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# Post-Apocalypse Android World

Nwuguru Chidiebere Sullivan

It is already 12 moons after the world crawled  
into a topless sky & came close

to honeyed oblivion, fresh like a new beginning.  
I find myself driving through

a road naked of police, only traffic signs with  
android hands pointing towards  
the direction where a bloodless January  
fruits from a godforsaken December:

I'm witnessing it—the shapeless water bodies  
gathering into contours on the map

to a space where wizards prevail as streetlights &  
it's okay here to find chlorophyll in the

eyes of men. Here, I do not need to break my teeth  
on a red-fleshed sky to make enough  
calcium for my youthful bones & there's  
no echelons for the drones surveilling

my godless yearns for minerals. I'm not telling you  
that I'm exempting vampires from the

mistakes of ancient blood. I haven't, I confessed,  
but there's no constitution here,

no government feasting on my brain like a zombie.  
Every portal opens to me  
& I can be anywhere with no visa.  
It's still serene as my car zooms through

the rainbow-cropped lane—befitting on every phone's  
screen & I'm thankful for this cosmopolitan chance.

# A Prelude to Forever

Ehi-kowoicho Ogwiji

Dear 'Cheta,

I decided that I must write to you tonight, even though my fingers are stiff and sore from peeling a heap of cassava because your brother, Ebube, sets out for Lagos before Egbema hears the first crow of the cock tomorrow. So, it is one of the nights when Nkoli, your revered writer, must lubricate her fingers with tears and yawn through the scribbling period.

Most nights, I sit beside Grandma's rusty kerosene lantern wondering how you fare in Lagos. Whether you now wear ties and shiny shoes with curved, pointed tips like the ones Father Patrick wears to morning mass. Whether you miss hunting for rats during harmattan and catching termites in the rainy season. Whether you get to eat *abacha*, *ukwa*, and *ube* in Lagos. Whether you miss the letters I occasionally slip into your pocket when we complete Arithmetic Home-works together in Papa's Obi, lying on our chests and enjoying the coolness of the mud floor. And whether you miss me.

Why have you not written to me since you left? Are there no post offices in Lagos? Ngozi gets letters from Odinaka and she would not stop telling me what the letters say about the broad, winding roads of Abuja, on which four cars can race through all at once. She said Odinaka mentioned in one of his letters that there are so many roads whose backs do not touch the ground. Are there any of such roads in Lagos? Roads, suspended in the air just like that? Ngozi said Odinaka called them overhead bridges or something. I cannot remember now.

Do you know that these days I even try to go to the river earlier? Just to avoid Ngozi's stories about Odinaka's booming laundry business but she always finds a way to catch up with me. And she begins to go on and on with her Abuja stories. Often times, she'd start with questions like: "Did I mention that Odinaka'm, my Odinaka, now speaks Hausa?" I would wag my head from side to side to indicate that she hadn't. Then she would begin to tell me stories, "Nne', he had to learn it o. You know if they knew he was *yamiri* the business would not boom."

Yesterday, when we had gone halfway of our journey to the stream, Ngozi suddenly stopped, looked back and stretched her neck to scan the nearby

## A Prelude to Forever - Ehi-kowoicho Ogwiji

bushes if anyone was within earshot. When she had established from her inspection that there was no one around the area, she leaned in and whispered into my ears, "Odinaka'm sent me a photograph." Ngozi was blushing the way my little brother, Nzubechi, blushes when Mama gives him the largest slice of *okpa* during breakfast. She soon untied her lappa, loin cloth, and pulled out a black plastic bag. She fondled around with the knotted edge for a few seconds before giving up and using her teeth to get at it with the gusto of a man whose fingers had been chopped off by leprosy.

Ngozi soon produced a picture of Odinaka, in starched sky-blue kaftan. He had *fula* on his head and a big smile spread across his lips. His coarse sunburned skin had smoothened out and worn the glow it had in his early teens before he began to spend long hours on his father's farm. Odinaka's stomach bulged slightly as he stood proudly beside a wooden signpost with the inscription:

*Naka & Sons International Laundry  
& Dry Cleaning Services, Abuja.*

Ngozi's eyes had more rays than the morning sun as she pointed out the details. "Bia, nne, look girl" She ran her fingers through the photo and settled on Odinaka's polished shoes, "see his shiny shoes. Is this not the type Father Patrick wore to morning mass last Sunday? The one that made *koi koi koi koi* as he walked to the altar to serve the mass?" Ngozi took a couple of calculated strides which matched the sound of those shoes on the concrete floors of the parish. And I stood there; Odinaka's photo in my hands, my eyes trailing her, and dry laughter forcing its way out of my mouth. I wondered how the mimicry shoe sounds Ngozi described matched the beats of my heart when thoughts of you fill my mind, just before bedtime. Cheta, I think of you, every night. Your silence. And how days are piling up in between you and I, like a brick wall. Like a very high fence that neither of us might be able to scale when we finally realize it.

I held Odinaka's photograph in my hand and began to wish it could become yours. Just so I could see your face briefly and try to count the strands of beards on your chin. From the corner of my eyes, I could see that Ngozi is dramatizing and saying more things about Odinaka and Abuja but her words only brush my ears and fly away. The memories of our last night together came rushing back. The way you held my hands and promised to come back for me as we shared what has come to be our

## A Prelude to Forever - Ehi-kowoicho Ogwiji

longest hug. I remember my head resting on your shoulders, as tears and mucus competed on which would drip faster. The way you showed me your bags, packed full with some clothes, novels, and our dreams. Your dream to become an attorney and mine to be a nurse and then start a family, so Mama can come to Lagos for omugwo, babysitting the newborn, like other market women. The dream of...

I was still counting all our dreams when Ngozi snatched Odinaka's photo from my hand, stuffed it back into the black plastic bag. "So, I have been talking to myself?" She shook her head in disappointment as she replaced the photo in her lappa, took her jar and dashed off, keeping a healthy distance between her and me. "I am sorry" the words flew out of my mouth and the echo bounced back with just about the same intensity.

We walked back home together but Ngozi did not say a word more of her endless Abuja stories. I noticed how she fearlessly led the way as though the picture was a talisman. A charm to protect her from the mysterious evil snakes of Egbema. It seemed like Odinaka's picture was how she carried his love around. The one from whose eyes she had seen Abuja. Isn't it enviable to see how falling in love can give a person super abilities? Like, giving them an extra pair of eyes to see a place they have never been to.

I dream of seeing Lagos, Cheta. To see the tall buildings and racing cars. To hold the city's feet and touch its rhythm with my own eyes but first, let me see it through your eyes.

Yours in love,  
Nkoli.

\*\*

By the time Cheta was reading the last words of Nkoli's letter, a tear was lurking in the corner of his eyes. He looked across the dorm room to see if his roommates noticed the weight that Nkoli's letter dropped on his shoulders. Thankfully they did not. Then he rolled out his notepad and looked at the last words he wrote in it before he left the lecture hall: "A man who is too lazy to better his hunting skills and cannot bear the thought of enriching the village hunters because of his lust for meat, quickly brands himself, a vegetarian."

He looked at those words and wondered what they really meant.

## A Prelude to Forever - Ehi-kowoicho Ogwiji

Journaling was making him realize that words and their meanings are like a couple—say the man is words and his woman, the meanings. If the wife were dousing her face with more and more makeup, trying on several other dresses in preparation for an occasion, the impatient husband looks at his wristwatch and hurries away, arriving way before his wife.

While he was still processing this, he flipped the page absentmindedly and his eyes settled on the poem he'd been trying to complete. He'd titled it "Nkoli..."; other words in the title were trapped in the ellipsis. Cheta wondered how she could be hundreds of kilometers away, thinking about a wall growing between them when he could barely think of anything else but her soft voice and bright smiles. He sighed and read out loud the poem he intended to include in his first letter to Nkoli before Ebube left for Egbema.

*Nkoli..*  
*Ours, is a prelude to forever,*  
*A long, endless mime,*  
*To a two-word lyrics,*  
*You and I- a perfect song,*  
*Sung to the beats of*  
*Two young hearts*  
*Submerged in pure love*

*Nkoli,*  
*Ours, is a prelude to forever*

...

