




M.A. CREATIVE WRITING



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Novel:

The Straw That Grows in Dry Savannah Plains

and

Mini dissertation:

Trauma, historical injustices and affect: the vicissitudes of womanhood in Zimbabwe in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *This Mournable Body* (2018)

By

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Declaration

I, Bongani Sazini Ndlovu declare that the novel *The Straw that Grows in Dry Savannah Plains* and the mini-dissertation 'Trauma, historical injustices and affect: the vicissitudes of womanhood in Zimbabwe in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *This Mournable Body* (2018)' are my own work and all the sources used have been acknowledged by means of referencing.

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of stylized, overlapping loops and lines, representing the name Bongani Sazini Ndlovu.

B.S. Ndlovu

Date: 28/01/2020

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the psychological effect of social inequality and social injustices fostered by colonialism as portrayed by Tsitsi Dangarembga in her novel, *This Mournable Body* (2018), the third novel in her acclaimed trilogy. I look at how some of the colonial social injustices were inherited and are being perpetuated by post-colonial governments and societies of today. The advancement of trauma theory has opened up new fields of studies to be explored when looking at postcolonial African literature. These subjects range from historical injustices, to issues involving oppression, race, and gender. Most recently the rise of the #metoo movement has exposed a deep rent in societies' treatment of female voices. The rise of the #metoo movement suggests that there is an inadequacy of platforms where women can share their stories of trauma. Trauma narratives written by African female writers provide a platform where the social injustices endured by black women are expressed and realized. Dangarembga's novel, like some other postcolonial African novels, reimagines the history of colonialism and aims to give perspectives necessary to redress the current social structures that oppress black women. To explore the presence of trauma in the novel, I use the psychoanalytic theories offered by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder (*DSM*), a publication proposed by the American Psychiatric Association used for the classification of mental disorders, together with the work of literary trauma theorists such as Caruth, Rothberg, Kaplan and Kaplan and others. I aim to reveal the psychological damage suffered by black women because of their gender and race. I argue in my analysis of the novel that colonial legacies are the driving force behind the social injustices that the black female characters in the novel face. History and memory function as the site of injustices and oppression in which trauma is situated. Through the exploration of history and memory, I reveal the history of victimization that the protagonist suffers and that is connected to her trauma. Dangarembga's narrative renders in detail the process of reexperiencing, remembering, and narrating trauma. The dissertation is part of a Master's in Creative Writing. The creative writing part of the M.A. is a novel titled *The Straw That Grows in Dry Savannah Plains*, which explores the subjects of migration, displacement and nostalgia in relation to the Zimbabwean diaspora in South Africa. Trauma in the novel is multidirectional: firstly, it is experienced through the journeys undertaken in the process of migration and then it manifests in displacements as the immigrants struggle for survival in the new countries. Lastly, trauma in the South African context manifests through xenophobic attacks that immigrants suffer in the country and the loss of livelihoods that accompanies it.

Keywords: trauma, historical injustices, affect, gender, colonialism, patriarchy, Zimbabwe, Dangarembga.

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The Straw That Grows in Dry Savanna Plains

Prologue

Something is rotten in this country, I can smell it, it's everywhere; in the blankets that I wake up in every morning, all the way to the toilet with the morning erection raging in my pants, stomach growling. I smell it down the passage to the grocery store where I buy half a loaf of bread that might not be available for one reason or another; the truck could be broken down and awaiting spares from China, or out of fuel, or the driver didn't show up for work and now the shopkeeper's face stinks with frustration. His sad tortoise eyes constantly trickle disappointment. When he opens his mouth to speak the rot that comes from it sticks on me, on my clothes and lingers in the entire township. I smell it in the newspaper's front page, in the title that tells of another farm invasion by war vets that are pure rot itself. Radio stations broadcast more rot every day than one can handle, the smell permeates the morning air which hasn't been fresh since the country started to rot from the memory of its colonial history, left to brood and decay into gangrene that has become the face of this nation. Now my mind is starting to rot, if I don't rot to death and get buried in the rotten countryside where old people have long been rotten and the only thing left to them are the rotten votes they give to the rotten regime that rules with an iron fist, which where it strikes leaves a stubborn rotten mark, which even all the knowledge acquired in all the rotten text books of the rotten school curriculum cannot erase. To escape the fierce hunger, the mad drought that has stolen upon the land, the rot that reigns everywhere, I have to brutalize every rotten moral principle and challenge every social order.

Part I

Something is rotten in this country

I did not tell anyone when I left. Not that I didn't want to stand in the middle of our street and shout to the entire neighbourhood, telling everyone that I was leaving *kwam'godoyi*, as it was called. But telling of such an excursion was deemed to jinx it. There were countless possible ways of how such an undertaking could turn out; for that reason, people created all sorts of myths to ease the apprehension of those who were about to embark on it. Many of us, in the company of great witchdoctors and renowned prophets, went to bathe in rivers to wash away bad luck, others burnt things with a pungent smell and spoke to the ancestors. While others, like me, prayed fervently according to the teachings of our denominations.

Three days leading up to the departure, I suffered a maddening travel-malaise that stole from me hours of sleep and tortured my mind with obsessive thinking. Each day, I would wake up at the same time at midnight. My eyes would open at once like a bulb that has just been switched on. Then I would hear the ticking of the second-hand count down the minutes of the night. A minute or two would pass, then, the sour taste of sleep would register in my mind. After I drank a glass of water in the stark darkness of the kitchen, the weight of my bladder would direct my feet to the chamber pot that sat squat against the wall. I would undo the zip of my old school shorts which I slept in and direct my erect penis to the sides of the pot to reduce the sound of urine which got amplified in the silence of the night. Then I would crawl back into a heap of blankets spread on a reed mat on the floor and lie awake for the rest of the night, brooding on the probabilities of crossing the border. I was sixteen.

My best friend Makwe had left the country a month earlier to join a band of his six brothers who had been in South Africa for over a decade. After his departure, I was gripped by melancholic sadness that ate away my vibrant and cheerful disposition. For the first time since Mother's death I was forced to think about my life—about my future since the era of hanging out on the porch of the township's grocery store playing table soccer, if not passing the afternoon on the stoep of the town hall, watching school girls, in their hoisted tunics and rolled down white socks sashay down the street, had abruptly ended. Those days had left with Makwe. With him gone, nothing we did was enjoyable anymore. Myself and the remaining

two friends, Muzi and Master, tried to keep up the routine but everything we did felt forced, laboured—like trying to dance without music or swim in sand. It was so bad that after a few rendezvous our little group disbanded. Muzi began to spend more time with his girlfriend. Master became fully stationed at his mother's fruits and vegetable stall. I tried to hang out with other boys from the township but again, the same feeling returned—this time it was like trying to bite the bend of your palm with fingers pulled backward hard. I even tried to revive an old friendship with my childhood best friend Ntula, but he too had changed. His family had joined the Jehovah's Witnesses. He had been saved now, at least that was what he thought.

My dejection was soon noticed by NaThulani, Makwe's sister, who one afternoon called me as I was passing by their house. The sun was high in the sky, its intense heat landed hard on the centre of the head, causing a sort of itching sensation. The gate opened with a grating rasp and slammed shut upon the release of my hand. I made my way to the tree-shade where she sat squat on a home-made wooden bench whose legs were slanted to an angle. She had returned from South Africa with an ailment that had dragged on for a few months. Like many that came back homesick, it was as if she was going to take a few weeks to recover and then return to the city of gold. But several months had passed and she hadn't gotten any better.

'Sit,' she said.

The bench creaked to my weight, and swayed to the side, threatening to collapse. The earthy smell of boiled groundnuts suffused the hot afternoon air. The nostalgic voice of Matilda Zijenah bawled from the radio speakers through the open window, announcing the coming of *izaziso zemfa*.

'Here, have some peanuts,' she said.

I could feel the heat of her body temperature. Her breathing was deep and laboured.

'What's wrong?' she said. Her voice was thinned into a sibilant whisper, forced through lips covered in red blisters.

'Nothing.'

She let out an explosive cough. I raised my eyes and stole a glimpse of her face. It was frightening to look at. Her temples and cheeks had imploded, leaving the skull traced under a thin parchment of skin that looked as if any second would crack and shred.

'Come on, Mo, you know you can tell me anything.'

'I'm telling you, there's nothing wrong.'

‘You’ve lost some weight,’ she said. Her fingers fumbled on the plate. She gathered a few nuts into her palm, and one after the other they cracked at the pressure of the thumb and the index finger. The next move sent each one flying into the mouth.

‘And you haven’t had a change of clothes for a week. If not more,’ she added after a long pause.

I lowered my head ashamed. She was right. I hadn’t had a change of clothes for a number of days. But that wasn’t something unusual in the township. There were people that had never had a change of clothes for as long as I had known them. So why had she noticed? I hadn’t had a bath for a while either.

‘Pedzi is back,’ she said. Then immediately after she spoke again she had another fit of convulsive coughing that sent jets of spittle flying out of her mouth. I watched her cough until her eyes turned bloodshot with traces of veins. A blob of tears formed in the corner of her left eye. It kept growing until it was too big to hold, then in slow motion, trickled down the side of her face. She lifted a hand and wiped it. A series of sniffing and deep swallowing followed. Once she was composed, she continued, ‘He’s here for a few days. And I was thinking...’ She cleared her throat. ‘...that maybe if you wanted go to South Africa he could take you with him when he returns. Makwe hasn’t found a job yet but he has settled in.’

The mention of Makwe cleared my mind from the puddle of hopelessness that I had been wallowing in. Curiosity, like an angry parent, seized me by the ears and dragged me back to reality. Faster than the snapping of fingers, she had gained my attention. I wanted to hear more about Makwe. How he was? What was he doing? With whom was he hanging out in Joburg? All sorts of questions flooded my head. I sat forward, resting both elbows on my knees and kept my head down. Leaving the country hadn’t yet crossed my mind.

‘Things are getting tough here, Mo,’ she continued casually. ‘What’s your plan?’

She had all my attention now. She had me thinking about things that I had only heard adults lament. The dwindling of the economy, the depreciation of the Zim dollar, inflation. All language of an economist to me. A nightmare of every adult in Zimbabwe. Not me. I wasn’t old enough to concern myself with all that. I just wanted to hear Eminem’s latest album. Of the Zim dollar, all I knew was that the notes were gathering dust in trunks and suitcases in people’s houses. And that my sister was walking to work to save money and that the ATM’s were out of cash and the men responsible for all that wretchedness were The President and his clique.

‘If you don’t like it there you can always move on... Go somewhere you like. I know your generation is fascinated by the West. So maybe go to the US, Canada or Europe. Wherever you like. Just don’t stay here and wither away with everything else,’ she said calmly as if she was talking about going to buy mangoes at MaLunga’s stall.

The radio speakers broke into static. The crackling lasted a few seconds, and then a metallic woman’s voice burst into an announcement of a new washing powder.

‘So, what do you think?’

My tongue became bone dry.

‘I...I really don’t know, NaThulani,’ I said eventually with a snort of release.

She cracked open the shell of another peanut. A gentle flick of the wrist and the seed went flying into her open mouth. Then she chewed slowly.

‘You mustn’t be scared, Mo. Hundreds of boys your age cross to South Africa every day.’ She raised a fist to cover her mouth as another wave of coughing set in. ‘And now they’ve made lives for themselves. They live better than the most educated people in this country.’

She told me everything I needed to know about Johannesburg, about the journey there and life in Hillbrow. How things were—what to do and not to do. I listened with deliberation. When she had exhausted all the expositions, I took an opportunity to tell her the reason I hadn’t contemplated on going.

‘That’s not a problem, Mo. People take care of each other. What I’ll do is... I’ll write a letter to my brother Justice and ask him to give you a place to stay.’ She took a deep breath. ‘Until you can stand on your own feet at least.’

‘Do you think he’ll agree?’ I asked, rubbing my chin. I was nervous to my gut.

‘Once you’ve arrived, he won’t send you away to live on the streets. As for the money...I say make a plan. I’ll talk to Pedzi, he owes me a favour so you won’t have to pay him to take you. Just secure the money for transport and keep aside twenty dollars for emergencies.’

I looked away. A long silence filled the prolonged lassitude that is usually felt in the township during afternoons. The yard was littered with memories—a dry, twirled orange peel lay morosely to the left; pieces of eggshell were scattered a few steps further on, a dried out maize cob, a desperate milk plastic-pack stuck against the fence. On the street, two barefoot young girls scuttled by, their face beaming, teeth bared, dirty dresses pirouetting to their gait.

Five steps and they disappeared. In their place a mirage materialized on the road surface. Another song started on the radio; high-pitched strings of a guitar followed by the doleful voice of Oliver Mtukudzi.

‘I’m not sure if I can do it,’ I confessed after an interval of silence.

‘At least think about it. But you’ll have to be quick, Pedzi doesn’t stay for more than a week.’

‘Okay, I will... I’ll think about it.’

I left NaThulani gripped by another paroxysm of coughing and went home. Down the road, the engine of a garbage truck whirred tirelessly. An old woman, both hands hung over her lower back, stopped and watched as two men in denim overalls worked in the open bonnet. After a few seconds she mumbled something to herself, shook her head and waddled away. I followed the bend of the road, carrying on along the street until I came to a junction and took a right turn into our street. I thought about nothing else other than what NaThulani had proposed for the rest of the afternoon.

The next morning, I returned to her and told her that I had made up my mind. That I was going to South Africa. She was delighted to hear that, even though she couldn’t express it verbally, I could see it in her eyes that had brightened with elation. Her response was that she was going to send for Pedzi that afternoon. She told me to return the same evening for an answer.

I left the house at sunset, trekked up the street, walking next the gully that ran along the road. Elongated shadows of trees and houses fell softly to the tarmac. With the sun on the horizon, the ground radiated the heat back into the air. NaThulani was already in bed when I arrived. Her daughter led me to the bedroom where, before entering, she announced me. Then she ushered me into the bedroom and left us. The air in the bedroom was choking with the smell of sickness, of a moribund state held together by a cocktail of pills. After a moment, Thulani reappeared and ushered me into the bedroom, stepping more quickly upon re-entering to help her mother who was propping herself up. She helped her rest on the pillow against the wall and left.

Pedzi was to leave in three days. Pedzi was leaving in three days. So, I had to come up with the money really quick. She had arranged for us to meet the next morning to finalize everything.

The next morning, she introduced me to Pedzi. He was a lanky Shona boy in his early

twenties, light in complexion with mottles of late adolescence acne on his face. His sagging thick lips served as a sign that he had been a thumb sucker as a child. He had an older brother, Tafi, whom he visited frequently in South Africa. Pedzi had mastered the border security well enough to travel without a passport.

Pedzi left shortly after we had concluded the details about the journey. I remained behind to write a letter to Justice which NaThulani dictated in a throaty voice, between intervals of coughing and heavy breathing. I patiently wrote down every word she said, the pen slipping off from the grasp of sweaty hands and limp fingers. The first three lines of the letter expressed the warmth of her heart. Then came the narration of the economic situation at the house. I listed the desired items, essentials first and then the optional. The second paragraph explained the status of my situation at home—how I was orphaned like them. It went on to describe how I was a good, obedient boy who would not cause him any trouble. I have to admit, it was awkward to write such kind and warm sentiments about myself. Since NaThulani couldn't read or write, it was my duty to advocate on behalf of myself to her brother Justice, who she thought was the only one who could take care of the six brothers.

We lived in a single room, so to avoid the risk of my sister coming across the letter, I left it with NaThulani. I was to fetch it on the morning of our departure. Back at home, I had to behave normally even though I was consumed by a gnawing angst. I performed my daily duties. I took out the dustbin in the mornings, picked up litter around the yard and watered the vegetable garden after sunset. Then I went on to make supper and waited for my sister to get home to eat. But she was coming home later and later every day. With the weekly minibus taxi price hike, she had decided to forfeit the taxis to save some money. Every month-end she would split the savings into small amounts and store the money in small bundles in different places in the house. Each stash was assigned a specific purpose—groceries, rent, water and electricity and emergencies. The money for food was tucked under the mattress; the rent, water and electricity money was on top of the wardrobe, under the suitcase. And the emergency savings, whose envelope was swelling every month, was tucked between the pages of Mother's old King James Bible with a ragged leather cover, a creased black strip bookmark and reddened edges. It was all in brand new, ink smelling twenty dollar notes which amounted to a hundred and sixty dollars.

I left home on the third day, early morning, shortly after my sister had left for work. I made sure to carry out all my duties before I left. I was wearing a pair of baggy jeans, my

sister's jersey with teddy-bear prints on the front and a pair of J.O.E (Just One Earth) shoes that had seen a few years of heavy use. Apart from the severely slanted heels, the right shoe was open at the front. If it didn't shovel up sand to my face, it tripped on protruding rocks and roots. Each time I wore them, I had to adjust my steps. I had to lift my foot higher so as not to plough the ground. I had mastered a technique of walking in them, but inevitably, grit always collected inside the shoe. That was if I didn't end up spitting jets of sand launched into my face. Pedzi wore a navy-blue sweater with red shoulder pads, black jeans and a pair of Asics trainers with lime-green reflectors.

We took a taxi on Nketa Drive, a Peugeot 504 station wagon with a low hanging rear like a fat goose—so low the exhaust grazed the road surface at speed humps. We squeezed into the boot and sat on one buttock cheek, hemmed against each other, legs stretched out and criss-crossed in front. The conductor sat with one leg hanging outside the taxi, his right hand propping up the door so it wouldn't shut. The taxi lumbered up Nketa Drive, turned at the D'Square intersection and tore through the township, heading towards the buildings visible at a distance. Half an hour later, we got off at TM and tore through the city.

Pedzi led the way through congested sidewalks, across the streets and the traffic lights. We paced alongside people rushing for work; school kids from the suburbs, racing their *vi-chitshi* watches to get to Rhodesia-inherited private schools. We filed past three girls from Evelyn High School, dressed in green tunics that fell a few inches short on their knees, brown blazers and hats, talking in English as if their noses were blocked. A few steps ahead of them was a group of boys from Gifford and Milton High School, sounding as if they had just disembarked from a plane from the US or maybe the little-sister Canada. I caught a whiff of their body lotions, Camphor creams, Cocoa butter lotion and body sprays. A left turn on 5th Avenue, and straight ahead until the intersection of Robert Mugabe Way. A cover of Steve Makoni's *Handiyende* sounded in the distance. The voice of the singer quavered in the morning silence below the chords of a guitar. Twenty paces ahead, a blind, one-legged beggar came into view. He sat with his legs sprawled on greasy cardboard boxes that were spread on the pavement next to the entrance of an OK Store. The trouser leg of his missing limb was folded and fixed with a broken wooden peg. His sleep-encrusted eyelids twitching tentatively, he clawed at the string of the guitar. A pair of rusty steel crutches lay next to him. In front of him there was a dented enamel bowl where passers-by deposited coins. A man in a suit walking in front of us stopped, and began to search his pockets. He tossed a handful of coins

onto the bowl. Pedzi began to search himself purposefully and also tossed a handful of coins into the bowl. The man stopped playing and thanked him profusely. He hadn't stopped playing for the man who had tossed small change onto to the bowl. From the sound of coins, he knew the kind of donation to stop a song for.

A left turn into JZ Moyo Street brought us to the front of the Reserve Bank where a fountain with three bronze tiger-fish statues loomed at the entrance. A year or two ago water used to gush out of their mouths. Now they posed mid-air with mouths wide open, sad eyes as if they knew they had run out of water. Or maybe saddened by the status of the vaults inside the bank. A succession of arched streets lamps stretched down Main Street. A blue Mazda B2200 pulled over and reversed into the roadside parking. Right turn, straight ahead, and another left turn. We came to a red traffic light and stopped. The inside of Haddon n' Sly glowed like a place in a fairy tale across the street.

We crossed the street to the front of the City Hall where skinny Rastafaris in safari clothes were busy unpacking their art work. In an hour or two the street would be flooded with tourists, rubicund faces, locked hair, blonds, brunettes, redheads, gingers, dressed in colourful clothes, colours of Africa, skirts sweeping the ground and sackcloth sling bags bouncing against the hips. British, German, French, Chinese, old men and women with cheeks battling gravity, chins sagging like wattles of an old turkey, went doddering about the streets with fanny packs bulging at their fronts. Carrying with them a garlicy-oniony smell accumulated from a few days on a safari.

Past the Rastas, through the gate of the City Hall and into the concourse. A pair of pigeons descended from the belfry and landed a few meters in front of us. An old white woman in a floral dress, toes peeping out of grey flat shoes, stopped and watched the pigeons. The clock registered the top of the hour with eight lazy chimes.

The bus was scheduled to leave at noon, a woman at the information centre told us. With three and a half hours to kill we decided to walk to a grocery store across the road to get some food. We put together some money and bought a half of bread, four slices of polony and a litre of Fanta. The benches at the bus station were home to the vagrants that were still fast asleep in heaps of sweat, shit and piss-reeking blankets.

We had just started to eat when I noticed movements in the blankets. I didn't think much of it. Pedzi scooted a few inches away, dragging with him the paper where our food was spread. We continued to eat and soon we got lost in the warm, soft bread and in the

sweetness and fizz of the Fanta; tiny droplets of gas escaping the surface in numbers as if they wanted to jump out of the plastic cup. I hadn't had a Fanta in weeks if not months. As for the polony, I could barely remember what it tasted like. Half way through, the edge of the cup had just sat on my lower lip, a little tilt and the Fanta would seep onto my anticipating tongue.

'Aaaah!' I heard Pedzi moan. When I looked down my eyes fell on a little street kid boy dashing away with the last piece of bread and polony. The boy stopped a few meters away and looked at us with his face beaming with triumph; the bread and the polony clasped in his hand. Pedzi had jumped off the bench and attempted to chase after the boy.

'Voestek, ubocela maan!' Pedzi shouted, raising his hand over his head.

The boy ran a few meters and stopped. Ducking his head, he opened his mouth and sunk his teeth into the bread and chewed with fervour.

'Uzosinya isinkwa leso okusalayo!' Pedzi added.

The boy writhed with laughter as Pedzi continued to cuss at him. In three bites the bread was finished. Then to celebrate his victory, he broke into a dance; a combination of twisting moves, occasional kicking and jumps. Passers-by stopped and watched him dance; his rubbery legs and arms splayed out in twisting motions, buttocks thrust out and the fingers of the right-hand snapping in melody. He changed sides, and continued to dance at an angle, his head moved from left to right, up and then down. All heads were turned to the boy now. A man and a woman almost collided and stopped holding hands as if they were about to start tangoing. In the opposite direction a man in a flat-cap, a newspaper pinned under his armpits, walked into a pole and walked away rubbing his forehead. Pedzi ejected another violent clicking sound. My teeth caught the dry and cold air. I closed my mouth and recovered the moistness that I had lost in the past few seconds. The boy ended the performance by twisting, and posing in half-genuflecting, legs crossed into a four-like sitting fashion. Pedzi shook his head and looked away. I wanted to laugh but I knew that it would upset him.

We gobbled down what remained in our hands in silence. The clock bell rang, followed by nine low chimes. One after the other the tramps woke up. Each one gathered his donkey blanket, rolled it and packed it behind the public toilet. A beautiful sun was taking its course across the blue, cloudless sky. Pedzi sat back and lent his elbows against the backrest of the bench. He and I hadn't said more than ten words to each other since we left the township three hours earlier. I was convinced that he hadn't taken a liking to me. He was of the Shona tribe which automatically made him a historical adversary.

A loud belch interrupted the silence between Pedzi and me. When I turned to him a big smile was inscribed on his face.

'Fanta makes me burp,' he said.

'Me too.'

Pedzi turned his head and looked across the bus terminus. A Translux bus had just driven into the terminus.

'By this time tomorrow we'll be in Jozi,' he said softly.

His words unveiled the future for me. I saw myself walking the streets of Joburg, dressed in *pantsula* fashion, Converse, checked shirt and Dickies pants and a matching bright red hat. Maybe an orange one would look better on me. Maybe not. Maybe a cap would look better on me, a Nike cap, its visor folded round and pulled down over the eyes so you can hardly see what's in front of you. I vividly saw my own transformation. Thoughts of being in Joburg temporarily relieved me of the guilt of stealing the money for emergencies. This is also an emergency, leaving this place is an emergency, I thought.

Like a house caught on fire

Bus fare cost me two of the crisp new twenty-dollar bills, impaled with the head of Jackson wearing a startled expression on his face and an ominous hair-do that made him look like a disgruntled slave master. The notes had clean, cream edges with greenish grey textures that gave them an abominable weight. In God we trust. We also did trust in Him, but it didn't help us until then, when the only thing we trusted were the dirty, crinkled USD notes which we passed between us with pounding hearts and fingers that trembled rheumatically. It troubled me deeply to pass such clean, ink-smelling, brand new notes to the bus conductor. When the time to purchase the ticket came, I couldn't let go of the notes. I stood there in front of the conductor with my hand extended and the two notes clipped between my fingers. It seemed to me that my muscles had entered a spasm, locking my fingers. The conductor tried to tug the notes for the second time but my fingers wouldn't give in.

'Eeh, shamwari!' the conductor said, *'are you going or you're here to play games?'* He was a stick of a man, wearing a dark green beret positioned to the side of his head. Pedzi gave me a nudge on my back. The notes were crispy textured between forefinger and thumb. It hurt to watch the conductor crinkle them and shove them into his pocket. He wound the lever of the ticket machine which was slung around his neck with a leather strap. The machine vibrated and wheezed as a strip of paper slid through the slit. He tore off the ticket and passed it to me.

'Next!' he shouted.

The engine of the green AVM hummed laboriously behind him, blowing hot air to the doorway. Up the steps stood a grey-faced man in a similar green beret. He extended a big, greasy hand. I passed the ticket to him. He lowered his eyes and studied it for a little while, then he looked up at me with suspicion.

'Where is the road leading to?' he said in a deep Shona accent.

'Beitbridge.'

'Who are you traveling with?'

'Alone.'

He lowered his eyes and looked at the ticket again.

‘Are you going to be crossing the border?’

I remembered what Pedzi had said earlier.

‘I’m going to fetch some goods from the border.’

‘Woooh! One has to ask since all of you Ndebele boys are running to South Africa.

We don’t want any trouble with the law enforcements on the way.’

He split the ticket into two pieces and handed one of the halves back to me. It was baking hot inside the bus. Diesel and oil fumes suffused the air. I spotted two vacant seats down the aisle. The maroon Rexene of the seat was hot when I laid my buttocks down. When Pedzi came he cornered me out of the widow seat. I didn’t protest, I figured I had to be nice to him.

We sat in silence while all around us voices broke with excitement. People were bidding each other farewell. Last messages were being yelled through the widows. Promises were being made and reminders being reiterated. There was a nervous air about. The engine revved. A child started to cry two seats in front of us, its immature voice box vibrated sorrowfully. Pedzi sat back and rested a shoulder against the wall of the bus. I kept still, head held straight, eyes to the front; my face forged into an emotionless portrait. But if you looked closely you would see that I was burdened with nervous guts. It was as if the engine of the bus was turning in the pit of my stomach.

The doors closed with a rasp. Even until then, everything still remained surreal. I was in hazy state of mind. It was as if any moment the entire thing would turn out to be a joke. As if I would turn to Pedzi, point at him and shout, ‘Got you!’ Then I would laugh at him, and everyone in the bus would applaud at the performance and the cameraman would appear from his hiding place.

I didn’t have to leave, I thought. I could stay and ride out the economic storm that was packing on us. Hunger has never killed anyone; ask the Somalis and Ethiopians. I knew that leaving home would burden my sister and I didn’t want that. What would she do when the clock struck ten p.m. and I hadn’t come home? Questions teemed in my head. My imagination started to weave images of my sister at home. I saw her get up from the bed, walk to the door and open it and step outside. A glance down to the gate. Then she would slowly start to the gate, releasing the latch to open it and walk out, crossing the concrete slab bridge that ran over the drainage gully. I saw her stop on the side of the road, place

both her hands on her hips and look in both directions. A sigh. Then she would trek up the road to a group of boys who would still be hanging out at the street corner. There she would learn that none of the boys had seen me during the day. The news would make her worry more—send her knocking on every door on our street, asking people if anyone had seen me. Regardless of how many people would tell her that they didn't see me, she wouldn't give up. That's her; she is just determined to an almost stubborn extent.

Thoko was short, round-faced with a mat of natural short hair which she had shaved off when Mother died six years ago. Of my father, I knew nothing about the man except that his surname was Moyo. I learnt this after Mother's death. The subject of our fathers had been forbidden during Mother's time. It was taboo.

I had to learn this the hard way. I was in the fourth grade when one afternoon our teacher gave us homework which was to draw a family tree. This was an exciting and an easy assignment. I had come home fired up, a clean sheet of paper and a pencil held in one hand, my school bag jiggling on my back. I had hurried through lunch and began with the assignment. I wrote Mother's name in the centre of the page, and below it came my siblings in the order that they were born. Then came our relatives with interlocking cogs, my great grandmother ugogo uMaphekela at the top and then grandmother ugogo umaDube; names of my uncles and aunts and cousins fell on the page as they came, until the page was a network of names that stretched to one side. When I finished I realised that our family tree was one sided. I held up the sheet and studied it, trying to conjure up as many names as possible but still, the list stretched to one side. Then I remembered that our teacher had said we should ask our parents for help. It became apparent to me that I had to ask Mother about my father's side for the family tree to balance. So, I dashed outside, to the backyard where Mother was tending the vegetable garden. She had sensed me approach and looked behind her.

'What's the rush about?' Mother said, 'have you finished eating?'

I nodded as I stopped before the boundary of stones.

She turned back to the plants and continued snipping the stems of kale, beating the soil off the leaves and packing them in one hand. I remained still, thinking now, how am I going to approach such a sensitive subject? Mother hated and had no respect for men whatsoever and had never been shy to express it. And here I was about to ask her about a man—probably the last man on earth she wanted to hear about.

‘How was school?’ she said after a while, as if she had just remembered that I was there.

‘It was okay. Miss gave us homework...’

‘Doesn’t she always give you homework?’ She straightened, placing the back of her hand on her lower back, winced.

‘She does but... today I need help. It’s a family tree.’ My heart was throbbing. ‘I’ve done most of it but now I’m left with one side of our family.’

‘And which side is that?’ Her voice hinted caution. I hesitated. From the look on her face I knew I had stuck my hand in a hole with a viper—I just needed to wait for it to strike so that I could know what kind and how big it was. I decided not to say anything more but she gave me a look that said, ‘I’m waiting for an answer and you better say it now.’ I opened my mouth to speak but then I had forgotten what the question was.

‘And now,’ she lashed out. ‘Has your tongue become stuck to the roof of your mouth?’

I lowered my eyes and shook my head.

‘So answer me, damnit! Which part of your family don’t you know about?’

‘My father’s side,’ I murmured.

‘What father?’

‘My real father.’

‘The only father you should concern yourself about is the heavenly father. So which father are you talking about?’ She moved from one spot to another, taking long strides between the plants, avoiding trampling on them. The soles of her *sebeles* were covered in red mud. She stooped over and attacked the leaves of the plants against the hedge, snipping the stems with a twist of the thumb and forefinger.

‘But Miss said we have to ask our mothers for the sides of our families that we don’t know about. When we told her that some of us don’t have fathers she said that it was impossible unless our mothers were Virgin Mary.’

She straightened up and cast a murderous gaze on me, ‘Is your Miss your mother now?’

My eyelids fell automatically.

‘Since when is your father a concern of hers, huugh? Am I not giving you everything you need?’ She paused. ‘Are you not being fed every day? Don’t you have a roof over your

head? Are you not dressed? Whose yard are you standing on?' Her voice thundered louder and louder with each question.

All the while I stood there seized by a catatonic torpor, fiddling dirt with the big toe, regretting having asked. Mother sallied on and soon my head was spinning in a whirlwind of questions whose answers, yet simple, seemed to be more complex than mathematical equations. Who gave birth to you? And where was your father then? She made sure I grasped what an invalid my father was. A man incapable of anything, even to present himself on an occasion such as my birth. Regret surged all around me.

And when I couldn't answer not even one question, I knew I had no chance.

'Now go inside and do your homework. Leave out what you don't know. And if your Mistress has a problem with that I'll deal with her myself. Now go!'

I left head down like a wilted sunflower head. My older siblings had a different father, who before I was born had left for his homeland, a village somewhere in Malawi. When Mother died I automatically I became my eldest sibling's responsibility. Thoko was twenty-four and unemployed at the time. The second born was Winnet, married, with one child; my brother Stephan had been saved and spent most of his time with church people and came home only once a week. Therefore, Thoko and I were the only ones left at home. Our home was a one room house in a township that was once a military barracks. The wardrobe divided the room into two; a bedroom on one end and the living room and the kitchen on the other. The kitchen was a corner assigned to a two-plate ring stove that sat on top of a small cupboard. Mother's funeral was followed by many trying times. Inheritance disputes flared up the very first day she was laid to rest.

The funeral procession cars from the graveyard had just stopped in front of our house when the front door of the main car was flung open. Thoko rushed out of the car and the door slammed shut. An explosive sound turned heads and dropped jaws. From the urgency in her steps, I knew that something was wrong. I watched her pace across the yard, heading to the house where she disappeared into the dark hollow of an empty house. The rest of the mourners came out of cars in small groups of twos and threes, walking heads down in slow procession. The leading group, which included my grandmother, was a step away from the door when Thoko bolted out of the house with the same urgency in her steps. She had had a change of clothes. There was an exchange of words at the door, like in a silent film, I could only see hands all over the air, fingers pointing and palms flailing and

chopping the air. Biting the corner of the collar of my shirt, dirt and detergent salty on the tongue, I ambled closer to the scene. Aunt NaDu was saying, 'Take a few days to heal at least.'

'I don't need any time to heal,' my sister said.

'But my child...'

'I'm not a child. And I'll never heal so it will be a waste of time for me to sit here and wait to heal,' my sister retorted. She turned around and made towards the gate with long steps. I followed a few steps behind her, determined to find out more about what was happening.

'Where are you going?' I asked, my voice breaking with tension.

'Town.'

She opened the gate to an angle and squeezed out. I followed her down the street, assailing her with questions. When will you be back? Why are you going to town now? Do you really have to go? She replied calmly at first and then her voice started to rise with every answer, until it reached a high pitch.

'Go get something to eat, I'll be back when I get back,' she lashed out.

By then we had passed five houses down the street. I followed her a few more steps, just to exercise my rights; to prove to her that I wasn't going to start taking orders from her now like she was my mother. She silently strode down the road, heedless of my reluctance to obey her. When I felt that I had gone too far from home I stopped and watched her pace down the road. I felt her spirit ebb away from me, leaving me exposed to all possible danger. I watched her recede into a small figure that vanished at the bend of the road. Then I turned around and started up the road, passing kids from the neighbourhood playing Andy-over on the street. A group of three abandoned the game and came running towards me.

'Mo!' Sibbo called out to me from a distance. Her skirt was girded up on the sides and tucked into her underwear to allow free leg movement.

'We heard your mother died,' Puppu said. Puppu was the fat kid of the neighbourhood.

'Don't say that,' reprimanded Sibbo.

'So what's going to happen to you?' asked Ntula.

I shrugged.

'So you're now an orphan,' Puppu said.

‘Does that mean you will be a street kid?’ Sibó asked sympathetically.

‘I’ll live with my sister now,’ I said.

‘But your sister is also a child,’ Pupú said. ‘I know a boy from school, his mother died and now he’s a street kid.’

‘Not all kids that lose their parents become street kids,’ Sibó said, defensively.

‘I think I better go,’ I said.

Their conjectures about my future made me uneasy. I hadn’t really thought about what was going to happen to us next.

When I got home, I went straight to the food station and grabbed a plastic plate from a pile that sat on the ground, next to a trestle table where our neighbour NaNgqabelo stood dishing out food to the attendants. I skipped the long line of impatient elders and went right to the front. NaNgqabelo lowered her eyes and looked at me with a wounded face. Without saying anything she reached for the ladle, scooped out a spoonful of pap and slumped it on my plate. She added a small piece of meat and a lot of gravy—so much that it swirled and rocked the plastic-plate out of balance. When I looked down at the piece of meat on the plate, I was overcome by great dissatisfaction. I felt cheated. This was our funeral after all—our dead, our loss, our party, our food. Not anyone’s. I summoned the courage to articulate my grievance. ‘This not meat,’ I said to her. She ignored me the first time so I had to reiterate. ‘There’s no meat here, it’s just fat.’

She frowned at me menacingly. Realizing that I was unwavering, she ejected a fierce clinking sound and snatched the ladle from the pot and it came out with large chunks of meat which rained on my plate. Specks of gravy went flying in all directions, landing on the tablecloth and on my shirt. I lowered my eyes to my shirt. The plate started to swerve, swirling the gravy. It went left first, then right and left again and when it went back to the right I rushed my free hand to rescue it.

‘Children these days,’ she muttered behind me. I walked away counting the pieces of meat in the plate.

Later that afternoon, as I roamed around the yard, I saw NaNgqabelo passing a lunch box over the hedge to her daughter. In the opposite direction our relatives were gathered under a lemon tree; aunts and uncles that I had never met before. A heap of Mother’s things lay scattered on a reed-mat which had been spread on the ground. Uncle SaThabani towered over a group of women seated on reed mats on the ground and men on benches

and chairs. He called out names at intervals. A person whose name was called out came forward and received an item from the heap of clothes on the reed mat. One after the other, they pounced on Mother's things as if they were playing a game of touch; her clothes, shoes, jewellery and crockery. Each hand ate into the heap. After a few minutes of watching, I went on with my business. I circled around the yard a few times and came to the backyard where a group of four women from the neighbourhood washed plates and pots.

'Go play! Children are not supposed to be at a funeral,' shouted a woman from our street when I asked her why she was putting spoons in her handbag.

An hour later, as I was on my way to drink water from the tap at the backyard, I peeked through the window. Furniture had been moved against the walls, leaving an open space in the middle where our relatives from the village slept. I had been sent to our neighbours' the first day we learnt that mother had died, and had been brought home on the day of the burial. I carried on along the wall. The late winter sun was now making its trajectory down east. It was mild and tingled on the skin. August winds blew gently. Spring was just around the corner. In a week or two, the first rains would fall and the Jacarandas would explode in blossom, turning the streets of Bulawayo purple. After two to three weeks the purple rain of leaves would blanket the streets. And in another week exams would begin. I had missed a week of school and I certainly didn't feel like going back.

The church group occupied one corner of the backyard. At the back of the house, I stooped over and cupped my hands under the spigot and drank water. It was milky and tasted of metals. Back at the front yard, the lemon-tree shade had stretched away from the group gathered under it. The ceremony seemed to be proceeding fast. Only a few of Mother's clothes were now left. My heart went still when I spotted Mother's favourite feathered hat among the remaining items. I wondered who was going to get it. It had been one of Mother's treasured belongings such that it even had a special shelf in the wardrobe where it was kept wrapped in its plastic cover.

The mood became tenser as the heap sank lower. The best items had been saved for last. Among the few items left was Mother's purple chiffon dress with an attached belt. My aunt, Za, the youngest in Mother's family, was named the inheritor of the dress. Before the announcement was finished, Za had pounced on the dress from the mat. She held it up to her face and inspected it. When satisfied she cradled it against her chest, her face beaming with glee, cheeks formed into hillocks and teeth in their disarray fighting to be part of the

show. It wasn't long before NaMemory was on her feet. She pounced on the dress, grabbing it from aunt Za. People scattered.

'This isn't fair!' shouted NaMemory. 'How come I've only been getting rags? I also want something nice. Why is everybody getting nice things but me...?' She protested, tugging at the dress, her triceps jiggled and arms twisted violently.

'Yini sisi,' someone shouted, '*sekwenzenjani?*'

'What about me, huugh? Her voice was breaking. 'This isn't fair.'

'Hayi bo, NaMemo. *Yehlisa umoya sisi, akunjalo,*' my uncle SaThabani implored, sotto voce. He tried to separate the two women but was shoved to the ground.

Our aunts, hands over head, cried out, 'Hayi bo! Hayi bo!'

'We'd rather cut it in half,' NaMemory was saying through gritted teeth.

'But sisi you live in the village, where are you going to wear a chiffon dress to?' aunt Za shouted, tugging at the dress. 'Going to fetch fire wood *emaguswini?*'

'I don't care. Who doesn't want to look nice, huugh?' NaMemory retorted. 'Who? I also want to look nice. I'm tired of wearing these rags.'

The tug-of-war between my aunts escalated as both women became worked up emotionally. Aunt Za was in tears now. Onlookers gathered around. Women from the neighbourhood had abandoned their duties and came flying to the scene. And the church people, draped in white robes, stood clustered together like broilers before slaughter. A swing left and then right, and SaThabani who was trying to break up the fight got tossed out of balance again. He staggered backwards and went down, buttock to the ground. NaMemory proved to be stronger; but aunt Za's determination kept her clinging to one end of the dress. The two tugged at the dress until a ripping sound reached a new high and the dress tore into two pieces. Each one was left holding a piece of fabric in hand. NaMemo was left with the skirt, which she held up and spread to assess the damage.

'At least it's something,' she mumbled. An expression of triumph filled her face. Aunt Za at the other end looked like someone had just ripped out her heart and held it to her face.

'Please, *bakithi*, let's not behave like savages,' uncle SaThabani cried out as the tension subsided. 'Please, let's all sit down. We're about to finish, we're almost there.'

Everyone sat down. The chatter died down as SaThabani resumed calling out the names. The next name to be called was aunt NaRubenns'. She was a distant aunt who had

spent a significant amount of time with Mother when they were young. When she was presented with a pair of shoes she forfeited them and asked if she could take photos of her and Mother in the photo album instead. There was a specific one which she wanted—a black and white studio photo with three women: my mother, her and a third woman I didn't know. They were all dressed in seventies fashion, tunic dresses, platform shoes and hair made into Afros. Mother then was tall and heavysset. Her arms were thick and her cheeks full and firm. Nothing like after the cancer had gnawed her into a gaunt woman with sallow skin and thin hair. And that bold gait she had had turned into faltering little steps. Her big round eyes lost their brilliance and became torpid. She became unrecognizable. Nothing like the woman I had grown up knowing. Uncle SaThabani had just announced the recipient of the last item on the mat, Mother's hat, awarding it to my grandmother. With everyone's attention directed to the proceeding of the ritual no one noticed when my sister returned.

'What's this?' Her voice thundered through the morbid afternoon air. Everyone turned their heads to the direction of the voice. 'Am I really witnessing this or am I losing my mind?'

I got up from the stoep where I sat and stood at an elevated level.

'We were just...' SaThabani muttered. He crumpled the list in his hands and pocketed it.

'Doing what exactly?' She advanced a few steps. 'Stealing her things. Our things.'

'No, my child,' cut in aunt NaDu. Her voice was oiled and armed with endearments.

'Her body hasn't even decomposed but you're already sharing her things amongst yourselves.'

'No, it's not like that,' said NaDu.

'*Lawe shuwa, gogo*. I can't believe you're allowing this to happen in front of you.'

'Mntanom'ntanami, what was I supposed to say,' my grandmother said, getting on all her fours and propping herself up. Her doek fell off her head, exposing a mat of grey-hair covering the entire head. She tried to catch it but missed. Just then, Winnet walked out of the house and paused at the door before ambling to the scene. She whispered something to Thoko who turned around and thundered.

'No, Winnet! That can't be. We can't let them do this. What about us? What do we get?'

'Listen to your sister,' said my grandmother. She started slowly towards my sisters.

‘What they’re doing is customary. The deceased’s things must be shared amongst all.’

‘What about us, gogo? Does anybody even care what we get?’

‘You and your siblings will share whatever is left. You’re young. You’ll work and buy your own things—these things your mother worked for them herself and now she is no longer with us.’

Thoko shook her head contemptuously.

‘*Ngam’nyala lawa.*’

‘Just let them be.’ My brother appeared out of nowhere. ‘God will see them.’

‘No, Stephan, God can wait!’ Thoko retorted. ‘And you, you’re the man of this house now. You should be standing up to them.’

‘What do you want me to do?’ Stephan shrugged in resignation. ‘They’re the elders.’

‘Elders, elders, elders!’ Thoko shouted. ‘Elders stealing our things. What makes them elders?’ She looked around with raging eyes. ‘Grey hair? Is that it?’

‘Wooh, wooh!’ SaThabani cried out, hands held high like a priest blessing the parish. ‘Let’s not fight, *bakithi.*’

An invisible rain of her spittle fell on my face. I ran a hand across my face and took a step back.

‘I’m not fighting,’ Thoko said.

‘No one is fighting,’ my grandmother corroborated. ‘We’re just trying to figure this out.’

‘You’re all a disgrace,’ Thoko said. She turned her head over her shoulder and ejected a jet of spittle that sputtered on the ground. ‘If mother was here you wouldn’t have had the guts to do this.’

‘If she was here we wouldn’t have been gathered here, mntanom’ntanami,’ my grandmother said softly.

‘Isn’t it sad? Young people die and the old continue to thrive.’

‘Don’t talk to your grandmother like that, Thoko,’ SaThabani reprimanded. ‘You’re only inviting bad luck for yourself.’

‘As if losing a mother is not bad luck enough.’

Please, Thoko, calm down, let’s talk about this, calm down, let’s see how we can work things out so that everyone comes out of this happy, please, sisi, listen to your elders, calm down. Voices erupted from everywhere, all pleading and imploring.

‘Just take whatever you want and leave. All of you,’ Thoko said. Her voice was lowered in resignation.

‘What about the hosepipe? I can use it to water my vegetable garden,’ said one of our uncles, genuflecting as if my sister was now an important person.

‘Just take everything.’

Thoko turned around and left. Winnet and Stephan took off after her. I followed suit and paced behind them. The gathering dispersed. Our relatives plundered the house. Cupboards were flung open, pots, spoons and plates clanked as they rushed through the kitchen drawers.

By sunset everyone had left, including Winnet and Stephan. My brother, the forever loyal servant of God, had left with the church people. Winnet, called by her duties, was picked up by her husband.

After an hour of boarding, the bus slowly started forward with convulsive jerks, penetrating the crowd of people that scattered about. Three women moved to the side of the bus, faces to the windows. Messages were still being exchanged. It manoeuvred out of the terminus in intervals of violent engine revs and swayed left into 5th Avenue. Then it carried on along 5th, negotiating its way through the lunch hour traffic and stopped at the red traffic lights on Harare Road and Selbourne Road. A convoy of cars snaked around the block from Max Garage fuel station across the road. A ritualistic rush before the fuel hike scheduled for midnight.

We turned right into Selbourne Road and tore through the Centenary Park, which once boasted stretches of green lawn, exotic and indigenous trees which gave shade to benches where Lovers sat woven into each other’s bodies in the summer heat. But now the grass was parched and the trees stood with dry limbs. Park benches and shade structures had collapsed and their rubble piled on the ground.

The park had been once the city’s pride. People flocked from different parts of the city to celebrate special occasions. On my birthdays and Christmases Mother used to take me for a picnic and ice cream at the park. After the picnic I would play around the fountain, where water cascades shot to the sky and tumbled down with a force that sent small particles spraying all around the pool. The water always had a funny urine-like smell which I assumed was caused by the coins that tourists threw into the pond. I didn’t mind the smell because when Mother’s wasn’t looking I could reach into the water and grab the coins. I had

managed to take the money several times without detection. But one day my luck ran out.

The only obstacle other than my mother who was sitting on a bench a short distance away were the park rangers. Since it was a holiday, the few rangers that were on duty skimmed on patrols. I had been playing around the pond, keeping an eye on Mother and the rangers. A quick glance in Mother's direction and I noticed that she was preoccupied. Another quick look around and the rangers were also not in sight. I saw this as an opportunity. I leant over the pool edge, dipped a hand into the water and scooped out a few coins which I pocketed quickly. Then I continued playing, giving off no guilt suspicions.

Later in the day, after ice cream, we crossed to the other side of the park to go and see baby Jesus in the stable. Every festive season, a stable was erected and models of Mary and Joseph and the wise men dressed in colourful Biblical robes were set around the cradle where baby Jesus lay. A life-size mule, laden with baskets of gifts, was also brought to complete the simulation. Straw was scattered about on the floor. A sole star glimmered overhead. Christmas carols played all day long through the megaphone speakers. Being at the stable conjured up the spirit of nativity. It made you desire to be an ardent, obedient child of God. However, the feeling lasted only for a first few minutes. And for those first few minutes I was composed. I stood next to Mother by the fence and marvelled at the artistic simulation of the Nativity. It wasn't long before the feeling wore out. Then I became bored. Soon, I was running around the stable, going in and out of the enclosed area. I had just made my third exit through the gate when Mother's voice broke above the low chatter of the majority whites who had brought their children to this humbling rendition. I stopped running.

'Come here!' she said, beckoning me. 'What's in your pockets?'

I lowered my head and started to pick at my fingernails.

'I said come here! Didn't you hear me?'

Heads turned around, eyes searching around for the abominable speaker.

'Come! Come! Come!' Mother said, repeatedly slapping her right thigh.

I dragged my feet to her, maintaining a sad facial expression. With all the fun dissipated, guilt loomed all around me.

'What's in your pockets? Let me see.'

She stooped over and grabbed the flap of the right pocket and jerked it violently. I followed like a lifeless dummy doll. She tried to force her big hand into the pocket but it

didn't fit so she made me take out the coins.

I inserted a hand into the pocket and took out the coins.

'Open your hand, let's see.'

I spread my hand, revealing three rusted fifty cents coins.

'Where did you get that?' Mother said. Her voice was burning with fervour.

I kept my head down and didn't respond.

Her eyes widened. 'I said where did you get that?'

White people looked at us with startled faces. I was drowning in shame, immersed in its deplorable existence. I raised a hand and pointed in the direction of the fountain.

'What? Have you gone dumb?'

I shook my head.

'Answer me when I'm talking to you,' she said. 'Are you taking money from strangers, you?'

I shook my head.

'So, where did you get it?'

'I picked it up from the fountain.'

'You picked it up?' Her left hand found the hip. 'Who're you that's so lucky to pick money up in this day and age? I walk around with my eyes-wide-open every day but I've never picked up money. Not even a cent with a hole.'

She went on and on and preached and preached to a point where it seemed just appropriate to say amen.

'How dare you steal on the day that our Lord Jesus was born, huugh? I bring you here to see baby Jesus and what do you do?... You steal. No more...I say no more.' I can't recall how, I remember being tugged by the ear, all the way back to the fountain. She scolded me all the way. We went past a model of Father Christmas laden with a gift-bag; a carol played softly in the background. A madman lying on a park bench raised his head, poked a finger in the ear and wiggled it violently. We stopped on Selbourne Road for a wave of cars to pass. My ear was now on fire. I could feel it start to depart from its usual position.

At the fountain, she let go of my ear with a violent shove and shouted, 'Put it back, right now!'

I staggered forward and stopped about a centimetre short of kissing the water surface. I retreated as if I had just seen a beast inside the water.

‘I can’t believe you’re stealing from uCouncil.’

In my mind, I had always pictured uCouncil as this big, bold to the neck, wealthy man; possibly with two or three wives and snobbish children, living in a big house somewhere in Kumalo or in Elanda. I just couldn’t understand why he would mind me taking a few coins that tourists tossed into the pool. The coins didn’t belong to him after all. Even if they were his, their sum couldn’t make up a fraction of what he had since he owned everything in the city. Each time something was wrong in our township the adults would direct their frustrations to uCouncil, using the personal pronoun *-u* (he/she), as if he was an individual. The complaints went like: *uCouncil* has cut the water supply, *uCouncil* is not fixing the roads, *uCouncil* has raised the electricity prices again. Every time it was always *uCouncil* this and *uCouncil* that. Even the house we lived in belonged to him, the land, the water, everything was either his or his friend’s, *uGovernment*. But *uGovernment* was the more despised one of the two; even though I had always thought that both of them were greedy, selfish men, I was convinced that *uCouncil* wouldn’t mind me taking a few coins from his luxurious park. It wasn’t the first time after all.

She started towards me. ‘What are you waiting for? I said put it back!’

I snapped out of the daydream that had seized me. I had already made plans for each penny. I had seen myself making small purchases from MaLunga *emkambo*—stretching every penny. With that much, I could get a packet of biscuit-crumbs, mangoes and a Super Cool, and still get some change back.

I took a step, extended a hand into the pool and spread my fingers, letting the coins escape the grasp of my palm. The water rippled and gurgled as the coins penetrated the surface one after the other. At the bottom of the pool, an array of coins glimmered. I thought about what I could have purchased with all that money.

Big suburban houses loomed all around us, eerily quiet streets, high walls and hedges. Then came a stretch of thorn bush trees as we ebbed away from the city, dwarfish and squat in nature, uniform like buttock cheeks. Cars became less and less. The road narrowed into a strip on the ground. A sign that read, *Welcome to Bulawayo* in red letters on a rusted white board swept past the window. I rushed my eyes to it. Beneath the letters was the emblem of the city: a Ndebele warrior shield flanked by two elephants standing on their hind-legs, tusks pointed up and the front legs raised. The emblem reminded me of a school trip that we had taken to Matopo during our final grade school year. What had first

fascinated us had turned up the most heated debate we ever had in class.

The Matopo hills were majestic in their grandeur. High peaks gave a three-sixty view to vast stretches of lush greenery; strewn boulders, balancing rocks and marvellous cliffs reigned over the expansive lands. A small track wound up the hill, through mimosa, musasa and miombo trees. We marched in a single file, girls in red tunics and boys in hard khaki uniforms. The sun wasted us. By the time we reached the peak, we were drenched in sweat and weak to the knees. We formed a circle around Cecil John Rhodes's tomb and the guide took the centre and narrated the history of the place. One by one the teachers left for the tree-shades; umbrellas were flung open and others put on their sun-glasses. And us, the ardent scholars, bore the merciless sun as it drilled into our little skulls.

Next day in class we were all sad and gloomy. I couldn't tell whether if it was from the historical narrative given by the tour guide or merely from the experience of being at a gravesite, since the dead always had a way of having an effect on one's spirit. Our teacher, Miss Ngwenya, had urged us to take notes, therefore we all knew what was expected of us that morning.

'So, what were your impressions of Matopo hills and the trip overall?' asked Miss Ngwenya.

We all thrust our hands up, snapping our fingers to be picked and shouted, 'Me, me, me, Miss, me, me, Miss.' Miss Ngwenya was dressed in a purple two-piece suit with a cream skirting and a pair of black glass-shoes. Spirals of permed hair fell to the sides of her head, dripping oil like they were something edible. The sweet scent of her perfume made you swallow when she passed next to you.

She stood in front of the class, stick in hand, and scanned through a wave of raised hands. Extending her arm, she pointed the stick at Wellington. Wellington was a short Shona boy who always came to school in a dirty uniform, regardless of what day it was.

'Wellington!' she called out. 'Will you stand up and tell the class about your experience of the trip?'

'I...aah, mina, Miss,' Wellington stammered.

'Please stand up, so we can all see you,' Miss Ngwenya said cordially.

Wellington pushed back his chair and stood hunched over the desk.

'I didn't go to the trip, Miss,' he announced.

'Ooh, by the way. Your mother didn't have the money again. Sit down.'

I had been lucky to go on the trip. My uncle SaSipho had stopped by our house a week before the trip. And a green five Zim-dollar note from him had secured a place for me.

As Wellington sank down to his chair, Miss Ngwenya's started forward, entering the aisle between rows of tables and chairs. Her eyes roved around the classroom. She sauntered down the aisle and stopped halfway through. Then as if she was picking a green fly from a can of milk, she called out, 'Promise! Why don't you help your cousin here and tell us what your impression was of the trip?'

'He's not my cousin,' Promise protested. 'We're not even related, Miss.'

A wave of laughter swept through the classroom. Promise had repeated a grade, so he was a year older than most of the pupils and sat next to me in class.

'Well, who knows?' Please tell us what you learnt from seeing Cecil John Rhodes's grave?'

The class fell silent. Promise lowered his head, cleared his throat and scratched the back of his head.

'Aaaah mina Miss, I learnt that no matter how superior you might think you are, one day you'll end up dead.'

Another episode of mad laughter washed through the class. I tried to compress the burning urge to laugh. Promise was my best friend. And despite the friendship code, I was afraid that if I laughed at him he wasn't going to share his sandwich with me during the break time—which would then make the hands of the clock that sat above the chalkboard tick slower. So slow it hurt to look at it. I had been tortured by it for enough years. I clenched my teeth and pursed my lips as hard as I could. Laughter wasn't worth missing out on a sandwich for.

'This isn't *R.M.E* (Religious and Moral Education), Promise. Leave morals aside.'

Promise opened his mouth to speak but Miss Ngwenya had shifted her attention to the next person.

'Pauline! Care to share your experience with the class?'

Pauline was the prettiest girl in class. She had a dark, smooth skin and petite body. Her clumsy sitting habits had made her popular among the boys.

'For me, Miss, I just asked myself, why are we here?' She creased her forehead. 'I mean, this man caused havoc to our country.'

Promise leaned over to me and whispered. 'What does havoc mean?'

‘Sssshh at the back!’ Miss Ngwenya ordered. ‘You had your chance, Promise. Continue, Pauline.’

‘If we really think about it, Miss,’ continued Pauline. ‘Why would a man that ruined our country be buried in a heritage site as if he was a hero or something? It just doesn’t make any sense to me, Miss. We shouldn’t even be wasting our time talking about him right now.’

‘You must be crazy,’ Thulani interjected.

Pauline turned around abruptly and looked at Thulani scornfully.

‘Cecil John Rhodes brought civilization to this country. If it wasn’t for the white people we would still be living in caves and dying of diseases... and we all wouldn’t be here.’

‘It’s you who is crazy,’ Pauline retaliated. ‘Who brought smallpox that wiped out the population of the San?’

‘Woooh, people! ‘Let’s not call each other names, okay?’ Miss Ngwenya intervened.

‘All I was saying is that the man doesn’t deserve to be buried in a national heritage site. They should have thrown his body *e-mara* or somewhere where people won’t have to see it like he was some kind of a hero.’

‘Okay, we hear you, Pauline. Now let’s hear what others have to say.’

‘And white people didn’t bring anything here. They found everything here,’ she said. She cast a quick derisive glance at Thulani and sat down.

My hand was starting to become sore from being held up when Miss Ngwenya picked me, ‘Blessing, let’s hear what you think.’

‘For me, Miss,’ I began.

‘Stand up so we can all see you.’

‘For me, Miss,’ I said, pushing my chair back and making sure its hind legs didn’t ramp the floor, ‘I thought the view from up there was breathtaking.’

The class exploded with laughter.

‘And the rock formation, unbelievable, it’s just too bad that both these things are wasted on a tomb of a colonialist such as Cecil John Rhodes.’

‘So, you share the same views as Pauline. Okay, what can I say.’ She twisted her lips and turned away. ‘Let’s hear somebody else, Ticha.’

Ticha, the pen thief, got up.

‘Aaaah, mina Miss, I agree with everybody. This Cecil John Rhodes guy was a

monster—my father didn't want me to go there in the first place. He said the fact that we still have the man's grave in our country is an insult to the ancestors. That's why there is drought and the economy is doomed.'

'Let me guess, your father stopped school in grade two, right?' Thulani shouted.

'Why don't you stand up and tell us what your thoughts are, Thulani. It seems like you are the only one that has a different opinion.'

'For me, I would say it was an educative experience, Miss,' Thulani said, speaking through his nose.

'Educative!' someone whined. 'That's horse shit!'

'We all know that you love white people, Thulani,' Mbonisi's voice soared above the classroom, 'but to tell us that going to see Rhodes's grave was educative is taking it too far.'

'Of course, it was. You guys just think white people only did bad things in this country. What about Lobengula, what did he do?' Thulani said, defensively. 'Why don't you blame your forefathers for letting themselves be molested by a handful of white guys. Why don't you do that? Instead of...'

'They had guns, stupid,' erupted big-headed Mbonisi. 'What would you have done?'

'We all know that Lobengula sold the country,' someone cried out from the other side of the classroom.

'Okay! That's enough!' Miss Ngwenya shouted. 'Sit down, Thulani. Let's hear what the girls think.'

Her eyes roved around the classroom.

'Loveness! You're quiet today. Please tell us your impressions of the heritage site.'

Loveness stood up from a chair in front of me. The back of her skirt was creased.

'For me, Miss, I just don't understand...I don't understand how Cecil John Rhodes's grave is part of our heritage. The man was just wretched.'

'Wretched, big word,' someone mumbled from somewhere in the mid-rows.

'Thank you, Loveness, sit down,' Miss Ngwenya said. 'Let's hear another voice.'

She entered another row of chairs. Her eyes darted about before she picked Felix next.

'Hayi, for mina Miss, I just thought to myself—what kind of a parent gives a boy a girl's name? No wonder he was never married—there must've been something wrong with him.'

We entered another fit of laughter.

'No, no, Felix. Cecilia is a girl's name not Cecil,' Miss Ngweya corrected.

'But still, Miss...'

'Rhodes was gay,' someone whispered.

'Who said that?'

We turned our heads and searched for the culprit. The mood in the class had suddenly become tense. My brain started to work, searching the vocabulary folders for the meaning of the word gay. First folder. Nothing. Second one. Nothing. Then I thought, whatever it meant, it must be very bad since Miss Ngwenya's face had suddenly turned sour.

'Who said that?' Miss Ngwenya repeated, taking a step, weaving through the aisles. The scent of her perfume intensified as she got nearer to my desk.

