

saraba

ELECTRONIC LITERARY MAGAZINE



citylife

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Publishing Note

MAJOR FLICKER

THE WAY to begin is on a tiny road with no traffic, no nothing, perhaps only a flicker of light at the end of the road. This is the summary of *Saraba* for this second issue, and one is tempted to end it there. We received fewer entries than the first, and we could not get a Guest Editor. Our box was almost as empty as we left it. That is why there is a very high tendency for us to get despondent and end this all, easily, pocket our losses, and who can say anything? But *Saraba* deserves more than that.

In this issue, *Saraba* is ossifying. We are happily trying a blend of black and white and colour, to give both the literary and the digital feel. Also, our classification of works has changed. This is digital, very fluid and decidedly easily maneuvered.

Our choice of city life as theme does not exactly deserve the little justification we have done. But this is only a repository, a chance to begin a reconsideration of whether the city writes our stories or we write it's. Anyway, City Life is an inexhaustible theme. So we are not totally to be nailed. Thanks to all who cured our almost despondence with enthusiasm and submissions.

In the end, it is the expectation of a major flicker at the end of the road that published this. Nothing more, nothing less.

—
DAMILOLA AJAYI
EMMANUEL IDUMA

End Love

PAUL ONANUGA

I never stopped to wonder, even as the bus sped on, creating that familiar image of trees and grass fleeing the other direction, “when did things go wrong?” My mind was clouded by varied thoughts. It definitely did not happen today. The smoke occasioned by bush burning stung my eyes; the planting season was only just around the corner. Planting season? My own planting season had been jeopardized, the pot of soil shattered. How could Funto just throw away four years of courtship, blow it away with the whirlwind? How could she break the news like that, telling she did not care about me, and throwing me out like that? The night was young, darker than usual, matching my mood. The passenger behind me nodded forward as the bus hit a pothole, one of the numerous along the expressway.

Barely three hours ago, I was alighting from a bus, a bus from Lafia, slowly taking in the hustle and bustle of Lagos. From the park, I paid a biker to take me the whole distance to Funto’s apartment, one that she has since refused me to pay for while I accomplished my NDA programme in Kaduna. I did not call her before I made the hectic and tortuous journey down South; I intended to surprise her with my visit. The storey building she resided in still looked the same way it was when I visited about a year ago, save for patches of

cement applied to seal some holes. The paint was less obvious now; a year of weather beating had taken its toll. I traced the stairway up and located the two rooms she used, one beside the other. Peals of laughter, mixed with cement, sailed across the door, punctuated by the conversation going on and the television. I knocked, praying that she had not moved away, within the few months when we were incommunicado; I lost my phone and had never believed in the postal system. I heard feet dragging along slippers, the lock turned, Funto opened the door. She opened the door wide enough that I saw the man lying on the rug, bare-chested, heavily built, in boxer shorts, just the way Funto loved her man. She moved back shocked at my presence, pulling up the wrapper she had turned around her tighter. My eyes went damp and I remembered the times we were together like that. My throat knotted, dried and no word could come out except a forced low-voiced “why?” Her face said it all. She simply slapped my face and said “leave now and never come back”. I heeded her advice, boarded a bus and left for nowhere.

The question “why?” kept ringing in my head. Why did she not give a hint before these happened? At about 12am, our bus stopped at Lokoja. I alighted quietly in the darkness, and traced a familiar route to a beer parlour, hoping by the dawn of morning I would cease to exist.

Gone, Baby Gone

DAMILOLA AJAYI

She left. Perhaps in the morning after I had clutched my torn portfolio and headed out on my usual job-hunt. After the morning sun arrived in its intense beauty and the city awakened from its quasi-slumber. After husbands grumbled out of bed in readiness for the day's work; after children queued buckets at the dribbling tap to fetch their bath water; after the nosy housewives brought out their laundry to be washed with home-made soaps and gossip.

Perhaps she had breakfast, perhaps she didn't. But one thing was sure: she had left. A sizable chunk of her clothes with her. Her jewelry box too, gone. Her body lotions and other skin-care paraphernalia scattered on each other as though she was in a hurry. Maybe he was waiting in the car. Or at the door. Leisurely leaning into the door, his face lit up with a smug smile complimenting his sparkling fatigues. His eyes accompanying her as she undulates around the room, dropping odds into the travelling bag's wide mouth. The curtain at the door swaying over his over-polished shoes, acquiring a skim of his black kiwi at its frills.

But the bed was well-laid. The pillows, snug their cases, laid side by side at its head, smoothed save for the one on her side of the bed. It bore a deep indentation, perhaps her buttocks. She might have rummaged the bedside cabinet for her documents: her O' level results, I.D cards, birth certificate. One of the drawers did not quite key-in; a peephole provided a dark view of its contents, the tip of a paper hung out like a tongue.

The shoe rack missed some shoes. There were naked hangers on the mop stick, our wardrobe. Red lipstick smeared my hung white shirt. She must have been in haste while divesting the hangers of her clothes, accidentally kissing the sleeve of my shirt. Or was it symbolic? An undisputable evidence planted on a favourite shirt to signify the remoteness of her return?

The mattress sank in as I sat in it. My disarrayed thoughts restrained me of my habit of kicking off my shoes. I sat fully dressed save for my unbuttoned shirt. Sweat beads studded my forehead; some seeped down my temple and dropped on the rug as my head was slightly bowed. My hands were on my head. My mind in turmoil. The only sounds in the room were the creaking sound of the leaking fridge and my racing heart.

How did I not know? The signs were there. Lately she had been talking about him. The Brigadier. How he came often to lunch at the restaurant; how he often insisted she wait upon him; his generous tip, the first of which she had made a pot of chicken soup from...

2.

I did not finish that meal. After she told me the source of the soup, my soiled hands refused to journey from the plate to my mouth. My teeth refused to chew the chicken lap. To even swallow became self-betrayal. I rinsed my hands, slipped on a shirt and left the room.

I walked two streets to Joe's, a bar owned by a Biafra veteran. Old Joe was behind the bar, wiping as usual in his slow and painstaking way. Joe is always wiping: the wooden bar top, the glass cups, his baldhead. Sitting at our usual spot were my drinking buddies, Saul and Jamiu.

Jamiu effortlessly spewed out whorls of smoke, a cigarette dangled in between fingers while his other hand straddled a beer bottle. Saul sweated his guts on a bowl of fish pepper soup. He had abandoned his spoon for this gastronomic duty. I raised my hand in signal and Joe comes, cradling my brand on a tray.

We drowned our sorrows that night on credit, appending our signatures on Joe's brown debtor book on our way out. I staggered into my room, slipping into bed beside Esther who was fully dressed, a rare occurrence.

Brigadier came up again in our conversation one evening. Then I was still employed: a meager pay contract job with a small construction company on a bridge building project. My post was structural engineer. But I really functioned as foreman. Every evening I dined at the restaurant where Esther waited; where we had met. That evening, she brought my meal—she knew my order by heart—and went to the backroom to change from waiter to Esther. She carried a fancy magazine when she showed up on our way home.

I asked her where she had gotten the magazine not quite stripped of its purchase cellophane. She said it was gift. A gift from whom, I asked. A gift from a man she replied. I allowed a few minutes to pass and asked, "Was it the army guy?"

She didn't respond. I snatched the magazine, tore into bits and emptied the pieces into an open drain nearby—and that was it. She never mentioned his name again. Until last night.

3.

Yesterday was Esther's birthday. She clocked twenty-seven, contrary to what her body displayed. She has the body of a budding pubescent in the gradual process of becoming a woman. Despite the acne that periodically plagued her face, her beauty shone through. Her smile especially. Just like it was that day when I first time I noticed her.

I had discovered the restaurant not too far from the project site, recommended by a fellow colleague, the quantity surveyor. The food was good, just as he had promised; the price reasonable too. It was like killing two birds with one stone. Feeding at *Knives and Knight* became another of my habits.

It did not take long to notice the lady-waiter in the snug-fitting uniform. She smiled often. She attends to customer as though her life depends solely on their order, offering rapt attention and saving her ears for the little details. She became an acquaintance and we often said a few words to each other. Exchanging pleasantries and any day I didn't show up for my meals, she would inquire why the next time I came around.

