# Contents

**Foreword**  *Emma Shercliff and Bibi Bakare-Yusuf*  

**Fish**  *Chuma Nwokolo*  
**Fish (pidgin)**  *Victor Ehikhamenor*  

**Candy Girl**  *Hawa Jande Golakai*  
**Nénii Née (Kpelle)**  *Yarkpai Keller*  

**The Idea Is To Be Sealed In**  *Binyavanga Wainaina*  
**Ni Wazo la Kufunika (Kiswahili)**  *Elieshi Lema*  

**Woman In The Orange Dress**  *Sarah Ladipo-Manyika*  
**Arábinrin Inú Asọ Òlọsàn (Yoruba)**  *Kola Tubosun*  

**Cotyledons**  *Toni Kan*  
**Cotyledons (Igbo)**  *Chikodili Emelumadu*  

**Solitaire**  *Edwige-Renée Dro*  
**Solitaire (French)**  *Edwige-Renée Dro*  

**Painted Love**  *Abubakar Adam Ibrahim*  
**Launukan So (Hausa)**  *Abubakar Adam Ibrahim*  

**Other Contributors**  

**Permissions**
Foreword

Welcome to this very special Valentine’s Day Anthology of African romance stories.

Since the launch of Ankara Press in December 2014, we have been overwhelmed by the positive response of readers to its vision of ‘a new kind of romance’, with African settings, storylines and characters. One of the key reasons for establishing the imprint was to counter the one-dimensional view of life as portrayed in many romance novels. As we know, modern romance does not always revolve around a dominant male hero, a submissive heroine and a happily ever after.

We wanted to harness some of this excitement to focus attention on a wider issue this Valentine’s Day. African literature is sometimes accused of presenting a rather depressing portrayal of life across the continent. Whilst we acknowledge that it would be disingenuous for African writers not to engage with the serious issues that frame daily life - issues such as corruption, insecurity, violence, poverty, unemployment and civil unrest, all of which have been highlighted by Nigeria’s current election campaign - we feel it is important, as publishers, to do what we can to provide African writing with the space to reflect the stimulating, vibrant, quirky, joyous complexities of life here.

Our motivations for commissioning this anthology were very clear: to provide a Valentine’s Day ‘treat’ for readers, particularly those based in Nigeria who may need respite from the election fever sweeping the nation by 14th February, and to invite literary writers to see if they can invert the romance genre and make it meaningful for themselves. We also wanted to show that romance can be empowering, entertaining, and elegantly written, by men as well as women.

Thus, this Valentine’s Day Anthology contains pieces by authors based in Liberia, Nigeria, Cote d’Ivoire and Kenya, writing not about Ebola, poverty and terrorism, but about the joy of the everyday: the love, laughter and heartbreak that forms part of a universal experience. The stories also recognise that romance can occur at the most unexpected times (although, admittedly, rarely in as unexpected a situation as that explored by crime writer Hawa Jande Golakai) and between any two individuals. We are therefore particularly proud to include Binyavanga Wainaina’s beautiful portrayal of same-sex romance within this collection, underlining that desire and intimacy are a very real part of life in Africa, as they are elsewhere in the world.

Moreover, romance in Africa takes place in multiple languages and we wanted to reflect that in this collection. Each story has been translated into a language spoken by one of the authors and an audio version of each text recorded. This anthology therefore becomes a much truer representation of romance in Africa as we can hear and see what romancing in different languages might sound like and mean.

We owe a huge debt of gratitude to everyone who has worked so hard, and often to unfeasibly short deadlines, to enable us to produce this anthology. One of the most exciting aspects of the project is that it has been a truly collaborative effort, bringing together writers, publishers, translators, readers and photographers from across Africa, all of whom have shown an incredible amount of goodwill by donating their time and talents for free. We believe the generous response we received indicates how strongly the writing and publishing community feels about the issues we are trying to highlight. It also goes to prove that the near impossible can be achieved, despite seemingly insurmountable technical and editorial issues, with a healthy dose of determination, good humour and mutual support.

Thus, we present our selection of sensuous stories from across the continent. We do hope you enjoy them. And please feel free to share the love – and the Anthology - with your wives, husbands, civil partners, friends and lovers.

Happy Valentine’s Day!

Emma Shercliff, Valentine’s Day Anthology Coordinator
Bibi Bakare-Yusuf, Publisher, Ankara Press
Fish

By Chuma Nwokolo
He smiled at her, and waited.

***

It was his usual grin – a laconic amusement wired into his steel-gray moustache. It was often there but today, suddenly, Nkemdilim wondered if he was laughing at her.

What if he had been play-acting that night when they first met? She was the one laughing at him then: ‘This is 2014!’ she had shouted, to be heard above the club music, ‘nobody says Excuse me Dance, any more!’

His spectacled brows had risen in embarrassment. She had started to feel bad about laughing, especially with her best friend, Taiye, joining in.

‘I am sorry,’ he had shouted back. ‘I just returned – unexpectedly – to the dating scene.’

He had straightened up, about to walk away, and then almost as an afterthought, leaned into her ear: ‘What do people say, these days?’

Her nostrils had picked up the restrained suggestion of a man who knew his perfumes, and she shrugged, holding back another bout of laughter: this would be something for the girls at the office! She was teaching a man at least twenty years her elder modern pick-up lines – and on a dance floor at that!

‘I don’t know! Anything except Excuse me dance! God!’ He was still looking at her, with those guileless eyes of his. This sort of man would be hard work! If you wanted him you would have to do all the work! She added, ‘Say something funny, or do something confident…’

‘Like?’

She shrugged again. ‘Like take her hand and lead her to the dance floor or something…’

He had taken her hand then. There was a lighter circle on his ring finger. As though he had pulled off a habituated wedding band the minute before, as he walked into the club, or the month before, as he walked out of a divorce court…

‘Like this?’ he had asked, pulling her gently into his half-smile.

She had exchanged wide-eyed, rolling-eye glances with Taiye and they had laughed again, this time, with him. ‘You are funny!’ She had said, meaning that he was anything but. Yet, she had risen all the same – not really to dance, merely to have yielded to the cultured strength of that arm, and to give him a few more lessons on the 2014 dating scene…

***

Beside her, Taiye coughed discreetly, in maid mode. He was still waiting. Nkemdilim studied him as he stood in his black and whites. He did look too wise, far too experienced to have honestly said Excuse me dance on a dance floor, barely six months earlier. Perhaps the pretended incompetence was an elaborate pick-up ruse... Perhaps it was mere bait, and she had bitten. She replayed the scene as he lifted her up to the dance floor with that masterly angler’s arm. She let the sharp thought of that realisation sink into the soft palate of her feminine pride. She let it raise a pour so pained, so organic it seemed to rise from a deep, excavating memory of a Chastity Vow remembered, or an Old Love rekindled... something deep and cataclysmic enough to abort the present solemn proceedings... She let the devastatation of that thought cloud her features, so that from her peripheral vision she could see his easy grin slip into a moue of concern. A cord of concentration tautened his brows, tightening his gloved grip of her fingers – as though it were the desperate grip of some fisherman at the end of an epic fight with a prized marlin who felt her slipping away from his hook at the very lip of his boat.

Then she smiled sweetly, and said, ‘I do.’
He smile, look her, come wait.

***

Na so the man dey smile, tey, tey: that kain small smile wey be like say dem wire am join im grey bia-bia. but today Nkemdilim come dey wonder whether na im the man dey laugh sef.

Abi the man just dey play that night wey dem first meet? Na she dey laugh am then o; 'This na 2014!', she holla well well sotay she loud pass the club music, ‘Man nor dey yarn babe ‘Excuse me dance’ again na!' The see-finish answer wey Nkemdilim give am just weak the man. Im face embarrass.

She come dey feel bad small, because her best friend, Taiye, come join hand dey laugh the man.

‘Abeg nor vex o’ the man holla back, ‘e don tey when I enter club sef.’

He arrange imself like say e wan waka go, but e change im mind, come put mouth near her ear ‘How dem dey talk am these days?’.

As the man near her like that, her nose come smell scent wey tell am say the man sabi better perfume, she come hold herself make she nor laugh the man, as im take ask am the question - how babe like her go dey teach bobo wey take like twenty years senior am as im go take toast babes – and for inside club for that matter! Her office girls must to hear dis tori! ‘I nor know o! Anything sha, but nor be Excuse me dance, God!’

The man still dey look am, with those im innocentie eyes. This kain man na work o! Babe wey want this kain bobo, na she go chase tire! ‘You suppose make the girl laugh, you suppose gather better swagger…’

‘Like how na?’

She raise her shoulder. ‘Like, you fit just carry the babe hand waka go dance floor na, or something like that sha…’

Na so the man take carry her hand o.

The man ring-finger white small, like say im just comot im wedding ring before e enter the club, or like say e remove am as e waka comot for court where im and im wife go tear paper, before before.

‘Like so?’ the man ask, as im laugh, take style draw her near body.

She come look her friend Taiye. They open eye, roll eye, come begin laugh again but dis time nor be say dem they laugh the man. Na dem with the man dey laugh. ‘You funny o!’, she talk, although nor be say the man really funny sha, but she sha follow am. Nor be say she wan dance o, but the man gather one kain strong hand, that type wey dey weak woman. And she dey think whether make she teach am small how dem dey take toast babe for 2014.

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Taiye nor forget say na she be chief bridesmaid, she come cough small. The man still dey wait her. Nkemdilim look the man as e tanda for im black-and-white.

He be like who get korrect sense. E nor be like mugu wey fit dey yarn Excuse me dance for club only six months ago.

