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ISSUE III

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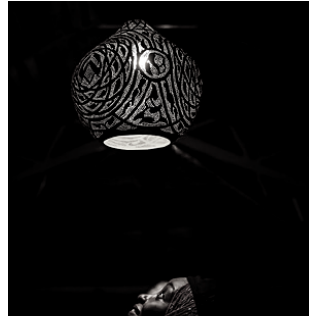
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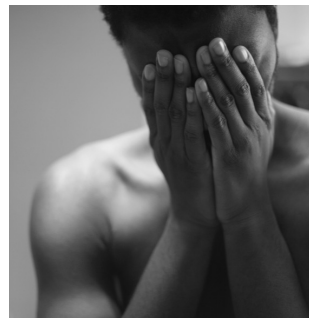
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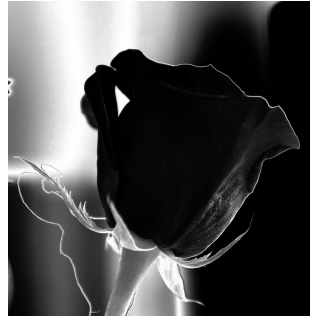
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# EDITOR'S LETTER

**TIAH MARIE BEAUTEMENT**

"My family and I stood on the margins of a reality we couldn't make sense of and tried to answer impossible questions," writes Sané Dube in "The Things That Survive Death". The essay features in The Single Story Foundation's Issue III, but the line itself could summarize any of our publications. Reality, or the lack of, and how human beings navigate it, is precisely what writers are continuously exploring. Or, more precisely, humans grappling with change while fearing getting stuck, a riddle we all seek to unravel.

Death, a tale as old as time, continues to throw the living off course, punching us in the gut. Yet, as Kearoma Mosata explores in "This Is How We Grieve", amongst the pain are new beginnings, such as her daughter being born shortly before her grandfather dies. Sophia Ebgelo also toys with the dichotomy of living with joy while also experiencing sorrow, in her short "Until I Come Home". Kites fill the air, as breath leaves the father who installed the love for the hobby into his child.

"Your mother's shanty doesn't smell of roses," writes Abram Mahlaba in the poem "Log in Your Eye". Pain reaches us in many ways, even as we continue to carry on. Chisom Okafor in the poem "Wonderlands" addresses the hardship of carrying on in a hostile space: "learn to pick out its echo when it calls / the love you seek does not belong in this place." And Sindi- Leigh McBride explores living in discomfort in "Hot Girls In Cape Town", from asking her mother, "Why isn't my skin like yours?" to enduring the sweltering heat in a city gripped by severe drought.

Why do we read written works that explore the infinitely difficult questions? Many have argued that it is toxic to read about death, change, or people existing in hard situations. It is trendy to yearn only for inspirational sound bites and uplifting, positive thinking clichés. Yet, I would argue, ignoring the bruises that life doles out only further isolates people from the full spectrum of the human experience. When life does knock us sideways, we are ill prepared to cope with the full spectrum of reality. "I hear you," the writers in this issue seem to be saying, both to their readers and to the people they encounter in their everyday lives. And as we read, we are also saying, "I hear you," and "we are not alone," because "this happened to me too."



**THE ELDERS COULD NO  
LONGER REMEMBER ALL  
THE THINGS OUR PEOPLE  
USED TO KNOW.**

# **THE THINGS THAT SURVIVE DEATH**

**Sané Dube**

I looked into the mirror and saw my twin sister's ghost dancing on my face four months after she died. We didn't share a face, but I could see her in mine, she could see me in hers. I'd taught my eyes to focus on anything but the reflection staring back in mirrors. That day, I was careless. When I looked up, her ghost danced on my lips and my cheekbones, reminding me some bonds survive death. She had died on a cold day in November,

on the same day we'd come into the world thirty-two years before. Most come alone; we didn't. I came first, Sam ten minutes later. Dying, though, was a solitary affair. I was 2,000 km away when the call came. She was still warm to the touch when they found her; life left her body slowly. Phone calls, flights, and tears shed in waiting rooms followed. Later, I stood beside the casket and held her cold hand. Hoping it wasn't too late, I

whispered a reminder into her ear, to send me a sign when it was my turn to cross over.

The elders I asked about twins could no longer remember all the things our people used to know. We lost our ways of knowing, unable to trace a clear line through history. Years ago, Sam and I met one of our maternal great-uncles, an old man with cloudy eyes and grey hair, who'd lived a full life. He'd been a twin too, but his brother died at birth. He'd lived most of his life as if he came into this world alone and yet the absence haunted him. There was a shadow lurking in his eyes. You could see it if you looked closely enough. A lifetime hadn't dulled the pain. The loss frightened us.

My mother had discovered she was carrying twins late in her pregnancy. Ultrasounds weren't easily accessible to young mothers in the Zimbabwe of 1985. But the child she was carrying kept her bent over a bucket with sickness in her throat. It hadn't been like this with the ones who came before. Her doctor ordered an ultrasound and a giddy technician pointed out the two shadows on the screen. My mother's sister told this story at Sam's funeral. After we buried her; a cousin shared an early memory of us, the twins, running away from bath time. Two giggling, joyful toddlers running through the house on

Erica Hepburn Street. Would the way Sam died erase all these moments that made a life?



Sam died in a country we lived in but could never call our own. From the late 1990s onwards, a generation fled Zimbabwe. The country was young, a mere decade into the independence project, when the so-called liberators took off their masks to show us the faces they'd been hiding: oppressors play-acting revolutionaries. They put yokes on our necks and continued the work of killing us, slowly. The country became a land of dead dreams. A crumbling economy and a repressive political climate served as backdrop as Zimbabweans left in droves. My family broke too, scattered to three continents. We built homes in new places and tried to re-make ourselves. We contorted our tongues and learnt how to speak with new inflections. In the new places, no one cared about the lines we traced through our history or the memories we carried in our chests. We chased papers and "white" passports. Maybe if we had them, they'd treat us like we were human? We taught ourselves new ways of being and layered the meaning of home. We taught

ourselves to avoid talking about the things we longed for, wore masks to hide the bewilderment we felt about lives that hadn't turned out the way we imagined. We tried to forget the places inside us where dislocation met loneliness. Sometimes it worked. Mostly, over time, we disappeared from our own bodies, haunted by death.

Fifteen years into the displacement project, Sam grew weary. She ended her life on a cold winter's day. We packed up the house she had lived in with tears in our eyes and glasses of Canadian whisky in our hands. With death hunting her, she had left instructions on yellow sticky notes: trash, donate, for Sane. We found a box that reminded us of the carefree years of adolescence. Close to the bottom, a picture of a smiling Sam from the year we turned fifteen. She had dyed her hair blond during one of the school holidays. She wore it closely cropped to the scalp, slicked back with palms full of Blue Magic hair gel. A nose ring glinted back at the camera, the expression in her eyes relaxed. In the same box I found a journal from the year we turned sixteen. She wrote poetry on its lined pink pages and practiced her signature in the margins.

By the time we finished packing up the house, our parents had arrived in Canada. They came two weeks after she died,

carrying passports bearing visas that had required expedited and "compassionate" processing. We brought them to the house and watched silently as they peered into the boxes and picked out items to remind them of the daughter they'd lost. After it was all done, I was haunted by the image of my father in a too-big winter coat, snow at his feet, taking a picture of the house his daughter had died in.

My family and I stood on the margins of a reality we couldn't make sense of and tried to answer impossible questions. We tried to piece together her last few hours, that last year. We had spent decades masking our pain and pretending we could survive intact. There were no words for what happened to lost people like us. Was this way of dying inevitable for the fragmented selves we carried in our chests? Sam came back to Zimbabwe in a biodegradable wooden urn. She'd been away from home for 15 years, disappeared into an exile of sorts. We buried her in a tomb built by her father's brothers. She was buried in the southwest corner of the country, in the land of balancing rocks and sun-kissed skies. A crowd of heaving mourners stood with us; they called her daughter and buried her like their own. We planted a tree beside the tomb to give her shade. She was an ancestor now.





Sané Dube is a Ndebele writer. She was born and raised in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. She currently lives and works in Toronto, Canada.

I was unmoored and untethered after the burial. I wandered through the city I lived in, carrying grief in my chest. Well-meaning friends told me there'd be an after. That one day, I wouldn't wake up to feel my heart rattling erratically in my ribcage. I didn't believe them. If your twin dies, aren't you dying too? Loss haunted me; I found myself retreating inwards. I envied the Yorubas who create sculptures to remember. They believe twins share a soul. If one twin dies, steps are taken to preserve balance for the living twin. They pour out their grief for the lost twin in the sculptures, and, in so doing, ensure they won't be erased from memory. They give the living twin a path back to wholeness.

Lately, my twin has been visiting me in my dreams. In the last one, I live in the Canadian city built on two rivers, in a 1920s era apartment with creaking hardwood floors and whistling radiators. We stand together, looking through the window at an elm tree in the courtyard. She has a smile on her face. Now, the ghost of my face dances on hers.

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# GLITCHES

Gothataone Moeng



*"I willed myself to disappear into the darkness behind my closed eyes, but the low murmur of music coming from the hall kept me awake."*

Mpho watched me through the windows of the sky-blue phone booth outside our school gate. She twirled the handle of an open bright red umbrella to the left, to the right, to the left again and leaned in.

"Remember what I said," she told me, in a low, slow voice, as if to a child.

My father picked up the phone.

"Papa," I said.

"Heeeey, Mme," my

father said. Mpho rolled her eyes at my wide smile. I was named after my father's mother, so he called me "Mother" in his good moods. I was fourteen and learning to take advantage of him. It was so hot that November, that a man had become a national hero after swimming in the fountain pools in front of parliament. Newspapers called him "The parliamentary swimmer". Pictures of him, with water

droplets glinting and fleeing from his head and from the white t-shirt stuck to his skin, were couched between stories about the Y2K bug and fears of the impending end of the world. On the phone, my father wouldn't let me forget the swimmer.

"Mme," my father said. "So, you Gaborone people, you swim at parliament?"

"Papa," I said. "You know, everyone says that man is sick."

"You city people," my father said, laughing.

"Papa, this is not why I called."

"That's why it doesn't rain there in Gaborone," my father said. Mpho tapped at a non-existent watch on her left wrist.

"Papa," I said. "Please, I need money ... I need ... I have no food." Mpho rolled her eyes and shook her head at me. The side of the umbrella thump-thumped against the booth.

"Ija, ija," my father said. "Again no food? Don't they feed you at that school? Look, Mme, where does all the money we pay to that school go? Wait, wait, here is your mother ..."

"Papa, no," I hissed. "No, no, no, no."

"Your mother wants to talk to you..."

"...Hello," my mother came on the line.

"Mama!" I said, "Hello, Mama."

Mpho threw her hands into the air and walked off. I slipped another P1 into the

coin-slot. It fell in with a deafening crack.

"Le teng?" I said to my mother. I was always trying to win her back.

"Oh, Sadi," she said. "You ask an elder how she is? So now even your tongue has made its home there?"

At home, the phone sat on a pile of directories on top of the bookshelf beside my father's chair. While he could reach for the phone from where he sat, I knew that my mother would have to be standing up to talk to me, her feet bare, perhaps, on the cool tiles; perhaps the voluminous skirts of her dress draped over my father's arm. But every time I thought about my mother, I pictured her lying on the three-seater couch, on the verge of exhausted sleep, glasses slipping off her face, her Scheme Books and Lesson Plans on the coffee table.

"We now have twelve people," my mother said.

My mother was a lifetime member of the Full Gospel of Christ Church and contributed annually to the church building fund. Every Easter, she joined members of the congregation in a pilgrimage to the birthplace of the church's founding bishop. She attended church every Sunday but had long given up on dragging Papa and me there. I was unsure whether it was the possibility of the world ending, or the incident that took place in my last primary school,

but something had prompted my mother to make urgent plans for my baptism.

"You are getting ready, aren't you, Sadi?" my mother asked. "Reading your verses?"

"Yes, Mama," I said. "Then we who are alive, who are ..."

"...who are left..."

"who are left," I said. "Then we who are alive, who are left...uh..eish...then we..."

"...shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air," my mother continued. "...and so we shall always be with the Lord. Amen. You only have a couple of weeks left, Sadi," she said, and a feeling like foreboding settled in my stomach. The church was going to make a big ceremony of it: on the night of New Year's Eve, dozens of young people would be taken to the Metsimasweu River and be dunked under—once, twice, three times—just as John the Baptist would have done, and then, be given new names to live up to. Already, I juggled a lot of names: those given to me at birth, those I had acquired in my childhood, names I had picked up the previous year, but my mother had made her decision. She *needed* me to be baptised. Whenever she spoke of it, I fell silent under the weight of all my names.

Mpho and Tshiamo were waiting for me on the bench in front of the guardhouse. Mpho lay propped up against

the wall with her legs crossed, while Tshiamo sat on top of a newspaper on the far right of the bench, an umbrella open over her head. As usual, she had slotted a newspaper under her butt because she did not trust the cleanliness of the bench.

"And then?" Mpho asked. I sat down between them. "I *told* you what to say," Mpho said. She had the top-button of her shirt undone and she blew air down her chest at intervals.

"You wanted me to ask Papa for money for pads. You are crazy!"

"It works," Mpho said. "Trust me."

"Shame," Tshiamo said, reaching for my hand, "don't feel bad about not deceiving your parents." I was comforted by her cool hand inside mine, but beneath that comfort I worried about lying to my parents.

Besides me, Mpho puff-puff-puffed down her chest. "Now," she said, "What are you going to wear?" I shrugged my shoulders as if I didn't care that there were only five weeks before the end of term, before the end-of-term disco; as if I didn't care about a new outfit for the last school disco of this millennium. Mpho poked my stomach and said, "You know I would lend you something, but we don't wear the same size."





I was never sure if Mpho, Tshiamo and I would have been friends had we not been at the same boarding school at the same time, or had we not been the only three girl boarders in our form from north of Dibete: Serowe, Pilikwe, Mahalapye. Mpho had more in common with the other girls who had gone to private English-medium primary schools, girls who went on family vacations to Kasane and Cape Town and Maputo. Tshiamo and I were both on partial bursaries; our parents paid only a fraction of the school fees, but she was the kind of girl that I never would have been friends with back home. She was always brandishing her autobook, as if we had not all outgrown those notebooks we used to fill with song lyrics and magazine cut-outs of our favourite musicians.

