

LESLEY  
NNEKA  
ARIMAH

*Who  
Will  
Greet You  
At Home*

The yarn baby lasted a good month, emitting dry, cotton-soft gurgles and pooping little balls of lint, before Ogechi snagged its thigh on a nail and it unravelled as she continued walking, mistaking its little huffs for the beginnings of hunger, not the cries of an infant being undone. By the time she noticed, it was too late, the leg a tangle of fibre, and she pulled the string the rest of the way to end it, rather than have the infant grow up maimed. If she was to mother a child, to mute and subdue and fold away parts of herself, the child had to be perfect.

Yarn had been a foolish choice, she knew, the stuff for women of leisure, who could cradle wool in the comfort of their own cars and in secure houses devoid of loose nails. Not for an assistant hairdresser who took danfo to work if she had money, walked if she didn't, and lived in an "apartment" that amounted to a room she could clear in three large steps. Women like her had to form their children out of sturdier, more practical material to withstand the dents and scrapes that came with a life like hers. Her mother had formed her from mud and twigs and wrapped her limbs tightly with leaves, like *moin moin*: pedestrian items that had produced a pedestrian girl. Ogechi was determined that her child would be a thing of whimsy, soft and pretty and tender and worthy of love. But first she had to go to work.

She brushed her short choppy hair and pulled on one of her two dresses. Her next child would have thirty dresses, she decided, and hair so long it would take hours to braid, and she would complain about it to anyone who would listen, all the while exuding smug pride.

Ogechi treated herself to a bus ride only to regret it. Two basket weavers sat in the back row with woven raffia babies in their laps. One had plain raffia streaked with blues and greens, while the other's baby was entirely red, and every passenger admired them. They would grow up to be tough and bright and skillful.

The children were not yet alive, so the passengers sang the call-and-response that custom dictated:

Where are you going?  
*I am going home.*  
Who will greet you at home?

*My mother will greet me.*  
What will your mother do?  
*My mother will bless me and my child.*

It was a joyous occasion in a young woman's life when her mother blessed life into her child. The two girls flushed and smiled with pleasure when another woman commended their handiwork (such tight, lovely stitches) and wished them well. Ogechi wished them death by drowning, though not out loud. The congratulating woman turned to her, eager to spread her admiration, but once she had looked Ogechi over, seen the threadbare dress, the empty lap, and the entirety of her unremarkable package, she just gave an embarrassed smile and studied her fingers. Ogechi stared at her for the rest of the ride, hoping to make her uncomfortable.

When Ogechi had taken her first baby, a pillowy thing made of cotton tufts, to her mother, the older woman had guffawed, blowing out so much air she should have fainted. She'd then taken the molded form from Ogechi, gripped it under its armpits, and pulled it in half.

"This thing will grow fat and useless," she'd said. "You need something with strong limbs that can plow and haul and scrub. Soft children with hard lives go mad or die young. Bring me a child with edges and I will bless it and you can raise it however you like."

When Ogechi had instead brought her mother a paper child woven from the prettiest wrapping paper she'd been able to scavenge, her mother, laughing the whole time, had plunged it into the mop bucket until it softened and fell apart. Ogechi had slapped her, and her mother had slapped her back, and slapped her again and again till their neighbors heard the commotion and pulled the two women apart. Ogechi ran away that night and vowed never to return to her mother's house.

At her stop, Ogechi alighted and picked her way through the crowded street until she reached Mama Said Hair Emporium, where she worked. Mama also owned the store next door, an eatery to some, but to others, like Ogechi, a place where the owner would bless the babies of motherless girls.

For a fee. And Ogechi still owed that fee for the yarn boy who was now unravelled.

When she stepped into the Emporium, the other assistant hairdressers noticed her empty arms and snickered. They'd warned her about the yarn, hadn't they? Ogechi refused to let the sting of tears in her eyes manifest and grabbed the closest broom.

