

The Smell Hits You First

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by

Tariro Ndoro

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This collection of poems and prose poems is a record of my life, from growing up in the small town of Bindura in Zimbabwe to landing in the small town of Grahamstown in South Africa. It is a story of dislocation: physical, emotional, and political. It is a story about borders and boundaries; although not rich, I was raised among the rich; although not white, I spent a considerable part of my childhood in white spaces. These fragments are told through the voice of my younger self and also retrospectively by my adult self. Two important influences on my style and my struggle to write about my identity have been *Woman Hollering Creek* by Latino American author Sandra Cisneros and *Citizen: An American Lyric* by US poet Claudia Rankine.

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Mbare City Heights – A Prelude

1. MaTapi

The smell hits you first –
Of urine on stairs
Left there by a drunk
Of spilt chibuku on a dirty floor
Of dirty nappies on a child's buttocks

The stairwell is always dark
You learn to walk without light,
To scrunch your nose just so
When you pass the bathrooms –
To avoid smells of toilets
Blocked with faeces

The noise hits you next
Five families, one flat
Most of them fighting

Somewhere in a dark flat
Behind a demarcating curtain
A wife cooks supper for you
Greeted by the warmth of paraffin
Burning in a prama stof
You are used to seeing her by candlelight

2. Harare

Mbare Township was called Harare before 1980 and the city of Harare was known as Salisbury

You learnt to wash your body with soap in mouth,
Your panty too – otherwise it was stolen,
You learnt to buy a black and white TV
Even if you could afford colour
You learnt humility – pride made you a target
In Harare, your friend would steal from you
And tell you about it the next day
You learnt to walk around the slum by day
The flat – no cubicle – was too small for anyone
It was only meant for Pa
Pa the factory worker
Pa the quiet one
Pa who had left home in search for work

We had waved at him, all of us
When he left for Salisbury in the Kukura Kurerwa
Amai had roasted a chicken for the journey
I never understood why he didn't send money
Those years of hunger...

When I too reached Salisbury
I understood
I understood what Pa felt
That Harare ate your soul
There was nothing to do there
Except complain
Get drunk,
Violent drunk
Wake up with bhabharas

You learnt not to judge a man
They beat their wives because they were easier targets...
Than Smith
Than curfew
Than poverty
Than being called a boy when you were a man

3. Sekuru

I never met my grandfather. He died before I was born, but I inherited his scowl, his scrawniness. Our name means luck – a conch in Mozambican Shona, a crown in Zimbabwean Shona, royal insignia. But he died threadbare. Ane ndorochema is “he who has luck” but when the white man came he had none. He who had been proud. Yet he was too small, too scrawny to be a blackwatcher or a soldier and so a factory hand they made him. *Him*, being a single man and a poor one too. Only Mbare City Heights could be his home. He died before we met and in the only picture I have his eyes are not smiling.

Things I've Known

Three years into marital hell
and two daughters into eternity,
Mother left the capital and landed in sleepy Bindura
Father's face remains a vague remembrance
of a bristling beard dancing on my cheek and Saturday visits
to a nearby cafe laced with the fragrance of syruped waffles

At five, we spat in the face of Maidei,
chief caretaker and nanny,
by riding our tricycles on the just
polished wooden tile floor
of the government issued house
given to Mum by virtue of being magistrate
We spat too, in the face of neighbours,
by stealing carrots from their gardens
And on Christmas Eve, we learnt for the first time, fear:
Running from bandits near Mbuya Ngoro's compound –
wherein an older cousin carried me, so I could go faster,
and my sister dropped her rag doll

In '98, I knew abandonment:
Left to the devices of boarding mistresses,
*(No dessert for you tonight
Never cry when you hurt yourself)*
I would hear my mother's voice
when the matrons spoke at night
But never see her in the morning.
Starting again, 2002
I felt Kwekwe heat after Rusape winters
Dry air contorted my throat in an asthma grip
And a new Shona dialect constricted my tongue to silence

I've known about suitcases and halls –
After the government issued house came another
From sleepy town to dusty growth point – Murehwa
A whole family packed into one Stuttaford's Movers van
Then
Brought low, '99 was the year of shame:
Two roomed boy's khaya for the female lawyer
Distrusted by clients because she's a she
And no more government issue house

And, in '05, that hungry year of drought resistant maize

I learnt too:

The drive to Botswana leaves
your kidneys feeling parched
I learnt to wait in line
I learnt to wash, quickly
In the toilet stall of
A *Total* bathroom because
Hotels are expensive when
you have to cross the border
To buy groceries

I've known elation, too:

The high pitched rough tumble of
Mosi oa Tunya, kissing me with her mist
As Vic Falls' roar reverberated in my gut
And the salty, swirly roaring
Of the Indian Ocean when I swam in her
And she tossed me out