What had bound us three from the beginning was the different way we spoke: the way we addressed adults in plural and dropped the l's from certain words. The other Form Ones in the house made us repeat this sentence over and over and over again: Ke bone ntlole a tlola-tlola mo tshimong ya ditloo ka letlatlana, and as if in chorus, we said it the same way every time, "Ke bone ntole a tola-tola mo tshimong ya ditoo ka letatana."



I shared a room with Mpho and had met her first, when she sat on her bed, hemmed in by packs of sanitary pads, toothpaste and roll-on deodorant, all still in their plastic packaging. Her posters – Michael Jackson, and Aaliyah, – were already stuck to the wall, so she sat cross-legged, tapping at her braids as she watched her mother fold her clothes into the drawers built into the bed frame. She was much thinner and darker than her mother. At my own mother's prompting, I bent my knee and extended my hand in greeting to the older woman and she said to her daughter, "See how respectful she is?"

"Me too," Mpho had said, leaning over and rifling her fingers through her suitcases, as though she was bored: "I am respectful." I had watched her in silence, and wanted my hair to pour over my shoulder the way her braids did. Her mother laughed, and I saw that the mischief in both their faces came from their slight overbites.

When they left the room, my mother had handed me a P100 note. I put it under my pillow, but my mother took it and hid it in my underwear bag. My face burned, watching her dig into my panties. After, she sat next to me on my bed and took my hand in hers.

"Sadi," she said.

She cradled my face in her hands.

"Botlhogile," she called me by my grandmother's name. "Remember whose name you carry."

I knew she was referring to the stories about me and Mr. B. I wondered if she could feel the heat of shame burning my face. Her voice, when she reiterated how I should conduct myself so far from home, was just as solemn as when she bent her head to pray. When she was done, she smiled and opened her arms for a hug. I wanted to win her back, but I still felt uncomfortable in her arms; in the same inexplicable way as when a couple on TV caught the two of us off-guard with their moaning kisses and neither of us had escaped to the kitchen in time.

Outside, a girl ran past my new room, singing "My Heart Will Go On" at the top of her voice.

"Let me go," Mama said.

I had watched her leave and heard the door clicking into place as she closed it behind her. I lay back on the bed. Out there, somewhere, my mother was walking away into Gaborone, leaving me, here, in the city, so far from Serowe, from Papa and her, from the friends I had known all my life, from the past year and all its shames.



Our school was in the centre of the city, sequestered behind high security walls and tall trees. Three security guards manned the school gate and noted all the boarders' departures and arrivals. The girls' boarding house was a red-bricked double-story, shrouded from view by the canopy of morula, sycamore and knob-thorn trees in front of it. Girls from years past, whose initials were still etched into our study desks and whose faces smiled at us from the walls, had christened it "Slaughter House", a prison within which time obeyed its own rules. Depending on the hour, our night guard, who we all called Uncle, could be seen sitting near the door, his head leaned against the saddle of his bicycle, which was always propped against the wall. During the day, winter or summer, Uncle's black-and-grey blanket was folded into his chair. Sometimes Slaughter was riotous with the sound of girls singing and laughing and oohing at the TV. Other times, Slaughter was quiet, with only the bells that governed our lives lifting the heavy silence within its walls.

In the quiet, late afternoons, after our extra-curricular activities—netball for Mpho and I on Monday afternoons, Cheshire Home visits for Tshiamo and I and Drama Club for Mpho on Wednesdays—we waited for the supper bell in our room, lying on the beds with

our feet up against the wall. Even in our waiting, I was often stunned by how time slinked ahead, quickly and quietly, as if oblivious to the madness our world was descending into. Everything seemed a dream. Everybody—the pastors, the newscasters—all went on endlessly about the Y2K bug and the impending end of the world. But how ordinary everything felt against this clamour. Reading *Song of Lawino* out loud in English class, History quizzes on Wednesdays, beef sausages and raw tomato slices for Sunday breakfasts. Mpho had memorised Tabona's entire timetable so that we bumped into him every time he came out of his Biology class. Tshiamo was called into the principal's office to discuss the possibility of her skipping Form Two the following year. We carried on as if the end of the world would wait for us.



When next I called my father, I made sure to ask where my mother was. Papa said she was outside doing the washing. I imagined my mother, back curved over a zinc tub, elbows deep in suds. I switched to English, imagining he would be more vulnerable to it.

"Papa," I said. "You know, some people believe it's better to make such big

decisions when you are older."

"Big decisions? Mme? What are you saying? Is this still about money? Hee, Mme, you are going to break my head with all this English. Life-changing choices?"

"I mean, I am only fourteen. Can I really be trusted to know whether I want to devote myself to a Christian life?"

"Mme," my father said, "you already promised your mother."

"But I don't want to do it."

I could hear myself whining. I was not sure how much my father knew about the incident the previous year. We had carried on as usual. Every evening, as I sat doing my homework, he called out to me so he could show me something funny on the TV. Every Saturday, we abandoned Mama to her cleaning and cooking and went to watch football at the dusty grounds nearby. Around him, I was still the same girl, unaltered by rumour.

"Papa," I said. I did not know how to explain to him that going through with the baptism felt like confirmation of everything people had said about me.

"Papa, if this was about money, would you have sent some?" His roaring laugh was still in my ears even as I walked back to Slaughter.



Two weeks after my failed attempt to get money from my father, the three of us were in my room. Tshiamo was sprawled on my bed, a white towel tied above her breasts, a book covering her face. I knew that she was probably sucking her thumb, a habit that she had tried and failed all year to shake. I was sitting on a chair in the middle of the room, facing the mirror on the inside of the door. Mpho stood above me, oiling my scalp. Some of the oil dripped on to the once-white towel wrapped over my shoulders. She was talking again about her plans for the disco, what she would wear, whether she would get a chance with Tabona.

"Cheri," she shook my shoulder and I looked up to face her in the mirror. "Do you know what you are wearing?"

"What?" I asked.

"The disco," she said.

"I don't know," I said. "I don't know if I am feeling this disco."

I dreaded what the disco meant; the end of the year, going back home to my mother, to my friends and the stories they had told about me and Mr. B.

"No," Mpho said, pulling my head in the opposite direction. "You have to come, we are all going." She turned to Tshiamo.

"Right?"

I looked at Tshiamo in the mirror. She shrugged, her left thumb stuck in her mouth, her book open on her chest. Right

then, before I could say anything, the bell rang for supper. Tshiamo scrambled up, grabbing at her towel with her right hand, keeping her pickled finger away from the towel.

"Fish and chips," she said, as if she needed to tell us. The smell of oil tented the school. Slaughter was almost empty which meant people were already queuing outside the dining hall. Mpho wiped her hands on the towel draped over my shoulders.

"I will find you there," I said. I sat looking at myself in the mirror even after they had left. My hair was sticking up towards the ceiling. The metal teeth of the Afro-picker poked my scalp. Its small black fist peeked above my hair. I looked like a creature from outer space. I tried to imagine myself in Serowe, waking up in my own bed, the world returned to its ordinariness. Down the corridor, someone warbled *My Heart Will Go On* at the top of her voice.



Throughout the year, we had spent afternoons in the room I shared with Mpho, dancing and moon walking, shrieking to the latest hits when Mpho bought the CDs. Other times, quieter times, in low and reverent voices, we



ushered each other into the lives we led outside the boarding house. Mpho just *knew* that her father was cheating on her mother, Tshiamo had wet her bed until she was ten and, sometimes, she worried that the stress of tests and exams would return her to this humiliation. Me, I told them that I was saddened by my body and the weight it was gaining. I wasn't though. Not really. I hoarded my real secrets, like treasure for some unknown future use. Some were small, like the fact that I hadn't been to Serowe all year; that my parents had been sending me to my aunt's in Molepolole over school holidays. Some I recognised as minor transgressions against Mpho and Tshiamo, dark thoughts fuelled by a competitive streak, which burrowed inside me sometimes, dark and diligent as bugs, even though, from the outside, the three of us seemed good friends. I still wished, in vain, to be better than Mpho at everything: athletics, Biology, English Literature, French, Geography, History, music classes, netball, school plays, the school variety show. Yet I helped her study and at night I stayed up with her beyond curfew, and in the dark, we judged the merits of the boys she was interested in, as if we were gods weighing up the sins of hapless mortals.

At night, before lights out, Tshiamo gathered with the other church-going

girls to read the Bible and pray. I thought her attempts to pray herself into God's good graces, just in case the world really did end, were obvious and futile. As if praying could stem the passage of time, as if it could stop the world from falling apart if that was its destiny. But sometimes I joined her and the girls in the downstairs sitting area for prayers. Night after night, I sat in that circle of bowed heads, my contempt rearing its antennae, and for that contempt I felt guilt.

There were bigger matters I kept from my friends: the names that littered my past. Orange, Slut, Vaseline, and the stories that had given birth to these names, improbable stories about me and Mr. B. I also saw no reason to let the two know about my mother's schemes for my redemption. I stayed up nights wondering if Mpho and Tshiamo could tell I carried these secrets, worrying about the kinds of things they kept from me.



A week before the disco, Mpho and I took a Broadhurst Route 5 up to the FET circle. At the circle, we got off to walk to the new mall. Our umbrella was useless against the heat. Even as dark rain clouds gathered, the sun shone fiercely through the clouds. The heat from the soil

throbbed through my thin flip-flops, and I felt like it would singe the eyelashes off my face and the hairs from my arms. Sweat, sweat everywhere. Between my breasts, sealing my T-shirt to my back; sweat in the crooks of my arms.

We retreated into the shade of the Morula trees that lined the road. Their sweet, yellowing stench accompanied the occasional thump of the overripe fruits as they fell, graceless, from the trees. Vendors—selling watermelons and bundles of sweet reed—had parked their vans under the cover of the branches. Men sat in camp chairs besides the vans, eating the watermelon in the old style, split into halves, plunging their fingers in and tearing chunks of the pink flesh out. One of the men had his T-shirt off and his prodigious stomach rose in front of him. He had his watermelon lifted up to his face to drink the juice. The men fell silent when we walked past. My heart beat loudly in my ears. Mpho chattered on, in English, oblivious to the stares of the men, oblivious to my embarrassment. Beneath their gaze, I suddenly became aware of my body and how I looked in my black school trousers and my yellow top; of my legs which suddenly seemed unable to walk, of my beating heart. I wondered if I could disobey the men if they summoned us to them.

"Angie!" one of the men shouted once we

had walked past them. The others chorused after him.

"Angela!" they shouted. "Michelle! Sethunya! Neo! Bontle! Baby, come on! Lebo! Hey Lebo, I love you! I love you, Nkamo!" I felt strangely exhilarated, like I had been running in the rain. Mpho's face glowered.

"Hey, baby, hey Mpho! Tshepi! Tshiamo!" the men shouted. Mpho faltered on hearing her name. I stopped and looked back. The man with the enormous stomach was barefoot, his black work-boots placed neatly out of the way of the watermelon seeds and the peels and chewed up ruins of the sweet reed.

"Not you," the man said. "The little one, in the shorts."

Mpho quickened her steps.

I hurried after her.



Inside the mall, we walked from shop to shop, seeking their icy mercy, standing beneath the air conditioner units until the cold washed over our bodies. In Mr. Price, Mpho trailed her hands through the skinny jeans, the stomach-out tops, the miniskirts, the denim dungarees, until we got to the queue outside the fitting room. I sat on the floor and waited. People

swirled around me. Kwaito crackled in the speakers above my head and in a moment Mpho stood in front of me in a short sleeved red dress. It looked slightly big on her. I nodded slowly; deciding what she wanted to hear.

"Eita," a boy said. I watched Mpho give the boy a look, and then strike a pose again, her arms akimbo, hands on her waist. I followed her gaze and my first instinct when recognising the boy was to be excited. Finally, somebody from home.

"Orange," the boy said. "You are Orange, right?"

Then I felt I was in one of those dream moments when you see somebody and you are infused with knowledge of them: the reason they are wearing the pink shirt their mother gave them when they were twelve, the exact words that would come out of their mouths next, the fact that they needed to suck their thumb in order to fall asleep. Looking up, memories of Kagiso flooded my body. How, for weeks and weeks and weeks, in my last months of primary school, he and his friends, Thabo and Brian, had tortured me.

How they called me this name, this name Orange.

"You are that girl, Orange," Kagiso said, now. My heart beat in my ears. Mpho watched me.

"You are lying," I spat at him from the floor. "Liar!"

"Wait," Mpho said.

"It's you," Kagiso said. "I know you. From Motalaote."

He turned to Mpho.

"This girl," he said, "Is a slut. She slept with a teacher."

I lunged at him. I beat him blindly. Then I felt somebody—a shop assistant—pull me back. My tears were hot and painful, and I took big heaving gulps of air. The shop assistant's breasts were in my face and I smelled the bleach and coconut spray of her T-shirt.

"Aoo, don't cry," the shop assistant said, rubbing my back. "Come on nnana, don't cry." And to Kagiso she scolded, "What are you doing to these girls?" I waited by the door as Mpho paid for a top. I was tired. My eyes were swollen and tender. Walking back to the combis, I tried to defend myself to Mpho, but I could not say anything except that the boy was a liar.

"He is lying," I said, over and over again, but Mpho just smiled uneasily and didn't say a thing. We were silent for the entire combi ride back to school.



My world was changing again. I could feel it. It was in Mpho and Tshiamo's lowered voices, how they fluttered somewhere

above my head, beyond the blankets I had entombed myself in the moment we returned to Slaughter. How, when the supper bell rang, they left without saying a word to me. I could feel it in the return of that terrible loneliness, of Mr. B not looking at me in class. Of being severed from my friends. Boys I had never spoken to approached me, giggling, asking if it was true that I had been wearing orange underwear the first time we did it. Asking if it was true that he had had to use a whole jar of Vaseline before It could go in.

Mpho and Tshiamo brought back macaroni-tuna pasta and an apple on a paper plate. They coaxed me to eat, their voices low, as though I were a hospital patient. I sat up and picked at the tuna, feeling as exhausted as if I had been working in the fields the whole day. Not even Mpho's forced chatter about what Tabona had been wearing could cheer me up.

"So," Tshiamo said finally, wonder in her voice, "you slept with a teacher?"

"No," I said. My body had suddenly assumed its exhaustion from the year before: the same breaking into tears at a moment's notice, the same weakness in my limbs, as though I were recovering from an illness. My chest ached at the memory of my friends no longer talking to me, of my mother not believing me when I told her the truth.

"It was just a story those guys made up about me."

Mpho and Tshiamo did not respond, so I went on to tell them the story, how my period had come, how I had stayed behind in class and Mr. B helped me, how the story had swelled and engulfed the whole school as the days progressed, growing bigger and more bizarre the longer it went on, until it reached people outside of school.

Until it reached my mother.