Abi na sense the man take play am? Abi all that excuse me dance yarn na the worm wey im take hook her like fish! And he don hook her well well! She come remember as the man take carry her go dance floor with im ogbonge fisherman hand. Kai. She just open eye dey remember. The shame of the matter come enter her body well well so tay e reach the side wey her woman yanga dey sleep jeje. She come let that vex full her belle, come dey comot for her face small small. Person wey look her face go think say she just remember say she don swear before before say she go never marry lai lai, or say she just remember the original bobo we she bin wan marry and that love don catch fire again. That vex come full her face, like say some serious katakata don gas wey fit dabaru the big show wey dey for ground…

She come take corner eye see as the man smile just dey wash, as im swagger just dey melt, sotay the hand wey im take hold her come tight her finger – like say the man be fisherman wey hook one kain ogbonge fish, wey don drag am, drag am, struggle, struggle, sotay im don draw the fish reach for the very doormouth of im boat… and the fish wan comot for hook!

She come smile one kain sweet smile like dat, come say ‘I do’.

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Victor E. Ehikhamenor was born in Nigeria. His fiction and nonfiction have appeared or are forthcoming in The New York Times, Agni, The Washington Post, Wasafiri, The Literary Magazine, Per Contra and elsewhere. He is the author of Excuse Me!, published by Parrésia Publishers. He is also a painter and a photographer whose art has been widely exhibited and collected worldwide, and used for notable book and journal covers. Ehikhamenor holds an MSc in Technology Management from University of Maryland, University College, and an MFA in fiction from University of Maryland, College Park. He lives and works from Lagos.
Candy

Girl

By Hawa Jande Golakai
“Grab her legs.”
“I should do whetin? Haaaay, mah pipo lookah troubo. You nah serious for true.”
Shaking my head, I try to prop Leonora up by the shoulders, making sure her head's turned away because that clotted spit oozing over the peeling red lipstick and onto her chin is no wet dream. Then I crouch low and heave; my wife is no small woman. Once I’ve lifted her torso off the floor, I look up.
“Ciatta! Really?” Was she serious? I’m breaking my back and my so-called lover is over there with her arms crossed looking on like I’m a psycho, like I just asked her to kill somebody. Okay, poor choice of words, considering the situation. I jerk my head wildly in the direction of Leonora’s feet, urging her to jump in anytime. Ciatta still doesn’t budge, instead draws her arms tighter and juts a hip. “Cia, come on!” I lose it, then “Dammit!”
when my back loses it, popping a tendon or something else that isn’t supposed to pop. Grinding pain between my teeth, I drop Leonora, who does quite an impressive face-plant into the carpet.
“Fineboy chill, I beg you, befo’ somebody come bust inside heah and find out what we doin’.”
“We?” I rotate my spine, trying to unclench. “More like what I’m doing. If you’re not interested in saving my neck, I don’t see why you’re here.”
“Mtssshw. I’hn blame you. I came, dah why you tellin’ me nonsense.”
She cocks her chin away from me, classic move when she’s trying to control that spitfire temper. She’s not pissed, not really, I can tell. Anger runs a whole different tier, in spectral shades, with her. She looks round the room, deciding if she approves, if I chose well despite the shitstorm this has turned into. From the tiny smile that crooks up the edge of her mouth, I did good. Clean and respectable but not high-end, romantic but seedy enough for debauchery. A tough combo in this nosy Monrovia. She beckons with the crook of her finger; I notice for the first time a French manicure with a tiny red heart stuck to each nail. Why would something I’d normally find so cheesy make me want her more? I go to her like a little boy.
“Dah wha’ happin’?” she coos, massaging me. Tiny knots dissolve like sugar to caramel.

“You see what happened – my wife’s dead!” I point to the body, which I’m past the point hoping will wake up, stagger to its feet and cuss my ass out.

Ciatta huffs. “Aay mehn, my eyeball dem nah bust. Whetin happin exactly, tell me it,” she flaps a hand, “articulate it, in dah yor fine-fine white pipo book.”

I ignore the gibe. She’s no trash but playing up our differences (many) is her thing and though I protest, that edge of forbidden frisson it adds ... hot damn. Who knew I knew how to mess around.

In looks my jue is so like my wife I shouldn’t have bothered. Night and day though. Take for instance their outfits: Leonora, champion at making pretty love and eye contact, straight out of a corny rom-com with her red trenchcoat, fancy black frills underneath no doubt; Cia in the very lappa I tore off her the first time we ravaged, with those hideous tiger-print heels that slaughter me every time they’re up in the air.

“She was sitting on the bed when I walked in. I don’t know how but she found out about your surprise and genuinely thought it was for her. What could I say?” I gulp. “Then she opened the box of chocolates ...” My head slumps into my palms. “Once the reaction starts, it’s unstoppable. She’s so sensitive. She’s always careful about carrying her epi pen but clearly dressing like a hooker to surprise me took precedence.”

“De geh didn’t tink her husband was gon kill her on Valentine’s Day.”

“‘I didn’t –’ I choke on a sob and she kisses me, silences me. “We ... we need to get rid of the body.”

“No. Now’days you can’t try dah one deh. You’hn do nuttin wrong but let’s get yor story straight.” She looms over my wife, unblinking.

“When she looks up her eyes glitter so dark and sultry in the twilight, like oil dancing on top of ink, that I know I’ll wreck it all for her, now and always. “Nobody saw me since I came by the back way, so dah part okay. Jes pretend dis was like last year but one smuh sumtin’ went wrong.”

“How will that...” The clouds part.

“Yes, yes! I always order candy for you, my Ma and a special box for her. In my hurry to get here I grabbed the wrong box and that’s how this catastrophe happened. Thank God the other boxes are safe at home. I’ll destroy the extra one meant for Ma and use the custom candy as proof of the mix-up.”

“Ehn-heehhn, palaver fini. Dah was mistake. Dey say when bad luck call your name, ripe banana will break your teeth.” She laughs at my awe. “O-o-o you jek! You lookin’ inside my mouf like my teeth made o’ diamond. I nah only good for one ting.” She crosses to the bed and I drink in every muscle shifting under her thin wrapper. I shouldn’t be tingling right now ... why am I tingling?

“It been how long?”

I check my watch. “Twenty, twenty-five minutes.”

“Good. More than one hour and it look bad. After I leave be ready to give de performance of your life. After you give me de performance of your life.”

“From the tiny smile that crooks up the edge of her mouth, I did good. Clean and respectable but not high-end, romantic but seedy enough for debauchery.”
Born in Frankfurt, Germany, Hawa Jande Golakai spent a vibrant childhood in her homeland Liberia. Her 2011 crime debut *The Lazarus Effect*, published by Kwela Books/NB Publishers, was nominated for the Sunday Times Fiction Prize, the University of Johannesburg Debut Prize and the Wole Soyinka Prize. Her forthcoming novel is due for publication in 2015 and she is at work on the third. She loves doing autopsies and is bored stiff by romantic gestures, except when they involve intrigue and food. When she isn’t moonlighting as a crime author, she works as a medical immunologist and health consultant. She lives between Monrovia and anywhere else she finds herself.
Gprobante

Yέ nga leké? Haazy, ŋanaua ŋga Mënìkkét kale. Mënèfì i ŋgei a tòyé” ŋga ŋun kplèin. ŋga noi kpanan, agée ŋga Leonoraup soñ a galan. ŋga duan été. ŋga bene agée fè nayai kaa, gèye ngabhe kpolii timéi, gèyein ŋen mu, veyé a séi wéli mèmîi. Gòli mûl mûl pum. ŋga mayèg. ŋga gbaloŋ. Mamu fe a nènîi loŋ. ŋga nàa musié tí, ŋgé ŋgwléema kaa.


“Sulon loŋ lëlëi kwèlè pu ilàma, ŋgài kplèá fëîi. i mèi saa. Nuuda fàala pa è mènîi kaa kwagèi pèlèi mu.”

“Kwaya?” ŋgà ŋyàma soñ, ŋgà kplànl zu. ŋgawo su è too a nèlè. “Da nòbè ŋgágëgi. Aní ñè Éwèlè i ŋgà snòf, fè mènîi kolon i kabé mènîimal.”

“Nèní, yafèi Ënyaò. ŋga pàbed iponaái ñè mèni boma Ëgnun fèmà.”

“Nèñí, lekó mònòvi. ŋgà lo pékèi mu, gèwó nènú gbíŋ ŋga. Fe gòloŋ, kò e gili kòloŋ agèè zàmåne sa a pòo. Lebèŋga pòli moï?”


“Nèñí nòi ti fèkènìi gòlòmi ani ŋgà sulon a pawíi Ëñwèlikëma yele Ëgïma.”

“Vèkèni a gòloŋ Ëgùko. E nagbèngë seì ŋgài ma, na ekè mu. Féè ku saai kula bè.”


A pawíi kïí lìì. Ëgële kòlòŋ su e bèla? “Oweí, oweí. Ëgàpaí seì néè téi ipo, ka mòma. Ëgài lëtí da kpèni se Ëgèe pawíi a mëfilaí. Ëgàbe gë méñí Ëgàmái këkëti.”

“Owei, owei. Ëgàpi sëè néè téi ipo, ka mòma. Ëgàpi ñëa da kpèni se Ëgëe pawíi a mëfilaí. Ëgàbe gë méñí Ëgàmái këkëti.”


