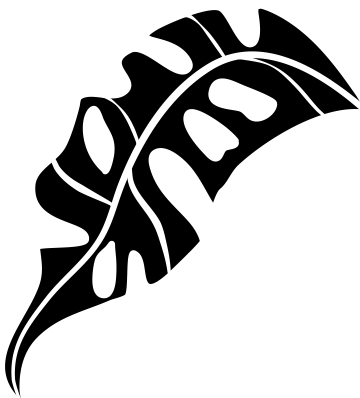


how to revive the dead



essays on loss

MARVELLOUS OGUDORO



ch 1. gait

Since the last time Mr. Emeka was at our doorstep, nothing much has changed. Granted, his most recent drunken trip had happened only two nights ago. But we had at least expected to see a change of clothes. The visit itself, though, does not surprise my brother and I, who reluctantly leave our chessboard and rush to alert our mom of Mr. Emeka's presence.

Hands still dripping from washing dishes, my mother arrives at the front door eager to return to her chores. "Mommy Collins, good evening ma" he yells when he finally perceives that the adult he is looking for is standing right in front of him. My brother, Sonto, and I have begun to notice that Mr. Emeka- when drunk- needs a bit more time to understand things. Intoxicated, he'll mix up his tenses or will refer to me as my brother or vice versa. One day, when on an errand for my mom, he even bought the wrong kind of peppers. This being the case after "ata rodo" was repeated five times by my mother.

Despite the fact that Mr. Emeka is maybe the worst person for an errand, my mother still entertains his requests for work when he stops by. The other neighbors ignore him. "Every village needs a drunk" they'll say while laughing at his intoxicated gait. These neighbors, especially Mr. Richards and Mrs. Okon, sometimes make fun of the fact that he only drinks the Nigerian-made Gulder beer. As if imported catalysts for alcoholism would somehow be better. But my mother, I assume to teach me and Sonto some important lesson, always tries to come up with a job that Mr. Emeka can do. It's just who she is.

Like every other day he visits, the “village drunk” will ask three questions. “How is Oga’s business?” “What about grandma’s health” and “How are the boys doing in school”. Mommy’s answers, unlike Mr. Emeka’s questions, vary depending on how eager she is to leave. Today, her responses are simple and short. “Business is doing better” “Her leg is still a bit swollen, but the drugs are starting to calm the pain” and “They have plenty of homework but are studying hard”.

The errand for today is also relatively simple. Can Mr. Emeka buy some fuel for the generator? “These people have refused to allow us to charge our phones”, she’ll complain while voicing her preferred fuel station. This expression of discontent for the government that is as close as she’ll get to a political conversation with a drunk man. “If you allow him to talk about politics, I will never leave this door” my brother and I will hear when Mr. Emeka walks away.

For now, though, my mom will slip a crumpled 500-naira note into Mr. Emeka’s left hand; his right is too busy with the extra-large bottle of beer that has fueled this visit. Sonto and I are old enough to know that the errand will actually cost about 300 naira. The 200-naira change is money my mother will never ask for. And we assume, Mr. Emeka will use this money for another bottle of beer. Maybe though, we brothers hope, he’ll today walk his inebriated gait to somewhere other than the alcohol shop and buy some food this time.

We are wrong.

ch 2. one day

You already know that time moves slowly when you're depressed. Or it could be passing by slowly because you're stuck in Lagos traffic after some heavy downpour. Either way, seconds are creeping, and you are here; sitting with the heaviness of your drenched heart. Your hands feel icy, so you wiggle around in your seat, before sliding your ten fingers under your trouser covered thighs for warmth. You remember how during those months when you first moved to Michigan, your hands also felt cold, but you had then blamed it on the weather. "One day I'll get used to the freezing". You never did and so today, even with the warm Lagos rain, ice builds across your palms.

When it's finally time for you to climb out of the bus, you whisper a count, "one, two, three, four"; Numbering the important items in your pocket that you dare not forget. Once, on your way back from secondary school, you reached the number, three, before realizing your inhaler was nowhere near your keys, phone, and wallet. That day, you didn't tell your mother you had lost your asthma relief, knowing that it would only make her financial anxieties worse.

Your count right now, though, is complete and so you stagger out of the bus into the rain that is more of a light drizzle. You convince yourself that even this little water leaking from the sky is enough to make you feel cold. "One day I'll get used to the rain".

There is nowhere in particular that you are going, or at least that's what you tell yourself. This white lie will make it easier to tell your therapist you just stumbled across her grave- your mother's that is. She passed away seven months ago, lacking the breath of life that your inhaler affords you.

Her burial site is tucked away and quiet. Serene enough for you to hear cars honking from many miles away. Maybe you can even hear the bus you just got off? It is not quiet enough, though, for you to hear her heartbeat. "I'm too far up" you tell yourself before remembering what your therapist asked the last time you thought that. "Do you feel like you'd be better off that far down" he said while being careful to read your reaction. A quick and defensive "no" left your mouth and it was followed by many minutes of silence.

"One day I'll get used to her absence".

ch 3. apple tree questions

From the day that Atinuke is named, questions fly around from your neighbors while they butcher the pronunciation of your baby girl's name. "A child who has been pampered since birth" you interpret before gauging to see if the oyinbo people understand that you're not trying to be pretentious. Yes, Atinuke has been born into your family- one with significant and maybe questionable wealth. But her name, you'll argue, is more about how she'll be pampered with your love, affection and time.

