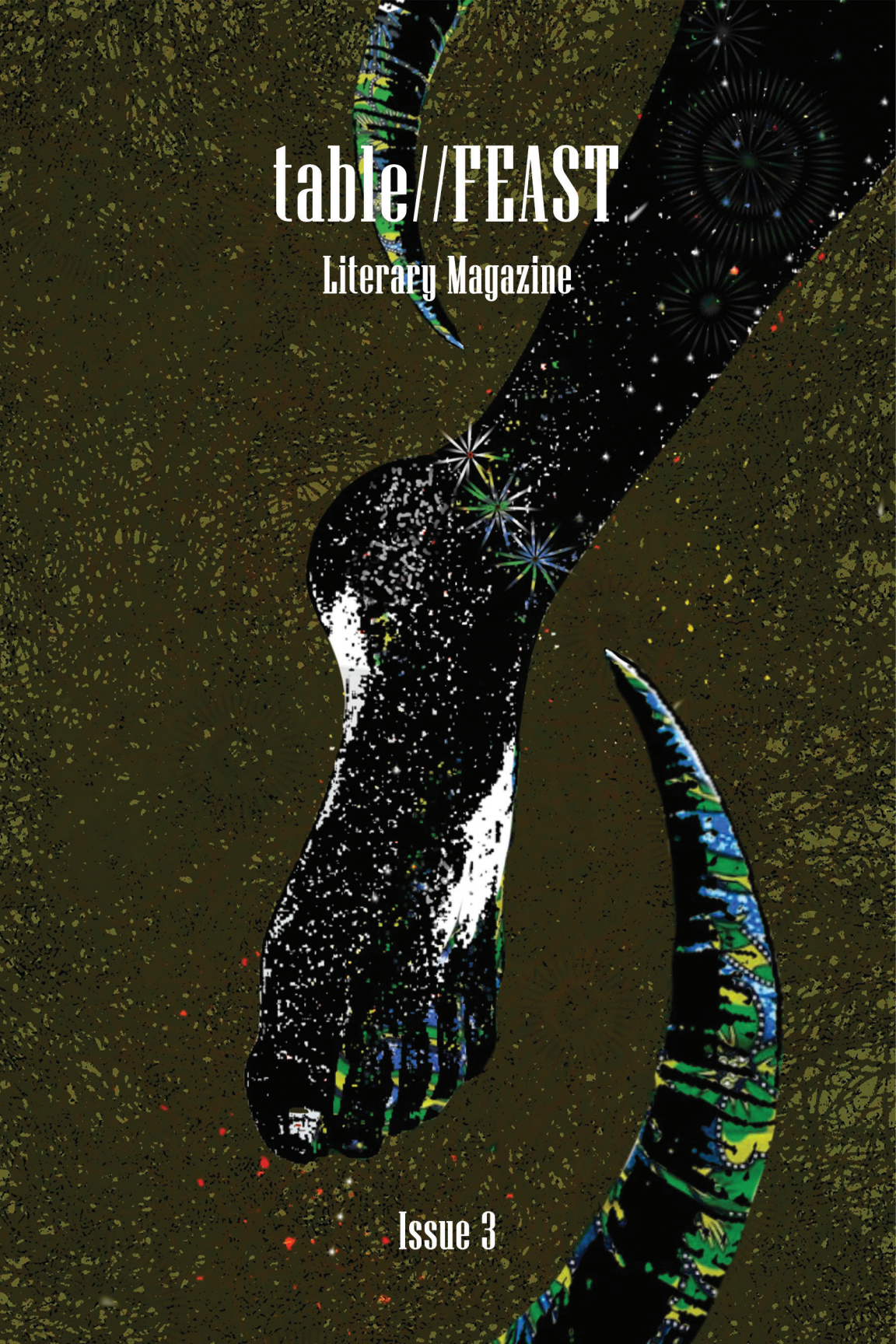
table//FEAST
Literary Magazine
Issue 3

Njideka

Kasimma

Our humanity is contingent on the humanity of our fellows. No person or group can be human alone. We rise above the animal together, or not at all. If we learned that lesson even this late in the day, we would have taken a truly millennial step forward. (Achebe, Chinua. *The Education of a British-Protected Child*. Knopf, 2009)

I was a curious child, am a curious adult. I was always the one tugging at elders' lappas, trousers, asking this, asking that, telling them to foro anyi ifo, tell us stories. Most of the time, my questions were met with rebuke such as, *you ask too many questions*; *this your why-why-why will put you in trouble*. In my childhood innocence, I'd look the adult in the eyes, and ask why. A knock on my head was what followed. But I was not merely trying to add a fourth "why" to their three-why-caution. I was only curious as to how "why" could get me in trouble. So, to save my head, I started asking "how" instead of "why". The method is different; the destination is the same.

Once, on our twelve-hour drive back to Jos from Achina, our hometown, I asked where my mother's parents were. I was either ten years old or younger. My father said they were dead. I wouldn't leave it at that. I asked, "When did they die?" My father said my mother's mother died long before her husband. "How did they die?" I asked. And my mother snapped, "Ị na-ajụka! You ask too many questions!" I used to think she ended conversations because she liked silence, but when I grew up, I realized that it was her way of protecting herself from past suffering. My father, on the other hand, is always eager to answer questions. You ask him a hundred questions; he will answer all and then ask you one. Even to my children, he answers questions. My daughter once told me that she likes Grandpa because he is always answering questions. I learned from him not to ever stifle my children's curiosity. At that moment, in the car, when my mother ended the conversation, my father did not. He said the war took my mother's father. He was a soldier. He caught a bullet around his left eye. He lived with the swollen eye that way for many years before it finally offed him.

