

IN MY COUNTRY, WE'RE ALL CROSSDRESSERS



A COLLECTION OF NIGHTMARES

BY

KANYINSOLA OLORUNNISOLA

**IN MY COUNTRY,
WE'RE ALL
CROSSDRESSERS**

Kanyinsola Olorunnisola

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Introduction

Identity. Who is that person? That one, right there, whose heritage has been severed from him by centuries of colonization, conquest, and slavery? That one, right there, who has been severed from his native language and culture? That one, born into a body with black skin, into a cradle of global racism, fed and clothed in imported culture? That one, the one whose first available language remains steeped in allusions and epithets that leave little means for describing the self without evoking racist prejudices against skin-color and cultural origin? That one, who searches in the global market to find some identity that fits, and the only identities on offer are those provided ready-to-wear by former slave-masters and colonizers? That one...in the film, in the song, in the news, in the mirror?

Identity. Kanyinsola's twenty poems examine identity, heritage, language, culture, dignity. Personal history cannot be separated from global history. In a world where racism still thrives, and the language in the mouth is adopted from cultural invaders rather than inherited down through bloodlines, the impact of slavery and colonization on personal identity cannot be seen as past tense – it is present. Present in language. Present in music. Present in politics. Present in relationships. Present in culture. Present in names used for self-reference. Present in media, news and entertainment.

Identity. Can a new one be forged? How? Where? What language can be used to construct it? Can it be forged in "the adopted tongue forced / into my mouth by capitalist boats of conquest"?

*and we walk the earth as embodiments of conflicts //
children of two cities – one borrowed, one deserted*

Identity. Once begun, is colonization ever over, or do the attacks continue, another theft of identity and dignity and culture always imminently impending, perpetually “at the mercy of those who only know my people as savages”? Can any new identity forged be trusted? “Are we a new chapter or mere plot-fillers in this story / of the white man’s quest...”? Can we rebirth ourselves, or do we merely “have the solace of gleefully living out stereotypes”?

Kaninsola’s poems cast the blazing light of an uncompromising interrogator...into his own personal experience and history, onto global experience and history as it is still being written by oppression, delusion, and denial. These poems demand answers, and the questions they ask are insistent, perceptive, and piercing:

how come only things foreign to my body make it beautiful?

Laura M Kaminski (Halima Ayuba)
May 2018

CONTENTS

Introduction.....	i
FOR THE CULTURE: AN INTRO	1
KANYIN WRITES ABOUT STRANGE DREAMS (OR THE REALISATION THAT NOTHING CAN SAVE YOU FROM FEELING DISPLACED IN YOUR OWN HOME)	2
SPEAKING MY NAME WITH AN ACCENT (OR THE POEM YOU WRITE WHEN TOLD YOUR NAME SOUNDS LIKE A KNIFE).....	4
WEIRD INTROSPECTIONS UPON SEEING THE PORTRAIT OF KUNTA	5
INTERVIEW (OR THE CHOKING WEIGHT OF SIMPLICITY)	6
PORTRAIT I: DISPARITY (EXPLAINING MY PAINTING TO FELA).....	7
@blackboy199_tweets_about_unease	8
HOLLYWOOD ALWAYS KILLS THE BLACK BOY	10
CHICKEN SLAUGHTERING AS THERAPY	11
HOW TO RUIN A FIRST-DATE.....	12
MATHEMATICAL EQUATION FOR THE MYTH OF LAKUNLE ALARA	13
AFROBEAT BROKE MY HEART	14
DEFENDING MY GENERATION TO FELA.....	15
OJO THE PAN-AFRICANIST DOES PSYCHO EX-GIRLFRIEND ANALYSIS	17
BLACK WOMAN SEDUCING THE HANGMAN	18
AUDITIONING FOR THE ROLE OF LAKUNLE ALARA	19
EXCLUSIVE... WITH FELA ANIKULAPO KUTI	20
IN MY COUNTRY, WE ARE ALL CROSSDRESSERS.....	21
About the Author.....	22

