
And the price also triple-quadrupled.

So even koko and koose could
No longer be easily afforded – anymore.
From that time, Mma Ayeshetu could not send Abu and Fati to school
again.

It was soon after Baba Inusah said
The unfriendly goodbye to her for good
Turning her into an instant single-mother.

Those were the days of Alhaji Bawumia
At the helm of affairs, when cost
Of living developed wide wild wings
And started flying haphazardly across space:
The falconer lost control of the falcon and
Things fell apart. Life became simply bearable!

Eric Tetteh is a teacher, poet and playwright.

Prose

POKA

Azags Agandaa

Someone once called me by that name—Poka. Barely a few years ago. The caller was the queer old woman next door, Nma. She had lost her sight to aging, and now recognized people only by their voices.

I wasn't Poka. I told the old lady but she merely shrugged and muttered something inaudible to herself. She was senile so I regarded her actions as some of those uncanny things that come with old age.

When I told Mama the old woman called me by that strange name, she dismissed it saying Poka means woman. She said that I was only called *woman*. It made sense then and I let it go. Before that incident, Poka had never been mentioned at home. If all these years Mama never mentioned it, who would? Father was quiet by nature. It was as if he lived in a different world altogether within our small home. Father was always absorbed in his sacred ritual—reading. Forlorn, meditative, he went about it. He was always cloistered in the harmattan shed like a monk, hunched over a book or newspaper. A middle school leaver, a book addict. His favourite was *Treasure Island*. He kept an old copy of it.

The fact of Poka's ever existence was, thus, shushed at home. Yet, I should have detected that a dark secret haunted our small home. For, Mama had a strange, patterned habit of occasionally jerking suddenly as though spooked by a spirit of some kind. This would be followed by her silent sobbing throughout the night. And then she would wake up the next morning misty-eyed as if a relation of hers had died. But no news ever came tolling of any death.

But that day when I got home from school, I asked Mama in the middle of a conversation once more about the forbidden name—Poka. We were alone in the kitchen preparing the evening meal and conversing heartily as usual, much more as friends and not just as mother and daughter.

'Mama,' I called.

'Mother?' she said; Mama called me Mother.

'Who is Poka?' I demanded.

Mama was quaked into a sudden silence as if gripped by a fit of seizure. She was in the middle of sweeping the litter of vegetable straws on the floor while I was washing the kitchenware. She stood staring at me, and the broom slipped down from her hand. Then she threw her face away quickly. She wasn't the same Mama I'd known all these years.

I'd just turned fourteen, the same age Poka died. It was our Sports Teacher who let the cat out of the bag on the final day of the annual sports event when once again I made our school proud by winning the race for girls.

Master Aveh said to me after the event: 'Bless God you've come to replace Poka. Just that Poka never came second in any race. That girl was unbeatable; she was always first in every race.' *Poka?* I asked. 'Yes,' he said. 'Poka, your older sister. Your mother's first daughter.' 'I've got no sibling, Master Aveh; I think you're mistaken,' I said. 'I'm an only child.' 'Well, if you say so, Asibi,' replied Master Aveh.

The same name again—Poka, I thought. Later, I went back to Mas-

ter Aveh. He refused to say another word. But I never left the matter there to rest and rust. I picked it up, dusted it and resolved to pursue it to the end.

‘Poka is a female name. It can be used for any girl. I’ve told you this before,’ Mama finally replied. ‘If anyone calls you Poka, just know they’ve called you *woman* because you’re one.’ Then came: ‘You shouldn’t go about listening to what other people tell you outside the home. I do not want to hear you talk about *this* again.’

A silent mood was set between us after these words. I asked no further questions for the rest of the evening.

The next day was Saturday. I rose up unusually early and sneaked out of the house. The sun was not yet out, but the morning twilight was glowing. As the Principal Sports Prefect I had access to the sports room. I had in my pocket the spare key to the sports room where all the files of the sports pupils were kept.

