



# ENTRAPMENT

poems  
by Stanley Princewill McDaniels

# **ENTRAPMENT**

Stanley Princewill McDaniels

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## Foreword by Otosirize Obi-Young

In its preoccupation with the very personal—internal void, wanderlust, suicidal tendencies, masturbation, love, sex—the poems here find McDaniels in a tradition of emerging young Nigerian poets digging into the Self, into something very similar to, but more visceral than, Fiston Mwanza Mujila’s idea of “the geography of hunger.” This tradition, remarkable in its introspection and deliberate in its decentralisation of the societal, is best represented by two poets whose chapbooks were, coincidentally, published in this series last year: Romeo Oriogun, in the way the political is bent to his personal; and J.K. Anowe, who, by pegging his work in the psyche, is this tradition’s finest exponent, and the one with whom McDaniels shares kinship.

The poems here probe two major paths: self-search and self-pleasure. In the opener, “Persecution,” there is a search for freedom, a need for reassurance in existence, and in this search, as though functional, the persona is also a wanderer, propelled by wanderlust. “Everybody thinks I’m a false god,” he ruminates, his belief seemingly anchored in an alternate conviction. Then he stands in front of an oncoming vehicle and the poem ends, and we are left to infer whether or not he dies. This chain of void birthing lack of conviction birthing questions birthing resignation runs through the chapbook and, in a world he cannot relate to except through himself, keeps the persona trapped.

In “The Bottom Line of Loss,” he reflects: “Sometimes, to move on is to give up.” In “In a Blue Room with Two Inverted Chairs,” a voice that might be his as easily as it could be the author’s narrates the suicide of “a boy/ walking to the edge of a bridge/ He is the relic of a country/ wrecked by war.” In “Paranoia,” in which “A river runs behind the building/ on top of which a boy is preparing to jump off” and “Anne locked herself in her garage with/ her car running & lit a cigarette in hand,” the persona envies others not merely the freedom of death but the ability to decide to take their lives. In “Black Birds and Grey (Poem XLVI),” in which he is again possessed by wanderlust, he murmurs: “I take a seat at the end of silence/ & wait/ for my therapist again.” In “Crash Site (Poem LVI),” he coos it again, but this time as a foundational question: “Have you ever seen silence/ Have you seen me?” In likening himself to silence, we are allowed into his resignation; we realize that he has been saying a lot less than he feels. All through the collection, the persona’s reflections, wrought as they are in silence, are attempts to inhabit a similar process to what Gaamangwe Joy Mogami describes as “unbecoming invisible.”

But it is in the erotic that McDaniels’ art finds life, and in its detailed privacy of self-pleasure, we are enjoined to witness a persona propelled by a psychosexual drive, whose sole reprieves come in these brief moments. In “Testosterone,” his masturbation births “spasms of salty rain,” after we are treated to a metaphor in which his taking of his semen in his palms simulates a mother lifting her baby. To label this metaphor oedipal would be to over-analyze, because the persona’s phallic

fixation might simply be what it is: an outlet. "Baby Rocker" is a coital movement in which his beloved is expected to feel in sex a stimulus for love. In "Transfiguration," we watch him in post-coital bliss. But in "The Principle of Dying," this finding of life is replaced with the French orgasm-as-death metaphor. Despite these, the persona here is not one for whom things can be made simple: he has difficulty accepting self-pleasure as total liberation: he likens it to sin. In "To a Lone Masturbator," we see this: "Your mouth opens/ like the legs of a brief rain &/ something comes out like sin."

Yet not all the poems here strictly follow this dual paradigm; the rest squirm in heartbreak, an in-between place. In "Appointment with the Black Birds," there is physical distance between the persona and his love interest, and the result is strong: "Once I was darkness/ & the wound in my chest/ was hell." In "For People with Problems about How to Love," his need is more forceful than love; the poem captures that rare emotional intensity that, for some people, precedes love; that might even propel one into things love would not.

