

Busisiwe MAHLANGU**Birthmarks**

My mother's mother has done this suffe1ing for my mother
My mother has done this suffering for me
This is how I inherit a scar

Let the night

Instead of your mother
feeding the fire
that burns you
& tells you of your ugly
She cautions the doubt in the air
& dots your skin
that is swollen
from lack of velvet touch
She cradles you to sleep
& watches over
to beat the ghosts
that keep you frightened
She beats the air
There's no one else to tackle
as the nightmare rises
to your face
There's no one to clutch
the end of the belt
that has raised you
She beats the air
until she is beating herself
& the words
she has used
to keep
you scared
She eats the guilt
undoes the thrashes
of your childhood
Everything bad
you've done
doesn't make you
anymore.
You are not the one

at the end of the rod today
You are not being screamed at
Your back rests on the bed
& as you sleep
Your mother
stifles bad language
out of her throat
You do not witness
this undoing,
that cracks
her in the middle
& forces one half
to taunt at the past
& another
to mould a future
in the dark
You do not witness
her
or the violence
choking her
You do not
because tonight
you sleep
& let someone fight for you
even if they're fighting themselves
to keep you
safe.

I wear mother's bones

I fit mama's clothes when she goes to work.
I fit into the dances she had in them,
into the panic of walking the streets at night,
into the making of a home that would not hold

Her favourite skirt is striped black and white,
the lines pointing to her feet
like a whisper saying she must
run.

Her favourite blouse is blue
she was beautiful in it
before it became a month
swallowing her ugly along with her light

This one outfit
excused from scraping the floors
and raising white children
Saved for Sunday's gospel
and prayers begging God for an answer

To look like mama is to look like sacrifice:
only a corner in the room
while baba fills the whole house with himself

The mirror says i am drowning in a skirt
i twirl in amazement
mama's life is so beautiful i can die in it
if death could tell me what made her laugh.

Made her happy with less.
made her stay when she could run
what made her wear a blouse to watch herself drown?

I want to tweak the sides with a needle and thread
but she will know,
that I wear her life when she goes

Girl is prayer

They say to the girl, your body is a temple. Girl transforms her body into a temple. They say the holy spirit lives in you. Girl holds up the door and lets the spirit in. They tell her, you are not your own. Girl throws herself on the ground and begs them to accept her flesh as sacrifice.

Temple is church. Church is body. Body is blood. Holy communion. When they break into the church, split the body open and drink the blood - girl is asked when did she stop being a temple? She counts the times she believed less and cuts a line into her skin. She sees the blood and wonders where the holy spirit was when they ripped her bones apart.

A building collapses to its feet. The unraveling looks like the priests in their perfect wear. It sounds like a sermon forced into a nonbeliever. It looks like the bible pages next to starving children. But what is said - about priests turning small girls into temples they break into - is that everyone should be forgiven. Girl swallows her wound and forgives.

Wind

I see my mother in the mirror
Her face changes into mine

I am searching for a voice in the wind,
a girl I lost
while learning to breathe.
There are names roaming in the air,
waiting to be called home.

I see my mother in the mirror
My face grows into hers

In this body,
I have travelled places I don't remember
but my scars are the maps that know the ache
Joy cannot be written out of a corner
But in the outline of my poems
I am making a face and she is smiling.

We laugh until a girl cracks out
with a name on fire

In the garden of men:

A weed

Mama shows me the dili hiding underneath her nails
seeds she collected from the sweat of men
She must do this work,
labour for a man's love
only to receive absence as payment
The last man loved to plant,
Mama grows vegetables to convince herself she doesn't need him anymore.
next to the tomato garden in our backyard
mama is growing a boy and he stands scarecrow in the field
he becomes the fear and the afraid
mama is growing a son and she feeds him only breast milk
he earns his strength from the heali of a woman
and mama thinks he cam lot betray the place he comes from
She doesn't know he goes around beating girls
Look at all that mama is crafting,
In the same soil that I've buried dead roses as bodies,
From the times I did not die well.
I think this place is a cemetery but we call it a garden
The end of life and the beginning
Mama is no saviour
she is here for a different resurrection
throws all her back in sacrifice for better gold

in harvest season
we have all that we nurtured/
from each meal/
we get Adam's rib to build a broken woman up

To water

I am drying out on a sidewalk
a paddle mapping out an end.
disappearing

is
a
slow
journey

I envy bad water,
that chooses drought
in the face of a flower.

Father, teach me how to be vapour -
to walk out without leaving my name
hanging inside a mouth waiting for my return

Undoing a river

I begin each morning
stretching my anns
counting parts of me
that escaped night.
My body in salt water
but nothing can heal it.
I lay my body on the floor
and start fixing
I pull it out of the water
I dig it out of a wound
It bleeds out on the mat
and I say, it's not your fault
the pain swallows you.
Every morning I check
my body for intruders,
I dig into the sores
make a difficult place to live in.
All this medicine made
my body strange,
All the prayers made it sink
My body belongs to anyone
trying to save it -
My mama and her church,
so I let them have it,
with their prayers and salt water.
But my body makes love
when it belongs to me
I know a body makes love
even when it is sick.
The undoing of a river
is a waterfall.
A body makes love.

Colours in the black rainbow

We did not have colours for painting when we were kids.
We had charcoal from bums and chalk from old ceilings.

Black and white. Mamelodi. 2002. 6 years old into Sarafina singing,
'freedom, is coming' with grey hands and dusty feet running

Drawing black rainbows on the ground and chasing after
people driving by in their cars, throwing dust over our artworks

We had black and white cuddled in the cave of our hands
carried democracy in our baton tongues, learning the word

apartheid. did not understand the relief our parents had
that we were this learning pain by theory, by distance, by bloodline

we drew the people. outlined with black. faces and bodies
brooding white. black for a shadow. white for a truth.

black boys in the outline. black girls in the outline.
drawing a rainbow for a country finding promising peace

we knew the colours and their boundaries
hoping that we belong somewhere.

Curfew on my mother's dreams

First generation.

A revolution doesn't ask for permission.
On campus, a grass of rubber bullet shells grows
not for our safety,
but for the protection of the institution -
Against angry gyrating students
burning buildings,
stripping themselves naked,
upsetting school

First generation.

I am ordered to show identity at every turn;
for the protection of the institution.
Police shoot their commands
into flesh
after we are jailed for singing
our agony into the sky
the institution is safe, sir.

Invincible and willless to the brutality
that it erases history with ease -
Shut its doors at our mothers' hopes for us
Drew a line at our fathers' sweat.
The education we were promised
can transform lives
has us gagged and stripped away
beaten and shot at
jailed and written off
But we are here to collect it
We are not going to accept it with its spikes
It will be dismembered
Until all the weeds are pulled out
It will take years
And languages of protest you did not know exist

because a revolution doesn't ask for permission.
Draw another line again and ask us not to cross it
We will tear the limits until only oceans remain

Set me free

Here sister, take my tongue
and run to the light,
be careful of the blood,
I had to break my voice free
My story will be carried by your feet

Where I end. You begin,
where you end. A small girl begins

Here sister, take my eyes
they carry terror in them,
Do not be afraid,
These are warning shots of the evil -
a collection of sins performed against us
but I want you to know that beyond the torture
my dreams are burning the darkness

I wish you capture this light
because it was made for your eyes.

Here sister, take my ears with you
They are a well of screams
They know all the waiting I've done to be seen.
They are an ocean of songs sung in whispers.
When you reach an open field,
sing the song of your happiness
with all the breath inside you,

I will listen for your freedom
and I will know that somewhere
the future is kind to us.