



NATURE
KNOWS
A LITTLE
ABOUT
SLAVE TRADE

NNADI SAMUEL

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Little About
Slave Trade

Sundress Publications • Knoxville, TN

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ISBN: 978-1-951979-56-0

Published by Sundress Publications

www.sundresspublications.com

Editor: Kathleen Gullion

Editorial Assistant: Ashley Evans, Kanika Lawton

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Colophon: This book is set in IM Fell English

Cover Art: Coral Sue Black

Cover Design: Coral Sue Black

Book Design: Kathleen Gullion

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Praise for the Inner Lining of my Morphing Apparel

Some countries give new meaning to dress codes, not only dictating what their citizens wear, but also enforcing strict measures with fines and imprisonment.

—Francisca Coker

Satin worn past twelve is buttoned satire.
All that glam spent, unstarching uniform grains.
Low-waist silk & the sagging yarn, both heavy with polymer sweat.

Mother sows cotton by criminal luck,
practise woolgathering in our distraction.
Her snore: a staunch uprising.

*What language picks offence at a lady
unwilling to wear her country to numbness?*

On no occasion has it been me
to purchase a fabric unplagued by grief.
Even the bugs rock denim to levitation.

I: asphalt glory.
Color riot, in ways that put coffins out of fashion,
snithe the threading to come clean as shorelines.

It's a question of what lingerie affords liberty in a different town,
what vows held us back from the sea this long.

I lose sparkle each time I conceive being sentenced to a bristle sackcloth
all my fragile life.

My sternum aches for harmful collars, for tough cravats.
Each knit: a ruffraff defying strangling.

Behold, my exit dress
earned with stubborn currency.

Praise for the inner lining, ribboned as a door.
What oath ordained escape to be one way?

A Wreckful Planting of Small Pockets of Thirst

I run out of ways to keep you urgent in my mouth,
stomach your shouting relic.
When grief comes for an unburial, unearthing you into the forgotten,
I stuff you under my tongue.

How I've learnt to carry you across borders,
across turnpikes & racial diss,
across the panting roadblocks,
where we exist loudly as exclamations below a cop's knee,
or viscous ransack that gets close but doesn't claim my throat.

The near miss—a hurt we alone can voice.

I scale you across walls unpronounced.
Pawn all my sound rates at eager cost to house your absence.
The mold of your breath a memory of all the things we run out of,
till I approach the wild reserve of oxygen & grim soil yawning to mouth you,
whose hunger surrounds a place to kill its aura,
knowing an opening isn't reception.

You go by the names of every fattened contraband
nurtured by my silence,
plump with a knowing of all I've held back.

I genuflect, teeth heavy into dust
to sow your person in a sullied language.

I drown your absence deep in the carnivorous mud:
a wreckful planting of small pockets of thirst.

The sky—grief hefty.
Wrathful cherubs, laced in giant heaps of puffed cloud.
Each turn, a weeping threat.

I howl into wetness till the ground goes soft,
loamy with my passing breath & the trail of your absence I indent with shrub.
Each thicket, a bleed and scything remark scribbled in furious red
across the tiny mouths of the world

as I hold you urgent, behind clenched lips,
a sharp susurrations tilling its underbrush.

How likely we assume dust,
by which I mean, slit our tongue into sonnets & decibels.
A throbbing loudness seething from within:
an hour of sobbing gold.

Nebulous Strike in Minnesota

Six months into prepartum trauma, I occupied the alley,
tummy-red & indecent with blood clotting fiercely like
iridescent fog on a Sunday, as I irony my way into a female talk
with my godmother. Her passion for poetry, squeezed
from tonight's sharp want, to cause a small miracle of breeze and
nebulous strike in Minnesota
whose landscape toughens with maple wood snow ridden by
the thickest
pang of dust: monsoon flatulence. a gas breaking on my elephant feet.
I kegel in the warmth, memorizing the old baobab plant potted by my foster
father, whose mortgage
exceeds a headcount & by all means, indebts we: his descendants and
all our afterbears. Loan, beyond estimate, sits nameless as a scattered blood
right we inherit with caution.
The curse we put a face to, as banks flag down our surname. Right here,
taking my godmother
to the moon and back with a love poem, I tongue distance—the length of
a metaphor.
Her uplifting to the chorus, desperate for a rising. The way the fetus
inside me attains weightlessness,
manly afloat in baritone pulse. The vibe that brings life to rectum.
Tell me about birth, my traveling, my approach to language in concealed
weightlessness
of a lost flesh: days I cribbed in my godmother's hut. Red clay,
printing its brutal remarks on my turned back. My feet,