And I can never disown;

The 3 year old girl (doe eyed)
chubbily ambling after her older sister,
who woke to the sound of *Sankomota*,
and smell of freshly baked mince pies
Or the 5 year old tomboy who ran
around with sparklers on November 5th,
fascinated always by bright lights
and the smell of burnt matches
That impressionable 12 year old,
scaling Mt Peza on the rim of Mozambique
Or at 19, that nervous girl on her first flight, outbound
To Xhosaland, welcomed by the turquoise azure
and salty smell of Mandela's Bay
And, finally that 22 year old – in a sterile laboratory
Made of artificial lighting and controlled temperatures –
back sore and feet numb with the ache of failed experiments
Always carrying on her shoes, dust
from a thousand past lives that can never be revisited

Convicts in the Garden

Feet shackled in a line, like a chain gang
They would come
In prison garb of no discernible colour
In that foreboding dirty green *Prisons* truck:
Guards would set them in our yard
And Maidei would lock us in the house

But I wasn't afraid –
Not me. I'd walked past their holding cells
A hundred thousand times because
Mother was a magistrate

And when the guard gave Maidei
Their communal metal mug,
(Dirty green with black scuffs)
Over the top half of the kitchen stable door,
I always wondered why they didn't drink from ours

The magistrate's house

Even from the blurry place of being still asleep
I heard Maidei's distress cry, "Muno mapinda mbavha!"
And I remember chaos the night my mother
Slept on the sofa, under a brown Puma blanket
Knife in hand, until policemen in grey and blue
Came to dust for prints the morning after –
Released convicts always stole from our house
Always leaving excrement at the corner of the house,
Under a cabbage leaf – juju to keep from getting caught
Because *Mum* put them in jail.
Using a twisted coat hanger, they took my Popeye t-shirt,
The one with gold glitter on it. But no amount of fingerprint
Dusting ever brought my special t-shirt back to me.

Sleeping in the arms of safety

Mother is a heartbeat
Lub - dub, that's my lullaby
I am safe in her arms

I remember,
 Mum sleeping in the lounge
 black kitchen knife in hand
 after robbers stole into our home
 Mum carrying me on her jerseyed back
 Tafadzwa on her stomach
 because she carried us alone

Mum is shelter
Her lub-dub that's my lullaby
And her deep breath is my rhythm

Maidei

She always washes the plates in her green uniform with the orange flowers on it, and those red and yellow pata patas from Bata while I eat my porridge, sitting on the floor where I won't break Mama's special plates. But I'm already full from the hundreds of cents I swallowed by mistake – the brown 20c ones that I swirl in my mouth over and over until I swallow them by mistake and the cold taste of metal is gone for ever and ever amen but I eat her porridge anyway so that she won't shout at me. Then she takes me to *kresh* and picks me up in the afternoon with her dark boyfriend Edmore, who wears oversized shirts and the same cap every day and makes me play with the toy guns and ugly face masks he sells so that I won't tell on them until it is time to get Tafi from big school. Then me and Tafi ride our tricycles up and down the brown tiled passage Maidei has just polished until she comes with the green Perfection bar that still has bubbles on it from her washing and tells us that if we don't stop she'll put soap in our eyes but she forgives us anyway, by the time we sit on the red sofas to watch Coca-Cola on the Beat and they play "Thriller". She lets me hide behind her back until they take the ghosts away. But tomorrow she won't be walking me to school or threatening me with her green soap because Edmore came to see her yesterday just as she was putting meat on the stove for supper. Then she told us to go and play outside until we saw the kitchen light go on, so we went outside and played with Justice and Michelle and Chido and Dzokai until all their mamas called them in to bath and me and Tafi kept playing until my tummy was grumbling and we went back home to look for food and there was Mama in the kitchen looking angry and we thought we would get it for staying out too late but Maidei was already packing her bags and crying and Edmore's cap was on our bed.

The Letter

We are making pizza: we roll sticky stuff and put dots of meat on it. Mum tells us to write a letter to Father Christmas, it will be Christmas day tomorrow. Tafi writes the letter. We ask for bikes but Father Christmas doesn't get us bikes because other little boys and girls also asked for bikes, and we can't all have them. That is what his letter said, that's what the letter said. Tafi says there's no Father Christmas, it was Mainini who wrote the letter, "Look, it's her writing."

Mainini is having a baby, I know because Tafadzwa told me – Mainini's tummy is big, Tafadzwa says, and it will get bigger and bigger until a baby pops out. Big sisters know everything. We are walking... slowly, because of Mainini. We're walking on a nice road and there are trees everywhere, maybe Christmas trees, maybe gum trees – I don't know, just tall trees... and they all smell like Christmas.

