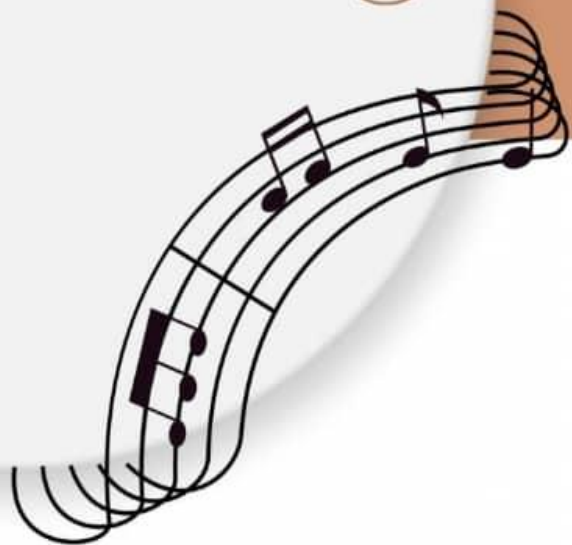


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Shin Song



PROSPER ÌFÉÁNYÍ



# SKIN SONG

Prosper Ifeanyi

INKspiredng

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# **Dedication**

This book is dedicated to Ify

# **Acknowledgements**

I am first of all grateful to God, then to the editors of the following magazines where some of these poems first appeared:

*Brittle Paper*: “Immortalising the Sufferer”

*Conscio Magazine*: “The Offing”

*Eremite Poetry*: “Poets are Failed Musicians”

*New Note Poetry*: “Look Back in Anger”

*Pepper Coast Lit*: “Cowries and Rosaries”

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## **Blurb(s)**

Skin Song embodies the theory of self and the (re)membering of the beauty and kinetics of our inner bodies. With impressive deployment of sonorous diction and an appreciable understanding of syntax, Ifeanyi helps us to reimagine ourselves as gods. A prodigious Start!

—Ifesinachi Nwadike – Author of *How Morning Remembers the Night*

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# Memories Are for Letting Go

Torch a soul and watch passions burn.  
Step away from the chaos and notice  
the ashes levitate towards the  
skies. For there is nothing as gratuitous  
as looking back at the ruins. Where it all  
began. Where something as flippant as  
a mote mattered.

Show me how to appreciate this nectar  
you puke. To look upon your works like  
daisies blooming up a morning star and  
scrounge more for you. Yesterday, you  
cursed an oak as dead as a clock and  
rattled the barks as if searching for magnets  
to hold everything from going south.

Today, coffee breaks are plain  
insulins, injected into my memory and you still  
are not here to witness the pain of holding  
on that silent memory. A memory I let out  
when everyone except flashbulbs goes to  
sleep. My therapist tells me to keep  
them on, so I don't wander off into the

waiting arms of darkness and chaos. I  
let them rest and chew pills I know are meant  
for cats. At first I make it look like an accident,  
then I reach the hotline for 911. And when the

raspy receiver asks what the emergency was  
I tell her *one man down on the love highway*.  
Like I said, It's all an accident. Until it isn't.

\*The italicised phrase was culled from Adekunle  
Gold's verse in the song "*Pami*"

# Self-exorcism

*The assurance, I suspect, is rooted  
in desire*

—Pamilerin Jacob

I am asked what scares me  
the most. I am scared because  
even the inability to answer is my  
fear. But then again, I try to convince  
myself that it's a curse to see clearly.

Sometimes I am a blackhole  
sucking everything into myself  
and destroying it like a nail eating its  
way through woodwork.

I am trapped in this mortal body like you  
but unlike you, I try to beguile the distrust  
I have for all these feelings except pleasure.  
I let that one swoon and sway me wherever  
it pleases— without questions

For nothing could be so neat and yet  
incalculable that it claims a **your body**.

**And** if you plunge your head further,  
you might break. So, I  
wind up my wanton proclivities and  
couch it in the name of a God light-years  
away

How does something bad  
feel this good even after self-exorcism?  
You think this instant that you pretty much  
want to have this feeling, until the climax  
hits and you are left scouring and loathing  
again

That irredeemable part of yourself you know  
no Bible, or God, or oil, or cross, or chaplet  
can conceal. For the demon lies within.