The school was empty. The pitch was still fresh with un-swept feet. The race ground now lay silent, still striped with whitewash along the lines where yesterday’s hundred feet, including mine, had trodden. The galloping hooves of young horses still hitting the earth. I could still hear my name echoing across the field, a million hands brandishing in the air... But I ignored the absent crowd pressing on and went straight to the sports room. I unlocked it and made for the file trunks. One after the other I rummaged and fished through the stack of flat files beginning with the bottommost trunk. The files were aged, dusty and moldy brown. And some stale musty smell lingered about. In the third trunk, I spotted a file with a Red Cross mark on its front cover. I pulled it out. The familiar details of my family struck my eyes and I cringed backwards in fear:

Name of pupil: Poka Sambik.

Father: Nabil Sambik

Mother: Azuma Sambik

Discipline: Athletics

Record(s) set: Best female athlete in the circuit, 2000-2003

Born: 1990

Died: 2004; aged 14.

Azuma was a household name in the village, but not Nabil and Sambik. Ours was the only known family bearing *Sambik*, the name of my great grandfather. The Sambiks were long sojourners here. We had come from the Tongo hills.

It couldn't be by any happenstance that the dead Poka merely shared my family names—Sambik, Nabil and Azuma, and was an athlete like me. When I got back home that Saturday morning Mama followed me into my room.

'You're not happy, Mother,' she said, looking into my face. 'Where have you been? You look very worried.'

I told Mama she and Father were hiding something from me.

Mama was silent.

I said again, 'Who is Poka?'

Mama said this time, 'Eat your meal first, Mother.'

I wasn't hungry, I told her.

Mama sat down and heaved deeply. The words jittered out of her lips. 'Poka was your sister.'

I listened to the rest of it. In a word, Poka had died because of circumcision.

'The razor had slipped and cut her in the wrong place,' Mama muttered. 'It would have been a source of shame to our family name if your sister wasn't circumcised, Mother. She wouldn't be considered woman enough. And the shame would come back to me, her mother. Everyone else's daughter took part in that ritual. She would have been the only one left out in the village.'

'Did you ask her if she wanted it?'

'If she wanted to be made woman?'

‘She was woman already.’

‘She was but—’

‘Mama, it’s a bad ritual.’

‘A woman does not speak so, Mother.’

‘Did the police hear of it? Did they come to see it?’

Mama made no reply.

I felt the resentment in me deepening, blistering now. Poka should have been alive. One with whom I could share my little childhood secrets. Her death deprived me of the joy of sibling rivalry, the spring that waters the garden of every childhood.

I said, ‘Why did you not take Poka to hospital when she started bleeding?’

‘We thought the bleeding would soon cease,’ Mama said nervously. ‘But she died.’

‘That isn’t it entirely, Mama,’ I said.

Mama looked at me and cast her eyes down. There was guilt in her demeanor and she sat still like a confessor still holding onto some grave, grievous sins before a priest. And then the truth, why Poka had to die at home, fluttered out at will.

‘If you sent a bleeding girl to the hospital you never came back home.’

I said, ‘Are her photos, too, dead? Or did she not take photos in her lifetime?’

Mama went into her room and returned.

I saw my blood sister for the first time in a photograph.

Some of the photos were taken in groups with friends. There was something about them. The photos did not have the look of things forgotten. They were alive and clean of dust.

Poka looked just like me. Except that she’d taken more from our father—her facial expression tells you she was a quiet coy girl.

When I asked Mama to show me Poka’s grave, she broke down and wept. Father heard the noise and came into the room.

That evening I'll discover something for the first time about our small home: that there exists in our small home a little room of secrets. An inner room inside Mama's room. This room Mama goes into every night to encounter the spirit of her dead child. In this room, Poka lies buried and all that belongs to her.

The night was unusually long. Daybreak was a long way coming, and I lay awake grappling uneasily with indecision. When the day finally broke, I left the house quietly.

