OCCASIONAL DISCOURSE OF THIS OLD QUESTION

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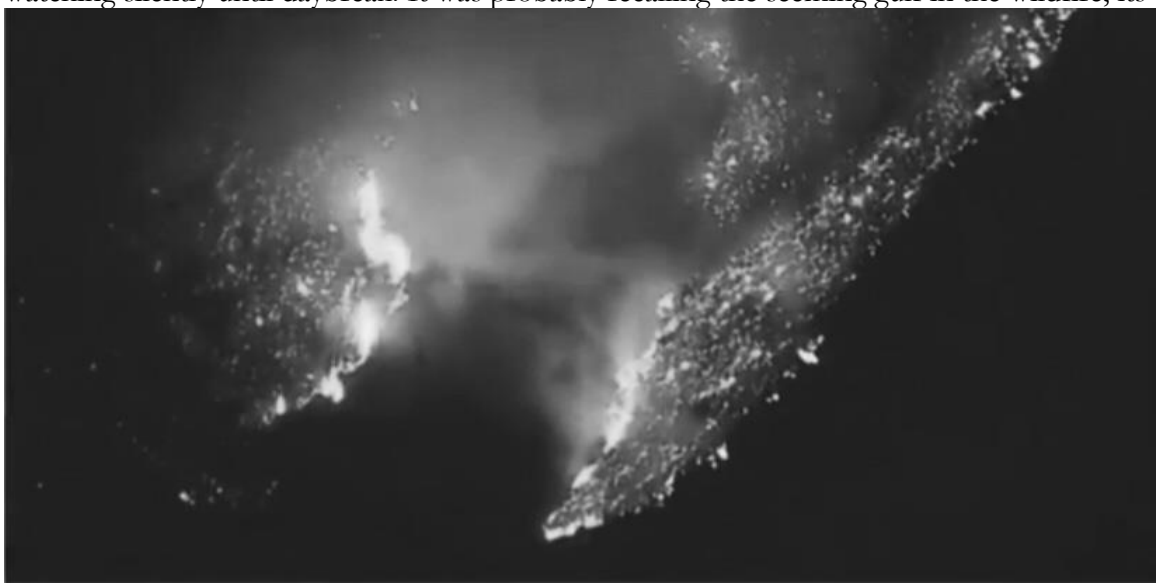
A note on the destruction of my friend Zachary

In December 2014, barely one week after the department reluctantly approved my undergraduate thesis which, for varying reasons, had dragged past several deadlines, I embarked on a hesitant journey to visit my family, or what still remained of it, in the village of A, that, somehow in this spirit of yuletide, I would begin drawing to an end my self-inflicted isolation of more than a decade. And indeed the whole affair of leaving Zaria on Christmas Eve for my hometown, east of the Niger—Benue Confluence, felt responsibly fair after all until I decided to get off the bus in Lokoja, still hours away from my destination. This precipitous disembarking was, again, not without uncertainty, due chiefly to the scarcely remediable nervousness which consistently took possession of me every time I came this close to meeting my family and partly for the purpose of visiting nearby relics of a mud house where my grandfather committed suicide in 1975; relics so haunting that I conceived a curiosity and began frequenting it, taking notes for my study and, subsequently, constructing for myself a narrative by which to comprehend the desolation that a year earlier had entered my awareness to be vastly present in my own body, family, country and race,—indeed, the Black Race. I cannot now recall exactly what time it all began but, suffice to state quite early, my purpose of composing these pages is to recount the gradual journey that resulted in my awakening to the *nervous condition* in which I see the black population of the world. This appreciation has since plagued me with a particular sourness of the mind, that every time an occasion presents itself I cannot help taking a road to visit a location of loss. On my disembarking in Lokoja that day, as the searing mid morning drew firmer and firmer into a pitiless sun, the whole of my body began succumbing to the curious fatigue which usually beset me in this city. Without hesitation I slung my schoolboy rucksack over the shoulder and walked from the bus station toward the city center, past the International Market, and down the main road. Utterly fascinated by their stark nearness to the past that haunted me, I would usually make straight to several places of interest such as the supposed Union Jack hosting site, the European Cemetery, the Samuel Ajayi Crowther Memorial Cathedral, The World War 1 Cenotaph, the Lugard House, National Commission for Museums and Monuments of Colonial History. Instead I wandered through last-hour Christmas shoppers swarming around stalls, loitering around the stadium, and then all way through several newly established estates. It was in the main square of one of these developments that I took seat on a bench that I had a good view. Even though I was now seated in the open it seemed that I was floating in an airless contained space as I gazed at the view, to detect some invisible cover that I felt had overtaken the city since the last time I was here. As I took in the mostly inappreciable structures around me—the houses, dusty streets, stalls, traffic, and office buildings—once again it occurred to me how open areas in places I had been wandering were being lost to city expansion. These urban centers had about them a sprawling unimaginative bareness that filled me with horror. Their self-evident lack of planning, no broad avenues anchored by art, no beautiful structures, no intricate engineering and intricate architecture displayed something deeper, something frighteningly shameful, a stark disregard for the human spirit or, as my friend Zachary once put it, a stiff-necked national anti-intellectualism. Indeed, there is in this country a terrifying indifference to whatever does not immediately put food on the table or money in pocket, and this is why there is little in Nigeria's urban centers that prompt curiosity in the passerby. It was while thinking about this widespread artlessness and dearth of philosophy, that I stood up from the bench, took advantage of the now subsiding sunshine and walked through city center once more in the

Christmas dust and took the road out of town, passing colonial structures, most of them in ruins but still impressive. I eventually arrived at the place where my grandfather, a world war veteran, had destroyed his own body decades ago. I must have stood there three whole hours trying to make sense of it all as I usually found myself doing when lost in such remote places; staring at the manner everything had become complex with time, overgrown plots, mounds of red earth, hay and rotted beams, shrubs, rocks, disused alloy, tall grass and rolling grassland. I wondered if beneath this geometry of destruction, laid a more complex maze of shame. The noise of weavers in the canopies of nearby trees drew my attention and I raised my gaze to the trees and saw tiny birds that seemed to be scoffing at my repeated and futile visits to his place of destruction. It was probably due to this air abundantly filled with Christmas ambience, suspicious sound of birds, shame and a deeply familiar horror that made me felt fear, and not able to bear the place any more, I hastened back to town with images of human skeletons. Through meandering rocky paths I arrived at the Niger River Embankment where, in the falling darkness, I stood smoking and gazing down at fishermen setting off in their canoes onto expanse of water. I also cannot now recall precisely what I saw besides the fishermen paddling downstream and their shirtless comrades gutting dinner catches on the shore, but it was so destructively hefty in the darkness descending over the place that I slowly collapsed onto the sands. The fatigue immobilized me for a long time; it took a while before my eyes could begin to make out things in the thin darkness around me. Gazing down the river thus, which lay darkly dreamingly vast before me, perhaps due to my earlier sighting of a man and his boy-apprentice distressingly pulling fishing nets from a nearby canoe, desire to recall the plot of Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* instantly filled me, and it was this, I believe, which further prompted in me an absurd image of baby Moses drowning in the Nile hours before Pharaoh's daughter considered taking her bath; believing that the fishers I earlier saw setting off from the riverbank for night catches had indeed gone further and further away not to cast nets but to drown themselves at the downstream deep; accepting that the world was now one expanse river of darkness into which my forbears, having *drowned* to destruction, beget me systems of drowning myself; recalling that during the past months young black African migrants, in the course of escaping destruction on the continent, were drowning in the Sahara and the Mediterranean Sea. As the darkness drew even into the night I sat up in the sand. I felt boundlessly hollow inside, yawning. I made to get back on my feet but the fatigue felt like metal. So I found myself chain-smoking and trying to remember my previous visits to this city, and it began with my recalling of a walk from this selfsame riverside one night to pay a hasty visit to my second cousin who had recently accepted a professorial position at the newly established Lokoja University. The house was deserted and securely locked up. But uneasy with fatigue and in the hope to rest in his garden, I went round the house and found my second cousin standing atop the fire escape. I climbed up there and rested against the railings, restraining to ask why he was home but had locked the doors. Later, I stood beside him on the fire escape, overlooking corrugated roofs of buildings stretching onto the expanse of land along the river into the groves by which, as it were, the Brits once lived and named the country as *Nigeria.* By way of explaining my regular visits to this city, I told to my cousin how my happening upon an old essay called *Occasional Discourse of the Negro Question* around the time I learned about story of my grandfather's abandonment of his family and subsequent suicide had drawn me into coming back to scenes of such destructions across the country, a nervous tracing of the almost universal *homelessness* of the black body—its age-old question of being in great distress. On this Christmas Eve, however, as I sat alone by the river and gripped by fatigue and migraine and fear of drowning, I gazed at the darkness filling the face of the water in

front of me and struggled to think of my cousin's response to my observation that night atop his fire escape but I remembered nothing save the sudden wildfire which appeared in pillars of inferno and raging plumes on distant hills across the river, which we both stood watching silently until daybreak. It was probably recalling the seeming gulf in the wildfire, its

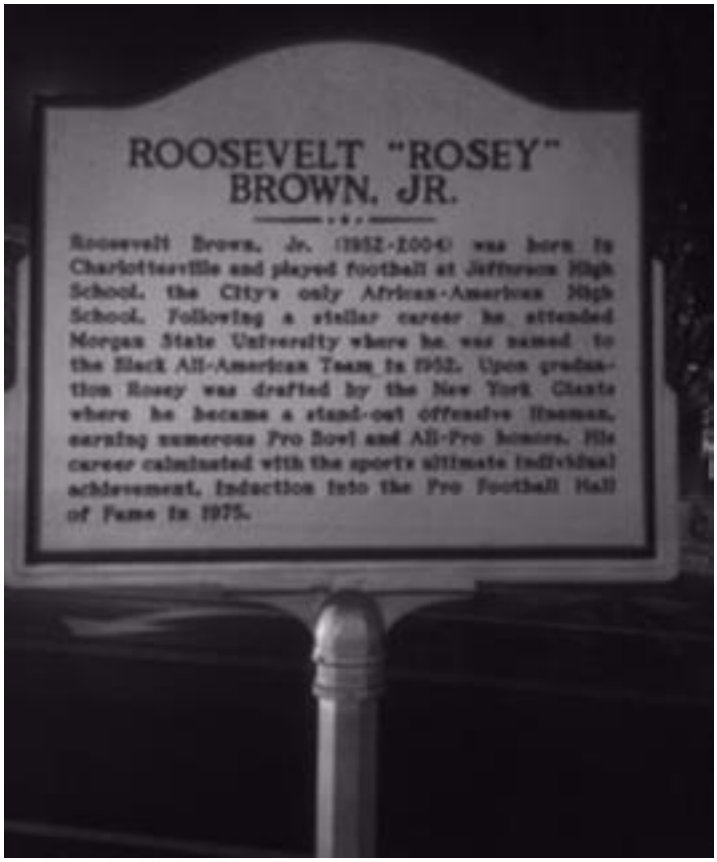


solid blackness, and my own resolve to understand it in the phenomenon of national tragedy about which I had not only conceived a curiosity but had since begun tracing that, after dragging myself from the riverside later the night, got me pacing my motel room and asking myself several questions I had been deeply ashamed to ask. Even as I now compose this note I have no answers to any of the questions, but the uncertainty of my footsteps in that room was evidence of shame about the centuries-old dismal condition that created me. For the first time an immediacy to this heritage of shame filled me knowing that European colonization was a only fancy term for decades in which my ancestors were brutally infantilized, that my grandfather was *impressed* into the Royal West African Frontier for a war for which he had no purpose, that my own father waited long and in vain for his life to change for good, that during my last semester at the university a professor could still confidently say to the class that Europe was responsible for the underdevelopment of Africa. Pacing that room, I thought hard about the reasons for the endless misery in my family, my tribe, my nation and continent, how it was possible after all for black people to be bought and sold, how it was possible that a certain conference in Berlin could ensure the destruction of my grandfather. Is there any truth to the idea that Black Africans are inferior? Why did my ancestors fail to stop these foreigners? What was it about black people that made them fitting for slavery and colonialism and such utter degradation? If truly my ancestors had great civilizations in science, art, society, medicine and technology, philosophy, why had the black race fallen behind the rest of world? What preoccupied my ancestors during the centuries curious Europeans developed schemes in war, industry, exploration and trade? Is it not possible that those who, even today, teach us that Europe underdeveloped Africa, that the history of the backwardness of my race began with Europe, are not only trying to escape from reality but are also complicit in infantilizing black Africa? Are they not deepening the inferiority of Africans and entrenching white, Western supremacy?

Bereft of any useful answer to these questions in my motel room, I could not help but wept in agony. It was in this motel that I convinced myself to begin documenting the journeys that resulted in my own awakening to this age-old destruction, which still fiercely

defines the black identity in the world today. In spite of the snow-white walls of the room—sheets, ceiling, the absolutely whitewashed halls, the two or three wallpapers displaying flowers and expansively breathtaking landscape above my bed—I could not help thinking that night that the whole place was being lowered into an utter blackness. Reluctant to meet my family, it was during this time that I conceived composing these pages about the fears in me.

Two years later pacing, on a day which began with Donald Trump giving a speech in Warsaw where he emphasized the impression that "Western Civilization" has been confronted by a lethal threat with the recent migrations to the West, than it has ever [had to] face in the past, and that an urgent rallying together of "Western peoples" must happen to secure this occidental refinement of "symphonies, innovation, the fastest and greatest community" known to mankind, cultures, he argued, were begun by ancestors of the West, also ended as the long day I finished assembling pages on my gradual awakening to wretchedness of my race. I had begun my project in America in August 2016. Some months later in spring 2017, I locked myself inside my apartment, with an inexplicable urgency, and for months did nothing save compose the last pages of this book**.** And emerging from what immediately felt like a dungeon, a desperate craving to return to reality took hold of me. I felt hollowly distant from the world, so I pulled myself through the streets to downtown Charlottesville, grabbed something to bite and even though a hefty fatigue had encamped in my joints, similar to that which usually plagued me when visiting relics of the past in Nigeria, I set off to wander this old city. I strolled through the university grounds, down the gleaming, almost deserted streets. A profound foreignness that had not before occurred to me during the many months I had been in this place suddenly coated everything, the streets, the traffic lights, buildings, sharply reminding me of my stranger status here. Once more I began trying to make sense of the words I heard Donald Trump utter earlier that day in the light of the pages I just concluded about the present-day condition of black people in the world. Even though I could not say precisely why, right in the middle of this thought, I felt my eyes gradually being taking over by a particular darkness. It felt unhealthily distinct from the night darkness and so rapidly staccato that I no longer could make out passing cars and other passersby. A short while later at midnight I was taken into the emergency room in the mental ward where I remained for several days.



My bed in the hospital ward was a feet from a wide window, so that even laying on it I could still see cranes protruding

against a multistoried building under construction. A certain meaning sprung into view whenever I stood gazing out the window. The skyline, the traffic lights, and distant freight trains seemed like motion images in the thick pane before me, and this proximity to distance began playing with my mind. I observed that the gigantic building under construction, which I had been told by my nurse was an extension of the hospital, appeared so close to the sky that I could not help suspecting that the reason why the mental facility was located up there on the uppermost floor of the hospital was to offer a subtle commentary about the suspended state of its patients, a fitting description of mental illness. We, the patients, were neither fully up nor on ground, but stationed in air. Even though there was a hard floor upon which the room, bed and I stood, the impression of my being suspended in air became deeper and deeper each day. Peering down at the street below, cars coming in and out of the parking lot, the hesitant traffic meandering at intersections, the doctors in their uniforms expertly emerging from all this chaos and making haste across the street into the hospital, the passersby along the curb; and the sudden distinctness by which all these movements impressed their forms upon my vision began to keep me at the windowsill. And indeed it was this my floating about the ward, as it were, which made me restless in the room, laying down and rising up, pulling blinds up and down, seeking stability, weeping on end, standing at the window and watching the view with a wandering mind, where, as I sipped at my tea early one evening and seeing a worker at the construction site with his body crooked on a crane, I happened to recall that several months earlier I had walked this city struggling to dispel from my head a distressing image of my friend Zachary. Despite being quarantined in a lunatic asylum in Nigeria, my friend keeps mailing me handwritten letters. No month passes without his letter in my mailbox. It was Zachary, the scholar with whom I feel the greatest affinity, who heightened my own interest in studying. His collection of Michel De Montaigne introduced me to a whole new sensibility of the essay form. His obsession with Werner Herzog whose *The White Diamond* and *Lessons of Darkness* he considered "purely endless" came to gradually steady my own gaze of the world. My friend is only in his thirties but his inclinations are utterly old-fashioned. He does not print his letters. He uses neither a phone nor Internet; he is taciturn and traveling on foot is one of his major principles. All the years I stayed in Zaria, where, like myself, he was a student, Zachary never spent a night sleeping; his off-campus apartment, or Library of Congress as his associates named it, was filled with obsolete lab apparatuses, documentary films on obscure fields and unimaginable collection of books, most of which dated back several centuries. He was a Mathematics student, so it was strange the manner he came to possess an inexplicable relationship with darkness and had since his second year committed to some obscure scientific enquiry about it. Occasionally he wandered at night with his photo camera, down campus, far into Old Zaria City, through inner streets and alleyways and mosques, settlements that perpetually lay dark without electricity, and then at dawn he would stroll back home with photographs of images made indistinguishable by blurry swaths or utter blackness. So I

was barely taken aback when he confided in me that the subject of his study was, in fact, to determine all geometry of darkness. It was ambiguous to me then as it is now. Upon entering his dim musty room, which also was notably studded with varied measuring apparatuses such as tapes, wall clocks, thermometer, speedometer, ruler and abacuses of several types, Zachary was always to be seen hunched over books and papers at his desk, curiously facing corner of the wall as if his subject of study extended inside the bricks. He slept on the floor but had purchased a scrapped and reconditioned hospital bed and had it positioned by the only bare wall in the room. He never said the purpose for which this bed appeared in his affair with darkness. One day, as the afternoon was drawing to a close, I walked into the room and found my friend photographing the bed, where sun coming from a small window cast a beam of light in the shape of slanted square. He told me that he was taking the photograph to aid in his analysis of the anatomy of darkness.

Nothing was more customary about him than this staying locked in this room, drinking and reheating coffee, and on Wednesdays, with those eyes that were already taken over by vast uncertainty to the gym where he trained in the sport of boxing. Remarkably, his fine and intimidating intelligence did not save him from receiving the poorest grades in his class. Zachary attended his classes, studied in his room and all libraries nearby in Zaria, procured books with the allowance that came monthly from his older sister, but the moment it was time for examination, melancholia would take possession of him. He would become compulsively irritating and take to violence at the slightest provocation. By this time I was beginning to be naturally affected by the uncertainty surrounding his mind. It defied all logic that he had so many books and breathless insights, and even lent books to professors and some of us his younger friends, but chronically got bad grades. It was thus during this time of desolate floating between incomparable knowledge and terrible academic performance that Zachary offered to take me on a walk one night to talk about Thomas Carlyle's *Occasional Discourse of the Negro Question*, which, for several reasons, had obsessed me since I happened upon it in the obscurely obsolete section of the university main library. However, rather than give the intended exposition on the essay, he started his characteristic analysis of layers of darkness. His scientific (mathematical) insights on darkness were not only beyond my comprehension at the time but also were clearly symptomatic of the utter blackness into which he was desperately drowning. If my friend were a Westerner or a resident in the West, perhaps a young European or American, he might have gained the limelight as an emerging philosopher of this generation. But this was not possible for him as a black man in a black world, a man born in a place notoriously disdainful of his kind of imagination and inquisition, a place with no regard for true human curiosity. His philosophical talent and inclination were too sharp, earnest and, worse, agonizingly unrecognized. It was these unexpressed insights, this long-practiced obliviousness of the entire world to his imagination, which, I strongly believe, caused the rapid destruction of my friend. Zachary himself had fairly foreseen his own tragedy when he argued that his study of darkness was to enable him to pierce the geometry of known things to reach the very soul of existence, where, he further observed, we could find realm of true but unanchored meanings. I cannot now recall his observations that night as we wandered through the lightless streets in Zaria; however, as we made to take leave of each other he first counseled I desist from trying to understand the so-called Occasional Discourse of the Negro Question, an essay published by a European, and then expressed his absolute optimism about the Question. He has never stopped being an optimist. Despite the disrespect he receives from the world and his countrymen he refuses to despise. Years later, as I began composing these pages, it occurred to me that his evasiveness to speak about the present-day "Negro Question" in the world was either because he himself, whatever his knowledge of science and history, was not aware of the similarity between our lives and the thread of *dismal* history from which our generation was born, or his silence came from the certain shame which he himself had once described to have been burdened upon us by our reckless ancestors. Months after that awkward evening, Zachary graduated after nine years of pursuing a four-year degree, and with of course the worst grades. Before leaving Zaria he discreetly gathered all his books and drowned them in river. He went back to his family in Abuja and, as he wrote in his letters, the interminable animosity with his father became fiercer. So it was from these images of Zachary that a particular one began haunting me by the time I moved to America. The image tormented me as I wandered every night in Virginia, which, memorably, also had an unspeakable history of not only disdaining black bodies but also prospering by destroying them. If today there is anything still more nervous about the Black Race besides the massive stale *Third-Worldness,* it

has to be this: the black body shockingly exists in profound dishonor and destruction anywhere it finds itself, in Europe, in the Americas, Asia, Australia, and of course, nauseatingly, in Africa. Awakening to this fact of my race in 2012, the year I became twenty-one, filled me with fear. I shall explore this year of unease later in the notes.

Even though my recollections of Zachary obsessed me over the years, it was one particular moment that upset deeply and kept me aware of the dungeon where I myself belong; the dungeon which made it impossible to be able to compose these pages in Nigeria, on the African continent; the dungeon which ensures that to be human I have to sojourn through institutions in the West, begging for a degree, subsidy and endorsement; the dungeon which keeps my body homeless, placeless and humiliatingly nervous anywhere it finds itself in this world while people of our ages of different races live in comfort on their home turfs. In this image of my friend he was bare-chested and crooked over the table in his studio, working a dismantled computer in the shine of a hanging oil lamp. His face, bearing giant spectacles for the long infirmity of his eyes, pulled close onto the table. Though there was a slight beauty in the way his dreadlocks, remarkably long and hefty and ungroomed, spread onto the hardware bits scattered across that table and shone under the huge lamp above his head, it was the manner his trunk tensed up in that unbalanced, brittle posture that lingered with me. It was vulgar to have let this image stay so long in my mind since what I described may seem mundane, but it has become an image of enormous significance. I do not embellish this. My friend does not consider himself a victim and I do not intend to establish his victimhood, or define him by such jaded postcolonial terms. I recall asking him to put aside the repairs he had been doing since morning was at hand, but he was stubborn and refused. I watched him labor all night in the heat and dimness, afraid to be leave him, wary of stepping into the darkness outside; neither of us at the time knew the hour when this world would disappear us. Our comrades, such as C. Boy, Terry, Abdul, had begun disappearing.

I do not ascribe this recurrent image of Zachary in my mind to the series of letters—treatises on water, nighttime light, Wu-Tang Clan, sex, destruction; incomplete observations on photographs; ramblings on my obsession with the Negro Question—he has been sending me from the mental hospital for the past several years and to which, guiltily, I have not written good response. I attribute it to the anxieties inside me that made possible for such an image to affect the way I now see the world. I put it to the brutal conditions that adeptly placed him into a narrative in which no one regards his body and imagination. I accuse the innumerable forces that seek to normalize this truly absurd position; the forces that now believe that "the centuries-old negro question" of misery, underdevelopment and continuous destruction, phenomenon which claimed my grandfather and which Zachary and I still belong effectively, has become jaded and thus be discarded. I blame it on the forbears of our history. I am indeed reluctant to show any respect to these forbears. I sympathize with grandfather, my father and all ancestors who were destroyed by the weight of European inhumanity but, honestly, I cannot say I have any regard for them. I am shame-ridden and my refusal to feel any sense of pride about my own ancestors is part of this heritage of shame. What happened to my ancestors was not a single night affair, nor a looking over the shoulder rape. It was a comfortable enterprise lasting hundreds of years, a business that set up consuls, offices, straits, railroads and ships mainly to plunder land and bodies. The great emphasis of this long night of indescribable cruelty has, expectedly, always been about black bodies in shackles, in labor fields, on ships in transit, mutilated bodies. They are, indeed, the true conditions of past eras, and in many ways conditions of this present time. History books, professors, have taught and exposed me to the humiliation that my ancestors

suffered. However, my curiosity has always been the reason why it all happened.

I actually did not notice this crooked photo of my friend Zachary at the time when I sat two chairs away from him in that room more than three years ago; however, as I set off assembling my notes, walking Charlottesville every day, from the amusements downtown to the breathtaking scenery of hills, railroads, woods, libraries, theaters, bookstores, the Monticello, roving the arcades of imposing buildings in the disturbing quietness of the almost deserted campus at night; befriending young scholars with great thinking and originality; contemplating how "we" came distantly lagging behind the prosperities of the world, wanting to know my thoughts on the "position of the black body and what the world has made of it," by which I mean to affirm or denounce the inconveniences passed on to me by my forebears, it began to occur to me while I gazed upon this position of Zachary in my mind that his posture over the table, shone upon by the hanging lamp, held some significant meaning. I am lost, ill, and susceptible to reading too much meaning into situations but not this. I observed that his crookedness at the table notably obscured his waist downward as if it had never existed. This crooked position made the trunk of his body, which bore more the light, display his tense black complexion, so that, he appeared in that room as if the strength of his body had all streamed down into his skin color, giving a brittle impression. Picking up and dropping the tools at the table, his sweating became profuse from the dark of his body in a way I had never seen, and in that long moment of exertion it seemed like I was staring at a trunk that been smothered by a dark, wet living sheet. In that moment it appeared as if every movement by Zachary only pronounced the strange discomfort of his black body. I did not tell him this at the time, but I felt fear once I saw it. And it is as I now recall also, in fact, I could see that the intensity which I beheld years ago and which had returned times without number to humiliate me is in no way a unique phenomenon, but a fitting commentary of the nervously homeless position of the world's black population both as natives on the continent of Africa and in the diaspora. Unbeknownst to me, all my life the world bullied me to stare and take in that all the women and men, boys and girls, individuals through whom I became aware of myself, possess this same nervous posture as Zachary.

I have learned that the world that centuries ago began this enterprise of destruction of our bodies has not broken off from its own denial, nor am I hopeful that it will. I am also aware that some will say this is nothing new, that the case has long been made, that it has become an heritage of paranoia of our race. It is this heritage of destruction and underdevelopment that first began emerging in my awareness in 2012, and which deeply eventually caused me to breakdowns time and again in 2014 when I became twenty-two years old. These notes are as a lengthy reply to all the letters that my friend has sent me. The notes are not about my friend but about the small journeys that I took, which opened my eyes to the larger condition of his life and both our lives. My response, spread across three separate but crucially interlinked notes, is long and will require a greater amount of patience and labor on the part of the reader than I put into composing it. I take refuge in the old words once said to the French public by Karl Marx, that the labor required to read these notes is a "disadvantage I am powerless to overcome, unless by forewarning and forearming."

"the Stranger"

> And Cain talked with his brother: and it came to pass, when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother, and slew him. And the LORD said unto Cain, Where is thy brother? And he said, I know not: Am I my brother's keeper?
>
> Genesis 4:8,9 (KJV)

Just months following another diagnosis Bipolar II disorder, I lessened the routine evening walk about town and took to staying indoors. I had begun having strange but firm feeling about death once more. I changed the daily roving that usually began by grabbing coffee in a downtown shop, then to the sport facilities on Cherry Avenue, and after a long stay spectating the practices I moved on to the university grounds and wandered till midnight when I would trudge back home to work on my thesis. I had maintained this same schedule with earnest excitement since I arrived except for a weekend or two when I went to theater with friends or dinner at professors'. However, this change meant that I would leave the apartment only for class and workshop, a biweekly thesis office hour with professor Jeff, and sometimes, a long walk to the nearest African marketplace five miles away. I make certain that the night never sets in on me at any of the places unless it is within my therapist's home, which is just a flat around the corner, or where I live in The Flats at West Village, a hotel-like building of simple redbrick façade overlooking West Main Street. And the severe boredom that I had feared when I stopped this relentless wandering in the streets never materialized due to the view outside my apartment window. My apartment is on the fifth floor, south side of the building, and has a balcony looking out a pleasant view that entails an Amtrak station, sets of meandering railroads, woods stretching onto little hills that curve against the horizon, rows of story buildings, and, notably, a nice swimming pool just below me. I was a foreigner to balcony, its upper class appearance agitated me and thus I was reluctant to put it to use. However I adjusted a bit and after nerve-racking negotiations with the landlord, I dragged the little reading table from the window side of the bedroom and tightly placed it in the balcony, so that, even when I am not reading and just sitting there it would still give the impression that I am up to something worthwhile.

Until about six months ago, gazing at this view with wandering mind was indeed worthwhile in that lingering there I somehow came to realize that the novel which I had begun would not come to fruition, that the writer which I came to America to be was not really meant for me. Of course, the view also served as escape from the danger I initially felt would come upon me wandering the streets. The habitual sitting at the balcony in the evening and watching the space began to fiddle with my mind, sapping out the energy of this looking. The rhythmic movements of cranes over workmen and tractors at the construction site a distance away, or the variety of transient or resident birds flocking east in the shades of falling darkness, or the double-stacks toiling and rattling containers on the railways the other way, or the bare human bodies down in the pool below me, attractions which I had occasioned my eyes to gaze upon can no longer satisfy the visual thirst that first drew me to their view. And as a replacement to this dissatisfaction, a sudden obsession with the frames of the buildings in the vicinity emerged in me. Notably, these buildings are not worthy of admiration in any sense of architectural wonder but their mere visibility encased me into the habit of now sitting at the balcony and counting their windowpanes and iron bars on end. I would snap photos of the buildings with my phone and print the photographs on A4 sheets, and immerse myself in trying to identify the exterior, which I could see, and the interior, which I could only imagine. I kept the routine of snapping photos of the buildings, printing them, redrawing on plain sheets, and giving different areas of tone. I had pencil-drawn the image as many times that the entire view, carrying the woods, buildings, railroads and swimming pool, now distinctly stood in my head in their separate shades.

I cannot now tell if it was the singular imagery of the railroads that meander between those buildings and the one on which my balcony is that sunk me deeper into looking back at the places I had lived in the past, but the more I gazed at the details of my drawings the more conspicuous my memories became, in that those buildings in which I once lived in the past would emerge like cumulus clouds and blur the things right before me at the balcony. It appeared like being between dream and memory and dejavu that I could not control. In utter compulsion I had taken great delight to depict the railroads in darker shades in all the images I had drawn, so that their contours stuck out even at a mere glimpse of the drawings, and looking at them, as I did on end, they possessed a peculiar outline that triggered memories of these places in my past more than any other details.

I had started looking at the photos of places where I once lived long before this habit of sitting on the balcony but did not have as much urgency to document my intense memories in them until I began this repetitive drawing of the details of the view before me. And these memories, which come in characteristic searing stream, just as it once did about two years ago in Kaduna started pulling me violently into the quest to understand the meanings of the gradual lost of my own body *in this world*.

Though I'd rather not have it be so, it feels like a system of mental journeying to observe a plague with little desire for a cure. Maybe, this has to do with my inability to imagine outside the "aesthetic of suffering," the rhythm of my own self-pity. I speak of buildings and cities that are now desolate, or about to be. Inhabited by silence and the smell of decomposition, overgrown with moss and molds, full of insects stuck within cobwebs matted on old walls and geckos on the clammy underside of broken bricks. They do not come without making me perceive plasters peeling off the damp wall of my life to leave ulcerous sores in its stead. I had—four years ago—considered this prolonged attraction to such recalling as a means of looking at the years of my estrangement from "home" and having to be put up by all sorts of people. But I soon started to wonder if I contained seeds of ruination that had seeped into the walls of these hospitable buildings and cities the

moment I stepped within them. I am not sure. To be honest—perhaps as you already know, though it's vulgar to say of oneself and narcissistically leaning even—I am a lost man, and this is the reason why I am now coerced to undertake comprehending these buildings where I lived. It could be that they bore this ruination and had imagined a cunning method of injecting it into my body while I slept under their roofs, thinking I was a beneficiary of "goodness". But even this I am afraid to accept, because closely examined, I am implicated on all sides because the buildings I speak of include the house where I was born. The one my mama lives in up to now. Its colors have faded. Its cement floor and wall are worn out and the cracks run across the patches like a cartographer working through samples for the perfect maps. Termites ravage the woods of its doors, beds, windows, ceiling, cupboard and garage no matter the amount and strength of insecticides. Termites fill corners with sawdust, leave woody powder on grains in the kitchen and smother utensils with their odor. The other night I spoke with my mama on the phone after weeks of fighting to do so and hoping not to, and although she was euphoric at the sound of my voice, I discerned the movements of termites in her head, and the way her voice fluctuated on the phone like thick twirling dust motes.

It's shameful the pleasure I take *in* the learning of despair. It's shameful that this mere looking from this balcony would further deepen my anxiety about the houses I lived in in the past.

Of note, even now as I write these notes, there is one such house that binds my mind. The house belonged to a man I befriended years ago in secondary school, and the now unceasing compulsion to diagnose it and the man came from an essay from my ex, an essay I shall continue to return. For nearly five months now, first as a way of improving my English grammar and, then, as a space within which to chip in subjects about my diagnosis, the relationship with the therapist and the subsequent obsession with drawing buildings from the balcony, my ex, who not long ago returned to Kaduna after a long visit to her family in Palestine, and I have been exchanging short essays about 'cities', trees, and buildings we both know, either the ones we have stayed in however briefly or the ones we read about over a significant length of time. Buildings and cities that are no more, or have lost what had them impressed on us, or face a threat of displacement entirely, six paragraphs maximum. The exercise itself as I'd realize feels dusty and pretentious, since its an image most appropriate to the picture of two aged former lovers, now invalids and lonely, exchanging residues of memory during nights in old quiet homes, like something in a Western movie. But although my ex is almost thirty and I am about to be twenty-five that does not mean that we have not existed in the "extreme corner of the world" for centuries and, sadly, now possess an eternal distance between us. Her wedding happens next September but she was diagnosed with a cancer two months ago. She has begun brooding over the imminent loss of her body and, like myself, seems to have no idea how to escape visualizing the horror.

My first essay to her, eight hundred words long, nostalgic and somber (on purpose), talked about a hut my grandaunt lived in for forty years with an ancient hide bag down its roof, a heavy bag she considered sacred tied around the neck with brown leather ropes, that she fought to keep anyone from opening until her death. When she died on a rainy night ten years ago, the village trooped in to see the content of the famous bag. To their amazement it contained seven balls of wool placed on the other half of a grindstone that laid over some powdery content. She had been widowed since her thirties and rather than remarry she stuck to herself, her seven children, and the memories of her husband who labored at his spinning wheel at night, refined salt in the morning and became a merchant the rest of day. This was

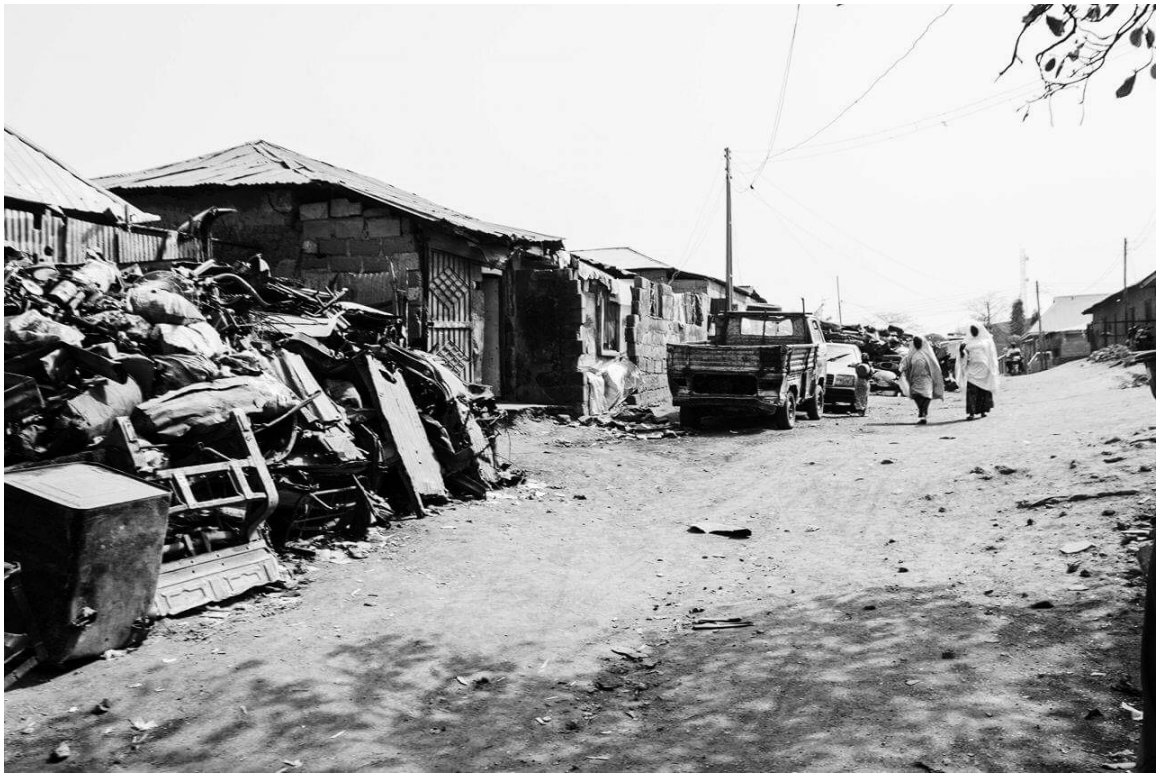
in the seventies. The house, apparently, is no more. On a visit to the village recently I found that the only remnant of the household was the solid hearth outside standing firm in its place, facing a new mosque and surrounded by a nursery bed of pepper seedlings.

Her last essay (my ex), in distinct contrast to the previous ones she had written about Bedouin homes in villages and hillsides in Jericho, Samaria, Hebron, Judea, and elsewhere in Haifa (the birthplace of her mother), was intimately about this house that I knew, the house which belonged to this man of my young adulthood. If not for this sitting at the balcony and consequence of exchanging these essays I would not have become aware of its fatal reality. The house stood in my head all along despite the fact that it had been rubble. How delusional we are about the truths of our reality. But the moment I received her last essay and perused it one word after another like sieving through grains of river sand. I felt the house struggling like a windstorm, then minutes later it collapsed with a deafening sound in my head, the thick dust choking me at once.