FOR THE CULTURE: AN INTRO

This is how you spot a cross-dresser:

¹He wears his lips red, a testament to ²the covenant of unholy sacrifices ³made with the blood of his fathers, whose black ⁴bodies dissolved into the blueness of ⁵an ocean, he contours his face to hide ⁶the breakage, the unremoved scars of history ⁷growing beneath his skin, he draws a half ⁸circle above his eye – an uncompleted ⁹journey, he puts on a dress that does not wear his ¹⁰gender, looks in the mirror and asks: *how come only things foreign to my body make it beautiful?* ¹¹The story begins with a ship and ends ¹²with a drowning.

I'm coming home to you, Lakunle.

KANYIN WRITES ABOUT STRANGE DREAMS (OR THE REALISATION THAT NOTHING CAN SAVE YOU FROM FEELING DISPLACED IN YOUR OWN HOME)

my tongue is a path split into the feet
of two warring continents Atlantics apart,
each half-tongue cannot carry the weight
of my grandfather's songs with the newness
of such ancient wisdom – knife cannot slice water,

neither tongue can carry the majesty of my sacred name
into realms of identity; the core of my dreams,
my daylight fantasies morph slowly into dinosaurs,
a futile longing for the splendor of yester-lives,
to crawl back into the womb of time and be reborn
as the progenitor of a race so lost in the complexities of life.

NEW GENERATION

two languages war for the attention of our tongue
foreign cities take shelter in our ever-willing eyes
we carry another man's history on our bald heads
our native prayers are sent to shrines of alien gods
the disappointment of a new note after a caesura.

though life is cruel to black boys of our kind
we do have the solace of gleefully living out stereotypes
but when the sun dies, you find yourself wondering
are we a new chapter or mere plot-fillers in this story
of the white man's quest to break the world into himself?

SPEAKING MY NAME WITH AN ACCENT (OR THE POEM YOU WRITE WHEN TOLD YOUR NAME SOUNDS LIKE A KNIFE)

Kányinsólá is not the kind of music that flows
river-like with the adopted tongue forced
into my mouth by capitalist boats of conquest,
its inflections too crass and primitive
for the refined taste of Western voices

but please do not bastardise it with your accent,
it comes from a long line of men with throats full of songs,
mighty men whose stories are swallowed into the belly
of broken cultures, time crusting off their
beauty along its edges & leaving them in tatters of toneless notes,
at the mercy of those who only know my people as savages.

WEIRD INTROSPECTIONS UPON SEEING THE PORTRAIT OF KUNTA

Our dead fathers roam this house
when we sleep, snoring
into the palm of fleeting oblivion,

their memories hang on the picture frames,
but their bodies float in the spaces above us,
I felt someone claw me in my sleep last night
Ahmed, I think it was your father's father,

I think they are trying to tell us something,
maybe if we sleep less, snore less,
we will hear them, maybe they will warn us
of unforeseen battles heading our way,

sometimes I feel there is a war knocking
on our door, threatening to tear us down,
sometimes I feel the war is already inside of us
and we walk the earth as embodiments of conflicts

children of two cities – one borrowed, one deserted,
torn away from home, yet unable to leave its shores,
our fathers have the secrets to winning this war,
but they long died selling us to the white man,

may the dead never speak to the living.

INTERVIEW (OR THE CHOKING WEIGHT OF SIMPLICITY)

Can you please, state your name?

I am Kanyinsola, but sometimes I get lost in time and go by `Tunde or so stuck in my thoughts that I wear my ancestor's pseudonym like a badge – Lakunle Alara.

Did you know that my people have a ceremony just for naming newborns, assigning them destinies before they get used to their mothers' loves? But I wonder who gave my people their names, this colour the darkest of lights trapping a civilization in backwaters of doom, it is the kind of tragedy Fela crooned endlessly about. Forgive me, I have digressed, it is a side effect of loss and agitation, my people are familiar with it.

