

POETRY

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1986

forgive me, my dear reader
this is not splendiferous
or imperially glamorous
like the timeless tale of Genji.
this is the odyssey
of a girl child whose life
was finished before it could
be completed or started.

a teenage girl, born to obscurity,
13, yet full of wants and dreams,
had the Midas touch of puberty
and fed it for claps and scraps
to plagued, deranged travellers
and faceless, squalid fathers finding
bemusements and liberty
in moral anarchy.

it started with the fever,
then the sores and rashes,
then the bowel explosions
that refused to stop,
then the itchiness and the aches —
probably a rogue bug or
the aftermath of some
rancid staple food ingested —
so she'd thought;
thoughts may be free but not
when they are egregiously wrong.

and then, as months replaced months
and superstitions outgunned reason,
the dark clouds — now linenless —
gathered, heralding an endless night.
bones replaced the subtleness

of flesh, fear stood in place of hope
and bare skin wrestled hauntingly
to conceal ghoulishness as thrush
pervaded the tongue, throat and lungs.

somewhere else; yet not so far away
from the hospital that received *Iman**,
a hoisted flag — green, white, green — flies
close to a mast dispersing hoarse radio waves.
There's a new, dreadful ailment in town.

And it's the great, hearty Nigeria:
juntafied, plegic and unassumingly disturbed.
HIV/AIDS had paid it a ghastly visit
through the body of a girl that
was so ravaged with disease,
her soul had paid her its last respect,
watching the body it once enlivened,
from the piers holding space and time in place,
become a carcass before death strikes.

**Iman = a pseudonym given (by the author) to the first, recorded patient of HIV/AIDS in Nigeria.*

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Patrick Ashinze, MBBS, graduated from the College of Health Sciences, University of Ilorin, Nigeria (2021) where he won the Inaugural Students Union Poetry Prize (2019) and The Best Writer's Award (2018). His writing has appeared in literary outlets such as *Hektoen International*, *Ann Arbor Review*, *Eunoia Review*, *Terse Journal*, *Chicago Lit*, *Corvus Review*, *Astar Lit*, and *Kalahari Review*, among others. He won the 2021 Wingless Dreamer International Midnight Poetry Prize, was first runner-up for the 2021 Mandela Institute for Development Studies (MINDS) COVID-19 In My City, was a finalist for the 2023 African Writers Poetry Prize, and was a finalist for both the 2021 Stephen A. DiBiase International Poetry Prize and the 2021 World Neglected Tropical Diseases Storytelling Competition. He currently leads The LIND LEAGUE, a clinical research hub with over 100 members across 3 continents, set forth to encourage and nurture early-career clinicians and researchers through equity-focused and inclusive training, opportunities and interaction. He has served as a peer reviewer for several journals and has been an author or co-author of approximately 100 peer-reviewed articles, published in journals such as *The Lancet*, *Therapeutic Advances in Endocrinology and Metabolism*, *Current Problems in Cardiology*, and *Medicine* (Baltimore), among others. He currently resides in Eastern Nigeria and is on the Faculty of Clinical Sciences, University of Ilorin in Ilorin, Nigeria.

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Footnotes

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