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Language, Violence and Landscape in Yvonne Vera's *The Stone*
Virgins
-and-
Ekhaya: The Years of Childhood.

Frank Thabani Sayi, BSc, MA

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirement of the Degree
of Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

This thesis is presented in two parts – a Critical Thesis and a portfolio of Creative Writing. My Critical Thesis explores how violence in Zimbabwe necessarily derives from the question of the land. That it has a historical resonance that stretches from the fight for independence, to the post-independence internecine violence and to the present day. Given the unparalleled levels of violence, particularly violence against women, I interrogate the genealogy of this violence, in order to explore the basic assumptions of my thesis; that its aetiology, signs and symptoms, can only be read and understood in the context of past national trauma and group dynamics. I ponder the ways in which violence dominates Zimbabwe's collective unconscious as a major part of its psychic history. And by contemplating violence as a mode of relating that shapes the myriad of ways in which Zimbabweans relate to, and treat each other, I try to establish the trajectory of this violence well into the future. To do so, I use a nuanced reading of Yvonne Vera's novel, *The Stone Virgins*. By focusing on language, violence and landscape, my reading of Vera's novel places it within an interpretive context of history, memory and trauma studies. This allows me to interrogate the complex nexus between Zimbabwe's history of violence, and the role played by political violence in the formation, sustenance and maintenance of what I propose to call Zimbabwean masculinities. It is also through this nuanced reading of *The Stone Virgins* that the thesis explores the complex, social, political and violent cultural practices which I believe have led to the distinctive nature of Zimbabwean masculinities. The thesis also explores how Vera's literary works address the estrangement of people and language from the landscape, both physical and internal, and the way in which her novel seeks to describe, and at the same time contextualise, the way in which violence turns familiar spaces into inhospitable terrain. In discussing *The Stone Virgins*, it is my contention that Vera's narrative structure, and her characters, and by extension Zimbabwean masculinities, necessarily derive from such a deformed, violated and sometimes violating landscape. My short stories compliment the Critical thesis with its theme of language, violence and landscape in the context of war and its aftermath.

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Language, Violence and Landscape in Yvonne Vera's *The Stone Virgins*.

Introduction

I have crossed the taboos. And therefore that is different. To explore, not with romanticism, women's characters. But with accepting the violence that accompanies their existence. That's what I have done differently. And to have understood the intimate complexity of their mental worlds, and their emotions, and to have explored those moments of tragedy without, you know, withdrawing from them: without covering up. To go into the moment of abortion and say it; and moment by moment of a woman's feeling of tenderness of herself, and violence towards herself: both those things.¹

Yvonne Vera, writer, feminist, and intellectual was born in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, in 1964.² Her birth straddled two very significant periods in Zimbabwe's short history, both of which influenced her writing in unpredictable ways. The first was the war of liberation, which occurred during her childhood, closely followed by the post-independence internecine war, which she dramatized in *The Stone Virgins*.³ She had an itinerant childhood, during which she followed her mother, Ericah Gwetai, a schoolteacher, across the length and breadth of Zimbabwe. However, by far the greatest influence in her life was her great-grand mother Masidengere: traditional healer, spiritual medium and storyteller. As a child, Vera read extensively, particularly English literature. By the time she reached secondary school, she was recognised for her wide erudition. In 1984 Vera qualified as a teacher at the prestigious Hillside Teachers' College in Bulawayo. In the same year she met John Jose, a Canadian national whom she later married in 1987. Vera moved to Canada where she enrolled at York University, and would later graduate with a Doctorate in Comparative Literature.

¹ Ranka Primorac, 'The Place of the Woman is the Place of the Imagination', in *Emerging Perspectives on Yvonne Vera*, ed. Helen Cousins and Pauline Hodgson-Katiyo (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2012), pp. 384-5.

² Ericah Gwetai, *Petal Thoughts: Yvonne Vera, A Biography* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 2009).

³ Yvonne Vera, *The Stone Virgins* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002).

According to her mother, Vera's writing began in earnest with the publication of her first short story: *Why Don't You Carve Other Animals* in 1992. Sadly, Vera contracted HIV/AIDS and died of AIDS-related meningitis in Toronto, Canada, in 2005.

Much has been said about Vera's HIV status, particularly the way her condition is supposed to have influenced her writing. There is a claim that she saw her diagnosis as a death sentence and that it infused her writing with a certain urgency, as she was aware of her imminent death. However, what is evident from the testimonies of those closely associated with Vera, is that she was 'different things to different people' and that each relationship she had was unique. Erica Gwetai, her mother, has said that she was temperamental, strong-minded and very stubborn. However, throughout her dealings with those closest to her, Vera never revealed her diagnosis; it was a secret she kept until her death. Her critics have been quick to criticise her over her silence regarding one of the most devastating pandemics to affect women in Africa. However, to her husband, John Jose, Vera's writing had always been about her illness.⁴

Vera left behind incredible works of literature, written over a very short period. Her fiction derives from very pivotal moments in Zimbabwe's history: *Nehanda*, 1993, marks the beginning of colonialism; the moment in which White colonialists intrude on the African Landscape—both the psychological and physical landscape.⁵ *Butterfly Burning*, 2000, foregrounds the manifestations of that intrusion⁶, and *The Stone Virgins*, 2002, the uprising that finally dislodges the colonial intrusion; and the aftermath of the trauma of war of liberation, its impact on ordinary Zimbabweans, and the beginning of the post-independence internecine war.⁷ *The Stone Virgins* became the touchstone in Vera's activism as a writer, feminist, survivor, and witness to traumatic events. Vera's encounter with stories of rape in the milieu of the *Gukurahundi* atrocities propels her narrative in

⁴ See John C. Hawley, 'I enter into Its Burning': Yvonne Vera's Beautiful Cauldron of Violence', in *Emerging Perspectives on Yvonne Vera*, ed. Helen Cousins and Pauline Dodgson-Katiyo (London: Africa World Press, 2012), p. 64.

⁵ Yvonne Vera, *Nehanda* (Harare: Baobab Books, 1993).

⁶ _____, *Butterfly Burning* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000).

⁷ _____, *The Stone Virgins*.

The Stone Virgins.⁸ As such, the power in her writing lay in her ability to witness, to listen, and to convey that experience on behalf of others. According to her mother:

[Vera] Displayed an amazing capacity to be able to derive inspiration for writing from images of her past. She always found the language that depicted an incident clearly and vividly. Her ability to highlight a state of mental and physical suffering and helplessness was [...] detailed.⁹

The Stone Virgins is set during the last phase of the war of liberation, through the brief interregnum, straight through to the 1980-1988 internecine conflict. Therefore, it binds together the narratives from two wars, and acts as a lens through which the implications of gendered violence against women on the margins of Zimbabwean society can be viewed—what Vera aptly describes as ‘women’s encounter with brutality’.¹⁰ Surprisingly, however, Vera neither absolves nor condemns the perpetrators of violence in *The Stone Virgins*. Nor does she dwell much on the structural causes of such violence. Even though she alludes to these causes in passing, her focus appears to be the minutiae of what it means for a woman, primarily, to be caught-up in the middle of the violence:

A woman is in the forest; she is alone, the ground is bare. What is her relationship to this landscape, and who is she in this moment? She’s endured all these things, but at this moment her mind is collapsing. How does she endure this moment? And not only this moment, but everything else that she’s gone through. I try and connect these two things, so that the individual is not isolated—though they are offered in isolation. I use the isolated individual to explore how they are connected to everything else.¹¹

Like Ghassan Kanafani’s tale of the 1948 Arab-Israel war—*The Land of Sad Oranges*¹², Vera’s *The Stone Virgins* has little to do with ‘the military details

⁸ *Gukurahundi* soldiers or Fifth Brigade as they were popularly known in Zimbabwe, were a brigade of soldiers who swore allegiance to Robert Mugabe. ZANU (PF), (Zimbabwe African National Union—Patriotic Front), was until recently, Zimbabwe’s dominant political party. *Gukurahundi* soldiers were ex-ZANLA (Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army), guerrillas who fought against White Rhodesian occupation in the war of liberation. They had their own chain of command and were answerable only to the President himself. It is said that within their first week of deployment in Matabeleland, more than 20,000 civilians had been killed. For an in-depth study of the Matabeleland Massacres, see *Gukurahundi in Zimbabwe: A Report on the Disturbances in Matabeleland and the Midlands, 1980-1988* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2007).

⁹ See Erica Gwetai, *Petal Thoughts*, Kindle Version, Location 216 of 2521.

¹⁰ See Jane Bryce, ‘Interview with Vera’, in *Sign and Taboo*, p. 225.

¹¹ _____, ‘Interview with Vera’, in *Sign and Taboo*, p. 223.

¹² Ghassan Kanafani (1936-1972) was a renowned Palestinian author and political activist. He was assassinated by the Israel government in 1972. He wrote extensively on the Arab-Israel issues including the *Nakba* or *Calamity*, the expulsion of Palestinians from their land. His works include *Men in the Sun* (1962),

and high-level political debates of standard historical narratives. Instead, Khanafani attempts to go beyond and beneath such accounts and examine the psychological impact of this episode of war on one family which is forced to flee the city northwards to Lebanon.¹³

The narrative in *The Stone Virgins* revolves around the Gumede sisters: Thenjiwe and Nonceba. Although largely anachronistic, it is set during the pivotal moment of Zimbabwe's independence from colonial rule and paints the portrait of life before and after independence, against the backdrop of the post-independence internecine war. It is in this context that Thenjiwe is raped and decapitated by Sibaso, a marauding dissident, haunted by the violence of the war of liberation. He also rapes and subsequently mutilates Nonceba, who is left for dead but survives. His actions spark the war for retribution, what became known as *Gukurahundi*. *The Stone Virgins* recalls and galvanises the trauma of that war, whilst engaging and contesting the nationalist narratives of the post-independence internecine war in Zimbabwe. As a silhouette of that war, it showcases human capacity for extra-ordinary violence, but also, endurance and survival too. And in terms of trauma, what it means to live and tell, thus complicating our understanding of testimony as literary form.

The location of *The Stone Virgins* is Kezi, described by Vera as a 'rural enclave'.¹⁴ The description gives Kezi its own unique character as a vehicle for Vera's narrative of an impending massacre, silhouetted against the tranquillity of Kezi. As such, Kezi can be read as a counterpoint to Bulawayo's peripatetic way of life showcased at the beginning of the novel. Kezi offers instead, a degree of permanence, and slower pace of life, reminiscent of village life in the context of the novel:

Kezi is a rural enclave. Near it are the hills of Gulati. When you leave Kezi, you depart from the most arable stretch of flatland there is. There are

All That's Left for You (1966), and *The Return to Haifa* (1970). *The Land of Sad Oranges* is a tale of displacement and humiliation visited upon Palestinians as a result of their expulsion from Palestine by the Israelis in 1948. Like the *The Stone Virgins*, *The Land of Sad Oranges* is a mixture between fiction and historical veracity. Kanafani, like Vera, uses monologues, flashbacks, and multiple standpoints to create a multiplicity of voices.

¹³ John Collins, 'Exploring Children's Territory: Ghassan Kanafani, Njabulo Ndebele and the 'Generation' of Politics in Palestine and South Africa', in *Arab Studies Quarterly*, Vol 18, No. 4 (1996), pp. 65-85.

<<https://www.jstor.org/stable/41858189>> [accessed 3 Jan 2018].

¹⁴ Vera, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 15.

towering boulders of rock, then hills and an undulating silence for a whole bus journey, till on the horizon you see Bulawayo beckoning.¹⁵

It is in this rural enclave that *The Stone Virgins* offers its counter-discourse to the nationalists' rhetoric of a thriving and non-violent democracy in Zimbabwe following its independence from White colonial rule. The story line revolves around the two sisters' lives, Thenjiwe and Nonceba. Vera uses them to foreground the tragic lives of women caught within the web of war.

At the centre of communal life is the Thandabantu Store owned by the observant and astute Mahlathini. At the beginning of the novel, Thenjiwe in particular, is presented to readers as the embodiment of the Kezi landscape: a young woman who is rooted to the earth, carefree, highly sensual, and who understands the power of her own sexuality. Thenjiwe falls in love with a stranger, Cephas, with whom she has a brief love affair. Cephas follows Thenjiwe home from Thandabantu Store. She relents and takes him home because she needs 'a man around her knees [...] touching her knees and telling her his own pursuit, no matter what it is, just some hope of his, however faint.'¹⁶ Towards the end of the novel, following Thenjiwe's death, Cephas returns to Kezi and saves Nonceba from a certain death. However, her happiness is short-lived even as Vera presents her to readers. Her happiness is doomed by an impending calamity heralded by an omniscient narrator who declares, scrambling any sense of straight-forward unfolding narrative time:

She takes the stranger home. She has a lot to forget, so this is alright. She has no idea now, or ever, that some of the harm she has to forget is in the future, not in the past, and that she would not have enough time in the future to forget any of the hurt.¹⁷

When war begins, Thenjiwe is decapitated and Nonceba is raped, mutilated and left for dead by the novel's anti-hero, Sibaso a freedom fighter turned rebel. His scepticism towards Zimbabwean independence and the ensuing

¹⁵ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 17.

¹⁶ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 36.

¹⁷ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 36.

violence propels him to recover his hidden weapons and return to the bush to continue his quasi-war¹⁸:

I return to the bush. I want to risk my mind, to be implicated in my own actions, having taken a personal resolve against personal harm. Such a war. I find a prop for every truth, for every untruth [...] I endure the war anew. I am an instrument of war.¹⁹

In *The Stone Virgins*, Vera interrogates the complex nexus of the relationship between Zimbabwe's history of violence and the impact of that violence, and the role of political violence in the formation, sustenance and maintenance of what I propose to call Zimbabwean masculinities.²⁰ As such, Vera's project in *The Stone Virgins*, can be taken to be much more wider than is credited by most critics. In *The Stone Virgins*, Vera foregrounds and explores the issue of violent masculinities through her male protagonists in the novel, particularly Sibaso, freedom fighter turned murderer of the Gumede sisters.²¹ Vera conveys the difficulty such an endeavour entails:

It is a very difficult subject, but I have a scene – 'a photograph' – of a woman being decapitated. It happened—they'd cut your lips and nose—

¹⁸ Independence was not received with the same admiration by all the parties involved. The Shona ruling elite suspected a perfidy by the Ndebele, whom they regarded as treasonous and untrustworthy. A virulent propaganda campaign began to cast the Ndebele in this light; and this inflamed old hatreds which pandered to the notion of the Ndebele as foreign invaders from South Africa. A quasi-nationalism emerged in which there was an attempt to establish, finally, the true inheritors of the Zimbabwean nation-state. According to this logic, in order to establish Shona dominance and autochthony, true independence could only be achieved once the enemies of the state had been neutralised. Ndebeles—like White Zimbabweans—were seen as foreign invaders and not as part of the new Zimbabwe. Under this frame of reasoning, the revolution to remove imperialist invaders had been incomplete. The continuous revolution, as has been recently evident in Zimbabwe, can be understood in this context. On the other hand, White Zimbabweans had envisaged their continued domination under a different guise. Recently, they paid heavily for their perceived dominance of the Zimbabwean economy through violent farm occupations and expulsion from the country. See Ruramisai Charumbira, *Imagining a Nation: History and Memory in Making Zimbabwe* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015), p. 11.

¹⁹ Vera, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 141.

²⁰ For earlier attempts and contribution to the understanding of Zimbabwean masculinities, see *Manning the Nation: Father Figures in Zimbabwean Literature and Society*, ed. Kizito Muchemwa and Robert Muponde (Harare: Weaver Press, 2007). The text, however, is a collection of disparate essays whose combined effort is to address only the literary representations of fatherhood/manhood in the Zimbabwean context, rather than address the question of violent masculinities in the Zimbabwean context per se.

²¹ Sibaso, the dissident in *The Stone Virgins*, can be read as representing a group of ex-ZIPRA fighters (mostly Ndebele) who deserted the Zimbabwean National Army after a series of ethnic purges within the military, against Ndebele officers, in the build-up to the *Gukurahundi* massacres. Many felt that they had very little choice but resort to an armed insurgency, in order to save their lives. Most fled with military-issue weapons, some retrieved weapons they cached just before the ceasefire, and some were armed with rudimentary weapons such as axes and knives. But they lacked both political leadership and ideological orientation. Instead, they became marauding bandits who terrorised civilians for food and sustenance. For a more detailed study of the insurgency in Matabeleland, see Jocelyn Alexander, JoAnn McGregor and Terence Ranger, *Violence and Memory: One Hundred Years in the Dark Forests of Matabeleland* (Oxford: James Curry, 2000). See also Norma Krigger, *Guerrilla Veterans in Post-War Zimbabwe: Symbolic and Violent Politics, 1980-1987* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

but cutting someone's head off [...] A man comes to a village and does that: how does he do it? How do I convey that in a way that interests the reader?²²

Vera's question in the above quote can be extended to the exploration of *Gukurahundi* operatives, and their murderous activities: what it took to mould and shape each man within the group, and the group itself into an obedient and unquestioning instrument of violence, which raped, pillaged and coerced men, women and children into burning buildings: all seemingly without a conscience. It is worthy of note that *Gukurahundi* soldiers were selected from the mainly Shona-speaking ex-ZANLA cadres. They were trained by North Korean instructors and were seen more as an armed wing of ZANU (PF), than a national defence force. They were infamous for their unsurpassed ruthlessness. Their espousal of party ideology cascaded to the masses through all night meetings called *Pungwes*, in which civilians were forced to sing ZANU (PF) political songs, and where retributive justice was administered—through beatings, extreme violence, and mass murder—to those deemed traitors to the party ideology.²³ Their behaviour mimicked that of a guerrilla movement rather than a legitimate army. They also placed themselves in the context of freedom fighters. In the case of the people of Matabeleland, no distinction was made between ordinary citizens and dissidents.

