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## What if I Don't: Episodes from her life.

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WHAT IF I DON'T:

Episodes from her life.

A Senior Project Submitted to:  
The Division of Languages and Literature

of Bard College

by

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## INTRODUCTION

This is an experiment in fictional truth-telling inspired by what I see when I look at myself and the women who have shaped me.

Before I even started writing, a voice once said to me: you, this girl, if you cannot be beautiful, be useful, and if you cannot be useful, be tragic. I found this intriguing and problematic, especially as this voice – which was not mine – came from somewhere within me; inside, inside. Since hearing those words, I've asked myself who owned that voice and how did it come to be? I've read Rosemarie Waldrop, Jamaica Kincaid, Edwidge Danticat and Marilyn Robison – authors who assured me that I didn't have to be beautiful or useful or tragic. They wrote about home, family and women's ordinary lives in a way that inspired me to write, using my place in the world as a valuable source.

In the process of writing this piece, I thought a lot about womanhood and how a woman might occupy many spaces; or no space at all. These spaces are familial, societal, mental and physical. Moving between them can be anything from a wild dance to a tight squeeze. The "I" in this story speaks through poetry and prose, and I couldn't have written her if I hadn't read Ann Lauterbach and Nathaniel Mackey, who showed me how to push beyond what I thought poetry and prose should be and find a space that allowed this story to be told. That space is sometimes prose, sometimes verse, sometimes in between.

I've secretly hoped that, in writing what you're about to read, I would locate a clear definition of where I am and where I've been placed. In all honesty, all I've done is make a muddle that's not so different from what I started with. This is not a loss. I'd rather have a muddle of my own making than order that's dictated by someone else.

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## I

*The fact of her body awaits her,  
like a goat waiting for master,  
tied to a tree,  
straining its neck on its tether.*

Thunder enters the room but rain cannot. There are now six eyes to contend with. Six eyes and one volcano. Lusty, Liar, Busty and Yellow witness the eruption, which comes through my body. Juju priestesses dance, shake their staffs, when spirits borrow them. My dance is borrowed, from a white woman in a story called Chicago. My staff is a pink umbrella. Two eyes leave and four eyes return. *Tallest is dancing! Tallest is dancing like the devil has entered her you-know-what!* I would like to keep dancing. I would like to keep dancing but the rain stops, the eyes disperse. Lusty and Yellow fight over crackers, Busty falls asleep, Liar says she rubs condensed milk under her breasts and *that's* why.

Although we appear the same there are varying bodies, varying levels of unease. The barriers between us and the world are only as thick as shower curtains. The pink umbrella is named in secret. Many things I own are named in secret, thereafter. You can carve a piece of wood and call it God, and once you pray to it, there God is. My kinship with material things requires this sort of faith. And this sort of faith makes you porous.

A mirror confirms what I already know and can't deny: that I am in fact here, in fact this. But facts are no longer enough. Why is it hard to resist picking paint off the wall, even when you want things to remain beautiful? What will happen when my mother is no longer there to say, "wash the curtains?" What then? I'm supposed to put on something decent. That means no jiggle, and nothing that a boy would wear. Guests don't like to be confused. My father has a habit of bringing guests even when my mother is tired. Yet she cooks, and I serve. Now I am too old to rebel. And I may never leave this house.

\*

*She has always sold her apples to the man who drives by every Tuesday  
 on his way to another place that is not his home.  
 She does not love these apples, or keep them for herself.  
 She did not grow them but maybe another girl did, several rivers away.  
 And maybe that girl tucked her skirts between her legs  
 when she watered the plants,  
 like she had always done since she was a girl (not a woman,  
 as she is now, who has forgotten not to behave like that.)  
 Apples do not grow in this part of the world,  
 on this side of the road  
 with this man who drives by on Tuesdays.  
 And someone should tell him  
 that she has not always been there.  
 That one day she will be gone.  
 So he will not be surprised  
 when he looks for her and sees nothing.*

The House of Want has low ceilings, walls lined with broken mirrors, a stray cat that seems to walk through walls. Upstairs, shelf upon shelf of books and dust. On Thursdays, a live band plays jazz and centre stage is open for those who are willing. I am willing. The song and a lie are intertwined: *I have the stuff that you want, I am the thing that you need.* But today, the Question Mark who has arrived ahead of time has me tasting guilt and setting up dominoes, against the suddenness of his what-you-call-Love. I am caught between black lace and restraint. Nevertheless, I split open to allow safe passage for straying eyes. *Give me a song, I say, and I'll sing it.*

The force of a song comes from the pelvis. "Supple" to me is a waitress whose tilted pelvis evokes a tea kettle pouring. And it's not as they'd have you believe, you sing with your body, not your voice. The voice is, materially, just air. Your insides shape air into voice – your tongue, your lungs, even memory, even longing. I know this after meeting Ms. Paisley

whose divorce and black clothes are glamorous to me. I rest my weight on one leg in order to sit into myself. I aim for *supple* and discover *raw*.

If we could end the day howling like wolves do, separate but together, kneeling under the sky, looking at a point beyond the stars: *Then what? If x then y, remember?* Maybe there is no *then*, there is no *y*. This I can live with, although it's maddening. *So maddening*. I think the sun draws all the longing out of our bodies, and at night we just drown in them. *Or float*. Or drown. I've said it before and I'll say it again, there's a scream in my chest and there isn't a note on the scale that's high enough. *Even if there were ...* I couldn't possibly sing it.

2.

*There is no way of knowing  
when the place she is in  
will cease to be the place  
where she is.  
She will stand by a bus stop as usual  
wondering if  
that man over there can also feel  
his state of matter changing.  
Her limbs will remember to  
climb into a bus,  
take a window seat,  
pay a fare.  
This memory that gets her across the street,  
to her tiny office on the 9th floor  
is a kind of forgetting.*

Another church has been bombed in the North. The news does not interrupt but rather complements business as usual. One more ladleful of pepper stew on white rice. We discuss, we lament, we commute. It's the first Sunday of the month so our whole family spends the evening at chapel, as we've always done. Pastor asks us to pray for the bereaved.



And because we are Pentecostal, our prayers are almost deafening. People shake and moan, wail and weep. I can only say *amen*.

En route to the Firm Foundation Housing Company, I walk under a pedestrian bridge and through a filling station. The underbridge smells like old piss. I wonder if the underbridge will always smell like old piss. If one day, by chance, it doesn't – let my nose jump off my face in celebration. A fully eaten corn cob has been nestled in the same patch of grass so, for a week, I've denied my craving for roasted corn. You don't want to pick up desires the way clothes pick up smells. It is unfortunate that Grace (the desk adjacent) is out sick, but this means I get the fan all to myself. The heat is just ungodly today. I won't get much chance to say *hello, Firm Foundation Housing how may I help you*, as calls have dwindled in the past few months. Above ground-level, I can see all of the lot next to us, mostly wild grass surrounding two rusty shipping containers – one red, one blue – and a clothesline. A naked man comes out of the red shipping container to fetch water from a pipe jutting out of the wall. He walks over to a platform made of concrete blocks laid out in a grid. He gets on the platform and pours water on himself. Should I feel something? I push a button and watch the blades of the fan move faster and faster until they disappear.

