

For Girl at Rubicon

Carl Terver

"Terver has voted for refinement."
—Ismail Bala

For Girl at Rubicon

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Also by Heiress

someday i will be the shape of my story by Tares Oburumu

Painter of Love by Michael Chiedoziem Chukwudera

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The Presentness of the Past: Carl Terver's Poetic Necessitation of Memory

Memory is always an art, even when it works involuntarily.

—Harold Bloom.

“For *Girl at Rubicon*,” the title of the chapbook, confirms poetic deception, which is quite an interesting trope in the reading and appreciation of strong poetry to be still in vention today. Carl Terver employs the less universal or the less serious, although more personal, theme as a way of consolidating and depicting our collective memory as a nation, as a people. Memory is always the presentness of the past, and cliché, being one of the chief and effective deaths of poetry, figurative and semantic freshness becomes the major intent of Terver as these poems treat us to emotive and figurative uncanniness in lines like these in the first section of “*My Country Has No Lover*”—

My country has no lover
So she plays with penises anyhow
And bears the woes of erection

—in the end of “*Sudanese*”:

Abacha was fighting capitalism while my father
Was a bank manager. I ate Cornflakes
Every morning & knew
You were a distant continent that will not happen to me
Even when I hear you die in a Salif Keita song
Screaming to heaven, *Eloi eloi eloi eloi lama sabachthani*

—through the end of the minimalistic yet interpretatively sophisticated “*After Rain in Rwanda*”:

Say farewell to the rainbow
It means nothing now

—and the end of “Bombs Keep Going off in the Middle East,” which through its literary allusion re-confirms and re-animates human desperation for peace which ironically is not a given:

I sit in my living room
Watching Netflix on my secondhand Hewlett Packard
Awoonor said ‘The world is not good for anybody’

A book of our shared memory through the poet’s personal memories, Carl Terver invites us to active contemplation of, and participation in our own history and gone experience. In “Chibok II” of imaginary prequel, as the title ingeniously insinuates, Terver’s theurgical performance becomes a strategy of experiential reformation of the kidnapping of the school girls, a national incident now almost largely forgotten, which as the poet contemplates is tantamount to forgetting our self. In contrast, “This Blood” is a representation of our reality with unsophisticated imaginative execution:

My country has an alternative Stock Exchange
That counts dead bodies,
The more the bodies
The shares bought,
That raised Patience’s Cry:
This blood we are sharing!

In representing our experience as sincerely as possible, Terver comes to the conclusion in “Coming For Your Head” that the only actions we possess against the atrocities that plaque our nation are analysis and storytelling:

Moloch’s worshippers make merry while we
Submit research papers to Princeton:
The Beautification of the Countryside with Red Flowers

For Girl at Rubicon understands our memories for us, and objectively so, because the relatability of these poems to our common experience can only be successfully denied only in escapist engagement, and as the chapbook understands, escapism cannot erase our recurring reality any more than our inactivity can delegate the effect of the same experience, same memories into existential nothingness.

Writing is hard and writing strong poetry is harder. But writing strong poetry as a critic might be one of the most difficult literary engagements, while also being the most rewarding, as long as the critical faculty is not turned off in the process of writing poetry. The best of the poet-critics are of the conviction that imaginative works are primarily for “the common reader,” a phrase popularised by Virginia Woolf in her book of the same title. T. S. Eliot is the fundamental of the bunch, in recent times, Lauren McLean articulates the critic’s utmost mindfulness of details in “[Moonrise](#),” and Carl Terver, in the pages of *For Girl at Rubicon*, validates the possibility of the coexistence of imaginative versatility with semantic simplicity in the writing and reading of poetry. With visceral bluntness, “Telex from the Past” rhetorically engages in expressive criticism of a mode of Africanism in Africans’ characteristic self-identification with blackness, although without historical validity, which the poem understands to be self-patronising at best:

So I ask again like Obiora,
When did Africans lose their dignity?
Do I want to be African? No. It makes me
A stereotyped genius
No, no, Kendrick. I am not a proud monkey.

