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# COSMOLOGY OF WANDERERS

Thesis submitted to the faculty of  
The Graduate School, University of Mississippi  
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts  
in English

Hussain Ahmed

May 2022

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### **Abstract**

This manuscript explores the inter and intra African migration with a huge influence on the art of mourning and survival. On the 14<sup>th</sup> of April 2014, a group of insurgents that the world later know to be Boko Haram, kidnapped 276 mostly female students in Chibok, Borno State, Nigeria. The disaster led to the death of thousands of military personnel and vigilante group members, mostly young men who fought to maintain peace in the region as well as the country at large. Since that night, millions of people have been displaced.

**Dedication**

For the Nigerian Soldiers

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**I**

## **PILGRIMAGE**

The Mediterranean remains blue across centuries of swallowing.

Because it is not a cemetery, it does not date its memories.

On the sky is a diary that catalogued the bodies lost to the sea.

In the language of a gong, water clashes against the rocks,  
an elegy to the fish that embalmed our dead inside their cold bodies.

After the new millennium, I learned to forget what I cannot save.

A seed vault was built outside a deserted city – obscured with grief,  
we searched for familiar faces from the shadows on the walls.

Every song in a foreign tongue sounds like a prayer.



## EXODUS

I looked forward to the time / when I would join the queue /  
outside a booth / coins in hand / waiting for my time /  
to talk to someone on the phone / the war came  
and we tucked our coins away / the telephone poles resisted the ebb /  
but they became sanctuary for pigeons / with nowhere else to go /  
Mama told me all birds came from the desserts /  
or they are the ghosts of pilgrims that didn't make it home from hajj /  
the dessert is the fastest route to the sea / and it has enough space  
to bury the amulets that slows us down / we decided  
we want to return with our thirst / and be baptized  
in a salt pool / she stepped on a nail the day she was to leave /  
it was an omen, but she's excited /  
she is packed to meet with God on an arid land / like a wanderer  
she left home with a bag / packed with pepper and antibiotics /  
and a tongue that can only pray in Yoruba.

## ABECEDARIAN AS AN ATLAS FOR AWAKENING

Because my stomach is full of water, it means I thrive on what would kill me.  
Cozenage of a dark room, full of pictures on transparent plastic films,  
Designed on the sides with henna, they looked like postcards for men craving the sea.

Every child in this neighborhood learned to hold their breath under water,  
For that is how we can survive the memories of the floods.

Growing on the corners of our room are honeysuckles – their fragrances  
Herald the memories that kept us up in the nights.

I pretended to be asleep when Baba made for the sea,  
Jaborandi leaves tucked beneath the sides of his ears, since it could not be  
Knitted into a boat, to carry everyone whose names were etched on his rib bones.

Laying on the floor, I imagined he'll be back before sunrise.  
My body became a pool, rippled with the belch of a frilled shark.

Next time I make it to the beach, I hope to grow gills  
On this chest that has been a cupboard for a burnt atlas, kept together with  
Purl stitches, that now resembles the flag of a colony that no longer exist.

Quilts in different colors kept us from the cold and they  
Remain an evidence for our hastily packed bags for departure,  
Since no one noticed that we headed for the sea without knowing how to swim.

To speak of the dead is to make a pot from what should have remained clay  
Under this pink sky – harbinger for awakened griefs, logged in stomachs, or  
Vagary of prolonged drought, in a time when we needed the soil to break.

When the wind whistles, I sing along and drum the table that has the  
Xylography of the past I don't want buried on the beach. I continue to

Yearn for a flicker on the face of the Mediterranean, that will resemble  
Zodiac sign, for how we may survive, unlike the men before us.

## **PRAYER**

I held a snowball in my hand  
when I heard the muezzin's call.

Half way in prayer, I doubted  
if this God can distinguish brown eyes.

I worried less, and sought intercession  
with the tongue I sin with.

For the first time,  
I prayed in a new country –

with the tongue I inherited  
from a dead man.

## GENESIS

### I.

The war began on a school day.

I saw men walked around  
with faces eclipsed by rage and grief.

The moon was fatigued  
by its tawaf around earth.

### II.

I was born with hair on my shoulder,  
Mama said I was *kinium* in my previous life.

The scar on this forehead is a sign of reincarnation.  
She told stories to distract us from the dying voices.

My Mama's eye was a theatre, for men  
that praised the rusty edge of a blade

as they would a gate  
that leads to a garden of proteas.

### III.

Wrinkles sprouted from the sides of her eyes  
after the new millennium, boys my age died in sleep.

On the sky that day were the stripes  
of all ninety-nine shades of red.

We walked streets during the curfew  
in search of florets,

and for the first time in weeks,  
I said a song in praise of my lunch box.

IV.

We have all lost something, and in their memories,  
we held congregation in Kakuri market.

For once in our history that may go undocumented,  
our scars flickered, as if caressed

by the yellow hands of a sleeping God.

## CHIMERA [PALM AND WINE]

This house is an incubator for spiders.

Memories are gardened inside the cracked walls.

I heard this story from a blind palmist who speaks  
through his son, unconscious – after gulping a brew

of fermented millets. Surrounded by landmines  
in a field that borders ghost villages around Gwoza.

I beseeched the palmist to tell of what lies ahead  
of this towns and their lonely pigeons.

There is an end to this war, but its fracture could  
be permanent. & there is danger in permanence.

I grab a handful of the wind, my fingers float  
in what should have been in resistance.

Now I know, not all that float is dead,  
and a dead fish may house a liverwort seedling.

Is that not what an aliens would do  
when the ground is white and slippery?

Until then, the gurney was returned  
to the safe house behind the mosque.

I stomach my nostalgia for the towns I won't get to love,  
it's difficult to name them after all the bones they housed.

Every plant that grows on this brown water,  
surely has its roots in the mouth of a ghost.

In the corner of a room lies a prayer rug, shrunk with fire  
I imagine, the prayers of the inhabitants lingered somewhere above the roof.

The danduma they left behind is a diary  
of how long they've had their foreheads hennaed in praise of the unseen.

Today, I pray for this city to be safer than its seas,  
so there would always be a place to hide

and every lost thing could be found. For now,  
an incense glows from my tongue before it burns out of wishes.



