

SPECIAL ISSUE #1

AFRICAN WRITER

MAGAZINE

**Kuh
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sis**

[CATHARSIS]

**-PURIFICATION
-CLEANSING
-RELEASE**

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GUEST EDITORS' NOTES

Nadia Alexis, Poetry Editor

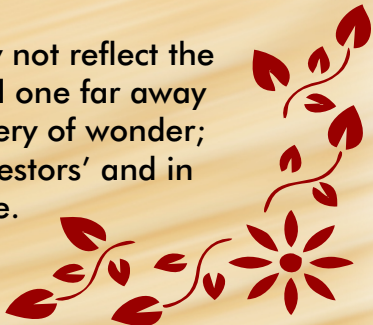
In many ways, this year has been one of the most difficult of our collective lifetimes. To experience the COVID-19 pandemic while navigating the ills of capitalist, white supremacist, heteropatriarchal, imperialist terrains has often felt insurmountable. With each passing day, I turned to whatever I could to get through it. Aside from things like FaceTimes with loved ones, watching comedic social media skits, eating as best I could, and dancing, I often found myself turning to poetry. I read poetry nearly every day, whether that be a single poem or much less often slow-reading an entire collection. I needed to release fear and pain, to see the world again, to turn inward, to connect with others, to lean into awe or hope or the ordinary or a different type of darkness. This was familiar. This felt like home.

Catharsis is a releasing, a purging, a cleansing. In sitting with the poems in this issue, I sought to feature poets who engaged with this issue's theme with fresh and urgent perspectives. And in thinking of which way forward as we move into 2021, some of these poets offered nuggets of hope and that also felt necessary. Catharsis can be a painful process and reckoning but it also opens doors within and outside of ourselves. It calls on us to make room. It embraces longing and visioning. It calls on us to see things, people, and places anew. The poets in this issue ask us to reflect on home, lineage, inheritance, queer identity, first-generation experiences, self-love, gifts in the natural world, self-preservation, the sacredness of eulogy, the necessity and inevitability of letting go, the sweetness in dreaming, and much more. Dear reader, be moved and be changed.

TJ Benson, Fiction & Nonfiction Editor

In this Special Issue, we invited contributors to share their interpretation of catharsis as release, especially considering the kind of year Black people experienced worldwide. Many readers will find Tapala's stunning meditation on grief (and learning to articulate its unexpected relationships with different aspects of our lives) relatable in 'Êykhôh', as much as Ire's meditation on space including physical, psychological and digital, when the world was in total lockdown in 'In situ'.

Pieces like Mwiya's 'Nokokure' and Otröy's 'Prison Chicken Stew' may not reflect the chaos that was 2020, but they speak to what it feels like to have a loved one far away from reach. Our issue also brings some attempt at closure and rediscovery of wonder; Jazmyn offers an ode to those we lost in 'This is How You Bury Your Ancestors' and in Cruz's 'Rainbows + Butterflies,' a young girl falls in love for the first time.



This is How You Bury Your Ancestors

**by
Silk Jazmyne**

It must always be a full moon. The air must be dry. The rains are long gone. This is how you must bury your ancestors.

Bathe them with lavender and frankincense on the black marble. For the pyre, gather oak branches from the holy forest where the unicorns are born and stars sleep during the day. Place the gold coin under their tongue and obsidian stones in each palm. Sing as the old flames consume them. The language from old eden, after creation before our fall and before our rise to galaxy.

Have the priests gather their ashes before having them touched by all living relatives. A large bowl of remains that everyone from the eldest to the youngest must place their hands in. Ashes sticking to hands as tears fall. It's the way they've asked to be remembered.

Remain barefoot while the hole is dug by day. By the proposed night, wear the mourning white and bands of gold on your ankles to announce your approach to the soil.

Say the prayers as you open the box. Singing in the tongues of those that first settled this place. It's a language foreign and familiar.

This must always occur by the water. The waves singing in unison.

Pour the ashes into the hole, over the roots of the small tree that stands there. Close it with bare hands. The knees of your gown will get dirty. There will be soil and sweat. When you stand, you'll be before the tree that will hold their soul for eternity. You'll touch the leaves and remember their embrace. You'll smile and know they are at rest. Pain, nor sadness nor the fear of death shall ever grip them again.

This is how you bury your ancestors. This is how they live on in the universe and in you.

Firdous Hendricks

Rahm - Womb



This body of work sits in the duality and connection of life and death. It speaks to transcending the boundaries between the womb, the living and the world of the ancestors - the space where the living experience divine knowledge - held in grief, joy and the collective memory that sedents in our bones. It is in this space, this maternal rocking, that release and healing can occur.

Firdous Hendricks

The Wakils



JACQUELINE JOHNSON

INHERITANCE

I am the daughter of Henrietta, who was the daughter of Hannah, who was the daughter of Rose who was a daughter of the Cherokee Nation. Daughters who made education their way out of no way.

Women who spoke in proverbs, song, and cloth. Women who lived, taught, and nurtured the generations. Hannah, known as mother of mothers, with her own nine children and twenty-seven foster children for whom

she provided sanctuary and love in this world. I am from Patricia and Gloria both daughters of Henrietta. Warrior women of the Civil Rights

Movement, who taught and rescued the children of heroin, neglect, and abuse. Women who saved the lives of someone else's son or daughter. I am from women who insisted on Sunday school

and church, who insisted on piano lessons, and dance classes, and lessons in service, and exposure to art, music and culture. I am from women who believed in molding a child and teaching values to last a lifetime.

I come from women who wrapped money into the corners of flower-patterned handkerchiefs. I come from women who wove sweet grass baskets. Women who walked under sudden sun showers.

I come from grandmothers who covered their granddaughters in long midi dresses, hoping to camouflage and distract the sea of grown men aware of their new beauty.

Women who praised and thanked God every day for everything, who knew hunger intimately. Women who knew how to wrench sorrow from a young girl's soul.

To enchant the heart with the sweetness of life. Women who knew how to make something out of themselves. How to turn nothing into a lifetime of gifts.

Praise the

JACQUELINE JOHNSON

Praise the ancestors' restraint
your house was destroyed,
yet you live:
to start again,
to dream anew.

Praise the water
that entered your house
but not your lungs.
Praise the merciful sky for raining no more.
Praise the winds' sudden stillness.
Praise the precious seconds, minutes
you now have
to reconsider,
remake a life once asleep.

Praise the children of the hurricane,
wise ones sent to remind those
coming long after
who we are in this cycle.
Praise the children larger than us
willing to become spontaneous mothers and fathers.

Praise the wind her terrible blessings.
Praise the wind who took some
but not all your family.
Praise the water that kicks our collective ass.
Praise that we have a chance
to prove we are the ones
they sent to work,
to become stronger,
to become wiser.
Praise the wind her terrible blessings.



IN SITU

By Xaron Ire

(The Antithesis of Catharsis)

Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Every new day is a temptation I never manage to escape. It's a trick I'm a little too familiar with. A dream dances away just as I'm shaking sleep off my feet, off the dense of my bones and brain. A glassy world thins out into blue walls that are not really blue anymore. My sky is a shade of white when I look up: the asbestos that watches over me seems to wear out, slowly but surely. A feeling enters my mind and becomes trapped there. The room becomes immaterial; a nebula of sighs echoes into the reality I'm confronted with. Every new day is a conflict, inside, outside. The mattress pulls me in, and something else attempts to pull me out. What to do? It's past dawn and my heart is already broken. I lie back for a bit, pretending to sleep, pretending to dream — but time rocks me into another intermediate state.

The truth is very short, maybe a little biased, whatever... I've never had a room of my own. Even now. Yea, even now, I'm tucked into a bed that has never belonged to anyone, save the master of the house. The lord of the house is my grandfather, a man that — to put it in his own words — has expired. He is the most grateful person to God. What with after living a comparatively long life, it is only right, to him. There is a polarity among the aged: those that are mostly grateful for the lives they've led, and those that are mostly dying in

regret. It's a funny thing, regret. That one can look back into the past, that is both empty and clear, lacking, and still wish, long for something that is forever lost. It is a wonderful thing. But back to the mundane... this room that is not really mine. Is anything really anyone's anyway?

It is said that the nature of everything is mind. In my intermediate state, there is no distraction. The only thing that be, is mind. At this point, I'm twisting and turning in my bed, morphing into abstractions. In the eye of my mind, I'm in a placeless place. When I eventually glimpse the real world, it's past noon and I'm disappointed, among other things. Fawwwwck — I yawn into wakefulness, stretching my skeleton, listening for a crack, multiple cracks at my joints. The window on the other end of the room, adjacent to my bed, it holds my gaze for a while. Regret waltzes into my mind. What the fuck am I even doing here? I wish something exciting would just happen to me for fuck's sake. I've been out of school for about a year. Mind is exhausted, aching for an academic environment. Today's date doesn't really matter — it is the same as yesterday and the day before, empty and clear. I wish I had my own room for real. It'd be empty, clear with white walls. Depth, I want depth too — a high ceiling will give me tha-

Mind becomes distracted from its world building. I'm staring at my phone without much intent. A notification hangs off the top of my screen. Apparently, I'm running out of device storage space. I'm advised to delete some applications, or some device functions will cease. Is this what dementia feels like? Fucking 32 gig internal storage! My phone and laptop bear witness to the need for expansion. That a certain space, a room, a brain, a memory chip, is not enough to hold the objects of our longing, is testament to this phenomenon. Is it greed to want more? To want better? I don't think so. Perhaps, it is the nature of mind in fact — ever expanding. And what rightly parallels this than the universe itself! 'Tis the nature of mind to be tempted by the incorporeal. And in turn, to fill (feel) that gap; to be resourceful, productive. Call it entrepreneurship. I drop my phone and retreat into the emptiness of mind, whose very nature is pristine cognition. Awareness.

