

# Short Story

## The fifty rand note

Tsitsi Nomsa Ngwenya  
Zimbabwean Writer  
nomsaezweni@gmail.com

I come out of Sandy Springs Gardens on a warm Saturday morning headed to Tshepiso Township in Soweto. This block of flats is on the corner of Van der Merwe and Klein Street just across from Number Four Police Station, Hillbrow, Johannesburg. My sister's husband offered to drive me to Tshepiso in his *bakkie* but I declined the offer. I am walking leisurely with my niece Ntombi and nephew Philani down Van der Merwe Avenue when a street advert catches my eye. 'Get rich quick charms, *Sangoma* from Chipinge, Zimbabwe, Penis enlargement.'

Wares are sold on the roadside in the streets; belts, woollen hats, curios, watermelons. A heavy old woman sits on a stool with her back covered in a blanket. She is wearing a red beret and does not move. Another with a nice face decorated the Xhosa way chats to a friend in a big frilled frock. The frills lift off her skirt blocking her from direct contact with anyone. She rearranges her vegetables on her stall and wipes her hands on the frills. The fourth woman in the row serves a cup of steaming coffee in a big yellow cup to a client.

A man with dreadlocks shows some wooden artefacts from his stall to a customer. He speaks in hushed tones frequently shaking his head as if ridding himself of the tsetse flies with his huge mane. The customer takes a closer look at the carvings of Africa's big five. He puts that of a white rhinoceros aside, then that of an elephant. A young man runs across the street with a few people in hot pursuit shouting obscenities in different languages. The stall keeper takes his gaze from the running boy and then gives the customer the king of the jungle. He refuses it because of its small size. A friend from a nearby stall comes to his rescue by offering him a bigger one. He pays and then they give him India's pride – a small tiger as a way of appreciation. He turns to look at a woman selling beads before disappearing into the crowd.

I take a look at the pile of books by the street corner. They are all sorts but very little African literature. I lose interest. My mind wanders. I notice a very beautiful woman in her early twenties wearing a long skirt which has been raised by her curves. She does not bother to tug it down. She chews some gum as she chats to a middle-aged man sporting a gold tooth and an earring in his left earlobe. She also has a gold tooth and a gold ring. He is wearing his cap sideways. He lifts his fingers from his mouth and blows mushrooms of smoke into the sky. The two of them disappear into a clothing shop; I am glad as I wish

her to buy a skirt. I then decide to buy my nieces and nephews I am visiting some delicacies from the supermarket in the mall. My eyes rest on some biscuits, sweets, chocolates cake and fruit.

I notice a fat man behind the laundry shelf scratching the security code off an item. His eyes are darting back and forth. He is wearing a big black jacket. I open a fridge and take out some Red Bull energy drink for my strength. Ntombi carries the cake and Philani the other stuff and the fruit. I finish the energy giving liquid in just one gulp and it instantly renews my strength.

We now walk briskly towards the Kentucky Fried Chicken outlet. We enter and get friendly greetings from the waitress. Before we are served three gay couples enter the shop. Two sets are white and they sound British. The black couple's skin shouts that they are loaded. A girl calls from behind the counter to her friend in the kitchen.

*'Tendai huya uone ngochane!'*

*'Ehe' shuwa tiri ngochane, it is true we are homosexual'*, answers the one dressed like a woman in the black couple, twitching his mouth, his voice also adjusts to suit that of a woman.

At once I know why they are in South Africa, back home such people have no room. It is said that they were worse than pigs and dogs. They take their order and disappear into the Land Rover and Porsche parked outside. They seem to be as free as Zimbabweans in 1980.

*'Monsieur Boubacar finally brought his fiancée, madam Dieynaba.'*

*'You lie, pere Diara!'*

*'She flew in last night, I helped her move out of the flat he had been sharing with his Congolese friends to pave way for his mad' mizelle.'*

*'Know what N'dole my friend, on Monday I am organising for a ticket for mine.'*

*'What will you do with the beautiful local one you are staying with?'*

*'I am married, she knows I am married, I will organise a new place for my wife elsewhere.'*

*'Fair enough my broda, but it is funny how we fought these toubabs back home. Does it not look like we are following them down here in South Africa?'*

Two dark men converse in English laced with French. One would not be reproached for concluding that they might have come from the Islands of Goree, even Mali or Gambia. They are walking ahead of us. We cross the traffic lights together and then they disappear into a Nigerian haberdashery after exchanging some pleasantries with the owner who stands by the entrance, soliciting customers. In a hair salon next the haberdashery, women plait different types of hairstyles for their customers who sit still not fidgeting but browsing mechanically through the magazines in their hands, chatting in different languages even though Nyanja dominates the conversations.