Zita has a flair for practical things and I do not. This is the tension of our sisterhood, that she took some parts of our mother and I took others. Guests marvel at their resemblance, at my height, at her wisdom, at my talent. Zita is a faithful reproduction and I am a manifestation of dreams. So my mother paid willingly for sewing school, and art teachers, Drama Club and guitar lessons. Sitting in a windowless room, in a corner of what used to be a mall, I feel my fingers must be connected to invisible strings that someone else is pulling. How else have I written price tags for hours on end? That same someone has drawn me, and forgotten not to use permanent marker.

At an art exhibition, one of the old girls is there. She remembers Liar, Busty and Yellow but not Lusty. I have fallen off the face of the earth. I search her eyes, her smile, for signs. We part ways to go around the

gallery and I watch her at a distance, looking for signs. One painting in particular pulls me in, a large canvas with brightly, brazen colors: teal, orange, acid green. A woman plays a violin under a small, yellow perfect circle that must be the sun. Her body is plump and larger than her head, which is also a perfect circle. Her eyes are perfect circles, taking up more space than they should. There's nothing in her world except her, the sun and the violin. Old girl comes to this painting as well. She says she goes by *Jide* now. I tell her I go by *Carmen*. This is enough.

- She has no ears
- The painting?
- The woman playing the violin ... has no ears.
- Wait, look, right next to her eye ... Looks like a small pearl. She can't be wearing an earring without an ear.
- And yet.
- You can't see an ear.
- Which doesn't mean there isn't one.
- But you have to wonder.
- ...
- Why *Jide*?
- Why *Carmen*?

*Jide* is a man's name after all, peeled away from *Yejide*, a name for daughters whose grandmothers have returned from the dead. *Carmen* has nothing to do with what my people named me. *Carmen* is the name of a woman who has nothing but herself, a fictional gypsy very much like the color red. According to *Jide*, I may well be part *Carmen* but I'm also – certainly – part *Madame Bovary*.

Between work and home is a long strip of road with tempting diversions. A whole year can glide by on the wheels of “maybe some other time”. Today I intend to look and not buy, starting with the sculptures. I can imagine the wooden masks in my home, one day. The sculptor is carving a calabash and there is a bench if I need to sit. But I must see the flower man now or not at all. He has built flower beds on the roadside and mother owes our garden to men like him. Not much

grows all by itself in a town built on beach sand. The flower man has a wide maze of flowers behind a fence. Of course hibiscus, of course rose and gardenia ... but here is a plant with no green at all. Nothing but dizzying dark purple. He cannot tell me what purple means, only that it's good for the house. He's educated himself as far as the names and needs of his flowers. I'd like to know nothing but my name and my needs. I'd like to not know how these categories can include everything. Maybe mother's garden needs another plant. I buy, on the premise that purple means magic.

I joke that Dubem is my child though, by some error, he came out of my mother's body. I pick him up from school, even with the strangeness of being on my old stomping ground. I recall myself, breaking a chant of solid-to-liquid-to-gas to ask Mr. Azubine whether it's always like that. After lessons, I am the only one he tells that it is not. I did not accept it then, that a hard object could suddenly turn gaseous, but I accept it now. Dubem begs to play a round of soccer and I let him. In a classroom, waiting, a story occurs to me like water from a rock: the world has disintegrated and it all started with a bomb in the North. The Protagonist lost her family in the violence. She is alone now. Her face is mine but her golden-brown hair is not. She lives in a white cotton nightgown that belonged to her mother and spends her days tending to the family house. The Protagonist has not been outside the house in nine days.

\*

*In the backseat of a taxi  
 where she is safe  
 a decision is made:  
 If she's to have a son,  
 he will be called "So Be It."  
 If she's to have a daughter,  
 she will be called "E Ka Aleluya."*

When Zita quits her job, everybody understands. After all, her stingy boss gave her only a can of condensed milk and a sleeve of biscuits as a Christmas bonus. Her boyfriend, Ike, leaves her because she won't do more than kiss him. He leaves for Canada and Zita builds a moat around herself. Tonight, she crosses the moat to confess that she's tired of this house and everyone who lives in it. It's been decided: she will study hard and resurrect her dream of becoming a doctor. Then I'll have the room to myself.

- I know you sleep in my bed when I'm not here.
- Of course I do
- And you wear my clothes
- You wear *my* clothes
- Yes, but I'm older.

We go to Bible study together, and there we find not just muffins but chin chin and ginger cookies. The hostess bakes compulsively these days. Her children are all grown up and the house is empty save for her husband. Zita has one muffin and I have two.

- We always said we would bake.
- We need ingredients.
- We can *buy* ingredients.
- From where?
- The supermarket down the street.
- It's expensive.
- We should bake soon.
- We should.
- How about next week?
- Take a muffin for Mummy.
- Why?
- Are you serious?
- Yes.
- Just take a muffin for Mummy.
- If you want to take a muffin for Mummy, then do it.
- Why are you so selfish?

– Why can't you just take the muffin?

\*

A chicken, five-hours dead, stands between mother and I. My father mediates. One should be able to cut a hen when asked by one's mother. One disagrees. Why now? Why today? Why is this so important? Mother's anger is hot, woven with despair, and gathered around her like a heavy shawl. One's indifference is cold, this afternoon. It is a virtue to prepare your own chicken, and even if you don't eat chicken, your family does, and if your family doesn't, your future husband will, and if he doesn't ...

- It's a life skill.
- They sell pre-cut chickens now.
- A live chicken is better.
- Cheaper.
- Better!
- How hard can it be?
- You see? She doesn't want to learn anything!
- I don't have to learn this.
- She thinks she knows everything!
- I know what I need to know.
- She thinks it's all about her!
- If I ever have to cut a chicken ...
- Please talk to her.
- ... I'll find a way to do it.

Why does the rooster crow at dawn? Mother can no longer wield Future Husband as she wields her wooden spoon. Maybe I won't be cooked to perfection, maybe I won't be cooked at all.

\*

Even if you carve your name on her foot and love her lavishly, your favorite doll can still go missing. Old toys go to the motherless babies,

and long lost toys are declared dead. Old toys remind me: how exhausted I am, how play is a response to longing. Though the dolls are as I left them, they have never been so inanimate. I look at them and suddenly fear that they will come alive, and steal my heart, and leave me frozen as I am.

Though un-real, the Protagonist is alive. She refuses to be named, and I refuse to name her. She has come outside to tend the garden. Having been housebound for 18 days, her eyes must now adjust to un-obstructed light. I myself am waiting to hear if I got the job, having the image of a carpet pattern linger behind my eyes. The Protagonist sinks her feet into the earth which seems to soften under her feet, pressing through the spaces between her toes as though any minute she could be pulled under. There is no beginning or end to this carpet, these small flecks of what could be yellow, green or red, overcast with grime. No beginning, no end, just middle. Infinite middle.

My brother, Lota is now a shadow in this house. Father has left him to God but mother insists. Outside, near the old basketball hoop, he lights a blunt and tells me he's moving out soon. He would rather be free than comfortable and loved, it seems. There is nothing but seeming with him. The lighter flame disappears; Lota exhales smoke. I revisit an old lesson: some changes cannot be undone.

- When you burn something, it can't be un-burned right?
- Yes
- I can't remember not knowing that.
- What are you getting at?
- There must've been a time when we didn't know.
- I guess.
- But we'll never know what it feels like again, to not know.
- Irreversible changes ... that was primary school right?
- Right.
- You can't un-burn, you can't un-know
- You should tell Dubem that
- He's ten

- So?
- D'you ever wish you were ten?
- No. Yes and no, you?
- All the time.

