NOTES OF A NOSTALGIC NIGERIAN

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Bachelor of Science - Microbiology
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2011

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

Master of Fine Arts - Creative Writing

Department of English
College of Liberal Arts
The Graduate College

University of Nevada, Las Vegas
May 2024

UNLV | GRADUATE COLLEGE

Thesis Approval

The Graduate College
The University of Nevada, Las Vegas

March 29, 2024

This thesis prepared by

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entitled

Notes of a Nostalgic Nigerian

is approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts - Creative Writing
Department of English

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Abstract

Ucheoma Onwutuebe; Notes of a Nostalgic Nigerian
(Under the direction of David Morris)

Young Nigerians are leaving home in droves due to economic hardship. Many have found legitimate routes to the West and are settling and thriving in their chosen fields. This mass exodus is both beneficial and unsettling. Beneficial in the sense that the migrant leaves as an act of love to support their families back home. Unsettling, because the homefront is destabilised by this separation, thereby rocking familial equilibriums. In these essays, I write about this tug and pull between the necessity of an exit from home and the homesickness that comes after. I also detail ways that I cope in America, the methods that keep me afloat in a strange place. Most of the coping mechanisms are fashion, dating apps, therapy, and of course, writing. In the essay on fashion, I write about how I wear myself as boldly as I can so as not to drown in a sea of anonymity. In the therapy piece, I discuss my origin and ways its memories keep me grounded and tethered to my true identity. Some of the essays are written in epistolary format: to strangers that I have met on my way, who leave remarkable impressions and make me see ways I negotiate my existence in the world as a migrant and also as a woman. Another letter is addressed to family members, where I relay my American experience. This is overall a work of nostalgia, an anchor cast between a new country and an older country that is truly my home.

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When Migration Is a Gesture of Love

On the night before I left Nigeria for America, my mother called me into her room, locked the door behind me, and pressed a wad of crisp notes into my palms. Dollars.

"Count it," she said. I licked my thumb and leafed through my latest fortune, fumbling. My fingers quivered, weighed down by the gravity of the moment. My mother watched me like you would the recipient of your kidney, daring them in the silence of your generosity to live recklessly. It was a massive chunk of her life savings, those bills.

Why did she need me to recount it? Didn't she already know how much she was saying goodbye to? Nigerian mothers are given to drama and flourish, and mine was no exception: the door firmly bolted behind us, her standing gravely beside me, waiting for me to arrive at the end of the sum. When it became apparent that I would never get through this task, she collected the money from me and counted it loudly. Materially, this was the biggest gift I had ever received. Enough to keep me afloat in a new country till I found my feet. I was so moved by her kindness that even the *thank-you* I muttered afterward seemed pale, a cheap response.

Still, I was not shocked she had made this provision for me. My mother is someone whom life never takes by surprise. She always has stashed the right tools, the right objects for unforeseen circumstances. She knows the right person to call to get things done, and if that contact doesn't work, she knows someone else who has the right contact. Days before giving me the bills, she had combed through her phone list, dialing the bank managers in Umuahia, looking for who would give her a fair exchange rate.

I was moving to America for graduate studies in creative writing. However, this move did not inspire in me a great sense of joy or pride. My dream was to become a successful writer right there in my country. I had no desire to leave my loved ones and the place my stories were set. I side-eyed the mass-migration bandwagon and was determined to brave the economic realities that were actively evicting young Nigerians like me out of the country. I watched and read about racism from afar and knew I didn't want to be touched by that nonsense. I preferred the honor attached to the writer who educated herself with the books in her parents' collection and in the state library. I wanted the bold testimony that read: In this hard place, I thrived.

But as the cost of living climbed and my paychecks remained stagnant, the things I could once afford years ago became luxuries. Moreover, my mother was retiring soon and I worried for her, considering how poorly the Nigerian government treated its pensioners. In Nigeria, children are often their parents' retirement plans because pensions rarely come, and even when they do, they are abysmal.

I wasn't sure I'd be able to take care of my mother, to make meaningful contributions to her well-being alongside my siblings, if I remained in Nigeria. My unwillingness to leave home was a dream with no value, and I had no option but to discard it.

My pay as a freelance Nollywood script writer could not foot the bills for my journey. There were visa-application fees, passport fees, my airfare to the US Embassy office in Abuja for the visa interview, and finally my fare to America. When my savings were completely swallowed by the process, my mother supplied the rest of the money I needed.

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My move had been decided in January, six months earlier, over morning devotions.

Saturday mornings are for these meetings that masquerade as family prayers. We assemble in my father's room—my mother, my younger sister, and my brother. If my elder sister and her children are visiting, they join us, and half the time is spent keeping the children's little fingers away from tearing pages off the Bible and hymn books. My mother facilitates these devotions now that my father is dead. When the children get out of control, when they have finally ripped a page or a fight has broken out over who will sit beside grandma, we miss my father and his military presence. In these meetings, we squash family beef. We gossip. We cancel people. "Whenever this person visits," my mother might warn, "tell them I'm not around and you don't know when I'm coming back." In these meetings, we also worry over troubling headlines of another killing, another kidnapping, another armed robbery—headlines affirming how unsafe Nigeria has become. We lament the rising cost of living and discuss how to tighten our belts. But most importantly, we address pertinent issues.

That morning, as we struggled to maintain solemnity in the presence of unruly children, my mother asked, "Don't you all think it's somehow that all of us are here, all of us in this country?"

We nodded. It was indeed "somehow" to have all her children under one roof, in one town, in one country. None of us were abroad. None of us had a different flavor of problems.

"We should spread out," she said. "At least one of you should leave the country. Establish the family branch elsewhere. It's not good that we are all chooking our heads in one place. That's why we have to pray harder for Ucheoma's desire to go to school in America." By declaring this

to the entire clan, my mother made it a collective family problem, rather than a cross I had to carry alone. There was comfort in knowing that my family was interceding for me.

So that morning, we all knelt down and prayed.

These devotions are not peculiar to my home, and neither are these meetings with the agenda of sending a family member out of the country. I am certain that, just at the same time as my family mulled over my potential departure, the same topic was deliberated in another Nigerian home, and prayers and plans were made to disrupt that family's equilibrium by encouraging the migration of one of its members. Economic hardship and few employment opportunities left lots of people despondent, and migration by whatever means became a clarion call.

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For many young middle- and lower-class Nigerians, moving to a new country is a family venture even if only one person is making the trip. Like a family house, everyone lays a block; a kobo here, a naira there. Sometimes an heirloom is sold. If your family is capable, they will give you what they can, as my mother did for me. And if they are not, you are only handed a litany of prayers, loaded with blessings and a list of advice such that when you finally reach your destination, you are heavy with the intangible hopes of the ones you left behind.

Our desperation to leave home by any means, through routes safe or dangerous, is not a marker of the headiness of youth, nor are we leaving simply because we desire a change of scenery. Our migrations are motivated by a sense of hopelessness in our country. Our move is triggered by a need for survival, to escape the dire economic conditions at home and to flee the toppling effects of failed governments and policies. By this year, the unemployment rate had grown to an alarming 33 percent, the second highest in the world, and inflation wasn't helping

the naira retain what little value it still held.

This isn't the first time Nigerians have left the country en masse. In the 1970s and 1980s, a wave of brain drain swept the country. Young and middle-aged professionals with growing families refused to subsist on the scant resources created by the government's austerity measures, a strategy adopted to recover from the losses of the fickle oil market. The IMF had insisted that the country devalue its currency, and this encouraged the government to hike the prices of food items. As the hardship increased, professionals packed their bags and skill sets and left for America, Europe, Australia, and Asia.

For the ones who left, their families at home did not have to wait for the failing government to deliver on their promises—those overseas were doing the heavy lifting. Now younger ones could go to school without being chased out for delayed fees. Pensioners didn't need to queue in the sun for their delayed gratuities; a trip to the MoneyGram kiosks settled monthly expenses.

My peers and I grew up to see what difference a generous family member abroad could do for their loved ones back home. The kids in school with a relative overseas had shinier things. The elderly with successful children away were prouder and more at ease than those whose children were in Nigeria and unable to provide in that capacity. In a country where hardship calluses the body and the spirit, watching some of my family members and friends in a state of perpetual neediness was enough to push me to abandon an established career and press the reset button on my life, applying for graduate programs in more promising countries.

I was convinced that I would make it in this new place. I would alleviate the poverty at home from far away just like I had seen others do, and I would send warmth to the hearth that forged my bones. Leaving home was a chance to prove that love ought to have tangible dividends, should be felt, should have three dimensions.

It is not a difficult decision to leave a country that never runs out of hard things to throw at you—hard things that blunt the edges of your patriotism. Because to live in Nigeria is to suffer many things, to endure a heartbreak that may never heal in this lifetime.

So the calculation is simple: Developed countries require a migrant labor force. When I arrive there, I'd work long hours, get established, spend little on myself, and send the rest of the money home. When she converted the hard currency to naira, my mother would whistle and bless me from afar. On the night before my departure, I knelt before my mother in prayer for prosperity, for grace, for good fortune. I can still hear her voice as it rose from the pit of her belly: "May you prosper beyond your dreams, and may the road be kind to you. If danger is in front, you will be at the back. If you walk through the desert, it will not dry your bones, and the sea will not swallow you." My amen mingled with tears and rose from the same place as her prayers.

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My visa interview happened on a Thursday in July of 2021.

"I'm sorry," the consular officer said, as she issued the blue 221(g) refusal form to the young woman in front of her. "You do not qualify for this visa."

The young woman gathered her papers and walked away, shoulders hunched and eyes brimming with tears. In the waiting hall were other Nigerians bristling for their turn to be called to the glass interview window. We were mostly young, and the room felt thick with apprehension. A refusal was not just evidence of personal failure or a denial of starting a new life in America. The disappointment is communal, especially when you consider all the money your family may have invested up to this point. A question answered wrongly or with stammering lips could topple all the hopes they have placed on you.

My turn was fast approaching, and I was shaking like a reed in the wind. I could hear the consular officer, a white woman, from the bench where I perched with three other supplicants in the cold hall of the US Embassy in Abuja. I was the fourth in line. The next girl went forward to the interview window and in two minutes her hopes were dashed—another blue rejection form. I held my breath. The third girl went forward and my heart became a talking drum, talking to the God of my mother, muttering to him to turn the tide around for me, to break this streak of rejections happening before me. *Baba God*, I prayed, *run this show for your girl abeg*. I know that palpitations and nerves are common in every interview. But this was not just any interview. The burden of establishing a family branch in a better place rested heavily on my shoulders. The outcome would affirm if the God my mother prayed to really heard, if he really cared. I thought of my mother and what a refusal would mean to her. She had already spent so much. I thought about starting this process all over again if I was denied a visa, and I wondered if I had enough faith left in me to toe this path again. At home, my siblings and my mother also waited with hushed breath. I imagined them like the soccer fans at the stadium, hearts in mouths and at the brim of breaking into joyful noise or pained cries as their player prepared for a penalty kick.

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When I came home after the interview, I met my mother in the kitchen. She was making catfish stew.

"For you," she said to me.

I handed her my passport.

