

NIGERIAN NEWSDIRECT CHAPBOOK SERIES  
WINNER 2022

# FOR THE LOVE OF COUNTRY AND MEMORY

MICHAEL IMOSSAN



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(WINNER 2022)**



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MICHAEL IMOSSAN

## PRAISE FOR THE BOOK

“When you live in a country that wants you dead, all forms of art within that country should rebel against the murderous atmosphere. In Imossan's work, he has served as a collector of hurt. The chapbook is a chronicle, memorabilia to remind us of what our country has taken from us, and what it continues to take. The poems in this collection detail a history of grief, of war, and of suffering. With his unfailing wealth of language, Imossan is able to perform an important duty of poetry—recording, telling stories about the experiences of people, and in this case, a people exposed to a myriad of trauma.”

— **Samuel Adeyemi**  
**Author, Heaven is a metaphor**

“To read this book is to stand before a collage unfolding with every sigh— a riveting assemblage of an eyewitness' account transcending text to a mutual experience. Here is an excellent reportage with the pulse of the truth it represents.”

— **Martins Deep**  
**Author, A Sheaf of Whispering Leaves**

“What is at stake - and Michael knows this acutely - is the collective memory of a country so willing to forget. He writes like a stream flowing placidly, even as dumb bombs kaboom around it. Herein is his invitation to the remnants of stories severed by forces sometimes too grave to name & stitched hastily by time; to give feeling to the truths we must not let slip away.”

— **Divine Inyang Titus**  
**Author, A Beautiful Place To Be Born**

“There's something about what Michael Imossan weaves with this touching collection that's painful yet healing, familiar yet somehow far and dissects this cadaver of a country. The chapbook expresses memory as a means to preserve pain and grief and loss, as odes and dirges mirroring what throbs in the poet's patriotic heart. For the love of country and memory curates the diverse experiences of a poet's relationship with his

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country. Home here is a myriad of blood and tears and grief and love and nostalgia. There is hope, despite; lurking in corners of this sparse darkness, he spins through this place he calls a country, this hub of memories, and this home where his poems come to rest. Michael helps us understand how much trauma we've lived with, how they've moulded us and how we still grow, how in spite of them, we're still reminded of what it means to be human.”

— **Taiwo Hassan**  
**Author, Birds Don't Fly For Pleasure**

## Acknowledgements

I acknowledge greatly the editors of the following magazines and journals in which these poems first appeared in earlier forms: “A river burning” In DiBiase, “How I explain natural and unnatural occurrences to my little brother” in The Wall City Journal, “The road arrived in ashes & “Rains falling into oblivion” in Lumiere Review, “Lost at sea” in The Radical Art Review, “This city was once beautiful” in Frontier Poetry.

I sincerely gratify my parents for engaging me in literary works; poetry and prose, enough for me to grow into someone who can pen down his emotions and send them out amidst the self-doubt and fear. This would not have been possible without them.

I also greatly appreciate my friends whose feedback have helped in the process of editing and assembling this Chapbook. Thank you to Divine Inyang Titus, Taiwo Hassan, Martins Deep, Samuel Adeyemi, Ebieme Silva and Ihunanya Nnadi for their comments, encouragement and feedback.

A special gratitude goes to Fatima Ahmad Usman, the hands that first nudged me into submitting my poems regardless of the fear, and from then, continued encouraging as well as inspiring me in the writing of most of the poems here.

Much acknowledgement goes to the poets whose works have inspired the writing of these poems. In the writing of the poem “the road arrived in ashes,” I happened upon Romeo Oriogun’s “Nomad.” In the writing of “Sand food” I encountered Samuel Adeyemi’s chapbook collection “Heaven is a metaphor.” Some of the lines and structures of the poems here are inspired by writers like Pamilerin Jacob, Nduka, Hanif Abdulraqib, Ocean Vuong, Maggie Smith, Victoria Chang and so many others. I want to say thank you all for imparting me with your works.

## Foreword

A poet is a broken thing, by this, I mean, a poet is a god. I know this because I, too, have created something in my own image. I sit in the garden of my desk: books earmarked like folding petals. I have done well to sever the darkness with my lamp. On the edge, papers pour like spilt coffee. I pick one of them, mould alphabets into words and words into metaphors. My muse whispers to me: *let us create this poem in our own image* and then, the poems become broken.

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## **Dedication**

This Chapbook is dedicated to all the victims of Nigeria, both dead and alive.

