Ghostroots

“Ghostroots” by ‘Pemi Aguda is a debut short story collection set in Lagos, Nigeria, blending the mundane with the supernatural. The twelve stories explore themes of inheritance, maternal lineage, and haunting legacies, often focusing on women grappling with familial and societal burdens. Aguda’s prose weaves unsettling yet deeply human narratives, where everyday life intersects with spectral presences. Notable stories include “Breastmilk,” which delves into generational trauma. The collection has been praised for its elegant voice and was a finalist for the National Book Award for Fiction, marking Aguda as a significant new voice in contemporary literature.

Manifest

The chapter opens with the protagonist, a 26-year-old woman, discovering her first pimple and fixating on its presence. As she examines the blemish, her mother unexpectedly calls her "Agnes," a name that does not belong to her. This unsettling moment occurs during a mundane activity of sorting beans, where the protagonist takes pleasure in removing and killing weevils, drawing a parallel to societal exclusion. The mother's sudden use of the name Agnes, followed by her silent retreat, introduces an air of mystery and unease, hinting at unresolved family history.

Later, the protagonist learns from her father that Agnes was her maternal grandmother, who died when her mother was young. The father's dismissive attitude reflects a generational silence common in their Nigerian Pentecostal family, where past traumas and histories are often left unspoken. The protagonist's curiosity about

Agnes grows, especially as her mother continues to act strangely, further distancing herself. The pimple becomes a physical manifestation of this unresolved tension, symbolizing the protagonist's growing awareness of her family's hidden past.

The tension escalates when the mother calls the protagonist "Agnes" a second time, this time in candlelight during a power outage. The mother's terrified reaction suggests she sees her deceased mother in the protagonist, deepening the mystery. The father's vague explanation about the resemblance between the protagonist and Agnes only adds to the confusion. The protagonist's attempts to understand her mother's behavior are met with evasion, leaving her to grapple with the weight of inherited trauma and the unanswered questions about her grandmother's life and death.

In the final section, the protagonist's fixation on the pimple mirrors her growing obsession with her family's past. Her destructive act in a restaurant bathroom—flooding it with tissue and newspaper—symbolizes her frustration and desire to disrupt the silence surrounding Agnes. The chapter concludes with the pimple mysteriously disappearing, leaving the protagonist to search for answers on her own. The unresolved tension between the protagonist and her mother, coupled with the vanishing pimple, underscores the themes of identity, memory, and the haunting nature of unspoken histories.

Breastmilk

The chapter opens with the protagonist's raw and conflicted emotions after childbirth as she holds her newborn son for the first time. She describes the baby as a "warm, slimy creature," reflecting her detachment, while hospital staff interact with her in a patronizing manner. Her husband, Timi, attempts to participate but is sidelined by the traditional hospital protocols, mirroring the protagonist's own unspoken tensions in their marriage. The physical exhaustion of labor contrasts with her observational focus on Timi's tearful pride as he holds their swaddled child, though she deliberately turns away from this emotional moment.

The narrative shifts to the protagonist's mother visiting the next morning, brimming with pride and questions about the birth. Their strained dynamic emerges as the mother dominates conversations while the protagonist, physically drained, resists engagement. A discussion about a postponed conference reveals the mother's priorities—her activist work on chemosensory research—while highlighting the protagonist's lingering concerns about being overshadowed. The mother's performative care contrasts with the daughter's desire for autonomy, a tension exacerbated when a nurse arrives to check lactation progress.

A confrontation unfolds as the nurse insists on examining the protagonist's breasts despite her insistence that no milk has come in. The protagonist's sharp resistance—grabbing the nurse's wrist—and her mother's correction of the nurse's use of "Mrs." underscore their shared defiance of societal expectations. This scene amplifies the protagonist's bodily autonomy struggles, linking her inability to lactate with deeper anxieties about failed maternal norms and unresolved marital betrayal, as hinted by her fixation on the nurse's resemblance to someone from Timi's past.

The chapter closes with preparations for discharge, where physical touch becomes a metaphor for trust issues. Timi's dry palms remind the protagonist of his past affair,

casting doubt on her performative forgiveness. As she holds her unnamed son, the doctor's reassurances about delayed lactation go unheard, symbolizing her unspoken fears of inadequacy. The fragmented ending leaves her emotional state unresolved, suspended between societal pressures of motherhood and the weight of unprocessed betrayal.



