

PRAISE FOR GHOSTROOTS

“In *Ghostroots*, the delightful speculative conceits of the stories are elegantly, even architecturally, balanced with the gorgeous fullness of human emotion, all the hunger and longing and fear and delight of being a human being in the world. A wonderful collection from a truly gifted writer.”

—Lauren Groff, author of *The Vaster Wilds*

“A marvellously unsettling collection where the everyday strangeness of life and the uncanny rub up against each other to create real fire.”

— Kelly Link, author of *White Cat, Black Dog*

“Pemi Aguda is spectacular. This book is a big, strong river. Once you are caught in its currents, you flow with it no matter where it runs. And it runs through gorgeous and startling places.”

— Luis Alberto Urrea, author of *Good Night, Irene*

“*Ghostroots* is the kind of collection you dream of discovering and reading—from one of my favourite living writers.”

— Jeff VanderMeer, author of *Hummingbird Salamander*

“A treasure chest of surprises; sometimes scary, sometimes funny, always darkly familiar. With unadorned prose and crisp, delicious sentences, ‘Pemi invites us to the dark underside of everyday life and dares us to look away. The stories in this book leap off the pages to bite at you long after you drop it, if you can.”

– T.J Benson, author of *The Madhouse*

“Here you’ll find breath-taking stories of the familiar and the strange, full of empathy for characters trying to bridge chasms between communities, families, generations, and their ghosts. ‘Pemi Aguda builds worlds with blade-like acuity. You’ll be caught in their sway and transported.”

– Diane Cook, author of *The New Wilderness*

“In this perceptive and astute collection, ‘Pemi Aguda tells of the metaphysical cracks on the surface of contemporary Nigerian society with an uncompromising humane touch.”

– Emmanuel Iduma, author of *I Am Still With You*

“‘Pemi Aguda’s Ghostroots is a triumph! The author’s strong storytelling skills give readers the gift of realistic characters and darkly imaginative stories that creep under your skin and stay buried there. Disturbing, enthralling and unforgettable. This author is now among my favourites.”

—Tanarive Due, author of *The Reformatory*

GHOSTROOTS

Stories

PROPERTY OF MASOBE BOOKS

'PEMI AGUDA



MASOBE

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For Modupe and Ngozi, and the women who raised me.

