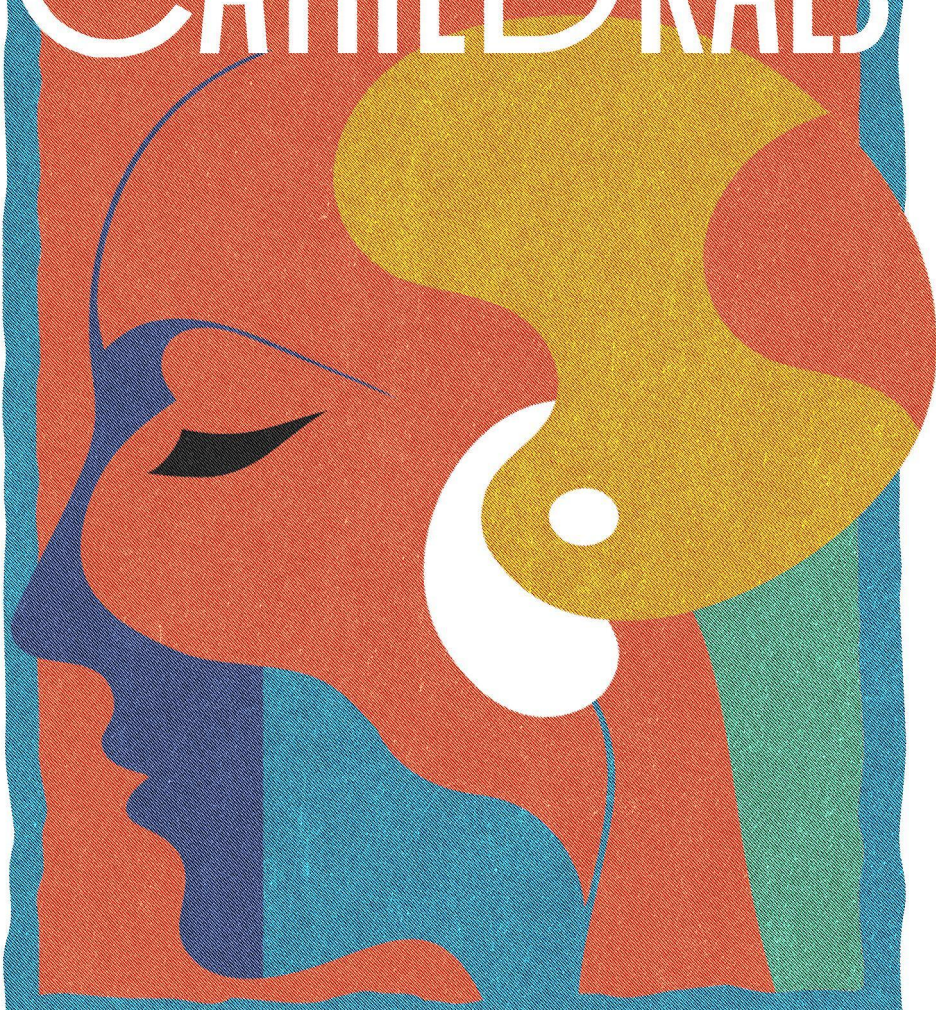
THERE ARE CATHEDRALS



An Ibinabo Residency Anthology

THE IBINABO RESIDENCY

There Are Cathedrals

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The teams at Pencilmarks and Iko Africa, vessels of creations in their own rights.
Their hours of dedication and initiative have birthed insurmountable beauty.

Support our work by visiting the websites:
www.pencilmarksandscribbles.com and www.ikoafrica.com

There is nothing more fulfilling than observing creation from beginning to end, and to you, the reader, this is your victory as well,
Salut!

1

Editor's Note

'There are cathedrals everywhere for those who have eyes to see.'

Being a literature lover has been the salvation of my life and this collection signifies the importance.

The Ibinabo Residency, a joint initiative between Iko Africa and Pencilmarks has birthed an anthology that exudes the gospel of magic being embedded in the mundane - reminding us to be sensitive, grateful and dreamers in every thing we do.

It was my honour to teach the residency and curate this anthology. We hope you enjoy reading it.

These eleven essays will alter your lens in positive ways. Let them.

JACK, C.I
Resident Facilitator,
The Ibinabo Residency.

2

Green, Green and Green by Dolapo Femi-Oyekola

In the little green book that I picked up in 2022 when it felt like my life was falling apart, I found a sentence that felt both like a slap and like home.

Well, it was really a phrase—the kind that they teach you in primary school. Yet to 27-year-old Dolapo, it read as complete.

'That spring when life was very hard, and I was at war with my lot and simply couldn't see where there was to get to...'

This is the opening sentence (or, more accurately, phrase) to Deborah Levy's 'Things I Don't Want to Know', a short collection of essays about her life and the lessons she is still learning from her experiences.

Deborah broaches many topics in the green book, but they all centre on her journey towards becoming a woman and a writer. The first time I read it, I found it oddly comforting how I could completely relate to her sentiments in each phase of her life.

There I was, living in mid-2022, scared, yearning for more, and confused about how to begin the journey towards whatever that

'more' was.

As might be a rite of passage, I had just had my heart broken and my self-esteem had just taken a nosedive.

I did not like what was the current make up of my life and did not know how to make it better.

Instead of finding solutions to improve my lot, I did what any self-respecting, emotion-evading bibliophile would do: I reached for the shelf. That was when I randomly picked up the green book.

Since then, Deborah's words have held, soothed, and taught me like a wise mother's hands.

***

My 27th birthday was sublime. It was the start of the calendar year. It wasn't just excitement about the plans for the year; the gifts that came reeling in on that day added to the loveliness of that day.

But this birthday was especially memorable because it was in the period of my life when I still struggled to make new friends. I grew up timid and still had huge chunks of that in my adult living.

When I spoke, it was in low volumes and also not always in fullness. And yet, here I was, avalanched in love that apparently existed for me. With these friends, I had been found, seen and loved even more loudly than I spoke, than I lived.

Another surprise was being gifted by a former and forgotten love interest. With him, I struggled to speak as well, and yet, unlike these friends on this day, he did not see me nor love me. I particularly found it amusing that as I revelled in a budding romance with someone else, this former love interest, like a

weed, was attempting to be rooted in my life at the same time as my budding and preferred new plant.

So, with the attitude that one receives and preserves gifts from such a donor, I shelved the wrapped green book far away from me, as I had done with him. The weed had been uprooted, sure, but it apparently left behind its remnant.

***

In one part of the book, Deborah writes of living with her godmother in Johannesburg.

At this time, her father had been arrested because of his anti-apartheid stance, and so as a 7-year-old, she was confused and lost and struggled to speak what was in her head and her heart, so much so that she was questioned about being mute.

Encouraged by a nun in her school not to be afraid of something as 'transcendent as reading and writing,' Deborah begins to do more of that. She learned this lesson at age 7 and continued to learn it in adulthood.

"I had been told to say my thoughts out loud and not just in my head but I decided to write them down...To become a writer, I had to learn to interrupt, to speak up, to speak a little louder, and then louder, and then to just speak in my own voice which in not loud at all."

Reading this that first time in mid-2022 made my despaired heart pause.

My budding romance from earlier in the year, when I celebrated my birthday, had died before reaching full bloom. And there I was, sad, annoyed, and still not speaking loudly or even at all.

Could I write to say the many things I wanted to but couldn't?

Where and how would I begin?

In Johannesburg, Deborah meets Melissa, her godmother's daughter, who is as confused by Deborah's reluctance to speak up as Deborah is awestruck by Melissa's living loudly. She writes of Melissa;

"Melissa was the first person in my life who encouraged me to speak up... she was spirited and brave and she was making the best of her lot... saying things out loud, owning up to the things I wished for, being in the world and not being defeated by it."

As the words are underlined here, so are they underlined in my book. And so, with eager hope to write myself out of the despair-shaped hole, I started my Substack and started to speak.

At first, it was slow and gradual, but then it became increasingly loud. In ink, I did as Deborah and Melissa had said.

From outside of the hole and with the Substack, even I could attest a different living. The way a new leaf sprouts slowly on a stem, continues to unfurl and till it unravels and presents itself as part of the full plant, so did my voice become louder.

A louder, more present living.

***

For every hard copy book I have owned, I have left a note for myself in it so that when I return to it, I will get a sense of where my head and heart were in the period that I first read it. And so when it felt again that my life was falling apart in 2024, I reached for the green book and found the note I left for myself in 2022:

"This book was given to me by someone I did not want to receive it from. Not for malicious reasons but for severance reasons, peace of mind reasons, new beginning reasons.