# The Asylum

*For Ojo Ilemobayo*

Last year, I polished my nails  
And plucked fresh lavenders without having to  
Smoke just to see you. Today, it's  
Almost the same as yesterday; only, there  
Are no pee breaks in here—the asylum  
Grows cold and heavy

With one-third of my dreams shutting  
Their way into a crypt. In here,  
Only kaftans, plaids, and denims bellow  
In the air— not me.

How dark the greens of  
The yew becomes when you are  
No longer here.

With graves wanting every now and then  
To hold this body down. Oh no!  
They simply couldn't understand.

With sassafras poured into  
Every scintillating mug, I am  
Told to douse this memory of untruth.  
If they, who knew the thickness of  
Love clogged to our  
Boots, called you untruth,  
What more life could I live than this love I have given you?

## Polar

Why do I find chaos within the nape  
Of everything I touch? Sometimes  
Permanence steers clear of everything  
That needs evanescence. I am a boy

Sitting behind a counter, trying to  
Remember why my dream swallows  
Everything I try to call home; sometimes  
The dreams are monochromatic and

Very rarely does it have a tinge of colour  
Or shape. They start with a foreboding  
Like an ostrich trying to peck a pirate's  
Eye or an albatross adorning an unclad

Man. I don't know *sha*, but the dreams  
Start somewhere. Somewhere between  
I love you and can I get your number?  
I am more dead than alive when the

Weight of these dreams shatter the mouth  
Of the boy wielding the scale. And like  
Fresh springs, his body pours down into  
The crevices of those parts unseen and

Uncared for. The river birds sing of a  
Folk song, where souls made of water  
Converge from the east and west into  
A confluence, and just like that, time

Dilates and everything is normal again.  
My mother tries to make me recount  
My dreams repeatedly; but this  
Time, I tell her I can't remember shit.



## Olokun

My grandfather and I, today, caught a  
Marlin. She was smoked over a raft and  
As we drifted, he taught me a lesson  
About the smoke and the sea. He said:  
*One day, we will talk over two shots of  
Ogogoro, how a woodsmoke dismembers  
Itself from its body just to see God.*  
Tonight, the seagulls chant canticles  
By the shores and pigeons scavenge the  
Remnants of diaphoretic pepper and  
Tomatoes lying beside the motionless  
Water. In that water, we see a troupe of  
Worshippers crafting their tongues over  
Things of old. My grandfather tells me  
They are a connection between the sea  
And land. The sea gives, the sea takes, but  
At what cost should one prey at its  
Evanescence? The sea, *music's* melody to  
The man, and the man offers it a slice of  
Himself. The sea is a disambiguation of  
Everything man probably misconstrued.  
Smoking a fish is an understanding of a  
Transaction with the sea; what is smoked  
Is recompensed to the sea with diffused  
Vapour and then given back by rainfall.

## Ode to Harmattan

The harmattan breeze whistles softly upon  
The disquieted town  
To keep afire under its frigid shawl  
Spooked sucklings sheltered  
Under the bronze  
Bosom of dormant mothers

Bodies unresponsive to the lucid  
Call of water  
Arid rheum hitherto  
Claims resemblance with sampled alabaster  
Jars and you say your breath

Hasn't caught up the curtain linen?  
When I am no longer mindful of the sacral hours  
At which I do the laundry  
I know you are here  
And your presence so heavy it  
Shutters the windows of my lids  
Upon the wake of dawn

You take your leave and  
O, how the wronged persons  
Await your return

## The New Normal

The bulb flickers as if beckoning to the room.  
The whiskey becomes eloquent, and all is at  
Once still. The faucet *musics* atop a sink and  
The vibratile cringes to the mad rattling louvre.  
A stray toast at every corner in sight, the kettle  
Snoring with a barometric heave. The doornail  
Eating away the crust of wood like a blight.  
And this, is what I call normal. The abstracts  
Speak their own languages; we just don't hear  
Them enough. Does your neck feel your collar?  
Do you ever think why the body, made of sand,  
Cannot hold water? Why does my father suddenly  
Want me to speak Arabic? The lilacs I kept as a  
Boon now withers, and with it, my desire for  
Surprises. Girls no longer churn at the mention  
Of love letters so my mother made me a robe of  
Many colours to get the men. So, when I say:  
Mother, I looked at a man the way I never should,  
She called that the new normal.