Historical context and critique of *The Stone Virgins*

Vera wrote *The Stone Virgins* after completing a doctorate in *Comparative Literature* at the University of Trent, Canada. Unsurprisingly, *The Stone Virgins* has been reviewed as Vera's most difficult work. Like her characters, it has an internal life of its own, and a certain complexity of form and language that can be intimidating to readers at times. Kizito Muchemwa²⁴ and Lizzy Attree²⁵ have both

²² Bryce, 'Interview with Vera', in *Sign and Taboo*, p. 224.

²³ A recent documentary about *Gukurahundi* atrocities has resurfaced on YouTube: *Gukurahundi Documentary* (1980-1988). It was produced by Zenzele Ndebele, a human rights and political activist from Zimbabwe. <<https://m.youtube.com?v=n5VpQQGawAM>> [accessed 14 Nov 2019]. Although the documentary deals with *Gukurahundi* atrocities, there are no contributions from the perpetrators. Both the military and security apparatus have remained silent on the issue.

²⁴ Kizito Muchemwa, 'Language, Voice and Presence', in *Sign and Taboo: Perspectives on the Poetic Fiction of Yvonne Vera*, ed. Mandi Taruvinga and Robert Muponde (Harare: Weaver Press, 2002), pp. 3-14.

²⁵ Liz Attree, 'Language, Music and Modernity', in *Sign and Taboo, Perspectives on the Poetic Fiction of Yvonne Vera*, ed. Mandi Taruvinga and Robert Muponde (Harare: Weaver Press, 2002), pp. 63-80.

pointed out that Vera's fiction has a postmodernist orientation, and that her prose is both difficult and dense. This is a theme I shall return to. Difficulty pertains to Vera's stylistic devices in which there is no discernible trajectory which allows us to identify a specific literary tradition in her work.²⁶ There is a suggestion here that her work is an amalgamation of various literary traditions, out of which she creates her own unique style. Muchemwa, further elaborates on the postmodernist aspect of Vera's language by comparing it to Dambudzo Marechera's writing.²⁷ He states, 'there is the fracturing of traditional narrative forms and the re-ordering of language to capture new experiences and the solipsism of narrative.'²⁸ Attree compliments Muchemwa by suggesting that Vera's 'language and imagery is constructed to provide an alternative, fluid, often ambiguous perspective on life.'²⁹

Much of the criticism of Vera's work centres on her use of language, particularly her use of the English language, in a style perceived as impenetrable to most. This has led some critics to suggest that Vera's work lacks the political commitment of a realist novel; that somehow, her fiction does not house any re-useable template for resistance. This is an issue I shall return to, in relation to the localism of Vera's language which undergirds the narrative in *The Stone Virgins*. Without it, I argue, the structure of the novel would collapse. Realistically, however, Vera could not avoid the use of the English language in her writing, since Zimbabwe itself is a colonial creation with conflicting stories of nation already imbued with English. Through her writing, Vera brings both the colonial and post-colonial history of Zimbabwe onto the surface of the text through her use of English. *The Stone Virgins* can be read as a way of pondering how specific languages can contest for, and find due status, and their own place inside the story

²⁶ Muchemwa, 'Language, Voice and Presence', in *Sign and Taboo*, p. 3.

²⁷ Dambudzo Marechera (1952-1987) is a Zimbabwean novelist, short story writer and poet also renowned for his difficult prose style and wide erudition. Like Vera, he wrote several novels, characterised by spatio-temporal shifts, and the blurring of boundaries between fantasy and reality. He was known for his idiosyncratic lifestyle, and his first book, *The House of Hunger* (1978) was awarded the Guardian Fiction Prize in 1979. *Black Sunlight* (1980) followed it, and *Black Insider* (1990) was published posthumously. Like Vera, he succumbed to HIV/AIDS at the age of 35. For a detailed discussion of his work, see *Emerging Perspectives on Dambudzo Marechera*, ed. Flora Veit-Wild and Anthony Chennells (Eritrea: Africa World Series, 1999).

²⁸ Muchemwa, 'Language, Voice and Presence', in *Sign and Taboo*, p. 3.

²⁹ Attree, 'Language, Music and Modernity', in *Sign and Taboo*, p. 63.

itself. Vera, herself, anticipated the issue of language through her idiosyncratic approach to the use of the English language in her works. Regarding her use of English, Vera said:

English has more ability to capture things. It adapts to different places—India, Africa—and if we struggle with it, it is only political. As individuals we carry a lot of history that historians write about, but in a language that is not familiar to everybody. In fact, its individual languages. What I try to do is show this.³⁰

Vera, therefore, is using the English language with the sensitivity of its disparate, albeit colonial, histories. On the other hand, it seems that Vera's corpus, particularly in *The Stone Virgins*, has forever been tainted with the postmodernist label by those who first took scholarly interest in her work. For these critics, the postmodernist technique provides the best conceptual framework through which her work can be apprehended. In the context of this argument, the postmodernist technique pertains to the fracturing of narrative, the mistrust of grand narratives, and a preoccupation with postponement and suspension of meaning.

According to Oliver Nyambi, in *The Stone Virgins*, Vera has—through her creative fiction—tried to 'deconstruct' state-sponsored narratives of the *Gukurahundi* atrocities and at the same time 'open[ed] up access to alternative knowledge and the theorisation of the atrocities'.³¹ As such, Nyambi suggests that *The Stone Virgins* constitutes a 'new way of seeing' and also acts as an 'anti-memory' and a 'fascinating site for counter-history'.³² Nyambi's reading of *The Stone Virgins* locates Vera's novel in the realm of an alternative history and as an 'indispensable repository' of the conflicting memories of the *Gukurahundi* atrocities:

The function of the testimony in *The Stone Virgins*, however, transcends the mere disclosure of the victim/perpetrator's subject position. Besides its capacity to recover the voice and memory of the subaltern woman [...] it allows Nonceba's witnessing subject perspective informed by her experiences, to acquire an affective and aesthetic dimension.³³

³⁰ Bryce, 'Interview with Vera', in *Sign and Taboo*, p. 223.

³¹ Oliver Nyambi, 'Silenced Voices, Resuscitated Memory and the Problematisation of State Historiography in Yvonne Vera's Novel, *The Stone Virgins*', in *SAGE Open*, April-June 2014 <<https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244014535606sagepub.com>> [accessed 14 Nov 2019]

³² Nyambi, 'Silenced Voices', p. 3.

³³ ———, 'Silenced Voices', p. 3.

At times, it is evident, through Vera's own pronouncements, that she had an inherent mistrust of history, particularly the way it derogates women's experience to the margin. To Vera, writing for a woman is an act of courage. Because a woman writer knows the 'intense risk a woman takes in the sheer effort of writing, placing herself beyond the accepted margin'.³⁴

However, despite its perceived postmodernist orientation, Vera's work can avail itself of other forms of reading too. In relation to this thesis, *The Stone Virgins* provides a vehicle for the exploration of trauma in a particular historical moment in Zimbabwean history, and how the representation of trauma offers a daunting challenge to writers. For example, many critics have praised Vera for her steadfastness in addressing taboo subjects, and for her challenge to the prevailing assumptions of the presumed 'unspeakability of trauma', together with other Black African women writers such as Tsitsi Dangaremba, Sindiwe Magona and Chimamanda Ngozi-Adichie, particularly Ngozi-Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, and her exploration of the tragedy of the Biafran Civil War in Nigeria in the 1960s,³⁵ and also non-fiction writers such as Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, in her exposition of the lasting trauma in the aftermath of apartheid.³⁶ Collectively, these women writers have been saying the *unsayable*, and interrogating the complexity of *unsayability* itself.³⁷ Vera's work, I will be arguing, belongs to and makes a crucial contribution to these debates.

At the same time, despite the presumed open-endedness of Vera's narratives, and of the suspended meaning, a close reading of her work(s) suggests that Vera's work is much more complicated than the label of postmodernism allows. To restrict it within the confines of postmodernist writing is to limit its power and reach. It has been suggested by Muchemwa and others that her deliberate 'fracturing of narrative in order to closely mimic trauma' provides the evidence of her postmodernist tendencies par excellence. But it can also be

³⁴ Yvonne Vera, ed., *Opening Spaces: An Anthology of Contemporary African Women's Writing* (Harare: Baobab Books, 1999), p. 3.

³⁵ Chimamanda Ngozi-Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun* (London: Fourth Estate, 2014).

³⁶ Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, *Dare We Hope: Facing Our Past to Find a New Future* (Cape Town: NB Publishers, 2014).

³⁷ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University, 1996), pp. 1-9.

argued, that perhaps Vera's aim, in presenting her victims in the isolation of the local context is to challenge the conceptualisation of trauma as a universal, always self-same or identical human experience that can be apprehended meaningfully outside the nuances of such context. The psychical disintegration of her characters, particularly Nonceba, can be read as an attempt to highlight the tangible and local specificity of her experience of trauma, and to galvanise, in a complex way, all the factors that are responsible for her predicament. In other words, her isolation does not cut her off from the context of war violence in Zimbabwe, but rather unifies both the symptom and the cause of the violence afflicting her. What is crucial about all these varied readings of Vera's work, is that *The Stone Virgins* confronts the reader with more than one attempt by Vera to narrativise trauma. More importantly, *The Stone Virgins* tells the story of unprecedented violence visited upon the people of Matabeleland in the 1980s, if story is the right word to use in this context, thus raising the issue of how such violence can be represented in literary form.

Therefore, if anything, *The Stone Virgins* should be recognised as providing a number of potential ways of registering in language and tackling the issue of *Gukurahundi* atrocities. It is through a complex web of narrative techniques, the omniscient narrator, soliloquy, introspective self-narration, that Vera's text generates in the reader anxiety-ridden uncertainties, highlighted through the gaps in the experiences of Vera's victims, and by extension, those of the victims of the *Gukurahundi* atrocities.

To this extent, Vera's work can be read in tandem with Dominick LaCapra's work. LaCapra is a historian, with a specific interest in what he calls 'limit events' such as the Holocaust.³⁸ To him, any meaningful apprehension of the past must have at its core a psychoanalytic theory of trauma. To LaCapra, psychoanalysis, as a mode of working-through, facilitates dialogue with victims of trauma. LaCapra, like Vera, rejects the idea of a historiography that is an objective and accurate record of the past, because, he argues, trauma bears differently on specific groups and subjectivities. Since no one historical event is transferable

³⁸ See Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 2014).

from one person to another, what matters is the specificity of each traumatic event, or events. To him, the problem, when it comes to trauma, is not that it is an 'inexpressible state', but rather a failure of listening. Often, victims of trauma do not communicate their experience for lack of listeners. To LaCapra, survivors of traumatic events are living archives. As such, the historian must elicit their memory, in order to gain an 'affective understanding of the experiences of others', without appropriating it as their own. He suggests that such 'testimonies should, and must, feel emotionally and intellectually disruptive'.³⁹ If anything, this 'empathic unsettlement' may facilitate a better understanding of the collective experience of trauma.⁴⁰

A central argument in this thesis is that what Vera demonstrates in *The Stone Virgins* with regards to the *presumed unspeakability* of the events surrounding the Holocaust, is that there is much that can be 'reconstructed' and 'reclaimed' about *Gukurahundi* atrocities as part of the collective experience of Matabeleland. As Vera says, although her victims are 'offered in isolation, they are not isolated'.⁴¹ Their experience forms part of a wider narrative of collective trauma. By mimicking trauma in her writing, Vera is countering the idea that traumatic experience should forever remain beyond articulation and reach. This is not to deny or invalidate the claim that narrating trauma presents writers and those caught up in the web of trauma, with a formidable task in trying to convey the essence of a traumatic event.

And of course, within language itself, there is a nagging question which concerns itself with what constitutes the act of witnessing, and of survival: if the person standing in front of us has been subjected to, and witnessed the most atrocious acts of violence, who is the person now standing in their place? And by what mechanism do we measure both the effect and affect of trauma with the individual as aftermath? Aftermath, in the context of this argument, and as a concept, frames our understanding of the victim or witness as the total sum of their life experience. If their overall constitution becomes the embodiment of the

³⁹ LaCapra, *Writing History*, p. xxxiv

⁴⁰ _____, *Writing History*, p. xxxi.

⁴¹ Bryce, 'Interview with Vera', in *Sign and Taboo*, p. 223.

after-effect of a traumatic event or events, then trauma, one begins to realise, resides precisely in what Vera aptly calls the 'survival of an ambush'.⁴² An ambush plays out the elements of surprise, of the lack of preparation of the intended victim; and like trauma, an ambush takes advantage of concealment.

Controversially, survival might just mean not surviving at all. That truly speaking, trauma's work begins in the aftermath, in the search for meaning provoked by the event, in the context of one's own survival. While in the background, will be humming that persistent question which those who survive extreme violence have to contend with - why me? - alongside the persistence of survivor-guilt. Read from this perspective, Vera's work represents the constant search for a language able to convey the enormity of being overwhelmed by what she calls 'the insupportable feeling of anguish', when everything changes irrevocably:

'Everything has changed, and changed her way of seeing, of inhabiting her own body, of being alive.'⁴³

Through her apt phrase of the 'insupportable feeling of anguish' Vera points us further to the contingent or random nature of trauma, how each traumatic event becomes linked to the last, and how through this link, a series is established, which often leads to an entanglement in the mind, in which the distinct stage of each entangled event can be threatened with loss. Survival, therefore, lies in the space between each entanglement. Each will remain indistinct, in the milieu of entangled traumatic events. This, I suggest, is what Vera means by her search for what she calls the language of wounded souls. Incidentally, it is worthy of note, that there is no word for trauma in any of the indigenous languages in Zimbabwe.

According to Annie Gagiano, there is a tendency by Vera's critics to see her novel as a 'primarily mono-gendered' text whose focus is to shape the nation from a woman's perspective.⁴⁴ Gagiano suggests that nothing could be further

⁴² Vera, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 69.

⁴³ _____, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 91.

⁴⁴ Annie Gagiano, 'Reading The Stone Virgins as Vera's Study of the Katabolism of War', in *Research in African Literature*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (Summer, 2007), p. 65. <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/4618374>> [accessed 23 December 2018].

from the truth. That far from being a 'primarily woman-centred text', *The Stone Virgins* also 'portrays male victimisation too, by indicating its intertwinement with behaviour patterns involving the violent subjugation of women'.⁴⁵ For example, Vera's depiction of Sibaso's inner turmoil—whose character, apart from Nonceba's, is the most vividly sketched out - persuades us to recalibrate our presumed understanding of the effect of violence on the minds of male combatants, and to understand that turning both men and women into heroes is a process imbued with violent enterprise, that one cannot worship heroes without the symbolic investment in violence. As she goes on to elaborate:

Vera pursues her theme of male damage spiralling onward and outward, so frequently in terms of harm inflicted by the subjugated men on women, in yet further instances before she introduces Sibaso to the reader. Her evocations of war-damaged men around Thandabantu Store during the brief lull of 1980 depict seemingly 'solid men' who nevertheless 'wear lonely and lost looks' and 'guard' their loneliness and remain inaccessible to the 'worship[full]' women who surround them [...] The word 'lost' echoes through these descriptions; these men are deeply troubled and plagued by recurring nightmares.⁴⁶

The search for words: trauma and gender in *The Stone Virgins*

The mind is perishable. Memory lingers, somewhere in fragments. Such rocks; something happened; this too is memory. You are alive; this too is memory. You allow sleep to cleanse your body like warm water, like the clarity of Simude. You laugh in your dreams; you rest. A cleavage in this rock. You are safe. Yellow grass is wrapped over your body, the odour is severe, like a carcass, like dead things.⁴⁷

In the above quotation Vera, through a third person narrator, helps us enter Sibaso's mind which is in turmoil. The words 'perishable' and 'fragment' point us to the fragility of his mind, compounded by his confinement in the 'cleavage of rock' which can be read as a split in the mind of the one who is trying to survive, and at the same time hold on to two conflicting demands, what can be described as a 'pathological dissociative response to his predicament'—Marlene De La

⁴⁵ Gagiano, 'Reading The Stone Virgins', p. 66.

⁴⁶ _____, 'Reading The Stone Virgins', p. 66.

⁴⁷ Vera, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 102.