E tìaŋlìi gbiŋ Ëgà. Nanaíi keleké sàà zu
Yarkpai J.C Keller was born in Handii, Bong County in Liberia in 1959. He received his diploma in information technology studies in 2003 and currently works as computer technician with the Liberian Observer in Liberia and as a freelance translator. He is married with children and dependents.
THE IDEA IS TO BE SEALED IN

By Binyavanga Wainaina

The idea is to be sealed in.
It is not hard. He is a soft, mild dreamy child, content to follow others. His rituals are simple. They exist only to carry himself (always (within) enchantment). He is ten years old, and in his slow, dreamy way, he has marked out all the go-to graph points that awaken his inner joys. He has learnt to open his tap of enchantment: to save it up for carrying to school, that naked screech of encounters he loves, but which turulents his soul.

He knows to softly bypass; to avoid trouble; to never demand; to not make claim; to fight for no territory; to never snitch (better to confess first, even if you are innocent); to avoid all confrontation without seeming to. To put on a blank easy face when mum or Auntie Njenga sit eye to eye with him, frowning in concern; determined to solution: to put their curiosity right inside his intestines, shift them around, seeking his secrets. He is too naked to them. Too opaque. In plain sight. But unseen. When they do, he smiles innocently, cries even, when really pressed, allowing tears.

He has some private contempt for his sisters, his cousin Ochieng. They seem unable to control their impulses to act. To try. To trip. To say no! Their faces are often swollen with desire and vulnerability: tears, anger insistence. They confuse him. Why? Surely the world is only a fridge. To open briefly? To take some food out for his soul, and slowly stuff it into the stretchy stomach-giant world inside himself? In car trips, he has learnt to train his ears to remain blocked; to vague out his siblings. His interface is in agreement to be with them: nodding, approving, agreeing, copying, frowning knowingly. Because he never insists, he is always the one to share: bedrooms, sweets. He prefers to offer first.

"But his face and lower arms, are a dark dark copper, busy with veins, nerves, tendons and muscles."

George Waruiru Odero did conquer one piece of ground for himself. His three sisters hate using the outside toilet. His mum and Auntie Njenga hate it too. He loved it. It was those old long drops with a pull down chain for flushing. At night, it rumbled with the thick sounds of crickets, which to him was the stadium cheer of stars. He had his own key. It had a crude shower, which was not used. He brought in an old couch. Here under a naked 60 watt bulb, he could sit for hours, and let his insides loose, let the flow of dreaming roll over him. Grow stories, and dreams over days so they created thicker feelings. Many times he arrived agitated, banging the door behind him after walking fast, away from the rest. There was something about the nakedness of tangling
with people: their words and contentiousness. Their hard unselfconscious sunlight brought him often to the edge of panic. He hated crying.

This toilet was always dark, built for African servants in colonial days, with a tiny window so high he had to stand on a chair on the couch with a stick to pull it open. It was full of shadows, light was only soft angles and flutters, sounds were always muffled. There was mould, rust and moods.

It was here he brought his first short novel, aged seven, and his second the next day, and through his childhood, hundreds. It was here that he first masturbated, and soon enough, several times daily. The idea of being sexually vulnerable left him uncomfortable. That somebody would see his availability from sweat on his nose. He liked to leave his toilet into the world refreshed, neutered, and with enough enchant and novels in his bag to carry him through the day.

So, this way, he cruises through to fifteen, to boarding school in Njoro. One day, a Sunday, after church, free from school to walk into Njoro town, his bag full of novels, he avoids the crowds of friends all going to look for chips, cheap booze, in the popular places where school girls like to go for the same.

He has seen this tree many times before. It reminds him of his toilet. Full of moods and dappled shadows. A huge gnarled old eucalyptus rising high above the middle of an open air nyama choma joint. He walks in, the place is packed with Sunday Lunchtime treats. Most people choose to avoid the tree, to sit under the mabati shades with linoleum covered tables. That is fine. The noise of strangers is the best silence. There is a crude table nailed to the tree, with a bench below it. He sits in the shade of the tree, faces away from the crowd, opens his bag and piles three novels on the table. One remains in his hands. Alistair MacLean. The Golden Rendezvous. He puts his fingers into the folded page mark and heads for the butchery. He orders a quarter kilo of goat ribs, chips, some slices of mutura, and a bitter-lemon, the short cloudy one. They give him a receipt for the food. He takes the receipt into the kitchen, which is hot with charcoal. There is a huge pot of boiling goat-head soup.

And the wide sweat soaked back of a man. Facing away from him.

Avoid direct eye contact. Narrow your eyes a little. Vague your face and look dreamy. Smile/frown a bit.

He turns.

There are bits of bone on the man's face, and sweat. The man's torn white apron jacket is folded to the elbows. The man's skin above the halfway mark between the wrist and the elbow is shockingly soft and creamy-skinned. Pale tea. But his face and lower arms, are a dark dark copper, busy with veins, nerves, tendons and muscles.

He wants to lock the door to the toilet. A
slow creamy feeling tingles through his belly. The man's voice crackles into him, like fat on fire. There is a sawn off-log and a machete by its side where meat is hacked. The man turns. And his arm rises. It is most certainly headed for the receipt between George's finger. It is not. Thick work-grimy fingers full of calluses brush his upper arm, for the briefest moment they linger so close they tickle, then they curve into a fist and grab him gently and he turns to find the man's breath flutter past his cheeks. Something wrapped up and muffled shivers, then runs around his solar system. A big glowing full moon groans. The smell of fresh sweat fills him, burning meat. He turns, smoothly, determined not to allow his screen to freeze, to expose him. Raises an eyebrow ruefully. The man is undeterred. His face moves closer. Large white sooty teeth, a giant open child's smile in that battered matatu of a face full of creases, angles and a busy jawbone. George looks at the pipes of life gulping at the man's neck, the open overall ridged with bone and gristle. The hand is so gentle on his upper arm. It strokes down his arm, and pulls the receipt out gently, and a laugh tickles out of the man's belly and climbs up from George's toes, his testicles fist, and the laugh growls like the school tractor, finds the simmering acid of shame pooling in his belly.

The man laughs in his face, so free and open, eyes almost shut, pupils clear, with no shadow. With joy he says, “Umepotea wapi?”
The thick hand leaves his fingers tingling, and returns to give George a mild slap on the back. The man turns away and says, “Nuthu Tha.”
The lunchtime sun is overhead and there are no shadows. One foot ahead of the other, fingers working frenziedly inside the pages of the novel. He allows himself to enjoy the uncurling of this strange itchy joy. George gathers the moister of feeling around his neck and earlobes and brings them to the front of his mind near his eyes. He reaches into the mood of the novel and is lost.
The meat comes. He eats. Another waiter. Not the man. The man who now occupies the hairs on the back of his neck. Little flows of feeling trickle down his spine. He reads and reads. Lost in that ship. He chews bones. In the late afternoon, people clear the butchery, the drinkers move to the neighboring bar. In the cool of seven PM, the hand lands on his shoulder. This time he can hear the smile's sunlight. Already, the mabati roof is crackling like fat, like stars about to burst out from blackness, and bristle sharply out the back of his neck. The other hand reaches behind his shoulder and smoothly pulls the book from George's hand. All the diners are gone.

“He reaches into the mood of the novel and is lost.”

Listen to the audio version read by Billy Kahora

Binyavanga Wainaina is an African writer. He lives in Nairobi.
Ni Wazo la Kufunika

Translation by Elieshi Lema

"Lakini uso wake na mikono sehemu ya chini ni rangi ya shaba iliyokolea, imetapakaa mishipa, vena, mikano na misuli."

wa hofu. Hakupenda kulia.


Ndani humu, akiwa na miaka saba, ndipo alipoleta kitabu cha kwanza cha fasih. Na kingine siku iliyoafuta, na katika maisha yake ya utoto, aliletu na kusoma mamia ya vitabu vya fasih humu. Ni humu ndani ndipo alipojichua kwa mara ya kwanza, na kisha kufanya hivyo mara kadhaa kwa siku. Alichukia kuonyesha udhaifu wa ujinsia wake. Kwamba mtu anaweza kuona jasho kwenye pua yake na kutumika tamaa yake. Alikula kuondoka chooni na kuingia kutafuta chips na помbe rahisi katika kaa pendwa zilizojaa watu. Ameshauruona mti huu mara nyingi siku ziliyojaa sarudi, aliwakwepa makundi ya raifi zake, na wanafunzi wasichana, wote wakienda kutafuta chips na pombe rahisi katika baa pendwa zilizojaa watu. Ameshauruona mti huu mara nyingi siku ziliyojaa sarudi, aliwakwepa makundi ya raifi zake, na wanafunzi wasichana, wote wakienda kutafuta chips na pombe rahisi katika kaa pendwa zilizojaa watu. Ameshauruona mti huu mara nyingi siku ziliyojaa sarudi, aliwakwepa makundi ya raifi zake, na wanafunzi wasichana, wote wakienda kutafuta chips na pombe rahisi katika kaa pendwa zilizojaa watu. Ameshauruona mti huu mara nyingi siku ziliyojaa sarudi, aliwakwepa makundi ya raifi zake, na wanafunzi wasichana, wote wakienda kutafuta chips na pombe rahisi katika kaa pendwa zilizojaa watu. Ameshauruona mti huu mara nyingi siku ziliyojaa sarudi, aliwakwepa makundi ya raifi zake, na wanafunzi wasichana, wote wakienda kutafuta chips na pombe rahisi katika kaa pendwa zilizojaa watu. Ameshauruona mti huu mara nyingi siku ziliyojaa sarudi, aliwakwepa makundi ya raifi zake, na wanafunzi wasichana, wote wakienda kutafuta chips na pombe rahisi katika kaa pendwa zilizojaa watu. Ameshauruona mti huu mara nyingi siku ziliyojaa sarudi, aliwakwepa makundi ya raifi zake, na wanafunzi wasichana, wote wakienda kutafuta chips na pombe rahisi katika kaa pendwa zilizojaa watu.
Anataka kufunga mlango uendao chooni. Msisimko wa hisia laini unampita mwilini. Sauti ya mwanamume inapasukia ndani mwake, kama mafuta yanayounga. Wanapokatia nyama kuna gogo gogo na panga kando yake.