'Okay! I see you don't want to reveal the culprit. All of you, detention. That will teach you...'

'It was Rejoice, miss,' someone shouted.

Miss Ngwenya turned around abruptly. Her plump legs pivoted on the heels of her shoes and the spirals of her hair whirled.

'Rejoice! Where did you hear that?'

I was now convinced that whatever word *gay* meant was not good. We had made some bad remarks about Cecil John Rhodes, but this must have been really bad. What could be worse than being called a monster, a thief, a racist. I had even silently thought of him as the queen's attack dog.

'Rejoice! Do you want me to repeat myself? You know that I don't like to repeat myself.'

Rejoice's eyes looked like they were going to explode.

'I heard it on TV, Miss,' Rejoice replied.

'And which programme was that? Never mind. What were you doing watching adult programs?'

Rejoice lowered her head, resting a chin against the chest.

'I don't want to ever hear anyone mention that word, not in my class,' Miss Ngwenya said. 'Do you hear me, Rejoice?'

Rejoice nodded.

‘Not in my class,’ Miss Ngwenya concluded.

Just then, I reached for a pen and scribbled the word *gay* on my palm. I intended to search for its meaning in the dictionary when I got home. Before I had finished, someone whispered, ‘Wayetshaya esika-Banana.’

Then it hit me; the former President Canaan Banana’s sodomy case had been making headlines in every newspaper, for months now. From that statement I surmised what it meant.

Once we were out of the city, we started to drive past a group of herd boys. They all looked like they had crawled out of the same hovel that morning, stunted in growth, ragged clothing, barefooted and whips hung on their shoulders. Bony cows and goats. Mud huts stood at an angle, randomly scattered on patches of cleared land, women bent down with straw-sweepers stroking the ground, clouds of dust rising up to the air. They halted doing their chores, straightened and watched the bus drive by. Wrinkles on their faces were a history book that narrated their lives.

Ahead, over the heads of passengers, I could see the driver’s back. He swayed and his shoulders heaved. His head nodded as if someone was whispering sweet nothings into his ears. Through the front window screen, road-makers raced to meet the bus. Pedzi mumbled and chewed in his sleep. A speed limit road sign flew past the left window.

Inside the bus, the nervous energy had settled down. My eyes started to feel heavy. I hadn’t had enough sleep the previous night. I had tossed restlessly throughout the night. The floor had seemed harder than usual, the pillow possessed a stiffness that burdened my neck. And the morning came while I was still trying to find sleep.

Swept into the corner

We stopped in Gwanda, a small town south of Bulawayo, in front of a dilapidated red brick building with a fading Coca-Cola sign above the door. A limping boy entered the bus and chorused his Super Cools. Three women vendors sailed on their skirts to the windows with baskets raised over their heads and circled the bus. People made purchases through the windows. A cocktail of smells pervaded the air as the people nibbled on boiled maize, groundnuts and *indlubu*. A group of passengers boarded. The bus started forward and worked its way back to the road before the new passengers had taken their seats. An old couple found a place at the front. A middle-aged woman took a seat just behind them and two old men came doddering down the aisle. The old man at the front cradled a *Chibuku* calabash close to his chest. Millet beer trickled down the sides of the calabash. He wore a brown suit and a cream panama-hat. The two men came in a single file, swaying and staggering comically. In two intervals, the old man at the front paused dramatically to say something to his companion behind. I watched them advance, all the way until they took the seats abreast of ours. Both men wore suits. They sat down one after the other and took off their hats simultaneously. The man in a brown suit placed his hat on his knee. They were either close brothers or twins. Their drunken conversation filled up the silence inside the bus. They argued and reminisced a great deal.

‘Hence, I was saying to you,’ said Brown-suit, ‘this country has never been any good. I feel sorry for these young people growing up under the rule of a mad tyrant.’

‘Aren’t all tyrants mad one way or another?’ said Green-suit.

‘Not like this our one, my friend...not like this one. Look at what he is doing? Look...’ He spread the palm of his right hand. ‘Zimbabwe has no enemies, not even a single one. But look at the size of the army. What is the purpose of such a big army in a starving nation except to stamp down any sort of uprising? To squash even the slightest idea that these little people conjure up with their active little brains. What chance do they have to be free thinking young men if one wrong word leads to a boot to the mouth? But what option do they have...’ He turned and looked at me. ‘Us...we don’t care anymore. Our time is done, we’re just waiting to

die. It's up to them to choose to grab by the bull by its horns or run from it. Isn't that right, nephew?' His grey, heavy brows shot up and his eyes widened with expectation. His eyes were a strange colour —almost amber.

At first, I thought the question was rhetorical, but when I realized that he awaited a response, I started to scramble my head for answers. For there were many bulls to wrestle if you were a young Ndebele in Zimbabwe. There was the obvious bull that we were all fighting: the bull of hunger—that was the fiercest of them all. One could never win that battle, simply because the bull of hunger just never dies in this continent. It always reincarnates. If not in the grounds that one occupies, it appears in the neighbour's yard and before you know it has jumped right back onto your doorstep. Then there was the bull of tribal inequality; of dire corruption and sordid politics; crumbling economy and the drought that threatened to devour every living thing on land.

So, when the old man mentioned the ominous bull, I was reeled into a *mind-bog*. The first bull that came to my mind was the castrated one, the undying one, the stubborn one that dominated the kraal and bullied all other bulls that threatened to grow a set of balls.

'Yes,' I said, after slight hesitation.

'See, even the boy agrees with me!' Brown-suit said. He turned to his companion and then back to me and said, 'You're the future of this country. Whatever you do, make sure you don't go down without a fight. Do you hear me, *mtshana*?'

I responded with a gentle nod.

'Don't let them take your future away from you. You see us?' He slammed a palm on his chest. 'We fought a big fight. We turned Ian Smith's one thousand into a few years. Where is he now? Where is he?' He ducked his head and rolled his eyes as if looking for Ian Smith in the back of the heads of other passengers. 'Gone!'

I forged a smile.

'Now tell me something, nephew...' He took a quick swing from the calabash and smacked his tongue to taste the beer. 'What is your surname, *mtshana*?'

Another pang of hesitation hit me. I didn't know which surname to proclaim. Officially, I used the surname of my mother, who had been raised by her uncle. And because of that reason she used his surname. Mother had been the first born in her family of twelve children, born of my grandmother who was very young at the time and an absent father. As a result, when my grandmother later got married, Mother had been sent away as a child to be raised

as her uncle's daughter. All done in an effort to present my grandmother as a childless young woman to the prospective husband. As a result, Mother had never gotten to know her father. Many years later, after a long search, she had finally managed to track down her siblings. The reunion had been celebrated with a big party at our home. Our relatives came in numbers, new cousins, uncles and aunts and the old ones came. My grandmother wrote a two-line letter turning down the invitation. She wrote: *I don't have time for parties. I have fields to plough and maize to winnow—carry on without me.* Mother was heartbroken by this, but the party carried on as planned. The preparations dragged on throughout the eve of the party, falling into the next morning. At around one thirty cars started to pull up in front of our gate. One after the other they came, parked in a line along the fence, spilling over to the neighbour's side. My uncle SaBrilliant brought his Tempest stereo which came accompanied by two large speakers that were placed at each corner of the front of the house. I was assigned the task of looking after the records which had come in two beer crates, tightly abutted in their ragged jackets. A goat was slaughtered. A big fire was made in the back yard. Women got busy with the variety of food that had been bought, samp, pap, rice, meat and salads. The chairs of mother's dining table were taken out and scattered around the yard—something that never happened; benches were lined up and rocks were hauled to the tree shade. Uncles gathered under the shade and drank millet beer from calabashes that were wheeled from Madlodlo Beer Garden by the younger uncles. Neighbours came and joined the party. Elders guzzled liters and liters of beer and devoured chunks of meat which was served on big plates. Us children hovered around the kitchen and delighted in sweets, biscuits and the endless flow of Sparletta cold drinks and Mazoe juice. We ate and drank, spilled drinks over our clothes, messed our shirts with tomato sauce, filled our pockets with sweets and played without care of being called for chores until sunset. Under the lemon tree, voices grew louder and gradually reached a drunken crescendo. A track ran from the tree to the toilet. Once in a while, one of the women walked around the yard wetting the ground to reduce dust. By sunset the noise under the lemon-tree had reached a new high. Everyone was talking at the top of their voice. Hands were tossed in gestures. Others got up to speak so their opinions could be heard. My uncle SaBrilliant was leading the racket, his sharp drunken voice riding over others and his crack of laughter terrorized the afternoon air. Darkness closed in. My friends were called to their homes. Deprived of playmates, I sat down on the doorstep and watched the party under the lemon-tree. Blazers and ties had been taken off and tossed

over the backrests of chairs. High heels had been kicked off, and now lay on their sides, scattered all over the yard like autumn leaves. Also tossed away along with these confining items were pretentious demeanours. Everyone was at their most genuine. And thanks to the pails of *masese*, true characters came out untethered. Arguments had been maintained in a civil way until SaBrilliant's voice thundered. 'You don't know what you're talking about!' he said. 'You just came into her life yesterday and now you want to dictate to us what surname she should use.'

'No, not at all. All I was saying is... all I'm saying is that it's only appropriate that she uses her rightful surname,' my uncle SaSipho said, hands raised above the head. 'That would please the Sibanda ancestors greatly, and in return they will bless her. I mean look at her...'

'We don't care about your ancestors,' shouted SaBrilliant, indignantly. 'Where were they when she was a young girl struggling in the village? Did your ancestors ever send her a bag of mealie-meal one day? Do they even know how much a bag of sugar costs?'

'Leave the man alone. Like all of us he wants what's best for our sister,' my uncle SaSithembile interrupted, getting up from his seat. He was over six feet tall, barrel-chested with broad shoulders and massive arms covered in grey hair. He was a retired military man. SaBrilliant was his younger brother; a taxi driver, short and chubby with a meaty face and a low hanging paunch that spilled over the grey polyester pants.

'Don't tell me what to do,' SaBrilliant erupted. 'I can't believe you are taking his side. This is our sister you're talking about. We don't even know these people. For all we know they're thieves trying to steal into our family.'

'And why would they do that?'

'Who knows? We can't go around picking up people in the streets who claim they're relatives of ours.'

'If they share blood with our sister then they are our relatives,' SaSithembile said, calmly. 'Can't you understand that?'

'I'm happy I don't share anything with these people,' SaBrilliant said, tossing a hand over his shoulder and the fingers grazing SaSithembile's face. SaSithembile's face turned sour in an instant. He raised a hand and gently rubbed the spot where he had been hit. It took him a moment to process what had just happened and then he reacted with a powerful blow that knocked SaBrilliant to the ground. His body went flying, crashing into chairs and benches. Calabashes, beer mugs and cups clattered into madness. Everyone bolted and scattered,

snatching their beer mugs on the way. I stood up and got onto the stoep.

‘Ng’zakulimaza mina!’ SaSithembile threatened.

A cry for the fighting to stop was expressed. My uncles and aunts pleaded with SaSithembile to let it go, calling him by his surname and totems. SaBrilliant took the gap to get up. He staggered a few steps, picked up a chair and crushed it over SaSithembile’s head. The chair broke into pieces. SaThabani got caught in the middle of the blow. Chaos broke out. In the background, a Soul Brothers song *Omama bethu* was playing at full blast. SaSithembile, as if he had just been brushed with a feather, lunged at his opponent. He got hold of him, wrapped his hands around his neck and started to choke his brother. Behind him came SaThabani, who attacked the two and tried to break them up. It was then that Mother’s voice thundered above the commotion.

‘Hey! Whose dogs are going at it in my home?’

Everyone went still. Mother came into view. She walked slowly towards the group and stopped in the middle of the front yard. She was barefoot. Her shoes had been kicked off during the early hours of the party. At first, she had flip-flopped around the yard in slip-ons which she later tossed away and walked barefoot.

‘Can someone tell me what is happening?’ she said.

‘They’re fighting over a surname, sisi,’ said aunt MaDlamini.

‘What surname?’

‘Yours, sisi,’ NaMemory replied.

‘He wants you to change your surname to Sibanda,’ SaBrilliant grumbled.

‘I was only suggesting it, sisi. That’s all,’ SaSipho said, stepping forward.

‘Sisi, you can’t let them change your surname,’ SaBrilliant said. He also started towards Mother to beat SaSipho into getting to her first. ‘It would be disrespectful to the people who raised you.’

‘It wasn’t her choice. You don’t owe anyone anything.’

‘That’s just not the way we do things, sisi,’ said SaBrilliant.

‘What I do is up to me,’ Mother lashed out. ‘No man can tell me what to do. No one but me, this one.’ She tapped her chest.

‘But sisi...’

‘Can’t you see that I’m a woman? Not a little girl.’

Both my uncles lowered their heads.

'I can make my own decisions. I don't need a man telling me what surname is well suited for me.'

All eyes were directed at her, faces sullen and limp lips speechless. All the alcohol flushed out of the systems.

She turned to my sister, who stood next to her. 'Turn off that stupid music. The party is over! Everyone, go to your houses.'

'But sisi...' SaBrilliant whimpered.

'I've done enough talking. Now take your tin of a radio and leave.' Her voice carried a finality that couldn't be contested. People looked at each other in disbelief. A sad mood descended over the place when the Soul Brothers' record made distorted sounds as it came to a stop. The look of disappointment intensified in drunk faces. It was too early to end a party.

Eyes followed her to the lemon tree where she started to pick up the pieces of planks of the broken chair. She held up two pieces and tried to piece them together. She twisted and turned them, trying on different sides. Failing to do so, she let out a furious tongue click, followed by an angry utterance, '*Izinja lezi.*'

Everyone hurried to help clear everything on the ground. Everything was done quickly and in silence. Those who knew Mother well wanted to be far away from her at that point. Mother was a warrior—her siblings knew that well enough. When she was angry her skin colour would become darker, her eyes would assume a menacing, fierce look; her left cheek would start to twitch and she would speak through gritted teeth. As a result, her siblings had dubbed her the Black Boer.

So, when Brown-suit asked me what my surname was, I was reeled back into the very moment in time when my, our family's, heritage was debated into a fist fight. I wasn't sure what to tell him. In administrative scenarios I had always used Mother's foster surname. But now that I understood the shortcomings of it, I didn't want to continue using it anymore.

'Hawu, *mtashana*. Have I asked you to tell me a family secret?' Brown-suit said.

'No,' I said, 'not at all.'

'Then what seems to be the problem?' he said soberly. 'Or are you of the other tribe?'

I smiled.

'No, I'm not.'

He raised his voice. 'So, tell me then.'

Saliva flooded my mouth. I tried to rush it down my throat but it seemed to be too thick. I choked, coughed and cleared my throat. Somehow, I couldn't bring myself to articulate my father's surname. It was as if Mother was standing right there in front of me, her face screwed into a whirlwind of fury, watching me with widened eyes. Uttering my father's surname would have made Mother turn in her grave, but to pronounce it as my own, it would have certainly raised her from the dead, Lazarus style—dramatically, in slow motion and maybe with a horror-movie-like soundtrack.

'*Mtshana!* The way I see it...' Brown-suit said, 'you have a problem...a big...big problem.'

He turned to his companion and prodded him with an elbow. Green-suit, who seemed to be contemplative, passed the calabash.

'Let me give you some advice,' he added, leaning over, into the aisle. 'Next time someone asks you what your surname is...' He paused to clear his mouth and ejected brown dregs of millet that went spraying from his O-shaped mouth. He chewed and spat again. Then he wiped his lips with the back of his hand before he continued, 'Just tell them any surname that comes to your head. A man without a surname is not a man. Rather tell them that you are an orphan; your parents were killed during the Gugurawundi and you don't know who they were. It's understandable. We all know what that old grey mule did to our people—no one can argue with that. But to choke on your tongue the way you just did...' He shook his head. 'Had God blessed me with a son, I promise you he would have ruled this country—it's a shame it'll be ruled by lizards.'

'Better lizards than pigs,' Green-suit said.

'Lizards bask in the sun all day and pigs eat shit all day. They're both useless creatures, but at least a lizard sticks to its diet. A pig...' He shook his head despondently.

Both men broke into laughter. Brown-suit tapped his thigh and stomped his foot. Green-suit threw his head back and guffawed. Then Brown-suit became silent at once. He leaned over to me and said, 'Let me tell you something, *mtshana*. You look like a good kid and I like you. Don't ever be scared of anyone or anything. Otherwise you'll never be able to do anything. I mean anything. You won't even be able to bed a girl. Mark my words.' He raised a hand, snapped his fingers and crossed them.

Pedzi sniffed, turning to the window-side, tucked his clasped hands between his thighs. In the front seat, a middle-aged man with a thick, humpy neck turned a page of *The*

Chronicle. At the top of the page, the headline, written in red, bold letters, read: *War vets invade another white farm in Mazoe*. Below the headline there was a black and white picture of men in overalls carrying knobkerries, sjamboks, machetes, axes and sticks.

It was the first advice that I had received from an adult in a long time. Because I hadn't finished school, I was alone at home most of the time. I conducted myself as I pleased and no-one would tell my sister about my afternoon excursions. As a high school dropout, you're feared by the neighbourhood. Elders in the neighbourhood warned their children about you. You represented what every young child should never become. You were a rebel; a miscreant to be done away with. You were a threat to the society. This was because most high school dropouts turned out to be small time *tsostis*, smoked dagga and consumed excessive amounts of alcohol. And the girls became pregnant soon after. But most of us high-school dropouts had a similar narrative.

A new school term had just commenced. The beginning of a new term meant the daily dismissal of students who hadn't paid their fees. Our teacher had been absent during the first three days of school. Therefore, our class had survived the mortifying first day dismissals. When she reported to class on the fourth day, half of the class got sent away. That evening I told my sister about it over supper.

'I don't have money,' she said, 'but I'll try to borrow from my friends.'

'What will happen if you can't get it?'

'I've managed to get it before, haven't I?'

'Yes but...'

'But what...who said I won't get it?'

'I was just asking,' I mumbled.

'Don't ask me stupid questions. You go to school so you can ask your teacher those stupid questions. Not me.'

That statement ended the conversation. We finished eating our supper in silence.

She had been paying my school fees since Mother passed on, six years before. I had been in grade 3 then, and now, 2006, I was starting Form 3. The next morning, I woke up at the usual hour, took a bath, got dressed and ate maize porridge standing over the cupboard, and went to school. A similar proceeding took place. We got sent away in scores. Every morning I performed the routine with the same enthusiasm as the day before and went to school, only to be sent away. Each morning as the register was marked, those with

outstanding fees were asked to leave the classroom. It was all done in a shaming fashion. One after the other, we picked up our school bags and left the classroom. As the week progressed, fewer and fewer of us got sent away. Usually when a child got sent away from school for outstanding fees, the parents would run around, knocking on every door, borrowing money from friends, neighbours and relatives. They didn't want the child to miss classes. My sister followed suit. Though it embarrassed me a great deal, I waited patiently while she shook every loan-shark's purse to pay for my school fees. After the second week, the number of dismissed students had lessened by half. By the third week it was down to only three students. Me and two other boys. The days of the third week dragged and the hours lagged. I became used to lazing at home all afternoon. The other two guys settled their fees by the end of the week and I was left alone. I never relented. I kept going to school each morning. I put on the stiff greys that sat on your body like cardboard paper and walked five kilometers to school—my back laden with text books. Some days, especially on Fridays, the teachers forgot to mark the register, so I could do a full day. I attended surreptitiously, playing catch up with each lesson. I would arrive in class half an hour earlier to copy some notes from other students so I could study at home.

Each time the teacher walked into class, I felt a surge of anxiety arise within me and I would enter a silent stupor to avoid being noticed. It worked mostly in male teachers; especially our science teacher, who came to class every Monday morning reeking of weekend imbibing.

On the last day I was in class, our teacher, Miss Gwasunda, a Shona woman with a muzzle of a mouth that always reminded me of a gorilla whenever I looked at her, called me to her desk. I had just survived the first two periods of the day; one more and we would then go for a break. When she pronounced my name, it took me a little while to react. It was as if I had been caught with my pants down. Shame showered upon me.

I pushed my chair back gently and lowered my hand to pick up my school-bag that was on the floor.

'Where are you taking that bag?' she snapped.

I unslung my rucksack, lowered it down to the side and let it drop to the floor. Steadily, I made my way through the aisle, fixing my tie on the way. I stopped in front of her desk and waited while she rummaged through a messy desk— her greasy chubby fingers turning and lifting up the clutter of papers, magazines and books. After a long futile search, she raised her

eyes and looked at me through a pair of thick glasses, her magnified eyes popping out as if she had just seen death.

‘Okay, Mr. Moyo,’ she said. She knitted her fingers casually together and rested her hands on the desk. ‘I can’t seem to find my register. Have you settled your fees?’

My eyes fell.

‘No, ma’am.’

‘So, what are you doing in my class?’

I kept my head down and didn’t respond.

‘I asked you a question, Moyo.’

‘I’m here to learn, Miss,’ I said. I could hear my voice breaking with uncertainty.

‘Mmmh, you’ve got a nerve, huugh?’ She sat up, folding her arms, tucking the hands in the underarms. ‘Tell me something, Mr Moyo.’ She paused. The lines flanking her lips dug into the skin and the arcs of her nostrils flared. ‘What good is your learning to me? Do you think I’m here to work for a charity? Do I look like the Mother Teresa of Zimbabwe?’

I wilted. I endured the degradation, knowing that it was nothing compared to what I was going to face from my peers.

‘I asked you a question. Mr Moyo, didn’t I?’ she said. Her face turned hard and filled with rancour. I couldn’t see behind me, but I could feel all forty-two pairs of eyes riveted to the back of head. Thoughts, judgements being made in numbers.

‘You did, Miss,’ I said.

‘So, answer me then,’ she blurted out. ‘What good is your learning to me without your fees paid?’ She repeated it, pronouncing each word slowly, syllable by syllable, as if I were a mute meant to read her lips. Her face contorted and assumed all sorts of hideous shapes.

Then she pushed back her chair and got up. She trudged heavily to the chalkboard and picked up a piece of chalk and started to write on the board. I followed the writing with my eyes. She swapped the piece of chalk for a rod and turned around to face the class.

‘Class! Eyes on the board!’ she yelled, tapping on the board.

There were shuffling movements as the eyes found the board.

‘Let’s read together what’s written on the board,’ she commanded.

The entire class, heads raised, chorused in high-pitched voices.

‘No fees, no class, no school, no future and no life!’

‘Again!’

The class chorused again, louder the second time; adolescent voices, tuned to their highest pitch. I stood there, in front of the classroom, legs crossed at the ankles and hands on my back, drowning in shame and naked to the soul.

‘I hope that’s clear enough for you, Mr Moyo,’ she said. She placed down the rod and went back to her desk.

The armchair creaked as she dropped heavily on it, followed by a series of awkward noises that sounded like farts as she adjusted her weight on the chair. I couldn’t stop my imagination from running wild. An urge to laugh twirled itself around me and choked laughter out of my throat. I averted my head and pursed my lips. I managed to hold still for a few seconds, then a convulsive snort burst out and I chuckled. It turned out that I wasn’t the only one thrown into the midst of this awkward moment. Behind me, the rest of the class was chortling behind hands and over shoulders.

Miss Gwasunda lifted up her startled face and looked at me scornfully. Uglier than ever. God’s flawless hand. Everyone silenced at once—all the flashed teeth got wiped out of the impish faces. Laughter was probably the only activity that we shared and enjoyed equally as a class; spiteful laughter, scornful laughter, derisive laughter, stupid laughter.

‘I thought I heard a sound,’ she snapped. She cast a long look at the class. ‘Find something to do. Don’t just sit there like roosting chickens!’

She picked up an old copy of *Drum* magazine with an image of Brenda Fassie on the front cover. She looked a few years younger—like a teenage girl. Good makeup artist. She had short blond hair and wore a glistening, gold string dress. She had this beer garden look. There was a deformity about her mouth that I couldn’t quite place. It looked like a mouth that had had teeth knocked out.

Twenty minutes of standing. My feet were now facing the assault from a size too small shoe. I had already changed positions a few times. All of them had just about the same effect.

Miss Gwasunda looked up at me. ‘What are you still doing in my class, Mr Moyo? Is the writing on the board not clear enough for you?’

‘I...’

‘Off you go! Don’t come back until you’ve paid your fees.’

I retraced the steps back to my desk. Every set of eyes in the class followed me, stayed with me while I packed my books into my backpack and returned those that I had borrowed to copy some notes. They watched me whisper goodbye to Alois, the guy I shared a desk with;

and accompanied me through the lonesome walk to the door. I felt them when I extended my hand to reach for the door handle, pressed it down and opened it. I even felt the eyes on me when I trudged along the corridor, all the way until the end, where I got off down the steps and made my way across the deserted school grounds; past the gardener who was bent over trees, clipping the foliage and twigs into defined round shapes with a scythe. The groundman stood holding a hose in front of him like he was urinating on the plants. I followed the walkway to the gate. The guard, a skinny man wearing a tattered camouflage uniform, came up to me and said, 'Where do you think you're going at this time of the day?' He had a deep voice that didn't suit his bony frame.

'Home.'

'You must be foolish to think I'll let you bunk school.'

'I'm not bunking,' I protested. 'Surely, you must know me by now. I've been passing here for the past three weeks.'

He cocked his head and gawked at me. Then he laughed.

'Ooooh, it's you. You still haven't paid until now,' he said, shaking his head. He undid the lock and released the chain around the gate.

Once I was outside the school grounds, I loosened my tie and yanked it up and tied it around my head such that the two strips fell over the side of my head. I trekked along Mpopoma Road, kicking stones and cans all the way home. I was numb of all feelings. I told myself that I didn't care anymore; that whatever happened, happened. A garbage truck made a left turn into 7th Street and stopped. Two men in denim overalls with BCC written on the back leaped from the back and started towards a row of dustbins; each man juggled two bins at a time, swinging them as if they were toys and emptied the rubbish into the back of the truck. The mechanism whined as it churned the rubbish into the tank. A Peugeot 404 taxi rattled past. I crossed the street into our township. On the other side of the road was a small bush where a small stream ran, dividing the two townships, Mpopoma and Mabuthweni. To cross it you had to leap on small rocks which were unsteady, so you had to be extremely cautious otherwise you could fall off. A path cut through a steep ascent covered with shrubs and sparsely spread eucalyptus trees. A kilometer ahead stood the first houses of our township, Mabuthweni—the barracks. Stark concrete walls, maroon dome-shaped roofs, hundreds of them, huddled together in rows. The narrow streets were flanked by gullies where young lovers mated by night, and months later fetuses were dumped there to rot. On

rainy seasons young boys raced paper-boats and ran along the gullies, cheering.

When I reached home, I took off my uniform and hung it up in the wardrobe and folded my socks and put away my shoes. I made maize porridge and ate sitting on the door steps, discouraged to the last grain of hope. I prayed that my sister would bring home good news. But when she came home later that evening, she didn't have to tell me that she hadn't found someone to lend her the money. She didn't say anything and I didn't ask. As the days progressed, I began to resent school; the idea of it and the system in which it operated. I couldn't find the fairness in the conditions in which some of us had to learn and yet produce competitive results. I didn't think it fair.

Fifty kilometers outside Gwanda the bus slowed down to a road-block a few meters ahead. Two oil-drums painted black and white were positioned on each side of the road with a log across. As the bus neared the roadblock two policemen came into view. They looked like coat-hangers in their oversized Nazi-Germany-like uniform of camel-coloured pants with double breasted-jackets and oxblood-red jackboots that glimmered in the sun as if they had been dipped in oil. One of the policemen strolled onto the middle of the road and raised a gloved hand. He motioned to the driver with the other hand. The engine of the bus died down into a whiny wheeze and we stopped.

'What do these cockroaches want?' Brown-suit grumbled, leaning into the aisle.

'Don't say it so loud,' Green-suit whined. 'What if he hears you?'

Just then the door opened with a rasp and then we heard footsteps on metal stairs. Then came in the skinniest, hungriest and most desolate looking policeman, walking like the world was the most painful place to be. He said something to the driver who turned his head and looked inside the bus. The policeman started down the aisle in short, slow steps, a baton held with the right hand and the thumb of the left hooked on the loops of the belt.

'We must hide the calabash,' Green-suit said in a hushed voice, reaching for the calabash in Brown-suit's hands. 'Give it to me.'

'No!' Brown-suit grumbled, 'We're not hiding anything.'

'Don't be stubborn. You know these people will make our lives difficult for nothing.'

'Listen to me, dammit!' barked Brown-suit. 'We didn't buy this beer on credit; do you hear me?' He lowered his eyes and surveyed the calabash. 'We didn't steal it either.'

Green-suit shook his head reproachfully. He craned his neck and looked over the seats.

The policeman was now eight seats away. He approached steadily, thumbs hinged on the loops of his trousers, stepping gently on the floor, turning his head from side to side. He worked the aisle easily and steadily like a true figure of authority.

Brown-suit leaned into the aisle. 'Look at him come,' he said drunkenly. 'Look at him, walking like a boss in his factory. Like he owns this bus. I bet he doesn't even have a penny with a hole in his bank account. Skinnier than a mantis. Look at him! Look at him! Lizard-faced bastard. Look at him, dragging his sweaty balls. Inhumane human. He thinks he is on top of the world—that this whole world is his. He can do whatever he likes— what his minds tells him. As his little balls please. To hell with everyone else.' He paused. His head rocked a little as he resumed commentary. 'I bet he didn't even finish school. He got into the force because someone pulled some strings to get him in. Now he is going around with a big head, thinking he is the chief—he is the man now—because of that stupid uniform. And those cheap boots from China. I wouldn't wear it even I was facing a gun barrel. Look at him. He is not wearing the uniform. The uniform is wearing him. Even a donkey would look better in it—it would bray knowing whom it serves. It just doesn't do. He...he doesn't know whom he serves.' He turned to Green-suit and announced, 'He has stopped. I wonder what he's asking that woman.'

He sat back, raised the calabash to his mouth and took a long swig. As he brought it down, he tried to pass it to Green-suit, who shrugged him off.

'Get arrested alone.'

'To hell with you too!' His chest heaved. 'You should go with him when he gets off this bus—you are well suited for each other. Maybe you two can be friends.'

'Me?' Green-suit queried, 'Friends with that rat? Never!'

The policeman interrogated the woman, who answered him subserviently. The mood inside the bus grew tense. Passengers became restless. Soon there were grumblings. Passengers started to complain about being delayed—that the policeman was wasting our time; that he should chase after the criminals instead of harassing good citizens. Finally, after much grumbling, the policeman turned around and retraced his steps back to the door. He paused halfway down the steps and instructed the driver before he exited.

'*Hamba! Swina lothuvi,*' Brown-suit said.

'You lucky devil!' muttered Green-suit.

'What do you think he was going to do to me?'

‘The bastard was going give us a hard time, you know it.’

‘No way in hell. I was going to tell him about all that shit that his mother fed him during the drought.’

The door slammed shut. The bus started and we steered gently back to the road. A series of gear shifts and it gained speed and penetrated the afternoon air, descending the slopes of Mbembeswane with a plunge. The sun was setting behind us. Stretches of plains rippled past the windows—all signs of human habitation we had left several kilometers behind us. Mild sun beams sifted through the rear window, landing on the aisle, casting grotesque shadows against the surfaces. Trees began to turn into shadows; distant mountains on the horizon faded as the darkness loomed all around us. An eerie silence grew around us and every sound became accentuated. Pedzi cleared his throat and unfurled himself into an upright position.

‘What time is it?’ he asked in a throaty voice.

Neither of us had a watch, so we had to rely on instinct. He leaned forward and peered outside.

‘We should be near the border now,’ he said.

Behind the door sits a hag with a whip

The border, as you appeared, was made up of a sheet of lights, buildings and tree shadows. We ducked heads and peered through the windows, looking at this systematic structure that stood before us, between us and our salvation. Lights inside the bus had gone on. An eerie silence occupied the air. Most of the seats were now empty and the few passengers that had been left on the bus sat sparsely which added to the gloominess. The bus rattled and swayed through the dirt road which we had come to, after diverting from the main road because of ongoing construction, which Pedzi eagerly brought to my attention.

A growling stomach reminded me that the time for supper had long passed. We had both skipped lunch and now supper was needed.

‘We’ll get some food once we are across,’ Pedzi said.

‘I’m not hungry.’

He frowned. ‘Are you nervous?’

‘A little.’

A faint smile passed his droopy lips.

‘Don’t be. I said I’ll take you to *Jozi* and I’ll do it.’

That was very reassuring, coming from a guy that I knew so little about. The bus drew nearer and nearer to the lights of the border post. The mood became tenser with every kilometer we covered. The engine ground harder, the walls and seats rattled, gravel-stones crunched explosively, escaping the weight of the tires. We covered about fifteen kilometers of dirt road and then returned to the tarmac where scores of trucks stood on the roadside. There were so many trucks they looked like trains back to front. I watched outside, stirred by curiosity and awe. Then came the girls of the night in mini-skirts and high heels, standing on the roadside. They struck poses and flashed plump thighs, slender thighs, average sized thighs. They flicked heads and their weaves cascaded over their shoulders.

The road widened from a single lane to two and then to three as we entered the border post. The hum of the engine changed as the driver performed a theatrical change down, stepping on and releasing the clutch, tossing the gear lever about with his left hand as

if it was too hot to handle. Soon the bright floodlight of the concourse fell on us as we rushed off the bus to join the chaos on the ground.

An intractable feeling of discomfort descended on me like a cholera bug, rapid and violent—sending cataracts of excreta down to the rectum with a burning rush. It commanded me to seek the comforts of a toilet bowl there and then. It wasn't only the fear of confronting the border controls that crippled me—but also the fear of failing, of having to return home, to the township to face the neighbours, crestfallen. As for my sister.... I had done more shameful things.

At that stage, failure had become my nemesis, it haunted all my endeavours.

'Are you okay?' Pedzi asked, leading the way through scores of people gathered at the border. Faces bloodless like corpses. A rustle of documents, a murmur of questions and remarks. Coats and jackets were hung over arms. Heaps of bloated China-bags, boxes and suitcases lay randomly on the ground. Three men in navy blue uniforms combed through the luggage, opening bags and scattering belongings.

'Food is no longer allowed across the border, *mamazala*. We're trying to curb foot and mouth disease,' said one of the men to a short chubby woman with a jersey tied around her waist. 'So, how am I going to feed my children?' She dropped her hands to the sides, spread her palms to the inspector as if to show him the holes of nails on them. Crucified by inflation.

We weaved through cars and buses, walking confidently as if we were the first-class travellers. Pedzi signalled me to the left with a gentle nod. I followed. We entered a passage between two buses and disappeared in their shadow. Pedzi bounced onto his toes and tiptoed, craning his neck to peek through the windows.

'This one doesn't look full.'

'How do you know?' I asked.

'Look!' He pointed at the windows. 'Some of the curtains are open and others are closed. Passengers are required to open the curtains of their windows when the bus arrives at the border.'

'So, what do we do now?'

'Let's first see what's happening inside.'

We were already at the tails of the buses so we made a left turn to the hall entrance. A faded Zimbabwe coat of arms emblem sat above the door. One of the heads of the two Kudus on the emblem had been decapitated. The *Z* and the second *b* in Zimbabwe were also

missing. So, the letters read *imba we*, which translated to ‘*house Oh!*’

The customs hall was buzzing with murmurs of scores of people in lines that stretched and swirled all the way to the door and spilled outside. The air inside was filled with a choking cocktail of human odours.

‘That’s the express line,’ Pedzi said, speaking over his left shoulder. ‘Those should be the passengers of the City to City. They should be done in about ten minutes.’

He changed course abruptly and joined one of the lines, cutting in on some people.

Our line had hardly moved in the fifteen minutes and the express queue was down to three people. We kept a close eye on the last three people and saw when the last person left the teller, joining the rest of the passengers of the City to City bus that had grouped at one end of the hall. The group disassembled on the driver’s orders and marched out in a single file. The line came towards us, passports in hands, walking proudly a few feet away. I caught the whiff of their perfumes and expensive body lotions— roses, peaches and strawberries scented cosmetics. They were a different crowd. Women tiptoed in high heels, men shuffled in blazers in the heat. Just as the last person in the line walked past, Pedzi turned around swiftly and pulling my hand, joined the line. I reacted instinctively and followed. Anxiety levels soared. I waddled behind Pedzi, my heart throbbing in my neck like that of a frog. I tripped on Pedzi’s heels. He turned around and looked at me reproachfully.

‘Sorry,’ I whispered.

The City to City bus was parked a few meters away but the walk from the entrance of the customs office to its door was like a long trek through steep hills and rocks. People congested at the doorway and the line slowed down until it came to a standstill. Then it started to move slowly again. With every step the door seemed to stretch farther. Pedzi looked confident in front of me. Yet I was trembling from within—my spine shook like a cord overloaded with current. The line moved a few feet. I managed a few steps, placing one foot after the other, as if we were subjects of an intense culling operation. A woman in a pink tracksuit plodded up the steps and stopped midway. Her big bumpy behind filled up the entire doorway. Her pants were a size too small such that the binding sank into the crack of her buttocks, and the inner thighs ate large amounts of the material which left the legs twisted out of shape. She took another step up and stopped again. Behind her, a man of a similar build followed, galumphing behind her. Huge chunks of flesh fell around his waist and heavy folds of fat gathered on the nape. His neck and head were one thing. Back and

buttocks, the same. It wasn't hard to pair him with the woman who had just gone up. One could see what coupled them: quintessential 'food kill me' kind of fatsoes—eat as much as you can. Teeth just keep on chomping and throat keeps swallowing. One can never have enough food in this continent. Fat is a sign of wealth. If you aren't fat then you aren't rich enough.

I took another step and reached the door. Now I could smell and taste the freedom on the other side of the border. However, I was sick to the stomach with nerves. I was bloated in fear. I wanted release and I wanted it now. But I wasn't going to let a little discomfort stand in the way of freedom. I took a deep breath and clenched, held it tight. Soon my stomach began to ache. I counted down from ten and told myself that if I got to zero and it still ached I was going to let loose. Come what may come. Ten. Pedzi stepped on the first rung and stopped, giving room to the other passengers to climb up. Nine. Eight. Seven. He took another step and entered. I moved a few steps. Six. Five. Four. Something prompted me to look over my shoulder. A man in a blue jacket stood with his back against the bus, arms folded over his chest. In front of him stood a young woman. The man said something to the woman, who tossed her head and laughed. It was obvious that he had said something amusing, for soon after, she lowered her head shyly. The man took a step towards her and embraced her. It was then that I noticed the letters, 'City to City' written on the back of his jacket. I went dumb.

'We should sit separately,' Pedzi whispered, going up the steps.

Now that I was alone outside, I let it out, nice and easy like oil spreading over the base of a hot pan. Great relief came over me. I stepped inside the bus a new man—or rather boy. Having unburdened myself of the torture of a bloated stomach.

The inside of the City to City bus was splendid—it was like stepping inside a cinema or a theatre. Two white fluorescent lights ran parallel on the ceiling, flanking the aisle which was carpeted with a blue mat. I kept my head down and hastened through the seats, all the way to the back. Glances were cast in my direction. I found a vacant seat at the back and sat behind a woman and a little girl of about five. Her hair was made into cornrows, decorated with two pink ribbons tied at the ends. An indisputable copy of the woman who was paging through a fashion magazine. A moment later, the sound of a door opening and closing as the driver entered sounded, followed by a gentle whistle of pressure release. I sat still and waited, afraid to breathe, in case I got detected.

When the bus started to move, I dropped a silent sigh and eased into the comfort of the fairly cushioned seat. I had hardly enjoyed a moment of the luxury when the head of the little girl appeared above her backrest in front of me. Her jet-black eyes burrowed into my conscience. She didn't blink for a clear minute. Then in a sweet angelic voice, she said, 'You weren't on this bus, were you?'

Two people on the left side of the aisle turned around and looked in our direction. I sunk deep into the seat. The woman next to the little girl turned the page of the magazine—as if nothing had happened. The little girl propped herself up and looked down at me. I forged a smile.

'Don't smile at me,' the little girl said. Her voice was sweet like honey but the words stung like its makers.

I frowned. The bus swerved left, jolting everyone to the side. I knocked my shoulder against the wall and bounced back to an upright position. The girl almost fell off the seat but seized the backrest just in time.

'I asked you a question,' the little girl said. She was feisty. A woman in a little girl's body.

I felt blood drain out of my face. I stared hard at her but she wouldn't be intimidated. So, I ended up acting desperately and extended a hand and fiddled with her cheek.

'Don't touch me!' she lashed out, wiping off where I had touched her.

The woman closed the magazine irritably and turned to the little girl.

'What did I tell you about talking to strangers?' she exploded. 'What did I tell you?'

The girl sank into the chair like a thick liquid dribbling down a surface and disappeared behind the backrest. By then we were halfway across the bridge, a two-way narrow road, straddled by heavy darkness. Down below, I could see the river glimmer in the dark, swirling and writhing between the shadows of trees and undulating landscape. Its grey, moon showered waters flowed steadily towards the far darkness. A cold sensation rushed through my spine, I shuddered as if I had witnessed the evil it harboured. Perhaps not just yet.

We drove past the first stop-and-check without any disturbance. There was a brief exchange of words between the driver and the border control officers outside a little hut. And off we went. Technically we were on South African soil, but we had not yet confronted what made us Zimbabweans. The fence that tore the two countries into individual entities.

When the bus pulled over, passengers poured out with an urgency of a family fleeing a

burning hut and took to the customs office. Everything was done speedily in the City to City bus. Pedzi was a few feet ahead of me. Over my left shoulder, I could see the gate and the fence that marked the boundary to South Africa, where our liberties ended. Silhouettes of border control officers at the gate inspired great fear. They possessed a fiendish power over the fate of foreigners, absconders and border jumpers and that terrified me.

Pedzi slowed down until I reached him and we entered the customs office walking shoulder to shoulder. We turned our feet towards the counters where declaration forms lay scattered. A few pens attached to the wall were available for use. Other passengers were already busy filling in the forms. I followed suit, picked up a pen and started filling in the form. I ticked the Mr. in the first box. I assumed I was fit for the title, I had been called that at school, even though surprisingly only when I was in trouble. I went on to tick male in the sex option. Then it occurred to me that there was something funny about these two options. I started wondering if there was a Mr. that is not a male or a Mrs./Miss that is not female. It seemed tautological. Name: I wrote down my name. Surname: I paused and pondered. When I rested the tip of the pen on the paper to write a gentle breeze swept by and one corner of the paper lifted from the counter. I jerked backwards—mother's ghost living in my memory had suddenly appeared. I blinked and it was gone. Then quickly I scribbled down Mother's surname: Msipha. Home address: home, home, home, I thought. A lodging is not a home. I decided to skip the section. Then there was a series of blocks where the passport number had to be filled in and the purpose of the visit stated, duration of the stay, address of the place of stay during the visit, the name of the person being visited, relation, etc. I couldn't fill in any of that but I had to look busy. I started to draw a heart and pierced it with an arrow. I added drops of blood dripping from the wound. When I looked up, Pedzi was still busy with his form. His was filled almost to the halfway mark. I had time to kill so I went over the image with a pen, outlined the drawing and added a third drop of blood. Then I decided to give it a body so I drew one. Before the body took form, Pedzi stepped away from the counter and walked to the entrance. I dropped the pen and took off after him.

I followed him outside, across the customs office concourse, to the toilets across the yard. He stopped in front of the mirror and started to pick at pimples on his face. I walked past him and stormed into one of the open toilets. I was greeted by a yawning toilet bowl crowned with green flies. There was ordure everywhere. On the walls, on the floor, by the door. The urgency to pee petered away. I retreated hastily. I tried the next one, wearing the

look of disgust and met a similar scene, only much worse. I peed quickly, choking on the smell of shit and fermenting urine. I withdrew before finishing and messed the front of my pants. Three spear-head-shaped drops of urine landed on the front of the legs of my pants. I cursed at myself. Outside, Pedzi was still picking at the pimples. I took up my position next to him and looked at the mirror. I couldn't recognize myself. A homeless boy stared at me from the other side of the mirror. His eyes were bloodshot. A thick mat of brown hair sat on his head. I drew closer to the mirror. The homeless boy bared yellow teeth nestled in bright red gums. I cupped hands under the spigot and took water into my mouth and used a forefinger to clean my teeth. I repeated that three times and stood back to re-examine myself. I still couldn't recognize myself from the image in the mirror.

'When we go out,' Pedzi said, 'we head straight back to the bus. Find a place to hide somewhere between the seats. Everyone is now busy with immigration. After that they'll all go through checkpoints and catch the bus on the other side of the last gate.'

'What about the driver? Won't he see us?' I asked nervously.

'The driver is also inside,' he said. 'They don't search City to City buses. Sometimes a border control officer comes and stands at the door and looks around. Don't panic if they do, just stay down and don't make a sound.'

'Okay,' I whispered.

'The bus will then drive a few meters and stop again. It will stop for about...'. He waggled a hand. 'Let's say about five minutes. Someone will probably come and talk to the driver. Depending on the person the conversation won't take long. Then it'll start and drive through the gate and when it stops for the second time that's when we get off. The driver will get off to find the passengers and direct them back to the bus.'

'Why can't we just stay in the bus and go all the way to Joburg?'

'A new driver will take over from Musina. There'll be a few passengers boarding so a ticket inspection will be done. Just do as I told you,' Pedzi said. 'Come, let's go.'

Pedzi leading the way, we stepped nimbly through the dark, skulking behind vehicles in the parking lot. The front of the City to City bus was visible from a distance. As Pedzi had said, the bus was vacant. A gentle push and the door hissed open. We ducked heads and entered. The carpet was soft under the knees and palms and smelled of methyl alcohol. I crawled to the back, guided by the outside light that filtered through the windows and hunkered between seats. Pedzi found a place in the middle rows and hid. I kept still and

listened to the throbbing of my chest.

A few minutes later, I started to suffer cramps, violent contractions that tensed the hamstring of my left leg. It was subtle and distant at first. Then it became intense. I endured the pain until I couldn't bear it any longer. I lowered myself and sat down and stretched my legs. It was then that I noticed that if I slid underneath the seat, I could fit and assume a lying position. It was a less strenuous position and I was completely hidden under the seat.

After a little while the bus started to move, slow and steady. A swerve to the right and then it came to a standstill.

'We're travelling on schedule,' I heard the driver say.

'I understand that but we also have work to do,' shouted another voice from the outside.

'When did this start?'

'By law we have to search all buses going through this gate. So, please kill the engine, Sir.'

'Do I really have to?' the driver said. 'I need this baby to stay warm for the journey ahead.'

'I'm only doing my job,' a second voice announced.

I kept still and tried not to panic. The door opened and heavy footsteps fell on the floor and approached with rhythm and purpose. Then a prolonged silence followed, stretching the tension in the air.

'Look what I've found!' someone announced. 'I told you. I'm never wrong about these things. I felt this one in my bones.'

The urge to see the face whose mouth had pronounced those words was strong but the visceral fear of what was to happen next stopped me from getting up. I kept my head down, tiny fibers of the carpet pressed against my left cheek and the smell of methyl alcohol strong on the nose. I weighed my options which thinned into one. I knew that I couldn't make it to Johannesburg by myself. Then came a clamour of voices, accompanied by many footsteps.

'Do you know this boy?' said a deep male voice.

'I've never seen him in my life,' the driver said.

'Are you sure?'

'What? You don't believe me?'

'Enough!' interrupted a third voice.

The first two speakers became silent.

'Let's hear it from him,' continued the third voice. 'You! What are you doing here?'

There was no answer.

'Do you know that what you are doing is a punishable offence?' Another short stretch of silence passed. 'Okay, he doesn't want to talk. Take him away!'

The voices broke into a chatter again, filled with excitement and condemnation.

Meanwhile I contemplated what to do—stay hidden in the bus or reveal myself. Since I didn't know where I was heading, the latter option seemed more palatable. Once I had decided what to do I didn't hesitate.

'Here is another one,' said one of the border-control officers. She was a short chubby woman. A squadron of control officers had come to witness the culprit that had been apprehended. And now there were two culprits. Excitement grew in their voices. Pedzi was being led out of the bus.

'Search the entire bus!' shouted a clean-shaven man with a round face. The group spread out, ploughed through the seats, opening luggage compartments and looking underneath the seats.

We were taken outside and led to the back of the customs office building, where there was a big open room. A bright, white light rushed out through the doorway, when the door was opened.

'Bring them in. Let them come join their brothers and sisters, here,' bawled a middle-aged man from behind a desk. He had a pair of reading glasses on which he took off as we entered. A thick book was spread open in front of him.

There were about fifteen detainees inside the room, a group of men and women, all sitting with knees drawn up. Their faces were filled with consternation. Women sat with their heads tilted to the side as if in mourning and men hung their hands on their knees and bowed their heads as if in prayer. The few that had the strength to raise their heads when we entered cast glances in our direction and then went back to their initial positions. There was a little girl of about seven years old in the group. She sat next to a woman in her mid-thirties.

'Sit down!' shouted one of the border-control officers. 'You're prisoners now.'

Pedzi led the march to the end of the room where we sank to the floor and sat down.

'Knees up!' shouted the man.

We obeyed.

'No talking,' said the man behind the desk.

Two chairs and a desk were the only pieces of furniture in the room. What kind of a place was this? An office; a cell? An office turned into a cell? I cleared my throat and swallowed. The man behind the desk raised his head and looked at me with menacing eyes. Questions flooded my head. What are they going to do to us? Throw us in prison or beat us? I could handle a beating. But prison...I wasn't sure if I ever wanted to know which direction its doors faced. The idea of it was daunting. I had grown up in the hands of a harsh and pedantic mother. My flesh was acquainted with physical pain. I had taken a beating at school on an almost daily basis and had been involved in several violent street fights with other boys in the townships. But there had never been a hand as agile, violent and aggressive as my mother's.

One afternoon, I had just knocked off from school and I was walking along the school fence when I bumped into my uncle Dumi's girlfriend/ex-girlfriend—she also didn't know the status of their relationship since the man had disappeared to South Africa. Having paid *lobola* and everything. MaNcube was happy to see me. She oozed endearments and asked me about the situation at home and the state of our family. I had a feeling that she thought that Mother was in contact with my uncle and was keeping this from her. After a long conversation in the summer heat, she asked me to walk her home. Her house was not far from my school so I agreed. But walking her home meant that I was going further away from home. When we got to her house she opened the fridge and offloaded an assortment of food, cheese, yoghurt, biscuits and a deluge of Mazoe. She offered and I nodded my head to everything. I gobbled down everything she placed in front me. Soon I was slumped on a big, soft cushioned sofa, watching a colour TV that stood on its own feet. It was as if at any moment it was going to start forward and toddle across the living room. It also had doors that could close into a cupboard. I watched *Captain planet* at 16h00, then *Woof* at 17h00 and decided to stay for *Ocean girl* at 17h30. Before I knew it was dark outside and the smell of roasting chicken that emanated from the kitchen cemented me to the sofa. It was a Friday and with about five kilometers to walk home MaNcube suggested I spend the night. She vowed to walk me home the next day to explain to Mother what had happened. Since neither of us wanted to walk in the dark, through swamps and dangerous townships, all the

way to another dangerous township, it was the most logical thing to do. The next morning, MaNcube walked me home soon after breakfast. And to find Mother home on a Saturday morning, an ardent Seventh Day Adventist, presaged the unthinkable. MaNcube apologized on my behalf and took all the blame upon herself. In MaNcube's presence Mother was calm and understanding. She offered MaNcube tea which they took in the shade of the lemon tree. Meanwhile, I lingered around the house, looking through the window once every few minutes, weighing Mother's temperament. They refilled their cups and talked and laughed.

MaNcube left home at noon. Mother walked with her and she was gone for nearly an hour. I had even forgotten that I was in trouble when she returned. She walked into the house unexpectedly, wielding two thick twigs hidden behind her. The smile and the warmth that had imbued her face earlier had dissipated, replaced by wrath that was unleashed on me upon entering. She lunged at me and the first strike missed and landed on the table surface. I shot up at once, pushing the chair so that it fell with a loud crash. It was as if I had just stepped on her blistered toe.

'What are you doing breaking my furniture?' she exploded. 'Do you know how hard I've worked to buy that chair, huugh?'

I didn't reply. I retreated backwards slowly. Keeping my eyes fixed on her, I circled the table. She picked up the chair and pushed it into the table. I stretched the distance between us. I had just done a full circle when she lunged at me for the second time, sending down her massive hand with a violent thrust. She missed again and the twig landed hard on the table surface. This aggravated her more. I decided to stop and bear it once and for all. Then she came at me with force, sending lash after lash. The first blow landed on my right shoulder. The second one on my head, and then they rained on me. Each blow sent the twig twirling and wrapping itself wherever it landed. Each sweeping slash cut through the skin and tattered flesh. The wounds stung, itched and burned. I tried to duck underneath the table for cover. But a vice of a hand grabbed me by the ankle and yanked me out, ripping off my shirt. With my back exposed I was doomed. I endured lash after lash. I scratched and scratched as one lash followed the other, accompanied by angry prayers, 'I've— told—you—several— times. Don't— go— to people's— houses— with—out— my— con—sent. You—just— don't—listen.' She took a deep breath. 'I spent the entire night looking for you. While you were sleeping, not giving a shit. Sel-fish little devil. You made me skip church.' Another deep breath. 'How many times must I tell you. Don't go—don't, go—don't go to peo—ple's

houses. Don't—go, don't—go, don't—go to peo—ple's hou—ses.'

I kicked and screamed, 'Ngilamulelani! Nangu eng'bulala bo! Ngilamulelani bo!'

But Mother wouldn't stop. The louder I screamed for help, the more she thrashed me. She thrashed me until I was cringed up in a corner, arms over my head, seized by a fit of hiccups. I drew a deep breath each time her hand went up and closed my eyes as it came down, tightening them when the twig landed on me.

'I've warned you before,' she said. Her hand gained momentum, landing successive lashes.

'I'll kill you! *Satane weRoma.*' She staggered backwards and stood back against the wall. Her chest heaving rapidly and sweat trickling down the side of her face.

That evening reminded me of many thrashings that I had received from my mother. Therefore, physical pain, especially induced by beating, did not frighten me. Corporeal punishment was believed to be instrumental to conditioning a child in our culture. For that reason, I couldn't see anything more that the border-control officers, with their big bellies and fat buttocks, could do to me that I could not handle. My fear lay in the stories that I had heard before—that the police took you to the forest, let you go and sent police dogs after you. Footage of such an occasion had been released to the media a few months ago and that made the rumour concrete.

The devil broke the hasp of my back

The hands of the clock on the wall lagged. An hour and a half had passed since we had sat down on the cold floor. But it felt like we had been there for hours. My buttocks were now stiff, the coldness of the cement floor drilled deep into the bone with a twinge of a needle. My legs were strained from maintaining the same position: hamstring, calf muscles, entered a semi-spasm. The knee joints were locked in pain. I stared at the clock, watching the hour hand crawling like a tortoise and the second dithering like a mantis. Pedzi, sangfroid, sat beside me like he was sitting under the shade of a *musasa* somewhere in his home village. No possible danger in that.

I went over the possible scenarios of the outcome of the detention and they were all hard to digest. When I looked at the time again only half an hour had passed.

It was just before midnight when the man behind the desk flung his wrist to look at his watch. Pushing back his chair, he stood up and started to gather the things on the desk. Before he finished the door opened and an Afrikaner man of a massive build, with heavy chest, broad shoulders, thick sunburnt arms covered in meshes of reddish hair, walked in. A hunting rifle was slung on his left shoulder, secured by a firm grasp of his hand. He wore largest size farmers' shoes that slapped the floor violently as he walked. He had deep-set eyes, menacing under a protruding forehead. His lower face was covered in a white beard. A face meant to breathe abomination into the air. He cast a quick glance in our direction and redirecting his eyes back to the man behind the desk, said something in a language that sounded like he was drawing phlegm stuck in his throat. I tried to listen but understood nothing. No. It sounded something like the language spoken by the people at our church when the holy spirit had descended upon them and they were speaking in tongues. Lots of retching sounds, lots of hissing, lots of bar-barring. Behind him entered a gangling teenage boy with red hair. He had freckled skin pasted on an oblong of a face. His contemptuous green eyes darted from one end of the room to another and then swiftly moved away with an urgency of revulsion.

I don't remember when and how. But when I opened my eyes the boy was walking

along the wall, kicking up the feet of those whose knees had been lowered, 'Knees up! knees up! knees up!' he chorused.

The clonking of bone in contact with the front of his steel-front boot made me shudder. He came along the line, kicking one after the other, as if he was practising to shoot a soccer ball. We winced and cowered.

'Kaffirs,' he said as his final kick landed on my shin. 'Hulle luister nooit.'

He dawdled back to the desk which he sat on, one leg hanging, arms crossed and rested on the lap. He lowered his head and said something to the old man who replied without lifting up his eyes. Troubled father and son relationship?

Next time I looked at the clock it was midnight. The temperature had dropped sharply. On my left, heads were bowed down and every few seconds someone nodded and jerked backwards with surprise. The little girl was now lying down on the woman's lap.

The sound of Pedzi chewing on his tongue in his sleep. The Afrikaner boy snoring at the other end. His hands were cradled over the chest as if he was shielding an invisible infant from its attacker. To his right, the old man was as awake as the morning sun.

Darkness faded as the white morning light filtered into the room through the louvres. Morning had finally come after long torturous hours of drifting in and out of sleep. A man, one of the detainees, placed a fist over his mouth and yawned. To his left, another detainee emulated him, jaws extended, and tendrils of saliva stretched between lips. He finished off with a weird, loud throat sound. A sour taste of sleep in my tongue registered; the smell of sleep slowly dissipated in the air and was replaced by that of humans —unwashed human bodies that had been subjected to long, hot days.

The time on the clock registered five forty-five when the Afrikaner pulled open the drawer, took out a book which he threw on top of the desk with a thud. He turned to the boy who had fallen asleep on his chair and tapped his feet.

'Japie! Japie! Staan op, dis oggend,' he said. His voice was deep as if he was speaking from a big hole.

The boy sat up.

'Staan op!'

Just then came a gentle knock at the door. Before the Afrikaner responded the door swung open and a group five men entered. Three of them were over forty, judging by their hair that was bleached into white patches, leathery skin and eyes filled with a sadness that

looked to have made permanence in their faces; and two boys in their early twenties. The two boys strolled in haughtily in front of the group. The detainees were preceded by two black border patrol guards in military-green uniforms. One of them had a rifle slung on the left shoulder and the second had his by the waist.

‘Môre. Môre,’ they chorused as they entered.

They both were in good spirits like hunters going home with a kill exceeding their competence. Arrest them and send them back to face the little Frankenstein’s monster of their own making. You could see it in their animated faces and hear it in their loud triumphant and trumpeting voices.

‘How was the evening?’ asked the Afrikaner, getting up. He took out a handkerchief and dabbed beads of sweat breaking on his forehead.

‘Busy, busy,’ one of the new patrol guards said. He switched to English. ‘We chased a big group that was trying to cross close to the railway all the way to the last fence and on our way back we caught these two.’ He said pointing at the two boys standing in front of him.

‘And the three madalas?’

‘These three we caught just after we left the watch point,’ replied the second patrol guard. ‘They’d just gone through the hole by that big tree.’

‘I thought they closed that hole last week,’ the Afrikaner said. His voice was raised in alarm.

‘We mend fence and they open holes in it. It’s a little game we play,’ said one of the patrol guards.

‘This business of catching them only to send them back is a waste of time ma’an,’ said the Afrikaner. ‘There should be a severe punishment. Chop off a hand or a foot, or something. That’s what the Arabs would do.’

They all exploded with laughter.

‘Then what do we do when we have a country of handicapped for neighbours?’ said one of the patrols.

‘Look at it this way,’ the Afrikaner said. ‘Let’s say you’ve a beautiful home. A home with everything you’ve ever wished for, nice furniture, big yard, fancy car parked in the garage and as a bonus, a beautiful wife. But...’ He raised a forefinger to his face. ‘You’ve got one big problem. Rats...big monsters of rats, everywhere. In your garden, crawling in your ceiling, garage. Everywhere. You name it. You can’t sleep and neither does your beautiful wife, and

children. Now this problem is straining your relationship with your family. Your missus is threatening to leave if this problem persists. You know the missuses like to fuss, nê? And you know very well that the rats come from your neighbour who harbours them.'

One of them, knitting his arms, shifted his weight to the side. The second stepped a foot forward.

'Now, this problem has been going on for years,' continued the Afrikaner, 'and you've done everything you can. I mean everything, poison, traps, you name it and a cat is out of the question because you're allergic to them. What would you do?'

The two patrol guards turned their heads and looked at each other with puzzled expressions on their faces. After a slight hesitation they both shook their heads.

'What do you do?' asked one of the patrol guards. His voice was thin as if he had swallowed a hot coal.

'Think about it. We'll talk again tomorrow,' said the Afrikaner, walking to the corner where he picked up his rifle. He slung it over his shoulder and passed an old brown leather bag to the boy. Then he slowly started towards the door.

'Please tell us. It will trouble me the whole day,' the second patrol guard pleaded, following the Afrikaner with his eyes.

The Afrikaner stopped a foot or two from the door, turned around and looked at them. He remained silent for a little while. He looked like a mercenary lost in his purpose with the barrel of the rifle jutting out behind his left shoulder.

'Tell them, Japie.'