Contributions

The chapter describes a tight-knit group of women who practice "esusu," a traditional rotating savings system where members contribute money monthly, and each takes turns receiving the pooled funds. The system relies on strict rules and mutual trust, with severe consequences for those who fail to meet their obligations. The women pride themselves on self-sufficiency, rejecting banks and loans, and enforcing order through collective discipline. Past incidents, such as seizing a generator or temporarily taking a member’s daughter, illustrate their uncompromising approach to maintaining the system’s integrity.

When a new woman joins the group, she initially adheres to the rules, participating in meetings and paying her contributions on time. However, she soon begins to struggle financially, pleading for extensions. The group, following their established protocol, seizes her husband and later her mother as collateral, but both prove ineffective—her husband is lazy and disruptive, while her mother transforms into animals and escapes. Frustrated, the group demands alternative forms of repayment, leading the woman to offer her body parts piece by piece.

The woman surrenders her arms, legs, torso, and eventually her head, each part serving a practical purpose in the group’s daily lives—chopping vegetables, comforting children, or providing emotional support. Yet, despite her sacrifices, she remains unable to fulfill her financial obligations. The group continues taking her body parts, only realizing too late the consequences of their actions. The woman’s voice grows increasingly faint as she diminishes, leaving the group to confront the unsettling reality of their relentless enforcement.

In the end, the chapter highlights the dangers of rigid systems that prioritize rules over humanity. The women’s unwavering adherence to their collective savings scheme leads them to dehumanize the new member, stripping her of her body and identity.

The narrative serves as a critique of unchecked power and the moral costs of absolute discipline, leaving the group to grapple with the unsettling outcome of their actions.



The Hollow

Arit, a young architect, arrives at Madam Oni's house for a renovation assignment. The house strikes her as unattractive, with its chaotic roofs and peeling pink walls. Greeted by Lucky, a teenage gatekeeper, she learns Madam Oni is absent but proceeds to measure the property. The compound feels oppressive, with overgrown gardens and looming fences. As a junior at her firm, Arit is tasked with the groundwork, her mind already analyzing the space despite her limited role. She reflects on her uncle’s teachings about the essence of a house—questions of beauty, function, and client needs—as she steps inside.

The house’s interior is cool and eerily silent, with no visible air conditioning. Arit meticulously sketches the layout, but the design confounds her; rooms and corridors lack logical flow. The décor feels dated, with faded carpets, stucco walls, and vintage curtains. The absence of personal touches—no photos or art—adds to the house’s unsettling emptiness. As she moves through the space, her measurements become disjointed, mirroring the house’s resistance to coherence. The kitchen, with its stark marble counters, offers no respite, and the backyard’s wild growth contrasts sharply with the sterile interior.

Madam Oni suddenly appears, demanding Arit’s opinion on the house. Arit admits her confusion, and Madam Oni’s tone shifts from irritation to desperation, asking if the house can be "fixed." Arit deflects, explaining her role is limited to measurements, not design solutions. Madam Oni’s weariness is palpable, and Arit senses an unspoken history haunting the space. The chapter intersperses Arit’s present task with fragmented glimpses of another woman’s traumatic past, hinting at a connection between the house’s dysfunction and hidden suffering.

Arit’s reflections return to her uncle’s lessons, emphasizing that a house is more than physical structure—it carries the weight of its inhabitants’ lives. The chapter closes

with unresolved tension, as Arit grapples with the house’s enigmatic nature and Madam Oni’s unspoken anguish. The narrative suggests that the hollow feeling Arit senses stems from untold stories, leaving the reader to ponder the deeper meaning of home and the scars it may conceal.



Imagine Me Carrying You

The chapter opens with the protagonist returning from a weekend getaway to learn about her mother's involvement in a fatal car accident. While staying at a friend's mansion to avoid her mother's scrutiny, she receives a call from her father, who reveals that her mother hit and killed a young woman during a heavy rainstorm on the Ibadan Expressway. The family of the deceased has chosen not to involve the police, and her mother, though financially compensating them, is emotionally shattered. The protagonist rushes home to find her mother inconsolable, wrapped in grief and guilt, a stark contrast to her usual composed demeanor.

Upon arriving home, the protagonist attempts to comfort her mother, but her efforts are met with hostility. When she makes a dark joke about the inefficiency of the justice system, her mother slaps her—an unprecedented act of violence that shocks the protagonist. This moment underscores the depth of her mother's trauma and the strained relationship between them. The mother's obsession with attending the victim's burial further highlights her desperation for absolution, even as the deceased's family rejects her presence, leaving her to grapple with her guilt in isolation.