"Wait, let me wash my hands before I rub stew on it."

When she dried her hands, she flipped the pages till she saw the glossy American visa and read the page word for word. She danced and danced, sang, ululated and wriggled her big behind for her God. She hailed him: *Omemma, Ekwueme, the Husband to the widow, the warm hands that hold the widow in the middle of a cold night. The One who wipes her midnight tears, the God who perpetually disappoints her enemies.*

She turned to me and asked, “So you’re really going to America to study?” I found her question amusing, like it just dawned on her.

“Yes,” I laughed. “I’m going to America.”

A Migrant's Fashion Manifesto

All my life, I've had a shy disposition, mingled with an unquenchable desire to be noticed. From my early twenties, I have curated my outfits with the aim of making people look twice. Hence my fear when I landed at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport and everyone—from border control to airline personnel—strained their ears to understand me, thanks to my Nigerian accent. Panic crept into me and I wondered if my stay in this new country would mean an erasure of a kind, that I would not be heard. As I sat in a corner, waiting for my connecting flight to Dallas, where I would unite with my aunty and her family, I came to a slow resolution: If they needed to strain their ears to hear me, they wouldn't need to strain their eyes to see me. This was part of my New Year's resolution: to incorporate more color into my life, to allow myself to experiment with things I admired in others, to thrust myself further in the eyes of the world. To be more seen.

I have a steady hand when it comes to makeup. I spent my peppy late-teenage years perfecting the craft of titivating. YouTube makeup gurus, many of them black, steadily emerged and built a cult following among girls my age. My friends and I saved tons of those videos on our devices and would study them closely, pausing them to test new techniques on each other. Those YouTubers taught us how to arch our brows, how to line our lips with the right shade of pencil for a fuller look, how to choose the perfect foundation, how to wear cheap makeup so no one could tell it was cheap. But our school, Abia State University, was located in Uturu, a small, quaint town in Eastern Nigeria, and our options for beauty products, even the fake ones, were limited to what the vendors outside the school gate supplied. We were left with no choice but to improvise.

In April of 2021, an email gladly informed me that I was accepted into grad school. My primary joy was at the opportunity to dedicate time and energy to writing. But to be honest, I couldn't silence the other joy of the many fashion possibilities America represented. My Nigerian wardrobe was all right, a few people already knew me as fashionable, but I knew I could do more, especially when far from home and possible judgment from puritanical family and church members. I thought of the new self I would invent once I migrated to America. A more fashion-forward self. I downloaded shopping apps like Target and Sephora from my room in Umuahia, and I filled my cart with products I would buy once I arrived. On Pinterest, I curated what my American self would look like: nerdy-chic, a wardrobe heavily inspired by Issa Rae, with a sprinkle of Tracee Ellis Ross and a hint of Julia Sarr-Jamois. I envisioned my American self strutting across campus in a style I called "the serious writer who is not afraid to look in the mirror." I imagined a makeup bag bursting to the seams, a face beat to perfection, a wardrobe charged and alive with colors.

I have been an ardent follower of global fashion weeks for years and a fan of the street style that comes out to play in those moments. The looks I admired most, had I tried them at home, would draw the wrong kind of stares, especially in Umuahia. When I lived in Lagos, Nigeria's fashion capital, I had the chance to experiment, but I was too broke to spread my sartorial wings. America, I believed, was the perfect playground for me to run wild.

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As part of my resolution to incorporate more color, I ordered a set of brightly colored matte liquid eyeliners. When they finally arrived, I sent selfies of me wearing them to my mother, and she replied, in disapproval, "And what's that thing in your eye?"

"Fashion," I texted back.

Even though my mother is my earliest fashion influence, a woman who is an aesthete to the letter, we do not see eye to eye when it comes to style. She leans toward the sophisticated and chic: a constant red lipstick, fine jewelry, carefully crafted ankara dresses, and headgears masterfully layered, an Igbo woman total in her pride. My awareness of beauty came from watching her lay another coat of maroon lipstick, an extra puff of Elizabeth Arden's 5th Avenue behind her ears. During PTA meetings in primary school, I remember her being the only mother who wore bright lipstick, her hands full of gold and silver rings and her heels ever high.

My father was also interested in his looks; he had a tailor who made him clean-cut senators. Before he left the house, he'd make us polish his leather shoes till they shone. In old pictures of my parents, I admired the carefully coiffed Afros, round like halos; the bell-bottom trousers, tight around the crotch and tapering off; the impossibly high platform boots. For my mother, the red lipstick. In an old family album, I see my grandfather in Isi-agu and white trousers, topped off with a wide-brimmed hat and a staff leaning against his legs. He had a reputation as the man with the cleanest bicycle in our village, and my grandmother's collection of headgears belonged in a museum. I come from a lineage of people who took their appearance seriously.

When we were little, Sundays were our family's fashion parade. We headed to the Lord's house and looked the part. White lace-trim socks and kitten heels for the girls, a suit and solidblack boots for the boy. No one could touch the Onwutuebes in fashion, and that was my mother's aim. I remember her dragging her four children to Ariaria market, all of us in single file, matching from store to store. She would comb through the Babies Line—the section of the market reserved for traders of children's clothing and wares—looking for eye-catching fits she was sure no other kids in our church would wear.

Unlike my mother, my own style rebelled against the confines of matured elegance. The daintiness that came with it wasn't natural to me since I had a penchant toward scatteredness. Growing up, I struggled before I found my aesthetics. I timidly curated a street-style and androgynous wardrobe, but street style can come off as comical if it isn't handled with a deft and bold touch. When you are young and still teething at style, there will always be mishaps, like color clashes and bulkiness, when you were aiming for insouciance. Several times, my mother did not hesitate to show her displeasure. "Are you going to wear that out of the house?" she would ask. Our fights continued for years afterward, even when I believed I'd found my feet. Her disapproval hurt me because through my clothing choices, I tried to find a route to selfdiscovery, to stand outside her shadows.

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When I packed my bags for Las Vegas, I gave away many clothes, waving goodbye to my former identity. "You will find better things there," my elder sister said. "You are going to the land of Forever 21, H&M, Zara. You don't need any of these old items." I gave away those articles with a bit of nostalgia: my favorite black chiffon shirt with cartoon doodles, a striped two-piece suit, a yellow silk blouse with exaggerated sleeves, a blue mid-length denim dress thrifted at Balogun market. Though I would miss the person I was in those clothes, I was eager to welcome the self my new clothes would make me. I arrived in Vegas with just one suitcase containing essentials. Essentials such as nine pairs of glasses. I knew getting prescribed glasses in America would cost an arm, and my graduate-assistant stipend would not cover the frames I saved on Pinterest. Before my trip, I went to Ariaria Main Market with my mother for one last mother-daughter spree. Ariaria is renowned for its ingenuity—craftsmen could build you a Gucci shoe or a suit that can pass for an Armani if you do not look too closely. We met our supplier of

eyewear in his dingy shop, and he assembled pairs of fancy glasses for me. When my mother, out of joy, blurted that I was going to America, he hiked the prices a little. “When she gets there and compare my price with American price,” he said, “she will come back and say ‘thank you’ to me.”

My first months in America were riddled with financial challenges: a delay in the arrival of my SSN card, invariably delaying my stipend. I managed the money my mother had given me as I waited by the mailbox, praying each new piece of mail was from the Social Security office. Weeks went by until all I had left were two fifty-dollar bills. That money, as my people would say, was my “home and abroad,” my last card. Unable to acquire new clothes, I repeated outfits and regretted that I didn’t bring more clothes from Nigeria. I hated how uncharacteristic I looked in the plain T-shirts and jeans I wore, in the simple gowns, hated how I blended in with the Americans who showed up to school in their sweatshirts and joggers. They were home, after all, in their fatherland, and could afford to look like they just rolled out of bed. But I was a visitor and I was raised to show up dapper whenever you left your home. Home was six thousand miles away, and I hated that I didn’t look like my imagined self.

With my one hundred dollars and the strong desire to look better came tough questions: Use my last card to shop and go hungry afterward, or buy food and continue looking unimpressive? I chose the former. I could brave hunger. I knew hunger firsthand from boarding school and in later days of penny-pinching on a low income. But anonymity was something I didn’t want to be touched by. Not in a new country. Belonging wasn’t my aim. Standing out was. For someone who had relied on clothes as her quickest medium of expression, as her conversation starters, those first months were tough for my ego. Clothes are like a whiff of a substance I take to charge up my persona, to summon a higher self. To look anonymous in a noman’s-land was akin to a complete erasure. I was a few weeks into teaching, and since public

speaking was not my forte, I needed to lean into my superpower, fashion, to get through the seventy-five minutes of class. But I wasn't holding anyone's gaze. I only had my writing, another avenue where I channel my power to capture the world's attention, but readers are a unique audience that take longer to court. I wanted to be seen as intriguing even before anyone met me on the page. I wanted my clothes to lead them to my work.

I confided in my roommate, and she pointed me to a thrift store. As I sifted through the racks, looking for items that portrayed style, thinking of ways to combine them and still hide their obvious cheapness, I was taken back to my first foray into thrifting—those days of saving pocket money from boarding school to buy bend-down-select clothes from Umuahia Main Market. I remembered the vendors, bells in hand, calling on customers to pick from the mountain of clothes they sprayed on trampoline bags by the railway. I remembered the haggling, the joyful journey homeward with a polythene bag bursting with a good haul. The clothes in this Vegas thrift store smelled the same as the ones I found in Umuahia, heavy with the perfume of fabric softeners. That first trip produced a white sweater, its wool lush and rich to the touch, that I paired with white palazzo pants. (I had read somewhere that monochrome makes you look expensive.) A purple sweater, with a cut-out choker V-neck. A burnt-orange cropped sweater. A pair of tailored lavender pants and two oxford shirts, purple and pink. The next day, when I walked into class, my presence filled the room. I didn't hide behind the computer while projecting the slides to my students. I walked around the room, my voice confident and loud. My higher self was summoned, and she taught class that day.

When my payment finally came, I switched to Ross, a department store, and great were my finds. Every month, I added one or two new items to my wardrobe. I bought makeup and skin-care products from Ulta: Revlon ColorStay foundation in Cappuccino, MAC Studio Fix Powder (NW50), LA Girl concealer in Chestnut. Gold earrings and necklaces from Forever 21. I

wore niacinamide by day, retinol by night. I found my mother's Elizabeth Arden's 5th Avenue on sale at half the price and smelled like her for months. I carried the scent of my mother with me, and the homesickness abated. I knew she would approve of this aspect of my grooming, and the thought of it pleased me.

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On days when I am not reading or writing or grading papers, you'll find me scrolling through Pinterest and saving pictures from Paris, Milan, Tokyo, Lagos, or London fashion weeks. I study; I make notes. You can also find me staring meditatively at Tyler, the Creator, his funny hats, his colorful sweater vests, his liberty to run wild in style in a way I have never seen on any Black man. I mourned the untimely death of Virgil Abloh for what he represented for me: a Black man cracking the hard shells of fashion innovation, walking corridors previously inaccessible to him. Find me too on the Instagram page of Candice Brathwaite, a woman who has encouraged my pursuit of being seen, a woman who looks like me, wearing lipstick, displaying her collection of shoes and designer apparel, donning coats in blindly bright colors that no one else but her can pull off.

