

BUTTONHOOK PRESS 2022 CHAPBOOK SERIES

DUST AND RUST

Haibun

TAOFEEK AYEYEMI



OPEN: JOURNAL OF ARTS & LETTERS (O:JA&L)

DUST AND RUST
TAOFEEK AYEYEMI

Cover Image: Prehistoric rock art from a site in eastern Zimbabwe showing a complex set of human and geometric representations with social and possibly religious significance. Photograph by Steve Evans over-printed with text “With a Foreword by Rich Youmans.” **By free license.**

DUST AND RUST

(HAIBUN)

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celebrating the publication of Taofeek Ayeyemi's haibun chapbook *Dust and Rust*.

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DEDICATION

to the loving memory of my father

MUSLIUDEEN AYEYEMI

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DUST AND RUST
TAOFEEK AYEYEMI

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FOREWORD

In this, his first book of haibun, Taofeek Ayeyemi (Aswagaawy) introduces readers to a few of the memorable episodes and relationships that have populated his life—scenes of growing up, maturing, and entering into the challenges of adulthood; of moments spent with parents and grandparents, with brothers and friends, and with loves both lost and won. Through the following pages, he reveals himself to be a man who honors family and heritage, who seeks wisdom through his experiences, and who is at heart a romantic.

A lawyer in the Nigerian city of Abeokuta, Taofeek has a gift with words for not just arguing court cases, but also memorializing his experiences through poetry—which, in *Dust and Rust*, takes the form of haiku and haibun. "The Venom and the Serum" contains a line that could serve as an underlying theme of this collection: "we can bring the past into the present while the present continuous is a stream flowing into the future." The book does indeed begin by bringing "the past into the present," introducing us to the author as a child, as well as to his family: his mother and father, his siblings. It's a family steeped in caring and love and filled with rich memories, such as those shown in "A Tabernacle of Flowers":

We are not rich, but mother's pots and spoons know
what it means to be restless. Every Saturday morning
when my sisters wash father's clothes, we find his
trousers are a piggy bank; we harvest their coins for the
puff-puff seller.

The title haibun offers more glimpses into his childhood years—a time of simple pursuits and a youthful optimism that seemed to be a match for any hardship.

Raised near thickets and forests, we were
custodians of chirps, hisses, tweets and buzzes.
We also were artists, experts at decorating bad
days with iridescent smiles; days our hunts
escaped with our baits, with our hooks, with our

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only traps, with our hopes of next supper. We were mathematicians, we solved hunger with sleeps and woke up into knitting our tendons with gulps of water and seeds of ọ̀sún sún plucked at the riverbank. As kids of the house, in our juvenile delinquencies, we held the light of rose and matched it with rainbows. . .

These episodes show the author growing into a young adult, at which point the focus turns (as it often does at this time of life) toward love. Taofeek brings us into the euphoria of early love, as he waits impatiently for a message from his girlfriend, who begins "to see everything in twos." They also show the earnestness of trying to select a good mate, to avoid "the nightingale that eats your fruits and sings honey into your ears" but flees during hard times, to marry a partner who can share all of life's challenges, mysteries, and wonders.

how best to propose
I lift my face toward
the Milky Way

The final few haibun show past and present mixing, culminating in "Nostalgia." Here, Taofeek states that the "past is gone" and poses the following question: "How do we spend our present for a sweet future." He finds an answer through an old man met on the beach, who offers the following story about his time as a farmer growing mangoes.

When the mango grew and started flowering, we knew the next stage was fruiting. But we plucked the flowers from the trees to stop it that first season. Then we repeated the same ritual in the second and third seasons. By the fourth season, when we left it to grow, the tree became burdened with big and marvelous fruits. My son, by this I'm simply telling you to not live your life too early.

full moon . . .
the watchman pockets

his torchlight

It's a fitting end to a collection in which the author journeys from past to present, striving to capture the meaning and wisdom from episodes in his life, and sharing them in a voice that can speak to us all—not a moment too soon.