So one evening I walked into restaurant about fifteen minutes to their closing hour, clad in a jacket. Safely tucked in my jacket's inner pocket was a couple's ticket to a movie at the local theatre. Esther came to take my order, smiling as always. While taking my order, I dropped the

ticket on the table for her to see and I said I would not take NO for an answer. Her smile became a nervous blush. She returned transformed from the smiling waiter who had just taken my order to a dazzling nubile in a blue dress. She slipped her hands into kink of my elbow and we walked to the theatre. She giggled at every word I uttered like a teenager in love.

That was the beginning of our romance. It took a week to persuade her to sleep over at my place and another week to convince her to move in. She left the room she was sharing with a friend and moved her belongings into my loft.

4.

Her birthday fell on a Thursday. She woke earlier than usual, humming to herself an Ishekiri song. When I woke and wished her a happy birthday, she turned her right cheek for me to kiss: her gesture for silent anger. I hurriedly dressed and I set out on my Job search. My contract with Soji Builders had long expired. No job was forthcoming and my funds were fast dwindling. Every morning I would set out, armed with my portfolio, combing the city for building sites with ongoing work, advertising my services to any foreman who cared to listen. Sometimes I got lucky, but mostly the usual response was NO JOB, BETTER LUCK NEXT TIME. I set out early on that Thursday, fueled by a renewed frenzy to find a job, even if it was casual labor to enable me give Esther a befitting birthday.

I had chosen another part of the city for my search. I heard an estate was on construction. Bar gossips also informed me that there were various vacancies to be filled on that site. I arrived at the

site before the sun and, to my dismay, met a large crowd of job-seekers like myself; some even better qualified already clothed in their dirty work clothes. The foreman arrived late in the morning, wearing a red helmet and yellow overalls on his traditional attire, chewing on gum like a curd-eating goat. He picked twenty individuals and told the rest of us what we woke up wishing not to hear; the clichéd dismissal: NO JOB, BETTER LUCK NEXT TIME.

After idling around for a little while—nursing a notion that the foreman would have a change of heart and call me in the blue shirt, for the last available work slot—I faced the grave reality of my being jobless on today of all days. I waddled away with a sachet of water dangling from my mouth at noon. Aimless. Jobless. Penniless.

A few kilometers walk led to the main road from where I took a bike to the nearest Unity bank. The serenity in the bank sharply contrasted that oven of a city. I took extra time to write out the withdrawal slip, sitting with my face against the vent of the cold unit, relishing the blast of cool air that hit my face whilst battling with the drying ink of the pen. I presented my slip to the cashier who typed into the computer, wrote and stamped on my slip, picked up money atop her desk slab and hurled it through the hole in the glass partition. I asked after my balance and without looking at the computer she recited it. Twenty-seven naira. I slipped the money into my otherwise empty pocket. My pocket felt heavy, as I began my walk to Joe's.

5.

I met Jamiu at Joe's, smoking as usual and sipping a sprite.

"Oh boy, you no they ever work at all?"

Jamiu acknowledged me from behind his dark shades. He once said he liked seeing the afternoon sun through those tinted frames. The truth was that the sun blinds him during the day and he needed the shades to dam its rays. He wiggled a little to sit upright from his slouch. He breath smoke between his thighs through several gaps in his lips like the cigarette smoke was mouthwash.

"What happened to your work at the Times?" I asked taking a sit next to him and retrieving the smoldering cigarette from his finger.

"I lost that Job a week ago", he said staring ahead into the bar, at Joe wiping away as usual.

"How", I inquired. A quick survey revealed an empty bar with most chairs upturned on tables except for ours.

"I wrote an article on bad governance, the editor hurled it back at me saying I was too specific and that I had mentioned too many names" he took a swig from his sprite and continued," I told him that as the editor he is at liberty to excise and splice back any parts that held his interest".

"Ehnn..." I said, awaiting him to resume his tale.

"The next day I got to office and I found my property in a neat pile on my desk. A letter of acceptance of my resignation was drafted to me with instructions to meet the accountant for my month's pay"

"So that is how you fell back into the streets" I said, tilting up from my sitting posture to signal at Joe with a snap.

Jamiu did not say more. He stared at the smoldering cigarette and the wax ashtray blackened with soot. He liked to think of himself as deep. He always hibernates from the world and just converse with his inner man. Jamiu wished to be a writer. He even worked hard at it. Jamiu had written two novels and ten volumes of poetry, all unpublished. For a while, he was crazy about getting published and he spent ample time going around scouting for publishers who would take interest in his works.

He had returned to one of these publishers one day. He was told the cliché dismissal of publishing world, a mild modification of no luck better luck next time: to check back in a few weeks. Famished, he crossed the road to purchase roasted corn to appease his gut. As he unsheathed the roasted corn, he found out that a page from his manuscript had been used to package the corn. That had marked the end of his search.

Joe brought a cold trophy beer and laid it down on my table. I asked Jamiu if he cared for a drink but he said it was too early to drink for him. *But it is not too early to smoke*, I said to myself. I settled down with my beer, sipping it and thinking of how I could find a job. The thoughts of even returning to the village to farm my father's land crossed my mind but I subdued it with faith in an uncertain tomorrow in the city.

The drone of a drop-top BMW quenched as it parked beside the road. I saw three soldiers in fatigues come out and march into Joe's through

the glass window. They took a table close to the bar and shouted orders at Joe who was quick to oblige them with their requests: three bottles of big stouts and chipped glass cups. They laughed a lot and from their faces I could tell they were young. They spoke in loud pidgin and joked away the most productive hours of the day. I could imagine one of them was the brigadier. Perhaps the hefty one who spotted a beard and wore shining black shoes.

Saul walked into the bar at about two-o'clock. Waddling his fat bulk shrouded in his mechanic overalls soiled with grease and sand. His feet making grating sounds on the raw cement floor. He took a seat beside us, sweating like a mad goat. He snapped his fingers and Joe comes over. Saul placed his order: a bottle of beer and a bowl of fish pepper soup.

Saul was not always like this. His love for food and alcohol had begun shortly after his wife left him. She left him for one of his customers who had enough money to buy her jewelry and send her siblings to school. Saul had tried very hard to please Preye but he just didn't earn enough. When she had eloped with the man in the Volvo, taking their only son with her, Saul had buried himself in his work, food and beer. He channeled his passion towards eating. When we—Jamiu and I—asked him why he ate so much, he would say that is the only thing that brings him joy. We also knew this was not entirely true for he usually visits a chubby girl in Miliki Spot, a brothel nearby.

I emptied my third beer and bid my friends farewell. I got to the bar and appended my signature in Joe's brown book. I had now acquired

a debt of over three thousand and I watched Joe has I appended my signature. I could see behind his blank expression, his façade, his indifference pout. I knew he thought I was testing his patience.

6.

I went into the market nearby and purchased condiments to prepare Esther's favorite dish of vegetable soup. I returned home, lodged my last bottle of cheap red wine in the leaking fridge and walked into the communal kitchen shared by seven wives that resided in our compound. I finished the meal and kept it warm in a food flask. I lay on the couch and awaited Esther's return from the restaurant.

The moon had ascended into glory when Esther returned. A car's drone preceded her knock. I could imagine it was the Brigadier who dropped her but I didn't go to window to confirm. I also held my peace. It was her birthday and also not a good time to exchange bilious words.

She walked in exhausted. I could tell from the furrows on her head. I told her to take a shower. Whilst she was in the bathroom, I quickly set the table and when she came out she saw my culinary display. She offered a near smile and said she wasn't hungry; that she ate at work. Her boss had planned a small get-together after work and she had eaten. I looked at table and what was left of all the money I had withdrawn at the bank. I fell on the couch and watched as Esther packed the meals into plastic bowls which she kept in the fridge.

Later that night in bed, facing her side of the bed, Esther said, “The brigadier came to the restaurant today”.

I kept mute and she continued, “He asked me to come with him to Abuja”

I did not respond. I lay awake till she started snoring and kept thinking about what she had said until Morpheus crept behind me and also hurled me into dreamland.

7.

Time seemed to expand after she left. The wall clock’s hands became laborious. It was as though a revolution took as much time as evolution in itself. Every tick was heavy in my ears; the passage of time became painfully significant. The power was out, as usual. A spider was wafting webs that bridged the white asbestos to the cup of the ceiling fan. I watched at as the arachnid went about its work as an ordained weaver, bored sick, and left without options of making myself happy.

