

DREAM

SCAPE

And

The

End

Of the



By

Eviano George

WHY I LIKE IT: *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes "Dreamscape and the End of the World," by Eviano George, exists in that purgatory of our own minds. Half-dream, half-reality, all allegory, the scope of this story takes you to that place of liminality between lucidity and the frightening fear of waking up and realizing that you're exactly where you were when you fell*

asleep. There is something terrifying about the end of the world no matter in what way we'd watch it happen, and, when those thoughts transfer to nightmares, they're all the more palpable. Combining fractal imagery, a literary background, and Biblical retribution, our tale follows the imaginings of K, a homeless man and predictor of the end of the world, and his brief interaction with our shared-point-of-view, student speaker who observes his work and interprets the chaos that he predicts. What I like about this story is the flash. That flash of a moment in which you can't decide what is real or what is Nostradamus, that flash where you can't tell if you're asleep or awake, that flash where you weren't sure if it was déjà vu or a genetical memory bore into your bones. It's like Burroughs on heroin, but instead of heroin you have an apocalypse, the code to break past your reality, and that large, last breathe before you wake up. If there is beauty at the end of the world or release or a startling shock, then this story captures it well. Read on.

Senior Editor CHARLES writes...*This is second language fiction. There will be grammatical bumps and occasionally eccentric phrasing. We don't edit this out or change it but see these features as a positive part of the reading experience—literary 'wabi sabi' if you will. There's too much good writing here not to enjoy.*

QUALITY QUOTABLE (for the love of language...)

K surfaced from his trance at precisely nine fifteen on Thursday and wiped his eyes to find the street children huddled in a circle, flipping marbles and taking bets on how long it would take maggots to appear. They scattered when they heard his crazed laughter, leaving behind the multi coloured marbles, bits of rubber bands, coins, and sheets of paper with names in list form.

Dreamscape and the End of the World

K, the homeless man sat huddled at the junction where two major roads that ran the length of the country. He had sat in that same spot at the same time every evening for the past five years. A ragtag mass of humanity spilled and frothed into the roads and side streets around him. This multitude consisted of harried wives, despondent husbands, rushed students, tired workers, many on their way back home from work to pick children from school, to prepare the evening meals, to hit the beer parlours and whore houses, each one with his eyes glazed over in his own individual island hell, each avoiding the eyes of the other.

Bus conductors hung precariously from the doors of rickety buses, dots in a sea of yellow and black vehicles. They screamed destinations, bathing onrushing passengers in rivulets of saliva. Hoodlums in half rags and sunglasses and tinpot jewelry, teeth burnt brown from too much codeine and marijuana, roughed hapless drivers up for right-of-way money. Disabled people with insect eyes and elephant legs and rivers of many colours oozing from their pores stretched hands out for alms on the edges of open gutters that spewed filth and shit and urine.

The sun was exiting over the horizon but the heat still beat down through the dust clogged air. In the midst of this inferno of blaring fuji music and unwashed bodies sat K, his body clad in colorless rags, hair hard and kinky and falling over his forehead right down his eyes which held a furtive, hungry look. None of this differentiated him from the other three thousand and one homeless men and women loitering on every corner of that junction, nor from any of the mad persons bumbling stark naked down the roads who might, at any given time, jump out of their most lucid of dreams to attack the unwary with mouths full of canines.

He looked not much different from the holy man lugging a wheelbarrow stuffed full of gospel albums with cracked covers, and moldy bibles in nine languages who screamed, “Repent you foul demons for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” The only distinctive thing about K was the pristine white notebook in his hands in which he was scribbling something as he had done on that same spot at that same time for the past five years.

No-one gave him a second look, for the mad man who has the time to sit and write must be the maddest of them all. No one, that is, except for the children who came from nearby stalls where their mothers sold sizzling fried yams and bean cakes wrapped in oily, old newspapers. They peered over his shoulder at his scratchings, seized his notebook, and fled with him hot on their tails while he cursed their forefathers and forefathers’ forefathers. The children made faces and flung the notebook between themselves with the accuracy of professional athletes, unperturbed by the weight of their distended bellies. Only when they tired of tormenting him did the eldest one throw his book back at him. It smashed into his one good knee and he fell to the ground crying.

