

DAYBREAK

and

OTHER POEMS



DAMI AJAYI

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— Dami Ajayi is a medical doctor and co-publisher /fiction editor of Saraba Magazine. He lives in Lagos, Nigeria.

Advance Praise for *Daybreak and Other Poems*

— “Sometimes dense, sometimes dark, *Daybreak and Other Poems* present a mélange of poems that are tectonically rhythmmed, symbolically graced and clinically eroticized. Invariably laced with a terrific lyrical fluency, the poems in *Daybreak* announce a grand arrival of one of the “experimental brothers”. Haunting; indeed haunting!

Tosin Gbogi

Author, *the tongues of a shattered s-k-y*

— “*Daybreak* is apt evidence that echoes and re-echoes the sublimity of Dami Ajayi’s nuanced poetic voice. His unique style, tone and diction make him extraordinary amongst his contemporaries.”

Echezonachukwu Nduka
Musicologist, Poet, Author

— “These poems breeze you on like fine narratives laden with the beauty of verse. The telling is bold and unpretentious packed with today’s talk and everyday emotions particularly at midpoint. Dami’s verses here definitely stands in a downing space of its own. Some *daybreak* for sure.”

Su’eddie Vershima Agema
Author, *Bring Our Casket Home: Tales One Shouldn’t Tell*.

— “*Daybreak* is a fired bullet—suddenly here, suddenly gone, but not without smears that will never leave—the sensual, martial, audacious truths of a poet we must attend.”

Tolu Oloruntoba,
Publisher, Klorofyll

— “In this collection are dreams, memories, love, lust, and longing, beautifully woven in the author’s lively voice around a series of places and people. As part of a yet-uncompleted mosaic of a rich and daring experience, the work is a testament to promise. Present in Dami Ajayi’s work is a vibrant preview to a lithesome charm of a style, coloured with playfulness and derring-do.”

Kola Tubosun
Editor, NigeriansTalk Literary Magazine

— “Short, sharp, tangy, leaves you yearning for more, every word tugs at memories, you smile. Dami Ajayi is the face of new poetry”

Ayo Olofintuade,
Author of *Eno’s Story*

— “In *Daybreak and Other Poems*, Dami Ajayi stravages from dystopic noir themes to transcendent discourses of daylight and the sun. The burrs sticking to the poet’s field clothes bear close inspection as witnesses to his wanderings. Most, not all, who wander are lost: this poet has kept his bearings with remarkable presence of mind”

Tade Ipadeola,
Author of *The Sahara Testaments* & Winner, Nigerian Literature Prize 2013

— Ajayi writes poems deeply rooted in the worlds we live in—whether that’s Nigerian, online or bound up in our minds by desire, hope and worry—and more often than not succeeds in opening doors between these worlds, inviting us all to tramp along with him.

Mark Lilleleht
Editor & Founder, african poetry review

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A Preface

“The Coming Poet”

A tweet by Dami Ajayi irritated me. In that tweet he asked a number of his friends which of his poems we liked most. Some of us responded; but I didn't, I couldn't. It was ego-massage and I would not participate in that. Long ago I settled the matter within myself that one of the most despicable acts of becoming visible in the literary world today would be to solicit for attention. Like the mobile phone screens we now munch, fleeting attention is waiting to be caught in motion – validation is waiting at the street corner twerking like Miley Cyrus and licking her sledgehammer. What this sledgehammer is I cannot tell, but it has to be something ranging from doom to despair and the success in-between.

Yet I want to accuse Dami Ajayi of success. This is what this essay is about; he has selected a number of new poems in this pamphlet *Daybreak and Other Poems*. It is a different form of ego-massage. This kind, however, brings with it an attractive solicitation for attention. I have to think about what the poems mean to me; what *poetry* means to me, and what it is yet to mean. I have to imagine that my friend is dead and I am dead and we are in this place where we can have a conversation without the monstrosities of our time. But since we are not dead and since we are young and can chit-chat about our future like it will never come, I want to write about Dami Ajayi's poetry as what it is and what it will become, as the prophet of its own acceptability, as the measure of its own significance.

