

Mama,
it starts with a dream. Always the same dream.

A man walks into a building.

Like the sun rising and never setting. Permanence. Like a dandelion blown. Everything dispersed. Never coming back together.

Something happens that can never be undone.

A man walks into a building. A song plays in the overhead speakers as the sun shines outside, bright, awash with light, and the newness of day. And then bang, or pop; and then darkness and then everything falls apart, like it always does, like it always will. Permanence.

A man lies under the weight of darkness. There is something in his mouth, something like metal, like grit, like grinding; like ebbing. He wonders why he cannot move, and remembers. He remembers. He is tired. He is thirsty. The something like sand is now in his throat. He wants to cough. He remembers. *Try not to move. Try. They will be here soon.* But they never come. And the dirt in his mouth and in his throat and in his eyes fills his lungs. An ebbing. A river flows, smooth. The darkness is strange and calm. He dips his feet in the river and feels nothing but sand. There is sand everywhere.

The darkness is firm. It holds him as everything falls apart. He looks into the river and sees nothing, only darkness. Is this it?

There are flashes of light deep inside him like a swallowed storm. Names appear, etched to the shore of his mouth, names that are erased by the tide of certainty that comes and goes. This is it. No, there is hope. This is it. No, I won't give up. This is it. No.

No.

He remembers.

Names.

Promises.

Laughter.

Sadness.

Tears.

Joy.

Dreams.

Memories.

He coughs a river.

This is it.

He pushes himself further in. First his feet, then his knees, then his waist, then his chest. And then his neck. What is left?

No.

He coughs again. His teeth grind the crystal shards together. His throat is an hourglass of time running out. This is it.

This is it.

His head submerges. Names erased. There is nothing left. Darkness falls.

Mama,
let me try this again.

You won't remember this.

A day. I don't remember what day, but a day. And I don't remember what brings me to your room but I stand there watching you. Your eyes move underneath their lids as if reading the sorrow etched on your forehead. And because I have recently taken to painting, I understand why the deep lines form shadows depending on the position of the light source.

A kick.

There is so much movement. A fly bangs itself against the window pane. A million particles float in the golden light.

Another kick. A twitch of the finger.

What is this language written in your skin?

Dreams?

Of what?

Loss?

How much?

Hope?

For what?

I am watching a stranger, a person who reminds me of someone I used to know, someone whose voice rose in me,

someone whose words created worlds, someone whose face reminded me of me. This is not Mama. This is not you. This is the body of a stranger lying on your bed.

Light lands on skin, is absorbed, is bounced back. Gold on brown birthing greens and blues and yellows.

Do you remember the time we went to the National Museum, the time I started crying when I saw the painting of the child holding the breast of its dead mother? How I stood there arrested, becoming the child holding a mother that was and was not, unaware of this change that had happened? Unaware.

“It’s okay, Ayub, It’s okay.” You said. Over and over again, saying nothing else, Arrested, too, by the image.

Or the time you got a phone call from Sister Sylvina, that our school bus had had an accident somewhere between Eldoret and Nakuru on our way from Uganda. The way you broke down as I told you how the bus had rolled seven times and how I had jumped out the window when the shell came to a halt, hitting my head on the dewy ground. How Daniel lost his finger. How the doctor pulled my skin like tough linen and pushed thread through numbness. How your son, who had left for the field trip still with the innocence of childhood, now explained how bones break and how body parts are severed by fast moving metal. How I slept in your bed for two weeks after the accident because Baba was in Malawi and because my bed reminded me of an empty smoking wreckage.

Is this what your eyes see as they move under their lids? Is this part of the story written on your skin?

I'm too big to sleep in your bed.

And this time Baba will not return.

Everything behind you is a broad muddy red. A golden streak lands on you, moving ever so slightly to the gliding sun. Your satin robe cuts your body in half, forming a river from your shoulder to your knee. Your arm runs across your stomach. Your head rests at an angle, regal. Always regal.

And I stand there, watching.

A child holds on to its mother's breast not completely aware of the change that has taken place.

Baba is dead. Everything is new. And yet, everything remains the same. This newness is absence, but these absent things remain written all around us.

What I'm trying to say, Mama, is that sometimes we go back. Sometimes go back, if only to leave this place of grieving, if only to find joy again. Like memories captured in photographs offering us transmission to those times apart from now - and a part, still, of now.

Like,

June 12th 1986.