That is the story I told them.

"I swear," I said, crossing my fingers, "on my grandmother's grave."

I did not tell them that I had often wondered, sitting in his classes, about Mr. B's life: who cooked for him, who washed his clothes, who discussed the news with him at night? I did not tell them that I felt a thread connecting the two of us, in his deferring to me when nobody put their hands up for answers. How sometimes I did not put my hand up and waited for him, knowing that he would turn around and nod at me. When he did, I would rise above my classmates and speak only to him and he would nod and write what I said on the chalkboard, while I sat down and tried to contain the giddiness in my chest. I did not tell them that on that day my period surprised me, I had waited as my classmates rushed outside. I had attempted to clench my legs together and



walk out, but he had called my name. He had reached for his desk drawer and extracted a toilet roll and handed it to me with no ceremony or embarrassment, pointing at the storeroom towards the back of the class. The storeroom was cool.

I stood in the centre of the room, surrounded by rolls of used manila paper and boxes of notebooks. I unspooled the toilet paper and laid a wad of it across the rust-coloured stains inside my panties, pulling them up until the toilet paper rubbed at my private parts. When I walked out, Mr B asked if I was okay, and when I lingered, he put his hand on my back and led me to the door.

Outside, my friends had laughed and clapped their hands over their mouths, making suggestive sounds at the idea of me and Mr. B. Ordinarily I would have scolded them, but something unknown, lying dormant inside of me, awakened and stopped me from quashing my friends' chatter. With the memory of Mr. B's hand still fresh on my shoulder I threw my head back, knowingly, as they begged me for details, my laughter all the confirmation needed. But that was not the story I told Tshiamo and Mpho.

"If I lie may lightning strike me," I said instead, in the oaths of all our childhoods, and I thought of my grandmother Botlhogile, whose name I carried.

"Okay, okay," Mpho said. "We believe you. No need to go all bundus on us."



After, I refused to go anywhere. Not to the shops after school, not to the memorial gardens between classes or to the phone booth after supper. I stayed in our room, in bed, and pulled the covers over my head.

On the evening of the disco, the clouds gathered above the city, teasing us with the promise of rain. The darkening rain clouds made me miss my father. He would be excited were he in the city: he would tilt his head and study the sky as if, by looking at the clouds, he might move them into offering up their precious drops. We could speculate about when the ploughing season would begin, about how much maize and sweet reed he would save up for me.

I gathered my coins and walked to the school gate. Everything looked just the same, but even I could feel the excitement in the air. I waited while three Form Five girls finished their urgent whispering into the phone. When they left, I dropped my coins in. My mother picked up.

"Hello," she said. She sounded the way she always sounded: tired. I remembered

the beginning of the year, in my room in Slaughter, when she had held my hands in hers and prayed, when she had pulled me into her arms.

"Hello," my mother said again. I watched the darkening clouds and tried not to breath.

"Heelang," Mama said. "A o motho? Or is it a ghost that has called?"

"Dumelang," I said.

"Sadi," she said. "Oh, Sadinyana."

"Mama," I said. "I wanted to speak to Papa."

"Your father is not here yet," she said. "He's probably...I don't know where he is. I just arrived myself, and I just put the meat on the stove. I wish I could rest my feet a little, but there is so much to do. Oh, I am so lonely for you here, Sadi."

My heart stirred with hope.

"The first thing, when you come home," she said, "you have to get measured for your tunic, your baptism robe. Then you will see, everything will be different."

"Ok, Mama," I said. I wanted to believe that being baptised could restore me in her eyes, but sometimes I felt like my mother had given up on this world entirely, that she was preparing to rise up to another world, into another life altogether.



That night, I watched Tshiamo and Mpho get ready for the disco. Mpho glimmered in a red mini-dress and gold hoop earrings; Tshiamo was fresh in blue denim dungarees and a white tee. They slathered on foundation, lipstick, mascara. I watched them smack their lips together and spritz 'Exclamation!' on to their necks and wrists.

Again they begged me to come, but I shut the door after them and crawled into bed. I wished that I was anywhere else in the world. I willed myself to disappear into the darkness behind my closed eyes, but the low murmur of music coming from the hall kept me awake. Footsteps stomped in and out of the house, girls all giddy and running up and down the stairs, shrieking "My Heart Will go On" at the top of their voices.

Finally, the house was silent.

Upstairs, in the common room, I watched TV by myself. An advertisement warned viewers about the Y2K bug, which, the TV said, would return the world to a foolish time. Power plants spluttering into darkness, aeroplanes swooping from the sky and crashing into homes and schools and churches; traffic lights would blink into death, sending cars screeching and slamming into one another. I wondered how easily this millennium would give way to the next. Perhaps the old millennium had hardened

into a husk that would peel away and reveal the new one. Perhaps there would be a crack, a loosening, like when we were young, and our teeth shook in their gums and fell out. When we threw them up to the roof and asked the mmankgodi to bring us new ones.

I imagined the earth in an endless sunlit freefall, as if in a nightmare, nobody sure of quite where we would fall. Or perhaps rising into the sky, our clothes flapping in the wind. Maybe the bug would return us to a past, my old friends and I all back together again, practicing dance moves behind a classroom. I wondered where I would be as the new millennium revealed itself. Perhaps at Metsimasweu, with dozens of girls like me, all wearing white robes, fanned around a bend in the river. Perhaps I would have waded in by then, the cold water lapping away at my disgrace. Perhaps I would be submerged, the pastor's hand pressing my head under, warping, then revealing, the vivid sounds of the world. Once, twice, three times.

Maybe the millennium would slip into the new like night into day, with no announcement or ceremony, requiring no more preparation than being alive.



Outside, the music suffused the dark air. I tiptoed past Uncle, who slept with his head against the wall, his blanket draped over him even in the heat. I walked toward the hall. A kissing couple on a bench outside the Bursar's office disentangled and waited for me to shuffle past. I could feel the music humming in my chest. I was going to wade in amongst those ecstatic bodies and find Mpho and Tshiamo. We were going to dance with each other, just like any girls anywhere else in the world. We would move, our bodies oblivious of the real world and what of it awaited us. I was going to close my eyes and move with the night, full of grace, expanding and swelling around me, swallowing me whole.



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# WONDERLANDS

**Chisom Okafor**

I was born in a place for old men,  
for boys feasting their way backwards into time.  
The priest swiftly makes an incision  
from where he stoops to weave a certain birthmark;  
in *secular seaculorum*...  
I know boys trapped to birthmarks like seagulls to brown water  
I know boys turned silenced men, still sutured to the mark of the beast  
I know this, because here, you know forced silence is how best to live after birth:  
accept the wrong love in its untouchable  
learn to pick out its echo when it calls  
the love you seek does not belong in this place,  
it's been broken and wears the segmented skin of centipedes.

My skin, like each trickle of salt water makes for a sea of wonderments –  
lost love, broken hands, burning flesh.  
My body is a riverbank, flooded with wonderments.

We face the milky way – newborns, at daybreak – to recite  
reminders to the shadows that make love to us:  
*there are beasts in us too, as in every man.*

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Chisom Okafor lives and writes in Lagos State, Nigeria. His works have been published or are forthcoming in *Praire Schooner*, *Brittle Paper*, *Expound*, *Kalahari Review* and elsewhere. He is currently working on his debut chapbook.



# BENEATH THIS SKIN

**Assumpta Vitcu**

Dad said the best way to know what a person is truly made of is to cut them open. Despite being the disciplinarian in our home, he was fair and kind-hearted, unlike some of the aloof men my cousins called father. I used to think my dad was made of starch because his frame reminded me of an overgrown tuber of yam. I was thirteen the night I found out how wrong I was.

I was startled by the sound of his fist-sized bunch keys hitting the laminate floor. Dad shuffled across our threshold, moving as though his legs were too heavy to lift. Mum let out a small whimper when she saw him, the smell of baked chicken trailing her from the kitchen. Dad planted one giant palm on the stark wall to steady himself. It was like watching a collapsing skyscraper in slow motion. He slunk down to the floor.

No one dared to touch Mum's white walls, but I knew this was not why her mouth was ajar. This was the softest we had ever seen Dad, his mahogany head cradled in Mum's lap, as though she were a plate. He looked more like the amala Grandma makes on Sundays; thick, steaming stew sliding from top to bottom then pooling around it.



But the red substance congealing on his bald head was not the spicy comfort food I had been raised with.

Dad whispered something to Mum. She stopped singing "How Great Thou Art" and, although I could not hear what he had said, Mum hushed him, gently. His face, beaten and pounded, contorted every so often. And then, after the second or third time, Mum shouted for Frances with an urgency of voice I'd never heard before.

"Phone for an ambulance, ngwa!" When she mixed English with Igbo it always unnerved me.

"I'll call an ambulance Mum," said Frances, my brother, snatching my phone from my hand. "Password?"

I silently presented my thumb, unlocking the screen.

As if each of Frances's blinks made life fast forward, before I knew it, paramedics were suddenly at our door.

I remember the bloodied palm print on the wall.

It looked darker than I thought possible, and each fingerprint was just as precise and perfectly formed as I'd seen in movies.

As Dad was wheeled into the ambulance, I sat on the stairs staring at the blood spatter I would later liken to a Rorschach test, after learning the term in my A-level psychology class. That was the

night I discovered my father was made of fear and resilience, not starch as I thought, or privilege, like his attackers believed.

Days later, I heard Mum on the phone to her sister: "Mr Seymour hit first. He lives in the house at the end of our street and his family smiles when we pass. Usually. I thought they liked us?"

As she continued, I learned that Mr Weber, Mr Rossi and Mr Adebayo joined in too, kicking and punching and spitting, not just at Dad, but also at his brand new car. It was *time to teach the arrogant monkey a lesson*. Mum cried when she said that line. I don't know whether it was the brutality, the jealousy or the shock that Mr Adebayo, a fellow Nigerian who had sat on our sofa and laughed at Dad's jokes, said nothing when my father was called a monkey.

It shook us all.

Dad said the best way to know what a person is truly made of was to cut them open. I thought it was a weird thing to say since biology taught me that we are all blood and bones on the inside. But what he meant was that exteriors often are deceiving. Now, seeing my father broken taught me how revealing our fear and the fear of others can be.

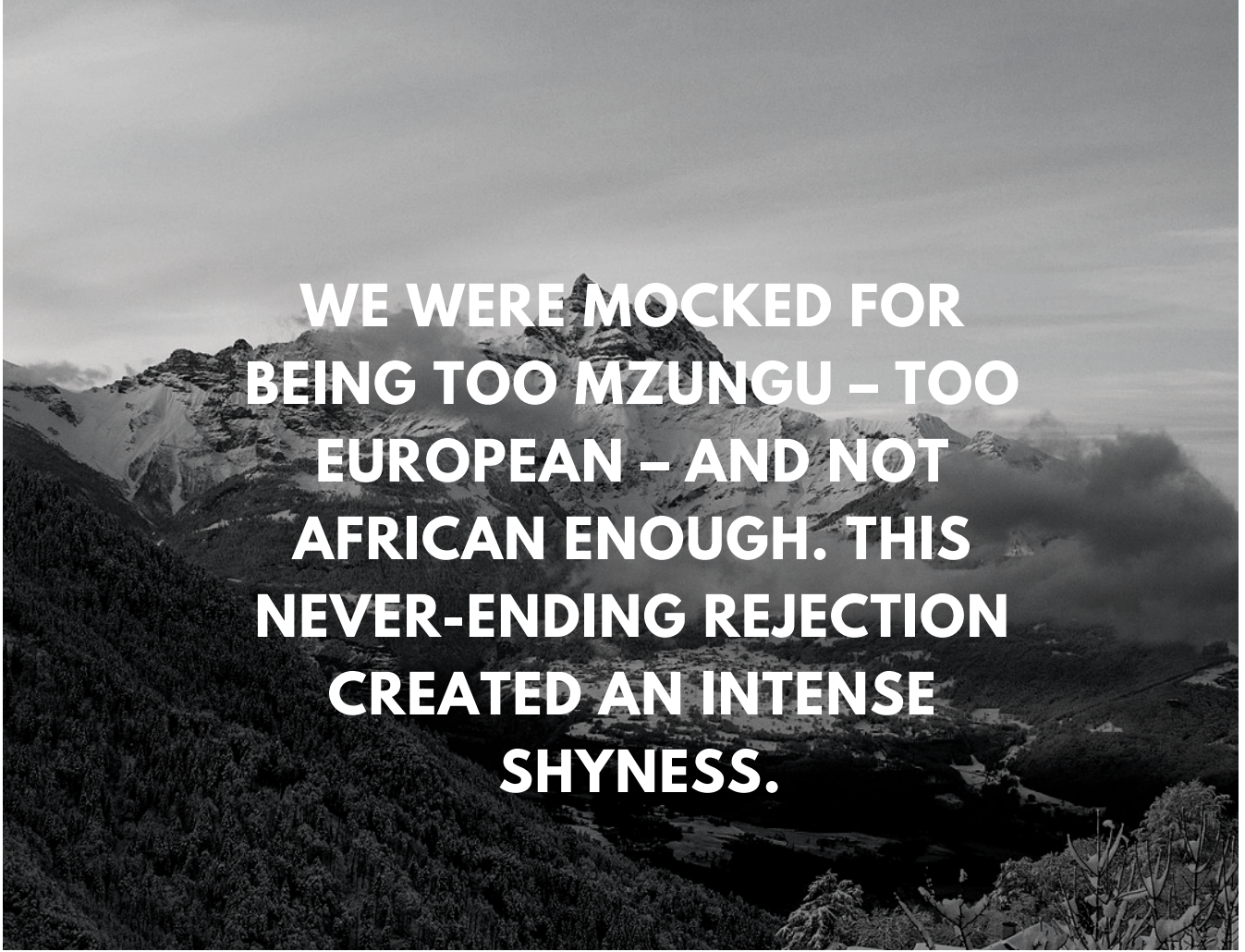
That night, Frances and I learned that our skin was a sin; but how much penance would we need to pay until we

are forgiven?



Assumpta Vitcu is a London based British-Nigerian poet, writer and special event planner with an LLB in Law and Masters in Creative and Professional Writing. Her work has been featured within *Praxis Magazine* and a number of publications such as *MAIA Creatives*, the *Ake Review* and *POSTSCRIPT*. Assumpta's work centres on love, loss, life-lessons and deracination. She is the founder of Wisely Worded Women; a community for wondrously willing women of colour.



A black and white photograph of a mountain landscape. In the foreground, there is a dense forest of evergreen trees. In the background, a large mountain peak is visible, partially covered in snow or light-colored rock. A river or stream flows through the valley below the mountain. The sky is overcast with clouds.

