



# saraba

Fashion

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## Going Home

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The bachelor had been  
made for minutes;  
he craned his neck into  
the room and saw hung,  
waiting for her to dry,  
the ordered cloth

The fan, no longer whirring,  
nearly blew out of his fist  
the letter written by Baba  
himself and postmarked, "Life"  
But he clawed, weakly, at the eye  
of the besieging storm  
with fearful fury  
for she must never read  
such an ancient scroll

He drew out, battered master  
of an overgrown field, with searching  
voice, to feed on till sated,  
bitter tastes of thought pods,  
gnawing at his larynx

It was not until the announcer  
announced them boarded  
and above African lands  
that he scrawled what would not be posted,

"That rag slanders you my love;  
you must know, we go not where  
greenish waters of admiration wet  
distinctive suavity with  
drooping jaws and slit honour  
The neighbours will be told,  
I brought shame!"

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*Yemi Soneye*



## Fashionably Dead

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Speak to her in Yoruba, Twi, Swahili, Sesarwa, Setswana or Shona.

She may not comprehend *some* but in *all* she will delight in a rhythm natural to her ear, a movement instinctive to her tongue and a reassurance that she is beautiful with her big kinky hair and sweet dark lips.

She knows that dogs do not belong in handbags and that makeup cannot mask an obliterated heart and that her weight is not a gift or a curse; my sister is the soul in Africa's golden daughters; she needs no toxic creams to lighten her skin nor does she need the fashion of sparkling blood diamonds hanging around her neck like a colonizer's noose.

She has glistening brown eyes like one who has stared at the earth for too long; her nose is fantastically flat, her lips are fabulously full and every hair strand in her dreadlocks is twisted and locked just the way it ought; her smile flashes bright and wide because home lives in her, even without ugly hair extensions and impractically painted nails. She does not wear clothes too small and too tight because she commands respect and dignity to never leave her heart. Sister's skin shines dark, black and her neck is regally long, and her laugh is loud and bold.

But why do her daughters speak in trendy baby voices as they sip on fat-free drinks laden with gunk? It seems her daughters have murdered her, because all I see around me are young girls with severely shaved eyebrows, skirts too short and too transparent, all for the fashion that would make the ancestors ominously laugh in pity. Her daughters walk around like stiff dolls and their lips continue to glisten with gloss the color of blood. The daughters have killed their mother and replaced her with the colonial master's dream African woman: a woman, always being added to but never beautiful enough.

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*Donald Molosi*



## Rod-Stroked Survival, With a Deadly Hammer

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*(c) Tom Humberstone*

Rebecca fantasized that life was a lottery ticket or a pull of a lever,  
 that one of the gambling chips in her pocket was a winner or the slot machines a redeemer,  
 but life itself was not real, that was strictly for the mentally insane at the Elgin Mental Institution  
 She gambled her savings away on a riverboat  
 stuck in the mud of a riverbank, the Grand Victoria, in Elgin, Illinois  
 Her bare feet were always propped up on wooden chair;  
 a cigarette drooped from her lips like morning fog  
 She always dreamed of traveling, not nightmares,  
 but she couldn't overcome— overcome  
 the terrorist ordeal of the German siege of Leningrad  
 She was a foreigner now; she is a foreigner for good  
 Her first husband died after spending a lifetime in prison  
 with stinging nettles in his toes and feet; the second  
 husband died of hunger, when there were no more rats  
 to feed on, after many fights in prison for the last remains  
 What does a poet know of suffering?  
 Rebecca has rod stroked survival with a deadly mallet  
 She gambles nickels, dimes, quarters, tokens tossed away,  
 living a penniless life for grandchildren who hardly know her name  
 Rebecca fantasized that life was a lottery ticket or the pull of a lever.

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*Michael Lee Johnson*



## Harvest Time

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A Métis lady, drunk—  
hands blanketed as in prayer,  
over a large, brown fruit basket  
naked of fruit, no vine, no vineyard  
inside— approaches the Edmonton,  
Alberta adoption agency.  
There are only spirit gods  
inside her empty purse.

Inside the basket, an infant,  
restrained from life,  
with a fruity winesap apple  
wedged like a teaspoon  
of Autumn sun  
inside its mouth.  
A shallow pool of tears  
in native blue eyes.  
Snuffling, the mother offers  
a slim smile, turns away.  
She slithers voyeuristically  
through near slum streets  
and alleyways,  
looking for drinking buddies  
to share a hefty pint  
of applejack wine.

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*Michael Lee Johnson*



## The Global Swagger Revolution

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When I heard Terry-G's song, I assumed swagger was a slang, and would not be found in an English dictionary. This ignorance lasted for, perhaps, two months. Then I heard the word being used out of Terry G's context, something less entertaining, and I checked a dictionary. Perhaps he popularized the usage of the word in Nigeria as T.I. had popularized it in America (globally?); there are variants now – 'swags', 'swaggalicious' – which points to me the importance of a word that stands out. There are other songs with words that stand out. Or perhaps we should note that when words come off music in the way swagger has, they become all-embracing terms, almost always used in the assumptive sense. And we easily find that there is something about language that makes it fashionable – acceptable by an entertained mass, whose acceptance is primarily hinged on popularity other than intelligence. So, the question, which I am asking with that notion of 'popularity other than intelligence' hanging over my head, is whether we can make matter out of something like the music of Terry G, which makes fashion out of words that otherwise would be considered negative. Simply, does fashion confer amorality on life?

This question of amorality could be overblown, considerably. But a critical, and yet less serious appraisal, reveals that words like swagger become amoral only because they have mass appeal. This mass, presumably, consist of the lot, like me, who have not ascertained the meaning of the word, but use it nonetheless. The use of the word, therefore, becomes necessary because it has an assumed meaning, and this meaning blurs other alternatives, especially because the alternatives are unknown.

Could we consider that the nature of the use of 'swagger' is the nature of the use of 'vote' also? Now, this could be preposterous, but I would consider it nonetheless. When vote is used, there is usually no general 'ignorance' as to what it means. Yet, my concern is that often, the act of voting is considered as the act of being responsible. I believe that there are instances where voting is not an expression of responsibility – it is a question of trust. It is a question of whether Nigerians, for instance, trust PDP, CPC, ACN, and whatnot. So, here, trust becomes more cogent – weighty, truthful – than responsibility, and if I am forgiven, trust becomes more cogent than an expression of rights.

Again, we find that it was not really a question of rights in the final analysis for Cote d'Ivoire – agreed, they had exercised their rights, as Nigerians are doing, but rights are not as important as the expression of trust in Gbagbo. For with his emergence as a dictator, he stripped himself off that trust and thereafter began to violate their rights, having nothing of them in himself.

The popularity of the word 'vote' and the popularity of the art of voting, is, hopefully, a promise that those who use it would stop to ponder on the purport of their act.

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What I am saying is that there is a global swagger revolution – if swagger is used as a synonym for all the fashionable changes that has happened to our lexicon, our use of words, and its impact on our lives

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Hasn't Facebook also become something like Terry G and T.I's swagger? There are those whose friendship is purely virtual – meaning they would never meet their Facebook friends, ever, or that even if they meet they would make casual talk, the kind of talk that would never happen on Facebook. This means that Facebook's definition of friendship is certainly changing the way we previously considered friendship. And Twitter too – hasn't the network conferred new meaning on 'tweet?' Such that Tolu Ogunlesi notes in his profile, interestingly, that 'retweeting' does not mean 'endorsements.'

What I am saying is that there is a global swagger revolution – if swagger is used as a synonym for all the fashionable changes that has happened to our lexicon, our use of words, and its impact on our lives.

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*Emmanuel Iduma*





## Partial Measures

The friends my mother most often spoke of were those she knew as a girl in West Town, the black neighbourhood near downtown Oklahoma City. Geraldine, Helen, Ruby, and Arletha are some of the names Momma would mention, with Miss Arletha proving to be one of her most enduring friends: she was a dignified woman whose loyalty and consideration met my mother's high standards. A few years ago, Momma called and told me Miss Arletha, then almost 80, was losing her bearings because of dementia and not long afterward she died. It was hard reconciling the news of her illness and death with my memory of the woman's elegance and steadfastness.

I recalled Miss Arletha on the afternoon of my Uncle Vernon's funeral in the early 1990s. She walked into her big sunny living room from the kitchen, her hands smoothing down the lines of her snug navy skirt. She raised the cover of a polished console piano, and keeping her back straight, gracefully sat on the bench. She took a breath, placed her hands over the keys, and let them fall into a lulling rendition of "Precious Memories," the song Momma had requested for my uncle's funeral.

