

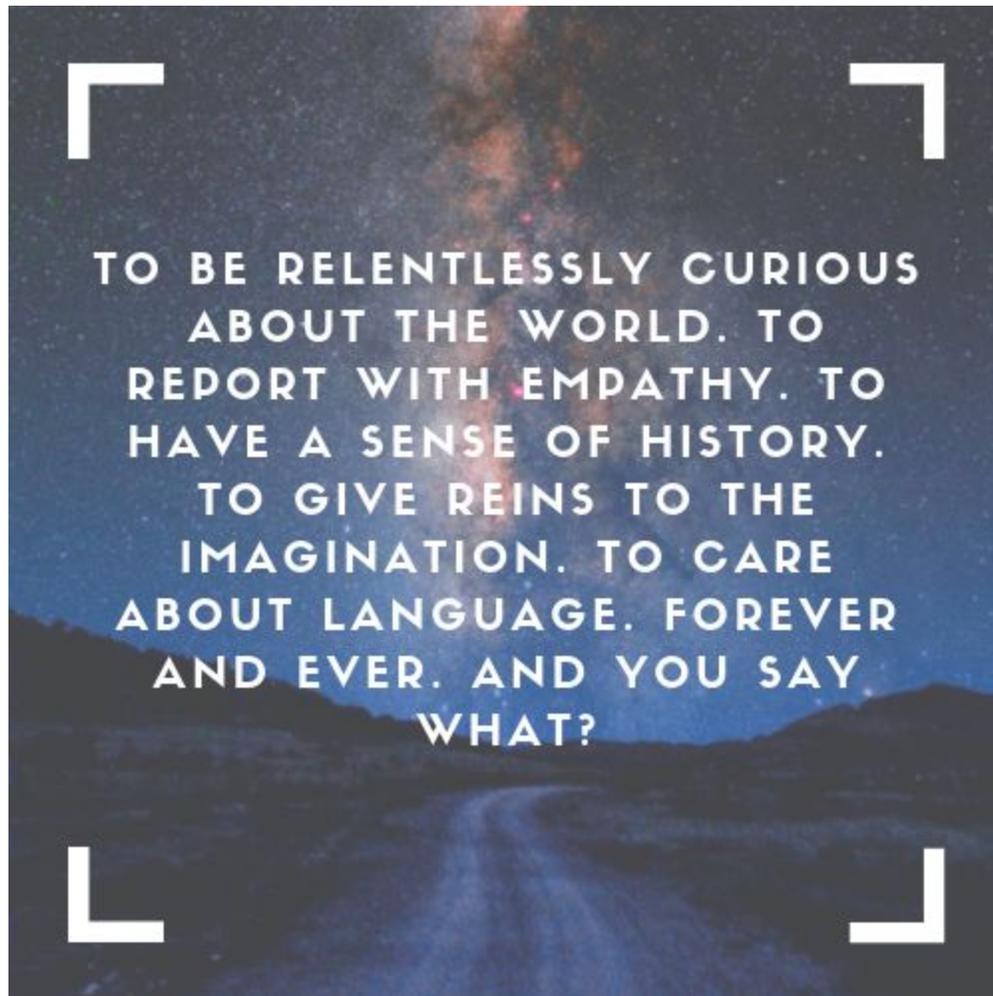
THE QUESTION MARKER



11TH ISSUE

THE **Q**UESTION MARKER

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ISSUE NO. 11

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The magic continues. This month's cover is about China's influence in Africa and we have an excerpt from Solomon Elusoji's new book *Travelling With Big Brother*, which documents his reporting trips across China. On the other hand, Farida Adamu reflects on data privacy, Carl Terver muses over Naira Marley (who appears for the second time in this magazine) and there is an interview with poet, Nathaniel Soonest.

Perhaps the most important thing about this issue is the new section devoted to poetry. Nathaniel Soonest is the first poet to be published and hopefully, he will not be the last. So, sit back and enjoy the stories. I'll suggest you keep a cup of coffee or chocolate by your side - it's going to be an enjoyable ride.

Eke Jude
Co-editor
November, 2019

The Journo Who Went To China

“When I started to get some sleep, they came with nightmares. The dreams all had a common theme: I would suddenly be back in Nigeria and then struggling to return to China, to return to this life where the electricity never blinked and water didn’t stop running.”

Solomon Elusoji



Photo Credit: Solomon Elusoji

Elizabeth,

You described leaving for China as going to war. I thought it was a funny metaphor. Now I know it’s true. It’s like laughing at a joke hours after one has heard it. Later you said I was becoming Chinese. “Do people ask if you are mixed in China?” I remember laughing so hard. Black boy like me. But it also reminded me how little I had told you about what I was actually doing there.

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It all started with a phone call. I was lying in my cramped apartment when I noticed the vibration. It was the newspaper's Editor. The one I told you about. Ms Nwogwugwu. For a moment, my mind raced the clock and won. She never calls unless it's important. And, as usual, she was brisk and direct. She said she would like me to go on a training to China, for ten months. Okay? Yes ma'am, I replied. I didn't think, just said it. It wasn't until the call ended that I realised what had happened. A bomb had been dropped on my apartment and detonated. Nothing was ever going to be the same again.

It was the first day of a new year. 2018. I had written IELTS the previous year and applied to British universities and received two unconditional admissions. Although I didn't have the money to pay the tuition fees, barely enough to cover my flight tickets and living expenses, I had also applied for a Chevening scholarship. So, 2018 was supposed to be the year I left Nigeria.

But not to China.

China was a land of factories and similar looking people. It was a bland canvas, a place where people spoke in strange tongues. It was London in Orwell's 1984, where you can't use Google or Facebook. It was a dark, unknowable, distant land. Who goes to China? People who want to create knockoffs and manufacture cheap, low-quality goods en mass. So why would I want to go to China?

The question isn't a difficult one to answer. I just wanted to leave. Even if just for a while. At the time, as you already know, I was a newspaper contributor. It wasn't a paying position, but people and organisations paid to be written about and the line editors allowed my pieces to run, if it wasn't absurdly advertorial. I made enough money to rent an apartment on the fringes of a Lagos slum, buy food and beer. When I made some extra money, I tried to do some independent reporting. One morning, I woke up and travelled almost a thousand kilometres to Makurdi, to report on a devastating flooding. It was one of my proudest moments as a reporter, lodging in cheap motels for about four days and interviewing the victims, aid volunteers and government officials. I returned to Lagos with a bruised bank account balance, but it felt good. These brief spurts of ecstasy, however, couldn't hide the fact that I spent most of my time chasing public relations stories, after brown envelopes, after my own share of the national cake. It is quite possible to rationalise this behaviour but I felt my soul

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slipping away for every *truth* I chose not to include in a story. This sensation of *slipping away* manifested itself in various forms. I tried to fight back.

