

Spring 2013

Designs

Chinelo Okparanta

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/iowareview>

Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Okparanta, Chinelo. "Designs." *The Iowa Review* 43.1 (2013): 85-95. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.7305>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Iowa Review by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

DESIGNS

The peeling linoleum on the countertop, near the sink, is the only sign that Celeste was here, that she is gone. It is speckled gray and turned up at one corner like the flap of an old envelope. Celeste's blood, that tiny drip of it, now dry and jagged around the edges, is the envelope's seal; but it is a seal that does nothing to tack the envelope closed.

Ifeinwa stands at the sink, rinsing leaves. She rinses them one by one, and then the tomatoes, and then the carrots. All of them she rinses carefully, as she would in Port Harcourt; and of course, there, where vegetables are sold fresh from the farm with specks of dirt and sand on them—there, such fervent rinsing would be necessary.

But she is here. Still, she rinses them that old way, as if they have not already been washed and dried and packaged for her to use: it is always some time before the salad is made.

I stand by the door that separates the kitchen from the dining room, and I watch. She is humming, and the sound is like an old lady's song, a folk song, the kind my mama used to sing back home, her legs braced against the sides of the mortar, her arms rising and falling with each strike of the pestle on the yam.

I imagine Ifeinwa back in Nigeria, her wrapper tied around her chest or in a knot above her shoulder. She is in her family's compound, and she is carrying a large bowl on her lap—rinsing palm kernels for oil. Soon, she switches from the kernels to rinsing beans. And after the beans, she pours a small bag of rice onto a tray. She stays with the rice for some time, first shuffling the grains with her fingers, picking out tiny stones as she goes. Then she flips the rice in the tray. With every flip she fills her mouth with air and blows the air over the rice. The chaff rises from the tray like dust in the air. She flips and flips, and she blows air over the rice until chaff no longer rises from it.

I shake the images away. Here, where fruit and vegetables and grains are sold ready to eat, where they glisten under the grocery store lights, all that cleaning and rinsing is not necessary. I walk over to Ifeinwa at the sink. "Let me help," I say. I'm carrying with me two small tubers of yam, purchased on my way back from work, at the African store down the block from Beacon Street.

“You do the yam,” I say, handing the tubers to her. “I’ll finish the salad.”

She laughs. “I’m taking too long?” she asks. Her voice is soft, and suddenly I’m aware of how smooth her words have become. Already there is that fluidity of American English in her tone, a lilt which took me the better part of a decade to master. Already, she is mastering it.

She lifts her hands from the bowl where the leaves soak. She shakes the water off her hands and dries them on the skirt of her dress. It is autumn, and the window in front of the sink is cracked open. I feel a draft of the cold breeze on my face, and it surprises me that Ifeinwa is even wearing that dress.

“You’re not cold?” I ask, eyeing the little red dress. It was I who chose it, who bought it for her, eager for her to fit in. The first time she wore it, she complained of the cold. She changed back into her wrapper and blouse, both of them with the traditional ankara design. I was petulant about the change, but she insisted. They were better, she said, because she could layer the wrapper all around her body, and its warmth would be only a little short of a blanket’s.

86 I continue to eye the dress. “You’re really not cold?” I say. I watch as she shakes her head in response. It is not too fervent a shake, but her braids are long, and the movement of her head causes them to whip mildly around her face. I think of Celeste, who does not wear braids, and whose hair is nothing like Ifeinwa’s hair.

Ifeinwa speaks, but with my mind on Celeste, the words that reach me are indecipherable, so I have to ask, “What?”

“Maybe I am, just a little,” she says. She laughs softly. “You know. A little cold. Maybe I’m just a little cold.”

I nod. “Yes, of course,” I say, and then I watch her as she moves away from the sink.

She places the yams on the countertop and then picks up the knife. I think of Celeste holding that knife, of Celeste helping me to plant the surprise. I urge myself to stop looking at Ifeinwa, but it is a struggle to stop, and so I watch from the corner of my eye.

Ifeinwa picks up the first tuber of yam. She peels off the bark until all that remains is the flesh, which glows a milky white. She cuts the yam into cubes, the way we do before boiling. Then, she reaches up, opens the cupboard, which is not too far above her head. She grabs a pot from there, transfers the cubes into the pot. She moves on to the remaining tuber of yam.

By then I have progressed from the leaves to the carrots and now to the tomatoes. I slice the tomatoes into thin circles, and from the corner of my eye, I watch as Ifeinwa begins to peel the second tuber of yam.