In the middle of that same year, when my life felt very much like the first sentence of this book, I serendipitously picked it up to read again. Only when I was reading did it occur to me that this was a hell of a read.

Many times, I laughed and smiled. I underlined some sentences in the book. They could easily be written by me if I had the guts if I could speak loudly."

"If I had the guts, if I could speak loudly."

As I read these words again this year, in 2024, I smiled at how they still resonated with me. I was still acquiring guts and speaking loudly through ink. I think of how my mind knew to reach for the book again in a melancholic state and how Deborah's words have, once again, carefully and lovingly held me in such a time.

***

In the final essay, Deborah has lived and loved and is now in Majorca on a personal writing retreat. This Deborah is well-published and has been nominated twice for the Man Booker Prize.

This Deborah is, interestingly, at the time, now dealing with her lot.

In her hotel room in Majorca with her laptop and seated on a desk, she faces the screen, unsure of what to do or where to start. She looks around the desk in her hotel room and notes all that she sees: her walls with power points to plug her laptop to continue writing, a hole in the wall close to the desk and her mind filled with sadness about her current life and then she writes;

"That spring in Majorca, when life was very hard, and I simply

could not see where there was to get to, it occurred to me that where I had to get to was that socket…"

The book ends this way, and I smile again, grateful for the reminder that in my journey of becoming a woman in the world who is not defeated by it and a writer, I, too, simply needed to get to the socket—again and again and again.

I needed to live authentically and speak truly and fully, even with my written words. I turn the page and see an annotation on the last blank page of the book;

"Apart from the underlined parts, this is what I want you to learn: that good gifts often come in ways that you do not expect."

3

In this place by Blessing Tarfa

The thing about place is the most fascinating thing about the ways I process memory as a human. But I am not in a good place right now, mentally... what happens in the Good Place?

Even in the good place, I am accosted only by the people who lived it with me to make it remain good. I am in this place now, same people but with an aching loss that has removed the goodness of this place.

What is this new place?

I think humans are always grappling for ground wherever they are.

There has to be a place where something can be kept, where something can exist in three dimensions, with a base for settling. In the end, everything finds rest.

And how did places come to me?

As the people that live them with me...

In 2018, I attended a creative Writers workshop. It was my first time being in a place with writers who were accomplished in their capacity and to be taught by writers I admire.

One evening, we went out for a shawarma treat. I was

surprised to see the car park before a building we often pass on our route to the studying centre.

The building is the green that remains after a dark green fabric is washed over and over again, turning almost light green but leaving trail marks and tracks of its original colour as a statement of its true identity.

"Bistro," the sign says. The entrance was a pedestrian gate that forced us to make a single file to enter.

"Small spaces" I thought to myself. I dislike small spaces.

The sound of water is the first thing you hear when you go into the bistro.

That day, it reminded me of my full bladder, and I quickly traced back my steps to find the little sign that pointed in the direction of restrooms. I returned to the entrance but the sound of the water had not stopped, I traced the origin of the sound to a mini fountain made up of an engraved pot pouring out water onto clean white rocks.

Nigerians are obsessed with adding a touch of "local" to every space: even small spaces.

The interior of the bistro is a clinical white with a strip of grey paint running -across the walls that divides it into two halves: top and bottom.

There are six love seats paired up and arranged in a way that seats a group of four. Two seats facing one another with a white table the length of the seats running in between.

The seats are all white with a hint of grey around the edges. A trick they used to either make us more careful when we eat or to convince us of how hygienic they are: "Look, food can mess up things, but we clean up real good".

There was a fan in the corner blowing full force. It looked big enough to make a loud whirring sound, but Ebuka's voice

swallowed it whole.

When we finally settled in our seats and the smell of our perfume returned to us, the smell of the bistro fought for territory in our senses. I could no longer smell Francis' perfume, who was sitting across from me, but the smell of freshly baked bread and garlic filled the air in the small space.

Sada walked to the counter and made an order for all 17 of us. The sales girl, in her crisp white shirt, walked through a brown door that, I believe, leads to the kitchen. Shortly after she returned, the smell of grilled chicken began to waft through the small space.

I believe it is a chain reaction: the constant smell in the bistro is garlic, ginger and baked bread. You only begin to smell the chicken when a sales girl walks through the brown door, which I assume leads to the kitchen.

The smell of chicken holds no dear memory to me, nor does the sound of water running out of a local pot in a bistro. Just accents, really, but it was there that the first truth of my life hit me. That when I remember the day I wanted to be a writer, I couldn't think of anything else I would rather be.

Places come to me as the people I have lived them with.

The next time I return to the Bistro, I will sit in the company of the voices of 17 writers long gone.

When I want to remember Zaria, the home of Ahmadu Bello University, where I spent five years earning my undergraduate degree, I do not remember it as a large expanse of land populated with tall buildings and even taller trees. And there are imposing structures that confirm it is a revered institution, and there are trees that signify a good plan and the thought of the environment.

But the structures and the aesthetics are barely features for

the human interactions that I made there.

I vaguely remember the structure of the department of biochemistry, the red walls plastered behind a row of trees, but only as a drop back to my friend Hanifa, who is announcing to me what lectures will not be held today.

The department is where Hanifa and I met and started a lifelong friendship, our names carved into the wood of the long benches in every class where we sat together to receive a lecture.

The call to Muslim prayer is a permanent fixture that signals the time of day.

Such that when I recall meeting a person at 2 o'clock, I can hear the voice of the muezzin playing in the background of the conversation we shared.

It is an indicator of what time it was Hanifa and I snuck out of the department to buy suya only to meet the absence of the vendor at his stand, as he has gone to pray. At Zaria, the woman I found was Hanifa.

Places like the sculpture garden, where I sat in the company of inanimate objects raised in honour of our heroes' past—the burst sculpture of Nnamdi Azikwe, the first president of Nigeria, the cigarette man hanging from a tree to represent death by our vices, and the one of Mother Earth holding an aircraft destroyed after a plane crash to pay tribute to the victims of the Sosoliso plane crash.

In the sculpture garden, I am in the company of death, and death, too, is dear to me.

Places are void to me until someone fills them with their fragrance and their voice, or a kiss, or with death.

You could have been anywhere, and I could have been nowhere. But now, here, your presence can make any place an altar. It may not be a good place for my heart, for my head.

Perhaps this is what makes it a true altar, and these things I lose are the sacrifices of praise for the place you make for me.

4

There Are Cathedrals Everywhere By Onyeche Ada Onobu

'There are cathedrals everywhere for those who have eyes to see'.

This is the theme we have been encouraged to use for our final assignment. I have to be honest; I have struggled greatly with this. I would not call it vague, but I would not call it straightforward, either.

Despite participating in this workshop from April to June and having previously explored this theme (I'm confident we've even received reading assignments based on it), I couldn't fully grasp it.

But that is the thing about me, though. I rarely get a lot of things. Things that are obvious to everyone else take me a bit longer to realise. I do not know why.

Maybe it's due to my ADHD. Maybe it's my brain. Maybe it is because I am a Cancer. Maybe it's Maybelline. Who knows? That's just the way my mind works. But it has made my existence somewhat complicated.

To my understanding, the theme refers to discovering magic

in the ordinary; to decorate time from thin air, as Basquiat and a Twitter user, I believe, once said (I will never call it X, God forbid).

But I don't see it—this supposed beauty in our world that is being overlooked.

To be frank, this is incredibly challenging, especially while being a forced member of *Baba Bala Blu's* Nigeria. But where can I find the supposed beauty in the mundane?

How am I, as a writer, supposed to channel my craft and deepen the narrative when I lack the inspiration to do so?

I think it will be difficult for me to appreciate things we overlook until my life is where I want, need, and believe it should be. Maybe I'm overly literal, but who cares?

But let me try to think about some things I consider beautiful amidst the mundane. What I do cherish is music—the divine melodies of Beyoncé, Victoria Monet, Paramore, and Dua Lipa.

Yes, I like generic American pop music (although these artists I mentioned have experimented with various musical genres, but that's beside the point), but don't judge me.

Have you ever listened to Beyonce's 'Bodyguard' while driving to your dreary job on a rainy Monday morning while swerving to avoid *keke napep?*

Have you been scream-singing the lyrics to 'Misery Business' since Yaradua's presidency?

When you think back to Victoria Monet singing about rocking short nails on 'Touch Me,' have you contemplated your sexuality?

Have you ever used your toothbrush as a pretend mic to count the rules Dua Lipa sings about?