Mkono unazunguka bega na kugeuza kichwa. Sauti inapata sikio lake, imeloa vitone vya mwanamume, inakwauruza kutokana na kelele za usiku.

“Nipe hizo sigara juu ya kitanda. Unaweza kuondoka kwenye njia ya kushoto.”


Woman in the Orange Dress

By Sarah Ladipo-Manyika
She came into the restaurant on crutches, so I looked to see what was wrong. Broken foot? Broken leg? Torn Achilles tendon? There was no cast. No plaster or boot. No, not even from the side view was there a leg bent back. There was no leg. At least none that came beneath the hemline of her simple cotton dress of pale, orange lace. Cantaloupe orange, with short puff sleeves, scooped neckline and hem hovering just beneath the knee. Could it be then that the limb ended at the knee, or somewhere even higher? All that could be seen was just the one leg with its dainty black shoe the colour of her hair. She was smiling, smiling so broadly that it made me wonder what she and her companion were celebrating. He wore a grey suit and tie and stood no taller than her, but slimmer and balding in the back. She had an afro which was wrapped in a long scarf of bright blue silk. And as if that were not frame enough for her dark, honey glowing face, the window behind her head was decked in tinsel and twinkling yellow lights. All through dinner she kept smiling and flirting with those large brown eyes as though giddy with some secret excitement. From time to time she would lean across the table to share a private joke and as she did so, her pendant, a miniature Benin bronze, swung ever so gently, suspended from the tiny chain around her neck. Apparently mesmerized, the man brought his chair closer and closer until it went no further and it seemed that he might disappear into those liquid, amber eyes. Twice, she threw back her head with such loud laughter and clapping of hands that people turned to stare, but she didn’t care. All she noticed was he. And when the restaurant turned up the music and dimmed the lights, I caught a glimpse of her shiny black shoe tapping a dance between the wooden legs of their chairs. And that was when my partner reached across our table. “Everything will be okay,” he said, dispelling the silence that had fallen between us. “Yes,” I nodded, squeezing his hand. “Yes, I think so.”

Listen to the audio version read by Sarah Ladipo-Manyika

Sarah Ladipo Manyika was raised in Nigeria and has lived in Kenya, France, and England. She holds a Ph.D. from the University of California, Berkeley, and teaches literature at San Francisco State University. Her writing includes essays, academic papers, reviews and short stories. In Dependence is her first novel published by Legend Press, London; Cassava Republic Press, Abuja; and Weaver Press, Harare. Sarah sits on the boards of Hedgebrook and San Francisco’s Museum of the African Diaspora and she is this year’s Chair of Judges for the Etisalat Prize for Literature.
Arábìnrin
Inú Asọ
Ọlọsàn

Tí Kola Tubosun túnọ
wọ́nú ilé ounjẹ náà pełú opá; eyí si je kí n wọ́ láti mọ œun tó sẹlẹ. Sẹ eṣe kíkán ní?
Tábí eṣe yiye? Ishan tó fáyà? Kó sí ẹdidi egbò nibẹ, bẹẹni kó sí báta. Rárá, bí mo se n wọ́ láti egbè kó tíle fi eṣe kankan hàn tó rọ sẹyìn. Kó sí eṣe kankan nibẹ. Kó sá sí ikankan tó jade lábẹ asọ léési olówùù aláwọ ọsan tó wọ. Àwọ ọsan nla, pełú ówo pèmpé wíwú, orúùn tó gé kùrù ńtì isálẹ rẹ tó n fó pèmpé ní orí orúùn kí n rẹ. Ñẹ̀ ò lè je pé eṣe rẹ̩̩í̩ sí orúùnún ní bí, tábí ibómírán lókè sii? Òun kan pèrè tí a le rí ní eṣe kan yí pełú báta tó dúdú mírinmirin bí irun rẹ. Ò n reérìín múse; erín tó lọyà́yà gidi dé’bí wípe mo bẹrẹ sí s’ásàrò oun tí óun ńtì énikeji rẹ̀ n sâjọyọ rẹ̀. Òun wọ̀ asò isé aláwọ aláwọ eérù pełú láti orùùn. Kó sí ja ju arábrínrin lọ rrárá. Ò kán tínrín dìę, ó sì pà lórrí ẹ̀rìyìn. Irun arábrínrin yíi gün, ó sì pọ̀ púpọ̀ bìí tì àwọ̀n elérè. Ò kóó pọ̀ pełú ibrúrn ńtì aláwọ ojú orún. Àfí bìí wípe kó tì mún ojú rẹ̀ (tó n tán redere bìí oyuín) dábí ëyí tó và ẹ̀rìyìn áwòrán ńtì, fèrèrésè tó và ẹ̀rìyìn orí rẹ̀ n tan yanranyanran pełú inà kèèkèèkè mirinmirin. Títí tó wọ̀n fi jeun tán, ó sá n reérìín, ó sì n ńoju nla rẹ̀ tó dúdú mínniño sọrọ, bí pé nínú rẹ̀ n dún fún nkan ńsií rókọ̀rọ̀ kan tó lárrín ní rẹ. Ní ìgbà dé ńgbà, yóò tê síwájú lórrí tábílì láti só fẹ́ẹ̀n rẹ̀. Bó se n se bẹ̀ẹ̀, ńgbá ńrùn rẹ̀, tí ó jè érè kēkèèrè láti lí láá Bííi, yóò máa mi jolojolo bí ó se rọ láti ara sèènní kēkèèrè tó fí sọrùn. Bó se dún móọ nínú tó, ńkùnrin náà gbé àga rẹ̀ sùnúmọ títí tó kò fi le ńgbà síwájú rẹ̀, tí ó sì dábí wípe ó lè pòórò sínú àwọn ójú olómi olówó iyébiyé obínrin rẹ̀. Lẹ́ẹmẹ́jì, ó so oríí rẹ̀ sèyìn pełú erín nla áti ipàtèwọ̀ aláriwo tì àwọn ójú ójú àya ńbí lọ́wọ́ lọ́wọ́ iyébiyé obínrin rẹ̀. Nígbà tí ilé oúnjẹ sì yí orínrí yí iná sílẹ̀, mo rí báta rẹ̀ dúdú tó n tún yanranyanran tó si n jọ̀ dièèré láárrín èègbá àti ẹ̀rìyìn pẹ̀rẹ̀ tó fí sọrùn. Ìgbà ńi ni énikeji náà na ówọ̀ mí mí láti orí tábílì.
Ó ni, “Gbogbo nkan ni yóò dára nígbéyìn.” Ò sì lè gbogbo idákejeje tó di dúró sáárín wa lọ̀.
“Bẹẹni, mo fẹsí pełú orí mi, mo sì di ówọ̀ rẹ̀ mú dáádáá. “Bẹẹni, mo rò bẹ̀.”

Listen to the audio version read in Yoruba by Yemisi Aribisala

Kola Tubosun is a linguist, teacher, and writer. With an MA in TESL/Linguistics from the Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, he has worked in translation, language teaching and documentation. He has worked at the International Institute in St. Louis, and is currently involved in building a multimedia dictionary of Yoruba names and also in translating Twitter into Yoruba. His work has appeared in the International Literary Quarterly, The Moth, Farafina, Sentinel Poetry and Saraba, among others. He blogs at KTravula.com, and he can be found on Twitter at @baroka.
Cotyledons

By Toni Kan
Everyone said I started late and then the first man that came along made me his wife.

That was my luck but it was not for want of trying.

Back at secondary school in Isi-Enu, I was wanted but not the way other girls were wanted. The boys wanted me because I could not be had. They did not want me the way they wanted Tina, the one they all called 9 to 9 because she followed five boys into their room and was raped from 9am to 9pm.

Or the way they wanted Ifeoma Okeke who all the boys had used to gba set.

I was wanted because none of the boys had ever seen my pant and it was something that made me proud.

“You will marry one day and one man will use your thing to play football,” Georgie, my friend said.

Georgie was tall and light skinned with long hair and nose that looked like a Fulani. She was not like the other girls but every year she would fall in love with one or two boys.

“If you don’t service this thing, one day it will close up o,” she would say every time I rolled my eyes at her

I did not service the thing even though I was tempted to. Once, on a trip to Nsukka, Gideon, one of the senior boys in our school had slipped me a note: “Your breasts are like cotyledons.”

“Ke kwa nu nke bu cotyledon?” Georgie snorted as she let the paper fly out the window to be interred in the red earth.

In my first term of form three I did not know what cotyledons meant but I was so impressed that I let him touch my breasts some nights as we went home from prep.

Izu was tall and different from any boy I had played with before including Gideon.

“How can he be like Gideon when he is an old man,” Georgie who did not know how to bite her tongue said.

He was thirty two and I was just turning nineteen when he came to ask for my hand. He lived in Lagos and had two shops in Idumota where he sold bags.

“Business is moving well and after we enter matrimony, you will help me in the shop,” Izu said to me in English because he said he wanted our children to speak English first and not Igbo.

“Me, I am going to the university,” Georgie said. “I will not sell bags for any bagger.”