There is a line that runs along the circumference of that yam. Perhaps she doesn't think much of it. I imagine now that if she were to have given it only a bit of thought, she might have commented on the eccentricity of the yam, as if it had been cut in half and then stuck back together with a kind of invisible glue. Instead, she proceeds to cut it along that pre-existing line. Suddenly it's as if her knife hits a block. She makes a soft, muffled sound, a bit like a whine. I stop with the tomatoes, and I ask her if something is wrong. But I do not offer to help as I usually do, when, for example, she has trouble opening a jar.

She does it all on her own, carving slowly around the core of the block. There is a look of determination on her face. She digs, fusses, groans. When she arrives at the box, she stays a moment just staring at it. Then she extracts it slowly, cautiously, knowingly. It is a light shade of green, the box, delicate like jade.

She exhales. The sound of her exhale is a little like vindication.

She smiles brightly. The ring inside is just a band. Celeste saw that it was so. Still, Ifeinwa tells me, her eyes glazed with tears, how perfect it is.

I go closer to her. I get down on one knee, and I take her starchy hands in mine.

"M huru gi na anya," she says, looking down at me. Her voice is suddenly heavy with the cadence of Igbo, but it is soft still. I see you in the eyes, she says.

I look up at her—at her teary eyes, her smile, at the braids that dangle limply around her face. "I love you, too," I say. And it is true.

That evening, we eat the salad, and then we eat the yam, dipping cubes of it into palm oil—the good old-fashioned way, which is the only way that Ifeinwa will have her yam. This—the yam with palm oil—has become her favorite meal. (She used to buy fufu at the African store down the street. Then, she'd spend hours preparing okra soup to eat with the fufu—this used to be her favorite meal. But the odors of the soup and the fufu would rise in the air and would linger, sometimes for days at a time. Eventually I had no choice but to protest. Too rancid, I explained. Not at all American scents.

When she could no longer bear my complaints, she gave in and did away with the fufu and okra soup. She settled for the yam with palm oil.)

After we have eaten the yam with palm oil, and after Ifeinwa has washed the dishes and I have wiped them dry, Ifeinwa punches the numbers into the phone, all fourteen of them. The phone hangs on the kitchen wall near the fridge. Ifeinwa plays with the dangling cord while she waits for her mother to pick up: she tangles and untangles the cord around her fingers. She does this every time.

“Mama!” I hear her say from where I am sitting in the living room. First her back is to the wall, and she is standing. I am not there with her, but I know that this is so, because this is the way that all her calls go.

Next, there is the sound of her sliding, and I know that she has slipped down to the floor, that she is squatting there, talking to her mama on the phone that way. It is the only way she has done it since she arrived.

“Kedu?” she says. I imagine her mother answering, “Odi mma.” All is well. I don’t listen to what follows next. But I imagine that when she tells her mama the news, her mama screams and asks, “Ezi okwu?” Is it true? And there is more screaming, happy screaming, and the wrinkles on her mama’s face deepen. At least, I imagine they do.

Next comes the talk of when the wedding will be, because, after all, it has now been made official, even more official than my buying the ticket that brought Ifeinwa here. More official than our living together in America for this entire year. I imagine that her mama exclaims again, from the shock of the announcement, as if the proposal is a surprise. She exclaims, as if she didn’t see it coming, as if she hasn’t always expected it, even from the time I wore maroon knickers and Ifeinwa wore maroon pinafores, from that time when we were mere children in our primary school in Port Harcourt.

We were small children then, and all of us played together, the boys and girls. But we were closer than the rest, Ifeinwa and I, and once, her mama caught me buckling her shoes. It was the harmattan, and there was a breeze, and someone said (her mama or mine), “Those two will grow up to marry each other someday.” The statement came off singsongy, light and happy, like a blessing. And after that, it was just assumed that that was the way things would be.

In the living room, I lean my back into the couch. I stretch out my legs in front of me, on the coffee table just ahead. I open the newspaper and wait for Ifeinwa to finish on the phone. My gaze shifts from the newspaper to the window. The curtains are drawn just a little open, like a slit. I look through the slit. Outside, the sky is dark.

Ifeinwa enters the room, beaming. Her smile reminds me of Celeste's, but nothing else about her is like Celeste. She is gentle where Celeste is harsh, submissive where Celeste commands. She was that way even in primary school: pliant and yielding; and so I kept her close.