I take Chaédria LaBouvier's advice seriously, a mantra I mutter to myself when I feel lazy: "There is tremendous confidence in facing the hostile world with a good outfit." I refuse to look like my bank account. I will wake up every day and don well-thought-out attire. I will take pictures and send them home to my mother. I will spin the color wheel and land on the brightest hue. I will not be annihilated. I will be seen. I love being looked at, and I have made peace with that. I love being photographed, and I am fine with that too. I choose to curate my life on social media, and never would it be said of me, "Here comes the poor immigrant in her worn clothes." Mba. It is a sin against myself to be anonymous.

Not that fashion would answer the question of respectability. Some people, despite how well-dressed I am, how tasteful, would see me as nothing but a Black body who has come to America to pillage opportunities. But it is important for me to pour my dignity into good clothes. I want to look in the mirror and say, You tried. You tried to clothe this Black body with care and love. I want to dress my own esteem, to clothe my pride. I am of course more than another immigrant whom they may strain to hear. I am a writer, with a talent for assembling and remixing her wardrobe. Though the new clothes won't erase the accent, won't erase the fact that I'm new here and trying to find my feet, fashion makes me a confident stranger. It covers my quivering frame, makes my steps surer. Through my clothes, I have created for myself a protective armor that will shield me from whatever harm this new place may present.

I remember an elderly woman who I bought smoked fish from under the Ketu bridge when I lived in Lagos. Every day she displayed her wares on a trampoline bag on the ground, beside other chatty traders. Daily she'd wear old trinkets, her arms bearing the shadow of tattoos she'd gotten years before. Whenever I went to her, she'd smile and call me "My daughter," showing her gums where teeth used to be. I loved buying from her. I marveled at her effort to look good, to wear her colorful ankara blouse and wrapper, her bangles and earrings dangling as she swatted flies. I think of her as I clasp my bracelet this morning. If she saw me now, she would cheer me on.

An Immigrant's Eyewitness Report from the Streets of Dating Apps

One quiet Saturday night in my Las Vegas apartment, I was casually strolling the streets of Instagram when I arrived at the page of a couple I'd never seen before. I stopped to ogle at their unabashed display of affection and their poses that seemed stenciled from a perfect fantasy: Forehead kisses, kisses underwater, date nights, and tables splayed with food that I'd never eaten in my life. Then I found more kisses: underneath the sunset, on the neck while they posed for mirror selfies, love bites.

I have everything I need in this life of sin, I thought to myself, looking around my tiny room filled with books and clothes—this altar of self-adoration and a testament to how I have chosen to spend my heyday—everything but what this couple has. In an instant, my admiration turned to jealousy turned to insecurity turned to a deep sense of scarcity. Will there be enough love to go around? Would it reach the latecomers at the end of the queue, or should we vacate Instagram for these coupled people? Where did they find love? Can someone point me in the right direction?

But you know what they say: Time waits for no one. Forget plastic surgeons and their bogus claim of selling youth—the tucking and lifting can only do so much. Better to chase the black goat while you have daylight, to make hay while you still have eggs. With these proverbs in mind and the distant echoes of my mother's fervent prayers for the grandchildren I owed her, I downloaded four dating apps. All at once. If we were going to do this, we had better roll up our sleeves and cast our seeds upon many waters.

On a normal day, I'm a tough babe. Societal pressures do not faze me. I left a stable bank job in Nigeria to chase an elusive writing dream that led me to an MFA program in the States. I

faced hell and high water, but I never looked back. Boyfriends have come and gone and rarely do I pine. I keep moving.

Back home in Nigeria, I had unbridled access to men, from the puritanical to the heretic. Straitjacketed choir boys and aspiring music-video producers, nine-to-fivers and the brave ones fording the tough waters of entrepreneurship. Old money and dream chasers, young and middleaged—I knew them all. But America was new territory, and Instagram, my addiction and that bane of human existence, often reminded me of cuddles, of romance, of what it felt like to be wanted and desired. America, this new country, made my aloneness more pronounced. With all the cultural shocks I was experiencing daily, and the changes I faced each second, I desired someone to share details of my day with. It didn't matter if the pictures couples posted were choreographed to elicit the insecurity of users like me. Their photos and videos made me question my choices, and my hard-babe facade began to yield. I thought of my closet teeming with beautiful clothes and my bathroom drawer filled with makeup and a vast array of ointments. Vanity upon vanity. For whom was I preening and decking myself?

When I packed my one suitcase to come to America, I put everything I thought I needed inside, and romance wasn't in it. I packed light. I didn't want any love to wait for me at home other than my mother's, my brother's, and my two sisters'. The kind of love that did not need constant tending and the performance of nurturing. All my decisions were influenced by this need to leave home and pursue writing. My singleness was orchestrated by shrewdness. I know Nigerian culture too well to think I would have still followed my aspirations if I'd gotten married. In-laws were likely to ask how special were your dreams to unsettle the home front by relocating. *So you think you are the only one that can dream? You think we don't have dreams of our own?* Even though there were people I knew who had it all, who came to an agreement with their partners about leaving, I didn't want to roll the dice with my future.

Dating back home was easy. You and your dates spoke the same language, and even the nonverbal cues did not need interpretation. I understood the touch or wink that meant *I like you*. The ones that implied *I want to fornicate with you* or *You are like a sister to me*. Not to say that Nigerian men are different from other men in their cunning craftiness; I just knew them better. But the men in America, how would I know? Who would hand me a map and teach me the detours and dead ends? It didn't help that America is a potpourri of cultures; one person could have Jamaican and Irish roots, his stems Italian and Moroccan, and his branches Korean and French, making him a medley of many cultures and places. Nor did it help that Las Vegas is a transitory place. Many do not pitch their tents here. The profiles on the dating apps reaffirmed my concerns. *Just here for the weekend, looking to suck toes*. I looked at my toes, wiggling them, and looked at this man's lips—chapped and unmoisturized—and I wasn't sure I could trust him with them.

I've never endorsed internet dating apps, being a firm advocate for the organic, the way love happens in old movies. The standard meet-cute: You, walking down the streets to nowhere on a sunny day, carrying a stack of books—it is always a stack of books—when some invisible force trips you and you splatter your books on the pavement and, just in the nick of time, the one who shall become your beloved rushes over to help you and you two reach for the same book at the same time and when you lift your head, behold, you are staring into his eyes, hypnotic as Kaa's from *The Jungle Book*, inviting you to "Trust in me . . ." Since this scene wasn't my reality yet, I needed to take my future into my own hands. I scrolled through my phone and searched for my best pictures, something to make me stand out.

Aware that perverts and serial killers lurk in these apps, I thought it would make sense to test the waters with the Christian apps. Who knows—I may find what I'm looking for more easily with the men of faith.I selected my profile picture like you would an outfit for church. The

men looked prim and undangerous, and in their bios, they declared their unwavering faith in Jesus. They were looking for good women to fight the good fight of faith with them, God-fearing partners that would help their Christian journey. I swiped right for the few I found attractive. I avoided the shirtless men who looked like strays on their way to some other place less pious, someplace that promised debauchery. I managed to strike up a conversation with a certain brother. It was sparse, like the small talk you had outside the church when the service was over and you're conscious that people are eavesdropping. He was a graduate student, hoping to get the position of graduate assistantship next semester. I didn't bother to ask where he was from and he didn't bother to ask me either. When the talk became too laborious, I exited and kept swiping. I found a good-looking brother who played the trombone in his profile picture, but the first question he asked me was, *If you were a musical instrument, what would you be and why?* and I unmatched him with Godspeed. The question felt too rehearsed, the same thing he obviously asked other women, auditioning them for the all-important role of wife. The last thing close to an audition I attended was my visa interview, and I wasn't ready to relive that experience.

When I ran out of patience, I tried Tinder, in search of people unafraid to show some personality. To layer up my identity and to stand out in this sea of people seeking companionship, I chose pictures that actually represented me: joyful, bookish, yet fashionable.
My tagline was "Nigerian memoirist looking for new stories."

It didn't get nasty all at once. At first, I was welcomed by the men who only took hiking pictures. There were lots of them, and they wanted to go on hiking adventures with their love interests. I swiped left because I couldn't promise that. Being Nigerian in itself is an emotional hike, and I'd come to America to find reprieve.

More personalities unraveled and, in no time, I lost myself in this noisy, open marketplace of bare chests and tattoos, biceps and toned abs. The inner streets of Tinder were like walking

into a sweaty locker room filled with leery men. I wasn't particularly shocked; these were just men . . . menning.

Some bios were warnings: *Better know your order before we get to Starbucks*; *Short girls stay away*; *Swipe left if you are looking for something serious 'cause I'm not*. I swiped left. Left for the men passionate about politics—I could foretell that over dinner, the pendulum of conversation would never swing my way. Left for a thirty-six-year-old man, sticking out his tongue in front of a mirror; for the man sitting stark naked on his loo, holding a half-empty shot glass, promising to be more fun in person—I lingered a while at his pictures. How on earth would I bring you home to my mother? Another man with a narcissistic pout asked point-blank in his tagline: *Can you cook?* I swiped left. I didn't cross the Atlantic Ocean to encounter this question again. I banished the karaoke enthusiast to the left. Men half-naked in bed, men in tight briefs outlining their groins, men looking for peace of mind, men holstering guns, displaying their shooting skills. Left, left, left.

However, men with stethoscopes slung casually around their necks? I swiped right. These are the kind my mother would want for me, men she'd be convinced could take care of me. Shy, bespectacled tech bros—come to my right, baby. Who knows? You may be the next Zuckerberg? Middle-aged men unashamed to proclaim their tiredness? Come to my right side, good and faithful one. I am tired too. Out of habit, I swiped right for men with Nigerian names—they will save me the time of explaining cultural nuances. Young men with subtle fashion sense? Right.

Men in suits? Right. Men who wore minimal jewelry and perfectly manicured nails? Swipe right.

My first chat was with a man with a broad chest and long hair. Six foot two, according to him. Not quite my spec but he would do.

How are you?

I'm fine, I said.

So what are you looking for, or are you here to collect data for your stories?

That won't be such a bad idea, I replied.

Give me your number. I want to call you on video. I don't have time to waste.

No, I won't give you my number just yet. After that, radio silence.

A good-looking Swiss man asked me if my other name was Enitan since I said I was looking for stories. Before then, I didn't even know that Enitan, a popular Yoruba name, meant "person with a story." He punctuated our chats with imperfect Yoruba, and I was impressed.

Where did you learn that? I asked. *Who taught you Yoruba?*

Married to a Nigerian for 15 years.

Are you still together?

Very much so and I'm not looking to change that. Haha.

Then what are you doing here? Does she know you are on Tinder?

Of course, she knows. This is my last night in Vegas. Wanna grab a drink?

Bad idea, I thought. These things don't end well.

There were migrants looking to date only American citizens, men who discontinued the chat when I said I neither smoked nor liked to party, and men recruiting for threesomes. After forty-eight hours, my hand began to hurt from all the swiping without result. I deleted my profiles and uninstalled the apps.

