

# **The University of Sheffield**



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## **Representation of Violence against Women in Zimbabwean Fiction: A Collection of Short Stories**

Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Philosophy (Literature)

July 2021

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## **Dedication**

I dedicate this thesis to WOZA (Women of Zimbabwe Arise) and, to the memory of my grandmother, Lizzie Mbano 'Kanga' who inspired in me a great love for storytelling and taught me – knowingly and unknowingly – to be a fighter.

## **Abstract**

This thesis is a collection of loosely linked short stories entitled *Homewards*, resulting from research on the representation of violence against women in Zimbabwean fiction. The stories mainly explore themes of violence and sexual violence, dislocation and displacement, silence and articulation, and how the Zimbabwe/South Africa border, temporary and informal settlements, and the undocumented migrant status have become additional spaces for violence against Zimbabwean women. The concern of the creative work is the tension between history, personal stories and fiction. *Homewards* is based on Zimbabwean women's lived experiences displaced by violence and who at the time of writing were living in the diaspora in Johannesburg and the border town of Musina in South Africa. The project's practical, sociological aspect involved conducting interviews and creative writing workshops with the participants to collect personal accounts and narratives from refugees, asylum seekers, and immigrants of gender-based violence experiences. The stories and accounts were used as the inspiration and ethical guide for writing about difficult and sensitive subjects, especially the taboo topics of sexual violence and rape. The choice of short stories as the creative project was influenced by emerging trends and arguments in academia, literary criticism and fiction that the most useful way to present and represent Zimbabwe, within the context of highly contested accounts of the past and the recent past, is to acknowledge multiple experiences. This project contributes to the larger project of restorying and re-examining Zimbabwe's past and challenging historiographic conventions of how Zimbabwe's past is celebrated and remembered. The project is predicated on the realisation of the ways women's voices have been marginalised in the ever-urgent struggle over Zimbabwe's past and recent history. The stories in *Homewards* add to

the growing body of women's contributions that complement and problematise dominant historical and official accounts and other artistic representations to resist what Kizito Muchemwa (2005) calls 'the slipping into oblivion of unacknowledged, unspoken and unwritten traumas of history'.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kizito Muchemwa, 'Some Thoughts on History, Memory, and Writing in Zimbabwe', in *Versions of Zimbabwe: New Approaches to Literature and Culture*, (Harare: Weaver Press, 2005), 195-202.

*Homewards: A Collection of Short Stories*



## **List of publications included as part of the thesis**

'Mushrooms for my Mother', *Route 57: University of Sheffield Creative Writing Journal*, Issue 12 (2016)

'Some Friendships are Forever' *Verse Matters*, ed. by Helen Mort & Rachel Bower (Valley Press Anthology, 2017)

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'Mushrooms for my Mother' & 'No Roads, Just Trails', *Wretched Strangers* (Boiler House Press 2018)

'Jambanja', *Chains: Unheard Voices* (Margo Collective, 2018)

'Waiting' *LiterallyStories: Short Story Fiction from Around the World*, (Thursday 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2019)

'Peace be Still' forthcoming in *Wasafiri: International Contemporary Writing*

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## **South Africa: Present Day**

*When we gather together in the moonlit village ground it is not because of the moon.  
Every man can see it in his own compound. –Chinua Achebe*

## **Peace be still**

Nothing could have prepared me for it. It's only seven o'clock on an autumn weekday morning, an hour after sunrise – but it's already difficult to move a few steps in any direction without encountering an obstruction. Everyone knows it gets busy. Border escapades, together with how people back home make ridiculous requests for money and expensive gifts and whether there is any sign that our old man's demise is near, are among the favourite topics of discussion for Zimbabweans wherever they happen to meet. 'As you know, it is the busiest land crossing in all of Africa', they'll say before proceeding to narrate, in great detail, their ordeals or those of their relatives, or friends. Still, all the stories, most of them embellished, don't quite capture the mayhem of coaches, minibuses, cars, trucks, bicycles, and people —everywhere!

The dizzying jumble of colours, smells and noise, just a few metres from the gate on the South African side is the one-stop, last-stop market for anything from matches to toiletries, to clothes to television sets — any last-minute must-have, before leaving the land of plenty. As soon as we step off our coach, dozens of vendors swarm us like plague grasshoppers. Money sellers follow us shouting, 'Rand! Dollar! Pula!' in singsong voices incongruous with their hardened, unkempt appearance. Because I bought my currency at the Nedbank, at Park Station in Johannesburg, I avoid making eye contact. I have heard too many stories of people unwittingly buying fake money. The abandon with which they shove the notes in our faces, tells me that they are dangerous people.

A woman rummaging in her bag while clenching her passport between her lips is knocked over from behind by the surge of people getting off the bus. Result: woman, bag, contents of bag and passport land in the dust with a thud. No one stops to help. We all navigate our way around her and past the billboard displaying the South African flag and the pointless 'Beit Bridge Border Control' proclamation. I doubt that anybody would mistake

the huge, brown, green-roofed buildings, the barbed-wire fence and the armed check-points for any other place.

I'm going back home for the first time in twelve years. We, that is, my mother's four friends Maria, Sihle, Tanatswa, Viola and I are travelling together, 'because it will be better that way' my mother had said. We're in and out of the South African immigration control building in no time. They must have suspended the permanent *go slow* they usually reserve for Zimbabwean travellers. A friend who'd travelled home at Christmas time swore she'd not go home again until she'd saved enough for a flight.

'She [the South African Immigration official] dozed off with my passport still in her hand! *Kuvata chaiko*, for ten minutes!' she'd said, the shock of it still evident in the tone of her voice.

Three minutes perhaps, I'd thought, but I know we've been lucky.

We head for the Zimbabwe side past the patrolling officers, past the place where they check vehicles and past the 'Foot and Mouth' footbath. There are people lugging suitcases, *saga* bags, five or ten-litre cooking oil cans, five or ten-kilogram bags of flour, beans or rice, and shouting as they weave and squeeze their way through gaps between other people doing the same; there are mothers with screaming babies on their backs, ploughing through the chaos and calling out, 'mind my baby' to no one in particular; there are travelling parties — school children and teachers; groups in church uniforms; families and couples all intent on keeping together, a feat which they must think can only be achieved by screaming instructions at each other. Other people are however trying to go through it quietly, hugging their belongings close to their chests, the strain of it showing in their restless eyes.

Along the wall of the building marked 'Immigration', a long, thick queue snakes out and disappears around the corner. At the front, as it gets to the entrance, it turns into a

heaving, shoving, tangled mess of bodies and bags, all trying to get in at the same time – *vhigoroni*! For a moment, it is the year 2000 again. My little brother, an uncle and I are trying to leave the National Sports Stadium in Harare where the World Cup qualifier between the Warriors and Bafana Bafana has ended in pandemonium. I'm trying to squeeze myself between hordes of people pushing and stumbling towards the exits and realise I have lost the ability to breathe. Someone is tugging at my arm, calling my name. I come to the realisation that I'm not at the stadium but frozen on the spot in front of the immigration building, telling myself to 'breathe', in English. The *vhigoroni* is happening in my head again, as has often happened since. The others are all staring at me in embarrassed consternation. I stride off to find the back of the queue, leaving them to catch up. No one asks if I'm ok and I'm grateful for it. I usually burst into tears if anybody does.

To survive a *vhigoroni*, you need brute determination, superhuman strength, and undignified and unashamed selfishness. I possess none of these qualities and am prone to episodes of forgetting how to breathe. I suspect my companions don't possess these qualities either. They don't look like they do. Back home, people practice, daily, in queues for cash, for fuel, for water, for bread and other necessities or in queues for transport to get home at the end of the day. The five of us have all been away from all that for too long. The jostling often leaves people bruised, seriously injured, separated from the clothes they were wearing and/or separated from their other belongings. Thirteen people died at the stadium in 2000. I can imagine myself telling someone else one day about how I spent days at the border waiting for the crowds to thin out.

It takes us more than three hours to get to the head of the 'queue'. The customs officers are taking their time — checking every single bag, confiscating goods and luggage, and demanding fines in US dollars. This we gather through the unsolicited announcements we get from those who have been cleared to go through and in their relief are generous with advice. 'They told me to eat all my Flings or pay import duty!' a woman says wiping her

face. 'The president banned them. Imagine that! The president banning Flings! He wants us to 'buy

Zimbabwe' they said. How can we buy Zimbabwe when there is nothing to buy in Zimbabwe? I tell you, if you have any food in your bags, you'd better start eating it now', she finishes with a guffaw. A man wearing three shirts and a heavy winter coat tells us, 'they can have it all, the thieves!' before striding off towards the bridge. He must have been forced to leave all his groceries and clothes, perhaps.

I can't stop myself imagining the people inside, chomping biltong and *Tennis* biscuits; scoffing baked beans, tinned *chakalaka* or *Black Cat* crunchy peanut butter with their fingers, and washing it down with *Oros* – some sort of enforced hotchpotch banquet of incongruous foods. I imagine this feasting going on long into the night. An involuntary shudder runs through me at the thought of still being here at nightfall. The sun sets like a lamp caught in a gust of wind here and then the darkness thickens so you can almost touch it. I silently pray that some people will pay the 'import duty'.

We are saved from having to do the jostling by the arrival of an important-looking man and what I assume to be his family – a woman and two teenage girls. Their eyes are hidden behind dark glasses. He's holding a leather document holder in one hand and dangling some keys in another. The woman and the girls look unruffled in their maxi summer dresses and flip-flops, in spite of the cool autumnal breeze. They are clearly not expecting to do any pushing and shoving — wrong clothes, wrong footwear. They head straight for the entrance without faltering. It is as if we weren't here. They must be used to melting their way through thick crowds like these, without having elbows thrust into their eyes.

Two men, obviously immigration officials by their distinct matching blue shirts, who all along had been lounging under a tree, chatting and laughing, suddenly jump up to attention. They had been oblivious to the bustle around them. They had not even intervened



when an argument between two men turned into a fistfight. A woman had left the queue to go to the toilet but when she returned a fellow queuer, a woman nursing a chubby baby, said she didn't remember her. Their menfolk, the nursing woman's husband (he kept shouting that his wife hadn't seen the woman before) and a man whose relationship to the other woman was unclear, had resolved it by throwing a few frenzied punches at each other. However, as soon as the officers see the man and his family approach, they both spring to action. One bounds up to the entrance, scattering people on either side as he does, shouting that if we don't form a neat queue none of us will be served.

‘Are you animals?’ he shouts. ‘All we ask is for you to act sensible and form a line. Why is that so difficult?’

The other marches down the length of the queue, scaring people into moving to the back. At the entrance, the heaving mess melts away and the queue thins out, allowing the family to stroll in, making no bodily contact with any of the horde. A scattering of grumbles and tongue clicking ensures but quickly dissipates into the breeze. No one says anything decipherable. If the important-looking man is someone really important, like a government official, saying anything could mean more serious trouble than several hours' delay at the border. Everyone knows this.

For the fifteen minutes that it takes to serve the man and his family, the two officers manage to keep the queue just outside the entrance, in a single file and moving along smoothly. During this lull, we make it inside. There's a humming sound in my head as if I've had too much coffee and I'm walking on air. I think I'm going to be sick. I start to tell myself to ‘breathe’ but Viola nudges me from behind.

Outside, the din erupts again as soon as the important people leave, but it sounds so far away. The five of us – a group of sullen and haggard-looking women, with very little to say to each other – have somehow managed to keep together. I wonder if the other four

resent our situation as much as I do but like me, realise how in our own individual ways we need each other – not so much for ‘safety in numbers’ but more for the complementarity of our survival skills. None of us has enough coping strategies on their own, not at this point in our lives anyway, for the challenges associated with the journey and what lies ahead.

I have also kept our passports and travel papers together. Mum had asked that if any explaining needed to be done, it would be better if I did it. ‘It will make things easier’ she said. I didn’t understand it then. When I had asked for everyone’s passports and papers at Park Station, in Johannesburg, it was as if they expected it. It is apparently not unusual. That is how *Malayitsha*, the cross-border taxi operators who help people cross the border illegally, manage to slip people without passports in, I have since learnt. One person takes all the passports in, somehow alerts the officer serving them that there is or are extra people travelling with the group, without passports. Money changes hands and the officers doing the headcount are also made aware. Everyone pretends that everything is as it should be. I have however decided not to hand all the passports at the same time. I’m not a *Malayitsha*. I push the niggling resentment back, clutch my growling stomach and approach the desk when someone shouts ‘next’.

‘Sihle Mufandaedza’, I say, simultaneously pointing to the coughing bundle on a bench behind me and handing the passport over.

The man behind the desk just extends his hand, his face devoid of any expression. He glances over at Sihle but when he turns back to me, his brow is knitted into deep furrows. He wants to know how I come to be accompanying a ‘corpse’ back home by myself. He says it as if I’m standing outside, not a few feet in front of him, drawing the attention of his colleagues, some of whom walk over to peer at me and to gawp at Sihle. Sihle is very ill and yes, almost dead. All sorts of illegal repatriations of the dead are possible. Stories are told of people concealing their dead relatives in suitcases or rolled up in carpets and declaring them as goods or brazenly sitting them up in cars or coach seats. I’m hoping it won’t come

to that. I think the immigration officer is hoping this turns out to be one of those he could recount at the pub with the introduction 'well, I thought I had seen it all...'

His questioning gaze travels from the *takkies* on my feet to the *doek* on my head twice. I shuffle my feet, from one to the other, the same way I used to do at assembly when the boarding mistress would walk down the rows of uniform-clad girls, checking our hair, ears, necks, fingers, and shoes – especially shoes. She had an obsession with clean, shiny shoes; I was an absent-minded child. I would shuffle and 'cleverly' buff my scuffed shoes on my socks on the back of my legs when I thought she wasn't looking.

'Where are your elders?' the man says.

There is no insult greater than the insinuation that you're behaving in a manner that requires your elders to be present to deal with things or as though you were brought up in a village or home without elders. To stop the spring that's already bubbling inside from gushing up to the surface as he examines Sihle's passport, lingering on each page as if it were a document detailing the secrets to immortality, I close my eyes and sing 'Peace Be Still', in my head, over and over. It stops me running off at the mouth. I try not to look like my head is thumping, my stomach is threatening to evacuate its meagre contents and my heart is thudding in my ears.

'You're an unaccompanied minor; it is not allowed.' He says the 'unaccompanied minor' in English enunciating each syllable with slow relish. I can tell he is not Ndebele from the way he pronounces 'unaccompanied' with a 'mba' sound: an irrelevant observation in this instance. A tight constriction is crawling up my throat. I remind myself to keep breathing. I'm not sure whether the 'it is not allowed' is official immigration regulation or just cultural disapproval. He's quoting 'unaccompanied minor' in English to make whatever decision he makes sound official. I don't say anything. I've been told that it's best not to argue. The troubles back home have made the immigration and customs officials very important people, much like the BSAP during Smith's time. You don't argue unless you're

personal friends with their boss or some other important person like a politician, from the right party.

The slight lift of the corner of his mouth could be a smile, a smirk or a question. It occurs to me that he might be thinking that I'm going to be his lucky case of the day and that I have been briefed and coached into not panicking and caving in prematurely and offering something too early. Maybe he thinks that silence is my delaying strategy. The truth is, I have no money to spare and hope that I won't have to offer any. Although I have cash in three currencies, just in case, Harare is a long way and between us, as far as I know, we have just enough to get us there. I just wait, avoiding eye contact.

'You people need to learn to do these things properly', he says sliding Sihle's passport back so that it almost drops off the desk and I have to let go of the other papers to catch it. He sounds angry when he says 'you people'. I feel very small, like the child he's assuming me to be. The man's clicking his tongue and shaking his head while I scramble to gather all the papers he's caused to scatter. I'm shaking all over from the effort needed to stop myself from telling him that he doesn't have the right to insult me. At another time, I would have. I would have demanded an explanation, asked him, 'what exactly do you mean by 'you people?'' I would also have pointed out that Sihle is not yet dead and that since I'm a returning resident, I can enter the country in whatever state and unaccompanied too if I so wished.

Not anymore. It would only cause trouble for everyone, like the time I annoyed the pastor at our church back home. My mother had to go to a different church for a few weeks and our family was put on the list of members who the congregation needed to remember in their daily prayers. That is usually reserved for people going through difficult times like illness, loss of a job or a crisis of faith.

I had got it into my head that it wasn't fair for him to keep referring to all human beings as 'Man' in his long-winded sermons. Every time he said something like 'Man cannot

live by bread alone' or any other such preacherly saying, I bristled with such suppressed impatience as could only be eased by singing the hymn 'Peace Be Still' over and over in my head until his voice died down, his hands stopped flapping, and the choir started singing. Then it didn't matter anymore, and I would stand up with everyone else clapping my hands, swaying and stomping my feet; letting the music take over. One particular Sunday however, the storm would not be still. I interrupted his 'it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter heaven' sermon with 'or woman, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich woman', I said. I kept shouting 'woman' enough times that my mother had to intervene. 'Some things are never meant to be said out loud, my child, and other things are alright to say but only at the right moment', she had said, a sad smile hovering about her lips. I was ten.

I don't have the ten thousand rand required to do an official repatriation of the deceased, which might become necessary if the man becomes annoyed and decides to delay us. I'm also not sure I'd have the strength to organise an illegal one. My only choice is to remain strong and not say anything. I have seen dead people before — grandma, my cousin Cynthia and the boy that drowned in the pool at school, but I had not had to deal with the bodies myself. I don't know what I'll do if Sihle didn't make it across the bridge. I need the man to put that stamp that says Sihle has officially entered Zimbabwe. If it happens then, Sihle will be my problem. That is why I gave him her passport first.

I realise when I hear tongues clicking behind me that while I've been crawling on the floor the man has walked away from the desk and disappeared into the inner office. There is no knowing when he will return. It happens a lot — officers just disappearing into the inner offices before they've finished serving and then casually reappearing as if they had pre-arranged it with the person they were serving. I can't move to another counter. That's not how it works, they tell me. It will be the same man all the way through, even if he were to take a lunch break before he finished serving me — that's how it works.

I try not to imagine what would have happened if the South African immigration official hadn't just waved us through. A young man, who had tried to start up a conversation with me on the coach on our way from Jo'burg, had warned that the South African chief immigration officer was a white man who was breathing fire. A friend had texted him from the border, he told me, with a hint of pride, hoping that I would be impressed. However, when we got to his post, the white man with the breath of fire was slouched in his chair, half-asleep, his fire-breath doused by the sheer numbers of people he had had to shout at, I guess. We must have looked a strange sight, not least because of our wretched appearance. Maria's incessant sobbing and Sihle's apparent, grave ill-health had already been drawing knowing glances that seemed to say 'we hope you make it across the bridge, in time.'

He'd not bothered to check if we had not overstayed our visas. We would then not only be liable to pay fines but would also have become 'undesirables' to be banned for a period of between one to five years. South Africans love to catch *overstayers*. I know it is important to have the right stamps in one's passport, always, but I'm not regretting the absence of a departure stamp at all if it would have come at the risk of ending up at Lindela. Everyone knows about the Lindela Detention Centre. I did some internet research before leaving Jo'burg, not wanting to rely entirely on the stories of fellow Zimbabweans.

After reading a few official sites that mentioned human rights, official documentation, and some statistics, I stumbled on a post by an 'eye witness', someone who had 'experienced the horrors first-hand'. It was entitled something like, 'Don't *Border-jump* the Zimbabwe/South Africa Border — You will die!' A section of it read:

Lindela is the repatriation centre where they take 'illegals', *dabulaps* 'border jumpers' or 'undesirables' to await deportation — only it can take between thirty to sixty days to be processed. Lindela has a reputation as a place of brutality, hunger, overcrowding, and disease: that reputation is well

earned. Many have died there. They keep you there for weeks on end to keep up the pretence of carrying out removals per international human rights law. After the thirty days, which they consider to be a suitable length of time to show respect for human rights and dignity, they bundle you into prison vans and drive you past the queues at border control, then across the bridge over the Limpopo. Once across, they dump you, with no water or food, in the hot, dry and dusty patch of meagre veldt that is No Man's Land. No Man's Land is so named because it is not worth anything to anyone except to the *gumagumas*, the gangs of criminals who make their living prying on 'border jumpers'.

I stopped reading then.

While people are usually keen to regale you with tales of how they negotiated themselves out of or down to a lower bribe at the border, what happens in No Man's Land always happened to the friend of a friend. The tales of rape, robbery and murder are whispered amongst people that live in the townships near the border but no one reports them to the authorities. Border jumpers don't report crimes to the police.

I'm relieved that the South African immigration officer had just waved us through although we now don't have exit stamps in our passports. His seeming goodwill has ensured that it will be impossible to get a visa if any of us ever decide come back to South Africa. We would have to either take our chances with the crocodiles and hippopotami in the Limpopo or with *Malayitsha*. *Malayitsha* are not out and out thugs, like *gumagumas*. They are in the business of knowing the people that should be known and making sure that the people that should be known are kept happy. This and the art of offering a bribe without appearing to, is what *Malayitsha* need so that their minibuses can cross the border with the minimum of fuss. However, the fact that they have the desired 'people skills' does not mean that they are less dangerous, they are just a different kind of dangerous. They have been

known to demand further payment once across the bridge on the Zimbabwe side and leave those who can't afford the unplanned fare increase behind or they 'kidnap' passengers, particularly first-timers once on the South African side and refuse to let them go until their relatives send more money.

It's been such a long day since the young man tried to warn us about the South African immigration officer with the fire breath, that in the euphoria at being waved through, I had not prepared for the Zimbabwe side. I look around, hoping one of the other four comes over to offer whatever support. Nothing. I wait at the counter, not wanting to sit down in case it is the wrong thing to do. Judging by the length of time he's been gone, the man has probably decided to take a break. I use the time to try and steady my breathing and arrange our papers in the order I will present them.

He strolls back in after what seems to be the better part of an hour, stopping at various desks handing out drinks, sandwiches and receipts and counting out change.

I decide to give him Maria's papers next although Maria has not stopped crying since she received the news of her husband's being found alive. 'He's at Chikurubhi', the text had said. Chikurubhi is the maximum-security prison in Harare, reserved for the worst of the worst – hardened criminals and enemies of the state. There are no good things to be said about Chikurubhi and I would rather not know which category of prisoner Maria's husband is so I have not tried to console her. Every time she tries to say something she breaks down, sobbing. She's sitting on the same bench as Sihle, surrounded by all our bags, sniffing softly into the ends of her soggy *doek*.

The officer doesn't seem to be concerned about the pace at which things are going. He doesn't mind it. The slower the process goes, the more desperate people will get. When people, especially those travelling with children or those in a race to reach the land of their ancestors before they die get desperate, they are more willing to do whatever is necessary.



I'm aware that the immigration officers are good at helping most situations and cases towards the 'desperate' category. At one end of the room, a young woman has been told that because she doesn't have a passport, she cannot just walk back into Zimbabwe. I suspect that that decision has less to do with her documents than it does with her buxom chest and curvy body and the fact that she is travelling alone.

'Maria Nyoni', I say as I give her papers a last quick leaf though. I'm trying to determine when Maria had left the country. She has an expired single-journey, emergency travel document in a plastic wallet. The plastic wallet is holding the paper together in place. It looks like it had been through a washing machine and then been gnawed at by rats. This wallet is amongst other pieces of paper and documents that I haven't had the chance to check whether they are part of the travel documents. I'm trying hard not to give in to the urge to just let go and join Maria in the sobbing that I just hand over the whole wad of papers. He scans every single page, including personal letters, hospital appointments, unpaid bills, and even the receipts. My stomach is still churning. I feel naked even though the papers are not mine. At least, she has the travel document so presumably can walk back into the country, I tell myself.

My heart is pounding so loudly, and I'm grinding my teeth so hard that his words are scattering like chaff in *Nyamavhuvhu* winds. I steady myself against the counter and take a deep breath because I can feel my stomach plummeting towards the bottom of my *takkies*. *Focus!* I tell myself

'Some people think they can just cross borders and go about as they please, without the right papers. This woman could be Malawian or Zambian or any other alien. How do I know she is Zimbabwean, he? We can't just allow people to come and go as they please'. He's addressing these remarks to his colleague at the next desk. I clutch my stomach tightly, with both arms, maintaining contact with the counter for balance. Hot, stinging tears are beginning to form so I will them away, blinking rapidly.

He turns to me with a pained expression on his face. 'This woman is an undocumented immigrant', he says as if he is addressing a toddler. 'She could be a South African, trying to enter the country illegally.' I'm sure even he doesn't believe this.

*Just smile and say something polite.*

'I'm sorry', I say. 'She's going back home. We're going back home. Her husband's...'

'Does she have an I.D?'

I don't answer. The Zimbabwe bird insignia is still visible on Maria's tattered travel document.

Maria fumbles in her handbag and produces the small, grey, square, metal plaque that confirms she's Zimbabwean. My hand is shaking as I hand it to him.

'Ok', he says, looking equally displeased.

'You need to sort your papers out before you decide to go crossing borders again. This is not like crossing the river in your village to go to the next village for a spot of gossip with your friends, ok. This is an International border!'

Again, I detect the insult but I mumble an apology. As he hands the whole lot back, I concentrate on making sure no papers escape my grip again. The ID falls to the floor but I leave it there. I sense the vulgar curiosity of his gaze on my hands as I shuffle the wad of passports while holding Maria's paper under one armpit. My ears feel hot. My stomach is growling even louder.

When I turn to point at Viola, she's standing behind Sihle, pretending to fish for something in her bag, not even looking up when I say 'Viola Ncube, 13th March 2010'. Another wave of resentment and regret sweeps over me. I feel like pouncing and jerking her

head back to force her to look up. I don't know if these names that I'm reeling off to the immigration man are their real names. Many people change their names when they get to South Africa. My brother changed his to Teboho for his fake South African papers.

'It means we are thankful', he had told me in a nonchalant voice. We were sitting on the bed in his room in a flat in Hillbrow, surrounded by everything he had given up his name for: in one corner, a two-plate electric hob on a tea trolley whose bottom shelf was covered by cream lace and served as a pantry; next to it, a huge, orange, plastic bowl with all his bits of crockery in it; a pile of neatly folded clothes on a solitary chair just behind the door and a sparkling, silver 62-inch Samsung television hanging on the wall; facing the bed. At least, it's a name that doesn't attract too much attention, is all I could think. Some people choose names whose nuanced or distinctive pronunciations are too difficult for their unpractised tongues to execute, making it uncomfortable to witness when they have to give their names in official situations. I can only hope that the names match the papers and the pictures in the home office database. I don't really know any of them; they are my mother's friends. I met all of them for the first time at Park Station the previous day. Viola has mostly kept to herself — taciturn and private. I know she knows Maria from back in Harare. The three of them: Mum, Maria and Viola were at university together, yet she and Maria have not said a word to each other beyond the initial greeting at Park Station.