Throughout this chapbook, the Self is the canvas upon which is mapped turbulence, multi-level tension: between internal void and questions, life and death, pleasure and pain. This is captured, in "Buried" and "Black Birds and Grey (Poem XLVI)," with rousing references to a "sky at war." Every emotion exuded by this persona is not grown to find a home in the world but to recollect in his mind and body. When it isn't quite resignation that he feels, it is an awareness of the end. In this collection, there are places full of meanings, in both the body and the mind, that McDaniels opens.

Otosirieze Obi-Young  
July 2017

A finalist for the 2016 Miles Morland Writing Scholarship and the 2017 Gerald Kraak Award, Otosirieze Obi-Young's fiction has appeared in *The Threepenny Review*, *Transition*, and *Pride and Prejudice: African Perspectives on Gender, Social Justice and Sexuality*. His essays and interviews appear in *Interdisciplinary Academic Essays*, *Africa in Dialogue*, and *Bakwa*. He is an editor at *Brittle Paper* and the curator of the Art Naija Series (*Enter Naija: The Book of Places* and *Work Naija: The Book of Vocations*). He teaches English at Godfrey Okoye University, Enugu.

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## Persecution

It begins like this: each time I pray,  
I pray to a pair of eyes, cold as medieval walls.  
In them, I seek redemption in the peace of  
the catholic silence. Every day, I wander around  
the desert, you know, long walks here & there.  
I come back to a room of silence.

I am tired of dying. I want to be free. They've all left,  
  
all of them, because I refuse to stretch my hand.  
I want to see my shadow in the dark, I want  
to feel its hand on my shoulders. I need to know  
I'm not a stray thought, a passing conversation.

I go out for a walk. It's only eleven am.  
I walk in the middle of the road.  
Everyone thinks I'm a false god. The air is crowded  
with honking cars  
& screaming women. I'm not a false god.  
Their words &  
screams are like stones & spittle. They look  
like scribes &  
soldiers. They keep throwing stones. They  
keep changing  
my name. I see a car running head-on  
towards me.  
I close my eyes & lift my hands to the Heavens  
like a god  
invoking rain. The car looks like a stone. I chant  
my name to the wind that it may carry my voice  
through the times,  
to all the ends of this Goddamned world. I see  
the car coming like a bird descending from a light.

I see it...I see it...

## Testosterone

At night, I reach down & take it  
the way a mother collects her crying baby  
out of the cradle. I hold it like  
a flower. It always brings this way:

I walk into the shade.  
The shade transforms into a storm.  
It then pours spasms of salty rain.  
My body, paralysis, after the storm.  
I hate myself once more for killing an ocean

& each time, after the storm, I re-enact  
the previous promise - I, dead as wood,  
dead as a bag filled with sin - the depth  
of this bag tells me how far I am from home,  
how home is a pale dot in the distance  
until it disappears into the mouth of the snake &  
this new promise becomes an apple tree  
at the center of an illusion, & the snake  
is loneliness, urging, in its profound nothingness,  
the body to enter the shade  
& transform into the storm, once again.

## The Principle of Dying

With each stroke, I feel my life  
slip out of my hands. This is  
lying-in-state. Each stroke strokes the body  
into the Earth, & it gets darker:  
save me!

Somebody please save me: somebody  
something, anything, save me, witness me!

To find the reason for dying,  
you must go to the edge where time  
began - a small death to show the self approved.  
So I lay down, & thrust my hips forward.  
I wonder if He still hears me.  
I wonder if He thinks  
I cannot be redeemed  
out of the ashes.

The body sinks deeper into the sin  
until I find myself in prison.  
I get darker, something like the certainty  
that I'm going to hell,  
with each stroke, each moan,  
I feel my life slipping, like water, like my seed,  
out of my fingers.

## Buried

Slowly, I turn into a scanty place  
until the last man goes  
with the last piece of furniture,  
the last item  
of being

& silence is poured into the room.

