

The Voices
of
Many Lands
Cecile's Writers Anthology

Edited by

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Woerden, the Netherlands
www.cecileswriters.com

Cover design by Cathy Guijt at Kikoro Illustrations
Cover font Octin Vintage by Typodermic Fonts

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ISBN-13: 978-1719916769

DEDICATION

This anthology is dedicated to all Cecile's writers—those published here,
and also those published online in Cecile's Writers Magazine.

Thank you for trusting us with your work.

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FOREWORD

Half a decade ago we published our first story in Cecile's Writers Magazine. Now we are releasing our first Anthology. We have loved, cried, laughed and been inspired by the more than 100 intercultural writers we have published. To mark our 5-year anniversary, we have decided to share a small selection—a taste testing, if you will—of what we have to offer in our e-zine. We each chose pieces that resonated with us. We hope you will enjoy reading them as much as we have.

THE SUNBIRD WITH A BROKEN WING

by

Abubakar Adam Ibrahim

THE VOICES OF MANY LANDS

Prisoner I am/ Behind this ribcage

Awaiting the dainty fingers of morn/ To give me wings

One night, Zizi went to her room and emerged the next morning completely transformed from her father's daughter into a child of the ephemeral four winds. She had sat up in her room and read the old notebook, the one she chanced upon lying in a ray of sunlight atop the pile of silverfish-eaten books in the garage.

Her brother Sule wanted to start a music studio and thought the abandoned garage would be a good starting place until he made enough money to move out. It was obvious from his sullen mien that he felt like an eagle in a canary's cage. Zizi knew she, too, would feel that way if in the next four years when she turned twenty-five and, like Sule, was still living with her parents.

Sule had enlisted their younger brother Bala to help. Zizi was no good when it came to such things. Her wiry arms lacked the strength to move the broken furniture and boxes of old books and shoes and things. And the dust would trigger her asthma and have her mother Mma in a state of excitement.

Bala had just turned seventeen but his head was just inches from the chandelier in the dining room. He would wear tight-fitting T-shirts (shirts that would have hung loosely around Zizi's shoulders) and flex his muscles, like Sule.

She stood by, watching them laugh at the scurrying rats and swatting the roaches with brooms; envying them this luxury of hefting things and laughing unhindered in the dust. She would have given her right thumb just to be like them, like a sunbird roving in the garden, darting from flower to flower, adding her iridescent blur to the landscape.

A shaft of sunlight streamed in from the window high up on the wall, catching in its glare dust particles moving randomly like a colony of scattered ants, illuminating the gold plated edges of the notebook that had been atop a pile of other old books. It was hard-covered and burgundy, with the words: 'Jos Steel Rolling Mill, 1990' printed on the cover in gold. It must have been her father's, he had worked there. But it hadn't been his neat colonial handwriting that filled the pages. The scrawls had been uncertain. And because her geeky reading glasses were in her room, she took the diary away and stayed in her room past dinner time.

But Mma, who had attended a rather strict missionary school, would have none of it. Families must dine together.

'That's just a ploy to bring dad home early,' Sule had said once. 'No way am I going to let my wife tie me down like this. No way!' Mma had slapped him then, right across the face, stoking the irate spirit that had since refused to be pacified.

So that night, Sule sat waiting at the table next to his father, cracking his knuckles and grinding his teeth.

When Mma noticed her husband's brows furrowing into aqueducts that cast shadows over his glare, noticed how he was caressing his greying beard, she knew he would pick up his cutlery and dig in before Zizi was at the table. Then the evening would be ruined.

Eventually, Zizi breezed in and sat quietly as Mma ranted. When her mother was done, she set down her reading glasses and said offhandedly, 'So, Mum, who's Asabe?'

'How on earth would I know?'

'I found her stuff in the garage while Sule and Bala were cleaning. She must have lived with you.'

Mma looked up from her plate. Her eyes met her husband's and quickly they looked away. 'I thought I asked you to stay away from the

garage while your brothers cleaned?’

‘I didn’t know you loved Maxi Priest, Mum. You don’t seem the musical sort?’

‘Maxi Priest? Who told you about that?’

‘In the things this Asabe wrote. She said you played Maxi Priest on the stereo all day. Who was she, Mum?’

Mma looked up again at her husband, who bent his head and busied himself cutting up bits of yam on his plate.

Mma paused with her fork halfway to her mouth. ‘She was some skinny... house-help we had, before you were born. Now keep quiet and let’s eat in peace for God’s sake.’

With dinner over, Zizi retreated to her room, to her discovery. After Sule had turned off the generator, she read by flashlight. When, eventually, sunbeams streaked through the curtains like tentative fingers seeking the meaning of things, they found her seated on the bed, staring blandly at the glossy poster of D’Banj on the wall beside the wardrobe that had several of her bra and panties hanging on the knobs of the open doors.

