

OLUFUNKE OGUNDIMU

## Water in Green Bottles

**I**N MOTHER'S COBWEBBY kitchen cabinet, in the damp section under the kitchen sink, are an unending line of dusty bottles. Green Seaman's Schnapps bottles with bits of labels stuck on their bodies. The bottles stand tall, seemingly unmovable, aged. Inside each are two shifting layers, one of water and one of sand. The first time mother saw me trace numbers on the bodies of the dusty bottles, she smiled. She told me the bottles held stories. I opened my first bottle that day. I grabbed the one closest to me and tried to open its rusty cover. It didn't budge. I pulled up my dress, held the bottle's cool body with my knees, and used the hem of my dress to open it. The bottle fell on its side and water poured onto the tiled floor. I reached out to catch the spill, and I touched a memory.

1.

A YOUNG BOY tiptoed through a grass-lined path riddled with puddles, and he left some of himself in each. He displaced enough water to form a trickle, which crept down the path he came by. This mixing of muddied puddles flowed back to a pool hidden behind grasses. He left enough of his lineage behind in the first puddle. In the second, he left his joy over the big grasscutter that his trap had caught. In the third, he left behind a fear for his descendants, a fear he hid from his mother. His children would drink from the pool many years later, and his fear would become theirs.

2.

AN OLD WOMAN walked through a flood of waters grabbing at her ankles. She waded into the deeper end of a stream. She pushed aside lily pads and hyacinths, and fishes darted about her. The water reached her waist, rose to her chest and neck, covered her head. Her head-tie unraveled around her and the water carried it away. A burden dropped off her shoulders and sank to the bottom of the stream. The waters

dissolved the sorrows of her heart. She did not come up for air. Her lungs filled up with water, and the roots of the lilies and hyacinths held on to her body.

3.

A WOMAN SAT by a small stream, alone. She washed a bloodied piece of cloth and wept. On her back were welts, shooting pain through her body. She dipped her cloth in the stream and squeezed pink water out of it. She remembered. She washed away her shame in the stream, and grains of sand stuck to her clothes. The waters washed away some of her pain but as she waded out of the stream, she stepped into a new pain that had been left for her in the past. This pain wrapped around her heart and squeezed until it stopped. But not before she saw what her great-great-grandfather had done, reflected in the waters.

4.

A YOUNG MAN swam through waist-high water and struggled against the pull of a river. His strength failed him, and the swirling depths pulled him down. It pulled him into rapids polluted with the deeds of his mother, but a surge of clear water remembered the deeds of his father and carried him to the other side of the river. These stronger waters roared as they remembered his father, and their voices covered up the noise of those other angry waters.

5.

A WOMAN GAVE BIRTH in a sterile room and held on to her baby girl as she waited for the second birth. She heard water gurgle down a sink in the room. It called to her. She turned and looked for the source of the sound. She dragged her upper body off the table and sat up. The second birth gushed out of her, a flood of blood clot and water. In an outhouse, her younger sister looked at the blood trickling down her legs from her clenching insides. She watched her blood mix with her urine and the earth suck in both; she became a woman. In a cold city, their oldest sister washed the blood of a rape off her body under a shower; she did not cry. She scooped up water and washed the torn flesh at the juncture of her thighs. Red water pooled on the tiled floor

of the bathroom for a time. She winced and placed bloodied hands on white walls. The pain-laced water hissed through pipes and into stagnant gutters. Melted snow trickled into gutters and carried her pain into a canal which drained into a river which drained into an ocean. The Pacific touched the Atlantic and carried her blood home; her pain slithered under clusters of broadleaved water lilies. She cursed the man, and waters swelled, absorbing the curse, "May his first-born daughter, up to the seventh generation, know of my shame."

**6.**

A MAN IN A DREAM could not wade across a dark swirling river, because it could only be swum across. He jumped in and swam for the shore, but it moved, retreating. He swam faster, reaching for a land that faded away each time he tried to grab it. The waters spoke to him, reminding him of a time in the past when a woman left a curse for the daughters of a man. In the present, he woke up from the dream, thirsty and afraid. He grabbed a cup of water and drank. He decided never to have children. It was too late. The night before, a fertilized egg had attached to his girlfriend's womb. His daughter.

