



Burnt Men

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Oluwasegun Romeo Oriogun

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Foreword *by John L. Stanizzi*

In a poetic landscape dominated by what reads so often like the same old language focusing on the sad tired themes, there emerges a voice of courage and passion, wisdom and strength, power and tranquility. A voice that is utterly unique and surprising, and at the same time, familiar and welcoming. This is poetry in which we are welcomed, in which we feel accepted, and although the ideas are often challenging and sometimes heartbreaking, what holds this collection together, and what ultimately embraces the reader, is the profound sense of humanity ascending from the pages.

Oluwasegun Romeo Oriogun's chapbook *Burnt Men* refuses to acknowledge the evils of the world as anything more than necessary roadblocks along the way toward enlightenment, a way cleared by love and spirituality and powerful restraint.

The book opens with the startling *burnt men*.

*a preacher said gay men are dead men.
i wake up to the smell of burnt men
in my veins*

From the outset we understand Oriogun's response to his world. Is there malevolence on the earth disguised in a garb of goodness? Of course. But the moment the death sentence has been cast upon all gay men, those men enter Oriogun's being, they abide in his veins. He cannot – and will not – ignore such iniquity.

*i swear my tongue burns
every time i say the word love,
i do not know when men began to burn men
for saying the word love
but i know that a man in love
is so close to God,
he can hear his heart beat.*

In the poem called *Wreckage*, the themes of love gained through loss, and of beauty recognized through sorrow are further developed, this time with startling images that are so fresh and inventive that one must read with *two* minds – the mind that tries to breathe in and assimilate such absolutely incredible images – and the mind that, at the same time, reads and comprehends what is right there in front of us, told in language so beautiful, so powerful, so unique, that we're left shaking our heads in amazement. Amazement at the originality of the language. Amazement at the poetry. And those are two distinctly different entities in the poems of Oluwasegun Romeo Oriogun.

*I see you in abandoned ships,
You walk through cabins that hold scented memories of lovers,*

*The ballroom where we danced before our clothes fell into water
Calls your name and you dance to strains of memories.*

Wreckage continues...

*We were dangerous memories of storms,
To survive we had to run from the wars in our hearts.*

And Wreckage ends with...

*This death of ships filled with flowers leaves me in tears,
This place of death and life mourns in silence
While two lovers with dead hearts
Stare at pictures that will leave pools of tears in their bones.*

It is a lovely and startling irony that we are left immersed in the poet's anguish and yet uplifted by his genius at the same time. I'm not sure how there can be a more satisfying experience when reading poetry.

It seems to me a staple of such delightful tasks as having been asked to pen this *Foreword* is to say something like "...over and over again," or "...in poem after poem." And often I think these devices are for form more than they are to actually tell us anything about the work. But in Oluwasegun Romeo Oriogun's work, *over and over again, in poem after poem*, I am astonished and delighted and wounded, at once.

There are not enough memories to keep the dead awake

*

*Deep in my heart a little house is burning,
There is no river nearby.*

*

*someone once said, when the sun is dead
we take light in small sips.
i do not know what it means,
i only saw stars
falling as butterflies.*

Over and over again. In poem after poem.

Oluwasegun Romeo Oriogun's poetry confronts what is haunting, what is debilitating, what is most precious, and presents it to us gloriously and with absolute honesty. And whether his primary subject is politics, spirituality, or the sensual (*all* are present in nearly every poem), he does so with such mastery, such originality, that on first reading it was difficult for me to not just forge ahead mining for the gems I knew were there. And while there are many from which to

choose, these lines from *Maps* represent a prime example of that marriage between the political and the spiritual, swaddled in Oriogun's sensuality.

*still men on broken streets will look for God in rolls of marijuana,
they will wait for the fumes to lift them through the dark,
for a light to burn the emptiness in them.*

Among recurring images of ships and water, stars and love, butterflies and tears there is the "idea" of home – home in the city, home in the country, homes on fire, homes that are castles, and, ultimately, homes in the heart....

