

New Nonfiction by Abena Ntoso: Memorial Day

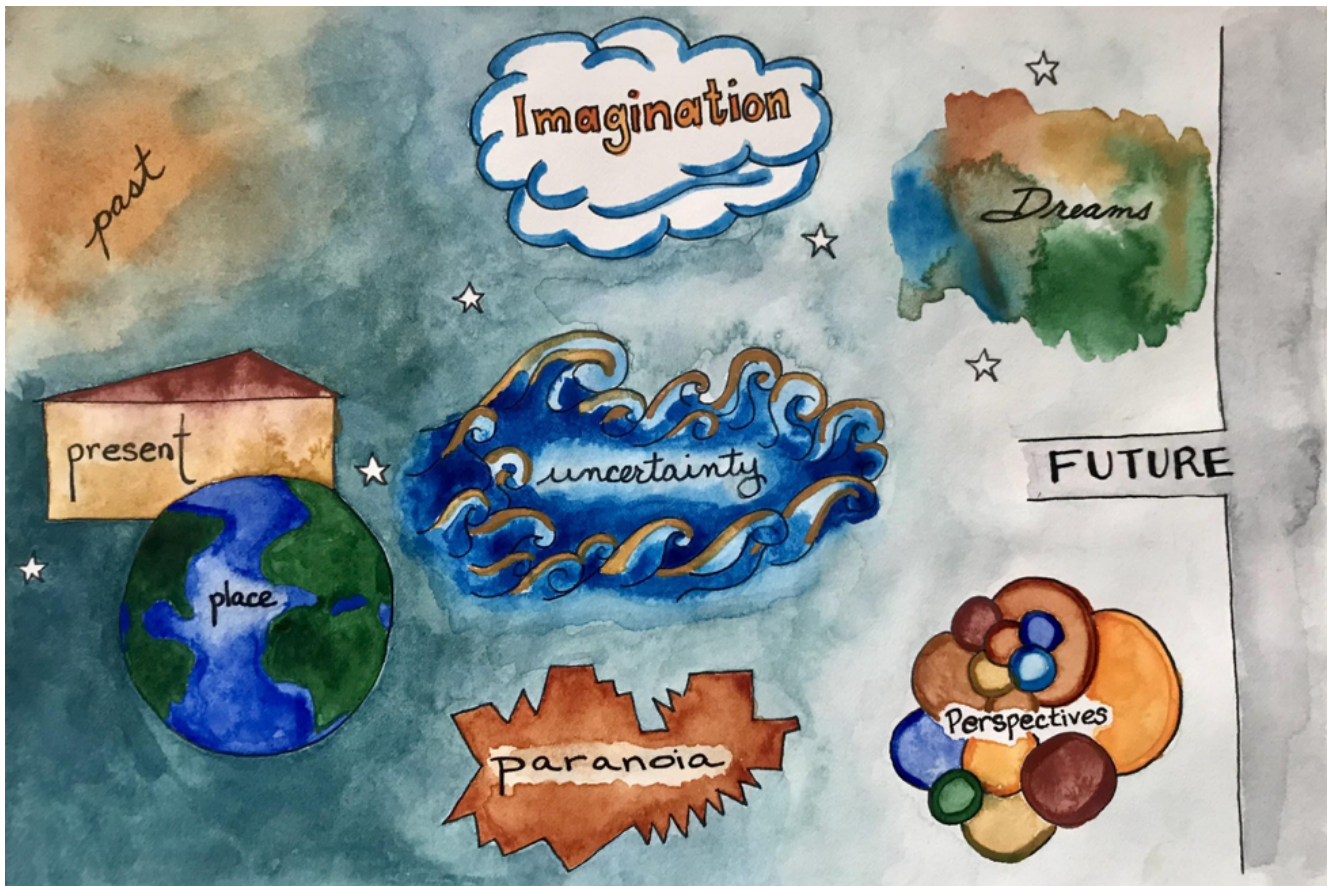
There are four ways of telling what happened.