The Question Mark works in finance. He's never asked if I love him and we've never split a bill. He's too young to be balding, so I urge him to grow a beard. *Gelato or baklava? He has used the word ambience one too many times.* Do I point this out? I wonder what sort of animal he would be. A dog? A pig? A dog-pig? I am most certainly a cat. A cat who can't decide if she wants gelato or baklava.

\*

*What if I don't?*

\*

Ms Paisley says I ought to sing for a living. Next week she'll be in Italy. To her, there's no such thing as a lost voice. There's no such thing as lost, period. Nothing is lost, only misplaced. I dream of Italy. No, I dream of sunshine, pasta and narrow streets. I dream of buildings so old that when you touch their walls, the walls touch back. Play with pianists, she warns, don't marry them. I sip honey water and promise myself Italy. The truth? I'd sooner marry a pianist than learn to play a piano.

\*

Tonight there's a vigil at chapel. Zita, Lota, Dubem and I are here, but there's being here and there's being here anyway. Some traditions bind tightly with your composition and, as a consequence, you cannot rid yourself of them and remain intact. Mother says, with my knotty hair and lack of earrings, I look like dried crayfish. A chapel woman says I must be an artist. Between sessions of godly song and dance, a man wails. He wails and convulses, in a suit and tie, all the way to the altar. A chapel woman says he must be possessed. He must not be intact.

## 3.

*Here, in this yellow metal,  
this carved out belly of the whale,  
they wait, diverted,  
and she is one  
of them.*

Waiting for transport is never a solitary activity. People collect where the buses stop, sometimes in front of an enterprising woman cooking takeaway rice on a stool, before a coal pot, under a faded umbrella. Sometimes on a busy street, at a junction no less, where people are hawking groundnuts on the sidewalk, and tiny black boiled nuts that may or may not be kola. Then there are days when waiting occurs at a proper bus stop with a little wide booth, a bench, and something overhead to protect the lucky ones from rain. This would be right next to an overhead bridge, where you just passed a beggar who pleaded with his eyes and hands for whatever you could give him – the 20 naira in your pocket perhaps? And you spent the entire walk across and down thinking whether or not whether or not and finally, time and space having passed, settled on not. What could 20 naira do anyway? If you gave 20 naira to every beggar what would you have for yourself? You remember that he does not just beg but has taken it upon himself to sweep the overhead bridge and its steps as well. Somehow this makes it worse, the 20 naira sitting in your pocket.

You wait with other people who are going where you are going. As buses roll by, you listen for the right one. There have been buses hijacked by robbers, buses that left and never returned, all sorts of stories you've heard about public transport. Quite reasonably, you would like to have a safe ride home. So when your spirit is at ease, you climb into a bus, and take the window seat if it's available, because you anticipate the smell of everyone's sweat, the heat of a packed vehicle, and any air from any window would be welcome. If the window seat is taken, you squeeze into the middle of the last row, or middle of the second row, or even the first row. Anything but the edge of the middle row: the pull-out bench



right by the bus's sliding door. Why? Because of Mr. Jimmy that's why. Because Mr. Jimmy fell out of his middle row pull-out bench one day and a metal rod from God knows where tore him open and everyone could see his intestines as he lay there on the road. And he got to be outside his own body and taste the spirit world. And it didn't even change him.

On the bus, sometimes a woman would talk loudly into her cellphone to some nearest or dearest and you'd hear all her business, albeit in fragments. As a little game you would play with those fragments like jigsaw puzzles and try to piece her life together. You'd invent a person for the other end and come away feeling you know her, laughing at her stories like you'd been there. When people climb onto the bus and seem well acquainted with the driver you feel annoyed yet inexplicably envious (you never hoped to meet anyone you actually know on one of these bus rides. If anything you hoped the opposite). There is always some surly dude, some sour old man who is a mechanic, or plumber, with a raisiny face and beady eyes that would conjure up every wickedness. He always finds something to complain about or picks a fight with the driver. And if not that man, there is the young person or not-so-young person who feels personally attacked by the driver's fare. *Two-fifty? To get to Obalende? For where? Who born you? Are you a thief? Look at this man! I mean ...!* And all of us would agree, but nobody else would raise hell. We are resigned to it. This person who cannot not be resigned often gets off early, much before their intended stop. I myself was meek as ever the first hundred times.

I would often get off a little before my stop, scared that the driver would drive right past it. I could never bring my tongue to form the words *o wa* which I learned everyone else said when their stop was drawing closer. It means, *it's coming* and for a while I couldn't say it. I would say almost anything else, beat all about the bush. And I got paranoid about change too. Scared that the driver would "forget" to give it to me. The system of giving change when a passenger alighted gave me hives. Metaphorically of course. I don't think Lagosians get hives. And the other reason I stopped a little before my house was because of prying eyes, wherever

they might be. I didn't want strangers knowing where I lived. It's always possible I could be followed, mugged, killed. My aunt, who had been riding buses – it seems – all her life, thought I was crazy. Use your money, she said, let him drop you at your gate. I thought she was crazy.

Once, I saw a mad woman while waiting for one Lekki shuttle to fill up. She just walked the pavement, naked, like it was nothing. Breasts flapping like wings. Hair like a nest. I remember when Zita showed me a video of a drunk man she saw, preaching the gospel by another resting shuttle. Why was that what his drunkenness led him to do? Of all things ... We have amassed some odd anecdotes, Zita and I, as we have been taking transport for some time now, to save money for taxis when we most need them. For events and functions, functions and events. Those outings for which you didn't want to show up looking the least bit out of sorts. Getting off a bus, you are sweaty, your make-up runny, or splotchy, your under arms most likely wet, or damp if you're lucky, your white shirt possibly stained and your perfume gone to heaven. Your coiff and blowout flattened by heavy heat. For taxi-necessary events, one must look to have the ease of a comfortable life. Sweat is a brand on the skin. All hairs must be in place. And you yourself enjoy the luxury of an air conditioned vehicle on the way to a place where you will certainly see people you know.

Speaking of events, it's hard to forget the first really good one I went to: a well-known man's – I think 60th – birthday, at the mansion tucked into a cul-de-sac in Millenium Estate. It made my ten-year-old eyes pop. People like champagne glasses held in the hand, each with a champagne glass held in the hand. And women in colorful dresses long and glittering under the stars. The subtlety of the food we ate was foreign to me. He had opera singers, and a backyard gate that led out to the waterside, where a boat bobbed patiently, waiting to take guests up and down the lagoon. But what seared my memory was the woman in the royal blue dress, a colour whose name and personality I familiarized myself with much later in life but which was, that night, just the deepest, most gorgeous blue I had ever seen. She had a mighty bosom, and back then I was young enough to believe that I would have such a

shape one day. Her dress clung to that shape, a narrow waist that opened up all the way to the ground like a flower overburdened with petals. Her hair was lighter than the black it should've been, her skin honey-light. She was almost translucent under indoor light. Out of nowhere, I wanted to be her someday. Women like her didn't sweat. They give the beggar 20 naira. Or they don't encounter him at all. Whose daughter was she? Whose wife? I knew nothing of her except that she certainly belonged there with these people. These fine people.

