

# OMENANA

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IN THIS EDITION

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**Omenana:** *Giving life to speculative fiction; because stories breathe here*

**#Omenana 12**

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*Our Darkest Selves*

We live in a world where women are often expected to be our consciences – absolving men of responsibility for their own behaviours and choices. However, rarely are women allowed to choose for themselves what it means to be good or moral. We hold women to higher standards yet we do not reward women for meeting them, nor does society ever hold such baselines for itself. Rather, goodness is defined as whatever behaviour will benefit men and thus is always malleable.

So what happens when women define goodness for themselves? Well, in this edition we bring you tales of women and girls making choices and behaving badly – but not always in ways that you might expect. In Mirette Bahgat’s “A Bridal Shroud” a young girl takes control of her destiny; while in “Memento Mori” by Tiah Beautelement, a woman decides the path of her happiness – with the most unexpected of partners; in H.J. Golakai’s “Lee-ah (Sister)” two friends determine the boundaries of their friendship on their own terms; while in Osahon Ize-Iyamu’s nerve-tingling “In the Garden Watching Nim Noms” a girl must decide how far she’ll go to become the thing she most desires.

It’s been a long, exhausting road to this edition. Between illness, unemployment, and new employment, we’ve had to make our own decisions about how to balance our unwavering passion for this project and our need to buy groceries, sleep, and pay rent. It hasn’t been easy. We’ve had to watch as our publication schedule, carefully crafted at the beginning of the year, was blown out of the water by the grenades of the daily demands of life. And you, dear readers, have had to bear the brunt of that.

We are deeply sorry.

We can only continue trying our best and limping along as we can. Sadly, this means we can only commit to one more regular edition this year. However, we leave open the possibility of collaborations to come – particularly in celebration of our 4-year anniversary.

We want to thank Joseph Omotayo whose last-minute review brought this edition together, as well as Wole Talabi for his generous donation to this edition, and a continued thank you to the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America (SFWA) for making this year possible.

But our biggest thank you goes out to you, our readers, for sticking by us through our ups and downs. Your loyalty is beyond our capacity to repay. We humbly ask that you continue to bear with us.

Thank you.

*Chinelo Onwualu*  
September, 2018

# A BRIDAL SHROUD

Mirette Bahgat



One night, when the air was hot and sticky, and the only sound one could hear was that of the night crickets and the occasional cries of curlews, Kiya sat on the roof of her house. She gazed up at the few scattered stars in the sky, while braiding her dark coarse hair. Her father was on the lower floor preparing dough to bake for the next day. In the silence, Kiya thought she heard something, or someone. A call maybe, a familiar sound. With her hair half-braided, she made her way down the stairs.

"Aba, did you call for me?" She asked her father.

"No."

But she was sure she had heard something. She went out into the front yard, her bare feet brushing against the damp grass. Despite the warm night breeze, her limbs were shaking. And after a few seconds of silence, she thought that maybe the voice she had heard was that of a fleeting curlew or perhaps the summer wind blowing in from the southern desert.

She took one cautious step forward. Two steps. Five steps. Until her toes met the lukewarm water of the Nile River. "Who are you?"

And then she heard it again—this time louder. "Kiya, here."

The voice echoed from the river's direction.

A fog formed above the still waters of the river, and a twirling breeze stirred the scent of Jasmine into Kiya's nostrils. She shivered like the river's reeds and thought of running back into the house.

"Come, Kiya. Come closer."

She took one cautious step forward. Two steps. Five steps. Until her toes met the lukewarm water of the Nile River. "Who are you?"

"I can be anything you want me to be. I can be love; a love more lasting than the love of your father, and more embracing than the flooding river tides," the void said. "Or I can be fear, if that's what you want. You know what fear is, don't you?"

It took her a while to say anything. She was still looking at the empty space above the water, her knees quivering, her face pallid.

"What do you want?" She finally asked.

She didn't get an answer back. She waited and waited for the voice to say more, and



Art by Sunny Efemena

only when the normal sound of the night crickets and the curlews returned, did she go back inside.

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The next day, Kiya and her father rose with the morning star to make fire in the oven, knead the dough prepared from the night before, and bake bread on the fire. The largest loaves they ate with fried eggs and black honey, while the rest they put in straw baskets covered with white cloth. After breakfast, they hit the road to Deir El-Medina grand temple to sell pigeons and bread to the worshippers who streamed from all corners of the land of Kemet to offer sacrifices on the altar there.

There were many shrines in the temple. But one particular shrine attracted thousands of worshippers—the shrine of the god Sobek. Tut was one of his worshippers. Once they reached the temple, he would grab Kiya's little hand and lead her to the shrine to pay homage to the god.

The dark congested space, with shafts of light coming through the small timber windows; the heavy fragrance of sandalwood and frankincense; the intricately patterned olive green wall tiles and high ceiling—it all nauseated Kiya. In the middle of the shrine, a colossal granite statue of Sobek stood high, with his human body and crocodile face wearing a mischievous smile, a smile that announced dominion and deception.

When Kiya once asked her father about his love for Sobek, his face darkened. "It is fear more than love," he said. "I, like everybody else, fear the gods—their brutality, their unpredictability, their fury. Who am I to ignore them, to challenge them, or to think that I really have a choice? Freedom is an illusion, my dear, just like love. Fear is the only truth when it comes to worshipping the gods."

"Why are you afraid of the gods, Aba?" Kiya asked.

"I can't predict them, my love." Grief clouded Tut's eyes as he turned to watch a couple of kids running in the temple's courtyard. "Thirteen years ago, before you were born, your mother's womb was closed. For many years, we prayed to Sobek to grant her fertility. We burnt offerings by the altar, and raised prayers night and day,

Fear. Love. The two words had possessed Kiya ever since she'd heard the voice at the river the night before. For a twelve-year-old, such words were ghosts with no faces.

until he finally answered. When I knew that your mother was pregnant, I was ready to do anything for the gods; my heart carried real love for them. I promised Sobek that in return you would be raised to become a priestess at his shrine. But, after a week of delivering you, and for no apparent reason, your mother breathed her last. I wept for her like never before. I wept for her and for my callowness in believing that the gods give freely. The love that consumed my heart for Sobek turned into fear. And it is nothing but fear that has driven me to worship the gods ever since."

Fear. Love. The two words had possessed Kiya ever since she'd heard the voice at the river the night before. For a twelve-year-old, such words were ghosts with no faces.

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In the first month of the Shemu harvest season, Tut caught The Poor Man's Disease. It started off as a mild fatigue, then dry coughs, then losing more and more weight until he had to wrap his loincloth twice instead of once, then dry coughs with blood, then fever, then night chills and hallucinations.

At first, Kiya didn't comprehend what was happening; she had never come this close to death before. For her, death was something she heard about every time her mother's name was brought up, or whenever someone in the village disappeared and never came back. But this time death was close, so close it visited their house and stayed with them for several months. At first, it was a light guest; its presence went almost unnoticed. But day by day, it made itself more comfortable, until she could smell its thick presence in every corner of the house, until she could see it in Tut's absent eyes, hear it in his non-stop coughs; until she came to believe death wasn't going to leave till it claimed Tut's soul.

Tut died and left Kiya alone. She didn't weep, neither that day nor in the days

"Take your time," Yuf said. "But remember, Kiya's father left her a house by the Nile, and you'll be the only custodian once you take her in."

after. It was as if a thick rope was tangled around the trail of her tears. Her neighbors prepared everything for the funeral—they embalmed Tut's body after removing his liver, intestines, stomach, and lungs, putting each in a stone canopic jar. The jars were to be buried with his body, no gold nor precious belongings, only loaves of bread, jugs of black honey, and his wooden lute. By sunset, all the mourners from Deir El-Medina and the neighboring villages boarded boats and crossed to the Western side of the Nile, where prayers were recited and his body was buried.

Through all of it, Kiya watched in shattering silence, the same way she used to watch hoopoes flying in the sky or boats sailing on the river. Hired mourners did all the crying and wailing, while she further withdrew into herself.

"A twelve-year-old girl can't live alone," some of the neighbours said during the funeral. Yuf, one of the neighbours, went and asked Tut's cousin, Ramose, if he would adopt Kiya. But he said he would need some time to think it over.

"Take your time," Yuf said. "But remember, Kiya's father left her a house by the Nile, and you'll be the only custodian once you take her in."

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For the next four months of the harvest season, Kiya stayed at Yuf's house. One late night, the tight rope around her tears untangled, and found their way to her eyes—tears of confusion, of missing her father, of not knowing where he was. Those tears turned into angry waves and a flood that gushed out of her body. She wanted to flee from herself. There was no reason for her to exist. No light. No family. No home. Even the Nile with all its vastness seemed limited compared to her despair. Could it contain her? Could it save her from herself even for a fleeting moment?

She took off all her clothes and ran into its waters, swimming for as long and as fast as her limbs could carry her; until her racing

heartbeat outran her racing mind; until the impossibility of her survival felt less impossible.

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A silhouette of a man stood watching Kiya from afar as she swam in the river. Her black spontaneous hair and growing breasts ignited a fire deep down his belly. For long minutes, he stood motionless with parted lips, watching her. And then he walked down the road to Yuf's house.

Yuf and his wife were lounging on the front porch of their house smoking dried lotus, when they saw Ramose approaching.

"Finally, Ramose! I've been waiting for your visit," Yuf said.

"Yes, I've been planning this visit for some time now. I had to make some arrangements before I came down here."

"Ah, does this mean you've decided to adopt Kiya? Come, have a smoke."

Ramose sat next to Yuf. He reached to the tray on the table, and selected the thickest darkest dried lotus petals which had the strongest flavour. He packed his wooden pipe and tucked it between his lips.

"So, you have made up your mind, yes?" Yuf asked.

"Yes," Ramose said as he frowned. "But I won't adopt Kiya. I will marry her."

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"You can't let him marry her," Yuf's wife said after Ramose left.

"Why not?" Yuf asked.

"He is more than four times her age. Besides, you know his reputation: He buys young girls, marries them for a year or less, and then moves on to the next one."

"Look, we have nothing to do with this. Ramose is Kiya's only relative. If he wants to marry her, fine. At least we won't have to carry her any longer."

Yuf's wife stayed awake all night, thinking of how to tell Kiya the news. *Does she even know what marriage is?* She felt bad for a young girl like her, losing her father, and now losing herself to an old man.

The death that Kiya once feared now seemed tempting compared to marrying Ramose. It was just another sort of sacred union, in a sense, but with death she got to choose what she would unite with.

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"Kiya, next week you'll move in to live with Ramose, your father's relative," Yuf's wife told her the next day. "He wants to marry you."

Marriage was another word, like death, that was unfamiliar to Kiya's ears. Unlike death, marriage was supposed to involve happy scenes—people laughing, clapping, dancing, eating; a man and a woman, close together; a new home; children born to life. But, Ramose and she? No. Like the pigeons Kiya used to raise only to see their blood shed to please the gods, she was to become an old man's sacrifice; fresh blood at his aging altar; soft skin to his dry bones; young sweetness to his bitter mouth.

No! her mind cried out. But her tongue was frozen. The darkness became darker, the pit became deeper, and the mouth that had used speak a few words after Tut's death became shut tight, like a graveyard.

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The death that Kiya once feared now seemed tempting compared to marrying Ramose. It was just another sort of sacred union, in a sense, but with death she got to choose what she would unite with. She thought of the Nile. She knew that if she swam south towards the cataracts, the turbulent water rapids would sweep her up and end her life.

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It was past midnight and everyone was sleeping. She slinked out of the house and walked towards the river, her limbs aching from not moving for a week. The fresh breeze met the stale sweat on her body, and she came to notice how dirty and stiff her body was.

She took off her dress, and as she walked towards the steep edge of the riverbank,

she heard footsteps behind her.

"You sweet thing, what are you doing here at this late hour of night?" She turned to find Ramose standing right behind her. His presence threw her off, and she skipped to snatch her dress off the ground and put it back on.

She stood for a second staring at him, her mind caught up in questions of what had brought him here and what she should do—run back to Yuf's house? Or swim forth unto the river?

"Yuf told you we're getting married soon, didn't he?" Ramose asked.

She looked at him, his stooped posture, his bald head, his sly looks. *Death will at least be more beautiful*, she thought.

"I'm not getting married to anyone," she said.

Ramose laughed, loudly and bitterly. He stepped closer to Kiya until she could feel his warm breath on her face; it carried the stench of beer. "A girl like you should never say no to a man like me, but, you know, I like young girls with strong personalities; they intrigue me."

He took another step closer to Kiya, who now stood at the edge of the muddy riverbank. He touched her cold cheek with his rough fingers, gazing at her mouth, "I can't wait to—" before he could say anything further, Kiya stepped around him in one swift movement, and without thinking, she lunged at his back, throwing him off balance. Ramose staggered before losing his footing and falling down the slope of the riverbank into the deep, cold water.

"Bitch!" he gasped.