Things we did with Grandma

We rode in the back seat of Max's cab, Taf and I,
from the hostel car park out into the great beyond
past the place where the navy tarmac turned to dirt

We rode in the blue Rixi Taxi with our bags between us
holding onto the headrests of the front seats and
looking out at the blue expanse of Rusape Dam
listening to Max's descriptions of the mermaid that lived there:
"Not like Ariel, *The Little Mermaid*," he would say,
"these ones eat girls like you for dinner"

We stood in the paddock
as gran herded her cows with their tinkling bells
and I stood far away because I was afraid of cows –
still am

We visited her sister on the other side of Mutare Road
where we climbed an old kopje which we saw as a mountain
and on the way back we picked fruit from the nearby hute trees
and went to collect our cows from the dibh

We did homework
under the old peach tree that no longer made peaches
and we sat there with my addition cards and word cards
and I read to her from my yellow Sunrise Readers

We walked past the paddock on Sunday mornings
when the dew was still wet and the grass was taller than me
to the tall church that had no ceiling,
where I was unceremoniously baptised in a pink dress with lace on it

We fought always on Monday mornings
because I never ate breakfast when she told me to:
Sun Jam on white bread, eggs of the side and the tea
in a metal cup that always managed to scald my tongue

We made up anyway
because I was already late for school
and it would be another week until we fought again
and there Max would be, his taxi in a cloud of dust
as he came to collect Tafi and me

Old Kitchen

grandmother laid me here as soon as I fell ill –
wrapped in blankets, on the rukukwe
on the floor

unable to move,
I watch the shaft of light falling at an angle
from the square window and I see floating filaments
of dust that I have sometimes tried to catch

between dreams and wakefulness
the chalk-like paintings on the mud brown wall
remind me of cave paintings and a disused chimney
infects the room with smoke from old meals cooked

sometimes Tafi pops her head in
to look in on me – see if I am well enough
to play outside with her,
but each time she shakes her head gravely
and pronounces: “you’re just homesick”
then shuts the green door

The library

My best friend is the library
This library is my favourite place
Her damp, earthy silence is my sanctuary
Transports me away, far out into space
When beastly playground bullies won't play ball
And with the smell of decaying pages
She therapeutes me when teachers shout, yell
Her books steal me from their clutches.

This musty room is my space/time machine
And Mother Knowledge goes nowhere
Whenever she takes me out for a ride
To the worlds of Blyton, Dahl and Kipling
Where there's Big Friendly Giants with kindness to spare
And Kipling's rhymes think to make me smile

Seasons in a Schoolyear

in february,
we all smelled new
and the factory hints of fresh cloth and plastic
ushered us into the year
there was, also, a reacquaintance with
hospital cornered bedding
and “lord behold us”

in june:
dew drops formed a white carpet
on the green lawn
and we braved the cold
in our white ankle socks
and lace up toughies

in october,
we squelched hunger with matamba,
which they called monkey oranges,
said we must never eat
they were also good for playing hockey with –
but you couldn’t hit them too hard or they’d crack
and spew their orange flesh
and pythons would crawl up from their
burrows and lie tanning across the road
and when swimming gala day came the white girls
competed for the place of *victrix ludorum*
and we, t-shirt clad, graced the pool with novelty races

in november,
we sang christmas carols
at the dutch reformed church
and they asked the girl
with the sweetest voice
from each class to sing a solo
in the candlelit procession
to the choir’s pew
that girl was never me

Blue and Gold

The rainbow tour will be in blue and gold
Blue's regular, gold because we mine it here,
Where the dirt is red and the heat is stifling – even in winter
The rainbow tour will be in blue and gold
In the white bus that looks like a bread truck – old
Every weekend there's a new stop:
Gweru, Bulawayo and Triangle,
Where ashes from the sugar works cling to your
Kit and nostrils till you smell it no more
There is the hostel made packed lunch of sandwiches
That are soggy before we leave and naartjies smaller than golf balls
There are travel restrictions: hockey girls in front,
Rugby boys at the back,
But always sharing a seat with Nyarai, best friend and
Sharer of secrets, food and midnight sit ups
There's heart, sweat and dedication:
Tuesday Thursday practice,
Wednesday Friday Saturday match days
There is respect for the uniform: navy slip and long socks,
Worn with the pride of a nurse's cap
Then there is that stint of mine in the clunky
Goalie's pads – too proud to refuse the job
Yet too afraid of high velocity hockey balls
To do it well

Like Hugo Boss

When I was in Grade Three, it was finally decided that we could visit my dad at his house. We would walk from Chinamano Heights, via Kensington to his bachelor flat near Avondale shopping mall, because my dad was healthy and didn't need a kombi where he could walk. He would cook for us, on his two plate stove, and because he didn't have a dining room table, he would overturn plastic dishes and set trays on them. My dad was always a good cook and on Saturday mornings, he treated us to omelettes. Dad always made us bath before bed, because that would give us sweet dreams and when bed time came he would climb into a sleeping bag on the floor so Tafi and I could sleep on his bed. When *Harry Potter* premiered at 7 Arts, Dad walked us there at five and came to fetch us at seven. You should have been there to see it – the theatre was packed so full that kids and their parents were sitting on the floor. When we would go back to boarding school, my dad would send us postcards from many African places, even though he was firmly in Harare. All of them smelled like Hugo Boss.