It was still the early hours of the day. In the small town, shop owners were opening their shops. The night watchmen were returning home still wrapped in warm harmattan clothes, the heads of their white torches peeping out of their overcoat pockets. I didn't know what the world would think or say of me afterwards but I knew there was no turning back.

I waited under the small mango tree outside till a cop came out. 'Have you been raped or something?' he said, looking about my groin.

I said no. 'Someone died through circumcision.'

He asked for details.

I gave him Poka's most recent photo taken not long before her death. It was taken in May, 2004, right after a sports event. She'd scribbled the date at the back of the photo. The policeman looked at it briefly and turned some baffled eyes on me.

'How old are you?' he enquired.

'Fourteen.'

'You should have been a boy. Your father would have been happier and prouder of you,' he said. 'You're very bold and daring.'

I was turning his words over in my head. Wasn't a girl made to be bold and daring?

He was still looking at me, stunned. To my surprise he said: 'I've got some good advice for you if you care to listen, young girl. If your parents go to jail, they'll not come back home, and if they don't, who'll take care of you? I advise you to go back home and let things be. Your

sister's been dead for thirteen years. Tell me: what's the use pursuing a matter this old? What's the use of digging up an old crime that's been sleeping well over thirteen years?'

I was still standing there looking at him and he at me. 'A crime's never old,' I heard myself saying.

Slack-jawed, he shrugged and said, 'Well, you have no idea what goes on in jail. But I'll tell you this: your parents are never coming out if they go to jail and you'll soon regret it.'

We entered the yard. He led me to a desk and asked me to wait. He went and tapped on a door.

A tall man came out. 'Is this the one who's come to see us?' he enquired, looking at me quizzically. 'Another case of rape?'

'No, sir; a rather strange one,' said the cop.

'How strange?' he said. Turning to me he said, 'You can write the statement yourself, I suppose.' He placed the sheet before me. 'Today's date first, and then—don't leave spaces, no paragraphs. Write it out and sign.'

I sat at the desk and wrote it all out. I ended it on the note that my sister died at home and not at the hospital after bleeding for three days and her death had since been silenced. I signed off.

The superior who was examining Poka's photographs now paused to read through my report.

The cop's cold eyes were cast on me as his superior read the report.

'Very interesting,' said the superior, nodding like a lizard, after he had finished reading through. 'I should think this is the first time in my practice life to handle a case this delicate and gender sensitive, uncovered and filed by a teen girl against her own parents, thirteen years after commission of crime.'

The cop said nothing. The superior looked up at him. 'Trust me,' he said, 'it's worth pursuing this case. It can change your life forever.'

The cop nodded.

I went to see Father and Mama the following morning before they

were taken away. First, the cop went to bring Mama out of her cell. She was handcuffed behind her back in disheveled hair. Mama had been crying in the cell: I saw it in her sore eyes.

Father didn't want to see me, the cop who had gone in to bring Father said.

The folk who had gathered under the mango tree looked at me with deep-rooted hatred. Among them was Master Aveh who quickly averted his gaze when I looked in his direction. Our headmaster stood leaning on his motorbike, his chin cupped in his hands. His demeanor begged the question: Why did you do this? In my mind, I replied: *I did it for the one who did not die well.*

The policeman stood waiting. Mama drew closer to me. 'Mother,' she whispered, 'you'll go and stay with your uncle. We're not coming back home and you'll be all alone in the house.' She made to hug me but her handcuffs pulled her back and she winced in pain. She suppressed a tear.

On the police van my father's head, streaked in ignominy, was down. He was barefoot when the police came for him and he preferred to remain so. He'd refused a pair of sandals offered him by one of the men. His oversize work trousers were swaying loosely in the air; his short-sleeved pallid shirt was ill-buttoned so that the right half hung longer than the left.

The van honked, purred and cranked into motion. Father was still bowed, a lined face buried in quivering palms. Mama was gazing back at me as the van moved slowly out onto the red road. A tear ran down her face, glistening with love.