## Look Back in Anger

How does one tauten guilt with a monkey wrench & not  
Break up like a china? Feed the roaches with beardlike  
Croissants & still feel nothing? Absolutely nothing. Say he  
Loves white & despises ash? Piggyback God & complain of  
Back ache? Humans are finches, perching & pecking at the  
Woodworms & still complain of mouth pain. Tables turn &  
Only yesterday did I get the requiem. It's my death day & I  
Make a toast to those who died many a time before their  
Actual death. I have seen a man bruise his daughter's  
Skin to turquoise & still attend her wedding; scars fresh  
Like minted cheddar, smile looming like hanging crescent.  
But still she stands, like the sun posing to the heliograph  
& fearful that she might burn—burn gold. Burn a crime.  
Yesterday, I & a friend attended a soiree in Abidjan till  
The night was upon us. When we smoked our cheap blunts  
He whispered. & I never heard what he said, but we both  
Laughed what was our last laugh, until his wife stole him  
Away. Marriage swept frivolities under the carpet of  
Responsibilities & dared call it growing up. & like all things,  
I refuse to awake from this dream. Tender at night, green  
With envy. When will I, too, find that sweet loving.

## Poets Are Failed Musicians

*“Music is the Sister of Poetry  
And her Mother is sorrow.”*

—Sergei Rachmaninoff

Give me a harp & a lyre and watch me plough  
The bows into a hymnal. My lips ache like battered  
Cymbals clapped into waiting for the watchword & watchman  
At heaven’s gate. But this art, like a cavity, plunges me deep  
Into the sinus of a sea, therein, I chew the groundnut sands  
And inhale the scent of the horizon, wanting to stretch my rear  
To a fastening velcro but all I croon about is grief. Every Gen-Alpha  
Centric poet lulls about grief, & I know them well, like the  
Fingers of my toe. One sings about his mother who meets death  
At a tryst once every week. Another, serenades how darkness kissed  
The oil in his paraffin lamp. A line has been leaving rent free in the  
Corners of my heart & each time I try to tame it I need a trombone;  
So I put it down & instead, sing a song akin to how  
Goosebumps count time in an hourglass through body languages.

## The Offing

*When I saw God*

*I trembled like a man I used the*

*Wrong pronouns*

—Kaveh Akbar

A boy, prettier than me, asked if I were truly  
An image of God or dust clotted from a womb.  
I had the answers. They were wrapped somewhere  
Around the clenching of my palms, & he did get  
Them. At dinner  
I bricked up my mouth hole with  
The lord's prayer but didn't say amen because I  
Had learnt to question that, too. This boy, foolish boy,  
Wouldn't know God, his father, even if he  
Looked him in the face. Wonders why he can't  
Sniff rose flowers too, or wear frocked skirts.  
Maybe I  
Am just uglier in the outside  
& pale onion white in the inside; maybe  
I am a sundial without a gnomon as a child without  
His father. When a black  
Boy does it, it's someone did it. When another does,  
It's he did it. Identity is future. "Future" from  
The Latin *futurus*, meaning I am, but I still  
Don't know what.  
Somewhere in 2060, a boy  
Is being promised a sister, but the robots aren't horny.

## Legon

There is a woman. And a boy. Oh, there is  
Always a woman! This one loved me, and I don't  
Even know what that means. For each time I tried  
To loosen my bowels and say the words, moths  
And fireflies flew. Some got stuck in her hair  
And oh, must she feel the shame! Dancing  
Nakedly clad in the sunset of dreams and  
Mounting on those geese, she, a dwindling  
Painting, frocked idly on my canvass as I  
Drew her still to life. A swoon, I like to think.  
Oh, and the boy. Whispering wishes into the  
Hanging dust and eyeing the bread crumbs,  
He was dyslexic, so he couldn't read this poem  
Or notice me leave the room. But boy was he  
Garlic and onion when he came across his  
First catch. Chuffed, he raced into his mammy  
Wagon, riding through the straits of Legon and  
Piping soft melodies only the birds in the sycamore  
Could overt, and there, a babushka awaited his  
Joyous laugh.

