

AN ARC OF ELECTRIC SKIN

Wole Talabi

Wole Talabi is an engineer, writer, and editor from Nigeria. His stories have appeared in such venues as *F&SF*, *Lightspeed*, and *Clarksword*. He has edited three anthologies of African fiction: the science fiction collection, *Africanfuturism* (2020); the horror collection, *Lights Out: Resurrection* (2016); and the literary fiction collection, *These Words Expose Us* (2014). Wole also cowrote the play *Color Me Man*. His fiction has been nominated for several awards including the Caine Prize for African Writing and the Nommo Award, which he has won twice (2018 and 2020). The author likes scuba diving, elegant equations, and oddly shaped things. He currently lives and works in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. His first tale for *Asimov's* considers the dire circumstances of . . .

AN ARC OF ELECTRIC SKIN

For a long time, I wondered what kind of person would volunteer to have their skin exposed to temperatures cycling between the melting point of aluminium and the night-time surface temperature of Mercury, riding a wave of thermal torment that would drive most people insane with pain.

Now I know.

I fell in love with such a man.

He was ungraciously tied to an anti-ionization pole and executed by a six-man firing squad in front of the dirty grey wall of Kirikiri prison before a hushed crowd of witnesses.

I never even got the chance to say a proper goodbye.

I was in the vice grip of three burly secret service officers, tears still streaming down my face even though I'd been crying for days. His Afro was wild and uneven, the white jumpsuit he'd been dressed in was frayed but clean and his eyes were still as defiant as they'd been the day he'd walked into my office at Lagos University

Teaching Hospital and said with calm and composure that belied all the rage that must have been inside him, "Dr. Ogunbiyi, I read the paper you published with Professor Aliyu. I want to volunteer."

His real name was Akachi Nwosu, but the media called him *Shock Absorber*, because he used to be a roadside mechanic before he met me and taught himself to wield lightning. My people believe names are tied to one's essence and can influence or predict one's destiny, a bond to one's Orí. I think Akachi's people have similar beliefs, because he told me his name means *hand of god*. It was appropriate. What else would you call a man whose destiny drove him to find a way to hold on to the raging flow of displaced electrons and bend them to his will?

My heart aches because I miss his determined eyes, his hard hands, his smooth skin, his soft voice. But also, because in fragile moments, doubts overwhelm me, and I am not sure if I ever knew him completely enough to have truly loved him. In the darkest of those moments, when I think about his final deception, I am not sure if he ever truly loved me either.

He'd graduated from the University of Ibadan with a degree in electrical engineering, during which he had attended guest lectures by my senior research partner Professor Aliyu. He graduated with a first-class degree and a fascination with electrical systems, despite having to work part time as an assistant at a mechanic shop where he also lived because he couldn't afford accommodation. But he couldn't find a job in the crumbling post-oil economy, and so he took what little savings he had and started a small mechanic shop of his own next to Ojota Motor Park. He showed me pictures of it while we lay in each other's arms, two nights before the procedure. It was little more than a zinc roof over dusty land and a pile of secondhand tools. The profits weren't good, but he worked hard. His calloused hands bore witness. He spent hours attending to junky jalopies that were barely roadworthy, but heaven knows he did his best with them. His own mother had died in a bus just like the ones he frequently serviced, in an accident on the Lagos-Ibadan express that everyone knew was caused by a contractor cutting corners on what should have been road barriers. An accident he'd barely survived himself, needing five months in the hospital to recover and walk again. His father had sold everything he owned and borrowed from family members just to afford the care his son needed. So, when Akachi worked on those buses and cars, he told me, he saw the faces of the families that would get into them, hoping to make it to their destinations, and so he worked as hard as he could to make sure they did.

He endured every brick the crumbling system threw at him. Constant police harassment raids for bribes, aggressive underpaying clients, random changes in government policy that almost always meant he had to pay more for something, thieving and untrustworthy assistants. All of this under the blistering heat of the Lagos sun, increasing his already-high melanin levels, his darkening another physical marker of his endurance. And still, he persisted, my Akachi. He had a strong mind.

"This country happens to all of us," he'd told me the first night I had asked about his scars. That was his philosophy. "Some of us more than others."

He eventually saved enough money to move out of the face-me-I-face-you he shared with friends from university and into a self-contained in an almost respectable part of town. He was working his way up the broken system, keeping up with the *Nigerian Journal of Electrical and Electronic Applications*, and still looking for a job where he could apply the knowledge that still fascinated him.

Then he went to the campaign rally.