1. Just tell the truth. Some stories are told just once; others are told over and over again, like myths and legends. We remember such stories not because they are memorable, but because they have been told. Like the well-crafted, witty, searing, suspenseful story of Odysseus and the Cyclops ... *"Nobody's killing me now by fraud and not by force!"* Such a story of human suffering. *"Nobody's ruining my life!"* We grow breathless and sweaty, gasp for words and air, just trying to explain things. It's happening, it's real, and yet no one can really see it or feel it but you. And, let's face it, you certainly aren't doing a great job of explaining it to anyone else.

2. When we think, speak, and behave, we do so while mixing up the past, present, future, imagination, dreams, and paranoia. Our personal concept of "reality" is more warped than we realize.

3. We may decide to editorialize what we think we know.

4. Or, I decide I have to tell the stories, but I can't beach my existence on the shores of the past or along the jagged coastline of paranoia. I invite you to subtly explore and question your truths, but you must remember that everything I say is a tale. I'm spinning fictions and poems to entertain us both, and to hopefully provide catharsis. It's also best if I tell you this up front, so that you can voyage with me and not worry that we may end up stuck in one place. I am a mental wanderer; and you are also free to wander wherever you please. I have enclosed a map for your convenience.



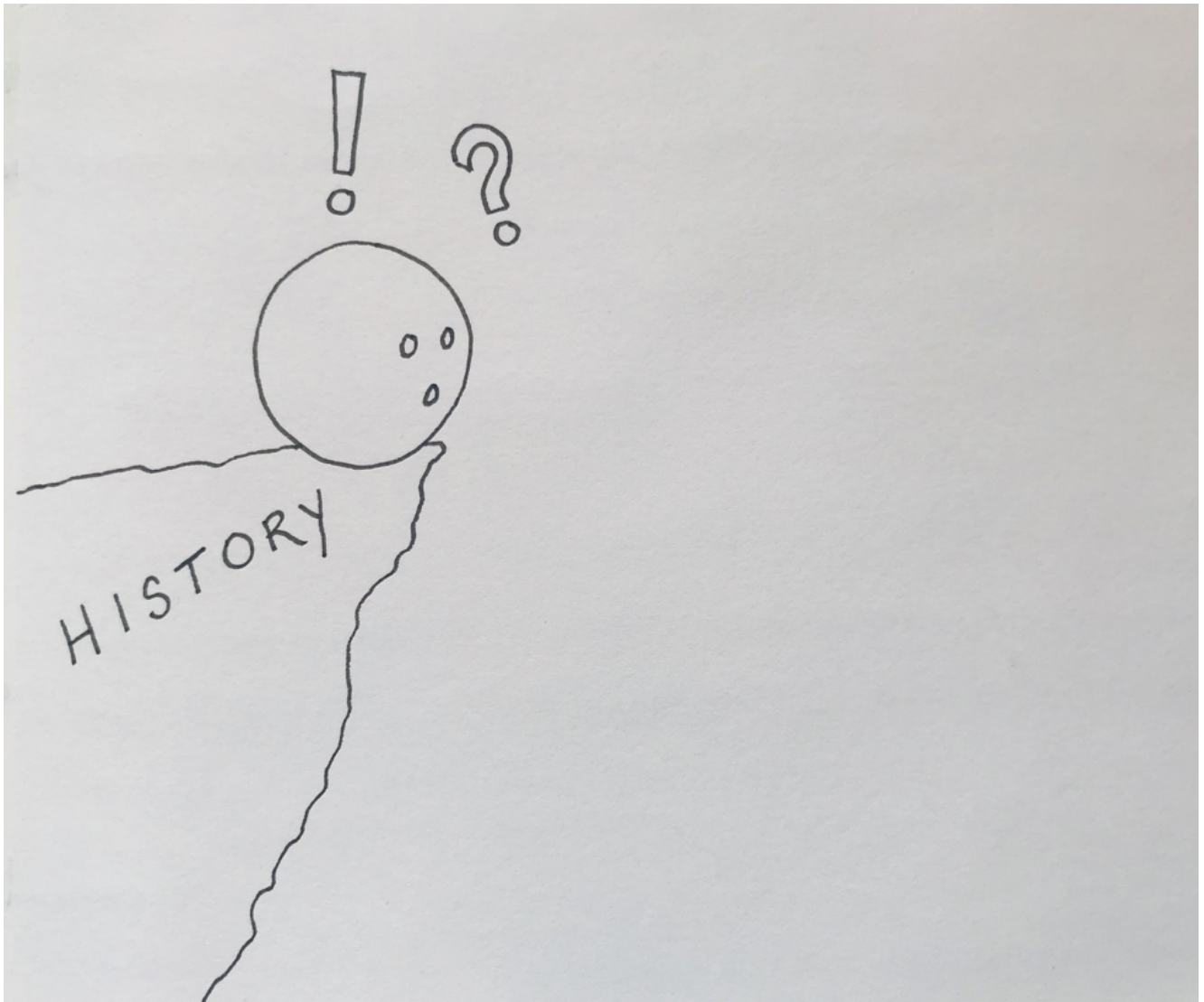
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I have a daughter, and I have a son. I have bags that are always empty, and bags that are heavy and full. Books, binders, cellphone chargers, laptops, dishes, Tupperware, blankets, pillows, paint brushes, colored pencils, lavender-scented trash bags for the trash can with the lid that closes. I have usernames and passwords. Lots of them. I have hair and skin. All over. These things make me a lot like other people .