MICHAEL IMOSSAN

## ARISE TV

*The research work comparatively evaluated the ENDSARS coverage of NTA (Nigerian television authority) and Arise TV. Based on the findings of this study, the researchers conclude that Arise TV gave more coverage to 2020 ENDSARS protest in Nigeria than Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) (Daniel, T., Gloria, E., Gloria N., & Justina, O in Journal of Communication Studies, vol. 3, 2021.)*

*The national broadcasting commission, NBC has sanctioned major broadcast stations for violating broadcasting code during the #ENDSARS protest. They include: Channels Television, African Independent television and Arise TV; all fined N3m each. [Vanguard, Oct. 26, 2020.]*

a newspaper stand squats busily at the park.  
in the distance, a man is holding another man  
by the scruff of his neck—which is to say,  
the war is still deep in our bones; still wrapped around the  
neck of our throats and look how we swallow it: the last time i  
bought a newspaper was to see myself on its  
poetry column. poet who said to not be called a poet,  
and when the interviewer asked why, i replied,  
*what glory lies in bending grief into rainbow  
or flowering our losses with metaphors grim as death?*  
for some reason, i ignored the loudness of the park,  
the twin speakers from the video store cutting  
my ears with knife-like music.  
the newspaper vendor, seeing me, promised i was going  
to like *this one* with his finger pointing.  
but a promise is lot's wife retreating into sodium.  
i picked the newspaper, flipped through its pages  
and saw a commissioned road with a name that did not resemble it.  
you cannot fill potholes with broken promises.  
on another page, a burning city was painted in colourful strokes,  
still, i heard voices of children seeking safety in bodies of breathless mothers.  
i have seen this before. once, a city was on fire and all i saw on  
the national tv was how to make baskets with raffia straws.  
when i turn to leave, bullets may wash over us like flood.  
noah, the weatherman, will not be here to warn us of this tragedy  
nor will luke, the reporter, be here to give an account of it.

But God! Bless Arise TV

## THE ROAD ARRIVED IN ASHES

*"They kept firing at our vehicle until it somersaulted three times and burst into flames. Only I and one other passenger miraculously came out of the bus but the other passenger later died from gunshot injuries. 'I lost my four children, three girls who were grown up and my 10-monthold baby. I watched them, including my mother, maternal uncle, nephew and niece burn to ashes while the attackers were watching with delight.'" (SAHARAREPORTERS, NEWYORK. 11 DEC, 2021) Bandit attack in Sokoto, Nigeria.*

at sabon birnin, inside a moving bus,  
i felt the solemnity of silence flailing  
like curtain in the night.  
the road, poured ahead like water spoke of how  
the beginning of a journey could be the end of another  
—I did not listen—  
as the road moved with us, i watched through tired glasses  
dry leaves bristling against desert dunes.  
trees trapped in the solemnity of this silence opened their bodies  
to collect secrets of the moon. and i thought to myself  
*what light is left for the living?* the man in front of me stifled  
his lips to the driver's jokes in a way that said,  
*if you take life a little seriously, death becomes afraid of you.*  
suddenly, a woman's voice fell onto the asphalt.  
i do not remember her name.  
how much memory can the dead carry?  
i tried to save her voice but it had trickled down  
to break the silence of the road. the road sang its own song.  
and we were passed through the sudden ritual of blood & gun & fire.  
i swear, before night cut through our bodies like knife,  
before we were shown the true nature of fire;  
how it torches what it touches, i knelt down to pray;  
to harden my flesh in supplication.  
still, morning found me—a ghost waiting in the rain for night  
to guide me back into my grave.

the road

arrived in ashes.

## I HEAR MOTHS EAT TEARS FOR DINNER

*The governor of Kaduna state, Nasir El-Rufai, said the state has suffered 'too much' from religious conflicts [Punch newspaper, Dec. 9, 2021.]*

tbh, the world is as cruel as its creator.

if you have lived long enough you'd know that  
the dead are always reliving their deaths in our  
memories—that frail point of breaking.

it is the eve of a new year and i am seated in front  
of a bonfire chewing through piles of abandoned tyres.  
there's no smell of burnt meat. no smell of fresh flesh  
sizzling against wires—just a fistful of smoke slicing  
through thin air.

soon the fire would crackle and fireflies would break free,  
fluttering towards a sky naked of stars, a sky made bare by  
years of witnessing. i trap one in my vein and  
it runs like blood. everything is capable of running if  
placed in the ~~right~~ wrong track.

a moth dancing around the bonfire falls into my eyes and  
i am cursed with the burden of memory—the past flapping  
like wings in my eyes. i hear moths eat tears for dinner.  
inside my pupil, sabon gari is burning, houses whittled  
down by the simple magic of fuel and matches.

tell me, what revolt can a faithless brick wage against a  
baptism of fire?