Next question.

PORTRAIT I: DISPARITY (EXPLAINING MY PAINTING TO FELA)

Three generations of men stand quietly on the edge of a lake, holding hands in a solidarity of brokenness, each pair of eyes bears its own shade of defeat, skins bathed in dusk. The first man has an open mouthful of tongues and hands the potency of a sculptor but his body is too welcoming in the way over-bright lights attract moths. We see the second man with locks between his nose and jaw, a most morbid of travesties, his body, half-drowned, half-dying, a map of scars, hands the forced coarseness of earth.

The third man has his mouth split into a grin but all we see is a gaping emptiness where tongues should reside. His hands bear the notes of the conqueror's songs with unsuspecting pride, he shares nothing with the first man but lineage and that could be everything one needs.

@blackboy199_tweets_about_unease

it is 2016 and a woman is running for president, #ImWithHer runs through my timeline like whips across our grandfathers' backs, we are all eager to see what becomes of the Free World afterwards but we are instead taken back decades into decadence, our hopes Trumped into irrelevance.

it is also 2016 and Beyoncé is bashed for releasing a pro-black song, because for people like us to be proud of our skin is offensive to those who wish for us to be nothing but vestiges, dead somewhere in a dark pit or bound on a leash again #BlackHistoryMonth.

it is also 2016 and we are at unease because @negro_haters with cop badges still plant bullets in our heads and white analysts insist that @black_lives_matter should be called #AllLivesMatter, that it is

irrational for @black_ folks to fear what lurks in the night.

it is 2016 and the same fear that made the dreaming King walk through #Selma still clutches at our hearts, it still splits us into mirror images of our slave-fathers and battered mothers, we are still afraid of every reminder that this land will never love us like our mothers do, that we are aliens undeserving of hospitality. That and other terrors keeps us up at night when the world cries itself to sleep.

HOLLYWOOD ALWAYS KILLS THE BLACK BOY

Maybe poetry is just childbirth, the divine delivery of infant words splashed on wood, kicking & screaming for the stillness of wandering eyes; but why do my poems keep coming out dead? Wrinkled & black & voiceless, they look like things from a time when visions of the colour purple led to a brief exodus of the colour brown from the land of the brave.

In my dreams, a banner sings bright in the air but there are no stars spangling it, just the blood of my brothers coating the ashes & these ashes soon find their way into my lungs; with this I wake up trapped inside this prison of mortal flesh, bleeding from the nose, my room becomes home to nightfall and nineteen moons come to pay homage to my body's love of happy endings.

Don't let me die, a song without a name plays in my head.

Let us be clear, my poems look nothing like me: full of life & love & joy & life & energy & light & life. Did I say life? It is my way of saying I like being alive, though every breath is a rehearsal of a story written by men who do not look like me. Depression attracts sympathy until your best friend scrolls through your Most-Watched Movies folder: *Out of Africa*, *The Colour Purple*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Roots* & *Get Out*; calls you a recovering alcoholic living in a liquor store. Hollywood always kills the black boy, or girl. Death comes in one colour but many forms & silence is one of them, so I get ready for labour again, may it come out alive this time around.

CHICKEN SLAUGHTERING AS THERAPY

when I kill my first chicken,
the knife grazing against its throat,
i think of our brothers slaughtered
across the borders, their heads hanging
from their necks, a savage mockery of the American Dream.

i lick my lips & taste the wetness of their pain,
i imagine them screaming and kicking against
the wind like Pentecostal zealots in prayer
and wonder if their last words had felt like freedom,
i imagine them saying, "Death is souvenir in alien lands."

native soil rejects foreign bodies,
so when they fly them in, smelling like grief,
like unfulfilled dreams and unstaged rehearsals,
i run home the tears and run home my feet,
to settle down and slaughter another chicken,
to ease our brothers' disembodied suffering on earth.