Damp clouds. A promise from heaven. Entire oceans in clasped hands. Keep calm. Glimmer in eyes. The violence of separate independent lives becoming one. Community. Wings spread, pushing, lifting. Golden rings through which a possible life is pledged. *I now pronounce you husband and wife.*

This is how life will be: dreamlike, like rice falling from the sky, laughter, tears, light, magic.

The ultimate union.

And then,

Over the moon with dreams created from years of courtship. Mombasa. Waves hit rocks, a forever ritual. And sun-kissed skins create life.

Living on a promise. *Till death do us part.*

You hold the photo of a month-old me and you tell me how when I was born you were the happiest woman in the world. You hold me, your body trembling from a cold wind that blows from the open window behind us, the photograph cutting through the air like a broken propellor. The photograph: a child born on a Tuesday, the third day of the week, in the third month of the year, in the third to last year of the decade. Perfect symmetry.

“Three is the number of completion, Ayub, God’s number.”

I am 3. Trinity.

Creator,

redeemer,
sustainer.

Whole.

But this is months later. We go back:

“He looked so tired,” you say. “It was lunch time and he had left his office to bank some money. I was about to go for lunch when I saw him. I don’t know why but I waved my hand for him to come to my booth even though I was just about to go for lunch.” You flip the photo album pages slowly. Parts of the pages are torn and a few photos slide to the centre. This story has been told many times, a remix of a remix of a remix. This is one thing I like about you, how you tell certain stories over and over again, each time adding or leaving out a detail. This is how you remember, like painting, adding layers of colour and painting over others, over and over again.

And I still ask questions. I always do.

But this time, unlike the other times, there is no light in your eyes, no colour on your skin. You are a black and white photo of a woman sitting by the window, too far in your sorrow for the light to reach you, remembering.

“We talked about the traffic, the weather, silly things, anything to keep us talking to each other. He told me...” you stop and put your voice down, take a breath and pick up your voice and continue, “... he told me he liked my smile. And then he asked me

out on a date.” There is something like a smile on your face, fleeting, a gentle stroke too slight to last. “I told him I would think about it.”

A remix of a remix. Parts left out, too big, too jagged, too much to be told this time.

And then, the almost-smile fades, your eyes looking at something but not quite seeing it, you say, “he looked so ridiculous in those boots.”

In other versions, Baba comes to pick you up two Saturdays after you meet. Baba had called you from the red phone booth outside Cucu’s shop. Remember when you saw him you almost ran back into the house? “I was horrified,” you say laughing and Baba interrupts saying it was not *that bad*. “He had a blue denim shirt, tight blue jeans that he had tucked into these brown boots...”

And then a soft light grows on your face. You are now laughing almost like you always do. It sounds like a gargle, blooming, but not quite, like a Morning Glory only revealing part of its purple, waiting for the sun to rise.

“He looked so ridiculous.”

What do we love about stories, Mama? How much of ourselves do we present? Leave untouched? This act of turning the folds of

memory if only to find something like a light to guide us through this grieving.

Till death do us part.

And then,
nine months later.

March 3rd 1987.

“When you were born I was the happiest woman in the world.”

Mama,

I am welcomed into this world by the dampness of you. Salty like sweat and tears. You hold me, your suffering now love, joy, rage, laughter. You tell me I cried so much that it was as if I was not ready for your love, this love that pulls me to the centre like photos in an old album. But I am pulled. And I fall. Into a love that is in itself a universe. Nothing has existed before it. It is a love guided by its proximity to grief. The grief of always losing. And because of this love I am beautiful, a mirror, a bouquet of memories blooming. You listen to me as my voice searches the night, as the doctor places me onto your waiting arms, swaddled in softness. Your eyes join in the search, regarding this miracle.

“It was such a difficult pregnancy. We thought we were going to lose you.”

This is what you say. This is all I know of my coming to this world. Difficulty. And when you tell me this story I plant a seed in my heart:

Let it all end here—

let her fall into a pit
and find a meadow.

I was too tired to pass through your body and you were too tired to push me along. But there we were, both of us, still strangers, already tired of this miracle, learning to be tired together, to let go together.

Baba holds your hand the entire time as your voice scatters in the air and crashes his bones. He only lets go when you let go to hold me. There is no distance between us, only a lifetime. I stay cradled in your arms, the child who stayed, an entire life forming.

And then,

August 7th 1998.

An entire life, like a brown muddy river cut off somewhere, ebbs into nothing.

Mama, I am trying my best here.

