Africa In Dialogue Interviews

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Brittle Paper Anniversary Award Winner

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Fiction Winner

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Editor’s Letter

I believe that the art of conversations is the art of remembering. It is the art of remembering that which is elemental for all of us: our private and public griefs, rages, pains, joys, loves and laughers. When we converse we revisit our individuals and collective histories. A re-visit that is necessary because this is where the personal and public intersect. And when we remember the intersection of the personal and the collective, we remember how to heal. We remember that we can heal. We remember that healing is our heritage and birthright.

My conversations with the Brittle Paper 2017 winners was our collective remembrance of how to make the personal and collective world, through imagination, sensible and alchemic to ourselves and to those who witness us.

With Chibuihe, we remember our collective failure with the constant erasure and harm brought to queer bodies and the importance of demanding for active protection of queer bodies. With Megan, we remember magic in surrendering, the ancient mother archetype and how its been used as the custodian of pregnancy trauma and motherhood-pain. JK and I explore existentialism, the power of confessional poetry and finding meaning and healing from poetry.

With Sisonke, we remember how we carry the world as women, how we take care of the world as women and how the world celebrate how women endure pain. Hawa and I remember public grief, the collective hysteria that manifested during the Ebola Crisis, and how because we die, we must remember to truly live all of our lives.

I invite you to read our conversations as these remembrance contain the possibilities for new meanings and magic that will awaken and transform.

Gaamangwe Joy Mogami
Founding Editor, Africa In Dialogue
A Dialogue With Chibuihe Achimba

Chibuihe Achimba is a Queer poet, essayist and photographer from Nigeria. He is a 2018 Fellow of Ebedi International Writers Residency; winner of the Brittle Paper award and a finalist for the 2018 Gerald Kraak Award. His works have been published or forthcoming in Guernica, Heart Journal, Cosmonauts Avenue, Gnarled Oak, Bluepepper, Brittle Paper, Kalahari Review, Expound Magazine, 14: Queer Art, Mounting the Moon etc. His coming out essay ‘We are Queer, We are Here’ which went viral and led to his abduction has been made into a feature film. His poetry chapbook, “hallowed” is forthcoming this fall in the U.S. from Damaged goods Press. He is the co-founder and Art editor of Kabaka Magazine.

This conversation took place between a green bedroom in Gaborone, Botswana and Ebedi Hill, Lagos and Toronto by Email.

Interview by Gaamangwe Mogami
Chibuihe: Thank you so much, Gaamangwe. I think it is pertinent to begin with what that amazing platform, Brittle Paper, means to me and us. As African creatives working at this moment in our history, there are certain types of spaces we need spaces that understand and acknowledge the varied social and cultural revolutions happening within this continent and are willing to support it. Conscious spaces. Spaces that understand the politics of identity. Woke spaces (yes, I said it - who slumber epp?) Often times we talk of the need for Africans to tell our own stories, but I don’t think it’s enough to merely tell stories. These stories must be told properly. And all the stories must be told. The many sides and patterns must be recognized. The nuances and ripples; all shades and scents; the accents and roiling variations. Any African story that comes out linear and flat is malnourished. And malnourished stories are half-truths. Half-truths are dangerous. Brittle Paper seems to have understood this politics from her inception. By opening that space for queer writers and contents alike, she aligned herself to this progressive Africa rising out of colonial ashes. An Africa that embraces herself totally. By publishing that piece and standing by it throughout that period of chaos, for not removing it even when the pressure to do so was intense—I’m here wondering if there’s a better support a writer would ask for.

Receiving Brittle Paper Anniversary Award cemented that support. I’ll also talk of the money that came with that award. I know it’s sometimes haram to speak of awards in terms of money, but then that’s mere propriety. I was already caving under the weight of medical bills which I incurred while fixing myself from the battering and injury. While the intrinsic value of that award helped to repair my battered psyche, the extrinsic snatched me out of debt. The benefit was immense and total.

Gaamangwe: Oh Brittle Paper, Brittle Paper is the revolution we’ve been dreaming of. The allegiance she has with and for African literature and creatives is deeply moving and powerful.

On top of all the above, recently, you shared that We’re Queer, We’re Here, is being adapted into a movie. Congratulations! What a powerful transmutation of a powerful work of art. Let’s time travel to the origin of this essay. What, at the time, compelled you to write this essay? And how was the psychic process of writing it?

Chibuihe: The news of the adaptation is one exhilarating tonic. Talk of impact. What other blessing does an artist ask of if not such transmutation; to inspire someone elsewhere. I think the ultimate goal of a work of art is multiplication—to morph into other beautiful forms and expand the chain of ideas and consciousness. If I am to be very honest, it was the sort of thing I least expected. Let’s face it, that essay was less than 3000 words and was not grandly executed. And after the incident, I desperately wanted to disappear the essay. The mere thought of it alone gave me panic attacks. So when Olisa Eloka, who adapted and directed the film, contacted me, I was reluctant at first. Now, I am very grateful to him for being patient with me, and, particularly, for his dexterity with the project.

That essay is dedicated to the patron saint of rage. A hurricane of anger that swept across my entirety for days, rattled me and couldn’t let me concentrate. It was so unusual, so disturbing. I couldn’t believe that Romeo Oriogun was being harassed and
maligned in that manner when he should be celebrated. And harder to gulp was the fact that it was coming from within the literary community. I looked at it and saw my own tragedy. It was truly disheartening. I believed every artist has an ethical obligation to protect the right to freedom of creative expression irrespective of ideological differences. But poor me, I was naive. Nigerian writers owe their allegiance first to their religion and the threadbare moral rectitude they flaunt. The concept of free expression means nothing to them except when it gives them the chance to extend their control and project their bias and prejudice. I couldn’t believe that that type of envy-induced homophobia would be left unclipped and without outrage; that the literary community, save a few young writers, would display such shocking indifference. It agitated me as much as it sent numbing chills down my spine. Here was a tribe that picked its wars based on religious and moral affiliations and not ethical commitment.

I think of homophobia as an intellectual crises, a total deficiency of thought. The least places I expected to see it thrive was amongst the very people that pride themselves as the conscience of the nation. I have had a brush with homophobia, but it was from a bunch of uneducated louts. It was difficult to deal with them but not as draining as reconciling my faith in the intellectual tribe with the fears that leaped into sight in the wake of Romeo’s crisis.

I was jarred into a rude awakening, that the solidarity we thought was for every kindred spirit was rather a chequered thing dispensed along fault lines. I realized that writers of queer literature (I wish I can used this tag less often) has been distanced as a contagious other and therefore responsible for themselves. I realized that it was a struggle against silence, against total erasure. It was as if history had just handed to us another great opportunity to assert our presence which required immediate action or wait for some other time—which no one knew when it would be.

So it was rage that compelled me. It was solidarity. It was self-defense. It was giving stupidity the last middle finger. It was both arrogance and assertion. Anything. Everything.

The reality of things broke something in me and at the same time opened me up. So when I decided to face my laptop, it rushed out in one loud scream. I was grading students’ test, which had already passed its submission deadline, and putting my fury in perspective. That essay was the first and final draft. I couldn’t revisit it again because if I had looked at it twice, my careful other would have prevailed and it wouldn’t have been sent out at all.

Gaamangwe: Fury as the origin of creation or an act is so important and powerful. Fury starts the kind of wildfires that can and will reveal and burn down the overgrown rots in our collective home. The impetus of many revolutions across the world started from there, from blithering red fury, from refusing silence and from refusing erasure even within the chance of possible danger. So I am thankful to your fury, for it started and revealed the deeply terrifying and heartbreaking truth of our collective judgement, hypocrisy and fear.

I think that those who perform intentional, psychic and physical violence on others are deeply terrified beings. They are beings grappling with their own inner powerlessness and distrust of nature. For nature is deeply mysterious and vast and always expanding onto itself. That on its own is a little terrifying because we are experiencing nature with little to no guidelines. So these deep terrified beings convince themselves that making little, narrow “right and wrong”
rules will make the experience here easier. I don’t know, it’s probably more complex than this but what ruffles me is the righteousness. This blind-sighted belief that one is right and so another is wrong is by far the most harmful belief in the world.

