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In Water: New Short Fiction from Africa (Short Story Day, 2015)

This Land Is Mine

If you still had a name I would have written to you. I don't understand why you decided to get rid of it and renounce your faith in Allah. That was the first step you took. I watched you as you wiggled out of yourself to become a new person. And that person made her way out of our lives to exist only in postcards that fly in from different corners of the world. Father reprimanded you for talking back to him. Then he slapped you when you declared that you no longer wanted to wear the hijab and that you had no time to attend prayers at the mosque five times a day. You told him that modernity was slavery to time and as a modern woman you had no time to waste on superstition and blind faith. How did you muster the courage to tell father that he was myopic and unreasonable? He hated you when you called him a simpleton. You asked him why he was stubborn on settling in a death trap when reasonable people advised that we relocate to a safer place. Father told you that he owned the land and that his ancestors were buried there. "And what do you know about death?" he asked you. "If you want you can leave." So you left.

You told me that you did not need a name because you did not want to be defined. You said names were not for human beings but for simple inanimate things like trees and mountains and buildings. You said human beings are too sophisticated to be called by a single name. You can be a student to one person, a daughter to another, a sister, a Muslim, a drunk-ard, a whore, and whoever else others perceived you to be. How could all those things answer to a single name? And I understood. You told me that I could call you anything I wished, but that hasn't been easy since you went away. When you were still here, I could just say sister and you would turn your ear to

me. There is so much I want to share with you. But I don't even know how to address my letter to you since without a name you have become a void – an empty space that roams across the globe in search of things I can't even comprehend. I finally understood why the world demands that we abide by a few irrational dictates like having names. Names have their place whether we like them or not.

I wanted to tell you that you were right. Father might have been myopic. The invisible python came again this year. It swallowed our food, guzzled my friends, and made away with our livestock. They say the python lives in the mountain, in a big hole, where people used to ditch deformed babies and people with leprosy. But people don't do that anymore. So when this python is hungry, it churns and groans under the surface of the earth, sometimes making the world tremble and shake. When it becomes angry, it creeps through the dark nooks of the earth and finds its way out in one of the rivers that come down from the mountain. It creeps into the flow of the river, manoeuvres in its tide, vomiting volumes of water that it carries in its belly. The python rushes like gushing wind and consumes everything it finds in its way. It wreaks havoc on houses, slashes down trees and crops, sweeps away land, and swallows humans and animals to feed its hunger. It joins the river and runs down the valley to kill those of us who reside in the concave of the country.

As you yelled at father that evening before you left, I heard everything. You emphasised that there was no sense in staying down here waiting for the water to come and sweep us away like it does every year. Father told you that you could not be sure whether or not the python would come out this year. He told you to leave everything in the hands of God. He told you that he was not planning on leaving the land of his ancestors. You shouted at him – telling him to stop running away from reality with his superstitions. You told him that there was no mystical python that brought water down the valley. You said it was a geographical fact that the area was prone to flash floods and it wasn't meant for habitation. Father sneered at you in the fading glow of light, his eyes crimson like burning coal in the devil's furnace. "So you think you know better now that you let a white man abuse you for his pleasure?"

And you said his outbursts were irrelevant.

"Did I send you to school to become a whore and talk back to me?" And you told him that he was committing a fallacy; *argumentum ad hominem*. You said you did not understand why he was attacking you instead of addressing the issue at hand. I don't think he understood any

of this because he just turned his back on you and banged the door behind him.

Ever since you started going out with Theo, father attributed every thing he didn't like in you to your relationship with him.

"Nothing good comes from those people," he said.

He believed it was Theo who made you lose your faith in Allah.

He said it was Theo who told you to get rid of your name. Father called you Zeinab, after the granddaughter of the prophet Mohammad, but you did not like this name. "I am a free spirit and I will not be trapped in the confines of a dead woman, be them holy or whatsoever," that's what you told father. After that you went to Sweden with Theo and when you came back a dragon was chiselled on the upper part of your left arm. Father did not want to look at you. He said the spirit of the python was in you and that the demon was passed on to you from Theo. But you told me that having a tattoo was just a way of expressing yourself. It showed that you owned your body. You went on to pierce your bottom lip and your bellybutton, as if the snake on your arm was not enough. Father hated Theo for all this.

