

# Neuro Magazine

Issue # 3



## Editors' Notes

Hello one and all! Iarlaith here, just thought I'd make a note before you go on to the rest of the wonderful writing that exists below.

It's only been about 3 months since the last issue, but be warned this isn't going to be a trend, Neuro Magazine is going to publishing twice a year. One Spring and one Autumn.

Now at two and a half years old I, as well as Yelaina, have seen many Covid era journals come and go. To be honest, I'm sort of amazed we've managed to stick around. Having gone through a pandemic and now finished with college I was worried, entering the 'real' world that Neuro Magazine might sink under.

There have been times where I have been tempted to stop, but no. I couldn't imagine doing so. Having made the last two issue there's something incredibly satisfying about seeing so many writers trust us with their work.

We're not the biggest journal, the flashiest journal or even the loudest or most interactive journal, so to still see people send us their work, it's very gratifying.

As I've said before, Neuro Magazine isn't going away and by love or thunder we shall evolve. I want to see how far we can take this.

To those who have read the work here, or on site and to those who still submit, thank you. Each poem and short story is that little push we need each time. I truly hope we can make this a journal worthy of the work we find.

Now. Enough of the mushy bullshit, head below and enjoy. Read. There're some seriously weird things down there, all worth a read. Trust me.

-Enjoy

Iarlaith Cunningham

*Editor in Chief*

Hey Neurons,

Once again, let's all give a big round of applause for yet another stunning issue—to the authors, to the readers, to the thinkers and the doers. As always, it's been a pleasure to read your amazing submissions and an absolute nightmare to pick the “best.” To everyone who is published here, thank you. To everyone who submitted but was rejected, thank you even more for giving us a chance. I'm truly sorry we couldn't find a place for you, but you'll find the right home at the right time. Until then, we still want to hear from you.

I hope you like our little robin friend on the cover page. I photographed him in Cork about five years ago. And if that isn't interesting enough, how's this: robins symbolize rebirth and renewal. Beginnings and endings. Life and death. Change, transformation, and growth. Is it too cliché to say that a robin is the ideal centerpiece for this issue? *But Miss Editor, what does a robin have to do with poetry and fiction?* Oh, don't worry, you'll find out.

In all seriousness, this issue is delicious. So sit back, relax, and let Neuro tell you a story or two.

Keep reading,

Yelaina Anton

*Head of Fiction*

## **Table Of Contents**

### **Poetry**

Saddee Bee	<i>An Ode to the Woman in Purple</i>	5
Bud Sturguess	<i>Incident at LAX</i>	6
Peter Donnelly	<i>Orcus Hermetically Sealed</i>	7
Mark McDonell	<i>[Radiology. For your safety accompanying persons are requested to remain in the waiting room]</i>	8
Abdulrahman M. Abu-Yaman	<i>Tides of Happiness</i>	9
Alan Murphy	<i>ICU Blues</i>	10
David Ryan	<i>Salad Bar</i>	11
Geraldine Fleming	<i>Summer Solstice on the Mount</i>	12

### **Fiction**

Maitiú Charleton	<i>The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living</i>	15
Brian Howell	<i>The Films of His Life</i>	16
Jason Jawando	<i>Friends on the Bank</i>	21
Kate Perris	<i>Inside the home for broken girls</i>	26
Robert Stone	<i>Rites</i>	35
Olusoji Obebe	<i>How Colour Fades</i>	43
Elisha Oluyemi	<i>The Way of the Progenitors</i>	52
Keith Buzzard	<i>Residue</i>	59

<b>Biographies</b>		68
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# Poetry

## An Ode to the Woman in Purple

*Sadee Bee*

An after-school program / where I spent my time  
away from home / I met a woman who only wore purple /  
She often spoke in rhymes / espoused idioms like she hid  
them in her purple back pocket / with a warm smile / she  
practiced my name until she got it right / it has never  
been easy to pronounce /  
She placed a pencil in my hand / told me it was a  
paintbrush / from which a picture could be painted  
with words /  
Outside of that room with the woman in purple /  
all I knew was how to stay silent / to shrink /  
To whisper my words into the abyss / allow them to  
be spirited away into the dark / to keep my opinions and pain  
much too close to my heart /  
I'd wait patiently for the day / to be with the woman in  
purple again /  
Where rhyme and meter brought me to brave new worlds /  
and Sylvia Plath saw deep into my soul /  
In her velvet purple outfit / she taught me that not every  
space is filled with fear / or judgment / that words are not  
only used to hurt / but also to heal / to have fun / and  
to feel free /  
She may never know how much she truly meant to me /  
Time has erased many of my memories / Her name still eludes me /  
But I never forgot how beautiful purple is /

## **Incident at LAX**

*Bud Sturguess*

I was taking home a box of my brother's things

When I went through security

the metal detector shrieked at me

like a tattler with nothing better to do

I was scared, I dropped the box

and started to cry

The officer said

It was the metal studs on my brother's belt,

the spirals in his ragged notebook

But most likely it was the gold

that set off the alarm

In the box, sticking out for all to see,

as if it were mine,

was a big gold record in a frame

They'd given it to him in L.A.

for half a million sales

Everything was in order,

the officers said

I flew home without my brother

With half a million sales

in a cardboard box

## **Orcus: Hermetically Sealed**

*Peter Donnelly*

There's a secret territory in me – a meta-space  
and an underworld, an underground,  
a turbulous anti-world – where zip-filed  
and proofed away are dark, elemental forces  
which ripple and billow their torrents in  
compressed connotation. Though densified  
and encrypted – proofed into abstraction  
from the languages of upper floors –  
in their exertion a malignity, a self-preserving  
and violent chaos in the un-form of coarse  
data disturbs the condition. Unquarried and raw,  
it tremors and upsets an unstillness of surface  
in a teeming dreaming underworld hermetically  
sealed and fused: a theatre of nightmare,  
eldritch and unheimlich, a language of image.



**[Radiology. For your safety accompanying persons  
are requested to remain in the waiting room]**

*Mark McDonnell*

*'I get this dream  
- bit embarrassing -  
we're having sex;  
she's got both breasts.'*

In mine we're side by side  
strapped into the capsule of a rocket  
that's about to crash on an alien planet....

*'My life's on hold you know  
till she get through  
all this'.*

...some small sounds  
as the last of her settles.  
I stumble out  
of the wreckage...

*'You know that photo  
they took of the Earth  
from the moon?  
Small, far-off.  
when I first seen it  
I actually cried'*

Yeah, me too

## **TIDES OF HAPPINESS**

*Abdulrahman M. Abu-Yaman*

Bar beach

As untamed children, me and my silver  
spoon crew would storm the beach at  
dawn to give our playfulness and child-  
hood enough space to flourish and flow.

When done building sand castles and  
playing with our toys, we would abandon  
them for the tide to swallow.

Next morn, we'd rush back to glance  
at slum boys that claim the ownership  
of the toys vomited back to the shore

Lekki beach

As adults, me and my fellas now  
visit Lekki, to baptize our bleak  
hearts after working nine to five  
with tides of happiness; sloshing  
and splashing the waves enjoyably  
on ourselves, with the hope that our  
joys casted into the tides would swim  
to the other side of the shore and be  
transferred to a forlorn by tickling  
his feet.

## **ICU BLUES**

*Alan Murphy*

He was in denial till the end,  
filled with obdurate ego, plotting  
to escape his hospital prison;  
the bane of nurses who would confine  
his body just as his pained spirit.  
But he soon left our family of nine,  
without acceptance or decision,  
in ICU, still brightly nodding  
at one moment, recognising Des.

## Salad Bar.

*David Ryan*

That was a bard that sank a cask,  
A barfly Hank drank a bag a cans.  
Sad that salad days can't last.

Blab was bratty. And hacks' barbs arc.  
A madman spat at Alan's Raybans.  
That was a bard that drank a cask.

A man clad all dash and masks,  
bank-cash and bland grassy hands.  
Sad that salad days can't last.

A balmy Czar had a lash and sparks  
a tap of brass and Slav's Kaftans.  
That was a card that sank a snark.

Krappy Bananas yank Sam's Acts.  
Bang! Bang! Schnapps Harry Callahan's  
Sad that salad days can't last.

A cat can't smack a tall ask.  
Fall chap Mark bawls "Carry-Bag Man".  
And that was a bard that drank a cask.  
Sad that salad days can't last.

## Summer Solstice on the Mount

*Geraldine Fleming*

balancing on the grassed lip  
of this edenic gouge  
a shadow drenched hunter-green bowl  
mist agitates between beech & birch  
I stare-straining above leaf level

first rays of rebirth breach the horizon  
kissing the tips of brooding trees

last night  
on midsummer's eve  
i travelled the path behind my eyes

vestiges of bramble & bracken  
fringed by gothic wild garlic  
merged with dog roses & ivy

stellar vestigial lines  
posed primal imprints  
to help meld mind to moment

long ago whispers  
inscrutable sounds  
bled out their rosetta missive

cauterised through time for a  
primed audience

before Stonehenge  
before time was gauged

salmon slept & leapt

on this spot  
people lived & loved

on this spot  
thrived & died

on this spot  
invented & invested

on this spot  
here we stand ready

from sky to earth  
from then to now

the belt of Venus smears pink light  
first rays of rebirth rake the sky  
our history is shared

# **Fiction**

## **The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living**

*Maitiú Charleton*

It's like there's this place inside me that I can go into that I know will make me want to die. She didn't reply, they both knew she shouldn't yet. Like there's a button, a big red button, like that meme? Or that cartoon? His eyes flitted away from hers as his hands grew in movement. Where if I press it, really, really bad things will happen. A fire, or a bomb or a load of corpses dropping from the ceiling suspended on wires revealing something that was always rotting above me which I could always smell but never see. She played it off as if she wasn't quite following and looked down at her tights a little. Her legs were folded over each other like a ballerina. She spoke earnestly. Nick that's really horrible to hear, when do you think you began to realise that? He wondered when she realised she would parrot back things her therapist had said to her instead of actually listening to him. He decided to pretend to answer her question with his tone. I can make this huge hole in my stomach that makes me feel like there has never been a more evil person on the planet, where I want to tear my guts out because I feel like I deserve it. But I then come into a dilemma, he continued, with a new positive quirk in his tone. I can't do that because the practicalities of that pain would be awful and I really hate blood. I once saw this piece of art where a man's face became unwhole due to some glass that wasn't really slicing, it was just disengaging his parts? Do you get me? She was looking up at him now, he was a little ugly in the dim lights of her apartment. Mostly, yeah, she lied. He knew he had to stop now.



## **The Films of His Life**

**(A mini-novel in four screen ratios)**

*Brian Howell*

### **I.**

#### 2.35:1 – The Films of his Childhood

They had to be westerns, they had to be CinemaScope. They were Clint Eastwood in Italy and Spain: no matter that they didn't have a colour TV for years, that his father would tell him to stop wagging his foot when it was in his father's line of sight. 'Gets on my fuckin' nerves, that, Mark.' Clint was avenging all the bullyings Mark had had at school; no matter how bad it got, there would always be a repeat showing; and if it wasn't a Leone film, it was a lesser, Lee Van Cleef vehicle.