I am deeply sorry that you have been broken over and over because of homophobia. Especially because, as we all witnessed, the publication of this important essay led to these deeply terrified beings to come for you. I send you love and light in your healing journey from that experience.

I have intellectually tried to understand homophobia and each time I am left with more questions. Are some people just wired to hate? To be devoid of empathy? Which part of our collective, cultural belief heritage has started and sustained this terrifying hate for other humans? The questions endlessly trouble me. I explored some of these in my dialogue with Otosirieze but I believe it’s important to keep questioning and questioning until we arrive to a new shifted world.

What revelations about yourself and others have you discovered ever since writing the essay?

Chibuihe: One sterling but heartbreaking truth about ignorance is that it comes with a suffocating cloud of fear and insecurity. Because knowledge liberates the soul. To be open minded is to say yes to the miraculous illuminations each moment brings with it. The bulk of the homophobes I have encountered are people who are swimming in the mire of their own ignorance. An individual who is yet to interrogate his own life and existence, who cannot categorically say if he is a homosapien or was carved out of an orange tree in the Garden cannot be relied upon to give an intelligent definition of what sexuality is or is not. Nature, as you pointed out above, is mysterious and vast, and so is truth and, indeed, life itself. To believe otherwise is to undermine the power of our very origin.

I know about willful hate, the hideousness of people whose souls cannot contain anything but cruelty and oppression. The psychopaths and sociopaths, deeply dysfunctional people, who perpetrate violence on others to gratify the monster and, sometimes, the emptiness in their own souls. I am more interested in those still living unexamined, uninterrogated lives. These people who have surrendered themselves to fear, who insist that everyone must be like them, narrow-minded and flat and slavish. They whip out culture and tradition or religion to defend their inability to think, as if culture itself is not always expanding and morphing into newer realities. These are the ones I am out to confront. We are all inheritors of these cultures and traditions and co-initiates into this foreign religion. You cannot use any of them as a weapon to undermine my identity.

A few weeks back, I saw pictures of two men allegedly caught making out in their room. They were stripped and decorated with palm fronds and were being led to a junction where they would be lynched and burnt. Now these horrible humans who were about to commit murder in the name of culture and tradition clearly do not understand nor respect the sanctity of this institution they tout around. This was an Igbo town where lynching is an abomination according to that same culture. An Igbo community where placing palm frond on anything precludes such thing from harm. In the end you will observe that people are just looking for excuses to legitimize their bigotry. The Igbo culture into which I was born is diverse and nuanced. It is an egalitarian society with inclusive values and has immense respect for individuality. No matter who you are
evolved a place for you. There was room for the maverick and the modest. The gender binary was anything but rigid. It is possible and commonplace for the same deity to be male in one community and be represented as female in another town. Masquerades, which straddle the spirit and human world, oftentimes celebrate the male body with feminine masks and elaborate costumes. There is a certain shape-shifting fluidity present in the culture I was born into and each careful study I do reveals even more fascinating truths about us.

My sexual identity is located and rooted in the multidimensional worldview of Ndi Igbo. My identity is not foreign and I refuse to be othered by ignorant people who has chosen not to take control of their own lives. My body and all the narratives it embodies is located within the culture of my people, and because this culture is organic, it is continuously evolving and so am I.

The writing and publication of that essay and the impact of my abduction initiated me, albeit, violently into a world I was not ready for. I have always taken writing as a hobby and, at best, a part time vocation—a place where I go to document my thoughts and fascinations. Now I have realized that writing can be both risky and rewarding. This experience thoroughly broke me and unleashed the ghosts of past traumas that somehow I had managed to contain. My body has been a site of abuse and violence, and also the source of tremendous strength to my soul. At a very tender age I learnt to balance my femininity and masculinity in the same body. I taught my soft and my stoic to cohabit because that was the only way to survive and navigate this riotous world. I have always been queer, always acted queer, which is to say that I have always been a source of terror to folks who have a narrow definition of masculinity and life in general. But this experience came when my body has adapted to comfort—and you know comfort is a terrible place to be during a revolution. My body had given away its defenses. I thought that the worst that would happen was to be trolled or cyber bullied, so I deactivated my social media accounts. Now, a year after the publication of that essay, I still cannot trust people enough to visit them. My mum calls to ask when I would be visiting and I ask if she’s sending a taxi to pick me. My social anxiety has escalated I can no longer trust friends let alone strangers. From time to time I call some people to apologize for avoiding their calls, yet I cannot will myself out of the cocoon I have constructed to hedge myself. I rely on medications to tame the nightmares and manage my ever degenerating mental health. The drugs are fucking me up and I sincerely do not wish to stay on them. I am constantly searching for strength in spaces other than my body. I believe in the regenerative energy present in creating, in conjuring worlds outside the realm of the physical. I pursue some kind of magic and sublimity in my works—be it poetry, photography or research—hoping to find a sort of respite and consolation in them.

Gaamangwe: I read your response and it broke me. I am heartbroken for you, for the experience you went through and still re-live in your memories and daily life. No one deserves to experience such violence and terror for merely speaking on what is true. I send you healing light always. Take your time. I think you family and friends will understand. Self-care is a daily pro-

I think about disrupting and challenging culture a lot. Because, as you said, the ones we seem to be so protective of is not ours to begin with. The one we seem to use as reason for violence is alien to the sanctity of our native cultures. Our cultures are, as you said, for all of humanity, with our vastness and diversity. We have much to do to undo these rigid
demands, to reject compromise, to take and insist on your right to live and love. This is the meaning of life. This is righteousness.

Shortly after the incident, I stayed in a safe home, a shelter for displaced LGBTQi persons. I could not have imagined seeing so many displaced and traumatized individuals who have been stripped of dignity and have become refugees in their own country, moving in and out throughout the period of my stay. You see, part of the ways homophobia wields its ugly power is in the form of systematic erasure of minority groups and the atrocities being committed against them. The injury inflicted on the queer body in Nigeria is an ongoing crises. The media seldom cover it, and when they do, they let their bias determine their position. Most of these incidents happen in places of no interest, so it is likely not to pop up on your news feed. Some are unimaginably gruesome it would appear preposterous, even faked. But all these factors do not subtract from the pain and trauma the victims go through, it rather isolates the victims, deprives them of empathy. Most of them are not writers like me; they do not have agency. They have no access to spaces and opportunities that will help them manage the crises. For instance, I had bi-weekly appointments with a therapist, a privilege they could not afford. Now these are the ones who live on the margin. The ones who know suffering and what it means to be stripped completely of every form of dignity. These ones who are broken to their bones and abandoned on the sidelines, the poems seek to document their stories. Because it would be a double tragedy for their experiences to fade into obscurity, unacknowledged.

The chapbook is a sort of proof of the wounds inflicted on the queer body. Because we need evidence to confront the agents of hate and injustice and while at it, we will also be rewriting the queer body into existence.

Chibuike: The poetry chapbook 'hallowed' is made up of close to two dozen poems celebrating the queer bodies who have suffered and are still suffering as living martyrs. Even the ones who have been exterminated, to me, are still alive. Their ghosts people the streets and their spirits energy, electric desires propel our creative vision. Their heads, even though bruised and bleeding are yet haloed. The poems celebrate homoerotic desire as something natural, normal, righteous and valid and not as sin. Writing the poems afforded me intimate moments to articulate and interrogate my desires once more and reaffirm my commitment to make the society I have found myself in conducive for people like me to live and thrive in. The poems are both placards and grenade. We are here. And we want what we want.