As for the more corporeal pleasures—sex doesn't appeal to my asexual nature. I tried it once and was not impressed. It

also made me realise the importance of lubrication. Now, it just makes me squeeze my face when I think about it, as I'm smelling something putrid.

Smut? Hell yes. Hours I have spent online poring over fictional characters getting it on. Yes, Harry, let me see all the ways you can get creative with a wand.

Weed and alcohol? ADHD medication is not cheap, and antidepressants don't work, so yes, I need all the coping mechanisms I can get.

If I can sneak a few tiny bottles of gin, eat some laced brownies, and not be myself for the next five to eight hours, then thank God.

In 2018, I tried to take my life, and in 2021, I tried again. Between those years and even now, I have struggled with suicidal ideation. It's become such a constant presence that I sometimes forget it's not the norm—that these thoughts aren't supposed to be part of everyday life.

It's ironic that even after all these years, I still struggle to identify my triggers. The most random thing can set me off, and the next thing I know, I'm devising a plan on how I'll drive off a bridge.

Despite the passage of time and the depth of my struggles, I find the strength to continue. I think it's just human nature to persist in spite of insurmountable odds. After all, you're not really trying to kill yourself, but the thing inside you.

So, as I previously said, I am not too sure there are cathedrals everywhere for those who have eyes to see.

Perhaps the reason I haven't seen any cathedrals is because they don't exist yet.

I believe that we must build cathedrals for ourselves, others, those who will come behind us, those who never saw them, and

those who should have built them in the first place.

5

As Writers, Are There Cathedrals Everywhere? By Claire Molen

Cathedrals always left me awestruck. I have been drawn to the menacing architecture, the tall thick pillars, and the befitting dome that reminded me of the Pope's mitre. Beyond that, they represent important landmarks for geographical purposes and description.

As a writer, I think we have a rare gift; to take the mundane and show its value, to draw attention to the overlooked. Just as cathedrals stand as monumental structures amidst the hustle and bustle of city life, so too can our words elevate the ordinary to the extraordinary.

————

"I need a hug"

I have been no stranger to harrowing sadness, the type that gnaws at your gut, spilling out its visceral contents. Sadness that makes your blood hot and burns into your chest; that feeling of sheer despondence and frustration that shatters any iota of self you have.

In the last three days, I have sautéed in these feelings, con-

fessing to my friend how tired I was.

"What do you need?" I was asked.

"I need a hug," I texted in response.

"Ok, I am going to give you one when I come," she promised.

When she arrived a couple of minutes later, she held me close, silently wrapped up in a tight embrace. My heavy heart began to feel lighter as my sadness began to dissipate. It wasn't just the physical act of being held; it was the warmth, the unspoken understanding, and the silent promise that I wasn't alone.

My heavy heart began to feel lighter as my sadness began to dissipate. I wanted to cry as my final catharsis, but I couldn't. The tears were there, just beneath the surface, but they refused to fall.

Instead, I found myself breathing deeper, each inhale pulling in a little more strength, each exhale releasing a bit of the burden.

I thought about other times when a simple hug had made a difference.

There was the time after a rough breakup a friend hugged me in such candor that calmed me. That hug gave me the strength to be vulnerable.

And then there was the time my grandmother passed away. Her hugs were always warm and comforting, and I missed them terribly. At her funeral, my family and I hugged each other tightly, sharing our grief and finding solace in our collective embrace.

In this modern world, where technology often replaces face-to-face interaction, I wonder how much community is because of a lack of physicality.

Studies have shown that hugs can reduce stress, lower blood

pressure, and even boost the immune system. But beyond the science, here's a simple truth: hugs make us feel loved. And in moments of darkness, that feeling of love can be the light that guides us through.

Thank the heavens for hugs and friends that give you the best hugs, they just might make life bearable.

"I can get warm water here."

I went to a Nigerian Catholic boarding school, and as such, a warm bath was one of the luxuries we could not afford.

My skin became familiar with the coldness of an early morning bath, the sheer jitteriness, clashing of teeth, and goose pimples that followed. I learned to adapt, to find small moments of joy even in discomfort.

Fast-forward to when I got into a federal Nigerian university a couple of years later and was allocated to a school hostel—the same ritual continued. The showers were just as cold, the water biting into my skin in a familiar way of kinship.

Post-graduation, I found solace in a different environment where the warm baths never stopped flowing.

I remember the first time I stepped into a warm shower in my new home.

The feeling was surreal. The water enveloped me like a comforting embrace, washing away the fatigue and stress of the day. I stood there for what felt like an eternity, savouring every drop as it seeped into every pore.

I was unaware of my excitement and appreciation for this new change until I blurted out to my partner, "They have warm water here."

It sounded ordinary to hear because they giggled in response. "Bathing with warm water is normal, love."

It became clear how, when you have been an ardent customer of hardship, the seemingly mundane can appear as luxury.

This experience made me reflect on other small luxuries many take for granted. A comfortable bed, a hot meal, a quiet space to read—these are all things that can seem insignificant until you've gone without them.

My journey taught me to appreciate these small comforts and to be grateful for the progress I had made.

"Did you make it?"

Have you ever visibly raced against time? Exactly one week ago, I was in this fix, rushing to an airport barely 30 minutes away from the scheduled flight. I was so sure I was going to miss my flight.

Inside, my mind began to panic, but on the outside, I maintained composure, calmly explaining to the Uber driver what was at stake.

"I have a flight in 30 minutes. Can you make it?"

He nodded in affirmative as I set the destination on my Google Maps, and the navigation to our destination began. According to Google, the estimated time of arrival was 40 minutes. I was filled with a sense of dread, thinking about all the consequences of missing my flight. Would I have to pay extra fees? I had no money for that.

The rest of the ride was punctuated by silence as he occasionally amped up the car speed to 100 km/hr. I felt like I was in Fast and Furious, but the bad kind. The city blurred past us as we navigated through traffic, my heart pounding with every passing second.

When we finally arrived, we were two minutes late. He hurriedly explained to me where I could board; his urgency

matched my own.

An hour later, while preparing for take-off, he called and asked if I made it. As I responded in the affirmative, I realized that this was one of the simplest yet kindest acts I had experienced that week.

His concern was a small act of kindness that made a significant impact on my day. It reminded me of the goodness in people and how even strangers can extend a helping hand in times of need.

"You didn't tell me."

I have a problem. The problem of not speaking, intentionally measuring the truth to protect the feelings of others.

Or maybe I am just scared of criticism, so I omit information at will.

I am used to the independence of answering to myself, and when this problem began to manifest in my relationships, I began to struggle. Simple omission had enormous effects that lasted for days.

Simple things can have a ripple effect.

A small lie, a withheld truth—these can grow into something much bigger.

But really, can people withstand the truth?

Can we deal with the backlash of their criticism? I remember a time when I didn't tell a partner about a mutual ex.

When they found out, they felt betrayed, and our relationship suffered.

In relationships, honesty is the foundation.

Without it, everything else can crumble.

But to be honest, for the longest time, I wasn't ready for this.

Human beings are predictably sure to make mountains out of molehills.

Or maybe I was just not ready for honest human interactions or to be vulnerable or open. It terrified me.

In recent times, I have intentionally started taking my "honesty" journey seriously.

It has been challenging, as I occasionally found myself slipping back into my old habits, but it has also been rewarding: building stronger, more meaningful relationships and letting people love me for who I truly am.

6

Ode To A Feeling: Warmth By Kingsley Okonkwor-Anslem

This is a collection of stories that emphasize the beauty of warmth and its presence in the most unexpected moments of our lives.

These stories encourage us to stop and smell the roses, to acknowledge the gentle moments and how the simplest things can bring with it so much comfort.

1. BLUE IS NOT THE WARMEST COLOUR

When I think of warmth, the first thing that comes to mind is the cold. The chill that makes the gentle kiss of warmth all the more welcome.

It is in the quietness of a chilly evening that we appreciate the gentle comfort of warmth, its unfurling banners in direct contrast.

July in Lagos brought with it many new developments, some

surprising and others not so much. Among the unsurprising was the sudden change in weather. The scorching sun that had turned Lagos into a sauna began to give way to heavy rains and the cool winds they left in their aftermath.

As I settle on my bed, ready to write about all the abstract ways I've felt warmth, I look down at the blanket I am currently bundled in as it blocks out the cold that followed last night's rain. This blanket wasn't always mine.

My mum bought my sister a blanket. It was big, red, and packed with a thin layer of stuffing. It wasn't special or expensive; however, it was quilted, and the intricate swirling pattern was the only thing that stood out about it.