My ideas as to how his poetry will change things are sketchy. But there is an experience I now recall. In mid-2010 Dami and I embarked on a project of responding to love through poetry. He wrote a poem and I wrote the next and we went back and forth. The only similarity our poems shared was the thumping pulse of our immediate circumstances – Dami had a new girl and I was wooing one. As the project progressed, Dami's love for his girl waned, and my affection for mine increased. Each poem reflected these shifts. By the time we had shared ten poems between us, Dami's romance was over, and my prospective lover – with whom I shared all the poems I had written – hadn't acquiesced.

I return to this experience because poetry *changed* things. It brought us closer to our understanding of what we felt for our lovers; it set language on its head because the words we wrote were always trying to catch up with us; it tricked us into believing we had the sort of love we could not afford; it

brought us to our knees and made us conscious of the precariousness always demanded by love.

I would like to explore the method through which a poet understands his life's circumstances. The method is in the poem, the understanding is in it, and therefore the poet's life is his poem. Dami Ajayi writes about his life's circumstances every time: his love, his grief, his sexuality, his medical practice. He can only gaze at his life as yesterday and today but I find the future without clarity in his work. Even when he writes about what he and his lover aspires to, the future is shadowed by pressing intricacies of the present.

*...Life is the American
Film to which we all aspire
("You Are My Flagellation")*

In the poem he tells his lover that life is a novel, a television series, an endless love song. He tells her that people fall in love in movies. This is an American movie, by the way, and we aspire to its fantasies. Our aspiration is rooted in what we have become today: zombies of an American state of affairs and its ultra-culture. It is not what we *will* become. Dami is writing about a present kind of love. He has been changed by the poems he wrote in 2010. He has realized that love must be solicited for in the present moment because in real life romance is not compressed into ninety minutes. It is a minute-by-minute "legal tender of living."

*The fingers of the heart try to grasp things
Like beauty, curves, blue eyes. Affection is no foreign
Exchange. No, it is the legal tender of living
("You Are My Flagellation")*

Once the legal tender is presented and accepted, sex follows inevitably. Since the poet's method is his poem, he must convey his earnest troubles. I get the feeling that Dami Ajayi wants to understand the currency of sexuality – what is exchanged in lovemaking and what is not and what cannot be exchanged. Particularly, he is interested in the opening of bodies to reveal souls struggling with banality, ordinariness, fading beauty, and the end. I like to think of his poetry in connection with opened bodies because he is a doctor. In his mind the human body is struggling to mean something beyond the clinical. He has seen bodies break open; his friends have slumped to their deaths unexpectedly; he has looked at eyes filled with sickness and seen something other than the cure. He has to write about sex as though it is the human body falling apart.

*What do we do about this rush
Seeping from sealed sweat pores?
("Konji Blues III")*

*Do not greet the old whores lined outside
Angry veins erect on their bleached skins.
Their gaunt faces are open histories of
Distances covered and miles counted
("Amaokpala East-side Motel")*

Poetry has to fall apart to allow us entry into it. It has to mean nothing so that it can mean everything – we must wonder at its prowess so that we can be shocked by its force. It is like waking up and thinking the day is going to be an ordinary one until something serendipitous happens. It is like dawn talking with dusk because dusk knows what dawn doesn't know about today. Thus, poetry is the poet taking initial steps towards the unknown. The poet has to find himself – he has to be found – and poetry will ensure this.

*And they said daybreak is poetry
("Daybreak")*

In seeking himself, Dami Ajayi has written about dreams. For most of my adult life I have shared uncertainties with him and it is clear to me that uncertainty is good material for a poet. He will excise it of its haziness and confer immediacy or sometimes nostalgia on it. There is no other way. Dreams can be anything but intangible. They are quantifiable because their qualities are provable in Dami Ajayi's poems. He has to dream to be carried away from the world's misery. I get the sense that he has to dream to participate in the world's misery.