The poems draw from the personal stories of queer people I know and the ones I encountered during my research. Because the society demonize them, I have decided to deify every one of them. They are holy, saintly, tortured like Christ and therefore deserving of incense and the hallelujah of our collective honor. I am drawn to the characters I recreated in the poems the same way I am drawn to the mythic character of Christ. To refuse to view your body and existence as an apology, to resist the pressure to bow to society’s arbitrary demands, to reject compromise, to take and insist on your right to live and love. This is the meaning of life. This is righteousness.
Praise for *hallowed*:

“*hallowed*, Chibuihè Achimba has carved out poems that are vulnerable and speak to the Queer experience in Nigeria. His voice is necessary and needed because like his poems, it is a thing of beauty, one that we need to remind us of the beauty that exists outside the ugliness of the struggle.”–Komes Oriogun, author of *The Origin of Butterflies*

“The pain & potency of trauma in Achimba’s poems are delivered with a language so immediate, so intimate, they’re filled with an inheritance almost hereditary.”–JK Anowe, author of *The Fracturing*

“To read Chibuihè Achimba’s *hallowed* is to see and to live through the pain of fragmentation and the anxiety of identity. Each poem in the collection is a feast of wondrous, elegant imageries. Written in language so pure and searing, this is a humane testament to the human predicament, the will to live, and to exist on one’s own terms.”–Chimezie Chika

“It is such a gift to witness the work of such a wondrous poet as Chibuihè Achimba, who presses into grief until it sings, *hallowed* brings tenderness and painful precision to the internal and external worlds of violence visited upon queer bodies— one poem declares “I have a wound I call a country.” Yet, guilt is unfamiliar to the speaker who loves and hurts for the sake of love. The voice brims with desire, and echoes long after you put down this book. Achimba writes: “lord I was something before you emptied me of language,” but these stunning poems are a masterwork of language.”–Logan February, author of *Painted Blue with Salt Water*

Chibuihè Achimba is a queer poet, essayist and photographer from Nigeria. He is a 2018 Fellow of Ikibar International Writers Residency, winner of the Brittle Paper Anniversary Award, a finalist for the 2018 Gerald Kraak Award, and was recently longlisted for the 2018 Kofi Addo Prize. He won the 2016 Balohi N’ivo Haiku prize and was, in that same year, nominated for the Pushcart Prize. His works have been published or forthcoming in Guernica, Catapult, HEArt Journal, Cosmonauts Avenue, Aké Review, Gerald Kraak Anthology, Gnarled Oak, Brittle Paper, Expound Magazine, 14: Queer Art, Mounting the Moon, and elsewhere. He is the co-founder and arts editor of Kabaka Magazine.
Gaamangwe I was going to say this is heartbreaking yet again but now I feel this is no longer enough. How can we help? How can the people of Nigeria and Africa actually help LGBTQi persons? How else can we shift these experiences?

Chibuihe: Help? That word has a tinge of aloofness to it. It sounds messianic. The conditions in which the LGBTQi persons in Africa find themselves are man-made. It is not some kind of natural catastrophe, say earthquake or tsunami. The laws that sanctioned these violence were made by people. Maybe, it is better if we start from seeing it as the work of our own hands, built and sustained by our silence and apathy. I think it’s about time we acknowledged this as a collective failure.

For every LGBTQi person killed or displaced, the society—the church, mosque, school, media, the law enforcement agencies, the judiciary, the family—has a hand in it. So it is really not about help. Because when we speak of it as help, we are absolving ourselves of the responsibility.

It is our duty to create a more diverse and inclusive society, or at least, honestly demand for one. These conditions, these deaths and suffering were made by us and we are the grease that oils it. I cannot believe otherwise. It is our duty to unmake it. And this duty demands a certain urgency and commitment.

This is why I think queer people should start coming out to their own families and intimate friends first. We need to shift the responsibility to folks to whom our lives and wellbeing mean something to. Folks who have invested in our lives and therefore have a stake in our survival. When families begin to understand it this way: That a queer person is not some imaginary fairy that pops up on the television or magazine covers but rather their own son, their own daughter, sibling, cousin, friend; when it dawns on them that the body roasting at the junction could be their own blood and kith, the conversation will surely change. It is sad that ours is a society where people live in denial, distancing themselves from the real problems, preferring to ‘help’, as if we are not capable of rooting out this injustice all together.

(Please forgive my tone.)

It is not about the killings and oppression, I am interested in the allocation of guilt—who takes responsibility for these atrocities. We need to start holding people to account. I am queer and I am your son/ sibling, if you push me into the streets and I get killed, you murdered me. It is that straightforward. Parents are as much as guilty as the mob that threw the petrol and struck the fire. The sibling who issued threats and the friend who stood by and watched me get burnt has got blood on their hands. Religious leaders should be held accountable for uncouth utterances which often times incite violence against queer bodies. I have seen a preacher on television asking that queer people be exterminated. He used that word ‘exterminate’ on a cable television channel. Devotees should ask their clerics hard questions as regards to social justice and the plight of queer persons in Africa. That is more pragmatic than trite sympathy.

I am tired of faux sympathy. It is useless really. We cannot have these large mass of sympathizers trailing every homophobic attack and yet nothing is being done to prevent future occurrences.

In the end, what matters is if we are willing to take full responsibility for our own lives and future. If we are ready to lay aside apathy and embrace empathy and, above all, commit to this task. If we are ready to begin the journey of reconstructing our values and, by extension, our fate and future as a continent.
Gaamangwe: I absolutely agree. Asking to 'help' is problematic. Like you said, it takes the responsibility from our hands. Lately, I am deeply tired of my own faux sympathy. Of having these conversations here and then continuing on wards, while little change has actually taken place. Yes, conversation is so important but it’s not enough. I know I and everyone around me can and should do more. And yes, to starting with our households. The family unit is the beginning and guardian of our collective agreements. These collective agreements that say this and that is right or wrong. These collective agreements are man made and so can be changed. It’s time we actually take it upon ourselves do engage at commit to creating this necessary change.

Chibuihe, thank you for joining me here. You have given me much to reflect on, and much to do going on-wards. I look forward to reading your work now and in the future.
JK Anowe, a Nigerian-born poet, is the recipient of the inaugural Brittle Paper Award for Poetry in 2017. He holds a BA in French from the University of Benin, Nigeria, where he was awarded the Festus Iyayi Merit Award for Poetry in 2015. He is Associate Poetry Editor, Praxis Magazine Online. He lives, teaches, and writes from somewhere in Nigeria.

This conversation took place between a green bedroom in Gaborone, Botswana and a military base/sleepy university town, both in southeastern Nigeria by Email.

Interview by Joy Gaamangwe Mogami
JK: I’m grateful for your kind words, Gaamangwe. Truly I am. Winning the Brittle Paper Award for Poetry was, at one point, an amazing experience, and at another, befuddling: One I did not know how to react to at first. I really wasn’t expecting to win. I know it somewhat comes off as a stereotype because it is what most people say when they win stuff, but it is actually true. I didn’t expect to win. I mean, there were tricklings of hope here and there, but with the likes of Gbenga Adesina, Safia Elhillo, Nick Makoha, Romeo Oriogun etc. on the list, poets whose work are considered more urgent and socially relevant, I didn’t think I had a good chance.

And besides, it sort of acknowledged that relevance I’ve always wanted people to see in my works. I am one of those people, as I am often inclined to think, who get rejected more times than they are accepted for publication or awards, whose anticipation functions also in that same order. Credo to Leave was the only poem accepted for publication amongst all other pieces I sent out last year. I had sent it out the same day I finished writing it. Also, none of the agents I had queried had emailed back. So imagine my surprise when it got accepted for publication, and months later, would go on to win an award. It was, and is still, truly amazing. It shows how often our works transcend us as artists. How these works may sometimes have a mind of their own, have plans of their own, a nucleus different from the artist.

Gaamangwe: I agree. Our art can transcend our expectations in unimaginable ways. I think it’s because other people don’t experience our art the ways we experience it or even expect them to experience it. Which is kind of the best part really. I am happy for you. How did Credo to Leave come to you? How was the process of writing it?

JK: Well, I was listening to “fall away” by Twenty One Pilots when it came to me. Started off as a scattering of random words and phrases coming at me, hence the unilinear stream of consciousness that dominated the entire structure of the poem. Something I’d later come to describe as Schizo-Poetry: the conscious/subconscious inability to maintain a linear stream of thought for a considerable amount of time in a poem. Which is also a style Twenty One Pilots imbibes in their music. But I digress.