## **GREY**

j

We are back in the city  
where I learned to read in English

and prayed in the Arabic I was made  
to believe God understands better.

If I want to make Aljanah,  
I need to learn the difference

between 'ka' and 'kha'  
and to learn to sing

pages of qasida from heart, even if  
I don't know what they mean.

## ب

The cloud was baked into fragments. The mango tree outside the mosque had grown wild, its branches cast shades over the rusty train track. The cars' skeletons in front of our old house were in a nearly perfect line, as I believe we would all be on the day of resurrection. When we left, the air was filled with smoke and some of the cars were still shedding their upholsteries to the fire. The curfew had been relaxed, we were headed out of Kaduna before the sun mounts the blue altar, of a sky that witnessed too much death, but interceded with rain when it got tired of the blood.

Departures are irreversible, even when you return, some parts of you would not come with you into the city, because the walls are scarred with murals of palm and machetes.



I was barely eight years when it happened,  
I don't remember praying Fajr.

The house we lived in  
was filled with echoes.

That morning, I doubted there was  
anyone else left in the house

or they were, but too scared to breathe –  
to remain unnoticed for the flying swords

or the Angel of death, that roamed  
the streets of Kaduna with pride.

We tiptoed down the staircase,  
with bags of clothes and pictures.

There was a car waiting down the road  
to take us to an underground car park.

Many of such had resurrected in all corners of Kaduna,  
to help evacuate us from the city.

I believed leaving was because we had other places to go,  
because we had far more things to lose.

ث

Everyone has a gate they want closed only at night. I want mine opened

but I desired no one to walk through it.

God's house must not be left unattended, so Baba did not travel with us.

For someone who had a room that always reeks of incense, he doesn't get sick of the burning sky.

Baba led salaah in a city that has half its sky grey with shame.

& the wind clustered – with the whispers of everyone lost to the eclipse.

I rehearsed loneliness

until it became a cloud

over a new city

waiting to be plundered.

Except, I own the boxes

or I will, through inheritance.

The frames on the walls – are  
a batch of untold histories,

everyone I know in the pictures  
looks younger, happier – or dead.

I have since learned  
to spell magic with my eyes closed

in a bid to reimagine this city of wanderers.

۷

I was born a year before the last eclipse, it took seven years before the next one in 1999. I am never tired of hearing the stories of how we survived the first, *you almost got us all killed with your wailings*. Mama

would always say with a smile, “I had to place a pillow over your head anytime you starts to cry, but I’m careful to not press too hard so you don’t suffocate”. There are several versions of how we

survived, but in my Baba’s version, I was a siren in a ghost town, seeking to sing the wounded to sleep. I lost my Grandfather to the last crisis, he was thrown inside the well in their backyard. His library

was set on fire and the fence of the house where he dreamed to nurse the new army of preachers and teachers was demolished to fill up the well, while he was inside of it. There are several versions of how

many days he survived inside the well, he was heard saying the adhan. Even though he couldn’t see the sun, he knew the prayer time by heart. He doesn’t need an alarm to know when it was time for his

forehead to be planted in the wet soil.

ح

He was buried in the makabarta in Tudun Wada,  
in the middle of a horizon of brown grasses,

labeled with dust of memories, each with their date of departure.

It's a taboo to read the names on the graves, but in all my visits

I remember the warnings after reading at least fifteen names or more.

I'm taken aback anytime I saw a grave plate with an age about mine or younger.

We visit his grave every year before the start of Ramadan,

because we sing better with empty stomachs,

because we are a vase of refracting pebbles.

د

Once, before I was old enough to visit the graveyard, Baba comes home with tea leaves, plucked from the cemetery. We believed a part of our grandfather nestles in our bodies anytime we sip from the tea.

His grave was the biggest I have seen, maybe the widest in the whole of Tudun Wada. He was buried with a son, a student and two strangers whose names no one knew, not even my Baba.

د

The city swallowed my ancestors  
and every rosary Baba owned.

The air is a blunt thorn in our lungs  
to curb the stench of the dead, and

to stop their ghosts  
from roaming the streets at night.

It was the same for everyone  
entering the city for the first time.

We sought refuge beyond the barrack gates,  
like most people from the neighborhood.

We rode for hours  
until we were seven hundred miles away,  
  
to the embrace of waiting families,  
families I knew from the pictures on the walls.



۝

For three years, we lost somethings we adored more than Baba's prayer rug or his ash colored Fiat, my sister died of typhoid. What survived a giant fire did not survive the spirits inside the water. There is something that weakens the tendons that held our bones, and worst, it kills. *Only a stranger would suffer from it*, one of the myths I believed.

I was home, but I am a stranger. Whatever lives in the water my Baba drank as a child, I'm not immune to it, as any of my siblings.

ج

On the balcony of an old but newly painted hospital,  
on a tarred street where we learned to ride bicycle,

Mama and Baba's sister were seated outside.

Maryam was without a cloth, or so I remembered it.

The electricity was out, it was crowded with patients,  
and that was because their services are cheap,

I hear people say it was rare for people to die in the hospital.

I have been there myself since we arrived Ilorin,

the spirits in the water are finding it hard  
to recognize my Baba's gene in mine or in my siblings.

We got sick before every full moon.

but I was a bit consistent with fever of all sorts.

## س

I recognize the heat inside the hospital, it could make one want to get well soon enough, or to the least miss the fresh air strutting outside. I overhead Baba's sister tell a friend whose child was at the hospital for a scheduled injection, that my sister is heavy, "she'll need to vomit, and she'll be alright, maybe we will be going home soon. She looks well already, can't you see?"

"Yes, I pray that Allah will purge her blood and bones of diseases." She said, before fading into the waves of patients.

For almost a week, Mama did not change her clothes or came home for anything, but a day before Maryam died, I saw her walked through the space we made into football field outside the compound and did not make eye contact. I knew she saw me and was mad I had the strength to play when my sister has not been home for a week. I followed her inside the compound, she reduced her pace to respond to the greetings and prayers from the women seated outside their doors, taking in the fresh air.

She changed her clothes without taking her bath or brushing her teeth, she left in new clothes and with a spec of light on her face that suggests what I heard earlier was maybe the truth, Maryam will be come tomorrow.