Soon, clients trickled in, and the other girls washed and prepped their hair for Mama while Ogechi swept up the hair shed from scalps and wigs and weaves. Mama arrived just as the first customer had begun to lose patience and soothed her with compliments. She noted Ogechi's empty arms with a resigned shake of her head and went to work, curling, sewing, perming until the women were satisfied or in too much of a hurry to care.

Shortly after three, the two younger assistants left together, avoiding eye contact with Ogechi but smirking as if they knew what came next. Mama dismissed the remaining customer and stroked a display wig, waiting.

"Mama, I—"

"Where is the money?"

It was a routine Mama refused to skip. She knew perfectly well that Ogechi didn't have any money. Ogechi lived in one of Mama's buildings, where she paid in rent almost all of the meagre salary she earned, and ate only once a day, at Mama's canteen next door.

"I don't have it."

"Well, what will you give me instead?"

Ogechi knew better than to suggest something.

"Mama, what do you want?"

"I want just a bit more of your joy, Ogechi."

The woman had already taken most of her empathy, so that she found herself spitting in the palms of beggars. She'd started on joy the last time, agreeing to bless the yarn boy only if Ogechi siphoned a bit, just a dab, to her. All that empathy and joy and who knows what else Mama took from her and the other desperate girls who visited her back room kept her blessing active long past when it should have faded. Ogechi tried to think of it as a fair trade, a little bit of her life for her child's life. Anything but go back

to her own mother and her practical demands.

“Yes, Mama, you can have it.”

Mama touched Ogechi’s shoulder, and she felt a little bit sad, but nothing she wouldn’t shake off in a few days. It was an even trade.

“Why don’t you finish up in here while I check on the food?”

Mama was not gone for three minutes when a young woman walked in. She was stunning, with long natural hair and delicate fingers and skin as smooth and clear as fine chocolate. And in her hands was something that Ogechi wouldn’t have believed existed if she hadn’t seen it with her own eyes. The baby was porcelain, with a smooth glazed face wearing a precious smirk. It wore a frilly white dress and frilly socks and soft-soled shoes that would never touch the ground. Only a very wealthy and lucky woman would be able to keep such a delicate thing unbroken for the full year it would take before the child became flesh.

“I am looking for this Mama woman. Is this her place?”

Ogechi collected herself enough to

direct the girl next door, then fell into a fit of jealous tears. Such a baby would never be hers. Even the raffia children of that morning seemed like dirty sponges meant to soak up misfortune when compared with the china child to whom misfortune would never stick. If Ogechi’s mother had seen the child, she would have laughed at how ridiculous such a baby would be, what constant coddling she would need. It would never occur to her that mud daughters needed coddling, too.

Where would Ogechi get her hands on such beautiful material? The only things here were the glossy magazines that advertised the latest styles, empty product bottles, which Mama would fill with scented water and try to sell, and hair. Hair everywhere—short, long, fake, real, obsidian black, delusional blond, bright, bright red. Ogechi upended the bag she’d swept the hair into, and it landed in a pile studded with debris. She grabbed a handful and shook off the dirt. Would she dare?

After plugging one of the sinks, she poured in half a cup of Mama’s

most expensive shampoo. When the basin was filled with water and frothy with foam, she plunged the hair into it and began to scrub. She filled the sink twice more until the water was clear. Then she soaked the bundle in the matching conditioner, rinsed and towelled it dry. Next, she gathered up the silky strands and began to wind them.

Round and round until the ball of hair became a body and nubs became arms, fingers. The strands tangled together to become nearly impenetrable. This baby would not snag and unravel. This baby would not dissolve in water or rain or in nail-polish remover, as the plastic baby had that time. This was not a sugar-and-spice child to be swarmed by ants and disintegrate into syrup in less than a day. This was no practice baby formed of mud that she would toss into a drain miles away from her home.

She wrapped it in a head scarf and went to find Mama. The beautiful woman and her beautiful baby had concluded their business. Mama sat in her room counting out a boggling sum of money. Only after she was done did she wave Ogechi forward.

“Another one?”

“Yes, Mama.”