I tried to write a book in grade school; I wrote a 40-page chapter book in a black and white marbled composition notebook. A good piece of fiction, but I don't remember what it was about. Someone in the house threw it away. Perhaps it was me.



In high school in the 1990s, I wrote poems on a Smith-Corona word processor, and then on a Packard Bell computer. I wrote my deepest secrets and my mundane musings in a large purple hardcover journal that went everywhere with me, except for school. We didn't write in school, except for half-heartedly scribbling hasty essays to no one in particular about this or that novel or historical event. In college I did slam poetry, and I wrote my poems in several hardcover spiral-bound writing journals that I ended up throwing away when it was time to "grow up." Writing was not part of waking up and being a real adult.

Twenty years later, a writing workshop for military veterans shook me awake and reminded me to write, and write again and again. Every day now, I've been waking up on Earth and filling notebooks.

It's 2020; in my imagination Earth is a drunk bowling ball, rolling around on the rocky edge of the highest cliff, constantly shifting in precarious circles, nauseous and peering unsteadily, unable to comprehend whatever is below or beyond the precipice of history. I am watching this spectacle, and I'm writing this book.

How can one possibly chronicle the various permutations of a redesigned relationship with reality? A disease ravaging human physiological and societal structures has written so many people deeper and deeper into distinct forms of suffering that can swallow a person whole—hunger, illness, isolation, unemployment, martyrdom, the sudden and lonely deaths of loved ones ... and yet there is also an awakening, an introspection, a forced freedom to wonder how we will revise our lives in an apocalyptic invitation to survive today and the remainder of this century. Acutely mindful of the present, we draft new possibilities for our future. Left with few options, we explore everything.

The kids build a multi-blanket fort in the living room, and the youngest introduces a brilliant piece of legislation, using magic marker to draft a sign which alerts potential visitors of the new law: "No farting in the fort."

Representative Ocasio-Cortez from New York eloquently demonstrates that misogyny and verbal abuse are pervasive and very real. Other very real things that are often minimized: poverty, homelessness, systemic racism, domestic abuse, sexual harassment, violence, rape.

Standing on the concrete balcony before sunrise, I count 10 stars to the east, and let's just say that I am not telling you everything because it's simply just too much. I walk back inside, turn on the silver lamp and sit down at the dining table to write.

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My mental explorations lead to interesting observations and dialectics about the nature and meaning of anything and everything. I am acutely aware that exploration is a luxury, although I maintain the belief that all human beings should be able to enjoy enough personal safety and security to be able to explore, whether physically or mentally. In that sense, I don't think of travel—physical or intellectual—as a luxury, but as a requisite for opening one's mind.