Rich Youmans

Editor-in-Chief, *Contemporary Haibun Online*

DUST AND RUST
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THE RARITY OF LOVE

Although my parent did not eat from the same plates, each would always wait for the other to arrive before they ate. Sitting side-by-side or face-to-face on a mat in the corridor, with the moonlight twinning the lamplight, they would gist over how the day went at their various workplaces, and plan how to 'settle us' (the kids) for the next day. Most of the time, each would leave some of the food for us twins—the youngest of their children. They divided the piece of food while we fixed our gazes on the largest share. And we would eat from both dishes, Dad's before Mum's.

*starry night –
the bright of the lampshade
dimmed by a moth*

HOME TRAINING

Whenever someone called on our parents, we only hung around long enough to salute them and announce their presence. Afterwards, we excused ourselves so they could have their privacy. We won't stand gawking like children of today, whose probing gaze could throw a visitor into discomfort or make them lose their appetite. And if we were lucky to receive gifts from any guest, we prostrated or kneeled and recited our thanks, and then headed to the bedroom to wait for our in-house money exchanger— mother, to change the big notes we received to coins. We slipped the notes into our various wooden banks, dreaming of how our money would rise like a river until the wooden bank overflowed. We prayed for more visitors.

*chased
a laughing dove runs
into the louvres*

(IM)MORTALITY

Anytime I fall ill, I always remember my parent's reactions when I was still under their care. Dad would say: "*Ojòjò ò sògún, ara Ògún ò le*". That is, "Ill health strikes Ogun, Ogun becomes weak." Ogun is the god of iron, a man known for his strength and agility, but who too fell ill sometimes. Many gods in the Yoruba traditions began with the intention to immortalize powerful men by carving statues or observing similar respect for them. In the end, they became the gods we worshipped.

*Milky Way –
under forget-me-nots
a number of snails*

But mum, who did the caregiving, held a loud silence that echoed the voice of hope. Only I could hear the fearful prayer she muttered as she served several potions to make us well. If we were to follow the ways of the Yoruba people, my parents too would become gods.

*August wind . . .
a congregation unrolls
their mats*

A TABERNACLE OF FLOWERS

There are flowers by this river. I imagine myself touching a fleeting butterfly or a dragonfly, of pausing their flight, redirecting them to the meadow, the way neighbours fill our house every weekend. Christian families have named their children with Muslim names because of my father's kindness, they'd say they can't convert at this stage but don't care if their children do. We are not rich, but mother's pots and spoons know what it means to be restless. And every Saturday morning when my sisters wash father's clothes, we find his trousers are a piggy bank; we harvest their coins for the puff-puff seller. When the economy forces everyone to drink garri, we drink ours in grand style—I add *ewe oriji* to mine, or raw pepper & onion. As I grow, I understand what mother means when she says *tounje bati kuro ninu ise, abuse buse*.

*a pigeon
sipping from the pothole —
neighbour puffs his cigar*

WHEN DEMERITS OUTGROW BENEFITS

Mother never cooked okro soup during my childhood. She never cooked beef, *ponmo* and chicken were cooked once in a while. We were used to only fish— frozen or smoked. And we knew she must never see us eat mango. I once told a friend about these, and she said it might be a tribal aberration or a diabolical taboo. But I remember that when mother brought food home from events, she allowed us to eat the beef after she had eaten from it.

Recently, I bought her apple, watermelon, carrot and mango. She asked that I wash the mango so she might eat it first. And at night, she sent a plate of okro to me, and I wondered— were the abstinence part of sacrifices mother made for our well-being as kids?

*second morsel . . .
a housefly follows
my hand*

ALTRUISM

In the yard is a bird cooing around the empty sac mother earlier used for spreading cocoa seeds, ruffling the floor with its tips, continually pecking at the concrete. I rise, and as I straighten up to turn, the bird takes flight and returns immediately. Its wing, however, hangs in the air as it roams the yard as if expecting to hear 'set! go!'