ش

Maryam was home – lifeless,  
after she emptied the boxes in her body.

That was all I know of her death.

I was nine and naïve about how loss swells  
inside a body to render it breathless,

all I knew was to aspire  
to be a goalkeeper in a soccer field

and maybe one day return to Kaduna,  
where the spirits in the water recognizes my genes,

where there is a God  
that understands my accent –

although, I never heard him speak.

On the veranda, women gathered on my mama's side of the family house, crying harder and harder as if to remind God of how fluent they were in the language of grief. Women are trusted to mourn in

the open, the men only say prayers and pretend there is no enough water in their bodies to be shed for something they lost, something they once loved. I sat and wondered why there was need to cry

and mumble unprintable words as they try unsuccessfully to ask questions and demand answer from God, but they looked into the eyes of the closest person consoling them and yelled. Why?

I could not bear the congregation  
of crying women,

so I stared at the ceiling,  
decorated with the seed of some red berries

that only get sold during the rainy seasons.  
I took turns counting the seeds over and over

to distract my eyes from the crying.  
It was before I got used to mourning.

I am to learn to say prayers for the dead  
like my uncles and my grandfather, who

comes out of his room at intervals  
to ask the women to lower their cry,

with an assuring tone, as if to confirm to them,  
that a God that gave command to the angel of death

could hear whispers from quaking hearts.

ط

For a minute or less, the crying would reduce and then after he went back to his room, the tempo would rise and continue for a long time, until a new mourner runs into the house to heighten the wailing with their fresh voices.

I wanted so much not to cry, to shed the weight of pains trapped in my small body. The pain is not one I know to name, it is a strange voice that poured out of my mama's mouth as she continues to listen to so many reasons why she must be thankful to the God that took her daughter.

ط

I didn't witness  
how she was lowered

inside the earth  
in the family house's backyard,

I was too young to witness  
the ritual of janazah.

ε

She was buried amongst her ancestors. Men and women who built the house she lived in before her death. For days, or even weeks, my heart was filled with fear. I was afraid I'll see her sit on the grave if I walked passed it alone. I believed she wouldn't be shy to speak to me, but I was worried she wouldn't speak in a language I will understand. I avoided the backyard at nights and the restroom, built against the fence that bordered the mosque and the family house. Her grave was small, but I guessed would fit a three-year-old.

A cousin told me the dead in the backyard communicate amongst themselves, and now my sister will have so much to learn from her great grandparents.

“How would they know her and what would they be discussing” I asked him

“They will tell her stories of the times before Nigeria got her independence, before there was a single car roaming the streets of Ilorin”

I want to hear those stories too, but I don't want to die to hear them.



Thirteen years after we left Ilorin,  
I walked inside the family house.

There is a giant water storage tank  
just above the well

once it was our only reliable source of water,  
it swallowed so much space,

it shrunk the memory I had of the house.  
There is a solar on top of the roofs

In case of power outage. I recognized this house,  
but there's been layers of paints over its wall,

like a scar smeared with mascara,  
I could see beneath the orange painting,

no matter how long I stayed away,  
I can still see the balcony

where I blow charcoals to embers  
on evenings when we had something to cook.

## ف

Some of the women did not recognize me, I had grown big they would say after I reminded them of my name and whose son I was. On my way to the restroom, the heaps were levelled like the small

field outside the house where we once gathered on most evenings to play football. I thought I could see the past in the new face the house wore, but I was wrong. The bones of my ancestors in the

backyard were deemed old enough to be sand and they've been erased with my sister's. I could have asked my mama's father why they decided to erase the sign that my sister was laid here in the house,

but I didn't, I was too mad to trust that I will ask gently, so I tucked my shock away.

ق

If the memory wasn't a louse  
in my hair,

I would agree the backyard  
had no memory

of any of our ancestors  
or my sister's,

because the soil  
would not grow

what wouldn't survive  
in water.

## YORUBA ABECEDARIAN I

Assembled in a field of  
browning corn stalks,

dozens of soldiers huddled a faulty compass  
entranced by their urge to dance to bullet songs.

egùn kii mu ojú so lókun, not even  
for the amulets around their wrists, they

gawked the sky for floating feathers, because  
gbangba l' aṣá tá fún omọ akin.

hunted, the birds forgo their songs, but  
in their silence is ritual for the missing. They

joined the sides of their palms together, but  
knew when to keep their eyes open in prayers.

Lost in the Gwoza forest, they left me a message.  
Months after it was sent, I became an eagle

nutmegged in currents of strong winds, but  
ornamented with the scriptures of lost shepherds.

Ọgbe okón le muni fuyé ju owu tú tú ló  
pressed into a tent, to hide the soldiers from rain.

Regiments of sacred men, waiting for the war to end,  
sonorously, they sing the praises of their lovers.

Ṣugbọ̀n omi àdágún ko le ya awòran aláṣò ala  
thrown inside a cave with a fork to dig up an exit.

Under the tent, water runs against their feet.

What a mirror does not shows,  
yearns to remain wrapped in shadow.

## **EMPTY**

I know what a body emptied  
of its light, feels like on the palms.

I have seen a body emptied of  
its memory, I dread the open eyes,

even though I don't dream of them –  
I dread what is dead that is not a sacrifice.

I avoid eyes emptied of light, I fear  
they would tell me something new about myself

if our eyes meet. I am scared they would  
tell me what no one would believe.

I am not bold enough to be a mad prophet.  
Today, I locked eyes with a small body,

emptied of want. The toddler was younger  
than the one I held to the cemetery in these hands

because we don't have gurney for children.

I dream of bodies cloaked for prayers,  
laid calmly on the grey rug inside my room.

I'm waiting for my brothers to join me  
as we always do, but they are seven seas away

& this prayer must be said before the sun set.

Because the moon is God's right eye,  
we don't bury our dead under its light, even in war.

I was alone, but I hear my lover's voice  
asking me to switch off the fan.

With eyes eclipsed with fatigue, I raised my hands  
and brought the blades to a halt. I sweat out my fears,

after watching the clips of children  
dressed as if they are on a journey in Sahara,

except their mothers are assembled  
in a garden of wren, learning to perfume their palms

with what is left of the dead. I made ablution  
and stood on the danduma – spread before I slept off,

it was past time for prayer, the sun slouched in its cradle.