**7.**

ON THE EDGE of a river lined by moss-covered tree trunks, a water buffalo bowed her head and drank. A hunter poured gun powder into an old Dane gun and used his plunger to load his gun. He took aim and hit the shoulder of the water buffalo. The buffalo looked at the hunter and charged into the water, snorting. It struggled to move away from the hunter but the waters stopped it. The buffalo lowered her head and dropped into the water, and a happy hunter waded in for his kill. That night in his house, his wives made buffalo meat soup, and the family ate. But the tough sinewy meat didn't soften in peppers and spices and palm oil, and in the insides of the children, the meat spoke, saying that it had been killed before its time by one of its kind. That night, his mother didn't come home.

8.

A WOMAN'S BAD inner head had to be washed in flowing waters. She knelt by the edge of a river, took off her head-tie, and began to sing. She unwrapped a ball of black soap and dipped it into the water thrice. "They said I should wash to be blessed. I am washing to be favored." Black suds formed as she washed her outer head. "I wash the bad off my inner head so that my life may be better." She cupped her hands together and scooped water onto her outer head which housed the inner. She washed the bad. It mixed with the waters. It darkened and frothed. The fishes in the river caught cold and shivered from the evil that swirled around their river. A fisherman caught a fish and his children ate the bad, but the bad didn't stick. In their insides, the waters remembered a woman in their past who had done good. And her good cancelled the bad in their supper, and the bad didn't become theirs.

9.

A GROUP OF surly children climbed up a stout orange tree that leaned across the rumbling waters of the Asejiri dam, angry that concrete held in its strength. The children shook the tree and ripe oranges plopped into the furious dammed river. Years later, a grandchild of one of them came home and took a sip of the water that had made its way to his dining table water from a deep-sunk well fed by a feeble, underground river. The river remembered; it was a tributary of the Asejire. That sip mixed with his insides and the bad stuck to him. He stank like a he-goat in rut.

IN MY MOTHER'S hometown, there is a small pool of water which hides under hyacinths and water lilies. Its watery beginnings are under the high rocks that surround the town. Plants dance on the surface of the pool, creating ripples which reach for the boundaries of sand and water. Some touch the sandy shore and retrace their paths in moments. Sometimes, several ripples bump against each other, transferring or cancelling out moments, creating new energies or merging with the old.

**I O.**

A FARMER DAMMED the little tributary of a stream for his small vegetable farm. The irritated stream commanded that its tributary stop flowing along its banks, so the tributary refused to flow through the channel that the farmer had dug. It stuck its heels into the surrounding soft clay soil and became a muddy pond. In dry season, it stank, and scorpions crept into its nearby burrows. The farmer's vegetables withered and died. He abandoned his plot of vegetables and let the tangled weeds overrun it. On the farm, under layers of earth, a footprint remained hidden from sight. It held a memory. The time for a deed to be remembered had come.

**I I.**

A LITTLE HOLE appeared near the edge of a grave, and each time rain fell, the hole deepened. Water dripped on a casket, but it did not get under the cover. The dripping water found a groove and flowed away from the face of the dead. It caught the whispers of the dead mother for her child. This water pooled on the concrete slab at the bottom of the grave. Over the years, the water made space for itself in the grave's corners. It seeped deeper into the earth until it rested on a slab of granite. A woman knelt to quench her thirst by the edge of a spring that trickled through a hole in the granite, and the waters healed her of a curse.

**I 2.**

A MOTHER WASHED a screaming new baby in a bowl and threw it away. The bath water, not the baby. It rushed down pipes and into the neighborhood gutter, which connected to a canal that was once a river. Another woman found the bowl, wiped it with her wrapper, and hurried home. From the cloth, she squeezed out a couple drops of the bath water into a glass cup and stared at it. She looked at it until she saw the past of the baby. She used it to see his future, and she stirred harm into what she saw. She dragged a chair by her door and smiled, "I will wait and see what becomes of him." The boy grew up, worked hard, and treated the world with respect. The waters remembered, and they heaped bad into the bowels of the woman who had planned the bad. She never got up from her chair.

I 3.

A DEBT OF 1.01 Nigerian pounds written in blood stayed with a family, and generations carried it within their souls. Promised to a river and not paid, it growled in their insides. The waters in their insides tied their intestines into knots and they had seizures. The river whispered in a middle sister's heart of this debt, and she could not quiet the voice. "The debt is now one hundred Nigerian naira," the river said to her. This middle sister, forever too young or too old, did not fit anywhere. Oldest sister got the new clothes, and middle sister got them well used. Younger sister babbled, and middle sister could not understand her. Middle sister told her sisters about the new debt, but they rolled their eyes at her. "It is 1.01 Nigerian pounds. It will remain unpaid because Nigerian pounds are obsolete," oldest sister said. Still the river whispered into middle sister's ears of the debt plus interest owed it in the past.