The mother's grief takes a haunting turn as she recounts the accident in vivid detail, comparing the victim's weight to her daughter's and describing the futile attempt to save her life. This monologue reveals the mother's psychological torment, blurring the lines between the victim and her own child. Meanwhile, the protagonist discovers a temporary voter's registration card belonging to the deceased, Eyitayo Omolade Ogunlesi, which her mother has kept as a morbid keepsake. The card humanizes the victim, forcing the protagonist to confront the reality of the life lost, though she resists delving deeper into the victim's identity.

The chapter closes with the protagonist reflecting on her mother's tendency to preemptively punish her for imagined transgressions, a pattern that has defined their

relationship. Despite her desire to escape through parties and alcohol, she stays by her mother's side, resentful yet resigned to her role as the caretaker. The mother's assumption that her daughter would prioritize fun over family underscores their mutual misunderstanding, leaving the protagonist to navigate the complexities of guilt, grief, and familial duty.



24, Alhaji Williams Street

The chapter opens with a vivid depiction of Alhaji Williams Street, a place steeped in history and community ties. The narrator, the only son in his family, reflects on his deep familiarity with the street's every detail, from the sound of Mr. Joro's car horn to the Obozos' aggressive Rottweiler. The street's tranquility is shattered when a mysterious fever begins claiming the lives of the youngest sons in each household, starting with Ade, the only child of Ms. Williams. The grief-stricken mothers, including the narrator's own widowed mother, gather to mourn and share futile remedies, highlighting the helplessness that pervades the community.

As the fever spreads, the street's residents grapple with fear and superstition. The deaths of the Emenikes' youngest son and later the Adeyanjus' and Bellos' boys reveal a chilling pattern, sparking whispers about the cause. The narrator's mother, while sympathetic, maintains a pragmatic stance, dismissing the idea of moving away as futile, citing the Anthonys' failed attempt to escape the fever by relocating to Abuja. The family's daily life—studying for exams, repairing furniture, and stringing beads—continues amidst the growing dread, underscoring their resignation to fate.

The mothers' nightly gatherings become a poignant ritual of shared grief and desperate hope. Each family tries unconventional remedies, from cayenne pepper to grated ginger, but none can halt the fever's march. Oga Tanko's futile attempt to freeze the illness away with air conditioners ends in a pile of broken units, symbolizing the community's powerlessness. The narrator's mother, ever resourceful, scours the internet for more solutions, reflecting the blend of tradition and modernity in their struggle.

The chapter closes with a sense of inevitability as the narrator, his sister, and mother confront the unspoken fear that he may be next. The sister's question about moving is met with resignation, emphasizing the family's emotional and financial ties to the

street. The narrator’s quiet anxiety is palpable as he studies, his pen digging into the paper, mirroring the tension between normalcy and impending tragedy. The street’s collective grief and the mothers’ unwavering but futile efforts paint a haunting portrait of a community bound by loss.



Things Boys Do

The chapter "Things Boys Do" explores the unsettling dynamics between fathers and their newborn sons through three distinct narratives. The first man witnesses his wife's traumatic childbirth, where the baby's arrival is marked by eerie silence and a doctor's evasive reassurance. The father is haunted by the infant's unnerving white eyeballs and his wife's subsequent health decline, leaving him fearful of his own child. This segment sets a tone of dread, questioning the natural bond between parent and offspring.

The second man grapples with his mother's insistence that his son is not biologically his, adding familial tension to his wife's post-birth struggles. The baby's unsettling eye movements and his mother's accusations create a atmosphere of distrust. When his wife dies shortly after, the man is left alone with Johnny, the child he struggles to accept. This narrative thread underscores themes of doubt and the fragility of paternal connections.

The third man, an adoptive father, experiences an inexplicable unease with his new son. Despite his wife's apparent bond with the baby, he feels judged by the infant's stern gaze and notices fleeting gray flecks in its eyes. His playful interaction turns to discomfort, leaving him to whisper, "You're not a good boy." This vignette amplifies the chapter's recurring motif of children as unsettling, almost otherworldly figures who disrupt paternal certainty.

The chapter culminates with the first man's growing fear of his son Jon, whose presence triggers visceral dread. The narratives collectively paint a portrait of masculinity in crisis, where fatherhood is fraught with unspoken fears and supernatural undertones. The boys, though infants, wield an unsettling power that destabilizes the men around them, challenging traditional notions of paternal instinct and familial harmony.

Birdwoman

Felicity, the protagonist of *Birdwoman*, is introduced as a woman whose life has been marked by unhappiness from birth. Conceived out of wedlock, she grew up in a religious household where her parents' guilt manifested in strict piety and financial deprivation. Her childhood was further marred by abuse from an older cousin, and even after escaping her family at nineteen by stealing money, her discontent persisted. Despite building a successful tailoring business through shrewdness—poaching skilled tailors from her former employer—Felicity remains emotionally unfulfilled, her life defined by a lingering sense of being an unwanted burden.

