

Butterflies

I see her sometimes, usually when I least expect it: a reminder of her. In the bow of a lip: an outline a blind man could trace with his fingertips. The curve of the continent in the sweep of a skull, in the soft moulding of a profile. A man in a bus. Sitting alone. Tall above the slumped bodies of the other passengers: a surviving lily in a bowl of wilting flowers. For several seconds I gazed up at him. He never looked my way. The bus moved off over the bridge and I watched it go. And for a moment I felt it, the tightening in my guts, the drifting melancholy - the return of a forgotten nostalgia.

On Sunday mornings I have seen her in the shape of a thousand butterflies winging their way down the Old Kent Road, where only hours before razor cut youths stumbled out of doorways and bare legged, bare foot girls walked home – holding onto their handbags and high heels. The butterflies' dark heads were crowned with turbans, their bright robes like great iridescent wings billowed in the gusts of air from the passing traffic. In twos and threes they came together to form a colourful cloud, a great host of butterflies winging their way through the grey walls of the city to spiritual pastures: to the People of Destiny Mission, to the Temple of Christ, to Our Lady's Church of Everlasting Hope.

What do they pray for, I wonder? Held captive by fate and history in this dark country.

For some miracle, a pair of ruby slippers? A click of the heels, a spinning tornado to whisk them up and set them down again in a place far, far away - beneath a burning amber sun.

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Abie, 2003

The Women's Gardens

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It began with a letter, as stories sometimes do. A letter that arrived one day two winters ago, bearing a stamp with a black and white kingfisher, the damp chill of the outside air, and the postmark of a place from which no letter had arrived for a decade or more. A country that seemed to have disappeared, returned to an earlier time, like the great unfilled spaces on old maps where once mapmakers drew illustrations of mythical beasts and untold riches. But of course the truth is this story began centuries ago, when horsemen descended to the plains from a lost kingdom called Futa Djallon, long before Europe's mapmakers turned their minds to the niggling problem of how to fill those blank spaces.

A story comes to mind. A story I have known for years, it seems, though I have no memory now of who it was who told it to me.

Five hundred years ago, a caravel flying the colours of the King of Portugal rounded the curve of the continent. She had become becalmed somewhere around the Cap Verde Islands, and run low on stocks, food and water. When finally the winds took pity on her,

they blew her south west towards the coast, where the captain sighted a series of natural harbours and weighed anchor. The sailors, stooped with hunger, curly haired from scurvy, rowed ashore, dragged themselves through shallow water and on up the sand where they entered the shade of the trees. And there they stood and gazed about themselves in disbelief. Imagine! Dangling in front of their faces: succulent mangoes, bursts of starfruit, avocados the size of a man's head. While from the ends of their elegant stalks pineapples nodded encouragingly, sweet potatoes and yams peeped from the earth, and great hands of bananas reached down to them. The sailors thought they had found no less a place than the Garden of Eden.

And for a time that's what Europeans thought Africa was. Paradise.

The last time I thought about that story was a week after the letter came. By then I had left London - the city I now call home - to follow the letter's route in reverse to the place from where it had come and beyond. I was standing in a forest just like the one the sailors had stumbled into. And I remembered how in the early morning I used to watch my grandmothers, my grandfather's wives, leave their houses and make their way down the same path upon which I was standing, towards their gardens. One by one each woman parted from her companions and went to her own plot, whose boundaries were marked by an abandoned termite hill, a fallen tree, an upright boulder. There, among the giant iroko's, the sapeles and the silk cotton trees of the forest, she tended the guavas, paw paws and rose apples she had planted there. Then she weeded her yams and cassava

where they grew in the soft, dark earth and watered the pineapple plant that marked the centre of her plot.

I thought of the sailors' story. And for a long time, I thought it was just that. A story. About how Europeans discovered us and we stopped being a blank space on a map. But months later, after the letter arrived and I traced its arc and came to land with a soft thud in an enchanted forest, and after I had listened to all the stories contained in this book and written them down for you, that one story came back to me. And I realised the story was really about something else. It was about different ways of seeing. The sailors: blind to the signs, incapable of seeing the pattern or logic, just because it was different to their own. And the African way of seeing: arcane, invisible yet visible, apparent to those who belong.