It was the foggy layer of receding hope in the set of details buried in the concluding paragraph of that last essay that thrust coated my heart. It seemed that the end of man has come and both of us are meant to witness it as starved children, she wrote, asserting like a philosopher. My eyes, she continued writing, have seen mass loss of homes and lands of people in my family but I lack the words to explain what it was that I felt seeing the broken house of your friend. I wish you were there beside me to watch how the rain and sun poured on the desolation; peradventure it'd have reduced the weight of misery I assume reading this would bring you. There was a fire burning in the inside of a section covered in slight disposition by wet rusty zinc, brown and torn in the center. You could see the smoke, not the flame, and looking over the entire debris you would notice an immense emptiness hovering its past, that not even the rain and sun could dislodge it. There is something about us, she said, we are the generation that arrived when everything that once stood, or seemed so, had long fallen off. The end of man is here, she said, then concluded with this line from a Christian hymn we both loved and sang together in the past: *mine eyes have seen it in the watch-fires of a hundred circling camps*.

Apart from visiting this house with me twice, I had often confided in her about it. And the news that this house that is no more brings me so much anguish as I wake each morning knowing I will see the other houses from balcony. This anguish comes more from the memory than from the actual fact that the house is no more. Had her essay not brought me once again, I doubt if I'd have committed myself into observing the nervous presence that comes from beholding the railroads, buildings, the hills, and the places in which I lived in the past.

I have been reluctant to tell the story, but with her essay and seeing these railroad from the balcony, I have to tell the story of the man and his house now.



My last moments in that house happened somewhere around the start of my second year of university in Zaria, when academic staff embarked on the strike that would span months. Although I was just weeks old at a laundry job at a professor's, I still couldn't resist a strange urge to maneuver an escape from the campus and go back to Kaduna. And to give a good argument round this flimsiness of mine, particularly to my new job, I took the strike as opportunity to seek medication for inflammation of the lungs (my ex had loaned me money for this the preceding month) but the trip came along with series of coincidences that would preoccupy me for the next couple of months—and it was all about this house and its owner, Mr. Raphael G.

The remaining trace that was there of Mr. Ralph, as fondly called by his students, which I was once, entailed the unpainted one-story building he lived in on Foot Satellite. The rustic two-story house prominently faced a coffin shop across the street and had the following features: two pillars on either side of its high and well-laid stone veranda; an ever prospering curry plant he tended somewhere in one; his old blue Yamaha motorcycle now threadbare and cobwebbed leaning against the wall to the backyard; and to the left of the house, on a tiny stretch of grassless land, a dilapidating pen. The home had no running water but a well and a water tank sat in the backyard, near a dump of unused hoes, rakes, and cutlasses. It sat on a stony portion of land between an old photo studio and a welding workshop, and a dirt road, about thirteen feet wide, which served as shortcut from the bus stop through the neighborhood to town, passed its front. This house—four bedrooms, two on each story, their baths; an enormous but unsophisticated kitchen of hard plain concrete floor and a distastefully tiled sitting room—prior to my last visit, had been vacant, emptied of all the household goods (though he never had a reasonable amount), and this included a red plastic table on a spot in the hall to the rear door I used for study the time he was alive and up to the third month into my first year in the university when his family barred anyone from entering the house. In contrast to the popular building design of the neighborhood, the

doors and windows were wide and high, the former made of unornamented steel, the latter of rough mahogany wood. Sometimes, because the cement used for the building had been adulterated, and wasn't detected until many months later, the doors and windows dangled from the rails. Another striking feature of that house was that it had no ceiling, so that with a raised face one could see in clear view the beams, cobwebs, woods of the roof, and the electric wires that passed across them. The obvious similarity it shared with the other houses in the neighborhood was that it had been built directly from imagination, voluntary labor and meager income, no physical budget or a professional design whatsoever. Almost worthy of note as well, there were two tiny windows upstairs that had no cover but pieces of maroon chiffon that hung on them. The room with the tiny windows was the man's; I recall being in it a dozen or more times, perhaps more. The view from the window offered a sniper's position overlooking corrugated roofs of the houses from the backyard to the trees and bush overhead.

In the rainy season the walls retained water, the floor got soggy and cold, so that walking barefoot in the house seemed like treading on ice, and in dry season, since it had no ceiling, the heat wave teemed down until the body became damp and felt syrupy. Except for some missionaries from the headquarters of the chapel he worshipped at who rented it for a few days, sometimes hours, whenever they were in town, no one has lived in it after he died, not even his niece, Lo Pamela, who owned a seamstress shop three streets downtown and rented an apartment in an estate two miles away on a hillside.

He was the principal of a secondary school. A man I briefly befriended, tall with an oval face, a moustache, and lisped when he talked. He was big like a trainer's, his eyes permanently askance, his muscles though waned with age still pushed to tear out through some of his wears. Features that, if I must say, constantly betrayed his amiable sociability all the time, for as I knew him back then he was in all ways a soft, easygoing fellow that I never heard or saw raised a voice at anyone except a certain night that for convenience sake I shall hesitate to talk about until somewhere later in this story.

In October 2008 Mr. Raphael was killed, with eight bullets to the back, at about four a.m., on his way back from morning prayers at a nearby chapel. His killers, unlike other killers in this part of town who would leave a sign, a note, or bullet on top of the victim's corpse to issue a clue behind the bloodshed however vague it may be, left nothing behind except his big bloodied body, moist with dews, that laid stiffed on the edge of a drain in the wee hours.

The Wednesday of the week I returned from campus to Kaduna, one intensely cold evening, a buddy with whom I was having tea in a nearby teahouse asked me to log in Facebook and see a notice on the school's Old Students' Association page. I had joined this group the month before and always missed out on news. I seldom used Internet. One of us, the post said, had fallen three years ago, able principal Raphael G. May his gentle soul continue to rest in peace. Amen. All old and current students here are asked to attend the students' anniversary celebration at his house this Friday, 6 p.m. come one come all. Note; a collection will be taken for his family, it concluded. The notice seemed hurriedly posted, like the writing of his obituary, which I had watched being written, and regardless of the well-known truth that he never was "popular" amongst the students since he was a distant man, there was something remarkably warm about the post. I scrolled the page to confirm if it was tradition to so honor a deceased member (both former and current) of the school community. I found a few similar posts on students, deaths, victims of accident or riots, but none on a teacher. The other posts were celebratory, matriculations or graduations of former students, a few photographs of individuals, groups, and classes on field trips and other such

engagements like the visits to the premises of the nearby Peugeot factory and the Coca Cola Bottling Company. I scrolled back to the post. Beneath it, were two images, one of the crucifix, which obviously had be taken from someplace on the Internet, and the other, a grainy photograph of Mr. Ralph posing at the entrance to the school on a spot made prominent by a collection of red sharp stones, in a worn out checkered jacket over a grey shirt, black chinos, and a pair of somewhat dirty white canvas shoes (which I had seen on him countless times), with his hands deep in the pockets, his head shiny and bald, his expressionless face and his back to the wall some inches from the school noticeboard. Looking closer I could see that a quarter of the noticeboard with red and blue card bulletins had entered the shot. This was the first time I had viewed his entire physique, before now, despite with my own brief intimacy him, which I should note was somewhat intense, all I had of his image in my were his eyes, voice, the muscles and his inclination for talking to himself.

It was a certain mood in this 'post' that caused me to have an unprecedented feeling about my connection to Mr. Ralph that evening at the teahouse. I had, before seeing this post, been preoccupied of late with defining the man I was becoming with memory of Mr. Ralph. It was this attachment to this memory that, I believe, gave this notice a denser impression I had accumulated of him in relation to myself over the years. My memory of him was luminous yet rather unsettling. I imagined myself sitting on the stairway of his house one more time eight months after the previous visit, and once there I realized that I had to enquire about the gaps in his life, the life he hid from everyone, including me. Though this news of anniversary caused me to grieve, I also realized that someone with whom I had shared myself played me on purpose and it took a social media notice to unravel this naivety of mine. So, more than anything else, although I had vowed to never visit the house again, I went back to the house for an opportunity of meeting Lo Pamela, because I knew that no event could take place in it without her being there.

Viewing the photograph beneath the post it dawned on me that apart from his name, Raphael G., and his place and date of birth, which according to the school records were the village of L outskirt of Makurdi, and 1943, respectively, no individual had any information to share. He was not an enigma; he simply wasn't known. Strangely people didn't care, or so I thought. He lived and roused no strange feelings with the neighbors. Lo Pamela was the known family and she wouldn't talk about him either. When he died the obituary the literature teacher at the school had written and given to me to have printed black-and-white on A3 paper in town because there was no budget for the funeral, had scanty information: his name, date of birth, place of employment, and cause of death, which was strangely described as a disease. Unlike dead bodies of elderly people that according to tradition and familial honor are required to be taken to their hometowns, the land in which their umbilical cords were buried at birth, the remains of Mr. Ralph were laid to rest far from his village a day after the gruesome shooting, on a spot surrounded by thorny weeds and anthills in the graveyard across the train tracks, an hour walk from the school.

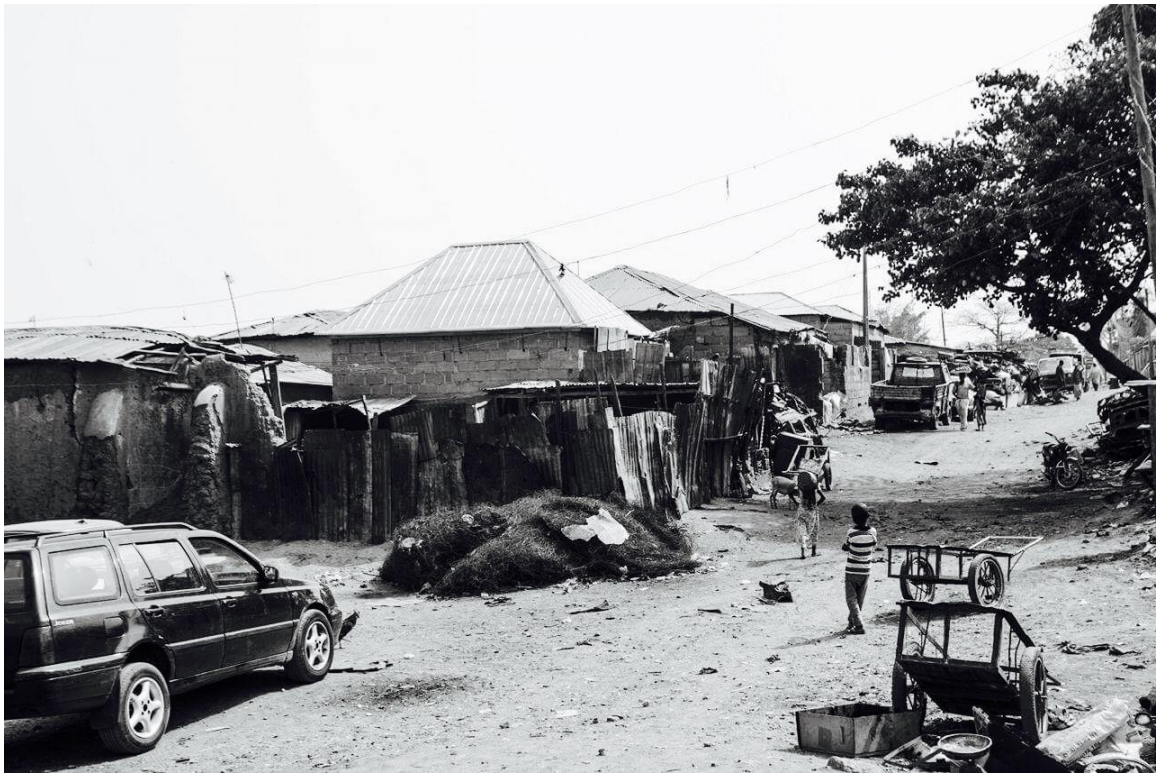
However, first things first. Here is how our friendship was born.

In the month of May 2008, I had come to the school to undertake a six-month special program. My guardian, disappointed with my poor performance at the previous school, decided to register me in a new school and write my school leaving examination. The preceding years had been unsteady moments in my education, years of being out of school and months of irregular attendance, and skipping and repeating classes. So, now in this school, the schedule was designed around two sessions. First, an intense morning session one-on-one with a tutor focusing on the parts and figures of speech and comprehending

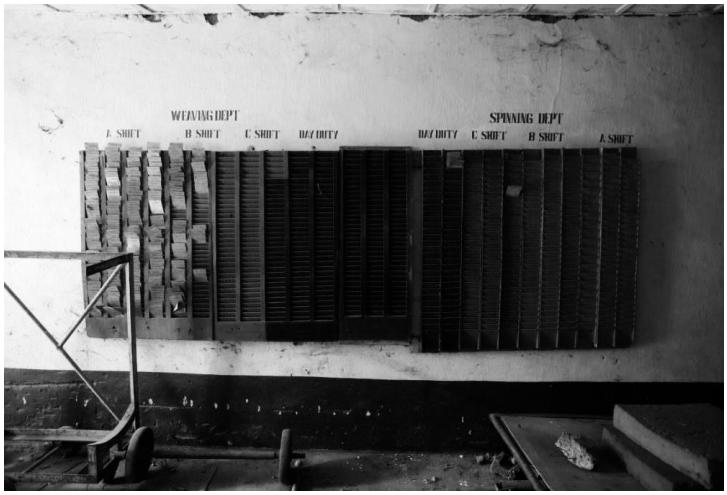
passages and poetry. Second, at four p.m. I would return to the school to join the other students for extramural preparatory class for the other subjects, finishing at eight thirty each night. Although I had come face to face with Mr. Ralph on my first day of school when in the company of my sponsor I walked into the administrator's office and saw him sitting on a couch leafing through documents in a red file, he had made no impression on me. I'd started to become aware of him about my third week, particularly on a day I had gone to school early enough to complete homework before my tutor arrived but found the classrooms and library still locked. To douse my anxiety, I walked from the corner on the walkway connecting the school compound to the entrance and began wandering through the blocks of classrooms, past the playground onto handball court, and at that corner of the school, after a pause near a shrub, I turned left towards a green building that held the staffroom, the laboratory and 'library', then down to the school's store where I leaped across sludge to a water tap that stood on a concrete slab. I turned the tap on and placed my feet under, the cold water striking the flesh of my feet like a foreign. The entire ground of the school was waterlogged, with portions filled with stones and sand to strengthen the buildings, and walking there soiled my sandals with mud caked on the sole and toeholds. Afterwards, through threads of young luxuriant aloe vera plants I put the alley to the kindergarten section behind, a yellow Syrian-style building with a crude balcony overlooking the tap, north of the school entrance, and walked further down to the blocks of classrooms that marked the border between the students' access point and the garden belonging to the Young Farmers' Club, opened to students only on Wednesday afternoons during the clubs. Some more feet I would be at the fence that separated the school from a large farm behind and reaching onto the foot of the hill on which train tracks passed into town, near a house where I would later. There was no one in sight, so I rolled up legs of my pants to the shin and tightened the strap of my backpack, fought off a bee, turned right onto a footpath heading through a bush to a mound of loam. The ground was a fine humus, a mix of black and brown soil with a thick earthy smell, husks of dead insects, and earthworms that crawled over leaves as millipedes folded at the stems of little grasses. I stood on the mound of loam and looked into the distance amidst the chorus of croaking frogs in the marsh. There, for the first time, I saw the school's spherical fishpond bounded by iron net. The pond's entry, which faced out to the other end of the fence, could be accessed from a point where eight pawpaw trees gathered behind a patch of blossoming spinach. A breeze bent the plants, the tall grass and spreading tendrils. Then moments after a swarm of sunbirds fluttered from the inside of the thick leaves of a mango tree on my left towards the farm behind the fence, I heard a movement in the small bush around the pawpaw trees that alarmed me and made me stand on my toes. I craned forward and found an unfamiliar man holding up a hook to the neck of a pawpaw tree. He hadn't seen me. I looked around him and noticed two other men close by at a giant protruding root toward the fence. I could now hear their voices. The two men were feet away from the part of fence where a mass of moss was expanding across a huge crack. I looked to see what the men were busy at but the blossoming plants obstructed my view. Soon, one of the men came into view: Mr. Ralph. Had I ducked in time and left the mound through the rear of a nearby guava tree, he wouldn't have seen me. He was in work wear—an overall, rubber boots and a hat bearing the word STRANGER. Once he was in full view, I could see he was carrying three large pawpaw fruits. He began walking towards me as the other men followed, then stopped as his gaze met mine. I burst into a cry, apologizing for trespassing on the farm.

Later the same day at school, by happenchance I saw him standing by the door of the library I saw him with a set of files, now in formal clothes, and my mind traveled back to

the caption I had seen on his cap in the morning. Coincidentally one of the problems in my homework from the previous day was to identify and discuss the grammatical function of "the stranger" in the sentence, *The chubby woman refused 'the stranger' entrance to the ward,* and then indicate, with reason, if the sentence had been written correctly. I must state hereby that it was the words "the stranger" that marked our relationship and most fittingly defined its uncanny brevity. We kept bumping across ourselves this way, he carried files, entering and exiting offices and buildings. He would stop to pass his regards to Aunty or inquire about my progress with the tutors, or caution that my dreadlocks violated the school's dress code, a few times he teased me about the incident at the garden that morning Although back then I knew little of this world and man's relationship with himself, I could detect in Mr. Ralph that there was nothing eccentric about him, no signs of anguish whatsoever. The more time I spent in the school the plainer he became, through gossip and by eavesdrops on my friends. One day a girl I had shared a seat with during an evening session told me that the school had no tutor for certain subjects including Agricultural Science, and that Mr. Ralph who served as both the principal as well as the coordinator of the Young Farmer's Club had taken upon himself to be the provisional Agric. tutor. This fact as illogical as it sounded didn't come across to me as unimportant; first it revealed why I had found Mr. Ralph working early at the garden that morning, and second, my previous school had no teachers for biology, economics, government and literature for nearly five years. Several days after the awkward meeting by the school's fishpond, I was alone walking home along a lightless street when I felt a large hand come on my right shoulder. I turned in panic and to my surprise found that it was Mr. Ralph. He gave a guttural laugh, apologized to have rattled me, and as we walked on he told me why he was late and returning home at that the time of the day. He had worked late into the night in his office, but his motorcycle wouldn't start when to go home. According to the students this late night in the office was a tradition, a fact I would later confirm. We continued in silence up to a junction, at the road of the house he had described to me as his home, then he told me he knew my guardian and that they had discussed my situation, which according to him showed I was 'different and therefore require special assistance', that, if I would consider, he would be happy to let me use his home for study anytime. He shook my hand and ascended the road. This was the beginning of the brief but intimate relationship between Mr. Ralph and myself.



A month later, on the night of a public holiday, to escape the chaos of a street dance festival happening in front of the house where I lived—which was on its second day and would last for two more—I strolled from the house planning to stop at Mr. Ralph's. I had been inside the room all day because the security guards at the industrial area had become stricter with us collecting scraps; alloy and aluminum. I was living in the older rundown part of the neighborhood, in a room of a compound house next to an abandoned clinic formerly owned by a Lebanese, opposite a damp unlived house that gave out a meditative appearance with the weeds over its windows and doors, half an hour away from the bus stop. Mr. Ralph lived in the middle on the other side of the neighborhood, a residential extension that was built in the late eighties and declined with its about a decade after. It emerged, like most ghettos in the south of Kaduna, with the opening or expansion of factories during the economic boom of the seventies through eighties, prospered and built a middle class for a few years up until it was devastated by the Depression that would eventually cancel out that class of people. Neighborhoods built by former workers in the railway service and textile factories but now were patches of decay like the companies themselves. On the way, past the junction linking the separation, I found Mr. Ralph some forty minutes away from the school in front of a house next to a deserted and overgrown swamp. Behind the house was a horticulturist's garden where, I presumed, he had gone to place order for new flowers for the school's annual beautification week that was a month away. It had just poured down, the drains frothed dirt and in large puddles in the road, one of them, I observed, lucidly reflecting the scape of the clear sky. As usual when it rained here at night and the neighborhood hadn't loss power, everything, especially the buildings, appeared brown and mushy in distance; the dirt, traffic and corners became visible and imposed a momentary clarity on their distinct outlines like an outdoor junk-artworks exhibition. Gazing at the rows of wet electric poles and the slipshod distribution of trees from up the neighborhood, they seemed to bow in or



slant in their sullen profiles under the moonlight like drunks having a good night after payday. Back then I lacked the language to describe their similarities to my *bodies*. That night, a distance from where he stood, I stopped walking and figured how I could circumvent around the puddles. The wet road squelched under my shoes and a breeze, clean and free, blew with such firm freshness that walking under the moonlight that moment I felt my being become exhilarated and whole, the first time I would experience both realities simultaneously.

Mr. Ralph was wearing a navy-blue raincoat that had been unzipped halfway and the hood removed backward. He looked like a soccer coach at the touchline. The instant he saw me, he said, What are you doing out here? he said feigning amazement in a teasing voice the instant he saw me. I told him why I was out on the street. He moved onto the road and rather than head to the house, we took the street by the Rehab C. to another junction, south of the bus stop, and walked a distance to a mosque adjacent to a small railway staff housing on our left, where several routes of train tracks emerged from the bush and crisscrossed beside a set of football fields and the Army Construct. We were far from our neighborhood. He was in front and I walked behind him, never asking him about our destination. We meandered in the refreshing mood of the night under the wide-open sky and a happy moon. Breaking the lengthy silence since we started walking he coughed and spat it into the tall grass that had overgrown a portion of a dormant train route on his side. In 1956, he said, I failed the screening in the military due to my flat feet but I went on to use same feet to run in college, setting records as a runner that still stand. He stopped talking. We had taken a turn and were now midway past the Army Construct, a military construction plant. He spat again and continued speaking. It was a good school, he said, and we had an incredible sport culture. Sport was rather a major deal those days, and that's why it bothers me terribly to see the coldness of students toward it nowadays. He paused. I laughed and shyly disagreed, using the football fields we had passed as evidence. Perhaps our passing the Army Construct or the football fields had triggered his comments about sport and military. He continued, That's because there's so much money in football, you all youngsters want to have a chance in Europe and live large, you know. But look at it, young people like you don't swim, run, box, no tennis and so on. You guys don't even exercise your body. I don't understand your generation. You all think, walk and dress the same way, unlike us. We were nicer, happier because we taught our souls the meaning of plurality. We had vanities but we learnt. Here, he said in firmer tone, here you are on the verge of leaving secondary school and you can't write or solve basic problems properly, come on. Our variety was deep, contagious and contentious. There's so much boredom now. Those days we had politics within blocs, we played it from these ideological understandings. You were a socialist or pro-capitalist, separatist or anti-imperialism, left wing or right wing, Palestine or Israel, the Soviet Union or America; you were this or that, an atheist or something from a book. We debated amongst ourselves, drank together on Fridays and wrote cutthroat pamphlets bearing fiery thoughts

on Saturdays. He talked on as though he had been waiting for decades for the right opportunity to say all this to someone. Perhaps because of my poor academic performance, he genuinely saw me as channel to lay his complaints. But I did not understand any of it back then. Left to me right there, I would have preferred returning to the pandemonium in my street or to go bother about the forthcoming examination. We had come to the road leading to Monday Market, walking between a maize field on a hill and an enormous Water Facility. He turned to a road that would return us to the neighborhood, a dirt road with wooden shops of either side belonging to food vendors, mechanics, and welders; some distance further down we took a turn right by a sawmill where I had once apprenticed, the soggy wood dust slushed under our shoes. The night was a shimmer of moonlight on the deserted streets and taken by an unusual quietness. I followed behind him, staring at his back, the bulky body in the raincoat. I cannot now recall precisely the thought I was thinking but it must have had something to do with baba. He made me recall walking home with baba during the nights from guarding against the birds' attacks on the millet fields or returning from my mama's father's compound down the village where he had gone for closed-door meetings that I knew were about her. Or it could have been something else. But as I walked along with Mr. Ralph this night, it was becoming cold and I hadn't left the house in my hoodie. He threw long steps and I hurried behind like a child until we reached the house. He took me to a room downstairs to sleep, the first time in my life I'd have a whole room to myself for a night. Everything felt awkward, like one huge silence.

Our friendship developed through the months but like a bud badly put to a new plant. We would meet in school; walking home together most nights after my second session, at times after moments alone in his office; cleaning the pig house during the weekends and refilling their feeds; simplifying complex subjects in the textbooks for me; patching cracks in the roof; replacing a broken or stolen pane, which we had to do almost fortnightly; wandering around the neighborhoods, past the usual routes by the fields, the Army Construct, by the cabbage fields, the farm on the hill and, on exceptional situations, reach an old food kiosk by the gate of a nearby textile company across the bus stop where we would sit for hours dangling legs on the bench and gazing at, amongst other such things, the headlights of passing motorcars. Other days, like Thursday and Saturday nights when the train station had little or no traffic, he would ask us to sit on the platform outside until midnight or thereabout. It became monotonous and embarrassing, a palpable unease walked with us; it began to bother me because he wouldn't admit it. I had turned a different being in the eyes of the other students and weak in my own head. Strangely, because old people I had befriended in the past would and did, he never initiated a conversation around family, his nor mine, no reference to why both of us were living away from the family. We lived and walked together with this unease between us. I have a thing for older folks, have befriended and loved them more often because I desired to be "possessed"; my thinking is that they disregard your follies and go further to be more responsible to the relationship, which is something you have to equally share with someone of your age. But there was something

amiss in the case of Mr. Ralph; I regarded him but never felt possessed, and all the time I was too embarrassed to excuse myself from such vanity. When he faced me to talk the shyness would drive me to pulling buttons on the shirt, staring the ground, or biting the lips. All this entailed his sudden bursts into talks that rotated—as though he had been teaching a syllabus and was now irritated by my disinterestedness to digest it—around history, socialism, and his failure to pass the military screening as a young man, Who made such a requirement? Who told him the feet are better in war than the brain?

One such night, my fifth month in the school, we visited the house of a teacher at the school whose wife suffered from a severe flu—forty minutes of prayers and chatter—and returning to the house he said he had to see a man in a neighborhood about an hour away. Although the hectic day along with the now somnolent heat of the night had almost numbed my body, I agreed to come along. As usual we went in silence, he in front with tall and long quick steps, I made great effort to keep pace. We passed a narrow path behind a brothel and reached a junction, a fish market on the right and a beerhouse next to a church to the left, he took the road cutting through rows of gated compounds towards the train tracks and began trudging. A party was happening in front of one of the houses. We climbed the hill that could be seen from the school, crossed the train tracks, descended and crossed the dirt road leading to the railway station. We had come to the front of the graveyard outskirt of the neighborhood; there, some walk from a small church by a telecommunication mast on a land to the right, he headed for a narrow path that would take us through the graves, and I followed behind fatigued and parched in the throat. I removed my hoodie because my head had become moist from the intense heat. It was full moon and the night stood in silence as though waiting to be cracked. The nighttime insects blinked in the tall grass of the graveyard. The luminescent power of the moonlight highlighted the figures of houses and curves of the neighborhood in the distance. The graves filled out all sides; on our right it extended to the edge of an enormous drain by the fence of a nearby textile factory. The graves sat in different colors and sizes, some unmarked and others outgrown by grass—gazing over the roll of tombstones straight from its entrance to the end they seemed like tiny stiff-necked heads. Like Lot's wife, unanimated by a god who despised curiosity. We continued along the path to where a long grave could be seen near a vast hole and he stopped moving. Look at this grave, he said, his face fixed on the subject. Look at this grave, this road we are on used to shortcut here to our destination but look how the graves have taken over it. This is why we are taking the pain of walking down. Look there, he said, now pointing to the edge of the drain beside the fence of the textile factory some meters from us. In the eighties, he continued, in fact, so recent in the mid nineties, all that area was empty, no single grave. Now the whole place is one expansive estate of graves, have you noticed the continued proliferation of graveyards around here of late? I nodded, a quick count in the head I realized there were seven large graveyards distributed around the settlement. He turned back to the road and I followed, dry sticks cracking beneath our shoes. At the end of the graveyard, we descended onto a marsh, warily stepping on laid stones to avoid falling off into the dirt, walked so for minutes, and climbed out onto a sandy platform linking to a path. We walked along the path to the beginning of a street and eight blocks further, he stopped in front of a blue low building with tattered curtain on its small gate. He turned to me, It's here, let's go in. Inside, the room was tiny and stuffy with a smell of garlic, ginger, and mosquito coil. We sat, legs folded, before a man naked at the top and covered waist down with a white-red-striped shawl, a big mirror stood by his side. He raised a song, sang it meditatively, stopped and sprayed a group of coins onto the floor. A strong smell hung in the room now. He looked up to face Mr. Ralph as a way of saying what can I do for you. We exchanged a

glance before he stammered, Sir, I came to know my fate. Tell me when death shall come for me and how. Silence, the man began another incantation that gave me time to study the room and grapple with what was happening. He stopped, stared at Mr. Ralph and said, You have many years more on earth, many. Don't be afraid, why worry when you have such a long time here? When it's time, death will come for you while you sleep in bed to say 'rest in peace'. Mr. Ralph turned to me and asked if I wanted anything from the soothsayer, Yes, Would I pass my examination?

Two weeks after this visit, before the commencement of the examination, I was at the plastic table in the hall to the kitchen solving problems from the previous year's mathematics question paper when I heard the knock on the door. It was fifteen past six in the morning on a Wednesday, a detail I remember because I had glanced at the clock on the wall behind me. Three hours before he had left the house for the chapel, carrying a flashlight, a bottle of olive oil and his worn out Matthew Henry's Commentary bible. It was the second week going of a three-week dry fasting program with a group at the chapel; they held prayers at two a.m. every day. I opened the door and found a woman on the veranda—I recognized her from her stall in the market—and she asked me to come along with her because "something had happened to Mr. Ralph". I went back in, donned a coat, carried a flashlight and joined her. Nine blocks from the house, on the edge of a drain in front of a knitter's shop, Mr. Ralph lay face down with blood and dew on the body, and the bible, bottle of olive oil and flashlight strewn on the blackish scum in the stagnant water in the drain.

I should also say that, although the soothsayer had predicted otherwise I failed the examination and had to transfer to a new school the following year.

So, two days after I stumbled across the Facebook post, I was at the house minutes before the death anniversary celebration commenced. It had been dry and blustery, the pig house troubled, by a whirlwind, was now scattered about in the dry pig shit. Weeds had grown around the house as sign that it had not been visited of late. Two woofers placed beneath a window frame on the veranda welcomed attendants with "When the Roll is Called Up Yonder", a photograph of Mr. Ralph on 4A paper pasted above the lintel of the front door. The scene had a quiet distress that was reminiscent of his funeral, although it had taken place on the school's playground. A mass of old and current students, some of whom I knew, had taken the street but I was overwhelmed by the many faces and entered the house without engaging any pleasantry. At the door, there was a lanky dark girl who ushered me in; she scented caramel. When I inquired she told me Lo Pamela was upstairs. I started up the stairs my feet struggling for strength, struggled the throaty voice of the girl at the door had recalled with absolute immediacy the voice of my ex. My ex was a woman of remarkable distinction: size, height, and her unique blend of Arab and black skin tones. But it was her voice that pulled me the first day we met. The first time I heard her speak, I felt a jerk in my veins, then a rush of warmth; the voice gave her a demanding yet tranquil authority. I am yet to know a voice as steady and powerful as hers; even when she cried from a pain, from a weakness, it never lost this combination of authority and calm. It never attracted pity, and this could be the reason why I thought she existed only to sympathize with my troubles. Her voice was devoid of meaninglessness and even when unclear, it possessed in its center an ambiguity that promised a "near-future" resolution. I am reluctant to forget her presence completely because prior to meeting her I wrestled with urges to speak but remained tongue-tied. After she arrived into my life she spoke me into existence. For the first time I felt free to 'say something'. Even as I now compose these notes I can hear her saying to me, '*Speak, Memory*'.

Of course, I still can't speak but having the urge to do so freely alive in me is enough. Without this, I'd not have had the confidence to return to that house, climbed the stairways. And since she was the first voice I'd hear in the immense silence that surrounded me, it's no weird feeling to be reminded of it right there in this house, because it, *this house*, too, was one enormous space of silence. Upstairs, I passed through the unlit floor, searching one corner after another and found Lo Pamela standing at the tiny windows in Mr. Ralph's dusty and empty room. She turned at the sound of my footsteps as if she had been waiting for someone to come in, stared at me till I couldn't contain the embarrassment any longer. You Pwaangulongii, she said, her large eyes, wet with tears, glittered under the full fluorescent tube on the wall. We embraced and although she was many years older I knew she had come to trust me as a mate. This confidence that displaced the age barrier, I am sure, came from Mr. Ralph: she couldn't understand why a teenager would be the only known friend of a lonely man of sixty-five.

We remained in an embrace but my eyes were on one of the windows, gazing the heads of the houses that sprawled from the backyard to as far as my sight could make sense as frames and bodies in the darkness. Music was playing downstairs, music, yells and the prayers. I tried to get her to talk about Mr. Ralph but she only tightened her embrace. It is worth noting that Lo Pamela had a penchant for going silent when asked anything regarding Mr. Ralph. Like him, she never discussed his family beyond identifying as a niece (and the obvious fact that they both worshipped together at the chapel). Those days, especially during my early visits to the house, aside from the brief exchanges they had during the weekend cleanings and monthly stocking up the kitchen she did for the house, they acted like strangers. She was elegant, confident and somewhat demanding at her shop or elsewhere when we stumbled across one another, however, she grew cold and distant the moment she entered the house, as if she were someone coming to prop up the life of an invalid. She would enter the house and move straight to the kitchen, open the rear door, take the washing bowls and dishes onto the washing space by the water tank in the backyard. She would return to the house, get to the unoccupied room and change into work clothes—a scarf, grey trousers torn on the left leg, a T-shirt that always pulled to reveal stretch marks on her lower back when she bent to wash, and a headphone reaching from an MP3 in the pocket. She mopped the floor, wiped the dust off the curtains. She cooked afterwards, delicately tidied the kitchen and backyard, and returned to the room. She would reemerge glowing on the skin but fatigued in the eyes, head off to the Mr. Ralph's room upstairs where a recorder ceaselessly played Highlife hits from the eighties, minutes passed, inaudible conversations, door banged, and then she would descend to the rear door, sometimes after a stop to bid me goodbye, and disappear through an alley from the backyard. Another seven days or more before we saw her again. This was her routine. Her work, this routine, seemed like a maid's but she denied it such a frame. Instead, an act that fascinates me now as I look back, she kept to the routine like a cast repeating a performance for which she sought more than perfection; as though she *dreamed* of transforming the series of chores into a system, heritage for someone yet to come. And, to be honest, that was what it truly was, a lady in dreamland (*dream* is used here only because nightmare does not happen in plot, I think). She, like Mr. Ralph and me, never knew how to exist in that house. There was a living thing, automatic and defining, in there that sought to categorize you. I could see or sense all these movements depending on where I was in the house, either seated at the plastic table on the other side of the kitchen hallway or on the floor of the second bedroom downstairs, or outside on the veranda with the manager of the coffin shop, an acquaintance from my previous school who played midfield for the football team.

We left Mr. Ralph's room to join the songs that had already begun. It was nearing nine p.m. Downstairs, I convinced Lo Pamela to give me a contact for someone in Mr. Ralph's past life. I will speak to someone to meet you, she whispered, hesitated, but you need to be cunning about it. I will inform this contact that you are a journalist writing a story about Mr. Ralph. She reached for my hand and squeezed. Otherwise nobody in his family will speak to you. I squeezed her hand in return. We stood in a corner of the kitchen watching a man in his thirties— according to Lo Pamela was a former senior prefect at the school—leading proceedings for the evening to a small crowd that the sitting room could accommodate. The photograph of Mr. Ralph, the very one beneath the Facebook post, was pasted on the wall across from us, a boy of delicate cheeks and pouty lips stood beside it. I couldn't take my eyes off it.

This last time being in this house restored the silence—such silence that offers photographs their permanent capacity for ambiguity or strength to never cease generating meanings—that always stood between him and me. He not only despised speech, he had mastered the technique of speaking through silence, a habit for which he was known amongst the students. For instance, he never talked at staff meetings. Instead he passed notes containing his thoughts on any subjects to the teachers and management, something that was further confirmed when he was replaced on the handball coaching team with a more outspoken teacher. During the morning where he was expected to address the students, he assigned the task to a teacher and stood waiting in silence. Somehow, all the students fathomed a way of understanding by studying the shape of the silence on Mr. Ralph's face. This silence extended to the class but with a slight difference. During his class hour when he would walk briskly into the room to teach Agric. Science, he taught using giant diagrams. These diagrams drawn upon large banners or white cardboard sheets were hung across the blackboard and he would pace the aisles giving short explanations. Other times, when using laboratory apparatuses, he enter the class, place the particular apparatus on a table in front of the seats and give an assignment to draw the image, label it, discuss its maintenance, and outline its functions. He never took questions from anyone in his classes, and when done with the characteristic short explanations he would turn to the blackboard and began writing notes for us to copy onto our exercise books. Sometimes, even though we had copies of the textbook he was speaking from, he insisted we copied the contents, tables, diagram and whatever calculation in the chapters into books. It dawns on me now as I relay this story that no one, if my memory has not failed me, ever showed any dismay for this system. Perhaps students were afraid of hurting his feeling or, in one of my mama would say, he had escaped the realm in which people contemplate whether or not to be disgusted by a person. This silence stood as one of the pillars of our relationship. The silence had a system and it was this system, if truth be told, that conditioned me to return to the house and fill in the many gaps it had created. No temperament for conversation. Unlike me, he had fluidity with people but consistently executed it in few words. Yes, he coached me a few times at his house; invited me along to the chapel a place that he had been ordained as a deacon, where, as I would notice, his silence would disappear for moments of intense sermons and endless prayers; shared meals with me and discussed Naguib Mahfouz who he considered the best writer ever, and who I would later come to accept as my own all-time favorite writer, but nothing had the fluent rhythm between us as like silence.

Once, standing by the curry plants that he had been pruning, he told me about the intermittent loneliness that he felt by way of arguing his case for his nightly wandering. When it comes, he said, I become so drowned into distance that separate like a tiny grain of sand. He wouldn't speak further. My old friends act this way; even baba was notorious for

this instantaneous break in the middle of a conversation. They give gestures as if about to reveal a thing and then abruptly pause to sink in silence. I describe this condition as a continual inability to escape *the* fiery silence. Like them, we the progenies constantly wrestle to imagine the best words for our situation. I couldn't fathom why Mr. Ralph and the old friends before him behaved so but now as I analyze these cities and buildings, their emergence and subsequent, irreversible decline, things start to cohere and I start to comprehend the functionalities of this "extended silence", and have arrived at on two hypotheses. The first, which is readily palpable, has to do with *a* shame instituted by culture. It exists in the bodies of the people from the generation past, of baba and Mr. Ralph, men who are slices off a certain failure, and the relentless ambition has been for this shame to be passed on to the progenies. It is a taboo to reveal so much insecurity to a child, reveal a bit and evoke silence or use real or invented exploits from your past to substitute the intended speech. Deploy it as a strategy to complete the passage onto the "beyond", past the dry millet fields reaching the horizon and possibly further. The second hypothesis lies, first, in the shock of realizing one's loneliness, a horrific epiphany that could happen at any time and place. This second lies in the mental unearthing of the gradual loss of the grasp that kept close the skin of the beloveds of their lives through the years.