**WE WERE MOCKED FOR  
BEING TOO MZUNGU – TOO  
EUROPEAN – AND NOT  
AFRICAN ENOUGH. THIS  
NEVER-ENDING REJECTION  
CREATED AN INTENSE  
SHYNESS.**

# SCRIBBLING

**Margaret Odari**

I remember when Malova ran away from home. It was the only time I ever saw my father cry. He was filling up the bathtub with water for me. I would have a bath early in the evening, after which it was Eric's turn. My father broke into sobs as the warm steam filled the room. I remember him mumbling something about how it was dark outside and Malova would be all alone.

Eric would ask me later if he had been

crying. And for whatever reason, I said, "No."

Malova's bedroom was next to the bathroom. Out of all the rooms and bedrooms in our house, I liked his room the most. It was a small room with dark blue walls when everyone else's were white. I was the shy little sister that he invited into his sanctuary with a smile – to touch and read whatever books and comics I enjoyed. Sometimes, I'd sit



quietly with him for hours as he picked up a screwdriver and opened the transistor radio to see how it worked. He'd remove and scatter over thirty tiny pieces of plastic and metal parts from inside the radio onto his desk. The following day, he would put the pieces back in the radio and make it work. He had lined his walls with his paintings and the wooden bookshelves were cluttered with fraying, discoloured soft cover books and magazines he bought from the second-hand store. It was the only book shop of its kind in our town, near that dusty street corner close to the city market. His room was filled with the musty smell of browning paper, stacks of torn, colourful comics and scratched 33rpm records that would skip and endlessly repeat one line on the turntable before a gentle thumbing prompted the tune along. And then there was a pile of exercise books in a corner, several lined, light blue note books in which he'd scribbled illegibly. He was forever writing. I'd later learn that these were words to songs and poems he had composed to express some of his deepest feelings. In the familiar comfort of Malova's room, I would learn this art of scribbling and would read and write poems that made me laugh, think or soothed me.



I was too young to understand where my mother came from. I can't recall who introduced us, but I do remember someone saying that she was our mother. That she had been doing a secretarial course in England and that she would now be living with us. I remember the way she beamed at me. An aunt would later tell me that I didn't return the smile. Soon after, I saw her clothes hanging in my father's closet. Her favourite was the navy shiny sheath dress she wore with the matching hat. I liked her blue glitzy shoes with the pointed high heels. I tried them on my feet when I thought that she wasn't looking. Carried that soft purse with those pink, little, sewn-on beads and strutted around and around their bed with oversized stilettos and bag. Feeling all grown up.



Malova and I always excelled at school. The pressure to do well was intense: education had lifted my father out of poverty and moved us into the middle class. Schools were segregated when I was born, and the substandard education given to Africans in colonial Kenya ensured that most Africans only had access to menial jobs. After independence from the British colonisers, my three

older brothers and I – all born during the freedom struggle – were thrown into European environments so that we could reap the benefits and privileges of the 'best' education. This was to be found in the newly desegregated schools in independent Kenya. Even though we lived in Kenya, we hardly ever encountered other African kids in those early years. Instead, we lived among Europeans in a neighbourhood in Westlands.

I have vague memories of that time. I recall getting my first bicycle – a red Raleigh – and the feeling of gladness it gave me, since I was finally able to tag along with the other kids in the neighbourhood's 'bicycle gang'. We donned gum boots and cycled to the swamp-like grasses outside St Mark's Church in the rainy season to splash through the puddles and collect tadpoles. Unlike my European friends, I was singled out and followed around Asian stores. I'd have coins rudely thrown at me at the counter where, excited, I had taken my weekly pocket money to buy chewing gum, toffee or comics. The Asian woman at the cash register would place my European friends' shopping in brown bags; she would refuse to bag mine.

Aunt Lois was my mother's stylish and beautiful younger sister. She worked as a secretary at a travel agency in town. I remember Aunt Lois making herself

'prettier' with skin-lightening Ambi, which burned her face to raw patches of pus-filled bubbles. As a young girl, my mother and aunt took the hot comb to my coarse, shoulder-length hair, pressing every kink out of it with the charcoal-heated, smoking metal. And even so, I remember the high-pitched cackles of European children, who pointed and snickered at my braided hair. Even worse: my hair wrapped in string.

I knew I was unwelcome in many European friends' homes. Elke's mother's stare would follow me coldly up and down the stairs of her two-storey flat as she sat, arms tightly folded on the mahogany sofa. Simon's mother always seemed angry when I visited. She would talk to my European friends who visited Simon, but never to me. Although almost all our school friends and neighbours were European, our parents expected us to be as traditional as the African kids we hardly saw. With 'white flight' in our neighbourhood and schools, more Africans moved in. We were mocked for being too mzungu – too European – and not African enough, especially Eric and I, who could not speak Kiswahili and Luhya. We were not good enough for Africans, Asians, or Europeans. We didn't belong anywhere. This never-ending rejection created an intense shyness in Eric and me and an explosive anger in all

three of my older brothers. We brought these tensions home to our parents; arguments ensued. Occasionally, Eric would return home and wordlessly break windows or slam doors or shatter plates in an uncontrollable fury. Two of my brothers would eventually refuse to go back to school.



*It didn't kill our bodies at first.*

I loved the feel of the sun's rays on my skin. The striped brown and tan lizards loved the heat too, and they sun-bathed spread-eagled on the grass or murrum, doing their high-speed scattering thing into bushes and up trees well in advance of any intrusion. The lizards were bold, bolder even, than the prickly hedgehogs that quietly travelled through the greenery near the wet, faded clothes which smelled of Omo.

I was watching the goings-on in the hedge in the midday heat when I heard some unusual commotion coming from Malova's room. Malova was in the hospital and my parents were throwing away his paintings and books and records. He said nothing on his return. Just grinned and joked with me. I thought this meant that everything was okay.

I'd forget this incident for twenty

years, maybe more, until I came home to find Malova in an argument with my parents. I cannot remember what the conflict was about, but I vaguely recall hearing my younger siblings – who'd been born long after the colonial transition and had an easier upbringing for it – criticising Malova for being unreasonable. I remember thinking he was being unfair, but said nothing. He was already under enough fire. When everyone left, all he said to me was, "Margaret, they threw away my books."



Somewhere in the twenty years before Malova said this, I would be told that Malova's scribbling – from neatly written words carved into songs and poems to never-ending, illegible scattered thoughts – was a sign of sickness. And somewhere in those twenty years, that sickness would be given a name: Schizophrenia. Somewhere in those twenty years, I would learn that his love for those books he read to me – pages of poems we loved – was called hoarding, yet another symptom of his sickness.

The small artistic pleasures we had shared, the simple pleasures that bonded and comforted us, were now considered signs of a disease. Writing was my lifeline,

it was how I talked to myself, the only way I expressed words I dared not speak as I tried to hide the pain of rejection hidden deep inside me. The more pained, scared or unwanted I felt, the more I wrote to soothe myself. My own words comforted me. I scribbled and scribbled and scribbled some more. I hid my writing. I would now see Malova sporadically, as he spent decades of his life in and out of psychiatric institutions. He would slide into psychosis when he was on the verge of imploding from stress. He didn't speak about his pain. But my parents and I could hear the anger and strain in his voice when they told him he needed to focus less on distracting music and writing and go back to school.

There were many arguments: days before he became psychotic, we knew that whatever strain he was under, was leading him there. Almost as if a psychotic break was a relief. An escape from the pain of living.

"No, don't listen. He's sick," my uncle would say.

Is he ill? Or is he just unhappy? His eyes looked sad even when he smiled, and I found it hard to separate his distress from the sickness. Sometimes, he was clearly lost in his psychosis. At other times, I found myself questioning why my parents and relatives were calling his sadness an illness. He would tell me

secrets my aunts told each other in his presence because they wrongly assumed that because he walked around talking to himself, he was too ill to hear or care about what they said. Never revealing my source, I enjoyed seeing their shock as I questioned them about what he'd told me. He would tell me they were wrong to say these things about me.

When Malova spoke to me about how much he hated the psychiatrist who coerced him into taking medication that was harming his body, he was focused and fully aware of what was happening to him. Soon, a second brother would take the same path. Prolonged anguish led him towards psychosis. He would also be diagnosed with schizophrenia. Then, as with hikikomori in Japan, another one of my brothers grew so afraid of the world that he hardly left the house, or even his room, for the next three decades. He, too, would eventually receive a diagnosis of schizophrenia. Many years later, I would meet the sister of his once good friend, Victor. She would tell me that, like my brother, Victor was extremely shy and sensitive. He, too, had refused to go to school and had also isolated himself in his own room at home.

Three brothers with mental illness. I was the fourth child. Was I next? I had no doubt in my mind now that prolonged anguish was a speedy one-way trip to

psychosis. I needed to calm myself. I walked for miles and swam tens of laps to relax. Dearly beloved teachers offered me lifelines in the form of praise like "Excellent!" or "Good!" in my text books. By now, the desire to emulate Europeans and criticisms about being too *mzungu* were waning. My brothers and I encountered more Kenyans in the school system and in our neighbourhoods. I became proud to be an African. For my three older brothers, it was too late: terrible damage had already been done. Two stopped going to school altogether. Malova had been a student at the Duke of York School (which was later renamed Lenana School). He ran away from home when my father insisted that he return to classes. I looked at the world through frightened eyes.

At the high school I was privileged enough to attend, I lost myself in beautiful, poetic words of colourful plays and singing. When the play ended, I took T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* script home and revelled in his poetry for weeks. Hitting hockey balls in the cooling, crisp Nairobi air, I was part of a blue-skirted team where I always felt lost, and yet the game energised me. In spite of my loneliness, I still loved school. Sloshing potassium permanganate in test tubes in Mrs. Mould's chemistry lab; solving intriguing geometry puzzles with Mrs.

Meynink; being challenged mathematically by the logical but interesting Mrs. Priestley. All these activities brought warmth to many days. Our strict headmistress, Sister Pauline, also encouraged me. School became my lifeline. But, I was still afraid of the world which seemed to hate me. My brothers' anger and psychoses drained me. I worried about my dear, overworked father. I felt tense. Too tense.

Chronically shy. "I feel like nobody likes me" swirled endlessly in my head and sometimes found its way out of my mouth when I was alone. I explored fantasies of being loved in scribbled poems. I asked my mother why I was expected to do so many chores when my brothers did none. "Because you're a girl," she'd reply. "Because you're an African," my aunt would remind me. Unfair. Too unfair. I resisted and killed any chance at a relationship with my mother. I was a disappointment: I was not the African girl she wanted me to be. Still tense. Way too tense. How does one escape the pain of living when rejection seems unending? Scribbling? Psychosis? Lock yourself in a room for decades? Run away like Malova? I didn't want to become 'mentally ill'. I needed to save myself, to bolt, to out-run those demons closing in on me. But where could I run to? How fast could I run?

***Flirting with Demons.***

I had nowhere to go. So, I stayed and flirted with the demons. Flirted like a widow spider that needed her enemies close, watching them and using them. Eventually disposing of them to protect her interests. I got close to my demons by learning everything I could about mental illness.

Pain. I could only think of pain. Wasn't our pain more entangled in this messy schizophrenia web than the clinical science of brains and genetics seemed to suggest? In all this pretentious, convoluted jargon, through all this arms-length talk of diagnoses and symptoms and causes, why was there no talk of pain? Why was there no talk of what was causing this anguish in our lives?

I did an unscientific analysis in the laboratory of my mind, conducted on my three younger siblings born long after Kenya's independence, those who fit fluidly into predominantly African environments. I tried to imagine them sliding into psychosis. I could not. Provided new stressors didn't come along, they appeared safe. They were not, as young children, looking for a sense of belonging in a world that on multiple fronts was rejecting them.

I read more. I listened to Malova. And then read more again. Many decades later, I would read *Update: Schizophrenia*

Across Cultures, in which NL Myers states that schizophrenia and paranoia are over-diagnosed among racial minorities in the United States and Britain where the percentage of minorities in the community is extremely low. Was this not similar to the concentrated white areas in which my brothers and I had grown up in Kenya after independence? Why was there so much schizophrenia in my family when only one in a hundred people is supposed to suffer from the disease?

I thought about how accusations of paranoia are used to silence the truth. I thought about what happens when the pain of rejection is invisible, minimised or denied. I thought about what happens when trauma is expressed as mental illness. I thought about what happens when the "ill" person becomes the focus of investigation instead of the society that inflicted the blows. Who benefits from this oversight? Who loses?

***Adjusting My Vision***

Sometimes the eye-doctors need to examine their own eyes. Sometimes the world needs to reframe what it sees. Sometimes the blind spots need the spotlight. Sometimes the healing begins when the selective vision that focuses on the perpetrators' masterful illusion is broadened.

Childhood trauma has a way of repeatedly drawing the sensitive child's eyes towards very real dangers, towards discrimination that the world refuses to see. Society says society is okay. Society says that the traumatised mentally ill person is scary or weird or crazy or lazy or spoiled. Society says that something is wrong with that person and they need to be fixed, corrected, medicated and made normal. They are labelled as defective, weak, pampered and privileged as they're drowning.

But isn't there something wrong with the burden this person has to carry because something is wrong in the world this person lives in? In this story of madness, who is mad? Is society mad? Can mental illness be a normal person's reaction to society's sickness, society's madness, society's hate, a terrible injustice in society? I am flawed; my family is flawed. We are products of a seriously flawed world. Being flawed and the inflictor of so much pain, the world has no right to point the finger at me or my family and stigmatise us.

***Your privileged shall become our cheap labour***

History class in school involved

crafting poems of pleasure in my head as I stared too intently at the blackboard, pretending to listen to the dry-facts drone of my least favourite teacher. I was a model student. At least I came across that way.

Later in my adult life, I would drift across the history that school had not taught me. These were neglected histories that became lifelines I had desperately needed as a child. In these self-taught history lessons, there was drapetomania, a "mental illness" behind Black slaves' desire to flee captivity. In neglected histories, I would learn how colonial settlers in Kenya classified Africans' desire for independence as mental illness. In the history they never taught me in school, I would learn that only Africans who received a western education developed schizophrenia. I would read about how the leading once-respected colonial physician, Gordon, arrived at the conclusion that Africans were uneducable, and prone to mental illness, because education caused too much intellectual pressure on the brain. This fact of scientific racism was clearly designed to support education policy in the colony – deny education to Africans because they were needed to perform menial jobs. I would learn that Black people globally are over-diagnosed with schizophrenia. I would learn that Black

men in the U.S. civil rights movement were over-diagnosed with paranoia and schizophrenia. I would learn that schizophrenia is said to be genetic even though there is no genetic test that confirms schizophrenia. I would learn that some cultures around the world see psychosis as a natural reaction to long-term trauma. This was consistent with what I had observed in my brothers. My discomfort with schizophrenia, and anything that placed the burden for society's ills on the unproven genetic make-up of the individual, would grow. I was uncomfortable with the questionable evolution of science in matters of the mind.

