

Portrait of a Poem as Etymology

by Abdullah Jimoh



"2 Head" by ?evval Horzum

At the shed-kitchen in the backyard, while cooking, the poem begins with the voice of my father — archeological, narrating my biography. Digging up the landscape of my beginning. I watch him speak keenly of the origin of the word *ʔpʔʔyʔmí*, which is my name, which means *Gratitude suits me*. Language is like a river housing various species of fish. How a word in one language can be a sentence in another. I watch him perspire while unearthing the difficult past with his tongue like a well-digger. His tongue, pale pink, the insides of his mouth a shade of red as wet clay. He says he was at the border between life and death but was more dead than alive, by which he means his whole body, apart from his legs, was frozen, the night mum went into labor. He says he couldn't sit, stand, bend or lie-down. His name is *Modúpʔʔ* which means *I'm grateful*. When granny suggested that the baby should be named *ʔpʔʔyʔmí*, he couldn't agree more because of the episode of the labor night. So now *I'm-grateful* fathers *Gratitude-suits-me*. I enjoy how he tells the story like an archeologist, excavating the etymology of my name — an artifact. I like how people in my language used to tie a word to incidence and christen their child with it. Say *Babátúndé*: Father comes again (after death). Say *Ìyábʔʔ*: Mother returns (from death). Say *Ayomidé* (my joy has arrived). My arms are the word “welcome,” opening like a bird's wings to hug the ones coming, returning & arriving.