She waves her fingers in front of me. I fold away the newspaper and smile back, following her with my eyes.

She curls up next to me on the couch. She folds her legs beneath her body and leans her head on my shoulder.

She says, "So, this is what you and Celeste were doing, all this time? Finding a way to plant my ring into that tuber of yam?"

I smile and nod. "This is what we've been doing. It pleases you?"

She nods. "Very much," she says. "It pleases Mama too."

"Good," I respond. "Very good." I pick my newspaper back up, begin to unfold it.

"It's Friday," she says. "We have no weekend plans. Nonso, we should celebrate our engagement this weekend."

I shake my head. "We should rest," I say. "Work has tired me out. We should rest."

From the corner of my eye, I see that she is nodding slowly—hesitantly nodding her consent. "Okay," she says, reluctantly. "Okay."

We stay silent for some time, and then she begins again to speak, mumbling something about how maybe I am right about rest, about how her practicum has also tired her out.

A minute goes by, maybe two. Then, "Actually," I say, "maybe we can have a small celebration right now."

Ifeinwa's eyes light up. She returns to beaming. "Really?" she asks. It is the tone of hope mixed with surprise, but more than that, it is the tone of gratitude.

I nod with pity at her. "Yes. Really," I say. I tell her that Celeste will be stopping by soon to drop off some designs. We can celebrate as soon as she arrives, just the three of us.

Her smile fades away, and her eyes grow pensive. And then she says, "It's late. Past nine o'clock. Celeste will be stopping by again this late?"

"Just to drop off plans," I say. "Not to worry. We won't be doing any work tonight. She's just dropping off plans. And then maybe we can celebrate this engagement of ours."

She rises. I watch as she sets three wine glasses on the table, and I watch as she takes a bottle of wine out of the rack.

There is a painting of us on the wall by the wine rack. It was done the month after she arrived. Those were the days before she enrolled as a nursing student, before she began taking any classes at all.

We were walking along the Charles River, and there was that series of street vendors, who sat on cloths spread across the concrete, and on the grass. There were the graphic artists too, who sat spraying canisters of paint onto large canvases.

Ifeinwa pulled me to one of the graphic artists. We had no pictures of the two of us as adults, she said. And what good were the childhood pictures now? This would be better than any photograph, she said. And so we sat and allowed the vendor to spray his paint, all colors, into portraits in the images of us. She carried the canvas home.

90

She has just retrieved the corkscrew from the cupboard when we hear the knock on our door. I rise from the couch, and I open the door. Celeste enters, her smile wide, her eyes glowing. Her lashes are long and straight, not tightly curled like Ifeinwa's. She breathes deeply, and I watch its effect on her chest. I step aside and allow her to come in.

Celeste goes straight to Ifeinwa in the dining room. A black leather handbag hangs down from her shoulder. In the opposite hand she carries a gray plastic tube, the designs rolled up inside. She holds on to her bag but sets the tube on the table. The cylinder rolls back and forth, just a little, before it finally settles to a stop.

Celeste takes Ifeinwa's hand in hers. They mock-examine the ring. They laugh and they hop about like little girls on a playground, like primary school students who have been let outside for recess after lunch.

I am standing under the archway between the living room and the dining room. I observe them from there.

Ifeinwa sees me where I am standing and calls me to join them. I walk a few steps into the dining area, a few steps to one of the chairs that surround

the table. Ifeinwa fills the glasses with the wine before I have taken my seat on the chair.

When we have all three taken our seats, Celeste raises her glass high and calls for a toast. I raise my glass as well, and Ifeinwa joins.

“A long and happy marriage,” Celeste says. It is a brief toast. Just that. But it appears to have all the power of those long, extended toasts: Ifeinwa smiles demurely and thanks Celeste in a wholehearted sort of way.

All the while Celeste, seated by my side, has already begun allowing her gaze to linger on me.

Celeste and I first met at the university, the month I arrived. We met the very first day of classes. Just a simple hello. It was August, and in Nigeria the sun would have been strong as well; and if it rained, there would have been that same scent of wet concrete.

But in Nigeria there would have been other things too: the scent of crushed millipedes. That sandy scent of snails.

I loved August in America the same way that I loved it in Nigeria, the same way that I loved the rain, and the scent of millipedes, and the scent of snails. I loved August with the same intensity I would eventually despise the autumn, and especially the winter—that cold, dark season which brought me to the brink of despair.