Mandisema

Still too young to know faces, I heard voices outside as I sat in the cool hut and I would hear Tafadzwa saying, “ndabayiwa bundu” when she fell and hurt herself. It made no sense... but it was her way of saying, “I’m hurt.”

Too young to be useful, I would walk to the chibhorani with the big girls and waited while they collected water for you to start cooking. On Mondays you used that water to wash the red Methodist uniform you’d worn the day before and use your brown sewing machine to fix the hem of the black skirt, your eyes becoming dull but not too dull to thread the needle.

Used to only one sister, I would starve when you served sadza for all your grandchildren and Tawanda squashed it with his hands so that no one else could eat. And when dusk fell on Chihota you told us stories about tsuro nagudo and we giggled when you picked at our knees.

You were always making peanut butter. And now when I buy peanut butter in shops I say to myself “this tastes like Mbuya Ndoro’s dovi” or “this doesn’t taste like Mbuya Ndoro’s dovi” and when I hear Methodist hymns I remember your starched red uniform.

That final time you were sick we went to Pari to see you, but no children were allowed in the TB ward. Dad said we would see you next time.

Tafi cried the most at your funeral. Tete told her not to cry, “big girls don’t cry,” she said. I’d already cried at home so I looked brave.

Sometimes, when I am eating homemade peanut butter, or sewing on the machine you left for us, I find myself singing an old Methodist hymn... then balling like a little girl who’s nine years old and losing her gran all over again.

Semi-detached

Cemented yard

I hate it here

Ten steps from the gate to the house

Neighbours' avos in our driveway

Home

Suffocating

The house is even smaller than the yard

I never invite friends home

Sharing a wall with neighbour

Her rats infest our ceiling too

St Martins

Mutsvaiii....ro!!
Tino-nama ma-po-too
Mutsvaii...rooo!
Tino-nama ma-poto

Street vendors with wares
no one wants to buy,
herald the second rising
of the semi-detached tenements

The first took place at eight
when working grown-ups went to earn:
when factories on the other side of Seke Road
began to pump smoke and fumes into the air

Vim yauya Viim!!!

Now the dependants stir –
the man from next door
who always pops his head above our Durawall
sits on an old couch in the sun and smokes grass

The retired Mr Matthews takes a stroll
teeth still sparkling, swagger still sprite
Mr Matthews... who was forced
to join the Rhodesian forces in `76
because “Bobby from down the road
told the soldiers he was hiding”

The boys from around
wake up early to smoke,
linger lazily
at the corner of Winder and Adams

From across the road Tanya and his sister come out to play
their mother teaches Grade Sevens in Epworth
where girls fall pregnant before they hit thirteen
she’s Mum’s best friend,
came with her number 5 sadza pot
and cooked for our guests when Uncle died

Overhead aeroplanes make their way to the airport
Sometimes head out to Joburg
other times helicopters fly low

but we are too old now
to chase after them
screaming “aeroplane, aeroplane!”

Somebody raped my cousin

Somebody raped my cousin
The police opened a docket
But they abandoned investigations:
Eyewitnesses reported that *she* wanted it
And that's what the verdict was:
When a nine year old girl visits an older man
It's because she welcomes his advances
Why else would she go there?
Why incriminate the poor man?

She's slowing now

like a five year old, she must be fed
 she's slowing now, has been for a while
 her eyes, once vital, have lost a flame
 like a lightbulb expired, now lost its power
 like a fluttering dove youth has left her:
 she looks hopeless now, when we visit
 and Mum says, "I am Elizabeth's girl"
 and she looks at her niece,
 as though solving a calculus problem
 but gives up, shamefaced
 and, shaking her head, gives up
 weeping "handichazivi ini, handichazivi ini"

Yellow Sadza

Two chefs from the hostel kitchens got fired one morning:
They were caught stealing food from school grounds

It happened in the year when we ate yellow sadza
From the drought resistant meal that
You could only eat when you were starving
When we bought bread for a million trillion dollars
When it could be found, that is
And hunger taught us that three meals a day wasn't a given