Cruz-Guzman's phrase.⁴⁸ Sibaso's mental disintegration can also be read as registering the pathology of war that has afflicted men and women of his generation, and that of multiple generations before them. In other words, there is a multiplicity of layers of trauma that afflict the Zimbabwean nation, beginning with the annihilation of its original inhabitants, the *Khoi* and the *San*, as a result of the displacement of the *Bantu* during the *Mfecane* wars (1818-1835) at the height of Tshaka's rule in Southern Africa.⁴⁹ (Interestingly, and in the context of the internecine violence in Zimbabwe, the *Gukurahundi* atrocities can be largely seen as driven by old hatreds deriving from this period, which cast the Ndebele as foreign invaders).⁵⁰ This was followed by the First and Second *Chimurenga* through to the Matabeleland massacres. Like the rest of the nation, Sibaso has been 'betrayed before, during and after the war'. He is now a man who 'imitates those before him with all their weaknesses', by subscribing to the old hatreds, and by his very own contribution to the blight of trauma afflicting Zimbabweans.⁵¹ But for all his murderous adventures, Sibaso is cowed in the bush like a wild animal, and Vera removes his coat of bravado and exposes his vulnerability as he lies amongst 'dead carcasses'.⁵² Intuitively, Vera wants us to know that behind every hero there is a coward, and that the whole concept of a brave and heroic masculinity is fraught with contradiction. In terms of the language of trauma, or the way in which Vera *mimics* trauma in her text, Sibaso is presented to us as a man in turmoil. He is among the 'drowned', and a man who 'embraces death, a flame'. As he walks, he can feel an 'explosion in his mind and his mind is a ferment', and he starts to question his own sanity because, after a 'certain point, reality stops coinciding with his wishes'.⁵³ Turmoil is represented by various textures in the text itself: rocks, warm water, and dead carcasses. Sibaso declares: 'my mind is scalded and perfectly free.' But there is something sinister about a

⁴⁸ Marlene De La Cruz-Guzman, 'The Narratives of Twice-Betrayed People: Double-Traumatisation and the Decline of Nationalism in The Stone Virgins', in *The Journal of African Literature and Culture*, 5 (2008), 177-205.

⁴⁹ See Philip Mason, *The Birth of a Dilemma: The Conquest and Settlement of Rhodesia* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958).

⁵⁰ Charumbira, *Imagining a Nation*.

⁵¹ Vera, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 78, p. 106.

⁵² —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 105.

⁵³ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 117.

mind that is *scalded* and *free* at the same time. If somewhat contradictory, Vera's use of conflicting terms to describe the same mind creates a tension that gestures us towards a mind that is terrifyingly unhinged, which allows Sibaso to 'exist in several realities all at once'.⁵⁴ Sibaso becomes the embodiment of trauma, and as such, an exemplar for the whole nation:

During the war we are lifeless beings. We are envoys, our lives intervals of despair. A part of you conceals itself, so that everything is destroyed, only a part; the rest perishes like a cloud.⁵⁵

Vera weaves her narrative around these fragments to elucidate the incommensurability of the dreamscape and the 'patchwork of thoughts' which have manifested themselves in Sibaso's mind, as palimpsests over the prevailing reality, thereby unveiling the futility of his endeavour. Even as he struggles with his predicament, he still wonders when it would be that his mind could restore itself. And that really is the question for the whole nation.

If there are moments in Vera's writing when she strains one's enthusiasm for her work to its limit, particularly in the context of Black African women writers, it is because she is relentless in her confrontation with the issue of violence against women, and she shows a remarkable resilience in her willingness to 'speak the unspeakable'.⁵⁶ In her confrontation with taboo subject material such as rape, abortion, infanticide, incest and murder, Vera names directly the source of violent trauma in the Zimbabwean context, particularly in relation to women: violent masculinities. But she also asks another no less significant question, particularly in relation to this thesis: what it takes to subdue seemingly ordinary men to authority.

⁵⁴ Vera, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 117.

⁵⁵ _____, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 117.

⁵⁶ The phrase derives from Toni Morrison's lecture: Unspeakable Things Spoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature, as part of the Tanner Lecture series on Human Rights, delivered at the University of Michigan on October 7, 1988. <<https://tannerlectures.utah.edu/documents/a-to-z/m/morrison90.pdf>> [accessed 30 December 2018]. Morrison was addressing a series of questions concerning what types of literary works should constitute a literary canon, in an attempt to address the Afro-American presence in American Literature. Particularly, the adverse perception, and absence of African American and Chicano literature within the traditional literary canon. She was venturing into new territory and bringing the *unspeakable* to the forefront of discourse on the racist American canon. In the context of this thesis, I paraphrase the title of Morrison's lecture if only to highlight Vera's attempt to discuss subjects that had, up until then, been traditionally seen as taboo: self-immolation/suicide by women as a form of protest, self-abortion, infanticide and rape. See also, Danielle Taylor, ed., *Conversations with Toni Morrison* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994).

The narrative in *The Stone Virgins* can be read as a political commentary on the failure of the nationalists' project of nation-building through violent coercion, by exploring the complex and crucial role played by state-sponsored violence in the construction of Zimbabwean masculinities, and the state's controversial success at the normalisation of, and the embedding of violence in daily social interactions as an admirable masculine quality, that continues to shape the Zimbabwean masculinities to-date. That is all the more reasons why we should explore closely the thematic preoccupations of her work, in particular the violence against women and the sexual themes articulated within *The Stone Virgins*. Equally interesting is her exploration of women's and men's experience of violence which exist in the novel as a type of counterpoint. Vera's narrative echoes Edward Said's invocation of writing that becomes contrapuntal. Meaning, 'it travels across temporal, cultural and ideological boundaries in unforeseen ways to emerge as part of a new ensemble *along with* later history and subsequent art.' Vera, like Said, understood well the power invested in the rupture of narrative in dislodging the dominant narratives of the past.⁵⁷

In terms of storytelling, the goriness of the narrative in *The Stone Virgins* can be said to be unparalleled. Of all Zimbabwean writers, Vera is renowned in this regard. Vera's complex prose showcases the difficulty faced by women in the developing world, particularly when it comes to the trauma of violent rape. In most cases, victims of rape are not protected from re-living the trauma of rape. The issue isn't so much the *unsayability* of the act of rape, but rather finding the vocabulary that does justice to each enunciation, so that when affected women recount stories of rape to strangers, each re-telling is marked by in-determinations.

My view is that it is in the course of such in-determinations, that, Vera's work requires and endless re-reading after first contact. First contact registers the power of her voice, and the way in which it permeates through all the other voices in her narratives. I also understand that the darkness of her language necessarily comes from the subject material of her stories: war, rape, violence, incest, infanticide, self-immolation and mutilation. Vera's trauma fiction, or fictionalised

⁵⁷ Edward W. Said, *Freud and the Non-European*, introduced by Christopher Bollas (London: Verso, 2003), p. 24.

trauma, not only reconfigures life out of the daily experiences of Zimbabwean women, at the most local level, but it also provides a profound insight into the lives of women and men in times of conflict elsewhere. *The Stone Virgins*, particularly, broadens and complicates discursive space and allows us to probe beyond the accepted facts into the realms of contested reality—it speaks across several genres: the visual, oral and the tragic.⁵⁸ *The Stone Virgins* is a hybrid text that is attuned to the affective, literary and experiential aspects of history. It provides for an empathic framework for apprehending women's experience of violence within a broader historical context. Through Vera's empathy with her victims, she encapsulates feeling, and the excess, which Dominick LaCapra suggests, cannot be fully apprehended, because it seems to defy language in terms of its grotesque and carnivalesque appearance.

The Stone Virgins is punctuated throughout with instances of violence. Perhaps it is the narrative of the woman who is forced by soldiers to decapitate her husband, in front of her two sons, in order to save their sons, that most clearly demonstrates the absurdity of mindless cruelty. Apart from the moral and ethical question that this raises, such a moment of calculated and random violence is clearly a zero-sum game—the loss is equivalent to the gain, which means there is no gain. Although Vera argues, as will be shown in Chapter Three, that the decapitation scene serves as the synecdoche for the Matabeleland massacres, I posit that this scene, whether deliberately intended by Vera or not, also serves as a lasting metaphor for the Zimbabwean civil war. The gruesome murder committed by a woman in order to save herself and her sons, and the juxtaposition of murder with mercy, complicates our understanding of female agency, particularly in the context of genocide, as demonstrated by women's willing participation in the genocide in Rwanda.⁵⁹ But what is more worrying is the breach of the familial bond, and by extension, the rupture of the code of *Ubuntu* itself, which serves as the hallmark of the *Gukurahundi* atrocities. As Vera herself argues, in war there are no sacred bonds. Such acts of violence left indelible marks in the collective

⁵⁸ Vera, ed., *Opening Spaces*, p. 2.

⁵⁹ See Nicole Hogg, *Women's participation in the Rwandan genocide: mothers or monsters?* <https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/assets/files/other/irrc-877-hogg.pdf> > [accessed 16 March 2021]

psyches of the people of Matabeleland. And it is in this regard that *Gukurahundi* will forever remain as an ineradicable stain in Zimbabwe's collective memory.

Perhaps we can pause here and ponder for a moment on what exactly is meant by this persistent need to understand trauma as it pertains to women in the Zimbabwean context. Or, more precisely, which acts, within this overall traumatic experience we are interested in and why? If the aim is to reach, through language, the 'unreachable zenith' of the limit-event, it might simply mean that victims hold onto their last resistance, which, in psychoanalytic terms, is the moment of utmost humiliation, shame and disgust, the last nugget of a debased humanity. So that were others to become privy to its essence, the victim would have nothing left of themselves. Perhaps, as Gabrielle Schwab has suggested all along, it is to the listening and not the telling that we must pay attention.

The central preoccupation of the thesis is therefore how literary writing enters the domain of trauma, violence and memory. Alongside the writing of Gabrielle Schwab, key trauma theorists Cathy Caruth, Dominic LaCapra, Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, Stephen Frosh and Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela will provide its theoretical frame. I will also discuss the theoretical points of convergence between history, psychoanalysis and autobiographical writing, to explore the complexities of Vera's metafiction, and her attempt to address the effect of historical violence in Zimbabwe today.

Caruth's notion of trauma as something that defies language and Schwab's nuanced view of trauma 'as something that hibernates in the unconscious, only to be transmitted to the next generation like an undetected disease,' led me to think of trauma more in terms of its impact on the collective.⁶⁰ Therefore, throughout this thesis I work with the idea of trauma as something deeply personal but also communal, entrenched in the existing material and historical reality. *Gukurahundi* atrocities were targeted at the Ndebele people as a distinct ethnic group. Its soldiers were mobilised by a specific ethnic identity fuelled by hatred. Therefore, refracting their violence through the prism of collective trauma clearly outlines the trajectory of this violence in terms of its manifestation at an individual and

⁶⁰ Gabrielle Schwab, *Haunting Legacies: Violent Histories and Transgenerational Trauma* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p. 3.

communal level. Vera's 'trauma fiction' has been instrumental in helping me progress the idea of a collective trauma in the context of this thesis. Although her victims are offered in isolation, their suffering is always embedded within a specific historical context. Thus, highlighting the 'intimate experience of and interconnectedness of the violence with historical events which surround and affect her characters.'⁶¹ It is in this regard that her thinking ties in my own and with what Schwab, in her consideration of trauma, calls the 'consideration of the environment that regulates material living conditions, the organisation of kinship and gender relations'.⁶² As the first 'known' attempt at the narrativization of the Gukurahundi atrocities, *The Stone Virgins* also reopens the debate surrounding the massacres in Matabeleland in particular, and violence in Zimbabwe generally. If official denial and outright intransigence are the hallmarks of the *unspeakability* of Gukurahundi atrocities, it is by re-imagining the history of these atrocities that Vera articulates what is deemed inarticulable, and gives it voice, through an exploration of the complexity of the language of trauma, thus issuing a latent critique to the idea that trauma cannot be spoken. By delving deep into the recesses of her characters she elucidates its psychic aspects and the mechanism through which it retains a hold in the collective cultural consciousness. Notably she shows the gender dimension of violence and its aftermath, uncovering cultural myths that treat women's 'subjection, passivity and even death as their apotheosis.'⁶³ Therefore, *The Stone Virgins* can be read as a warning, that far from being simply forgotten, history serves as a justification for violence in the present, what Vera aptly calls the 'past as repast'.

The Gukurahundi genocide in Zimbabwe will remain a crucial concern throughout. As such, it will form the backdrop to all the arguments of the thesis and will help problematise the inextricable, if not symbiotic, entanglement between *The Stone Virgins*, and the violent history of Zimbabwe.

⁶¹ Lene Bull Christiansen, 'What Would Vera Write', in *Emerging Perspectives on Vera*, edited by Helen Cousins and Wilson Katiyo (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2012), p. 205.

⁶² Gabriele Schwab, *Haunting Legacies: Violent Histories and Transgenerational Trauma* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p. 99.

⁶³ Sofia Kostelac, "'The Body is His, Pulse and Motion'": Violence and Desire in Yvonne's *The Stone Virgins*," in *Research in African Literatures* 41 (3): 75-87 p.10

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Structure of the Critical Thesis

In Chapter One, I discuss the traumatic impact of historical violence in Zimbabwe drawing on South Africa as a key point of comparison in relation to the legacy of apartheid, the project of reconciliation and the philosophy of *Ubuntu*, stressing the points of connection and the differences from Zimbabwe which has never acknowledged the *Gukurahundi* massacres, persists in its historical denials of violence, and has no ethic that could take the measure of, and offer a reparative project for communal life. I examine the influential theory of trauma developed by Cathy Caruth and ask how far it needs to be modified for a non-European context, at the same time as deploying the writing of Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela to explore ways of entering the mind of a perpetrator which also forms a central component of Vera's *The Stone Virgins*.

Chapter Two argues that in Zimbabwe trauma is exacerbated by the prevailing wall of silence and the reluctance to confront the violence of the past. Through Gabriel Schwab's concept of haunting legacies, the chapter interrogates the nexus between trauma, silence, language and memory, whilst considering Zimbabwe's 'multiply layered historical atrocities'. In a similar vein, it considers how Vera utilises silence as a recurring motif throughout *The Stone Virgins*, in order to foreground the debilitating isolation of her victims. And it also explores, how, on the other hand, Terrence Ranger, a historian, interpreted the silence surrounding *Gukurahundi* as a political move by the state to deliberately exclude *Gukurahundi* from national memory. Controversially, he suggested that Vera used the *Gukurahundi* atrocities as the canvas to her imagination. His argument echoes the work of psychoanalyst, Dori Laub, whose rendition of the triadic relationship between psychoanalysis, history and literature, provides a framework for engaging with the concept of the traumatic return, thus suggesting that it is through Vera's creative 'writerly unconscious' that *Gukurahundi*—a reality 'portioned to the past'—is projected into the present as something that not only unsettles, but also acts a counter-narrative to the prevailing denial and silencing political rhetoric. Vera, I argue, offers a specific aesthetic of violence; the difficulty of Vera's language draws attention to what is lost in the attempt to

produce a speaking subject. In this regard, Vera invokes the language of animals to further amplify the crushing helplessness experienced by what she calls *wounded beings*, thus suggesting that trauma crosses species boundaries, producing a mutual recognition of distress.

Following on from the thematic concerns of Chapter Two, Chapter Three explores in greater depth the intricacies of gendered violence in *The Stone Virgins*. It discusses the ways in which Vera, controversially, utilises the mutilated female body to bring into prominence the issue of voice. Through a close textual analysis of Vera's metanarrative—her commentaries on her own writing—as well as her novel the chapter pays attention to the radical ambiguity of Vera's language, particularly, the way in which the idiosyncratic nature of Vera's prose emulates and, at the same time, attends to the nuanced specificity of trauma in the Zimbabwean context. An exegesis of Vera's gendered analysis of the war in *The Stone Virgins* alongside Nancy Shepher-Hughes's study of the impact of violence on the residents of the slums of Brazil, help expound the ways in which violent trauma disrupts communal bonds, as seen both in the community depicted in *The Stone Virgins* and, also, in the wider Zimbabwean context. Significantly, Vera chose as a motif for the gruesome violence in *The Stone Virgins*, the photograph of a grotesquely mutilated woman. The photograph is historically linked to the Rhodesian atrocities, thus firmly establishing the contiguity of the violence as represented in Vera's novel—and by extension—*Gukurahundi* atrocities, with past wars in Zimbabwe. I then discuss the wounding of the mouth in the photograph as symbolising the communally sanctioned silencing of women par excellence, thus signifying the presumed dangerousness of women's voices. Elinor Sisulu's quote allows me to discuss the public silencing of atrocity surrounding the *Gukurahundi* atrocities across the gender and racial divide, by contrasting the density of Vera's narrative with the paucity of official responses to the violence in Zimbabwe. I also ask why, controversially, Vera chooses to silence or exclude other women who played their role in the conflict particularly female combatants and, through a reverse epistemic violence, white women too. Presumably this was to concentrate her readers' attention on the violence specifically targeted against women and the public silencing of that violence that has ensued. I conclude by suggesting that in

Zimbabwe, a country associated with perpetual anomie, the silence plays its role in keeping trauma alive, thus allowing violence to persist and a pervasive fear to spread across the torn fabric of Zimbabwe as a nation.

Chapter Four attends to how, in *The Stone Virgins*, Vera is preoccupied with the idea of landscape—as a physical and mental space. In keeping with the idea of trauma as deeply entrenched in the unresolved issue of the land in Zimbabwe, the chapter will explore how Vera utilises the arbitrary limitations imposed on the landscape, to foreground the vicissitudes of her characters in the novel. The chapter will also consider the idea of the landscape as a body of determinate signs that must be read and interpreted, since the notion of the infestation of the landscape by an impure and undeserving humanity features heavily in the Zimbabwean imaginary.

In *The Stone Virgins*, the limitless power of the state manifests itself through the laws of containment. Thus, allowing the ruling political elite to view violence as something that is intrinsically natural and inevitable. Therefore, I will argue that if the physical constraints imposed on the landscape, as a result of this violence, diminish women's experience of political violence and relegate it to the margins, then in *saying the unsayable*, *The Stone Virgins*, registers the often neglected and unmappable dark spots, in which women suffer alone, often in silence. I will also consider how such a hostile landscape defines its inhabitants, and the processes by which such subjectivities are formed. And also, further interrogate how the language within Vera's novel evolves, and responds to, the changes manifest in the political landscape; and how, through a fragmented prose and complex use of localised vernacular, Vera creates a *language of place* which expounds the boundaries of assumed meaning. The chapter will also ponder how extreme violence plays a discursive function within the narrative, and the text itself, in the same way, say, *Gukurahundi* soldiers mutilate women's bodies in order inscribe on them a set of political messages.