Mark entertained a fantasy that his two best friends at school looked like Eastwood and Van Cleef, and his mind was constantly shooting its own south London version of *The Good, The Bad, And The Ugly*. He yearned to see those films in a cinema, full screen, not panned and scanned. It did not happen for years; he was on holiday in Belgium and it was there that he finally experienced the awesomeness of it, coming out of the cinema into the heart of mediaeval Bruges braced and ready to return to England. It was a feeling of elation he was not to experience again, until he saw *Little Big Man* (2.35:1), and, later, read *Blood Meridian*, that is.

His father was steeped in the older films, of John Wayne and Henry Fonda, but surprisingly receptive nevertheless to the new twist to the genre. *He saw in 1.33:1*, but he did not lord his knowledge over the boy; only his refusal to suspend disbelief, to detonate those tiny suspensions of disbelief on which childhood's innocent joy depends.

'Phew, he shot seven times—he's only *got* six bullets!'

‘Dad, it’s a *film*.’

End of story. Or nearly.

It was nothing to the day he saw Polanski’s *MacBeth*. In Todd AO-35. The film anticipated Steadicam by a generation. The movement, the sweep, the dream with mirrors. When he came out of the cinema, he was in love with CINEMA. He wanted to be a DIRECTOR. He hunted the film down till he found it time and again, at The Everyman, The Paris Pullman, The Scala, The Electric, The Ritzy (missing the riots by a week). Its power never diminished; only the screen size did.

## THE POLANSKI YEARS

The experience set him on a crusade, a journey that he would not finish until finally disillusionment set in. Disillusionment with himself, with Polanski’s half-witted follow-ups to his masterpieces. *Repulsion*, *Cul de Sac*, *Rosemary’s Baby*, *The Tenant*, but above all *Chinatown*, had inveigled their way into the screen of his mind and stayed with him.

## II.

### 1.85:1 – Abroad

Europe was his cinemathèque, but, strangely, the one where he was exposed to more Hollywood films than ever before. That rectangle, denied so often by the inanities of TV programming, became the norm. He had to see the Boormans, the Penns, the Rafelsons, the

Coppolas, the Miliuses, the De Palmas, the Scorseses, the Ciminos, albeit sometimes in CinemaScope, that visitation from his childhood, but the pervading format was 1.85:1.

### III.

#### 1.66:1 – Art films

It had started around the age of seventeen, perhaps from the very day he discovered *Time Out* in the school library. A world opened up, a door to a world he already thought he knew. But the parameters changed. The visual parallelogram altered, became narrower yet retained a dynamic. Godard was an enigma and stayed so. Bergman and Fellini were art house fodder, the hors oeuvre for the eagerly anticipated new Antonioni at the Plaza. Wenders was obligatory after that: Truffaut, Resnais, Chabrol, Rohmer, Marker (rare), Bertolucci and Pasolini too, when the Italian was in a sensible mood. French cinema, Italian, German, any European pic, really.

You can't sum it up, except with a film, maybe *L'avventura*, with *Last Year In Marienbad* (the latter admittedly widescreen) a close second. There was no point in trying any longer when friends were falling asleep in front of him in the pub.

What is the next step? Write a film review, make a film, become a cinema manager ...

He found rusting cans of discarded films in the cellar of the place.

Screen ratio is all, the aperture of perception; cinema is everything, Godardian aphorisms, gnomic phrases, infiltrated his sleeping hours and exploded when his feet hit the London pavements on the way to the Scala on his days off.

In Germany he'd had an affair with a boy called Martin in Germany he'd had an affair with a boy called Martin in Germany he'd had an affair with a boy called Martin in Germany he'd had an affair with a boy who had seduced him in parallel with the offerings of the local cinemathèque in Cologne. Martin had moved suddenly, holding him by the waist, pushing him gently onto the bed, impaling him with knowledge learnt from the dark of auditoria. When it had ended, he had not continued with anyone, of either sex. It had been his only time. In Germany he'd had...

Somewhere in there was a film maker who didn't fit, 2.35:1 (*The Man Who Fell To Earth* and *Bad Timing*), 1.85:1 (*Don't Look Now* and *Eureka*). Nicolas Roeg—the name so apt. But then neither did any great film maker—Polanski, Kubrick, Lynch, they all used different ratios.

What I want to know is what is the ratio of my dreams, what is the ratio of yours?

#### IV.

##### 1.33:1—Films of his Old Age

Going to the Everyman, Hampstead, two or three times a week, like his private viewing theatre. On Sundays, a bracing game of tennis in the morning, then the double bill. No guarantee, of course, that it'll be that hallowed near-square, unless it's early John Ford, though *The Searchers*

wasn't so late (the negative ratio coming in at a curious 1.96:1), it's true. Maybe even a chance of Powell and Pressburger's *A Matter of Life and Death* (*AMOLAD*, that is, 1.37:1) or Helen Mirren in *Age of Consent* this month, if I'm in the mood (admittedly not 1.33:1).

His father should be with him now in the dark of this place, like that day he took him to the cinema in Deptford. He could not remember what they'd seen, but the memory was comforting.

Occasionally, his daughter would join him. In the end he would marry, he had always felt sure. He knew too that they would have a daughter. He knew that the films would provide neither the solution nor the code to his life. He would write a book as if to underline this; he would call it *The Films of My Life*, like Truffaut, with whom he had absolutely nothing in common.

## **Friends on the Bank**

*Jason Jawando*

Once home, the only thing he could do was sit in it. He looked around the room he'd occupied for years. It was the first new furniture he'd bought since ... he couldn't remember buying anything. It changed things. The chair hadn't changed – still the same dank discord he'd seen in the shop – but the room had.

He relaxed into the chair, sinking like a millstone in a duckpond. A green haze shrouded his vision, enfolding him into its embrace: as safe as childhood. The cinescreen behind his eyes flickered into life, but instead of the main feature, all he saw was jagged lines, dragging him to the junkshop where he'd found the chair, and then further back, shouts spinning him around, splashing up his nose, dragging him under. A path blocked off since he was a child, reopened. There were memories skulking in pokey rooms, hiding behind wooden doors. The imagination he'd never possessed turned out to be shackled-up with childhood reminiscences. Their offspring, pushy and demanding. Where had the chair come from? Who had been in it, what had they done? Had it started life as a happy chair in a family home before things – family or happiness – had changed and it had been discarded, stored out of sight, until someone had been taken with embarrassment one night and dragged it over the back fence and down to the woods? Had it been chucked into a stream and left to moulder until it became someone else's problem?

We found it, the chair, stuck underneath an overhanging branch, wedged against a sandbank, squelching when prodded, mingling the smell of damp cloth with the stench of a stream at the height of summer. How long had it been there? It might have been days, weeks, or years. We'd never seen it before, but we hadn't been looking.

There were three of us that afternoon; we had been together almost every afternoon throughout the summer holiday. Fourteen, we were: except for me. Still thirteen, I would catch them up in the autumn, before they turned fifteen after New Year. I was shorter than them – I mean, obviously, because I was younger, but for my age, too. And because of an ear infection when I was seven, I'd never learned to swim. That wouldn't matter down there: the water was only six inches deep. That's what they said. And it was what I believed as I shinned along the trunk of a fallen tree, following my friends as they edged along to the other bank.

People didn't half dump some shite in that stream, just a convenient hole in the ground for anyone living nearby who was too lazy or stingy to get rid of things properly. 'They should be more aware of the environment,' I said.

My friends looked at me like I'd suggested we should take up knitting. The chair wasn't dumped: it had been left there to give one of us the ride of a lifetime, like being in a boat, only better. It could only be one of us. I didn't need to ask more. I still had the bruises from the time we found an empty barrel at the top of a hill. I hadn't agreed to get into that, but not all the bruises came while I was rolling down inside it. I knew from experience that I could say I wasn't going to get into the chair, but unless I was willing to walk home alone my protests would count for nothing.

My protests counted for nothing. The chair wobbled as I got in, but the sandbank held it for now.

'Are you sure the water's only six inches deep?' I asked.

My friends nodded. There was no turning back, anyway. I'd already stepped onto the chair, grabbing hold of the headrest with one hand, while the other reached backwards for dry land and missed. As the chair lurched under my weight, my standing foot had lost contact with the bank. I pushed my weight into the seat and turned round.

They laughed, my friends, the way they always laughed when I made a fool of myself. I eased myself round in the chair to look at them and saw something else. A long stick was extended in my direction, the expression behind it I had seen before, when we found a cat with its leg trapped in a manhole cover. Someone had prodded the cat, goading it into trying to escape, while the weight of the manhole cover crushed its leg. I had said something about cruelty to animals, which had made them laugh even more.

The stick he held now was for safety, not prodding. I had insisted on it before getting onto the chair. If my friend kept hold of the other end, I wouldn't float off downstream. I just had to keep hold of my own end. I leaned out of the chair to grab the end of the stick. For a moment, it looked as if it would be snatched away. I grabbed it before that happened and held on. My other friend dislodged the chair with his foot. I set off.

Close to the water, the smell rose, invading my nostrils and staining my hair. The current was stronger than I'd expected. Freed from its temporary prison, the chair tried to gallop off, dragging me into a tug-of-war between the stream and my friend on the bank, and sagging in the water, deeper than the six inches I'd been told. The chair span, desperate to be taken. My friend: I wasn't sure he had the willpower to fight. Did I want to stay in? Could I live with the shame if I bailed now? There was a bend ahead. It looked like a convenient point to jump off. Perhaps I should wait to see what lay beyond.

Beyond was another stretch of water. A long stretch with no bends or juts for another 15 yards, which seemed to telescope to 15 miles. I decided then. I needed to get off. I needed to get off immediately. My free hand reached for the embankment, but missed, grabbing a handful of air. The chair wobbled again. I grabbed the stick with both hands. 'Pull me in.' My friend did nothing. My other friend just laughed. I tried to pull myself along the stick to the bank. The current dragging the chair away became more insistent, my feet dangling in the water as I tried



to hook them round the bottom of the chair to get some purchase, became heavier. 'Pull me in.' On the bank, my friend smiled and wrenched the stick towards him, ripping the flesh on my hands as the stick slid from my grip, dragging me forwards almost forcing the chair to lurch away, before I could sink back into the seat to steady it. My friends smiled and waved as I floated away. The current sang in triumph, drowning out their laughter. The smell rose to meet me.

He wakes up in the junkshop chair in a room overstuffed with rejects, picked up at bargain prices and cheaply forgotten. He recognises none of them. Recognises nothing of the room. This is not his room, not his choice, not somewhere he has been before. Someone might have thought this was a charming eccentricity, but it's a prison of bad taste.