The boys retreated a few steps and said, 'The more I look at my dog, the less I think of my neighbour.'

'What does that mean?'

The Afrikaner didn't respond. He smiled and shook his head. Then turning around, he extended a hand and opened the door. He left a long silence that lingered in the room long after he was gone. Switching to Venda, one of the patrol guards said something to his colleague. An exchange of short sentences passed between them. Then one of them took a seat.

'Okay! Back to business. Starting with you,' he said, pointing at me. 'Make a line and give me your names.'

'Don't give him your real name,' Pedzi whispered.

The man behind the desk raised his eyes and looked at us.

‘What did he say to you?’

I turned to the back.

‘I’m talking to you,’ he said.

I placed a palm over my chest. ‘Me?’

‘Yes. You in a jersey with Teddy bears. Where did you get it? Did you borrow it from your grandmother?’

The second man chuckled.

‘Nothing,’ I said.

He shot up at once and stood hunched over the desk. ‘What?’

I didn’t respond. Instead, I kept my eyes fixed on him. To me, he was just another big dog behind the gate barking at passers-by.

‘Do I look stupid to you?’ he said angrily.

The mood in the room had suddenly changed from tense to being extremely tense with chances of violence and thunderclaps. I wished the Afrikaner hadn’t left. He had been definitely racist in his little anecdote; probably a narcissist too, also a mad jingoist, but he had not been unreasonable with us. Not once had he tried to exercise his authority over us. He had simply carried on with his duties as if we didn’t exist—as if we were not human, unworthy of his attention. But now here was a brother, a brother not only by skin colour association but also by historical ties. Move the border by a few kilometres and he would have been a Rhodesian bastard. He probably would have been standing right here in line with us.

‘I’m talking to you,’ he said, walking around the desk. He came to me seething with rage and stopped uncomfortably close to me. He was short and stocky. His bow-legs grappled to keep him upright; it was as if anytime one of them was going to give in and snap, sending him crashing to the floor. But they didn’t—years of shitting squat in the village and goat’s milk had fortified them.

‘I’ll ask you again.’ He raised a forefinger to my face. ‘What did he say to you?’

I turned back to Pedzi and then to him.

‘What are you looking at him for?’ he said. ‘I asked you the question, not him.’

I hesitated.

‘He said don’t be afraid.’

'Why did he say that? Is he your bodyguard?'

I shook my head.

'So why is he telling you not to be afraid?'

'I don't know,' I replied.

He turned to Pedzi.

'Why are you telling him not to be afraid? Who are you?'

Pedzi took a step back and looked away.

'Hey! I'm taking to you.'

'No one,' Pedzi mumbled.

'If you are a no one then why are you giving him assurances?'

'He's my brother, okay,' Pedzi lashed out.

'Wooh, so you are the mastermind?' He took a step closer to Pedzi. 'Do you know that border jumping is a punishable offence?'

Pedzi didn't respond.

'Do you know that?'

'I didn't know.'

'Now you know. Let me ever catch you or see you in this room again. Your parents won't recognize you when you return home. Both of you.'

He turned around and retraced his steps back to the desk.

'Now! One by one, give me your names,' he said, sitting down. 'Starting with you, come.' I hobbled to the desk. My knees were stiff and the sole of my shoe flapped and padded the floor.

'Ngqabelo Mabena,' I said.

He looked up at me. 'How do you write that?'

I leaned over slightly and started to spell the name, 'N-g-q-a-b-e-l-o.'

Then I started on the surname as expected.

'M-a....'

'I know how to spell Mabena. Do I look stupid to you?'

Pull the blanket off while they sleep

We were packed into the back of a truck like livestock being transported to the slaughter house. I stood squashed against the side, clutching the wire mesh on the window with both hands, looking outside as the truck pulled away from the driveway. It went rattling all the way to the gate where it stopped. The sun was bright and yellow against the horizon. Its rays poured down with vengeance. April was one of those tempestuous months. Long hot days were followed by afternoons of heavy rainfall. In the mornings you would have to hop on rocks to escape small pools of rainwater and by noon the ground would be cracking from the lashing of the sun. What a time to be travelling.

Thirty minutes into the journey, the sound of the engine changed into a low faltering hum as the truck gradually slowed down. Then I felt the wheels bounce off the edge of the tarmac road, onto the roadside. Its sides vibrated and rattled—and the canopy swayed and rocked us into a frenzy.

‘We’re stopping,’ one of the detainees announced.

A chatter broke out. Everybody turned their heads and looked around in confusion, desperation and fear. The commotion lasted a few seconds and then everyone fell silent at the sound of the opening door.

‘Someone is coming,’ a woman said.

‘Where did you put your money?’ Pedzi whispered.

‘In my pocket,’ I replied, placing a palm over the front pocket of my jeans.

‘Remove it and hide it in your balls. Don’t let anyone see you.’

I took out the notes from my pocket, crumpled them into a ball which I shoved deep under my testicles. The edges and corners were sharp against the scrotum. I pressed my thighs together to flatten the edges. To endure great pain at once is better than to suffer gradual, recurring pain, I told myself.

A rigid silence ensued. Footsteps. The air tensed. The footsteps became louder. We could hear them grinding the stones with rhythm all the way to the back of the truck where the latch clunked and squealed as the doors swung open. A light draught rushed inside the

truck.

'Is there anyone who wants to talk to me?' the policeman who had opened the door said. His suspicious eyes darted from one end to another.

The back of the truck was imbued with a newly revived energy. Heads were turned to solicit answers from the eyes of those who knew what that meant. Pedzi looked away.

'I asked a question,' the policeman said.

There was no response. An uncomfortable silence followed. The policeman's face grew sour. It had started off somewhat relaxed, then it changed to serious but still not bearing any signs of hostility. When he spoke again he was a different person—no longer the same man who opened the door two minutes earlier.

'Does anyone of you people speak English?'

Another wave of panic set in. Then, as if he had just figured out an answer to a difficult question, one of the old men raised a hand.

'Yes! I can speak English,' he said.

'Well then, you must have heard what I said. Ask them if anyone wants to talk to me,' the policeman said.

'I'm sure they heard you,' the old man said, turning his head, looking around for affirmation. 'We're just not sure what you mean by that.'

'How stupid are you people? Do I've to spit it out?' the policeman raised his voice. 'Who wants to go home?'

Another exchange of looks passed between the detainees. I raised my eyes and looked at Pedzi, who gave me a look of disapproval. After a slight delay, a middle-aged man stepped forward and tentatively raised his hand.

'*Woza baba*,' the policeman ordered.

People spread to the sides, letting the man through. He got off the truck and stood next to the policeman. Once outside, he looked different. The distress on his face dissipated. He had been freed from the shadows of fear and uncertainty that occupied every detainee's countenance. Even though I could not see my own face, I knew it was there and I couldn't escape it as long as I was in that truck. Later, I would learn that I couldn't escape it at all, as long I was on the other side of the border.

'Anybody else?' the policeman asked.

Two men stepped forward. One of them had an old greenish suitcase clutched under

his arm. He grappled with it and joined the other two men. The policeman made another call but no one came forward.

‘Have it your way!’

He slammed the door shut and secured the latch. A moment later the truck started and manoeuvred back to the road.

‘They’ve let them go,’ a woman said. Her voice was filled with regret.

‘I wonder how much they paid them,’ another woman said.

‘It doesn’t matter. What they did was stupid,’ a man said. ‘They won’t last an hour without being arrested again.’

From the side window, I could see the three men. The road stretched endlessly like bubble gum behind the truck. A few kilometres after the stop we entered farmlands—stretches and stretches of maize fields; green blankets of spinach and tomato fields; fruit trees with branches heavy with ripe fruits. A clear blue sky unfurled itself above us. The engine ground and whined. A pair of pigeons flew across the window.

Musina Police station was thirty kilometers from the border, located in a small suburb on the eastern side of the town. It was made up of an ivory-white building and a block of cells in the backyard. A two-meter high wall crowned with a coiled barbed wire enclosed the buildings.

The doors opened. Iron eats iron; nothing resonates with the loss of freedom more than the sound of an iron door grate. It screams confinement and reminds one of the pleasures of liberty. It possesses a certain power over you. It makes you feel weak, helpless and hopeless. The air becomes thick and food loses taste. And that little hollow you are confined in becomes a beast after your soul.

A group of four policemen stood chins raised and hands on hips and feet wide apart. Their plump figures suggested that they were men of large appetites and deep thirsts—big bellies and alcohol-blotched faces. If only they could see themselves through our eyes and if only we could see ourselves through their eyes. I wondered what we looked like to them, what we represented to them. I imagined we looked impoverished; servile immigrants huddled together like sheep in sight of jackals; filthy border jumpers carrying their deplorable burdens—coming to stain our infallible democracy and to take our jobs and to eat our food; to shit in our fancy toilets and fuck our sisters; to live in our houses and dirty our streets; to rub shoulders with us and take our language as their own—to be us.

‘Put all personal belongings in this basket,’ said one of the policemen, holding out a clear plastic container.

People looked at each other and said nothing.

‘I said all personal belongings in this basket.’

There was no reaction.

‘Are you people trying to tell me that you don’t have any personal belongings?’ he said in disbelief. ‘We’ll see about that.’ He turned to one of his colleagues and shouted, ‘Search them!’

‘Any weapons?’ the policemen ordered to search us said, ‘boys from Bulawayo we know you. Your brothers have made a reputation killing people with knives in Johannesburg.’

One after another, we were searched. You had to stand with arms stretched to the sides and feet wide apart. A policeman would run his hands from your underarms, down the flanks, around the waist and down the legs to the ankles. Finally, he would grope your crotch to feel for hidden items. It was all an uncomfortable business.

‘Aren’t you ashamed of touching an old man’s balls like me?’ one of the old men said. ‘You are only inviting bad luck for yourself.’

‘Your luck ran out here today, did you touch an old man’s balls?’ the policeman replied.

After a protest from the women a woman officer was brought to search the women.

Gravel stones clattered rhythmically under the weight of our steps as we marched in a single file to the backyard, through the passage between the building and the wall. There were four policemen on guard—two at the front and two at the back. The head of the line had just disappeared around the corner of the building when a commotion broke out.

‘What is he doing? What is he doing?’ a female voice said.

One of the detainees had just broken off from the line and dashed to the wall. He tried to jump onto the wall but his hands missed and he slipped. On the second attempt he managed to hook his fingers on top of the wall. Hoisting himself up, he started to climb the wall. When the policemen at the front realized what was happening they rushed after him. Before he could reach the top, one of the policemen had him by the ankle. He yanked him down. The boy tumbled down and hit the ground with a thud. Like flies on a rotting carcass, the policemen went over him and started to beat him. Punches and kicks rained hard on him.

One of the policemen came bustling, shoving us against the wall of the building.

‘Against the wall! All of you! Against the wall! Now, now!’

I moved a step back and pressed my back against the wall. He shuffled past, shoving everyone who had fallen out of the line.

‘They’re going to kill him,’ a woman said sorrowfully on my left. ‘We must do something.’

‘What can we do?’ a man said.

‘Just do something!’ the woman cried. ‘We can’t just stand and watch.’

More policemen poured out of the building. They came running, pistols in holsters jingling and bouncing on the hips. They didn’t care to know what had happened but joined in on the assault. One of them was a white man of a massive build. His arrival presaged the boy’s doom. Cowered into a ball, head in the crook of his arms, he endured the beating. His body jerked convulsively as blow after blow landed on him.

Soon the policemen began to tire. The first one staggered backwards and stood at a distance with both hands on his knees, shoulders heaving. The second policeman placed a palm over his chest and paced a short distance and stood hand flat against the wall. The other two withdrew simultaneously. One of them, pulling up the waist of his pants, tucked in his shirt. He blew his nose violently, turned his face over his shoulder and spat. The white policeman stooped over and his hair fell over his face as he pounded the boy. He seemed to be possessed by something beyond the need to punish him. He beat him with every inch of his God-given strength. He changed hands, sunk his ivory teeth into the lower lip and continued the assault until he was drenched in sweat. Then he fell to the side and sat there with his knees drawn up and both hands resting on them. One of the policemen, a stocky, clean-shaven man with thick arms, stepped forward and sent three volleys to the abdomen. Someone uttered a muffled *hllhll* sound.

‘Get up!’

The boy managed to get onto all fours and remained in the same position.

‘Not so clever after all, huugh?’ the policeman said. He turned to his colleagues and shouted, ‘Take the rest inside.’

In the backyard there was a block of three cells. Above each steel door, letters A, B and C were written in orange paint. The door under the letter B was opened.

‘Inside!’ the policeman ordered. ‘Men to the left and women to the right.’

We entered the hall and fumbled in the dark. For the first few minutes you couldn't see anything. A heavy veil of darkness sat in front of you. When you closed your eyes, it got replaced by red deformed manifestations in the inner eyelids. You had to grope about to find a place to sit. In the process you stumbled on people who shoved you away violently such that you lost balance and fell on top of another person who barked at you with outmost anger. I decided to stay where I had landed. I raised my knees, and sat there with my arms wrapped around the legs. After a few minutes of gathering myself figures started to materialise in the darkness. Silhouettes slowly separated from the void that sat all around us. The room took shape. It was the size of a mini hall. The walls were covered in brown splotches and stain maps. Blocks of timber crossed each other at angles on the ceiling. Heaps of donkey blankets lay scattered across the floor.

It turned out that there were other detainees who had been brought in the previous night. We were about thirty people inside. Men to the left side and women to the right, just as the policeman had instructed. After looking around, I spotted Pedzi from the shape of his head. I got up and tiptoed to where he was, placing each foot carefully between people.

'Where do you think you're going?'

'He's coming to me,' Pedzi said.

'There is no space here.'

'That's none of your business.'

Pedzi made space next to him.

'Are you okay?'

'Yeah. I'm fine. It's just that...'

'Don't stress. We'll be out of here in two days max.'

Two nights, I thought. I couldn't endure another two hours of choking on the smell of sweaty armpits, feet and buttock cracks and ancestors know what else.

'But if we are lucky we'll be out of here tomorrow,' Pedzi added.

Next day; two words that made sense at that moment, words to hang on to and devote one's thoughts and hopes to. Every other word was just nonsense and every other thought was torture. The hall seemed to brighten up by the minute. Now I could see the faces of the people across the hall, across the undulating waves of grey donkey blankets spread out on the floor. There were about ten women. All of them sat with backs against the wall, legs either stretched to the front and crossed at the ankles or folded to the side. The

little girl stood in the corner, playing with the zip of her green jacket, next to the mother who had an arm around her waist.

Half an hour later, the door opened, sending in blinding light.

‘Get in!’

Someone tumbled into the cell. The door slammed shut and we were back in intense darkness. We sat there in silence, listening to the new arrival making tortured noises, unable to marry sound and image.

‘Are you okay?’ a woman said from across the hall.

There was no response.

‘Did they hurt you?’ a different voice asked.

‘Stop asking him questions,’ a male voice chimed in. ‘He’s in pain. Can’t you see that?’

‘What do you want us to do?’ the first female retorted. ‘Just sit here and listen to him suffering and not ask if he’s okay? What’s wrong with you men? Somebody is dying while you just sit there with your knees raised like you are giving birth.’

‘Watch your words, mama,’ the male barked.

‘She is right,’ the second female jumped in. ‘You should be trying to help him but instead you are just busy spreading your testicles.’

‘What do you know about testicles?’

‘I know just enough.’

A fierce clicking of the tongue followed. The mood in there was tenser than in a village struck by a tribal warfare. Silence stretched. Fear reigned. Uncertainty prevailed.

Every few hours the door opened as new detainees were brought in. They came in small groups of twos and threes and stumbled in the dark. Utterances of reproof were ejected. Once the new arrivals had settled down, the cell would fall back into silence. Everyone would plunge back into their thoughts. You couldn’t see the faces of the detainees but you could feel their presence, their troubled souls rising above and circling the walls—the weight of their eyes, the attention on their ears and the subdued sound of their breath. If you listened closely, you could also hear their thoughts. For everyone there shared the same thoughts. What was going to happen next? When were we going to be let out? What about food? Was there any? Then there was the inevitable concern. Were we going to make it to our destinations? Occasionally a thin subdued cough tore through the silence. When it passed the silence grew deeper and eerier.

At noon, the door was opened and an instruction from the man in the doorway launched us to our feet. We poured out of the cell, into a backyard where two plump women in light-blue kitchen overalls, white pinafores and white doeks, served us food. There were two policemen on guard at each end of the yard. We formed two lines, each person with a plastic plate and a cup. Soon I was at the front and received a serving of an ominous looking bean stew. I could count the number of beans floating in a watery gravy of tomato chunks and onions. This was accompanied by a thick slice of bread and half a cup of *Drink 'O' Pop* which smelled more like medicine than anything else. I joined a group of other detainees in the shade of the tree. The beans weren't cooked through. Each ingredient tasted separately. The onions were chewy and the tomatoes were sour and acidic. The stew hardly had any seasoning. Pedzi came and sat next to me. We dug into the plates with our hands. Sucked the liquid in the cups and stewed everything together in the mouth and chewed with synchronized movements. The entire affair lasted under five minutes.

'Wooh! You look like you haven't eaten all your lives,' said one of the plump women.

'They're coming from the house of hunger,' said the second woman. They both laughed.

'Woman! You don't know hunger,' one of the detainees said. She was a middle-aged woman with an impenetrable face.

We were let out again at twilight. After we had regrouped under the tree two policemen came and distributed ham, cheese and tomato sandwiches. Receiving the sandwich, I wrestled the urge to forfeit it. I had grown up in a Christian family, so we were not allowed to eat pork. When I took the first bite of the sandwich I felt as if I was betraying our family values. Eating pig—or just looking at it – was considered to be sin by Mother. According to her, breathing the smell of pork was just as bad as eating it. She would say that the word pork was devised to make something bad sound delectable and sophisticated.

'It's just pig meat—forget the word pork. White people have a way of making things sound more agreeable than they are,' Mother would say.

'But mama, how can something created by God be bad or unclean?' my sister Winnet would ask.

Winnet had been assigned the task of writing down the shopping list for the reunion party. My uncle SaBrilliant had arrived that afternoon to oversee the preparations. He squatted on a wooden bench close to the door. His pants were too tight and an awkward

bulge had set between the legs. A bottle of Lion lager stood erect between his feet. He would lean over to pick up the bottle at intervals and send down long gulps and finish off with a loud belch.

‘Who said everything was created by God?’ Mother said.

‘Doesn’t the bible say so?’

‘I don’t know. All I know is that it tells us not to eat pig.’

Winnet smiled shyly and looked away.

‘Your mother is right, child,’ my uncle said in a throaty voice. ‘Not everything was created by God.’

Mother’s eyebrows shot up.

‘I didn’t say that!’

‘I mean really! Think about it,’ my uncle said. He paused, took another swig of his Lion larger. ‘Look at white people for example.’ He extended a free hand, motioning to the imaginary white people. ‘Just look at them and tell me that they were created by the same God that made us. Look at how they live and look at how we live. God is not as harsh to them as he is to us. I mean, they can do pretty much whatever they want and still come out fine. Look at slavery for instance, if it had been blacks enslaving whites, I promise you the slavery enterprise wouldn’t have yielded as much. But us, you do one wrong thing and the bad luck that follows you...’ He shook his head solemnly.

‘And He also punishes drunks,’ Mother said.

A brief silence swept in as my uncle grabbed the neck of the beer bottle and took another long gulp. A globule of beer trickled down the sides of his mouth. He raised a hand and brushed it across his lips.

‘If He lets Nigerian pastors rob the poor why the hell would he care about people like me having a little fun? No harm in that. I would rather burn in hell than join any gang.’

‘A church is not a gang,’ Mother protested.

‘Choose what you want to call it,’ SaBrilliant mumbled, ‘but to me...it’s definitely a gang after your wallet.’

‘This conversation has just become too political for me,’ Winnet whispered. ‘All I asked was if I should write down pork or not. Not a lecture on the Bible, Jesus and his white friends.’

‘Hey!’ Mother erupted, pointing a finger at my sister. ‘Don’t you ever, ever blaspheme

under my roof, do you hear me?’

My sister lowered her eyes.

‘Unless you are moving in with your drunkard of an uncle.’

‘Okay! Okay! So, no pork,’ said Winnet. ‘I got it.’

‘Write it down, what are you still asking questions for?’ SaBrilliant said. ‘I’ll eat alone if no one wants it.’

‘And whose pots are you going to use to cook it with?’

‘*Yah eish!* Your mother is raw. She is raw like a sunburnt Boer.’ He tossed his head and laughed drunkenly. ‘She hasn’t changed a bit since she was a girl. Until today she stands hard on the ground. No wonder your fathers ran away.’

‘*Hayi suka!* Weak men don’t have a place in my home,’ Mother said.

From the first bite of the sandwich I disagreed with Mother. Pigs were definitely created by God and definitely not dirty after they have been slaughtered and the meat processed into ham. The meat was so good. I felt I had missed out all those years growing up in a Christian home. I ate hungrily and greedily. I blatantly betrayed the teachings of my upbringing and didn’t feel remorseful. Instead I felt cheated. I finished the sandwich and emptied the crumbs that were left at the bottom of the plastic bag into my palm and ate them too. Then I turned over the paper and started to read the matrix writing on the white sticker pasted on the back of the bag. Ham, Cheese and Tomato, it read. The price was printed at the bottom of the ingredients. I decided to keep the bag as a souvenir so I pocketed it. When I looked up Pedzi was holding out his uneaten sandwich.

‘You can have mine also,’ he said.

I hesitated. I thought he was testing me.

‘What about you?’

‘I don’t eat pork.’

Without delay, I took the sandwich, stripped it naked and attacked it.

The devil works in mysterious ways too

The next day, we were woken up before sunrise—just when the white light of dawn announces that the night has ended. The time when witches in my hometown pack up their paraphernalia and return to their homes; when security guards on night shifts wake up before the check-up guy arrives and the licentious men in their beds at home see to it that they remember to take their socks with them. Like school children on assembly day, we dragged our feet out of the cell and gathered in the courtyard. A short policeman with a paunch threatening to pop the buttons of his shirt came and stood in front of us. He raised a finger and began to count our heads.

‘I got 92. Is that correct?’ he shouted to two policemen smoking cigarettes at a distance. One of them raised a thumb.

‘You’ll be given something to eat and please do so quickly. Don’t chew just swallow. Immediately after eating proceed to the bus at the front.’

‘What are you giving them breakfast for?’ shouted one of the two policemen. ‘No breakfast for anyone. You’re spoiling them. They’ll want to come back again. Save that food for the coming ones. Government is running out of money. We’re not running a feeding scheme here.’

‘You heard the man. I wanted to give you something to eat but...’ He shrugged.

As he reached for the door to close it a woman shouted, ‘There’s someone inside.’

He peeked inside the cell and turned to us with a look of surprise on his face.

‘What wrong with him?’

‘He is injured,’ the woman replied. She wore a purple sleeveless jersey. She had strong, overworked arms that looked like strips of biltong.

‘Injured! Injured by what?’

‘They beat him.’

‘Who beat him?’

He stepped inside the cell and disappeared into the darkness. Hushed comments passed between the detainees but no one said who had beaten the boy. The policeman

came out and stopped at the door.

‘Do any of you know who he is?’

People looked at each other and shook their heads.

‘He came with you,’ said a woman, turning to one of the detainees—a young man of about twenty years of age.

‘I don’t know him,’ the boy said. The look on his face.... you could swear he was being asked by a Roman soldier if he knew Jesus.

‘But you were talking to him the entire time,’ the woman said in an accusatory tone.

‘That doesn’t mean I know him.’

‘Okay enough!’ the policeman shouted. ‘I need two strong men to help carry him. The rest of you, go.’

He stepped back inside the cell.

At the front of the main building there were two police vans and a bus. I was happy that we were being released. I started to think about what we were going to do next. I figured we were going to be at the border during the early hours of the morning to take a bus back to Bulawayo.

To accommodate everybody, some people were to stand in the aisle. Faces went under the underarms of taller men, crotches brushed against buttocks and hips. Whenever the bus swerved, people touched each in uncomfortable places.

‘Bhudi, please don’t touch my buttocks with your thing,’ a woman shrieked.

‘What are you talking about, woman?’ barked the accused.

‘Don’t act dumb. You know what I’m talking about,’ the woman said. ‘I keep feeling something hard against my buttocks. Please stop it, I’m not a tester.’

‘You must be crazy to think that I’d want to test a woman like you. You don’t even have those buttocks that you’re talking about.’

‘At least I have a husband who loves me. I bet you are still a bachelor at your age. That’s why you are going around perving and poking women’s behinds.’

‘If your husband loves you enough why didn’t he give you money for a passport?’

A wave of laughter rippled through the bus. Only men laughed and the women maintained straight faces.

‘Enough!’ said the woman with a purple sleeveless jersey. ‘Is that what men have been reduced to? Making fun of women and behaving like boys without mothers!’

‘Our mothers ran away with the 5th brigade,’ someone shouted.

The men laughed again.

A few turns from the police station led us to the main road. I watched the landscape ripple past the window, mountains, savannah plains, trees and cultivated fields. Then I started to wonder how big the world was—the sky that envelopes everything and the ground that stretched under the grinding wheels of the bus. Then I wondered how significant was that moment in proportion to everything that was happening in the world. We had been driving for some time when someone said, ‘Where are they taking us?’

People turned heads and looked through the windows.

‘I think we’re heading in the wrong direction,’ a woman added. Her voice was full of panic.

I looked at Pedzi, who stood a meter in front of me. Between us there was a wall of three people. He looked calm, absent-minded—as if someone had borrowed his mind and feelings and forgot to give them back.

‘I also don’t recognize this place,’ another person said.

‘Beit Bridge should be in that other direction,’ a man in faded blue two-piece overalls chimed in. He looked more like someone going to work at a factory than a border jumper. He had probably left home going to work, without telling his wife that he was skipping the country. After a few sleepless nights she would learn that he was in South Africa. She would get upset for a few days but soon get over it, knowing that every month-end now she could expect some groceries from South Africa like other women.

‘How do you know?’ a man said angrily.

‘She is right,’ another woman said. ‘We’re heading in the wrong direction. We’ve been driving for almost an hour. Shouldn’t we have reached it by now if we were going to Beit Bridge?’

The argument escalated as more and more people weighed in on the matter. Which direction were we heading? Where were we being taken? Conjectures flew in all directions. There was no telling which one was right. Each person came up with a different theory. Someone said we were being taken to a forest where we would be freed and then hunted with dogs. I had heard that theory before but to what extent was it true, I had no idea. Another person said we were being taken to a bigger prison where we were to serve a short sentence. Somebody said we were being taken to a crocodile farm where we would be fed to

crocodiles. Each theory inspired profuse prayer, which I participated in, followed by a recital of a bible verse: *As I walk through the valley of the shadow of death*, I began silently. *I take a look at my life... Wooh! Wooh! Stop! Stop! Stop! Not Gangster's Paradise, Psalm 23:4. I started from the top, after apologizing to God, Jesus and the Virgin Mary of course: even though I walk in the valley of shadow of death, I shall fear no evil...* I finished off with a silently pronounced Amen. The power of those words set in immediately. I was fearless for a few seconds until a rattling sound took over as the bus went off the tarmac, onto a dirt road, stirring up clouds of dust that loomed all around the windows and seeped into the bus. An old man had a paroxysm of coughing. The little girl joined him a moment later and soon everyone was coughing frantically. Meanwhile the engine whirred and grumbled as the bus worked its way along the bumpy dirt road. In some areas it had to slow down to almost a standstill and then it would cautiously move forward. Now it had become obvious that we were being taken to a remote place. We had left all places of civilization a few kilometers behind. One of them must have been right, I thought. But which one? My head started to scramble for a plausible theory. What were they going to do us? Were they going to free us into the wild to hunt us like animals or feed us to crocodiles? Since crocodile meat is a delicacy the industry must be booming, I thought. Or maybe imprison us in some remote place. Which one was it? Prison seemed a possibility but the thought of being turned into a Sis'Rose made my stomach turn. Freddy Gwala had painted a clear picture of prison life in his song.

One afternoon, I must have been in the fourth grade and it was during school holidays. We were bored and hungry and the sun was merciless towards everything it landed on. Ntula, Tino and I sat on tree branches of a mango tree, eating raw mangoes with salt. We were playing a game of, 'what would you choose?' The circle had gone around twice already and it was Ntula's turn to ask me a question. With his mouth full, a penknife in one hand and a cut yellowing mango in the other, he said, 'What would you chose, going to jail and become some thug's Sis'Rose or becoming insane and walk around the streets naked and eating from dustbins?'

I considered the choices but they were both unappealing. Ntula had taken the game to infuriating extremes.

'This game is boring,' I said.

‘You know the rules, you must choose one,’ Ntula said, sinking the knife into the mango and cutting a big chunk.

‘I choose neither of them.’

‘Why? You have to choose one. Let’s say you were going to be killed if you didn’t choose.’

‘I would choose to go insane because at least I wouldn’t have a sense of what is happening around me,’ Tino said.

‘What if being insane is painful?’ Ntula said. ‘At least when you go to prison you do time and when you finish they let you out. Then you can continue to live your life.’

‘Then you should choose prison. I’m not choosing anything,’ I said. ‘I’m not playing anymore. I’ll be the judge.’

‘No! There’s no judge,’ Ntula said. ‘Either you are in or you’re out.’

‘Okay, I’m out,’ I said, climbing down the tree.

‘Where are you going?’ Tino asked.

‘Home.’

I left them up in the tree and went home. I was terrified, angry and feeling defeated.

Here I was, facing similar, ball-shrinking alternatives. Prison. Death or get hunted. Who knows how the hunting will turn out? I knew that there was no prayer that could save me from the brutal hands of the border controls. I had to wait, like others, to suffer the consequences of my transgressions.

The heat was rising. Sweat was breaking out in all corners and orifices of the body. Everyone was silent. Heads were bowed down or turned to the windows.

Ten kilometers into the dirt road, we came to a small, niggardly tarred road that led us to the gate of the border post. There were no formalities at customs. The bus shot past the building like a presidential motorcade and took to the bridge at speed. We descended a slope into the Zimbabwean side where the earth looked like a sunburnt fabric. There was a colonial building with two round columns at the front and a triangular marquee crested with Zimbabwe’s coat of arms. The red stoep of the porch glimmered in the sun. On the opposite side there was a fenced yard which boasted dozens of impounded cars, covered in dust, lying flat on their stomachs like wounded creatures, wasps, beetles, roaches, hogs with snouts, deflated and backs lecherously raised. Some looked like they were going to say something to

you—ask what the exchange rate of the rand to the dollar was.

Two policemen came out of the building and stood at the door with hands on hips. They looked up at us with contorted faces under the visors of their caps. New stock, fraught with desperation. The good for nothings. Can't even border jump without being caught. At least those were the expressions on their faces.

'Welcome back to Zimbabwe,' one of the policemen said in Shona. 'You thought you could run away from the problems of your country.' His chubby face shimmered in the heat of the sun.

He counted us and signed a piece of paper handed to him by one of the South African policemen.

'Come with me! We must register you so we know who you are.'

He led us to the back of the building where there was a table and chair. In the corner of the backyard there was a big cage full of dusty electronics and appliances.

'Such evil! They take people's things to let them rot here at the back of this building,' a woman commented.

'One by one, give me your names,' said hippo-face, drawing up a chair. 'Let's not waste each other's time. We know that you want to go back. Go! Crocodiles are waiting for their dinner. And as for the lucky ones, we'll see each other again tomorrow.'

'*Vele!* What are we going to stay here for?' the woman in a purple jersey said, dragging her words like she was perched on a toilet bowl, talking while trying to move her bowels at the same time.

We gave the police officer our names, made-up ones of course, and left the deportation centre. Arid, dry and rocky ground—stretches of it. A strip of dirt road extended northwards outside the gate, flanked by patches of thorn bush thickets squatting under the infernal sun. Cicadas droned in the silence of the melancholic morning air. Their shrill cry tortured the ear drums and induced feelings of insanity. A lazy mirage danced about at a distance. It was as if the world had imploded in front of my eyes and everything had come down, crushing us. Pedzi stopped outside the gate and stood with both hands on his hips. A globule of sweat trickled down from the temple and raced down the side of his face.

'What do you want to do?' Pedzi said softly. 'Do you want to go back or try again?'

My head dropped. In truth, I didn't know what I wanted anymore. I had expected the journey to be hard, but not this hard. It wasn't just physically taxing but it was also

emotionally corrosive. I was tired and felt weak.

‘You need to decide now!’ There was an aggressive tone of impatience in his voice.

‘We can try again,’ I heard myself say.

I didn’t want to seem weak or afraid. But most of all, I saw this as the only chance I had to get out of the country—out of *KwaMgodoyi*. I still had a hundred and thirty USD in my pocket, which was substantial.

‘Okay!’ Pedzi wheezed. He grabbed my shoulder firmly. ‘Let’s get something to eat first and rest a bit. Now let’s go to the border.’

‘Where are we now?’

‘This is a deportation centre. The border post is less than a kilometer from here.’

We trooped along the dust road until we reached a small town which was made up of one long street and poorly constructed structures in an irregular arrangement. An OK store, as always, was one of the big shops there— milking every penny.

Incense fumes permeated the gloomy inside of a small grocery store. Behind the counter, a short Chinese man stood with both arms rested on the counter. A copy of *The Herald* was spread open in front of him. He lifted his round chinless face as we entered. His eyes were just a slit above the cheeks and a bob of hair fell equally to the sides. Pedzi stopped at the counter and looked around—left to right and up and down. The Chinese man watched him suspiciously. Then, dragging his words as if he was being forced to talk, he said, ‘How much is a can of Fanta?’

‘Three dollars each!’ the Chinaman replied, flashing tobacco-stained teeth. His eyes were nowhere to be seen.

‘Three dollars for a small can of Fanta?’ Pedzi queried. ‘We bought it for half the price two days ago in Bulawayo.’

‘My friend! My friend! This,’ the Chinaman exploded, pointing a finger down. ‘This! this is not Bule-wayo. I say three dollars. Three dollars.’ He raised three fingers. ‘That’s it. That’s it. No money, go! Go!’

Pedzi turned around and looked at me.

‘Should we buy here or try at the border? There is a tuck shop there.’

‘Let’s try at the border.’

‘Okay!’

He slammed a hand down on the counter and walked away. Just as we stepped

outside the store the Chinaman shouted, 'Don't come back here! I know you come here to steal. Bad choice. Wrong. This... this no place you can steal.'

Pedzi stopped abruptly.

'Why don't you go back where you came from, fucking Ching-Chong? You think this is China?' He tossed a hand over his shoulder.

'Get out of my shop or I call police,' the Chinaman shouted. He took out a cellphone and made as if he was dialing the police.

'We're already leaving your stinking shop; can't you see that? It's a shitty shop anyway.'

'Your mother is shit,' the Chinaman retorted.

In a fit of rage, Pedzi retreated back into the shop. He marched on the Chinaman with a forefinger pointed at him. 'I'll fuck you up, Mr Chinaman. Do you hear me? I'll fuck you up.'

The Chinaman rushed away from the counter and stood against the fridge.

'You don't know anything about my mother. Do you hear me?' Pedzi shouted.

He grabbed the safety bar with both hands and rattled it.

'I'll fuck you up! You hear me! I'll fuck you up.'

I rushed back inside the shop.

'Pedzi, let's just leave before the police come,' I said.

'I'll fuck this Chinaman up, tell him,' Pedzi said, letting go the bars.

'He'll fuck you up, Mr Chinaman,' I said to the Chinaman. 'Now can we go?'

'I call police,' the Chinaman said defiantly.

From the tone of his voice, you could tell that he had a lot of trust in the system. In the police. He sounded like a young boy warning a bully about his big muscular brother.

As we walked out, Pedzi grabbed the door handle and slammed the door shut. It bounced against the doorframe and swung back inside. He went back, grabbed the handle and jerked it violently and slammed the door shut again. The walls vibrated and specks of dirt showered the place.

'You call this a shop! You call this a shop! It's a fuckin' shack if you ask me.'

I was dead with fright.

'Pedzi, a police van is coming,' I said.

He looked around.

'I thought I saw something like a police van but it turned into that street.'

We took off and ran a short distance to get clear of the building. A group of young men stood gathered at a corner. Pedzi lifted a hand and waved at them. Two responded with imperceptible nods.

‘Those are GumaGumas,’ he said. ‘Don’t look at them! Don’t look at them!’

We trod in silence for a while. When we were a safe distance away, Pedzi said, ‘Did you see how they looked at us? It’s definitely them.’

‘Are they dangerous?’

‘Dangerous?’ he queried. ‘They are monsters. They rape women and kill people.’

The name suggested something outside of the civilized world; a cannibalistic tribe found somewhere deep in the forest of Central Africa or Asia.

We took a small road east. A bloated carcass of a dog caught in rigor mortis lay on the roadside—sparse grey fur, teeth bared and the gums turned green. Maggots writhed out of the eye sockets. A sickening stench permeated the air. I turned my head away. Pedzi drew the collar of his sweater over his nose.

Thirty minutes later we came out to an open field with hundreds of trucks parked in lines, trailers covered with dusty sails. An eerie silence lay over the area. The door of one of the trucks popped open and a man shuffled out, groaning and moaning. He shambled to the front of the truck where he took a piss. We veered right to avoid a rivulet of his urine that flowed into our way.

We weaved through the trucks and came out to a big road. Cars came flying past, blowing strong gusts of wind that raised dust which settled on the faces and caked on the skin. You felt it in your eyes when you blinked and in your teeth. After a short while the building of the Zimbabwean border post came into view. A new hope rose from within and it grew more and more as we neared the border post. By the time we entered the gate our spirits had been absolutely revived. It was as if the past two days had never happened. The scene at the customs concourse hadn’t changed a bit. You could swear it was still the same people, wearing the same faces of desperation, waiting to get a turn to cross over. A chance to escape the unescapable. At the gate, we veered right, in the direction of a caravan that had been turned into a tuck-shop. There were few words that passed between us now. Pedzi acted and I emulated.

‘Two curry-pies and two Fantas, please,’ Pedzi said in a soft voice.

I took out the bundle of notes and picked out two five USD notes and passed them to

the woman behind the counter. She raised each one to the light to examine them. Then she shoved them into the front pocket of her apron which had faded sunflower prints on. A subdued clinking of coins sounded as she fished for change. She counted the money from the inside of the pocket, making sure that we couldn't see it.

'You said two Fantas and two curry-pies?' the woman confirmed, handing over the change.

'Yes!'

The woman ambled to the fridge, swung the door open and stooped over. Balancing with one hand on the knee, she peeked inside the fridge. She was in the same position for a while.

'The Fanta is on top,' Pedzi said. 'I can even see it from here. And can we also have five chewing gums.'

'Oh sorry! I don't know what I'm thinking.' She slapped a hand onto her forehead.

'I said two,' Pedzi grumbled. 'And two curry-pies.'

I waited for the word 'please' but it never came.

'She might be having a bad morning,' I said to Pedzi as we walked away.

'What about us?' He stopped abruptly and looked at me with eyes filled with disbelief. 'What about us? Are we not having a bad day?' He resumed walking. 'We had a nightmarish two days. I could be home eating breakfast now but look where I am. Look. I'm busy eating rotten curry-pies.'

We trooped back to the gate and along the road, to a nearby *Soft n' free* billboard where we sat down and ate. My curry-pie crumbled into pieces on the first bite which I nibbled at until the last morsel and still felt like I hadn't placed a thing in my mouth. I went to buy another one. When I returned Pedzi had fallen asleep in the shade.

Cars came racing down the road and slowed down to cruising speed as they neared the gate. I started to try to guess their names as they appeared from around the bend at a distance. I counted a lot of Ford cars, Escorts, Lasers and Batams. There were a few Nissans and Toyotas and lost and lots of VWs—it was if they were being handed out on the streets in South Africa. Then I decided to sort them according to their registration number plates. First, I started to count the cars with the GP number plates against the ones with Zimbabwean plates. Having counted more of the GP plates, I went on to count the nicer ones of the GP plates. There weren't so many nice cars: as some of them came rattling down the road it

made you wonder if they were going reach their destinations. After counting cars, I started to do a mental list of things that I wished to buy when I arrived in Joburg. Nice clothes, Puma t-shirts and sneakers, Levi jeans and some Timberlands. Then I went on to muse about the food I wanted to try out; I wanted to taste everything that I had ever wished to eat—food items that I had seen on display at TM display and at Haddon 'n Sly. I wanted to try a hot-dog. I had a vague concept of what it looked like but the name just didn't sit well with me. Who calls food meant to be eaten by humans a hot-dog? It just didn't make any sense.

Pedzi turned to the side and mumbled something. He tucked his hands in his underarms and tightened his grasp. A light blue BMW came racing down the road, low on the ground as if it was going to sit down when you ordered it to. Its engine rumbled like a big boiling pot of *amagwadla* below the vibrating resonance of Mdu's *Tsiki-Tsiki Yoh!* I followed it with my eyes. It started to fart and pop as it slowed down to a cruising speed and glided through the gate and stopped behind a City to City bus. Doors popped open and two young men in their mid-twenties got out, leaving the doors wide ajar. They stood around and started to tuck in their shirts and adjust their hats. They both had leather jackets on in the heat of Limpopo. Satisfied with their looks, they marched inside the customs office with bouncy steps.

I picked up the curry-pie wrap that had been attacked by an army of ants and blew them off and nibbled on dried mutton and pastry crumbs. I rushed the morsels down with the last warm drops of the Fanta. Doors popped open and slammed shut. I turned my eyes back to the customs office concourse where the engine of the BMW had started to rumble, followed by a series of high raves before it bolted off and tore through the morning air.

'What was that?' Pedzi mumbled, raising his head an inch from the ground.

'It was a car.'

'Which make?'

'BMW, I don't know the model.'

'What did it look like?'

I described it to him, mentioning the three red, blue and white lines on the grille, a raised back with a spoiler and a sunroof. I made sure I didn't leave out the mags and thick balloon tires. 'It must be a *gusheshe*,' he said, gently lowering his head in the crook of his arm. He was silent for a while. Just when I thought he had fallen asleep, he added, 'Wake me up after thirty minutes.'

After some time, a period which I assumed was thirty minutes, I woke him up. He raised his head and looked at me squinting.

‘Thirty minutes has passed,’ I said.

He lowered his head, closed his eyes and slept.

‘Pedzi, I’m thirsty,’ I said after a while.

‘There is a toilet inside,’ he mumbled. ‘Wake me up when you come back.’

The shade of the billboard had moved a few inches when I returned. Pedzi was now lying with half of his body in the sun. His right hand was shoved into his pants. A sleeping position adopted from boyhood—grab it while you sleep, otherwise you might wake up and find it gone. I made a note to avoid that hand when I woke him up.

He sat up and looked around.

‘How much money do you still have?’

I took out all the notes in my pocket and counted a hundred and twenty USD.

‘Put away a hundred.’

I counted five twenty-dollar notes and shoved them back into my pocket.

‘Not there,’ he said. ‘Hide it somewhere in your clothes. But not under your balls. GumaGumas know that people hide money in their private parts. Do this.’ He picked up the scraps of plastic wraps from the curry-pies and shook the ants off.

‘Give it to me!’

I passed the notes to him and he wrapped them up with the plastic from the curry-pies.

‘Make a hole in the waist of your jeans and shove it into the back,’ he instructed. ‘Let me show you.’

I watched him tear a hole in the waist of his jeans. I didn’t understand why we were doing all this, but when he said something about the money getting wet, I knew that we were going to get into the water.

‘Are we going to cross the river?’ I asked nervously.

‘There is no other way, Mo,’ he replied without looking up. He kept his head down and continued to work the notes through the hem of his jeans. ‘We’ve tried the easy way and it didn’t work. You saw what happened.’

‘But NaThulani said I should return home if we have to go through the river.’

He straightened up. ‘If you want to go back, then go. I’m crossing with or without you.’

Tomorrow this time I'll be in Jozi and all of this will be in the past. I know I promised NaThulani to take you safely but...' He looked away. After an interval, he turned to me, speaking with a different tone, 'I won't let that stop me from going ahead as planned.'

A thick prickly bubble of air developed in my throat. I turned my head away from him, blinking repeatedly to push away the tears that were welling in my eyes.

'So, what's it going to be?'

I couldn't bring myself to articulate my thoughts. What I was feeling. It seemed as if the greatest of silences had arrested my tongue. Everything faded; objects receded into the distance, leaving me in a vast open space—without my bearings.

'Okay,' I heard myself say. 'I'll do it. I will cross the river.'

The tension of creases on his forehead waned. He extended an arm and tapped me on the shoulder. 'Don't worry, you'll be fine.'

'But I can't swim,' I confessed softly.

'You don't have to swim. The water level rises up to here...' He raised a hand and touched a spot on his chest; the depression where the two arcs of the chest meet. It didn't seem deep. Anything below the shoulders was worth the risk. As long as my head is above the water surface I can handle it, I thought. A second concern came to mind.

'What about the crocodiles?'

'Crocodiles are in shallow areas. Were we'll cross there won't be any crocodiles.'

He finished hiding the money away, and we were ready to face the mighty waters of the Limpopo river. The only thing left was to find a group to cross with. There was safety in numbers and the Gumagumas feared a challenge.

'Now we need to fix your shoe,' he said. He took out gum from his pockets and handed two pieces to me. We chewed the gum into pulp which we used to stick together the open front of my shoe.

Out of the house of hunger, into the land of bondage

People bustled about, travellers of all ages—children were being tugged violently and the luggage hauled without consideration of damage. Everyone was fighting to cross the border before sunset. It was clear that no one wanted to be in the same place by nightfall. It was as if a big storm was coming—threatening to batter everyone and sweep everyone back to their homes. Occasionally, lazy whirlwinds stirred up red dust; dry hot air wafted through and you felt it on the skin.

We had been watching the operations of border-jumper aides for half an hour. They worked covertly in the border post, looking for clients and using signals to advertise their services. This was the crucial and most dangerous part of border jumping. The aides you chose could lead you right into the hands of the gumagumas. Some of the aides worked with the gumagumas. It was hard to tell which ones to trust. Having monitored the workings of the aides at the border post, Pedzi approached a lanky guy with dreadlocks tied in a ponytail to negotiate a pass for both of us. I waited and watched from a distance.

‘We have to meet up with some people in town in thirty minutes.’

We exited the gate and hastened along the road, heading back the way we had come. By the time we reached the truck stop we were moving like the wind. We retraced our way back to the town, through the backstreets. The morning air was ripe with the activities of a small town. Radio noises, children played about on the streets, women stroking the ground with their sweepers, clouds of dust rose. A tall, skinny woman in a red doek stopped sweeping and straightened up. She stood with her grass sweeper in one hand and looked at us through the settling fog of dust. Her face wore a sadness greater than I had never seen. It was as if she was looking into our futures and was troubled by what she saw. I kept turning my head to see if she was still looking at us. She watched us until we were further into the distance, then the sound of the sweeper broke behind us. Dry grass scraped the ground with utmost vengeance, as if to rid it of a contemptible stain. I turned for the last time.

We made it to the front of the OK store just in time to join a group of seven border jumpers, four men and three women and two aides. One of the women was very young, a

teenager, a few months pregnant. She wore a skimpy yellow t-shirt with the lower part of the stomach peeping underneath as if any minute the baby was going to put its foot through the opening, duck out and shout *umaz'velela!umaz'velela!* with arms triumphantly extended upwards. A group of three young men dressed in *Jozi* fashion stood talking a few feet away. One of them had a thick gold chain that looked too heavy for his scrawny neck. The second had short spiky dreadlocks and the third had nothing distinct, except that he had a mean face. He had stony eyes. Looking at him, I was reminded of the young Robert Mugabe—cold and sullen.

'Ola!' Pedzi hollered. Two of them returned the salutation.

An interval of silence passed. 'We were sent here by Njuri.'

'Go and join the others. We leave soon,' said the mean-looking one. He turned to his companions and continued with their conversation.

Pedzi remained fixed on the same spot. After a little while the mean-faced guy turned to us. 'Didn't you hear what I said? I said go and join the others.' He turned back to the others and continued to talk. He did so in a manner that suggested that we were disturbing them.

'We need to talk about the price first,' Pedzi said defiantly.

'Do you want to cross or not?'

'We want to cross but we need know how much it will cost.'

His face softened. 'Don't worry, we'll talk about that on the way. I just need to finish one last arrangement and then we go. If you still want to talk, we'll talk all the way until you are tired.'

The other two chortled. I noticed that the one with the gold chain also had a gold tooth which sparkled every time it caught a glimpse of sunlight.

'Give him forty, twenty, twenty each,' Pedzi whispered as we joined the group. 'If he asks for more money give him an extra ten. And that's it.'

A group of nine of us left the town accompanied by two aides, Gold-chain and Mean-face. We trooped east, through the back streets until we came out to a dirt road and crossed over to the forest. Stray dogs scavenged for food, pawing through the thrash at a dump site. The smell of sun-beaten faeces strangled the air and flies droned incessantly. We cut through a field of *inzala* plants in bloom. A strong fragrance of herbs lingered in the air. Low fluffy clouds drifted across the sky and blanketed the sun. The shade brought us temporary relief.

The path wound down the slope, descending into a wilderness of indigenous trees. After a hundred meter stretch the sun's rays sifted through the clouds and fell hard on us. We trod tirelessly, accompanied by our long shadows, heading deeper onto the ominous sea of trees. The small groups of threes and twos that we had kept in the beginning of the journey had dissolved into a single file. Mean-face led the group and Gold-chain was at the tail. We walked and walked and just when I thought we had walked far enough to be close to the river, we walked even more.

We started to come across articles along the path, sandals with broken straps, single shoes twisted out shape by the heat of the sun, an occasional blouse tossed onto a tree branch, a no-longer-distinguishable bra with ravaged laces, a yawning suitcase emptied of contents, rained-on letters, documents and certificates meant to be used on arrival, Coca-Cola bottles and all other shit that gumaguma found worthless after plundering the possessions of the border jumpers. One could do a survey and learn a great deal about the people whom these things belonged to.

Mean-face started to whistle a Lovemore Majaivana song, *Siyayiwela*. He whistled it cheerfully in a high-pitched tone that made you feel like he was doing it right next to your ear. He whistled the damn sorrowful song until I felt like crumbling to the ground and bursting into tears. Listening to it reeled you into the troubled sea of memories of your childhood. Back to that township of pauperdom, where you wandered the streets in the sweltering summer heat, belching hunger, the tarmac hot under the soles of your bare feet. He whistled until those memories cascaded into the sky and came tumbling down in a lava of wretchedness. The song carried a despondency that made Zimbabwe seem like the most desolate place on earth. Maybe it was, because here we were, risking our lives to leave the country.

We came out to grasslands where slivers of grass rustled in the breeze. Mean-face plucked a blade of grass along the path and deposited it into his mouth and started to chew on it. That was the end of Majaivana. Silence accentuated every little sound. Then I started to miss the song. Its catchy lines and pleasant melody. So, I started to sing it in my head. *Siyay'wela, siyay'wela, siyay'wela sibili. Siyay'wela ingul'kudela siyofun'imali.* The song got stuck in my head and I couldn't rid myself of it.

Mean-face trudged heavily at the front. The gap between him and the next person was growing bigger. We had been marching nonstop for three hours and everyone was thirsty

and tired. Coming to a bend, Mean-face stopped abruptly and turned around.

‘No one told me that there are people from Jairos Jiri’s here,’ he said.

He went on to complain about slow people, how much he hated to have to wait for anyone and threatened to leave behind those who delayed him.

‘I need to pee,’ the pregnant girl announced.

There was no response.

After a while she announced it again. Her words seem to die in the wind. Everyone ignored her and kept marching on, breathing heavily, with only one thought on their minds. Not to be left behind.

She stopped on the way, blocking everyone behind. ‘I said I need to pee! Right now!’

Mean-face turned around and thundered, ‘Sisi! Sisi! I was just telling everybody about people that delay me. Didn’t you hear me, we’re running on schedule here.’

‘But I’m going to pee myself,’ the pregnant girl cried, pressing her thighs together until the right thigh overlapped the other.

‘So, what are you waiting for? Go!’

The girl stormed into the bushes, lowered her sweat pants in plain sight and sank to the ground.

‘Go, further! We don’t want to see your buttocks. You’ll bring us bad luck.’

‘But I’m scared...’

‘There’s nothing to be scared of here. The only thing that can harm you is what your grandmother gave you.’

The girl got up, scuttled further into the bushes and squatted behind a tree.

‘Anybody else who needs to pee or take a shit? Do it now, we’re not stopping again after here,’ Mean-face said.

Everyone left the path and scattered about like cockroaches in the dark when the light has been switched on. The two aides were left standing alone in the middle of the path. Each person picked a spot and did their business. On my left, a woman drew up her skirt and lowered a pink pair of knickers. Her big round buttocks jiggled nervously as she sank to the ground and she disappeared in the grass. I rushed my eyes away from her like a child who had seen something obscene. A man squatted behind a thicket and exploded with a groan. Two men stood beside each other and peed. Yellow urine arched to the ground in front of them. I struggled to get something out. Everybody seemed to be managing well. I looked up

and closed my eyes and released. Just as the first drops of urine trickled down, Mean-face shouted, 'Time up! *Wasala wasala!*'

People rushed out of the bushes half dressed—men drawing up their pants and women repositioning their skirts. I tried to stop but the pleasure of urine tingling in the duct was insufferable.

'Let's move!' Mean-face barked.

I tucked my penis back into my pants with urine still dribbling.

'I wasn't finished. But it's fine, I managed to halve it,' said one of the men.

'Me too,' said another.

With everyone relieved, or half relieved, we picked up pace to match Mean-face. We went over dongas and took turns to jump over a tree that had fallen across the path and trekked up the incline, towards a bend where soon after the path fell into a descent. A Go-way bird called in the silence of the forest—that haunting melancholic call that harbingers a bad omen in folklore. It went on and on.

'Qedu phoko! Qedu phoko! 'zakudlani eb'sika! Go away! Go away!'

Over my left shoulder, a burst of sun rays filtered through the interstices of arching tree branches. Fresh crisp air rushed through the nasal passages and brushed the cheeks and top of ears with gentle strokes. A grasshopper took off from a thicket to the left and droned away—its wings brightened to lime green against the sunlight. A dove cooed. Crickets chirruped. The forest seemed to wake with the dissipating light of day. A pair of doves took off from a nearby tree. The flapping of their wings soared above the forest and waned into the distance.

A rustling sound from nearby shrubs sent the pregnant girl into a fit of hysteria.

'What is it?' Mean-face grumbled.

'I thought I saw something.' She stood panting heavily, a hand on her stomach and another on the chest.

'You thought!'

'I heard something and when I looked, I saw the trees shaking.'

'Whatever you think you saw, it's gone. It's probably in Tsholotsho by now. And don't you dare have that baby on the way,' he said.

'I told you. It's seven months.'

The sun boasted bright reddish colours on the horizon. Columns of red-earthed anthills

towered up from the ground—lumpy like the facial skin of witches. Outlines of insects flying around against the backdrop of the sun. It was a pleasing scene. Night descended heavily on us. The noises of nocturnal creatures took over, the croaking of frogs and the shrill droning noise of cicadas. The pregnant girl let out a subdued groan. A slight hesitation interrupted her steps. Someone let out a cough and cleared their throat at the back. That gave me a chance to clear my own throat.

By the riverbank, we sat and wept

Green, greasy water rippled and glistened ominously under the moonlight. It coursed smoothly on the surface yet raged underneath. Beyond the river, still dark shadows of trees and undulating landscapes loomed to meet the grey horizon. To the right a veil of darkness sat unperturbed.

‘We cross here!’ Mean-face said, turning to the back. He looked about and inquired if everyone was there. Responses were mumbled.

‘Okay,’ he said, sounding satisfied. ‘Now take off your clothes. You’ll need them dry on the other side.’

He stooped over to draw the laces of his converses. Stepping on the heels, he slipped them off his feet. He unfastened his belt, dropped his pants to the ankles and yanked out each leg forcefully. He stood almost naked, beating dust off the legs of his pants. He had thin legs covered with sparse coils of hair and wore maroon underwear with a shade of a hole on the left buttock cheek. Every bone on his back traced under the skin when he twisted and turned, preparing to lead the expedition across the river. We stooped over at the same time, as if each person had been waiting to see who was going to start and entered an orgy of undressing. I stripped to my underwear, tied my clothes together and rolled them into a ball. Next to me, the pregnant girl stood shivering, holding her clothes over her stomach and covering her breasts with the free hand. Gold-chain gathered our clothes and packed them in a refuse bag which he tied at the opening.

‘Have you felt how cold the water is?’ Mean-face said to Gold-chain.

‘No!’

Gold-chain ambled to the edge of the river, crouched down and dabbled a hand in the water and beat it. He got up, shaking his head, retreated to the group.

‘It’s dead cold,’ he said.

‘They’ll feel it themselves.’

Mean-face turned to the group and announced, ‘The water is very cold! But I’m sure none of us here has a geyser at home so we know what cold water feels like on the back. So,

take it easy, dip your feet first and when you feel ready, get in and wade towards me. Once everyone is in, we'll hold hands and move slowly together as one. And whatever you do, don't lift up your feet. Don't be fooled by what you see on the surface, the current underneath is strong. It will sweep you off your feet. It rained last week. So, don't let go of your neighbour's hand.' His voice reached a crescendo. 'Do we understand each other?'

Everyone agreed in unison.

Mean-face got in first. He waded slowly with his arms spread, rippling the water in his course. He stopped about five meters into the river, turned around and beckoned. Everyone started forward at once.

'Wait!' cried out Gold-chain. 'Don't just go in all at once like flies on damp shit. Let the women go in first.'

'Why should we go in first?' protested one of the women. 'You want us to be eaten by crocodiles first? No way! Let them go in first.'

'Mama! Mama!' Gold-chain barked. 'Where do you see crocodiles here?'

'We all know that they are there—and they are ready to eat people.'

'What's going on?' Mean-face yelled, raising a hand over his head.

Gold-chain turned to me and one of the three men. 'You two, go in.'

Simultaneously we stepped to the edge of the river. I dabbled the big toe first to feel the water, which was frigid. The kind of cold that bites into the bone at first contact and sends shudders through the body, locking the tendons in the jaws. I gathered my shoulders and wrapped my arms around them. Teeth chattered. The spine shook fervently. By the time I got to Mean-face, my toes had become rigid. It was as if I was caught by an evil spasm from the knees down. Pedzi followed with the second man. I could hear his lips vibrate like a little boy driving a toy car. Then came the last two men together. The first two women went in next, hands cradled over the chest, shoulders hunched and thighs pressed together. Another set of two followed, leaving behind the pregnant girl who squealed like a mongrel when she stepped a foot in the water. She retracted her foot and took a step back.

'I can't do this,' she cried, 'the water is too cold.'

Mean-face quickly jumped on her. 'Sisi! Sisi! Stop wasting our time. When you left your home, you said you wanted to go to South Africa—this is it. This is how you go to South Africa without a passport. Now please move it or go back. You saw the way.'

'I'll hold her,' one of the women chimed in eagerly. 'Come! Take my hand.'

The pregnant girl wouldn't move so the woman had to wade all the way back to the bank. She took her by the hand and forced her into the water. Together they came quivering like an old couple on walking sticks. Gold-chain with the refuse bag suspended on a stick came after them. Now that everyone was in the water, surrounded by menacing darkness, we had to face new depths of the river. The mud was soft and slimy underneath the feet as we started to move, holding hands in a line, ploughing the river bed with our toes. Pedzi was on my left, a middle-aged woman with a hard grip to the right. Then came the pregnant girl and two other women before Mean-face at the end. In the beginning, Mean-face counted out the steps and we moved steadily in unison. As we moved further deep into the river, the force of the current became stronger. Every step became a challenge. The force of the moving waters tested your balance and forced you to tighten the grip of your hold on the next person. We kept sinking deeper and deeper; the cold water licking your back, aiming higher each time with an intention of swallowing you whole. I gasped for air as I sank to the navel. We had just covered a third of the river's width when the pregnant girl announced, 'I need to pee!'

'So, what are you telling us for?' Mean-face barked.

'Just do it in the water,' whispered the woman next to her.

'I can't walk and pee at the same time...'

'If animals can shit and walk at the same time, why can't you?' Mean-face grumbled.

'But I'm not an animal.' Her voice was thinned into a whine.

'Just do it, all right. I don't want to have to think that you'll pee in the water that I am in.'

'Okay, I'll do it,' the pregnant girl said. Then she repeated to herself in a whisper. 'I'll do it.'

It was eerily silent. A gentle breeze swept by. Water rippled and gurgled. My mind wandered for a moment, and when I realized where I was, I had lost rhythm. The current had gained power over me, forcing my feet off the riverbed. Wrapping my fingers around Pedzi and the woman, I tightened my grip.

'Have you done it?' the woman to my right asked. I felt her tighten the grip of her hand. 'Yes!' the pregnant girl whispered. 'Yes, I've peed. But now I want to poop.'

'You must be crazy!' Mean-face scoffed.

'Just hold it in, sisi!' the woman encouraged her, 'men don't know anything about

pregnancy. You'll get some relief on the other side.'

'There's no relief she'll get. We're not stopping for anyone,' Mean-face jumped in. 'There is a car waiting for us.'

'Even if it's just for two minutes,' the pregnant girl said.