Kiya stood on the riverbank watching Ramose as he struggled to keep his head above the water. As she turned around to leave, she heard a loud hiss. She looked back, and right behind Ramose, a scaly body broke the surface of the dark waters, moving swiftly towards him. Ramose looked behind him, and started crying for help. He tried to swim towards the shore, but his uncoordinated movements further submerged him instead. The beast crept towards Ramose, its eyes fixated on him. Kiya stiffened as she watched the emerging creature attack Ramose— its massive jaws

clamping down on the old man's body, its colossal tail churning the water. Ramose screamed and gasped and rose and sank, until he stopped moving all together. His mangled body was soon swallowed by the water, and the smell of fresh blood lingered in the air.

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After doing away with its prey, the beast started swimming towards the shore, its eyes now centred on Kiya. But she didn't run away, instead she looked the beast straight in the eye, like a convict looking at her saviour.

Kiya's father once told her that the gods sometimes respond to prayers when you least expect it. She had never seen a god before, yet she knew it was him—Sobek. He was now out of the water, his greyish-green body four times her size, his scaly tail more than two meters long. He wore an ornament of lapis lazuli and gold in his right ear and gold anklets around his front feet. Standing a few centimetres from her, his lunar eyes locked into hers.

"Sobek Ra," Kiya said softly.

"Kiya," Sobek Ra said. "You haven't answered my question yet."

"What question?"

"If you were to choose, would you choose love or fear?"

"It was you?"

"It was me."

They sat together, side by side, on the damp earth. Sobek smelled of fresh green algae and stale blood, and the sound of his breath, raucous and deep, infiltrated the night. Hours passed like a thief. Time stopped all at once, as if there was no before and no after. Until the songs of the early-hour bulbuls and the aurora sky alerted them to the nearing morning.

"My father once told me humans never get to choose their destiny," Kiya said, pulling her slender legs towards her chest. "He said that the gods control us like paper dolls."

Sobek sighed. "Destiny is a conundrum. Some people choose to love their destiny, and some people fear it. Your father never accepted what fate had in store for him. He

thought he could appease the gods with words and bounties to change what is meant to be. He blamed me for his wife's death, and failed to see death as just another station towards a new life."

He turned to face her. "But you, Kiya, you are different. When death called for you, you followed. And so in return, I grant you the freedom to choose. Choose to die in fear, or choose to die in love."

She pressed her toes in the cool soft soil beneath them. "What difference would it make? Death is death."

"No, Kiya. Death is a clown with many faces. A fearful death kills both the body and spirit, but a loving death is an altar. You offer your mortal body for your soul to soar."

Kiya looked out at the clouds. Small scattered clouds merged to form a white river in the sky. Small clouds merged in her mind too. A sudden sound of an approaching cart alerted both of them. Sobek sprang to his feet.

"It is time for me to leave," he said, lumbering towards the water.

"Wait, I haven't made my choice yet," Kiya said.

"Yes, you have," he looked back at her with a smirk on his face. "Wait for me at the shrine." Then he swam away.

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It was Akhet— the season of the annual flooding of the Nile. A season long-awaited and celebrated by all inhabitants of the Land of Kemet, for it brought fertility. Farmers prepared their lands to be fertilized by the silt-laden waters before sowing and harvesting the crops that were their only means of paying off the heavy taxes imposed on them by the Pharaoh. Merchants and traders would later buy the crops during the harvest season, and sell them in the big city markets across the region. It was the season of new beginnings, of recreation and rebirth.

During this time of the year, women unable to bear offspring would offer their sacrifices at the shrine of Khepri, the god of recreation and sunrise, to open their wombs. They visited the grand temple daily and walked counter-clockwise



around the scarab statue nine times, one round for each month of pregnancy. Husbands and wives who had fallen out of love with each other rubbed their bodies with silt before making love by flowing waters to reignite their affection for each other.

At the shrine of Sobek, sacrifices were offered at the altar and priestesses, priests, and worshippers chanted day and night asking for the god to bless the crops, and the people, and for the waters of the Nile to fill the land and quench its thirst.

Amid the commotion, Kiya sat in a secluded chamber at the bath complex. Her head was shaved, and she wore a long bead-net linen dress. Three priestesses gathered around her—one plaited and waxed a long black wig, and put it on Kiya's head; another adorned her face with red ochre and black kohl, and painted her nails with henna; and a third rubbed warm jasmine oil over her neck and arms. A high priestess knelt in one corner of the chamber, burning kapet on top of coal embers and chanting the hymn of the Nile.

*Hail to you, O Nile! Who manifests  
yourself over this land, and comes to give  
life to Kemet!*

*Mysterious is your issuing forth from the  
darkness, on this day whereon it is  
celebrated!*

*Watering the orchards created by Re, to  
cause all the cattle to live,  
you give the earth to drink, inexhaustible  
one!*

*Path that descends from the sky, loving  
the bread of Seb and the first fruits of  
Nepera, You cause the workshops of Ptah  
to prosper!*

*Hail to you, O Sobek, Lord of waters.  
Protector of the justified and repairer of  
evil.*

*Healer, he who made the herbage green.*

*Hunter, he who with swift violence  
destroys the wicked utterly.*

*I approach you with humility and an  
honest heart,*

*and offer you a glorious bride with no  
blemish.*

*A virgin as your heart desires.*

*Today is your feast day, a wedding of  
heaven to earth.*

It was Akhet—the season of the annual flooding of the Nile. A season long-awaited and celebrated by all inhabitants of the Land of Kemet, for it brought fertility.

*Today, your bride will be offered as a  
living sacrifice on the altar of your Nile.*

*May the waters rejoice with the bride of  
the Nile, and flood to nourish our lands.*

Kiya sauntered towards the temple gates, surrounded by priests, priestesses, and cheering multitudes. She rode the decorated red chariot pulled by black, heavily-muscled horses heading south towards the Nile cataracts. She was alone, completely alone. A bride with no groom.

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Mirette is an Egyptian short story writer and spoken-word artist. Her work has appeared in various publications, including *Ake Review*, *Afreada*, *Ramingo*, and others.

In 2009, she was awarded The European Institute of the Mediterranean writing award.

She was also awarded the American University Madalyn Lamont literary award in 2016. Her story 'Exodus' was shortlisted for Short Story Day Africa contest in 2016. She holds an MA in political science from the American university in Cairo.

# IN THE GARDEN WATCHING NIM NOMS

Osahon Ize-Iyamu



## Day 15

In my rich, luscious garden, there are palm trees. There are orange trees. But most importantly, there are nim noms. Red, purple, blue nim noms. In bloom, ripe, tender, and soft. They grow as curly as my hair, and I love curls, so I love nim noms. And I love them, so I eat them.

I crouch in the soil, as low as I can go, and let my ear brush the mud. I stretch my neck like I am spying on a test and grab each leaf with my teeth, then I chew. No one is looking when I feast, when I devour. I chomp till I feel a tingling within me and I cough up petals. I eat until my neck turns purple and I'm ripe and unfolding into blossoming. I eat till I'm fulfilled, till a velvet petal grows from my palms the next morning and I brush it softly. Then I *pluck* it out and wash the blood off my fingers because that wasn't the transformation I needed.

When Auntie comes to ask who has destroyed the beautiful, precious nim noms, I shrug. I shake my head and pass around the tissues and cry with everyone for the loss of the nim noms. After Auntie stops crying, she stands firm and calls the exterminator.

He sprays the nim noms with something awful but non-lethal, then wipes his gloves and says that all the pests will go, so there'll be no more sorrow. Auntie writes a check and he leaves, stomping feet, a smile on his face.

But an exterminator can't get rid of me. I will never stop eating nim noms, not even the ones coated with a thick layer of pesticide. They taste of something spicy and savory and sweet. Like chicken, cheesecake, and peppers. Maybe the chemicals will give their sweetness an edge and make me more special.

The first time I ate a nim nom was after Daddy ignored my attempt at a hug in favour of a phone call, while Sunday got a smile and pat from Daddy later that day as Auntie was shouting at me for not dressing properly or doing anything right. Auntie had once said that all plants are great, but nim noms are special because they're filled with magic. So I put a nim nom in my

He sprays the nim noms with something awful but non-lethal, then wipes his gloves and says that all the pests will go. so there'll be no more sorrow.



"It's simply not true!" I scream, stamping my feet on the floor. "I would never eat a nim nom. I know better. I am better. Only rabbits eat nim noms, and I am not a rabbit. I'm not. So how could I?"

mouth, and I swallowed the opportunity to be greater.

### Day 23

The chandelier is shining bright when my little brother, Sunday, bursts into the living room, sweating. I'm chatting with one of Daddy's friend's daughters while Daddy and his friend are drinking whiskey. With his sticky eba hands, Sunday points an accusatory finger at me.

"Ella has been eating the nim noms. Ella is the pest! I thought it was a rabbit, but it was Ella."

The room bursts into gasps. My face flushes. Sunday! My own brother, trying to destroy me. Exposing me, embarrassing me. I've been caught. Now the whole crowd is staring at me, folding their arms, whispering. Gossiping. *Me*. Eater of nim noms. Destroyer of the beautiful. Murderer. Liar. Disowned daughter.

"It's simply not true!" I scream, stamping my feet on the floor. "I would never eat a nim nom. I know better. I *am* better. Only rabbits eat nim noms, and I am not a rabbit. I'm not. So how could I?"

Deny, deny, deny. Lie. Lie. Lie. Straight through my teeth. My teeth that ate the nim noms. They must believe me, for I have eaten and I am now filled with sweetness.

"But I saw you!" Sunday counters.

"Daddy—if I was a nim nom girl, a dirty girl, then you would see me with mud on my dress, looking stained and impure. Ungood. The cleaners would say my clothes looked awful. Have you ever seen me look anything but perfect?"

Murmurs in my favour. Yes, yes, yes. Sunday looks around the room, panicked, and when he tries to talk, his defenses are drowned out. Who would believe the boy with eba-stained hands?

I am hugged by my father, an apology for

ever doubting me. He knows me to be true. He knows me to be good. The nim noms have made me good, have made me pure, have made me sweet. Daddy strokes the beads in my hair and promises to take me to the mall on Saturday to buy me something nice. Something pretty—for my hair, or for my skin, or for me to play with.

I shoot a knowing smile at Sunday just to let him know I have him beat. His eyes open wide in horror. Daddy snaps his fingers for Big Nanny to come take Sunday back to his meal, an unfinished bowl of ogbono soup, and I can hear his "noooooos" all the way to the dining table as they drag him away. I let out a small cackle of victory. Little snitch almost ruined me.

The daughter of one of my father's friends turns back to me and our conversation goes from dolls to snotty siblings who really ought to stay in their place. The girl pulls the hair off one of her dolls, straight out of the scalp, and I like her style. She's the kind of person who would do something ruthless without a second thought. Like lie through her teeth. Like eat the nim noms in her yard.

She comes close to me and asks me if I really did eat the nim noms. The girl tells me that she swallowed an eraser once, a very precious eraser that once belonged to her grandma. That kind of thing is about as bad as eating nim noms and so I don't have to hide my secrets from her. The girl tries to touch my hair but my eyes widen and I slap her hand away. I tell her she is a monster, that she should be filled with shame, and watch her eyes well up. I storm out of the parlour, up the stairs and into my bedroom, where I fall into tears of my own, only weeping when I'm sure I've locked the door. God help this feeling of worthlessness inside of me. Of being evil. Of being bad.

In the evening, I go to Daddy's room and tell him I never want to see that girl again. Hypnotized, he deletes his friend's number from his phone. Pleased my father

answered my small request; I smile and go to my room, where I fall to slumber. At midnight, I eat some more nim noms, sweeter than ever now that the rain has washed off the pesticides. I fill myself with goodness, and know that with my eating I am becoming a better person.

I don't know why my sweetness only works on adults and not other children like me. Maybe I need more nim noms. Maybe I need to feast. Maybe children know real goodness, the kind that comes from the heart rather than from nim noms. But what is real, anyway? This is faster. This is better.

### Day 29

Sunday barges into my room when I am trying on my Junior Girls Singing Club outfit, and I scream my head off. He doesn't care. He shuts the door.

"I saw you eating nim noms last night," he says.

Deny, deny, deny. "The exterminator obviously needed to use more chemicals. So many moles must be digging around."

"I opened my windows and I saw you," he says. Straight to my face, stepping closer to me. Is he trying to intimidate me? Fool.

"You don't know what you saw. Big Nanny says you haven't been eating enough, and you know how you get when you don't have enough foo—"

"I saw you!" He screams. His flailing arms hit my dresser causing some of my perfumes to fall off. "I saw the beads in your hair and your blue nightgown and your favourite bracelet. I saw you on the floor, putting nim noms in your mouth." Who does he think he is? I'm done playing these games. "And so—who's gonna believe you with your eba-stained hands?"

"I'm going to ask for a camera for my birthday. And then I'll get you. And they'll see you're not even a rabbit. No, you're just a filthy rat."

I hate my oversabi little brother, with his snotty little face. I didn't ask for him, but yet he came. I can't delete him and I hate him and...

"I'm going to ask for a camera for my birthday. And then I'll get you. And they'll see you're not even a rabbit. No, you're just a filthy rat."

"Get out of my room! Get out! Out! Out! Out!"