'This one will have to bring her own papers. She can speak for herself, can't she?' the man says motioning to Viola and handing the papers back. I don't like the way his eyes linger on my chest then work their way onto Viola's. He must be working out whether I'm worth creating a complication for or to stick with Viola who is less wretched-looking. From the little mum told me of Viola, she is the best placed to cope with whatever the man has in store for her, I reason to myself. She had been a police commissioner before fleeing to South Africa in 2008. Some people said she left because she could not stand by and watch the police brutality, the beatings, rape and corruption while others thought that she only left because of the poor pay and yet others thought that she had embezzled millions of

government money. Either way, her reasons for returning, and at this moment, are just as obscure.

I put Viola's papers to the bottom of the pile and turn to point at Tanatswa. I catch my breath. She is by the doorway, trying to push and squeeze her way out of the building breathing as though she has just completed a marathon, and for a moment I think she is going to be sick. Looking at her pathetic attempt, I wonder how any of us would have made it through the *vhigoroni*. She is pregnant. It is obvious even though she has tried to hide it under a poncho. She has a husband back home who she hasn't seen in years. I don't know where in Harare she is going. I hope that we will all go our separate ways as soon as we get off at Rotten Row. I'm pleased that Mum's other friend, Thandi, hadn't turned up at Park Station. Who knows what her story would have been. Mum had said Thandi needed to leave South Africa and never return. I wonder whether she murdered someone. It would complete the picture perfectly, I think to myself. I'm being uncharitable but I'm past caring. I hand Tanatswa's passport over to the man and start towards the door mumbling an apology, but he raises his hand to stop me and just stamps it, shaking his head.

I give him my passport and a small smile. He doesn't smile back. He takes a long time, checking every page, occasionally looking me up and down, making me shuffle my feet again. I follow his every movement waiting for that lift of the hand. I almost forget to breathe. When it finally happens, the thud of the stamp as it lands on paper makes me jump. My legs start to fold over so I hold on to the counter with one hand and gather my papers with the other. He must have decided he couldn't get anything out of me.

*Ok, just walk away.*

I hand Viola her papers and head for the door. I feel a tinge of guilt that I'm leaving her to deal with the man alone but I can feel my bowels loosening and I have an overwhelming need to vomit. I stumble towards the door already adding this to the growing list of things I will never forgive my dead mother for.



## **Thandi**

‘Her name is Thandi’, Mum said, tugging at a plastic storage box from under a table. Her efforts were being hampered by the fact that the box was wider than the base of the table. I simply stared at her. She soon realised that she needed to lift the table off the box. It was a big orange box with a black lid, the kind you buy from Builder’s Warehouse on a Saturday morning intending to organise all your *stuff* into separate containers and to label them, so you know what’s in them the next time you look. Mum must have bought the box intending to do just that. The result was, however, no different to when she didn’t have the box. She had just tossed everything that had been in different drawers, bags and cardboard boxes into this one plastic box, without any due consideration.

‘It’s such an elegant name, isn’t it? she continued, ignoring the beads of sweat that had begun to trail down her forehead.

‘Mmmm...’, I muttered from across the room where I stood watching her efforts.

‘I’ve always thought so, anyway’, she added, perhaps sensing the non-committal tone of my voice.

‘I guess so’, I replied. I wasn’t going to commit to anything before I knew where this was leading. I knew Mum too well.

By pushing and pulling, she finally managed to get the box close enough to the sofa so she could sit down. She started rummaging through it, fishing things out and placing them on the floor, next to the box. There were bits of paper, old newspaper cuttings, hairpins, pens, paint brushes and anything else she wasn’t currently using and could fit into the box. She was looking for a photograph that she remembered putting in there together with her other important documents, she said.

I offered to help but she carried on as if she hadn't heard me. I pulled a stool out from behind the wardrobe and sat down, relieved.

'I had it on the list of baby names for you, you know'.

She was trying to do it again, trying to get me to ask questions but 'mmmm', was my only response.

The pile of papers and the other bric-a-brac she was taking out of the box was growing into an unsteady stack on the floor.

'I think you should...', I started to say but I changed my mind and made a small noise in my throat instead. I was going to suggest that it might be more useful for her to start her packing and that I could find Thandi without the photograph, but I decided this would be a mistake. Every time I tried to talk about packing, she became sulky or overly cheery and unpredictable. The last time I tried we ended up at The Zone, in Rosebank, eating gelato ice-cream at midnight of a cold and rainy night. I wondered if she would do a really Mum thing and take just her passport.

She didn't even look up from her rummaging. I knew she'd heard me.

'There is something ethereal about it, don't you think?' she gave me a quick glance.

I was used to Mum's way of describing places, events and especially people in a way that didn't quite match with the reality. There was the time she was going to take us on a *once-in-a-lifetime adventure to one of Africa's most amazing festivals* in Grahamstown. Only it took us a twelve-hour bus ride, a long delay at the border and another ten-hour ride, on the back of a *bakkie*, from Johannesburg to Grahamstown. It was the middle of a biting cold *Karoo* winter.

For years after, she had talked about it as if we went on a fabulous trip on the Blue Train and arrived in Grahamstown to a week of fantastic performances and

other exciting cultural experiences. She chose not to remember that we were so tired when we got there that we spent the following two days half-asleep then had to do the journey, all over again, to get back home. We didn't see a single performance.

She had even convinced herself that her life, since the move to Johannesburg, was more exciting and glamorous than the one-roomed existence she shared with two other people. She lived with a Mozambican artist whose paintings and sculptures, in all stages of completion, took up most of the space in the section that doubled as the living room and his bedroom. Their fellow flatmate was a young Malawian woman whose random, fervent, sobbing prayers sounded increasingly desperate every time I visited and by all accounts and appearances, kept Mum awake most nights. My weekend visits oftentimes became silent affairs, with a lot of mummery. Mum didn't want us to disturb the young woman's prayer sessions. We had to sit in silence when she was praying, as a show of respect. I think my annoyance at having to resort to gestures amused Mum to no end.

I implored her, many times, to look for another place but she assured me that *communal living* was increasingly becoming very fashionable and that she was comfortable where she was. Using words that were best suited for a different existence was Mum's way of *loving the world*. I was sure she knew that three impoverished immigrants sharing a small, cellular room divided by two pieces of rectangular African-print cloth with mismatched patterns did not quite equate to 'communal living' of the sort advertised in *South African Garden and Home*. I spent many Sunday afternoons, sitting in Mum's part of the room, just looking at the cloth partition and battling boredom and self-pity. I couldn't stop my eyes tracing and becoming distracted by the pattern of orange-and-brown calabashes running diagonally across the light-green cloth to where they met the black, almost-heart-



shapes patterns of the blue cloth and thinking that, with a little realignment, the hearts could be made to appear as though they were hovering or pouring into the calabashes and that, somehow, this would give the whole garish combination a much better finish. Mum's *charming little place* was nothing more than a squat in an ugly, high-rise block of flats on the outskirts of Yeovil. Each section or 'room' couldn't have been more than four square metres.

An overwhelming sadness always enveloped me, sitting amongst mum's possessions, surrounded by the Mozambican man's artwork, listening to the woman sobbing a prayer. The worst part was watching Mum's out of place cheerfulness.

The pile on the floor was getting higher, and starting to totter like blocks in a game of *jenga*. I wished I could give in to my mother's kind of happiness. It would make everything easier. I would just agree that Thandi was an *ethereal* name, that I would have loved the name and that it would probably have made a difference. I would also not care that Mum could not allow herself a moment of uneasiness.

I didn't particularly think anything of the name except that it was perhaps a bit too common. Thandi, was one of those Ndebele names, much like Mandla or Themba, given to children by parents who lacked creativity because it was the first name that came to mind. For many parents, it was a safe choice, unburdened with political or religious connotations. I knew so many people called Thandiwe, Nothando, Thandeka, Thandekile or Thandanani that the joke about throwing an orange, at random, into a crowd seemed quite possible if the aim were to hit a person named Thandi.

'It would have been a great name for you', she was still ruffling through the jumble of things in the plastic box.

I just wanted her to be quiet, not to say anything at all and to find the photograph.

‘You’ll know it’s her when you see her, you’ll see’, she said looking up, attempting a smile. I looked away. I wanted her to be her normal, confident and unsmiling self again.

A long silence followed. It was only punctuated by the chanting of the young woman on the other side of the divide, and the rumble of traffic outside. I listened to the silence, tracing the patterns on the dividing cloths with my eyes; Mum continued to rifle in the box and the pile continued to rise. It was a beautiful, sunny afternoon. I had to do something to stop the slow descent into resentful detachment. I rose from the stool and started to pace back and forth along the only free space, just in front of Mum.

Just as I was going to tell her to give up, and that I could just accost all *beautiful* women that came into Park Station and ask their names, she found it – slightly creased and yellowed, and the images beginning to fade.

‘See, I told you’, she said, forgetting herself and beaming a full toothy grin. In the excitement, she leapt to her feet, knocking the whole pile of oddments and papers over and scattering them across the floor.

‘See, isn’t she the most elegant woman? Thandi was never meant for the townships.’ I had never heard her speak with so much pride. It was as if she were somehow personally responsible for this *elegance*. After the initial shock at her unbridled delight she had come to a stop amidst the chaos, where she stood, intently studying the photograph. She started to gently trace the outline of the images with

her fingers until she sensed my eyes on her. The tenderness then left the movement and it turned into a rub that threatened to scratch the already fading images.

‘I’ve never ...’ she started to say, but I stopped her before she could finish.

‘Mum, please’, I was pleading, willing her to stop. I wanted her to admit that she was worried about her impending journey and about me going home without her. I wondered why she wouldn’t acknowledge that things had not turned out the way we would have both wanted or why she didn’t realise that, maybe for once, we didn’t have to be strong. Why were we not like other Zimbabweans? We should have been happy. Here we were, a long way away – a lifetime away from the police beatings, the food shortages, the electricity and water cuts, the long queues at the bank, but here we were, clutching, at least I was clutching at something that would make things seem better.

I took a step towards Mum and almost snatched the photograph, but she was holding on tighter than I thought. She wanted us to look at it together, the way we used to look through the family album, sitting next to each other on the sofa back home. I moved next to her anyway, just not so close that our shoulders or heads collided. This was not the family album and we weren’t back home.

The woman was wearing a flowing, floral, red dress and white, strappy, high-heeled sandals. She was sitting on a stool, in front of a man and Mum, clutching a small handbag, that was resting on her lap, with both hands. The man was standing with his left hand resting on the woman’s shoulder and his right arm around mum’s waist. Mum’s left hand was resting on the woman’s thigh. I had never seen the man before either. He was lithe and handsome and I knew he wasn’t my father. Nobody could say I looked like Mum but something about this man told me he wasn’t my father.

There was no indication of where the photograph was taken or when. The plain blue background suggested a photography studio backdrop. They all looked so young, in their early twenties, I thought. I wondered why the woman was laughing, staring directly into the lens and flashing a row of pearly white teeth with a gap in the upper row. She was pretty, silken voluptuous lips, smooth, soft skin, the colour of peanut butter which stretched over a delicate oval face, framed by a jet-black afro. The camera light had caught the glint of tears in her eyes. The man had a serious look about him, a scholarly look – probably put-on in mock defiance to whatever was making the woman laugh. Mum was Mum – intense eyes, furrowed brow and thin lips pressed together firmly – almost smiling but not. Smiling didn't come easily to Mum, the result of a habit practised from childhood. Even when she was in her state of affected happiness, her smiles didn't reach the eyes and her laughter too breezy. Her Methodist minister father was so against any show of gaiety and indecent baring of teeth that Mum had mastered internalising her mirth, to an art. As a result, those who didn't know her well would not know that Mum rarely really smiled or laughed.

It didn't look like she was going to explain the circumstances in which the photograph was taken; she didn't. I guessed I would never know. I couldn't ask because a familiar, tight constriction was crawling up my throat.

There was something about Mum and her past which filled me, all at once, with excitement, curiosity and unease. Every time something new came to light – a long-lost friend or acquaintance or when I discovered she had been to a place that I didn't know about, I always found myself caught between wishing I didn't know and wanting to know everything. She could slip life-changing details, for me at least, into the most innocuous conversations and then move on as if nothing had happened.

Once, while talking about the abundant fruit choices in South African supermarkets, she casually said ‘I saw this boy buying fruit at a market in *Gjakova* once’, as if it was the most usual thing to have done. ‘*Gjakova*? Where? When? Why? But because she never told full stories, I had come to a sort of resentful non-intrusion. I had decided that if she wanted to tell me, she’d have to do it properly – from the beginning to how she came to be infected with HIV although I wasn’t sure that I would be surprised if she said ‘like that time the gorilla bit me and I discovered I was HIV positive’.

I didn’t think it was fair of her to leave it to me to put the scattered and splintered snippets together into a complete image or to expect me to wait for the missing details of our lives to be told in the words and at a time she chose. It left too many possibilities tumbling through my mind.

‘It all gets so mixed up sometimes: faces, places, times...’ she was saying, with a faraway look. I didn’t say anything.

‘Memories..., that’s all we have left’, she said, narrowing her eyes in concentration, trying to clear the fog.

My eyes were drawn to the laughing woman and the scholar. They looked like they were suited to each other – her in the red dress and him in a light blue safari suit. Mum was wearing a dirty-brown, bell-bottom jumpsuit that reminded me of pictures of female guerrilla fighters in our school history textbooks. She was saying something about how people have to do what they have to do but her words were coming to me in fragments. I was trying hard to slow my breathing down and to stop trying to make the heart-shapes of the cloth pour into the calabashes.

‘You wouldn’t have known it then’, she was saying.

‘Known what?’ I forced myself to ask.

Here is what Mum told me.

‘I had completely the wrong expectation, you know’, she said.

I said I didn’t know but she continued anyway.

‘My only other encounter had been with MaSibanda, the shebeen queen, you know’.

I knew of MaSibanda. Mum had told me the story of how MaSibanda almost bled to death from a miscarriage because no one would help her and how Mum and her friends had to run to the clinic to tell the nurses about the pool of blood gushing from between her legs.

MaSibanda’s sexual exploits were legendary. People in the township seemed to know everything so it was a well-known fact that MaSibanda slept with everyone’s fathers and made them spend their wages on her so that they had noisy rows with their wives, and their children went to school without shoes.

‘But Thandi was different – classy and unaffectedly beautiful’ mum continued.

I wasn’t sure I wanted to hear the rest of the story.

She told me how when she first saw her, Thandi was wearing a floral skirt that reached just above the knees and a sleeveless viscose light blue blouse that followed the curves of her full figure. Mum had been watching from behind the kitchen window wondering whether she should do something – call the police maybe.

‘The crowd was getting bigger outside. News travels fast in a township.’

‘Mum, please’, I pleaded. I didn’t want her to embark on one of her township tales. They always had multiple plots and a niggling anxiety was beginning to make me restless.

‘I remember it as if it were yesterday’, she said. ‘The sun had risen leisurely as if to give the inhabitants of the sprawling township time to adjust to the heat; and to allow Thandi to get away, to get back to her normal daytime life, doing whatever she did during the hours of daylight – selling vegetables at the market, maybe. But just as the first rays of the sun touched the corrugated iron roofs, the township sprung to life as if on cue. The man she’d spent the night with, realising that they had overslept opened the door and pushed her out and locked himself in, but not before causing such a din as to attract the whole neighbourhood.’

This was a familiar tale. I had always thought if I needed to make money that way, I would ask for payment upfront. Township people bored by the routine of their lives have a knack for predicting which situations have the potential to turn into something worth witnessing. This had turned out to be one of those – a woman of the night, caught, out in the open in the glare of the sunlight on the wrong side of daybreak. There was no mistaking what had happened. It was generally agreed amongst township folk that prostitutes abound in the township, that a lot of men paid for sex and that in most cases the prostitutes were the same women who sold tomatoes by the roadside during the day but importantly that for them to be seen during the day still in their alternative jobs ‘attire was a bad omen.’

Mum said she saw Thandi’s lips move and heard the crowd roar with laughter. Someone later told her that Thandi had said that she was waiting to be paid, that she was not going anywhere until the man paid up.’

‘I still don’t know her real name, Thandi is the name gave her because it was befitting, and because when I think of her, like I do so often, I don’t want her to be just a street woman for whom dawn came too early and who provided a few hours’ entertainment for the people of the township. She’s been through a lot; please help her get back home as one last favour, to me. She’s been good to me’, mum said this in a voice that indicated that that was all she had decided to tell me. She handed me the picture, avoiding my eyes.

I closed my eyes.

It was happening again – this thing with Mum starting things and leaving them unfinished. She must have promised Thandi that she was going to help her get home and now she was leaving it to me to fulfil that promise. She had always been like that, Mum. We once lived in a house where one of the living room walls was half a purple ruddy colour and the other, a limy green. She had started the redecorating project with her usual manic gusto – buying a to-do list pad, listing all that was required, including overalls and bandanas for our hair then driving the little Ford Cortina to Dulux Paints on Highfield road in Southerton to buy all the different size brushes, roller brushes, even paint pans and step ladders. She was going to paint the living room in pretty, luxurious colours – brighten it up a bit. The enthusiasm had only lasted two days but it wasn’t enough to finish decorating all the walls. There was also the time she took on an editing assignment for a novel and lost me a whole summer and a possibility of falling in love. She had cleared a space for herself in the living room, bought a small office desk and installed her laptop on it – her workspace. By the end of the third day she had proclaimed that never before had she read such an interesting tale yet so appallingly marred by bad grammar, errant



punctuation and offensive spelling that she needed help to save it. It was a *poignant* tale that needed to be told, she said. She bought a second desk from the auction floor at Hammers and Tongues. I had planned to spend the summer falling in love with a boy my brother knew. I've forgotten his name. It was an adjective – Innocent, I think, and I could have fallen in love with his toothy smile and bushy afro had we not spent the whole of the summer with our heads buried in mum's editing project.

She was smiling too much, looking very happy as she said, 'I could have done it myself but you know I can't. Thandi will be a gem, you'll see.'

I knew then I would never see mum again.' I knew the same way I knew when her sister, aunt Chiedza was going to die. They sat planning a shopping trip one afternoon but I knew then and had to sing 'Peace be Still' almost audibly to stop myself from busting into the room and shouting 'a funeral...a funeral, not a bloody shopping trip!'

'You will recognise her straight away', Mum was saying. 'She will be the most beautiful woman at Park Station.'

I decided it was time to leave, wondering why it was difficult for me to remember happy times. Sure, there had been happy times. I didn't remember our lives having been miserable, but as I gave Mum a hug for the last time, I couldn't remember when we had been truly happy.

I scanned the faces of all the women as they came into Park Station, having secured a seat on a bench near the main entrance hours before; none were as striking as Thandi. She hadn't turned up. She wasn't coming home with us after all.

## Dreaming

The house, like so many in Nancefield Township, is one of those whose architecture was determined by how far the bricks would go. The bricks didn't go very far. During punishing summer months, it gets incredibly hot indoors. The low and flat corrugated-iron roof absorbs all the heat and hoards it, just at head level, making it difficult to think straight or engage in meaningful conversations indoors. The roof crackles so much that it sounds like a steady, light drizzle is beating a soft rhythm on it. The only respite is at night or in the winter months when the corrugated iron roof makes it cold, too cold to be indoors.

It's not surprising then that, throughout the year, a lot of people with similar houses, which is most people, spend their days outside, waiting for the rain, watching out for any signs of trouble or just enjoying the optimism exuded by those who leave their houses and set up their vegetable, cigarette, or sweet stalls or open up their *Spaza shops* – carrying on regardless. The indoors seems to magnify the oppressive heat or the biting cold, but there is also an obsession amongst some people, a vague fear that comes with not being certain what's going on in the outside world, a fear that the world is full of evil and that should evil decide to visit them – they need to see it approaching. There are also other people who believe that something life-changing might happen outside while they are indoors. As a result, most people live outside in all seasons, only going indoors at night, to sleep.

But Tanatswa doesn't. She will brave the heat and the cold – sitting or lying on the cool concrete floor during the summer months and *layering-up* in winter. She is going to spend the day inside as usual, even when the girl comes, she decides.

She opens the windows, at least. There is no sign of a cloud in the sky, no breath of air stirring, and the sun is directly overhead. Days like this seem to add to the dejection – the sun, too hot too quickly, the breeze far too weak and the rains way too late. The simple pleasures that should come at no cost seem to be snatched away by the savage heat and the sheer drudgery of life.

The two women sit in deep silence.

The older one sits in an armchair, her eyes trained on the dusty floor, and her face empty of emotion. She is knitting a pattern with her fingers and some imaginary thread. She keeps shifting in the chair as if in search of a more comfortable spot. It's not possible to tell if she's nervous, bored or just too hot. Her twinkling eyes say she is younger than her care-worn face suggests. Not more than fifty, the younger one decides.

The younger is perched on the windowsill, arms crossed over her chest, watching the older woman and trying to breathe more evenly. She knows that the crossed-arms-waiting is not helpful but thinks the relaxed lounging, particularly at the windowsill, would be worse. There is a box next to the armchair which she thinks she could sit on. She wishes she had worn something different; the blue polyester shirt is damp and clinging tightly to her torso and the black trousers are too tight. She's uncomfortably clammy and in desperate need to undo the trouser clasp.

It isn't meant to be this hard, the younger woman is thinking. She has remembered to be respectful, and to allow the other woman to speak comfortably without any unnecessary interruptions. An uneasiness seems to make casual conversation cumbersome and inappropriate so neither woman has said anything

after the initial greeting – the briefest of smiles, some mumbling and a firm handshake.

The younger woman is thinking about the fragment of a poem she had found while packing her mother's things. Her mother had always taken the trunk she left home with when she left that last time, everywhere. She had it in Harare in the house on the main road; she had it in the house by the lake in *Zomba*; and had brought it with her to Johannesburg. The trunk was too full and wouldn't close. She had to unpack all the papers and files and other things, and repack all of them into the same trunk again. It seemed to work with the clothes before. She took the books out first. They needed to be at the bottom. As she lifted the first one out, a piece of paper fell to the floor. She picked it up and read:

*I will keep broken things:*

*In my house there remains an honoured shelf on  
which I will keep broken things.*

*Their beauty is they need not ever be "fixed."*

*I will keep your wild free laughter  
though it is now missing its reassuring,  
graceful hinge.*

*I will keep broken things<sup>1</sup>*

She wants to know the rest of it. She makes a note in her notebook reminding herself to find the rest of it.

After a few minutes, the younger woman moves towards the corner of the room to her bag and starts to put the notebook away. There are other things that need

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<sup>1</sup> Alice Walker, 'I will keep broken things'

to be done before she can leave. She could go back and finish the packing, give the chair and the pot plants away and take the rubbish out. She is leaving the keys with a neighbour for her landlord. She has already bought a one-way ticket for herself and, if this woman is travelling with her, then she will need to add buying another ticket to her to-do list.

The older woman looks up and watches in silence. She had come to this place to start anew. It was not home but she loved her house with the low, flat roof and the mornings. Mornings were always the best part of the day. She could imagine the colour without see anything – the women’s colourful Zambia wrappers, the fruit in their baskets, the two-wheel pushcarts with funny names scrawled on the sides with bright paint, the children’s grey school uniforms. She knew all this was happening around her and didn’t need to see it. She could hear the beat of a Kwaito song from her neighbour’s house. And everyone spoke Shona or Ndebele. Nancefield is where every Zimbabwean who crossed the border by *Dabulap* ended up, too scared to venture further towards Johannesburg without official documentation.

‘I’m not too sure what is supposed to happen now’, she says with no discernible emotion.

The younger woman stops tugging at the straps of her bag and sits back down.

‘It was different to what I thought. I didn’t feel anything. He just lay there. There was no blood at first.’

The younger woman doesn’t say anything.

The older woman starts to speak more hurriedly, in a monotonous drone. ‘We had something. He loved me. I would have learnt to love him, with time. I just did it – a quick first stab in the side, deep where there are no bones. I let him bleed out. I

think I knew all along that I was going to do it. The idea came to me the day I saw the man in the field with the girl. I knew then I wanted to make a man feel the terror that women feel when they know that bad things are about to happen to them. He didn't make a noise. I had watched my mother slaughter chickens before and expected some noise or movement. There was no struggling or flapping about, he just slumped and died with a vacant look in his eyes.

The young woman does not write anything in her notebook. She is thinking about the doll with the missing limbs. The bone man 'Mabhonzo' used to wheel his cycle through the township once every week, on a Thursday. The children, meant to be at school doing gardening or science projects, spent afternoons scouring the dusty streets for bones. They could also sell empty glass bottles but that depended on someone having had a beer or a soft drink. It was easier to find bones.

It was on one such afternoon that she first found the doll. It was a white doll with flowing blonde hair and eyes that closed shut when you tilted it. Scary thing it was but she was drawn to it. It had on a silky maroon mini dress with a pink bow in the front. It was rather like she imagined the ghosts looked like – white women with blonde hair. Black people don't become ghosts; they became evil spirits. Was she a collector of broken things, like her Mum?

'Let me start at the beginning', the older woman says, jolting her out of her reverie.

'My real name is not Anna', she says, sitting forward in the chair and folding both feet under it. The younger woman now sits on the box, her pen hovering over a still clean page.

‘Anna is my Christian name, you see. Father Petrus, at the mission where I went to school, gave it me when I was baptised. My real name is Tanatswa. That’s the name my father gave me when I was born. You can call me Tanatswa if you like. Anna is for very official situations, with white people or in offices’.

The younger woman thinks she can hear a goat bleating somewhere out on the street, except this is the city and people are not allowed to keep goats. Tanatswa, (the younger woman has decided she will call her Tanatswa), is still speaking. She speaks quick Shona. She’s *Manyika*, from the east. The younger woman wants to ask why Tanatswa would go back home, knowing that they will arrest her and most certainly give her the death penalty. She wants to know how Tanatswa knew her mother but Tanatswa is still speaking, quickly, hardly stopping to breathe. The younger woman begins to feel dizzy, lightheaded like she is floating on a warm, fluffy cloud, unable to defy gravity. Her last thought is that she should have worn a loose-fitting, cotton dress.

## Some kind of love

She saw him again. A fleeting glance like before. He was wearing the same scuffed leather jacket. There was something in the way one of his shoulders hung lopsided so that his jacket appeared uneven at the elasticated hem, which gave him a gentleness negated by his hulking size, his manly angry face and unruly, woolly beard. Together with the khaki *sportie* on his head, the faded, blue jeans and the white *takkies*, he looked artistic – perfect to play *Shaka Zulu* in a film despite the droop in the shoulder, she thought. She was sure she had seen him, known him before. Although it had been years since she left home, she often saw bits of the people she knew back home on other people's faces — her aunt's soft brown eyes on the cigarette seller, her best friend's cheeky smile on the little brat next door. But with him, it was different.

