

A dollar for two

Nomsa Tsitsi Ngwenya
nomsaezweni@gmail.com

As the sun came out red – eyed from behind the canopy of trees, piercing people’s eyes like a needle – I neared the bus stop with a tired step. The sky was clear, so blue as it was unsoiled by any lace of clouds. I had been ascending an uphill path to reach this shimmering flatness of land in the heart of Harare’s Golden Triangle.

The force of air pounds down my lungs now, I had been breathing air which was trapped inside of me as I ascended. I try not to smell the fiery odour of the memories I want to forget. I try to bury my hurt in a steady zeal. I walk with my heart and limbs not with my soul. My soul is floating somewhere, floating the way spiders walk on water. I am going to search for peace, which has eluded me like a man I met on a vision. My life is an act of courage now, few would live under the circumstances I live under, every day.

People are bitter; they chew their hearts in turmoil every day. Their little eggs of hope are being crushed with boulders in the Golden Triangle. Where the rich and affluent live, or where they used to reside before fleeing to live in squatter camps in South Africa. Some went as far as England to do bum cleaning, most are scattered all over the world as far as Syria and Macedonia. Not that they wanted to, they had to survive.

A water delivery truck drives past and their assistants holler at me, at the same time mocking me as to why I do not have a car, yet I am dressed like I belong there, in the Golden Triangle. I forgive their limited intellectual capacity and unevolved conscience. I ignore them as I don’t want their voices to burn my already burnt nerves. I move towards the bus stop which is the shade of a tree, there are no benches as you would find in England; even big timeous buses disappeared well before the Zimbabwean dollar. I stand in the nature-given shade the of leaves of a Musasa tree. Water is sold for fifty dollars per 5000 litres, in the Golden Triangle. It is a thriving business but those who sell water deny that they sell the God-given liquid. They say the 50,00 dollars is a charge for fuel and their time. They would never sell water. The 5000 litres do not last one and a half weeks for an average family of six. The boys sound happy, I conclude they must have delivered a dozen tanks and collected a wad of Obamas.

Those with no tanks and no money to buy water are seen from time to time pushing wheelbarrows with all types of containers; including pots, anything that can hold water. Some maids balance 20 litre plastic containers like Stone Age village women, the only difference is that they wear tight jeans and hipsters, their hair long and shiny, beautiful, like that of white women. They descend with their purple and yellow hair from double and triple storey houses carrying tins, anything that can hold water, speaking in borrowed American and English ascents. The water they are fetching has new uses now, unlike during

the Stone Age. In the Golden Triangle, there is no green lawn to talk about like in most yards. Some tall, heavy winged grass peeps and hangs out from brick boundary walls, to some only the brown blade of grass, dead leaves under gigantic trees and dead golden maize stalks from the previous season of farming. We now farm in our yards and outside, in any free space where we also dump our rubbish, in rocky terrains and swampy marshes. We grow maize in the warm soil here and let the soils of the farms we repossessed tighten back to their virginity. Warm and wet marshes rouse the inner urges of yams, satisfying the insatiable throat of the earth carrying the Golden Triangle, where they lived.

Suddenly there are two women by the bus stop, one of which is given to much talking. She keeps on cutting off the other with much gesticulated emphasis. She is plump and pouting. There is a bucket of something which is constantly attracting flies – big green ones. She waves her fat hand over the bucket until she finally places her handbag on top of it. I am not sure if that will keep the flies away. She is wearing a bright coloured top, not very old, but not quite new either, her rings of dried and fresh sweat overlapping under her armpits. Her voluminous skirt flies and rests on top of the handbag on top of the bucket. She has beautiful short natural hair. She is sweating profusely.

The other woman is tall and slender and is wearing an African Zambian outfit, even though she sounds Zimbo. Her beautiful features seem to have been hardened by maternity. She habitually smooths her skirt with her hands as she listens to her friend. She nods her head to what her friend is saying; she must have been fertile ground for her friend's damaging words. Maybe she was already pregnant with them. The friend seems not to have a good word stuck to her tongue. She looks quite despicable and mean, even though she is quiet. Her mop of a wig falls in strands, covering her right eye. She keeps re-arranging it with the palm of her hand. "Woe to the person they are slandering", I think to myself. I do not go near them, afraid of catching their fever of rot, superstition and destruction.