Once, an astute observer, a student of sociology and of the symbolic interactionist school to be specific—as he labelled himself—squatted down beside K and studied his scribblings, only to realize that that jumble was in fact a coordinated amalgam of circles, strokes, and runes meticulously crafted and arranged like plants in a palatial garden. The student, enshrouded in a haze of butterflies which he swatted at absent-mindedly, watched him on that first day, and then the next, and then the day after that. K soon came to hunger for that silent presence any time he observed stray butterflies gliding and weaving between exposed electrical wires far above that flurry of humanity. Two weeks passed in this way before the student broke the sanctity of that solitary communion.

“And what does it mean, all this?” he said.

K craned his neck to look at the student, eyes filming over with tears because in all the years he had sat destitute in that corner, only two people had ever spoken to him as a human being. The first was the man of God, he of the wheelbarrow full of anointing oil and bibles in multiple languages, and then only to condemn him to the eternal lake of fire and brimstone and gnashing of teeth because what else could those occult symbols mean if not the words of the devil.

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you,” replied K.

“Try me.”

K stared hard into the eyes of this student who embodied the air of one of those rare, delicate souls who in their unyielding innocence refuse to brook nor compromise with an evil world, and are marked with the indelible taint of an early death.

“Well,” he said. “I am on the verge of solving the equation that will provide the specific date and hour in which this world is going to end.”

His lips worked silently as if he wanted to say more but stopped himself short. Besides the man of God, the only other person he had revealed this question to who did not crumple with laughter was the woman who wandered naked as Eve in the motorpark with her face tilted skyward, engaged in philosophical discussions with beings she said glowed green, had eyes like pears, and were older than time itself.

The student did not laugh. He rose from his squatting position and raised a hand to stroke the sparse hairs on his chin. His gaze wandered out into the distance. Every now and then he would swat at a butterfly that wandered into his line of vision. The cacophony of shrieking conductors, sellers hawking their wares, barking dogs, and honking vehicles intruded upon their shared instance of knowing.

“You think I’m crazy don’t you?” said K.

This drew the student’s attention and he contemplated the homeless man as if seeing him for the first time.

“No, I don’t think you are. In fact I think you’re the most lucid person I’ve ever met in my entire life. Tell me, how soon do you think you’ll solve this equation?”

To himself he said, “Interesting, very interesting. He’ll make a most interesting subject for the thesis. I must introduce him to Chinua and the others. They’ll love him.”

“I can’t say exactly but I assure you I’m almost there. I can feel it,” said K, scratching his thicket of hair.

“Perfect. I’ll be here this weekend and I’ll bring some of my friends. I can’t come tomorrow because there are some things I must take care of.” He wiped a hand on the front of his dashiki and extended it to K.

“By the way, my name is Kongi.” They shook hands.

K watched Kongi dart and dash nimbly through the onrushing traffic, his mountainous afro bobbing in the wind, red dashiki trailing a train of butterflies behind him. An irrepressible urge to scream scratched at his throat and left him choking.

“Don’t go,” he rasped. “Don’t leave me alone.” Grabbing at a lamp post, he tried to steady himself. Then sighing, he sank once more into an unfathomable solitude.

Kongi did not show up at the appointed time. He did not show up on the next day either, nor on the day after that. In a fit of depression, K chewed through four pencils and the fingernails

of his left hand until his beard was smeared with ink and caked blood. He heard the news that night on the radio from one of the passing cars stuck in traffic.

The army had gunned down a number of insurgents and anarchists who had caused untold damage to citizens of our great motherland. The government was calling upon both foreign and local media to stop spreading the fake news of a ‘Flower massacre.’ These were not mere university students offering flowers in the face of guns but cowards who slaughtered children and raped old women and defamed the good name of the State. K realized then that he would never see Kongi again.

It was a Sunday, that singular day when the streets are free and God’s children are in their best clothes and on their best behaviour and churches are packed with multitudes singing glory be to God in the highest and the air vibrates with chants of Hosanna and the rhythmic thumping of drums and stamping feet. After having his breakfast of garri full of sand, a handful of groundnuts, and clumps of powdered milk, and avoiding nearly being crushed by a bus, the solution revealed itself to K as he sat by the side of the road cradling his knee.