I would imagine Mr. Ralph's life and his loneliness this way. You—Mr. Ralph—were not lonely in the beginning. You wandered the fields in the company of village lads with slingshots and sacks in hands, hunting birds, burning farms and purloining grains; your naughty but hearty laughter burst the plains and its dry grass until they lit with fire and left clouds of smoke that served as miracles of the tenor down his heart. In college, weekends, wiping joints together with comrades, the games and the girls, the gatecrashing and stolen sex; in the railway service, you had two friends employed at the same with you, one blind in the left eye but could see the end of the world. He immigrated to a city in Europe and left you with the other man. The last time he reached you it was to say he had begun working in a mayor's office and had married his niece, and the man he had left you with would convince you to join the railway workers' union; you did but sixteen months later an old friend took him to become secretary-general of a clandestine new communist party. A coup d'état had just happened and, according to the new guys, the elections were a year away. The village lads and college mates, who now were men, whatever that was, still stayed in touch but over beer you now only could conversed about stock markets, the revolution in Iran, the Congo, and the Soviet Union. Their kids had grown and were heading off to boarding schools while ceaseless fights surged between them and their spouses. Regardless the nervousness of this time, let's say late seventies through the nineties, the parks still had flowers that had petals, the swings hadn't slackened, rollercoasters hadn't broken down, the 'Pepsi gardens' in them glowed with feet of children at day and caresses of lovers around barbecue fire at night; the breathtaking golf lawns of colonial mansions and hardwood floors of club houses shone like the face of God; the box office of the theater bustled midweek and weekend; the walls of the national archive and museum had no decay and rust; and the cafes still opened past nine p.m., where artists, writers, and other such poor but arrogant people agonized over words, HIV, jazz, Bob Dylan, communism, and meaningless revolutions. All these delightful things were made by the white colonialists but, once taken over by the new black elite, began to rot with abandon. Everything became a bore, one by one your buddies left and you never noticed it, since you were preoccupied with sorting out the loan from the microfinance until one day at home while you pruned a plant you tended like a bride for years it dawned on you that everyone was no more.

And it is this process of unearthing the past that peels off every fear. It was this process of recalling the past that gradually made Mr. Ralph saw himself metamorphosing from shame of that generation into the man I came to befriend. There is no other way to illustrate this point than through—howbeit hazy—an incident that occurred a certain evening. It had remain and has since become more than a gigantic image in my head. I had been invited to a prayer meeting at the chapel and was returning home along with Lo Pamela on my left side and Mr. Ralph right in front of me, on a sidewalk passing a row of stalls from the bus stop leading to the chapel. An oncoming Coca Cola retail truck lost control and trudged toward us, and people ran helter-skelter for safety. In nanoseconds, we were stuck in the traffic and scrambled for way amongst the bodies on all sides, when I noticed Mr. Ralph maneuver his way from in front of me till he found a spot behind me, leaving me completely exposed to whatever danger there was. The truck swerved only inches from me, barely missing me head-on. But its opened door this side smashed my shoulder with a force that knocked me backward into the bodies. I could hear voices and nothing more, Lo Pamela's amongst them. Back at home I regained consciousness around midnight and found her seated by my side. Later, she was upstairs; I heard them arguing in his room. Lo Pamela made a case on my behalf, told the man that it was wrong that he had used me as a shield against the truck. The argument continued until I heard him say to her, You are a whore. This was the first and only time I heard him raise his voice at any person. She hastened down the stairway, opened the door and ran into the night.

It is now as I read my ex's essay on the fall of his house and looking back that I realize the weight of what had happened all along. I am caught between disgust and pity for him.

II. The Journey and Route

I sat in the boat crossing the river with two women and a child, and the boat's owner, a man in his forties. In twenty minutes time we would reach the other side of the bank. A classmate's sister who provided me with accommodation in a hotel suburb of L had driven me to the river. A mile ride through a path filled with broken stones, past an illegal winery and a small chemical factory whose surrounding grass was drying from a chemical spray on one side and withered brown on the other, smelling like a pissoir. Rolling dry fields studded with trees on either side; giant vultures hovered over clouds of smoke in a bushfire overhead. The woman sitting next to me in the boat lifted a song in English, sang it before changing to a language I didn't understand. It had the same melody and maybe the same words. She had a moving lilt in the timbre of her voice. Her partner teased her in Pidgin English that she had switched to the language not to mispronounce an English word and be embarrassed by my presence. She insisted she did it just for that reason. I believed her. They argued. The intense sun drowned the coolness of the river; apart from dripping in the heat, my nostrils hurt from long hours of inhaling the hot dry air and catching whiffs of burning straws through the journey from Kaduna. Gazing over the river that went south along the boat and taking in the subtle restlessness that rumbled from the water waves whilst this argument about English grew louder, I recalled a story Mr. Ralph had once told me. I fought to restrain a laugh. It's a story I had come to doubt at each remembrance, either because I had grown wiser to doubt that it ever happened or because it had been exaggerated. The story went this way: He, Mr. Ralph, watched two men argue after attending a meeting about the founding of a new party in the mid nineties, which both men had also come for. You

speak impeccable English, how come you sound this foolish? One of the men asked his partner, they were at a table in the elegant bar of the hotel. Sir, no fault of mine, the other man said. My professors, he continued, gave me the whole of English language and seized my ability to think about hope. You know, my good man—he pushed his face closer to the first man and continued again, laughing between words—wisdom is found in hope, not in grammar. But nobody told us so, not even the education commissioner. He stopped speaking. According to Mr. Ralph, this second man's name was Sibanda (or something like that), a fat Zimbabwean renegade who despite his own obvious contradiction said he loved Jesus and communism with equal enthusiasm. So because, according to him, Jesus was the first communist and the Passover feast in the upper room was the inaugural committee for the "communist manifesto". Sir—the renegade continued his reply—it's none of my fault that I speak such clean English and sound, in your words, foolish. English was the collateral we used to get employment, obtain titles for the lands, and marry women. In our time, wise people, as defined by your words, are wretched and poor and to escape such misery we learned the English language. This is how I arrived here. I drive a big jeep, just completed my third building, my daughter studies in Berlin for her first degree, her second should be in England, and sometimes next year, once I open my factory, I am taking a new wife. My good man, he said, after taking another drag from the cigar, do you think I'd have amassed all these privileges with wisdom? Excuse me, man; I don't admire men of your kind. I cannot tell the veracity of this tale. In any case, as I now recall it, it's a story that remarkably stands as a fitting commentary of the national anti-intellectualism that has since entrenched its power.

At the other side of the bank, I bade farewell to the women and hired a motorcycle rider. A long ride on dirt roads through fields of palm trees and bamboo up to a junction at a rocky slope, where an improvised wooden sentry sat adjacent to a group of girls sledgehammering rocks for gravel, then turned right and slithered down onto a new road, passing truckloads of sorghum, maize, and millet coming our way from the nearby fields. It was harvest season. I had not imagined the journey would be tedious and long since my classmate who provided my accommodation argued crossing the river was a shortcut to the village. I arrived at the village around four p.m., three hours from the riverbank, my backpack heavy with bedding, but I would not reach my destination, a mission house, until dusk. On a path, we reached a trench planked over for a bridge; my rider wouldn't go any further, arguing that I had paid him too little. I came down, waited until two men on a motorcycle arrived and gave directions on the route. I was closer than I thought. Walking past the flocks of hens swarming back to the compound of houses, the boys pulling goats by their ropes toward trees in front of houses, the dinner smoke from fires over kitchens, the wails and calls, and the clicking bell of bicycles making for home from long days at the fields instantaneously brought back memories of the years I had spent with my family in our village where, under military regime, elders would gather after the day's work under the shades of trees in front of baba's home and chatter over beer. Then, we, the children, depending on the season of the year chased home cattle on the fields or caught crickets in the nearby bush or played soccer in the primary school open ground, trapping pigeons. I had come to a long footpath to the mission station, out of the stretch of open ground that was about three hectares big. The path was ridden with yellow and brown leaves blown from roadside cassava beds and particles from trees strewn across tiny dry sticks. My throat parched from the long trek under the sun felt like it would crack if I opened it to yawn. From a distance I could discern the image of a man standing in the middle of cashew trees west of a house I assumed was the mission house. I walked closer and could see on a stretch

out from the house a small church on an elevated ground. He was in a black long-sleeved cotton shirt folded up on the elbow, white hat, a black anti-dust mask and a black tracksuit. He had a rake of wooden handle leaning against him. At a distance past a borehole behind him, a woman with a bucket of water pulled a goat away. It was the month of October and there was a lot of dry grass on the ground. Once I was close enough to him, I could see a small gallon of petrol sitting by his left foot, on it a lighter. I introduced myself. He said he was the man I was seeking. We had been speaking on the phone through the journey until I had a low battery. The man was big and tall but hunched with age. After gulping two cups of water at the borehole, we walked through a passage of thick lemon grass to the top of the nearly hill where the church bell stood, and stood there looking down at the palm grove that ran from the foot of the hill onto the threshold of the grazing fields away; we could see cattlemen tendering their animals, starting campfires in front of their tents. A teenage boy wearing a traditional hat and in what seemed like a yellow jersey rode a bicycle with a large gourd tied on its back up the road that separated the grove and the grazing field. The evening breeze had come and it blew around us soothingly as if aware of our anguish. I asked him if I could smoke and he nodded, I asked him what laid under the trunk of a felled tree down the hill, one of the station's sheep, and he told me it had died from some strange illness days ago. I wondered why he had brought me here but I remained quiet. The view before us, similar to what I had seen on the road here—vast fields of trees and plains and small hills of clean pebbles and rocks and variety of birds—was breathtakingly reminiscent of magnificent long shots I had seen in films set in the Middle East, so that gazing at it seemed like I was an alien in a foreign land, and the more I looked the more I discovered the treasures suspended into obscurity by my own urban anxieties. We have reduced everything to a place far below ourselves; no wonder beauty is no longer here, no longer with us.

The family was originally from an agrarian village on the outskirt of Makurdi, a town in the then northern region of Nigeria. They moved west to Ibadan between 1961 and 1963 (not enough information to specify) for the convenience of their mother who had to complete a teacher-training program. It was a working class family of seven, the father, who was an employee in the railway service, two daughters, and three sons (of which the eldest had joined the military two years before the family moved). Three or so years after the family settled—with the father shuttling between both cities in the north and west to keep his family and job—Mr. Raphael G., the third son and fourth child was admitted to the university to study for a mathematics degree after a brief stint at a local steel factory. It was while there that he would develop sentiment for a girl who, though living with her family in Lagos, hailed from the East, from the village of U in the present-day east of Nigeria. Nigeria, in this period, had recently become independent from British rule and had adopted a confederation of three regions comprising the North, East, and South. Once all the narratives are tidied up together, it could be said that the moment at the university and subsequent love affair with this girl created the condition of the man who would, decades later, become my principal.

He was the favorite child to our parents, the man said, and no one could explain why, but that is what it was. He stopped speaking. It was over dinner the evening I arrived, we sat on a bench in front of his small office at the mission house. The small old-fashioned building, pale white and old—a mud house built as if with bricks and given a modern structure by the zinc, iron doors and windows, and the white paint, so that one had to be close enough to detect its crude intrinsic properties of hardened clay and hay—was built in the '80s by an evangelical church expanding its outreach into the hinterlands of north to central Nigeria. My host would tell me, as a way of showing the progress that had been made thus far, that the population of the village was predominantly Muslim and traditionalist in the '60s but Christians currently constituted about forty percent of its total. The house had an office space for the administrator, whose responsibility entailed overseeing a church, a clinic that was now defunct, and a primary school of two blocks of classrooms an hour away, and a storeroom, which had to be converted to a visitor's room now and then, and two other rooms. Moments after my arrival that day, he showed me into the storeroom that had been fumigated, cleaned and furnished with a bed placed on the cement floor in the center of the room for my use and left to attend the church midweek communion service. By the time he returned I had washed and rested when he returned and invited me to dinner. I would later discover that he had lived in one of two rooms on the other side of the house; next door to the woman I had seen pulling goats from the side of the borehole earlier.

My father, he told me, spent more on him than any of us, and this is why it's easy to say he was the most educated of us all, having attended the best schools. Somehow we never felt jealous—well, I never felt it—because he found his way to become the center of attraction in our family. Suffice to say that he was strong-willed and unusually rebellious. None of us could ever look our father in the eye except him, and he did so all the time. Once, because of an argument between him and our mother during a term break, he set fire to our father's new car, a second hand our father had purchased. Luckily the fire was put out on time. Though it's now difficult for one to admit, he was an intelligent man, so intelligent that as a boy when our mother was training in Ibadan he read all her textbooks and could sufficiently discuss the courses. Having said this, he paused and washed his hands in a water bowl on the bench near him where we sat sharing a meal of boiled yam and eggplant sauce. Then he belched and fanned himself with the shirt he had just pulled off. Let me put it this way, he said, turning to increase the oil lamp between us, he was sociable, so excessively

outgoing that it bothered our parents, but his love for animals, knowledge and farming became a source of confidence they'd later get. Behind the house in Ibadan, he had a farm almost the size he had owned back in Makurdi, nearly the size of a football stadium.

He stopped speaking, stared; and it was now obvious to me, seeing how he struggled with his breathing, that he had a sickness that was at an advanced stage. The man thought it was important for him to build a portrait of Mr. Raphael as a child and perhaps as a teenager before taking me further into any details.

Their father, alongside his job at the railway service, cultivated yams and soybeans on large-scale and owned a cashew field to build a family, to "give hope" to the children. We come from a family of professionals, he told me. Our grandfather was a scientist, a blacksmith, his wife a potter. Our parents had access to the world even though they lived among predominantly peasant families. We were not rich, the man emphasized, but our parents had education and earned a livable amount for the household. It was the '50s and 60's and we were reading French and English books at home, ranging from philosophy to literature to theology. We had a relative who had been educated in England and Italy, and was working in the department of education, which, if I must tell you, was a real achievement to families and villages back then. Once he said this, a call came on his phone and he stood away to receive it.

The man returned from the call and wanted us to continue the conversation the following day because he had to attend series of meetings in the morning, which included a PTA meeting at the primary school that had been shut down by striking teachers. I inquired about Mr. Raphael G.'s claim that he once failed to pass screening into the military, and the man told me he had no memory of the incident. This memory or lack of it was pivotal to this trip, in the first place. After a brief silence he said, You know, he never was the kind of man who would want to go to the military. I never knew him as such a man. Maybe, if you asked about grains and crops, goats and rabbits, I'd say yea, but not military. I don't have any memory of that. I am an old man already; maybe he did and failed actually. He stood up to leave. At the entrance to the house, he stopped and turned to face me—a move that offered his physical resemblance to Mr. Raphael G., the body and oval face. My memory, he said, is gone, there's nothing of this world in it any longer. That's why I was reluctant to meet with you all the while. But after the third month I thought to myself that if I failed to meet you or anyone outside the family interested in his story it would be lost forever; age is not on my side, and, worse, the *disease* won't let me even delay telling the story. Every night I meet Jesus, and I don't mean in the dreams because I've stopped having them. It's in my room or in the office I showed you earlier. Across the table, we converse about the souls of these villagers who increase sinning the more each time we show them the ways of the Lord. Or we talk about coffee. Little boy, I have no memory anymore. There's nothing worth keeping by the way. I'm now telling you this story to unburden myself and, more importantly, to help your generation. I'm a religious, so it's partly also my religious obligation to bring you to the shame of our generation. Maybe, he failed the screening actually. Or it could be that he had passed and refused to accept the training, my brother showed cowardice in his life at some points. Or, simply, he lied to you. He was a pathological liar. No, the appropriate word should be serial liar. He turned and entered the house, coughing out phlegm. We parted for the night.

I had planned to spend three days in the village but it was end of the week already and the man found it difficult to communicate any more to me. In the beginning, it had seemed like his clustered schedule hampered the progress of 'the investigation'. However I'd come to notice that he deliberately devised escapes from discussing anything with me. The

one night, unannounced, he opened the door of the storeroom with a spare key and threatened to have me locked me up by the police if I didn't let out the reason why I sought to know the story of Mr. Raphael G. Looking back, it's now easy to see that he had done this not because he felt a threat to himself but because he truly wanted to keep the story as secret. However, I kept to the script that Lo Pamela and I had rehearsed, and insisted that I was a journalist writing a feature about the school. The following morning, after he had gone out, the woman I saw at the borehole told me that Lo Pamela was the man's daughter and also that the man had a disease that was chronic. It was by side conversations I had with the man himself, the woman, and clandestinely with a church member who frequented the house that I came to figure out that the family had collapsed somehow and strongly believe that Mr. Raphael G. was the sole reason behind the destruction. The story went this way: He had begun failing at the university. He was intensely in love with the girl. It wasn't long when news reached the family she was pregnant and when this happened he refused to further his education and instead left the west and returned to Makurdi where he would begin "significant farming". It seemed that this time marked the point he realized what he had actually wanted and was going for with rigor, the man told me. Well, he said, our father felt betrayed and stood against it because he demonstrated the best academic potential of all the children. He had opportunity, because it was the time when parents hoped to insure the future of their children with an education. But our brother had a strong head; he returned to our hometown and using a loan he obtained from our mother, started a farm, growing yams and cassava alongside a piggery and poultry farming. It was between '64 and '66, he said. Already the atmosphere in the country had grown gloomy and unpredictably tense, the civil war was months away, and for this reason the entire family moved back from Ibadan to a house in Makurdi so as to be close to their hometown. More so, pogroms in the north against Ibos from eastern Nigeria had surged and the girl who was pregnant with his child had been summoned alongside her family to retreat to the east. That was months before the war broke out. I didn't return with the family immediately—the man told me one morning down the hill as we collected woods for the kitchen—but corresponding with the family I knew that he was devastated beyond repair when the family of his lover forbade her from joining him or even letting him visit her. The family believed that he was a northerner and obviously complicit in the pogroms against the Ibos. They had moved to their hometown, in the village of U in the east.

He had no correspondence with the lover for as long as the war lasted, between 1967-70. The family had entered a turbulent time with the war; its first son was fighting on the side of the federal forces against the Biafran army while at the same time the third son, Mr. Ralph, strived to locate his pregnant Biafran lover. He stopped working in the farms, and on several occasions he paid to be smuggled into Biafra in search of the lover's family. After the war ended, he sold all his birds, pigs and every other crop from the farm, told his family he was leaving to find her. I remember, the man told me, it was a Saturday afternoon that I drove him to the train station where he had a ticket for Port Harcourt. At the station, strangely, he did not appear to be heartbroken. In fact, said the man, we never stopped sharing jokes up to the time he boarded his train. He even forgot his luggage in the car boot. Till this day, I can still see the dress on his body that Saturday—an armless red sweater on an ash-color pants and leather slippers. It was as if he was visiting a friend in the next street. For seven years we heard nothing from him, the man would tell me one afternoon in his office. Our brother, he said, I mean the soldier, had lost an eye during the war and was now living in a house close to the rest of the family. I was married and living in Jos at the time. Our parents, like the prodigal son's father, stayed at the door waiting to hear something

about him. I can't completely say that our mother passed on due to this loss but she loved him immensely. She loved him, and perhaps it was this assurance of the love that everybody had for him that encouraged his foolishness. He was aware of this love, knew that whatever he did could never diminish it. True, he was right but he was also mistaken to have been foolish for too long.

The man's language was now strong and unsettled me. I asked if he wanted water or coffee, he nodded. I ran out of the office to relay it to the woman in the other room, waited by her door until the coffee was ready and returned with her. We brought him the coffee, he sipped and he suggested we continued the conversation some other time. It was the beginning of my second week in the house; except for conversing with him, the woman and the church member, I was alone all and usually walked the village to kill time. To be honest, I had begun to have serious doubts about the subject of my curiosity. I wandered the village, struggling to patch details of Mr. Ralph.

I was seated on a rock on the hill taking a call from a classmate who phoned to update me on events back in school when he came and asked that we take a walk to a field owned by the mission house. On the way, he told he was retiring from the post at the mission house at month's end; and that the church council was planning a ceremony in his honor. He didn't plan to leave the village, he emphasized. It will be my seventy-fifth birthday as well. We came down the hill, took a path through the grove and emerged out on a square with a cluster of huts a short distance away. We walked across the plain sandy square towards the huts; the sun that had been harsh all day had become calm. The nearby trees flapped with the wind. Boys played soccer in the square. Further down, in a compound, a group of women pounding millet straws in mortar sang out their heart. They waved at us in greeting. We reached a compound house, a brick house next to a deteriorated hut with dangling wooden doors this side. Laundry dried on a stretch of woods in the eerie compound. He pulled the door open and gestured for me to go in. I did, pulled my hoodie backward to take in through the dinginess. I found the room empty but for sixteen rocks of different sizes on the ground, with a wooden stool balanced on one of them. The sun had been down for a while but returned and the man wedged the door open wide, a blade of sunray entering the room. He made to join me in the hut when the door closed again, wedging the door fully and flooding the room with light. He told me to observe the room and I did. I cannot now recall precisely my feeling in that room but I remember staring at the stones and trying to make sense of any details of Mr. Ralph on them. The man closed the door, then we walked out of the compound and took a road behind heading into the field that belonged to the mission house. The sun was setting, a yellow ball surrounded by splattering rays in the distant sky. It was horrific walking behind him. Gradually it prompted in me passing drew of my image of walking with Mr. Raphael G. during those nights. The bulkiness and their striking physical semblance, particularly from the back, made it as though it was the ghost of the dead man I was following.

Piles of timbers sat on a platform above one entry point to the field. Once we passed them, on a path through spreading cashew trees, I could see charred remains of garments at the foot of a shrub in a nearby dry land. This prompted in me another passing burnt image of a petrol truck that had fallen by the wayside here and spilled into a groundnut field, leaving the spilled earth like a mash of chocolate, the groundnut flowers drenched in petrol and turning grey. We walked more feet into the field. We found a group of harvesters, some of them members of the church I recognized, at the close of the day's work in the field. A large field of maize and millet that had been let to ripen to crisp, but they had been sickled down for easy harvesting. The harvesters were mostly aged women, were in two groups, winnowers and threshers. A plot of soybean stood nearby on a stretch of the field. When we arrived the soybean portion of the field, the man stopped and began picking strayed beans from the dry pods that had burst open in the intense sun and heat. Apart from little girls gleaning on the nearby stretch of millet and the calves roaming in front of a stack of straws on an open ground near them, we were alone this part of the field. It wasn't quite long before the workers noticed our presence and cried greetings at us. He waved at them, bless you, God bless you. I bent to join him picking the beans but he stopped me, insisting he had taken me along to see what estranged Mr. Raphael G. from the family. We moved from the soybean farm and descended onto a passage, passed two giant water pumping machines under irrigation canals that were being readied for the oncoming farming season and came to an elevated craggy ground on which lay a rock. He walked round to the other side of the rock so that we put the field behind us and looked over stones that gathered from below the rock up to an abandoned quarry meters away, he leaned his back against the rock. There was an old burnt spot before us, right at the foot of the rock. A pair of baby's rubber shoes half melted in the ash increased the sense of "futile effort" in my head—I couldn't tell why. A group of girls, some of them with garlands on their heads, performed a dance in a circle under young trees. Apparently children of the workers waiting for their owners to pack up for home. When we waved greeting to them, they flustered and ran into the bush. After emphasizing the flaws of his own memory one more time, the man began to tell the story of his brother. Dusk had begun gathering, slouching toward the bleak rock side.

I am a religious man, he said, which means my way of survival comes only through faith. Perhaps that's why I don't feel bitter about all the events that make my memory. Unlike many men of my age I have an option, this faith, and I must tell you right on that therein is the danger, because people doubt your suffering. It takes forever to convince people that though you exist within the perimeter of faith, there's yet a significant portion of you like the soybean farm we've just seen that can burst open from faithlessness and waste. I have faith; I am not bitter but it doesn't mean I don't suffer. I love the life I lead and feel

terribly anxious about my retirement; however, it's almost a decade since I stopped having the urgency that faith genuinely requires; perhaps, because I don't remember how I arrived at this phase of my life.

He began telling me as if he had crammed the words and feared mixing them up, and for the first time since my arrival I could perceive a similarity he shared with Mr. Raphael G., apart from their physique. I tried to keep my eyes on the shirt he wore to directly avoid his face, a thick shirt embroidered with thorny flowers and plants that from a distance looked like a garden of thistles. Then, though shy and overwhelmed before this stranger, I was ready to decipher the history behind why Mr. Ralph lacked the means of telling his life. Perhaps the true reason I had taken to digging through this dusty sequence of a past had to do with my own earnest longing to lift an unspeakable burden off myself, to achieve a momentum through which I could build a narrative suitable enough to bear the shame and folly in my own family's history and possibly locate within it the source of the destruction that I recently became aware of.

In the month of July 1977, the man continued, two weeks after I moved to this village as a missionary, I received word that my brother had gone back to the family in Makurdi. Seven years had passed since this new appearance. This was my second station of serving the Lord and, on several occasions, I fought against being transferred from here because of what happened here with my brother. At times it comes across as if I am stuck here to atone for the shame. Perhaps it is so. He, my brother, upon his return, had narrated the ordeal of locating his wife, as he had then begun referring to her, and her family. He had been to her village, to the address the family lived in Lagos, traced her lineage through towns and settlements of her extended family and according to him the further he went the more it dawned on him that a war had actually taken place, that so much desolation could be wrought in three years. I found bones, bombarded settlements, and ruins everywhere, he once told our family. Those seven years he traveled through ghost towns, across trenches, and over rivers, and each time he made inquiry he only found silence in the empty stares at the refugee camps and deserted cathedrals. He had gone with a photograph of her, taken before the pregnancy, and as he showed people he imagined the changes that must had occurred on her body through the nine or so months of the pregnancy and the years afterwards. He found neither a trace nor footstep because when he eventually got to the village of U six months after that he left home, he found that the houses were rubble and covered by rot and tall grass. Upon his return to Makurdi, father who had an undying emphasis on education, talked him back to school. Initially he was aggressive and objected to the offer, possibly because he felt guilt about our mother's death. Our father, now retired, sold his car and demanded he leave for school at once. He traveled further north, to the Kaduna Polytechnic and got a diploma in agriculture, and in '81 when he returned home one more time he said he couldn't live anywhere around the family any longer. Said that he saw flying men in his sleep. Well, there was not even a family anymore. I was away, and my sisters had married and lived in distance from each other. What remained of our family there were our father and veteran brother with his two boys from a failed marriage. He had gone blind in one eye in the war. They both started living together in the same house. My father moved in with him after he sold the family house. This was the period I had to reach out and invite Raphael to join me in this village. After a series of correspondence he agreed to come. You see, I lived in the hut you have just seen, the one with the stones, and my superior, an Irish woman, the kindest missionary I have worked with, lived in the brick house opposite. The mission house had been built and strictly for an official purpose. The brick house has been renovated many times since but the hut has remained the same,

because when she returned home to the Great Britain in the early nineties to get proper treatment for a disease that was shrinking her body, I moved into it. Raphael eventually arrived here in 1982, and the Irish woman agreed to let him have a room in the house to live. Then many negotiations took place with the chief of the village to release the land on which he could farm. The land he was given was the very one we are standing on, right from the fields where the timbers are all the way up to the orange plantation over there. The land was a forest back then but my brother had the head for sorting out things.

Before the farming season arrived, he said, the trees had been felled, the soil got leveled where it had gullies and curves, and was sprayed with agro-chemical several times. He made a motorway into the land, channeled water from the stream a mile away, and somewhere on it he had a small building erected. The first year, we grew yam and corn, and made enough profit for him to begin rearing goats and rams. The village was conducive, labor for the field was cheap and easy to come by. When it was the next farming season, my brother said he wanted to grow wheat but we made him realize that it the environment was not suitable. The village elders, with whom he had become friends, also cautioned him against growing such a crop. He became upset and argued that we undermined the knowledge he had "painstakingly acquired from the polytechnic". We didn't stand his way. We understood that his brother had fought on the side of the federal forces against the army defending his lover and such things are easy to empathize with, which was why I focused on my primary job in this village. He went ahead and planted wheat. It was a large investment, labor, seeds, chemicals and time, and turned out to be a colossal loss in the end; the field stood vastly bald. Strangely, he was still after the disaster determined and concentrated the energy on rearing the animals. My brother became a recluse, never stepped his feet into the mission house or the church. The disappointment from the wheat was real but he overplayed it. To him, though he never uttered it, there was nothing as hurtful as seeing illiterate villagers demonstrate better judgment than him, an educated man. And that was what he had felt all along with our family; he was more read than any of us and thought he had deeper insight and foresight. Then realizing this gross mistake at each stage in his life tormented him beyond words.

In the months that followed, he spent more time at the small farmhouse than at the brick house in the village. The farmhouse had been brought down. Apart from volunteering at the community college on the request of the Irish woman, where he taught English language and Biology to the students, he never left the field, and when he did, it was to hang out with some of his workers in the local beerhouse. Of course, he was my brother; I couldn't let him die of misery. During the evening I would visit him in the field if I had no other commitment. Sometimes I even canceled meetings. He hadn't lost his sense of humor. One evening, I had gone to the field and found him behind the house reworking his pigeon coops. There was magazine opened on a chair beside him. I reached for it and looked at the page where there was an advert for an umbrella that cost at some ridiculous price. I asked him if he had seen the price of the umbrella, he nodded, laughed and said mockingly, A mere umbrella costs so much money? Come on, does it also cover shame? He possessed the energy to evoke sense in the most bizarre way. On a portion of the land, he had begun

growing a cabbage field. He told me that he was testing his irrigation technique. Given the lush and healthy plants before us, I told him he had succeeded. During our many walks across the fields together, we could never talk about our past lives but he would say how much he wished our mother was still alive. This silence towards our past was induced by fear, the fear of rooting out what we held against ourselves from childhood up to when life separated us. I would be assisting him with a task or we would stroll through the bush, the palm groves, the rocks, caught birds and hunted games together. I expected him to apologize but he never uttered a word and behaved as though he was free of guilt. In any case, he was obsessed with his business, especially the pigeons and the coops. He began a habit of standing in the yard and gazing at the birds with curious expression for hours. Soon, he hung on his door a photo of two pigeons facing one another, so that the first thing one see entering the house were two eyes of birds anxiously looking out. I recall always being stopped at the door by the lingering intensity of these eyes, as though the birds were teaching how to know the world by waiting, gazing in amazement.

He stopped speaking. The voices of the workers now leaving the farm petered out. The evening breeze had come; it blew about us like a group of witnesses.

You see, he began speaking again as a smile emerged across his wrinkled face, my faith is my promissory note. Like suicide, to kill one has to begin to question the meaning of fear. Fear is faith on the flipside. Once you lose fear you can do anything, put a knife to your veins, plough down people with a car. Listen, here I am a man of faith. In my trade healing souls is the center of engagement and this is why I was utterly unhappy that I never knew the moment my brother lost his sense of fear. Perhaps he never had it at all. My brother, Raphael, sang in the church choir, he loved The Beatles and The Rolling Stones, he engaged himself in activities that displace fear and reinforce faith.

Our brother, the veteran, had come to visit us in this village during the Easter of 1984 and they had an argument that would be the straw to break the camel's back. Ah... Our brother's war experience had completely overwhelmed his entire life. He constantly referred to the war the way you exhibit a rich CV, always navigated a way to display a piece of his war-front experience. The longer I heard him, the more clear that he had lost confidence in his other credentials, had nothing on which to build his ego except the mortars and artilleries he shelled to liquidate the "bodies of the enemies." So while he was visiting, we would gather in the night and talk about things, the trivial, the country, our father, and ourselves. You know, things like that. But he would recede into his memory and, like a man struggling to make an impression during a job interview, begin to dole out one by one his exploits at the war front. We were two hundred soldiers at a time and got ambushed. Nine of us survived. I was one of them. Ask the Biafrans about me. I kicked ass, he would say and pull off his shirt to show scars from the shrapnel. One such occasion, at the fireplace in the farmhouse, which by the way was only a short distance walk from the village, while he talked about the exploits, my brother, Raphael, accused him of having schemed to invade his lover's village and have her and the family killed. A brawl broke out. I ran to stand in between them but how could I withstand the strength of a scarred veteran and fury of a miserably heartbroken lover? How? For weeks, they didn't speak to each other. We became a spectacle to the villagers. My employers queried me but the Irish woman always intervened on my behalf.

One Sunday after service, word spread that a dead body had been found on the rock beyond the field. That was here on this same rock on which we are standing. It was the beginning of rainy season. The congregation gathered there and stared in disbelief at the butchered body of our brother lying beside a bloody machete. He had tricked all of us into

believing that the brawl between them was over when he started inviting our brother to assist him with one task or the other in the field. The morning of the atrocity, I overhead them talk about felling a tree since our brother was to return to Makurdi the following day. His two sons had sent words that our father's health was deteriorating. They departed for the farm an hour before I left the hut for the church. We took the body home and never found the killer. He ran away without his luggage. This happened in 1984. Once the burial was over in Makurdi, our father told his kinsmen that his son had died of severe wounds sustained from falling off a rock. How could you involve the police against your own blood? he asked a day after the burial. One evening, he summoned us and laid his right hand on his bible and told us never to call the police on our brother. We kept the promise, concealing the truth about the murder until now. And he, the murderer, disappeared. Then people began sending words about him here and there. At a point I heard he had begun working in the railway service in Kano, another time news reached me that he left the railway and was in Kaduna to take up a position in a textile factory. About a decade ago, Lo Pamela joined a church and met him there; he had been working in a nearby secondary school.

It was dark when we left the rock side. I was in front walking back to the mission house. The old man began a song and heartily held it for a long time. All this was quiet except for his voice. He hastened his pace and I made sure I remained in front. He kept singing the same song. And my mind returned to the details he had told me and I realized the story was bigger than I had thought. Many gaps in the story of Mr. Raphael G. still stood. Was the cause of his own death some revenge by someone? If so by whom? I did not ask him these questions. Perhaps I will someday. We came by the grove and he stopped singing. We walked for a few minutes more until arrived at the hill near the church. We climbed the hill, the man coughing hard and spitting in the grass behind me. Right then I knew it was safe to travel back to Kaduna and hold on to what I had gathered and if possible live with it forever.

The Places Our Fathers Lived

And the angel thrust in his sickle into the earth, and gathered the vine of the earth, and cast ***it*** *into the great winepress of the wrath of God. And the winepress was trodden without the city, and blood came out of the winepress, even unto the horse bridles, by the space of a thousand* ***and*** *six hundred furlongs.*

—Revelation 14:19-20

About a decade ago, a lethal scourge—lethal, because it made a slit in our bodies—arose to become an affliction in the spine of K where I grew up. It announced its arrival little by little, with a stunning intensity and continued to stay so for years. This affliction caused, a multitude of horrifying things, including a sudden exodus of people from the streets, mostly the boys and girls my age. Remarkably, it did not carry with it the picture of a mass migration in any way. The public eye was somehow oblivious of its presence, you could say. One just observed that someone he was used to seeing had disappeared forever. This plague possessed a silence, became ubiquitous everywhere in K and shed abroad in our hearts an apprehensiveness that made the body shake. No person spoke about it, not even, strangely, among the men and boys at the game houses, betting centers, crack corners, and brothels, places where all things got discussed the loudest. There was no word for it, and, worse, people did not deem it for what it was. Despite all efforts made at the time I could not comprehend it until years later when someone recommended I read an essay titled *Letter From a Region in My Mind* by James Baldwin, the American writer. Not a person came—and I reckon could come—close to putting into words the heat I felt and saw in the area at the

time as James Baldwin in that piece, and once I studied the essay the meaning of that time did not only dawn on me with a frightening nearness but enabled me to realize the "size" of the helplessness that accompanied the *space* I was in during that affliction. Everyone in the neighborhood knew he had it (the affliction), was aware that this knowledge was not unique to him only but could not admit it. I had a roommate by the name Mohammed, way older than I was and a handyman at the brothel in which I also had a job, who for days on end woke up upset each night, his bed sheets wet from perspiration and his lamp flung from the headboard onto the floor. He would groan and shake as if his body were a factory of giant revving engines. He said he was having a fever, and before then, he had claimed to be suffering from heartbreak. But you need not be very perceptive to know his words were false, that in a way, just like the rest of us, he had no idea of what had besieged him. One day he packed his bags without telling us his roommates and left town.

Looking back, the occurrence did not appear like afflictions I had seen before in the past, and, I confess, before this particular one I had witnessed many of them though I was barely fifteen. It was certain, however, that the exodus from the neighborhood was inextricable from what Mo suffered and vice versa. In the years before, there had been floods and murderous riots that emptied neighborhood homes but families, although having vowed to never return, came back after weeks, months, sometimes years, with their hearts, bodies, and the luscious smiles. But what I saw this time around seemed like a finite exodus. Unlike the previous exoduses, and apart from not being precipitated by an obvious situation like a flood or riot, it had a profound system that I felt each moment I walked the neighborhood at dusk or dawn. It then began to unveil to me shapes of the world. I watched mates leave, armed with backpacks and hoodies, as if fleeing from a pestilence heading out to cross the *sea* into the wilderness, seeking Canaan. Cliques shrunken, parents went to the stores themselves since the grownup kids disappeared, and the notorious local halls turned a flaming silence. Grownups—gangsters who possessed the same destiny as us and in whom we found our only *hopes* seeing that their vulgarity had the resilience and "righteousness" that gave the neighborhood something to aspire to, began, one by one, to lose their head, falling, weeping helpless in the corners and getting removed to rehabs, to the shelters of pastors and imams. Some of them never returned, others did, but it was not long before they got removed again, this time, to the jails. The view that we had of our collective destiny, the boys mostly, since the "girls were meant" to attain their destinies in and through us, began to crumble. These gangsters were the preachers, prophets, employers, and fathers we had known all our lives. We thought they were indestructible. Thus utterly defeated many years before we could assume them was terrifying. This anxiety dragged me into any jobs or social activity through which I could escape being engulfed by the secret torrent of shame in the tiny corner I was hiding. I was reluctant to join the exodus, was afraid to dare it, and what seemed destined to render me helpless became, in the words of the scripture, "a light unto my path."