"I am going to ask my son to e-mail the owner of the house and influence him to chuck them out. Then we will see what she is going to do with a week-old infant", went the fat mother.

"Oh, the wife has a baby already?"

"The baby looks exactly like the man next door."

"...for vegetables and water."

"One dollar for two by ten litres of water, ha, ha, ha!"

A miserable hearse of a metre taxi stops nearby the two babblers; it looks as if he had dropped off a client nearby, and of course he would not leave the precious greenback along the way. He offers us a ride at the same commuter omnibus fare we are waiting for. I walk to the taxi as well; happy that I would be dropped nearer to my destination.

"The taxi is full now, as it is we are already squashed", screams the fat woman.

"She can still find space, the back seats three people", pleads the taxi driver.

“We are squashed *mkwasha*, she can wait for a commuter omnibus. I have this bucket of fish as well so we can’t fit.”

“In a commuter omnibus you are made to squeeze each other four by four on a three-seater.”

“As you said this is not a commuter, she is not riding in here”, mumbles the slender woman.

“Sorry *maiguru*, you could have made yourself comfortable but your friends are refusing”, explains the driver.

“It is all right, I will catch the next lift,” I lift my hands in surrender as an omnibus stops just behind the taxi.

“Thank you for showing presence of mind *maiguru*.”

“So we do not have minds, hi! *mkwasha!*”, fumes the fat one, placing her famous bucket on the floor of the car.

“Copacabana, *maiguru* town, town, hey you taxi, we will get your licence revoked if you continue stealing our customers,” shouts the conductor to the taxi driver, his veins standing out in his face.

The culprit quietly drives away. I enter the bus to join two other people, excluding the driver and his conductor. Along the way we see an old man walking briskly, he turns only his head to look at our approaching bus behind him. I sit as if I do not want anyone to know I am about.

“*Mdara* get in, let’s go to town today we are going up to Fourth Street.”

“I do not climb on buses for poachers.”

“We are not poachers *mdara*, let’s go,” the conductor pleads as he opens the door for him. He thinks for a while and then leaps in.

“Is the road safe ahead?” the driver shouts at his colleague going the opposite direction.

“No, there are police at the end of the corner of Harare Drive and Drew Road – go the other way – and again before Glen Narah and Enterprise Road robots.”

“Town, town, sister, Copacabana,” they call at the two women walking by the side of the road. One is wearing a domestic servant uniform with a baby strapped at her back. The women look at the conductor and indicate that they are not going far.

“They belong to ZFA, don’t worry about them”, explains the old man.

“Zimbabwe Footing Association.”

“Uhm, yes, they are continuing with the Association.”

“Established 2005.”

The commuter omnibus stops for a beautiful girl who appears to be a student at some tertiary college. She does not get in immediately.

“Hey sister, are you possessed, why look at the bus as if you have a demon which needs to be appeased before it smells diesel,” the conductor shouts with his harsh and fowl breath, almost asphyxiating us. One could be forgiven to think that a civet cat resided in his mouth – and one under his armpits.

“I only have three rand and I desperately need to go”, pleads the girl with humility.

“Let’s go but don’t do it again tomorrow.”

“Are you going to give her bus fare then?” questions the old man.

“I am not her father old man and this is my office, I am at work!”

“I sell these at work because I have not received my salary for the past six months,” the old man lifts two pairs of plastic sandals from China.

“How much *mdara*?” enquires the conductor.

“You get two pairs for a dollar.”

“Let’s see”, a woman from the back seat extends her hand to the conductor, who passes them to her.

“They are nice but *mari handina*.”

“I could have afforded four pairs in a day if I had kept my job of picking grapes in the Western Cape, ha, ha, ha!” laughs the driver.

“Oh, so you are also a diasporian, I came back in early 2010, I was in KwaZulu-Natal Province.”

“*Mdara!* You too crossed the borders!” exclaims the conductor.