An urge to look back to see how far we had gone grew. When I finally did, the sight of the body of water all around us overwhelmed me. I began to lose the rhythm of my breathing. The air became thick. The harder I tried to draw in as much air as possible the denser it became and the more my lungs demanded it. A ball of pressure had formed in my chest; I let it out with a deep sigh. I had lost another few centimeters. Now the water level was up to the chest and I could feel the swirling of the surface and hear the gurgle of the water close to my ears. Underneath the water, the current was fighting to topple everything that opposed its course.

The woman next to me drew air forcefully. She was now up to her neck in the water. I could hear her spitting and gasping for air. Her grasp was tight around my hand. We were now right in the middle of the river, where the waters raged; violent irregular swirls tested the strength of your knees and the very core of human anatomy. Everyone fought to keep the line and move with the others.

'Something is moving in the water! Something is moving!' someone cried.

'Moving where?'

My eyes roved around, nervously surveying the water surface from the left to the right.

'There! Something is moving there!'

Silence.

'It's moving again!' the voice of the pregnant girl broke out again. I rushed my eyes to where her forefinger was pointed but saw nothing.

'Can you see it? There!' She pointed at a spot on the water. 'I can see it.'

We stopped moving and stood still, eyes focused on the spot in the water. Silence grew. 'I can't see anything. What is it?' Mean-face growled.

'I think it's a crocodile. Can anyone see it?' She turned her head hysterically.

'There are no crocodiles here, I told you. Now stop freaking everybody out.'

We began to move again, wading tentatively through the rising water level. Every step required caution so we had move slowly and in unison. Then a thought registered in my

head. There was something odd about the procession— something was missing in the link. Support had shifted to one side. Then I realized that my right hand was free. The woman had let go of my hand or I had let her hand go. Either way the link had been broken. I tried to turn to look back to see how far she had fallen behind since we had hardly progressed. Loud gurgling filled my ears. She was in a battle with the river. Her hands swung about frantically and she bobbed up and down on the water surface. The same course of action was repeated over and over again. For a moment, I thought she was swimming, since if you don't know how to swim it just looks like erratic movements. Pedzi tugged my hand, I followed like a lifeless doll.

'Somebody is drowning!' I shouted to him.

'Leave them!'

I had the urge to look back, to see what was happening behind us. When I eventually did, I got swept off the riverbed. Off my feet went and slid to an angle and I plunged head first into the water which rushed into my nose and ears. I paddled my feet frantically and found the riverbed. Bending my knees, I dropped my weight onto my feet and regained balance. The undercurrent kept the fight on, threatening my legs with powerful swirls.

I rushed a right hand across my face and cleared the haze of panic. It was as if I had just come into contact with the face of death. Nothing prepares one for such. My next attempt to move resulted in another plunge into the arms of death, I slipped and went face down into the water.

'Don't lift up your feet!' Pedzi shouted, tugging my hand.

Then came a piercing cry—a recognizable voice screaming at its highest pitch. The pregnant girl, I thought.

'There is nothing we can do,' Pedzi shouted. 'We have to keep moving.'

I kept my feet down and forced movement to each leg. The current was much stronger now, unyielding and violent like raging winds of a tornado. Water all around us, masses of it. Flashes of the sky above. Stars winking. Shadows of trees and landscapes across the bank. Water. River bank. Sky. Stars. Water. Blank. River bank. God, God—God—where—where—God—where? Seated on His throne, a halo above his head, thousands of bright beams of light emanating from it, watching. Ancestors—you—long dead—where—a spirit hovering somewhere here on earth—unfinished business to take care of. Watching over me. Not me. Not me. No, certainly not me, this wouldn't be happening. More important stuff to do.

Scores to settle. Neighbour owed a goat, never got to pay. Ancestors—ghosts, could it be the same thing. Scare the tits out of children’s mouths. Ancestors! Oh yes! Mother, guess she has advanced to ancestor status now—. I called upon her. Told her I was just trying to make a life for myself. Then I turned to God again, dear God. I acknowledged that I was a sinner first; just as the pastor always advised in his sermons. It all starts there—by acknowledging that you are a sinner. So, I did, since I was just sinning right there by crossing illegally to South Africa; there was no denying it. I guess border jumping is equivalent to breaking into someone’s home according to the church’s standards. Then after that I asked God to forgive me for my sins and lastly, I asked Him to send his angels to come and save us. Then with an amen, I closed and waited. And when the river didn’t stop raging, I accepted death—I assumed my prayer was a little too late.

One in, one out. It could end either way. I knew that some of people had been taken by the river—had been swallowed by it. Being churned by the gluttonous waters—to be spat out somewhere in a distant river bank where no one would find their body for days, life having been choked out of their bodies. There they would lie swollen, pale as ghosts, decomposing, flies buzzing all over, vultures would come to feast, river birds merrily twitter in festivity; flies hum the songs of celebration and maggots by their numbers, with mad appetites, work the remains of a corpse that is beyond recognition now. Clever if you ask me, the whole decomposition process as a means of eradication. Imagine if matter didn’t decompose, lifeless bodies would just pile up, serving no purpose but consuming space.

We floundered madly about, beating the water hard and fast. I could hear Pedzi breathing heavily through his mouth; hear him spit out jets of water in intervals and blow out the little left in his mouth. A course he repeated over and over. Every move was laborious, I went down a few times. Each time I thought, this is it, I won’t be able to get up again. But Pedzi, whose grasp was firm and strong, propped me up. Then I would get up, find my balance, stomp my feet, hands swinging about wildly and keep going for the bank. The last steps seemed to last an eternity. As long as we were still in the water, the fight was on, I kept beating it, flailing it, clubbing it and smashing it with both hands and feet, all the way to the river bank where we collapsed on the ground and lay there with tortured lungs.

‘Are you okay?’ Pedzi said, between gasps for air.

I nodded.

‘You?’

He opened his mouth to speak but instead he was seized by a paroxysm of coughing. He turned to the side and coughed with a hand on his chest and the other made into a fist over the mouth. I closed my eyes to rest them but when I tried to reopen them I couldn't. Silence fell. The throbbing of my heart grew and it beat harder, such that I could feel blood racing in my veins. Time elasticized. Every second became magnified. For the first time during the journey, reality dawned on me. Every moment leading up to this very one replayed in my head.

Then came the voices of two interlocutors. They sounded distant at first and grew louder as I regained my consciousness and opened my eyes to the dark sky.

'Yes, we all know. You abandoned us as soon things got rough,' Pedzi was saying.

'This water is possessed. It has never been this bad before. Never! I swear to you.'

'There is no use swearing now, is there? People are already dead.'

Mean-face stormed off and stopped at a distance with his head bowed down. His body became a figure in the darkness. Just then Gold-chain appeared, lugging the black refuse bag through the sand. He dumped the bag in front of us and without saying a word, walked away. He paced a short distance and crouched down, extending a hand to the ground for balance. I went into the bag with feverish haste to get dressed so I could be warm but met loops of wet rags. A moment of shock passed. Then casually I started to dig into the bag, pinching out items and dumping each to the side. The rest of the people came in dribs and drabs.

'This one is mine,' said one of the men, stooping over to reach for a pair of pants in my hand.

He lifted it up to his face and examined it with suspicion. As if someone had swopped it for an older one.

'We might as well have kept our clothes on,' he mumbled.

'We were just unlucky,' Mean-face said.

'There's no luck involved here, just poor, poor, poor planning. Now people are dead,' the man grunted.

'Would you rather have crossed where there are crocodiles then?' Mean-face said irritably. 'Would you?'

'Maybe it's better than this. This was just awful,' the man replied, taking off. He walked a short distance and stood muttering to himself.

I found my clothes, crumpled and heavy with water. The front of the shoe which was

pasted with gum had detached and the other one was filled with water. Even after I had poured it out, the shoe remained with extra weight. The letter which I meant to present to Justice was unsalvageable. When I spread it to assess the damage it split into quarters in the folds. The words were distorted and ink-spot stained. I folded it and replaced it in my pocket.

‘We should start moving,’ Mean-face said.

‘Shouldn’t we wait for the others?’ one of the men said.

‘There won’t be others,’ Mean-face said.

‘How do you know?’ the man barked. ‘What if they made it out?’

‘If they haven’t come out by now it means...’ He smashed a palm over his forehead. ‘It means they are dead, alright! It happens all the time.’ He paced in circles. Then he stopped to add, ‘People come here knowing what can happen. It’s a gamble but we do it anyway. Each man at his own risk! Now you want to make as if it’s my fault. It’s not my fault! I’m not God, I can’t tell what will or will not happen.’

‘So, we are just...,’ the man said, putting a hand through the sloppy sleeves of his wet shirt.

‘Wait a minute!’ the second man jumped in. ‘You said it has never happened but now you are saying it happens all the time. Which one is it?’

‘I didn’t say that....’

‘Yes, you did. Ask them.’

‘Listen! If you want to wait for them, then do it. By all means. I’ll take those that want to go with me.’

The argument went back and forth. The man remained adamant, insisting that we waited for the three women and one of the men.

‘Those that are staying, stay. I’m leaving,’ Mean-face said. He took off, strode across the bank and entered the bush.

One after another the men took off after him. The adamant man, Pedzi and I waited for a little while.

‘We should probably go after them. The devil won’t hesitate to leave us here to be eaten by hyenas. That would please him greatly,’ the adamant man said.

We rushed after the rest of the group, entering the bushes in single file and ran a short distance to catch up.

‘That’s the spirit, gentlemen!’ Mean-face said. ‘People who want to leave the country

just do it. They don't think about the cost or those they're leaving behind, otherwise they'll never do it.'

'If I'd known, I wouldn't have done it,' the adamant man grumbled.

'What did you expect? A walk through the park?'

About fifty meters from the river bank, we came to the first boundary. A fence of coiled barbed wire crested with double edged barbs. The coils were waist high and about a metre wide. Gold-chain dumped the refuse-bag on the ground and rummaged in the woods for a log which he used to prop up the barbed wire. He lifted it just enough for a person to fit through underneath and held it in position while Mean-face tunnelled under the fence. Between his head and the wire was about an inch. A slight miscalculation and the barbs slashed whatever came their way. He used his hands to propel his body forward and kept his head down and legs tight together until he came out on the other side.

Gold-chain gestured to me. 'You! Small boy, go next!'

I crouched down, placing both palms flat to the ground, and lay flat on the ground. I kept my head down and tunnelled through. On the other side, I got up and beat the sand off my wet clothes. Pedzi pushed for going next and Gold-chain allowed him. The three men went in turns, the adamant man went last, still as adamant as ever. Gold-chain tossed the bag over the fence and passed the stick to Mean-face who propped up the wire for hm. A short trek led us to the second boundary of a two meters high wire-mesh fence, and we trod next to it for about half an hour until we came to a tree growing against the fence. Behind it was a hole which we took turns to go through, making sure not to rattle the fence. On the other side of the fence we were on South African soil. We worked the ground with our feet and tore through stretches of forest, dense thickets, tree branches with thorns that tattered the skin on single contact. I tripped on objects a few times but didn't care to look back. Two hours of marching led us to a small dirt road where military trucks drove up and down. Here cars also picked up border jumpers. This was the place that determined the success of the treacherous journey.

'Get down! Get down!' Mean-face said, motioning to us with his hand.

We crouched down and huddled behind a bush. The night was still.

'The car should be here any minute now. You two must pay me.'

Pedzi nodded in approval. I retrieved the wet notes from my pocket and leafed two twenties.

‘A car is coming! Put your heads down!’

We obeyed. A car came, moving slowly like a funeral cavalcade. Stifled tire noises against the ground, rattling body panels. A spotlight rushed over our heads. It lingered briefly on the shrubs a meter away and raced back to where it had appeared. The engine sound receded down the road.

‘It has passed. We have ten minutes to get out of here before the truck comes back again. Now give me my money.’

I passed the notes to him. He leafed the notes, twice, thrice, then his face assumed a sour look. Even the burst of moonlight couldn’t make it agreeable.

‘This is not enough,’ he erupted. ‘After what I went through, you give me this change. You must think I am crazy to come all the way here for this stupid money.’

‘That’s all we have,’ Pedzi said.

‘Don’t play games with me,’ Mean-face said, reaching into his pocket. ‘I’ll skin both of you alive and leave you here to be eaten by hyenas if you mess with me.’

In a flash a pen-knife snapped open and the silver blade reflected the moonlight. Pedzi sprung up and stepped away from the group.

‘Catch him!’ Mean-face shouted, pointing the shiny blade of his okapi at Pedzi. Like an obedient dog Gold-chain started towards Pedzi with his hand spread out. Impulsively, I got up and moved to a safe distance.

‘We had a deal,’ Mean-face grumbled.

‘Fifteen dollars is the normal price,’ Pedzi retorted, ‘we gave you an extra ten. We want our change back.’

Mean-face advanced towards Pedzi. ‘Does this look like a normal situation to you? You think I came all the way here for five people?’

‘That’s not our problem,’ Pedzi shouted defiantly. ‘Mo! Let’s go!’

Crushing through the shrubs, we both came out to the dirt road at the same time.

‘This way!’ he said, starting to run.

We tracked east and followed a road that seemed to lead to nowhere. It was dark ahead and even darker behind. A terrifying ordeal, running to a place out of sight, not knowing how far you still have to go. We could have been running to a much worse predicament. That thought scared me to the guts.

‘How far is it? I asked, between breaths.

'I think we're close.'

We ran in silence for a while, the sound of our feet stamping the ground, reverberating behind us. At one point I thought that there was someone running after us. But when I looked back, there was no one, except faint, elongated shadows of us cast by the moonlight. We ran for half an hour before there was any sign of civilization which eventually appeared in a yellow shell of the Shell garage sign. Slightly beyond it were rows of lights, yellow and dim against the dark sky. As we drew nearer, the back of a white building of the gas station came into view. Below the Shell sign was a red arrow that pointed to the petrol station. A climatic burst of elation. Relief. Utter joy that surged like a seething beverage before you take the first sip. Coming closer to the building, we stopped running and paced in silence, anxiety building. The service station took form, rows of fuel pumps, petrol attendants engaged in their routines, cars driving in and out. Just as we made a left turn onto the front of the building, I felt Pedzi grab my arm and pull me backwards.

'There is a police van in the parking,' he wheezed.

The fuel station was at the corner of the main road leading to and from the border, and a small dirt road. About a hundred meters in the direction of the border was the taxi rank. After a little while Pedzi took a peek from the corner of the building.

'They're still there.'

We kept our backs against the wall, its shadow falling over our heads and stretching a meter from our feet. We waited with nervous suspense. The throbbing of my heart synced with a powerful surge of blood to the head which I felt on the temples.

'Shit!' Pedzi said.

'What is it?'

He gestured down the dirt road to a set of headlights advancing furtively. I wilted. An explosion of tension filled up the atmosphere and tore us into pieces. Every course of action that had led to this moment seemed to waste away, become futile. All this trouble and suffering had been for nothing. And yet we were still nowhere close to being at a point where we could choose freely what to do. Go back home or continue with our journey. If we got arrested now it would have been the end of us. The patrol officer at the border had made it clear that he didn't want to see our faces at the station again. Who knows what would have happened if he had seen our faces again and recognized us. But there was nothing we could do until then, except stand there and wait and try to conjure up as much hope as

possible from whatever nefarious hole it existed in.

I kept my eyes fixed down the road while Pedzi watched the police van at the petrol station. The spotlight raced to one side of the road, picked a spot in the dark and remained fixed on it for a while. Then it moved to the next assigned spot. I kept watching it move from place to place, waiting for it move to the other side of the road, to see if it would catch us on its trajectory. The more I waited for it to come, the more it lingered. Then suddenly, it came racing up, against the dark edges of the roadside. It swept across the ground, just a few centimetres from our feet and went down the other side of the road where it picked a spot and shone on it.

Pedzi moved his head and took another peek at the police van. Each time he withdrew, I could feel his spirit sink before he reported back to me.

'Is it still there?' I asked, knowing very well what the reply would be. I guess I hoped that by some sort of a miracle, the van would have left. That maybe Pedzi, from nervousness, had lost the capacity to think.

'They're still there,' he whispered. 'Keep watching the truck. Tell me when it's close.' His voice was shaking.

'They're close.'

He glanced over his shoulder and looked down the dirt road.

'When they're much closer. I'll watch out for the police van.'

The headlights grew gradually, became bigger and brighter, taking form into visible rectangles; no longer specks of light in the distance. The front of the truck could also be seen clearly now. Its monstrous grille and armoured window screen. Above it, the spotlight worked tirelessly through the darkness. It roved from one side of the road to the other. Each time it veered closer to our feet.

'I think it has stopped,' I whispered.

Pedzi looked down the road. His eyes were set in focus. Then softly, he said, 'It's moving again.'

Just then, the spotlight raced up the roadside, blended with the lights on the main road and reappeared on the other side of the dirt road. It swept past our feet, grazed the front of Pedzi's trainers and bolted down the roadside. I was certain that when it came up again, it would certainly catch the beige colour of my jeans and the bright orange reflectors on Pedzi's Asics trainers. So, I pressed myself hard against the wall and waited, heart

pounding, tongue bone-dry and eyes about to pop out. The spotlight fell on the bushes and remained fixed on them. Two figures leaped out of the back of the truck and vanished into the bushes, where the spotlight was fixed.

‘How far?’ Pedzi asked, without moving his head from the edge of the building.

‘Close. Very close.’

‘The police van is moving,’ he said softly. As if he wasn’t certain of what he was saying.

Down the road, the two figures reappeared from the dark and climbed back into the truck and the headlights started forward. As the headlights gained motion Pedzi announced, ‘Okay, let’s go!’

We moved away from the wall, kept our heads straight and skulked across the petrol station, to the taxi rank.

Part Two

This place is not a place

As standard etiquette, I knocked on the door three times, stepped back and stood shivering. Daylight was breaking behind me, and the morning breeze stung on the skin. The wet clothes I had on added to the intensity of the cold. The floor of the corridor glistened under the white neon lights on the ceiling. A meter-high balustrade wall prevented a ten storey plunge behind me. Sunset Place occupied the corner of Van der Merwe Street and Klein Street. The courtyard formed a vacuum of a space that hummed from the noises that came from the apartments and bounced against the walls. From where I was standing you could see the window panels of the adjoining building. Sheets and sheets of glass covered in all sorts of material. From rags to newspapers and cardboards.

I had followed the instructions as Pedzi had relayed them.

‘Wait at the gate until someone comes along and go in after them,’ he had said, ‘When you’re inside, head straight towards the phone booth and you’ll see the lift on your right, at the end of the lobby. Press the button on the wall and wait. When the door opens, get in and press ten. It will take you to the tenth floor. When you get out on the tenth-floor head right. You’ll see the numbers above each door. Follow them until you get to 106. It’s the second from the last door. Knock and when someone opens tell them you want to see Malanka.’

‘Malanka!’ I queried.

‘Yes, people know him as Malanka. If you say Justice, they won’t know who you’re referring to.’

I had never heard such a name before—it sounded like a type of mollusc that fed on Mother’s greens in her vegetable garden. It was definitely not Zimbabwean—one couldn’t go by such in our township without being sneered at. I memorized the name and said it to myself all the way up to the tenth floor. Inside the lift, all by myself—first time inside the little compartment that launched me up to the tenth floor. Experience. Tick.

When the door didn’t open for a while, I knocked again. A little harder the second time so that the security gate rattled.

‘Who is it?’ a throaty voice inquired.

I recited my name.

‘Blessing! Moreblessing!’

Whenever I was asked to give my name, I had always used Blessing. But as always, people choose what to call you—whether you accept it or not. They use that name until it starts to define you, in your presence or absence. At home, my siblings and relatives called me Mo—short for Moreblessing. And also, everyone in our township. But my friends at school called me Bless.

There was no action for a little while. I concluded that maybe the inquirer had waltzed back to sleep. Just as I was about to knock for the third time, footsteps sounded and the keys rattled in the keyhole, followed by a deep depression of the door lever. All was done with a slight air of aggression. The door opened to an angle, just enough to put a face through.

‘What do you want?’ a woman asked. Her face was contorted, nose drawn, eyes half-shut, cheeks jutting and lips stretched to what almost looked like a grimace.

‘I’m here to see Malanka.’

‘Who is looking for him?’

‘Blessing,’ I said hesitantly. ‘Tell him that NaThulani sent me.’

She opened the door wider and stepped barefoot into the open. She had a sarong pressed against her bosom and it fell loosely over her body to the mid-thigh. She had now fully awakened—her eyes were visible and the tension of sleep released from her face. She lowered her eyes and looked at me from my shoes up to the head and then closed the door without saying another word. The safety chain clicked into the catch and it went quiet again. By then I was devoid of any emotion. I was doing what I was supposed to do. After a while the door was reopened, wider this time, with an urgency of a concerned individual. In the darkness of the room appeared a lanky figure. He paused briefly and remained in the dark to see who was at the door. As he stepped closer to the door, the light from the corridor fell upon his face and revealed a youthful round face with dimples, curved lips under a round nose and not a single hair on the face. He wore a pair of checked boxer shorts, and was barefoot, toes raised to escape the cold of the cement floor. He was about six feet tall. I introduced myself and narrated the reason of my unannounced visit.

‘What does she expect me to do with you?’ he asked with the outmost degree of disbelief expressed in his tone of voice. I passed the letter to him. He looked at me, held his

gaze for a while and then slowly unfurled the letter which disintegrated in the folds. It tore from the top to the centre and the two pieces fell to the sides like dog ears.

‘How am I supposed to read this?’ he said, slapping the piece of paper with the back of his hand. ‘The words...’ He shook his head.

A long silence fell, heavy and dull like a thud of a hammer on a surface, but still like a cat’s footsteps on a carpet.

‘My sister must’ve gone mad,’ he said softly. ‘Does she ever think before doing something?’

He turned around and walked back into the flat, leaving the door open. I watched his figure get swallowed by the darkness inside. His form got replaced by a white sheet hanging theatrically in the darkness. Another door opened and closed. I waited, uncertain what was going to happen next. Conflicted between hope and hopelessness. He had clearly expressed his discontentment about the affair. All that was left was for him to verbalise his final decision. While I waited, I thought up a contingency plan—which was not much of a plan but an idea. I decided I was going to live in the streets and look for work in the meantime. I didn’t see him return until I heard his voice break out in the darkness.

‘Come in!’ he said, unlocking the security door.

I walked tentatively behind him, following his elongated bare back, through the dark room. The smell of sleep and other body odours suffused the air. Someone grunted on the bed to the right. He led me to another room, the main bedroom, where he invited me in.

Inside the room, a light blue bed sheet partitioned the room into two narrow spaces where only a double bed could fit, leaving a thin passage on either side. Someone was snoring heavily on the bed. My first thought was that it was my friend, Makwe. But when he didn’t wake up to greet me I was bewildered. Malanka went into the wardrobe and took out two blankets which he spread in the passage between the bed and the curtain. While there he tossed pieces of clothing to change into.

‘Get some sleep,’ he said, ‘We’ll talk in the morning and figure what to do with you.’

After a change of clothes, I crept into the passage and lay down. My head filled with the phantasmagoria of the crossing, vivid images and voices teemed in my head.

I don’t remember when I fell asleep, but it was after hours of being tortured by the persistent memory of the crossing. I woke up at midday. The light blue curtain that divided the bedroom had been flung over a string that was attached to the parallel walls of the

room. Faint light filtered through the glass door that led to the balcony where Malanka stood hunched over the parapet. A surge of bowel movement made me seek the bathroom before everything else. I had gone three days without defecating. Having found the toilet, I lowered myself down to the toilet bowl and exhilarated in its comforts and returned to the bedroom feeling a few kilos lighter. I cleared the blankets off the floor, folded each one and piled them on top of the bed. After that I decided it was best to notify Malanka that I was up. I opened the door to the burst of city noises that rushed into the room like a volume knob of a radio out of frequency that has been turned up. An incessant muddle of city noises, cars horns, tire screeches, sirens, hammering and grinding in construction sites, random yelling and occasional whistling, and a combination of tens of thousands of people's voices.

Marijuana fumes suffused the air on the balcony. Things lay cluttering the balcony floor— flower pots with dead plants, a bucket, rags, mop, old newspapers with water marks. Women's panties were hanging on the laundry rack. A stained three-quarter bed mattress leaned against the wall.

'I thought you were never going to wake up?' Malanka said.

His eyes were bloodshot and glistened fiendishly. He looked like a sportsman since he wore nothing but Nike clothes.

Lowering my head, I forged a smile. A cacophony of car horns. A jackhammer laboured between intervals of grinding. Someone yelled from the ground.

'Did you travel well?'

'Yes, I did.'

'No trouble at the border or police on the way?'

'No.'

'You must be lucky, Blessing.' He raised the *zol* and took a long drag, sipping it like it was a hot cup of tea. The coal glowed and died out to white ash. A few flakes dropped on the floor. He stretched a hand to pass the thing to me.

'Come on,' he said with laughter in his voice, 'don't tell me that you don't hit *zol*. I know your friend does but keeps it from me.'

'I don't smoke,' I said.

'How come your friend smokes and you don't?'

'Makwe doesn't smoke.'

'You wouldn't tell me if he did anyway,' he said. 'Do you know how I know that he

smokes?’

I shook my head.

‘One day when I was visiting home and I asked him to roll a *zol* for me. And guess what?’ He paused and looked at me expectantly. ‘The devil rolled me a perfect *zol*. I didn’t say anything to him but I knew.’ He raised the *zol* to his lips and took another long drag. Then speaking from his throat, added, ‘That’s how you know if someone smokes, ask them where to buy it then you’ll find out.’

He finished smoking the *zol* and put it out by crushing it against the wall and tossed the stub over the parapet.

‘Come inside,’ he said.

He went into the wardrobe, picked out some clothes, tossing each item on the bed.

‘Take these. It’s the least I can do. You should have a bath and eat something. Then we’ll figure out what we can do about your situation. You can’t stay here, this is not my flat.’ His voice fell from buoyant to sombre as he expounded the reasons, stating that he had just gotten out of prison four months ago, was unemployed and living with his girlfriend. He also told me that the *mastaand* was strict with overcrowding and for that reason Makwe had had to leave for Soweto to stay with their older brother.

‘Do you have any relatives or anyone that we can contact to take you in?’

I told him that I had no relatives and knew no-one in the country.

‘There must be someone you know,’ he said in disbelief.

‘All my relatives are home.’

He looked at me crestfallen.

Then calmly, he said, ‘Go and take a bath. I’ll talk to Thabiso and see if he can allow you to stay a for few days while we make a plan for you.’

After a bath, I put on the oversized clothes that Malanka had given me, a pair of black Reebok tracksuit pants that mopped the ground when I walked, a black t-shirt which I layered with a grey sweater whose sleeves covered my hands and a pair of Adidas push-ins. I sat down on the edge of the bathtub, elbows on knees, palms over my eyes and fought the tears beginning to well in my eyes. I was in the same position for a while.

When I finally stepped out of the bathroom, Malanka showed me to the kitchen, where a four-plate gas stove sat against a wall covered with white ceramic tiles. A Daewoo fridge purred meditatively on one side. Dented steel cupboards, an overflowing rubbish bin

and a vegetable rack with three desiccated onions. He showed me how to use a gas stove and emphasised the importance of shutting the burners after use. I scrambled some eggs which I ate with bread and coffee.

From the kitchen, a doorway to the left led to the living room which was partitioned into four spaces in the same manner as the bedroom. In each space was a three-quarter bed, covered with a creased duvet carelessly scattered on it, a single uninviting pillow—it could tell the deepest thoughts of the head that had rested on it if given a chance. A suitcase or bag carried all the possessions of the tenant. A row of female shoes stretched along the wall at one end, silently relating the journey of the wearer. A collection of half-full bottles of perfumes and cosmetics boxes sat on the side table. Everyone was out—out somewhere doing what they were supposed to be doing or not doing to make a living. It was clear to me, without explanation, the kind of living arrangement that was undertaken here. These were places to sleep, to lay a head down under a roof to catch some sleep—that is if it did come. A place where one could escape the night's brightest lights of Johannesburg—lights that burned so bright they could blind you, but never really cast light that mattered.

When I returned to the bedroom Malanka was back on the balcony. Again, I hesitated at the door, thinking that I might disturb him from his pensive state. I have to say, from the moment I stopped in front of the door earlier that morning, every course of action became formidable—everything I did I had to think through. Reflect, ponder, excogitate and act. That became the operational device which I comported myself with. Without thinking further, I opened the door and stepped outside onto the balcony and stood holding the door open. He didn't move or say anything for a while.

'That is Number Four police station,' he said, speaking slowly.

He pointed at a building with an arched roof, green on the sides, surrounded by a brick wall linked by a big steel gate. Police vans, trucks and *gumbagumbas*.

'And those at the back are the cells. You can't see them clearly from here but if you stretch a bit you can see the top of their doors.'

He showed me the landmarks of the city— Ponte to the east, the Dome up north, the Telkom Tower and Auckland Park Tower. The rest of the area was a forest of buildings, randomly jutting from the ground like reeds in marsh—brooding all sorts of activities night and day, from sex trade to secret society gatherings to church schemes. Some buildings rose above others, their walls thrust upwards as if their intention was to penetrate the sky and

peek into the heavens.

‘What do your friends call you?’ Malanka said. ‘The name Blessing won’t blend here.’

‘My friends call me Bless. But at home I use Mo.’

‘Stick to Mo, it has character,’ he said. ‘You’ll see what I mean. A lot of changes in a person when they get here. This place is not a place. When you’re home you think that life here is great, everything is good. But no—when you finally get here, you realise what a charade it is that people put on when they visit home. You see, me.’ He jabbed his chest with an arched thumb.

He paused and remained pensive for a little while—weed working his brains. Then he continued with the same tone of voice, ‘I’ve never worked for a white man in my life. Not even a single day. I’m just not the kind of a person who can wake up every morning to go to a factory or a shop to say, ‘good morning, Baas’ to some fat racist Boer. No! I can’t do that.’ He shook his head vigorously. ‘Not me, I rejected that idea long time ago. I make do without work.’ He reached to the side pocket of his jacket, dug into it and took out a packet of cigarettes. He turned the box upside down and tapped its bottom. Cigarettes butts twitched out in one end. He drew one, placed it in his lips and struck a match. A small flame blazed. He took a long drag and released a cloud of smoke into the air, then brought down his hand gently, resting it on the parapet. ‘But you don’t have to be like me. It’s not the kind of life you would want for yourself.’

An ambulance, siren blaring, raced uphill on Klein Street. A few meters ahead it hit the backlog of the cars at the traffic light. Then it started forward with convulsive jerks and negotiated its way through the traffic, getting onto the opposite lane and bolting up the road. Car horns erupted. Obscenities were yelled through the windows. Hands thrust through the windows with fingers made into signs. More obscenities. Malanka let out a hard cough. Then speaking through the choke of smoke, he said, ‘You see. The thing is... ambulances and police cars sound the siren just to avoid traffic and red robots. And people know that, that’s why the taxi drivers are telling them off like that.’

‘But what if it’s not a ploy?’

‘Then there would be more than just one emergency vehicle.’

He smoked the rest of the cigarette in silence, raising a hand to his lips at intervals; the burning end of the cigarette smouldered as he dragged on it and died to white ash when he brought it down. Squinting, he released the smoke through his mouth and nose that flared

like a living thing. The sun lumbered across the sky. Its rays shortened as it disappeared behind the building to the west and then elongated as it reappeared on the other side of the buildings. At a much lower angle. I watched cars, mostly taxis, race down the street to beat the green traffic lights and screech to a standstill at the intersection. The events of the crossing infiltrated my mind at intervals—I would hear voices and the gurgling of water. Then I would be jolted back in time to relive the moment all over again.

'I'll go down to get something to eat for supper. Vee comes home late and doesn't cook. When I'm alone I usually eat street food.'

Vee was Malanka's girlfriend. She had a fair complexion which gained a shade every week. In the evenings, before bed, she would go into the bathroom and come out with her face smeared with a white face cream which reeked like a hospital ward. A few times she sent me to buy the face cream which came in 200ml tubes in a pink and green box with Chinese writing at the back. It was illegal so the sales were done clandestinely in hair salons. It proved to be quite popular among the dark-skinned people who were keen on skin-lightening products. A lighter skin gave you immunity from police profiling in the streets.

Vee worked as a service girl at a popular butchery on Esselen street. When I met her that evening she welcomed me with cordiality and expressed sympathy for my situation.

'I hope Thabiso understands and lets you stay with us,' she said.

'Haven't we tried that already with Makwe?' Malanka chimed in.

'Just explain to him about his situation. Maybe he'll understand.' She shrugged.

Thabiso, the landlord, shared the main bedroom with Malanka. There were four other beds in the living room occupied by *Zimbos*. Fortune, the woman who had opened the door for me, occupied the last bed. She worked as a house maid in the suburbs. Max slept on the second bed. The other two beds belonged to two brothers, Jones and Limu, who were both unemployed. They earned a living from small time crime.

Over the next days I met the rest of the tenants one after another, often late at night when they came into the kitchen where I had been assigned a place to sleep. I met Fortune again that evening. I had just woken up from a bad dream and had been trying to fall sleep again. But whenever I entered sleep, flashes of people drowning came to my mind's eye — accompanied by the screams and cries for help, then I would awake. There was a sudden click of the switch and then the light came on, followed by a gasp of surprise. I raised my head and our eyes met. I recognized her from earlier that morning.

‘Oh, I’m so sorry!’ She sighed. ‘I want to make something to eat. I’ll be out of your way in a few minutes.’

‘It’s okay. I can’t sleep anyway.’ I propped myself up to a sitting position. She introduced herself as she stepped into the kitchen. And I told her my name.

‘So, what’s wrong? Why can’t you sleep?’

‘Nothing really. I just can’t seem to fall asleep.’

‘I know what you mean.’

Sounds of pots, dishes and sizzling food. She bombarded me with questions about the situation at home—the availability of goods in stores. Whether mealie-meal was available? How much did it cost? What about cooking oil and sugar? What was the exchange rate of the Rand to the Zim-dollar? Were the USDs better to send home than the Rands? And the sordid, grim and tedious politics of Zimbabwe—was the president ever going to give up power? Was he ever going to die? And if so, when? Were there not any men with balls big enough to get rid of him? What about MDC? Could they ever change the situation at home if they got into power? Wouldn’t they just take care of their own and forget about the voters just like the ruling party? I answered all the question as succinctly as I could. Yes, the president was going to die one day. But when, who knew? Yes, maybe MDC could change the situation in the country. No, there were no guarantees.

She told me about life in Hillbrow. How hard things were. How everyone lived to avoid arrests on the streets and send money home. How most people were left without money to live by throughout the month; and how expensive things were; and how hard it was to get a job without a work visa. Acquiring documents was the biggest challenge for an immigrant. One had to bribe Home Affairs officials with copious amounts of money to get them—that was if you were lucky. Otherwise the perfidious miscreants just took your money, got fat from it and then complained about immigrants. She also told me that she had lost six months’ savings, robbed by a Home Affairs official, while she was trying to get her papers in order. ‘But don’t worry yourself about all that. You’re young, you should have fun,’ she said with exhilaration.

I met the other tenants in a similar fashion. In the kitchen or in awkward bathroom encounters where one just rammed into the bathroom thinking one was alone in the flat only to meet someone squatting over the toilet bowl, face caught between a scowl and expression of shock.

I stayed indoors for a few days to evade detention—that's what every new arrival did. The streets were a minefield. There were stop-and-searches everywhere in the streets of Joburg, mostly in Hillbrow, Berea and Yeoville. You were almost guaranteed to be asked to produce an identity document whenever you were stopped for a search. Firstly, one had to acquaint oneself with the operations of the police, the frequently asked questions such as—where are you from? Which school did you go to? Which province? What village and who is the chief there? What is his surname? As if every South African was born in a village or knew who their chief was. Vee left for work at six in the morning and returned after nine pm. Malanka woke up around eight, and left immediately after brushing his teeth and putting on his sports clothes. He took a bath once a week—a ritual prescribed by a *sangoma* to induce luck for him to steal more, rob more people, burgle more houses and become the best goddamned criminal he could possibly be. He returned around lunch time with piles of boxes, refuse bags stuffed with clothes and appliances, electronics wrapped in blankets. He would whistle from the street and I would rush downstairs to help him take up the loot.

I can't say that the landlord allowed me to stay, I simply stayed and Malanka never broached the subject with me again.

Pure evil

Pedzi came to visit after a week. He was all dressed up in new clothes, orange Converse, blue jeans and a diamond-patterned jersey matched with a *Dickies* hat. The job with his brother Tafi had gone well, he told me. He suggested we go for a braai at the butchery where Vee worked and I agreed. I braved the cold—still wearing the same clothes that Malanka had given me a week before. No underwear, testicles dangling, penis shrunken into a little lifeless worm from the cold. The rag of an underwear that I had on, I had washed that morning and it hung on the bathroom rail, concealed under a five Rands towel that was already shredded after a week of use. We took the lift down and waited at the foyer to access the security door. Outside the building, we ambled along Van der Merwe Street, turned right at the first intersection into Edith Cavell Street and went uphill, passing heaps and heaps of garbage piles next to the Metro bus stop; black refuse bags vomited sundry filth, used diapers winked at you, one-night stand used condoms spattered on the pavement, bloodied bandages dived out of their folds, rotten pap, a rat caught in rigor mortis, the no longer inviting G-string. The medley was garnished with browning cabbage leaves, peeled off from the heads to make them look fresh. Along the street, a rivulet of dirty water coursed downhill. The entire suburb was meshed together by a foul stench that smelled like genital pap.

We crossed Pretoria Street and followed the downhill road, coming to a block of flats. Pedzi left the sidewalk.

‘Get off the pavement,’ he said, ‘tenants of the building throw down rotten food on passers-by. Sometimes they even spit on you.’

We passed the Video Den down the street. A group of five West African brothers were arguing at the corner. A man in a ZCC cap crossed the street and came marching towards us. A police van slowed down and stopped on the roadside, next to a woman with a baby on her back. Down the descent until we came to the bustle in front of the butchery. Pedzi ordered a meal of pap and meat that came with a plate of chakalaka. For a small fee, a greasy-faced man with hands covered with healing burn wounds braai-ed the meat for you.

‘I’ll have a beer; do you want one?’ Pedzi asked, sitting down at a table that three

Khalanga men had just cleared off.

‘I don’t drink.’

He smiled. ‘Give it some time. I’ll bring you a soft drink then.’

He got up and pushed his way through a crowd of meat guzzlers milling about at the front of the butchery. A Brenda Fassie song started to play at full blast from a nearby building, sizzling the lazy afternoon with a melodramatic delectation of Hillbrow-life. The thing about hearing a Brenda Fassie song is that no matter where you are in the world, you can’t help it but visualize her singing it, head ducked into the neck, lips twisted and mouth wide open and a serious, expressive face bearing all the emotions of the song—and those little furrows that formed on her forehead which made her look somewhat racy.

Pedzi came back after a while. He complained about the long queue and the beer not being cold enough.

He pushed the can of Fanta to me and opened the brown bottled beer with a sharp twist. ‘So, how does it feel like?’ he said.

‘What feels like what?’

‘To be here,’ he said cheerfully, the mouth of the beer bottle held close to the lips. ‘After all that we went through. We finally made it.’ He tilted the bottle and casually sipped. The beer seethed to the mouth of the bottle. For a moment it looked like it was going to overflow but it didn’t.

‘I feel the same.’

‘Come on, Mo!’ He lowered his eyelids and started to peel off the sticker on the brown bottle. Looking up, he added, ‘You wanted to come to Joburg and now you’re here. That should inspire some sort of excitement.’

Hooking a finger around the seal of the can, I snapped it open. The fizz rushed to the mouth.

‘To be honest, I feel a bit lost. And....’

‘It’s early days,’ he said, leaning over the table. ‘Wait until you see your friend Makwe. When are you going to the township anyway?’

‘He’s the only person I know in this country, Pedzi. And you a bit.’

‘Don’t say that. Now you know Malanka and Vee. They’ll introduce you to other people from home and as time goes by you’ll bump into other people from your township in the streets.’

We both savoured the sweetness of our beverages, each one hitting that particular nerve which inspired some sort of temporary contentment.

‘Don’t stress,’ he said. ‘Everything will be fine. You’ll see. You’ll even forget that you came to South African without knowing anyone. You see me...’ He raised the beer bottle to mid-air. ‘I’m not like others. I don’t like it here. I come here for a month or two and go back home. Like now, we did a job two days ago and got away with a hefty loot. If I do another good job, I’m going home next month.’ His hand completed its course to the mouth and he drank. ‘What about you? What are you going to do to survive?’

‘I’m not sure yet. Look for work, I guess.’

‘Try Chinese shops first. They hire and fire people frequently. It’s the easiest way to start. Save up some money, get your own place and fix your papers. That will make your life easier.’

We sat in a muddle of voices, hundreds of mouths talking at the same time, all wanting to be heard, their drunken ideas to be acknowledged.

‘Can I give you a letter to take home?’

‘Yes, sure. But I’m not sure if I know which house your family lives in.’

‘You can give it to NaThulani. She’ll find someone to take it.’

‘Why don’t you just call?’

‘We don’t have a telephone.’

‘Cell phone?’

I shook my head. A new song started. Two men came to ask us if we were done eating so they could have the table. When we told them that we were waiting for our food they went away disappointed.

‘I’ll go check on the meat.’ He got up and finished the last sip of his beer standing and left.

A few minutes later Pedzi returned with a tray heaped with sizzling meat, a serving fit for a family of five. He placed it on the table and went back for pap which came steaming, a mountain of it accompanied by a bowl of a red, saucy chakalaka. We dug into the pap, big scoops and picked big pieces of meat. Half way through, Pedzi got up to get another beer and brought me another can of Fanta. We feasted. Guilt lingered at the back of my mind like a fly on the face of a dirty child with mucus. I had never had the privilege of having more than two pieces of meat in a single serving—I’m talking about boneless meat, not attached to a chunk

of fat. Neither had I witnessed so many people eat so much meat, not at a funeral or wedding.

To eat so much knowing that people at home were starving was just pure evil—sin at its highest degree. That is if it has ratings. No human being on earth should eat so much. To me, that was just madness. I ate and ate and ate until guilt was shoved deep into the pit of my stomach where it couldn't rise to torment me. And when it tried to push up I snatched the can of Fanta and sent down three angry gulps to bury it once and for all.

'At home, you'll never see so much meat,' I said, drunk on too much food.

Pedzi laughed.

'This is not home. Things are different here—there is a surplus of everything. You'll see for yourself. But even with all this shit, people are still not happy.'

'Not happy, why?'

'They want more money to buy all these things that they see in front of them but can't afford. I don't know what's worse...' He dug into the pap, rolled it into a ball which he dipped into the chakalaka and tossed into the mouth. He chewed clumsily, lower jaw moving in circles like a cow and swallowed. He washed it down with a sip of beer and continued. 'Having nothing to eat because the stores are dry or having nothing to eat because you can't afford it?' He rushed another gulp down his throat. 'The thing about being here is.... you work your ass off to support people at home. And no matter how much money you send home, they'll never say wooh, stop! We've had enough. Instead they keep asking for more. You, here, will be trying to make a living for yourself but the guilt about the situation at home will make you send everything you earn and even borrow from loan sharks on top of that. That's why you see people like Malanka, Tafi and me do what we do. We can't live like that.'

He extended a hand, dug fingers into the pap and rolled it into a ball.

'But I am not saying what we do is good,' he continued. 'Anytime you can get arrested and go away for a few months or years and come back to nothing and have to start all over again. That's why I do HB only, the sentence is shorter. Tafi and Malanka do armed robbery and that gets you a good few years.'

It was only then that I learnt about Malanka's vocation. He had only told me that he committed crime for a living, but no details involved. It turned out that everyone that I was introduced to was a felon, heist-puller, shoplifter, bank robber, car hi-jacker or a fraudster.

We finished off the last dollop of pap in the plate and shared the last two pieces of

meat and made space for a trio who had been eyeing us for the past twenty minutes. We retraced our steps back to Van der Merwe Street where we parted.

I took the elevator up, tortured by excesses of food, unable to move. A visit to the toilet entailed a token dump. Sitting ten storeys from the ground, discharged a mountain of it. In a city woven by the stench of indulgence.

Vee arrived home just after sunset. She found me in the kitchen, going through one of the magazines that Malanka had brought that afternoon.

‘So, Pedzi came to take you out for a braai,’ she said.

I considered the statement neither a question nor a comment. So, I didn’t respond. But Vee remained at the door which compelled me to look up. And just as I did, she said, ‘So, you also want to get into crime?’

Her tone had now changed from being offhand to serious.

‘No. He just came to show me around and I thought...’

‘Let me warn you, Mo!’ she said, shifting her weight to one side and weaving her hands. ‘When the police patrol the streets, making arrests and find you with criminals, they don’t ask questions, they throw you into the cell with them. And they charge you with whatever crime those people that you’re caught with committed. Tell me...’ She dropped her hands down to the sides. ‘Who is going to bail you out or come to see you in prison?’

Silence encroached.

‘I’m sorry, Vee.’

‘You don’t have to apologise to me. I’m not reprimanding you, I’m only warning you so that when something happens to you tomorrow you don’t say that no one warned you.’

I apologized again.

‘Think about it,’ she said. She turned around and left. The bedroom door closed soundlessly behind her.

The coming weeks were oppressive. I stayed within the building, I circled its perimeters until I knew every passage, corridor and the most hidden walls where the names of people who had once lived there were carved: *Rasta was here, 04; Killer, 02; Theuns 79. Fuck Marko by town clerk* (Marko was the caretaker). Out of ennui, I carved my name on the plastered wall on the rooftop, *Mo! 06*. I spent my afternoons on the roof top, basking in the mild winter sun, among the unemployed lot, new arrivals and students, escaping the murky, sullen, dirty,

peeling, cracked walls of their flats. This was the safest place to hang out since deportation was a nightmare to every illegal immigrant.

One afternoon, I took the elevator up with a neighbour, a girl from a flat down the corridor on the same floor we lived on. I had seen her hanging out with her friends on the rooftop. Her name was Lina, she was from the Eastern Cape. She was short, chubby with a smooth brown skin, well defined lips and a big bosom that greeted you with this strong presence that made you want to bury your face in it. She was in her mid-twenties, a final year Law student at Wits, slightly snobbish and wore glasses which made her look a little intimidating. She was frank about not associating with foreigners. On our first encounter she expressed her views brazenly.

‘I don’t talk to foreigners,’ she said.

‘Is that the name of your favourite song?’ I said to her, without looking in her direction.

The weight of her gaze fell on me. Even though I so much desired to turn and look at her, I didn’t. I felt proud of myself for having done so.

‘I mean, I don’t talk to foreigners. Literally, is that so hard to understand?’

Silence loomed above the whirr of the motor of the elevator. I kept my eyes on the digital counter above the door: 1st floor, 2nd floor. When the counter turned to 3, something compelled me to ask her why, so I did.

‘Apart from all the bad things that you people do in our country...’ She twisted her lips and tilted her head to an angle. ‘I just don’t like them.’

‘But how is it possible that you don’t like every foreigner in this country? There must be...’

‘Don’t try to convince me...’ She looked up at me. ‘What’s your name?’

I told her my name.

‘Well, don’t try to change my mind, Mo!’

‘I’m not, only trying to understand.’

Good, then let’s not talk again, okay?’

The ‘okay’ came accentuated with a tilted nod and a squint that made me desire her.

‘Understandable but not acceptable,’ I murmured.

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘It means you are beautiful...in my language’

'Haha, you think you're funny.'

The elevator jerked to a stop, followed by the tinkle of the bell and the door slid open.

She stormed out.

'Have a nice afternoon,' I shouted behind her.

She didn't respond.

Only mountains never meet

The visit to Soweto came like rain after a long drought. Malanka came in early on a Sunday morning after being away all weekend and woke me up. His eyes were bloodshot. He seemed to be sober despite the heavy smell of cigarettes and alcohol that he carried with him.

He stopped at the doorway and stood leaning against the frame.

‘If I don’t take you today, I’ll never do it,’ he said.

We left the building just after seven-thirty and took Klein Street, which fell into a descent. Men in red overalls offloaded a truck in front of Jamaica Wholesalers at the corner of Pretoria Street. Bottles tinkled in crates being hauled in trolleys. We carried on down the street, passing the gate of the General Hospital on the right. A man with a bandaged head hobbled out of the gate of the hospital, a yellow hospital file pressed under the arm. His clothes were covered in bloodstains. While I was still looking at him, two girls came out behind him. One of them was limping and wore one shoe.

‘Yesterday was a rough night,’ Malanka said. ‘Pirates got thrashed again and the supporters went on a rampage.’

Klein Street ended at an intersection with Joubert Street. Across the road was Joubert Park. We crossed over to the side of the park and trekked along the fence, curving onto the side of the taxi rank. Homeless people lay curled up in donkey blankets in the shade of the stalls. A green fly rose from the blankets and droned away. One hobo was packing things into a shopping trolley, getting ready for a day of *hobo-ing*. He stopped and looked at us as we filed past him.

‘Why are there so many mad people here?’ I asked.

‘They’re not mad people, they’re just homeless.’

‘I didn’t think there would be so many homeless people here.’

‘You haven’t seen anything.’

That statement left me with a blank in my head—a dash that needed to be filled. I thought about homeless people all the way. Homeless people in the city of gold. That didn’t make sense. Something is not right, I thought. The gold must be fake or something.

Street vendors pushed their trolleys to places of business, while others erected their stalls and packed them with wares. A woman tossed cabbage leaves onto the roadside and nursed the head back into life.

Mannequins dressed in the latest fashion struck poses in shop windows on Small Street. From catwalk to township poses, forefinger pointed up to flag down a minibus taxi, elbow on the knee mid-crouch like those poses you see in pictures from the '90s.

'I've a jersey just like that one,' Malanka said, pointing at a black golf jersey with a red diamond pattern at the front. I rushed my eyes to the window where the jersey was. A price sticker with Sale R599 written on it was attached to it. Everything was always on sale on Small Street.

At the taxi rank, a grey-bearded Zulu man touted his minibus to commuters. He wore colourful, round wooden earrings and sandals cut out of car tires. It took half an hour for the taxi to fill up. People came in dribs and drabs like water from a tap that is running dry. Eventually, we left the rank and drove through the desolate streets of the city, past the dilapidated buildings in Marshalltown, old factories, warehouses and ghosts of buildings in Booyens. The engine of the minibus taxi grumbled and whined through mounds of earth that towered from the old minefields. I held my breath as the minibus took the wide bend at the FNB stadium at full speed. It was as if the wheels had left the road surface. My buttocks began to slowly lift from the seat. By the time it jerked into position, I was dead with fright. Then through the front window screen, sheets of corrugated tin roofs appeared, spread across the land, absorbing the morning sun that would turn the houses into ovens in an hour or two.

The minibus taxi ploughed through the streets like a charging buffalo. Malanka scooted forward to the edge of the seat and held on to the backrest of the seat in front of ours.

'Short left!' someone announced from the back.

The driver hit the brakes and the minibus stopped with a violent jerk, jolting everyone back and forth. I almost bumped my face to the backrest.

'You've got to be careful in these taxis. One day you'll fly out the window,' Malanka said.

A woman with a stunningly protruding derriere shuffled out. Before she closed the door, the taxi took off and went full throttle and slowed down to make a left turn at the Shell garage, and eased past the Carioca Chicken container on the right. Car washes were abuzz.

Jazz music serenaded the *babalazi* out of the system, children played about on the streets, churchgoers with their fat wallets paced to churches.

Malanka announced our stop. The driver hit the brakes and the minibus stopped with a violent jerk. The house that we were visiting was one of the decent-looking ones on the street. Malanka opened the gate, making sure that it didn't make a sound, replacing the latch on the cradle. In the back yard was a block of three rooms. A moment after knocking, the door of the middle room opened and the expectant face of a boy my age appeared.

The room was small and crammed with furniture. A double bed sat against the wall on one side, a wardrobe was adjacent to it, then a cupboard and a TV. A ZCC uniform was hanging on the wall to the left. A silver star pinned to a green piece of cloth was fastened on the left breast pocket of the jacket. On top of the wardrobe was a green plastic dish where Sylvester kept all the remedies from the church, teas, salts and oils, things that he used for his monthly ritual of stomach cleansing through vomiting and induced diarrhea.

Makwe's brother, Sylvester, was in his late thirties. He was short and chubby with a round face and jutting jaws. His mouth couldn't close completely, always leaving the two gaping incisors exposed. NaThulani's health was of great concern to him. He kept jumping back to the subject like a broken record. Since it's custom to always say that a sick person is getting better even if they aren't, I kept telling him that she was recovering.

'I really don't know what went wrong with her,' Sylvester said. 'She was fine all along, then one day...' He shook his head sorrowfully. Then he turned to me, 'Are you sure she is getting better? The last time I saw her she wasn't looking good.'

'Yes, she is definitely better than when she first came home.'

After breakfast, Makwe and I finally had the chance to escape to the outside. We went to wash the dishes in the outside basin. We hadn't seen each other for two months. We had both grown from the experiences of that short period. Life was precarious on this side of the Limpopo.

'So, what's it like here?'

'It's a bit like home...but somehow different. There's more life here and...' He dipped the dishes in the foamy water. The lemon-scent of the dishwasher permeated the air.

His manner of talking had changed. His accent, intonation, sound, every word was forged and rolled out carefully. He spoke slower and dragged every word. Each sentence was punctuated with a *mara* and accentuated with a *neh*. I envied him—his quick advance to the

ways of the locals, their language, clothing style and culture. He had even gained the texture and skin tone of the locals. He had become a local.

He began to scrub a plate with a dishtowel, scooping the foamy water and letting it run over the grease. He placed it in the clean water and started on another one. Stories rolled out as we washed the dishes together. The little awkwardness that had threatened our friendship earlier had disappeared.

‘If I tell you something, promise not to tell anyone.’

I promised not to say anything. He turned around and looked behind.

‘I went to the rounds with Pedzi and Tafi.’

He finished scrubbing the pan and passed it to me.

‘Were you not scared, Makwe?’

‘I was scared at first. But when we got to the house, I wasn’t anymore. Pedzi still owes me my share of the money.’

‘Are you going to do it again?’

‘I just wanted to know what it’s like.’

After washing the dishes, while waiting for them to dry, we went to pass time at the front yard. A short wall separated the main house from the neighbours’. You could easily see into the other yard. You could also see up the road as people approached from a distance. At the corner there was a group of boys and girls gathered and a small speaker was set in the middle. Makwe brought me up to speed about the happening of the township. He told me about the people. Who they were. What they did. What they were like. He told me about the friends that he had made. His potential love interests and the girls he carnally desired. One of them was a girl from next door. While he was telling me about her, she came out of the house. The legs of her pyjama trousers fluttered at the rhythm of her steps as she came dragging her feet.

‘That’s her!’ Makwe whispered. ‘Don’t look! Don’t look! She’s coming this way.’

I tried not to look at her but I succumbed to the desire of seeing this beauty that Makwe had passionately talked about. Silence encroached on us. She wasn’t wearing a bra. Her pointed breasts pierced the light cotton of her pyjamas. She was a few inches taller than us both. She advanced leisurely. Just as she opened the gate, Makwe greeted her.

‘Excuse me! Excuse me! Who told you my name?’ she bleated.

‘Come on Lerato, don’t be like that.’

‘Please! Whoever told you my name had no right.’

She opened the gate and stepped outside. The gate swung shut by itself. A subdued click of the latch sounded. She strolled up the road to the group gathered at the corner. We waited until she was at a distance before we exploded with laughter.

‘Excuse me! Excuse me! Who told you my name?’ Makwe mimicked her.

‘I just know it.’ I mimicked him.

We broke into another frenzied laughter.

‘As if she doesn’t know my name,’ Makwe said. ‘I bet she even knows my surname.’

Makwe had hardly finished his sentence when a voice boomed from behind the window, ‘If the reason you are standing there is to mess with girls, you’ll hear it from their mothers before the end of the day.’

‘Sorry Ma,’ Makwe said in a smooth, oiled voice.

‘I don’t need your apologies—just stay away from people’s daughters. I don’t want any trouble in this house, do you hear me?’

‘Okay, Ma!’

The speaker disappeared behind the curtain.

‘Who was that?’

‘That was the *mastaand*. We should probably go back inside.’

We cleared from the corner and went back to the back room. We entered backs arched, knees bent so as not to disturb the peace inside the room. Malanka sat squat on a plastic chair with his face between the palms of his hands, his eyes riveted on the TV screen where the Sunday derby was on. The sharp voice of the commentator sifted through the speakers. The score was nil-nil, that’s all I remember. I couldn’t concentrate enough to follow the match. I wanted to be back at the corner of the house, looking at girls—a new breed that I had not had the pleasure to acquaint my eyes with, lighter, rounder buttocks, plump thighs and wider hips—and willing to show some skin. Lots of it. Miniskirts were much shorter and the tights tighter.

We took a taxi back to Joburg. Inside the minibus a group of church people argued profusely, men and women draped in white robes with various signs, stars, crescent moons and crosses sown onto the garments.

‘How are we going to live, huh?’ said one of the women. ‘What are we going to do if they send us back home? How about you tell us. Because Pastor won’t be there to save us.’

'It's not the first time this had happened. You know that,' said one of the men.

'Yes, but it's never been like this...' the second woman said.

'Sshh, lower your voices,' another man said. 'You want everybody in the taxi to know that *singamavelakude*.'

The taxi driver leaned forward and turned up the volume of the radio. A *Mas'kandi* song with sharp guitar strings sounded on the speakers. Followed by an explosion of drums, accompanied by a stretched piercing cry of recitals that sounded like a bleating goat with a knife on its throat. Malanka leaned back and rested on the backrest.

We got off the taxi on Small Street just after sunset and walked under the soft-lit streets of the city. Being a Sunday, Vee was at home doing her hair. She sat on the floor between the legs of a woman I had not seen before. Splinters of synthetic hair lay scattered on the bed and the floor. A full packet lay next to her. A third of it had already been planted on the head. It stood on ends like the quills of a porcupine.

'I hope you ate wherever you were,' Vee said.

'We had lunch five hours ago and now we're hungry,' Malanka replied.

'As you can see, I'm busy with my hair.'

'Even if you weren't busy you were going to find another excuse. I know you,' Malanka said. He took off his jacket, hung it in the wardrobe and replaced it with another one.

'Mo can cook.'

'Mo is not my girlfriend. You're supposed to cook for me.'

Vee threw her head back and laughed. Her laughter was derisive.

'You only think of that when you want food and sex. When you're out getting drunk in night clubs with whores and don't come home for days you don't remember that.'

'Don't talk to me like that in front of people.'

'Why not?' Vee turned her head and looked at him. The woman stopped plaiting and held the strand of the synesthetic hair mid-air.

'Are you ashamed of who you are and the things you do?'

'Don't start with me. I'm not in the mood for this shit.'

'You must think that I'm stupid, Malanka...'

'I said, I'm not in the mood for this. Didn't you hear what I said?' Malanka lashed out.

Noticing that the argument was escalating fast, I left the bedroom and went to the kitchen. I fired the gas stove, flung open cupboard doors, taking out pots and began to make

some food. A few seconds later, the woman who had been plaiting Vee's hair joined me in the kitchen. She stopped against the wall, kept her head down and played with the strand of hair piece, coiling it around the fingertip.

A moment later, the door slammed shut. The roar reverberated in the flat, cupboard doors creaked, pot lids clinked and the glasses tinkled on the shelf. I continued to prep for the relish, dicing tomatoes and onions into little cubes while the oil heated up in the pan. I could smell the oil start to burn but I had gotten lost in my head.

'I think your oil is burning,' the woman said softly.

I moved the pan to a free plate, tossed in the mixture and retreated swiftly to escape spattering oil droplets. I stood at a safe distance and watched the ingredients sizzle. I advanced with a ladle and stirred the stew until it was cooked, adding the mince that I had prepared. In the bedroom, the altercation seemed to have heightened. Malanka's voice rose above Vee's. She retaliated, yelping like a Chihuahua standing up to a bulldog. He wanted to leave and she was stopping him. The squabble lasted for half an hour. Then a loud crash came, followed by a loud bang as the door opened and slammed shut. Within a few seconds Malanka appeared in the kitchen doorway. He took out a glass from the cupboard, filled it up with water and drank with loud gulps. He brought the glass down to the tap and filled it up again. Just as the glass sat on his lips Vee appeared at the doorway.

'If you want to go, just go. I won't stop you anymore,' she shouted.

'I don't need your permission. I'm going whether you like it or not.'

'If anything happens to you don't call me. Call your whores, I'm done looking after a grown man.'

'Why would anything happen? Are you going to bewitch me?'

'Anything happens here, you know that. Pedzi got shot by the police this afternoon. Who knows, next time it will be you.' Her voice was breaking with emotion.

Malanka's face got drained of blood.

'Pedzi got shot?' he queried.

I stopped everything and became still.

'Who told you that?'

'I heard from someone at the butchery.'

'Someone...who is someone? Is there anybody named someone?' Malanka erupted.

I picked up the ladle and turned the mince relish on the stove. The pasta started to

seethe over the pot. My grip of the lid was weak when I opened the pot to release the pressure. For a moment I thought that she had said that to get his attention. But it turned out she wasn't.

'I overheard some guys talking at the butchery,' she said.

'What did I tell you about talking to guys at the butchery?'

Vee lowered her eyes. Guilt washed over her face.

'Didn't I tell you to stay away from men? Didn't I?'