I couldn't hold it any longer now. I broke down and went running after the van. But my parents were now only silhouettes on a police van in the distance. I was still crying, running after the van that was way out of reach.

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Prose

BLINDSIDED

Michael-Angello Sarbah

What he had silently feared was confirmed formally. She did have a fever.

Jude Sampson looked gravely at his wife. He held up the thermometer for her to see. It said she had a temperature of forty degrees Celsius. “We need to go to the hospital,” he said in a hard voice. “We can’t ignore this.”

“Maybe it’s just a coincidence; it isn’t so strange to get sick. It isn’t possible... we’ve been taking every precaution.” Samantha Sampson sounded frantic through her nose mask. She normally was expressive, but in that moment she was legitimately panicked.

The two of them turned and looked at their little daughter, who was sitting still, a few feet away, watching them with wide eyes. She coughed suddenly. It made them flinch in unison. “Yaa, we need to take her to the hospital. Even if it’s something else, we need to be sure.”

Samantha groaned softly. “You know what this means; we’ll be separated from each other. Nii, we’ll be quarantined. We could be taken from work for at least two weeks, and that’s if we aren’t even infected. Only God knows how things will go after that.”

Jude slowly inhaled. He moved to wipe his forehead, before remembering he wasn't to touch his face. He sighed again. Constantly following the safety precautions was draining. Besides, they had been following them so aggressively, but now there they were with their daughter's fever and cough. He paused to think about Samantha's words. 'It isn't possible.' Really, it didn't make sense that their daughter was infected, if she was. She hadn't been outside, and besides them no one got around her or even entered the house. Even in their rare instances of physical contact they had been extremely mindful and cautious. At that point they were pretty much using hand sanitizer as body lotion. They had taken every precaution down to changing nose masks every few hours; all entrances to the house were locked, so she couldn't wander. It really wasn't possible.

"Sweetheart," Jude said gently, his voice just a bit distorted through the nose mask. "You okay?"

The little girl looked to her father, her eyes set unflinchingly on him. His heart warmed at the deep trust in her gaze. It made him want to hug her tightly. Slowly, the beautiful little girl nodded. "Yes, daddy."

Jude smiled sadly. He was glad his mouth was hidden by the mask. "Good girl. Does your throat hurt?"

Again, the little girl nodded slowly.

"When did it start? Do you remember?"

She shook her head.

"Okay, baby. Don't worry." He looked at his wife. "The sooner we act, the better."

Samantha nodded her understanding and said, "I'll get her ready."

Two weeks had passed since the Sampsons' spontaneous visit to the hospital. Little Josephine had sadly tested positive for COVID-19. It

was discovered that she had an old, used nose mask stored in the chest pocket of her overalls. Neither of her parents was sure if they were the one to have improperly disposed of a used nose mask which Josephine found and played with. They decided there was nothing to be gained from blaming each other, and focused on how to move forward. Jude also was positive for the disease; by some odd miracle, his wife wasn't.

The two were receiving treatment from home. Because it was a viral infection, there was no cure for the disease. Their conditions weren't so bad that they needed help breathing, and all that could be done was help their immune systems fight off the SARS-CoV-2 cells in their bodies. So, that was the plan. Samantha moved in temporarily with a neighbourhood friend Jacintha. She honestly had been surprised by how willing her friend was to accommodate her in their unenviable situation. She was surprised because she had expected her to not even want to talk to her—exactly what she would have done if someone else was in her situation. Feeling guilty that Jacintha Brown had welcomed her friend with genuine concern for her, Samantha decided she would do something very special for that angel when it all was over. So, till her family recovered, that was the arrangement.

Friday evening. The madness of the initial quarantine and testing had ended; really, things had slowed somewhat after Wednesday. Samantha sat behind a desk in Jacintha's guest bedroom, nearly done quarantining, staring sternly at her husband who was sitting up in bed.

"Yaa" Jude referred to his wife by day name. "I'm fine. I don't need to lie down" He protested.

