

ACROSS THE GULF

WINNER, ANA PROSE FICTION PRIZE 2017

DUL JOHNSON



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ISBN: 978-978-53799-5-2

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An Imprint of VERSHAGE Enterprises

Administration and Correspondence:

C/o GERI, Suite 8 & 9, No 2, Ugbokolo Street, High Level, P. O. Box 2192, Makurdi, Benue State, NIGERIA

***Black Gate Trove, No 3, MFM Street, Karu, Nasarawa State**

P.O. Box 2192, Makurdi, Benue State

+234 (0) 807 358 0365; +234 (0) 809 248 7423; +234 (0) 703 187 4471

<http://sevhage.wordpress.com>

<http://vershage.wordpress.com>

sevhage@gmail.com

Cover Design: Eugene Odogwu

Book Design: Su'eddie Vershima Agema

Typesetting: Winepress, www.winepress.pub

For Book Supplies, call +2347032610015, +2348156702704

CHAPTER ONE

I funanya did not come back.

What had started as the beginning of a blissful life ended up as the beginning of pains, sorrow and loss that would dog her all her life; the beginning of a ruined future of a family about to be born. It was a moment of bliss shattered by the most terrifying sounds that she had ever heard, sounds that haunted her for the rest of her life.

It was not entirely Ofala's fault. As always, she was eager to escape from what she had nicknamed *nkporo-ulo-nso*, *Churchprison*, especially on evenings when her father was not in a prayer or some other meeting at the Church. She hated the house: its shape, paint and the dank, stifling air it exuded at night.

Kalu had the oddest house in Okigboli. He had chosen to be different, and, but for Nwamaka, the difference would have been too bizarre for all members of the family—except for Kalu himself—to live with. It was long, like a church building, and only the sizes and position of the windows, one front door and a small one to the backyard through the kitchen, made it different from the Presbyterian Church, Okigboli, where he was an evangelist.

More than its shape, what made the house really bizarre was its paint. Kalu had insisted on painting the house sparkling chalk-white, inside and outside: the outward proclamation of his spirituality. Nwamaka stoutly resisted this until Kalu decided he would use sky “heaven” blue on the outside and “spirit” white inside. Spirituality, after all, was a thing of the heart; it came from the inside, he argued.

'Then you will have to be cleaning the house yourself,' Nwamaka protested.

'Why, Nwamaka?'

'Because it is not the Holy Spirit that is going to live in this house! You have small children crawling and running all over the place. You cannot paint any part of your house white.'