During the planning session a couple of days before, the young head minister of Avery Chapel A.M.E. Church had said, "I probably can't get a soloist to perform 'Precious Memories.' Not on such short notice," as he tapped the table where we sat.

When I asked him to try anyway, and he reluctantly promised to, Momma had faith that the song, a testimony to the survival of what's been lost, would make it onto the program. When it didn't, I added this to the number of times the minister got my uncle's name wrong during the funeral, and thought angrily that G. Vernon Irving deserved a lot better. My anger was tempered, however, by the corrections the members of the congregation called out after the minister's mistakes. After each of his references to "Vernon --um--Smith" or "Vernon Watkins," one voice or another would call out, "it's Vernon Irving." When I looked behind me at the many unfamiliar faces, I'd see them roused by a certainty that whatever the slick pastor was doing, they were present to honor someone who had a place in their lives.

The pastor did apologetically explain late in the service, "We buried one of our --um--other elders named Vernon--um--Vernon Smith a week ago," as Momma stared ahead at the chancel wall. Uncle Vernon, who'd married three times, kept his money in cloth bags rather than the bank, used industrial paper towels for his correspondence, and started riding a motorcycle in his sixties, had been active in the church since he was a small child. He had served as a deacon there, and had helped along its financial growth. The pastor should have mentioned some of this, rather than offering testimony to "the departed's faith-filled journey in this hard life," a speech that undoubtedly drew regular use. But if the pastor had tailored his talk to fit Uncle Vernon's quirky habits and gotten the man's name right, I might have missed the elders' affirmations. I would have missed the respect they managed to convey through their studied silences and frequent utterance of my uncle's name.



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Though Miss Arletha's life was probably full of mysteries I could not fathom, it was easy for me to take her as I saw her—a stately, but rather ordinary, woman.

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Miss Arletha's playing was the tribute I cherish the most, though, because it was, among other things, a personalized gift to Momma. Miss Arletha's "Precious Memories" didn't have the emotional urgency of the Aretha Franklin-Reverend James Cleveland rendition that I'd grown up with or that by Rosetta Thorpe, whose percussive guitar and wailing voice are just as penetrating. Miss Arletha's was a parlor song, perfect for a home piano: the left hand mostly played a standard broken chord; the right, a steady, undecorated melody that I easily sang along with in my head:

Precious mem'ries, how they linger  
 How they ever soothe the soul.  
 In the stillness, of the midnight  
 Precious mem'ries, lead me on.

Miss Arletha's rendition was an anchor, a stay, helping me hold onto Uncle Vernon even as we were letting him go. Her playing signified on the pastor, who had refused the song because of its tactical complexity, as if we had asked him to pull together on two days' notice a full performance of Bach's St. Matthew's Passion. Miss Arletha's "Precious Memories" was like a dish of cobbler. The music and the unsung, but deeply felt, words nourished us in a time of loss, reminding us of the rewards of friendship and of the complex relationship between life and death.

Although I saw her seldom, Miss Arletha's image, reputation, and name were bound up with my sense of Oklahoma City, a place of dry heat, hot winds, and vibrant red roses and orange lilies. My grandmother and uncles lived there, and my parents, sister, and I exchanged calls with them weekly. They'd visit us in St. Louis in the spring; we'd visit them in summer. I would often hear the name "Arletha" and a part of a story about her, but I'd stop listening before I found out the specifics of her opening a daycare center or her struggles after foot surgery. That was all boring women's business for me, with my penchant for fencing with a Romper-Room wand and making the legs of our baroque dining-room table into a maze fit for Theseus. I took Momma's requisite comments about Miss Arletha's foster daughter, Meryl, to be uninvolved business, too, for they amounted to little more than "She's okay" or "Had a cold, but she's over it now." During our visits to Oklahoma, Meryl, who was a few years older than me, played "Interview the Stars" more often than "Battle of Barbies" with me, but we got along well anyway--our play fed my sense of Oklahoma as a place of fun of the relaxing kind. The days there were blazing and long and the people seemed less driven than those back home.

Though Miss Arletha's life was probably full of mysteries I could not fathom, it was easy for me to take her as I saw her—a stately, but rather ordinary, woman. The only exceptional transaction I could associate with her was her parting from Meryl. When I was eleven or twelve, Momma dropped the news to me, sometime after a phone call with one of my uncles that "Things just hadn't worked out too well with the girl, and Arletha had to let her go." My questioning yielded no further information about this dismissal, even though I assumed



Momma must have heard an earful. I wondered where Meryl had gone and what had led to her separation from Miss Arletha. Once Momma admitted, “Arletha just couldn’t do anything with her,” but these words, without any elaboration, didn’t yield a fuller understanding. Having no knowledge of my own about Meryl and Miss Arletha’s break and gaining no clarification from Momma, my sense of the woman should have become more tenuous, for I had to admit the premature closure of her role as mother. Yet my image of Miss Arletha continued to emphasize stability and even-handedness. She was a longtime friend Momma could relax with during our yearly visits. There seemed to be no competition and no threats in their relationship, just harmless chatting about old friends and the impact of local and national news. They talked and listened to each other, occasionally puffing on Salems and sipping sweetened iced tea or mint lemonade. For Momma, Miss Arletha provided comfort and acceptance, which she encountered too seldom in her peers. Once Momma had complained, after much prodding on my part, of a former neighborhood friend who “took and took and took.” In my view, Miss Arletha just expected Momma to be herself and helped her reframe her place in a long-standing social network.

This network included other friends from Momma’s childhood, such as Miss Arletha’s brother Garland. Where she seemed familiar, Garland evoked a whole way of life that excluded me. I heard Daddy, Momma, and my uncles mention Garland all my life, but I knew little about him: I’d ask myself more often than them, “Who is this Garland?” It was only when I was twenty that I began to understand what he meant to my family.

Garland’s presence was not a guarantee at family gatherings, for he didn’t live in Oklahoma City. He’d been Daddy’s best friend during the Second World War and introduced him to Momma after their return from Japan. I had supposedly seen Garland during our visits to Oklahoma in the 1960s and 1970s, but perhaps he wasn’t the sort who drew kids near with candy, jokes, or expressions of sincere, unthreatening attention. On the occasions I was near him, perhaps I didn’t see him because of the people standing between us, people who were poking, punching, nudging, and bobbing at him --and leaving me to myself. When Daddy died, however, I got more than a look at him, for he, along with my uncles, made the long drive to St. Louis to honor my father and comfort my mother.

As a child, I was told that Garland’s face had appeared in a Coca-Cola ad before I was born. I would think of Garland when I looked at the Coke tray that held bottles and cans of Vess, Seven-Up, and Dr. Pepper on the floor of our pantry. When I played there, I’d move the sodas to the tray’s edge to see the image of the woman at the center. Her scarlet lips were parted in a smile, gold and magenta ribbons accented her brown pompadour, and her bright pink cheeks dominated her white face. The tray in the pantry in Grandma Chandler’s kitchen in the flat above ours had the coral-cheeked smiling face of a red-haired woman. These pictures bore little resemblance to the faces of white nuns and clerks with whom Momma, a nurse in parochial schools, worked. They looked nothing like the actresses on *Here’s Lucy* or the *Patty Duke* or *Doris Day* shows, which I watched on our black-and-white TV. My family didn’t have a copy of Garland’s ad, which Daddy told me was made in an effort to sell Coke to more black persons. I wondered if the picture of Garland showed a brown face with red cheeks and if the image would have been as foreign as those of the women



models, but it seemed too silly a question to ask; I knew Momma and Daddy would smile and change the subject. It didn't occur to me to ask how the real Garland looked, but if I had, the answer would probably have been a comparison to someone else I didn't know or remember. That was my parents' way of dealing with such questions. As it was, "Garland" was a name that summoned up rich meanings for my parents and uncles. He had something that made them sigh or shake their heads, smile, and look away.

On one of my family's late August visits to Oklahoma City, we went over to Miss Arletha's for a yard party honoring Garland's return. We drove over from my grandmother's bungalow on the eastside to a nearby northern suburb with cow pastures and long ranch houses where my uncles also lived. When we parked, I noticed that the stench of the evening sewer, so penetrating earlier, had faded. My parents led me on a path to the back of the house, and they seemed to disappear into a night jeweled with lights. Overhead, dangling gently between trees and laundry poles there were royal blue and emerald green lanterns. Holding my Barbie, I sat on a blanket away from the adults. I fiddled with my doll's gown, making her dance against the lights and the dark sky. I smoothed the blanket against the grass and arranged my jumping beans in a line, waiting for them to race. I smelled flowers and cigarette smoke, fried fish, and maybe berry pie. I felt giddy, up past my bedtime and at the edge of the adults' fun, which was remote from my concerns. I heard the faint sound of a jazzy organ and the voices of my uncles and their friends before an adult led me inside to rest on a bed. For years, when my parents or uncles mentioned Garland in my presence, I thought of this night of adult laughter that seemed far from my order- and work-bound parents' usual behavior.