He has been here before, though, he realises as he stands and walks around. He doesn't remember when or why, but he knows he's never been anywhere else. He looks at the objects closely, and doesn't remember why he bought any of these things, but who else could it have been? A mirror hangs on the wall. He recognises his own face but looks properly: the individual lines and wrinkles are an alien geography. Looking at the room again, he still remembers nothing but is sure of where everything is. He walks to the door.

Outside the lawn, freshly mown into immaculate stripes, slopes gently away. The sun sets behind the copse at the far end, casting shadows that don't quite reach the house. He doesn't recognise this either, but he knows that beyond the trees there is a stream. On the bank there will be friends playing. He walks towards them.

Heading through the copse towards the water, I feel what I'll know when I get there. Hovering between thought and feeling, the memory refuses to be pinned down. This has happened ten-

thousand times before. Each time will be a surprise. One of the boys pulls the stick. Twice: once in my memory and then immediately afterwards, like a ricochet, too close to be a proper echo. The first time he tries to pull the other boy into the bank. Immediately, he pulls again. Not again, this is still the first time. He pulls the stick from his friend's grasp. The third boy laughs, the laugh getting louder and more high-pitched as the boy in the chair slips away. 'Help him,' I tell them, but they ignore me, the laughter continuing as I walk to the edge of the bank. 'Help him.' The boy in the chair looks at me, his face getting smaller as he slips further away.

I turn to the boys on the bank, but I'm alone. The boy in the chair looks at me as he floats away. 'Pull me in,' he says from a distance. My hand stings. I look down and see the stick and a red mark where I gripped too tightly. 'Pull me in,' the boy says one last time. The stream laughs as he floats away.

## **Inside the home for broken girls**

*Kate Perris*

I have never been able to understand how you can abandon your daughter, your very own child.

As I put together the tiny pieces of a face after a fall from a high place, as I realign the broken arm of a girl thrown carelessly against a wall, as I re-attach the foot chewed by a vicious, so-called “pet”, it is under the eyes of my adopted daughters.

I know the girls may be reliving their own trauma so I need to be near them, not in the main room with the other nursing staff. I know the other nurses are jealous of my attachment, that they can't form the same bond with the patients. That they are occupied with their blood relatives, whether they like them or not, and most do not. But I get to choose my family. I am the lucky one.

Azalea. This patient's name is Azalea.

She has the blackest of black hair, twisted into two plaits. The reddest of red lips, tracing a perfect bow. Sad green eyes, gazing into the distance and away from human contact. Her skin is as white and delicate as chalk. I trace her cheek with my finger, and to me it feels like bone.

She is the last thing I see before I lock the door. Every work day for years I have checked her for signs of change, but never does she alter. Faithfully I keep her clean. I have to stand on a chair to do so, and the chair and I both being older I need to be careful how I stand, but I never miss a day.

Azalea shares the long-term patients' room with her sisters. I would never ask them to leave. There are girls who have been here even before I began working in the hospital, since the war I was told.

Their treatment is paid for in advance. Once they have recovered from their surgery, I send a postcard to their family as a reminder. Then, a week later, I send another postcard, and the final postcard after a month. But still, some remain.

The patients who never return from the hospital.

On average, there is one child left behind every month. What mothers love their daughters enough to surrender them for healing and yet never return? I remember the tears over the shattered faces, the dislocated arms, the fractured legs. The mothers are only soothed when I promise to make them better than new, pristine and perfect. But even when they are made whole again, some remain unwanted, abandoned.

How must these daughters feel?

Every time a girl comes round from surgery I tell her that her mother loved her, that it must have been rough siblings or friends who hurt her. I tell the daughters something must have happened to their mothers. Surely they must have been knocked down by a tram, kidnapped, stricken by amnesia. But one day—when their own treatment is complete—their mothers will, they surely *must*, return.

But even as I whisper it into the ear of a rosy cheeked girl, I know that this is not true. I have never known a so-called mother to return after more than a few weeks have passed.

In reality, they've probably adopted new daughters and forgotten about their older girls. Or perhaps the persons responsible for hurting their former darlings convinced them that they should have outgrown them by now. They will say that they did them a favour,

really. Their brothers (I always blame the brothers) think girls' need to mother is stupid, but what do they know? It is their phallic toys that are stupid and should be outgrown, not the female desire to nurture and care. Where would they be without it? We would be much better off without their destructive toys and urges.

Before I have to leave the hospital at night, I close Azalea's eyes. I hope she can sleep. I kiss her forehead, carefully step down from the chair, and pull on the cord, which turns out the light.

I lock the doors before descending the dark stairs leading to the street. I am always the last to leave at night, and the first to arrive in the morning. To enter and exit I must fight with the barely serviceable slatted double doors. To be joined together both need to be yanked severely and aged paint flakes off, drifting like ash.

When I unlock the doors in the morning, sneezing on the dust that floats through the air, I ask them if they've been fighting, and when they tell me no, I believe them. I would be able to tell if they lied. Even though I can't look into their eyes, because their eyes don't work that way, I know the truth.

I try to get the long stay patients to look after each other. There are so many of them now. I used to assign the girls who have been there the longest to look after the others, but now they take new girls under their wing without even a prompt. They fill the gap left behind by their mothers.

I wish someone had told me what to expect when my mother died. I had no one to guide me and she hadn't been expecting that particular event, so she had no will. I had no idea, then, how to look after myself, nor how to deal with the legal difficulties that arose from the suddenness of her death.

It was the solicitor from that time who, when I was in need of a job, suggested that the hospital take me on as an apprentice, and on the condition I was not in what they called a customer facing role, this was agreed.

That was close—very close—to 20 years ago, and although the other nurses and I are not what they call friendly I drop hints. I drop bigger and bigger hints in the break room, when we are drinking our tea. Finally, I have to get to the point.

“Tomorrow marks twenty years since I started working here. Twenty years!”

Bethan puts down her cup of tea.

Margaret coughs.

Susan sneezes.

Everyone finds something to look at that is not me, and they start talking about watching people competing. There is nothing people will not fight to do better than each other on television, for some reason, and for some reason the other nurses find all of it fascinating.

I hope that they are planning to mark the day and are just feigning disinterest so that they can surprise me. All day I wait in expectation of a cry of “surprise!”, the unveiling of a cake, or at the very least a card signed by all of them.

But like my girls, I wait in vain. At the end of the day all of the nurses disappear without saying a single goodbye, or thank you for all my hard work. I have been there the longest, of course, so nobody can truly thank me for the entirety of my hard work, but they could thank me for the portion of it that they witnessed. When the last nurse leaves, I am left staring into space, holding a scalped patient in one hand, and a wig in the other.

As ever, Azalea, in the top left-hand corner, is the last girl that I dust, and I reflect on how long I have been doing so. In fact, I recall, I placed her here on the tenth anniversary of

the day I started work. I gasp. She has been here 10 years today and I did nothing to celebrate. I am no better than my fellow nurses. I smack myself on the face, and gasp again.

How can I make it up to her? An audacious thought enters my mind. I cannot chase it away, bold though it is.

I will find her mother and reunite the two.

I gasp once more. Really, I am gasping too much, but now I know I have to try to find Azalea's mother.

I wonder to myself what Azalea would say if she could meet the girl who forgot her. I hope her mother will be truly sorry, but whether she is or not I will get her to apologise to Azalea, whatever it takes. I was never able to get my mother to apologise to me for certain things, not even at the very end, but it will be different for Azalea.

Here at the hospital, we never dispose of any records, just as we never dispose of any patients. I find the timeworn cabinet where we keep the names and addresses of all those parents and grandparents who have not returned. I pull out a long, thin drawer and find the card where I typed her name almost a decade ago. Ceri. I say it to myself, muttering it contemptuously. Then I say it louder, and more scornfully.

“Ceri.” In Welsh it means to love, which is not appropriate at all for such a girl.

With only a small detour on my way to and from work I can walk past her house every day.

It takes a few days, but in the end I finally see a teenage girl who must have been Azalea's abandoner. She has a ponytail high on her head and a carefree manner. Her mother calls her home saying that she has forgotten her lunch. She rolls her eyes theatrically even though she

does not know she is being watched. I see her deposit the brown bag in the bin as soon as she is around the corner. Apparently dumping things is her stock in trade.

Even though I have started to feel that it is futile, I want to remind her of her daughter. I try to think of the best way to do this. I will take photos of Azalea and post them through her letterbox. I have been left a camera which prints out photos instantly. I bring the device with me to the hospital so that I can take photos of Azalea. I use up a whole film in my eagerness.

I take the photos home and get out my black pen. The wide white strip at the bottom of the photo is perfect for writing messages. The first message I write is “Remember me?” “Forgotten daughter,” “You left me in hospital”, “Abandoned girl,” I continue, and then start again from the first message because I have no more ideas. I will leave them every day until she realises the seriousness of her desertion.

I have to start leaving earlier for the hospital so I can drop the photos through the letterbox before Ceri leaves for wherever it is that she goes. I can’t imagine any school or workplace where you can dress like her (I don’t like to say it, but she looks like a woman of the night, only during the day) but there must be somewhere that she goes so early.

I will need to be earlier. I will need to be stealth. I creep up to the letterbox and open it with two fingers, just wide enough to slide the photo through, and then silently release it. And then I crawl away, behind the hedge so I can’t be seen from the windows.

When I get up, there is mud on the knees of my tights and on the palms of my hands, but I do my best to wipe it off so I can be presentable for work. My clothes are not so different in colour from mud, anyway. They were my mother’s when she was alive.

I do not hear from Azalea’s neglectful parent, but then the Monday of the second week when I insert my fingers the photo is snatched from my fingers, and when I look up, eyes are aimed at me through the slit.



Until then, I hadn't been able to remember her bringing in the doll, but when I see her blue eyes through the letterbox I remember seeing them before, filling with tears when she was a sweet little girl.

She had been persuaded to give up her doll only with the promise Azalea would be freed from pain. But did she ever return to see if the pain had been alleviated? I search for the young girl in the (to be frank, unattractive and slatternly) teenage girl. Her pulled back hair reveals a forehead covered in carbuncles.

Realising that I have agitated her, I continue delivering the photos. One day when I am running late due to my bicycle having been attacked by hooligans, I need to deliver the photo during my morning break. But when I drop in the photo I immediately sense she is waiting for me. I run away, not bothering to try to stay below the level of the hedge this time. Ceri opens the door and shouts crudely at me.

"Hey! Cow!" she shouts when I do not reply, as I do not have anything to say to her that I haven't already written on the photographs. She tries to throw the photo back at me but it twists and falls at her feet. She scowls at it, then turns her scowl on me. If looks could kill, her look could kill someone who did not come from tough, peasant stock such as mine. Her mousy blonde ponytail swings from side to side. I watch it sway until her mother comes and grabs her by the shoulder. Azalea's grandmother doesn't see me and doesn't listen when Ceri protests, not even when she picks up the photo and waves it in her face.

I smile. I am the victor. Well, Ceri's mother is the real victor, but Ceri is the loser, and that is what counts.

It pains me to see Ceri treats her mother no better than her daughter. I have so many regrets about how I treated my mother.