I will then go on to elaborate how, in *The Stone Virgins* for example, the mutilated body itself projects its own point of view, the same way, the landscape, too, assumes a premonitory quality. Finally, I will go on discuss Vera's stylistic

devices and narrative techniques, and consider how, and in what way, Vera's literary works act as a mode of historiographical writing.

Chapter Five will continue with the theme of violence, but with specific reference to what I propose to call Zimbabwean masculinities. The aim of this final chapter will be to interrogate the genealogy and specificity of violence in Zimbabwe, and to explore the basic assumptions of my thesis; that its aetiology, signs and symptoms, can only be read and understood in the context of past trauma and group dynamics.

Kieran Mitton's conceptual framework for analysing the dynamics of violent groups lends itself to my reading of violent masculinities in the Zimbabwean context. Through an engagement with his study of the Sierra Leonean civil war, I will explore how the notion of shame and disgust were used to recruit, and to subsequently mould *Gukurahundi* operatives— and those who came after them—into an obedient, unquestioning instrument of violence. And how the prevailing culture of impunity, fostered by the *state of exception*, undergirded by security indemnity laws, allowed for individuals within the unit to cross the ethical line, in terms of the limitless violence they committed against unarmed civilians. This, too, I will go on to argue, is also the main preoccupation of Vera throughout *The Stone Virgins*.

Similarly, I will also consider how, and to what extent, the figure of the war veteran continually haunts the Zimbabwean landscape. I will argue that since Zimbabwe remains entrenched in a *state of exception*, this has necessitated the need for perpetual enemies of state, in order to justify the excessive levels of violence, to silence the ruling party's political enemies. I will also consider how this routinisation of violence has spawned violent masculinities, through a sustained political investment, by linking the figure of the war veteran to the continuing revolutionary struggle, with the unresolved issue of the land at the centre of this ongoing grievance. And I will posit that the grievance around the land, its ownership and the privileges it bestows is the last resistance in terms of addressing the trauma of the past, since those implicated in the atrocities of the past, and in the continuing political violence, remain in positions of power in Zimbabwe today.

The conclusion will provide an overview of the themes discussed and explored within the body of the thesis. It will bring together all the threads and thematic pre-occupations of the thesis by commenting on, and highlighting, the tensions and key learning points in order to identify areas for further research.

Chapter One

Accumulating Histories of Pain: Crossborder Violence and the Persistence of Trauma.

Some dissident murders introduced new levels of sadistic cruelty. In an infamous Lupane case, a headmaster's wife was forced to cut off her husband's head. In another instance, a son was forced to kill his father after the latter was accused of informing on a dissident. In a widely cited Nkayi case, a second wife was forced to cut off the hands of her husband.⁶⁴

The Stone Virgins is located at the precise moment in which history, literature and memory intersect. There is an inextricable entanglement between *The Stone Virgins* and Zimbabwean history, occupying as it does, the massively 'porous borderlands between history and fiction'—Keith Jenkin's phrase.⁶⁵ Porousness suggests a symbiotic relationship between history and fiction; and the diffusion of material across the narrative boundaries. As the material crosses boundaries, real or imagined, it acts as an intermediary between generations of Zimbabweans. In its circulation, the material gathers testimonies and enriches them with their human and social context. According to Vera, *The Stone Virgins*, in its rendition of the social context 'surprises in the most carnival way, reducing distances, accepting the least official stance.'⁶⁶ As such we can view the *The Stone Virgins* as a testimonial surrogate that testifies for those who can no longer testify for themselves: the victims of the Matabeleland massacre. According to Beverley Southgate, we can view history and fiction as mutually exclusive but interdependent zones, because History's witnesses, too, still depend on fractured and compromised memory as a means of reconstructing the past. The difference between the novel and history, as suggested by historical theorists, is that there is a presumption that History's witness—supported by the archive—is much more reliable and can be trusted; and that History's scientific method can withstand the

⁶⁴ Alexander, et al., *Violence and Memory*.

⁶⁵ See Beverley Southgate, *History Meets Fiction* (London: Longman, 2009).

⁶⁶ Vera, ed., *Opening Spaces*, p. 3.

intense scrutiny of the empirical. Michel Foucault's work has already problematised the argument on the archive; and he has cautioned that the archive is no more innocent than memory itself.⁶⁷ History often yields to the temptation to search the haystack of imaginative literature for source material. In the same vein, it can be argued that fiction is also a historical artefact that provides feeling, sentiment and access to the interiority of history, in order to ameliorate its perceived coldness.⁶⁸ If nothing else, coldness foregrounds a certain distancing, and a presumed scientificity. According to Vera:

As a writer you don't want to suppress the history, you want to be one of the people liberating stories, setting them off. But that task and challenge takes long. You have to be removed enough from it to depict it in all its shock and trauma. But people did live, as well, and fall in love in this time.⁶⁹

Seen in this regard, *The Stone Virgins* represents a 'recognisable picture'—Southgate's phrase—of *Gukurahundi* atrocities and the Matabeleland insurgency. The novel also reveals to the reader the fear and the feeling of the violent encounter amongst those caught up in the violent war of retribution. According to Vera, if the [Zimbabwean] Historian is concerned with the neat assemblage of historical artefacts, of the beginning and end of the Matabeleland genocide; then Vera is concerned with the chaotic violence of war, its manifestations long after the soldiers have left, and how the traumatic impact of historical rupture sustains itself. As Vera says of the victims of war:

But they collapse inside, and I am keen to capture that collapse. I am writing in a way, biographies of unknown women, but I am also interested in our national history, so they are always against the backdrop of a particular time.⁷⁰

Vera's predicament suggests that History cannot communicate the [un]reality of trauma, and still remain faithful to the facts. On the other hand, the novel can still provide a unique vehicle for conveying trauma. *The Stone Virgins* is a narrative of an historical event that has, and has not happened, at the same time.

⁶⁷ See Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin Books, 1998).

⁶⁸ LaCapra, *Writing History*.

⁶⁹ Bryce, 'Interview with Vera', in *Sign and Taboo*, p. 226.

⁷⁰ ———, 'Interview with Vera', in *Sign and Taboo*, p. 223.

It is deliberately carved out of and imposed upon an infinity of possibilities. *The Stone Virgins* can be seen as a vessel for traumatic memory, which is unlike ordinary memory in the history of atrocities in Zimbabwe. Unlike ordinary memory, traumatic memory often refuses to be integrated into language and narrative. As Judith Herman suggests, what also stands out about traumatic memory, apart from its fragmentation, is its refusal to go away.⁷¹ Herman's claim is that traumatic memory is fundamentally different from ordinary memory, because of its refusal to be integrated into ordinary language and narrative. But, at the same time, it refuses to be banished from memory. As such, it is persistent in seeking acknowledgement and an outlet. To the victim, this means that they are caught between the imperative to tell, but also not to tell, depending on the event. Hence Vera's own problematic stance [or 'difficult position'] in substantiating her declaration—'If I say I was raped I am met with incredulity':

When I say I have been raped, abused, been a victim of incest – as the women in my stories have been – I am either met with a shocked silence or shouted down. I write from the margins of my identity...I wrote my name and my hopes down, then a few mistruths. I felt free. Then histories intruded...History is not something we can hold under foot, like a spider, perhaps like a scorpion. However, it is equally tentacled, defying each boundary.⁷²

By opening with 'If I say I was raped' Vera performs the uncertainty of her own utterance, making her statement sound more of a hypothetical enunciation than something real that has actually taken place. To Vera, History resembles a traumatic intrusion of an accumulated and an accumulating past.⁷³ And it is within this flux, this constant movement that other histories can emerge, histories whose relationship to trauma is yet unclear. As such, any sense of closure, or final denouement will forever elude us. As recent trauma theory has stressed, in the milieu of trauma the 'I' never simply is, but is always in the process of becoming, because there is no regulatory mechanism to mediate the human encounter with trauma. Trauma, therefore, changes the semiotic and symbolic field, in terms of

⁷¹ Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 2nd ed. (New York, Basic Books, 1977).

⁷² See Terence Ranger, 'History has its ceiling. The Pressures of the Past in *The Stone Virgins*', in *Sign and Taboo, Perspectives on the Poetic Fiction of Yvonne Vera*, ed. Robert Muponde and Mandi Taruvinga (Harare: Weaver Press, 2002), pp 204-205.

⁷³ ———, 'History has its ceiling', in *Sign and Taboo*, p. 204.

the meaning invested in both. Here, we might stop and consider what I propose to call the psychoanalytic component of Vera's language: it can be argued that Vera's own preoccupation lies not with the literal truth or the historical authenticity of her language, how it might reflect reality, but its changing evolution, and fragmented, flexible character.⁷⁴ In reading her work more closely, it does not seem that authenticity is any concern of Vera's. Her focus is on the way in which her language can communicate and attest to the psychic disintegration of another, and the way in which traumatised individuals are reduced to a state of abjection. As Vera says, she can only write from the margins of her identity, or, more precisely, from within abjection as a HIV-positive African woman, and as the product of a violent post-colonial society.⁷⁵ As we will see, the intensity of the cruelty inflicted upon her victims, and their suffering can only be captured ironically through a beautifully written, albeit dislocated and difficult prose.

In *The Stone Virgins*, Vera demonstrates that she still has faith in the testimonial capacity of language under the most extreme of conditions, albeit not as record, or reflective in a realist way. She concerns herself rather with 'the materiality and semiotic mode of bearing witness'—Nicholas Chare's phrase.⁷⁶ She reworks language by refracturing and reordering it, and reordering the symbolic, in order for what Julia Kristeva defines as the 'semiotic' to protrude into view.⁷⁷ There is an acoustic and aural quality to her prose with a musicality—'the staccato of narration', supplemented by the graphic display of violence within the text—a joining of the vocal and graphic as suggested by Kristeva.⁷⁸

Vera's visual aesthetic prisms open the symbolic field and through this disruption, one can see, hear, and feel under the surface of things. This rupture opens up language to new meaning, and registers its malleability: if there is no word for a man-made crater in the circulating linguistic register, then one has to

⁷⁴ See *The Holocaust and the Text: Speaking the Unspeakable*, edited by Andrew Leak and George Paizis (London: Macmillan Press, 2000), p. 3.

⁷⁵ John C. Hawley, "I Enter Into Its Burning": Yvonne Vera's Beautiful Cauldron of Violence, in *Emerging Perspectives on Yvonne Vera*, ed. Helen Cousins and Pauline Dodgson-Katiyo (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2012), pp. 63-79.

⁷⁶ Nicholas Chare, *Auschwitz and Afterimages: Abjection, Witnessing and Representation* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), p. xix.

⁷⁷ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Rudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 4.

⁷⁸ Vera, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 183.

find a word for it, or ‘make it up’ until the made-up word ingratiates itself into the everyday language; for example, the way in which political violence in Zimbabwe has necessitated the coining of a phrase that distinguishes ordinary fear from an extreme form of fear associated with state-sponsored violence. That phrase is *Chidudu*. It is an onomatopoeic word which phonetically imitates one’s heartbeat under distress. As a new addition to the shared communal vocabulary, it galvanises a shared communal recognition of an extreme kind of fear, such that only those who have experienced it truly know what it means. Its evolution and etymology are rooted in the very origin of political violence in Zimbabwe: a violence that is necessary, or unavoidable, like a regular heartbeat. According to Cathy Caruth, trauma makes people.⁷⁹ There was, therefore, a recognition by Vera of the necessity of both creativity and invention when it comes to language—‘well-constructed lies’ which sound like ‘perfect truths’.⁸⁰ To her, ‘a woman writer must have an imagination that is plain stubborn, that can invent new gods and banish ineffectual ones’.⁸¹

This suggests that there is a process, conscious or otherwise, in which a traumatic event manifests itself through the actions, behaviours and mannerisms of the individual affected by trauma. More importantly, she argues, that there are changes that are registered in the individual after the encounter with trauma, following the rupture of their psychic apparatus. Therefore, how traumatised subjectivities are *made* will always vary according to the circumstances of the traumatic event, or events. A vivid illustration of this point might be the injunction used by slave-owners: that slaves were not only bought, but that they were also made; or the idea that one must intentionally brutalise and dehumanise an individual in order to turn them into a slave. As such, a traumatised self operates at the extremes of human existence, and in operating in the deepest realms of trauma, one reaches the nadir of disintegration, and of any possible assembly of the self, a place where self and life lack signification because life, as simple

⁷⁹ Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*.

⁸⁰ Vera, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 81.

⁸¹ —, ed., *Opening Spaces*, p. 1.

affirmation or state of being, can no longer be taken for granted and does not make sense.

However, to some, it is becoming evident that the Euro-centric model of conceptualising trauma as a singular event is no longer adequate in addressing the diverse forms of trauma, particularly in the developing world.⁸² According to Martin Beck Matuštick, there is a 'necessity to work through the legacy of the Holocaust in the context of other histories of violence, including contemporary ones'.⁸³ Perhaps he had in mind the recent genocides in the Balkans, Rwanda, Sudan, and some that are still in the making; particularly in the Middle East, Syria, and the Yemen. There are also arguments, particularly from post-colonial countries, which express the view that the current trauma model is inadequate in capturing the full impact of trauma, in situations and contexts where trauma is a way of life, and not a stand-alone event that appears on the horizon and soon vanishes.⁸⁴ There are also other convincing arguments of trauma as a continuous stress syndrome, and of multiple events that permanently entrench themselves in the lives of the more disadvantaged:

So, trauma in South Africa requires an analysis of complex notions of time, of collectivity, and of the material conditions: racial inequality, abject poverty, and unemployment are 'violent' social structures that are doomed to perpetuate trauma instead of interrupting it.⁸⁵

⁸² See *Trauma, Memory and Narrative in South Africa: Interviews*, ed. Ewald Mengel, Michela Borzaga and Karin Orantes (New York: Rodopi, 2010).

⁸³ Martin Beck Matuštick, 'Future's Past: A Conversation about the Holocaust with Gabriele M. Schwab', in *Critical Trauma Studies, Understanding Violence and Trauma in Everyday Life*, ed. Monica J. Casper and Eric Wertheimer (New York: New York University Press, 2016), pp. 122-134.

⁸⁴ See Joy DeGruy, *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America's Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing* (Oregon: Upton Press, 2005). DeGruy's argument is that the psychological impact of chattel slavery on the African American collective psyche has never been addressed properly. She argues that there are 'transgenerational adaptations that afflict African Americans, such as violence, drug addiction, failed relationships, and prevailing negative stereo-types associated with 'blackness' in Black communities themselves, that are associated with the past trauma of slavery, particularly the violence pertaining to slavery and the economic disenfranchisement of blacks as a result of it. This can be applied and/or exported to the post-colonial context which can be understood as a continuation of the violent repression of Blacks under the sign of a virulent capitalism. DeGruy's argument ties in with the proposition made by Gabriele Schwab, 'that it is the transgenerational transmission of the psychic damage that makes future generations vulnerable to repetition and opens history to new cycles of violence'. See Gabriele Schwab, *Haunting Legacies: Violent Histories and Transgenerational Trauma* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), particularly Chapter Four: 'Identity Trouble: Guilt, Shame, and Idealisation', pp. 92-117.

⁸⁵ Mengel et al., 'Trauma, Memory and Narrative', p. x.

In other words, trauma otherwise interacts with, and is further complicated by material conditions such as abject poverty and violent systemic structures.

According to Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela:

It's lived. It's there. That concept echoes in a way with Caruth's perspective that it's lived experience that is constantly there [...] There is something in the past, but then, I am poor, I am unemployed, I was raped last night, I have a daughter who is raped by my partner, and I live in squalor, in the squatter camps. So it's lived, it is every day that you wake up, and then you have to face it, people have to balance it.⁸⁶

In the Southern African context, and Zimbabwe in particular, it is becoming obvious that trauma cannot be dealt with outside of the framework of financial restitution, particularly when it comes to women, who are mostly affected by poverty, extreme violence and still remain on the margins of most social and economic institutions.⁸⁷ Perhaps the rallying point for all these forms of trauma is the global context of war-related violence.⁸⁸ The combined impact of all these wars suggests that trauma, as a result of war-related terrorism and genocides, is also on the move across borders, both real and imaginary. Consider the following example given by Ntombi Mcoyi, a social worker and coordinator for the political violence programme in South Africa, dealing with foreign nationals who were displaced as a result of the xenophobic attacks in 2008:

In terms of their countries of origin, many people at the camp at the moment come from Somalia, Burundi, Congo, and Rwanda. That is the majority of the people. There were also people from Zimbabwe and Mozambique, but most of these people have actually left and re-integrated with their communities.⁸⁹

According to a psychologist also working within the same trauma centre as Mcoyi:

We still work with some of those people, because we try and re-integrate them into communities. We work in the safety sites with them but also in the communities. And we established a support group for women, because we found fifteen women—well, those are the fifteen that we identified, there probably are many more—but fifteen women who had witnessed or been exposed to *multiple* rapes: they were raped in their country of origin,

⁸⁶ See, Mengel et al., 'A Better Past', in *Trauma, Memory and Narrative*, pp. 173-185.