He runs out, quick and alert. He has crossed a line. I shut my door. I relax my breath, then I scream again. I am filled with shame and anger and pain. I am filled with hurt. I pluck out the tiny little petals from my skin and I rage.

My secrets are mine to keep. *Mine.*

My mother left us a year ago. In a drunken stupor, breath full of sour wine, sticky and stumbling and raw with emotion. Rain was falling and thunder was screaming and our dinner was rice and stew. My father tried to calm her but she was a mess, crying and angry, then vomiting on the floor. She didn't leave with footsteps, but puddles.

Mummy and Daddy loved each other, never fought, so why would she leave? I know Daddy still calls her on the phone and they talk, slow and awkward before falling into rhythm. I know Mummy talks to Sunday, but she cuts the call before it can ever reach me. She never asks to speak to me. Maybe it was because I used to cut her hair when she slept or because once I threw out all her sleeping pills or because I would use the wine in her cabinet as blood for my dolls in the dramas I would act. She thinks she knows who I am. She thinks it's easier to avoid me. She thinks I won't be good, but I'll show her, I'll show them all.

Daddy won't tell me where Mummy is and I hate him for that. I hate my mother and I'm sure she hates me.

She called me a demon before she left.

### Day 37

My Auntie is hosting a planting party, to celebrate things that grow. They are serving drinks and organic juices and everyone wears nice spring clothes. The grass glows greener than ever, not surprising after all the shouting Auntie did

I burn. My hands keep clenching and my eyes keep twitching and I try to hold it in. try to be sweet.

to make sure the place was perfect before the visitors arrived. My eyes shine wide at all the freshly-planted nim noms, fresh and all mine. Mine.

Auntie comes in with the grand plant, golden nim nom brought all the way from London. It's beautiful, stretching out in all directions like a peacock's feathers, with its tapering, curling leaves that resemble hair. It is ripe and juicy, gorgeously pure. I almost faint at the sight of it. I love it more than anything—more than my brother, or my father. It will be my Christmas dinner. It will make me better for the holidays, best for the New Year.

Before my Auntie can plant it in the soil, my brother stops her.  
“Wait! I don't think you should plant that pretty thing here. I'm not sure all the pests have gone yet, Auntie,” Sunday says.

That. Little. Snitch. He better watch himself. I cast dagger eyes at my brother, but he doesn't look at me. He gives me no attention. Who does he think he is? If I eat *him* someday, it would only be right.

I burn. My hands keep clenching and my eyes keep twitching and I try to hold it in, try to be sweet.

“What?” My Auntie shrieks, face paling, hiding her precious plant. Her oh, so delicious plant. Her sun hat wobbles on her head, and the crowd murmurs in confusion. “What have you seen?”

“Big, chewing, rats!” Sunday screams, raising hands to the air, eyes to me.

The crowd gasps.

I explode.

“Lies!” I immediately say, and the crowd turns to me. “I'm always watching the nim—the flowers, and I haven't seen anything. Sunday just wants attention.”

“I do not!” He yells, and the crowd looks back and forth.

“Maybe if you washed the eba off your hands you could finally tell a lie that sticks.”

“Stop it, both of you!” My father in the midst of the crowd shouts. He glares at us.

I walk up to Daddy and wrap my hands around his waist. “Daddy, see how Sunday is behaving.” I tell him and Sunday looks shamefully at the floor. He knows I have Daddy like thread around a roll, loving me. “Daddy, I'm so sorry,” I say, forcing out tears. “Sunday brings out the worst in me,” I turn to the crowd. “Everybody, I'm sorry. Sorry. Sorry. It's Sunday's fault.”

If I have Daddy then I can have the crowd, all in the palm of my hand. I can show them my flowers and, even though I hate the petals on my skin, maybe everyone's adoration will fill me up and I will finally bloom and be full of nectar and full of love; as pretty as a nim nom. I can get them all to love me, to not criticize me, to do my will. That's how I will be better.

I whisper to Daddy, “I know how we can fix this. Let's give Sunday up for adoption so he can find someone who loves him. It'll be you and me—just like old times.”

Daddy stares at me and I smile at him.

“Ella?” He says to me.

“Yes, Daddy?”

“I have never been so disappointed in you.”

“What?”

“Get out.”

“Daddy, *what?*”

“To your room!”

I burn bright and my stomach rumbles, and I want to eat every nim nom around the room. Every single one, in my mouth, so I can be transformed.

“No,” I say, stamping my foot. “No!”

“Who the hell do you think you're talking to?” My father bellows. If his voice is thunder, then I can be lightning.

“That's not fair! It's all Sunday's fault; he thinks I'm a rat when he's nothing. He doesn't want you to love me! Daddy, don't let Sunday do this. Please. Don't let Sunday destroy us.”

I open my fingers up for Daddy's warmth; I just want to be loved. I just want to be pure. But all I feel are hands dragging me away. The crowd watches me and gasps and my father shakes his head. I hear their murmurs. I hear someone call me spoilt. A brat. A rat.

This can't be happening. I've been destroyed. My father does not love me anymore. I wasn't enough.

I begin to scream. I cry and tremble. My petals wilt and droop, itchy on my skin.

My brother has ruined me. I must make him disappear.

#### Day 44

Sunday has gotten hold of one of Auntie's old phones. He called her after the party and mentioned he had seen more “rats” and that he wants to use it to record the rodents eating the nim noms. Auntie came and dropped the phone for Sunday,

then took away some of the silver nim noms planted in the garden.

For the next week after the party I stay silent and keep my head down, avoiding Daddy's gaze. I feel diminished, malnourished, but Sunday has that annoying phone all day long so I can't feed. Everywhere I go he is watching, video on. If I step outside, he is there. If I get up at night to pee, he is watching. If I excuse myself from the dinner table, he is there. Always with the phone on.

Why doesn't Sunday want me to be better? Why won't he allow me to eat the nim-noms so I can be sweet, so I can be pure? So I can be like all the other girls who don't hate their brothers and fight their mothers, and don't hate themselves.

I eat to be. So I can transform.

But since the little snitch doesn't want me to be better—

#### Day 53

I enter Sunday's room with a march and a glare, and he stands up and grabs the phone like we are about to fight. But this



is not a battle. I push him down to the floor and he lands with a thud. He sees the roll of tape in my hand and it's like he knows what I'm about to do, and when I come closer he curls to a ball. He's still holding that freaking phone and I try to take it out of his grasp but he holds it with all his might. I scream in frustration.

He shrieks and I just want to shut him up. I grab his struggling, squirming legs and push them down, firm, steady, under my control. I wrap them several times with tape till his legs are stable and unmovable. Then, I grab his arms which are flying to my nose and I hold his hands tight, and bind those too. I cover up his little accusatory lips, again, and again, and again, till he has no more words to say. I like his silence.

Then I wrap his disgusting fingers and his crying eyes and his nose till all the rolls of tape are finished. I'm done being sweet. All the nim noms that I have ever eaten roar through my belly. My stomach rumbles with a hunger that's monstrous and starts to fill with heat.

I crouch down, as low as I can go, and bite his skin, pressing my teeth deeper and deeper, a bit further into his flesh. He doesn't want me to feed so I will eat *him*. Sweet or unsweet. I will chew him up; a meal without taste.

I stretch my neck and chew his ears first. No one is looking when I tear out the flesh from his jaw, when I devour. I chomp his little fingers till I feel a tingling in my stomach and a fluttering in my chest. I eat till my neck turns purple and my lips turn red, till I'm fulfilled. I chew and chew and tear and swallow Sunday whole. Then I belch.

I leave his remains for the rats.

I take his bedroom key and lock the door and head downstairs. I run to the garden, to the nim-noms and I begin to devour every single one. I'm not even subtle. I dig up the roots and suck on their stems. I need to feast till I feel no guilt or sorrow or shame, till I have erased my sins with the taste of sweet. With the taste of pure.

Petals grow on my arms and in my throat.

My tears are running down my face into the soil and messing up my dress, messing up my rage, but there's nothing to feel sorry for. I just need to feed and be good. Good, good, good.

Why am I like this? Why won't I stop? Why can't I work and grow and transform to shine? *Why* can't I get it right? I just need... I stop eating when I feel eyes on me, a shadow in the darkness. I look up in horror to see Daddy is watching from the window. He is watching, mouth wide, face twisted. He starts screaming.

Petals bloom on my skin, itchy and bloody. My throat aches with chlorophyll and my stomach swims with vomit. My petals flutter like wings, as though ready to carry me. I am the pest who eats the nim noms. The rat. I am still unsweet, but I am strangely relieved. The hiding is over. I will never be better, never be pure, no matter what I do.

I could try to be better. I could start over and work on my heart, but that's too hard and right now I have to eat. I can't help it. I love my nim noms. So I take another nim nom, then I start digging through the soil.

END



Osahon Ize-Iyamu lives in Nigeria, where he writes speculative fiction stories. His work has been published in *Clarkesworld* and *The Dark* and he is a graduate of the Alpha Writers Workshop. You can find him online @osahon4545



# MEMENTO MORI

Tiah Marie Beaument



Death walked in, taking a seat at the table as the kettle came to a boil. The woman silently wheeled herself over to the drain board to fetch another mug. As she moved, the light danced across fingers, each sporting a silver splint.

"How many sugars?" she asked.

Death held up two fingers.

She placed a small tray in her lap before rolling over to the table. Death accepted his mug of rooibos with a nod of thanks.

She pushed her braids from her face, causing the coral beads interwoven into her hair to click. Death fingered one, noting the dark Rhodophyta hue remained. He had worried; it had been too long since his last visit.

"I'm healthy," she said.

He inhaled her salty scent, rolled it over his tongue, considering it, before replying with a nod.

They sipped their rooibos in leisurely silence. He was in no rush. There were plenty under his command on duty today: from owls, to buck, to ravens, to horses, to his beloved canines.

In fact, he mused, the latter would make an excellent gift. He pulled out a notebook from the rear pocket of his jeans, making a note.

She placed her empty mug on the table and held out a hand. He removed the folded parchment from the inside pocket of his black coat, handing it over. She opened it without comment. This was not

always so. The first time they'd done this she'd asked, "Why parchment?"

It was a good question.

Unfortunately, he had no satisfactory answer. This was true of many things in life and in death.

While she read, he made himself busy in the kitchen. It was a pleasure few mortals granted him in their homes. It was their loss, as he was an excellent cook. He'd decided on black bean and butternut chili, which would be served over rice. No cutting required; she didn't look up for it tonight.

As he dished up the food, she said, "The ramp was damaged in the storm. I'll need help to reach the water."

He nodded. He'd spotted the split planks on his arrival. It explained the unusually low number of vials prepared for collection. He pulled out his notebook, making a note to have his birds check on her with more regularity. He looked up to find her watching. He tore out of a piece of paper and handed it to her.

It was blank.

She folded it into an origami ibis then placed it into his hands. He admired it, before tucking it into an inner coat pocket.

They ate in companionable silence as the sun drew closer to the earth. As the bright orb's underbelly met the horizon, she pushed her bowl away. "I'll go change."

Death nodded and collected the dishes for washing up. He had placed the final bowl on the drying rack when she emerged from her bedroom. She'd removed most of the braces and splints, and was wearing a silk robe of blues and greens. A thick grey towel sat folded in her lap, the very one he'd brought her on his last visit. He smiled.

"I think it's best if you carry me tonight," she said.

He was relieved that she had come to the conclusion on her own. Wordlessly, he scooped her up and walked out into the dying light. She turned her head, fixing her eyes on the sea. It was a special place, where two great oceans meet. While the area was well known, her cottage and dock were secluded, far from where normal mortals dwelled.

Death picked his way down the ramp with care. Many of the boards were missing or splintered. The floating dock, however, remained sound. He gently set her on the dock's edge, so her feet could hang in the water. He accepted her towel and robe without comment, then stepped back as she checked the belt around her waist that held numerous tiny vials. As the earth swallowed the sun, her gills appeared. Without farewell, she slipped into the sea.

Death waited another moment before turning back to the cottage. He had a toolbox to fetch.

#

The ocean welcomed her into its depths as the webbing between her fingers and toes slid into place. The sea's gentle caress soothed her irritable skin while its bulk supported her weight, easing the aches in her joints. How she had missed her watery nights, where she could move with ease and grace. But Death's time was in high demand and she had not wanted to ask for help. She knew he'd come, eventually. Souls trapped in the sea needed collecting, like any other, and she was one of his best.

As she swam through the deep, many silvery souls drifted by, but she left them alone. They were those of the drowned and their bodies were dead. In time, other soul collectors would catch them, but while they waited they would gently float in a peaceful, slumbering state, unharmed. What she was searching for was far more elusive.

Stories formed by memories that had slipped out through human tears, breath, sweat, and ablutions whispered along the currents she travelled. Thoughts



were typically lost at a trickling pace, relieving the mind so that it would not become over-encumbered with new ideas and experiences. There were times, however, when chunks of the past were lost in a gush, either through trauma or an act of mercy. They were of little concern because the soul itself usually remained intact.