We then move towards Wanderers bus terminus; the station we are seeking to board from.

As we cross to the other side nearer to the station I hear some gunshots behind me. People run for cover in all directions. Some flatten themselves with their backs against walls. I dare to look further, as I see yellow police trucks and heavily armed police everywhere. The shooting goes on for about ten seconds.

Heavy women run about, oranges, apples, and other fruit lie on the pavement after being trodden on by people running for their lives. Ntombi and Philani pull me so we can run away but I am curious. I do not budge sensing the danger is over. Some people enter the shops, and then there is looting. What a chance! The food shop I had been few seconds ago is suddenly packed with street men and boys munching on chicken and chips. They pay no attention to the salads. Women continue running, some clutching young babies, some pulling small children by the hand. The scene resembles the Sharpville massacre or the dispersed Soweto children's silent march to John Vorster Square back then.

'It was a robbery in a bank.'

'No, it was in a shop, clothing shop, I was there when it started.'

*'Sisi shesha, kunzima la eGoli.'*

'They did not catch them, they were so swift.'

They got two of the six robbers; the other four ran away with cash in a black bag.'

'The robbers got away. The police killed two pedestrians and a man who sells music by the street corner near the bank.'

*'Hayi bo bhuti, kanjalo nje?'*

*'KemaZimbabwe, from the style of stealing.'*

'Some of them have magnets for fingers.'

'The other night they raided the eating house where I work at three in the morning. I was on a night shift. They entered and ordered everyone to the floor after demanding the safe keys; they took everything and all the cooked food. The police came at six in the morning. Everything happened in about five seconds but to us it was like a hundred years.'

In the hush of the moment a young mother comes running with a baby strapped to her back. She is complaining that someone splashed some water at her from behind. Her skirt is dripping wet. She offers me her back to unfasten her baby. I ask her to come round a wall which shelters some vendors from the public at the bus terminus. From her English accent at once I know her origins. I take the lifeless baby from her back, which is when she notices that the dripping moisture is blood not water. I give her the motionless bundle. My eyes start swelling, as I repress the strong desire to cry. The whole place rings with anger.

*'Mai-we mwanangu kani, ndotangira papi?, mai-we-e!* My mother, my baby, where do I start from? she cries with her querulous thin voice in Shona, a language spoken in Zimbabwe.

*'Ke'ng mme?'*

'Ngoane!'

'Nini ekomeli mwana, namoni abimeli makila na litoyi, what happened to the baby, I can see blood dripping out of its ear?' a woman asks in Lingala; from her looks she must be from Brazzaville or Democratic Republic of Congo.

'Ah! Angalia, vana piga mutoto navanduki! Angalia sikio yake inotaka damu, mungu wangu, Oh my God! What happened to the child's ear, there is blood dripping from its ear!'; two women enquire in Kiswahili almost at the same time. They are dark beautiful women with decorations lines cut on their faces. One has huge holes on her earlobes and they have huge artificial gaps in their front teeth.

'Ndi chiani chachita kumwana uyo, what happened to the baby?', a Zambian woman who also has a baby strapped to her back inquires in Nyanja.

'Tsohle di phomotse modimo oa ka!' exclaims the Sotho woman who had come first.

The bullet has gone through the child's skull. The bleeding is from its left ear. Two sisters come along to help carry the lifeless baby to a meter taxi nearby. The mother mourns quietly as her sweat runs cold on her. I tug fretfully on my hair as we proceed with our trip. I think of our crisis back home. We are indeed in the middle of a slump, but this is a place of seedy misery. The place is as full of people as a butcher bird's cache but with them there is no probity and virtue.

'Dube, Meadowlands one to five,' calls the bus attendant. I proceed to ask one of the guys in Zulu where the bus to Tshepisonq is. He points a finger in that direction without answering me verbally. I get into the back seat with my little companions and make myself comfortable. In no time the thirty-five seater coughs, grunts and whines out of the terminus into Main Reef Road.

Outside people seem to be in a perpetual rush. A priest, pastor or whatever walks on bare feet dressed in traditional Zulu regalia, his server or aid carrying a reed mat behind him. Another walks in the opposite direction, dressed in Egyptian-like amulets. My niece tells me the one in bare feet belongs to a certain church which mixes tradition and Christianity. She has forgotten the name of the church. Conversations go on in the bus. Each speaks in their mother tongue – Sothos, Zulus, Xhosas, Shanganis and Venda. They understand each other as they carry on with their conversations. I enjoy it all. There are no conductors on these buses. I take out my fare in the form of a fifty-rand note and hand it over to the Xhosa woman who is seated in the seat in front of me. I tell her I am paying for three in the back seat. She nods and passes it over to a Sotho woman with a baby on her lap. I am struck by her beautiful flawless skin. I notice her nice even teeth as she smiles at her baby girl.