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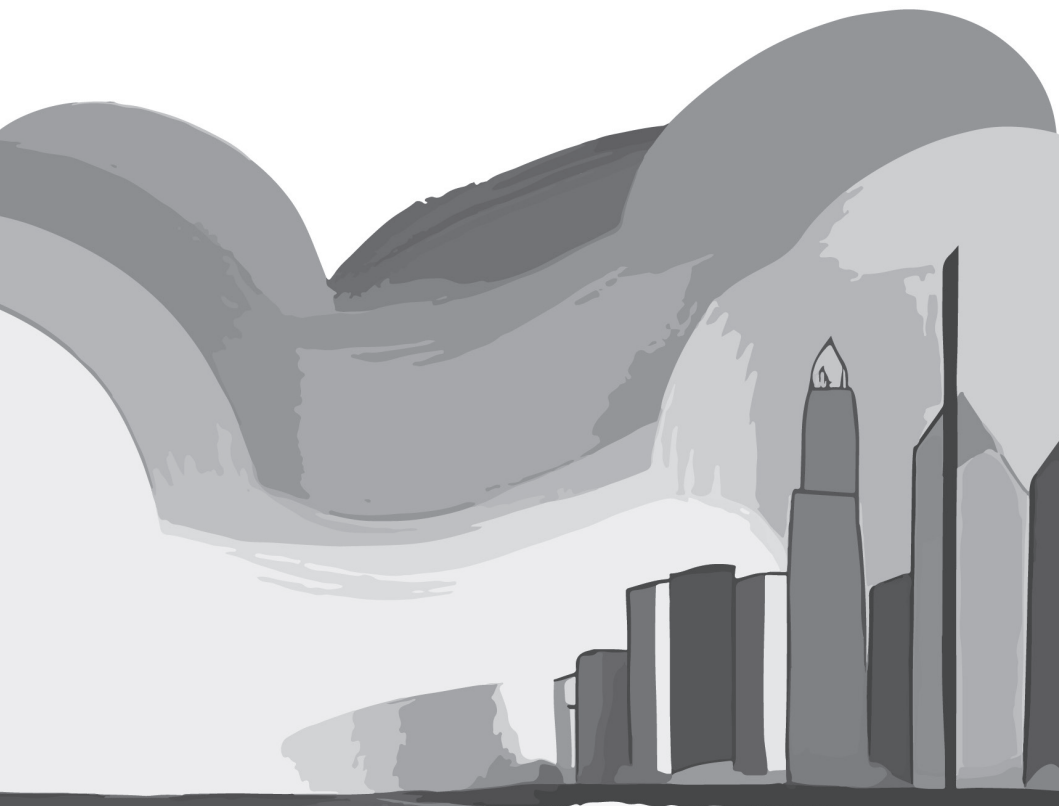
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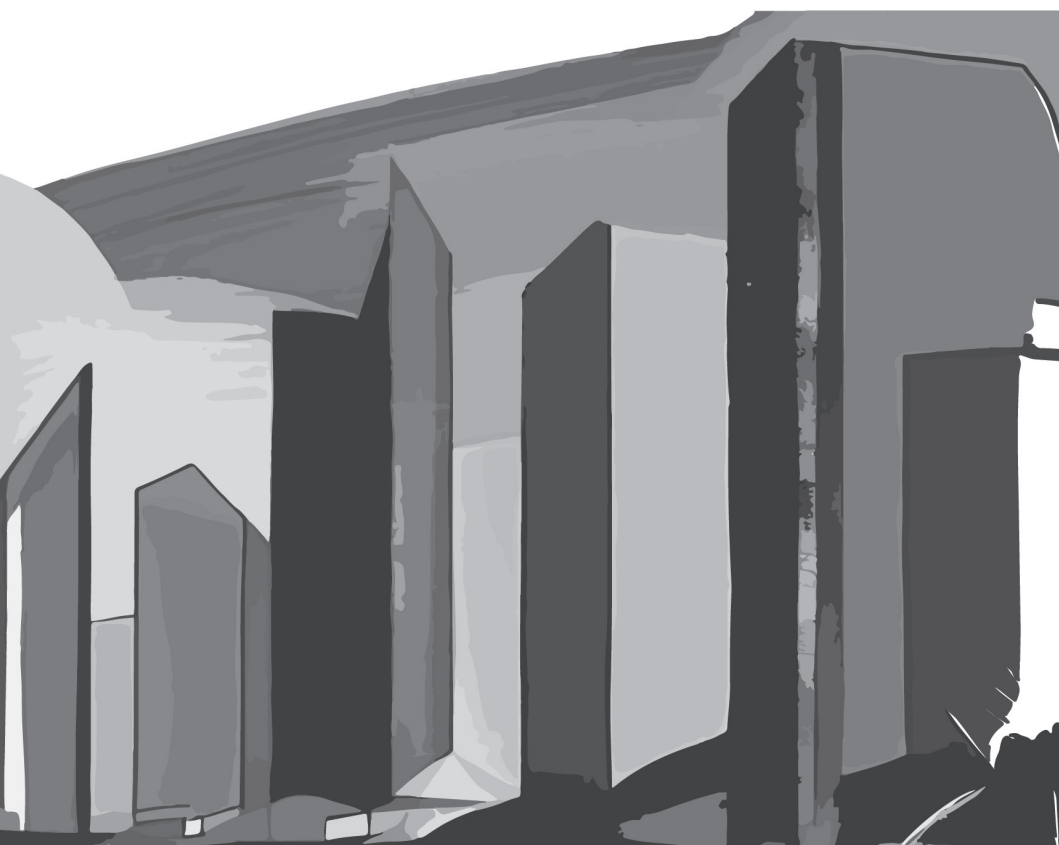
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GHOSTROOTS

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MANIFEST

This is the first pimple of your life. Question the foreign object with all your fingers.

If you were to draw a straight line down from the right corner of your lip, then another straight line forward from the corner of your jaw, the pimple would be sitting at that intersection. Your index fingernail—false, acrylic, painted a burnt orange—flicks at the tiny bump. You press the pad of your thumb down on it, hard. The pimple does not go away. You have just turned twenty-six. Why now?

Tonight, your mother calls you Agnes for the first time.

Agnes is not your name.

You are sitting at the dining table, picking beans, picking at this pimple. You like to sort beans on the wide surface of the mahogany table that's older than you, sliding weevils and broken beans to a corner, making a route through the good beans so that you never have to lift them up. You think of the bad beans and weevils as lepers, driven out of the colony to live amongst themselves in disease and brokenness forever. When a weevil starts to creep back to the good beans, you stab at it. You love to feel them die. The crunch, then the give, under the force of your finger. Flick the dead off, stab again. Your mother must have been standing there awhile

because when you look up, there she is, frozen, gripping her Bible and hymn book bag to the gold buttons of her nineties suit. The illumination from the hallway bulb envelops her so that her edges are blurred. Half of her face eaten by light.

“Agnes?”

“Hmnn?” You ask. “Who’s that?” But your mother only shakes her head, retreating.

“Who is Agnes?” you ask your father later that night. He is eating while watching a news report on the South Sudan civil war.

Since the start of the conflict, almost two million people have been internally displaced. . . .

You sit at the foot of his wicker chair, pulling hairs from your arm in the glow of the television screen. Agnes is your mother’s mother, your father tells you. “She died when your mum was young, *ş’oo mọ ni?*” He questions your ignorance as he makes vile noises with his tongue and teeth in an attempt to dislodge beef. But what do Nigerian parents tell their children about their own parents? Especially the Pentecostal Christians? Nothing. If you took a poll of your friends, three out of five would be similarly ignorant of these histories of parents who moved from somewhere to Lagos, leaving behind religions and curses and distant cousins and grimy pasts.

You ask your father if he wants more beans and beef, your hand back on that pimple. He shakes his head no. Your father hates that you take the weevils out of the beans; he thinks they add a certain flavour to the dish.