“What was I going to feed my family? I was also earning what everybody was earning. I took a teaching job at a private college.”

“Why did you then leave?”

“Xenophobia, besides earning peanuts. I would not even talk of the living conditions.”

“Put your fares together, one American dollar per two people parents, I have no change,” the conductor commands.

Four people climb into the bus before the Chisipite roundabout. Two pay a dollar after sorting themselves out, the other man pays four rand and the last five pula for the fare. It is well accepted. Two more people embark before Nazareth House, one pays with a ten rand note, another with a five American dollar note. The bus moves on and stops after a few metres for a young man who is flagging frantically.

“*Ndeipi?*” asks the young man as he enters the bus.

“*Tiribho*, where are you coming from this rich and affluent neighbourhood?”

“*Zvakapera izvo*, that is a myth now, these are suburbs for everyone”, interjects a woman

sitting next to the old man.

“Village people have better living conditions than most of these people now,” echoes someone at the front seat.

“*Kumusha kwakauya kutown*, I got a room to rent in the main house at a house near the shops,” answers the young man finally.

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“He, he, he!”

“And your business of supplying water to that Complex?” asks the driver.

“It has become lucrative now, we charge a dollar for two by ten litres required on the first floor; doubling as we go up the floor.”

“Where do you get water from?”

“From the communal borehole within the complex.”

“The situation reminds me of Mozambique during Samora Machel’s reign, and how you used to laugh at them calling them all sorts of names!” the old man comments.

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“He, he, he!”

“Ho, ho, ho!”

One woman in the bus wants to alight at the corner of Arcturus and Enterprise Road. The conductor has no change yet so he gives her a token, which she could use for her ride back on the same route. Tokens are laminated papers printed 50c on either side. There is no rising sun or Dr Martin Luther King’s head on them so we don’t know if they are Zimbabwean or American cents – the important thing is they serve their purpose.

“I need my money, I need a coin, I can’t take that token because I don’t live here”, complains the recipient.

“None of our business, town sister. Copacabana, if you do not want a token then buy your own car, town sister!”

“Copacabana sure, I am going somewhere near Rainbow Towers?”

“*Ka wani*, my sister.”

“Hey, you! Stop lying to customers! There is no commuter from this route which is allowed to rank at Copacabana!” shouts their colleague from another bus which had parked waiting for passengers.

“Know how to plough your field you scumbag!”

Upon hearing that, the young lady leaves the scene of the drama to hitch-hike for private

cars.

“Let her go to private cars to breastfeed frogs and snakes!”

“Ndiwo ato maCompany acho, he he he!”

“Ha, ha, ha! The things people would do in desperate times!”

“If you are not giving me my change I would rather come with you to town then you can give me my change there.”

“Suit yourself and get in quickly woman, we don’t have twenty hours to attend to your story.” Before the woman sits down the driver moves the bus so violently that she bumps against a steel pole which was supposed to be a seat, all her handbag contents spilling all over the bus.

“But you want our money.”

“Even you, left a wet towel at your house going to work, my children will ask how my day was, just like yours, you too want the money”, shouts back the conductor after spitting through the window.

“You should at least have some decency of apologising not insulting her.”

“I am not educated like you, but I take your children to school every day, so you should also show me some respect.”

I receive a text message on my phone, it is my friend Cindy, whom I had assisted with some airfare when she wanted to pursue her Masters degree in the United Kingdom back in 2007. My business was doing well then, but when she came back we were already using the multi-currency system. She was then employed by my friend who was running a freight company, before his sudden death from a stroke, which led to a heart attack the following year. She is currently working for one of the surviving big companies as a Human Resources manager.

Her company had flighted an advert for a marketing job and I learnt about it from the papers. When I called her earlier she said she would call back after five minutes. I called again after an hour but her phone was answered by someone else, who informed me that she was attending to a client. I needed a job and she knew it. She knew I was desperate for a job. We had celebrated her new car the previous weekend at her new house. I was happy for her. When she was first denied a study visa, I stayed with her for two months, encouraging her when she cried every night. It was after my author friend had written a letter pleading for her in her own handwriting that she was accepted. The message said her company could not have employed me because I was over qualified. She did not see the importance of letting me know.