But for the people whose entire memories slipped away while their physical being still breathed, leaving them unable to recall the names of loved ones or recognize their faces, this was not so. These souls, torn between body and mind, followed the sense of self into the water and were the hardest for Death to locate. Until these disembodied souls could be caught, the victims' loved ones could do nothing but helplessly witness their long decline.

As she swam, she shut her eyes, opening her heart to sorrows. This is what her fellow collectors did not understand: dark souls could not be seen or captured. They floated in their watery coffins much like dread sits in a stomach. Her days on land, living with Ehlers-Danlos syndrome, the chronic condition that caused her body to constantly ache, had taught her this: pain worsened if you fought it. The only way to live with it was to ride its wave with acceptance. This affinity to pain was what called the dark souls out of hiding. She greeted them with open arms, without judgment, soothing their shame as she slipped them into vials and secured them in her belt.

#

Death finished his task by the darkest hour before the dawn. Yet he remained. Watchful. Patient.

When the sun's first rays brushed the horizon, her head broke the surface of the sea. Yet she remained out of reach. He knew she was often reluctant to leave, content to swim long after her gills and webbing had retracted. But he was selfishly pleased when she, after spotting him, swam over to the dock. He knew she managed to pull herself onto land, day after day, without assistance. But he

found himself unable to bear the thought of watching her face twist in pain as she hauled herself out. Quickly, before she could protest, he'd lifted her up, swaddling her with the thick grey towel.

She stared up at him as he set her gently down in her chair.

He stilled, fearing he'd taken too much liberty.

"Thank you." She turned her head towards the ramp. "And for that."

Her words made him bold, and he leaned down, brushing a kiss across her forehead.

She replied with a soft sigh.

Back in the cottage, he took the fresh vials, packing them in his case along with the rest. Done, he went to say good-bye. He found her in bed, nearly asleep. Her eyes fluttered open when he ran a finger down her cheek. As he pulled away, her hand found his.

"Stay."

She was not the first to ask, but never before had the invitation come from her lips. He was fairly certain she was offering nothing more than her slumbering company. Yet he found himself removing his shoes, shrugging off his coat, and joining her in bed, where he curled himself around her smaller form.

It was warm, comfortable.

A minute later, she was fast asleep.

He waited until the sun had fully risen before kissing her cheek and abandoning the bed. She hardly stirred. He stepped out of the room, leaving the door open a crack, the better to hear her breathe. He wondered if she knew her slumbering breath flowed in time with the waves below, creating a rhythmic melody.

In the kitchen, he brewed her a pot of rooibos. As foil wrapped bricks baked in

the oven, he cooked up a bowl of oats, lacing it with raisins and cinnamon. On the other hob he prepared a pot of West African peanut soup. When all was ready, he put the bricks into a cooler box, setting the food on top, and shut the lid. He withdrew a sheet of parchment, the words he wanted already inscribed.

#

A black Labrador arrived a week later, unannounced. Its trainer looked befuddled and dazed, as if he couldn't quite understand how he came to be at her cottage. Which was an accurate assessment of the situation. For while records showed money had been received and a discussion of what mobility services would be required, not a single member of the organization could recall interacting with the buyer.

Nonetheless, the trainer handed over the paperwork which detailed the animal's history and care. As the trainer drove away, a delivery van arrived with dog food and an assortment of pet supplies. Neither driver would recall the location of her cottage by the end of the day.

In the quiet, dog and woman took stock of one another. As she scratched its neck, she her fingers brushed a piece of parchment tucked into the harness. As she read, a raven hopped onto her shoulder. She turned to the bird, whispering, "Please, give him my thanks."

With a gentle tug to a braid, the raven agreed, then flew away.

Dog and woman worked well together. Each night, before she slipped into the sea, she'd remove his harness. The dog would leap into the water, swimming alongside for a half an hour, before climbing back onto the dock. There he would wait for his mistress, guarding her chair, as she dove into the deep, embracing dark souls whose abandoned bodies longed to die.

Once the dog had his mistress safely back to the cottage, they'd sleep on her bed, side by side. The training manual did not

recommend this. Neither woman nor dog cared.

#

As soon as her head sank under the rough sea, she could hear the terrified cries of fishermen. The other soul collectors were occupied: a hurricane, a jellyfish sting, a tsunami, a suicide. There was never enough of them, but tradition stated that sailors and fishermen should never die alone. Tonight, the dark souls would have to wait.

Battling the turbulent water, she reached the ten terrified humans trapped inside a flooded compartment. She was not permitted to save their lives, but amidst the chaos and panic, she could bring them calm and comfort. Heavy beams blocked their escape. Drawing upon her hypermobility – a trait of being born with Ehlers-Danlos syndrome – she subluxated her joints, flexing and contorting until she partially dislocated them. This caused pain and damage, but she was able to squeeze through a gap between the twisted door and a fallen beams.

Inside, as the boat rocked and debris came loose, she gathered the dying close to her. The boat groaned, seams threatening to split, but she stayed, singing softly to the fishermen. As air evacuated their bodies, a beam fell. The impact completely dislocated her right shoulder. Yet she remained with her charges, welcoming their souls. They turned silver, and peacefully slipped into the awaiting vials, where she corked them, one by one, using her remaining working hand. Finished, she turned her attention to her right arm. But try as she might, she couldn't force it back into its joint as she often could with other dislocations.

The boat moaned, beams around the gap shifted, narrowing the way out. Pushing panic aside, she grabbed the nearest beam with her left arm, and hauled her torso through what was left of the gap. As she twisted and squeezed through the maze of tiny open spaces, she felt something tear in her left ankle. She

continued to kick with her remaining leg, when something struck her right knee, pinning it. Rotating like a contortionist, she subluxated the joint bending in unnatural ways to free herself. Pain rocketed up her body as, with another pop of a joint, she finally pushed out of the boat. But her body was now battered, with only her left arm in fully functioning condition.

She was swimming too slow. Time was running out. The dock was still a mere pin prick in her sight when the sun began to rise. She gasped as her gills and webbing retracted. Struggling to breathe, she thrashed in the choppy water, her bones growing heavy, her muscles weak.

Turning to float on her back, she released a desperate whistle for help. Her only answer was a raven's caw.

The sun rose higher, its heat stinging her face. As the waves tossed her spluttering, exhausted body around, trying to force water up her nose and mouth, she thought of Death and wondered why he hadn't said good-bye. Through bleary eyes, she spotted a raven circling in the sky. There was comfort in knowing she would not die alone, at least.

The sound of the water changed.

Splashing.

There was a cold bump on her cheek. A pant in her ear. A lick over her nose. Blindly, she tossed her good arm over the dog's neck, grabbing his scruff. It was all she could do to hang on as he dragged her battered body through the choppy sea.

#

Death came as soon as the raven brought word. He walked into her home without a knock. As he strode into her bedroom, he found her asleep. The dog raised his head, acknowledging the visitor, and, satisfied, snuggled back down beside his battered, bruised, and exhausted mistress.

Death looked her over as best he could

without waking her. She and dog had clearly done a decent job sorting out the majority of her injuries once they'd made land. That was her way, to be as independent as possible. Managing her chronic condition was as everyday to her as brushing her teeth. But she'd always struggled to reset her own shoulder.

With nothing to be done until she woke, Death joined the pair in bed, curling his body gently around the woman's. He listened to her breath's rise and fall, in perfect harmony with the waves. The dog's huffy beat added a bluesy feel to the mix.

She was still asleep as the sun stretched past midday. He was antsy, Death needed a distraction, while waiting to reset her shoulder. He decided to cook, but as he rose from the bed, her left hand shot out, grasping his own. He looked down, noting how the silvery splints she wore on each finger sparkled in the daylight. "Stay," she whispered.

This time he placed the kiss directly on her lips.

#

Death had never been a healer. Popping her shoulder back into place left him convinced he'd caused her more harm than help. Her cries of pain had sent fear down his spine, despite her assurance afterwards that the worst was now over. As she bathed, he busied himself in the kitchen, wondering how he could persuade her to see a doctor. He knew there probably wasn't any more a doctor could do, but it would make *him* feel better.

He looked up at the sound of her chair. She had rolled out of the bedroom, body covered by a fluffy robe. Death noted the extra braces on her wrist and ankles. She parked next to the table, and with the assistance of dog, eased herself into a dining chair. Her robe slipped, flashing a knee brace and long strips of brightly colored athletic tape.

He reached into his jacket for parchment.

"Don't," she said. "I'll be fine."

He wasn't sure he agreed, but he could tell by the look on her face she was in no mood to argue. He set down mugs of chai and plates of mandazi instead.

"Thank you," she said.

He joined her at the table. Out of lowered eyes, he watched her attempt to cut the puffed triangles. One went skidding off her plate, straight into the dog's grateful mouth. A blow of frustration escaped her. He sensed an offer to assist would not be appreciated. Instead, he set down his cutlery and picked up the food with his fingertips. He made a subtle show of dunking the breakfast treat into the rich caramel sauce, before bringing it to his mouth.

She smiled, proceeding to follow his lead. When she'd finished her meal, she carefully cleaned her hands on a serviette and dabbed her face. As she folded the cloth, she said, "I have a favor to ask."

He wished he could shout, "Anything!" But he was not made to behave as such. Instead, he merely nodded, as his heart warmed.

"It would help to have a larger bathtub, one that would allow me to float during the day when, well, when I'm sore and have had enough."

He pulled out his notebook, making a note.

"Thank you."

She stood. He pushed back his chair, preparing to aid, but she held up a splinted hand. He remained sitting, watching her careful steps. The dog ghosted beside her, his harness handle available should she need support. When she reached Death, she gave him a smile, cupping his face with one hand.

He dropped his arms to his sides. She slid onto his lap, resting her head against his chest. As he embraced her, she said, "Do you think, perhaps, you could consider this your home? Use it as a base, between

your travels?"

He did not inform her that he already did. Instead, he kissed the top of her head. When she did not look up, he placed a finger under her chin. As she raised her face, he pressed his forehead against hers.

She reached to her waist, untying the fastening. As her robe fell open, she whispered, "Take me to bed."

**/End**



Tiah Marie Beaument is the author of two novels, including the award-nominated *This Day* (2014, Modjaji) and numerous short stories. She is the managing editor of the The Single Story Foundation's journal, teaches writing to all ages, and freelances for a variety of publications. In her spare time she has been spotted riding horses and as pillion on motorcycles on the South African Garden Route.

## ARTIST SPOTLIGHT ON: **TAMARA REDDY**

**Tamara Reddy** is a self-taught Alternative Visual Artist currently based in Johannesburg, South Africa. She is founder of 'Tred in Mental', a graphic art free space which encourages the freedom to create visual poetry through graphic art, fantasy, humour and the appreciation for the Human Race.

Tamara's artwork shares a visual culture, of the state of being, through Graphic Posters. Her artwork questions the way we are socially conditioned to belong as people; to seek truth. All design work is created as an alternative form of visual education for children and young adults in raising awareness to the strengths and weaknesses of our current social conditions. Human development can go through extreme measures to have purpose in this world. Eco Terrorism, Women abuse, racism, corrective rape, child abuse, thought disorders, suicide, anger and loneliness are a few of these extremities. Tamara's visual identity is dedicated to shining a light in a dark place. It is important to find and create beauty because of how 'real' life can get. Her artwork aims to connect to great hearts and innovative minds in pushing the human race forward through the freedom of Expression. Tamara's gift is to share a world of magick through the use of colour and imagination.

Her portfolio includes design work for print, posters, album art, comics and illustration, and video art.

### **1. Tell us a little bit about your background.**

I am a self-taught alternative visual artist currently based in Johannesburg, South Africa. I have been drawing since I was a child. I studied Psychology and

Media Studies at the University of Witwatersrand from 2005-2010. It was only in my final year, when I was deep in socio-critical theory, that I realised a truth about reality and our fear-based society that resonated within me. This



led me to start illustrating the emotions and thoughts in my reality.

I saw similar styles and emotions in the gig posters used to promote bands. I thought to myself: "Okay there is a way I can share and display the messages of my art; people make beats about this stuff!" I was also really inspired by Nan Goldin's photography, so I played around with a camera for a while. But found it too intimidating to take pictures of people; I was not as comfortable with photography as I was with sketching.

One day, I was messing around with an image on my PC, combining my sketches with the photo. The outcome was dark, surreal, and romantic; a lifeform that showed itself to me. I fell in love.

## **2. What inspired you to be an artist when you were growing up and why?**

I grew up in Lenasia South, in Johannesburg. It was during the early 2000s (I was a teenager then), and growing up in this area was boring and really lonely for me. I was also the introverted, weird, and angry kid who believed in magik and that Alanis Morissette was my angel. There was no alternative, no grunge visual culture such as music, graffiti, and posters on the street poles. All I had were the Simunye Grooves CDs and MTV.

I was continuously pressured to fit into the Typical Indian Girl mould, which was: study, dress pretty, have lots of money, and get married. I wanted to escape. I had met a soul-friend in my final year of high school. She was the only girl who got my weirdness and loved it. And in that love I found power. Her love for music opened the door to my love for poetry, alternative music, trip-hop, and punk culture. I started making indie comics and playlists for her.