Above me, the ground is a sky at war, as if  
Heaven were being invaded. That means  
beauty also lies in destruction. That means  
the stars & the skies are relics  
of a divine war. That means  
if I look up, I would see silence. If I look up,  
I would see loneliness. If I look up,  
I would see four grey walls closing in. If I look up,  
I would see swans. If I look up, I would see horses  
flying from end to end. If I look up,  
I would see my mother's arms. Beneath my feet  
is a condemned body saying,  
"This is not your true image.  
This is the image of sand."  
Is there a way  
to spin out of this wheel, to write  
a new story from an old one?

## Crash Site (Poem LVI)

i

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What's left of a crash site  
are broken bits of places you touched  
as when a moment falls  
& breaks into shards of nostalgia.  
So you stand in the middle of the room  
as if everything were as you were:  
the fireplace still burns, you can smell it,  
of those cold nights and sweat.  
You see her footprints everywhere like thermo lights,  
you hear her night song from every wall,  
you see her eyes on every threshold,  
you look up,  
down,  
          left,  
right,  
          front,  
back  
& all you see is the day she left  
& the world became something without a name.

ii

Have you ever been in an alley  
made of dead, cold bricks?  
Have you ever fallen without reaching a surface:  
you just keep falling,  
& falling,  
& fall,  
& f  
&...  
until you realize  
you've been falling all your life?  
Have you ever seen silence?  
Have you seen me?

## To a Lone Masturbator

*after Anne Sexton*

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This is how to destroy the bed: first, roll the tape. It lures the Thing out of the dark. Then stroke it to the rhythm. It goes up & down to what could have been in & out of the slippery city of red.

The tape continues,  
Up & down,  
The tape continues.

Remember, you're destroying the body. Up & down.  
Faster. & faster. & faster.

Now they are coming. The unborn children are running towards the gate as if it's closing time. Forward & backward. Faster. They run faster. Your mouth opens like the legs of a brief rain & something comes out like a sin.

You wipe your seed with a rag.  
You feel a new spot of darkness over your soul,  
You feel the bag sag an inch or two.

## The Bottom Line of Loss

& my eyes are two sacks of sadness  
hung loose from the gallows.  
In them are relics of small things I have left.  
I hold on to them the way a lover  
holds on to the promise of a lover.

Sometimes to move on is to give up.

I scoop a handful of desert sand,  
raise it up to the sun like a priest  
raising the Eucharist,  
& let the grains of grief escape through my  
fingers,  
then I realise nothing is truly ours.

The sand through my fingers  
is the fate of every little thing we hold to our chest:  
we scoop them, & feel our hearts soar,  
we love them, we long for them, we long to love them  
& when we love & have them, they slip away or  
break our hearts, or  
transform into something which  
we cannot name  
so all we do is grieve  
& wail, & feel the birth of a certain emptiness  
inside us.

## Dry Bones

Finally, the night spreads its clear tentacles  
on my skin  
& awakens a Thing looking for whatever it can  
to call home. At some point, anywhere would do.  
It enters its darkest moment, locks itself in the room,  
& cries alone.

The tears fall like a building collapsing to the ground.

It gathers its tears in its hands, careful not to  
let it slip through its fingers, & raises  
from the dark. I rise with it from the dark,  
& walk one tear at a time, one pain at a time.  
On the road, I watch a woman cleanse her sins  
from her hair with chemicals.

The song in my eardrums sounds like a door, opening.

Scrap that! The song in my eardrums brings  
the image of a boat rowing across every place  
that hurts, rowing across every place dripping blood  
until they are cold, & damp, & stale like vacant  
apartments. This is when we are truly alone.

I feel the impact of the giant piano. I feel  
the drums. I feel the warmth oozing from the voices.  
The woman is done cleansing herself.  
There's a space spread around me like dry land:

I fold it into a gift-box, & carry it  
in my heart. It is heavy with loneliness.

Another boat enters my ears,  
- a stranger in Moscow. It rows very slowly.  
There's an open-ended space in what you deserve,  
what you think you deserve, & what you get.