Ogechi did not uncover the child, and Mama didn’t ask, long since bored by the girl’s antics. They sang the traditional song:

Where are you going?  
*I am going home.*  
Who will greet you at home?  
*My mother will greet me.*  
What will your mother do?  
*My mother will bless me and my child.*

Mama continued with her own special verse:

What does Mama need to bless this child?

*Mama needs whatever I have.*

What do you have?

*I have no money.*

What do you have?

*I have no goods.*

What do you have?

*I have a full heart.*

What does Mama need to bless this child?

*Mama needs a full heart.*

Then Mama blessed her and the baby and, in lieu of a celebratory feast,



*“Look, I’m no scientist, and I may not know what ‘consensus’ means, but I think we should all start eating coal.”*

gave Ogechi one free meat pie. Then she took a little bit more of Ogechi's joy.

There was a good reason for Ogechi not to lift the cloth and let Mama see the child. For one, it was made of items found in Mama's store, and even though they were trash, Mama would add this to her ledger of debts. Second, everybody knew how risky it was to make a child out of hair, infused with the identity of the person who had shed it. But a child of many hairs? Forbidden.

But the baby was glossy, and the red streaks glistened just so in the light, and it was sturdy enough to last a full year, easy. And after that year she would take it to her mother and throw it (not "it" the baby but the idea of it) in her mother's face.

She kept the baby covered even on the bus, where people gave her coy glances and someone tried to sing the song, but Ogechi stared ahead and did not respond to her call.

The sidewalk leading to the door of her little room was so dirty she tiptoed along it, thinking that, if her landlord weren't Mama, she would complain.

In her room, she laid the baby on an old pillow in an orphaned drawer. In the morning, it would come to life, and in a year it would be a strong and pretty thing.

There was an old tale about hair children. Long ago, girls would collect their sheddings every day until they had a bundle large enough to spin a child. One day, a storm blew through the town, and every bundle was swept from its hiding place into the middle of the market, where the hairs became entangled and matted together. The young women tried desperately to separate their own hairs from the others. The elder mothers were amused at the girls' histrionics, how they argued over the silkiest patches and the longest strands. They settled the commotion thus: every girl would draw out one strand from every bundle until they all had an equal share. Some grumbled, some rejoiced, but all complied, and each went home with an identical roll.

When the time came for the babies to be blessed, all the girls came for-

ward, each bundle arriving at the required thickness at the same time. There was an enormous celebration of this once-in-an-age event, and tearful mothers blessed their tearful daughters' children to life.

The next morning, all the new mothers were gone. Some with no sign, others reduced to piles of bones stripped clean, others' bones not so clean. But that was just an old tale.

The baby was awake in the morning, crying dry sounds, like stalks of wheat rubbing together. Ogechi ran to it, and smiled when the fibrous, eyeless face turned to her.

"Hello, child. I am your mother."

But still it cried, hungry. Ogechi tried to feed it the detergent she'd given to the yarn one, but it passed through the baby as if through a sieve. Even though she knew it wouldn't work, she tried the sugar water she had given to the candy child, with the same result. She cradled the child, the scritch of its cries grating her ears, and as she drew a deep breath of exasperation her nose filled with the scent of Mama's expensive shampoo and conditioner, answering her question.

"You are going to be an expensive baby, aren't you?" Ogechi said, with no heat. A child that cost much brought much.

Ogechi swaddled it, ripping her second dress into strips that she wound around the baby's torso and limbs until it was almost fully covered, save for where Ogechi imagined the nose and mouth to be. She tried to make do with her own shampoo for now, which was about as luxurious as the bottom of a slow drain, but the baby refused it. Only when Ogechi strapped the child to her back did she find out what it wanted. The baby wriggled upward, and Ogechi hauled it higher, then higher still, until it settled its head on the back of her neck. Then she felt it, the gentle suckling at her nape as the child drew the tangled buds of her hair into its mouth. Ahh, now this she could manage.