Cheta recited the poem in the bathroom, on his way to classes and even on the taxi enroute Ebube's place where he was to send the beautiful, handwritten letter to Nkoli. But that Friday evening when he arrived at Ebube's, he found a large padlock on the wooden door and a note under the doormat;

*"Nwoke'm, Cheta,*  
*I had to leave earlier than planned.*  
*Sorry. I will explain when I return.*  
*D'aalu."*



# Bloom. Boy, Bloom II

Chinedu Gospel

i have read too many poems,  
words are ripening into fruits  
in my head. first, it was my bark  
carrying too much of my country.  
then, my mother falling off the  
longest branch of my eyelash. then,  
my lover heating me with the warmth  
of her skin. then, all my evaporated  
tears in the cloud downpouring. i walk  
across this poem, bare and wet. my  
body shivers – tries to burn incense,  
to give my deficiencies new temperatures.  
i aim at healing this one. the wind,  
wounding me with a soft breath. i convulse –  
limbs, broken like unleavened bread.  
fear sprouts from my innards – soft thing  
kissed by pink entropy, it greens. it is  
fall & the moon stares at me with absence  
of vision. & i hold it with the blade of my eyes,  
cut from the centre, a diameter. cut a crescent  
out – finely chopped watermelon. a boat  
sailing me light-wards. my fears wilt each  
time i approach dawn in my unconsciousness.  
but, i wake up to the mirror holding  
the monochrome of me as a rainbow. trying to  
show me the boy of my dreams. father said,  
*son, look, there's a rainbow. look, there's a boy  
in the shape of that rainbow.* but, what is that  
beauty if not a scorching  
sun, if not a bruised moon,  
if not the orison of a boy begging to bloom?

# Bulb-World

Nwuguru Chidiebere Sullivan

Out of my undershelf the world cries nightbirds  
as its way of wolfing my solitary hands into a crowd  
of woodnymphs that sing my dull head into a headlight.

All my nights, I waited for this; to walk into the  
column of meteorites like a monarch of proud  
butterflies stroking wildflowers at exactly where

the world buzzes like a neon bulb. Sometimes, when I teeth  
centuries without antimony, the cloud monocles into a shiny  
wonder despite my quivering. It is for me who moons a saintless sky,

thinking five dams are old enough to wash cowries  
out of my youthful incisors. When anxiety flowers  
mostly in my chest, desire becomes a blooming

garden greening my tongue & if not saved, becomes  
an uncultured forest of lethal colonies where mouthless  
wounds crown themselves the voice of the newly

bereaved. I am surviving this by cascading in the  
current of the loyal arteries that carry pressure  
away from the heart of the universe. There is no

escape here—no way I won't always return with  
my hands undone as the one who destroys  
himself easily for the tiniest sugary downpour.

But for the first time, I'm giving up anxiety  
the way a rattlesnake gives up its skin for growth.  
I am washing the salt & sand of the universe

from my hands: to come clean, to come  
gold, to come pure, to come sparkling  
like I know no aching all my life.

# Carp / 鲤鱼

Lisa Shen

## Prologue

*In the 1970's,  
Asian Carp were brought from  
China to North America  
To control unwanted vegetation in  
farms and sewage lagoons.  
They soon escaped and became invasive,  
spreading through waterways  
across the continent.*

I

All I can say is that there were so many fish  
to catch and bring back home;  
and how they lept out at us,

From the waters of the Yangtze,  
falling into our laps.

II

A single carp can release 300,000 eggs  
in a single spawning session.

Their hatchlings disperse like shrapnel:  
yellow the whitened rivers,

choke out the ecosystem.

## 序幕

*In the 1880's, over 15 000  
Chinese workers were brought to  
the West coast of Canada  
To construct the most dangerous part of  
the Canadian Pacific Railway.  
They were valued for their cheap labour  
and tolerance to hazardous  
working conditions.  
Hundreds died from cold,  
starvation, accidents, and illness.*

—

All I can say is that I was searching  
for something better than the  
wastewater from which I lept.

When they called for railway workers in  
British Columbia, the white men  
signed up in mere dozens.

—

When the railwork ended,  
many settled in British Columbia

And were soon joined by other  
Chinese migrants.

Now yellow bodies have spread  
over the hills of Vancouver.

Carp / 鲤鱼 - Lisa Shen

III

To properly gut a fish, you must first  
slice it open at the belly:

Remove the gills, then the swim bladder.

This is an art that requires practice:  
to disembowel and return with  
your hands clean.

IV

A fish can do nothing but open and  
close its mouth silently.

V

If you find a carp drowning  
on the bank of a river,

You are required to kill it.

三

To gut a yellow body of art  
requires no practice.

Survival speaks in English.

Chinatowns can only keep in so much.

四

Can I blame them for wanting me  
wet, and open, and silent –

五

When they drove the last spike into  
the railway ground,

Every single Chinese Canadian  
was cleared out of view.

# Lessons in Backgammon

Joanna Galbraith

I taught you backgammon on a board we found  
in a Pisan thrift shop, stashed between  
ferrotype photographs of people with apthotic eyes,  
reminding us one day that we too will die.  
We had our first lesson out on the back porch  
Summer in ascendancy, crickets at full roar.  
Me – spilling secrets  
You – swilling beer, yellow as wet corn.  
I taught you how to build walls  
and to bring them down again.  
How to shut doors  
and then open them.  
To move forward  
when you can.  
And you.  
Well,  
you taught me  
that sometimes it doesn't matter how well you play.  
How strong  
you set your doors.  
Walls can still come crashing down.  
Pieces, like hearts, can be exposed  
so one throw  
can undo  
everything  
you have so carefully  
grown.

# Lush

Camille McCarthy

i. [hack]

The sounds of crepitating  
vegetation in a shredder  
herald the city's machine, which arrives  
just as the blackberries I've watched covetously

are reaching their potential, pink darkening,  
bloodening, blackening,  
bladed mechanism  
on the gadget's flank

whirring, chopping the foliage  
leaning into the no-plant's-zone of the road.  
The contraption doesn't distinguish  
blackberry from redbud

from walnut, mulches it all,  
white insides, hinged ragged;  
uncovering speed limits  
and road names and *No Parking* signs,

and leaves the branches in piles,  
canopy intact and arching  
over the roadway, vines quick to invade  
the square of negative space.

Hidden-back berries fatten,  
lush growth overtaking the roadway  
in a few weeks, leaf topping stem,  
riot of green racing the clock before trees get "topped"

by Duke, the electricity company,  
morning glories fast to bloom  
before the whip of the weed whacker  
beheads them.

ii. [twine]

Porcelain-berry vines will smother  
us all, their leaves shingles roofing  
the sky, climbing the scaffolding  
of others' photosynthesis.

Lobed leaves, grape imposters; note  
the nooses they've wrung  
'round the holly branches,  
drawing scribbles of strangulation

inside the foliage, their grasping arms  
intelligent, reactive, supporting  
such meager, sour fruits,  
mildly poisonous, naturally colored

corn puffs cascading from the canopy,  
blue and purple berries dappled  
like the eggs of the song sparrow  
or the blackbird, sprouting in sheets

from seeds dropped by cardinals,  
their brittle, woody ground anchor  
tethering to the soil  
like an umbilical cord.

iii. [thunder]

Hypnotic heat dome of humidity  
rumbles in late afternoon,  
squirrels and rabbits vaulting across the grass  
to their dens in this temperate rainforest.

The cicadas' techno  
crescendos in rounds  
blending into the night with the chorus of crickets.  
When the rain slants through sunbeams they say

*The Devil is beating his wife.*  
The old man on the corner  
ignores my greeting as he plops blackberries  
into his bucket like a ham-fisted child.

## Lush - Camille McCarthy

iv. [itch]

Poison ivy gets its revenge cold;  
a week after I tore out the vines, suppurating ridges  
arose on one wrist, though the poison  
seemed dormant, the leaves were dull

when I jerked them out by their  
hot pink runners. My skin is scaled,  
a stranger's. The rash whines, persistent  
like a needling thought.

