

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

A Man and His Breasts

Osinachi · Thursday, December 17th, 2015

I am a dreamer. I dream of cameras—rolling and flashing lights—capturing every deliberate pose of mine. I dream of being in the eyes of the world. I dream so long, so deep that I feel myself lifting from the ground, but once I remember this I juggle back to reality, my face drawn against the impossibility that sits on my chest. And so, instead, I begin to dream of getting rid of this. I begin to dream of shedding this difference that has held me back since puberty. I dream of being normal.

I am not sick. I only have this condition.

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I was in junior secondary school when I noticed it. Before then, I had run around our former neighborhood in Aba wearing nothing but shorts, a child unwary to the eyes of the world. I was a constant face in street football. I cherished throwing my shirt in reckless abandon while I chased after the *felele* ball, sweat running down my body like agitated caterpillars. As evening brought the voice of my mother knifing into the air with my name I would pick up my slippers where I had thrown them and walk home with other boys, the fun we just had fresh in our stomachs. But then the hardness of the breasts began, the itching came time after time. As I scratched I realized that my breasts were getting bigger and bigger. Or was it rounder and rounder? Soon, I had two tiny nipples on my chest pointing ahead whenever I took off my shirt.

I stopped taking off my shirt.

I took up every excuse, no matter how absurd to make sure that I kept my shirt on, even at home where it was just me and my family. I slept with a shirt on in the swell of cool and in the rage of heat because my elder brother slept in the same room as me.

Soon I got tired of hiding in a shirt during sleep. I started taking my shirt off whenever I was convinced everyone had slept. Father took notice. Mother took notice. So did my siblings. Yet nobody talked to me about the breasts that had grown on my chest. If father had discussed it with mother, I do not know. But as he announced one evening that he was going to see a chemist in a neighbouring street a battle began inside of me. I was in the middle of a seesaw weighted on respective ends by ‘Tell him’ and ‘Don’t tell him’. At last I ran after him and he stopped at the door.

“Daddy, please ask Dee Chukwudi if he has medication for these things that have grown on my chest,” I said to him.

Father turned and looked at me. In his style, he was silent for a little while, his jaws moving slightly as though there were hands in his mouth moulding the words. When the words came they were: “No need to bother about that. It is called *akp? ara*. You will grow to fit into it. I had it too when I was your age.”

I nodded.

Years passed and I got a mobile phone of my own. As father had taught me to use the internet I decided to seek solution online. The only thing I could come across was the medical name of my condition: gynecomastia—man boobs.

“Gynecomastia.” As I grew up, I remember pronouncing that word over and over again until it etched into the skin of my head with the fire of my anxiousness. As I grew, I never got to fit into the breasts as father had assured because it seemed they grew ahead, always ahead of me. I needed to talk to a medical practitioner, someone close.

My chance came the evening I was sent to the chemist’s shop to get drugs for my younger one. As I sat there, packing up the packaged pills, I said, “Ehe,” like someone who had just remembered something long forgotten. “Dee Chukwudi, my father said I should ask you if there is a cure for gynecomastia.” That was a lie. Father never told me to ask him. The chemist was obviously confused. He looked at me from across his shelf as if I had morphed into some other person that he did not know. However, he asked me to come into his backroom. There, he made me lift my shirt and, with each squeeze, he inspected the breasts. He would consult with a doctor and, on a later evening when I reminded him, he would say to me, “I’ve talked to your father about that. What is needed on that is surgery.”

As his words sunk in my ears, they seemed to drag hope with them. My family was struggling with finance. Surgery was a burden they couldn’t bear. So I held that answer inside. Since I was not dying from this already, I decided that I was not going to pay more attention to this condition.

I was wrong. Indirectly, my emotional life was in danger, and I was going to pay the most attention to this condition throughout my life.

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My wardrobe is filled with button shirts because no matter how much the wind blows against them they do not reveal the shape of my breasts. They grant me that salvation from the eyes of people, but they are not all that I want. I want to wear t-shirts too. I love t-shirts—the way they gum on a man’s arms and his biceps. If only I had a chest like other guys I might even wear a body-hugging shirt. For now I have to stick to button shirts—that garment that signposts gentlemanliness to the average Nigerian.

