

Where the Walls Used to Be

[Your Name]

At dawn, Ibadan glows with a kind of tired gold. The city wakes reluctantly, like an old man rising from a mat—groaning, stretching, remembering. From the hill at Mokola, the rusted roofs spread out like a sheet of forgotten prayers, each one holding stories of laughter, debt, and the long ache of survival. Beneath the bridge, a boy curls into his shirt, his breath misting against the chill of morning. He sleeps between two worlds: the noise of buses warming their engines and the silence of a city that has learned to look away.

There is a rhythm to Ibadan's mornings—hawkers calling “pure water, gala!”, the clang of metal pots in buka kitchens, the first honk from a danfo on its way to Dugbe. Yet inside this familiar pulse are lives that remain unseen, those who live without a room to call theirs. Their homes are made of motion—under bridges, in uncompleted buildings, on pavements that remember too many feet. For them, home is not a place; it is a pause, a temporary shelter between expulsions.

In Yoruba thought, *ilé*—home—is more than four walls. It is identity, the ground from which a person's name grows. We say *ilé ni a nábá ni sòrò*—it is in the house we speak to one another. To lose that house is to lose one's dialogue with the world, one's belonging to speech itself. And yet, in the heart of Ibadan, many walk speechless, disinherited from their own soil.

Sometimes, I pass by Beere market and watch a woman spread her wares beside a broken wall. She tells me she used to have a shop before the demolition. “Government say road expansion,” she murmurs, half to herself, half to me. Now her goods—cassava flakes, palm

oil, and crayfish—sit under the open sky, her stall rebuilt from memory. Still, she calls it *ilé mi*—my home. The tenderness of that declaration lingers; it feels like defiance.

Ibadan has always been a city of arrivals and abandonments. People come from Iseyin, Oyo, and Osogbo, chasing work, safety, or something nameless. Some never leave; others fade into the alleys, swallowed by the city's wide, red earth. The walls here remember every departure. Even the houses that stand seem to lean inward, weary from holding so much silence.

What does it mean to live in a place that forgets you even as you breathe within it? To belong nowhere, even in your own city? Home, I have learned, is not merely where we lay our heads—it is where the world agrees to see us.

In the Yoruba language, *ilé* is both house and homeland. It carries within it the intimacy of a roof and the expanse of ancestry. To say *mo n lọ sí ilé*—"I am going home"—is to say more than one is returning to a room; it is to say one is moving toward wholeness, toward the center of oneself. *Ilé* is where one's spirit recognizes its own echo.

But what happens when *ilé* becomes unreachable—not only by distance but by the conditions of living? The philosopher Martin Heidegger once wrote that to dwell is to be at peace within the world. Yet for many, the world itself has become inhospitable. Cities like Ibadan expand restlessly, swallowing spaces that once held memory. Landlords raise rents, developers erase old compounds, and the air grows thick with unclaimed histories. The result is a quiet estrangement—people adrift inside familiar streets, searching for the feeling of arrival that no longer comes.

My grandmother used to say that a person without ilé walks with one leg in the air. As a child, I thought it was a proverb about wandering. Now I understand it as a statement about balance. Without a place of return, life tilts. You move, but never quite stand. You are perpetually between—between acceptance and expulsion, belonging and loss.

Across cultures, home has always been a moral anchor. For the Greeks, oikos was not just a house but the root of economy, ecology, order. For the Hebrews, exile was the ultimate punishment—not merely because of hunger or distance, but because it fractured the covenant between people and land. Even in modern times, we still speak of “finding ourselves” as if identity were a room we could reenter.

Yet, the African imagination of home carries a communal pulse. Home is not private property but shared rhythm. The compound is porous; laughter and quarrel spill over walls. To be homeless, then, is not just to lack a roof but to fall out of rhythm with one’s people. In Ibadan, I often see men gather at roadside joints to drink palm wine and debate politics long after work. There, amid the clatter of bottles, you sense that for a few hours, they have built a temporary ilé—a space of speech, warmth, and recognition.

