

Through Memory, Home

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Şesí. T'òkọ T'aya. Tóyìn. A pause. Ánkùs. This is how I know I am close to home: tarred roads give way to dusty ones narrowed by gullies that claim more of the road each rainy season. The names are of bus-stops leading to Òkè-Àró, a confluence town where my father chose to build his house.

Ánkùs. Ọbánlá. Ẹnílọ́bò. I am calling these names to myself as I drive home for the celebrations. Ẹnílọ́bò invites me to an introspection: Have I returned as the person I was when I left? I earmark the thought for consideration later and amuse myself anew at the corruption of Hercules to form Ánkùs. Gíwá. Sẹ̀lẹ̀. Òkè-Àró. Òkè-Àró is where I turn.

Little has changed and it is both comforting and disturbing. The Okada riders, brown from their rides, are heavily clad as usual: winter hat/head warmer, dark sunglasses, nose mask, windbreaker, jeans, socks, boots. There are no lanes to separate traffic here. Vehicles struggle for whatever patch of the road will inflict the least damage. Power Station on the left. The familiar stench of pig shit from the right. From this vantage point, I see everything. The river, overgrown with ferns. The abandoned wooden shops just beyond the river. The houses with red or green roofs to either side of the meandering road. The dust stains everything the eye can see, and it stains the eyebrow if one stares too long.

Several things are interesting about Òkè-Àró and the Matogun town it leads to. The borders of Lagos

and Ogun State blur so neither government provides the required infrastructure. It is said that during Fashola's tenure, he approached the town's chiefs for a formal absorption into Lagos State. At this time, Governor Gbenga Daniel had denied the existence of the town on Ogun State's map. The majority of the residents work in and pay taxes to Lagos State anyway. Though the town is home to what is reputed to be West Africa's largest pig farm, it is owned by the Lagos State Government. One would think that these coupled with Fashola's high-performance tenure would be enough to help the chiefs to a decision. It wasn't.

Beyond the long-winding Òkè-Àró - Matogun Road is a river, Odò Olókè, that snakes through the town in valleys. My mother tells me that it was so-called because residents had to descend a slope to reach the river and, with a bowl of water balanced on the head, they would begin an ascent that, from the bottom, appeared to reach the firmament. Those days whenever her mother, my grandmother, set foot in the village, one of the wives immediately set out for the river to fetch her drinking water. She would accept no other welcome.

Beyond Odò Olókè is Ibafo on the Lagos-Ibadan Expressway. Thus, the Òkè-Àró - Matogun road is to be continued by a bridge that connects to Ibafo, allowing access to Oyo State. This peculiarity makes the Òkè-Àró - Matogun a federal road, one which no state government is allowed nor the federal government willing to fix. My ten-year-old Mitsubishi creaks in part protest and part resignation to this bureaucratic stalemate.

Wherever the road descends into the valleys, onrushing water buoyed by gravity carries away the topsoil into gutters and the river. To augment their incomes, families rise early and gather whatever silt has filled their gutters into a heap to be sold once they have a tipper-full. Elsewhere, on flatter land, the mud slush would be so viscous that cars that break down in it are abandoned until the rainy season ends. If you brave an Okada ride through the mud slush in the mornings following a rainy night, your "good mornings" will find fathers and sons armed with shovels, moving buckets of sand.

Still, my father is not alone in his poor choice. Many others like him bought lands here while it was as cheap as lands could be. One of them was wealthy and, unfortunately, philanthropic. At the end of the rainy seasons, he would pay for the Òkè-Àró - Matogun road to be filled again with sand and graded. This was the yearly ritual I grew up to: the road is filled and graded, the rains washed it into gutters for families to gather and sell then the man graded the road again for use. I moved to Ibadan for my A-Levels after secondary school and returned to find the road yawning in places. That year, the road was not filled and graded. My parents, like many others, had done away with their cars, unwilling to bear the costs of incessant repairs. Where was the wealthy man?

My family shuffles between Abeokuta and Lagos. Without cars that year, we grumbled about the discomfort of the journey to Abeokuta via public buses. As traditions are not so easily done away with, we gathered our things and steeled our minds. At the bus-stop, we prayed for an empty Keke Napep to no avail. When one came along still bearing passengers from Òkè-Àró, we shouted for it to return to convey us. We were there, shouting down every other Napep that passed until, luckily, that first one returned. Its driver was a raucous Yorùbá man, middle-aged but with a gaunt look. His hair was starting to grey and his buba and sokoto were well-worn. Thankful for our luck, my mother launched into a conversation that I translate loosely, capturing as much of its nuance as I can.