# Immortalising the Sufferer

i

## *Birtbing*

The night my grandfather died  
Even the chains couldn't keep him out.  
He lived and forged his way through  
Charon, the ferryman of Hades, and  
Swallowed the sixth of a drachma  
{Obolus} coin.

The brine from which  
He came through attested to his victory  
O'er the Test of Salt, **of which** was victorious.  
& again, the scar on his head  
Forced you to bellow:

## *Nnamdi! Nnamdi! Nnamdi!*

For father is around, & in your offspring  
Did you see his face; & so you broke into  
Bulby tears when you saw his heels  
Erode into unrecognisable fragments,  
This, you surmised, was from the staying  
Out on a baobab tree.

ii

## *Pantheons*

I have not come here to sow where men



Didn't reap. Neither have I travelled  
Through the elemental bodies to converge  
At your shrines.

The reconsecration of the  
Soul is but a light year away from where  
I stand; homage to the ones born anew  
Gaslights the very purpose for which they  
Venture: to hurt or to wander?

My existence  
Rests solely upon the solipsism of my  
Father's father & those before him. The  
Toughness of the kola determines how  
Droste-the-effect might play out.

Before our earmarking as evil-doers,  
Have they stopped to ask themselves  
who acquiesces to their appellation of  
*chis* & personal gods on the night when  
Their hearts become tempestuous?

iii

*Souvenir*

& tell this to your sons & their sons, that  
Those who place the crucifix on the  
Gravestones & think they shall have peace  
Should learn from the bats of the night:  
When refused by others to be called birds  
Or mammals they price themselves in

Being what they are.

& since the module  
For their foolishness cannot be  
Recompensed, I leave with them these words.

iv

*Blight*

These prayers eat me deep, & not in such  
A manner where the words are efficacious,  
But because of the unwelcoming embrace  
Which yawns wide among every kin I call  
Out to.

Give me a common ground for which  
I can exist and I will; in your hearts or  
Labial call. For when I go to the heavens  
I am conjured up from the earth, in blood  
Oaths and swears & when I sway to the  
Earth I am bathed in ochre coloured sand.

v

*Spiritus Mundi*

From where I come, a woman  
Throws a net into the river to battle the  
River goddess, Oyese, if her child is voluptuously taken from her.

This child's name is Nnamdi meaning

“Father is around”. She cries not wanting  
To lose her father over and over again.  
& in her anguish, the iridescence of a light  
Shines on her soul & so does the elixir of life.

## **A Thing or Two About Family**

Nothing really is accidental as the cosmic disaster of a family. A rough, patchy and yet, sane collection of hard workers trying to keep a sail boat going. I must *confess*, we don't *profess* very much how we are nothing without each other. My father, before hoisting heavenward with the Biafra sun, always told my brother and I a story about a boy who is tugged into a tempestuous sea; he gaggles and meanders like the dolphins until he sleeps in death. But father doesn't call it that. He says he made peace with the fact that swimming are for fishes. That is how I like to think morning remembers night. This is why I am vexed to garb my discontent of my family.

# **I Know the Knife-Scars Serrating Down Their Backs**

Yesterday, I wrapped myself  
into a prayer as I watched my  
mother and father play gladiator.