And still, something fragile lingers at the edges. The city grows noisier, its silences more profound. The old mud houses of Oje crumble into dust, and new glass-fronted buildings rise in their place—cold, reflective, impersonal. The roofs no longer rust; they glint. Progress, they call it. But sometimes I wonder if progress is simply another word for forgetting.

When I pass through Yemetu, I still see the shadows of my childhood—the smell of roasted plantain, the chatter of women at wells, the slow, stubborn rhythm of life. But where my grandmother’s house once stood, there is now a pharmacy painted a sterile white. The land

remembers, even when the living pretend not to. I stop and imagine her voice rising from beneath the tiles, saying, “*ilé ni baba ènìyàn*—home is a person’s father.” I do not always know what she meant, but perhaps it was that without home, a person’s history becomes an orphan.

Ibadan is a city of thresholds. Nothing here ever fully leaves, and nothing truly arrives. The old and the new sit side by side like reluctant companions—the rusting corrugated roofs of Beere staring across at the blinking lights of Bodija’s supermarkets. In this in-between, people build and unbuild their lives daily.

The faces of homelessness are many, and not all are visible. There is the boy who sells sachet water at the junction near Ogunpa, his voice roughened by exhaust fumes. There is the woman who sweeps the verandah of an uncompleted building every morning, as if ceremony could turn it into a home. But there are also those who live behind walls yet wander within them—the young graduate sleeping on a friend’s couch, the widow priced out of her family’s compound, the teacher who leaves every year when rent rises faster than salary.

Ibadan teaches you that exile is not always about distance; sometimes it is a condition of staying.

Once, at Dugbe market, I met a man called Ade. He had once been a civil servant before an illness consumed his savings. When I asked where he lived, he smiled and said, “Everywhere. It depends on the night.” He spoke gently, almost humorously, as if to soften the edges of his story. Yet his eyes carried that certain dimness—the one you find in people who have

learned to shrink their dreams to fit the size of survival. “This place,” he said, pointing to the open space near the roundabout, “this is my sitting room. When rain comes, I move.”

I remember walking away thinking about how cities define belonging through stability—an address, a rent receipt, a light bill. Without these, you do not exist in official language. You are a blur. You can be seen, pitied, even photographed, but never recognized.

And yet, beneath the surface, a subtler kind of homelessness grows: the estrangement of those whose lives have been restructured by modern ambition. Every day, people leave their ancestral compounds for concrete apartments that rise like sealed boxes, each one a private island. The communal courtyards where everyone once gathered to peel yam and share gossip are fading. Doors are thicker now; greetings rarer. We have replaced proximity with privacy, and in doing so, we have forgotten how to live together.

Sometimes I think the city itself is homeless. Ibadan moves without direction—its streets widening, its markets scattering, its history plastered over by new signs and imported glass. The same road that carried drums and laughter now hums with impatience. Even the walls seem restless, repainted too often, as though the city were trying to erase its own memory.

Still, moments of belonging emerge in unlikely places. I’ve watched men at Oje wash their hands in shared bowls before a meal, speaking in proverbs and teasing each other with the affection of brothers. I’ve seen street children gather around a transistor radio, their laughter filling a broken space with temporary warmth. In those small gatherings, you can glimpse what home might still mean: not a structure, but an act of gathering—an insistence on communion in spite of lack.

But how long can such fragile homes endure? When the rains return and flood the roadside stalls, when the government clears informal settlements in the name of “beautification,” when memory itself begins to fade—what happens to those who live by improvisation?

Sometimes I think the truest image of Ibadan is not its skyline of brown roofs, but the man pushing a cart up the hill, his life balanced on two wheels. He pauses midway, wipes his brow, looks ahead to where the road bends. He knows he will move again tomorrow, and the next day. Yet still, he moves—because stillness, in this city, is another kind of disappearance.