"Thank God you returned. Getting a bike or Napep has been terrible because the road was not fixed this year", she began.

"I knew you would wait. It is better that you did."

“Ah, you know how these things are. How could we know that you would not have taken passengers where you dropped the other ones?”

“But I gave you my word. That is a contract between us, and God was our witness.”

“If you had seen passengers before us, you would have carried them. Likewise, if we had found another Napep, we would have gone also. However, it is God that said we would find each other.”

“You do not yet understand me, ìyá wa. Once you asked me to return and I said I would, we entered a contract together. If you betrayed that contract, then you would bear the consequences.”

My sisters and I looked at each other. This was no sarcasm and my mother’s alarmed look confirmed it.

“What consequences? Shouldn’t each person just do what pays them? I wouldn’t blame you if you had carried other passengers instead of us.”

“Ah, I will blame you! My primordial head is vengeful and will blame you also. I am no ordinary being. If you betray a contract with me, you will bear the brunt of it. Last week, one man made this same request you made to me. He was carrying plantains to Òkè-Àró for sale. I saw passengers at Adélaní, I ignored them. All the way until I got to him, exactly where you stood today. Can you believe that this man took a bike the moment I got to him?”

We were all silent while he spoke. Mother sought to pacify him.

“Ehn, that one is bad. I understand. However, which one is now your vengeful orí? God would have provided passengers for you also so that you recoup your losses.”

“Recoup my losses, you say? The madman broke his leg close to the pig farm! I met him there, the bike had slipped into the gully and his right leg broke into two. I saw the disfigured thing as I passed him on my way with other passengers. My orí does not accept any slight.”

We all exchanged looks and this time Mother did not brave a reply. Still, he continued.

“This road is better like this. Though it is not graded, at least we are in control now.”

“In control how? How is this road better like this?”

“Aren’t you suspicious of the wealthy man that graded it yearly? What is the source of his wealth? He was using people’s glory, that is why he was the only one who could afford to grade this long stretch of road yearly.”

He misjudged a climb and his Napep powered off. Undaunted, he stepped out to push it as he spoke.

“It is better now that we are doing it all ourselves. The youths have chased the evildoer away. He was not doing well anymore so he moved away.”

Thus, a new ritual began: the road is fixed and tolled by community youths, the rains wash it into gutters then the road is tolled again to be fixed. As I drive past the toll gate now, I wonder about that wealthy man again. Had he heard these beliefs about his wealth? Where is he now?

In accord with our willful abandonment of this town of dust and superstitious beliefs, the gully has

claimed the road that leads to our house. I park two streets away and wind my way home between half-roofed bungalows and aged storey buildings awaiting completion of their higher floors. The climbing plants that line our fence have overgrown the trellis and now jostle the rusted barbed wire for space. Between them and the overgrown vines, little of the bungalow within is visible from outside. But I remember its yellow and army green paint. Its spacious driveway and the reflective tiles of its interior are vivid in my mind's eye. When the gate opens and my sisters drag me inside and into their arms, I am home and it is all as I remember.

The clocks in my house no longer tell the time of day, at least not as they should. They tell how long it has been since my family last called this house a home. Unlike the glass stools glistening with the wetness of freshly applied cleaning fluid, the clocks are like dusty squares that oversee the tiled sitting room. I do not ask; I know that I am to clean them and change their batteries. Two of my three sisters are here and, true to my name, Ọkánlàwọ́n, I sit between them. A question sits expectantly between us: how have you fared, sojourner? In the quiet, we look to one another for clues. Midé's eyes are as lively as ever. The only chair close to a socket has always been hers and she is there, guarding the gifts she has for everyone until her appointed time. "Attendre mon temps," she says in her French whenever anyone tries to snatch them. "Èní s'òyìnbó nílẹ̀ àna rẹ̀ l'òrẹ̀ ẹ̀," I tell her each time. Àwẹ̀ní has stretched to what will probably be her full height. She has also slimmed down in compensation for this gain. Her laptop wears an older look now, the keys polished from use. Beside it is her jotter, turned to a completed to-do list written in her impeccable handwriting. "Glory to God!" is written just beneath it. I find her expression of religion—spirituality, she might say—, even in the minutiae of her life, comforting. When they point out my weight loss, I quickly confess my erratic feeding habit. I know the stress is telling on my face. Lagos has not been kind since I moved back. Lagos—where one must constantly move as fast as possible, fight as long as possible.