Collecting music led me to live music, club culture, and album and graphic Art. I finally found a place where I belonged. I finally understood the beauty that lies in darkness. This inspired me to create my craft, to shine light into dark places, to

address the social oppressions that women have to endure daily. And to help young women believe in themselves enough that they break their silences.

## **3. What is the most challenging aspect of being an artist, particularly as a woman, in your country?**

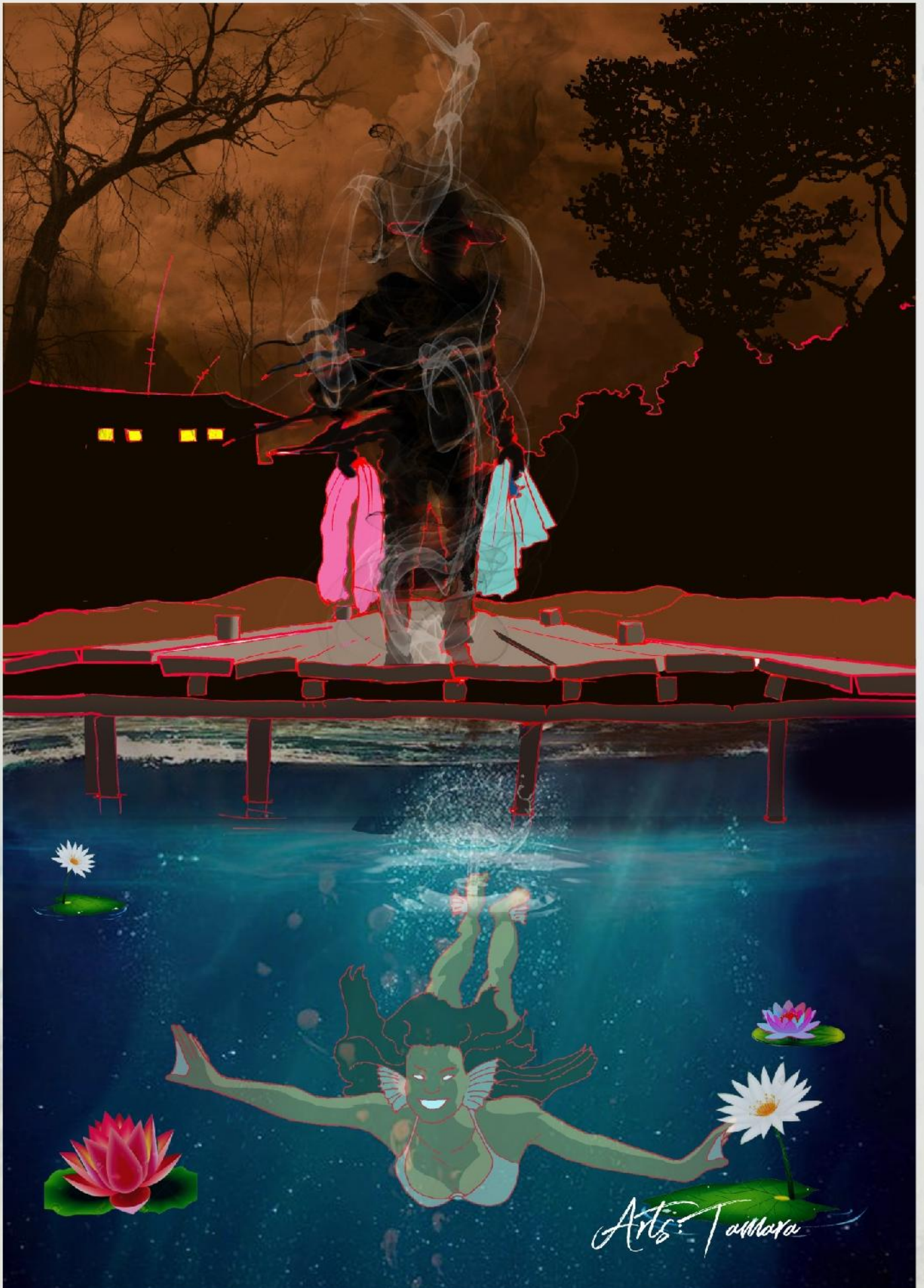
I feel female artists are very segregated, disrespected and stereotyped in South Africa. Firstly, it is really difficult to find female visual artists, unless they are made popular by the media. And the only time a female artist is celebrated by the media is during Women's History month, or in theme-based parties, or as a sex symbol – and that is if they know how to market themselves. There is a noticeable amount of gender inequality.

If you looked at a visual art exhibition, for example, it will be highly dominated by male artists and maybe one female artist. I feel that there is no encouragement for women to come out more and share and collaborate in their craft so that we don't have to see the same artists all the time.

I think women artists have to work a bit smarter and harder, because we are breaking the brand of the masculinity-centric society that we live in. I feel that all artistic voices should be recognised equally. It should not matter if we are women or men, self-taught or college-educated. What should be recognised is our passion for pushing the human potential.

## **4. Are you involved in any other projects outside your regular job? If so, can you tell us which ones you're currently most excited about?**

Yeah, I am currently involved in a Visual Art and Contemporary Dance collaboration with choreographer and contemporary dancer [Thamsanqa \(Thami\) Majela](#). I really enjoy Thami's work. This project in particular, because it speaks to something we both experience and are aware of: the extremes that one experiences in depressed masculinity and femininity.





Light On: Tamara Reddy

*Arts: Tamara*



This performance will be shown in South Africa at the [My Body, My Space festival](#) in Mpumalanga. I am also creating a photo-manipulation portrait series where I work with children and women in townships and villages sharing the stories unique to their identity as human beings.

**5. What strategies do you use to carve out time for sketching?**

My strategies are rooted in reducing the anxiety that comes about because of working alone and having to discipline myself. Before I start any work, I first make sure I am mentally healthy to do so. I work out and meditate, ensure I have coffee, and always play a movie or an album in the background to eliminate PC noises and the voices who make noise in my head.

Once I am in the zone, I am complete. However, it is critical to step outside and see daylight when the struggle does eventually present itself. Sometimes that's done in the form of scratching my dog's belly, sometimes it's done in the form of YouTube videos. After sketching is done, I always make sure I clean my work space. I reward myself by being in nature. For me, it is very important to balance my eyesight with man-made light and natural light.

**6. Are there any TV shows, movies or web series you would sneak out to watch right now?**

Definitely. The TV series *OZ*. I always find myself going back to *OZ*. I think the more I develop in myself, the more I listen to it. It blows my mind all the time. That and the movie *Gattaca*.

**7. Who are the most exciting artists on the South African scene right now?**

I would say [Vusi Beauchamp](#), [Ayanda Mabulu](#), [Zanele Muholi](#) and [Naomi Van Niekerk](#).

**8. What was the most discouraging time in your career and how did you overcome it?**

Shoo! I think the most discouraged I have been was when my artwork was selected for The Burning Question, an exhibition about climate change danger featured at the [2017 MTN Bush Fire](#) festival. My family did not support my passion for making art at all and made it difficult for me to be at the exhibition. It broke my heart because here I was trying to do something that would make a huge impact on people. Instead, I was being judged and belittled, told to "get a real job". Naturally, I fell into a depression and it really hurt. Even when I was eventually able to go to the festival, I was still depressed and disappointed - and stayed that way for about two months thereafter.

In the course of those two months I still created art, but I was now starting to fear sharing my work and exhibiting because I was afraid I would be hurt like that again. My art then became a container that turned my anger into something like a bubblegum milkshake. It was the only space I found in my loneliness that understood me. I eventually found myself again and I accepted that that which makes me feel happy is much more important than making others happy. I accepted myself and that I can't change for anyone. The truth is in staying true to myself.

**9. Looking back, is there anything in your career that you would do differently? Any major decisions you regret?**

I don't regret anything because everything has been a lesson to learn in becoming a better artist. There are definitely things I would have done differently. One thing I learnt is never do anything out of desperation because it makes you do things you don't want to do - giving away your value for way lower than what it is worth.

**10. What is it you would most want to be remembered for when you're gone?**

Reminding people of the light inside them.

# LEE-AH (SISTER)

H.J. Golakai



“Bury it deep.”

“Shh. I know how to bury things.”

The two girls, on their knees on the ground, stared at each other. The first girl pulled her lips against her teeth in an exaggerated grimace that made the second girl burst out laughing. It was a sign they were thinking the same thing, that the words of the buck-toothed elder who had guided them in basket-weaving two days before had not been forgotten. *Curse the ancestors' heads, the two of you are impossible! You hail from two villages with a long history of conflict, but you have forged this attachment rivalling the rock of ages. You have both been blessed with beauty and cleverness, but your minds are too consumed with mischief. Watch yourselves, or you will never learn to watch each other.*

“This is not sprinting or a decoration festival, Omaru girl,” teased the first girl. Her eyes were tawny and her smile coy and quick, revealing small teeth but no other truths. “This is a task for real women.”

“Hehn! The very reason to mind your mouth, fire-dance princess,” the second girl, possessed of a temper more fluid and easy to read, struggled to keep her agitation under control. “Be careful not to hurt your fine fingers, Wasa women are delicate.”

But every minute they lost on banter was costing them.

Their search for sacred ground had unfolded in the style of all tasks they performed together - lazy, playful, and peppered with winding tales. Barefoot and naked save for the vibrant strings of beads in their hair and short lappa wrappers

around their waists, the girls had pushed aside branches and stepped over fallen logs, mindful of snakes and scorpions as they swatted at bugs.

Eventually, dusk had threatened, a reminder of the consequences facing them if their task remained unfinished. The mood had sobered and the pace quickened. Finally, they saw it: a patch of ground lit by fading sunlight, nestled near the stub of a fallen mango tree, protected from the energetic course of a nearby stream. The girls held their breath, and as if in answer, the wind kicked a whisper through the forest's leaves. Their eyes locked. Water, wood, wind, and fire. Earth to act as vessel. Their site had spoken. They fell on all fours and began to dig.

Two pairs of hands - one of honeyed, stripped wood, the other deep cocoa-brown - scabbled through the dirt, wrist-deep in filth as they tossed handfuls of soil aside. Their scooping gathered momentum as they competed to see who could scoop faster. Two heads of ornate braids - one whose brown locks were woven to the top of her head, the other whose black plaits fell down a long neck and strong shoulders - bobbed up and down, faces fierce with concentration, foreheads close and dotted with sweat, breath laboured in the hush of the evening.

After several minutes, the second girl rocked backwards onto her toes, a glimmer of triumph in her dark eyes, signalling her companion to fling the last handful of dirt to one side in a huff. The hole was deep enough. Deft fingers went to the swathes of lappa around their waists and began to undo knots of fabric.

Nestled within the lappas lay two wooden dolls. Each was clothed identically to its owner and carved from two different trees, one golden and the other umber, much like the hands that held them up. The girls sighed, reverent smiles playing across their lips. The dolls were placed, into the

Nestled within the lappas lay two wooden dolls. Each was clothed identically to its owner and carved from two different trees. one golden and the other umber, much like the hands that held them up.

earth side by side, then dirt layered over them and pressed down. A smooth, heavy stone acted as the final seal.

They hugged and laughed. From that night onward they would not only be women, but sisters. Tomorrow, branded high on each of their shoulders would be a ritual marking, a public symbol that they had braved the secret society of womanhood. As they matured, their scars would expand with them, soaking up dreams and desires. They would be forever bound, each a beloved guardian of the other. Sisters in society, sisters in blood.

Miatta was tired. The village of Wasa seemed to taunt her, moving farther and farther away with every step she took. She regretted not having set out from home earlier even as the afternoon heat gave way to the evening's cool, but that could not be helped now. What mattered was the grave situation that demanded she walk these endless miles, one she feared to name even to herself.

Many days had passed since the messenger had come from Wasa with urgent news: her bond-sister, Nyenpu, was ill with the fever and had sent for her. She had sent him back with her message - *hold on, my feet are flying to you* - a promise she had been unable to keep. There were many considerations before embarking on a journey on foot, especially with rainy season at its peak and the rivers and forest in full flush. Treacherous waters often swept unfortunates to their death. The forest, untended for months, grew wild, its animals bold. Miatta was not worried about any of the physical dangers. She had grown up roaming the valley and learning its ways, for amusement as well as safety. Her worry was the fever.

No one knew exactly where it had come from and which family fell first. The healers and herbalists of both Wasa and her own village Omaru remained baffled. They chanted and stirred and sprinkled their mystical cures, but the fever fought them with a bitter will. They had managed to stay its hand and restore many of the infected, grey and shaken, to the land of the living. But many others had not fared so well. The fever was a proud beast, and wanted the final word. Every so often, waves of wailing rose to the sky as another weakened soul succumbed...

Miatta shook her head. *Nonsense.* She would not let doubt and fear creep in. Wasa was close and she would arrive just after nightfall, if she kept her stride. The journey would have been easier and faster if not for the extra load, but that had been unavoidable.