HOW TO RUIN A FIRST-DATE

Tell her about home and how it is everything but home, how your country drowned in an ocean and washed ashore, found at the feet of a foreigner's lake.

Do not compliment her hair, it will only remind you of your mother, and do not forget to tell her about that, how the woman who birthed you screamed as the rebels set fire to your village, her sweet scent going up in flames, how your skin is a relic of scars and loss, your heart the dwelling place of demons. Tell her that you are a boy from a lost country, that you have been looking for love across borders and she is your latest attempt to escape the edge of brokenness.

MATHEMATICAL EQUATION FOR THE MYTH OF LAKUNLE ALARA

And so goes the myth that I existed once
[it is a popular story in the dreams I live in],
my name being the lyrics to a divine song
of wealth and all things desirable to men.

fact x:

La+ kun+ le = wealth is plentiful in this house/come have a taste of this
abundance

Alara = one with style/come watch my glory soar

La + kun + le ≠ I have too much, come take it all away

Alara ≠ one who is ready to lose his honour

fact y

Europe = the home of the pilgrimage of black slaves

Europe = the place where ships are made

Atlantic ocean = willing accomplice.

solution (xy)

$x \times y$ = Lakunle is bound in chains

$x \times y$ = Alara becomes a nigger

centuries later

$xy + \text{time (300years)} + \text{a little bit of myth (m)} = \text{Kanyinsola Olorunnisola (k)}$

recap

$(x \times y) + 300 + m = k$

AFROBEAT BROKE MY HEART

Sometimes I wake up and my body tastes like rum, that is how you know I have gone looking for love again from women who do not know how to exist in daylight. That is not the point. Those mornings when my head hurts from a hangover and my splintered heart gathers itself back into my split-open chest, the memory of the nocturnal partying pours into my skull.

Afrobeat blasting, disco lights flashing, girls lush in pop dresses, a faithless mixture of genres, something old died here tonight.

With all distractions quieted down by moments of aloneness, I allow myself the indulgence of musings.

The story goes that a song got stuck in Fela's throat, he turned it into a discography which haunted a generation, not all music is meant for entertainment, some are created to pacify a burning country or to set fire to the garment of unruly gods, Afrobeat was my love but it became something unrecognisable, its mouth full of the wrong languages [it now has a name for each of its many frivolities] an accomplice to the lustful swaying of sweaty bodies crashing into one another and birthing a nation of desecrators.

DEFENDING MY GENERATION TO FELA

You have to understand that some of us are like water, only impurities give us colour, imperfection is the only spine our backs have ever known. Look, beauty is not found in temples and shrines but in the home of sinful men like us, you say we failed but what happened is not a subjective curse, we were born into the mouth of sharks, our names were written with the tongue and accent of foreigners, we are lost but one needs to be lost to find his home sometimes.

I saw my ex last night at a cafeteria, bones of other men stuck between her teeth, she tried pulling them out but her mouth broke into a carnival of blood filled with the genes of strange men crumpled into such little space. I crawled out of such space a lifetime ago, perhaps that is what we both are great at – loving too many things at once that we have to

swallow as much as we can,
you with women and me with
languages and stolen cultures. I
don't mean to be rude but I
think you should stop haunting
me in my sleep, stop calling my
name on the radio, stop
burgling your way into my
poems, they are not yours,
they are the only solace boys
like me have when the thought
of my life as a contradiction
reminds me: we are all
consequences of history.