Other than a few beers for my father or a bottle of wine for my sister's college friends, we tended to keep a dry house. Within a half hour of arriving at my house a few days before Daddy's funeral, one of my uncles and Garland had made a trip to the nearest 905, one of North St. Louis's biggest liquor stores. On coming back and stationing themselves in the kitchen, Garland especially got louder, barking out high-pitched words and laughter, while a lower mash of sound enfolded him. While Momma and my sister Joyce politely greeted guests in the living room at the front of our house, Garland, my uncles, and some of their acquaintances shifted about in the kitchen chairs, nearly boring into the linoleum as they reared back to laugh or listen to a point being made. They scooted around, elbowed one another, and cleared their throats as they hunched over their drinks and ash trays. There was a rhythmical, "And Ben was--- and we were---and then we---that time Vernon---and--- Quentin and---and---Garland---drove---and Ben---and we didn't---and he was," with laughs interspersed, shoulders shaking, and feet tapping the floor. Over the course of several hours of a morning and afternoon, the storytelling went on and on. The men were making the most of the occasion, and I resented their tight friendships and loose tongues. Garland and my uncles were talking about adventures of their shared past in a shared language. I found few hooks to catch on to, little identifying Daddy and making his life clearer. Nothing telling me why these men were his friends. Nothing about what he--hard-working, responsible, logical, and giving--had seen in Garland. Nothing about how he and Garland might have been alike in some ways. And nothing about what Daddy did before I knew him and when I wasn't with him. I heard names I knew, but none of the scenes that were so vivid and moving to the men came to life for me.



Rather than seeing my grief and relative youth as a barrier to understanding, I blamed my disengagement on the easiest target. I stayed outside the stories, though I stayed in the kitchen, taking up the dirty dishes, then starting a pound cake, then storing the food brought by the continual stream of visitors. I was precise and productive, measuring and scrubbing, getting things out, using them efficiently, then putting them away. My busyness was a willful, but apparently unnoticed, affront to Garland's verbose, rangy lounging. I stayed near the men, tolerant of my uncles' talk but mad at Garland. When he missed an ashtray and let a hole from his cigarette burn into a lime green placemat, I wanted to cry. Afterward when I came into the kitchen and saw the grey gouge in the mat, I cringed and covered it; I felt a stabbing resentment about Garland's presence and embarrassment over my response to him. I began to think that it was only Garland's loud, laughing intensity that was keeping my father's gentle spirit away. If Daddy had been in the kitchen, he'd have helped me pour my cake batter and cleaned the mixer; he'd have told me a straight story with a beginning, middle, and end, about a day of fishing at Lake Carlyle, perhaps, or about the foibles of a smug co-worker at his office. I wanted my Daddy and uncles, my sister and Momma, my grandmother and my aunts present the ways I had known before. I wanted Garland and his kitchen rowdiness out. I thought repeatedly, "I never had to listen to this blaring man when Daddy was around." My anger at Garland, though, kept me from feeling the numbness that Daddy's death had left.

Now I understand I was placing Garland in the convenient role of free-wheeling Travelin' Man, without even crediting the depths of the type. Garland's piercing voice and careless moves marked not lack of concern about other people but rather a blend of energetic self-regard and insecurity, a showmanship that entertained and a need for acceptance and respect. Those days in the kitchen though, my harsh judgment of the man refused nuance. I told myself "Remember he's Miss Arletha's brother," but that reminder didn't really matter, for I would promptly forget he was larger than what I made of him. Even back then, however, I couldn't quite reduce Garland to his uncouth loudness. If his regaling exhausted and alienated me, it obviously appealed to others. He had won my father's love. And he had become a part of my family's folklore, a necessary source of excitement and mystery in a web of pragmatic routine and social aspiration. Later that evening Garland scrambled out of the kitchen leaving chairs displaced. And I felt relief as I spooned gooey broccoli casserole and green-bean casserole and still fresh iceberg and tomato salad into Tupperware. I turned when I heard someone at the door from which Garland had just exited. It was the friend who was taking him away for the night and, standing there with her chin up, her grey hair styled in looping curls around her heart-shaped face, she seemed out of sync. Dressed in light grey jacket and skirt, with a silky fuchsia blouse, she watched my progress, and noted in a calm voice, "I don't like telling anyone what to do, but if you put that salad away with the tomatoes in it, the lettuce'll discolor."

I looked at her, seeing the subtle rose blush on her caramel face and the bright red lipstick, and said "Thank you," at the same time getting another container in which to place the tomatoes. "You can do it your way, if you want, you know. I'm just trying to help." I repeated my "thank you" and haltingly asked, "You've known Garland for a while?" To which she firmly said, "Yes, dear," and added, "I'm sorry about your father."



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Humility no less than  
courage is a virtue in  
reckoning with the  
past.

---

The words and manner of this beautiful, poised woman complicated my vision of Garland as a distraction and ruin, as a marker of what Daddy, thankfully, hadn't been. She helped me stop cementing the story I'd been making about Garland that had gotten me through a day at home without Daddy. The story had served a need, just as my later vision of Miss Arletha's piano-playing would. Confronting my father's and uncle's deaths, I was too hurt to embrace a larger picture of my parents' friends and of my parents themselves. I let my sentimentalizing tendency take over, and it gave me a Daddy and Momma I could love and respect easily, unquestioningly: my mother, the deserving recipient of a perfect gift; my father, a noble man in a world of fools. In different ways, their friends were, at least temporarily, casualties of my efforts to craft a smooth family history. Now I see what my perception of Miss Arletha and Garland gave me—characters revealing my own limited knowledge and my selfish will, my preference for gaps in knowledge and for expedient reconstructions. Knowing I have such powers gives me pause, and reminds me that humility no less than courage is a virtue in reckoning with the past.

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*Karen Chandler*



## Runes

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Runes rooted in the past, seared with time's flighty tentacles  
are best left to stand alone, slave to none. For, light  
shines on all corners of the globe

One kind, not yours, rests firmly here, on a path tested  
with time, tarred by chapped feet. Trod here, ancestral  
spirits of this clime

Then, your way remains not mine, a prescription  
not meant for this land. Reiterated: a trail yet  
exists here, carved out ages ago.

---

*Chitzi Ogbumbada*



## Jumoke

---

*Jumoke* scrapped all of it, hair, scalp and *skull*. She needed nothing for this new journey of solitude. She whispered to the *iroko*, “Be my man, I know you are strong enough.” When morning came, the canary called her name, thrice, trying to make a fourth call but fought, hard, to a stop. The birds brought grains in bits, till a fistful made a *meal*. She gulped from an upturned pod. Facial gullies led streams of salt down her *cheeks*.

Nails dripped blood,  
sun-dried blood

Red scales fell to the earth  
and met the stream of  
her *salt*.

She *died*.  
And lived, once more, a new *Jumoke*.

---

*Emmanuel Uweru Okoh*





## She, Alek

---

I see the representatives of white womanhood  
 stare up at me in resignation  
 For them, this is the world and this is the acceptance of the status quo  
 They believe it is theirs, an apple for the taking  
 Pale and aloof, selling themselves  
 with their eyes, their hair, their skin –  
 declaring war on the Afro femme type  
 They keep sliding their eyes, their hands, their bodies against the sky light  
 the glass ceiling of a glossy magazine cover.  
 Their loud confidence and put-on quiet assurance  
 almost a desperate attempt to keep a hold on their number-one spot  
 It's a passionate plea and the wailing in their eyes  
 cannot quieten the fact that to the left,  
 two rows over and on the top rack of magazines, is  
 a Queen  
 that ebony-skinned  
 non-contrasting  
 beyond compare  
 nonpareil  
 of apparel avatars  
 With her glowing, goddess, dark, chocolate skin  
 perfect head  
 long limbs and awake smile,  
 she is the one you would open doors for  
 even as she opens doors for you  
 She, Alek.

With all the competing creams, to vanilla,  
 to pink and palm-coloured faces vying for limited attention, it is  
 she, Alek,  
 and others like her, who will define and redefine the echoes of beauty  
 They promise so much more diversity and a move to an under-defined concept  
 so much less of the vacant, vapid, vampiric and false virginalism of the perpetual vogue-teasers.

