

Inherited Fear

So I did it. I let my body bulge in all the places I forgot it could make room
I felt it hallow then fill up. Packed it tight back into old
jeans and short dresses, I did the unthinkable. I stayed up all night
with nothing but the flicker of a candle braving my fears. What if
I failed to bridle this animal? What if it tried to eat everything; our
house, my voice, his vows. I prayed dizzy, doubtful prayers to three
different gods; of restraint, of gluttony, of emptiness. I called my
other mother in tears. I blocked my father. I made tally marks on
the walls to count all my new siblings, their wives and kids, the new
world I had to fit into. I pressed the grapes, they made more
room. The parents made a fuss about washing the veil to send home
little ones. I stressed about the bank and the job and the life. So
when they say women let themselves go, I wish to show them
everything I'm trying to hold with my hands.

Adrift At The Immigration Office

you're being unladylike again
 crying in parking lots
 in traffic at the immigration office
 migrating from one name to another
a little lost in the white sea of paperwork
 and numbers
 they want your parents'
 confirmation of your belonging to someone
your person's to stand adjacent
 to your personhood
 doesn't this take you back
 to *patlelo* playing *mmantlwane*
the fluid of movement from mother
 to child and sometimes father
when the boys were busy playing
 rough
 and someone had to fill that gap
 and isn't that how little girls have learnt
resourcefulness filling empty spaces to not pass on
 joy on imagination
 on a functional world
 isn't that how mothers have learnt
 to keep it moving
to not pass on family on life
 keep it

moving but here you are again halted
by the lady behind the glass
lipstick murderously red eyes listening impatiently
for the whereabouts of your father
if he is dead *point me to his grave*
you say not in that way
if he is alive *show me where*
in the house he sits
you say not like that either
or you say he is home
though nothing
in the world of government
documentation acknowledges that
you're a woman now you're resourceful
you say it's fine
i'll leave it, my mother's name
i'll leave it so as not to
pass on certainty
on affirmation
on belonging
though this too makes you a boat
adrift

Unbeliever -After Vuyelwa Maluleke's Not Beautiful

i know i am only the beautiful i have built like a nest
with scraps of eccentric beauty and holy rebellion
i know you mean well but when you call from that small village
afraid i have forgotten the mirror of your face and therefore mine
by yourself you are a frontline of an army i care little about
your talk is ammunition born of fear and i have been afraid too
to come outside this full bodied and short sighted
been afraid to *be* while the christian gaze blazes on
i am alright mama i know there are very serious voices questioning
your motherhood and you look at this colorful pierced
mosaic of a daughter and think *i am failing* i weep but not for me;
my ugly is not beautiful still i am finding it a home
but you ma when you look at the mirror plain as scripture
demands women to be are you a believer? in that village
of rockery and thirst do you think its gospel sees you?

Duplex: Old Photograph

I met my father at the station
He was buying me lunch-a subconscious goodbye

I've said goodbye to men offering me lunch
For our first date; saved us both the pain

On a first date, save some of your pain
It never quiet heals that first sin

I was my parent's first not so quiet sin
All their loving is an attempt at sanctity

All love is an attempt at sanctity though
sometimes, just guilt's hackneying hold

Sometimes I am hackneyed by guilt, so I hold
A picture of my father and I to my chest

In a picture I keep atop my chest of drawers
I am meeting my father at the station

How To Use Public Transport

1. Wait. If you really have to get anywhere at all, you're going to have to wait. Under a tree, or next to an electric pole on a queue with strangers. Your destination is a thing impatience cannot grant you so, wait. Unless you're going for an interview, or a first date with a girl you very well knew was out of your league. Unless your sister is sick and the pharmacy where you mean to get the vitamins and Feroglobin is closing.

2. When the kombi finally arrives, you will waddle on gratefully to take the last seat, before a man with a beard longer than you had to wait packs himself tight between you and the door, practically sits on your lap. When he stretches his arm to steady himself, stewing in his own sweat, you will want to mention the unmentionable odors wafting like steam from his underarms and mouth when he says, 'Oh, sorry mama.' But you will remember your sister of course, and the pharmacist's doors toying with the idea of shutting, you will swallow your discomfort.