A seed lingers too long in my subconscious and I grasp it before it disappears into clarity. I'm transfigured into a large room, high-ceilinged. On the carpeted floor, there are

two unframed unmade beds at each side of the room. One is green, the other is red. Toys litter them both, spilling to the chasm. Terrazzo unravels where the luscious carpet ends. An overhead fan orbits its own orbit while everything remains intact. The room is mostly, empty. The immaterial becomes immaterial, and I sense an inner peace permeating all around. The curtains are up. I search for the observer of this imagery, but there is none. I *am* in everything. I am everything — the room of my childhood, shared with my brother. Light filters in through the sole window, calling me at a pace. My heart beats with the rhythm and I disappear into white, into a familiar soun-

My phone is ringing, but I don't pick the call. Habit. A mild irritation crosses the mind-body threshold and hooks me in the throat. I need water, so I finally get off the bed, phone in hand. There's power for now, so I plug my phone in. I stretch some more, trying to transmute my memory into words, but I fail. It's a harsh thing, the reality that we spend so much time desiring, and in a moment we hold the object of our affections, only to lose it. Yea, it is a cruel thing. Our only compensation is to perhaps find satisfaction in the present moment. But how? It is a great dilemma. O Zuckerberg! O Bezos! What have you made of us? Or maybe the question should be: O mind! What have you made of yourself? Damn he that was never birthed, child without parent that is no orphan — damn you clever foolish mind. Damn you!

I gulp down the last drops of water, and put the sachet tidily into a clean plate on my white desk. I go to the other end of the room and collapse into the sofa backing the window. It's flanked by a mirror to my subjective left. I turn to the mirror, staring into it, searching for that which is not lost — myself. In a flicker, I become the object of my own gaze, and lose myself. The reflection is empty, and so am I. I shift my gaze away from the mirror to catch a panorama of the entire room. Ouuu, it's a box I'm in. Weary of the all too familiar sight, I let my mind wander into wishes. World building begins again: a white room, high ceiling, emptiness, depth. Memory mixes with my wishes, time disappears. I'm searching for the words to describe these, but they refuse to come. I long for white spaces, but all I find is darkness. I shut my eyes, admitting a frustration I do not desire. There's so much interference inside and out. Too. Much. Noise.

I can hear my brother watch *Blade Runner 2049* in the next room. Officer KD6-3.7 is reciting his baseline, an ambiguous thing altogether, but not lacking in context, and in

that case, meaning. And blood-black nothingness began to spin... And dreadfully distinct against the dark, a tall white fountain played. I recite along, missing a few words, but not the beat. The words live in me, even though I can't recall them all. My frustration subsides and a smile spills in dopamine, to my face. I smile, but only for a bit. Sometimes, I'm just oozing of reflex. There are principles through which the mind is made manifest: the human body is one.

I turn to the mirror again, inspecting a hairline that is gradually losing its appearance. I'm getting old, lol. Look at this body, it morphs into dust but the mind remains as mind. I-

I can feel my cock swelling. It feels hard in itself, warm against my thighs. I want to fuck someone, not stroke myself into release. But these are days of pessimism and self-love, so I fall for the temptation and pick up my phone. I open MX Player and click on a file that has named itself Videos. How ingenious. The first clip is a burst of a well-constructed scene, but I want to believe it is real. In anyway, there shouldn't be any difference. What is a room if not a constructed emanation of the human mind, as is everything else that it holds? A room is the mind's museum. The immaterial attempting to quicken that which is not capable of life. The illusion holds, but only for a while. He that is material is that which marks the passage of time. All such things will meet an end one day, at a certain time.

I get bored and allow myself a deserving ejaculation. Ughh! That was so pointless, I find myself thinking. In itself, sex, of whatever form or position, whatever the size of the organs involved, is inherently empty. A grasping for the wind, 'tis true. That we are endowed with opposable thumbs doesn't guarantee that all is within our grasp. Try holding water and you'll see. Verily, satisfaction only exists because we allow ourselves to believe we are satisfied. It is the great escape of the mind. A couple copulates in dim light; one is master, and the other is slave, for a time. Submission, domination, that is the satisfaction of the world's intercourse. You are mine, but I belong to me. 'Tis the way of things.

I grab my bed cover and wipe my groin clean, my hands too, and my belly. I pick my phone, deleting my stash of fantasies, knowing very well that they will be replaced in earnest. The earlier prompt that warns of a diminishing internal storage space, disappears from the notification bar. Aha! The soul is lighter, but the mind remains. I raise my head, my eyes leaving the phone, fixed on a brown door a few steps ahead. No one has come to look for me. How sad. An overwhelming feeling of loneliness jumps rope in my head, and I fall into the rhythm unconsciously. Fuck! I'm so lonely, I finally say out loud. A bird, having landed on my window

sill, overhears my lament and twitters a song in return. I don't know if to be comforted or be depressed. It seems I have a choice, so I choose to be excited, turning to the window, my back facing the room. My rapid movement scares the little thing and it flees as unexpectedly as it had come. Hmm. The Flight of so-and-so emotion-personified; it'll be a fabulous painting, I muse to myself, slowly retreating into the sofa, into myself-

A thought hits me and I grab my phone immediately, typing ideas at a speed that attempts to match that of my epiphany. I look up from my phone, stare into nothing, picking various perspectives from which to see the room from. For once it seems alive, questioning *my* existence, positing that maybe, just maybe it is mind that doesn't truly exist. The audacity! Okay, I'm definitely imagining these conversations with the room. This dialogue is the mind interrogating itself, no doubt. I am not insane. I have not lost my mind to a fucking room. I, is real. You, are not. Why does everything have to be so contradictory? I know what I need: why, a different room of course, my room; white walls, large and empty, not lacking in depth. Depth. But the mind has no depth, it is laid bare, flat. What to do? I get up from the sofa, cursing the room, that is my mind. I've got my phone in my hand, so I grab a towel and begin my journey to the door.

The door is right in front of me, but I can't bring myself to unlock it. Loneliness is a choice, perhaps. If I go out, maybe I'll find interaction, interrelations, intercourse. I grab the handle decisively, but let go eventually. I'm better off in this room, that is mine, but not really. The door remains as it is. And I collapse into my bed, unlocking my phone for the umpteenth time. And for what? To watch a YouTube clip I've seen so many other times. Repetition is a compromise we have to make for the purpose of learning. Learning, the process of grasping the immaterial, that is. I tap, and the clip rolls. 25 Ways of Looking at Francis Bacon. The narrator's voice is deep, and clear, and soulful; it grabs you with its soothing sensation; just as much as the painting it describes, I dare say. It doesn't mean that he sees the world this way, only that he can make things look this way... The painting is Bacon's 1963 *Man and Child*, and verily, it makes me wonder about the mind. What to do with it? I'll probably never know. For now, the present is all I have, and maybe — just maybe — this shallow room, with its dull-white ceiling and dirty-blue walls, can be enough.

Do Not Insult the Eyes of God

Ariyo Ahmad

I learnt about a young sprouting flower and old withered flower from the revolution of the moon. When the moon was behind the cloud, praying for another day to come like nightmare, and later she resumes to her highness office, I thought grandmother would come back to life like a tiny atom or a crescent - I have waited hanging my arm beneath my jaws for support for two years, grandmother is yet to leave a trace of the cloud turning grey not to talk of drop of rain coming to kiss the land. Plethora numbers of times the moon has gloom so bright from the sky's horizon and rest in her chamber. And grandmother's grave is to be decorated with flowers every month to make new fragrance call her from heaven to life. I think she now loves the condominium crusade in heaven

A flower passed on in my eyes late last night, there was no funeral the next night after the ritual of the dead. I judge that to be partiality because when a boy was hidden beneath the soil, I saw numbers of people wearing black, up and down with candles as their flag in hands, smokes evolve running to heaven. They said that was a sacrifice to burn the eyes of God to return the boy, that same night his mother misplaced her soul from the shelf of her body, I later blame them for a blasphemy on God

The candlelight of a mother waving like my eye lashes was blown out by the heavy wind of life, when her eyes went to rest after she lost her husband in an aircraft accident. Couple of time when the sun shines I learn to smile, it is like I have sun in my eyes because we both only sleep during the spread of darkness. I and the sun vacate our official office. A lot of known and unknowns' things have happened by the spread of fragrance of death. My father, I was told went on a journey to his ancestral father.

I have been asking about his coming like the waiting for Jesus but he seems to have grown bitter of this world, each night he had summoned me saying see you soon. I told the boy who died last week to convey my message to him, to halt calling my body to meet his ancestral call, I want to let spoon sparkle together and take the fresh breeze of the wind, my eyes have seen and my ears have been filtrated with pregnant words, I don't fear death because I am prepared for her battle, unless death wants to fear me and get choked with my ebullient courage



LeConté Dill

INCANTATION: A Cento

We stand in the valley & go to our knees
Know the masses ask me everyday for a eulogy
We can make me
valuable somewhere else maybe
Southern coast of a has been empire
Even angels want to live forever

*** "Incantation: A Cento" is comprised entirely of lines borrowed from the following poets (in order of appearance): Terrance Hayes, Morgan Parker, Jericho Brown, Robin Coste Lewis, Danez Smith, and Morgan Parker again*



LeConté Dill

Sweet Release

Now I wear sundresses
to laze around the house
Misplace my weekends
in between couch cushions

Looking for my sun
inside my room
womb outside my body
heart outside my chest
Yes!