Ezekwe4President. EzEasy. A New Nigeria. We all remember the slogans. The dig-tags. The posters. Ngozi Ezekwe announced her candidacy quietly at a small event

near her hometown in Awka but within a few months, she had become the leading opposition contender. She was a technocrat with a plan, unlike the political vultures circling the federal carcass we'd become used to. She came in with a clear agenda, an empathetic ear and grassroots support from businesses she'd helped survive the economic apocalypse. We all remember the hope. And we all saw what happened. Quovision display decks crackled with high resolution holostreams of soldiers beating unarmed people in the streets, dragging them into the backs of armored trucks, firing live rounds into defiant crowds, breaking up the opposition rallies and protests. Akachi was one of those taken into custody near the infamous Ojota protest site where almost forty were killed. He was beaten and tortured for weeks. The Gusau administration made no secret of what they did even though the president denied giving the order on international broadcasts. But on the ground, we all knew what it was. We'd seen it before. Their regular trademark. It was a show of force to intimidate the opposition and its supporters. We were living in a hostage state.

It was during his weeks of torment that something broke in Akachi. To be treated that way by those who were meant to protect and serve you, to know that they could kill you and nothing would happen, it does something to your mind. Pain can clarify things. He told me later that after hours of unrelenting terror and agony, he'd stopped fearing death, that he'd realized then that he'd been so focused on surviving the system that he hadn't ever truly been alive, that he was doing nothing but dying slowly and had been doing so for a long time. He told me that when he was released, he'd resolved to ensure things changed.

I wish I had known then exactly what he'd meant.

"I'm not recruiting test subjects yet," I told him that day in my office, after he'd explained who he was and what he was talking about. "We still have a few iterations to ensure we can manage sensory response."

"You mean pain?"

"Yes," I told him. "Right now, we can only ensure subject survival and prevent long-term tissue damage, but we are still working to limit the impact of extreme temperature microexposures on pain receptors. The body and the mind will protest, even under anaesthesia."

"I can handle pain," he said calmly.

I'd just come back from a session with the visiting council at the African Academy of Sciences to make my seventh application for additional funding after a week of sleepless nights running calculations and preparing proposals. The potential of our research was enormous. Even the most conservative members of the council weren't myopic enough to miss the value in being able to use enhanced conductivity in human skin to develop a new category of biomedical devices that could be naturally embedded in the body and controlled using dermal interface circuitry. They just wanted to see more progress before they committed to helping us. Professor Aliyu had already designed and tested a prototype device using enhanced conductivity in discarded epithelial extracts, but we needed to show that we could make this work in living people. I felt like I was the one holding things back. I was under pressure to make some progress. I should have been more sceptical. I should have asked more questions. I should have told Akachi to wait until we were ready, but instead, I asked him to fill out a form.

It took a few weeks for me to convince Professor Aliyu to cross what he believed to be a moral line and for us to perform all the preliminary tests and screening processes. We spent much of that time together, Akachi sitting just outside my office quietly watching me or reading. Patiently waiting for another blood or skin or hair sample collection or for another baseline skin conductivity measurement. I never asked him why he never left the hospital in between tests, but I did ask him to join me for dinner

once as I was closing for the day. He seemed so focused sitting there, reading an old battered electrical engineering book, but I don't think I will ever forget the soft smile that broke across his face when he looked up and the way he said, "Yes, Doctor. But please, let me take you to the best buka in Surulere. I hope you are hungry."

"I am," I said. I hadn't eaten all day.

We went to eat amala and gbegiri at a makeshift shop down the road. An old lady in a black blouse and ankara wrapper scooped up the soft lumps of yam flour, loaded them with generous helpings of soup and meat, and we took seats on plastic chairs behind her. We spoke as we ate. That was the first time we talked about anything other than the experiments, but the conversation flowed naturally, easily. We spoke for hours, until the old woman told us she was closing for the day. It wasn't planned, but we went back to my place and kept talking. He showed me some of his scars and I told him about my work, and we kept speaking until we fell asleep together, face to face on my bed with all our clothes still on. When we woke up in the morning, we laughed and then we kissed, leaving me lightheaded, like I was still asleep and in a dream. It was only later that a feeling of wrongness settled upon me. He was, in some sense, my patient. But nothing that happened that day was planned, and sometimes you get caught in a river and you can't do anything but flow. Love can be a strange and sudden thing.

Three days after he'd passed the final screening, I led him into the bio-annealing cell I'd designed with Professor Aliyu. He squeezed my hand as he stepped into the black, ovoid pod with wires and tubes running out of it like so many umbilical cords. He smiled at me before securing the fibreglass mask over his face. Professor Aliyu was nested comfortably in his wheelchair, monitoring the thermal induction and vacuum pump systems that would rearrange the molecular structure of the melanin in Akachi's skin. Part of me wanted to pull him away, to wait until we had improved the bio-annealing procedure to the point where we could do it with less pain. Or perhaps to reduce the target conductivity increase from the theoretical limit to a near-threshold value, even though I knew that would only reduce the pain induced by a small fraction and increase the risk of process failure. For sure, if I'd known then what he was planning to do, what he had resolved to do all along, I would have dragged him out of there. But I didn't, so I stepped back and gave Professor Aliyu the signal to begin.