## **CHIMERA [LIGHT AND PRAYERS]**

The difference between light and fire is just the urge  
to swallow,                    with no trace.

We rely on light for prayer time,  
in between,    a parrot on the balcony never stops singing

in its cage. It curses and prays for every stranger.

Orchestrated in the light that showers us while we bend in prayers.

A beam of light sneak out of my body            after the ablution

waiting for someone to lead the prayer, the light pops out in a cave

Where the artifacts beneath may never be found.

In the absence of this light, it would have been a prayer house

Where Baba would travel,

in search of a place, where God will not be shy to show him a sign.

If the voices in my head are mistaken for strangers and not Gods'

It is already too late for me to witness a prophesy or lead the survivors across the sea.

The scars around my neck are debts I must find a way to erase,

But the wound on my palm is an entrance to an island of goblets.

I know I am a stranger in this country because

I no longer feel guilty after I missed three jummah prayers.



I fear the adhan would slip beneath the heavy doors

And a stranger would knock on one of the front doors,

asking why there's a God whose tongue cannot be mimicked.

The lights in my eyes fade out before my shadow equals my height.

If it was already prayer time, the birds outside wouldn't fly

up to the mountains, before I opened my window to let them in.

When there's a fire on the mountain, I know it is God's sign

that it was time to run through a pathed sea of blood, unscarred.

# II

## **COSMOLOGY OF WANDERERS**

The moon trailed the wings  
of bearded eagles. Because

it held memories of wanderers  
from centuries past.

A tabula was painted in oil-blue  
to remember the eyes lost to the river.

Give out the clothes you outgrown,  
so you can be remembered by strangers.

In this new planet, only bats survive  
the dark nights.

This tongue that whispered lullaby  
once wailed in search of an exit.

A golden fish floats in the saltwater,  
because – betrayal comes with love.

At the rise of a new sun, the flag is flown at half mast,  
but it continued to dance in the wind.

When you find a shore, bury your coins,  
you will become light if you empty your pockets.

Remember to sing qasida  
for all who didn't  
make it out of the fog.

A wanderer's heart is an open roof  
chamber— for shadows  
and memories before they fade.

## COLONY OF GHOSTS / I`LU` ÀWỌN O`KU`

ogún pari,

sùgbọ̀n èmí àwọ̀n òkú ò ní darí wálé

the war has ended,

but the ghosts of our dead did not return.

mo gbá awọ arami mu bi èwù tógbó,

mo ní igbàgbó pé yíokó agara bá iná.

I hang onto my old skin;

I believe it held out the fire.

kí iná tósè yọ, igi tó ní ìbọ̀ji nbe ní àgbàlà wa,

ó fẹ́, tó tó gba agbo igbéyàwó.

before the fire, there's a tree with a canopy in  
the backyard,

large enough to host a wedding procession.

órún lúgo sínú kúrukúru

pèlù ìrẹ̀wẹ̀si láti pàrẹ̀,

ni n tó lè jé ti ìbèru láti dá okùnkùn padà.

the sun hangs above the swollen face of the  
sky,

reluctant to fade out

in what may be in the fear of reversing the  
dark nights.

èèfi rú, lóké ilé to gbíná,

gbògbò ilu na si monle, pèlù oun ti a pàdánù.

the smoke rises high on a house set on fire,

the whole town became lit with loss.

kí igi tódí oun tó níbọ̀ji,

gbongbo re takun de ìnu àpàtà lábé yépe

before the tree became a canopy,

the tree stretched its root through the loamy,  
to the rocks beneath.

ilè a sì maa kún fun ogbé

nitori pe odalè àwọ̀n tọ̀n rìn lóri ré.

the ground had gullies

for betraying all that once walked on it.

fún ipàdánù olólufé mi,

mi ò ní jé ki olóngbo mi wọ̀nú iná,

in fear of losing another lover,

I won't let my cat into the fire,

.sùgbọ́n tí kò bá jóná,  
báwo ni mà se bèrẹ̀ ìjósín fun.  
mo wo ójù ọ̀run,  
.sùgbọ́n o mó kangá, bi oju to pàyà ìgbádùn.  
ni abé àwọ̀ àrami to gbo,  
ibùgbẹ̀ ni fún àwọ̀n eyá labálabá,

éyi jé orin ìyìn fún àwọ̀n ti ọ̀ta ìbọ̀n dá ọ̀gbẹ̀ si lára  
nitorì pẹ̀ wọ̀n kò lẹ̀ sáré.  
látí dẹ̀kun iná yí, gbogbo ere s̀sísá gbọ̀dọ̀ dọ́pin  
ti a ọ̀ bá fẹ́ fí eyín sá yí po iná toun jo,  
kolé jé ìránti fún àwọ̀n ọ̀nà tí a kò fẹ́ sẹ́ rí padà sí.  
igi ogbà yi yíó rúwé,  
.sùgbọ́n abé re yíó si májé ibòji,  
fún gbogbo ẹ̀ni tí ó fẹ́ jó ìjó ayọ̀.

if he does not burn in the flames,  
how do I start to worship it?  
I looked at the sky,  
but it seems plain as if suspicious of pleasure.  
beneath my old skin are temples of moths,  
  
in praise of men whose bodies were lined with  
bullet holes,  
because they could not run faster.  
to end the fire, the running would have to  
stop,  
or we would begin to run backward around a  
fire  
to remind ourselves of the paths we don't  
want to take.  
the tree would shed some of its leaves,  
but it remains a canopy,  
under which everyone can dance in  
merriment.

## EPIPHYTE / A`FO`MA´

òsùpá ni awon ìyè to pamọ  
o fi ara jo oju orun,  
iyè na teka, ni ijùwè pè ojo onipè rọ.

bi oju orun sè dúdú si  
awa na kó orin kikó  
pelu awon ahon wa ti orun fun ododó igi opoto.

awon omọ obinrin tenu má ibèèrè fun ibon,  
lati dara pọ mọ awon ajagun. won fe pa ina ija,  
sibe, awon ope ti pe ninu ile amọ  
ni won gbe fun won,  
won ko gberi won je, ifokantan won si doogun.