As if sensing her disloyal thoughts, the baby on her back stirred and kicked her legs in happy protest. Laughing, Miatta stopped, put down the bag of provisions she was carrying, then stooped and tightened the lappa holstering her daughter. When the messenger from Wasa had brought the news of Nyenpu's illness, Miatta had hurriedly packed to travel with him the next morning. That night, though, her baby had developed a fever and, frantic, she postponed her journey. The illness turned out to be a common bout, the child recovered in a few days, and Miatta set out as planned. There had been no other choice. Friendship was strong, but it paled next to motherhood. She would explain her tardiness and Nyenpu, blessed with a daughter of her own, would certainly be forgiving.

"Don't worry, my love," Miatta murmured and caressed the soles of her child's feet to calm her. "We will soon reach, then we can rest."

Her words sounded uncertain even to her own ears, though she knew her daughter was far too young to notice. The sun was sinking quickly and Miatta gathered up her load, and doubled her speed, averting her eyes as she walked on. She could see the divide coming up ahead, the clearing no traveller wanted to cross alone, the dreaded territory that was neither Omaru or Wasa. The area was always devoid of animal life - no birds nesting nor monkeys chattering. Many mothers had simply to lift a threatening finger in its direction to achieve immediate silence and obedience from their daughters. *People disappear here. Ghosts walk among men here. THE WITCH WILL EAT YOU.*

She kept her back to the clearing, feeling exposed, imagining wispy fingers reaching through the envelope of silence that hung over the place to grab her. All she had to do was keep moving and before long, there would be signs of life. Traders always traversed these parts. They knew well the unpredictability of long journeys and would often offer fellow travelers food and shelter for the night. But before then, there

*She sneaked a look behind her and saw a thatched roof, the only sign of human occupation, emerging from the bush.*

was just she, a lonely traveller with a baby, and the divide, darkening, yawning in her face...

She sneaked a look behind her and saw a thatched roof, the only sign of human occupation, emerging from the bush. A sap tree, the tallest for miles, towered over the equally imposing hut, and they both pushed their way out of the forest as if to swallow her. She broke into a light jog.

Miatta slowed and shook her head once she was past the clearing, scattering her wild thoughts to the wind. Like every young woman, she had seen the inside of that hut and knew it held little to fear. Not that she ever wished to revisit those countless tasks and dull lectures that she had had to endure as a young initiate of the secret society. The hut and its memories were no cause for unease, but its occupant was.

The old zoe who lived there, whose duty it was to train young girls and usher them past the veil of childhood, watched her far too closely. Eyes even the other elders dare not meet weighed Miatta at every step - at initiation, at the river, at the fire-dance, on the day of her marriage. Always questioning, probing, demanding. Why, Miatta did not know. Never would she dare question or even approach the old woman. Such unspoken matters --

Miatta strained her eyes into the dusk. Someone was coming. It could not be, but there was no mistaking that determined strut or the sway of those hips. She broke into a jog, oblivious to the strain of the baby bouncing on her back. The figure picked up speed as well, their slippers snap-snap-snapping against the ground as they ran to each other. Miatta and Nyenpu laughed as they embraced. Miatta forgot the journey, her hunger and gnawing worries. Her friend was safe and sound, well enough to come and meet her on the road.

Miatta recoiled from the embrace after a moment. "Ah-ah, Nyenpu, your skin is boiling!" And such a hungry heat it was, like stepping into the smoking hut where beans would dry after harvest. She laid a hand on Nyenpu's face and studied her

properly. All was not well. Gone was Nyenpu's fair and radiant complexion, in its stead an unnatural grey pallor that stood out like clay against the deep brown of Miatta's fingers. Sickness had eaten her meat. Her eyes bulged within juts of bone.

Guilt pierced Miatta's heart. Weeks had gone by since she or Nyenpu had visited each other's homesteads. More and more, the daily motions of life had taken priority over everything. If only they were still carefree girls with the leisure of time. If only she had left earlier...but she was here now. She would set her friend right in no time.

"My sister, you don't look good at all. Why did you leave your bed to come outside this late?" Miatta asked, rocking back and forth to shush her daughter. The sudden sprint to hug Nyenpu had woken the child, and combined with hunger and the evening chill, the baby sounded highly unamused. "You know how stubborn I am. I heard you were on your way to see me so I decided to come and meet you. I knew you were worried, and I wanted you to see I was doing better."

Miatta reeled. How high and unnatural her friend's voice sounded! Like a mosquito had climbed into her throat and taken over her speech.

Nyenpu must have seen her shock because she rushed to explain: "I sound strange, I know," she coughed into a fist. "The fever changed many things about me. It will take some time before I find myself again."

They drifted to sit on tree stumps by the roadside, and Miatta proceeded to breastfeed. She waited. There was a story to be told and Nyenpu, spinner of tales, would have her saga of triumph over the fever waiting on her lips.

None came.

Instead they traded family news and village gossip from weeks spent apart. The dark cloaked in and Miatta lit her kerosene lantern. With light and company at hand, she wanted to feel more at ease. But could not. Nyenpu was frail and understandably not herself, but even so she seemed...more unlike herself than ever. In fact, the darker it got, the stranger she became, and in a frightening trick of the light her pupils seemed to glow.

Miatta saw her husband's face, loving and worried, rise in her mind as she anxiously scanned the night around her. Trade had briefly taken him away from Omaru and before leaving he had begged her not to go, to leave their child behind. Miatta now wondered if, in a haste to see her friend, she had been reckless.

It was also impossible to grasp this business with Nyenpu, who seemed to be worsening by the minute. She had already refused food and water several times, pleading fatigue. Her skin was like a slick hide shrinking into her bones and the pungent furnace of her breath was unbearable. Why leave your sick-bed so promptly after a grave illness to meet someone already on their way to see you? What careless fools had been caring for her, to allow her to slip out undetected in such a condition?

This was not her only worry. The child would not cease her howling for more than a few minutes at a time. Nyenpu had taken her and cradled her, crooning playful words and songs, but to little effect. Her friend soon sank into an uncommon silence, perhaps concerned her strange voice was upsetting the baby.

"We need to go," Miatta said. Whatever magic or madness had coaxed Nyenpu out of her sick-bed would not hold for much longer.

"You are right. But this one is tired, o! All these tears!" Nyenpu said. "Let me hold her. You can't carry everything the whole way."

Miatta shook her head. "Nyenpu, you are barely fit to carry yourself. Don't worry, I can manage."

Nyenpu laughed in her high mosquito timbre. "Ah my sister, you've had her the whole day, she's tired of you! Look now, she's stopped crying."

Miatta recoiled from the embrace after a moment. "Ah-ah. Nyenpu. your skin is boiling!" And such a hungry heat it was. like stepping into the smoking hut where beans would dry after harvest.





The baby, wild-eyed and silent, was already slung to Nyenpu's chest, and Miatta found her tongue had thickened with a protest she couldn't voice. She hoisted her provisions bag with unnecessary force, irritated by the uneasiness clawing at the walls of her stomach.

"When we reach Wasa, you can have porridge and milk," Nyenpu cooed to the baby, blowing her kisses.

Miatta found her feet would not move, no matter how she commanded them. Her heart thumped a hard, unsteady rhythm.

"Maybe we shouldn't go to Wasa. We should go back to Omaru." Her words surprised her.

A cruel iciness flashed in Nyenpu's eyes with such swiftness Miatta felt sure she had imagined it.

"Come stay with me until you recover fully," Miatta pressed. "We'll send word for your husband not to worry, and I'm sure your mother can look after your little one in your absence. It's much better that way." Nyenpu smiled. It was a completely different smile from the one Miatta had always known. Her trademark mischievous twinkle remained, but there was a dead, unsettling quality in those fever-pink eyes that the smile did not touch. They locked eyes, and Miatta fought an inexplicable urge to grab her daughter, rip her free of Nyenpu's bosom and hold her tight against her own chest. And run.

As if reading her mind, *challenging* her, Nyenpu pulled her lappa tighter. "Then we go to Omaru," she agreed, smiling softly into the baby's hair.

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They spoke little as they walked. Miatta held the lantern up to the night, on guard but lost in thought.

Nyenpu was absorbed in coddling the baby, singing childhood songs, caressing her head, releasing her from the sling to bounce her up and down. But the child had started crying again and remained inconsolable, only resting intermittently from screaming and kicking her legs.

Miatta threw a backward glance and realised how fast she must have been

walking. Or perhaps Nyenpu's pace was far slower. Frowning, Miatta slowed down. Shrunken and ghostly as Nyenpu was, somehow she did not *look* tired.

*People disappear. Ghosts walk. THE WITCH-*

Miatta stopped. Tingling with fear, she put down the lantern and carrier bag. Calling out that she was thirsty, she rooted through it, fingers scrambling over one item after another. At last, one hand closed over the water bottle and the other gripped a cool circle of glass. She tipped the water to her lips and angled the mirror in her shaky palm.

Disquiet crystallized into terror as she stared at the reflection. Behind her, the unrecognisable being that was now Nyenpu had stopped walking. It swung the baby aloft, gently at first, then more roughly, its claws gripping the child's tiny, chubby arms as it lifted her higher and higher. Muscle and bone shifted unnaturally in its face as its jaws spread. A charred, disfigured lump of a tongue curled, twined and whipped into the child's face. Its eyes burned a red so bright they lit the surrounding skin with a horrifying glow. The baby released another lusty scream and the creature transformed. Nyenpu's face returned, comforting with kisses and murmurings of love.

Miatta choked down a sob. "I need to urinate!" she cried.

"My friend, you are all over the place today," Nyenpu shrieked. "First Wasa, then Omaru. Now you drink, then immediately you want the toilet. You worry me now." Miatta kept her gaze to the ground, certain her eyes would betray her. They always did, and Nyenpu knew her too well. She had to brave the forest, run to safety. But how to get her daughter safely back in her arms without raising suspicion? Could she run ahead, alone, on the lie that she sought shelter for them in the nearest homestead? Was her only child safe with this soulless version of Nyenpu for even a few minutes? Her daughter gave her a tearful gaze, tiny fingers opening and closing as she strained for her mother.

Without a word, Miatta stepped up and took her out of Nyenpu's arms.

Their eyes did battle – first a question, then sadness, and at last a squaring off – as

realization settled over them both. Miatta's neck twined up proudly. Nyenpu's eyes glittered, defiant gems filled with the haughtiness she was known for. The underlying crackle of competition and tension they had always relished began to mutate in the hush of that moment. Were they youngsters again, monkeying up a mango tree to grab the highest fruit, or feverishly twisting reeds into baskets, each one certain her fingers were the most agile? Hips gyrating to the drumbeat as they eyed the same well-muscled suitor, both lightheaded with the hope she would steal his attention, make his blood hot for her love?

No. The challenge before them now was more final, deadlier, than any they had ever faced.

Miatta said, "I will come back soon."

New-Nyenpu replied, "Then I will wait here for you."

Miatta veered off the road into the dark, strapping her precious bundle to her back.

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Miatta ran so hard and fast her feet burned like live coals.

Running in the daytime required a different system from the one employed at night, especially when moonlight and heavy foliage came into play. Crashing past branches and leaping fallen logs, she recalled every skill learned as a youthful sprinter. She kept her mouth closed and head down, doing her best to pick out the layout of the forest floor before planting her feet. Her slippers were soon abandoned.

Girls with quicksilver were often warned about the dangers of mixing speed and femininity. Society demanded of a young lady that she walk not run, treading with grace and dignity. But Miatta had always ignored the scolding of elders as she raced packs of boys, breasts cupped for support, laughing triumphantly as she won, braving her mother's switch against her legs with a secret smile.

Now, she called upon her latent lightning, for what was at stake went far beyond punishment and public scorn. An unlucky frog squished beneath her graceless heel and Miatta skidded. Cursing, she felt

stones and pebbles give way to softer ground and mud under her feet; she grabbed a branch to brake just before she emerged onto the river bank.

She scabbled downslope towards the sandy edge of the water, stared at the river's churning waters and wailed softly in despair. The forest was a snarl of shadows, but a river crossing at night was another brand of madness. She could hear Nyenpu barrelling through the bush, knocking obstacles aside like toys, her shrieks rising to the moon. Bent double, Miatta was heaving from exhaustion. It was useless trying to hide. The baby's terrified screams betrayed their position too easily. Through the sweat stinging her eyes, she saw Nyenpu break the forest barrier onto the rocky shore, then slow to a slither, each step a taunt.

The creature stopped at the top of the verge and looked down on Miatta, and for a second Miatta saw a flash of her friend, the look on her face impossible to decipher - love, disgust, pain, triumph, mourning - and then both the look and her friend were gone. The gaunt creature moved a final step to the very lip of the edge and Miatta shuffled closer to the water's edge. Quiet sobs wracked her as the creature ripped a young banana tree from the ground and flung it like a twig. Miatta screamed and leaped out of the way.

Nyenpu cackled. "Haaaay! My sister, stop this nonsense. Why are you running from me? It's only me. There's no reason to be afraid."

Miatta scuttled to the lip of the water's edge. The ebb was lowest where she stood, but still too tumultuous.

"'Lightning Legs Miatta.' You were always so fast. No one could catch you." Bloody coals bored into her with a look of pity. "I let you believe it too, that you were so much quicker than me. I let you believe many things."