I return with a cup of uncooked rice, pour it towards the bird, but again it takes flight, this time up and up, crossing roof after roof.

windstorm . . .
a butterfly perches
on the temple door

DAYS OF DUST AND RUST

Raised near thickets and forests, we were custodians of chirps, hisses, tweets and buzzes. We also were artists, experts at decorating bad days with iridescent smiles; days our hunts escaped with our baits, with our hooks, with our only traps, with our hopes of next supper. We were mathematicians: we solved hunger with sleep, knit our tendons with gulps of water and seeds of ọ̀sún sún plucked at the riverbank. We held the light of roses and matched it with rainbows, hoping to bathe in our infatuations with next-door friends. Alas, our feet only gathered dust, our lust in vain. We erupted into the mosque every now and then, where our lips exploded into litanies until our hearts *dis-rusted* into sanctity, accepted what the days kept bringing. Mother said if one's water was not enough for bathing, we should wipe only our faces with it. We were birds, searching for where to perch aright, lest we burden the brittle ground with our almost weightless selves.

*harmattan over . . .
one by one, plants
take colour*

ENCOMIUM

Father steps into the intensive care unit, I walk behind him. There is a gas cylinder beside a man with oxygen over his nose. You breathe for free; this man has paid to be able to, Father whispers. That is his way of reasoning, appreciation and prayers. Once, a woman threw a grenade of words at her fourteen years old son for bed-wetting. Father told her of kids at the General Hospital who can only urinate with the help of a cannula rubber. A heatwave of remorsefulness burns her face. The following morning, I saw the woman smilingly spreading the boy's mat and nightgown on the clothesline.

tending the cuts
from grass blades . . .
harmattan deepens

THE CHORES

Weeding, my cutlass halves a centipede. I rise and, while stretching my back, sight a fruit bat hanging on a branch, motionless. Insects and crumbs of dry leaves tangled in a spiderweb.

*mango break . . .
counting and recounting
the passing egrets*

In the morning breeze, tips of dew-laden lemongrass leaves are brushing the walkway. My twin sister clears the compound, leaf by leaf. As more wind blows through, more yellow leaves flutter down the tree behind her; and some accidentally make their ways into the waste bin.

*sultry noon —
a hawk picks a lizard
picking termites*

PLOUGHING

I lift the hoe for another strike, a snake rises with it. I had flung it all away before discovering it's just a snake's skin shedding. I bend and squat over the last ridge I made, breathing out a large smile. The sky is getting dull and dark. Bats flocking out of the broadleaf forest, group by group.

*raking . . .
a tailless gecko
enters a hide*

An old hunter biting into a mango combs his way out through the thick forest. Three dogs walking from behind him, one limping. Their bells rattling in the rhythms of their pace. I greet with a howl, then a slight bow. He howls back and pauses, stirs his sack and raises a partridge. "I have more than enough," he says. Before I negotiate further steps through the farm towards him, he hurls the bird my way.

*after rain . . .
the black hound lowers its head
into a hoofprint*

METAMORPHOSIS

I bury the razor blade into his hair, watch strands crash over his scalp and-slip into the water-filled bowl. When did the black-as-charcoal hair I used to know turn so white? All through the cutting his eyes remain closed, their lids trembling. His warm breath runs through my fingers and spreads over me as I cut down his moustache and beard, hair falling like snow.

*praying mantis –
in between father's prayer
a wide smile*

SOLILOQUY

We are trained to be brave and keep going even in the face of weakness, and sickness. So whenever they see us fall flat, face down, they know we've gotten to the peak of exhaustion. But *báòkú, ìse ò tán*, says a Yoruba proverb: If we are not dead, struggle continues. And *gbogbo ibi ló gbalágbára, omó òlẹ̀ làyè ò gbà*: Every place is accommodating for the hardworking person, only the lazy one has no place. "You are correct," says my brother who, unknown to me, has been standing at my back.