In this chapbook, Terver employs what Harold Bloom comprehends of W.B. Yeats’s primary imaginative faculty in his characteristic “simplification through intensity” to escape the fatal attributes of oversimplification of poetic thought, a mode which descends from the poet’s professed precursor in Hitomaro whose “[On the Sea at Omi](#)” represents the omnipresence of memory made locally empirical through our visual and auditory relationship with nature. This mode of acute experiential versification is exemplified by the second stanza of “These Leaves”:

Your absence every holiday reminds me
Of the poem you asked me to write;
These leaves heap on each other with my failure to
Zipporah
I think of you when I see them & the baby in my stomach kicks
I turn to my side to tell you this
But can only imagine so

—through the middle of “Sometimes I Need A Catapult to Aim”:

Don't tell me politician A is deflecting to party B
becos I go crazy I want to lay down my political me
Before I go serial killing

—to the third section of the technically experimental “My Country Has No
Lover”:

Her flirting is entertainment
Where dismembering limbs is sport.

Dis—

mem

bered

for sport, for profit, for religion —
Adding pigments daily to blood murals.

I tell this story of her adultery with blood
& if She can be stoned to death

—which marvellously culminates in the riveting ending of the eponymous “For
Girl at Rubicon”:

Drizzles of you wet memory:
The way you squinted
As if you fear light running into your eyes
How your face rose to the unsaid in mine
Way you turned face away
To avert my lips's snail—walk on yours
And how you mimicked Smeagol

Your name becomes an antiphon in my heart
In a language I did not hear you speak,
Sabbaths I took & doubt whales that swallowed me . . .

Mnemosyne is the godmother of both poetry and the poets as exemplified by
John Milton's “[On Shakespeare](#),” where the poet calls the immortal bard “dear

son of memory” and “great heir of fame,” hinting that no powerful imagination is conceivable without memory of our self, alive and active, tending to us and our imaginative faculties. Terver continues this poetically necessary tradition in *For Girl at Rubicon*, while aesthetically amplifying the interpretive power of the memory of these poems through his conscious and quite experimental versification of our national reality:

Erections flog her gait
Giving her a walking stick
as she flirts with baals & Moloch. Anybody dies:
In a police cell,

fall off

storey buildings, or

h

a

n

g

from an Abacha Rope. Infidels,
split open & grilled by Akbar’s single cry.

The first poem in this chapbook begins with active memory and the last ends with the same, and we are not only invited but earnestly welcomed to participate in the poetico-semantic reinvention of the memories, histories and experiences of our self, an engagement which proves impossible without the poet’s aesthetic disregard of his own vulnerability as exemplified by “Of Songs I Sang Here,” which unpredictably, memorably ends:

I know the old songs that breathed here
That inspired pride
That patriarchs sang
If you do good
Are Now fractured—
Long interred in bandages of pain

Here, memory is not only defined but redefined, and we derive pleasure in the poet’s aesthetic redefinition of what was into the present language that stretches our sensibilities beyond the pages to the real. In “Healing Is A Dog Faced God,” “memory is a tombstone,” a metaphorical ingenuity which escapes the

implication of ultimate deadness as the major “yawp” of this book, but rather a visual representation of the aliveness of the material deadness of the things versified with these poems in human memory. To praise the poet for his figurative deliberations and completeness of poetic thought is tautological since an active, attentive reading of these poems is self-revealing of the poetic excellences and authority on both personal and collective memory that contribute to the stretching of our consciousness which is the ultimate attribute of the strongest of poetry.

Ancci

Iseyin

October, 2022

No, the human heart
Is unknowable.
But in my birthplace
The flowers still bloom
The same as always.

TSURAYUKI

Part 1

iii.

At the end of the rainbow
I find a chest of music
You do not sing in it,
I hear the flute of another

iv.

Nights become poems with you written out of them
before the last lines about crossroads

v.

I wanted to be blinded by you
To truly say, Nakupenda

vi.

(But now)

Let me go to the sights of other waterfalls
You can't poison me forever

3.

Drizzles of you wet memory:
The way you squinted
as if you fear light running into your eyes
How your face rose to the unsaid in mine
Way you turned face away
to avert my lips's snail-walk on yours
And how you mimicked Smeagol

Your name becomes an antiphon in my heart
In a language I did not hear you speak,
Sabbaths I took & doubt whales that swallowed me . . .

Für Zipporah

I want to find your lengths
& plot their geometry
on this graph of me
inebriated
by the winged mermaid in your eyes

I want to chew your breath
till my body is stupored
with all your pheromones

I want to measure your lips with mine
Compose a rhapsody into you
& you—pour lyrics into me, that
will finger walk in my bloodstream

So our orchestra is complete
without rehearsal

Phenyl ethylamine

(for Nightingale)

Some phenyl ethylamine of you
Is still in my belly, even after our last supper

How else do you come to me in transfigurations
When epitaphs are the only reminders of us?