I sit down not knowing where to begin. Mental travel is not a pragmatic endeavor; it is disheveled and eclectic, authentic and impure, sagacious, sobering and silly. My thoughts, ideas and observations wander throughout the universe, and my daily writing is an incomplete account of these creative and intellectual escapades.

I grasp at words and attempt to say ideas and emotions that cannot be said. Language is a chunky and viscous medium for the flow of an authentic existence.

I pen an ode to customer service:

*The joy and peace you bring is underrated
underappreciated,
like Jesus, a savior I can't see,
except you start off every conversation
with "My name is _____. How can I help you?"
and I am usually not down on my knees,
my eyes are not closed,
in fact, I may be multitasking, or staring
at the equipment or correspondence that
seems to be the source of a particular kind*

*of problem today,
problems that are usually solved by the end of our
discussion; you may have just performed a minor
miracle. If only prayers worked that way.
But then again if they did, we would probably take
God for granted too.
You deserve a raise,
or at least, more praise.*

The streaming recollections of my most vivid dreams are usually written down without interpretation. In one dream, "I was invited to fly an old-school Amelia Earhart-type plane with another young woman and two men, and it was unclear whether we should wear shorts or a cover up over our bottoms and legs, and the bathroom where we were changing was semi-outdoors and had dirt floors so it was muddy, and I was holding my breath, and sometimes I had sandals and sometimes I did not."

At times it is difficult to write creatively, especially when I am inundated with the more mundane or administrative aspects of life. During such weeks or months, I struggle with "maintaining my dimension of creativity, curiosity, playfulness, self-expression, and observation despite the pull of other dimensions." I make a commitment to re-establishing balance, and sometimes I feel like a rebel when I write needy and nonsensical poetry, release an incessant flow of thoughts and emotions, or paint pictures that look like masterpieces by a 3-year-old. After much deliberating about the nature of work, I decide that this too is worthy of my time. Perhaps this is evidence of a quotidian brand of nonconformity.

I feel overloaded with responsibilities, and I escape to the

park to find mental energy. Seated cross-legged in the gondola I write, "I feel like I'm seeing through a different person's eyes, a depressed person's eyes. I am in a depressed person's mind, walking in their sad, sad shoes, and there's the woosh of cars along the road and birds calling in the various ways they all do (a hooting, a squeaking, a trill, multiple voices and languages), but somehow I don't see with wonder and delight, it's like my brain is tired and that part has been clubbed and is lying unconscious in a ditch and everything else that is walking, sitting, staring, yelling, crying—all of it can't find the missing part that has been beaten and left for dead."

Some aspects of quotidian life do become quite amazing. On one occasion I marvel at the habit of taking a shower. "Mostly an everyday experience except for those occasional days when you don't take a shower, you skip a shower for one reason or another, and it gets to the end of the day and you just give up on showering. Does the frequency of this say anything about you? Something about your personal motivation or lack thereof? Your ability to end on a high note? Your nonchalance? Your personal commitment to conserving water? Your blasé approach to personal hygiene? Your work ethic, coupled with your level of exhaustion?"

I think about what freedoms I can explore as a poet; I try capitalizing the first letter of every single word I write, "Just So You Would All Know That All Of My Words Stand For Something, None Of Them Are Extra Words Or Filler Words, They Are All The Point, They All Introduce And Elucidate, And I Am Not Complacent When I Write."

I write about dirty words. Violence. Abuse. I sip coffee and attempt to process trauma and the human response to it. Sexual harassment: why do we collectively mumble excuses and ignore it? Verbal abuse: why do we simply shrug our shoulders, an outward sign that we simultaneously condemn and condone? Child abuse, domestic abuse: why are we afraid to say that all

people should feel safe in their homes? Why are we afraid to name a source of pain that comes at the hands of someone who is supposed to love and protect? What would it be like if we stopped ignoring violence and abuse in the home, if we started addressing it as a serious public health and safety concern? Would this also make us better at preventing it in our public institutions and in the street?