He screamed, but we could not hear him. He screamed for the three hours it took to increase his skin conductivity fifty orders of magnitude. I stepped out of the room to cry.

I still wonder how he managed to endure it. I still wonder how I could put someone I loved through that. I suppose I will always wonder when it comes to Akachi.

It was only a month later that I truly understood why he did it.

I saw it all in high-resolution holostream, same as everyone else.

Incumbent President Umar Gusau was standing in the back of an electric black Mercedes T-class pickup truck, flanked by secret servicemen in dark suits and military attachés in camouflage as he waved to a crowd of paid supporters. Although he was supposed to be resting at home and preparing for his conductivity stability test that day, I saw Akachi on the quovision screen. He was an almost-invisible speck in the sea of people. Almost invisible, that is, until he pulled up an umbrella fitted with what I later came to find out was a high-powered laser, and fired it silently into the sky where it formed an ionized column of air, an artificial conduit for electrical discharge.

When lightning finally tore down from the sky in a hot, bright streak, he reached up and seized it like a whip made of bright, electric death. I gasped audibly and didn't even notice that I was spilling my cup of hot Lipton tea onto my desk. He

struck down at the presidential procession in a smooth, clear motion. There was a deafening explosion of thunder. A flash of impossibly white light. A scattering of dust and particles and fragments. The holographic displays went dead, and I exhaled deeply, letting out the breath I didn't know I had been holding and seeing the brown spill that was spreading steadily across my desk. I didn't even bother to try to wipe up any of it. My eyes remained glued to the fuzzy, crackling images being transmitted from Abuja. When the holostreams were reestablished and everything had settled, there were bodies, there was fire, there was blood.

No matter how many times I watch it, a part of me still doesn't believe that the man I loved could cause so much destruction, so much death. I suppose now, in hindsight, I should have known, I should have seen the signs. The frequency with which he quoted the late Ken Saro-Wiwa and Fela Kuti; the way he always averted his eyes when I spoke about the results of the procedure and his future; the calm with which he spoke about his mother's death, the state of the economy, the bribes, the torture, the politicians, the pain. So much pain. A lifetime of pain and struggle. I should have known that he was full and running over. I should have loved him enough to see all of him clearly.

More was to come. He went on a rampage throughout Abuja, wielding lightning like raw justice at corrupt politicians, judges, soldiers, police, foreign businessmen, everyone he believed had a hand in making the broken system the way it was.

He surrendered two terror-filled weeks later, a trail of dead in his wake.

During the trial, some in the media started calling him Nigeria's first true-life superhero. They dubbed him *Shock Absorber*. Others said he was no hero, just another tragic monster the system created. In the end none of it mattered—he was quickly found guilty and sentenced to death.

I was given the opportunity to say goodbye, to watch him die, by President Ezekwe herself, a woman who wouldn't be where she was without his actions but who now reluctantly acceded to cries for his public execution in order to secure her position. It was the law, she'd said to me on the phone, Section 33 of the Constitution, and she could not be seen to interfere in the trial of a man, a terrorist, who had extrajudicially murdered her predecessor in cold blood. She'd be accused of sponsoring, sympathizing or spinelessness in matters of upholding the law. Even commuting his sentence to life would make her position untenable, she told me as I begged her over the phone to save his life, tears streaming down my puffy face like bitter rain.

And so, I helplessly watched camouflaged soldiers in tactical masks march in, take up positions and take aim. He just smiled and mouthed two words.

"Thank you."

Ah. My Akachi. The hand of god. My people believe that Ẓàngó, the òrìṣà of thunder and lightning, is also the lord of justice, and he only strikes down those who have offended him. Those who have committed offenses against the land and its people, and for whom spilled blood demanded justice. I think Akachi's people believe something similar. Seeing him bound there, I still wasn't sure if what he had done was good or even just. Divine or otherwise. But things had been so wrong in the country for so long that perhaps this was what was needed to start a change. Or perhaps he has only started us down a dark and dangerous path filled with even more desperation, more violence. I don't know. I could see he was at peace with himself, and for that, I was glad.

But I could not bear to watch the bullets pierce his beautiful black, electric skin; the skin I'd caressed and touched tenderly, the skin I'd helped him turn into a weapon. I closed my eyes and waited, holding my breath, until finally, I heard the unmistakable sharp cracks of semi-automatic fire.

They sounded like judgment, like thunder, like heartbreak.