My people say, "Many routes lead to the market," but this online dating path? This would not lead me anywhere. I felt like I was worrying the hands of destiny, stopping them from ticking at their own pace. Many times, these things happen when you're not looking, and I'd rather a meet-cute than the emotional chess that dating apps require. Walking through them was like wearing two left shoes. Besides, I was grateful for this momentary stillness in my life, devoid of

relationship drama. Why settle when none of the men were a good option to present to my mother? I couldn't risk her asking me: S*o this is the best you could do in America?*

A Nigerian Attempts Therapy

University of Nevada, Counseling Services Intake

Name: Ucheoma Onwutuebe

Race/ethnicity: African American/Black/African/Nigerian

To be precise, I am Igbo. Where I come from, a child inherits her father's origin. You are not from the place where you were born. You are not from the place where you grew up. You do not belong to your mother or to anyone who raised you. You belong to your father, present or absent.

My father was enlisted as a child soldier in the 1967 Biafran civil war. Like most Igbo men who survived the war, he did not talk about it, but growing up I could see my father carry both the pride and shame of it square on his shoulders. He insisted my first language be Igbo, and he didn't fall for the identity craze of the 1990s when most Nigerian parents forbade their children from speaking their native languages.

"Say it in English," parents would chide their children if they dared speak Igbo. In school, students were mocked and punished for speaking vernacular. But my father stood above the pressure to present his children as "polished," refusing to tuck away their mother tongue. I said bia, before I said come. I knew Mama Ukwu before I knew she was also Grandmother.
When my siblings and I prattled in Igbo, my father wasn't concerned that we might turn out Igbotic, the local way of referring to people too provincial to adopt civility. Civility, meaning the white man's ways, the white man's tongue. My father, who is now dead, was a titled man, a prominent chief in our village. He favored his well-tailored senators, his walking staff, and his red chieftaincy cap over a suit and tie. He was proudly Igbo.

But he wasn't always proudly Nigerian. On only two occasions do I remember him crying tears of joy for our country. The first time was the Atlanta Olympics in 1996: Nigeria vs. Argentina. Football was the only thread that held together our country's worn fabric, and every Nigerian home glowed from TV rays that night. Our boys had beaten the Japanese, the Hungarians, even the almighty Brazilians. This was the final match and we wanted that gold medal. The Argentines were hammering us, and we were losing 2-1. But soon our boys equalized, and just a minute before the final whistle, Emmanuel Amunike scored the winning goal.

My father cried with joy. He danced with my uncles in the yard, waving cassava leaves in the air. As a little girl, I couldn't know what those few hours of joy meant for a man whose country had failed him again and again, as it would also fail me in the coming years.

The second time he cried was at the death of Sani Abacha, the military leader who tyrannized the country and looted the national treasury. In those years, the entire county was hunched by fear of the despot, afraid to speak up, afraid to complain. Journalists and activists were killed by firing squad. Political opponents were imprisoned and tortured. When Radio Nigeria announced, in June of 1998, that the General was dead, my father cried and danced. So great was our collective national joy that poor market women gave away their goods to passersby. Impromptu parties broke out in the middle of our streets. "Our country will be great again," my father said that evening, as he washed down his garri and ukazi soup with a bottle of lager beer. "This country will be great."

I wished he hadn't believed that.

Sex at birth: Female

My mother wanted a son. Those were the days when Nigerian hospitals were not equipped with machines that could tell a baby's sex. Mothers hoped they would be pleasantly surprised by an answered prayer. My mother had requested a boy because her first child was a girl. It was okay if the firstborn was female; she would care for her parents when they grew old. But this was to be followed by a son, and more sons, and maybe a sprinkle of daughters. If not, people would talk. What was there to do with a litter of girls? Who would perpetuate the family name?

My mother's parents had nine children in their aggressive pursuit of sons. Their fifth child was finally a boy yet they kept on trying for more sons, for more prestige. Stung by the ordeal of her gender, my mother wanted sons too. Her mother-in-law, Mama Ukwu, was already rolling her eyes, hoping my mother did not come bearing her people's difficulty in producing sons.

If my father was disappointed at the arrival of another daughter, I never knew. My mother named me Ucheoma, a name too noble for a consolation prize. Ucheoma means "good thoughts." Though this is not what I ordered, she probably thought, God still thinks good thoughts towards me. I love my mother for the gift of my name.

Many girls face violent welcomes—their mothers wail with disappointment and their fathers storm out of the waiting halls. Relatives beg them to come hold their babies. Nwa bu nwa, they say, pleading with the men. A child is a child. But no one needed to run after my father. He marched into the labor room and held me. I believed he loved me; his smiles in my baby pictures tell me so.

Gender Identity: Female

I am a Nigerian woman, plagued by Nigerian womanly problems. When I moved to America for graduate school in the summer of 2021, I believed this new country would shield me from those nagging afflictions. I believed the shiny billboards and neon signs of Las Vegas would shoo away the burdens that come with being a Nigerian woman. But like my accent, the ghosts of those problems marched right alongside me. During my first winter break, I spent the holidays in Wylie, Texas with my auntie. One evening, she invited me to join her at a meeting of Christian Nigerian women. I'd been attending a lovely Pentecostal church in Las Vegas, filled with sweet, kind people, but after four months away I longed for the Nigerian-ness in the churches back home and jumped at my aunt's offer.

My aunty and I arrived late, in the middle of Praise and Worship. The women were nurses, teachers, bankers, and new wives freshly imported from Nigeria. Some were dressed in hospital scrubs, others came with children in tow. The woman who led the songs wore a colorful ankara gown and long winter boots, her outfit a blend of home and abroad.

I'd forgotten how animated church could be. The music leader slapped a tambourine against her thigh with the throbbing music. The women bent at the waist, dancing and singing. Those familiar songs, songs I did not realize how much I missed till I heard them again that evening. Songs I first sang in nursery school as we lined up for morning devotion. Songs my mother sang as she stirred a pot of ukazi soup in the kitchen. I sang along, drenched in nostalgia, my eyes stinging with tears. I was home again.

Then came Testimony time. One by one the women came forward, bearing the sheaves of

God's goodness and faithfulness. "My sisters, this our God is too good," the first testifier panted into the microphone, as she thanked God for a wayward child who gave up video games to face his studies.

"Look at me, I am now the mother of a teen!" cried another, celebrating a child who'd just turned thirteen. A woman testified for an errant husband coming back to his senses. "Who would have thought Obumsele would look at me and touch me again?" Another testified for a cousin—an old spinster—who was finally getting married. "I was worried for Ifedi—tall and beautiful but no husband. I thank God for He has finally broken the yoke of marital disfavor upon her life."

The common thread in all their testimonies was husbands, children, and marriage. Not one woman spoke about her own needs. I could feel my tears of joy drying up. I thought I'd left all that when I said my goodbyes at Nnamdi Azikiwe International Airport in Abuja.

When the meeting ended, I knew what was to come. My auntie pulled me into a circle of women. "This is my little niece," she said, her voice dripping with pride. "She is a genius. She can write, eh. She and Chinua Achebe are in the same WhatsApp group. She came to America this August and she is already a graduate assistant in Las Vegas!"

"You don't mean it!" they cried. "Congratulations nne. Is this the one that her father died some time ago?"

"Yes," my auntie said.

"Eiyaa." They patted my back affectionately. "It is well, my dear. Welcome to America. Wow, she's a grown woman. Aka oji ya? Is any hand holding her?"

"No hand is holding her, oh," my auntie said, pushing me forward towards the women. "She is very, very single."

"My dear," they said to me, "life does not consist of only writing and graduate assisting. You need a man. You need God's marital favor."

Relationships Status: Single

Lately, I have been avoiding my mother's calls. The last time we spoke she asked me, "So, is anyone talking to you?" trying unsuccessfully to mask the worry in her voice. "In your church, are there not God-fearing young men there?" These questions come, like clockwork, after I've shared some good news with her—a career milestone, an acceptance, a successful application. They pose arrogantly, as if to say, whatever you have achieved pales in comparison to this void. This singleness. This cultural crime.

I understand my mother's fears. Marriage provided her an identity, answered her prayers to further her education, made her a legitimate mother, and placed her on a pedestal that unmarried women could not touch. "Every woman needs a covering," my mother would say. Why? Because the world handles you less carelessly if you are married. The landlord will rent to you more quickly if you are married. The bus conductors, the rude cashier, the pastor, the iman, the wastrels on the streets, all of them are careful to treat you well if you wear a wedding band. If not, perhaps you have a husband who can throw hands, and the offenders will be in serious trouble.

My mother's worries are founded on these grounds. Who will provide for you? She seems to ask. Who will throw hands for you? Who will shield you from the insolence that our culture reserves for women? Who will cover you?

Sexual Orientation: Heterosexual

Men are my weakness. Serve me men for breakfast, lunch and dinner, and I will lick the plate clean. The way they unsteady you with their flattery and spin you with words till your brain whirls and you forget your mother's warnings. The way they crush you like leaves under the weight of their potency.

Time will fail me to talk about ways they assault the world with their beauty, leaving casualties in their wake. I have been that casualty. No shame in saying that. I shall be a casualty in the future and I am fine with that. That is the lot of every woman who desires men. They bruise us and we pretend to be unscathed and return again to the battlefield. I have become a collector of bruises and I show them off like war marks. Look where Tunde said he would never leave but left. Look at the imprint of Ebuka's strong hands. Look when Jamil said his mother doesn't like Igbo girls. Look at the marks of Ifeanyi's unrequited love.

But for man-desiring women like me who were raised in a misogynistic culture, there are so many inventive ways your desire can be wielded against you. Your desire is never a thing that can stand alone on its own two feet. It must lean on acceptability, on societal barricades, on the gospel of shame.

First to attend college/university: No

My mother studied English Literature at the University of Port Harcourt. "Your father trained me in school," she often said to us. This means the bill was on my father. My father, at that time, was already an accomplished young man who also trained his four siblings in school. University was an ambitious option for women then but my father wanted a well-educated woman. So he paid her way. He was her covering.

My father studied chemistry at the University of Ibadan. He was amongst the first people in our hometown to attend university.

International Student: Yes

My American visa is my biggest miracle. More than winning the lotto. More than that reluctant "Yes" from the consul officer in the US Embassy, Abuja. My visa is my fair chance at life. It is also my mother's bragging right. "Do you know that my second daughter is a lecturer in America? When I tell you I don't give birth to useless children, you better believe me."

A child in America is a parent's hope. This child will send over pills for arthritis. This child will provide them with proper medical care. This child will offer them a home to retire in, a home far from the incessant kidnappings and killings in Nigeria. A child in America is an emblem of a fortunate parent, a sign that luck and favor exist in that family. Why? Because the Nigerian dream is to leave Nigeria. Because Nigeria is tottering on the rims of hopelessness. And this is how Nigeria failed me.

Why do I need to leave home to breathe? Why are there Thanksgiving services in church when visas are approved? Why do embassy officials possess that much power? Why are they able to decide our destiny, whether we go to the promised land or stay back in captivity?