Ogechi decided to walk today, unsure of how to nurse the child on the bus and still keep it secret, but she dreaded the busy intersection she would cross as she neared Mama's Emporium. The

people milling about with curious eyes, the beggars scanning and calculating the worth of passersby. Someone would notice, ask.

But as she reached the crossing not one person looked at her. They were all gathered in a crowd, staring at something that was blocked from Ogechi's sight by the press of bodies. After watching a woman try and fail to haul herself onto the low-hanging roof of a nearby building for a better view, Ogechi pulled herself up in one, albeit labored, move. Mud girls were good for something. She ignored the woman stretching her arm out for assistance and stood up to see what had drawn the crowd.

A girl stood with her mother, and though Ogechi could not hear them from where she perched, the stance, the working of their mouths—all was familiar. They were revealing a child in public? In the middle of the day? Even a girl like her knew how terribly vulgar this was. It was no wonder the crowd had gathered. Only a child of some magnitude would be unwrapped in public this way. What was this one, gold? No, the woman and the girl were not dressed finely enough for that. Their clothes were no better than Ogechi's.

The child startled Ogechi when it moved. What she'd thought an obscene ruffle on the front of the girl's dress was in fact the baby, no more than interlocking twigs and sticks—was that grass?—bound with old cloth. Scraps. A rubbish baby. It cried, the friction of sound so frantic and dry Ogechi imagined a fire flickering from the child's mouth. A hiccup interrupted the noise, and when it resumed it was a human cry. The girl's mother laughed and danced, and the girl just cried, pressing the baby to her breast. They uncovered the child together, shucking a thick skin of cloth and sticks, and Ogechi leaned as far as she could without falling from the roof to see what special attribute might have required a public showing.

The crowd was as disappointed as she was. It was just an ordinary child with an ordinary face. They started to disperse, some throwing insults at the

two mothers and the baby they held between them for wasting everybody's time. Others congratulated them with enthusiasm—it was a baby, after all. Something didn't add up, though, and Ogechi was reluctant to leave until she understood what nagged her about the scene.

It was the new mother's face. The child was as plain as pap, but the mother's face was full of wonder. One would think the baby had been spun from silk. One would think the baby was speckled with diamonds. One would think the baby was loved. Mother cradled mother, who cradled child, a tangle of ordinary limbs of ordinary women.

There has to be more than this for me, Ogechi thought.

At the shop, the two young assistants prepped their stations and rolled their eyes at the sight of Ogechi and the live child strapped to her back. Custom forced politeness from them, and with gritted teeth they sang:

Welcome to the new mother

*I am welcomed*

Welcome to the new child

*The child is welcomed*

May her days be longer than the breasts of an old mother and fuller than the stomach of a rich man.

The second the words were out, they went back to work, as though the song were a sneeze, to be excused and forgotten. Until, that is, they took in Ogechi's self-satisfied air, so different from the anxiousness that had followed in her wake whenever she had blessed a child in the past. The two girls were forced into deference, stepping aside as Ogechi swept where they would have stood still a mere day ago. When Mama walked in, she paused, sensing the shift of power in the room, but it was nothing to her. She was still the head. What matter if one toenail argued with the other? She eyed the bundle on Ogechi's back but didn't look closer and wouldn't, as long as the child didn't interfere with the work and, by extension, her coin.

Ogechi was grateful for the child's

silence, even though the suction on her neck built up over the day to become an unrelenting ache. She tired easily, as if the child were drawing energy from her. Whenever she tried to ease a finger between her nape and the child's mouth, the sucking would quicken, so she learned to leave it alone. At the end of the day, Mama stopped her with a hand on her shoulder.

"So you are happy with this one."

"Yes, Mama."

"Can I have a bit of that happiness?"

Ogechi knew better than to deny her outright.

"What can I have in exchange?"

Mama laughed and let her go.