Sometimes all I need going for me is a line or an idea I perceive will be either at the start or finish of the poem, even though the most primal thing when I start out to write a poem is my art, my craft, i.e. utmost concentration on the creative execution of the subject matter, not on the subject matter itself. Other times, which is most times, a title, whether tentative or not, is enough. Though for this particular poem, the title had to come last.

I wrote it during an intense period of my lifelong struggle with clinical depression. And save for the preconceived notion that anything I set out to write would be poetry 80% of the time, I didn’t exactly know what I was writing. I was typing furiously on my phone, just wanting to get everything out: how I felt at that moment, how I’d always felt before that moment, how I’ll most likely feel after that moment and for the rest of my life. And it wasn’t until I finished writing that I’d found therein a filtering of hope, albeit bleak. It was this small speck of hope, or maybe a longing for it, that helped birth the title, Credo to Leave. Which, if you ask me, was my way of telling myself I could get out of that murky place lurking with ennui and existential dread. So, I guess you could
A Dialogue With Chibuihe Obi

Into an earthworm dipped in salt. (Laughs)

It’s crazy, really. Hope, being how it is, can be a cruel twisted thing, and doesn’t look like much from where I stand sometimes. Reason I’m very much inclined toward introversion and anonymity, almost always have earphones plugged-in in public, and sometimes, never go to certain places alone. Listening to music, especially the ones ridden with melancholia, I’ve found for me, is oddly calming. Taking long walks that hurt my feet also helps to create that feeling of not ultimately being alone in the struggle. Reading works by Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath, poets who had similar experiences in their lifetime, gives succour in these moments too. Because writing is often out of the question and isn’t at all a form of healing for me, sadly. I am unable to bring myself to write anything, to see beyond my present predicament and muster words. Thankfully, Credo to Leave is one of those very few poems I’ve been able to write in such situations.

Gaamangwe: I resonate so much with the idea of Schizo-poetry and the way poems come to you. But yes Credo to Leave is raw and visceral and urgent perhaps because the feeling of existential dread is something familiar to a lot of us. I had many knotted lump in my throat moments reading it.

And now I wonder where or what the source of your existential dread originates from? What brings it to the surface? And what does that hope look like for you or what often gives you hope when you are within depression?

JK: Haha! It’s really nice to know that you feel this way about my poem, Gaamangwe. It’s not something I hear often outside my small circle of friends. So it means quite a lot.

In the wake of receiving the award, I was greeted with a lot of attention. Congratulatory messages. Praise-filled messages. Messages whose senders asked me to mentor them. Etcetera. Now this sort of public attention isn’t something I’m exactly new to, (had a similar experience when my digital chapbook, “a parable for paranoia,” was published for free download by Praxis Magazine Online 2 years ago), though I try as much as I can to avoid it. And I’ve never been used to this sudden outburst of attention, being that it’s also similar to my fear of noise. Which is somewhat manageable if the source of said noise is particular, singular. The anxiety and irritation only kick in when it is the direct opposite, coming at me from all directions, so that I begin my faithful work of overthinking, and any form of unapproved proximity to me approximately turns me into an earthworm dipped in salt.

(Laughs)

It’s crazy, really. Hope, being how it is, can be a cruel twisted thing, and doesn’t look like much from where I stand sometimes. Reason I’m very much inclined toward introversion and anonymity, almost always have earphones plugged-in in public, and sometimes, never go to certain places alone. Listening to music, especially the ones ridden with melancholia, I’ve found for me, is oddly calming. Taking long walks that hurt my feet also helps to create that feeling of not ultimately being alone in the struggle. Reading works by Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath, poets who had similar experiences in their lifetime, gives succour in these moments too. Because writing is often out of the question and isn’t at all a form of healing for me, sadly. I am unable to bring myself to write anything, to see beyond my present predicament and muster words. Thankfully, Credo to Leave is one of those very few poems I’ve been able to write in such situations.

Gaamangwe: I struggle to write when I am within existential dread too. I must be out of the dark to truly write. But then again writing truly terrifies me whenever I have to do it. Yet, I profoundly love the damn thing. I find reading to be my saving grace in those moments. Existentialism says that we are all merely passengers in our own individual ships floating next to each other, fighting our own degrees of the storm, and yes sometimes we survive because our neighbors are shouting encouragement and understanding. There is both healing in shouting and hearing encouragement. It’s the reason we create art after-all right? I mean, why do you gravitate to writing poetry? What kind of poetry do you find yourself writing? What is on the other side of writing these poems for you?
JK: Oftentimes, I've come in contact with folks who, in appreciation of my work, say they were able to achieve for themselves some sort of healing after engaging with said work. Now while I'm very much grateful that I'm able to proffer this passageway, this "healing", through what I've written, I'm somewhat perplexed by it. Don't get me wrong. I'm not one to tell people how to approach or perceive my work or any work of art. In fact, I do believe that a poem no longer belongs to me the moment I drop my pen and say okay I'm done here. But then again, healing, or the search for it, is not the reason I, to use your words, gravitate towards writing poetry.

I've always considered poetry the truest art form. Written or otherwise. Have always been of the notion that it exists in everything. That it belongs with the basic neither be created nor destroyed, only harnessed. It has fascinated me a long time how so much of feeling, so much of living, so much of being, could be captured with such little use of words, how something so economical and immaterial in structure and form could be one of the most honest ways of expression, resonating in ways certain basic human instincts are configured to be. Like blinking at a sudden burst of light. Or crying, especially in infants, to signify some sort of discomfort. And for me, it is nothing short of privilege that I'm able to harness this energy, like a spiritually rejuvenated monk returning from a solitary retreat in the mountains, to make new meanings of life, not as we know or have been taught to know it, but in the most honest way possible.

So writing poetry, personally, isn't at all a proffering of healing as much as it is a form of documentation, of archiving the most
importantly, each one of us must carve that which we need to move to the next hours with some lightness. If we can be within our personal worlds better than we were in the moment past then it is alright, you know? I find the idea of poetry as one of the basic units of existence really powerful. I mean, yes, poetry is in all things. And truly, in recognizing this, our lives become fuller and meaningful.

And a lot of the human experience is about meaning-making. So when we see poetry all around us, we make the meaning of ourselves and lives potent and significant, and sometimes that is all we need to go through this strange beautiful messy thing called life.

On meaning-making, what meanings have you discovered or created about your person-hood and experiences with mental illness, through and in poetry? And the bigger view, the meaning of life itself?

JK: Well, meaning is something I still struggle with. And this struggle is very much apparent in my poetry, I begin to think of it as meaning itself. My confusion is nothing new, it’s not something I’m inclined to hide. I grew up in a very Christian, very catholic household. So, I was nurtured in an environment that allowed little or no questioning of things deemed spiritual and holy. I mean, I have this memory as a boy where I asked my father where God came from, who was his father and mother, how he came to be, and he answered by telling me to watch my tongue, that asking or even thinking of such things were sacrilegious. And that, believe it or not, threw me into more confusion. I was convinced something was wrong with this God, and, in a generic sense, with living.

Over the years, as I edged towards adulthood, I, in part, deviated from the tradition of my upbringing and carved a

Gaamangwe: Relief is more than enough. It is a form of healing. But, most
niche for myself, a niche that was neither entirely influenced by the former or by the world. I began to think maybe it wasn’t the God that was the problem but the way people perceived this God. Maybe it wasn’t life but the way people chose to live it. Maybe we’re mostly the way we are as a result of the different ways we affect each other, not by some supernatural phenomenon. Poetry has been the only constant amidst the struggles with feeling displaced in a world largely built on the premise of identity. And I think what it has done is help me deal with my confusion, cartograph it best as I could. Nevertheless, I am still very much in the process of finding meaning. I believe we all are. At least, until we stop breathing.

Gaamangwe: I totally understand why the feedback from your father got you confused. Honestly, I had a similar experience. I was always asking and met with similar feedback. Religion it seems does not encourage exploration. Yet, God is the big unknown, how can we be expected to not want to explore this grand frontier?

I don’t know though if our lives are not influenced by a certain supernatural phenomenon. I see the supernatural even in what we call ordinary and mundane. From the phenomenon of night dreaming to the creation of poetry.

But yes, like you, I think meaning is ever-evolving and folding. A lot of things are always continuous, re-born and re-created in new moments. It’s all grand and fascinating.