Now forty-five, Felicity is described as physically imposing yet perpetually grim, her demeanor reflecting her inner turmoil. Her unmarried status becomes a subject of speculation among her employees, who assume a man might bring her happiness, though Felicity herself seems indifferent to relationships. On her birthday, a day she keeps secret, she indulges in small, private rebellions—like wearing a revealing dress or eating ice cream alone—highlighting her isolation and unresolved longing for transformation. These acts underscore her quiet desperation, as she remains trapped in a life that feels heavy and unchangeable.

While running an errand in Agege Market, Felicity encounters a crowd gathered around a self-proclaimed magician named Ayao. Initially dismissive, she is drawn back by the promise of magic, a fleeting spark of curiosity breaking through her cynicism. Ayao, a shabbily dressed but charismatic figure, performs card tricks before announcing his grand finale: a volunteer will fly. The crowd recoils, but Felicity, sensing a performative ruse, steps forward. Her decision surprises onlookers, hinting at a latent yearning for escape—or perhaps a willingness to disrupt the monotony of her existence.

The chapter ends with Felicity volunteering, a moment charged with quiet significance. Her action suggests a rare openness to the improbable, a departure from her usual guardedness. Whether Ayao’s magic is real or a con remains unclear, but Felicity’s participation symbolizes a fleeting hope—or a final act of defiance against a life that has offered her little joy. The scene leaves readers questioning whether this encounter might catalyze a change in her otherwise unyielding unhappiness.



Girlie

The chapter follows Girlie, a young domestic worker, as she navigates her daily responsibilities for her employers, Madam and Oga. Sent to the market three times a week, she purchases household items, groceries, and baby supplies, adapting to their preferences while masking her exhaustion. Girlie reflects on the disparities between her employers' affluent lifestyle and her own humble background in Akko, a village far removed from their polished neighborhood. Her observations highlight the invisible labor of domestic workers and the emotional toll of her separation from family.

Girlie's routine reveals the challenges of budgeting with fluctuating market prices and the physical strain of her work. She carries a leather purse gifted by her mother, a symbol of her forced transition into adulthood. The narrative underscores the risks faced by domestic workers, such as unsafe transportation and exploitation, as Girlie recounts warnings about unmarked taxis. Her resilience is evident as she navigates these dangers, relying on makeshift prayers for protection.

At the market, Girlie interacts with vendors like Iya Tomato, who shows her kindness by adding extra produce to her purchases. These small gestures contrast with her employers' detachment, offering fleeting moments of warmth. Girlie's internal conflict surfaces as she avoids greeting Grace and Mummy Grace, whose playful bond reminds her of her estranged mother. The chapter poignantly captures her loneliness and the ache of missing home, amplified by weekly phone calls where her mother's voice becomes a comforting presence.

The chapter closes with Girlie's encounter with Iya Tomato, who probes about her well-being and family. The vendor's concern contrasts with the indifference of Girlie's employers, highlighting the isolation of her position. A sudden interruption—a woman bumping into Girlie—mirrors the instability of her life. The laughter of Grace and Mummy Grace triggers a surge of emotion, emphasizing the emotional weight Girlie

carries. The chapter masterfully portrays her quiet endurance and the unspoken sacrifices of domestic labor.



The Wonders of the World

The chapter opens with Abisola, a student who joins a school geography trip at the last minute after her mother unexpectedly earns enough money from a sale. Feeling self-conscious about her borrowed sneakers and the pitying looks from the trip coordinator, Mr. Baju, Abisola boards the bus and finds herself seated next to Zeme, a peculiar new boy whose erratic movements and unsettling aura make others uncomfortable. Zeme's unusual behavior, including his whispered prayers and intuitive understanding of Abisola's desire for the window seat, leaves her both intrigued and uneasy. Their interaction highlights the tension between curiosity and discomfort, as Abisola grapples with Zeme's enigmatic presence.

As the bus travels through Lagos, Abisola distracts herself by critiquing the exaggerated billboard advertisements, which she finds insincere and unrelatable. Zeme, meanwhile, reveals that he is praying for the journey ahead and claims his people consider him a prophet. This declaration deepens Abisola's skepticism, and she withdraws, turning her attention to the passing scenery. The chapter subtly explores themes of perception and identity, as Abisola questions the authenticity of the world around her while Zeme's mysterious nature challenges her understanding of reality.

