

Merit C. Onyekwere  
Middle College High School  
Ninth Grade

five times when i catch myself alive

There are five times when who I am coincides with who I want to be, and when I catch myself unapologetically alive:

- 1) When Uchechi's voice crackles with laughter and her almond brown eyes are creased at the corner, delicately.

Have you ever felt at home in the vivacious uproar of a child's laughter? In that moment when they discover humanity on their tongue—sweet and savory, before they know anything of it? Or perhaps when they peep their own existence in a puddle and giggle ruefully at their beauty, before they know to question it?

Uchechi has an innocence about her that smooths the edges of Papa's rough voice. She has ruddy cheeks that beam in dark times, and ears that can't discern the *kp* from the *gb* when Mama speaks Igbo. She gets scolded for it sometimes, and I can't help but pity her because the *kp* and *gb* are said with the same gurgle of the throat, purse of the lips, and vibration of teeth and tongue that even I am sometimes clueless as to which is being uttered.

Nevertheless, Mama continues to melt her syllables together into a big Igbo soup that only the most perceptive listeners can manage to swallow. We smack gleefully on her thick consonants and full vowels, and Uchechi uses her spoon to separate the words she knows from the ones her American ears weren't trained to catch.

She chews them but doesn't swallow.

- 2) When highlife music floats through warm air and I catch my heart beating in sync to the rhythm of the drums.

It is summer, in some year, on some planet in my mind, and I am sitting in the back row of a cramped minivan, thighs sticky with sweat and body heat. The fan is on at the front of the car, and a few gentle waves of cool air brush against my molten legs. I shiver in delight at the contact, my tensed muscles untwining all at once.

We are passing by trees, farms, and hillsides, and the plethora of colors escape my vision just as quickly as they enter. There is a soft hum of something—guitar—emanating from the speaker next to me. My sister requests, sleepily, for Mama to turn up the volume. Mama acquiesces, but not without a reprimanding, “*Biko.*”

Soon, the melody of the music envelopes the warm air and I feel strangely at peace. As if the sun’s harsh rays aren’t sizzling against my dark brown skin and I’m not inhaling the remainders of hand-me-down air.

Papa melodically taps his fingers against the steering wheel, and Mama looks out of her window like movie women tend to do during dramatic scenes. Uchechi is asleep, drooling, and Nneoma’s hair is fluttering as she zones in and out of consciousness—as if she can’t decide whether to continue daydreaming or succumb to the instruments that blend into one warm, honey feeling.

The music fades in and out, all sugar and fire with hints of ground cinnamon, and we keep floating down the road, seemingly into eternity.

I smile, consumed by the nothingness of it all.

3) When I see Mama smile in her beautiful, memorable way.

Mama was born in the 70s, when things were worse than they are now, but people were somehow happier.

Even when she immigrated to the U.S. some decades later, she carried that somber happiness in her spirit, and she still leaves a little piece of it in every room she

enters. Sometimes she spills a little more, and then the room reeks of her presence, like she carved herself into the walls and weaved her voice into the air.

When I was little, she was in school, struggling to get a degree so her children could have some ounce of success themselves. She learned to read and write in English—that stiff, proper English—and mastered her American accent.

If you listen closely, you can still hear bits of her Igbo tongue creep through her smooth vowels and subtle cadences. She sounds American, but a bit *too* American. Like she shoved herself into the thin confines of the English language, and cut off tiny pieces of her culture to seem more acclimated.

Still, there are times when her Igbo-ness juts out of the mold ever so slightly. It moves through the air like a song, and her spirit seems full and *at home*. Even in this country, that wanted to push her out the second she came in—in her own little world within it—she feels at home.

And to me, that is lovely.

So I giggle and smile at Mama as she sits beside me. She notices and beams at me, her spirit alive and full.

Completely her beautiful, Igbo self.

- 4) When Chimere forgets how to use her own sharp voice and translates her thoughts into words.

There's an odd finality in words.

Once you utter them into existence, they mold into meanings and crawl their way into people's minds. Or once you write them, they're sprawled across a page, bare, waiting for a reader to give them some ounce of meaning. Definition. Importance. *Feeling*.

But when we strip them down to their essence, all that remains is letters—odd symbols on a page that we're able to recognize. To identify. To *understand*.

Chimere understands.

She likes to see words as beings, completely individual from each other and from the meanings we give them. She juxtaposes them in peculiar manners and reshapes them at her will. She uses them to speak for her when her own words fail, because they often do.

Chimere learned this at a young age, when she didn't know how to express the feelings bubbling inside her. She didn't cry, or yell, or *talk* at all. She just wrote and wrote and wrote until her fingers ached and ink stained the page and there were no words left to write.

That was the beginning of her poetic prowess, and the end of her struggle to find words to say.

Because she realized that, sometimes, there aren't any.

And she decided that's okay.

So Chimere's words speak for her, most of the time. They tell her story when she feels like her story can't tell itself. They are an extension of her being.

They grow, like plants, blooming in fertilized times and blossoming into sunflowers at her fingertips.

It's beautiful when she creates gardens without uttering a single word.

5) When I'm on Nigerian soil—black and vibrant and achingly *familiar*.

We visit Nigeria every other year, in the winter, when the sun still beams down in Mbaise and the air is thick with humidity.

I remember how I used to hate it—the warmth clinging to my body like a second skin—because it itched and burned and made me feel heavy. Over time, I grew accustomed to it, and felt comfortable with waking up in pools of my own sweat during long stretches of afternoon.

Now I crave it because it means home.

It means *udara* juice dribbling down my chapped lips, and the *poppoppop* of fireworks in the backyard. It means cousins dancing in the dark, when the only light is the organic joy that emanates from within our bodies, moving sporadically and freely. It means hearing more Igbo than I'm used to translating, and getting lost in the speedy conversations laced with gossip and firm consonants.

To the untrained ear, it sounds harsh when Igbo erupts from the confines of their sticky mouths, but I've learned to mush the edges together to make the words round and spongy. Now, they bounce against my ears like a fuzzy tennis ball, finding solace in my mind.

And each time we return, that tennis ball wedges itself deeper into my being, and my Igbo sounds a myriad less *American*.

Some day in the future, when I've visited home enough to belong there, the syllables of my native tongue will roll out of my throat effortlessly. And I will be able to call myself Igbo—hold the “American.”

I can't wait until that day.