My love for you I thought decayed
But memory keeps carbon dating it

Razbliuto, the word you taught me
Repeats in my ears like a game
Of time replayed

Tempus does not fugit. It ferments
Like phenyl ethylamine

Musleema

There is a letter under your hijab
written in rich cursives that bear revelations.

A fatwa is declared

On all who seek it.

I am a reader, Musleema

& a fan of letters. & you, Musleema

Are now my object of fandom.

Can I see beyond your hijab,

Retrieve the letter and dwell on its canon?

I want to tread the contours of every

Cursive, till I can write like the letter–
writer,

Till I know the epiphanies they beget.

I shall starve still. My longings stop

At the cascades of your hijab, deferred

Bear revelations, Musleema, that I

May go into a trance with you

Aubade for Vanessa for leaving Makurdi without goodbye

I waited for butterflies
that flit in the stomach,
wondered if the squeezed balls of paper
of still-hatched loves I flung behind
would unfold
& come back to me.
Instead
you came
& I have been beaten by the winds of purity

But since you left
the city developed sore feet
Without you.
I cannot walk it alone

The Grim Reaper Came for My Lover

You were a brook & flutist at the same time
your liquid eyes & music
were beauty tendrils that fell on my paddles;
How I did test your waters

You showed me the sky ahead
& in it I saw the Grim Reaper
coming for your flute

My paddles sunk,
hugging tightly, those tendrils

But I believe my feet
shall find another brook & tread
the musical airs regained

Gay Boy

On the other side of my bay you sit,
specimens crawling inside you.

we stone you to death
so we can live without sin.

God plans something for you between the firmaments
Perhaps it was you he hovered on
when darkness was still upon the face of the deep.

Clay, the breath of life, Eden garden,
ribs, woman, fruit, coitus, the fall.
none makes sense. *You are*

a masterpiece of evolution.

God will come for you in the evening
because you can't eat apple & not wear fig leaves

I Think It Rains & Bleaches the Plains

I have seen dawn contort along paths where
 infant petals dance ballet to pain.
I think it rained & bleached the plains.
I saw seasons droop in the quake.
It rained when merchants occupied the gods' edifice

It rained and grew vegetations of burden.
& it could not be aborted, it aborted songs.
I thought it rained, but was it a lie?
Heritage dons the archer's regalia

I think it rains and the sullenness here enriches.
Joyed, it pelts measles on surfs – thick on the
plougher's path,
thick on the mandate

The groove is wed-locked to the pelting.
It bed-wets generation gap.
I saw it belch at last supper
& convulse on the Soothsayer's Rib

It rained again on an evening,
cold on our skins.
We couldn't afford cardigans,
So we lit candles, drank coffee
& talked over the weather

This Blood

My country has an alternative Stock Exchange
that counts dead bodies,
the more the bodies
the shares bought,
that raised Patience's Cry:
This blood we are sharing!

The tale of bloodletting here is a full body
With veins and arteries
Competing with trees' roots for earth:
Its anatomy defies professors.
But business, always to the capitalist,
Is business.
Dollars for the oil barrels
Security votes for the Generals
Bulletproof Benz for the Minister
& more IDP camps for propaganda

& forrin aid

My brother calls across the Atlantic:

"Are we at war?"

I say "No," but Cable Network News insists

Coming for your head

1.
Headsmen are gardeners recruited by my country
because she loves to pick red flowers

2.
Filling the vases at the table of Moloch's worshippers
is beautification

3.
Beautification is the evening news, headsmen
the early morning news, herdsmen
gory pictures on Facebook, hedsmen
wailing, maiming and death, herdsmen

4.
In Gboko, humans become *Goods Only*
perched on Toyota Tacomas
& Peugeot pickups – the fleeing

5.
Moloch's worshippers make merry while we
submit research papers to Princeton:
The Beautification of the Countryside with Red Flowers

Healing Is A Dog Faced God

Nobody heals

1.

Healing is the road to a new destination
whose signs of arrival
a child keeps calculating

2.

Arrival is entry into inertia

3.

Has the hermit learnt unfeeling
fettors winged emotions
whose unflight provokes the wraiths of unfinished poems?

4.