in the distance, i hear the screams of children,  
night turning a razor wrapped around infant voices  
until they turn water, turn blood blurting from  
torn spleen. define piety to me as a thing free of  
bloodshed. a holy book written in red ink?  
what glory lies in cruelty? a sickle blessed by god?

the preacher said salvation is a thing with borders,  
this means my brother is only my brother if he worships  
god in my language. this is to say, the muslim man is a  
border i cannot cross. this is to say, there are roads in

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the christian man's voice i mustn't follow.  
this is to say in this war of worship, i could be held  
behind friendly lines.

i close my eyes, a black bird barges into this memory  
and i trace the length of loss to where a man screams  
god in a language i do not understand. i walk in  
his voice long enough to know the pain of  
purification through fire—sodom soaked in blood.  
i want to rescue him from the raging flame but water  
pours over the bonfire like tears and i'm jerked back  
to the present; to the hissing sound of dying  
flames; to the smell of sulphur; to the sight of  
thick smoke spiralling heavenwards.  
in the suddenness of these actions, i see the true  
language of worship. a boy sitting beside me  
slits his tongue trying to say *Amen*.

## RAINS FALLING INTO OBLIVION

*At least eight people were killed and many others missing on March 28, 2022 when gunmen detonated a bomb on the tracks and opened fire on the train linking the capital Abuja with the northwestern city of Kaduna. [Aljazeera]*

march hung over my calendar,  
with a noose around its neck and everything  
began marching to their end.  
i sat beside the ocean and watched as it swallowed  
the sky in a communion of mouths.  
the winds, sharp as rutil wrestled the sands into  
submission. here, even true peace is suspicious, we  
must doubt it until it becomes war—it is the  
only thing that runs in our blood. in the ocean  
sprawled over my eyes, i saw three men arguing  
the worth of ethnicity over freedom. in the heat  
of their argument, i saw a country fall inside  
water. i jumped into the ocean to save it and found  
myself on a train. inside the train, two men  
calculated the distance between freedom and the sun.  
i gathered my thoughts into wings and attempted flight.  
maybe Icarus sought freedom. outside, the day ran  
faster than the train as if it were scared of darkness.  
i wanted it to stop but the moon lodged in-between  
night's throat was an interlude of pain.  
soon the train squealed to a halt.  
All the flowers wilted—fell onto earth in shapes  
of soft bodies splintered by a heartless shrapnel.  
Seeing this, i moved to close the night but the bomb  
broke through and found us: rains falling into oblivion.

## THIS CITY WAS ONCE BEAUTIFUL

*The rate of insecurity in Kaduna State is alarming and really calls for concern. With the degree of atrocities going on in the state, the people seem to have lost hope in the government, saying they have failed them. [The Guardian, August 18, 2021.]*

this city was once beautiful.  
come! stand on that tower that  
holds a bell swinging sunflower in  
gentle wind like st. peter's  
glottis in a storm of hymnodies.  
peer into its past, see how beautiful the landscape  
was: watery in its colours like dew drops dripping  
onto the canvas of a skilled artist—green in  
its right, green in proper ablution, in mediterranean  
glamour. and when the sun sprinkled hues  
of itself onto the lush grasses, it glistened into  
a garden groomed in smiles.  
yet today, i walk the dust of southern kaduna  
and find bodies rotting: overflowing the mortuaries like  
spilled blood, piled over themselves in columns,  
sprawled out in rows like a spreadsheet  
stuffed with dead bodies. in the midst of  
these bodies, i find a girl, still in her blossoming pink.  
she raises her hands in the shape of a gun &  
makes a gunshot sound. i reckon that is how she  
was killed, snatched away from purity.  
beside me, a vulture gnawing through eyes takes flight.  
i run after it. give me back their dreams.  
the smokes from the near villages call to me, as if to say  
*look how terror wrestles beauty, look how cruelty,*  
*like grasses, grow in our bones.*  
i see a building held together by a single strand of  
hope & memory. i touch it, it crumbles.  
in the rubble, a butterfly breaks free.  
i want to name it but what is named after  
terror can never be free. i hold it instead, clamping it  
between fingers and it bleeds like blood.  
how often we crush delicate things in the heat  
of our wants. on my way back, a man hedges  
himself along my path, points a gun at me.

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*what is the name of your god?*

i want to answer him, to tell him i have no god;  
that i am made of water and hibiscus. but my mouth  
betrays me. dead from silence, my body hardens.  
my eyes shut themselves inside a room of darkness.  
i open the door and find the little girl -again- still in  
her blossoming pink. she raises her hands in the shape  
of a gun, this time shooting something out of them:  
a butterfly drifting into the wild, a moth bending towards fire.