The first time, she saw him, she almost greeted him. He looked so familiar, – like a long lost relative, an old school friend or maybe even a celebrity. He was dark, very dark and handsome, with mesmerizingly big eyes, bushy, shapely brows and full lips. There were not just bits of him that reminded her of other people, like the brat's smile. His was an unforgettable face, yet she couldn't place it.

It bothered her for days. Her memories were usually perfect; each one possessing an intense clarity, with every moment rendered in sound and colour, even the ones meant for forgetting. Her dreams were even more vivid.

She had searched through all the chapters in her life and decided that despite the niggling conviction that she knew him more personally, she had probably actually just seen him on TV.



She was sitting in the *Nando's* at Ghandi Square across the street from her office on Rissik Street, trying to organise her handbag. She was getting better at it – taking her jacket off first, then the scarf, before sitting down to empty the contents onto the table. She would then carefully repack everything again, making sure to discard any rubbish — sweet wrappers, bits of unfinished chocolate bars, receipts and other bits of paper she didn't remember having. She would place the useful stuff back in, neatly so nothing was out of place – the diary against the back inner pocket, the coins in a little wallet in the side the inner pocket, the pens inside the penholders and the wallet in the main compartment, next to the diary. She would then order a coffee and sit watching the street outside.

It was when she stood up to go and throw the rubbish into the bin that she caught sight of him again. He was crossing the street towards the entrance. Her heart quickened as she watched his sure-footed stride. When he got to the entrance, he, however, turned left to walk down the pavement. He was going to disappear again, like before but then he turned his head. He must have sensed her watching him. As he did, their eyes met – for the briefest of moments. He did a double take and came to a sudden stop. He stepped back towards the entrance – a smile working its way from his lips, across the deep, craggy ridges on his cheeks until it reached the eyes.

Then it happened. In that moment when he flashed his white teeth, she remembered! It was as though they had woken from the same dream, at the same time. His stare went dead cold. She stood rooted to the spot, unable to move.

It had been a breezy evening in February in 2008. She was walking home from work, past *Nehanda's* tree on Josiah Tongogara Avenue, letting herself be hypnotised by the pongy smell of the Jacaranda flowers carpeting the path. The jeep had come to a sudden stop just in front of her, making her jump. She remembered

the shouts, the taunts, and being pushed roughly into the back. There were other people there. A girl, not more than twelve, two men huddled together and two women carrying bibles. They didn't look up when she came in. She never found out what had become of the others. But the man with the famous-face look was there. He was there asking questions with no answers – did she not know that women were not to walk unaccompanied in the Avenues? Did she not know that loitering for purposes of prostitution was a crime? Was she coming from a secret meeting? Why was she not at home cooking for her husband and children like all other respectful mothers and wives? Was she coming from campaigning for the opposition? It was that dizzying smile he kept fixed on his face while he forced a rough object into her that had survived, deeply buried under the other faces.

She had almost added that encounter to the other memories one should let go, reminding herself as she often did, that some things are best left forgotten. She could make a new life for herself here. She could bury the things that needed burying here, in Jozi: others had done it. They would call her alien, immigrant, refugee, *kwerekwere* but she would get a job and make new friends. She could be a house maid. A live-in. It's safer, she wouldn't meet a lot of people from back home. First, she would convince the white madam that she wasn't an insolent, town black person. She would be ok if the madam thought she was a country bumpkin, uneducated and eager to learn. She would let the madam explain everything – *this is where you switch on the iron. First you must make sure there's water in the tank. The microwave is for warming food only, hey, we use the stove for cooking. Separate all the whites first and only use the 'rapid wash'*. It wouldn't do to tell madam not to worry, that she used to have a Philips steam generator iron and four-in-one inverter microwave oven. She would wear the mask — just smile and say, 'thank you,

madam', and try to bury all the things that should be buried somewhere deep within the deepest recesses of her being.

But here was her worst nightmare, standing on the other side of the glass, come back to life in this place of new beginnings.

## Running

As I get nearer to the front of the queue, I realise it's not going to work. I have rehearsed it many times. I can say '*Molo bhuti*' with confidence but decide that I won't. I fear that the immigration officer might then say *Molo sisi* and then other things I won't be able to understand and then I would have to resort to 'Please, I'm here to see my *sister*', to own up that I'm actually Zimbabwean. It's been like this for as long as I can remember. All my brothers and sisters and the other kids at school were always quicker with explanations and answers and especially with denials. I also have a stutter.

Someone shouts 'next!' My heart lurches and I jerk involuntarily.

There are four counters. I've been trying to work out which of the four officials would be best. I decide, not the woman, because her voice is so loud that everyone can hear everything.

'*Hee*, you lost your passport *ne?* *Yoo*, you people think I was born yesterday. Now what must I do? I must magic a passport for you *ne?* Or I must just stamp the visa on your forehead?'

Every time she says 'must' my heart thuds painfully. I think if I get to be served by her, she will say, 'Now, what must I do with your story *ne?* I must sit here and listen to you tell me this *filimu ne?* *Hayi*, I wasn't born yesterday *mhani*. Don't bring your *filimu*.'

I'm not worried about the other people waiting in the queue laughing at me. They have their own *filimu* scripts to worry about. They just might wonder why I don't have a better story, something more imaginative.

If it works out that the woman has to serve me, I will pretend that I need the toilet. I will have to join the queue again but that would be better, I decide.

The young man at the desk next to the woman seems to be too meticulous — checking everything, narrowing his eyes until they're almost shut to peer at documents, straightening them out, holding them up to the light and occasionally leaving the desk to confer in hushed tones with the large woman sitting away from the counters. She must be the boss. She's not wearing the uniform, but a simple flower-patterned dress incongruous with her unsmiling efficiency —it stands out amongst all the green uniforms and the grey filing cabinets. She also peers and straightens, and turns the papers over, occasionally walking to a large machine in a corner, to place the documents under the UV lamp.

I don't want my papers to be put under the light. Some people get summoned to a side room after their documents have been put under the light. I don't want to be taken to the side room.

Of the two older men, on either side of the woman and the young man, I prefer the one with the bulbous belly, the one who looks people up and down as they approach his window, not the one who keeps his eyes fixed to the desk even when he is not looking at any papers and shouts 'next' but does not bother to check who approaches. I wonder how he will know when there's no one left and he doesn't need to shout 'next!' No, I decide the other one would be better. He sweeps his eyes from the tips of your shoes up to the top of your head so you feel like running towards the counter to prevent him from looking a third time. I hope that when it's my turn, he will look only at my hair and not at my chafed shoes and my loose fitting black dress

which had seemed like a good idea for looking nondescript but now, I realise, makes me look like I'm in mourning. But, I would rather him, I think.

When someone shouts 'next!' again I realise it's not him because he is still serving the young white man lugging a filthy backpack that's almost the same size as him, telling him to enjoy his stay and to make sure he visits Kruger National Park before he leaves, and that he could always come back to have his visa extended.

The woman behind me in the queue taps me on the shoulder. I turn around, momentarily confused. She says something.

I dash towards the door.

I take a few race-walking-like steps before breaking into a run. I run past all the people in the queue, ignoring their open mouths and quizzing eyebrows, and past the woman handing out tickets that give you your number in the queue. I toss my ticket at her shouting '*askisi sisi*' as I pass her. I know '*askisi*' means 'I'm sorry' in one of the languages — Tsotsitaal, I think. I'm out the door before she can stop me but the sun hits me right between the eyes and for a second, I can't see a thing. I can hear my heart pounding *buum* and taste the bile rising in my stomach. I don't know which would be worse—throwing up or fainting. I force my eyes open and then everything comes slowly back into focus.

*'Heyi! Heyi!'* someone is shouting from inside.

Suddenly I feel light again so I take off, ignoring an old man sitting on the steps just outside. He asks, '*Hezvo, kwakanaka?*'

I could stop. He speaks my language, he's from home and he looks concerned but I just run past him and past the cars in the car park in front of the building. I feel

guilty that I can't stop to say '*kwaziwayi baba*, I'm fine, thank you. Just a headache', so that the old man doesn't have to add me to the other worries etched on his leathery face. I just keep running. I even wave to the guard sitting in a little wooden cabin just inside the big gate when he shouts '*uyaphi sisi*'? There are two more security guards walking up and down the street in front of the big gate. One of them gestures to me to stop. I know they carry guns but I don't think they are allowed to shoot without permission.

I think I can hear the immigration officers shouting after me and telling me they will find me; they will find all *Makwerekwere* and send them back home.

I just throw my head back and laugh. My handbag and scarf are flying behind me like they do in the movies, where people run like it's the best thing. I feel like Lola in 'Run Lola Run'. Except Lola didn't have a handbag. She had a scarf, I think.

I run like Lola all the way back to my grandmother's home in Chiundura, through the open plains where wild flowers of all colours spread like an endless carpet and the savannah grass hides you from your older brothers so they are annoyed and worried, and when they eventually find you they slap you so hard it feels like someone has made a fire on your cheek. We are running to go and wash our clothes and frolic in the cool, dark waters of Gweshuro. Nobody can catch me. Not even Tariro, who they call *chihwerure* because when he is running, he winds one arm around as if he is coiling the strings of a *chihwerure* ready to uncoil it at lightning speed. This seems to work for him but even he can't catch up because I'm light and unburdened by the desire to win. It's not a race for me. I'm ten years old but I know that if you run in anger and frustration, it slows you down. When they get to the stream, I'm already in, splashing and rolling and laughing.

Then I'm twenty and the riot police are everywhere. They're in the lecture rooms, in the library, in the halls of res and even in the Great Hall where the Agric students are sitting their final exams. I've seen the riot police more times than I've seen some of my lecturers. I'm sprinting across the University Green, with teargas searing my eyes, tongue and chest. I thud past the new 'international standard' sports arena built for the All Africa Games in 1995 and past the rugby field where all the students who went to the former whites only, 'group 'A' schools' meet on a Sunday, away from the soccer field where the rest of us like to go. Other students are running with me past the sign that says 'Welcome to the University of Zimbabwe' and past the 'lovers 'green' where couples like to sit on the grass by the stream on Sundays when the rest of us are singing ourselves hoarse at the football pitch and the former 'group A' students are chanting 'Lomu! Lomu! Lomu! because singing is not something they do.

We run towards the fence and jump over it — left leg onto the middle rail that cross the vertical metal posts first, then right leg on to the top rail. There are spear-shaped spikes on the top, to stop students from leaving campus to go on protests. It's like one huge, open plan prison where we're encouraged to learn the importance of freedom, to dream about it and to understand how to free ourselves from the shackles of oppression, like our great forebears before us, but we're forbidden from daring to put any of it into practice. The spikes don't stop us from trying though. I'm on top of the fence with both legs straddling a few spikes. The jump down is easier. You twist your body so that you're facing the direction you came from and lift the left leg from the middle railing on the other side and jump backwards and down. I've done it many times before. We help each other up, with the riot police fast approaching. They are not running. They never run. They just march in a horse-shoe



formation like Tshaka's *impi*, beating a rhythm on their shields with baton sticks. It would be impressive if it wasn't menacing. They always catch us. They radio each other and always manage to surround and round us up, all without running a single step.

Our running is not light. It's burdened with the anger and frustration of unrealised dreams. We think we are running fast but the rage just weighs us down. It's like we're running on the same spot — legs burning, chests heaving, and eyes and tongues protruding but the effort not enough to increase the distance separating us. I know this but I can't help it. It's the slow realisation that it doesn't matter that you understand what the Chimurenga was about; that you cried tears of understanding when Samora Machel was killed by the South Africans, and danced in the streets with your friends when Mandela walked out of prison; that you're proud to be black and that black is beautiful and all that. All that doesn't matter because the police can beat you up and tear up your 'By Any Means Necessary' t-shirt, they can throw you into the back of a Santana and fondle your breasts while your friends look on powerless and that when they finally allow you back on campus, 'October 4' is shut and you can't sit around and have drunken arguments about how inappropriate 'October 4' is as a name for the campus pub.

I had prepared myself for a life of teaching. I didn't have enough compassion to be a nurse. Any other occupation — doctor, lawyer, engineer or any of the other ones no one had heard of in the village like seismologist or archaeologist were guaranteed to consign you to a lifetime of spinsterhood. I was going to be a teacher. However, at twenty-six, I found myself *singing* '*amai nababa, musandicheme kana ndafa nehondo*' (Mother and father, do not grieve for me if I die fighting for Zimbabwe) and jogging through the Avenues past all the nice flats with balconies,

where the not-so-rich white people, the expats and the young, newly-rich black people live. I feel powerful — fifty cadets, in blue tracksuit bottoms and white vests singing Chimurenga songs and waking the almost-rich people in the morning feels a bit like freedom.

I'm here because although it's not as well paid a job as teaching, my boyfriend who got a third in his degree and couldn't get a job *because they all now go to women and Ndebele people*, is joining the police force. I can't be in a school, teaching and becoming too clever to be a good wife. My mother cries when I tell her. My father says, tell them to deploy you as far away from home as possible. That way, you won't have to beat up the people you grew up with or your own parents. I'll probably have a desk job is what I tell him.

When we do the fitness test to Domboshava, I even take a few minutes to admire the San rock paintings on the side of the *dwala* that gives Domboshava its name, but still manage to get back to the finish line in Harare before him and a lot of other hopefuls. When the training starts, I find that I enjoy it even though our relationship doesn't survive Domboshava. The running is easy and I run faster and longer than most of my group. I especially enjoy the *toyi toyi* in the mornings, half jogging half dancing, half protest and half celebration. We leave KG6 barracks at five o'clock and head south along Josiah Tongogara Avenue then through the streets of Harare with batons at the ready. We particularly enjoy chasing anyone we see wearing red t-shirt with the words '*Chinja*' emblazoned on the back. We like to tear their t-shirts off and beat them with the batons and kick them with our boots and ask them what change they would like to see. We beat them some more when they can't answer. No one ever answers.

With time, I start to enjoy chasing in the comfort of a Santana and then just to waiting at Harare Central Police Station for the younger officers to bring in the catch when the hunt is done. Although I can still run faster and longer than most, it is unbecoming for a woman my age and status. Once the younger officers begin to call me *shefu* or *ambuya* I decide the interrogations give me the same buzz as the chasing anyway.

I hate the screamers, they're hard work — like running on a hard, uneven surface. The non-talkers make it easy. If only they said something. They never do. The end is the same — blood, urine, faeces, groaning, twitching and then silence. Sometimes we call an ambulance and when you're driving around the streets months later, you think you can see someone you didn't think had survived the interrogation. You know it's them because they walk with more caution: they take a few steps forward then stop to listen and to look over their shoulders. Then there's the limp and the scars.

Then it's 2008 and I find myself running again, fleeing from a group of people wielding placards. Only I can't jump over fences or bushes anymore. Teargas is burning my chest. Some idiot young cadet has let it off in panic. And, although they are not running, they're dancing, but fast catching up to me. They are singing '*Povo yaramba zvemadisnyongoro*' (the masses have had enough). There's nowhere to hide. They sing that my name is written down in some book and that my time's up. The commissioner says I need to find a man, a husband to protect me. He tells me the police cannot afford to protect me forever. He doesn't think a woman like me should go to waste. His eyes are fixed on my chest. I decide then.

That's how I find myself here, not running but shaking before the South African immigration officer, fumbling in my bag — past the mace spray, past the other things — bits of *droewors*, nuts, the *dumwa* that my grandma made me, for good luck and past the other passport, — until I'm clutching that small but all important piece of plastic in one hand. It that says my name is Dineo and I come from Nelspruit. I'm not sure how to pronounce Nelspruit and I couldn't pinpoint it on the map but I'm sure South Africa is where my dreams will come together.

## **Dhulivadzimu: The Place of Waiting**

*They say we dance like rivers, hands flowing North like Nile, like deserts do not surround us. –Jason Nkwain, ‘Have you ever seen an African Dance?’*

## **Jambanja**

She gathered then shoved all the papers into a well-worn, brown leather briefcase. She would sort and separate them later, at home. She was going to destroy some, particularly those with personal details. She was taking with her the ones with information that wasn't needed for open cases but could be used later and she was leaving behind those that did not have any sensitive information on them, for someone from the main office to collect. It was safer she thought, to pack the ones she was taking with her in the check-in suitcase. Her hand luggage would only be the tablet and the two novels by Buchi Emecheta that she'd never had the time to read. She took one last look around the room. There was nothing much – just a small table and chair in the centre of the room, two tall, empty filing cabinets in a corner against the back wall and a bench along the other wall, just inside the door. Satisfied that all was as she wished it to be, she switched the light off.

An intense, opaque blackness immediately drowned everything. She closed the door behind her and stepped outside. For a few long minutes, she lingered, holding on to the handle and accustoming her eyes to the darkness. She hated the few moments between turning the lights off and stepping into the deep black nights. She had always hated it. The sudden loss of sight always sent her into a momentary panic. She believed that the split instance of blindness gave other beings that had been in the darkness longer, an unfair advantage.

Her fear of the darkness was perhaps one of the reasons for her decision to leave. Every day, with each moment that darkness approached and flooded the township, particularly during the cold months when it seemed that night fell so suddenly, she would find herself filled with nervous alertness. She would sit in the

wooden cabin that was the office, distracted, and unsettled by sporadic bouts of frenetic energy. Her mind had always had the power to create horrifying scenarios of what could happen in the dark. As the date of the election drew nearer, her imagination grew more vivid and the scenarios it spun, even more gruesome. This was not helped by the rumours, the reports and the evidence on her clients' bodies and in their troubled, sombre eyes. It was true that not all the beatings, the rapes, the torture and even the disappearances happened at night. It was just that she opened her office in the mornings. Also, if they came for her in the night, there would be no witnesses. Those who were arrested, or abducted during the day stood a better chance. Friends and relatives would carry placards and *toyi toyi* on the streets demanding their return. Those who disappeared at night were often presumed to have fled to exile or chosen to go into hiding. She should have loved the darkness; felt invigorated and protected by it and her work was best done under the cover of darkness but she knew not how to stop the constant torment of her mind. She would be happier once she got home.

A faint breeze sent the sweet, earthy scent of the promise of rain and the pleasant fragrance of the abundant gardenias, wafting through all the other stale odours that were as familiar a feature of the air as the huge boulder at one end of the street was a permanent feature of the surroundings. Some stagnant water had collected in a ditch in the middle of the road, with rotting debris floating in it; there were the mounds of garbage that dotted the roadside in front of the dwellings and a dog, with a shattered skull and broken limbs, which lay decomposing at the street corner. All these revolting smells mingled with the aromas of different evening meals cooking on open fires behind the thousands of shacks that were the township. As if nature were playing a practical joke, a small forest of gardenia shrubs thrived

just a few hundred metres away from where the carcass of the dog lay. The delicate, white flowers stood out obscenely amidst the drabness of the township but at a respectful enough distance as if even they sensed that life in the township was short and cheap.

Next week it would be a cat, a different ditch with different remains in it or mounds of rubbish at different roadside spots but as she stood there she was convinced that in all the time she had been here, this township had had the same rank smell of deprivation and an ever-present air of anticipation and danger.

Another permanent feature were the urchins that spent their days kicking a plastic football about on the dusty streets until sunset when they would all disappear suddenly. Once the sun went down, the people of the township would stay inside, not venturing outside. They were not afraid of the dark. They were used to the dark and, unlike her, they spent most of their evenings in darkness. Although she called the cluster of dwellings a township, it was in reality an informal settlement – a shanty town without official services. The dwellings were just a collection of shacks made of cardboard, wood scraps, rocks and scraps of sheeting on the outskirts of a sprawling city. The people knew how to survive without electricity but they also knew that bad things happened to people after nightfall, especially with elections so near.

The street was completely deserted.

She took a deep breath, wondering if she would miss it all – the smells, the silence, the noises, the filth. She wondered if she would miss the people, now her friends, mostly. Would she miss the worlds that the surreptitious notes and the people opened up – at once dangerous, distressing, rebellious but life affirming?



She enjoyed her work in the township, if enjoyment was an appropriate description. She was not under pressure to prove herself to anyone. Her work could not be openly acknowledged or hailed – not by the organisation that funded the work; not by the people that benefitted from it; and certainly not by the government. She knew that this made it more unsafe. It was work that no-one but the state should have been doing and yet, if they did, it would confirm that bad things were happening and the government didn't want to acknowledge that. The organisations that worked to pick up the pieces, like the one she worked for, could not own up to doing so for fear of victimisation, and the people that benefited from the work kept it quiet, to protect their benefactors. But the people trusted her and didn't ask too many questions. Everyone knew what had happened to her in the last place she worked but out of respect, they pretended they didn't. To them she was a legal advisor, a teacher, a counsellor, sometimes even a doctor and a lot of other things too; which made it worthwhile. She had tried to keep her work as neutral as possible. She didn't ask people about their political views or how they obtained the cuts on their hands or bruises on their bodies or why they wanted to get rid of the baby they were carrying. Her work was not to judge or give moral advice. Hers was to give them the assistance they need – reference letters to doctors who would help without asking too many questions, transport and recommendation letters to safe houses and organisations that could provide counselling services, giving out food packets and other provisions whenever there were any and importantly taking pictures of all the injuries, and cataloguing them carefully, just in case.

However, as she stood in that street listening to the silence, amidst the musty stench and the enigmatic darkness she knew she would not be coming back to this office or into these people's lives again. They didn't know it. She imagined that they

would turn up in the morning as usual. First the men, they were always first, and then the women and children — hungry, broken; and then she imagined they would just walk away again once they realised she wasn't there and would probably return for a few following days. They might wonder if she had been arrested, or killed, or whether she had become one of the disappeared. After a few days they would get used to the idea that she wasn't coming back. They would be disappointed, even sad, she liked to think. She knew that the office might find someone to replace her or that a different organisation might come along, use the same small workplace amongst the smell of decaying dogs, fermenting rubbish and gardenias to do similar work, and that there might even be another woman they would call auntie so-and-so but, if none of that happened, the people would still get used to the disappointment because disappointment was another permanent reality of their lives. She was sad that that's what life had become for these people. They couldn't even vote.

She felt that something momentous was imminent, and she wanted to be home when whatever was going to happen, happened.

She decided to take a taxi home. Although she felt a strong urge to walk down Sobikwa Street, just this last time to savour the mysterious quality of the night and, just this once, to face her fears and dare the night, she knew this was not a good idea. A woman doesn't take a solitary walk at night in a place like this. She'd never done it before.

She peered down the road and started walking; she would flag down a taxi at the end of the road, just next to the decomposing body of the dog. She had toyed with the idea of burying it when it first appeared but she remembered her previous colleague advising her that if no one asked her to do something, she shouldn't. She knew that someone would know who the owner was, who had killed it and why. She

also knew that there would be people who wished they could bury it – people whose children played at the street corner, people who loved animals and would have been appalled at the cruelty or people who found the sight revolting. None of them had buried it, or buried other dead dogs or cats before this one and none of them would bury the ones after. That is why she had left it where it lay with maggots wriggling in and out of its orifices.

Just as she was about to turn and walk towards the next street to try from there, having decided that she couldn't stand the stench of the dog, a boy emerged from the intense blackness of an alley, handed her a piece of paper and slipped back into the night as suddenly as he had appeared. It happened so quickly that she didn't get a chance to ask. She considered just walking on to get her taxi and tossing the piece of paper on the ground but curiosity got the better of her. There was also the possibility that someone might be in trouble and needed help. She would read it, and then get her taxi.

Rather than walk back to unlock the office door and endure another terrifying few seconds of blindness when she turned the light on and then when she came out again she decided to continue to the street corner where she could read the note in the glow of a distant tower light. She read the two words; no doubt written by a woman – the narrow cursive curves confirmed it for her.

*'Chabvondoka! Jambanja Tonight'*

She turned the crumpled piece of paper, torn off from the corner of a mealie-meal bag, hoping for more clues. If it had been daytime, she would have walked to the schoolteacher's house. In the three years she had worked in the township the schoolteacher had clarified numerous similar sorts of messages and smoothed over

a few awkward episodes caused by her initial arrogance in thinking that she could learn all the ways of a people, in a few weeks.

She relied on information supplied in this manner to know where and when things would be happening but as with other local slang words in similar crumpled and hastily scribbled notes, she was not sure what '*chabvondoka*' meant in this case. Did it mean that the police or the army were coming in the night to carry out raids on suspected *enemies of the state*? Was it the ruling party supporters who were coming to terrorise suspected opposition party supporters? Sometimes opposition party supporters also carried out revenge attacks. She wished it meant the people were themselves were organising some sort of action.

The note was not signed.

She would go home and let someone else deal with whatever this was about she decided, but the same boy must have been following her, expecting a reply.

'I know where they want you, auntie Maria' he said softly and started walking away. She didn't feel assured that the boy knew her name and that she couldn't see his face but she reckoned to derive some comfort from the 'auntie'. She knew she had to go with him. She hesitated for a few seconds but her indecision did not last long. For if she tarried too long, the boy's form would blend into darkness and she would have to stumble in the darkness by herself. Was it morbid curiosity, dedication to her work or just fear? Maybe it was all three. She found herself tentatively following this boy through narrow streets and back alleys into the cool darkness of the summer night. The shacks always looked drab enough in the sun, but the darkness gave them a quality of musty poverty and squalor. They stood indistinguishable in the gloom and darkness. She would not be able to find her way back on her own. Heart pounding, she quickened her step.

She should have been walking away from all this, not faltering deeper into the seemingly unending cycle of destitution and despair and the ever-present threat of danger.

## Watching and praying

She was making *maqebelengwana* when they came. Four men and a young woman. She knew two of the men but that wouldn't make a difference. She found herself thinking about the song she used to sing with her brothers and sisters at Sunday school back in Kwekwe when she was a little girl. *Rindai munamate, Ishe vanouya!* They would belt it out, heads thrown back but completely out of tune. She was only eight; the song always had the opposite effect. She always sang it too joyfully, too animatedly, to the irritation of Miss Khona, the Sunday school teacher. She wanted the children to reflect upon their sins and to repent for they did not know the day or time, 'especially you, Sihle, always disrespecting the sanctuary of the Lord with all that giggling and whispering'. She would take on such a sombre tone and serious face that Sihle would have to sing the song joyfully to muffle the giggles. She wished she could tell Miss Khona that she hadn't committed any sins and that the son of God could not appear everywhere at the same time unless everyone gathered together to wait, which they couldn't since no one knew the date and time. But Miss Khona cried too easily. So, they sang on. 'Watch and pray, the Lord commandeth; Watch and pray, 'twill not be long', sometimes in English, other times in Shona until it was time for 'Divine Service'.

She was glad she had not wasted any time watching and praying. Although she had known, for weeks, months even, she had made the decision to continue making *maqebelengwana* as if it was all the same. The effort that went into it made the days go quicker. She'd read somewhere that one is always nearer by never standing still, or words to that effect, so she decided that she would not just sit and

wait. Besides, making *maqebelengwana* also meant that they didn't starve. She made enough money to keep the children fed and clothed, and the rent paid.