When Ogechi dislodged the child at the end of the day, she found a raw, weeping patch on her nape, where the child had sucked her bald. On the ride home, she slipped to the back of the bus, careful to cradle the child's face against her ear so that no one could see it. The baby immediately latched on to her sideburn, and Ogechi spent the journey like that, the baby sucking an ache into her head. At home, she sheared off a small patch of hair and fed the child, who took the cottony clumps like a sponge absorbing water. Then it slept, and Ogechi slept, too.

If Mama wondered at Ogechi's sudden ambition, she said nothing. Ogechi volunteered to trim ends. She volunteered to unclog the sink. She kept the store so clean a rumor started that the building was to be sold. She discovered that the child disliked fake hair and would spit it out. Dirty hair was best, flavored with the person from whose head it had fallen. Ogechi managed a steady stream of food for the baby, but it required more and more as each day passed. All the hair she gathered at work would be gone by the next morning, and Ogechi had no choice but to strap the child to her back and allow it to chaw on her dwindling nape.

Mama was not curious about the baby, but the two assistants were. When Ogechi denied their request for a viewing, their sudden deference returned to malice tenfold. They made extra messes, strewing hair after Ogechi had cleaned, knocking bottles of shampoo



over until Mama twisted their ears for wasting merchandise. One of the girls, the short one with the nasty scar on her arm, grew bolder, attempting to snatch the cover off the baby's head and laughing and running away when Ogechi reacted. Evading her became exhausting, and Ogechi took to hiding the child in the shop on the days she opened, squeezing it in among the wigs or behind a shelf of unopened shampoos, and the thwarted girl grew petulant, bored, then gave up.

One day, while the child was nestled between two wigs, and Ogechi, the other assistants, and Mama were having lunch at the eatery next door, a woman stopped by their table to speak to Mama.

"Greetings."

"I am greeted," Mama said. "What is it you want?"

Mama was usually more welcoming to her customers, but this woman owed Mama money, and she subtracted each owed coin from her pleasantries.

"Mama, I have come to pay my debt."

"Is that so? This is the third time you have come to pay your debt, and yet we are still here."

"I have the money, Mama."

"Let me see."

The woman pulled a pouch from the front of her dress and counted out the money owed. As soon as the notes crossed her palm, Mama was all smiles.

"Ahh, a woman of her word. My dear, sit. You are looking a little rough today. Why don't we get you some hair?"

The woman was too stunned by Mama's kindness to heed the insult. Mama shooed one of the other assistants toward the shop, naming a wig the girl should bring. A wig that was near where Ogechi had stashed the baby.

"I'll get it, Mama," Ogechi said, getting up, but a swift slap to her face sat her back down.

"Was anyone talking to you, Ogechi?" Mama asked.

She knew better than to reply.

The assistant Mama had addressed snickered on her way out, and the other one smiled into her plate. Ogechi twisted her fingers into the hem of her dress and tried to slow her breathing. Maybe if she was the first to speak to the girl

when she returned she could beg her. Or bribe her. Anything to keep her baby secret.

But the girl didn't return. After a while, the woman who had paid her debt became restless and stood to leave. Mama's tone was muted fury.

"Sit. Wait." To Ogechi, "Go and get the wig, and tell that girl that if I see her again I will have her heart." Mama wasn't accustomed to being disobeyed.

Ogechi hurried to the shop expecting to find the girl agape at the sight of her strange, fibrous child. But the girl wasn't there. The wig she'd been asked to bring was on the floor, and there, on the ledge where it had been, was the baby. Ogechi pushed it behind another wig and ran the first wig back to Mama, who insisted that the woman take it. Then Mama charged her, holding out her hand for payment. The woman hesitated, but paid. Mama gave nothing for free.

The assistant did not return to the Emporium, and Ogechi worried that she'd gone to call some elder mothers for counsel. But no one stormed the shop, and when Ogechi stepped outside after closing there was no mob gathered to dispense judgment. The second assistant left as soon as Mama permitted her to, calling for the first one over and over. Ogechi retrieved the baby and went home.

**I**n her room, Ogechi tried to feed the child, but the hair rolled off its face. She tried again, selecting the strands and clumps it usually favored, but it rejected them all.