My mother is pretty too. But she is my mother.

4.

*An image of a nurse walking towards,  
in starched white, reinforced. Flesh, now.  
There is kinship between wrinkles and repetition.  
Her skin folds over itself neatly.  
A soft hand turn-ing over to show nothing.  
Water enters wood and makes it bend.*

*A new mother, sick with love.  
What disfigures pain to make it resemble wickedness?  
An arrival, a departure.  
Boiled bark, prayers, and eucalyptus oil.  
Songs cannot protect what is precious.  
The contract between life and bitterness is necessary.*

*A multiplication.  
Consider that blood and bone split an arm into five fingers.  
Flesh grows around them. Flesh repeats.  
And yet, only a mouth can taste, only a nose can scent.  
This is how soup is made.  
Charcoal is temporary but the pot is forever.*

*To live is to manage.*

*A flared dress is cut on the bias. However.  
 Length does not become breadth. A smile does not stretch beyond one's teeth.  
 Is it fair to chew more than what can be swallowed?  
 What must be swallowed.  
 Love is not medicine.*

*Who says that God inhabits bodies?*

*Flesh is not alone. A soul repeats also. Call it refrain.*

*To be – moreover – To be obliged.*

Because she's the closest thing to an origin, I don't want to witness this part, this surrendering to fact. In fact, grandma Funto is still here. But there's being here and there's being here anyway. The burden of Ma Funto's upkeep saves Aunty Laide from wandering around my mother's house. Now, Pa Edward, whose house was half-consumed by fire, has taken the guest room. For the time being, Aunty Laide will share the blue room with her mother.

When a cow is plagued with flies, God provides a hungry bird.

So much has happened and so little is remembered. Days that I forget even as you live them, dreams that are dangerously ordinary, such things frustrate me, when I am so desperate to be real. Just last night I dreamed of sweeping the house only to wake up and find the house unswept. Tonight, the power is out and Zita is awake because of mosquitoes. I am awake because because. We used to use lanterns, when we spent weekends at Ma Funto's place and the power was out. When Ma Funto had a place of her own.

- Why did they call it One Thousand and Four?
- Because there were one thousand and four apartments.
- Were there really?
- Go and count them.
- Aunty Laide was so nice back then.

- She had her own life, you know, even if she lived with them
- They had their own lives too.
- Ma Funto used to go out and buy things.
- And she had all those neighbors...
- And Pa Edward had his record player...
- Remember graduation?
- What about graduation?
- When we stood up for the hymn and he conducted with a fork and knife?

Lota comes to look for a flashlight. I want him to recall that we were friends once. I gave him baths and told him stories once. Our flashlight is dead but he lingers quietly. Maybe he won't abandon us completely. Zita, Lota and I are all that's left of our adventures. I ask Lota,

- Were you there the night they came here?
- Who?
- Of course he was there, Zita says
- Ma Funto, Aunty Laide and Pa Edward.
- When they got kicked out of One Thousand and Four.
- I don't remember, Lota says.
- Policemen broke the windows, Aunty Laide stepped on a piece of glass, Zita says.
- And I add,
- Their neighbours had to spend the night at Our Lady of Apostles
- Feels like they've always been here, Lota says.
- And they're gonna be here after us, I add.
- I always thought I'd be the first one out.
- I thought so too.
- Mark my words: three years from now, I'll be married, Zita says.
- And I'll be ... elsewhere, I say.
- I'm going to bed, Lota says.

\*

*What if I don't?*

\*

Consider: the politics of living with your sister, her husband, her children, your fibroids. Aunty Laide's worldview is so narrow that she has excluded herself by mistake. And yet she's remained Catholic. Ask my mother why and she will tell you Why has a long tail and two branches, one for me and one for you. She is the third of five sisters, the product of a strict mother who might die at any moment. What do you do? You sever yourself from expectations. You find a thing to enjoy.

5.

*Good stuff, yes please  
that's big enough.  
New dog, old fleas  
sweet Sisyphus.  
Buy two, one free,  
she's got a gun,  
she's got a gun,  
she's got a gun.*

Townsquare is a foreigner's paradise as it is a theatre, a gallery, a bistro and a bookshop all in one. I earn enough here to buy a few hours of independence each week, and the manager has taken a shine to me. I have no title but I do what needs doing. I'm nearly essential, like duct-tape. Foreigners are whiffs of air from overseas so a room full of them feels like travel. Even the locals who come here are a bit foreign. What does it mean, to be at home among souvenirs? A shelf of handmade soaps that smell like comfort, wooden miniatures of wild animals, coral necklaces and little green-white-green keychains that say Welcome on one side and Goodbye on the other?

Some days I'm a crayfish and some days I'm a siren. Both metaphors occur to me as I walk home from work. I laugh in the middle of the sidewalk and upset the passers-by but I'm not in the business of giving

explanations. Not today. Not for a while. I am not comfortable, but it is good to laugh at what perplexes you.

At our Sunday service a man formerly possessed goes to the altar to give thanks. He is not a regular here but pledges to sow a seed. His story is warm but uninteresting, so I slip out of chapel to stroll around the parking lot, along the wall that separates us from a mangrove swamp. I make a game of spotting the terrestrial crabs. Mother is fed up with my restlessness. The formerly possessed man made some insightful points, apparently. She wants to know where I was. I shrug, as though to tell her would be to make the crabs disappear.

\*

How do you explain the need to tend the world as well as burn through it like wildfire? I want to be alone. I want someone to want to be next to me. I want. I want. I want. And then I don't want. I don't want at all. In the night bus, I do a risky thing. I touch a man's leg because it's dark, and I feel like a replica. I leave my hand there long enough to feel him tense, then relax. I move my hand over his zipper, up, down and into his trousers. He lets me.

\*

*Flared dress, scuffed knees  
ducks in a row.  
Warm seat, shirtsleeves  
fine afterglow.  
Night sky, side eye,  
get clean away  
get clean away  
get clean away.*

Lota left his lighter behind. I light a fire and feel primitive playing with the flame, finding it easy to talk to. Fire must have been the first

god. I light a bigger fire, thinking: funny how fire doesn't consume darkness, how fire and darkness coexist. Unlike fluorescents, unlike sun. *Have I belabored the point? What's it like to be a thing that just is?* I'll have to purchase things, and live somewhere and afford to leave that place now and again. I'll have to work and earn enough to go to Balogun Market when necessary, to look for the right kind of material and leave with six yards of not-quite-but-close-enough; pay a tailor to learn my shape and make dresses for the functions and events that seem to colonise adult life. I'll complain about the back and forth of fittings but secretly enjoy the ritual. Fire has one response to everything: *at the heart of a flame there is nothing, only burning.*

The Question Mark proposes at the House of Want and I feel ... relieved. In his defense, his mother fled motherhood. Or motherhood fled her. Nobody owes anybody the truth and that's what makes good people good. But there are so many eyes to contend with. Two pints of palm wine on the house! I leave mine untouched. In my defense, my great grand-father drank himself dead with it. The cat who seems to walk through walls finds me sitting on a bench where the books are. She seems unimpressed. *What do you know? You can't tell a rat from a blessing.* I hug women I don't know. The live band smiles at me. I could sing. I could be supple.