*Why leave your sick-bed so promptly after a grave illness to meet someone already on their way to see you? What careless fools had been caring for her, to allow her to slip out undetected in such a condition?*

Miatta hesitated, throwing desperate glances between forest and river.

There was no turning back.

Smirking from atop the sloping verge, Nyenpu picked up a boulder and flung it with impossible force, laughing as it thudded down the gravelly bank. Miatta leapt, stumbling as the squirming baby nearly tipped them over.

The boulder rolled to a stop. With the agility of a jungle cat, Nyenpu dove through the air and landed on it in a squat, gnarled hands dangling playfully in front of her. There were only a few steps between them. Tilting her head, Nyenpu looked past Miatta at the river.

"Can you make it, *Lightning*?" she hissed.

Miatta sucked in her breath and dove into the churn.

The tide swept in at chest height. She clasped both hands and kept them behind her back to raise her daughter's bottom as high as possible whilst keeping her head above water. Her soles were rubbed bloody and sore by the stony riverbed. In no time, keeping her balance became excruciating.

At last, she spluttered onto the other bank and took off again. Nyenpu was close, jeering that Miatta was no fine swimmer and did not know the forest as well as she did. But Miatta knew Nyenpu had always been afraid of rivers, disliked their perpetual wetness and unpredictability. Even in death, the creature who wore her spirit would not leap in, would look for a gentler crossing with stepping stones. This bought her time, but not much. Fatigue began to wear Miatta down. The baby's cries roused a chatter of angry monkeys as they ran. Soaked and exhausted, Miatta begged every ancestor she knew for protection as she scanned the trees for sanctuary.

Her eyes fell on a huge fallen log, its centre rotted away. She slung the baby down and climbed inside the hollow, pressing her close inside the tight space. Choking on the mustiness of their cocoon, she tried to settle her heavy breathing and her daughter's distress. The baby's wails dropped to whimpers, yet still her cries carried. Trembling, Miatta squeezed her closer. "Please, my love," she whispered.

"I followed her, on the final night of your initiation." the zoe went on. "She crept back into the forest and removed your idols from the ground."

"Please be quiet, for me."

Her daughter promptly fell silent, fumbling in the hollow for her mother's finger to suck. Footsteps in the undergrowth. Nyenpu called her name, in melodious tones, then plaintively, seductively, and finally shrieked in rage. "Come with me!"

Miatta shut her senses against the desperation of the plea. Freshly parted from the body, a gina spirit could seduce out what it most desired, using praise, promises or threats, to drag a living soul with it into the afterlife. Darkness lit the flame for it to burn hot and angry, but daylight would melt away its power.

Miatta held her baby and her breath, and prayed and prayed for the sun.

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"I do not understand."

Seated on the mud floor, her infant asleep in her lap, Miatta frowned at the old woman.

At first light, she dragged her battered body to the hut beneath the sap tree, falling through its door when it opened before her hand touched it. Now, after hours of rest, revelations flowed.

"She came for you. You know the gina, when it comes for you, you can only fight. Or," the zoe spread out her hands, "allow it to take you into its beyond."

Miatta shook her head. "No. *Why*? We were everything to each other, we made worlds together, from the time we were babies." "Your worlds began to separate longer ago than you know. The man that you call husband..." the zoe prompted, and waited. Miatta stared into the fire.

"Before me, he was hers," she answered at last, "when we were young girls. She

captured his attention first. But Nyenpu..." a sigh trembled from her lips, "...so headstrong... so many games. She could not settle her heart on one young man for long."

"Neither of you could." Miatta opened her mouth to protest and the old woman raised her hand for silence. "As long as virtue was maintained," she allowed. "Beautiful women never easily resolve to love only one man until it pleases them to do so, nor should they have to."

She stared into the fire, lost in a gone time. Miatta studied her and then guiltily looked away, unable to imagine the worn, wrinkled face had ever held charm.

"He grew tired of her," Miatta continued. "To save Nyenpu's pride and avoid her temper, he allowed everyone to think otherwise. But she swore, *swore to me*, that it did not matter when love grew between us. Yet she wanted me dead."

"She wanted you with her," the *zoe* corrected. "The man was nothing. Your friendship grew so strong, it corrupted her. Nyenpu's will was of iron, even in death - she could not pass on and leave you behind. In her eyes, you belonged to one another, in life and beyond."

"I followed her, on the final night of your initiation," the *zoe* went on. "She crept back into the forest and removed your idols from the ground."

Miatta covered her mouth. The sacred idols, once buried, were never to be disturbed.

"She did not trust the ancestors to be the guardians of your bond. By doing this, she chose her fate. Nothing could have prevented the events of last night."

"When did she die?" Miatta whispered.

"At dusk. Not long after she appeared to you."

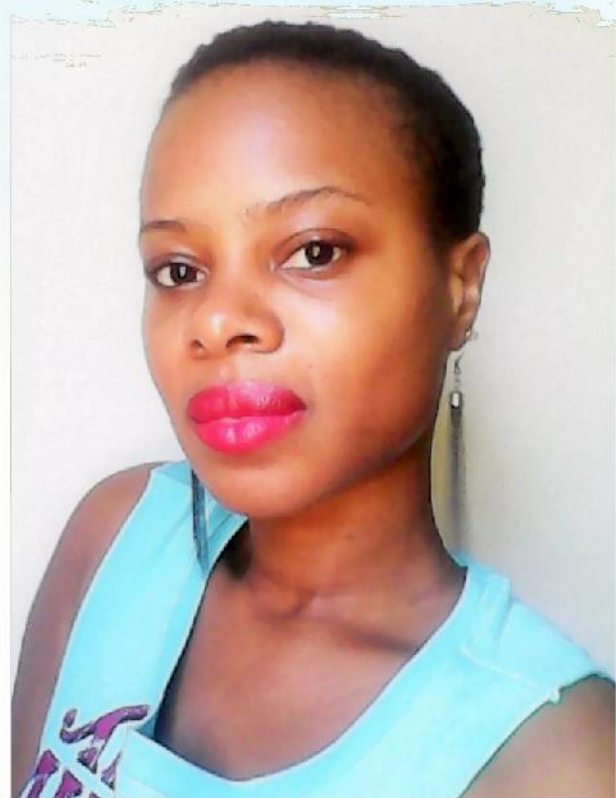
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Women ran onto the road as she neared Omaru village. Their slippers roused the dust, their lappas fluttered like colourful wings. Their faces were bright with tears.

"Come o-o-o, come!" they cried. "Come and hear it! Your sister Nyenpu has left us."

Miatta sank to her knees and pressed her forehead to the ground, her first tears falling as her baby stirred on her back.

"I know," she sobbed. "I know."



Born in Frankfurt, Germany, **Hawa Jande Golakai** spent a vibrant childhood in Liberia.

After the civil war in 1990 she bounced around the continent and considers herself a contemporary nomad and cultural sponge. Her 2011 debut *The Lazarus Effect* was thrice nominated and she is a laureate of the Africa39 Project, celebrating some of the most promising new authors on the continent.

In addition to her second novel *The Score*, she has featured for the BBC, *Brittle Paper*, *The Guardian UK*, *Commonwealth Anthology*, *Ankara Press* and others. She is the winner of the 2017 *Brittle Paper* award for her creative non-fiction essay *Fugee* and has served as a judge for literary prizes such as *9mobile (Etisalat)* and *Short Story Day Africa*. She is also a medical immunologist and with her son, lives between Monrovia and anywhere else she finds herself.

# REVIEW OF TRINITY: RED OCTOBER ISSUE 1

Joseph Omotayo

## Writing Back at the Colonial Empire

The desire to create superhero characters Africans can relate with has always been the driving force behind comics in Africa. Ayodele Elegba, the convener of Lagos comic con, buttressed this when he hinged the founding of Lagos comic convention on the strong need to make [“every...fan and creative to boast of a comic convention they can call their own.”](#) The desire to create relatable characters is not peculiar to Ayodele alone, Roye Okupe [quit his very lucrative tech job in Washington to YouNeek Studios](#), the creator of the popular EXO (Enodegemic Xsokeletal Ordiance). All these go to show one thing; arts in Africa are at the very significant point of not only writing back at the colonial centre, but of deconstructing Western idea of arts and what they should be made of. It is in this vein one could say comics as Trinity are postcolonial literatures. There is one basic thing postcolonial literature does; it wrestles agency of representation from western cannons as it re-ascribes it to those who should speak about themselves. Following that path, a whole new set of African superheroes are coming up. We have EXO, Binti, Black Panther, and now Laguda in this Trinity Issue 1.

## History as an Amenable Material

This Trinity Issue 1 is themed *Our Father*. The issue is the first part in a series of 8 episodes. Trinity's *Our Father* maximizes on Nigerian political history for a resourceful material. This issue condenses Nigerian political history spanning about three centuries. It drew from the country's precolonial era, its colonial political terrain, its early postcolonial period (that timeframe abutting on the slippery edge between the country's military and democratic political systems), and the country's present political turmoil. As it is the norm of works depicting real events, this comic plays a safe distance in the representations of true events as it

creatively changes real names and known personalities. However, this subtle distortion reveals so much for the reader to get follow. For instance, names like Jubo Jubogha (the Jaja of Opobo), and Donald Duke were represented as Jumbo Jumbosa and Dariye Duke respectively. Also, Boko Haram terrorist organization is depicted as the Sons of the Sandstorm (Easifat Ramalia).

In fully appreciating this issue, a reader's knowledge of history is useful. You cannot really relate with the many events in this issue if history fails you. The historical timelines in this comic are factual dates of events that once happened in Nigeria. A typical example is the occupation of Lagos in 1851 which is alluded to in page 6 as one of the preludes to events in this series. The phrase “boiling cannons” gives away the cloaking of the historical and infamous British invasion of Lagos which is also locally known by the Yorubas as Ogun Agidingbi.

*“In 1851, the HMS Bloodhood pounded Lagos and Kosoko's ambitions into submission in the war of boiling cannons” (pg. 6).*

History could be an endless spectrum of alternate narratives and truths. The truth at every point in time depends on whose agency is the most popular. Trinity's *Our Father* knows this as it spins history to present an interesting alternate history. The events surrounding Jaja Opobo's death is played on as a quality material that gives an absorbing angle. No one would really know for sure how Jaja of Opobo died. What if he didn't? What if he came to Lagos after his exile to create an revolutionary movement that would later topple the British colonialism? What if otherwise of everything you have come to know about history?



REVOLUTIONARY

EMPEROR



#1JUNE2018

# TRINITY

RED OCTOBER

NUPOWAKU. ODUKOYA. AFERE. BRIGGS. MORBY.  
AMADI. OLADEJO. PABLO ET AL @theoladejokazeem

Omenana: Giving life to speculative fiction

**CONTRARY TO COMMON BELIEF, ABUJA IS NOT THE CAPITAL OF THE WORLD'S MOST POPULOUS BLACK NATION.**

**THAT IS MERELY A CONVENIENT RUSE**

**EAGLE ROCK, SANCTUARY TO THE NIGERIAN PRESIDENT, IS NOT THE TEMPLE OF POWER EITHER.**

**IT IS NEITHER THAT SAFE NOR THAT SACRED.**



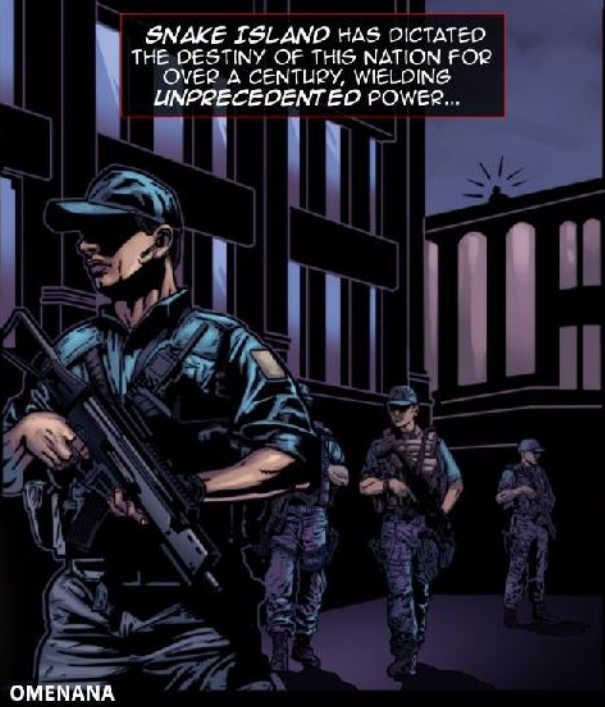
**THOSE JADED SOULS WHO WHISPER ABOUT CARTELS AND CABALS AND CONSPIRACIES...**



**...ARE TOTALLY AND ABSOLUTELY HALF RIGHT.**



**THE TRUTH IS THIS:**

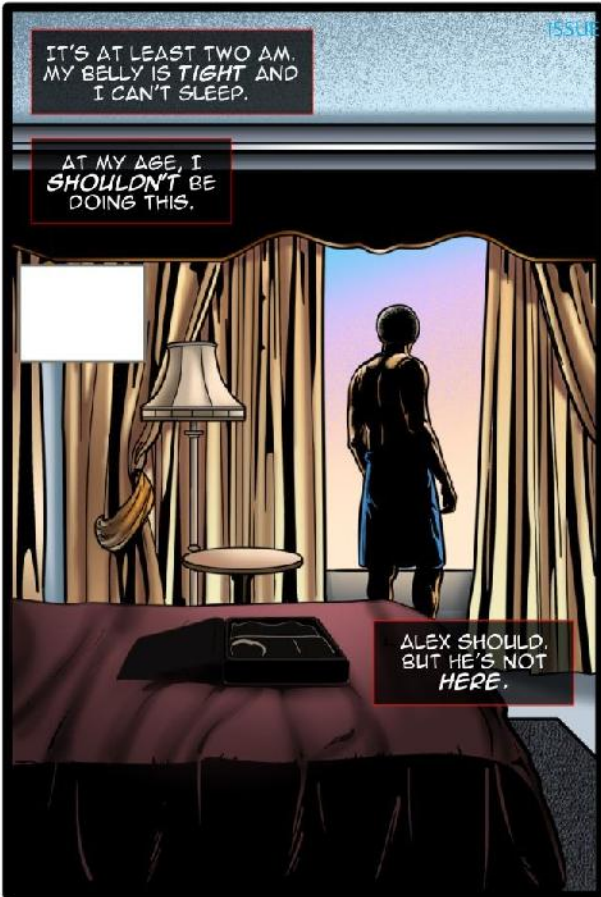


**SNAKE ISLAND HAS DICTATED THE DESTINY OF THIS NATION FOR OVER A CENTURY, WIELDING UNPRECEDENTED POWER...**



**...BEHIND ITS WALLS OF CONCRETE, STEEL AND SECRETS.**





IT'S AT LEAST TWO AM. MY BELLY IS TIGHT AND I CAN'T SLEEP.