⁸⁷ See Benita Parry, *Post-Colonial Studies: A Materialist Critique* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

⁸⁸ See Maria Erikson Baaz and Maria Stern, *Sexual Violence as a Weapon of War: Perceptions, Prescriptions, Problems in the Congo and Beyond* (London: Zed Books, 2013).

⁸⁹ Mengel et al., 'Political Violence, Children and Trauma', in *Trauma, Memory and Narrative*, p. 80.

they were raped on the journey to South Africa, and they were raped as a result of the xenophobic attacks or even in the camps now.⁹⁰

If there is cross-fertilisation of violence, as the above quotes suggest, which spans generations and continents, this portends that both trauma and violence, if this is not already the case, will soon be contaminated by other sets of experiences, thereby creating a cauldron of experiences, which will not only be hard to deal with, but which will present language(s) with other insurmountable challenges: how to articulate such experiences without the specificity of each traumatic experience drowning in the cacophony of conflicting and competing narratives of trauma? Trauma, it seems, although it is condemned to repetition, is not static but something that evolves and with its evolution comes challenges mainly related to language. This brings us back to Vera's astute observation: that we need a language that not only adapts, and opens itself up to new meaning, but also makes us see, feel, and hear the traumatic rupture of the world around us:

The death becomes like a dance, the way the man kills this woman is almost sexual, its skill and passion and intimacy, while maintaining the violence and the darkness of the scene, which was true of the experience in Matabeleland.⁹¹

All these arguments, brought together in the broader context of violence and trauma in Zimbabwe, provide the framework for my own research question, of the interaction between state-sponsored violence, its influence on prevailing masculinities, and the way in which this violence trickles into, and forms part of the daily contact between men and women in the Zimbabwean context. Zimbabwe is a nation formed out of violent conquest and the systematic subjugation of Blacks, and its coherence is sustained through continuous violent state repression aimed at ordinary citizens.

Land, violence and trauma in Zimbabwe

⁹⁰ _____, 'Political Violence, Children and Trauma', in *Trauma, Memory and Narrative*, p. 80.

⁹¹ Bryce, 'Interview with Vera', in *Sign and Taboo*, p. 224.

I have chosen Zimbabwe and South Africa as the background to my discussion of the TRC as both countries offer a unique opportunity as comparative sites for the study of racialised historical trauma. The two countries share a history, not only because of their contiguity in terms of physical geography but also in terms of their shared history of racial segregation. To many the TRC not only reopened old wounds, but it also failed to dig deeper into the history of Apartheid, and unravel, once and for all, its complex formulation.⁹² Also, to the same critics the most recent rupture of communal violence in South Africa following Jacob Zuma's arrest registers a tragic return of the spectre of violence that has haunted the South African nation for so long.⁹³ But the difference between the two nations is that in South Africa there has been an ongoing attempt, spanning more than two decades, to work-through the trauma of the past.

In Zimbabwe for the past four decades there has been no workable conceptual framework for addressing the grievances of the past. Historically, this has been frustrated mainly by the reluctance of the country's successive leadership to talk about the *Gukurahundi* atrocities as a mode of recognition and acknowledgement of the nation's dark past, and the ongoing psychological impact this still has on ordinary citizens. The lack of a mechanism with which to respond to multiple grievances means that the pain linked to these atrocities is still very raw. In terms of trauma, there is no mechanism for facilitating collective healing. This is further compounded by the endemic corruption, state-sponsored violence and the lack of accountability. And finally, President Emmerson Mnangagwa's

⁹² Terry Bell, *Unfinished Business: South Africa, Apartheid and Truth* (London: Verso, 2003)

⁹³ In July 2021 riots erupted in KwaZulu-Natal and the economic hub of Gauteng Province following Jacob Zuma's incarceration for contempt of court after his refusal to give evidence at an enquiry into corruption during his nine years in power. The riots followed a prolonged period of lockdown during Covid, compounded by a crippling economic stagnation. The riots were seen by many not only as an outrage against Zuma's incarceration, but as a wider symptom of the still prevailing inequality and impoverishment of Blacks linked to Apartheid. In some parts of the country such as Phoenix in Durban there was a re-enactment of the of humiliation of blacks reminiscent of Apartheid. Armed groups of Asian men (of Indian descent) mounted patrols in which they ruthlessly murdered blacks on sight. Many of those they murdered had been displaced from their homes as a result of the riots. Apparently, they'd failed to provide proof of residence, thus re-invoking the memory of the notorious pass laws utilised by the Apartheid regime to brutalise and oppress blacks. The use of the same tactics by Asians provided necessary commentary on the state of race-relations in the Rainbow Nation. But more importantly, particularly in terms of the relationships between Indians and Blacks, the role played by the Indians in the oppression of Blacks during and after Apartheid. This cannot be ignored, given the events in Uganda during Idi Amin's rule. There is already a prevailing perception in South Africa that Asians continue to play a role in the exploitation of Blacks. Given the country's history of violence it is hard to imagine how this will end. See Jason Blake, 'South Africa: more than 70 dead as civil unrest linked to Zuma jailing intensifies, in the *Guardian*.>[https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/july/13/troops-deployed-in South Africa-amid-violence-rarely-seen-in-he-history-of-our-democracy](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/july/13/troops-deployed-in-South-Africa-amid-violence-rarely-seen-in-he-history-of-our-democracy). [accessed August 31, 2021].

role as former head of the notorious CIO during the *Gukurahundi* atrocities disqualifies him, both morally and ethically, from any ongoing project of reconciliation. Therefore, Zimbabwe as a failed state is the embodiment of what can go wrong if an historical injustice is allowed to prevail for so long. On the other hand, the most recent eruption of violence in South Africa is symptomatic of the absence of a workable framework for reparations and redistributive justice—two very important predicates for an effective reconciliatory process.

If Apartheid and *Gukurahundi* symbolise crimes against humanity on a massive scale, the philosophy of *Ubuntu* offers an alternative conceptual framework for an easily identifiable unity or connection between them. Under the sign of *Ubuntu* there is no singular narrative of suffering, since the self is constituted through the collective. If the aim of a racialised and divisive politics is to disrupt the ‘capacity for linking’, the philosophy of *Ubuntu* offers a different mode of relationality in which the other must thrive for the self to survive. In terms of collective healing, it is a mode of reciprocal recognition of the other’s pain. Fundamentally, the concept of *Ubuntu* brings people together and offers a modicum of collective hope, through the belief that our shared humanity is only ever temporarily disrupted.

The foundational argument in my reading of *The Stone Virgins* is that there has been no respite from violence in Zimbabwe for almost a century and a half. The violence that began with the brutal colonial invasion continues unabated. Therefore, political violence in Zimbabwe can be traced from its inception, during the colonial occupation of Zimbabwe, throughout the period of resistance to colonial rule, and the post-colonial period in which various nationalists vied for power, through the state security apparatus as the main instrument of violence.⁹⁴ The prevailing silence in Zimbabwe, not just the victims’, but also the whole nation’s—is indicative of the state’s refusal to acknowledge the consequences of its own violence. *The Catholic Commission’s Report on the Disturbances in Matabeleland* has already established that there is sufficient evidence, from victims and witnesses, to suggest that soldiers and dissidents routinely brutalised

⁹⁴ See Mason, *The Birth of a Dilemma*.

and raped women.⁹⁵ What is unsurprising, given the circumstances, is the general reticence amongst victims to report the rapes. The brutalisation of Zimbabwean women as a result of political violence frames and exposes the tensions of a nation in crisis.⁹⁶ According to Everjoice Win, a feminist and political activist in Zimbabwe:

We know who our enemies are; it is the local chairperson of ZANU PF next door; or the very young 'war vet', who burnt the huts. It is the police who are supposed to maintain law and order, causing disorder. It is the army who are supposed to protect us, but who now ram AK47s into young girls' vaginas [...] Or, our very own ministry of women which trains the violent youth militia [...]⁹⁷

To-date in Zimbabwe, there has been no official narrative of the events in Matabeleland and the Midlands in the 1980s. Nor, have there ever been any official responses to the most recent instances of state-sponsored violence. Perhaps what is missing from the 'crucible of harmonisation'—Wole Soyinka's phrase—is remorse, or even recognition.⁹⁸ And it would seem, at present at least, that in Zimbabwe, unlike in South Africa, reconciliation is not a workable concept, or even an available concept, however premature that conclusion might be. The futility, or, rather the utility of forgiveness, depending on one's position on these questions, has been illustrated by the turn of events in South Africa recently. The new South African president, Cyril Ramaphosa, recently announced the government's intention to seize land for redistribution amongst the poor and landless Blacks, to realise the goal of the revolutionary struggle against Apartheid.

Interestingly, Ramaphosa's pronouncements echo those of Robert Mugabe in the early 2000s, and the uncanny resemblance to Zimbabwe's continuous

⁹⁵ See Gukurahundi, pp. 192-196.

⁹⁶ See Andrew Norman, *Mugabe: Teacher, Revolutionary, Tyrant* (Gloucestershire: The History Press, 2008), for a more detailed exposition of the direct consequences of Robert Mugabe's rule in Zimbabwe.

⁹⁷ Everjoice Win, 'Are There Any People Here?': Violence against Women in the Zimbabwean Context', in *Agenda*, 18 (2004), 17-21. <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/4548110>> [accessed 6 January 2019].

⁹⁸ Wole Soyinka, *The Burden of Memory: The Muse of Forgiveness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 34. Wole Soyinka is a distinguished Nigerian novelist, playwright and political activist. During the Nigerian Civil War, also known as the *Biafran War*, he was imprisoned by the Nigerian government for a period of more than two years, during which he wrote one of his many autobiographies: *The Man Died: Prison Notes* (1971). He has also written other novels: *The Interpreters* (1965), *Aké: The Years of Childhood* (1981), and *Isarà: A Voyage Around Essay* (1989). In 1986 he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. He was the first African to be honoured in that category. To-date Soyinka remains a strong critic of the successive Nigerian governments—both military and civilian. He also remains a strong critic of the numerous dictatorships in Africa, Zimbabwe included.

revolution that seeks out new enemies of the revolution cannot go unnoticed. This unexpected, and somewhat late pronouncement by Ramaphosa, coming as it does, at least twenty-five years after the fall of Apartheid, serves to illustrate the unpredictability of human action, as Hannah Arendt suggests.⁹⁹ Ramaphosa's timely announcement, in terms of its political purchase, brings to the fore, the urgency with which the whole issue of reparations needs to be scrutinised again; and underscores that a certain level of vigilance and extreme caution must attend to it. In all the political manoeuvring, what should never be forgotten is that the fundamental basis for Apartheid, like slavery and colonialism, was the complete alienation of Blacks from what should have been their inalienable rights as human beings; their total and cruel exploitation as part of the mechanism for commodity exchange, mainly as indentured cheap labour—all in the advancement of White privilege.

In South Africa today, White privilege continues to be maintained at the expense of collective Black impoverishment.¹⁰⁰ From this alone, it should be argued that the continuing impoverishment of Blacks cannot be resolved through simple dialogue. Moreover, any mode of reconciliation that fails to address this aspect is bound to fail. Unsurprisingly and, some might say as expected any and every argument about the equal redistribution of wealth in South Africa, has been counteracted by the invocation of the plight of the White Zimbabwean farmers across the border. Under this schema, Zimbabwe now serves as an exemplar of Black incompetence, and as the affirmation of 'blackness' as a trait that renders Blacks as incapable of independent thought and intelligence. The underlying argument, with overt racist overtones, is that Blacks cannot be given access to land because they do not know how to farm; and that they cannot be trusted with wealth because they will plunder it irresponsibly. These tired arguments derive from a past that still operates in the present. There is also a reluctance to unravel the economic violence embedded within this argument. The routinisation of economic violence afflicting the Black majority, such as being forced to live in

⁹⁹ See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, introd. Margaret Canovan, 2nd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 8-9.

¹⁰⁰ Gobodo-Madikizela, *Dare We Hope?*, p. 19.

abject poverty, and any attempt at the normalised *racialisation* of poverty afflicting Black South Africans should be seen as abhorrent and indefensible. In ‘The Roots of Afrikaner Rage’, Gobodo-Madikizela says the following:

Seeds of hatred continue to fester amongst Afrikaners who feel that the new democracy in South Africa and the freedoms enjoyed by blacks have robbed them of their heritage. While the buzz word is ‘reconciliation’ and while the rest of the world has praised the political transition in this country as a miracle, and a civil war that didn’t happen, some Afrikaners feel marginalised by a process that has ended decades of the legalised oppression of blacks by a white minority government.¹⁰¹

The work now, this working-out of the remnants of a virulent Apartheid and its persistent return, both in South Africa and Zimbabwe, must concentrate in dislodging this ‘last resistance’—Jacqueline Rose’s term.¹⁰² The Whites’ perceived rootedness in the past, their staunch refusal to integrate after centuries on the continent serves, if anything, as an emblem of a continuing, enduring and ambitious White supremacy. As Julius Malema has argued all along, Blacks cannot be expected to wait for ‘the logical conclusion’ of such an endeavour; because they have ‘lived it’ and continue to exist within its realm.¹⁰³

As such, it can be argued that the *South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission* grossly underestimated the depth of division in South African society in the Post-Apartheid era. Instead, the strength of feeling, and the precarity of the lives of Black South Africans, calls for the logic of a balanced calculus that will seriously reconsider the contribution of Apartheid policies to the wretchedness of life in the Black townships. The old calculus, whose method of execution and implementation grossly, and deliberately, under-estimated the economic, psychological, emotional, and spiritual transformation undergone by both Blacks and Whites under Apartheid should be abandoned. The difference now is that the hold, the containment of Blacks within the fortified perimeter of the township, is

¹⁰¹ _____, *Dare We Hope?*, p. 6.

¹⁰² Jacqueline Rose, *The Last Resistance* (London: Verso, 2007).

¹⁰³ Julius Malema is a South African politician and leader of the opposition, Economic Freedom Fighters’ Party. The main thrust of his argument is that the revolution in South Africa will continue until all the land seized by Whites over centuries has been restored to impoverished Blacks. He has used very inflammatory language and has persistently encouraged Blacks to seize and occupy any piece of land that they deem is theirs, using violent means if necessary. He has been accused of inciting racial hatred against Whites, leading to concerns of what has been called a White Genocide in view of the increasing number of White farmers being killed. See <<https://www.genocidewatch.org/southafrica.html>> [accessed 2 October 2019]

no longer possible. The excess violence has over-spilled into the areas that were previously unaffected by the spectre of the so-called 'Black-on-Black' violence, as if the racial codification of violence would somehow make such black violence inevitable.

Controversially, in South Africa, it is the very symbol of Afrikanerdom that is now under attack: the White farmer. It is unclear whether there are racial motivations behind the attacks; or whether the farm is a convenient target for criminals in terms of its isolation, and what is likely to be found on a farm by marauding criminals. Politically, the first version, of coordinated and racialised violence against White farmers, has more purchase. It confirms Whites' fears of an impending calamity orchestrated by a multitude of impoverished Blacks, while at the same time pandering, as part of an appeal for international help, to what proponents of the movement call an impending 'White Genocide'.¹⁰⁴

Under these circumstances, it is difficult to see and to discern, whose responsibility it is to forgive, and whose to reconcile.¹⁰⁵ To some, if the TRC illustrates anything at all, it is the complexity of forgiveness as a concept. Nevertheless, there is another dimension of forgiveness that can be brought into the frame of this argument. Mainly, that most White South Africans have never forgiven Black people their blackness. The guilt and shame of past injustices are counteracted and justified by an insistence on the continuance of a malevolent paternalism, which in essence is the basis for the continuing exploitation of Blacks by other means.

Land and permanent grievance in Zimbabwe

In Zimbabwe, as in South Africa, the object of this permanent loss and grievance is the land.¹⁰⁶ If, to mourn effectively, as Sigmund Freud suggests, is to move beyond one's preoccupation with the object of one's loss; then this

¹⁰⁴ According to Genocide Watch and Afri-Forum, an international consortium of White right-wing extremists, the world is totally oblivious to the plight of White farmers in South Africa. This is against the backdrop of the changes to the law allowing the South African government to redistribute the land seized from White farmers.

¹⁰⁵ Soyinka, *The Muse of Forgiveness*, p. 34.

¹⁰⁶ See Paul Gilroy, *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2004).

leaves Zimbabweans on both sides of the racial divide in a state of an unresolvable melancholia.¹⁰⁷ Gain for one side necessarily means a great loss for the other. In the context of jarring inequalities in both South Africa and Zimbabwe, it would be nigh on impossible to move beyond this 'last resistance', given that any kind of resolution would have to take into consideration the on-going grievance about the land. In his discussion of postcolonial melancholia, Stephen Frosh emphasises that:

This operates for individuals as each of us seeks some reconciliation with the un-mourned object of past losses, hauntingly continuous in their effects. It operates too at the level of the collectives, as the unspeakable events of the past—experienced by people as victims or perpetrators—become the conscious and unconscious source of contemporary struggle and regret.¹⁰⁸

Frosh uses the concept of melancholia to illustrate what he calls 'stubborn attachment to a traumatic historical past which refuses the act of forgetting' so that the past is always a 'work in progress'.¹⁰⁹ Fundamentally, he is suggesting that the past will eventually determine what happens in the future, and that has unimaginable consequences. This is particularly the case in terms of the violence of the past which is permanently entrenched into the question of land redistribution. Currently, in Zimbabwe and South Africa, of particular concern is the figure of the White farmer both as the embodiment of continuing injustices, and in his persistence, his refusal to disappear from the anguished collective Black imaginary. In other words, the White farmer is the last hurdle to be overcome by Zimbabweans in their attempt at collective mourning. The farm as the lasting symbol of post-colonial oppression makes manifest the prevailing inequalities in wealth. As such, it is through the symbol of the farm that we must complicate the predicament faced by all Zimbabweans. In terms of historical trauma, the farm must not be understood only as an object of mere possession: it has its own form of resistance—its refusal to acquiesce to any claim to presumed ownership. The

¹⁰⁷ Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume 14 (1914-1916): *On the History of the Psychoanalytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works* (London: Vintage Classics, 2001).