*i've learnt to shape my mouth into a roof
and make home out of my bones.*

Yes, Oluwasegun Romeo Oriogun knows, perhaps better than many, the necessity of journeying roads rife with struggle, but what he teaches us – intentionally or not – is that, although we may well live in rooms...

...that fold their hands over my eyes

...it is also true, if we are willing to open our hearts, that...

*there is always someone calling your name softly,
open your ears and walk*

...and that, indeed...

*The sky will not fall at the end of the storm...
...the end we will be beautiful houses full of scars and stories.*

Not since I first read *Dancing in Odessa* by the young Russian poet, Ilya Kaminsky, have I been so taken by a book of poems. Oriogun tells us...

The doors of my house are pillars of dreams...

...and he most generously invites us in, asks us to sit, stay awhile, and partake of the gifts he offers. Among the many gifts in this book that he has blessed me with are these lines...

*i once held a baby girl to the sky
only to find the sun calling her God.*

Come in. Sit. Stay awhile. Oluwasegun Romeo Oriogun has gifts enough for all of us.

burnt men

a preacher said gay men are dead men.
i wake up to the smell of burnt men
in my veins,
i swear i do not know how they got there,
sometimes i see fire in the mouths
of young boys
and all i want to do
is kiss them to sleep.
it's not sunday
but men will write fire
on the skin of lovers
and call it God's word.
to kill a man
place a tyre over his head,
set it on fire
but ashes are not dead men,
they are bodies
flying to freedom.
even with chains
you can't stop a man
from loving another man.
the rains are here again,
bringing rivers to bodies on fire.
the preacher said gay men will burn in hell.
i swear my tongue burns
every time i say the word love,
i do not know
when men began to burn men
for saying the word love
but i know that a man in love
is so close to God,
he can hear his heart beat.

Wreckage

You will have to walk to abandoned beaches
To know about the death of places,
How silence can be beauty and also tears.
I see you in abandoned ships,
You walk through cabins that hold scented memories of lovers,
The ballroom where we danced before our clothes fell into water
Calls your name and you dance to strains of memories.
It is the road we must all pass through,
To live in the future we must live in the past.
Most days I wake up to find my clothes
Dancing into memories,
I miss you like childhood songs
But we danced too close to the fire,
Tearing soft words from our souls with tongues,
We were dangerous memories of storms,
To survive we had to run from the wars in our hearts.
My body leads me to abandoned ships
And I mourn for memories that are underwater,
Memories that left flowers to grow in fallen ships,
This death of ships filled with flowers leaves me in tears,
This place of death and life mourns in silence
While two lovers with dead hearts
Stare at pictures that will leave pools of tears in their bones.

Cities

Inside my body are places I've never been to,
There are houses my eyes have not seen,
Grief is the mother of voyages.
I'm travelling along roads of memories,
My soul stands beneath a hill and admires its beauty,
Down the road there are flowers painted brown by the dust of life,
Places are not always the same,
There are cities of grief,
There are cities of joy,
There are deserts filled with wandering bones,
My body is a country of diverse places.
The only sane place is a cemetery,
There are not enough memories to keep the dead awake,
There are places in my body filled with burning trees,
Some memories should be locked in cages.
The radio said last year died with his memories,
Someone should have told him, the dead always
Leave their memories in the hearts of the living.

A Sad Poem

This poem begins with you living in his mouth,
With you trying to hug his mouth like consonants,
You've always begged his teeth to hold his temper.
There's a city on fire inside your stomach,
Water couldn't locate your house.
I heard you live in the pit of his heart.
There's a dog dying in your eyes,
He runs through the lane in your heart.
You make excuses for the whip in his hands.
He said, he loves you the way a child loves a toy he wrestles with,
He said, the one he loves the most he hurts,
He said, women should be tamed,
He said, his father locked his mother in a cupboard for safe keeping.
You didn't see the cracks on his pavement,
You are beautiful like a broken antique,
Burning ships smell like you,
You are a broken mirror,
You are a house in an area prone to earthquake.
You are a poem filled with tears.