No-one else was watching and praying. Even the families that had lost their homes in *Operation Murambatsvina* knew that one day someone would come to announce that they were still squatters, their shacks were illegal, and they should move on. When they dared ask the officials who came to make the announcement where they should move to, they were told 'back where you came from'. Many of the families that now lived on the outskirts of Dhulivadzimu Township had moved from Bulawayo and Masvingo after the government ordered the destruction of their homes in the campaign. Some had heard that Beitbridge was the best place for waiting without waiting. It was close enough to South Africa to hope that if things got too desperate a mad dash across the border or across the Limpopo would be possible but still not so far away from home to make it too difficult to return should things revert to the way they were.

Since 2005, when they had found out that they were *tsvina* 'rubbish', to be moved from place to place in the same way the British used to move them during Smith's time, a lot of people, even those who hadn't lost their homes and livelihoods took on a generally unspoken but agreed and frenetic waiting. It wasn't a 'watching and praying' kind of waiting; it was a busy waiting. A few young people dared to wear t-shirts emblazoned with 'waiting for — to croak' and a picture of large green frog sitting in the centre beneath the words. The nods and smiles from people walking past them meant that everyone knew. People rebuilt their shacks; they helped the new arrivals build their own shelters; the children went to school and everybody went about their business. Some people tried to cross the border in the morning to disappear in Messina, with the hopes of making it to Johannesburg, only

to be caught by the South African Police and brought back across the border in the evening. They had to be doing something while they waited.

She didn't know how to make *maqebelengwana* when she came to Beitbridge although she'd loved them when she was growing up. She loved it when her grandma used to visit because her grandmother made the best *maqebelengwana*. Now she made batches of them every day but couldn't eat them. It wasn't the same anymore. She'd become very good at it, her fingers quick and precise, the way MaSibanda her neighbour taught her. 'You have to sell something', she said. 'Food is good because a lot of men who work in the offices at the border will want to buy lunch from a beautiful woman'. She had tried to protest, to explain that she wasn't a prostitute and would not be stopping in Beitbridge long but MaSibanda persisted. 'The little ones have to eat and it's easy. You scoop small portions of the dough with the tips of your fingers, like this'. She laid it in the hollow of her cupped palm and then cupped the right hand sideways over it to roll the dough into bite-sized balls which she laid out in rows on a tray. 'Precision the secret. You can't have them all different shapes and sizes. Doesn't look good on the plate. The balls have to be the same size or they will not cook evenly'. She was right, the men loved her food. *Maqebelengwana* are like bread and sadza together, and she was young and new.

She liked the rows on the tray – all neat and even. The dough stuck to her fingers. The flour stopped the balls from crumbling. They also needed to stick to the base and the sides of the pot. It made them light and crisp.

It was an unseasonably chilly and breezy September evening when they finally came. She had been in Beitbridge for close to a year. In September Beitbridge is usually drought-ridden – the days dry, relentlessly sweltering, and the sky extraordinarily cobalt. But on this September evening – when America was 'seeking



approval' to act against Syria; and Somali militants had terrorised people at a shopping mall — a woman taken away by armed men in Beitbridge would not make the news, any news. Beitbridge has always been like that; people come and go.

Patches of white matted her hair. It was also on the faces of the little girl and boy where she had tried to wipe their faces clean before ushering them to one of her neighbours, whispering 'my friend- in Kwekwe, please'. The children didn't move. The neighbour had to haul them by the wrists. 'Come children,' the neighbour said, trying not to look into Sihle's eyes. She didn't know where they were taking her. People never know usually, and whoever is taken is never seen again. 'I will call your mother,' the neighbour said. They both knew that that was not possible. Sihle's mother was dead. But that is what people say to a neighbour who is going to die a horrible death and whose grave nobody will ever find. They don't want to remind each other that numbers of friends have never been exchanged. The 'please' is what says, 'everything else is a lie but please look after the kids'.

Sihle could have left and moved on to a different town. The opportunity was there when Parama closed his shop, vowing never to ever bake bread again, and offered to take Sihle away. He had put up with the government price controls long enough but the frequent sporadic raids he couldn't cope with. The Green Bombers were the worst — young, twitchy and singularly vicious. No one could remember how they had become an 'official' militia but they were a permanent reality all across the country with the confident authority that comes with false entitlement. They made no pretence that a crime had been committed before terrorising people — they just burst in, and took what they wanted, which was always everything. At least the police tried intimidation first, getting angry only if the shelves were empty. Not even Parama's explanations that their militia colleagues had already taken everything

would stop the torture. They then demanded to know why there was no bread if Parama was running a legitimate business.

‘We’ll have to look at all the papers,’ they’d say, ‘to look at everything and see what sort of business you are running here, otherwise how do you explain the bakery with no bread.’ As always, he tried to apologise; no, he didn’t have any bread or buns or cake because the goods had already been taken and yes, sorry that he was lazy. Yes, that too, and an embarrassment to the hardworking people of Zimbabwe who fought and freed their country from imperialists through sweat and blood. The War Vets, as veterans of the Liberation War of the 70’s, were not sure what they wanted. Whether there was bread or not, there was hell to pay. All they knew was that they were entitled to whatever they wanted or whatever was available and, if nothing was available, people had to be beaten up. Sometimes they wanted to use the front of the shop to sit and drink beer confiscated from the bottle store down the road. Then they would want Parama to cook them *sadza* and beef stew. They had fought the British and liberated the country and deserved to be taken care of by those they had liberated.

One morning they turned up and demanded Parama start baking bread while they waited. His employees had to serve them free drinks and sing liberation war songs to entertain them while Parama ran around trying to buy enough flour. They stayed an hour, only leaving when Parama managed to buy some bread from the market vendors who had brought it from across the border. They trashed the shop and left. Parama knew they would be back. They would terrorise the market stall holders for a few days and then work their way back to the bottle store and to him. Not long after that, he hired a lorry, piled all his possessions onto it and left, vowing never to set foot in this god-forsaken place ever again; and taking Ellen with him.

Everyone had known about that too, even Ellen's husband had known. No one could blame her. Some even envied her. They admired the way she walked elegantly to the lorry, holding up her hand to be hoisted onto the passenger seat and straightening her skirt before sitting down. It was also the manner in which she just stared straight ahead, ignoring the people who had gathered to watch. He had asked Sihle first. 'You would never have to work so hard again. I'd protect you' She didn't want to be unkind, to remind him that he couldn't even protect himself and that there were War Vets and Green Bombers everywhere but she only told him thanks, but she couldn't.

She could have left then. She didn't. And then they came. She heard their Santana screech to a halt outside just as she was rolling ball number thirty. The regular orders required forty. A spoonful of beef stew and four balls, two dollars.

*Maqebelengwana* were what kept the children alive — that and the fact that the soldiers had a base near the border post, and the customs employees and truck drivers waiting for border clearance needed her. It was clear in the feverish looks on their faces when they came in the night. She could have left the first time when one of them approached her, a sheepish smile on his lips. She could have left the first time one of them refused to pay, calling her a dirty whore and what would she do about it? Could have left when Parama offered. Or she could have walked across the border. Just walked across the border and disappeared into the golden jungle of Jozi, the city of everyone's dreams. But disappearing with two little children is not easy, and they needed to eat so she bore it, hoped she'd be paid, begged to be paid. In return, her wares were never confiscated — a kind of love, she liked to tell herself. At first, she thought it would be easy — quick and breezy like it used to be when she was younger and could fall in love easily, sometimes twice a week. She tried, but all

she could think of were the pimples, the smells and sometimes what she bought with the money if one of them had been particularly generous. The little red dress with yellow butterfly patterns for the girl, and a watch, decorated with a cartoon figure on both the face and wristband, for the boy. Then she would remember, somewhat fondly, a kind of love.

And she had promised.

“I will be here when you come back, when they let you go.” Then, she had loved easily, laughed easily, and accepted things as they were. She couldn’t remember exactly when the promise had turned to resentment, a chain around her ankles. Some days the bitterness almost consumed her, especially the days she would feed the kids, ready them for bed and sit down with her mobile phone to *juice up*. She resented the way he sounded preoccupied, resented it when he was cheery, and resented it the most when he professed his undying love, ‘my world, my life’ he would say. All she could think was that a prison cell was no world and that the real world had spent all the love she could give. She worried that he might come and she would not be there. That he would be hungry and tired but that there would be no food waiting. Besides, she wanted to tell him herself how difficult it had been without him, how she had had to sell herself to keep the children alive and then she would leave him, telling him she didn’t love him anymore, maybe had never loved him. She had loved the look of confidence; the revolutionary zeal burning in his eyes; his ease with words; and the way he laughed with his head thrown back and his eyes closed. Now she just didn’t want him.

As they bundled her into the car, she wondered what would happen to the children, she hoped her neighbour would take them to an orphanage; they were too young to survive on the streets.



## Mary, Mother of God

I realised then that I would never cry again. Granted, I couldn't stop my eyes from misting when things got too much, no one can. There would always be times when tears would find their way to the surface and roll down my cheeks unbridled. I knew that there would be times, as there often were, when I would hear about terrible things happening that would leave me feeling hopeless. Unless a miracle of biblical proportions happened, I was still going to hear how the police beat up people at the fruit and vegetable markets and seize all their wares as evidence. There was no doubt that I was going to hear fearful whispers of how the Green Bombers forced strangers to have sex in pubs, just for the heck of it. There was also still going to be stories of young girls contracting HIV from being molested by their fathers or their uncles. Of course, the senselessness of it would make my tears bubble to the surface. Then my lips would quiver, and I would have to clench my jaws. On days when there seemed little point in striving, struggling and all whispered and shouted encouragements of '*aluta continua*' sounded hollow, I would probably still let the warmth of my tears mingle with the soap and the water in the shower, and I would still whimper into my pillow in the dead of night. Some things cannot be helped.

I had never been a great crier before anyway. I was not one of those people that cried a lot. I always marvelled at those women, funeral criers, who could get to a funeral, any funeral and then, from the right distance from the home of the deceased and at the right moment, let out a heart-rending wail that would bring everyone to silence and trigger a mass response. Yes, I carried tissues and dabbed at my eyes until they turned red and could rock my shoulders as vigorously as the next person but I wasn't even going to try anymore. I was going to walk up to people – at funerals,

at courthouses, at roadside accident sites, at hospital bedsides and at other occasions where people expected tears – just walk up to them, look them in the eye, offer my condolences or commiserations as appropriate, and then walk off again, with my head held high. They accused women who did that of being witches. I wasn't going to be burdened by traditional norms and cultural expectations to try to prove that I wasn't a witch by bawling and blubbering and rolling on the ground. I didn't want to have a good cry so we could all feel better afterwards. I didn't want to feel better that way anymore. It seemed to me that there was nothing to feel better about, that it would probably be best if we didn't feel better about things, if we stayed heartbroken and enraged.

It was around midday on a pleasantly warm afternoon, the kind that you get in Harare in late March. I was taking an unusually long lunch with the three girls I worked with. We were sitting under an enormous avocado tree, in the grounds of what used to be a scouts' hall. It was well off the main road with a long driveway so we could hear any car approaching. It was one of the reasons I liked working from that particular building. Our colleagues always joked about how they sometimes forgot about us, forgot to invite us to meetings and other company events. We loved it. We could get back to our desks and compose ourselves long before anybody knocked on the outer door.

We had decided on an early lunch. None of us was in an industrious mood. We were hardly ever in an industrious mood. We hadn't been paid for several months. There was no indication we would be paid anytime soon. The company had lost all its money when the government decided to *dollarize* the economy. When we went home at the end of the day one day, the company was thriving, with trillions of Zimbabwe dollars in the bank but, when we came to work the following morning,

everything was gone. No one, it seemed, had been prepared for that. We sat together, crying with impotent rage and disbelief, and a lot of us hoping that this was it; this would be that proverbial straw that broke the camel's back. We thought people would rise up, go on the street, *toyi toyi* until the government conceded that they had made a mistake. We reminded each other of the countries where this sort of mass action had brought change – some show of people power. We must all not have been including ourselves in that group of 'the people', for nothing happened. We continued to turn up for work, sometimes borrowing bus fares, other times walking in. The company directors had to apply for some American dollars against their accounts; everyone had to. A few hundred American dollars for businesses and organisations, five dollars for individuals, regardless of how much was in the account previously. Those were the rules.

We went to work because we couldn't just stay at home.

I had woken up with a feeling of vague unease that I couldn't shake off. I felt a little detached and expectant, a misty sense that I was waiting for something. I wanted something to happen. I wanted to wake up to the news that the police had come to a realisation of the error of their ways and were going to uphold the rule of law and stop brutalising people. Every day as I opened my eyes, I hoped it would be the day all hospitals opened again, and banks compensated people for all the money they had lost. I prayed for the day when the elderly wouldn't have to walk for hours expecting to receive food aid only to be told that they supported the wrong party and wouldn't be getting anything. I wanted all these things and many others. That's what would make me happy to cry again. Sometimes I woke up happy – blissful even. I would listen to the birds and the street noises for a while. Then it would creep back



on me, and I would remember. With a sinking feeling, I would remember that I lived in a country where my main aims for the day were: not to have any dealings with the police; definitely not have anything to do with soldiers; to stay out of the way of Green Bombers; to space out my meals so that I only ate when it was necessary, and above all, not to fall ill or injure myself. On this particular morning, I had woken up acutely aware from the moment I opened my eyes that there was nothing to be blissful about, that although the birds were still singing beautifully and the streets were fittingly lively, everything else was not alright.

I went about my morning ablutions with a little more disconnection – standing in the shower until I could feel the skin on my palms wrinkling, putting on the same pair of jeans I had been wearing the previous day and perhaps the day before that and throwing on a t-shirt that wasn't mine. Such was my detachment that, at work, I only managed the briefing meeting and the check-in phone call to the boss at the central office and the first page of the thirty-page funding proposal that was due in a couple of days – thirty minutes of work in total. Not even the prospect of going without a salary for another month could shake me out of this disquietude. I was listening to what the girls were chattering away about, sometimes dropping their voices to whispers, other times bursting out in exclamations. I let the fragments of their chatter sooth me, like a lullaby. I was just letting the breeze wash over my face and would probably let the afternoon go to waste, again.

'I told him I was leaving him. Do you know what he said?

'Go on, did he beg? Did he promise you the world?'

'Did he say he was going to break your leg?

'No, I was holding a knobkerrie, and I told him I was going to break his head if he came near me. He said he'd tell my mother.'

The other two gasped.

‘Ah! A full-grown man!’

‘I know! *Mashura chaiwo*, telling on you to your mother.’

‘What does he think your mother will say?’ They laughed, ‘hee hee de, huuri’, and high-fived each other, *chikwee*, that sound that women make when they are happy and carefree. It was a high-pitched sound that pierced the tranquil air of the lazy afternoon.

Then my phone rang. A sound as shrill and vulgar as the girls' laughter. I picked it up immediately. It was a woman on the other end, an in-law with whom I shared some responsibility for our nephew. Relationships can be like that — complicated by hundreds of years of a complex confusion and conflation of Shona, Ndebele, Kalanga and Tonga culture and customs. She wasn't my in-law; she was my sister's in-law. Her husband was my sister's husband's brother. Because she was married to my sister's husband's younger brother, she wasn't sure how to address me. My sister had been *maiguru*, ‘big mother’. That's what you call the woman who is married to your husband's older brother. Following that logic, I was supposed to be *mainini* ‘small mother’. She couldn't call me that or by my first name because I was older than her, so she ended up calling me *mainini* anyway, somewhat timidly.

‘Hallo’, I said slowly, buying time, trying to work out who it was. I should have recognised the number. ‘Hallo, Hallo, *mainini*’. Then it hit me. Although she just said ‘*aenda Tafadzwa*’ in a breathy, breaking voice, I could detect the *Manyika* twang. For an instant, I allowed myself to believe that we had, together, planned or arranged for him to go somewhere, like the doctor's or maybe to visit a different relative for a few days, to give her some respite. She had to wash all the bedding every morning and to give him a full bath, in spite of the water shortages. It had to

be done. My main contribution was to find water. I would fill every available container, from one-litre capacity upwards, and pack them in the boot of my car. She prepared his meals, made sure he had taken his medication. She didn't complain. Never complained. Her two children, a little smiley girl and a football-crazed ten-year-old boy had accepted their secondary status with good grace and patience that belied their ages. They didn't complain either, even when their mother reserved all the choice food for their ailing cousin. They understood. Because of all these sacrifices, I for a moment thought we had made a different arrangement for him and had somehow forgotten about it. Then it sank in. He was dead. At thirteen, his disease-ravaged body had given up the fight.

There was very little of him left in the end. He had always been small. He had developed to the size of an average five-year-old and grew no further, so at thirteen he was no bigger than he had been at five. He could not hold down any food or drink. His eyes were the only part of him that remained alert. He could still speak, and he did with the gruffness and wisdom of an old man, deliberately and slowly as if he was pondering every word. He would sit in an armchair, propped up by pillows and wrapped in a blanket. He would be reading a leather-bound bible, flicking the pages with a shaking, bony finger. 'The First Book of Samuel' he would tell me. It was always The First Book of Samuel. I would sit next to him, listening to his shaky voice reciting the verses, with tears falling unbidden down my cheeks. The last time I had seen him, he had rebuked me. 'Don't cry, *amai*', he'd said wiping the tears from my eyes. 'We all have to leave this world sometime'.

The way he was so understanding and grown up about his impending death was more painful than the fact of the death. I was the adult, the one who should have

been trying to find the right words to explain how everyone has to leave this world sometime.

Things happened in a blur after that. I did things in a semi-conscious state – I went to the police station to collect the police officer; they didn't have fuel to attend to the death. I drove him back to the station later and then went to buy a coffin at *Mbare Musika* – one of those they make while you wait. We couldn't move his body without a coffin. I was sure the police commissioner makes a cut from the coffin makers because This was a ridiculous regulation in a country where many people can't rub two coins together. I ferried the body to the hospital. Then I arranged the transport from Harare to the rural home so he could be laid to rest next to his father. Most of this was later recounted to me by various relatives who also told me I had a silly argument over someone's husband choosing to eat his lunch in the car rather than by the fire with everyone else. He was shy, they told me. I have a vague memory of glaring angrily at this woman, whose face I can't remember, and having a whispered row with the husband, whom I can't remember either. 'We thought you were going to throw the plate of *sadza* in his face' a friend later told me.

What I do remember is the Catholic hymn that people were singing over and over again on the day of the burial. We are not Catholic, and the people gathered there would have known that. Tafadzwa wasn't either. His father's people were *Mapostori*, *Johanne Masowe WeChishanu*-John the Baptist followers. They only sing hymns that are based on stories from the Old Testament. I was annoyed. I hadn't and still haven't reconciled to the idea of Mary taking the place of our ancestors in interceding on Tafadzwa's behalf. I can't remember if they had been singing it when we arrived but, from that time, one person would keep the call going and another would take over when the last person got tired. It was on a loop. '*Amai Maria*,

*mwana wenyu uyu'* (Mother Mary, here welcome your child). I thought it wasn't fair of God if he expected an explanation of or a request for forgiveness from a child who had only known pain — the pain of losing both his parents and then realising that he was going to die young. I had the uneasy feeling that this would confuse the rightful intercessors and leave his soul roaming aimlessly forever. For as long as I could remember, the conflict between ancestral worship and Christianity always created interesting dilemmas at all important ceremonies. People try to cover all bases, but anything else other than that song would have been acceptable to me.

It troubles me now that that is what is imprinted in my mind about his funeral. Sometimes, when I relax my guard, I get an impotent anger. Tafadzwa was my child. I had looked after him from when he was a baby. I had sat with him through nights when the pain was too much for his little body. I can't remember the graveyard or the grave. I remember a bit about his dad's death although I wasn't there. I remember about his mum too; I was there at the hospital with her. I think I do, but did I leave the hospital already aware that she had died, got home and waited for the phone call from the doctor and then started crying?

As soon as I started talking, telling the woman not to cry, that I was on my way and would arrange everything, I knew the day had come. I knew from this day on; I would never cry again. I resolved that until a time when the government could be called to account for destroying the health system and for keeping all the ARVs for themselves and their families and selling the rest, at exorbitant prices, there was no use in shedding tears. Funerals continued to happen with such regularity it was hard to keep up, there was still no food in the shops, there was no guarantee your home would still be your home tomorrow, and Tafadzwa was gone, but his death had shown me that the future needed a different strategy.



## Freedom

I'm not scared. I am breathing easily and evenly, not hyperventilating and feeling as though I am suffocating. I'm a little surprised at first. I am usually resigned to numbing terror, and panic. I often feel my throat closing up, trapping my screams in my chest. My limbs refuse to take any commands from my brain so I can't even blink or close my eyes. I have an odd sense that something else is missing, something that often completes the experience. It only takes me an instant to realise what it is. It is the revolting mixture of smells. How could I have missed it! I realise that what is missing is the rotting-food-smell of *masese* that sometimes has me thinking I'm the one who's thrown up and am smelling my own vomit. There is also the pungent tobacco smell of the snuff that he sniffs and rubs on the gums. It is the most retch inducing habit I have encountered in a person. I have no understanding of why anybody would think it was a pleasurable thing to do. This always has me in spasms of sneezing. Snuff clings to clothes, and curtains, and melds with the dusty surfaces of the room until everything smells of tobacco. The dead-body-smell that comes with working at the factory is not even as bad as the snuff because a lot of fathers smell the same. A lot of men in the village work at the shoe factory. You get used to that smell easily. He must have taken a bath. I don't smell stale sweat and other bodily fluids. I detect a hint of Old Spice and the delicate fragrance of the flame lilies that grow wild in our back yard. The carbolic smell is all me. I like using Lifebuoy soap.

I'm in control. I even lie with my elbow propping up my head. There is just a calm that makes time and everything else meaningless. I am smiling and imagining that I am Aphrodite and he is Hephaestus. I might even have lifted the hem of my

skirt a few inches up. But still, I watch his every move. He is lying on his stomach on the concrete floor relaxed, confident, and jovial. He is even making small talk.

‘I’ve been thinking, dhiya,’ he says, and rolls on his back to look up at the ceiling. Although I hate the familiarity of ‘dear’ I let it be.

I watch him with an unfamiliar fascination. There’s a hint of brown trickling from his nose which matches the yellowy-brown staining of his teeth. I’m trying to reimagine his face, wipe the trickle away, brush the teeth, pin the ears back and perhaps make the mouth a little smaller – it’s the smile that ruins it for him. He is almost handsome until he smiles his big mouth and lion-sized teeth grin. Then he looks like a donkey braying.

He rolls over to look at me.

‘In fact, I have been wondering,’ he continues, slithering towards me on his stomach. He stretches his hand to touch my face. He does that a lot – calling me his sweet pea and asking his mother for forgiveness.

Usually, I am off the floor, screaming and scratching him with my nails. I could scream and scratch now. I just get up and walk to the window. There are people in the house next door; there are always a lot of people around. I think I can see Ma is there too. They are all sitting around a coffee table eating, chatting and laughing, like they do on T.V. I believe they are playing a game. I start to shout at the top of my voice and wave.

‘Help! Help! Help!’

Someone looks at the window for a few seconds and then goes back to whatever it is they were doing. I can see some people sitting around a fire, eating *maputi* in the garden. I shout even louder, ‘I’m here, please, someone rescue me!’



But the festivities continue, no one can see me, or maybe they can but have decided not to help.

I decide I don't need them anyway. I run to the other window, facing the street. I look down the road. My father is coming. He is lugging something behind him. I manage to undo the latch and run out to meet him. I am not frantic. I speak in a quiet but confident voice.

I say, 'He's tried it again and I'm going to report him to the police'.

'Ok', my father says. 'I will come with you.' Fathers are understanding and supportive.

I am not sure what happens or how it happens while we wait for the police. I think my father takes charge. I decide that the police should arrest them both together, so I walk five houses down the street to effect a citizen's arrest of the man's son. Some men help me to apprehend him and frogmarch him to the police station.

'He's a very bad man, they both are', I tell them.

I sit down on a chair just outside to wait for the police so I can tell them everything.

'Thandi!' Ma's voice rings out. She must be coming to be with me as well while we wait for the police to arrive.

My eyes open at the same time as my response. 'Ma!' I call out. Birds are singing, someone is snoring next to me, and I have a cramp in my leg.

Slowly, ever so slowly, I can feel fear rising from the pit of my stomach. I think I am going to be sick. I still hurt from the last time, and I think when it happens again, I'll probably suffocate. In an hour Ma leaves to go and sell boiled eggs at the bus terminus. We don't have a father; we have never had one. My brother leaves for school soon after Ma, and I will then be all on my own.

He will come to the door before Ma has even turned the corner and motion with his finger, leering, laughing, eyes blazing. I will cower under Ma's bed, but he seems to find that entertaining. He will pull me from under the bed, do it again, and tell me to take a shower afterwards. He will then go to work, and his son will come for me.

I don't tell anyone. I will never tell.

It was a variation of the dream she had every night. This was the one where she calls the police and the man, and his son get arrested. In this version, she knows her father and can see his handsome smiling face. She sees him walking down the road carrying a brown briefcase because he has an important job at the factory and doesn't have the dead-body smell clinging to his clothes. This image is a conflation of the stately Roman Catholic priest and the kindly music teacher at her old school. She had never known who her father was. In the other version of the dream, her father is a small balding man who is afraid of the abuser so hands her over to him when he comes to ask. She was going to get dressed and leave the house before anyone could come for her. She would risk her mother's anger that she hadn't done any chores during the day by spending at her friend's house. Her friend's mother doesn't have to work because they have a father who works in an office.

## **Waiting**

The woman just turned up at the house one morning. That was not unusual in itself. People turn up at other people's houses without invitation or warning. All the time. It is even more usual in Dhulivadzimu, being so close to the border post. It was little wonder that the Vha Venda gods and ancestral spirits had chosen this dusty, barren gorge as their dwelling place. It is as if they had known that this is where all their benevolence and guidance would be most needed. Always.

There are always aunties, uncles, cousin brothers, cousin sisters or acquaintances from the same village back home in need of a place to rest the night, to take a shower and have a hot meal before they attempt the crossing in the morning. There are also always other cousin brothers, friends of friends and former school mates in need of a place to rest after the crossing back into Zimbabwe before their long journeys back home. Friends, family and acquaintances do not require invitation and they don't give advance notice of their arrival.

Noma had woken up well before the street came to life. That's what she did every day, had been doing for several weeks. She hoped that this would be the morning she would at least be able to master whatever it is that she needed to master to catch up with some paperwork, maybe to just open the box and pick out a file, just one file and perhaps flick it open, just to the first page. Munashe had long stopped reminding her about deadlines. Now he only called to say hello from the girls and everyone at the office and call if you need anything and no, George doesn't mind taking on more cases for a few more weeks. she could detect something in his voice – a bit more pronounced each week. Someone once told her that the only thing worse than 'not coping' is for other people to know that you are not coping.