### ***History and Culture As Armour***

I have a stronger armour now that I'm older. I call two countries home. I have learned about an African version of Kenyan history, have reconciled with my mother and am proudly African in ways that I define African. Being proudly Kenyan makes me a stronger Canadian. I enjoy the diversity of people here in Canada and the colourful summer festivals. I'll over-indulge in the sumptuous perogies, roti, jollof rice, moussaka and other tasty dishes from places unseen. Bliss

in my proverbial backyard. I'll eat them against a backdrop of the snow capped mountains and blue ocean water that lured me here. I like the sensory experiences of exploring all that is exhilarating about the world, while my body stays put in this very beautiful country, Canada.

But at times I must admit that my paradise is an illusion, a smoothly executed, smiling magician's trick, a landscape of all that is truly beautiful and entertaining about us illuminated so brightly it blinds us from seeing the growing well of collective pains of the diverse peoples of Canada. These pains lie silenced and unattended under the beautifully textured rugs and food. Buried under the weight of these delightful tapestries are the smothered voices of too many racialised, highly educated or skilled immigrants whose credentials have not been recognised. They have become cheap menial labour, sometimes living in poverty with poor health. Drowned out by the trance-inducing din of drum beats from across the globe are the distress calls of Aboriginal peoples misrepresented, stereotyped and erased from the collective conscience. Close, too close, yet invisible to those who are mesmerised by the rhythmic moves of the synchronised dancers, I see immigrants



mobbed, bullied and excluded from social places and workplaces because they're racialised, presumed guilty or deficient. The palatable term "cultural difference" is used over racism to describe their exclusion and eviction. My Kenyan colonial past is disguised in my Canadian present in ways that are excruciatingly similar but tastefully different. Something magical about discrimination is that even if you can't see it, it exists. And if you don't believe it exists, it does.

I often wonder why we smother, bury and silence other people's pain. Why we are so adamant about looking past it. I wonder why we create such pain in others by putting so much weight on meaningless differences. And yet I know I must focus on my difference, know my history and make sense of how others see my difference in order to survive any attacks on who I am. It is not safe for me to integrate or assimilate by pretending my differences don't exist.

Whenever someone flippantly says to me "You work with the crazy people" or "They should all be locked up, I don't care whether it's prison or hospital," it is personal. They are talking about Malova, about who I could have become. They are talking about many people who are unable to bear the

rejection of racism, poverty, sexism and other forms of hate, day in and day out, and have been driven to "illness", whether it's depression or anxiety or psychosis. And with no accountability by the society that drove them to that state.

### **Going Home**

I can still see Malova's wide grin and his oversized brown trousers sagging over his favourite dusty shoes as his outstretched arm pierces the hot air to happily deliver this token of affection to me. But his skinny frame no longer greets me with an ice-cold bottle of fizzy Coca-Cola when I travel home to Kenya. He is no longer here to share these moments with me, and yet I still feel very loved by him, by my father and by my mother, who are now all gone.

Till this day, Malova is my warm, caring shadow, quashing my demons with his endless teachings and ensuring I never stop questioning how we care for and treat people living with poor mental health. His life has added a depth to my work that would not exist – in a career path I would not have chosen – if he had not been a caring compass in my life. Because of him, I now scribble and scribble some more and refuse to hide my work.

I returned to Nairobi last year, and

while I was there, I decided to go back to see our childhood home. Everything had shrunk. The lane leading up to the house, once steep and winding, was but a barely noticeable slope. The smooth tarmac hid that the path was once covered in murram and potholes where puddles formed. The creaking tree I thought would fall on the house still towered above it, though it no longer looked so mighty and threatening. The corner where I used to make mud pies and pots was still as dusty and as inviting as ever. The house was still the same, though much, much smaller than it was in my memory. The garden, too, had shrunk. To the people who live there now, it is probably just a house – a roof over their heads – but for me, it will always be a shrine of memory.

\* some names have been changed to protect privacy

(Saskatchewan). In 1996, Margaret was awarded an Honorable Mention in the Personal Essay category of the 1996 Writers Digest Magazine competition.

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# UNTIL I COME HOME

Sophia Egbelo



I raced through the streets, bolted through our gate and front door, racing down the passage to open my parents' bedroom door. But the bed was empty. My father was gone.

I was born Cudjoe, but my father called me Champion. He was away at sea on the Monday I was born. Four weeks later, when he held me for the first time during my Akan naming rites, I did not cry when our elder put his index finger into my mouth and poured cold water over my naked body. Dad said I sucked our elder's finger, looked up at him and blinked. "He's a real champion," the ceremonial

crowd whispered.

As a young boy, living on the shores of Winneba, I dreamt of stringing a kite and flying it as high as the Great Blue Turaco. Once we grew out of toy cars and action figures, flying was all that mattered to us seven, eight, and nine-year olds. Sometimes, younger boys as little as five and six joined us on Asaba Field as we competed in games of kite-surfing on weekends.

My father taught me how to string kites. He showed me how to navigate a kite's ropes so that it soared at its highest. The day I turned eight, he said to me, "The sky is your guide. Never look down." The sky always seemed impossibly far, but once I set my kite soaring hundreds of feet above my head, I felt as if I had superpowers. Flying gave me the strength to believe that anything was possible.

I lived in Winneba Bay with my parents and two-year-old sister, Abena, in a house that sat on the low-lying slopes of Labadi Beach. From our home we could hear the thundering waves, loud as the roars of the Ashanti masquerades, and because of this, we were known as the "children of the ocean". However, we feared the water. We prayed for a peaceful ocean, for when it grew angry, the tides sent waves across the land, striking everything in their path. The ocean was off limits to us, and so the sky became our playground.

On Saturday mornings, I sat beside the stereo, anticipating the afternoon forecasts, shouting in glee if a windy afternoon was predicted. As the second half of the day arrived, I'd put on my tennis shoes and grab my kite. My father would stop me at the door, and together we'd recite, "Beware of

the storm, always look out for power lines, play safe, and remember: the sky is your friend."

On Asaba Field, my friends and I dug our feet into the grass. We loosened our grip on our strings, our kites soaring in response. I'd stand with my back to the wind: pulling the strings urgently, and then gradually letting go. I'd watch as my kite flew higher than the others. Kwesi would smack his fist into his palm because I always won, while Afi would shake his head. Mumbling, Afi and Kwesi said that the only reason I always won was because my father taught me everything. They were right. Dad taught me one of the simplest tricks: that to fly a kite I should tilt my arms at an angle, back to the wind, and retract my strings. As the kite rose into the sky it would ease into the wind, gliding, in much the same way that my dad adjusted sails on the big ship where he worked.



The Christmas before I turned eight my father returned from sea. When the holidays ended, I packed a bag, determined to join him when he returned to the ship. I believed he had the coolest job as a marine man, and I was certain that I was going to live onboard one of

the ships of the Eagle Marine Fleet. Just like him.

But when he saw me and my bag, he laughed. "Champion, living on a ship is no fun. You can't play in the sand, you can't run on the fields, and most importantly, you won't be able to fly your kite." I dropped my bag. He rubbed my head. "Cheer up, Champion. Count the days until I return for your birthday."

I did as he said. In January, I began crossing off the days on a calendar and at night I counted each day left. On the first of April, after a day of pranking each other in class with April Fool's jokes, I realised that it was only a month until my birthday. After school I sped home. At the door, I was met with a surprise: my father, sitting on his usual couch, as if he had always been there, facing our boombox and television set.

"Dad...is that you?" I scratched my head. My heart leaped with excitement, but I did not shout *hurray!* or race to him. I stared at my dad as if he were a dream. Finally, I took a tentative step toward him.

His eyes were smiling, but he did not get up as he usually did. He did not lift me and spin me through the air. Instead, staying seated, he spread his arms for a hug.

"How about an early birthday present?"

"I knew it!"

I sat on his lap and buried my face into his shoulder, allowing him to tickle my ribs until I fell to the floor, out of breath. I lifted my head and my mother's eyes met mine from where she was standing in the dining room. She said nothing, looking away. She didn't join Abena and me in the living room while we listened to my father's adventures onboard ship. And later, at the dinner table, she did not laugh at any of his jokes.



As days passed, more and more rain fell, bringing with it fast winds that ripped tree branches and uprooted plants from their roots. I watched from my window as a branch fell from a tree, destroying my kite. After securing what was left of it, I grumbled to my father, hoping we could make a new one, but he shook his head and looked away. The next time I asked for help with the kite, he promised that we would build a new one when the rain stopped falling.

Day by day, the skies cleared up and on my eighth birthday the sun came out. On that day, I had a party at school and was given lots of presents, and at home, we ate the best jollof rice. I never wanted

the day to end. When the guests left, my father entered the living room holding a brand-new craft box. He sat beside me.

"Champion, turning eight is a big deal, soon you'll be ten years old! It means you're becoming a man." He smiled.

"Dad, does that mean I get to go on the Eagle Marine Fleet just like men do?" I asked.

Without replying, he carefully placed the box in my hands and wrapped one arm around my shoulder. I opened it and couldn't help my smile. I lifted the kite fabric to my nose and inhaled its plastic smell. I noted the sharp-bladed scissors, the untouched kite rods, and a spool of strong polyester strings. I continued smiling feeling the newness of every item with wonder. These were the neatest building materials I had ever seen.



The month of May brought with it a new season; the sun stayed in the sky until early evening, and the days were warmer. But my dad remained in bed, much like our neighbour's cat that slept all day. When the first Saturday of the dry season brought the perfect

flying wind, he still wouldn't come out of his room. I had woken that morning, determined to fly my kite, and barged through his door with the new craft box. The familiar, gravelly voice of the newscaster announced a forecast of eight to 20 knots per hour. I gave my father a meaningful look.

"Perfect weather!"

He looked at the box as if he'd never seen it before, as if it had lost all the significance it had once held when he gifted it to me on my birthday.

"Not today," is all he said.

I took the box outside, and in my rage, I tossed it under the shed.



A few short weeks of school remained, until the term ended, and we went on our summer vacation. During assembly, our Cultural Arts teacher passed out permission slips to students who were interested in taking part in the upcoming Asafotu Festival. The ceremony was held in August: festival season. It was a celebration of fighters from different regions of Greater Accra, Ashanti and Tamale. During its heady days, people from all over were dressed like warriors from the Ashanti, Ewe, Fante, and Mole-Dagbon tribes. We all looked forward to

spotting *the* eight-foot tall masqueraders, the royal clan, and the indigenous chiefs in the throng of the crowd.

I collected a permission slip, anticipating my parents would let me join the festival, I raced home to tell my father about the event. I hoped we had enough time to construct a big enough kite in time for the festival. I imagined my father cheering me on from the crowd, and the feeling of happiness grew in me. The more I pictured this scene: my father's laughter, his pride, the faster I raced through the streets. I bolted through our gate and to the front door, racing down the passage to open my parents' bedroom door. "Dad! Dad!" I called out. But the bed was empty.

My father was gone.

I searched the house, but none of my family was home. Outside, on the veranda, stood our neighbour, Auntie Cece.

"Come, your mother has asked me to watch you," is all she said. Auntie Cece's house always smelled like red stew. I'd lick my lips whenever the smell of food drifted from her house into ours and wondered if she had a restaurant hidden inside her house. Often times, I overheard her daughter, Ama, clap her hands and sing along to

loud Akwaba music that rang through the walls. An only child, Ama was the same age as me, robust, and as loud as can be.

Following Auntie Cece's order, I entered her house, I sat at the dining table. Reluctant. Ama was carrying Abena and tickling her cheeks. Once she saw me, she lifted her face.

"My mummy told me the ambulance came and carried your father and your mother was crying," she announced at the top of her voice. I held my breath and turned to Auntie Cece. She threw her hands in the air and marched over to Ama, twisting her ear until it turned red.

"This child will kill me! Who told you what?"

"But, Mummy, that's what you said." Ama began to cry.

"Quiet, before I give you a dirty slap! You have a sharp mouth! You can't keep a secret for one second!" She shoved Ama to the side, and Ama's crying grew.

Auntie Cece's gaze fell to the ground. She exhaled. "Cudjoe, your father was rushed to Maitama Hospital. Everything will be all right."

I bent my head over her dining table and Auntie Cece drew closer to rub my back. I didn't lift my head. My mouth filled with salty saliva. I could still hear Ama sobbing from the living room.



The antiseptic smell of Maitama Hospital irritated my nose. Unlike Asaba Field, my school, our church, and Kweshi central market, the hospital was a foreign place, as strange as a cemetery. I walked beside my mother, following the sign that led to the Oncology Ward. Oncology. I wondered what this word meant. We came to an abrupt stop at room twelve. My mother gently pushed open the door. I expected to see my father slumped in a hospital bed, shivering under heavy blankets. But he was sitting up, and as we entered the room, he gave us a wide smile.

I ran to his side and reached for a hug. "Dad, are you coming home today?"

There was a big, noisy machine beside his bed with tiny tubes plugged into it that ran like worms into his arm and chest. He looked as if a scientist were carrying out an experiment on him. I stared curiously at all these things that had pierced into his skin, wondering if it hurt. I ran my fingers over the tubes, and then, turned to the noisy machine and its incessant beeping, I squeezed on one of the tubes. I let go, afraid it might burst

open and spill out all the liquid in it. Noticing my discomfort, my dad rubbed my head, and assured me that he would be home soon.

My mother was watching with a smile on her face. She had prepared my father's favourite dish of peanut soup with large chunks of meat. My father pulled her closer, but he did not eat. Instead, he held onto my mother's hand and they spoke while I played with Abena. I heard my father assuring my mother that life would be fine and that he would return to his station on Eagle Marine Fleet soon. But my mother sat beside him muttering words I could not make out. And then they stared at each other, quietly as her smile wore off and silence filled the room. She looked uneasy and her eyes fell to the ground. Soon Dr. Boateng entered the room. He adjusted the tubes on my father's arm and I drew closer, observing him, wondering how his own particular super powers would cure my dad. When the doctor completed his inspection, I tugged on his white coat and asked if my father might come home the following day. My mother gestured at me to be quiet.

Dr. Boateng did not respond, and when I asked again, all he said was, "Young chap; we are working hard to get your dad back to you. Okay?"