Sometimes, *clients* asked me to send my account number and I would decline, even after the stories got published, because I wanted to be 'professional'. Of course I took money from others. It was an incongruous defence, a lukewarm, spill-out-of-my-mouth transgression. I couldn't figure how to balance the spiritual and the material.

So when Ms. Nwogwugwu called, I guessed that the universe was trying to help out.

*

One of the first things I did, in the wake of the unexpected news, was to go in search of books about China. I found Peter Hessler, Evan Osnos, Ian Johnson, Richard McGregor. All white men. But I would expand my list later. As I started to clear the cobwebs, I was amazed about how much I didn't know about where I was heading to. A new world began to emerge right inside my apartment. It was almost like an epiphany, like being born again. I am Nigerian, but my education, my values, my identity has been shaped by the west. I read western books, watch Hollywood, listen to American pop; I believe in democracy, in the idea that the individual is sacred. Maybe this is what it means to be Nigerian, after all the country is a British creation, a mere agglomeration of colonial interests.

So when I began to learn about China, it struck me that there was a different world somewhere, a reality that didn't necessarily correspond to mine, an alien matrix. I couldn't comprehend it at the time, of course. It was just a feeling, a sense of foreboding that made my soul leap. I was on the verge of discovering something. And I was eager to know what it was.

The travel application was pretty straightforward. My contact at the Chinese Embassy was Mr Fan, a bespectacled, charming diplomat whose first word to me was 'Congratulations'. He was in Abuja, so I e-mailed him the required documents. But I had to travel from Lagos to the capital city to get my passport stamped. The Chinese embassy paid for my flight tickets and I got a recommendation letter from Ms. Nwogwugwu to take with me. It was a generous recommendation, from an editor I had watched with awe in the

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newsroom arguing about the fine points of grammar late into the night. I am sure she couldn't even pick me out of a group photo, but she read my flailing, verbose and sometimes overly ambitious efforts at journalism and spotted promise.

After picking up my Chinese visa in Abuja, Mr Fan asked me to dinner, so I could meet the Nigerian journalist that had spent ten months in China the previous year. Bukola Ogunsina. I had reached out to her earlier. She told me, on the phone, that the training program was a fabulous opportunity to travel through China and expand my horizons. She intimated me about the stress of constant travelling and keeping up with what to write and the inclement weather, but her voice was suffused with excitement. She had had a terrific time.

When we met, over a banquet of Chinese dishes at a restaurant in Abuja, she turned out to be a graceful, kind woman. She practised her Mandarin with Mr Fan and his colleague and laughed as I struggled to wield the chopsticks. She gave me a few tips on surviving in China. But the one that stayed with me was: you have to act like an ambassador. When people look at you, they'll see Nigeria. So what you do matters. It was good stuff. But, throughout my time in China, I also came to realise that the opposite was true. It didn't matter what I did. Sometimes, what mattered was what my country had done.

In a twist of fate, I had also gotten admitted to study for a Masters degree in Global Journalism at Renmin University, as part of the training. More than two British universities had offered me admissions in the same area of study. But this was a fully funded admission. While studying journalism in the UK is not the same as doing it in China, as a senior colleague advised me, I quickly learnt that Renmin had the most reputable journalism faculty in communist China. That was something.

So I counted the days, while reading more books, articles about China. There was so much, too much, inundating. It was a bottomless pit.

I didn't pack a lot of clothes (didn't have much anyways); didn't pack any food, except a sack of garri and a handful of red, crushed pepper, which eventually saved me from a coroner's death-by-starvation report, during my early days in Beijing.

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On the eve of my flight out of Nigeria, I packed my bags and travelled across Lagos to sleep over at my Father's. Together, accompanied by my sister, stepmother and cousin, we boarded a taxi to the airport the following morning. As I went through immigration, I was literally trembling, not with joy, but with something else. It was like being in a corridor that opened to heaven, a place you've heard so many good things about. And you are at the door, your hands on the handle, about to turn it down. Your heart is bursting at the seams with, what's the word now? Adrenaline? I don't know. But it was overwhelming.

When the plane took off and the map opposite indicated that we were out of Nigerian airspace, I felt lighter, freer. It was a moment of small triumph. Like many others before me, I had found a way to leave, too.

*

The first leg of the flight, from Lagos to Addis Ababa, was uneventful. But the second one wasn't. I sat beside a Chinese lady who taught in Africa and an Angolan scholarship student who had been to Macau. She was heading for vacation in China and he, the Angolan student, was resuming studies at a university in Beijing. It was a long journey and the company was great.

When the plane touched down at the Beijing airport, I held my breath. My dog-eared copy of *Norton's Anthology of Fiction* was clasped between my knees, as the pilot steered us to a complete stop. The flight announcer demanded for Nigerian passengers to get off first. I fought through the already-crowded aisle. Behind me was another Nigerian, a teenager who moved like she had been here before. As we hurried through the tunnel-like extension that connected the plane to the first immigration checkpoint, she told me she was studying communications at a university in Beijing. She had completed a year of Chinese language training and was returning that spring to start taking degree courses.

She left me at the first immigration checkpoint, while I fished for my yellow card. I saw her far ahead on a later queue, at the last immigration checkpoint. I hadn't gotten the chance to collect her contact number. But she'd contact me months later, with a shocking surprise.

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The immigration officer checked my passport and asked me to step aside. And I waited, for more than thirty minutes. While other black people joined me, some from Togo. We were eventually attended to at a police booth, where our pictures were taken before being allowed to proceed.

I found the airport stunning. The lights, the moving floors, the train shuttle, the smooth surfaces. It was nothing like all the airports I had travelled through in Nigeria. This was something I would do frequently through my time in China: compare a piece of infrastructure with what I had experienced in Nigeria. It was my only terms of reference. And every time, the Chinese version, placed side-by-side with its Nigerian counterpart, was akin to magic. Once, I made a friend who told me Beijing infrastructure was one of the worst she had experienced in her travels across the world. I marked her off, in my head, as delusional.