## LOST AT SEA

*We died singing the National Anthem of a Country that killed us.*  
[Stella Inabo, Oct 25, 2020]

on the boat, the boatsman kept dipping his paddle  
in and out of water like fingers in the art of teasing  
and each time, i watched as the sea cracked its lips into  
a giggle—goosebumps growing on its back a  
ritual of ripples. in the near, the sun edged behind  
fishermen who strung prayers to the tip of their hooks  
as baits sunk into the bottom of the sea  
only to haul back a school of emptiness.  
the emptiness grew into songs. the sun, caught  
in the calmness of water danced to its rhythm.  
there's always a correlation between light and sound;  
how they both struggle for speed. in the far, i saw  
the sea kiss the sky, their lips thinning into ~~oblivion~~  
horizon. what sits back in our eyes as beauty?  
what loneliness walks out of here?  
night sidled up to us from the east. i watched  
between songs as the sun drowned.  
aren't some songs suffocating?  
the moon blossomed over the sea.  
we waded closer to shore and the seaweeds, green as  
fatherland reminded me of home, of a tiny portrait:  
mum and dad and i sitting at the dinner table.  
beside me, a chair is empty. in the faintness of night,  
i grope the emptiness to know who should  
be there. i feel my brother wrapped in country's cloth.  
in the absence of light, the hands become a  
window to the eyes. i stretch farther into remembrance  
to find a hole on his forehead blackening like a  
wilting rose. his body solid, cold as a bullet's heart.  
i pull closer to him, as if to hug him,  
as if to remake him into liquid, into warm water,  
into little tenderness. someone is singing the  
national anthem, please beg him to stop.  
some songs are suffocating. my food sours.  
father calls to me. the boatsman yells my name.  
anchored to memory, i have forgotten what  
the living want from me. what crawls under my

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vein when the sun is not looking?

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## EVEN HURRICANES HAVE NAMES AND FOR THAT, I NAME MY TRAGEDIES SUNSET

*About 40 people were killed when the gunmen stormed the church on June 5, opened fire on the congregation, and also detonated explosives as the worshippers scampered for safety. [Channels TV. August 9, 2022.]*

### I

my father, before he died, said: *if you name a thing after beauty, perhaps it will outlive its suffering.*  
i called his sorrow rainbow and watched day by day as the song in his eyes, fluid as water, fizzled away.

### II

even hurricanes have names and for that,  
i name my tragedies sunset.

### III

i do not belong here. In a semantics class, my lecturer speaks of prototype meaning; how we assign properties to words based on our first encounter with them. i must confess, when i first heard owo, it was +church + gun +blood – safe. so that when my friend told me he was from owo, all i could see were children swaddled in blood and their dead mothers tugging at god's ears. there's something hiding in the church, if you lift the pews, you'll find dead bodies. the pastor's mouth is filled with blood. his words are muffled by them. praise the lord; we can no longer hide in *amens* [sad emoji]

### IV

i swear, here, we cannot tell the difference between dreams and nightmares. in a dream, a petal pushes out of my eyes. in the morning, it becomes a dead

flamingo.

V

rumour has it, my mother built our house close to the river,  
she thought if she stayed close to water, she could learn  
the philosophy of fishes; how they survive drowning.  
in my language, the word for survive is *ubóbó*  
and the word for escape is *ubóbó*

VI

at night, when i dare to dream, i find myself swimming  
across the atlantic. a green passport in my hands.  
confused whether to say: i have survived  
or i have escaped this sunset of a country.

## WHAT STRENGTH LIVES IN POETRY?

*Unknown Gunmen shoot 5 in Imo community* [Leadership Newspaper. June, 2022]

under the sacredness of a hut,  
the priest, a young boy bathed  
in native blood sat before me. he unfolded  
a piece of cloth and splayed it over the mat on which  
we sat. on it were white sands pulled from the wetness  
of sea, coins old as history and the beauty of seashells.  
i sat before him, waiting to be answered by blood,  
waiting to retrieve what was lost.  
i spat my name three times into my palm and stamped it  
on the sands, a way of saying: *the war is here with me,  
my roof, too, has known the taste of terror.*  
the sands turned to sea. all the ghosts that journeyed  
towards happiness stood before me.  
i stamped my palm again and the sea turned  
back to sand—all the travellers lost on their way to  
borno; to zamfara; to katsina stood  
before me—all saying the same thing, all saying,  
*only language will save you. only language will save you.*  
o spirit of my compatriots, what strength lives in poetry?  
what mercy lives in silence? i only seek the mercy  
in peace, yet i must fight and all you have given me  
is language: lexis lined up in my head like soldiers,  
like soldiers waiting to be called to war.  
i walked out of the hut, above me, the clouds  
with teeth cracked like jokes chewed through the sun.  
on my left, a boy yelled, *The unknown  
gunmen are here! the unknown gunmen are here!*  
his feet running faster than the night could carry,  
faster than the horror that followed.  
i picked up my pen to write, the wind began to cry.