Breathe into the creases
into the pieces
kissed missed

Miss me through December
Carry me into the new year



Rainbows + Butterflies

By Kleaver Cruz

And that Saturday morning, the clouds were in the sky as they always were, clumped together, and they covered up pockets of sunlight in the way they always did, making the afternoon feel later than it should, making the shadows more comfortable to roam. Claribel didn't take it in, she was used to it, the clouds clumped together, covering up pockets of sunlight; if the clouds had not been where they always were, that would have shifted Claribel's Saturdays in a major way, it would mean more sun, if only for a few moments, but it would have shifted her Saturdays, Claribel who was used to the clouds clumped together, covering up pockets of sunlight in their usual way.

Claribel took a deep breath the way she always did, her thoughts raced in her mind, around and around underneath her brown skin, around and around her purple soft cotton crop top, around and around her denim bell bottom jeans, around and around her teal jellies

that popped on her brown skin, around and around her teal braided bob covering the small golden hoops in her ears; so her thoughts raced in her mind in their usual way. And she pulled out her nameplate chain from under her shirt for some sunlight to hit it, and all this was what she always did in the same way her thoughts always raced in her mind before a deep breath. And all this usually happened on Saturdays on that fifth-floor fire escape and that was normal to Claribel.

And sometimes, Claribel did not want to listen to anyone. And that Saturday morning, the fire escape was her oasis, its coat of faded paint in a worn-out shade of sky blue was light enough to be a cloud—an iron billow she could float from, out to somewhere other than that apartment. Somewhere free of shared air that felt thinner the more years passed. Somewhere she could not taste someone else's breath or overhear messages that bounced around the walls to land in ears they were not meant for. Somewhere where being *la mas vieja* didn't mean her ears heard it all. Claribel was interrupted by whispers.

“Can you two shut up and get away from me for a few minutes?”

She swatted the curtain in the open window, her twin sisters' feet shuffled behind it. Carolina and Camila. Marysol, their mother, was watching *The Price is Right* in the living room. The twins were still standing by the curtain in her bedroom when Bob Barker was announcing the next contestants and she caught them from the thinnest sliver of her eye,

“Don't make me repeat myself. Get away from that fire escape, *eso es un peligro!*”

The pair were peeking through the curtain again, out at their sister.

“How did she know we were in here?” Camila asked Carolina as they

leaned on the wall closest to the window. Carolina softly pushed Camila off of her and adjusted the bun on her head as she straightened out her rose-patterned skirt.

"I told you to be quiet Camila. Now look." Carolina rolled her dark brown eyes and walked out of the room.

Claribel stuck her head through the window, "You two are always trying to blow up my spot. Jesus, can you leave the room?" She rolled her eyes as she watched Camila leave and then returned to her rusty terrace. Her quiet time was late in the morning, on Saturdays when they gave a re-run of her mother's favorite game show. For about 25 minutes she could sneak onto the fire escape as her mother screamed her guesses for the prices of shiny cars and dream vacations at her TV. From that fire escape, Claribel could pretend she was on one of those glittery beaches.

The smell of burning coals drifted through the air, in the breeze. From where she sat, she could see a small family starting up a barbecue in the back yard of their small private home. She quietly joined in the laughter of the little girls as they played Tag and chased each other around the concrete yard with bouncing puffs of thick hair on their sun-kissed heads.

Claribel pinned her teal shoulder-length braids away from her face as the breeze brushed an affirmation through them. She sat cross-legged with her back against the grate and closed her eyes. She was still there, but everything around her was more lush and greener. There were more trees to interrupt all the concrete. And she took a deep breath, like in that ad her mom was watching on the TV.

"Hey!"

It sounded like someone was trying to get her attention. She continued to breathe with eyes closed.

“Hey!”

The voice was more confident this time.

“Hey don't live here. I have a name.”

Claribel opened her eyes, brushed her left hand across her chain, got up and leaned against the bannister to get a better look. She was surprised. This person she did not know, had a short afro in her favorite color: lavender, like on the bag of epsom salt her mother poured into the bath the few times she was able to take a break. Lavender, like the label for the oil her abuela used to rub on her temples when she was afraid there was a monster under her bed and couldn't sleep. These eyes she just met gave Claribel a tingle, they were familiar in a way she'd only known her own eyes to be. Claribel wondered how long this person had been standing there, looking at her, before she got her attention.

“I was hoping you had a name,” The stranger smiled from under her hand, blocking the sun from her face, “I'm Yuri by the way. You live around here?”

“Yes, I live around here,” Claribel tried her best not to smirk.

“True, well I live here,” Yuri pointed to the small white-plastered brick house behind the concrete yard with patches of grass around her,

“Anyways, it's nice to meet you...what was your name again?”

“I never said it,” Claribel responded.

Claribel! Come here! Marysol's voice rang out from the apartment, she looked back towards the open window.

“Ah, Claribel, it's nice to see you,” Yuri lowered her hand and smiled.

“I-I gotta go,” Claribel started to walk towards the window and looked back towards this new face.

“Ok, well, can I see you again Claribel?” Yuri winked.

“Maybe.”

Claribel crouched back through the oversized window, closed it, drew the curtains and smiled. She speed-walked out of her mother's bedroom and slowed down as she entered the biggest room in the apartment.

Inside, she could hear the prize wheel spinning on the TV. The living room was big enough to fit an old wooden entertainment system, a china cabinet of the same dark wood and a sofa. Near the window in the far-left corner of the room, Marysol squeezed an overstuffed leather armchair in it. She wanted to have a throne in this lifetime, even if it meant buying it herself. All around the room were pictures of their extended family and Marysol's prized possessions: her daughters, the Hermanas Reyes. The walls felt as stuffed as the family tree. Her mother was hanging up the phone when Claribel entered the room.

“Hija, I've been calling you. Where were you? You'll never guess who that was,” Marysol said.

“We won the Lotto?” Claribel asked.

“What? No, that was my old friend Leonila, from back in the day. We used to work together. Anyways, she just moved back to NY with her daughter and I invited them over for dinner Saturday night.”

“Cool, “Claribel didn't like the idea of being forced to entertain a stranger.

Marysol looked at her daughter, “I can't believe her baby girl is not a baby anymore. She's about your age actually, I'm sure you'll love her.”

"I'm sure I will," Claribel faked a smile.

"I'm sure she's beautiful like you," Marysol wrinkled her nose, "and can you tell one of your sisters to go clean the bathroom?"

"I'm tired of telling you two to clean around here!" Marysol yelled towards the hallway.

"I'll do it Ma, it's the summer. They should have fun," Claribel made her way to her small shared room.

"Thank you Clari," Marysol blew a small kiss at the back of her eldest daughter's head.

Maybe one day someone will do chores for her, Claribel thought to herself.

She

opened the door to the room and found the twins flipping through magazines.

"Can we talk for a second?" Claribel asked her sisters.

Carolina and Camila sat at the edge of the bottom bunk and looked at their older sister.

"Do you know how rainbows came to be?" Claribel asked another question.

"What are you talking about?" Carolina asked her sister.

"What is she talking about?" Camila asked Carolina.

Claribel sighed, sat at the edge of her bed and leaned in,

"So, once the whole world was gray. All the time. It was the kind of days that got

tiring and with no sunlight usually felt sad. Then one day there was a gathering of gods, above the gray. They argued and argued, all day and all night, about what to do to end the gray days. Until one god, Shila, stood up. They were dressed in the most beautiful clothes of every bright color you could imagine. They stood and said, 'We must share what we love, to bring more of what we love into the world.'

And so, Shila cut a ribbon from their cloth and laid it across the sky. That beautiful stream of colored fabric was seen from all over the world and ever since. So, when you see a rainbow, after a gray day, it's something special.

Something to love. That's how rainbows came to be.”

Her sisters looked at her in confusion as she looked out the window. “Never mind, You two don't understand anything. Why does Ma even bother sending you to school?”

“So, we don't understand why you came in here talking about rainbows and unicorns and we're the dumb ones?” Carolina said.

“I feel like I understood some parts of that, can you tell it again?”

Camila said.

Claribel buried her head in her pillow, face down. She kicked her shoes off and laid silently. She wondered what Yuri was doing. How had she not noticed her first? What were the chances that they shared this backyard of sorts? The way one can from a fifth-floor-apartment-fire-escape-attached-to-a-building-with-a-private-house-on-the-opposite-side-of-the-block-kind-of-way.

Claribel could hear her sisters talking and she pretended it was the birds again from outside or perhaps Yuri's velvety voice. She felt butterflies in her stomach and smiled into her pillow. She needed to see her again.

Saying Goodbye

**For
Larry Neal/
Gaston Neal/
George Floyd/
Breonna Taylor/
Ahmaud Arbery
& Them**

KENNETH CARROL

that time Gaston,
of Drum & Spear
of Larry Neal future visions
blues in the shadow
Fred Foss on sax

you said, dig this...
the blue annunciation
how gifts are shared by
the absolute cool

handed me Larry Neal
smooth as you, Hoodoo Hollerin'
accompanied by BeBop Ghosts
in green

Sent me to page 76 so Larry could
Pass on Max's truism
"We have always been at war."