Memory is a tombstone:

Here lies your healing
that died with your lovers
that died with your loved ones
that died in the bloodsheds of Shekau
that died with Eunice, with Leah
that died with all your soldier brothers & fathers

Northeast is a staple name for the tabloids
Hear it again.

5.

Behind epitaphs, life tempts you to go
into the world with heart un-heavy
as morning drizzle

But when downpour comes
Its torrents rush through your marrows

6.

Healing is a dog faced god reminding you
Of your inadequacy

Boy Not on A Swing

I am stendin' at a zeybra wearing two ropes of flehwiers
One, for all de buks av red in skool
de second is hehvey with the speettle of wa Thiong'o

Kaars fly eyround me
into a spirul of time decay,
till they meet in my hed

I kennot sing like Eric Donaldson,
this is the land of my birth.
Kaaaars meet in my hed—

Wen will I find Uhuru?

Of Songs I Sang Here

I embalmed dance steps
for when my feet no longer dance
Alas, the drummers complain of their lost skill
I shan't lose my footing on decayed grounds

*May the songs I sang here no longer discolour
in the veins of nameless wars*

The songs I sang here, of country
are now discoloured.
From discolouration,
 Lost
in the veins
of Nameless wars

I know the old songs that breathed here
that inspired pride
that patriarchs sang
If you do good
are Now fractured—
long interred in bandages of pain

for sport, for profit, for religion —
adding pigments daily to blood murals.

I tell this story of her adultery with blood
& if She can be stoned to death

Part 2

Sudanese

You are the 120 ml of Erujeje I drink on evenings
when my African mood swings cum
You are the metaphor I see when Damian Marley sings
of stereotyping images, of the ribs of little kids
I knew you as a child on TV also as Darfur,
a strange food sounding name in my ears
You were hijabs, colours blue, yellow, orange,
Green, always a woman
You were also Ankara prints flailing
in the desert wind, always a woman
As a man or boy you wielded gun.

Sudanese

You became my imagery of North Africa, founded
by cable tv and international magazines
The desert lab
where UNICEF kids queue for oxygen
& carbohydrate mesh

Abacha was fighting capitalism while my father
was a bank manager. I ate Cornflakes
every morning & knew
you were a distant continent that will not happen to me
even when I hear you die in a Salif Keita song
Screaming to heaven, *Eloi eloi eloi eloi lama sabachthani*

After Rain in Rwanda

There are no dykes.

*When the dams
of the firmaments
break,*

It floods

Say farewell to the rainbow
It means nothing now

Telex from The Past

*When a comet crosses the sky, my people say
A witch has fired gbunka u mbatsav, a magic gun*

I woke up this morning & found electronic hieroglyphics
on the walls of my bedroom
And thought about the trickster hare

'Dear hieroglyphics, hieroglyphics on the wall,' I said
'What can I do for you?'

Some say the past must live again, Lenrie Peters
they ask why we have English names
they print nonsense patterns on textiles in China & call it African print
Beer bottles proclaim having African extracts
Some say our ancestors rode in papyrus boats

So I ask again like Obiora,
when did Africans lose their dignity?
Do I want to be African? No. It makes me
a stereotyped genius
No, no, Kendrick. I am not a proud monkey.

but hear the hieroglyphics on the wall beeping:
Black is beautiful black is beautiful
who said black isn't?

I hear the telex posing to me: *Shall we call a comet a comet?*

Is this how I shall be forced to say
witchcraft is not real & get baptised?
What is this thing you reveal, O hieroglyphics?
Is an alien drone hovering in my room?
Is this some C.I.A. prank?

Bombs Keep Going Off in the Middle East

Yemen peeped out of its rubbles
to eye the high minarets
of Saudi Arabia. The minarets
caught her and said 'Be content'
Bombs keep going off in the Middle East,
CNN & Aljazeera are Pulitzer winners
at showing the confetti of the blasts
UN spits. I sit in my living room
watching Netflix on my secondhand Hewlett Packard
Awoonor said 'The world is not good for anybody'

These Leaves

These leaves
Remind me of a kinship I can't fathom
They smell of time in a treasure box
I'll love to open to you
when you're back
I love to see them accumulate each holiday
With the absence of study,
fine boys, fine girls
& badly spoken English

Your absence every holiday reminds me
of the poem you asked me to write;
These leaves heap on each other with my failure to
Zipporah
I think of you when I see them & the baby in my stomach kicks
I turn to my side to tell you this
But can only imagine so

Confessions to Two Lovers & Things Felt In-Between

i.