He hobbled to his corner, fished out his notebook, and traced a finger up ream after ream of symbols and equations. He located the spot where he had inputted a wrong number and slapped a palm to his forehead. Excitement welling up in him, he licked his thumb and wiped away the number and then saw that he would indeed have to change everything. But such was his agitation that the prospect of restarting the equation did not faze him and, in any case, he had already laid most of the foundation in these past five years.

He set to work without stopping for the next three days and nights, neck bent over till his eyes almost scraped the page, never once looking up so that the hoodlums, the children, the

policemen, and other passers-by suspected he was dead as always happens with so many of these damned of the earth until someone witnessed the green steam emanating from his eyes, his nose, his ears and even from the patch covering his arsehole.

K surfaced from his trance at precisely nine fifteen on Thursday and wiped his eyes to find the street children huddled in a circle, flipping marbles and taking bets on how long it would take maggots to appear. They scattered when they heard his crazed laughter, leaving behind the multi coloured marbles, bits of rubber bands, coins, and sheets of paper with names in list form.

Unable to control himself in his ecstasy, K hopped from one foot to another. He had done it. He had really done it. He knew the exact day and hour to the minute when the world would end. Sadness diluted some of that happiness when he remembered the innocent face of that student of the butterflies. No sooner had he cleared his head of the fumes of that bittersweet memory when he felt a chill overtake him under that blazing nine o'clock sun. It hit him then that if his calculations were indeed right, the world would come to an end in a year and a day from that moment.

He fell to his knees and raised the notebook to the sky, staring questioningly into the clouds. His lips formed these words,

“If you are there answer me now. Be a man and show yourself and tell me what to do. Have mercy on me. On us. Let this cup pass over us.”

He remained in that position for about an hour until his eyes burned and he could sense nothing beyond a film of white and a buzzing in his ears. He would have remained frozen there had the children not crept up behind him and chased him with stones and a sand

coloured dog they had on a leash. When he recovered his senses and his heart had stopped pounding from the fright, he once again slapped his forehead.

K made his way to the nearest public toilet to relieve himself and crouched over the rim crusted over with shit and faecal matter that overflowed the sides until it was impossible to tell the original colour of the bowl. In that half-squatted position on the ridges of his toes, he had his second epiphany in as many days. Dismay turned once again to excitement and he hunted in his pockets for his notebook and pen. The pen was almost empty of ink so he licked the tip and swung it hard, testing it at intervals on the paper to get it going again. Someone knocked on the door of the toilet.

“Mr. Man how long you want spend inside there abi you want born pikin for there?” came a voice.

Silently, K turned the lock until he heard a click, then wedged his leg as best as he could against the entrance. He knew from a past life that inspiration is a fragile thing that must be teased and coaxed out from the unconscious mind like the embers of a first fire if it is not to vanish into smoke. Reaching then into his innermost self, he began to draw out the material and transcribe it onto the page.

It poured thick and fast in the form of all kinds of names, names from all ethnicities, of all epochs, names from his past and present and futures past, names dredged up from another life when he lived under his own roof and watched TV alongside his wife and children, names from his time as an academic when he had attended conferences all over the world, names he had come across while reviewing academic journals, names of long dead white men and living Asian women, names of pastors and soothsayers he had conversed with when the winds of his misfortune became gales and blew him down the doomed road of his own personal odyssey, his dead children's names, his wife's name, the name of her new husband.

He wrote down names as if his mother had never named him and he was testing on a new name for himself. He wrote names until the sun went down and night rose and his fingers were raw at the edges and started to bleed.

Then he became conscious of the smell of the shit ridden toilet again and the sound of people banging on the door outside and swearing on god and the graves of their dead grandmothers to drown him in that effluvium the second he opened the door. Hands reached through the battered door to tear at his rags. He clambered up the window, jumped into the canal outside, and ran all the way to his rotted mattress under the bridge. He sighed when he noted the human shaped depression made on the side of the mattress where the motor-park woman used to sleep. In the months since she left it had not regained its original fullness. Reviewing his notebook, he chuckled to himself. This must be what it felt like to be God. Soon, he was yawning and as he turned over to sleep it occurred to him that he must begin the colossal task of selecting three out of that mammoth number of names.