I cannot remain here.

I cannot stand the walls!  
Up ahead is a road - long & brown.  
I see a man talking in parables,  
beckoning me  
to follow.

## Appointment with the Black Birds

*Ephesians 5:8 – "for one time  
you were darkness, but now,  
you are light in the Lord"*

Today is the day of the black birds.  
Today is the day  
they are set free  
to be children  
playing in the sky  
as if  
everything were alright  
with the world.  
So they flutter here & there,  
side to side  
in my head, until their wayward feathers  
whirl & settle  
in my eyes as grief.

It weighs down my lids  
the way  
clouds carry the burden  
of rain.

She called:  
the intermittent phone silence  
stretches the distance  
between us  
into something much more  
than  
end to end-  
you feel me going away,  
I'm on the road  
looking for pills.  
They are exit doors,  
the only way  
out of prison.

I feel the lines  
on your face,  
hoping they would form something like

a road map  
into you,  
so, at least, I know  
I'll be safe.

The burden opens  
&  
I walk into my self.  
I'm sorry mom.  
I'm sorry I turned out  
this way.  
I'm sorry to be one more wrinkle  
stretching the corner  
of all the years.

This is bad tea.  
This is really bad tea.  
Once I was darkness  
& the wound in my chest  
was hell.  
It became a forsaken place.  
The city deserted me  
at a time I needed saving.  
I die, & die, & die, &  
It makes no difference  
because  
you will never get as much  
as you've cared,  
you will never get as much  
as you've loved  
& that space will spread its reach  
into your psyche  
till it becomes a nagging ache  
rooted deep inside your chest like a pit,

& you cannot explain the origin of depression  
unless  
you become the maniac yourself.

I touch my chest  
& it's empty.  
I lock myself inside

& cry alone.  
This is bad tea,  
this is really bad tea.  
In the emptiness of the decaying grey,  
I sit  
& wait  
for my therapist.

## In a blue room with two inverted chairs

A house stands somewhere  
between  
sadness & a beer-parlour.  
It's difficult, at this point, to choose  
a preferred destination.

Around it, time stops  
as in  
breeze sweeping an  
empty can  
in the street of an abandoned village.

The house captures a boy  
walking to the edge of the bridge.  
He is the relic of a country  
wrecked by war, cities fallen in droplets.

He collects the memories he could reach  
into a creel, and tosses them playfully.  
At the bridge, he calls the name of his mother,  
he calls the name of his sister, he calls the father  
he never had who left the names of those he loves  
on the back of a horse -  
& jumped.

## When a camera breaks

I sit: night comes & covers me  
with its clear tentacles, its stillness.  
There are people on the other side of your head too,  
witness them. Break your gaze into  
spilled contents of a capsule-

tiny seeds meandering on a wet surface like the image  
of two lovers on the wall, moving, breathing-

& tomorrow is the other side of a cassette

I sit; waiting for a song to blossom, slowly,  
like a shy flower.

## Baby Rocker

I put you  
in a rocker, because  
you are my baby, &  
rock  
gently:

to & fro  
to & fro

till your heart  
absorbs the words  
& becomes warm, & your pulse  
begins to race,  
& the alarms in your body  
begin to go mad.

To & fro,  
to & fro,

I rock you gently  
till your heart, which is now  
accustomed  
to the rhythm, opens slowly,  
like a double-door  
& I, lover & poet, enter  
into your city  
with back  
the way a worshipper  
may enter the heaven  
of a god:

to & fro,  
to & fro,

I come bearing all the seeds  
of all the love  
I have to offer, enough  
for the world, enough for life times  
upon lifetimes with you,  
Ola m.  
To & fro

to & fro  
a love without start  
nor end,  
I rock you gently.

## Transfiguration

We lay still like a reflection unto Heaven:  
two bodies, Yours & mine. Your image rises & transfers  
my soul into Yours, one & whole,

& a drop drips from the edge of a new green leaf  
& breaks at the centre of the Thing like a painting.