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When I got promoted to junior secondary school 2, Physical and Health Education was introduced as a new subject. The first time the teacher walked into the classroom, he gave us the title of the textbook to be used; then he added that as a class we shall be having physical and health exercise every Thursday morning. Everyone was to come with their white t-shirts, white shorts and white shoes. I was troubled because it meant that I would certainly have to change in the midst of my classmates—Mulan yet to be uncovered—and certainly I would have to wear a t-shirt. But every

outing came with its luck as I would run off to find my private change space somewhere in the building, away from the eyes of everyone, and return promptly for the activities. As we skipped the rope and threw the discus and played the handball, excitement took everyone's eyes away from my breasts which pushed against the t-shirt. But on the day that we were divided into groups for the continuous assessment my condition let me down in the presence of my classmates.

My group had just finished, and I was looking out at others when a classmate, a brilliant boy that I had recently become friends with came up to me and begged that I lend him my t-shirt. In his eyes was the lucid conviction that I was going to give it to him. He had not come with his and he was going to fail the continuous assessment if I did not help. I hesitated. Then I said, "No." And walked away, pushing my way through surprised classmates. I wanted to give him my t-shirt, so badly wanted to. But I could not bear baring my body in the midst of everyone. My condition could not let me. So I walked away in fear and lost a friendship.

This brought me the realisation that I was going to face even harder times if these breasts were not done away with. I doubled my care in hiding. But no matter how much I tried to hide, somehow two friends in my former neighbourhood found out. I think that one of them had seen me exposed and had told the other. Wryly, as we discussed girls and sex one day, and I did not have anything to contribute to the conversation but to chuckle and smile, and one of them commented that I needed to meet girls, that I needed "to give way for the semen stored up in these breasts to flow out." He touched my breast to drive home his point.

I froze at his remark, the ghost of a smile lingering on my face. He was merely uttering what I came to realise was myth among young men—that man boobs were brought about by lack of sexual adventure in the life of a young man; the semen not ejaculated regularly ended up packing up in the chest, swelling into breasts in his body. Before him I had heard the same thing from a much older person in whom I had confided. He had said that once I started *releasing* I would see that the breasts would disappear. He had suggested masturbation. I had believed him; and I would spend almost every day for the next four years, locked in, my hand soiled with body cream, masturbating. I got used to standing naked before the mirror, examining my lump breasts with the dedication of an undertaker at urgent work, with the belief that each ejaculation expelled semen from my breasts. The belief was strong that I was getting close to being a normal guy until in the presence of another friend my best friend then accidentally caught a glimpse of my breasts and exclaimed his discovery. They both laughed like drunken men. I would go home that day ashamed, tears ripening inside of me. The breasts never shrunk a skin.

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I see guys out in the open, trapped in the glamour of lifting heavy metals that make up their improvised gym. They talk football and argue whose six packs are more developed, and flex their venous arms. I sit where I am, looking, admiring their bodies. And envying them.

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In the year 2009, my family got in a tiny tangle of trouble with a man who had imposed vigilante levies on the neighbourhood. Father disagreed with him and his style, and one evening we found ourselves, together with other residents, in a brawl with this man and his cohort. As we slept that night, he packed some policemen and broke down our door. I had no shirt on so, in the midst of the shouts and the uncertainty on whether the intruders were assassins, I hurried over to the wardrobe

and quickly threw a shirt on just as they barged in our bedrooms, torchlight searching faces in the dark. For the first time in my life, I was taken away to the police station where, prior to being thrown in cell, I was made to take off my shirt. This was a tough moment for me. I was nineteen but I was not afraid of what was waiting in the cell. Whatever it was, it was not as cold as the eyes that filled my breasts once my shirt came off. Humiliated, that was how I felt—naked to the world, even with my boxers on. I wept without sound.

The sound came when the officer who inspected cell washing the next morning barked at me and ordered me back into the wet cement floor, my arms wrapped around my chest like a wrapper, a bucket of urine trapped inside my skin in-between by laps. When father came with my uncle and I was called out, my arms were still wrapped around my chest, I tried to force a smile but some tears clung to my eyebrows just as rain clings to palm fronds. When the District Police Officer and the officer that led the operation apologized for the mistake I shook my head and bit my lips. I was not pacified by the arrest and detention of the vigilante man who had lied to them. I had been exposed to the world in a way that I had avoided fervently. All I did was to never forgive.

When I got admission into the university, finance and self bothered me. I can say that the finance part was a general worry which every member of my family felt at that time. But personal to me was my condition, *this* condition. Considering that I was different, I was worried about how I was going to live in a single room with five roommates. I was also going to bathe in a public bathroom. How was I going to stand in the midst of other boys, covered in nothing but lather, my breasts pointing at them? I later found out that the bathroom was a hall with about six stalls, most of which their doors had broken off. Whenever I bathed, I faced the wall, taking in the eczema patterns made by many years of lather drying on it. The guy in the opposite stall could only see my back and my buttocks.