The sailors saw what they took to be nature's abundance and stole from the women's gardens. They thought they had found Eden, and perhaps they had. But it was an Eden created not by the hand of God, but the hands of women.

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The letter that brought me back to Africa came from my cousin Alpha. I didn't recognise his hand on the envelope, he had never written to me before. Alpha had once been a teacher, but in those changed days he made his living composing letters for other people. People who took their place opposite him one by one, clutching a scrap of paper bearing

the address of an overseas relative or else the business card of some European traveller-unwittingly exchanged in a moment of good humour for a lifetime of another person's hopes. Alpha conveyed greetings, prayed for the recipient's health, invoked the memory of the dead, and wrote hereby merely to inform them of the sender's situation, the dislocations and hardships of the war. Sought their help in solving their many difficulties. By God's grace. Thanking them in advance.

And then he swivelled the letter around to face his customer, for their perusal and signature. They nodded, feigning comprehension. And signed with a knitted brow and a wobbling hand the letters of their name learned by heart. Or else they pushed a thumb onto the opened ink pad, and left a purple thumbprint like a flower on the bottom of the page.

My own letter was written on a single side of paper taken from a school exercise book. No crossings out, no misspellings – suggesting it had been drafted beforehand and carefully copied out. Alpha's signature was at the bottom of the page. Alpha Kholifa, plainly executed without flourishes, a simple statement. He used his mother's name, the same as mine, so there could be no mistake. The other thing I noticed, only after I had read the letter through, was the absence of a return address. Knowingly, he had denied me the opportunity to write back with ready excuses, to enclose a cheque bloated with guilty zeros.

The letter contained not a single request or plea. The sum of it was held within two short sentences.

The coffee plantation at Rofathane is yours. It is there.

O yi di. In our language: it is there. Alpha had written to me in English, but the words, the sensibility was African. In our country a person might inquire of another after the health of a third. And the respondent, wishing to convey that the individual was less than well, requiring the help of God or man, might reply: *O yi di.* He is there. She is there. The coffee plantation at Rofathane is yours. It is there.

He did not ask me to come back. He willed it.

The letter finished in the conventional manner. Alpha enquired after my husband, whom he had met once, the last time I went back. We had taken the children, to be seen and admired by family and friends, though they – the children, that is - were too small then to have any memory of the visit. I remember my aunts called my husband the Portuguese One, the *potho*, which has become our word for any European. After those sailors who landed and kept coming back. Named the country. Set up trading posts. Bred bronze coloured Pedro's and Maria's. And disappeared leaving scattered words as remnants of their stay. Oporto. Porto. Potho. The tip of the tongue pushed against the back of the teeth, a soft sound. Over the years the word had moulded itself to the shape of an African mouth. It did not matter to them, my aunts - that my husband was, in fact, a Scot.

The morning after the letter arrived I woke to a feeling, which I mistook at first for the chill that follows the end of a warm dream. A sense of apprehension, of an undertaking ahead. I knew I had left it long enough. I sat up and shook my husband's shoulder - my Portuguese Scottish husband – I told him I must go.

And so it happened that I was there, standing in the forest among the women's gardens, remembering my grandmothers. Beyond the trees their daughters were waiting for me. Four aunts. Asana, daughter of Ya Yima, my grandfather's senior wife, a magnificent hauteur flowed like river water from the mother's veins through the daughter's. Gentle Mary, from whom foolish children ran in fright, but who braided my hair, cared for me like I was her own and talked of the sea and the stars. Hawa, my nemesis since childhood. Enough of her. And Serah, belly sister of my father, who spoke to me in a way no other adult ever had – as though I might one day become her equal.

The stories gathered here belong to them, though now they belong to me too, given to me to do with them as I wish. Just as they gave me their father's coffee plantation.