As we turn into Main Reef the bus driver announces that we will each be given our money back as the collection was thirty rand short. The fare was ten rand for everyone seated. I was amazed as that is incredible. I have not been given my twenty rand change either. I muster the courage to tell the driver I have not received my twenty rand despite having paid. The Xhosa woman confirms having received my money and passed it on. There is

much noise in the bus. I keep quiet and observe. I cannot understand how someone could have pocketed the fifty-rand note. I become sympathetic and conciliatory to the woman, whom from the accent I can tell is Zimbabwean, and a Kalanga. Most probably she is from Plumtree or somewhere down Matabeleland South. She has occupied the front seat, next to the driver and therefore she has been burdened by the responsibility of collecting the bus fare. Half the bus suspects that she has pocketed the money without saying it openly. She is Zimbabwean after all. My niece Ntombi gets furious and I urge her to hold herself together. I wait eagerly to see how the driver is going to solve the matter.

*'Laat ons line, back to the terminus'*, the driver barks.

*'I gave my money to this lady I front of me, she can confirm'*, explains the other boy who looks like the township type by the tsotsitaal and mannerisms. One could be forgiven for thinking he is a Cape Coloured or Sotho by the fairness of his skin.

*'Ora nna, you did not give me any money'*, the Sotho woman throws away her hands in desperation.

*'My maar hoor my, strues God, I gave you my twenty rand and you even passed me back the change.'*

*'Morena oa ka, I did not see sheleti yahaho'*, she refuses again in confusion.

*'Eya mme, do not worry all is alright. No one would hold you responsible'*, interjected another fat woman, so fat was she that she occupies two seats.

*'Asseblief, what does it matter anyway, everybody get your money before you alight from the bus'*, the driver commands as he parks his bus in the terminus.

*'Matata ke 'ng Moruti oa ka, what is the problem my Priest?'*, probes the termini attendant surprised to see our bus is back so soon.

*'Somebody is not being honest with their bus fare, and how I hate to use kragdadigheid on such matters!'*

*'Phumani nonke ephasini yami siqale kasha, get out of my bus all of you!'*, the driver screams vehemently.

A heavily scarred man who is also a passenger and been quiet in all the confusion runs to the nearby toilets. His wife who is equally scarred and has two missing front teeth gets busy packing and unpacking her luggage. She throws up her hands in protest at the thief who is wasting her time. She is wearing a pinafore and a green woollen hat with South Africa, World Cup 2010 written on it in white. with male curiosity and conviviality the driver instructs everyone be searched.

*'How much money did you have before you boarded the bus?'*, he asks the scarred man who had run off to the lavatory.

*'Fifty rand,'* he replies.

He then searches his shirt pocket and takes out the fifty rand note. He put both his hands

in his trousers pockets again and produces another fifty rand note. Without saying anything he hands me the other note. There is laughter as we all climb back in the bus. The man and his wife sit side by side behind the driver as the bus moves away, with uneasy wonder and without guilt.

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In the streets life continues as usual. We drive past a cemetery of metal as we approach the open spaces wedged between the city and the black townships. The bus fumes and roars. On the left are the mine dumps from the disused mines. Egoli. The Europe of Africa. We depart from the waste land and enter the South Western Township. Soweto.

In Tshepisoong we are met by boys kicking their balls in the dusty red dirt.

‘Themba, Kgomotso, Tshepo, here!’

*‘Hayi bo! Themba, ushaya kanjani, bona liya phuza amafu.* No Themba, what kind of a shot is that, now the ball is flying to the clouds!’

Their ball bumps and lands in a yard where two teenage girls stand chatting. The one who looks fifteen and heavily pregnant kicks the ball out to the boys who clap and whistle in appreciation and mockery. She is wearing a pair of very short pants which just cover her curves, her blouse also covers half the tummy. Only strings which were cut from below the bodice in a decorative manner hang loosely exposing her protruding navel. She starts jumping with her left leg raised from the ground, throwing a stone first and then following it leaping like a frog. They are playing a game with lines drawn on the ground. Her grandmother calls her from inside the house and she disappears still holding the stone in her left hand.

We walk across the streets where women in pinafores and berets chat to each other across their fences. Some friendships sour and some perish from these gossips. A grown man winks at a young girl who seems ambivalent. One can tell by his gaze that he hopes she should love him come what may. Her short skirt reveals fine legs. I do not blame the man ogling at her, but if she was in a certain sovereign state she could be locked up with hard core criminals, charged with loitering with purposes of prostitution.