¹⁰⁸ Stephen Frosh, *Hauntings, Psychoanalysis and Ghostly Transmissions* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 54.

¹⁰⁹ _____, *Hauntings*, p. 54.

farm reaches out and touches. And in the process it possesses too, as Doris Lessing has demonstrated in her thought-provoking rendering of the psychological violence of the farm in *The Grass is Singing*.¹¹⁰ What Lessing demonstrates, most poignantly, is that the farm is a mode of relating—Jessica Benjamin’s phrase.¹¹¹ The history of the violence associated with the farm shapes the myriad ways in which whites, particularly farmers, relate to blacks purely as the source of cheap labour, and in turn blacks view whites as their eternal oppressors. That relationality plays itself out in the political landscape of Zimbabwe today, and the spectacular ugliness of Zimbabwean politics, with regards to the violence of the farm, is there for all to see. As Dick, husband to Mary, the character around whom the plot turns in the novel, angrily retorts to his wife:

All day I am down on the lands with these lazy black savages, fighting to get some work out of them. You know that I won’t come back home to this damned fight, fight, fight in the house [...] If you want to get work out of them you have to know how to manage them. You shouldn’t expect too much. They are savages after all.¹¹²

His outburst follows his frustration with his wife for demonstrating a lack of understanding of the appropriate way of handling their Black African farm workers. In terms of historical trauma, therefore, what remains inarticulable in Zimbabwe is both the economic and physical violence linked to the farm as the synecdoche of all contested land ownership. As the last visible remnant of colonial subjugation, both Blacks and Whites remain in the grip of its violent aftermath. In terms of narrative and storytelling, and in terms of the social absurdity, one wonders what kind of fantastic story has yet to come out of the farm in Zimbabwe. Politically, as *The Grass is Singing* suggests, the farm has irrevocably damaged the way in which Zimbabweans relate to each other, and it has undermined the African existential philosophy of *Ubuntu* itself, that is, it has

¹¹⁰ Doris Lessing, *The Grass is Singing* (London: Harper Perennial, 2007).

¹¹¹ Jessica Benjamin, *Beyond Doer and Done To: Recognition Theory and Intersubjectivity and the Third* (London: Routledge, 2018).

¹¹² Lessing, *The Grass is Singing*, p. 33.

inserted itself into the most intimate spaces of human relations, casting doubt on our own capacity for humanness, Pumla Gobodo Madikizela's phrase.¹¹³

Humanness derives from the African philosophical principle of *Ubuntu*. According to Archbishop Desmond Tutu, one of the chief disseminators and promoters of the concept, *Ubuntu* in its purest, simplest forms, means 'I am human because you are human. If I undermine your humanity, I dehumanise myself.'¹¹⁴ But what is often mis-interpreted or overlooked about the philosophy of *Ubuntu* is reciprocity as its binding principle, and the dissolution of the line between the individual and the communal. Therefore, pushed to its logical conclusion, the philosophy of *Ubuntu* simply means that one cannot violate oneself or others seemingly without violating the communal body. The individual [body] is entangled with the communal body, which is why, in terms of collective trauma, as applicable to the Zimbabwean situation, healing must also be a collective act. Collective healing demands collective listening, and the acknowledgement of the atrocities of the past. Forgiveness therefore is a gift from the violated community to those who violated [it]. It is not something that an individual alone can give. Under the overarching umbrella of *Ubuntu*, there is an acknowledgement that transgression by an individual signals communal failure; and that in the act of grievous wounding, the whole community identifies as 'wounded' until the healing process begins.

According to Tutu, perhaps the most unique element of *Ubuntu*, compared to Euro-centric jurisprudence, is its rejection of revenge or the notion of retributive justice. Instead, *Ubuntu* focuses on communal rehabilitation through truth. Truth paves the way for reconciliation and forgiveness. Under this schema, African jurisprudence offers a challenge to the Eurocentric understanding of trauma as a singular event which impacts mainly on the individual. Such thinking may prise open trauma theory to interventions way beyond the counselling couch.¹¹⁵ But it too has its limitations. For some the very concept of *Ubuntu* is too

¹¹³ See Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, *A Human Being Died That Night: Forgiving Apartheid's Chief Killer* (Uxbridge: Portobello Books, 2006).

¹¹⁴ Richard A. Wilson, *The Politics of Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa: Legitimising the Post-Apartheid State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 9.

¹¹⁵ See Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

closely linked to the Christianity which facilitated the cruel repression of Blacks and the violent occupation of African lands.¹¹⁶

However, what cannot be denied is that at the core of the philosophy of *Ubuntu*, is a conceptual framework for organising collective *Bantu* principles for existence, at the centre of which lies the collectively binding idea of the sanctity of human life. *Ubuntu* is a philosophical principle of the self, which construes the self as constituted through the whole, under a mutual and reciprocal recognition. This mutual recognition and reverence for the other is contained in the most basic and fundamental *Bantu* greeting: ‘*Sakubona*’, which simply means, ‘I see you’.¹¹⁷ It is the simplest but most significant act during the initial encounter with the other; as an invitation, a mode of reaching out. After the initial recognition, comes the greeting: ‘How are we?’ And always in the plural, so that the individual is addressed through the communal. The greeting establishes the basis for social interaction. More importantly, *Ubuntu* stands as the opposite pole of racialised non-recognition.

The open gesture of the greeting fosters a mutual recognition in what Jessica Benjamin calls the Third, which she explains as a mutual dynamic of reciprocal responsiveness and understanding.¹¹⁸ Benjamin’s concept is suggestive of a third space in which meaningful contact across the racial divide is cultivated; and where racialised differences are worked out. In Zimbabwe, one might surmise, this would be the wasteland between farms: uncontested, in-between spaces. For a long time now, White Zimbabwean identity has depended on Black identity, both psychologically and materially. First, by way of an indentured labour system, and second, as leverage to demonstrate White racial superiority when viewed against the impoverishment of Blacks lives. Under this schema, poverty stands in for Blacks’ spiritual and intellectual impoverishment. Which is to say that there exists a irreconcilable dialectic between the two identities, with diametrically opposed ambitions, and conflicted intended outcomes. The third mutual space, as suggested by Benjamin, will pull both identities into dialogue

¹¹⁶ See *Religion and Reconciliation in South Africa: Voice of Religious Leaders*, ed. Audrey R. Chapman and Bernard Spong (Philadelphia: Templeton University Press, 2003).

¹¹⁷ DeGruy, *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome*, p. 31.

¹¹⁸ Benjamin, *Beyond Doer and Done To*.

across the rupture caused by racial segregation. As Benjamin suggests, it is through this mutual space, that an invaluable exchange can take place. If we take the concept of the third and *Ubuntu's* communal life, we could argue that this is what has been missing in Zimbabwe, indeed in any racist nation or culture which enforces hatred and dispossession.

The aspirations of Rhodesian Apartheid, like any totalising system, lay in its ambition to not only disrupt any meaningful recognition, but to degrade, and dehumanise Blacks. Its aim, as configured in the earliest stages of its formulation and beyond, was to allow for a cognitive dissonance in which individuals occupying the same space, failed to recognise each other's humanity. Rhodesian Apartheid allowed for the 'misrecognition' of the Other's alterity. Under this schema, the regulation of social spaces and interactions became the foundation for state policy and entered the public domain, under what was called—rather disarmingly—Rhodesian etiquette.¹¹⁹ Over the years, this repetition of exclusionary practices, through daily micro—and macro-aggressions against Blacks, created and consolidated a system of racial hatred which remains today. In psychoanalytic terms, the resulting discomfiture retains a hold, in both the Black and White imaginary, in the Zimbabwean context.¹²⁰ Amongst Blacks it manifests itself as self-doubt, self-disparagement, and a lowering of ideals. And amongst Whites, as an unbridled sense of entitlement, as intuited by Frantz Fanon:

Native society is not simply described as a society lacking in values. It is not enough for the colonist to affirm that those values have disappeared from, or still better never existed in, the colonial world. The native is declared insensitive to ethics; he represents not only the absence of values, but the negation of values.¹²¹

¹¹⁹ See Allison K. Shutt, 'Manners Make a Nation: Racial Etiquette in Southern Rhodesia', 1910-1963, in *Africa: The Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 87, No.1 (Feb, 2017), 214-215.

¹²⁰ The Imaginary is one of the three categories of Lacanian psychoanalysis: the Symbolic, the Imaginary and the Real. According to Lacan, the Imaginary is the key to our ego-formation: it shapes how we perceive of the world, and how the world perceives of us. In other words what we imagine others to be and what they imagine us to be, is filtered through a complex web of relations. In instances where there is an animosity, say between races, the 'arbitrary and fixed' nature of these relationships, although largely 'fictional' is an illusion that has tangible consequences in real life. For example, Blacks might believe that they are inherently inferior to Whites, and Whites superior to Blacks. There is an interdependency between the Symbolic and the Imaginary, so that what both these groups feel about each other is largely determined by sociocultural and socio-linguistic structures. All of which, taken together, affect their shared reality and the different ways in which they relate to each other. See Simon Clarke, 'Colonial Identity and Ethnic Hatred: Fanon, Lacan and Zizek', in *Social Theory, Psychoanalysis and Racism* (London: Palgrave, 2003), pp. 99-122.

¹²¹ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, translated by Constance Farrington (London: Penguin, 2001), p. 32.

On listening closely to the arguments about lack of progress in Zimbabwe, it seems that the same old views still prevail. And that such views pander to the notion of the past, in which natives toiled away on the farm under the benevolent supervision of the White farmer. If the mind of the native is understood both as the target of colonial subjugation, and as the object of its inquiry, perhaps what remains to be exposed, is not just the topography of the farm—this has already been executed sufficiently enough through racialised Rhodesian cartography—but its symbolic resonance as the vestige of White dominance, and also as the primary site for registering trauma in the Zimbabwean context. The farm marks the unshifting terrain of White racism, and it registers the blind idealisation of the paternalistic kindness of the White farmer. The continuing tragedy of the Black farm worker, who is still psychologically and economically attached to the farm, is that there is no intention to save her from the drudgery of hard labour. Instead, she is reduced to an ‘unremitting vulnerability and clutching dependency’ on the White farmer, under the auspices of a ‘bad faith economy’—Jean-Paul Satre’s term.¹²² More dangerously, recently, the plight of the White farmer has become the counter-narrative to the suffering of Blacks. Under this schema, the White farmer has turned into a defenceless and pathetic figure, who not only deserves pity, but recompense at the expense of the Black farm labourer mired in poverty on farms that generate millions per year. This has been their plight for centuries. Such a perceived vulnerability politicises Whiteness in the context of the

¹²² This is a concept which derives from Jean-Paul Satre’s existential analysis of the way in which people distance themselves from the results of their own actions. The concept was further developed and utilised by Paulo Freire in his teaching method which he called the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, in which he encourages students to develop a critical consciousness through a cooperative teacher-student education model. See Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (London: Penguin Classics, 2017). Nancy Scheper-Hughes utilised the concept of a ‘bad faith economy’ in her book, *Death Without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), as an analytical tool and explanatory framework for exploring the hidden nuances behind the dependencies or exploitative relationships between impoverished servants and their masters in which ‘exploitation parades as benevolence and passive-aggression masquerades as a fawning dependency’. Scheper-Hughes suggests that there is always a contradiction inherent in the perverse relations of power and domination. In the Zimbabwean situation, the White farmer rescues not only the impoverished farm worker but also maintains and sustains the ‘exploitative and colonising social system’. Domination itself is a mode of dependency, so that White identity in Zimbabwe uses the so-called impoverished Black identity as a crutch to support itself. Through *malevolent* paternalism, Blacks are exploited for their own good, and sometimes across generations by the same families. Under this ruse, Whites look after, and take care of their needs, but never fully rescue them from the demise of transgenerational poverty. See Yuka Suzuki, *The Nature of Whiteness: Race, Animals, and Nation in Zimbabwe* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017), pp. 67-68.

Zimbabwean farm and acts a metaphor for a rehabilitated version of a pervasive and malevolent Whiteness.

According to Yuka Suzuki, a Japanese American who spent time in Zimbabwe most recently with White farmers, the narrative of his encounter suggests that racism against Blacks, if anything, is on the rise. The White farmer, resolute in his demands, has not yielded an inch to the demands of the farm worker, in particular, or the poor landless peasant in general:

The narration of chaos requires as its counterpoint an identifiable state of order, or a sense of order of how things once were. The myth of 'Beautiful Rhodesia' was a common point of beginning for those who told a story of a spiralling descent into decline after Zimbabwe's independence. Rhodesia was the best country in the world, many of my older informants reminisced. They, i.e., blacks had this country handed to them on a silver platter [...] things worked much better than they did anywhere else, and in twenty years they have taken the country apart, piece by piece.¹²³

There exists now, as part of the politicised perpetuation of this mythology, the idea of Zimbabwe as having once resembled the *Garden of Eden*, of Zimbabwe as once having been the bread basket of Africa, that somehow a post-independence Zimbabwe now constitutes the Fall of what was a thriving land.¹²⁴ Such stories, as Suzuki suggests, have become 'important currency' traded amongst White Zimbabweans today; whereupon they are 'consumed, traded and exchanged' and eventually entered into the annals of a shared and collective White mythology.¹²⁵

What is missing from this narrative is that in colonial Rhodesia there was no common cultural foundation between the disparate groups that now live in what constitutes the territory known as Zimbabwe. Whiteman as god-figure in this *Garden of Eden*, and as the representation of the perfectibility of humankind, disabused both the people and the language beyond recognition. Terms that once

¹²³ Suzuki, *The Nature of Whiteness*, p. 48.

¹²⁴ There is a growing body of literature primarily written by exiled White Zimbabweans allegedly highlighting the plight of Black Zimbabweans. But a close reading of these texts quickly establishes that they are a critique of Black rule and that in essence they are advocating the return of White rule in Zimbabwe, or at least White dominance of the economy. Most of the writers concerned fought as soldiers in the Rhodesian military against the notion of Black majority rule and were complicit in some of the worst massacres in Zimbabwean history. They include Bruce Grobbelaar, *Life in a Jungle: My Autobiography* (Liverpool: DeCoubertin Books, 2018), and Peter Godwin, *When A Crocodile Eats The Sun* (London: Picador, 2006).

¹²⁵ Suzuki, *The Nature of Whiteness*, p. 48.

symbolised an established and universal relationality, such as love, neighbourliness, and kindness, all acquired different and shifting meaning. I return here to the misnomer that was Rhodesian etiquette, in which the forbidden intimacy between the races, in its broadest implication, and in relation to trauma, disrupted 'relationality and the capacity for linking':

In the post-colonial context, farmers' anxiety centred around the policing of social boundaries between black and white, especially for children. Julie, a frequent guest at the Lawrence house, had been sent to live in Mlilo when she was seventeen because her parents felt that she was spending far too much time with her black friends in Bulawayo [...] People generally saw Mlilo as a 'safer' place, where spatial segregation was easier to maintain.¹²⁶

The 'psychosis of whiteness' persists together with the continuing hallucination about an assumed racial superiority.¹²⁷ If the history of Zimbabwe is a history of violence, we can therefore surmise from this, that it has 'generated psychic deformations' that have been passed on from generation to generation—in both the Black and White imaginary.¹²⁸ White Zimbabweans, who now claim to belong to Zimbabwe, but whose real claim—which inevitably has material benefit, is that the land belongs to them—never shed a drop of blood to defend the territorial integrity of what is Zimbabwe today. They fought instead to thwart the aspirations of the new nation, and for the continued subjugation of Blacks. That in the eyes of the Black Zimbabweans remains as the main defining characteristic of Whiteness. To Blacks, the reality of their needs will forever remain opposed to those of the Whites. Worryingly, it seems, such differences can only be resolved through the question of the land.

Jacqueline Rose, in *The Last Resistance*, her treatise and examination of Zionist identity against the backdrop of the Israel-Palestinian conflict, suggests that the right to the land is justified on radically discrepant grounds and histories. That to claim to belong somewhere becomes impossible to contest, and the truth-claim of each statement depends on its utterance. In addition, each utterance

¹²⁶ _____, *The Nature of Whiteness*, p. 48.

