

Wana UDOBANG

Poems

UNTITLED

My uncle squeezed the tube into my hands
Asked me to lather the pink cream on his back
Rubbing till the streaks eased out.
His skin
Changing as quickly as the sunset
Leaving a red hue on his cheeks
It never stopped there

Like a ritual

One
Pinch the skin on my chest

Two
Stroke

Three
Place his hands between my legs

Four
Make me suckle like a baby without teeth till the grunting eruption

Between childhood memories of Terra Hawks and Thunder Cats
These memories are struggling to fade
I am failing to forget

How do I piece together the fragments of my innocence?
How do I tell my mother that her little girl's body is no place safe for living?
How do I tell my mother that her little girl's body has become a terror unto itself?

Have you ever wanted to set yourself alight, so you can feel something?

But I ask myself what good is spitting fuel into flames?

I still hate the smell of bleaching cream

DEAR FATHER

Dear Father
You are an uncomfortable conversation
Each memory a running tear scalding my face
My heart is an open wound

Dear father
You are a tedious sentence
Each word convoluted like the stitches looped across my chest
My skin is mangled in scars

Dear father
With every misstep I feel the ground limp beneath my feet
Every day is a balancing act of forgiveness and letting go
Of which both I fail recklessly

Dear father
I am finding my way back to anger because anger is a name, I can pronounce
I seek to ask but one question, yet I fear I know the answer
I will ask you regardless

Dear father
Why did you stop holding my hand?

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writing sample

IWP 2020/2021

SHYLOCK

Mother named me Shylock
She said I took after you
I am searching between frown lines and crow's feet
I cannot find you there
I don't recall the flavour of his voice
I am losing the fragrance of your memories
I am learning to mourn the living

CONVERSATIONS WITH YOUR MOTHER

Your mother says that you are spilling with guts
She kisses her teeth every time you sit
Says you spread and sink into the living room couch
Says your back has no arc
And your bum has no bounce
Every time she sees you
Her voice is thickened with anger
Because you fail miserably at this kind of self-sculpting

You are painted in your father's skin
You wear his frugal hands
And slip right into his flat feet
This is why she still sends you a care package
of creams, teas and potions in-between

You see, your mother is doused in lemon cream
She is burning on both cheeks
Her hips are stuffed in girdles
She is crackling at the seams

Her blood is a cocktail of diets and diuretics
This is why she soaks your breakfast in chillies
Says the heat will purge you of your ugliness
Since your body is twice its size
She gives you a double dose of everything
Including her regret

When you become a woman
You will forget how many abortions spilled from between your thighs
You will forget the number of boys you let climb over you
Just because they called you beautiful

When you become a woman
You will have conversations with your mother
Tell her how all the women inside of you
will never match up to the daughter in her head
Tell her how you tip toed till you tumbled from your own inadequacy
You will tell her that when your body became anaesthetised by expectations
It was easy to consider your veins as tight ropes

And then she will tell you how she strung amulets round her waist
Burned candles, kept vigil, bathed in prayers
Drenched her pillows in anointed oil

You will read about epigenetics
Discover that your mother's trauma could bury itself inside your marrow
without altering your bones

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writing sample

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When you become a woman
Your body will become an archive of memories
Your body will become a landmine of loss
You will become a dirge
You will wonder where beginnings stop and end

When you become a woman
Your mother will tell you about how she mutilated her body
Splayed each part to be sanctified by the sun
So that your father could love her

When you become a woman
You will learn that the easiest person to forgive will be your mother

CONFIDENCE

You are confident; a compliment
Read between the lines
Women like us don't get out of bed in the morning
We pose in front of mirrors
Carving surgery lines with self-loathing
Hoping our bodies can fit into the cauldron of the worlds gaze

We live under the tyranny of the scales
At this intersection of big tits, and big butts and big, bold and beautiful
Check the triple X pages of your google search if you missed the reference
It is difficult to tell when we stop being a fetish
And start becoming something to feel sorry for

How we pour all our time into fuckboys
Into boys who only love us in the dark
Into boys who want to stay best friends
Whilst they fuck with the blinds closed