*wisdom tooth
I'm already wise
before it grows*

DEAD BEFORE PHOTOGRAPHY

My grannies had died long before I could identify my right hand from the left, before I could brush my teeth on my own, before I could wipe my face with water under the morning dewdrops. But father and mother never stopped talking about them. Father would describe his mother as tall, longhaired and fair. Mother would say her mother is short, dark and has a birthmark on her forehead. Their names built a nest in my ear, crumbs littered the floor of my mind. Often, I'd begin to imagine their various faces recalling the description made by my parent and juxtaposing my parent's visages with theirs. Now if I see either of them in my dream, I can identify who is who.

weekend cleaning
father
in grandpa's coat

REMINISCENCE

I stir again my coffee with which I retrieve my body from the cold grip of the breezy morning. The clatter of the glass reverberates in my head the sound of father's spoon; how he'd stir a spoonful of honey into his uncreamed green tea.

*daybreak chill . . .
the light of a candle falls
and rises*

THE VENOM AND THE SERUM

I'm a mirror owned by many ladies. But to persuade a heart is not easy. In hunting diamonds, how do you know you're digging the right field? In hunting frogs, how do you confirm the pregnant one? This confusion is an arrow shot from past memory— one that never stops giving me a nightmare. And past tense means we can bring the past into the present while present continuous is a stream flowing into the future. But the only way I wish to invite the past is by way of tales. A moonlit fairytale that is more of myth than reality and renders this myth a plate no one uses. Like a zoo guest taking food to his host, I pay tribute to the person I was some years back. Truly, I still burn anytime I remember. Heartbreak is a venom. But instead of becoming poisonous, I'll make a serum for anyone who comes my way.

*hot night . . .
scratching my rashes
till they bleed*

FIRST LOVE

At every skylark's song, I pick up my phone, expecting to receive her goodnight message. Finally, my phone screen lights up the balcony. It's indeed a message from her, but not a text message, nor a voicemail, but a picture—her picture, a selfie, which I've fruitlessly asked for until now. What a romantic way to end the day! A pink moon glow behind her. In the darkness of the foreground, her teeth are like stars. I reply to her wordless message: "Good night, good knight."

*Planter's Moon—
the crickets' chirp paused
by approaching feet*

BLOW SOFTENER

I don't take my coffee black, or raw; even the ones labelled as decaffeinated make me feel drained still. If I continue that for a week, I become lean and weak. But thanks to milk for coming to my aid. Even my girlfriend who doesn't like coffee generally would take a few sips from my creamed coffee.

*sacrifices
the burden we carry
for addiction*

SOULMATE

Sitting on this prayer mat, I turn the last page of last year's diary and open the new year's. I review again my major resolutions. I begin to recall the sweetness of love I've experienced. I recall the bitter ones too. I imagine the pleasure of getting into a union with someone who pleases one's eyes and mind at all times. But how do you identify the nightingale that eats your fruits and sings honey into your ears, but lifts itself into the liturgy of flight when the tree breaks? How do you know the pigeon that dines and wines with you, and when the tree falls, goes down with it?

*New Year shopping . . .
making a choice between
candies and cookies*

STAR BRIGHT

I return to my room. Her orange blossom scent is everywhere, as if she's waiting for me. It fills me with hope, as well as the fear that this affair won't last. I lift the curtain and moonlight spills onto the floor. Two birds take flight from the windowsill, a few feathers battling each other through the air. My phone vibrates. It's a message from her, telling me she has been outside searching for the brightest star to name after me. I smile and fix my gaze at the stars, begin to count them—one here, another there. I'm beginning to see everything in twos.

meteor . . .
before it fades
my wish

INCUBUS

She leads me into the secret shrine by the river. She walks behind me, pointing the ways to me. The tree that has accommodated nuptial blackbirds terrorizing the natives stands there full of leaves and nests. She had told me the enigma living there once appeared to her that she is his. "If love is war, I'll fight this to claim you for myself," I confronted. I kick alive a chain saw and bury it into the tree. Halfway through, a voice rings out, "You're next."