I also got a blanket on the same day. It was blue, flat and felt like it was sewn out of millions of little porcupine quills. The tiny bristles making me very aware of their presence whenever I tried to bundle up in it. I hated this blanket and my mum for making me drawn to it by buying it in my favourite colour.

Two years later as my sister leaves the university, she doesn't take this blanket with her *"too much load"* she claims.

Tonight, as we're lying in the living room, taking in the dark, she makes a sound, her voice laced with discomfort, and I ask her what's wrong. *"I'm so cold,"* she says, then walks off.

Even now, after three more years, I await the day she remembers that she had let me "borrow" the blanket long enough.

So, as I sit nervous, waiting to hear the screeching sound my door makes when it opens, I hear instead the clicking of her door as she returns with a *wrapper* that does very little to protect her

from the cold.

Now, every night, as I lie naked, covered only by this big red blanket, I remember that I only feel this warmth because of my sister.

2. THE SCIENCE OF HUGS

"...and this is when you hug someone when you care about them, and you want them to know that."

The beauty of hugs is in their ability to heal, comfort, and celebrate a connection between people.

In those gentle moments of embracing, time stands still as the warmth of your presence engulfs another, an earnest feeling that exceeds words.

IK and I have been online friends for three years.

We lived less than an hour away from each other, but we were comfortable with this arrangement. Maybe we were scared that finally seeing each other would demystify the other person, and we wanted to preserve this bubble for as long as we could.

So it comes as a surprise this Tuesday morning, as I'm preparing to brave the scorching sun on my way to lectures yet again, that I get a text from him saying he'll be in my school today.

IK hated the university. He said he knew too many people there, so avoiding it in its entirety was the best thing for him.

All of this went out the window when his new romantic prospect turned out to be a student there.

It is now 2pm, and all my lectures for the day are over.

"I'm at the sports complex..." I read the last message in our WhatsApp text thread as I hail down a cab.

"Sports complex, please go through the back gate," I tell the cab driver.

I spot the bulky figure sitting under a tree as I alight the cab. He spots me as well and quickly stands up.

As I angle myself to give him a quick side hug and a pat on the back, he suddenly engulfs me, squeezing the life out of me.

I was 19 years old, definitely too old and too shy to be picked up so easily while being hugged, but it didn't matter to him, and I allowed myself to savour the hug, permitting the warm feeling already creeping up on me.

3. MIDAS TOUCH

"I can't sleep until I feel your touch..."

The Weeknd's electro pop hit comes on shuffle.

In this moment, as I think of warmth, I think of a lover's touch. We are taught young that touch is one of the body's five fundamental senses, and in its quiet state, it shapes our experiences with the intricate textures of affection.

So, on the day when you're overstimulated, you'll crave one thing more than anything else: your lover's touch.

The first night I spent with my old lover, I couldn't sleep. This insomnia did not come as a shock to me.

I spent the first night in a new house, mostly awake, mapping out the room, alert, and praying to the sandman to grace me

with his presence. I knew this night would be no different.

By 1 a.m., the last of her friends leave, and we're alone once more in our little oasis.

As we settle in for the night, our attempts to make love futile, I watch our breathing become synchronized, and she falls asleep in less than five minutes.

We stay cuddled up until 3 a.m. The lack of light, coupled with my insomnia and heat, makes me leave the bed in search of a cooler surface.

My friends call me *"floor child,"* so I easily locate and find comfort in a spot on the cold tiles. Headphones plugged in, Troye Sivan's *SUBURBIA* playing on repeat, I read issue after issue of comic books I had saved over the week.

By 5am, my lover rolls over, searching for me on the bed. I watch from my place on the floor as she sits up, sleep very evident in her eyes when she realizes I'm no longer on the bed.

She finds me on the floor, then repositions herself on the bed, her head where her feet once were and gently connects her hand with my exposed stomach.

"Have you been here since?" She murmurs

"mm" I hum in response.

She returns to sleep immediately, a deep smile plastered on my face, warmth spreading through my body.

This deeply unconscious search for me, this simple act of her hands stretched out over the tall bed to find its rest on my stomach.

I do not need new words to describe this feeling; I already

know what it is.

So, when my eyes open by 6am, the sweet tendrils of daylight already creeping in, I join her in bed, her touch the one thing I needed to finally close my eyes.

4. UNSAID WORDS

"Words are like a pebble, and the heart is like a river. What happens when a pebble is thrown into a river? It causes a ripple." - Michael Bassey Johnson

My friends make it a habit to let me know how good I am with my words. I do not make it a habit to let them know how much I cherish theirs.

I do not make it a habit to let them know that when we're together, laughing and catching up on each other's lives, their voices heal parts of me that they didn't even break.

I do not let them know that whenever I disappear for weeks on end and they text me *"Booboo, how're you? I haven't heard from you in a while"* their words are like a hot cup of tea for my soul, offering warmth and comfort in stressful times

7

Onye Aghala Nwanne Ya By Ewa Gerald Onyebuchi

Silence drapes the air in the bus, save the rattling of tyres against the road. The women sitting a few seats behind me have become quiet, and without turning around to look at them, I imagine that they've exhausted the oil needed to keep the wheels of their conversation in motion.

The driver's stereo has grown silent and no longer spurts streams of hip-hop. The silence is so pristine, almost unsettling that I feel like begging the driver to switch the stereo back on. The man beside me wears an earpiece; I wonder if he's at ease in his own world, and if the earpiece is just a ruse to pluck him out of the silence.

I thrust my head out of the window, and at once, everything speaks to me in muted strangeness: the wind whirring around my face, the trees appearing to glide past us, the closely knit houses.

The bus snails to a stop towards a gridlock when we arrive RCC.

A sign post, which reads, *Nothing Pass God Ministry, Enugu*, stands at a corner off the road.

The sound of this city stings my ears: the honking of cars as drivers shove their necks out of the windows to yell at one another, the birds bickering from close range, as though they, too, can't wait for the traffic to fizzle out.

The sun gradually unfurls through the clouds, polishing everything in dazzling yellow, and in this moment of delay, I watch some children in uniform sidle through the space in between waiting cars to the other side.

A mother clutches her child's wrist as they cross to the other side of the road. But my focus drifts quickly to the girl holding her brother's hand, nudging him towards the gridlock.

The boy, slim in his yellow shirt and blue shorts, probably eleven, hesitates and slides away from his sister's grip. For a moment, the girl pauses. A brief exchange passes between them, and I imagine the boy frowning, telling the girl that he's old enough to walk by himself.

A car honks, the boy surrenders his hand. The girl wraps her palm around his wrist, and they cross the road.

What I feel is so sudden, so raw I smile and the tears crawl down my eyes.

The children are long gone, but I'm struggling to shake the blend of nostalgia and fear off my bones.

Last year, my youngest brother X almost took his life.

More than the reason for which he had attempted suicide, I can't still picture this brother of mine as someone who could surrender himself to the fangs of death.

One night in his hostel, Brother X shut the door of his shared room without bolting it. He gulped a small sachet of hypo and hurried to his bunk, perhaps with the intention to die quickly.

But the transition into the realm of lifelessness was stalled when he began to wriggle on the bed, clutching his stomach and squealing from pain, his voice a string tugging the boys chatting away on the hallway.

Whenever I think of this moment, a different scenario plays in my head: what if he had only squealed and no one was within earshot? What if he had bolted the door from inside, so he could stave off any form of interruption?

* * *

I was eighteen when I began walking Brother X home from school.

At the time, we were living together with our parents at Sofremines, Kogi State. Brother X was in primary five, and I had just sat for UTME and was waiting for the University of Lagos to release a date for their post-UTME.

In addition to watching the house and keeping things in order, I was expected to fetch Brother X from school.

I didn't quite enjoy going to my brother's school to pick him up.

First, the distance from our house to the school was far, and I mostly completed it on foot in the sun's harsh glare.

Second, I didn't like to be seen by my old teachers, not because I had behaved badly during my time with them. But I was weary of their questions, their eyes lowered in scrutiny as though I was a strange specimen to be studied.

Still, their questions bore a common thread: how was I, what school did I apply to, and what course of study? To each one, I answered appropriately, offering smiles that were too tight and loose at the same time.

Yet, what I enjoyed about the journey from my brother's school to our house was our shared moments of intimacy.

How Brother X would dart across the road to a bush of Ixora flowers, yank off purple heads of Ixora.

He closed his eyes and inhaled its scent. Then, opening them, he pushed a strand of ixora flower into my hand and said, "Brother Onyebuchi, smell it. It smells nice."