Even so, this is not all the baggage there was in that exodus. It was, of course, a two-sided brute. The first comprised the folks who, having witnessed what the "enemies" did to their fathers, left the neighborhood entirely, to jails, rehabs, graves, cities, and to make the long trek across the Sahara onto the boats of the Mediterranean. The second exodus could be established as intra-exodus; they remained in the neighborhood but *deserted* it, they no longer returned a smile or a salute in the alleys, no longer grabbed cups of tea in the cafes, refused the schools and menial jobs, and most notably there was a bewildering maturity to their bodies and attitudes even though they were within our ages, and younger in some cases. As if coated with a new skin they did not resemble their former selves. I was not unfamiliar

with change since my adolescent body was heightening all its sensibilities at the time. I witnessed these sensibilities delicately transform me in and out. But that was it. They remained the changes I could have, and after them came the entitlements from the parents, the immobility that having reached the cul-de-sac of their lives they passed on to us. One could not tell if the fear behind the exodus had to do with the fear of becoming their fathers. But whatever the fear was, looking back I believe it sprouted from the hard clay ground of the world where these fathers lived and where effectively they had become invalids. I had no cordial relationship with the members of the second exodus but seeing them leave shattered me inside. This was possible because the world to which they migrated could be entered straightaway at the doorsteps. With the curtains of the room I lived in waved aside I could see all of its frightening structures. And daily looking at the comrades in this second exodus reminded me of the frailties of my own body. The world from which I was coming, long resigned, had turned to despise *the* taste of power and the world which I was approaching, from the vision I was bearing at the time, was incapable of power—and early on I came to identify with it, still with it. This world in which I inhabited and as seen in the neighborhood was formless but not indistinct to both strangers and us. It was full of fear and shame and hovered over by a muteness, so that except for the tenor of salvation in the streets, brothels and other salvation which streamed onto our souls from the minarets of mosques and horn loudspeakers of cathedrals, promising us of a future joy in Heaven, we had no taste of what it means to look at the future or expect any *changes*. Our very presence in it continued strengthening the personality disorder that began emerging in the first exodus. And this disorder explained thus: before my flight from my family, my mama, Sunday school teacher and prayer warrior, assured me—and in a way assured herself, since I was destined to become what she is, *that muteness*—that the chariots of saving angels would turn up at the doors. By which she meant that the angels would achieve what they had failed to achieve with our fathers. This is where, I suspect, that the split of personality underlying the horror of the second exodus found a home—kneeling at the throne of Grace and waiting for the chariots of angels. Boys and girls my age who had prior to this time vehemently despised the Holy places began trouping into the madrasas, Islamiyya, boys' brigades, and bible schools. Overnight smaller churches, deliverance tents, and mosques, founded and overseen by former classmates—teenagers—grew and filled the corners. They had a new fierceness to their voices and eyes. Their voices, once fresh cocoa, became distant. Thick white saliva sat in the corners of their lips. Their bodies were emaciated from relentless fast and prayer, and those faces and bodies we used to see and desired to grab in the dark corners disappeared into burqas, beards, robes, and such garments. These suckling street preachers, some as young as eleven, saw visions and prophesied but not about themselves. They carried large megaphones at dawn with fingers tender like petals, saying, "the barn is full and Lord of the harvest is near his return," their words competing with the noise of the alleyways.

Despite this, the fathers moved about the neighborhood as if unaware. They remained impenetrable, that, one could not discern the symbol of their silence. They kept transistor radios by their sides all day, read the newspapers at the electronic shops down the streets, gathered at the beerhouses for soccer games, debated political parties, groaned about the "enemies" who used and dumped them without the pension, but it was impossible to tell if they were aware of the exodus, if they knew what had caused it. Had they slipped into that silence to easily let the children escape the fangs of these "enemies"? A close look at their gaits revealed the plot woven around them. In the cathedrals, numerous praying groups at the altar called on the angels to pay the benefits or reopen the factories, and one watched the men exiting the mosques grumbling about these "enemies".

On the one hand, during this exodus, a walk outside the neighborhood to uptown estates where *the* other people lived in homes protected by electric barbwires and drystone walls was a move past an irremovable boundary. It was impassable in the beginning; however, we found a way of skipping over. Stepping into the estates nauseated me far more than it hoped to frighten me. Past that firm boundary, we encountered *this* other people's indispensable reality, and this reality was first a fear of losing who they perceived they were and then of us the trespassers. We had fear but they feared us more. To them, we were burglars and rapists, children of women and men who refused to have the *dream* and work hard. Walking the streets and watching them push baby strollers past us, the prominent disgust for our bodies and existence was visible in their eyes, because, the boundaries separating our space and their babies was sacred; to cross it was sacrilegious since we were unworthy of being seen, incapable of visibility like their kids.

This, I should say, was the moment the naked disdain—long lodged in me—for *this* other people began to raise its head, a reality that has stayed with me and will be for a long time. I once thought I was being immoral for bearing this disdain but have since become unapologetic about it. I was six, or so, when, right before me, a man struck down my mama at a construction site, a man who had a huge house and fleet of cars. That was the beginning of my inexhaustible fright of big homes and cars and people who stayed in them, and as I grew up with the constant image of my mama crashing onto the gravels that morning, seeing that body lying in the stones and blood, seeing the shame and weakness that made her and me defenseless before that man, I knew I was being made to possess an eternal grudge. It did not take me long to realize that I faced a fatal threat.

The belief that this world is as conspiratorial and resentful as it can be was the truth *this* country unknowingly first gave me. It exposed itself to me before I could demand it to do so. And without this threat of exterminating my existence by this "enemy", I contend, this place one calls a country has no genesis, no shape and future. It was created from this truth, to exterminate is its embodying role. It is its foundation and destiny, the moment one feels otherwise—meaning the time you could get safety, secure the spirit and have untrammeled imagination in this place—it would cease being *this* country anymore. Looking back, I see the beginning of it all. Although I was long filled with guilt about it, I am convinced that what I felt back then was genuine and distinct, and it was not covetousness for the shiny cars or high walled houses. At no point in my life did I have the appetite for them; I had arrived at the place to know I was never going to get them. It was something rather rusty and unutterable. And as horrifyingly abstract as it is, I never managed to name it. But I had it and it opened me past the door of shame onto the threshold of disappearing into nothingness, dissolving into a meaningless piece away from the form that was my body, almost turning me into a suicide bomber in an instance. In better words, in the future of *this* country as still seen in the eyes of these other people lies a depravity meant to dispossess one of his body, just as that attempt on my mama's body years ago. I noticed this nameless thing became larger each time I walked a neighborhood boy to, say, deliver lunch to his father who worked as guard to one of those houses owned by a man his age. And it kept growing, and I had to stop wandering about town because I was fast approaching the limit. This limit was there but I could neither describe it nor tell anybody about it. The fire of this scourge burned on inside me, and everywhere I turned K was the smell of burnt sacrifice exuding through the cracked doors and windows.

The exodus continued into the year I turned eighteen, and I could not join the first category of exodus because it no longer fascinated me. I was a veteran *runner* and could not—due to fatigue—begin another flight. From the beginning it was clear I was not meant

for it and had even thought that what they were running from was some kind of disease for which I had no need of cure. The first exodus was fatal, although the second exodus looked the most lethal to me, because I was born deeply into it—the eighth day of my birth my grand-uncle, the imam, held me, sang the words of the Koran into my ear, said incantations and burned incense over me, and pronounced names on me. Two days after that I was taken to the church, to my mama's church, bathed with Anointing Oil and holy tongues, and got christened as well. However apart from my own familiarity with the nervousness of this second exodus what worried me the most was the effortless manner the boys and girls I had known all my life became frighteningly complex with time. It opened the floodgate of Hell over comrades who I knew intimately, and I never stopped feeling a torrent of shame on myself each moment I neared their places of worship. It was perhaps the complicatedness of this second exodus that made the entire exodus ineluctable.

It was thus by the time I became eighteen that I began to fully understand the adversarial symbols strewn across the scourge besieging the neighborhood. Without hurrying, I started the year off by resuming a Disc Jockey apprenticeship I had begun at a metropolis studio the year before, and further up the month of June when the farming season arrived, on the permission of my studio manager, I moved to work in a cornfield. Months later I would get accepted and leave the cornfield for the university, something, because I had become too hardened to lose to any illusion of change whatever, I would come to take, profoundly, as temporary exile from the neighborhood. Folks—my family in particular, because I was their first from the large household to ever head to a university—considered all these actions as admirably adventurous, a hustle to escape the only life I had known, the boy who was becoming the man they could never imagine themselves becoming, but they were separated by a fat darkness that was driving me off.

My job in the field, a vast rocky slope enclosed with iron nets and brick walls two hours drive east of the metropolis and on a shoulder down a village south and a short distance from the oil refinery, required processing seeds for the beds, marking and collating portions tilled by each laborer to tally with their pay, and when time for weeding the beds came and further through the harvest, I would join a group of schoolboys and with wheelbarrows, we would take to the storehouse or the refuse collection what needed to be there. Remarkably, this tedious task always passed the six o'clock closing time deep into the night when the sky became big and full of longing. It was one such experience that loosened me up to gazing at the world. Although fearful, I began attempting darkly to see things anew. *Seeing* the dry grass whirled in their colors and the neat pebbles laying unperturbed along the fallen grains, straws, and stretch of blades of grass wet with dew stirred me each day, so that standing amidst them, particularly before the commencement of work in the morning, I would gaze on end at the distant refinery gas flaring with the leaden smoke and billowing into the blue sky.

There in the field, I realized that people I met were almost the same as those in the neighborhood, old men, middle aged women who looked older than their own mothers, then a handful of young men a bit older than I was, and finally boys my age. I could sense the fear I saw in the neighborhood amongst these field laborers, especially among the men, the fathers. I would take solitary walks through the field once everyone had gone to bed and it turned out to be the time that frightened me the most. The women and the girls had this unsettling look but at the close of duty, they took it with them back home, to their sleep, and as dangerous as this was to them, they seemed more capable of hoping on the rock of salvation than the men. They returned to the field the next morning with clear eyes, with that

particular quality of the deepness of their refreshed black skin glowing in the clean air. The curves of the girls that got lost in the fatigue and hunger of the previous day's job returned with a stunning visibility that rattled my throat. The men, however, stayed behind, sleeping over in the surrounding huts, tarpaulins, and sometimes in the vacant rooms of the nearby petrochemical plant. The darkness concealed the resigned look but it was immediately clear how much their murmurings and constant waking up deep in the night pointed to the exodus. I watched the men walked about and I could not resist the thoughts that I was on my way to being what they were, and what they were at the time was not only nameless and terrifying but erected an immutable wall between the world and me.

Through the months in the field—which by the way I reckon as the single meaningful moment of my life yet—I have sensed that the prickling movements that had been in my bowels for more than a decade had transformed into a vast, twisting pain, forcing my inside to become a maddening beast. And if it happened so, it took incessant bending over by the quiet corn beds and holding the stomach, where I would drag in deep and long breath to ease the lacerating agony. Whenever the pain began, particularly in the field and at nights, and having taken the contorted position of bending over, I would find myself fighting for breath until I incanted verses of the Koran or the bible, as the case maybe, sotto voce, and soon it would be gone. But no one seemed to notice, even the mostly elderly laborers in the field, and myself was never going to let it out to anyone. I thought I was the single being in that field with shame hovering my head and did not know that amongst the men was a man, a member of the exodus, whose misery would become public in the coming days and further lead me back into a quest to discovering the purpose of the affliction that besieged the neighborhood.

Precisely during the month of November when I would leave for the campus, shortly after reestablishing contact with my sister who had been my only familial connection all through the estrangement, and a few days before I became exactly eighteen—a reality that now more than frightened me than ever—I received an email that my lungs had grown worryingly terrible, scraggly rubbers in the x-ray film I would claim at the post office some days later. Three weeks before, and a month before I would leave the cornfield, I had had a scan to detect and name the excruciating fire in my bowels. I was reading the email in a hut east of the field. A section of my lungs had stretches of field-beds-like contours across it, lines that seemed like thin black ink that had spilled out of a container and thickened on a transparent surface, and the other part when drawn upon a lamp or spread out in the sun revealed a mutative appearance that could not bother me as much as the previous one even though it had an unhealthy structure as well, a contortion embroidered by varying tones of black like the dirt body of a beautiful striped animal in a monochrome. I use the word "embroidered" for a purpose that shall be later discussed. However, honestly, it was the first time I would meticulously *see* myself past the flesh. Or, in better words, it was the first time I had summoned myself to do so, since before then I had been hopelessly obsessed with taking in the rather existential exterior around me, a preoccupation I had a gift and mirthful temperament for. Holding the x-ray in hand and remembering the series of attacks I suffered in the cornfield and also, say, the nightclubs, I became aware of a new interior reality made alive by photography. It had not before occurred to me that my interior was not only visible—both within and out—but that although it carried a certain ugliness as seen on the x-ray film, it nonetheless could be photogenic. Frankly, with all goodness in me then, for some unexplainable reason which I felt was tied to the crisis in my bowels, I took to having a greater concern about the latter than the former. So that the shape of the lungs, which could not be viewed without a rush of anxiety, now possessed a hopelessness that was fraught with

something that would send me to seeking hope—a kind of being full of the exodus. What therefore preoccupied my thoughts afterwards was the amiable visibility of my lungs rather than their frightful condition. In an other, more complete sense, the word that came to me regarding this interiority of my body at while having my distant friend's photographs in hand when the news of the bad lungs came, would commit me to six years of contemplating on the human bowels, the nearness to distance reinforced by photography, and the very stark visibility of one's interior despite the fact that we all remain helplessly enjoined to all exteriority. The moment was symbolic to me. From that November of 2010 when I turned eighteen until early 2016, about six years after that man's misery turned a public knowledge, nothing, no matter what I did, could remove the power of the thought that continued coming back to me over and over again.

It could thus be taken that one reason why I became unusually terrified in the beginning by the news about my lungs had to do with the neighborhood. For far too long in K, there had been an unbroken line of *being* that tacitly defined life. The definition had it that if one became a thing at eighteen the individual could never be escape for the rest of his life. And, because it was such obvious and momentous truth that had an astonishing corroboration in the lives of people older than us there, it came to be the single, and say, "official", age to predict the direction of one's future. This is to succinctly say, for example, the neighborhood boys and girls who stayed in school up to the age of eighteen would grow and end up in a school, either in a teaching or non-teaching position, this or nothing else, because, actually, one could not become anything else—there was nothing else one could become. In the same light, those who could not afford being in school at eighteen, like these fathers, would become factory hands, laborers of any sort, and most of the times, convicts; the girls who remained in the church and who had not become mothers at the age, which was nearly impossible in the neighborhood, waited on the Lord and their lords; this declaration of existence also applied to the drug addicts and prostitutes on the street corners. There was no escaping it; the parents tried to flee from it but could not, and there was absolute hopelessness for the progenies. This circle of being and becoming was what the entire neighborhood had, a tradition one was born into, or came into, and one where with no opposition began to *hope* with it.

I was eight years old in the village when my older brother implied in a whisper to me the shape of my life by comparing me to my teen-age sister who had recently been impregnated. The family was sure about my destiny because I was one of them, we had the same destiny, and were, covertly and overtly, certain that neither the Sunday sermons that blazed from the pulpits nor my mama's "chariots of flaming angels", nor daily prayers at the mosque could otherwise alter the train of our life. It was certainly this assurance from childhood that arose that November when I turned eighteen; I knew that come what may I was going back for a life in the brothels. However, nothing prepared me for the condition of my lungs. So what increased the fright on the day I received words about my lungs was the fact that in a few days I would be eighteen, which suggested I would live the rest of the life in the sex industry and become entangled to a ceaseless treatment for my lungs, staring at photographs of friends and their friends who had gone with the exodus and now lived their lives around the rivers of the world, while I consulted one medical lab to another. Despite having been accepted into the university, I knew my destiny was set; it was not reckless to have had such a thought but was an affirmation of my capacity built firmly from my vision of the world.

And I came to being convinced that it was this reality that had also taken over the man whose misery had become public knowledge in the cornfield.

He had stopped coming to the field weeks earlier. I knew because I always marked his portions, which were never full to the day's allotment. Then words spread in the neighborhood that the man, sixty-eight years old former factory worker and chorister in a local church, had climbed the roof of his house and used a razor blade to slit open his bowels. His bowels? I was exiting the premises of the post office where I had claimed the parcel with the x-ray results I had had concerning my own bowels when the news of his death reached me, and the street before me became blurred in an instant. The harmattan had been fierce, I wore a hoodie worn over a sweater, my body pricking with sweat underneath and my palms damp long from the abrasive weather. The man was father to a girl I knew in K. She had not joined the exodus. She was not meant to join anyway, because she was tougher and braver than all of us. A twenty-three year old apprentice at a barbershop down a street in K, a basketball player, AND a long acquaintance of mine who had, few days before this news, offered to cover part of my university tuition. Nigga, me don't have much but me can't watch you lose on this shit, she told me. So hearing the news of her father's death—but more meaningfully knowing the manner it had happened—I considered it wise to walk down to the shop and offer my condolences to her. But at the barbershop, which was fifteen minutes walk down from the post office through the community market, her boss told me she had traveled to the village and did not if she would ever come back.

Six years later I set off to locate Nina.

Due to my own desperate homelessness over the six years I could only return to K on occasion, looking to check up on the latest about her whereabouts. I stopped by the apartment she lived in and met neighbors by whom I understood that three different tenants had already occupied it since her departure. On the streets and basketball courts I bumped into folks who knew her and it seemed she had become a past behind them. Realizing the true meaning of her disappearance as the months went by, I moved from just empathizing with her to thinking; her ceaseless flamboyancy and remarkable urban freeness made it impossible for me to imagine her in a village and possibly downcast. There are people one cannot imagine being unhappy and isolated. Then as it became years, as a matter of fact, I began an almost unconscious relationship with her. I got into the habit of spending time at the barbershop where she was an apprentice. But then, not long after, I would come to

discover that this failure of mine to let her go from my imagination actually stemmed from the fright I felt during the exodus in the neighborhood years ago. And this could be explained in two ways. First, one was the fear of losing everyone with whom I had a unique connection to the exodus, meaning, being left without a comrade in the struggle. Second and more important I considered the shape of her prolonged disappearance. The fact that in the reality of things she had never shown any desire to leave, did not seemed to possess the anxiety of that exodus, and had remained the time that the fellows trooped out somewhat became the rock on which the rest of us, though frightened to the vein, gained the strength that restrained us from succumbing to the affliction. In this sense thus, unbeknownst to her, she become the hope "unto which" I cast my eyes once any news emerged of another comrade who had disappeared.

And this was the reason why, as the time went by, I found myself pondering both the reason that caused her to leave in the first place and what subsequently kept her from returning, knowing how powerful a figure she was for us. And as if presenting as evidence that something was utterly amiss about her, I began noticing a certain activity on her Facebook wall, which, by the way, I had been following since the beginning of her disappearance. In the first months, the wall gradually grew quiet, with a sentence or a phrase posted every four months or so. This infrequent act did not trouble me, because, it was easy to attribute it to the very fact of her being in far away in a village and having little Internet access. Then I observed something else on her wall that made me rethink. Her wall had been known for its outrageous photos and videos of herself and celebrities whom she loved. But, one by one, she removed all her personal photographs from the wall, and then the photographs of celebrities, even those of Brenda Fassie, the singer, for whom it was obvious she had relentless adoration.

So because it was cheap and safer than a bus trip at the time, I chose the Thursday evening train ride to Kafanchan, a town from which I would then journey to the village where she lived. Three hours before departure that day, I left the house I was living in at a block behind the local YMCA premises for the station, through alleys and streets, reached an old closed factory, and then took the road to the train station. I had passed this factory numberless times, especially when I was a student at the secondary school, and yet could not tell what it had produced before it shut down. Like many factories here, I grew up to find this in disuse. Viewing it however from my position on the path, it had a mundane appearance that pulled my scrutiny all the time. It stood like one of those deserted grey plants in post-communist Soviet Union Eastern Europe. Recently, I had begun studying photographs of these post Soviet Union factories in a photo album I had stumbled across and bought at a campus' auction months ago. The peeling wall paint, the dull wires, the enormous cobwebs stretched round the sinking roof, the firm rusty padlock and hinges, and their wary, irreverent desertedness of this factory before which I now stood ratified what I felt looking at those photos. And had I a camera to snap photo of the factory this instant that the sun had gone off a bit for the surrounding bleakness to become more vivid and loud; it could pass for a photograph taken from an evening walk through an industrial estate in Eastern Europe in the mid '90s. The factory was fenced by *frailty*, and a board bearing notices of safety and visiting hours was slung between two enervate wires on the fence.

I continued further down the road, toward the train station, passed my former school and turned left onto a road through the railway housing quarters. A bust of wind began. I stopped by a tree to wear a hat warmer as a whirlwind bustled about, dispersing straying chickens, tossing paper and leather bags round about with its heedless feet.

Schoolboys chased after the whirling dust with their kites. And out on my left laundry flew high up from washing lines, in the air they gave the impression of birds shot and slow-motioning downward. At a distance windowpane of a house shattered and a woman with a suckling stuck to the breasts ran after a plastic bucket in the wind. The surrounding grasslands and fields had become brown from the dust and dryness and wind, but, like praise time of a Sunday service, they would burst into life again as the sun rose and splashed upon them, as the tiny birds fluttered off the blades of dry grass, as the butterflies, after hovering long like a shy lover, settled on the tips of dusty plants. Few days ago I was stuck in the moist and snowing America and here I was wrestling this chameleon weather—mutating between intense cold to breezy dryness. Weather, whatever form it chooses to be, looks to increase one's awareness of bodies. The awareness is visible in the inanimate bodies but more vivid in the animate, and perhaps this could be because this certain awareness itself emerged through anxieties peculiar to the animate. For instance, my ex told me an observation about her body whenever it rained. She observed that *that* sheer awareness of raindrops on the roof or the ground made her bladder full ceaselessly, as if the drops made straight inside her body. She never liked the rains because, she told me, that she resented anything other than herself taking charge of her body just as the rains always did. I found myself trying to explain the exodus I witnessed years ago within the frame of this weather and what it brought to one's consciousness. The root of human dignity, I claimed, is the capacity to trace one's place or moment of awareness even though it is a dwelling seldom conducive. Thus as I walked this place toward the station I pondered the human body, its interior, what extent does one's interior weather enhance self-awareness of the condition of the bodies without?

I must say, and unashamedly so, that despite the determinate force to meet her I was not sure this afternoon if the journey I would embark on later that evening had to do exclusively with the man who committed suicide by slitting his bowels, or the fright that had refused to let go of what might happen to my bowels, or the long desire I possessed for the body of his daughter, or, all these motives combined. For six years, the thought of the man tearing out his bowels stayed with me because I had assumed my closeness to him in the cornfield, though we never made transactions beyond our employers' wants, warranted my having a stake in his life and death. On the other hand, she, Nina, was a tomboy and I had that helpless, indescribable burning in me for such women. Even all through the six years that she did not return to the neighborhood it seemed that what had held me more to her was this dream to be near the unique way she deployed the "physical" frame of her being. This was my predicament, which showed how depraved I was to be perversely lost between a death and living flesh. Saddened by the death of this man and the disappearance of his daughter became an earnest hope to move close to the latter. As I look back, perhaps what bound me to the hope of nearing her body aside from my lust was the freedom she invented with it, the unbroken exhilaration she built around it. Before and during the exodus, she seemed above the anxieties that tormented us each day. And I was bewildered by the life she led. Never was there a time that she appeared wary of the exodus, so there was a zero possibility that she would leave as well. But that she left and never returned—having demonstrated that she had escaped what frightened the rest of us—did not just confounded me but became essential to the journey of my own life.

Certainly all places in the world over have a certain girl who grows to become an abominable reality in our subconscious. Families, for the sake of honor and morality, frown against associating with her. And so, in many ways such a neighborhood girl becomes the freest women because the rules no longer apply to her. New rules are written for others

because of her, not for her. This kind of girl becomes subtopic in Sunday school lessons and schools' moral instruction booklets. In secondary school we had such one girl in my class named Mistura, the only daughter of a renowned imam— a tall smartass, baby-faced, brown. One term, she was caught sleeping with a staff almost the age of her father and given an expulsion; when demanded to offer an apology to the class she told her buddies—who would later tell us—that she would be dead to do so, that she had no regrets and that we must know that the school had not enough dick to beat her pussy. She left, never went back to another school and instead, as we found years later, she co-founded a photography studio somewhere in town. I recall the teachers never stopped using her to make illustrations. And like Mistura, years ago the neighborhood had Nina who had been nicknamed Rumor because nearly all the males around had spread her, or thought to have done it, or hoped to do it. In contrast to the girls of the neighborhood, she lived by herself in an apartment on the second floor of a yellow house up the street that was formerly a bakery. Her father lived in the neighborhood in the past, in a block down the market road but moved away to a nearby village. The windows of the yellow apartment where she lived never closed no matter the weather or time. I remember the hip-hop jams that grooved on up there nonstop, and smoke, which obviously came from joints, hovered around the windows and doors as if she had a sky full of clouds in the apartment. She became known after a sex tape of her spread through the neighborhood. She had male buddies and like them, she never wore skirts or high heels, never plaited hair, had swaggering gait, and she had a fat ass on which she sagged her pants. Including the basketball court where she trained every evening, the unused building back street that she frequented along with some of us the boys who had been honing painting and graffiti skills, the barbershop where she apprenticed was also crowded because of her. Boys love bad girls; with her the saying rang so true. And although I was melted in the presence of tomboys, we never were more than acquaintances until the day she offered to cover part of my tuition.

It was this memory of Nina that continued in my mind as I reached the platform, waited for minutes before stepping onto the train and walked the aisle to a seat beside a man. I naturally saw him as a man in his fifties, a feeling that stayed with me as I began running into him during the following days. He was thin and wearing a maroon jacket over kaftan. He did not look up from the newspaper he was reading to return my greeting. I had begun taking notice of him a while ago on the platform where, before me, he paced up and down in exasperation and then at the ticket hall when, despite knowing that it was inappropriate, as he himself would later admit, he refused to give way for a station worker who, seeing the heavy spanners he carried, appeared to be working on a mechanical malfunction on one of the yellow coaches on which we just embarked. And prior to all these moments at the station, he had walked past me with a woman while I stood by the factory but lost sight of them when the heavy wind began.

The train departed the station, passed my former school and the factory, and causing me to remember the turbulence of the aircraft from America days ago. The coach was crowded, women had their kids on the laps, and folks of all ages who had no ticket but smuggled inside crammed the aisle. The chaos inside was obviously deafening but the warmth from the many bodies sufficed the cold weather. I took out my phone from the pocket, which by the way was occasioned by a beep in the phone of the man sitting next to me. I logged in to Facebook to see if Nina was online. She was not, last seen fifteen hours ago. She refused giving her phone number when I asked. Nigga, let us keep this shit going on Facebook, she told me when—while still in America—I began discussing the possibility of visiting her in the village. Among such questions, she declined telling me her reasons for

not coming back to the neighborhood all these six years. Three weeks before she dropped a message in my inbox with directions as to where to find her.

The train rattled on. Through the window I could see the zincs of houses, multicolor, new installations and old broken ones, and despite the sunset the rusty houses and zincs stood out the most. Everywhere disused automobiles—'80 Volkswagen, '71 Volvo, Corolla pickups, trucks, W114, Peugeot 505—pummeled by age and rust lay about the city as if a war had taken place, a war from which it seemed hesitant to move away. And my feeling about this city at the time and even now that I write this is etiolated. The city is old in the heart and its breath is weighty and smells of tired alloy. It is a close city in which citizens navigate their existence in compound houses, alleys, cathedrals, mosques, civil service offices, markets and stalls. Construction sites visible, too, most of them unfinished. This city, like this country, is an incomplete sentence. In other, better, words, the maker of this sentence lacked purpose and, worse, had long died. This is why the heart of this city shrinks at night. It fears the footsteps of darkness more than the Gods it extols. It is a treacherous city, pitiful like a cheated trader and murderous like an assassin. In recent decades, it has stopped having imagination, no archives or museums, no cinemas or squares or outdoor spaces where one could open wide himself. The further I walk across the city, especially at night, the more profound it turns out it resists imagination. It is a city with no alternatives; it is utterly about survival in the inside. And the city prays ceaselessly that if prayers were drops of water, a week's prayers here would be enough to flood the face of the earth. It is not a city for one seeking alternatives. Perhaps this was why Nina had never returned to the neighborhood.

The train soon put the city behind, running through hills and forests and fields. I attempted a position that would lure me to sleep but the seat was too crooked and my back, too hunched, came alive in pain. I turned toward the man beside me. He had fallen asleep,

resting his hands to hold the newspaper to his lap. I noticed that he had padded the nonexistent headrest of his seat with a bunch of clothes to balance his head. He faced the roof of the coach, mouth gaped open, and flies moved about it. If I not for the snoring he could be taken for a corpse. I kept staring. And looking at him and realizing my recent obsession with staring at people and things, I became aware and ashamed of my own conceitedness. It then occurred to me that there was a danger in what I was now doing, that this shameless gazing was pulling me from myself, that what I unconsciously arrived at had gained the capacity to deprive me of the true subtleties of life.

And as this stream of self-rebuke went on a fight broke out four rows in our front. Two women, one of them had a baby crying at her back. The man seated beside me woke up, apparently upset by the brawl. He looked the window my side and I caught his bloodshot eyes. He stared past me briefly and turned away, yawned, craned forward past the candy man who busied a customer right before us and stared in the direction of the fighting women who now argued something about tomatoes and macaroni. It was not long before he gave a dismissive hiss and sank back into his sleep, this time with his head propped in his palms and his elbows on his laps. He smelt of medicine. I could not take my eyes off him until he fell asleep again. And before I could make for the book I had been reading all week—W. G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*—in my ruckpack, a man seated across from us turned on his transistor radio and increased the volume loud enough for all to hear the newsreader reading a startling commentary on the US presidential candidate, Donald Trump. The lady in Marley twists behind my seat shouted at him to switch off the radio and he shouted back at her, telling her to shut the fuck up because the train was not her father's sitting room.

The radio newsreader began a long commentary on the history of the old Zaria city but soon the noise in the coach grew and overwhelmed the voice of the reader. I could hear it low in the background, the words indistinct. I glanced at the man beside me and he was now slumped to the edge of his seat, his head rubbing the hip of a boy in the aisle. It was probably the strange manner of his slumped body, as if bereft of life, which slowly made my heart skipped. The fear of losing my own body emerged before me another time. In the quest to collect stories about my family, I got into the habit of discreet gathering of files—photographs, newspapers, and archived videos—covering the length of the twentieth century. Recently I had come upon a photograph of my uncle taken in prison circa 1982. He was in an ash overall standing by the door of the prison's canteen. As a piece of art there was barely anything striking about the photograph; however, I could recognize in it. I could not explain why I felt this way but the photograph stuck in my head and remains with me till date. I was aware that as a general rule the taking of photographs was prohibited in prison, but I assumed someone he trusted had taken the photograph so that it could be passed on to me. No one knew why this picture was taken but it constitutes the most valuable visual record of what has been happening to me—imprisoned and in work wear and standing by places in which people eat. I have yet to come across a photograph in which I precisely recognized myself than this very one. Thus as the train rolled along with this unceasing stream of disarrayed thoughts, I began drawing a connection between the image of this uncle in prison and Nina's father tumbling down from the roof of his house. And it seemed as if history, or what I thought it to be, hurdled with me in-between.

I felt so close to the events, to the past, and then it occurred to me that all experience was being relived before me. The adversities and wars, the economic woes and colonialism that I only had come across in old movies, books, grainy photographs, and in defunct newspapers and magazines returned and stared me in the eye with resounding intensity. Seated on this train, the sheer realization of act of witnessing brought both a sense of privilege and a feeling horror. Unlike the black-and-white photographs and grainy images in those books and movies, my nearness to the reoccurrences allowed a profound visibility. This is in fact the only difference between the past and the present—the shades of color. Somehow I began to gain the burden of responsibility, the witness' responsibility. How could one live in this time and escape having this burden when right before us the Second Intifada happened, when Syria collapsed into war, when uprising swept through the Middle East, and South Sudan became world's newest country only to go up in flames, when, right before our eyes ISIL and Boko Haram were born and countless human bodies drowned daily in the Mediterranean? Perhaps there is the danger, to be a witness to these realities, to be certain that as these histories progress so the whole of humanity declines. So, because it is the end of the world and our exile in shame is irresolvable. It dawned on me with immense shock that it was barely decades ago that there was colonialism. As close and nauseous as it made me feel, there was a grounded shame to it as well, because the anxieties from decades ago have been passed on to us with frightening exactness.

Some time later, after I had stopped looking over the shoulder at the man with the radio and as I became less tense sitting next to the man beside me, the train decelerated, the metal grinding of the wheels against the tracks. We came by a looming field, with the frame of the town appearing before us like a large body hidden behind a vast valley. As the din died once more striking image came to view by the time I looked out the window, a caravan of heavily turbaned men on donkeys who were approaching a mosque from which a faint call to prayers could be heard**.** Soon the train would arrive the station but there was something oriental about that fleeting glimpse that called to mind the imagery of caravan and trains and merchants moving in the desert wind in literature from the East.

I disembarked some minutes later. Apart from the passengers, the station was almost empty of people and lightness when I stepped out. A walk further from the mouth of the

coach, at a building that seemed to be a storeroom, a firm smell of diesel stood, turned my stomach the way a shovel would a mass of mortar, and had I not moved thence fast enough the nausea would have embarrassed me. A few more yards away, the man who sat beside me emerged again and passed to meet a young woman who, because of the darkness that side of the station, I could not clearly see.

The following morning, having managed a little sleep, I made to find my way from the lodge to the village Nina told me I would find her. Nearly an hour drive, I had little trouble with the taxi since I was not entirely unfamiliar with this part of the state. She was online all night and that offered us a chance to converse another time. She did not hide her suspicion concerning my visit; she was keen on knowing why I was headstrong about meeting her, noting that we had never were friends any time when she lived in the neighborhood. And because she did not believe, or it seemed so to me in our chat, that I was simply concerned about her disappearance and wanted to learn about the details of her father's death, I told her I was becoming a writer of books and thought her a good project for one of them. This, too, she did not believe, which I held no grudge for, because, there was nothing she knew from years ago that would give her the image of me as a writer. I asked her in the chat if she was happy where she was; she went silent for minutes, and then a long "typing" that would only produce a phrasal reply: *talk soon*. I recall that during this conversation I was staying a hymn playlist on my computer, a friend's materials for writing his thesis. Hymns laden with communist memes of blood, flag, martyrdom, comradeship, hills and rivers, the Party and its infallible Leader. To liven the room and with no alternative, I clicked on this research playlist, and for want of more things to fill the intermittent silence in the chat I began telling Nina about the hymns, breaking down their embedded themes, the imagery, and allusions and their exact effects on me right there. She typed back some long but indistinct remarks, which I read and understood to mean that what I had just taken time to describe in the chat had a similarity to her current state of life. What therefore I failed to decipher immediately was if she felt like the shape of hymn as a piece of music or if she had become the images I mentioned.

It was this very thought that, once again, delightfully preoccupied me until the taxi eventually pulled a few yards from an unpaved crossroads. Having agreed with the driver that he would come back to the same spot to pick me later in the day, I exited the taxi. I walked a mile off

the main the road, looking at the plains studded palm trees around houses under construction. Communication masts and hills and harvested fields came to view far and near. It did not take time before it turned out to be a different village from what I had imagined. The village was not remarkable, though, perhaps two or three steps down from what one would get in the neighborhood. I passed a row of provisions stores, their owners having just arrived to opening the bifold barns for business, and turned right before an intersection onto a platform bypassing a little mosque through another cluster of old houses until a remote road leading downward appeared like a curved line on a map before me. I took the dusty road. The houses in this place were same as those of the neighborhood, bored and decrepit. I reached a ginger field that outstretched north to enclose of a church where a service was underway; and on the other side in the distance, I noticed acacia trees scattered in the fallows shaking gently to the wind. Those trees, in the brief moment I looked at them, pulled attention with the birds over the fields as if reminding one that the year was still young and that the barns were emptying. Despite the slight inexplicable horror that welled inside me as I looked at the trees, I continued along the road and observing in amazement at the pleasantness of the strong wind. In contrast to the neighborhood, it did not dry the nostrils to make one's breath difficult. Further down the road, past a rock by a long harvested okra field, I came upon a group of old men gathered by a truck, with five boys playing the checkers under a tree near them. A radio sitting between the men read the news, and their dog barked at me as I walked close. I stopped and saluted them, asked if I was on the road to the school. They nodded, one of them strained backward from his seat this way and pointed to where the road curved right by a bunch of dry banana trees and an almost flattened henhouse.

This time the thought of finally seeing her made me anxious, my walk grew wary and I began to have enormous doubt about the journey entirely. I took the direction regardless. I looked up the road, as if straining to gaze into the horizon, and saw her hastening my way. She approached and was looking past me toward the corner from which I had emerged, obviously searching to identify someone or thing behind me. Not till we were steps closer, however, that, after a sudden pause to scan me, she realized I was the one. She started a guttural laugh. Apologized to have mistaken me for someone else. She was in a black and maroon floral dress, with a stretch of lace around the neck. Her hair, loose and shiny, was delicately tied at the back of the head, and a pair of black leather slippers with grains of red dust on her feet. When we earlier hugged each other she smelt good like a child**,** of talcum powder and Vaseline**.** My nigga, she said, still laughing, I never knew you have grown this big. You were so tiny and, your display photo betrays your look, she added, smiling bemusedly. I managed a laugh, struggled for an appropriate response, timid. I stuttered. Though I was taken by her freedom and memory of me, which came along with this bemused face. Maybe I was rather too sensitive and not as worldly-wise as she was. Now grinning enigmatically, she proposed we walk down to get soft drink at a store close by, to which I objected by mentioning that it was barely "the third hour of the day". She laughed again, this time, with a slight shyness. She turned back, and we made for the road up.

As the walk along the road continued, jokes started to break the ice. She remarked on my full beard, she expressed her surprise that I could grow one, and that I could be taken for her older brother. We walked on, and the more she laughed the more familiar she became. She had not lost that careless laugh that rumbled in her throat, and just like in the past she would let her shoulders and arms shake in rhythm with the laughter, with her head flung back so that one see the laughter rattling in her almost undetectable Adam's apple. It was not long before I began seeing her from six years ago. She led the way as we headed to a path that branched off the road. I examined her discreetly. Her skin, as revealed at the shoulder, neck, and arms not covered by the dress, had the same charming pleasantness that I knew. This nonetheless obscured the fact that the grace in her thin frame was no longer there. Apart from her style of dress and an unsettling calm in her voice, I could not discern any obvious changes to her body or in her mannerisms. Of course she looked older, consternation she had as well displayed regarding my appearance just a while ago, but that did not make her looked too distant from the young woman I knew years ago. The school appeared before us and she hurried inside. I tried to see that swaggering gait that most defined her walking in the neighborhood. It was there, but not suppressed.

The building stood alone in the middle of the plain from the road. The first thing one noticed in the façade was a giant childlike scrawl of League of Nations on the wall. My house, she said, is a twenty-minute walk from here. As soon as I finish up here, we will go straight there, or are you in a hurry to leave? She cocked her head my way me as she stood in front of the wooden door. I told her I had all the time. Unlocking the door, the decaying frame almost fell forward but she steadied it expertly and wiped sawdust off her shoulders. Inside, I discovered the school was not an official one, meaning not a school in literal sense, but a former liquor store converted into a two-room classroom where a handful of village children received a two-hour spelling and arithmetic class each Thursday. A large mat lay upon with an image of Felix the Cat covered the clay floor and exercise books were strewn a bout the corners. So this is my place of work, she said by way of introduction, giving a smile laced with embarrassment. She stood on the other side of the mat, leaning her hip on a desk. I told her it was an impressive place. I stood by the blackboard, looking at a drawing of cutlass. Turning back I found her pushing a back door open. She smiled, which I took as a gesture summoning there. I tiptoed over the mat to meet her. The door opened to an expanse of fields and hills, and just a few yards from us some of the children were digging up potatoes in a small plot. My students, she said, they are my students. We wanted to test growing potatoes in dry season and it worked, man. Look at the well over there, she said,

pointing at a built circle of blocks roofed over with car tires. It is a tiny place but means so much to me, she told me as we came out the door onto a step where we could watch the joyful tiny hands digging the huge beds. I was puzzled by the potatoes but never inquired how she managed to grow them out of the season. She said she had been at the school since the beginning of the previous year. Like her two other colleagues, she told me, she had no educational qualifications herself.