I was a teenager when my mother told us that yes, her father fought in the war, but he was also a dibia. By now I knew it was the Biafran War, but

I did not know anything else because nobody liked to talk about it, and no one taught it in schools. Because my mother is so quiet, I learned to read her body language very well. The voice with which she told us about her father was the same kind of compassionate voice she poured on us when we were ill. And the way she rolled her eyes up and smiled, I deduced she was seeing the face of a man of whom she was so proud. That was why her story stuck in my head; I knew it was important. He was a powerful man, she said. His name was Joshua. His funeral was a spectacle. Masquerades came from very far away towns like Arọndizuọgụ, carrying baskets on their heads that dripped of blood. She could not look at the masquerades because she's a woman and if caught, they'd cut her head and add it to the basket. "So, in the baskets were human heads?" I asked. "How am I supposed to know?" she snapped. "You better keep quiet let me tell you this story before I change my mind."

It is stale news that slavery and colonization dragged Africa's development backward. The time Africans could have used to explore this earth and learn new things about survival, we used that time going to the Western world (in ships and chains) to till their soil or tilling our own soil to fatten their GDP. The method is different; the destination is the same. The colonizers replaced the stories we know of ourselves with the ones they told of us. They replaced our names and languages and traditions and religions with theirs. And when they finally left, m bụ ndi Britain, they did not leave us alone. They had to meddle in our affairs. Had the Brits simply gone after the 1st of October, 1960, there might have been no Biafran War. Had they not interfered in that war, it would not have lasted that long. Today, Nigeria is still plagued by the effects of colonization and the Biafran War. The cries of those who died in the war are so deafening; they rise above any sound of reasoning. That is why Nigerians, in fact Africans, are fleeing, risking their lives at sea, to go to the land of the people who once called them "British-protected persons." And now, the new story is Illegal Immigration. But, of course! Isi kote ebu, ọ gbaa ya. That bee is stinging us now. Us in this context is our humanity. It is not stinging the humanity of our past. It is stinging us now. Why? Because nke anyi ji ka, because what we have now is biggest. What we have now is our present, not our past. Just as our past has landed us here, our present will determine our future.

I am a curious adult. I understand the web of knowledge that comes from asking questions. I have been wondering why journalists insist on not

banning from their rule book the terms "third-world country," "one of the poorest countries in the world," etc. It appears journalists are mandated by ethical bushwa to add to every item of news about Africa the word, "poor" or any of its variants. Always mentioning Africa alongside poverty and AIDS is as inane as always mentioning the United States alongside foolishness-in-handling-guns and cancer. When you keep telling, even a tree, that it can never grow fruits, even if it is on the richest soil, it will never grow fruits. Instead of giving a poor person fish, give them a fishing net. That way, they will stop borrowing from you and leave you to face your GDP. That way, they will stop wasting your resources and your fuel and your manpower, fighting them away at sea. And, in this case, Africans are not asking for Western nets, no. We are asking for African nets, the ones you took from us; yes, the very ones you ripped into pieces and shared amongst yourselves at the Berlin Conference of 1884. Kindly give them back. Onye ji mmadụ n'ala, nọkwu n'ala: they who hold someone to the ground are themselves on the ground.

Things are still falling apart. 67 years after Achebe's book, Things Fall Apart, things are still falling apart. Why? Because of the words we use. There is power in words. Agụ sị na ọ naghi ata ire mmadụ maka na ihe na-egbu mmadụ di na ire ya: a tiger says it does not eat humans tongues because what kills humans lives in their tongues. This is said in the Bible as, "Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits" (Proverbs 18:21). If we do not change the eyes with which we see the world, if we do not change the language with which we speak of the world, we will continue to curse the world, our only home, with our words. And, as Achebe said, "We rise above the animal together or not at all." So, it is not an African problem. It is an all-of-us wahala.

But how should we see the world? With the eyes of njide ka.

My mother's name is Njideka. What it means is, what I have (Njide) is the biggest/best (ka). Njide ka is love. Njide ka is gratitude. Njide ka is plenty amid lack. Njideka is the woman who rejected the single story of her father as a war victim. Njideka is the woman who remembers that her father is also a great dibia. Njideka bụ nnem.

The question now, ụmụ nwannem, is:

What do you see when you see the map of Africa?

What image comes into your head when you encounter the conglomeration of the alphabet, "Africa"?

What do you hear when your eardrums beat "Africa"?

What do you say when your tongue flaps out the word "Africa"?

With the eyes of njide ka, I invite us to see, in Africa, human beings with all the bodily make-up, internal and external, as the rest of the world; people who are standing strong, shoulders back, chests out, despite everything they have been through; people who overcame the inhumanities of slavery, colonization, racism; people who are thriving, happy, surviving, despite the low words used in describing them; people who have trumped on, are trumping on, and will continue to trump on the single story imposed on them.

We have no other home besides this earth. We have no other siblings aside from our fellow human beings. This snake of separatism will swallow all of us, both the separators and the separated. We have what it takes to rise above this animal Achebe warned us about. Nke anyi ji ka: what we have is the greatest. What we have is our home and each other. When we see with the eyes of njide ka, we see gratitude, not lack; humility, not pride; most importantly, we see humanity, humans. The method is different; the destination is the same.