Then she took my hand and asked me how it was.

“What did you enjoy it?”

I told her I did. I told her how Izu filled me up the way a big bowl of fufu fills up a hungry man. His thing, I told Georgie amidst giggles, was so big and long I feared it would come out of my mouth.

I never got the chance to work with Izu in the shop because I was pregnant two months after I joined him in Lagos and by the time my second child was born, fire had gutted the building housing his
shops and turned his wealth to ashes. He sold one car first and then the other before he took to staying at home and drinking all day and beating me.

Things had gone bad between us the way a pot of egusi soup goes bad if you forget to warm it. We had forgotten how to keep things warm between us. That was when he began to whisper to me; Osas, the Bini boy who lived down stairs. He would wait for me by the staircase as I came down to fetch water. “Come with me and I will make you happy,” he’d say, his tongue sweet like ekwensu, my skin breaking out in goose bumps.

“I have a husband,” I’d tell him but his answer was always the same. “He will not know until we have gone far away.”

“And my children?”

“We will take care of them.”

Osas did not work but he had two cars and always seemed to have money to spend.

One day, Izu found me talking to him. He did not say a word as he walked past us but when he got home that night he beat me so much my period came ten days early and I could not go out for three days.

Osas sent me money and medicine and when Izu travelled to Kano to see a cousin, Osas brought me cake while the kids were in school.

I had not eaten cake in a long time. So, I sat in the living room and ate it all until I was as full as a python that had swallowed an antelope.

Izu’s cousin gave him money to start a new shop and the new business seemed to consume him. He left early and came back late as if he was on a quest to recover all he had lost at once. Izu stopped beating me and even though I was thankful, I missed being touched; the love we made when he wanted to make up.

That was when I started allowing Osas to touch me.

“Let’s do this thing,” he would whisper, his hands running like ants all over my cotyledons.

I would hold them and tell him to stop. “The neighbours will see, they will hear,” but he would laugh and push my hands away.

The air was taut, like a string pulled too tight, the day I finally gave in and stepped into his room. Osas took off my clothes as if they were made of glass and when I was naked, he laid me on his bed and covered my body with kisses from my lips to my cotyledons and in between my legs.

I was trembling when he finally spread my legs and our bodies became one but then before I could open wide enough to take him in, he cried out and collapsed on top of me.

I lay there still very hungry and thinking of fufu, while Osas snored beside me.

Listen to the audio version read by Dike Chukwumerije

Toni Kan holds both M.A and B.A degrees in English Literature. He worked as a journalist for 5 years and rose to the position of editor at the age of 26 years, before moving on into banking and telecoms. Author of 4 critically acclaimed works of fiction and poetry including *Nights of the Creaking Bed* and *When A Dream Lingers Too Long*. Toni Kan was, until recently, editor of the Sunday Sun’s literary supplement, Revue. Toni is the publisher of sabinews.com and a managing partner at Radi8. He is at work on two books: *Infidelity* and *The Carnivorous City*; a collection of short stories forthcoming from Cassava Republic Press.
Cotyledons

Translation by Chikodili Emelumadu

Otutu ndi mmadu siri na chi eforoolu m gboo, ya mere njiri kwenyere nwoke izizi gafetere nu.
Obu otu akaran na siri di, obughi na ma agbaghi mbo.
Mgbem n’agu akwukwo sekondari n’isi-enu, umu nwoke n’achu m nke ukwu. Mana obughi otu ha siri achu umu nwanyi ndi ozo ka ha siri chu munwaka. Umu ikorobia n’eso mu n’ike bu maka m ekwero ha nchuta. Okwa mu kariri nke Tina, onye umu nwoke buru ‘9 to 9’ site n’otu osiri soro okorobia ise n’ime ha baa n’ulo ha wee ra ya n’ike, bido na elekere itenani nke ututu rwo na elekere itenani nke abani. Ma obukwa Iheoma Okeke nke ha neha n’ile jiri gba set.
Ihe m guru ha aguu makana onweghi onye n’ime ha huru mpeteri n anya.
Obu ihe njiri turu ugo.
Enyi m nwanyi Joji siri m “Okwa ime-gide ihe a, mgbem inuoro di, ojiri gi baa bolu.”
Enyi m nwanyi a bu Joji toro ogologo, n’enwu ocha. Imi ya piri onu ka nke ndi n’achi efe. Onaghi eme ka ndi umu nwanyi ndi ibe anyi kamana kwa aro, o ga enwenata otu nwoke ma obu abuo oga ahu n’aya.
“Nodu ebe ahu. Oburu na imesapughi aru, mee ka ndi ibe gi siri eme, nekwa ka iatchiri atachi.”
Eyefodi m ya onu, kama na ihe o kwuru guru m a gu. Otu ubochi, mgbem ndi uko akwukwo anyi jere
Nsukka, Gideonnu no na klaasi umu nwoke toto-siri n’ulo akwukwo anyi kpanyere m leta n’aka nke odere ‘Mkpuru ara gi di ka cotyledon’.
Joji chiri ochi. “Keke nke bu cotyledons?” o rapuru mpmep akwukwo ahu Gideon dere ihe na ya o wee fepu na window, danye n’ime aja uzuwu.
Mgbem anyi bidoro klasi nke ato, amaghi m ihe ‘Cotyledon’ bu, mana otu osiri da mu uda na nsi soro m uso, ya mere njiri kwere ka Gideon kpatu m obere aka na anyasi mgbem anyi na anachigha n’eba anyi no n’akwado akwukwo anyi ga agu echi ya n’ile. Izu toro ogologo bia di iche n’ime umu nwoke n’ele mu na ha megasiri ihe egwuriegwu, ma nyanwa bu Gideon n’orwe ya.
Joji n’amaro otu esiri ata okwu eze, si m “Kedu ka osiri di gi ka agadi nwoke a aga eyi Gideon?”
Izu di ari iri ari iri n’abuo, m n’onwe m n’acho ime aro iri na itenani, mgbem ojiri bia okwu nwanyi m. Obi Lagos mgbem ahu, nwee shop n’abo n’Idumota ebe ona ere akpa.
“Aafia n’aga nnu ofuma, kamana mgbem anyi gbasiri akwukwo, aga m acho ka itinyere m aka na shop.” Otua ka osiri gwam ya na bekee n’ihi na ochulu ka umu n’ile anyi ga amu buru uzo suo bekee rapu asusu Igbo.
Joji si m “Hmmm, munwa agam eje ya bu mahadum. Onwerokwa onye m n’en-elu aka ire akpa n’aafia.”
Owere jide m aka n’aka m, juo m otu nme korita anyi si di oge izizi ahu.
“Onyere gi obi anuri?”
Asiri m ya ‘Ee’. Agwara m ya etu Izu siru juu m afo, ka nni onuno siri juu nwoke agu n’anyi ikpakwu. Ochi ka m n’achi mgbem ngwara Joji na ihe ya toro ogologo, gbaa agbaa, obere ihe ka osi m n’onu puta.
Enwerozi m ike iso Izu wee ree ihe n’aafia; ka onwa n’abo gasiri njiri bia ya bu Lagos, ntuta ime. Tupu njesia ije ime nke ibuo, oku gbaa ulo ebe
shop Izu di, aku n’ile okpara wee ghoro ntu.

O buulo uzo ree otu ugoala, reekwa nke ozo, wee bido noba n’ulo, nwuba mmanya kwadaa, wee n’ebi m aka.

Anu m di na nwunye anyi biara gba uka, ka ofe egusi siri agba uka ma oburu na adaghi ya n’oku. Anyi chezosiri otu esiri edode ihe oku n’etiti anyi n’abo.

Obu mgbe ahu ha Osas, nwoke Bini bi n’ala jiri bido takwuiba m umu obere ihe na n’iti.

O siri m, “Bia ka m mporo gi s i ebea pua, aga m eme ka obi di gi polina-polina,” ire ya n’ato uto ka nke ekwensu. Akpata oyi wurukasiri m n’aru m n’ile.

Anam agwa ya si “Imana m bu nwunye mmadu,” mana ngwachakwaa ya, o ka na ako ihe o na ako.

O siri m, “Mgbe o ga eji wee mara n’anyi apugo, anyi eruola ebe anyi n’eje.”

“Umu m aa?”

“Anyi ga enedo ha anya.”

Ozas enweghi ihe m furu ona aru, kama na onwelu moto abuo, jide ego ofuma ofuma.

Otu mbochi, Izu jidere anyi ebe anyi n’akpa nkata. Oyero di anyi onu, ghara anyi gafee. Mana oge onarutere n’anyasi ahu, otiri m ihe ee, nso nwanyi n’erubeghi eru m jiri oso-oso bia bido m. Enweghi m ibinyi oto si n’ulo puo iro ubochi n’ato gaa.

Ozas nyere m obere ego, goro m ogwu. Mgbe Izu jere ugwu awusa ihu nwanne ya, Osas zutara m achicha oyibo wetere m oge umuaka m n’ n’ulo akwukwo.

Oteena aka mgbe m tara achicha oyibo, n wee noro n’iru ulo be m, wee tajuo ya afo, dorozie ka eke noro ene. Nwanne Izu ahu ojere ihu na ugwu awusa nyere ya ego ka o were bido zuba ahia ozo. Di m tiniere onwe ya n’ile na azum-ahia ya. Onu ututu ka ojiri apu, lota n’ime ndeli, ka ochoro iji osiso kpaa aku n’uba ya nke gbara oku. Izu kwusi kwuru iti m ihe. Obi di nma n’ihi na okwusiri iji arum melu igba, kamana ahu m choro aka ona adi emetukebe m ma ocho ka anyi dozie.