My mothers

I grew up with women who fought with the earth,
My mother lives in a root deep in the ground,
She fights for space in the soil with her fingers,
With tongue and breasts.
Her mother always wore a smudge of earth on her forehead.
They walk with thunder in their veins
And lightning in their hair,
My mothers smell of farms,
They smell of blood,
The picture of a malnourished child lives in their eyes
And they carry fire in their arms to burn the image in their eyes
My mothers are made of bones – fossils that have survived droughts and hunger,
At night, they climb up from the hole in their hearts and drown the soil with rivers,
My mother's cries are houses of fire,
I do not know where to hold,
I do not know where to embrace,
Deep in my heart a little house is burning,
There is no river nearby.

the origin of butterflies

give a man a piano
and his fingers will find music
but when grief lives in walls
what music will a mouth produce?
my hands are beginning to find space
deep in my room - say a butterfly
once lived in your throat,
that's to say you once held the winds under your skin,
that's to say you once rode bicycles naked
on dusty roads,
that's to say you once saw pregnant women
and thought of flowers
hiding behind laughter.
on the blank page of your life
what will be the next sentence?
write death, sadness, a little boy
singing about plath in a dark room.
last night i saw a butterfly
break darkness with the colours
of her wings, she rose gently
to the moon with songs
within her body.
give a man words
and he will build a castle full of darkness and light.
there is a place where
butterflies live - mother
said happiness can come
from sadness.
on the next page of my life
i wrote only one word. happiness.
i watched as it grew from my book
and broke the night

into fragments of stars.
someone once said, when the sun is dead
we take light in small sips.
i do not know what it means,
i only saw stars
falling as butterflies.

maps

there are no maps to heaven,
just like there are no maps to happiness,
still men on broken streets will look for God in rolls of marijuana,
they will wait for the fumes to lift them through the dark,
for a light to burn the emptiness in them.

it is for times like these that the heart was created,
to carry rain and not break,
to carry roots of the soul and live,
to dance to the storms running wild on tin roofs.

homes does not live in papers,
it lives where your dogs are at peace.
maps were created to stop you from wandering
but your heart must lead you home.

we trace our way back
through the lines in our palms.
it is only through names we will be saved,
say a litany for lost ones,
there are some lost to storms,
there are some that don't live in maps,
they live in songs.

there is always someone calling your name softly,
open your ears and walk.

freedom

birds will find home anywhere
it is the secret of life
to call somewhere strange home
to walk into houses and make nest out of nothing

there are some who call the road home
they will look for love in tree branches
they will talk deep into the night
waiting for a voice to rise from dusty lanes
they will learn that love comes from homes within the heart

i've learnt that people die before they live
burying themselves deep within their souls,
i've learnt that love starts with a small o
that wraps itself around the tongue
before it travels round the world,
i've learnt to shape my mouth into a roof
and make home out of my bones.

when you see me singing with birds
it is because i've learnt to carry my home
within me and sing songs
that will bring a ship filled with voices
into my shores.

Broken

i have not experienced death
but i know about dying,
how the body shuts itself
into silence and mourns in broken houses,
how its mouth is full of songs without wings.

i know about women
who are made up of broken glass,
with cuts on tongues
and silence.

if you ask: what is death?

i will tell you it is silence,
it is memories fighting to stay alive,
it is a woman crying into herself.

each battle was first fought in the head
before the hand picked a weapon,
every war is filled with broken women
and children.

footprints are maps
that lead to the heart,
when i looked at mine,
it was filled with the tears of my mother,
i was broken before i could fly,
there's a war inside me,
too many women have died
with seeds in their hearts,

there are children walking with shadows
for company.

my hands are bowls of blood,
i'm scared of tomorrow,
life should be butterflies,
not waiting for a teardrop
to fall down your face in the dark.
there's a woman dying next door.

survival

most days i'm like an empty ocean,
deep
& alone
in the dark corners
of my heart
but like waves
my soul
seeks land.