This is how Nigeria failed my father. When he said his country would be great again, he likely dreamt of better infrastructure, quality education for his children, sound healthcare. When prostate cancer appeared out of the blue, it felled the big man like a weak tree. No medical insurance. No regular checkups at the hospital. We had to crowdsource funds to send him to

India but by then, it was too late.

After his job at the breweries ended, my father dabbled in politics though he did not have the liver to wade in deeper. Instead, he sat home and read newspapers. He was still a big man by default, a titled man. Relatives still knocked at the door, asking for handouts and he gave what he could. But no matter how big you are, Nigeria will humble you with its madness. That's how the man died in his prime. Entered 1954, exited grudgingly in 2018.

My father cried on his deathbed and asked God to please spare his life. He didn't want to die and he made us read to him Psalms 118:17 where the psalmist sang, I shall not die, but live, and declare the works of the Lord. My father died without driving his daughter to the airport, a ritual he performed for his children leaving town. He did not live to hear the good news of my American visa.

Top concerns that bring you to counseling: Relationship Problems

A certain boy is trying to bruise me, but my spirit is too strong for him. After experiencing Nigerian men's sweet love and their demonic wickedness, I am convinced there is no mountain I can't move, no valley I can't climb. I'm here only because I heard therapy is where bougie people come to toughen their hide against this cruel world. So I have come to receive additional powers that could make me even more invincible.

It appears the creeds I learned on the streets back home are not enough for this American terrain. So I have come like an old dog, for you to teach me new tricks. Are there words you never say to men in America? Words that may be fine with men in Nigeria, but taboo here? Words like "atone"? Because I asked this American man I'd been seeing to "atone" for canceling a date impromptu (because, Hello? Have you met me? You don't just cancel on women like me!) and he said the word "atone" messes with his mental health and it's triggering and it's threatening to ruin all the mind work he's done on himself.

His reaction surprised me and that surprise brought me to this couch. I want to be like those people who balk at conflict because their therapist told them to flee at the first sign of "drama." I want to be like those people who cancel dates because, "Sorry, my therapist says I should lie back in bed."

In Nigeria, psychiatric treatment of any form is hidden like a dirty bra strap. Don't let anybody know that your brain is touching wires. Don't tell anybody that as you sleep, dark thoughts sit by your bedside. Who will marry your daughters if people know that someone in your family has a head that is not screwed on correctly? So people keep mum and walk around with mental health issues that go undiagnosed. But even if they were diagnosed, who could afford therapy?

One time in Lagos, my mind was running in circles, relaying batons of worry. I googled "therapist near you." When I saw the astronomical price, my mind was cured immediately. Who needs therapy when you can blast music from your headphones and call up the man currently bruising you?

But now that I am here in America and my health insurance covers it, I might as well indulge myself. I need a wisecrack from this therapy session. I want to say like other people, "Listen to what my therapist said to me that changed my life forever."

History of abuse (physical, sexual and/or emotional): None

None, if you leave out those older men who did things to you when you were younger that they shouldn't have done. But that's normal. And it gives you stories to trade with your friends. "Mr. Onaku, the maths teacher? Filthy goat! He asked me to raise my skirt when no one was in the staff room." "The registrar? He told me that if I was serious about graduating this

year, I knew what to do, and he wrote on a paper the address of a hotel." No, I do not want to unpack that.

History of other trauma: Refer to above.

Are you currently considering dropping out of school?

Are you kidding? Drop out and go back to Nigeria because of this small- man trouble? Not a chance. Plus, it would rescind my mother's bragging manifesto and she'd never forgive me.

Any past therapy: Not unless I won the lotto.

How do you cope with depressing thoughts: Pray

Just like writing, I can pray fluently. When my father died, I prayed. When I was applying for my American visa, I prayed. When men bruise me, I pray hard. I also go to church. So far, America hasn't changed my relationship with either church or prayer.

The other day on Twitter, a young Nigerian who now lives in America wrote, "Ever since I moved here, I no longer go to church. There's constant power supply. You get your check on payday. The system works. What is there to pray about?"

In Nigeria, people go to church out of hopelessness. When the government fails you, starves you, refuses to protect you, denies your children education and refuses to create an environment in which to thrive, the only hope the citizens cling to is a God they cannot see. They flood the churches and mosques and traditional priests' shrines, seeking their fortune, hoping to ferry their destiny from a place of despondency to richer soils.

They need a miracle for hospital bills. They believe that one day they will lift their pillows and find bundles of miracle money. They believe in divine health because a single illness can wipe away a family's fortune. So they pray the headache away before it becomes a stroke. Pray the boil away before it becomes a tumor. Pray the bill away before they lose their home.

As for me, I still pray here in America because I don't want to forget. I don't want to forget how much I prayed for where I am now. I don't want to forget that my mother lost her appetite for days and only regained it when I came home with my crisp American visa. I don't want to use God as a ladder and discard Him when I hop off at my desired destination.

In my prayers, I also ask God to teach me to be a good visitor in America. I say to Him, "Remind me that America is not my home. No matter how much I grow in my career and arrive in places where I can call the shots, don't let me forget that this is not my country. Even Your Holy Word admonishes us that this world is not our home. Teach me to be a good guest, just like my mother admonished us as children when we visited others' homes. 'Don't be like those children without training that smear walls and jump on furniture,' she'd reel out as she tied our shoelaces, 'Don't break the TV. Don't follow the tray of food with your eyes and act as if you've never seen food in your life.' "

Coming to America is sink or swim for me, and I have no option but to swim. This is the best option life has presented me and I am here to plant my dreams and help them bloom. Perhaps America may help me recover the things my country tried to steal from me. Things like peace of mind and a chance to dream. But no matter how diligently I prune the tendrils of my life and water the foliage of my ambition, it is you, God— as St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians—who gives the increase. That's why I pray. Remind me, God, that I didn't come to America to gawk at shiny billboards and neon signs. I came to save my life.

To the Expat at Murtala Muhammed Airport

Long before you settled beside me in the crowded waiting hall, I had worn myself threadbare with worry. Worry about my luggage being too heavy, worry about my Nigerian passport subjecting me to scrutiny, worry that my slim wad of dollar bills would not suffice for the journey ahead.

This was my first international trip. I was about to set off to New York for a two-month writers' residency, and I couldn't stop thinking about all the stories I'd heard of foreigners turned back at the port of entry. The departure hall heaved with passengers, some already attired in outfits for colder climes. I found them laughable in their parkas and sweaters. This was a warm May evening in Lagos, and eager hawkers in traffic had read the thirst on our faces, dangling bottles of ice water too close to our noses, urging us to buy.

After the lengthy pantomime of passport check and luggage scan, I slumped on a bench by the gate and exhaled. It was 10:40 p.m., two hours until my flight.

Murtala Muhammed International Airport was a far cry from the airports of Hollywood films. In those airports, lovers flung aside their luggage and raced into each other's arms, mingling tears of sweet reunion. Here, the air was devoid of romance. There were no lovers in sight. Only the swelter of a crowded space and travellers who fanned themselves with their boarding passes. The fluorescent bulbs flickered and the escalator lay dormant, unpowered. The woman on the opposite bench from me clamped her Ghana-Must-Go bag between her legs as if it held treasures. When she zipped it open and zipped it close again, a familiar kitchen smell wafted out of it. I caught her conspiratorial gaze and she winked. "Crayfish," she whispered. By her cunning, it had escaped the wardens' search.

Her glee and triumph warmed me, but my worry returned quickly. I clung to my handbag and often felt for my wallet. Still, when I made room for you beside me, I paid you little heed.

It was only when I turned to ask you if you could make out what the announcer said in her butchered British accent that I really noticed you. Scuffed shoes, graying blonde hair, the easy confidence of a seasoned traveler. As you inquired about my itinerary, I made sure not to tell you this was my first trip outside Nigeria. I told you I was traveling to New York for a residency. No, not to see a boyfriend, as you slyly assumed. In your halting English, you said you had lived in Nigeria for twenty-five years. Tonight, you would travel to France to reunite with your daughter.

When I asked you about Nigeria, you complained about the decline of the naira and how the government had deteriorated, our national policies growing unkind each passing year. You missed the Nigeria that had made you stay more than two decades. I scratched my underarms and shifted in my seat. I'd read about those shiny years in history textbooks, but hearing the comparisons from you, I somehow felt embarrassed, as if a bedroom secret had made its way to the nosy neighbour's lips.

I was curious to know why you left Belgium—why Nigeria was home to a man like you, who could spin the globe and find home in any corner of it. You had arrived upon the soils of my fatherland as a contractor for a road construction company. After the job was done, you pitched your tent here. In a strange way, I was proud that you loved my country, like a mother hearing the praises of her child from the mouths of strangers. You loved it enough to stay all these years, even as we were afflicted with the worst kind of mass migration outwards.

Young Nigerians were leaving home at a disheartening rate, many cramming for the exasperating English-language exams to increase their chances of visa approval and admission into schools abroad, while others risked the dangerous route of illegal migration, driving through

the Sahara desert or floating on rafts across the Mediterranean Sea. Just two weeks prior, I had watched many Nigerians turned away at the American embassy, denied the hope of entrance and a visa. That same day, when the consular officer stamped my passport and said, “Enjoy New York and good luck with your novel,” I said, “Pardon?” thinking I had heard wrong.

Now you spoke of your 43-year-old daughter. I reminded you of her, you said. I imagined her on the other side of the world, waiting for Dad. You walked over to the Mr Bigg’s booth and returned with two Cokes and two doughnuts. My journey was long, you said, and I needed to eat.

I basked in your fatherly concern, my worry easing off. I nibbled at the doughnut, wiping the grains of sugar and oil on a napkin, hunger now one fewer concern. You assured me there was really nothing to be anxious about. I would have a good time in New York. Then, you drew closer, your warm breath in my ear, and said, “You are beautiful.”

The stark lewdness in your eyes surprised me. I did not see it coming, and I sensed it as a precursor to something more. I swallowed hard and lowered my meal. This was, I thought, what my mother meant when she warned me about accepting favours from strange men. Then you added, “You must come see me when you return. I will show you a nice time.”

Your flight was announced and you patted your breast pockets and the sides of your trousers for your business card, which I later lost on purpose. I watched you walk to the queue, not bothering to smooth the crease in your trousers. You paused in your tracks, turned around, and walked back towards me. I looked at your empty seat and wondered if you forgot something. Your wallet? Your passport? When you drew near, you slipped a $100 bill in my hands. “Don’t forget to call me.”

I looked at the bill. How could I not feel grateful for the small miracle, all the while feeling the weight of it? You expected something in return. Something I was not sure I was ready

to provide. Though I would count this as one of the many strange acts of kindness I've been dealt in life, there was a hollowness to this one I've never been able to shake.

Thirteen hours later, bedraggled, alone, and sorry that I had laughed at the passengers in Lagos decked in parkas, I stood paralyzed for more than thirty minutes at the arrival terminal of JFK airport, taking in my new environment, unprepared for the cold that nestled in my bones.