Representatives of the China Africa Press Centre, the training organisers, were waiting with a big sign at the arrival lobby. Some other African journalists had streamed out before I did. I ticked off my name on a list and went round, saying my name and country. There were journalists from Kenya, Zimbabwe, Botswana, South Africa, Mozambique, every corner of Africa. For the next ten months, I would travel across China with this group and make unforgettable memories. But on that cold February morning, we were complete strangers.

On the bus, I tried to keep awake and watch a foreign city for the first time. It was just past midnight. Skyscrapers rose against the night sky. The wide roads, the elaborate, intricate bridges, the almost saintly magnificence of the city. It was a lot to take in at once.

We were domiciled at the Diplomatic Residence Compound (DRC) in Jianguomen, situated at the very heart of Beijing. The DRC consists of a series of residential towers, tree-lined roads and guards swaddled in heavy coats and wool hats. During my time there, it was serene and secure. My apartment was commodious and well-furnished. When I had friends come over, I was always quick to remind them I wasn't paying the rent.

My first night, I could hardly sleep. I was brimming with ideas. My vision of China was already being reset. This was a *modern* city. And what about the

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apartment? It was one of the biggest and most comfortable I had ever lived in. So I sat down at the dining table (yeah, I had one, thank you) and wrote my first story from Beijing.

It was about *The Evolution of Big Brother*. Of course I had read about censorship and human rights abuses and inequality and environmental pollution and degradation, and all the other question marks hanging over modern China. But now that I was here, none of those things mattered or, perhaps, they mattered differently. And the article was exploring the idea that maybe the Chinese are right. Maybe a dictatorship, not a democracy, was the future of the human race.

The next morning, I went out looking for a proper extension port for my phone charger. No one had told me that China's electric ports were different, two slanted lines running from each other. Walking down Guanghua Road, my hands tucked into my jacket, I passed a number of bars and embassies, including the United States consulate. But I didn't find an electric-store shop. I turned into Ritan road. The farther I went, the more people I came across.

Along the sidewalk, people queued in front of shops, apparently for morning snacks. I found a shop selling a variety of things, including toys. But the attendant wasn't interested in my frantic gestures. I left, deflated. But, up ahead, I found another store. And this attendant spoke some English. She was excited to see me and asked where I was from. She also had the extension port I was looking for.

When I returned to the apartment, I stumbled on Omphi, my South African colleague in the elevator. She said she was having issues with her phone's Internet connection. I told her I could fix it and invited her to my apartment.

Omphi is fair-skinned and exudes a soothing intelligence formed through more than 14 years of professional journalism. She was one of the most critical, curious and honest minds I met in China. And she had a great smile, which appeared when I fixed her Internet connection problem, by installing a Virtual Private Network (VPN) application. I think I would be a very rich man now if I had charged a dollar for every VPN related issue I fixed in China.

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Later, we had our first meal in the new country together at the Italian restaurant opposite our building. We shared a medium sized pizza and two glasses of chocolate milk. It would be the beginning of a marvellous friendship.

*

Our first few days were about settling in. We received our first monthly living allowance (just over a \$1,000), registered for a Chinese phone card, visited the hospital for a medical check-up and a nearby supermarket to shop for household items and groceries. It could have been overwhelming if we didn't have two Chinese assistants, Pinky and Marshall, to guide our every step.

One of my first biggest challenges was finding something to eat. The Italian restaurant served a lot of really great meals, but I soon got tired of asking for extra pepper. Together with Omphi, I tried a Chinese restaurant, which advertised itself as a great place for Peking duck. But when our order arrived, it was cold and sour. I almost threw up. So I started to finagle with my phone and soon found the Chinese McDonalds web app. Somehow, I managed to input my address in Chinese. When the delivery rider called, I would just mutter *dui dui dui*, which could translate to mean *yes, yes, yes*. And it worked. It would be a long time before I learnt enough Chinese to download the Meituan app and fully delve into the magic of food delivery in China; but with the McDonald's efficiency, I was beginning to get a glimpse.

One evening, during our first few days, I stood with some colleagues on the sidewalk, trying to flag down a taxi. But none stopped. It was windy and terribly cold. We bantered: perhaps the taxis were not stopping because we were black. At some point, I pulled out my phone and translated 'stop taxi' with Google. Then I screamed the phrase at the next taxi. To our surprise, the vehicle stopped. We ran towards it. Later, after acquiring a bank account, I started using Didi, the taxi-hailing app, and life just became a lot easier.

I also quickly learned that, in Beijing, cash was a burden. Whether it was at the big supermarkets or the petty trader selling used goods in the underground, all you had to do was retrieve your phone and scan the seller's Wechat or Alibaba QR code. As at 2018, the volume of mobile payments was the largest in the world, [totalling more than US\\$ 12 trillion](#), from more than 700 million mobile users. And the numbers are not expected to slow down. Some analysts have

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predicted that by 2023, the country's annual total transaction value via mobile [could reach \\$96.7 trillion](#).

And then there was the subway, which is [one of the busiest subway systems in the world](#) with nearly two billion rides a year. At first it seemed intimidating. I did several Google searches, inquiring how to pay and know when to get off. There was a lot of good stuff on Reddit. Descending down the subway stairs, for the first time, I felt my heart pound. At the ticket counter, I held up my phone towards the counter to reveal my destination to the attendant. She understood and sold me the appropriate card. It ended up being pretty easy. The signs were in Chinese symbols and Latin letters. The announcer spoke, first in Chinese, and then in English. The train was on time. There weren't a lot of seats, but it was clean and airy and fast. The only thing I could think of, as I ascended out of the metro, was why Lagos didn't have one.

*

As I am sure you know already, meeting people from different countries gives you a feeling akin to spreading your wings across the universe. You feel like you are close to something truly universal. This was how I felt when I had dinner with Billy, who is Mongolian, Hafyza, who is Maldivian, and Tenga, from Namibia. Billy and Hafyza were part of the team of journalists from Southeast Asia who were also on a similar training program like ours, the Africans. We met at the Italian restaurant and talked about life in our different countries, about work, love and wine. Being selected for the training, it appeared, was also a defining moment for them.