The rains began innocuously as with other rains except weathermen all over the world fast came to realize that it was raining at the same time everywhere in the world, a curious phenomenon to be certain and one that would surely pass except that it didn't. Soon mails tinged with the beginnings of panic made cross-continental journeys in scientific circles and, with a few well-timed hacks and leaks, made their way, transmogrified, into the public sphere by way of articles and journals and blogs and Instagram and Twitter.

In various identical scenes around the world, screaming activists waved placards in front of solid black walls of policemen and swat teams. They said these were the consequences of ignoring climate change. The bridesmaids of Christ danced, gyrated, and sweated under open tents, expecting that celestial groom to descend on a cloud at any moment and whisk them

away from the confines of this accursed world. Power brokers in all motley shapes and colours held meetings at round tables in air-conditioned bunkers surrounded by the paraphernalia of state and capital. Governments of the first world issued statements that declared the situation to be a plot on the part of the Chinese and Iranian government who were no doubt forming a new and unforeseen axis of evil. The Chinese government, never to be outdone, attributed the rain to a sinophobic conspiracy and Western states trying to interfere in its internal affairs.

The Israeli prime minister, an avuncular man with steely white hair and a stately tone that inspired confidence and a nostalgia for statesmen of past eras, looked squarely into the camera and told a watching world with no equivocation that this was the result of dealing lightly with Palestinian riff-raff and the world must finally confront the reality of the Arab question or perish. Sub-Saharan populations listened on battery-powered radios to their politicians give insipid speeches about neo-colonialism and Capitalism and how Africa must rise up like a phoenix from the ashes. Live news channels displayed the cool, rational citizens of Paris, New York, Tokyo, and London fighting mortal battles and strategic warfare for the dominion of toilet paper in the vast wastelands of Walmarts and Carrefours. Upturned television screens flashed images of cars jamming highways and autobahns, their occupants screaming curses in a babbel of tongues,

racing to get to the hinterlands and mountain regions amid the impossible spectacle of the once great coastal cities, the Lagos, the Rio-de-janeiros, the Hong-Kongs, now deserted.

K hunkered down in his corner in the shade of an umbrella that provided only the most rudimentary protection from the rain. He tried to figure out which would drive him deaf first, the chattering of his teeth or the demented roar of the downpour. A stone's throw from where he sat curled up, the lights from a crystal display flickered in and out of focus, submerged one moment and exposed the next. They revealed the incompletewords "mpagne earl Tower" in bright green lettering amidst a shower of sparks.

Beyond the safety of his roof, rivers the colour of coffee edged with white froth churned with debris: chairs, tables, lampposts, a Hummer jeep, a procession of dogs and bleating goats and cats still chasing each other, their beady eyes animated with terror. A corpse with the saddest face in the world and skin speckled with moss flashed by, entangled in reeds. It thumped against the lights of the tower for a couple of perverse moments, as if looking for a way in before sailing along. Next came a poster of the president from the last campaign, a broad smile creasing the fleshy, determined cheeks, and the words, "The rains of change" written in bold red above his head.

"Rains of change. Good joke. Very good," came a voice hollow with misery from behind K. He turned wearily. The voice belonged to a man sitting on the edge of the roof, elbows on knees and palms cradling his face, with his feet twirling in the water. It was the first time the man had spoken in the three weeks since their little group had clambered up to the topmost floor. They had had a narrow escape from the jaws of a shark while they were absorbed in looting soaked cartons of cereal and soggy sausages from the kitchen of the hotel whose roof now offered them protection. K suspected the man had slowly undergone an erosion of his sanity after that spectacle of a great white shark cavorting in the mid floors of a hotel in the center of a West African city.

Of the other members of their group, the little girl was just then tugging at the hem of the shirt of the man with sunken, beaten shoulders he assumed to be her father. The man looked out hopelessly into the rain from under the raincoat that sheltered them. He ignored the little girl's cries of I'm hungry and why is mummy not getting up.