When he left, I scooted closer to my



father. I took his hand. He did not look at me. He exhaled as if a stone lay on his chest.



The month of June was the longest of my life. Permission slips for the Asafotu Festival piled up on my teacher's desk. Afi and Kwesi stayed behind after class to construct their kites. Even though I wanted to join them, I had to go home and take care of my sister. I tossed in bed long after I put Abena to sleep. Sometimes, I'd sit up in bed and listen to Uncle Kumi, who often stayed behind after dropping my mom home from the hospital. He spoke in a low voice.

One night, I listened carefully, only to hear my uncle say that my father must be transferred: "They must take him to Federal Hospital."

My stomach twisted and ground inside of me all night. I stayed awake, too afraid to close my eyes. I wondered what would happen to my father. Why were they taking him away? In the morning, my mother did not speak as she got us ready for school. Her eyes were full of worry. She was in the middle of a day dream, leaning against the kitchen sink, hands in the water,

until the sound of Auntie Cece yelling at Ama broke her reverie.

That day, I refused to play with Kwesi and Afi. I did not want my friends reminding me of how cool my father was. I did not want them teasing me if they found out that he lay in a cold room with a big noisy machine at Maitama Hospital.

After my lessons, I trekked along Tema Motorway, keeping to the sidewalks until I saw the tall building that was Maitama. The hospital gate swung open right in time for me to walk in. An ambulance was parked at the entrance to the lobby, its siren blaring and its spinning lights flashing on and off. I felt my pulse quicken. I moved closer to the ambulance and watched two uniformed men jump in before it pulled away. Inside the hospital, a lady with a tight face was seated at the front desk while other people wearing name tags walked around the open pavilion. I was too afraid to approach her for directions. I recalled the ward and room number from all the times we'd visited and decided to climb the flight of stairs until I reached the oncology ward.

The hallways were quiet. I knocked several times at door number 12 but there was no response. I clenched my fist and closed my eyes fearing the worst. After taking one deep breath I pushed on the knob and peered in through the crack. Inside, the air was cool and the curtains

around the bed were drawn, allowing only light from a small side lamp. I shifted my gaze to the bed, spotting my father. He lay, unmoving. I walked to his side and stared at his face. A much thicker line of tubes had been inserted into his chest and ran through his arms until it connected to the big machine that made uncomfortable noises. I turned my focus back to my father, placing my tiny hand on his arm and leaned in.

"D-Dad?"

I hoped for a response, but all I heard was the machine going off and on.

"Dad, I could be a hero," I said.

His eyes stayed closed.

I whispered louder, "Dad, I could be your superhero."

Nothing.

My father's unshaven face was pale. Even in his sleep he looked tired. I wanted to touch it, but I could only stare. What kind of pain did he feel? Where did his body hurt? Could he hear me? I wondered. Shortly after, a nurse walked in and introduced herself but I was unable to look away from my dad.

"Who brought you here," the nurse asked. "Does your mother know you're here?"

I nodded without looking at her.

"Well, your father will be asleep for a very long time," she said.

I asked if he could hear me.

She smiled. "He is in a deep, deep sleep. It's called sedation."

"When will he wake up? And when is he coming home?"

The nurse pulled a chair closer to his bed and suggested I sit with him. She left the room as I took a seat.

I stared at my father, as if by looking at him long enough I could will him to open his eyes, even if only for a second. Uncle Kumi arrived with my mother who rushed up to my father's bedside and let her hands fall on his face. Uncle Kumi stood on the other side of the bed with his hands in his pockets. Dr. Boateng walked into the room and Uncle Kumi asked me to leave. I obeyed, and I fell asleep on a bench in the hallway, only waking at my mother's touch.

"Cudjoe, you must say goodnight to your father."

Her hands shook.



The next Sunday was Abena's third birthday. It was the last time my mother wore her beautiful Kenteki dress. A year ago, we had picnicked on Labadi Beach. The water was calm, the air smelled of

seaweed, and we made sand castles on the golden sand. What I remember most about that day is the buttery frosting that iced Abena's cake. This time, there was no cake. We gathered around my father's bed and the soft sound of Reverend Boakye's bible being read filled the room. Auntie Cece held a handkerchief up to her nose and sniffled. Uncle Kumi and Auntie Serai stood beside each other at the foot of the bed. My uncle's face was straight as if he had a thousand thoughts on his mind, while Auntie Serai faced the floor. Abena sat on the bed beside my father with her thumb fastened between her lips. She looked around, confused. I stood at the head of the bed. At the end of the prayer, my father looked at up at Reverend Boakye.

"Amen." He was smiling, the same way that he did whenever he saw me after a long absence. He wasn't drowsy, or in a deep sleep like the last time I visited. After everyone else stepped out of the room, I shifted toward him.

"Dad, are you coming home tomorrow?"

"Not tomorrow, Champion," he replied.

"Why not?"

His arms and chest were free of the tubes, the big noisy machine had been switched off, and the hospital had

cleared his table, as if he was soon to be discharged. My father smiled at me.

"Champion, I'm going to a place where you and I, your mother and Abena will all be together someday." He took a deep breath and gestured. I placed my hand into his open palm. It felt cold as he squeezed mine. His lips quivered.

"Cudjoe."

"Yes, Dad," I answered.

"Take care of your mother until I come home."

"Yes, Dad." I nodded.

"Cudjoe," he called again.

"Yes, Dad."

"Take care of Abena until I come home."

"Yes, Dad."

His eyes searched the room. He let go of my hand and placed his arm on my shoulder. "Cudjoe, where's your kite?"

"My kite? It's safe." I never told him what I did with the new craft box. I had been waiting for him to come home.

He took a deep breath. "Good. Don't ever lose it, Champion. Don't ever lose your kite." He struggled to say more and his eyes looked far away.

Uncle Kumi re-entered the room. My father lifted his face and stared at him as if he had told me a bitter truth. Uncle Kumi stood by my side but would not look at me. "Your father needs some rest. We will be back tomorrow."

My father leaned forward and hugged

me. He did not let go for a long time.  
*Until you come home.* Over and over I  
 repeated it. *Until you come home.*



A month went by. Our school was on a long vacation and everything felt strange with the new void that lingered at home. Auntie Serai visited all the time: she helped a lot because my mother was weak. My mother sat in one place all day, staring at the wall.

A month ago, at the start of July and two days after Abena's birthday, I was excused from school. I rode in the back of Uncle Kumi's car. I did not ask him why he had picked me up early. Uncle Kumi drove across the highway patiently; he was in no rush. He did not put on the stereo and as we rode along, the loud exhaust from motorists filled the silence. When we approached the tall tower of Maitama Hospital, he turned to me, "Cudjoe, you are a man."

Uncle Kumi led the way to my father's ward. I spotted Dr. Boateng, and Mr. Kofi, my father's best friend, outside his room. They did not say a word and Uncle Kumi did not acknowledge them. He walked past them and entered the room. Inside I saw my mother's weary face. Her eyes

were swollen and red. She stood up and wrapped her arms around me.

My father lay on the bed. I broke apart from my mother to look at his face. His skin was blue-grey and puffy and his eyelids were shut tight. He seemed to be sleeping peacefully. The room was quiet. And as I inched closer to feel his body Uncle Kumi held me back without saying a word. My uncle took off his hat and gestured to Dr. Boateng, who moved to pull a white blanket over my father's head. Two hospital attendants came in and wheeled him away. I heard my mother scream as she slumped to the floor. My gaze did not shift. I stared into that empty space where the bed had been removed. The world was empty. I felt so small, so weak, and so helpless. I had been betrayed by Dr. Boateng and his promises. I fell into Uncle Kumi's arms and struggled for air.



The days felt longer. Under the evening sky, children played. Their joyful voices mixed with the loud waves of Labadi Beach. I smelled the ocean as a strong breeze blew, and Auntie Cece's overgrown cassava plants swayed with the wind. The voices of the children grew nearer and soon, Ama came running

around the yard with her playmates.

I tried taking an afternoon nap, but my body ached. I sat up in bed and from my room I spotted the craft box lying beneath the shed. I walked outside and set it on the table. I opened it. Inside were all the new materials I had not used. I closed the lid and pushed it aside. As I sat under the shed staring into nothing Ama called out for me to join them. I shrugged, and Ama ran off with her friends. My old kite that had been destroyed rested against the wall. I picked it up and loosened the strings. Now covered in dust and its fabric shrunken, the kite was like a carcass in my hand. I pulled on an angle and it ripped in half. I tossed the kite aside and looked into the clouds. Before my eyes the sky appeared grey and a surge of sadness overpowered me. I had lost my superpowers and felt like a bird without wings.

When I ventured back inside, my mother was resting on the mat in the centre of the living room. She was exhausted, almost as tired as my father as he slept in hospital. I hated the black dress she wore. I hated how its edges closed around her neck and her wrists so that no part of her body was exposed save for her sunken face. I hated the black head scarf she wore to

cover her shaved head. I hated how her sadness widened the void around us. Our laughter was gone and we sat looking at each other with long faces.

Mother watched from the living room. Her arms were folded, face buried in one hand. And the look she wore reminded me of the chaos of my father's funeral. On that day, women from his village had screamed, *Papa Cudjoe wake up! Wake up!* And men took off their hats and bit their lower lips. My father's brothers and sisters wailed, following the procession of the hearse. It felt as if the whole world was mourning.



Three weeks had passed since the burial rites. The Asafotu Festival was mere days away. One morning, I lay in bed listening to the birds. Outside, two brown robins perched on my craft box. I watched them chirp like choristers. Their lively sounds caught my ears and I continued observing them settle on my box. As they flew away, I became curious as to what a bird was without its wings. A bird was nothing without them. The magic of flight freed the bird, and I imagined that same freedom each time I manoeuvred my kite through the sky. Whenever I raced through Asaba Field and unfastened the

strings of my kite, when the sensation of the breeze brushed against my face, I felt a rush of exhilaration. I was free. In that moment I longed again to feel this way. I left my bedroom and walked to the shed.

I spread a sheet of silk over the work table. I recalled how my father had measured each angle after cutting the fabric to give the kite its form. I measured the sides and inserted the plastic rods through them, each string finding its loop. Lastly, I wrapped the fibre strings around a spool to form a bundle. I was ready.

Mom sat on her mat in the centre of the living room. She looked up from where she had been positioned since the mourning period and smiled. It was the first time she'd done so since she had begun wearing black. I sat with her. I wanted her to know that she was not alone.



On the day of the festival, noise from the street filled our home. I stood by the window, watching a group of boys parading their Kente dresses through the carnival procession. I had not seen Ama all morning and knew she must have been out with the neighbourhood

children dancing to the festive sounds. By evening, countless floats and revellers in costumes had passed our streets chanting the famous Asafotu song. In the midst of their jubilation I heard the thunderous fireworks explode, and watched its spark emerge into a burst of colours in the sky. As the display continued, I thought of Kwesi and Afi running across Asaba Field along with my classmates, perhaps placing bets on who had the best kite. I was missing out.

I walked down the passage and stood in front of my parent's bedroom. The door had been shut as if one had been forbidden to enter. Even my mother had not slept there since my father's death. I unlocked it and crept in. Amidst the darkness of the room, this once familiar place felt foreign. The scent of my father's cologne settled in my nose, but I did not move. I stood in the centre and my eyes moved from the mahogany dresser to the wardrobe that held his clothes, and then to the king bed and my father's favourite pillow. Resting on the dresser was his Eagle Marine Fleet identification card, his wallet and key chains. I recalled the last thing that my father said to me. But he was never coming home. I had to go on with life and do as I had promised him. I closed my eyes and remembered all of us sitting on this bed as my father unpacked his

luggage after being at sea.

I walked out of my parents' room, charged. My mother was asleep and did not notice when I sneaked out the back door, escaping into the darkness with my kite secured under my arm.

At first, my legs felt stiff from a nervousness that had plagued me from the very first day my father was admitted to Maitama hospital. Nevertheless, my eyes were set on the night and I kept my pace, albeit stumbling the way Abena had when she was learning to walk. The festival had long paraded the streets of Winneba Bay, leaving its celebratory trail of confetti and empty bottles alongside foil wrappings from ice cream and candy wraps that caused the pavement to glisten. I heard the thundering waves of Labadi Beach and followed the sounds until my feet felt the cold sand. The beach was empty, and the stalls stood lonely, but the night sky glowed as if there was an audience above watching the festival. The waves gave a loud bang as they hit the shore and retracted into the ocean, I tasted the moist, salty sea in the air, and let the wind brush my face as I inhaled and let go. When I untied the strings of my kite, it rose slowly upwards into the air. I steered it in the northern direction, following the wind, and ran

into the oncoming waves. As the water retreated, I let the current pull me along. I no longer feared the ocean.

I continued running across the shore, letting the light in the distance guide me. The waves crashed harder and the ocean serenaded the air with its roar. My kite flew high above my head. Through the roar of it all, I heard my father's words: *Be good Champion. Be good.*

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Sophia Egbelo is a multifaceted writer and lover of the arts. She enjoys reading and writing stories that delve into culture, traditions, magical realism, social issues and personal plights. When she is not writing, her interest is backpacking across cities around the world.

# HIS WOUNDS

**Thulani Rawula**

they still smell fresh.  
after all these centuries,  
the odour was still haunting  
like a dream,  
it was hatched underneath his understanding.  
differed.  
worms penetrating through the idea,  
ceasing the content of home & pages &  
chapters &  
windows.

they unlock the spectacle within the frames & prose of its nature.  
haemophilia.  
skin and flesh failed to clot the bloodline.  
odour still came out from the wound,  
the cat was nursing it,  
caressing it with its delicate tongue,  
tongue that asks no questions.  
breaking the idea into its infinite touch,  
but the wound remained a mark & flagged.

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Thulani Rawula is a 24-year-old South African short story writer & a poet. His works are fused with fables of traditional folk-lore's and South African tales. He got his undergrad degree from the Nelson Mandela University (NMU). He grew up between the thorns & weeds of Despatch outside Port Elizabeth. He is working on his collection of short stories *Jailbirds & Other Stories* and a collection of poems *The Book of Worms II*.



# HOT GIRLS IN CAPE TOWN

My mother treats her love of high temperatures like it's not just a preference, but a pain threshold that makes her superior to everyone else.

SINDI-LEIGH MCBRIDE

December in Cape Town rubs me up the wrong way. The tourists. The traffic. The tourists in traffic. I hate everyone and everything, but it's the heat that really rattles my nerves. While my sweaty thighs chafe, high fiving each other to make me look like I peed myself, my brain can't seem to get enough oxygen through the duvet-thick-air-suffocating my sinuses. I *know* that no one is to blame for the heat. But I also *feel* that there is something so *rude* about the soaring temperatures. I once saw this tweet: if Cape Town is a hot girl, she has a messy bun and is ignoring my tweets right

now.