Now, what poetry or writing projects have you been creating since winning the award?

JK: I’ve completed a collection of poems since the award. It interrogates mental illness/existential dread, longing and loss in relation to the psyche/self, to the body, to God, to family, to country, and desire. And I’ve been struggling to start a novel too.

I also serve as Poetry Editor for Praxis Magazine Online Poetry Chapbook Series, working on digital chapbook projects by poets who, I think, are nothing short of rewarding. And I really am excited about getting them published as part of the series of which I’m a pioneer.

Gaamangwe: I am excited to read your collection of poems as soon as it gets published. It explores my favorite topics! I am also happy for your role as a poetry editor. We need more poetry chapbooks published. New voices, new perspectives and new understandings of our human experience. JK, thank you so much for joining me here. I am forever shifted.

JK: Thank you, Gaamangwe. For your kind words. For your insightful comments/questions. I will make sure to send you signed copies when it’s published. I really enjoyed having this conversation with you. And I wish you well in all your present and future endeavours. Cheers.
Sisonke Msimang is the author of Always Another Country: A memoir of exile and home. She is a South African writer whose work is focussed on race, gender and democracy. She has written for a range of international publications including the New York Times, the Washington Post, The Guardian, Newsweek and Al Jazeera.

This conversation took place between a green bedroom in Gaborone, Botswana and a city in Australia by Skype.
Gaamangwe: Congratulations on winning the Brittle Paper’s inaugural Essay Award! How was your experience when you won?

Sisonke: It was wonderful especially because I didn’t know that there was going to be an award when I wrote the piece for Africa is a Country. When the shortlist was announced, I looked at the other people in the shortlist and I thought, ‘There is no way that I’m going to win. That’s nice for them to include me!’ and then I won and I was as surprised as everyone. It was amazing.

Gaamangwe: That is great. Your essay was illuminating. Let’s time-travel to when you wrote it. I am sure it was inspired by events happening that time period but I am interested in what was the impetus of the essay?

Sisonke: For most of us who are interested in writing, particularly people who are doing interesting and intellectual work in our continent, Chimamanda is an important figure. I have been reading and thinking about her for a long time. I was also thinking about this whole idea of #blackgirlmagic and #blackgirlexcellence, and how burdensome it came be. Chimamanda in so many ways embodies the idea of a black woman who has taken up space in powerful and important ways. She is someone who is admired by many but also someone who bears the burden of that admiration because in some ways she is the only one of that stature. It’s a very large burden to carry. So I combined the two ideas because I have been suspicious and critical of what the term black girl magic might actually mean in relation to the stereotype of the strong black woman. Black women are always expected to achieve. We are expected to take and take and always be strong and show our strengths. I think that hides a lot of our vulnerabilities and someway this feeds into the idea of black girl magic.

Gaamangwe: Yes, and when the criticism comes, it comes in an exaggerated and harsh manner especially for black women. Chimamanda has experienced both the celebration and the criticism. It’s at a point where everything that she says is under scrutiny. It’s really harmful.

I found it powerful that you paired Chimamanda with the #blackgirlmagic. I realized, while reading the essay, that I was not really using the hashtag consciously, and so I was not cognitively aware of what I was implying with it, let alone what the politics around it are. I have pictures where I am standing there doing nothing related to excellence whatsoever but #blackgirlmagic it. I had to check myself out on that.

Sisonke: That’s right. What I try to do with my writing and criticism is to point something out so that we are conscious and thinking of it. However, I am not of the school of thought that says because we have a critique, it means we must stop. I love the #blackgirlmagic. I am critical of something so that I can use it in ways that works best
for me. For example, people read a cigarette pack and know what’s in it and they can still choose to smoke that cigarette and I am not going to hate them, right? So I feel like there is a lot in criticism especially this days where everyone is woke and conscious about ‘being the way they are suppose to be’ and I really don’t want my intellectual observations to stop people from being who they are. I want it to be productive so that people can reflect and think about it and obviously use that information the way they feel they need to. I did not write the essay to judge but rather I was saying it is important to think about things. If you want to use the hashtag, have that consciousness and you go girl!

Gaamangwe: I agree. I definitely found reading your essay, learning about the origin of the #blackgirlmagic and engaging with the nuances of it empowering. I now use it with intention. I also think it’s important to look at the meanings and duality of things and make decisions from there.

In the essay you wrote: There are many forces arrayed against the very people black girl magic was conjured to protect and defend. Perhaps then, it is time to accept that creating new possibilities doesn’t happen magically. The work of imagining new futures and shaping alternate trajectories does not belong to a few glammed up spokespersons.

That second line was interesting line for me because I would have thought creating new possibilities happens magically.

Sisonke: Here I meant that one of the problems of the idea of magic is that its linked to this idea of strength. Somehow, genetically black women are strong. We just emerge in this world with attitude and this ability to take more and more work. And if you believe that, you overestimate the quality and effort it takes for achievement to happen. And so I don’t want us to unwittingly buy into ideas about us. Its like different parts of the coin.

That on the one hand we are strong like slaves and we can take more whipping, more lashings, more, more and more. And on the other hand, we are made that way. We are built that way. So the black woman who achieves becomes; that’s just how they are. That’s what they do. Rather than just like anybody else, just like a white man who works hard to build his empire, so too has Serena Williams worked hard to build her empire, so too has Michelle Obama. There is nothing innate that’s magical that makes us do well. Just like there is nothing innate that makes us do bad. And that’s the stuff that stereotype are made of right? And just because its a positive one, it doesn’t mean it’s not damaging to us. That’s what I meant on this idea. Why do we call it magic? We call it magic because it just seems like we are naturally like that. Yet we work for it.

Gaamangwe: So it’s a sort of a bypassing. Its an empowering word but it can also bypass the work that women actually do.

Sisonke: Yes. The nice side of it is ‘look how amazing they are’ and the dark side of it is ‘look how much they can take.’

Gaamangwe: Yes. We are having this conversation on how when a woman shares their experience with violence, especially domestic violence, everyone says ‘wow, you are so strong.’ The first instinct is to celebrate how the black woman has endured the pain and the violence rather than ask why that had to happen in the first place.

Sisonke: That’s the same concept. Look how strong she is rather than why was it happening.

Gaamangwe: On the other side, everything
that women go through is made to be this magical thing. Oh you are a mother? That is so divine that you went through that experience. And it is divine but it can be traumatizing. And that’s pretty much the response to every aspect of our life.

Sisonke: Yes, nobody wants to tell the truth about the pain. I talked about this in my book. I talk about the experience of becoming a mother for the first time and realizing how it fundamentally changes your life and wondering why nobody ever told me.

Gaamangwe: Because we are made to feel shame when we say wow, this is actually terrible or actually I worked hard for this. Everyone expects it to be easy and so women keep that part of the narrative to themselves.

Congratulations on publishing your book! How has the experience been like so far?

Sisonke: It’s been a great journey. It was hard to write because with the first book its intimidating because you don’t know if you can finish it and how long it’s going to take. Everything feels new. I have been writing essays and articles for a while but a book felt like a very different beast. But then having it published, letting go and realizing that you did the best you could and that it’s out there in the world. That is so important. I’ve just been so grateful with the fact that anyone is reading it. Let alone the fact that the commentaries have been so positive and that women, Africans resonated with a lot of the experiences in the book. That’s been really, really humbling, amazing and beyond what I have ever thought.

Gaamangwe: That’s amazing! That’s every writer’s dream. I am happy for you. Thank you for joining me here Sisonke.
Megan Ross was born in Johannesburg in 1989. She is a writer, journalist and designer, as well as the author of Milk Fever (uHlanga), and several short stories which have won numerous awards, including the Brittle Paper Award for Fiction in 2017. Megan is also an Iceland Writers Retreat Alum, and currently lives in East London with her partner and son. Her first book, a collection of poems called Milk Fever, was published by uHlanga earlier this year.

This conversation took place between a green bedroom in Gaborone, Botswana and East London by Email.