*Dream shuttles like red carpets
Flying over memories,
Tall spires and giant Town Hall clocks
Stuck in time.
Fantasies are rigid dreams
With tight-ass plots;
They can't be sold for profits.*

*Sometimes I shut my eyes
To the world's misery for
A sleep snack.
("Dreams")*

If poetry is falling apart in my time – if Damí Ajayi has to self-publish this collection of poems to showcase his work – we have to think about what it is in another light. Poetry is written every day, in varying degrees of poignancy, and this explains its uselessness. To the average critic and publisher, it is being written more than it is being read hence making its value unascertainable. This is true but only a half truth. The individual reader like me reads – or hears it – in order to nourish a part of himself that only language can attend to. Poetry is consistent in form because it has to be consistent in its nourishment. It has to be economical with language so that it can become an itch that we keep scratching and returning to. This is the essence the average critic and publisher struggle to valorize despite the ubiquitous verses that appear on Facebook and Wordpress – and why I believe Damí Ajayi is self-publishing this collection, or has to.

There must be something about our post-literate world that is equally an important consideration for the poet. Literacy as we know is prescribing a new approach; it is fraught between the demands of YouTube, Tumblr and Pinterest, today's sites of graven images. We learnt through our ears, and then with our eyes, now it is a combination of both. This is the crux of the poet's challenge today. He has to be seen-and-heard. Performance will have to be his voice; otherwise his poetry will remain *written*. If the poet wants an ego-massage, he must seek a hybrid-form; a poem that is written that can also be spoken. At least this is what I perceive Damí Ajayi is trying to do.

*Life is sweet
Like the taste of the evening's fresh stew
After a hard day's labour*

*Life is sweet
Like corn cobs
In June
("Tolu")*

The poet will have to call on contemporaneity to complete this task. He has to, put more directly, converse with us using familiar registers. It is akin to adopting the Nigerian idiom. The poet has to do certain things with the poem that makes it foreign to, for instance, the American idiom. This is why English is an African language – because in poetry we can modify it into the Nigerian idiom, in one of its myriad forms, and it would symbolize communication, an exchange between us and anyone else with a similar Nigerian sensibility.

*Muyideen roamed into Berger from
A family compound with twin graves and stray goats,
Awe in his eyes;
Awe at the bustling city that
Soon sweeps his Ghana-Must-Go sack
Full of trivia like locust beans and a paper strip
Of crumpled Uncle Alaka's residential address.
("Johnny Just Drop")*

Earlier I declared that performance has to be the voice of the poem. Let me clarify this a little further. But first I must say that in relation to Ajayi I am convinced that he is *not yet* completely immersed in speaking the Nigerian idiom. In "Slow Dancing" for instance he uses a foreign accent as though he is speaking to an unspecified audience. But I am concerned with his *natural* voice, which is Nigerian and therefore performative; a gesture of reaching out to an audience that use the same language he does to navigate their immediate locality.

When we read some of these poems we have to see them come off the page – like "Die a Little", "The Blue Room." It is this act of page-leaping that makes me think his poetry is codified in a contemporaneous image. The poet has to fit the poetry into the life around him; he has to use this language to create a little, consistent universe that contains the things we see, and he has to do this with all the strength he can muster. When I read Dami Ajayi's poems I see the image I recognize as utterly familiar to my Nigerian experience. The poem performs this image, especially when it is read aloud, because it is written in the Nigerian idiom. I may not understand what is being read aloud, but I have an emotional satisfaction which attracts me.

*Amble slowly down Third Mainland Bridge;
Smile tiredly at the unperturbed lagoon
Shimmering with the full moon's reflection.
This gridlock detours at Redemption Camp,
This will be the longest day of your life.
("Go Slow")*

This conversation I am having with Dami Ajayi's poetry has to do with what I think his poetry foreshadows; which is why this collection is what it is, a mixed bag containing poems with a foreign accent and poems bearing the Nigerian idiom. Dami Ajayi is reaching for the familiar and is slowly getting to it. I like the idea that words are objects out of which a little mechanism called a poem is manufactured to deliver purposeful items. The poem is delivering everything at once; romance, satire, humour, grief, uncertainty; it

is delivering the image of what it means – no, what it has always meant – to be Nigerian.