3. Passengers can be trigger happy for chatter. Too bad if you'd really like to be quiet right now. Too bad if you're not the small talk type because the woman behind you keeps tapping you on some, '*Hee, mama, wena* what would you do, if you were a man and your woman didn't want to give you some?' They are stretching to lightness a weekend's happening where a man un-alived his wife for God knows what. I mean what do they ever do if for? If not for their smallness? A woman old enough to be your mother is making a net of her voice to collect all ill rationale against the woman, she says, she herself has been married for years and gives her husband everything. Says her husband might have wells from which to drink but he knows where the ocean is. Says women these days think marriage is a podium to step on to equal men so for her the woman who is not here deserved it. Her audience amens her heresies and the kombi driver, who cannot be trusted to form his own opinion is for sure pleased.

4. When the kombi approaches your stop, you will clear your voice quietly, practice saying, '*O eme mo stopong*,' under breath for too long before '*o nkemele hoo!*' rolls off your mouth to save you from missing the stop. It comes naturally, and while the driver might throw your change on your hand because they all hate, '*O eme hoo*', at least you're by the pharmacist's doors. At least your sister will have her medication for today. At least you still have your limps though a hip threatens dislocation, that man really sat on you the entire trip.

The Girl In The Photograph

If I look at it the other way

You're just a girl my love
And I cannot exist in that page
I wryly look at you to see
A being so human her faltering
Could not bring the world to its knees
And so cannot bring mine to a standstill
You're motherless in most of the pages I've read
You're reading the bible in most of the pictures you have
I picture you falling in love with someone else
Someone who is not I
latches on to you and so you cannot get to me sooner
Soon as a concept is obsessed with immediacy
I've been alive long enough to know that
nothing longed for will be granted at that breath
Yet I pine for the girl I've seen
in a photograph in a school uniform
Un-pregnant and unafraid
I want her, I want all of her
Still water before the trouble of me came along

Alternatively

She doesn't leave the village

No marriage of her mother others her

Though the man is not hers to call father and he makes sure

no confusion blurs that

She still has her first daughter

I need that girl

I come years later

After she graduates and works somewhere

where the pay makes more than sense for the hours

She never goes to that old star location

Never meets the man I love who doesn't love her

And so cannot love me

She has me somehow because how else will I meet my first best friend

With whom I fight the most but we work it out the best

She never meets the man I love because my mother never did

In this imagined picture the man who fathers us is a blur

I don't know yet if he stays or stomps his foot down

To mean no one leaves

In any case us three, our faces are vividly radiant with happy

And if he stomps his foot one more time

we all walk out laughing

Our whole lives on our backs

You can't blame me this is the only life I have known

And no, I don't have to give him a name

Let him earn it if he has to

I've already done much reserving space for him here

And what has he done?

Besides sit and be

imagined

In The End The Woman Leaves

In this story I am too tired to unlearn, the one in which I forget my first language and my grandmother asks my mother to find another lover, I am five years going on thirty and already have a mouth full of things. Stories, birds and places.

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Stories about reckless loss and defiant love.

Birds flying out of my mouth like my life is a trick.

Flying to places I wish to be home

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In this story my father is plagued by a nameless disease that crawls on his skin and names him mad man with its itch. He is sick but what's that to a wandering eye? The man still commands the paint brush delicately to picture white people's faces on commission. Because of this, some days we can afford hotel dinners and cool afternoons by the pool.

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In the same story, the hotel visits and expensive gold watches are little liars, here to quell mother's discomfort. In this story I am eight and already know the disposable affection fathers give when other women come into the picture. The other women who come in at will when wives are at work. Other women who help fathers pull the rug from under the whole family's feet and has it all named something sanitary for them like *affair*.

Somewhere in the story the man is a tree whose roots rapturously grow strong enough to destroy everything around it. No one can do anything to the tree because where will everyone take shade?—The birds, the neighbours, the priests?