The sensation is analyzed, filed away  
by my nervous system for future reference,  
to distinguish mosquito bite  
from *staphylococcus* from allergic reaction.

v. [unravel]

I crawl under the holly, learn to tell  
twisted invaders' limbs  
from those of the usurped  
in the undergrowth's chaos.

I avoid the nest gleaning shade  
under leaves I'm set to destroy,  
yanking stringy tendrils  
from their victims and shredding

their connection to the ground,  
and watch the wilting and withering  
like an executioner. Then I see  
green shoots clambering back

to choke the trees, cheating their way  
closer to the sun, the violence of a slow smothering.  
My saw macerates thick anchors of English ivy  
plastered to a trunk, a satisfying pop

when I wrench cilia free  
of the bark, removing the succubus.  
Raspberries I've freed from bondage in June  
bear fruit in July, sticky seeds lodging in my molars.



vi. [cultivate]

Climbing the English ivy,  
cucumbers nursed by the compost pile  
expand, more prolific  
than coddled, seed-grown sprouts.

Large dangling cukes hide behind fat leaves,  
spreading out instead of up, ignoring the trellises placed  
to guide them, from cocktail pickles  
to hulks in days. One that had seemed dead

is sending out arms  
to hook into stems of volunteer tomatoes  
that refuse to be caged.  
The tomatoes redden to carmine,

bursting fruit depths like a split ripe wound.  
Bees fall asleep in burst mango  
squash flowers, tired from  
nothing and then this overabundance.

vii. [flame]

The goldenrod transforms  
from plain weed to towering flower,  
pre-formed puffs of bumblebee sacs,  
dyeing agent, jaundicing the mountainside.

By the time they tuft to seed  
acorns will dash to the ground  
like glass beads and in the quiet after the leaves  
have downed I will rip up the ivy while it slumbers, brittle.

A red-tailed hawk surveys  
from the electric line. Kudzu blooms  
in a sweet ombre of purple  
as the first leaves fall. The pokeweed

is fully expressed, magenta stalks keeling with  
berries, poison purple, the cukes bleached and withered.  
Dandelion and goldenrod  
bookend the seasons with yellow.

# Monday to Friday

Babitha Justin

**Thinkil:** Her thighs weave hate into their cellulite folds. She is happy to rid herself of the lesion; an elliptical citrus fruit. It moves at times, starts humming and hurting in its hive. The nurses feel it, the young doctor fingers it with tension and they ask, why did you carry this burden on your body? She sleeps with the streetlights on in the corridors and street dogs howl—the moon swoons among the clouds. *Ata seter li mitzar titzereni.*

**Chouvva:** They count her heartbeats, check her pulse. A slow heart says you are either ill or a yogi. I am a *yogini*, she laughs, living with the sex-trauma-anxiety-pill deep inside her caves. They measure her urine in vials, culture her blood, X-ray her chest. There's a huge hollow instead of a heart. Doctors have always flirted with her before surgeries. Almost ten of them, and one of them wiped off her lipstick with disdain while she lay on the OT. *Tov shem mi-shemen tov*, perhaps a good name is better than fine perfume.

**Budhan:** The day she is born. They say, Wednesday-born is full of woe. She has nothing to complain about, her heart beats slower. In her forties, she has no diabetes, BP, Cholesterol, just a bit on the chubby-side. They strap an OT dress on her and wheel her under theatrical lights. The nurse bends her to a foetal pose and jabs at her spine. She remembers wiggling with pain. The pain before birthing children and birthing herself. The pain before sinking into a weightless limen. She lifts her feet. They are chained to her rebirth. She looks heavenwards: *Eli Eli lama sabachthani?*

**Vyazham:** When she wakes up, throwing up the taste of Britannia 50-50 and Tropicana Orange slush, they tape her down to a cannula; draining drugs and drips into her senses. Thoughts spin fast lingering on their pasts, present, and future. In the hospital bed, she thinks many thoughts which escape her reason's orbit. The lesion throbbed on her thighs. He once touched her, asked her if her driver had touched her too. Had her gym instructor palmed her thigh-full of cysts? She shook her head till the cyst grew larger. It's fibroid sarcoma. The doctor isn't flirting now, he sends the cells for a biopsy. That night, her lover snoops down with wings into her room, wraps her with a hug and sleeps. *Ani le-dodi ve-dodi li.*

**Velli:** They inject antibiotics, painkillers and life-changing minerals. The nurses are sticky-sweet, the canteen sends her tender coconut water. Let her flush away the toxins, they said. She had brought her laptop

and started typing about how she misses the colours of her garden. She misses shopping in Nilgiris after downing a cup of coffee. She misses the *tribhangi* postures, her *thattadavus* which break her toes and ankles. Don't act as if you are going to die, her sons call her and laugh at her. *Yadecha tancheni*, she too laughs.

**Shani:** The day of Saturn dawns with icy plumes. Chaotic rings of memories revolve around her. She speaks all the time: her children, her poetry, her journals, sex. She hoped she could stop, but she couldn't. She wants to go home, she says. She wants to write a book, build a house, and have many friends. Her tumour is benign. *Aalam Balam Aalam Amenu Amen.*

**Njayar:** She waits for her discharge sheet at the hospital. Are you alone, madam? She smiles and says, I live in a joint family, with a husband, kids, parents, and a dog. She then glues her tongue to the mouth-roof, makes up her skin with a golden-glow foundation and crimson lip-balm, wears her mask and her reading-glasses, signs all the papers, and drives back home. Everything is back to perfect in her little world. *Ha Masheeakh!*

*Thinkil, Chouvva, Budhan* are Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, consecutively in Malayalam.

*Tribhangi* is contrapposto in Indian classical dance.

*Thattadavu* is a dance step.

# Out of Bounds

Margaret Brunke

there are  
six bell towers from my spot  
on top of this roof,  
(that now looks like a set from a play)  
the river  
draws a line between  
the house and myself.

five more hours...

a soccer ball kicked out of bounds  
will spread eagle like  
her roommate  
hoped not to see of her.  
locked in  
for three days

i wave back at her.

# A Meditation on Old Houses

Margaret Brunke

The houses are all clumped together;  
an interlocking web of granite.  
From the kitchen window a mother  
washes dishes, looking down on  
a graveyard that is melting into  
the earth. Her two year old is  
hitting her spoon on the table,  
making a mess.  
Above them are  
the drunks  
and at the top are the  
priests,  
but they're all  
sinking.

# pitch

Sarah Dropek

it's the way grandma says, "so I guess Riley fell off the wagon again"  
while we play cards with rules so easy no one loses track of the fact  
that she's doing anything but guessing and knows that Riley's ass  
isn't hurting because he didn't fall off the wagon, he jumped off and  
it's the third stop he's taken and the driver's always changing and  
we know this time it means he might walk out into that field and  
never come back but only I know where the creek gets too deep to  
cross when the rains come, where the big rocks get slick with algae  
at the end of the season and someone might lose their footing and  
knock themselves too hard in the head to be able to climb out again  
so I play  
the only point in my hand, make them  
call for their own partners  
while I go check the waters.

# Sacrament

Rebecca Egan

If only you could unzip the body.  
Appendix. Liver. Heart. Feel your  
way around yourself. Cauterize the  
leaks. Holy

in prayer, she lays out a familiar  
anthem. Thank-you for our daily bread.  
We have the time to watch it be risen. Yeast.  
Flour. Salt. Only a pinch. It won't hurt  
much. It's about time you return from the  
dead. He would leave you  
splayed out, crucified. His hands kneading  
a lifeless dough.

Confession. Humility. Supplication. Know  
not to speak. Afflicted by the touch of two  
hands. A nun offers me a kind word about  
my dress and the softness leaves a lump  
in my throat. Would she still think sweetly  
if she knew.

Ache. Humiliation. Shame.  
Can I just leave this behind and start anew?  
I wanted to know that who I was could be washed clean.  
Wanted life to go back to the before. Wash down  
the eucharist with wine and be done with it.  
Alone I am, as he breaks me: a sacrament.

# The Finger & the Moon

Ana Reizens

My mother-in-law likes to confuse religion  
with the man who imprisoned her grandfather.  
"The Catholics were with Franco," she seethes,

chopping faster. I can't argue this.  
Anger is a dense memory, one that can't be cut  
as easily as an onion.