(for Zipporah)

I come to you like Nicodemus asking,
what do I do
to be born again in you?
the rheums have left my eyes,
I have washed in the pool
& it is only your face I remember

ii.

(after Vanessa)

The taste of music is sour here
& I have lost appetite for it.
they told me I will enjoy
the lights of the city
but now I am having urban frostbite
from cata-tone
& neon blizzards

To Admire Blood Murals

Blood murals begin like strange anthropomorpha
forming on wet plywood ceilings,
a foreign dance in the wind
& a seesawing of ash filaments in the sky.
They start, by a Declaration to desecrate,
God's handwriting on black flags,
painters hearkening to van Gogh
if you hear a voice that says you cannot paint
who paint with crimson, invoke blood moons
& make ceilings drip with erythrocytes . . .
Making you mourn Onyeka for singing, *Don't be sad*
& you begin to see more ceilings over your firmaments:
Blood murals floating on the sky.

You begin to think it is art:
In the anthills of the north,
white tents of IDP camps contrast with amber

You think about bodies:
the red flowers your country keeps picking
for her vase

Inside you
your heart disintegrates with Funmi Adams' *My Beloved Country*

Hawk

I have always wanted to write
a poem about the hawk, three
winged boomerang in the sky, hovering
over our problems. When it
swoops, it is like a desperate
Nigerian politician trying to have
sex with his long-awaited dream.
O hawk, O hawk,
haven't you been here before man?
Descendant of the dinosaur.
Haven't you reigned over these
balsam trees, these locust beans trees,
these okpehe trees, these shea butter trees,
and all the tributaries of this land?
First time I beheld you close, your
furious face reminded me of African
dictators, iron men, metal men. I know
you surpass me, king when the sky is
yours, circumferencing over my afternoon

An Answer to the Rule to Write a Poem of 16 Lines on “Why Poetry”

a city announces dawn with the heartbeats of engines
prayers from the megaphones of churches, the lull of
the muezzin, a blended medley, a chaos, a breathing,
a film of forward existence. But the artist never misses
to catch the anima of the first brushstrokes of daylight
or the remnants of what this place still reminds
of a morning in the country; the quiet waking, the prayer
of birds, fresher drafts of air, or the solitary tapper
who greets his customer *good morning* with a keg,
or the one who has caught a grasscutter, or the boys
who string crickets like beads—this is not a poem about
daffodils, but you know what I mean. The old Italian
sang *bella ciao* to reject a fascist government, *Una mattina
mi son svegliato*. I woke one morning and found the invader.
I see death calling. If I die fighting for freedom, lay
me on the mountain under the shade of a beautiful tree.

Getting Out the Port of Spain

A strange thing is happening—
on our phones our friends gone abroad
are giving us a voyeurist view of their new
Beginnings
of the streets of Europe, the skies
of America, see how wonderful
it all makes sense

So we are trying too, filling out forms online
Writing exams that test our ability to language
Choosing, where? Delaware, Arkansas,
Illinois, Birmingham, East Anglia, making sure
we get it right. You don't want to end up in a
lonely place without better post-graduation plans

This is the real *estate* of the new African writer
where all his gains are, lest he amounts to
nothing, as a friend tells me.

So we are prospecting, we are prospecting
We are prospecting. To prosper.
Somewhere in a Caribbean novel
someone shouts across from his verandah,
“What happening there, Bogart?”
It seems life's journey now is just about
getting out the Port of Spain

Carl Terver is a Nigerian writer of Tiv ancestry. He has an arts degree from Benue State University, Makurdi, and writes about literature, film and music. He has been published in *The Republic*, *Daily Trust*, *Olongo Africa*, *The Stockholm Review*, *The Shallow Tales Review*, *Iskanchi*, *Za!*, *Millennial Poets*, *Afapinen*, and *Konya Shamsrumi*, among others. He is the Digital Editions Editor at Konya Shamsrumi; the founding editor of [Afapinen](#); and the author of the chapbook, *For Girl at Rubicon*, and the gazelle *everyone I know is ripe in plumage*. His essay “Does Anyone Care About Your Poem?” has been received with critical acclaim. In 2023, he was the first runner-up of the Eriata Oribhabor Poetry Prize. His forthcoming work is *Glory to the Sky*, a book on photography.