The second time your mother calls you Agnes, your little family of three is sitting in relative darkness. Electricity is out again and fuel scarcity means that you only see each other in candlelight until the power is restored. Your father snores in the grey-turned-brown armchair you call “daddy’s chair,” while you and your mother sit across from each other at the dining table. You pull the empty Milo tin that the candle is mounted on closer to yourself. Wax sashes off slowly and trickles down a side. You close your left eye, then the right, then the left again, enjoying the way the flame shifts. You draw the candle even closer, sniffing at the flame.

Your mother’s face lifts from her phone screen and watches you. Through your left eye, you see her eyes widen. Through your right eye, you see her mouth open. Through both eyes, you see terror spread over her face, the way it does when a flying cockroach is in the vicinity.

“Agnes?” Your mother’s voice is all croak and phlegm. “Agnes, is that you?”

You lift the candle to your chin to illuminate your face, pulling it slightly back when heat licks at that stubborn, still-there, solitary pimple. “It’s me.” Pause. “Are you okay?”

Your mother says nothing, swallows.

“Mummy, do I look like your mum? Do you look like her?”

She pushes her chair back, not answering, leaving the table in an arthropodous scurry, locking herself in the guest bathroom until the lights come back on.

“But what’s wrong with her?” You ask your father the next morning, whispering over his black coffee and your milky tea.

He shrugs. “Her mother died around your age. Maybe the resemblance has heightened?” He ruffles his moustache, forehead crinkled. “Be patient with your mum, the memories are hard on her.”



Days later, you sit on the four layers of tissue paper you've spread on the toilet seat of one of Lekki's posh restaurants as protection from the innermost liquids of strangers, and stroke at the hardness of the pimple.

You skim the inside headlines of the newspaper you picked from the top of the magazine rack. *Woman Cuts Lover's Penis Off in Rage of Jealousy. Man Beats Daughter to Death for Skipping School. Community in Outskirts of Lagos Hack Thief to Pieces.* You close the paper.

Someone knocks, jiggles the handle, but when you don't respond, footsteps fade away. It is then you wipe with too much tissue and stand. After you flush, your gaze stays fixed inside the toilet bowl even when the shuddering of the machinery has stopped, and the Lekki water is as clear as it will be. You watch until the water in the bowl stills.

The replacement tissue rolls are sitting on an open shelf under the sink. Pick them up, one after the other, throw them into the toilet bowl. All five of them. When the last one has landed on top of the others, white on white on white, squeeze up the newspaper and throw it in too. Flush again. Watch the water rise to seat level. When it starts to seep out of the bowl, through the newspaper's print, and out to the black-and-white hexagonal tiles of the restaurant bathroom, flush one more time. Then walk out of the flooding bathroom.



The next morning, you wake up to find the pimple gone. Lying on your back on your friend's sofa, you spread fingers across your face, searching to see if it has moved to a new location. Your unmoisturized fingers are dry and harsh against your soft skin, so you trail every inch lightly, careful not to scratch yourself.

"If you haven't ever had a pimple, can we say you've not gone through puberty?" Your friends used to tease you, cupping your cheeks in their hands, plastering kisses on the smooth, taut skin of your face because you have always been the loved baby of the group, the youngest. Sweet baby-faced you.

Only when you are satisfied the bump is no longer there do you creep into the bathroom to stare at your reflection in the tiny mirror above the sink. If you lean back, away from the mirror, you can see all of your face, but no, don't lean back. Move your face up, down, left, right, and see the parts in detail. The thin brows, trimmed too slim by the zealous makeup artist at a friend's wedding. A wide nose, yellow sebaceous dots accenting the point where nose blends into the rest of the face. Lips that are full, too full, so that you highlight with a brown lip liner before filling in with lipstick, an attempt to thin them.



The third time your mother called you Agnes, she hit you in the face with a Bible. Your friend Lesley is hosting you until your mother stops seeing her mother in your face, stops

labelling you the reincarnation of someone who terrified her. You and Lesley both work on Awolowo Road, so you drive together every morning in the red Honda handed down from your mother. Lesley doesn't have a car.

You move away from the mirror to get ready for work. But after you have pulled on the branded neon green T-shirt for your job at Globacom, where you spend all your hours asking how you can help customers, the pimple is back. You touch it, softly. It is tiny, almost imperceptible to the eye, but there is a hard bump underneath. You sit on the arm of the sofa that is temporarily your bed, worrying the pimple. Pinch it, press against it.

"Genes," is what you told your friends when they teased. "I got mama's good skin."

Lesley hasn't stirred from her room this morning. She is a deep sleeper. You stare at your friend's bedroom door, brushing at the pimple. Then you pick up your tote bag. Don't knock on Lesley's door, don't wake her up even though you're her ride to work. Jog down the stairs to your car, slam the door. Drive alone to Awolowo Road with your bag sitting in the passenger seat like a queen.

When Lesley starts to call over and over again, an hour later, sending angry *WTF?!!* texts, turn your phone face down on the desk. Walk to the bathroom down the hall, lean into the mirror, and see that the pimple is gone again. Your skin is back to baby-smooth and blemishfree.