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*Luso Mntbali*

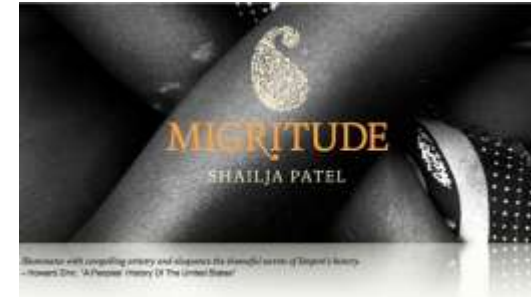




## On Migritude

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*We have traveled half the world  
with hearts open,  
we've seen everything.  
Always remember who we are,  
where we came from,  
and you'll never do evil. [From What we Keep ]*



Migritude is a gift of which Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak writes,

“A vibrant, gendered, wordsmith’s voice, speaking Africa, Asia, the metro pole, history, the present – the world.”  
[shailja.com]

In the introduction to Migritude, Vijay Prashad writes, “I came to Shailja Patel’s Migritude joyously, embraced by the first few lines about the teardrop in Babylon. The embrace didn’t falter. The words held me. They are a song”

I too did not deviate from that first embrace.

One has great expectations from a text which begins with such poetic imagination as “It began as a teardrop in Babylon.” My mind flew to all the teardrops shed from the dignities stolen by imperialism, injustice and hate. The indignities endured in exile; the collusion of global capital and imperialism in the political and socio-economic tyrannies which force us to flee our homelands. We see this as I write, with the murder of Ugandan LGBTI activist David Kato and South African lesbians and transgendered women and men who are being raped and murdered because of their sexuality and gender identity; with the women of Congo, many of whom daily, face rape and other terrible acts of violence; with the people of Egypt who are demanding freedom from the tyranny of Mubarak and his US / Israeli allies; with the millions of people of colour - who dare to cross borders and face daily hostility in the US, Germany, and UK; with the surviving indigenous peoples of America whose lives are impoverished and history erased with whiteness.

Through her own life journey and mixing prose and poetry, Shailja’s Migritude exposes and shares the tears of history merging personal stories with reflections on violence, colonisation, and migrant journeys which flow horizontally and vertically, through the lives of women.

It is best I start at the beginning and go with my feelings which are not linear but bounce around moving between sadness, joy, anger, hope, irony, knowing and not knowing. Migritude is a gift but not a gift on a plate. Rather it is poetry woven with performance which requires imagination. And this is one of the many gifts of Migritude – we get



to expand and explore our imaginations. And we learn. It's about how we imagine ourselves, our histories, our political journeys. It is also about facts. Facts of our histories which we are never told and facts of the politics of empires and post / neo -empires which are full of deceptions and exploitation.

Migritude has many beginnings. The first is in 6th Century BCE and the first depiction of the motif "Ambi" in Central Asia, which on the arrival of the Barbarian - Imperialism, is later stolen by Scottish weavers of the small village of Paisley. Ambi becomes Paisley, Mosuleen becomes Muslin, Kashmiri becomes Cashmere and Chai becomes "a beverage invented in California."

Later in 800AD there is the beginning of the relationship between Africa, Arabia and Asian brought about by "flourishing" trade and travel between the peoples of these regions. Another beginning is the gift of her "wedding trousseau". Shailja's mother had been collecting saris and jewelry for the day Shailja would get married. It wasn't happening so she gave up, broke tradition and offered her the gift of a red suitcase full of exquisitely beautiful saris. An act which Shailja interprets as recognition of her chosen path as been equally worthy of that of her sisters' marriage. An act of feminism and the knowledge that one has the power to change the way things are. An act which would lead to the performance of Migritude.

So I imagine I am lying down half struggling to extricate myself from the red, gold, green and turquoise blue saris with which Shailja performs to break the silence of violence, violation, rape, war, indignity, empire. The other half of me struggles to cocoon and protect myself in their softness.

The book is roughly divided into three parts. The first is Migritude which was "created dangerously" [i] to "reclaim and celebrate outsider status" and to "tell the invisible stories of empire war colonialism, the impact on those that are on the receiving end of these global forces" [KPPFA Interview]. Shailja's parents and their personal uncompromising struggle to ensure their three daughters have the gift of education; the Maasai and Samburu women in Kenya who were raped systematically for 35 years by British soldiers stationed on their land; the women of Iraq and Afghanistan - abducted, vanished, killed; the indignities unleashed by border patrols on people of colour.

The second part - "The Shadow is the story of Shailja's "creative journey" and the making of Migritude "a behind the scenes and after the fact, vinaigrette of memories and associations". Here she tells of her discovery of the origins of Paisley in ancient Babylon forcing her to engage with complex and multiple migrations. Similarly history as told by Empire is full of half-truths and erasure. Such as Idi Amin being a guard in the Kings African Rifles which were used to quell the Kenyan Mau Mau uprisings and from which he learned to torture from Britain's finest. And that Britain, Israel and the US sponsored the coup which brought him to power and unleashed terror on millions. And on love which in western context is often reduced to the banal by repetitious words and expressions. Following a performance in Genoa, Italy Shailja learns from a member of the audience that during his childhood in rural Italy, life was so harsh that parents dared only kiss their children when they were sleeping as any affection when they were awake might weaken their ability to survive.



The third and final section is devoted to poetry and Shailja's journey from poet to performer; and most importantly, for her work as an activist, her personal shift from "self-protected silence to political expression". As Shailja learns, yes, you can run in a Sari!

I end with another quote from the cover of *Migritude* which captures both the beauty of this poetic masterpiece and its explicit call to action!

"*Migritude* is poetry as documentary. It is non-fiction as testimony. It is authorship as survival. Of course *Migritude* defies categorisation - the best art always does" Raj Patel

## Notes

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/ Shailja Patel – Kenyan playwright, poet, performer and activist - <http://shailja.com/>.

/Extras: An interview with Shailja Patel by Preeti Mangala Shekar of the Women's Magazine. [<http://bit.ly/ga2tdZ>]

/*Migritude* is published by Kaya Press, 2010

/[i] Taken from *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work* by Edwidge Danticat

/This review was first published in *New Internationalist*

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*Sokari Ekine*



## Hot Water and Other Relevancies

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Book: The Water was Hot (2011)

Author: Binyerem Ukonu

Publisher: Serene Woods

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In many ways, *The Water was Hot*, Binyerem Ukonu's debut short story collection shares the quality of a novel. Then again, the experiences relayed in the book are novel in the actual sense of the word. Ukonu breathes life into his stories, in ways that are sometimes shocking and at other times downright absurd.

There's starkness to the reality in this book, and it lends credence to what the late British novelist, Beryl Bainbridge, said that there is no such thing as imagination. That all accounts are borne of the factual details encrypted in the mind. Reality is the forte of this collection of stories: reality that is brash and unforgiving. Reality that seems so strangely familiar, so engrossing that one overlooks the absence of style in this collection.

Most, if not all the stories, are narrated in the first person. This could have come across as monotonous, but the stories infest on the power of their strength and soar into familiar coherence and plausibility. The first story, 18B, is an appetizer which starts on a rather engaging note. It is a popular story, not quite purged of its cliché prospect but one is tempted to prod along with the author as he leads towards an abysmal precipice which the craft of contemplated fiction will navigate away from. But the recreation of reality is genius and must be lauded as often as possible. 18B can be called the literature of the abrupt, the plot falls like a china, long after the reader cradles it and perhaps cherish it. But not all hope is lost as the story rides on rickety language into a rundown motel of denouement for the night. This might not come across as thick in terms of literary weight but it strikes reality with a resonance that is hugely familiar.

A fistful of the stories in this collection share this quality. And the monotony of language, quality and even experience might be the only drawback that puts the story in the cadre of promise.

The author is a first-time short story writer and he must have embraced the craft in its exact literal context; he wrote 'short stories'; stories that could have benefited from range and generous introspection. Perhaps, he simply



subscribes to the ideology of stories finding their voices, and often times telling themselves. As the stories in this collection do that perfectly—they auto-narrate. They treat their material with stark indifference, they relay them with an officious propensity that deeply contrast and contradict the emotive quality embedded in the heart of these stories. This can be akin to writing one's diary in Victorian English.

But all misgivings can be forgiven on the altar of contemporariness. For this is what these stories preach: what it is to be human and sensate and relevant in our time. One must not wave this regal quality with a condescending affect. Literature must evolve and devolve itself often, and who says it must be in a stepwise ladder form?

This collection has earned its place on a shelf close to good literature. It is, in itself a discourse, between what literature is and what it should be. Better put, it is a hybrid of what is sensational and what is human. It is a ball of emotion that rolls over itself unabashed without the benefit of self-evaluation. It is panache of truth, a witness of its time but a betrayal of craft.