He was a child discovering a plaything for the first time, a child beckoning an adult to experience the wonder of his world. I inhaled the flower, its nectary sweetness, and smiled, and I felt like a child again.

There were times when our silences were enough, and holding each other's hands and swinging them as we walked home was all that was required.

* * *

Brother X attempted suicide because he was depressed.

When asked why he was depressed, he claimed his bad grades made him feel small and inconsequential, and no matter how well he wrote his exams, his lecturers always failed him.

My father had suggested reporting these supposed lecturers to the Dean, who was also his close friend, but Brother X refused. "Eventually, these lecturers would start to pick on me. And besides, I only have a year to go. I don't want any trouble," he pleaded.

Brother X has been an A-plus student beginning from primary to secondary school, so it was almost implausible to imagine that he was lagging behind in his grades.

Yet, the university is an entirely different environment, where you're expected to juggle everything, from academics to social

responsibilities to religious activities. Even in your penultimate year, not everything successfully aligns with the centre of balance.

For me, what is most disturbing is trying to picture Brother X as someone who could slip easily into that trench called depression.

He was always jovial, this brother of mine, ready to entertain us, to pluck the smile from our faces. As a child, he wasn't afraid to display his need for affection, to be heard, and to be loved.

I spent much of my growing seasons looking out for him, always trying not to lose sight of him, like a mother hen. I accompanied him around to church or to run errands for our mother, except on occasions when I was swamped with house chores, and he had to go outside in the company of my other brothers.

Even while my brothers played, I always issued a stern warning to them to watch over Brother X, to guide him like an object that could crack.

I don't know why I was so particular about Brother X, about his safety.

Perhaps my love for him had segued into a fear of foreboding that one day, someone, somewhere, would whisk him from us if we allowed him to walk on the road alone.

Perhaps I thought just being around him would forestall any impending harm.

When Brother X turned fifteen, I thought this was the point when I would outgrow my anxiety, and my heart would stop pounding in my chest whenever he stepped out of the house unaccompanied.

Still, I followed him around, even when he resisted and claimed that he was now old enough to look after himself. My

presence commanded an imposing air about him that shooed off the girls who admired him and wanted to approach him.

* * *

Following Brother X's attempt to end his life, my mind continued to string up questions it couldn't proffer answers to: at what point did my brother let go of my hand?

Or was it I who lost sight of him and started to forge bridges between us, anything to avoid his calls when they came because I assumed he was only calling me to beg for money?

When did I become so busy with life, with the pursuit of ephemeral worldliness, I failed to notice my brother slipping from my sight?

When did I stop reaching for his hand, trying to assure him that everything would be fine, that he was safe with me?

Sometimes, it's hard to picture Brother X as someone who could slip into depression. But Robin Williams thinks otherwise: *The saddest people always try the hardest to make other people happy because they know what it's like to feel absolutely worthless, and they don't want anyone else to feel like that.*

The gridlock has finally thawed out. The driver eases the bus onto a smooth plane and picks a speed. The image of the girl and her brother stays with me.

When I think about them, I ponder the Igbo adage, "*Onye aghala nwanne ya,*" which I grew up with.

It loosely translates into *"No kith or kin should be left behind."*

I think of Brother X and my other siblings and how, over the years, we have become a ball of yarn intricately woven, connected by our differences and worldviews.

Whatever affects them affects me, and unashamedly, I share in their joy, happiness, sadness and pain, their wins and losses.

8

Mide By Olawale Lawal

5 July 2024
8:22 PM
Lagos, Nigeria

The ringing went on for another thirty seconds without a response.

Mide swore under her breath and set her phone on the passenger seat. She turned all her focus to seeing through the windshield, which was an arduous task considering the unrelenting rain.

The wipers were working at full tilt, but that seemed to have little effect on clearing the cascades of water arriving from the skies by the millisecond.

Her predicament was made worse because her windshield and all of her car windows were fogging on the inside, and she had to constantly wipe them down to have any hope of visibility.

Worse still, the car was having an as-of-yet undetermined problem. No matter how hard she stepped on the pedal, it wouldn't move beyond a snail's pace. She ruefully thought

about her husband's constant teasing about how she never paid attention to the workings of her car.

"*You this woman ehn, how person go just dey drive, and you no go even look your fuel gauge, eh*," was his playful jab at her this past Tuesday.

Why should she care about all of that minutiae, though? She had him to look after all that, didn't she? She could hardly remember the last time she refuelled the vehicle herself. She left all of that to her husband, Deji, who dutifully saw to the monthly maintenance and constant refuelling of her car.

Frustrated, she snatched up her phone and dialled his number again. She gave up after the seventh ring with no reply. Where was he anyway? He should've been home by now, she thought. He should also have been worried she hadn't come in yet. Especially in these weather conditions that have had Lagos in a choke for the best part of three weeks.

If only Deji would pick up his phone. She considered hailing a Bolt or Uber ride. However, she couldn't fathom leaving the car out in an area she wasn't particularly familiar with.

Leaving your car unattended overnight is always a bad idea in Lagos. You might as well stick on a sign advertising free car spare parts to all the thieves in the area. Besides, she would be extremely fortunate to find available drivers at reasonable prices in these weather conditions and at this time.

With luck, the traffic would ease up, and she would get herself home before midnight.

Mide was preoccupied with her thoughts, so the sudden bright beam of light at her window took her by surprise.

Instinctively, she braked the car. Behind the beam of light now trained on her face, she could see the silhouette of a man in a long dark coat and a flattened black cap.

His furiously moving left arm was motioning her to the side of the road while the right held a long and rather menacing-looking gun. The oft-dreaded Nigerian police. Not tonight of all godforsaken nights, she thought. She complied nevertheless and pulled her vehicle over to the indicated spot where three similarly attired policemen had set up a temporary roadblock. She rolled down her window, thankful the unforgiving rains had slowed to a drizzle.

"*Good evening, madam*", he leaned forward and announced cheerfully through a mouth with several gaps where teeth should've been. A quick flip of the switch of her interior lights to on showed a remaining collection of brown stained teeth, possibly from years of tobacco use and poor hygiene. He reeked badly of [2]ògógóró and cheap cigarette smoke.

"Good evening, officer", she replied.

"*Can I see your driving license and particulars*?" She noticed that his speech was slurred and his gait was unsteady. And these were the people supposed to provide security to the public.

She huffed, retrieved her purse from the backseat, and then extracted her driver's license after some rummaging. She also fished her vehicle documents from the glove compartment and presented them to him.

"Yes, here they are".

He scanned the card with his eyes and then made a pointed show of reading through the details of the vehicular forms.

With an almost palpable disappointment, he handed the documents back to Mide.

"*Anything for your boys, mama? Make we take see something use do weekend".*

Doing her best to conceal her irritation, Mide reached into her purse, took out four one thousand naira notes, and placed

them into the grubby hands of the now grinning policeman. It would no doubt go to purchasing more liquor and other such substances. That was no way to live, extorting money from motorists and using them to fuel personal vices. She wondered what examples he set for his family at home.

She gave a half-hearted wave in response to his salutations as she slipped back into traffic. What a racket, she thought.

Days like this made her reconsider whether Deji had been right in suggesting that they relocate to England. She had demurred because she wanted to remain physically close to her family and not have to undertake a six to eight-hour flight every time she wanted to see her parents.

Mide sighed and looked at her watch. It was now 8:59 PM. Her Google Maps display indicated that traffic was now thinning out. That was good news. The bad news was that she still had at least an hour of driving to get home due to flooded roads along her route. Might as well put on some music to elevate her mood, she surmised.

Clairo was her go-to for a comforting and laid-back mood. The young singer's dreamy yet earnestly soft voice weaves into and floats over lo-fi instrumentals to produce an effect that transports you into the very depths of the story she is painting at the time.

As the soothing alternative music filled the car, she let her mind wander again.

Why was Deji not replying to his calls? It had been over two hours now. Was he alright? She picked up her phone and dialled him once and then twice.

Against her racing thoughts, she made a conscious effort to calm herself.

Deji is alright, she thought. He must have fallen asleep or

something similarly trivial. How she could do with a warm bath, a hot meal, and some scented candles.

10:49 PM

Mide turned her vehicle into the street marked Adeyemi Folagoro Drive. There was no flooding here, thankfully. Together with her husband, she had chosen to live in this part of town because of the exemplary security and the presence of an efficient drainage system.

As a result, they didn't have to deal with the widespread flooding that plagued many parts of the city with the arrival of the rainy season.

Wait, who was that man standing at the gate to her residence? she thought as her headlights brought the stationary male silhouette into focus.