Laughing at my struggle with humidity, my mother always says the same thing: "Shame my child, at least when it's cold, you can warm yourself but when it's hot there's *nothing* you can do."

Wat se shame. My mother is from tropical Durban where humidity is as tantalizing as masala-coated pineapple. I know she says that shit with glee. When I was small, she would run deep baths of boiling hot water, luring me to sit on the side with the promise of stories while she luxuriated in Radox like a suburban Scheherazade.

She made it look so good that all I wanted to do was hop right in with her, but obviously had to wait until the water had cooled, by which time she would be ready to get out. That routine taught me to stay in my lane until I can handle the heat.

My mother treats her love of high temperatures like it's not just a preference, but a pain threshold that makes her superior to everyone else. When we went to The Baths in Citrusdal, she would bask in the thirty-two-degree heated pool longer than any of us, smirking as the European porpoises turned puce while she maintained

composure, slick as a river otter.

When it was my turn to stew in the bath after her, she would knead Dove lotion into her skin like she was about to massage bread into being out of thin air. Jealously, my eyes water-level like a crocodile, I would always ask the same thing: "Why isn't my skin like yours?"

What I meant was 'Why am I not perfect like you?' I know it's a *thing* to think your mother is the bee's knees, but my mother really does have very beautiful skin. It suggests all my best visuals. Augustus Gloop falling into the river. Juliette Binoche lovingly stirring pots of melted magic, while she herself melts every time she looks at Johnny Depp. Professor Lupin saving Harry from Dementors. My father tells anyone who will listen that she is a Black Magic Woman. Her skin is a big part of the spell which makes sense since it is the first port of call for all sensory experience.

Back then, when we tandem-bathed regularly, my own skin was a mess. My uneven tan meant that even though we shared the same warm undertones, the state of my skin was all wrong. Where my mother was a smooth sepia brown, enriched by the sun, my patchy fawn shades ranged from pale tan to dark deer-red. Pimples hadn't arrived yet,

but I had those dry, white patches of skin that my mother insisted was because I didn't eat enough vegetables. She would threaten me with scurvy if I kept it up. I'm still a bit cross about that comment, because it was she who bought, cooked and dished my food, watching over me like the Eye of Sauron until I finished everything. Did she expect me to grow extra vegetables on the sly under my bed? Mxm.

This is a historical gripe and I am an adult, but I wouldn't dare bring it up, even now. Recently, while watching me meticulously pull off every single string of spongy white tissue lining an orange, my father called me an OCD fruitcake. I retorted that I only do that because *his* wife told me that citrus pith causes cancer, so if I am mad then so is she. Out of nowhere, my mother klapped me on the head from behind. *Who is she, the cat's mother?* I didn't even know my mother was home.

This woman does not look favourably on revisionist history or having her judgment questioned. She definitely did not look kindly on my primary-school-skin palette of bright-red face, milk-white boobs and burnt-brown everything else. Lathering my sun-burnt body with After-Sun after galas, she would look disapprovingly at the X between my shoulder blades and circle

in the middle of my back – standard issue tan lines from that standard issue one-piece – and threaten to skin me alive if I kept scorching my body. Somehow, she knew I thought it was cool to only put sunblock on my nose like a cricket player.



I was stuck on Strand Street in a peak hour gridlock trying to get to the Sea Point beach in an overcrowded tourist town because of poor planning and a desperate need for water. Newlands pool, closer to home, still hadn't reopened after the city government declared war on water-users. I figure they're governing the water crisis by institutionalizing a fear of missing out. More people panicking about when Woolworths bottled water stocks will run out means less people talking about the poor planning that led to the situation in the first place. But hey, who am I to get all judgy. But if I were truly a resident of this city, I would know when to stay indoors, avoiding the masses. It's the seventh sense of Capetonians. The sixth is knowing how to dress for mercurial weather.

As I sat in traffic, I couldn't stop thinking about this as the sun seared

the tops of my thighs, my shorts hiked up as far as possible. The Clinique Smart Repair moisturizer on my face had an SPF15, but there was no protection for the rest of my limbs. No question, my mother would not approve.

While my poor body sweltered in the gridlock, I contemplated driving up Roeland Street, parking at Gardens Centre and taking a MyCiti Bus to Seapoint but I remembered that the covered parking would cost roughly the same as a tank of petrol. Meanwhile, Fine Music Radio told me that the Northern Line was down so train travel was chaotic, plus, schools had closed the day before, so youth were swarming the streets. To make it worse, it was day one of the Sevens Rugby bonanza. There was still a week or so before holidays began officially but clearly Dezemba had arrived. I was now drenched in sweat but there was nothing for me to do but sit vas. Traffic back to the Southern Suburbs was worse. I hadn't budgeted my time for this.

My plan had been to do a few laps, then meet my friend Ronel in town for First Thursdays because she wanted to support someone opening a show at a Bree Street gallery. Ronel is the most supportive person I know. She is also *the* most put together person I know, in life and aesthetically. I act glamorous

when wearing one extra accoutrement, like earrings or lipstick, but Ronel acts that way first thing in the morning, without any bells and whistles. That said, she is super into *all* the trimmings: earrings, lipstick, choker, nails, lashes and everything always goes together just right.

In the end, it took me two hours to drive 13km. The pool closed as I arrived. All the happy people, sated by sun and swim, flooded out as I seethed, silently swearing at every one of them. Especially the children.

I vented to my best friend, Raisa, via voicenote. She listened, but listlessly. She explained she had a heat-headache and was struggling to get ready for a twenty-six-hour call at Mitchell's Plein hospital. Putting our complaints into perspective made me feel like a brat, but also pepped me up to continue my mission. Raisa has that effect because she's always going on about how there's no excuse for not achieving if your intentions are excellent.

I drove another 5km to Bakoven Beach. It took about twenty-seven minutes. By now, it was after 19h00; the sun was starting to drop, but the irreverent temperature refused to chill. No respect, not even for gravitational checks and balances. With seventeen minutes before dark, I grabbed my

towel and raced down the steep stairs to the beach.

Being in the water was bracingly brilliant. For seven glorious minutes I felt the deep relief of success. Around me, the water was that unnameable grey-green of old people's eyes and after taking what felt like ten thousand years to get to it, I bobbed about blissfully, submerging then popping back up, buoyed by the thought that this elixir was my reward for surviving the heat.

Once my temperature and temper had a moment to cool off, I could appreciate the scenery, too. Bakoven is my favourite beach because it has these awesome giant boulders; they have a slightly prehistoric, perception-altering air about them that makes the views of the mountains shimmer. The sounds of nearby Camps Bay morphs magically and life feels like a mirage. Time flows yet doesn't. Once, while basking on a boulder, I read Mishima's *The Sailor Who Fell Out of Grace With The Sea* in one fell swoop.

But darkness was coming. As I swam from the beach, shouldered by boulders, I appreciated the water's stillness. For a moment, I imagined swimming out to the sun, perched low on the horizon, and tapping it quickly like a rock climber at the top of an indoor climbing wall.

20h30 I was back in the car. There was still traffic, but at least it was

moving. I was meeting my Glamazon Friend and needed to clean up, but I knew driving home to shower was out of the question. Thankfully, my Virgin Active membership allowed me access to any of their gyms during December as they renovated my home branch and Sea Point's was nearby.



Ronel wasn't picking up my WhatsApp calls and my messages also weren't delivering so I figured her phone had died. But now that I looked so fresh I definitely didn't want to go home. I was wearing my favourite bodysuit from Topshop, the one with intricate pseudo-BDSM type straps across the chest and a pair of pale pink cotton Soccer Mom trousers that I got at U-Turn second hand shop. I love outfits like that, half-sexy half-granny, expensive and cheap.

My friend and favourite DJ Reezo called to check if I had gotten my ticket, I forgot that he had hooked me up to watch Stimming play at The Odyssey, where he was playing the opening set. I managed to find parking a block from Bree Street and as I walked down, I tried spotting Ronel on the streets teeming with shirtless guys

and crop top girls. The average age looked to be about sixteen going on seventeen. When I got there, I showed my phone to the lady working the door and after she scanned the electronic ticket, I walked up the stairs to the source of the music.

Reezo was wearing a marvellous hat and cut quite a dashing figure dancing behind the DJ booth, but stepping into the cloud of cigarette smoke made me want to dash right out the venue. Ugh. Also, as I greeted my grooving friend, my stomach growled in competition with the speakers I needed to eat.

I walked back downstairs, scoping the venue to suss out the odds of a good meal. Everyone looked as if, like me, they had come straight from a fancy gym, but unlike me, had spent the first day of school holidays sculpting their bodies into shape, and now had come out for the sole purpose of craft beer as a reward. Ugh. Also, the waiters looked harried, the combo didn't bode well.

I left and walked up towards Kloof Street, straight to Stacked Diner, a recent discovery. They serve tasty delicious beverages and all-day breakfasts, so it's my new favourite place, second only to Hokey Poke on Church Street. I ordered a crispy potato hash brown stack with soft poached eggs and extra avocado and stared at my fellow patrons while I

waited. That's one of my favourite things about being a woman; you can do things like that without immediately being written off as a creep.

Warm and glad after eating, I walked back to the jol feeling secretly smug for being so content with my own company, outdoors on what had become a balmy night. Finally, the heat had learnt some manners. When I got back to The Odyssey, there was a small queue outside and even though I had already been through this gauntlet, I was stuck behind a young party girl (stilettos in Cape Town, nuff said). She was wheedling loudly, trying to get her friend in, so I couldn't help overhearing her conversation with the door lady.

"I knooooow guest-list is closed but my friend's gonna be here in like fifteen minutes max, pleeeeeease do me this favour?"

"Girl or guy?"

"Girl."

"Is she hot?"

The girl in front of me paused for a split second. Rookie error. Immediately, all malleability in the door lady's disposition dissipated. She stiffened, stood straight up, going as far as shuffling the lists of names on the table, acting all brisk like she was about to enter a board meeting.

"Babe, can you imagine how hard it

is for me to turn away ugly girls? At least guys know their place at a party when they're like, out of their league."

She laughed, a hacking Hadedá sound. "I would definitely rather be a guy than an ugly girl."

She caught my eye and winked. "You're a hot girl, you know what I mean."

Because she was looking at me, I didn't know if she was talking to me or the poor girl in front of me, who didn't know whether to go in or not. She went in. I was left at the threshold looking at the door lady thinking about that friend, so unceremoniously bounced before she had even arrived. Ugh. The moment felt similar to when people are not only racist in front of you, but also expect solidarity in their racism. Unwittingly, I felt like an accomplice.

I looked at the door lady blankly. I imagine she was a hot girl when she was sixteen going on seventeen, if you're into a certain type of pale-faced pretty. Sharp nose, see-through eyes, limp hair, jutting hip bones. Fast-forward about a decade and her skin looked like she had been smoking since she was ten, betraying all her secrets: that she's moonlighting, working the door to pay for the car she can't afford but bought to upstage her ex-boyfriend's girlfriend; that she once did a line of cocaine off this very pavement, trying to impress some DJ

from Berlin; that she hates her mid-level marketing job so she's doing graveyard shifts to suck up to event organizers, hoping to rise up in the ranks far enough to finally quit her 9-5 and live her best life as a creative influencer. I heard some impatient shuffling behind me, and I ghosted. Invisible, I didn't acknowledge the hag, gliding away back to my car.

Driving home I kept thinking about the ugliness of what that woman had said and the even uglier impression she made on me as a result. She might be the kindest person on the planet for all I know and it's not like she barred me from the party for being ugly, so why was I so upset? My mind had conjured the worst dark magic, making her look bad to dispel how bad she had made me feel.

I sifted through my mental debris searching for something to make sense of this and settled on a tasty Barbara Smith titbit: *There's a difference between being opposed to the status quo because of your own identity and being consciously, actively, radically opposed because you understand how the system works.*

As I pondered, I saw three Sakmanne, walking in the service lane of the M5 highway, clad in their custom hessian bags. I've never seen a

female sackcloth Rasta, it's mostly young men selling plant-based medicines around the CBD. I used to be afraid of them, but now that I know more about their ways, I am in awe. In this Youtube mini-documentary, one guy was talking about why he chooses to live on Table Mountain and was like: "The city is full of blood man, people do wrong things, me, I can't see these things."

In those few seconds, all I saw were dreadlocks streaming behind swinging arms. I couldn't tell if they were male or female. It didn't matter. They looked so purposeful, marching as if to war. Walking stridently, but somehow, happily. Min gepsin about traffic or tourists. They looked so free and it was so sexy. I lifted my eyes to the mountain, saying a quick please-and-thank-you for them, my friends, and the things that make them so beautiful. Focusing on intent. Sharing fruit, the earth's candy. Making an effort to be supportive. Trying new things. Questioning the status quo and feeling some type of way about injustice, even if not directly affected. Especially when not directly affected. I hoped that none of them would ever be turned away from anywhere, for whatever reason. More than that, that they would never turn others away.

On that hot December night in Cape

Town, I prayed to all the gods for all  
my friends in all the cities to feel the  
way my mother lives – free in her skin.



Sindi-Leigh McBride is a researcher and writer, born and based in Johannesburg, and working in fields of human rights, governance and development. Her essays and short stories have appeared in *Africa's a Country*, *Prufrock*, *Kalahari Review* and more. *Mail and Guardian* included her in their 200 Young South Africans feature in 2013, and in 2015 she received an award for arts journalism from Business and Arts South Africa. She holds MA degrees in International Relations (WITS) and Political Communication (UCT). She tweets at @sindi\_leigh.



NATIONAL BESTSELLER

"A luminous  
rumination on  
storytelling and  
place, exile  
and return...  
extraordinary."

—SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE

# EVERY DAY IS FOR THE THIEF

*by the author of*  
OPEN CITY



## EVERY DAY IS FOR THE THIEF: ON MEETING TEJU COLE

Tolu Daniel

I met him in 2013, with many admirers – new and old, riding on the fame of Open City. Teju Cole speaks to convince. His speech filled with pauses and precise anecdotes. He knows his way around words and understands how to convince and also ease you into his POV. His eloquence and carriage became my first point of curiosity. I dashed after him for a photograph when I noticed he was free. Then, being seen with a famous writer was more important than querying about the process of art. From the stage where he had just descended from his panel discourse, he had seemed almost god-like. I approached, and he agreed to pose, a photo on an old Tecno phone, gone now. Thankfully. I was staring at him, wondering about his size and care when proximity wasn't an issue. He thanked me in perfect Yoruba, smooth, without an accent, for attending his panel session, displacing any mental throne I had placed him. "Didn't know you spoke Yoruba so fluently", I asked.