*a dream of autumn . . .
my eyes split open
into winter*

WIFE MATERIAL

After about fifteen minutes of waiting at the gate, Arike arrives on a bike with a large smile, her teeth reflecting the forenoon sun as if they are made of glass. I help her unmount and wrap her tightly in my arms. The bike man says "She is beautiful." I smile. The sight of her grows flowers in my heart, while mine produces butterflies in her stomach. Hand in hand, we walk inside.

*sudden wind . . .
stretching my hand to catch
a moringa blossom*

We decide to stay outdoors, so we take out our refreshment and climb up the decking. Under a small cover, we arrange the stool and chairs. We sit. She touches my tribal mark for the umpteenth time. I smile. I approach her lips with one of the chips, she bites and I take in the remnant. While we chew on, I relive our six-week-old discussion.

*the close cry
of a laughing dove —
Easter week*

"Arike! I can't imagine a day I'll not be able to play around you again."
"Assss! But there's a key damaging the dog's teeth: I apply makeup. I party a lot, dancing as if that is my life's purpose; all that you detest"
"Arike! There is impermanence in this way of life. When you get married, the shamefacedness your new status bequeaths you will stop you."
"Even at that, I don't wish to stop. Life without partying is boring?"
We burst into laughter hitting the palms of our hands against one another.

*hotter days —
a cock chasing a cock
chasing a hen*

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"Arike! Many events can dispense with your absence and hold perfectly, that should hint you the needlessness of your attendance of all parties." She sighs, heavily so. Knowing that my words are having the intended effect,

I quickly add, "I'm not saying one should have zero tolerance for partying."

"Assss, even the few I would attend, would have me dance out my sweats."

I let out a loud laugh. "Arike! You're a phenomenon."

too big for meal . . .
a small gecko staring
at the cockroach

"But, Assss! That does not mean I'm not a wife material na."

Wife Material is a slang for a lady deemed suitable for a good wife and mother. Who is a wife material if not an angel clad in human flesh. One that folds her fist to conceal nothingness while guzzling a sugarless gari.

"Arike, you are! Fatai have said a wife material is one that cooks a meal fit for kings with N500 only."

"That Fatai is a fish," she says laughing hard.

I knock off an empty bottle from which she drank with my left leg that goes up as I bend backward laughing.

weaverbirds rise
from an elephant grass . . .
bush burning

"Well, Arike. It's good to honestly discuss our likes and dislikes.

It's better to settle area of differences now than going into marriage as if it's a rehabilitation centre."

We laugh. I rise and pull her up, my left hand holding hers, and my right in her right. I lift the bottle from which I drank above my head, turn it upside down and catch the drops with my tongue.

scorching sun —
a snake sheds its skin
in between two stones

ORISON

I walk into the compound, pluck a leaf- the leaf of bryophylum (*eme abamoda*) and write my wish on it with the nib of my pen: "Atinuke." I have been keeping the seeds of the dates I've eaten since saying your name. Yesterday, it became 1,000 and I wounded them into a rosary. Back inside, I light incense. Its scent smells of you. The laughing dove that cries on my rooftop no longer calls "Odere koko;" It now calls "Ayanfe."

*seashore date . . .
the tide goes away
with her names*

HONEY AND MILK

rose petals the thought of your dimpled smile

Dear Ayanfe,

I grew up hearing our country is a land of honey and milk as it overflowed with mineral resources. I imagined Ogun River as a river of honey and Osun River as a river of milk. I imagined myself digging deep to plant an avocado sprout and getting the mouth of my cutlass greased with crude oil. I imagined all flora as food, and none carrying thorns or poison. But this land carries praise that doesn't belong to it. This praise belongs to you, Ayanfe!