Others came out of the bathroom bare-bodied, only their boxers or towels on. I came out with boxers and a shirt as though I was afraid of being raped.

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My classmates and I have a little poolside gathering to celebrate our graduation. As other guys shed all their clothes except their swimming trunks or boxers, I appear in a sleeveless. I look at their eyes and I see that they are wondering what I am doing. I pretend that I am so holy that no one deserves to see my body. This is how I swim throughout the day. I constantly emerge from the water, my hand pulling the sleeveless that gums on to my body. I make sure that no one has seen the revelation on my chest as the wet sleeveless clung too tightly.

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In the hostels, I devised a means of changing into my clothes. I made sure that there were not so many people in the room, and I made sure that I was not engaged in a conversation with anyone. I faced the wardrobe and, swift as wind, pulled off my wet shirt and put on another one.

In the second semester, one of my roommates took notice. I was changing one morning when he commented out loud that I never stayed in the room bare-bodied, never went to the bathroom bare-bodied, and I was always in a hurry, more like jumpy, whenever I changed. My heightening heartbeat was almost going to knock me out until those present asked him what his business was. On the day that he physically attempted to expose what I was hiding I went to class feeling submerged in the wish that the defect I had in my body was a scar, no matter how big, no matter

how ugly. (At least, I would have to say why a knife went into my body instead of explaining why breasts grew out of it.)

That day he came from behind me with impeccable stealth and pulled at the shirt I was about to breeze into, his eyes searching my body. I fought him off, not in a way that showed anger but in a way that stated that I wanted to be left alone.

Another day I was in the bathroom when he got into the stall directly opposite mine. I heard the swishing of his clothes as he undressed, and then his voice, “I would have wondered if you bathed with your clothes on.” I chuckled nervously. I knew that he and others must have had their suspicions. I imagined their voiceless inner selves asking why a guy would feel insecure like a girl in the midst of other guys. I imagined them trying to fight off that inner self as it theorized, ‘Maybe he is gay.’ For a long time, and even vaguely now, I felt that I had lost my personhood.

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I am obsessed over the human body. Maybe it is dissatisfaction with mine that has led me into seeing the poetry which the body can become. So I see a photo of a perfect body bare against the setting sun with the beach as background, and I instinctively show someone by my side, saying “Wow. Look at that.” They look at the photo and frown and look at me like I am possessed. I am disappointed that they don’t see that which I see. But how can they?

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I have met only two persons with gynecomastia, friends both of them. The first was my junior secondary school classmate who had come as I was doing laundry to complain that his breasts were getting bigger and giving out water whenever he squeezed them. I recall that he had pulled up his shirt then and showed me. I had smiled, told him that it was called gynaecomastia and that I had it too. I had seen his chest deflate as he heaved a sigh of relief (maybe at learning its medical term or knowing that someone else had it, I don’t know); then he had said to me, “My mum is panicking that I have breast cancer.” As we grew up together and entered into senior secondary, he saw his breasts disappear. His body had hormonized itself into shape. I guess this was what father had assured me of. I waited for mine. It never came.

The second person was a primary school friend who I had reunited with while in junior secondary school. I had paid him a visit one day only to meet him in their living room, his shirt off and the breasts on his slim body looking out of place. If he was bothered that I had seen him that exposed he did not show it. I did not say anything about it to him. When later we went out to meet with another old friend, this friend of mine eagerly pulled off his shirt and we got to play football in the compound. Once other boys saw his breasts, I think that one of them said something like “Man, some breasts you have there.” Others laughed. We played on, the only wears I put aside being my jacket and my footwears. Time passed and he moved with his family. I never got to find out what happened to those breasts.

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A website reports that only about 15% of males in the world experience gynecomastia I can imagine that this tiny figure sufficiently represents males in the world who love to swim in public with their shirts on, who are scared about a first time in bed because their partners will look up at their faces and ask, “You have breasts?” And I cannot help thinking how much of that 15% has

lost things—friendship, dreams and aspiration, confidence etc.—they badly wanted to keep because of their condition, and how many of them have been fed that masturbation myth. I wonder how many still dream and hope for the ideal body.

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Remembering those two friends now, I strongly wish that I have the luck of the first or the courage of the second. Either way, I would have been living my dream of being showered with flashlights—in the studio, on set, on stage. But for now, my body is a piece of art that doesn't fascinate me.

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