I soon became close to Laetitia (Mauritius) and Ahlem (Tunisia), two of the most important people I met in China. They both spoke French but also enough English for me to, sometimes, interrupt their never-ending communion. My Kenyan colleague, Trix, became my de facto cousin, because she knew so much about Nollywood and Nigerian pop. We lived in the same building and, sometimes, when the writing was awry, I would appear at her doorstep and she would play some music and watch me dance drunkenly. And there was Tlotlo (Botswana), a magical adventurer, who always urged me to leave the

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apartment, leave the books and live. Go skydiving or hiking, she would say, do something different.

It was a thoroughly stunning education meeting these people. When someone asked me, some few weeks before I left China, what my biggest takeaway from the training was, I didn't think too deeply. It's the people I have met, I replied. To have friends from across Africa, especially, helped me think differently about the continent, about how we are all so different and yet so similar.

*

We had a bus. It was one of those long, tourist buses with enough space for up to 40 people. Our driver was Wang Bing, a chain-smoking, calm and dependable man in his forties. He didn't speak any English and his accent was too sloppy for me to even pick up the occasional phrase. But he was always early, ready to ferry us across the city, through traffic jams and toll booths. He was there, from beginning to end. And when he wasn't focused on the road ahead and lines formed across his brow, he had a disarming smile etched on his face

Our first official briefing was delivered by Mr Chen Zhe, the CAPC director whose English was a bit forced but kind. My English name is Alex, he said. But everyone I knew called him Mr Chen. When someone asked him whether we have to submit our stories to him for vetting before publication, he looked amused. We don't have such rights, he said.

The briefing was about getting us ready for the next ten months. The training was about helping us understand Chinese media, politics and society. And we were scheduled to attend conferences and summits, visit Chinese media houses and government ministries across the country; and also be treated to a staggering variety of Chinese culture tourism. In addition, we would receive a number of lectures at Renmin University, with guest lecturers from universities and think tanks across the country.

After the briefing, the group broke to head for our first lecture. Downstairs, I stumbled upon Hazem, the Egyptian journalist and asked him whether he was enjoying his stay in Beijing. He shook his head. I'm lonely, he told me. I

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mumbled something about how time will help him adjust better, but he looked disinterested.

Marshall, one of our assistants, sat beside me on the bus, making a phone call. When he dropped, he continued to tinker with the screen, his lean fingers dancing across the surface. Bespectacled, he was usually busy with his phone, focused intently on its machinations. I wanted to ask him how long it took for him to learn how to type in Chinese. The day before, while at the hospital conducting a physical examination, he had suggested that I focus only on learning how to speak and listen. It will be too difficult to learn how to write because of the characters, he said. So I wanted to ask him how long it had taken him. But, again, he was on the phone receiving a call. So I turned my face to the window and watched Chinese life in 3D: jacketed pedestrians standing at a zebra crossing, rows of bicycles parked on the sidewalk, sleek cars and giant billboards. I had never been to Europe, but I had read about London and Paris and the resplendence of Amsterdam. Beijing evoked those literary memories.

*

When I started to get some sleep, they came with nightmares. The dreams all had a common theme: I would suddenly be back in Nigeria and then struggling to return to China, to return to this life where the electricity never blinked and water didn't stop running. I would wake and my heart would be thumping, beads of sweat on my forehead in the chill of winter. It wasn't difficult to understand what my subconscious was telling me.

The previous year, in 2017, I had interviewed a Nigerian who had embarked on the journey to Libya. Friday Eneji. He came to THISDAY headquarters in Lagos and said he wanted to tell his story. He removed his clothes to reveal the scars he had collected while trying to get into Europe. It was a difficult story to write, because I struggled to understand why someone would take the kind of risks he took, to leave. But, thousands of miles away from home, I was beginning to.

I was beginning to understand panic, desperation, but only a little bit. I still had no intention of staying back in China illegally. But that was because of the countless privileges (Oh Lord, these should be rights) I have had growing up, the parent that provided shelter, food and books, the public-subsidised

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secondary and university education I received, the newspaper internship that nurtured my journalism instincts. I could return and get a job and be relatively comfortable. This sort of privileges come with pride, the kind that protects you from the panic that pushes you to the edge.

But I don't believe the subconscious is subject to our hubris. At least mine wasn't. It was reminding me to do all it takes to remain *here*. You can't go back. You can't go back and not be able to return.

In a way, it was a warning. +

Solomon Elusoji is a co-editor at The Question Marker.

This essay was adapted from the author's China memoir, Travelling With Big Brother, which is available on Amazon [here](#).

Our Phones Are Giving Us Away

Our digital footprints continue to power a multi-billion-dollar data economy

Farida Adamu



Two years ago, sick and broke, I was in need of a soft loan. I called and texted a couple of people but couldn't get any help. Then I logged into Facebook and the first thing I saw was an advert by a Nigerian fintech company offering a loan without collateral. Magic moment!

I got the loan within an hour, after filling out some personal and financial information. Despite receiving funds in my bank account, it felt unreal, not

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because I got a loan without collateral but because my phone knew I was in need of funds and led me to where I could get money within a short period of time. Someone or something was paying attention to the calls I made or the texts I had sent, and targeted a loan ad at me.

Then, perhaps more interestingly, a fintech company ‘trusted’ me enough to give me a loan without any credit history or collateral; this is surely an upside of data and technology. The downside? I had to part away with personal data like my BVN to verify I am a real person and the owner of my bank account. I was required to login to my Facebook account, which gave the fintech company access to my social capital and network; I also surrendered my phone number to be sure they can reach me, and the contacts in my phonebook, in case I decide to go silent when my loan is due. I had to turn on my GPS to have my location verified as well. The information I provided helped the algorithm decide whether I was eligible for a loan or not. This method broad profiling has since been adopted by other fintech companies that have come into the market. A certain loan company even accesses all your contacts and sends messages to them to ‘encourage’ you to pay back in case you abscond on your loan. The number of Nigerians who benefit from these loans and other financial services they offer have grown exponentially. But many do not understand in what ways their data is being used even though they “consent” to terms and conditions before signing up on these services.