Bruised

bruised heads learn to walk slower,
they learn to live in sad songs,
to search for a mouth to echo their thoughts.
it is how my mother lived,
she searched every man for a reason to live,
she folded her dreams
into the hands of men who said her voice
is a lost little dog,
she followed them, hoping their whistle
will bring her home,
she waited for their fingers to rub care through her furs,
every man that left stole a part of her,
it is the way she was taught to love,
she didn't know humans can be cities with roads
that have lost their names,
she didn't know some cities are prisons
with beautiful eyes.
i was taught that love is a battle
that leaves one broken,
I was scared of songs that lead
to lonely houses,
scared of finding myself in a country
that doesn't hold my bones,
i closed my heart and set it on fire.

by drops

they say love starts in little drops,
so when your words came in whispers
and the songs in my head got slower
i thought our love was growing into waterfalls
i never knew you were leaving,
i never knew people
also leave in drops
until i met the silence in your heart
and the world became dark
and void

lost

father, the day you died
i felt something leave me,
it was silent like the death in your body,
i've tried finding it in God,
in the bottles you left behind,
in cigarettes and women
who talked like dried leaves
and left me more empty,
there's nothing that fills this hole in my body,
nothing that smells of sweat and blood.
everything i've held left questions
that pushed me deep into woods,
here, lost in a forest that holds only voices,
i walk, searching for a voice
that will bring light to my veins.
sometimes i travel to the past,
to look into your eyes turning away from the world
and try to find the exact moment
where one death led to the death of another.

northern star

- for sibbyl

you are soft dreams in a blue sky,
during storms we hide our fears in words,
there's always a song to fall into,
love is a throat filled with birds.

i've lodged in motels
where a woman is salvation for the night
and the clink of glasses a song
that consumes the hurt in our hearts.
the tongue of darkness is a broken tree
with branches that look like nests.
life calls this deception sadness,
you call it a prelude to light,
the waiting that tears the skin
into fragments of holiness.

you forged your smiles into memories
and hung them on the rainbow.
how did you know about angels that dwell in storms?
there's a sound that lives in your mouth,
the rod of Aaron lives in water,
you carry rivers in your mouth,
morning comes and my hands are filled with flowers,
some voices are lights
under dark skies.
there are fishes with scales full of dirt
and mouths filled with broken hooks of memories,
we were never made to be beautiful,
we were made to be light rains
falling after storms.

theory of dark rooms

i have lived in rooms
that fold their hands over my eyes,
dawn teases curtains with light
before returning to dreams.
the serpent is an early riser,
the voice of God comes after nakedness.

the doctor asked the reasons for my aloneness,
i folded my tongue into a dark room
and answered:

there are many reasons for dark rooms.

1. we were born to sadness.
2. the world covered our skin with dead faces.
3. our aloneness is a being that speaks to walls.
4. no one listened to the songs in our blood.
5. the songs we heard drowned in rivers of days.
6. we are waiting for someone.
7. love should come to desolate cities.
8. our stories are filled with lonely windows.
9. we have learnt to live in our world.
10. there are spaces in our bones where someone has gone missing.
11. there are eyes that hold only empty rooms.

we sit by windows, waiting for a voice,
for a familiar footstep, for a face
that will bring an end to the sky
that holds broken stories over our heads.

flowers

- *for farida*

each word must begin its quest from a mouth,
we break words at dawn to set them free,
every soul must be free to find home,
fireflies are lamps to happiness,
there's a place within your breast where flowers do not die.

before you find joy
find the end to sadness,
there's always a moment of awakening between them,
some voices walk on water,
an angel calms the sea with a harp on his tongue.

love is a city in the sky.
smiles cannot be hidden in a gourd.
our shadows are victims of loneliness,
when we come together the world becomes a rain of flowers.
kisses are doors to the garden of lotus. take my hand, let's knock.

