

Caine Prize Stories 2009:
Shortlist

Waiting

EC Osondu

MY NAME IS ORLANDO ZAKI. *Orlando* is taken from Orlando, Florida, which is what is written on the t-shirt given to me by the Red Cross. *Zaki* is the name of the town where I was found and from which I was brought to this refugee camp. My friends in the camp are known by the inscriptions written on their t-shirts. *Acapulco* wears a t-shirt with the inscription, *Acapulco*. *Sexy's* t-shirt has the inscription *Tell Me I'm Sexy*. *Paris's* t-shirt says *See Paris And Die*. When she is coming toward me, I close my eyes because I don't want to die.

Even when one gets a new t-shirt, your old name stays with you. *Paris* just got a new t-shirt that says *Ask Me About Jesus*, but we still call her *Paris* and we are not asking her about anybody. There was a girl in the camp once whose t-shirt said *Got Milk?* She threw the t-shirt away because some of the boys in the camp were always pressing her breasts forcefully to see if they had milk. You cannot know what will be written on your t-shirt. We struggle and fight for them and count ourselves lucky that we get anything at all. Take *Lousy*, for instance; his t-shirt says *My Dad Went To Yellowstone And Got Me This Lousy T-shirt*. He cannot fight, so he's not been able to get another one and has been wearing the same t-shirt since he came to the camp. Though what is written on it is now faded, the name has stuck. Some people are lucky: *London* had a t-shirt that said *London* and is now in *London*. He's been adopted by a family over there. Maybe I will find a family in *Orlando, Florida* that will adopt me.

Sister Nora is the one who told me to start writing this book, she says *the best way to forget is to remember and the best way to remember is to forget*. That is the way *Sister Nora* talks, in a roundabout way. I think because she is a Reverend Sister she likes to speak in parables like *Jesus*. She is the one who has been giving me books to read. She says I have a gift for telling stories. This is why she thinks I will become a writer one day.

The first book she gave me to read was *Waiting For Godot*. She says the people in the book are waiting for *God* to come and help them. Here in the camp, we wait and wait and then wait some more. It is the only thing we do. We wait for the food

trucks to come and then we form a straight line and then we wait a few minutes for the line to scatter, then we wait for the fight to begin, and then we fight and struggle and bite and kick and curse and tear and grab and run. And then we begin to watch the road and wait to see if the water trucks are coming, we watch for the dust trail, and then we go and fetch our containers and start waiting and then the trucks come and the first few containers are filled and the fight and struggle and tearing and scratching begin because someone has whispered to someone that the water tanker only has little water in it. That is, if we are lucky and the water tanker comes; oftentimes, we just bring out our containers and start waiting and praying for rain to fall.

Today we are waiting for the photographer to come and take our pictures. It is these pictures that the Red Cross people send to their people abroad who show them to different people in foreign countries and, after looking at them, the foreign families will choose those they like to come and live with them. This is the third week we have been waiting for the photographer, but he has to pass through the war zone so he may not even make it today. After taking the photographs, we have to wait for him to print it and bring it back. We then give it to the Red Cross people and start waiting for a response from abroad.

I want to go and join my friend under the only tree still standing in the camp. Acapulco is raising a handful of red dust into the air to test for breeze; the air is stagnant and the red earth falls back in a straight line.

"Orlando, do you think the photographer will come today?" he asks.

"Maybe he will come."

"Do you think an American family will adopt me?"

"Maybe, if you are lucky."

"Will they find a cure for my bedwetting?"

"There is a tablet for every sickness in America."

"I am not sick, I only wet myself in my sleep because I always dream that I am urinating outside and then I wake up and my knickers are wet because it was only a dream, but the piss is real."

"The same dream every night?"

"Yes."

"Do you think that if I go to America, my parents will hear about me and write to me and I will write to them and tell my new family to let them come over and join me?"

"When the war ends, your parents will find you."

"When will the war end?"

"I don't know, but it will end soon."

"If the war will end soon, why are the Red Cross people sending us to

America?"

"Because they don't want us to join the Youth Brigade and shoot and kill and rape and loot and burn and steal and destroy and fight to the finish and die and not go to school."

This was why Acapulco was always sitting alone under the tree: because he always asked a lot of questions. Sister Nora says it is good to ask questions, that if you ask questions you will never get lost. Acapulco begins to throw the sand once more, testing for breeze. Pus is coming out of his ears and this gives him the smell of an egg that is a little rotten. This was another reason people kept away from him. A fly is buzzing around his ear; he ignores it for some time and at the exact moment the fly is about to perch, he waves it away furiously.