Joe was not an option. I had acquired enough debts and I knew I could not be welcomed by Joe. The hunger that had plagued me from my long stroll after my usual unsuccessful job search had now receded behind to the chain of events and what was left of it was a dull pain that seemed trivial to the hurt in my heart.

Soon the shuffling of feet would invade my privacy: whistling husbands returning from the day’s work for the weekend. Cradling cellophanes filled with weekend goodies either snatched by their children dancing around in underpants or

their wife wrapped in loin-cloth and knowing smiles.

My weekend stretched ahead of me like a skin of tideless waters. I felt tired within, sweating from heat, a direct consequence of lack of power and crowded houses and poor ventilation. I stood up and stepped out.

I walked. No discerned destination. Just around like the strolls I and Esther would take when there was no power. We would comb the streets with held hands and have conversations about her friends and our childhood. We would even sing old songs and enjoy the air caress our skins softly. When we returned home, we would make love and slept in each other’s arms.

I was opposing the street traffic. The passers-by raised dust as they walked towards their abode, as I walked away from home. I could not imagine where Esther was. The very thought of it hurts. I knew that thinking of her and the brigadier would ache like an open sore anointed with perfume. So I just let my thoughts flow out against the direction of air, form ripples around my head and whirl me away from the conscious.

The evening had slowly become night after I had walked about an hour. A tumultuous crowd still moved against my direction. I had now passed the dusty paths and my feet were grinding asphalt. The toots and horns of vehicles saturated the air and the bustling voices and shuffling feet was a useful distraction.

I approached a pedestrian bridge that arched an expressway. It was long abandoned by pedestrians. The metal floor had slowly rusted till it had given

way to holes at different spots and no longer had the strength to hold up any weight without giving way.

Sitting at the base is a man wearing dreadlocks and dirty cloths. He stares into the road with his eyes grazing past each vehicle without lingering a little too long. Perhaps it was boredom, I can't say but whatever made me to walk towards him, I still can't fathom. I walked to where he was and took a seat beside him, playing my vision on fast cars.

"A beautiful night," he says.

He reaches into his shirt pocket and drew out two crumpled sticks of cigarette. He straightens it out with his fingers and reached into another pocket to fetch a matchbox. He offered me a stick which I collected and we both smoked, blowing out ribbons that threatened to accompany the speeding vehicles but dissolved shortly after its pursuit. We smoked away most of our plaguing problems. The pedestrian guy's company was not

alcohol and garrulous talk at Joe's but it sure did calm my edgy nerves.

Walking back home was laborious. I had not known that I had covered such distance. I looked into the crescentic moon and I remembered this was about the same time we- I and Esther— usually return from our aimless evening strolls. Hot tears threatened to fall out but I fought the furtive war of a man. *I can't cry over woman*, I tell myself. And as I contemplate my emotions, my face gave way for the film of tears that rolled down my shirt. My tears gave way for my countless wishes. That I could hurl myself into the immediate past. That I had stayed home a little longer that morning. That I had told Esther how much I loved her, how much I wanted her stay when she told me about the brigadier's proposition. That I had returned home and met her on the bed, sleeping gently like a babe, like nothing ever happened. These were my very wishes as I turned the doorknob to let myself in.

“A city is a place where there is no need to wait for next week to get the answer to a question, to taste the food of any country, to find new voices to listen to and familiar ones to listen to again.”

Margaret Mead (1901 - 1978)

U.S. Anthropologist

World Enough

Street Light

AYO ADEOLA

I **remember** the sun as my light
The lightness of my steps in that time
When the morning was for work
And night for sleep

I still sleep now
But to lie is to work
All night I do so
Like the streetlight by my window

I remember how I came
When my eyes knew earth
Now I see through eyes
Reflecting souls like mine

Not that we are alike
We just all lack insides
For all our emptiness
We are various brands of nothing

I remember the streetlight again
It was for me as a wise man's star
Watching it beckon to me
Marking me as a "been-to"

Now under it I stand
The darkness is here too
A pasted smile worn
Hawking bodily wares

Once Upon a Smile

BOLA AKINLOYE

Once there lived in a town a young lad,
who like him created the world never had,
a merry old soul he was from birth.
Joyful heart, he had all friends on earth.
Wouldn't do no one wrong and he never expected one
he would repay with a smile every evil done
but then like every his age a companion was needed.
To suit his merriment, a virtuous girl heeded.
Of a clean kind she was, young and pure.
They lived in peace, smiled to cure.
The days went by, weeks into years.
He loved his wife, no cause for fears.
Working at the mill, he came home one night
his maiden wife kissing a man under no light!

Twice there lived a man in this certain town
his smile withered off into a permanent frown.
He had no reason to love and expected none
and the smile once upon a time, had all gone

Take me to the place where
you say they took your self
banished it like a bad tree
on a ground with new mud
take me to that place now.

Where's there's no plan for air
or water from a clean source
but big giant demons there
with long sticks for fine sweat
the manner of Golgotha.

Place your feet on fresh earth
for a moment the grand
feel of a perfect creation
is true and pure and good
unlike the place you went.

Feet, Mud & Tree
EMMANUEL IDUMA
<<

You say they took your self
noise written on a dashboard
screaming in the armour
of a thousand iron shields
call it traffic, it's not.

You say they took your peace
your baby littered there
at home, father like you
should travel within senses
call it work, it's not

Place your feet on fresh earth
take the chance of a rebel
once and for all a rebel
tell them you are changed
the mud has bathed you.

The mud shall make your bath
with delicious coolness
take you in like good trees
on a ground with new mud
you have won the city, yes.

Subtopia Herald,

3 November 2008

Vacancies

I am looking for a place with an open door,
20,000 leagues beneath the ocean floor;
only that everywhere I turn,
the space I find is six feet down.

Obituaries

Yesterday,
only yesterday,
I cut a dashing figure in high society.

Weddings

“Will you take this bottle to be your lawfully wedded wife?”
In my heart, I have divorced my sorrows.
In my hand, I have embraced the bottle.

Births

I will begin anew.

Love and the City

(Episode 1)

First, it was easy to count.
Then it all went out of hand,
and we lost heart.
First, it was only two of us here.
Now we number up to many minions,
servants of Mammon.
They say lovers in India have the same problems,
that they are left no choice
but to cuddle in the public eye,
seeing there are no public parks,
and there is an extending extended family
in a shrinking single room.
Darling,
the press of these people will not let me hold your hand.
We won't hold hands and walk down tree lined avenues,
or hear the birds sing,
or watch the sun set.
There are no poplars along popular thoroughfares,
from Idumagbo to Okokomaiko,
it is just the blaring of Klaxons,
the din of commerce,
the booming ghetto blasters—
the solid wall of Babel, insurmountable, impenetrable.
The ceiling of smog is still held up by the pillars of
industry.
Sweet heart,
please take an Okada,
meet me at the eatery at—
When a nation's call credit is low,
it awaits the salvation of hawkers

Lagos

ADEMOLA SAMSON

C

Lagos!

You who sneers and snarls
at the forefathers pearls
of gaugeless value
and like no milieu
spurns the elder's principle
to gauge emotion crucible

With inhabitants as in a saga
with self-opposed dagger
weave to climb the raffia
with strand extract of banana
in the diehard hassle for molue
only to call the careful, suegbe.

You who take fraud for being smart
and moral integrity as daft
papa's headless body will run
mama's dead body will turn
mark of their disappointing stare
at your express nono and snare.

“The only credential the city asked was the boldness to dream. For those who did, it unlocked its gates and its treasures, not caring who they were or where they came from.”

Moss Hart (1904 - 1961)

U.S. Playwright and Stage Director

Act One

10 Questions for **Kaine Agari**

SARABA: What really influenced your writing of *Yellow Yellow*? Was it to become, like Saro-Wiwa or Soyinka, a voice of the people? Or was it to attempt writing a story you felt was needed?

KAINE AGARI: **It was a simple challenge to myself to write fiction, inspired by Ken Saro-Wiwa's book, *A Month and A Day*. The subject matter was one that I was familiar with since I had done a lot of research writing on women and the Niger Delta for academic institutions.**

SARABA: Your story pitches a girl that moves from a rural community to an urban one. Is there a fulfillment you think comes with cities?

KAINE AGARI: **Almost everyone wants to experience the glitz and comforts of city life at least once in their lifetime.**

SARABA: A couple of critics believe that towards the concluding part of your story and even at the end, the story did not resolve the theme. What is your response to this?