I did not know then
that we'd still be at war
this long after you had
become ancestor spirits

still losing family members
like Vietnam body counts
a litany of names, a compendium
victims of gruesome white death

Fathers & sons, Mothers & daughters
this long after you sang to me
about meeting Miles in Pittsburgh
that we'd still have to

"clean our weapons" because
sus scrofa domestica
& their voracious appetite
for black corpus

decades after Lasana &
us memorized
Don't Say Goodbye...
we are awakened by the horrors
the social media depictions
post-modern lynchings

my son, young poet
& blerd joy
is in the street
long after you & H. Rap
uptown after MLK's
death lit up the night
in D.C.

What can I give him but you
& Foss on North Star, but Larry Neal
& Dumas & Redmond & Sanchez
Clifton swearing that we have always
loved Black so that he will know
that we have always mattered
& always been at war

BABY GIRL HERSELF GIVES BIRTH TO



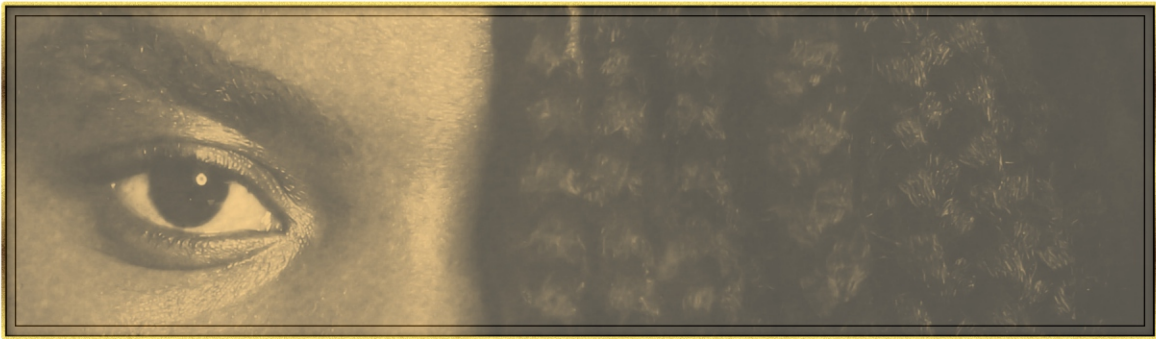
radhiyah
ayobami

what i would have said to myself then was:

listen. the world has built whole religions
that demand you say no to yourself
so say yes to everything.

you do not have to be be righteous & good,
tie your braided hair up in scarves & wear old shoes
work jobs with nametags & no bathroom breaks &
carry groceries home by hand in the rain.

i would have said listen:
you birthed a whole laughing human into this world
who shakes his feet with joy when nursing &
sleeps for hours on the laps & bosoms of family women
who has cousins running up to kiss him in the middle of their play &
an eighty year old aunty with broken hands that cradles him in her elbows
like the children she lost in the rows of tobacco fields
i would have said baby girl:



yes- go to where women eat rice with their hands &
let them braid your hair a hundred braids for hundred dollars
& don't forget the tip
yes- shake the rain of braids across your back
lay in bed on a long afternoon with your favorite man
let him inhale the fire & shea butter scent of each strand
yes- buy the red boots &
don't wear them to the place that makes you punch out to pee.
wear them when you stroll to the park on a bright morning
with the laughing nursing baby in your arms &
feel joy deep as the eighty year old aunty
holding life in her broken hands.

A LIST OF THINGS I WANT BEFORE THIS LIFE LETS ME GO

K.B.

A house paid in full for Granny. A house with a dog for me & G. Tiny chickens running around the love-stained grass. Instagrammable

interior decor. An omelette made from vegetables I harvested. Proof of me playing drums, shirtless. Lightened scars & teeth & tongue-cheek dreams.

Toes that I'm not afraid of showing. Learning from the nights I didn't know myself well. To kiss a pseudo-stranger on the head in a drunk tizzy

again. To hug my nigga until she screams *can you stop eating me out?!* again. A bookshelf leaning from the weight of my thoughts & prayers.

Mostly, honestly, forgiveness. A silly-ass case of plastic splashed with matter of gold paint that says I matter. To matter to most people, eventually.

An orgasm that makes everything feel like it's breathing. An orgasm that makes everything in the day possible. My mother's acceptance, though that is nearly

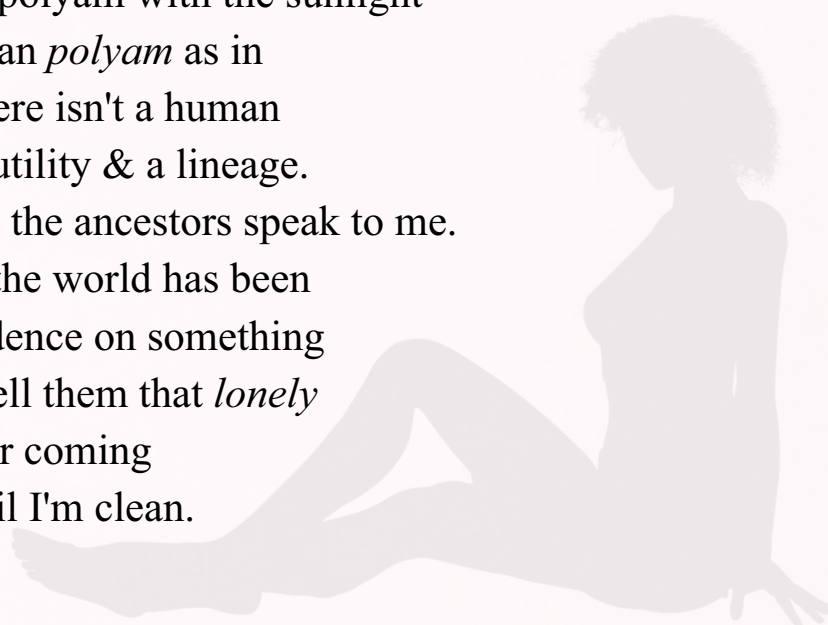
impossible. I don't have room on this list for the finite. A berry smoothie from juiceland any time that I want. An endorsement from juiceland

& my mother. A house on the sun that isn't only a house. A day where my biggest task is to give my lungs a pardon

for willing me this far. A win that is a win only for me. A me that is the foundation for the house that holds freedom.

A CASE AGAINST LONELINESS

In the beginning, heaven begat earth & earth begat Sunday. For this one, I'm sitting in a desk chair crafted by hands, all somewhere unaware that they're now touching bare skin. This is all the proof I needed, but I'm feeling generous with language, so I'll try to make this quick: in the dreams of my dearest enemies, I am kissing dirt handled by a million years of fertilizer & dead skin in a casket made by the son of someone or a sibling that was loved by many. Everything that exists has a birthstory. Some days, I touch mud just to high-five the humans that willed it. But today, just like any day, I could never be alone. Today, I am polyam with the sunlight & trees just like Bjork wanted. I mean *polyam* as in I talk to them. I mean *alone* as in there isn't a human here to witness this desk chair be a utility & a lineage. When I pause long enough to listen, the ancestors speak to me. They remind me that everything in the world has been touched & every surface has dependence on something using it. I chuckle in agreement & tell them that *lonely* is a capitalist concept. I tell the lover coming from the showerhead to kiss me until I'm clean.





Nokokure

By Munukayumbwa Mimi Mwiya

One of my favourite Lady Gaga songs, is 'You and I,' and in it she sings about Nebraska. In fact, there's a very catchy line where she sings, "There's only three men imma serve my whole life, it's my daddy and Nebraska, and Jesus Christ."

Much like I never imagined I would someday stand in Beijing's Tianamen Square or walk the streets of Lagos' Surulere, I never imagined I would someday ever be in the Nebraska Gaga sang about. Or someday have an unforgettable Nebraska guy of my own to think about.

Towards the end of 2018, I visited the USA, first time. And over my first weekend, we (my incredible hostess and I) went on a trip to Omaha. I had absolutely no idea where that was, so imagine my pure joy when I got there to find it was in Nebraska. We were there for a funeral, so I didn't get to see much of the place, but just being there was wonderfully surreal. The weather was erratic, for lack of a better word: when we arrived it had been nice and sunny, then it got a little cool, next thing I knew, it looked like we were about to be hit by a windstorm. It felt like I had experienced all four seasons of the year in the two days I was there. None of that took away from the serenity I felt just being there though, or from the excitement that I was in the place where Warren Buffett was from, something I hadn't thought about before.

Fast-forward to 2020. Katima Mulilo, Namibia. I go out to hang out with some Peace Corps friends, and there was a guy from Nebraska there, Noko. I was meeting him for the first time. I vividly remember there being at least two people between us on the bench we sat. He knew my brother, I remember him saying, "Hey Mimi, I hear you're Siseho's sister..." I remember someone mentioning I've been to Nebraska, and Noko swiftly making sure he was sitting next to me, calling me his favourite person, for having been to Nebraska. I remember asking where in Namibia he was stationed, and making a face when he answered "Okakarara". A Namibian town I've never been to. A big shame as far as Noko was concerned... kuti Okakarara is the Nebraska of Namibia. I don't think I'll ever forget that comparison. I laugh each time I think back to it. I must visit Okakarara by the end of this year. We spoke about work, wine... and stuff like that.

The sad thing about memories is, when we are making them... we aren't thinking about them as memories, or how we'll come to cherish them. How very desperately we'll hold on to them. How they will be all we have left...