remembrance

- *for boys killed in buni yadi*

in the middle of the night
a man bends shadow into water,
watch it float & drown
and call it revelation.
it is the way we hide grief,
waiting for a voice from heaven
to lead us across these deserts of hearts.
to survive we call the voice in our hearts blasphemy
- the conflicting fire of hurt & reason
burning in our hearts,
the silence that that sleeps
in the water behind the eyes.
there are lots of reasons not to forget the death of young bones,
how they screamed before their mouths drowned in bullets,
how they looked for hope in oceans.
carve a face out of the clouds,
put it in your heart,
we must not forget the voices that made the rain
talked to the earth in sad notes.
there's a land where people hold shadows
between their teeth
before walking into the desert,
we remember in different ways.

the beginning of things

because it's raining
you will hide behind walls
while a girl raises her skirt
to show you the space between her legs
where blood and history met.

you will walk deep into her wound
until you meet your grandmother in a long line of women
waiting for a man
to steal their voices
& give them silence.

i do not know where i heard the story
of a man chiseling the face of God
until he resembles him.
i once held a baby girl to the sky
only to find the sun calling her God.

two and four

deep in the night
two figures pray to the rain
under sheets
while their thighs
join a medley to water.
my mother's voice rises from the dark
to dance with a chorus of moans
before joining a man's shadow.
on the floor
four angels half-asleep
pluck her voice from the sky
and sink further into the earth
to meet those that mock songs of angels.

Image in the Mirror

Hollowness:

Memories travel down my spine,
My inside is filled with sand,
Inertia, and nothing.
I'm two words held apart,
Nothings lives in rivers damaged by oil,
Nothing lives in broken dreams.

Triage:

Bandages hold torn limbs,
My memory a mosaic of torn places,
My memory a poster child for dirges,
There's nothing here only pictures
That tell stories broken on a dusty road.
We leave some memories to die,
Resurrection is hell,
Death is bliss.

The Delta:

My body melts into photographs,
I live in the past with burning rivers
And dead boys,
Mother's song is a nightmare,
Memories are chariots on fire,
Death is bliss.

England, 1965:

Father dances to songs on fire
In a pub where men drink with sadness.
Sometimes I'm him,

Sometimes I'm empty,
Sometimes I don't know the owner of my hands.

Images & Mirrors:

I see myself in roads,
The pilgrim is always a visitor.
Sometimes I see the boy in my eyes,
Sometimes I see the wall,
There's nothing here,
Only memories that tell stories to boy awake at night
With a photo album full of strange people.

broken veins

there's something always missing
from the story of boys without fathers;
a way back into the body,
a voice before a door,
a man holding his name
before the wind stole his voice.
the river holds the beginning of things,
she heard the first voice
that made darkness run from light,
in her songs a boy maps his way back to the beginning of the story
before Kafka turned a man to a bug
and made him crawl on walls
with questions trailing his many legs
like the ones falling like hail stones
in my heart.
the river is filled with boys
swimming to places that hold their stories in fragments.
before a full moon
a boy clad in white breaks coconut over water
and ask for a way back
to the origin of the voice
that formed him through semen and blood,
he places the flesh in the river
and sends his broken vein
on a journey that will give him a new name.

heartbreak

if you could listen
to my silence
you would hear
dead leaves
seeking for doors
in the earth.

the poem
i wanted to write
left with your skin.

clean sheets
lead to dreams
of thighs
and wet shorts.

names live
between absent ribs,
call the night
on phones that hold sex and liquor
in shadows
of past dates.

i'm sorry
our papers only knew
poems of tears.
they call it a masterpiece:
to bleed in lines
and still see the sun
in shades of indigo.
a firefly dances

to the tune of flames:
i call it the dance of death.

my body
reeks of cigarettes and sex.
nights are little pills
of memories
stuck underneath
the tongue.

the sea cleans all
who comes
into her bosom.

the wind
is a bad lover.
she comes and goes
with her hair on fire
and her memories
locked between her teeth.

the sea cleans memories
with songs
from shells.
listen
and drown
in waters that hold
the bones of resurrected lovers.