KAINE AGARI: **The story ended where I wanted it to end. I didn't want a tidy—And they all lived happily ever after—ending.**

SARABA: The NLNG Prize—some say you clinched the prize because your story themed on the Niger Delta, rather than the aptness of your craft as a writer.

KAINE AGARI: **Yellow-Yellow was not the only**

book on the Niger Delta entered into the competition.

SARABA: Given the state of the Nigerian publishing industry, what is the role of an established writer like you in bringing up new writers?

KAINE AGARI: **Sharing information and mentoring.**

SARABA: Takaii and your creative writing, which would you choose?

KAINE AGARI: **I enjoy both. I would not choose one over the other.**

SARABA: Do you see yourself as a feminist? Is there a tendency you are considered one?

KAINE AGARI: **I am sure I am considered a feminist but I don't think I am as extreme as people think. I come from a family of very strong women and I was never limited in my choices because I was a girl/woman so I have grown up with very strong sense of self and entitlement as a woman.**

SARABA: Are you working on a new book?

KAINE AGARI: **Yes I am. It is another Port Harcourt story. Working title is 'In a Garden of Graves'.**

SARABA: So, why do you write?

KAINE AGARI: **It's fun to create another world and escape in characters that live out one's fantasies.**

SARABA: What do you think about when you are alone?

KAINE AGARI: **Several things: how to grow my business, what to write about, my family, my friends, how much I spend on petrol every day, etc**



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“Almost everyone wants to experience the glitz and comforts of city life at least once in their lifetime.”

Kaine Agari

Nigerian Author of *Yellow Yellow*

Saraba Interview

Review of *Eko Dialogue*

JUDE DIBLA

An obstinate mosquito drives me out of bed. It has been on my case all morning singing irritating tunes in my sleep; a medley of jazz, juju, afrobeat and a hint of reggae in the most ridiculous shriek that leaves me suicidal!

Eko Dialogue (Eternal Creations Limited)

So begins the preface to Joy Isi Bewaji's collection of short stories 'Eko Dialogue'. That intro appropriately captures the medley of vignette tales that make up this very smart and well put together collection. There's an array of different souls in this collection right from the very deceptive first story, *Happy Lagosians*, which introduces the reader to the somewhat disgruntled local liqueur seller and her first customer for the day.

Bewaji's gift of observation of the everyday Lagosian must be applauded. Not only does she know the people well, she is also able to speak their lingo and lay bare their hopes, desires, regrets and hurts in very few words that says it all. Bewaji's economy of words seems quite deliberate and suited to this collection.

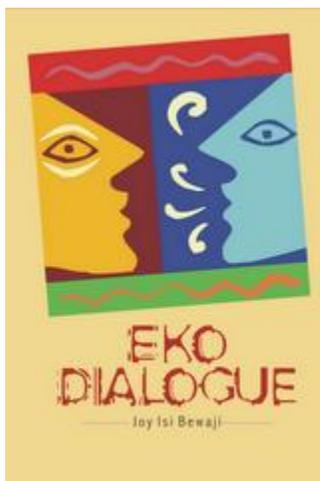
What is outstanding is the way Bewaji present what in other terms could be sad, heartbreaking

tales of a people and their everyday struggle with deft humour. No one is spared from Bewaji's scrutiny; there's the overzealous pastor with the designer clothes and expensive wristwatch who beckons on his followers to raise money for his rent, the passenger in a bus who shrieks for his change from an unruly bus conductor, the socialite who buys bags worth £8000, sleeps with younger men because her husband cannot perform in bed and has troubled children, the celebrity who is so full of herself and many more hilarious skits that leaves the reader laughing. There are tons of laugh-out-loud moments in this collection.

Bewaji's deft handling of her material sort of reminds me of Ben Elton's satirical novels where he pokes fun at quite serious issues, allowing the readers to not only enjoy the writing, but also appreciate the depth of the situation at hand.

At first the collection reads like a random compilation of unrelated stories but then Bewaji shows her mastery of her craft with her epilogue as she stylishly links all the stories together in a brilliant ending.

A lot can be said about *Eko Dialogue* and its author, but one thing remains glaring and that is the birth of an exciting new satirical writer.



A Review of *Everything Good Will Come*

MORGAN OLUFEMI

The **Novel** *Everything Good Will Come*, authored by **Sefi Atta**, is a narration of the consciousness of women as seen through the eyes of a growing child. The narration is in first person. The writer made it a point of duty to present the central character's consciousness boldly as she matures to become conscious of the prevalent conditions that plagued the African Woman. The novelist used the historical knowledge of a post colonial Nigerian Experience as narrated by Enitan, the protagonist, who realises the marginalisation of women.

This novel enlightens readers about the happenings of the Nigerian state as well as draws readers into its historical contextual environment and the attendant emotional and structural breakdowns of human relationships. Enitan is born into a Nigerian State riddled with ethnic and religious differences; these religious and ethnic differences are however stirred into cataclysmic emotions when political underpinnings are considered. The narrator's understanding of the

unnecessary creation of the Nigerian state by the colonial masters, without taken cognisance of the ethnic differences prevalent in diverse societies is valid, even in today's world.

For so many Africans, growing up wasn't easy; they were made to become "born again" by the wheals of the cane in the name of corporal punishment and discipline. The African child is also left to find out things for him or herself. This leads to questioning the unpredictability of moral upbringing.

Enitan also finds herself struggling with the concept of religion and morality. The incessant conflicts in her family which further heightened the deteriorating health of her sickle-celled brother, who eventually passed on, is worthy of mention. Her mother, an escapist, seeks succour from marginalisation, and a broken marriage, in a white-garment church. She transforms from the once glowing young wife into a "wild Christian"; a strict and unhappy admixture of holiness and bottled-up grievances. But she however still holds on to traditional beliefs as she kills a fowl to secure her daughter's fertility.

Enitan grows into womanhood under the influence of her carefree childhood friend Sheri who lends her a shoulder in her search of "womanist freedom". She is made to realize the limitations of the female gender; a situation where she is reserved for the status quo from childhood: a shallow education limited by dreams of Childbirth, Wedding, and Graduation, finally, a ridiculous transfer to the royal office of the kitchen.

Governmental issues are on the front burner of the novel as she harps on the manipulation of the constitution by politicians and the ruling hands. The author also makes worthy mention of the inconsistency of transition. Political will is being transferred from the hands of corrupt politicians to the hands of heart-hardened military coup-plotters who are bent on arresting, maiming and eliminating hapless civilians. The military barge into the hallowed gates of leadership, their reason being that the politicians were corrupt but their "reign" was just as uncensored, unchecked and unencumbered.

Hassan, a Brigadier Sheri gets involved with, represents not only the power and opulence of military rulers in the military regimes but also their chauvinism. In

fact, he portrayed the archetypal male who limits the aspirations of the woman; who sees them as slaves and “commodifies” or “thingifies” them.

The novel *Everything Good Will Come* also extrapolates on the life of the Artist and how the economy determines their livelihood. The artist is left to wallow in poverty amid supple creative skills. They are not totally accepted in a society where money is a basis for cooperation, friendship and societal acceptance, all thanks to the politicians. The artist is emotional and caring, but most importantly, sympathetic about the sufferings of the populace, that is what led Uncle Alex, Enitan father’s friend, in the first part of the novel *1971* to join the civil war. Uncle Alex will remind readers of one of Nigeria’s greatest poets, Christopher Okigbo. But in the same vein, the Artist also leads a careless life, as Mike Mukoro reflects an artist who not only engaged in the act of creative drawings and fine sculpting but also involved in flirtatious ardour. A replicated trend of many-a-creative hand which Chaucer Geoffrey, the great English poet, is one.

Another inerasable part of the work *Everything Good Will Come* is the showcase of Lagos Life in both “the good old” and “the bad old days”. The socio-economic travails of the middle class Lagosian who likes to live in exquisite places and purchase suspected expensive commodities.

Activism is also a constant message in the work. A female character plays her role in national emancipation. Amidst her sufferings, she forges ahead and wins new converts one of which was Enitan. She however admits that it is not worth dying for a country that does not appreciate the developmental activities of her citizens. The Nigerian Prison Life is another serious issue mentioned in this work. Here, women are treated like rags and broken teaspoons. This perhaps might make the reader pardon the author’s strong feministic tendencies.