Everyone else was going back to a friend's house for food and wine. I joined them. Duh. Noko offered me wine. A *Fat Bastard* cabernet. He noticed my socially awkward self-avoiding the crowd and opting to cook instead. He helped pass one or two things as I was cooking... then left me alone.

Hardly a month later, I find out that in light of Covid-19, all the volunteers were being evacuated. My friend Cassi and I are morosely packing up her stuff. She points out a painting and says, "I drew that one with Nate."

I ask her if Nate is Mr. Okakarara... I genuinely did not remember what his name was. Just that nice guy who gave me wine and compared Okakarara to Nebraska. Had I not been amused by this white guy so taken with a Namibian town, I would have called him Nebraska of course. Anyhow, Cass tells me, "No, that's Noko. He's my baby! Do you like him?"

I sheepishly say, "I don't know. He was just really nice when I met him." I casually ask her for his number, thinking it would be nice to even just talk to him on the phone before they all leave. Cass promises to forward me his number, but we both get caught up in the sadness of goodbyes, comfort food and packing, and forget about it.

A couple of days later, both the volunteers and I found ourselves in Windhoek. We just weren't together. I didn't even think they were allowed visitors, until two days before they were to leave the country, I was out with Siseho and he told me he was waiting for transport to take him to go see them. I joined him. It was a beautiful bittersweet moment where my friends and I got to have a brief reunion before what could be a final goodbye. I ask Cass where Mr. Okakara is, she gently twirls me and asks, "You mean, that guy?"

We see each other at about the same time and I swear he seems just as happy to see me as I am to see him. We hug for quite a minute and our hands, in the most organic of ways, find each other in a clasp.

We go to his room... briefly talk about how sad it is that he is leaving. And we kiss.

"The sad thing about memories is, when we are making them... we aren't thinking about them as memories, or how we'll come to cherish them."

There is no other way to describe that night other than magical and bittersweet. I eventually have to leave. I go to bed almost wondering if I dreamt it all. The next couple of days, I remain in a bittersweet daze where I smile at the memory of how I couldn't keep my hands off him. And I'm sad that I didn't know him better, longer, sooner.

Anyhow, I find Noko on social media. I tell him part of what I'm feeling. He tells me he enjoyed our time together, even though it was brief. He says he's sure our paths will cross again. He's sure he'll come back to Namibia, and I will go to Nebraska. I live in hope.

I had initially titled this 'Nebraska', but when we were in Windhoek that night, I heard everyone calling him Noko. It wasn't the name I had known him by, not the name Cass had told me. It's the name the locals of Okakarara had given him, I think I only vaguely remembered it and the story behind it. I was quite inebriated that night. Then I saw someone call him 'Nokokure' on an Instagram post and I remembered that's what Noko was short for. I know it's an Otjiherero name, so I call the one Herero person I have in my phone, "*Hallo Mamitjie, hoe gaan dit? You're the only Herero whose number I have, what does the name Nokokure mean? One who was born far? I see. Fitting.*"

I started writing this a week after that night with Noko, but abandoned it after the first two paragraphs, I'm not sure why. For days I had been looking forward to writing it, then I started and suddenly I just couldn't continue anymore. Maybe I do know why, maybe it was too soon for me to accept that was it. It was now just a memory. Just something I can write about. Anyhow, I got off the phone with Mamitjie and decided I would be renaming 'Nebraska' to Nokokure. And I decided to finish writing Nokokure. One who *is* far.

Eulogyⁱ

by Shalewa Mackall

"I am a historical construct too."

Robin Coste-Lewis

There lies everybody's

one Black friend,ⁱⁱ
one Black teacherⁱⁱⁱ
one Black whatever

She was not anybody's first
choice for dinner^{iv} unless

brain picking
resource development
or guilty conscience cleansing were on the menu

She could be relied on

to take the weight^v
in times of trouble^{vi}
to be *sassy* enough^{vii}
to speak truth to power^{viii}

She also whispered^{ix}

white lies like
"yes, I can see how that was not your intention"^x

She voted.^{xi}

She prayed.^{xii}

She was on the front line
for every group photo

(unless she was hidden in the back or *accidentally* forgotten).

Done in by exhaustion^{xiii}

her absence was unnoticed
till they called
and she didn't come^{xiv}

i ***for the Unnamed***

ii They only need one.

iii She was the one they had

iv there had been one or two or twenty before her
but only ever one at a time

v See her hips

vi See her shoulders, damp with everybody's tears

vii See how her eyes, neck and wrist roll when she says

“Talk to the hand!”

not that she actually ever said that

viii Not that they ever heard her cry

#SayHerName

or #MeToo

or #BlackLivesMatter

or *I am lonely*

or *pay me what I'm due*

or *help*

ix She found neither solace nor protection in coerced silence

x Her tight smile belied her pain

xi With greater vigor and attention than the results reflected

xii She sought God's grace

xiii Everybody says, “She never seemed to need any help.”

xiv Spent, she gave up the ghost

laid down

expired

PRISON CHICKEN STEW

John Otroyin

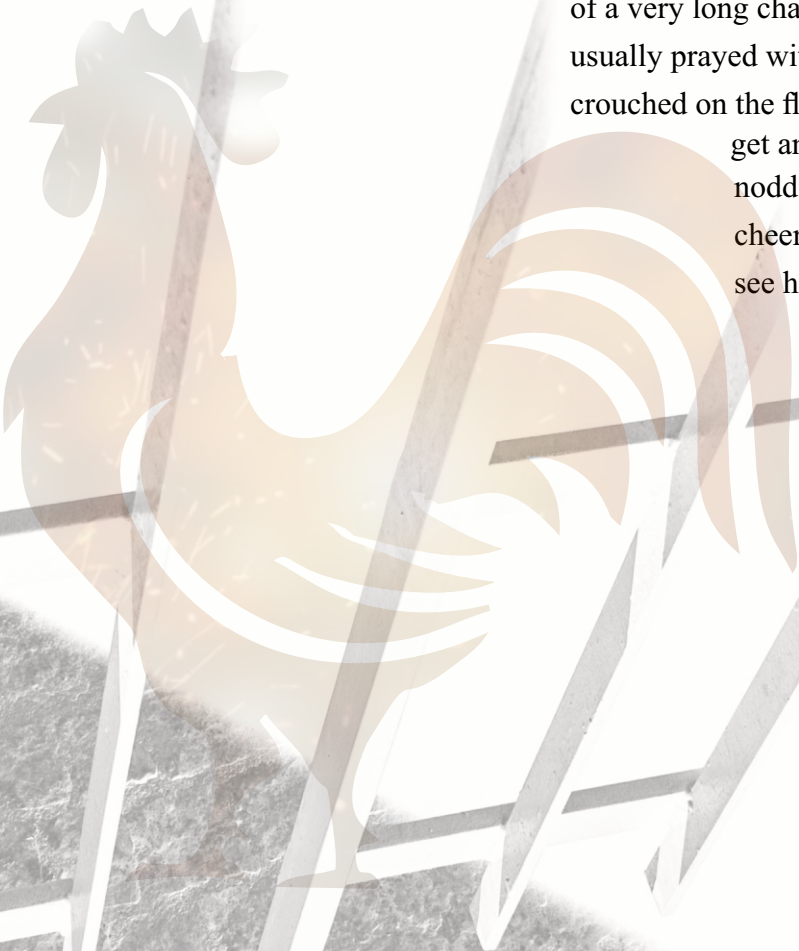
Like a blind spot, a woman never sees wrong in her first-born child. To Mama, Brother Owoche is a saint. She always preached of how excellent he was academically in his primary school days and used him as an example for the rest of us to emulate. She beamed with pride whenever she told us how early he started talking as a child or how he never wet the bed (this was her weapon against Sister Ekaji, who woke up wet, well into her late teens).

It was this same inevitable maternal bias that always made Mama turn a blind eye when Papa complained about how close Brother Owoche was to Mrs. Johnson. He (Papa) passed several laws, banning Brother Owoche from the Johnson family, but whenever the law was flouted and Papa tried to instil discipline, Mama was always on Brother Owoche's side, pushing him out of the room and blocking Papa from chasing after him.

It is such an irony that Brother Owoche, who had been the binding force and the pride of the family, is now the topic that threatens to tear us apart.

I come out of my room to see Mama by the altar of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and Immaculate Heart of Mary. She is silently counting the white and red beads of a very long chaplet. This is a new Mama. The old Mama usually prayed with a pensive, interceding demeanour, crouched on the floor like a street beggar for whom life cannot get any worse. Today, she is standing as she prays, nodding in thanksgiving, genuflecting and singing cheerful praises at intervals. This is the first time I see her pray in this countenance in five years.

Papa comes out of his room, ready for work. The same work Mama concluded has eaten up his conscience. After driving the ambulance for years, your system builds a defence against shock and fear. Like when our former neighbour, Mr Boniface, murdered his wife by tearing her stomach inside out. Everyone in the compound was petrified and jittery except Papa. That



night, Mama refused to sleep with Papa in their room. She slept on the sofa in the parlour, complaining in tears that a man unbothered by the scene might one day borrow courage and do same to his wife.

"Gbole Papa," I greet. He cuts his sour stare at mama and turns to me.

"Gbolehi, Oyi. How was your night?"

"Fine, sir."

"When are you returning to school?"

"Next week, sir. I want to spend some time with Brother Owoche before going back."

He scoffs, irritated, and leaves with heavy steps. Mama shakes her head at our exchange but does not stop her prayer.