Why does Ceri try to catch me in the act of delivering the photos if not because of her own guilt, her own complicity? I know she will break down sooner or later and return to the hospital.

And the next day, she does so at last. When everyone else has gone home, there is a knock on the door. I know it is her. Her face is tear stained once again as I fold back the first door. She moves back, hiding behind it, but I can see her eyes, radiating her familiar hostility.

I put my finger in a loose slat so I can meet Ceri's glare with my own. When I pull it out it is bleeding, but I have asserted my dominance. I fold the doors so she can see me, and turn my back to her.

She is pleading. "We paid you to fix her. Why can't I just leave her here?" she says through sobs. "You scare me. If I take her, will you leave me alone?"

I pivot towards her. What is scary about me? I only do the things that other women do, nurturing children and caring for them.

I sigh and put my hands on my hips. "Do you have the receipt?" I insist.

"No, why would I need a receipt? You know who I am. You won't leave me alone!"

"You need to present the receipt," I say, lips pressed together tightly. "I do everything by the book. No exceptions."

"For God's sake!" she explodes. "Who keeps receipts for 10 years?"

"No receipt," I say, "no Azalea."

"I didn't even want her. She was my grandmother's. My cousin was jealous she left her to me and threw her at the floor."

I shrug. "And that is my problem, why, exactly?"

“Give her to me,” she shouts.

I fold the doors together and start to hook them together on the inside.

She pushes through, her fists pressed together.

“Where is she?”

I say nothing, but her crazed, darting eyes spot Azalea. Having been here the longest, she is on the highest shelf, the furthest out of reach.

Ceri sees that there was no way to reach her unaided, and her eyes cast around for something to stand on. She grabs the chair, and pushes it towards Azalea.

“Stop!” I cry. But something prevents me from saying that the chair is in need of repair.

She steps onto the chair in a great rush. In a moment, the leg snaps and Ceri hits the floor. Her head smashes against the floor just as Azalea’s must have when she was injured a decade ago.

In this moment, they are finally alike, truly mother and daughter again. Ceri’s face is frozen like Azalea’s, her mouth slightly open, her eyes also fixed in one direction. The only difference is that blood is forming a pool around Ceri’s head, thick and crimson.

My mother’s blood pooled in the same way.

I don’t want to lose my job and my daughters. I need to make sure she is found somewhere else, and without any sign of injury. It is lucky that repairing girls is my stock in trade. I have never fixed one this big before, but her, I can make better than she was before.

## Rites

*Robert Stones*

Lowe stood at the window and watched the traffic on the main road a hundred yards away. The road was bright with rain, glistening now and then under the lights of the infrequent cars. To be driving on such a night, in the middle of the night, seemed like an adventure to him and he was ashamed to be doing nothing. He could have sat by his father's bedside, but no one wanted that. Lowe least of all. There was no point.

At home he might have heard an owl, but here in his parents' house, soon to be his mother's house only he supposed, there was no chance of that. The dissolute purring of the cars was all that disturbed the great silence. They might not call in this weather anyway. It had been raining for hours.

His mother and sister must have been asleep. They were exhausted. Lowe himself had arrived only that day. His father too slept if that is what it should be called. Lowe did nothing but watch for cars. All the times in his life when he had done nothing. That Sahara of wasted opportunities. A bitter thing to think on when you had so little time left. Hanging on for those last few not-so-precious hours.

No one drank here. That seemed a waste too. Both drinking and not drinking. But there was some booze. For Christmas and those other special occasions which never came around because no occasion in this house ever was special, exceptional, enough. Lowe had lived here for twenty-six suffocating months, his last years as a teenager, and that had been thirty years ago, but he knew where they kept the drinks. There was a bottle of Warnink's advocaat, a relic of the Christmas he had moved out. At least. He was resisting that but he had been worrying at

what was left of a bottle of vodka ever since everyone else had gone to bed. He had drunk too much of it.

A vigil was what he was supposed to be doing. Keeping. That felt like it ought to be important, but it wasn't attached to anything any more. You know what it means, but what does it really mean?

He thought he had better look in on the old man again. He had left all of the doors ajar to minimise the noise of opening them. Except for the door to the bedroom. His father had always hated an open door and any man would want some sense of privacy to die in. He crept up the stairs past the pictures, speckled with age, that had been on these walls always. Lowe's father would never look at them again, having walked past them, without much caring to look at them, every day for decades. Owls of the world, poorly drawn, a green woodpecker, painted more yellow than life. His mother was in Lowe's old room. Sweating among those dreadful nylon sheets he had tossed and turned between all those years ago when all of this was unthought of. He might have heard some muffled moan from her. If so it was a sign she was asleep. His sister had her own old room. He turned the handle of his father's door, which gave its unstifflable little squeal, and pushed it open against the too-feeble resistance of the too-thick carpet. It made a noise like a sigh of exasperation.

He stood in the doorway a little embarrassed to find he still had the vodka bottle in his hand. Nothing had changed. Which was to say that the one thing that might have happened had not. His father's breathing was as uncertain and unlikely as the traffic in the road, coming at sudden and unpredictable intervals. Was he on morphine? Lowe wasn't sure. He had had little to do with any of this. He stepped up to the bedside as if on a dare but with a feeling of reverence. He held the vodka behind his back like a fool.

There was a lamp on the bedside table, surrounded by a disarray of bottles, beakers, droppers like so many captured chessmen, but its shade was thick and red so it seemed to cast shadow, not light. His father lay at last in this edifice, this tent of shadows. He was almost unrecognisable to Lowe who had not seen him for eight months. This looked like a model of his father made from grey paper. His head lay on one very slim pillow. Other pillows were piled in what had until recently been his mother's place, as though representing her now. He had been neatly shaved that day. His sister would have done that. The room was full of flowers, undoubtedly the gifts of his mother's friends.

Back downstairs he finished the vodka. It would have been ridiculous to put that big bottle back in the cabinet with so little left in it. He stood it on the dining table in the bay window. Two years he had lived in this house and that was a lot of dismal meals on a lot of forgettable days around that table. Someone should have stood vodka bottles there more often.

He could have read. They didn't take a newspaper any more. He was half way through Alan Bullock's biography of Hitler. *A Study in Tyranny* (1962). It interested Lowe very much but reading it didn't seem like the right thing to do. He didn't want to mark his father's dying day with it. He didn't want to relive any of this every time someone mentioned Hitler. Anyway he was too woozy to concentrate on it.

A game of Monopoly had been set up on the table and was in progress. His sister and his mother had found this thing to do to pass the hours. They didn't mind about ruining Monopoly forever. Lowe was aware that his only job was to stay awake and equally aware that he was now extremely tired. He had had a very early start. So he stared at the board and tried to figure out who was winning. There were four counters: the top hat, the iron, the boot and the little Scottie dog. His mother would always have the dog. They must have been playing the game

out for four players, rather than playing against one another. Lots of properties had been built. The game was well advanced but everyone still had plenty of money.

Lowe didn't really know the rules of Monopoly. Not the actual rules. When he had first played the game with his parents they had not played to the actual rules. The buying of property had been particularly poorly understood. What did you have to do before you could buy a house? He thought now that his parents had been such a long way from being able to buy a house of their own that they could not believe it was so easy to do it in the game. They owned this house. His father's redundancy money had paid for that, for the deposit at least. As for hotels. That made as much sense as the iron and the top hat. Funny to think of his father sitting at this table playing with this very Monopoly set. Some of these banknotes would have been his once. Now he had nothing. He had sat around this board and momentarily all he had hoped for was to land on Chance. Now he was sitting perched on the edge of time.

Lowe sat back in the armchair but found he couldn't see all that he wanted of the board from there so he stood up again and picked up a little yellow house, turned it over, squeezed the sharp points of its gables and put it back down. It was empty inside. A shell merely. And what of this house, the one he was standing in now? Lowe wondered if he would ever live here again. On his own. With his sister. He had no idea of the value of the house except that it would be altogether beyond him to buy it, or half of it. He didn't know whether his mother would want to live here alone and he wouldn't dare to ask her.

He decided to take a few turns. It was hard to imagine that this game would ever be finished given what tomorrow was likely to bring. He rolled the dice, moved the dog seven squares, although it may not have been the dog's turn, and thought about what to do. He looked at everyone's cards. The dog had landed on Coventry Street which it appeared to own. Should it buy a house? Could it afford to? Was it allowed? Yellow houses on yellow properties. He

looked in the box. There did not seem to be enough houses. Yellow houses on yellow properties. That was definitely how he remembered it. But that could not be right, could it? He had just decided that he knew that that could not be right when there was a knock on the door. It must have been three o'clock in the morning.

His parents only ever used the front door reluctantly. His father would never use it again. Lowe struggled with the latch. When he did get it open there was no one there. Then he saw a large black car at the end of the drive with a man dressed in black bending over messing with something on the front passenger seat. He just watched him, saying nothing.

When the man stood up and turned around his face was completely obscured by a huge bouquet of lilies which he held awkwardly under one arm and in his other hand Lowe noted the very welcome sight of a bottle of champagne. As he approached, Lowe thought the man must be able to see him by peering through the lilies. Lowe took the flowers from him and held them upside down by his side to show the man how he should have handled them and then he took the champagne from him too. He stared into his visitor's face and thought he knew him. Not someone from school. He might have been someone off TV. Then he thought he looked like David Hemmings. The *Blow Up* era David Hemmings but also brow-beaten, round-shouldered, very sad. This is what would have happened to David Hemmings if he had been born in Wolverhampton and had never managed to get away. He would have become an undertaker or whatever this chap was. Not an undertaker. His father wasn't even dead. Then David Hemmings spoke. It was something like,

— Tell him to try to embrace Jesus.

— OK, said Lowe. And he grinned because that was not something you could say in reply to David's command, or advice. Then he was ashamed of grinning. David backed away.



He didn't turn around, he stepped backwards. Lowe nodded at him and shut the door. His mother called from upstairs,

— Tell him to close the gate.

Lowe opened the door again but the man was already gone and he hadn't needed telling to close the gate.

He put the lilies down on the armchair and the champagne on the table, next to the empty vodka bottle. Lilies were not appropriate for a sick man, and their smell was so powerful and deathly. That had not been David Hemmings obviously. Had he been representing some religious organisation? Jehovah's Witnesses? Had his father or mother been in touch with such people recently? That seemed tremendously unlikely.

Lowe thought of Peter Knowles who had given up a very promising career as a centre forward for Wolverhampton Wanderers in order to become a Jehovah's Witness. Those two roles being incompatible, apparently. Seventh Day Adventists they were really called. He meant them no disrespect. They had made a nuisance of themselves knocking on people's doors with their cultish agenda, giving away *The Watchtower*. Peter had been Cyril's brother, another footballer. There had been a Cup Final song about Cyril, mainly because his name was considered quaint. He had played for Tottenham though. Wolves hadn't been in the Cup Final for sixty years. Then there had been Dave Hill, at one time the bass player in Slade and a preposterous man even by the high standards of glam rock. He became a Jehovah's Witness too. Imagine answering a knock on your door one Sunday morning and finding Dave Hill standing there. In a jacket and tie. Lowe wondered how old his father had been when Dave Hill was still putting on make-up and wearing purple platform boots. Lowe had had a photograph of Peter Knowles once, as a football card. His father would have stuck that in his album for

him. He felt he was spinning back through the most trivial incidents of his childhood and not even just his own, any boy's childhood. He could recall so little of whole years of his life.