òsùpá ma'n mole ju ni igba ihamo,  
sugbon ewo ni lati ka iwé akọ ranse  
ololufe ni abe imale na.

Marsi ni ju osupa kan lo,  
ko si nkan to sonu ninu re ri.  
pupa ara re si gbe ojiji awon eye  
ti ofo ninu re pamọ.

pelu ewa erupe ti igi wu jade ninu re,  
mo sewadii aye tuntun, ni ifokan te  
fun awon nkan ti ko ni semi leyin mi.

the moon had invisible wings  
that matched the sky,  
it is outstretched, so I know it will rain soon.

as it gets darker,  
we learn to sing  
with tongues that scent of blooming figs.

the girls continued to ask for guns  
so, they could join the war. They want to  
bring the fire to a quench.  
instead, they were handed knives  
long buried in clay,  
they were only trusted with rust.

the moon shines brightest during the curfew,  
but it's a taboo to read  
a lover's note under its reflection.

mars have more than one moon,  
nothing gets lost in it,  
the red surface hides the shadows of the  
wandering birds.

out of the pulchritude of the soil on which a  
tree could grow,  
I seek a new planet – in dependence,  
for what will not survive a day without me.

oṣoṣo mi ma'n sè akoso ìnà,  
tì osi tan ìmàḗ si gbògbò àrà mi,  
àwọn ẹran odò n'be nìnu ìkun mi,  
ti rogodo àrà wọn tọka iṣemi mi.

my brain generates enough electricity  
to make my body trans – parent.  
in my stomach are sea urchins,  
their spherical shells tell that I'm alive.

àwọn isan owo mi da gege bi itàkun ẹro,  
ti àwọn lèkèlèkè ba si ori re,  
eye mon po si niigba ogun,  
gbogbo ẹso mangoro ehinkulè wa ni wọn je tan.

the veins in my arms are telephone wires,  
lined by crows.  
birds flourish during the war,  
they fed on the mangoes in the backyard.

kosi àsìkò lati gún àwọn ìgì lehin isinkú,  
yatò sí ti aba fè nàgà wo ìbi iná sún mó ilé wa si.

there was no time after each burial – to climb  
the tree,  
the only time we did, it was to see how close  
the fire was, to our house.

àwọn eye diró mon okun, ni àsìkò aféfé.

the birds held firm to the wires when the wind  
blows,

Oyá mi lenu,  
oru melo ni àwọn eye yi fi sè irin ajo,  
sè wọn padanu iye.

I wondered  
how many nights does it take them to arrive,  
do they lose feathers on their way here?

àwọn eye po loju orun lásìkò ogun,  
wọn je nìnu àwọn ẹso to ti jera,  
bayi ni wọn sè fi enu wọn yi èjè.

there are more birds on the sky during the  
war,  
they fed on the rotten fruits  
and got their beaks stained in blood.

èmi àwọn oku wa ti tẹdo si ìnu àwọn eye na,  
wọn si hun àwọn orò nipa iranti ayè wọn,  
si ìbi ti owo wa kò tó

the ghost of our dead found home in the  
birds,  
they'll nest their memories  
where our hands would not reach.



## COLONY ON WATER / I`LU` ORI OMI

tí mo bá fo kúró lórí ọkọ ojú omi,  
áyun ní yóò jé fun mi  
láti dá wá nínù eja nílá inú ibú.

if I jump off the ship,  
it'll be lonely to  
forever remain in the belly of a shark.

òjò tó pa igún, kò ní kó má fò,  
gbogbo nkan lalè pàdànu nínù omi,  
kò sì dá oun ìrànṣì sí.

eagles drenched in the rain would fly when it  
stopped.  
everything could be lost in water,  
even memory.

òjò ná gbè emi wa kuro ni bi ogun,  
a bẹ sìnú rẹ  
a sì kọ orin ìyìn àwọn oku wa,  
bi eni wipè wọn wù jàdé ninu ilẹ̀.

the rain distracts us from the war,  
we jumped in it  
and sang praises of our dead,  
as if that will make them grow from the soil.

irú kan nàà ni ìroyín èrùn ati àwọn  
tó bá ogun lọ,  
a má kọ orin arò wọn  
títí ewé à fi yi awọ padà.

harmattan and martyrs have similar attributes,  
their praises only lasted  
until the leaves change color.

gbogbo ìgbà tí mo dúró láti ya àwòrán,  
mo si mọ́n rí ojú àwọn omọobìrin  
tí a pàdánù ni ojú èrọ àwòrán.

anytime I pose for a photograph,  
its everyone of our missing daughters  
looking into the lenses

gbogbo òwúrò tí mo bá jí pèlu  
ila tuntún ni ìwájù òrì mi,

I wake up each day with wrinkles  
on my forehead,

á má rán mi létí bi àwọn ewé mustard

it reminds me of how mustards

.se pàdànu òdòdó wọn.

lose their petals.

fún àmì òun ti a lẹ gbàgbé,

as the collection of symptoms for what we  
may forget,

mo dá òrùn lẹbi fún àwọn òdòdó wa tó rẹ.

I blame the sun for all our dying flowers.

## CHIMERA: [SCENT AND MEMORY]

There's a cap in Baba's wardrobe,

it doesn't fit his head.

But it was uniformed

for a wedding he missed,

because his memories are dated

in two calendars.

No one

would inherit this cap,

because it's also a bag

for passport photographs

or old currencies

or expired drugs.

It stores

all the almiski perfumes

to cloud the stillness of the dead.

Every Friday,

he scents himself

as we do with the dead bodies

In commemoration

for the ashen lamps

livid of it becoming

what it never would remember.

Until our legs receded  
after they were buried  
in the earth,  
Death has no language for consents      It would then  
wake them  
from this slumber.

Only to be asked,  
of what they practiced  
a million times,  
As I have too,  
in a language  
we all speak to God.

The scent would  
remind them  
of all they left behind  
As they answer  
Munkar  
and Nakir

We'll be gathered  
to warm these cold bones  
with the praises

Of the men  
that are no more,  
we'll then pray

That the scent of almiski  
guide them

through the gates of Aljanah.