Here, no light bulb flickered, and the sterile air was not redolent of smuggled food. I steeled myself to gather momentum after a long flight and observed the diversity in the rapid traffic of faces—some awake, some crusted with sleep, some speaking languages I did not understand, some, like me, who spoke English with an accent. I watched the coming and going, the certainty in these people's gait. When I gathered the little courage left in me, I spotted an officer with a kind face, the type who would offer directions patiently. He pointed at a fleet of yellow taxis. And with your $100 bill, I paid my fare.

Dear Father, I Write to You from the Land of the Living

A cold morning in May, two months after your funeral, I searched Facebook for the doctor who sold us fake drugs for your cancer. I was a day old in a new country. My journey was long, the journey to this new country, and I wondered if the people I met on my way could tell from my gait that I wore the heavy garb of the recently bereaved.

Before my impulsive search for this doctor, I spoke with Mummy on the phone and she asked, How are you feeling? I said I was jet-lagged and it amused me that finally, I get to use this phrase I admired on the lips of others. Jet-lagged, I said again, running my hands on the white sheets on my stiff bed. I liked the term better than the new word 'bereaved'. I had never been bereaved. Your death was the first time I was touched intimately by tragedy, and bereavement was not a thing I wanted to borrow from those who possessed it. I liked jet lag better. It had an easier, posh ring to it, a malady reserved for those who traipse the world simply for leisure. I loved being jet-lagged but I didn't like being bereaved.

Rather than find all the sleep I lost sitting on the plane for fourteen hours, crossing time zones, travelling from Lagos to New York for an artists' residency, I lay in bed and searched for the doctor on Facebook. He was easy to find. His bio said we went to the same school, Abia State University. Not a surprise. Anyone could have been to my alma mater. But was this his real name? Did he truly study medicine? Is this online version of him manufactured to swindle more patients? Such duplicity wasn't beyond a young man who saw you in your last stages—bony and pale—held your hands as he performed compassion before he went for the kill, exploiting a desperate family willing to do anything, buy anything, to keep a dying father alive.

I sent him a friend request and he accepted in seconds. This too wasn't a surprise, his swift acceptance. Men are easily roused by a good profile picture. But I was surprised when he arrived first at my DM before I arrived at his, surprised when he said, Hi, as if he had been waiting for me. This is where I wish I was more patient. I wish I conversed with him slowly, even flirted with him, until I had milked the right information, something concrete I could use to apprehend him, shame him on social media, make him pay for what he did to us. But when he said Hi, I typed: So you're aware my father is dead? The one you sold fake drugs to?

He blocked me. No one has ever blocked me on social media, not to my knowledge. I have done the blocking, especially to strange men, when without a preamble, they declare their undying affection or say inappropriate things to me. After he blocked me, I lay in bed for too long, my luggage at the corner of the room waiting to be unpacked. All I could do was take a screenshot of the message and to this day, I go back to read our frozen exchange.

It was Daa, my big sister, who discovered he was a swindler. Ever the detective, she knew something was amiss after we paid heavily for those capsules. When they neither abated nor erased your pain, she took the bottles and googled the components. If we were paying through the nose for this panacea, she must have thought, we may as well find out its components. Her suspicions were confirmed: the drugs were merely vitamin supplements manufactured by a multi-level marketing company. They had absolutely nothing to do with cancer. Nothing to do with pain.

Now we laugh at the memory. As Langston Hughes prescribed, we laugh to keep from crying. We laugh at the doctor's audacity. We laugh remembering how he kept a straight face when we begged him to reduce the price of the expensive medicine. We laugh at our desperation. We should have believed the real doctors when they said you had only six months to live. Mummy laughs now and shakes her head when she remembers the swindler. Human beings?

she'd say, they have mind sha. So one day, that thief will knock on some innocent family's door and ask for their daughter's hand in marriage? And they will think he's a respectable doctor and gladly oblige, not knowing he has blood on his hands. Tufia! May such men not come near my daughters.

Some days, I think of the doctor and imagine that at some point we were in ABSU at the same time, and while I studied microbiology, he slogged it out with cadavers, making his parents proud the way you wished I had made you. Some ambitions cover a multitude of sins and a child studying medicine is an atonement to many Nigerian parents. In your usual manner of fashioning the destinies of others, you wanted me to be a doctor and you hoped one day I would come around, repent from my vocational wanderlust, and settle into this vision you created for your second daughter.

I still think of your penchant for ordering the destinies of those around you and I guess it is because you are the first son in an Igbo household. You grew up being deferred to. All your siblings deferred to you. Even your mother, Mama Ukwu, held a certain reverence for you and called you Dede. It was natural for me to follow the order of things, to know your word was final. But over time, I grew an opposing muscle, as if I came to this world to prove to you that man shall not make himself the pilot of other people's lives.

Here's an early memory of my defiance: In Primary 4, I got my hands on a novel, I don't remember the name now, but it was a novel I was too young to read. When you saw me huddled in a corner, flipping through the pages, you snatched it from me. The next morning, I found the book in your room, the room you shared with Mummy, and took it to school to show off to my friends. The teacher, Mrs Onwuchekwa, found me at my desk, huddled over and reading the novel, and she seized it. When you came to pick me up, she showed you the book and your voices were inaudible as I watched from my desk, trembling. As we drove home, I avoided your

eyes, my heart in my chest convincing me that I was in piping hot soup. Your disappointment was another presence in the car as we passed Azikiwe Road down to Macaulay Street. I knew the scolding which would follow would be long and unforgettable.

So far, I have repented from my wanderlust, no more hopping around from one career path to another—today a banker, tomorrow a social media manager for a startup. I have settled into a craft. But it isn't medicine. Writing is the only thing I haven't failed at yet. It would greatly satisfy me, not in a vindictive way, but I will love for you to see me now. My I-told-youso would be delivered in kindness. You would see that your worries about my instability and sporadic choices were unfounded. You were not the only parent adverse to unusual careers, careers that do not promise security. Some of my friends fought their parents too when it came to deciding their destinies. While some won, most lost the battle. Your generation of Nigerians extolled fields like Engineering and Law because those paths held a promise of surer income.

You couldn't make sense of my stubbornness when I refused to try medicine for a brighter future. Your fears were legit. Nigeria isn't a place one gambles with their future and you tried to make me see what you, the elder, could see perched on the ground that my child-eyes couldn't see standing on skyscrapers.

I didn't know how much I resented our career spats until one evening, a few weeks ago, I was walking home from the library with Ephraim, another Nigerian here in my current school. He is studying one of those shiny courses hanging from the branches of STEM. A wise man, following a path that promises a future lined with wealth, a trajectory that would make him necessary in this age of technology. I had mentioned to him that I studied microbiology in my undergrad. And that day as we walked home, he said, Why don't you return to your science roots? Do something with your microbiology degree. There's money in STEM and your stay in America would be more sure-footed if you returned to your science roots.My anger at him was

hot and blinding. What on earth prompted this counsel? Mind you, he said this to me, a writer, no longer a fledgling, a writer accepted into a fully funded program, writing a column for a respected journal, a writer with three coveted residencies under her belt. Who gave this man, this Nigerian man, the audacity to say this to me? I hated that his careless suggestion reminded me of you.

My inner critic still speaks in your voice, that voice that questions, that voice that chides. That voice that asks, Aren't you making a grave mistake? What are you doing with your life? But I have made peace with our many disagreements because a father's worry is a father's love hiding behind a mask. These days I imagine how good it would feel to call you on video or to send you a bottle of perfume as I did for Mummy and my siblings last Christmas, to have you enveloped in the smell of your daughter's love. I imagine how sweeter our love would have been from a distance.

I have made a sport of conjuring the tenderest memories of you. Here is my favourite: You in your idle moments, seated on the pavement in the front yard, a wrapper tied around your waist. The patterns on the wrapper are faded with age and your hairy chest is bare. Jackie, the dog, comes to you, tongue lolling, pining for your touch. Your transistor radio is tuned to BCA and while you listen to the afternoon news, you stroke the dog's back and she closes her eyes, surrendering to you. The radio speaks softly and you listen with intent, searching the dog's fur for ticks.

*

You were a man acquainted with death. I recall the way you spoke of the death of others, especially during morning devotions. You spoke of some deaths in a didactic voice, urging us, your children, to learn from the errors of the departed. Some deaths were unresolved mysteries, the startling passing of a person so young and budding, suddenly rid of a future stretched before

them. You had a friend, Achike, who died in his late thirties. You always spoke of Achike with the heaviness associated with the early, uneventful demise of someone well-loved, someone well-behaved, the type we think should have earned the reward of long life. Achike's wife often came to our house and you and Mummy treated her delicately. Your conversations in the parlour were punctuated with heavy sighs, and Achike's wife would clean her tears with her crumpled handkerchief. Some mornings during devotions, you remembered him and reminisced about your childhood together in Nenu. His was an unresolved mystery; it should not have happened. That is also how I think of yours.

Your acquaintance with death came with your position as a respected son in our hometown. Everyone called you when trouble blew, when another wayward child got arrested, when a ghastly accident happened, or when someone had to be rushed to the hospital. You were the family member they called when a body suddenly went cold in the dead of the night and you called the ambulance to drive the body to the mortuary. When Papa Ukwu and Mama Ukwu died, I remember you dashing in and out of the house, carrying on your shoulders the responsibilities, the task of a good funeral. You attended many funerals, and before you stepped out of the house, any of your four children would polish your shoes till they gleamed, and you always returned with burial programs. My siblings and I took turns reading the programs and judging the family members' writing skills, gauging if their tributes were heartfelt or maudlin.
We laughed when we read 'Death oh death, where is your sting?' We laughed at the clichés. We laughed when we found typos. Our childish minds measured the love the deceased had with the eloquence of the bereaved.

Unlike the booklets you returned with after each burial, I have been unable to read yours. I do not care for the typos, I do not care if the graphic designers set the pages correctly. I do not care when relatives read the tributes and remark on how much we loved our father, how eloquent

our tributes were. I am more intrigued by your picture on the cover. You in stride, dressed in purple senator, immaculately tailored; you in your red Igwe cap. I am wondering if you knew that the photograph would be used for your obituary. In your own parents' final days, you made sure to invite a photographer to the house to capture them in old age. We knew as we dressed Mama Ukwu and Papa Ukwu, as we combed their hair and shined their shoes, that those were the pictures for their obituaries. I wonder if they knew that their bodies were being prepared to pose for death.

Contrary to you, I do not know death well and do not wish to be acquainted with it. The Pentecostal church I attended in Nigeria has an adverse leaning toward death. Death is an enemy. Period. At the end of the year, during the Thanksgiving service, our pastor would brag about the low burial count the church registered. The potency of the Word he preached kept life in the bones of the congregants. In that church, we were taught that some deaths are not natural, and therefore cannot be the will of God. The deaths that claim people in their prime, deaths by accidents, death by mysterious illnesses. God's hands were not in those demises. The enemy swung the sickle and those heads were the scapegoats. Since his mission was to steal, to kill, and to destroy, we were urged to keep him at bay with the Word on our lips. So when someone died in one of those unsmooth ways, the prevalent question in the church was, what did they do wrong? Why didn't they fight back, resist the enemy? Did they pray before they entered that bus, before they ate that food? One time, a member was stabbed to death by her relative, and it was hard to understand why. She was a vibrant Christian, she spoke in tongues, she led a Bible study group. Why then did she die like that?