We cross a footpath and feel a fountain of coolness. I evade gazes from young township boys whose trousers hang low past their waists cutting across their bums. We walk in Indian file; Ntombi leading the way across the bush I feel could have been transformed into a small park. There is a small stream cutting across it which I feel too could be enhanced with some nice landscaping. We get back to the dirt road and my eyes are suddenly attracted to a well-manicured, beautiful garden. It stretches across the street into a vast open space. I wonder who could be doing this as I have not seen even a patch of vegetable garden from the time we jumped off the bus. Ntando tells me there are no water problems in Tshepisoong like we experience in the Golden Triangle back in Harare.

As we get closer I am surprised to meet my cousin brother tending the yellow roses, grown together with bell-shaped petals, all in bloom. There is also a profusion of bougainvillea,

petunias, salvia, red and white roses. On the ground beneath them are well-organised little white stones bordered by red smooth stones. He later claims that he brought them from ten miles away in a wheelbarrow. Their fragrance is euphoric. There are grown guava and peach trees in the yard too.

There is much happiness as I meet with my cousins some of which I last saw a decade and a half ago, back in the village. I have two cousins staying in the cabins in the backyard of my late brother's house, Ntombi's father. The other half brothers stay nearby, in rented zinc cabins. *Imikhukhu*. My late brother's widow comes out of her bedroom to greet me after a while. It's the children I am concerned about most. She is stepmother to Ntombi and Ntombi has lived with since she was fourteen, now she is twenty-one. The children are excited to see me. I am also ecstatic with joy. I am not sure if the youngest is happy to see me or the KFC and cake, because she would not have remembered me. I last saw her when we buried her father when she was four months old.

I light up the environment with cheerfulness and laughter. I put a greasy feast on the table for all. I have tea and a small piece of cake as fast foods are not my favourite. In a moment the hi-fi goes full blast. Dumi and Njabulo dance as free as the weeds in the nearby stream. Their friends join them in the fun as I film them on my small camera phone. They dance and dance. Later my sister-in-law joins in the fun. She cannot help it anymore. My new sister-in-law, MaButhelezi, wife to my young brother, joins us as well. She is a proper Zulu well-bred and raised in Mnambithi in KwaZulu-Natal. It becomes warm in the house so we move out.

Women sit on the lawn and the boys enjoy their jive, as we all cheer. In no time two fat women come to join us.

*'Likayi mme?'*

*'Ke'tang sisi, wena?'*

I love the language so I struggle to say my greetings. My accent sends all women into stitches. Motlalepula my high school friend from Botswana taught me some words and phrases so I try to join them into sentences. I must be sounding vulgar because MaButhelezi closes her mouth with her hand as the other women crawl with laughter. I do not mind. My brother arrives from work in his German car. He joins the happy mood. After greetings he drives to the *spaza* to get more drinks and some mixed portions for barbecuing. Somebody brings a braai stand and in no time charcoal is glowing with flames. It seems to me these folks have nothing more than stereos, beer bottles and braai stands. Everything seems to be ready. The older crew let beer course through their veins like blood while music beats against the soles of their feet. This kind of lifestyle ignites hope rather than gloom, I think to myself as they all dance rhythmically like the language of animals which has no words only memory.

A heavily pregnant woman walks through the gate in her husband's company. He joins the men whilst she joins the women in the shade of a peach tree. There are no introductions at that moment. We just greet each other.



‘So, woman you are so big now! Who is the father of this one you are carrying?’ asks one of the women who had arrived first.

‘Do you need to ask *ma*, it’s still in the kraal isn’t it’ she replies with a naughty wink.

They all fall into knowing mischievous laughter. I am amazed. I listen and observe everything quietly with great interest.

‘My mother-in-law shocked me back in Limpopo when she claimed that Nthabiseng looked like her aunt Morongwe’, laughs the other friend of the first visitors.

All the while MaButhelezi is looking down in embarrassed. My sister in-law tries in vain to stop the juicy tales.

‘My Mozambican live-in lover nearly beat me to a pulp last night after he caught me with the taxi driver’, laughs the woman who had come in after the pregnant sister.

‘You cannot be such a fool, to be beaten by a Mozambican in this country.’

‘Get township dogs on him and get him deported’, advises the pregnant one.

‘I wouldn’t dare, who would pay my rent and give me money to send my children back home KwaZulu-Natal?’ cries the near victim.

‘*Uyateta khona eZim ne?*’ laughs the newcomer.

‘Shush, Themba will hear this and slaughter me. I just wanted money and diamonds from him, Zimbabweans are loaded these days, especially if you meet with those in the right positions.’