We cannot be too wrong to call it journalism. It shares the unmistakable motive of a personal journal, seething with societal commentary and popular stereotypes. This is what dignifies Mr. Ukonu as an author; what might justify this suite of stories as relevant.

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*Damilola Ajayi*



## First History Lesson

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You can find the history of everything  
right here in this tide pool  
Here in this tide pool is the history  
of everything  
The sea palm is the first moon landing  
and that snail on the side of the rock  
is yesterday  
That bit of shell is  
my mother's first communion  
So, you see, there is no order  
or rather, not the order we want  
I understand the mussels that are snatched up by gulls—  
they are moments from tribal wars  
The calcite shells  
are the days that everyone has forgotten,  
impenetrable as they are  
And, I understand the sea star in my hand,  
I understand its spines and toxins,  
I know it is the day  
that we first came here  
But this moonstone, that found its way in,  
I don't understand. It might be  
the first day of the world, the first time  
the sun came up after the moon went down,  
and they decided it went well and should try it again  
Or, it might be the first day of the sun altogether,  
the way the sun now shines through this stone so easily,  
as if the stone permits the light,  
as if the light bows and makes prayer hands  
every single time.

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*Lauren Henley*





## On the Runway

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Moving along shining path,  
bright tiles and lights,  
swaggering on high heels  
shoulders high,  
flawless skin,  
she posed around

Her hair flared about  
her strapless shining outfit  
as she darted about, on marble steps  
with smiling lips  
and sparkling strikes from cameras

She moved faster,  
a strange light followed  
Her heart leaped,  
her heels squeaked,  
screeched and stopped  
Her hands became cold;  
she tossed,  
later  
turned  
Her legs uncontrolled,  
she stumbled and fell  
on the runway which clowns prepared  
the cameras striking still

Her wig fell,  
she fell with it.  
Her heart followed,  
later  
her blood.

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*Victor Olusanya*



## Forever

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The spirit in which these tamed emotions hide  
rests in the abyss of a shallow grave  
The cries I heard at dusk were emptied  
into a sacred rage  
I am unaware of the glitter of your mourning  
unaware of the phantom-gestures,  
yet your soul hovers in an endless pursuit  
searching for closure,  
hidden in the cracks of my skin  
the contours of my gnarled mind  
Forever finds a place to hide  
next to the nostalgic bruises of a vindictive affair,  
a place where body and soul part  
where mind and deed collide  
She sits on the edge of my dimmed emotions  
inside a dark warmth, near the cinders of our past  
I am to her the present in which her future faded  
Goodbye wedded the last of all we made,  
cemented, into the crevice of a fallen forever.

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*Yolanda Mabuto*



## End of Love

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The past sings in my present misery  
and I awaken to a silhouette of your absence  
I keep hearing the echoes of your silent goodbye  
Words unsaid, yet those words tame my intuition  
and arise as my conscience  
I keep hearing your silent goodbye  
Whispers of an embrace that held tight to my heartbreak  
I quietly ache,  
as every mistake gathers in a  
coffin-past  
This surely is the end of love.

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*Yolanda Mabuto*





## Going Home

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I had never seen my father so happy. I'd expected that he'd be mad, After Evi, little Joan and I kept him waiting outside the church where the special evening programme, which was supposed to come to an end by six, but went on for several more hours, was held. Evi was even surprised that he came at all (her, "Oh, could that really be Dad?" said it all), because when she had asked him in the morning if he could come with us for the "Life Recovery Service," and then if perhaps he could come pick us up at the end of the event, he pretended not to hear her, staring up at the ceiling like that—like he was seeing a vision there—and whistling a song about this world not being his own. I watched him from the dining table where I was supposed to be having breakfast; his legs, outstretched and crossed at the ankles, trembled violently as he whistled, as if they were out of control. They shook like that whenever he was angry, which was often, except I wasn't sure anymore who he was angry with and why. Mum was no longer around, and we, his children, were staying out of his way.

I wondered why he preferred to sit like that, whistling all day long, not talking to anyone. I knew he had things to say, because the other night as I walked past his bedroom to the bathroom further down the hall, I heard him talking to himself, cursing everything about his life, and wondering why his enemies would not let him drink water and put down the cup in peace. I heard him ask, "Why, God, why now?" and I heard his sobbing loud and clear through the door. And there he was now in the parking lot, grinning at us, as if he didn't have a care in the world.

"Come on in, oh, come on in, my darlings," he said as we approached the car, waving at us from inside, as though we were very far away and he needed to catch our attention. "Come in—let Daddy take you home."

Evi and I were in no particular hurry to enter, but Joan let go of my hand and ran to his side. I heard his door open, Joan said, "Daddy! Daddy!" and then she began to giggle, normally at first, then hysterically, the way children laugh when relentlessly tickled. In a while she seemed to be out of breath and began to cough. My father laughed too, deep and loud, and it was, I don't know, perhaps a little frightening. It was the way he used to laugh when he was making an attempt to tame his rage. "I'm laughing," he would say, "because if I don't try to see the funny side of what you've just said, I could kill you for it." That's what he said before he hurled Mum over the railing and sent her crashing onto the glass centre table below—that fine one he'd spent nearly half his salary importing from Dubai: It happened in slow motion : Mum screamed as she fell, arms flailing wildly like the wings of a bird in flight, the glass shattered, small, silvery pieces flying in every direction, like beads bouncing off a hard surface. Mum's head burst open, her blood spread out on the white tiled floor. Dad came running down the stairs, accusing, "See what you've made me do? You see?"

I should have said something then, something mature like, "Dad, this is not the time to pass blames. Let's get Mum to the hospital." Or I should have done something impulsive, like go over and beat the shit out of him. I knew I could; at sixteen, I was well-built and bigger than most boys my age, bigger than my father who was so thin he looked like a walking twig, a stiff pole, ready to break any moment. But I did not say or do anything. Mum's crying became a dull



moan, a question: “What have I done, Edward? What have I done to deserve this?” And still, I could not act. It is the most inexplicable thing, this paralysis of the limbs and the will.

Dad started to pace, his veined hands shaking, his mouth muttering words of complaint, accusation. Why wasn't I asleep? I thought. Why hadn't I taken Joan and left Evi here? Why didn't we have neighbours who could hear something and come over? Why this, why that.

I was still standing there, doing nothing, when Evi came rushing down the stairs. She stopped as she reached the last step and screamed, “What are you people doing?”, she held her head in her hands like that—like she was staring at the scene of a violent crime. “Blood! Blood everywhere! Mum?” She fell on my mother and began to fuss over her: checking pulse, listening for heartbeats, lifting arms and watching them fall limply back to the floor. “Oh my God! Mum? Mummy!” Dad and I went over then, at the same time, like two fools under the command of some evil sorceress.

*Hold her this way!*

*Like this?*

*No, stupid boy, you're dragging her on the ground!*

*Sorry, Dad, what should I do?*

*I said hold her! Like this?*

We managed to get Mum out of the front door. Thirty minutes later, we arrived at the hospital, but it was too late. Mum died that night, and we came back home with her blood on our faces, our clothes, our hands.

/

“You two beautiful people,” Dad said, coming out of the car and looking at us over the top. “What are you waiting for? Get in, let's go home.”

In the bright lights of the church parking lot, he looked different, old in a ghostly sort of way. His neck seemed thinner, head bigger, long face stretched taut, showing the contours of the bones beneath. His eyes were so deep inside his head, they were two black holes staring back at you. I shuddered and looked away, looked to Evi, who shrugged, opened the front door and entered. I looked elsewhere, at the floodlights beaming from all corners of the lot, with all kinds of insects dancing around them. Church people dressed in suits and flowing gowns, clutching Bibles to their chests were walking to and from cars, bumping into one another and laughing about it, shaking and holding hands, listening with keen interest to what the other person was saying, the way people behave only when they were around a church. I wondered if any of these men would beat their wives to death when they got back home.

“Baro,” Evi called, “let's go home.”

In her eyes, there was an understanding that could not be conveyed in words: the kind of understanding that losers shared, that made you picture them in your mind's eye holding hands and walking together in the rain, shoulders slouched, heads bowed down, though they may never have known each other before the race. I wanted to open her



door, fall against her and apologize for being weak. She would hold me close and I would weep and weep on her shoulders, weep until the morning came. But what kind of man would that make me?

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That night when we got back home from the hospital, Evi cried a great deal. She buried her head in her pillow and her body shivered as if she was suffering from a cold. She hadn't even washed herself free of Mum's blood, hadn't even taken off her clothes. I went to her, clean and smelling nice, and tried to comfort her. She wouldn't let me. She sat up slowly and stared at me hard like that—like I had been lying about something and it was time to confess to the truth. I got up and began walking towards the door. "Why?" she asked, "Why didn't you do anything?"