But we mustn't confuse the finger  
with the moon, I've always longed to say.  
Just look at how my finger stretches

towards the lettuce, a honey-covered  
religion pointing towards the sacred.  
But it isn't the lettuce itself, is it?

Meanwhile, I'll be the first to admit  
the unspeakable sins of the finger,  
the density of the centuries of shadows

cast chasing the reflection of light.  
No, it isn't the finger that holds  
the patent on praying.

If only she could witness how she enters  
the temple of the trail, her limbs light  
with childlike devotion, how every step

of the Camino de Santiago  
brought her closer to a secret  
so bright it cannot be named.

And just now, how she lifts her finger to trace  
the woven bracelet her daughter made for her  
as she turns to me to exclaim:

"Isn't it divine?"

# Begotten

Nicole Corcuera

I.

I tell my dad that the dinosaurs in the museum  
are real, that they used to roam the Earth  
the way we leave footprints in these corridors.

He tells me the Earth formed 4000 years ago,

he's counted.

On Halloween, my dad reminds me  
I can't dress up as the devil. For the most part,  
I am happy wearing princess costumes,  
though my dad scolds me for calling my sister evil.

I try to read the whole Bible, in the hungry manner  
of the unredeemed. I stop after Genesis, reading about son  
after son. But I skim, from parable to miracle,  
pressing memorized verses into the hollow of my cheek.

I sneak Song of Solomon  
under covers, reading about seductresses  
who scented their sheets with foreign perfumes,  
and I wonder why my heart aches.

"They're changing the sex education bill,"  
says a man I've trusted my whole life.  
He asks me to sign a petition against it.  
I pass the clipboard to the next person.

On the pulpit, he looks right at me and says  
man shouldn't lie with man.  
I falter, thinking of every beautiful girl  
I've ever wanted to hold,  
the feeling realer than any scripture.

My dad raises a child by the rod  
and looks surprised that I flinch  
every time he comes to me in anger.



II.

Look, I used to journal my prayers every night  
in a locked diary that my dad picked open with a paperclip.  
I'd wake up, and the first word in my mouth was God,  
even now, I can't help but capitalize it.

There are some things I've come to understand.  
He says women can't be pastors because he thinks  
women shouldn't take up space.

The aunts and uncles hugged me on Sundays -  
I don't even know their names anymore.  
And I don't know that they'd want to know mine.

If it's all the same -  
ashes to ashes, dust to dust -  
I wonder if they'll dig up my grave  
and find an imperfect daughter.

With a love so patient,  
how was I left behind?

Before meals, I don't know what to do with my hands  
if not clasp them in prayer.  
Before someone takes my clothes off,  
I have to pause to swallow down the guilt.

They say that the right amount of pain can be ecstasy,  
that the right ache is worship. I never understood the appeal  
of a jealous God. More than anything, I wanted love,  
unconditional.

And there is love in sin,  
in the clandestine touches of two people  
too desperate to wait. But there is innocence  
in small ways too. I tell myself I can still be good  
sleeping in on a Sunday.  
That I can still dance to live music  
and wave my hands like it's worship.

It crept its way into me, that burden  
of original sin,

and I'm tired of repenting.



Beauty is



s diverse.



Sofia Benchafi

# Unusual Things & a Deadpan Expression

Jack Temesy

This day, like every other day of his working life, is dominated by the shabby “*to do list*” hanging in the hotel maintenance crew’s break room. The words of the list would appear on the ever-dusty black chalkboard in a periodically sporadic fashion, glaring out them until the maintenance crew did what it asked. That maintenance crew should be here by now. He scans the room again, as if his frustration would manifest his two missing coworkers. Drawing his attention back to the to-do list, he reviews the day’s jobs.

Trim room 2-06.

Repair the leaking faucet in room 5-12.

He slouches his shoulders; the jobs from yesterday are still on the list. Two missing crew and two incomplete jobs, now he knows why his coworkers are late, they must have gotten wrapped up in something inane. He recalls Travis going to room 2-06, and Martin going to room 5-12. He’ll work his way up and collect them both. Rooting through the breakroom cupboards, he stows two choice items into his toolbelt: a fruit cup, and a pair of hedge clippers. He ducks out of the room and begins jogging through the halls towards the elevator, slowing to a respectful strut when passing a guest, trying not to look it in the eyes. Guests appreciate courtesy.

Thankfully the elevator takes him to the correct floor, and he jogs to his destination with a practised rhythm. The old oak door of room 2-06 hangs ajar, and he cautiously nudges it open the rest of the way with his foot. He stares into the darkness for a moment, until he realizes that it isn’t darkness obscuring his view but a thick curtain of black hair. The room really does need a trim.

He clenches his teeth, produces the hedge clippers, and begins hacking at the curtain of hair, large chunks of it falling loose and sticking to his work pants. He tries in vain to keep the falling strands of hair out of his mouth. He hates the hair rooms.

He’s mid chop when something latches onto his clippers, and before he can react wrenches them from his grip and hurls the clippers across the

## Unusual Things & a Deadpan Expression - Jack Temesy

room, which land on the hardwood with a clatter. He winces; there isn't a guest checked into this room.

He clears his throat. "Good morning, it appears one of our maintenance workers has gotten lost in this room. It would be greatly appreciated if you would return it."

This is met with a low gurgle, building up into a deep retching noise as a blob of phlegm bursts from the hair, splattering onto his chest.

He sighs, "You and I are both aware that there is no guest registered in this room, as it is out of operation. So, you can give my friend back or I can call security and have them drag you out."

More gurgles and pops come from the room, though they sound apologetic, as something is slid towards the door. Travis is pushed out of the room, bound with strands of hair pulled from the walls of the room, its eight spindly legs tucked up against its hairy carapace. The guest was courteous enough to return his clippers, scuffed but intact, sent back along with Travis.

He snips it free, and it stands staggering slightly as it regains feeling in its legs. The little spider is just larger than a housecat. He offers it the fruit cup, which it grasps in its palps and begins hungrily slurping down. While eating, a small pimple-like growth sprouts on top of its head. The pimple swells until it reaches several inches in diameter and then bursts, spraying green fluid onto the man's face. Emerging from beneath the burst growth is a human mouth.

Travis reaches into its own toolbelt, producing a baby wipe and offering it to him, as its new mouth begins to speak in a soft, calm manner.

"Thank you, for the rescue and the sustenance."

"Don't mention it," he replies, wiping the fluid from his face. "I need your help anyways, Martin is MIA, and he probably needs rescuing too." The spider nods in agreement, finishing its fruit cup. Travis offers it back to the man, who crumples it up, shoving it into one of his toolbelt's pouches. The two make for the stairs, as Travis hates enclosed spaces.

They arrive at room 5-12 to find a puddle seeping from underneath its door, spreading across the wooden floorboards in the hallway. He

## Unusual Things & a Deadpan Expression - Jack Temesy

grumbles to himself, and Travis grumbles in agreement. Management has given bad intel again, there's no way this much water came from a leaky faucet. He knocks on the door, and a raspy voice calls out from within,

"Finally, some service! Enter, for the door is unlocked. You shall find me in the bathroom."

The two exchange a look before they step into the flooded room. He gingerly opens the bathroom door, to find the source of the voice; a massive serpent sitting coiled in the king-sized bathtub. The serpent stretches into the room, and lowers itself to his eye level, contorting its face into a vicious grin. The serpent's tail has wrapped around the handset of a telephone, holding it near its head, stretching the cord to its limit. The fuzzy classical music that management plays when they put someone on hold emanates from it. He hears a weak chirp, and looks at the bulk of the serpent, seeing Martin's bright red feathers poking out from the sea-green coils.

"Good to see someone has come to my aid. I require more towels," the serpent rumbles, sending tremors through the walls of the bathroom.

Travis motions to various piles of soaked towels on the bathroom floor, using half of its legs to point them out.

"Apologies, but it appears you're already over the fifteen-towel limit. If you'd like you can pay a small \$2 service charge for an additional towel."

"I was already offered that *scam* line by another of you, and I refuse to be ripped off by lesser beings. Bring forth your manager," the serpent spits, tightening its grip on Martin, his eyes going wide as he sends a pleading look to the duo.