sashaying the railing my foster father fixed decades
back, in the timely fashion
of a stone coffin—durable in its wearing out. From the audible distance
of a co-wife, the shout fills me with monsoon, ruptured breath.
A daggered flatulence,
 released in the harmful custom of a birthing. Dust, reeling
the way the fetus folds, clenching its shapeless fist while I stabilize my
eager, worn-out breath to suit the calmness of township:
 my Iowa dreams, exaggerated everywhere across the border
holding those whose raised me. I dragged my skin like an animal,
throughout three cardinal points till my luck
 went South. A wanderer, unsettled by the inner works of clime.
unable to language in clearly distilled allomorph
 I'm torn apart by grammar. The manner of its safe delivery, stuck
between my thighs.
Woman, if not anything, a terror gadget, surviving pills & the messy
contractions, to forge a replica from her fallen relic.
Woman, if not anything
 uncontained as the whirlwind. A neat violence, stretched across a
young navel withstanding all harms thrown at it:
the tactics of a warfare.

Poems Like This Refuse Sound, My Cramp Bears Music Enough

Pa is unscored ghazal.

Alas, my grief shifts note & the storm Lazarus our hairlines.
Sorrow playing Jesus, playing resurrection cheap

for
those buying it—sums up to all the boldness I haven't mustered
to let Pa know his acts don't
preach, yet earned me a whooping sum of salvation. I mouthwash the
filthy
Psalm, scoop Chronicles into my loin. How best to script him with the right trauma,
without muddling my lap?

Late red-riot sums up to how I see my monthlies, unsee the heinous male hardened
by my

hurt & that of his spouse: mistress, fine-tuning blood to harbor a man making
his bass seem a weapon.

Cuts blooming brightly from her thighs.

The sound catches

as incest in my teenage year. A ripeness so me, it takes a veggie
like Pa to reach out when no one does.

& yes, of all penetrations Pa knifed into my
bodice,

swearing if I had absorbed more blades, my puberty won't have been this rapid. In truth, I

understate here. Pa honed this longing to harm my softness, made his jerking device
spill bad blood across our afterbears. It lunatics me, this orgy: an
adult setting his animal upon a minor. A sadness beyond my youth. I'm preteen

& still adoring blood,
rinsing steady, like the red torches if prolonged on my crotch. I burn for a thing I haven't
voiced, say blade. an attempt to play Pa in my own trauma sums up who is really at
loss here.

Here's my stand: it sucks how Ma suffered in your hands. How your
hand suffers me. It sucks how you jut your bony weapon of bliss,
expecting me to suck it up. You soil my years with vermilion blood,
and
I revel in its color. Here's the pus, furious with white grace. Yet, stinks to know I'm trying
not to cut you off, despite

all the gashes in this poem. I grieve, the countless times a
throbbing slice of light finds your palm strangling a teabag. Such needless
use of
violence, first known by me, then Ma, now this porous sac. Pa—the knife & haunting
minute. He had shoved Ma into oblivion.

My heart skips at his footstep, or do I assume my life a
bonus track? I let the poem throw more hint on this. Say, my knock-knee is a repetition
of pardon. What then is Pa if not a misdemeanor? I unlock his palms, dream them neat
& it was. Waking up

sums up to
a treacherous Pa

sums up to
a wound or deadbeat

sums up to
how I hurricane these stanzas &

still not done here.

The storm Lazarus my last fear.

in our thoughts: a woman derailing a stray bullet with
prayer beads.
The way she pleads “*the blood*” as though we haven’t shed more of that lately,
as if this red-faced object isn’t me, bullet bright, dashing my
loin to the
ground—if that’s the softest way to call this body quits. I wish
to amplify my
bones, to make a loud statement. I’m wounded by the consonance of ‘Iowa’ mud-
breaking through my lips, as a cannon hawking a well-dressed
echo. I sustain the entirety of grammar in a verse looted at gunpoint. You survive
this country only by dodging the voiced
bilabial plosive that goes boom! everywhere your feet touch.