AT MY AGE, I SHOULDN'T BE DOING THIS.

ALEX SHOULD, BUT HE'S NOT HERE.

I...I SHOULD HAVE PROTECTED MY BOY FROM ALL THESE.

I CAN'T SLEEP BECAUSE KIDS HAVE BEEN DISAPPEARING ALL OVER THE COUNTRY.

SOMEONE HAS BEEN KIDNAPPING RICH KIDS AND STASHING THEM AWAY SOMEWHERE.

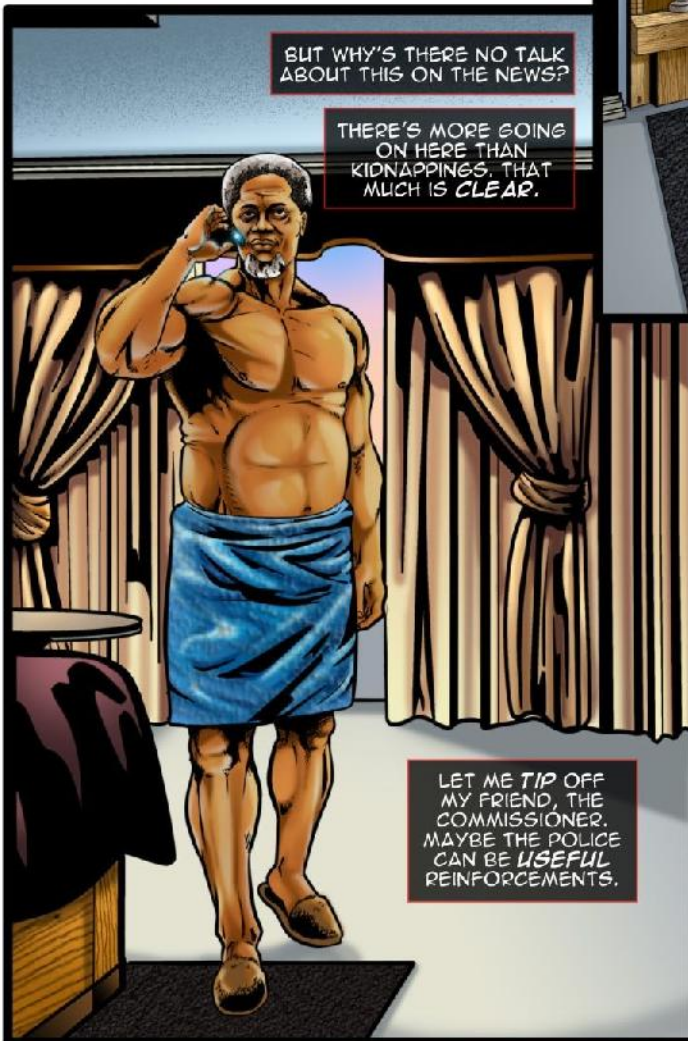


MY ABUJA TRIP REVEALED THE KIDNAPPERS HAVE THREE TARGETS: LAGOS, ABUJA AND PORT-HARCOURT.

I CAN'T DO MUCH ABOUT THE OTHER HOT-SPOTS BUT LAGOS IS MY CITY.

I HAVE THE DETAILS OF THE PLANNED ATTACK.

I WILL BE THERE.



BUT WHY'S THERE NO TALK ABOUT THIS ON THE NEWS?

THERE'S MORE GOING ON HERE THAN KIDNAPPINGS, THAT MUCH IS CLEAR.

LET ME TIP OFF MY FRIEND, THE COMMISSIONER. MAYBE THE POLICE CAN BE USEFUL REINFORCEMENTS.



IT'S ALMOST TIME.

I'LL BE ENTERTAINING SOME FRIENDS TONIGHT. WITH DANCE STEPS OF RAIN AND RETRIBUTION.

IT'S ONLY RIGHT I DRESS FOR THE OCCASION.



ENJOYING YOUR MEAL, HUH, OBITATEL?

GRAZHDANIN, NACHALNIK. OF COURSE, BOSS.



LISTEN CLOSE. VYACHE SLAV IS PAYING BIG DEN'GI TO GET YOU OUT.

WE WORKING ON PLAN TO GET YOU OUT.

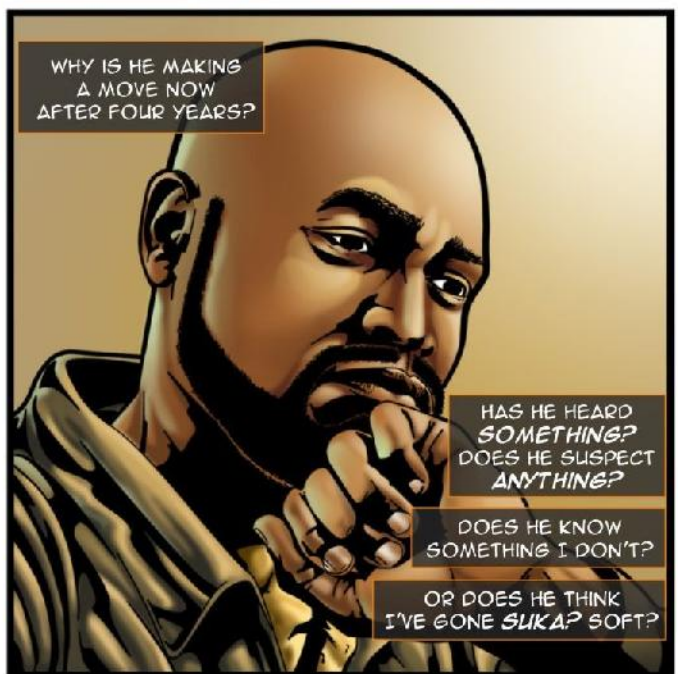
...AND TRY TO NOT LOSE HEAD, EH, TOVARISH?



MAYBE TWO DAYS OR SO, MAYBE. FOR NOW STAY LOOSE, RELAX...



NOT SO GOOD NEWS. VYACHESLAV IS MY RUSSIAN DRUG CONNECT. THE MAIN GUY.



WHY IS HE MAKING A MOVE NOW AFTER FOUR YEARS?

HAS HE HEARD SOMETHING? DOES HE SUSPECT ANYTHING?

DOES HE KNOW SOMETHING I DON'T?

OR DOES HE THINK I'VE GONE SUKA? SOFT?

THE DRUGS HAVE HIM  
CLENCHING HIS JAW...

ISSUE-12

OMENANA

Review of Trinity: Red October Issue 1



I AM NOT  
PAYING  
**SQUAT!** DO  
YOU KNOW  
WHO I AM?



OGA, WHO  
**BROKE** YOUR  
TOYS? AND  
WHY SHOULD  
WE CARE?

...HIS CHIN **QUAKING** LIKE  
THE ISLAND OF HAITI.



I'LL SHOW  
YOU THE SORT  
OF TOYS I  
PLAY WITH...



GET ON YOUR  
DIRTY KNEES,  
**ASHAWO,**  
AND...



IF YOU POINT  
A GUN AT ME,  
YOU'D BETTER  
**USE IT.**



WHAT  
ARE...?!



TOO MUCH  
YARN. VERY  
SMALL  
**SENSE.**

**HURK**



MAY **SERIOUS**  
THUNDER FIRE  
THAT YOUR  
**AJEBO** HEAD.  
OLORI  
BURUKU!

ALRIGHT,  
BASH. LET'S  
GET WITH THE  
PROGRAMME,  
**SHARPLY!**

CALL YOUR  
MEN TO  
ROUND UP THE  
UNIVERSITY  
KIDS.



**CHAIRMAN!**  
**CHAIRMAN!!**  
PAPILO DON  
**DISAPPEAR O!**  
NOBODI DEY WITH  
DOSE PIKINS  
AGAIN O!



SURELY,  
YOU GUYS  
WILL BE  
CHATTIER,  
WON'T  
YOU?

WOULD YOU  
CRIMINAL  
GENTLEMEN  
KINDLY  
INTRODUCE  
YOUR-  
SELVES?

WHAT'S THE  
MATTER?  
YOU ALL LOOK  
LIKE YOU'VE  
SEEN A  
**GHOST!**

*"Jumbo Jumbosa, after faking his own death, decided not to return to Opobo. He arrived in Lagos and struck a friendship with an impressive young man named Herbert Macaulay. Together they formed the secret society of the Virtuosi... They swore to kick the British out of their country." (pg. 7).*

The prologue to this issue is a rich history about how a country came to find itself in its present predicament. There is a thorough portrayal of the different tensions in Nigeria. First was the invasion of the Lagos. There are also the disruption of traditions and personalities (Kosoko the Oba of Lagos, and Jaja of Opobo), the founding of Nigerian seat of power, Aso Rock, and the significance of Dahomey to Nigerian precolonial history. The most interesting Trinity does with history is how it asserts the civilization of precolonial Africa through the mention of Dahomey. A well-organised empire, Dahomey a strong deconstruction of Western narrative of Africa as lacking in political organization prior to colonisation.

### Comics' Elevated Imagery

Comics often traverses the limitation of written literature at creating definitive images. With the use of graphic arts, characters and events are fleshed out for necessary comprehension. You are rarely lost in comics' narratives; because whenever words fail, the graphic art rescues. For instance, when Kadara complains about Sir James' grumpiness, the scowl on her face says it all. Also, this Trinity issue uses creative cartoons to help the reader connect the many dots parts where flashbacks are really needed. One could only hope subsequent episodes provide those compulsory backstories. Questions like the place of Laguda the vigilante in the grand scheme of things, the consequences of the theft in the prologue, the pre-prison life of Alex Laguda, and the kidnap of Da Costa are some of the reasons you would want to read subsequent episodes. However, the captivating images of the graphics art covers for those blank spaces as they elevate the reader's imagination of events. As comics are wont to, Trinity combines words with visual arts for storytelling. What Trinity however does differently from the pack is that it uses language with a mesmerizing effect. You will find engaging descriptions like this throughout the book:

Art & Lettering by  
REVOLUTION MEDIA

*"...Snake Island has dictated the destiny of*

*this nation for over a century, wielding unprecedented power behind its walls of concrete, steel and secrets." (pg. 5)*

### Trafficking in Paradoxes

Arts that appeal to us are ones with counterintuitive events and outcomes. Trinity's Our Father is filled with interesting paradoxes that leave the reader with a dire curiosity. This is a quality of a good page-turner. The secret society of the Virtuosi creates Venom that would later turn against them. Laguda is a vigilante of justice while his son deals in drugs. Dariye Duke appears like the perfect successful result of the #NotTooYoungToRule crusade but stuck to the ways of old deceptive politicians he should be a deviation from. Miss Efusetan Black, an activist, takes on Dr. Odion Odia, Minister for Information, with a strong fervor on government's shadiness on TV but later glows at the prospect of a rewarding government contract from the same. These interesting paradoxes are knitted into the storyline to keep the reader pinning for more.

Trinity Issue 1 is as political as it entertaining with both written and visual arts. I want to see what happens next in subsequent episodes. You should too.



**Joseph Omotayo** is an avid reader and reviewer. His critical essays have been published on several blogs and in prints.

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FUCK

LOVE

FUCK

LOVE

Omenana

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