I am remembering this time we were walking, Baba and I, to Juma's. My hair was sparse lentils on a plate and he couldn't have any of it. "Time for a haircut," he said, running his palm over my head. We had just passed the abandoned cattle dip past the groups

of boys playing bano on the dusty pitch where they showed old kung fu films.

“Can I go?” Remember how I always asked?

And how Baba always said “when you are older. It’s not safe.” But he never told me what I wouldn’t be safe from and so I would go back to the time they found a dead man dumped in the cattle dip, his decomposing body bathing in the dark sludge that had collected at the bottom of the dip. There he lay with the ghosts of dead ticks removed from smooth cow skin. I imagined a knife through skin, through flesh, a body thrown in over the metre high wall bleeding, silently, while *Enter the Dragon* showed, becoming like water.

What does it mean to become like water?

Does water forget?

The cows splashing through it

The ticks remaining, dying

The lives lost in it?

“When you are older.”

But I’m never old enough to get over the fear of water, never old enough to feel safe.

Baba always told Juma to add alcohol to the shaver. Always. And he did, until his hands were cold with evaporation.

“You can get AIDS from cuts.”

Even at Juma's, this man who knew my head like a map, we were never safe. He placed the shaver on my skin and I felt the ghost ticks. Millions of them.

I am remembering,
Are you?

And when Juma asks if I want a *cut*, and he always asks, Baba says no. He asks, always, because it pains him to let me walk out with undefined edges, a sandy beach littered with drifting baby hair.

This Saturday, Mama, you are in hospital. I am going to have a little sister. We are going to visit you after I get my haircut. One of the boys playing bano shouts "CRACKINGS NO PAYINGS" and we both turn to look. An argument builds, rises. I feel his arm on my shoulder and we both look ahead at the dusty road.

"I miss Mama," I say, "I'm happy I get to see her today". And he removes his hand from my shoulder holding his gaze, giving a moment and then says:

"We are lucky Mama is fine, Ayub. Sometimes things do not go as planned and we lose the people we love.

Death is a horrible thing."

It seems strange now, like an exaggeration, this move from feeling your absence to the nature of death.

These memories are the background, broad strokes on which everything rests. Isn't that what memory is? The first strokes, the foundation? The thing behind the thing here, now?

Still, in your grief, you remain distant, a figure far away on a ship sailing from and toward. And I remain like a lover waiting on the harbour separated by water, still learning to be like water.

To be the separation and the connection.

The child who stayed.

Do you remember when you bought me the coloured pencils for art class? Later, after the excitement had died down, an inexplicable sadness washed over me because I knew they were the expensive kind and if you wanted you could have gotten me the other ones. While you were boiling water to make ugali, I put away the colouring book and asked you what colour August was and you told me that:

August is the colour of ghosts. Colours we only see through closed eyes.

The colour of absence.

And as you spoke I closed my eyes and saw absence all around us as warm light bouncing off the shiny stainless steel cooker, a rainbow cast above the spice-rack.

Paprika reds.

Turmeric oranges.

Curry yellows.

Oregano greens.
Plastic jar blues.
And the wall, all of the purples.
The colours of absence
of madness
of sadness
of fear.
August.

When you come back from the hospital, you stay in bed for six days. “You need to get some exercise, that’s what the doctor says.” Baba’s voice is too weak to lift anything. And on the seventh day, there you are standing next to the kitchen sink holding a glass under a waterfall that does not stop. I watch you lift the glass to your mouth, slowly, spilling water all the way. The tap is still running. And then you choke, cough, and I hold my breath. I walk towards you and turn the tap. A dribble runs down the side of your mouth. And then you place the glass on the sink and pull me close to you. Softly. Then tightly.

“I’m sorry.” You say.

I stand there pressed against you, the landscape of your body rising and falling. Your body the shape of absence, the colour of madness, sadness, and fear.

You smell like a deep vacant blue.

“I’m sorry.”

I feel the ghosts inside you. Flesh on flesh. Silence.

And when I want to speak,

I choose not to and instead I hug you back, tightly, my arms around you like spiral shavings from a newly sharpened pencil.

And

I choose not to not ask:

“Where is the baby?”

Do you remember, Mama?

How you talked about Gakenia like she was already there. “Put your hand here, Ayub. Can you feel her kicking?”

So young, I thought, the age at which we learn to kick the walls that hold everything together.

But you too chose to stay.

Mama,

maybe I should have started with easier times, the good days like when we sat in the sitting room and watched Burudani; the women, their bodies like blue sequined waterfalls, swinging to Rumba and Taarab, waves hitting against the rocks behind them curving abstract altars to the gods of the sea. We saw them:

colours

ocean

music;

freedom.