N’oge a ka njiri kwenyere Osas.

“Ngwanu ka anyi mee ifea,” aka ya noro n’awukasi m ka aruru na cotyledons mu.

Ejidere m ya aka, si ya kwusi, na ndi agbata obi anyi ga ahu anyi, ma nu kwa ihe anyi n’eme. O chiri ochi, were aka m wepu n’ara m.
Chikodili Emelumadu is a writer, journalist and broadcaster living in London. She started a career in print journalism at the age of fourteen, working on school publications. She left her job at the BBC World Service to dedicate her time to writing fiction. Her work has appeared in Eclectica and Apex magazines and Luna Station Quarterly. She speaks and writes two languages fluently and two others rather badly. She can be found ranting about life, Igboness and whatever else seizes her fancy on Igbophilia.wordpress.com.
Aurélie arrived at her TV company, sweaty. She had jogged from her home at La Riviera 3 to her office at Les Deux Plateaux.

“Stéphanie, comment va?” she greeted the receptionist.

“Any messages?” she asked.

“No, but you have a visitor.”

She looked across the lobby as Stéphanie gestured in the direction of her office. To the frown on her face, the receptionist added, “It is Monsieur Sylla.”

“Oh. What time …” then she waved her hands, thanked the receptionist and made her way to her office.

Sylla was sitting across her desk, looking as if he’d always sat there.

“Stranger! Where were you? Or perhaps you were in Ghana all along,” she said as she stood at the entrance to her office.

“My favourite person in the whole of Côte d’Ivoire.” He got up, walked towards her and pulled her into his arms and into the room.

“How I’ve dreamed of seeing this day, djarabi.” He kissed her, and she kissed him back. Those lips! That body. He’d put on a bit of weight, but nothing much to distract from the military physique that towered over her and always got her weak at the knees. She stayed in his arms when they broke off the kiss.

“I need to take a shower, you know,” she whispered.

“I suppose. Gyms in this country no longer have showers?”

“I ran from home to here,” she smiled at his surprised look. “I had to distract myself from you disappearing like that.” She put her hands under her chin and looked at him.

The last time she saw him, Gbagbo had finally been dragged out of his bunker. Sylla had arrived at her home late one night. How? She’d no idea. Not even her watchman had been aware of his entrance. There had been blood on his hands. So maybe he’d climbed the huge wall with the barbed wire and the broken bottles that had been logged into the cement to deter thieves. Her living room had been the HQ of her staff. They listened to gunshots whilst talking about their relief, but sadness at Gbagbo’s departure. She’d gone up to her library to find a document when someone had put his hand on her mouth. The terrified sound she made died instantly in her mouth, as she heard him whisper in her ear.

“She’d gone up to her library to find a document when someone had put his hand on her mouth. The terrified sound she made died instantly in her mouth, as she heard him whisper in her ear.”
to leave this country. The situation is lethal and I can’t take money out of my account.”
“Not a problem,” she’d said. With the situation the way it had been, she made sure she always had enough money on her. Nobody knew when one would have to cross into Ghana.
“I will reimburse you.”
She’d waved her hands and fetched the money from the back of one of the bookshelves.
“Will you leave immediately?”
“I’ll lie low a bit, then I’ll leave. Insh’Allah.”
She’d given him the spare key to her bungalow in Bassam. That night, after two years of being separated, she told him she loved him. And, in her heart, said, “I wish I’d never left you.”

She’d been a voracious newspaper reader after that, and had paid attention to Abidjan’s Kpakpatoya. Even though she was a media person, she took the gossips of Abidjan with a huge pinch of salt. But with Sylla leaving like that, she took every piece of kpakpatoya very seriously. Rumours of assassination or of arrests of Ivorian exiles in Ghana made her heart jump. Then Sylla rang a month later to tell her he’d left the country.

“How I’ve dreamed of seeing this day, djarabi.”

on tracing circles around his belly button.

“Maybe I’m mistaken, but when I was in Sweden, the kind of ring you are wearing was commonly used as an engagement ring.”

“That night, after two years of being separated, she told him she loved him. And, in her heart, said, “I wish I’d never left you.”

“Oh.” She twiddled with the ring. A solitaire Charles proposed with a week ago. She was still using the novelty of the engagement to explain her discomfort with the ring. But really, the thing felt like a noose around her neck, especially now that Charles has announced that they would live in Addis-Ababa after the wedding. Something to do with a good job at the African Union. What about my career? She’d wanted to ask him but Charles would have spoken about the will of God and how he’d prayed about the thing and all that tra la la.

At the beginning, she’d been pleased. Here was a man with the same ideals as her, someone willing to live out his faith, without compromise. Bold in the Lord and all the rest. Then she realised that she wasn’t like him. She wasn’t as rigid as Charles for whom two glasses of wine were more than enough and a joke about Jesus’ first miracle being turning water into wine would raise a theological discussion.

“Indeed, my darling, I am engaged.”

“And there I was thinking you were not the marrying kind. Your own words,” he placed his hand on hers, caressing her.

“A girl can change her mind.”

“Especially when it concerns a nice Christian man, hum?”

“No, not necessarily.”

“So change your mind and let’s get married instead.”

“Are you serious?”

“You wouldn’t know how much.”

She smiled at him, sat up and took off the solitaire.
Aurélie arriva à sa station de télé toute en sueur. Elle avait fait du footing de chez elle à la Riviera 3 à ses bureaux aux Deux-Plateaux. “Stéphanie, comment va?” elle salua la réceptioniste. “J’ai des messages?”

“Non, mais vous avez un visiteur.” Elle regarda autour d’elle dans le lobby au même moment où Stéphanie gesturait dans la direction de son bureau. Au froncement de ses sourcils, la réceptioniste ajouta, “C’est Monsieur Sylla.”

“Hey, étranger! Tu étais passé où? Ou bien tu étais au Ghana tout près là là pendant tout ce temps,” elle s’arrêta à l’entrée de son bureau.

“Ma personne préférée dans tout Côte d’Ivoire là.” Il se leva, se dirigea vers elle et la tira dans ses bras et dans la pièce. “Tu peux pas savoir combien de fois j’ai rêvé de ce jour, djarabi.” Il l’embrassa et elle l’embrassa en retour. Ces lèvres! Ce corps. Il avait pris un peu de poids, mais rien qui pouvait distraire de ce grand physique de militaire qui dominait sur le sien et qui lui donnait des jambes en coton. Elle resta dans ses bras même quand ils firent finir de s’embrasser.

“J’ai besoin de prendre une douche, tu sais,” elle murmura à son oreille. “C’est ce que je vois là! Les salles de gym dans pays là n’ont plus de douches, ou bien?”


Il chuchota, “djarabi, c’est moi.”

“Cette nuit-là, deux années après leur rupture, elle lui avait dit qu’elle l’aimait encore. Et dans son coeur, elle avait ajouté, “j’aurais jamais dû te quitter.””
volonté de Dieu et comment il avait prié pour savoir si le bara était vraiment la volonté de Dieu et tout le tralala qu’il allait verser sur elle. Au début, elle avait été heureuse de sa relation avec lui. Un homme avec les mêmes idéaux qu’elle. Quelqu’un qui voulait vivre sa foi, sans compromis. Courageux dans le Seigneur et tout le reste. Puis, elle arriva à la réalisation qu’elle n’était pas comme lui. Elle n’était pas aussi rigide comme Charles pour qui deux verres de vin étaient plus qu’assez et une plaisanterie sur le premier miracle de Jésus – la transformation de l’eau en vin – aurait soulevé un débat théologique.
“En effet oui, mon chéri, je suis fiancée.”
“Et moi qui pensais que tu n’étais pas le genre à se marier. C’est sorti de ta propre bouche.” Il mit sa main sur la sienne et la caressa.
“Une fille peut changer d’avis.”

“Surtout quand il s’agit d’un bon Chrétien, hein?”
“Non, pas nécessairement.”
“Donc faut changer d’avis et puis on a qu’à se marier kéh?”
“Tu es au sérieux?”
“Est-ce-que mon visage ressemble à pour quelqu’un qui est entrain de s’amuser?”
Elle lui sourit, se leva et ôta le solitaire de son doigt.

Edwige-Renée Dro hails from Côte d’Ivoire and is a laureate of the Africa39 project. Her stories have been published in Prufrock magazine, Prima magazine and on africanwriter.com. She is currently editing her first novel amidst endless nappy changes and broken sleep – the joys of being a mother! Edwige-Renée blogs at laretournee.mondoblog.org, a France24 and RFI platform, and works freelance as a translator (French/English). Edwige loves reading more than writing and believes that red wine can solve every problem under the sun.
He fell in love with her smile when she was still a house officer who had quietly, untainted by any scandal of note, garnered the reputation of having had a thing with some of the most wealthy men in Abuja, without ever being ensnared by their promises of making her a fashionably corpulent and contented wife.

Every time Yaro thought of her, and this was often, it was her melancholic smile, like twilight shimmering through a lazy fog—a faint promise of happiness persisting through the haze, that came to his mind. It was the first thing about her that struck him the day she walked in late to his seminar on child and maternal health. She sat down and fiddled with the wooden bangle on her right arm and her cowrie necklace. He had thought her apparent eccentricity was more suitable to a writer or some other creative-minded hobo than a medical doctor.

During the coffee break, she walked up to him, shook his hand and said, “I am called Inara. Have coffee with me.” He couldn’t say no when she smiled.