\*

*Gold tooth, what's new,  
conquistador?  
Long day, bean stew  
fine china cup.  
Half-moon lip stain,  
hair in the drain,  
hair in the drain,  
hair in the drain.*

The Protagonist finds a bird in the house. I wonder how it got in. She opens a window to let it out but it refuses to go, so she opens a door.



Even then the bird remains, flying from ceiling to floor, corner to corner. She tries to catch it but it won't be caught. It wants to have its cake and eat it too, this bird that is something between a rock and a pigeon. But a bird, no matter how unremarkable, is not a cockroach or a rat. A bird can be tolerated. A bird perched on a curtain rod can even be pitied. The Protagonist allows the bird to stay where it likes, provided it feeds itself.

Here is how a Question Mark becomes a Full Stop: it's not what you think. Not with answer. Not with satisfaction and not without happiness. Even when that happiness is as inexplicable as procreation in a world as uncertain as ours. We ask God why we're here when we should ask mothers and fathers. Stop, for now. Breathe, for now. A return to birth names. If comfort surrounds you, maybe you'll solidify ... in the manner of a sigh that turns to salt. Not with love; not without affection, I allow myself for once to rhyme. My body gets caught in a mirror, the way a hair gets caught on a splinter, and the mirror confiscates my property. I say *give it back*. It says *see how this dress grips you, how you are clasped like two hands praying*.

I know now why they say spirit is willing but flesh is weak. It is something to do with being material. A new home is made in my image, and permanence is what I call this phenomenon, this inability to leave empty spaces alone. This matter of consummation. I leave the walls unpainted, as paint always peels away. I slip on the newness of these floors. Flesh and marble know it's only a matter of time. What can be seen can be touched, and what can be touched can be destroyed.

## 6.

This morning I have come outside to buy groundnut. They are going out of season and when I am lucky enough to see a tray of groundnut in the corner of my eye, the moment is so narrow that opportunity cannot squeeze through: My window is rolled down, and my car has slowed in a bottleneck. I yell "groundnut!" but the girl with

the tray on her head does not hear. So I yell again. Just then traffic decides to move and I cannot wait so I inch forward, hoping the girl who is now running will catch up. Maybe she does catch up. I waste a few seconds deciding how much groundnut I want, and she wastes a few seconds finding change. I cannot wait any longer because the bottleneck has begun to move again. She is left holding a small bag of groundnut as if it were a tiny stillborn, and I am left gripping the steering wheel, hunger stretching the peaks of my knuckles. Not a hunger in general but a specific hunger, attached to a particular thing without which this hunger would not exist.

I called my mother yesterday to ask her if she had been able to buy groundnut recently. She tells me it is the strangest thing, that they are so scarce now. I make a sound of agreement and small suffering. We have had this conversation before but it is still true that the groundnut girls are few and far between this year. Maybe it's the rain, she says. It must be, I say, even though neither of us know much about how groundnuts react to the weather. The farms where they are sourced are outside of town, far outside the town where we live. I tell her I found a girl but she was too slow. She asks me if I have been going to church and I say what I always said when I lived in her house: *Sure*. She asks about Lota and I don't know what she expects to hear. No, he has not called me. No, I do not know how he is doing. I assume he is fine. My brother flies around Lagos like a bird with no feet. He stopped talking to us a long time ago, and now he has begun to see the shape of his life and it scares him. I know this because I have been there. One day you are small, and life is wide to you, then one day you are bigger and you realize life is not like that at all, and what seemed so vast to you is in fact small. What is the head of an elephant compared to the foot of a mountain?

My mother and I stayed on the phone for awhile. She was cooking rice and stew, her rough ingredient stew made with the Philips blender, not the Kenwood which blends smooth. I laughed at the word "ingredient", at how she uses it, how I use it now to mean tomatoes, peppers and onions blended into a bright red paste. Many years ago, when I was barely taller than our deep freezer, I reached into the cold

box, past chicken housed in ice-cream bowls and fish tied in nylon, to clear bowls with red stuff in them. Identical red stuff, in the eyes of a child. Mother had asked me to bring out stew to thaw on the side of the kitchen sink, so I brought out one of the bowls of red stuff. When she came back from work in the evening and dipped her finger in the thawed red stuff, she grimaced and shouted my name. I went slowly like I always did when I heard my name shouted like that. *Obiageli*, she wrapped my name in barbed wire and tossed it at me. *Obiageli*. I kept silent. *Obiageli. How many times did I call you?* I kept silent because I knew by then that sometimes mothers ask questions they don't want answers to. It was a hard thing to learn back then, the difference between Ingredient and Stew, but a simple thing to know now. Stew is Ingredient fried with oil and onions, spiced and salted to go on top of rice, beside yam, mixed into okra. Frozen Stew has spots of hardened oil, ridges of it on the side maybe, but the oil is always there. Ingredient is pure. The slap that hit my face was no surprise but I jumped back anyway. *Is this stew?* I didn't want to look at the red stuff. It had lied to me. *Did you open the bowl? Next time, look! Taste if you have to. You'll thank me when you're in your husband's house.*

\*

There is nowhere I'm going, as I'm walking now. I am only hoping to see groundnut as I go. Maybe they are on strike, the groundnut girls. Maybe they are meeting in secret somewhere, talking about selling groundnut for 60 naira a bag instead of 50. Who knows what happens in the lives of others? Maybe groundnut girls are dying under our noses, being killed perhaps by one of their own. Many strange things happen in Lagos now. Just last week three families died on the road. Their driver lost control of the wheel, I hear, and the car flew somehow, and flipped, and landed right on top of another car. On-lookers say it was like a film-trick. The driver's sister went to the papers to say her brother crashed that car on purpose. She said her brother, I cannot remember the man's name, but she said his head was not correct. The same man had abandoned his family to live in a small apartment where his neighbours claimed he argued with himself. They knew him, where he

was from. His sister would send him stew and it would rot on his table. Some children discovered this after breaking in to look for trouble. Who knows if these things are true? Why not let the man die in peace?

The road before me stretches on, but I haven't seen anyone walking with a tray of groundnut balanced on her head. I walk past one building that has housed many beauty shops under different names. They come thinking they will make money because the women who live here are rich, but rent pulls the rug from under them and they pack up after a year or two. I used to like going in to see each new salon. It was like reincarnation, the same desperate enterprising spirit pressing against a wall with different colors, knocking against new furniture, a new name. This time, the sign on the outside says Empress Beauty Emporium.

A laugh rolls in my throat. My people name things with such faith. To give the name Emporium to one room on the second floor of an ageing duplex is to hope that success will slip through that gaping space between the actual business and what it is called. There are many businesses like that ... Shawarma Kingdom, God's Finger Supermarket ... common kiosks that call up luxury; mundane shops that call upon the Divine. I suppose it is a kind of prayer. My father's mother named me Obiageli, and then died quickly, the same rainy season when I was born. She was very old and Igbos like to reserve the responsibilities of name-giving for the eldest kin. I wish I could have gone to her funeral. I hear the casket had a transparent top so you could see her face, framed with flowers. Fake flowers. All the family was there, the ones I hear about but don't know, and the ones I don't hear about at all. Everybody wore the same fabric and ate the same pounded yam; drank the same palm wine. People told my father congratulations because they knew his wife was at home with a baby, a small girl named Obiageli whose skin was as precious as palm oil.