Dami Ajayi is a *coming* poet if we agree that his followers on Facebook are not, and cannot be, his only audience. He has the potential to be heard louder and in a longer span of time. At this time in his career he may have to tweet in order to assure himself that his work is being venerated. That will change.

—Emmanuel Iduma is the author of *Farad*, a novel (Parresia, 2012).

Daybreak & Other Poems

Amaokpala East-side Motel

Sexual memories are made of these
Urgent needs that throb thighs
Pockets a-jingle with loose coins,
You take a winding walk
To the Amaokpala East-Side Motel.

Do not greet the old whores lined outside
Angry veins erect on their bleached skins.
Their gaunt faces are open histories of
Distances covered and miles counted

Your special is waiting by the reception:
A Femme Fatale sipping Fanta.
Give her The Wink and scurry upstairs
to The Blue Room.

This room with torn curtains that flutter,
Its rusty ceiling fan, a one-eyed voyeur.
Its bed; a repository of nether fluids.
On floor that has eavesdropped on countless trysts

When she comes in and lets her dress drop,
You bask in the warmth of impending explosions
One more footnote in her history
One more mile in a long, long road.

Konji Blues III

1.

What do we do about hearsays
Gathering like Vietnamese camouflage
On our brows?

What do we do about this rush
Seeping from sealed sweat pores?

What do we do to the skipping record
Imploring, why not fall in love?

2.

I like the thud of clothes drop.
I like flimsy eye contacts,
Sweeping like a glass cup storm,
A bucket Tsunami.

3.

The kept woman
Likes to be called Madam.

She daydreams in the glazed mirror
In the cavernous corridor,
Sinfully.

4.

Eve,
Let me unfurl you,
Exfoliate you, rid you of clothes:
They are insignias of debut sins,
Eve.

5.

Please be still.
The pain that spread through your thighs
Is the joy that starts from your scalp.
Let me in

Die A Little

I

Little child, have we met?
Perhaps you reeled out of some UNICEF poster.

Bad air blotches mosquito-kissed skins.
Anaemia is an antithesis of capitalist ads.

Poverty porn exerts no age restrictions.
The ticking clock tocks:
Every tick talks of you
Dying.

Queen of the malnutrition pageant,
Your sludge red cells don't hold back sickly smiles.

Fleeting dreams French-kiss the air
Your sparse cells are like a tiara of thorns.

If we all die a little,
Perhaps you will die a little less.

II

Needle kisses skin with practiced ease,
Rips into blood conduits.
And a part of me leaks into this bag.

I die a little to quell this child's thirst.
Mosquitoes are to Africa what vampires are to Hollywood.

Africa's towering giants won't conquer little David,
No, Jehovah is my witness.

Tomorrow when your sheen is restored,
I shall smile for the first time.

You Are My Flagellation

Love poems are like Cocaine,
Heroin, Met, LSD, Marijuana for
Those in touch with their feelings...

The fingers of the heart try to grasp things
Like beauty, curves, blue eyes. Affection is no foreign
Exchange. No, it is the legal tender of living.

This is why love songs sell and crooners
Make a career singing the same songs till their voices break.
Songs are the raw material of text messages, ladies.
They are crude oil of those fancy voice notes.
In the world according to affection, we are all plagiarists.

Hell, art is incestuous; love is incestuous,
Or what did Freud say? In some quarters
They say, "Forget Freud, he was a novelist"

But isn't life a novel, a television series,
An endless love song? And in films don't people
Fuck and fall in love?

Yes, they do. And they also watch the sunset.
Growing old with their bent spouse's hands
In theirs. That is the life. Life is the American
Film to which we all aspire.

Forgive me; this was supposed to be a love
Poem. And I wanted to call it something cryptic,
Something profound, something exotic like
You are my flagellation.

You know that is borrowed too.
Stolen, actually from, was it Odi Ofeimun?
But baby, you are my flagellation.

I have started the poem baby, you are
My flagellation. You are the imagination that

Proselytizes me to a dummy. You are the
Aggregation of all the virtues that I can't afford
On eBay. You are my screen saver.
My one and only.
My madam at the top.
My cocoyam.