¹²⁷ See Kehinde Andrews, 'The Psychosis of Whiteness: The Celluloid Hallucinations of Amazing Grace and Belle', in *The Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 47, No. 5 (July, 2016), 435–453. <<https://doi.org/10.1177/002193471663880>> [accessed 20 October 2019]

¹²⁸ Suzuki, *The Nature of Whiteness*, p. 48.

becomes a mode of resistance, in the sense of entrenchment: ‘This is my land because this is where I see myself.’¹²⁹ To White Zimbabweans, Zimbabwe is theirs because they carved it out of a wilderness. They tamed its savagery; they built everything that is on it; and seemingly erasing all traces of Black labour in that endeavour. To Black Zimbabweans, the country belongs to them because they shed their own blood and sacrificed lives in order to reclaim it from the violent colonial invaders. The building monuments scattered throughout the country register their sweat and labour, and more importantly, their ruthless exploitation at the hands of Whites. In their minds, they are the autochthonous inhabitants and rightful owners of the land. But the counterclaim that is now being made by a resurging White supremacy, is that [it] wants to save what it built from the plundering incompetence of Blacks. A view, it seems, widely supported in the West. However, as Rose warns:

Nationhood is not a right, it is a claim; agnostic, most likely to destroy another. Self-determination is a myth, because as a right it depends on the other’s recognition. The worst delusion of all perhaps is that of national self-hood. Not just because no nation in the twenty-first century, nor indeed in the twentieth, can be anything other than an in-mixing of peoples and hence selves [...] ¹³⁰

From this, we can deduce that any notion of a vulnerable Whiteness becomes dangerous, because of its power to mobilise, under the sign of an inverted formula: yesterday’s victimiser as today’s victim. We’ve seen the outcome of this mode of thinking as avidly demonstrated by the Palestinian-Israeli conflict—this lack of the recognition of the other.¹³¹ In Zimbabwe, this very concept of the mobilisation of Whiteness as a political force to be reckoned with was recently demonstrated by the use of international sanctions, which crippled the Zimbabwean economy through the implementation of the Structural Adjustment Programme, imposed on the regime by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. If Robert Mugabe’s regime was the target of the sanctions, their effect was harshly felt amongst ordinary people, who had never benefited from the excesses of the regime. The famine and desperation that followed was

¹²⁹ Rose, *The Last Resistance*, p. 43.

¹³⁰ —, *The Last Resistance*, p. 44

¹³¹ See S. Yizhar, *Khirbet Khizeh*, trans. by Nicholas de Lange and Yaacob Dwerk (London: Granta, 2008).

linked to a series of historical events (for example, the colonial war of occupation and the subsequent war of independence) that could not be understood in isolation.¹³² If we fail to grasp this notion of the contiguity of historical events as a contributory factor in the manifestation of trauma in Zimbabwe, then we disavow the reality of historical violence as the main cause of trauma in the past and ongoing history of Zimbabwe.

Narrating Trauma or Trauma and Repetition

Under these circumstances, and in terms of narrating trauma, truth-telling becomes an enterprise fraught with uncertainty; and denial almost becomes a necessity, a sifting device through which narrative must pass, in order for it to be re-contextualised, re-framed and re-articulated. Each narration stands on shaky ground precisely because there are no willing listeners. Whites deliberately refuse, and will not, and cannot hear, the traumatic narratives of Black history. Recall becomes intentional, purposeful and a mode of survival. As such, any form of recall must be careful in its deliberations: if traumatic memory operates against the precarious condition of living under permanent political violence, how others perceive it is defined by a similarly challenging circumstance—the time and place is never right to talk about violence.

Judith Butler in one of her meditations on global violence made the following observation:

In a certain way, and paradoxically, our responsibility is heightened once we have been subjected to the violence of others. We are acted upon, violently, and it appears that our capacity to set our own course at such times is fully undermined. Only once we have suffered that violence are we compelled, ethically, to ask how we will respond to violent injury. What role will we assume in the historical relay of violence, who will we become in the response, and will we be furthering or impeding violence by virtue of the response that we make?¹³³

¹³² See Zvakanyorwa Sadomba, *War Veterans in Zimbabwe's Revolution: Challenging Neo-colonialism & Settler & International Capital* (Suffolk: Boydell and Brewer Ltd, 2011).

¹³³ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), p. 16.

The significant phrase in the above sentence is the ‘historical relay of violence’. Butler implies that there is a passing on of violence between generations. That each generation will continue to pick up, and pass on, this ‘relay stick of violence’, until such time that one generation questions the whole enterprise of the relay in the first place. The relay stick serves as a metaphor for the mechanism through which violent histories are transmitted or handed over from one generation to another and symbolises the instrumentality of violence itself as something that is always *at hand* in its projection and can be brought *to hand* when the situation arises. During the relay, there is a firm grip, an intentional ‘holding on’, a willed determination, finally leading to, the hand-to-hand, almost intimate transfer of the stick.

If we liken those embroiled in ordinary relay to those in the grip of violent histories, we might surmise that there is an unconscious will, aided by the socialisation process that enables or facilitates the act of the passing on of violence. Gabriele Schwab’s idea of ‘haunting legacies’ suggests that the transmission of violent legacies by far exceeds the passing on of historical knowledge, and even stories with ‘thick descriptions of personal involvement’.¹³⁴ It is through her concept of haunting legacies that she explores the psychic lives of violent histories:

What I call ‘haunting legacies’ are things hard to recount or even remember, the results of a violence that holds an unrelenting grip on memory yet is deemed unspeakable. The psychic core of violent histories includes what has been repressed or buried in unreachable recesses. The legacies of violence not only haunt the victims but are also passed on through generations.¹³⁵

I wish to demonstrate this last point through the spectacle of necklacing. The necklace is so benign a description that it barely registers the horror at the centre of one of the world’s most cruel and savage forms of execution. Necklacing also has an economic dimension to it: it is cheap, and it deals death to cheap disposable lives. Its engrossment with crude township economics is also realised in the aftermath: in the wake of a necklacing there is ‘no body’ to bury; the

¹³⁴ Schwab, *Haunting Legacies*, p. 1.

¹³⁵ ———, *Haunting Legacies*, p. 1.

individual is cremated alive. The second most crucial ingredient is the victim, usually accused of a heinous crime such as rape, paedophilia, or collaboration, or a similar crime which demands instant communal justice. Communal denotes the implicit involvement of all in those communities. Here, we may recall de Kock's scathing indictment of the White South African community and their implied consent in the murder of Blacks to advance the aims of Apartheid.¹³⁶ The third and final ingredient of a necklacing is the spectacle achieved through the aesthetic of an engrossing visual display of an indescribable suffering:

In the township of South Africa militant black youths capture a victim. Next, they chop his hands off or tie them behind his back with barbed wire. Finally, they place a gasoline-filled tyre over the terrified victim's head and shoulders and set it ablaze. The melting rubber clings like tar to the victim's flesh, while the flames and searing fumes enshroud him. Within minutes, the execution is over. By the time the police arrive the charred body is usually burned beyond recognition. Horrified family members who may be forced to watch the killing, are often too intimidated to identify the murderers.¹³⁷

In the wake of Apartheid, necklacing is a persistent theme that validates the prevailing economic reality of the post-Apartheid state, and through it, the legacy of Apartheid violence itself, which terrorised Blacks, and at the same time left townships unpoliced. In its refusal to go away, necklacing is also a constant reminder of the failure of the promise of democracy in South Africa. In the context of this argument, and within the realm of historical trauma, I want to suggest that necklacing is a ritual that Black South Africans are unconsciously driven to perform over and over again: against political rivals, immigrants, criminals and suspected predators in those communities.

Winnie Mandela, conveyed as the symbolic mother of the nation, could not have foreseen the lasting legacy of the endorsement that she gave necklacing, and the resulting haunting it has visited upon the Black [South] African imaginary.

¹³⁸ The spectacle of necklacing demonstrates the contingent resurgence of

¹³⁶ Gobodo-Madikizela, *A Human Being Died That Night*, p. 53.

¹³⁷ See John Greenwald, *South Africa: The War of Blacks Against Blacks* (2001).

¹³⁸ <https://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1458854,00.html> > [accessed 23 Oct 2019]

See Sisonke Msimang, *The Resurrection of Winnie Mandela* (Australia: Text Publishing Company, 2019), pp. 96-107, particularly her Chapter 'Soweto' where she argues that Winnie Mandela's infamous speech on necklacing was part of the revolutionary party line. That, in fact, prominent figures within the ANC such as Chris Hani, and Oliver Tambo had already made similar declarations, but with time, managed to distance

‘unthought knowledge’, of violence as a communal language that functions, and is passed on, through the perverse logic of relationality and communal interaction—through singing, dancing, and celebration which accompanies such violence.¹³⁹ As such, it is not unusual to see children in the township play-acting or acting-out necklacing.¹⁴⁰ This way the spectre of necklacing is maintained and sustained in the collective psychic life of South Africa’s violent history. Still, nobody knows how and when it started. Nevertheless, it exists, and its formula is deeply lodged somewhere in the recesses of the South African imaginary.

According to Riedwaan Moosage, necklacing persists because it has never been unambiguously condemned or condoned. At the height of its use during Apartheid, liberation movements such as the ANC (African National Congress) and UDF (United Democratic Front), did not expressly condemn or condone necklacing. Chris Hani, Chief of Staff of the ANC’s military wing, *Umkhonto We Sizwe*, went so far as to say that necklacing was a ‘people’s weapon against oppression, designed and owned by the masses themselves’. Under this form of reasoning, necklacing was a legitimate response to the evil that was Apartheid. And yet the state itself saw necklacing, not as part of legitimate political violence, but as an inexplicable and barbaric act of Black-on-Black violence. Moosage suggests that there is still an ambivalence ‘that permeates liberation struggle discourse on the practice of necklacing’, that it is still visible in the post-Apartheid re-articulation of the act of necklacing.

themselves from the violence of the struggle, unlike Winnie Mandela, who was ostracised because she was a woman, who was both ‘courageous and messy’; and had largely been seen as intransigent and unrepentant. In terms of violent masculinities, this further complicates our understanding of what is expected of women revolutionaries, as contemplated by Vera in *The Stone Virgins*, in relation to the reception of female guerrillas after the war.

¹³⁹ Christopher Bollas, *The Shadow of the Object: Psychoanalysis and the Unthought Known* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987). Bollas’s idea of ‘the shadow of the object and the unthought known’ suggests that individual character is a form of memory; that remembering and repeating is at the core of the history of the self. So that when a traumatic event is witnessed at a very early age, it is registered and repressed in the unconscious, only to reappear as assumed knowledge. In the context of necklacing, it is something repressed in the collective unconscious waiting for an importune moment in which to reappear. But no one knows when and how it started, except that somehow the community knows of its existence as part of a shared communal knowledge.

¹⁴⁰ See Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, ed., ‘Introduction’ in *Breaking Intergenerational Cycles of Repetition: A Global Dialogue on Historical Trauma and Memory*, (Toronto: Barbara Budrich Publishers, 2016).

Necklacing refuses to be forgotten precisely because of its ambivalence. Indeed, it may be that the inescapable ambivalence of necklacing is the condition for the possibility that it will always also be remembered.¹⁴¹

In the words of one of the witnesses giving evidence to the TRC regarding the spectre of necklacing:

We failed to protect them, not just those who were burnt by the necklace, but those who did this terrible thing. We sat here and watched. We did or said nothing. The whole community. We sat here hoping that somebody will do something to break this cycle of insanity. It has left us with a terrible scar, knowing that we could have done something, but didn't.¹⁴²

In her scathing indictment, like Eugene de Kock, the witness blames everybody as being complicit in the act of necklacing even though some were more willing participants than others. She evokes a palpable helplessness that is the hallmark of all tragic and traumatic events. Most of all, she points the finger of blame at the community that allowed [its] children to indulge in such a fantastic re-enactment of communal violence. The more she speaks, it becomes unclear who the victims are, let alone the perpetrators. As Gobodo-Madikizela implores:

In the fluidity of a necklace murder, was there time and space to stop the killing? In addition, in a community of people depressed by their circumstances, beset by life's struggles, thwarted in their hopes, how do you bring such an act into a range of possibilities? How do you even make it thinkable?¹⁴³

Across the border in Zimbabwe, but still on similar terrain, there is a similar haunting which continues to procure more violence through acts of repetition. Since the State no longer has a monopoly, or epistemological advantage on violence, or a complete handle on the specialised way of apprehending violence, self-expression through violence now circulates freely amongst the people of Zimbabwe. And if Zimbabwe is read as the template of a failed state, this might help us re-consider the question of the social and political utility of violence. This way, we may unscrupulously interrogate the mechanism through which war violence is distributed and accepted into civilian life through

¹⁴¹ See Reidwaan Moosage, *A Prose of Ambivalence: Liberation Struggle Discourse on Necklacing* (2010). <<https://www.scielo.org/za/pdf/kronos/v36n1/v36a06.pdf>> [accessed 18 November 2019], p. 138.

¹⁴² Gobodo-Madikizela, *A Human Being Died That Night*, p. 75.

¹⁴³ _____, *A Human Being Died That Night*, p. 75.

an 'ecology of violence'.¹⁴⁴ An ecology of violence suggests the presence of an eco-system through which violence is nurtured, together with the moral ethic of violence as the preferred method of conflict resolution—whether in the private or public sphere. Here we might return to Judith Butler's assertion that we respond to violence in accordance to how we've experienced it, and in relation to our situatedness in terms of its manifestation in specific zones. From this, we may proceed and formulate a suggestion: that the question now for trauma theory and literary imagination, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, is to interrogate how people continue to live in the aftermath of violence which is where this thesis situates itself. As such, we must go back to the colonial encounter and not only seek answers for past injustices, including reparations, but also to understand the real cost to life as it pertains to the continuing violence in Africa.¹⁴⁵

A close reading of Judith Butler's concept of the relay of violence also necessitates a call for the revision of the current understanding of trauma, and the advancement of a transnational conceptual framework of understanding trauma that lends itself to multiple readings of trauma as a global phenomenon. Such a framework will necessarily evolve out of the original formulation, run parallel to, and at times overlap, with the existing framework in certain respects. As Dominick LaCapra suggests:

Freud developed these concepts (psychoanalysis and mass psychology) in a clinical context and thought they applied to collective processes through analogy; a recurrent concern is how it is possible to extend them to collectives. I believe that this concern, both in Freud and others, is based on mistaken individualistic ideological assumption and gives rise to misguided questions. One should rather call into question the very idea that one is working with a more or less a flimsy analogy between the individual and society and argue instead that there is nothing intrinsically 'individual' about such concepts as repression and working-through. These processes refer to modes of interaction, mutual re-inforcement, conflict, censorship, orientation towards others, and so forth, and their relative individual or collective status should not be prejudged.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴ See 'Transforming the Ecology of Violence', in *Expanding the Boundaries of Transformative Learning: Essays on Theory and Praxis*, edited by Eimear O'Neill and Edmund O'Sullivan (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 173-183.

¹⁴⁵ Mengel et al., 'A Better Past', in *Trauma, Memory and Narrative*, pp. 173-186.

¹⁴⁶ Dominick LaCapra, *History and Memory After Auschwitz* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), p. 43.

According to this logic, an alternative reading to Freud's original formulation of trauma might reveal that although the experience of historical trauma is embedded in the unconscious, it is not always purely individual. Under the new reading, traumatic recall locates itself in the now of social consciousness. Through this new way of reading and understanding trauma, particularly in societies where violence is a way of life, trauma can be understood as being embedded into communal structures of interaction, through socialisation. The previously conceived latency of trauma might apply to this circumstance in so far as it pertains to the cumulative effect of violence over generations, with a tacit understanding that it is unpredictable in its effects. And this unpredictability hinges upon several factors, such as civil war, conflict and lack of collective restraint that might exacerbate it. Such circumstances do not always allow for critical distance for those engrossed in violence. Instead, individuals—whether singularly or collectively—entrench themselves in a repetitive compulsion to commit violence as a mode of socialisation. And it is through this re-enactment of violence or acting-out and its repetition that the transference across generations occurs.

Restaging the past: confronting a nation in denial

According to Elinor Sisulu, Zimbabweans are still wounded by the deeds of the past. Woundedness, as a metaphor and mode of existence, has been evoked by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, as the basic assumption of the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission's* binding principle. Particularly his attempt, to make visible the magnitude of something which lies deep in the collective unconscious, through the metaphor and visual aesthetic of the wound. According to this principle, 'woundedness' mobilises against the continued repression of collective trauma, and propels nations towards the act of healing, through the rubric of social justice, based on shared truth regarding the past. And it nudges those in opposite extremes towards the middle ground through a politics of mutual recognition. The wound, as aftermath, points us back to slavery, colonialism and neo-colonialist economic policies of the West still in operation in Africa today. Africa, seen in the

context of a wound, needs healing.¹⁴⁷ And this notion of healing pertains to the gentle reconfiguration of the psychic deformations that result in collective trauma. As previously suggested, if left unattended, these injurious states, can be as pernicious as the fetishistic attachment to them.

After the war of liberation, both sides of the warring factions were absolved, and forgiven their misdeeds, no matter how horrendous those might have been. In Zimbabwe there has been no framework put into place to explore past injustices similar to that of the *South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (TRC).¹⁴⁸ Those absolved of any wrongdoing included groups such as the Rhodesian Selous Scouts,¹⁴⁹ renowned for their ruthlessness in the so-called pseudo-guerrilla operations; and ZANLA¹⁵⁰ and ZIPRA¹⁵¹ cadres who committed atrocities of their own. The Rhodesian military and intelligence apparatus never conceded defeat, and never revealed some of the most horrendous atrocities it committed in defence of White supremacy.¹⁵² White Zimbabweans, at least those implicated in the atrocities of the past, have never expressed remorse, nor, acknowledged how they themselves continue to be affected by the trauma of the past.¹⁵³ The culture of impunity that the Rhodesian regime established remains deeply rooted and operative in Zimbabwe today. For example, the subtext of the White farmers' argument about land ownership is that the continued subjugation

¹⁴⁷ See Wole Soyinka, *The Open Sore of a Continent: A Personal Narrative of the Nigerian Crisis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

¹⁴⁸ After the fall of Apartheid, under the South African Interim Constitution in 1993, it was recognised by the new South African government that there was a need for the country to come to terms with violent atrocities of the past. This need for understanding emphasised that the philosophy of *Ubuntu*, which derives, as previously mentioned, from *Bantu* jurisprudence, should prevail rather than vengeful retribution against the perpetrators of Apartheid-era crimes. The TRC was led by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Nobel Peace Laureate, a prominent and vocal activist against Apartheid. The Commission facilitated Hearings presented to it by both victims and perpetrators on behalf of the South African nation.