"I wish I had a dog," he said.

"What do you want to do with the dog?"

"I will pose with the dog in my photograph that they are sending to America because white people love dogs."

"But they also like people."

"Yes, but they like people who like dogs."

"London did not take a picture with a dog."

"Yes, London is now in London."

"Maybe you will soon be in Acapulco," I said laughing.

"Where is Acapulco?"

"They have a big ocean there, it is blue and beautiful."

"I don't like the ocean, I don't know how to swim, I want to go to America."

"Everyone in America knows how to swim; all the houses have swimming pools."

"I will like to swim in a swimming pool, not the ocean. I hear swimming pool water is sweet and clean and blue and is good for the skin."

We are silent. We can hear the sound of the aluminium sheets with which the houses are built. They make an angry noise like pin-sized bullets when going off. The houses built with tarpaulin and plastic sheets are fluttering in the breeze like a thousand plastic kites going off. Acapulco raises a handful of dust in the air. The breeze carries it away. Some of it blows into our faces and Acapulco smiles.

"God is not asleep," he says. I say nothing.

"There used to be dogs here in the camp." He had been in the camp before me. He is one of the oldest people in the camp.

There were lots of black dogs. They were our friends, they were our protectors. Even though food was scarce, the dogs never went hungry. The women would call them whenever a child squatted down to shit and the dogs would come running. They would wait for the child to finish and lick the child's buttocks clean before

they ate the shit. People threw them scraps of food. The dogs were useful in other ways too. In those days, the enemy still used to raid the camp frequently. We would bury ourselves in a hole and the dogs would gather leaves and other stuff and spread it atop the hole where we hid. The enemy would pass by the hole and not know we were hiding there.

But there was a time the Red Cross people could not bring food to the camp for two weeks because the enemy would not let their plane land. We were so hungry we killed a few of the dogs and used them to make pepper-soup. A few days later, the Red Cross people were let through and food came. The dogs were a bit wary, but they seemed to understand it was not our fault.

And then, for the second time, there was no food for a very long time. We were only able to catch some of the dogs this time. Some of them ran away as we approached, but we still caught some and cooked and ate them. After that we did not see the dogs again; the ones that ran away kept off. One day, a little child was squatting and having a shit. When the mother looked up, half a dozen of the dogs that had disappeared emerged from nowhere and attacked the little child. While the mother screamed, they tore the child to pieces and fled with parts of the child's body dangling between their jaws. Some of the men began to lay ambush for the dogs and killed a few of them. They say the dogs had become as tough as lions. We don't see the dogs any more. People say it is the war.

I decided I was going to ask Sister Nora. As if reading my mind, Acapulco told me not to mention it to anyone. He said people in the camp did not like talking about the dogs.

"I am not sure the photographer will still come today," I said.

"Sometimes I think there is a bullet lodged in my brain," Acapulco said.

"If you had a bullet in your brain, you would be dead."

"It went in through my bad ear. I hear explosions in my head, bullets popping, voices screaming, *banza, banza bastard, come out we will drink your blood today*, and then I smell carbide, gun-smoke, burning thatch. I don't like smelling smoke from fires when the women are cooking with firewood; it makes the bullets in my brain begin to go off."

"You will be fine when you get to America. They don't cook with firewood; they use electricity."

"You know everything, Zaki. How do you know all these things though you have never been to these places?"

"I read a lot of books, books contain a lot of information, sometimes they tell stories too," I say.

"I don't like books without pictures; I like books with big, beautiful, colourful pictures."

“Not all books have pictures. Only books for children have pictures.”

“I am tired of taking pictures and sending them abroad to families that don’t want me, almost all the people I came to the camp with have found families and are now living abroad. One of my friends sent me a letter from a place called Dakota. Why have no family adopted me? Do you think they don’t like my face?”

“It is luck; you have not found your luck yet.”

“Sometimes I want to join the Youth Brigade but I am afraid; they say they give them *we-we* to smoke and they drink blood and swear an oath to have no mercy on any soul, including their parents.”

“Sister Nora will be angry with you if she hears you talking like that. You know she is doing her best for us, and the Red Cross people too, they are trying to get a family for you.”

“That place called Dakota must be full of rocks.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Just from the way it sounds, like many giant pieces of rock falling on each other at once.”