So, that morning when she had ‘pulled myself together’, she went to open the curtains and let some of the new dawn into my living room. There was no package or unusual object outside – just an orange-gold horizon, with the sun beginning to peep through, and a woman approaching from the street, clutching a handbag under her armpit. There had not been another object since the rag doll several days earlier, but she found herself checking the *stoep* every few hours. That was the reason she started to work more and more from home, she reasoned, to be sure there was nothing there.

The woman didn’t see the curtain move so Noma watched her for a few seconds. The outside light came on automatically whenever there was movement within five metres of the door. One of the ‘security features’ she had added to her brother’s house since moving in.

The woman walked like a beautiful person. Maybe she had been beautiful once. She took long strides, her shoulders straight and head poised upright although the floral summer dress she wore was so well-worn that the patterns had faded to just blotches of grey. Her shoes were dusty and torn at the front, so you could see all her toes peeking out. The handbag she hugged close to her body was however a *Dori*, the oval ‘*Dori genuine leather*’ label clearly visible just next to the clasp.

Her dark eyes had a red puffiness to the lids. She could have been any age, but she had deep lines on her brow, on her cheeks, around the mouth. The scars on her face could have been tribal markings if there was a pattern to them. And her eyes had no expression in them; her whole look was that of someone who had been travelling through the night and for a very long time before that.

She paused when she got to the *stoep*, unsure.

Noma's first instinct was to call someone. But who could she call? What would she say anyway? That there was a woman at the door? She could just be a weary traveller, someone's aunt, looking for a place to rest awhile.

Noma didn't get more time to decide what to do as the woman started knocking, hesitantly at first but more urgent with each knock. Her dress and shoes reassured Noma. Besides she didn't look like she was going to leave anything on the *stoep*.

Slowly, ever so slowly, Noma opened the door.

"Ehe?" she was trying hard not to let the tremor in her body reach the voice. "Ehe?" was a lame greeting but she couldn't think what else to say. She searched the woman's eyes but there was nothing there.

"Some women lent me these," the woman explained in a matter-of-fact tone. Noma must have been staring.

"Sorry, can I help you? Do you want to come in?" Noma said trying not to look at the woman's face either. She didn't ask why the women had given her the clothes as she was afraid of what the answer might be. Would she say someone had stripped her and sent her out onto the streets naked and that some women had seen her and given her some clothes to cover her nakedness? It was even more unsettling that Noma knew somehow that the woman had not walked out of her house naked and these women had forced her to wear the clothes for decency and to stop her from falling foul of the law.

After a brief hesitation the woman answered, flashing a quick nervous smile, "Thank you. I am sorry to trouble you, but I didn't know where else to go." She quickly glanced down the road in both directions. Noma couldn't stop herself doing the same.

“They said you would help,” it sounded like a question. “You know... at the centre,” she added.

Noma stepped aside and let her in. She made a pot of tea and settled down on the sofa across from her.

In a tone that might have been her appearance given a voice, the woman told her story. “So, I wanted you to have these papers, just in case ... in case something can be done,” she concluded shrugging her shoulders and handing the bag over. Noma thought she saw a half-light in her eyes then, like the lambent red reflection you catch off a deer’s eyes on the highway in the dark. She was torn between needing to know what had actually happened and a self-preservation instinct — maybe this time, not knowing enough was best and maybe she had not pulled herself together enough to out-reason her instinct, so she let it go. But she looked troubled and confused so the woman added, ‘There is a whole lifetime ahead. Isn’t there?’

Noma watched the woman walk out looking a little less peculiar without the handbag. Had the blotches been black or blue when the dress was new?

Noma sat on the sofa for a long time after the woman left. Outside, the sky was burning, and the street was pulsing. She could hear the distant drone of a car engine left running, a woman singing a lullaby and the unmistakable and not unfamiliar sounds of a domestic quarrel gone too far. A cat meowed somewhere close by; Hugh Masekela was singing about freedom and smashed hopes on the radio; and two, maybe three drunken discordant voices were crooning in accompaniment to him. There was a sudden explosion of laughter which sounded like it was coming from the next room.

The noises from the street always reassured her, until the light started to fade outside, making all the shapes — the houses, the cars in front of the houses, the trees,

the shrubs and the hedges — grey and vague. Then she would start waiting for morning again.

Noma still has the handbag, locked away in a drawer in her bedroom. She's still working from home. There was an earthenware pot on her *stoep* the other day. Her friends think that she should leave the country, go somewhere, anywhere and become part of the famed diaspora.

She oftentimes found herself imagining what she would give as her reasons for seeking asylum if she took her friends' advice. She would have to give a strong reason, evidence and all that. In her case, all she had was, 'I fear for my life because I have been finding things on my front *stoep*'.

'What sort of things?'

'Like... like a rag doll, a scarf, a...a...an earthenware pot and... And there was a wooden spoon one time'.

'Why should some neighbour or a secret admirer leaving you nice presents on your door step make you think someone wants to kill you?'

At other times it went like this:

'I fear for my life because... I mean, a woman was raped by some men, soldiers, police maybe and left some documents with me to look after'.

'What are the documents and what do they say?'

'I don't know. I haven't read them'.

'If the woman was raped by some men, as you say, why should someone want to kill you?'

‘There are more women, and men and children, and I have other papers, with names and dates ...’

People gossiped that vidence and proof were not always enough to get an asylum claims approved. Believability.

She convinced herself that it was probably best to wait for the election. Surely, the madness would stop. Until then, all she could do was — check that the door was locked and go back to waiting for dawn knowing that the day ahead would just be the same.



## The Lizard

I wake up to a commotion outside on the street. I strain my ears and hold my breath. It is something I do very well. I usually listen for a few seconds then jump up shouting 'fight' or 'accident' or whatever I figure the noise to be. I'm usually right. Uncle and Ma do it too, but they don't jump up and bolt out of the door like they have been stung by *shungushungu*. Uncle ambles out a little while after me, a frown of feigned irritation on his face, looking like he is going to ask what the fuss is all about and tell everyone to go home or to take their noise somewhere else. But he doesn't.

To understand what the commotion is about quickly, you need to approach the heart of the racket the way Uncle does, deliberately, listening to what people around are saying and cautiously, in case you need to run away at short notice, but I hate missing the beginnings of things and then having to rely on other people to fill in the gaps. Other people always manage to make themselves part of the story. That's how people, adults, retell what happened. They'll say, "I was just washing my husband's uniform. He is a soldier as you know..." or, "I had just sat down to eat my lunch, I was early today. I'm usually still cooking at this time " Sometimes they get so lost in their own story that I don't get to know what happened because in their story they might see a love rival in the crowd of people watching the action you missed and start to tell you about all the things she has been saying about them and how they are going to have it out with her in front of everyone, one of these days. If you manage to steer them back towards what you want to know, then they just say, "Then I heard the Santana arrive and I went back to my washing. Can you believe it? Those naughty Shumba boys knocked my pail over and ran away laughing. I'll

have to have a word with their father. He should teach his children some manners instead of letting them run loose in the township. Why doesn't he have a wife anyway?" I would have to just stand there and listen because you can't walk away when your elders are still talking. So, although I like gossip myself, I prefer to see events as they happen and listen to gossip when nothing else is happening.

Ma comes out of the house last, always. She does so when she is sure there are other women already there. She almost always has to rely on me to tell her what's happened, so all she gets is, "Some policemen came to arrest the Rastas at number 1429. The Rastas at number 1429 refused to get arrested, so people booed and chased the policemen away. Then a Santana came with more policemen, and that's when you came out." She gets the abridged version all the time because she doesn't want people to think that she is a gossipmonger so she nods too vigorously and says 'hooo, hooo, hooo' so loudly I tell her the story in one breath.

Comotions are not uncommon in the Township. Also, our house is a T-junction house, directly in front of where two roads — Liboho Road, and the gravel road with no name, come together. There is no sign saying our road is Liboho Road, but father says the papers that came with the house said our address is 1431 Liboho Road. No one is sure where the plaque stood or whether there had ever been one, but the most accepted and retold story is that *Mapostori* stole the sign for scrap metal a few days after it had been installed. Mapostori love scrap metal — perhaps something to do with living off the land like the Apostle John the Baptist whose teachings they follow. So, although no one has seen the sign or my father's or anybody else's papers, our road is called Liboho and the gravel road has no name. I have even given our address to a pen pal in Czechoslovakia as 1431, Liboho Road, Mkoba Township, Gweru, Zimbabwe, Africa, The World.

My mother is always dusting the furniture while humming tunelessly. She had wanted a corner house. The dust from the gravel road clings to everything in the house and the patch of the street directly in front of our house is also the meeting place for people who live on the two streets. It is the arena for all the dramas that happen on the two roads and sometimes commotions from nearby streets find their resolution in front of our house as well. This is how I have become an expert on the sounds of the street. Also, you just have to learn, at an early age because if for instance, your fourteen-year-old friends call for you to come out and play *pada* or *nhodo* and they sound too nice, like they're pleading then you know that if you do go out, you have to be prepared to fight and not to play *nhodo* or *pada*. It means that something has happened, and you have lost a friend somewhere between the last game the previous day and waking up in the morning. Otherwise their normal call to play is impatient and full of threats to come out quickly or the game will start without you. Reading the noises of the street is a matter of life and death, my brother, Chipiwa says. "The hunter must identify with exactness the various sounds heard in the forest." In the fourteen years I've been alive and lived on this street I have almost become as good as my brother.

A single long piercing whistle, from the back of the house, just after supper, seems to be his call to go out hunting. I have never seen the whistler of this long, piercing whistle but I think whoever it is must have been a cattle herder at some point in his life. Chipiwa doesn't make it back until long after we have gone to sleep. A similar sounding whistle, during the day, is for my sister, Chiedza, to put Vaseline on her lips, a bit of black shoe polish on her eyebrows and wear her best shoes before going out. I have often wondered if the cattle herder and Chiedza's whistler are the same person. She gets back in time to make supper, which she does smiling to

herself. I don't care about hunting or the single whistlers. It's the thunderous cheering, booing and chorus of whistling — definite indications of a fight, a brawl or a scantily dressed woman walking down the street — I don't want to miss. Sometimes when its women fighting, they might tear each other's clothes off, or something unusual might fall out of a bra. Occasionally when nothing else is happening, children will follow a mad person and cheer, boo and whistle anytime the mad person makes faces, dances or makes sudden, threatening movements. Sometimes it's when a husband has found his wife with another man and makes the man leave the house naked while beating him. The husband might allow other people to join in with the beating, especially if the naked man is fighting back. If it's a woman who has found her husband with another woman, then the other women don't wait to be asked to help. They just join in, to teach the mistress not to steal other women's husbands. A husband and wife fighting is a 'domestic'. There is laughing and cheering, but no one tries to stop them. Even the police come and park their Santana a distance away, get out, lounge against the bonnet and pull their caps down low to stop themselves from cheering.

Raucous laughter, whistling and even louder cheering means there is a police chase — one or two policemen chasing a pickpocket or a shoplifter with a huge crowd of mostly children and young men following at a distance shouting '*mbavha, mbavha!*'. The laughter is because the police officers, usually fat and unfit are out of breath and will not catch the thief. The cheering makes it more fun, like at a football match.

Singing and drumming mixed with shouting from one person is a religious revival, *mvuserero*. The various churches are all agreed that our township is the modern-day Sodom and Gomorrah so they often, at different times, on different

days, parade through the streets singing, get to a corner and stop. One person will start to shout, imploring people to turn to the Lord and be saved, for the second coming is nigh.

The loud exchanges between two women quarrelling over whose turn it is to sweep the yard or apply *cobra* on the veranda, dogs barking, children laughing, a street vendor shouting his wares and someone playing Gregory Isaacs on a ghetto blaster means everything is ok, there is nothing unusual happening. You could go outside and lean on your gate or sit on the metal bin and wait for something exciting to happen.

Complete silence means you don't go outside, or you take extra care if you do. Usually, only Uncle goes out to investigate. He doesn't do it immediately. He will hesitate until Ma laughs her spiteful laugh and then he will straighten himself to his full height and walk out as if he was marching at a parade.

People in our township spend a lot of time outside, on the streets, on street corners but particularly in front of our house, it seems to Ma. They only gather indoors when someone is going to die. Then, they wait and talk amongst each other in hushed tones. Once the waiting is over the women then go outside wailing and throwing themselves to the ground.

Every important discussion and information exchange happen on a street corner. The street corner adds much more credence to a piece of information than a courtroom, the news or church. I know this because everyone knows that in court you just say you know nothing, and you haven't done the thing that they say you have done and swear on your dead mother's grave even though she's still alive. That is what Uncle says. He knows about the law. He had a big book about the law which

his wife used to hold down the tablecloth on the outside table where she used to sell boiled eggs and oranges. She is dead, and Uncle lives with us now.

People don't trust what they hear in church either although they flock to the different churches throughout the weekend: *Johanne Masowe yeChishanu* (John the Baptist Friday), *Johanne Masowe yeMugovera* (John the Baptist Saturday) and all the other mainstream Saturday and Sunday varieties, Catholic, Methodist, and Salvation Army. Ma says you have to have someone to bury you with dignity when you die, and that church people know how to do that very well. So, everyone goes to church. I was in church once when a man, moved by the spirit to witness and bring his sins before the Lord and lay them bare, confessed to having done all sorts of horrible deeds before he found the Lord. "I was a fornicator" he had said to tut-tutting and shaking of heads. "I was a murderer" to more tut-tutting and head-shaking. "I was a robber". No one looked horrified or shocked. Instead, the congregation had burst into "Lord Jesus take my heart and wash it until it is as white as the cold," singing jovially and stamping their feet. Everyone knows that church is not a place for telling or hearing the truth, so no one asked him who he had murdered or who he had fornicated with. If he had, in the course of socialising at a street corner, told a friend or a neighbour all the horrid things he said he'd done the response would have been different. There would have been whispers, people would have crossed the street to avoid meeting the murderer and fornicator and an attempt would have been made to convince the police to investigate.

People don't believe the news either. They watch the evening news and immediately go out onto the street to compare their reading of the events presented. "It's ZBC, your one and only family, favourite station!" one of them will say, "what do you expect?"

"BBC, CNN, ZBC, all the same. All of them liars" someone else will say.

At which point the first one will say, "The ZBC doesn't have to lie to us. We can see it with our own two eyes."

"At least ZBC lies are our lies and not Britain's lies,"

This will go on for a long time, until someone else says "Ecclesiastes one verse two, vanity of vanities, and all is vanity", in English, and then it will be time to go in. It is the same every evening.

Our house has most of the benefits of a corner house without being one. The only thing we don't have that most corner houses have is a bigger garden. We also forego the benefit of not having neighbours on one side. I still think our house is better than most corner houses in the township because a small bridge, a culvert actually, runs over a small, stagnant gully that cuts across the gravel road without a name. A concrete bridge, however small, with small concrete ledges on either side gives our T-junction a status almost equal to that of a crossroad. Men sit on the ledges and talk for hours. Sometimes someone's wife, mother or sister brings out roast peanuts and *mahewu* for the men to drink. We can play on the street, but us girls are not allowed to stand at a street corner for long periods in the same way the boys can go to the shops but are not allowed to play *slaag*. We can however sit on the ledge during the day because Ma can see where we are from the window. We can sit there until the men start coming back from work and we have to go back inside.

Although the gully underneath the bridge floods in the rainy season, for most of the year it is dry, and my father burns our rubbish in there. There is a bit of water in the gully from the thunderstorm the previous week; it is just nearing the end of the rainy season. The commotion outside is because a monitor lizard has been

spotted in the gully. The lizard must have been washed in during the thunderstorm. My father would say that.

Monitor lizards, like hyenas, are associated with witchcraft. Hyenas are said to be ridden by witches at night for transport from one witching job to another. I found out about this on a bus one afternoon. The bus had failed to stop at a rail crossing. A woman asked the driver "*Ko nhai mukwasha, ko* you didn't stop at the rail crossing?"

"Did the hyena you were riding last night stop at the rail crossing?" No one had said anything after that.

As for monitor lizards, no one I've asked can explain a clear association to witchcraft. Monitor lizards are rare anyway, in the city, almost unheard of. Some *born location*. People who have never been to the rurals have never seen one. The only bad thing I've heard is that they love to steal milk from livestock, depriving hungry families of precious milk from their goats or cows. I find this both revolting and terrifying. I imagine that the cow or goat must be horrified when they realise that a different species is suckling from their breasts.

On this early morning, when I bolt outside to see what the commotion is about I do it too quickly and people square their shoulders and elbows, so I can't quite see anything. The crowd is unusually big. The men with jobs have not left for work yet. Someone tells me it's a very big lizard. People are standing in clumps talking. A man, in khaki trousers and safari shirt, is at the centre of the crowd, someone tells me. I can hear him.

"I was on my way to work. I've never been late in all my life. This is not a good sign. My enemies have sent this lizard, so I can lose my job. Oh, my poor mother, how...how am I going to look after my poor mother?"



"Stick to the point VaMakhaki", someone shouts, and he gets back to the story.

He had come out of the house and locked the door. As he turned to start walking down the road, he caught a glance of something moving in the water. At first, he'd thought it was a crocodile. The crowd bursts out laughing.

Uncle, who knows a lot of things because he passed his Standard Six and always wants to take charge of situations, has already gone back into the house and called the wildlife and forestry commission all because a few people were beginning to clamour for the killing of the lizard. He is a spoil sport.

"It's a criminal offense", he warns them, in English.

Another group of watchers are speaking in whispers, their heads together, a little way away from the main crowd. I can only hear the words ZESA, occasionally. ZESA is the electricity supply authority but, if you live in our section of the township, Zesa is the nickname given to an old woman who people suspect of being a witch. She had been run out of her rural home and resigned to continually starting over in different townships. Her family had been 'Muzorewa's people' *madzakudzaku*, when Zimbabwe had been Zimbabwe-Rhodesia for a few months in 1979. That's what everyone says. Muzorewa had become prime-minister for a few months after coming to some agreement with Ian Smith. Although Muzorewa had disappeared into obscurity soon after independence, those who had supported his politics of compromise were forever tarnished, with no hope for forgiveness. They were *madzakudzaku*, traitors to be despised unto death. They could not just disappear into obscurity into some low-density suburb like Muzorewa. She could have kept running, gone where nobody knew her and started afresh again but she had

grandchildren who needed her now. Their parents had long disappeared to places where no one knew or would ever know Muzorewa.

I don't think anyone knows for sure that the old woman had been a Muzorewa supporter, but she is ancient and rarely smiles. She has a long, haggard face which makes me think of a crocodile or a monitor lizard every time I see her. It is not so much the folds of her wrinkly skin but her eyes, big, grey and lifeless. I think that many people who dislike her do so because they don't understand why so many people die young in the township and she doesn't. They know about AIDS and alcohol, everyone does. They don't know what to do about AIDS and alcohol but at least they can get rid of witches. That's what my history teacher had said. "History is full of women condemned for daring to outlive the men in their lives" she'd said.

I smile at the old woman whenever our paths cross, willing her to do the same. If she smiles, I think, people might forgive her the Muzorewa thing. I want her to smile and shout a cheery 'hello', and then people might forget. I think she is a harmless, old woman who has no reason to be cheerful. I can't say this to anyone. They might think I'm a witch too.

By the time the man in the khaki suit finishes his story the smaller, separate group have already decided what they are going to do.

Shouting, mixed with singing, is the noise I fear most. It is the sound of an actual hunt, a group of people, usually the youth wing of a political party, singing *Chimurenga* songs until they spot the enemy. They stop singing and shout at the person to stop or to come out of their house. There might then follow catcalls and cheering — and prolonged screaming. It means a *perm* — chasing, general harassment, humiliation, beatings and burning of houses — is in progress.

*Chimurenga* songs are the songs that won liberation war against the British, everyone knows this. I love *Chimurenga* songs, the rhythm and the *toyi toyi* dancing that goes with the singing. Everyone loves *Chimurenga* songs but I only like to see them sung on TV on national days of commemoration, like on Independence Day. When the breakaway group starts singing ‘*mupanduki chera mwena, mupanduki nguva yakwana*’ (traitor dig a hole, traitor, your time is up) I know a *perm* has started and rush back inside, wonder if the old woman will survive the *perm*.

**Where the Rain began to Beat us**

*Is it true the ribs can tell the kick of a beast from a lover's fist? –May Angelou*

## **Mushrooms for my Mother**

I remember not to stop at the *robots* at the intersection of Charter Road and Cripps Road as I have been advised. You don't want to stop there, I've been told. I go through a red *robot* as a result. On my right, I drive past the former 'whites only' cemetery and further ahead, to the left I can already see Matapi Hostels. It is Matapi; I know it is because it can't be anything else. The graffiti on the walls, the broken windows, (or iron sheets, plywood, plastics and cardboard boxes instead) the mounds of rubbish blocking doorways and the suffocating collage of smells leave me in no doubt that I am going in the right direction. I wonder if I should call Themba, let him know what I have decided to do but I don't. I drive on. My hands are sweaty and a little shaky so I grip the steering wheel tighter. Ditches filled with raw sewage dot the road and have to be negotiated with care as it is not easy to tell how deep they are just by watching the car in front.

The last time I came to Mbare my father had clenched his hand over my little wrist so hard all I could think about was when we were going to get to where we were going. That was more than twenty years ago. I have been told that all the different sections are easy to identify and that if I get lost, I would be the first one. Once I turn right into Remembrance Drive, I am sandwiched by the second-hand clothes market Mupedzanhamo on one side and the hostels on the other. Mupedzanhamo is sea upon sea of chaotic piles of clothes laid out on mats on the dusty ground. The locals have given it the grandiose name *Kotamai* Boutique, which means in Shona 'bend over'. The first rays of the sun are only just beginning to touch the corrugated iron roofs but there are already customers ferreting in the heaps of clothes like chickens in the dust. I smile, for the first time in a few days. I don't feel

happy though. My thoughts keep drifting uneasily to Themba. Besides, I am a bit ashamed that I have never been to Mbare before despite recommending it as a ‘must see’ to visiting friends and then pouring over their photographs with the same interest I reserve for *The National Geographic*.

I should be feeling scared but for some reason I am not even worried about where to leave the car. Reports of how people come back from shopping at the market to find their cars sitting on bricks, all wheels gone, are so regular I almost know for sure I am giving the wheels and other parts of the car up. I park across the road from the market, in the residential section. I pick a space between two shacks. In spite of the sun, they don’t look less drab than the hundreds of other assorted colourless tenements crouching in the gloom but the space looks big enough. A few paces away, a group of hard-faced youths smoke marijuana and take turns drinking from a *scud*. They pause to look at me and at the car and go back to gambling their day away. Two skimpily dressed women who had started to walk towards the car when I park curse and turn back to reclaim their posts when they see me get out.

I have no idea how I am going to find the Muzarabani bound buses’ terminal or get a timetable but I step over the puddles to cross the road. I walk past an old woman and almost stop her to ask until I notice that the baby on her back is a chicken. I know I would not have been able not to stare so I let her disappear towards the shacks.

There are people everywhere haggling over prices in high-pitched singsong voices. I pick my way past a fenced-up area. The stench of putrefying fruit and vegetable flag it as the wholesale fruit and vegetable section. Subsistence and small-scale farmers from the surrounding semi-rural or semi-urban areas (I have never known which it is) sell agricultural produce from here. Different kinds of fruit, grain,

grain meal, beans and vegetables, including *mufushwa* in all imaginable containers are laid out on the ground from one side of the farmer's market to the other. I take a deep breath when I finally leave this din behind, feeling a tinge of envy. It is as if it isn't the twentieth of March, as if they can't see the posters advertising the fact that an election is only a few days away. "*Kusi kufa ndokupi?*" is how one young man I interviewed for a piece I'm writing for a foreign magazine explained it to me. 'Either way, you end up dead, isn't it?'

Next to the farmers' market is the bigger 'one stop' market where one can buy factory and hand-made clothing, school uniforms, flip flops, electrical equipment, herbs and medicines, crafts, leather and other specialized products. Anything really. You can buy back your stuff when it gets stolen. How that works I can't get my head around but they say if your house got burgled and you came to Mbare you could negotiate to buy the stuff back as it would invariably have ended up here. In this maze of stalls and booths made of corrugated iron and timber I see a hand-painted sign that reads '*International Traditional Healer-AIDS, marriage problems, abortions and everything, 24hrs*' hanging in front of a booth where a man sits surrounded by bottles of unidentifiable objects floating in tea-coloured liquid, bits of horn, animal skins, and bowls filled with various pale-coloured powders. I stop to look and almost bump into a woman balancing a basket on her head.

A woman stirs a huge drum of *sadza* in one corner and several more sit behind piles of peanuts, selling scoops of them measured in '*Killem*' can caps. Besides the markets, there are wandering vendors selling everything from posters to perfume. A man approaches me shoving a bottle in my face. "Buy perfume madam ... smell good for husband ... genuine stuff," there is a mixture of desperation and sadness in his eyes.



The 'one stop' market is next to the bus terminus. The Mbare Musika terminus is the major bus station for rural bound and incoming transport. Buses to other towns and cities also leave from Mbare. There is even a section in the terminus for buses to Malawi, Zambia, Botswana and South Africa. I am only going to Muzarabani on a *chicken bus*. It is less conspicuous than the Benz C 180 Kompressor that was my fortieth present from Themba. I don't intend to draw attention to myself or my mother. I just need to see her. It is urgent for me that I see her before the elections and I have also been increasingly thinking about leaving the country.

The bus station surprises me by how suddenly I come upon it. As there are no signposts one suddenly comes upon a mayhem of buses of all colours and types pulling in and out of the terminus and a tremendous noise from their honking, the engines running, conductors accosting potential passengers, vendors advertising their wares and relatives and friends shouting their goodbyes. The terminus is even more packed with people. I have heard about the dexterity with which pockets and handbags can be relieved of their contents in the muddle so I hug my bag closer.

I need not have worried about a timetable and the specific stop for my bus. A *windi* (the locals call conductors *windi* because of their penchant for hanging out of moving vehicle windows to tout their routes) accosts me as soon as I cross the boundary between the market and the bus terminal. He asks me where I am going. I straighten my shoulders and tell him Muzarabani. No sooner have I said that than I am pulled in all different directions by four or five *windi* who have suddenly appeared and now surround me. One of them grabs my bag and manages to drag me through a maze of buses and to literally hoist me onto a bus, stepping over a man pulling a goat on a string and trying to negotiate the goat's bus fare with the driver. As soon as I sit down a ticket is quickly written out for me to ensure I don't change

my mind. The buses work on the principle of not leaving the terminus until all the seats are taken and there is no standing room. All I care about is that I am going to Muzarabani to see my mother. Even as I wait for the bus to fill up, I don't call Themba.

