



*wash between your toes*

TENI AYO-ARIYO

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for the girl in the river and everyone searching for hope  
in tight spaces.





tutø 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?

ounjə aarə • 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

àbùrò 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 օօօ • 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

şere • do good

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

onigboyà • brave

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

męta-le-logun • twenty-three

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

oşu • menstruation

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



ọbẹ ẹja • fish stew

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 şe օլօrun • 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

àdùrà mi • my prayer

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

lojo kan • someday

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, Teninlani, 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](#).