Crash Course in a Slaughterhouse

We grow into the slaughter we are born for.
—K-Ming Chang

It outlives magic, this tearing apart of mashed
bodies, without incurring a bloodstain.
Broken torso yanked from the wreck scene.
The shard stuck in between our teeth like a brand-new phrase.

Surgery blade tears through a lifespan.
Cerecloth, holding the corpse skywards—the way you take a request to God
or take a long break,

since being Christlike implies molding a miracle
from mirage, till the ‘nointing slacks.

I do not know about elastic pain,
but I’ve known a placenta to its stretched limit,
because I too am a product of a rough up:

flesh stitched against free will, to rot in unkind places.
Hijab, machete ripped from a female’s neck.
Skin, stunned by the silvery weight of metal
to a well-peeled surrender.

How slaughter driven, this aggressive let-loose between fabric & loin,
thread & a flesh wound,
Boy & his furnace of a hand.
Bystanders & wailing—siren that they are,

A fodder for accident, as we know them to be,
since holding Christ by his words implies
stating it where it aches:
at the tibia, bone terribly sutured in a way we stay

piecing the hurt, till every shard takes the form of language.

*

For Every Bus Stop, There is an Equal Sporadic Shootout

This asthmatic lad pouring his breath into the failed exhaust system of a minibus,
English resting on his tongue,
a vow pinning him to the asphalt granite.

I attest to that verb full of cartridge & deadly spark.
I attest to stray bullets, misplaced hit,
to the hastiness in burial rites:

A middle-aged man, tucking in the road's belly
his only son: a heartbreak of a child.

Death comes in tripod:
two ruptured arms & a displaced head shoved under a blanket of ash.

An upturned carcass was once a neat corpse anyways,
& how to account for what rage turns benevolence to a boneyard?

How he laid bone-close to earth,
till his skin browned the crimson soil.

Each mound, a pathway to every foot seeking safety,
as they race, still uniformed in their grief.

Boy, lacing & relacing his heartbeat in the hour
of its panic attack—pulse searching, as a nurse
rummages a body for pockets of life.
See, there are no easy routes to resuscitation.

Teenagers, spelling knife backwards.
The scar re-hatching in the ugly fashion of
camo, blood patterned to roughening.

May God see the wound in all of this:

that the children are sore-footed, trudging,
maybe aware of being chased into the slaughter they were born for.

A barrage of slayed teens tucked in the road's belly.

Schwa: in a Sound Where All Consonants Means Loss

Each sergeant here mispronounces the initials of a lost
cousin—displacing the schwa. I remedy their ignorance without fail,
screaming: *the /miriə'm/ with an upturned syllable,*
as sound approaches & falls off their mashed earlobes.
My aunt, fevered in the ricochet,
& on folding back to reecho their lapses,
she wraps my fist to a note: *'á oni sukún omo.*¹
the snow kills better without a black accent.'
Say we persist, my cousin would be gone wearing that name.
Iowa lives up to this misnomer, knowing itself a bully all year-round,
ruptures the vowel in your name to stifle your presence.
If this isn't reproach, a part of it lurks around.
Imagine those days your name stales cold—unaccentuated in between
chequebooks & work permit. The boss who sours your night shifts,
because your initials don't make the cut. The Caucasian girl who pronouns
you in the wrong. Imagine a colleague seeks my opinion in christening
his daughter, & I strengthen her lips with a little white, deboning the negro stank.
That way, if we ever wake up to her absence like my cousin,
she won't be found bludgeoned—laying ruptured, as the vowel in your name.
Upturned, as the syllable in /miriə'm/ you mispronounce:
the pose a crying mother keeps,
when she folds in between, weary as a naira note.

1. May we not cry over you (Yoruba adage)

Greengrocery

The rain leaves us ripe & waiting.
orange bright, as boiled persimmon displayed on the slab,
thriving under a swelled rot—the size of our grief.
The way the greengrocer gropes the fruit,
crushes the kaki how a colonist ruins our sleep by feet: a thumping on our shutter.
I'm trying not to mistake a vitamin for torment.
I'm trying not to lose my tooth to the malnourishment.
The grocer shoves the fruit into a cellophane, & my hands, still joy-wet,
unburden it on Mariam's head like the load that it was.
This child too, a burden earned from the sameness between *harassment* & *haram*.
I spoon-fed the term *rape* to Mariam till she came of age,
held the word by its letter like a live bait
& we nurture the suffering: the pink weakness of a wound. An inner bleeding.
Mariam's dress flinches, and a hemorrhage accosts us.
Her room, still foul-scented with the scuffling of a strong man.
& while we argued the cramp away on the long queue,
I dissect parts of her body that end with a syllable—ache wet & fractured
with blood: thighs, tongue, & swollen thighs.
A Caucasian pushes from behind, & all our harsh consonant pours to the ground.
This too, a sin to be mopped.
Mariam parboils the persimmon with love.
A citrus greening, diseased on the plate. She dresses the fuming starch,
& I treat my tongue to the plague afflicting my lips, like the Caucasian at the mall.

