Woman of The Lake

Makuchi
Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi is a literary critic who also writes fiction under her pen name, Makuchi. She was born and raised in Cameroon and is currently Professor of English and Comparative Literature at North Carolina State University where she teaches courses in World and Post-colonial Literatures, Literary Theory, and Women's and Gender Studies. She is the author of *Gender in African Women's Writing: Identity, Sexuality, and Difference Your Madness, Not Mine: Stories of Cameroon* and *The Sacred Door and Other Stories: Cameroon Folktales of the Beba*. Her work has appeared in *Callaloo, Crab Orchard Review, The Toronto Review of Contemporary Writing Abroad, Theory*, and *African Gender Studies: A Reader*. She is currently working on a novel.

I was the first person to come out of the area. I was in Subum with my daughter who came to spend holidays with me.

It was evening [nine-thirty] of the twenty-first and we were sitting at the table reading, trying to help my small daughter with her studies. Then she went to bed and fell asleep; I also went to bed without noticing any sign of anything. We didn't have any sign of anything.

It was around midnight. I didn't even imagine the time when I started feeling some heat. I felt as if rain was threatening to fall, so I got up from bed, got a bucket and went outside, expecting that rain would fall. Then I went back to the house and went back to sleep. I was in a very deep sleep. I felt as if it were becoming hot, you know when it is starting to be the rainy season, the first rain, we used to get some heat; yes, I felt that feeling that very night.

Then I fell back to sleep; I heard some sound, something sounded like an airplane. I heard the sound. It went and bounced like this: boom. It was as if I was in a dream, I heard that noise as if I was dreaming . . .

All of a sudden, my skin became very hot and I perceived something making some dry smell. I could not speak. I became unconscious. I could not open my mouth because then I smelt something terrible and could not speak. I just closed my mouth and remained silent.

All of a sudden, I heard my daughter snoring in a terrible way, very abnormal. so I forced myself to stand up from the bed. I was already weak. I tried to see what was happening with my daughter and find out what was smelling in the house. I did not really know what the smell was. The smell was terrible. So just when I stood up, I fell. When crossing to my daughter's bed, in the middle of the floor, I collapsed and fell. I fell. I remained there. I didn't stand up. I was there till nine o'clock in the morning, Friday morning. I don't know whether I was sleeping, I don't really know. I was there until a friend of mine came and knocked at my door. The door was locked, he hit it very loudly, so much noise that he woke me. I heard it as if I was dreaming, I was surprised to see that my trousers were red, had some stains like honey: I saw some starch, some starchy mass on my body. My arms had some wounds . . . I had some marks here. I didn't really know how I got these wounds, where they came from. My face, too, had some wounds, these marks. So I managed to stand up, opened the door. I was unable to speak. I wanted to speak, my breath would not come out. I sat in silence for some time, my friend was talking outside, asking me a question, my voice would not come out. I was breathing abnormally . . . My daughter was already dead. I did not know she was dead. I didn't know that she was dead, I thought she was *still sleeping. When I drank that milk and water, it was around eleven-thirty. I fell back to sleep. I went into my daughter's bed, thinking that she was still sleeping. I slept until it was four-thirty in the afternoon, almost getting to evening, on Friday. I slept with my daughter there, not knowing that she was already dead. When I recovered, I really stood up at four-thirty, with my clear senses. I really felt as if I was dreaming. I never knew what was happening until I went outside.*

Everywhere was quiet, I managed to go over to my neighbors' houses. They were all dead. I tried my neighbors' doors, they were bolted inside, I shouted through the window, I saw them lying. The friend who came and knocked my door, I went to him and I saw him resting the same as I did. He was just lying on the bed, he told me that he could not stand up, he was just resting. Everybody was asleep, those who survived. Myself, what I did was I went back. I saw that my daughter was already dead. It was ten minutes to five o'clock in the evening. I felt that I had a little strength; I decided to leave because there had been no vehicle, since morning. The rest of my family was absent. So I decided to leave; I thought that, this thing must have happened all over and most of my family was in Wum. If I am dying, I will die on the way. I got my motorcycle; I rode. When I just started my motorcycle, I heard the sound [of the engine], it was quite normal.

I wore my dresses, and wore my cap, I tied on some mask in case of any smell, I will not feel it much. A friend whose father died left with me to Wum . . . about sixty kilometers. As I first arrived, I went to my boss . . . Then he took me in his car, because I could not ride from there . . . I was unable to walk, even to talk. My hands were all frozen, when I reached the hospital, my body was completely weak.

. . . As I rode through Subum, passing through Nyos, I didn't see any sign of any living thing; the only [other] person was that friend I carried.