"There is nothing good that comes from a white man," he repeated those words. "Aren't they the same people who came with a picture of their friend nailed to a tree claiming that he was God? What God can be nailed to a tree? Isn't it the white man who is bringing strange practices into this country? Aren't white people teaching men to sleep with other men? These people are evil!"

When I asked you about this you told me that father was not always right. You said there were some things that he did not know and others that he did not understand. You said homosexuality had nothing to do with white people but that it was just love as we know it – a lasting affection between ordinary people. You said the problem was that people always wanted to put labels on everything and that they were scared of what they did not understand.

"Do you remember Gwaza?" you asked. I remembered him. He was that man who looked like a woman and people made fun of him. He used to live at the far end of the river and he had no family. He had a beard and he was bald like most men here. But his voice was too squeaky for a man and he had a very big behind and what looked like breasts. People always whispered and giggled when he passed by. They made him run away.

"Was Gwaza a man or a woman?" you asked, and I said I was not sure. "You see, not everything can be categorised," you tried to explain, "There are some things we cannot understand in this world

because the world is much bigger and much darker for our comprehension. We are in no position to judge others.”

I wonder what father would say if he heard that you started smoking. Your last postcard almost made me cry. You said smoking was a new experience you were experimenting with. You actually made an effort to squeeze a chunk of words onto that postcard to make me understand how you felt. You said you love how the smoke feels when it descends inside you, scorching your lungs. You like releasing the smoke through your nose or watching the plume of smoke wiggling into space when you whistle it out from the small hole you create between your lips. You said it feels like you hold the smoke hostage inside you only to give it the freedom to melt into open space. You said you love the idea that you are able to free something from the confines of humanity and this gives you satisfaction. You talked of freedom with such passion that your words dug a hole inside my heart. I yearn to experience this freedom that you talked about. You described it as the power to be. I swept the postcard across my nose to smell you and its fragrance made me realise how much I missed you.

With my postcard I wanted to tell you about the strange night when the water came. I woke up around midnight to find drops of blood splattered like rose petals on my white bed sheet. It was a freaky sight and I leapt from my bed in terror. I wanted to wake father up to show him what had happened but that was when I heard a gushing sound like thunder down the valley. It was as if the mountain was crawling downhill to dis- place us from our land. I rushed to my window to witness the absurdity of the night and that was when my eyes confronted death. Death looks like nothing. It has no face, no shape, and no sense of direction. The darkness of the night was displaced by thundering fog and the wind outside was rushing at the speed of sound, inflicting vengeance on the environment. The water was coming down like it does every year but this time with more vigour and a new determination. The blood on my sheets was a sign.

You see, it had been raining continuously for two weeks. The government warned us that the rain would be heavy this year. They sent trucks and other heavy vehicles to help us move from this area but father and others like him did not listen. I wished I'd left with you when father disowned you but I was powerless. Father told me that I was not old enough to make my own decisions. I knew that this place was dangerous but I was too much of a coward to stand

up to father. I would gaze at his thick lips and his thick beard and wonder how I could challenge him. With all the authority and the knowledge that he carried in his balding head, father was God personified.

Others heeded and left before the disaster. We stayed. Father did not want to abandon his land. He would go out in the rain to check on his crops, most of which were now faltering from too much water and no sunlight. He dug gullies around the house to stop water from getting in. He put plastic bags on the roof and on the windows to prevent leaking. He had no idea what mother nature had in store for us. He dismissed the government people, accusing them of plotting to steal his land.

“This land is mine!” he told them. “No one will remove me from it.

My fathers were buried here. My yesterdays are in this place!” They told him that meteorologists had forecasted hostile weather conditions and heavy flooding but father did not listen.

“I have lived here my whole life and I know the python comes and goes, taking what it wants with it. I will not leave!”

They told him that there was no python but that only made him furious. He said he would beg Allah for mercy so that the python spares us like it did every year.

“But science tells us otherwise. This time it’s dangerous.” The government official tried to reason with him.

“You want to teach me science young man? The white man’s wisdom, huh?” Father’s eyes were burning coal. “The white man has torn my family apart, turned my daughter into a disrespectful whore. Now you want to use his ways to rob me of my land?”