‘But *uyatsiba*, he knows the pregnancy is his, isn’t it.’

‘You must have been cooked in a fool’s pot, *setlatla sa mosadi!*’ comments a woman with a gold tooth and freckles.

‘Oh, yes he does, but he wouldn’t dare come to my husband. I told him to stay away. I see him in a hotel every time he comes for his business dealings and it is normally during the day.’

‘*Sekuru’s* daughter-in-law,’ laughs the talkative newcomer.

Everybody roars with laughter. The other woman who has been quiet all the time lifts her skirt to show us the knife scars from her husband who found her in bed with a Nigerian lover. Since then she claims she has stopped her philandering ways. She and her husband are still together.

I take a stroll to the garden outside the yard, across the street. Carrots, beetroot, potatoes, rape and spinach greet me. There are raspberries and gooseberries too. I look across and see idle township boys walking up and down the narrow meandering footpaths, criss-crossing each other and disappearing into the low lying stream on my right. Some emerge from the same stream puffing coils of smoke through their nostrils laughing uncontrollably, their eyes blood red. On the side of the street where there are no brick houses are tin shacks,



their walls appearing reduced in height with the load they are carrying. There are used mattresses, razor wire, bicycles, ready to be sent to Tsholotsho and Kezi with Nhlanhla the local *malayitsha* when he also takes mealie-meal, sugar and onions to relatives in Mpophoma, Bulawayo. Here the life of foreigners is uncertain like rain on zinc roofs.

People come to buy vegetables from us as we stand there chatting. They are harvested as and when a client requires them. My brother who grows them was an Agriculture teacher back home. He is not yet employed because of the papers. He has no work permit. I enjoy the air for its odour and surprise. Here water is not sporadic or apologetic like back home. Dams fill up every rainy season though.

A young well-curved lady visits us, her lips glossed with some balm scented with lemon, she is also chewing bubble-gum with a hint of cinnamon. I am struck by her impatience. She folds her hands seeking consolation not warmth, maybe something to restrain her impatience because it is hot unlike other winter afternoons. A gold tooth shows in her front teeth as she talks to my brother quietly. There are no introductions yet, but after an exchange of words with him she relaxes and greets me again. I smile at her as I show her my acknowledgement in a silent language we both understand as women.

Back in the yard there are more women; they are still sitting and chatting. Excited voices and loud music spill onto the lawn under my feet. I give my niece and nephews some coins as I prepare to leave. The little girl holds the money I give her in a tight fist, most probably thinking of buying some jiggies or whatever else it is she desires. There is much sadness as I announce my departure. I feel like crying too as the children swarm and cling to me like bees. I assure them I love them and I shall return.

'*Askies sisi*, so, how long have you been in South Africa,' asks a woman neighbour who is having her hair plaited by Ntombi.

'Oh, I came on Friday morning and I am returning tomorrow.'

'I feel sorry for you the journey is too long, the last time I travelled to Mussina I had my feet swollen for the whole week. I thought you had come to look for a job or you were working somewhere here already. Which bus are you taking?'

'She flew in and is flying back, you whore.'

'*Matata ke'ng tu*, I am asking *fela*.'

'She is a reputable businesswoman, and an academic, if you know what that means!,' exclaimed her friend.

'For sure, I suspected something was special about her, the humility, the friendly unjudgemental calmness. You know I can always recognise an educated person the moment they step in my door. Sure *sis*. So, when are you visiting again?' the Xhosa woman exclaims loudly.

'Any time I get a chance, I come to South Africa almost twice every month for business, but sometimes I go on to Cape Town and Port Elizabeth.'

‘Auntie, may you please bring some books. You always carry some in your bag’, little Dumi asks as he opens my handbag to remove Achebe’s *Arrow of God*.

‘And me too, and me too, me too’, chorus the children who are still clinging to me.

‘Oh yes, I will bring something for your age, you will get this from my library when you are older,’ I assure them.

*‘Kiyareboha aunty, utsamaye sinhle.’*

We arrive at a place of instancy and style driven in the old German manufactured vehicle as the sun dips into its mother’s belly for a suckle before coming up strong the following morning. On the elevated ground under the raised balconies stand beautiful women advertising their God-given wares. Men pay for their services. Maybe it is a basic one, who knows, demand is ever there for the world’s oldest profession, isn’t it? It is freezing, but most are almost naked. I sympathise with them. It is their job. Children need to be fed and sent to school. Even some husbands need to be fed too. Egoli. The City of Gold. I feel so ashamed as I am walking with my brothers, niece and nephew. I then decide I will come back for a stroll with my brother-in-law later after my brothers depart back to Tshepisoong. I will walk around Hillbrow, Berea, Joubert Park, Yeoville, which I hear are home to every evil and where a person can be skinned alive.