"What do you want?" Ogechi asked. "Isn't this hair good enough for you?" This was said with no malice, and she leaned in to kiss the baby's belly. It was warm, and Ogechi drew back from the unexpected heat.

"What have you got there?" she asked, a rhetorical question to which she did not expect an answer. But then the baby laughed, and Ogechi recognized the sound. It was the snicker she heard whenever she tripped over discarded towels or dropped the broom with her clumsy hands. It was the snicker she'd heard when Mama cracked her across the face at the eatery.

Ogechi distanced herself even more,

and the child struggled to watch her, eventually rolling onto its side. It stilled when she stilled, and so Ogechi stopped moving, even after a whirl of snores signalled the child's sleep.

Should she call for help? Or tell Mama? Help from whom? Tell Mama what, exactly? Ogechi weighed her options till sleep weighed her lids. Soon, too soon, it was morning.

The baby was crying, hungry. Ogechi neared it with caution. When it saw her, the texture of its cry softened and—Ogechi couldn't help it—she softened, too. It was hers, wasn't it? For better or for ill, the child was hers. She tried feeding it the hairs again, but it refused them. It did, however, nip hard at Ogechi's fingers, startling her. She hadn't given it any teeth.

She wanted more than anything to leave the child in her room, but the strangeness of its cries might draw attention. She bundled it up, trembling at the warmth of its belly. It latched on to her nape with a powerful suction that blurred her vision. This is the sort of thing a mother should do for her child, Ogechi told herself, resisting the urge to yank the baby off her neck. A mother should give all of herself to her child, even if it requires the marrow in her bones. Especially a child like this, strong and sleek and shimmering.

After a few minutes, the sucking eased to something manageable, the child sated.

**A**t the Emporium, Ogechi kept the child with her, worried that it would cry if she removed it. Besides, the brash assistant who had tried to uncover the child was no longer at the shop, and Ogechi knew that she would never return. The other assistant was red-eyed and sniffing, unable to stop even after Mama gave her dirty looks. By lockup, Ogechi's head was throbbing, and she trembled with exhaustion. She wanted to get home and pry the baby off her. She was anticipating the relief of that when the remaining assistant said, "Why have you not asked after her?"

"Who?" Stupid answer, she thought as soon as she uttered it.

"What do you mean who? My cousin that disappeared. Why haven't you

wondered where she is? Even Mama has been asking people about her.”

“I didn’t know you were cousins.”

The girl recognized Ogechi’s evasion.

“You know what happened to her, don’t you? What did you do?”

The answer came out before Ogechi could stop it.

“The same thing I will do to you,” she said, and the assistant took a step back, then another, before turning to run.

At home, Ogechi put the child to bed and stared until it slept. She felt its belly, which was cooling now, and recoiled at the thought of what could be inside. Then it gasped a little hairy gasp from its little hairy mouth, and Ogechi felt again a mother’s love.

The next morning, it was Ogechi’s turn to open the store, and she went in early to bathe the baby with Mama’s fine shampoo, sudsing its textured face, avoiding the bite of that hungry, hungry mouth. She was in the middle of rinsing off the child when the other assistant entered. She retreated in fear at first, but then she took it all in—Ogechi at the sink, Mama’s prized shampoo on the ledge, suds covering mother-knows-what—and she turned sly, running outside and shouting for Mama. Knowing that it was no use calling after her, Ogechi quickly wrapped the baby back up in her old torn-up dress, knocking over the shampoo in her haste. That was when Mama walked in.