I write about the word pilgrimage. I write about the abbreviation "IRL." I find it interesting that there is even an abbreviation for the phrase "in real life" ... is this something that we now find ourselves saying so often that we have to abbreviate it? I paint, experimenting with mixing colors for a variety of flesh tones.

I do not know that on Memorial Day a man will be choked to death in front of a crowd. I sing happy birthday to my mother, and I hug my children. It is days later when I first hear about what happened to George Floyd. It is almost a week before I finally take a deep breath and listen to *The New York Times* news report.

Over the next few weeks I write pages and pages about my frustrations with humanity, racism, sexism and violence. I wonder what my mother's birthday will be like in subsequent years. Next year I am going to write a poem for my mother and have it framed.

"In poetry, just as happens constantly in our own minds, the biggest kinds of thoughts about life and the world can shift with ease into very personal and intimate ones, and back again."

—Matthew Zapruder

I scribble words. Paradoxes. Parables. Panegyrics. Bona fide and exigent matters for consideration. What does it mean to love and be loved? Why was this woman scorned? Why was this child slammed? Why was this man murdered in the street? How do

we right this? How do I write this pain? How do I spell it out?

I read and re-read Rumi first thing every morning, prepare to open up my heart for human business. I savor words and language. I copy quotes that make me pause and think. I pull out my oil colors—yellow ochre, cadmium red, ultramarine, viridian—paint my mother with a newborn baby in her arms, wrapped in a blanket of Adinkra symbols for strength, humility, knowledge, and learning.

I write about dreams before I forget. The river in this one is iridescent, blue, turquoise, bright green, glowing. We are floating down this river with magical properties to heal a deadly and infectious skin disease; the river was full of people, and at first I had a full army-issued diving suit with a mask like the gas masks, and I was underwater, but then I came up and there was an African guy, in his 40s and bald, and he took off his mask and we were all crying because we knew he would get infected, and we were all floating down the river and it was nighttime, and when we got to the end of the river there were lots of people whose skin was raw, exposed subdermis, and we were crying and screaming; Dawn was there, and we were afraid of the people and for them, we thought they were infected and dying, and we floated around and were on our way back, and the river was crowded and we were trying to avoid the infected people with exposed skin, and then we felt our own faces and realized that we were like that too, our skin was raw, everyone, everyone; we were screaming and scared and continued floating back, and when we got back to the shore at the other end of the river we were suddenly healed, and there was a tree in the river that had flowers on it, and we were so happy and grateful that we survived and were healed, and Dawn and her daughter were already at the shore, and we picked the delicate flowers for our hair, and the water was iridescent, blue, turquoise, bright green, glowing. The river was supposed to heal us, and it did.

There is a current and a past; for most of us, it is difficult not to confuse the two. So it is with writing fiction; the flow between the imagination and reality is as natural as a dream.

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“Caminante, no hay camino, se hace camino al andar.”

Traveler, there is no road; you make your own path as you walk.

—Antonio Machado

If life is a frighteningly intricate tangle of experiences, how do we cope? How do we find our way amid a complexity and vastness that we cannot even begin to comprehend? At any given moment, we are busy splitting atoms, mapping the DNA of viruses, and calculating distances between galaxies in the universe. Or maybe we are making a bologna sandwich while arguing with our mate. It is quite possible that we remember attending our sister's college graduation and watching our children play in the water fountains on campus with their cousins; maybe we heard about what happened several days ago on a street corner in Minneapolis, Minnesota; perhaps we have also studied the various conquests and movements that have transpired over the past few centuries or millennia. We might dream of a hot pink crape myrtle tree blooming and tossing confetti petals; imagine the star-spangled fabric of a nation ripping into two; think about what it must be like for our mothers to watch us leave over and over again. There is a chance we are fretting over the possibility of being robbed of our possessions, or considering drastic measures to protect ourselves amid the fear of losing much more. Maybe we plan for our upcoming vacation; maybe we don't see retirement as a viable option, and maybe we predict that we will all be working tirelessly to save our planet or inhabit a new one.