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I get tired of telling this story but in the end which is also the beginning, the woman leaves.

Monologue At The Thanksgiving Table

Think about it this way/ No one wants to come back home to a house cradling an inferno like a child/ With charred silhouettes around the dinner table mistaking the smoke for an aroma of something good, you know- dinner, peace, normalcy/ The kids do not like fireworks anymore/ Something is always up in flames around here/ A sacrifice they know could well be themselves so they offer something of theirs/ Their toys, their school books, their childhood/ If somehow you had happened upon a vicious vice/ Lines or the bottle, maybe this could be excused/ But it is just you my darling/ Inside a temper that obliterates everything in its wake/ In this story there are no heroes or villains/ Just two flames that don't know how to burn together/ And maybe that's ok/ There is nothing left on the family album by way of pictures/ Nothing sits still even for the saying of grace/ What is grace for when you're the turkey at the thanksgiving table/ Ready to have the last bits of you shredded silly/ Ready to be between jaws and swallowed into darkness/ Ready to meet your maker by way of a lover's hands/ I do not want to die this way/ So this turkey will up and walk her way/ Stuffed with all her children/ Happy thanksgiving

if i know any god

and i am not weeping. i'm not weeping because i have no mother.
my body knows the comfort of warm hands and soothing lullabies
to quieten my so big worries in this little body. and i hate to make
this another father poem so i will not make this another
broken telephone to call then die in stillness only to hear him breathe
on the other side. i have wanted to breathe easy for as far long back
as i can remember and i do now. but they don't tell you about the seasons
of warmth and fatness and mirth. they don't tell you that is when
you're most at risk of exiting, your finger prints on every arrow
showing you out. papa, i am married now and i don't want
to compare notes. i hear you are too and i am worried,
do you understand? she is my mother in every sense of the word
and all i want is to save her, do you get that? anyway,
i am another lost thing in the quagmire of our relationship.
and if i know any god, it is both because of you and in/spite of you
i have loved things that hurt me, i have wanted to be nothing
like my mother. beside you she was prey and who wants to be
devoured (even) by love? i wish to say i am nothing like you but here i am
perpetually angry and raw. papa, i need you, present, healed and mine.
i need your voice firm and sure and gentle. for the road ahead,
i will need your love a satchel and a piece of bread.
cross this river with me, hold my hand. i am afraid
i will not know what to tell my daughter, what to show my son.
tell me, when your father came back home, did you know him?
did you too hold the palm of his hand as a map to gaborone?
when he died, did you feel the murder of crows collapsing
in your chest? or did you keep going, obliterating everything on your path?

Gaborone Is Nobody's Mother

The first language I learnt was my father's
Laid on my tongue by his mother
Whose am I now that it has grown heavy?
And this tongue cannot lift any sentence beyond
ndo shaka... something

When Marobela sent me to the city
Saying she could not nurse both infant and wilting old woman
Her language was not in my luggage
She forgot to call me back home
Ndo shaka kwilila kunzi

For a year around my mother's sisters
I am daughter from the gods speaking in tongues
My cousins gather around me in hilarity
You cannot blame me when I say,
Ndo shaka kwilila kunzi

And then I learn my mother's language
Forget the first love of my iKalanga
I go to visit my grandmother's grave
And my father's sisters ask me,
Uno dwa ngai?

I have forgotten the language
with which to say-
This too is home

I craft myself a home in the city
Between Marobela and Kanye
But everyone knows, no one is from Gaborone
This city has no daughters of her own
This city is nobody's mother

When My Mother Asks How The City Is

I don't know

What else is there to say about this place

And its unforgiving hunger

Besides its forever asking where I am from

But then quickly unlearning my answer

People here ask me how I am

And before I can unfold my business

They are a bird already chirping to another

What else is there to say about my ache for home

This open wound of loneliness

The men here say I am not from around here

They say it with their silence

Their leaving while I am busy loving them

What else is there to tell about this place

Besides its stale hospitality

Like I ever asked of it anything

But a small-small lie that we both pretend

it is home