

The background of the cover is a painting of a woman with dark hair, looking upwards and to the right. She is playing a violin. The painting uses a palette of teal, brown, and white. The style is expressive and somewhat abstract, with visible brushstrokes and a textured appearance. The woman's face is the central focus, with her eyes looking off-camera. The violin and bow are positioned in the lower half of the frame.

INKspiredng Chapbook Series 2024

A SPAN
OF
SOMETHING

ISMAIL BALA

A Span of Something

Ismail Bala

INKspiredng

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Foreword: The Poet Thinking

By Chiedu Ezeanah

The phrase above comes from the title of Professor Helen Vendler's incisive book on four poets, namely: Pope, Whitman, Dickinson, and Yeats. Poets of significant note are not only lyricists, they are also thinkers. If you are looking for sumptuous evidence of thought in a lyric, Ismail Bala's oeuvre illustrates this best in the cryptic strength of poetic thinking that underlies his equally mellifluous lines. This reminds us of one of his favourite poets, Wallace Stevens. His mastery of the poetic form in English and Hausa languages is no surprise as he is a scholar-poet whose understated erudition is like the calm introspective personality of a deeply reflective poet.

Ismail Bala's widely acclaimed first collection, *Line of Sight*, remains outstanding evidence of his patiently honed craft in this regard. In his new collection, *The Span of Something*, Ismail Bala's artistic powers have fully manifested and enriched our poetic tradition and the world. The poet's explorations here are richly varied: personal, amatory, cultural and cosmopolitan in its deliberate and delicate Bakhtinian literary conversations with wide-ranging names of other poets, near and far.

In this dialogic frame of Ismail Bala's *The Span of Something*, music of intimacy and meanings from diverse reflections on diverse themes abound to nourish, soothe and humanize us

all again and again as aesthetic and thinking beings amidst the widening hurts of our present world.

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The Rain

Close by, a rainstorm breaks. It ruffles our room.
You peer into the window so it wets a part
Of your cheek, your thin lips, your startled eyes.
You look at me and when I beckon you come
Closer and perch beside me, wanting me to hold
Your fingers in my hands as if it were
A fragile cup that the rain might break.
You want me to get between you and the savage storm.
Holding your fingers my deft hands twitch,
Throb on you and then, wondering how to proceed. Brave.
The rain rips through me as your grip tightens.

In the Shower

(after Neil Rollinson)

You climb onto the bathroom scales
and stare at the dial twirl back and forth
beneath your weight, swift, unwilling
to stop. *I've added weight,*
you say, in anger, *how can you afford
to lift me up?* I lather in the shower and feel
my full gut rise in the foamy water.
I tell you about the scientists at the end
of subterranean labs, trying to parse the universe
in coats of pure white. They're looking
for black holes, for SMBHs; for the missing
gravity that will bring us together. The cosmos
it seems, is contracting infinitesimally.
We are getting further apart by the minute.
You purse your lips and turn to speak to me.
I can't take it, you say, *half a kilo!*
I tell you you're pretty, that you look as beautiful
to me as you eternally have. You shed off
your shorts and get into the shower. As you adjust
your shape into the foam and move closer to me
the water burbles and bursts for a moment,
then drips from the face, soaking the bathroom rug.

(SMBHs- Super Massive Black Holes)

Moonlit Night

I don't recall who ogled who first,
who seduced who first,
All I recall in the moonlit night—
the stars strewn outside,
the lazy moon trudging in the sky—
was that you cued me and I cued you.
And straight away we were in a big cove
in a small house with the light peeing in
and your heart racing; mine too.
And it was this whirling, wheeling thing.
It's hard to pin it down;
it is hard to recall which was which—
who was who when the storm was spooning in.

Swirl of Veil

(for Adama Ahmed Said)

Side by side with you, I have fondled the sky
in a zillion dimpling places;
floated through its fog and seen it suffused
a pharos to behold, beyond and behind us

I have returned in that drab Harmattan dust
to see my fate in your provocative eyes
and furtive swirl of your veil

I have heard the thud of my heart
even in the canter of your smile, gleaming
softly gleaming over your red-lipped face

and I have held you, uptight and confused
to my tender bosom,
loved you among the fabled stars...

And then the day sailed through, a time-tested thief
bearing his booties in the brick and the mortar,
thieving away the mist and the memories

my world has been lush ever since,
lush and luxuriantly scenic.