I turned to face her, thought of an answer, then said, "I don't know."

"I don't understand," she said. "Do you even feel anything? Mum's not ever coming back—do you know that?" She looked like a victim from one of those horror movies who had come back from the grave to haunt the killer, what with her hair unkempt, her eyes red and swollen, her white dress smeared with all that dried blood.

"Evi, you should get out of that dress," I said. "Go and take a bath."

"Clothes? You're worried about clothes?"

"I'm fine," I said, though she hadn't asked me whether or not I was.

She came off the bed and walked towards me. "You're afraid of him, aren't you?"

"Of who? Dad?"

"Yes, for godsakes, Dad."

"Me? I'm afraid?"

"You like him more than Mum; than any of us."

"Evi, what are you saying?"

"Admit it!" Her tone was stern, like a command.

"Evi, please..."

"You always try to please him, to do whatever he wants. He owns your brain, doesn't he?"

"Evi, please stop!" I covered both ears with my palms, then turned and made to flee. She grabbed me by the waist and spun me around. God, she was strong—petite, but very strong.

"Every time he starts acting crazy, you don't ever say a word."

"What do you want me to say?" My voice was shaky, echoing in my ears, as if coming from miles away. I felt my knees buckling beneath me. I was going to fall to the ground.

Evi folded her arms across her breasts and observed me with narrowed eyes. "Mum's gone," she said finally, "mum's gone."

I fell down, got up at once and left the room.

Early the next morning, before friends and relatives started trooping in to offer their condolences, Dad called us together for a "family meeting," where everyone would be free to speak their minds. Express themselves. Let's have a heart-to-heart, all right? I am your father; if there's anything anyone of you wants to say to me, don't hesitate to do so. I won't eat you up. Even Joan was in that meeting, looking lost as Dad began to speak of Mum's many virtues and the reasons why he loved her. He told this story of how their love had begun at a petrol station. He was the attendant



and Mum was driving an old beetle. As he filled up her tank, he told her: Baby girl, you're very beautiful, you know. I promise you—it may take long—but I promise you, I'll get out of this place someday and marry you. He laughed. We stared at him. "So you see," he said, "I loved your mother dearly and I wasn't really the one that...caused it, you know. You heard the doctor saying something about her blood pressure. She had diabetes, and it must have been recent, you know, because we didn't know, and she lost a lot of blood, which of course is not normal considering the kind of injury so—"

"Dad," Evi interrupted, "you threw Mum all the way down because she said your anger made you act like an agent of Satan."

"Yes, yes, I know," he said shifting in his seat, "but if, you know, if she had been in the best state of health, what I'm saying is, things would not have happened the way they had, if, you know, if..."

I was sitting beside him and Evi was on the other side of the dining table looking at me—looking at me—as if she was expecting me to say something. I turned my head towards the table. Suddenly, Dad burst into tears. "She was always pushing me, always making me angry. She knew my weak points and never helped me overcome them, just used them against me. You see what has happened now? You see life? Ah, this life; why won't my enemies let me have peace?"

I heard Evi's chair scrape the floor and looked up to see her walking away.

"Where're you going?" Dad asked. "The meeting is not over."

"I'm going to my room, Dad," Evi said and then called to Joan, "Joan baby, come on." Joan hopped off her chair, too quickly, as if she had been waiting all morning for the cue.

"Evi, don't disrespect your father. Come back and sit down."

"Dad, don't push it."

"I said, come back here."

That was when Evi snapped and pounced on him like an evil creature, quick like that—one minute, standing there, cool and calm, the next, grabbing him by the neck and shouting in his face: "How could you kill her, Dad? Why did you kill her?"

"Your mother—"

"She was your wife!"

Dad pushed her off him and she fell to the floor. He arose and began ranting, "I didn't kill her! I loved her! I loved her! I loved her," as if he was trying to convince himself.

Evi sprang to her feet like a boxer who had been knocked down but had no intention of quitting the match.

"Yes, you did!" she shouted back, poking Dad in the chest, "You bloody son of a bitch, you did!"—I thought: Oh, my God, Evi is swearing—"and you would pay for it, I swear!"

Dad turned away from her and laughed. "Children of nowadays," he said, shaking his head from side to side, "just like their mothers, always pushing their fathers to the edge." He rested his palms on the edge of the dining table as if he wanted to push it. His body was trembling. Joan's crying filled the room, it rose and fell, then rose and rose, like a car shifting gears, until she hit her falsettos.

I stood up then and thought of bolting for the door, but stuck my hands in my pockets and said, in a tiny whisper, "That's all right, now, that's all right."





“You know what, Dad,” Evi said, her voice strong like that, clear like that—like this was the most important thing she would ever say. “The only reason why Mum put up with you all these years was because she loved you. She did get fed up sometimes, you know, with your reckless spending, and your gambling, and your foolish lending, and your fucking temper!” She paused, her voice had begun rising. “But every time”—she was calm again, shaking her index finger for emphasis—“every single time she spoke to me about it, I told her to stay. I told her to try and make it work. I told her you would change. And I feel guilty about it now, because if she’d gone all this time, she would still be alive.”

“I didn’t kill her,” Dad said, turning to face Evi and clasping his palms underneath his chin like one in earnest prayer. “It was not my fault. Don’t you understand?”

“But you can’t hurt us anymore,” Evi continued, as if she had not heard Dad speak. “We’re leaving. This moment you stop being our father, and I hope you die a painful and horrible death. Wicked man!”

Dad slumped to his knees and let out a great and terrible cry, the cry of one, I imagined, who was burning in the flames of Hell after he thought he’d done the Lord’s will. Evi turned her back to him and started to walk away, but her shoulders began shaking and she stopped. I knew then that we would not be going anywhere. “Dad,” she said in a broken voice. “Dad, why?” and she began to cry. Joan also was in tears. I felt somewhat embarrassed, not knowing what to say, whom to comfort, where to go.

/

“Baro,” Evi said again, “let’s go home.”

Dad had already gotten into the car and was firing it up. I got in and wound down the glass. Beside me Joan was bouncing up and down like a newly inflated ball, singing nursery rhymes about her mother who sat, washed and plaited her infant hair.

“Dad, sorry for keeping you waiting,” Evi said. “The programme was supposed to end by six, and we didn’t know you were coming.”

Dad laughed, his head hit the seat as he threw it back. “What are you sorry for dear? I could wait all night for you.”

*Wait all night for you?* What the hell was that?

“Dad”—Evi reached out and touched him, her voice close to panic—“Dad, are you all right?”

“Oh, of course I am, can’t you see?”

“Joan,” I said, “put on your seatbelt.”

Joan whined: “No, I don’t want to wear it; it’s tight.”

I reached over and strapped her in, then I fastened my seatbelt. Joan continued to whine. Dad put the car in reverse, swerved onto the expressway, changed gears and then the car began to fly. He switched lanes at will, dodging in between other cars like one of those mad bus drivers. Horns honked after us, and curses pursued, and, in the orange glow of the streetlights I could see a truck in the distance. And we were flying straight towards it.

“Dad, slow down, will you?” Evi yelled, above the noise of the wind rushing in through the open windows. Her hair was flapping against the sides of her seat. “Dad, please.”

Dad laughed merrily and took his hands off the steering wheel. “Going home!” he cried. “We’re going home!”



“Oh, my God, Oh, God, save us.” Evi covered her face in her hands.

“Ah, my baby is afraid,” Dad teased. “But you know that this is how I drive, eh Rebecca, you know this.” Dad reached out, placed one hand on her leg and playfully moved it up and down her thigh. Evi shrieked and shifted away from him, her body pressing against the door. He had called her Rebecca, that was my mother’s name.

The car flew faster, the truck was getting bigger in front of us. Joan began to vomit. And then I began shouting, banging on Evi’s seat in front of me: “Stop this car! Stop this car! Stop this car!” As I shouted, I heard Evi say, “Dad, your seatbelt. You’re not wearing your seatbelt.” The truck seemed to have stopped moving and it loomed large before us, like a mountain. Joan was sitting still, hugging herself. Dad was singing the song about this world not being his own.

I didn’t know precisely when I unhooked my seatbelt and jumped, but next thing I was stuck in between the front seats, wrestling the steering with Dad. I heard “Let it go, leave it”, I heard, “Dad, watch out”, I heard “Mummy! Mummy!” and I heard the screech of tires, and then the car seemed to be spinning very fast, throwing me this way and that against, I suppose, the roof, towards the windshield, on the dashboard, and everything became dark.