We went round the building and returned to the front where graffiti was scrawled across the wall. We continued moving through random topics as we conversed, so that it turned boisterous one time and the next, as if empty of words, it would become uneasy and quiet and awkward. Slowly, however, the differences of our individual worlds emerged. I told her the story of my school principal who was shot and killed years ago. I do not remember what led me to talk about this, but once I told her I observed that she had no interest. Instead of inquiring details about it, without any connection to our rambling, she immediately began telling me about the ingenuity of Kendrick Lamar, the American rapper, who she had been 'feeding' on since the release of his last album, *To Pimp a Butterfly*. Though the album was cerebral and too difficult for her to understand at first, it spoke to something deep in her; the track "*i*" in particular meant a lot for her; she wondered how one could be that political and yet so raw and relatable. Right from *Section.80* to *Good Kid, M.A.A.D City*, Kendrick has shown in clear terms all she desired of rap music, he is rare and an unapologetic combination of the past and present of the genre. Taken by her analysis, which I found genuine and absorbing, I spoke about my own admiration for the rapper as well, said that if I were a writer I would create a form with the firm fluidity I noticed in Kendrick, and having said this, I suggested that since she loved it we should watch the video of the song, "*i*", on YouTube. She grinned, showing a broken front tooth. I brought out my phone.

We sat in the shade of the roof, so that we looked out the road that passed the school to the rocks and back to the settlements. The pre-noon sun arose. Once in a while someone passed the road before us, and we shouted greetings at them. The sun and the cold became less and less that it heightened the sensual feel of the velvet shirt I wore against my skin, I took off the sweatshirt over it to let the sweetness stay. Though the mood between was unease, it nonetheless was pleasant. Looking back now, I am certain I was not at peace that moment, because, the feeling that had initiated this trip had disappeared. In fact, I became empty inside. I pulled off the sandals and let my bare feet slid deep into the cold fine sand in the shade till a rush ran up inside my legs. I took in the surrounding of the school. An empty land stretched faraway to meet a house across the road where they were houses, most of them under construction. Above them were birds one would only see in a village. The air moved and hit against my face. Looking at the dry foliage, the atmosphere indeed seemed timeless. She was watching the song playing on the phone and I observed how absorbed she was by it. I did not utter a word. Instead I listened to the manner Kendrick Lamar's heart wrapped went through the twirling funk beat until I felt deep literal beating of heavy metal and bumping in me. After several repeats of the song, she joined the rap and I caught up with her, "*peace to fashion police, I wear my heart on my sleeve, let the runway start. You know the miserable do love company. What do you want from me and my scars? Everybody lack confidence, everybody lack confidence. How many times my potential was anonymous? How many times the city making me promises? So I promise this…"*

It was while doing this that a man on a motorcycle emerged from down the road where the men who had directed me sat under the tree sat, and rode toward us. Both the smoke from the motorcycle's muffler and dust raised by the wheels made a huge plume as if a sport race. I noticed a sudden change. She had propped her head against my shoulder

while mumbling along with the song but sighting the man she stood up and walked inside. Seconds later she was back outside, carrying both a black handbag and sack full of potatoes. Out of earshot of the man who now was yards from us, she told me to leave, that, hopefully, she would be online later and we could chat about it. I said that I was not in a hurry to return to Kaduna and that my intention was to stay as long as possible to have a better conversation whenever she had the time to do so. I greeted the man and he mumbled a reply, then he got off the motorcycle to enter the same classroom she had come from. He came out empty handed. He locked the door, and before I put my sandals back on my feet, they rode away, this time up of the road as if heading into the rocks. One by one the children behind the building passed by me with dust and sacks and loud chatter.

Back at the lodge that day, I resisted being caught between relishing the brief moment I had had with her and the unsettling incident with the motorcyclist. Neither sleep nor movies on the computer could put me at rest. I took to continuing W. G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*; however, hours later, having covered more than sixty pages of the book, I could not reach anything I had read, the impression felt purely as if I had been busy reading blank pages. These pages seemed to carry invisible characters, which deepened the disorder in my mind. Little by little the impression enlarged and effaced any memory of me, of the past few hours, of the train ride and the encounter in the village. I lay on the bed, staring the decaying ceiling above. Gradually, a migraine came and throbbed heavy. I undressed and walked to the bathroom, barefoot. The grey tiled floor was wet—from my wash earlier that morning—and the chill made a massive spasm surge from the soles to up to my pelvis. I walked to the window and carried the pouch of salt and charcoal concoction I came with, dipped the toothbrush generously in it, and washed my mouth. The acidic tingling of the paste went round the tongue, the roof and either wall of the mouth till a foamy saltiness abounded.

That done, despite the cold room and a stern wind remaining outside I opened the faucet and filled the bathtub with cold water. It was when I had let myself immerse in it for a long time, with the cold sensation of the water most notably sitting between the thighs, about the groin, further up in the armpits and deep around the earlobes, where a fresh bruise left unguarded, that I could gaze upon the image I had left behind at the school. It was this immersion that somehow, allowed me to regard that the man who had come for her on the motorcycle as the same I met at the station and sat beside on the train ride the day before. What puzzled me most was neither the fact that they both knew each other nor the utter coincidence of my noticing of him while heading to the train station. It was the authority that the man's presence exerted upon her in an instant. She was not just subdued by it, but her behavior gave substance to my suspicion that this had become a routine. What I had briefly witnessed was absolutely incongruous to the image of her from years ago in my mind. Back then o person, be it a mate or someone older, male or female—could intimidate her.

I had tricked myself into believing that coincidence was a dream, a secular miracle, or a course in the memory of dream, a more quality tool in the foregrounding of tragedy, or hope as the case maybe, in fiction than *factuality*. Immersed in the bathtub that day thus, apart from acquiescing once more in the tragedy of the world to which I belonged and the facts in which it would continue to exist, I was aware that my recent urge to trace the places in which our fathers lived was fundamentally a renunciation of the total conditions created by history rather than as opposed optimism to that might rectify what had been. Given that history is one overburdened narrative, I realized to have a foothold in it one has to deliberately stare at the coincidences, especially the tiny ones. It was this attempt at staring at the coincidences embedded in this journey thus far which made me trace back to the

previous day, right from the moment when I stood before the factory, where I first encountered the man, till the time when we both lingered at the station last night. I was aiming to identify and pick the hidden prophesies implanted in those moments that I had not taken notice of, hoping to explain, through him, what kept Nina back from returning to the neighborhood. But it ended as a futile effort. Though the man fascinated me, he was not remarkable in anyway. None of his features carried a power, except his quiet eyes that ran deep behind. He was a small man, not well built, not someone fitting for a, I recall, space that remained in his seat around him. He was completely forgetful. But that he had, without effort, panicked one of the most powerful folks in my life on the day of seeing her after six long years, with no words or hard gestures. It had similar lethalness to the tradition of that exodus.

It was late night when she appeared online, again. She had left a message while I lay in the tub, asking if I had made it safely back to the lodge. We started the chat. Anticipating I would persist, she demanded that I do not inquire about the man and the incident at the school. Then she added that she regretted the embarrassment that I must have felt. If not that the night was now long gone she said she would for us to meet and walk in the cold, that if I was still around tomorrow she would like to treat me to lunch and speak to me about her father, though, to be honest, she was trying to understand why I was keen on knowing about him. In the meantime, she wanted to know what the neighborhood was nowadays, wanted to know if I had eventually returned to my family, if I had a lover, and if I had truly meant what I told her about becoming a writer of books.

We managed to navigate away from the delicate issues that I earnestly wanted to talk about to gossiping about folks we had known in the neighborhood. Little by little we came upon a boy named Pharaoh, so-called for his natural bald and brown skin. A funny, notorious liar that the instant Nina inquired about him it caused me laughter. Do you still remember what he said about his father, she said, like a girl holding her belling and laughing, falling to the floor. Of course I did, I told her. Pharaoh made many of us believe that his father, who was dead at the time unbeknownst to us, lived in Egypt and had co-built the pyramids; told story that he once slept for hours in a river; and once after disappearing for many months one year, he returned one day and told everyone he had gone to obtain a diploma, which turned out to be untrue. I told Nina that Pharaoh, after a short stint as a pastor of a new church, was now a corporal in the police force and now identified as an atheist. She told me that she had fucked him when he made her believe he was a virgin; however, Pharaoh told his buddies that she had been on him for months until, out of pity for her, he reluctantly agreed to her pestering. She added, after a long pause, that he was the last person with whom she had sex in the neighborhood. From Pharaoh, she asked about the YMCA premises, asked about folks in the basketball team, asked about Professor, the elderly man who sold secondhand thrillers in wheelbarrow by the community market.

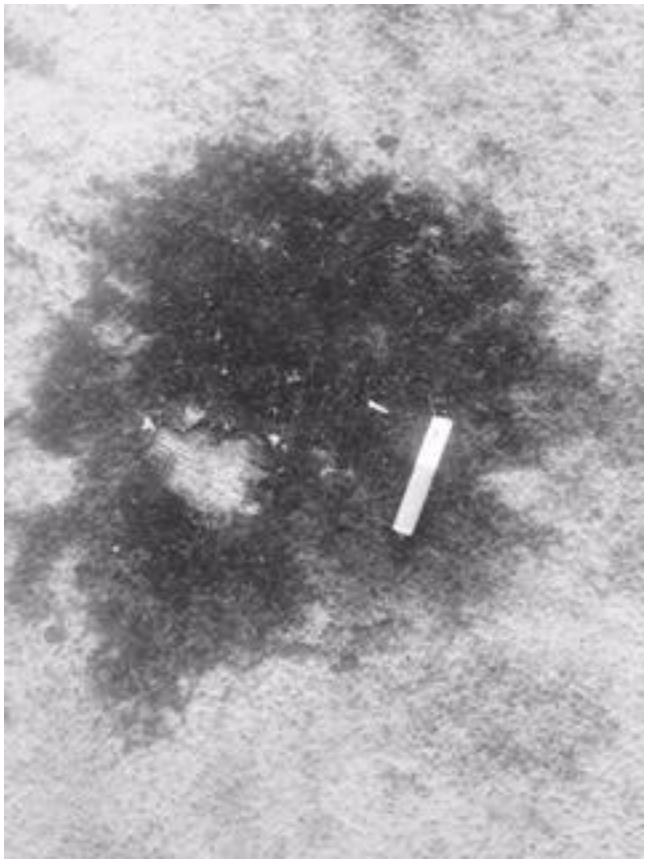
We chatted until about dawn. After scheduling the day together, she got my number and said she would call to inform me when to meet her at the school, from there we would head to the house where she lived. It turned out otherwise. Her phone went out of reach all day and each time I came online for the following nine days, she was not there.

I did not consider myself a walker in the obvious sense, for until I got into university I was convinced I could be reformed. But on campus I thought otherwise. With Nina now unreachable and I more determined to remain and meet her once more, at least, I began whiling away the long days by walking about the town twice a day. At first I did not entertain the thought of going to the village to find her. So I walked two or more miles in the

morning, leaving the house of my host behind a new residential extension through an unpaved road, taking in the rush hour, passing the shops opening for business until I came upon a thing of interest like a football field, where I would watch practice games. Returning to the house was more delightful, getting lost in the indistinct streets, numberless buildings, walking against the warm sun onto the corner to meet again the unpaved road. Then when dusk fell, I would leave the house again to the main road about the time my host and her neighbors would be returning from work, to rove along the town center, or sit at a corner to watch shop owners put their wares back inside. It was relieving for a stranger here to witness as the night came over the buildings and town. I was immensely enamored by this sense of anonymity in a big town and even more so because it made no one wary of my hoodie and me at night. Bit by bit as the night grew deeper and without streetlights, the roads and all moving in them became so indistinguishable to my eyes that when I stepped into the darkness I no longer walked by sight but by faith. I passed the corners back to the lodge and looking at the manner small lights of the numerous lanterns of roadside vendors wrestled against the darkness.

If I recall correctly, I did not seek out a particular thing during any of these evening walks, except one day when I hitchhiked back to the train station. For an inexplicable reason I suspected I would find the man in question once more, but that did not happen. After spending time at the station and watching the coaches, tracks, and the people moving about them, I dragged myself again onto the road. Though I brooded the image driving this journey I was neither certain nor hopeful, only felt a certain lumpy pain about my joints. Then leaving the station I passed a house that caused me to remember an old friend with whom I no longer had any contact. It was a brick house built behind a field, its red fence meticulously ornamented with broken pottery that had a feeling of grandeur from a distance. The moment one came close, it became ordinary. Now seeing it and remembering the friend somehow pulled me into believing that walk in the village in which Nina now lived would bring details about her father. I yielded to the thought. I was born in a village whose people held a unique relationship with the sun, shrubs, and grass. My grandaunt, though blind, could never describe the nature of each of her children's birth without telling the color of the grass at the time. My brother could tell when the mushrooms would sprout by merely gazing the soil at the backyard. Baba could detail the amount of the coming rainy season by looking at the bank of the rivers. Once a helicopter passed baba's cassava field and crashed onto the bank of a river. I recall how everyone who had gone to see the debris days later narrated his or her versions but without leaving out the reference to the luxuriant mushrooms that had bloomed between the shrapnel.

I taxied to the village thrice, and went to the school but did not find her. The doors were locked with a chain. I never bothered asking around for her. I had the feeling that I would find her somehow. Though I did a great deal of walking the in village I did not stay into the night, which, as I had been cautioned numerous times by my host, had recently come under attacks by unknown gunmen, with many left dead. By which I came to realize that my host meant to say something questionable about anyone who sought to walk the streets in the desertedness of the night. I reluctantly took the advice despite the fact that walking had of late become far more than a pastime to me. As a child it was a means of straying from home as far as I could to avoid any contact with baba, then throughout my adolescence it fulfilled both a medical recommendation concerning my bowels as well as substitute for lack of transport fare into the town, and thus had to walk the miles, sometimes kilometers. Then, as I became acutely aware of my own eternal incapacities and shame, it began serving a new purpose for which I never imagined. Disillusioned with the regular



nightlife in the DJ booths, the brothels and nightclubs, I took to walking, pondering the possibility of being a photographer or a writer. And even this, as constant as the thought remained, and because I was shackled by fear of wanting to be anything, it was immediately clear that they were inaccessible to me. I was fluent in three languages and stutter in one, however I could not write in any of the three languages. And the fourth language—English—which I stutter greatly in use could not, not matter what, morph into an instrument of hope for me. I regard language entirely as a means of reaching hope. More so, the literary culture of the place in which I grew was one that meditated significantly on themes that seemed distant to me. And I truly wanted to create a literature in which, as narcissistic as it may come across, I was the central figure and theme. The only thing that appeared possible to write to me was about me. Thus concerning being a writer, I already was a significant failure in it even way before I moved for it. To be a writer was impossible, still impossible. On the other hand as a photographer, the closest I had been was dating someone who did it for an income. I was cognizant of the fact that I had the temperament for a photographer but, right so, I recognized I had no aesthetic patience, and photographs, since they are "still", lingering, momentary and unabashedly physical, require a huge sense of deliberateness to be interacted with. I was convinced hence that I lacked this important quality. Meaning, I was too chaotic to gaze at a thing twice, which has been the curse of my life—wanting to stay and gaze and still unable to let go the chaos within. So having failed in these two, I allowed myself to become more aware of the images of places in which I found myself, hoping that both the photographer and the writer which seemed to be only things I could be but will never be should then be atoned for by constantly looking at the world through the fears and shame in my body. And walking, the kind that I had engaged as hobby since childhood, progressively metamorphosed from its impalpability into a tangible project to experience the hopeless anxiety of the world to which I belonged. Meaning that the more walking I embarked on, the less shape I recognized of the world, and by some means I chanced upon solace in this shapelessness, since walking as a deliberate motioning neutralizes shapes in transiency. This, I should say, more than anything else, was what drove me out of the lodge and more into the town, from where, regardless of the silence from Nina, I sometimes took the taxi to the village and wandered till when dusk came upon me.

It was mid morning nine days after that meeting at the school when, during one of these wanderings in the village, I came upon a church sitting left of the road. Almost a drab edifice fitting to a distant past, it reminded one of the Anglo sturdiness of many churches that began being vigorously planted around towns and villages in the north of the country

since the turn of the twentieth century; Anglo-delusion to save our fathers unto salvation in the tradition of the queen. These "orthodox" churches—Methodist, evangelical, Anglican, Presbyterian, Roman catholic, Seventh Day Adventist—were the most important institutions alongside the colonial civil service that these fathers became part of. And many of the churches, like the one before which I now stood, seemed disturbingly distant and wan. And, in fact, if not for encountering a column of graceful women in blouse on wrappers and bearing basinful of foodstuffs, who not long ago overtook me and made into the premises, I would have simply walked past and not know that it used to be her father's church. The gate was closed halfway that I could not only discern that were many voices inside but, with a craned neck, could see a team of youths mounting sound system in the shade of a canopy. I started for the gate unhurriedly. The sun had risen though residue of dew was visible on the blades of grass. Grasshoppers the color of sand skipped about the place. A wooden signboard began the corner leading to the gate and almost there, at the concrete slab that stretched onto the fence, rows of flowers that seemed to had been newly planted but not taken care of. The fence painted milky white was cracking in several parts but most prominent between the upper hinge of the gate and the pillar. After a short a wait at the gate, I entered the premises.

Inside, I soon realized that a women conference was underway and the women who passed me with foodstuffs could now be seen at an outdoor makeshift kitchen at a corner east of the church. The cloud of smoke from the open fires billowed in the air mass, curled in rings; and beside this effect having a touch upon my eyes, the smells of boiling pepper and frying tomatoes were strong in the compound. The crowd in the premises was mainly older women, which made me reluctant to go in any further. And as I contemplated this, barely past the parking lot, a decent fellow with high-cheekbones standing between two little girls at a not far a distance waved at me and began, warmly, approaching my place. I looked to see if he was someone familiar, but no. He was a stranger. I met him on the way. We shook hands firmly, smiling rather awkwardly. In the rather brief exchange, he said he saw me with Nina at the school the morning I arrived and by chance seeing me around here once again deepened his curiosity, that he wanted to know, due to our supposed facial resemblance, if I was a relative of hers. Her father, he said, was a popular member of this church. But before we could move aside and converse more, which I desperately wanted to have, a female voice summoned him from the crowd.

Here, it began dawning on me what she recently told me about her father being a well-known face in the congregation. Once the fellow was gone and lost in the crowd, I moved through the crowd and neared the entrance of the church, an interlocked ground with old yet beautiful Greek-style pillars on either side. I climbed up to the third slab of the stairway and stood by the giant hinge of the door, looking at a part of the façade defaced by cement patch. It seemed to have been cracked open by a fierce thunder. Its charred spots were conspicuous despite the generous cement patching. About five minutes later, I came down the stairway and took a pavement leading to the side of the church and got to a corner from which I could see its extreme at the other side. Not looking for a particular thing I walked further close to where a little boy wearing a T-shirt with a large image of a dancing man stood. I do not remember for how long I stood there but I recall being taken by the stained giant glass panels on that side of the building. They spoke nothing to me, nor reminded me of a thing, however, they slowed my roving. Then I walked back to the entrance, toward an open ground. Though I did not notice it earlier, there was a water tank with a conduit reaching from the roof, and beyond it, an enormous baptismal pool that was dirty inside. What however drew my attention around this vicinity was a noticeboard on the

far left of the pool. I moved close to it. On one side of the board were pasted ads and bulletins of weekly programs and the other half were twelve papers pinned against it, each a list of names. Reading the names on these papers, I discovered it was the congregants grouped into the twelve tribes of Israel for the church annual harvest bazaar. Apparently these very lists were of the previous year. And I recalled the church in my village in which my mama was a devout member. It held its annual harvest as a weeklong bazaar in the church compound where villagers traded farm goods and livestock to raise funds for the mission. For the village Christians, the single most important annual festival than this bazaar was the Christmas. It used to be a pleasant atmosphere, meaningful to my innocent days. This was why this particular grouping that I now stood before held me for long. Then, for no particular purpose, I traced Nina's name through the lists and found it in the list titled Tribe of Asher. Right beneath the title was the bible verse, *his bread shall be fat, and he shall yield royal dainties (Gen 49: 20).*

A while later and with nothing more of interest to me, I made away from the entrance into the crowd to find the fellow I earlier encountered. Easily I spotted him bent over a dismantled loudspeaker under the canopy. When I got there, I realized how busy he was fixing the sound system. Nonetheless I managed to ask for direction to Nina's house, if he did not mind. He smiled cheerfully, which I took to mean he would. He apologized that he would have taken me there himself if not that what he was on had to rectified before the commencement of the conference noon session. He described the way for me, which he said was easy to track, and then suggested sending an image of the house to my phone. We shook hands one more time.

Putting the church far behind, as if turning west side toward a large garage of grinding mills roofed over by corrugated iron, I came upon a T Junction and took a rugged path through a grassland. Not far in the grassland, having passed amidst a little field of budding orange trees, where the mid morning wind gently shook the foliage, I soon came by a corner that directly led to the façade of the brick house protected by a mud fence. I paused at a short distance, checked my phone to verify the façade with the snapshot the fellow had transferred earlier. It was the same house. I moved further and once more stopped walking. It was, apparently, a shabby house that, despite the snapshot and it being in a village, if I had not strained enough to look past the fallen wooden gate and caught a glimpse of a male body

passing with a green plastic bucket by a motorcycle to the other side and the litters of chicks cheeping in the compound, I would consider deserted. Seeing the house in full view, the weight behind my mission got heavier. And perhaps it was the sudden awareness that I was now right before the house in which the suicide took place years ago that sobered me, halted my feet, that, more conscious than I ever was, I began gazing upon one of the places that our fathers lived. It was this time it occurred to me that the essence of my journey here was profoundly self-referential. That is, what actually stuck me to the life of her father all along had to do with myself rather than anyone else. I had hoped, though without knowing this myself until now, to come close to the days of the man's youth, a far distant period from the time he became the man who tore open his bowels. In that sense, and not without immense shame at the sudden recognition of my own depravity and selfishness, I came to infer that I had not in any significant way changed from the boy I was in the field years ago. That I had only come to know the man as he was when he was about my age and the subsequent happenings that led him to the final decision of climbing the roof of his house to run himself onto the hands of death. Therefore his daughter was only a ground for me to exploit and achieve this aim, to escape the affliction that drove him off to the roof of this house. Against what I had duped myself to believe in the first instance as the reason behind my journey here, I came fundamentally to seek safety. This safety, however, seemed unreachable where I now stood a few yards from the house. On the left side, where a giant thorny plant clothed by a mass of cobwebs slanted across a corroded garden clippers, a cluster of concrete and steel patterns on the ground, relics of razed building that once stood there like a lost city, ran across the stretch of land. Further that view, fifty meters past a large stone sitting on dumped zinc and over the plot on which goats roamed, a gully tore past what appeared like a tomb. On the far side of it a ferocious fire burned the dry grass in a manner that it seemed it was signaling to me that grass would never grow there again. In the sky above the fire, giant birds, birds found only in villages, moved upon the face of the darkness of the burning. And not until I receded onto a mound as if moving away from the view of the burning ground to overlook a small field of vegetable and the woman working it, west side of the house, that I became aware I was being watched by a child who ducked behind the mud fence as our gaze met. Curious, I came down the mound, crossed the open ground toward the boy, the dry prickly weeds dusted with skin flakes of grains broke underneath my steps and blew tiny clouds. The cold was gentler today and the sun, unexpectedly, had refused to rise. The fine sand and the dry grass made my feet more bedraggled each step I took across the open ground. Behind the fence, the boy, now backing this way, sat on a stool looking over grains in an unfurled tarpaulin to the wind. A man, whose face I could not see from my view at once, worked at something in front of him. Some nine meters from them, a row of shrubs, maybe herbs, stretched along a footpath onto a neighboring property so that the view reminded me of the entrance of my primary school decorated with plants on either side. I turned back to the boy and the man. I cleared my throat loud enough to get their attention, and when they turned around, alarmed, it was the same man on the train, he who had taken her away at the school days ago. It was when he was fully turned this way that I could see he had been working on a diesel machine on the ground, his hands blackened with grease. He was embarrassed, and stuttering, asked if I was here looking for her. I nodded. The man gestured the boy to lead into the compound.

The compound appeared to have been swept a little while back, a few twigs lay across patterns left in the sand by the broom. The boy led inside the house, which I immediately observed to be a two-room house. I took a seat by a window of broken grass, with chipped woods that sufficed for the missing panes. The room was almost bare. No

carpet covered the cement floor, the wallpapers, obviously from the '90s, aligned to a map peeling off the wall. Somewhere on the map, I noticed as I came close, someone had used a blue marker to circle Zanzibar lying in the Indian Ocean, off the coast of Tanzania. At a corner, a TV set in a wooden box sat on a stool, beside it, on a bigger stool, were stacks of dated newspapers, maps, family photo albums, hymnals and religious pamphlets. Without being told, I knew that her father lived here alone. And now she lived here alone. There was no door in the opening connecting both rooms, so that, despite the darkness in the next room, with a stare I could make out the piles of laundry on the floor and the ruffled bed. I busied myself taking in the room as I waited for her to finish from the bathroom, where I had been told she was.

I sat, looking in amazement at the similarity of this room to the one in which I born, the one my mama still lived in. The setting, which now frightened me, had an uncomfortable exactness to the one in my toddler world in the '90s. I began asking myself how she descended into this decay. I watched the leather shoe case hanging on the wall, the Singer sewing machine parked at the arm of a chair, the tears and colored patches of the chairs, and they all belonged to the past. I could not but persuade myself to think that she had deliberately let herself moved from the present to the past.

I heard the sound of an aluminum bucket being dropped in the compound, then footsteps, one, two, three, and then feet being tapped on the cement doorstep. She entered the house from the compound and went straight to the other room. When she emerged again and passed me, in an oversized sweatshirt on fading baggy shorts, an aloe Vera mint followed after her. She grabbed a seat across me, beside a deep red drawer by the door and she looked younger than she was at the school. She began by stating that she saw me walking to the back of the fence. I asked how. From the bathroom behind the house I could see anyone going to the back of the fence, she said. She expressed no amazement at my sudden appearance. She said that she lost her phone the morning after we last talked online and had since not had access to another one to reach me.

I thought you have return to Kaduna, she said. I apologize for any inconvenience caused, she added, smiling enigmatically. To which I replied that I was fine, that her disappearance afforded me the chance to know more of this part of the world. I managed to inform her that my thought regarding her silence was about the man, that I believed he restrained her from reaching me. She denied it, insisted it was the lost of her phone. After awkward silence, she told me she would appreciate if I do not talk about the man. And little by little we entered a breathless chatter of things in the past, once again. I wanted to know if she had married, and she shook her head. This time, unlike the day before, I had shed off the shyness and was a bit more in control. I was no longer nervous about the man. I observed this made an impression on her, and she could not refrain from saying it to me when in her usual frank but warm tone she remarked on how my timidity, or perceived reclusiveness, those years in the neighborhood irritated her and her buddies. That my frame was too thin, and, worse, the hunchback made me looked pitiable all the time in the neighborhood. She laughed, her shoulder heaving.

Despite the appearance of the course of events from the day at the school and the man outside, there was no sign of distress round about her. This puzzled me. The room was dull but that she the seat by the door, the daylight allowed me to see her. I noticed she still had the shower cap on the head.

After asking about folks we mutually knew in the neighborhood and if I was still painting and doing graffiti, which I said not anymore and explained why, she went further to inquire if I was writing a novel, fiction, and what role I was creating for her father in it.

Well—hesitantly, because I doubted if she would comprehend the argument I was about to make since she had no post-secondary school education—I told her I was not sure what I would be writing. Elucidating that should I write, if I ever bring myself to it, I would love my writing to be read as my convictions and the chaos within and not categorized, that I would prefer them to be read as you would a poem or a dramatic text or photographs, since, I believe, there was no fictional or nonfictional poetry or photography or drama. And having heard me given this opinion, she crossed her jaw with her fingers and assumed a contemplative pose. Then she hissed. Come on bitch, she said, I may not be as well informed as you on this, but you cannot then write real life shit and pass them off as fiction or the other way round. I insist things must be outlined and called by their names; otherwise it would be complete dishonesty on the side of the writer rather than his intended subtleties. You get? She stopped speaking, and I told her she had a valid point there, however, my interaction with literature, and by extension, art, was no longer about utmost predilections and intentionality of the creator but my fluidity as their consumer. And in order not to be seen as stupid or naïve, I confessed that, without realizing it until recently, I had become lost and no longer own a distinct boundary between my memory and dream; that my ex left me because, in her words, I had become hopelessly delusional. That thus if I was to create literature these things—meaning memory, dream and delusion, and my own crisis in them—would essentially affect its form. Having said this, I paused and gauged her to see if she was taking note of my words and then added that if I were to write about her or her father or me, as I planned to do, the truth of the story would definitely be there and nonnegotiable but that I would not therefore hold myself, or allow myself be held, accountable for what does not exist in the pages of my literature.

But even expressing this point with apparent vehemence did not impressed her, and as a consequence she was not reluctant to inform me right on that I had made no sense, that she preferred to stand by the thoughts she had earlier expressed. This embarrassed me a bit. I soon found myself regretting the words I just uttered, because, it seemed to me now that she did not now only consider me stupid and naïve but also untrustworthy. A silence stepped into the room. Outside, I could hear a loud metal sound and in the background, in a raspy voice, a boy shouted at someone to never walk by the house again.

Once again, not without this awkwardness, we found a way from the unease and returned to the chatter. She asked to watch videos on YouTube and I gave her the phone. She coiled in the chair, lost to the screen, I grabbed the book from backpack and reclined in my seat and I lay not sure if I was reading the pages or nervous being there or if I had embarrassed myself. I tried recalling the several issues we chatted and I cringed at the memory regarding the genre argument, visualizing it again I thought it made believe I was showy. Then I pushed aside the thought and wondered about the man and why she it irritated her each time I made to talk about him. I moved the book aside and looked at her, whatever she seeing on YouTube engrossed her. Slowly a heavy sleep came upon me in the seat.

When I woke up the atmosphere had become dull with the dusk approaching. She sat on the floor, putting together a thread of wigs. She suggested we moved out into the compound, toward the kitchen shed in the center of the space. She fetched me a bowl of water, asked me to wash my face that my eyes were bloodshot from the sleep. I thanked her, moved to a corner of the fence and wash. She made fire and began cooking. The man and the boy were gone, or so it appeared. I did not ask her. And taking advantage of the supposed aloneness with her, I inquired to know if she was married and did not want to talk about it. This time, I

used the most innocent tone. She joked back to me, asking if I was falling for her. I said yes. She said she was older than I was, and I replied it meant nothing to me. Then she added that if so, she must me let me know that she would never marry anyone who abstained from calling a thing by its name, someone who invents fiction for people to consider as nonfiction, someone who is an obvious motherfucking scumbag.

This sparked a prolonged laugh. It was irresistible to watch her being so carefree. And I recalled the time in the neighborhood she, the "bad girl", lit up places, the open space at the YMCA grounds, at the local hall by the community market, the basketball court a turn from the road onto the military outpost. I vividly recalled one such night at a street party. I had a place behind a pole and, through the crowd, could view her standing under the brightness of the neon at the stage. Though the light was dim, her Mohawk haircut and the red cup she held were visible. Under the blaring music I watched her moved a yard and began speaking into the ears of some girl who was in a sky blue gown. When they stopped speaking, she handed the red cup to the girl, moved back to the brightness where a boy now stood. They pulled close, started a slow dance, and in no time she was breathtakingly grinding on the boy. I recall, in fact, later that night coming across them as I walked home with friends, she and a group. They stopped to ask we share some lighter with them. As these memories reappeared in my head, I felt an enormous shame inside that she had no idea that my visit was more of myself than her.

I understand your concern, she said. I can understand the worry about him, I mean the man, but… She spoke while busying with the cooking, the pot, stoking the fire. This image of her by the fire and speaking to herself bore exactness to my mama at a chore, angry, mumbling and saying words as though she spoke to no one, when, as a matter of fact, she longed everyone to hear that she was speaking but did not delight doing so. I watched as the smoke of the fire rose to conceal her head, so that she appeared headless on the other side of the fire where she now stooped, like my mama, straining her throat in weary to explain to me, to patriarchy. I am not married to him, she shouted to me across the fire. I am not. And please can we not talk about him any longer? She emphasized. She walked to the shed that towered over the cooking place, hoisted down a mortar, returned to the fireside, panned over the many bowls about there onto a plateful of spice, and carried it back to the mortar. She winnowed the spice in the bowl and at the same time struggled to hold back her loosening wrapper on the waist. She poured the spice into the mortar and retied the cloth properly. She stretched to the roof of the shed and dragged a pestle, which made a ceramic bowl fell from there and smashed against the hard ground. She did not looked at the shattered utensil; instead she began to crush the content in the mortar. She halted the pounding at once, turned toward me and asked if I had allergy for garlic. I shook my head. Open your mouth and answer me, she said, with little but distinct irritation in the tone. I obeyed. I asked if I could give her a hug, she pretended not hearing me. I watched the space of the compound, the motorcycle parked at the corner, the hens pecking about, the red head of an agama lizard protruding from inside a broken part of the outside ceiling of the house, the withered pumpkin plant at the space between the west of the mud fence and the wall of the house. The slow, patient darkness could be felt in the evening cold.

I turned my gaze back to the fire, fixed upon the aluminum pot that was now fuming and sizzling. Pwaangulongii, she called, which was the first time she would do so since I arrived. I am sorry for speaking that way. She stopped. I told her that her words were not unsavory, that I understood the innocence underlying it and thus I could not be indignant by them. Then she gave a naughty laugh, saying, is it why then you sit your ass there like the African man you are and watching me labor alone at a meal we both would eat? Come on

bitch, grab a bucket and get me some water from the back of the fence. I went, as she had demanded. Passed the way on which the boy had earlier led me into the compound, I came to the place where he was seated with the man, both the grains in the tarpaulin and the fellows had gone, further that way I lowered the bucket into the well, pulleyed out the colored, grass-ridden water. I returned. Having dropped the bucket of water nearby her, I moved to my seat. The falling darkness, of course, amplified the quietness of the house, the nearest voices that were heard came from the compound a distance away. I asked how she managed to live here alone all these years. She replied, as if cautioning me, that I must ceased any attempt at turning her mood sore. Moments later, despite I was aware of the downright insensitivity on my end, I found myself telling her about the death of my principal again and how, years later, I traveled to the village of U to meet his brother in order to get more details about him, about his loneliness. It was the first time I would relay this event to anyone, and even as I did before her I had no idea what it was that propelled me. I had another urge as well, this time, to narrate the story of baba and the unspeakable shame in which I found myself regarding him, but a stone in my chest halted the words. She broke the silence later, because, she wanted to know why I was telling her these stories. I kept silent, looking as she moved back and forth in the compound, washing the dishes, wiping the pots dry with a cloth, shooing the hens from fence to their house on the other side of the compound. Till a few years back, I never managed to ponder the connection between the railroads, the meticulously built colonial buildings and the houses in which these fathers lived. And so, even now as I write this, it bothers me immensely to accept that whatever the connection there was had to be a perfect industry to blur the line between silence and the sense of commitment against vacantness and decay. Watching her did all this, I recalled traveling to my hometown before the trip to America. Looking to get an interview concerning baba from the eldest son of my grandfather, who now was very old and regarded as the patriarch of the family, I visited his house again, months ago. It was one late afternoon when I got to the village. I disembarked the bus along other passengers at the bus station and I started the road for the house. From the stalls that made up the beehive of the village, where the aroma of boiled corn and roasted yam and bushmeat hung, I came upon a mosque adjacent to a cement depot. This mosque was built the year I became six or so. I passed through a path behind a defunct clinic onto a house whose broken doors revealed its vacantness. Thereabout I had to go round a massive barn that seemed to be stuffed with cassava to reach another part of the slope. That side of the village, I passed a compound thronged with hunting dogs and men and music and beer. I turned right beside a house and ascended the slope land leading to the house, through clusters of huts and dilapidating brick houses, then by a crooked corner, across a collection of cola trees, the imposing rear of the house became visible before me, so that, like looking at a building atop a hill from a distance at the ridge I could see the enormous stone doorsteps of the house overhead. At the extreme point of this rear view were two graves and a giant concrete pavement and behind them a woody entrance to the neighboring compound, belonging to an eminent imam of the village. The graves, as I had been told since childhood, belonged to my grandfather and his father. I recalled my relentless walk up and down this slope as a child with my back almost breaking with distress, down to the compound of my grandmother and back up to baba's. I continued to the house and it was when I came closer, though, that I discovered that the manicured lawn with which the house gained its reverence had turned a parched stretch brimming of black sand and unappealing stones. Viewing this, it emerged in my consciousness that the dwindling grass and sparse shrubs I had begun noticing in recent travels were more than forerunners of the approaching desert. And furthermore, amidst the discovery of this desolation, I looked at

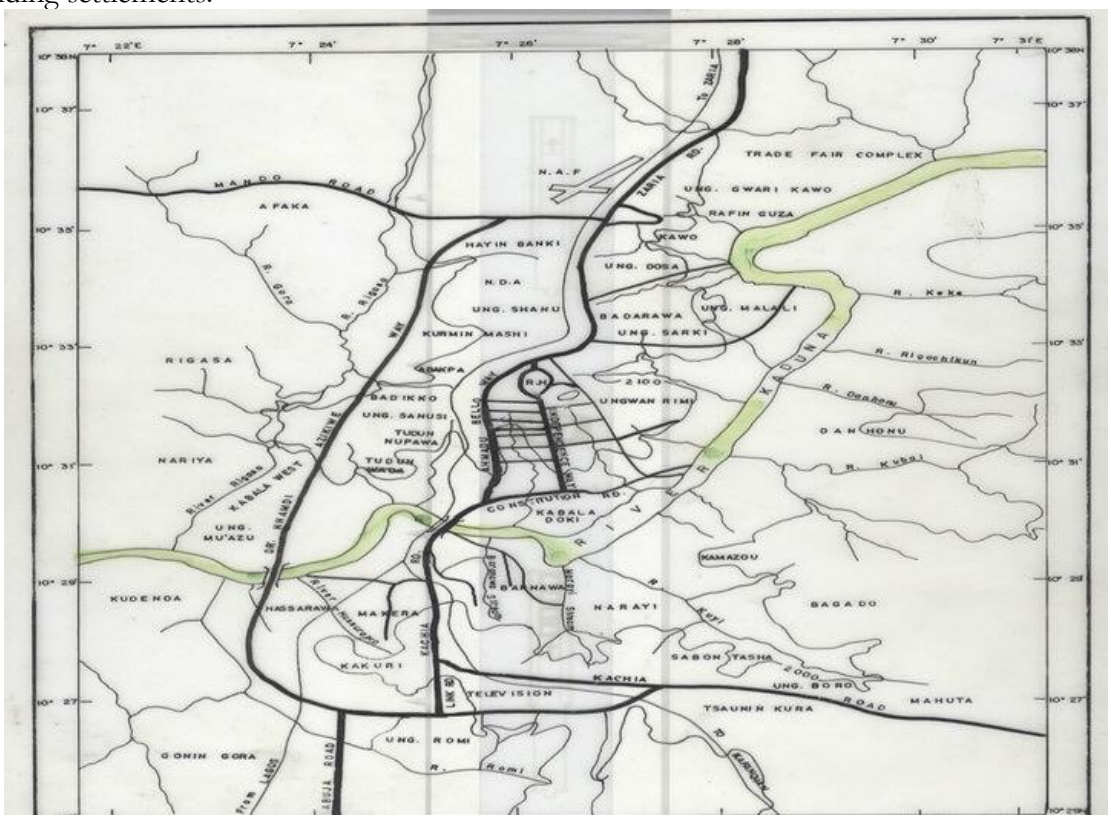
how small the house had become in my adult eyes, when as a child, and even hitherto, it was the only dignified house in my family, meant for the patriarch. The very high doorsteps that I laboriously climbed as a child could now be covered in three to four strides. Then inside the house, like this house in which Nina now lived, the scenes were much more disenchanting. When I entered the once elegant sitting room of mighty glasses and polished mahogany chairs, I could not but furthered into the other rooms and they, like everything else in my life, were stuffed with silence, dust, broken glass, shabby bedframes, and black-and-white, grainy photographs. It appeared like a disused archive. I never imagined the throne-like chairs, impressive photo enlargements hanging on the walls, and the luxurious carpets could lose all dignity. Outside, at the veranda, where I would later be seated on a bench in the falling dusk, I found that the same recliner on which I watched this patriarch lay all the time in the '90s had not been replaced. Compressed to the woods and reclining rings, it bore a "stunning exactness" to the world to which both of us belonged in the mid '90s. Nina came near where I was, arms crossed on the chest and staring at the boiling pot on fire. She said nothing nor did I. I rose, with a crack in my knees. A little while after I rose from the seat, something caught my eyes above the fence, a distant distinct light. The darkness had arrived. It was cold but not as the previous nights in the village. The branches of trees outside the fence waved in the wind. The light that caught my eyes, which I took as a traveling satellite in the horizon, began a "staccato flash", then, as if disgusted by my scrutiny, "grew dimmer and less and less distinct". I recall asking her if she noticed the light and instead of a response, she moved nearer to me, gave a side hug. I pulled closer, her pelvis pressed against my hip, the warmth. It must have been the first time in a long while that I stood so close to someone I truly wanted to go to bed with and feared being tormented afterwards.