But then, there was the matter of Celeste. She was the reason that I began to love the cold: Celeste with her wide smile and penciled-in brows. Celeste with her brassy hair. She should have been a brunette, but she had grown accustomed to dyeing. She dyed even during those early days of graduate school. Sometimes, she waited too long to dye, and her natural color crept in and threatened to blossom, like weeds on grass.

She was the reason, with her long, manicured nails, with red lipstick that made her lips shine like plastic. Buxom Celeste whose full chest appeared to do battle with the seams of her blouses. “They’re real,” she’d say, back then. As if she could read my mind.

When the autumn came that first year, it was she who offered to show me a place where I could buy a coat. She did not take me to any of those little boutique stores around the university. She knew that I could not afford those.

We got on the tram, took seats by the window. I looked outside for most of the ride, afraid to speak, afraid of all the ways in which my accent could betray me.

But Celeste asked questions that forced me to speak. “What is Port Harcourt like?” she asked. “Have you lived anywhere in Nigeria outside of there?” She told me that she had a great-uncle and a great-aunt who once lived in Nigeria. In Port Harcourt, she said. G.R.A.—Government Reserved Area. Of course, that was way back then, before Independence, she said.

I asked, “Way back then? During the time that the colonial masters were settling in, building their mansions and their clubhouses and making servants of the Nigerians?” They were English, but they brought with them some Americans too, I said.

I imagined the G.R.A. then, what it must have looked like during the reign of the colonial masters—devoid of rubbish heaps, a network of paved roads, estates of majestic houses with cylindrical columns marking their fronts. Houses like government buildings, with pipe-borne water and the kind of serenity that plenty of money brings. I told Celeste all this.

When I was done, Celeste shook her head slowly. “Sorry,” she said, her first apology. And it was sincere.

92

She took me to the Salvation Army on Mass Ave. She searched through the racks with me. She used on the coats the same soothing voice she would later use on me, the kind Mama used to use on the chickens in our backyard. They’d run freely around the compound, but every once in a while, she’d choose one for stew. She’d chase it around, making those soft, cooing sounds. The chicken waddled away, but eventually Mama won.

At the Salvation Army, the coats on the rack brushed against Celeste’s hands, the fabrics sliding between and around her fingers like vines crawling all over a gate.

When she found the coat, she shook it as if to air it out. She continued to shake, to get a better sense of the coat. Its sleeves writhed all around her from the force of the shake.

She handed it over to me when she was done. A prickly heat appeared to have radiated up her face by then, rendering her cheeks red. All that fervent shaking. I observed the heat on her face, and I seemed to absorb it from her: first, I felt it in the soles of my feet, and then it crept up to my thighs. It was the strongest in my groin, and then in my chest. From my chest, it radiated up to my face.

It was then that I understood. That there was something else to it.

Ifeinwa toys with the ring around her finger, turning it clockwise and then counterclockwise. Celeste sips from her glass of wine. I watch them both.

“The next step is deciding a date,” Celeste says.

Ifeinwa nods. “It might be far, the date,” she says. “You see, the traditional wedding will have to be done in Nigeria. Planning for all that will take some time.”

Celeste turns to me. “I imagine it’s a lot to plan,” she says.

I nod.

She begins to rise from her seat. “Well,” she says. “It’s certainly getting late. Thank you for the wine. But time for me to head back home.”

Ifeinwa rises and walks Celeste to the door. I rise too.

At the door, they hug. I stand behind Ifeinwa, and when they are done with their hug, my hands find their way to Ifeinwa’s waist. They rest there, lightly, in the groove between her waist and her hips. Celeste looks in the direction of my hands. She doesn’t move to hug me too. Instead she raises a hand and waves.

It is some time, five or so minutes, before I open the tube of designs. I slide the designs out, and I announce to Ifeinwa that I should have returned the tube right away to Celeste. I tell her that I will run downstairs with it. Who knows, perhaps I will catch Celeste still on Lenox Street, maybe at worst on Beacon Street.

Ifeinwa only nods. For a moment I think I see a question forming in her eyes. But she shakes it away. “Well, hurry up,” she says.

Just outside our building, there is a courtyard. The courtyard is all concrete, save for the swings and slides and seesaws, which are plastic and metal and nearly colorless in the dark.

We are standing beyond where the courtyard is, at a distance from the entrance of the building. We are one level above the courtyard, at the top of the steps that lead to the street. We stand there, because there is where Celeste has chosen to wait for me.