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When the lights came on again, I was lying on a small bed in a small room. There were people on other beds around me, some, like me, had bandages wrapped around their heads and limbs, some were restless, turning this way and that, groaning, “Ah! Ah!” and others looked like they were already dead. I didn’t know what I was doing here, or why I was alone. Where were Dad, Mum, Evi and Joan? I started to get up, but there was a sharp pain in my lower back and my head ached, an absurd throbbing like that—like there were shockwaves spreading from the centre of my brain to the outside of my skull. The pungent smell of disinfectant filled my nostrils, nauseating me. I needed to get out of this place. I made to rise again, fell back, and everything again became dark.

In the days that followed, the lights came on and off at their own will. Through the darkness and through the light, my memory came back bit after bit, first of the night of the accident and then of several nights before when Mum had died, and then of many nights and days before that. I remembered the days when I was a little boy, when my father used to get us ready for school, I and Evi both. In those days Mum was always working and was out of the house most times before we even woke up. In the afternoons, he would come pick us up from school, carrying me on his shoulder and holding Evi by the hand. He would buy sweets and biscuits and whatever else we wanted, and when we got home, he and I would play boys’ games while Evi slept or talked to her dolls.

I remembered also Christmas days when we sat around the table and ate fried rice and chicken and talked and laughed. Somehow, Mum always got the Christmas food just right, so that Dad didn’t have to complain about the salt and bang on the table and throw the water in Mum’s face. I remembered days when we played cards, or chess, or Ludo, and Dad won and didn’t have to suspect anyone of cheating, which would have made him stand up and stomp away, leaving the game unfinished, and the days when Dad told Mum, in our hearing, “Baby, you are driving me crazy again,” and then carried her up the stairs, Mum protesting and laughing at the same time, behaving like a small child. I remembered days like that, even though they were few, I remembered them.



On the fourth day, when it seemed like the lights would not be going off again, I saw Evi for the first time since the accident. She entered the room head first, looking in with this frightful expression on her face, as if she was not sure whether or not I was awake, or alive, as if she feared the doctors may have deceived her. She walked with a slight limp, wincing with every step, a plaster spread across her forehead. The bandages around my head had been removed, but my legs were still in cast. When she got to the bed, Evi kissed me on the cheek and pulled a chair closer to the bed and sat. She had never kissed me on the cheek before—we never shared that kind of intimacy—and it made me feel strange that she was doing so now.

She asked, “Do you...remember the night of the accident?”

I said, “Yes, I do.”

“They said you had a concussion and you could—”

I said, “I remember everything.”

“Oh.” She laughed, then joked: “And I was wishing I had been in your shoes...been the one to forget, you know.”

I didn’t laugh. “Where’s Joan?”

“Oh, she’s fine, she’s fine, nothing serious.” I looked at her. She must have seen something on my face and said, “Really, Joan is fine. The seatbelts saved us.”

“Where is she?”

“Aunty Margaret is looking after her.”

I looked away and there was silence, except for the groaning of the rusty fan that turned slowly above. “Do you remember that evening,” Evi asked suddenly, “on New Year’s day, when I was ten and you were eight?”

“What?”

“That evening when Dad danced with Mum around the sitting room, and then he tried to do an iron-chain and his trousers split down the middle?”

“Oh.”

“You know, you and I had a good fight that lasted till morning.”

“Evi...”

“Do you remember how—?”

“I remember everything, I do.”

She arose from the chair, sat on the edge of the bed and took my hand. “Baro,” she said softly, “I know you don’t want to hear this, but Dad died in the accident. They said he was driving drunk.” I freed my hand from her hold and turned away. And memories, only of times when Dad laughed, and danced, and played football with me, floated unbidden to the surface of my mind. I felt guilty thinking these thoughts, because when the doctor—that mouse that couldn’t get the smile off his face—had come out of the theatre and announced to us that Mum had died, while Evi collapsed against the wall and Dad grabbed the lapels of his coat, screaming, “Tell me you’re lying, Doctor! Tell me you’re lying,” all I could think of was the many times Mum had threatened to leave and changed her mind at the last minute. Evi took my hand again and began to caress it. I turned towards her. “I held him,” she said, “I held him”—her voice had an urgency to it—and his face was ripped off and blood was pouring out. His hand was twisted and his stomach



was cut open and these things were hanging out.” She was looking at me and I knew she was not seeing me, but my dying father on that hospital bed. “Baro,” she continued. “I told him to die a violent death, but I...I never thought Dad could die.”

“I can’t understand,” Evi said, looking at her hands, her voice not straight, the way people talk when they are close to tears. “Where do we go from here?”

I was filled then with a sudden dread. It was me alone now, and I felt as if I was walking naked on a public street, and the whole world was watching, waiting to see me fall.

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*Kesiana Eboh*





*(c)Mila Schon Backstage, Milan Fashion Week*



## The Serious Guide to Becoming a Seriously Unfashionable Writer

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A few months ago a co-worker drew me aside.

'Wow! I didn't know someone like you could write a story as deep as that. I even scrolled back to the top of the page to confirm that it was you,' she adjusted the frame of her glasses as she spoke.

'Really?' I asked.

'Yes *now*,' she went on. 'You know you visit all those fashion blogs everyday. And you're...' I could see her struggling to find the right word 'trendy. Honestly I didn't know you could write like that,' she said with a belittling chuckle.

I stared at her too-white teeth and felt like shaking her. But I didn't. However I did say something about not judging a book by its cover and how I wasn't a fashion guru or a celebrity stalker – which may or may not be true depending on who is telling the story.

The relationship between literature and fashion is a precarious one. The globally accepted style for the African female writer is terribly bohemian; confined to dreadlocks, afros, turbans, conspicuous wooden bangles and ankle skimming ankara skirts. The average person will assume that you're vain the minute they discover you love fashion. It's okay to overindulge in chocolate, books, cars or exotic vacations. But if you love clothes or shoes you stand the risk of being regarded as an airhead.

After the last book reading I attended, I got home heavy headed from loud debates about why the theme of solitude ran through Márquez's novels and whether or not Mario Llosa deserved the Nobel Prize in Literature. Then I took off my six inch heels and flung them away like a crumpled sheet of paper. And as I watched them sail across the room, I felt like crying. My towering heels had done nothing to hide the fact that I was a dilettante as far as literature was concerned.

In my quest to be published, I have received letter after letter of rejection and acceptance. Some of the editors who bothered to reply were kind enough to explain why my story wasn't selected. So I got a lot of: 'I don't think you've found your voice' even though I wasn't aware that I had lost my voice and 'I'm afraid we'll have to pass on this one, your writing is a bit too plebeian for our taste' even though they didn't say what their preferred taste was.

I believe the best writers write well because they read widely. Many will argue that it is impossible for me to write like Cheever, Achebe and Hemmingway if *The Devil Wears Prada* and *Confessions of a Shopaholic* are some of my best



books of the twenty first century. It hasn't dawned on them that I do not want to write like Cheever and co. Or that while there are certain authors I enjoy reading, I am not fanatic enough to become their literary doppelgangers.

Take the bustling Lagos social scene on the other hand. Just wear a playsuit or a jumpsuit or a birthday suit, grab a pair of coloured contact lenses – preferably green or blue - and the mandatory twenty inch Peruvian weave. Then attend the right social gatherings, master the art of contrived air kissing, appear in *Scene and Be Seen* and voila! A fashionista is born. If you flip through the airbrushed pictures in newspaper fashion inserts, while you'll find a potpourri of professionals, business men, socialites and actors, you're not likely to find any author in there. How can you be regarded as a 'serious' writer when you live in rabid fear of being photographed in the same outfit twice? How can you claim to be an 'African' writer when you're smiling for the camera instead of telling the kind of stories that will bring us foreign aid?

I give up. It's no use willing the god of fashion to win the god of literature. So, to appease the latter, I've written a handbook to help me look more like a writer:

1. My Jimmy Choos have got to go. It doesn't matter that I starved for months just so I could buy them on sale. Bye bye Jimmy Choos, Welcome sensible, label-free shoes suitable for the black and white portrait on my dust jacket.
2. I've forfeited my sixteen inch Brazilian weave for a brand new dreadlocked diet. I've also cancelled my eyebrow waxing appointment at the Day Spa. If Frida Kahlo could grow a unibrow, so can I.
3. My parents do not exist. But when I become a famous, critically acclaimed author they will appear. My mother will write a tell-all autobiography revealing that my baby doll was named Twiggy, not Amelia Jane like I claim and I'll sue her.
4. My Estee Lauder Lipstick in Extravagant Red has gone AWOL. So has my Benefit Bad Girl Eyeliner. Swipe by swipe I've stripped my face clean of makeup. Now it's easier for me to go about with the pained expression befitting for the heavy themes in my stories.
5. Sophie who? Marian who? Sorry, never heard of them. I am a serious writer who only reads serious, prize winning authors. I ordered Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom* from Amazon even though I still haven't been able to get past page ten after a month. But I'm making progress.
6. It's official. CNN is now my favourite TV channel. Who knew that *Inside Africa* presented such an inside view of Africa? Sure I'll miss the Kardashians' antics and Joan Rivers' creative insults but whoever said a writer's life is easy?