"Mr. Man." She pointed a stark-tipped blood-red fingernail at her laptop's web camera. "If you get up from that bed, forget Coronavirus. I'll come and deal with you personally. *Rest.*"

He sighed and raised his hands in surrender. "Alright, madam. But I'll have to get up if Jo needs something."

The two stared silently at each other for a moment. Merely a few blocks apart, that spatial distance felt almost like both a tangible and

emotional barrier between them. It was, for her, like they were in two different countries. Samantha sighed, as the weight in her heart became heavier and heavier. “I really want to kiss you right now,” she said softly.

Her husband nodded. “So do I.” He was silent for a moment. In the past month he hadn’t touched his wife. Yet right then it wasn’t sensual desire that he felt, but deep overwhelming love; he just wanted to put his arms around his wife, kiss her, and hold their daughter in-between their embrace. The physical distance that had been between them for what felt like an unbearable lifetime already had deprived him of the emotional satisfaction he gained from hugging his daughter and wife. That, for him, was far worse than his testing positive for COVID-19. He smiled at his wife but remembered she wouldn’t see—she insisted he wear a nose mask though the only people in the house were the same ones infected. The house Madame didn’t want the place getting “over-contaminated through sneezes...” So instead, to reassure her, he laughed gently. “Don’t worry. This will end soon and we’ll kiss so long you’ll get tired of me. I promise, Yaa.” He laughed in that throaty manner which usually preceded a certain sequence of events. “You will get tired of me,” he repeated with a low growl and wicked twinkle in his eyes.

Samantha rolled her eyes at him. “I believe you. Anyway, I’m checking on Jo. Let me add her to the call.”

“Or,” Jude said in a smooth tone, “I could go to her so you speak directly with her. Simpl—” But then he stopped dead in his tracks when he saw fire flash in his wife’s eyes. He blinked. “You know what, you’re right. She should get more acquainted with technology.”

While Jude waited patiently, amazed at his assertive spouse, Samantha worked to add their daughter to their video conference. “Hello, baby,” Samantha said cheerfully, all traces of that fire completely gone. “How’re you doing?” she cooed.

“I’m fine, Mummy,” the little girl said in a content tone. “Mummy,

how are you?”

“Me? Oh, I’m fine.” Samantha laughed. “Say hello to Daddy.”

The maskless girl smiled a delicate, angelic smile and said, with a childlike version of her mother’s hard, crispy voice, “Hi, Daddy.”

‘Daddy’ cleared his throat. “Hi,” Jude said in a small voice. He was still amazed at his wife’s fire; when did she become comfortable speaking to him so sternly? But he knew it was because of deep concern for his well-being. It made him happy. Perhaps they weren’t together in the way he wanted, and the situation had struck them and flipped their normalcy flat on its back, but right then, as he looked at the faces of the two people he loved most in the world, he thought to himself, ‘This isn’t a terrible arrangement.’

A lot wasn’t clear. His wife was still working, but he was not. He didn’t know if the disease would cost him his job, or if he retained it, whether colleagues at work would stigmatise him. He hadn’t heard from many. At that moment, though, he did not care. All he cared about was that his wife of seven years, his precious Samantha, was safe, and that perfect Josephine, was said to not be in grave danger. Whatever happened, they would fight as they needed to. He said a silent prayer to God and thanked Him for his life’s two invaluable gems.

“Baby,” Samantha said, smiling sweetly at the left side of her monitor, “what’ve you been up to in your room?”

Jude also smiled as he waited for his daughter’s response. He suspected Jo’s answer would make her mother angry at him again. It wouldn’t matter, though, because he sort of liked her angry, and besides, they were in indefinite quarantine. Really, all she could do for now was complain and threaten from afar. He laughed.

“And what is so funny?” Samantha inquired, raising an eyebrow.

Michael-Angello Sarbah is a keen lover of media, communication, and education. He graduated with a Bachelor’s degree in English Education from

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