

Dear Ebele,

Her name came to me when I was ruminating about the lights of innocence the world refers to as children. Infant lights that after too many falls finally muster up their first steps. Newborn glows that are so precious it's traumatizing to hold them. I thought of a form of purity that should've reminded a woman like Momma that regardless of the pain, they are blessings brought to this world.

I was 8 years old and sinking a thin comb through my Barbie's fine hair. The pretty doll's skin was milky white, and it was my favorite doll.

Beforehand, I had another model of it that Momma had given me on my 7th birthday, only its skin had been darker, and its hair hadn't been as straight, as normal, as it should've been. My shoulders had wilted when I saw it. But, my withered excitement revived when I'd secretly traded with a friend and replaced it with the version I thought was right. Never, would I play with that doll around Momma.

I was caged in my room with walls as tan as creamer, my legs crossed, my back straight like a princess. A book sat beside me, and before I started combing I'd scribbled out on page 9: "cruel world," and replaced it with something sweeter: "Beautiful world."

"Ebele," I smiled. Then I paused, relishing in the silky texture I've thirsted to feel in my own hair.

"Ebele," I repeated.

For too long, I've wanted children, a fragment of me to raise. Unlike Momma, I wanted what I believed gave meaning to a seemingly pure earth, and I wanted my second born to be a girl.

Ebele.

My daughter's name. That was to be my daughter's name, and I just had to whisper it to know. The name was odd, but that was its purpose. I never liked traditional names, names like 'Grace,' bored me and I saw them as time worn. But, 'Ebele' would make her stand out.

Her name became sacred to me like a prayer. If I used it for anything else, I'd bite my tongue until I tasted something metallic. Nothing else could have that name. Everyday I dreamed of her, neglecting to think of the pain of her deliverance, the complications I could have. I only regarded reveries of the aftermath.

In the future, she's slumbering in my limp arms, swaddled in her knitted pink blanket. My giant fingers would encircle her small ones, stroking the dents deepened in between her knuckles. Her name would be inscribed on the whiteboard. I'd be studying her, questioning how I succeeded in producing something so fragile. Her scent reminded me of fresh tulips and vanilla and it'd make me smile. My supposed husband would be with me; his fingers, as milky white as my doll's, nestled on my backhand. But I'd have no interest in his presence. Just her. My Ebele. My Glow.

Always, my imagination draws her as an ugly child sprouting into something beautiful. Crooked teeth fixing in place, clear skin replacing scars. Her cheeks would cave in, sharpening like mine.

The era of womanhood would sculpt her body, her breasts fuller, hips shaping. A rose, lovely. That's what my daughter would be. I'd imagine her as strong as my Momma, yet her presence would

soften the atmosphere. I'd dream of her as an infant with chubby feet attempting to run before walking.

Ambitious. Stubborn.

Unlike Momma, I'd see her as a soul that radiates a change I could never bring to the world.

—Lulu
Age: 13

Dear Ebele,

I always forget that the color of my skin isn't milky white like my dolls.

I get so easily lost in a school where nobody can say their skin is painted with chocolate. Yet, because I speak and dress like them I don't see myself as different until Momma turns on the news or something controversial stirs in a discussion that unsettles even me.

How would I benefit from complaining? I'd ponder.

I'd adamantly view the world as beautiful, relentlessly reading the bold words I marked on page 9 to reassure myself; I mainly held that book whenever Momma would bellow,

"You will never be like them."

I

never

liked

Reality.

But...

It's you Ebele, that will make it more beautiful, something worth living.

Or so I'd hoped.

Ebele. Once you inhale your first breath, you already shout that no longer can I forget, nor run. I see you bud out of your ugliness. But, what if ugly is all you see in yourself?

In a reverie, I've returned home from the store, and it's when I set the crinkly paper bags onto the countertop that my stomach coils, absorbing the silent atmosphere. I recently accustomed to the still house since I'd divorced my supposed husband. It was a song of déjà vu, but not a surprising one. Momma was a single mother; it made sense that I'd be too, especially after ignoring her warning about marrying a white man; hence, in my dreams, I didn't invite her to our wedding

Suspicion guides me to the bathroom, and there I spot your 8 year old frame.

Ebele your knuckles are white from how hard you're gripping the scissors, inches from your black curls. Despite the white I imagine you have in your blood, my genes are all you have. Dark tone, plump lips. Hair, all mine; unlike the pictures that appear when the words 'Mixed kids,' are plugged into Google images.

It takes me too long to convince you to put that thing down, remarking that your curls are God's gift, an attribute the first woman on earth had. You don't believe me like I didn't believe Momma.

You're screaming, asking why you can't look like your friends, demanding that I texturize your primitive hair until it becomes straight and flowy like you believe it should be. Stubborn. Disobedient.

You'll have my temper, arguments between us splitting our floors.