In real life, we flow through our thoughts and actions so

rapidly that we rarely take the time to think about where they are taking us. Most conversations and nonfiction writings often reflect our valiant attempts to convince ourselves and others of what we refer to as "truth." Few of us realize, let alone care to admit, that our stories and language float in an ocean that is always everywhere all at once. What an adventure it can be to acknowledge this and embark on a mental journey!

This ability to wander and explore is the reason why I write poetry and fiction. I write to ponder humanity and nature; I write to probe paradoxes and dilemmas; I write to peek into the universe. I write poetry to expand my thinking, to find wisdom and authenticity; I write poetry to record the beats of a moment or thought, and then to question the music. I like to be mindful of the infinite ocean of natural thinking, and so I write fiction because it is how I allow my mind to play.

Freedom to play with words and language, to traverse past, present and future, to intersect these with dreams and imagination, to clothe our worries in questions, and to don multiple perspectives ... this is the freedom we experience when we read and write poetry and fiction. Perhaps in tumultuous times it would be especially wise to consider that this freedom of thought is a blessing that we should not forget about or squander. To appreciate poetry and fiction is to sense that, as Rumi puts it:

"Love is the reality,
and poetry is the drum
that calls us to that."

Writing poetry and fiction is a way in which we can consciously alter the amount of influence that each mind state has on our psyche or our social and political interactions at any given moment. With these two literary forms, when we write, we can usually be incredibly honest with ourselves about what is real and what is made up, what is past, what is

present, what is imagined, and what was in our dreams. If asked to parse our own literary work, we would be able to literally drop words and phrases into each of these mind-state categories as they relate to the story that we are attempting to tell or the experience we are trying to create.

Furthermore, when people read poetry or fiction they know it's just that ... there is no expectation of needing to believe something, agree with something, or debate its validity. We are aware that the author has made all of this up for our entertainment, and we can comfortably take the stance that we are allowed to decide what we think.

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In her mind, a civil war is brewing, but no one wants to call it a war. There is a paranoid anguish in watching America implode, an anguish of wanting everything to be alright, but knowing that it isn't, and not having any idea how to make it so. The nightmare of polarization mixes with the immense pressure that the past exerts on the present—both personally and politically. The impotence of watching the present reminds her of a child's innocence, the struggle to make sense of the world when she wants to fix it but realizes that she can't—that this world is simultaneously larger and more minute than she can possibly comprehend.

And so begins the memorial story,

this meandering tale of vainglorious battles

in which the author takes up sundry pens and portable devices

with lofty hopes of celebrating peace among the paradoxical parties

of humankind, the protests and propaganda

littering the sometimes crowded, sometimes deserted streets

of a weaponized post-war people.

This wayward wordsmith awkwardly commences her wandering while seated at a small and sturdy dining table from Ashley Furniture, aided by the glowing filamentous light of a brushed nickel folding lamp she used in graduate school, along with a generous mug of coffee chased with a copious amount of caramel mocha coffee creamer, an international delight indeed. Two score and one year have passed since life first illuminated her adventurous spirit, and yet amnesia eclipses the first few years that followed birth, that event which was likely quite traumatic—for what ripened babe and exhausted mother do not grow somewhat at odds with one another and the gods, so much so that the mother has little choice but to force the ready human from her loins? And yet this miraculously celebratory disagreement which triggered her adventures in vitality seems to have little bearing on the psyche with which she now attends to her craft.

Her own dogmatic approach is the dreamy and desperately futuristic optimism of thinking, “we can do better than this.” Until violence hits closer and closer to home ... then

perspectives, mind states and time periods don't even matter ... She just wants to protect, and she's stuck thinking "this shouldn't be." Small details from her life catch her attention; she imagines being held down and injected with something; she imagines a leather belt raining down on her daughter as she cries out cowering in a couch; she imagines her son's thick hair and dark skin on a grown man who is running. She would run too. She has run—several times—and she would probably do it again.