When Zizi heard a knock on her door, she pulled the bedcover over the open diary and turned to the door as Daddy, after an appropriate interval, let himself in. He stood by the door and sighed. ‘I see you found Asabe’s diary?’

When she looked up at his face, he looked away. And when he finally looked at her, he was surprised to see tears running down her face. He crossed the room and sat on the edge of the bed but hesitated to hold her. She looked at his hands, big-limbed like her brothers, and turned away.

‘Can I see it, the diary?’

‘I burnt it.’

Daddy knew she had lied. ‘Well, you shouldn’t be reading people’s diaries, you know, Zizi. They are private things.’

She wiped her tears with the back of her hand. 'It was all true, wasn't it, about you and her?'

'God damn it, why did she have to write all of it down?' he muttered and rose. He walked to the window and stood looking out at the hedges outside. He sighed. 'She was a nice girl. I never meant for any of it to happen, of course, but then, things were difficult with your mother, and I don't know, Zizi, I don't know. I shouldn't have let it happen.'

'She knew, didn't she?'

'Your mother? She had her suspicions, of course, but it was only a brief moment of... indiscretion.'

'Indiscretion? She was pregnant from you twice! Two abortions, Daddy.' He sat down on the chair by the window and held his head.

'I need to find her.'

'What?'

'You know where she is; I need to talk to her.'

'Zizi, what on earth for? It's been twenty years. She is happily married somewhere. The whole affair is done with.'

She wiped her tears again and looked him in the eye, this man she had called father all her life. 'Not for me, Daddy. Not for me.'

#

Broken fingers strumming/ A broken guitar

Broken melodies/ Galling broken hearts

Zizi sat swirling the juice at the bottom of her glass with a straw, watching it go round and round. If she looked into the glass hard enough, she imagined she could shut out the noise of the diners; the clink of their cutlery, the sound of their little laughters. Yet, each time the door swung

open, she looked up.

Eventually, a woman walked in and looked around. She reached for her phone and dialled. When Zizi's phone rang, she waved at the woman by the entrance and watched her put her phone away and advance toward her..

'Hi, you must be the young woman I spoke to on the phone.' The lady drew out a chair and eased her bulk into it. Zizi tried to imagine what this woman with soft smiling eyes, chubby cheeks and fingers like slender sausages looked like twenty years before in a maid's uniform with a feather duster in one hand. Her imagination failed in this task.

Zizi introduced herself, mentioned how she got the woman's contact from her father and watched recognition darken Asabe's face. Zizi reached into her bag and slid the diary across the table towards her.

Asabe's eyes misted as she touched the book. She opened the pages and ran her fingers over the scrawls. 'You read it, didn't you?'

Zizi nodded.

Asabe covered her quaking lips with her hand. When she was done crying, she straightened. 'I was young and naive then. I made up some things.'

'No, you didn't.'

Asabe brought out her purse. She pulled out some pictures and with shaky hands proffered them to Zizi; her rotund and proud looking husband, her four children, split equally between the genders. They looked like their father mostly. 'I have a family now.'

'I know, and I am not here to cause you any trouble.' Zizi reached out and held her hand. 'I just need you to tell me about the Maxi Priest man.'

'The Maxi Priest man?'

'Yes.' Zizi tapped the diary. 'He is my real father, isn't he?'

'I made that up; you mustn't believe everything you read.'

Zizi smiled indulgently. 'My brothers are tall and healthy. They are big-limbed. I am sick and birdlike. I wear glasses to read and I am only twenty-one. My complexion is different and I look nothing like the man I've been calling father. I don't even look like anyone in my extended family. No, you didn't make it up.'

Asabe nodded and dabbed the tears from her face. 'I am so sorry. I have made a mess of things, haven't I?'

'Tell me about him, please. I just want to know what kind of person he is.'

'I don't know where he is now, or if he's still alive or not. I just knew how he used to come to tutor your brother in the afternoons. And then your mother would return from work and start playing Maxi Priest's *Oh baby, baby it's a wild world*. You know the song, don't you? He was very smart, Mr. Bello. He was a really nice man.'

#

I am grand/ quintessential

I am the glass spires/ built on mire

She eventually found him in the suburbs sitting on a lounge under the shade of his veranda. She stood from a distance, under the mango trees, and watched him as he watched the children playing football barefooted in the mud, their bare torsos glistening from the exertion. Eventually, Mr. Bello reclined on the lounge and called out, his voice rising above the din of the children to reach Zizi. A woman emerged from the house with only a wrapper tied around her bosom. Zizi watched them confer, watched the woman return to the house and return with a book and a pair of reading

glasses. He read with the book cover facing the evening sky.

Images of Mma's shamed face rose in her mind. Zizi had expected Mma to deny it, but instead her mother's face had collapsed like shattered ice sliding off a metal surface.