## I HAVE KNOWN LOSS AS FLOOD

*For the umpteenth time, it was another season of gnashing of teeth for some residents of Lagos State, who had the misfortune of losing their valuables as well as loved ones to flash floods.*  
[The Guardian, July 17, 2022]

outside, the cloud kept tying a thick knot around the sky like a boa priming its prey, then loosened to reveal the miracle of water. i and my brother, little infants, what did we know of the lesson of purification? we ran outside, lord! gift us the gift of happiness. it was not the first time we walked through water to find the birthplace of joy; that cradle where glee resided. sometimes the stream accepted us with contempt, sometimes the river spat us out in near death. but the rains? the rains were always welcoming. about a month ago, someone told me rainfall was god weeping over his own cruelty. LWKM, who i be to argue am? i have grown to know that after Sodom was rain. the radio on the verandah, an old black box steeped in fatigue paused its song and a voice announced the blossoming of tragedy—poor hibiscus lost at sea—the prognosis of a flood opening like an exhausted wound into our homes. LOL, such morbid satire. i have made this up. in my country, there are no pre-disaster warnings. last week, a bullet, like a dog without a home waltzed into a house without first knocking and softened every bone into water—and made everywhere moist with tears. it is true the rains kept coming—and this is how i have come to know lagos in *a heavy downpour*: houses crumbling under the weight of water; humans drinking too much until floatation becomes a science the body cannot learn while alive. i have known loss as flood. i have known flood as loss, but i leave this poem open for my brother in hope that he comes back with happiness dripping from his chin

| beads of soft rain.

**WHAT IS IT ABOUT HEALING THAT THE DEAD CANNOT LEARN?**

i collected your body from the mortuary today,  
it smelled like decayed salmon.  
the morgue attendant, a lady with breath like rust, said,  
*we tried our best to preserve him, but you should know,  
we can never truly heal a dead body.*  
M, look how they're talking about you  
as though you were a dead thing. as though you  
were that spoilt chicken we bought from  
the grocery store the other time. and what did  
it smell like? what does death smell like?  
the scent of formalin on cold skin? the stench of an  
overripe mango festering at the hem of its tree?  
speaking of which, the season is ripe with mangoes  
and i cannot help but walk through the hallway  
of memories, where we are seated at its tip,  
melting mango juice into the heat of our mouths  
like gold. you should know the dogs are still barking,  
one of them ran through night and lost its eye.  
i named the wound after you.  
there is a thing about naming a wound after another  
wound that keeps it alive.  
i swear, i saw you in my dream holding two slices  
of mornings, inside your palm i saw a  
seascape—the sun, half dipped in ethereal blue and you,  
rippling into vast nothingness. sometimes, to have  
is to call loss by its middle name. the second time  
such dream broke into my eyes, i cut off its limbs.  
the following night, it grew four more.  
what walks out of pain as miracle? tell me, M,  
what is it about healing that the dead cannot learn?

## A ROAD BROKEN BY COUNTLESS ACCIDENTS

*It was estimated that 15 persons die in Nigeria on a daily basis due to road traffic accidents, or four persons every six hours, or 426 per month [The Cable, Nov. 25, 2021]*

looking at my ceiling fan as it spins,  
i'm tempted to believe life happens in circles.  
there's always a daunting darkness  
waiting at the end of each spin; how the  
earth orbits the sun only to be broken by a quake;  
how i spin back into the mouth  
of a lover who bit me in every kiss.  
the circling is mad: a hanged man returning  
to his noose.  
and what if i told you our dreams orbit the stars,  
that when night has been swallowed by the  
gaping yawn of day, all that is left to do is wake to the  
sweltering heat of a morning thick as a lamb's fur.  
and truth be told, i have always been a circling man.  
each day, i saunter into a tall morning where a cloud of  
fellow circling men, unperturbed by this  
daunting darkness thicken the streets.  
the trees on the sidewalk, parched of their green,  
splinter their barks and remake  
themselves into weapons. there's no forgiveness  
in healing (flesh must grow over what was lost)  
and sometimes, i wonder if they, like me,  
take notice of *that* streetlight, bent over like  
a tilting prayer in a road broken from  
countless accidents. yet, as the world spins me  
into a vehicle, a boy wishes me safe journey  
only that the journey is never safe.  
i see the words glide past the clefts between  
his coffin-coloured teeth.  
i see him stretch his arms for alms. i tell myself,  
*i owe him nothing except what i cannot give to him:*  
his body dipped in the lushness of soft blue,  
his tongue folding over the tender taste of blueberries.  
say in another life brailed with fatherhood,  
my child asks me, *dad, what did you do to quell  
his hunger?* i shall circle the question back to  
where the trees splinter and the bent streetlight



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falls over a running car. *son, forgive me.*

*i'm guilty of terror, just as the world is.*

all this darkness and the world is still spinning.

still quiet.