Two chefs from the hostel kitchens got fired one morning:
Twenty years of service counted for nothing

Mirrors

The preening begins with a hot shower
(Not that you were dirty)
Loud music follows
You also have to get your groove on
There's always a right song
For make-up application
Of course, your bed is full of cast off outfits
That would make your mother blush
It's not enough to be pretty,
One has to be the prettiest
Collective efforts are the best:
You can borrow each other's jewellery
It always ends with a spray scent
One final flourish of perfume
Before hitting the night

Discotheque

She hopes it's not too short
But also hopes it is
Their dresses are always too short,
The senior girls
No one can ask them about it
And of course she'll end up in a corner
Making out with her boyfriend
The Form Ones will be in a circle, mouths agog
Still blameless, judgemental
Watching couples grind to dancehall music
The boys will be in a secluded corner somewhere
Drinking contraband beer from a dark bottle
Only five people really dance
Because discos weren't made for dancing

Pari

(Parirenyatwa General Hospital)

“Wait here,” he tells us,
We’ve already been waiting for two hours
He types away, like he’s busy working
But on closer inspection, I see he’s on Facebook

They finally find a qualified person
To give my sister her tetanus shot
But first she must give him “lunch money”
(For services rendered)

We walk out, later
Past the haggard people queuing on the floor
With undressed bandages and oozing sores
Soiled cotton in red refuse bags lines the corridor

All afternoon we’ve only bumped into one doctor

Second Street

“Copa Ca-ba-na!!!!” The hwindi breaks my reverie, and Fast-and-the-Furious-like the driver parks the kombi right by my feet. I’m not sure if they’re seeking my patronage or trying to frighten me. The inside of the kombi smells like wet shoe and the man beside me tucks me into his sweaty armpit. Seven a.m. and he’s already musky, I try not to roll my eyes. “2 padollar,” the hwindi announces, eyes alert and rear end hanging out of the front window. People start passing money but there is a shortage of coins. I hand my precious rand coins to the woman beside me, she hands back a sweaty dollar— tattered and smelly, like a dirty piece of cloth, I’m not sure if it’s legal tender anymore. We get to the Parkade and I get off and walk steadfastly in one direction neither looking down at the beggars with their metal plates singing “Ndoda Mwari Muyamuri” nor the blind women being led by their children asking, “tokumbirawo rubatsiro.” Somewhere in the distance a hopeless man is fighting with a man for a dollar because he “guarded” his car... but the man says he didn’t ask for help. A child blocks my path and it is her mother, selling tomatoes on the side of the street, who grabs her – face sour, naked breast suckling the other young one in her arm. Her husband sells cellphone chargers at the corner of the street. A drunken man tries to grab my hand, I shy away. The smell of fish invades my nostrils as I pass by the fast food establishments. A gang of street youths lounge on the curb – at every corner I pass there is a man selling airtime and a group of loafers in tow. Strive Masiyiwa must be the richest man in Africa.

There’s a little old bookshop at the corner of Speke and Nujoma where you can buy classics at three dollars apiece...I suspect they’ll be out of business soon, but I hope not. I cross the road where Strachan’s used to be Stella Nova’s, and think the cathedral is peaceful and gorgeous from this angle but we are all too busy to care. A man in a battered Mazda B2000 threatens to impale me with the poles tied to the top of his bakkie as I try to cross Robson Manyika but life gets quieter after that – it’s as though I’ve crossed a border. I’ve left Eastgate and all its snobbery behind. It’s the last weekend of the holiday and every schoolchild with a social life is swarming the complex. All that lies before me now is a ragtag of small to medium enterprises where only the poor willingly go, and the lower middle class strikes bargains. Yet there is quiet – and familiarity. I come upon South Avenue, at the edge of the city, the railway looms ahead but I’m not sure if anyone goes there anymore. Here everyone is familiar – I say hello to the dreadlocked Eddy who rents a chair in the corner “saloon” and barbers hair, hello to Tinashe who works in the tuckshop-esque store where you can buy grilled maize at R4 a packet, hello to Sekuru (I’ve never asked his real name) the nearing forty Shona man with a great Adam’s apple and old black minivan who fixes watches at Khatri Brothers and has the deepest voice in the world. Among all the start-up enterprises in long decaying buildings, National Carpets looms as an old relic where no one shops anymore. I can already smell raw beef from Montana Meats and down the road at the corner of Orr and South, Mohammed Mussa makes a good turnover selling wholesale to the masses – the Shona don’t really like Arabs but they shop there anyway. Last week a man refused free water from the haberdashery shop beside us and went thirsty because of this bigotry. I have no time for this, I have “turquoise blue” baby dresses and wedding gowns to sell. It is time to open shop.