Mummy was the last member of the group. She lay unmoving in the centre of the roof, belly up, her eyes and mouth gaping. But for the subdued expansion and deflation that moved, inch by inch, the soaked rags that barely covered her gargantuan bulk, K would have thought her dead if not. A sorry lot they were, he thought, and returned his attention to his notebook. He inhaled, concentrating his energies in his head until he began to see pinpricks of light, then exhaled in one long, explosive burst. Taking up his pencil, he allowed himself to be carried away on the coattails of that outburst and wrote furiously, pouring himself into the writing in one final, desperate charge. He sensed, almost like a burning mark on his forehead, the indelible fate of the bearer of bad news whose head is forever destined to be cut off for his pains.

An hour later he raised his head to find himself alone and the water up to his thighs. Apart from his roof, nothing else broke the surface of that watery wilderness. Insensible now to the rain that lashed at his eyes and the tears that rolled down them, he started to laugh.

Somewhere in the old world, in the south west of a place that was once called France, where grand cathedrals had risen to the sky, and sprawling acres of grapes had ripened under the sun, but which was now a sterile ocean without end, the rains were thinning; the carcasses of buildings poked out in places like so much debris. A giant white piano floated into view, bearing on it the body of an emaciated man with skin speckled with moss and thin enough to see through to the blood pulsing in his veins and organs palpitating below the surface. Beneath a ragged beard that covered three-quarters of his face, his lips moved. The piano floated in no particular direction for the better part of the day. Only when the sun began its descent did the man struggle painfully to a seated position, leaving behind the imprint of his body and an entire continent of creatures that scurried for shade.

At the other end of the earth and at about the same time the bearded man opened his eyes, a woman washed up face down on a beach. Her stocky back was ridged with barnacles and pulsing leeches. She struggled to her knees, coughing and spluttering; out shot a sea horse, a pile of seaweed, the cork of a wine bottle, bits of plastic bags, the serrated tops of soda bottles, strips of wire, blackened sand, and a coffee brown liquid. She remained there with her hands supporting her bulk, her body heaving, emptying the contents of her stomach onto the sand. Her agonized gasps were the only sounds that punctured the hermetic air free of the noises of either bird or beast. Her rasping devolved into desperate sobs as fragments of images exploded like shards of broken glass in her mind: The terrified faces of a boy and girl, her children, a man, her husband, squeezing them tight in his arms, forearms taut with defiance in the onslaught of an irrevocable fate.

Moments after the previous two had roused themselves on opposite ends of the earth, a young man crawled out of a crevice in the floor of a house in the same city where, in another life, K had spent his terminal moments striking away at names in his notebook until he settled on three names from pages twenty, fifty two, and seventy eight. The young man clutched a half-open laptop to his chest. The emerald glow of running numbers from the screen lit up his face and neck in the darkness, bringing scars of pimples from a recent adolescence, and an incipient beard into sharp relief. He had been in the process of creating a piece of software when he fell into a slumber from which he did not awake for a lifetime and a half and in which he had dreamed of rain, a monumental flood, a purple sky covered from end to end in names the colour of blood, and the end of the world. He lurched to the window and looked out to discover himself floating in an unending sea filled with bits and pieces of things that were and things to come and things not yet seen. He opened his mouth wide and yawned.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *The kernel of the story came from a writing prompt during a period of experimentation where I was just trying to get words down as fast as possible without any particular objective in mind. I don't recall the specifics of the prompt but it had something to do with a man writing names in a book.*

Weaving in themes of hope and hopelessness, indifference, cynicism, and a desire for a fresh, new world around the basic idea wasn't difficult. These are themes I'm prone to ruminating on, perhaps excessively, as we are deluged with horror after fresh horror, with the infinite capacity of institutions to profit from misery, and with the human ability to withstand and carve out meaning in the face of all the absurdity. The biblical myth of Noah's ark gave form to parts of the middle and most of the ending.

I read. Far more than most people might consider sane. If I am to pick literary influences that stand apart from the rest, of which there are many, I would have to say Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Albert Camus. I would consider my life fulfilled, and be ready to die this very minute, if my stuff could measure up to even a tenth of what those men have written.

AUTHOR BIO: Born and raised in Lagos, Nigeria, Eviano George is an ESL teacher somewhere in the vast wilderness that is the Mexican countryside. He has an unhealthy obsession with learning new stuff; He is a bit of a jack-of-all trades and competent in a few--the poor man's Leonardo da Vinci, or so he likes to think. Fiction happens to be the latest in along line of obsessions.