'They're only customers. How am I supposed to work if I stay away from them?'

'Do you also have to sleep with them?'

'How can you say that to me, Malanka?' Vee exploded. 'How can you say that? I'm not like you who goes around poking at everything that wears a skirt.'

'You think you're better than me, neh? You think that I don't know that men come to the butchery to catch the girls there. That's why your boss only hires beautiful women, right?'

'You also met me there remember...which means you're just like those men that you think so little of.'

He slammed the glass on the counter.

'This wasn't just mere talk, Malanka,' she cried. 'Pedzi is dead and the guy simply thought he should tell me since he knows that I know Pedzi. What's wrong with that?'

'I thought you said you overheard them. Now you're telling me that some guy told you. Which one is it?'

'Does it matter?'

'Yes, it matters if you're lying to me or not.'

'That's not the point.'

Silence.

'How sure are you that it's true?'

'Why would anyone lie about something like that?'

Malanka remained pensive for a little while. I strained the starchy water from the pasta and replaced it with fresh water.

'Did they say what happened?'

'Apparently he got into a fight with one of the Mozambican boys selling vegetables at the market and he pulled a gun on them.'

'Where did he get a gun?'

Vee shrugged.

Another eerie silence passed.

‘He must have tried to run; otherwise why would they have shot him?’

He walked out of the kitchen. Vee rushed after him.

‘So you’re not coming home tonight.’

‘I’ll be back soon!’ he yelled from the corridor.

A few seconds later, she reappeared in the kitchen.

‘Come! Let’s finish up so you can go home,’ she said to the woman who stood against the wall like a bride in the presence of her in-laws. ‘I bet your husband is having a fit now.’

Pedzi’s death worried me deeply. What made the situation worse was that I had no way of verifying that information. And I had no one to talk to about it. With Vee having gone to sleep and everyone out, the walls whispered dreadful things. I decided to go up to the roof.

The rooftop was unoccupied. I checked all the hiding places, behind the boiler and the washing line area and found no one. One had to check the hiding spots to avoid being caught off guard when suddenly one heard the moans and groans of couples responding to each other’s imminent climaxes. A myriad of lights made up the northern suburbs, Parktown North, Killarney, Rosebank, the satellite tower in Auckland Park slightly to the west and the sterile three buildings of Johannesburg Hospital. During the day you could see The Dome, peeping slightly above the rooftops of buildings like a kippah on the head of a Jew.

The rooftop was imbued with tranquility that settled on you as you walked out through the glass door and met the maze of thousands of lights, spread out across a blanket of darkness like stars. Up there, there was peace that couldn’t be perturbed, not even by the mad drums of Kwaito and House music songs that pervaded the atmosphere. Every time I was up there alone, I wondered what the people were doing inside those buildings in that very minute. The brawls that were taking place, the licentious love making, drugs and alcohol consumption, the murders that were occurring that very moment and the drunk wife beaters raising fists over the defenceless wives. It all gave birth to a fiendish energy which the city exuded. Hillbrow was the capital of degeneracy, a place sick with venereal disease—the smell of it contagious and cankerous to the gullible immigrant far from home.

‘One can’t go anywhere in this place without bumping into people from Africa?’ a voice said behind me.

When I turned around to look at the face whose mouth had pronounced those words,

Lina was standing behind me. The tip of her cigarette glowed in the dark as she took a drag on it. The air became stained with the smoke of her cigarette which became stronger as she advanced and stopped next to me. She leant her back against the wall. She was in her night clothes, a brown robe open at the front, the limp belt left to fall to the sides and underneath she wore a short pink dress with red hearts.

‘Well, since we’re here we might as well make conversation,’ she said.

I didn’t respond for a while. Not that I didn’t want to but I didn’t have anything to say to her.

‘What do you want to talk about?’

‘Why don’t you tell me what it’s like where you come from?’

I turned and looked at her.

‘I remember you saying something about foreigners. What’s changed?’

She raised her chin, placed a cigarette between her lips and dragged on it and blew out the smoke soundlessly.

‘It’s just us up here. It would be awkward if I stood in one corner and you in another. I’m not keen on awkwardness today. I came here to relax.’

‘So, you would rather break your principles because you can’t stand an awkward moment.’

‘Listen here... I didn’t ask you for anything, okay. I just asked you a question and if you don’t want to answer it, that’s fine.’ She turned around and sauntered away.

‘It’s like paradise.’

She didn’t respond, kept on walking. The sound of her slippers scraped the floor.

‘I mean it. Without all the nice stuff and angels in white robes playing trumpets, of course.’

‘So, what makes it like paradise, then?’

‘Come back and I’ll tell you.’

She stopped next to the boiler and peeked over the wall, looking down. After a slight hesitation I walked over to her.

‘I prefer this view. Its less...mmmh.’ She turned around briskly, ‘It’s less dramatic.’

‘It looks plain to me. It has a uniformity that I find boring.’

‘Listen to you sounding clever.’

‘Me, clever? No!’

Her lips nursed the extraordinarily thin cigarette strangled between two fingers. Its smoke entangled with the sweet scent of her body. I couldn't figure out whether it was her body lotion or the perfume she wore. Whatever it was, it had had a strong grasp on me. I found myself wanting to sniff her, to draw in the smell through my nose.

'So, are you going to tell me about your country?' she said. Her voice was low and hoarse like someone who had seen many years of nightclub conversations.

I told her about my country—the older version of it—the version that many Zimbabweans mulled over, wondering if it was ever going to return. In truth, I told her about the Rhodesia that I had read about in history books, had learnt about in Commence class. The bread basket of Africa— but as with every other basket, emptiness is inevitable.

We came to ask for a pinch of salt, not the whole bag

Now I could find my way around Hillbrow. I knew the streets well enough to take shorter routes through dodgy passages and sweep through congested pavements without panicking. I had mastered the street names, I knew which ones were safe and those never to use after dark. Every second day I went to the Five Rand shop at High-Point to buy bread. As you entered, you were welcomed by a pungent smell of paraffin and wax which emanated from piles of cheap soap that were stacked at the back of the shop. People bought them in bulk to send home. As a result, the Pakistani shop owners kept a surplus of it which made everything in that store smell like soap. It took me some months to get used to the smell of soap in the bread.

I had just paid for a loaf of brown bread at the till and was about to make my way to the slicer when screams erupted outside. As I was trying make out what was happening, a frenzied crowd of people poured into the shop, women with hands above heads, mouths wide open, let out maddening screams. At the door two guards stood with their eyes popping out as if they were witnessing a miracle.

‘What’s happening? Who are all these people?’ shouted a Pakistani woman with an accent. Behind her, came two Pakistani men, shuffling in gaudy robes.

The Pakistani woman stood alarmed, watching the people flocking into the shop like there was a bonanza special.

‘Somebody please tell me what’s happening in my shop.’

‘They’re robbing the KFC,’ a woman shouted.

‘Who?’ one of the guards asked.

‘The robbers!’ Her voice petered into the distance as she fled to the back of the shop.

‘Don’t just stand there, close the doors. What am I paying you for, huh?’ She switched to her language, addressing the men in gaudy robes behind her who immediately took off and rushed in different directions. The guards closed the doors, shutting people outside.

Three successive loud bangs sounded, sending everyone at the tills to the back of the store. Tellers left the till drawers open. Within a few seconds everyone had cleared from the

front and stood huddled together at the back. The entire business lasted just under five minutes. But the frenzy lingered long after the robbers had left. About ten minutes after their escape, the police arrived. Their presence turned the lobby of the High-Point blue with their uniforms.

After the scene had been declared safe, people were told that they could now leave the store. But which stupid illegal immigrant would dare go outside to a police-ridden foyer. So, everyone started to act as if they were shopping, loading items into trolleys and baskets.

‘If you’re not buying, get out of my shop. Out!’ shouted the Pakistani woman, clapping her hands. ‘Come back when you want to buy, okay.’

People shuffled along the rows, eyes directed towards the shelves—buying with eyes since it wasn’t window shopping. I followed two women to the butchery side and stopped in front of the display fridge. The butcher man started forward with an urgency to help. Looking down at the chunks of red meat on the display, I tasted soap on my tongue. I moved on to the bakery where a man stood in front of the bread rack. He grabbed a loaf of bread and squeezed it. I took a place next to him and conducted my own test. The other loaf was softer than the one in my hand. After a quick glance around, I swapped the loaves and cleared away. Down the passage two plus-size women stood suspiciously too close to the shelf. I noticed that one of them had two cans of shoe polish in her hand which she stuffed into her crotch. She reached for another two cans, assumed a squatting position and sent them down her skirt. Six large cans went into her body before my eyes.

‘What are you looking at?’ one of them said.

They swapped places and continued with their business. I walked up and down two more rows and then decided to leave. As I walked out of the door, one of the guards stopped me and demanded a receipt. I started to search my pockets even though I knew that I didn’t have one. I held out an empty hand to him. As I began to make my case, he pushed me to the side.

‘Step aside, will deal with you just now,’ he said.

He attended to two schoolgirls and then came back to me.

‘Which till did you pay at?’

I turned to the row of cashiers behind me. They all looked alike as if they had crawled out of the same womb. They were all young women of about the same age, dressed in red smocks, all of them with hair tied to the back.

‘The second one from the last.’

‘Wait here,’ he ordered, pointing down his forefinger with emphasis.

Three women came pacing to the door, each one with an aim to beat the other two. Two got to the door at the same time and simultaneously brought forward their receipts. The guard hesitated. He made as if he was going to take the receipt of the woman to the left but ended up taking from the other woman. He peered inside the shopping bags and then held up the receipt and studied at it. He looked inside the shopping bag again and consulted the receipt once more, then he made a tick on it and passed it back to the woman. He did the same with the second woman. Just as he went through the receipt of the third woman, the line had extended by two more people. At the till counter, the other guard was still consulting the cashier. Occasionally, he would turn his head in my direction, then back to the cashier. The guard at the door combed through the groceries of the third woman. He took out a packet of tampons and looked at it from every angle like he was studying a Rubik’s Cube. The woman’s face turned livid.

‘You must have no wife or sisters. You’ve no respect for women,’ the woman said.

‘A job is a job. *mamazala*.’

‘A job is a job, that’s so true. But some jobs are for wankers.’

When I noticed that the guard’s attention was on the woman, I slipped past him and bolted up the stairs. A sharp left turn at the end of the stairs took me to the foyer. I maintained a steady pace. Running would have invited some attention. Everywhere in the city there is always a bloodthirsty mob ready to mobilize into a cadre. There is no trial in mob-justice. Another right turn and I was out of the shopping centre. I crossed over to the other side of the street, past the pharmacy, carrying on along the street and past the Mad-Max store where heaps of clothes spilled from the crates on the sidewalk. People jostled about, trying to lay their hands on the latest fashion of reject clothes. I was a block away by then. I slowed down to the descent of Edith Cavell and strolled to the flat as if nothing had happened.

Three months of harsh winter passed, with overcrowded flats, the incessant bustle on the streets, the occasional roar of gunshots, casual crime; serious crime, blood-sucking policemen harassing people at every turn, violent deaths, stabbings in night clubs, lovers caught in bed thrown off the balconies. There were no limitations to what tragic event could happen in Hillbrow. I became part of the chaos, I made up the census of the devil’s den. The

brawls between Malanka and Vee became frequent and more violent. Sometimes they lasted for hours and carried on into the early hours of the morning.

My seventeenth birthday came and passed without me noticing. When I realised a week later, I told Vee in passing and she endowed me with twenty Rands which I used to buy postage stamps and an envelope to write to my sister. With the remaining change I decided to ask Lina out to the movies. By then I was besotted with her, by her native-ness. She was the beauty and I, the alien, was the beast. That is how I saw it anyway. She agreed, with terms of course. It had to be on a weekday, late afternoon—after her classes. We had to go separately and meet up at the cinema. We arranged to meet at Kine 300 on Pretoria Street, on a Thursday afternoon.

I arrived at the cinema thirty minutes earlier and purchased two tickets. To pass time, I walked around the lobby, looking at the posters of the movies on circuit, *Scary Movie 3*, *Blade Trinity*, *Brown Sugar* and *Love Actually*. Old movie posters of classics like *Indiana Jones*, *Star Trek*, *Jurassic Park* decorated the lounge area which was made up of red velvet sofas spread out in a soft-lit room. A vending machine was set against the wall on one side.

Ten minutes after I had just sat down in the lounge, Lina arrived. She had come straight from university. She asked if I had been there long and I told her that I had just arrived. The movie was about to start, we bought some snacks, popcorn and two cocktail juices that tasted like medicine. The cinema was eerily empty. There were two other couples, one on each side of the aisle, surrounded by tiers of empty seats with arched backs that looked like tombstones in the dark.

Throughout the entire movie, I wrestled with the urge to place my hand around her—and endured the torture of a ferocious hard-on, the sear of denims was brutal on my genitals. I tried to distract myself but the treacherous thing wouldn't sleep. I tried sitting in different positions, legs crossed, legs wide-open and no luck. When the movie finally ended, I remained seated. We watched the credits, the long list of the main cast, supporting cast, the endless list of the visual effects team, the cameramen and the rest of the team at the end. The name of the production company came on and got replaced by a blackout. Then the lights came on. Lina got up and stretched.

'Do you also want to watch the empty screen?'

Getting up, I pulled the sweater over the bulge of my jeans and followed her as she led the way out of the cinema hall, into the scantily lit streets of Hillbrow. I had hardly followed

the movie so I avoided talking about it on the way. Since it was after dark, Lina suggested we walk home together and spilt up when we were near our building. I countered the idea by suggesting a longer route around to avoid bumping into someone we knew on the way. Instead of turning right into Klein Street, we continued along Kotze Street, heading towards Braamfontein.

‘I just love Taye Diggs,’ Lina said with impish glee on her face.

‘I thought you said you don’t like foreigners.’

‘Don’t ruin the moment.’

‘Okay, okay. I’m sorry, I was just teasing.’

‘Next time you think of teasing me, think about going to the movies alone before you do.’

We walked in silence for a while, through the quiet streets of Braamfontein, heading towards the red-lit sign of the Civic Theatre visible in the distance. We stopped at the corner of the Constitution Hill and talked about the politics of the building we lived in. Then we slowly started down the road and carried on for another two blocks and eased into the descent of Clarendon Street, past the Hillbrow Police Station. We were a block from our flat so we stopped to say our goodbyes.

‘Thank you for the movie,’ Lina said. ‘And for the popcorn and juice.’

‘Please don’t mention the juice....it was disgusting.’

She smiled.

‘It wasn’t that bad.’

‘It tastes worse than *Drink-O-Pop*.’

A short silence ensued.

‘Something is on your mind,’ she said.

I looked away for a moment and then back at her.

‘I want to do something.’

‘And what’s stopping you?’

I couldn’t have asked for a clearer invitation. Her breath was warm and her lips were sweet and soft. She drew a deep breath as I kissed her passionately, wrapping my hands around her plump body. Her bosom against my chest, the folds of her waist against my palms. She whispered my name.

‘What did you just do?’ she said softly.

'I kissed you.'

'Why?'

'Because, I've been wanting to do it since the day I first met you on the rooftop. And...'

'But you can't just do something because you want to...'

'I know...I know. But...but I thought you said...'

'I know what I said.'

'I'm sorry, I shouldn't have kissed you.'

Her face became sullen. Conscience fired shots at me.

'Now that you have, what happens now?'

'I see you again when you're free. Maybe I'll kiss you again... I'll ask first next time.'

She lowered her eyes and gently shook her head.

'You're sweet. But...'

 She shrugged. 'I don't think this will work.'

Oh! The pang incited by those words! How catastrophic.

'Why?'

 I managed to say after a moment.

'I'm not right for you. First of all, I'm much older than you are, you know that. And...'

She looked away and seemed to search her mind.

'I like you, Lina,' I said. 'A lot.'

'You're just saying that'

 Her voice had become a sorrowful whisper and her eyes gleamed in the shade of the building.

I took her by the hand. Her palm was soft and warm against mine.

'I mean it.'

She opened her mouth to speak but no word came out. She looked away and remained contemplative for a while.

'I've got to tell you something. Let's see if you still feel the same after that.'

A gut-churning moment of silence descended. I waited for her to say what she wanted to tell me. Every second of delay tested my patience. Big blocks of angst rained down on me and buried me. I feared that she was going to tell me that she had a boyfriend or even worse that she was a prostitute, which wouldn't have surprised me. I had heard stories about college and university girls being in the trade to fund their studies.

'I have a child, a daughter,' she said.

At first, I thought she was testing me, to see how far my endurance went and how much this affection that I had just professed to her stretched.

‘How come I’ve never seen you with her?’

‘She lives with my parents in the Eastern Cape.’

A police van passed, driving at twenty km per hour. The driver looked at us with suspicion until we were out of sight. A guy stopped at the corner, looked up the building and whistled. A moment later someone shouted from the top.

‘See what I meant. You look like your cat just died.’

‘I don’t have a cat.’

‘Well, your pet cockroach then. I know you have those.’

I looked away, laughing. She smiled.

‘And you are what, fifteen?’ she said.

‘Seventeen.’

‘My little brother is seventeen.’

‘I don’t care even if you have a child.’

She looked at me with eyes filled with pity—as if I was a lost sheep blundering through the wild without a shepherd. Then without saying anything, she turned around and started downhill. I watched her go.

‘So, when will I see you again?’

There was a delay.

‘Thursday afternoon,’ she shouted without looking back.

A great feeling of elation passed through me. I watched her walk away, in her goatlike-gait—her steps gentle as if she was afraid to dirty them by touching them on the ground.

Slow boat to China

The cloud of fear of detention and deportation never petered out. It lingered tirelessly above every immigrant's head. I learned to manoeuvre the streets of Joburg, avoiding dangerous areas and high police-patrolled streets. Noord Street was one of those high-risk areas. The police picked out immigrants like flies from scores of pedestrians. Every time I went to the city, I had to take the long way around, through Park Station and came out on Eloff Street where I would start doing rounds looking for work in Chinese, Indian and Pakistani shops. There were rows of them on the outskirts of Joburg, starting from Noord Street until Market Street. They stretched along the streets, roller doors flung up, incessant music playing inside the crammed little shops. Striplings called out to prospective buyers from the doorways. I combed through streets, weaving through pale-faced vendors in their stalls. Heaps of second-hand clothes brought in bales from Europe and America, expired chocolate bars, gum and sweets, sold at mouth-gaping prices.

It had rained the previous night. Light winds inherited from August gales gusted through buildings in the mornings and died down as the sun rose higher in the sky. I had been to every shop on Noord Street, all ten blocks of it. Now I was halfway through Bree Street. The morning was turning out to be futile. The enthusiasm that I had felt when I left the flat had diminished. After the Kosher shop, where I had been shooed away by a Jewish man behind the counter, I decided to skip a block. I walked along the street until I came to a red traffic light at the intersection of Bree Street and Marshall. I waited for the little green man in the traffic light to come on.

After crossing the street, impulsively, I decided to try a Chinese shop that occupied the corner. Like all other shops, the pay counter was at the entrance. The place was poorly lit, narrow and stretching to the back. Two girls sat behind the cash register, wavy weaves falling over their shoulders, red lipstick and overly arching eyelashes. One of them was filing her fingernails. I asked to see the owner of the shop.

Before the reply, a short Chinese woman appeared from the back of the store. She came marching purposefully like a soldier of the Third Reich.

'Miss Sue, he wants to see you,' said one of the girls.

'How can I help you?' the Chinese woman said. Her voice was metallic and raspy.

I started towards her and we met in the aisle.

'I'm looking for a job,' I said.

'Look around you, young man! Look around! You think you can sell this? You think you can sell all this, huugh?' She picked up pieces of clothing from a big crate and held it up. 'You know the sizes of women's underwear, hugg?'

I looked around the shop. Only then I realized what kind of products were being sold there. Garish women's underwear was displayed on the walls, brasseries, panties of all kinds, sizes and colours. G-strings, boyleg and bikinis were stretched in hangers with matching bras. A pair of pink panties in one rack puzzled me— they were extraordinarily large as if they were meant to be worn with cross belts. The two girls behind the counter started to chortle. When I opened my mouth to respond my vocal cords froze.

'Don't know? Okay, come back tomorrow when you have answer. Now go! Go!'

The Chinese woman walked me out of the shop and stopped at the doorway and watched me go. I could feel her small, slanting eyes on my back. Their weight settled on me until I crossed the street to the next block, and got swallowed by the chaos of the city that spilled onto Jeppestown.

A minibus taxi whizzed past, turning left into Mooi Street at the traffic light. It nearly knocked a man with the side mirror. A second taxi followed closely behind. Then came another and another. I stepped back to a safe distance. The rest of the people at the traffic light held their ground. An old man in a check flat cap paced across the street. Right in the middle of the intersection, a scraggy character in red dungarees, a stack of newspapers in one hand, leaped in front of a latest model BMW and held up a copy of the *Daily Sun* to the driver's window; *Priest stabs man to death over a nyasti*, was the title on the front page. *Daily Sun*, the best-selling daily newspaper in the country, Chief editor's unwavering commitment to murders, rapes, witchcraft and sex scandals which people feast on during tea and lunch breaks.

The group of people waiting to cross the street began to swell, just at about the same speed as the one at the opposite end. The two groups stood facing each other like two bulls about to lock horns. A whistle sounded to the left, a car horn in the same direction. A red Toyota Corolla shot past, windows rolled down, Mandoza's *Nkalakatha* blaring out through

the speakers. Two girls in school uniforms started to dance, doing the get-down, their miniskirts receded over plump, youthful thighs. The newspaper guy also broke into a dance. Whistles sounded. The dance moves soon became obscene. The little man in the green traffic light came on. The two groups started forward at the same time, hastened by the pulse of the city and collided soundlessly in the middle of the street. Shoulders bumped, bags grazed and arms brushed against each other.

‘Look where you’re going!’ shouted a short chubby woman.

Suave men’s clothing in the window of a shop across the street caught my attention. I decided to go in but hesitation gripped me at the entrance so I walked past. After much deliberation I stopped a few meters away from the door. Having gathered enough courage, I walked into the shop. An old Indian man with a long white beard had his head down at the counter. He raised his eyes and looked at me with suspicion as I entered. A middle-aged black man in a shiny polyester suit rushed from one end of the shop to meet me at the door.

‘Good morning,’ I said.

The Indian man did not respond, instead he lowered his head and looked at his wrist watch. Then he closed the book in front of him and picked it up. He cradled it against his chest and moved away from the counter. Ardent Mohammedan, wouldn’t swallow saliva during fasting even if thrown into a pit filled with Nando’s chicken. Mohamed got tempted with fried chicken on Ramadan. Adam couldn’t turn down an apple in the garden of Eden.

‘Can I help you?’ the black man said.

‘I’m looking for a job.’

Craning his neck, the black man relayed the message to the Indian.

‘What?’

‘He’s looking for a job, Mr. Ankara.’

‘A job!’

‘Yes. A job. Work, Mr. Ankara.’

‘How old you?’ the Indian man asked, speaking from his throat like he was swallowing a hot potato.

I stepped slowly towards him.

‘I’m seventeen, Sir.’

‘And you’re looking for a job?’

‘Yes, Sir.’

‘Aren’t you supposed to be at school?’

The question sat in my throat like a big morsel of food that just wouldn’t go down. After that, I decided to call it a day and turned my feet to Hillbrow.

George Michael’s *Careless Whisper* played to the deserted platforms at Noord Street Taxi Rank. The volume was so soft such that some parts of the songs were inaudible. All that you could hear was the underscored distant murmur of the chorus, followed by the rasping saxophone when it hit those long, sharp, excruciating notes that made you feel like death. Minibus taxis were parked in rows, scores of them, lying under the roof, old and worn out. A group of taxi drivers were gathered in a circle, eating a mountain of pap with tripe. A short distance from them a boy in orange Converse and a hat was washing one of the minibuses. All his concentration was channeled on the scrubbing, scooping foam water, pouring it over the taxi and rinsing. He turned briskly to the front, lifted up the wipers and worked on the window screen. Then he exchanged hands and polished the window. He washed the minibus with energy and passion as if he was being cheered at. He made it look like fun. I began to wonder if I could also wash cars for a living, minibus taxis. But the taxi rank was no place for an immigrant. That was where chaos was bred, configured and then channeled to other parts of the city. It was where girls in miniskirts were groped by greasy, filthy, coarse hands of taxi drivers and verbally harassed in broad daylight. Their clothes ripped and left to parade the streets naked. It was where lesbians and gays were brutalized. It was where schoolgirls were preyed on, taken to cheap hotels and violated for a free ride back to the township. It was the anvil for the devil’s work—a place of great abomination.

The road curved along the fence of the Johannesburg Art Gallery. Women in pairs were doing their hair on the streets. A few steps ahead, three women in red berets paced energetically. They had been walking in front of me since the taxi rank. I had tried to overtake them but they were walking faster than I had thought. Klein Street turned into King George Street. I stopped at the traffic light on Wolmarans Street to let a cyclist pass. The three women crossed the road diagonally a few meters ahead. A young man appeared from around the corner. He came walking with bouncy steps and cut between them. They all turned their heads and looked at him tread energetically across the road. One of them, leaning forward, said something to the others who exploded with laughter. I nearly collided with a man who had just appeared from a building around the corner. A quick step to the left was enough to avoid the collision. He didn’t flinch, kept marching right on.

Waves of people heading to the city came pouring down Klein Street. The three berets disappeared behind the crowd. The next moment I saw them they had stopped. Not thinking much of the detour, I trudged on and collided with droves of pedestrians. Before I realized what was happening a strong grip seized me by the waist of my pants and hoisted me up. I felt my feet leave the ground and soon I was standing on my toes. When I tried to break free, my assailant tightened his grip and the leather belt became taut around the waistline. Further up, I went. Since I didn't have underwear on, the bind of my jeans, where the two sleeves join, sank up into the crack. The only underwear I had, I had tossed into the garbage bin earlier that morning having worn it until it was threadbare. I tried to turn my head to see the face that was putting me through such torment and mortification, but I couldn't. All I knew was that whoever it was, was a big mean devil with a hell of a grip. Since it was common practice in these areas, I thought that I was being mugged. I tried to break free again. By doing so, I exacerbated the pain. 'Passport or ID,' the assailant demanded. He switched hands and brought me to his front. His face was grave and menacing.

'I...I don't have it with me,' I squealed.

He tightened his grip. The bind cut deeper into the crack of my buttocks; this time bisecting my testicles and squashing one against the inner thigh. My body was heating up very fast.

'Where is home?'

I extended my hand and pointed north, the direction of our flat. The same direction as *Kwamgodoyi*.

'Where is that?'

'There!' I winced.

'Come, you're playing games with me. You're Mugabe's person, you. I'm taking you in for a permit.'

The devil dragged me to an alley where a police truck was parked. He opened the door with one hand and shoved me inside like a heavily loaded cart.

'The way home is waiting for you.'

I landed hard on the floor. Other detainees inside the truck gathered their legs and pressed themselves against the walls. The door slammed shut and a dark shadow of memories filled up the place. After a tense moment, my fellow immigrant brothers and sisters warmed up to my arrival.

'Are you okay? Did you get hurt?' one of the women asked. I noticed that she had a red beret folded in her hands. Her hair was dishevelled.

'No, I'm fine.'

I got up, picked a spot and sat down.

'Are they even allowed to do that?' the second beret-sister said.

'They can do whatever they want, it's their country,' replied the third beret-sister.

'But that doesn't give them the right to manhandle people like that,' the first beret-sister said. 'What if you get hurt?'

'That was nothing. Wait until you get to Lindela, you'll see what the guards do,' the second said in low depressed voice.

'Who's going to bail us out? I can't go to Lindela, I'd rather die,' the third sister said.

Half an hour later, the number inside the truck had doubled. Men came hoisted with the waists of their pants and women were tugged by their wrists. There were ten people inside the truck, the three beret sisters, a depressed looking woman, two middle-aged men and an addition of two young men in their twenties, both dressed in striped t-shirts, loose fitting pants and Converse. The two occupied one corner of the truck. The older looking one seemed mad beyond heavens. Shaking his head, he would eject a fierce clicking sound. Then he would look up, leaning his head against the wall of the truck, exposing a corrugated neck. The second guy had a smaller build. His shirt hung loosely on the shoulders. He had an orange hat which he kept bouncing on his hands. He had kept his head down the entire time. He stopped bouncing the hat and started to pat its crown like it was a living thing, fixing it into shape. He patted it for a little while, then he held it back and looked at it with admiration. You could see that it was of sentimental value to him. That it was to him what a cowboy hat is to a Texan. Then, in a thought, he placed the hat on his head and pulled it down over his eyes. He readjusted it a few times until he was satisfied. He started to nod his head, tapping down the right foot and shaking his shoulders. He moved his head sideways, sideways then back to nodding. Clearly, there was a song in his head. A kwaito song—loud gongs, hard thumping drums, mad percussions and lyrics screamed from a voice box burnt out from years of alcohol. Not much meaning to them, but who the hell cares. As long as the beat moves you.

Outside, you could hear the city noises, car horns, sirens, people yelling, delinquents whistling and the chatter of thousands of mouths. It took me a few minutes, if not an hour,

to grasp the idea that I was back inside one of those trucks. Similar to the one I was in in Musina—one tonner with blue and lime-green lines running right around. I was a rat caught by the same trap twice.

Fifteen minutes later, the door opened as another detainee was brought in. The new arrival was a woman in her mid-fifties, with a sparse white beard on one side of the chin. Whenever you got held for a permit, you couldn't believe it at first. There was this cloud of incredulity that took over you and left you stupefied. The whole permit business seemed like an urban legend until you were inside the back of the police truck and the doors had been slammed shut and the latch secured. And you were sitting in the dark silence, the floor cold and hard on your buttocks.

'You can let go my hand now,' the old woman said. Her voice was full of bitterness. 'Where do you think I'll go?'

'One can't be too sure, *mamazala*,' the policeman said.

'You have no shame.'

'I don't get paid to be shameful, *mama*. Please get in...you're wasting time.'

With her grocery bags in hand, the old woman groaned and whimpered, labouring into the truck. She sat down next to the beret sisters and mumbled.

An hour later, the engine started. The old woman who had dozed off started up and looked around in bewilderment. High revs followed as the truck started forward. It maintained a low speed through the congested street of Noord.

Being driven through the streets of Joburg at the back of a police truck was like a shame walk. It ripped away the little integrity that you might have retained through the dehumanizing business of border jumping. It displayed to the world that you were the unwanted, unwelcome face that the system fought with all its might to keep away. The *persona non grata*. And because police trucks always drove at twenty km/h, people took this as an invitation to express their discontent.

'*Godukani, makwerekwere!*' someone shouted.

'Waste away, dogs!' another voice shouted from a group of students on Wolmarans.

'We don't want you here!' another voice urged on.

The truck roared and let out a throaty belch as it lumbered uphill on Tudhope Street and slowed down to almost standstill when it reached the crest of the hill. The rasp and clank of gears saw us to a left turn into Joel Street. I had crossed my fingers hoping that it was

going to get stuck but the jalopy laboured relentlessly all the way to Berea. The Ponte tower building loomed above the skyline of Joburg to the right. The Coca-Cola logo at its crown twinkled and flickered ceaselessly night and day.

Berea was grey and misty. Hillbrow and Berea, because both are perched on a hill, are always a few degrees lower in temperature than the city centre. I started to sneeze violently. We were all silent, working the bones of our brains, fear of deportation visible on every face. We all had a single goal. That was to make it out of the back of that truck before it pulled over on the driveway of Hillbrow Police Station.

We made a left turn into Five Street and then came to a stop. A loud beeping came on as the truck started to reverse into an alley.

‘Where are we?’ asked one of the beret-sisters.

‘This is the Nigerian club on Five. Don’t you recognize it?’ replied the one with dishevelled hair.

‘So, they’ll drive around with us the entire afternoon?’ the second sister said.

‘Until the truck is full at least.’

‘Without asking for a cold drink?’ the third sister said.

‘It would rain world-engulfing floods of the Bible.’

‘For now, they’re just enjoying our company,’ the second sister chimed in. ‘Driving around with a truck load of illegal immigrants makes them look busy. You’ll see, by the time the truck returns to the police station, it will be half-empty.’

‘I’ll be very happy to get a free ride home. I haven’t seen my mother in two years.’

‘Don’t say that. Haven’t you heard stories about Lindela?’ said the one with dishevelled hair.

Her eyes were filled with pity. Her voice expressed something that she knew about Lindela that others didn’t. The beeping stopped and the doors opened. The pantsulas exchanged glances. But none of them said anything to the other. Each one seemed to be caught in the wanderings of his imagination. The thump of the drums of Kwaito, maybe dance moves or the next new pair of Converse. The old woman’s pendulous cheeks seemed to sag lower every minute and the wrinkles on her face etched deeper into the skin and the sparse beard grew whiter.

Ten minutes into the second location, the doors flew open and two policemen stood grappling with a tall, muscular man with a flat-back square head. He was dark skinned,

physically distinct from everyone else inside the truck, a definite easy prey for the police who used such profiling to pick immigrants in the streets of Johannesburg. The shade of your skin colour determined if you were worth five hundred Rands or not. The dark-skinned faced were likely to face discrimination. The thing about the Nigerians and other West-African brothers was that they didn't go down without a fight. I admired that about them. This West-African brother put on a fierce fight. He moved through the policemen like they were paper dolls. A gentle swing by him and they tumbled down like drunkards drunk on cheap liquor. He brought down two policemen with a single wave, tossing the third to the ground with a violent shove. When the third policeman got up, he drew his pistol and pointed it at him. As he raised his hands to surrender he met a heavy blow to the head.

'You beat me for what! You beat me for what,' the Nigerian brother cried. 'Fuckin' policemaahn. You beat an innocent man. And for what? Piece of paper?'

'You're refusing arrest,' said the policeman with a pistol. 'Now get in or I'll use it again.'

'No, I'm not getting in,' the Nigerian protested. 'Do what you want but I'm not getting in.' His voice was thinned to a hiss.

The two policemen tried to force the man into the truck but he wouldn't budge. The policeman cocked his pistol, threatening to shoot him. But the Nigerian brother remained averse to getting into the truck. According to him, he hadn't done anything wrong. To him, Africa belonged to everyone who lived in it and he was willing to die for that right. The scuffle continued as the policemen wrestled him. He spread his legs, dropping all the weight of his body to the ground he stood firm. The two-policeman tried to shove him but he didn't move an inch. Noticing that his companions were losing the fight, the third policeman holstered his gun and joined in. Shoe-soles scored and scraped the asphalt. Knees bent, legs wide apart, the tussle intensified. A lot of pushing and shoving ensued but the Nigerian remained planted on the ground like a deep-rooted tree. He waved his arm to the left and one of the policemen went flying with it. He almost fell to the ground but gripped onto the door of the truck which swung him back to the wrestling.

'Hold his feet!' the first policeman yelled.

The second policeman stooped over and tried to reach for the man's legs. But just as he got hold of them he kicked him in the face. The policeman staggered backwards and stopped against the wall. He stood breathing heavily, watching as the other two policemen

grappled with the man. His face was flushed. When he regained his strength, he got back into the fight with a revised strategy, securing his right arm around his neck, he grabbed him in a choke-hold. The other two policemen seized the opportunity and secured his hands. They brought him down to the ground, and one of them pressed a knee on his chest as the other cuffed him.

‘Let me go! Let me go!’ the Nigerian screamed fiercely.

His face was down on the dirt now. The policeman exerted more pressure on the neck and the Nigerian squealed like a rat.

‘Okay, okay! I give up, I won’t fight anymore. I get in.’

‘Why were you fighting in the first place? Now we’re charging you with resisting arrest and assaulting police officers.’

‘I was only fighting for my rights. You people try to bully me, I had to fight. Now I’m not fighting, I get in.’

‘Let him go!’ said one of the policemen.

The other two policemen released him. He got up, holding his head with one hand, found the rung at the back of the truck and climbed in. He sat next to the old woman who scooted away from him. The door clanked shut and it was all quiet again. The second man to be arrested on Five Street was also from West Africa, Senegalese, Ghanaian, Malian, who can tell the difference? I’ve plunged into the ignorance of differentiating nationalities seen in this country. Since everyone from west Africa is Nigerian, from the horn is Somali and the rest share all sorts of names. The man was also tall, clean shaven and bow-legged. He wore a pair of dark blue jeans and a size too small pair of leather sandals. He had also put on a fierce fight, ploughing through the police like Samson against the Philistines. As I’ve said, I admired that about the West-African brothers. They had the courage to fight the police. Most of us were walked into trucks without even flexing a muscle like sheep being driven into the slaughterhouse. Us, Zimbabweans, never fought or questioned the police. If we saw them first we ran for our lives, if not we bribed our way out—five Rands, ten Rands, grilled chicken feet. Anything goes with hungry policemen. But we’re as stubborn as millipedes when it comes to deportation. A Zimbabwean gets deported one day and is back in Joburg the next day, not having made it home. The exercise, however tedious and exhausting, we keep at it and the police also never tire. They get fat out of our money. And we build careers over their paunches.

Escaping the Gumbagumba

When people saw a loaded police truck they hastened their feet as if it was contagious. We turned left into Twist, past the adult shop with elaborate red and blue lightings flickering in daylight. *Open 24 hrs*, a sign read on the wall, *Take your sex life to greater heights*. We stopped at the intersection of Kaptein and Twist Street, among minibus taxis whose engines roared impatiently. The descent on Twist took us to a familiar territory. On the left, The Redds Bar bustled with animated crowds of boozers. After a left turn into Edith Cavell Street, the truck slowed and reversed into the alley between the Hillbrow Theatre and The Lloyds, a building known for harbouring criminals and prostitutes. During this time of day, the streets of Hillbrow belonged to young women brought in from Zimbabwe to be made wives. They roamed around in pyjamas and stood on street corners to discuss latest gossip. They were easy prey and the husbands always paid up the bribes.

‘They’ve just made a big mistake,’ mumbled one of the pantsulas, getting up. He pulled off his orange hat and peeked through the window.

‘What is it?’ his counterpart inquired.

‘Do you know who lives here?’ the pantsula in an orange hat said.

‘We’re getting out of here.’

He whistled a finely tuned twitter that petered away. There was no response. He whistled over and over again until he was out of breath. Disappointed, he sank to the floor and sat down. Just as his buttocks touched the floor, a response came in a finely tuned twitter similar to the one he had whistled. He rushed up to the window and whistled back. The exchange went back and forth until it was interrupted by the opening of the door. Two girls joined us. We were now fifteen in total and we were getting crowded. As soon as the doors were closed the pantsula got up again. Cupping his hands around his eyes, he peeked through the window.

‘Hurry up before we leave!’ he said to someone on the outside.

The Nigerian looked up at him.

‘What is your friend going do now?’ His voice was thin and raspy.

‘What do you think?’

‘How is he going to do it?’

‘You know what...’ the pantsula lashed out. ‘You’re asking too many questions, *maan*. Are you also going to ask me for a Pass?’

A prolonged stretch of silence settled in like dust on a surface. Anticipation and anxiety grew around us—it loomed, filling up that little space we were confined in and engulfed everything. Questions rained, heavy and hard, crushing against the head and denting the skull. We waited. What is going to happen next? Is the pantsula certain about what he intends to do? Is it going to work? What will happen to him if he gets caught?

He turned to his counterpart and whispered, ‘He’s coming.’

The mood became tense. People, shifting weight, changed positions and readied themselves for what was to happen next. The second pantsula got on one knee and tied the lace of his Converse. The old woman gathered her stretched legs. The beret sisters gave each other interrogative glances. The Nigerian ran a palm over his face and made a strange droning sound with his lips. A knot tightened in my stomach.

‘As soon as the door opens, I’m out of here,’ the pantsula said.

‘What about my groceries?’ the old woman said.

‘You’ll buy other groceries, *mamazala*.’

‘Each man for himself,’ said the pantsula in the orange hat.

The wait. The wait. The wait. Apprehension, heavy in the air. Somewhere a fan droned laboriously. A car horn sounded incessantly in the near distance.

‘He’s here,’ one of the pantsulas said.

We all sat silent, ripped by anxiety and anticipation. Then suddenly a loud raspy clanking of the latch sounded and the doors flew open. There was no time to think. The pantsula boys were the first ones out of the truck. Then came the Nigerian brother in handcuffs. The rest of us scrambled out in a frenzy, hands, shoulders and elbow doing all the work. By the time my feet touched the ground, the pantsulas were halfway through the alley. Loud screams flared up as the policemen realized what had happened.

A race to freedom. The sounds of feet thumping the ground resonated in the alley. Cars raced down the street ahead. We all knew that once we had reached the end of the alley, the police weren’t going to pursue us any further. We were not criminals after all. Halfway through the alley my chest was burning as if I had swallowed a litre of paraffin.

Soon, the West-African brother was on the lead and the Nigerian went galloping behind him. The group surged on, racing the last stretch of the alley. As I drew near the end of the alley, a cacophony of deafening car horns broke, tires screeched and a loud crash that silenced everything. The West-African brother landed hard on the road surface. A pool of blood formed around his body. The Nigerian, blue-faced, stood stunned on the roadside. The driver of the security van got out of the car and rushed to the front of the van to assess the damage to the vehicle before he turned to the West-African. He crouched down and said something to him. The Nigerian started to address a group of people that had started to gather around. Heart pounding, temples throbbing, I marched. The scene got swallowed by the swelling crowd. I carried on along the street. The events of the day replaying in my head like a strange dream. I crossed to the other side of the road, pacing downhill to the turn of Van der Merwe. I slowed down, knowing I was safe—but I also knew that this was just the beginning. That this was going to happen again. That my life was going to consist of the pestilential fear of deportation, of being sent back home, fear of those grim walls of detention centres, fear of the cruel, abrasive hands of their operators and most of all, the fear of having to do it over and over again.

Part three

Hope you are well and not in hell

The elevator tinkled to a stop. When the door slid open a foul smell wafted in. Outside, the entire corridor reeked of cow dung. It was as if someone had hauled their grandfather's entire kraal all the way to Joburg. The smell became stronger as I neared the door of our apartment. When I opened the door, a big green fly droned out. Its sound carried on in my ears long after I had closed the door. The wooden floors glistened in the daylight that filtered through the open windows. Everything was neatly arranged, a line of shoes stretched along the wall, wrinkled and twisted to the shape of the owner's feet. Suitcases and bags were closed and piled in one corner—usually they would be left open with their guts spilling. All the curtains that divided the living room were drawn and thrown over the suspension wires. This neat arrangement signalled that Fortune was home since she was the only person who actually did some cleaning. She was lying on her bed. The fabric of her skirt fell gently over her thighs, exposing the white triangle of the fabric of her panties. It's amazing how the mind and the eyes are connected. All this registered in my head within a few seconds of walking into the door.

'I haven't seen you for days,' she said.

She looked a little uncomfortable; my eyes had accomplished making her uncomfortable for the first time in the three months that I had been there.

'You've been scarce lately,' I said.

She smiled. 'I know.'

'Busy week?'

'Kind of. You know how it is. What about you? I thought you'd gone to the township to visit your cousin.'

'Not yet, I've been around.'

'Any luck with work?'

I shook my head in dismay.

'Something will come up, don't worry much.'

I was sick of hearing those words. It wasn't as if I had all the time in the world to find

work. Months had passed and the pressure of unemployment was gnawing at my confidence. I wasn't worried, no, I agonized about everything, even about the niceties that people threw at me.

The smell of cow dung was being emitted by a big black pot of *ulusu* that was boiling on the stove in the kitchen. Brown broth of offal seethed and trickled down the sides of the pot and sizzled as it came into contact with the flames of the gas stove. It was a familiar smell, just out of context and that was enough to throw me into mystification. Someone seized by nostalgia had gone to the trouble of acquiring offal, ancestors know where in Hillbrow, and had been boiling it for hours. The thing about the so-called traditional food is that when you see it or get into the kitchen where it's being made, you would swear you wouldn't eat it. But once it had been prepared and dished out, it tastes nothing like the smell it emits when cooked. While I stood staring at this homey offering that had transported me back into Mother's kitchen, Vee walked in.

'Did you see where your friend died?' she said.

'I passed it? at the market yesterday but I didn't see anything.'

'Look on the wall of the public toilet. You'll see there's a trail of blood running across the wall.'

She walked to the stove and opened the pot. The gurgle of the pot rose to a crescendo.

'You should go and see where your friend died. His parents are here to take his body home.'

Pedzi's send-off was held in the parking lot of The Sentinel, a twenty-something-storey building of grim concrete slab and red-brick, which he lived in. Makwe, Vee and I arrived a few minutes into the ceremony. A modest coffin with golden handles was perched on a bier at the front. Pedzi's parents and close family occupied the front row. His mother, a woman in her mid-fifties, stood huddled in a black blanket thrown over her shoulders. Her drooping face was grey under the peak of a black doek. A head-master-faced man with a grey beard, wearing thick framed glasses, was nestled in a dark suit next to her. His hands were clasped in front of him, as if holding a briefcase in front of him. A fair crowd of people had turned up. We joined the gathering crammed in the poorly lit underground parking. The priest, an old man with sparse grey hair, preached about death and the second coming of Jesus. He emphasised the importance of preparation for one's death. He went on to narrate the

eulogy, praising Pedzi for all the hard work he had done for his family and the love he had for his family. He went on to dissect Pedzi's life, telling the gathering how he had been a good young man, the decent living he made for himself in the harsh conditions of a foreign country. And how so pure hearted he was and how he wouldn't squash an insect. All of which we listened and nodded to as if any of us believed it was true. As the preacher's voice waned, coming to the end of the eulogy, a woman started a send-off song. Her voice reverberated across the parking lot, evoking great sadness and melancholy. A group of men proceeded to the front, lifted up the coffin and led the procession to the trailer outside.

After the gathering had dispersed, a group of Pedzi's friends, most of them known criminals, proposed drinks in his memory. Makwe and I implored Vee to let us join but she wouldn't. After much begging and pleading she agreed.

'Walk me home first,' she said, 'and no alcohol.'

We walked her halfway to the flat and returned to join the rest of the group at The Redds Bar. Tables had been joined and chairs gathered around. A Malawian *madala* brought case after case of beer, fat brown bottles came rattling in red crates. I tried to abide by Vee's directive, but when funny stories about Pedzi started to flow, I was obliged to take a sip in his memory. I took small sips at first, but as the alcohol penetrated into the bloodstream, large gulps seemed necessary to absorb the sometimes ill-humour. More crates descended on the tables. A joint was lit. Its smoke twirled and hovered over the table.

'Remember when Pedzi told that security guard that his mother was dying of hunger in Zimbabwe while he was busy stopping us from trying to feed our families?' one of the guys said. He was a skinny guy with a network of veins traced on the forehead and temples.

'Were you there in court when he was arrested for stealing perfumes and when the magistrate asked him if he had anything to say to the court, he turned to him and told him that he was tired of being treated like shit because he had smelly armpits?'

A wave of frenzied laughter swept across the table. The stub of weed burned out before it reached our end of the table. A new one got lit. Makwe took the first drag of the new joint and passed it to me. Without thinking, I took the thing and took a drag.

Makwe leaned over and said, 'Hold in the smoke for a little while.'

I took another drag and tried to hold in the smoke for as long as I could, just like I had been instructed. But then I started to choke on the thing. Releasing it with a burst of air, I was seized by a hard cough. Everyone cracked up with laughter.

‘Do it again. You’ll feel it this time,’ Makwe said.

Another joint was lit at the other end of the table. One of the girls, getting up, knocked the table and the beer bottles rattled.

‘Heyi! Wenzani wena,’ someone erupted. ‘You’ll buy us a new round if they break.’

Pedzi’s memorial turned into an emotionally charged carousing, replete with drunken stories and memories. One of the girls started to sing *Amagugu*. Soon she was joined by three other girls. On the third line of the song, the entire table broke into song as they joined in and sang drunkenly. Busiso, the girl who had started the song, broke into tears and wept. A second girl started to weep, then another one. All the girls plunged into an orgy of weeping and lamenting.

‘We came to die in this rotten place,’ Busiso said, her voice breaking. She had a chubby *phuza-face* with red blotches on the cheeks.

‘Pedzi was such a good, good, good person.’

‘They’ll kill us all,’ said another girl, between sobs.

‘Who’s going to kill us all?’ Tawanda asked with a confused look on his face like he had just missed a train.

‘These people,’ Busiso said, all teary. ‘This place is hell. The devil lives here, I tell you. He has many faces, one day he is a chubby policeman in a tight uniform demanding sex from you... and the next, he is a hobo trying to score a quick fix of *nyaope*...’ She twisted her face and her nose flared as she drew in mucus. ‘Sometimes he manifests as an angry Boer with thick hairy arms, hating everyone and everything that doesn’t look and sound like him. And other times he’s just a guy, you know?’ She shrugged. ‘A simple, good looking Tsonga guy—a guy you can sleep with and think of introducing him to your parents, but then you think, wait a minute, I don’t know really this person. But by then he has brutalised you senseless. If he hasn’t killed you already.’

‘What is she talking about?’ someone said.

‘And one day... one day. One day he appears as a drag queen and tried to cut off your dreadlocks in an alley. Now look what he has done... he has taken Pedzi.’

‘Don’t say that,’ someone reprimanded.

‘She’s just drunk, guys, can’t you people see that?’ said Tawa.

‘Just let her get it out of her system,’ said one of the girls. She turned to the side, covering her mouth, whispered, ‘Don’t you guys know that she and Pedzi were...’ She

winked.

'Pedzi was my brother. Don't start saying things about him now that he's gone. Let him rest in peace,' one of the guys lashed out.

'He was a brother to us all. But those devils killed him,' another one said. 'They gunned him down like a dog.'

'He shouldn't have pulled out a baby brown on those fish-smelling Shangani boys,' someone said.

'Come on! The thing wasn't even loaded,' Tawa said defensively. 'He just wanted to scare them.'

'I warned him once about carrying that thing around just for show,' another guy said.

'Please guys! Please! Enough about that,' one of the girls lashed out. 'We are here to remember Pedzi, so let's do that. Only say good things, alright! Now to Pedzi.' She raised a bottle of Zamalek and proposed a toast. Everyone raised a Zamalek and clinked bottles.

I don't remember what time I left the bar. But I remember being in the elevator, drowsy and swaying out of balance, the jarring whine of the motor loud in my ears. And at Lina's door debating with myself if I had knocked a little too hard. I had agreed not to compromise our friendship or relationship. Were we in a relationship? Or was it a friendship with a lot of friendliness happening? After a little while, the door opened and Lina appeared. Her face turned cold when she saw me.

'What are you doing here?' she hissed. 'I told you not to come here.'

'I wanted to see you,' I said, stepping closer to the door. I could hear the desperation in my voice. 'I know you said Thursday, but Lina... I couldn't wait.'

She opened the door wider and stepped into the open.

'Why...what is it?'

She wore a short denim skirt, a blue sleeveless t-shirt and a pair of black Adidas slippers. Her large bulging breasts exploded on the sides and above the low neckline of the t-shirt. Looking at her breasts, I salivated. I could feel my blood begin to tingle in my veins, and the pestilential, reprehensible, gradual swelling followed. I wanted her in the most hedonistic manner, like she was something to be had, possessed for one's self-gratification.

'I just wanted to see you.'

'Okay, you've seen me. Now what?' She made as if to close the door.

I drew nearer, pressing myself against the security door, wrapping my fingers around

the bars the way prisoners do. Indeed, I had become a prisoner of affection that was surging inside me, which manifested itself in a mad fervour.

‘I don’t mean see you as in see you with eyes but...’

She reopened the door to an angle again and looked up at me with a blank expression on her face.

‘Teenagers!’ she scoffed. ‘If I let you in promise me you’ll...’

‘I promise!’

‘You don’t know what I was going to say.’

‘It doesn’t matter. As long as I get to see you.’

‘Wait here!’

She vanished inside the apartment and returned with a set of keys which she used to open the security gate and let me in. In the bedroom, everything was pink. Teddy bears and colourful pillows festooned the two three quarter beds set on each end of the room. She kicked off her slippers and threw herself on the bed, using a pillow to cushion her back against the wall.

‘Sit! Relax! No one is going to try and arrest you for a pass here.’

I sat down on the bed. A floral scent lingered about in the room. She wiggled her dainty toes painted with orange nail polish. Spontaneously, my eyes followed the tawny, tapered legs. In my head, it seemed as if I was drifting into unfamiliar territory, replete with tenderness that threatened to swallow me—too many emotions. Lust stewed with curiosity, seasoned with adolescent vengeful erections, served on a bed of naïve ideas of love. All too confusing. We talked for a while. Or should I say she talked and I listened. All I wanted to do the entire time was to stretch my hands and touch that insufferable voluptuousness. When I finally did, she didn’t resist. I attacked those luscious lips with boyish insouciance. Copious amounts of saliva, smeared all over her body, on her lips, on her neck and the exposed upper chest. I had never imagined what it’s like for a dog to be all over a bone. She responded with muffled utterances at first, then she threw her hands over my shoulders and surrendered to my lechery.

‘This is so wrong? You’re just a... just a...just.’

He voiced died down to a murmur. She moaned and breathed heavily like a dying large beast. Eyes locked, we got rid of our clothes, shirts, skirt, pants, underwear, all went flying in different directions and some landed on pieces of furniture in the room. She reclined on her

back. The bed creaked softly. I rested on her bosom, her wetness loomed around me. I drowned in the excess pleasures that her body exuded. Kissing her and moving to her rhythm, I counted up to a hundred in my head and paused to delay the intensifying pleasure, returning to the exploration of her body which was decorated with patterns of stretch marks and folds.

‘Eat me!’ she whispered.

At first, I thought I didn’t hear her right. That the weed was making me hear things. So, I went on, tongued her belly button. She responded encouragingly. Then she whispered again, between gasps for air, ‘Eat me.’

I pretended not to hear her. I worked her from all angles, at least, I thought.

‘I said eat me,’ she repeated.

That set me off completely.

‘Because there is no food at home it doesn’t mean we eat people.’

She cringed and shook with laughter.

‘I don’t mean that, you silly boy.’

Drunk on adolescent infatuation, infernal erections, I made love to her in the heat of a September afternoon; rain clouds gathered, electrifying thunder smote the sky, rains—heavy downpour and drenched the sheets. My eyes barely able to open, I collapsed to the side and lay next to her. I remained fixed in the same position for a while, listening to the hammer of triumph beating in my chest, taking in as much air as I could.

‘Do you know why I said I hate foreigners?’

I turned to her. A solitary ball of a tear trickled down the side of her head and fell into the earlobe. I wasn’t sure I wanted to hear the reason but I shook my head anyway.

‘My daughter’s father was a foreigner,’ she said.

‘Was?’ I queried.

‘Yes. He was Nigerian,’ she said. ‘He used me to get papers, left me pregnant and went to the UK.’ She sighed deeply. ‘I was young and naïve then. After that I swore to myself that I was never going to associate with foreigners. But it’s hard since I live here.’

‘I’m sorry about that.’

‘Don’t feel sorry for me. Some people have gone through worse in the hands of foreigners.’

‘It embarrasses me to acknowledge it,’ I said. ‘But Lina, you can’t put all fruits in the

same basket and sell them for the same price. Yes, we might have one or two things in common but...'

'You haven't seen what they do out there.'

'I know what you mean. But you see it because the spotlight is set on them, on us foreigners since we are the outsiders. Not on anybody else.'

'Off course you would say anything to defend your brothers.'

'I'm not defending anyone. I agree with you, completely. All I'm saying is that no one is infallible. Even your people do bad things.'

She sat up and looked at me frowning.

'You know what people say about Xhosa women.'

'This conversation has just turned me off,' she said angrily. 'I think you should go.'

She swung her legs and scooted to the edge of the bed and picked up her denim skirt on the floor. I rushed to help her with the zip. Our hands touched. She was warm. A warmth that penetrated my palms and found the reservoirs of lust that wear off after every climax. Only to be revived again. I wanted more of her. I leaned forward and kissed her shoulders. She shrugged me off.

'What did you do with my underwear?' she said, turning over the bed cover and pillows.

I helped her look for her underwear, and found it twisted and entangled into a cord of lace under the bed. I held it up to her. She took it and disentangled it and slipped her legs into it. Drawing it up the waist, she shuffled into it.

Being-less beings

As the festive season drew closer Malanka became more absent from the flat. He would spend several days away. And Vee never got tired of complaining about his habits. Whenever he was around they fought a lot. One day, after Malanka had been away for a week, Vee came home looking like a drag queen having a tough day at work. Her hair was dishevelled, make-up and the eye-shadow smudged around swollen eyes. I could tell that something was wrong when she came in. She stormed into the bedroom and came out with a heap of Malanka's clothes and dumped them in the bathtub. She went through them with a pair of scissors, shredding them into pieces and bleached all his trainers, scoring the shoes with steel wool. The next day she came from work earlier and went to bed immediately after learning that Malanka hadn't returned. She was in bed for half an hour. Then she got up and took out the laundry and started to wash her clothes. After hanging the laundry on the balcony, she came to the kitchen where I was and switched on the stove and began to prepare supper. Ten minutes into the cooking she switched off the stove and went back to the bedroom to lie down. Half an hour later, she was back in the kitchen, dicing tomatoes and onions. I listened to her move around the kitchen, opening and closing cupboard doors and slamming things on the counter. Then she stopped everything and stood still with her head down for a little while.

'We should go find him,' she said with a breaking voice.

We left the flat just before dark and combed through bars and night clubs, starting at his number one favourite spot, Planet Hollywood, on Pretoria Street. Vee waited outside while I went in. Two bouncers in black muscle t-shirts stood at attention on each side of the door. I stood with arms extended while one of them searched me. After his nod of approval, I followed a dark passage, guided by the blue lights overhead and the softness of the carpet under my feet. A group of men stood around the pool table at the pool-area. A Motown song was playing in the hall. The Temptations or OJ's, can't tell one from the other. Booths with seats covered in red velvet arched around the dancefloor where disco lights flickered. In the first booth there was a fat man with big banana folds on the back of his head and an immense beer paunch. A young girl sat with legs crossed next to him. A faint light fell gently on their

drinks on the table. The man's gold watch rattled and glinted in the dark. The second booth was empty. Three coloured women in their late forties rushed out of the fourth booth when another Motown song started to play. Spindly, dry legs sticking out of short leather skirts; flat buttocks squeezed into tight jeans, fake snake-skin boots, fish-nets and high heels. One of them stopped and cast a long gaze at me.

'Looking for a nice time, sweetie,' she said. She was a Tina Turner look-alike, black leather skirt, curly, fluffy hair trimmed at the back and the sides and red stilettos. A pencil-mark beauty spot on the right cheek twisted out of shape when she smiled.

'I'm looking for someone,' I said, looking around.

'Buy me a cigarette and I'll be your someone.' She touched my chin and raised it up.

'You're handsome,' she whispered. 'Come! Sit!'

'I'm not staying, I'm looking for my cousin. He comes here sometimes.'

'Keep looking.'

She turned around and walked across the hall to a group of pool players and whispered something to a lanky man with a cue stick in his hand. The man turned around and looked me. Then he passed the cue stick to one of the players. I found the exit and hurried out of there.

Malanka wasn't at Planet Hollywood. He was not in the next five clubs and bars that we went to. In each one, Vee waited outside like an ex-wife following up on her drunkard of a husband for alimony. After circling the cigarette smoke-suffused floor, I checked the reeking toilets, opening the doors of every cubicle. I waited for the people to come out of occupied toilets to make sure I hadn't missed him. In one of the cubicle toilets of The Ambassadors Night Club, I walked into a big fat man with his pants on the ankles.

'Didn't your mother teach you to knock. You bastard!'

Each time I walked out of a bar or nightclub alone, Vee became crestfallen. I was denied entry at one of the prestigious clubs in Hillbrow, The Summit. It was a strictly no under eighteen and the dress code was smart and casual. And I was nowhere near smart and casual.

Vee wouldn't go in or leave the place either. Instead we stood next to the entrance for half an hour, under the watchful gaze of two bouncers in black suits. On the wall, on each side of the entrance, were posters of naked women pole dancing. One of them had a leg high above her head which was thrown back, face up, waves of hair falling to the ground. The second poster was of a woman in a crouching position, knees spread wide apart and hands

holding on to an invisible pole—hair wild as if escaping the explosion of the thoughts in her head. While we waited, I don't for what exactly, a Rixi taxi pulled over in front of the club. A plump man shuffled out and passed two notes to the driver through the window. He hobbled past us and disappeared into the darkness of the entrance hall.

'I just don't understand this place,' Vee said, irritably. 'No matter how hard I try, I just can't understand why things happen the way they do here.' She pointed at the entrance of The Summit. 'That! Right there, is someone's husband going into a strip club. I can't stand this, I'm done with him. I can't carry on like this. I just can't.'

She took off, crossing Claim Street to the other side of the road. It was dark now and the streets were bustling with people. Car horns sounded ceaselessly, voices shouted from all directions, occasional whistling at street corners. This was the only time illegal immigrants reclaimed the streets of Hillbrow from the police patrols. Darkness camouflaged everything and everyone. Light skinned. Dark skinned. We all blended under the mosaic of city lights.

We walked along Pretoria Street, past the deserted market—rows of tables that made up the stalls were upturned, cardboard boxes piled in rubbish bins, crates and stools chained to lamp posts. The public toilet building looked like a witch's house in the dark, past The Sentinel where the rotor-gate squeaked interminably.

'Malanka has a friend who lives here,' Vee said. She stopped and looked up at the building. 'Maybe he knows where he is.' Her voice was full of hope again.