The rapid growth of the mobile app industry has contributed to the ongoing unprecedented levels of data harvesting. As of the third quarter of 2019, Google Play store had 2.47 million apps while Apple App Store had 1.8 million apps. In its Third-Party Tracking [report](#), Financial Times estimated over 88% of android apps transfer information back to Google’s parent company Alphabet while 43% of apps studied transfer information to Facebook. During the Cambridge Analytica Scandal, Facebook admitted to having over 5000 data points on each of their users and this number will continue to increase. On the surface, this may mean nothing but different information shared by these apps to a parent server is how profiles and shadow profiles are created. For instance, if my bank app or loan provider shares my data with Facebook, a Dating App shares my data with Facebook, and my Period-Tracking app also shares, Facebook will be able to determine my financial status, my sexuality, the approximate dates my menstrual can occur and other passive information that I may have provided. They create a profile and target ads at me. Beyond

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targeting ads, much more can happen. For every person Facebook targets, they target their friends and profile them as well. Biometric and face recognition apps put a final nail to this coffin. The idea is to be able to use these data to link to different databases and create not only a physical profile but a psychological profile of people by studying their behavior. Cambridge Analytica Whistleblower Christopher Wylie describes this as [a psychological warfare](#). The interconnectivity of these mobile applications may explain why my loan company had me download their mobile app first and had me link my facebook account at some point.

When it comes to the issue of data privacy, people usually argue that they have nothing to hide and don't mind being profiled. But data rights are human rights; until they are being threatened, you may not know just how much you need them. Our digital footprints continue to power a multi-billion-dollar data economy. We are the producers but we are also the commodity and unfortunately, we receive no compensation or financial value from these cash troves. However, getting paid off for our data alone may not be enough. Of course, a loan facility trying to offer me money to ease my affairs cannot pay me for giving them my data but what of the others like Facebook and Google who thrive because we exist. Anya Skatova a research fellow with University of Nottingham [argued](#) that data cannot be measured in monetary value and it is rather simplistic to just pay people off for using their data. The other thing that is left will be to let the power of usable access and sharing go back to the hands of the people who own and created these data, where data created by individuals are domiciled on their own personal domains.

By 2020, [1.7mb](#) of information will be generated by one person every second. As a starting point, we should start asking some of these questions when engaging with any sort of digital technology: How is my data created? Who is gathering data about me? Who is it being shared with? What are they using it for? I did not see the need to ask these questions when I requested a loan years ago, I didn't even know they were questions I was meant to ask but as they say, the older, the wiser. ✚

Farida Adamu is a data journalist and co-founder at Researcher.NG

Has Naira Marley Defeated The Hypocrisy?

“Marlians represent a growing number of many disillusioned young Nigerians plagued by the failure of the country.”

Carl Terver



Photo credit: SoundCloud

The glorification of the lascivious, the hedonistic, the sybaritic, the wanton and vainglory in Nigerian music keeps crossing the uncrossable lines, that the Nigerian Censors Board might lose its morality marathon to police it. We had

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“Diet”—one of the best songs of 2018 by the crazy beats of DJ Enimoney—banned by the NCB for glorifying the use of narcotics. Olamide’s “Science Student” was banned for the same reason. But none of these deter our artistes. Hear Zlatan featured in Tekno’s “Agege”: “If I get money I go buy anything/ Smooch anything, fuck anything/ I go enter any country, fuck anything”. The video of this song is almost a striptease event and money-spraying clownery. So brazen the lyrics one might wish they are anti-establishment or anti-anything, at least—such energy in the wrong hands.

Naira Marley, it seems, has been making the roll call in using such energy: while rappers are doing cyphers and pushing diss tracks that aren’t helping Nigerian hip-hop, Naira Marley has been courting a fan base he calls Marlians.

How?

It began with an expression—“If u know about slavery u go know say yahoo no b crime.” This was Naira Marley’s infamous commentary when the singer Simi, earlier in the year, cautioned yahoo boys from buying her music. Like Oluwa Burna’s Coachella big font tweet (“I am an African Giant”), which at first seemed like a PR damage but became a springboard for the artiste’s increasing fame, so was Naira Marley’s ditty. Like fungus, a prospect of a Naira Marley celebrity industrial image began to grow from the comments that trailed his “yahoo no b crime” comment, conflagrating the online community. Naira Marley, who wasn’t really in the spotlight after the momentous glory of his World Cup single “Issa Goal,” saw the light.

He released “Am I A Yahoo Boy” with Zlatan where he sings, (translated from Yoruba) “Do I look like a yahoo boy?” “Did they write yahoo on my head?” This gave him enough notoriety that the EFCC came, brandishing handcuffs.

About this time solidarity for Naira Marley grew, with his fans gradually evolving to fill the position of the worshippers or stans for the celebration of Naira Marley’s celebrity status. His popularity soared. Bloggers went agog on his story. Perhaps Naira Marley’s trick was to use all these as fodder to parlay himself to stardom.

Then came the controversial single “Soapy,” after his release from EFCC jail. It didn’t stop there, he became a version of his own Cicero—or we may rather compare, a Reuben Abati, famous for anomalous commentary—making social commentary: “Having a big ass is better than having a masters degree,” “If you like do the biggest marriage, if you don’t have kids you’re still single.” What is

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the endgame of such unequivocal insults to the sensibility of Nigerians and women generally?

The endgame for him and his managers is increased notoriety. An ingredient the showbiz industry knows too well increases an artiste's market value, when it doesn't backfire. While he has tamed in his Cicero act, he has bolstered in the department of dropping singles which, by day, increases his fan base, the Marlians.

Starting with "Soapy." It is not hard to see the writing on the wall concerning this song. Fresh out of detention, what better time to release a single? With the blessing of REXXIE, whose crazy, psychedelic and trace-inducing beats on the production has guaranteed the song remains this year's No. 1 club banger till date, the single narrates prison experience and introduces a new dance, soapy. The song has caught on, albeit with controversy; the dance, too explicit, simulating the jerking posture of masturbation. Then came another single "Opotoyi," very lewd, where he sings of a woman's sexual performance as "her quick action is like sugar, which he wants to "release" (ejaculate in) her "vagina . . . so sweet like sugar." And more recently, his single "Putu" demonstrates Naira Marley's streak for the obscene.

Obscene songs or not, it doesn't stop the appreciation of Naira Marley as a singer both from Marlians and non-Marlians alike. Naira Marley cannot exist without a system that doesn't allow him to thrive. The artist(e) is a mediator whom society transfers its desires and anxieties upon for expression. Naira Marley and his kind of musicians represents that fraction of his age, the Millennials, often wrongly accused for being misguided and lazy youths, for being hedonistic (call them the codeine generation); a generation in troubled times. The accusations are hasty as well as they're true, as well as a number of these Millennials are living this reality. It is for this number that the traffic for which Marlians music and Naira Marley's celebrity image finds expression.