## SAND FOOD

*In the 2021, Global Hunger Index, Nigeria ranked 103<sup>rd</sup> out of the 116 countries with sufficient data to calculate 2021 GHI scores. With a score of 28.3, Nigeria has a level of hunger that is serious [Global Hunger Index, 2021]*

the man on  
the television says  
the coming days  
will be bloody.  
i quickly imagine a  
*monday* with crimson  
water gushing from its ribs.  
but he explains further  
and all i can hear is the promise  
of hunger. outside,  
my neighbour's children have their bones  
poised over flesh; poking hard as if  
to break free from the prison of skin.  
the older one says to the younger ones,  
*come let's make food.* and they all  
circle around tiny pieces of woods  
with an empty tomato tin on it.

they pour water,  
pour earth,  
set fire

then

blow air.

as if to say, let all the elements  
bear witness to this hunger slicing  
through our stomachs like sharpened glass.  
with spoons made out of sticks,  
they scoop the dirt to their chin,  
laughing away the ache in their stomachs.  
watching them from the window, my tummy rumbles.

i swear, i want to join them, i really want to.

**AS RANDOM AS DEATH IS**

*Boko Haram terrorist have killed three farmers working on their farmlands in Gajeri village, Konduga Local Council of Borno State [The Guardian, August 5, 2022]*

Before we first learned how to walk,  
the journey began in our eyes.  
there are roads to remembering.  
i walk the sad path of a song to  
watch my past standing at the edge of night:  
a boy tiptoeing the ledge of loneliness, leaning  
into the brisk air of the harmattan wind  
unfurling against november's naked skin.  
his hair, wearing the colour of three dusty streets.  
his hands, red with memory,  
red with the blood of country, unwinds  
a kite chained to a makeshift spool—far from freedom.  
*Asa's Jailer* blares from the distance  
and a boy is learning for the first time that  
a song is just a poem that has passed through water.  
tell me, what language do songs speak  
when doused in tears? do they carry the  
accent of a boy exorcised in fire?  
are they tone-marked in the manner of a boy  
unfamiliar with the hibiscus of a mother's touch?  
or stressed in the way we love to make prisoners  
of the things we hold dear—like how i hold  
my mother's memory in my eye.  
at the funeral, as a way of comfort,  
the priest iterated the order of loss:  
parents before children, older ones before  
younger ones. i held him by his  
flailing cassock to bloodstained borno  
where a mother rolls soft earth over her son's body  
and a father, like a flower, is planted beside a  
headstone bearing his daughter's name.  
look... look... look how random death is.

## A RIVER BURNING

*I murdered him because he tried to lure me into  
homosexuality, killer of Abuja doctor confesses* [The  
Guardian, Jan. 20, 2022]

the cemetery has never been a place  
for the living but i go there to surrender  
this burden of loss; to lessen the heft of  
remembering. i must confess, my country  
wants to kill me. each time i visit my mother's  
grave, i sit on her headstone, beside a black bird,  
exchanging frustrations. it tells me how it lost its  
child to the madness of electricity. i tell it how i lost  
my lover to the madness of country, how i still carry his  
ashes in my vein—and like that, the day becomes  
ripe with mourning. look! some grief are  
old enough to bear children, and some nightmares  
taste like liquid—rippling and rippling.  
the only time i had known happiness after mother's  
passing was in the mouth of a boy haunting my dream.  
someone said our body is made up of  
80% water. another said the road to death passes  
through my country's map. i believed them both,  
because, there was a boy drowning inside of me.  
i wanted to pull him out as rose-petal but the  
voice on the radio said, *a bounty has been placed on  
any boy who sees flowers in the body of another boy.*  
what that meant was that the boy who came for  
my sister said he saw a flower in our compound.  
what this means is that i can never be a flower,  
no one is ever going to come for me. perhaps there is a  
place in the atlas that spells *safety*. perhaps death is  
a road to freedom, to my mother, to Ezechukwu.  
last night ghosts snuck into my blood. this morning  
i find myself cutting open my wrist. all i want to do.  
is see my loved ones again. what you do not know  
is that there is a river burning and there's not  
enough rain in my body to quench it.