## **INSIDE A TENT FOR GHOSTS**

]

Inside a makeshift tent in Gwoza,  
soldiers sat and chatted about home,

to distract themselves of their losses.

Outside the tent, Officer S would be shot,

he would die in his favorite purple shirt.

ب

The last time we met, it was a Sunday. We stood side by side in a nearly perfect role behind Baba for Asr' prayer. When the congregation dispersed, I sat with him on the cold tiles, and I listened to war stories. He had eleven days away from the heat in the North-East, but he spared me two hours, I would have stayed longer, if I knew the figments of sparks I saw in his eyes were about to set.

ت

There is no permanence in survival,  
what you survived may one day return to kill you.

Tired of being a savior  
in a country that only knows to bury heroes,

I asked Officer S if he ever feels tired  
of wearing his boots for days without taking them off

or if at any point, they start to grow heavier  
before they feel like part of his body again.  
A soldier is guaranteed clean legs, he joked.

ث

Tired of having flashes of all the friends that are no more, he told me he sees them in mufti anytime they appear in his sleep, but without their limbs. I have learnt not to sleep for several days, I know that when death comes, I will have till Israfeel blows the trumpet, to have all the rest these bones need.

ج

I listened to him talk about the war and the young soldiers that broke down in the middle of their first tasks or those that lost all the confidence they had garnered during the trainings, only to start crying. In the middle of sporadic exchanges, no one hears what you say but we read lips and keep faith that the insurgents will get tired and lower their guns too. I sighed in absence of a perfect word to console who has death in a pouch but now seem to be weakened by its weight, with each day that passes. I don't know what to say to someone who had killed and has no thought to live beyond the days he is already in. I nodded with a half grin on my face, this was to make sure he continued to talk, without feeling he would scare me off with all the death stories.



ఊ

You tell every new boy posted to the artillery with me,  
that the easiest of the three ways to die in a khaki

is to let fear whisper 'run' in your ears  
in the middle of a bullet exchange.

Never stand up to run away from the bullets,  
when it rained on us on dark days.

it is important to maintain your position to avoid dislocations.  
I remind them that no one out runs a bullet.

You are much safer buried within the grasses,  
than wanting out of the chaos before there is a vanquish.

خ

He continues; this is simple. If you and your brothers pick up a fight with a stranger, the moment any your brothers run from that scene, they are taking off with half of your morale, it will take more than a miracle for you to win the fight. The first rule is to die with the gun in your hands and not a bullet through your back, you will be remembered with bile memories, if anyone survived to tell the field stories.

Softened by grief, he picks his words as if unsure their meaning had changed with the time he spent away from home, for the peace keeping. This ebb is bigger than what we went to another people's land to coo to sleep, Boko Haram is a whirlwind no one can breathe in. I listened but wondered why I deserved this vulnerability from the man I always thought to be void of pains, trained to fight and not to speak of any evil, bigger than what bullets can deflate. It was after he died in the purple shirt he wore that day, I wondered if he could perceive the whiff of death, or something close to it as he speaks to me with calmest tone I ever hear him speak.

د

You should come to the barrack tomorrow  
he announced after few minutes silence, I didn't know what to say.

"I'll be there", I promised, even though I knew  
I'll be on my way out of Kaduna by first light.

I have a weird confidence in always seeing him,  
no matter how long it took. I remembered the day

before he left for a peace keeping mission in Liberia and Sudan,  
I always knew I will see again. That Sunday, I was wrong,

I still hold the pain in my body,  
a pike of grief that I keeps growing anytime I remember him.

ذ

I was hundreds of kilometers away in Ilorin, just about time when I walked inside my room and collapsed on the bed, sprayed on the tiled floor, my phone buzzed, it was Officer S, “I heard you have travelled today, safe journey”.

“I’m sorry, I had to leave, it was an emergency”, I replied him.

He reminded me, that he bought some caps for me from Borno, the state where he served, fighting Boko Haram for the past four years or more. He was returned from Sudan with other soldiers to help foster the peace in Nigeria’s North-East. The people of Maiduguri and Borno are known for their unparalleled crafts with threads in adorning men’s cap. He told me, he will leave three caps for me, I can come get it anytime I return to Kaduna. On my condolence visit, I was given the caps by his wife, after I told her of our last discussion, the last time I was in Kaduna. She confirmed the caps are in his wardrobe and she doesn’t know who it belonged to.

و

I prayed daily and gave out saddaqaah.

I knew Allah answered my prayers

and I'm always with the believe

that Officer S won't lose his life to Boko Haram.

I thought I was specific enough, Ya Allah,

my husband should not fall,

he should not fall in the hands of those insurgents.

I knew Allah answered that prayer and it was confirmed,

we don't have a voice to pray against our death,

what may kill us will be the least we expected,

things we are expert of, things we are comfortable with.”

ز

Her eyes are red and glassy but not because she's about to cry, it is the eyes of a window, who has squeezed dry her tear glands. Her voice is husky, I could hear the pain beneath her voice and with an occasional short giggle, my heart tear further, she had lost weight from the last time I saw her in the women's wing of the Friday prayer group. We inherited the women congregation from our Baba, we take turns to lead them in special prayers every week, and we preached to them about things we have heard from our favorite Islamic Scholars and the ones we remembered from the time we were students.

س

The women section of our Baba's mosque in Kakuri  
was newly tiled before Officer S arrived Kaduna

for an eleven days break. I sat on a wooden bench  
in front of older women, some older to be my grandmother and some are younger.

They sat with legs outstretched on the mat  
I arranged against the wall, such that they can rest their backs

as we go over several Quran verses and some Islamic poetry.  
The most fun part of the gathering is the singing,

I love to sing the poetry aloud, the women's chorus  
makes it more enjoyable, with their chorus, something new blooms

inside my body, something tender I cannot point a finger to;  
"Solatul ilahi, 'ala Ahamdin" I chanted

"Ahmadin" the women chorused.

ش

All through the singing, I led, and they chorused, I ended up with enough happiness to last me a week until we are gathered again. With each line they chorused, I chanted even louder, and they followed the wave of my voice. This ritual was started by my Grandfather, my Baba inherited it, and ever since, generations of cousins and faithful students have led the women. There was no roster to tell when it was anyone's time, but I knew it was my time when I crave for Fridays and I had nowhere better to be.