A few houses down from Empress Beauty I walk by Oasis, a 24/7 convenience store where I buy breakfast cereal, almonds, flavoured tea and biscuit. Things a woman cannot claim to need. Almonds are cheaper in another store within walking distance but I don't like going there.

Mother would shake her head. That store is very helter-skelter, like a bus full of cargo exploded inside it. The workers there don't wear uniforms, and sometimes they gather in the back, to gossip. This store, however, is air conditioned, and sometimes I run into people I've seen on TV or in *Occasions* magazine, and if not them, then people that look like them. It's not that I prefer these people – who prefer themselves – to others. It's that when we exit the store, I and they, the young man who checks receipts at the door smiles at us exactly the same way, as if we are all glazed with magazine gloss.

Past the storefront, a man in the driver's seat of a black Benz G-Class has the windows rolled down, radio talking loudly. He sits there like a small somebody, young but leathery, unable to sink into the luxury of the big black car because it is not his. You can always tell. Whoever owns it is inside Oasis, buying things Mr. Somebody hasn't learned to want. The radio is talking about the driver who crashed a car and killed three families. A woman in a floral dress emerges from the store gripping a little girl, who nearly disappears among shopping bags. Each flower on her dress looks so real I can almost smell it. Her little girl is wailing and the woman is tired. She looks at me with familiarity but does not linger. Doors open, windows slide up and mother and daughter disappear behind tinted glass. The little girl's skin was such a pale yellow, her hair so long, curls so reckless. I wonder, what kind of white man does the woman have? I know no matter how good she is, how well known in the community, she will never be able to do away with the side eyes, the stares. At least no one will look at me like that.

Mother had a young friend who badly wanted to marry a white man. She wanted it so much that she made friends with our cousin, Tochukwu, who had married a white woman overseas for his Green Card. But Tochukwu, they say, was running a business finding white women, who were comfortable and stupid, for Nigerian men who needed Green Cards. They say he did this and nearly got caught. Even then, my mother's friend always asked if Tochukwu's comfortable, stupid women had brothers. If not brothers, uncles. If not uncles, sons. She did this until she turned 30 and sense fell into her head like a coconut from a tall

palm. They say Tochukwu ran a salon business after his marriage scams began to fail. They say it was a front for illegal substances. Now, he has begun a small church in Onitsha. The people who go there call him a prophet.

\*

I remember when we were little, we used to visit Tochukwu's family in Onitsha. We would catch grasshoppers and house them in empty milk tins, kill lizards with brooms when they scuttled across the living room floor. One of those lizards, we crucified with toothpicks and twigs. Tochukwu told us stories and they would begin like a story but end like nothing. Let me explain. A story would begin with a tortoise, chicken, rat or goat because I didn't like people stories. The tortoise, chicken, rat or goat would do something naughty or stupid, and I would laugh, leaning in. *And then what? Ehen? And then what?* But that was how Tochukwu's stories went. A naughty thing, a stupid thing, more naughty things, more stupid things. I would hang my ear on his words, waiting for the part when the naughty stupid things rolled up into one big full stop, one small lesson. Tochukwu was not like that. He would stop when he was tired and send me in to play cards with my younger cousins. The tortoise, chicken, rat or goat never learned a thing, never changed. Never even died.

\*

Now I have walked so far that I am at the gate where this town begins. Buses and okadas gather here, and usually groundnut girls gather too, setting down their trays, re-tying their wrappers, counting their change. What happened this rainy season? One side of the road is always flowing with pedestrians who walk from the bus stop. Some of them stop to enter gate-side buses that run around the town in a loop. The way these buses work, if you are the first one in you will sit and wait as long as it takes for the bus to fill up with passengers. Then you go. Sometimes the driver is not even in the front seat to wait with you. It is too bad if you are in a hurry, but precious if you have ridden several buses so far, squashed between sweaty people, heat gripping your neck. It gets to be

so that getting home is a job no-one is paying you to do, and sometimes you think you would rather sit on that bus forever, with its open windows, even though it is rusted inside, its wood benches soft and dull with age.

I stop a taxi without praying, like I used to, that the man inside would be good. If his face turns sour and he drives me somewhere I did not ask to go, if he kills me, I die. Whether he is good or not, the man in the car does as I tell him. He puts on the AC and keeps the radio off. He drives along to nowhere in particular, keeping an eye out for groundnut. After all, I will pay him. The leather of my handbag is not fake, and my sweat smells of flowers. He looks in the rearview mirror, right at me, and I pretend not to see.

– Ma?

– Yes?

– Your seatbelt, Ma.

My seatbelt? I have forgotten again. I realize this only happens in other people's cars. My seatbelt. But there is only one situation in which you want to be tied down in the car: if it flies and tumbles. Everything else: getting taken, drugged, raped, trapped in a fire – you would want to get out quickly. Taxi drivers don't usually care about such things. I thank the man with a smile because, whether or not he is good, I suppose it was kind of him to remind me.

– What time is it?

– After five, Ma.

– Already?

– You are late?

– No. Where are you from?

– Enugu.

– My father is from Anambra.

– *I na-asu Igbo?*

– Not really.

– But you hear it?

- Not really.
- You hear of this man, this driver that caused accident?
- I did
- Terrible
- People die everyday.

He looks in the rearview mirror.

- Ah, madam. *Ura ga-eju onye nwuru anwu afo.*
- What does that mean?
- Only the dead sleep in peace.
- Yesterday, a woman just went ... like that.
- Your family?
- An old girl from secondary school.

He shakes his head and makes a sound of difficulty.

- It was very strange. I saw her just a few days ago in the supermarket. She hugged me and we talked for a while. We hadn't seen in years.
- But you knew her face?

I nod.

- And now they're saying she has gone. No sickness. Nothing. Just ...

I snap my fingers.

He clucks, hisses.

- It's only God, Ma.

He is about to say something but he stops.

- Groundnut! He yells,
- Groundnut!



I turn to the right, where he is looking. The girl is a little behind, across the road. And she has not heard him.

– Groundnut! I shout.

– Groundnut! He echoes.

She doesn't answer. I don't blame her. That is not her name.

I ask the driver to stop. I pay him. He smiles and tips his head respectfully. I cross the road fast fast, walking back the way we came, taxi and I, after the groundnut girl. Her dress is so faded I cannot tell if the white spots drowning in pink are daisies or polka dots. Her hair is cut low, dyed blonde. I have never seen a groundnut girl with dyed hair before.

– Sss! I call, as you would call anyone on the street,

– Sss!

She turns around to see who, then eyes me up and down. She sets her tray down, moving tightly, saying nothing. Then she turns, takes a large sheet of plastic and ties it over the groundnut tray, as if it is going to rain. But it is sunny outside.

– Do you have 50 naira bags?

She picks up the tray and says nothing. I do not even have time to think when she starts running.

– Wait! I shout after her. She has started to shrink with distance when I start running too.

– Groundnut! I scream,

– Wait!

People have started to look and I wonder what they must think. I in my white shirt and blue jeans, she in her faded dress. Who stole from who?

She runs fast, her tied up tray tucked under one arm, but I am determined. Even though my lungs have started to pinch and squeeze, I run under a low hanging branch; over an open gutter; down to where the road becomes a smaller road; into the smaller road, after the girl.

I nearly trip on a raised paving stone swallowing a lump of anger that has formed in my throat.