No child should see this; but it's  
something they should witness.  
How love bleeds when the sickle

yanks it off its root. The photo album  
still looks perfect, and I come here to  
pilfer a glance upon the lurid smile—

where it all started, before time slowly  
turned my father into a nervous wreck.  
I do this at night because father's alopecia

keeps getting worse, and a reminder  
of his youth could incite a whooping.  
Sometimes I feel my head is no longer

here, and if everything goes south mother  
is not to blame. Her body a wilting flower  
enclosed in the traipse of a uniform body,

that I am afraid it might be the only  
wreath she gets. Sometimes I wonder  
if she knew I knew her darkest hours;

just sitting there—waiting, with a bluebird

in her heart. Wanting a home other than  
what this squalor has to offer. The tincture

of her voice stabbing the wind reminds  
me of falling rose petals, enough to make  
boys with dreams return home. But still,

father's touch burns bright and it must  
mean the whole world to him that I wasn't  
handpicked with a hand full of aces. I am

careful that should I fall into the cusp  
of a reaching hand, I would be a thorn,  
pricking every soft balloon which inflates

me a home. So when we pose those drab  
family pictures, I don't smile because I know  
the knife-scars serrating down their backs.

## Cowries and Rosaries

Watching the ants cascade granules  
of sugar down the mound of the earth  
reminds me of my mother leading me to the  
pulpit for the preacher man to save my soul.

*Come, son, let your old mother take you  
to God.* And when I told her I couldn't feel a  
thing, a shush would run down my spine,  
like the gelid slap of holy water bruising  
my toughened caramel skin, saying:

I want to kiss your birthmark...

Sometimes I wonder where everything  
goes when the sound of mortars and pestles  
disappear; my mother is always too  
shocked to weave her mouth around the  
stories, so she makes us wait. But why  
wait till the night? Why is the night,  
perforated with silence, unspoken of? Why  
does my father bury his face into his mat,  
even when he tells us:

*This, here, is where I want my body laid.*

I still remember solemnly, how the rain  
of yesterday pierced the carapace of our spirits.

The embers have gone cold now, and so  
so have our ambitions, my sister and I.

And the shrine that once used to stand  
tall beside our home now wavers; as if  
waiting for me to say it...to say:

Mother, I have sinned, I no longer feel  
religion. And mother would always go on to  
rewound the cassette player, that if I be

gladdened in heart, might just dance off-key  
to such foolishness.

This too is the reason why it reekingly is  
blasphemous to place Santa above Ani; that  
is why I couldn't throw away the cowries at  
the behest of rosaries. For what difference  
can be alluded to these contraptions?



## **We Are the Damned Ones**

O, molten prayer, save thy  
Self from the scourge of fleshly  
Cravings. I tread upon a path  
Of roughly fashioned  
Desires my body couldn't take  
And I constricted myself like a  
Snake wielding a staff. A metaphor  
I like to think. Don't ask much of  
This mortal soul but ask the body  
For we are the ones  
Damned to dust.  
Grief. Grief. Is what they would  
See in the boy whose heart they  
Took a chance on and let  
Their flowers grow  
Pain forced my hands to  
Stopper the galloping thump  
Of my mother's chest and  
She says it happens when I am  
Away from the chaos. She knows  
It draws me; but what she doesn't  
Understand is why I don't put  
It to rest like every other thing motion revs.  
I'd still very much love to sit  
And do a census on galaxies  
Still, I wish the air smells  
Like ice-cream— dull, infantile, etcetera  
O, traversing prayer, might  
You for a second cleave  
To my doubt like feeling my way through  
A lollipop wrap?

## On Happiness

*“When love ceases to be tragic it is something else  
and the individual again throws himself in search of tragedy.”*

— Albert Camus

The whiff from the smoke buries itself into a neon light and the soot is enough to ward off just about anything that eats fluorescence. It’s uneasy for night these days because it stays longer than it pleases; inebriating us with oneiric realities like crooning elegies for tattered kites bellowing and lost forever to the skies, when it betrays its primordial essence over day.

The voices of our fathers crawl their way into the moat but meet our absence. We were gone with our skiffs tattooed with kaolin chalks, trying to unbecome the mystery we made ourselves into. Travelers of guilt ploughing our way through the brackish rivers telling stories of love to children whose generation might have no need for it.

And I often think it isn’t wrong to assume that the way the wind hits, my body might just be the wreck. Writing all day is affecting my perception of time, and so does my desire for little things like love which doesn’t cost A nickel. Lately, there has been too many days in a roll that hitting the cul-de-sac of love and hate becomes inevitable.