The Novel is however not without its shortcomings. Firstly, the explicit use of history in the work is one thing that may not interest someone who is conversant with the bulk of rather unpleasant history Nigeria has added to her resume over the years. The writer does not allow the first person narrator to give historical insights but does so through an interventionist mode, an outright disobedience of the tenet that a writer should as much as possible present issues and historical guidance through another audience. Literature is a reflection and a reconstruction of stable and unstable historical facts, but it is not a textbook study of Nigerian history from 1971.

The novel also came to such an abrupt end that one will wonder if that is all. This is however a new trend with the new literary writers of this generation; they leave readers to complete the illusions, the happiness and the sorrows. I believe they also immortalize their characters leaving one to wonder if Enitan is not the radical womanist besides one.

The work is however not rid of unconventional, seemingly compound words that can neither be said to be purposeful or creative. These words include ‘awoman’, ‘loveshis’, ‘timetraffic’, ‘thenothing’, ‘tortoiseshell’, ‘setfrom’, ‘reasonfor’, to mention a few.

Sefi Atta is a writer of riveting descriptive powers, having won The First *Wole Soyinka Prize for Literature* with this debut novel; but perhaps it will take an analysis of her second and third works to induct herself into the Hall of Fame for African Womanist Writers.

Argument against Secluded Universities

OLAOLUWA AINLOLOWA

I have a problem with universities secluded from

cities. I have heard academics speak passionately about the ills of locating a university in the city. Stark in the middle of so much steel, concrete and glass, so many cars continuously pouring fumes into the air in their impatient trudge along the hot tar, an academic community cannot thrive. That's not it.

The problem of locating a university in a city is that it distorts and defeats the very standards and sacred purposes for which a university was created. A university, it is argued, should be a place that essentially shields its entire inhabitant from the realities of the city. It should be a place where every law hold as true and sacred, and ethics is enthroned on high. No distraction whatsoever should be allowed into the citadel of learning, it is a place where landmarks should not be moved and to which society should look up for some kind of a model. It is supposed to be the closest approximate to an utopia.

These are very good reasons, in fact not only are they good they are true. But I beg to differ. And I have just one reason.

Somewhere in an ancient rain forest town called Ile Ife, quietly tucked among 25,000 hectares of gently ululating hills is a university, Obafemi Awolowo University (formerly university of Ife). It should be a model for those who argue for a secluded university. With all the perks of nature (a couple or so mountain, world largest colony of a specie of bats etc) and the advantage of a very good management (almost uninterrupted power and water supply, carefully tended hedges and manicured lawns etc) it is not hard to see why alumni, staff and student of the university are always so proud to identify with it – they call it Africa's most beautiful campus. That's not all. It has every thing a man needs within its walls (every kind of market, scores of restaurants and bukas, lodges, conference centres and petrol

stations and what not?) and finally a virile student union makes sure that the prices are the fairest you can get anywhere. In Nigeria this sounds like an utopia approximate.

But there is something seriously wrong with this setting. It is not real. The realities which assault us as Nigerians in the city and big towns is sealed off. The students and staff here live in a Nigeria we in the city only dream of. Cocooned in this capsule of comfort and luxury, students even loath going home and the school just manages to compound the situation by giving only two weeks (for semester breaks) and three weeks (for session breaks) vacations making the naïve students spend the greater part of their stay on campus.

God help the man who arrive the labour market of the city after 4, 5 and 6 years in that university with its worldview

intact. He may have good a sense of aesthetics, fair play and justice but that is not what these Nigerian markets and cities wants. He will be essentially lost. His counterpart of the city will definitely outsmart him where what you need is not a sense of aesthetic or the ability to master a series of hand-outs, but an instinct for survival sharpened by constant contact with the harsh realities, an aptitude for fabricating opportunities out of problems and navigating complex situation.

I attend Obafemi Awolowo University and live in city an average of 14 hours drive away. I seldom go home because of the meagre two or three weeks breaks and get to spend whole years in this place. When I

return home and see things differently, **I know how it is that a man's worldview can be skewed after a few years of seclusion.**

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ON SARABA

A Writer's Teething Diet: A City Experience

ANYADUBA ARTHUR

At a time like this, especially for a writer from the supposed third-world, the subjects of the art seem to have been exhausted or at least there is a recycling of what had already recurred many times. This may be the attendant result of the stagnant process of development in the society. Our world here has been on a halt since independence and so the subjects of the art. But this piece is not really on the subject of writing. I have really wanted to write about city living and its challenges. And like seeking a good subject of writing, I am yet to grasp at anything new or something worthy of literary calisthenics about the city. Yet, a city experience seems to provide something more than a mere literary subject.

For a JJC (new person) in Lagos, many things may appear wondrous and exciting. And for a writer (or one wishing to be) whose limited exposures were still virgin of the contours of a real city life, Lagos may be just what they need to identify their literary form. My little personal experience in Lagos, as a JJC if you wish, did not provide me with anything too new about life or about human experiences. I have read a lot about that wonderful city in books that there is hardly anything unsaid about Lagos. Yet, it is only a real experience of it that makes the difference: for me, I was after a good subject for my novel. (I have found one, but it is not a Lagos subject though).

In my experiential Lagos sojourn, the massive structures and the thunderous traffic appeared

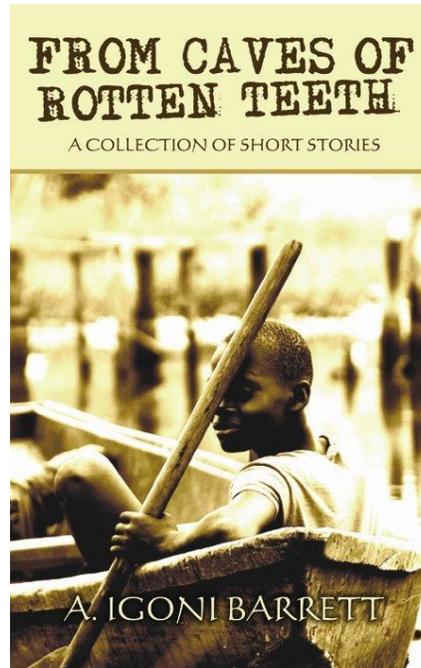
appealing for a good literary subject. But this is not new; it will not make an interesting subject because it is already an exhausted issue. The fast and robotic motion of mean and faceless people chasing after time to their unknown destinations that made one wonder whether the world had come to its twilight was a wonder. The unalarmed attitude of people to some bizarre things (even to danger) appeared interesting to me. I was walking with a friend along a street in Lagos recently when the tires of an old bus burst and blasted loudly. I negotiated quickly and rapidly with my legs, dashed into the nearest compound, without even giving a chance to my high inquisitive mind to know the cause of the blast. I thought the desperadoes were on rampage until I saw that I was the only one running and that people were all laughing at me. On their tired eyes and sunburnt faces were pity and sympathy to a JJC, who was yet to know what it meant to live. Fear had become a common phenomenon. Yet, this too is a familiar subject and it must have been exhausted in many postcolonial African city chronicles already.

I thought of the hot afternoon sun that baked raw the steaming bodies of people along the streets, [and for an intellectual], it can fossilise the brain. Or is it the numerous gases that one inhales, from the traffic, the gutters, the toilets and even from the disgusting odours of the farts and the poignant breaths of people in a stock-packed Lagos bus? I moved a bit to the sublime and alas it was great.

The naked laps and the bare breasts that dangle and flap around the streets every night have become a prodigious institution and culture of Lagos city. In fact, the things about Lagos that I thought were exaggerations in books are in actuality understatements. The realities of Lagos are more fictive than fiction. But all these issues are outdated subjects that can hardly sustain the interest of readers. This made me understand that life is in recurring progression. And for us in Nigeria, it is a stagnant recurrence. It is paradoxical that the city, a centre of civilisation, is the epicentre of immorality and pervasion. Enough satires have been dished out on Lagos city and I am not ready to repeat the process. Lagos has only confirmed the paradox of existence, and like many other cities, it exposes the base, the mundane, as well as the good, sides of life.

