

When We  
Were  
Fireflies

PROPERTY OF WASHOPE BOOKS

PROPERTY OF MASOBE BOOKS

When We  
Were  
Fireflies

PROPERTY OF MASOBE BOOKS

Abubakar Adam Ibrahim



MASOBE

First Published in 2023 by Masobe  
An imprint of Masobe Books and Logistics Limited  
34 Gbajumo Close, off Adeniran Ogunsanya,  
Surulere, Lagos, Nigeria  
Tel: +234 806 316 6939, +234 701 838 3286  
Email: info@masobebooks.com

Copyright © Abubakar Adam Ibrahim 2023

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, transmitted  
or stored in a retrieval system or distributed in any printed or electronic form  
without permission in writing from the publisher.

The moral right of Abubakar Adam Ibrahim to be identified  
as the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance  
with the Copyright, Designs and Patent Act 1988.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is  
available from the National Library of Nigeria

ISBN: 978-978-998-790-0

This book is a work of fiction.

Any references to historical events, real people, or real places are used fictitiously.  
Other names, characters, places and events are products of the author's imagination,  
and any resemblance to actual events, places or persons, living or dead, is entirely  
coincidental.

Cover Design Oriahi Ofuzim Anderson

[www.masobebooks.com](http://www.masobebooks.com)

**Other Books by the Author**

The Whispering Trees  
Season of Crimson Blossoms  
Dreams and Assorted Nightmares

PROPERTY OF MASOBE BOOKS

PROPERTY OF MASOBE BOOKS

To the June Bugs.

And

To all those who love even in the overwhelming presence of hate.  
And those places where flames of odium licked loveorn lives.

PROPERTY OF MASOBE BOOKS

PROPERTY OF MASOBE BOOKS



# Contents

## Red

An Artist Meets a Train	3
Leaf Storm	9
The Child	25
Wing Storm	28
Taste of the Colour Yellow	37
Scented Henna	46
Whispers	57
A Sort of Visitation	59
Lost Children	65
Chicken Shawarma	69

## Orange

The Chronicles	81
Morning After	88
The Sighting	93
Gallery of Doubts	98
The Chronicles	107

A Forest of Fireflies	111
The Mother	117
Blood Rain	123
The Chronicles	127
Libya	132
Chariots of Memories	133
Discovering Kaka	138
The Chronicles	147
The Colour of Grief and Impending Heartbreak	150

## **Yellow**

Emergence	157
News of a Passing	164
Making Sunlight Sing	170
Farewell	175
Road to an Ancient Murder	179

## **Green**

The Voice that Screamed that Time	189
A Love Like This	199
The Curtains	211
Gidan Makama	221

## Blue

Road to Kafanchan	235
Finding Home	245
The Girl with Stars	251
The Gift of a Name	258
The Name of a Continent	266
Turai	271
The House His Father Built	281
Inquest	286
The Red Awning	298
Fate of the Cockroach	301
Stunned Bug	303

## Indigo

Bricks and Blood	311
Tea with Ginseng	315
Little Bits	322
Something that Needed Doing	325
Beneath the Mist	328
Finding Basiru	333
Gangare	336

Hoofs No Longer Thunder	339
The Zoo	342
Karambau	345
Mouldy Clothes Don't Need Cleaning	349
The Shrinking	353
The Return	358

## Violet

Reunion	363
Bilya	366
Things that Come at You	372
Fathers and Daughters	376
Portrait in the Dark	381
A Season in her Eyes	382
The Door	384
Threads of a Tapestry	387
A Girl with Lilac Veil	392
The Withering	397
Darkness	400

PROPERTY OF MASOBE BOOKS



# 1 RED

*“Red is the first colour of spring.  
It’s the real colour of rebirth. Of beginning.”*

—Ally Condie

PROPERTY OF MASOBE BOOKS

## An Artist Meets a Train

The first time Yarima Lalo saw a train trundling into the Idu Station on a hot June day in Abuja was also the first time it occurred to him that once, many years before, he had been murdered in the carriage of an old locomotive with well-worn, seaweed-green seats.

The instant he heard the blaring horns and the rumble of the engine from a distance, he knew, with unwavering conviction that in a previous life, one he had had no recollection of until that moment, he had had his head smashed in by an angry, squat man with a club. Memories of that incident—the metallic taste of his own blood in his mouth, its fine spray on the train’s upholstery—rolled towards him like the approaching Chinese-made demon with a frightening roar and overwhelming certainty. The force of it pulled him towards the platform edge until a railway man tugged at his shirt, glowered at him and asked if he was crazy or just wanted to foul the new tracks with his blood.

“Kai! Who do you think is going to clean up that mess, eh?” The man’s thick moustache arched downwards and his scraggly eyebrows furrowed into a scowl. “First time train is running in thirty years in this country and already some soko is trying to soil it with gore.” He spat on the tracks and turned away, just as the train zipped past, stirring a gust that rattled Lalo, still stunned by the confetti of images popping in his head.

Before that Friday, and as far as he could remember, Lalo

had never before seen a moving train. Determined to rid himself of that besmirchment, he had come to the station, stood in the middle of the hall and inhaled the still-heady smell of fresh paint. He crossed the gleaming hall, his reflection on the tiles distorted by the LED lamps in the high ceiling. Lalo was desperate to banish sad memories of the decaying carriages he had seen years before at the Jos train station. A raw army recruit at the time, he was exploring the Jos terminus when he was confronted by grey cargo carriages withering away at the station they had slithered into three decades before. Wheels fused onto the tracks by rust, gaping cavities of missing doors and windowpanes, loose electrical fittings dangling by wires knocking hauntingly against the panels in the light draft. Each bit of flaking paintwork ferried away by the harmattan breeze, like broken moults of a serpent, was inscribed with a small piece of history.

That image slipped into the shadows of his thoughts only to resurface from time to time over the years. The last time it did, two days before his birthday, he set up the easel in the corner of his small, cluttered studio on Kolda Street, plugged in his earphones, as he often did when he worked, and splattered this grey, haunting image onto the canvas, all the while bobbing his head to the music in his ears. He was rubbing in the grey skies over the carriages with his fingers when the small silver bells on the door tinkled as it opened to let in his patron, Ben Bangos, a man the size of a fully-grown orang-utan with an afro like an upturned eagle's nest. He was followed in by his driver, whose potbelly and flowing kaftan gave the false impression he was the principal, especially since Bangos himself was wearing jean shorts and a simple white T-shirt.