Yours,

Ejire

*how best to propose
I lift my face toward
the Milky Way*

GARRISON

Passing through Sango, I recall a day here more than a decade ago, when my feet got stuck in between the rear tyre and fender of my bike. Some days after, a friend had his leg heavily bandaged because his leg got stuck in the same way. On another day, a friend covered her mouth with bandana. Maybe she had eaten unripe cashew fruits, I thought, or perhaps in a fit of experimental craziness had bit the seed so its liquid spread over her mouth. Two days before then, I had poured a sugary-looking substance into my mouth. It was when my mouth turned to fire that I realized its alchemy. Later we moved out of town into a new house at Ifo, where I am headed now to see my parents. But crossing the Sango bridge, I breathe the air and realize I never really left.

*one by one . . .
emptying my palms
of seashells*

THE FLIGHT

I lift my International Passport, flip to the information page; it will expire in a few months. Yet, no Visa Stamp on it. I've only used it where a valid ID is required during any registration. At the University, every time I descended from a Debate or Moot Competition podium, Akinola would tell me: "Aswagaawy, you'll go places— not only with legs, but also by wings." The aircrafts have not come queueing for me, but my literary works, published widely across the globe, have crossed many borders.

*summer zoo visit
on the zebra crossing
a zebra crossing*

NOSTALGIA

As I finish muttering my litanies, I leave for the shore so the tides can flow into my feet. I walk out of the prayer section for the part of the beach meant for merriment; where people hold the hands of their beloved and walk into the water; where the sounds of cameras mix with the sounds of the tides; where you see the sceneries of love and lust. I retire into one of the rafia-roofed pavilions, sitting on the small fence mounted around it. I begin to recall the memory of days of weeding under the sun and in the rain; days of fetching grasshoppers eating water leaves by the roadside for supper; days of checking if a roadkill hadn't rotted too much for meat, days we removed a crushed giant rat from the mouth of father's pickup vehicle; days of waiting at the veranda for the moon to walk out through the million clouds and display God bowing to Himself.

*approaching horse . . .
an egret drops a baby crab
on a baby crab*

The past is gone. How do we spend our present for a sweet future? An old man I met at the prayer section has also come to this side of the beach. I walk up to him. "Please," I ask, "tell me, how did you spend your youthful age? What helped you grow into a fulfilled, happy man?" "I was a farmer," he says, "Basically a mango farmer. When the mango grew and started flowering, we knew the next stage was fruiting. But we plucked the flowers from the trees to stop it that first season. We repeated the same ritual in the second and third seasons. By the fourth season, when we left the flowers to grow, the tree became burdened with big and marvelous fruits. My son, by this I'm simply telling you to not live your life too early."

*full moon . . .
the watchman pockets
his torchlight*

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ABOUT THE WRITER:

Taofeek "Aswagaawy" Ayeyemi is a Nigerian lawyer, writer, and author of the chapbook *Tongueless Secrets* (Ethel Press, 2021) and a collection *anbade at night or serenade in the morning* (Flowersong Press, 2021). A BotN and Pushcart Prize Nominee, his works have appeared in *Modern Haiku*, *cho*, *Lucent Dreaming*, *Akitsu Quarterly*, *Frogpond*, *ARTmosterrific*, *Banyan Review*, *the Quills* and elsewhere. He won the 2021 Loft Books Flash Fiction Competition, 2nd Place in 2021 Porter House Review Poetry Contest, and Honorable Mention in 2021 Oku-no-hosomichi Soka Matsubara Haiku Contest and 2020 Stephen A. DiBiase Poetry Prize among others.

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ABOUT *DUST AND RUST*:

In this, his first book of haibun, Taofeek Ayeyemi (Aswagaawy) introduces readers to a few of the memorable episodes and relationships that have populated his life—scenes of growing up, maturing, and entering into the challenges of adulthood; of moments spent with parents and grandparents, with brothers and friends, and with loves both lost and won. Through the following pages, he reveals himself to be a man who honors family and heritage, who seeks wisdom through his experiences, and who is at heart a romantic.

Rich Youmans
Editor-in-Chief, *Contemporary Haibun Online*

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