I am stunned at her incredible response but I do not reply to it as I am not sure of what to say.

There is a road block before the robots. Two lady officers are signalling for the driver to stop. The driver swerves from the road and parks properly.

“Papers”

“You saw my papers Madam on my way to Greystone Park, there is no point of showing them to you as nothing has changed yet. You gave us a ticket, here it is if you have forgotten.”

“I don’t care! Go behind that truck over there”, she insists, pointing her finger to the said truck.

“We saw those Madam Officers on their way to Greystone Park. We will deal with them if they ignore our instructions and come back from town without the required papers”, reasons the male traffic officer.

“I have made my decision, I am sorry, behind the truck”, she motions with her hand as if shoeing chickens from her grandmother’s kitchen hut in the village. He shuffles his hands out of his back pocket and follows her blowing into the folded fingers of his hands. He comes back with furrows of anger on his forehead. He is sweating.

“Eve’s Squad.”

“*Iqembu lika Eva.*”

“*Chikwata chaEva*”, echoe some male passengers in the bus. All the women look down with shame.

“Bitch”, the driver mutters, though not loud enough, with unmentionable obscenities as he plays Mapfumo’s record.

“*Nyika yamaichemera yayita mamvemve.*”

The minibus is still not full. After the Newlands roundabout two elderly women climb in and after the robot more people climb in and the omnibus fills up. The driver stops after the robots and the conductor keeps on calling for more passengers.

“Where are they going to sit, how much is the omnibus?” asks the golden girl.

“If you want to buy the bus, ours is not for sale.”

“I want to pay for the ride, what are we waiting for anyway?”

“More passengers.”

“Where will they sit?”

“There is space.”

“We are late; we want to catch the only bus to Chirumanzu, *mzukuru.*”

“And that is my fault that you were waiting for your daughter-in-law to make tea for you!”

“There is no more buttercup, stock margarine and bread to go with your tea”, interjects the driver.

“Gone, gone, gone *ambuya*.”

“And that is my fault.”

“You wear people’s heads, no olivine or palm-olive soap for your groceries either.”

“Next time you visit, we know they can’t afford visiting you, bring maize meal, cow-beans, dried cattle and sheep fat and ...”

“Firewood.”

“Drinking water.”

“They fetch some to bath with from the surrounding streams, including the Mukuvisi River.”

“Town, Copacabana brother, get in.”

“I have two rand and a quarter of an American dollar coin.”

“Let’s go.”

The gentleman with a designer suit enters and squats at the front, there are no proper seats but just a rise with an almost flat base. He sits facing all other passengers except the two who sit at the front seat. His phone rings.

“I will give your money when I get it, I am in Victoria Falls right now, will only be in Harare on Thursday”, he cuts off the phone call and mumbles some inaudible curses.

“Is this your Victoria Falls my son?” asks the golden girl.

“*Mbuya*, leave him alone, do not humiliate and debase my customers! What kind of person calls for a debt on a Monday morning anyway?”

“He should go to the Reserve Bank and ask them to give him his converted trillions and zillions either to rands, pulas even Australian dollars!” someone interjects.

“Who is not humiliated every day anyway?”

“Yens.”

“No, we don’t want those people in our land!”

“They are here already, what will we do?”

“Those mean slave drivers!”

“My *mzukuru* who worked for them told me they give ten minutes lunch and they wait for you as you eat so you could go back to work, no day off, no leave!”

“In our land.”

“In our sovereign land.”