Two policemen drag two men into their yellow van, near a night club. A woman pulls my brother-in-law aside and tells him how handsome he looks. She holds his arm for a while looking him directly in his face with the hungry eyes of an eagle, mouthing her invitation. I stand aside. Motionless and voiceless. He pulls away from her after thanking her for the compliment. She tightens her brassiere as she vomits obscenities from her mouth whose lips could hold a glass full of beer with her red lipstick. The air is filled with disaster. I ask my brother-in-law if we can walk back home to Sandy Springs. I pray to God in silence.

At the street corner, a bald man fries some chicken livers in an open pan over a gas stove. By his side some sisters cook *pap* and another slices vegetables and packs them away probably for resale. A young widow sells some chicken feet to a middle-aged man wearing a security type of a uniform. She has baby twins who appear to be at the crawling stage, one sits on her lap whilst the other makes paddling motions with its little arms trying to get on her lap too. Her black headscarf moves backward to show her beautiful hair underneath. I just hope the husband did not succumb to the most dreaded disease. She must be in her mid-twenties. More women sit along the street with huge steaming pots.

*‘Lekani ndigule mbale ya nsima ndi nsomba kuti ndibele njala,* let me buy a plate of pap and fish to cheat this hunger’, a man says to his friend as they walk side by side.

*‘Gula nsima ndinkhuku. Samaphika nsomba monga mmene muna zolowera ka ku Malawi moti ukhonza sanza utatha kudya chakudya cho.* Buy pap and chicken. They do not prepare fish the way you are used to back home in Malawi. You may even throw up after eating it’, the other advises as they move in the direction of the women with huge pots.

We meet my brother-in-law’s friend from work and I politely greet him in English. My

British accent terrifies him. He answers in a Venda-laced accent. He inquires about our Great Leader. I assure him he is fine and still the Commander-in-Chief of the Defence Forces, the First Secretary of the former ruling party. This sends him into streams of laughter as he asks me why so many sudden titles. I quickly change the subject and ask him about their polygamous president instead. He defends his African tradition without answering my question. I should have known better anyway. He is a Venda maybe a Vhafuwe, who knows.

Two gentlemen enter the bar like fugitives. The sound of a gunshot blasts down the street but people continue with their normal business. I am startled and scared. Death so near, so close to the skin you could smell it. I feel I am at the mercy of misfortune. Half-dressed girls line the streets. One can tell they are aged between fourteen and twenty-five and they are strikingly beautiful. I wonder about their origins. Where are the mothers, brothers and sisters? Egoli?

‘It is your money which determines the time you want with me,’ shouts one of the women wearing a belt for a skirt to a client.

He is a well-groomed gentleman sporting a shiny gold ring on his second finger. After a few little whispers they disappear around the corner into an Isuzu double-cab with yellow number plates. The sweet scent of her perfume wafts in the air. Johannesburg lights brighten the dark sky. She enters the fast car and disappears into the cruel night with intoxicating brightness. A heavy thud follows then a scream. And then silence. Some people cheer from the fifteenth floor balcony. A woman screams. A baby cries. The thud is from a man who has just landed on top of plastic plates of fruit. He is already dead.

A few passers-by take a look and carry on with their normal business. I shudder and shiver. My brother-in-law tells me to walk quickly and disappear from the scene. I hesitate. He might need help. The victim might need help. I think. Maybe he is not dead. He died before reaching the ground. I am afraid to look back in case I turn into a pillar of salt. I walk in lethargic silence. I try to close off my fears by thinking of my early days as a young girl playing with my sisters by the river, back in the village. It is something intimate in my mind and somehow shuts out the horrors for a moment. I remember and imagine our bodies squirming in cold water as we swam in the river, in the afternoon, sure of discretion from herd boys, hornbills swooping above our tiny heads, above rocks, above Mphafa trees lining the river banks. We swam all the colours of sunlight in our hearts. We would then bask in the sunlight like mantises, slowly, satisfied.

We pass another spot and the smart ladies are still selling their God-given wares.

‘Fifty rand for a short time, I can give you a discount since you are from up North,’ negotiates one goddess of beauty with a young fella. It was as if his origins are inscribed on his palms she is holding.

An old bold man steps out of a BMW. He sports gold chains on his neck and wrists and gold rings on all his fingers. He pulls the girl into the car without a word. The jilted suitor prowls at him like a leopard and in no time there is blood everywhere. His entrails peep

from his open belly. His friends pull him to his car and drive away. I am startled by this display of violence and near tragedy. Terror engulfs me. Fear crawls into my mind with tedious paralysis for I had seen the thing of the eye. I close my eyes to staunch the flood of it.