“I’d like to go to that place with angels.”

“You mean Los Angeles.”

“They killed most of my people who could not pronounce the name of the rebel leader properly, they said we could not say *Tsofo*, we kept saying *Tofo* and they kept shooting us. My friend here in the camp taught me to say *Tsofo*, he said I should say it like there is sand in my mouth. Like there is gravel on my tongue. Now I can say it either way.”

“That’s good. When you get to America, you will learn to speak like them. You will try to swallow your tongue with every word, you will say *larer, berrer, merre, ferre, herrer*.”

“We should go. It is getting to lunch time.”

“I don’t have the power to fight. Whenever it is time for food, I get scared. If only my mother was here, then I would not be *Displaced*. She would be cooking for me; I wouldn’t have to fight to eat all the time.”

We both looked up at the smoke curling upwards from shacks where some of the women were cooking *dawa*. You could tell the people that had mothers because smoke always rose from their shacks in the afternoon. I wondered if Acapulco and I were yet to find people to adopt us because we were displaced and did not have families. Most of the people that have gone abroad are people with families. I did not mention this to Acapulco; I did not want him to start thinking of his parents who could not say *Tsofo*. I had once heard someone in the camp say that if God wanted us to say *Tsofo* he would have given us tongues that could say *Tsofo*.

“Come with me, I will help you fight for food,” I say to Acapulco.

“You don’t need to fight, Orlando. All the other kids respect you, they say you are not afraid of anybody or anything and they say Sister Nora likes you and they say you have a book where you record all the bad, bad, things that people do and you give it to Sister Nora to read and when you are both reading the book both of you will be shaking your heads and laughing like *amariya* and *ango*, like husband and wife.”

We stood up and started walking towards the corrugated-sheet shack where we got our lunch. I could smell the *dawa*, it was always the same *dawa*, and the same green-bottle flies and the same bent and half-crumpled aluminium plates and yet we still fought over it.

Kimono saw me first and began to call out to me, he was soon joined by Aruba and Jerusalem and Lousy and I’m Loving It and Majorca and the rest. Chief Cook was standing in front of the plates of *dawa* and green soup. She had that look on her face, the face of a man about to witness two beautiful women disgrace themselves by fighting and stripping themselves naked over him. She wagged her finger at us and said: No fighting today, boys. That was the signal we needed to go at it; we dived. *Dawa* and soup were spilling on the floor. Some tried to grab some into their mouth as they fought to grab a plate in case they did not get anything to eat at the end of the fight. I grabbed a lump of *dawa* and tossed it to Acapulco and made for a plate of soup but as my fingers grabbed it, Lousy kicked it away and the soup poured on the floor. He laughed his crazy hyena laugh and hissed saying: the leper may not know how to milk a cow, but he sure knows how to spill the milk in the pail. Chief Cook kept screaming, hey no fighting, one by one, form a line, the *dawa* is enough to go round. I managed to grab a half-spilled plate of soup and began to weave my way out as I signalled to Acapulco to head out. We squatted behind the food shack and began dipping our fingers into the food, driving away large flies with our free hand. We had two hard lumps of *dawa* and very little soup. I ate a few handfuls and wiped my hands on my shorts, leaving the rest for Acapulco. He was having a hard time driving away the flies from his bad ear and from the plate of food, and he thanked me with his eyes.

I remembered a book Sister Nora once gave me to read about a poor boy living in England in the olden days who asked for more from his chief cook. From the picture of the boy in the book, he did not look so poor to me. The boys in the book all wore coats and caps and they were even served. We had to fight, and if you asked the chief cook for more, she would point at the lumps of *dawa* and the spilled soup on the floor and say we loved to waste food. I once spoke to Sister Nora about the food and fights but she said she did not want to get involved. It was the first time I had seen her refuse to find a solution to any problem. She

explained that she did not work for the Red Cross and was their guest like me.

I was wondering how to get away from Acapulco. I needed some time alone but I did not want to hurt his feelings. I told him to take the plates back to the food shack. We did not need to wash them because we had already licked them clean with our tongues.

As Acapulco walked away to the food shack with the plates, I slipped away quietly.

EC Osondu was born in Nigeria. He worked as an advertising copywriter for many years before moving to New York to attend Syracuse University, where he gained an MFA for Creative Writing and is now a Fellow. He has won the Nirelle Galson Prize for Fiction and was also shortlisted for the 2007 Caine Prize.