'Give me his name and number, I'll go and ask if he knows something.'

'No, I'll go with you.'

The foyer was packed with animated crowds. A bean-headed Shangani man greeted us from behind the security guard's desk. He asked for our IDs which neither of us had. Then he gave us a long speech about how people made up all sorts of stories to gain access without Passes to commit heinous crimes in the building. He corroborated his speech with an anecdote of how two weeks before a man had been found with another man's wife and was given a choice to either sit on a lit stove or jump off the balcony from the eighteenth floor. I wasn't sure how true the story was. But those kinds of stories were echoed everywhere in Hillbrow. Vee begged him to allow us in but he wouldn't yield. Then she resorted to the only way she knew how. She offered to buy him a soft drink which loosened the tight screws that had locked and secured the vault of his decision.

'Only this once,' the guard said, rubbing palms together to receive the five-rand coin.

The lift wasn't working. We had to use the stairs to climb all the way up to the sixteenth floor. By the time we got to the fifth floor we were tongues out, panting. We had a few seconds of rest on the landing of every floor. We stopped on the tenth floor. Placing a hand on the knee, Vee looked at me with a wounded face.

'I want my money back. Little shit didn't tell us that the lift isn't working,' she said between deep breaths.

A little girl of about seven opened the door for us on the sixteenth floor. A moment later, a woman in a sarong came rushing to the door. She gave the little girl a minute-long harangue before she acknowledged our presence.

'I'm so sorry. I've told her a hundred times not to open the door for strangers but she still doesn't listen,' the woman said. 'Every time she thinks it's her father.'

'We understand,' Vee said in a low pacific voice. 'We didn't mean to butt in but we came because of a pressing matter.'

The woman tilted her head to the side.

'My name is Venita.'

'I know who you are' the woman said.

An awkward silence ensued.

'Is Agrippa around by any chance?'

The woman lowered her eyes, gathered the flanks of her green cardigan and knitted her hands over her chest. And looking up, she said, 'Haven't you heard?'

Vee took a step closer to the door. 'Haven't heard what?'

She lowered her eyes.

'It happened on Monday.'

Consternation mapped itself on Vee's face. The lines on her face etched deeper into the skin, her forehead filled with creases. After a suspenseful delay, the woman continued, 'They were arrested on Monday in Boksburg. I thought...' She shrugged.

Placing a hand on her stomach, Vee staggered to the side and stopped with her palm against the wall. Her shoulders heaved as she took deep breaths. The little girl appeared again and the woman sent her away with a reproachful look. The girl bit the collar of her dress and scurried away.

'I'm so sorry, sisi,' the woman said. 'I felt the same when they told me. It was as if I could die but then I thought of my children and realised that it was no use to give up on my

life for a man who doesn't even care to come home sometimes. God knows what he's up to in those stinking bars and nightclubs.' Her voice started to break. Her lips trembled. 'I'm not even going to go and see him. I won't bother. There...' She crossed fingers. 'I swear on my mother's grave, oh! I want him to take the beating of prison life, maybe when he comes out he'll have regained some of his senses and learn to find work like other men. Because right now he is no use to me other than the twenty rand that he gives me to buy bread and the occasional poking I get from him.'

'Thank you,' Vee said softly.

The exchange ended in hushed tones, words pronounced from the depths of great distress. The future had just turned bleak in a single day. Vee struggled down the stairs. On two occasions I lunged a step or two down to catch her from falling. It took us half an hour to get to the ground floor. When we eventually got to the foyer she walked over to the guard's desk and demanded her money back.

'What happened?' the guard asked with a puzzled look on his face.

'We just climbed sixteen floors and you're asking us what happened?'

'Is this your first time in this building? Everyone who's been here knows that the lift doesn't work, it has never worked since.'

'Well, if you had told us before we gave you our money. It would have made a difference.'

She slapped the desk and spread her palm to the guard. 'Now, give me back my five Rands before I give birth to a goat.'

The stern-faced guard fished out a five-rand coin from his pocket and passed it to her.

'Thank you.'

'I knew you were trouble!' he shouted in a sore voice.

'You've never seen trouble,' Vee retorted. 'You should've tried to refuse me my money. Then you would have seen trouble.'

His last words got swallowed by the crescendo of the noise coming from the outside. The way back to the flat was the hardest part of the evening. Vee seemed to have lost all consciousness. She bumped into people on the way. A young man she bumped into turned around and cursed at her. A woman in dowdy clothes threw a hand over the shoulder and muttered something. At the intersection of Twist and Pretoria Street, having shoved through the clogged front of Fontana, she plunged into a stream of minibus taxis. Headlights

brightened and dimmed, car horns erupted. Her steps didn't falter, instead she marched on as if nothing was happening. A miraculous series of steps saw her to the safety of the other side of the road.

'Heyi Wena! S'lima somfazi. You want to soil our clothes with your shit?' yelled an old man selling sweets and cigarettes at the corner. He was heavily armed in a coat and his face was a shadow in the mask of the balaclava. *'Why don't you go and help your grandmother to plough in the village if you don't want to be here anymore?'*

The man went on and on but his words fell on deaf ears as Vee plodded through a throng of pedestrians. I waited at the traffic light. My head filled with a carnival of city noises that sounded like a swarm of bees.

Yawning toilet doors and singing toilet bowls

Vee skipped work the next day and spent the entire day in bed. In the evening, I made supper with a sausage that was in the fridge which Vee had brought from work as her daily allowance. Just as I sat down to eat there was a knock at the door. Max had responded with a roar of an inquiry. His voice softened as he responded to the person at the door. Then it went quiet. After a moment, he appeared at the doorway and announced, 'There is a pretty young lady asking for you.'

Lina stood with her legs crossed at the ankles at the door. Her big round eyes were wide like she had seen a cat giving birth. She tried to steal a glimpse of the inside of our apartment when I opened the door but I managed to block her view. She knew the madness that I was living in, but not the finer details which I had preferred to keep away from her. She didn't know that I slept on the kitchen floor in a mad jamboree of cockroaches that skittered out of cupboards at night and scattered surfaces with their droppings. She couldn't know the squalid condition of our apartment, of bed covers mapped with repulsive marks; moth-eaten curtains that were hung shamelessly all over the apartment, the piles of donkey blankets in worse condition than Mother's boss's dog's. Being an immigrant was not only shameful to me but it also suggested severe, inescapable pauperdom. Sometimes it inspired maddening desperation to cleanse oneself of it. To endure the scum of it one needed an emotion-numbing antidote, which in my case turned out to be weed. I started to smoke, I smoked it well and hard. At times with Lina. We smoked on the rooftop and went down to her apartment and had cathartic sex, sex that aimed to subdue every grain of suffering, emotional torment and all deficits that youth threw at us. I learned new skills very fast and we tried them all.

The festive season frenzy was at its peak. December sixteen, Lina left for home in the Eastern Cape. Christmas. Boxing day. Days were flying by. December 31st, the streets of Hillbrow became abuzz with the excitement of the New Year—a different kind of buzz than the usual excitement of a soccer match or weekend. Bottle stores were packed, people stocking up with alcohol for the New Year's Eve celebrations. Radio speakers played at full

blast on balconies, in cars with windows rolled down. Meat was purchased in kilograms. Poor cows and goats must abhor the festive season, I thought. Broilers must be used to it, ingrained in their DNA through a thick needle injected into the skin. By seven o'clock in the evening the streets had cleared, no traffic and no pedestrians. Only police cars raced up and down the streets with lights flashing. It was like those scenes that you see in dystopian movies where an entire city has been wiped out by an epidemic and the only a handful are left to live in a ghost of a city, scouting for danger through windows and fissures. At ten pm the police patrols stopped.

A small stereo twanged above its capacity on the rooftop. As a ritual of the building, residents gathered on the rooftop for the countdown. Chairs, benches, anything one could be used to sit on were carried up to the rooftop. People came lugging chairs with one hand and a beer in another. The anticipation for the New Year was heavy in the air. The party became bigger as more people joined in. Music thundered, people danced. Mafikizola, Bongo Muffin. Brenda Fassie's songs were repeated over and over. The song of the year started to play closer to midnight, Professors and Spikiri's *Current*.

'More Volume! More Volume!' someone shouted.

The owner of the stereo was reluctant at first but people urged him on. The speakers started to crackle, producing indistinct distorted sounds. Everyone danced, slapped and punched the air, following the steps of the song where action was required, *uzozwa mpama! qupha! eeh-wena!*

Ten minutes before midnight, the celebrations kicked off with a loud crash as a wardrobe plummeted ten storeys from the next building and landed on the street, followed by the resounding noise of breaking pieces of glass and wood. People stopped dancing and rushed to the parapet to watch the New Year's celebrations—Hillbrow style.

'Come, let's go and watch,' Fortune said, taking my hand. Her hand was warm and soft.

Hand in hand, we rushed to the parapet to join the band of spectators that had formed along the wall. People were looking down over the wall. A small police van came racing up Van der Merwe Street and before it reached the intersection of Edith Cavell Street, beer bottles rained on it from the balconies of Edeleon Court. Spectators began to cheer and whistle as more bottles flew off balconies and windows. The van sped off and turning into Clarendon Street it hit the curb and raced back up to the police station.

‘What is he thinking?’ Fortune said.

‘Happie! Happie!’ someone shouted frantically.

‘Happy New Year!’ another voice urged on.

A big refuse bag parachuted from the next building and spun in the air, spitting white rotten pap that showered all over the place. It landed on the road with a thud.

Limu took off his shirt and waved it.

‘Happie! Happie!’

‘Look! Look!’ Fortune said, tapping me on the shoulder.

Two guys struggled with a refrigerator twenty storeys up on the balcony of Heidelberg Court. Someone started to whistle.

‘Are they going to...’

Just before she responded the refrigerator launched its trajectory down. It plunged down fast and disappeared from our view.

Fortune ducked her head and pointed a finger up. ‘Wait for it...’

A few second later, a loud explosive crash sounded as scraps of metal splintered and bounced against the pavement.

‘We only get to be spectators in this flat,’ Fortune said. Her lips were red from the strawberry cider that she had been sipping on all evening. ‘If the caretaker sees you even toss a beer cap... you are done. He fines you a thousand Rands, and gives you twenty-four-hour notice to vacate the building.’

When the countdown to midnight started, the mutiny intensified. The entire neighbourhood roared with rambunctious madness. The roar of things thrown from buildings carried as far as Parktown. At exactly midnight, a massive explosion erupted west of the city as hundreds of fireworks launched into the sky, tiny sparks formed into patterns cascaded and illuminated the skyline of Johannesburg. Some of them exploded into a mesmerizing display of fireworks. More stuff was sent down by numbers. Cupboards, display units, beds, toilet bowls, sinks, mirrors, all sort of stuff collected throughout the year, saved for this sole purpose, was sent flying through balconies and windows. Frustrations and afflictions hoarded throughout the year were purged during the New Year’s celebration. More whistling and shouting.

‘Happie! Happie!’ people shouted, wild with excitement. ‘Happy New Year!’

A mad orgy of compliments started. People threw themselves into each other’s arms

and wished each a prosperous New Year. Two drunks started spraying each other with beer foam. Limu raised a beer bottle, opened his mouth and poured it down his throat while three of his friends cheered him on. A woman from the third floor started to dance frantically. The cleaner guy started to dance behind her, advancing towards her with his hips thrust forward, arms open as if to embrace her from behind. In three moves he was going to touch her buttocks with his crotch. I waited to see what was going to happen next. Fortune turned around and planted her lips on me and kissed me passionately. Then she took off and left me bewildered. She went about hugging everyone. I took a quick swig of the second Zamalek bottle that I had been nursing the entire evening and finished it off.

‘Happie! Happie!’ someone shouted from the depth of their throat.

My head reeling from the kiss, I extended a hand and grabbed a half-full beer bottle on the parapet and took a rapid swig. I looked around. No one was looking in my direction. I took another half-full beer bottle and downed it just at about the same speed, then I walked around, screaming, ‘Happy New Year!’ Can’t beat them, join them. I guzzled down three more leftover beers in a space of five minutes to catch up with the frantic train of excitement that had long departed. I looked around for Fortune but she was gone. The next day we both acted as if nothing had happened.

On the third of January, we visited Malanka, a month after he had been arrested. Vee had been reluctant to visit him but after a relative of one of the accomplices told her that he was sick, she decided that we had to go see him. We took the first minibus taxi to Benoni, south east of Johannesburg and arrived just in time for the formalities. Then we were led to a hall by a grim-faced prison guard in a brown uniform. We trooped in silence among the most depressed, troubled looking group of people who were visiting convicted loved ones. Inside the hall a set of benches were arranged in rows. It was the most desolate place that I had ever been to since iMpilo Hospital where Mother had been admitted. Musina Police station had been daunting but not to this degree. This was utterly diabolical, gut churning, infernal fear inciting. A hollow feeling developed inside me. I felt myself sink deeper and deeper into it until I got lost in the abyss of darkness. Vee sat shivering next to me.

Fifteen minutes later, a prison guard came out of one of the many steel doors that opened with a buzz. He stood at the door and called out the names of the listed visitors. Those called got up and stepped to one side where the guard had pointed. After all the registered visitors had been called, we were led to another hall, a much bigger one with

tables and chairs arranged like in a cafeteria. We were allocated a table with a number where we sat down and waited. Mothers, wives and daughters. Tortured faces in every direction. A buzz sounded as the second security door opened. Two guards came out and took positions at one end of the hall. Then the prisoners came out. They came shuffling in oversized orange overalls. Men of all sizes, bronze-coloured faces for those that were lighter in complexion and lead for the dark skinned. Lack of sunlight for some and too much of it for others. A man, heavy in chains, shuffled past our table. I watched him struggle to a table at the corner where a woman sat with her head down.

A skeleton of a man came and drew up a chair at our table. I had never known that one could lose so much weight in such a short period of time. Every bone on his face was defined against the skin. When he smiled, all the teeth protruded eerily against scarlet gums. When I shook his hand, it had a greasy, slimy feel to it like part of a wooden article in a public place that has been touched by many hands. He didn't raise his head the entire thirty minutes we were there. Vee asked questions and he gave laconic responses.

'How long?'

'Honestly, I don't even know.'

'Just tell me, Malanka. How long?'

'If they don't link me to other crimes, maybe fifteen.'

Vee's left cheek started to shake violently, her lips narrowed into a thin line as she began to cry.

'Don't cry in front of all these people. What will they say?' Malanka said, softly. 'Let's hear what the judge says before we enter any state of grief.'

She cried herself into silence. Then she sniffed and wiped her tears with the back of her hand.

'I can't do it, Malanka,' she said, shaking her head. 'I'm sorry but I just can't. Not after the way you've treated me in the past year we've been together.'

'You can't do what?'

She kept her head down and didn't respond. He knew what she meant. I knew what she meant. But we both sat there and pretended we didn't know what she meant. The idea of it was indigestible. For a moment, I thought she was testing him, to see how much he wanted to be with her. To inspire some sort of emotional reaction from him. For him to beg her to wait for him. For the first time in their relationship the scale of power had toppled to

her side— putting her at an advantage.

She pulled the collar of her blouse over her face and wiped her eyes. Regaining composure, she looked up at him and said, 'When you come out, that's if you're ever going to come out, don't expect to find me waiting for you. And please don't try to find me.'

'What are you saying?'

'Don't act stupid, Justice. You know what I mean.' Her voice was hostile.

'How long have you been planning this?' He shot up and stood hunching over with both palms flat on the surface of the table.

One of the guards started forward, hand ready on his baton. He advanced with long slow steps. Malanka turned and glanced at him. Then he sat down. The guard stopped halfway and watched us. After a moment, he retreated to his post against the wall. Stepping a foot to the side, he wrapped the fingers of the right hand over the wrist of the left. Just then the bell chimed, breaking the connection of the two worlds. I sighed, swallowed saliva and cleared my throat with relief. The two guards stepped away from the wall and began to round up the prisoners.

'We have to talk about this,' Malanka said, getting up. 'You hear me. We have to talk about this.'

The cords in his scrawny throat twisted and became rigid when he fixed his eyes on me.

'Tell Jones and Limu to bring me cigarettes.'

Vee threw a hand over the mouth and turned her head away. Her body quivered as she sobbed bitterly. We remained seated long after the prisoners had been rounded up, long after other visitors had left. The fan on the ceiling whirred lazily above us.

Sand to the eye

In the township, the days were long and the hours lagged; the brutal summer sun coursed languidly across the sky, scorching and torturing everything on its way. Winds blew violently, carrying clouds of dust from open fields and playgrounds, scattering it across houses and shacks where it nestled and caked on surfaces. The wheel of life moved sluggishly, its jagged teeth grinding and treading heavily on sensitive historical ground that whimpered and cringed. The wounds inflicted by the past somehow still had a grip on people's day to day confrontation with the world and with each other. The hand was fierce, stubborn and incessant. Old joes who were referred to as Bra *smang-mang* and Auntie *smang-mang*, who had suffered under it, spent their lugubrious days drinking sorghum beer in bottle store porches or under tree shades, trying to escape its grasp. Even one thing that made the township unique, the lingo, was shrouded with Afrikaans terms, thrown between sentences, stewed and chewed together with whatever native language was being pronounced.

The transport system was efficient but expensive; shopping centres were far part. We relied on overpriced spaza shops on street corners that sold nothing but vetkoek, buckets load of atchar, dried snoek and miniatures of supplies—single use items pretty much. One drop of cooking oil and one teaspoon of sugar, please! Add a pinch of salt in there. And don't forget my weekly condom. Recycle, reuse, same thing. She won't know I washed it. Smear saliva on it, cost effective lubricant.

We were now living in the township of Soweto with Ish, Makwe's oldest brother who was a cobbler and had a stall at Phomolong train station. He also sold sweets and cigarette loose draws in his stall to compensate for quiet days. Makwe and I had moved from Sylvester's lodging to accommodate his girlfriend who had been retrenched from house work in the suburbs. Ish was in his mid-forties, short but well-built. He was dark skinned with a rigid set of jaws, jet black eyes and sunken cheeks. His head was always clean shaven. We lived in a shack in the backyard of a house owned by a Zulu family of eight brothers. There were four other shacks in the backyard with abutting walls. You could hear someone turn on the other side of the tin-walls. Three of the shacks were in a row and the fourth adjoined to

the side, in an L- shape formation. The first shack belonged to an old woman, the aunt to the Zulu brothers, tall and thin, with leather skin and a giraffe neck. Everyone in the house called her auntie, so we also started using the title. She drank beer every day. When the Zamalek had hit her in all the right places she would stand in the middle of the yard and protest all day, swearing at the Zulu brothers. She would state how she had been robbed of the privilege of living in the house. It turned out that the house belonged to her father, the grandfather of the Zulu brothers. The next shack belonged to Mfanimpela, nicknamed Makhi, a man from Mpumalanga who was a long-distance truck driver. His wife, a light skinned young woman with enormous bulb lips that smiled with alacrity at the Zulu brothers, came to visit him every month end. Then there was Zamani in the last shack. There were fourteen of us in total in the entire yard. We all used the outside toilet: one had to hop on stones to access the toilet bowl which was half-drowning from a water leak. Then you turned around carefully to take a sit. Since the toilet was so small the entire manoeuvre to come to a sitting position, having made sure that your pants didn't drop into the water, could take you a nice few seconds if not an entire minute. By then someone would have knocked on the door twice or thrice. By the time you started to do your business, you knew you had to hurry up because someone would be waiting outside.

On weekdays, Makwe and I would take turns to tend the stall at the train station. We would wake up at four thirty in the morning to catch the first wave of commuters that took the first train out of the township. Since our stall was the only one on the eastern side of the station, we didn't have competitors. A fair amount of train commuters would buy chappies to chew the frustration of going to work at such an early hour of the day. By sunrise we would have made about five rands, which was enough to buy a loaf of bread for breakfast. Ish was quite popular among the township mamas who, every morning or evening, made small purchases of *zimba* chips, mints or Cadbury's chocolates. Once in a while they brought their exhausted shoes to be fixed. Ish would flirt with them to court business from them and in turn they flirted with him to get their shoes fixed on credit. Both parties seemed to enjoy the little game. Business was good. No harm intended. Ish fixed the shoes of the township mamas on credit and they would swear on their unstained panties to pay him at month end. But when the month-end came, with everyone paid, the train was the last mode of transport that people wanted to use. They took kombis or budget buses to get to work until their salaries were depleted. Only then, mid-month, they would resume using the train. Now out

of money and in debt, they would either change routes or access the platform through a different gate. Some even adjusted their schedules and caught earlier trains. Later they would then get off at the next station and walk home. When Ish discovered this, he would wake up earlier and knock off later than usual to catch everyone that owed him money.

One winter morning, Ish and I stood shivering against the wall. Heavy rain had fallen throughout the night and had slowed to a mild drizzle as dawn broke. We had walked in the light showers from home to the train station and our clothes were damp. Ish, hands deep in the pockets of his sweat pants, a beanie pulled over his ears and eye lashes, kept mumbling to himself. It was month-end and the frustration of piling bills was eating him up. Wave after wave of people came and passed by, heads ducked, shoulders raised over ears and hands thrust deep into pockets. A few regulars raised a hand as they passed by. The morning was painfully slow. We had hardly sold anything and the stock was low. Ish had just toyed with the idea of packing up when a woman who owed him money passed.

‘Don’t just pass as if you’re passing a street light,’ Ish said.

The woman kept her head down and hurried on.

‘*Heyi wena!*’ he shouted. ‘I’m talking to you.’

The woman stopped at once as if something had snapped in her head. Turning around, she launched into a tirade. ‘Don’t say *heyi wena* to me. What do you see when you look at me, huugh? A girlfriend?’

‘You were ignoring me...’

‘So that gives you the right to say *heyi wena* to me? What do think my husband will say when he hears you say that to me? Huugh?’

‘If your husband cares about how people talk to you then he should give you my money.’

‘You know what your problem is...?’

‘Right now, you are the problem.’

‘*Yazini...*you’ve no respect, *kwerekwerendini*. Where you come from they didn’t teach you manners. Here... we’ll teach you some manners. You’ll know people.’

‘You?... teach me manners?’ Ish scoffed. ‘A goat would speak.’

The woman brought her handbag down, went into it and took out a bunch of coins which she scattered on the counter and on the ground.

‘Don’t ever ask me about money in public again. You embarrass me,’ she said, irritably.

'Yeses!'

She threw the bag over her shoulder and stormed off.

We watched her strut across the clearing until she vanished into the ticket area. Our eyes remained fixed in that direction long after she was gone. Ish remained motionless for a little while. Then he shook his head despondently and took a step towards the counter.

'This woman.... She must be mad. She thinks I can be eaten with eyes wide open like dried fish.'

He began to pick up the coins that had landed on the packets of sweets. I stooped over, picked up a five-cent coin that had landed on my feet and looked at it. It was rusted with jagged edges—it had seen a few good years, and had probably been at the bottom of a sewage system, dunked in baby's saliva, donated to a street beggar who used it to purchase a half a loaf from a Pakistani-owned *spaza* shop who then gave it to his Indian counterpart who used it to pay his maid, who then used it to pay her taxi fare, then given to our lady here as change by the taxi driver. Now hurled at us with the spirit of all those people who wished they could have saved it to better their lives. We picked up the coins, five cents, ten cents, twenty cents. The largest sum of the lot being a two-rand coin. When Ish counted the coins, they came to a total of ten Rands and a few cents.

'It's not enough,' he growled. 'She owes me fifteen Rands, I want the rest of it.'

Later that evening, returning from work, the woman stopped at our stall and stood arms akimbo. 'You know what?' she said. 'You should consider yourself lucky. Many people don't get to keep that stall for as long you have. And you know why?' She paused and waited for an answer that never came.

Instead, Ish told her that the money she had given him was short and that she owed him four Rands.

The woman dropped her shoulders and sighed deeply. 'You really know how to shit on a well that you drink from, *kwerekwere-ndini*.'

She turned around and left. Ish's face turned ashen. He blinked repeatedly as if his eyes were irritated.

'She wants me to bed her, do you see that?' he said in a low voice. 'She wants it and she's going to get it.'

I smiled.

'That tone has sexual frustration written all over it,' he added.

He could have been right—but it didn't matter now. He had lost that little affection that the woman might have had for him. The altercation triggered a series of hateful events. As a vendor in the township there was a constant necessity to prove yourself, to stand your ground and show that you were part of that community. Often you were tested on your capacity to think, you were asked the prices of the same item over and over, given short money, asked for change with ridiculous large notes. Someone would purchase two mints worth twenty cents each with a two hundred rand note, yet our daily revenue didn't even amount to fifty rand. Some customers, since they were picking their own sweets, took more than what their money could afford them. Therefore, you had always to be alert and stay ready to challenge or be challenged.

One Monday afternoon, I was alone at the stall. The shade of the eaves fell short in the afternoons and sunrays filtered into the counter. The sweets became gooey and melted in the heat of the sun and the cigarettes dried out. I sat on an upturned empty oil-can, head ducked to the shade that was waning every minute. My eyes were glued on the text of Chenjerai Hove's *Bones*. My mind had blocked out everything around me and I was immersed in the narrative when suddenly a shadow fell over the pages of the book. When I lifted my eyes two *majitas* had stopped behind the counter. As I stood up to help them one of them reached for a box of cigarettes. He tilted it and drew a cigarette from it. From the first look at them, I sensed trouble. They were about the same age as me. One of them had a Dickies hat on, the kind with a small brim; its crown was so tattered such that the scruffy hair peeked out at the top. The second guy was a fatso. He was light in complexion with mottled skin. He had the type of body that had he been born on the other side of the border he would have been eating out of garbage bins to maintain—and still he wouldn't meet its hunger.

'How much?' said the guy in a Dickies hat.

'Five bob.'

He turned to the fasto and held out the open cigarettes packet to him. The fasto took three cigarettes and pocketed them.

'This cigarette is dry,' he said, blowing out the smoke.

I leaned forward a little. 'What?'

The fasto picked up a mint, unwrapped it and tossed it into his mouth. He crinkled the shiny wrapper and tossed it back on the counter. I added twenty cents to the total of four

cigarettes. Two rands at five bob a cigarette plus the twenty cents. The Smoothies mint exploded in the fatso's mouth as he crushed it with his teeth and ground it passionately.

'I said this cigarette is dry, didn't you hear me?' the guy with a Dickies hat said, raising his voice. 'What language do you speak?'

Shit. He has asked the question, I thought. The question that every illegal immigrant dreads with all the God-given passion. I had to quickly think up an answer. The thing about being conditioned by a certain environment is that, with time, one learns to anticipate the demands of that environment, and given a fair chance, becomes great at counteracting.

'I speak Shona. What language do you speak?' I said.

I said this in isiZulu which left him confused. I had guessed that he thought I was going try to hide the fact that I was a foreigner and when I didn't, he ran out of things to say. He looked at me with searching eyes. I could see that he was wondering what gave me the courage to tell him the truth when many foreigners in the township choked themselves to death trying to sound local. I maintained eye contact. He turned around and started off with bouncy steps.

'You haven't paid for the cigarettes,' I said.

'Consider them your contribution to the society.'

I have to say, I hadn't expected that one.

I watched them walk away, jump over the turnstiles at the ticket checkpoint and vanish to the platforms. I was now four cigarettes and one mint short. A big shortage from the meagre stock that we were constantly running on.

Later that evening, while I was making supper, Ish mentioned that he had counted stock and had come up short. I pretended not hear him. I continued to stir the pot of pap, adding mealie-meal to thicken it. Ish sat on the edge of the bed with his back straight like someone riding a horse. Makwe sat squat on a beer crate against the tin-wall. An American sitcom was showing on TV. The silence between us was filled by animated voices of the actors and the occasional roar of laughter of the audience. I had been following the sitcom through the dialogue but in intervals my mind wandered off.

'*Madoda*, I'm talking to you,' Ish said.

Again, neither of us responded. I continued to work the pot, adding more mealie-meal to bring the pap into a perfect blend. Meanwhile, the walls of the shack kept closing in. The air inside became thick and heavy. Our shack was a two by two dwelling made of rickety tin-

walls and a cracked cement floor that was now lifting off the ground. In some parts the cement had completely come off, leaving patches of bare ground that required a little nursing. Depending on the day, we had to sprinkle some water on the patches to curb dust. On the roof, a light bulb spewed its light onto a three-quarter bed that was pressed against the wall to accommodate the TV stand. A small cupboard at one end gave room to a two-plate coil stove. The second beer crate served as a side table next to the bed. On top of it was a candle fixed to a bottle which stayed ready for blackouts.

Makwe burst into rapture and cracked himself along with the canned laughter of the audience on TV. Ish leaned forward, reached for the power button of the TV and pressed it. The TV screen blinked and went off with an explosive burst of sound.

'Madoda, I'm talking,' he said angrily.

'We didn't hear you,' Makwe said. *'What did you say?'*

'How can you hear me when you're so high up in the clouds?'

'High!' Makwe protested.

'Don't even try to deny it. I know what weed smells like. But that's not what I'm talking about right now. I'm talking about the stock.' He paused contemplatively. *'Either there is some money missing or the stock is short. Which one is it?'*

A pang of guilt rushed through me. I had hoped that he wouldn't notice since at times he didn't count the stock. There was silence—the kind of silence that you can almost hear someone swallow and the saliva race down the throat.

'I know it's you, Makwe....' Ish said. *'It can only be you.'*

'Me? Why is it always me when there is something wrong?'

'It was me,' I heard myself say. I didn't look back, I kept working on the pap, mashing the lumps into fine porridge. A graveyard silence swept in. The creak of the tin wall as it cooled down from the afternoon heat. A dog started to bark far in the distance. Then unexpectedly came the explosive sound of the TV as it came on.

'I'm sorry, I forgot to say. Two guys came to the station this afternoon and took some cigarettes and refused to pay.'

'Have you ever seen them before?'

'No. But one of them looks familiar.'

'Show him to me when you see him again at the station. I'll sort him out,' Ish said. And that was the end of the subject.

As the weeks passed Ish became more short-tempered and irritable. We all suffered from a lack of privacy. We wallowed in boyhood vigour, endured the torture of raging, remorseless erections that worsened in the mornings. Sometimes you had to brave them out and get up with bulging pants and prod the air all the way to the outside toilet. When you were lucky to be alone that morning, you could reach under the mattress where Ish kept his private collection of XXXL magazines and find relief in photo-shopped pictures of naked Asian women. I would come to the images of slim bodies, tiny tits and thin legs—Korean, Japanese, Chinese, who can tell the difference? After release I would lie in bed longing for the voluptuousness of Lina's body, the folds on her flanks and stretch marks that decorated her hips.

Then one day, having reached his highest endurance level, Ish told us that we had to move out. He gave us three months' notice to find work. To expedite the undertaking, every Sunday evening, he gave us each ten Rands for transport to go to the city to look for work. Again, we took turns each week. Makwe got his ten Rands first. He was gone all day and returned in the evening without having found any work. When my turn came I returned with a similar result. This went on for three months. Ish gave us an extension of another month.

After a futile few weeks of circling the city streets, one morning, as I got off the train at Park Station, I decided to try my luck in restaurants. The only place I knew was the northern suburbs. I hurried through congested streets, alert for police presence and arrived at the MTN taxi rank during the morning madness rush. I asked one of the touts for a taxi to Sandton. He pointed to the longest line which wound around the rank all the way to the shopping centre at the back. I joined the line and toddled behind the last person until I got into the taxi.

Thirty minutes later, I got off at Sandton City. I found my way around the mall and started to comb through the food court. I went into every restaurant, café and coffee shop there was. In each one, I was met with a similar response. When I asked for the manager, a smug white guy came to the door. He would ask me if I had experience. When I told him that I didn't, he would apologize and tell me that they only hired waiters that had experience. I returned to the township dismayed and disheartened.

After a fortnight of Jehovah's Witness-level of commitment to the job search, I found work at an Italian restaurant in Rivonia. It was by instinct that I went into a packed restaurant. I asked one of the waitresses if I could speak to the manager. Her response

sounded like an ancient language in the hum of the busy floor. Waiters in orange overalls scuttled about between tables where pink-faced, pale-faced, overly tanned-faced white people sat in small groups, savouring the splendour of their colonialism heritage. And not a single black, grey, blue or green face in the patrons. Another waitress whizzed past, a tray with cups balanced on the tip of her fingers in one hand. Before I could convert thoughts into words she had vanished into the madness. A third waitress appeared from the same passage and launched into the restaurant floor and got into the theatrics of serving customers. Behind the third waitress appeared a middle-aged white man in fashionable reading glasses. He was dressed casual in a pair of jeans, a dark green golf t-shirt and trainers.

'Howzit, ma couzy,' he said. *'You look lost in the middle of my floor; how can I help you?'*

'Good morning sir,' I said. He bowed to his wrist watch. *'It's five past twelve so technically it's afternoon. But I'll give it to you. What can I do for you?'*

'I'm looking for a job as a waiter, Sir.'

He looked at me from my shoes to my head. Then he smacked his lips and said, *'Can you set a table?'*

Set a table, set a table, set a table. What does that mean? I thought. But soon it came to me, lay down the stuff that the refined people use to eat with.

'Yes, I can set a table,' I said.

I had never set a table in my life. But what could be so hard about setting a table, right?

He snapped his fingers.

'Okay come with me.'

He led me through rows of neatly set tables to a private function room. On the way, I studied how the tables had been set and memorized the arrangements—fork and knife, left and right, fork and knife, left and right, I sang in my head. Fork n' knife, left n' right, left n' right, fork n' knife. All the tables in the private function room were bare and unset. The man yelled something to one of the waiters who responded with promptness. The waiter vanished into a passage and returned with table-setting paraphernalia. Fork n' knife, left n' right, I continued to sing in my head.

'Set this table for me, will you. Be back in a minute to check it out,' the white man said. He went about surveying the rest of the tables in the restaurant.

I laid down the tablecloth and adjusted all the overlapping sides to the same length. Then I flattened the fold marks, ironing them by hand until my palms started to burn. Next, I placed a side plate on each corner of the table, and a folded serviette on top and cutlery last. Fork and knife, left and right. Just like a boy scout march. Adding a glass to each setting, I finished setting up the table. I circled it to check if everything was aligned and made the necessary adjustments. I took a step back and studied the setting again from a distance. I noticed that one of the glasses had fingerprint marks on it. I plucked it off the table like a plant-thief and cast a quick glance around. There was no one in sight. Ducking my head, I spat on the fingerprint mark and cleaned it off with the hem of my t-shirt and replaced it. I went over the table again and again and again until there was nothing to fix. Once I was satisfied, I stood aside and waited for the owner to come back. Waiters went up and down. Faster, with much more resolution than earlier, chasing that ten percent gratuity. Trays were now fuller and the plates much bigger. Half an hour passed. I moved closer to the scene in case I had been forgotten about. But no one came. Running out of patience, I asked one of the passing waiters if she could notify the owner that I had finished.

‘He is having lunch with his girlfriend,’ she said.

‘But I have...’

‘You want a job right...’

I nodded obsequiously.

‘So, wait...’ She twisted her lips and shrugged. ‘Besides we’re not allowed to speak to guests when they are eating.’

She turned around and scurried away to the mad feast on the restaurant floor—a feast of the gloating goats. I waited another half an hour before the owner returned. He came mouth full, relishing something greasy. He didn’t say a word to me. I watched him wringing his oily hands as he walked around the table, surveying the setting closely. He stopped, stooped over and looked at the cutlery. His eyes moved up and down. He straightened and moved around the table. He circled the table four times before he came to a standstill and without saying a word, walked away. He was gone for a little while and returned with an army of the staff, waiters, kitchen and bar staff, trooping behind him.

‘Look at this table,’ he said as the group gathered around the table. ‘Look at it. I want you all to see how you lay down a tablecloth and set a table. You see this...’ He pointed at the table. ‘This is what a set tablecloth should look like. You iron it flat with your hands until

the folds disappear.’ He emphasized this by ironing the air with his hand. There were shuffling movements in the group. One of the girls in the front row folded her arms and shifted her weight to one side. The second one stepped a foot forward and pushed a hip to the side. Someone scoffed.

‘But John, we don’t have the time to spend setting one table,’ one of the waiters said.

‘Do you ever have time to have sex with your wife in the mornings?’ He widened his eyes. ‘No! Of course not. But you make it.... Time is never enough.’

‘His mother is probably a housemaid. It must be in his blood or something, boss,’ another waiter said.

There was some chortling.

‘Your father was probably a cow herder and look how you turned out... a waiter selling steaks to make a living,’ the owner said.

Another wave of laughter swept through the group.

‘I’m going to leave this table like this for the rest of the day. I want all of you to come and look at it during your lunch break. Now go, get back to work, my customers seek your attention.’

The group disbanded.

He turned to me and said, ‘When can you start?’

‘Tomorrow... I can start tomorrow, Sir.’

‘How about Monday morning? It will give you time to see your family for the last time because here...we work. Four double shifts, two singles and one day of your choice off.’

‘Monday morning is good, Sir.’

‘Good. I want you to teach these people how to set a table,’ he said. ‘But there is one little thing I want to bring to your attention.’ Resting a hand on his lower back, he stooped over the table. ‘None of them even saw this. Look here!’

I stepped closer to the table.

‘The knives are facing the wrong direction. The edge always faces to the inside. Don’t forget that,’ he said. ‘Be here Monday morning to start training. Seven o’clock sharp and don’t be late. If you’re a minute late don’t bother coming into my shop.’

‘Thank you, sir.’

‘And one last thing... don’t call me Sir. We’re not running a bureaucracy here. Now go, before I change my mind.’

I walked out of the restaurant with my pulse beating faster than drums of a tribal song. I couldn't breathe because of excitement. I made note of the location of the restaurant so I wouldn't get lost the following Monday; 487 Rivonia Boulevard. I walked back up to Rivonia Road where I took a minibus taxi back to the city. On the way I decided to get off in Hillbrow to see Lina and check on Vee, and also to find out if there had been any correspondence from home. It had been four months since I had written the third letter to my sister Thoko—with the dragging South African Postal Services strike, it was hard to know if the letters had been delivered or sat gathering dust in a pile somewhere.

The front of the butchery was full of big-bellied meat guzzlers as usual. While waiting for their meat to be braai-ed by the greasy-faced Malawian, they lamented about the deteriorating situation in Zim, the looming threat of the xenophobic attacks in the townships.

Vee was behind the counter and the only way I could speak to her was to join the line. While I was still talking to her, the owner of the butchery appeared from the back. A set of keys jingled in his hand. He ordered Vee to arrange some meat for him and his friends.

'Wait for me,' Vee said. She tossed a piece of meat and boerewors on a plastic plate, dished out a dollop of pap in another plate and passed them to me. 'Here, go and *braai* some meat. I'll come to you when I finish with this order.'

I have to agree, meat has a certain nefarious hold over a tongue that has relished its juicy, savoury and tender taste and then has been deprived of it. Squeezed between two big men with thick arms and massive beer bellies, I braai-ed the meat impatiently and removed it from the coals while it was still dripping blood. As I sat down to eat Vee came and joined me. I went through the plate like I hadn't had a meal in days, the juices of the meat trickling down my fingers, to the back of the hand. I licked my palm and fingers and savoured every modicum of it. Vee sat in silence and watched me eat. Then, in a low, soft voice she asked if we were getting enough food to eat in the township.

'Yes, we're getting enough food.'

'Obviously not enough, enough.'

'We eat enough. A lot of tinned fish and baked beans. A lot...like every day—more than enough. It's just that this meat is...'

'Oh, I see.' She smiled. 'I'll give you some boerewors to take with you.'

I ate the last piece of the meat. The fat around it was now congealed and stuck on my fingers. I wiped the plate clean and used a toothpick on offer to pick the gristles off my teeth.

‘The Xhosa girl from next door was asking about you,’ Vee said. ‘She used to come to the flat every day to ask for you but now I haven’t seen her in a while.’

‘I’ll go and see her.’

‘What did you give her?’ She tilted her head to the side and looked at me at an angle. ‘During the first days I thought maybe you took something that belonged to her but when I asked her she said she just wanted to see you. Then I just thought... maybe she really likes you.’

‘I didn’t give her anything.’

She didn’t pursue the subject any further. There was no letter for me from home. And no, she hadn’t been to see Malanka since the last time we were there together.

‘Has any of his brothers gone to see him?’

‘No, I don’t think so,’ I said. ‘Sylvester and Mavusana went home to bury NaThulani in February. And we haven’t seen them since they got back.’

‘Oh my god did she...?’ She threw a hand over her mouth.

A moment of silence passed.

‘Did anyone go and tell Malanka at least?’

‘I don’t know,’ I said hesitantly.

‘I don’t understand, why has no one gone to see him?’ she said, getting up to leave.

‘Sylvester was supposed to go before NaThulani died. But...’

‘What about others...six brothers and none of them has made time to go and see him.’

She sighed deeply and left.

I left the butchery and walked up Klein Street, along the shade of buildings all the way to Van Der Merwe. I took the elevator up to the tenth floor and went straight to Lina’s door. Her face filled with shock when she opened the door and saw me. She opened her mouth to say something but no word came out. I could see her eyes getting teary.

I was suddenly imbued with a desire to take her in my arms and embrace her. When I leaned over to wrap my arms around her she withdrew, taking a step back as if I was a stranger to her. After a moment of hesitating she came closer, I took her in my arms and embraced her as tightly as I could.

‘What’s wrong?’ I said softly.

She buried her face on my left shoulder and started to cry.

‘Nothing.’

‘Lina,’ I whispered, taking her in my arms again.

I whispered entreaties to her, in the order they came to me—in tones taut with affection and endearments. She kept her head down and wept even more. Her body shook violently in my arms.

‘What’s wrong, Lina? Please talk to me...tell me.’

She slowly raised her eyes and looked up at me with saddest eyes.

‘You just left...you just left without saying a word. How could you?’

‘It was sudden. There was no way I could get hold of you...I wanted to leave a message but...’

‘I’m pregnant,’ she said.

The rhythm of my heart beat jumbled at the sounding of those words—the emotional response they elicited. A shadow flashed past my eyes. I felt giddy as if I was going to black out.

‘Mo! Did you hear what I said?’

I had heard her clearly—I just wasn’t sure what those words meant. Maybe the baby is not mine, I thought. I hoped it wasn’t mine. We hadn’t seen each other in four months. It was enough time for her to have met someone, fallen madly in love, got married and voila! A little bambino on the way. It was a possibility. But no. That is not how the story would go. That’s not how the narrative would ensue. It was mine, the baby was mine. Eighteen weeks. And yes, she was definitely sure it was mine. What kind of question is that? What was I expecting cumming inside her—shooting hundreds of little me’s into her uterus? No witchcraft there, just plain, simple science. It was nice, wasn’t it? I did it over and over again. So why was I surprised?

‘How can you even suggest that?’

‘I...’

‘Don’t say anything, Mo. I was so stupid, I knew this was going to happen. I knew you were not to be trusted like the rest of them. I knew it, I knew it.’

‘No Lina, no. I’m...I’m not saying I won’t...of course I’ll look after you and the baby.’

‘How? With what exactly?’

‘I told you that I just got a job. As soon as I get some money I’ll come and give it to you to...’

She looked away to compose herself. Then with a revised tone, she said, 'I won't take money from you. Look at you...you look like when you first came here.'

'So you noticed, huh.'

'How couldn't I? You were the most impoverished looking boy I had ever seen.'

'Oh, is that why you went out with me?'

A faint smile passed across her lips.

'That's not what we're talking about here.'

'What are we talking about? I thought we were talking about me and you and...'

'You know what? You're a piece of work, Mo.'

'Piece of work, wait until you have another me to deal with.'

'Does that mean...'

'Yes, I still want to be with you.'

'I thought... I didn't know where you were... I was scared I was going to have to have another baby alone.'

I explained to her what had happened. How Malanka's arrest had prompted the move to the township. She told me how she had been anguished over losing contact with me. I promised her to return the following Monday after the training.

After a week-long training, I started to wait tables. There was no basic salary; we only earned tips, a ten percent gratuity which was recommended but not mandatory. So, you had to be severely unctuous to customers—crocodile smile, smile harder than a smiley face emoji even if it meant death. You had to articulate those, 'Yes, Sir" and 'Yes, ma'am's', say them with a loud clear voice—without hinting at any sort of disinclination. You had to worship the clients—praise their wallets and purses. Bow down to their fingertips which counted the notes and filled the gratuity spaces at the bottom of the bills. Hoping God wasn't watching you had to give glory to white men and their money. Which I did. And yes, I did make good tips in the first month and the second. I worked double shifts every day. On weekends the restaurant got so busy—I thought of nothing in those fifteen hour shifts other than pizza orders, extras; no chili, extra garlic and lots of cheese and don't forget to make it gluten-free base, please, I'm allergic. And the names of cocktails, Sex on the beach, Zulu on my stoep, Long Island, Daiquiris and the virgin ones too; unpenetrated, unviolated. Steaks came in different sizes, men's and ladies' portions, and how they were to be done—blue was when the cow could still moo on the plate and medium rare was when it was dead but its

heart still beating and very well done was when it had been cremated and served in its afterlife. When I went to bed, I would dream about waiting tables and orders. When I stepped on the floor the next morning my feet stung like I was stepping on pins and needles. I wrote another letter home and inserted two hundred-rand notes. I told Thoko that I was going to be a father, that I had found work and was going to come home as soon as I had saved up enough money.

The philistine at my heels

A low, distant, rapping of the door drew me out of sleep. It became louder until I was fully awake. Someone was knocking on our door. I couldn't move. Every muscle in my body was tortured with pain. I rolled to the side, pulled the blanket over my head and hypnotized myself back to sleep. The knock erupted again. Three loud consecutive bangs. I tightened the grip of the blanket over my head, closing every little gap that could let in sound and hoped that the person at the door would go away. I didn't have the strength to attend to anyone for any reason. Whoever needed to borrow some sugar for a cup of tea could wait another thirty minutes. Pinch of salt for porridge, can do without. Looking for Ish? You know where to find him at this time of the day. I wanted to squeeze in as much sleep as I could get. Since we shared a bed I slept better alone in the mornings. With Makwe and Ish at the station, I could rest the raging morning erections. That was if I could snap out of sleep, reach under the mattress for the XXXL magazine, leaf through the pages to the model suitable for that day and masturbate to her with one eye open and the other one closed. At times, I was too tired, I had to endure the aggression and leave them to Mother Nature who never failed to present effortless relief.

'Mo! wake up! Open the door! Wake up!' the knock resounded. Someone was shouting from the outside. The urgency in the voice chased away my sleep. I bolted to a sitting position and sat still for a moment. I recognized Auntie's voice beneath the pounding of the door. Tin-walls rattled, a light shower of grit. The light bulb that had been left on winked. I looked over my left shoulder. It was seven-fifteen on the clock. The rapping continued, accompanied by the frantic calling of my name. The voice thinned into a screech. I threw the blankets off my legs, boxer shorts bulging from remorseless tumescence, walked to the door. I opened it just enough to see outside. A blinding, torrential morning light poured into the shack. My eyelids fell spontaneously. Auntie looked like a ghost in her morning gown that was once purple but now was something between colours—pink, blue and purple.

'Mo!' she bawled. 'Were you sleeping or were you dead? I've been knocking for almost half an hour; my knuckles have become numb. As if I don't have arthritis already.'

You've to come with me, right now.' She was panic-stricken and restless. She genuflected, hunched, heaved, carrying limp hands over her chest. Her face was grey with anguish. I forgot that I was in my underwear and swung the door wide open and stepped into the open.

'Come...come where?'

'Something has happened at the station,' she said. Her voice was breaking with apprehension. 'You must... you must... come...you must come now. We need to hurry.'

'What has happened?'

'I'll tell you on the way. We don't have much time right now. Come on, get dressed.'

I hurried to my work clothes that lay on top of the washing basket and got dressed. And rushed back out of the shack with the zip of my pants still down and the buttons of my shirt unfastened. I shut the door behind me and inserted the key in the keyhole. When I tried to turn the key, it got jammed. Auntie's panic had rubbed off on me. I withdrew the key and examined it. The bunch rattled in my hand. It was the right key, silver, rippled wedge with three incisions—the only one of its kind in the bunch. I reinserted it in the keyhole, tried to turn it. But again, it wouldn't turn. When I tried it for the third time it fell on the mat. Specks of dust left the mat, rose gently and lazily. I stooped over, picked it up and studied the bunch again—doubt ripping through my mind. All of a sudden, I wasn't so sure if it was the correct key—I wasn't sure of anything.

'Just leave it!' Auntie shouted. Her voice was a thin rasp. Years of shouting, reprimanding, scolding. I opened the door and tossed the key on the bed and took off after her.

'A child knocked on my door a little while ago,' she said as we started down Ngiba Street. 'and told me that Ish is in trouble at the station. I don't know what kind of trouble but... it appears there is a mob involved.'

We hurried down the street. The women of the street stooped over, heads wrapped in old pantyhose to protect their weaves from the clouds of dust stirred up by their sweepers.

'Salibonani! Dumelang! Abusheng!' Auntie shouted. The women raised their sweepers, yelled back morning greetings—in SiSotho, IsiZulu, Tswana, Shangani—in all the languages of the township. Half way down the road I began to regret having taken slippers which kept sliding off my feet.

'Just take them off,' Auntie ordered.

I kicked the slippers off my feet and each one went sliding on the tarmac. I snatched

them as I went by and held them both in one hand. I *ate* the road barefoot, every inch of it— coarse grit, hard tar. Cold morning air rushed through my nose, biting the tips of the ears and cheeks. Theories swamped me. What could have happened at the station that Ish couldn't handle, that needed such urgency and immediate attention? Something that couldn't wait until I was home in the evening.

Fifty meters from the gate of the house we took a left turn, onto the last ten meter stretch of Sizi street which intersected with Phomolong Drive. We tore through a small bush on the other side of the road with feverish haste and came onto the fence to the railway line. A hole had been cut open through the fence to create a short cut across or into the platforms.

'We don't have time to use the bridge,' Auntie said, squeezing through the hole in the fence. The wires rattled. We scurried across six lanes of railway tracks, gravel crunching under our feet and came out on the other side of the second fence. This was something never to be done this time of the morning. That very crossing was a death spot.

Ahead of us, slightly to the left, the back and the side of the train station building came into view. Its cream walls, grey tin roof and eaves falling over the platforms. Above the roof, columns of thick carbon smoke twirled to the sky. Dark and heavy like clouds bearing a storm. It covered the sun and turned the vicinity dark. Blood curdled and joints weakened. I stopped and looked up at the sky and smelled the toxic burnt rubber in the air. My heart thumped harder. Then came the distant clamour of the mob arrested in the air. A cough-ball rose from the depths of my chest up to the throat, carrying with it a nauseating, sinking feeling.

Things whirled fast around me, houses, trees, structures. I ran short of breath. All of a sudden, I couldn't seem to take in enough air into my lungs. A deep urge to sigh rose. I must have been in same position for close to a minute. Auntie was about ten meters ahead of me now. Despite all the heavy drinking and smoking she was surprisingly strong. Forget the witchcraft she had been, on multiple occasions, accused of by the Zulu brothers. Including that...I don't know where she got all that strength from.

'Come! We've to get there and see what is happening,' she shouted.

I quickened my pace into a steady jog, following the path. A man in a red shirt and blue work suit pants appeared from the corner of the station building and came racing towards us. A yellow Shoprite plastic bag swinging in his hand.

Auntie stopped and stood hips thrust forward like a drunk taking a piss.

'*Yini, wagijima kangaka sekwenzenjani?*' she shouted to the man.

The man didn't respond, instead he came fast at us.

'Please tell us. What happened?' she repeated.

The man slowed down to a fast-paced walk. His face was terror itself—if ever it took form, shape and face.

'Are you going to tell us or just bare those eyes at us?' Auntie said, sounding irritated.

'They...they...they...' He swallowed. He turned around and pointed at the station.

'They've killed a man,' he said. 'They...they...they've killed many men.'

From his accent, I could tell that he was Shangani, Mozambican. Like myself, he too had probably woken up to what seemed to be an ordinary day, washed the sensitive areas of his body in a small dish—running a wet cloth through the groin, down to under the testicles and lastly the crack of his buttocks. He had rinsed the cloth, dried himself before applying that Coco butter lotion whose scent he carried with him.

'Woooh, slow down, slow down,' Auntie said, calming the man down.

The man gasped and swallowed, choked on his saliva and swallowed again.

'Feeling better?'

The man nodded.

'Okay, now talk to us. What's happening?'

'Local people,' the man began. 'The local people. Killing all foreigners. Everyone dead. People dead. Dead, dead, dead. I can't stay here; this country is no place for a man like me. I must run.'

He took off and left us standing in the middle of the path, more confused than we had been. The Shoprite plastic bag with a lunch box inside rustled next to him as he stretched into the distance.

'Hey! Where are you going?' Auntie shouted. 'You didn't tell us anything.'

The local people, killing all foreigners, everyone dead, I silently recited the words. In the exact same order, they had fallen from his lips. But they still didn't make enough sense to form a solid understanding of what was happening beyond the visible walls of the station. Why—what could have happened?

'Maybe you should go back home,' she said. 'He mentioned something about foreigners being killed. If it's what I think it is...it's best you go back home. Stay there, don't go anywhere until I come back.'

'No. I'll come with you. I have to see what is happening. I can't just leave them there

alone. Maybe they need me.'

'And what do you think you're going to do? You see grown men running and you think you can stop whatever is happening behind those walls?'

'I'll go and see for myself.'

I spoke with a finality that she couldn't challenge. We carried on along the small path flanked by knee-high dry grass.

An angry mob had mobilized at the gate of the train station—men, women and youngsters of all ages, armed with sjamboks, knobkerries and sticks. A man wielding a machete swept past us and went about slashing the air erratically. Slogans were chanted—grievances vociferated. A group of six men *toyi-toyi-ed* in a circle formation. They whistled and burst into song. Fisted hands were jammed into the air. Liberation struggle songs were chanted with fervour—voices charged with anger. Everything married together into a throng of rancour. Chaos. Mayhem. Maelstrom.

A young man raised a sjambok high up and brought it down with a violent thrust and struck the ground and shouted, '*Habashwe!*'

We veered to the left to avoid the group of *toyi-toyi-ing* dancers. Voices roared. Sticks pointed to the sky. A young girl in a school uniform swept past us, her school bag bouncing against her back. She went through the gate and disappeared in the mayhem. A man wearing sandals cut from car tires broke into a Zulu warrior dance in front of us. Whistles erupted, cheering him on.

'*Harebabatle mo! Hababuwele habona, maan!*' shouted a middle-aged woman with fervour. She wore a black dotted head-wrap that fell off her head. '*Yah. Ons is moeg, man,*' she added, stooping over. She snatched it from the ground and retied it around her head.

'*Vele!*' another woman agreed, tossing a hand over her shoulder. '*Rehatesti kamaKewrewere.*'

Two young men rushed past us. One of them almost knocked Auntie to the ground. She staggered forward and found her balance.

'*Hey nina! Voetsekani mahn!*' she shouted. She turned over her shoulder and ejected a green slug of phlegm that splattered on the ground.

Next to the gate, a man in blue overalls lunged at a tire. He bounced on the ground before tossing it to the crowd. It went whirling and landed on the ground with a thud. Two men stooped over simultaneously. One of them turned to a bottle of a brownish liquid which

he used to douse the tire. The second man struck a match and set it alight. Blue flames blazed, slow dancing on the edges of the tire first. Then rapaciously gaining momentum. We pressed against the crowd at the gate and entered the station grounds.

My eyes roved around. To the right, just as you entered the train station yard, a row of counters stood devoid, swept clean of wares. Unfurled sweets wrappers, empty cigarette boxes and used matchsticks lay scattered on the ground. Under the first counter, Ish's duffle bag had been emptied of all his sewing equipment; an upturned anvil, a leather needle and the webbing had been unwound from its roll. The plants in the yellow planters had been uprooted. Stems, branches and soil were shredded and spread on the ground.

Red and yellow flames twirled around another tire inside the station, eating into the rubber that emitted a thick, jet black smoke that pervaded the concourse. Figures moved about in the smoke like ghosts in mist. A boy standing on top of the counter raised a stick and whistled. Two men helped each other to unpluck a Trust Condom board on the wall—fit to be used as a side wall for a shack. Three women debated whether to take the refuse bins or burn them. In the end they wheeled them off the station grounds. A man raised a sjambok and said something along the lines of freedom. Not yet uhuru, he said in the end. He wagged the weapon in emphasis and the crowd cheered fervently. A young man, black like coal, head clean shaven, coming out of the public toilet door, shouted, '*Sekunjalo!*'

'Die poppe sal dans,' an old man with sunken cheeks urged him on.

Auntie let out a fierce cough. I covered my nose. We pushed forward. The door of the ticket office was closed and the window counters were shut. The guards were nowhere to be seen. I was numb of all feeling. I could have shat myself and wouldn't have felt it. I kept my feet moving, looking around at the disarray that reigned over the train station grounds. Ahead of me, I could hear Auntie eject exclamations, muffled *ma-babos, haah, haah, mmh, mmh, heeh.*

'My God! What am I seeing?' she mumbled to herself.

I directed my eyes to where she was looking. A charred body caught in rigor mortis was sprawled behind a flower planter, knees on the ground, the torso fallen backwards, head resting on the ground on its side. The eyes floated in their sockets like button-eyes of a teddy bear. The face was unrecognizable: crinkled skin stuck to the skull the way burnt plastic cringes on a surface. All the teeth were bared—shit-eating smile. Smile of death that every dead finally submits to. The left hand was under the tire and the right hand's fingers were

twisted in the air, pointing to all directions like the dry branches of a Baobab tree. A tire, stripped into thin, blackened wires and a charred substance, smouldered around the waist. The last of it was still caught in blue dying flames. I walked around it in circles, examining the corpse. Ish's deformed safety boots evidenced what I had feared. Burnt leather twisted out of shape and the steel-front was now visible. Covering my mouth, I retreated backwards. Tears formed in my eyes, blurring my vision. An excess of saliva flooded my mouth. I swallowed. Tasteless, slimy. I felt mucus dribble down my nose. I drew and swallowed. Then, I felt someone tug me violently. She pulled me away from the scene.

'Don't look! Don't look!' she shouted. Her voice filled the vacuum that had formed in my head.

'Auntie!' someone called out behind us. It was a woman's voice. 'Where are you taking that boy—can't you see what's happening?'

Another body was being incinerated by flames against the wall. The smell of burning flesh was strong in the air.

Every direction that Auntie led me there was a body— still in flames or reduced to ashes. I counted a total of five bodies.

'You're one of them, I know you!' a man shouted in an accusatory voice. 'He is one of the shoe-man's boys.'

I wilted. I drowned in a puddle of voices that erupted all around me. A group of men armed with sjamboks, sticks and knobkerries started towards us, rounding us up. Auntie pushed me behind her.

'It's him,' a second voice corroborated. 'I've seen you with him.'

'Don't talk nonsense,' Auntie protested. Her voice was sharp and thin. 'This is my grandson.'

'Don't lie to us, *magogo*. You think we're stupid *wena, neh*? We know this boy,' the first man said. He advanced with intent, crooked forefinger pointed in my direction.

Shaking my head, I retreated a few steps. All of a sudden, I was hot—sweat was breaking from all corners and cervices of my body. A globule trickled down my spine; another one coursed down the left loin. Both underarms turned into wells.

'I know you!' the first man bellowed, pointing a stick to me. 'I know you. I have bought cigarettes from you.'

The cock crowed three times and after the third time a man who wants to live must

run.

As if urging me to run—the honk of the train sounded. We were now closer to the gate. A throng of commuters running late poured into the station. When I saw the gap, I took off. Two men lunged at me with sjamboks raised. A slight move left, I went through them. A woman raised a stick to strike but she missed. I felt the draught of her swing. A man in a corduroy flat-cap, arms wide open, took a dive at me. I swung gently to the left. His fingertips grazed my shirt and I was gone.

'Vimba! Vimba! Vimba!' voices chorused.

'Don't do this, people. I'm beseeching you. He is my...' Auntie yelled behind me.

The boy on top of the counter jumped off and landed in front of me in a squatting position. He raised a stick and took a swing at me. I veered right and went past him.

