

On Kwame's Workshop, Memory and the Call of Waters

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In this interview, Carl Terver, an essayist, poet and the founding editor of

Afapinen, speaks with the 2022 NLNG Shortlistee, S'ueddie Vershima Agema, on his book, *Memory and the Call of Waters*.

CARL TERVER

It must be great to have made the NLNG Prize shortlist. Congratulations. Will you kindly tell us about your thoughts at the time — at the beginning, that is — when the idea of your collection *Memory and the Call of Waters* was birthed?

SU'EDDIE VERSHIMA AGEMA

Thank you, Carl. It is lovely to be on the shortlist, and I am proud of Romeo and Saddiq, as well as everyone who made the longlist. On *Memory*, by the time I had the spirit of the poems come together with a reflection of what it currently has, I was keen on exploring personal and communal experiences close to my heart. I often try to use a dominant theme or metaphor to drive home my target themes or objectives in every collection, as evident in *Bring Our Casket Home* and *Home Equals Holes*. I eventually settled on using water and memories as dominant metaphors for the work because they are life's constant.

CARL TERVER

I perceive that by using these metaphors which you say are life's constant, you are trying to use your poetry, therefore, as a vehicle to grapple with, understand, or find meaning, when the situations surrounding us stray from this constancy you bring up. Like when you write about the incessant killings in Nigeria in your poetry. But shouldn't what we seek, in poetry or in life, transcend the constant? I mean, it seems like the only way forward for the human species; it is what drives us away, every step we take from it, from our annihilation.

SU'EDDIE VERSHIMA AGEMA

I don't think poetry should be prescriptive or pigeonholed into just one thing or the other. Poetry, like art in all its glory, is big enough to hold life's constant and transcend it, you know. More than that, whatever vehicles we use in our art are creative tools that often go beyond what we set out to do. When we set out to create, we have these ideas which many times come flooding and if we do not find a way to direct them, they might drown us or come out jumbled. Thus, in using the vehicles I mentioned and, of course, exploring the various things I did in the work, the final product was not just to capture the present or reproduce the fixed. Reading through the final poem, 'sailing on a sea of stars' gives this idea. Yes, we should transcend the constant but it is okay to use the finite constant to navigate the infiniteness of the vastness that lies beyond our biggest imagination.

CARL TERVER

Your last words there felt like I stepped on a landmine for asking that question. Great! Moving on, I'd like to interrogate your usage of repeat words in some of the poems in *Memory and the Call of Waters*, which I will bring up later. For now, let's look at these haunting lines: '...a mobile statue in a crowd / Medusa's minion . . .' You use this metaphor to describe your state of estrangement or displacement in a time you were away in Brighton (UK) studying. This is from a first poem 'When walks turn to dares after Greek legends' that precedes another poem of the same concern 'The vanity of the scholar's dream', where you write, 'No one will tell you a man died here / Deckerd in the glory of a mighty home . . . It is the hanging axe at your neck / Pushing you to breathe a lie . . .' We seem to be in an age where writers are ripe in plumage to migrate north of the hemisphere, but the weight of your words in these two poems travel in opposition. What do you say?

SU'EDDIE VERSHIMA AGEMA

You didn't step on a landmine o. Even seems like you are the one setting the landmines which I am trying to dodge! Or did you step on your landmine? ☐

To your question, the poems *actually* buttress what you say and give an idea of what that sojourn can translate to, this migration you talk about. It is not the exact heaven that most people think it is. It is not just writers; it is everyone across fields for reasons we all know. Reasons we wish were not there and which we hope one day will be addressed. Most people think that going abroad translates to a happily ever after, but that is not the case. Every society has its challenges and if you are Nigerian, have felt the beauty of our land's depth and breadth, then you would miss home in all its wonders. For several people, there is the depression that comes from the dark days of winter, and this happens to even oyinbo people. For others, it is the burden of other things from systemic issues to stress, racism, hassles of the hustle, plus so much more. What I have partly done in some of the poems there is to show sides of the story in a holistic manner that reflects what I felt, and most people felt in those periods. Having said this, I think it is important to note that not all poems there are autobiographical, in the sense that some were inspired by events of others, necessitating me to wear someone/something else's toga.

CARL TERVER

All right. I like your usage of the firmament above us, or the sky, as a metaphor — something I plan to comment on when I get the chance to review *Memory and the Call of Waters*. Now, in this same poem about your time in Brighton, you talk about the city lights at night as 'false lights that shine from above,' which when you 'stare at night skies / where the false sun reigns supreme . . .', it never goes down 'like a benevolent capitalist'. In 'babel', the second poem of your collection, reference is made to the sky again — in fact, it's the binding symbolism of the poem — in the lines, 'I look to the skies. But the view is a stranger to my eyes. The constellation I grew up in are hidden. A blanket has been drawn over heaven's vastness and the top view mirrors that which is aground . . .' What does an apocalypse of the sky or the firmament above mean to you?

SU'EDDIE VERSHIMA AGEMA

Hmmm, that's a deep question, and I seem to have got a headache trying to think of an answer. Your question is bringing back memories of my childhood, where I would think of the sky as one huge sea that might come flooding one day or something like that. I loved looking at the sky, the clouds, their formation, outline, grid, and beauty.