This i hold as the sky holds the sun,  
as Your skin holds our names.

My mouth parts  
& You become the air that filters  
& escapes.

## Black Birds and Grey (Poem XLVI)

I feel you linger around the distance  
like the scent of a stranger.  
Each day is a step away from you,  
so i walk for miles & miles as the scent  
fades & fades & transforms into

pain, which exhausts itself & wears out  
& becomes the silence  
of a haunted town.

I take it in my arms, the pain & silence, to  
the cliff. I set it free & recite your name  
to go with it. I watch them turn into black birds  
fluttering away from a sky  
at war with itself.

The house is up in flames  
& I see all the unanswered prayers fall back down  
from Heaven. In my body is a blue dinning room  
with an empty teacup & two dusty chairs.  
Everywhere aches.

Every joint is a cross road between letting go  
& hanging on. There is nothing to hang on to,  
only the silence of stone  
in a lonely furnace.  
The house turns to grey.

Grey is the color  
of loneliness, &  
I find succour  
in the heart of a hummingbird  
with songs laying dead  
in its belly. It's lonely in here.

I take a seat at the end of the silence  
& wait  
for my therapist again.

## Faded

They look at me like I'm dying for the first time.  
They do not know I've been dying  
all my life. They do not know  
that parts of me have been dying slowly,  
as if, they were fashion trends  
that fade into sepia pictures  
until every trace of their presence  
is erased just like the dinosaurs.

They do not know. They do not know  
that a standing tree without leaves is a mannequin

& every bit of essence disappears into bleakness  
as when a bomb goes off.  
I feel a young man digging my body.  
A fence separates Us  
& I'm on the other side.  
But the ice didn't show  
that I fled, or  
that she died.

They do not know  
that the world cannot die  
for what it believes in.

## Paranoia

The sky is a blind man. A river runs behind the building  
on top of which a boy is preparing to jump off  
into an alternative place. Tragedy is a superior good  
& there's a kind of beauty attached to strange places.

I envy the boy. Tonight, I will set myself on fire

& burn into the brownness of men  
who do not know  
how to go home.

Here, have a drink.  
The Earth is long & dry,  
you'll need it.

Anne locked herself in her garage with  
her car running & lit a cigarette in hand.  
I envy her. But why did she have to die, Goddamnit!

In the house, there's the smell of coffee, brewing:  
a rockychair, books,  
a fireplace, a pet dog,  
& more books.

They are your arms, my love.  
They are your arms - soft & unreal as dreams.  
They welcome me back  
to all I will never have.

What? Who's there?  
It's the walls again. They are coming.  
Hold on Anne! Take me  
with you.  
I don't know where home  
is.

I need a drink.  
I desperately need a drink!  
All I see is Nothing.  
All I am is Nothing, to my self.

## Four Hundred & Thirty

A dim light kindles  
showing a Bible & a gun.  
The city falls & burns before your eyes:  
death is a shadow gliding over homes without blood  
& as each breath stops  
& each tear drops, salvation  
becomes a moment of finality  
that separates God from gods.

## For people with problems about how to love

We were never truly free:  
let us be together now, we  
can love each other later.

## Void

I take to my lips the wine  
of your tenderness -  
the sip satiates, caresses my tongue  
like one sampling the contours of a race car  
& sets loose wild tides of longing  
as the stretching distance expands this emptiness

into a house without furniture & painting.

## All Metaphor (Poem XXXI)

I have had you accost my thoughts  
in the strangest of places, at the oddest of hours,  
& in rare glories: in my room - wide & dry - when  
all the world stands still;  
on the road to places where broken men go  
to hide the wreckage of their broken hearts behind  
the smoke of cigarettes, or  
better yet,  
drown it  
at the bar.

You come to my thoughts like a police officer  
& I, a guilty citizen, guilty that I love you,  
surrenders  
& it's quite simple I've already been invaded,  
so my blood begins to pound,  
my pulse becomes a race car  
accelerating between shifting gears:  
gear one, clutch, gear two, clutch, accelerate, gear three,  
accelerate, accelerate, clutch, gear four,  
accelerate- fast, faster, still faster  
tearing through the wind  
like a fighter jet  
till i descend on the runway  
& land into your arms.