Come, buy our pretty dresses

Mary cries

Her husband said the Princess dress cost too much –

The wedding cost too much.

“I didn’t even want this!”

So she cries right here in the shop.

Grace doesn’t cry, she connives

Her mother in law’s paying for the whole thing –

And she’s chosen to pay for the ugliest dress

Grace wants us to pretend it’s hired out already:

“Just say you just say you mixed up your dates”

Parity is happy when her dress fits

She sucks her tummy in to make sure

But of course she can’t wear it,

With all her skin exposed like that

Her aunt advises her:

“Wear a polo neck underneath the dress”

Our prettiest dress is off white

This is why we’ll never sell it

No good pastor’s wife will allow her girls to buy it

And walk down the aisle like a non-virgin

When newlyweds return with hired dresses

Sandra sits them down and tells them:

“Murume haana curfew”

We give advice on the house

Not for sale

The customer is always right
Even when he bends over the glass pane
Even when he points at a ring
Asks if it's the correct size,
Says he wants to buy it for you –
He's right because he's the shopkeeper from next door
Telling you he'll only help pay
If you hand over your phone number
He's right because he's a forty year old man
Who walks in under the pretences
Of shopping for his wife
But when the shop's dead quiet
He walks over
Tries to buy you, in fact
He's right because even though
He looks like he has a wife and six kids
(Who probably go to school with empty stomachs)
And his threadbare suit looks as though
It must have been handed down twice
And his threadbare face
Makes him look older than Dad,
Even then you must be polite
When you ask him to leave

The offending document

It could be any handbag; it could be a messenger bag with extra-long straps, a cute colourful type or a scuffed black one that looks cheap. Let's assume it is the scuffed black one, because it is the most likely.

We must assume that its owner is stressed out – because that is how she walks, that is how her nostrils flare. Her hair looks “frustrated”, that is to say, it was once relaxed, and now it has growth; and because she's been hustled all day, the hair stands on one end. There is sweat on her brow and she is wearing a frock; yes, a frock because it is floral and black and made of cheap rayon. Her outfit is completed by knock-off tennis shoes that are not of the Tommy variety but she still calls them “matomi.” Yet this woman is just like the twenty something year old woman with dreadlocks (we pray to God she's not smoking mbanje). Her nose has a stud in it, another cardinal sin, and she too is frustrated. This we can attest to because she is telling her boyfriend, quite eloquently on her Galaxy S5.

It is true the older woman's bag is heavy because of the old Nokia phone she'll never replace, the one ply tissue paper still on its roll (in case she has to use a public toilet) and an old Fanta bottle full of water. Her wallet is just as scuffed as her bag but that doesn't deter her – most of her money is in her bra anyway. The younger woman carries a bottle of mineral water, chewing gum, a book and a passport. It is this document has them relegated to the same fate. For now the two women might share a camaraderie, a complaining together if you will, but after they've crossed the border, one will head for a bus station in Joburg where she will sleep under a truck for R2 a night until she has enough merchandise to sell at home, the other will take the Gautrain to Marlboro where her aunt lives and spend her days between Gold Reef City and Sandton, but for now they are equal, because of that offending document.

Cross the border by night

Cars will pass you on your way to Beitbridge,
You will know they belong to your countrymen,
Because of the heavy loads they carry.

You will stand in a queue for hours
A semi-stampede will start up,
Reminding you of your asthma
You will panic, but you will not complain.

A husband will go to the front and ask the officials
If they “can please let his sick and pregnant wife go first”
They will tell him she must go and be sick in her own country.

When you cross the bridge to the other side
The cars’ headlights will illuminate the bodies
Hanging for dear life on the pillars of the bridge
You will feel sorry for them:
If they do not fall to the crocodiles,
They will be shot by farmers who think they are monkeys
No one will hear their obituaries.

In Messina you will be robbed
And it will be by your homeboys –
The ones who couldn’t find a job on the other side.

At the embassy
They will hand you application forms through barbed wire
You will not complain.

Carburettor Song

Bbrrrpupupupu

Every car has a carburettor problem
in NU Seven
where the sunrise is glorious
but exhaust fumes suffocate the crisp air

Fixing his run down Citi Golf
Sipho watches another beat
down car hurtling down the road

Bbrrrpupupupu

with hangers-on in overalls
smoking zols, unhurriedly

MaSibanda washes her feet

Bbrrrpupupupu

in a bucket outside her house
her hair covered by a navy *doek*

Bbrrrpupupupu

Taxis bring tired workers home and
the sun sets as men scurry home for supper

Yoghati and Anele

Dhaaadhahadhadha

still climb trees at twilight
outside the municipal office
where the brown grass is overgrown
and little ones play on a rusting seesaw
a stray dog sniffs for food in the street

Returning

I

I chose the window seat. The men in my row were deep in conversation and at times seemed as though they would speak to me. I was having none of their conversation. The clouds in the sky were soothing enough and no topic could draw me out. The hymns kept playing in my head; it had been a long journey home, a muddled visit and a sad goodbye.