Remember how Juma Mdudu came up between the songs, laughing, excited, speaking a language that ran like blue water colours, a language I understood in parts, a language that came back to me years later when everyone who met you asked if you had lived in Mombasa?

“Naam, kwa majina kamili wananiita Juma Mdudu. Hapa katika Burudani wananiita Le Grand Mighty Kuku Ngwendu Wa Za Banga manake ndio wale watu wazito wenye rumba la kuanzia wakati wa Kalle mpaka kina Mzee Luambo Luanzo Makiadi. Kwa kifupi ni kwamba, hapa katika Burudani, wewe kazi yako ndugu yangu unaosha mikono halafu unakaa kitako.”

And there we sat as requested by the man in the TV, music, like painting, building upon tradition, layers of history and ways of making. Sound, like colours, layered upon each other. Melodies created from base notes, tones from a palette. A kick and snare paced to the artist’s movement and then a guitar, a tune formed, and then more colour to create harmonies; running notes, voices, trumpets, a spattering of percussion. Music. Music holding us, pulling us closer to each other.

Do you remember, Mama?

Do you remember that Friday morning about two weeks before school opened? The week you told me to “go through my books” and “prepare for school” breaking our ritual? Do you remember I

was sitting at the dining room table while you waited for Burudani to start? I remember.

I remember I was reading about folding, thinking about how the Rift Valley was formed. I remember thinking about the earth splitting, some twenty two million years ago, pulling itself apart and fracturing within itself. I remember thinking of two tectonic plates pulling apart and everything between them sinking to fill the empty space created. Rifting. I remember.

And,

I remember you standing in front of the TV, which was unusual because, A) you usually sat on the long sofa next to the window, and B) you had been whispering "Jesus!" every seven seconds and I knew this because I was no longer thinking about rifting but holding my left hand in front of me, fist clenched, my little finger sticking out, counting the sixth *Jesus*.

I remember standing next to you when you called Jesus for the eighth time.

And I remember August, the colour of ghosts, through a 25-inch Sony Trinitron screen. Thousands of pixels. Image upon image: smoke, dust, rubble. Suffering. Grief. There was no Burudani, only this thing we were looking at, this thing pulling everything apart. Rifting. A man in a blue suit spoke but his words ran like water colours only the red words beneath him staying: BREAKING NEWS

and then

a building broken apart

and people

like ants

one

on

top

of the other

bloody and confused and hurt and lost and wandering, like
bougainvillea petals in the wind

or

pearls scattered, rolling over a once-marble floor. The air behind
the man was too thick for birds and so ember and ash flapped their
wings against the once-blue August sky as the man spoke about a
bomb here (or there) and in Dar-es-salaam, and names were thrown
at us as if we would know what to do with them, names that
sounded strange to me, like the words that came out of Juma
Mdudu's mouth

and I moved closer to you so that my shoulder was touching
your arm

and I was not dreaming.

Or maybe I shouldn't have started so far from the end, when
death came to visit, and called me by the wrong name.

Maybe I should have started a little bit later, after everything
between us had stopped falling within itself.

Dear Mama,

Like stars,

the constellation of bulbs hang off hasty wiring drawing moths and mosquitoes, and midges from the surrounding darkness. Movement like black and white ocean waves. The visitors milled about the tent and the house and the compound, sombre bodies sailing the winds of our sorrow. There were tears and there was laughter. There was music and there was silence.

And,

there was food, because hungry stomachs do not mourn properly.

And,

there was a framed picture of Baba on a white-draped table, because to remember is to make present.

And as we sat there next to Baba's portrait, the sky was split at its helm. Pearls falling from the sky. The whole world wept.

Mama,

only now have I allowed myself to let go of the promises. "Next December we will go to Mombasa" but December will come and pass and then twenty-one Decembers will come and pass and I will be left with his words in my hands, too vast, like an ocean. I still see him being lowered into the grave, and as I write this I feel it. If a whole life can be fit into a hole in the ground so can an ocean be

held. I can still feel the soil leaving my palm. I can still hear the soil knocking on the coffin.

And this is how I remember him
as earth moving, moved
As flowers in the wind
and
as you, Mama, breaking
and tearing my heart apart.

Yet, Mama, here I am. The years a bridge of shattered glass. Here, still unable to say this thing to you, you who chose to stay, and me, like Baba, like Gakenia, unlike you, unable, any longer, to stay.

This time death calls me by my name. And there is nothing left to say.