I envision walking in on you again. This time you're holding a magazine with girls that resemble your friends and the white dolls I gave you on your birthdays that you cried about for weeks after I disposed of them.

"You'll never be like them." I'd growled.

You open my eyes Ebele.

I never believed in rebelling against the racist systems that oppressed me... I believed in obedience, in pretending it never existed... until I saw you warp into me.

I'm constantly face to face with the trash: first, it's the white dolls, then the texturizers and the white magazines. Essence magazines replace them. Natural hair products stock the bathrooms. Black dolls, lectures become more prominent. The news is on more, and as the screen flashes, my beginner hands would be raw as I plaited your hair after practicing on wigs.

You hate it.

I imagine you as vulnerable, believing stories about how confidence portrays you as angry or that if you dare avoid professional fields like medicine or law, you'd be a failure in life.

You're the innocent soul I watched suffocate underneath the vile actuality of this world.

You're the reason why I became like Momma.

—Lulu
Age: 16

Dear Ngu,

His name touched me on the day I was exposed to a curse word worse than what my middle school counterparts would say.

*I've been an only child for as long as I can remember and I knew that even if it were Momma's last day to relish in her fertility, that wouldn't change.
I hadn't thought such things before until Momma spoke that word.*

*A mistake. Yesterday Momma told me I was a mistake. It came with no hesitation just, "Lulu, you're a mistake,"
Her tone, though, hadn't been bitter. Instead, it'd been quiet like my short gasp.
I blamed the news.*

*Lines creased Momma's forehead like the ridges of desert sand as she loured at the TV. Yet, vulnerability shun from her large eyes, a sight so foreign to me; Momma hated to be vulnerable.
Below the reporter scrolled the following headlines:*

'19 year old black male killed by police. Sister a witness.'

A clutter of protesters marching down the street materialized on the screen. Most arms, cocoa colored like mine, were raised, all expressions the same: furious as if heading to war. All wore a shirt that had a picture of what must've been the boy's face. "Black lives matter," imprinted every poster. Sometimes it was camouflaged as historical facts or bitter pictures.

*"What?" I'd finally said. By then my insides felt bare. She let my question dangle in the air.
"This world is getting worse," she muttered. "Having a girl is no better, but at least...I was wise enough to pray against having a son."*

I regret ever going down those steps.

*I rushed back upstairs, and this time I said his name to myself: Ngu.
It pulsed in my head again even when I'd slammed my door. The book I'd written in at 8 years old, I snatched from the shelf and opened.*

I wanted more than one child and I wanted my first to be a boy. Ngu, my first born, that would be his name. A name that stood out more so than Adam. He'd be a child who'd cling to me, the special bond between a mother and son tethering between us both.

*"Beautiful world." I whispered over... and over.
More moisture fogged my eyes and with it came another reverie.*

In the future, I'm returning home from the hospital. My supposed husband is my chauffeur, his eyes twinkling like any man would when they're taking home their first child, a boy. His excitement makes him speed, the car jerking from bumps on the road. But, such distractions don't deter my focus from the baby nestling within his knitted blue blanket. I'm hovering over his car seat, caressing his forehead. His aroma is of sweetened honey and baby powder. It draws me in further, awing at the resemblance he has of me.

I imagined him looking like an average boy: his nose too big, his cheeks chubby. Then his features would even out. His scrawny body would thicken, and his height would ascend until I'd have to look up to face him or strike him. A handsomeness molds his face enough to remind me of the glow I'd produced. A sweet Alyssum, prosperous. That's what my son would be.

I imagined him as brave as Momma, his presence lightening the atmosphere marinating him. A sun.

I picture his chubby hands reaching out, demanding to travel into the arms of others. Determined. Difficult.

Unlike Momma, I see him as a soul that'll purify the world I always try to run from.

—Lulu
Age: 14

Dear Ngu,

I witness my friends be recognized for things I've struggled to work for. I've watched them escape the same consequences I'd be stuck facing. My barriers would be higher than theirs, all because my skin isn't milky white. Nonetheless, I refused to fight against that.

Momma had warned me about this foolishness. A successful entrepreneur, she'd unfold stories about being raised by parents who migrated alone to Portland, Maine from Bamenda, Cameroon but succeeded, how I'd continue that success.

"You think you'll have it easy!?" she'd yelled once, gripping my phone exposing my social medias. I'd come home with a 90% on my test, a low standard for Momma.

"You get no headstarts! Not like them!"

I wouldn't believe her. The lenses I used to view the world wasn't as defiled as hers. I never saw myself as the victim she painted me as. I didn't want to.

Ngu, I imagine bitter things. I'm holding you in the hospital once you're born, my attention on the news that showed dark skinned women who all lost young crimeless sons to bullets. My eyes would find you, and fear displaced affection. I see you as a sun Ngu, but what if that's short lived? That's when I understand why Momma wanted no boys.