There is a Gnawing Need for Sugar

Cane. & across states, lanky bodies with collar bones: the shape
of a knife, peel fabrics of white in the open space
& a terrible sweetness abound.

Their colleague, knifing the diabetes from afar.

Passengers, the embittered gas attendant wielding a nozzle
& therapist whose mental health is in jeopardy in this country,
clings tightly to *iréke*¹, teething careful in honeyed places.
The jawbreaking attempts, met by a vanishing of healthy stalk.

There's a wild approach to anything here that holds juicy detail:
the fuel tanker going headlong into every teenager.
Hands, upshot high as a ready Kalashnikov—gunning for crimson sky.

The restless shard of a young lad unsettling the whirlwind,

& for the time being, I wish each legible stalk takes the form of language.
Each brandished nozzle—a verb to-be. Each upshot hand,
paraphrasing the atmosphere.

The wound on each knifing merchant, scrawled in past perfect tense.
Their lanky bodies—a movable gerund,

1. Sugarcane (Yoruba dialect)

with collar bones—the shape of a plea.
May God oblige this stunning request.

Reckon, I too pray amiss.
I've once questioned the smallest sweetness in life,
once petitioned heaven on account of candy floss.
The easiest sadness is a boy.
Of all prayer points God, grant us a unifying language.

A Bilinguist Blaspheme in Broken Accent

As with each raw moment of sign languaging,
meaning comes in restitution of jaw & careful jargon
of warm hands, fondling a narrative in the air.
Sound, blooming from my fingertip.

I converse in high gifted parlance,
& regurgitate my thoughts in way too many phrases: verbatim.

On shuttling between kiosks to own my smaller needs,
I throw a capsule of word in between clenched lips,
& my tongue sifts the broken plural into a native slang.

The larynx owns a church of dialects.
& on lifting my voice, I'm bare-teethed:
polyglot inscribed on the scruff of my chaplet.

At Confession, Hebrew churns from all corners of my mouth
like grammar to kill for—rich-soft on my gum: a godly accent.

Say, a deity refunds prayer in its broken state;
do we call it *English*?

Countlessly, I'm of the notion: a poem tiles the hour to a sacrilege.
& that which I call brother, a seminarian in his seminudity, tells us
sound travels the vast chorus of language.

Even the wind could turn into a well-dressed noise.

Consider the rare niceties of life that measure how silence stretches,
how hymn weaves the summary of breath.

Yet, where do our breaths go?

Where between *language* & *Lord* does my blasphemy touch?

Queen Primer for Kids Rankshifting Between Countries

I'm by all means convinced the sea enrolled in our first grade,
in lieu of a teenage vagabond.

Saltless phonemes from sleek cable

lungs & the listening device
seared to her breast. A suffering
she knew to skin, like negro
comes in such hurtful flavor.
I go about her with lectured silence,
improving on speech and native slangs.

Once, we got to rough vernaculars and

the spotlight catches her wound,
its bright surface, exuding what
proves unbearable: the yellow *Unfortunately*,
the white *hadIknowns*, & vowel infection,
as we threw our voices across the class bench.
I'm graceless with that fricative, hardened on soft palate.

Stamping my feet in a bid to concoct any

gourd-like tone, to prove our forefathers held
oil to anoint these verbs pacing the atmosphere.
Semaphore, blooming brightly from her throat
if she attempts a smattering of lips,
its ultra-violence everywhere—
which she does anyway, crafty with
the trauma, schooling me on the benefits.
Before now, I quarreled with sounds,

yanked off its coherence from my teeth.

I used to weep in a narrative no one reads,
could keep a dirge going for months,
& still come full-blown with grief;

ripe with tragedy enough

to last a genre.

Only the sea alludes

to this drowning.

What am I, if not this black kid: a pseudonym nearly

extinct.

What colors my life if not this wound.