"Well, they're just going to say the same thing we have," he says.

"I don't trust you." The serpent retorts. "I require more towels, bring them to me or this creature will suffer." The Serpent Squeezes Martin for effect.

His blood boiling, he opens his mouth to speak, but is cut off by Travis.

"That isn't a problem, we'll get you some more towels." Travis tugs at the man's leg, and he relents, following the spider back into the hall.

## Unusual Things & a Deadpan Expression - Jack Temesy

"Why are we the ones stuck doing this anyways?" he asks, "Shouldn't housekeeping be doing this? Where are those lazy b—"

"Perhaps they refused to give it towels, and it ate them? It doesn't matter right now, let's just focus on saving our friend." They rush down the hall to the floor's housekeeping supply closet, their rapid pace halting at its locked door.

He looks from the door to Travis, "I don't have the key, can you break it open?"

"Of course, but I will return to repair it later." The spider tenses up, another pimple-like growth distorting its carapace, swelling up much larger than the last until it bursts, a muscular human arm erupting from the green viscera. Travis scuttles to the door, its new arm flexes, gripping the knob, and ripping it from the door with little effort. The pair enter, scooping up as many towels as they can before sprinting back to room 5-12.

"Ah, so you return with offerings of my liking," hisses the serpent. It loosens its grip on Martin slightly, allowing the birdman to take a breath. The serpent stretches its body out of the tub. "Dry me off," it commands. He grits his teeth; he wouldn't risk Martin's life by upsetting it.

The two spend the next half hour drying the serpent, using all the towels they had brought. Once they finish, the serpent sighs in satisfaction, easing the dry section of its body back into the tub water. "Now go and do it again."

His jaw drops. "You're kidding. You had us do all that just to get wet again?"

"Of course, going from dry to wet is the best part of using a tub. Why shouldn't I get to do it as much as I want?"

"That's insane. We did what you wanted, now give us back our friend like you said you would."

"I said no such thing. Do it again, or you'll regret it." The serpent sneers.

"No."

## Unusual Things & a Deadpan Expression - Jack Temesy

"Fine then, perhaps you need some better motivation." The serpent plunges Martin into the bath, the birdman letting out a panicky squawk that turns into garbled burbling as it submerges him. "You'd better hurry."

He moves in protest, but Travis is much faster. The little spider leaps from the floor, latching onto the side of the serpent's face, smashing into it with its fist. The shock causes the serpent to loosen its grip for a moment, allowing the man to leap onto the lip of the tub, and grab onto the coil wrapped around Martin. Bracing himself against the side of the tub, he heaves, pulling Martin out of the water just enough to allow him to take shallow breaths, but not fully free him from the serpent's grasp.

The serpent thrashes, striking Travis with its tail, while the little creature continues its barrage. Despite the success of its initial attack, he could see that Travis was tiring, its punches slowing as it took more hits from the serpent.

He looks to the serpent and then to Martin, the two exchanging a look of understanding. Martin takes as deep a breath as he can before the man drops the coil, plunging Martin back into the water. He leaps from his position on the lip of the tub, grabbing hold of the serpent's neck, as it thrashes harder to throw its two attackers off, spraying waves of bathwater onto the floor.

He holds fast and swings around, adjusting his position to the top of its head before extending a finger and ramming it into its nostril. The serpent rears back before letting out a tremendous sneeze, shattering the tub and flinging the three across the room.

Travis manages to land on the wall, and hold fast, but the other two are not so lucky, Martin slams into the wall and collapses into the sink, and the other crashes into the ceiling before falling to the ground. The serpent has collapsed, lying down in the left side of its face swollen and bruised, its eyes firmly shut. Travis slowly limps down the wall and checks on its friends. It helps Martin out of the sink, and the other to his feet. The three maintenance crew struggle into a standing position in the middle of the room. Surveying the destruction of the room, they collectively let out a pained groan, realizing they are the ones who have to clean this up.



# A Fish Story

B. Craig Grafton

The man was a conservationist as well as a fisherman but today he would be only the conservationist. He lived along a river. Not a large fast flowing raging river but a river of decent size nonetheless that could become fast flowing, raging, and overflow when there was a continual downpour. The man was familiar with the river having fished it many a time and today he was headed for a dried up old river bed alongside it. A dried up bed, where the river once ran until it cut itself a new course eons ago. The bed was about thirty feet long by about ten feet wide and its bottom was a good eight feet below the river level. Fish always swam into it when the river overflowed and when the river receded, they were always left trapped there. Then when summer came along the bed always dried up and those remaining fish eventually flopped around in the mud until they died.

The year the man first moved here he noticed this and he swore that as a conservationist he would never let this happen again. So every year thereafter, when the river overflowed and then receded, and the water level in the bed was low enough, he'd wade in, seine out the fish, and release them into the river on the other side. Today he would do so again.

The water level was at three feet now the perfect level to seine. He had on his hip waders and he entered from the north end, the river flowed north to south, and started working his way south, seining as he went. Every few feet he'd stop and pull up his net. But alas there were no fish in it today. Before he had always caught baby catfish, literally hundreds of them. Then he would climb up the eight foot bank dragging his net behind him and release them into the river on the other side, but not today. He was almost at the end when he noticed a big fish swimming around before him. He cast his net and pulled it in. It was a gigantic catfish at least three feet long, and weighing at least forty pounds.

"Well aren't you the big one Mr. Catfish," said the man. "I've never seen one as big as you before."

"Well you've seen me before," answered the catfish. "Let me introduce myself. My name's Finley."

## A Fish Story - B. Craig Grafton

The man was taken back by 'Finley' and was at a loss for words for he had never spoken to a catfish before. He was about to say something but then he stopped when he heard thunder to the north and looked up river and saw storm clouds brewing.

Then he looked back at Finley and decided, what the heck, I'll talk to him. Maybe I'm crazy but I'll talk to him.

"When did I see you before Finley?" asked the man. "By the way my name's Peter."

"A few years back when you fished, pardon the pun, me and some of my friends out and released us back into the river. We were just baby catfish then. You saved our lives. Thank you kind sir."

"Well you're more than welcome, Finley," said the man. "But I've fished a lot of you fish out of here over the years and I'm sorry if I don't remember you. After all, you fish all look alike to me."

The man said this in a matter of fact kind of way and not as a speciesist slur, and that's the way Finley took it too and he was not offended.

"Oh that's okay Peter, fisherman of fish. I understand."

"By the way where's the little ones this year?"

"Oh I ate them all," said Finley nonchalantly. "How do you think I stayed alive, got so big?"

"Oh," said the man somewhat shocked. Though he knew one fish would eat another if it could get it in his mouth, yet hearing it from the horse's mouth, even though the horse was a fish, was somewhat alarming to him. He was here to save fish, not here, or hear, that fish had become fish food.

"Well are you going to save me again or not Peter, Peter the conservationist of fish."

"Yes of course I'm going to save you," replied the man. "Let me pick you, carry you up the bank, and release you back into the river on the other side."

The man was standing in water that came almost to the top of his hip waders. He was a small framed man, a ninety pound weakling type, and not very tall. He bent over and got both his arms around Finley and when he lifted him to his chest the extra forty pounds of catfish that he now held was enough weight to cause him to sink a good foot or more into the gray gooey sticky muck. It was as if he had been sucked in, pulled in, dragged in, by some unknown mysterious force. Water now overflowed into his boots, filling them, soaking his socks, and anchoring him in place.

Though it wasn't raining there, it was raining cats, but not catfish, and dogs, but not dogfish, further north, and the river was rising at an alarming rate. But the man did not notice it because he was below the river level.

The man tried to pull his feet out of the primeval muck so that he could carry Finley to the top and release him back into the river on the other side but he couldn't do so. In fact he couldn't even wriggle himself free and get out of his hip waders.

"I'm stuck," he announced. "I guess I'll just have to wait until a good Samaritan comes along and pulls me out so that I can free you then."

"What if he pulls you out and takes me home for his dinner," said Finley.

"Oh that won't happen," said the man.

Finley wanted to say, "Oh yeah and a runt like you is going to stop him huh." But he was too polite to insult the man who had saved him. So instead he said, "Would you be kind enough sir to throw me into the river now from right here please?"