The man with the nice suit seems so unsettled, he keeps on fidgeting, ignoring his phone which is ringing non-stop. His hands are sweating and shaking and a horde of conflicting sentiments show on his face. He tries to look out of the window to get some fresh air but cannot. His improvised seat is too low for his comfort. The man looks like someone sitting on an alcove of death, on a voyage to a tragic place. I forget my own grief and sympathise with him for a moment. Life is devouring me like that spider which devours its partner after mating, rolling him to a stain. The mini bus stops for a young woman who is in the company of two men. She asks the conductor if there is enough space for her to sit. The conductor does not answer but insists on asking her if she wants to go to town or not. She then decides to go after she is promised a proper seat when someone alights before Police Headquarters, which is not very far from where the bus is, satisfied she sits with the agitated man. The bus moves and then stops at the bus stop and two people alight. The conductor then, instead of making the young woman seat on a proper seat as promised invites three passengers who immediately sit on the proper seats. Then verbal war breaks, the woman cannot contain the treachery. She screams for the driver to stop and demands her money back before alighting. When the driver and his conductor refuse she bits the conductor's hands at the same time stepping on his toes with her heels until he screams for the driver to stop the car. She then alights with the receipt book, threatening to tear it if they do not give her dollar back.

Two men passing by see the drama and try to hold her and bring her towards the bus but she overpowers one as she throws a fist which could even disembowel a military man at another. As the man falls down the conductor quickly snatches the book but before he boards the bus a missile rushes past his ear, then a stone which crashes the windows sending passengers for cover. The third stone hit the back of the bus with a loud bang which made other motorists lose control of their vehicles. I hold my spectacles as I also take cover between my legs. As all this is happening the bus is moving approaching the robots which turn green much to our relief. The woman runs but the bus snakes into the traffic until we lose sight of her. For some moments there is silence in the bus until the conductor speaks.

“Alight everyone, alight from my bus parents; this is our final destination.”

“Hey you, conductor, you promised you were going to Copacabana, how dare you short change us!”

“It is not our fault, we can't risk having our windscreen broken by the police.”

“You said Fourth Street. At least we could have planned our trips better.”

“Since when have you ever questioned anything unfair done to you? Is it because I am not educated? You welcome harassment and intimidation from those who sit there burning your money and dignity to ashes. I do not even have your change for your fare. We will meet on your way back. You have no cars of your own anyway, so we will meet again later!”

There is no joy at the Fourth Street bus terminal. I am paired with a guy who had paid with a ten rand note; I had paid with one American dollar note. We are now given a dollar, I

give up my 50 cents by buying a bottle of *maheu* energy drink I don't need and pass the change to my waiting partner. Two women who were also paired refuse to compromise. The vendors are of no help as they ask them to buy something first.

"You buy something."

"You buy too. I need the coin but I have no other", says the woman who had refused a token earlier.

"Who has it, with your dress you can't fail to have a coin, or you give it up."

"This is an insult. How dare you judge me with clothes my son bought me from Edgars Stores before the multi-currency system. If he was not killed through xenophobia in South Africa, it could have been better."

"You take it; I will walk home. We used to walk anyway in 2005."

The other woman walks away triumphantly. I give her a dollar quietly and another elderly man also gives her ten pula coins. A vendor gives her a bottle of *maheu* energy drink. A small crowd has gathered at the scene.

"That is Obama's money! It comes with its own problems."

"I agree, *muface, zvakapresser*."

"See this scar on top of my right eye? I was paired with a woman with a baby who also refused to buy her crying baby some yoghurt for her change. I ended up buying some *sadza* with some chicken liver sauce for my lunch and that cost sixty-five cents. She fed her baby from my plate to consume the fifteen cents' change. Whilst I was still enjoying the soup, in the blink of an eye, a hard blow stung me and sent me to the ground."

"Ha, ha, who from?"

"Ha ha ha!"

"Ho ho ho!"

"The husband; from nowhere he came. If it was not for the security guard who had seen us quarrelling before, I could be history by now."

"Oh, sorry, what do we do now?"

"Wait."

"For the rain, Zimbabwean dollar, referendum."

"I said wait."

"For the money in the bank, I saved, I banked."

"I said wait, quietly."

"Whilst my eyes swell, the swelling rising with inflation."

"I said, do what you know best, wait."

“Other people are failing to manage their weight.”

I said wait in the manner of a pregnant woman, in silence. It is the noisy bird which gets a stone from the catapult, if toilets could wait to be flushed at 7:30 in the evening. Bus drivers and conductors run around the termini looking for the change as street vendors scream dollar for two biscuits, sweets, cakes buns and fruit.