That day I walked away from the waiting women, into the trees and towards the water: the same river that further on curled around the houses, so the village lay within its embrace like a woman in the crook of her lover's arm. Either side of the path the shadows huddled. Sharp grasses reached out to scratch my bare ankles. A caterpillar descended on an invisible filament to twirl in front of my face, as if surveying me from every angle

before hoisting itself upwards through the air. A sucker smeared my face with something sticky and unknown. I paused to wipe my cheek in front of a tall tree with waxy, elliptical leaves. Along the branches hung sleeping bats, like hundreds of swaddled babies. As I watched a single bat shifted, unfurled a wing and enfolded its body ever more tightly. For a moment a single eye gleamed at me from within the darkness.

Here and there scarlet berries danced against the green. I reached through the cobwebs, careful of the stinging tree ants, and plucked a pair. I pressed a fingernail into the flesh of a berry and held it to my nose. Coffee. The lost groves. All this had once been great avenues of trees.

And for a moment I found myself in a place that was neither the past nor the present, neither real nor unreal. *Rothoron*, my aunts called it. Probably you have been there yourself, whoever you are and wherever in the world you are reading this. *Rothoron*, the gossamer bridge suspended between sleep and wakefulness.

In that place, for a moment, I heard them. I believe I did. A child's laugh, teasing and triumphant, crowning some moment of glory over a friend. The sound of feet, of bare soles, flat African feet pat patting the earth. A humming - of women singing as they worked. But then again, perhaps it was just the call of a crane flying overhead, the flapping of wings and the drone of the insects in the forest. I stood still, straining for sound of their voices, but the layers of years in between us were too many.

I passed through the ruined groves, of the coffee plantation that by then was mine. Not in law, not by rights. Customary law would probably deem it to belong to Alpha, Asana's son. But it was mine if I wished, simply because I was the last person with the power to do anything with it.

Down by the water, under the gaze of a solitary kingfisher, a group of boys were bathing. At the sight of me they stopped their play in order better to observe my progress, which they did with solemn expressions, kwashiorkor bellies puffed out in front of them like pompous old men, sniffing airily through snot encrusted nostrils. I smiled. And when they smiled back, which they did suddenly, they displayed rows of perfect teeth. One boy leaned with his arm across his brother's shoulder, his eyes reclining crescents above his grin, and on the helix of his ear the cartilage formed a small point in exactly the same place as it does on my son's ear. I had bent and kissed that very place as he lay sleeping next to his sister, before I left to catch my early morning flight.

And later, inside my grandfather's house, I pushed open the shutters of a window, finely latticed with woodworm. The plaster of the windowsill was flaking, like dried skin. The clay beneath was reddish, tender looking. In the empty room stood the tangled metal wreck of what was once a four poster bed. I remembered how it was when my grandfather lived and I came here as a child on visits from the city on the coast where my father worked. Then I sat bewildered and terrified before him, until somebody – a grandmother, an aunt – picked me up and carried me away. It was only the fact that my

father was the most successful of his sons, though still only the younger son of a junior wife, that made him deign to have me in his presence at all.

In the corner a stack of chests once stood, of ascending size from top to bottom. Gone now. Fleetinglly I imagined the treasures I might have found inside. Pieces of faded indigo fabric. Embroidered gowns crackling with ancient starch. Letters on onionskin parchment. Leather bound journals. Memories rendered into words. But, no. For here the past survives in the scent of a coffee bean, a person's history is captured in the shape of an ear, and those most precious memories are hidden in the safest place of all. Safe from fire or floods or war. In stories. Stories remembered, until they are ready to be told. Or perhaps simply ready to be heard.

And it is women's work, this guarding of stories, like the tending of gardens. And as I go out to them, my aunts, silhouetted where they sit in the early silver light of dusk, I remember the women returning home at nightfall from their plots among the trees.

And I wonder what would they think if they came here now, those hapless port drinkers.

Of all the glorious gifts the forest had to offer – fresh coffee.