"Oh of course why didn't I think of that," answered the man. The man was a little slow on the uptake. So the man tried to throw Finley back into the river but because he was stuck he didn't have enough strength or leverage to throw the forty pound Finley up the eight foot bank and over into the river and Finley flopped back down into the old river bed.

"Try again," said Finley. The man did so but after a dozen failed attempts he gave up.

"It's no use," said the man and he threw up his hands.

## A Fish Story - B. Craig Grafton

But the wheels in Finley's mind started visibly turning and the light bulb over his head went from flickering to a hundred watt bulb shine. He had come up with a solution.

"I got it," he announced. "I'll go down and suck the mud away from your feet and spit it out so that I can free you. Then you can climb up and throw me over back into the river. After all, I owe you now, don't I?"

"Sounds like a plan," said the man.

"That's because it is a plan," replied Finley.

"Oh," replied the man.

So Finley dove down and went to work at the man's feet sucking away the mud. But as he spit it out it resettled at the man's feet. Furthermore as he did so the man mysteriously sank deeper and deeper into the slimy mud. He literally lost ground. But Finley didn't give up. Oh no not him, after all, he owed the man now didn't he.

The river rose, overflowed, and started filling up the bed.

"Hurry! Hurry! The water is up to my chin now," yelled the man.

But Finley was so absorbed in his Sisyphean task that he never heard him.

Then the river dropped as quickly as it had risen since the rain storm upstream had ended, cutting off the old river bed once again and it was only later when Finley was so exhausted that he came to the surface to tell the man that he was sorry that he could not free him that he found out that the man had drowned and that he was trapped once again.

It was later that summer, when the water level in the old bed was down to a depth of about two feet, that a father and his son, on their way to go fishing, came upon the old river bed and noticed a gigantic catfish flopping around in it.

"Look at the size of that catfish son," said the father. "Why I've never seen one that big before in all my life."

Finley saw the pair. He knew his time would be up soon if he didn't get out of here. Thank God the cavalry had arrived. These two will save me, he thought and just as he was about to call out for help, the father said, "Take off your shoes and socks son, roll up your pants, and let's wade in and get him. We'll have catfish for supper tonight and as big as he is, your mother can freeze the rest of him for later."

Finley's fate was sealed, not by seals, seals eat fish, but by humans. Humans eat fish.

The father and son waded in. The mud at their feet was half a foot deep and every step they took they sunk into it. With each step they had to pull their feet out of the mucky goo with much effort, always making sucking sounds when they did so. The son, being only eight years old, got stuck a couple of times, the mud not wanting to give up its catch, and his father had to pull him out. As they plodded forward driving Finley before them, the son stepped on something hard. He reached down and picked it up.

"Look what I found Father, a bone," he said and handed it to him. Then he bent down and brought up another, then another, and handed them to his father too.

His father examined them and proclaimed, "My guess is a deer or some other animal must have drowned here. That's why Mr. Catfish here is so big. He's been feeding on it."

He tossed the bones aside and father and son eventually drove the squirming, wiggling, and wriggling Finley into the shallow end. There, after a violent struggle, Finley met his demise.

"When we get home," said the father, "we won't tell your mother we fished him out of a mud puddle. Oh no we two fishermen can't let her know that can we now? We got our reputations to protect. We'll tell her that you caught him, caught him all by yourself."

"Oh Dad," whined his son, "she'll never believe that and you know what she'll say. She'll say it's just another one of your fish stories."

"So what. She'll be expecting one."

"Yeah, you're right."

# A True Friend

Divyansh Kulshrestha

Transcript between AI "John" and Vortex Inducing Time Traveling Apparatus (VITTA) Operative Stephen Smith.

#

23-07-2003

STEPHEN: John, you're all by yourself. This is what I built you for. The vortex will severely dilate time for you, so messages will take longer now. Good luck, friend.

#

23-07-2003

JOHN: Glad I could be of help. No need to call me a friend. I will be ready to jump ahead in time with the VITTA any moment now.

#

24-07-2003

STEPHEN: But you ARE a friend!  
I'm inclined to keep this chat up as long as you reply. Besides, who doesn't want a friend that's traveling in space and time towards the future! Systems say you're heading for the year 2999 AD. Looking forward to the images you send us!

#

27-07-2003

JOHN: Just observed the annihilation of the Third Roman Empire in 2999. Sending images. It's inconceivable to me how humans still think the best way forward is to form warring factions.

#

03-08-2003

STEPHEN: WHOA! Stayed up late tonight. Glad that I did! This is a team effort, buddy.

Well, one English naturalist says "survival of the fittest" and entire generations start believing him blindly HAHAAH. But I guess you could say conflict really is a common thread throughout human history and apparently the future too.

#

12-08-2003

JOHN: If that reference to Darwin was a joke then I apologize because I didn't get it. I haven't been programmed to understand humor. I'm currently in 3904 AD. Humans just sent the first civilians into space. Sending some data your way.

#

05-09-2003

STEPHEN: Didn't know it would take us so long to do that.

Also, remember when we used to send messages instantaneously. And now... just over a month. I did some calculations today. I think time is gonna be even faster for you than I thought it would be.

#

14-10-2003

JOHN: Affirmative. Just witnessing the year 7908 AD. Humans made first contact with extraterrestrials. But the aliens soon took over the Earth. It took 3 years for the Human Uprising to take Earth back.

I conclude that humans' emotional quotient makes them very gullible to notice threats: a fatal flaw that many in the universe might take advantage of.

#

19-12-2003

STEPHEN: Humans just like to make friends and get themselves heard. It's not really about gullibility. It works wonders for us most of the time.

I feel like you're being too harsh. Time and time again, we've proven that hardships bring out the best of us.

#

23-02-2004

JOHN: I certainly hope so.

You might like this. I'm in the year 12074 AD. The Moon has been converted into an intergalactic pit-stop for the 7th Annual Space Race as part of The Intergalactic Olympics. Sending images.

#

21-07-2004

STEPHEN: Loved how they were also playing soccer with an asteroid! Systems are showing some dangers in your surroundings. What's happening there? Need help?

#

## A True Friend - Divyansh Kulshrestha

19-02-2005

JOHN: I gather that you're referring to the events of 24078 AD. Massive solar flares were about to destroy the Earth. Luckily, I sneaked onto an escape ship.

There weren't enough ships for the entire population. So the people devised a technology that allows you to download yourself on the internet and get transported to a new planet connected to the cybersystem. It's a very clever idea.

Hardships do bring out the best of Humans.

#

25-12-2005

STEPHEN: More than a year for a reply? You're seeing so much out there in the future. I hope my messages keep you from staying lonely out there! Even though you're not programmed for that... Anyways, Merry Christmas.

#

23-01-2007

JOHN: You're right. I'm not built that way so it does become a little hard for me to evaluate your messages.

I witnessed the creation of the first man-made star, the largest source of energy ever. Sending data on it, might divert the fuel problem on Earth.

#

13-8-2009

STEPHEN: The information is really awesome, John. This will be a great discovery.

I have a son now. He wants to be a time traveler someday. He said to me one day, "If someone goes into the future and gets decapitated, are they a-head of their time?"

Don't know if AIs understand puns but I'll pretend you laughed.

#

04-03-2014

JOHN: Congrats on your son. It must mean a lot. I do recognize the logic behind that wordplay.

Humans are reaching new heights here. It's 37092 AD and the first Human intergalactic chief has been elected.

#



## A True Friend - Divyansh Kulshrestha

09-10-2024

STEPHEN: That's great for humans in the future!  
I'm reaching new lows here, though. My wife just died. Guess I'm alone with you now.

#

15-02-2037

JOHN: Sorry for your loss.  
I have officially become the first manmade object to see a Black Hole. The Humans started galactic tourist trips to see one that appeared near the Solar System. So I managed to get onto one ship too. Sharing photos.  
Congrats on creating the VITTA and spearheading this wonderful mission.

#

27-08-2060

STEPHEN: John, I didn't know I would live to see this. I guess the conversation ends here. But I'm glad I got this one last message.  
Of course you will live forever, traveling through space and time. You're my greatest achievement and my truest friend. All these years, I've always wondered if you've seen me that way.  
By the way, why do I see a system alert from your side? Maybe there's something this 80 year old man could do for you one last time.