II

The journey home had gone well, I'd shared a Wimpy meal with another girl from uni who was on her way home, just for a break, and an American expat had spoken to me until boarding time. On the outbound flight to Harare, the complaints of my countrymen had irritated me as usual but I had been too preoccupied to care this time. It is complaining. This time I stared at the clouds all the way from Joburg to PE, my heart felt full and I couldn't risk speaking lest I let it all out in one breath.

III

Desolation. One word. I remember them singing "uri gamba usatye" in those bright red Methodist uniforms when we gathered. After the Grahamstown winter the Marondera heat made my feet swell and I was tired when Dad buried his wife next to his mother.

IV

Pain. That's it. My younger sister never liked me but when I got home earlier that night, she ran to me and hugged me and never let go. That's how I know she was grieving. There was no need for words.

Pectoris

*And I was standing near my cupboard,
And I was ready to get dressed for an exam –
And then there was a dagger that pierced my heart
Again and again and again
And I was too shocked to call for help so I fell back
Towards my bed. And it hit me – from the back of my chest
To the front of my breast – I was dying!
The lights went out and a vice like grip held my sinews
Shoulder blade to spine, I was constricted:
Volcano shots of hot lava pumped into my sternum,
Like a submachine gun firing – five rounds per second,
The pain was in my left side, where the heart is
And I decided I was dying*

Secrets will never harm us

I didn't tell anyone, that first Sunday, after she died, that I was in mourning. I remember them laughing at the pants I was wearing. I wanted to turn around and say, "Hey! These are the only black clothes I own." But I just carried on walking.

I never told anyone about that heart attack scare. I was by myself when I sat in the sterile surgery getting my pressure checked. Not a soul held my hand.

The day Nandi told me to lower my pyjama pants so the boys would see, I never fought her. Just listened.

I would only take my memories and beat them, ball my fists and tell them, "You will never hurt me; you will never hurt me... again." But the pain will never go away.

Tell me

How do you keep a smile on your face
when you've made plans to go up to Joburg
but you already face a thousand obstacles?

When the last goodbye was punctuated by four years,
how do you keep smiling when saying farewell
to the friends that became your sisters?

How do you keep calm when the Translux driver
tells you Kele can't come out to hug you
after putting her bags on her seat?

And when the bus windows are so dark
you can't see them wave back when the bus pulls away

Foreign

You talk about liberty and emancipation
And use other Pan-African rhetoric
But you invented words like kwerekwere
And expected the events of Alex not to happen!
You sat down and tweeted this and that
About “no to xenophobia”
But words came before your machetes
You ask me why I don’t venture into townships
I say, “My countrymen die there”
“It’ll be okay,” you say
That’s because you don’t know
About the frowning immigrations officer at OR Tambo,
The sniffing dogs to welcome me...

When I venture into Joburg,
I wear long sleeved tees
So my vaccination scars can’t be seen,
My cousin Admire made it his mission
to be the hardest thug on the street
So they wouldn’t target him
I stay in rich areas
where they don’t do sweeps for illegals,
I never speak to anyone –
Don’t want to let them catch on
That I haven’t learnt to speak your language

Fragile Heart

the sound of beetle makes
with his wings on wall
keeps buzzing in my head

someone's loud sound system
makes my burglar bars
rattle against my window
threatening to smash the glass

the flimsy metal gate opens
and then clangs shut
(just last night a girl
was attacked in her flat)

a few yards away
tyres skid on the street
and a car speeds off
the engine sounding
like it's right beside me

Transport

With the resounding of the boiling kettle sound
A bibbed man chases a thief out of Tygerberg station
It's seven a.m. and scores of us flock into that morning Mecca

Across from me, sleeping on that overflowing yellow foam
of the tattered prison grey seat, there is a tattered young man and
his sister. Both fatigued and shuffling to their dead end jobs

In amongst the rushing travellers, there is a man always hustling,
always rushing among the hawkers armed with bright green
veggies in the seedy grey station where air smells like diluted urine

Straining from left to right, the yellow locomotive
rolls out to where the daisies sprout between the rusting
tracks and platforms where stranded passengers are abandoned

because no one disembarks to accommodate them. Yet there is still
that adrenalin spin that takes the train on a buzz; high, high above the world
as a graffiti-ed train speeds past, unveiling that bright pink vandalism

of our time before dropping passengers back to the vision of Dr Vicky's
dilapidated advert for "Quik & Eazy" abortions next to one of those Lost
Lover adverts, and the distant picture of a lonely man in overalls