I look into the women's eyes; the consistency of their prayer session is something I envy. Some of the women have been coming to this mosque before I was born, they were here with my Grandfather and the generations that followed, they are still here, not tired of praising Prophet Muhammad and singing in Yoruba, with the confidence of a congregation that had witnessed miracles after miracles, and now know what name to call Allah that he never refuses to answer.



ص

Officer S's wife came late,  
like other younger women that have children to take care for,  
  
she always do, and I make jokes  
or sometimes fined her fifty naira for the prayers she had missed.

The women take turns praying for the husbands  
and their children, they announced when their children are about to write exams in school  
  
and when they finally passed the exams. They announced when their husbands  
buy new cars and some of their prayer points are kept secret

but they find ways to remind the congregation  
that something good is brewing in their households,

we don't ask what it is, "we know we cannot undo what you want, or do what you don't"  
someone will add and then, there is always calm and with an assertive voice,

"this one will happen" everyone else will chorus "Amen!"  
and there was another silence for me to prescribe a perfect verse

from the Quran to be recited in unison.

ض

Alhadullillah!

Officer S is back from Gwoza, he is doing great, I need more prayer for him, I want Allah to protect him more than he has done in the past.” She said smiling.

One of the younger women in the mosque made a joke that her smiles are brighter than it was the weeks before and the older women agreed, chipping in other teases and they laughed. Awkwardly, I joined them.

ط

I sat on the cushion chair

facing the television,

the pictures of all their four children

placed above the screen.

Children who would have to learn

not to run to the veranda

anytime there is a shout

of soldiers returning home,

children who would

correlate their father’s face

from the pictures on his phone,

with the last memory

of him

outside the army uniform.

“Everyone in Kalapazin knew he was no more,  
before I did” she moaned.

ظ

Growing up, Kalapazin barrack was a revered place, we've heard stories of men beaten for not recognizing the sound of the bugle when they visited, or young boys that were asked to chase a chicken inside the large fields of the barrack because they were found gambling when they should be in school. I have been to the barracks many times, we followed Baba there to name children whose fathers were away and to sometimes visit the mothers of children who stopped coming to our Arabic School, in all my visits, I never saw anyone running after a chicken.

ε

“How?” I asked.

“I don’t know,

but their husbands must have heard

and told them, but they don’t know

how to break the bad news.”

I slept a day before and I had a terrible nightmare,

I was inside the house when I heard rumbling

outside our apartment.

I peeked out and it seem it was about to rain,

I rushed outside to the clothesline

and the wind became even more turbulent,

I noticed Officer S’s uniforms were on the clothesline

and I tried to retrieve them first before the other clothes,

as I stretched my hands, the wind blew off the uniform from my reach

and I ran further and further with no avail.

Anytime I come close to picking it, it flies even farther.

ع

I woke up worried about my husband. The electricity was out, I took a flashlight and refilled the empty kettle that was outside my door. I ran to the bathroom, she said. In Kalapazin, two rooms share a kitchen and toilet. The bath is a small complex, shared amongst the family of officers in every floor of the building. I made ablution, she continued. I prayed two rakaat and prayed to Allah to protect my husband, I didn't know I was too late.

The last time he came home, I bought two chickens for him. I asked that he nurture the birds, feed them and make sure to take care of them. Every time he called, I always asked about the chicken. One who has a pet would escape all forms of darkness.

ف

I have heard a similar story in the past.

A friend once told me that the secret why  
every old person in the neighborhood has a cat,

is because they don't want to die,  
and the cats will take their place if anything bad should happen to them.

Households where they have cats, they don't get sick. He affirmed.  
One would wonder why every Nigerians don't have a cat,

why most people like my Mama are fearful at the sight of one.

ق

A cousin brought a stray cat home and hid it in our backyard and feed it from his ration. In less than three months, the cat was back on a full swing, climbing over the roof into the compound when we are asleep to lick off the soup from the plates or crush the fishbones that are left uncrushed inside the plates. One morning, I went for a run in a cleared part of a degenerated textile company that is now used for years as a sport arena. I came back to my Mama's complain of a cat that she saw a night before, until this moment, no one tells her it was brought home by one of my cousins, it will not end well, we all knew better and promised to do something about it, nothing was done, and the cat grew bigger with each day.



ك

He told me he brought millets  
for the chickens and feed them after Fajr prayer

I was happy and confidence  
that Boko Haram will not kill him.  
If they shoot at him,  
they will miss, I was right.

He was not killed by Boko Haram,  
he was shot by a fellow soldier.

U

I was inside the hostel, named after Nigeria's Head of State, in Obafemi Awolowo University in Ile-Ife, a small town where the Yoruba religion believed was the first part of the world that was created, when I read the news from the Nigerian Army's Twitter, that there was an accidental discharge in the military camp in Gwoza and two soldiers were lost.

I was wearing a short and without any cloth, I was consoling my hunger with the whispering from the pot of spinach and mackerel fish. A friend was turning Eba inside a plastic bowl, I was waiting for him to finish cooking, so I can have enough strength to go cheer the football games that was airing inside the hostel's Common Room. I did not mind reading the news in full, I told my friend I don't believe the Army, chorusing the arguments of some of the comments under the Twitter feeds.

↑

‘Do people practice with live bullets?’

So, the Army think we are stupid?

‘We don’t suffer for these people hand o’ I retorted  
and plugged my phone and continue to wait.

‘‘How much longer?’’ I asked my friend,  
before he could answer, my phone rang,

it was my cousin asking if I had heard of what happened.  
I sat up in my bed and asked a little louder, weytin happen?

‘‘Officer S is dead, he was shot yesterday by his colleague’’  
‘‘ye!’’ That was all I could say in minutes.

‘‘Inna lillah wa inna illahi raji’un’’ I heard  
my cousin said in nearly a whisper.

Tears roll down my cheek and suddenly my stomach was filled with shards  
of despair, I told him I’ll call back, I called my Mama and she could not speak,

she blew her nose and cleared her throat but said nothing,

I cut the call, dropped the phone and

soaked my pillow with the salty water, dripping from my eyes.