7. No more Le Petit Marche. No more Sexy et Fabuleaux. My GTB MasterCard lies frozen in my deep freezer. Note to self: remember, Labyrinths is Christopher Okigbo's poetry collection, not the latest fragrance by Guerlain.
8. I'll attend every edition of the BookJam at Silverbird even though I'm clueless about the guest authors. Never mind the time I mistook Chinweizu for a deity. I'll blurt out Jhumpa Lahiri, not Carrie Bradshaw, when I'm asked who my favourite author is.
9. I'll stop harassing my vendor for copies of élan and ThisDay Style every Sunday. I'll get rid of the ceiling-high pile of French Vogue and Italian Elle in my bedroom. From this day forward, I do solemnly swear to read Okike, Granta and The New Yorker.
10. Public Notice: massive DVD auction of the complete seasons of Sex and the City, Gossip Girl and Ugly Betty going...going...gone!

If I still don't bear any resemblance to a writer after following these rules, I'll quietly relocate to another planet. Until then, I'll just keep doing what I love to do most. Write.

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*Suzanne Ushie*

This piece has previously been published in #7b, and online.  
We're republishing for the simple reason that this work is acclaimed.  
/Publishers





## Rekindling Love

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Book Title: A Love Rekindled

Author: Myne Whitman

Published: Createspace, March 2011

Type: US Trade 6X9 Paperback; EBook

Price: \$11.99; \$2.99

Pages: 276

ISBN: 978-1456516864

Status: Widely available

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A Love Rekindled, Myne Whitman's second novel, charts the story of Kevwe and Efe, a young couple who meet in a Nigerian university, fall in love and are engaged to be married. Unfortunately, a series of tragic events cause them to break up, leaving behind a trail of hurt and sadness. Several years later, they are brought face to face, and have to deal with the many unresolved issues arising from their breakup.

Like Myne's first novel, A Love Rekindled is a contemporary romance set in Nigeria, and like in A Heart to Mend, she does a thorough job of bringing the settings to life. In A Love Rekindled however, the story is split into two narratives; one set in the present day Abuja, Nigeria, the other set ten years before while Efe is still in university in Benin.

The university narrative moves quite slowly at the start, describing the budding relationship between Kevwe and Efe. The Abuja narrative, in contrast, plunges directly into the emotional conflict that both protagonists have to deal with. This narrative style takes some getting used to, but it actually works, especially because in many cases, the present narrative looks back to the past, and it gives the reader a fresher perspective on the events of the present.

One feature of the split narrative that appears to be a drawback is that in many cases, the events of the past narrative are foreshadowed by events in the present. However, the strength of the novel is the emotional journey that the author takes the reader on. She creates a sympathetic picture of both Kevwe and Efe, showing their innermost feelings as they interact with each other, and with others who are not so favorably disposed towards their relationship. The author also deftly weaves both stories together, juxtaposing the protagonists gently falling in love by degrees with their struggle to desperately regain that love they once had.



In the final third of the novel, Myne Whitman brings the narratives to a dramatic crescendo as she shows not only the searing heartbreak that betrayal can bring, but more importantly, for hearts torn apart by such heartbreak, the power of love to heal.

Note:

/Watch the video trailer on [YouTube](#)

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*Tola Odejayi*

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Again, we invite you to consider submitting to Saraba. This time, beginning from April until the end of May, we would be accepting works from emerging writers that explore, and touch on the simple subject of food.

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Please read our submission guidelines [here](#) before submitting. We are weary of those that call our bluff. We would not tolerate them any longer.

We remain committed to presenting the best of emergent writing from Nigeria, especially, the rest of Africa and impliedly, the world.

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Saraba is created to serve as a hub that stimulates young emerging writers and artists to creative intellectual activities beyond known capacities.

## Scandalous, Fashionable

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The task of raising a collage that forays into fashion is arduous and pitiful. Firstly, fashion is a slippery phenomenon, like a jelly hydra, it eludes even the most patient and skilled handlers, which we were not.

We often cut to the chase. We exhaust our senses in the pursuit of an ideal perspective for each our issues, but with this issue, it was not business as usual, our modus operandi was put to test. Second is that there is no global approach that seeks to suck in all the fragments of fashion and adapt it for a cosmic show glass. Suffice to say that fashion is personal, tribal, religious and prone to the element of time and even weather.

So how did we whether this rock? We needed a slant which providence (or was it internet?) brought our way in Suzanne Ushie's piece, The Serious Guide to Being a Seriously Unfashionable Writer. It was a safe slant; if you like, a tangential plank that bridged us closer into shaping the mound of our entries.

This also effectively failed. Each piece that came, came with a difference, a nuance that seemed set upon the head of the previous; all crammed with insightful approaches on the concept of fashion.

This was how we failed in securing a unanimous perspective for fashion; how we succeeded in multiplying the richness, the effusiveness, the feverishness and sometimes agonizing details of fashion.

And like after every fashion show, we have earned the right to present ourselves as the culprits responsible for this scandalous but noble feat.

D.A & E.I  
Ile-Ife,  
April, 2011



## Contributors

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**Yemi Soneye** was born in 1991. He is a graduate of Agricultural Economics and Extension from Ladoko Akintola University of Technology, Ogbomoso, Nigeria. His works have appeared on Sentinel Nigeria, Istanbul Literary Review, Palapala Magazine and Sunday Sun newspaper. He was a winner in the 2010 StoryTime One Sentence Short Story Competition. He awaits publication in an anthology celebrating Nigeria's golden independence anniversary.

**Donald Molosi** is a writer, poet and classically trained as an actor at the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art (LAMDA). He is from Botswana and is a graduate of Williams College in the US. He has just spent 18 months studying Forum Theatre in Senegal, Uganda, France and England, and is currently working in New York City.

**Michael Lee Johnson** is a poet and freelance writer from Itasca, Illinois. He is heavily influenced by: Carl Sandburg, Robert Frost, William Carlos Williams, Irving Layton, Leonard Cohen, and Allen Ginsberg. His new poetry chapbook with pictures is titled From Which Place the Morning Rises.

**Chitzi Ogbumbada** is a member of the Association of Nigerian Authors. He was the pioneer editor-in-chief of the Dais. Chitzi is a regular contributor to print and online magazines. In 2009, his poem came third at the maiden edition of the Embassy of Italy in Nigeria Poetry Competition.

**Emmanuel Uweru Okoh** is a Nigeria-based writer. His work has been published in NEXT, HNW and Naijastories. Emmanuel lives in Lagos and works in the media.

**Luso Mnthali** is a freelance writer from Malawi, living in Cape Town, South Africa. who has written for numerous print and online magazines including New African Woman and O the Oprah Magazine. She loves to dance, to cook and to sit near the ocean, listening to the waves crash.

**Lauren Henley** is currently a graduate student at Pacific University of Oregon, in the low-residency MFA program. She has been published in Hayden's Ferry Review, Eclectica, White Pelican, Projector Magazine, WORK, Breadcrumb Scabs, Cloudbank, The Delinquent, and others. Her favorite poets are currently Phillip Levine, Larry Levis, and Eugenio Montale.

**Victor Olusanya**, born and resident in Nigeria, is a 19-year-old law student of Obafemi Awolowo University. He is from Ogun State and he loves to read, draw and write.



**Yolanda Mabuto** (1988) was born in Gweru, Zimbabwe and began writing poetry at the age of 9. She has been published in 11 anthologies in Peterborough and holds 3 certificates of Poetry writing distinction. Now aged 22 she still continues to make poetry the centre of her happiness. Her writing is inspired by the life of others as well as her own and it reflects the artistic craft of life's pain and joy.

**Sokari Ekine** is a freelance writer, blogger and editor. She blogs on [Black Looks](#)

**Damilola Ajayi** is a contributing editor to Saraba Magazine. When he is not in Ile-Ife where he is studying medicine, he is either in Ilesha on medical matters or in Lagos on holidays.

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**Karen Chandler** teaches American and African American literature and culture at the University of Louisville (USA). She is currently writing a book on children's literature and black history.

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