Eating his sandwich as he sits on a despondent cement slab:
We are spinning
Infinitely,
To nowhere

He lies awake

I struggle, to fall into that slumber we should all nestle into
So does the man in 6B. He, too, lies awake –
dropping his pencils and scraping his chair
At intervals, as I used to on those coffee ridden
nights of classical music and chemical formulae
When the smell of Ricoffy brought to mind the
first strains of Beethoven's 9th and spin paired electrons

Headlights of passing cars are as transient, intangible
as Sleep when she eludes me, fuelling drunken students
to brawl outside my window to perfect her mockery
I breathe in, deeply, and swallow – as prescribed by
all these newfangled cures for insomnia –
We've been playing hide and seek for eternity:

In early memories, Sleep would whisper
To those weak ducts that brought me air, after
that summer of bronchitis and oversized
tablets would plant themselves in my throat,
no matter how much water I drank,
mocking me with wakefulness.

Like old foes, formidable, that old swollen
lung conspired with Sleep to keep me servile:
when the warmer Kwekwe climate woke me
with a malevolent alarm shrill
of sweat and hyperventilation. Between fire drills
and mystery novels I learnt to spar with sleep.
"One more page, one more chapter" as I sat in an empty
Bathtub, devouring words after the call for lights out

*Before the affliction, I drifted easily into that world
Of broken dreams when Maidei forbade
me from speaking after saying "Goodnight."
Then confined between my already sleeping sister
and the odorous paint on the wall,
I would count breaths
before succumbing.
And in early days when Grandma snuffed the candle,
After hymns and prayers,
and an hour of listening to Radio One
I would sink, willingly,*

*into the arms of Sleep;
only to be woken by intermingling scents
of burning pine and margerined porridge*

Later as I slept on Grandma's sitting room floor
With all the cousins, side by side
Sleep would elude, tempting me to follow her
outside, where she held fresh air captive
But I was imprisoned by that old superstition
My Grandma calls "zvehusiku"
held to the body heat of those beside me
I lay restless,
Like the times my Mum would hold me close
Swaddle me in blankets and pronounce me immune
To pneumonia. I would watch the walls of my eyelids
And listen to the taunts of the hand clock

Once I dreamed of Olympic Gold, when Marion Jones
was the fastest woman on earth. But I never could never run,
swiftly. Dad told me I was born with weak lungs:
Mum spent hours in labour and, escaping death
Emerged triumphant with one big eyed baby girl
That is why they called me Tariro
Tariro that is to say hope
I cried my first tears at 11: 45 pm in Avenues Maternity
Clinic. Maybe that's why I can't sleep at night:
My body clocks are all wrong.

Some Days are Perfect

*This morning is waking up on the right side of the bed,
Discovering a new song on the radio
Peanut butter on my toast
This morning's sun laughing with me
So warm I could spend the whole day in it
While yellow sprays smile up at me*

*This morning is the dance I can't keep out of my feet
Bob Marley singing Three Little Birds
This morning is jamming
This morning is jamming
Dancing feet dancing shoes dancing heart
The world's still as wonderful as Nat King sang it*

Glossary

Amai Mother

Bakkie pick up truck

Bhabharas babalas (hangover)

Blackwatcher black constable

Boy's khaya servant's quarters

Chibhorani communal water pump

Chibuku traditional beer

Dibh cattle dip

Dovi peanut butter

Handichazivi ini I no longer know

Hute small fruit (indigenous to Zimbabwe)

Hwindi tout

Kukura Kurerwa a bus brand

Kombi commuter omnibus

Kumusha family home, often in rural areas

Kwerekwere foreigner, derogatory

MaTapi block of hostels in Mbare

Matamba fleshy fruit indigenous to Zimbabwe

Matomi tennis shoes

Matemba kapenta

Mbanje marijuana

Muno mapinda mbavha a thief has entered the house

Mutsvairo (we sell) grass brooms

Ndabaiwa bundu my pimple was pricked

Ndoda Mwari Muyamuri I want the Lord, my helper

Njuzu mythical creatures with human torsos and a fish's lower body

Pata pata flip flops

Prama stof Primus stove

Rukukwe reed mattress

Saloon hair salon (embellishment)

Sadza pap

Sekuru grandfather or maternal uncle. Can also be used as a form of respect to when addressing an older man

Shamu stick used to beat children

Tinonama mapoto we fix leaky pots

Tokumbirawo rubatsiro we beg for help

Tsuro nagudo the hare and the rabbit (the central characters of most Shona children's tales)

Uri gamba usatye you are a warrior, don't be afraid

Vim yauya Vim (scouring powder) has arrived