Deji! Her heart leapt for joy as she saw her husband's previously furrowed brows dissolve into a smile with the rest of his face.

He opened the gates to let her in and helped her out of the car. She immediately dissolved into his welcoming and comforting embrace.

"*My love, I was worried sick about you. Kí ló ṣẹlẹ̀?*"

"I don't know what happened to the car. It moved slowly, no matter how hard I pushed on the pedal. I called you multiple times too, but I didn't get a response."

"*My apologies, baby girl. My phone got into the kitchen sink while I did the dishes earlier. Water went into it, and the screen went off.*"

"Oh, that explains it then. I was worried the entire way home."

"*You have nothing to worry about, my little pumpkin*", he said as he laughed and kissed the tip of her nose.

"*Come now; we'll run you a bath and some good food afterwards.*

What do you say to jollof, fried croaker fish, and some plantain?"

"Yes! Yes, I'd love that, Mr. Aribisala!" she giggled and did a happy jig.

"*Come on now. It's bad manners to keep Ms. Jollof waiting*," he said as he reached for her hand.

She gleefully put her hand in his and bounded joyfully to the house, almost dragging him.

There were always the most beautiful things, like her lovely husband and a warm home to be grateful for, even on days like this, she thought.

1234

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1 Pidgin English is a variant of the English language. It is spoken in Nigeria and has variations in Ghana, Liberia, Equatorial Guinea, and Cameroon.

2 Ògógóró is the Yorùbá name for a locally distilled drink containing anywhere from 30-60% alcohol.

3 This statement in Yorùbá directly translates to "What happened?" Yorùbá is the predominant language spoken in Lagos and its surrounding southwestern region of Nigeria.

4 4Jollof rice is commonly considered the national staple of Nigeria. It is a dish made from rice, tomatoes, red peppers, and a mix of spices.

9

A Classroom Epiphany By Azubuike Obi

Nkemakonam Ogbuefi has resumed work as a teacher in an elementary school. He has been assigned to the Nursery 2 class, which they call K.G 2.

Before now, Nkemakonam has written the Joint Admission Matriculation Examination twice. He is certain he will get into the law program this time. He's so sure, he tells his employer he is going to be with them for only two terms. Nkemakonam intends to save as much as he can from the paltry sum he was able to negotiate as salary. As he hands over his NECO result, he secretly hopes the tiny children reciting poems, their tender tongues rolling over the words, babbling, are not the ones he's to teach.

Nkemakonam has always wanted to teach. He also knows teaching does not pay; it was what one did because they wanted to, because their soul called them to it. When he knew that his soul wanted this, he did not know. What he did know was that he had felt a certain weightlessness when he helped other students through subjects they found difficult in junior secondary school.

II

Nkemakonam begins work after the mid-term break and the job is as tasking as he assumed it would be. He barely understands the babbling the children think is talking. He frequently has to strain his ear, blocking out every other sound, so he can focus on one child at a time. He's not sure they understand his teaching, and there's no way of being certain, too. He is uncomfortable because the children stare for too long and when they are not staring, they are shrieking as loud as howling dogs. He trudges on, eagerly waiting for the dismissal bell. He leaves immediately the children in his class disperse, like they did not very nearly bring down the roof with their voice, while making sure he loses his.

When Nkemakonam walks down the street after dismissal, children call out to him, 'Uncle! Uncle!' Nkemakonam begs the ground to open up and swallow him whole. What Nkemakonam feels is not shame. It is shock that is flavoured with embarrassment, punctuated with shyness, and laced with anxiety.

Weeks in, Nkemakonam is finally getting the hang of it. He still runs away from leading the morning assembly. The crowd is too much, and the intensity of the stares heightened, he says. But he understands the children better now. He knows the pitch when they really want to relieve themselves and when they just want to join their peers outside.

Nkemakonam is not so shy to teach again. He is now conscious of his gesticulations because the children pick it up even before he's aware of what he's doing. He understands this, and so uses it to his benefit. He demonstrates every definition and example now, immortalising them in their memories with hand gestures. They laugh so much, showing milk teeth and healthy

gums. Nkemakonam laughs more, too.

Sometimes Nkemakonam cannot for the life of him understand their thought process. Understanding eludes him when they cackle to something funny few minutes after they've been flogged. Is this what being unable to bear grudges looks like? Nkemakonam asks. Is this what it looks like when your joy is not contingent on the behaviour of others? It baffles Nkemakonam that 4 and 5 year olds fight for an opportunity to throw away the waste basket and water. Once, Nkemakonam had wanted to punish a pupil he did not want to flog because it was around dismissal time— he believes children going home happy will increase their chances of liking school and wanting to come back the next day without coercion—and the other pupils suddenly look crestfallen, like he's been unfair and has committed a sacrilegious act by allowing only one person the inexplicable fun in throwing away refuse. He recants his statement and warns the pupil not to repeat the offence again. He sends two other pupils away with the refuse and water. They grin and bounce off the class, racing each other.

Nkemakonam regales his siblings with tales of his children. He did not know when they became 'his children' or why he's claiming ownership. But he does, anyway. He's fiercely protective and would not allow his siblings get a laugh from seemingly stupid deeds of his children.

Graduation comes. Graduation ends. School resumes for the first term in the fresh school year. Nkemakonam returns. Over the holiday, Nkemakonam has been refreshing and refreshing his JAMB CAPS, willing it to change to something favourable. JAMB CAPS is reluctant. It doesn't yield, however hard he tries.

III

Nkemakonam is promoted to Basic One. The proprietor says it's in acknowledgement of the work they've seen him put. He's happy about this new development, but just below the surface, he feels it: Crippling demands. This new role is going to be much more tasking—the classroom is debilitated, with its leaking roof and chipped walls; the children are older, with more heightened senses; the workload has increased, the pay as stiff as a white woman's waist.

Nkemakonam introduces himself and it feels as though he has known these children since forever. There is a kinship which was absent with the children he had worked with. Maybe because with these set of children, there are more vivid memories of his own days. It is as though there is a tangible mirror and he can see himself, now through the lens of memory. Nkemakonam remembers his Basic 2 teacher fondly, he feels sympathy now. He can imagine how she must have felt to have to constantly comment on his talkativeness in school.

Nkemakonam finds out the relationship with the previous teacher bordered on hate. The children tell him how she would flog and curse and hit them for almost nothing. He feels the need to right these wrongs. *The stakes are higher.* It seems his every move is being watched, like someone is waiting to see what he does, waiting for him to fail.

This failure begins to manifest. He *mercilessly* flogs a child that almost never remembers. The proprietor calls him and tells him what he already knows: O is not like other children. She tells him to take it easier with O. Nkemakonam sighs and over the weeks that follow, he keeps an eagle's eye on O. During the weekend he Googles his observations. And, according to Google, O might be autistic. Nkemakonam sighs and wallows in an abyss of despair. How did he not know? How did he not recognize the

fragile gift which was placed in his hands? How and why has he not treated this boy like one who is enlightened? One who should know better?

Nkemakonam refuses to let ignorance continue holding him back. He decides to take responsibility and move on. He goes into the place of prayer and lets his heart out. He prays for patience and endurance and wisdom and understanding and empathy. He knows he is ill-equipped to deal with a child living with autism, but he has to make do with what he has. He has to be firm and, at the same time, calm and visibly loving. He has to give O space to understand and implement things he's been taught, but he has to make sure that he, Nkemakonam, does not become complacent.

The weeks and months that follow, Nkemakonam will try and fail and continue trying. Nkemakonam will restrain himself from using a cane when O does not remember certain answers. He will restrain himself from flogging O when he farts in the classroom and seats tightly, hoping nobody smells it. O does not know siting tight will prolong the malodorous odour, but Nkemakonam does, so Nkemakonam extends grace. He placates the other children, too, who are visibly offended at seeing another boy get away with such behaviour. Nkemakonam does not even allow them step on each other's foot without ensuring an apology. Consciously polluting the air and siting tight will be their funeral. They know this. And so does Nkemakonam.

He does not know how to explain the O's behaviour to other children. He apologizes in the boy's stead, and tell them to treat him like they would a younger brother. Nkemakonam does not know this at the time, but he will break down when his departure draws closer. He is going to disintegrate in the classroom, right in front of the children. He does not know how he gets to that

stage. He does not recall when he became this person who cries for strangers, albeit children he's been working with for about a year.

