

## Part I: Pride Before and Pride After

The Bible conceives of pride as a linear story, a dynamic of cause and effect. First the self-elevation, then the fall. Lucifer considering himself equal to God leads to his doom. His pride also keeps him down, preventing him from repentance and redemption. Later, he seduces Eve in the garden of Eden, still advertising a possibility of being just like God.

The fall of man may be regarded as an extension of this Luciferian pride, which is, after all, the father of all sin. But before God punishes their disobedience with curses of pain and patriarchy, strife, suffering and hard labors, an intrinsic change already takes place within Adam and Eve. Leaving the blissful state of being “naked and not ashamed,” they cover themselves. They learn shame even before being confronted by God.

The word “shame” comes from the old German, “scama.” Rather than pride’s self-positive feelings, shame is painful, with senses of guilt, shortcoming and impropriety; it may extend into states of humiliation and being cloaked in reproach. The initial shame of Adam and Eve is not a shame of guilt—they are not yet admonished by God for disobeying—it is a shame of self-reproach. A shame of their natural state of being, of who, and how, they simply are.

I am familiar with this form of shame, as a Black African of queer identity. I was raised in church, in the religious atmosphere of postcolonial Nigeria, where I evolved into depths of shame, not for things I had done, but who I was—shame I was too young to carry.

God warns Adam and Eve that if they eat the forbidden fruit, death will follow. Instead, shame comes upon them. But are these really such different fates? Many queer Africans around the world understand our shame as a sentence of social death, issued by hyper religious communities entirely convinced that they know and speak the mind of God, that they can punish us with decrees as violent as those placed upon Adam and Eve.

In my work as a poet, I use symbols of nudity to reach for the freedom of being naked and not ashamed. I probe the urgent question of gay identity which must emerge from the shadows of a closet, the layers which disguise me into proper society, and the rebellious potential of the nude body, taken as a metaphor for an uncovered, original self. There is also an interest in naked bodies from precolonial histories, where it is known that many African peoples lived, without shame, in various degrees of culturally symbolic dress and undress. It is the eye of European colonization which interpreted our indigenous customs through lenses of savagery, sexualization and sin.

Since it comes before he pronounces his punishments on Adam and Eve, we must not overlook God's question: "Who told you that you were naked?" It may relate to today's passage from the Book of Luke, about those who believe themselves godly and righteous, despising others. If not God himself, who told me the story of shame that I then identified with? For the Black and queer people of today's world, some pride may be essential to self-esteem. So, I differentiate pride with two counterpoints: there is a pride of exaggeration and self-exaltation, which goes against humility and comes before the fall. And there is the pride of human dignity, which goes against shame, and comes not before, but after, being cast down by an oppressive world.

Though shame helps us regulate our actions in the world, we should not, as children of God, live ashamed of who we are. None of us is so righteous as to decide who stays within God's light, who gets cast out. We all must guard against pride, lest we be destroyed. But it can exist in us for a reason, keeping us alive against the shame of social death, reminding us of our divine dignity. For without a dignified self-image, if we maintain identities of shame and perpetual disgrace, why would we aspire to a higher nature, or seek to identify with God?

I am a sinner, and a child of God, too. My pride goes not against humility, but against the shame placed upon me by a world which does not know me as my Maker does. I am mortal and made of dust, but also a divine spirit, before any other identity. Beneath my clothes and my gay, African body, I need no one to tell me who I am—a being made in the image of God. Naked and pure and simple. Humble, but not ashamed.

## Part II: Song of First Love and First Sin

I take the idols off your tongue, lick shame and shadow,  
 like shrouds, off your midnight skin, the skin on which  
 our scriptures are inscribed, inches deep. Who told us  
 that we were naked? Who told you that you were you?

You invite me out of memory, but I am at our very beginning,  
 standing in the before-self. The smell of magnolias there,  
 sweetgrass, sandalwood, brought onto my body by  
 gentle winds. I am in the ageless life that was promised to us.

We are each other's paradise, between us a boundless love.  
 Side by side, mountain by mountain, our limbs are four  
 rivers running. I am only I because you know me to be so.  
 You know me. You know me and know me, without remorse.

It was your voice I heard in the garden, the sound of you  
 deceived by desire. It was sundown, the mockingbirds cried  
 with mourning, tomorrow's mystery on the horizon. It was  
 unknown to us, our last hour of grace, of simply being.

I lick the fruit of your lips, pulped with pain. I love your blood,  
 how black, how bitter. There are those in the world who  
 wound us by how much holier they are. There are gods of  
 flesh and muscle, book and bone, who will not forgive us.

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