Opus

I love spinning
love 'specially just

after—unmoored—
the sighs and sometimes

crying over, our hard
climbing done—

sheets rumped—
bed, a life-

buoy, drifting...

The Dress

The dress darns her shoulders
and glides over her back.
It flows down her sides.
It even stretches down below her waist—
down into her frillies.
Blessed dress.

The Rendezvous

You came to the far side of the bed
and sat leering at me.
Then you touched me—I felt
hot lava on my brow.
I wanted it to leave a scar:
that's how I thought I loved you.
Because I wanted to be marked, engraved,
to have lifeline in the end—
I drew the sheet over my face,
a quick blush over my cheeks and forehead.
It will run its cycle, the cycle of fire,
fixing a cold patch on the brow, in-between the eyes.
You squeeze behind me; your touch tingled over my face
as though you had felt it too—
you must have realized, then, how I needed you.
We will always realize that, me and you.
The evidence will be my body.

Die Schöne und das Biest

(For Sylvia Kankara)

Settled in the snugness
Of a tryst so majestic,
Bed linen breathe steadily
Against the grace of femininity and
The perfumed air brushes my skin
On a salver of desire.

Virility hails the sight of flesh
So seductively edged within
The satin cups of scented lingerie
Moonlight... a new era of rapture begins.

The rhapsody of love at its making,
Dawn at its breaking, and
Elegance at its awakening embalms you and I—
The bed unruffled.

Yesterday's Ecstasy

Burdened by the memories of
Joyful days gone by,
I evoke the softness of your lips
And the bulge of your breasts
As I lay my head to sleep.
Holding the fringe of my fate,
I relish the scent of your lush hair,
Black like the plumes of a crow.

I remember that face;
Beneath is mask-like,
A facade of ferocious love.
One axe, they say,
Cannot fell a forest.
Yet stolen trophies lurk
In your innocence.

I behold the moon in her sovereignty
And the constellation of stars,
And my heart is smartly beguiled
By your tenderness caressing the bed of femininity.

The Figurine

Your tender dark body
arrests my eyes. . .

I dream of you shining, in the cusp
of night, the precious bulging crystal
of your glowing chest. . .

And how so often in the darkness,
smouldering with volcanic fever,
eyes red like rage,
I come to lust at your gaits
—I feel the thrill of a spasm
revealing my fantasies!

O sensuous Aphrodite!
eternal sin
of my confession!
Between the spiky teats of your bosom
you hold, in torture,
the single reason for my madness!

One Moon-swept November Night

One moon-swept November night
you came banging on my door,
I bade my time to respond.
when I opened,
there was only a black Hijab,
threadbare, half-tied to the lock.

The Mislaid Bracelet

(A Variation on a Theme by Jacques Réda)

Now I turn and trudge back with you,
Our eyes rummaging the dirt for that bracelet,
Mid-day sun so cruel it seems the very light
Is being sabotaged and will soon be gone
As its vast furnace dissolves.

And you,
Squatting among pebbles and grass,
Your shadow, lost beneath the horizon encircling us,
Turns this submerged path into a wandering boat
Where now we'll continuously be together,
As time, dazzled by the day's splendour, ignores us,
And the blood throbs in your bare wrist.

The Bandaged Wrist

(A Variation on a Theme by C P Cavafy)

She said she had injured herself on a staircase, or had tumbled,
but certainly, there was some other reason
for the injury, for the bandaged wrist.

She was reaching up the top for a shot
she wanted to take more closely
when the bandage came unloose. A tiny blood ran.

I tied it up for her again, wasting far too much time
over the edging; she wasn't in pain,
and—to be candid—I liked staring at the blood.
That blood. It was all part of love.

When she left, I found a piece torn from the bandage
under her seat, a strip I should have dumped
straight in the bin—but I lifted it to my nose,
and kept it there a long time:
her blood on my nose, o dear, my beloved's blood.

Half-Curved Bracken of the Cinnamon Fern

Whatever becomes of us, your body
will spook mine—slender, fragile
your kissmaking, like the half-curved bracken
of the cinnamon fern in the wilds
just plucked by the wind. Your urbane, lavish hands
between which my whole being has come and come—
the harmony and innocence of the heaven my tongue has
discovered there—
the lurid, insistent dance of your lips in my mouth—
your looks on me, hard, careful, probing
me out, your electric touch and tender fingers
reaching where I had been loitering years for you
in my pink-clammy clit—whatever becomes, this is.

Blameworthy

How do you implore
When I thrust in deep throes
Waiting to gain impetus
And plunge headlong
In this erotic cesspool?