When the Kombi minibus stops a third time, I don't even take my eyes from *The Daily News* I'm reading. It's a week old but the journey is long and the minibus unreliable. Apart from the peeling paint, the passenger door that is held in place by a piece of string and the gaping holes where the headlights once were, the minibus sputters and leaves a trail of grey smoke for miles. Sheu, the driver, jokes that the old VW Kombi is as temperamental as his wife. He isn't married. I don't find that or the 'GET IN, SIT DOWN, SHUT UP & HANG ON' sticker on the dashboard funny.

In the morning, when I first see the minibus, I consider not getting on. It is the look in my mother's eyes when she says, 'You have to go *mwanangu*, it's not safe here', that decides the matter. She had wanted me to leave as soon as I got off the bus yesterday. 'You don't know what they do to people from the city here', she looked annoyed. I had wanted her to say, 'I'm glad you came, my child', and to erase the last ten years into nothing and make it 1997 again. Instead, she just wrenched the small bag I was carrying, almost ripping my shoulder out of its socket, turned away and walked back into the hut. 'You have to leave tomorrow, first thing,' she said, not looking at me.

I have no choice. The next bus back to Harare is only expected in another couple of days. Most bus companies terminated services to rural destinations as soon as the date for the presidential election was announced. The collective national

curfew is half self-imposed and half implicit in the consequences faced by those who try to ignore the announcement and continue as normal, until they get beaten up by the Green Bombers for being out on the streets or in beer halls after 6pm. Those caught travelling across towns and cities or from the cities to the rural areas face even worse punishments. They are accused of travelling to go and indoctrinate rural folk with their ‘Western education inspired hatred of the dear leader and the state. I know I’m risking becoming an enemy of the state to see my mother before the election.

I realise that the minibus had not broken down again when I hear banging and shouting.

“Everybody out,” a gravelly voice shouts.

We all scramble up. We are at a roadblock –an unusual spot for a roadblock and an unusual way for the traffic police to conduct themselves. This I do not remark to the man standing next to me, waiting for the people in the front seats to get out first. The look on his face stopped me. He slowly and deliberately shifts his gaze to the front of the minibus and almost imperceptibly thrusts his head forward. I follow his gaze. There is a big log, a few branches and a pile of stones in the middle of the road. Also, there is nothing to suggest why this might be a good place for a roadblock. There is no bend in the road or other natural features that would prevent easy avoidance, and there is no safe place to park vehicles out of the way of other traffic—it’s just a nondescript stretch of a road between two small towns. Not much traffic uses this route. It is a short-cut but it’s all gravel. The potholes and ditches in the road are also legendary. Most drivers avoid the route but Sheu takes his chances as his vehicle is not roadworthy and he loathes having to bribe the traffic policemen

each time he is stopped at the several ‘official’ roadblocks, usually only a few kilometres apart, on the main tarred road.

I throw the copy of *The Daily News* under the seat, step out into the aisle and get off the vehicle. Everyone has huddled together just outside the door. We are right in the middle of the road but we must all understand what the roadblock is about and think that the decrepit minibus will give us some protection.

*‘I.D. necard remusangano.’* The owner of the voice emerges from the bushes, an AK casually slung across his back and a tattered green beret perched on top of a head of unruly dreadlocks. The national identity card (I.D.) was introduced by the Rhodesian government but the present government, the police, the army or anybody who does anything in the name of the government, including this unofficial militia, embraces its use to restrict and intimidate people. It is a legal requirement to carry some sort of identification, so everyone starts fumbling in their bags and pockets. He whistles and motions with his hand. Two more tattered and faded green uniforms appear from the bushes on the other side of the road. One is small and wiry, the other built like an athlete. I’m reminded of a documentary about hyenas that I watched several weeks ago.

The *Green Bombers* have existed to me only in the reports I compile for the organisation that provides safe houses for displaced victims of political violence. Everyone knows they are not the police and that they are not official but none of us is under any misconception that whatever happens at this illegal roadblock, there will be a chance to remind these young men that they are in fact an unconstitutional paramilitary militia. The smaller of the men scans the group as he approaches. There is a glow in his eyes. As our eyes meet, I know I’ve made a mistake. He walks over but I’ve closed my eyes. His fingers dig into my jaw line. I keep my eyes shut. When

I feel a hand on my breast I open my eyes and begin to protest; I want to tell him that I don't keep stuff in my bra, that any money I have and my phone are in my bag but the elderly man standing next to me puts a shaky finger to his mouth and shakes his head. The man hugs me close and unclasps my bra. The fondling gets more frenzied; all the other passengers avert their eyes. One hand moves slowly downwards and I try to shuffle backwards. I can see the veins on his neck bulge as he yanks me back by the belt on my trousers. I close my eyes again expecting pain. One, two, three...I start to count.

When I slowly open my eyes again, one at a time, the old man is alternately fumbling in his pockets and rummaging in a small duffel bag. The small man is now standing over him, waiting. 'I'm sorry, my son. I...which...what...which ones are you?' he straightens up holding two cards which he proffers to the small man. One has the distinct red, yellow and green and a picture of the Zimbabwe bird, the other has a red open hand symbol of the opposition party. 'Come and look at this, comrade Bazooka,' he motions to his friend. 'Please my son,' the old man says, his eyes pleading and his hands held in front of him as if in prayer. 'I'm old and these things confuse me.' Everyone tries to huddle even closer. A plump woman travelling with her young son puts her hand over his mouth. The little boy doesn't look like he is going to make a sound anyway.

'Slogan *mudhara*,' screams the one with the AK. I will call him AK, maybe his name is AK anyway, it wouldn't surprise me if it is. AK looks fifteen, maybe sixteen. I can't tell. Bazooka might be fourteen. Same age as my youngest son. This worries me more than the fact that he has a baton which he is using to beat a rhythm on the side of his leg and that his nom de guerre is Bazooka. Bazooka takes a few steps towards the old man. We all flinch. AK puts his hand up and the Bazooka

retreats. AK is in charge. I hope that is because of his AK which would mean Bazooka does not have anything bigger.

‘Are you trying to be funny *mudhara*? I said slogan,’ AK snarls. ‘Ok my son,’ the old man answers. ‘Viva the President,’ his voice is a little more than a whisper.

‘Is something wrong with your arms and hands as well?’ The old man doesn’t respond. The slogan always goes with the clenched fist salute.

‘Ah ha! I see now. You are one of those clever ones *nhai*?’ What does one answer to that?

‘Go sit down under that tree *mudhara*. We will deal with you later,’ he turns to address all of us. ‘This one needs re-education.’ The old man starts to apologise again but Bazooka pushes him towards the tree by the side of the road. ‘And *mudhara* start thinking about choices. You are all lucky today because we are in a merry mood so it’s your choice-short sleeved or long sleeved’. I hear someone gasp.

‘If the old man won’t use his hands and arms in praise of the father of the nation then they are no use to him’, Bazooka explains with a coarse laugh in the general direction the gasp came from. AK then turns his attention to the small group huddled together beside the Kombi. ‘Right! I want men under the tree, women on the minibus!’ There is a little shuffling, some pushing and shoving, yet no significant shift in positions. The group huddles closer. Bazooka and his comrade move towards the group. Men and women with the ‘right’ party membership cards are directed towards a different tree across the road. Men without the cards are led to join the old man where he sits, his head sunk in his hands between the knees. The rest of us, women without cards, are ushered back into the Kombi to retrieve our luggage. We get our luggage and again huddle just outside.

AK, who had remained inside the minibus, comes out waving the newspaper I had been reading. My knees give out. Someone props me up. ‘Whose is this? Who has been reading this rubbish? Lies! All lies, funded by enemies of the state intent on spreading rumours about our leaders,’ his nose is flaring. No one moves or says anything. My eyes turn blurry and I can taste salt. He marches towards the men clustered around the old man and throws the paper on the ground in front of them. ‘When I turn around again, I want it to have disappeared, disappeared so that there is no trace left of the lies.’ The men look at each other, locking eyes briefly, and then one of them starts tearing large pieces and handing them out. ‘This calls for a celebration, a good meal goes well with music anyway.’

Bazooka walks round the small group of men looking each one up. As he passes each one of them, they flinch and then sigh visibly. He stops behind a clean-shaven, well-dressed young man and pokes him in the back with his baton. The young man jumps up and there is a roar of laughter and clapping from the green uniforms.

‘This young gentleman here is going to start a song and everyone; I mean everyone, is going to sing,’ he says. ‘And oh! We want some dancing as well. Let’s have some bum shaking. *Zunzai mazakwatira vabereki*,’ he laughs out loud. The man with the newspaper starts ripping his own piece to smaller pieces and pushing them into his mouth. He looks round the group nodding encouragement. They all start doing the same.

I can hear muffled sobs. One of the newspaper people starts coughing and retching. The three berets move a few paces away to confer. I and a few of the other passengers are old enough to realise that this is only the beginning. These young men are taking us back to the guerrilla camps of the *Chimurenga* War of the 60s and

70s. All of a sudden, I am back there—camp in the bush, young men in tattered remnants of a green uniform, singing, dancing; and girls and young women screaming in the bushes.

I can hear the singing start, faltering at first but more resolute by the second bar. One joins and then another: everyone joins in.

*Chenjera      chenjera*

*Vanamukoma vanorova*

One of the Green Bombers whistle, a long piercing whistle. The people continue to sing. Even more tattered green uniforms appear. I see the looks on their faces. I smell the homebrew and dagga on the breath of the one who comes and disentangles my arm from that of the woman with the little boy. I think he says ‘show time’ or some such. Someone starts sobbing again as I am led a few metres away but still in full view of the men eating the newspaper. They roughly pull me back on the ground. One pulls my legs. The others hold my arms. There is more cheering and clapping. I hear roars of laughter. I hear the screams.

This time I am going to do something about it. I decide and start to walk away. I have a sudden urge to pick wild mushrooms for my mother. I will pick *nhedzi*, *tsuketsuke* and even the rare, sweet *chikunguwo*. I have the time to search for it despite the thickening fog and the approaching darkness. I hear whimpering after they leave to bring the next woman but I keep walking. The urge to pick wild mushrooms for my mother grows stronger still



## Law and Order

She wasn't known by an average name like Shamiso or Dorothy or some such like all of us are. Most of us will have these ordinary names all our lives, because generally we live such dull, monotonous and uninspired lives. But sometimes, for some people, something extraordinary happens, that transforms their life into an adventure and catapults them into uniqueness, greatness or notoriety. When that happens, they then either acquire a nickname or achieve a first name-only status that everyone, sometimes the whole world, will know. On a smaller scale there were a fair few people who had achieved this status. There was 'the flying doctor', a handsome young medical student who, as well as being the holder of the University Games 100 metres record also played football for the national team and set everyone's hearts aflutter every time he took the long walk from his dormitory to the sports pavilion past all the hostels.

Although I was resigned to the fact that I wasn't going to be one such person owing to the fact that I was so lacking in talent and only did things that I had to do, and with such lack of enthusiasm and skill that obscurity was the best state for me, I was always perplexed and curious when I heard of the first-name only people. What drew me to Viola was her nickname. The combination of terms that made up her nickname was so unusual I lay awake for days on end trying to imagine what she looked like. I was a curious person but I valued my non-contact with the police more than I desired to catch a glimpse of this notorious woman. Everyone referred to her as *Ambuya vekuLaw and Order* 'the mother-in-law at Law and Order'. She had acquired legendary status.

*Ambuya* is a common affectionate term of respect for a woman of childbearing age and older, usually used by men to avoid being misconstrued in social situations. The law and order part of the name referred to the police department at Harare Central Police Station that dealt with political crimes. People arrested under the Presidential Powers Act; or for contravening the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act; the Public Order and Security Act and a host of other acts, all deliberately or through ignorance applied wrongly with great regularity, are taken to Harare Central.

These people, usually opposition party supporters and other hapless people, often found themselves at Harare Central, sometimes just for saying something inappropriate or for wearing red clothes. Many such incidents regularly made it into the international press. What these stories did not reveal was the making of a legend with a penchant for unusual methods of torturing her victims.

Her favourite method of torture was that when the male police officers had beaten the ‘criminal’ to a pulp, she liked to stand astride them — most women in Zimbabwe, especially of that age, wear skirts and the women’s police uniform is a skirt — and demand that they look up her skirt and say what they saw. Now, the fun part for her was that any answer was not the safe one. If they said ‘nothing’ they were punished for lying. If they gave an accurate description of what they saw they were punished for looking at an older woman’s genitals, the ultimate curse believed to cause madness, blindness, impotence or death. Assuming that some of them survived the torture, the prisoners were doomed anyway. If the beatings and prodding didn’t kill them, then the curse would haunt them for as long as they lived. I never had a chance to meet this woman, which I’m not complaining about.

I hoped I would never have reason to. This wish was rendered secure by the fact that politics can be fickle nasty and dangerous. They said she'd disappeared — just upped and left. The people who bought and moved into her house said they didn't know anyone by that name. She'd probably left the country like everyone else who could. They said she'd gone to England. They were sure that someone with the kind of connections she had didn't need to languish in Johannesburg working for some white girl she had to call madam. She would get a visa, easy, they said. *Yes, she had done terrible things and, yes, she had been a staunch ruling party supporter, and, yes, that was her in the picture at the independence celebrations beaming at the police commissioner and, yes, she had been there when people were tortured and killed but, no, they had forced her. She was only doing her job. She wanted to stop and, yes, people had come in the night singing some songs but, no, they were not anybody she knew. She had left at night and crossed into Mozambique, then Malawi. If they sent her back to Malawi, she'd kill herself. Yes, her name was Viola, and she wasn't Malawian. She was a changed person – a God fearing woman.*

There were those that said they'd heard from reliable sources that she had been given a post somewhere quiet in a friendly south East Asian country of which they couldn't remember the name, where her children could go to school without fearing exposure.

Yet others insisted she had been seen in rags, hair matted into a filthy mop trailing a sack full of noisy rubbish ranting and gibbering, scavenging —clearly stark, raving mad! The result of the avenging spirit of all the people over whose demise she had presided. *Munyama.*

Whatever had happened to her, wherever she was, everyone agreed that she was a cruel, evil woman who had revelled in seeing pain.



## Careless love

She loved him because he was confident. He was sure what he wanted. She loved him carelessly, the way her aunt had told her never to love a man so you can't leave him if he starts to abuse you. Her aunt used to warn her that she needed to be independent, to have her own money and security. 'It's silliness', she would say. 'You shouldn't love a man so much that when they tell you he has died, you hold your head in your hands and start to bawl, throwing yourself on the ground before you have secured his identity papers, the insurance policies and his bank cards. You know how greedy our people are, my brother's daughter, and how the laws of our country are still backwards. It is my duty as your only father's sister to tell you these things because nobody else will'.

She'd loved him carelessly anyway – not learning to drive, not doing the banking herself. It sounded carefree and flighty when she told her friends 'he does everything'. She didn't know how much money they had in the bank, or if they had any. The children came in quick succession, first a boy, then a girl. Things were happening quickly, and their lives seemed to remain unaffected by the chaos around them. The country was burning but so was their love, her love. They had everything they needed – a beautiful house, the right sort of car and plenty of other wonderful things.

He loved her because deep down deep down he would have loved anybody. He was that kind of man. Love came to him as quickly as it came carelessly to Tanatswa. He knew this about her and took full advantage. She looked after the kids, making sure they were well fed and that their little minds were kept active. They went to parks for long walks. She made sure his meals were always ready when, and

increasingly, if he came home. Her friends tried to shake her out of it. 'Learn to drive at least, so that you and the kids are not always waiting for him to take you places'. 'Open a bank account so that you can keep some of the money he gives for housekeeping for yourself'.

She thought that her friends paid too much heed to the advice of the older generation, times had moved on and women now married for love, not for security. All she asked of her friends was that they were happy for her. They said they would support her, whatever.

When they told her that the police had come for him at the office and led him away to a waiting car, she had been too stunned for words. Her Isaac had never committed a crime before. He was a CEO at Global Investments and had no need for crime. She would sort it all out in no time. Surely, they would realise their mistake soon enough.

That first night he spent in remand at Harare Central, she had stayed up, crying into the phone to various friends. 'Isaac even pays all their stupid parking fines: that is who he is'. Her friends told her not to worry and agreed that the police or whoever had instigated the arrest would soon realise their mistake and let him come home to her and the kids.

The following few weeks passed in a confused daze. First, it was the papers. There were pictures of Isaac everywhere. There were photographs of him cheering Manchester United at a football game in London; leaving a hotel room in Johannesburg with a girl on either arm; looking at jewellery with a different woman in Dubai; him again, watching horse racing at the Durban July with a group of friends. She had no idea that he had been to all these places. Then there was a headshot of her in the bottom corner of the page or in the middle depending on how

the particular paper would have chosen to assemble the pictures. It didn't make any sense. He travelled a lot, but he always brought back romantic, thoughtful gifts for her and spoilt the children.

Many people had lost their investments. Global Investments was apparently not an investment company at all but a pyramid scheme which Isaac had started with his childhood friend, Brian. It didn't make sense that Isaac had done these things and she hadn't even suspected. He was to be remanded in custody.

After weeks of talking to lawyers and attending court sessions, she was too numb to feel anything when the magistrate said 'twelve years'.

She would wait for him she promised. She would write to him every day.

He only loved her and no one else.

They took the car first. Men in dark suits and carrying clipboards. She didn't know anything, she said, as she handed them the keys. Then some more men came with a van and took away all the furniture. When she received an eviction notice she packed their clothes and went to her mother's. She would wait from there if her father would allow it.

## Chosen by the ancestors

She lived with her son in a small pole-and-dagga house perched precariously on a rock surface on the outskirts of the village. It looked dilapidated, with grass falling off the roof in clumps and the walls peeling in places, to reveal the termite-infested poles underneath. It seemed like a slight gust of wind might topple it. Every year when the August winds came and went, the village breathed a collective sigh of relief. "We thank those in the ground!" they would say and hope that in the year something would happen to solve that predicament. They mostly hoped the hut would topple over.

She hadn't always lived in this house, she had lived with her husband, at the village shop. They had taken over running the shop when his parents died. It was a grocery shop as well as a bottle store, where people met in the evenings and on weekends to drink and gossip. Their house, at the back of the shop, was the first brick house in the village. It had a veranda, windows with glass panels and a corrugated roof – a palace amongst the mud huts of the village homesteads. It, together with what was the shop, now stood, shattered and undisturbed, like a historical monument waiting discovery. Another village shop had opened, but the owners had chosen a different site.

She was a primary school teacher, and had been since she finished her teacher training as a young woman. Although she hadn't taught at the village school for over a decade, she took on 'private students'. She would always be a teacher, everyone agreed. The thick leaves of the huge *mopani* tree in the front yard provided some shade from the blazing sun of the summer months. When it was wet and thundery, she moved her class a little to the side to shelter under the *ngarani*.



No one knew what she did, or where she went, in the school holidays. Every New Year or term, she came back to the village, to her waiting students and life carried on as before. Some people thought she had a sister in town. Others thought she visited her relatives in another part of the country. Her son always stayed on, working in the fields and looking after the vegetable patch. They also had a few chickens and goats. They had once owned the largest herd of cattle and the finest looking goats in the whole area, winning awards at the annual agricultural shows. No one could say what had happened to the animals. They had just vanished.

She woke up, very early in the morning, walked the two kilometres to the borehole, and stood in line to await her turn. The other women paid her no attention but helped hoist the bucket onto her head when she'd filled it up. She didn't say a word all the time, and it seemed that no one expected her to. They carried on as if she wasn't there. When she got home, with half the water she set out with, her wet dress sticking to her thin frame, she made a fire and made boiled mealie-meal porridge. She had a few mouthfuls of it and left the rest for her son. Theirs was a frugal existence.

After a quick wash in the Blair toilet outside, she appeared, wearing black court shoes, a black pencil skirt and a white blouse. Her hair, which she kept wrapped under a *doek* at weekends and in the evenings, was combed out into a soft, grey afro. From afar she looked like a prepubescent girl wearing an old woman costume. When you were near enough to see her face, it told a different story. Only the eyes remained young – big and alert, taking in everything intently and deliberately. Her face was wrinkly and gaunt and her whole body, skeletal. She, like her house, looked as though a gust of strong wind could carry her off like a leaf in a storm.

Despite her frail appearance, her classes always ran on time. Her students were also always present and always punctual. The son usually brought a desk and a chair out by the time she got back from the borehole. All that was left would be to call the class to order and begin. "One plus one, two plus two..." the chanting would go on for an hour or so and then there would be a change of subject. On other days she would shout "repeat after me" and recite the alphabet in a small but firm voice. The students never stirred. They stood, in neat rows and columns, their olive-green tops flapping in the wind, silently absorbing all the information.

One morning, I sat on a stool on the veranda of my uncle's house watching her. I was trying to find something to say to my uncle's friend who had come to see "the niece from university". I had started at university earlier that year, but my mother had suggested I spend some time with the uncle in the village. It would help with ideas for your writing project she said. "It might give you an idea where to start if you see where I used to spend my school holidays as a child". I wasn't too happy at first, but once I got there, I found that the slow pace of life suited my lazy constitution. There was some work to be done – fetching water, weeding the vegetable patch, making the fire and cooking meals, but there were no deadlines. I would wake up in the morning and help with the chores but often found myself sitting on the veranda watching people as they went about their chores. I especially liked to watch the people that got off the bus to see if I could correctly guess if they were village folk or town people visiting. I would look at their clothes, their luggage and how they navigated the uneven surfaces of the rural terrain.

I was sitting with my uncle's friend watching her with growing fascination, partly from boredom, but mainly from the fact that my curious mind could not let it be.

"Why does she keep at it?" I asked him.

If only she got a little help with her chores, if the community built her a better house, if someone gave her a bit of protein – some beans to eat with her porridge – and some companionship, real people, to talk to, then she wouldn't have to teach rows of *chomolia* plants. I said, getting excited the more my argument became clearer to me, I said if only her rows of *chomolia* were interspersed with carrots and beans and beetroots then she wouldn't be malnourished and losing her mind with it. I said, 'It's malnourishment, it does that to you, malnutrition and looking after a son who doesn't say anything'. I had a solid argument.

In response, my uncle's friend talked vaguely, avoiding my eyes all the time, about leaving those that the ancestors have chosen to give the gift of insanity alone and about things he said I was too young to understand, and walked away. I was sure I could understand. I could get in touch with a friend; sort out some Social Services assistance for her, pay for a doctor, register her with CONCERN Worldwide for free, fortified meals and organise some counselling for the son. That is all there is to it, I shouted at the receding figure of my uncle's friend. I was sure it could be done. I thought I should have said to my uncle's friend that I knew people who were getting help in the city and that I knew people who could help. I was going to do it myself. I would ask my uncle because he would agree that it was nonsense that the gods would pick on particular people to inflict insanity and deprivation. Ancestors are not God and this poor woman was not Job. It was an excuse not to help the woman, I thought to myself.

That was before I was told how she had watched her sons take turns to swing an axe at their father's neck, how when the first blow did not do the job they had kept swinging as if they were chopping wood for a bonfire, and how her husband, their

father, didn't die for a long time but lay there twitching and making a sound only a dying animal can make. I was told how the soldiers had kept their guns trained on her and her sons all the time. No one was allowed to cry, no one did.

The Pumas had rolled into the village just as people were coming home from the fields for breakfast. Everyone heard the unmistakable rumble of large vehicles approaching. Noise travels far in the sparsely populated rural villages, and people can hear vehicles when they are still miles away.

I wanted to know why they didn't run away and hide in the fields.

My uncle continued talking without paying any attention to my question. He seemed to be talking to himself, his voice a monotonous drawl. It was as if he were listing the chores that he needed to complete.

'We were all to meet at the ground in front of the store. We all headed there hastily, without tarrying. It wasn't the first time they had come to the village. They had warned that they would be back. They wanted to know where we were hiding our dissident sons. Now they were back. They knew who had been feeding the dissidents and sheltering them. The villagers had all looked at each other, wondering. No, the soldiers were not asking, they knew; it was Dube the shop owner and his wife. There was a gasp of surprise, but no one said anything. They wanted some food first. Dube and his family – his wife and two sons – were to sit in front of everyone and await their fate.'

With the whole village watching with open mouths and big eyes, his children had picked the head up, mounted it on a bicycle, and paraded it through the village and the next. Children fled, screaming in terror. The eyes of the severed head were still wide open; like they could still see everything. The body lay, headless, for the vultures and maggots to clear away. No one was to go anywhere near the body. Two

days later, one of the brothers was found swinging from a tree near the borehole where everyone could see his distended belly and open eyes. The other son never said a word again. It was like his lips were sewn together with a needle and sisal. No one knows how the fire that razed everything to the ground started or who started it. They all agreed that the store and house were still standing when the soldiers dismissed them and told them to remember what happens to dissidents and those who harbour them.

Before I left, I went to her house and planted two rows of carrots, a row of cabbages and some beetroot. I also fetched her some water and swept her yard. She never said a word.

I have always wondered if mum had known her. Was she part of mum's story? I had heard it said that silence is a lie and decided I would find a way to add her story to mum's book. Maybe mum had intended it all along.

Her name was Erica

## Mabweadziva

I only told her the story to annoy her. Not a lot. Maybe just enough to irritate her into showing how really scared and unsure she was and how she would always need me.

We were sitting with our backs against a wall – an old building that used to be a bakery before someone tried to indigenise it. Two people had died in the *Jambanja* between the workers and the indigenisers. One was a policeman, the other, nobody can remember.

The indigenisers had arrived just after opening time, waving sticks and tree branches, and singing Chimurenga songs, the festiveness suggested by dancing belying the menace in the message. ‘*Mupanduki chera mwena, mupanduki nguva yakwana*’ (traitor dig a hole, traitor your time is up). Even people from the other part of the country, who spoke a different language, knew this song. The peril of it lay in that the ‘traitor’, for whom time has run out, could be anybody on any day. On some days it was white people, on another, black market traders and yet on others, it was people who didn’t speak the majority *ChiShona*. The people in the queue knew this. They were waiting to buy bread and thereby colluding to keep the imperialists rich. They could be the intended recipients of this warning. On hearing the singing, the customers, some of whom had been queuing since before sunrise, quickly abandoned their positions in the queue and scrambled from the entrance.

Queuing was like that. Sometimes you were lucky and you got what you queued for: sugar, salt, *mealie-meal*, cooking oil, fuel or money. Other times, you didn’t. People all over the country were used to walking away from queues with nothing or with a different item to what they set out to get. And besides, there was

always another queue to join. In the grand scheme of things, as the government liked to remind people, bread was a luxury – one of those habits the imperialists cultivated to keep black people poor, together with flower farming and cheese making. Perhaps the indigenisers were going to take the building and turn it into a maize mill. The government and their supporters seemed to think that maize was all that was needed to feed the hungry masses.