She stood there and watched the herdsmen, young boys with long staves, herding cattle back to their camps, she watched the market women with bundles of wares on their heads hurrying home, she watched the kites circle in the dusky skies close to the jagged horizon.

She sighed and walked up to him. He sat up when she stood between him and the setting sun and he mumbled when she greeted him. They stood looking at each other.

'Young woman, are you...' the question trailed off as he peered into her face, like one stunned by his image shimmering in water.

His cheekbones were prominent, and in his eyes she saw the hollowness she had always seen in hers, in days of convalescence.

He coughed sickly and nodded slowly. His gestures were uncertain. 'You are...' he began again but left the sentence hanging.

'Who is your guest?' his wife asked from the door, holding the curtain open.

He ushered Zizi in and limped in after her. The click of her heels on the worn-out rug filled the silence in the living room as she walked round looking at the pictures on the walls. She noted the transformation, from the dandy to the proud teacher, with his reading glasses posing with his students at an award ceremony, to the wedding picture with his wife, much younger, to the father with his three children; in whose faces she could see features she recognised in the mirror.

His wife buzzed around, offering a glass of water, which Zizi set down when she noticed the oil smudge on the rim and the specks in it. Then she came with a plate of leftover plantains and explained that it was

the only thing they had left. Zizi picked up a piece with her fingers and ate, conscious of the Maxi Priest man's eyes on her.

It had taken her three days to find him. Her mother could only remember the school where he had been teaching then, twenty years ago. Zizi had tracked him through three transfers, three different schools.

The woman now stood with her hands folded before her. 'You haven't introduced your guest.'

Zizi and the man exchanged looks. He coughed. 'She's a former student.'

'Yes.' Zizi put down the piece in her hand. 'A former student.'

'Oh,' the woman said and looked at her husband, who looked down. Then she started to talk about how she always wanted him to look for another job, but felt proud each time she saw his former students all doing well.

'It's for his health, you see,' she explained almost apologetically. When she looked at her husband again, he avoided her eyes. She fell silent and started fidgeting.

A little girl, just eight, rushed in hugging a stuffed doll. She hid behind her mother's legs, from where her tear-streaked face peeked at Zizi. The older brother rushed in after her, complaining about an alleged provocation. When he noticed Zizi, he straightened his shirt and tried to do the buttons, but several were missing. He turned and left.

'I should be leaving now.' Zizi stood up despite the woman's half-protest.

Zizi patted the little girl's head at the door. The mother repeated the offer to stay for dinner, which Zizi declined. She walked away with Mr. Bello, their silence heavy as the impending night. Finally, she stopped and turned to look at him.

'So, you have a family now.'

‘Yes, yes. Three children.’ He made as if to touch her face then abandoned the gesture. ‘Your mother, Talatu...’

‘Who is Talatu?’

‘Not Talatu?’ He put his hand on his forehead and shook his head. ‘You are Freda’s daughter, aren’t you?’

‘Freda?’

‘Not Freda?’ He held his hands before his tatty, misshapen T-shirt, and then put them down by his side. Zizi could not reconcile this man with his grey stubble, this one who walked with a slight limp from a bad knee, to the dandy Asabe had described, the one through whom she was conceived under the rhythm of Maxi Priest’s ‘Wild World’. But she could see what must have made him appealing to her mother and Talatu and Freda and whatever other women fell for his charm; there was a quality of helplessness about him, an almost tangible appeal to be loved.

She shook her head and took a step back. ‘This is a mistake. You have mistaken me for someone else.’

He reached out and took her hand and held on, just a bit longer than was necessary. When she looked down, she saw that their hands were alike, only his were darker, dirtier.

‘No.’ He squeezed her hand. ‘No, you are my...’

She pulled her hand away, suddenly. ‘I’m no one. I’m not who you think I am.’

His hand fell away and he stood listlessly, like a derelict ruin. She could almost see him crumbling before her, the sand rolling down from his head, over his face, and down his body. She shook her head and wiped her tears. ‘I have to go now.’

‘Your name, tell me your name, please.’

Again she shook her head. ‘It is better this way.’

She turned and hurried away when his desperate voice pleaded with

her to wait. When she had gone far, she looked back over her shoulder. He was still standing where she had left him, watching her. He raised his hand towards her, tentatively, and seemed to grasp the air before him. She turned round the corner and started running.

#

Night births/ Another morn with broken wings
Dreams flutter/ Dreamers dwell in stupor

The table was set but only Mma was in her chair, clasping her head in her hands. She stood up when Zizi entered and looked at her longingly, expectantly.

‘I saw him, the Maxi Priest man.’

Mma gasped and put her hand to her mouth.

‘His hands are bony, just like mine. His skin. His eyes, mother. The Maxi Priest man.’

‘Oh Zizi, I’m so sorry.’