Interview by Gaamangwe Mogami
A Dialogue With
Megan Ross

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THE ASCENSION OF AFRICA’S STORYTELLERS

favourite literary platform, and I have since appreciated how Ainehi and Oto rally around the writers they feature. There is a real sense of community in the online African literary sphere, and I'm grateful to have written something that was worthy of its recognition.

Gaamangwe: I agree, Brittle Paper has created a community that reflects and allows the African literary world to see and connect with itself and each other. I remember the first time I read your story. I read it and stared into space for a few minutes. I tried to get back to my work but could not. I was so shifted. And to this day I can't exactly say what it is that shifted me. That day I went to sleep early. Your story haunted me. I think I probably saw a little bit of myself in it. Not so much the theme of pregnancy, abortion and motherhood but falling in love in a foreign country. Your articulation felt so familiar. The tenderness, the distance and the proximity, feeling alive and outside oneself. I know what that's like. And it was personally refreshing to see your narrative.

Let's talk about what in the story was most of yourself. The origin and inspiration of this creation and what pulled you to write this story?

Megan: I began the story after swimming lengths in the pool at my condo. It was a typical Bangkok evening: loud, smoggy, gorgeous. I feel most at home in water, and when I went up 20 floors to my apartment I sat down to write and in that moment it felt less like writing and more like channeling. It was as if I had become a conduit for this story. I remember sitting on my couch, staring out at the vast Bangkok skyline, and inviting this narrative into my life, this story that actually preempted my own pregnancy six months later.

In all this time, between swimming, and finishing writing, I had not spoken a word to another human being. Even the word “farang” means foreigner, but I think the most astonishing part of this word and the story that

Gaamangwe: Congratulations once again for winning the Brittle Paper Fiction Award! What did receiving this award mean to you at the time?

Megan: It’s difficult to describe how pivotal the timing of this award was for my confidence. I had had a difficult year; a lot of loss, chronic stress, relationship difficulties, postpartum depression—and despite feeling buoyed by the odd publication, I really did have terrible imposter syndrome. Winning the award for the story that I wrote, that specific story, was great validation, considering how much of myself I wrote into the story, and how personal the imagery and narrative was to me.

Brittle Paper had for a long time been my
the idea that writers are both conduits and seers.

I agree, I’ve also never read or watched stories/experiences of abortion in that light. A much truer reflection of what every woman who’s ever experienced an unplanned pregnancy feels and thinks.

I can imagine the shock and fear that came up for you during the discovery of your pregnancy especially in a foreign country. But to look, weigh and feel through the endless possibilities that the crossroads in our lives bring is vital. It is our lives after all. But our patriarchal society has such rigid ideologies when it comes to women bodies.

In your discovery, what possibilities did you have to feel through before choosing to have your son? I always think that the shape of our demons are half-personal and half-collective. So perhaps, I am interested in all that informed your demons with regards to this important decision? And then there is healing; why did healing come to you after getting selected for Short Story Day Africa shortlist?

Megan: I’m really excited by that idea—of writers being conduits. Writing forms part of my spiritual practice as much as it is informed by my spiritual beliefs. I also, strangely, felt as if my grandmothers were with me toward the end of writing my poetry collection, which is interesting, given that the last poem I wrote was about them, and that toward the end of the editing process, my energy had begun to lag.

After my first gynae appointment, when my pregnancy of six weeks was confirmed, I went for a typical Sunday lunch at an Irish bar in Silom. I had cried and cried and cried in the gynae’s room: after asking her what my options were, almost to script, she...
abortions are illegal. I’m not exactly sure what my decision might have been if it were legal. I might have very well decided to keep my son. But it is in the freedom of having choices, and in the act of choosing, that one is empowered. To have that ripped away from me by a foreign state, that was essentially telling me 12000km from home what I could not do to my uterus, broke me.

I never had a choice. Not a real one. Considering an illegal abortion, or having to find one covertly, without people knowing, or having support, is no choice.

The shock, that was one thing. The disappointment, my own, and that I feared would be my family’s, was the worst. When I saw that positive test, it felt as if I had been living under a guillotine all my life and that it had suddenly, finally, fallen. As a woman who has a womb and ovaries, and is fertile, and was having heterosexual sex, it was always a possibility, ever since I became sexually active. The fear of pregnancy is something that looms largely in young women’s lives, and is used as a scare tactic in everything from sexual and reproductive health education to getting people to use condoms. So, on one hand, there was this uncanny relief, as if what I had suspected all along had finally met me, head on, but also, sheer horror. It was January, the new work year had just begun, my boyfriend, who, then, had only come over to visit me, was leaving in six days. It was the worst possible timing. And yet, if I am honest, I had experienced the most eerie thing only weeks before: I’d been walking home from work and I suddenly heard this voice in my head. It was quite loud, and seemed to resonate, and reverberate, as if it was being spoken into a beautiful cathedral and not my mind, and all it said was, “Surrender.” I’ve never said this in an interview, before, but it was part of the reason I eventually ended up not pursuing an illegal abortion. I felt, quite naively, in fact (I look back with fondness for the girl who was so naive, in a motherly way, I find it cute), that this was meant to be, and I was going to jump right into this no matter how crazy or wild it was. And in retrospect, it was an absolutely wild decision to make. I was 25, living in Bangkok. Who was I to become a mom so young, who only four years earlier had left university, who lived for weekends, for being completely and utterly noncommittal; and all of this before I’d accomplished anything I set out to do in my life: before I’d traveled more, or studied towards a masters degree, or done any of the number of things I believed I was entitled to do.

I think that it’s important we recognise how paradoxical this entire experience can be. And how several emotions, seemingly at-odds with one another, can co-exist. For instance, one of the most painful parts, if not the most painful part, of postpartum depression, is wanting to be a good mother, and longing to feel the intensity of a mother’s love, and to find joy in motherhood, but being prevented from doing so. My recovery from postpartum depression isn’t complete; I still am depressed but it’s one that manifests outside of my mothering. I’ve been travelling so much this year that each moment I have with Oli is an absolute gift. I am immeasurably grateful for my son. Each day I feel like the luckiest mom alive. Oliver sleeps with me every night, sometimes nose-to-nose, and when we’re lying there, together, all warm and happy, there is not a single place I’d rather be. My little boy is my greatest, purest joy and love.

I’ll never forget writing about this in my journal. I was in at BNH hospital in Bangkok, waiting for my second scan, the one during which I would hear my seven-week-old unborn child’s heartbeat for the first time, and I wrote through how anxious and scared I was. How afraid I was to disappoint my parents, who had worked so hard for me to have the kind of opportunities I’d been given. How much fun I still wanted to have. How much I was enjoying my first year of freedom. I think that reality only hit, however, after my son was born. In retrospect, that was when the difficulties
would only really have presented themselves, but for the first year of my son’s life. I really did struggle with whether or not I was doing the right thing, and how right I was for him, as his mom. Now I know that only he could ever be my baby, and only I could ever be his mom. It’s eternal like that. We were made for each other and in a way, I think we’ve always been together, in some or other form. But it’s taken therapy, three manuscripts, one published book, the love and support of my boyfriend, with whom I have been on and off for ten years, and a high dose of SSRIs to get to this place. I am of course 29 now, which is a lot older, in many ways, than 25. And like you say, experiencing this crossroads is what makes us human, this is true living, it’s life! I like the way you phrase this: “the shape of our demons are half-personal and half-collective” -- I definitely agree. I think as women and daughters we carry so many of our mothers’ un-exorcised demons, and that intergenerational haunting and trauma is real. I don’t think we ever understand how much of our collective past is written into our DNA. I felt, I think, how crushing fertility can be, how paradoxically life-ending it can be for women who don’t want children and have them, or who have unplanned pregnancies. Which is a feeling eons-old. It’s ancient. It revealed a newness in the relationships I have with other women: my mother, my sister, my deceased grandmothers and foremothers. It’s interesting, to wonder what we inherit, and what we pass on.

I wrote so much of myself into Farang, and I wrote it in a voice and style that I had hoped I was capable of. Being one of the winners of the 2016 prize was pure validation. I felt as if all I had been through was worth it: that I could be a mother and a writer and nobody but me could stop me. It helped me to carry on going. It was encouraging. I felt seen.