In this arrangement it is not surprising that the Marlians are growing. They represents a growing number of many disillusioned young Nigerians plagued by the failure of the country, corrupted by dysfunctional education that allows them less criticality of mind. A group of wild young men and women who have evolved an identity of The Survivors whose psychology disregards the means to the end (yahoo no b crime), who having no power over their fate, seek hedonism as an escape for their disillusionment under Naira Marley's musical Molly. Naira Marley already employs a number of vocabularies of identity in his

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songs for them: “Jo soapy,” “Ole ni everybody,” “Inside life,” “No belt gang,” “Marlians, come forward,” “Am I a yahoo boy?” “yahoo no b crime,” and the word “Marlian,” which members identify themselves with. (In “Put a” we see the full scale of “Marlian” solidarity. In the video Naira Marley asks a bouncer to control the crowd from walking into his party: “Control the crowd, control the crowd,” he says. “Marlians, come forward. The rest fuck off.” And until the other boys denied entry into the party take off their belts—a sign that they have joined the No Belts Gang, becoming Marlians— are they allowed into the party.)

It is sad and unfair: while we cannot persecute Naira Marley for being the artiste that simply reflects his society, nor praise him for uniting a group of people who didn’t know they belonged together, that Naira Marley’s second name reminds us of a great musician—Bob Marley—in his days, that a juxtaposition of the two Marleys is almost aberrational. We ask, “How did this happen?”

In this vein of criticising Naira Marley, there’s a word for the morality critics of his artistic vision lately. This bouquet of Marlian songs—Am I A Yahoo Boy, Soapy, Opotoyi, and Put a—serve their purpose, against popular judgement. The artist mustn’t use the megaphone on the street corner like an evangelist to show his consciousness. All this lewdness in lyrics, the glorification of sex and hedonism are inverted ways of telling us that something is wrong with our society. It therefore means that the founding of the Marlians points us to a group of young Nigerians who have been ignored and need help. (Frances Ogamba’s short story “Ghana Boy,” that depicts the inimical state of suburbia Nigeria that engenders the degeneration of young minds, suffices.) At last, to this, Naira Marley lets out in “Bad Influence,” another single: “the government don’t have nothing for us/ It’s like they tryna kill all of us . . . We want school but they give us prison/ We want education but they taught us lesson.” (Under these Buhari times, what can one say?) The song is a relief from Naira Marley’s negative energy so far. On the day he released the song he tweeted: “If I’m a #badinfluence I’m still trying to work out what influenced me to be bad. Why don’t y’all care? I’m a youth too.” With this kind of reminder of what Bob Marley might have said, we’re tempted to hail the Marlians, a strong force of opposition to the beast of hypocrisy our country is. ✚

Carl Terver is an editor at Praxis Magazine.

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The Definition of Poetry

Nathaniel Soonest speaks to Solomon Elusoji: "You have to write everyday".

Solomon Elusoji



The interview took place in a makeshift dining area. The table was round and empty, devoid of beer. Nathaniel Soonest, an award-winning poet and journalist, was sporting a flower-patterned shirt. His eyes were red and tired - he had managed less than four hours of sleep in the preceding 36 hours. But,

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as we started to speak, his voice rushed out clear and coherent. The interview lasted for about 45 minutes, according to my recorder. Here are excerpts of our conversation:

When did you begin to write poetry?

It started when I was in primary school. I have always been fascinated with words. I used to be very shy, then I fell in love with Shakespeare and he became a medium for me to reach out to the girls.

Poetry started for you with love letters?

Exactly. I couldn't talk to girls face to face, so I would rather write the words on paper. I loved - and I still do - the fact that, in writing, I could say more.

When did poetry become something central to you?

It was during the years between finishing secondary school and getting into the university. I realised if there was one thing I could not do without, it was reading and writing poetry. There was this joy . . .

What were you writing about?

By then it had moved from wooing the girls to what was happening in my society - corruption, cult killings, the hardships I had gone through as a boy. It was like protest poetry.

Were you politically inclined in the university?

I was very political. I ran for office. I didn't win at the University level but I won at the faculty level. I remember when I was campaigning, people thought I was campaigning for the SUG Presidency, but it was for Sports. That was because I used to go on campaign trails armed with words, the beauty . . . for me, poetry is about the beauty of words, the way you juxtapose them to make something extraordinary. I think that is what fascinates me about poetry.

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So you like Shakespeare. Who were your other influences?

My other major influences include Niyi Osundare. It also includes Esiaba Irobi, a bit of Wole Soyinka. But one major influence is Bruce Boston, a master of speculative poetry.

These influences, do they have something in common for you?

They are different. I read broadly and try to fuse many things into one while writing.

So you were talking about Bruce Boston?

Yes, that was when I got into university. Someone had introduced me to Eric T. Marin because I had written a poem about Obatala. So I went there and I saw many great writers of speculative fiction and poetry. That was where I noticed Boston and his poem, *I Build Engines*, which has shaped most of the poems I have written since then. I studied that poem for five years in the university.

You studied computer science. Were you trying to find the science in poetry?

That's the point. He brought the art in science. He fused both together. It was a beautiful marriage of words. Of course I was science-inclined, so it was beautiful to understand what he was saying. In my first year, I took a course called *Engine Drawing*. So when he writes, in the first line, *I build engines/from the lines of battle/no matter how they are drawn*, it meant a lot to me. After five years, I wrote a poem modelled after it, *I Write Programs*. So Boston has a great influence on me. In fact, he did a blurb for my first book and I have been published in a magazine where he was a judge. So it moved on from reading his work to me actively searching for him.

Your first book is titled, *Teaching Father How To Impregnate Women*. Your next book has a working title, *The Nakedness of God*. You seem to have a way of carving out interesting titles.

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I think it stems from my journalism background. Your headline should be catchy. That is what attracts and draws people in. If you check some of the great books you know, they have some very beautiful titles.

Being a journalist and a practising poet, is there some sort of conflict?

It's not so far away from each other. You can actually build a very good career as a poet from journalism.

Do you know people who have done that?