In communal living houses such as ours (called Face Me I Face You), quarrelling and fights are a constant. Neighbours fight when the other woman's child bullies the children next door; when one woman's child sweeps and leaves the dirt before the neighbour's door; when someone removes another's clothes from the line before it dries to sun theirs; or just when anyone feels like it, frustrated by poverty, work issues, bad road, or very hot weather. The first time our family engaged in a compound fight, it was with Mr. Johnson. It was barely morning when Mr. Johnson banged on our door. The bang woke everyone, but it was Papa that stepped out first. Mr. Johnson was shouting above his throat, urging Papa to produce Brother Owoche. He claimed his wife wouldn't let him touch her and this was because Brother Owoche was having an affair with her and giving her ill ideas. Mama and Sister Ekaji held Brother Owoche who was agitating to go out and face his accuser. At intervals he would shout insults above his lungs to Mr. Johnson, who was relentless in his retorts.

'Oga stop disturbing my family, go back and talk to your wife.'

'You wouldn't know anything about that because you will never live long to marry your own. Sleeping with married women will be the end of you.'

'Foolish man, you can't control your wife because you can't even control your penis.'

'Come out from under your mother's legs and tell that to my face, bastard boy.'

'You are not even half of a man, Oga. Your wife said your penis don't stand anymore. Find a way of solving that and stop whining like a mad dog.'

Mr. Johnson broke our door and dragged Brother Owoche out. It took the help of every man in the compound to separate the two. But did the fight stop Brother Owoche from spending time with Mrs. Johnson?



Sister Ekaji and her husband enter the sitting room just as Mama retreats into her room to grab her purse.

"Oonenu," her telephone-wire voice sings, "alekana?"

"I'm fine sister." I stand up to hug her, careful not to press her protuberant belly. "Uncle Clement, good morning."

"How are you buddy?" he greets back in a borrowed accent. Uncle Clement speaks like an American when he is not angry or stressed out.

"Where is Mama?"

"I am here o," she runs out of her room, and gives Sister Ekaji and her husband a big hug. "I am ready, can we go?"

"Yes. We can," Sister Ekaji answers and leads the way.

"We who?" Mama quarrels. "You want to carry my unborn grandchild to that evil place? Don't you know it is an abomination for pregnant women to be in places like that? Chu chu yaho wole. Stay back."

Sister Ekaji didn't argue. "Is Papa not coming, too?" she asks.

Mama throws her face sideways, looks up and down, then returns her eyes. "That one keeps behaving as if I bore Owo for another man, as if he didn't marry me a virgin. Please don't spoil my mood. Let us go and bring your brother home."

Uncle clement kisses Sister Ekaji on her hand and on her forehead, then whispers something into her ear before leading Mama and me to his car.

The evening he was arrested started too quiet to give any hint of doom. I was home at the time as we'd just finished the junior WAEC exams and had a whole term break. After my chores in the house, I joined Brother Owoche in his phone repair shop. This was his last year at home before leaving for the University of Ibadan. All Papa's warnings and threats for Brother Owoche to desist from seeing Mrs. Johnson fell on deaf ears. If he had a customer and one couldn't find him in his shop or the house, the next door to knock on was Mrs. Johnson's. He was her friend and gist partner; her errand boy and dishwasher; her handy man and babysitter.

I always avoided the shop because I am claustrophobic, it is the illusion of the opposite wall mirrors in the shop that makes it bearable. That evening, the shop felt uncharacteristically spacious and an angry breeze announced rain outside. When they entered, I was dismantling a tired Motorola phone on which Brother Owoche would work when he returned from the toilet.

"Are you Mr. Iyajini Owoche?" one of the two men asked.

"No. he is inside, in the toilet," I blurted out.

Mr. Johnson walked up from behind the men and said. "Officers, that's not him. That is his younger brother."

"Lead us to him," the other officer commanded.

We went to the house but didn't find Brother Owoche. Just as we stepped out from the room, we saw Brother Owoche coming out from Mr. Johnson's room.

Mama didn't sleep that night. No one in the compound did, for she kept banging the Johnsons' door, urging them to provide her son. The first light met Mama at the station, pleading and crying. With the swiftness of a sneeze, Brother Owoche was charged to court and convicted of rape. They claimed he raped Mr. Johnson's five-year-old whom he bathed, fed, and watched every time Mrs. Johnson went to the market or any other appointment.

Uncle Clement parks his car outside the prison. No one wants prison air stuck in their car, following them everywhere. Mama gets off impatiently and rushes to the gate. I leave my phone in the car and follow her. We pass the reception after a lazy search and a request to drop all phones with an officer. In the prison yard, we walk to the far left and enter the block just before a dwarf guava tree. We enter the second reception – a larger one. There is a wooden counter behind which two officers rest lazily. The lady officer flashes a smile when she sees Mama.

"Madam, you don't show again? Welcome ma," she greets.

Opposite the counter, there are two long benches. The sparse furniture and the beige wall makes the room look larger than it is.

"Well done, officer, good morning."

"Na past twelve, we don't enter afternoon so. Mama you don't bring anything for the boys today o," the male officer says, sizing Uncle Clement and me with his eyes.

"Today is our final day here now."

"Oh!" he drags the exclamation. "Na today? Eiya. Mama you try for this your pikin o. you don't tire to visit, if na some people, dey for don't forget say them born."

"What more can a mother do? After they wrongfully accused my boy? What..." she breaks into tears and Uncle Clement holds her hand.

"Madam, this don't be day to cry. E don't serve him time finish, na to look into the future remain," the female officer consoles, contorting her already ugly face.

"Mama, make you sit down there make we finalise the paper work, then go bring your pikin," the male officer says, pointing to the benches.

In the first three months of his arrest, Mama visited daily. When she fell ill and couldn't walk about, she made us carry him food in two parcels – one for him and the other for any officer at the



reception that evening. When the greedy officers increased the price of the bribe Mama paid to see Brother Owoche, her daily visits reduced to weekly. After the first year, visit to the prison became monthly. The seventh month of the third year was the last time I visited before I left for the University of Jos. We visited after third mass because Mama had made it a habit to attend all three masses said in the parish on the day we visit the prison. On Sundays, the prison's visitors' room is always crowded with families who have yet to give up on their arrested member. By now, Brother Owoche had already settled into prison life. In his early days, he usually wept throughout his visit period, complaining of monstrous mosquitoes and this cell chief or that ward captain. On that visit, he didn't nag or weep, but greedily devoured the plate of rice and chicken stew as if in a competition, while Mama talked away. After he finished his food, he looked around the table as if just noticing our presence.

"What school did you get into?" he asked in a terrifying bass voice, a whole continent apart from what used to be my big brother's sweet voice that came in a calculated pace.

"Unijos."

"Ha. Have they wiped out the boko haram there?" he smirked.

"My God and Mother Mary will protect him," Mama said.

"What course? Were you on the merit list?"

"Yes. Law."

"Law?" he scoffed dismissively, looking around the poorly lit room filled with damp air and wrongfully convicted inmates. "Ekaji, how far? How your bobo?"

"He is fine. He will be bringing his family for introduction by December. We're planning to marry by Easter."

Brother Owoche chewed his teeth, and changed the topic. If he was bothered because he won't be there while his younger sister takes the matrimonial vow, he did a fine job at hiding it.

A bare chested figure pulls in from the door behind the counter. It is my big brother. Under this amount of sunlight, he looks different. The last time I saw him, he had less scars, and no tattoos on his face or chest. Mama rushes him a hug, stretching to match his tall frame. We hug too, then Uncle Clement. We allow Mama some time to cry before we leave the prison yard for the car.

Papa barely says a word to Brother Owoche until after dinner which Mama makes sure we eat together, like a happy family. After a few lazy mouthfuls, Papa says his first word to Brother Owoche in five years.

"You see your life? I think you see? You never listen to anyone. You are the lord, the almighty."

"Papa I did not do it."

"Who cares? Who bloody cares?"

"Ada Owoche!" Mama calls at Papa, sorrow and anger in her face at once.

Brother Owoche storms out, ignoring Mama's call behind him. He enters the house very late, smelling heavily of Indian hemp.

In our room, I am searching for sleep to calm the unrest in my head when he asks: "Oyi, are you awake?"

"Yes."

"When last did you hear of Mrs. Johnson?"

"I... they left our former compound before we did. I don't know where they live now."

"Can't you ask for me?"

"Erm... the other day Samson said he saw them at Shasha Avenue."

"Ok. Goodnight."

"Do you love her? You want to marry her?" I ask, trying to get to the root of this madness. It is not uncommon for married women to charm young lovers with love potions – a pinkie nail in their food, or a powdery juju mixture in a cold fruit juice.

He scoffs and says, "I just want to give her a gift. Sleep, Oyi."

It is a Sunday morning and Mama is trying to convince Brother Owoche to attend mass with us. She is still pleading when they enter. Mrs. Johnson pushes herself in after the four armed officers.

"That's him, Officers. Arrest the bastard."

"Mr. Man, you are under arrest for the murder of one Mr. Johnson Okorie."

"God forbid!" Mama jumps in front of brother Owoche.

"Mama it is ok. I did it," Brother Owoche says calmly.

"Mother Mary! No, he doesn't know what he is saying," Mama shouts above her lungs.

"Whatever you do or say will be used against you in the ..."

"Shut up and cuff me," Brother Owoche says, stretching his hands with a smirk.

Mama runs out behind them, leaving me and Papa to the emptiness of the room that seems like that of an airy beach. Papa is visibly shocked and he loses balance. He falls into a sofa and allows his tears to drop freely. This is the first time I am seeing Papa cry, and I, too, begin to cry.