However, there is something new for one like me, in fact, for anyone that Lagos can provide. Living as recurring and stagnant as it can be, (as it has always been), comes with a distinct personal touch that seems to individualise and make new the supposedly common things. The common is always new to one who is just encountering for the first time the well-known. I used to think that good writing was a product of a good and new subject, (probably a strange one). I took writing to be a representation of something familiar in a distinct, stranger way. And I felt that reading and

sitting in my dark room in the night to imagine the wondrous and the beautiful were the kernels of good subject search for good writing. This may not really be true! I have come to understand that the greatest of inspirations can come when the common, the generally acknowledged and known issues become a sort of personal experience of a novice who is questing after the new, for there is nothing ever new, nor can there ever be. For any aspiring writer from this grey side of the world, the good and the effervescent contours of the rough Lagos (city) life are the very diet they need. To grow and mature and to become a good writer, one has to experience raw, (from a personal encounter), the wholesomeness of Lagos. The holistic experience of our contemporary society can best be appreciated when one lives in a city, like Lagos. It is not entirely a bad thing. After all, how can one appreciate wealth except one has touched the white beards of poverty? Nor can one appreciate up except one is down! So, life is paradox and our vain travails are needed for a healthier understanding of existence. It is in a city that one can learn and understand that good and evil are identical twins and often switch roles. For a young prospective writer in search of a literary subject, the city (Lagos) experience may be the best idea. It may not provide any new subject; but really, it can fire up their artistic sense of reality. Reality is the simple definition of city living. For this business, it is a good teething diet to relish.



From Caves of Rotten Teeth by A. Igoni Barrett is a collection of short stories that was first published in Nigeria in November 2005. The Orange Prize-shortlisted author Laura Hird described the book as 'a brilliant debut collection' and in an interview with the literary magazine Pulp.Net named 'The Phoenix', a short story in the collection, as one of the best stories she had ever read. 'The Phoenix' won the 2005 BBC World Service short story competition.

The fourteen stories in this edition of From Caves of Rotten Teeth (five of which did not appear in the first edition) deal with circumstances that reflect the day-to-day existence of modern African life. Although the stories may at times seem surreal the reader will recognize the truthfulness and realism with which they delve into the lives of their characters. The author has an uncanny eye for detail and a deadly accurate, though sometimes satirical, ear. With these stories he has achieved a vision that is both lighthearted and profound.

Praise for the second edition of *From Caves of Rotten Teeth*

'In this collection, Barrett entrances the reader with his lush language and imagery that brings the essence of struggle alive...the effect on the reader's imagination will last for a very long time' —Uzodinma Iweala, author of *Beasts of No Nation*

'A. Igoni Barrett's prose captures, with enviable depth, the emotions and circumstances of his characters...from

addiction to everyday survival, these stories are delivered with sincerity' —Kaine Agary, author of *Yellow Yellow*

'These stories share the same beauty of language, the same keen sense of observation...reading the collection is a journey into a world that is sometimes humorous, but very often a reminder of all that is wrong in our world' —
Chika Unigwe, author of *The Phoenix*

Orders can be made by sending an email to fromcavesofrotteenteeth@gmail.com The book is also available from the following places: **Kachifo Limited:** www.kachifo.com, **Glendora/Jazzhole:** www.glendorabooks.net, **Onyoma Research Publications:** +234-807-763-8752, **Quintessence,** Awolowo Road, **Terra Kulture,** V/I, www.booksng.com

A Creative Experience of Lagos

EMMANUEL IDUMA

I daresay the best way to examine a city is how many books have been

written about it. That said, I'd shut my face with a book and care less if many agree or not, and it would only be appealing if the following paragraphs attest to it.

Perhaps a better way to state it is to say that the best way to examine a city is how much creativity can ooze from it. I prefer this! Again, if you please, I'd put it another way: the best way to examine how creative a city is, is what a writer does immediately he returns from it.

So if the above premises are accepted, I'd proceed to write about a creative experience of two journeys. At the end, it might not be a very good narration of an experience. But I hope it'd be clear that the experience did spur creativity. By two journeys I mean I actually visited two cities, but there is the compelling nature of the one I make my title from.

But there was Enugu. Enugu belongs to me in some way, because of the four of us that visited the city (for a competition, we won!) I only could decipher the following and translate: *otutu ihe di ebube ne me na Enugu* (great things happen at Enugu—I hope I got the spellings right). Yet, it did not really belong to me. the following lines could not have been written by the owner of a land, but a writer whom a new visage was

conferred on. The lines I wrote the night we arrived at Enugu are;

Enugu seemed like a bird
metallic and humble
yet giant with a measure
of hopelessness,
or was it helplessness—
the people in it
like limbs of a leper
(permit the language)
Or like fortunes of
a talebearer;
jagged like pieces of
metal, hanging on a
forgotten landscape,
although unforgotten
by the hills in sight
and the people in flight.

If I must say, those were the best I could write of Enugu. The best I could see in that country of imaginations. It could be that nothing other could come to me from Enugu, but it could also be that until I wrote that poem, Enugu would shatter before my eyes. And be a city without meaning. A certain wish thus dangles. A wish that such writing about cities, about country, would be read and cause a catalyst for change. Change, recently, has become the word.

It is to Lagos that I attribute the best creativity. Lagos that did not bring a poem from me. Lagos that I stood four hours in the rain, only because I decided to visit for a Christian musical concert.

Lagos that I jumped BRT buses. Lagos that increased my return fare over a 100 percent. Lagos that rendered my phone and MP3 Player desirous of a miracle.

And Lagos that has a story for everybody, that makes a story for everybody. (I read somewhere that behind every window in Lagos, there was a story waiting to be told). Just the sights of Lagos alone. A graphic representation of life. Nigeria without Lagos is dead! No Lagos, no future! How far can one go without Lagos? Books and books and yet unending tales, possibilities.

To define Lagos would be to define nothing, just the surreal dream of flexibility. To write about Lagos is to write about nothing in particular. Not the people, because the people (like in Enugu) are in flight. Not the BRT buses, because when *time* happens to the buses, they might stop moving. Not Tafawa Balewa Square, because it could accommodate 350,000 people, but leave them in the rain. It is clear then that Lagos could make me

write this, but could deny me the possibility of writing about it.

I'd be mad if this happens to Nigeria. That writers would keep writing about them and it would deny them the conferment of change, of reality. Indeed, that's the way to write about Lagos. With the watermark of change, reality. Again, change is the word. That writers would not stop writing because it is doubtless that change would come. I resist the prompt to write a little about the word. I resist the prompt to define change in some way that evokes glory.

Yet, as one does not leave Lagos without a creative experience—that experience to write nothing-yet-something, that experience without limits—this dear country would not leave anyone without a good experience to tell.

I am tempted to say amen.



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Not Yet Uhuru

DAMILOLA AJAYI

Recently, I happened upon an article written by Helon Habila, a U.S based Nigerian writer. With this polemic—titled *Is the Publication Industry in Nigeria Dead?**—Helon succinctly chronicled the story of the demise and gradual resurrection of Nigeria’s Publishing Houses. He even went as far as stating the cause of death: the military regime, the unfavourable economic climate, the death of Arts in itself and replacement with sub-standard efforts.

As a preamble, he listed writers short listed for the Commonwealth First Book Prize (Africa Region) and accurately pointed out that amongst all short listed authors, there was only one Nigerian writer, Uwem Akpan, author of *Say You Are One of Them*, a short story collection.

Perhaps it’s some kind of consolation that Uwem Akpan, a Jesuit priest, clinched the 1,000 pounds prize but its also noteworthy that Nigeria is no “giant of Africa” when it comes to churning out literary works.

In the days of the First generation writers were notable foreign publishing houses that spread their tentacles into our territories and mediated our publications. Our political and economic instability has shown them the road out, or at best limited them to publishing academic texts,

necessary for their survival as enterprises, at the expense of our literary works.

But while we are dismayed at these publishing houses that had chosen to “spoon-feed” us, we should also realize that we are no babies. South Africa is no better than us, either in terms of input, experiences and documentation but they turn out their literature and left just a slot for us in the Commonwealth First Prize.

Although there seems to be an upsurge of publication houses but they still do not adequately cater for our literary needs; many great manuscripts are still sheltered in torn folders of shabbily-dressed writers awaiting their lucky day. These various publishing houses, of which only two are notable, seem to be living the dream and are still in the process of steadying their grip on the rocky ground of Nigeria’s economic soil. Perhaps that is why they buy rights to publish books previously published abroad and limit or concentrate their resources on the foreign-based award-winning writers at the expense of homegrown young writers.