Gaamangwe: Do you know the concept of the Oversoul? Eastern spiritual teachers and Ralph Waldo Emerson have written about it. This Whole One that exists in the world between world, where the aspect of our current personality originates from. They say the Oversoul is connected to our conscious ego and that if we are silent enough, we can hear this wise energy. The Oversoul overlooks our life within times, sees all the possibilities, and like a loving mother sends us guiding messages. I imagine that Surrender word coming from your Oversoul. The Oversoul is also what we call Spirit guides or Ancestors or Inner Voice or whichever name we use to mean the wise silence within us.

Of course your son is yours and you are his mother. Its ordained and ancient and sacred that way.

That part about feeling your grandmothers with you as you wrote the last poems for Milk Fever is powerful. Every creation is a testimony for us and the people who have already left us. So of course they will come and support and revitalise your spirit because Milk Fever is an important project. I often feel that stories are not just stories. There are anointed by magic. And little pieces of what was lost now and centuries back is reborn and given a name/face again.

I am about to finish reading it now. I am seating with it, pondering and just so ever grateful that you wrote this poetry collection. How did these poems come to you?

Megan: I’ve never read about the Over-Soul until you mentioned it, although when I did read about it, now, it all rang quite true, and I would say it definitely forms part of my spiritual framework and outlook. I truly agree with you regarding our ancestral connections, and how important our life’s work is to both honour those who have gone before us as well as keep them alive, and, maybe, ingratiate them into this current world, and ourselves into their own.

Thank you for your kind words. The
bulbous, navy plants and glistening gin bottles and an arc of violet light that shimmered like mirage. It was this very particular landscape, and as they led me through it I learned more about them. I listened for what I didn't hear while they were still alive. Marcia’s abuse at the hands of cruel Catholic nuns in the convent she grew up in (her parents were alcoholic entertainers from London who more or less left her upbringing to her older sisters) and Valerie’s charismatic nature, and charm, which I have heard was simply effervescent.

I was selfish when I wrote this collection. It was for me, and I wrote as if it was never going to see the light of day. It was only once I had a full manuscript of fifty-something poems that I thought I might submit it to the uHlanga reading period. I don’t know if I wrote it the right way, or if I’ve broken some artistic code in writing birth as I did, which makes demands on the reader, and insists on that respect and honour and understanding we give to war poetry, for instance, and poetic accounts of other heroisms. I am grateful that it seems to resonate with readers, especially women and people who struggle with the reality of their body, their gender, the expectations placed on both.

To this day, if I think too long about my son’s birth, my body recalls the labour, that grinding pain in my pelvis that was due to my baby being in a transverse lie, the ghost pangs of my cesarean. The poems have kept me safe, in a way. They carried the load of that whole unspeakable mess in their printed type and their spoken recitation.

There were poems that were written like origin stories; they were almost primal, in a way. And then there were poems like Glass Lives, which seemed to come from somewhere else entirely, somewhere otherworldly, in a process that can only be described as channeling. Glass Lives was a hallucinogenic experience. It is not a poem that rests on the page. It feels more like a short film I simply recorded. Each time I read it, it is like pressing play. In it, the experiencing of this poem, I literally saw my grandmothers in my mind’s eye: two women who never liked each other or knew each other well, but who both had their addictions, and the marriage of their children in common, sitting on a verandah in this strange, dry, planetscape. There were poems all have different origins: some, like Mourning Song, were written with urgency after the birth of my son. That particular poem was a private one; I wrote without an artistic agenda, so to speak, I never thought that it would see the light of day, or that it would become something other than what it was to me, which was a soundless cry for help, perhaps. A survival mechanism.

I felt as if the feelings I had were so taboo. Even when I researched postpartum depression and birth trauma, I found diluted accounts of the thoughts and emotions of women who had been through similar experiences. Nobody was speaking in plain English. Or simply saying I fucking hate this. Or I want to die. I’d rather die. So, that poem, and the poems around birth, were means of expressing a form of violence that is largely kept a secret. And I didn’t want to be quiet anymore.

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I suppose there were also poems that wrote themselves into existence without my even knowing what they were, at the time. Or how they would be fleshed out or take shape.

Gaamangwe: I agree, Milk Fever demands respect and honor and understanding. Every time after reading a poem, I pause and ponder more on it. There is something ethereal and otherworldly about your poems. I read Glass Lives and I felt like I was within a portal, where what is words and what is vividly magical blurs. You are an alchemist Megan. And I am ever so grateful that you wrote about motherhood in this way. It’s only this year that I feel that I am unlearning and relearning about motherhood. From works and conversations
like this. And it is so important and necessary that we create a world for ourselves where the true accounts of our human experience are fully expressed.

How has been your experience since publishing the book? And what are some of the things your readers have said that are shifting you as a writer?

Megan: Glass Lives is a significant poem for me. Thank you for reflecting on it, and for offering me space to do the same about my own work. Motherhood has always interested me. I can’t say why exactly, perhaps it is because of my own complex relationship with my mom, and spending my childhood, and now adulthood too, I suppose, trying to press all the imagined and recorded pieces of my gran together to paint the woman who was my mother’s mother. I don’t know why it’s so important to me. Sometimes I think that eldest daughters can never outgrow their role of family peacekeeper, that they, we, are a lepidopterist’s dream, these butterflies who press themselves into the pin and velvet of immobility and immortality.

Anyway, I digress.

Releasing Milk Fever has been equal parts wonderful and frustrating. I’m an impatient person and waiting on reviews and criticism has had me on tenterhooks! But seeing how it has been received, so far, and seeing readers’ comments on social media and goodreads has been unreal. Like having a baby and then having nothing to do with it after while everybody else has a chance to raise her. Many, many people have expressed feelings of being seen and heard upon reading it. Mother’s across the country have emailed and called and texted to tell me how strongly they identify with my experience, and that they’re grateful for having certain images and lines to hold on to. I must admit to being shocked at how relatable the ‘personal’ behind the poems has been for people; how many readers, as far flung as London, Amsterdam, Joburg and East London, have focused on my experience of birth and pregnancy and motherhood. I suppose this could be because that by the time I had gone through the writing and editing stages, I had moved through so many layers of my experience to the point where I felt as if the poems are themselves new entities and not representations of my life.

I am grateful for feeling so recognized. Just last night I was a guest speaker at a corporate event and afterwards about thirty women came to tell me how touched they were and how strongly they identified with the isolation and fear I described. So, right now, it’s an interesting experience. I feel torn between the poetry and the personal. There are moments when I would love to just discuss the work, and other writers’ work. But I keep reminding myself that it’s okay to be relatable. It’s okay to write something that speaks to people. That something can be literary and relatable.

In terms of readers’ reactions, I have mostly just been bowled over by the positive response. Friends who I have lost touch with have whatsapped me to say they cried when they read my work. An academic, a man, stopped me the other day to say how enlightened he suddenly felt after being immersed in the book, and essentially, how ashamed he was that it took reading an unfiltered, gory account, or, interpretation, of motherhood to empathize with mothers and women.

That was powerful.

I’m always going to be a student, and am excited to see what critics have to say and what criticism and responses - negative and positive - await me. I can’t wait to learn more. And grow.

Gaamangwe: Megan, I really enjoyed talking to you this past month. If it was up to me, we
could talk forever! I love how you are a storyteller with everything. I think that is what makes you so relatable. I wish you so much light and sacred unfolding and tons of engagement with Milk Fever. You’ve set the bar so high with your debut book! Just magic.
A Dialogue With 

Hawa Jande Golakai

Hawa Jande Golakai was born in Frankfurt, Germany, and spent her childhood in her homeland of Liberia, later living in several African countries when her family fled the civil war. Her crime debut, The Lazarus Effect, was nominated for three literary awards, and published in the UK in May 2016 by Cassava Republic Press. Hawa was listed by the Hay Festival as one of the thirty-nine most promising African writers under the age of forty, and her work was included in the Africa39 anthology published by Bloomsbury. She works as a medical immunologist and health consultant in Monrovia.

This conversation took place between a green bedroom in Gaborone, Botswana and Monrovia, Liberia by Skype.