IV

Now, months into teaching Basic One, Nkemakonam understands O's strength and weaknesses. He knows the boy remembers routine sharply. He knows the boy sometimes looks into space and has to be called back. He knows when the boy is exhausted and a change will serve him better. Something like changing to practicing spellings after a while of solving Arithmetic. The common entrance examinations for pupils in the final year of primary school looms closer, too. Nkemakonam, who has overcome the anxiety of facing about 100 children, now conducts the morning assembly.

On his day of duty: Wednesday, he asks the final year pupils questions on English language and he senses a certain lack of knowledge and certainty. He proposes to tutor the pupils on a Thursday, after school. The proprietor agrees.

And there, while they threw questions at him, and him trying to answer and clarify as best he can, he has an epiphany: He wants to do *this* forever. He does not want to know a life that does not involve tutoring children. Nkemakonam has been in the classroom and the courtroom now seems repulsive. When asked what happened over the year he worked as a teacher before university, Nkemakonam will answer: Teaching changed my life.

10

Static Space By Deborah Iyalagha

The journey of life is fast-paced. Although there might be days that seem to stretch, going on beyond the boundaries of 24 hours and the passage of minutes feeling like dragging chalk on a board, usually, time passes pretty quickly, and we only realize the passage of time after it is in the past.

An example of this is when facing an exam.

For instance, in my second year of university, I had my Microbiology finals, which I had been preparing for all semester, yet it seemed no progress had been made.

The exam season felt daunting, almost suffocating, as if there was no hope for a future beyond the exams. But I wrote the exam and ended up passing the course, and I have faced even greater challenges in my academic odyssey, just like Homer.

I have come to the conclusion that there will always be monsters, so, rather than focus on the problem in front of me, it is better to experience the moment and take in the world around me.

The static space is about attuning myself to the world. Immersing myself in the present.

Letting go of all inhibitions, feeling the rain on the skin and being the main character at the end of a 00s rom-com.

To that main character, tomorrow doesn't matter; only now does, the moment that they kiss their love interest and share a dance. They are not thinking about the future of their relationship or whatever may come; it is simply about enjoying the moment and not sparing a moment to think about the future. This does not mean that the current has no effect on the things to come; rather, it is about not consciously considering what might be but fully enjoying what already is.

***

It's a rainy Tuesday afternoon as I lean over the balcony in front of my supervisor's office, taking in cool air and exhaling a deep sigh that comes from a place of frustration.

Now, at the penultimate moment of my university career, I finally understand the big deal with projects that are spoken of so much.

Many times, I have heard testimonies and stories of bad situations turned in the favor of friends, but until this moment, standing in the cool of the afternoon, I have not quite understood it.

A yawn brings a rush of cool oxygen into my lungs, working hard to keep me awake and fight the urge to sleep, an urge that is not unfounded as I had pulled an all-nighter to get into this moment.

With an exam on Thursday, the looming storm of pre-qualifying exams and the submission deadline close to my door, there is so much pent up in my chest that I might just explode.

If it had been another time, I might've screamed out to the air, letting the wind carry the echoes of my voice, but that would not be appropriate, so I resort to looking.

I take in the green grass on the open lawn in front of the Science & Technology building. Students are walking calmly, unbothered by the light shower, as they make their way to class.

The leaves of the tree directly in front of me dance to the silent tune of the gentle breeze. I bring out my camcorder, hoping to capture this peaceful moment, an attempt to immortalize it forever. The door opening breaks this reverie, and I brace myself to re-enter my supervisor's office, hoping the meeting goes well.

It does not—at least not how I would've hoped—which leaves me feeling frustrated. The frustration wraps around my throat like a boa trying to squeeze out tears from my eyes as I stand in the office, but the moment I step out of the office and see the lawn, a calmness overshadows me, and I take in a deep breath and let that wash over me.

I stand and listen to the birds, the light patter of the rain and the low hum of conversations, and I find solace in them.

***

There is something about the static space that comforts me; perhaps it is the quiet or the abyss that presents so much comfort. In the silence, I feel a warmth wrap around me in the cocoon of being, in the cocoon of existence.

The silence may not necessarily be the absence of sound or people but rather finding solace in being present.

As I earlier stated, life is fast-paced, so finding a place of silence might not be possible or easy to come by.

The static space is about immersing yourself in the present and using the five senses to receive from your surroundings. I like to believe that memories are tagged with little descriptive notes that highlight the sensory perceptions of the moment, thus solidifying its presence in the brain.

The eyes are the best cameras that will never be produced commercially because it would not be possible to accurately create a camera that would capture the world exactly as the individual spirit sees it.

In my eyes, the world is always beautiful; this mindset was cultivated in early age Sunday school lessons that taught of God and the care he put into creating it.

The beauty of the world is not an aesthetic concept; rather, it is a spiritual thing. It is beauty that connects my spirit with the spirit of whatever or whoever I am looking at.

As creations in the grand scheme of existence, we carry within us individual essences of life. The proof of existence is beauty defined.

Of course, I am not resistant to the influence of societal definitions of beauty, but I take in the view of society and combine it with my connection with the subject matter. The closer I am to the object of beauty, the more beautiful it becomes. This is why my friends will always be lovely to me.

In my eyes, they are the most well-crafted beings that walk the face of this earth, not because of the features that make up their physical structure but rather the combination of all they are.

And even as we grow older, and in the case of eventual parting, they will always remain their beautiful selves to me.

This is what living in the static space is about. I use my eyes as cameras to actively take in everything around me and capture

images that will never leave me.

With my eyes, I capture the way my roommate's eyes crinkle in the corner when she laughs. I take in the way the rain falls against the backdrop of my class building.

Hearing in the static space feels like sensory on steroids. It involves listening not to respond but rather to absorb. Listening to remember, to recollect. The way I understand it, scientifically at least, is that hearing is strongly linked to the provocation of emotion.

This is why soundtracks in movies are very important to sustain the emotional connection of the audience. The particular thing about listening is that you have to stop talking in order to hear clearly.

Some evenings, I hear laughter as I make my way down the corridor of my hostel. From one room, I hear movie dialogue, and from another, an animated argument on talking stage protocols.

These conversations and sounds are filling, reminding me of the differences in human life experiences and the uniqueness that lies within each of us.

I listen as a friend regales a tale from secondary school, in his voice, I can hear the nostalgia and the laughter that the memory brings to heart.

At home, when I listen, I hear the sound of joy that echoes through the neighbourhood when NEPA brings light, as well as the disappointment when the light doesn't last longer than 10 minutes. Sometimes, if I stay up late, I hear the sound of my father's prayers and the petitions that have kept my brother and me safe even when we are far from home.

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The static space is a place of reflection, not the deep self introspective one where you consider your rights or wrongs, rather it's a reflection of what good things surround you in that moment.

It is a place of pleasure, drawing out the happy things and using them to nourish your soul. We, as beings, are a result of this nourishment.

The static space is a place to retreat when the world seems overwhelming, and Atlas passes on his task to me. I let go and immerse myself in the little things, pushing aside the rest of the world.

When I find myself choked up, I call my brother, and we exist in silence, the rhythmic typing at his computer providing a comforting reminder that he is present on the other side of the call.

The reality of my static space is, within its void, there is so much possibility to be, so I become.

11

Rest In The Bottom Lay By Eyitayo Jemimah Ajayi

Life was never meant to be all rosy. We sometimes think if man did not fall at the inception, we would not have to struggle. If Adam didn't eat the forbidden fruit, along the line someone else would have, maybe Adamu. If all was rosy, people would have turned their backs and forgotten the Rose of Sharon.

Recollecting George Herbert's poem, *The Pulley* that says, "Rest in the bottom lay", I realize we cannot truly have peace forever. Even when all is peaceful for a long while, we start to feel that all is not well - it is too good to be true.

"When God at first made man,
Having a glass of blessings standing by,
"Let us," said he, "pour on him all we can.
Let the world's riches, which dispersèd lie,
Contract into a span."
So strength first made a way;

Then beauty flowed, then wisdom, honor, pleasure.
When almost all was out, God made a stay,
Perceiving that, alone of all his treasure,
Rest in the bottom lay.
"For if I should," said he,
"Bestow this jewel also on my creature,
He would adore my gifts instead of me,
And rest in Nature, not the God of Nature;
So both should losers be.
"Yet let him keep the rest,
But keep them with repining restlessness.
Let him be rich and weary, that at least,
If goodness lead him not, yet weariness
May toss him to my breast."
- George Herbert

It is conceivable that Adam would not have fallen from grace if he had refrained from eating the forbidden fruit. The creation mechanism has a mechanism designed to propel us back toward God. Like boomerangs, we will undoubtedly come full circle to our creator at some point.

