wash between your toes

TENI AYO-ARIYO
wash between your toes
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Tени Ayo-Ariyo
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for the girl in the river and everyone searching for hope in tight spaces.
tutọ jade • spit out

you who wants to swallow me whole, i ask:

what do layers feel like against your tongue? can you separate bitter from sweet, my past from present?

i am a pomegranate, intricate and juicy. will you spit out my seeds?
ounjẹ aarọ • breakfast

i am unsure of what lies ahead
so i prepare myself
premeditate the worst
imagine my mom gone, then my dad, my brother, my sister—in no order
i try to deal with pain before it comes

the left side of my chest hurts so i wait for breast cancer. i grit my teeth at night and wear socks to bed even though it is july

my counselor asks me to write a 5 year plan so i gather my strength and scribble in my notebook “tomorrow i will cook breakfast: 2 eggs over hard, with spinach and a piece of ezekiel bread toasted” that’s all i can muster for now
aye mi • my life

i could die tomorrow
what that really means is, i can live today
which one will i choose?
orukọ mi • my name

i will not long for strangers to carry my name in their mouths when i have not yet mastered its syllables
àbúró egbon • younger/older sibling

I want the people at the leasing office to take me seriously so I pile lipstick on my face. I consider the man on the phone's one time offer of $79.99 for a gym membership I will never use. I trade all the neon and bright clothes in my closet for beige and cream. These are office colors. I order a checkbook online. I do not know what I will use it for but the woman at the counter stuffed pity in her throat when she claimed that this is the adult thing to do.

I am still 5 and 12 and 26 but nobody comes outside to play.
dide ki o jo • get up and dance

my friends sit on my couch after supper
they shed their skin
break all over the place
they do this every night for 3 months
i encourage it
revel in it
shove my own mess into the crevices of my house
anything to avoid what is mine

one day, or month, later i don't even remember,
i do not recognize my home any longer

“hey guys, i think you all have to go” i say.
“i tried to find my heart today and i don't know where it is.”

when they leave, i sort out what is mine and what is theirs. i foam roll my back, sit up straight,
dance to India Arie's “private party”
come back home to myself
omo mi atatata  ●  my darling child

my voice is the light that cracks
through dawn
to usher in the morning
every time i pray
god gathers the angels
they open their ears to me

i am their favorite lullaby
ninu mi  •  inside me

i can only give what i have inside me
i can only give what i have inside me
i can only give what i have inside me
i can only give what i have inside me
i can only give what i have inside me
ohun ọṣọ • jewelry

i call society tonight and ask about his return policy
“uhm, good evening sir. i need to return your labels, your rules, your expectations.”

i lay down his weapons
pick up my own
admire the wrinkles in my elbows
rub shea butter on my secret wounds
gather the scars he asks me to hide
wear them as jewelry
ade ogo • crown of glory

during the sermon the pastor talks about David
he was 17 when he was anointed king
37 when he was appointed

when they turn the lights down low i weep
i am in the space between my anointing and crowning
my night-self makes commitments to my day-self

1. stay off instagram
2. go to trader joe's and buy sunflowers for the dining table
3. finish unpacking the suitcase from my trip last month
4. call mom

i wake up, hit snooze and sleep for 2 more hours. It's afternoon when i get out of bed. i cross everything off my to do list and write

1. survive
i put cocoa butter on my lips before i go to bed
remember my dreams in the morning
correct spelling errors in my journal and lay my bed
i clip my nails and paint them during finals week
pull the chin hairs off my chin when they get rowdy
i wash between my toes

where are my trophies
my accolades
my speech

i came
i stayed
i built a home
the land of small brave things
at 23 i cut my first pineapple

at 23 i see my mother with new eyes
i am everything she prayed for in a daughter but i will not hear this from her mouth

on her worst days
she is broken and brimming
on her best days
still the superhero to my 4-year-old self
eniyan ti o ni eniyan • lonely person

i.

i am lonely tonight so i
cry to muffle the laughter from my neighbors' room
listen to strangers sing about love in sad voices

ii.

i need to convince myself i am lonely tonight so i
forget all the friends that hold me in broad daylight
forget all the other times God saved me
once a month i go to the grocery store and buy plain greek yoghurt and honey and brown rice and smile at strangers and pretend my ovaries are not karate chopping my womb

once a month i eat oatmeal for dinner and cashew nuts for dessert and that is not sad

once a month my body wages small battles against itself and for a moment i am a war
no one told me what to do after i've made coconut curry fish stew

i know, i know
there's a whole lot of life to be lived
plenty of people to hug and beds to lay
but i found a recipe online, went to the grocery store
made coconut curry fish stew and ate it

now what
kii ṣe ọlọrun • reasons i am not God

i.
this morning the tea burnt the side of my tongue to
keep me humble
when i take the core out of my apple all the pieces
turn brown
karen’s daughter died and the world keeps moving
and i can’t convince everyone to stop
men give me compliments about my face even though
i did not make it myself

ii.
i can’t hold the weight of the world in my palms
wa funrararę • be yourself

everyone says “be yourself, follow your heart”
as if myself is a toaster on the shelf at target
or the burgundy suede heels inside the box under my bed

as if i am not sprawled across state lines
lingering on earlobes
on sealed lips
on the small of his back
i do not always have a poem in my heart
sometimes it’s a song in my mouth
a dance in my limbs
a prayer in my knuckles
some days i am okay and some days i am not.

on the days when i’m not okay, i scream. i cry until the salt from my tears dry up in my mouth and taste like french fries. i am angry. i allow it. i write a list of questions to ask God someday. why did this happen to me? to her? to us? why didn’t you just make me a turtle? when i don’t feel like he is listening i talk loud. i vent long. i lay flat on the floor till everything that is not me seeps out.

on days when i am okay i write poems and leave them for strangers. count the lashes on my left eyelid and marvel at my teeth. i pour milk into my cereal bowl slowly and blow bubbles with a straw.

on the days when i’m in between, i remember the days when joy felt familiar. i revel in the fact that i am everything and nothing at all. i plant each foot on either side of my truth and plant my heart firmly in the middle.

some days i am okay and some days i am not.
Notes

Original poem titles are in Yoruba.
Teni Ayo-Ariyo writes soft, brave things. Her full name, Teninlanimi, means “I belong to the Great One” in Yoruba, a language from Nigeria. Her name is a subtle, powerful truth that calls her home when the world gets too loud. Some days, she practices yoga; other days, she uses her business school degree; and, most days, she is just trying her best to be human. You can find more of her writing on The Beautiful Project, Highly Sensitive Refuge and on her personal website.