Yellow + white—becoming [].

A Boy Ago

We learnt the waters the length of our teenage year, brother and I.
Call me kayak in that lazy drift.
Call him the paddle wheel.

Two of us—a perfect duo, racing past bison and tulips,
past the sainted mist.

Once, I attempted speaking-in-tongues
and brother cupped my incoherence in seraph palms,
the way you size a demon before casting it out.

Once, I drove breadknife to his skin
hoping to leave a scar, how tides leave their remark on our vessel.
Hands shuffling hands:
like this, we took turns in the corporal punishment of paddling.

If I'm worn out, he troubles the water on my behalf.
If he is spent, I win the tide to his side
and we both race to satisfaction,
else this longing burns out.

I likened crawdads to our own kind of misery,
and he says, *anguish comes in species*.
I metaphor a bird pummeling the futile wings of its hatchling as resilience.
Love is stubborn crime, he tells me,
and I lavish in the knowing, nearly mouthing my yeses!

Age catches on the skin in gentle patches,
where he first knew his boyhood to blossoming.
If he says *bro*, I metaphor it as a palm soothing the first ache.
If he says *joy*, I liken it to *grief in transit*.

We keep afloat this thought for months.

Each night, we swam the aqueducts praying the rivers yawn into rain.
Each night, we god the waters.

Nature Knows a Little About Slave Trade

Troweling gypsum on detached bricks against deadlines,
Pa's sandbathed yell finds me leaping across fence to where the sound catches.

Until now, it takes no cement cheek of his,
kidney stone and saliva to blare my concrete noun:
a rowdy belch of alphabet plastering his pewed gums
like mouth slaves dodging the bleeding rule to consonant cluster.

Each row, giving a soothing round of a tongue on soaked fonts.
The ache stretches, as wound glorifies an hour.

Atop the scaffold, all muscle flex from him commands a harsh paste.
They grieve. It's obvious, on my jaded lip,
the howness of skin, they filter through pores: bright napalms.

At final touch, Pa lamps his way towards a small stream to rid them off his lush beards.
The coarseness of it more vulgar than neon.

The next hour speaks us into a distant contract
as dusk came, repatching every leakage of light.
Such thoughtful blindness fat-fingering nocturne on our shadows.

Memories haunt the glassless frame.
I peer at it long enough to sculpt Pa towelling the piled bricks.

Each whack a violence rummaging where beauty would later touch.
The not enough-ness of dust, surrounding us like cruel jinns.

We sort our residence from the blind alley, ankle-red and intimate with cramp,
as neon sky leaks raw portions of light.
Pa deadens the last bit of civilization from his walkie-talkie,
& twiced his walk steps.
The motioned calm, swaying the grasses.

A decorum next to slavery—
it demands your Negro hands.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the editors of these publications where some of these poems were first published:

“Praise for the Inner Lining of my Morphing Apparel,” *Dgèku*

“A Wreckful Planting of Small Pockets of Thirst,” *Uncanny Magazine*

“There is a Gnawing Need for Sugar,” *Alphabet Box*

“Queen Primer for Children Rankshifting Between Countries,” *Olit Magazine*

“A Boy Ago,” *Trampset*

About the Author



Nnadi Samuel (he/him/his) holds a B.A. in English & Literature from the University of Benin. His works have been previously published or are forthcoming in *Suburban Review*, *Seventh Wave Magazine*, *Native Skin*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Quarterly West*, *Common Wealth Writers*, *The Capilano Review*, *Lolwe*, *Arc Poetry*, *Poetry Ireland*, *New Orleans Review*, *The Spectacle Magazine*, *Maine Review*, *Existere Journal*, *Munster Literature*, and elsewhere. A 3x Best of the Net and 7x Pushcart nominee, he won the Canadian Open Drawer Contest (2020), the Miracle Monocle Award for Ambitious Student Writers (2021), the Penrose Poetry Prize (2021), the River Heron Editor's Prize (2022), the Bronze Prize for the Creative Future Writers' Award (2022), the Betsy Colquitt Poetry Annual Award (2022), the Virginia Tech Center for Refugee, Migrants & Displacement Studies Annual Award (2023), Fourteen Hills Press's Stacy Doris Memorial Award (2023), and the John Newlove Poetry Award (2023). He was a finalist of the *Snarl* Poetry and Prose Contest in 2022. He tweets from the handle @Samuelsambaro.

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