But he was sure that he was getting off the point here. David Hemmings was not a Jehovah's. Not even depressed, slouching, hangdog David Hemmings. David Hemmings with a pudding bowl haircut. Lowe opened the champagne. The pop made him hunch his shoulders and grimace as people do when they have made a too-loud noise. He decided to take the lilies upstairs.

He didn't have a vase for the flowers so he propped them under the window. There really was a surprising number of flowers here. His father had been quite a gardener once. Not flowers so much though. It was a sign that Lowe had had enough to drink that he did not find his mission absurd or overwhelming. He had perhaps not spoken to his father in earnest for, well, perhaps not ever and now he was going to encourage him to try to embrace Jesus, a man whose name had never passed either of their lips. Not when in the same room as one another. He approached his father, put his hand to his shoulder and spoke the words.

He considered, without taking away his hand, that while these ministrations were completely insincere, they might nevertheless be effective. Lowe knew that there was an element of trickery, some sleight of hand, about deathbed conversions but he also believed that if his father would embrace Jesus and Jesus was real, then in a few hours his father, Lowe's father, would be in Paradise. Those were definitely the rules. Jesus was his father's Get out of Jail Free card. Lowe grinned but to some degree with happiness this time. He held his father's hand now which lay lifeless in his palm if not quite literally so. His father gave no sign that he knew he was not alone. Lowe told him that he still had time to make up for all of the trouble of his life, the great deal of trouble that he had caused and the trouble that he had endured. It was still possible to make everything alright. Even now.

Lowe thought he saw his father's eyelids flicker but the light was difficult. Perhaps he would never open those eyes again and that seemed such an easy thing to do. But he would still be seeing things now. What visions might even the most ordinary of dying men see? He could already know the great secret, the one that no one can tell even though everyone finds it out. Until this point, Lowe had never really believed that his father might know anything that he did not know. Even when he had been a very little boy he had never thought that. When he went back downstairs he fell asleep.

He woke up early the next morning to the noise of his mother clearing away the empty bottles. The vodka, the champagne and even the advocaat. She didn't need to say anything. He knew his father was dead. His head felt terrible. He made his way upstairs and had a look. The sheet was drawn over his father's face. He had no wish to draw it back. He couldn't see the lilies, nor smell them. His mother may have intervened there.

He didn't know where his sister was. Still sleeping, no doubt. She had done her duty. The fact is that she had never really liked their father. No one had. He had not been that kind of man.

## How Colour Fades

*Olusoji Obebe*

"Mike, your hair is getting bushy. You need a cut."

With a slight grimace hanging around one corner of my eye, I ran five fingers through my head. They felt like a rake combing through some close-cropped grasses. My countenance twisted into a deeper contortion of grimace. Or even confusion. *My hair is still short, for crying out loud.* I almost blared that out from my plaintive throat. But then, I'd to caution myself. We were taught that anyone who raised his voice on his parents would experience worse defiance from his own children. So, I hummed some indistinct words—a perfect blend of protest and acceptance. Father knew what was happening.

"You want to wear your hair like your brother?" He asked. I knew this was one kind of rhetorical question. In our home, we'd not dare return answers to Father's questions during cautioning moments. Doing that would amount to the offence of bantering words with elders. And one would have to go and look for his father elsewhere. So, we did allow his words and questions to puff through the air, entering our right ears and probably finding a way of escape through the left too. Father was the one who wouldn't negotiate his decisions with anyone. Even when Mummy advised him or raised her opinions, he would nod as if he accepted them. But you would find him doing something else. Then Mummy's advice would end up as water running off the duck's body. That was why we called him *Father* and Mummy *Mummy*. *Mummy* happened to be a more endearing name for us than *Father*. Well, if I were asked who I loved more between Father and Mummy, I'd simply say Mummy. She had a big heart, and child-likeness when it came to forgive-and-forget matters. You could offend Mummy now and she'd scold you, *talk sense into your head*, eye you menacingly but in the next ten minutes call you back into her arms. Unless she asked you to go have a nap. Like she told me last week.

On that day, I was playing stunts in the hot sun behind her shop. My friends had taught me how to do the stunts. We'd get some broken bricks, or even a full if we could get it and dig shallow holes. After that, we'd place the brick nearly before the mouth of the hole. Then, Sam\_\_the shortest guy in our midst that however happened to be the swiftest and agilest\_\_did dive in first. Now standing on the brick and his back facing the hole, Sam toed up and down, up and down, up and then, backflipped with nimbleness. He went into the air like a kite loose from its owner's grip and skilfully turned so that he could land inside the hole on his legs. We loved to call this style *Backie*. It was Sam 's favorite. Apart from *Backie*, there was another called *Bigboss*.

These were what I was doing with my friends. Mummy had once called and warned me to sit and never to go back to play again. But I sneaked out of the shop, seeing her get carried away with a *customer*. And the second time, she didn't call. She came to our stunt spot and saw me play *Backie* with my knees landing inside the hole. Sam would tell me I did land with my knees because I was still a novice and couldn't fly so high. At that, Mummy growled and it startled me. Then I knew I was *in soup*.

"Do you want to kill yourself? Break your neck like Bobo did to himself?"

"I said you should stop playing this dangerous game. You want to become a goat, ba?"

"Don't *copy* Sam. He has a short and smart body. You've a sturdy body."

Those were the words falling faintly into my ears knotted together by her hands which dragged me into the shop.

"Now, go and sleep."

Mummy had been pissed off. Yes. Whenever she really got irked, she would order us to bed. Unlike Father who would get a cane. And when there seemed to be no cane in sight, he'd get his belt.

I came back to the present. Father would get my hair cut soon. I looked so bad that I grumbled and shuffled in to get him his cutting materials. *Father is not trained as a barber. I don't know how he comes about shaving hair and beards.* Father would shave his beards all alone. After applying some cream-coloured salves on his cheeks for about 30 minutes, he set to work, picked the mirror and *Bic* stick to shave. I still didn't understand this.

After some minutes, Father had been done with my hair. But anytime I attempted watching how I looked in the mirror, I felt disappointed. Father was a bad barber. He couldn't do me the big-boy haircuts. He just did me *Skin Bololo*. *Skin Bololo* was a style that made heads reflect people's faces. Especially when oiled, the head would start carrying the sheen of a bright sun all around. What I hated about this haircut was that the yam-size of my head would fully evolve for even my classmates to scorn. I would cover it with my bag to and fro in school, lest the bullies slapped my brain out.

Would I ever be able to visit those barbershops? Would I ever be able to do *sporting wave* like the one on brother Ola's head? Would I ever have my hair cut with an electric clipper other than scissors, comb and blade?

I couldn't sleep that night. I was touching my head intermittently.

I grew up to my teens five years later. And before then, Father became more like math too hard for me to understand. Master Jidenna was our Mathematics teacher in school. He would often say *Guys, Mathematics is the simplest subject in the world.* But that was a lie. Blatant lie! I didn't understand the subject. My friends didn't. Our seniors didn't. Sometimes, I would wonder

who started Mathematics as a subject and curse him under my uneasy breath as I did my homework. I would tear a lot of papers in the name of solving word problems. Still, Master Jidenna would give me zero that had two eyes and two big ears.

Now, I feared that all my assessments about Father might equal zero. What I thought Father should go bananas about, he might keep mum or disregard it totally. He had seen me play football one day in the sun and didn't flog me.

"Playing in the sun will give you fever, Mike." That was all he said.

I now seemed to like him more, though. He occasionally took me to the barbershop for my haircut. Occasionally—Christmas day, Easter celebration. The first time a clipper touched my head, I almost cried. My eyes turned red. It scraped my scalp so hard that I suffered a small incision.

Father would tell me sorry even when I'd expected a shut up instead. Father might stop being mean to us at home, soon. I thought.

Later I would know Father was a nice man. Nice to a fault, even. He loved to give and might even borrow to give. He loved to accommodate people. And then, I started seeing a different shade of him. The fierceness in his face had worn off.

We played together. We laughed together. I could touch his beards and pull out a strand while he playfully groaned.

He now advised me. He would scold when he needed to. But no floggings.

It was a cool evening. Father wasn't yet back from work. Mummy too. I'd come home with my big bro to do some chores. But in the process, I got into trouble. Big wahala o.

I was fetching water from the well. Queen, my little sister, joined me. We were two silly kids who would always quarrel and fight. Real fisticuff. Most of the time, Queen was at loggerhead. So, we started our fight again, beside the uncovered well.

With fury blinding my eyes, I pushed her and she stumbled into the well. Immediately, my anger gave in to fear. Fear gripped me. It paralyzed me momentarily. I couldn't move. Couldn't shout. Thanks to God for a passerby who saw how jittery I was and had to stop to help.

But awfully, Queen had drowned. She didn't open her eyes. She looked dead. Fear almost killed me too. My heartthrob intensified. I was panting like a boy escaping the claws of bears. Of fears.

She was admitted. Father came. Mummy came. Everybody came. All my sad countenance seemed to tell anyone who looked at me was *I didn't know she would fall inside the well; I didn't deliberately do it, please.*

Queen later opened her eyes. But I'd been fearing Father's silence since he had come. He didn't say anything to me yet. His silence was menacing. I felt his silence come to me in the body of a killer trying to pounce on me. *Father will kill me. He will kill me. I'm done for.*

The following day was Friday. I couldn't go to school. Queen was discharged and brought home. She now spoke and ate and walked. Quite better. Then, Father called me to the *parlour*—we liked calling our sitting room that old-fashioned way. Mummy was there too, seated. They asked me to kneel down. I resurrected my fear. And this time, it came with pounds on my head. The pang had made me start crying even before my parents said anything.

"How could you, Mike?" It was Father who spoke first. "How could you have done this to your sister?"



Remember I couldn't answer these kinds of questions. Or else, I would so much irk Father that he would lash me out. So, it was a dialogue between Father and Mummy over my misdeed. But which was a mishap.

"Mike's too playful. Yesterday, you played *Backie*. Today, played *Slippo*. Tomorrow, football with monkey goalposts. Now, your sister is another object of play?" Mummy was fierce tonight.

She continued. "What if the man who rescued your sister didn't come in time, eh?"

"Exactly. That's how Queen would die. But God forbid. Evil son!"

"He's a wizard. *Omokomo*. You can't kill your sister o. You can't! We thank God it wasn't more than this. Though, this was much. But it hadn't been more than this. If not, we wouldn't be here talking."

"We thank God. Because if such had happened, people would have been saying nasty things."