Dead Memories

i

The rain is full of dreams, these dreams are not mine, they are my mother's vagina, two breasts, and a night of fear. I sit in her mouth to swallow her fears, to swallow the man who wants to inherit her from my father's dead body. He says a woman is a property, he says a woman is like the land, it must be passed down only to family, I sit quietly and wait to swallow his head. Alone at night, I walk along her heart filled with dead pictures, the child she carried before she died sings of lonely places. Memories are confused beings, they always get lost in dark places, I pull out strands of memories from her veins and see her chopping her knuckles into plates, survival is ugly. I see her, small animal running towards the borders of the city, running towards darkness. Count backwards till you are nothing, till you are in a place where women are hidden in bodies of broken birds. This dream is not mine; it wanders in graveyards where a woman is dead before she lives. This dream is my mother.

ii

Nights are cities filled with faces; they speak of the past, they live in our hearts. The hole in my heart is empty of nights. I walk into my past to fill my heart with faces that are asleep in graves. Listen, the winds are here again, they come with the past but like children of the sea they won't stay. I count to ten, listen to the doctor's advice, take my pills but the sea is always pregnant with waves that eat into beaches. Nights are here again, Ships are sailing to the unknown. I walk again to search for what I've lost.

iii

Memories in a coffin; mother's belly divided like the red sea to bring out the dead baby, I do not know his name, I can't remember his face. Some memories fly too close to the sun and get burnt; it is the way to forget, it is the only way some can live. My mother's coffin is brown, the color of my broken heart is brown. I can't remember if I cried when she was lowered into the earth, boys were taught to hide their tears in shadows. My memories are buried beneath her coffin, most nights I stand in the rain and sink with my tears into the ground.

iv

The doors of my house are pillars of dreams, last night I saw two graves in water, they had heads like my parents picture, I called one baba, the dream changed to a long road

and I stood between two cities, my tongue was divided into two and I became lost in the midst of tongues.

v

I've been on this road for a long time, my memories have grown beards. I'm scared of dying in a house alone with old pictures. The night is here again, I'm getting ready to walk into my dreams, to walk into my past to save a boy standing before a grave that won't answer his questions.

To a Fellow Traveler

*Come gently,
Do not divide the road,
There are others behind you, let them come.
Water is meant to be loved, not to be fought.
The road will show you tears of trees,
How they cover it with leaves and sunshine,
Learn, the earthworm will survive a hundred cuts,
Survival is ugly.
Learn, when we drink, we drown our demons for the night,
Only for the night,
Tomorrow a new demon waits behind the sun.
I shall remember you as dusty roads,
You shall remember me as torn clothes
Because names are certainty of being
And we who have suffered the curse of life are legion,
We are uncertain of our being,
We are nameless because our melancholy knows many names.
Listen to the songs of the wind,
Learn about birds and fire,
We are animals running from death.
Learn, silence is not survival.
It is death in little quantity.
Pick your tears, wear them, be beautiful,
You will find healing only in truth and in words.
The sky will not fall at the end of the storm,
Heal and walk naked with the rainbow,
At the end we will be beautiful houses full of scars and stories.*

Notes and Acknowledgments

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Oluwasegun Romeo Oriogun lives and writes in Ikare-Akoko, a sleepy town in Western Nigeria.

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Foreword:

John L. Stanizzi is author of *Ecstasy Among Ghosts*, *Sleepwalking*, *Dance Against the Wall*, *After the Bell*, and *Hallelujah Time!* His poems have appeared in *Prairie Schooner*, *The New York Quarterly*, *Rattle*, and others. He has read at many venues throughout Connecticut, and is an adjunct professor of English at Manchester Community College. <http://www.johnlstanizzi.com>