As you have noticed, there are several aspects to the heavens because I feel there is a great deal to it. It is a binding part of our world that many people ignore and tells many stories. Think of the difference between looking upwards in the village and the city. The stars are dead in some places because we have too many false lights. Think of fogs, whether natural or industrial. There are deeper nuances to this, but it is something I find myself thinking of often and the many ways that the sky can be a metaphor for understanding so much.

I think an apocalypse of the skies (if it happened at night) could be darts of fire spitting at the earth or maybe that flood I imagined as a child (if it happened during the day). The key thing is: the earth is not big enough to carry the sky and we ought to be mindful lest we come to that reality one day.

CARL TERVER

I can only imagine. It must be precarious, and a terrible time for anyone to witness. And I think this is partly what — when you use such metaphors — your poems remind us of.

It is in general agreement with many of your readers, some of whom I know and have had discussions with about your latest collection, that your language has, sort of, undergone a baptism, since *Home Equals Holes* and *Bring our caskets home*. How did you find a way to re-invent? What was your talisman? Was there any time you consciously felt this sense of a transformation in your poetry?

SU'EDDIE VERSHIMA AGEMA

It was bound to happen. *Bring Our Casket Home* was 2012, while *Home Equals Holes* was 2014; this is about seven years later. I have undergone various experiences and done so much, which reflects in this collection. I had the first draft of *Memory and the Call of Waters* ready in 2017, but I felt it was not ready yet. A lot happened between that time and 2021 when it found life in its first outing. I got to travel the world, live in a couple of cities around the globe, met with awesome people, read more, taught more and even got into family life, as you know. I guess all these came together. There were some other significant events, like a small apprenticeship with Kwame Dawes after a workshop in Oxford. The workshop itself was a game changer, something about witnessing. Next, Kwame challenged us to write a hundred pure haikus for 100 days without any excuse. Something changed in me after that challenge.

Communal fellowships (in person or through works) with my wife Agatha, and friends like Romeo Oriogun, Rofiat Alli, Daisy Odey, Debbie Iorliam, Oko Owi Ocho Afrika, Aondosoo Labe, Deborah Oluniran, Sharamang Innocence Silas, Torkwase Igbana, Bash Amuneni, Servio Gbadamosi, Ivy Ayede, Iquo Diana Abasi, Tine Agernor, Odu Ode, Elizabeth Umoru, Blessing Omeiza, you — Carl — and a few others had its impact, too. Reading them, working with them, and recreating through their eyes and views had its effect. Another thing that helped me was working on the collections of others like you and all the people I mentioned earlier. Some of the issues I raised with these works were things I had been blind to in mine. Thus, it was easy to come back as a different person to clean them. It has been a fascinating experience, and I look forward to where the roads lead on this continuing journey of transformation.

CARL TERVER

How did this transformation inform the tilting of your work, *Memory and the Call of Waters*? And what do you mean by 'call of waters'?

SU'EDDIE VERSHIMA AGEMA

The title came long before most of what I just mentioned as part of my transformation process, which is still in progress. The first draft of the book and this title were in existence by 2017 — before my extensive travels, before meeting most of the conversations, before Kwame, before Brighton. Everything worked its way into the womb of the structure already created.

On the 'call of waters', there's a lot I will give away in revealing the meaning, so I would pass on answering that. Let readers come to their deduction.

CARL TERVER

It is quite common to find repeated words in a poet's collection. While I found a few in your's, I was curious about the word 'kiss', since, here's a collection that in quite many ways does a lot of mourning. So, for instance, in the poem 'Transition II', you write about herders who 'kissed our cheeks'. Elsewhere, 'Accidents await as automobiles kiss each other . . .'; and elsewhere when you write about longing, all the way from Brighton, you ask, 'When will I . . . / see my wife sleeping and kiss my child?' What is your obsession with this kissing, even when the image you present in some

cases is horrifying?

SU'EDDIE VERSHIMA AGEMA

That's the beauty of poetry, isn't it? That one word e.g., kiss, can be a powerful channel for the expression of various things. And I wouldn't say I'm obsessed with the word, because isn't it more a part of our every reality than we care to admit? Kissing can connote a greeting, an affectionate display, a show of longing, a feeling of betrayal, and so much more. Kissing your child is something simple, yet so powerful; a joy that leaves an ache in its absence.

I could write a whole essay on how I have employed it as a device across this body of work but let's focus on the poem, 'Transition II', as I buttress my point. 'Kissed our cheeks' connotes love and affection, often the genial kind that we find people express in greetings — this was the case with the herders and our people, the Tiv, and other ethnicities across our nation. The same notion is an allusion to Judas' kiss, remember? Thus, the metaphor is concretised in the poem when we — as readers and partakers of the poem — move from that second stanza on warmth to the fourth stanza where suspected herdsmen are now leading us to Golgotha.

CARL TERVER

Mr Su'eddie, thank you for your time.

SU'EDDIE VERSHIMA AGEMA

My pleasure, Carl. This was fun and refreshing. Bless you.