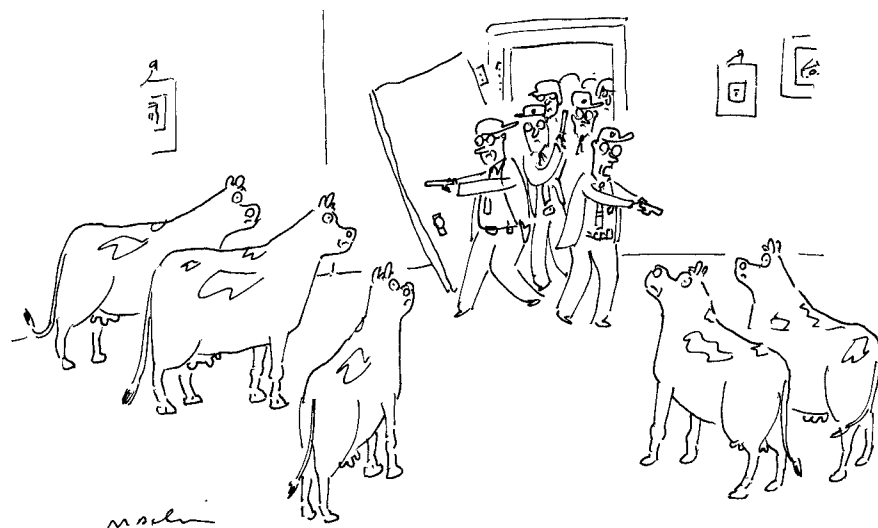
“I hear you are washing something in my sink.” Mama looked at the spilled bottle, then back at Ogechi. “You are doing your laundry in my place?”

“I’m sorry, Mama.”

“How sorry are you, Ogechi, my dear?” Mama said, calculating. “Are you sorry enough to give me some of that happiness? So that we can forget all this?”

There was no need for a song now, as there was no new child to be blessed. Mama simply stretched her hand forward and held on, but what she thought was Ogechi’s shoulder was the head of the swaddled child.

Mama fell to the ground in undignified shudders. Her eyes rolled, as if she were trying to see everything at once. Ogechi fled. She ran all the way



“Police! Nobody moo!”

home, and, even through her panic, she registered the heat of the child in her arms, like the just-stoked embers of a fire. In her room, she threw the child into its bed, expecting to see whorls of burned flesh on her arms but finding none. She studied the baby, but it didn’t look any different. It was still a dense tangle of dark fibre with the occasional streak of red. She didn’t touch it, even when the mother in her urged her to. At any moment, Mama would show up with her goons, and Ogechi was too frightened to think of much else. But Mama didn’t appear, and she fell asleep waiting for the pounding at her door.

Ogechi woke in the middle of the night with the hair child standing over her. It should not have been able to stand, let alone haul itself onto her bed. Nor should it have been able to fist her hair in a grip so tight her scalp puckered or stuff an appendage into her mouth to block her scream. She tried to tear it apart, but the seams held. Only when she rammed it into the wall did it let go. It skittered across the room and hid somewhere that the candle she lit couldn’t reach. Ogechi backed toward the door, listening, but what noise does hair make?

When the hair child jumped onto Ogechi’s head, she shrieked and shook herself, but it gripped her hair again, tighter this time. She then did something that would follow her all her days. She

raised the candle and set it on fire. And when the baby fell to the ground, writhing, she covered it with a pot and held it down, long after her fingers had blistered from the heat, until the child, as tough as she’d made it, stopped moving.

Outside, she sat on the little step in front of the entrance to her apartment. No one had paid any mind to the noise—this wasn’t the sort of building where one checked up on screams. Knees to her chin, Ogechi sobbed into the calloused skin, feeling part relief, part something else—a sliver of empathy Mama hadn’t been able to steal. There was so much dirt on the ground, so much of it everywhere, all around her. When she turned back into the room and lifted the pot, she saw all those pretty, shiny strands transformed into ash. Then she scooped dirt into the pot and added water.

This she knew. How to make firm clay—something she was born to do. When the mix was just right, she added a handful of the ashes. Let this child be born in sorrow, she told herself. Let this child live in sorrow. Let this child not grow into a foolish, hopeful girl with joy to barter. Ogechi formed the head, the arms, the legs. She gave it her mother’s face. In the morning, she would fetch leaves to protect it from the rain. ♦

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Lesley Nneka Arimah on imagining a universe of handcrafted babies.