You put a smile on my face even when I sleep,
You are the imagination that proselytizes me to a
Dummy. You are my flagellation.

I have started the poem baby, it is you and I
Holding hands, strolling into the sunset.

Daybreak

Night said, “There is nothing more
Heart-breaking than watching a day break”

Day stared into abyss.

Night continued, “First there is a void gloom,
Like in the Genesis, like after the apocalypse, after
Mankind expunges itself.”

Day held his peace.

Night continued, “Imagine how a teacher confronts a blackboard
With chalk, dawn is birthed in slithering streaks,
Every streak a degree towards Zen.”

Day smiled and said, “A gatekeeper lights a cigarette,
Smoke whorls rise gracefully skywards
And dawn is born”

And they both said day break is poetry.

Dreams Die at Ekwulobia

Every time,
I gaze into the plains.

I see loose laterite hugging foliage tightly
Kernel husks and shrapnel,
Dying fronds the colour of amber

Half-buried bicycle spooks
A naked pot-bellied sniffing toddler

Bush path worn from being trod;
This thoroughfare leads to the future and back

Tree barks obscured by paper obituaries
Advertise early deaths.
Painful exit
Sharp Sharp
Gone too soon.

Buried with mirth
In abandoned compounds

A radio coos a Highlife Igbo dirge:
The joy of life will kill us all.

The pursuit of happiness is a noble end
But even dreams die at Ekwulobia

Dreams

This is what dreams are made of:
A jaundiced sepia scenery
Then action creeps in
My Id is playwright.

Dream shuttles like red carpets
Flying over memories,
Tall spires and giant Town Hall clocks
Stuck in time.
Fantasies are rigid dreams
With tight-ass plots;
They can't be sold for profit.

Sometimes I shut my eyes
To the world's misery for
A sleep snack.

I bask in the immediacy
Of Morpheus's short embrace.
Sleep trysts in Molues held by
Thrust and rust; Lagos is a big
Jest of a city at whose expense?
BRTs decayed into Molues
Not in dreams. The brimming city
Sometimes dares to sleep-walk by the marina.

Paulina
Of the sultry waters
Was the girlie of my dreams.
Her ambience was BVLGARI Aqua cool
Her aqueous touch too,
But her love was the chaos that led me into
Chasing after stolen dreams
With two left shoes.

I will wake to tell my tale,
I will wake.

The Gnaw

This gnaw is a twitch
I can't ignore

It comes from memory games
My mind keeps playing on me

This still dark room used
To be filled with your laughter

Your scent I've tried
To forensically decipher

Apricot hair oil sprinkles,
Goat milk skin cream dabs

A whiff of astringent facial cleanser,
Musky pubic hair

Your scent lingers long
In my nostrils like a dogged delusion.

The Blue Room

Perhaps hormones firing on organic cylinders
Assassinated morals in a capitalist world
Where sex became a tourism tool.

Fancy hotel rooms were made for dreams
But when the hands of time choked them, they died:
Dreams decayed into screams.

Faded curtains wear emblems of tryst on
Their hems, billowing, lashing out quiet protests
In kinesics. This jaded room was blue in Simenon's vision;
It is constantly revised to colours of a rainbow.

Bodies trapped in the science of urge satisfaction.
Back gracefully arched—lumbar lordosis.
Amplitude builds against something ominous.
The wave falls in liquid spasms.
And another transaction is completed.

Tolu

If I was told that water could
Boil fish to taste,
I would disagree.
I would say that fish will not
Be cooked till it's matured,
That fish will not be
Tasty if slaughtered too soon.

But this is life
Where our say is fart in the wind.
The fact in the wind, the teleprompter
Being Facebook, tolled your final breath
That Friday night, while we were all bothered
With this nuisance, life.

Distance unsettles kindred hearts
When the filial rope snaps, death is the hawk
Mother hen wishes away but it perches on
Waiting to strike again and again and again

*

Life is sweet
Like the taste of the evening's fresh stew
After a hard day's labour.