The government official had no clue what father was talking about. His face looked like a puzzle with a dozen missing pieces. He glanced at me, pity seeping from his eyes. “Child,” he told me, “I hope you leave this place before the worst comes.”

Father told him off. He told him not to put ideas in my head. The man left.

And on that night the blood foretold the worst. I wonder if there is anything good that comes with blood. It’s always an ominous sign. The water cascaded down the valley like it had scores to settle. The river seemed possessed by a spirit that lurked beneath it and had lost its shape and its sense of direction. My animal instinct took control. A strange impulse then seized my rational faculties and I stormed out of the house with nothing on my mind but to run and run and run. My vision was blurred by the enormous fog. I did not know where I was going and it did not matter. The

sound of the water grew closer the further I tried to escape from death. Then I felt a heavy force that knocked me off my feet. The water slammed my body against something hard and I lost all feeling. I was unconscious of pain or any other sensations. My eyelids dropped instinctively, embracing my impending death. Before my mind made full sense of my surroundings, the water had already taken what it wanted and I could hear the deafening roar fading in the distance, tearing down the valley.

When dawn broke on the eastern horizon, I found myself hanging on a lean branch of a tree whose trunk I could not see. The water had absorbed everything. Looking at the ground was like perceiving the earth upside down. As if the ground was covered in clouds. There was nothing but water beneath me. I was certain I was somewhere in the Indian Ocean. I wanted to cry but my eyes already beheld too much water for tears to come. I hung there suspended, surveying the nothingness around me. I was at the brink of losing my mind when the helicopter came to airlift me. I could see the relief workers shouting, telling me things, but I could not hear them. They pulled me up and covered me in huge blankets but my body clung to its numbness like a corpse ready for cremation. I tried to remember what had happened but there was nothing to recall. I had not seen things happen. I'd only heard their sounds.

Sitting in this relief camp, listening to the chatter of mellow birds, the chirping of crickets, the groans and moans of frogs churning the mud, all I do is think. I think about the flood and many other things. Most of the time I think about Allah. Why did he let this happen to us? Sometimes I think he sent the water as a punishment for our sins. When I think in these lines you come to my mind. You are the one who said there was no god and that you did not believe in anything that had no proof of its existence. Allah must have punished us because of people like you. Doesn't the Quran tell us that "there is no God but God"? And how could a girl like you challenge that? When I have these thoughts I try to find comfort in the holy book. I try to recite some verses from the Quran but my mouth fails to form and produce the words. Sometimes I yearn to proclaim, "Truly he is most forgiving, most merciful", but when my eyes behold the water that has occupied the place we used to call home, my heart grows faint. There is no strength left in me with which to proclaim the love of Allah. I gaze upon the vastness of the water down the valley and wonder where Allah might be in that expanse. There is nothing there but death. The mosque is gone, the

people are gone, the houses are gone, the trees, and the crops. What can Allah be doing in a place like that? I have thought very carefully over this for some days now. I finally got rid of the hijab and threw it over the cliff. Allah went with the water.

I sit here and think about water – how it has transformed both of us. Water has emancipated you and me in very unusual ways. It was after you crossed the ocean that your attitude towards life changed. You travelled across acres of water to another part of the world and came back with new ideas. Crossing the water gave you the courage to question father. It gave you authority over your body and lit a new confidence in your eyes. It made you get rid of your name. That was freedom for you.

And in a way the water that killed my friends has also given me freedom. The world that I knew has been washed away. When I look around me and search through the faces in the camp, there is not even a soul I recognise. They are all gone and I feel like this has somehow set me free. This may sound strange but I know you will understand. I can walk without the hijab and no one will sneer at me with contempt. Sometimes I wear shorts like a boy and stroll around the camp. Nobody swears or calls upon the name of Allah. I'm thinking of going back to school, hoping that I get the chance when it's all over.

I lost all the postcards you sent me in the flood but I still remember what was written on the last one. It was a comment by a certain woman on time and dancing. I liked her words. If you still had a name I would have written this story on a million postcards hoping that they somehow reach you. But I feel it's about time that I concentrated on me. I will try to find myself like you did and to taste what freedom feels like on my tongue. I want to experience what it means to live. I don't want to just exist in this world – I want to be part of its orchestra. I want to sing along to life's melody and dance to the rhythm of time. By the way, father went with the water. I've been thinking: does man really own anything in this world?