## ROSE-PETAL-GIRL

bwari road remains as busy as the day I met you.  
rose-petal-girl swallowing your silence in peace.  
every sound is direction to a blind man and by this  
weightless logic, i followed your silence until it led  
me out of my body into your bones where i nestled.  
abuja wasn't much of a place for romance but we  
held hands together and swam through streets  
watered with loss, looking for a place to safe-keep  
our love. today, i met a man who said something  
about voices without the miracle of songs and i sang  
to him of us sitting beside the sea, pressing our scars  
against themselves as night sank into our  
bodies like ships wrecked in ocean.  
i sang of us exchanging wounds, which is to say,  
we were naming our losses after the rising tides.  
i sang of us finally surrendering our voices to the rage of  
ocean waves crashing against our throats.  
i remember how you said you loved *this* place and i said  
i couldn't. and maybe this is what it means to  
love this place: to surrender yourself to the certainty  
of death; to the weight of country pressing against  
your neck—and you, gap-tooth girl.  
you who held morning between the spaces in your teeth.  
you who had stars falling off of your smile surrendered.  
abuja is still as busy as the day i met you. a song bird  
dropped dead today in front of the national assembly  
and the flag was still white, was still waving. the sun did  
not recede behind swelling cottons of dark clouds.  
cars did not stop for a minute silence or even a second.  
everything was still as it was—just like the day you left.  
Assalamualaikum, a passer-by greeted.

## BECAUSE NIGERIAN POETS SHOULDN'T BE WRITING ABOUT LOVE AND ICE-CREAM

—for Daye Abasi

*AOAV's data shows that incidents of IED explosions in Nigeria have increased since January 2022, and higher numbers of civilian casualties are being attributed to IEDs. [RelieveWeb, May 24, 2022]*

in one of my dreams,  
i feel the ocean passing under my  
bed frame, singing: *the wind is no longer a friend.*  
singing: *there is a dirge where poems should be.*  
all that is left of my country is  
the wildness of want, the emptiness in hope  
and the harshness of silence.  
above me, a bird is lifting the clouds looking for a home;  
a place to surrender the burden of flight.  
in some other poem, i am the bird, and there's  
no place to call a home.  
look, i cannot claim what will not claim me.  
i am washing my hands of blood stains.  
can't you see? i have been clamping shut  
the body of leaking boys, trying to undo the  
bullet's work. the moon perches on our skin and  
we become a cold evening. i show one of my poems  
to her, to a friend who writes prose and she asks me,  
*why are you poets always grieving?*  
i do not respond. i let the silence thicken into glass.  
i do not break it with my grief.  
writing another poem, her question comes back to me  
like the sea goes back to shore, each return  
an attempt at salvation.  
*why are you always grieving?* i ask the poem.  
she does not respond.  
she lets the silence thicken into ice.  
she does not break it with her grief.  
she lets the bombs do their job.

## HOW I EXPLAIN NATURAL AND UNNATURAL OCCURRENCES TO MY LITTLE BROTHER

- i. every varicose vein is lightning trapped in flesh.
- ii. every lightning is a varicose vein that could not make it back home.
- iii. rape is a subtle way of saying, a hurricane fell in between a girl's thigh.
- iv. have you not been taught in school? here, a boy can also stray into the flesh of a bullet. (at least that's what we hear in the news)
- v. a dreadlock is a bad omen (do not wear it for whatever reason)
- vi. some women are refugee camps, some men are war zones. do you not know? you can love a person into madness.
- vii. the bruises on mama's skin are just colourless rainbows waiting on a mad peacock.
- viii. how can evaporation be anything other than our tears falling skywards to become spittle in god's mouth.
- ix. rainfall is god spitting back our tears on us—or could it be the sky trying to become human again? (some people can never be human, they are just skies barren of rain)
- x. gravity is a way of saying the sun is scared of height without poking its ego (ask it to jump, to fall like rain and see if it would)
- xi. do you know our million dead breathe through whirl winds?
- xii. war? war is like love, when it enters your blood, it never leaves. (i still hear gunshots in my vein)
- xiii. forgetting can be healing when remembrance begin to taste like knifecuts. (lord, bless me with the gift of amnesia)
- xiv. dreams? dreams are the safest place to hide (the road to death passes through our country's map)

FOR THE LOVE OF COUNTRY AND MEMORY

my dear, things (don't) just

happen.