"Yes. I just thank God. I will always worship Him." Mummy knelt and said a little prayer of thanksgiving to God, rubbing her two palms against each other. I was there on my knees, weeping profusely. I hadn't wept like this before. I was just 15. But this unfortunate event *corrected my head*. I couldn't play my usual games anymore. Every night now was meant for reading. Whenever Father put on the *gen*, Father would ask me to go inside to read and shut the door to the suspenseful music coming from the movie on the television. *How I wish I could watch this movie*. But then, I had to read because Father did come on intervals to check me.

And this set the path for the beginning of my maturity.

I still loved Father. I loved Mummy. I loved them both. They made us happy. Now, I hardly believed that I was so stubborn when younger. Mummy would tell me some of the stories and ask surprisingly if I had quickly forgotten. I'd shake my head innocently, thinking I could never do all that. She would laugh. Perhaps, she understood this change.

Yes, change. I was now taller than Mummy and trying to *out-tall* Father. Looked uglier. My big bro would tell me that that was a manly feature and I needed not to lament. Deep voice. Slow, calculated gait. Few talks, more reasoning. New friends. I'd seriously changed.

Now, I looked out for more meaningful things. One of them was how beautiful Mummy and Father related. I was so surprised that I hadn't noticed this all this while.

*So, they play? They laugh together? And do those couple's gossip?* So surprised that I hadn't noticed these all this while.

I assessed Mummy. She was a caring mother. A doting wife. I also assessed Father again. Now, he was different from who I knew some years ago. He was a responsible husband. A successful father.

I had seen couples fight in our neighborhood. But I hadn't seen Mummy and Father do that. They were peaceful with each other.

But on a fateful night, Father returned home looking gloomy. He went to bed without taking his dinner. This was obviously unlikely of him. We were worried, including Mummy. The next day, Father had woken before anyone else and exited the house without taking his breakfast.

"Mummy, what's wrong with Father?" My big bro asked. I'd also wanted to ask.

However, Mummy smiled. She looked less unperturbed than yesterday. "One truly needs to be observant because a dog who used to wag its tail at the sight of its owner but now barks

seeing the same person has got something up its sleeve," Mummy said. I looked confused. My big bro looked confused. We obviously didn't understand the proverb.

"Mummy, what do you mean?"

"I knew your father first before knowing you guys. And although Bamidele, your father, hasn't been like this since we both got married, I think he's got something bothering his mind," Mummy replied and smiled. Her smile really put me off.

And I'd to ask, "Mummy, and you know what that is?"

She nodded. "Don't worry, sons. I'll speak with dad when he returns."

I was looking forward to that. I wanted to know why Father barely replied to our greetings. Wanted to know why he had been skipping his meals. Wanted to know why he had looked so sullen and guilty. And to know why he wouldn't say these to anybody. But that very night, Father didn't come home.

The following morning, Mummy didn't even allow the second knock to thud before opening the door. We didn't sleep throughout the night. We kept groping in the bedroom corners and pacing the parlour with our buzzing phones unanswered. Mr Zaccheus, my big uncle, was the one at the door and right there behind him I could spot Father. *Why does it have to be uncle Zacchy bringing Father to his house? What's happening?* I guessed Mummy was confused too but that wasn't written all over her face. After all, nothing bad had happened to Father.

Uncle Zacchy had started speaking. It was a monologue. Sounded like a good script. Might have been rehearsed, even. Everything just went before me like a fast movie. Father was silent. He was meant to play that role because the Father I knew was a talkative one. But I could hear Uncle Zacchy say something that caught everyone unawares.

"Your husband has impregnated a woman..." he had said. Within two shakes of a lamb's tail, the woman—short, dark, ugly with eyeballs almost falling off from their sockets—sauntered in and sat beside Uncle Zacchy. I was fuming. *Is this really happening?* I shot a glance at Father. He was silent, still staring at the flower vase on the center table. *Father, you failed!* I wanted to growl but the teachings imbibed in me from childhood days wouldn't let me. I looked at Mummy. She was crying.

And the confidence entered into me. Uncle Zacchy might call it defiance but I didn't fucking care. It moved me to my feet and walked me out on them. I loved Father and wouldn't disrespect him. But I didn't expect him to do this. Not even shortly after I created a mutual bond with him.

I was thinking through that day like someone wandering all about for answers to his questions. Then, a web caught me. *Does this occurrence today suggest that Father is irresponsible? What is it that defines irresponsible parenthood? Polygamy?*

To mince word, I'd listened to my Social Studies teacher say polygamy was bad and monogamy good. I'd listened to my pastor say a man who marries more than one wife would not enter the kingdom of God. I didn't know if all these were true, though. I didn't know which was right, either. But Father shouldn't have done this.

## **The Way of the Progenitors**

*Elisha Oluyemi*

*In the village, adults cook by setting a cooking pot atop three similar-sized rocks arranged in a circle with firewood shoved into the spaces in-between, smoky flames blazing underneath.*

*But for me, I'd rather scoop sand with my small hands, depositing it into a can of beverage set on three stones. In my four-year-old mind, I was practising cooking. I wasn't crazy, and no one perceived me as such. The adults around didn't rebuke or deride me; they were rather delighted—happy for my innocence. And it wasn't only me who did that; my friends, too, boys and girls who occupied my age group. We were only having fun, pulling away from the worries of this world and seeing the beauty lodged deep in such things as filth and dust. The dust from which we all came.*

*Children are most attracted to this innermost part of man, so they revel in its presence. As children, we play in the sand, kicking dust at one another, relying on it for moonlight games and other fun. We dig our fingers into it and make sandcastles, and with the sodden form, we make clay creations—as God did with the first man.*

*But, as we grew, we began to hate the dust. We bat grimes off our dresses and sweep our rooms clean of them; we scowl disgust at those who live off the sand and frown at every whisper of dust—like God once did to Adam. Adam who grew to 'know'.*

*As the descendants of Adam spread across the face of the earth, God wanted their worship. The worship of the dust. And men themselves grew to regard the same—the same dust they hated to see. Glass houses are great, but houses made of sand dominate the earth. Fish makes some good meal, but the world celebrates plants and meat—products of the earth during creation. And so goes the continuum. The continual relevance of the dust.*

*My father, however, wouldn't buy into my argument. I was twenty-two, no longer the child who used to play in the sand and boil the same in an imaginary cauldron. I have grown to respect and revere it; to worship and deify it. The sand. The dust from which I was made.*

“What has come over you, Asura?” my dad questioned, his eyes visibly calm, yet betraying his unease. I saw it by the darkness clouding his iris, by the furrowing of his brows, and the occasional finger-taps against the sofa armrest. “Our faith doesn't allow the worship of any other thing except the supreme God!” When he articulated ‘supreme God’, he did it with a burst of conviction—a deep assurance that God tolerated no rivals.

But I didn't deem it blasphemous. Humans who follow a faith fail to see options and possibilities characteristic of *common sense*. And everyone who does otherwise is treated as some pagan—some friggin' goddamn outlaw.

I pulled closer to Dad on the three-seater sofa. I wasn't trying to convince or manipulate him, so I made no attempt to smile, only staring right at him, stating my thoughts with faithful energy and unblinking eyes. “Dad,” I called. He responded with a blink. I pointed at the clay creature I'd placed on the table. It was like the small-sized Buddha sculptures you'd find in Buddhist temples. But this was made of refined brown clay. The smiling clay god had almond-shaped eyes, a small pointed nose and a pair of lips spread out in satisfaction—you sense the satisfaction only if you can revere his grace, the grace of the clay god. His hands were spread before him, a palm over the other, like we do in the Eucharist—only that in this god's potted hands rested a handful of dust.

And I could bet my dad felt uneasy around it. He always put up a strong front everywhere. But deep inside him, he feared the mystery of the dust. He hated to see what he was formed

with, not because he was ashamed of his humanity, but because his eventual fate rested before his very eyes. *Dust to dust.*

“We can’t avoid our fate,” I eventually voiced. “If we wish to avoid something, we hate it and cast it away. But as for the things we love, we set altars for them, because our lives are tied to them. Our respect. Our reverence, Dad.”

“No matter how much you try, Asura, you would still end up not making sense.” Dad shook his head and rested it in his hand, his elbows digging into the armrest. “I shouldn’t have let you grow in the village, where you spent all your life in contact with the dust and learned to grieve Jehovah—”

“Dad, did you realise?”

“What again?”

“That only the clay god tells us about a certain future and reminds us of the vanity of life. Do you ever think of this?”

“Will you please make sense, Asura? You’re losing it!”

“People say the same when they loathe your newfound belief! Didn’t your friends tell you the same when you tried winning them to God?”

“But this situation is different.”

“Just how is it different?”

“It’s simply unrealistic, Asura.”

“You don’t find issues with this being unrealistic; you only can’t accept it because it sounds paganist.”

“Oh, you agree?”

“I don’t. I just want you to see that not all idols are enemies of God.”

“What you want to make clear to me is what God already condemned. He will never share his glory with any man or god.”

“But the dust is God’s ally!”

I watched Dad shake his head, lips parted to protest more; but I continued:

“The clay god is closely knitted with God’s essence. God knows him. He knows God. He’s been in God’s holy hands, patted and carefully handled like a new-born baby when Adam was formed. The attachment is spiritual; it is divine! The clay god deserves some recognition, especially in our family.”

“God...” Dad’s eyes pulled wide, lips still apart. “Eiih!”

“You must have lived a benevolent life in the past for you to receive this grace from God, Dad. We can become progenitors and founders of the service to the god of the dust. We can live forever.”

“You seek immortality in this mess of an idea?”

“Whether I live forever or die like every other human, the worship of the clay god must begin. It can’t be delayed.”

“Then do it alone. I recognise the supreme God only!” Dad turned to the clay god, then back to me, shaking his head. He moved to trudge along the centre table, but he stumbled, staggered and fell over the table.

And it happened.

Dad crushed the clay god under him, shards of the glass table cutting his palms and buttocks, so that he groaned.



I rose sharply, gazing down on the ruined god. Dad would claim it was a mistake—it appeared so. But according to Sigmund Freud, slips occur, not just as wild coincidences, but as a result of suppressed or unexpressed feelings. These feelings feel like they need expression, and so they slip through the cages of the mind, through the illusive restraints of a man’s psyche. And they burst out plainly, yet with a subtle camouflage, which we deem as *errors*.

Vain!

Dad, deep in his mind, must have wished to snatch up and break and crush the clay god. He obviously hated it; he despised it. He resented what it represented.

“You wanted this, Dad,” I revealed to him. He winced, scowling pain at the shard that stuck out through his left palm. I inched towards him. “But the gods are immortal, Dad, and you know it.”

“Is... is this all you can say?” He coughed and groaned, hoisting his wounded hand. “Come, help me up.”

I serve a clay god who reveres the supreme God—the almighty who wanted us to leave all vengeance to Him—so I helped Dad up. And I dressed his wound, watched him leave for the bathroom, watched him take some tea, and watched him sleep off.