As we go through life, searching for means of subsistence and things to enjoy, we strive to give our lives meaning. Life's uneven terrain is what drives us to look for means of feeling secure. We all turn to our cathedrals for consolation, assurance, and comfort at some point in our lives.

We can all agree that while a place of worship is the first thing that comes to mind when we hear the word "cathedral," we do not always find comfort in those places; instead, we build our own cathedrals where we minister to ourselves.

When do I realize that everything around me is breathing?

Sometimes, the walls around me are my cathedral. I become friends with the walls around me when my womb rejects me and ejects the fruit I refused to fertilize. We are so united at that point that nothing can separate us.

At that point, it is culturally accepted that people who place their legs on the wall are attempting to communicate with the other world. However, I don't even care if they think I am a witch. Yes, the walls do connect me to the other world, if that is the world of solace.

When I am in excruciating pain and wish my stomach would help me, I long for my love to hold me and comfort me. I feed my imagination to keep myself from being alone, even though I have been on that path by myself for the last sixty months.

Liverpool's mantra, *you'll never walk alone* does not apply to me in that sense.

Despite the walls separating us, he assured me he would always be there. What an irony—those same walls that keep me apart from him also attempt to soothe me in those circumstances.

Not that I believed the wall to be my purposeful source of comfort, but I discovered that the wall had feelings and could breathe during one of my down moments. Considering that we claim the walls have ears, I believe they also have reassuring arms.

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Like Hezekiah, you find me trying to beg my Maker for grace while facing the wall.

Trying to mutter words only He can hear because others might think I sound gibberish. When those tears come rushing forth,

and you want to hide them from the world, just face the wall and talk to your maker. Once again, the walls serve as my cathedral.

When life made me stick to a seasoning cube, I thought I was just loyal to the brand.

I didn't grieve my grandmother when she passed; I hate that I was emotionless about it. I found myself buying the seasoning cubes she used to cook her meals. Emotions are no-brainers; they find the tiny loophole to seep into your reality.

Every time I pick up the seasoning cube, I find myself thinking of her. Crazy, innit? I cook in the memory of her. It feels like the Holy Communion, each cube I take in remembrance of her.

At times, after all I think is not well, you find me calling my younger siblings, who are still oblivious to what life is, to delight me with their ignorance. Maybe it will trigger nostalgia, and I will be a kid for just a few seconds. But when it seems like they're talking gibberish which is all I want to hear, the adults with them try to caution them, jerking me back to the adulthood reality.

My plight is to hide under their obliviousness in a bid to simulate me into a soft reality. The excitement in their voice will probably pounce on me. I will forget all the burden of guilt weighing me down. Or maybe one of them will talk me into an unrealistic reality that I may dream for a moment.

When I see my muse—one cathedral full of cathedrals—he becomes my harbour.

At this point, I appreciate the self-reliance instilled in us to seek solace in others. I can't imagine if we were all time bombs with no one to deactivate the timing.

In the soles of his feet, I once found solace. Grasping his soles, sensing its warmth and igniting our intimate emotions, separates me from the outside world. How two people can feel

so strongly connected to one another that their nerves begin to wear thin. I assumed that feeling would last forever, but "repining restlessness" actually developed.

Every season, we find ourselves turning to our muse for comfort, reinvigorating the foundation of our bond in the hopes that, when everything becomes too much, we might lose ourselves.

Some turn to nature for solace, but their attempts to find solace are fleeting if they do not acknowledge the God of nature—"weariness may toss him to my breast." In all honesty, I do not find comfort in being outside, and I am not the type to go for a walk in order to decompress or listen to a birdsong in order to divert my attention.

May these cathedrals, whatever they may be, provide us with everlasting solace while they stand. May we never give up trying to identify a single cause, a temporary altar upon which to build a cathedral that would fulfil our needs.

12

When Nigeria Hasn't Happened By Maryam Ahmad

I

I was ten years old when I first heard the word "kakistocracy."

My elder sister, Atti, had just come back home in her red trousers and white gown school wear like a kid who had just visited a chocolate factory to share everything she had learned in school.

Atti hated Math but loved Government.

She would go into great detail about the Government lessons, her face lighting up with excitement as she explained the new things she learned.

On the day she learned about democracy, Atti got home chanting, "A democracy is a government by the people, for the people!" Her enthusiasm was infectious, her eyes sparkling as she spoke.

But what truly piqued my interest was the word "kakistocracy." It sounded strange and fascinating, mainly because it

started with "khaki."

I had just gotten a pair of khaki dungarees I adored and was saving for special days.

A kakistocracy, as she explained, meant a government run by the worst and most dishonest people, where bad leaders make everything worse. I had a curious mind, and I knew the basics of social studies, but I couldn't understand how leaders could be ill-equipped.

Leaders were supposed to have outstanding qualities, right?

II

What I didn't understand at ten was that living in a kakistocracy would become my reality for years to come. Each day, I face a roulette wheel of life in Nigeria—one where the stakes are impossibly high, and there's no guarantee of a win.

Every spin of the wheel brings a new outcome, and if I manage to avoid one disaster, I'm left hearing about those who didn't. This unending cycle of uncertainty puts a constant strain on my mental health and tests my empathy. The wheel never stops spinning, and each turn brings a fresh wave of anxiety and concern.

I reflect on how much my life has transformed and how many simple pleasures I once took for granted.

I used to eagerly anticipate leaving school and stepping into a big girl job, but now, even though I work in the nation's capital, life feels far more challenging than it ever did during my school days.

I think about how I can't use public transportation without the constant fear of being 'one-chanced.' or how travelling 200 kilometres to visit my family has become a daunting task

due to the risk of kidnapping. Constant vigilance has become a necessity, and ticking off visiting the thirty-six beautiful states on my bucket list now feels like a matter of sheer luck.

Insecurity and a poor quality of life erode the simple, often unnoticed blessings we once took for granted. Things like taking a carefree walk or enjoying a peaceful moment have become a distant memory.

Instead, you're left navigating daily life under the shadow of constant fear, always on edge and worried about being whisked away at any random moment. The state of the country affects every aspect of my life, stripping away even the most basic comforts and freedoms.

It doesn't help that I work in the development sector, where I am constantly confronted with social issues and witness regression firsthand. It's one step forward and five steps back.

Recently, I saw that we now have over 22 million out-of-school children.

When I started volunteering, it was 10 million, and even that was shocking. This is just one example. I work on many issues, but my optimism runs thin.

Most times, I become delusional, thinking if A and B are done to achieve C, maybe XYZ can happen. But it ends up being all the alphabets from D to W thrown in; maybe we will reach XYZ and whatever happens next.

Living and adulting in Nigeria is like navigating a never-ending maze, with every turn bringing a new challenge. Every sunrise brings its own set of troubles. There is always a fire somewhere—isn't that how the world works?

Bad things balance good things, right?

But it is different here. You are at risk of low-quality battles like having no power for days, unpredictable internet connec-

tivity, or the very frequent public sector strikes that can make your life ten times worse.

Every day feels like a battle for survival, and everyone I encounter has their definition of it; it is how it seeps into every conversation I have—whether with friends, family, random strangers, or even our taxi drivers.

Everyone has their own story of when Nigeria "happens"

Yet, we are expected to remain resilient, smile, and learn valuable lessons.

Maybe we will all emerge as diamonds after all this pressure and suffering.

The human experience here is a constant test of endurance, a journey through relentless adversity.

III

Unlike ten-year-old me, I no longer wait for special occasions to wear my Khaki; I've learned to seize joy whenever it appears, answering at its first knock and holding on tight.

I have accepted this normal, understanding that some days are great and others have you questioning your existence. I've realized that not everyone will migrate and that optimism, like a phone battery, needs to be recharged.

As everything deteriorates and headlines scream more net negatives than positives, as Nigeria "happens" to people daily, and as Twitter is always ablaze with a hot trending topic showing how deep in the trenches we are, I find solace in the things that keep me grounded. I am beginning to see the beauty in the everyday, the simple joys that are constant and surround me if I only take the time to notice.

While I am here, while Nigeria hasn't happened, while I stay

present, surviving Nigeria isn't just about getting through the day; it's about discovering the anchors that keep you grounded amidst the chaos.

I remember beautiful sunsets that paint the sky in hues of gold and crimson, brief respites that lift the weight from my weary shoulders. —all these small bits when I let them pull me back to the present, reminding me that life is still happening here and now.

I count my blessings, grateful for the ability to see the few and dwindling good things and recognize my privilege.

On the nights when I don't spiral myself to sleep, I pour myself a cup of tea and light a candle, savouring the moment.