It took him two more coffee dates, caught on the occasions their duties allowed, and a whole day of daydreaming to the tinkles of the half a dozen bracelets on her left arm to convince himself that he had fallen in love with the houseman at the National Hospital.

She loved as she lived, without inhibitions, and laughed like wind chimes in the night. She dazzled his austere world with the colours of her fervour and painted the four grey walls of his bedroom canary yellow, lime green, azure and carnation. When he walked in, she was putting the finishing touches, covering the last bit of grey with bright yellow.

“God in heaven! Inara, you crazy girl, what have you done, saboda Allah fa?” She smiled, her face splotched with a riot of colours. “Your room looked too sterile, like your consultation room at the hospital. Now each wall has a different mood. Feel it.” She closed her eyes as if absorbing the ambience through her skin.

She loved the outrage out of him and lay in his arms, her head cushioned by his impressive biceps. Drifting in post-coital bliss, he looked at the yellow, blue, green and pink walls, shook his head and smiled.

Two months later, after she had invaded his life with her contagious energy, she looked around at her handiwork, at the decorated gourds she had fixed on his walls, at the abstract tribal totem carved out of a massive bull horn she had dangling from his ceiling, she sighed, “I could live here forever, you know.”

“So do.” He put his arms around her. She looked away. “I can’t. I have to go. Do you understand? I have to leave you.”

She had signed up with a field mission team of Médecins Sans Frontières and was going to Darfur to help with the humanitarian crises there. She had no idea when she would be back.

“I am not letting you go. I need you.”

“Those people need me more, darling.”

“I love you, I really do.”

She kissed him.

“Marry me, Inara.”

She looked into his eyes and finally said, “Don’t be silly. That is so unromantic! Is that how you would propose to me, if you were serious?”

“But I am. I am serious. I want to spend the rest of my life with you.”

She smiled her sad smile, kissed him on the lips and said, “You won’t marry my type, Dr. Yaro, we both know that. Besides, this is what I want to do, to help. You will be fine without me.”

Sometimes she replied to his emails weeks after he had sent them. Sometimes not at all. Because internet connection in Darfur was poor. Because she was busy helping. Because
she did not know what to tell him. Eventually she wrote to him about a boy she had tried to save, about how despite his bullet wound he had seemed more interested in his pet canary. After the boy had died, she had let the bird out of the cage so it would fly after the boy’s soul, or to its salvation or doom. Whatever, it would be on its own terms. She did not believe in caging things, even if done in the name of love. That was the last email she sent to him.

His colleagues remarked on his slouching posture, about the hollowness in his eyes, in his voice, about how totally committed he seemed to the task of cutting up people and stitching them up, about how uninterested he seemed in the things that made young people think they would live forever.

“What else are surgeons supposed to do?” he would say, his voice dry and nippy like the harmattan wind howling outside and stripping the trees of their leaves.

During his stopover at Charles De Gaulle, on his way to Ontario for a conference, she appeared out of the crowd in a departure lounge.

“Dr. Yaro. Two years and fifty-eight days,” she said, “the years have been fair to you.”

“And fifty-eight days?” He held her at arms-length so he could look at her face. “Have you been counting the days since you left me?”

She fiddled with the coral-bead bangle she was wearing. “You are slimmer.” Her smile was even hazier.

“I haven’t forgotten you. When I said I love you, you thought I wasn’t serious.”

“I have missed you too, you have no idea how much.”

“Then come back to me. Let me show you that love isn’t a cage.” She laughed but her eyes were misty.

“You wouldn’t want me. You are a good man. And I am a crazy woman. I will paint your shoes turquoise and your car scarlet.” She laughed and looked at her colleagues behind her. One of them pointed at his wrist watch. “I have to go. But we should be in touch, yes?”

She took his card and promised to contact him once she got to Central African Republic.

For the next three weeks, he checked his emails and his spam box every hour. He kept his phone at hand. He searched for her on Facebook but couldn’t find her.

A year later, while his new girlfriend, who worked in a bank, wore high heels, crispy corporate suits and wanted him to paint his bedroom white, was lying in his arms, he caught a glimpse of Inara on CNN, in a news report from a Syrian refugee camp. He envied her free spirit, her travels and convictions and her refusal to be caged by commitments and conventions, romantic or otherwise.

One sunny Saturday morning in July, thirteen months after he had seen a flash of her on TV, he answered the door and found her fiddling with the end of her braid, rubbing it against her lips, her bracelets tinkling sweetly.

“She loved as she lived, without inhibitions, and laughed like wind chimes in the night.”

“Did you meet another woman?” she asked.

“No . . . I mean, yes.”

“Did you marry her?”

“No.”

“Oh?”

“Well, she was . . . she . . . she wanted me to paint my walls white.”

That was when she smiled. “Why didn’t you come for me all these years?”

“I didn’t know where you were or if you wanted to be found. But I was hoping you’d find your way back – to me.”

“You are just a silly man,” she said.

“But I am here now. Show me how love is not a cage.”

Listen to the audio version read by Elnathan John
Launikan So

Na Abubakar Adam Ibrahim

Murmushinta ne ya fara kama hankalinsa, a yayin da take kwantata aikin likitanci a asibiti bayan kammalal karatun jamii’arta, bayan ta shahara saboda alakarta da fitattun masu kudin Abuja, ba tare da ta bari sun tirke ta da dadin bakinsu ko dukiyarsu ko kuma alkawuran da suke mata na mai da ita kasaicacciya matur aure ba.

A duk lokacin da Dakta Yaro ya yi tunanin ta, kuma hakan ya kasance a kodoyaushe ne, murmushinta mai sanyaya jiki yake fara tunawa saboda yana masa kamar wani haske ne da ke bijirowa ta cikin hazo. Lokacin da ya fara ganin ta, yana gudanar da wani taron kara wa una sani ne a kan kula da lafiyar mata da yara. Ta shigo a makare ta samu waje ta zuuna tana dan wasa da awarwaronta da aka sassaka da icce da kuma sarkar da ke wuyanta, wace ta duwatsun vuri ce. Da ya dube ta, sai ya yi tunanin wannahai ayayan shigar tata ya fi dacewa da hartsaniiyar marubuta ko wasu masu zane-zane, ba likitoci ba.

Da akar yihutun rabin lokaci, sai ta karaso wurniwa, ta riki hanunsu ta ce, “Suna na Inara. Zo mu sha shayi tare.” Da ya kayri murwumushinta, sai yi yi ba zai iya ce mata a’a ba. Ya dauke shi ganawa da ita sau biyu, a lokacin da aikace-aikacensu suka ba su damar haka, da kuma ganin ta da ya rika yi a tunanin zucinsa kafin ya tabbatar a ransa ceewa laillay da afka kogin soayya da wannan ma’aikaciya Babban Asibitin Kasa.

Tana soyayyarta ne yadda take gudanar da rayuwarta, ba tare da wani takunkumi ba, kuma tana dariya tamkar wata sarewa da ake busawa cikin dare. Ta shiga rayuwarsa da ke nan dishi-disti, ta haskakata da irin kalar son ta da kuma hamasar ta. Kuma ta bi farin launin daksinsa ta mulka wa bangon launin ruwan dorawa da shudi da wani nau’un ja, ya kada kai kawai ya yi murmushini.

Bayan watanni biyu, bayan ta mamaye rayuwarsa da karfin son ta, sai ta tsaya ta dubi aikace-aikacen da ta yi a dakin, har da wata kwalliya da ta yi masa da wasu kawatattun kwarairayi da wani kaho da aka bi shi da zane da ke rataye a silin dinas, ta yi ajiyar zuci ta ce, “Tana soyayyarta ne yadda take gudanar da rayuwarta, ba tare da wani takunkumi ba, kuma tana dariya tamkar wata sarewa da ake busawa cikin dare.”

Ya dawo kawai ya cin mata, a yayin da ta dukuwa tana wannan aiki, tana ma cikin karasawa ke nan.

“Ni kam hon iya zama nan tsawon rayuwata.”

Ya dawe ta, sai ya yi tunanin wannan aiki, tana ma cikin karasawa ke nan.

“Ni kam zan iya zama nan tsawon rayuwata.”

Ta rufe idonta kamar yanayin da ta ambata yana ratsa jikinta gaba daya. Ta tarairayi bacin ransa da kyakkyawar kulawa har ya kai ga ta kwanta a jikinsa, ta dora kanta a damtensa.

Yana kwance cikin natsuwa, sai ya daga ido ya dubi daksinsa da ke da launin ruwan dorawa da shudi da kore da wani nau’in ja, ya kada kai kawai ya yi murmushini.

Ba da kanzu da wannan lokaci, sai ta karaso ta aiki, sai ta tsaya da tana aikace-aikacensu suka da launin kwarairayi da wani khar da aka bari-

“Ai dakin naka ne ya yi dilim tamkar dakin dube mara lafiya a asibiti. Amma yanzu ka ga kowane bangon yana ba da wani launi da yanan na daban. Ba ka ji a jikinka ba?”


Ashe a wannan lokacin ta riga ta ba da sunanta a Kungiyar Likitoocin Sa Kai ta Duniya, har sun tura ta yankin Darfur saboda ka agaji. Kuma ba ta san lokacin da za ta dawo daga wannan aikin ba.