I wouldn't realize I'm screaming until two nurses dash into my room.

I envision being in your middle school years later; I'm not there to return your lunchbox. I'm sitting in the principal's office besides you, your knuckles clenched and pale.

You'd gotten into a fight Ngu.

For months, you'd confessed, a boy had been harassing you. But, you always let it slide even when he teased other kids.

This day was different.

He'd spat on your palms, then ridiculed you about how you bleached your palms to look white like him.

That was the first time you'd ever slapped someone.

Your sudden blow had pushed him to the floor, and you raged at him as he'd do to others. Soon, your classmates surrounded you both, chanting for a fight. Before the boy could recover, though, teachers were dragging you away.

I feigned impassiveness as the principal explained the punishments. The boy reported for bullying, received a three day suspension. You, Ngu, the one thanked for speaking out, received a week.

Determined. Reckless. You'll have my naïveté. Forgetting consequences, thinking well of everything.

Having to accept reality, having to drive you home while you sulked in the back glaring out the window, it made me remember Momma calling me a mistake. I didn't speak. Neither did you, until night fell.

You're reading your favorite book when I slowly stepped into your bedroom; my eyes were red.

It only took a moment before I asked a question I've always wanted to ask Momma, God, Mankind, that Principal:Why?

I see you dimming from the truth as my lenses become defiled like Momma's. I imagined monitoring your clothing everyday. I bought you belts, made sure you wear them properly. I taught you how to behave towards an officer, a bully, to authority. I demanded you get 93% or higher in school and I reprimanded you if you let a white boy manipulate you. "You will never get headstarts," I'd snap.

Our beliefs clashing, you'd beg me to off the news whenever I turned to see those brave women again.

*How were they surviving with a son gone?
It made me wonder if I'd be like them, if I'd lose you before you turn 20.*

You're the innocent soul I watched suffocate underneath the darkness we both once thought never existed.

**—Lulu
Age: 17**

Present Day

Age: 35

Lulu couldn't shed one tear. Even when she stood and read her Mother's eulogy. She believed it could've been the shock of her death, life stolen from her in her sleep. Yet, Lulu thought it a blessing that she died without pain.

Lulu's eyes were just as dry when she stood before her mother's open casket, her corpse glowing, as though happy to be liberated from this earth. All her relatives and her mother's flower shop employees had left, leaving their judgment on her impassiveness and unoriginal sympathies to cloak the air. In Lulu's hand, she held an Onyx Odyssey, its petals dark, like her Mother's complexion... it was her mother's favorite flower.

Before setting it on top of her, however, Lulu looked down and removed 4 letters from her skirt pocket that she'd read awhile ago, letters she meant for her future children to see once she reached womanhood. But, it was at the end of the service when she thought otherwise. She slid the letters and flower between her mother's crossed arms, her eyes stinging for what felt like the umpteenth time. Lulu held her stomach, ripe with a child, a girl.

"You were wrong," she whispers, her hands shaking on her mother's cold fingers
"But you were also right Momma. About everything."

Her hands parted from her mother's and from the letters as sacred as her children's names, whereupon she hooked them around her husband's fingers. His skin wasn't as milky white as her young self had hoped for them to be in her letters. Rather, he was a man she was no longer afraid to marry because he looked like her, dark skinned. For their wedding, in the end, Lulu invited Momma. Her 6 year old son edges closer to her, his small fingers clenching her skirt.

Lulu fondled his hair, her smile weak. Already, he unveiled how much he'd resemble her. Determined. Difficult. Naive. Her son, Ngu, he was going to be a sun. His unborn sister a rose, an epitome of strength that she promised to nurture. But she now understood the fear Momma had, and it made Lulu realize how Ebele's birth would play out.

It wouldn't be like the fantasizations written by her younger self. When she alone in the hospital room, doubt would devour her and she'd question if she committed a sin, if she did more harm than good bringing her and Ngu into an oppressive system she's too numb to. What if Momma once believed Lulu herself to be a blessing, who later on broke under the oppression? What if the same happened with her daughter and son?

Lulu had never felt so splintered once she parted from her mother's casket: when she was young she resented her, but now... she regretted pushing her away.

But, Lulu didn't look back. Not even for her letters especially for her letters. She knew if she so as much as spared a short glance, she wouldn't see those envelopes. She'd see a child. 8 years old, legs crossed, back straight like a princess, toying with a milky white doll. She'd see a girl, 14 years old, relentlessly reading "beautiful world." She'd see herself, a forgetter of who she was. She'd see a version of herself that was nothing like her because **now**, she understood the reality she'd have to walk her children through. She understood that the cocoa coating her skin could never go away, that it's something about her and her children that she should love. And Lulu promised herself to never forget that. Just like Momma hadn't.