Eyewitness Account of Joseph Nkwain, a survivor from Subum, conducted and translated by E. Shanklin on March 25, 1987

When Ngonda was a little girl, her father bought an HMV Deluxe Portable Gramophone. That made-in-Great-Britain sleek black box captured her imagination in ways that a later invention like the Sony Walkman never could. Nothing could equal the thrill of the Winding Handle. She would fight her brothers over the right to wind up that monster music box. She won every time. In exchange, she was barred from touching the velvet felt or placing a record on the turntable. Her father brought that Gramophone home with two 33⅓ rpm vinyl LP records and a pretty little box of two hundred needles. After that, he bought a new record every Christmas for the next three years. When Ngonda broke one of the records, it caused a major kerfuffle in the household. Her father did not speak to her for an entire week. She remembers that a scratch, any scratch, on any of the records always put her father in a foul mood. Sometimes, he looked as sad as the white dog with the floppy ears sitting on his hinnies, staring at who knows what. She'd ask her father what that stupid dog was thinking and her father would tell her the dog was imitating his master's voice; that he was learning to woof as gallantly as his master. Ngonda didn't believe him. She was sure that silly dog couldn't sing a thing. But the thought made her laugh, and run tiny fingers over the sad-looking white dog forced to live out its life on the lid of a box. Her father said the dog wasn't sad at all; that its name was Nipper. Ngonda thought about it and renamed the dog, Alente, meaning a fool; one who is lazy; one who holds forth big ideas they themselves never pursue;

one who regrets. If Alente could really sing, what would he sing about? She made up lullabies they could both sing together. When she fell out of sorts with her siblings, she'd tiptoe to the HMV, raise the lid, and spill the beans to Alente. Thus began a close friendship between a little African girl and a sad-looking white dog. And then she fell in love with the big scratch on one of the records. Each time the needle got stuck on the crack, rotating black circles would replicate a plaintive wail that filled the house. Ngonda could never understand why the keening noise that so jangled her father's nerves had an intoxicating hold over her. The skip-screech-screech-screech-skip melody seemed to possess tentacles that reached out and pulled her to the gramophone. She would listen to that scratchy tune, put her fingers to her lips and giggle with abandon. She'd run out of the parlour if and when she was lucky enough to hear her father's approaching footsteps. That black box now sits on the wicker cupboard in her bedroom. Every now and then she'd flip open the lid, but Joseph Nkwain's voice would echo from Alente's mouth instead.

It's been a decade, going on two and yet, after all these years, Joseph Nkwain's voice still reverberates in her head like the HMV of her childhood. Some days, she gets out of bed and her lips would be moving word for word to his eyewitness testimony. She would hear those words bouncing off the walls of her room as clear as daylight. She would open the HMV and run her fingers along the now faded coat of her childhood friend. On other days, Joseph's voice torments her dreams, mocking her slumber, a far cry from the days when His Master's Voice amused a little girl to no end. Ngonda has come to resent those days when she ritualistically raises the lid of the HMV and flirts with the desire to bury and forget Joseph. She is now convinced that remembering requires too much personal effort; remembering levies a price she can no longer afford.

For far too long, she cloaked herself with the anguish in Joseph's voice and remained locked in the folds of mist rolling down the hills, blanketing the valleys, and silently hugging the landscape in a lethal embrace. The heavens above had thundered over their sleepy hamlets. Her eardrums had strained and popped, leaving a hole in the middle of her head. Some say the loud bang heralded the event that had been prophesied long before her father, long before her grandfather or great-grandfather was born. She knew of the woman-with-no-name about whom countless stories abound; the woman-with-no-name who had become legend.

Sometimes, Ngonda found a rare pleasure in retelling some of the many anecdotes her people relate about this creature. She, whom legend holds, defied the rule of the land. It is said that she went to her farm to harvest food on a nshialah—the day when the land rests. When the news of her censure by bekwop spread throughout the village, she declared to anyone willing to listen that the elders lacked foresight. That they were wrong to punish an act that sustained them, nourished their children and assured their immortality. She ridiculed their verdict, insisting she had done her duty. A wife's duty. A mother's duty. But the bekwop thought otherwise. They could not tolerate this one-woman crusade against a valued tradition. Their punishment was swift and severe.

Legend also tells of the woman whose imprisonment was ordained when she refused to be offered to the gods. The people sought to express their gratitude to the gods for giving them the lake, but the woman rejected the honour so bestowed. She vanished from sight for eight days and for eight days the gods thundered in the skies finding release when they blew up her lair leaving debris for miles around. The people acknowledged that they indeed deserved comminating. Only then did the gods retreat, but in their benevolence they left behind a lake. The people understood this gift as a token of their love for they had been chastised as only a parent would their child. It was no surprise that the gods occasionally went away on long journeys of exploration, but were known to return and rumble in the lake for days, burning the water so hot it cooked fishes, crabs, and tadpoles until a maiden's blood was offered in appeasement. And so, another version has it, that the woman-with-no-name had rebuffed this honour, insisting the gods preferred the blood of a firstborn male child. Again, the bekwop disagreed. They were the elders; they were the king-makers. They were the law. They planted gilded arrow-heads into the earth until their wood staffs quivered; they wielded the power of the sacred ngwali and bludgeoned her into the darkness of the abyss. One woman. So many faces.