Interview by Gaamangwe Mogami
Gaamangwe: Hawa, congratulations for winning the Brittle Paper Creative Nonfiction Award. How did it feel winning this award with a story you wrote two years ago?

Hawa: I was floored. After I’ve written a piece, I tend to have a strong inkling about the work but I wasn’t so sure with this piece. I was genuinely surprised by how well-received it was - first in Granta magazine and when it was published in Safe House. I don’t normally do personal pieces because I am a fiction lover. I like to reflect and deflect things through the lens of fiction and fantasy, the unreal. When I was asked to write the piece I was reluctant but I agreed because Ellah Wakatama Allfrey asked me to do it. She was really convincing and I could not say no to her. She was unbelievably good at pulling those emotional threads from me such that when the piece was done I was mentally and emotionally spent. I cried and laughed. I remembered every bit of the rage and comedy I felt during Ebola while writing that piece. So when I was nominated for the Brittle Paper award, I was pleasantly stunned. The quality of work nominated for the inaugural awards was stratospheric - the nomination was honour enough. Then I won!

Gaamangwe: I am glad you won because the same emotions that you felt while you were writing I felt them as a reader. It was this pendulum of emotions. I would be enthralled and sad in the moment, imagining what that must have felt like and then I will just start laughing because you’d just put it in a very hilarious way.

Hawa: Humor is my defense mechanism. I’ve used it for so long that I wonder if I’m too dependent on it. I was trying to write a Winnie Mandela tribute recently and it was a battle to completely steer clear. The piece ended up having a tinge of dry humor anyway. It’s something of a trademark. I think I’ll keep it.

Gaamangwe: I think looking at the subject of the piece, the humor, as much as it can distance us from the trauma, it also added an edge to it. It made it very human.

Hawa: It really did. In Africa, in addition to us having a very immediate outlook on life, we have a highly fatalistic outlook. Like we say here in Liberia; “if you can’t laugh, you will cry.” The two things are interchangeable because if you focus on the negative every day of your life and your life is already difficult as it is, you’ll end up in a mental home for depression. So create your own bright side. That fatalistic humor helped bring a dire crisis to life. Liberia was here long before Ebola descended on us. In the midst of this crisis, people held onto moments of lightness in their daily lives because they had to. Life within our borders got so bleak you’d think, “well it can’t get any worse than this”, and you just ploughed on ahead. The extraordinary became liveable for us, then ordinary, and then - even more disturbingly - sometimes boring. The incredible relies only on frequency - only if you don’t see something a lot, it will blow your mind. Before the crisis I knew my city well. During and after, I developed an ‘anything goes’ mentality. It was taxing to meet others coming from a completely different trajectory and have to explain “I don’t know another reality, this is my normal.”

Gaamangwe: Yes we do live with traumas but as you said we also have lightness and I think this is what we hold on to more than anything. But also this is our lives after all.

I think your piece was powerful because it really articulated your experience as a Liberian who went through a crisis which was private for you but your country people and other West-African individuals understood this crisis and were experiencing it and so a very public crisis.

It’s an important narrative because usually when people think Ebola, the narratives coming out are about the grimness of it, and that is how you are seen by the world,
as ‘those people who are from that country that has Ebola’ and that becomes your identity.

Hawa: It’s true, as Africans we have accepted to carry around passports stamped with stories that are not really our own. Stories of how the world sees us even though it’s not how we view ourselves, and most of those stories are macabre, grim and usually not nuanced. But then you talk to the people on the ground, the Africans who actually live in their countries, and a different story unwinds. I’ve lived on this continent all my life so I listen with great care to how stories are reported about “African developments and crises” - in Liberia, Zimbabwe, Kenya. Stories can contain us or be about us, but somehow we’re never the main ingredient. It’s allowable for us to be consumed by people who don’t necessarily understand us. The nobility in this new brand of “African literature” is to normalize, to show that what humans struggle with is truly the same everywhere. People are dirtbags and angels and everything in between, all over the world. Our perspective is no different.

Gaamangwe: Yes I agree. Our lives are not one dimensional. How was the process of writing this piece?

Hawa: It happened quite organically, and I’m glad I was approached to do it quickly instead of having too much time to get in my head about it. I’m the sort of writer who chronicles on the downslope - I have great recall and eye for detail, but I don’t write things down immediately after they happen. Every writer has their own process - I’m an aftermath chronicler. I bottle and pickle the emotions while they’re still fresh, digestible but not raw. This piece especially deserved that. I do my best work when the atmosphere, the smell, the cloak and the feel of things is still present.

I was asked to do the piece not too long after I got back to Liberia from Ghana. The finished piece “Fugee” didn’t mention how I stayed in Ghana for several weeks because I couldn’t get a flight back to Liberia. So I just sat in a region outside of Accra called Kasoa, with very little money and far too much time. Thinking, marinating in my emotions and the sweltering heat, talking to myself. I was alone in a large house, the home of a family friend, so conditions were ripe for me to get deeply weird in my head. That whole period was like a fever dream.

I thought of my recent trip - I’d left Monrovia for Port Harcourt, stayed on for Ake festival, then flew back to Accra to wait until the world deemed it safe for Liberian borders to reopen. I was grieving at the time over the death of my cousin from Ebola. While I was in Nigeria I was messed up; I loved being a part of all this literary talent but I also felt wrung out. I’d experience wild sways of emotion, go to the bathroom and cry or laugh, wash my face and go out and rejoin festivities. I didn’t really know what I was going through, just that I had to power through it.

I remember one such Nigerian experience: reporters on Ake festival were doing a promotion of all the authors like me who had interviews and literary panels. There was a mini press conference that was held and all the media that spoke to me asked me about Ebola. Some of them didn’t ask me about my work, it was all Ebola. How were Liberians handling Ebola and how Liberia was one of the countries helping to spread Ebola. I was thunderstruck. During one interview I excused myself (again for the bathroom) and when I got in there, instead of tearing up, I started laughing hysterically. Like, “what the hell was that? What am I doing here, seriously?” Complete out of body experience.

Those moments came in handy in the writing process that followed months later. Ellah emailed me, requesting a creative nonfiction piece with the Commonwealth Writers Trust. She was clear she didn’t want me to do a verbal autopsy of the crisis; she wanted me to make it breathe for her, take her through
When you talk about the Ebola virus and you try to liquify the pain, it’s hard to stay away from the word zombie. Aside from the flight I left on with my family in 1990, that was the most eerily silent airport experience I’ve ever had. As a speculative fiction writer, I tried not to imagine what could’ve happened had ONE person on that flight suddenly morphed into a braineater…..

Gaamangwe: That sounds so unreal but it was real life for you and everyone who went through that. And now, how is life for Liberians post the Ebola crisis?

Hawa: What is life like in Liberia now? Well, immediately afterwards it was devastating. I don’t know the actual death toll in the afflicted region - Liberia, Guinea, Sierra Leone, parts of Ivory Coast and Nigeria - but it was tens of thousands. And the disease struck every aspect of humanity, infrastructure, border control and diplomatic trust, health budgets, all of it. That’s incredibly tough for an already poor nation to bounce back from. But Liberians are a very resilient breed. The sky fell on us, we all watched in terror as it happened and there wasn’t much we could do. Yet we survived. Massive amounts of donor funding went into the sweet hereafter of mismanaged funds; I doubt we’ll ever learn where most of it went. Yet we’re still rebuilding.

Liberia is recovering and life has returned to normal for most. So many health measures we have I believe, I hope, we will keep. Hand-wash stations in public buildings, temperature and visual check of passengers at airports, the progress with vaccine trials. The moral learned from our saga is you can’t take the piss when it comes to forces you can’t see, can’t bargain with or pay off - a virus can lay waste to everything you cherish. And it has no respect; nothing that’s fighting for its own survival can afford respect or decency. There’s a hardcore lesson there that humans can learn from. Nature fights
dirty—stay on Her good side.

Gaamangwe: Thank you so much for writing your story it really helped a lot of us to really understand the inner aspect of experiencing a crisis as devastating as Ebola. Thank you so much for joining me.

Hawa: Thank you Joy.