The people who'd been waiting in the queue didn't venture too far as they realised that something interesting was going to happen never mind the possibility that it could turn violent. They were not going to get bread from Waldorf's on that day and most probably never again but the excitement of a spectacle was too alluring.

The bakery workers tried to barricade themselves inside the shop with the large trolleys they used for ferrying bread from the ovens to the shelves but they were outnumbered.

Someone called the police. Or maybe they were already on the way.

Like a wake of vultures, riot police swooped down on the scene, causing even more excitement and mayhem. A number of shots were fired. In the confusion, the indigenisers disappeared into the swirls of crowds that had gathered to watch, wide eyed. The workers also picked up their bags, unhooked their jackets from the hooks behind the changing room door and walked out of the bakery to be swallowed up by the same crowds that had swallowed the indigenisers. Not a single one of them turned up for work again. A few policemen and women continued to mill about for about a week or two and then they too vanished, taking with them whatever was still edible, usable or saleable. The baker, Mr or Mrs Waldorf, was never heard from or

seen again either. Not that anybody could say with certainty whether there had ever been a Waldorf to begin with.

If it hadn't been for the dead policeman, it might have been as if it never happened. Once every few weeks, a wide-eyed, wretched looking man would be shown on the eight o'clock news as "one of the killers of the gallant police officer who was brutally murdered during the skirmishes at Waldorf Bakery..." Sometimes it was two wretched looking men. On one occasion there were even twenty-three wretched looking men and women, wide-eyed and clearly in need of sleep and food, staring out of the screen of the eight o'clock news. They were accused, announced an animated reporter in a green suit, of going to an unnamed enemy country for military training. They were then going to use this training *to reverse the gains of the country's hard-won independence* and to kill policeman, while they were at it. This was serious; treasonous, the man in the green suit explained as the picture panned from one set of expressionless eyes to another. "*They were involved in a plot to topple our democratically elected government,*" the man said as the camera then moved to their bare feet, one at a time. Maybe they had been wearing shoes when they were arrested. The report concluded with a wide shot of the whole group. They were all so scrawny it was hard to tell the men from the women. They looked like they definitely needed to go on a feeding scheme, like the ones run by Care International in local schools, before they could topple anything. '*Fortified blended foods for severe acute malnutrition*', that's what would do it.

They, too, were soon forgotten. I often wondered if they were now at *Chikurubhi* Maximum security prison, waiting for the government to appoint a hangman. That job had been vacant for ten years. Nobody wanted to do the job of killing people who had already seen the end countless times. Or maybe they were



not at *Chikurubi* at all. They might just have, as soon as the recording was over, been given loaves of bread and bottles of Coca-Cola, some t-shirts emblazoned at the back with ‘Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation T.V, your one and only favourite family station’ and told to go home. They might now just be some of those countless people who you saw on the bus or in the supermarket, wearing ZBC t-shirts, making you wonder how they had got them. Surely, the public deserved to know where these emaciated, yet highly dangerous people were. After all, they were trying to *reverse the gains of our hard-won independence*. They had just disappeared and perhaps, were best left unremembered.

At the bakery, everything was left as it was. If you cupped your hands around your eyes and peered through the windows, you could still see the huge ovens at the back, a counter with a till on it and a display cabinet in which you could imagine rows of cakes ranged on the shelves. Rats had eaten everything else. Lizards had taken over every crevice. You could see their blue-green heads peeping out of the dark spaces and their red and yellow bodies darting across the dusty concrete floor. I was sure there were other creatures too, enjoying the solitude.

Grass had found pockets of dust to sprout from, where the wall was beginning to crumble. There were a lot of places just like this building all around the country. All silent, deserted but completely indigenised – owned by *the people*. There was the factory where they used to cure tobacco, the shoe factory, the factory where they used to make electrical cookers and travelling bags and the foundry where they used to make car parts; all given over to vegetation and wildlife once the flag waving, *toyi toying* indigenisers realised that, after looting the place of all movables, there was nothing left to indigenise. Sometimes, the indigenisers would discover that the business belonged to a black person anyway and that they had *toyi*

*toyied* in vain. They would then console themselves and each other by proclaiming that black people that used white people's names for their businesses were not fully conscientised and needed re-education. The place would remain closed anyway – unclaimed – except by *wandering, angry spirits, always waiting to cause havoc with the lives of those who dared cross their paths* and indigenous flora and fauna. There were whispers about a bright light being seen at night and of homeless people going raving mad after trying to shelter in the place. No one knew this for sure. 'A bad place, a bad business'; that's all people were willing to say. Nobody even owned up to ever having been one of those people, in those queues, waiting to buy the special, hot Waldorf currant-bread or sugar glazed, *mabhanzi*. Nobody knew anybody who had ever had anything to do with Waldorf Bakery. The dead policeman was the only person whom everybody could say with certainty, had ever been there. The newspapers showed a picture of a crowd gathered outside his house for the funeral.

We always ended up here. I liked to imagine the smell of freshly baked bread. She didn't care where we went. No bread had been baked here for the past five years but I still liked to sit with my back against the wall and my eyes closed, and imagine things the way they used to be; how I thought they used to be. I didn't come here before the indigenisation. Back then I bought my bread from Koullas Bakery. The young man who packed the bread into brown paper bags after you'd bought it, had eyes so deep and brown that when he looked at me everything seemed to disappear around me until there was just the smell of freshly baked bread and the rapid thudding of my heart.

Koullas Bakery didn't bake bread anymore either. Mr Koullas, who was definitely not British, was also run out of his bakery and told to *go back to Britain where you came from*, not long after the Waldorf incident. The young man with the

deep brown eyes had ended up in England, studying to be an engineer. A Chinese shop selling plastic buckets and shoes, electricals and bicycles stood where Koullas Bakery used to be.

No one else came near the huge, stone hulk that used to be Waldorf Bakery, not since the incident. The winding queues of people, waiting for hours to buy a loaf of bread, or just for the possibility of buying a loaf of bread, seemed to be something from folktale – a fairy tale that I imagined storytellers telling wide-eyed and open-mouthed children in homesteads across the country in come years to come. I could imagine the opening words, *“A long, long time ago when animals could speak and hundreds of people used to stand in queues that snaked their way all through the villages, people waited to buy whatever could be bought with whatever little money they had....”*

Not even the hordes of street children, who would normally claim any piece of unused ground or building, came anywhere near it. I wasn't bothered that nobody else came there. I reckoned that there were angry wandering spirits everywhere if it came to that. My sister, Chiedza, I suspect, hoped wandering spirits would wreak havoc with our lives, but perhaps not both of us at the same time. She didn't like the idea of our lives being so inextricably intertwined. They had always been. Our grandma, noticing how we were with each other, always reminded us that kinship cannot be washed off with soap, like dirt. 'Wise words of our forefathers. You'll both do well to take heed', she would say. It became an obsession for her. She once slapped me so hard the imprints of her fingers remained etched on my cheek for a very long time. I had tried to remind her that there was no soap in our forefathers' time. I was always to remember we were sisters above everything else. We had other brothers and sisters. I could wash those ties away if I wanted to. She didn't seem to

mind that. I already had done with several of them. But not with my older sister, Chiedza.

We had a strong bond, the sort that is formed from knowing too much about each other. It had been so since the business with the freedom fighter during the war. I was eight, she was fourteen. It had all started when father decided to send her to a boarding school far away from home. It was a mission school, out in the *rurals*. The Methodist sisters would look after her and keep her safe from the prying eyes and preying hands of men. That hadn't happened.

One night, a group of armed men knocked on the boarding mistress's door and forced her to open the girls' dormitory. Chiedza begged one of the freedom fighter not to leave her to the other men. He took pity on her, she was a small, sickly girl. He claimed her just for himself. The other girls were not so lucky. The armed men spent the whole night in the dormitory but were gone by sunrise. It was as if the dark figures in camouflage uniform, the AK 47s with bayonets and the anguished screams had all been a mass nightmare that the girls had dreamed up, like a mass hallucination. A lot of the girls who could not contain their hysteria had to go back home to their families, the school decided.

Chiedza decided to follow her abuser across the border to Mozambique. She remembered his kindness. She remembered that he had been gentle. Almost shy and had not battered her as the other men had done to her dorm mates. He had even covered her with a blanket before he left, and she thought she'd heard him apologise and say he loved her. So, she had packed a small bag and left the following afternoon together with her best friend and two older girls. At fourteen, she was not going to be allowed to be a fighter. She was too small, too young. She could serve other purposes though. She hadn't known that. None of them had known that. They knew

they couldn't stay at the school. All the girls who had somewhere to go left as soon as they could. Neither the teachers nor the boarding mistress tried to stop them from leaving.

Father, trying to do the fatherly thing and hoping to find her before the neighbours found out, borrowed some money to buy a car and go looking for her. He bought a huge, second-hand forest-green Studebaker truck, the first car anybody in his immediate family had ever owned. It was the only car for miles around. I was really proud of the car, of my dad and of my sister for making dad buy the car. I remember the morning he left. He and mum had a huge row. Not about my sister but about the boiled mealies dad was to take as part of his provisions. They were undercooked, and couldn't Mum ever do anything right? Mum then refused to do the rest of his packing for him and said she hoped a landmine would get him.

He found her, living with a group of other young women, a few kilometres from the border post. Thankfully, she wasn't carrying a bastard child or a venereal disease, mum had said. She hadn't found her hero, didn't even know his name. They had reached the border and realised that crossing wasn't so easy. They couldn't immediately proceed with their journey. The crossing was too dangerous. Rhodesian army patrols were too frequent. Even if they somehow managed to cross into Mozambique where would they start looking for a guerrilla camp? There was the problem of the landmines or wild animals. They couldn't face going back home either. What would everybody say? They had rented a room, with whatever little money they had. The room had soon become a frequent haunt for the border soldiers, truckers and other travellers. They'd had to eat and had no other way of fending for themselves.

Anyway, that is how the story was remembered, by me. Our other siblings were either too young or too stupid. I can't remember anybody explaining to me what was happening. Maybe, they did. My mum or dad. Maybe they came into my room, our room and sat down, sat me down and said '*our child, a terrible thing has happened...*' Well, they should have. I don't think they did because there was no bed or chair in our room and father would not have sat on the floor. Mum had bad knees and would have needed help getting back up again. Maybe Chiedza told me herself. Maybe we used to have more to say to each other back then. Maybe we used to stay up long into the dark nights sharing the hidden things of our hearts. That was the source of our hatred for each other – I knew too much.

They used my report card to get into a different school. Mother couldn't look me in the eyes for a long time after that. She couldn't forgive father for bringing Chiedza back, couldn't love Chiedza anymore and hated my knowing looks. Father started spending more and more time away from home. Mostly, I avoided everyone.

We would sit with our legs stretched out and our eyes closed to the glare of the midday sun. The sun has a way of hitting you right between the eyes at that time of the day at that time of the year, at that angle where the bakery wall captures the rays. The sun forces you to fumble in your handbag for sunglasses so that you see the khaki envelope at the bottom of the bag. Is it a letter or is it money? The envelope you haven't decided whether to hand over or open first. You could give it to her the next time you are sitting with your back against the front wall of Waldorf Bakery. After all, it has your name, or what used to be your name, on it.

We sat with our eyes tightly shut to the world. If we opened them, it would bring us back to now, to the silent spaces between our words, to the absence of other words, other voices, to the names we dared not mention. Something, maybe the

unmentionable names, maybe even just one single name, seemed to nudge the silent spaces between our phrases even wider apart every time we took the walk from the hospital gate to the Waldorf Bakery. We didn't know how to stitch together these widening rips until there was a continuous seam. I wasn't sure what I wanted. I tried, as always, to find out; from amongst the jumble of our fractured conversations, what she was thinking.

“You know the other person who died, I mean, not the policeman...” I began to say, trying to fill the silence. Sometimes it is surprisingly difficult to find the right things to say.

“Why does it even matter?” she responded, not opening her eyes. I took that answer to refer both to the dead person and to the ridiculousness of our situation. It is said that silence can be companionable and beautiful but there was something different to the deliberate, unspoken words that filled our silences.

Perhaps I also wanted to scare her a little and so that she would laugh it off. I needed her to laugh it off so I could read the laugh. She laughs a different kind of laugh when she is scared, when she wishes you hadn't told her the story. She laughs the kind of laugh that hurts the larynx. It is not the same laugh she laughed when I told her things that meant something to me, stories that scared me, not her like when I told her about Lawrence.

We called Larry, ‘Warlord’, at university. He was a history student who used to walk around campus wearing a horned-helmet and a flowing, multi-coloured robe, like some Viking Joseph. We didn't believe ourselves to be at war with anybody although most of our time was spent agitating for student demonstrations and protest marches. It was the 90s, student demonstrations were frequent. They usually ended

in violence and arrests. We referred to each other as cadres or comrades, so perhaps Larry was our ‘warlord.’

One day, when I was trying again to patch the scattered panels of our conversations into one quilt, I had told her how Larry had once threatened to exhume Cecil John Rhodes’s remains from the *Matopos* and throw them into the Zambezi River from where they would be washed out to the sea. She had laughed so much she couldn’t stop the tears flowing.

I had recounted to her how one Sunday afternoon in the University Green, a patch of ground with clumps of grass I had never seen green, Larry, to great shouts of ‘*adhumbureta wevhu*’, had jumped onto a bench and started addressing a group of us who were scattered around not sure what to do with ourselves. The university Green is where we went, me and Emma, and I’m sure a lot of other students too, when we felt too lazy to pretend that we were working hard by booking carrels in the library and then falling asleep in them, for hours. Sitting or lying on the little bits of grass in the Green was a way of showing people that you were clever enough to concentrate on your reading with people milling about, playing ball games, and talking in loud voices or shouting. There was the Beit Hall as well, only a few metres from the Green. Drama students would occasionally burst into loud singing whenever it took their fancy.

But that was ok. We were ready and willing to be lured into other activities, ‘*co-curricular activities*’ we called them. The Green was that place where students went to show they were ready for distractions. We liked to amuse the young men, when they came up to propose that they couldn’t concentrate because our beauty was too distracting, by falling in love for the afternoon. You could fall in love or shout for a cause for an afternoon before going back to the reality of Sembene



Ousmane's *'God's Bits of Wood'* waiting to be read before the following morning's African Lit class because the tutor started all classes by saying *'If you haven't read such and such a text you need to leave the class now before you embarrass yourself.'* You had to read *'God's Bits of Wood'* because you hadn't attended any seminars for *'A Chain of Voices'* and you were running out of options for texts you could answer questions on in the exam, and you didn't want to *embarrass yourself*. But for a few hours on a Sunday afternoon, you could forget Sembene Ousmane and throw yourself wholeheartedly at co-curricular activities. When Larry appeared on the Green that Sunday afternoon, we were as ready as ever.

"Comrades" he'd started to uproarious laughter and cheering. "In pre-colonial halcyon days, the *Matopos*, the sacred *Njelele*, *Matonjeni*, *Mabweadziva*, *Dombo-dema*, *Mwarindizimu*, the earthly residence of *Mwari*, were only accessed by sanctified emissaries of the people". We cheered every time he mentioned each of the traditional names of the *Matopos*. "Today, God's seat has been desecrated as the burial place of a white bandit, who was rabidly racist and who viewed all non-Anglo Saxons as 'the most despicable specimens of human beings'. He repeated the 'white bandit' phrase for emphasis. We all laughed out louder; more because we associated the word 'bandit' with the gangs of white-clad prisoners who seemed to spend hot summer afternoons digging up the sides of the roads. Prisoners are called *bhanditi* in *Shona* and we must all have had this ridiculous image of Cecil Rhodes in white prison clothes and barefoot, digging holes that nobody needed, with the sun beating down on him.

Larry liked giving his speeches in English. Every time he said a word, we were not familiar with, the crowd applauded even louder. Very few of us knew what we thought about his idea and none of us would dare dig up human remains anyway

– not even the remains of a white person. We are a superstitious people. Clever as we all were; we didn't know how to appease a white person's *ngozi*. Traditionally, to appease the avenging spirits, one should pay restitution to his people or sacrifice a beast. That would present some difficulties if we found ourselves in a position where we needed to appease Cecil Rhodes's spirit.

We just liked the Sunday afternoon impromptu speeches and the hysteria of it all. We liked to think that our bit of shouting on a Sunday afternoon was making a difference somewhere in the world - even if it was not our immediate world. We knew that. The situation at the university and in the country was getting worse with each demonstration, but still we were not deterred.

Years later, when I bothered to check the meaning of the word 'adumbrate' I wondered for a long time after if I had been the only one who hadn't had a clue what most of the words that came out of the Sunday afternoon orations meant. Words were easy then. It felt good to be able to speak and be understood and to understand others even using words none of us knew the meaning of and a language a lot of us found too hard to master.

I had not wanted her to laugh that laugh then. I wanted her to tell me that it had not been in vain, that I had turned out alright but she just threw her head back revealing a row of once sparkling white teeth and out came such a loud piercing sound at first I thought she was crying. I didn't mean for the story to be funny; it wasn't funny but she laughed until she was doubled over in pain. That laugh came from deep within the belly.

If I closed my eyes with my back against that wall, those teeth would still be sparkling white and if not, it could be the red wine, and nothing else. I could also have dreamed up the horrible sound that escaped her lips.

I hadn't wanted her to laugh at the memory of Larry, at how we used to be carefree, at how we thought we were at the centre of a world-changing revolution. At how we'd then left university only to realise that we hadn't made any difference except for Enoch Chikweche, another former university student changing his name to Munyaradzi Gwisai and refusing to say his oath in parliament in English. We also own some land now. Well, some of us do, although the manner of its acquisition makes me want never to open my eyes again.

Chiedza never wanted to talk about anything – the war, her illness, politics, us, death.

Was she angry – angry that her part of the story didn't seem to matter to anyone?

She says my stories are silly. "*Not stories at all*". The last time I saw her she made me shut up when I just had got to the point where I would normally say, "*The long and short of it is...*" she'd just drawled, "*There is no point to your stories. They start off as though there is going to be a point or at least something, and then – nothing. Words are only necessary when there is something to say*". That was the most she had said in one go for a long time. "*They are not funny; you are not funny, so don't try so hard. They are full of details and colour but nothing more*". I know she would have continued and asked why I didn't tell real stories like grandma used to tell but she suddenly went quiet, surprised by the sound of her own voice. Grandma told some stories, no, grandma told a story, the same story about how the crow lost his dinner. When we asked her to tell a story where she knew the details, she would pretend to be tired or to be falling asleep. I kept asking her to tell the story of how she'd been arrested for assaulting a *BSAP* officer but she'd pretend that it hadn't happened. She'd been pregnant with mum and had spent some months in jail

for assaulting a white police officer, *mujoni*. She was the only person I knew to have done that.

“I don’t like all this talking, Luba”, my sister said. She called me Luba “You try too hard, you hold on to things that don’t matter”, she said without opening her eyes. Then she told me that she didn’t want me to come to the hospital gate anymore and didn’t ever want to sit with her back against the crumbling wall of what used to be Waldorf Bakery nor have to deal with the sun hitting her right between the eyes.

## **Some Friendships are Forever**

The first time I saw them I thought they were floating. They were perched on a revolving glass pedestal in the window of Meikles Department Store on Main Street. I don't know how long I stood there with my face pressed against the panes watching the pedestal go round and round like a very slow whirlwind that compels one to watch rather than run for cover. The glare of the midmorning sun flooding the displays in the window, created a shimmering mirage that made the shoes look like they were encircled by translucent silk.

But that was thirty years ago. Thirty years, in which a war had been fought and won and some battles had been surrendered. They were thirty years in which I had also bought and worn many pairs of shoes, styles and colours. I could do that. This wasn't Rhodesia anymore. A job at The Harare Institute of Technology meant I never had to wear uncomfortable shoes or cast-offs again. The last time I did was when I interviewed for my first job after Secondary School. I took the shoes off halfway through the interview. They were two sizes too small and my feet were on fire. I didn't get the job.

It didn't make sense that a similar pair of deep, wine-red, peep-toe high heeled shoes, that I thought had lost me a friend all those years ago and haunted me all my life, lay nestled on a bed of crumpled copy of *Mail and Guardian* of the 15th of January 2000, in a box on top of my desk. They lay side by side, facing opposite directions, heel to toe. I poked one then the other with a trembling finger, the way we used to poke snakes when the boys had killed them in the school playground. I poked and prodded until they stood upright. They were size seven and nearly new, the 'Made in Italy' sign still visible on the inside.

Hands still trembling, I sat down.

The second hand on the wall clock sounded as though it was right inside my head. My eyes started to sting. I was either sweating or crying.

I had prayed for a sign for a long time until I remembered that God does things in his own time and that ancestors don't do signs of the nature I sought. All I needed to know now was that my obsession with the shoes had not destroyed Rura's life and that she had turned out alright. These shoes had arrived too late.

I eased the newspaper out, taking care not to touch the shoes. They had been sent from somewhere in South Africa within the month.

The package had arrived early one morning. The postman was a bald, burly man who never got off his bicycle to deliver the mail properly. He tossed everything, regardless of shape, size or weight. Telegrams bearing sad news; letters from loved ones in far-off places; dreaded school reports; food parcels from relatives in parts of the country where the harvests were better; bills and all sorts of packages, even the ones with the 'fragile' label; all came hurtling towards the recipients so that they didn't have enough time to steel themselves for the impact. I let the small, rectangular piece of paper float and land softly on the concrete veranda floor before retrieving it.

It was a receipt for a parcel. There was no indication of what the parcel might be or who it was from.

There is such a thing as wanting something so much that the thing starts to want you more, someone had once told me. Miss Watson had told us the story of a girl called

Karen and the red shoes that had stuck so firmly to her feet that the executioner had to chop them off to set her free. It made me shudder to remember.

Perhaps this was my punishment for forgetting about all the places to where good quality, comfortable shoes were supposed to take me, forgetting about all the selfless things I was going to do for the 'less privileged' once I had marched all the way to the top. Mine had become a selfish, comfortable life surrounded by pairs and pairs of shoes that had destroyed my desire to march anywhere or for anything.

No one else knew about the shoes and Rura was dead, had been dead for over ten years. My mother had called me with the news, one evening to tell me.

"They have found your friend."

"Mmm," I said.

"She's coming home."

"Mmm," I said again. I knew how to play her game.

"She's coming home, feet first," I knew she wanted me to ask what she meant but I didn't.

I can't remember why I missed the funeral.

It all started one hot October morning when I couldn't bear the monotony of school anymore. As I walked to school that morning the fields were still wet with dew but clouds of steam rose from the earth and I could tell that the morning assembly was going to be hell. The sun seemed to drop nearer with every step.

I thought if I had to sing 'London's burning' and 'pour on water' one more time it would either kill me or I would say something that would land me in serious trouble. I had been thinking about it for a long time and had come to the conclusion that the people of London should 'pour on water' themselves instead of expecting

us to run down to Jeka river, then all the way to London and back again, all in time for mental maths at half past eight, in the sweltering heat and the baking sand. If you had to sing ‘London’s burning’ in perpetual canons in the scorching heat, with your bare feet slowly getting roasted, you would also imagine you were actually putting out the great fire. So, instead of saying to Miss Watson, “Miss Watson, the sun is very hot where we stand in lines singing ‘London’s burning’ until we flood London with our sweat. We don’t want to get involved and we shouldn’t have to put out a fire in London...,” and getting myself in the grandmother of all troubles with Mr Bergeron the headmaster, I decided to skip school to go and look in shop windows in the town centre.

I got to the school gate and waited for Rura. I didn’t want to do it alone and Rura I knew would do it with me. She didn’t play with the other children much. She was different; ‘special’ Miss Watson said. She had large brown eyes that had no sparkle in them. I thought it might make her happy to see beautiful things in town. I wished to see what her eyes looked like when they sparkled.

It was my cousin, Maria’s fault. She continually beguiled us with descriptions of all the glamorous things we could look at in shop windows in the town centre. Maria said a lot of things. There were faraway places where the sun never set and the shops stayed open all day and all night, she’d tell us. We listened with our mouths wide open.

Maria wore shoes and a uniform to school so she knew about a lot of things, everyone agreed. She said if you hadn’t seen the things, they had in the shops in town then you hadn’t seen anything yet. “It’s like you have been blind all your life”, she said. Besides, in the township the shops kept everything behind the counter and you had to point to what you wanted to buy. The shop assistant would then get the



item from the shelf or from a box under the counter. I didn't even go into town to buy clothes. All mine, my sisters' and my brothers' clothes and shoes were made by various people in the township. So, at ten years old, I had never been to the town centre.

Maria claimed she had once passed through Main Street in a rich relative's car. 'I swear to you, there were lights and things and people sitting around tables in the shops and outside, eating and drinking.' I tried hard to imagine it but I didn't know what white people ate.

We were only going to look at shops on Main Street. I wanted to look at books and cakes and sweets. There was so much to see but we were going to be quick, I assured Luba. "We will be back before school is finished."

We walked for a long time but only got to town after midday. I now know that we walked seven kilometres to town and seven kilometres back home. Rura was also an anxious child; her parents were well-known for the roaring rows they had and the attendant injuries that extended to the children and the dogs. 'We should go home', she pleaded.

'One more shop, Greatermans... It's the biggest shop in the world. It's a department store, with everything', I coaxed. I knew we were going to be in trouble anyway so I figured I should make the best of it.

And then we saw the shoes!

Although Rura was getting increasingly worried she couldn't move either. In some collective dazzlement we stopped and stared with our mouths wide open.

There were other spectacular things on display in the window – mannequins, all nine of them a shiny jet black, wearing wedding dresses so white it hurt the eyes to look; hats and wigs that made me think of the masquerade dancers that sometimes

paraded through the dusty streets of the township and various electrical machines that I had never seen before. I knew they were electrical. I knew this because one of my friends had a distant cousin who worked as a housemaid in the suburbs. She said her cousin had told her that her madam had a lot of machines and that she even had one that washed the clothes while she sat and drank a glass of *Mazoe*. I wasn't sure about the madam allowing her to drink *Mazoe* but I believed her about the machines. I asked my father because he worked in a factory.

“He he he,” he laughed. “They are clever, these white people. They have machines for everything. One of these days they will create one that makes babies for them while they play lawn bowling in Harare Gardens. He he he.”

He was a vulgar man, my father.

I should have been paying more attention to the machines. I remembered that once some boys skipped school to go and look at trains and were allowed to tell everyone about it at assembly. They didn't get into trouble. Perhaps there was a machine in this window that nobody else at school had heard about. That would earn me more than a week of envious looks and the coveted status of being a member of that distinguished class of people who were worth having their names dropped into conversations. There would be people from my school whom I didn't even know existed who would be saying to their admiring friends, neighbours and acquaintances, “My friend Tina, from school, has been to town...” or “A girl from the school next to ours...” This would happen until someone's uncle decided to go overseas and the whole family went to the airport and saw aeroplanes. The machines would then become as insignificant and as insipid as owning a radio had become after Coca Cola ran the ‘win a radio’ campaign and people drank so much coca cola that the whole township was awash with little red round radios. I would then have to

join the insignificant band of name droppers but I would have had my time in the limelight and saved us a whipping.