Even as I write this, hoping that this direct inquiry would ease my stance and make me regard death as that inevitable event allotted to mankind, my faith needle refuses to move to neutral. Death remains that bloody enemy that unsettled the poise of our homefront and took my

father. Or perhaps, I should take Apostle Paul's stance, to regard death as gain? In other words, to see death as the beginning of a much longer journey than the short laps we run on earth? I don't know. Maybe I should pray for journey mercies as I sojourn through life, like the preachers at motor parks—tattered bibles and bells in hand—who make a living praying for passengers before they depart to their destination. What traveller is too haughty not to ask for mercies? What traveller, especially when the road is dreary and untarred, filled with potholes, wide as gullies?

While you were a man well acquainted with death, you had other fears. The fear of men around your daughters. This fear took the shape of anger whenever you saw your daughters hanging around boys. One afternoon, I was twenty or thereabouts, and my friend, we shall call him Oluebube, stopped by the house to say Hello. Of course, I didn't let him in. Who was I to let a boy into my father's house? The version of me bold enough to invite a boy over wasn't born yet, so we stood by the gate and talked, and all the while I kept my eyes trained on the road, making sure to flee at the sight of your Toyota Highlander. And just as I feared, you drove down the rickety road that led to our house and I ran, leaving Oluebube alone and confused. But you already saw us, and I can still hear the words of your loud reprimand, telling me what happened to girls who were not afraid to cozy up to men. You mentioned pregnancy. You mentioned losing one's worth, mentioned something about prostitutes and their hallmarks of standing by the roadside with men. I believe most men harbour this special fear because they know what their gender do to women. Other fathers had this fear too and some showed them in more hostile ways, like calling the police on men who moved funny around their daughters. Not that this fear stopped us girls from doing what we wanted with men. We even protected the boys we frolicked with from our fathers. Now I wish I had let you arrest some of those men. Some of those men should have been chased with a club.

A wise person once said that a woman's relationship with her father determines her relationship with men. Because I feared you, I am wary of men. Their capacity to induce terror. They fear me too. My ability to read them to filth on the page. However, each day, I am conquering that blighting fear. I won't lie to you that I haven't had a good share of love from men. But some turned sour and I am tempted to make you culpable of my choices. I want to think that I carry the tinge of your love, that particular flavour it has, into these affairs and sometimes, that flavour mangles things.

I think of the many versions of you. You were different in wealth and in lack. You took on new personalities when each visited. When wealth arrived in the form of a contract or a new political appointment, your voice and your laughter boomed and rocked the foundations of the house. From your volume, we could tell Daddy had come upon money. You were also unapproachable, like God on Sinai, spitting fire. Money gave you arrogance and you wore it well. Arrogance suited you like a pair of well-tailored senator. You were a big man then and whatever you wanted, you got. We could just be home and you'd return with a goat, a bleating goat, just because you craved pepper soup. Who were mere mortals for you to consult them? When a god wants to eat pepper soup, a goat must be sacrificed.

In lack, you were quieter and read the newspapers. You sat on the pavement and stroked the dog. You were even polite. Mummie, you'd say to me, what do you people have in the kitchen? Would you please make me lunch? I preferred that version of you. That was when we could ask you stupid questions and you would answer.

Daddy, is it true you bought your Peugeot 504 for N3000 in 1986?

Yes, that was when the naira was as strong as the dollar.

Daddy, did you ever take the first position in class when you were a student?

I think so. I took the first position once and my classmates lifted me on their heads and carried me home like a champion.

Daddy, why do you like beer? Isn't it bitter?

But my worst version of you was your sick self. Cancer is a hose that drains essence from the body. I watched your glory depart from you and I tried to reconcile the you that lay frail in bed to the you that was the pillar and terror of my youth. I hated watching your bodily functions leave you, how you needed help with little things like going to the bathroom. I hated the way sickness diminished you. How was this happening to you, who all your life issued authority? The only people I saw you pay obeisance to were the elderly, your father Papa Ukwu, the old people in the village, but to everyone else, you were Sir, Dede. On your last night, Mummy asked us to take turns sitting beside you, and when my turn came, I held your hand and you kept mouthing something. I didn't know what you were saying so I put my ears close to your mouth. What says the time? you asked. I told you it was around 10:14 pm and you hissed. I asked why, and you said you wanted the morning to come. In the middle of that night, you died.

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This has happened since you were gone. I left home. Again. I am studying in America. This news would have made you proud; it would have pleased you very much just as my WAEC result did. You would be proud since it is no cheap feat to carry oneself from our part of the world to another considering the obvious circumstances: scrambling to find the right document, the gathering of funds, the trepidation of the visa interview. This is where my writing has finally landed me. Yet at some point, the joy of the relocation becomes soured, turns rancid like milk. Especially when some American remarks with a smile, You must be very happy to come here. And this remark isn't said with good intentions, but rather in a tone reeking of condescension. You must be very happy to come here. When we are met with this kind of condescension, I and

my Nigerian friends laugh. If only things were better back home, we say, what on earth are we looking for in another man's country? Many in my generation have left because the people before us, your generation, did not make things better. And this leads to another question: Daddy, how did you vote in 1999? How did you vote in 2003 and in 2007? Did you think of me, of your children, when you cast your vote? Did you vote based on ethnic sentiments? I wish your generation fought a little harder for us, I wish they did not throw up their hands in defeat.

Here are other things that haven't changed since you left. I am still scatterbrained. I fail to make my bed every morning as you commanded. My room resembles Mama Ukwu's room. I still slam the door when I go to the bathroom in the middle of the night. I still can't drive. (Why didn't you teach me how to drive?) I still go to church, even though you worried that I was giving all my money and time to charlatans. In church, when I see men your age, lifting up holy hands in worship, I envy their lives. I want this to be you, alive, vibrant, participating in this tournament called life.

Ah, you should have seen your funeral! Big people everywhere. The who-is-who of society. No space for all the dignitaries that paused their lives to honour you. Trust your wife to throw a big event. You would have protested her largesse. You would have said she was doing too much. But she had to do what she had to do. She had to honour you in death.

There are times I miss you. The first time I left for America, I arrived at Penn Station and waited for over five hours for my train to Saratoga Springs. Mummy called me every five minutes to make sure I was alright, as if her worry would cross the Atlantic between us to save me. When she kept calling, I grew irritable on the phone, as I usually am, wanting her to leave me alone, to stop asking for the fly-by-fly details of my surroundings. I missed you then because if you were there with her, you would have talked her out of her worries and told her to quit

asking if I had brushed my teeth, if my underarms smelled, if the sound she heard was my tummy rumbling. You would have said, Won't you leave the girl alone? She said she is fine.

To A Nigerian Writer Considering The MFA

Dear X,

I always return to Teju Cole's Eight Letters to a Young Writer, not just to remind myself of the rudiments of the craft, but also to recall who I was ten years ago when I first encountered those words. Naive, starry-eyed, high on the immense possibilities of my writing. Just like you, I thrifted books with an unmatched obsession. My friends and I traded illegal PDF files of novels we couldn't find or afford. Far into the night, I read those books with care, dissecting and imitating the text, searching for the keys to the "Literary Kingdom". But it was in reading Cole's letters that I was sneaked to the backend of literature, where the essential tools were laid at my feet.

The sixth letter, "Home", makes a poignant observation about the widespread preoccupation to leave Nigeria, steady on the minds of many young people, including writers, who believed moving continents was their next step to literary acclaim. "I hope you haven't fallen prey to such thoughts," Cole warns. The literary establishments and resources are in the West, he agrees, "but what is here are the stories."

I took those words seriously. I pledged to stay and mine the stories at home. I believed I could achieve remarkable feats from my corner of the world. I also believed I was a more authentic Nigerian writer since I was closer to the stories. I didn't view my rigid stance as a fool's errand. I held a purist lens over my work and was bent on doing it for the love of arts and for country. I prided myself on writing well without bowing to the institutions that be. None of them will anoint my head with oil.

In 2019, a mail arrived from Yaddo, the prestigious artists' residency, affirming my ambition. With less than a 12% acceptance rate, I got in. Goals. My vision was aligning. I was gaining access to high places solely on the basis of my portfolio. At the residency, I met creative writing professors who had applied for years without luck, and there I was, with no fancy pedigree.

My writing was the only ticket I needed.

At Yaddo, in the space of weeks, I built the scaffolding of a novel, writing thousands of words a day. And for the first time, I experienced what it meant to create with ease, to write without worrying about the battery life of my computer, without the distractions of daily existence. No boss sending me to search for the best gbegiri in Lagos, no long commute from Ketu to Ikoyi. My productivity alarmed me and slowly, I realized how much time is stolen from your craft when basic amenities, such as constant power supply, are absent. I was in a controlled environment designed to make work seamless and I saw the stark difference between creating from a hard place versus creating from a place of ease.

Home was hard.

After two months, I returned to Nigeria jobless. In my former life, I had been a banker who quit her job in Nsukka and moved to Lagos to get closer to the literary world. But job after job, Lagos proved an impossible place to live with dignity. My dedication to writing was threatened each day. To save me the indignity of scrounging for urgent 2k, I moved back to my family house in Umuahia. Gratefully, a Nollywood producer, Ozioma B. Nwughala, took me under her wing and we wrote screenplays together. Yet, I wanted to write prose. I wondered where in the world was the possibility of living a life of letters without pledging allegiance to poverty. No writer is promised wealth, but there were those who had found ways to put a decent roof over their heads.

I wanted that decency, even a slice of it. In my newfound desire, my fealty to Nigeria began to yield.

To write solely for love, while living in a hard place, required a level of altruism I was not sure I had the bandwidth for. I was young, I was talented, why hold myself back? The professors and writers I met at the residency urged me to apply to MFA programs. Like you, I started considering it.

On Twitter, the anti-japa and anti-MFA rhetoric were loud. The umpires of these discourses almost demanded martyrdom from writers, forbidding the mingling of the pursuit of arts with the pursuit of comfort. Their absoluteness did not make sense. Most of them were no longer writing, most of them were past their prime and had grown disillusioned with the art. Despite their dictates, they had made havens for themselves but demanded from other writers a loyalty they could not muster.

Some Nigerian writers who found reasonable acclaim without the MFA had privileges of global access and were mostly dual-passport holders who did not need to queue for an F-1 or a tourist visa. Same as you, I don't come from a family with the means to travel the world. Most of my education happened in inept Nigerian public schools. My final consideration: the current pulse of global literature. If I was serious about this "writing-thing", as one boyfriend called it, I needed to position myself and my work accordingly. It would hurt to look back and say I didn't give this my best shot, that I refused to take up space with my work, that I played it small.

The MFA was my best option. So I grabbed it.

In my preparation to leave, I began to think of myself first as an individual writer before a part of a collective — Nigerian writers. The local literary community was growing tepid by the day. Conglomerates that supported literature were withdrawing their endowments yearly. If I needed to step away from home to gain a bigger perspective on life and craft, so be it.