The darkness is fluid. I cannot see the stars in the infinite sky but I can imagine them as I stand on the balcony of my sister's flat. I have persuaded my brother-in-law to take me back before I saw worst of it. The brilliance of the Johannesburg lights outshines the moon and the stars. The sight of the lights from the seventeenth floor apartment across the sky is enigmatic. They separate the land between skyscrapers and the sky, and the people. People who are always in a perpetual rush, who appear as if they are always ready to depart, day or night. Bright colours, bright lights, gold teeth, knives, guns. Johannesburg. But the sky is as still as heated air from the abandoned noise at the bottom.

Excited voices, loud music spills onto the pavement under my feet. Nigerians, Congolese, Zambians rule the streets. Some Zimbabwean intellectuals lead the industry, former female civil servants mopping the floors and minding babies. Some male counterparts pick grapes and tend to gardens in the suburbs, *emakhishini*. Women sell wares and their crafts to bring groceries home. In their double-storey houses furnished with fear and hunger. There is no water, no power, no peace.

I am told that every Friday night mini-buses depart to the Sovereign State pulling trailers, eSibayeni, a centre for *Malayitshas* in Hillbrow. ESibayeni is a fenced enclave within the skyscrapers. The place is usually full of Tshangana bags with groceries to be put on top of dead bodies in the trolleys. Skeletons of men and women who died from a disease with no name. Oftentimes if one enquires about the cause of death at the victim's funeral one will be told that it was a long or short illness or that they had been on medication but the disease is not mentioned. It is never mentioned as the cause of death at funerals. It is a monster disease transmitted through unprotected sex with one or numerous partners. It used to scream its presence a few years back, but these days it can be difficult to tell the sick from the healthy. The anti-virus medication is now available to the people, all the people. Back then you could tell by red lips, slippery hair, unnatural slimming, eyes without signs of blood flowing from the eyes of those affected. It is a much-dreaded disease, but not here. Or it appears, fifty rand for those using protection and hundred rand for the 'live' encounter. The difference between life and death is a fifty rand note. Egoli. City of Gold.

I scarcely close my eyes that night.

I spend the Sunday indoors as my flight is cancelled by Air Zimbabwe with no explanation. I decide to go back to my cousin sister's place rather than stay at a hotel indefinitely. I need company and family. I live in isolation in Harare as most of my relatives are far away from me. I feel all alone every time I am troubled by business challenges. I need a break. Our savings have disappeared in banks, eroded by inflation as high blood pressure also rises with it. Some people also died with Zimbabwean dollars. Those who survived were left behind with nothing but debts. There was no way they could leave Zimbabwe without paying them all. Their integrity and credibility were so much at stake. It was not

their fault but they still endured it all.

My other cousin who visits me on Sunday is a teacher. She teaches at a high school here in Mzansi. She claims she has two murderers in her class. One boy murdered his stepfather for beating his mother to a pulp and other murdered his classmate at break time with a knife. She claims that there are four pregnant pupils in her class who attend lessons every day, well, if they can. Her story reminds me of my former classmate who fell pregnant and committed suicide out of shame whilst we were in form three. She had broken the school record which stood at ten years without such a thing happening. I missed her so much as we had acted Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* together, I, being the narrator and her, Romeo. That was the only pupil I knew of too who fell pregnant during my entire years at high school.

My flight is rescheduled for Monday at seven am. At least I can be in the office by half past eight in the morning. That is better, I think. My sister from Soweto volunteers to take me to the airport together with my nephew. My sister's husband works in Pretoria. He wakes up at three o'clock in the morning to take three trains before he arrives at the restaurant where he serves as a cleaner in the morning and a waiter later earning one thousand five hundred rands. He is a qualified accountant with CIS but no work permit yet. At home he lived comfortably with his family in a four-bedroom house in Matsheumhlophe in Bulawayo. Their big girl is currently at the University of Zimbabwe studying for a degree in Animal Science; her brother is at a boarding school. She is a housewife now. The factory she worked in for fifteen years shut down just before the introduction of the multicurrency system. They are renting their house in Bulawayo now for their children's school fees. She lives in the village, peasant farming.

We get to OR Tambo Airport at half past five in the morning, I check in but my flight is not showing on the electronic notice board. I send in my bag and shop around after persuading my companions not to leave me alone just in case our only aircraft has a puncture or something happens to it in Victoria Falls, Bulawayo or even Harare. Pilots could be on strike again. The challenges are endless.