– Groundnut! I throw the word like it is heavy enough to knock her down.

She starts to lose speed, and soon we are both jogging, gasping for air on a small, quiet road. With my last burst of energy I close the distance and tell her to STOP. She turns and spits at me. I slap her. She slaps me back. I do not understand the bitterness in her eyes.

Road-side, she sits with a huff and dares me to come closer. I sit, too, just a step away. We are both tired, both sore on one side of our faces.

– You be that woman, abi? She speaks without looking at me. The sun, high above us now, pulls a cloud off its face, as if to watch what is happening below. *What woman?*

Her dilapidated shoulders, sink and rise with anger; heat from sun, heat from anger. Up close now, seeing her fully, she has small bones - laden like her eyes, with futility.

– No be you be that woman?

*No be you be that woman?*

– What's your name? I ask her.

– Nadi.

– Nadi, what are you asking me?

I would like to talk to her in pidgin, but my tongue doesn't bend that way. My tongue doesn't bend for anything other than English. My mother wanted me never to sound like a local girl.

Nadi hisses, as if *leave me alone, this woman*. As if it was me who looked for her trouble. And in a way it was.

– Na you wey marry ...

*Na me wey marry*. I am beginning to understand.

– ... with one big cake like this!

She stretches her hand up as far as it will go, and even then it is not high enough. The cake was monstrous, ten feet tall, seven feet wide, in wine and gold, those colors that had been chosen by a caucus of neatly plucked women who painted the Ojora name on their fingernails and wore it around their necks. Those women and my mother, who said of them *see money miss road*.

– I told them the cake was too big.

– For this Naija, wey people dey hungry.

– Nadi, I just want to buy groundnut.

– Ehn, I no go 'gree.

At first, I wanted to add my last name to his – have his name, Ojora, at the very end, of course, but mine leading up to it like a step to a landing. Mother heaved and huffed, clucked and hissed *what for? Who are you?* And part of me agreed. After all, what reason did I have to hold on to my father's name? What reason did I have besides, other women were doing it? I never believed that keeping our fathers' names could do much for the lives of women. *You can't dilute the Ojora name*. If my mother were

here she would see, Ojora or no Ojora, this small groundnut girl can still refuse to give me groundnut.

All of a sudden, I want to slap the blonde out of her hair. Does she not know what's good for her? I learned, younger than her, to be good to people like me. Does she not know that if she says the right words and does the right things someone like me could pay her school fees?

- You think you know me but you don't know me.
- I know you, she spits.
- What's my name?

Her face blanks, her eyes narrow.

- Ehen? Do you know me? Big woman. Big money... who you help?

She picks up the small bundle of cloth that sits between her head and the groundnut tray, her *oshuka*. I only know the word because one day, when I was fetching water, I decided to carry it into the house on my head, and mummy was sitting outside with one of my aunts as I passed. The aunt laughed and said, where's your oshuka? And my mother laughed with her. Later, I asked my mother what the aunt meant. She told me an oshuka was that rolled up cloth hawkers and labourers used to support heavy things on their heads. She said carrying things on my head like that would spoil my neck.

Nadi's oshuka is dark green, and I can't tell if the darkness is color or dirt. I want to hold it, press it to see how thick the fabric is, if it would fall apart in my hands. She balances the tray on her head and starts to walk back to the main road. I trail behind her not knowing what to do with myself.

- I told them the cake was too big. I told them not to put it in the papers

Nadi pretends not to hear.

– My in-laws don't even like me. But it's okay because I don't like them either. They didn't let Lota come to the wedding.

Nadi doesn't know who Lota is. She doesn't ask. I'm not sure what I would say if she did. Of course he is my brother, but I didn't fight to get him into the wedding. I didn't choose my wedding dress so what power did I have to fight for Lota? Lota, who didn't fight for himself?

– We still have cake in the freezer, you know.

At this Nadi laughs, and laughs, and doesn't stop laughing. Groundnuts roll on the tray as her shoulders shake.

– Hei! This woman, she laughs.

– I'll buy all of it. Let me buy all of it.

She turns to face me, blank again, eyes narrow as blades.

– How much for all your groundnut?

I ask, my voice hard and steady, a stake in the sand. Nadi eyes me, and when she speaks some of the bitterness has cracked open. What seeps from the crack is something I understand. The same thing seeped from me when my Full Stop proposed in the company of friends I'd borrowed, friends he owned.

– Which kain hunger be dat? Nadi asks, and I think of those lizards we killed in Tochukwu's house. How their bodies wrestled with the air one last time before their spirits gave way.

– I'm not hungry

And it's true. Any sort of hunger I had took leave somewhere between here and where I lived, where I would soon be going. But I was hungry

yesterday, I want to say, and I will be hungry tomorrow. She sets down the tray, says she does not have a big bag to pack them all. So I buy the tray, and the big plastic sheet, and carry the whole thing under my arm. I give her all the money in my bag, enough to buy a new tray. Ten new trays, if she likes.

At the main road, I offer her a ride in my taxi and she looks at me as if *are you stupid?* They are blunt now, those eyes of hers. She cannot go, she says, there is more to sell.

## 7.

*Even the cutting of yams, she turns over.  
There are those who can peel a yam without once breaking  
the circle of skin  
so that the skin falls whole and spiral,  
like a chain to be worn around the neck.  
But yam skins are said to cause itching.  
And she would not want to itch forever.*

*She would not want to be a woman wandering through a market,  
scratching her hands raw, her own skin buried  
in her fingernails.  
Everybody would think her mad,  
in the sense that her soul had stepped out of her body.  
And to whomever asks she would tell of how she heard a sound  
while cutting yams,  
how at first she did not even feel the yam skin touching her.  
What is it that rips through the wall and window?  
A wailing child? a whistling kettle? a squeaking lever?  
As it did not come from here, it must be there. In the next house.  
She hears this wailing–whistling–squeaking but sees no body.  
No light in the window, no doors opening or shutting.  
This presence of sound, absence of object, she turns over.*

They say that if you hear a drumming in the night, you shouldn't dance. If you do, the sound will possess you, dance you out of your bed, out of your home, into the night. And where do you go? You follow the beat of the drum, a skin drum whose percussion is mother-tongue. You dance away from everything you know, towards a certain tree under whose branches there is no such thing as death. You dance forever, even as flesh falls off your bones. Even after that.

If you live around the bush, you might hear a wailing child. A child? Alone in the bush? You want to go and see. You go and see but there is no baby to be found, only a small creature with sharp teeth and large hollow eyes. You are eaten alive.

After all these years, I have begun to accept that: I am the one who dances, the one who goes to see.

At a gathering of Like Minds it's almost a tragedy to belong. Still, whatever my mistakes, I'm good at being anonymous. I drink palm wine for the first time and wonder how my great grandfather drank himself dead. I'm told it would take getting used to by someone who pretends not to know I'm married. Everything is wood, old metal and native cloth. Beaded curtains separate here from there. Like Minds adorn themselves with cowrie shells and cultural relics. I recognize this hunger for origins as far-reaching and concrete as our present suffering. Jide the old girl recognizes me and I don't correct her when she calls me Carmen. A poet with green hair declares the body as a source of knowledge and everyone agrees. They agree so much that it is all they talk about. I cannot rid myself of the thought. Some truths are immediately apparent, immediately urgent, if not fully understood. A tall man walks up to a makeshift stage and our eyes are drawn to him. Music plays from a hidden place, a native tongue chanting, drum, unidentified percussion and ... rattle snake? The tall man dances. I am struck. There's no telling how his body will bend, where it will go, but it bends and goes with the rhythm of incantation. When he stops I find myself holding breath. I need his name. Jide says he goes by Legba. I want to free myself.

