

# The Road to the Country

By [Chigozie Obioma](#)

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To get to the country, make sure your car is in good shape.  
You must fill your tank with gas and carry more in a cask.  
Take enough food, medicine, clothes, water, a mat, and a blanket.  
You will not need to carry a book or a camera,  
Your heart must be strong enough to bear what you'll see in the country.  
You'd first need to have a lobotomy of the heart to be able to take photos.  
For what you will see in the country is anathema to the human eye.  
With these in place, you should set off before daybreak,  
at the first cock crow when the world is the color of a tadpole  
and the vagaries of the universe hang suspended in midair  
like a film stilled in motion. For,  
    the country is far.

You must carry a map of the country.  
The map should consist of the seven rivers, a stretch of bowed hills,  
and a catalogue of winding paths that traverse the landscape  
like the scars on the Jew's back after the sixty lashes.  
For the country was for centuries "a lost tribe"  
living in the deep heart of the savannah rainforest of West Africa.  
(Dr. Beke, the first European to visit the country, came there by accident.  
He had left camp with the Royal Niger Company at Port Harcourt  
and rode his bicycle into the forest in search of undiscovered species of animals.)  
Thus, only a map sketched by the hands of God himself alone  
can guide you and keep you from winding up in the wrong place. For,  
    the country is hidden deep in a dense continent.

The country is the land of men who bear in their bodies the mark of war.  
The country is of men who carry the destiny of their land like a hunch on their backs  
The men of the country built the houses whose charred remains you will see  
The men of the country built the singed edifices and the bullet-ridden schools  
The men of the country planted the hares of corns and the yams in the land.  
The women of this country, too, were once joyful and brimming with life  
but they now wallow in interminable sorrow.  
Their children are human tadpoles—Earth's unrecorded species:  
*The children of Biafra. Phylum humatadponalia.*

Their heads are bloated balls hanging on broom-thin torsos like lollipops.  
Their arms and legs are as thin as toothpicks, and their bellies protrude like a toad's.  
Their eyes are two bulging globules of fevered pupils.  
The shadows of these children have sprung tails. For,  
the country is a country of tortured people.

Once you set foot on Enugu, continue—straight on—to Aba.  
Then link Owerri through the strait of Nsukka.  
Uli will be standing at the lip of the bend like a begging cripple.  
Run through the Niger Bridge and you will find Awka,  
its ripped flags, singed cars, the charming ruins of the hinterland.  
You must tread slowly on the makeshift wooden bridge  
constructed by the people's army, an army long disbanded.  
The footbridge is as fragile as the heart of an octogenarian.  
You will come upon a mighty gape on the road outside Onitsha.  
This hole was carved by the cataclysmic strikes by British warplanes.  
You will find the pile of skeletons of the men in Asaba  
who were shot at and felled for three hours by soldiers of  
the Fourth Infantry Division of the Nigerian army on October 7, 1967.  
Once you pass this road, you have arrived in the country.  
But I know you want to reach its heart, its capital  
so head on, even if your eyes are growing weary from these sights. For,  
the country is like a graveyard.

To reach the heart of the country, you must drive straight ahead.  
Do not turn, but make your course to be like that of Odysseus.  
Do not heed the diversions on the flanks of the road!  
Do not heed the road signs and the signposts!  
(These were planted by ghosts—the ghosts of men killed by the bombs,  
and by the ghosts of children and women who died from hunger and starvation.)  
Do not mourn at the sight of the tattered flags with the slice of a yellow sun.  
Do not say a word to the people as you go.  
Do not reply to the “Ndewo” of the hoary men and the wrinkled women.  
Do not pity the dust-caked naked children as they throng to your car asking for food.  
Do not, I repeat, listen to this eerie squawking of the continental vultures  
whose stomachs bulge with the flesh of the dead.  
You must grow the heart of an executioner to go without distractions. For,  
the country you seek is entrenched in darkness.

When you turn the wheel in the axis of Nri and find trees wrapped in creedless flags,  
it will strike you like a sudden blow that you have reached the country.  
A thousand scales will fall out of your eyes  
as you gaze in wonder at the Edenic splendor before you.  
The land will appear as green and lush as it was on creation day.  
As if by a curious epiphany, you will see children playing in the fields.  
You will see women gathered with sunny faces, and men asleep in their hammocks.

You will see goats grazing in the fields, and hens dining in the yards.  
These things will feel so real and present that:  
You will forget the things you'd seen on your way here.  
You will forget the putrefying bodies on the road,  
and the abominable specter of vultures dining on the contents of split-open bodies.  
You will forget the miasma arising from the sockets of a burnt-out corpse.  
You will be anxious to get out of your car and head into the country.  
In haste you will put off your engine and pull to a stop.  
But once you get off your car, the impenetrable silence will shock you.  
For you will hear no sound, no noise, not even of crickets,  
No eyes will be watching as you unclasp your seat belt.  
All around you will be an endless breadth of scorched, empty plain—  
A wasteland peopled by the frightful shadows of the bygone past. For,  
the country you seek does not exist.

## Chigozie Obioma

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Chigozie Obioma was born in Nigeria. A recipient of Hopwood awards in fiction and poetry, his works have appeared in *Virginia Quarterly Review* and *Transition*. His debut novel, *The Fishermen*, was published in April 2015 by Little, Brown, and is being published in twelve other countries.

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