ن

“Look, this is the guy, they were friends”. She scrolled through pictures from Officer S’s phone. In the picture, four or five soldiers pinned a ram to the brown earth, it was an Eid, his last. In another picture that seem like the same day, they were all smiling, their faces, radiant as the sun on a wet sky.

•

I felt relieved  
when I heard

it was not Boko Haram  
that killed him,

but I felt a ting  
of sadness

that if I asked Allah  
to save him

from any form of death,  
he may still be alive.

‘You have done well,  
you are warrior as much as he was,

where his journey ended,  
his children will supersede,

and they will be the testimonies  
of all his hard work.”

و

I left Kalapazin with three caps, all embroidered in many colors. I walked passed the girls under a mango tree, braiding their hairs and laughing at a phone screen they huddled. I walked passed the officer that mounted the exit, he was about my age, younger is closer to precision. I walked passed the abattoir outside the fence of a dilapidated textile company that bordered the barrack.

ي

Inside my room,

I opened the WhatsApp

on my phone and scrolled

to read my last messages from Office S,

*Safe Journey*

I scrolled even further, to months back.

*We are going in now,*

*pray for me when you have the time.*

# III

## ASHES

Similar scars made a family of strangers.  
In many years, their paths would not cross, except on deserted alley  
where they would stare into the halogen lamps and match on.

There is a demise of a soldier that you may read on your way to the kitchen  
or on the radio after a music break. It will break you  
for now, you are a branch of dead figments, smothering in a tunnel.

Henceforth, all the dead would live in you.

And you would live in someone who saw your face in a photo album  
or heard of how you rescued a family of rabbits on the battleground.

You would live in the body of a stranger, who watched how you fed the rabbit  
and her seven kits slices of mangoes you ripened in powdered charcoal.

## DEPARTURE

Sometimes, you would lose a friend in an ambush.

You would fight off the fog that clouded the bank of your eyes.

It's not only of the dead and their laughter you had grown used to,  
it is of the wives that would call your number to confirm if it was true,  
and of their children who knew you from the picture you snapped  
on the last Eid.

Their families are now yours and you are a galaxy  
for wandering satellites torching the edges of the dark field with match sticks.

In the picture, you pinned a ram to the ground, and smiled.

You may have removed the ram's horns after singeing, to breathe in the hot air,  
baba said it cures epistaxis.

No one we knew was healed but we believed  
in the miracle of a ram's horn.

Sometimes, you lose a comrade in a gun fight, but you continue to finger the trigger,  
like a prayer bead.

You won't lower your gun, you must live to mourn the departed.



## YORUBA ABECEDARIAN II

Away from the bulb of shadows  
brimming with the rust of a past  
drained of what could make it grow.

Emerged an entrance, depending on where you stand.  
Eja o le fi inu ira se ibugbe, except  
for their gills, stripped like gingko leaves.

Going away from the lake, I imagine home ahead.  
Gbogbo omi nii mu mi ranti ile.  
How then do I resist a return?

In the eyes that refracts every light it once saved,  
jolting inside a socket, that  
knots every image we thought of God.

Let me rise in my bones, wrought in symbols  
masked of a past that we must remember –  
never to let go, because I won't be here for long.

On a bridge where the water became too viscous to flow  
ona to gba omi, o le ma gba oju ese,  
putting out the traces of all the fishermen, that

roamed this silk path after each rainfall, with  
sequel of wings that would be detached at dawn,  
ṣugbọn, iye apa kan ko le gbe ni de ile.

To pay up the debt, the wind  
usurp the relics of these martyrs  
without having to name the field they died in  
  
years passed, and none of the missing were found.

## CIRCLE

There's no vocabulary in the army – for grief, or death.  
Each door you exit, leads to another parade ground.  
With each lightening on the face of the sky, you remember  
the matching tattoos you drew on each other's back.  
This flash of repeating memories you crave every morning,  
I hope it keeps you alive until the next gun fight.  
Every death is expected, but you loam the pains in your mouth  
and sing of the days when the gyration was enough  
for you and the battalion. You remember \_\_\_\_\_,  
excused from the war front, and like you, he envisaged  
rapture is incomplete outside of the field.  
The roaring of the waters on the edge of Lagos reminds him of Maiduguri,  
the thatch where you both kept watch and sang until it stopped raining.  
The ocean's wave kept him alive until the next gun fight.  
He returned before the arc on his stomach healed,  
the field is where the love is, he made it to the pavilion  
where you sang on top of your voice, because you must not close your eyes,  
not in prayers, not to dream of anywhere outside the circle.  
There was an ambush when he was on guard. You still hear whispers  
of his songs and that alone would keep you alive until your next gun fight.

## UNMARKED

They pointed your wife to a mound of clay marked with Coca-Cola bottle,  
your name written hurriedly on a piece of paper, inside of it.

Baba escorted her to the burial ground, with your daughter.  
Until she came for you, you were declared missing.

Everyone is declared missing until declared dead. No one would tell her  
how you died, and she would not ask, she saw the pictures,  
you were laid beside another soldier in full regalia.

A giant mango tree stood tall by the entrance, it casted a shade on the  
signboard with the invocation to be muttered before they entered the burial ground.

The shadow was a trap for the promise that followed In sha Allah – bikum laa'ikun.

She doesn't understand the language she prayed in, your daughter does,  
but she's tired of the moving car. She wanted to return to the barrack,

to stare at your pictures when there's no one close by, she wants to be unmarked  
in the room she was born in, the room where we last sat around a tray of jollof rice.

## PARADISE

### I.

In this paradise, a baobab died  
with roots inside the ground.

Superstition becomes an experiment  
when there's faith to outlive a drought.

The soldier's bag was packed with bitter-kolas,  
because they cure a thousand ailments or more.

If you own what could be inherited,  
then, death becomes a cure

and without history, even God is mortal.

### II.

Paradise is where the windows are always closed.  
There is a tray on every entrance to its library,

heaped with the ashes from the incense we light up,  
anytime we say prayers, for the soldiers who feasted with us

before they left for the frontlines.

### III.

Paradise is where the petals of nameless  
flowers deflate the grief in the air.

It is forbidden to say this aloud, our prayers were  
unanswered; the soldiers did not return – alive.

## VITA

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