Life is sweet like
The undiluted palmwine whose
Gourd hasn't touched the ground.

Life is sweet
Like roasted corn cobs
In June.

Life is sweet
Like the intoxicating poetry
Of youth that plays with words
Like infallible, immortal, eternal.

Life was just getting sweeter
When the unfair umpire blew his whistle
After that favorite meal, that painless slump,
The succumb to gravity and everything goes dark
Like the end of a film reel.

Home

Homeward crowd,
Saddled with miserly experiences
And the misery of sore feet,
Pray, carry word home for me,
Tell my parents I am well.

Ambition sent me on an errand,
Like a flung stone in trajectory,
Sailing in the free air,
Assailed by doubt that stems
From foreign tongues.

At night, I lie on my side
And I hear the distant folk songs
From home, carried in the winds
And my heart aches.

It aches from this foreignness,
Foreign in itself; I stall tears
With a machismo that tore my ties
From home; when my feet ached
Journeys untold, when my bodies
Shivered from the ecstasy
Of virgin roads.

Days have climbed on themselves
Like complacent lovers. Nights
Have dried out like vigil oil lamps.
Feet kissed earth's dirt for too long,
More than the heart's wish.

Sometimes home is not a state of mind;
Home is the gurgling of familiar streams;
The clarity of sanguineous laughter.

Sometimes home is a heartache,
Unrepentant, in spite of
Geographical span.

Sometimes, home is a soft knock
Rapping on the door of memories,
Home is the clambering of red mangoes
Down corrugated roofs.

Sometimes, home is a visiting dream,
A vanishing apparition,
A piquant tune.

Sometimes, home is retreat,
Return.

Lagos Bunnies

Johnny Just Drop

Muyideen roamed into Berger from
A family compound with twin graves and stray goats,
Awe in his eyes;
Awe at the bustling city that
Soon sweeps his Ghana-Must-Go sack
Full of trivia like locust beans and a paper strip
Of crumpled Uncle Alaka's residential address.

Go Slow

Amble slowly down Third Mainland Bridge;
Smile tiredly at the unperturbed lagoon
Shimmering with the full moon's reflection.
This gridlock detours at Redemption Camp,
This will be the longest day of your life.

Ikoyi Blindness

Ikoyi's myopia hardly sees beyond
Finery, beyond visual percepts like manicured
Foliage, old orchard trees, bougainvillea
And an occasional power cut.

Slow Dancing

(After John Mayer)

Last night, I ran into a streetlamp.
The hatchback was doing sixty miles per hour.

I'm fine,
Save my split lip.
The hatchback burst her radiator,
Bonnet bent, metallic kiss stains
From the resisting lamp kinked.
Our doctors said we will live.

To think I lit a dozen scented candles before
Racing down the quiet asphalt
At half-past eleven;
I left Maxwell on.

The night had slept
While our demons cavorted on
Wireless telecommunication grids;
You said you were wearing only a smile,
Come get me.
My phone dropped.

Last night, you threw a banana at me
And missed. We quit an amorous weekend;
You slammed the door extra hard.
I registered your anger.

Hours later, you sent a text message
And asked me to call you back,
With a smiley.

We had a long talk,
The usual blame tête-à-tête interspersed with
Awkward silences that meant sorry.
You said you were wearing only a smile,
Come get me.

The Alphabet Laboratory

Poetry is the broken words of a stutterer's essay.
Clip, clip, clip, bang.

The shutter knocks the canon's lumen hard
Like Hadley Chase's lackey, Maddox's trigger finger.

I found these alphabets spilled on the ground,
Vestiges of a forgotten war.

Poetry is a recourse to soft music,
The pulp of contemplating you,
The sap of knowing you.

In the silence of vacuums,
An attitude gazes upward
Like burnt offerings and
Lover looked at his beloved
And creamed out words,
A new kind of orgasm.

All words are stolen from an alphabet pool
To undergo serial recombinant therapy.
The smartest scrabblers are negotiating turns
In the race of verbs, nouns, adjectives.
Adverbs. Prepositions are clues for positions.
Another letter drops with a sibilant hiss
Then I found you.

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