MICHAEL IMOSSAN



FOR THE LOVE OF COUNTRY AND MEMORY

## LORD, SWEAR YOU DO NOT ADMIRE THIS VIOLENCE

who knows how the moon shines at night?  
i have tried asking it...i have tried saying,  
*teach me how to glow in the centre of a wound.*

*there's light at the end of the tunnel.* the tunnel  
can be a metaphor for a hollow in a boy's head  
or his eyes or his dreams.

the light can be the doctor's lamp pointing to  
the exit wound, *look where the bullet flew*  
*out of.* the euphemism, so light it can survive  
gravity.

imagine a morning without the blistering hands of  
night. imagine a bullet without the duty of severing.  
Oh lord, swear you do not admire this violence: all  
those purities tainted with blood?

i once heard of a man who reddened the innocence  
of water into wine. father! do not forgive him for  
he knew what he was doing.

MICHAEL IMOSSAN

## WHAT I HAVE LEARNT UNDER THE TUTELAGE OF MY COUNTRY

- loss remains the same in all forms. say *lost*: i am lost in the sea of grief. say *lose*: to lose a brother is to breathe gravels as air. say *loose*: like a head uncorked from its neck, such great loss.
- when i died, i picked up my corpse the way i gathered my living & walked into the grave without the help of pallbearers. my country will never come to your aid, not in life, not in death.
- here, reality is a dream that has sprained an ankle.
- a chisel to the bone may not carve pain the way bullets deflate a swollen protest.
- here, a man only knows disappointment if he sees the green in a promise and calls it tomorrow.
- a national anthem in between night and morning is an interlude of pain (do not sing it for whatever reason).
- the distance between death and safety is divided by a roadblock (remain silent in the face of your right).
- here, a visa can be a road to freedom.
- we must always question the calmness of night (true peace is a suspect, doubt it until it becomes guilty, until it becomes terror, it is all that nests in our bones)
- do not study geography, you might step on a bomb while reading your country's map.
- darling, if you wring the moon of all its tenderness, what you will see is my country's flag.
- here, dead bodies overflow the news (i pack them back into my television before turning it off)
- to be a nigerian is to be a bird lifting the clouds in search of a home (we are all

FOR THE LOVE OF COUNTRY AND MEMORY

birds without a place to call home)

MICHAEL IMOSSAN

## I BEG HISTORY TO FORGET, I BEG HISTORY TO REMEMBER

*The word “japa” connotes a strong desire to emigrate from the country without a future plan of returning. The youth see this permanent relocation as a progressive exit to break away from the shackles of man-made poverty, unemployment and all sorts of manufactured deprivations [The Tribune, Aug. 10, 2021]*

before i followed the velvet street  
that led me out of my country,  
i stumbled on a business of flies hovering  
over rotten mangoes. the street, swept by dirt,  
held the stench of stagnant gutters.  
on the sidewalk, i saw boys rolling their lives as dice.  
some placed their dreams in neat wraps of  
marijuana and sent it to god as a burnt offering,  
*take! what prayer could not purify must be drowned in  
whiffs of smoke.* whilst walking, a man beckoned at me.  
his body, lost inside a swaying cassock. he said,  
*son! what lights your path might be a country on fire.*  
i do not know of prophecies but what i know, i hold it  
out to the winds; like how my country sips  
my blood in little quantity. some truths are so bitter  
even when said in reverse their taste lingers.  
for instance: my country murdered my brother tastes  
the same as my brother was murdered by my country.  
a sentence rescues a voice from passivity,  
not the other way round.  
five years after, i'm waking up to the sad  
smell of winter, to snowflakes, white as guilt,  
swaying softly in fervid air, to passers-by saying *hello*  
to themselves as if to say, freedom lies in  
greetings, in the bleak exchange of smiles.  
across the street, the past calls to me in burning shadows:  
my great-grandfather tethered by chains ploughs  
a rice farm. his sweat, a tributary seeking escape in the  
soil. his blood, crimson as innocence. behind him stands  
a burning bush, now shaped like a british museum.  
as i take off my sandals to walk into his past,  
i beg history to forget.  
i beg history to remember.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Imossan is a Nigerian poet currently studying for a masters in Linguistics at Usmanu Danfodiyo, Sokoto. He is a winner of the Radical Arts Review poetry contest (2022). He was named Finalist for the Lumiere Review Poetry Prize (2022). He won an honourable mention for the DIBiase poetry prize (2022). He is a best of net nominee (2022). He was longlisted for the unserious collective fellowship (2022). He was longlisted for the Nigerian Newsdirect Poetry Prize (2020). He has been interviewed by The Daily Trust Newspaper (2020). His works are forthcoming from; Brittle Paper, Frontier Poetry, Strange Horizon and elsewhere.