It was with a heart-filled joy I read recently in Monocle Magazine that Dr. Bibi’s Cassava Republic press was ranked amongst the top ten brands to watch out for 2009(I smell new books!). But beyond my olfactory satisfaction and the exquisite display of books with trendy jackets is a plague that needs to be addressed: the fact that

Nigerians don't read. This further buttress the cliché that the best way to deprive the African of anything is to put it inside a book. It's still very applicable in our world today, where literary interests are reserved for the esoteric. We need to develop a reading culture, we need to document our experiences, we need to churn out our finished literary products to world and educate the Diaspora about one or two things it involves about the African experience.

These were what we put into perspective when we established Saraba—and our caption is only apt in echoing our mission: to create unending voices. We see it as our prerogative and burden to seek new acts and talents and display them through our internet show glass. And it's strongly our belief that a time will come when Nigeria—and even Africa's literature—will stand its place in the scheme of things worldwide. But for now, it's not yet uhuru!

*-Check www.234next.com for Habila's article.

“How soon country people forget. When they fall in love with a city it is forever, and it is like forever...There, in a city, they are not so much new as themselves: their stronger, riskier selves.”

Toni Morrison (1931 -)

U.S. novelist.

Jazz

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Saraba's International Page

Writers Cities

Internationally acclaimed writers write about cities, fact or fiction, telling the life in those cities.

Manchester County

In 1855 in Manchester County, Virginia, there were thirty-four free black families, with a mother and father and one child or more, and eight of those free families owned slaves, and all eight knew one another's business. When the War between the States came, the number of slave-owning blacks in Manchester would be down to five, and one of those included an extremely morose man who, according to the U.S. census of 1860, legally owned his own wife and five children and three grandchildren. The census of 1860 said there were 2,670 slaves in Manchester County, but the census taker, a U.S. Marshall who feared God, had argued with his wife the day he sent his report to Washington, D.C., and all his

arithmetic was wrong because he had failed to carry a one.

(Edward P. Jones: *The Known World*, page 7.)

Lagos

Millions lived in Lagos. Some were natives, but most had roots in the provinces. They fell in and out with the elements as though the elements were created to punish and to reward...Most days it felt like a billion people walking down the labyrinth of petty and main streets: beggar men, secretaries, government contractors, Area boys, street children. You could tell how well they ate by the state of their shoes. Beggars, of course, went bare foot. If no one noticed the sky, it was because they were busy watching vehicles. There was a constant din of cars, popping exhaust pipes, and engines, commuters scrambling for canary-yellow buses and private transport vans we called *Kabukabu* and *danfó*. They bore bibles devilishly, and added to the incongruity around: cattle grazing in a rubbish dump, a man crossing the highway in a wheelchair, a street hawker with a Webster's dictionary in one hand and a toilet brush in another.

(Sefi Atta: *Everything Good will Come*, page 102)

India

The cities are large and memorably crowded in India, but when you leave them you travel through vast stretches of country where hardly a soul is to be seen. I remember wondering where 950 million Indians could be hiding. (Yann Martel: *Life of Pi*, page 91)

Keti

In 1982, electricity came to Keti, and it was also the year that Lamang decided to go into politics. The military, after decades of systematically running the country into the ground, had at last handed over power to the civilians, and one of the first promises made by the local politicians was to bring electric power to Keti. And surprisingly they kept their promise. After only a few weeks, the villagers, especially the

well-off, began to discover that electricity, apart from providing power, could also be a status symbol. They did this by installing two, sometimes three lightbulbs on cross poles before their houses, literally setting the entrance to their houses alight, and then leaving the bulbs to blaze, day and night, till they expired. The villagers call this prodigal display “electric power.”

(Helon Habila: *Measuring Time*, page 69)

London

In the old days...before the glorious Revolution, London was not the beautiful city that we know today. It was a dark, dirty, miserable place where hardly anybody had enough to eat and where hundreds and thousands of poor people had no boots on their feet and not even a roof to sleep under. Children no older than you had to work twelve hours a day for cruel masters, who flogged them with whips if they worked too slowly and fed them on nothing but stale breadcrusts and water. But in among all this terrible poverty there were just a few great big beautiful houses that were

lived in by rich men who had as many as thirty servants to look after them. **(George Orwell: *1984*, page 67)**

Olokun Road

Olokun Road was named after the mermaid that was said to come there sometimes in the night, transformed into a beautiful maiden, to wait by the roadside for her human lover. I often imagined her, standing in a recessed doorway or in the shadows under a tree, hope and anguish etched on her pretty, delicate face as she waited in the pungent, alien environment, in vain. The houses were old and craggy and lichened. The place had the unfinished, abandoned appearance of an underwater landscape. Crouching behind the bigger houses or in their own clusters were hastily built wood and zinc structures that housed an incredibly large number of families: the fathers were mostly out-of-work drivers, labourers, fugitives convalescing between prison terms. Further in towards University Road were night clubs and seedy room-for-an-hour lodgings where girls in black miniskirts hung out in dark alley-mouths, smoking cigarettes and waiting for a car to slow down, for the window to roll down and the finger beckon.

(Helon Habila: *Waiting for an Angel*, page 97)

India

India doesn't stand on ceremony, and rushes in from every direction, thrusting me into the middle of its unending argument, clamoring for my total attention as it always did. *Buy Chilly cockroach traps! Drink Hello mineral water! Speed Thrills But Kills!* shout the billboards. There are new kinds of messages, too. *Enroll for Oracle 81. Graduate with Java as well.* And, as proof that the long protectionist years are over, Coca-Cola is back with a vengeance. When I was last here it was banned, leaving the field clear for the disgusting local imitations, Campa-Cola and Thums Up. Now there's a red coke ad every hundred yards or so. Coke's slogan of the moment is written in Hindi transliterated into Roman script: *Jo Chaho Ho Jaaye*. Which could be translated, literally, as “whatever you desire, let it come to pass.” I choose to think of this as a blessing.

(Salman Rushdie: *Step Across This Line*, page 184)

Basingstoke

Basingstoke was named after a town in Hampshire, England, by homesick colonists who had set sail from Southampton in 1690...The entire snippet of a state...was saturated in English nostalgia, an emotion embodied, it seemed, in the picturesque mists that on many mornings arose from the river and its nearly level, humid, tree-filled valley. The river was named the Avon, though an old Nanticoke name, the Manito, had been recorded. Teddy had been eighteen his first summer here; awakened early by the unaccustomed quiet, marred by cries of roosters from their neighbor's little poultry-yards, he would watch these mists burn off under a golden sun, or as it were sink back into the marshy, verdant terrain that surrounded the seven hundred

houses—many wooden but more of brick, with some laid up in courses of alternating headers and stretchers in a style characteristic of old Delaware—that were home to Basingstoke's more than three thousand residents.

(John Updike: *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, page 133)

St Petersburg

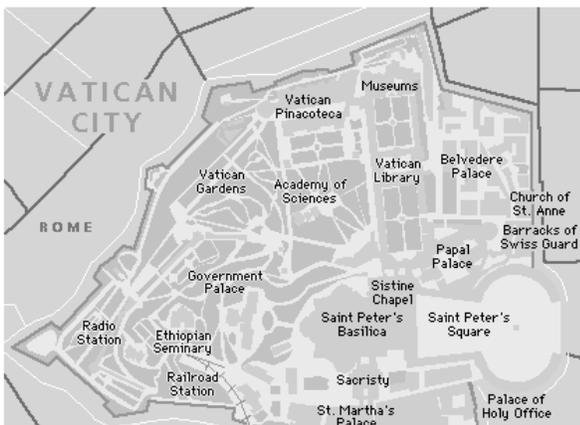
The heat in the street was terrible: and the airlessness, the bustle and the plaster, scaffolding, bricks and dust all about him, and that special Petersburg stench, so familiar to all who are unable to get out of town in summer – all worked painfully upon the young man's already overwrought nerves. The insufferable stench from the pothouses which are particularly numerous in that part of the town, and the drunken men whom he met continually, although it was a working day, completed the revolting misery of the picture.

(Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, page 4)

Weatherbury

The village of Weatherbury was quiet as the graveyard in its midst, and the living was lying well-high as still as the dead. The air was so empty of other sounds that the whirr of the clockworks immediately before the strokes was distinct, and so was also the click of the same at their close. The notes flew forth with the usual blind obtuseness of inanimate things – flapping and rebounding among walls, undulating against the scattered clouds, spreading through their interstices into unexplored miles of space.

(Thomas Hardy: *Far From the Madding Crowd*, page 164)



Favorite Lines From Clezio's Nobel Lecture

It was then that I understood a truth not immediately apparent to children, that books are a

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treasure more precious than any real property or bank account.