I considered all this in the first few seconds of staring at the shoes and was quite aware that when I got into trouble for skipping school to go into town and said I had looked at a pair of shoes; it would sound lame. It did not matter that these shoes were not like the ordinary black plastic shoes that our fathers wore to work or the black pumps '*MaTomi*' that we wore to church on Sundays and to school when there was an important visitor.

For an instant, a split second, I started to get an uneasiness creeping from within the belly. I remembered my grandmother telling me about a snake so beautiful it catches prey by hypnotising it. The beautiful patterns on its back create such a dazzling display as it slowly glides and spirals towards its prey that the prey remains rooted to the spot, mesmerised into immobility. Later, I discovered that that story was my grandmother's attempt at talking to me about boys.

I convinced myself that there was a lot to be learnt from the shoes or they wouldn't be sharing the window with the machines and the wedding dresses. They looked like the kind of shoes one wore to march away from poverty and hunger. I imagined myself wearing these shoes and walking out of the township towards a better life somewhere, I didn't know where, but I knew the better life wasn't in the township or in our country. An older boy from school who had later left to join the freedom fighters once told us about a woman called Rosa Parks, and we listened with our mouths wide open. I imagined Rosa Parks had worn shoes like these when she walked onto that Cleveland Avenue bus on that fateful Thursday evening. You don't fight and win battles bare foot or in ill-fitting shoes. No one would take you seriously. That's how I knew Rosa Parks was wearing shoes like these when she got

on that Cleveland bus. I also knew that Tshaka's greatness had something to do with sandals.

Of course, we were in the grandmother of all troubles when we got home although we didn't mention the shoes. That was the last time I spoke to Rura. She didn't come to school after that. The last time I saw her she was carrying some clothes in a plastic bag and catching a bus to somewhere, I don't know where.

Then my mother called to say they had found her, and she was coming home, feet first.

## **Beginnings**

*Now that I have put my gun down*

*For almost obvious reasons*

*The enemy still is here invisible*

*My barrel has no definite target*

*Now let my hands work – My mouth sing – My pencil write –*

*About the same things my bullet aimed at.*

(Freedom Nyamubaya - 'On the Road Again')

## No Roads, Just Trails

The path ahead looked the same. The landscape hadn't changed for kilometres, or maybe days. Ranga wasn't sure anymore. From the description her friend Sara had given her, she figured she must be nearing Shangani. The savannah short grass and the anthills that dot the harsh, semi-arid terrain seemed to stretch forever. There were a few shrubs scattered about and occasional trees but the topography offered no real shelter from the elements or wild animals. She could also be spotted from a long distance away. It was a wonder that Lobhengula had crossed the Shangani and disappeared. It didn't seem possible that anything could disappear in this stretch of nothingness. She occasionally encountered herds of goats that seemed to regard her with as much wonder as she regarded them.

Ranga wondered if she had made a mistake. The vast plains that lie between Gweru and Bulawayo have very few inhabitants. It is impossible to nurture anything in the dry, waterless plain. Of course, the people had all flocked to the farms and to the city. There were mouths to feed and taxes to pay. They were clever these white people. No hills or caves — the best place to keep an eye on a group of Africans and their goats.

She knew the way better on the Masvingo-Beitbridge road. She had used that route all those other times before. The grass grows taller and thicker in that part of the country and the trees are lush. *Majesa* flirt from tree to tree, leading you to the juiciest *matamba*, *tsvubvu* or *tsenza*. There are also a lot of big boulders and caves one can shelter behind in case a *Chopper* or a *Dakota* flew past.

She tried hard to remember how many days she'd been walking. She couldn't. She had stopped counting on the second day. The young man she met on

the first day had said the journey to the border normally only took a few days, just over a week, he'd said. He was thin and gaunt, with red, restless eyes. He was going in the other direction, back towards Gweru. She wanted to tell him that there was nothing back there for a young man but she didn't — at least that was one mother who wouldn't have to make this journey. 'A few more days, *amai*' he'd said, attempting a smile.

But she was not young anymore. Sara had said as much. She had implored Ranga to wait a few more days and try to verify the news but Ranga had argued that this time she knew for sure because she felt it in her heart.

"It's different this time. A mother feels these things," she had said.

This had hurt and silenced Sara.

Ranga was not going to give up. She could not give up. She did not know how to give up. It did not matter to her that progress was getting slower, that she could not feel her feet and that the few boiled *mealies* she had left were beginning to ferment. Besides, she had stuck to the main path, as much as she could, like the young man said, so sooner or later she was going to get to Bulawayo. The Beitbridge border would then only be another few days' walking away.

The thought excited and scared her at the same time. She did not have the right papers and she only spoke a few words of English. She was probably going to have to cross under the fence or swim across the Limpopo, if things did not go well at the border. She had heard about people drowning or being ripped to shreds by crocodiles and the ruthlessness of the *Boers* across the border was legendary. They were known to shoot on sight anyone caught going under the fence but she was determined to try, one last time. Her immediate worry was that she would definitely have to speak some *isiNdebele* in Bulawayo first. She could remember '*salibonani*'.

One of her brothers had courted a Ndebele girl when they were teenagers.

“A greeting is a good start,” she consoled herself.

She hoped that it would be enough. She was going to have to rely on people for somewhere to stay, and for food. She had a few shillings saved from selling *Seven Days* in the staff quarters in the evenings and at weekends. She needed to be able to ask about South Africa, where she would go to start looking, once she got there.

She was racking her brains for the word for ‘please’ in *isiNdebele* when she heard the sound of a vehicle approaching.

Everyone in the village agreed that since the *Puma* brought her back and the two soldiers dumped her at the Msasa tree that used to be the elders’ court, Ranga had not been the same. The *Puma* stopped long enough for one of the soldiers to shove Ranga out with the heel of his booted feet. She landed on her backside but immediately got up and dusted herself down. It was midday and everyone was back at the quarters standing around as they did every lunch time. At first the soldiers had brought the body of a dead freedom fighter to show them what would happen to anyone who thought of joining terrorist. They would kick them out onto the dust, leaving them for the villagers to bury. But this time the corpse had got up as soon as it hit the ground. They all stood or sat where they were, with their mouths wide open.

She walked away from the Msasa tree staring straight ahead. She did not stop to talk to anyone.

As the days went by, she went about her business as if she had never left.

She gave no explanation, not even to Sara. The foreman wanted to know where she’d been but Ranga didn’t even look at him, not even when he said Ranga had lost herself a month’s wages. All she said to Sara was, “Next time I am catching the train.”



Everyone knew what Ranga had been trying to do but no one could bring themselves to talk about it. They were not sure how far she had gone this time. She had not even waited to consult her other sons before setting out. The message as passed on by a bus driver had been, *'MaMoyo's son's friend heard from a chap in a shabeen in Bulawayo that there had been a sighting of Den in a nightclub in Hillbrow in Johannesburg'*.

This message, although vaguer and the source of it a bit more dubious than previous messages, was still enough to get Ranga packing her small sisal bag again.

Den was not the only man from the village to set out for Johannesburg in search of a job, and never return. They had all heard of the gold and the lights and the music. They sent their sons, brothers and husbands in search of this gold but none of them ever came back. Her neighbours had wanted her to succeed so they would have hope that their loved ones would return or be found too. They didn't ask questions because they didn't want the hopelessness of the situation to be confirmed by the details of what had happened.

The meeting was held at noon on one dull Saturday morning in winter. When everyone was seated under the Msasa tree the headman stood up with great difficulty. He was old and whatever news he had to tell the people made him look older and frailer. It was the way he shuffled to the front, his headman overcoat seeming to weigh him down.

'We must all ask our ancestors to forgive us for leaving without ceremony'.

Some women began to cry.

'The white people say we are not working hard enough, that we are too busy wasting energy on useless pursuits. That we are like children who need monitoring all the time'.

The police were finding it difficult to stop the beer brewing, the headman explained. The army believed that the ‘traditional ceremonies’ were a cover for *pungwes*, meetings with terrorists. The farmers too were getting increasingly frustrated by their workers turning up for work stone drunk or not turning up at all after weekends of traditional ceremonies.

The villagers had been moved once before to make room for a cotton farm, but it had only been to one side of their village. This time, they did not know which *keep* they were being moved into or if the whole village would be put into the same one. Ranga found herself packing her meagre belongings once again. She wondered how Den was ever going to find her when he returned. She had almost managed to raise the train fare. If only they had not been found out, she would only have needed to brew a few more drums of the *Seven Days*.

Ranga did not live long enough to see her grandchildren and her great grandchildren having to pack their belongings to go on similar journeys – constantly searching, fleeing and complying with official orders just as she had lived her own life – one long journey travelled, but never really completed. She would never have known that that journey to Beit Bridge and the different ways to cross it would remain a preoccupation for generations after.

She was oblivious to the racket around her. The lorry was only going to make one trip. Pots and pans, bedding, chickens, goats —everything had to be done in this one trip. She had only taken a few clothes and a blanket. As the lorry rolled away, she sat clutching her small bundle of belongings on her knees, gazing at the clump of trees where several earth mounds rested in the shade.

## Cobwebs in my mouth

She hesitates. She's not sure how to do this. No one has prepared her for this role. Young people wait for the elders to start important conversations, not the other way around. That's what she'd been taught.

It's only midday on an ordinary clear sky summer afternoon. The sun is gleaming with blinding ferocity outside but it's dark inside Gogo's thatched, round, mud hut kitchen – cool and shadowed. It's always dark in Gogo's Kitchen. Nomadlozi knows that it is partly because the only window is a small triangular hole in the wall, not big enough to let the light in or all the smoke out. She wishes she could remember the other reason now – something to do with north facing or south facing. She had failed Geography at school.

When she was younger she used to think that the darkness had to do with Gogo's *things* – the drums behind the door, the masquerade dancer mask and costume on the floor next to the drums or the rows of jars with all sorts of roots, herbs and other mysterious concoctions in them on the shelf on one side of the kitchen. Gogo is a *sangoma*, able to speak to the ancestors and to see things that other people cannot. In Nomadlozi's child's mind, talking to the ancestors could only be done in the dark. This was possibly a conflation in her head of the ghost stories her mother used to read to her and the vague descriptions of what Gogo's occupation was. Nomadlozi wants to be able to forget the drums, the jars and animal skins behind the door and sit down next to Gogo on the cool earth floor. She would work out for herself later what to make of the things behind the door.

Inside, Gogo works quietly and quickly. She sits on a reed mat, next to the fire, shelling some groundnuts. The thick, black smoke drifting from the fire doesn't

seem to trouble her. It shouldn't bother Nomadlozi either. She is ashamed that it does. She wants Gogo to rebuke her. She wants Gogo to say:

*'Ehe, child of my child, do you want to spend the whole day standing out there in the sun doing nothing? Do you want to be like the dancer who learns the dance when the drummers have dispersed? Come in here and help me shell these groundnuts and learn to do something useful with your hands, you lazy girl!'*

She wants Gogo to say it with the same feigned exasperation that used to make her laugh and reassure her when they played this game all those years she had lived with Gogo. She would then be able to duck her head and cross the threshold.

But Gogo keeps shelling the groundnuts.

A pot of some bean mixture is simmering on the fire. Gogo keeps tending the fire, making sure that the heat is just right. Nomadlozi is amazed at how easily Gogo does that. In the city, everyone has a stove with a dial with numbers on it to moderate the heat. She watches Gogo's hands as she works. Why don't Gogo's eyes water like hers in the smoke?

Gogo works quietly and quickly. There is a lot to be done before the sun sets. She is always busy. She has no one left to help her with the chores – all her children and grandchildren scattered across the world. There is nothing left for the young people to stay for in this country, everyone says, shaking their heads.

Nomadlozi knows she has to say something now, explain herself, try to make Gogo understand before the opportunity is lost. Once the shelling is done, Gogo adds a bit more water to the bean pot and gathers all the shells off the floor, making everything neat again. Nomadlozi should speak now.

She could tell Gogo how she sat on her suitcase, faint with hunger, watching people come and go. She watched women approach the rough, hardened-looking

men standing by their big trucks. She watched and understood the unspoken agreement between the truck drivers and the women, thinking how some people are just better at it. She watched them leave, one after the other – sometimes in twos, even mother-daughter or sister pairings. Never groups. It was easy to tell. When you watched for so long it surprised you that you could tell subtle differences like the fact that the woman with the black dress, flirting with the truck driver was not the same one from the morning who had first told them about all the foodstuffs that were subject to import duty at customs although they wore the same dress. The other had braided hair. Or how the mother-daughter pairs seemed more hesitant, sometimes abandoning the idea of hitching ride on the trucks all together.

She had waited for the three of them (herself, Sihle and Maria) to get a bus that had space for all of them. She wasn't going to flirt with truck drivers for a ride and despite the seriousness of their predicament (they were stranded at the border – their bus had left without them although they had paid the full fair to Harare) she was going to wait. She was prepared to book a room for the night at one of the many Bed and Breakfast motels in Dhulivadzimu even if it meant they might not have enough money for the rest of the journey afterwards.

Viola had appeared out of the immigration building, followed by an immigration officer. She didn't even look up. She just followed the man out of the building towards the carpark, not raising her head once. Nomadlozi had taken that to mean that she was being expected to pay some favour to the officer before she could be allowed to go or that she was receiving some sort of special treatment. Either way, they would never know. Nomadlozi was too afraid to ask what was happening. She decided that this was exactly the sort of instance where she didn't need to know.

She had called for an ambulance for Tanatswa as soon as they left the immigration building and found her leaning against a tree retching and, a pool of blood forming at her feet. The paramedics had been rude, explaining how that is what happens when people opt for backstreet abortions. Nomadlozi had to pay them before they could take Tanatswa to the hospital. She paid in cash and got no receipt.

She has hesitated too long to start speaking and Gogo stands, picks up the water pot and heads out the kitchen door leaving Nomadlozi feeling inadequate and something else she can't quite describe.

Later when she calls her mother, she has not recovered from her visit with Gogo. She can never visit her again, she decides.

'Read it to me', her mother says. 'Just the beginning'. You need a powerful opening line. All successful novels need a powerful opening line'.

She takes a deep breath and slowly lets it out then begins to read:

*Sanyathi River, sometimes known as Mnyathi snakes its way from Daramombe mountain range in the north central and cuts its way through rock to reach the mighty Zambezi River in the north-west...'*

She's aiming for a nonchalant tone.

'Mmmm...!', her mother says, stopping Nomadlozi mid-sentence, before the bit where the mighty Zambezi pours into the Indian Ocean.

'It won't work. People don't want to know about the hills and the rivers. Those will still be here when all this is done. People want to read about other people'.

She wants to say she can think of a dozen successful novels that start with a description of topography. She also knows a lot of people who enjoy reading about rivers and mountains that roll gently across savannah plains, but she has become

preoccupied with trying to figure out what she means when she says, 'when all this is done'. Was she getting better? Or was she talking politics?

A sadness envelops her; a sadness born of always having to try to work out what the words that fall out of her mother's mouth mean. Her mother had said this before, 'Make it about the people, she'd said. 'It needs to be a book that captures the spirit of the Zimbabwean people. It needs to capture the history we're living'.

She had heard this said about other books, but had always thought it one of those vacuous things people say when they haven't got anything more complimentary to say. She wonders again why she is the one doing this. She didn't want to write a book, had never wanted to write one.

'You mean, like *Nehanda*? she asks, trying to recover the conversation. Her mother is a great fan of Yvonne Vera and has read *Nehanda* several times. Nomadlozi has never read the book. Her mother had tried to get her to read it one school holiday but Nomadlozi had only managed a few pages. She had seen the play at Reps Theatre once. All she can remember of it is the animal skin costumes and the singing – too much singing, she thought back then. She finds historical novels as tedious as autobiographies and biographies, especially of well-known historical figures. She has never read *The Long Walk to Freedom* for instance, because she guessed she had read most of it elsewhere, in the papers and history textbooks. Now it sounds like her mother might be trying to make her write something like that. 'Mum', she says. 'I thought it was about you and your friends...'

'We are part of the history of our country too, aren't we?

She decides to change the subject, weighed by a deep sense of dissatisfaction and alienation. She will never understand.

'How are you getting on anyway?' Nomadlozi says with forced cheerfulness.

'I have a flat. The paint is peeling a bit, but it's ok', her mother responds also feigning light-hearted breeziness.

'What do the doctors say?' she asks.

'Not much', she sounds distracted. Nomadlozi doesn't believe her. Although she has never been to England, she has heard that the doctors are very good and will tell you what is wrong.

'Send me a copy of the opening chapter once you've got rid of the hills and rivers' she guffaws, at her attempt of a joke.

Nomadlozi doesn't get a chance to say goodbye. She had wanted to tell her that she had gone to visit Gogo in the *rurals*.



## Conclusion

This project started as an exercise in bringing Zimbabwean women's experiences of violence into focus. The collection of loosely linked short stories, *Homewards*, is based on the lived experiences of Zimbabwean women displaced by violence and who at the time of writing were living in the diaspora in Johannesburg and the border town of Musina in South Africa. The practical, sociological aspect of the project involved interviews and creative writing workshops with the participants to collect personal accounts and narratives of their experiences of gender-based violence. The stories and accounts were the inspiration for the stories in *Homewards*. From the narratives written by the participants, I was able to explore how the displaced women interpreted and chose to express their experiences. I also viewed their stories as a guide for ethical ways of writing about complex and sensitive subjects, especially sexual violence and rape.

The stories in *Homewards* attempt to create women-centred worlds that many Zimbabwean women inhabit but rarely find expression in literary representation. The stories are organised around the lives of seven women, Nomadlozi, her mother, Tanatswa, Sihle, Thandi, Viola and Maria. They, for various reasons, have escaped to South Africa but find themselves compelled to return to Zimbabwe. It is not enough to have female characters as the sole feminisation goal of my writing. Instead, I tried to create characters that embody the complexity of the 'Zimbabwean women' subject position, affirming their strength and agency while acknowledging the intersections of victimisation and marginalisation they experience at home and as migrants in the often-hostile environment in the diaspora.

Recent and emerging trends and perspectives argue that the most helpful way to explore the multilayer reality of Zimbabwean experience is to embrace the

idea of the ‘unique, but multiple historical experiences.’<sup>2</sup> Within the context of highly contested accounts of the past and the recent past, previously silenced or ignored voices, particularly women’s, are vital to resisting what Kizito Muchemwa (2005) calls ‘the slipping into oblivion of oblivion of unacknowledged, unspoken and unwritten traumas of history’.<sup>3</sup> *Homewards* is a contribution to challenging historiographic conventions of how Zimbabwe’s past is celebrated and remembered. The project’s starting point was the position that official versions of the struggles in Zimbabwe are biased and that not all historical players have had a chance to tell their stories. The inspiration was to ensure that women’s voices are part of the narrative as it unfolds so that they are not written out of history as has happened after the other main historical and political shifts. Inscribing women’s contributions and struggles has become more pertinent in the context of Zimbabwe’s ‘contested history’ and the government’s systematic attempt to propagate what it terms ‘patriotic history.’<sup>3</sup> Within this context, as a postcolonial feminist endeavour, the short fiction is a valuable strategy for disrupting narratives that are influenced by colonial, nationalist and patriarchal ideology and practices. Writing on the short story as a more efficient form of literary expression for the postcolonial condition, Philip Holden writes that,

“Short fiction insinuates itself into the fabric of history, and yet its fragmentary form raises contradictions that are never fully rationalized through historicizing narratives.”<sup>4</sup>

I was motivated by the challenges of narrating and inscribing gender-based violence and perpetrator perspectives within a context where mainstream and official

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<sup>2</sup> Anthony Chennells, ‘Marxist and Pan-Africanist Literary Theories and a Sociology of Zimbabwean Literature’ *Zambezia*, 20.2 (1993), 109-129 (p.127).

<sup>3</sup> Kizito Muchemwa, ‘Some Thoughts on History, Memory, and Writing in Zimbabwe’, in *Versions of Zimbabwe: New Approaches to Literature and Culture*, (Harare: Weaver Press, 2005), 195-202. <sup>3</sup> For a discussion of the terms, see Introduction and Chapter 1

<sup>4</sup> Philip Holden, ‘The Short Story and (Post)colonial Governmentality’ *Reading for Genre: Interventions*, 12.3 (2010), 442-458 (442)

narratives have hegemony. Arguments have been made about how repeated exposure to representations of violence can create a desensitisation and normalisation effect. The consideration is whether there is a way of telling the same stories and getting the same issues across without depicting actual acts of violence. Writing about the violence, particularly rape and sexual assault, was very difficult. In *Homewards*, 'Freedom', 'Some Kind of Love' and 'Mushrooms for my Mother' are specifically about rape and gang rape. The impact of the continued prevalence of violence makes it pertinent that the portrayal of these experiences does not retraumatise, degrade or disempower victims. Therefore, inscribing violence against women in fiction remains a complex action as fiction, like all art, is at some level entertainment. I remained conflicted throughout the writing process about getting the right balance between aesthetics and functionality. I took the ethical stand that relentless representation is not only a depiction of reality but also a deliberate necessity: a way of undermining silencing. Zimbabwean women are compelled to repeatedly write about violence and trauma and focus on politics as their stories seek to also function as historical and social document.

The border between Zimbabwe and South Africa assumes a significant status for many Zimbabwean women. It embodies the idea that identity is intrinsically dynamic; migrant identity is doubly 'decentred' in that it originates from the liminal spaces at the boundaries between dominant cultures, between the home country/culture and the host country/culture. Nyamnjoh suggests that, contrary to the opinions of host governments and nationals, many migrants often do not intend to reside in the host country permanently. However, they remain concerned about their home countries and, as such, conceive of their day-to-day reality (and subsequently identity) as being characterised by "flexible mobility" rather than a

series of fixed “dislocations and relocations”.<sup>5</sup> As such, the migrant is essentially in a constant state of flux and transition. There is always a sense for the characters in *Homewards* that they have no fixed personal identities for a start. They have also lost their cultural, community identity and have no immigration status. The identities that they have created for themselves respond to an unfolding and fluid political situation on both sides of the border. None of the characters in *Homewards* has concrete plans or aims. What they strive for is not going to resolve any of their problems. Life is not easy on either side of the border. My interest in the experiences of women living in the border town and Johannesburg was how the liminality of their existence further marginalises them, meaning that their stories are further removed from the mainstream narratives. As a result, their stories are more vulnerable to being ‘swallowed’ by history. Borders move people through liminal places but for the lives of the research participants and the characters in the stories, crossing the border either way leads to another space of liminality. Their lives remain in limbo as the stories in *Homewards* defy completion.

It is increasingly difficult to keep track of events and focus on actual, historical and material violence against women in a situation where the reality is constantly shifting and thus impossible to capture in a single, totalising way. It was hard to pin down any events, situations, and sometimes even the setting: for example, the continued ‘clean-ups’ meant that some city landscapes have disappeared. This is true of some neighbourhoods in the major cities, particularly Harare. This very transience is a subtext to the stories in *Homewards*, in which spaces are never completely known, and events are difficult to verify, and every election threatens

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<sup>5</sup> Francis B. Nyamnjoh, *Insiders and outsiders: citizenship and xenophobia in contemporary Southern Africa* (Dakar, Senegal: Codesria Books, 2006), p. 76.

upheaval. This transience is palpable at the border, where there is always a level of uncertainty about leaving or entering the country, creating an accumulated sense of vulnerability of history and place.

One of the main questions of this project was how violence against women, particularly sexual violence, could be fictionalised ethically. The project addresses the tensions in seeking to obtain as uninhibited accounts as possible of traumatic experiences from participants without causing distress or justifying possible criminal behaviour and not appearing to collude with perpetrators by giving them a central focus. The distinction is especially pertinent as the Zimbabwean civil strife is still unfolding and the situation continually volatile. This ethical dilemma about distinguishing victims from perpetrators is partly dependent on which side of the political divide people are on, specifically whether they support the government or the opposition. 'Viola', in 'Running' and 'Law and Order' is, on the one hand, a perpetrator but has to leave the country when her life comes under threat.

I was always keenly aware of the challenge in writing creatively or producing an aesthetically sound creative output and generating knowledge. Jennifer Webb, writing on the contradictions in practice-led research, argues that “focus on the production of a fine artwork can give precedence to aesthetics at the expense of knowledge. Focus on the production of knowledge can generate art that is didactic and “academic””.<sup>6</sup> I found the creation of ‘fine artwork’ and ‘production of knowledge’ to be the most difficult balance to achieve in the stories. The stories in *Homewards* aim to contribute to the understanding of national and personal

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<sup>6</sup> Jennifer Webb & Donna Lee Brien, ““Agnostic” thinking: Creative Writing as Practice-led Research’ *University of Canberra & Central Queensland University* (2008), 1-15, (p 1)  
<<http://acquire.cqu.edu.au:8080/vital/access/manager/Repository/cqu:4727>>

traumatic history, gendered and ethnic identity and personal and collective guilt. I found 'Law and Order' particularly challenging as I struggled with fictionalising a known person who, on a personal, ethical level, I believe should be made to account for her actions. I wrote the whole story as a character portrait. I left it as suspended and unresolved as I still have not worked out how to overcome my revulsion. I wanted to capture factual aspects of the crisis but found it impossible to write some of the stories I gathered as part of the research. For example, a young woman, Erica (not real name), in an interview (January 6, 2017) said 'They took turns to rape me. I don't know how many. Then they pushed a Coca-Cola bottle inside my vagina'. She wanted me to and hoped I would one day write a story. The ethical dilemma of doing this without sensationalising or disrespecting her experience meant that I included her experience in a sentence in 'Some Kind of Love'. I find the story otherwise too harrowing to contemplate. Also, creating fictitious characters and events based on history sometimes felt like a subversion of that history.

It is my argument that it is urgent for women to participate in the project of recording contemporary Zimbabwean culture, historical and political events through writing, and to be part of the discourse that seeks newer ways of engaging with the problem of entrenched violence and ultimately to be involved in the process of finding solutions. *Homewards's* significant achievement is, bringing together women's stories of violence in a way that forces the reader to engage with the prevalence of that violence and acknowledge the culture of violence that normalises violence against women. As a significant number of the stories have been published, my writing complements other Zimbabwean writers' work, especially women writers, in challenging the status quo to give a sense of the terrible costs of the continued political crisis in Zimbabwe. This sense of collective witnessing generates solidarity between readers and offers companionship to those waiting at the physical

and the metaphorical border. The writing in *Homewards* tries to respond to the central functions of feminist writing: a liberating contestation of various forms of oppression, a response to exclusion and a struggle for identity.

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