How have you fared, sojourner? I am thankful that easy answers, however incomplete, can be found to appease this soul-searching question. Often when there is too much to be said, it is all left unsaid. Another question once sat expectantly between us. One for which we found no easy answers within ourselves. Nor amongst one another. It was the last day of a three-day revival service at a church here in Matogun and, as expected, the guest minister charged the congregation with stories of downfalls, and of breakthroughs alike. Each story was backed by a bible passage then followed by a prayer point shouted out as if from some revelation to him alone. That he ministered in Yorùbá and had to be interpreted only added to the mysterious air about his persona. Often the interpreter failed to replicate the ferociousness in his statements and in holy anger, he would look to the corrugated roof and shake his head in refusal. Wọ́nú ẹ̀mí pẹ̀lú mi, alá kùnrin. Jẹ́ kí ẹ̀mí yíí gbé ẹ̀ wọ̀.

"There is only one favoured child per family. Do you follow?"

The tension was thick, us sweating congregants waited with bated breath for his next word. He repeated himself then started to pace the rugged pulpit as if impatient for his one plus one to be summed up to two.

"One child that carries the glory of the family. One!"

Heads started to nod in newfound understanding.

"Genesis 45:7. What does it say?"

"But God sent me ahead of you..."

"Şùgbọ́n Ọlórún rán mi şáájú yín..."

"To preserve for you a remnant..."

“Láti da irú-ọmọ yín sí fún-un yín...”

“And to save your lives by a great deliverance.”

“Àti láti fi ìgbàlà nílá gba èmí yín là.”

Was it disputable anymore? Joseph was singled out and lifted, heads and shoulders, above his brothers so that it was to him they returned, dolorous, when they had eaten all the grain he provided at first. The nods were fervent now. It was time for prayer.

“If I were you, I would loosen my belt.”

He resumed pacing.

“If I were you, I would find a space for myself at a distance from my neighbour.”

He stepped off the pulpit.

“One child carries the glory of the family.”

The words hung ominously over the congregation.

“If your siblings are here today, you should pull up your trousers.”

His voice dropped close to a whisper.

“An angel of the first sphere of heaven is passing this moment.”

My sisters and I did not look one another in the eye. I saw them look at the other families, some with up to five children. Which child do such parents choose for this divine favour?

“Ọyá, àdúrà!”

I have questioned this memory many times, muddying it as I groped for its entirety. Still, it retains the transcendental essence that the preacher so deftly impregnated it with. His last word was the starting pistol fired to start the race. Who dared dally at the blocks? The words that left my mouth in prayer were not mine. I hovered outside of my own body, in a debate with myself about this choice forced upon me: to be or not to be, at the expense of my siblings or myself. What was your prayer? We sat together on a bench after the revival and the question wedged itself between us, poisoning the silence. What was your prayer, child of my mother?

In my room, my secondary school uniform hangs above the bookshelf. My old journals are piled on top of it, within easy reach in nostalgic moments. I think that somewhere in the shelf’s belly is the passage I wrote of a street in a robbery. That passage convinced my English Language teacher that there was something of a writer in me. But that writer did not find expression outside of Composition classes until I chanced upon Edgar Allan Poe’s poetry and took his words for myself. Until reciting *The Raven* to the audacious girl that braved intimidation to tell me jokes, I spurted my first words. From then on, my mind was in thrall to her, my fair one, and I poured words in our special book. Then my WASSCE approached and I grew restless with a foreboding of love soon to be lost. It was, perhaps, the first time I would lose anything I valued. Soon after, in the middle of a poem, I ran out of words. I lost him—my young writer self in a haze of love and lust. I touch him when I touch the special book.

I should have known that he had many lives. I should have known that he would obsess over that thing that took him in infancy—loss. I was tearing myself away from another lover when he was reborn. First, as a reader consumed by the beauty of prose poetry. Then as a bibulous evangelist of Kahlil Gibran's *The Prophet*. If the words came in bursts in his first life, in his second life, they trickled. Still, in those few words, my soul's entirety he did outpour.

"These years will change you. Let it happen. You are metal in the forge finding form beneath the smith's hammer. You are a caged bird set free, listening to the four winds sing of wondrous possibilities: that heaven is a rush of blood to the head away."

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