The phrase, "Daddy's favorite person" will leave your mouth on this her naming ceremony and it will quickly stick around. With no siblings, there is no one to contest for Atinuke's spot and so, she quickly settles into her spot as the apple of your eye. Sometimes, you'll worry that being the only child has made the pampering professed in her name, economic or otherwise, to become too much of a reality. But you'll quickly remind yourself that "It's not my fault". Your wife's family, like on many other issues, quietly disagrees.

Atinuke will grow up fast. Too fast, you'll argue. One day, she'll be crawling around the carpet in the living room and the next day, she'll be walking off the stage at Columbia University with an Art History degree in hand. At this graduation, you'll wince when they call her to the podium. "How can these oyinbo people still be struggling with her name?"

ch 4. today

For the first time in eight months and 23 days, Uzo's schedule does not greet your mind as your eyelids part when you wake up. Since that Thursday evening when you spent hours begging him to reconsider this break-up, everyone had told you that this lapse in interest would come. Strangers, watching you cry on the subway, had nodded knowingly when they recognized the wails of a jilted lover. Your close friends urged you to stop delaying this morning by re-reading the break-up texts Uzo sent. Your mother, even through her calcified heart, had also told you this cut would heal. Granted, she said so while trying to remind you of her grief when your father had left; a reminder you didn't particularly enjoy. "Am I not doing better now?" she asked; needing you more in that moment than you needed her. "Uzo is nothing like papa" you protested through your tears. Eight months and 20 days ago since that encounter, she has still said nothing else about your heartbreak.

So today, when his going-about's are no longer the first thing on your mind, you'll acknowledge that Uzo was a little bit like your father. Tall, charming, and confused. Your father was always confused. On the nights when he tried to remember what you were studying in college, he'd talk through every subject except the right one; Sociology. Uzo was like this. He'd never remember where he dropped his phone or what your love languages were. Your psychologist thinks that maybe for the latter individual, he just didn't care enough. But if that were true for Uzo, what about your dad?

That doesn't matter right? Maybe people can be the same but also different? After all, you haven't receded into your shell like your mother. That thought will dance in your mind for a little too long and you'll then remember all the people you've ignored in the past 263 days. The text messages unanswered and the voicemails not returned. Last week, your therapist tried to ask you about these ignored signals from the outside world. The ways in which you stare at them but never engage. "But aren't I doing so much better now?"

ch 5. bowed heads

We meet every night at 10:37pm.

Sometimes, he is early and will spend a couple of minutes waiting to be let in. When I finally make it to our appointment—one I don't remember scheduling—he will waste no time. From his backpack, he'll pull out a dense collection of paper work. I, from the other side of this shaky table, will catch a glimpse of what we're about to go over. "There's more pictures than usual tonight" I'll note but my words will be met with crisp silence.

"Typical"

Before he starts, our heads bow but no one speaks. I remember the days when we didn't begin with this ritual. Those meetings when we just dove into the contents of his backpack. Meetings without beginnings. Back then, there had been more sentences than pictures. But there had also been more death stares; from him to be precise.

When our heads rise, there is already a picture on the table. "You can't really catch me by surprise you know? All these are mine".

The silence will not retreat so I'll let out a sigh and start.

ch 6. untitled

I've never been the best dancer in a room but I have grown into being willing to try. In moments where I am surrounded by music and merry people, I have learned to not restrain the joyful movements that my body asks for. When I watch my feet become burdened with hesitance, I choose to dance regardless. By doing so, I allow my stiffness to melt away.

This melting is especially true when I'm able to catch the smile of another dancer. In a few key moments, said person and I are able to exchange something extremely special. We, non-verbally, invite each other into the triumphs and failures of our collective footwork.

Other times, my body will firm up mid dance and this is usually after meeting another pair of eyes. These gazes carry more judgment within them. Frequently, these hypercritical people aren't even on the dance floor. They watch from the sidelines, but behind their piercing looks, one can see them ranking everyone's dance moves.

My anxious mind is always sure that I am at the bottom of their lists.

ch 7. train tracks

Of the 400 days that I have ridden this train, you've joined me for just about 36. I've been waiting and finally, you are here.

Since the special Wednesday when you boarded this train, every prior disaster seems worth it. The 78 days when I struggled to find a spot to sit. All 28 rides when the crying children could not be soothed. Even those 8 days, when the train's sudden stop sent someone's coffee flying onto my outfits.

Those days before you, are now simple the days before you. I can barely even remember them; You are here.

ch 8. october 20th, 2020

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about the author

Hi, my name is Marvellous and I am a Masters Student at Georgetown University's McDonough School of Business where I am studying Management. With a Bachelors of Arts in Philosophy and Political Science from Hope College, Michigan, USA, I have been lucky to have lived and studied in three of the world's iconic cities. These include the city of Lagos, Nigeria which is the commercial nerve center of Africa's Giant. Along with the world's financial and political capitals in New York City and Washington, D.C. respectively.

With interests in Business, International Development, Law, Entrepreneurship and Public Policy, I am excited to build a career in Management Consulting and Asset Management. Outside of school and work, I write, always have a book close by, and will say yes to almost any adventure.

I'm excited that you're here and I hope to connect with you sometime soon.