We are always starving
And hungry mouths need food
We gorge on anything that throws us a bone of attention
Anything is better than nothing at all
And anyone is better than no one at all

When barbed comments wrap themselves around us
Our bodies become an eviction notice
We are always traveling
In search of an algorithm to self-love our way into a truce with our own skin

Sometimes, my confidence is exhausted
From trying to make you remember me
As the funny one
The kind one
The smart one
The talented one
The anything other than what I look like one
The one who prefaces every meal with an
"I haven't eaten all day"
Because justifying and earning every morsel that travels through my mouth is what I do when I take
a break
From clocking in a time sheet of carbs and crunches
I never told you this before
But I don't enjoy your compliments dished with a side of *"for a fat girl"*
Because you think confidence and I are an unlikely pairing for a main course.

So, fuck your compliments that come with caveats
You will never know what it means to own a body that refuses to submit however much you beat it
My body is a binge and purge cycle of love and hate
I wear my unruliness and indiscipline etched into my flesh.

Commented [DN1]: I'll change this and the other three iterations of that spelling in this poem to "compliment" but we'll need to check with author

There is a bounty on my mother's head
They ask
How does a mother like mine watch her little girl become too big for desire to wrap itself around
me?
So, I am a living proof that there is a shame that comes with loving me
So, fuck your compliments that come with caveats
Because on most days
I fantasise about a life that doesn't weigh so much in humiliation
Or what it feels like to just be normal

GIRLHOOD

We were girls once

Before our fathers were the first men to turn our hearts into pieces of splintered glass
Before he left us
Before he never came for us
Before our uncles touched us
Before the first time we said No
Before the boys that pinned our bodies to the ground
Before our skins were marked

You were a girl once

Before you learnt to chew your tongue as your first solid meal
Before you swallowed your voice
Before anhedonia robbed you of breath
Before joy curdled inside your belly
Before you became your mother
Before you became skilled at fear
Before unrequited love
Before the love that never stayed
Before you stayed
Before god told you to submit
Before your skin grew its shell
Before self-loathing
Before everything was dead on arrival
Before loneliness dragged itself across your chest to sit in your lungs
Before the light went out in your eyes
Before you mapped your way in the dark
Before you learned to walk twice

I was a girl once

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DORATHY

This is the story of a woman
Who swapped her name for a band and three letters
Working her face through knock out punches
As she straddled her babies on her back

This is the story of a woman
Whose hands were battered from the match
She balled her fist to conceal her fears

This is the story of a woman
Who was taught that you must behave well
You do not leave the warmth of your home
Even if the heat will kill you
You stay till it singes your bones

This is the story of a woman
Who learnt to mask her cravings
Who knotted her failures like Dutch wax wrapped twice around her hips
Who wore her shame like pearls with ease
Who taught herself to build banks out of beverage tins
Nobody told her that sacrifice comes with no interest

This is the story of a woman
Who will never make the history books
Whose story will be the wind that soaks the dust
Whose face I wear
Whose hips I bear
Whose heart I refuse to match
Whose life is littered with unanswered questions
Whose survival is a buzzing miracle
Who never stopped loving regardless

FAMILY PORTRAIT

Inside the home our parents once shared is a stairwell
Inside the stairwell is a portrait
Inside the portrait is our family

My mother is sat back straight
Clad in her double wrapper and red blouse
Géle sits on her head like a crown
Left hand is perched on her thigh
Ring finger gleaming in the frame

Our father is next to her
His grin is wide
My siblings a halo around me
This photograph is perfection

I recall how we would alternate days between play wrestling
And our mother's screams leaking through the keyhole of our parents' bedroom
As children we learnt very quickly to choose pain over disgrace
So, my brother would throw his comic book to the side
Muzzle my mouth shut as the words
"leave my mummy alone" would eat through the spaces between his fingers

They said our parents were going through a mid-life crisis
But nobody told us that we would be left in a bloodbath