By the gate, I jump over linked hands of a little boy and a woman; a mother, half asleep, caught in the riot of forgotten dreams and lost memories. Gone with the yawns of motherhood, carried by the dust of grass sweepers. As I turn right to retrace my steps back home, a wave of rioters, responding to the call, rushes towards me, weapons raised. They are all a little too slow— not as motivated as I am. I'm motivated by fear, by the urge to live, to see tomorrow's sun rise from the shadows of yesterday's woes. A hundred meters away from the gate of Phomolong station the head of the train appears from a bend, above the patch of grassland. Fierce like a beast. Yellow cars sitting on big discs—each wheel grinds the rail with a violent thrust that produces a thundering roar, equaling that of hundreds of zebra hooves stomping the ground in haste, fleeing the predator that has set assail. It comes hard and fast. The coaches rattle and sway side to side as if they are going to tip over and fall on their sides. Between me and the railway there is a distance of fifty meters. A meter each step. The train is to slow down to forty km/h within a fifty meter stretch from the station. I am running at twenty km/h. Behind me shouts break with madness. Beneath the clamour of the train engine—the hordes pumped up with adrenalin—they yell slogans, fisted hands raised; whistles break left and right, like I am some wild animal that has just broken out of a thicket. The sky, in its celestial grandeur, vast and blue, stretches to the world's end. The sun morning screaming ominously like a prophet conjuring up lies. The philistines at my heels. My feet pad faster—the ground races beneath my feet. The soles sting as blood fires up. Lungs burn. Losing strength. The ambit of detestation—how far does it stretch? To the ends of the worlds. Someplace where savages exist in the memories of time. What could it be? Is the sight of my

face seditious? Too alien to the eyes of the native? Is my tongue coarse as rock salt, unsavoury to the ears of men of this land? The land of many skulls. My umbilical cord has long turned to dust under the earth. I too was conceived, cradled in a womb and crawled out of the very crevice of life, covered in blood and vernix. Not begotten. Eyes shut—wailed with the same bewilderment of any child cast into this puzzle. I too was conceived in these lands. I too was lulled to sleep on my mother's back while she was laden with chores—tired and tried. Launched into the extremities of civilizations. A human human no more. A stranger to all. My feet carry me—the ground trembles. A vortex of fears swirls in my head. Death here I come—life is this all? All there is—is there all. I am yours. Alpha, Omega. Spurned gods. Forsaken ancestors. Child unborn, A son, a daughter. Borne. Creation from nothing—Destruction of everything. The past meets the future. The story ends but the characters live forever. The wind carries me. Honk. Honk. The train warns—urging. A sea of memories cheers—a phantasmagoria of the past. Half a life. Always something. I have slowed down to fifteen km/h. Eyes closed. Unmindful, as a somnambulist walks the night, choosing neither step nor path, penetrating the darkness with insight of the unseeing eye—seeing nothing. My feet know the urgency of this run. The shadow races beside me. My unrelenting companion. From birth right to this moment. Where our fate is to be decided—though might linger a little longer than me. Until the sun is indefinitely shut. Or maybe together we shall collapse to the ground on the other side and sit beside each other, laughing at the foolishness of it all, shake our heads and say to each other, 'Almost. Almost. Damn almost.' Smile. Death you wait. Honk. Honk. The train warns. A stride at a time—one foot hastens the other. The feet tarry. Honk. Honk. I blink. The train operator on his feet, perched behind the glass panel, neck craned, face stern and eyes bewildered. His and mine meet, lock for a split second. Cold morning air rushes through my nose. Honk. Honk. Ten more steps and I am on the other side of the rail. My shadow whispers, 'I'm with you.' I smell blood in my mouth—salty, metallic like the smell of sea air. A strong draught rushes to meet me—blowing violently against my face and wrestles me down. I close my eyes and whisper, 'So am I.'

Trauma, historical injustices and affect: the vicissitudes of
womanhood in Zimbabwe in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *This Mournable
Body* (2018)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION; TRAUMA AND ITS AFTERMATH

1.1 INTRODUCTION

This dissertation explores the ways which Tsitsi Dangarembga portrays the effects of trauma experienced by the protagonist and other female characters in the novel *This Mournable Body* (2018). The novel is set in post-colonial Zimbabwe and draws on the themes of the previous two novels, *Nervous Conditions* (1988) and *The Book of Not* (2006), which form part of the trilogy. The first novel is set in colonial Zimbabwe and the second at the height of the liberation struggle. I have chosen the most recent novel of the trilogy because of its relevance to the current social issues experienced by women such as violence, inequality, subjugation, and marginalization. Global movements such as #MeToo have raised awareness about social challenges that women face today. The explosion of the #MeToo movement has drawn attention to the number of women burdened by the experiences of past traumatic events. The effects of trauma include feelings of social isolation, depression, and fear. Consequently, health organizations such as WHO (World Health Organization) are grappling with mental health issues that are prevalent in women, especially those affected by violence and sexual abuse.

The #MeToo movement began after a high-profiled actress accused a well-known film director of sexual harassment. What followed was a large number of women who came forward to share their stories. The #MeToo movement gained mainstream attention in 2017 on social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram (*The New York Times*, Nov 30 2017: *The #MeToo Movement: When the Blinders come off*). Because of such large-scale social movements, collective trauma as a struggle for recognition has given room to the victims of violence, rape, and social injustices across the globe to express their grievances more readily. Therefore, Dangarembga's novel *This Mournable Body* (2018), could not have been published at a better time than at the peak of such a revolutionary social movement.

This Mournable Body (2018) tells the story of a middle-aged woman, Tambudzai, on a personal journey of self-discovery. Her narrative reveals the social challenges that many

black women face in post-colonial Zimbabwe. Dangarembga's novel explores the effects of trauma engendered by colonialism and patriarchy in post-colonial Zimbabwe. In the novel, the colonial history of Zimbabwe creates a forbidding milieu in which the female protagonist, Tambudzai, finds herself reenacting her trauma in an attempt to liberate herself from the throes of social structures that undermine efforts made by black women. Tambudzai attempts to break away from social conventions and strives to change the status quo of black women in Zimbabwe. However, this is to the detriment of her psychologically and leads to emotional exile. As a middle-aged woman without strong social support, her mental condition is driven to a breaking point and she experiences a nervous breakdown.

The challenges that she faces are not unique to her, for they are also shared by other black women in the narrative. Her cousin Nyasha functions as a mirror to how Tambudzai's life could have turned out had she opted for a conventional life, getting married, having children, and leaving Zimbabwe for overseas: a path that many Zimbabweans undertook in the wake of the country's political and economic crisis. But it is no surprise that Nyasha's narrative is not a success story either. She returns to Zimbabwe with an impoverished German husband and two children of mixed-race. Nyasha's story also becomes that of identity search as she tries to raise mixed-race children and find a balance between the two cultures. It turns out that both cousins suffer forms of identity issues. The struggles of the two cousins are closely linked. That way Dangarembga foregrounds the problem of identity to explore the traumatic effects of colonialism in Zimbabwe. The novel explores the histories of the victimization of black women in Zimbabwe. Dangarembga focuses not only on one form of victimization but on the plurality of traumatic events which are a result of actions of a collective society. She recognizes the power of collective memory and explores the many social injustices that stem from a violent, patriarchal, racist, and oppressive colonial past.

1.2 THEORIZING TRAUMA CONCEPTS

1.2.1 DSM's approach to psychoanalysis

I will analyze *This Mournable Body* (2018) vis-à-vis the definitions of literary trauma theory and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as given in *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)* offered by the American Psychiatric Association. *DSM-IV/ TR* (1994:463,468) stipulates that there should be three requirements for PTSD to exist, which are: the exposure to a traumatic incident, the individual's immediate response, and the subsequent pathology. In its inception, *DSM* defined PTSD as a condition that affects only those who had been directly related to the traumatic event. Later it shifted its response from event-based trauma to include secondary victims such as witnesses, family members, therapists, and other observers. Brewin (2000:500) points out that we should consider 'the distinction between "primary" emotions occurring at the time of the trauma and "secondary" emotions arising out of subsequent cognitive appraisal, which could also act as potential risk factors for the development of PTSD.' The diagnosis of PTSD given by *DSM* begins with the stressor criteria. Criterion A1 classifies a traumatic event as one that 'involved actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of self and others' (467). Criterion A2 further stipulates that an event must be experienced with 'intense fear, helplessness, or horror' to be classified a traumatic. The *DSM- IV* (1994:468) distinguishes between three cluster symptoms of PTSD which are 'reexperiencing, avoidance, and arousal'. The revised *DSM 5* (2013) adds negative cognition and mood as the fourth cluster of PTSD symptoms. However, since my research is limited to a short dissertation, I will narrow my study to the three clusters, re-experiencing and avoidance and negative cognition and mood.

According to *DSM-IV* (1994:464,468), the 'reexperiencing' of the event can manifest in "'intrusions" (intrusive memories or flashbacks of the event), nightmares, and strong emotional or physical reactions to the triggers of the event'. Brewin (2007:116) defines intrusions as 'memories characterized as being triggered spontaneously by exposure to trauma cues, such as being fragmented, as containing prominent perceptual features, and

as involving an intense reliving of the event in the present'. *DSM-IV* (1994:464) states that the 'avoidance' cluster manifests as a way of evading triggers that can cause one to remember the event and 'arousal' refers to 'anxiety and hyperarousal'. The American Psychiatric Association stipulates that these symptoms should not only be numerous but also, they must persist for a long period. I will use these three indicators, re-experiencing, avoidance, and negative cognition and mood to map out the trauma that Dangarembga's protagonist Tambudzai and the women suffer as portrayed in *This Mournable Body* (2018).

1.2.2 Trauma in literature studies

Literary trauma studies tend to use psychoanalysis as the main framework for studying trauma in literature. One of the most notable theorizations of trauma in literary studies was advanced by Cathy Caruth. Caruth's *Unclaimed experience* (1996) provides various crucial insights into trauma in literary studies. In her work she explores the representations of trauma, drawing out the concept of reenacting trauma and the deficit of language to express some experiences. Caruth also points out the inflammatory use of the word 'trauma' in literary studies.

Caruth (2010:11) defines trauma as 'an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena'. I will use Caruth's definition of trauma interchangeably with that given by the *Diagnostic Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders* (DSM) to explore the effects of trauma in Dangarembga's novel. By using these definitions interchangeably, I will explore both the pathology of trauma and trauma theory. What is interesting to note is that the definition of trauma given by the American Psychiatric Society, like Freud's initial definition, posits that the phenomenon of trauma is exogenous (developing from external sources), resulting in the actual shock to the psyche. Freud (1917:3352) points out that the term traumatic is applied to 'an experience which within a short period of time presents the mind with an increase of stimulus too powerful to be dealt with or worked off in the normal way'. In modern societies, the term 'trauma' itself has

become traumatic. The connotations it carries imply a socially unacceptable state of mind. However, keeping in mind that language is always changing and the meaning of words changes over time, in this dissertation, I will use the word 'trauma' synonymously with the definitions of PTSD (Post-traumatic Stress Disorder) given by the American Psychiatric Association. According to Visser (2011:272), 'trauma: refers not so much to the traumatic event as to the traumatic aftermath, the post-traumatic stage'. Visser's description suggests that trauma is witnessed in the post-traumatic stage where the victim displays the stressor criterion of the traumatic event which is the stage known as PTSD. Building on her argument, Visser (2011:272) writes, 'Trauma thus denotes the recurrence or repetition of the stressor event through memory, dreams, narrative and/or various symptoms known under the definition of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)'. The text explored in this study reveals the repetition or recurrence of trauma, placing emphasis on the contagion effect of trauma and the struggle to consolidate cultural, socio-economic and political factors.

In this dissertation, I analyze the effects of trauma on the protagonist and other female characters in Dangarembga's *This Mournable Body* (2018). I will look at how colonialism, patriarchy, gender, and racial inequality and the liberation struggle have impacted the lives of black women as depicted in the novel. Through the portrayal of Tambudzai and other female characters in the novel, Dangarembga reveals the existential crisis that not only women in Zimbabwe struggle with, but all women in the African continent endure. I contend that Tambudzai's struggles can be read as an allegory of the political, social, and economic landscape of Zimbabwe. I discuss how colonialism simultaneously and paradoxically, through oppressive systems and structures, gave birth to social inequalities that exist in Zimbabwe today. Trauma here emerges as the result of the history of colonialism, reinforced by the oppression of women by the existing social structures. Although colonialism is not the focus of the dissertation, thematizing its extremities reveals its psychological implications for Zimbabwean women. Dangarembga, like many female writers of African descent, vividly portrays the struggles of womanhood in Africa in her novel. In her narrative, black women continuously find themselves at the mercy of their white female counterparts or black men who behave in a patriarchal way.

In analysing the cultural experience of black women, theorists such as Deborah Gray White argue that understanding women's lives necessitates understanding men's lives. According to White (1985: 28), 'African American women are confronted with an impossible task. If she is rescued from the myth of the negro, the myth of the woman entraps her. If she escapes the myth of women, the myth of the negro still ensnares her'. White points out that race, class, and gender are forces that work simultaneously in positioning social groups, pitting them against one another for survival. This notion serves as a useful way of understanding the lives of the black women in Dangarembga's trilogy. Tambudzai's position in the society echoes what Frances M. Beale refers to as 'double jeopardy'. Beale (2008:166) writes, 'And the black woman likewise was manipulated by the system, economically exploited and physically assaulted'. Like Deborah Gray White, Beale draws attention to the multi-faceted impact of the subjugation of black women in societies where the social structures are discriminatory. Dangarembga's narrative exemplifies the multi-faceted systematic subjugation of women in Zimbabwe. To investigate the plurality of trauma in the novel, I will use Michael Rothberg's theory of 'multidirectional memory' which offers a framework in the study of collective trauma in fiction. Rothberg (2010:228) suggests that we rethink trauma as 'collective, spatial, and material (instead of individual, temporal, and linguistic)'. This notion is supported by Craps (2008:53) who in his critique argues, 'the social and the historical relations must be taken into account, the traumatic histories of subordinate groups should be situated against the histories of socially dominant groups'. The advancement in postcolonial trauma studies over the years allows for a distinct, comprehensive, and culturally and historically specific study of trauma in relation to the lives of African women. While I recognize the ambiguity of the term 'African women', in this dissertation it refers to black women in Sub-Saharan Africa who constitute the oppressed, subjugated, and marginalized.

1.3.1 Historical injustice and identity crisis

The study of trauma in African post-colonial literature addresses the complex questions of historical injustices caused by colonialism. Trauma studies also allow us a widened scope in the investigation of the relationship between history and the experiencing of that history. Therefore, to understand history fully it is necessary to explore the experiencing of the event by the individual and the collective. In Dangarembga's novel history functions as the source of the problems that the black women struggle with.

The trauma caused by the onslaught of colonialism in the novel is revealed through the overwhelming experience of racialized discrimination. The results of that are noted in the challenges of shaping cultural and individual identity in postcolonial Zimbabwe. Tambudzai's experience of racism at the convent and advertising agency is central to the understanding of the identity crisis that she suffers. The fact that her experiences recur in the form of reexperiencing (flashbacks and intrusive images) reveals the trauma of racial discrimination she has suffered throughout her life. Through flashbacks, she reminisces about the conversations about race relations and Europeans she once had with her cousin Nyasha. During their conversation, Nyasha shares or points out her experience of being black in Europe. Having suffered racial discrimination herself, Tambudzai now understands the contempt that her cousin had for white people. Tambudzai's reference to the Ghanaian writer Ama Ata Aidoo exposes the catastrophe of colonialism, placing racial discrimination at the core of the colonial enterprise (*This Mournable Body* 2018: 83). Her referencing of the Ghanaian writer signifies the trauma of depersonalization during colonialism suffered by blacks across the African continent. According to Laing (1960: 5), 'if a man hates himself, he may wish to lose himself in the other; then being engulfed by the other in an escape from himself'. In other words, Tambudzai suffers what Laing terms the 'divided self'. I will use Laing's concept of the 'divided self' to demonstrate the splitting of Tambudzai's personality. I will point out that the neurosis she suffers stems from her internalization of the colonial mentality of the negation of self.

The theme of identity crisis recurs in Dangarembga's trilogy. It was first portrayed by Dangarembga in *Nervous Conditions* (1988) where Tambudzai's cousin, Nyasha, is conflicted between the western and traditional African ways of living. After living in England for a few years, Nyasha returns to Zimbabwe and struggles to reintegrate herself into the Shona culture. This conflict leaves the young Nyasha in state of a nervous breakdown at the end of the first novel. A similar nervous breakdown is also replicated through Tambudzai in *This Mournable Body* (2018). Both of these incidents stem from the psychological effects of the history and social structures in Zimbabwe. Tambudzai's experiences in the past shape her identity as a middle-aged woman in Harare. It can be said that her identity is fashioned by her experiences during her childhood. While studying at the Young Ladies' College of the Sacred Heart, she experiences events that leave her questioning her identity. This marks the beginning of her identity crisis. Through self-critique and self-reflexivity, she picks her life apart and questions every aspect of her existence. From an early age she learns that material possessions are regarded as a measure of what she refers to as '*unhu*' (humanity). Therefore, for her, the lack of this *unhu* makes her feel inadequate and unworthy. Tambudzai says, 'Thus I wondered until it became apparent one path to unhu was the way of material preponderance' (*The Book of Not*, 2006: 145). This kind of measuring oneself against other people is linked to the social reality of oppression.

Fanon (1963: 250) describes oppression in relation to colonialism:

... a systematic negation of another person and a furious determination to deny the other person all attributes of humanity, colonialism forces the people it dominates to ask themselves the question constantly: "In reality, who am I?"

Fanon points to an interesting aspect about the nature of oppression. Oppression, in his notion, goes further than racial lines. It includes the general denial of someone's attributes of humanity, something which Tambudzai echoes in *The Book of Not* (2006) when she points out that '*unhu*' (humanity) is measured by "material preponderance". Consequently, without material possession one is not worthy of *unhu*. This notion implies that the identity of an individual is determined by social structures such as social stratification.

While she is at the Young Ladies' College of the Sacred Heart, Tambudzai learns about the segregation and racism in the school system. This is prejudice that she will encounter also as a young adult woman at the advertising agency where her work is plagiarized by white men. As an adult, Tambudzai struggles to shake off the feeling of inadequacy and insecurity stemming from past experiences. At the travel agency when confronted with a competitive colleague, she becomes distraught and finds herself unable to participate during brainstorming activities. As a result, she develops a rivalry relationship with her colleague and starts to measure herself against her (*This Mournable Body*, 2018: 194). It is in such environments that Tambudzai's 'double consciousness' comes into effect. W.E.B. Du Bois (1913:3) describes "double consciousness" as:

... a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings: two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

The double-consciousness that Du Bois refers to can be noted in Tambudzai's subjectivity. Throughout the trilogy, she continuously views herself through the eyes of the people around her. This 'double consciousness' seems to be embedded in her character. This can be noted from her early childhood years where she constantly measures herself against her brother, Nhamo. Similarly, at the Young Ladies' College of the Sacred Heart, she obsessively measures her academic performance against Tracy and other girls. Later as an adult she competes for recognition with white male colleagues which results in her resigning from her job. This vicious cycle of racism, segregation, and oppression that Tambudzai experiences shapes self-perception. All these experiences reinforce her 'double consciousness', resulting in an identity crisis. As mentioned earlier, her identity development is strongly influenced by racialized segregation and gender-based oppression in Zimbabwe as portrayed in the novel. Her experiences of these social injustices bear psychological implications that are reflected in her cultural and individual identity. Hall (1990:223) asserts that 'individual identity, to a certain degree, is influenced by cultural identity'. He further elaborates that cultural identity is 'a matter of 'becoming' as well as 'being' (225). Hall's notion suggests that cultural

identity is a process rather than a fixed entity. Through this process everyone in that particular culture has a role to play in the forging of this 'matter of becoming' and 'being'. Thus, the marginalization of black women in Dangarembga's narratives brings into question the nature of the cultural identities of black women in Zimbabwe. It can be argued that without a true involvement of women in a society the cultural identity of that society is compromised or rather inauthentic. This struggle with identity issues because of their race and gendered status is detailed clearly in Dangarembga's trilogy, making it an important work in the making of cultural identity of Zimbabwe.

Rothberg (2011: 523) writes, 'public memory is *structurally multidirectional* [Rothberg's italics] — that is, always marked by transcultural borrowing, exchange, and adaptation....' Rothberg's view emphasizes the power of public memory in shared experiences and how it becomes a source of transcultural remembrance. He further argues that 'collective memories of seemingly distinct histories such as those of slavery, the Holocaust, and colonialism— are not easily separable from one another' (524). This seems to be the case with Tambudzai, Nyasha and the Ghanaian writer who find themselves questioning their identity after having discovered that they are black. What I find interesting about the realization of one's race (skin colour) is that it materializes after an encounter with a person of a different race which in this case is Tambudzai's contrasting herself to the white race. In the discovery of their race, Tambudzai, Nyasha, and the Ghanaian writer become exposed to the identity politics of colonialism.

As Tambudzai grapples with identity issues her psychological wounding is revealed through questions of 'true self'. According to Hall (1990:223):

There are at least two ways of thinking about 'cultural identity'. The first position defines 'cultural identity' in terms of one, shared culture, a sort of collective 'one true self', hiding inside the many other, more superficial and artificially imposed 'selves', which people with shared history and ancestry hold in common.

Hall's notion of cultural identity is relevant to my analysis of *This Mournable Body* (2018) in that it links collective trauma to the cultural and individual identity crisis portrayed by

Dangarembga in the novel. The collective trauma portrayed in Dangarembga's novel is a result of the shared colonial history of Zimbabwe. It is because of this shared colonial history that the women in Dangarembga's novel identify themselves with the struggles for identity and equality. However, the power structures portrayed in the novel result in the precarious nature of a woman's position in society. Thus, placing the text in context is necessary to understand the historical and current factors that contribute to the psychological and physical damage suffered by the female characters.

1.3.2 Mapping trauma through memory and affect

To investigate the effects of history on the collective and individual trauma, I will explore memory as a domain that holds the events of the past. The relationship between the event, memory, and language has been central to trauma studies. The psychoanalytic post-structuralist approach to trauma theory suggests that trauma is an unsolvable problem of the unconscious that highlights the sparsity of language fully to explain an experience. According to Hodgkin and Radstone (2018:6), 'trauma theory' is 'an explanatory apparatus through which to apprehend and analyse the past; partly through the frame of the individual memory, but also through a more general set of arguments about representation, what could be said, what could be remembered and how'. Since memory is referential, its relation to historical events needs to be integrated for the purpose of representation. Caruth (1995:153) indicates that 'the integration of experience and memory suggests that the mind separates the experience and memory, thus preventing the verbalization of the event in order to achieve a referential expression'. As a result of the integration of experience and mental processing of that experience victims of trauma struggle with translating their experiences into speech. Therefore, the memory becomes the locus of the traumatic experience. According to Caruth (1995:15):

The trauma thus requires integration, both for the sake of testimony and for the sake of cure. But on the other hand, the transformation of the trauma into narrative memory that allows the story to be verbalized and communicated, to be integrated into one's own, and others', knowledge of the past, may lose both the precision and the force that characterizes traumatic recall.

The complexity of memory in psychoanalysis was first posited by Freud in *Studies on Hysteria* (1893:11) where he writes:

The fading of the memory or the losing of its affect depends on various factors. The most important of these *is whether there has been an energetic reaction to the event that provokes the affect* (Freud's italics). By 'reaction' here we understand the whole class of voluntary and involuntary reflexes – from tears to acts of revenge - in which, large parts of the affects are discharged.

The study of memory was central to Freud's work and it remains fundamental to the contemporary conceptualization of trauma theory. Freud suggested that memory owes its content to the energetic reaction to the event which then evokes the trauma. In other words, the ability to recall the event relies on the victim's reaction to the event. What is interesting about the idea of 'affect' is that it serves as some sort of storage for the traumatic experience and the only way to access the experience is through its triggering. In her book *The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature* Kaplan (2005:34) references van der Kolk's essay co-written with Otto van der Hart:

In arguing that trauma is a special form of memory, they stated that in trauma the event has affect only, not meaning. It produces emotions— terror, fear, shock— but perhaps above all disruption of the normal feeling of comfort. Only the sensation sector of the brain— the amygdala— is active during the trauma. The meaning-making one (in the sense of rational thought, cognitive processing), namely, the cerebral cortex, remains shut down because the affect is too much to be registered cognitively in the brain.

The theory of affect in trauma studies has proved resilient since its introduction by Freud in *Studies on Hysteria* (1893). Shouse (2005:10) suggests that affect is 'the body's way of preparing itself for action in a given circumstance by adding a quantitative dimension of intensity to the quality of an experience'. What I find interesting is how the notion of affect relates to traumatic memory. Freud (1893: 9) argued that, 'Recollection without affect produces no results'. Susan Radstone and Katherine Hodgkin write, 'Following a terrible event... memory goes into crisis, and refuses the knowledge of what has happened' (6).

The development of the notion of 'affect' has opened up a new window into the understanding of the corporeal part of the trauma. According to Clough (2007:6):

Trauma is the engulfment of the ego in memory. But memory might better be understood not as unconscious memory so much as memory without consciousness and therefore, incorporated memory, body memory, or cellular memory. As a surfacing of a difficulty in remembering or in being certain about the truth of memory, the body becomes a memorial, a ghosted bodily matter.

Clough's notion of trauma is supported by the definition of PTSD given by the APA (American Psychiatric Association) in *DSM-IV* (1994) which shifted from the event-based to a response-based notion of trauma. Although there are attempts to work out the contentious sides of trauma, many theorists agree that trauma is acted out repetitively. It is through memory and testimony that this sequence of repetitive actions that characterise trauma can be confronted and investigated. Hodgkin & Radstone (2003:99) argue that 'trauma theory, whether in relation to an individual or a larger social phenomenon has at its heart the problem of witness testimony, and memory'. For reasons such as the centrality of trauma theory on Freudian psychoanalysis, I will allude to some of Freud's theories on trauma memory to explore *This Mournable Body* (2018). According to Visser (2011:273):

A fuller understanding of the concept of trauma in cultural trauma theory entails a delineating of its origin in Freudian psychoanalysis. While the 1980 third edition of the DSM discarded Freudian psychoanalysis as a classificatory template in favour of a model that considers psychic disorders on the model of neuro-biological, organic illnesses, and while, as Luckhurst demonstrates in detail, Freud's marginalization has been an ongoing process since the 1980s, genealogists of trauma theory agree that Freudian psychoanalysis remains the theory's explicit and inevitable foundation.

However, postcolonial trauma theory focuses on the collective experience in an attempt to solve the problem of the credibility of memory. In their critique, Craps and Buelens (2008:4) write, 'A narrow focus on individual psychology ignores and leaves unquestioned the conditions that enabled the traumatic abuse'. What Craps and Buelens suggest is that

while the psychological suffering of the individual is the primary focus when dealing with trauma, the social factors that can be attributed to the causes of suffering cannot be ignored in the process of healing. Craps and Bruelens (2008: 4) argue that for the trauma of colonialism to be inclusive enough the individual and the collective cannot be separated. Therefore, the integration of individual and collective memory is of crucial importance in the testimonial novel. In Dangarembga's novel the integration of Tambudzai's experiences and those of the other women in the novel gives the testimony credibility which characterizes the traumatic recall. Caruth (95:153) argues:

The trauma thus requires integration, both for the sake of testimony and for the sake of cure. But on the other hand, the transformation of trauma into a narrative memory that allows the story to be verbalized and communicated to be integrated into one's own, and others', knowledge of the past, may lose both the precision and the force that characterizes traumatic recall.

This view raises the concern of whether it is credible that the mind can recall a traumatic memory precisely and accurately. Caruth (1995:153) suggests that 'what the mind recalls in flashbacks is not simply the experience that has been repressed but an event that is itself constituted by its lack of integration to consciousness'. This notion is useful in addressing the question of language's ability to locate the truth of the past in testimonial narratives. Many of the newest approaches in psychoanalytic and trauma theories recognize the importance of the social context of the trauma. Balaev (2014:2) points out that understanding trauma:

... requires situating it within a larger conceptual framework of social psychology theories in addition to neurobiological theories that will produce a particular psychology informed concept of trauma that acknowledges the range of contextual factors that specify the value of the experience.

Balaev's notion contributes to the alternative search for the non-westernized approaches to trauma theory. The demand for specificity is crucial in Dangarembga's novel because it takes the social and cultural into consideration, specifically the issues of race and gender

embedded in the history of Zimbabwe. This allows us to explore the articulation of the histories of victimization of women portrayed in the novel. To me, if one were to omit the colonial history of Zimbabwe, the story of Tambudzai would not allow for a critical reflection of the multifaceted oppression experienced by the women in the novel. The source of the oppression that Tambudzai suffers is embedded in the colonial history of Zimbabwe.

As indicated earlier, the relationship between the victims and the oppressors will be explored using Rothberg's notion of multidirectional memory. According to Rothberg (2009:2) multidirectional memory concerns collective memory, 'the relationship that such groups establish between their past and their present circumstances'. Rothberg (2009:4) further argues that 'in both individual and collective versions, memory is closely aligned with identity, one of the most contested terms in contemporary debate'. Rothberg's view is relevant to Dangarembga's novel in that it maps out the history of victimization that shapes the identity of the protagonist. The novel explores how the legacy of the colonial history of Zimbabwe affects women socially and psychologically. To demonstrate the forceful impact of the past in the present, Dangarembga explores the historical injustice of colonialism in Zimbabwe which fed into ideological racism, sexism, and patriarchy. To shed light on these themes of the text, I will investigate the result of these factors which is the enduring trauma suffered by black women. Through the dissertation I aim to delineate the effects of trauma on the individual and collective; the idea is to reveal the challenges of womanhood in Zimbabwe as depicted in this important new novel by an influential writer.

This dissertation explores the portrayal of trauma through self-representation and self-expression by black women in post-colonial Zimbabwe with particular reference to the third novel in Dangarembga's trilogy. Three factors constitute the basis of the mapping of trauma in this dissertation—colonialism and its legacy, the delineating of cultural/collective and individual trauma in the novel, and the effects of trauma that make up the social fabric of Zimbabwe. Firstly, the aim of exploring colonialism and its legacies is to reveal the psychological and physical damage suffered by black women as a result of historical injustices. Secondly, it is to situate the novel in the context of the social narrative of black women in Zimbabwe.

In the second chapter, I look at the historical background of the novel. In order to contextualize my study, a brief overview of the history of Zimbabwe is apposite. This is done to give a background of cultural/collective trauma that I discuss in the third chapter. Trauma theorists such as Caruth, Rothberg, Balaev and others argue that trauma damages the social fabric in a similar manner as it scars the individual. This notion necessitates the understanding of the history of Zimbabwe in order fully to explore trauma in Dangarembga's novel. I discuss how Dangarembga's novel engages with Zimbabwe's history of colonialism, as well as the liberation struggle and its aftermath. I map out a series of events of injustices, subjugation, oppression and marginalization of black women to reveal the psychological impact suffered by black women. The chapter depicts the historical events that have shaped the character Tambudzai and other female characters in the context of the novel. In this chapter I also discuss how the historical injustices in Zimbabwe have shaped the narrative of black women in the novel. By doing this, I show how Dangarembga foregrounds issues of race, class, gender, and tribalism in addressing the effects of trauma.

The third chapter explores the depiction of trauma in the novel. I explore how collective and individual experiences are represented and linked together. I investigate how issues of history, memory and language are represented, as well as how social factors such as identity and subjectivity are negotiated in the study of the injury to the mind. Gender perspectives on trauma are central to my study of the novel. In this chapter I also look at how patriarchy, oppression and marginalization are experienced by black women. This allows me to explore the psychological scarring of the mind resulting from these gendered experiences. The definition of PTSD given by *DSM* is used as the base of my argument. I map out the trauma experienced by black women through the three indicators mentioned earlier: 'reexperiencing, avoidance, and negative alteration cognition and mood'. Investigating PTSD allows me to situate the trauma in history, memory, and the body as experienced by women in Dangarembga's novel. In this chapter, I investigate the relationship between history, identity, and memory to explore the complexities of the events that underlie trauma.

The conclusion shows how Tambudzai and other female characters' struggles can be connected to the psychological damage that they suffer because of their gendered status.

Since the novel being researched is part of a trilogy, the events it describes cannot be divorced from the past experiences of the characters. Where appropriate, I shall, therefore, refer briefly to the historical events of the previous novels. The main focus will, however, be on the third work of the trilogy since it has received little critical attention. This dissertation will therefore fill a much-needed gap in the scholarship.

CHAPTER 2: HISTORY AND THE EXPERIENCING OF TRAUMA

Dangarembga's *This Mournable Body* (2018) serves an important socio-cultural and political function as a work of fiction by an African woman. It is a text that explores self-narration, and self-representation in the face of social injustices faced by black women. The protagonist offers a powerful account of the persistence of trauma which has followed her throughout her life. It depicts the cycle of trauma experienced by black women and perpetuated by social structures dictated by patriarchal systems. The women in the novel are burdened with the effects of colonialism whose legacy is explored from multiple perspectives. Tambudzai serves as the conduit of the testimonies of social injustices in the novel. Through a detailed exploration of memory, the novel reveals how trauma is situated in the history of its sufferers who are in turn implicated in each other's traumas. According to Caruth (2010:24), 'history, like trauma, is never simply one's own, that history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other's trauma'. For Caruth history and memory are like two sides of the same coin, they are inseparable. To explore the trauma experienced by women in Dangarembga's novel one needs to situate it within the theoretical framework of post-colonial studies since the traumas that the women grapple with are embedded in the political past of Zimbabwe. Radstone (2003:81) argues, 'Trauma theory is associated with the "turn to memory" in history....' Consequently, it is necessary to evoke the history of Zimbabwe to explore the social conditions that contribute to the trauma portrayed in the novel.

The colonial history of Zimbabwe is an important factor in the social challenges that the country still faces today. Subjugation, oppression, segregation, and racism still exist at the highest level in the country today. To understand fully the trauma portrayed in Dangarembga's narrative, it is crucial to look at the cultural context of the novel. As Kaplan (2005:66) points out, 'Cultural contexts should not be excluded from trauma research, for it determines how symptoms are experienced and expressed and provides a framework for understanding traumatic events, opportunities for healing and therapeutic possibilities.' I contend that the novel presents numerous symptoms that reveal that the culture of Zimbabwe is traumatized. The effects of the historical trauma can be noted in the

reenacting of it through violence, oppression, and subjugation of women and other minority groups. I will depict how the historical trauma of colonialism and the liberation war is connected to the social injustices suffered by black women in Zimbabwe today.

The ruling party, ZANU PF, has maintained a hard grip on the reins of the country since the liberation in 1980, through bad governance plunging the country deep into economic crisis and political turmoil. According to Mlambo (2013:50):

By the new millennium, therefore, the idealism of the liberation struggle, with its promise of justice and fair play had been replaced by a harsh, paranoid, autocratic, self-serving, and arrogant political culture that now routinely violently suppressed any political dissident, muzzled the press and systematically undermined the judiciary.

The harsh conditions that Mlambo describes above are evident in Dangarembga's novel. Through the story of Tambudzai, Dangarembga examines the underlying political, social, and racial issues that make up the social fabric of Zimbabwe. She reveals how these factors affect the livelihood of marginalized black women. By making a middle-aged woman the protagonist, she reveals that gender is a big factor in the oppression and subjugation of black women. The diversity of the women in the trilogy proves that black women, regardless of their demographic profile, suffer systematic cultural oppression. Dangarembga's characters vary from young, old, educated, illiterate, poor or rich, employed or unemployed. The common struggle that these women share is that of gendered oppression. The subtle political undertones in the novel draw attention to the perpetuation of the oppression of women through unjust social and political systems.

2.1 The impact of Zimbabwe's traumatic history on women

The colonization of Zimbabwe began in 1890 with an invasion of the region by the British South Africa Company led by the British imperialist Cecil John Rhodes. It can be argued that pre-colonial Zimbabwe, before the arrival of the settlers, was at a transitional stage after the arrival of other ethnic groups from the south in the mid-nineteenth century. The arrival of the white settlers disrupted the forging of cultures amongst these ethnic groups. After

the invasion, the country became known as Rhodesia, a British colony. According to Freund (1984:117), concession companies that controlled the colonies, 'did the dirty work of subjugating the territory'. In other words, colonialism was exercised through concession companies which meant that the colonies were to some degree autonomous. The strategy of governance of the British was the 'divide and rule' policy. This policy aimed to reinforce ethnic identities which later affected the processes of nation-building in many African countries. Consequently, countries like Zimbabwe still experience divisions along ethnic lines. According to Mlambo (2013:58):

Further complicating the issue were the divisions among the Africans fighting colonial rule, which entrenched ethnic/political tensions rather than promoting unity and cooperation among the African people.

Mlambo's argument elucidates the systematic division of Africans by the colonial systems of governance. This explains to some extent the oppression and marginalization of women as portrayed in Dangarembga's narrative. Social stratification, the division into ethnic groups, and gender politics are indelible legacies of colonial rule. All these divisions are part of the psychological effects of colonialism and the struggle for liberation as explored in Dangarembga's novel. Mlambo lists several problems the country is grappling with since its independence (2013: 52):

the colonial legacy of racism; autocratic intolerance of political dissent; a racialized, unequal socio-economic regime; the armed conflict that tore the fabric of Zimbabwe's society for almost two decades and left the races divided; the policy of reconciliation after independence (the vexatious question of land ownership that remained dangerously unresolved for twenty years notwithstanding); and the problematic role of intellectuals, especially historians, in shaping competing perceptions about the country's past and present and fueling difference rather than a sense of common and shared interests.

The tensions between ethnic groups are a strong, vivid indication of the psychological effects resulting from the past. Mlambo's observations reveal the collective trauma suffered by the people of Zimbabwe. As a result of trauma, the attempts at reconciliation have failed

not only to unite races but both genders as well. Dangarembga addresses these multidirectional divisions through the dramatization of race, class, and gender relations in her novel. The division of dormitories at the Young Ladies' College of the Sacred Heart serves as a great example of systematic divisions (*The Book of Not* 2006: 41). This kind of dehumanization lends itself to psychological issues noted in Dangarembga's protagonist.

The struggle for independence was accompanied by much violence, resulting in trauma. In her trilogy, Dangarembga's depicts the damage to the social fabric caused by the collective experiencing of colonialism and the struggle for independence. On the physical side, there were injuries to the body experienced as a result of the violence during the liberation war; these are portrayed through Nestai, Babamkuru, and others. In her descriptions of the horror of the liberation war, Tambudzai reveals the physical and psychological damage caused by the nature of the events of the war. This is evidenced in the conversation between Mai Manyaga, Christine, and Tambudzai. When Mai Manyaga introduces Christine to Tambudzai the conversation soon turns melancholic while she reminisces about her brother who died during Gukurahundi. She says:

An awkward silence follows, for you are all members of a peace-loving nation. You do not talk about how citizens dissented and how their ghastly crushing cast bodies into disused mine shafts and swept them into railways carriages like debris dropped by a whirlwind (*This Mournable Body* 2018: 53).

The violence embedded in the history of Zimbabwe can be viewed in connection with PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) that Dangarembga's characters struggle with individually and collectively. Consequently, the violence experienced during the war can be linked to the cultural trauma seen through the disruption of family bonds. Roy Eyerman (2001:2) writes, 'As opposed to psychological or physical, which involves a wound and the experience of great emotional anguish by an individual, cultural trauma refers to a dramatic loss of identity and meaning, a tear in the social fabric, affecting a group of people that have achieved some degree of cohesion'. Eyerman makes an interesting remark by pointing out the effects of cultural trauma such as the loss of identity and meaning. These are evidenced

throughout Dangarembga's novel. For example, the loss of meaning caused by the war is expressed by Mai Manyanga. Mai Manyanga says to Tambudzai:

Yes, if it weren't for that cyclone down where those Ndebeles come from, there would still be someone for me to turn to in these times that are so bad nobody can say it. Yourself Kiri, wouldn't you be a different woman, one who has a father? (*This Mournable Body* 2018: 53).

The cyclone that Mai Manyanga refers to is the violence that broke out shortly after independence. Trauma here emerges as a product of the postcolonial effect where an ethnic massacre (the Gukurahundi) occurred in Matabeleland after the liberation war. The Gukurahundi exemplifies the reenactment of the trauma experienced during the liberation war, which is translated into cultural trauma experienced by the survivors years later. The ethnic group divisions created by the colonial system served as catalysts for the cycle of violence, which then perpetuates trauma, a development which is portrayed in Dangarembga's novel. Speaking about the violence of the Gukurahundi Mai Manyanga comments, 'Even though my brother survived the war, the monster that walks around was only lying down. It stood up again and chewed on him down there in Bulawayo' (*This Mournable Body* 2018: 53).

While Mai Manyanga laments her brother's death, she is not aware of the danger lurking in her own family. Her three sons enter a bloody dispute over inheritance. The desperation for individual success portrayed in Dangarembga's novel is a result of the fear of intense economic deprivation created by the inequality of colonialism. Mlambo and Raftopoulos (2009:1) point out that the Zimbabwean crisis has its 'long term origins ... in the colonial inequalities that characterized the country in its ninety years of colonial rule...' The economic struggles after the liberation war added to the psychological scarring of the black people, inciting a violent scramble for the few resources left. In her conversation with Tambudzai, Christine comments on the spirit of greed and corruption that has taken over the country. Her comment is specifically directed at freedom fighters, specifically men who hold positions in the ruling party and are in government. She says, 'There is nothing that any freedom fighter did...that people didn't do in the villages' (79). Tambudzai states that the greed and savage fighting for resources are a result of the inequality embedded in

Zimbabwe's colonial past. Because of the long-suffering and historical injustices, the blacks in the country engage in an intense squabble for resources. Here collective trauma is evidenced through collective experience.

The colonial history of Zimbabwe helps us to understand Dangarembga's narrative of cultural trauma. Colonialism can be seen as the intersection of the agents of trauma such as oppression, patriarchy, gender inequality, violence, and subjugation of women. The vicissitudes of these stories account for the multiplicity of the traumatic events experienced by the women in Dangarembga's novel, all of which can be traced to colonialism.

2.2 Collective experience and cultural trauma

The portrayal of the psychological and physical damage suffered by the women in the novel lends itself to the theory of collective experience. While each case in the novel is individual, it is hard to separate the experiences of each woman from that of the collective. The notion of collective or cultural trauma is rather complex and difficult. As Kaplan (2005:66) suggests, 'While individual trauma is always linked to the social sphere, given that social conditions shape trauma's impact... traumatic events may affect the discourse of an entire nation's public narratives'. For trauma to be collective, social experiences need to become a cultural crisis thus damaging to its people's identities. Sociologist Jeffery C. Alexander (2004:18) refers to 'collective trauma' as a process, 'harmful or overwhelming phenomena which are believed to have deeply harmed collective identity'. Alexander's notion identifies the trauma process as involving the interrogation of history. As Visser (2011:9) remarks, 'colonialism is part of that trauma process'. She adds, 'it is an established understanding that colonialism's traumatic aftermath continues until the present day'. Since Dangarembga's novel is a postcolonial narrative, the history of its context is a contributor to the socio-cultural construction of 'trauma processes' as defined by Alexander. Characteristically postcolonial literature insists on the addressing of the history of colonialism. This thus moves the focus away from the individual to collective experiences.

The collective memories of the characters explored in the novel reveal the interrelatedness of their trauma through history and collective experiencing. Rothberg's "multidirectional memory", discussed in the preceding chapter, suggests that we view memory 'as subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive and not privative' (Rothberg 2012:28). Rothberg's notion reminds us that one memory of a traumatic event does not necessarily replace another. Instead memory can be composed of many layers of experiences which are compartmentalized but can be used as cross-references to each other. For example, the memories of apartheid do not block those of slavery but the experiences of each event can be used to understand the past. Thus, looking at the collective memory of the collective does not dispel that of the individual. Dangarembga's narrative, as previously mentioned, is a testimony to the collective traumatic suffering of women through systematic oppression, subjugation, and marginalization by the patriarchal society of Zimbabwe. These injustices can be linked to the colonial past. As the women in Dangarembga's novel experience these social injustices, their collective suffering experienced during the colonial era and the liberation war is revisited through traumatic memory. An example of this is when Christine talks about a corpse that cries. Tambudzai says:

They have landed in a territory they seldom speak of with this discussion. It takes them a moment or two of silence to leave plains ankle deep in men burnt crisp, black and small as babies, infants who throb red blood from every orifice, the faeces of men who watch their daughters cut off their husbands' genitals, and pieces of women, scarlet decorations, that bob on the branches of forests (*This Mournable Body* 2018: 116).

This is a harrowing traumatic memory described by Tambudzai in the above passage. In her pointing out of this moment of remembrance, she reveals the persistence of the horrors of the liberation war that exists in the minds of the women. The traumatic memory above is prompted by the witnessing of psychotic Tambudzai in a mental institution. Referencing the horrors of the liberation war, Christine asks Lucia, 'When did you see eyes staring like that for the first time? Wasn't it when everything was smashed and torn and red was white and white was red and floating in a river that was running out, that should have kept on running inside our sister's body' (*This Mournable Body* 2018:116). Christine's words serve as a

reminder to Tambudzai that more tragic things have happened in their lives. They serve as an attempt to snap her out of the depressive state that she is in. Lucia corroborates Christine's allusion. She says, 'Yes, we did see our sisters looking back like that, as though they were dead, although still living' (*This Mournable Body* 2018:116). The witnessing of Tambudzai in such a state stirs Christine and Lucia's memory of the past traumatic experience. The collective experiences portrayed here may be read in the light of Rothberg's 'multidirectional memory'. Here we see trauma being portrayed as collective, spatial, and material. The visual representation of the damage suffered by the body offered by Christine reveals the interrelations between the wound of the body and that of the mind. In their recalling of this traumatic memory, the women 'reveal the conceptualization of memory as multidirectional: as subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive and not private' (Rothberg 2010:28). To some extent, *This Mournable Body* (2018) gestures toward the idea of "multidirectional memory" that for Rothberg is a crucial aspect of cultural practices of remembering.

While the psychological damages portrayed in Dangarembga's novel are a result of gendered black on black conflict, their foundation can be traced to the social dynamics that resulted from the colonial rule. There is strong evidence of the polarization of society portrayed in the novel. The patriarchal men who dominate the political landscape and occupy positions of power and the oppressed, marginalized and depersonalized black women are at odds with each other. Leon shares his views of the socio-economic environment of Zimbabwe, pointing out the dynamics of power and capital. He says, 'Capital's just like your politicians. It knows those women out there are nothing but quantities! Think about your aunt at the homestead, Nyasha! She's a bit in a calculation. A vote here, a price there for a dose of something' (*This Mournable Body* 2018:142). The dangers of this kind of exploitative system that has risen in post-independence Zimbabwe were expressed by Frantz Fanon. He (1964:144) who argued that, 'The militant who faces the colonialist war machine with the bare minimum of arms realizes that while he is breaking down colonial oppression he is building up automatically yet another system of exploitation'. In her novel, Dangarembga depicts these new forms of oppression that are directed at black women. In her attempt to reveal the social injustices of the past, she draws parallels between the colonial rule and the succeeding government rule. By doing so she

reveals the perpetuation of the marginalization and silencing of women in Zimbabwe. For example, Lucia warns Tambudzai about the dangers of being too headstrong as a woman. She says:

Sometimes there is nothing you can do to change anything. Remember Kiri and I went to war. If you see us who went to war not trying to do anything about this country of ours, you should understand that there is a reason (*This Mournable Body* 2018: 145).

Lucia's statement reveals the dire social and political landscape in Zimbabwe. What she says suggests that the problem of gender inequality and oppression is entrenched deep in the social fabric of Zimbabwe. Her statement reveals the voicelessness being suffered by black women in Zimbabwe. The silencing of women identifiable from Lucia's statement is done through systematic oppression. This is done through preventing black women from participating in economic and political activities as pointed out by Leon. He makes a critical observation that suggests prevailing attitudes to women in Zimbabwe. Leon says:

Women like you just haven't got it. Scale. Because no one wants you to have it. They have to make sure you never do! They don't want women like that. They want women the way they are now, just something with a shelf life, that ages. Can't you see there's nothing about women to interest any kind of capital unless it's solutions for aging? Botox, liposuction. That's at one end of the scale. At the other end, all they do is keep you being women (*This Mournable Body* 2018: 142).

Leon's statement exposes the depersonalization of women in Zimbabwe. Similarly, the colonial government subjected the indigenous people to every kind of oppression. The post-independence government of Zimbabwe has been predominantly male. In other words, the tables have turned in their favour. They have graduated from being victims to becoming the perpetrators of oppression and social injustice.

In Dangarembga's novel, historical trauma is a strong force that undermines progression while enforcing gender discrimination and tribalism. The repeated confrontation with segregation and oppression is what makes the socio-political shape of Zimbabwe traumatic

even in its current state. The oppression and subjugation of women are, in fact, inseparable from the marginalization of blacks during the colonial era. Only they have become localized and redirected to women. I would like to look briefly at the history of Zimbabwe to map out the major historical changes in the political, economic, social, and cultural shape of pre-colonial Zimbabwe. These historical changes mark the transitional period of the psychology of the black people in Zimbabwe. This will allow me to elucidate the cycle of trauma in Zimbabwe.

2.3 Connecting cultural identity to trauma

The advent of religion and western education can be linked to issues of cultural identity portrayed in Dangarembga's trilogy. The question of religion and education being used as tools of colonization, affecting the culture of the indigenous people, has been raised by many scholars. I would like to investigate briefly the impact of these two factors (religion and education) on culture in order to draw a parallel with the identity crisis that we see in Tambudzai and other women in the novel. Hall (1990: 225) points out that:

Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything else which is historical, they undergo a transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to continuous 'play' of history, culture, and power. Far from being grounded as a mere 'recovery' of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are names we give to different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narrative of the past.

Stuart Hall's analysis reveals that cultural identity is deeply rooted in the history of a group of people. Consequently, history itself serves as the foundation of the identity, culture, and language of people. Tambudzai's reminiscence of the trips she went on around the country gives us the historical background of the colonization of the cultures in Zimbabwe.

Tambudzai says:

He (Babamkuru) always included a lecture during the family outings: Mr. Smith's Kariba hydroelectricity plant and the sunken Tonga village whose outraged spirits stirred the river snake god to eat up several Italian engineers, to say nothing of their workers. Then Rhodes's grave up in the Matopo Hills overlooking Bulawayo, which had once been the most potent shrine of Mwari, the God of all people from Zambia through to your own country and into South Africa, where freedom fighters under cover of the night held sacred cleansing rituals during the war, and which, you had discovered as you researched advertising campaigns, young male Zimbabweans now marked their property with urine. The magic of these sites was strong and real to your teenage person (*This Mournable Body* 2018: 209).

Tambudzai's reminiscence of this period in her life reveals the loss of a strong cultural identity resulting from colonialism. This narrative of the past is the memory of a time in her life when cultural identity was strong and national pride was sturdy. From the above paragraph, it is clear that Tambudzai feels that the cultural identity has been compromised and the spirit of the nation has been lost. This loss is evidenced in her description of how young men urinated on the sacred grounds, thus desecrating the sites that held spiritual significance. In this nostalgic scene Dangarembga alludes to the question of Cecil John Rhodes's grave that sits on what was once a sacred place where the God of indigenous people was enshrined. This nostalgic recalling of the past reveals the estrangement that Tambudzai feels which lends itself to a cultural identity crisis. The link between history and identity is pointed out by Mlambo who writes (2013:66):

Clearly historians and historiography are important in shaping society's self-perception, particularly societies such as our own that are struggling to develop common national identities and establish states that are truly inclusive, in the wake of a rather traumatic, divisive and acrimonious past in which one dominant group presided over a system that marginalized the majority and effectively wrote them out of history.

The potential danger of the absence of historical and cultural identity is evidenced today in the way in which African countries struggle to form strong national identities. As a result, a surge of ethnic group clashes and xenophobia cases flares up ceaselessly. Tribalism still plays a role in the electing of leaders in African societies. The problem of tribalism or hatred

and suspicion of others as Bhabha (1984:132) puts it is a, 'classificatory confusion'. Dangarembga's trilogy is not short of descriptions of tribalism and hatred of each other amongst the indigenous people. An example of this is the altercation at the boutique store owned by a woman from Botswana. Through the description of savage-like behaviour, Dangarembga depicts how tribalistic attitudes undermine social development, thus hindering nation building in Zimbabwe. The crowd gathered at the door of the boutique store sings war songs, accusing Mai Moetswabi of witchcraft (*This Mournable Body* 2018: 190). The sentiments expressed by the crowd are of a xenophobic nature. Dangarembga depicts the rising xenophobic culture and violent mob justice in the country, fueled by the frustration caused by job scarcity and economic challenges. All this is an indication of the problems that arise from the legacies of a divisive colonial rule.

Often colonialism is narrowed down into the occupation of a specific geographic area or a historical era but what is often left out is the taking over of the culture, social legacies, intellectual property of a people and the erosion of their history. According to Fanon (1963:213):

Colonialism has made the same effort in these regions to plant deep in the minds of the native population the idea that before the advent of colonialism their history was one which was dominated by barbarism.

What Fanon points out in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1964) is how the power of colonialism became a constitutive element in the definition of historical identities and cultures in the colonies. One of the examples of the colonialization of culture in Zimbabwe was the advent of Christianity. According to Katrak (1995:18):

Colonial education was not meant to liberate the colonized; rather, it was the means through which the values and interest of the colonial master would be internalized by the colonized and perceived as their own.

Katrak's stance on colonial education raises several questions that are significant to understanding the forces of the victimization of women in Zimbabwe. Some of the deep

questions that are raised in Dangarembga's *This Mournable Body* (2018) are: is education enough to give women a fair chance to compete in male-dominated industries given the colonial history of Zimbabwe? To what extent did colonial education denigrate the culture of the indigenous people, a denigration that resulted in an identity crisis? How did colonial education alienate women and what are the consequences of that being witnessed today? These are important questions that attempt to investigate the contribution of colonial education to the oppression, marginalization, and subordination of African women as portrayed in Dangarembga's novel. I contend that missionary education played a big role in shaping the views and in the social positioning of women in Zimbabwe. While she is at the Young Ladies' College of the Sacred Heart, Tambudzai and other black students suffer segregation, unfair treatment, and oppression. This leads to poor performance in their studies, depression, and self-hatred. An example of self-hatred is verbalized when Tambudzai says:

On the other hand, I was now truly ashamed. What could it be? I wondered, so as not to locate the deficit in myself. It thus became clear to me that the trouble lay in the Europeans. Yes, this was always the trouble with white people, I decided. With some relief, I consequently indulged in the idea that living with them was making me as bad as they were (*The Book of Not* 2006: 100).

Tambudzai's self-questioning and drawing of conclusions about the nature of the relationship between herself and the whites reveal the corrupted social structures set up by the colonial government. What I find interesting is how these social injustices have influenced her character from childhood up until she is an adult woman. Her views on white people gradually change at the convent. Tambudzai says:

So the logical endpoint was, I deliberated, as one of the other school girls in the dormitory fell asleep, that I was glad the Sinai boys suffered their fate because they possessed different skin colours! *Aiwa, kwete*. How, could that be! I was appalled at the very notion of it, the idea that, like the worst of them, I was myself metamorphosing into a racist! (*The Book of Not* 2006: 101)

This seems to be a crucial turning point for Tambudzai's character. Her transformation is, however, damaging to her in that as her views of white people change they impact her perception of self and the world. As she becomes aware of her race and the environment she inhabits, she slowly slips into depression. However, depression seems to go unchecked among the young women at the convent as a few other girls exhibit signs of it. Another black student, Anastasia, exhibits signs of alcoholism which point to a depressed mental state resulting from the social injustices and performance pressure she endures at the convent (*The Book of Not* 2006: 105). For example, African girls' dormitories were separated from those of white students and they were also required to use separate bathrooms (*The Book of Not* 2006: 105). Secondly, the punishment at the convent was psychologically damaging. Tambudzai describes the isolation that one of the students suffered. She says, 'It went without saying there wasn't anyone for her to socialize with at the Catholic town hall, so no matter how much she wanted an evening of fun, she wouldn't be going' (*The Book of Not* 2006: 105). All these examples of oppression, marginalization, and subordination of African students reveal the oppressive nature of colonial education. Its psychological effects can be noted from Tambudzai and other black students at the convent. This answers the questions about colonial education asked by Dangarembga's trilogy I mentioned above. As an adult Tambudzai fails to excel beyond what the colonial education offered to her.

In Harare, Tambudzai finds herself unemployed and struggling to orient herself in a fast-changing city. This is partly because of the volatile economic and political landscape in Zimbabwe, but more so, because of the social injustices exacerbated by her gendered status. This is a challenge that all the women in Dangarembga's trilogy are faced with. Their hard work and academic excellence are overshadowed by their gender and race.

Tambudzai, Nyasha and Maiguru serve as the embodiment of systematic oppression of black women as a result of the legacies of colonialism. When Nyasha returns from Europe, she struggles to reconcile her academic achievement in Europe with her socio-economic struggles in Zimbabwe (*This Mournable Body* 2018: 142). Her struggles are noted by Tambudzai, who is disappointed by her cousin's fall from grace. When she arrives to live with Nyasha and Leon, Tambudzai is disappointed to learn that her cousin has married a German man without money. She narrates, 'YOU HAVE ENTERED A NEW REALM OF

impossibility, worse even than the discovery that your cousin had been placed on the side of impoverishment, in spite of her degrees, in Europe' (*This Mournable Body* 2018: 128). This is a sad observation made by Tambudzai, who grew up viewing Nyasha as a role model. However, Nyasha's struggles are not only because of the lack of judgment or poor decision making but more so because of socio-economic and political factors used to oppress black women. This is evidenced through Tambudzai's narration of Nyasha's struggles in Zimbabwe. She says:

.... Acquiring a degree in political science at London School of Economic, another at filmmaking in Hamburg, and coming back to Zimbabwe where no one wants her [Nyasha] to have either has caused her to be more fanciful.... You suppress a shudder of pity for your cousin, notwithstanding her education and ideals, will never amount to anything (*This Mournable Body* 2018: 164).

The above passage gives insight to the systematic positioning of a black woman in Zimbabwe such that even a highly educated woman like Nyasha cannot succeed because of her gender. This kind of societal positioning of black women in Zimbabwe is disadvantageous and excludes them from involvement in the economy and political participation.

It is a known fact that the colonial governments were not only racist but were also sexist. The question that arises from this is: were the struggles of women under the colonial government recognized in the process of nation-building post-independence? Another supporting question is: was there dialogue addressing gender and the oppression of women after independence? In addition, how have the answers to these questions contributed to the fashioning of a contemporary Zimbabwean woman? These are all the fundamental questions that Dangarembga's novel tries to address. Tambudzai and Nyasha exemplify the social conditioning of a Zimbabwean woman. When Nyasha learns that her child's teacher hits the children, she reacts emotionally and condemns the act. But Tambudzai sees this as a sign of weakness, referring to her cousin as being, 'enfeebled by her sojourns in Europe' (*This Mournable Body* 2018: 164). Tambudzai describes a Zimbabwean woman as follows:

Zimbabwean women, you remind yourself, know how to order things around. They go to war. They drug patients in order to get ahead. They get on with it. If one doesn't turn out, a Zimbabwean woman simply turns to another (*This Mournable Body* 2018: 164).

The Zimbabwean woman here is portrayed as unrelenting, courageous, and strong-willed and sometimes to a point of malevolence. Dangarembga's portrayal of the Zimbabwean woman is interesting in that it bears both positive and negative qualities. Hence the idea of the binary victim-perpetrator characteristics in Tambudzai I mentioned earlier in the dissertation. Dangarembga contrasts the two cousins to explore the different kinds of women in Zimbabwe. Nyasha and Tambudzai have a similar upbringing but they come from different backgrounds. Through Nyasha, Dangarembga portrays the psychological effect of interracial marriage, a relationship resulting from globalization trends. Throughout her life, Nyasha finds herself conflicted between her western upbringing and her Zimbabwean heritage. This juxtaposing of cultural factors with the notion of the psychology of cultural identity reveals the challenges involved in bridging cultural differences. Nyasha's feelings of insignificance are exaggerated through her continuous self- and overcompensation. She feels that her culture and heritage are being trampled on by western ways of doing things in their household, for example, the reading of children's books in German (*This Mournable Body* 2018: 136). Her sentiments are that there is a lack of racial and cultural equality in her children's upbringing. I argue that Nyasha's realization causes feelings of self-doubt which Fanon (1963: 84) characterizes as a 'classical type of inferiority complex'. In *Nervous Conditions* (1988), young Nyasha experiences problems with acclimatizing to Shona culture after spending some time in England. Her challenge is driven by the socio-economic differences between England and Zimbabwe. Fanon (1963:43) points out, 'historically, inferiority has been felt economically...'. As an older woman, Nyasha's sentiments about the Shona culture seem to have changed as a reaction to her marriage to a German man. Her inferiority complex can be linked to the identity crisis she has suffered throughout her life, from childhood returning from England and as an adult who has lived in Europe.

Tambudzai, on the other hand, is the opposite of Nyasha: she has never left the country and she has no children but exhibits similar signs of an inferiority complex that lends itself to an identity crisis. Her inferiority complex can be noted in her tendency to lie about who she is,

giving herself a false identity to impress the people she encounters. For example, when she meets a man in a taxi she lies about what she does for a living, claiming to be in horticulture. Similarly, when she moves to Mai Manyanga's residence she presents herself as a working-class woman. Her contempt of self serves as evidence of her inferiority complex which can be attributed to her identity crisis. This can be noted in her first interview with Mai Manyanga. She says, 'She likes you. In spite of your searing need to be favored, your heart sinks...You are growing suspicious at being liked by this woman, knowing there is nothing about yourself that counts at amiable' (*This Mournable Body* 2018:35). It is this kind of neurosis that leads to Tambudzai's self-critique and self-negation. This shows itself in her negative self-perception. She doesn't see herself as likable and amiable. These issues can be linked to an identity crisis stemming from social injustices accumulated over the years.

Dangarembga's narrative reflects on the struggles of womanhood in Zimbabwe. Through the portrayal of the collective experiences of black women, she reveals multiple forms of historical injustices and the perpetuation thereof. The effects of these injustices are depicted through an identity crisis and socio-economic struggles. The economic challenges experienced by Tambudzai and other women can be linked to cultural trauma as portrayed in Dangarembga's novel. Dangarembga depicts how many Zimbabweans left the country for South Africa, Botswana, and other envisioned greener pastures because of the economic challenges. The psychological factors that can be attributed to the exodus that took place are displacement, feelings of abandonment, and disintegrated families. Consequently, displacement has psychological implications in communities and the impact of it lends itself to questions of identity. In Dangarembga's novel, the power of trauma is reflected through disruptions and displacement. Tambudzai constantly finds herself disoriented, trying to find herself through self-analysis and self-criticism.