To be without a home is not merely to sleep outdoors; it is to live in a perpetual state of suspension—between being seen and being forgotten. The world becomes a hallway with no doors. You exist, but nowhere quite holds you.

When I think of Ade, the man from Dugbe who moved with the rain, I realize that homelessness is not a single wound; it is a slow erosion of presence. One loses not only a bed or an address but the small dignities that make existence bearable—the place to hang a shirt, the corner to leave one’s thoughts undisturbed, the morning greeting that expects your return in the evening. In their absence, a person begins to thin, as though identity itself depends on enclosure.

Heidegger once said that “to dwell is to be.” Yet in our time, dwelling has become a luxury, an achievement rather than a birthright. The dispossessed live at the mercy of the elements, while even the housed live in constant fear of losing what walls they have. Homelessness, then, is not a marginal condition—it is the shadow trailing modern life. We are all, in some measure, one misfortune away from exposure.

In Ibadan, the idea of home carries spiritual resonance. Every year during festivals, families return to their ancestral compounds, however cracked or overgrown. There, libations are poured for the dead, and names are called into the air. The gesture is more than ritual; it is reclamation—a temporary mending of distance. Even those who no longer live in the compound need its memory to remain whole. Without that, something in the soul begins to wander.

Perhaps that is why Yoruba funerals insist on returning the dead *si ilé*—to the house, to the ground that remembers them. Burial outside the homeland is seen as dislocation, a spirit left in transit. It is as if to be human is to be housed not only in flesh but in place.

Still, I wonder: can one rebuild home without brick or boundary? Can words, art, or memory become a kind of shelter? Writers, after all, build rooms of language; musicians lay floors of rhythm; painters hang curtains of color. Maybe this is what the homeless teach us—that home need not always be fixed, that it can be carried within, improvised like song.

Yet even that is fragile. The city's noise threatens to drown the inner voice. Poverty leaves little room for metaphor. When hunger gnaws, philosophy feels like a language for the full. And still, I return to the idea that perhaps every act of remembering is an act of resistance—an attempt to reclaim space from erasure. To tell a story is to rebuild a room, to make a small place where the lost can rest.

Sometimes, at dusk, when the harmattan light settles over Ibadan, I stand by the roadside and watch the city blur into orange. The air tastes of dust and roasted maize. For a moment, it feels like standing inside a memory—one that doesn't belong to me alone, but to everyone who has ever searched for a place to belong. In that fading light, I begin to think that maybe home is not something we find, but something we keep building, even after it has fallen.

Morning returns to Ibadan with its familiar murmur—the calls of hawkers, the rumble of motorcycles, the soft tremor of survival. Near Mokola bridge, the boy I once saw sleeping now stands at the roadside, wiping dew from his face. He folds his blanket, smooths his shirt, and begins another day. Around him, the city unfolds: smoke rises from akara stalls, the air thick with the smell of oil and beginnings.

Watching him, I think again of my grandmother's words—*ilé ni baba èniyàn*. Home is the father of a person. Maybe she meant that home gives shape to who we become, the way a father's shadow gives form to a child's steps. But what happens when that shadow disappears? Do we grow crooked, or do we learn to cast new ones of our own?

In Ibadan, even broken walls are not silent. They hum with the memory of those who once leaned against them, those who laughed and prayed and wept within their reach. I walk past such ruins often—the ghost of a window still marked by soot, the trace of paint clinging to brick—and I feel the stubborn pulse of something that refuses to die. Maybe that is what home truly is: not permanence, but persistence. The will to remain, even in fragments.

For all its dust and disorder, Ibadan is still a kind of shelter. It holds its people in its vast, untidy embrace—the shopkeepers, the street children, the restless dreamers, the ones who have roofs and the ones who don't. Here, everyone is building something, even if only the promise of another morning.

And so, as the sun climbs over the rusted roofs, the city gleams again—wounded, alive, enduring. The walls may have fallen, but the stories remain. Perhaps home is nothing more,

and nothing less, than that: the place where memory keeps standing, even when the house is gone.