Struggling with the waves of desire,
My entrails twitch, beguiled
By the fervent attention
Of your rod.
In the boundless tribute, I strike a height
Tending the tremolo in my torso,
Even the tempo of this spasm of lust.

“Probe me, I’m not innocent”.
What goes around comes around.
I’m caught, deeply caught
In the fallout.
And what do you care?
And biting proves every apple.

Empyrean

“Ascend th’ empyrean of my soul”

-Ken Saro-Wiwa

All dusk long my beloved
Trampling over old memories
In the searing breeze of a Kano evenfall
I have thought of you
In silent rhapsodies.

Now the voice soft as taffeta
From an unheard soprano’s throat
Drifts you to me,
O dream of my teens
Fresh as florets in June,
Who alone can calm the tempest
That pares my heart.

When darkness annexes my sky
And light cannot peek out of drapes,
Mount the firmament of my soul
Be the hope and the stars
And let me play quiet
In the softness of your shadow.

The Study of Love

(after E.V. Ramakrishnan)

In the catalogues of your looks
I examine the typescripts
of your sideward glimpses.
The archives of your articulate
motions stack up in my
library. I subscribe to the hardbound
series of your successive
moods. I bungle and misquote
as I understand less and less
about your more and more.

There is no coming to grips
with your prehistoric scholarship.

Stirring

And even now,
when fistful years have elapsed,
love has everything to say:
it's purely the day
stirring behind you, unmindful of itself,
the vigour after sleep and sleep's steady estimation
of where it has been:
it's the day awakening with the light
on the two quiet intertwined figures we make
as we stream into sleep, streaming through the night
towards the foretold and forlorn morning
when our bodies twitch again,
stirred by the sun,
and I recline there awaiting your eyes
to unfurl, two hazel ponds
that brighten within
with precision.

Crepuscular Night

When you break your heart
does it glint in your eyes?
Can you feel it in your breath?
How many teeth do you grit up in your mouth?
When someone asks how you're doing,
about the weather, or the children,
does your face freeze, or toughen or flat out
and is every hope lost?
Is life ragged at the hems?
Does Harmattan ever return?
Is the darkness of the night or the heart
something you might encounter again?
And know that it is the starry darkness of the night
the crepuscular night of the heart,
the very first night of Harmattan?

Rainbow of Trickery

Your face is a rainbow of trickery
spectral now, then bluish and a cool red
a topography of subtleties,
a rainbow,
cauldron of a thousand pastels
a wide blue sea of gliding plumes
sometimes too, your dimples are enduring exile of smiles.

Now I see the peril of hurricanes in your eyes
come shadow, come doubt, my fictional boat is set.
I shall weather the storms.

The Span of Something

I have treasured you in my hands:
What you measure is my fate.
It is the weight which you bear.
Your life is in double spell:
The time to grow,
And the time to die.

But of all these—
Death abounds intimately.
Life sprouts out of the plough
It is the sniggering wind:
We laugh towards it,
Because it is primeval.

It is the span of something
More intimate than lust.
The trifle soul in a trundle, twitching with sleep,
Is the present, and the past,
And the sporadic future.
It is eternity wrapped in a cot.

Him

(for Jackie Kay)

I had been warned about him.
How he would break, break.
How he would jilt, jilt.
I'd seen and felt
but I still stooped for him,
how he breaks, breaks.
How he jilts, jilts.

In the long intrepid night,
his eyes, eureka moments.
I tried to entice him and he smiled
a big smile that wrecked me in two,
but then I had been warned about him,
how he would break, break.
How he would jilt, jilt.

We two listened to the breeze.
We two quickened a stride.
We two, up in smoke, smoke, smoke.
And he's gone,
like he said he would go.
But then I had been warned about him—
how he would break, break.

Licensed

You tell me your escapades.
I tell you some of mine. An integrity we say,
An openness. In the middle
Of your story, at the fifth word,
You say I grimaced; you stop.
Go on, I demanded.
In the middle of mine,
Your eyes so far delighted,
Spark vaguely. But I fire on.
Our stories shine through
A licensed infidelity.

But at the end when the stories have stopped,
Spirits seemingly rinsed off our backs,
Who are those baying for attention?
Between a bosom and a hand
An uncanny finger trespasses. Inside my mouth
Your tongue grudges
A third saliva. Roll over.
Leave half the bed
Empty. Our hands should meet
To interlock.