FARHANA JACOBS



Untitled

FARHANA JACOBS



Three Sisters

The work is a personal exorcism of limiting beliefs around the feminine body's freedom to choose and seek opportunity, thus redefining what was historically sewn. The work is a constellation of the artist's relationship with pain, anger, and hope. They are a visual manifestation of the release found while in communion with spirit.

Dayton, OH

By Jamila Lovelace

Walk down the street, houses
Crumbled, paint moldy, I taste the lead
There's hills in front of every house
Majestic, here is majesty falling apart

My neighbour used to yell at us all
Until he saw my Nana and
Sitting on his stoop, sunbaked and shiny
“Hi Miss Lela”

They tore his house down, I imagine
They tore down part of him, in the gap between houses
Like the gap in his teeth, is green

On a hill, I see dogs
Walking next to silver gates, keeping in
Trash, a nickel gate
And a trash lot
Tin is too malleable, too much like gold

And sometimes the only color you see
Is on those lead paint houses
Like when there's a cloudy sky opening up
It never rains in Dayton

A cloudy sky opening up, and a gray light
And the colors look all washed out
But it's right there, a lavender house, a purple awning
And a brown brick house
They are kind to not leave
Their needles on the street

My neighbors cry in the night, but I smell cooking
And I know that they know they're home
And I'll go down to the Rite Aid and before that
A bus place that used to be a restaurant but it's a
Bus place now



There's a sign for Kevin
A cop who got shot but he's black, so I care
He was my mom's friend, so I care
They increased the award to 100 thousand, so I do care
I wanna find him and ask him who killed him myself

And the concrete, sample the concrete, the oldest there ever was
There's too many speed bumps and not enough flowers
So they planted flowers in the road under the wires
Where the shoes used to hang, what did they do with those shoes?

And my cousin is dead, I don't know how he died
But he's dead and for some reason when I think of those shoes, I see him
Every nigga is a star in Dayton
It makes me cry because I look at the stars at night
And I know there are niggas from Dayton up there

And there was Chicken Louie's and K-12 art gallery,
I used to make lumps of clay with pipe cleaners and cover it in glitter
And beads and say "mama it's a bunny!" And it wasn't
But it was home

My grandma would walk me to school, all dressed up in a high rise
And I would get to watch her soaps before school and
She hated kids but she smelled good and I loved her,
And I miss her and she hated kids but I know she loved me

She could plastic wrap the city
She was from Altavista, Virginia,
She knew dirt and she knew clean
And she thought I was clean

And I was the earth
I was the ground, I was the dirt beneath the concrete
I could have grown a flower in me
And there are niggas in Dayton
When the streets are white with pus and red with blood
There is always black underneath

INHERITANCE

Hussain Ahmed

I will die with less bones I was born with,
this depends on who makes the count.

I want to inherit my Baba's body,
but everyone wants him too.

I stayed all night with my eyes closed,
chanting the pedigrees scribbled in his diary

that Allah could be called
that I did not find in my Qur'an.

I shut my eyes tightly
and the darkness weathered.

I began to see sparks of blue lights
a flicker of a dying thunderstorm.

In retribution for all I have lost
to find myself covered in a blanket of spider web.

Termites shed their wings outside my room,
the wooden artifacts were returned to the soil

as nutrients to build their new colonies.

BIRDS

Hussain Ahmed

Today an egg hatched,
and the sky awaits its induction.

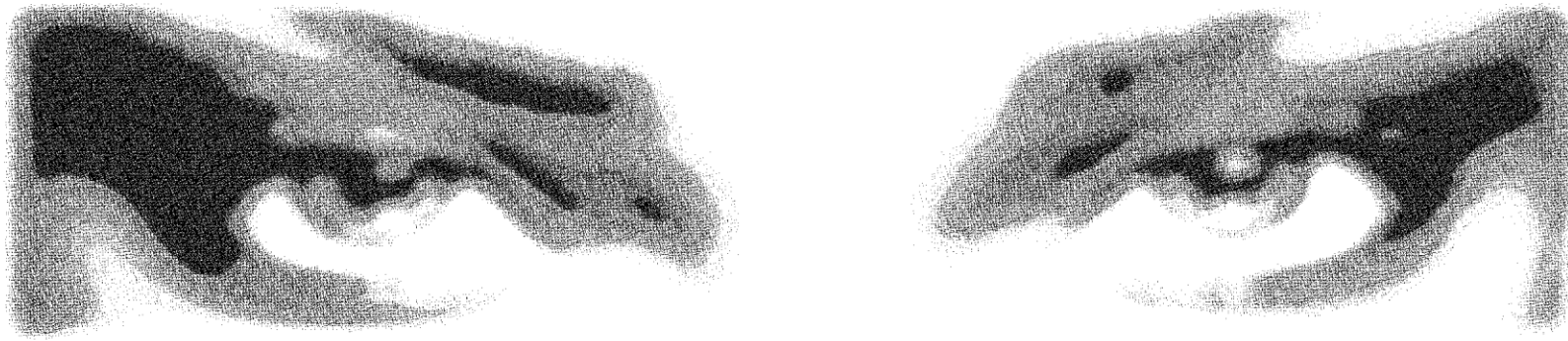
The sky keeps record of all that flies on it,
but doesn't tell when they go missing.

Emerged from the ashes were feathers
with faded inscriptions of Baba's will on interlocked
barbules.

Owls alternating calls were mistaken for the muezzin's.
They lodged in the minaret while we were in curfew.

There is a scar on my back, I can't recall how I got it,
or any other healed wound on my body,

birds do not earn their names by how high they fly,
I refused to be named by what I survived.



I.S. Jones

QUEER AMERICAN

I have sex with men but make love to women.

I only wish to fuck men who also desire to be fucked by men.

In the dream, I make love to Lorraine Hansberry in a rose garden.

I make straight men bow to the god of pussy.

I part her legs & kiss each faded bruise between her thighs.

In the dark, I practice my kegels to remind men who is fucking who.

Every interview asks the same question:

“What does it mean to be a queer American & Nigerian?”

Queer men take their internalized homophobia out on my naked body.

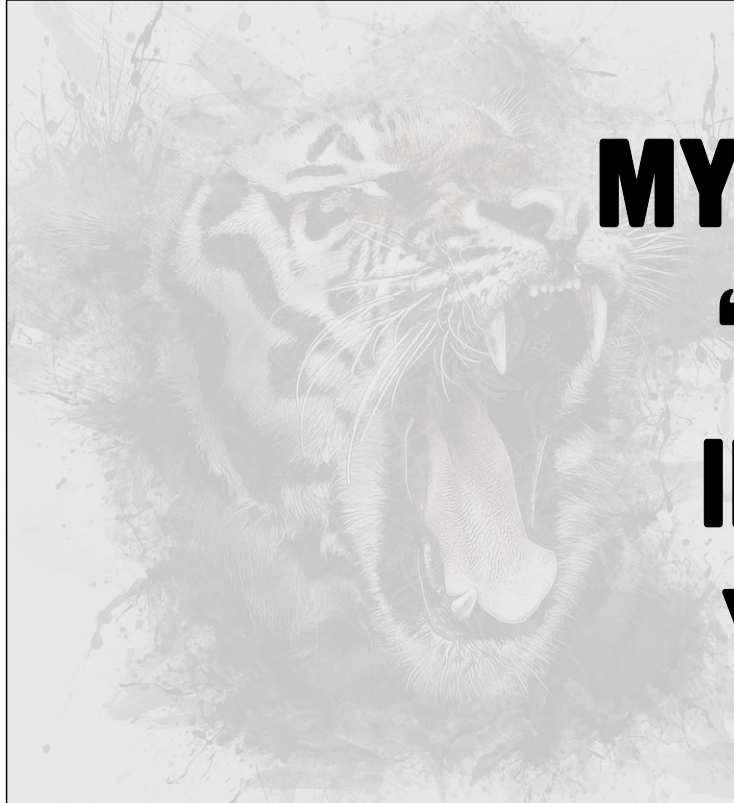
I count tiles on the ceiling to keep from laughing. My mother says she understands “switching to women” because loving a man is hard.

I haven't spoken to my father in months. I smoke, sometimes drink.

My father stops doing both after the stroke. I have his eyes.

I used to believe joy, like other sources of light, are scarce.

He knows nothing about me. There were things we were too embarrassed to say.



MY THERAPIST ASKS, “IS THE HUNTER IN YOUR DREAMS YOUR FATHER?”

I.S. Jones

The day you start asking too many questions is the day you start losing your faith.
Such a fragile beast, faith.

I move and half my body turns to water. When the stroke came for my father,
it was silent like a thief coaxing open a locked door, pushing back the security's trick of pins
until, at last, a click—

Something is wrong with me, kid

His voice is the river lacing about my hooves. It's summertime and early morning
dethrones the maggots feasting on rotting bark. I turn away from the window
to find I'm in her office again, the humidifier releases its lavender steam.
I don't remember the last time I prayed—always craning heavenward
my knees salting the earth. The forest pulls me back and I touch my hooves
to pine needles. I've grown weary of surrender without anything to show for my obedience.
I wanted to be chosen by my father and it made me feral. Is prayer, too, a finite source of panic?
I lift my head to meet the hunter's darkest eye. Safety is an illusion I've told myself so daylight would
return. When the stroke didn't overtake my father, I believed it was a divine gift that if he was touched
by death, but he would be returned to me as a field of red poppies. The magnitude of my hope
disgraces me.

