

AVIARA

PROPERTY OF MASOBE BOOKS

ALSO BY OTHUKE OMINIABOHS

*Odufa, a lover's tale*  
*A Conspiracy of Ravens*

PROPERTY OF MASOBE BOOKS

# AVIARA

Who Will  
remember  
you

PROPERTY OF MASOBE BOOKS

**OTHUKE  
OMINIABOHS**



MASOBE

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*For*

*Bishop and Dorcas,*

*Theresa,*

*Elohor and Henry,*

*Mum and Dad*

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*Who will remember you  
When you're gone, when your time here is done?*

**– Anonymous**

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# September, 2014

They found the first body at dawn. A few hours later, a black, battered Toyota Hilux squelched to a halt at the entrance of the town. Eyewitnesses watched from a safe distance as three policemen jumped out and tramped towards the lakefront.

One of the policemen ran back to the vehicle after a few minutes. "Oga, na girl. She don die," he said to his boss. The policeman glanced nervously at the deserted road and then towards the towering cathedral at the centre of the town.

His boss, the inspector, yawned and scratched his three-day stubble. Reluctantly, he dragged his thoughts away from the pleasures of the previous evening and the delectable young lady who had been his companion. They had rendezvoused at a popular hotel in town; the danger of being discovered by his wife had aroused him almost as much as the girl's nubile body.

The inspector regarded the recruit. Only a few days ago, his unit had gotten a distress call about The Preacher. They had barely begun investigations and now,

here was another case. And to think he had celebrated his new posting as a well-deserved vacation from the hassle of city crime. He cursed under his breath and stepped out of the police vehicle. “Come. Show me the body.”

The corporal nodded and led the way. He crossed the road and joined a sodden footpath. The inspector followed, sweeping his gaze across the lake which shimmered beneath the afternoon sky.

The other policemen snapped to attention as the inspector approached. The corporal moved to huddle with his comrades, squishing a mosquito that settled on his arm.

The inspector glanced with distaste at the naked bloated corpse. Her limbs were contorted in unnatural angles and her flesh looked bleached and wrinkled. He found it difficult to estimate her age in her current state but he thought she might have been in her teens—about the same age as his delectable companion from last night. He decided that she must have been dead a while: two days, one week? He couldn’t tell.

“Wetin kill am?” he asked, wrinkling his nose at the odour.

“Death, sir,” replied a recruit.

“Na death kill am?”

“Yes, sir!”

The inspector shook his head. He noted in passing that her fists were tightly clenched, but his attention was grabbed by the gaping hole in her chest, where her heart should have been.



The toll of cathedral bells suddenly shattered the still quiet of the town. The sound reverberated in the air, deep and sinister, raising the hairs on the back of the inspector's meaty neck. Gripped by an inexplicable paranoia, he muttered an unconvincing excuse and retreated to the police vehicle. The other officers followed, hot on his heels.

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BOOK ONE

# REVELATIONS

September - November 2014

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# One

I arrive after a heavy downpour to find the town in complete darkness. No candlelight leaks from the doorways we pass, no faces peer at the road from behind curtained windows. The night is cold and unnervingly still.

Mother must have been watching the road because she emerges just as the motorcyclist turns to ride away. She hurriedly unlocks the veranda gate and throws her arms around me; all the while casting glances into the darkness beyond the fence. She grabs my travelling bag and leads me inside, away from the drizzling rain. Father is waiting in the living room. The lantern is turned down so low I cannot see his face. He steps out of the shadows and puts an arm around me.

“My boy, welcome home.”

“You need to get out of those wet clothes,” Mother says as she leads me to my bedroom. “Come.”

My room has been recently cleaned and the windows thrown open to let in fresh air. A cool breeze brings in

the scent of flowers from Mother's garden. I change into fresh clothes and crawl into bed. I am home.



I am awakened by wind, loud and rancorous like a bitter quarrel between friends. Father steps into the room and the candle planted by the door flickers. Mother adjusts the blanket beneath which I am huddled and shivering. I do not know how long I have been asleep.

She feels my neck with the back of her hand. "He's burning up."

"We need to get him to the hospital," Father says.

"Is it safe to step out now?"

"I don't know. The boy needs a doctor." He walks to the window, pulls back the curtains and looks outside.

"It's been quiet. Whatever is out there must be long gone."



I am leaning against Mother in the back seat of the moving car. Father is hunched forward in the driver's seat, staring through the windshield, his glasses hanging on the bridge of his nose. Vision is near impossible in the rain, even with the piercing beam of the car's headlamps, so we crawl.

We arrive at the hospital to a deserted reception desk and a lone lamp with a feeble glow. My parents make me lie on one of the empty benches and go in search of a

doctor. In my feverish state, the rush of wind through the eaves sounds like a dirge. My eyelids are heavy and time feels like a deck of cards tumbling through the air in an endless loop. I hear footsteps. They stop beside me and a warm blanket settles over my feet.

Somewhere in the fringes of consciousness, I hear a voice calling me Pinocchio, a name I haven't heard in over thirteen years.



I am discharged by morning. Mother is waiting for me at the front door when Father pulls into the compound. Crow's feet frame her eyes as she smiles. She's wearing a red *boubou* and her feet are bare. She looks unchanged but for the pad of fat around her midriff and the new wrinkles on her brow and beneath her eyes.

She sits with me in my room, watching as I sip the pepper soup she has prepared. "It will take care of the fever," she says. "Eight hours is a long distance to travel on bad roads. I'm sure you broke down because of the stress of the trip. You'll be fine after you get some rest."

I do not attempt to correct her. She delves into a winding narrative of all that has happened since she moved back home with Father—the good, the bad and the mysterious—although she has told me most of the stories many times before, over the telephone. I am mildly surprised to notice the grey creeping into her luxurious hair which she usually diligently maintains with jet black dye.

“We even heard the deadly Ebola virus has overtaken several cities. People in the villages no longer shake hands,” she says, “and when someone sneezes in a room, everybody runs away. They say that is how one gets the disease. We bath with saltwater and use hand sanitizers. This prevents one from catching the disease. You should also have a hand sanitizer with you at all times.”

I laugh at how gullible Mother has quickly become after returning home from the small city barely three months ago.

“You can laugh all you want, but please remember to do as I have said. I don’t want to hear stories.”

“Yes, Mum.” I sit forward. “Mum, the town felt different last night. Did something happen?”

She lets out a sigh and tells me about the gunshots, which had sent everyone into hiding, moments before I arrived.

“It was like a war zone. Gunshots everywhere. Your father and I were so worried about your safety. It wasn’t until this morning we heard the news.”

“What news?”

“People are saying The Preacher was shot last night by armed robbers and now he is nowhere to be found. People are saying he must be dead, and the robbers took his corpse with them.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. We live in a wicked world.”

I besiege her with questions, but she doesn’t know