It might have sounded rather bizarre when, over dinner, to divert from the chatter and prompt her into the conversation that I actually came for, I asked if her father's passing had anyway reinforced her sense of freedom. But I was too invested in the details of the man's life that good sense eluded me. And seeming not to care of the consternation I anticipated, her answer carried a certain amount of dismissiveness instead. She put it this way: I know why you ask this question. I was away from my father when he was alive and now in death I am trying to be closer to him, right? Well, nigga, you must know who I truly am. I am a heathen. She paused speaking, staring me. I stared back, holding spoon to the bowl of beans porridge before me and struggling to process her words. Later she removed the stare, nibble for seconds and added faintly, hey motherfucker, I mean what I just told you. I am heathen.

We were back in the room, the power that had not been all day was restored by the time it was seven o'clock. The room had more light than what it was in the daytime, so that, observing it this instant it seemed as though it had undergone an expeditious phase to worsen the decrepit I noted when I first arrived. Above the wallpapers were numerous scrapes. Little by little she started discussing her father with me, insisting as a caution that there was not a thing in his story worth appearing in a book, that is, if I truthfully intended to write one by the way. That it seemed like I had come with a hope to encounter a convoluted narrative of her father, and since books, the ones she had read, she added, use the instrument of bewilderment to traffic their concerns, she was afraid that my hope would be thwarted by the plainness of the story, because, that was how she had seen it. That although people always made a case out of his death seeing that it had happened as a suicide, she did not consider it unique. There are many ways to die, many reasons that caused death, why heap attention on one than the other, she said. That being the case, I am afraid that,

including its paltriness, you will be disheartened that what I have to tell is not what you came for.

My father arrived this state in 1973 or 4 and some years later, using his A' Level certificate, became an employee at a flourmill. Prior to this time he had worked at a Wharf in the West. Lagos, I think. This flourmill which he had begun working at was in a small industrial estate two miles east of the neighborhood. She began speaking, and as if I was unfamiliar to this location or hoping to explain its significance to the story, she painstakingly described said area. Arced at a distance by the river that meandered down through the city, she said, the flourmill sat in a settlement named Kudenda at the tip of the forest. The settlement overlooked a bypass. Until recently and regardless of the season the groves and dense foliage rose to meet the hills overlooking the bypass. The mills, brewery, and construction plants that made this industrial estate pulled a mass of unskilled workers from the hinterlands through the late '70s to the '90s and thus increased the population of the surrounding settlements.



My father, she said, like many fathers of the neighborhoods back in Kaduna, was a member of a group of young men who arrived for a new life. There at the flourmill, he worked at various jobs ranging from truck driving, plant guard, to office assistance. In 1989, the year he married my mother, a nineteen-year-old student at the nearby Cooperative College, he left the flourmill for better earning at a beer and beverage plant just around the corner in the estate. He was the head of transport department, if I remember right. She paused speaking, hastened to close the door against the wind blowing into the room, and before sitting back on the floor where she had been since after the dinner, she cleared the dishes, went to the other room and returned with a heavy jacket. Smiling and shoving it to me she said, wear it for the cold. I did. After asking to be reminded the point she was making, she continued.

At the time, the young couple lived in a two-room apartment in the neighborhood across the plant, a settlement of about ten thousand people. It had one main road and no real center. Except the now defunct vocational training institute thirty minutes walks away, the only government buildings nearby were the local council headquarters, a small police station, and a magistrate court. And, as was normal for working class family at the time, they squeezed through the income to purchase a TV set, a radio and put nice curtains at the doors and windows. She stopped speaking. She stretched backward to reach one of the photo albums by the old TV set and showed me a photograph of the family taken at the time when she was two, standing beside her mother who sat on an armchair and giving the camera some bold pose, her father towered over them. You do not how much I fucking love this photo, she said. It is the single image of my family in my head, just look at how we were bossing in the photo. I took the photo. In the photograph I could see the floral curtain on the door behind the family. Not long after this photo, she continued, my mother capitalized on her husband's connection at the brewery and opened a beer shop across the street, pushing the baking business to the spare times. They did this, she emphasized to me as if it was not their obligation, so that I could be at a good school. My mother maintained the bar, which in the due course became almost the main joint in the area, while my father continued working his shifts weekdays, and weekends, frequented social events mostly put up by colleagues at the brewery.

Each evening men came to the bar, sat in the chairs in the open and the rest would be the clinking of bottles against the glass till it was late. I was little but I remember the men talking loud and laughing without care. My father joined them and he too would talk and open his mouth wide in ceaseless laughter. Come to think of it, I do not recall what they talked about or the cause of their joyful noise but I have those memories of the men laughing in the seats in front of the bar.

There is a memory of my father that can never erase from me. Sometimes he came home with a company van with which he delivered drinks to nearby beer shops, hotels, restaurants and so on. Always in the evening. I would be playing in the sand in front of the house and once I heard the honking of the van, I sprinted to it and climbed in through the driver's seat. In the van and over his body hung the smell of alkali and soda and receipt ink. I was familiar with that honking as my name and my father made it on purpose each time he neared home because I knew he loved watching me run toward the van. We would first circle aimlessly around the neighborhoods and the fields as though he was not working on schedule. Just both of us, well, sometimes a friend of his joined us. Afterwards, he drove out of the streets onto the road and head out to the customers. He let me wind down the window glass, where I raised out my hair a bit in the air outside even though my mother had argued him to stop me doing so. And whenever the van pulled before a bar or hotel he unlocked the other door and still in his own seat with the belt strapped he insisted I climbed down myself. He watched me did so, pretending a greater surprise than he felt as I struggled down the steps of the van. And boy, I cherished that moment. Once he joined me, we would go into the bar and grabbed a seat, leaving the unloading entirely to the bar or hotel's workers. Though my mother had a bar and he had crates of drinks stacked at home, he would summon the bartender to bring us drinks. It was so we would stay, drinking and chatting as if he had no more places to deliver until someone who knew him as the driver says something about him chilling out here when his van is blocking the way.

I never lived with my parents to have many memories of my father because by the time I was five I moved to stay at my grandmother's place in the city of Jos. My memory of those early days was pleasant nonetheless. He had numerous friends, who most of the times

were with him in the house or at my mother's beer shop, doing what men would do. I was close to him. I remember crying each moment he left the house, looking to be in his arms round the clock. My family was well known in the neighborhood, thanks to a flamboyant father and a mother who had the biggest neighborhood shop. Those days, as young as I was, I had the pleasure of watching neighbors fondly rivaled against each other to have me for the day, telling my mother how beautiful I was.

The other memories are as well tiny, she continued. By which I mean to say that apart from the being dropped at school daily by either of them; walking together to Sunday service and taken to the Sunday school; reciting bible verses in the adult service; staying by my mother at the beer shop till it was late night when we would cross back to the house; mingling with the other kids in the street; and of course, frequenting the tailors' stalls at the market to shop fabrics for blouses, skirts, and gowns, my life at the time was without momentous happenings. My mother sewed many of those dresses for me, and though I loved the smell of fabrics at the tailors' I always felt myself recoiling from them, specifically the skirts. Which is to further say I have no memory of a birthday ceremony. We were, you could say, a happy bunch. We had friends, livable income, good neighbors who had friends and livable income, a TV set, and we could afford nice curtains on the doors and windows. My father knew what his family needed, she said. Then added, my father never let me used a pair of sandals for more a term in school. He never.

By the time I became five, I left Kaduna with my grandmother who came visiting the family. And not until I turned thirteen I rarely came back to the house, meaning it was my parents who had to do the regular visits to the city of Jos where my grandmother, my mother's mother, had a house. In the month of September 2002, months after the sharia riots in Kaduna, my second year in secondary school, I moved back to my parents who now were living in the neighborhood, in a house five minutes walk from the YMCA building. My father no longer worked at the brewery and my mother had sold the beer shop. It seemed they waited for me to leave for them to become what they now were. The explanation for this was that my father had begun attending a new church, where, according to my mother, he received the Lord. And receiving the Lord meant, with his family, he kept a complete distance from the world, from dealing and earning by sales of alcohol.

My earliest observation of them both at the time was that my mother remained inside the house all week at her baking and my father, when not at the scrap merchant's due to his recent despairing unemployment, would not leave the auditorium of the church. Our house that once had many friends visiting had gone quiet except for the tireless prayers, hymns along with sermon tapes, or the machine at which my mother worked. The truth was I saw them drifting away from me, from their lives, one into the big arms of the Lord and the other into another marriage.

I stayed with my father and if you ask I can describe in full every detail of that house. He preferred I wear skirts and never sagged pants, but of more importance, avoid the streets. He would come to the couch in the parlor where I slept and woke me up each night and admonished that he did not want to see me stand with the boys in the street. When I wear perfume he pulled me back inside the house, sat across me with a bible in hand and begin to tell me about the "lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life". Weekdays, not without reluctance though, we went to the services in the church. But the relationship would be short-lived. And it happened this way: one day he walked in on me with some boy on the bed. I cannot explain any further than that. But you should know that he demanded I quit living with him immediately. And I did, moving to a house down the street.

She stood up from the floor and sat next to me. She started speaking again. He continued working in the church for a long time. I have no knowledge of his job there anyway. He never spoke to me anymore and I heard from people that he considered me a disgrace to him. It continued this way when someone I do not remember hinted me that my father was no longer living in the neighborhood, that he had moved to a village, meaning this very one. My findings would later reveal that he had come here at the visitation of my mother's distant relative. That relative is the man you met at the school; the one you met this afternoon. She paused.

When I inquired the reason why her father had relocated here from the neighborhood, she said he came on the invitation of the man who had been living here but that it was more complicated and would not be appropriate to explain to me. However, she warily hinted about a venture embarked upon by her father and this man, which failed and provoked a disagreement between them. In addition to this, she told me she was not aware that her father had been traveling from this village to work on the cornfield in Kaduna. When I went further with such questions such as the specific reasons behind her father's suicide and what kind of disagreements he had with the man and how those related to her staying back in the village, she yelled I stopped being stupid.

It was hence almost eleven o'clock when she would not speak any further about the subjects that I stood up to leave and she looked at me dismayed. You want to leave now that the night is far-gone? It is not safe this, a murder was only reported some nights ago. And having noted this, she passed and bolted the door, adjusted the curtain to conceal the hollows and cracks on it. Walking back from there, I asked her for a mat to cover the floor. She carried on into the other room and moment later, came out with a blue mat and a blanket. I spread it, sat on the mat for a while with my back leaned against a stool, then lay prone, and on second thoughts I rose, walked to the side of the TV set and made for the bunch of photo albums there. Sorting through them made a black sack leaning against the wall behind the stool fall the other way, spilling dozens of old grimy microcassettes and videotapes onto the floor. A brief, faint cloud of smoke billowed about the place. I kept the albums I was carrying on the TV, stooped down and gathered the tapes in the sack. The dust on the tapes and floor, discomfortingly old, seemed to have been left purposefully. With stretches of cobwebs, the dust formed like ugly wool. I never talked to her about this, but putting this incidence along my earlier observation of dust left untouched on the television screen, the edges of the stools, chairs and radio, wallpapers, and the lintels, it was simple to speculate. I stood the sack in its place and moved to grab a broom by the door, meaning to sweep the remaining dirt. She called my name, told me that sweeping at night was taboo to *their* people. I stood for a moment, a bit embarrassed that she had been watching me, and then turned back to the photo albums on the television. I added two more from the collection on the stool and walked back to the mat. I managed to avoid her gaze until I sat down. She was reclining in the chair in which I earlier lay as she narrated the story. She now was quiet, chewed at a fingernail, and kept an inscrutable stare toward the opening to the other room. The light was still on and the room had grown warm. Not certain what more might upset her as well as myself being overwhelmed by the thought that she felt tormented of my insistence at pulling this almost tactile memory of desolation to a more or less stranger, I took to silence and commenced, one by one, perusing the photographs. Most of them were, observably, taken prior to the 2000s.

The first photo that struck me was a 'portrait' of her father as a young man. Against a background of ashen wall, on what appeared like a veranda fronted by railings, the man stood before a gray window and looked out over the camera, so that one had the impression that his thought was at an object behind the photographer. His spruce afro and exquisite creases on the coat and pants reminded me of a photo of baba I once saw in Aunty Naomi's collection. However, remarkably, rather than its expected appeal to my concern of the past, this particular image drew my gaze due to its uncluttered ness.

When I showed it to Nina, complimenting its astonishing resolution and simpleness, she said the man in the photo was not her father but an uncle, and that the photo was taken in front of her grandfather's house before the war. I did not voice it to her, but I regarded the man in the photo as her father.

I came upon other such photos of him. One of this showed him as older man than he was in the previous image. Opening the door of a white van, the camera caught full his back onto his right side. And looking at this view of him, particularly the neck side to the jaw, I could see how much Nina looked like him. The photo was a simulation, I assumed. Another photo that appealed to me had him with two friends. They sat in a field and posed to the camera as teenagers. He was positioned between the two boys, looking and pointing at the boy left I wondered what he was staring. Then I leafed through the album onto a photo of him in a football team. A team of fourteen players in green striped jerseys, he stood next to the goalkeeper who stood in the middle. I turned to the back of the photo to see the date and it read Flourmill staff football team 11—05—1984. Union Cup. The men in the photo were aged between late 20s to late 40s. It seemed to be near kickoff of a game but, oddly, the men were all profusely sweating. This is the first photo in which I found him smiling, so that despite the graininess one still could see the goofy smile reveal snaggleteeth. I had passed numerous photos of him with siblings, choir members, church brethren, family, coworkers, friends, alone, but it was this specific one I saw him putting on a smile. Somehow it bothered me. Once again I stretched and showed the photo to Nina, who now was leafing through a magazine she had taken from my backpack. She chuckled, saying, that football was his next love after music; that he once threw a plate at her for covering his view while watching a game on TV. She stood up, laughing, and pulled aside her shirt in the upper part of the left trapezius to reveal a thick scar. That is evidence of his mad love of football, she said. She moved back to the seat and I repressed the question about the smiling man.

There was a photo of Nina herself in one of the albums. She should be nine or eleven at the time it was taken. She leaned her shoulder against the iron pole of the blue awning of a hall. Left hand on the hip, right feet slightly crossed on the left, in a white lace dress she feigned amused face onto the camera. The photograph must have been taken in the late afternoon, the shadows of the roof and the bodies of people nearby cast on the floor were visible, and the low sun could be discerned in the orange glow in the space of the shot. In a distance behind her, 7up logo drawn upon a board appeared in the photo. I showed her the photo, joked if she was modeling for 7up. She said it was a children's camp organized by her father's church. Turning the back of the photograph I found the name Joan written there. I asked if it was her name, to which she nodded. Moments later she explained that Joan was her real name and not Nina. She became Nina while staying at grandmother's where a neighbor said her voice was deep as Nina Simone's, who she had not known at the time; that the neighbor later introduced her to the songs and videos of Nina Simone and she felt the compulsion to change her name from Joan to Nina. After knowing who she was, she said, I wanted to be everything she was in the songs and videos.

It was thus by this that I realized that the voice to which I had been striving all along to correlate with her own was Nina Simone.

After looking through some photos of her mother, one in which she sat before a group and drink in hand and the other as a child standing at a birthday table of Coca Cola and food, I put the photos aside and sprawled on the mat. I could not determine what time it was for my phone had gone off for low battery and she had no clock or a watch in the house. She asked if I preferred the light turned off. I said no. She nonetheless walked to the switch by the door and turned the light off. I adjusted my body on the mat in the darkness and spread the blanket over. I could make out her movements in the room, to and fro both rooms. Then after a lengthy quietness I heard the bed in the other room creaked, which I took to be her finally going to sleep. I lay there and could not understand a thing. I had become more frightened than I ever was before the trip. I pulled the blanket over my face, eyes opened underneath. I heard her movement again, this time, to the room in which I was. She came by the mat and though the blanket covered my eyes, I knew she stood right before my body, in the space between the TV set and the mat. She stood there for minutes and I restrained myself from coming off under the blanket. She lifted something beside the TV set which made a noise. It was a radio. She turned it on, tuned onto an FM station on which a call-in program was happening. She moved to the mat, sat on it, that I felt her body close. She whispered my name and told me to make space for her on the mat. I did, and literally a lump came in my throat. She kept the talking radio at the top of the mat and covered herself with another blanket. Nina, I said, could you please let me hug you? Why? She replied. Because I want to, I said. She chuckled and said no. I shall never let anyone who evades calling a thing by its true name cuddle me, she added. Never. I shall never, never, and never allow someone who writes nonfiction and prefer people read it otherwise, she said, chuckling. Another lengthy silence passed and she asked if I was sincere about writing a book, if I truly wanted to become a writer. I said I hoped to write one but was afraid to do so, that I was not certain if being a writer of books was the direction of my life. I ended the reply. And as I was dozing she said quietly, I am sorry for the loss of your principal. My condolence.

It was about five o'clock when she woke me to leave the house before the man came around. I managed through the dark room to reach the light switch by the door but the light was gone. I opened the door for a bit of light to trace for the backpack, my sandals and cigarettes. I gathered the belongings. I walked to the door where she stood chewing a root. She let me hugged her. I asked if she wanted anything done for her, if she needed anything, and she said shook her head, emphasized that she was fine here and did not want me to visit again without her invitation. I stayed quiet for a while and it occurred to me I had not mentioned the fellow in the church who

directed me to the house yesterday. When I said it, describing him as high cheekbone, she told me his name was Yohanna—the pastor's son. We hugged again and parted and I was halfway through the compound, by the cooking place, when she called me, Pwaan, if you can afford it, please get me a piano. A piano.

I came out of the compound and for a moment became lost of the way out of the place. The fog and darkness almost obscured the view. But without much thought, I took my right and began ascending a road. The cold was rather intense and the darkness seemed murky that I felt weighty force slowing my movement. A fatigue stood in my joints, especially in the shoulders. Little by little, after passing a field of scrubs, signs of life emerged around me; folks walking past to the fields; the distant singing of morning prayers reaching me from homes and nearby churches; the headlights of motorcycles; and, somewhere, around an intersection where a stall stood, I recognized the road on which I was—the same which took me to her father's church yesterday. Fogs thick as phosphorus abound in the area. My movement became freer and yet as I moved farther away from that part of the village, and with supreme sadness gathering within, I found myself striving to understand all I had seen. I could not tell if I had been transformed in anyway. Perhaps just as she noted, I had come over anticipating tense moments of drama, and they never happened. She had narrated a brief story of her father and I had seen pieces of that story in photographs but nothing made sense. In fact, it felt like I had not heard a thing about him. What beset this walk thus was wholly about her, that she remained here, and I wondered what they did to her. Listening to her, watching her move about, it was obvious she had arrived the extreme too soon. And it should be noted that apart from this sadness in me I was also disappointed, because, amongst several thoughts prior to leaving Kaduna I had imagined that seeing me come for her she would fall on me and weep and tell it all and plead that I *save* and get her out of this wasteland at once. She did not; she was in perfect control of overseeing her decline. I was not sure if it was her refusal to make me accomplished the savior role I dreamed of or her inability to fully let me into the life of her father or my naivety to discern what it was that tied her in this village which now stung me deep inside. Of course, although the uncanny presence of the man in her life astounded me as I walked away this morning, it was the resigned fatigue in her eyes, voice and body that most frightened me. Not long after a corner, by a store flanked by studded fence, I stopped walking. Less than five minutes I emptied the remaining cigarettes. It was there I stood contemplating going back when the man rode his motorcycle down the road from whence I came—the same shirt he wore behind the fence yesterday. I was not sure if he saw me standing there.

Part Two

[…] All the fears with which I had grown up, and which were now a part of me and controlled my vision of the world, rose up like a wall between the world and me, and drove me into […]

—James Baldwin

The Schooldays of Turbulent Bodies

Or, What It Means to Lose the Body

I.

God hath spoken once; twice have I heard this… (Psalm 62:11, King James Version)

I doubt if anything else has defined existence like the struggle to control the body, especially the kind one engages *in* during moments of horror, that certain contestation against forces craving to *own* the human body. Until a couple of years ago, I had no clue whatsoever about how to navigate through this system of control that spanned across scores of generational anxieties to render me almost bodiless. In short, to confess—since I plan to tread cautiously in this tale—I could barely understand the frame of the warfare raging within me, which, like an atlas of fear and shame, had smothered my *purpose*, or, perhaps, what I had come to recognize as *this purpose*. For it felt, and still is, like turbulence that was designed solely to liquidate me.

When I was a teenager I could literally hear the sound of roaring inside me as though engines revved under my skin. An intense heat would run through my bones, until I clenched my fists and running to sit on the train tracks that passed behind the house where I was living, and even though I cannot now still say precisely why I had come to love taking solitary walks on the train tracks, I remember my feet misbehaving like they had stepped on rusty nails once I returned from the wandering to sit at Mo's café in the neighborhood, as usual every night, taking a cup of mint tea. I always failed to confide in anyone. This inability to describe the struggle in my body was perhaps, not surprisingly though, natural concomitant of my shame, perhaps because I was surrounded by people who persistently remained impenetrable, or because there was no simply language with which to tell it simply.

In the years before then, between the ages of four to seven when I had not discovered the words shame, soul, body, impenetrable, as well as their meanings, I would cry from hearing voices in air around me to the point where my mama began consulting a prophet who ran a small congregation some blocks away from our house on a farm compound which sat on a rock and overlooking a millet field, by the outpost of a dormant military base that still stood decades after the civil war. This prophet subjected me to a series of exorcisms, like standing me naked for long hours under the sun and sprinkling a stench-filled concoction, upon my face in poorly lit rooms until a peppery bite spread across my face, about the rim of my nostrils, lips and all the way to the earlobes. If it reached my mouth the minty sour taste created a spasm. Other times I was placed on mat, encircled by the congregation whose chanting filled the air on end, while the old prophet rammed a razor into several parts of my back, spine and thighs. These moments I believe marked the beginning of the struggle to control my own body, a battle fiercer than I ever imagined. The word 'control' as deployed here refers far more to the condition of a dancer or an athlete than that of a prig.

To begin, I think that all humanity's struggle is, first and foremost, a struggle to possess the body, any kind of body; this sort of possession could have several purposes depending on the situation of control: possess the body to love it, or to destroy it, or to increase one's ego of possession, or to remove it completely from within the presence of a horror. It is constant. It is everyday, oftentimes embodied in the mundane like the large brown bell hanging on the cathedral down Fatima Road, so that the more you gaze at it the

more *poetry* oozes from the rhythm of the ordinary. Camus through Sisyphus in one huge classic attempt to *re-see* things outline the contours and appetites of this struggle with existence. What I recognized in Sisyphus is simply this: the emphasis on Sisyphus's tussle on the impact the ceaseless, eternal condemnation was exerting on his body in that moment and his own hope to control this body through it. Both the boulder and the rolling up the hill are mere secondary images pointing to a real condition. The 'real' in this case is Sisyphus's body. If carefully reimagined one would realize that the boulder and the rolling are not actually the substance of that mythic concern but serve as a contingent upon which we are solemnly asked to recognize that Sisyphus's core struggle was neither the boulder nor its eternal fate, not even the curse itself either, but, rather the constant fight to control his body in the presence of horror, in the limited time between the boulder being rolled up the hill and its eventual descent. How did he toughen his body to prepare for the next roll up the hill? What kind of control did he imagine he had over his body within those moments? What fears conditioned his reaction to his body?

This, I claim, is the kind of horror one experiences in the act of controlling the body when the forces heightened reflex, the very kind which sat in the body of Conrad's Kurtz and which he saw when hands of death reached for his body in the boat in the Congo that he couldn't bear until he cried out, "The horror! The horror!" It is the same horror that Hemingway's "old man" encounters as he struggles with his catch at sea. This is the truth, the recognition which gives meaning to Sisyphus's struggle, the ever presence of a horror lurking around the body and the continual tussle to protect against it.

And the use of horror in this sense doesn't only infer negativity. Indeed, it's the total sum of all realities, hypocrisies, plunders, histories within which we realize that we are entities embodying more than flesh and bone and fluids and urges and goodness and politics and destinies and dreams.

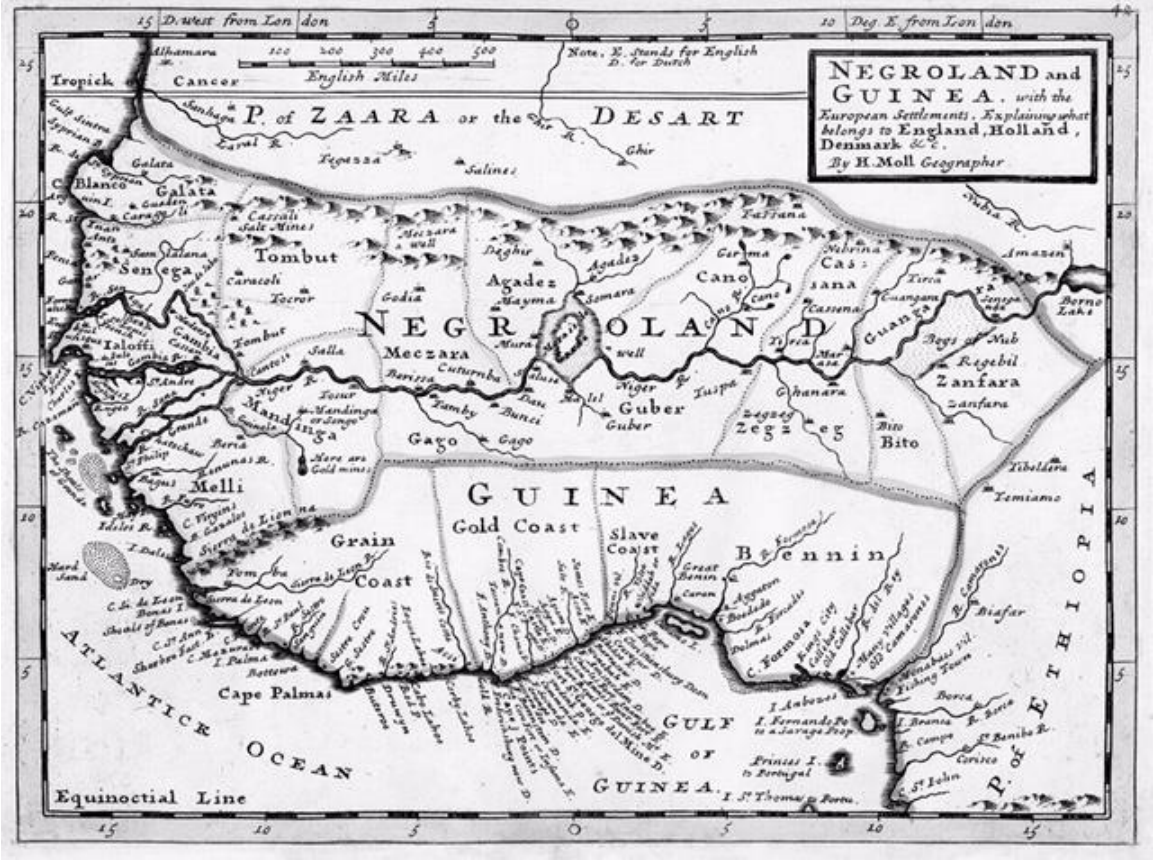
Many times we are oblivious to these horrors. Sometimes, it's a "learned obliviousness" and other times, we never recognize it until we are dead. Howbeit, sadly, unawareness doesn't displace its evidence. For instance, to use a vulgar illustration since life or existence itself is one vulgar product: Years ago in a small township known for its rubber plantations, a man, recently divorced and now working as a lonely cobbler, a bad trade in that town if I must say, walked into the office of a plantation manager one morning and warned him to halt production if he loved his life. The man had no idea what he was doing but the manager, like all foolish men, laughed it off. This stout, he said in his rich voice, heartbroken pauper of a cobbler has gone out of his mind to come threatening me, he said. Days after the cobbler returned and shot dead all the plantation workers alongside the manager, and he hurried to hand himself over to the law who afterwards gave him a life sentence. This cobbler used the resources of the plantation for his trade, but this trade increased the immensity of his torment and to displace this discomfort in order to save his body he opted to experience another horror. Years later, one day in the jail, after lunch, moments after the afternoon prayers, he stood in the mess hall and stretched out with a loud yawn, licked his lip, rubbed his belly with one hand like the asshole he truly was and, raised the middle finger of the other hand up yelling: *At least, here, I get free meals and room. Free. To hell with you all!*

To speak of the struggle to control the body therefore is to imagine, although not exclusively, a condition to face the existence of horror.

In August 2014, not long after my awakening to the destruction of bodies in my family, I found myself wandering the city of Kaduna struggling to comprehend my own space in this dismal narrative. I was immediately filled with dread at the thought of adulthood. I suffer a particular illness of the mind that stiffly resists treatments. By some means I discerned nighttime wandering as palliative measure of living with it. So I left my apartment and walked the city every night, through streets and alleyways, down the campus, past factories, across fields, remote railroads and then at dawn strolled back. Every time I was plagued with the thought of losing my own body, of it being destroyed. It felt like invisible forces were lurking at the corners to lynch me, to humiliate my body, to dispossess me of it. Even now as I compose these pages, almost four years after wandering that old city, I am deeply possessed by this suspicion. I now recall precisely the manner of my footsteps from the house where I was living, down the train tracks that remotely meandered into town. I could not explain the full images in my head at the time but I was somehow convinced that walking this city could save my body. How I cringe at this thought. And indeed it was during this lost to fear and shame that the thought of body as hereditary occurred to me. I had meandered to a tributary about an hour away from my house and lay sprawled on the grass, and as I watched the sun setting on the water; over the dry brown leaves; deep into the ends of the millet and sugarcane fields rolling on the other side of the river onto the horizon away; over the naked children diving from their boats and swimming by the fishing nets as if spilling from the stream themselves; as of a momentary transmutation within that parch of time, everything was a color, beautiful sunray filtering past and through the thick canopy of trees poured on the tall blades of lemongrass amidst the smell of wet earth and decomposing shrubs, and, though not in that artists' vain system of perceiving, I sensed the strong presence of something around me—some smell and appearance, which now strangely

fascinated me about sound, like the chorus of a waterfall. A thought struck me; first it came rustling through the leaves, the grass, then the clacking feet of the distant passing trains and the swaying tree branches, then it grew stronger crackling as though a log burnt nearby me, somehow the incident of my receiving of a radio from my mama emerged in my head. This radio belonged to Baba and my mama had had me taken possession of it mainly because she believed I have so much of my father in me. As I recalled this incident I could see my own body being passed on to me. I could see Baba and all the histories handing me this body. I jumped to my feet, carried my bag and walked away. I was shivering within. Like a car swerving past bents, I hurried through the shacks by alley leading from the riverside, came out by the government primary school, opposite my former school across the train tracks till I arrived at Chicken Change, a collection of chophouses and bars and game shops beside the ridge facing another primary school, and headed past where the train tracks lined eastward and round the grassy plain down, increasing my pace up toward the wall of an old textile plant even while I heard someone screaming my name from the roof of a house in the coming darkness. I dragged through the dirt road, past multicolored umbrellas of street food vendors opening for evening business and deserted mechanic shops and disused warehouses; their flaking walls shining in the light afar appeared like human tongues hanging down against them, and at a close view they stood like a vast body of leprosy. Walking there that moment felt like reeling through a rainforest in search of antibiotics. I knew that I had received a revelation about my body in relation to other bodies in my family. I knew the crisis in my body was only a slice of a vast tragedy. I am neither sick nor paranoid. I am a refugee fleeing from myself, and the faster my feet the closer I run back to myself. Right there, in the moments of those night walks in the streets and alleys of Kaduna and Zaria and elsewhere, I had a photograph of Baba in my mind all the time, he and my mama in a black-and-white. I walked everyplace with it. Even now I have this photograph clearly hanging in my head. I don't know the place the photograph was taken and, weirdly, I haven't summoned myself to inquire about it from anyone in the family. Maybe it was shot at the Teachers' Institute in Zaria, since my mama during my early days in the family talked so much of her frequent visits to the institute to see her younger sister there and on this particular day she was visiting aunty Naomi one more time when baba decided on a stopover on the campus. The photograph might not have even been taken on the institute's campus; who knows if it was in a government compound or at the corner of some rich man's palatial home. In any case, every time I stop to have a look at the image in my head, I see them standing in front of a tiny brown wooden kiosk on an opulent lawn with a delicately placed row of hibiscus running onto a column of tulips and chrysanthemums that stretched further out to a curved portion of the ceramic tiled wall. An odd photograph, which showed that neither of them had initially planned to take the photograph with the other; my mama was in a blue gown that had flowers around the waist and buttoned from the waist up the neck, and on her feet a pair of black moccasins. Baba, who appeared more relaxed than my mama, wore a loose turban on his head and a white kaftan that reached down to his feet to conceal his shoes. The photographer, possibly acting on his volition, snapped the photo with greater emphasis on the landscape than his immediate subjects. But in all these details what means so much to me, and perhaps what stuck this photograph in my head and keeps me returning to it ever since, are the cracks and fades that came through the years to mess the face of the photograph, not the people and objects in it. The cracks, as though from repeated folds, particularly run across the body of Baba but the severest one starts at the top of the photograph through his right collar bone, passes that part of his chest, then corners and severs his left arm from the body, and my mama's scarf and forehead down to her facial

marks suffer the effect of the fade, so that at a glimpse she looks like she has a skin defect. Each moment I stare at this photograph I could perceive that those cracks and fades were shadows of bigger things, things eating off the bodies in my family, and that through them I must become convinced that it's my responsibility to trace the origin of this plunder that has also extend its project upon my own body. "Photographs have certain spontaneity" and so is the investigative urge that comes from seeing some of them.

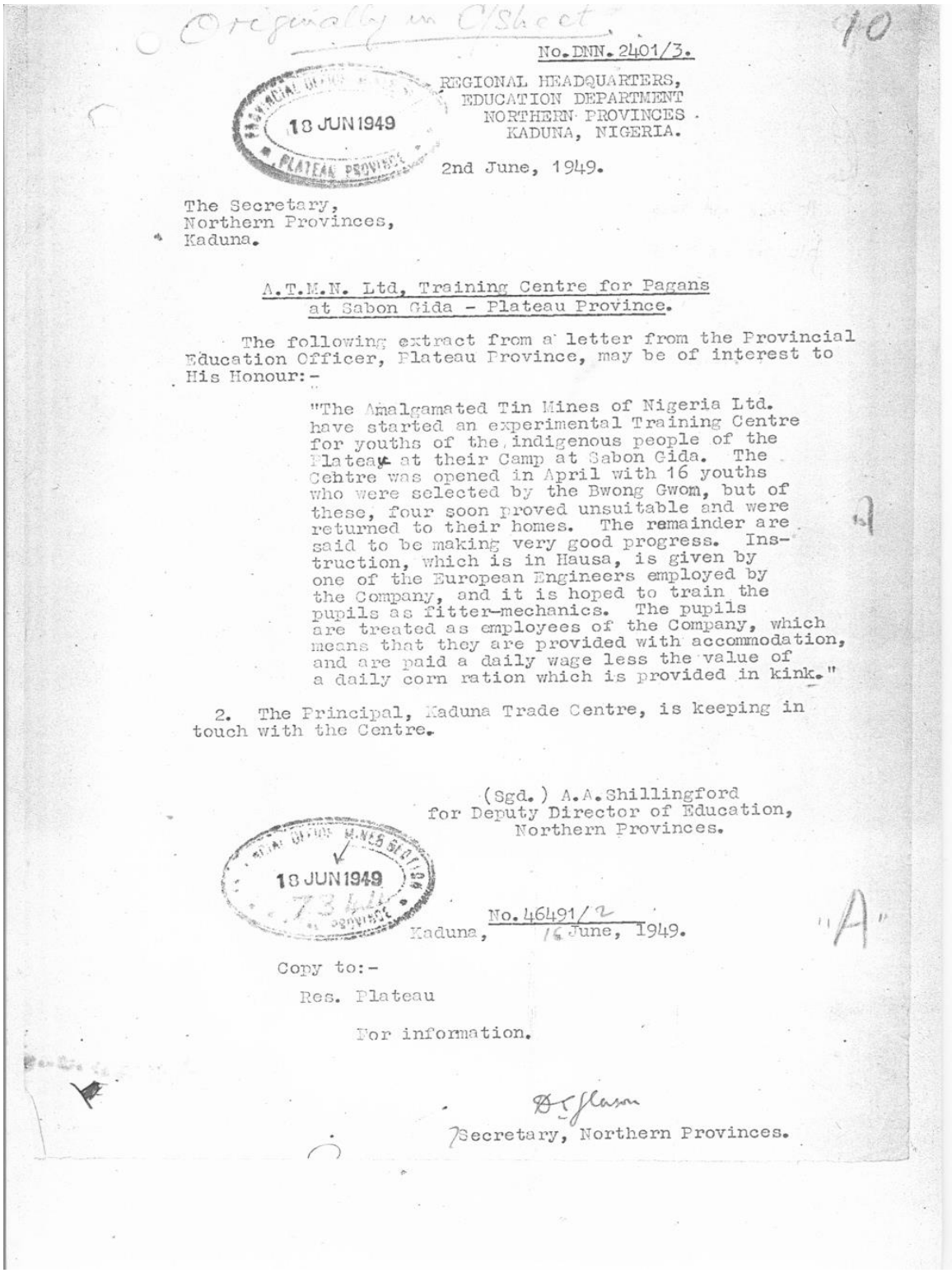


III.