Father drives me home and I answer his questions as plainly as possible. My Full Stop is alive we-thank-God. I'm also alive. He plays a high-life CD that has been in the car forever and it suddenly feels like a Sunday afternoon from before before, the sweet spot between a sermon's end and mother's Sunday rice. I love my father in a simple way.

- I wish you'd taught me to speak Igbo
- It's not too late. You can still learn.
- Even so, it's harder the older you get.
- But not impossible.
- I just wish, sometimes ... you know?
- *O ga-adi mma.*
- *It will be well.*
- You see? That's something.
- Do you still buy soursops?
- Why?

\*

I've found a way to explain how small a house feels when you grow up in it, leave it, and return to it. All what is lived through, in the house, collects ... and collects ... and collects – inside walls and under floors that push outwards to accommodate. It used to feel like being trapped in open air. Now it feels like a crowd of familiar eyes. Mother says it's not finished yet. She wants to turn the back porch into a smaller kitchen. The blue room is out of use but Auntie Laide cleans it every day. The rest of the house is cleaned twice a week, as there's no one left to dirty it.

Six soursops sit on the kitchen table this morning. I check them for ripeness. Softer ones will be washed and eaten as soon as possible. One of the soursops has a little black worm on it. I can't decide what to do with the worm so I leave it alone. Mother comes downstairs and sees the soursops. Six is too many. My father always buys too many. Knives? I bring two but she declares them blunt. I should go outside and sharpen them.



- How?
- Against the gutter stones.
- Do I scrape or grind?
- Come and see

Mother bends over the gutter stones and scrapes the knives against them, like she's writing the letter X. The sound is gritty, vicious, hypnotic. Yes, the gutter stones are far from clean, but so be it.

### 8.

*Without running water  
finally, the youngest  
befriends old rhythms,  
even older blues, which form  
the necessary dust of this house.*

Here, even if you are raised to answer to your name, you are warned: when you hear your name called, never say *yes* until you know who has called you. You must turn around and ask *who is calling me?* If no one answers, know that a spirit has called you and you have saved yourself from madness.

Old handwriting can be dizzying to read when it's yours. Now, a library of forgotten jotters swallows me whole. Zita once said: what if you take off your nose and put it at the end of a long road, get into a car and drive the car into the nose? What if the road goes into the nose, then the nose goes into itself? This is what happens. There was a time when I named almost everything I owned. There was a time when I drew in the margins: lips with legs, hearts with legs, winged houses and eyes with legs. Everything I created was given a choice to walk away.

My mother loved me as much as she could. As much as she could. But some of us would risk being fractured for a chance to be remade. Some of us are taught to make and make do before we are taught to bleed

properly. And now, I can't help but laugh at the mechanics of scheduled bleeding – how wombs shed their linings as an act of self preservation. Cunning mothers teach with song ... *Oluronbi oh, joun joun* ... See, Oluronbi, wanted something so desperately that she bargained with an iroko tree to fulfil her wishes. It shunned her goat so she offered her ram. It shunned her ram so she offered her daughter! Cunning daughters circumvent their lessons. What did she want and why did she want it so badly?

Look: above our oldest couch, facing fluorescent light, an oil-on-velvet painting of a small island at night, with two huts and coconut palms, lonely canoes on the water, moonlight and a dark circle where a silver moon should be. I touch the painting with the tip of my nose and let it linger till dust forces air out of my chest. Mother brings me a cup of water, opens windows and doors.

- Drink some water.
- Thank you.
- This painting is older than you.
- Did you ever notice the moon isn't there?
- I must have.
- I scratched it out.
- Why?
- It was already flaking.
- But it was intact.
- I picked off a little bit, and then I couldn't stop myself.
- ...
- You were always so rough with things.
- I know.
- Your room was always a mess and Laide had to beg you to take showers.
- She used to say, don't you want to feel fresh? Like a rose?
- And everything we gave you ended up lost or broken.
- Misplaced, not lost.
- Is it not the same thing?
- How can it be the same thing?

- You're lucky you can pay someone to clean the house.
- And cut the chicken.
- But there are things you have to do yourself.

Obiageli is a good name, a name that says *she will not suffer; she will eat and be filled*. My father's mother meant well when she gave it to me, but she was not there at my birth. Ma Funto was the one by mother's side when I crowned. She was the one who gave me Aina, the name I keep between my first and last, reserved for a child born with the umbilical cord wrapped around its neck.

## 9.

*A sound in passing  
inflicts upon her such familiarity as would  
have her possessed,  
this Tuesday morning,  
by the incompetence of memory.*

Aunty Laide sits outside, by the clothesline, bemoaning flies. Even now I'm scared to ask if she's happy. I almost hear Ma Funto's ditty, sweet and brittle, as she swatted flies with her broom: *You little naughty fly ... if I beat you you will cry ... for my sugar must not go to waste ... You little naughty fly*. It goes without saying, if you find a fly in your sugar you throw away the fly. Not the sugar. Never the sugar.

More and more I dream of my father's village, of red sand and a riverbank, wild ferns and breadfruit, morning mist, mosquito bites and the possibility of meeting a snake in the bush. Mary, a make-believe girl in a childhood song, is given garri to cook. She cooks it but it isn't sweet. They beat her but she doesn't cry. They kill her but she doesn't die. What kind of Mary is she? I am at a loss. Imagine one night, the moon is a perfect circle and you're light enough to be held by moonlight. The thought of Legba's body leaves me feeling starved. God feels near, at this ungodly hour, and I just want to live.

## 10.

*Yesterday,  
she was tired, so raw  
the sunbeams, slight  
and almost-nothing as they were,  
called her name and she answered.*

*The road to home was the same  
but she differed,  
deferred,  
to a familiar ache  
pressed against the heart.*

It has rained before and yet, this time is different. This time, the walls and windows feel thin, like lies, not shelter. I leave my clothes and slippers at the door and stand just outside a corner of roof, where rainwater pours like a waterfall. Rainwater inverts my skin such that I feel I can no longer touch without consequence. Mother sees me and sees me, like there's nothing left for her to say. Wasn't I the one who scurried to her room on stormy nights, unable to sleep for fear that strong winds would knock the house down? Wasn't I the one?

It's not that this body is no longer precious. I simply can't labor any longer under the illusion of containment.

## 11.

*Better yet to stretch thin and light,  
thread-like, and overnight,  
over day, over moments,  
pass through half-eaten leaves,  
loops on a dressing gown,  
holes in a scarf,  
and do away with  
this notion of permanence.*

Someone whispers *Aina* and I answer. Fuck the fact of the matter. People are starting to wonder. I'm starting to wonder, myself, if Oluronbi and Mary are somewhere to the left of now, perpetually laughing – whether absolutes are like snakes, and bites are unavoidable. What a blessing, then, to know how to bleed properly. In the tight warmth of a bus, I pass by my usual stop, toying with thoughts of how I am not this, not even *that*. How I may very well be a conversation.

*What if I don't.*