‘I’m sorry mother, but I can’t stay here.’

Mma moved closer but faltered at Zizi’s scowl. ‘But where will you go?’

‘It’s a wide world, isn’t it? A fucking *wild* world.’

But in her room, she found Daddy standing like one looking for his lost shadow in the corners. He began to apologise but stopped when he saw her tears. She allowed him to lead her to the bed and sit her down. He held her until she was done crying. But she started off once more when he started apologising again for his indiscretion.

‘You haven’t told your mother, have you?’

She shook her head. ‘Oh, Daddy, you have no idea, do you?’

THE VOICES OF MANY LANDS

He held her at arm's length so he could look at her face. He said, 'I love you, Zizi, you are my favourite, and I am so sorry to let you down.'

She knew she could never bring herself to tell him. But right then, she just needed to be away from it all, away from the long fingers yanking her heart in the directions of the four winds. Away from the ravaging shadows huddling outside, waiting to creep in under the curtains that had already taken on the insipid shades of loss.

~ • ~

Abubakar Adam Ibrahim is a Nigerian writer and journalist. He published a short story collection, *The Whispering Trees*, in 2012 and his first novel *Season of Crimson Blossoms* in 2016. Ibrahim is an arts editor at *Daily Trust* newspaper, and lives in Abuja, Nigeria.

~ • ~

I love Ibrahim's eye for details—they are beautifully worded and precisely placed without them ever taking away from the pace of the story. He has the gift of subtly weaving in information, too, in a short space of time, while creating a handful of settings and multiple rounded characters worthy of a novel. You come to understand both Zizi's grief in discovering the truth she's always expected as well as each of her parents' regrets.

—Vanessa Deij

BRAIDS

by

Alison Silverglad

I still have Ndey's coin. I could not bring myself to spend it. Not for candy, a loaf of bread, ices or mangos. She earned it with her own hands and I always felt I needed to give it to her.

The first time Ndey braided my hair, the dry season was at its hottest. My brown skin was grainy from the sand. I did not dare walk barefoot in the afternoon sun. The hottest months were also the party months, and my new family had an upcoming celebration. Our compound was expecting a new bride. Bakiri was to take his first wife, Salimata, in just a few days. My Aunt Kenjai, or *ibado* as we say for adoptive mother, who had no children of her own, urged my parents to give me to her, so she could raise me and educate me. As her newly acquired child, I was also her accessory.

Ibado wanted me to look pretty for the wedding and bought me a meter of cloth at the Sunday market and sent me with it to the tailor. Once her peanut butter sold at a profit, she brought home my first pair of buckle shoes. I saw her count her coins to the exact amount needed to purchase a beaded necklace and blue elephant-shaped plastic earrings.

"Ramu, do not do anything when you go to Ndey's home. Do not speak of anything. Do not touch anything or look too long at anything," my *ibado* said, while she washed the rice. The cooking hut was shaded but the smoke from the fire made it hard to breathe.

"I have asked Ndey to braid your hair because her hands are the finest. You know she is busy with all the work a new wife has, so she is braiding your hair as a favor."

I clicked.

She put the rice into a wet cloth and then placed it on top of the cooking pot, nearly full of boiling water. "Do not speak unless someone speaks to you. Do not get in the way of her husband Tephah," she said, as

she squatted above the pounder, slicing the small onion so that it dropped inside.

I was prepared to be on my best behavior when I went to Ndey's home. I knew some thought it excessive to waste Ndey's good hands on the head of a little girl, but I was thrilled.

Promptly after lunch, I walked to Ndey's compound. The air was so thick with moisture that my skin became wet and sticky well before I reached the grouping of grass-roofed huts. I stepped into the compound and saw Ndey's lithe body hunched over, sweeping the ground where her family ate. I noticed Ndey's bowl was empty. Aunt Kenjai always insisted that there had to be a small amount left; it was the only way to be certain we were full.

When Ndey finished washing out the bowl and iron cooking pot, she splashed water on her face, took a purposeful breath and together we put out the benches, the stools and laid down the woven mat. I sat down and Ndey sat elegantly on a wooden stool just behind me; her knobby knees bent upward, her legs around my body. She adjusted her skirt to remain modest; colorful fake wax print, it was the same fabric used to make outfits for us children. It fooled us, allowing us to believe our dresses were as fine as any of our older sisters'.

Ndey pulled on my hair and ran the sharp metal pick through it, and then she separated lines and sections on my head. Frightened that I might cry, I held my breath. I did not want Tepha, or the swarm of congregating children, to laugh at me.

Tepha came out of the hut and sat on the bench beside us. A man was to have his own hut, a place of privacy and relief from family pressures. So when Ndey shared his hut my adopted Papa Lamin did not find it acceptable. Papa Lamin accepted my youngest uncles to share their huts