He replied, "why wouldn't I be able to?" So, I return to this moment often. Like others, I had perpetuated a stereotype against someone who has soon become one of my favorite writers of all time.

Years later, at a reading on a wet Sunday evening at Jazzhole, a bookstore in Ikoyi Lagos, I met Cole again. Less jarring, it's perhaps my most memorable meeting with him. Not much had changed. He still favored a skin-cut and his rectangular glasses still sat like a chief on top of his large nose. His fashion sense is still somewhat bum, a black blazer over a collarless shirt and a jeans pants. He read an essay he wrote in 2013 published on Granta titled Water No Get Enemy.

At Ake Festival in 2013, I had found the last copy of "Every Day is for the Thief" – his first book, published by Cassava Republic after my encounter with him. The book would lay unread in my shelf for months as I favored other books. But when I finally got to it, my first read took four hours to finish, but I read it over and over again till it became a bible. He treated Lagos like an outsider with an insider's knowledge. His unnamed character spent his childhood in this city and perhaps because of this, carried a yearning for normalcy and a belief in

humanity, finding himself a judge of everything which made Lagos abnormal.

I used to enjoy how random Lagos was, especially the random energy in Lagosians. They have an unaccounted exuberance to hustle, to keep moving as though pausing and catching one's breath was something to worry about. I used to love this space because, somehow, I always thought one could find safety even amidst all the boisterousness. But it was no longer so. Lagos was now home to fuel tankers begging for explosions and containers begging to fall and crush random people walking by the streets. I had grown wearied by the gorier kinds of news coming from the city daily.

So, I wondered about a young Cole in the streets of Lagos. Did living abroad – in New York, travelling to Europe change how he saw life? Teju says Lagos is his favorite city, his favorite place in the entire world because of how much narrative everyday living in Lagos holds. I get it. Even with my trepidation, I still love Lagos, a love that returns me to it every time. But I have never been a Lagosian and this, perhaps, explains my insistence on romanticizing the place. Does it also explain Cole's obsession with Lagos too?

A friend insists Cole is a citizen of the world and has a strange notion of Lagos. He thinks Cole's treatment of Lagos is

unfair, somewhat panders to a western stereotypical idea of an African city. The obvious gaze of corruption, suffering, and everything bad, difficult to disagree with.

Although, whenever I think about stereotypes – I am usually careful because of my relationship with truth-telling – I try to think of the truth first, but I have learned that sometimes our truths have ways that unintentionally enforces certain stereotypes. So, I feel that Cole's guilt is that of telling the truth. The truth is what it is, whether or not it panders to an existing negative ideology.

Cole's Lagos isn't different from today's reality Lagos, save the necessary evolutions aided by time. New roads and new BRT buses, now mostly rickety, giving Lagos a new identity but – even at that – old Lagos still peeps through the cracks with its yellow buses, also known as danfos, and the agberos with their thick and pompous attitudes.

The most fascinating thing about Lagos, which Cole acknowledges is the idea of power or perhaps the notion of it. Allegiances are quick to switch. A threat could morph to apologies or praise if you can just dare to query the ruffian who issued the threat. Cole writes of an uncle who bluffs his way

out of a tight corner by asking an extortionist if he knew who he was. It is events like this where one learns to adjust to the hostile environment, the speed of improvisation, that changes how one sees the city.

The reading at Jazzhole was over. A line of people holding books percolated, waiting for Cole's autograph. I had signed my copies of his books on his return to the Ake Festival in 2016 so I instead browsed the store's shelves for books and spoke to other guests. I was determined not to repeat the debacle of my first encounter with him. I had imagined the forms my conversations with him might take, the topics and themes, perhaps photography or the manner with which he sees things which usually takes his essays to a route different from everyone else's. I even imagined perhaps we could talk about music or books, his opinion on Cornel West, Tavis Smiley and bell hooks. Or ask if he enjoyed Jay-Z or listened to Avicii.

Cole finished signing and I found him standing alone. His smiling face turned towards me, warmer than I could have ever thought and I became disarmed, so much so I stood in front of him and smiled back like a simpleton. I would muse later about his impression of me in that instance and what could have occurred had my friend Adeola Opeyemi

not intervened and done the introductions.

But, even when I found my voice, it still came out in a stammer. He, ever warm and pleasant says, "It's a pleasure to meet you." And, my first words to him were accusatory: "it's been a pleasure for at least five years and you have greeted me the same way ever since." He replied, "I remember you, maybe not your face, but your name, Tolu Daniel, right?" There were about five of us standing there with him. But I doubt if any of them saw what those words did to me, how if he never said anything else, I probably wouldn't mind. I thought of the moment before, when someone in the audience during the reading had asked how he felt getting his writing validated by VS Naipaul, Philip Roth, and others. Cole had replied that when he was a younger writer, he had buried himself in knowing the work so much and his knowledge has helped him tune his bullshit detector. He is able to recognize what good writing is and what bad writing is.

The reply validated me, and I had felt like I needed to hear it again in proper parlance. For the first few years after I began writing, I didn't really have an understanding of what I was doing. So, I just wrote stories and sent

them out for awards and prize considerations. Then, I began to yearn to get published in literary journals and would spend hours poring through submission guidelines to send my work. Those periods were the hardest because I would wait for replies that were never going to come and yet I kept producing stuff and sending.

One day I got a reply. It came with an advice to stop wasting my time writing as my writing wasn't even worthy of being called mediocre. I was hurt. I stopped sending my work out and instead focused more on reading the journals and magazines where I wanted to see my work. I also joined a reading club where reading one book a week was compulsory. I stopped writing entirely because I realized that I had never known how to write shit. I read so much that I began to feel a sort of distaste for some stories my friends shared with me. I started to see places that needed corrections and so I began doing edits and writing suggestions about how certain narratives would work better. I even got an editing manual, which aided me. I would take books I really enjoyed reading, rewrite first chapters, compare mine with the originals, and discard them. It was strenuous work but in time it paid off. So, it was incredibly validating to find a writer I looked up to reinforce that the

work, not the attention or the fame, is key.

Teju Cole didn't have enough time to say more. But I imagine that sometime soon, we will meet again. And this time – like the saying eponymous to the title of his novella, every day is for the thief but one day is for the owner – it will be my time.



Tolu Daniel is a writer and editor. His essays and short stories have appeared on *Catapult.co*, *The Nasiona Magazine*, *The Wagon Magazine*, *Prachya Review*, *Elsewhere Literary Journal*, *Expound Magazine*, *Bakwa Magazine*, *Saraba Magazine*, *Panorama Journal*, *Scarlet Leaf Review*, *Arts & Africa* and a few other places. Longlisted for the 2018 Koffi Addo Prize for Creative Nonfiction. He currently holds editorial positions with *Afridiaspora*, *The Single Story Foundation Journal* and *Panorama Journal*.

# LET ME REMOVE THE LOG IN YOUR EYE

**Abram Mahlaba**

You live a life of grandeur  
And enjoy flaunting your sleek coupé,  
But you forgot the precarious latrine  
Waiting to be swallowed by a sinkhole at your mother's;

Your mother's shanty doesn't smell of roses  
But a squalid odour, which now perturbs  
The breath under your nose;

You say my sisters are dirty and loose,  
That they jump like police dogs onto your coupé,  
That they're disseminators of the deadly disease  
And the polluters of the population;

You chortle as my brother  
Rapes and maims my little girls,  
But you forget the effects of the lethal ether  
That you keep injecting on his brutal brains;

I tried in vain to remove the speck in your eye,  
But with snobbish arrogance,  
You told me to first remove the log in my eye  
Before I run roughshod over your business.

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Abram Mahlaba is a creative writer and freelance journalism. He has published a poetry book, *Irksome Clouds*. He also got a couple of poems published in anthologies. He usually contributes to online sites like *Digital Journal*. Mahlaba writes to cherish the beauty of his national heritage and critiques what he feels necessary. He's blessed with a wife and two kids, Tokollo and Kimollo who are his great source of inspiration.



# THIS IS HOW WE GRIEVE

KEAROMA MOSATA

## **1. Homecoming**

On the day I arrived home from the hospital with my daughter, I went straight to my grandfather's bedroom. I waddled through the door, supporting myself with its wooden frames towards the nearest chair in the room; my body still reeled with pain from the episiotomy. He was sleeping but he stirred when I approached his bed and looked up at me. I remember telling him to meet his first great-granddaughter. I didn't expect a response because the dementia had reached the point where his speech was now filled with incomprehensible ramblings and random words. However, on that Friday afternoon, I had gotten a smile. It lit his whole face, even his eyes seemed to sparkle with life. It reminded me of how he used to light up whenever he talked about his hometown, Kimberley,

and chasing chickens in the township with his siblings. The smile carried a lot, saying what he couldn't articulate. He had welcomed her home.

## **2. The End Before The End**

We lost my grandfather when his dementia sneaked into our lives. It was his first death. It made him forget our names, our faces and, sometimes, his self, unaware of his own name. He was living in his own world, calling us by various names that shifted with the days. I reckon, in that final decade as the dementia worsened, he had also felt alien in his own home, in his own body. Thus, when he finally exchanged kisses with death, it hurt more than I imagined it would. I was not only crying for him leaving us, but for the ten years where



we lived with him as a stranger.

### **3. The Day: Part I**

I am told that when I was about five days old, I started crying hysterically. I am my mother's first child, and she had tried everything she knew to calm me: rocking, feeding, and singing. Nothing worked. My grandmother, a retired nurse, had also tried her own set of tricks but despite the huffing and puffing, she failed.

My grandmother, when recounting the story, says at around 3 am Papa insisted on driving us to the hospital. As soon as Papa was preparing to take me, car keys in hand, a knock came from the living room door. I stopped crying. When he answered, he found two nurses in their white uniform standing solemn faced. He jokingly asked the nurses if they had heard my crying all the way from the hospital but received a blank look in reply. They were there to tell Papa that my great-grandfather, his father, had passed away.

In Setswana tradition, babies sense these things. In the story, I knew.

### **4. The Day: Part II**

Papa had spent the entire night

wheezing and coughing. Day came, and I left the house, leaving my little sister in charge of my daughter, as I went to fetch items such as lemons, ginger and cough syrup.

In my absence, my sister says my daughter had started crying. She cried so hard my sister was scared something was wrong with my baby. Meanwhile, it is said my grandfather's exit from this world was silent. He waited to be alone in his room, while my mother carried his breakfast dishes back to the kitchen where she took the insistent crying three-month-old from my sister. As my mother rocked her granddaughter, there was an indescribable stillness in the house; only the sounds of a wailing baby could be heard. Perhaps my daughter was bidding her great grandfather goodbye.

### **5. How To Grieve Quietly**

My aunt told me to grieve quietly. That I should cry when no-one saw. She told me to hide the grief.

But.

How do you hide your pain? In your pocket? At the back of the house? In a box under your bed? Do you steal moments between preparing for the funeral to go cuddle with your grief? What do you say when you leave it? Does it wait for you to come back to it?

## 6. The Burial

The entire week leading to the burial felt unreal. I was moving in a grey space of confusion and denial. It felt as if I was motionless, watching everything happen, even as I moved.

I drafted Papa's funeral program – "Because you are a writer," my mother said. Typing away on my laptop while my uncle stood next to me telling me dates: of when Papa fled to Botswana, when he married mama. As his history rushed towards me, my grief stood back.

I wanted to be present in every activity, no matter how small. I wanted to help with the cooking, although I had no experience using big cast iron pots on the open fire. I wanted to go pick his casket with my mother and my uncle. I also wanted to sit with the old men and hear stories about Papa, although it wasn't tradition for me to go sit ko lekgotlaneng. I wanted to stay in Papa's bedroom and reminisce alone. I wanted to pick his final outfit. I wanted to take his suit to the dry cleaners. I wanted to shine his shoes one last time.

I couldn't be everywhere at once.

Instead, I stood next to the coffin with my siblings and talked about a man. My grandfather. I had written a short eulogy titled "Things My

Grandfather Taught Me." In my nervous stupor, I crumbled it up and spoke from the heart. My sister and mother looked at me nervously. I was the soft one, mama had always claimed. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

My grief came as I stepped away from the podium. It washed over me like a wave, bringing the tears.

I don't remember what I had said as I stood next to the coffin. I only know it was about my grandfather and how much I loved him.

They say I spoke eloquently.

## 7. The Day: Three Weeks After

I am a stickler for routine. Three weeks after my grandfather's burial I found myself missing life's everyday patterns. How each morning my newborn and I had walked to his room to kiss him good morning before beginning the rest of my day. That's what I had done the day he died; except my daughter had still been sleeping, so only I went to his room. I found my mother's aunt sitting next to him.

It was his eyes. I should have known that was a sign. He looked directly at me and smiled. That rarely happened. His eyes were clear and blue, like how the ocean must be up-close.

I miss the simple things, cooking

porridge for three: Papa, Mangwane and me. I miss how after a hectic week at school I would look forward to the long bus ride home to see him. I miss knowing not to forget to make him fish or chicken or anything but red meat because of his gout. I miss last year, when my hormonal-self had yelled at my little sister for frying some sausages which had triggered my nausea. How yelling had resulted in crying. I had gone to Papa's bedroom and laid next to him. He had smiled and held my hand. Calmness came.

### 8. Today

It is a month after The Day. I have sat down to type this essay many times. Each time I have come up with excuses as to why I can't possibly write: a crying baby, laptop not starting up quickly enough, rain — I can never find the words when it is raining. But my sentimentality and fear of forgetting have me here, keyboard clattering away, tears streaming down my face, while my almost four-month-old baby naps next to me. My biggest fear is forgetting his voice, his smile. Forgetting him. I try avoiding it by speaking about him often with my mother and my siblings. We all seem to fear the same thing. Thus, they talk

about him too: "Remember when Papa bought us candy on the way to the cattle post?"

"Papa loved his oats with honey."

"Today I was looking at photos from last Christmas. Remember how Papa's Secret Santa got him that pyjamas set?"

Thus, now we grieve with memories.

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Kearoma Mosata is a Motswana writer and blogger. She was shortlisted for the inaugural BSHD Tourism Fiction Award in 2016. Her work appears in print in *36 Kisses and other short stories and poems* and *It's The Devil You Know—Collection of Works on Gender Based Violence* and online on *Brittle Paper*, *Kalahari Review* and *Arts and Africa*. Kearoma writes about a lot of things but lately her writing has been inspired by the idea of displacement, the self and home.



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