Not really, but you can. There are a thousand and one people who have done it for fiction and nonfiction. It's easier to write stories as a journalist. My journalist doesn't entirely feed my poetry, but what it does for me is to expose me to certain encounters, while reporting, that inspire poetry. Once, I did a story about a boy who was saved after an attack in Syria - then I wrote a poem about it. So I've had moments like that where while reporting, an idea for a poem creeps in.

What's your writing process like? Do you write everyday?

Yes, I write everyday. Even if it's just scribbling down a metaphor, you have to write everyday. I am one of those who say you have to write everyday. To be a good poet, you must write. Then you read also. I read at least 10 to 20 poems everyday, whether it is on Twitter or Facebook or my email. (I am subscribed to a couple of poetry journals) Also I try to study at least one poem everyday - what were the technicalities, what did this person try to achieve, what is new about it? So I am always scribbling on scraps of paper, trying to keep in touch.

Was there anything you were afraid of as a child?

My biggest fear was failing my parents.

Isn't that the fear of most Nigerian kids?

I don't know about that. I didn't come from a rich home . . .

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So you wanted to be successful?

Yes, I needed to be successful, because I saw my parents giving too much, struggling so I could succeed. Then I had parents who always told me I would be great. I can't remember a day when we didn't have a discussion and it didn't include something about my greatness. They are my biggest supporters. Also, I think the pressure to impress them also stems from the fact that I am the first child. In the African sense, when every other person is failing, you can't afford to fail as a first child - people are always looking up to you.

And how has that played out in your poetry?

I try to play the role of dishing out knowledge to a younger generation in my poems, to help them find an upward path and come out successful. I think I like to speak for those who don't have a voice, because that's what I do as an elder brother - you won't touch my siblings or I'll come for you; it doesn't matter if I fail in my attempt, but the point is I'll come for you. In fact, my first book, *Teaching Father*, was trying to debunk certain myths, trying to *shake the table* as they say. It was about debunking chauvinism . . .

You are a feminist?

No I am not. I don't know what they call people who are striving for a balance. I really strive for a balance; I think there should be a balance.

If you are striving for a balance, doesn't that make you a feminist?

So I think the problem is with feminism as people perceive it. It's the term I don't want to be associated. Of course when you read *Teaching Father* - I have had a lot of feminist journals who want to publish my poems - some of the works there were advocating for women.

So why don't you want to associate with the tag?

The tag itself has been bastardised. That's what I feel. It is attached to so many things that are not necessary.

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And what are some of these things?

For instance, why should you always cook for your husband? Stuff like that. I don't think that's what the term should be about.

You don't think that's important?

I don't think that's what the whole story should be about.

You don't think that *cooking for your husband* is a valid issue in feminist discourse?

The point is, I think every sane human being knows that there are times when you should not be able to cook for your husband. Feminism should be about women being paid higher if she's more qualified than the man. Those are the kinds of discussion I want to have. I want to have that discussion about how the woman plays a role in how many kids she wants to have, when she wants to have sex. So there are certain parts of it that seem trivial, so people just start looking for . . . at some point, feminism becomes like anti-man. There shouldn't be an anti-man; it should be man, woman exists. She is, he is, they are, I am. That's it.

The conversation is that men are the problem.

That's the point. So when you say you are a feminist, it seems like you want to embrace the tag, *all men are trash*. I

You don't agree that *all men are trash*?

Why should all men be trash? We've had great men do great things; men who stood the test of time and you can take them anywhere.

What are some examples of these great men?

One great man I know is my father. My father cooks, cleans the house, washes plates, washes pants, washes everything. He has stayed with his wife

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for over three decades and still going strong. I am not saying they haven't had their ups and downs, but they understand each other. So I think my father is a good man. I strongly believe that. I see his methods of treating women and it's fascinating. So, the world shouldn't be about men. It's for everybody.

You've won a couple of literary awards. Who are the people who have helped you the most in the literary world?

Dami Ajayi. I have fed my mind from Dami Ajayi's library a lot. His works challenge me, I engage him in talks and they are wonderful. So he stands at number one, as far as my literary journey is concerned. Not so many people give you a chance, especially in Nigeria. The literary scene is like a cult, like a frat thing; you have to belong to a frat so that they can raise you, you have to have certain ideologies. But Dami Ajayi has no biases, just basic friendship and a mutual understanding of what we like. Iron sharpeneth iron. He has two books. *Clinical Blues*, his first, was something else. I loved it, studied it. And some of the best poets I have met, I met them through Dami Ajayi.

How did you guys meet?

If I am not mistaken, we met at a poetry event. I had loved *Clinical Blues* before I met him. So I think it was a *Clinical Blues* talk that brought us together.

And you guys have a mutual love for beer.

Yes, imagine us sitting over a beer and talking about poetry, telling him how *Clinical Blues* is better than *A woman's body is a country* (Ajayi's second book) and arguing about it. In *Clinical Blues*, he was showing off, this brilliant kid. But in *A woman's body is a country*, he shows how vulnerable a poet can be.

Another person who has helped me is Olulu (Olumide Holloway). He convenes the foremost Spoken Word outfit in Nigeria, War of Words. When I was way younger, we used to perform everywhere. He had a Sunday meeting where he gathered people - in their hundreds - and allowed poets perform. So Olulu isn't just for me. He helped a lot of other young poets. If I am talking about my growth, he can't be erased. Another person who has done something close is Efe Paul Azino; he carried us along and made sure we had places to perform at.

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The guys who gave themselves to create platforms for creative expression were the guys who did a lot for us. There is also Eriata. One of my biggest prizes was the Eriata Poetry prize. This was a long time ago, when we used to post poems on Facebook.

I think Facebook has done more for poetry than the government has done.

Yes, it has. Sometimes you feel published already, because you can have up to a 100 people read that one poem. What has the government really done for poetry? Maybe in those days. When I won my first major poetry prize, which was the *Nigeria @ 50* prize, my father expected them to take us somewhere abroad to perform because I think in his days that's what poetry used to be: you win a prize and then maybe you are going to be heading to some African country or England to present your poem. So the government has not really done a lot for poetry and literature, except for the NLNG prize. But that prize has not served. Where are the workshops, residencies, fellowships, where are the prizes for young people? You have someone going home with over a \$100,000; there's so much more we can do. It's a winner-takes-all prize that doesn't serve all. It's because Jude Idada is someone who moves, that's why we are hearing some noise after he has won - he is going around, reading to children. Where are the other guys who have won in the past? We probably don't even know where they are. That's a very big prize, one which is bigger than most prizes in Europe and America.