I 4.

A SHOE FELL into a well and the rancid odor of its owner's past seeped into the water. A middle brother came to the well for a bucket of water. He let down the bucket and scooped up water, and the odor floated up to the top of the well. The middle brother cooked his dinner and slept. He dreamed of footprints left by women on a path. He walked all over their footprints trying to cancel them, but the earth pushed up the footprints, and they erased his. The women laid their grievances on his weary soul, and he did not wake up from sleep.

I 5.

THREE RUSTY BLADES of a standing fan blew on a pad and the scent of lavender filled a room. Cool rain winds ran into a room and blew a door shut. A hand turned off the fan and the smell of lavender cleared. Water ran down a slanted, corrugated roof and emptied on three nearly naked children squealing in the rain. They took turns striking poses as lightning flashed across swollen skies. The waters sloughed off them and the children rolled about on the earth. The waters will remember their insides, their joy, their innocence.

**16.**

A CERTAIN KNIFE wobbled in the back of a man. He did not see it, but he could feel it. Before he died, he passed it on to his first son, who passed it on to his first son. They were betrayed by all, and they each died from a knife in their backs. They could not understand why their friends plunged knives in their backs. They lived poor and depressed. They prayed for relief, but the knives stayed. Memories held by waters kept the knives in their backs. Their girls did not have knives in their backs. The men tried to describe the pain in their backs to their wives, but their women could not understand them. The wives and girls prayed, but the knives stayed. Seven generations later, the seventh first son slipped and fell into a puddle, and the knife dropped from his back.

**17.**

A WOMAN PICKED up a glass of prosecco from a table. It fizzed and bubbled in the tulip-shaped glass. She dipped a nail coated with red polish into the wine, and her depression bled into the tiny bubbles that floated to the top of the glass. The tall glass reflected the big smile on her face as her eyes scanned the noisy room for the source of her angst, a smaller woman. The room swirled around her in sounds and hid the woman. She closed her eyes and listened for the voice. She walked closer and tipped her wine over the tiny shoes of the smaller woman. The room gasped, and she hid a watery smile.

**18.**

HER DEATH CERTIFICATE read: death by water. Every time she guzzled a glass of water, her innards fizzed with anxiety. Her stomach lurched and her body broke out in hives. When she sipped on a glass of water, her lips and tongue swelled. She stopped drinking water. She stopped crying, too, because tears made painful grooves in her cheeks. She told her doctors that she must be allergic to water. They snorted and said, you are 60 percent water. She chilled her room with ten air conditioners. She stopped going out. Slowly she dried up. Her skin shriveled and cracked, and that drop of water in her stopped remembering.

MY MOTHER'S mother sends Seaman's Schnapps bottles filled with water and sand to her children. "Deeds are fettered to heels in perpetuity," are her words that accompany the bottles. The green bottles journey on buses and planes, in bags and sacks, crossing many time zones and borders. My grandmother says, "Waters keep words alive in memories. Watch your words." She speaks blessings into the bottles: "May waters remember the good in you and silence the bad. May tides and floods speak for mine. Even muddy puddles in your paths will collect good and drench your feet with blessings. May the waters in your insides not retain bad and sour your inner heads." Her descendants come home to fill the green bottles; I fill ours. It is the first thing I do after our car pulls in front of her house. I run to the bottom of the valley and stop only at the edge of the pool. I place my bottle on the sandy bank and make faces at the pool peeping out from its cover of hyacinths and lilies. "Remember me from last year?" I say to the waters. "Wake up," I say, as I dip a finger into the water's surface and watch my reflected face wobble. I fill my bottle with handfuls of sand, dip the bottle in the stream, and watch bubbles rise.

IN A CORNER of my kitchen, under my sink, sit a constellation of green bottles filled with water and sand from the Ayepe stream. I open the kitchen cabinet and add to the group a new bottle, filled with still ripples and time and memories. I touch the older bottles, shrouded in dust and cobwebs and generations, and leave behind marks on their warm bodies.

Drink with me.