The kingdom of heaven is likened unto a man which sowed good seed in his field: But while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and went his way. Matthew 13:24-5

Soon after the Second World War a young Nigerian soldier named Musa, who before the war had received Islamic education in the ancient city of Timbuktu, returned home from the Burma forest with balls of darkness gleaming in his eyes. Rather than resume the teaching position he held before the war at the Islamic Training Center in his village he took to the streets, against all familial protestations, and began composing poems and performing them at ceremonies. He possessed a curious preference for giving his art at wedding and naming ceremonies but he rarely got chance for any of them since he had no background polish in this trade, no one wanted to risk scandalizing his family in public space. However, within a short time Musa had become a sensation at gigs, performing mostly at ceremonies for herders, fishers, farmers, and such age groups every night in the city of Jos. In the space of three years, without any significant professional assistance, he made a career for himself in

the Tin City. Indeed, those days the city of Jos was nationally renowned for it's mining across the plateaus, valleys and rocky plains. In the decades before British colonizers had discovered more sources of funding the motherland and had, through the Royal Niger Company and its subsidiaries, registered mining companies, which on operations attracted more *native* labor to the city. This attraction to offer labor began as a subtle migration where young men made the first batch to arrive the city from villages, then their relatives followed and soon the city of Jos boomed with factories and large fields of cash crops such as ginger, groundnut, and potato. Musa recognized the entertainment potential in this and immediately took it. As far as I can say with certainty, his abandoning of a former religious duty for this new trade was neither for profit nor fame but a strategy for being invisible or bodiless; a method of managing the sudden fire in his body. Though he never became a celebrity, he was relatively known in his small corner of that new world.



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18 JUN 1949 PLATEAU PROVINCE

REGIONAL HEADQUARTERS,
EDUCATION DEPARTMENT
NORTHERN PROVINCES
KADUNA, NIGERIA.

2nd June, 1949.

The Secretary,
Northern Provinces,
Kaduna.

A.T.M.N. Ltd, Training Centre for Pagans
at Sabon Gida - Plateau Province.

The following extract from a letter from the Provincial Education Officer, Plateau Province, may be of interest to His Honour:-

"The Amalgamated Tin Mines of Nigeria Ltd. have started an experimental Training Centre for youths of the indigenous people of the Plateau at their Camp at Sabon Gida. The Centre was opened in April with 16 youths who were selected by the Bwong Gwom, but of these, four soon proved unsuitable and were returned to their homes. The remainder are said to be making very good progress. Instruction, which is in Hausa, is given by one of the European Engineers employed by the Company, and it is hoped to train the pupils as fitter-mechanics. The pupils are treated as employees of the Company, which means that they are provided with accommodation, and are paid a daily wage less the value of a daily corn ration which is provided in kink."

2. The Principal, Kaduna Trade Centre, is keeping in touch with the Centre.

(Sgd.) A.A.Shillingford
for Deputy Director of Education,
Northern Provinces.

18 JUN 1949

No. 46491/2
Kaduna, 16 June, 1949.

"A"

Copy to:-
Res. Plateau

For information.

Secretary, Northern Provinces.

On the other hand, trouble had started brewing between him and his father and it wasn't long before the animosity spiraled up when Musa refused to return home to the young family—two wives and five children—he had begun years before his conscription into the Royal West Africa Frontier Force to fight the war. He turned down all pleas to return home,

to resume his religious calls, to be responsible to his young family but Musa went about his life as though he never existed before the World War. Every time he was captured and taken home, he found ways and absconded back to the streets, to his performances. His poetry, an acquaintance of his would tell me recently as I researched for these pages, was largely themed around a prospective Kingdom where gunshots would be the music used at parties and ceremonies. It was also rumored that, something which several people I interviewed concurred and refuted at the same time, after his return and during his days as a performer he started abusing women, men, children, and that apart from this flamboyant sexual life he was deeply a curiously quiet man who remained indoors whenever he was not performing or holding rehearsals, doing things he wouldn't even imagine before the war. For before the war, before and after his education in Timbuktu, northern Mali, Musa was a studious religious young man, a devout who went about his daily walking of the village with his wives, carried his children on his back and on bicycle wherever he was, taught community classes for free. Those days, apart from doing his farming and making dresses, another commitment of his was leading prayers in the village mosque and teaching the Hadiths. This latter religious inclination, actually, was the quality the village found in him and decided to contribute to a fund to sponsor his Islamic education at a foreign school. The options were Cairo, Timbuktu and Khartoum, but his father who had a particular disdain for Cairo settled on Timbuktu, believing the poetry and spirits in the desert sands and wind would enrich the boy's spiritual education. But his father's choice actually was more influenced by fear than anything else. He had been told about the fate of a village that had sent one of their own to an Islamic house in Cairo in the 1910s, a boy rich with gifts in religious contemplation, but years after the boy returned from Egypt to the village with a Sudanese mistress and set up a café; every night he hired singers to entertain his customers. Terribly displeased, the elders of the village in the company of the chief imam summoned him. Son, they said, we sent you to learn the thoughts and ways of the Prophet amongst his own people and you came back with a mistress? And worse, you now have a café and celebrate debauchery every night. You are a waste, a waste; they quarreled him. But the young man wouldn't have any of it; he spoke harshly to the men and dismissed them with insults. Soon, it became known in the nearby villages that sending their children to Egypt was a mistake never to be repeated. This, indeed, was the reason why Musa's father demanded he shun Cairo. So now, after the war, he clandestinely toured cities and performed his poems, and would always decline to respond to questions about his days in Burma. A few times he gave long talks about his days in Timbuktu, the ancient manuscripts, the music, nightlife, scholars, and women but never uttered a word on Burma. On one such occasion, as one of his friends who now live in Benghazi recently told me, after performing at the house of a mineworker who was marrying his second wife, an audience member walked to him and asked what it felt like in the war front? Musa stared, then smirked and chuckled: It felt like giving unto Caesar what is Caesar's, a time of giving off your body. He walked away from the man, his shoulders slanting to the right through the darkness. It was the only time he said a thing about the war, even though ambiguously. Musa never wrote down his poems and stories, but his performances were strong enough to preserve two of his works, which one of his acquaintances once sang to my hearing.

One day his father, the old imam, determined to reconcile his son to the families dragged himself from Ankpa, their hometown, all the way to the city of Jos. You can refuse witnessing to God, the old imam said to him, but family as you know is older and higher than God. What man abandons a family, what man of honor? Return to your wives and children, the old man advised his son. The war veteran sat in silence for a while and then

turned to face his father. Can I be left alone? He frowned. That very day of his father's visit, he was rehearsing with his band under a shade in the front of the house. And that was it. His father left that night, on a pickup back to their hometown and never spoke to his son until his own death.

This war veteran, Musa, was my own grandfather, Baba's father.

He was the man, though dead seventeen years before my birth, who taught me the need to gain a life that is completely free of shame, even if the chosen life means becoming irredeemably lost. No form of education could have done it. Teachers, professors and every adult in my life propped up all of my shame until recently when I learned about the story of my old man. He drew my attention to the rights to be ashamed and, possibly, still shameless, the right to renounce anything, anything that needs to be renounced. Prior to this time, I had become utterly aware of the darkness in my own body and thus desperately shame-ridden. I am still shame-ridden but learning my grandfather's past suddenly transfigured the contour of these shames to accessible frames, something I could see and say, hey here are my shames, here they are, what's good? It was he who also made me realized that it was possible for me to build a strong case for the ongoing warfare between the world and me, between histories and my body. It was through Musa I gained the truths that one could renounce a country (while still living in it and not even planning to desert it) and all things that it represents; that one could stop recognizing himself as citizen of a particular place and still possess the undeniable right to live in the birthplace, and that perhaps it is the good thing to do. Countries are like lovers, and when things get sored beyond fixing in a relationship you break up. That if put to close examination, countries, like all institutions, reveal features, constituents, that are only fit for trampling upon or thrown into the sewer without having any discomfort that sacrilege against a grand text is being committed. Musa, my grandfather, was a seer.

In November 1958, three years into his new career and two years before Nigeria became an independent state from the long-running British terrorism, for no known reason at the time Musa stopped having anything to do with the Nigerian state; he refused his benefits, forfeited the plot of land he received from the British officials upon his return from the war, declined invitations for further performances and, even though he had gathered enough money to depart Nigeria for other countries where most of his comrades had now emigrated, he simply retreated from city life, left Jos and went to live in a village outskirts of Lokoja. He was now only three hours away from his hometown but this proximity never closed the dark, vast distance between him and the families. He collected woods and stones and silkworms. Words had it that he could stand in the plot behind the house and for hours stare at the silkworms, that the moths enchanted him.

It was in this mud house that he committed suicide one June morning in 1975. It was in this mud house Musa's body eventually got destroyed; the moment the tradition which prospered on the destruction of bodies in my family got loudest and readily set its ambition that has been so ever since. Suicide runs in the family. In 2001, my older sister killed herself, half a decade before an aunty. I traveled early 2013 from campus in Zaria to visit my mama who had made an attempt in the village of A. She has made countless attempts, and like her I am deeply suicidal, deeply obsessed with stories of those who saw reasons to destroy own bodies. (*So what? Everyone is suicidal.* Well, I am only reemphasizing that we all helplessly lost folks.) I cannot now remember where I read this but it stuck in my head once I saw it: *suicide is the loudest way of renouncing institutions, any form of it. Be warned: life, too, is an institution*. But whoever wrote it must have been some lunatic all his life. Maybe my grandfather knew this author or had read his epic crap, and thought his initial renouncement of his country was not

loud enough, so to make it louder, make a huger statement, he decided to put up a large fire behind the mud house and self-immolate on that morning in June. It should be noted, however that while my mama's suicidal tendency has ancestral roots, my grandfather is the opposite—his own came from social history, a profound shame, for no one in his bloodline had it.

The family wasted no time on learning about his eventual self-destruction. They were Muslims and Islamic rites have a particular interpretation of a lifeless body; suddenly you no longer exist, in nanoseconds your titles dissolved as though you never had them, your body whisked to the grave as though it was never their own in the first instance. They arrived the house, collected his bones on the charred plot behind his house and discovered that he had curiously gathered firewood, collected together all his official papers, military regalia, the silkworms, the scoops, set them ablaze, and then threw himself into the fire. His death came just the fifteenth year after the death of his father.

In 2014, about one hundred and thirty years after Europeans, under auspices of their kings and princes and pride and fraud, sat in a Berlin Conference concerning Africa and my ancestors, and forty years after my grandfather's suicide, I experienced a series of nervous breakdowns that almost ruined me forever. They arrived in chunks and crushed my body daily, like an endless epidemic meant for me alone, because, every time they arrived it seemed they had been designed to plunder my body. I was in university in Zaria. My GPA was in free fall, relationships were strained on all sides, and at the same time I was contemplating both suicide and renunciation of my citizenship, feeling the strongest urge to escape my body, both the one given me by the conversation my mama and Baba initiated many years ago and the one brought upon me by Britain and my own countrymen. I was not intending to move to any country even, and in fact I don't love any particular country to forfeit this for. The only country, though not out of love, that I would have gone to live in, and still possess a great urge to, is Palestine because the only woman I ever loved, herself is of Palestinian descent. Through her my call in this conversation with the world got defined to consciously engage in struggles within certain margins, and this consciousness was also sure of one thing, my lack of love for Nigeria. However, when these chunks of nervous breakdowns arrived they were overwhelming to the extent that I couldn't bring myself to think anything else. Unlike my grandfather, I was a younger man, just had my twenty-second birthday, lacked the means of leaving the country, was an undergrad and working in brothels to earn peanuts, and even more so, I had a disease-unhappiness-infested mother who would be dead if I left.

Let me chip this truth here: I had no idea that my grandfather once renounced his citizenship and had further gone to commit suicide until these breakdowns pounced on me 2014. The only piece of information regarding his death I had prior to this moment was that he had been assaulted and burnt to death, and this came from Baba. They were never on great terms; their relationship got strained after my grandfather chose to move to the mud house in Lokoja rather than return to the family in his hometown. It is now a curse in my family that delights in messing up the father-son relationship, something severe that puts the son on his feet to flee from the father. It began with my grandfather and his father, then my father and his father, and then it was the turn of my father and my brothers and I. All his male children, ganged up against him. This is why fatherhood scares me. Baba never really mentioned a thing about the citizenship crap, which if you asked me I don't know why he evaded telling the truth. It was my brother Musa, named after my grandfather even though he is a Born Again Christian who told me the entire truth. It was while one of these breakdowns sent me running from my family one more time that Musa, whom I don't

deserve to have as a brother, whom I love but have never told or acted like it to him, painstakingly tracked me down to a remote house I was squatting *in* in Zaria. It was he who, after hearing about my crisis, held me up to his chest and narrated the story of my grandfather's death. I must tell you, it was a earthquake to be told these story, for they opened the earth for me to see, and, instantly, instead of finding a mass of rubbish or disaster buried underneath I saw a deposit of great wealth. In nanoseconds, all I now wanted to know were the details of his suicide. I jumped into calling everyone who could provide me with clearer pictures of the happenings in his life, especially those that took place in the 1970s.

But like my brother, everyone I interviewed about the specific reasons behind my grandfather's renunciation of his country and subsequent destruction of his body, had no clue. I sent mails, searched for connections, called countless addresses, but no one would tell me anything. Even this uncle who would boast knowing the color of the president's underwear stammered when I put the question across on the phone. They all knew he was a veteran, had begun struggling to control his body after the war and killed himself years after retreating from public gaze but no one could pin down the real reasons. Those days and maybe today, nobody cared about the mental health of a war veteran. But what pushed me on to want to know and grab the details that surrounded this man's death? To confess, in a way I was investigating a death, a life, a pain, a story, which would make credible my own intentions. I was hustling to interrogate a familial history that could breathe life into the new imaginations that were springing up everywhere within me. I was hoping my grandfather's reasons would heighten and build my own confidence, my own arguments, my own futures and politics. Somehow, in this damn life, we all are insecure bunch who are either seeking validation from our ancestors or fleeing from their destinies or renegotiating their vanities and shames and blunders. Somehow. I was younger, and about to embark on another world war, a similar kind to one that destroyed my grandfather. I thought knowing the details of his plundered body would rescue me from an imagination that prospers mainly on our bodies. I thought that to stop or defer the vandalizing of my own body, it was important to realize that '*this plot is bigger than me'* and thus build perspectives around it. That this plot was invented to be endless and the mindset of its inventors was to make my existence insufferable in it, to design the system in the manner that our bodies will lack the wherewithal to be *truly* operative or to obtusely operate if it must. This is what brings me to my own reasons and fears, to my own wandering the city every night and wondering on what it means for one to lose his body. Why did I want to renounce my country at age twenty-two, about the time many people would realize the need to love their own countries? What was causing my breakdowns? Why was I helplessly weeping in lecture halls and hiding from everyone on campus in 2014?

In the year 2013, even though I could barely string together a good sentence in English, I resolved to become a scholar, partly due to a conviction that being immersed in books would help me be nothing; something with sound I could use to manage my friendships; something that could help me remain in the *margin* and still be able to access Power; something through which I could transform the frailties of these bodies into a story that is exclusively mine, much more so for I had recently been awakened to the perpetual desolation of bodies in my family and country; something that allowed me to build language(s) through which I interact with and see this hopelessly lost world in all its hypocrisy and hollowness; something I could cling to and avoid having to be corporate; something that could insulate me from jealousy when my mates start making money, babies, and founding businesses, since this is what all the adults in my life had been up to, since they

all the things I detested to do or have. My deciding to walk into the world of books was, indeed, to escape the plaguing fears about my body. I had been ashamed to reveal my personality to anyone for two reasons that are completely based on a certain unreason, the kind of unreason that sprawls in your system if you grew up without privileges in a place like Nigeria. One, I had this feeling that I appeared formless, bodiless to people, that I was presence but with a non-existent bodily characteristics in their world. It was a strong but awful feeling, and, curiously so, this breath is still in possession of me. Every time I meet a person, I would see myself become a theme or an image or a category or the sadly some worry. There would always be a plea in his or her eyes that demand I retain this frame of being. This, weirdly, sadly, happens even with the most loving people in my life. How could I describe myself to someone to whom I am only a generation or a wannabe (of something or someone) or a familiar story? How then could I prove my humanity to a world whose sensibilities already deny that I am a real body with blood, bones, soul, and sensation? The attempt to dispossess me of myself is constant. It is not paranoia. It is a fear concretely formed through histories and years ago it rose to erect a wall between hope and me.

The second reason behind this incapacitation to be revealed has primarily got to do with me, and it has to do with the fact that I didn't see myself. Perhaps this reason informed the former, which is the greatest danger in all this trouble. I couldn't also see myself as well, I was invisible to my own eyes, and the moment I began seeing my body had grown so useless, powerless, and worn out, my sight so weak that each time I now see myself I look like a dying tree. I am an *"invisible man."*

My interaction with my body was, and still is, an act of faith; for there was nothing tangible I could confidently touch about me. Each moment I looked to see myself I could only feel the invisible, landless contours of the frame but nothing else, nothing substantial. For twenty and so years of my life on earth, this is how I feel and this is my first time of describing this self-invisibility. It was recently I realized that everything has to do with my eyes and, subsequently, the eyes of those countless people with whom I interact. My eyes, the vision, by historical arrangement of realities, have become so distorted that every time I try to see myself what I unconsciously do is look away from it, and what I see while having this straying *seeing* are solidly defined fears and shame, an uneasy wanting, rather than actual flesh, bone, blood, and warmth. Reading books gradually led me to believe that this dysfunction is a default setting through the generations before me to deprive me of seeing my own body. "*The way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe,*" John Berger. And I grew up being made to accept that my only possibility is to be an appendage. Not to be whole or multiple. Not to be stretchable or pronounced. The logic is simple. If you want to make a person useless, powerless, deny him of his body, because within it is the neuron, which without sensation and imagination are non-existent. You create this denial by playing with his optics; fill his seeing with anxieties that render his being bodiless. To completely destroy him, deploy the same strategy on the people who surround him. This is when he would become anything that doesn't look like a human, and the closest thing he can be, as in my case, is a beast or some inanimate *human*, an "irreality", a tree, a decaying tree, a phenomenon with little or no conscience. This is what growing up in all these forms of poverty in our continent did to me. This is what I accuse Europe and her people did to Musa. This is the feature of growing up in tight, airless spaces where possibility is the reserve of a few, where religion and hunger and madness are free gifts for everyone. It is the struggle to self-rehabilitate from this abuse that I tell this tale, to rescue myself from my invisibility and give me a form, a language, a territory, a course, a role, and vulnerabilities. So in my quest to be this scholar I busied myself reading all these postcolonial and historical texts in

libraries in the university, combing shelves from one department to another. Pre-historic Africa, pre-colonial Africa, post-independence, and geopolitics were the subjects. I read my eyes out. Apart from the fact that some these books were authored mostly by foreigners, the libraries were poorly stocked, the research department was an eyesore, and the Greco-Latin black professors on campus had begun losing traction in the many arguments in the Humanities. I discovered Amazon and spent every dime I made buying books there. I walked around the campus unhealthy, malnourished, scaly skin and lips, and unkempt hair, wore the same shirt, pants, and sandals for two full years. Unchanged. Wash and wear. I began hearing whispers behind me but I was past caring. Stakes were all-time high for me, and as a body in this century it was time I learned to care less about shame if I meant to accelerate things out of the reach of the forces fighting to liquidate bodies in my family. I moved from gaining new knowledge into re-seeing, debunking a handful of them.

I had begun all this with the thought that I could change many things, could change the condition of our continent. I had conceived a curiosity about why black people live in such poverty, why the country is one utter misery completely, why Africa sleeps in this vast underdevelopment, why our bodies suffer this dishonor, why it lacks the center of the world. Some books were helpful, so many of them were not. Trying to find reasons to love the country, I went everywhere I could find a book, trekked long distances to the homes of retired professors, civil servants, veterans. I borrowed books, sometimes stole many of them. I discovered the historical center at Arewa House in Kaduna, it became a home; I was made to believe it was the center for history of Nigeria and northern Nigeria but if those documents are credible then the Nigerian state is the sham that I have always believed was orchestrated by Europeans for whom our bodies and existence had no dignity. I went to the National and State libraries, and the more I read books on the history of the country, the more my fears. These texts revealed the crimes of white people in many places and at different times, these texts were largely easy shout outs to ethnic figures portrayed as national heroes, these texts made no pretense of being channels to the greater sham that the Nigerian state has come to be, but I was in 2014 and these arguments failed to send any energies that would help locate my own body, suddenly they lacked the fire to set my imagination burning, too. For the first time, I started being convinced that no white people or European, no external forces were responsible for Africa's centuries-old stupidity.

I was new to the world, naïve and lost and took to the Internet and explored and watched countless African/black themed videos published on YouTube and all sorts of texts. But these did not last long. I was lost and hungry, and the more I fought to get out of the castle of discomfort that entrapped my body, the sadder I grew, the vaster my disillusionment. I was nearing the end of myself, about to explode and vanish away. I had no mentors. In fact, I never knew I was supposed to have one, and all the adults by whom I had come into this discontent were either impossibly locked in their own lives or didn't have the capacity to understand my situations. Buddies waved my worries away. Nigga, you are just being too sensitive. What the hell are you doing to yourself? And even a psychiatrist I had begun seeing became disillusioned and told me to turn to religion to get deliverance from the things in my body. An uneasy weight sat in me and when it rolled about it enhanced the voices that were foreshadowing things about my grandfather and me.

I was mostly fearful of the fact that I couldn't quite literally feel my own body, no matter what I did. How could I overcome shame and fear when the container that carried them was inaccessible? I tried to trace this *body* by cutting it with razor blades or bruising myself with stones, but all the attempts to create sensation on my body failed. Blood would ooze out, the cuts and bruises would bite at nights or under the shower, but that was it.

There was nothing else. Nothing to feel, like fiber or timber, nothing I could perceive to say I had a body, something tangible I could grab and exhibit on the campus to say Hey, here is my body. See, niggas, this is how my body looks. Hey niggas, this is what I can do with my body. Soon my skin stood like the belly of a reptile, callused. Other times, I would seek sex with men and women, masturbate, threesomes, foursomes, just about anything to bring that sensation to my body and the deeper I dug or was being dug out, the more I felt like plastic. I was working in brothels, saw how people owned their bodies and enjoyed it, and still lacked the capacity to own my body.

I was ashamed about revealing this struggle to anyone. I couldn't tell anyone during sex that I felt nothing. I feigned pleasure to appease the partners. Just then I knew my end was close. Either I explode into air or induce it with substance. In order to empty our bodies of the anger they now bear, it is needful we re-form them since what we call our bodies are not our own in the true sense. They emerged and got labeled from a dispensation that abused and assigned them to roles that must be carried out with fear, shame, and limitations. To own them, we must burn them to ashes and rise anew like a phoenix. At once I moved from being confused to anger. In the beginning, I couldn't frame the source of this anger. But soon, I found out. Something was wrong with my body. To see clearly requires a flip side of things. I was beginning to see the tares that had been sowed among the wheat in the field. I could see bits of the barricades that restricted me from accessing and settling into my own body. I had just arrived in my twenties and was beginning to discern the world. Suddenly I could see this whole picture, the insecurity, this poverty, this race, this skin color, this sick continent, the insufferable voices deafening me from the depth of history. For the first time, I detested everything about my country, everything about the history of my continent. Somehow, I went about feeling badly betrayed by my ancestors. The breakdowns arrived again, and this time they were not playing with me.

Then, while wandering one night in Kaduna, something happened to me shortly after my brother recounted the story of my grandfather. It was eleven o'clock and I was walking home. I suddenly realized I had been walking almost in the middle of the highway, center of the bridge and the streets all along with no concern what the cars could do to me. It was then I knew that all the curses flying from the passing cars were being directed at me. The headlights coming my way flooded eyes but I discovered I could still see; the blasts of music from inside the cars and their revving couldn't stop my ears from their role. I heard still. Right there I found myself crying and shouting on the wide road some words from a documentary I had recently seen, "the cars need to move to the curb, not me. I will stand my ground. Enough walking cautiously on the side."

Perhaps it was this awareness of my cautious walking that prompted me to leave town and go to visit the house where my grandfather died. I couldn't bear the torment in my being any longer, so I decided to find things for myself. I had previously visited the house, thrice. Two times with my father as a pre-teen when he had gone there to water his memory, an act the men in my family religiously protect to appease the spirit of the deceased by sprinkling water around the house they died in on the death anniversary. The other one time I was researching on clay buildings for partial-fulfillment for a course in Level Two in university. But this time I was going there to find myself in the remains of a destroyed body. I collected a notebook, pencil and a borrowed camera in a small backpack, and left for Lokoja. It was a six-hour drive, seated between older men in the back roll of the bus I could only stare at the back of the heads of the passengers before us. At the bus station I had struggled to have the window seat so as gaze the rolling fields we would be passing but a man outsmarted me. And so crammed amongst these men, I managed to reach into my

backpack and remove copy of Thomas Carlyle's "Occasional Discourse of the Negro Question" and read over and again. I do not remember the number of time I read the essay but just as prior to this reading I allowed myself immersed in it the more. There was barely a thing striking about the piece but something in me held to it, a force pulling me deeper and deeper into looking at the Question of the men before me.

Six hours later I arrived in Lokoja. The next morning I dragged myself to the place outskirts of town, in a rolling village near a cashew plantation. I hitched a motorcycle and rode for about an hour, then down and continued dragging on the stony path, and if anyone had asked why I was walking there that morning he would have been disappointed.

Walking the road downward I remembered sitting in the bus and having doubt about the house, that perhaps it was no longer standing. Apart from the recent floods that had devastated the town, it had been nearly forty years since the death of its last occupant and there was the talk of bringing down the house soon after I visited it for my assignment. I was forced, reluctantly, to believe that though my grandfather had been dead for years now he would not let the house fall until this moment in my life, that somehow he had me in mind when he moved in, and that if the house still stood it meant that the ancestors were not entirely careless, that by an exchange of energies the past and the present were ready to cleanse themselves of their follies. This might not have been so easy to settle in my mind then, but that it was forced down my throat suggested, crudely, that to assess my bruised body required more than a trans-generational dialogue, and that perhaps this dialogue wasn't truly a dialogue but a warfare with the men and women who bore us in their loins while the crooked white man exploited their goodness, folly, and unpreparedness.

The overcast sky was deep but I found myself standing before the mud house, on the footpath that led to it. A small abandoned building in the middle of a bush. Red, aged, useless, it had not fallen. The closest settlement to it was ten minutes away; a small village of sparse houses and in the distance surrounded by cashew plantations and palm trees. There was nothing like my grandfather about this house. Dambudzo was right, '*if I am looking at something, and I am conscious of myself looking, does it affect what I see?*' He was a clean, sure and ordered man, the total opposite of me. I didn't see the house either through him or me the last time I was here. The more I stared at it, the clearer I saw myself in the unkempt, tattered condition of this mud house. It stood with a blank mood in this abandoned space, around it there was nothing but trees and shrubs and grass and birds. I walked to the door, removed the stick and rope that held it closed and found myself standing in the hut, a small cold room. The silence was enormous but not eerie. Apart from the heap of rubbish gathered at a

corner of the room, its only inhabitants were geckos, spiders either sitting or pacing in their webs, a stream of soldier ants ran across the floor, climbed the wall all the way to the window, and from the roof were strands of cobwebs running down, the window side was blank. The room smelled of moist, murkiness, and decaying hay. The room seemed heartbroken, and if seen through its flaking wall and the failing roof, it felt like a traumatized body that was lying at the feet of its assailant. It felt like I was standing in the last centuries and gazing at the plunders. I walked further to reach the heap, grabbed a stick that stood against the wall at a distance and began scattering it, hoping I find something that would supply me a clue. I was foolish. Minutes passed, hours too, the history remained inscrutable, I didn't find anything save the beautiful pebbles that had been collected from the river and gathered here by someone, on top of them the rubbish, beside them were shiny white snail shells. There was nothing about my grandfather here. I was standing in the room as a twenty-two year old man; the same age he was when he went to fight the world war, a war in which he could only have fought because foreigners were the authority over his land and body; a war which he had no agency to interpret due to his existence being owned by a colonial agency. He left for the war, leaving behind five children, my father included, and two wives. There was brokenness everywhere I turned in this room. Suddenly I could perceive the smell of a body, the smell of decaying bodies, the hays, the moist wall and floor, the dead ants stuck up in the murky, enormous cobwebs, and overwhelmed by this I broke down in the room, weeping. Everything seemed like tares that had been sowed in our fields, by an enemy. I wept.

It was six o'clock in the evening when I checked my watch again. I pulled myself up to my feet. I reached for the window, pushed a little and it wouldn't open. I let it. When I turned to leave the room, I found a Tasbih hanging on a nail on the wooden door and took it. I was convinced it wasn't my grandfather's. But who cares? He too was a Muslim, a devout at some point, I heard. I moved outside and walked to the back of the house. I wanted to see a piece of him, a piece of bone, a tooth, a fingernail, something from that morning in 1975, but it was all bushy. I got into the bush, began parting it to make visible the earth, searching if I could see relics of burnt flesh and charcoal. They were only ants, spiders, and earthworms creeping over dried leaves and wet grass, and at a distance from me a black shoe laid on its head. I stood upright and took in the surrounding. I tried to imagine him as a young man but felt sore in the mind that the only image of him was from a grainy photograph showed me by my brother. In this photo my grandfather was seated among a group of soldiers on a rock side, an artillery before them, and giving the camera a smile that didn't reach the eyes**.** I walked back to front of the house, struggled to lock the door and left. It was approaching night and the cloud was gathering again. I hurried. That night, broke and unable to afford a motel room, I slept in a roadside mosque. It rained all night and I lay there counting the beads and praying. My grandfather. As I lay there I got a breakthrough imagining him as a child: it was Morning Prayer in the village mosque and he stood before the congregation leading. A little child tottered toward him, passing through the men dressed mainly in white kaftan bowing, prostrating, standing, and muttering prayers in matchless unison.

I journeyed back to Kaduna empty handed, bereft of any meaning after all. It was cold inside the bus but I felt intense heat within my body, like I was being choked by suffocation. For the first time, I felt a raw fear of losing my body as my grandfather had.

"Occasional Discourse of the Negro Question"

The Discovery of What It Means to be Black in the World

I.

"Harden not your hearts, as in the provocation, in the day of the temptation in the wilderness: Wherefore I was grieved with that generation, and said, They do always err in their ***hearts****; and they have not known my ways. So I swore in my wrath, They shall not enter into my rest. Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an* ***heart of unbelief****…"* (Hebrews 3 VS 8-12. Emphasis mine)

"Behold, the hand of him that betrays me is with me on the table."

Visiting the relics of the house where my grandfather lost his body stands as the greatest journey of my life. Little by little the journey to the house has become the essence of my vision of the world. I discovered his story and immediately recognized a layer to my own existence; I realized that the uneasy conditions that plagued my body have their roots in a distant past. To say the least, the relics of this desolation are testament to what it means to be black in this world, liable to be dispossessed of one's body and subsequently destroyed. I do not fetishize victimhood or Europe's crimes in this case—in fact, I am partly composing these notes to utterly degrade the sense of victimhood long held by the colonized, to also strip the colonizer of his own centuries-old dreams; to say that the long fetishizing of the colonizer has mainly, subliminally entrenched her supremacy over the colonized, takes agency from the colonized within a shared history, absolves the colonized from responsibility and thus infantilizes him. Being awakened to the simple fact that the British people seized my grandfather and placed him in a war revealed to me a frightening heritage of powerlessness, a tradition of being without agency. Recognizing this history of humiliation did not only make me discover what it means to be born black in this world, what it means to be so shockingly insignificant, unproductive and perpetually susceptible to destruction, but became a fitting commentary of my own upbringing and arrival to this old "Negro Question", which, despite its age, has maintain similar anxiety. My grandfather felt betrayed by forces of several kinds, later happened upon his own agency and decided to revenge in an unconventional way. To rescue himself from that shame, he deprived the people, place, history, and country that conspired against him access to his love and understanding and presence. This is what I found in his suicide and went to pay my respect. My grandfather and every black soul through whom I came to adulthood are characters in a narrative that has been carefully fashioned to appear like everything is beyond or above our control; and how can one imagine himself to reality when he has been deprived of his own agency? For centuries, forces have dictated the mood and history of our lives. Their constant dream has always to infantilize us, for a man without agency is a perpetual toddler or an inanimate existence. Colonialism and another man's war destroyed the bodies of my grandfathers; for their own ancestors, it was slavery; my father's generation was rendered incapacitated by the World Bank, IMF, Structural Adjustment crap, and of course, the stupid black men who now inhabit post-colonial Africa; and it is the combination of these histories and their utterances that continue to suffocate my own age. An enemy sowed the tares in the fields while our forbears slept. I am aware these themes are not new and unique but my

awakening to them brought me shame. I did not tell my mother, she was not educated to know the kind of history that created her poverty. I did not tell my other friends who already had considered me an eccentric crank, and when I confide in my friend Zachary I could not obscure the fear in my eyes that just across the Sea and Ocean there was the Other World where people of our age went about their lives with no fear of destruction of their *bodies*.

I misled my body into believing that the people who direct our h*umanity* are just as they claim to be. I was too scared to see that they, like us, are victims of the fraud behind histories. The world with its histories, at least as we have come to know it, is one gigantic fraud. There are countless entanglements in these histories, in our realities, in our sensibilities, that impede the transition our generation seek, that aggressively hamper us from competing with people of our age in Beijing, London, Silicon Valley, New York, Dubai, Hong Kong, Tokyo, and elsewhere. In the order of the world, as created and tightly sustained by people who saw themselves most fitting to do so and to whom our bodies mean nothing, we rank very low; so that living, for us, is an uneasy phenomenon than free movement, an unsettling politics than owning our spirits. Our existence, by no other virtue but that our skin, has turned to the conditions of always of searching away from ourselves, a constant looking *unto the hills whence cometh our help*.

For months now, right from the moment I sensed the new form of anger in the eyes of my friend, in his letters, I have mulled over what to say in response. I am accustomed to seeing the anger in the eyes of young people in the country, in our continent, but the last moment we met and sat in that teashop in Abuja I knew Zachary's body was about to explode if nothing helped it. I still think so. I could tell what was upsetting him, and it was not the constant fight with his father or the fact of his desperate underemployment. It was something deadlier, larger; something like venom that has taken over the beauty of his eyes. It sits there like blood. It is a familiar sight; I have seen it destroyed people I loved. As a child I saw in the eyes of my older siblings, in my aunties and uncles, my teachers bore it each time I looked their faces. This thing has also locked itself in my own eyes. This anger is from our country, our continent and its histories. My friend's long running brawl with his old man, I believe, is transferred aggression. This anger is about the stupidity of black people, our ancestors, men and women who betrayed us. It is the fear of ending like our forbears in failure that agitates my Zachary. This is why we are young and still tremble at the thought of dreaming ourselves; this is why we avoid the Internet, satellite television, social media for fear of seeing our mates in comfort and innovating in Other Worlds without us. For the girls and boys with whom I grew up, coming to adulthood is a system of bending our bodies to shoulder a weight of shame, the black of our body. And this body is the most despised and abused in the universe. In the ranking of bodies, history has conditioned us to the bottom space and we've functioned from this assigned position for too long. The racial burdens on us have no equal in this world; there are enormous and multilayered. Who accepts us? Our humiliation goes beyond the usual white people, for in my awakening to this nervous condition I found also that our status remains significantly that of a lower man, the undesirables, even to Indians, Arabs, Jews, Chinese, Latinos etc. It is a heritage. The world will say I overgeneralize this but my eyes have seen immense misery to know when to tell the world to eat its arrogance and let me be. Indeed, and strangely so, this lower status given to our body is also well alive in the imagination of our brethren, 'other' black people, the black elite and the diaspora, those black men and women who no longer taste what is in our bodies on this continent. It is a simple but ugly, irrefutable truth. They are ashamed to

identify with us. All blacks are equal, but some blacks are more equal than others, some are too *black*. We are the *too-black* ones. There is nothing extreme about stating this, and this knowledge is good for two major reasons. First, it means that the world has long practiced the hypocrisy of honoring the black body only when it possesses economic and political power; without money and power the black body becomes a simple object. The second reason comes from the simple fact that the most dangerous people to the black population of the world and their imagination are not the aforementioned races but are the upper class and educated black people. My repugnance for this class began the moment I encountered one of their members attempting to liquidate my mama before my eyes as a child. Since time immemorial this black elite have continuously betrayed us and shown their cruelty to our body. At each moment in history—pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial eras—that occasions demand they represent us at the tables with other races, they always left with less of the deal. There is nothing extreme about this, nothing shameless in naming names. To engage a battle with the hope of a victory, you must peel off layers of the warfare, and this is what discovering the story of the destruction of my grandfather did for me.

And it might be surprising that while my friend Zachary lives in Nigeria, in Africa, among his own people where he is in the majority, I am composing these notes with racial politics. I hear you say, tribalism is the monster here, not racism; black people are the demons here, not white people or Indians or Arabs. And it truly seems like an unneeded conversation until a closer look reveals that the burdens on our body transcend the worries of racism. Houses are built from the foundation, not their roofs; the beginning of this centuries-old misery that Zachary and I share was largely on the precipice of shaming our bodies. It was a beginning invented by terror, and on which the terrorist moralized his crimes by degrading the bodies of our ancestors. The ancestors grew into distrusting their own bodies. At the outset of this terror, we were not there but were there because we existed in the loins of the ancestors. Thus we shared in their humiliation and shame, but also shared in their inabilities, their irresponsibility, their carelessness, in their stupidity, in their silence.

