

Noun

Men have been in the business
of naming things since Adam
named the animals in the garden.
We are men, and on this basis
alone our lord agrees with whatever
we christen a thing. Noah called
the rainbow a promise that the world
will never again be destroyed by water.
Like he knew he wouldn't be available
that summer afternoon when the tsunami
ended many worlds. It is arguable
that our lord was never in accord
with us, but it would mean we are
not his mouthpiece and that everything
we have said is untrue. But we are men,
and on that basis alone we cannot be wrong.
Our species cannot always come up
with new names for creations,
and this is where we fail. Not that
our lord minds. The man whose
invention lifts loads to unbelievable
heights called it a crane. After watching
a herd of wrens circle the dome of
a cathedral, another man named
his tool a wrench. My father,
thinking I will never leave him
named me after a spring. If the bird
at the peak of its flight cannot reach
the top of the crane, it is pressured
or burned from the failure
of not living up to its name. As I am.

Refuge Sonnets

The men who travelled along the Niger River from the Guinea highlands took from the Tuaregs what they were not given. They followed the water to its delta where it forked into the Atlantic with shiploads of crowns, coral beads, and the spoils from Benin, the empire they felled. Born many years later to the subdued tribe my father handed me shame. It was his father's and the fathers before him. Everywhere I went, war stories welcomed me. I step into the new world and people stare at me. They want to ask how I arrived here, and if it's true I brought desert sand with me, but they are afraid I don't speak clearly or they are afraid I'll ask the same of them. "Who is your father? What did he do?" So, we avoid each other. I live in their imagination as the wild man who has crossed the Sahara to take from their bequeathal. This might be why they drown me, even if they don't, I'll still avoid water.

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For David Oluwale

I was shrouding the dead by the water where they drowned him.
It must have been a dream since I knew what I was doing until
my father's voice reached me, telling me to let the water take him.
Sometimes I believe I'm in a dream until a cop approaches me
in a grocery store with his gun drawn. Glory to the days I don't die.
I think about the Lagos that I may never see again where the dead
migrant might have arrived without welcome. I used to like to put
my feet in the water at the shore. It used to soothe me to think
whatever washed off my skin will make it to the West African coast.
Lord, I am on my knees tonight. Hoping my voice cuts through the noise
of planes landing in San Francisco. There's more of us arriving in London,
New York, and Paris with familiar hunger. They say the earth is red
because it is scorched but I know it's the blood from all the wars.
Like how the expats who visited Freetown said it was difficult
to watch the killings but didn't say they kept the diamonds.

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They made their wealth from killings and diamonds. I know I am here but I don't belong when people pretend to reference the land when they say they've rescued migrants from dirt. When I object, they reach for their purses before they shove their fists in my mouth. Then they say let's talk Kigali and Monrovia. Once, I met a man in the street who said he just wanted to be proud of his dark skin. For him I brought Mansa Musa back to life. But the trolleys of gold didn't relieve him. That was a year after I kissed a woman who is now dead because she spoke eloquent Bambara. She asked if I wanted her tongue and all its stories. Everywhere we went they called our accents Ghanaian and were wrong every time. I don't recall the woman's words but the charge of her voice, elegant as the musings of a poet. I can wind the clock back to summer in Bamako where our skins fitted among bodies marching at a rally. Fela Kuti thumping from the speakers, repeatedly saying "this is why Black men cry."

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I know Black Africans too broken to cry or speak. I lie to men who seem to need my help with their affairs. Take the man on the street corner who asked if I date outside my ethnicity. I can't tell why I lied since I consider myself cosmopolitan. Perhaps he suspected I'm as lost as he is. There is a Gambian I ran into who was celebrating the Independence Day of a nation he was exiled from—until I ruined it when I mentioned our countries are mapped by colonial instincts. One time I lost my keys, and it didn't hurt since I already lost my country. I don't want these words to mean I'm struggling. For many years, I spoke loudly over people who called me a migrant. "I'm an international student," I say, yet I'm unable to split the difference. What I don't mention is the plot to remain here, my mother over a phone saying there's nothing for me to return to. My father crooning beside her "tell him to send some dollars, the exchange rate is good."

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He sends dollars home since the exchange rate is good. His father, an unpaid professor in a West African country calls him a horse, which would have been funny if he doesn't work too hard. He has worked since his first job at the convenience store at seven. Now, you might have seen him in your neighborhood, curbing mining on weeknights. He avoids talking about money, politics, and power, out of fear that he might sound needful, which may cause you to despise him or have him removed. It is American to disdain the poor. But he doesn't say this except on phone calls to friends back home who think he's stingy with his time. He spends his leisure hours making love over videocall to his lover a thousand miles across the sea. She often asks him to come home because there's violence against people seeking refuge everywhere in the world. He stays anyway and tells her it's not a bad life.

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For Olasupo Tolase

He stays anyway because he paid \$65 for a bad life and a marriage license in Plainfield. At the ceremony, he thought he saw his lover in the room, crying in the corner. He rubs his eyes and she's a waiter who has been yelled at over broken chinaware. He's afraid his wife isn't smiling wide enough for this pretense to fool an immigration officer who will look at the photos for evidence of love before adjudicating his permanent residency application. What he wants is to don a suit and be his grandfather whose eyes continue to follow him many years after he died in his sleep. His old hands holding on to themselves as if excited to be travelling again as he did in his youth.