OJO THE PAN-AFRICANIST DOES PSYCHO EX-GIRLFRIEND ANALYSIS

¹Trust that she'll come back, girls like her never ²truly leave, they hide inside walls and bedroom ³rugs, do not mistake that creaking door for ⁴the rude whisperings of the wind. When you put the ⁵TV on Supersport, she will appear ⁶as an Arsenal cheerleader, when you ⁷google porn on your laptop, she will pop ⁸up like an unsolicited ad. Even ⁹when Pastor fleets your house with holy water, ¹⁰your home smelling of frankincense and un-¹¹wanted things, she will add you to her Commonwealth ¹²of ex-lovers, set your bed aflame with ¹³mirrors until you begin to see yourself ¹⁴the same way she sees you – as another ¹⁵colony, another conquered continent.

BLACK WOMAN SEDUCING THE HANGMAN

¹I have had my whole life to be beautiful, ²built a home out of my dark braided hair ³to keep men like you safe from *oyinbo* ⁴girls, taste my juicy skin, it was made from ⁵the blackest of berries, my fattened bosom ⁶is a custodian of fallen angels ⁷who stumbled into temptation, my eyes ⁸glisten from tears that buried my brothers ⁹and my loud voice was born from shouting to ¹⁰God on Sunday and all other mornings ¹¹to keep me from your thirst. But what was I ¹²thinking? Niggers cannot escape the lust ¹³of the hangman wearing police uniforms ¹⁴or Wallstreet suits.

AUDITIONING FOR THE ROLE OF LAKUNLE ALARA

I have travelled through stories,
through my grandfather's songs,
the age-defying tide of memory
haunts me into a grim pilgrim
in search of your light of self.

Give me your name, your skin,
let me relive this life once more
before the Western wind blows
us both into the hungry Atlantic
where the mockery of night finds us.

We are but one and the same
parted by a cosmic deficiency,
an unbroken ancestral chord.

EXCLUSIVE...WITH FELA ANIKULAPO KUTI

Fela takes me to the river for a bath,
asks me to unclothe myself of my prejudices,
to unlearn the truths of foreign gods,
dive head-first into the water with my fears ashore,
communing with dust like all dead elements must do,

he begins washing my head with his lathers of music,
says men like us must learn to be like water,
chains cannot break water, boats cannot sink water,
so that if by chance they come again to conquer us
in our own fatherland with their mother tongue,
we must become a river – may they never walk on us.

IN MY COUNTRY, WE ARE ALL CROSSDRESSERS

Because the colonizers broke our world into
irreconcilable halves stretched further apart
by motion & something quite immovable,
we stand amidst the ruins, the rancid music
of fate poured into our elegant bodies &
these bodies become hosts, an intersection
of conflicting cultures.

Our languages were burnt out of our mouths
& the smoke snuffed out every memory of
our fathers, our native songs of water pulled
out of our throats & replaced with a flaming
tune.

I mean to say, that in my country, we dwell
in bodies not our own, we give our children
languages which do not know how to make
home of their tongues. But that is not the
real tragedy. What makes an ocean of my
eyes is the unsuspecting manner in which
we wear this monstrosity with a dangerous
swagger, how we have trained our tongues
to only sweeten at the taste of lands which
will never see us as anything more than
just another consequence of conquest.

About the Author

Kanyinsola Olorunnisola is a poet, essayist & writer of fiction. His work interrogates anxiety, broken lineage, insanity, grief, existential torment & the black body as a warfront – things typical happy people write about. He has an unhealthy obsession with Fela Kuti, James Baldwin, Ziggy Stardust, the Beat Generation & Button Poetry.

His nightmares have appeared in *Bodega*, *Brittle Paper*, *Kalahari Review*, *Bombay Review*, *Lunaris Review*, *African Writer*, *Spring.org*, *Bird's Thumb*, *Gyroscope Review* & elsewhere. He is the founder of the SPRINNG Literary Movement.

He won the 2016 Albert Jungers Poetry Prize, Brigitte Poirson Poetry Contest and the 2017 Fisayo Soyombo Inter-varsity Essay Competition. He spends his pastime listening to protest music, reading fake news, designing ads and tweeting about Trump to his 32 followers @K_tops.