The hunter looks into me and I look into his looking. His eye cocks back. The sky gathers its rage.
Let me tell you about regret: a father journeys to a new land and never sees his mother's face again
until he has a daughter. The daughter kneels before him and his mother kneels inside him.

His mother appears in dreams, if only to hold his soft boy hand.

His daughter confronts his cowardice and he goes to war with his mother.

He goes to war with his shame. Shame's machinery buries his mother every night.

He fights ghosts when he hits his wife, when he slaps his second daughter's mouth.

The animal of me bends believing she can't flee this time. All my selves bend.

I say to my therapist,

“I can believe my father loves me, but I'm not sure he ever wanted children. I can't tell if he is a
father or a forger.”

When the moment came, I didn't hesitate to walk into my father's eye and to discover his mother
inside.

There isn't much of him left here. I make my own miracle and gallop from the night.

Sorrow, send me your best flood.

I.S. Jones

AMERICAN/ NIGERIAN AS BEAUTIFUL OUTLAW

Like any good american, I climbed someone's back
so I could be "self-made"

It begins at the deportation center
chemical burns dress the thighs

left for dead by guerrilla soldiers

In Chicago circa 1984

It begins with a name, a queue

It begins at the zenith of a new life

It begins at a factory job

It begins w/a child

It begins w/ park benches

It begins w/ english knocking through a foreign tongue

It begins w/ a vow

*

My easy name gave me an easy life

My good english dazzles everywhere I go

Where I come from guns are more beloved than children

I am the Great American Dream™

which is to say I'm a fraud

I thrived b/c I'm not considered a threat

I was Stephanie

I was born into a land of pilfered gold
I spli+ +he ocean looking for salva+ion
Where I come from children die +oo soon
I arrived bu+ was depor+ed [+aken]
I +ried +o s+ay but no one here can unders+and me
I was found quivering a+ +he roo+
I was divided from +he girl I should have been
I was !+!() / @

*

Someth!ng as hopeful as a seed— opens
& th!s makes me my mother ! was chr!stened !n a dead woman's name
the story goes my grandmothers' chose the same name for me & never met
the story goes when my mother returned home to bury her mother
how she nearly d!ed of !!ver fa!lure from the same water she drank all her !!fe
for a moment the body reduced to zero o what the body acqu!escences to

*

Br() () klyn crisps int() fall bef()re I knew it My m()ther is ()lder n()w & survived
her f()rmer life to arrive
x= here

“Call your father I can't keep asking you” the j() ke is my m()ther thinks she's cursed
“Y()u kn()w
y()ur father l()ves y()u m()re than anything in the w()rld t() be first-b()rn is t()
be a zyg() te of h()pe the j()ke is funny because marriage is the curse

*

“nowhere / now here” is what each map tells me [x= here] when i ask where “home” is
every p{ace I've ca{ed my “where” disappears the faster i approach i don't understand
“home” or “origin” i am an out{aw returned & that makes me my father home is
my mother's body her hands turning from age I am everything & no one

*

Child of the sheph@rding light. Child of inherit@nce. Child of the tension between
borders. Child of circumst@nce. Child of gold. Child of the horizon's careful bl@de. I
c@me into the world whispered by two tongues. If the spirit comes into being before the
flesh, then I'm @ prophet. & if the night sw@llows me, I welcome myself home



Êykhôh by Katlego Tapala

There are only two things I can remember from when I received the call. I remember feeling my son's soft, small hand in mine, and registering his fear at seeing the blank look on my face. We had just left my mother's flat, headed to our own home north of the city, where we tried to maintain some sort of peace treaty; I, a worn-out mother and he, a naturally spirited toddler. On the other end of the line was Tumelo, a close friend since high school, when we lived in the same building I had just left, one floor apart. She asked me whether I knew that Hellen was in a coma. Hellen was the other component of the trinity we had formed as teenagers. Like a little Destiny's Child, an SWV, a 3LW—although Tumelo was the only one who could

“I didn't cry at Hellen's funeral. There was something wanting.

A light nudge, a gentle push to force me off the edge...”


Katlego Tapala

actually sing. I afford us too much credit, we were more like a 'kitchen crew', as the group of boys we had befriended from the nearby student hostel had called us because of our English 'kitchen names'; Hellen, Suzan and Ruth.

Tumelo explained that Hellen had fallen into a coma after being operated on earlier that day, to remove a brain tumour. I had spoken to Hellen just the weekend before and she hadn't bothered to mention the upcoming surgery, or even any illness. The city grew silent in that moment. People, like ghostly apparitions, walked around me, through me. We agreed that we would be at the hospital early the next morning, we would hold vigil with her family, *our* family, and wait for her to wake up. Between Tumelo's faith in a Living God and my shock staged as optimism, we were certain that she would wake up.

The next morning, as always, I reached for my phone once I opened my eyes. A few perfunctory swipes on Facebook and there it was: condolences streaming in, unfamiliar names and faces tagging Hellen's profile. 'Hellen with the double-L,' as she liked to say. Hellen was dead. Hellen, who not too long ago, I had spent years not speaking to—I hadn't told her I was pregnant and she in turn had not invited me to her wedding. We always did this. Petty fights where we would end up walking on opposite pavements, Tumelo trying to mediate, Hellen and me essentially contesting the role of The Father. We had just recently reconciled, the three of us promising to meet more often, the kitchen crew back together again.

I didn't cry at Hellen's funeral. There was something wanting. A



“On that last day of my grandmother's life,
the smell of death hung around her...”

Katlego Tapala

light nudge, a gentle push to force me off the edge I stood on, where, not at the bottom, but during the fall itself, I would find my grief.

Two weeks later my father called, telling us that we should go and see my grandmother, his mother, in the hospital. She had been in and out of hospital for several months and he believed that this would be the last time. I sat in the front passenger seat, my mother in the back with the children, the way we always arrange ourselves, as my sister took the wheel. Northbound we headed to Bela-Bela where my grandmother lay, passing the same landmarks we had for cumulative years: my mother for 56, my sister, 38, and I for 28. As you leave Tshwane, Wonderboom Nature Reserve lies on your right, the central feature of which is a 1000-year-old mother fig encircled by daughter trees that sweep back to their source, creating a dense grove of drooping branches that continue to place roots and bring forth new trees.

Only twenty minutes after we left Bela-Bela to return home, my father called again. MmeTapala was gone. It was as if, he said, she had just been waiting for us before letting go. Again, no tears. This time, I thought it was because my grandmother's death was 'understandable'. She was old and had been suffering; I've never felt much more than relief about this sort of ending.

As the weeks went by, I would leave my flat, going to work. A few steps from the gate was a storm water drain. Something had died in there. Vermin, a bird perhaps, and the smell would hit me with an intensity that affected not only my physical senses but my emotions too.

“She had taken me in like an uncool sibling;
my social life, really, was hers...”


Katlego Tapala

On that last day of my grandmother's life, the smell of death hung around her. Mouth slightly ajar, breath shallow and laboured, the nurses had not removed a soiled nappy. And so, stood my mother and I, daughter trees with a bowl of water and cloth, our branches drooping towards my grandmother. My grandmother's body, not a body truly but heavy bones draped in leathery skin. I saw her naked for the first time, saw a woman no more, just pomegranates and frail hands. Like Marceline Desbordes-Valmore;

*'Quand ses traits plus touchants, éclairés d'une flamme
Qui ne s'éteint jamais,
S'imprimèrent vivants dans le fond de mon âme,
Il n'aimait pas: j'aimais!'*

This smell of death that confronted me every time I stepped through the gate was like ullage. The feeling, still unnamed, that I had needed to fill up that tight space in my chest, spilled over. I cried for my grandmother and I cried for Hellen. My grief for them, the premise of which differs, remains intertwined. Like the two serpents rising on a caduceus, I cannot think of one and not think of the other.

Every September 11th, the world mourns the deaths of countless people who fell with the planes and from the trade towers in America. I wake up heavy-hearted on Hellen's birthday as her image is resurrected on Instagram. Every corner of this city I have called home for the last twenty-three years reminds me of her. Volkstem Avenue, where we would sneak up smoking cigarettes. The low-standing wall on the



“We always did this. Petty fights where we would end up walking on opposite pavements...”

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corner of Schoeman and Bosman, where half the block sat every afternoon watching the rest of the block go about their lives. And SG Lourens Nursing College, and in there, the small room she had once given me the key to over the Christmas holidays, after I had survived a suicide attempt. It's this particular memory that struck me most after her death. How she had not said to me, 'I know that you need some space,' but just knew. I realised how she had always been trying to save me from my adolescent self, dragging me to parties where, introverted and with no sense of the rhythm black people are supposedly born with, I'd stand against the wall making awkward conversation with her friends. She had taken me in like an uncool sibling; my social life, really, was hers. And in this way an even earlier attempt at my own death delayed.

It's been almost five years, and this is my first conscious recollection. Before this I have only allowed the thoughts to flutter like moths; feathery and ephemeral: inside jokes, moments where I think of picking up the phone to tell her something, dreams where her voice is as clear and matched in tone as if I heard it just yesterday. The emotion is suspended as I circumnavigate its imprint, even while writing this. To write this I have had to think about her, to bring up the bodies of memory. To acknowledge that although I intended to write an ode and not a lamentation, I will always be asking, like the Biblical book of the same name, in Hebrew titled *Êykhôh*, taken from the first word of its analects, *How?*

CONTRIBUTORS

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