C Major

(after Menka Shivdasani)

‘How come your hair is so lustrous?’
the tall pianist asked, and she,
half-awake, said Kano city was full of lustre
and sometimes the place got into your hair.

He was a pro, and they were playing
hide-&-seek with each other, sexed-up notes
on lustrous skin. ‘The problem,’ he said,
‘is you’re too subtle’, and played
music from the piano keys on her head.

It was when he got to the C Major
that something changed.

Later on, he asked, worried: ‘Did you,
baby, did you?’ for a critical moment,
there were silences that he didn’t anticipate.

‘I always come silently’, she told him,
not mentioning, ‘I always leave silently too’.

Pressured Memories

Sobs pierce my soul like
A barbed blade breaching the tenderness
Of a powerless pudendum.
The outline of your face stings
Like a torn bandage in Iodine to rid it
Of untold agony in a tomorrow so close.

But my tomorrow is a cliff
Of last night's love—a love I tendered
To full blossom.
But elsewhere in the stir of dawn,
It wilted like a stillborn
From an unwitting uterine tube.

Hermit

Only last night love abandoned me
Like vapour trails vanishing from the mirage of the sky.
My mind replete with memories of your face,
Memories that sprout out like a mangrove in the swamp;
My heart is swelled with fears which reiterate my forecasts
and
My conviction shrivelled to the size of a sesame seed—
The day I dreaded has betided me.

I remember the nights when I dreamed,
I dreamed of us etched against the
Cauldron of dialogue—
I, the still minuscule voice;
You, the prosecutor.
Once, I remember remixing the melody that
Preceded your pre-arranged departure,
Only to rise up with your back against mine.

When memories prick with no one to ease the pain,
Then I imagine my life as a solitary star
Amidst infinite darkness in an immense sky—
Lively, yet lonely.

Ivory Night

Blood stained the ivory night I made love
My hymen broke some ruptures after.

You blotted my thoughts—
They are lush and virgin and do not veil the
Innocence I presume.
I dream of a man all the while
Loving and caring me all out.
I yearn to twirl his tongue with mine
In return for the ecstasy that
True coition offers.

And after I've been defiled
By my thoughts—thoughts I want to let go of—
Then I have to go through the rites of sacrifice
So that I can bow before You unscathed
When it's time to sing the psalms.

Precedents

We plunged into the depth hoping to find
The trinkets we lost in times past—the companionships
Abandoned; the vows broken; the love betrayed—
Only to tarnish ourselves with much agony and
Setback.

For what we thought we would discover and tend
Became grits in our eyes, pricking us
On every side, burdening us with great pain
And asking reparation beyond reclamation.

With depleted hope and coagulated dreams,
We remember the precedents of pirate wars caused by
Years ignited by animus, years of cruel courage
And psychological bondage to the caprices of our desire;
Years we cannot bury, but must
Painfully pay for.

And while we exact comfort and confidence from
Our present pose, we turn back,
Still hoping to find some trinkets.

Farewell

Eventide.

We have nowhere to hide when cloudburst of calamity
Drench the fire of our love
And all in the name of a vow,
Your hymen's the ultimate price.

You've been caught pilfering
And I will requite the betrayal done me
By your errant plea.

You've been measured on a scale and
Have weighed short...and retribution becomes
My invaluable heritage given to you
Because you tempered honesty with deceit.

And on a blazing furnace of fraud, real love drips away—
Farewell my love, I will be gone.

Peregrination

In the depth of my despair
I can barely find comfort in the
Warmth that calmed me in years past.
And like a maxed-out fame,
I am left with a blankness that nibbles
At intimacy—
To love and to honour
To remember you'll always be here.

Thrumming on my lips is a tune
Long deleted from the memory of

Hope.

Solitude!

How my heart seeks solace.

My quest pointless,

My desire loitering,

Who shall have the last word?

Ismail Bala writes in English and Hausa. His poetry and translations have appeared in the UK, the USA, Canada, India and South Africa, in journals such as *Poetry Review*, *Ambit*, *New Coin*, *Ake Review*, *Lunaris*, *A Review of International English Literature* and *Aura Literary Arts Review*, among many others. Born and educated to university level in Kano, he did his post-graduate studies at Oxford. His poems have been translated into Latvian, Belarusian, Nepalese, Slovenian and Polish. He is a Fellow of the International Writing Programme of the University of Iowa. He is the author of *Line of Sight* (Praxis, 2020), and *Ivory Night* (KSR, 2024).



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