Not too long ago, a Moroccan woman sent me an email concerning my first note to Zachary, the short story titled *Africa's Future Has No for Stupid Black Men* published in *Granta*. She emailed from Lille, a city in northern France, and I was in downtown Charlottesville, United States, where I lay on the couch in my friend's apartment when my phone beeped. In this email, this Arab woman described how she read the note with complete disgust at what she termed as my sheer ignorance for allotting the whole of the continent to only black people. She went on to say: "After all, I can't even imagine what blacks have given this continent. You destroy anything that's given to you. Tell me a black country that is as prosperous as an Arab one since the end of colonialism? Look at your brothers in the Americas, and tell me. You are no different from each other. We Arabs were never enslaved. Whether you accept it or not, the glory of this continent comes from the science and history of AFRICAN Arabs from Morocco, Egypt, Libya…" In other words, black people have offered nothing to the world. In other words, our body is synonymous with subjugation, inadequate to produce in science and technology. In other words our bodies don't only get humiliated on foreign lands, they also suffer it on home turf. Everywhere our bodies go questions around their possibilities are a constant hammer blow, and this was why I was not taken aback to see that it is still possible in this century to buy and sell black women and men in Libya, the Arab world. What this Arab woman meant to imply is this: we are constructive or inventive, and whatever is this worthless is liable to destruction. But it is neither the ignorance nor the racist intentions embedded in the email that most saddened me, my age and small experience have garnered me with experiences enough to assess

humans, it is the realization that racism was invented from ignorance and has been hopelessly kept alive to sustain that ignorance, and that the racist's everlasting intention is not only to continually concretize his supremacist delusion in any given situation but also to degrade the voice of the 'other'. Later that night I took a walk through the neighborhood and could not help thinking about this long email. It caused me to remember one of the many times in primary school when my teachers stood me in front of the class because I had failed a simple quiz, and what usually took hold of me during this punitive times was not embarrassment or shame but a certain incapacitation, an invisibility to possibilities. It was the same incapacitation I felt as I strolled through Charlottesville that night. Even though I was devastated by her racism I also tried to understand her challenge—I knew she was indirectly, perhaps unconsciously, asking me to offer her evidence of the civilization of my own culture, of my race and skin; I knew she was asking me to show her evidence of a present-day prosperity of my people, a science, a nation, an innovation to prove the humanity of my race. And as I tried to make sense of her implications I felt a brief but profound shame that I was indeed struggling to gather evidence for my reply. I knew something was wrong, but it was this historical question and plunder that constantly seek to disturb and subsequently destroy our bodies appearing in my own email which rattled me the most as I wandered through the streets. That it seems this monstrosity, in its campaign to perpetually question my body and its possibilities as it once did to my grandfather, do not mean to only engage me on the street, or at airports, or in embassies, or in textbooks, on planes, or in syllabi, or on TV but all the way to a tiny parts of me, my email.

Coincidentally I received this email from this Moroccan about the same time something happened to a friend at a bank in Kaduna. She was in a long queue waiting to go through security and enter the bank; before her was a Chinese man carrying a backpack. Once it was the man's turn, the security guard timidly apologized, bade him to enter the hall without searching, and then walked to my friend. She refused the search, protested injustice and got a free ride to spend the week in hospital. Her countrymen pounced on her for having the courage to defend their collective dignity. It has descended this low. History dishonored our body so horribly (and induced it with complex) that another man who shares its shame would use any means to protect the status quo. This is the biggest victory for the terrorist in his colonial project. This is what I mean, that the politics of bodies and burdens of the so-called racial imaginations that define this world have entrapped us. To escape is both complicated and enormous. The forces that demean the black body exist within and abroad, and while the foreign force is easy to defeat, its home-based counterpart continues to destroy the body and imagination.

It was the third anniversary of our friendship when Zachary invited me along to ride to a few places in Southern Kaduna, to climb the rocks and caves there. I was glad and jumped at it. It was a two-hour drive from the metropolis, and through a rugged winding path we arrived a village of hills. A woman allowed us to park the car in front of her house, a dwelling that looked out to expanse of shrubs and a cornfield, and we departed to wander the terrain. He was in front of me, striding across the fields, through mines, down barns, rocks, passing farmers bent over crop beds and hunters going about their business with shotguns, and I recall that after several stops to take photos of the most obscure objects along the path he had begun talking about how strolling through rural places like this always caused him to remember the wild and intensity of Russian literature—Pushkin, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Nabokov and Andreyev were his favorite; and considering his eccentric manners of leaving city life for rural space, the usual hunting and photographing butterflies, visiting villagers to collect folktales on his tape recorder, it must have been that my friend, perhaps unconsciously, had begun aspiring to transform into some characters he had seen in Eastern Russian. The sky was blue and after a while strolling through the amazingly beautiful fields, Zachary decided to stop by a hillside. We went inside the cave. Damp, warm air could immediately be felt in the opening but became cooler as we moved further down the dark channel. I cannot now recall precisely what Zachary had meant to show me in the cave but after half an hour laboring in there I was overwhelmed by the compressed and dark room. The horror of the dark filled me. I began crying and pleading until he took me out of the place. I recall how confused Zachary was at the whole scene. I recall that once we were outside I cried the more, cursed and screamed at him that I was afraid of small dark spaces. I did not tell Zachary that during the funeral of my father months earlier my older siblings had taken me to an obscure tiny room in his house and showed me a sack of human bones

hanging down the ceiling. Unbeknownst to the family, he had secretly broken into the grave of my grandfather, exhumed his charred bones and collected them in that sack. I cannot now remember what I felt in that room in the presence of my siblings but it must have been frighteningly similar to the stale dark space in the cave. I fell into the hands of Zachary and began weeping just I found myself doing among my siblings in the presence of the sack carrying my grandfather's bones. It was Zachary who later told me that what I felt in those tiny confined rooms was called claustrophobia. Even though the whole incident was an embarrassment I knew right away that what I suffered in those brief moments is what other young black people on the continent experience. The societies are not only confined and airless but carry visible reminders of destruction. And I wonder if they have somebody like my friend who could name the disorder.

II.

"… See ye not all these things? Truly I say unto you, There shall not be left here one stone upon another, that will not be thrown down." (Matthew 24 VS 2)

"And five different individuals entered the large room, shut tight the door after themselves, sat at the table and began to deliberate the share of Power. One of them a scientist, another a business owner, another a manufacturer, and another an inventor; the last one was a ***black man****."*

—Zachary

Since everything is now a matter of categorization

My skin is the evidence I can now offer for the unease plaguing me. Strangely, awakening to the desolation in my family and continent began to convince me of certain inescapability from torment. This curious thing about my skin came to my awareness just about two years ago. This skin shines and pretends to imagine possibilities when I am in any place on the continent, but uneasily checks itself on my body when I am on foreign lands as if reminding me to be conscious of its existence. It acts out like an insecure lover who projects inadequacies on the significant other. When this uneasiness of the skin happens, I suddenly become manipulative, calmly rubbing it, delicately pulling the hairs until I feel peace. Other times, I am completely irritated by it, and then I try to get some room where we could be left only to talk things out. I speak literally in this situation and without embellishment of any kind. I always found myself running to hide in restrooms at airports, cafes, hotels, libraries or campuses since these are places I mostly find myself on foreign lands. Whenever this strange behavior on my skin begins, I feel the balls of fire rolling inside me, enlarging their size and intensity, the kind of balls of fire my mama once told me she felt within her. But unlike her I don't pull off my dress and cry and dance naked in the room. I am a new thing, I belong to a generation, and every generation has its own strategies for unhappiness. For instance, sometime ago I was at the Charles De Gaulle Airport in Paris, I had a three-hour wait for a flight to Abuja, and this skin jerked, started sweating profusely. It was one of few times I experienced such a nervous thing, and even doubted Dambudzo Marechera when he wrote about a similar feeling in his beautiful essay, *Black Skin What Mask,* until it happened to me. I literally did perceived this skin transfiguring itself both in tone and texture, heaving for a while, agitating like it was questioning its blackness. Suddenly the quality of its complexion was going down, and even itching badly, a creepy sensation raced within. Visibly nervous I

walked to the restroom and spoke to it. Why are you acting out here like a criminal? Why do you perspire for nothing whenever we are away from home? And in nanoseconds, like magic, it subsided. I did nothing but spoke and goose pimples grew everywhere upon it. This was the second time my skin would act this way. The first time was in America, in Boston. I have had a long battle with my body since childhood but the intensity of it all became ubiquitous the moment I began leaving Nigeria, the very time I made to imagine the future. This skin began being sweaty and anxious at airports and cities I found myself, and indeed it never took me long to realize that it is a confirmation of my Negro status still in this world, that although the 21st century has become distant from the beginning of these histories that birthed and destroyed my forbears my own existential '*status*' still effectively belongs to the same '*nervous condition'*. I am yet to own anything in this world, home and broad. There are no structures whatsoever to build me to compete with the world in anyway. So, when my mate who is Western wields enormous Power and wealth and comfort, I am nothing but a being in a black case roaming the world with shame and unease. While this mate is busy on his home turf imagining his next world, I am either on the street protesting or attending a Black Pride conference. My role is almost that of a moaner, to moan the present day terror of the men who began ransacking my continent centuries ago, to whine about the deeds of the forbears who allowed them, to imagine and wail over stupidities that sit in us. Unlike other young people in the world, Zachary and I carry burdens, labels, categories, that are likely to crush us before we fully step into the world. And if we ever stepped in there, we would only be a crushed race pitifully sitting before wealthy, powerful mates, and waiting for their crumbs, because while they enter the room with power and wealth and beauty, he and I go in with only our black bodies. This is the politics our race has been made to play for centuries, the ticketing of the black body. It was the same role that ruined and humiliated the bodies of our ancestors, and this is the role that now destroyed my friend.

There is enormous indignity of being black anywhere in Africa, Europe, North America, South America, Asia and so on. I have great empathy for the men and women who led us here, and they include my grandfather, my principal, Nina's father, my mama and baba. But I despise these generations who would use a teenager as a shield for themselves, the generation who shamelessly hid behind their progenies. What itches me most is how labels for my body, or its color, are recklessly thrown at me. Like I don't deserve the right to participate in the process of naming me or prescribing my responsibilities. In history books, it is either Negro or Nigger or blacks, the most lurid of them all, dark-skinned. Today, in media, it is referred to as person of color, so that I am suddenly lumped into a *group* called People of Color or, in the very sexy, lilt term POC. Those who coined the term and included my 'blackness' in it meant many cruel, demeaning things, and one of such is that since there are People of Color, there are, on the other side, a People of no Color, a People above the defines of Color, a People Too Pure. So the color white is not a color; it is pure, colorless, superior, and too beautiful to fall within a category of People of Color. '*People of color'* is concocted and embedded with historical, social, spiritual symbols and feelings, that advances white power and it's skewed capitalist dreams. There are specific labels for each color of the human bodies, and to avoid reaching these identities with their native particulars is racist and a Euro-American supremacist, long practiced, agenda to claim the 'highest table' in the room. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why my own body itches badly when I am on White People's land as their *colored* man.

We fell into these categories long before we came to this world. In politics, I am Third World and since categories are living things with creative possibilities, I produce and think Third World qualities. In literature and art, my imagination is Post-Colonial or Afro-something, nothing else. In economics and science, I become a developing or rising voice. These are my boxes; my task is to remain in them, and, possibly, if I am obedient and diligent enough I would win awards in Europe and America, would get to shake hands with queens, kings, presidents, and prime ministers. I walk through the world with too much burdens, too many explanations, and too many responsibilities, and professionalizing them means I could be rich and famous; and this is the danger for my generation, the fact that it is easier for our body to gain attention through pity and victimhood than its possibilities is the horror, horror imported and carefully framed by people of same histories to define the modern narrative of the black body. This is why I am not productive, this is why I am here slowly losing my own body and selves; I am fearful of stepping out of categories. I am living, traveling the world, representing and inventing as *the* black man or as *the* African or as a post-colonial reality, and this is okay for the enemy and his black elite friends in our capital cities. It means a lot to them. I am a writer and the expectation is that I meet these expectations too; if I do I will fly. Every force seek that I maintain this centuries-old *nervous condition* that humiliated my grandfather and stole the happiness in my family.

I have refused to engage such politics, because being demanded by the enemy and my brethren to operate with this consciousness is a burden, and partly killed my grandfather, rendered baba useless, ruined countless young people on the continent. It is an emphasis on my body and denies the other primacies like the mind and spirit. There is nothing like the black imagination. It is both a racist term and a colonial culmination that has been thrown at us by the *enemy* and somehow it became attractive to scholars of black studies and postcolonial thinkers. On close scrutiny, it barely means anything outside the realm of literary, artistic, and cultural criticism. My blackness is not something I want to glorify to prove my humanity to any system. It is not something I want to operate through. This is my narrative. This is where I belong and do not want to be a representative for anything other

than myself. I am my most important project. I am a black man, an African, I am proud of this race and roots but these are not my most important features and dreams. I don't represent blackness or Africa. I don't perform these features to anyone. I am more than these. I am whole, a humanity, I am huger than a continent and broader than a color. I am an individual and within me are countless worlds, races, continents and troubles; this is what the enemy has succeeded in depriving my ancestors of, my grandfather burst into flames once he realized the cheater's manipulation. These are my most important issues. Not a continent or race. I can't continue to roam this world as a victim of a narrative or system or history. Our ancestors busied their times here proving this for centuries. If certain songs have served their purpose, or have failed to, they should be thrown aside for new ones to emerge; we lose the other melodies that possess the potentials of releasing us from fear when we refuse to unsubscribe from the jaded ones. They edify no one, no thing.

The truth is that the Negro question in the modern world is close to what it is in the past. And there is nothing pessimistic about this. Black Africa has been foolish to think it can bring honor to their bodies in the committee of bodies by mere protest against the white man. It is deceptive to build hope for equalizing histories through reparation; and all deceptions share one shame, the shame of the reckless pasts. There is no pride in victimhood, it could attract sympathy and pity, but never will gain any admiration. It is nothing but folly to demand honesty from a perpetual thief who has canonized his fraud as power. This is what you see in Western capitals and metropolises during this strain of the restlessness of the black body in the biggest migration from Africa in centuries. Justice is a mere word, which on a close look through the legacies of the pasts and the anxieties of the present peels off the hypocrisy of power.

The *enemy* has always been threatened by the Negro's mere presence around him than by his potentials, has always been, and to hamper them from realization he questions the body by baiting the Negro with racism. When this happens, and it is a daily reality, the Negro concentrate his imaginations (cultural, literary, artistic, scientific), anger, possibilities and essentials into fighting, whining, and protesting against it while the enemy's children comfortably stay in labs and libraries, and elsewhere, with no worries, imagining and inventing the next thing. While we are fighting to defend our body, our blackness, the children of the *enemies* are becoming inventors, philosophers, technicians and other professions that bring much more power to their already overwhelming status. Imagine what the black race stands to gain if all the people running NGOs and movements for black pride and essence had no reason to do so but invest their energy and creative potentials into something else. We've become a generation of too many activists, and these social movements and activism have eaten some of our best minds. It was a trap by the enemy; we fall into it by the day. Like our ancestors, we are both victims and losers, who are seeking for victory in an unfair fight, however my thinking is this, I have decline the call to play either of them.

In August 2016 I came to America for graduate school, my second time in this country of vast wealth, of vast opportunities, of vast warmth, of vast hatred. It feels like a second regime. The year before I was a writing fellow at an artists' residency in New Hampshire. A few weeks prior to leaving Zaria, I suffered series of homophobic attacks that cost me friendships, my apartment, belongings and, most important of all, my manuscripts. It was about midnight and I had just returned home from walking the neighborhood when the last attack happened. They came bearing arms and chanting death in the darkness. Everything I

ever wrote was destroyed along with my computer. It was an unusual luck that saw me escape unhurt. So when I finally touched down in America on August 15, I walked out from Dulles Airport with mixed feelings: freedom and fear, a certain distance from humanity and myself, death and life, power and depression; caught between keeping to look over the shoulder or let my eyes roll freely into the dream before me in this land of Dreamers. I had lost the rhythm for life and to busy myself, to save myself, I was reading stories of deaths and suicides, stories that I had painstakingly collected over the internet and elsewhere over the period of many months, stories of people obsessed with death and dying, stories of people like my grandfather, especially writers and artists who facilitated their own deaths. This was the mood of floating in the in-between of life and death that bedeviled me up to the day I went to the campus to attend the international students' orientation. It was the very week of my arrival in America. This was my mood as I walked through the imposing campus, and just as I made for the steps of the venue of orientation, the lecture theater, a young man approached me. He was blacker and taller and older than I. His English felt intimidatingly good and elitist. It wasn't difficult to detect. He wore a grey suit, nicely ironed, and his haircut reminded me of the former Congolese nationalist Patrice Lumumba. His appearance was a brilliant combination of meditation and class that it prompted in me passing thought of films I had seen of African royals as students in Western universities. His name was Traore and curiously he said he would wait to speak to me after the orientation. He was not of the new students and later as we walked through campus to Mel's Café down the street, he was out there at the theatre for the purpose of 'recruiting new black students from Africa to some fraternity in the neighborhood.' If I accepted, he told me, I would be the first Nigerian in the fraternity. Later that evening, some hours after my lunch with him, I was on the way to a dinner given by an acquaintance in a house in the other part of town, Traore called to ask if I wanted to grab some drinks with a couple of his friends.

I am composing this part of my notes in a small flat in Charlottesville, Virginia, a state notorious for its cruelty to the black bodies, to our ancestors and their descendants. Today is Wednesday, and before I resumed working earlier I was occupied with scribbling other thoughts towards the memoir I plan to write. It has been raining all day and the wind hit against the windowpanes, as if wanting to shatter whatever barricade restricts it from reaching my body in this room. Straining towards the window I can see freight trains sitting quietly on the railroad below. On the TV beside me, there is breaking on Fox News about hundreds of young black migrants drowning in the Mediterranean. To escape the horrors ravaging their lands, these young people embarked on the most nervous journeys; on the computer before me, Angelique Kidjo is on YouTube and she being interviewed by an Al Jazeera reporter; two hours earlier, moments after lunch, I streamed the MTV African Music Award from South Africa via an illegal upload, and before that I saw another Al Jazeera documentary on Africa entitled, *Africa: The New Scramble*. I check my twitter account, and a friend has tagged me to a gory video of a seven year old who is being lynched by a mob in a Nigerian city. In only four hours, I am surrounded by familiar images of mutilated black bodies, the stereotypes. The black body is dying in the sea; Angelique Kidjo, a black celebrity, and the journalists are discussing the Negro's problems of child marriage, Ebola, war; in the documentary about the New Scramble, Africa is being partitioned again and this time China is the smartest power in the room. It is dusk and before I have a few more paragraphs to this note, it will be nighttime. I plan to take a break and walk about the neighborhood even though something tells me to suspend these night walks in

Charlottesville. My return to America came during the new heat of black bodies being destroyed at the hands of police. The American election was forthcoming. I was cautious about my night walks during the first days in the city and indeed, I was immediately frightened by thought of my own destruction in a foreign land. I managed to stay indoors for two weeks until I could no longer bear, so I first began by taking short walks every night from the apartment I lived, through the quiet streets and wandered around downtown Charlottesville. My confidence grew afterwards and in no time, I was wandering the streets all night as if it was through the alleyways in Zaria. Dressed in hoodies and sandals, with headphone, I would slung backpack on the shoulder and walk from this part of town on North East Str. to the campus, down Ivy Road and then all the way back to West Main Street, and branch off to other interior parts of the town. I was consuming the night with my feet. It was not long before I was introduced to the Jamaican writer Garnette Gardogan who would introduce me to his essay, *Walking While Black*, a brilliant piece, and I soon knew the danger of a black body walking American streets at night, in hoodies. I continued my walks nonetheless. The more I walk this city, the clearer I see how people live in heaven; the schools, the libraries, the broad avenues, the countless cafes and diners, the theaters, sport centers, offices, bars, the beautiful houses on colorful streets, the gothic architectures, the imposing highways; everything needed to improve the human spirit and expand imagination exist for this people and their children, everything that Zachary and I lacked to dignify the body, to bring beauty upon it. The more I walk these streets, rather than gush the blessing of America, the angrier I become with our continent and its managers. I would run into black people on the street and most of them don't seem to have better, happier life than the one back home in Africa.

Two months in America was enough to threaten and confirm my different body. Every time I walked through the streets some black guy who wants ten bucks for food would approach me. I had wandered off one night and hastening back home to catch a Skype appointment in the darkness, I bumped into some white lady at a corner. The horror in her eyes could melt down Mount Everest. I was stunned and confused at her clear suspicious of me. I moved closer and tried to offer an explanation but she shivered away, not even listening to my apology. She was apparently receiving a call on her phone before the accident and walking from her, I could hear her cursing and saying something about robbery to the person on her phone. I thought I could wave the incidence off but once I got to my room I lost peace and wept all night. I missed all my classes and workshop that week. It wasn't long after this incidence I went downtown when another white lady who seemed to have been campaigning for the forthcoming elections approached me and asked if I had registered. I shook my head, told her I was not American, and when I moved to walk from her, she stopped me again, looked into eyes, smiling, her head held up straight, Felons' voting right has been restored. I repeated I was not American and walked to the CVS to buy medicine. On my return through same route, this woman walked up to me another time, The governor has restored voting right for felons. I lost it. I knew what she meant. It was about my body, its historically assigned subjugation. I wanted to grab her by the shoulder, to risk the migraine and shook her but on second thoughts I controlled my frustration. People sat and walked about us, white people. I gave her a long stare, drew my face closer, "Ma'am, you ever heard of Kunta?" She drew back, shaken, "I mean Kunta Kinte; do you know him?" I didn't know what I was doing but kept it going. Three days after Donald Trump's stunning victory at the polls, I found myself walking from the campus at about midnight. I realized three white boys were following me all the way. My instinct was to run to open spaces where the presence of people would protect but somehow I maintained the same

pace. I wasn't walking fast or slow, tense within but cool without, a new strategy I adopted in walking the streets of Charlottesville. They followed behind for a while and when I reached a safer corner I stopped walking, feigned waiting for someone. Though I was deeply worried, I was curious to know their intention. They stopped at some distance away and talked among themselves. I watched from the corner of my eyes for a while and then they approached me and began spewing out nonsense about cotton, plantation, nigga, "we wuz kangs", Trump is president. The one who seemed most furious amongst them dealt a blow to my stomach, flinging the phone in my hand away. I grabbed it, and standing straight I saw him forcing his way toward me once more, I steadied my feet and although there was pain in my chest I gave him a hefty shove that sent him helplessly breaking on the floor. I knew my end was near but I won't let a white boy my age snatch my body from me. The fear disappeared moments after the shove, I was furious. They booed, cursed and left. It was a long incident that happened within seconds that the moment I got to the apartment I began to doubt if it had even happened to me. I was ready to kill that night if someone had tried to take my body from me. I was thinking of my grandfather all the chaos.

The apartment is the second floor of a brown house at the end of the street in a white neighborhood. From afar, it looks like a large slab slanting up to the skyline. I have walked for an hour my apartment on West Main Street and it is seven o'clock when I arrived. There is something about America that keeps me wanting to read Homer or Beowulf each night I walk this neighborhood. America, I have come to believe, is the world's capital of beauty, wealth, vanity, horror, grace, darkness, and poetry, and to truly grasp the depth of this combination one has to be transported into an ancient time of dreams and fantasies and hypocrisy, those distant times of transparent cruelty. It is freezing and the darkness seems weighty over the street. I wait in front of the house and some moments passed when the door opens. Traore emerges is in a black pants reaching to his knees, yellow Adidas sneakers, black hat, and an ash sweatshirt. I walk to him and as we embrace I smell cigarette on him. We enter the house, climb the stairways into the apartment and enter the warm room where a strong smell of coffee filled the air. A heavy object crashes on the floor in the apartment below. A French professor and her boyfriend live on the first floor, Traore tells me. We've rescheduled this meeting thrice, which was supposed to have happened during my second week in America. Today is December 1.

It is a small apartment; books, fashion magazines, camouflage design PS4 paddles and corkscrew are strewn on the rug. Once I turn to my right, a distance from the TV, I see a large box of chocolate half opened on a table. The apartment has the feel of a posh dormitory. The most prominent furniture is a large couch occupied by two men. On a rocking chair opposite them is a woman who seems to be about my age, she stands and grabs something from the table in front of her. She is Tall. Some inches away from her, near the door that opens to the patio, beside the pairs of boots and socks, there is another couch seated by three other young men. I am suddenly overwhelmed. I don't know how to meet people but I am able to manage the anxiety. Everyone in the room is black, actually the woman is brown, and though none of them fit the image I had in my head prior to my leaving my apartment, I feel connected. The image of a so-called black fraternity operating in Charlottesville would be expected to be fierce looking, scholarly, and eccentric, like a rebel group. The scene here seems like schoolchildren having some great moment. I refuse the seat I am offered on the large couch with the men, throw a joke to douse the tension, and as I aim for the floor the room heater makes some obnoxious beep that briefly rattled me. I sit

there on the rug, leg crossed, thoughts racing in head, struggling for control, and sipping from the cup of tea Traore just passed me. And as I raise my gaze to the wall of the room, there is the giant poster of the great James Baldwin in a grey suit behind a podium wearing those meaningfully weary large eyes, beside this poster are other three larger posters of Silento in Nae Nae pose on a glamorous stage and by him a black girl in a pink dress taking the same pose, then Young M. A sitting on the cement stairs of a house holding a pout and looking into the camera, and at the end is another poster showing Kendrick Lamar in dreads, in ash color tracksuit resting his back against a brick wall, in a frown, below his frame is: The New Prophet. Traore enters the bathroom for a wash and a conversation begins between the other men and I.

Traore told me he came from an elite family of business owners in a West African country. He came to America to study Physics but in his third year in college he had begun contemplating things. With the assistance of a housemate, a PHD student, he said, he started studying works by African-American writers. Malcolm X and Baldwin are the real deal, he once told me during a phone call. By reading he discovered the heart of America or, as he put it, the heart of white people. In a short time he became a radical. White people, he said, are evil that must be quickly exterminated from face of the earth. I recall precisely how a giant rumble raced through me as I heard him stressed *extermination*. He himself couldn't really point out the specific reasons when I asked why, or his reasons are no different from what is known. He stopped receiving his classes. For him, he had nothing to lose since he would be inheriting his family's business. He suddenly resolved that pursuing black people's cause was his calling and in order to familiarize with the 'struggle' began traveling across the States, searching for *the black organization, something with a force*. He told me he wasn't, and still not, interested in groups utilizing mere strategies of speech and protest. 'Lame shit,' he called it, 'if they kill one of us, why can't we kill two or more in revenge. Those devils! No one has got monopoly to hatred and murder, you know, brother.' After the expiration of his visa and past the time to graduate, he went underground. Years ago some person whom he had met and befriended while on a visit to Chicago, and who has recently moved to Virginia to be close to his mother invited him along. Traore's spirit bears so much of C. Boy, his story, too. The more we spoke over the phone, the clearer I saw the overwhelming madness that has entrapped our body.

Traore has finished from the shower and now in the room. He sits by my side on the rug and smells like a baby. Dwayne, one of the men, stands up, shares a joke about Traore and begins to pass wineglasses around. He opens a bottle of Rosé. Traore turns to face me with a bare look and say, You look tense. You fine, bro. I laugh. I tell him they don't have what it takes to make me nervous. They burst into laughter. But, of course, I am nervous. Looking at him with the corner of the eye, I see how much he resembles C. Boy in posture and gestures although he is older.

To begin, brother, don't befriend white people no matter how good you think they are, Traore says. It sounds more as a scolding than an advice. No matter how good they are, don't befriend them; white people are irredeemably evil, he continues. He spoke as though he had seen something only he knew about. The atmosphere in the room gradually feels like when a child is being forewarned of an imminent danger, and to be honest, he seems to have genuine concern for me. Looking at him, one could perceive the vast conviction behind his anger. Anna turns the TV off. I look around the room; my eyes meet with Dwayne's. We quickly look away from each other. He is a pretty boy.

Traore taps me on the shoulder and it lands with a sensation that reminds me of my friend Zachary. Zachary never speaks to me without his hand on my shoulder. I'm here to

tell the truth and guide you to it, Traore continues. Bro, you have so much to learn. White folks are your greatest enemy. I apologize for being so raw but there's no way around this fact. Its important to fight them with anything you can afford. I'm excited you are a writer; you'd be very useful. He takes a lengthy pause and then as if seized by a force he increases his tone and begins talking about slavery, post-emancipation, colonialism, unequal world invented and sustained by white people, James Baldwin, Malcolm X, B. T. Washington, Rosa Parks, Police and Brutality. It is a lecture, the kind given as though the receiver knew nothing about the subject. His eyes lose their brightness. "Our course, every black soul's responsibility is to fight, overwhelm these white people in whatever way until we regain every single thing stolen from us".

For two or three minutes, I was confused. I can't look him in the face anymore, he is teary-eyed and his accent deepens the distaste in his voice. But I want to say things to him. I want to let him know I understand his course but that it is not my politics, not not the game I am inclined to play. As I sit here, consumed by both pity and disgust. I begin losing my patience already. I have to leave this room, to leave this twentieth century rhetoric. But Traore keeps talking, and right away it dawns on me that I am never going to befriend him. I can feel the pain, the anger, the trauma in his voice but they lack the capacity to take away the disgust I now bear. I can see the tares in the field. Abruptly he stops the tirade, like a Pentecostal preacher from a long gyration at the pulpit. He gazes at the ceiling before turning this way to face me and say, This is why I want you to join us and fight these devils.

There are many things wrong with this. I don't think it is the right manner to convince me to join a fraternity. You don't hasten convictions. You build it. He doesn't understand that convictions take time and also that they take more than a glass of wine, debate and relationship. I have come to America to improve my writing and someone now tells me that commitment has to be secondary, that I should represent myself less in order to push for the 'destiny of a race'? I am in a class of ten writers, all Americans, all whites but me, all individuals filled with personal dreams and anxieties, but someone wants to condition me to representing the anger and struggle of a continent or a race? By this time my eyes are full of tears. I look round the room, my legs shiver, and my mouth feels vast. Anna sits, legs crossed over, in her chair, and though she holds a glass in one hand and checks her phone with the other she seems lost in something that has got nothing to do with what is happening in the room. The screen light of her phone pronounces the brightness of her gold nose ring. Dwayne, Alex, Chris, and the other guys who have been nodding all the way through the address cast their eyes on me. The tension grows huge. I hear the sound of a passing car outside the house.

I clear my throat, play with my fingers, adjust my sitting position to allow me face him and for the first time I want to be free. "Bro," I say, "I don't think this is my call. I mean this white people thing is not my interest. I've got to say this; white people are not my problem, will never be. I have problems, many of them, and I am deeply familiar with them all but none is about white people. I'm sorry. I don't want to waste my energy on these people. I am here on a scholarship. No black man has ever offered me such opportunity and there will be no greater hypocrisy if I become a black activist in America. Yea, I understand this struggle but I am not American and I am not going to live in this country. I will return to the continent and help my friends if I can; I hope to gather all the riches this wealthy country can offer and use them for my friends in Nigeria."

I lower my face to avoid seeing the people in the people. I am a shy man. I literally feel the weight of the eyes in the room on me. The breathing, the silence cuts. Something cracks against some metal in the apartment below.

I left Traore's apartment around twelve o'clock that night and walking home I felt as if something deep in my spirit had been plugged out and lost in the moment. I felt that I was back in the ruins of my grandfather's mud house in Lokoja. And I do not exaggerate my frustration. I felt fear in the cold night but it was the heat of recognition of the perpetual misery of the black body that immediately caused me to perspire. Instead of heading directly home, I took to wandering in the cold night, solitarily trudging through the streets. I could see the faces of the young people in Traore's apartment and the unease I found there is the same on the faces of every young black person I have known in my life. I saw in those fearful eyes countless Zacharys and little by little I found myself seeing the vast, almost single desolation among the black population of the world. I knew that Traore is stuck in anger here in America but returning home to his country on the African continent is choosing a deeper misery. As a black person, this is the condition, a perpetually floating in unease.

The men and women who continue to lecture us that Europe under-developed Africa are selling a lie; a lie that for decades has cushioned Africans into sleeping, that pushed us into this narrative of self-pity. This fetish lie has for decades frighten Africa from dreaming it-selves, inventing its meanings, and 'becoming' its true imaginations. A lie that, instead of reinforcing Africa's center in this world and expanding its systems and possibilities, injects fluids of mediocrity and dullness into our bodies. I am a black man who, like my friend Zachary, is reluctantly losing his body. I am aware of a new breed of our brethren who are scattered all over the world but are freeing themselves from centuries-old fears, inferiority complex and stupidity into the space of imagination, onto the platforms where unleashing our dreams and essence and respect is an attitude rather than a protest or scholarship: our originality. These new breeds are fed up with *offshore* imaginations that stalked and continue to control our race, those politics. Our bodies are tired of being ridden by uninventive fires, of being described and spoken for. Today, I want to summon this lie and its narratives to a new arena; ready to spank it, to discard it. We are re-forming us from its lane of disaster. Europe did not under-develop Africa. This falsehood is lying, sitting, squatting, crawling, and enlarging in the dreams of millions of Africans, in the systems of young black Africans like Traore, like my father and his fathers. Today, it'll be exorcised: it's our task. See: here, we are doing it. See. Africa's underdevelopment results from the actions and inactions of Africans themselves. Europe lacks the wherewithal to under-develop my land, my imagination, my body, and my dreams without my submission and nods. Europe is too inadequate to abuse these bodies and land without some forms of compromise from our ancestors and their present day descendants.

For decades, this terrible lie found its way into the syllabi of studies in Social Sciences and Humanities across schools in Africa, and maybe somewhere else. This lie, carefully designed and put in History, Literature, and Political Science courses, has been taught to students by professors who felt that it is the only way to reveal Africa's pasts to its young souls and, thus build 'an intelligent-informed generation' that would later own their continent. A former professor of mine put it this way: knowing of slavery first, and then colonialism aids the processes of decolonization; students must be shown how white-people impoverished their continent. The problems with this attempt, however, are, firstly, anything meaningful hardly comes after it, so that students know a lot about the past but possess little or no knowledge of the future, secondly; while teaching this lie that Africa's woes are a

foreign invention, professors emphasized the evils committed by these white people in Africa and barely mention anything about the folly, poor judgment and stupidity notoriously displayed by our ancestors in all their interactions with these same white folks, thirdly; this lie, instead of appearing or working as a recognition and study of history, aspired to be a training exercise for mere finger-pointing and accusation. All my academic life at the university, I learnt more about colonialism, slavery and white people than about Africa itself, than my own selves, than the possibilities in my world.

Writers of polemics and literature produced loads of texts (from '40s, '60s, '70s, to the 80s, especially) to justify this White Power that crushed the hips of our ancestors; their texts depict how crooked Europeans made intrusions into Africa and destroyed, contaminated, and demeaned its glory and beauty. Some of these folks and their texts went on to win awards, prizes and positions in Europe and American, where they soon became representatives, and Africa became a clan of pitiful, helpless cheated children who needed certain blessed clansmen speak on their behalf in London, Brussels, Paris, Amsterdam, New York, Milano, and The Hague. They attracted 'white-people's sympathy, apologies, grants. They unsettled audiences with rhetoric about how Europe raped and looted Africa, and were rewarded with positions in the departments of Africana Studies or some institutes in Western universities and organizations. Western endorsements of the validity of their angers and brightness promoted them to the status of the 'brightest' Africans, 'most refined blacks'; soon everything became a Black-Diaspora-Savior Industrial Complex that is obsessed with defending and explaining Africa to the world. But little happened to Africa in the true sense. We don't see its future. The pretense that Africa can be changed from outside its borders has grown into nothing but disgust, disgust that aspires to eternalize the conditions pillaging our bodies.

I suppose that Africa, as a space, as a conversation, as a concept, as a continent, as a construct, as a strategy, is the most misappropriated term in world history—countless people, colonialists, politicians, writers, journalists, tourists, revolutionaries, academics, NGOs, clerics, motivational speakers, entrepreneurs, governments, expats, both African and non-African golden boys and girls have banked on it to make fortunes and careers for themselves. I mean, they've busied themselves with the tasks of describing it, abusing it, sometimes excusing it, objectifying, cheating and mocking it to score points that have little to do the wellbeing of Africa.

Europe did not under-develop Africa. No outside people are responsible for Africa's poverty, wars, failures, and corruption, the black African's underdevelopment. If truly Africa is an underdeveloped continent, its underdevelopment comes from within itself, from within us. Nowhere else. We killed this continent, the ancestors and us. Narratives are words, and words carry within them creative potentials. All narratives, no matter what the size they assume, are political; they install new strengths into or dismantle the status quo. Politics is a struggle for Power, the East and West grasp this thesis. Africans grossly misunderstand it. The constant narrative that Europe and some white folks have succeeded in restricting Africa from development has only made sure power remains in the hands of the non-African; the narratives do nothing to the accused. They only promote the mightiness of his strength (both in the imagination of the complainant and the accused), he is happy to hear that he is responsible for ruining a whole continent, an entire race. It excites him to hear he created Africa's sorry conditions. He feels more powerful and stately about it. While the narrative massages his egos and opens his imaginations to newer possibilities, it kills the African and injects inferiority complex, passivity and stage fright into the systems of the African the moment he wants share the stage with the accused or his descendants. This

continent is on its knees because our ancestors and us unconsciously (most times, deliberately) *conspired* to allow it. An ambitious boxer who lost a fight doesn't go about protesting his defeat on the techniques and strategies the opponent deployed, he returns to training the next minute because he recognized that everything, every history, every contact is a contest, and no one wins a contest by protest. To win the war for Africa, we all must declutter our imaginations.

How come we don't win anything or invent or lead or give anything? How come there was an Arab slave trade, an East African Slave Trade, South African Slave Trade, The Atlantic Slave Trade, Middle-Passage and Trans-Sahara Slave Trade and after all of this came Berlin conference? How come were the ancestors outsmarted in all the cases and overwhelmed by 'white people'? How come? How come this continent, this race, this blackness is still one huge *nervous condition*?

The greatest scramble for Africa wasn't the one that happened in Berlin. The worst crime against blacks wasn't the middle passage on the Atlantic. Africa's disasters and slavery and poverty come from the inability of Africans to use their imaginations to repel all forms of intrusions. One is almost made to believe that black people lack the mental space to involve their creative energies. For centuries, from the ancestors to our dispensation, from slavery to colonialism, from independence to present day, there is a simple truth that runs through us: we have been incapable to look inward at ourselves. Of course, since there remains still in this century a universal question of the "Negro", the simple fact that the Negro has not been able to build a nation of great success and comfort either in Africa or elsewhere, a place of alternatives; the fact that the Negro could still be seen as article to be traded in this century implies we have in our hands a civilizational problem. And here I do not speak like the racist outsider who has consistently attempted to define this question by pointing at the supremacy of his own race. Indeed, I also do not intend to speak of the Negro as one people, one culture, one problem, one person. It is easy to attribute the underdevelopment of Africa to colonialism and all its relics—post-independence political corruption. While these factors are undeniably true, we have ignored our own indifference to rethink our civilization and thus abandoned our souls. Because we are somehow still spoon fed by foreign imaginations there is nothing organic in the progression of our politics, history, science, education and philosophy. The prosperity of the West is visibly on an organic thread, for prior to culmination of capital and powerful states, there were the Industrial Revolutions, there were poesy and philosophy, there was darkness and enlightenment, drama and science and other fields of curiosity. For the Western world a solid dispensation of curiosity begets another development, so that every intellectual phenomenon either is a rub off on the other or a vaster derivative of progress. But we have lacked the urgency to reconsider "our entire history", say, as the "Germans and Japanese carried out after the war." As a people, we have denied ourselves moments of wondering, of awakening, of discovery and uneasy questions. This is why, I believe, that we still wander in wilderness with little signs of Canaan.