And 25 years later
Inside this home our parents once shared
This portrait still lines the stairwell where I once saw my mother rolling down like tumble weed
The memory of our echoing living room betraying my eight-year-old voice still refuses to leave me
My brothers and I exchange childhood stories like we were war veterans
And I knew what it was to be on the frontlines before I got my first training bra
The women in our family became masterful at swallowing pain and chose to keep smiling
photographs instead
I wish they had known that neither piety nor a portrait could save a family

At the dinner table, I ask our mother why she never took the portrait down
She tells me in our language
"so that they don't say I was impregnated by the ground"

CATFISH

She clutched me in her clay coloured arms
Frail and thin
Bruised from the waring earth
She suckled me from her fallen breasts
Beaten of life she laid me on her chest
Heart, thumping like a steady drumbeat
She said,

You will not be catfish
Point and kill
They will not choose you
Like they chose me

You came with an entrance
Umbilical cord wound so tight around your neck
Like hands pressing against your throat
I feared you would break

The silence was deafening
The longest I had ever heard
The air was stiff
The world stood still
But you came
This thing
Starry eyed
Head adorned in a kinky bouquet
From dancing *Ekombi* in my womb
And summersaulting to praise songs
Shrugging those shoulders
Believing you had arrived

You would never listen
But hear me when I say,

You will not be catfish
Point and kill

Wriggling like a worm
Devoured as prey
Licked to the bone
You must tell your daughters this tale

That they will not be catfish
Point and kill
They will not choose them
Like they chose me

THIS IS NOT A FEMINIST POEM

This is not a feminist poem
It is not contorted metaphors
With neither punchline nor chorus

This is not a feminist poem
It is a woman learning to trade possessions before her lover takes his last breath
She will never get the chance to say goodbye because those final hours are one match-point away
from the backstroke of ravenous relatives
You see where we come from
Widows learn to bid their dead farewell even before they are lowered into the ground
Because grief requires time and time is a luxury, she cannot afford
But I don't want to talk about funeral rites or a daughter's non-inheritance

Because this is not a feminist poem
It is a thirteen-year-old leaking between her legs
She cannot will her waste to stop because culture demands that babies must birth babies
even before they are whole
This is Mercy
Waiting to be fully formed before the doctors can fix her
We exchange broken smiles but mine is crackling with questions
I want to ask
How does a six-year-old ask to be gang raped for lunch after school?
As she fiddles with the beads of a rosary that crawl around her neck
My lips are too drowsy to ask God why?
But I am trying to not be feminist about this because

This is not a feminist poem
It is the landlord who pays off your father to clench his teeth over choking tears for what his son had
done to you
And your daddy knows that homelessness is too close to home
So, he washes off your shame with a sponge
Dabs your wounds with scripture
Hoping those words will in turn douse the stench of the breath
Erase the handprints that form maps across your skin
And glue together all that is broken of you
But instead memory has an interesting way of refusing to disappear
This is how you exist with a tape loop in your head playing over and over again

I am not here to talk about the kidnap of justice in my country or whom, how and why we have
refused to pay her ransom

Because this is not a feminist poem
It is piercing screams of gaping mouths choking as hands stifle their lungs of ambition
It is men in uniform with bellies swollen from bribe
Sworn to protect you but tell you that domestic matters are family matters
It is walking around with a womb too hollow to bear an heir that you take in the seeds of betrayal
wanting it to pull together the remnants of matrimony.
It is the girls who are sent to school only to come back home knowing that their future is dangling
between their bodies and their silence yet deciding which to betray first

It is those 2am text messages from your boss' phone that leaves you reminded that you will always
loose

So, you grin

Dust it off a shoulder and bear it

You return to your job because this meagre wage pays for your little brother's tuition

And your mother's heart medicine

But this is not a feminist poem

It is acquainting yourself with the normalcy that your body is a minefield

trampled upon by the politics of culture

It is learning that the heavy medals of your success are meaningless

until they are smelted into a ring on your finger

But I told you at the beginning

That this is not a feminist poem

It is not a rant

It is not a call for your attention

It is not a checklist of everything you already know

This is not a feminist poem

This is a poem about life

For my sisters

Who struggle

And continue to fight

STILLBIRTH

When the pain gets too heavy
Make sure you open your mouth and spit it out
You must never chew
You must never swallow