No one was promising me automatic acclaim once my feet touch Western soil, but what's the harm in trying?

The consequence of this individualistic approach to writing is the feeling of a dwindling literary community in Nigeria. I noticed a reduced fervour for local events: the festivals that brought together writers from all over the continent, the gatherings at Freedom Park. I am careful in my nostalgia for those heydays because, in their insularity, the Nigerian literary scene was a perfect breeding ground for all manner of abuse, a shelter for men on the prowl for eager writers who wanted to be the next Adichie. Blame it on our respectability culture. Blame it on scant opportunities that made writers scramble for crumbs. If an MFA was a ticket to bypass all that nonsense, how diabolical it would be to begrudge any writer this escape.

I arrived at my MFA program with a healthy portfolio. At that point, I had written extensively for close to a decade. My expectations from the program were minimal. I already knew no one was going to wave a magic wand and transform me into a stellar act. I was looking to become a better writer, but above all, I had come to position myself in the Big C literary community.

I also arrived suspicious. MFAs do not have the best PRs. You are aware of what creative writing programs are rumoured to do to writers, especially we writers of colour. You've heard stories of workshops as dress rehearsals for the pages of the New Yorker, workshops as preening for the white gaze. I was alert to an attempt to tweak the flavour of my voice until it accommodated Western palates. My antennae stayed high.

Junot Diaz's "MFA vs. POC" confirmed for me the reality of writers of colour in most programs. You, writing from the margins. You, sitting in class with people who may know

Nigeria only through the lens of CNN reporting. You, taught by professors who swear by dead white male authors. You, fighting impostor syndrome, wrestling the voice that says you are only here to add some colour to a puddle of whiteness.

You, a foreign thing.

Gratefully, the MFA vs. POC wasn't a battle I needed to start. Other writers of colour had fought and won some ground for writers like me. Some programs were adopting books such as The Anti-Racist Writing Workshop: How To Decolonize the Creative Classroom. Some programs were confronting institutional racism.

My promise to myself remained to write what I'd be proud of, not what Nigerians wanted me to write in the name of Nigerian literature, nor what the West demanded of me. I wanted to write my own stories. I was bent on protecting my voice and my work at all costs. I freed myself from the pressures of 'Nigerian exceptionality', the temptation we often fall into in the bid to prove we are better than our peers. I shed the exoskeleton of haughtiness and embraced not knowing certain things without shame.

Here's an honest review: I have become a more confident writer since enrolling. I don't know when it happened. I think the great distance between here and home, how much I gave up to be here, spurred me to work hard. Perhaps it is the library and the unbridled access to books. It could be the classes, sitting with writers from different parts of the world, exchanging knowledge and craft secrets.

A writing program is a buffet. You make it what you want. You choose what serves you and walk away from what doesn't benefit you. Hopefully, you find professors that get you and your work and study with them. An independent study I took two semesters ago was the highlight of my education. Our focus was "Nigerian Books with Global Appeal". I and the professor read Chimamanda Adichie, Lesley Nneka Arimah, E. C. Osondu and Eloghosa Osunde.

It is hard to forget how animated we were when we read Vagabonds! We marvelled at the audacity of language, the deliciousness of the prose and how brazen a writer could be to create such work.

I also enjoy teaching. Most programs require that from you. I didn't know I was capable of this until I was thrown into a classroom of twenty students and commanded to instruct them. Teaching gives me a chance to play dress up but most especially, I love that I am responsible for the education of others.

Some days, I enjoy workshops. Some days, the feedbacks aren't quite helpful. But in all, I am learning how to talk about the works of others, and I love how the workshop mandates you to write more. Most importantly, I love that a book-length creative thesis is expected of me upon graduation.

But I'd be remiss to whitewash America for you. A well-structured place can also be oppressive. The honeymoon stage ends quickly when you're paying bills, when you are adjusting to a new culture. Always, there's a constant tug-of-war happening to you even outside the classroom, where you have to gauge how much acculturation you should permit yourself. Soon the glitz dissolves and you realise you are in a racialized country and Black people are at the bottom of the racial food chain. You are black and black bodies in America are more prone to all forms of violence. I enrolled in a literature class centring on contemporary Black authors to understand better what it means to be Black in America. The class cured whatever separatist mentality I arrived in America with, especially as a Nigerian who is tempted to think I am a different kind of Black person, a good Black person.

Racism sneaks up on you. I recall someone saying I was getting more published than my peers in the program because I am Black and Black stories are in vogue. In that casual statement, my talent was dismissed, my hard work and how I push past a myriad of rejections on

Submittable — all waved away and attributed to race. Such things can make a writer create less and less or even drop out.

You may also wonder why some writers leave social media when they migrate. Reasons vary. The need to silence the constant chatter online. Book-length projects. An escape from the heightened scrutiny from family members. Growth.

You can weigh the risks and make a decision based on your own reality. After all, the MFA is not a guaranteed path to a successful career. Many quit writing afterwards and find jobs at places like Meta or Spotify. You can create your own workshop experience outside of a writing program. Find friends who are passionate about writing, meet often and swap works with each other. Set deadlines. Enter for prizes together. For me, beyond the doors an MFA degree can open, what I remain certain of is my craft.

However, if you decide to apply, there is something you should know. Leaving home is a spiritual journey. It is reckless to fling yourself to any part of the world without asking hard questions and making investigations. But even when you ask all the questions, how would you really know the answers until you arrive? Upon acceptance into a program, so many things occupy your mind as you prepare to leave home. Visa documents, flight fare, settling scores with your al mater, hoping they release your previous academic records in peace. So many issues and distractions and so little time to solve them.

In my case, I prayed. I abstained from food for days to gain clarity. I didn't want to land myself in the belly of the beast. I didn't want to experience what could break my spirit. I prayed for safety, I prayed for community, I prayed my path would not be lined with monsters.

So far, my prayers have been answered.

I have also found my people. I found them in church, I found them with my classmates, I found them in the African Student Association. I get at least three hugs a day. Loneliness would

have driven me crazy and every day, I am grateful it doesn't know me by name. I whet the edge of my craft each passing day, testing new doors it could open. I'm good. I'm glad I'm here.

Curriculum Vitae

Ucheoma Onwutuebe
ucheomar@gmail.com

WORK EXPERIENCES GRADUATE ASSISTANT, UNIVERSITY OF NEVADA, LAS VEGAS.

English Department.
August 2021- Present

Teaching English 205
(Introduction to Creative Writing: Fiction, Poetry, Non-Fiction)

- I exposed students to global literature, from renowned to new voices. This expanded their worldview and allowed them to write authentically and develop their voices and style.
- Through craft lessons and workshops, students learned the rudiments of writing and became better critics of other people's work.

Teaching English 101/102
(Introduction to Rhetoric and Research)

- I taught my students critical thinking, reading, and writing skills across disciplines.
- I showed students the processes necessary for collecting and incorporating research material in writing.
- I taught them ways to evaluate, cite, and document primary and secondary research sources, how to investigate, report, and document existing knowledge, and how to develop arguments and support them with sound evidence.

Writing Center Consultant

- I helped students from all disciplines brainstorm, draft, revise and improve their papers.

Virtual Events Assistant, Black Mountain Institute

- I organized virtual events on diverse topics such as "Demystifying Publishing" and "Developing Audacity: A Workshop for Writers".
- I assisted in curating in-person events for writers such as Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah, Tyriek White, Tajja Isen, and Edgar Gomez.

Communication Assitant, Words Without Borders

- Interviewed Arinze Ifeakandu, the 2023 Dylan Thomas Prize winner and also provided administrative support for the team.

FREELANCE JOURNALIST

August 2019- Present

- I have written for The Lagos Review, Sunday Sun, The Nation Newspaper and a bevy of national dailies, on various societal issues including desperate migration, women's and children's rights, youth development, etc.

SCREENWRITER FOR NOLLYWOOD

January 2022- August 2022

- My screenplays have been produced and aired on IrokoTV, YouTube, IbakaTV, etc.

MANAGER, ANGELS AND MUSE/ VICTOR EHIKHAMENOR ART GALLERY/STUDIOS

April 2018 – September 2018

- I managed the renowned, contemporary Nigerian artist, Victor Ehikhamenor and served as his assistant.
- I also managed the daily running of the art space, from delivering artwork to clients, bookkeeping, and overseeing the company's social media sites.
- I organised art exhibitions and writing workshops for the young art community.

HEAD WRITER, WRITERS INC

January 2018 – March 2018

- I provided content for clients' websites and social media pages and supervised and edited other writers' works.
- I assisted the graphic designer in creating excellent images and layouts suitable for each content.

CASHIER, ZENITH BANK PLC

August 2015 – July 2017

- I credited and debited customers' accounts without discrepancies.
- I manned the ATM on weekdays and weekends, ensuring the machines worked optimally.
- I introduced new customers to the bank and served as the Relationship Service Manager.

ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER/ CORPS MEMBER, LEAH CHARITY FOUNDATION, ILORIN

November 2013 – October 2014

- I assisted the director and front desk officer in attending to patients who visited the clinic for cancer screening.

EDUCATION

UNIVERSITY OF NEVADA, LAS VEGAS, 2024

- MFA, Creative Writing.
  (Currently enrolled.)

ROYAL ARTS ACADEMY, FILM SCHOOL 2018

- Diploma, Script-writing and directing

ABIA STATE UNIVERSITY, UTURU, 2011

- B.Sc., Microbiology

RESIDENCIES

*Anderson Center at Tower View: July 2022.
*Art Omi: May, 2022.
*The Corporation of Yaddo: May 2019.

AWARDS

Pushcart Prize 2024 (Honorable Mention for *A Nigerian Attempts Therapy*)

Winner, Waasnode Fiction Prize, 2022 (Passages North)
Winner, Steal My Idea (Best Instructor Teaching Plan, UNLV English Department, 2021)

PANELS

2024. Moderator, Demystifying the Publishing Process, 31st Jan,

Organised by the Black Mountain with Tajja Isen, Talia Lakshmi Koluri and
Ly Ky Tran.

Special Guest, Unspoken Words, Nov. 7, 2023

Exploring Immigrant and First-Generation Identities with the Power of Storytelling

PUBLICATIONS

- Man (Passages North)
- A Nigerian Attempts Therapy (Bellevue Literary Review)
- Masterclass for My Ex's New Girl (Efiko Mag)
- Dear Father, I Write to You From the Land of the Living (Isele)
- Where are you and Where is my Money? (Public Space, Issue 32)
- Notes of a Nostalgic Nigerian (Catapult, A Column)
- Wants (Agbowó)
- To the Expat at Murtala Muhammed Airport (Off Assignment)
- Sturdy Man with Shaggy Beards (Bakwa Magazine)
- My Mother Cooked for Her Husband, Now She Cooks for Herself (Human Parts)
- Man, Following (The Lagos Review)
- Why am I a Citizen of a Place People are Glad to Escape? (Lagos Review)
- Village Memories (Brittle Paper)
- Girl (Prairie Schooner)
- A Certain Kind of Treasure (Kalahari Magazine)
- Thanksgiving Sunday Flashfiction Magazine
- Sexual epiphany (LipMag)
- Litany (AfricanWriter)