Would you advise young people to become poets?

Only for the right reasons. So spoken-word has made a lot of people start engaging with poetry and they think going into Spoken Word will make them into WizKid. The moment that is your notion, I think you are lost.

What's the right motive?

Let me use a bible term - I am a bible man - I think the motive should be to *edify* the soul. Once your goal is to edify the soul, you will not be frustrated in the end. Because at some point, the spoken-word artiste becomes a failed

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rapper, somehow. If you are going into it for fame and fortune, you have it wrong. If it was for money, I won't do poetry.

What is poetry's value?

Asides from preserving language, I think poetry has its place in pricking the consciousness of the mind; it is about making people aware of what is and what should be. That's one value that poetry has. But its main purpose is to preserve language in its most beautiful form. We are yet to fully explore words; there is so much we can achieve with words.

As a bible man, do you see a connection between poetry and prayer?

Not every poem attains the level of a prayer. So it's not totally prayer, and it's not sermon. It is between prayer, sermon and song. Because at one point it is teaching, it has melody and feels like appealing to something. If you tilt it this way it becomes a song, tilt it that way it becomes a sermon and then if you tilt it the other way, it is prayer.

Achebe talked about Africans doing great things with the English language. Which contemporary writer do you think has and is doing this today?

Poetry-wise?

Across the spectrum.

It is cliché to call Adichie. She has already attained that. But I like Chigozie Obioma. I think that's where language should be heading to, helping to change the narrative of people, change what people think about. So I think Obioma is working hard.

In poetry, who has achieved that? I think we are all still striving. But there are some people who are really topping the charts, who are close to attaining what Achebe was saying. A person - and I am talking about Nigerian poets - like Umar Sidi is not popular but there is something about his poems and his language. Dami Ajayi is trying - like I said, we are all striving towards it. When

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you now climb up the ladder a bit, we have a younger generation that is coming - we have Gbenga Adesina, we have **D.M Aderibigbe**

Isn't that your generation?

Yes it is my generation, but who speaks about himself?

I interrupted because you said a *younger* generation.

Yes, I fit into that generation.

I felt you were saying Dami Ajayi was in another generation . . .

Even Dami Ajayi is in my generation. The thing is Dami came in early than many of us, way earlier, in terms of the exposure and people who he has rubbed shoulders with. So Dami Ajayi is sometimes grouped a bit out of our generation, just a bit. So he is sort of like between two generations, because you want to classify him in the generation of people like Richard Ali, Gimba Kakanda, Jumoke Verissimo. But he's actually not in that class; he is still a little bit younger. Of course, after the Jumoke generation, you can go further to the Odia (Ofeimun) generation - that's too far. Now you have a guy called Logan February -

He is in your generation?

No he is not.

So how do you come up with these generational boxes?

For me it's just an age thing. If I am in my thirties.

How old are you now?

I am close to 34. I am actually 33.

That's pretty young. Logan February is how old now?

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Probably 20, 21.

I feel it's the same box.

But the point is 20 to 30 is a very long difference. We might think it's almost there, but I have a kid brother who is 14 years younger. But no, there is still a divide, because the way these young ones reason is not the way I am thinking about life.

What's the difference?

The difference is that there is more freedom. We had to break away from the cage in which we were born, which we were taught, to start being free.

You think the younger generation are free or are freer?

They are freer. There was a time when I couldn't use *fuck* in my poetry. In fact, it is worse because they are changing the notion about what poetry is.

When you say it like this, do you mean Nigerian is getting better or for poets?

Yes, poetry-wise. But it is not an attribution to the government. It is because individuals have woken up; and there are some other individuals who have risen up to the challenge of creating spaces for expression; you have the lady who does *Ake*, (Lola) Shoneyin; she is doing beautifully well; you have the African Poetry Book Fund (APBF), you have the Sillerman prize -

And the Brunel prize.

Exactly. So young people are observing and saying if that young person can get it, then I can do it; so he starts reading and writing verse because he knows the opportunities are there. You have a situation where you don't even need to have finished a university degree to get an MFA in the USA. It wasn't there when we were growing up; there was no freedom. If we were free, there was no reason why I would have gone to the sciences in the first place - there is no reason.

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I think the freedom now comes from enlightenment. Let me go back to the bible, it says in the last days, knowledge shall increase. A lot of young people will come with great things. We who came before them were going to be children of fear but we had to break the chains of those ideologies. So you have to break away from the things you have known because that's the only way you can thrive.

How would you want to be remembered?

He loved life. I want to be remembered as somebody who loved life, valued it and did his best to enhance it while on earth. +

*Solomon Elusoji is a co-editor at **The Question Marker***

Origin of Sin

“At 14, I will kiss a girl who knits her own history.”

Nathaniel Soonest



At age 10, I will wake,
a boy already drunk with the ashes of his father.
Eyes inebriated, yet mind still sober enough
to behold his mother
playing pranks with a needle.
Syringe to her right palm,

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in her left, cotton reeking of spirit.
She divides the earth into an equator
and sticks the needle into the upper left arch.
Eyes closed in what seem like savoring the bliss of pain;
she mutters a prayer beneath her breath,
I assume it is to the god of things lost;
I assume it is to the god of things that never long to be found.

At 14, I will kiss a girl who knits her own history.
She cultivates a forest on her head, a thick forest
where her broken spirit can be led away,
left to stray like an Azazel.
She buries my head between her thighs;
she warns that I will taste down there
the essence of her father, a man who eats babies for lunch.
She will have me weave her hair into one strong strand,
there is a lone tree at the center of the forest she has cultivated;
her locks will serve as rope from which her soul will dangle to freedom.

At 16, I will fail to take off my shoes at the door of the shrine house;
I will fail to enter the front door of the votive temple with my back,
I will enter the most holy place without knocking,
only to behold behind the rendered veil,
the nakedness of god.
She could have my eyes gorged out,
but there is always another way
to pay for crimes not committed;
so at the hill of rags,
I will leave my gown
like a propitiation on the floor;
I will burn my innocence upon her altar,
and I will learn, there is more than one meaning to light. ✚

Nathaniel Soonest is a poet and journalist.