But I knew: God doesn’t tolerate disrespect, especially for the things he holds dear—not Jesus or the prophets this time, but the clay he bent down to scoop and caress like a baby.

Dad’s fate was sealed that night.

But he didn’t understand it until his injured hand began to fester, and sand began to fill his bed. He would wash himself clean and wrap himself in some thick blanket to see if there would be no sand in the morning, but they would end up beneath him. They first came in sprinkles, then in handfuls, then in bucket sizes. And Dad began to grow weak. Tired. Sick.

And he began to sing songs—hymns that prophesied a place in the good heavens. But he wouldn't pledge allegiance to the clay god. So I continued to fill his bed with sand, while he was deeply asleep, and dab his cut with fluid from the broken sewage pipe, so that he showed no sign of recovery. I must work the work of the clay god, after all.

I remoulded the image and made it finer than the crushed one. And I set it in our living room and offered incense to it.

But God wanted a repentant heart. It was like when Moses' siblings reproached him. Moses didn't fight—even though his temper could be bad, as the Bible records. But God still fought for him to ensure that nothing affiliated with His holy name was reproached ever again.

Yesterday, I took the clay god to my dad's room and urged him to confess his sins and acknowledge that he is dust and that he owes his existence to the clay god. But he only cried and shook his head, tears dribbling sideways, into his ears. I thought of people who are forced to give up their faith, and wondered whether Dad felt that pressure too. That pain. But I really wasn't forcing him. I only wanted the best for him, for us, for the world which will in no time begin the worship of the dust.

On the tenth day after I consistently urged Dad to accept the clay god's grace, Dad spat in my face; and with a strength that never was there, he slapped the new clay model, so that it broke into several pieces. "I curse you!" Dad groaned weakly and started to cry.

That was the end, I knew. Even Moses' fate was sealed when he struck the rock twice, insulting the Son of God.

Dad had dishonoured God's treasure twice. He had no more grace to receive. The wrath of God awaited him, like the inevitable night that creeps upon us all. But I refrained from telling him, lest he cursed me again.

I only packed the broken pieces of my god and I stepped out of his room, going into the bathroom later to wash myself clean of his spit and the air I trapped from staying around him. And, of course, the grains of sand that lurked between my fingers.

Today, I step outside and gaze into the heavens. There are no sands in the skies, but beneath me, there is a vast sea of dust. And there is me, the one who mediates between God and his creations of dust.

I won't attend Dad's funeral. I'll, instead, pursue the gospel of the dust.

I turn and face our three-bedroom duplex. I can see a sturdy structure in place of it, a huge plaque fitted on the pinnacles and displaying in bold engravings, *The Synagogue of the Clay God*.

I look away to see a couple holding hands and walking up the street.

And I smile. The synagogue will need worshippers to fill it up. Couples who will plant the seed. Seeds that will germinate into trees. Trees that will bear more fruits. Fruits that will invite more men to their charms. For in such a manner as this is a creed established. And even in this manner, ancestors are made. I puff a sigh and walk up to them, smiling.

"Peace be unto you, Children of the dust."

## Residue

*Keith Buzzard*

It took a lot for me to learn to stop staring at the door. I had always looked to it to offer guidance. Comings and goings, beginnings, endings. A doorway is a tangible metaphor and therefore much wiser than the countless platitudes that one hears when the diagnosis rhymes with *terminal*. Sorry for rhyming *terminal* with *terminal*. I hope you can forgive me.

I had plenty of time to stare at doorways. Waiting for nurses, doctors, family members, friends. And when they did arrive, my thoughts and feelings rarely came into the matter. Apparently my approaching death didn't belong to me.

My first mistake was telling my friends and family that I was dying. I had no husband, no wife, no children, but I still had that biological imperative to leave something behind that said, "I was here." It's a selfish impulse and I was not immune to it. I felt that someone needed to know that I was dying. At the time it felt important to be the center of attention, at least one final time. As soon as I let my friends and family know, I began to regret it.

They would have figured it out on their own as my body began to waste away in front of them. If I had let them come to their own conclusions, at least I wouldn't have had to waste my dwindling time explaining to them what was happening, though I'm sure they would have wormed their way into the experience eventually when they wouldn't be able to overpower their desire to insert their own fear of mortality by fussing over mine.

Not that the doctors were any better. My condition wasn't unique enough to warrant the prestige-concerned tier of doctors, nor straight-forward enough for the newbie doctors to cut their proverbial teeth on. No, I was in that lucky category where the doctors floated through when they were bored enough to try something new or run me through a barrage of the latest

pharmaceuticals. I was on my way out anyway, why not get some last minute data out of it for Daddy Capitalism? If I was lucky enough, I might be responsible for an additional line of tiny-print disclaimer on an advertisement below the picture of a smiling person playing with a puppy or tossing a small laughing child up into the air.

Regardless of (or because of, who's to say) capitalism's insistent intervention, my death continued to intertwine itself throughout my body. It was nuzzling ever closer, wrapping and squeezing itself around every cell with the intimacy of thorny kudzu. That intimacy was trampled over by others. I was confined to a hospital room, the captive audience to a revolving-door parade of doctors, pharma reps, and the cartoonish over-acting of the bereaved, too impatient to wait for my exit, all too eager to perform their sorrow, chomping at the bit to display their mourning.

I felt sickened by the performance. Bored doctors trying to show off their knowledge, justifying their impossible price. Well-wishers trying to prove to the world how good of a person they are by refusing to let me be. Me and my death were sickened by their gaze as it writhed all over me. The trail left by their wet eyes passing over my body felt like the slime left by snails. I felt this emotional residue on my skin more acutely than the death coiling around and around the insides of my body.

And I let them do it. I played along with them, just another actor on the stage. Crying with some, acting brave for others. I lost myself in the performance, separating myself from the only thing that belonged to me and me alone. Eventually, thankfully, I realized what I was doing; my death was being taken away from me.

So I decided that if I had to share my death, divide it amongst everyone else, then I would not take part in it at all. If my death could not belong to me and me alone, then I would reject it entirely. I decided that I would not die, ever.

Of course the doctors and my loved ones protested when I checked myself out of the hospital; oscillating between sympathetic, moral, and furious arguments in order to get me to stay. They tried appealing to every ethos-pathos-logos sentiment they could think of, but I could tell that they were only upset because I would no longer allow them to leech off of my death. When I crossed this door's threshold, my 'Exits, stage left' felt like 'Enters, stage right.' It was the first time I felt light in a long time, a proverbial bounce in my step, a literal death nestled in my organs and tissues.

After successfully freeing myself from their emotional burdens, I set about trying to find something that would truly belong to me and me alone. If death was no longer mine, and therefore no longer an option, then I would have to find something else that was unique to me. I decided to make my body and mind completely my own.

This did not mean that I was no longer dying, however. In fact, I felt the process in earnest, as if the death within my body were throwing a tantrum since I had rejected it, lashing out like a jilted ex-lover. But I was resolute. Death had been spoiled and so it would have to go.

My body was beginning to actively fail so time was of the essence, but this also served as a great motivation. I was willing to do anything, pursue even the darkest of paths in order to reach my goal. My stomach was the source of the spoiled death, so I set about fixing that first.

By this time my death had spread throughout my body, but it had begun in my stomach, turning it into a womb to nurture it and so starting there seemed the most logical place to begin. This was also prudent because I also needed my stomach to nurture me, and if I was going to create something truly unique, I would need the energy my stomach provided through its alchemy.

I will freely admit that I do not possess the skilled hands and precise knowledge that surgeons possess, but when I removed my stomach from my body, I couldn't help but give myself credit. The process was painful and the workmanship rough, but the point remained that I hadn't done too terrible of a job in hollowing out my belly. There was practically a bounce in my step as I walked to the art supply store, though this could have been because I was significantly lighter due to the removed weight of the organ.

Having arrived at the art store, however, my mood soon soured. Choosing a nice set of wire sculpting knives I walked up to the cashier, a teenager who seemed plucked from a photoshoot highlighting the latest in corporate-approved indie fashion. They looked upon me with the derision that comes from the superiority complex attributed to niche (though still a financially viable avenue) counter-culture. They looked down on me and my sensible haircut, my functional denim pants, and gaping abdominal wound and rolled their eyes. I collected my tools and my receipt and left, frustrated that I let the teenager ruin my mood, practically sulking like a teen myself back at home while I scraped the death from inside my stomach like inky bubblegum, though I did perk up looking at the now scraped clean and pristine organ. I soaked the stomach in grease to prevent the sickness from sticking to it again and sewed it back in place.

My breathing had become quite labored and I found it hard to catch my breath after sewing my stomach back into my body, so I used the bone saw I had stolen on my way out of the hospital to cut through my sternum to inspect my lungs. The source of my breathing problem was clear now that I could see the sickness that had coated my lungs like a web of sticky tar, branching out and across like scaffolding in a bees nest. I held my breath and removed those next. It was a more delicate process than the stomach due to the ribcage. Here my inexperience became much clearer as I snapped a few ribs in the process of removing my

lungs. I tried to not scold myself at my amateur status, repeating to myself the old adage that if you want to make an omelette, you have to crack a few eggs.

Sadly, upon closer examination, my lungs appeared to be a lost cause. The branches of tar-like death had woven themselves into and through the tissue like the roots of an invasive species of brush. My lungs would simply have to be replaced. I began to panic because I didn't know what I could do to replace my lungs and because it was quite difficult to hold my breath this long. Then an idea struck me; I could get a new set of lungs at the morgue just down the street.

Even though the morgue wasn't far, I was still sweating as I limped my way down the street. The few people I passed looked at me holding my empty ribcage in place and sneered. Worse were the people who glanced at me and pointedly tried to avoid making eye contact. As disgusted as I was when people's gaze groped me like a clumsy, chubby fingered oaf, it stung just as bad when they looked away, having judged me within the microseconds they spent looking at me. I was thankful to be out of the public eye when I entered the morgue. This door had a little bell that dinged as I entered, which made me smile as I made my way back to where the bodies were stored in their refrigerated depositories.

The mortician in the back immediately began berating me for my intrusion and my appearance, saying intentionally hurtful things like, "You're bleeding everywhere," and "How are you even alive?" I would have explained my situation, but because I was holding my breath (which was getting quite difficult at this point), I could not. Expediency limited my options so while I held my ribcage together with one hand, I grabbed a shiny and heavy looking tool from the tray next to the mortician and hit him in the head with it until he saw the validity of my argument and excused himself to take an impromptu nap on the floor.



No longer being hassled by the mortician, I set about looking through the coolers for a new set of lungs. I settled on the lungs from a twelve year old John Doe. Though they were a bit smaller than my previous set of lungs, the child had drowned in a lake which would save me some time from having to hose them clean and I was running out of breath already.