I lean on the black metal railing near the top of the steps. It is a little to the corner, not directly visible from the steps.

Celeste leans against me. A cedar tree hovers above us. Its aroma is spicy but also like the scent of berries and nuts: it mixes well with the lavender of Celeste’s body.

There is a little light coming from a streetlamp not far away, which causes there to be shadows. Our shadows on the gray concrete walkway are long.

Celeste leans harder against me so that I can feel the pressure of the railing on my bottom and on the backs of my upper thighs. She buries her face in the crook of my neck. She kisses me there. They are light—barely there, the kisses—like the brush of a butterfly’s wings.

“Lucky man that you are,” she says. “Having your cake and eating it too.” The words come out muffled, but I feel her lips on the skin of my neck. I feel them mouthing the words.

I rub my chin. My fingernails rake through my beard. The sound is something like discord, like the rustling of leaves, only louder. “It’s not ideal,” I say.

Celeste says, “What she doesn’t know can’t hurt her.”

I stay silent for some time. Then, “No,” I say. “What she doesn’t know certainly cannot hurt her. Besides, a man’s got to do what a man’s got to do.”

She chuckles softly. She kisses me on the lips and lingers. She teases and bites and lingers some more. She tugs at my waistband and pulls out the hem of my tucked shirt. She runs her fingers under the shirt. She moans. Beneath our feet the cones of the cedar crumble.

It is probably after midnight by then. There are no children’s voices emerging from the courtyard, no adult chatter, no laughter. Just the sound of a cone or two falling to the ground, the sound of Celeste and me crumbling them under our shoes.

There is the rustling of perhaps a pair of squirrels, their tiny feet cutting across the concrete and the grass. The crickets chirp, those mating sounds that are a little like sounds of alarm.

My hands move against Celeste’s body willfully, as they have done all these years, all the mornings and afternoons at the firm, or in the apartment, while Ifeinwa is away at class.

I slide her skirt upwards, so that it bunches at the fullest part of her hips. I place my legs between her legs, force her thighs open that way.

She is tugging at the front of my trousers, at the zipper there, when the shadow emerges from the direction of the courtyard, from the direction of the steps. I look up to take it in completely with my eyes. When I do, I see that Ifeinwa is the shadow, that she has stopped in her tracks, and that she is watching me. She holds her arms around her body, because, of course, in that dress, she is cold.

Even in the near darkness, there is something pure about her face. It is after all artless and unprocessed in a way that Celeste's is not.

Ifeinwa's face isn't angry, only more than a little bewildered. She jerks her head around as if she doesn't know where to look.

I allow Celeste to continue with my zipper. I pull her skirt further up. I lift her so that her feet no longer touch the ground. I raise myself from the railing so that I'm no longer leaning on it.

Celeste raises her legs, wraps them tightly around me, so that they take up the space between the railing and my back.

I kiss Celeste forcefully, defiantly. I unbutton her blouse so that her brassiere shows from the front of her blouse. I am astonished by my cruelty, so I pretend that Ifeinwa is not really there.

"Nonso!" Ifeinwa screams. She steps forward, continues towards me. Celeste tenses up. All movements cease.

I loosen my grip on Celeste. I lower her so that her feet return to the ground. She pulls her skirt back down her hips, over her thighs. She does not bother to cover her bare chest. She turns so that she is facing Ifeinwa.

"Chi m o!" Ifeinwa exclaims. "My God!" Then, "Nonso, what are you doing? What have you done?" She glares at me, then she turns her head, her eyes so that she is no longer looking at me, so that she is looking directly into Celeste's face.

"Sorry," says Celeste. It comes out forcefully and soft at once. It is the second time that I see her apologize. It is not sincere. She says the word, but her eyes are cold and impenitent, as if she is resenting the fact that she should have to apologize at all.

My eyes shift from Celeste to Ifeinwa. For a short while, I take turns between the two of them, glancing erratically from one to the other. Finally my eyes settle again on Celeste. I observe the look of self-satisfaction, now even a little more like triumph, on her face. The realization is something like the movement of air, slow-forming, impalpable at first, then building and building until it is quite visible to my eyes, until the branches shake and quiver in the wind, until the leaves hop and skip about. I scowl, because it is only then that I realize my servant role in all of this.

That same scent of lavender is emanating from her, but suddenly it appears as acrid as the odor of fufu, except worse. It is terrible, the stench, the most offensive one that I've breathed in all of my life.

Still, I breathe. A deep, resounding breath, before a painful silence.