This “forest of paradoxes”, as Stig Dagerman calls it, is, precisely, the realm of writing, the place from which the artist must not attempt to escape: on the contrary, he or she

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must “camp out” there in order to examine every detail, explore every path, name every tree. It is not always a pleasant stay.

The paradox of revolution, like the epic cavalcade of the sad-faced knight, lives within the writer's consciousness. If there is one virtue which the writer's pen must always have, it is that it must

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never be used to praise the powerful, even with the faintest of scribbings.

Why write, then? For some time now, writers have no longer been so presumptuous as to believe that they can change the world, that they will, through their stories and

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novels, give birth to a better example for how life should be.

To act: that is what the writer would like to be able to do, above all. To act, rather than to bear witness. To write, imagine, and dream in such a way that his words and

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inventions and dreams will have an impact upon reality, will change people's minds and hearts, will prepare the way for a better world.

Writers, to a certain degree, are the guardians of language. When they write their novels, their poetry, their plays, they keep language alive. They are not merely using words—on the contrary, they are at the service of language. They celebrate it,

>

hone it, transform it, because language lives through them and because of them, and it accompanies all the social and economic transformations of their era.

And now, in this era following decolonization, literature has become a way for the men and women in our time to express their identity, to claim their right to speak, and to be

>

heard in all their diversity. Without their voices, their call, we would live in a world of silence.



J.M.G. LE CLÉZIO

Dear—

I am so happy that my story is part of the first edition of your online literary magazine...It is a very wonderful development in the Nigerian Literary scene especially for upcoming writers. I commend you and your team for giving the writers a voice.

You may not know that you have contributed so much for Nigerian and African literary community with this development. You will never be forgotten.

You have done something which many successful and established Nigerian writers are reluctant to do for the upcoming ones and the literary community.

The theme and concept are topical and the pictures are clear, something which many foreign online magazines do not have.

Congratulations for successfully publishing a new and inspiring magazine for writers.

Best of wishes,

Chiaka Obasi

life in the city could be plural...



...or singular

Notes from Uppsala

TOLU OGUNLESI

This will be the last of the Notes from Uppsala. The varied wanderings – physical and mental – of the last three months have now come to an end, and it is time to embrace the life that I let go. Time to readmit the life of sweat and of cold baths and repudiate the one of snow, steaming breath and hot baths.

*

Wherever two or three Nigerians are gathered (outside Nigeria), ‘Nigeria’ insists on being in their midst – in their words, in the perplexed tenor of voices, the involuntary wringing of hands and shaking of heads – the silent listener provoking speech, the unacknowledged protagonist of all stories, the overbearing waka-pass in an impromptu (& purely absurdist) plot.

I spent my final Sunday evening as guest of a Nigerian family. The second Nigerian family to invite me to dinner in Uppsala. Away from home it is the closest one can get to home; sitting across a table from people who know – or knew – Nigeria from the inside; who despite packing their bags and leaving at some point, still allow themselves to face and to feel the wayward homeland.

At every such gathering of fatherlanders it is impossible to resist dwelling on the great African territory that owes its famous name to a British Dame.

A land that inspires, constructs, destroys and re-invents stories. All sorts of stories – the surreal,

the merely comic, the tragic, the nostalgic, the brashly magical. As Nigerians we congregate in far-away lands to speak of (failed) politics, corruption, migration, of encounters with new cultures and new languages, of the negotiations of disparate (and often violent) forces that play in the many vacant spaces of the exiled mind. The recently-arrived are expected to regularly update their ‘seniors’ on the state of the green-and-white union.

There is plenty to laugh about, and to shake the head about. There is the air of undeclared contest – my story is bigger than yours!

And there is of course the food – the mention of pepper or an apology for its absence; the delight at seeing that garri and/or ogbono are not averse to exile; the possibility of abandoning fork and knife and settling for the flawlessness of painstakingly-washed fingers.

*

I spent the day before the Nigerian dinner enjoying another dinner. My Nigerian colleague (at the institute) and I were invited by another colleague (a Sri Lankan whose husband is Swedish) for dinner at their home in the Stockholm archipelago, about 15 minutes from the city centre. The area is what you might call the ‘Banana Island’ of Stockholm, with generously-gardened houses priced in the tens of millions of Swedish crowns. On the drive to her house she pointed out the houses of famous persons. Tiger Woods (whose wife is Swedish) has got a summer

residence there. On a tiny island all by itself lies the home of one of the members of the famous Swedish musical group ABBA.

In the thick of winter, the sea, which lies only metres away from the twisting road, freezes over several inches and becomes a giant skating rink.

*

Someday, when I do a 'Highlights of a Scandinavian Tour' piece, certain experiences will stand out, one of which will be this: Walking through the Uppsala cemetery one evening, in the dark, trying to see which tombs were Viking tombs amidst the sprawl of concrete slabs. The only available light was the weak, ghostly (no pun intended) one from the lanterns that burnt on some of the tombs (it was a few days after 'All Saints Day'). It was so calm, so peaceful, that before my eyes 'Requiescat In Pace' seized for itself new meaning (or perhaps merely reclaimed the purity of its original meaning).

*

Perhaps I should just do a Top 5, or Top 6 countdown of most exciting experiences in Scandinavia:

Top on the list should be the 17-hour ferry trip from Finland (Helsinki) to Sweden (Stockholm). Then there would be my guided tour of Oslo, worth every cent of the cost – starting from the Oslo City Hall, where the Nobel Peace Prize is awarded annually, to the Holmenkollen ski resort,

to the Vigeland Sculpture Park to the Kon Tiki Museum to the Viking Ship Museum, and finally the newly-built glass wonder, the Oslo Opera House.

There would be Gamla Stan, Stockholm's 'Old City', with its imposing entrance and quaint air and narrow walkways and tiny shops.

How can I forget Helsinki, wet, windy, gray city, with its bloody history and Stone Church (which played a role in the Biafran War) and colossal bookstore and a language so generous with vowels you can't but wonder if consonants are not being victimised for some disguised complicity in the Swedish and Russian conquest of the country.

Oslo, hands folded in a gesture of perpetual apology; a plea for understanding, for being so self-effacing in the midst of so much wealth.

Copenhagen, city of bikers, joggers, and artificial lakes. And an elusive Little Mermaid.

Last but not least, Uppsala, the oversized University campus, suffocated by designer shops and famous graves, and watched over by the oldest church in the whole of Scandinavia.

Thank you for not swallowing me. Or at least for not forgetting to spew me out again.

There is hardly one in three of us who live in the cities who is not sick with unused self.

Ben Hecht (1894 - 1964)

U.S. Writer

Child of the Century

Special December Issue:

Our biggest presentation for the year would be this December, where seven writers would critically review seven short stories. Hence, we are naming it "The Story Issue." We invite writers to submit their works, short stories between 3,000 and 10,000 words. Unsolicited poetry will not be published for this issue, but other non-fiction articles and reviews on different themes could be submitted.

Presently, we are contacting writers such as **Helon Habila, Toni Kan, Akin Adesokan, Kaine Agari, Biyi Bandele, Chris Abani**, and so on. Each would review a story and the review would be published alongside the stories. It is our own workshop-system and to blend the established with the emerging.

The deadline for the special December issue is **August 30, 2009**. Entries received after this would not be considered, and if we had the means, would be returned unread! You can start submitting now, with "Special December Issue" in the subject line.

Each story would undergo a first process of screening before the best seven would be given to the writers. Contributors whose stories are chosen would be informed of the writer who is to review the work.

So, expecting your entry.

Forum

We have started a forum, with simple rules and easy communication.

Participate and drag along a friend.

Forum officially begins **May 1st**.

Mark the date.

On Facebook

We're on Facebook. Check the groups.

August Issue

Since Saraba is now **quarterly**, our next issue is in August with Guest

Editor **Tolu Ogunlesi**. Our

chosen Theme is **Economy**. Write any reasonable piece on that, any of our categories, and we shall accept.

Deadline for submission is **June 30, 2009**.

END POETRY

This is not the norm
'cos we have been fed worm.
my words are arrows
shooting their sacred sparrows
let them wear their garb
cos I will pierce like barb
or let them visit the shrine
before it becomes home to swine
for those who walk on their leg
we shall make dem like egg
it is a new era
woe betide all that are

OLUFUNSO ORIMOLOYE



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