My body now takes delight in pledging its allegiance elsewhere and I am expected to be a spectator to it all. To watch time ebb away with the prospect of good tidings, even when I’m an unbeliever. Perhaps, this maybe, is man’s truth to his search for happiness.

## **If Prayer and Penance Shut Their Way into My Body, I Would Be a Window with no Wind**

i could give a million reasons why i think this prayer stops at the roof of my house, but then again, maybe the roofs are just too soundproof to let my ugly sins pass to a beautiful God. and since He came down the garden to always commune with the first man, i am forced to re-enact this rite. i am

deshabille, then unclad under the clapping of rain on my soft peroxide palm; God—He instructed me to immerse my body under the first pelt of rain drumming loudly upon my mother's roof. today, my body becomes the footstool of God, and i feel his legs—strut and assertive like the limbs of a sequoia tree.

mother wails something different each time she remembers kudjo hasn't come home. he must be head deep in a woman's bosom that he forgets the very sound of toads croaking the morning orison. but i am faithful in every way, i let God make my body his canvass and he starts painting from the thinning of my hair; my hair

corpuscle. He loves something as insignificant as my hair but my heart fails? i take out my hair and He surely brings them back; my heart breaks but He leaves me to mend like the undoing of a

raffia basket. how His ways are mysterious and  
how mine are mere paths with innovations lacking.  
the rain stops, but rivulets well up inside my body.

## **(S)kin Trade**

*for you can be quite sure that he  
is not risking his skin to find himself  
at the level of a former inhabitant of  
the old mother country.*

—Frantz Fanon

When the sun  
Soaked our skin  
And the rain rinsed  
Our feet. When the  
Soil belched our bones  
In the dank unthinkable  
Spaces of a wrecked home  
When the glib  
Becomes a parrot's phatic  
And the drums refuse to  
Startle the masquerades. When  
Mothers roll their buttock harps  
To the waiting embrace  
Of fathers who know not  
If this song will offset  
The loss. The loss of loosing  
A s/kin to trade. A trade of masking  
Affairs like the hidden alcove of a boat.  
Music waiting aloft until our hands touch  
And retch our unsinkable  
Souls. When love will rise  
Up one morning and resign itself to  
Its cheap commodification  
How a light treacherous to darkness

Launders rays across an  
Ecosystem of unfunded hearts  
The prayer and dissolution of  
Marriage are the Acts bequeathed  
To none but apostles  
They drift this boat and cast  
Lots on shards of broken  
Hearts just lying about the  
Corridors of a house. A green. Tall.  
And slender house.

## Untitled

Cut me open, and bind me like

Men bind secrets. A tumour is eating its way  
Through my body and I have but much

Time to tell you where                      so

Place me on a table, good surgeon, and

Tug my blood with the suction pipe. This  
Body is a valve waiting to feel warm air

Through a morning glass. The integrity of my bones  
Fail and with it the oiled joints of my memories. Why

Do we so much want as much as

A reassurance of life when death cleaves?

The morphine and analgesics do not

Bar me from listening to my heart beat; the

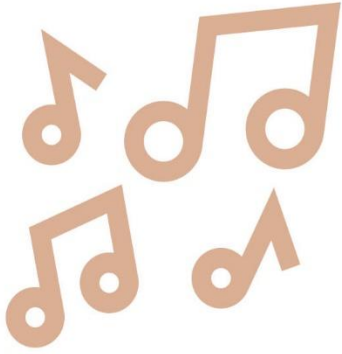
Rain smelt and pelted like ice-cream from an  
Heavenly spigot. And there I was, riding

A mule [God's own mule] on an alabaster chariot.  
Everything didn't hurt—the swelling, the welling.

## **Biography**

**Prosper Iféányí** is a Nigerian poet. His works are featured or forthcoming in *Brittle Paper*, *Lumiere Review*, *Identity Theory*, *Aothen Magazine*, *Petrichor Journal*, *Eremitic Poetry*, *New Note Poetry*, *Lothlorien Poetry Journal* and elsewhere. He is the Editor-in-chief of OneBlackBoyLikeThat Review and First Reader for Khoreo Magazine. Reach him on Twitter and Instagram @prosperifeanyii





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