Nobody will hold your hand whilst you writhe in pain from a belly swelling with anguish
Nobody will massage your feet as it gives way beneath your overbearing body
Nobody will come for you when you silently scream in a stillbirth

My dear there is no consolation for long suffering.
I wish somebody had told me earlier

So always remember that when the pain gets too heavy
Make sure you open your mouth and spit it out

WE MADE IT

When I was a little girl
My mother would mix a bucket of dough into the night
Rising to twice the size of her forgotten dreams
She would squeeze each ball into the searing heat
This was what it took
To put clothes on our backs
And books in our bags
My mother would never let her children out with an empty stomach

I am a woman now
And I am my mother's daughter
Learning courage through her blistered hands
Knowing fearlessness in the lines of her smiling face
Sometimes, we barter in silence like people do secret handshakes
She remembers the clothes she hawked off her back to keep me here
I recall the little girl
Trapped between a shop floor and a tuition payment
Too far away from home to know if I would ever make it
But somewhere between our silence and the humming generator
My mother whispers
"We made it"

THINGS YOU WILL LEARN WHEN YOUR FATHER LEAVES

1

Riding

First you will push your feet against the asphalt, place one leg on a pedal, stumble from side to side, break too quickly, break too slowly, somersault into a ditch, freefalling in-between. Yours came without training wheels. There will be scratches and scrapes, bruises and burns but you will ride. There will be nothing and no one to prepare you for the life ahead but you will ride

2

Driving

You will always remember your mother's anxiety before your first driver's license. There were days she drove far enough to take a break from your father's raging fists even though she returned to meet them waiting. Your mother never fails to remind you that a car isn't just this metal box with wheels you learn to plough through a road. She says driving is how women run from their death to keep their children alive

3

Swimming

No anchor, no boat, no life jacket. You go in headfirst and never stop moving. The water will feast on your fear, but till you get to the other side, you never stop moving.

4

Loving

They will tell you that the women in your family did not know how to hold onto their men because they always slid from between their thighs
You will smother yours with love
But the spaces between your legs will be too slippery to keep them.
So, they will leave anyways
They will leave anyways

SISTER CIRCLE

The women in my sister circle stage an intervention
One after each other, they take the stand
A trifecta of tenderness, tethered to the thought that I deserve better
Testifying of the light in me that I refuse to embrace.
This is not an indictment.
They say I need to learn how to be loved
My mouth spits desires but my body refuses to wrap itself around it
I have pushed love so far away that even hope becomes a trigger warning
These women know that I haul my resilience like excess baggage
Adorn my scars like medals of honour
There is a hunch on my back and even the keloids have become second skin.
This itch is evidence that I have never known a life without discomfort
Dragging these ankles beneath all this weight, ligaments wearing out
I am guilty on all charges

I don't know how to tell them that when you have been a burden for so long
you give away all of yourself asking for nothing in return
This is the only way you know how to be useful
You love others instead because loving yourself feels like a waste of time
I don't know how to tell them
The only love I have ever seen was sacrificial
There are no guarantees that it would keep you warm at night

You see girls like me have to pay our way to be loved
Nothing goes for free when you come with baggage, and trauma and extra skin.
It is too much for anybody to take
This is how self-sufficiency became a survival mechanism
I have always known that everything good will come to an end
And stowed away in the back of my cerebrum is this giant broth of resentment that nothing and no
one will stay
I find ways to strangle everyone with kindness even when I am the one dying

When the room becomes syrupy with all of my fear, these women pour more wine, more gin, more
of anything hard enough to steady my quivering heart
They empty bottles in libation to my life sentencing of collecting unwavering love
Demand of me to reimagine a life where perseverance isn't thawing in my throat

They remind me that in my mother's language the translation for courage is to hold your heart in
your hand, soaking wet, bloodied, bruised and battered
They say I wasn't always this scared thing with scales and spikes on my skin
Instead of resilience they ask me to make a masterpiece of joy
They say don't look back
Leave the baggage at the door where it belongs
These women in my sister circle prop me up
Straighten my spine
Piece together all my rupturing bones
And command me to move