The oceans & islands gather themselves  
to form your waist & nothing is as beautiful,  
nothing is more beautiful  
than that which endures through ones lifetime,  
through all the years.  
& I know this poem needs more metaphors  
to incarnate you, but  
you are all metaphors, ola m

## for chisom

you were my jewel, ola m,  
you were my seasons,  
you were home  
you lifted  
me

do not  
ask me to  
find purpose:  
finding purpose is  
finding you, you were

one with me with each breath  
so that when i cease to breathe,  
time stops & the earth ceases

to spin. you have gone with  
the wind, gone with the rivers  
& the times, never to come back

but only to remain as photograph  
in a washed-down stream of  
those captured moments we shared, you & i.  
& now i, poet & lunatic,

grow old with grey stubbles but  
cannot grow away from you, ola m  
i cannot grow from your magic,  
from your touch, from your arms,  
from you warmth

the way the stars  
cannot outgrow  
the sky

## into your picture

you're beautiful, ola m,  
you're beautiful  
i take a long gulp  
of your photo hanging on a wall  
in my eyes  
like a miserable drunk  
haunted by stale pang  
of palmwine,  
reeking of emptiness;  
& i drowned  
i drowned in a pool of white darkness -  
a pool in your heart in which  
i have fallen  
like a sky-diver without a parachute,  
falling for you  
only i never reach a surface  
for in this fall, there is no surface  
so, i wear your memory as life-jacket  
to keep me buoyed  
against the fate of a country  
between our hearts  
as i delve deeply into your picture:  
the ocean in your eyes, your  
nose, your lips, your  
face -  
& i died  
in all those  
places

## Woman

A woman is a woman. Simple.  
It doesn't really take much  
to put back together the rubble  
of a broken man, &  
mould him into form - a complete poem made  
to be recited by God.  
All you need is a kind of magic,  
all you need  
is a woman.

The beauty of a woman  
is like a new moon, hung at the center  
of the night.  
She is the body  
of the universe, the body  
of truth & of God: black, porcelain & woman.

It doesn't take much  
to save a song  
from drowning into sadness.  
It doesn't take much  
to be a lifejacket within reach  
as the ship - brown & dry - sinks, & sinks, & sinks  
in bottles of beer & alcohol.

All you need  
is a new day to walk through the door  
& ask whether you would eat rice,  
stay with you,  
touch your wounds & heal them  
without reciting a prayer,

so that she becomes your prayer.

All you need  
is a sun to define every morning,  
all your need  
is a kind of magic - soft as pure lyric.

## man

i've been here, twelve o'clock, the border abutting this millennia  
& the next,  
decades before the first light, before the scavenging of brown  
letters  
& magic phrases  
the trees in the forest  
seem a crowd of murmuring supporters  
but the inlets of the creek remain calm like the eyes of man  
who has seen it all;  
a breathing cave appears  
in the blackness of where the umbilical cord  
was buried  
& around me is a dark ocean;  
a forked bridge appears  
but i remain, hovering over numbers  
& psychoanalysis,  
searching for my difference,  
searching for myself, here, around twelve  
o'clock, where my umbilical cord  
is born

## essential geography

a woman is a country,  
a country is a home  
& home is a building  
in the heart

## About the Author

Stanley P. McDaniels is a Nigerian poet, a 2016 Ebedi/Soyinka Foundation fellow & Second Prize winner of the 5th Korea/Nigeria Poetry Feast. His poems have appeared on various electronic & print journal in *Bombay Review*, *Bakwa Magazine*, *Kalahari Review*, *Lunaris Review*, *Deepwater Literary Journal* & elsewhere. He was a coordinator at 100 Poets for Change, and currently writes from Ondo State where he's completing a degree in Political Science.