During a bathroom stop near Ibadan, the students rush off the bus, but Abisola and Zeme remain behind, both isolated from their peers for different reasons. Abisola's aloofness stems from rejecting Musa, a popular boy, which has alienated her from her classmates. Zeme, on the other hand, is ostracized for his odd demeanor. Their shared isolation creates a tentative connection, though Abisola remains guarded. The chapter contrasts the social dynamics of the group with the quiet introspection of the two outsiders, emphasizing their marginalization.

The trip's purpose—to visit the Ikogosi springs, where warm and cold waters meet without mixing—mirrors the chapter's exploration of duality and coexistence. Abisola's

internal conflict between curiosity and distrust, her observations of societal facades, and Zeme’s prophetic claims all underscore the tension between surface appearances and deeper truths. The chapter ends with Abisola and Zeme poised on the edge of a potential connection, their unresolved dynamic reflecting the uncharted journey ahead.



The Dusk Market

The chapter introduces the enigmatic Dusk Market, a hidden marketplace that emerges at twilight, filled with sensory richness—smoky stockfish, buzzing flies, sizzling agbara pans, and the cacophony of bartering voices. The market is preceded by flickering kerosene lanterns, guiding the way for those who belong. Ordinary pedestrians and drivers avoid the intersection instinctively, though children occasionally glimpse surreal sights like head-hopping men or winking birds, which adults dismiss or ignore. The market women, though unfamiliar, bear uncanny resemblances to people one might know, their mannerisms and appearances eerily familiar yet otherworldly.

Salewa, a lonely ogogoro seller, stumbles upon the market after dulling her inhibitions with alcohol. Her slow, meandering walk leads her to the intersection where the Dusk Market materializes before her eyes—lanterns, vibrant stalls, and bustling women in colorful ankara. The warmth and camaraderie of the market stir a deep longing in her, but the vision vanishes as suddenly as it appears, leaving her disoriented. The experience lingers in her mind, blurring the line between dream and reality, and she becomes distracted the next day, unable to shake the memory of the market's fleeting embrace.

The Dusk Market exists in a liminal space, visible only to those invited or those who, like Salewa, slip through "slippery moments" of perception. Children's innocent observations and adults' peripheral glimpses hint at its supernatural nature, but most dismiss these signs. Salewa's encounter, however, is transformative—the market's warmth contrasts starkly with her isolated life, hinting at a deeper yearning for connection. Her vulnerability and intoxication allow her to see what others cannot, but the market's ephemeral nature leaves her questioning its reality.

The chapter blends magical realism with poignant social commentary, contrasting the vibrancy of the Dusk Market with Salewa’s grim existence. The market symbolizes community and belonging, a stark contrast to the alienation of urban life. Salewa’s fleeting glimpse of this hidden world underscores the human desire for connection, even as it remains tantalizingly out of reach. The narrative leaves readers questioning the boundaries between reality and illusion, much like Salewa herself.



Masquerade Season

Pauly, a disobedient but imaginative boy, routinely ignores his mother's warnings to stick to major roads on his way home from his cousins' house. Preferring quieter, scenic routes, he often takes a shortcut through the Alele Estate, where the guards recognize him. One day, after staying late playing with his cousins, Pauly encounters three mysterious masquerades blocking his path in the bush. Despite their eerie presence and out-of-season appearance, Pauly politely addresses them, intrigued by their vivid and elaborate designs—one towering with raffia threads, another draped in red aso-oke with a silver mask, and the third adorned with colorful feathers and intricate embroidery.

When the masquerades begin following him, Pauly questions their motives, to which the feathered one responds, "Because we are your masquerades." Delighted by the idea of owning something so extraordinary, Pauly decides to bring them home, imagining his mother's pride and his cousins' envy. The journey back is effortless, with the masquerades moving gracefully and even earning nods of approval from the Alele guards. Pauly, though aware of his mother's rule against bringing strangers home, believes these masquerades are an exception—too special to leave behind.

At home, the masquerades stand brightly in the dim living room, their presence overwhelming yet fascinating. Pauly struggles to understand how to interact with them, pondering whether to ask about their origins or offer them food. Eventually, he offers biscuit and water, but the red aso-oke masquerade requests palm oil instead, its voice smooth and insistent. The scene is interrupted by Pauly's mother's arrival, leaving her reaction to the unexpected guests unresolved.

The chapter blends everyday life with the supernatural, exploring themes of curiosity, disobedience, and the allure of the extraordinary. Pauly's defiance of his mother's rules is tempered by his politeness and wonder, while the masquerades' enigmatic

nature adds a layer of mystery. The vivid descriptions of the masquerades contrast with the mundane setting, creating a sense of magic in the ordinary. The unresolved ending leaves readers anticipating the mother's response and the masquerades' true intentions.