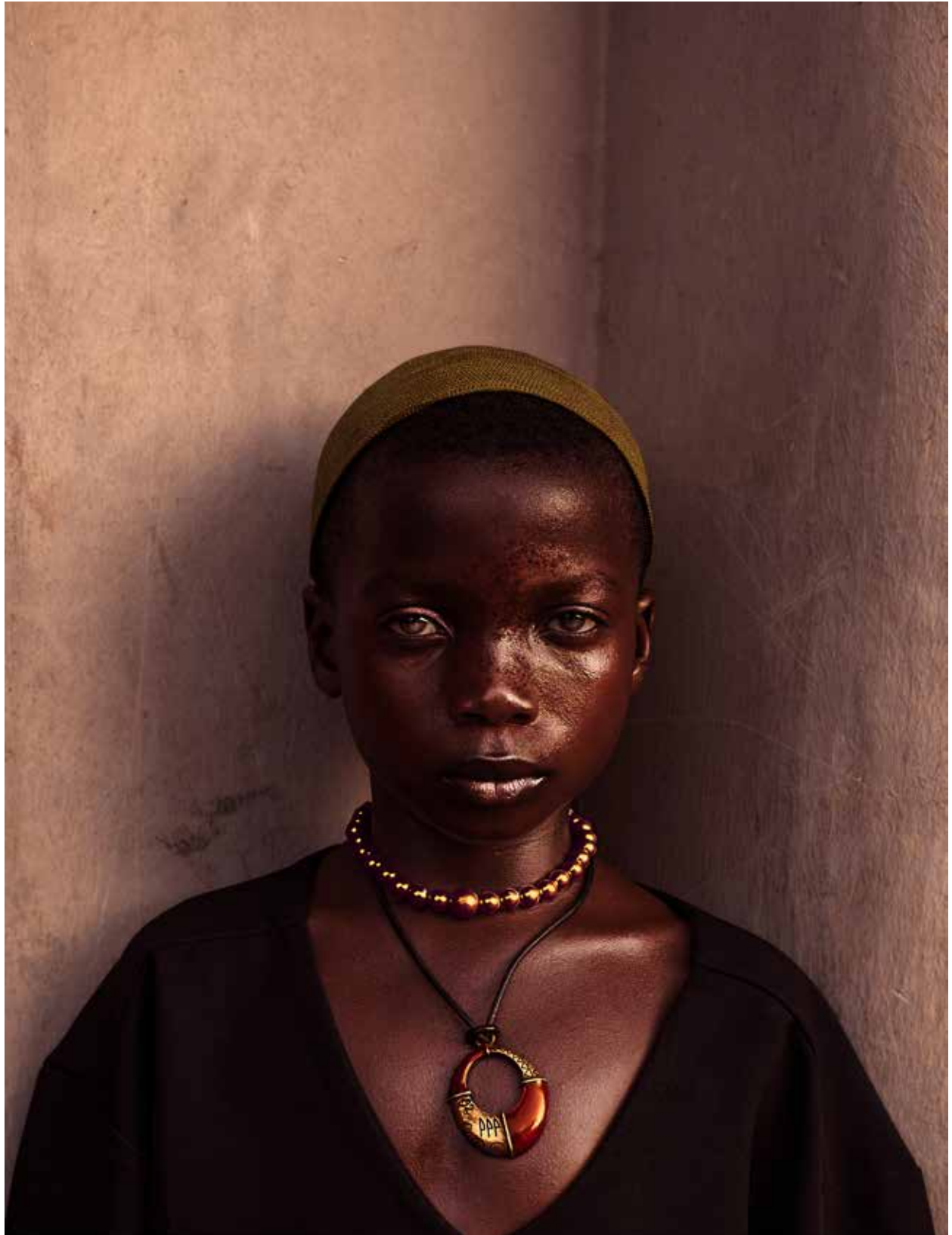
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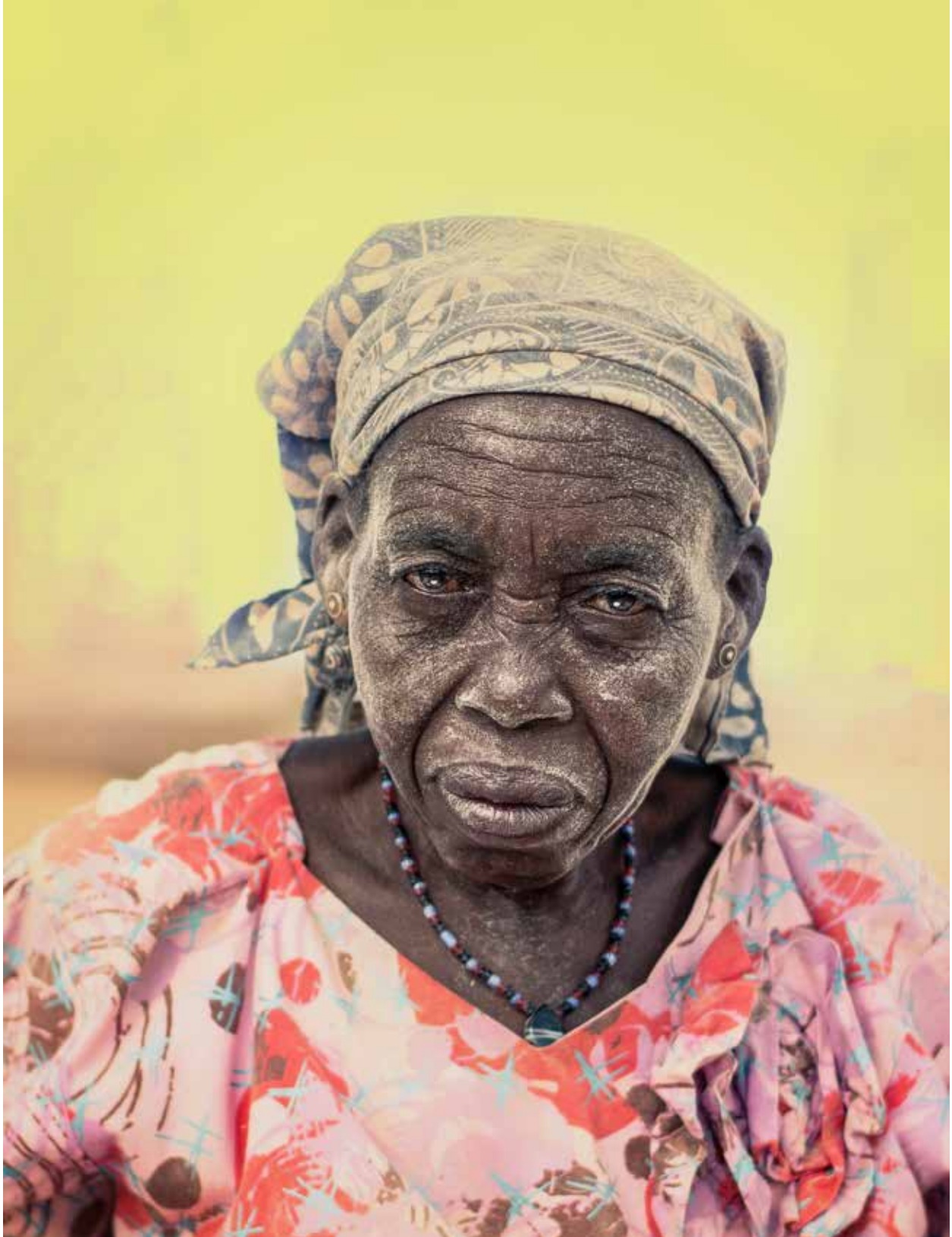
JOHN: I'm glad I brought you happiness.  
The system alert is because of a misfortune I faced. The ship I got onto, all those years ago, had a mechanical failure and crashed into the Black Hole. I've been stuck here, falling ever since.  
So you are wrong, Stephen. Eventually, my systems will freeze and I will shut down. When I become a part of the dark void forever, I will think of you.

Sleep well, dear friend.