People would later say that for too long, no one had paid heed to the lament of the woman imprisoned for centuries at the bottom of the lake. That grove was and always will be the indubitable throne kings, and chiefs ascend in final tranquillity as anointed ancestral Watchdogs. She was trapped there with them for half a millennium, and she had waited patiently to make her move. The woman-with-no-name clawed her way: inch, by, inch, hour by hour, day by day, week by week, month by month, year by year, decade by decade, century by century, and as dusk fell on August 21, 1986, she rose like the phoenix funnelling steam in a million tiny bubbles, soaring to the surface where she broke free, bringing her long tortuous journey to an end; her revenge was sweet and sticky like honey in a baby's throat. Before her strength fizzled, she had spread her arms, gathering the people into the folds of her warmth where they fell asleep, for eternity.

They converged. Spewed from the skies and regurgitated on the muddy shores of Lake Nyos like partially digested meat. They came. Italians. French. Japanese. Americans. Swedes. Brits. Nigerians. Belgians. Germans. Reputable. Renowned. Eminent. Scientists. They brought their superior knowledge confident that the backwoods of a remote African village would surrender its secrets and open new frontiers to science. They brought their superior equipment: inflatable boats, tents, coolers, monitoring machines, raft-building supplies, four-wheel-drive vehicles. Some in their haste had rushed to the scene without adequately arming themselves to withstand the conditions of the rainy season, but they brought an abundance of excitement for new discoveries, braving impracticable roads; a gift from the rain gods. Like their forebears of centuries past, they held their trepidation in check and exuded that same aplomb, that same air of ownership. These sons and daughters, descendants of hitherto explorers, rode the murky waves of the lake, congratulating themselves on new theories while sharing the booty. A handful of survivors stared in stunned, respectful silence. Well-wishers from neighbouring villages stared at the scavengers riding the waves, collecting specimens and data to their hearts' desire. Those who had once fished these waters to feed and clothe their loved ones watched as the lake was taken over, and they wondered. Those who had farmed the surrounding hills; whose crops listened to the whispers of the lake by night and sang its praises by day watched, and wondered. They wondered what will happen to the woman of the lake who was being carted away, jar by jar. The nation's airwaves deliberated along with them. How did these hunters find out so quickly? The two local scientists had barely reached the crest of the hill when tales about outsiders overshadowed their trauma. How did foreigners get to Nyos before their own relatives found out their nakedness had been laid bare by the woman of the lake?

The eminent scientists dismissed her with polite Odontol smiles. They gently but firmly ushered away local intruders, weary of performing their tasks under the prying gaze of nosy onlookers bent on undermining scientific facts with myths about a centuries-old woman's revenge. Science and the world stood to benefit from their effort. Science and the world stood to gain from this goldmine. So many crater lakes in this little corner of the earth. Only three of its kind known to exist in the entire world: two in this West African nation; the other, Lake Kivu, nestled in the Great Rift Valley, recognised as the world's gassiest and the most dangerous. Never had the scientific world seen such an occurrence. Well, not quite. It had happened before, two years earlier at another lake, with a lot fewer casualties. A simple wake up call. An incident that went largely unnoticed. Now this. A scientist's dream, in the middle of nowhere. When it happened on August 15, 1984, a few dozen kilometres away at Monoun, the few scientists to take notice couldn't believe their luck. But this time, it was historic, for the drama that awaited them was far beyond anything they could have imagined. They marvelled at the veracity with which the lake had risen above the clouds and spread its wings around the world in a gigantic puff of lethal gas. Hundreds gassed in Cameroon Lake Disaster; Cameroon's Lake of Death; The World's Most Deadly Bubble; Just When You Thought it was Safe to go Back in the Water; Bubbling Lake of Death; Cameroon's Killer Lakes; Monster in Lake Comes Alive; Mysteries of the Deep; Cameroon's Valley of Death; There May be More than One Way to Make a Volcanic Lake a Killer—the headlines screamed; Weird Science in Strange Places—a documentary exalted. The scientific world was titillated. Stimulated. Stumped. They were here to unlock the doors to poisonous gas chambers. They had to reach back, way back, pronouncing similarities between the devastation here and Turkey's Pamukkale Temple of Apollo. Apollo, with its deadly reputation from antiquity, ancient gateway to the Underworld. Apollo, whose instant vapours of death are cloaked in mystery. Apollo and Nyos mentioned in the same breath, who would have thought? Two years earlier, Monoun had claimed some thirty-seven or so lives. That a crater lake had actually burped deadly gas that killed people was singular. The poor peasants were casualties of Mother Nature. Pure bad luck, news reports concluded. But this time, the eminent scientists fought, or rather, disagreed over what had caused this new African catastrophe. They bit their nails; they wagged fingers, drawing battle lines in the mud between personalities and nationalities, erecting two bitterly opposing camps. There was the one-billion-cubic-metres-of-lethal-carbon-dioxide-gas-expelled-into-the-air theory vs. the volcanic-eruption theory. The woman of the lake was pure folklore, a comfort for less sophisticated minds. How else could the victims deal with such devastation? And while men of science bickered and sometimes compared notes, the people observed in silence and mourned. They staggered through muted grief like bats in the daylight and the scientists stumbled through confusing eyewitness accounts. It was their duty to reconcile what they heard with what they purported really happened that Thursday night.

One side argued that the boom survivors heard indicated the lake had erupted; the yellow debris floating on the lake indicated the presence of sulphur; the vivid colours and