It is eleven o'clock in the morning now. The information available is that it is delayed. Phone calls start coming from my office through my mobile phone. I am hounded. Creditors want to be paid. The bank has no money. Service providers have gone to lawyers, debt collectors. Employees have not reported for work yet. Most employers live on their nerves as it is difficult to manage people you have not paid. Some sell this and that in your time and still want to be paid end of the month. I had come to follow up on clients and investors. They told me they were still deciding, and weighing up the obvious risks. I am almost hopeless with them. What pushes me from day to day is hope. I hope for the best, am prepared for the worst and anything that comes in between wouldn't surprise me at all. I hope against hope.

It is three o'clock in the afternoon and my flight is still delayed. There are more women in the restroom waiting for the same flight. These women leave their breastfeeding babies to trade across the continent. It is them who hold the last threads of the economy

together. This group has been brought by the sympathetic South African Airways from China. They have been waiting for our Zimbabwe aircraft which was delayed by forty-eight hours without explanation there. They have not seen water in three days then they decide to dry wash in the toilets.

*‘maZimbabweans kea a tena, a tletse gohle mo, babangwe ba sadi ba gona ke ba le bahlapela ka mola dintlwaneng tsa basadi.Ke gore re ba romele go papago bona.* These Zimbabweans are a nuisance and are all over the show, some of the women were bathing in the ladies toilet. Just let them go.’

I smile a smile of those who do not cry as a fat woman cleaner complains to a man who appears to be a supervisor or someone senior. I wish I had all the supernatural godly powers to change our situation. The woman comes close to me and again emphasises how foolish these women are, now speaking in Zulu. I reply to her with a smile again as I dry my hands.

After an hour we are led to gate seventy-seven. A free South African aircraft would be organised to take us to Harare. We all walk to the departure lounge quietly. I try to read Ezekiel Mphahlele’s *Down Second Avenue*, but cannot concentrate. I try a spiritual book.

‘You know what I wonder when Africans will learn that we did not have boundaries in Africa some hundred years ago.’

‘Precisely my point Munya, who is a worse foreigner than in South Africa, a Malawian, Zimbabwean or someone who came from across the seas, put boundaries in Africa took the land from them and started selling it to the friends he had invited to come and enjoy the fruits of the land and the minerals from its belly!’

‘And that is their closest neighbour!’

‘Of course they are paid for being lazy, remember!’

An elderly woman takes pictures from her handbag, looks at them and wipes some tears off her cheek. The man’s comments must have reminded her of the people in those pictures. Another elderly man mumbles something; the dogs were sometimes set on my fellow desperate countryman. There was xenophobia in 2008. My niece and sister went to the balcony to wave me good-bye, if we left.

I meet my old friend Zinzile with her pilot husband who is now flying South African Airways. We greet each other in hoarse voices. We both shake our heads in disapproval but we do not say anything. We do not condemn or negate. We each hold our peace. She tells me they are visiting their home in Harare. I watch planes landing and taking off as it is a soothing pastime for the moment, with patience and good will. My ultimate quest is the desire for simple diversions to alleviate the tedium. I pursue peace and happiness but now I feel crushed to a pulp and put in a bottle, a hot bottle. Few could survive this murder, before birth, our message and ambitions are murdered as we remain in pallid silence. We watch them wipe all our knowledge out of their way.

Most people in the departure lounge display an unquenchable sorrow and sedentary posture,

with only fragments of our dignity left. The unscrupulously ambitious and unwaveringly egocentric individuals have drained the nation's blood. Most of us in the lounge are not glory seekers in Johannesburg. We have a goal. To survive and make others survive as well. Create employment. We want to nurture families which are breaking if not already broken. We are trying to exhaust every possibility of survival before giving in. My thoughts somersault deeper into my misery. I even imagine the ruins of the Parthenon and the thought leaves me in the deep end of my strength.

We walk into the waiting shuttle bus like crystal clear water, spring water, flowing to the desert, ready to disappear into the vast desert sands with no smiles or curses, our dignity eroded. There is no regeneration where we were going; it is like a deathward rush. With complacent looks we were going to cup our sovereignty with our hands and sip it like water in an hour's time. We have endured a day of ridicule and penetrating gazes. Some people are unsure of words to say to us, they fumble and fail but I hear their unspoken words. My pain has been inarticulate after I approached the airport with purposeful gaiety.

We climb the big bird's ladder with raw wounds and butchered minds. The big bird runs down the runway, first facing the Atlantic Ocean and then turns before gathering speed and momentum, it then heaves its heavy body up North, cutting through fluffs of clouds, leaving Johannesburg's hectic life below.

I pull my single small suitcase out of the airport to meet my daughter and colleague.

I give him the fifty rand note for fuel as his car is on emergency.

Tsitsi Nomsa Ngwenya October 2012