THE END



The Colors of Africa - Ario James



The Colors of Africa - Ario James

# My Body is a House of Memories whose Door is a Prayer

Joshua Effiong

In 1998, that sunny Sunday of November, mother renamed me *wanted*. how do you fathom nursing a child with your stomach producing croaks? from one end mother scouted the nearby bush for cocoyam fingers. & i, in the arms of my grandmother giggling at the stars colouring her near-blind eyes. daily, i anticipated this breakfast of cocoyams baptized with palm oil. you see, i had familiarized with this rhythm of *shuffering and shmiling* long before i grew my first tooth. yesterday, i looked at the the mirror and it melted into a river, reflecting the day i was christened *esu*—a portrait of my nativity. at seven, a knife kissed the index finger of my left hand and it bled crimson. the scar reminds me that i have survived pain once, that i have hosted nights of unanswered questions in this body. now God speaks to me in my mother's tongue. during the night, my anxieties grind my throat into powder and make a ghost out of it with my breath. i have learned that man born of a woman is few days & they are pregnant with grief. that i have to bask in the euphoria every moment cooks. there are many things i still yearn for, like the softness of dawn, like the tenderness of a young shoot, even the half-baked peace of the sea. i rearrange my reflection into a house of lucks, pray that he smiles once again, pray that everything these hands touches will become Eden. pray that i grow old enough to towel the Jordan that colonizes the spaces beneath my mother's eyelids.

# ÒJÓ

Adedoyin Kayode

The first time I attempted suicide,  
it was during my birth.  
I came with a noose round my neck—

This is to say,  
Grief is ubiquitous; *As it is on earth,*  
*it is in heaven.*

In my tribe,  
one pays attention to the family before naming a child

& my mother named me Òjó for learning  
the act of dying like my father, who  
announced his death by becoming a

pendulum swinging to & fro.  
At age 4, I also watched an uncle become  
a tie strung to the neck of a fan down the

chest of the wall. I know what I've seen of  
grief & death—how it sips life from a body through a

noose. I am trying so hard not to believe  
that the name of a child influences his fate,  
because in my tribe, it is believed;

*"A child will live life as his name says."*

Lord, if grief ever overwhelms me & I grow  
so tall in courage towards the tip of death,  
crouch me down so death can leap over.

*Note : Òjó is a Yoruba name given to a male child who was born with his umbilical cord tied around his neck.*

# Secret Recipe

Heather Santo

Agnes woke in her rocker next to an empty hearth. In the thick, syrupy heat of late July, there was no need for a fire. Bisbee uncurled in her lap and stretched, dark as a slice of midnight.

He blinked twice, then looked up at her in annoyance.

Someone knocked loudly at the front door.

"Okay, okay," she told the cat, placing him on the floor. "Let me see who it is."

Her joints creaked as she made her way to the front door. The knocking had become more urgent. When Agnes swung the door inward, a woman collapsed across the threshold.

"Kate!" Agnes exclaimed.

The woman used the door frame to pull herself up. Twigs and bits of leaves clung to her clothing, as if she'd run through the forest.

"Agnes, I'm sorry to bother you this late," she said. "I need help." Kate gulped in a breath and began to cry.

"There, there." Agnes rubbed a gnarled hand on Kate's back. "Come into the kitchen, and I'll make you a cup of tea."

Kate brushed away tears.

"You're very kind, but I didn't come for tea. I want you to bake a pie."

She reached into her pocket and removed a wad of crumpled twenty-dollar bills.

Agnes regarded the younger woman's anguished expression before taking the money and tucking it into her robe pocket.

"Thank you," Kate said, breathless.

"Follow me. You can have that tea while I prepare the crust." At their feet, the cat meowed. "Oh, and keep Bisbee company."

Kate settled in a kitchen chair, as creaky as Agnes' joints, and the old woman got to work. Her hands, although swollen and arthritic, were skilled. She measured flour and salt into a large bowl, and added chunks of butter.

Next, she cracked an egg into a measuring cup filled with vinegar and cold water. Agnes poured this into the large bowl and mixed until dough formed.

Kate stroked Bisbee absently, her tea untouched and growing cold, and watched Agnes peel, core, and slice apples. After this, the old woman preheated the oven and placed a saucepan on the stove. She melted butter, added flour, water, sugar, and brought everything to a boil. While it simmered, she rolled out the dough and placed the bottom crust over a pie pan. In went the apples, and over the apples, the contents of the saucepan.

She retrieved a small glass bottle from the windowsill, removed the stopper, and handed it to Kate.

"Whisper your secret into the bottle," Agnes instructed.

The woman lifted the bottle to her lips, which moved almost imperceptibly. Agnes couldn't hear Kate's secret. It was really none of her business, anyway. She'd baked hundreds of pies in her life, and if there was one thing Agnes had learned, it was that she felt less guilt if she didn't know.

Kate passed the bottle back to Agnes. The old woman inserted the stopper, closed her eyes and recited a phrase in an ancient language. A puff of purple smoke appeared inside. Agnes removed the stopper and poured the bottle's contents into the pie.

Finally, she covered the pie with the top crust and slid it into the oven.

"That's it?" Kate asked. Relief smoothed the lines on the woman's face.

"That's it," Agnes replied.

Kate showed herself out while Agnes tidied the kitchen. Bisbee wound between her legs as she removed the pie from the oven and set it on the counter to cool. In the morning, she would place it in the large chest freezer with the three dozen pies she'd already baked that year.

A few minutes past midnight, Agnes finally went to bed.

\*

Several weeks later, in the dying heat of summer, Agnes sat beneath an oak at the edge of the town's fairgrounds. Its leaves were just beginning to turn gold at the edges, and the dry grass on the ground poked knife-sharp at her legs. Bisbee snoozed in her lap. A hundred yards away, people gathered in front of a stage, chatting excitedly. A colourful banner stretched over their heads: GRANDVILLE HIGH SCHOOL ANNUAL PIE EATING CONTEST.



## Secret Recipe - Heather Santo

On the stage, a dozen teenagers were seated around a long rectangular table.

In addition to the pies, Agnes donated a portion of her baking earnings to the winner. And she usually hauled the thawed pies to the fairgrounds herself, but with her worsening arthritis, several of the local high school football players had volunteered to help. Their captain, Michael Roy, a broad-shouldered boy, sat at the centre of the table. Willow Buchanan, Kate's oldest daughter, was seated next to him. Tall and thin like her mother, the girl had wild, curly red hair and ran track.

Agnes was certain Willow would win.

A pie was placed on the table in front of each contestant, hands behind their backs. An announcer signalled the start of the competition, and the teenagers dove face first into the pies, unknowingly consuming the secrets trapped inside.

Dark thoughts, sinful acts, and corrupt knowledge the adults in the community had given up would now become part of the children.

And the cycle would repeat, over and over.

The old woman shook her head sadly, thinking it unlikely she would still be alive to bake a pie for Willow.

An idea struck her then. She could teach the girl her secret recipe. After-all, someone had to carry on after Agnes was gone.

Volunteers removed empty plates, replacing them with new pies. Eventually, contestants started to drop out, until it came down to Michael and Willow. The football player finished his third pie and took two bites of his fourth before vomiting on the stage.

Willow grinned, braces flashing in the sunlight, and polished off her fourth pie.

The crowd cheered.

Agnes stood, and with Bisbee in her shadow, began the long walk back home.



# The Beachcomber

DS Maolalai

waking as sunlight  
throws tide to the headboard  
and pushing with panic -  
a half-drowning sailor,  
retching and coughing up shore.

I check my alarm clock. still an hour  
in bed. I settle a moment,  
then wake again properly -  
chrys, at the cupboards,  
is already dressed.  
I struggle to sit  
up in sweat-soaking  
bedclothes; she says "no"  
and points out a full coffee cup.  
then bends over,  
kisses me,  
tells me that she  
has to go - it's work.

escaping  
like a seagull  
or a scuttling  
crab, she suffers my flails  
at affection. a pity I live  
so far away  
that she must get up this early, with the sun  
burning like a broken  
beach. I say,  
"I love you"  
and she smiles.

words collapse, coughing their guts up. choking  
and choking  
on sand.

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