3.1 Re-experiencing: intrusive images and hallucinations

3.1.1 Defining Re-experiencing

When the diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was first introduced in the *DSM-III* (1980), one of the distinct symptoms that were identified was the repetitive recollections of the traumatic event which left the victim feeling as if the event was happening again. The American Psychiatric Association borrowed from Freud who wrote extensively about the importance of the integration of intrusive memories. In his analysis of the reproduction of memories of a traumatic experience, Freud (1893:260) wrote 'a picture which refuses to disappear is one which calls for consideration, a thought which cannot be dismissed is the one that needs to be pursued further.' Freud's argument emphasized the importance of integrating traumatic memory, in so doing postulating that trauma sufferers experienced what he called 'unimportant memories' which were later termed intrusive memories/flashbacks by the *DSM-III* (1980). *DSM-III* (1980) took the idea of intrusive memories and pursued it further, identifying the repetitive recollections of a traumatic event as 're-experiencing'. *DSM-IV* (1994: 464, 468) defines reexperiencing as '[t]he persistent re-experiencing of a traumatic event [which] manifests in a form of "intrusions" (intrusive memories or flashback of the event), nightmares as well as strong emotional or physical reaction to anything that resembles the traumatic event'. What is later reexperienced constitutes what Ehlers et al (2002) describe as 'represented sensory impressions that signal the onset of the trauma or the onset of its worst moments' These sensory impressions vary from victim to victim but the common trends are listed by Ehlers (2002:103) as 'images, sounds, body sensations, tastes, or smells'. The emphasis on sensory impressions that are later reexperienced appears to be an indicator of PTSD.

3. 2 Re-experiencing as a narrative style in the novel

The opening line of Dangarembga's first novel, *Nervous Conditions* (1988), sets the flashback narrative style of Tambudzai's story. Tambudzai's narrative opens with a powerful statement, 'I was not sorry when my brother died' (*Nervous Conditions* 1988:1). Although this statement is expressed by a grown-up Tambudzai, recounting her childhood experiences in a small village in Zimbabwe, it reveals both the psychological and emotional condition of the protagonist through 're-experiencing'. It is through such intrusive memories that the story of Tambudzai becomes that of trauma. The brazen narrative style seen in the opening statement sets the tone for the entire trilogy. Dangarembga's flashback technique renders cues on the emotional and psychological state of the narrator. The opening statement of Tambudzai's narrative is a confrontation with Nhamo's death, an event, which I argue, her mind has not integrated into her consciousness. The impact of these unintegrated memories serves as an indicator of the trauma that she suffers throughout her life. Through testimony and self-narration, Tambudzai's story becomes a way in which these memories are integrated.

3. 2. 1 The persistent past: intrusive memory/flashbacks

As mentioned above, the tone of the opening lines of the first novel sets the mood of Dangarembga's entire trilogy. From the onset of the narrative, we learn that the relationship between history and the present is marred by events that were psychologically damaging to the protagonist. The effects of the experiencing of these events are what this dissertation tries to investigate. From the very first line of the first novel, *Nervous Conditions* (1988), Tambudzai is portrayed as an embittered young girl. Dangarembga carries this idea through the entire trilogy. Even with her experiences throughout the years, her character has not changed. Somehow it is almost as if it is not developed. In *This Mournable Body* (2018) we see the same spiteful, malevolent, and bitter adult Tambudzai. These are the qualities that drive the narrative of trauma in the final novel. Her resentment is not only directed towards her brother Nhamo but also herself and later translated to the society as a

whole. I bring this up because Tambudzai's narrative begins with a reference to Nhamo's death and through episodes of intrusive memories and flashbacks, a history of multiple social injustices is revealed. Through the depiction of Tambudzai's memories, the novel portrays how the past holds the traumatized in thrall. Her lifelong battle with oppression, racism, and patriarchy is revealed through a series of flashbacks. When she finds herself destitute the memory of the marginalization and oppression she suffered because she was a girl comes to her in a form of 'willed memory'. She says:

Struggle to achieve education, planting a field of green mealies and selling them to keep yourself in school when your mother refuses to vend for you as she had done for your brother. This you do not say, because who can speak ill of a mother. To do so will increase the crime of being born who you are and where it happened, justifying all the calamity that befalls you (*This Mournable Body* 2018:105).

The above memory reveals the trauma of gendered marginalization that Tambudzai experienced as a young girl. Her sense of self is blemished by the trauma of the depersonalization she has endured. The paragraph points to the psychological damage caused by the way black women are discriminated against in Zimbabwe. When her parents chose Nhamo to get an education because he is a boy the decision sets Tambudzai on a vengeful path. The opening line of the first novel and the above paragraph reveal a dark place that she finds herself in. However, she is aware of the wrongfulness of condemning her mother for treating her unjustly because she realizes the social pressures. In the flashback, we are taken through a re-experiencing of the trauma of the oppression and marginalization that has not left her. The excerpts make it clear that Tambudzai's battle is with the status or crime of being a woman as the title of the final novel suggests.

The metaphor of 'womanhood being a crime' that Tambudzai refers to brings to mind the subject of gender-based violence that the novel touches on through Gertrude's attack at the taxi rank. Similarly, the case of Mako's rape; Mai Manyanya's troubled family bond, and lastly Mai Tanaka's marriage to an abusive husband. Physical violence as we know is suffered by the body and tends to be traumatic to its victims. Tambudzai herself is no stranger to violence and the calamity that accompanies it. The novel's move towards the

violence experienced by the body is expressed through the bodily responses that Tambudzai experiences. For example, when she is confronted with a traumatic memory she experiences bodily reactions such as tightening of stomach or watering of eyes.

Dangarembga portrays the trauma of violence also through contrasting psychic states exhibited by the protagonist. The visual nature of the trauma of violence emerges in the form of intrusive images such as flashbacks, dreams, and hallucinations experienced by Tambudzai. For example, when she witnesses a hysterical woman threatening to take off her clothes to get Shine's attention she experiences episodes of intrusive memories. The trauma of Mako's rape is triggered in Tambudzai by seeing the frenzied woman undress. Here, the body serves as a site of the trauma of the violence of rape. When Tambudzai sees the woman undress a series of intrusive memories floods her mind. She says:

Your eyes water as you watch. The woman's frenzy mirrors the panic you endured a few hours ago when Shine stood at your door. What if you were younger? What would you have done if a man like Shine, an accountant with a job, paid you attention? Bertha's words sound harsh in your ears. Your stomach tightens as you recall Gertrude and the stone in your hand. You slide away from Bertha and your memories, closer to Mai Manyanga (*This Mournable Body* 2018: 64).

Tambudzai's automatic bodily response to the memory of Mako's rape reveals the power of the contagion effect of trauma. Through the notion of secondary witnessing posited by Felman and Laud (1992), Tambudzai reexperiences the violence of Mako's rape. Even though she did not experience the rape herself but through secondary witnessing, she becomes implicated in the trauma suffered by Mako. Consequently, when she witnesses the frenzied woman take off her clothes she reexperiences the panic she felt when Shine, Mako's rapist, came and stood by her door. Mako's rape exemplifies how the women in the novel, through secondary witnessing, become implicated in each other's trauma. What is interesting to note in the above passage is how the memory of Mako's rape triggers that of the violence at the taxi rank.

Tambudzai's trauma emerges through the reexperiencing of emotions such as fear, helplessness, and danger that she felt earlier when Shine stops by her door. When she sees

the frenzied woman undress her first reaction is an emotional one as her eyes start to water (*This Mournable Body* 2018: 64). Her reaction, it can be argued, is a result of the unconscious as her body reexperiences similar emotions as when Shine comes and stops at her door. It is the sight of the frenzied woman which wakes the memory of a possible danger that she experienced in the encounter with Shine. Here, the intersection between the psychological and physiological is evidenced through the concept of 'affect' raised by Ruth Leys. According to Leys (2012:11):

... affects are independent of meaning/intention and signification because they are corporeal-material processes of the body (my italics) ('intensity' is just another word for affect defined in non-signifying, non-intentionalist terms).

Leys's view on affects being 'corporeal-material processes of the body' goes hand in hand with the concept that the body becomes the site of the traumatic experience as suggested by Patricia Clough and Jean Halley in *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social* (2007). Leys (2012:9) further asserts that affects, 'are a non-signifying, autonomic process of the body that takes place below the threshold of conscious awareness and meaning'. Tambudzai's bodily reaction such as the watering of her eyes, the trembling stomach, and fear reveals how the trauma in the body manifests. She becomes overwhelmed by the sight of the frenzied woman; as a result, the trauma of the violence suffered by the body is triggered by the 'autonomic responses' of the body. Her re-experiencing manifests through strong emotional and physical reactions which signify the intensity of her trauma.

While Tambudzai struggles with various traumatic memories, for the most part she is aware of the power or impact of those of her childhood. Her reexperiencing of childhood events at the convent stems from conscious memory and selective remembering. The remembering process involves confronting the trauma and integration of memories. In her recalling of the past, Tambudzai reveals the pain of the intrusive memories of her childhood. It seems that her fixation with the past creates room for these flashbacks and intrusive images. The recurring flashbacks are those of her experiences at the convent and advertising agency. In the scene where she meets Tracey Stevenson for the first time after many years, she goes through an episode of intrusive memories. She says:

The most recent memory overcome, you tremble as others crowd back. You are at the convent on your first day, and your uncle is already disappointed that you are not allocated rooms on the same day basis as white girls are. Your lavatory is flooded because you are not allowed to use white girls' toilets where the incinerators stand and, without an incinerator of your own, you and your roommates have thrown your pads into the toilet bowl. The headmistress makes a public announcement at the assembly concerning "African girls," their dirtiness, and their cost to the school. Then, as the war intensifies, she calls you to her office to reassure you, joking that no one will be cut in half to meet government quotas for African students. In spite of this, the only one from your dormitory, you take the school bus to the town hall on Friday evenings to knit woolens for Rhodesian soldiers. Deep down, as you hunker on your seat, looking out the window to repel conversation, you know that things are meant to be different (*This Mournable Body* 2018: 158).

I have quoted this paragraph at length because it reflects extensively on the traumatic instances of racial prejudice that Tambudzai experienced at the convent. She describes her traumatic experience at the convent in terms of descriptions of reexperiencing. Her body's reaction to the intrusive memory serves as evidence of the suffering of her years at the convent. She experiences a sudden trembling which is followed by vivid intrusive memories of her first day at the convent and then the public humiliation of African girls at assembly. Both these events point to the psychological effects of racial discrimination and humiliation. What Tambudzai returns to in the flashback is the moment in her life where she is a helpless young girl, oppressed, and vulnerable in every way. This flashback triggers old feelings of uncertainty and struggle for survival that she experienced growing up, revealing the relationship between the event and the trauma. The historical experience of her trauma involves the story of survival and the psychological components of it.

The effects of racial discrimination that Tambudzai and other girls experience at the convent need to be understood in connection with the colonial history of Zimbabwe. A significant example of the relevance of the context is in the scene where the tourist, Herr Bachmann, starts taking pictures of a group of dancers, one of whom is Tambudzai's mother. In response to the clicking and the flash of the camera, Mai gets seized by an episode of hysteria and starts screaming at Herr Bachmann. She shouts, 'Me, that's what you think I

am. Not a someone, but that I am whatever you want to put in your picture' (*This Mournable Body* 2018: 267). Here Mai's reaction points to a reexperiencing of a historical trauma of depersonalization of blacks done by white people. Mai's reaction reveals a reexperiencing of insecurity and a threat to her identity which then triggers the hysteria. In his definition of ontological insecurity Laing (1960:47) writes, 'if one experiences the other as a free agent, one is open to the possibility of experiencing oneself as an *object* [Laing's italics] of his experience and thereby of feeling one's subjectivity drained away'. Mai's subjectivity exhibits the anxiety of depersonalization of Africans that is historically embedded in the tourist culture. This dehumanization of black people by the tourist industry reinforces the ontological struggle for self-determination and liberation. The scene takes us back to the theory of cultural memory which is evoked here through reexperiencing oneself as an object.

Mai's reaction reveals the fear of the danger of becoming no more than a subject in a photograph. She says, 'You want to laugh at my child when you are back home because her mother is a naked old woman' (*This Mournable Body* 2018: 268). Her remarks point to her fear of being depersonalized by being put in the photographs and displayed in Europe. This fear points to a re-experiencing of the past whereby she could have experienced an event of a similar nature. Given the history of Zimbabwe Mai's reaction comes as no surprise as Christine had earlier warned Tambudzai about the dangers of taking white people to the village. Christine says to Tambudzai:

Surely you know what you are playing with. You are the one with a sister using only one leg. You know what can be done when people are roused to fury, you know it. It is no longer explosives in the ground as it was with Nestai. These days, people's arms have become the size of their sleeves for less than this thing you are doing (*This Mournable Body* 2018: 254).

Here Christine warns Tambudzai of a possible likelihood of triggering traumatic experiences of the liberation struggle. Christine is aware of the historical trauma that lurks amid Zimbabwean society and the dangers of evoking the memory of the past. Indeed, the trip to the village ends tragically when the historical trauma is triggered through Mai and Babam'kuru. When Mai experiences a nervous breakdown, what follows is the chaos that

triggers a reaction from a wheelchair-bound Babam'kuru, who is also a victim of the liberation war. Something about the witnessing of the event snaps Babam'kuru out of his wheelchair. The response to the event by Mai and Baba'mkuru points to reexperiencing as a central and recurring image of the trauma of colonialism in postcolonial literary studies.

3.2.2 Reimagining hallucinatory experiences in the novel

Like intrusive memories or flashbacks, hallucinations are central to the definitions of trauma given by the DSM. There are several events of illusory experiences in the novel that point to hallucinatory experiences. There are times where the protagonist's mind creates images accompanied by sounds. Tambudzai's experiencing these series of visual and auditory hallucinations reveals her trauma. The opening pages of Dangarembga's novel, (*This Mournable Body* 2018), introduce us to Tambudzai, who is caught between reality and a dreamlike state. She describes an image of a fish on the panel of the wardrobe door as if it were alive. She narrates, 'There, a fish stares at you out of purplish eye sockets, its mouth gaping, cheeks drooping as though under the weight of monstrous scales' (*This Mournable Body* 2018: 9). The grotesque image is taken further on the next page where the fish changes form and it bloats into the size of a hippopotamus. Of course, this only happens when Tambudzai opens the wardrobe door but here the writer plays with the distortion of images to let us into the fantastic mind of the narrator. The most memorable examples of the novel's depiction of the visual nature of hallucinations are through the depiction of a laughing hyena, snakes, and ants crawling on her body. Tambudzai's hallucinations occur periodically through the novel. Whenever they occur she seems to lose touch with reality. During the process her mind enters a dream-like state where she then seems to experience a splitting of 'self' and she becomes the experience of the event and the spectator of the event at the same time. For example, when she arrives at Madam Mbuya Riley's place she is greeted by a woman who mentions the war. The mention of the war triggers an episode of hallucinations from Tambudzai. She says:

...snakes that hold your womb inside you open their jaws at the mention of war. The contents of your abdomen slide towards the ground, as though the snakes let everything

loose when their mouths opened. Your womb dissolves to water. You stand there and your strength is finished (*This Mournable Body* 2018: 17).

The narrative technique that Dangarembga adopts here is an attempt to render how trauma manifests in the mind of her protagonist. The hallucinations that Tambudzai experiences reveal the gruesome psychological effects of the trauma of war. Here, we see an example of the splitting of consciousness where Tambudzai takes on a spectator position and watches herself experience these phantasmagorical visions. This kind of splitting of self is widely explored by Ronald Laing in his work *The Divided Self* (1960). Laing (1960:158) writes, 'A hallucination is an as-if perception of a fragment of the disintegrated 'other' self by a remnant (self-focus) retaining residual I-sense; this becomes more apparent in manifestly psychotic patients'. Laing further points out that the self-self relationship in people suffering from trauma, 'provides the internal setting for violent attacks between warring phantoms inside, experienced as having a sort of phantom concreteness' (158). Laing (1960:158) further explains that due to internal conflict between the two inner phantoms, it may, 'compel the individual to say he has been murdered, or that "he" has murdered his "self"'. This seems to be the case with Tambudzai who, because of hatred of self and her past, undertakes a mission to free herself from the past.

Tambudzai's response to the undesired connection to the past is evidenced through isolation and withdrawal from society. After she is forced out of the hostel she takes residence with Mai Manyanga where her withdrawal deepens until she eventually falls into a state of depression. Her reclusive life involves sitting by the window and watching the events of the main house. As her isolation deepens, her perceptions of herself and the world seem to change for the worst. Soon her isolation begins to affect her psyche and causes her to experience episodes of hallucinations. Her hallucinations involve vivid images and intense emotions. During her hallucination she narrates:

The ants troop up the walls. They have grown as big as wasps. The widow sings a strange hymn in her cottage. Treble shines ivory and the bass gleams like ebony. Note by note, the melody trembles to the ceiling. You blink the music and the insects

away, afraid to think of anything while equally frightened of emptying your mind in case the space is occupied by something more horrible (*This Mournable Body* 2018: 84).

In the hallucination, there is a strong focus on the psychological void that exists in the mind of the protagonist. Tambudzai is aware of the existing void in her mind and her fear lies with the horrors that may occupy it, threatening her mental stability. Here, again we see an example of how the protagonist dreads the memory of the events of her harrowing past. This causes an internal conflict which results in problems that are pointed out by Laing's notion of self-self relations. Tambudzai's internal battle is evidenced throughout the novel. For example, when she wakes up after dozing in front of the TV she experiences an intense visual and auditory episode of hallucination. She says:

You open your eyes. They march on. You close your eyes. The insects continue parading. Staring at them the thing you promised yourself you will never recall pops back into memory. She is a corpse, long dead, lying by a bus shelter, dined on by creeping things, gnawed at by scavengers. You rush away from her into the kitchen. Once and for all, you must bury this woman (*This Mournable Body* 2018: 199).

In the above paragraph Tambudzai goes through various levels of splitting of consciousness. Her psyche shifts from one hallucination to another. She goes from the hallucinating about insects crawling on her to visions of a corpse and this develops into fully fledged derangement as she acts out her visions. Here we see her fight this other version of herself. All this is an internal battle taking place in her mind, signifying the problem of self-self relationship that stems from her traumatic past. Tambudzai's attempt to free herself from her past is represented through her refusal to accept a bag of mealie meal sent to her from the village by her mother. To her, the bag of mealie meal serves as a reminder or an association with an unbearable part of her life, her childhood. By burying the bag, she hopes to bury the past. In her attempt to purge herself of her past Tambudzai indulges in self-hatred and she engages in risky behaviour. This form of unconscious self-crucifixion creates a compulsive personality. For example, her participation in the violence at the taxi-rank where Gertrude is attacked by a mob reveals her compulsive behaviours. Her participation in the attack, it can be argued, reveals the adoption of a false self-identity: a second

personality within her that signifies a violent temperament. Tambudzai battles with this other 'self' that manifests as feeling unworthy, evil, and undesirable. Hence this notion is evidenced in a hallucinatory form where a powerful conjunction between imagination and narration is portrayed. Tambudzai narrates:

You run away from her into the kitchen. Once and for all, you must bury this woman. You rip the lid from the rubbish bin and heave up the bag of mealie meal. You scatter its contents across the floor and over the furniture. While rage flays at you like a whip, you scoop the meal up again and run out to the garden. There, you drag a hoe from the garage. You dig a hole deep as a grave and pour in the gift from your mother (*This Mournable Body* 2018: 199).

Dangarembga's depiction of the psychological processes in the above hallucination exposes a form of traumatic dissociation that Tambudzai suffers. She tries to push away the hallucination of the ants but instead, she experiences a splitting of consciousness as she relives the memory of the morning after the night club incident. A splitting of consciousness occurs and results in dissociation and derealization. Hirsch and Spitzer (2010:84) describe traumatic dissociation; they write, 'Traumatic dissociation—the process by which traumatic fragments survive and remain vividly present without being integrated or mastered by the traumatized person—is an extreme form of the splitting that characterizes ambivalent nostalgia/negative memory'. Hirsch and Spitzer's (2010) notion points to the survival of fragments of traumatic memories and their intrusion on a trauma victim's subconscious. Tambudzai's hallucination reveals a psychological state of derealization and the negative memories that accompany it. Her mind seems to shift between episodes of reality and fantasy, followed by negative memory of the image of her body lying at the bus stop.

In the second part of the hallucination, Tambudzai's perception of reality seems to have shifted to fantastical as her visions intensify. Students in green and beige of Northlea uniform manifest and attack her. While she fights the apparitions of the schoolchildren she realizes that they metamorphize into the form of her mother. The transformation of the apparitions from schoolchildren into Tambudzai's mother exposes the traumatic memory of

her mother. There is strong evidence of resentment directed at her mother all over the novel. For example, she says:

You have failed to make anything at all of yourself, yet your mother endures even more bitter circumstances than yours, entombed in your destitute village. How, with all your education, do you come to be more needy than your mother? End up less than a woman so dashed by life that she tried to lean on her second daughter... (*This Mournable Body* 2018: 41).

Here again, we see Tambudzai undergo feelings of self-critique and self-loathing which lead to her ontological insecurity. These feelings are emphasized when she takes a teaching position at Northlea where she confronts demeaning behaviour from her students. Her insecurity, for the most part, seems to arise from the settings that she finds herself in. Northlea Primary School seems to be a similar environment to the convent where she experienced traumatic events such as racial segregation, humiliation, and violent fights with other girls. When she arrives at the school Tambudzai is subjected to mockery and name-calling which leads to anger, resentment, and eventually to violence. She says, 'You perceive the unwavering eyes as mockery, the laughter as scoffing at everything you have become' (*This Mournable Body* 2018: 89). Her response to the schoolchildren becomes confrontational rather than amicable as both an adult and educator. As a result, she beats one of her students until she loses hearing in one ear (*This Mournable Body* 2018: 94). The fear of being mocked and laughed at is expressed clearly by Tambudzai in *The Book of Not* (2006) where she says, 'I could not go back to the homestead where Nestai hopped unspeakably on a single limb, and where Mai would laugh at me daily' (*This Mournable Body* 2018: 246). This is a sad situation that the protagonist finds herself in here, unable to go home because of being ashamed of her family circumstances and ridicule. At this point in the novel, she has lost her sense of identity resulting from the death of her idea of 'unhu'. Both these experiences add up to the events at Northlea where she is subjected to ridicule, alienation, and shame. Because of the psychological impact of these, it seems almost inevitable that Tambudzai would end up in a mental institution.

While Tambudzai's trauma is revealed through reexperiencing, Dangarembga frames trauma as resulting from a major form of identity crisis experienced by her protagonist. The scene where Tambudzai visits her home village gives evidence of this. Upon arrival at the homestead, she stumbles across a trunk filled with memorabilia. When she notices her name written on it she experiences what seems to be a splitting of consciousness. The sight of her name on the trunk triggers a hallucination and the trunk starts vibrating. She narrates:

It seems to vibrate with the gravity of a black hole that pulls everything into its origin. The force of it creeps across the floor, trickles through the air and up the walls and inward so that after a moment you cannot tell whether you are the box or the box is you. It is calling you to surrender something you are sure you do not have (*This Mournable Body* 2018: 231).

This passage powerfully conveys how Tambudzai's trauma draws from her childhood experiences. Her childhood possessions inside the trunk serve as a powerful trope that signifies the haunting memories of the past. When she sees her name on the trunk she realizes the necessity for her to confront the demons of her past to heal. Throughout the text, Tambudzai's narrative shifts between the events of the past and the present, pointing to the sources of her trauma. As she goes through the trunk, the fragments of the items inside gesture towards the events at the Young Ladies' College of the Sacred Heart where the dominant memories of her trauma point to. She narrates:

You rummage in the pile, pulling out books at random and not putting them back. The pungency of the past percolates up: girls wearing lace gloves and veils to Sunday Mass, eating at heavy wooden tables set with white cloth napkins in silver rings, [*the constant tension from not knowing whether or not you were as you were meant to be, the brutal fighting to answer affirmatively that question, and its damage*] (*My italics*) (*This Mournable Body* 2018: 231).

The last part of the above paragraph reveals the fundamental cause of Tambudzai's trauma which is the fear of '*not knowing what you were meant to be*', something that is associated with her identity crisis. The paragraph implies that the sense of not knowing oneself that Tambudzai experiences leads to questions of her identity, resulting in dissociation from her

cultural identity. This dissociation translates itself into a fragmented sense of self and disintegration of individual identity. Simply put, she does know who she is. This state of unbecoming lends itself to a deep void within herself that results in psychological suffering. The memorabilia in the trunk take Tambudzai back to the dining hall of the convent to the moment where her identity crisis began. In this context, the novel's representation of the relationship between whites and blacks at the convent is crucial in the understanding of the damages of the colonial past. In its depiction of racism and segregation, the novel reveals the crucial mechanisms of the power of colonialism.

3.3 Mapping out avoidance in the novel

DSM-IV-TR (2000) stipulates that for PTSD to be assigned the survivor has to exhibit the following criteria, at least one re-experiencing symptom, three avoidance/numbing symptoms, and two arousal symptoms. In this section, I will map out the avoidance/numbing symptoms exhibited by the protagonist. The American Psychiatric Association identifies the avoidance cluster as comprising different ways of evading stimuli associated with the trauma, often accompanied by psychic numbing (*DSM-V*, 464).

As already discussed, the novel offers detailed insight into Tambudzai's psychological processes in response to her trauma. At the beginning of the novel, she exhibits signs of withdrawal which eventually lead to symptoms that can be classified under the avoidance and numbing cluster. When we are first introduced to Tambudzai she has alienated herself from her family and friends and lives a solitary life in a hostel. While living at the hostel she vilifies others and engages in hateful forms of behaviour. Her solitude leads to psychological out of body experiences that can be linked to a form of dissociation. Laing (1960:78) describes dissociation as characterized by 'feelings of estrangement and derealization'. Laing (1960:78) lists examples of thoughts that people suffering from dissociation tend to have such as, "'This is like a dream', 'This seems unreal', 'I can't believe this is true', 'Nothing seemed to be touching me', 'I cannot take it in', 'This is not happening to me', i.e. with feelings of estrangement and derealization'". The examples of dissociative behaviours that Laing points out here can be linked to the 'avoidance and numbing cluster'. As the trauma

sufferer tries to evade the distressing memories, thoughts, and reminders of the traumatic event she/he enters a state of the splitting of consciousness.

Throughout the novel, Tambudzai exhibits thoughts similar to those pointed out by Ronald Laing. For example, after the incident with Gertrude, when she receives harsh criticism from other girls, she displays dissociative behaviour. She narrates, 'Ten eyes stare you down as you walk back past, your tray laden with food. You sit alone, letting them see your profile to prove their eyes cannot touch you' (*This Mournable Body* 2018: 28). This kind of dissociative behaviour that Tambudzai exhibits can be read as an avoidance mechanism that she uses to escape judgment by Gertrude and the other girls. By telling herself that, 'their eyes cannot touch her' she shows signs of a split between the body and consciousness. Laing (1960) states that instances of dissociation arise from, 'an original position wherein the self began as embodied, became temporarily dissociated under stress and returned to its original position when the crisis was over'. Laing's notion reveals how Tambudzai, through detaching herself from the reality of the responsibility of her actions at the taxi rank since she was complicit in Gertrude's attack, experiences dissociation. Consequently, her dissociation lends itself to 'avoidance' of the trauma of the event.

Tambudzai's avoidance is revealed through episodes of derealization and estrangement throughout the novel. Her relationships with the people around her all seem troubled. She consciously avoids personal relationships because of the fear of emotional attachment. This can be noted when she arrives at Mai Manyanga, who takes a liking to her (*This Mournable Body* 2018: 40). Her fear of loss and rejection drives her to the symptom of numbing. Nhamo's death and Nyasha's departure for Europe serve as examples of the loss of close people in her life. The loss of close relations has left her alone and vulnerable, something which, I argue, has exacerbated the fear of forging new relationships as a result of her trauma. For example, when she arrives to live at Mai Manyanga's, she chooses to distance herself from others because of the fear of revealing her identity to them. She says, 'Knocking at your landlady's door, being offered a seat, engaging in the conversation that is part of a visit will associate you too explicitly with the homestead. Then you will grow quiet and surly. Or you will talk and divulge too much concerning your family's circumstances' (*This Mournable Body* 2018: 59). Here, she uses avoidance as a defence mechanism. By doing

so she escapes the trauma of her past through avoidance of any memories associated with her family or the village. In her reflection on her childhood, she says, 'You force yourself not to spare a thought of your father, the very idea of who fills you with despair' (*This Mournable Body* 2018: 41). Tambudzai's revulsion, especially towards her father, is a response to patriarchal structures that contributed to her oppression and subjugation.

Dangarembga uses avoidance to depict the elusive nature of trauma. Like the other women in the novel, as a response to the challenges of womanhood, Tambudzai resorts to silence. In trauma studies, silence can be viewed as a form of avoidance or numbing. When it comes to the women in Dangarembga's novel silence seems to be the only way to deal with their trauma in a patriarchal society such as Zimbabwe. For example, when Mako discloses that she was raped by Shine, Tambudzai and Bertha chose not to act or talk about the incident. Tambudzai narrates, 'As neither you nor Bertha wants to continue considering the cause of her grief, you say goodbye, telling Mako you will see her when she has herself under control' (*This Mournable Body* 2018: 57). Here, Mako and Tambudzai avoid talking about the experience, a form of behaviour that reveals the silencing of women through patriarchal systems. Both women know that whatever course of action they choose to take will not yield any positive result since the rape has been committed. Tambudzai realizes that there is nothing that the women can do about it so she uses avoidance as a coping mechanism. She says, 'At much the same moment you realize there is nothing you can do or say since it is already done' (*This Mournable Body* 2018: 57).

Throughout Dangarembga's novel, we see patterns of avoidance exhibited by the women. Mako's rape goes unaddressed because neither of the women can bear to talk about it for fear of having to confront the matter. This kind of avoidance is also portrayed through Christine and Lucia, who shun conversations about their war experiences. Avoidance and escapism function as coping mechanisms that the women in the novel use to shun the trauma that they suffer. However, given the fact that trauma does not go away unless confronted and dealt with, the cycle of trauma is perpetuated through avoidance and numbing portrayed in the novel. The danger of avoidance is that there is a continuous need to escape whenever the agents of trauma trigger the memory. An example of this is when

Christine asks Tambudzai if she had seen the blood in Mai Manyanga's living room.

Tambudzai says:

Now that she has spoken of it, you want to move again, to dart away from the scene you witnessed many weeks ago, before Christine came, in Mai Manyanga's living room. You want to leave Christine's truth, that once you have seen blood you are covered by it, behind in the heart of this war-woman. You saw the blood spurt from your sister's leg during the war, just after you had graduated from your uncle's mission, and you fled from then on. You kept fleeing from the sight all through your years at the Young Ladies' College of the Sacred Heart (*This Mournable Body* 2018: 71).

The above paragraph reveals how avoidance and escapism perpetuate the trauma in women. Here once again Tambudzai's response to the conversation that Christine has started is avoidance. She tries to forget the horrors of the past but the mention of blood by Christine evokes the memory of the event of the loss of Netsai's leg during the war. Tambudzai's narration reveals the powerful nature of the trauma that she has tried to escape all her life. Even though she tries to avoid the memories of the war, she does not quite manage to do so because the triggers of the memories of the war keep recurring. Her avoidance signifies her denial of the trauma of the event. Her conscious memory seems to oscillate between episodes of avoidance, escapism, and denialism. For example, after she assaults one of her students, she refuses to acknowledge what she has done. When Christine tells her what she has done after she is admitted to a mental institution, she says, 'A girl was nearly murdered? By you? You smile, refusing to take it in. Having no intention to believe such a thing, you fight and win against the perils of contemplation' (*This Mournable Body* 2018: 119). Tambudzai's denialism here serves as a way of evading the memory of her trauma. This could also be read as a way to avoid the responsibility of her actions. The "politics of denial" is raised by Janet Walker in her work *The Traumatic Paradox* (2003). According to Walker (2003:107):

...naysayers rely on a true/false binarism in which memory is regarded as an infallible entity or flawless record (to use a mechanical or digital metaphor), and apparent mistakes in memory are therefore construed as evidence of dissembling or of the absence of memory rather than of its inherent vicissitudes.

What Walker points out here is that there are various reasons to be taken into consideration when dealing with contemporary psychological theories of memory. Her notion is that although inconsistencies in memory may exist in trauma victims, it does not mean that the events remembered should be denied. In Tambudzai's mind, the beating of the girl didn't happen which reveals the absence of memory of the event. This lack of memory may be viewed in terms of what Caruth says about a memory that has not yet been fully integrated. Consequently, when Christine brings up the incident Tambudzai gets surprised by what her aunt is telling her. Her denialism points to the issues of the credibility of memory raised by trauma theorists. Tambudzai's conscious refusal to remember the event of the beating reveals what Brewin (2003:116) describes as the "disorder of memory". This notion is further elaborated on by Ehlers and Clark (2000:325) who assert that trauma memory is, 'poorly elaborated and inadequately integrated into its context in time, place, subsequent and previous information and other autobiographical memories'. Tambudzai's avoidance can be understood as a way of shunning the painful repetition of flashbacks of the trauma. Avoidance becomes a way to forget. When Nyasha advises Tambudzai to visit Elizabeth, the schoolgirl she beat up, she says, 'Sometimes forgetting is better than remembering when nothing can be done' (*This Mournable Body* 2018: 137). Tambudzai's statement suggests despair and feelings of helplessness. Her refusal to do the right thing when asked to visit the family of the girl she assaulted suggests that she is in denial of what happened and refuses to take responsibility for it. It seems she believes that the denial of the memory will erase the traumatic memory from her mind. In her response to Nyasha, she says, 'They want to forget too' (*This Mournable Body* 2018: 137).

In addition, Tambudzai's changing of the subject in her conversation with Dr. Winton can be viewed as an indication of avoidance of the trauma. When Dr. Winton asks her about Nhamo's death, she says, 'You divert her probing by launching into the story of your cousin Nyasha, your uncle's daughter' (*This Mournable Body* 2018: 106). Similarly, during the conversation, she says, 'You cause another distraction by telling Dr. Winton that in any case you did not see much of your cousin's illness as you moved from your uncle's mission after winning a scholarship to a prestigious multiracial college in Umtali, the Young Ladies' College of the Sacred Heart' (*This Mournable Body* 2018: 106). Here again, Tambudzai

consciously avoids the memories of the painful past. This reveals a pattern of avoidance seen throughout the narrative, resulting in a cluster of persistent hallucinations, visions, and intrusive memories. Although her avoidance backfires at every turn, her recovery comes through self-narration and her relationships with the other women.

What I find interesting is how Dangarembga uses multiple female voices in the novel to give credibility to the trauma suffered by women in Zimbabwe. The diversity of the female voices in the novel gives each one of them a responsibility to become secondary witnesses to another's trauma. For example, Nyasha serves as a witness to Tambudzai's childhood traumatic experiences and Tambudzai also plays the same role for her. Christine and Lucia become witnesses to each other's experiences during the liberation war. Tambudzai and Nyasha serve as secondary witnesses to the two aunts' trauma of the war. Christine also serves as a witness to the tragic life of Mai Manyanga and her evil sons fighting over an inheritance. Such juxtaposition of characters gives credibility to the stories that the women give testimony to. Together these women face the struggles of womanhood in Zimbabwe.

3.4 Negative alteration in cognition and mood

The American Psychiatric Association defines negative alteration in cognition and mood as a symptom cluster in PTSD which 'represents a myriad of feelings, from a persistent and distorted sense of blame of self or others to estrangement from others or markedly diminished interest in activities, to an inability to remember key aspects of the event' (*DSM-5* 2013: 358). Tambudzai exhibits a number of these symptoms that fall under the negative cognition and mood symptom cluster which I will try to map out in this section of the dissertation. While I have mentioned some of the indicators of PTSD present in Tambudzai in the preceding chapters, I will repeat some of the symptoms to reveal their interconnectedness. Her thoughts and her mood give evidence to her emotional state which is also echoed by other female characters in the novel. The morbid opening of Dangarembga's first novel, *Nervous Conditions* (1988) introduces the mood that is replicated throughout the entire trilogy, a narrative of multiple traumas, repetitiveness, and re-enactment of trauma. I will look at Tambudzai's mood caused by the determining events

of her trauma, such as Gertrude's abuse at the taxi rank, the incident with the schoolchild, the rape of Mako, and other previous traumatic events such as her brother's death. Her mood is determined by the psychological wounding that she lives with as she tries to make a living in the city of Harare. She suffers from persistent negative thoughts, overwhelming feelings of an identity crisis, worthlessness, and lack of purpose in her life. This can be noted when she narrates, 'The only objects you possess that point to the human being you were meant to be are your academic certificates' (*This Mournable Body* 2018: 85). This statement reveals the lack of sense of self-worth outside her academic achievements. Her struggles with identity and self-worth result in the psychological wounding that translates to malevolence and bitterness resulting from the blame of self and others. Her complicity and lack of empathy during Gertrude's attack at the taxi rank are a depiction of her malevolence and bitterness (*This Mournable Body* 2018: 27). Laing (1965:82) points out the regularity of certain moods in people:

Everyone is subject to a certain extent at one time or another to such moods of futility, meaninglessness, and purposelessness, but in schizoid individuals, these moods are particularly insistent. These moods rise from the fact that the doors of perception and/ or the gates of action are not in the command of the self but are being lived and operated by a false self.

Using Laing's notion, I will explore the characteristics of schizoid behaviour in Tambudzai to map out the symptoms of mood in the novel. Laing (1965:82) defines a schizoid as an individual, 'whose experience is split into two main ways: in the first place, there is a rent in his relation with his world and, in the second, there is a disruption of his relation with himself'. I would like to draw attention to the meaning of the term 'rent' used in Laing's definition which refers to a large tear in the fabric. It seems what Laing suggests is that a schizoid is someone whose emotions and thoughts are split in such a way that the person loses contact with the reality of self and others or even the broader reality of the world. Tambudzai's relation with the self or society evokes the mood of dissociation whereby the thinking self splits from the body. She exhibits symptoms of various disorders. Afifi et al (2010:102) point out the coexistence of multiple mental disorders, 'PTSD is also associated with the comorbidity of other mental health disorders, social behaviours, and physical

health problems'. In line with this, it seems clear that Tambudzai suffers from several mental health disorders, of which being a schizoid is one. Throughout the trilogy, her moods alternate between feelings of self-hatred, self-blame, and guilt. As mentioned previously, these feelings manifest through anger, resentment, and malevolent behaviours. Her self-hatred is so intense that at times she cannot look at her reflection in the mirror. After having a bath, she avoids looking at the mirror in the bathroom in fear of seeing herself. She narrates, 'You turn away, not wanting to see the lumbering shadow that is your reflection' (*This Mournable Body* 2018: 10). Tambudzai explicitly expresses her anxiety about having to look at herself in the mirror. This is a powerful portrayal of a woman who cannot bear her physicality.

Through the persistent feelings of shame and self-criticism, Tambudzai struggles to distinguish between what is real and not. It is as if her negative thoughts about herself go unchecked, resulting in self-negation. For example, her contemplation of suicide when she is isolated and with no one to share her struggles with (*This Mournable Body* 2018: 41). As someone who has suffered discrimination and oppression Tambudzai experiences trauma which manifests through feelings of self-blame, estrangement, and powerlessness which set the mood of dissociation in the novel. Her residence at the hostel reveals her dissociation, exhibited through alienation from the other girls with whom she is constantly at odds. This friction between her and the other girls creates a hostile environment which further pushes her towards feelings of self-hatred and resentment. This is evidenced through her response to Gertrude's appeal for help after she is attacked at the taxi rank. During the incident, Tambudzai exhibits spiteful behaviour and she goes as far as deriving pleasure from seeing Gertrude experience physical pain during the attack. She says, 'You do not shrink back as one mind in your head wishes. Instead, you obey the other, push forward. You want to see the shape of pain, to trace out its arteries and veins, to rip out the pattern of its capillaries from the body' (*This Mournable Body* 2018: 25). Not only does Tambudzai derive pleasure from watching Gertrude being sexually assaulted by a mob at the taxi rank, but she also participates in the abuse. Her tendency toward violence is revealed through complicit behaviour. It seems her violence manifests as a symptom of her trauma. Her violence can be noted from earlier in her childhood where she is a young girl in the village, and she regularly fights with her brother Nhamo. This is a trait which she carries with her to high school

where she is constantly embroiled in fighting with other girls. She fights with Ntombi several times and enters into quarrels with other girls regularly also. It appears violence follows her throughout her life and it shapes and sets the mood for the events that lead to her nervous breakdown.

The alienation and estrangement that Tambudzai experiences result in the mood of futility, purposelessness, and nihilism. This can be noted when she lives at Mai Manyanga's where she is a recluse. She narrates, 'At other times, you wonder how you can suppress your growing feelings of doom' (*This Mournable Body* 2018: 40). Tambudzai's reclusive life can be read as a response to her trauma which is exhibited through avoidance of building close relationships because of shame, betrayal, and abandonment. This is evidenced where she says, 'You have shed friends since university because you could not keep up with their lifestyle and didn't want to be laughed at' (*This Mournable Body* 2018: 42). Her fear of building close relationships could also be because of the fear of loss, as discussed earlier. All these negative perceptions about self and others create a mood of desperation and defeatism. This leads her to self-condemnation which results in suicidal thoughts. While at Mai Manyanga she expresses the idea of ending her life, 'You are concerned you will start thinking of ending it all, having nothing to carry on for: no home, no job, no sustaining family bonds' (*This Mournable Body* 2018: 41). Tambudzai's words make concrete the experience of solitude, estrangement, and alienation. It is clear from the statement above that the narrator, although she is self-alienated, still values social relations. The absence of family bonds and a job causes a sense of purposelessness in her. Consequently, she starts to blame herself for it. This is evidenced when she moves to Mai Manyanga where she experiences episodes of self-reflection. For example, when she reflects on her resignation from the advertising agency, she says, 'You torture yourself, in the early days of your stay at Mai Manyanga's, with the idea that you have no one but yourself to blame for leaving your copywriting position' (*This Mournable Body* 2018: 42). Although Tambudzai is cognizant of the oppressive and segregative working conditions at the advertising agency, she cannot help but blame herself for leaving the agency.

The theme of self-blame draws attention to the root of Tambudzai's trauma which is revealed in the novel after she experiences a nervous breakdown. The source of her trauma

is revealed in the scene where she is in a therapy session with Dr. Winton who asks her the reason for her admission to the mental institution. Following her response, Dr. Winton says to Tambudzai, 'Guilt. Following an event seen as a sacrifice. You feel guilty about the death of your brother' (*This Mournable Body* 2018: 106). From this observation, it can be argued that Dangarembga's *This Mournable Body* (2018) can also be read as a narrative of the burden of guilt. It seems that a big part of Tambudzai's trauma is embedded in the guilt about her brother Nhamo's death. Although she herself has suffered numerous traumatic events her trauma can be attributed in part to 'survivor's guilt'. Her guilt is submerged and manifests through self-loathing and self-condemnation as portrayed in the novel. At times it is as if she is punishing herself for something which she cannot fully articulate. Dangarembga's novel draws attention to the trauma's complexity and its mushrooming effects, through the use of the survivor turned perpetrator motif. Although the theme of the 'survivor's guilt' is fascinating and points to the further dynamics of trauma, I will not pursue it further in this dissertation. However, I contend that Tambudzai's character seems to assume the role of the victim and perpetrator interchangeably to drive the narrative of trauma in Dangarembga's novel. The coexistence of these dynamic transitions makes up the character of Tambudzai.

From the first pages of the novel, it is evident that she is not a hero at all. She is not a likable character. One can argue that, although she is a victim of the numerous social injustices, she is her own worst enemy. It seems that to her, she is the only victim of these social injustices. She fails to recognize the struggles of the other women in the narrative. To her, everyone is a rival. We see this, for instance, when Dr. Winton asks her how Nyasha recovered from depression. Instead of answering the question she somehow makes it personal and she responds, 'Nyasha always manages... She always wins and gets the best of everything. Even her birth' (*This Mournable Body* 2018: 106). Her response serves as an indication of her competitiveness and jealousy that she has for her cousin. Her jealous behaviour becomes clearer when Nyasha returns from Germany. When the two cousins reunite she is quick to point out Nyasha's mistakes, choices, and shortcomings. This shift of focus from herself to others can be attributed to Tambudzai's feelings of inadequacy. Her inadequacy can be noted in her conversation with Dr. Winton when she says, 'They never see me. It doesn't make a difference who they are. Nobody sees me' (*This Mournable Body* 2018: 107). It is

through the vocalization of her inadequacy that Tambudzai's mood is revealed. It can be linked in part to the socio-economic challenges that she faces. Because she has a strong liking for material things, the lack of access to them affects her perceptions and her mood. For example, her attachment to her pair of Lady Di's (shoes) and then later shopping spree that follows the job at the travel agency give her a sense of fulfilment. In the first chapters of the novel, she struggles to make ends meet and her mood consists of self-pity, sadness, and gloom. When she finally gets a job and can access material goods her mood lifts somewhat. She says:

It is an odd, not entirely pleasant, sensation to walk down First Street Mall after so many years, towards Edgars.... As you hold up one garment and struggle into another, the changing room mirror hints that not all is lost as you approach middle age...All but trembling with excitement over spending so much money on goods that are not actually necessary but merely desired... (*This Mournable Body* 2018: 91).

For the first time in her life, we see her mood lift as she expresses the pleasure she gets from a shopping spree she goes on. Although this positive mood is short-lived, the mood of the narrative remains light-hearted, breaking the cycle of repetitive suffering witnessed throughout the novel. After the shopping, Tambudzai remains in high spirits as she tries to reintegrate herself back into society and find fulfilment in her teaching role. This is noted in the scene where she narrates, 'Mollified by our intervention, you unlock your office in a calmer state of mind. Following assembly, you spend the early part of the morning grading examination papers. It is an enjoyable task as you feel you exhibit considerable benevolence in allocating your students their grades. Completing the work well before tea time, you enjoy a sense of control' (*This Mournable Body* 2018: 91). Here we see a different kind of Tambudzai, a benevolent and gleeful person, different from the one we have seen since the first novel, *Nervous Conditions* (1988). Her fixation with her victimization seems to subside here as she gains some financial freedom and reintegrates herself back into society. However, the mood of the novel quickly changes as she becomes involved in the affairs of her students who call her names and make fun of her. Since this is a work of self-narration the mood of the novel reflects that of the narrator. This is clear in her response to the students' misbehaviour as she becomes motivated to punish her students.

Faced with the demeaning behaviour of her students, Tambudzai resorts to using violence as a means to discipline them. On one occasion she loses her temper and beats one of them. The beating of the student seems to trigger an underlying trauma in her that results in a nervous breakdown. The aftermath of the event is her admission to a mental institution. At the mental institution, Tambudzai exhibits disorders ranging from psychotic behaviours to hallucinatory states which affect cognitive and intellectual capacity. A significant manifestation of alteration in cognitive abilities is witnessed during the time she is at the mental institution. For example, when she wakes up at there for the first time she struggles to make associations with things and fails to respond to the person trying to interact with her. She narrates, 'At once you realize you should have made another response' (*This Mournable Body* 2018:101). Here we see an example of her cognitive functions falter as she struggles with not knowing how to respond to a greeting. When the nurse proceeds to ask her what her name is she manages to say it but struggles to remember her surname and the date (*This Mournable Body* 2018:102). Tambudzai's struggle to remember her surname and date, including her response to the greetings, reveals the blockage to cognition and delayed responses. It seems that her cognitive functions cease to operate at an optimal level due to the shock of the trauma of the event. As discussed earlier, this dissociation from reality is underscored through experiences of intense hallucinations. While being inspected by the nurse she experiences hallucinations that distort her sense of reality, making her doubt herself. For example, in her conversation with the nurse at the mental institution, she is surprised to learn that she is in a hospital. She says, "'Hospital!' Both question and answers" (*This Mournable Body* 2018:103). Her articulation of the lack of knowledge reveals the cognitive challenges that she suffers after the nervous breakdown. Here the trauma of the events is portrayed through the nervous breakdown itself, which is aggravated by PTSD symptoms such as hallucinations, depression, and impaired cognition.

Through the use of self-narration, Dangaremba portrays numerous symptoms of PTSD listed by the *DSM* to depict the trauma suffered by the protagonist and other female characters. Of course, some of the trauma symptoms I pointed out in this dissertation overlap with other mental disorders which opens up a new subject to be explored. It is through these

symptoms that Tambudzai's trauma can be understood and fully articulated. The symptoms of negative alterations in cognition and mood are part of the multi-layered textual portrayal of trauma in Dangarembga's novel. Tambudzai's depressive mood and blocked cognitive functions are symptomatic of the trauma that she has suffered throughout her life. Her psychological suffering is portrayed through the expression of the trauma in symptoms such as hallucinations, depression, dissociation. Dangarembga's narrative reveals how traumatized subjects enter a cyclical state of trauma whereby the past continues to affect the present. This repetition of trauma can be linked to what psychologists call traumatic amnesia whereby the victim has no memory of the event. Pederson (2014) points out the dangers of the traumatic event that is not fully recorded in the memory. He writes, 'The traumatic memory can be frightening for victims; if such forgetting is possible, an ominous memory lurks behind every bad mood, and the return of the repressed is a menacing possibility' (2014:338). The traumatic amnesia experienced by Tambudzai after the nervous breakdown serves as an indication of unregistered memories of a traumatic event.

In her 'Introduction' in *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social* (2007) Clough points out how trauma warps the time of the victims, making it hard for them to distinguish if they were living in the past or present. Clough (2007:13) writes, 'In psychoanalytic terms, trauma makes the past and the future meet without there being a present. The future is collapsed into the past as the past overwhelms the present—all this usually taken as pathological in the psychological sense.' Clough's notion points to challenges that the victims face trying to make cognitive or emotional sense of the traumatic experience. This dissociation can result in the victims experiencing PTSD symptoms such as traumatic amnesia, moods, or even entering a depressive state. Consequently, the victim goes through his/her life with gaps of unintegrated, fragmented, and conflicting memories. This results in the dangers of the repetition of the trauma through compulsion and acting out. Thus, Tambudzai's trauma emanating from the violence of the war, and her physical fights with Ntombi and Nhamo, can be linked to her violently beating one of her students and the nervous breakdown that follows. Through the portrayal of altered negative cognitions and moods, Dangarembga renders how trauma is experienced by the protagonist and other female characters.

CONCLUSION

In this dissertation, I set out to explore the effects of trauma resulting from historical injustices such as colonialism, racism, and discrimination based on gender. I also looked at the implications of trauma caused by social injustices such as patriarchy and the marginalization of black women as depicted in Dangarembga's novel *This Mournable Body* (2018). I mapped out the evidence of trauma through exploring memory, historical and social injustices experienced by black women. I contextualized the novel by looking at historical events such as the liberation war, and how they shaped the narrative of the protagonist. I explored these historical events to reveal the interconnectedness, transmissibility, and heredity of trauma. Recognizing the conjunction between memory and history enabled me to situate the trauma in Zimbabwean society at both the individual and collective level. Dangarembga's novel reveals the formative impact of the collective and individual traumatic experiences of black women. Lastly, I delineated the symptoms of PTSD given by *DSM*: reexperiencing, avoidance, and negative alteration in cognition and mood to reveal the evidence of trauma suffered by the protagonist in the novel.

Dangarembga's novel explores the relationship between individual and collective trauma. At times the two seem to be synonymous. The novel depicts how the personal struggles of the individual cannot be separated from the collective. There is evidence of friction between the individual and collective trauma in the text, whereby the collective trauma of the nation of Zimbabwe threatens to subvert the individual trauma of black women such as Tambudzai. The conflict between the two can be noted through Tambudzai's relationship with her family. She and her family experience the violence of war together but what follows is a struggle of reconciling individual and collective trauma. While the war is experienced collectively there are distinct personal experiences that the characters are subjected to, for example, her sister's stepping on a landmine at Morari and her leg being blown off. This takes place during an event when Babamukuru has been summoned to Morari to face accusations of being a traitor and is beaten by a group of men known as VanaMukoma. During this event, Babamukuru and Nestai suffer horrifying experiences that cannot be

viewed solely as individual trauma but also collective. As hard as it to experience these events it is just as hard to witness them happen to loved ones. Thus, the observers of these two events are psychologically affected and suffer the brunt of the trauma of witnessing. The trauma of these incidents is experienced at both the collective and individual levels, thus revealing the complexities of trauma that lurks in societies in Zimbabwe.

In the novel, trauma is multidirectional, historical, and collective as much as it is individual. History in the text functions as the site for the trauma where all its actors, colonialism, race, class, and gender are situated. The novel is written with a conscious attention to self-narration, language and gender issues. It depicts the psychological effects of the struggle for survival for women in a place riddled with historical and social injustices. In the reading of the novel, one becomes aware of the continuous shifting of perceptions of what it means to be a woman in Zimbabwe. Exploring how black women are marginalized through depersonalization points to Dangarembga's feminist agenda in the struggle for gender equality. Self-narration is an integral part of Tambudzai's story as it gives the reader a personal account of the experience of the silencing of black women. Dangarembga's stance is the view of history as an obstacle that needs to be dealt with. The heroine of her novel is burdened with the wrongs of the past and is engaged in a quest to change that status quo and forge a new path for herself and other black women. This is true for Tsitsi Dangarembga herself who has used her own voice to stand up against social injustices that black women suffer in Zimbabwe. Through telling Tambudzai's story, Dangarembga gives voice to women traumatized by these injustices. Self-narration becomes the tool to confront the trauma of the past in order to bring about catharsis and healing.

The novel's representation of history reveals the systematic oppression of black women and how it is perpetuated in postcolonial Zimbabwe. Dangarembga exposes the multifaceted and complex social structures that impact the livelihood of black women. There is no shortage of gendered oppression, marginalization, and violence against women in the novel. The novel exhibits the psychological scarring caused by these injustices that black women are subjected to due to their gender. Black women are depicted as the most likely subjects of the injustices of the legacies of colonialism. These historical injustices are translated into social injustices through the political and economic dominance of men in power.

Tambudzai's struggles with racism and male chauvinism at the advertising agency and later to find a job exemplify the gendered oppression in the novel. Similarly, she suffers from the injustices of colonialism at the convent as a young girl, an experience which leaves a stain in her mind. The patriarchal and racially divided city of Harare serves as a platform where the legacies of colonialism play out. Harare is depicted as a city that is losing its colonial glory, not only through dilapidation but also because of corrupted systems of governance. This also contributes to the frustrations of the society, leading to a hard and at times brutal struggle for survival. These frustrations are translated into violence which is often directed at black women as we see in the case of Gertrude at the taxi rank. Similarly, Mai Manyanga is attacked by her sons over the inheritance. The trauma of these events is evidenced through the tension in the city as depicted in the scene where a mob gathers outside Mai Moestabi's boutique store and also during the visit to the village where Tambudzai's mother suffers a nervous breakdown.

Tambudzai experiences multiple traumas throughout her entire life, some of which stem from the cultural subjugation of women to institutionalized racism and systemic patriarchy. As an adult, she has everything that a black Zimbabwean woman needs to get herself away from the life in the village to the suburbs of the city. She has studied, kept her school grades high, and strived to be on her best behaviour throughout her years at the convent, and as an adult working for the advertising agency. Her attempts to achieve self-realization and gain economic freedom are undermined by forces that are beyond her capabilities. Her efforts to become what she refers to as 'mak[ing] anything at all of yourself' (*This Mournable Body* 2018: 41) are thwarted by her race, age, and gender. At times, even her educational qualification seems to be a disadvantage in that it gives her false hope that she has a chance to get a job but the social structures are not malleable for a black woman. This is partly because of the systematic subjugation of black women in Zimbabwe but also because of the changing job market milieu driven by globalization. Tambudzai says, 'Your age prevents you from obtaining another job in the field, for creative departments are now occupied by young people with Mohawk haircuts and rings in eyebrows, tongues and navels' (42). In her physical description of the young people taking over creative jobs, there is an insinuation of the changing market trends inspired by western media culture. It is clear that the young people she describes are strongly influenced by western culture, therefore

they bring with them western perspectives and standards into the creative sectors. Consequently, the creative sectors do away with older people such as herself. Therefore, it can be said that age can also be added to the factors that contribute to the systematic oppression and subjugation of black women. Dangarembga brings together three significant factors, age, race, and gender, which contribute immensely to the social injustices faced by women in Zimbabwe. Discrimination based on race and gender proves to be a strong catalyst in the division of society, a force which Tambudzai cannot evade even with the best education money can buy.

Self-reflexivity is of great significance in the text in that it reveals how the trauma of the mind is translated into the body. Through the notion of affect that I discussed above, it can be understood how trauma can be situated in the body. In her foreword, Patricia Clough (2007) points out the connection between the mind and the body. She writes, '...the affective labor highlights not only the common qualities their products share but also the fact that in all these activities the body and the mind are simultaneously engaged, and that similarly reason and passion, intelligence and feeling, are employed together'. The metaphor of the female body as a source of mental suffering carries a strong significance in the novel. This is also implied by the title of the novel, which alludes to the female body being wretched because of its subjection to social injustices. In Dangarembga's novel, the female body serves as the site of the trauma of being gendered and racialized in discriminatory ways. The text thematizes race and gender, revealing them to be the source of the trauma suffered by black women in Zimbabwe. Through the portrayal of women like Christine, Lucia, and Nestai, Dangarembga reveals how women's contributions in the liberation struggle are undermined through the suppression of female voices in societies. Christine, Lucia, and Nestai served in the liberation struggle but their participation is hardly acknowledged, let alone compensated for by the government. Tambudzai's sister, Netsai, serves as a good example of the political skullduggery of the ruling party in Zimbabwe which has failed to recognize and compensate her for her participation in the armed struggle and her amputated leg. The discontentment caused by this is expressed by Tambudzai. She says:

Your sister is hopping around, going *hoopla hoopla* on her one leg, saying she doesn't care who hears her and talking loudly about the fight she is engaged in with ruling party officials

to obtain a place on the party list that will result in a dark-brown leg being imported for her from Mozambique (*This Mournable Body* 2018: 262).

The above paragraph reveals the depths of the corrupted political system which undermines the participation of women in the liberation war. This systematic oppression of black women can also be noted in Christine and Lucia, who fought in the war and experience similar challenges. These challenges contribute to the existing psychological scarring from the war.

Dangarembga's narrative tells of a tragic story of loss, depersonalization, alienation, and the identity crisis faced by black women in Zimbabwe. She reveals the shared suffering of black women through collective experiencing and collective/cultural trauma. In the text, trauma becomes an all-encompassing factor that brings together the women in the narrative to share their stories for the sake of coming to terms with their trauma and healing.

Dangarembga's novel is a tour de force that serves an important socio-cultural and political function in its scrutiny of the corrupted social fabric and political landscape in Zimbabwe. The story of Tambudzai is not only that of loss and suffering but also of courage, tenacity, and the struggle to heal through community support. For example, when she is admitted to a mental institution her cousin, Nyasha, and her aunts rally together to support her. They participate in her healing through caregiving, emotional support, and in comforting her. Here the social relations that Tambudzai has with her female relatives trump the absence of economic resources. Here, too, the idea of the spirit of *unhu* expressed in *The Book of Not* (2006) is evoked again. Nyasha takes in Tambudzai and encourages her to reach out to Elizabeth's parents to break the cycle of trauma and perhaps move on from the horrors of the past. Towards the end of the novel, Tambudzai takes the step towards atonement and visits Elizabeth's family to ask for forgiveness. This is a major step towards healing. Although this does not turn out as expected there are echoes of forgiveness from the family even though not explicitly expressed. Elizabeth's family wants to forget about what happened and move on with their lives. In that regard, Tambudzai's narrative can be seen as an individual's journey of anguish and expiation.

Tambudzai's healing begins with the acceptance of herself and others through forgiveness and reconciliation with her family. She acknowledges her complicity in the perpetuation of trauma through the beating of the student and works to change that by confronting the Chinembiris and asks for forgiveness. We also see her step up and take responsibility for her mother when she experiences an episode of hysteria. By doing so she takes on the role of being a mother, exhibiting her compassionate side that we had not seen in her throughout the entire trilogy. This signals a complete change of perspective and attitude and letting go of the resentment she has for her family and her mother. After the incident, Tambudzai resigns from the agency and courageously delivers the letter herself. At this stage, there is a lot of humility portrayed in her. As the events reach a climax, she takes a job at her aunt's security company as a cleaner and tea-girl. This seems to be the turning point for her, signalling a new start. The novel ends with an observation by Christine who tells Tambudzai, 'your education is not only in your mind anymore...now your knowledge is also in your body, every bit of it, including your heart' (*This Mournable Body* 2018: 271). This statement carries deep sentiments and it underlines the psychological and emotional transformation that Tambudzai has undergone. Her transformation is recognizable and commendable, as noted by Christine. Consequently, Dangarembga's novel goes beyond trauma to include transformation and healing.

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