“Ba zan taa barin ki ki tafi ba saboda ina bukatar kasancewa tare da ke.”
“Ai su ma mutanen can din suna da bukatar kasancewata a can.”
“Ai ni kuma son ki nake yi, matukar so kuwa.”
Ta dangana ta sumbace shi.
“Ki yarda mu yi aure mana, Inara.”
Ta kalle shi har cikin kwayar idanunsu ta ce, “Kai kam ka fiye shiriritu. Ai yadda ka yi maganar nan ma ko kama hankali babu. Yanzu haka za ka nemi aurena in da gaske kake yi?”
“Da gaske nake yi mana. Ina son in karaci sauran rayuwata tare da ke.”
Sai ta yi dan murmushinta mai sanyaya jiki, ta sumbaci lebensa ta ce, “Ai ba aurena za ka yi ba, Dakta Yaro, duk mun san haka. Ni ba irin matar da za ka aura ba ce, balle ma ni abin da nake so na yi da rayuwata ke nan; in taimaki mutanen da bala’i ya afka masu. Rayuwarka za ta ci gaba da gudana ba tare da ni ba.”
Bayan ta tafi, wani sa’in takan amsa sakonninsa na e-mel a makare, wani lokaci ma makonni bayan ya tura su. Wani sa’in kuma ko ta tamka masa, saboda yanayin yanar gizo a Darfur babu kyau, ko saboda ayyuka suna shan kanta, ko kuma saboda rashin bayanin da za ta iya yi masa. Amma bayan wani lokaci sa ta yi masa sako da a ciki take ba shi labarin wani yaro da ta taimaka mawa. Duk da fama da yaron nan yake yi da raunin alburushi da aka yi masa, wannan yaron bai gushe ba yana tarairayar wani kanarinsa da ya sanya a keji. Bayan yaron nan ya cika, sai ta bude kejin nan, ta saki kanarin saboda ya bi ruhin yaron nan, ko ya tashi zuwa ga tsira ko halaka. Duk wanda tsutsun ya zaba, zai kasance zabin kansa ne. Saboda ita Inara ba ta amince wa turke abu a cikin keji ba, ko da an yi haka ne saboda so da kauna. Wannan shi ne sakon karshe da ta aiko masa ke nan.
Abokan aikinsa kuwa sun kanscance suna magana a kan rankwafewar da kafa’darsa ta yi, tare da yadda idanunsa suka yi zuru-zuru, muryarsa ma ta dushashe da kuma yadda ya dukufa wajen tsaga marasa lafiya da kuma dinke su ba tare da danuwa da abubuwan da ke sa samari su ji kamar za su rayu har abada ba.
Yakan ce musu, “To me ke aikin likita in ba ya tsaga mutane ya dinke ba?”
In ya yi magana haka, muryarsa taka zamanto a bushe ne tamkar iskar hunturu da ke bi tana tsige ganyayen bishiyoyi.
A hanyarsa ta zuwa taro a garin Ontario, inda ya yada zango a filin saukar jirgi na Charles De Gaulle a Paris, sai kawai ya ganta ta bullo daga cikin cincirindon mutane.
Suna hada ido sai ta ce masa, “Dakta Yaro, shekara biyu da kwanaki hamsin
da takwas. Lallai tsawon lokacin nan ka kasance a cikin alheri.”
“Da kwanaki hamsin da takwas?” Ya riki hannunta, ya kale wa fuskarta kallo ya ce, “Ashe kina kirga kwanakin da kika tafi kika bar ni?”
Ta sunkuyar da kanta, ta kuma kama wasa da abun hannunta da aka yi da wani irin kodi. Ta yi murmush, tare da jin kunya ta ce, “Har kuwa ka fada.”
“Ke kuma kin kara kyau. Sai kuma kika daina rubuto mun sakonni.”
“Wannan wani dogon labari ne,” ta juya ta dubi wasu mutane da ke tsaye suna jiran ta, ta ce masa, “Abokan aikina ne daga kunyiarmu ta MSF. Za mu je kai dauki ne a garin Bangu.”
“Inda ake yakin nan ko?” Ta kada kai.
“Don Allah sai ki kula.”
“Zan kula.”
Ya ce, “Na yi ta kewar ki kuwa. Har yanzu ma ban gushe ba ina kewar ki.”
“Ni da na dauka ma manta da ni, ka samu wata hadaddiyar mata ka aura.”
“Ai kuwa ban manta ki ba. Ke da na ce son gaske nake mak, kin dauka wasa nake yi ni.”
“Kai ma ba ka san yadda na rika jin kewar ka ba.”
“To, ki dawo nana ni mana don in tabbatar maki cewar so ba keji ba ne.”
Ta karbi katinsa da ke dauke da lambar wayarsa da adireshin e-mel dinsa, ta kuma yi masa alkaarin tuntubarsa da zaran ta kai Jamhuriyar Afirika ta Tsakinya.
A sati ukun da saka biyo bayan haduwar su sai ya kasance a kowane sa’i yana duba e-mel dinsa saboda tsumayen sakonta kuma ya kasance yana kaffa-kaffa da wayarsa ko za ta kira shi. Ya hau Facebook ya yi bincikenta amma kuma bai same ta ba.
Bayan shekara guda, a ya yi da ya kasance tare da sabuwar budurwarsa, warce take aiki a banki, ta kuma kasance tana sanya takalman kwaras-kwaras masu dogayen dundunnya da kuma tsukakkun riguna irin na kwararrun ma’aiyin, sai ya hango Inara a CNN, a cikin wani rahoto na musamman da aka yi... na ‘yan gudun hijirar Syria. Ya kada kai yana mai jinjina wa himmarta da kuma ire-iren tafiye-tafigyan da take yi da kuma kin yarda da ta yi na kange rayuwarta, ko da a dalilin so ne ko sabaninsa.
Wata rana cikin watan Yuni, watanni goma sha uku bayan ya ga wulgawarta a CNN, sai ya ji an buga masa kofar daki. Ya je ya duma kawai sai ya ga ai ita ce. Tana tsaye tana wasa da silin kitsonta, tana shafa shi a lebenta yakin da warwaronta suke wani kara mai dadi. Ta tambaye shi, “Shin ka samu wata budurwar ne?”
“A’u...ina nufin e.”
“Ka aure ta?”
“A’u.”
“Me ya hana?”
“Am... wa so to ya yi in yi wa dakina farin fenti.”
Nan take fuskarta ta dau haske da murmush. “To me ya hana ka ka nemo ni duk tsawon lokacin nan.”
“Haba, ke da ban san duniyar da kika shiga ba, ko kuma ma shin kina son a gano inda kike? Amma na kasance ina fatar za ki karkato akalarki ya zuwa gare ni.”
“Kai kam ka faye son shiririta wallahi,” ta ce masa. “Amma ga ni nan, sai ka tabbatar mun da cewa so ba keji ba ne.”

**Listen to the audio version read in Hausa by Elnathan John**

Abubakar Adam Ibrahim is a Nigerian writer and journalist. His debut short story collection *The Whispering Trees* was long-listed for the Etisalat Prize for Literature in 2014, with the title story shortlisted for the Caine Prize for African Writing. Abubakar has won the BBC African Performance Prize and the Amatu Braid Prize for Prose. He is a Gabriel Garcia Marquez Fellow and was included in the *Africa39* anthology of the most promising sub-Saharan African writers under the age of 40. His first novel will be published in 2015 by Parrésia Publishers.
Other Contributors

Audio Recordings

Yemisi Aribisala is a writer and a lover of good food. She has written about Nigerian food for over 7 years; for 234Next, the Chimurenga Chronic, and at her personal blog Longthroat Memoirs. Her essays on food are a lens through which the complex entity of Nigeria is observed. Nigeria has a strong culture of oral storytelling, of myth creation, of imaginative traversing of worlds. Longthroat Memoirs is a trusteeship of some of those stories to paper and ink, collated into an irresistible soup-pot, expressed in the flawless love language of appetite and nourishment. Her food stories are soon to be published by Cassava Republic Press. Her essays can be read online under the pseudonym Yemisi Ogbe.

Elnathan is a lawyer who quit his job in November 2012 to write full-time. His work has been published in Per Contra, ZAM Magazine, Evergreen Review, Le Monde Diplomatique (German) and The Chimurenga Chronic. In 2013 he was shortlisted for the Caine Prize For African Writing for his story Bayan Layi. He also writes satire for his weekly column for the Sunday Trust newspaper. He is a 2015 Civitella Ranieri Fellow. His first novel, A Star Without a Name, is forthcoming from Cassava Republic Press.

Billy Kahora lives and writes in Nairobi. His short fiction and creative non-fiction has appeared in Chimurenga, McSweeney's, Granta Online, Internazionale, Vanity Fair and Kwani. He has written a non-fiction novella titled The True Story Of David Munyakei and was highly commended by the 2007 Caine Prize judges for his story Treadmill Love; his story Urban Zoning was shortlisted for the prize in 2012, and The Gorilla's Apprentice was shortlisted in 2014. He wrote the screenplay for Soul Boy and co-wrote Nairobi Half Life. He is working on a novel titled The Applications. Kahora is Managing Editor of Kwani Trust and also an Associate Editor with the Chimurenga Chronic. He was a judge of the 2009 Commonwealth Writers’ Prize and 2012 Commonwealth Short Story Prize. He was a judge for the inaugural Etisalat Prize for Literature.
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Helene Cooper is a Pentagon correspondent with The New York Times and was previously The NYT’s diplomatic correspondent. She has reported from 64 countries, from Pakistan to the Congo. For 12 years, Helene worked at the Wall Street Journal, where she was a foreign correspondent, reporter and editor, working in the London, Washington and Atlanta bureaus. Born in Monrovia, Liberia, Helene is the author of The House at Sugar Beach: In Search of a Lost African Childhood (Simon and Schuster), a New York Times best seller and a National Books Critics Circle finalist in autobiography in 2009.

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