I hurried home with my pale package and set about sewing my slightly used, but brand new to me, set of lungs under my rib cage. I was worried my stitching would be a bit slapdash, but ended up looking fairly decent. I sighed with relief at both not having to hold my breath any longer and because I was getting better at sewing. I also noticed that I was feeling better the more that the sickness was removed from my body. Even though the job of ridding the spoiled death from my body wasn't done, I allowed myself to imagine a world where I wouldn't have to feel people looking at me with wet, selfish, greedy eyes any longer. I would be free. I wouldn't have to feel their projected shame, disappointment, or anger that caused my heart to ache so terribly much in life.

The thought got me thinking further. I was standing with the tube of super adhesive in my hand, about to glue my rib cage back together, when I decided to remove my heart. A few deft cuts (I was pleased with myself at my increasing skill) and it was done. I dropped the diseased organ next to my discarded lungs and smiled.

My moment of reverie was spoiled, however, when I began to feel a pain in my belly. I looked down and into my exposed guts and saw, tucked between my diaphragm and my newly cleaned stomach, an organ that was blooming and pulsating to a sickening degree. My liver looked and felt like it was going to burst. I frowned at this because my liver was one of the few organs that had remained free of the sickness that coated my insides.

It clicked that I had assumed that the lungs of the child that were now in my body were clean because of the lake water they had drowned in. It hadn't occurred to me that the body

might have already been embalmed in formaldehyde or some other poison. That combined with the grease I had used to coat my stomach must have been wreaking havoc on my liver.

Luckily, the solution to my now ruined liver presented itself when there came a sudden pounding on my door. It was my downstairs neighbor, a hateful, washed out stockbroker, complaining about all the blood that was seeping through his ceiling and onto his rug, which cost over \$5,000 (he'd have me know). I let him in, calmly explained what I was doing and that I was happy to pay for any damages as I led him further into my apartment, killed him, and put his body in my bathtub. I figured that as long as I was going to use his liver, I could also use his blood. I was running a bit low and could use the top off. It occurred to me that removing my heart made the whole process a breeze. Without the self-doubt that came with empathy and morality, I felt like a kid in a candy store, or a venture capitalist in late-stage capitalism.

I spent the next few days meticulously carving out every last bit of sickness that had invaded my body with the wire sculpting knives, which performed quite well to the task. I then spent a few hours looking up videos of sewing tutorials, trying several different techniques, from the basic catch stitch, the blanket stitch, the whip stitch, the ladder stitch, and the invisible stitch. I practiced until I could do each quite adeptly and even used some fun colored thread.

I admired my work in the mirror, quite satisfied. I wasn't the freshest chicken in the roost, though much better than a dead chicken. But then I thought about going outside. I definitely wasn't going to show off my success to my friends and family. They had already proven that they were more concerned with basking in my death, so I would leave them to it. And I wouldn't parade for the doctors, showing that I had succeeded where they had failed, that would just be prideful.

Even being free of those restraints, I would still have to exist out in the world with other people. I'd need to go to the grocery store for food. I'd need to find a job. Now that I was going

to live, I'd soon run out of my savings. Especially when the family of my neighbor came around looking for someone to pay for the \$5,000 dollar rug.

All of these interactions would involve feeling their filthy gaze slather all over my customized body. Their judgment, projections, lust, and envy would leave a film all over me and I couldn't risk that affecting my nice stitchwork. Something would have to be done.

I tried coating myself in lacquer, to keep the residue of people's attention from touching me, but the smell gave me a roaring headache. Similarly, laminating myself produced the annoying effect of hearing myself squeak with every movement. The thought occurred to me that if I couldn't keep people's gaze off of me, perhaps I could redirect it back at them. I lathered myself in glue and rolled around in broken glass, so if someone looked at me, their own tactless visage would be thrown right back at them, refracted a hundred million times. But I was spending too much time polishing the bits of mirror and all of the reflecting light brought even more attention to me, and even covered in reflecting glass, it still felt as if people were robbing me of my agency, turning into an object meant for their amusement and consumption.

I came to the conclusion that I would never be able to live amongst people if I truly wanted the experience of my life to truly be my own. Everything I had done to this point had been because of other people. I had let other people own my decisions. This would simply Not Do. If I wanted to be free of the taint of other people, I'd have to go somewhere untainted by people.

For several weeks, I traveled only at night to avoid as many people as possible. Stealing cars and driving until they ran out of gas, then stealing another, searching for some place free of people, but always failing. There was always someone to gawk at me, to take part of my life and incorporate it into their own pointless narrative. I was just some interesting story for them

to tell and be the center of attention that they craved, at least for a few moments before they would have to dredge up some other excuse.

At last I stumbled upon an abandoned forest preserve, a forgotten refuge off of a forgotten road, in the middle of nowhere. Finally, a place where I could be free from other people. The abandoned entrance was a doorway that led to a land of potential. I could live a life that belonged only to me.

And so I did. Everyday was mine and mine alone. It didn't matter what I did or didn't do, what I said or didn't say, if I looked one way or another, no one was able to tell me it was good or bad or could be better, failing to live up to some fictional metric. I lived this way for a long time. I have no idea how long and I liked it that way. It could have been thousands of years for all it mattered to me.

Until one day God came to visit me. They came to me without a face, which I appreciated. If they had come to me with a face, the judging feeling would have been worse than it already was, judgment being their Whole Thing. They told me that I was the last human being on the planet. I said that that was good. I could tell they wanted me to ask them if I wanted to go to heaven, hell, or wherever, but that would probably mean I would have to be subjected to people or demons or whatever, so I said nothing. After a few moments they left and I never saw them, or anyone, ever again. My body, my experiences, my life, all of it finally was mine.

## **Biographies**

### **Poetry**

**Abdulraham M. Abu-Yaman** — Abdulrahman M. Abu-Yaman writes from North-central part of Nigeria. He is the winner of Wakaso Poetry Prize (January, 2021). His works have featured in *Allegro Poetry Magazine*, *Brittle Paper*, *Ann Arbor Review*, *Kalahari Review*, and elsewhere. He likes his omelette salty and his stew pepperish. He tweets @abuu\_yaman

**Saddee Bee** — Sadee uses her work to shine a light on the hidden parts of mental illness and the effects of trauma. She also speaks about her specific experiences regarding trauma and mental illness as a Black, Queer woman in Black spaces. Sadee Bee is ever-evolving as living with mental illness is never a straight line and hopes to be a voice and advocate for those like her.

**Peter Donnelly** — Peter Donnelly's first collection, *Photons*, was published by Appello Press in 2014. His second collection, *Money Is a Kind of Poetry*, was published by Smokestack Books in 2019, and he is (slowly) working on a third collection. He occasionally tweets @Peatstweets.

**Geraldine Fleming**—Geraldine Fleming retired early from an all-consuming career due to ill health. Bereft of purpose in life she found herself drawn into a past interest in creative writing. She is a member of the North Coast Writers Group in Northern Ireland and loves to write. Her poetry and prose have been published in a number of anthologies and journals. In 2019, she was Highly Commended in the *Bangor Literary Journal Poetry Competition* and in 2022 two poems were published in *Community Arts Partnership Anthology*, *Threshold*. Her poem *cartographer* was also long listed for the *Seamus Heaney Award*.

**Mark McDonnell** — Mark McDonnell, a son of the Irish diaspora in England, has worked in teaching, marketing and mental health in the USA, Spain and the UK. He is now focusing on writing and has been published in a number of poetry magazines.

**Alan Murphy** — Alan Murphy is the author and illustrator of four books of poetry for children and teenagers. His poetry and visual art have been in numerous journals and anthologies in Ireland, the UK and the US.

**David Ryan** — David has been writing poetry for ten years. An Art school graduate raised in London he now lives in Dungarvan. An emerging poet published in numerous anthologies he is working toward his first collection. He has also written a short radio play which went to production and still produces images.

**Bud Sturguess** — Bud Sturguess was born in the small cotton-and-oil town of Seminole, Texas, US. He has self-published several books, his latest being the novel *Sick Things*. His work has appeared online at New Pop Lit, Soonie Press, Erato, and in the print anthology *Mid/South* from Belle Point Press. Sturguess lives on disability benefits and collects neckties.

## **Fiction**

**Keith Buzzard** — Keith Buzzard is writer, teacher, and musician living in Minneapolis, Minnesota in the United States. His work has appeared recently in Grim & Gilded, Bullshit Lit, and The Under Review. Further nonsense can be found on Twitter at @KeithJDrazzub.

**Maitiú Charleton** — Maitiú Charleton (he/him) is a writer and journalist from Dublin, Ireland. He has done work for TG4, The Journal.ie, Quarantine FM and his writing has appeared/is upcoming in Icarus Magazine, The Madrigal Press, An Áitiúil, Sweet Tooth, JAKE and Calliope Hour Youth. He edits the publication @thecczine

**Brian Howell** — Brian Howell has been publishing fiction since 1990, having three novels and one short story collection to his credit. He has had over forty short stories published, including one short story collection and an inclusion in *Best British Short Stories 2018* (edited by Nicholas Royle). His most recent publication will be a collection of stories from Salt, U.K. this October titled *The Man Who Loved Kuras*, and a reprint of his novel *The Curious Case of Jan Torrentius* by Raphus Press (originally published by Zagava in 2017 and in paperback in 2021), also this year. Zagava also published his novel *Sight Unseen* in 2019. He lives and works near Tokyo, Japan.

**Jason Jawando** — Jason Jawando writes prose and drama, and has published stories in *Confluence*, *Under the Radar* and *Prole* magazines among others. He has an MA in Creative Writing and lives in the UK.

**Olusoji Obebe** — Olusoji Obebe is an emerging Nigerian writer and artist. His essays have made the longlists of the Sixth Chinua Achebe Poetry/Essay Anthology and the Libretto African Anthology Prize 2022. His works are featured/forthcoming in *Fiery Scribe Review*, *Nnoko Stories*, *Terror House Magazine*, *Lumiere Review*, *OneBlackBoyLikeThat Review* and others.

**Elisha Oluyemi** — Elisha Oluyemi writes in the thriller and literary fiction genres. He is the editor-in-chief at *Fiery Scribe Review* and has contributed short stories to journals, including *Brittle Paper*, *Kalahari Review*, *Nymphs*, *OBBLT*, *Sledgehammer Lit*, *Mystery Tribune*, *Adoxography*, *Shallow Tales Review*, *Arts Lounge*, and many others. He tweets @ylisha\_cs

**Kate Perris** — Kate Perris is a librarian living in London. She enjoys tatty seaside towns, charity shopping and charity shopping in tatty seaside towns. Her writing has appeared in *Dear Damsels*, *The Green Shoe Sanctuary* and *Angel Rust*. She tweets at @dansette and regrets every second of it.

**Robert Stone** — Robert Stone was born in Wolverhampton. Stories have appeared in *3:AM*, *Stand*, *Panurge*, *Eclectica*, *Confingo*, *Punt Volat*, *HCE*, *Wraparound South*, *Lunate*, *Decadent Review*, the *Nightjar* chapbook series and elsewhere. Micro-stories have appeared in *5x5*, *Third Wednesday*, *Star 82*, *Ocotillo Review*, *deathcap*. A story is included in *Salt's Best British Stories 2020*.