¹⁴⁹ The *Selous Scouts* were a Special Forces Regiment within the Rhodesian military apparatus. See Ron Reid-Daly, *Pamwe Chete: The Legend of the Selous Scouts* (Johannesburg: Covos Day Books, 2001).

¹⁵⁰ The Zimbabwe African People's National Liberation Army were guerrillas affiliated to ZANU (PF) (Zimbabwe African Nation Union, Patriotic Front) which has, up until recently, been the main political party that has dominated politics in Zimbabwe.

¹⁵¹ Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army were guerrillas affiliated to ZAPU (Zimbabwe African People's Union) which was the main opposition party up until the signing of the Unity Accord in 1987. After that, the party was dissolved into the structure of ZANU (PF) under Robert Mugabe's leadership.

¹⁵² See, *Civil War in Rhodesia, Abduction, Torture, and Death in the Counter-insurgency Campaign: A Report from the Rhodesian Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace* (London: Catholic Institute for International Relations, 1976).

¹⁵³ Recently, Emmerson Mnangagwa, the current President of Zimbabwe has set up the *National Peace and Reconciliation Commission*. It is worthy of note that its remit does not extend to the war of liberation years, thus excluding the White Rhodesian regime, and its involvement in some of the worst atrocities in Zimbabwe.

of Blacks, mainly as labourers on White farms, would solve all of Zimbabwe's economic and political problems. But whatever one's position, what cannot be overlooked, however controversial, is that the past begat the present, and in particular the amount of collective trauma experienced by all Zimbabweans, as a result of the past.¹⁵⁴ If Zimbabweans still exist in a perpetual state of nervousness, it is because they are still in thrall to an unresolved trauma that necessarily derives from their shared violent past.¹⁵⁵ And to quote Sachikonye once more:

The country needs to turn a new page. It needs to explore the truth of its past and contemporary history of violence and hate, and strive for justice and reconciliation.¹⁵⁶

He goes on to say:

The violence of the *Gukurahundi* period together with that from 2000 onwards was of a different scale and ferocity. It has been variously described as the epitome of bad things by those who run the Zimbabwean State. Both periods bequeathed painful legacies of trauma, fear and withdrawal by communities that witnessed the excesses but also wider society that was informed by them.¹⁵⁷

Sachikonye suggests that fear, withdrawal and lack of dialogue have led to the exacerbation of the feeling of isolation, depression and post-traumatic disorder amongst individuals who can no longer carry-out reality checks as a result of debilitating isolation. Worst of all, fear of communication interferes with the natural processes that take place through talking, sharing stories and speaking out.

If we turn back to South Africa, the question of speech as healing takes on further complex dimensions. According to Antjie Krog, during the TRC hearings, women's narrative of rape were often disjointed, elliptical and shrouded in ambiguity.¹⁵⁸ Quite often, these women had been isolated from each other, and their experiences of violence seemed unique, and unparalleled. Gobodo-Madikizela asserts that one of the most significant achievements of the TRC is that it allowed for the voices of the victims of Apartheid to be heard, and that the

¹⁵⁴ See Charumbira, *Imagining a Nation*, p. 6.

¹⁵⁵ See Tsitsi Dangaremba, *Nervous Conditions* (London: The Women's Press, 1988).

¹⁵⁶ Lloyd Sachikonye, *When a State Turns on its Citizens: 60 Years of Institutionalised Violence in Zimbabwe* (Johannesburg: Jacana Media, 2011), p. 8.

¹⁵⁷ _____, *When a State Turns on its Citizens*, p. 90.

¹⁵⁸ Antjie Krog, *Country of My Skull* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1999).

TRC also allowed for the perpetrators of the most heinous crimes to give validation to the silent suffering that the victims had endured for decades. But her other emphasis is on the language of hope, or a vocabulary of compromise and tolerance in the aftermath of tragedy, and of the reconceptualisation of evil, not as an irreversible thing, but something that can be worked-through.¹⁵⁹ Gobodo-Madikizela also suggests that the TRC paved the way for the re-humanisation of both the victims and perpetrators of violence. According to this mode of thinking, the violence of Apartheid de-humanised both the victims and perpetrators of political violence.

Krog's poignant book, *Country of My Skull*, dramatises victims's narratives of violation under Apartheid. To Krog, the TRC allowed this past to be told through the personal recollections of those who testified before it, it put real flesh on the rhetorical phrases like 'just war' and 'crimes against humanity'.¹⁶⁰ In other words, the TRC made real the actual suffering that had, up until then, been discussed only in abstract terms. At the time her book was published, Krog seemed optimistic, going so far as to suggest that the TRC was not only about the past, but that it also paved the way for the future:

In the beginning it was seeing. Seeing for ages, filling the head with ash. No air. No tendril. Now to seeing, speaking is added too, and the eye plunges into the mouth. Present at the birth of this country's language itself.¹⁶¹

At first glance the quote seems incoherent. She throws into the air a collage of imagery: 'filling the head with ash, no air, and no tendril'. It is as if she's struggling to re-enact a traumatic event; perhaps one of many she'd heard thus far. What is evident, however, from her use of imagery, is that seeing—as witnessing—is not enough: that for the victims of trauma to continue to live, they must be accorded a voice through a communal language that acknowledges their suffering, without erasing the impact of trauma on [their] individual lives. The grotesquery of the symbolism of the eye plunging into mouth in Krog's quote gestures us towards the transition from what had previously been [un]seen or

¹⁵⁹ Gobodo-Madikizela, *A Human Being Died That Night*, p. 126; See also, Gobodo-Madikizela, ed., *Breaking Intergenerational Cycles of Repetition*.

¹⁶⁰ Krog, *Country of My Skull*, pp. vi-viii.

¹⁶¹ —, *Country of My Skull*, p. 29.

ignored (traumatic memory) and could not be openly spoken about (repressed memory) to the transfer of the image into words: the narrativisation of traumatic memory into a narrative of suffering. And the search for this language to express the [un]speakable is embodied in the question that the victims of Apartheid violence kept asking, could easily be juxtaposed with a similar question in Zimbabwe:

What kind of a person, what kind of human being keeps another's hand in a fruit-jar on his desk? What kind of hatred makes animals out of people?¹⁶²

In her book, *A Human Being Died That Night: Forgiving Apartheid's Chief Killer*,¹⁶³ Gobodo-Madikizela meditates on the 'banality of evil'—after Hannah Arendt, in her book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*.¹⁶⁴ Gobodo-Madikizela interviewed Eugene de Kock, commander of *Vlakplaas*, one of the most notorious death squads operating under Apartheid. The [un]imaginable horrors committed by *Vlakplaas* were perpetrated, not only as part of a broader political and military strategy to destroy and terrorise Blacks, but also as divinely sanctioned acts. After meeting with de Kock, Gobodo-Madikizela surmised that the difference between 'Prime Evil' and good was not clear-cut.

In her analysis of the deeds of de Kock and *Vlakplaas*, she suggests that it is possible that de Kock 'went beyond what most humans could understand.'¹⁶⁵ And that even de Kock himself would have found it difficult to understand his own actions. There's a suggestion here, that there are certain acts, so very disturbing in their constitution that we might, as a measure of self-preservation, remain beside ourselves while we are engaged in them. It is this dissociative mechanism or cognitive dissonance which allows for the compartmentalisation of actions during traumatic events. During the interview, de Kock emphasised that it was 'the job' that was important. That the level of violence and depravity involved in the killing, did not matter at all, 'as long as one got the job of killing done'.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶² —, *Country of My Skull*, p. 44.

¹⁶³ Gobodo-Madikizela, *A Human Being Died That Night*.

¹⁶⁴ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (London: Tanto Media Inc, 2011).

¹⁶⁵ Gobodo-Madikizela, *A Human Being Died That Night*, p. 23.

¹⁶⁶ —, 'An Encounter with 'Prime Evil'', in *A Human Being Died That Night*, pp. 13-36.

But with each killing de Kock was drawn further into the vicious circle of murder as a way of life. Tellingly, he was afraid of his own people. Which is to say, that he knew what they were capable of. In the camps, and in the military barracks, and the police academies across South Africa, there were many others like him, ‘willing executioners’—Daniel Jonah Goldhagen’s phrase with reference to the Holocaust.¹⁶⁷ According to Gobodo-Madikizela, these were ‘the men who had been charged with the country’s security and protection of its citizens—which under these circumstances meant its White citizens who slowly became murderers.’¹⁶⁸ The numerous murders committed by de Kock and his accomplices were carried out in the name of Apartheid, and sanctioned by citizens and the state. More importantly, it was ordinary White South Africans who tacitly encouraged *Vlakplaas* to carry on. The communal sanction of the violence cleansed the perpetrators’ conscience of any feelings of guilt:

Tacitly or openly most white people supported the regime of terror as something grim but good [...] It would be hard to believe that it was only when these crimes came to light that white people suddenly realised that what had happened under apartheid was terrible. de Kock and many of the apartheid government’s operatives have said repeatedly that what kept them going—what sustained their zeal and conviction in the rightness of crushing the heads of thousands of black activists—was the powerful support that they felt they were receiving from the beneficiaries of apartheid privilege—the polite church goers, the cultured suburbanites, the voters. It is at their feet that the responsibility for apartheid, ultimately, can be laid.¹⁶⁹

In other words, *Vlakplaas* committed murders in defence of, and to uphold, a shared communal principle: White Supremacy. After making careful observation of de Kock’s hands, hands that Gobodo-Madikizela thought might

The chapter covers conversations with de Kock, with reference to the murders that he committed on behalf of the state. de Kock argues that ordinary White South Africans supported what he did. That they benefited immensely from Apartheid, which is why they never remonstrated with the Nationalist Party. The only rule he abided by, which is rather ironic, was the avoidance of the murder of women and children. He also claimed that he was under pressure from his commanding officers to produce results in order to prove that the millions of Rands invested to enhance the activities of the security apparatus were being put to good use. Success was measured in the number of ‘kills’. According to de Kock, the murder rate became proof of the effectiveness of Apartheid’s policy of *kragdadigheid*—strong-arm tactics.

¹⁶⁷ Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (London: Abacus, 2010).

¹⁶⁸ Gobodo-Madikizela, *A Human Being Died That Night*, p. 32.

¹⁶⁹ ———, *A Human Being Died That Night*, p. 111.

reveal something about the intrinsic nature of killers, she makes the following observation:

The nails were clean and white, with tidy symmetrical edges. One might even have been persuaded to call his hands beautiful. They could easily have been those of a friend or a colleague. For a moment it struck me that the line separating good from evil is paper-thin.¹⁷⁰

Afterwards she surmises that Apartheid's killers were no monsters; that no killers ever are. They were just ordinary people capable of doing extra-ordinary things. There is, she argues, no unbridgeable rupture between the ordinary and extra-ordinary. Good and evil do not exist in extreme polarities, as Michael Rothberg has observed.¹⁷¹ Like most perpetrators of heinous crimes during Apartheid, de Kock came to the TRC seeking for forgiveness. One of the central tenets of the TRC was that most victims were willing to forgive in exchange for truth, and for closure, on the premise that, truth would, in the end, free South Africans from the burdensome traumatic memory of Apartheid. Apart from raising more questions than it answered, the TRC, amongst other things, sought a language with which to express the depravity of Apartheid.¹⁷² To Gobodo-Madikizela,

The question is no longer whether victims can forgive 'evil doers' but whether we—our symbols, our language, our legal, our media, and academic institutions—are creating alternatives to revenge.¹⁷³

She goes on to say that the TRC hearings 'lay a path, an already trodden path, making it possible to know that it was within the grasp of ordinary people to forgive evil and end generational cycles of violence.'¹⁷⁴

However, as touched on earlier in this chapter, Wole Soyinka, in his irascible critique of the TRC, is adamant that the most obvious prerequisite that is still missing after the South African TRC has both a material and moral base that

¹⁷⁰ _____, *Human Being Died That Night*, p. 49.

¹⁷¹ Michael Rothberg, *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation* (Minneapolis: Minneapolis University Press, 2000).

¹⁷² See Antjie Krog, *Conditional Tense: Memory and Vocabulary after the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (London: Seagull Books, 2013), or *After the TRC: Reflections on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, ed. James Wilmot and Linda Van De Vijver (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1995).

¹⁷³ Gobodo-Madikizela, *A Human Being Died That Night*, p. 118.

¹⁷⁴ _____, *A Human Being Died That Night*, p. 118.

is, true remorse and above all a material transformation in the lives of the Black majority. He argues that, from the beginning of the TRC hearings, remorse was never a prerequisite to forgiveness. He questions whether this 'procedural articulation of the known will heal the nation'. And warns readers to tread wearily on the path already alluded to by Gobodo-Madikizela. Soyinka suggests that the TRC served no purpose other than to showcase 'the open articulation of what was already known, and the ascription of faces to deeds'.¹⁷⁵ In other words, victims, particularly Blacks, did not need the TRC to tell them of their own experiences, and that as a precaution we should 'move rather quickly and abandon the hazy zone of remorse for now, and move on to the material'.¹⁷⁶ By which is meant that talking about the evil deeds of Apartheid does not proffer Blacks recompense for their losses.

Soyinka further suggests that there will always be an [in]contestable economic dimension to the notion of reconciliation. In other words, reconciliation should never be considered outside of the framework of reparation. After all, historical violence was used to maintain economic advantage for the privileged few. Perhaps what has never been asked openly is whose responsibility is it to forgive? And whose to reconcile? And why? As Soyinka asks:

But will the South African doctrine work, ultimately? Will society be truly purified as a result of this open articulation of what is known? For even while we speak of 'revelation', it is only revelation in concrete particulars, the ascription of faces to deeds, admission by individual personae of roles within known criminalities, affirmation by the already identified of what they formerly denied. Nothing, in reality, is new. The difference is that knowledge is being shared, collectively, and entered formally into the archives of the nation. So back to the question, this procedural articulation of the known, will it truly heal society?¹⁷⁷

If we cross over the border, and return to Zimbabwe once more, where both the land question remains unresolved, and reconciliation is still only a very remote possibility, it is evident that the language of truth and reconciliation has yet to enter that nation's lexicon. There are still multiple resistances, driven by vested interests, and the pure belligerence of those who continue to commit acts of

¹⁷⁵ Soyinka, *The Burden of Memory*, p. 33.

¹⁷⁶ _____, *The Burden of Memory*, p. 35.

¹⁷⁷ _____, *The Burden of Memory*, p. 33.

violence unabated. More than 4 million Zimbabweans, well over a quarter of the population, are now refugees in neighbouring South Africa, and elsewhere. A huge number of these refugees are the first and second generation of Ndebele people who experienced, first-hand, the *Gukurahundi* genocide, and the subsequent political violence over three decades. A new cohort of victims from Zimbabwe has recently joined this group: White farmers; the latest victims of land seizures. Going back to Cathy Caruth's postulation; if trauma makes people, what are Zimbabweans of all creeds—both at home and in Diaspora, made of? As Sachikonye reminds us once more:

The outcome has been a society which muddles through with festering scars that could develop into future conflicts of retribution, thus reinforcing the cycle of violence. But the cycle of violence cannot be broken if the system of impunity of those who perpetrate violence remains.¹⁷⁸

My reading of *The Stone Virgins* is therefore refracted through the lens of violent Zimbabwean history, and Yvonne Vera's attempt to highlight the ongoing confrontation between history and the traumatic nature of that memory. The confrontation lingers, because, as Vera suggested—Africa has erred in its memory.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁸ Sachikonye, *When a State Turns on its Citizens*, p. 90.

¹⁷⁹ Vera, ed., *Opening Spaces*, p. 2.

Chapter Two

Bodies With [out] Memory: Yvonne Vera's Aesthetic of Violence

We conceive the establishment of juridical truth such that even when the victim of a crime has survived the event and can speak of what happened, we require the testimony of the third party [...] especially, though not exclusively, in the absence of a confession proffered by the guilty party.¹⁸⁰

In our attempt to understand how trauma silences, and how this silence is perpetuated between generations, Gabriele M. Schwab's essay on the powerful story of an Iranian girl, imprisoned with her mother from a very early age is instructive.¹⁸¹ The full tale which provides content for Schwab's essay is Shahla Talebi's short story, 'Bahareh: Singing without words in an Iranian Prison Camp'.¹⁸² Through the tale, in which the temporarily mute girl-child, Bahareh, shares a prison cell with her mother and other women, Schwab explores the power of silence following violent and traumatic events: specifically the relationship between violence, traumatic memory, language and silence. She locates Bahareh's story in what she calls the 'transitional space between the individual and the collective'¹⁸³:

While silenced histories are the product of internal psychic splitting, they can be collectively shared by a people or nation. The collective or communal silencing of violent histories leads to the transgenerational transmission of trauma and the phantomatic return of the past. I am locating Bahareh's story in a transitional space between the individual and collective trauma.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸⁰ Robert Harvey, *Beckett, Dante, Levi and the Foundations of Responsibility* (New York: Continuum, 2010), p. 6.

¹⁸¹ Gabriele M. Schwab, 'Voices of Silence: On Speaking from within the Void, A Response to Shahla Talebi', in *Critical Trauma Studies: Understanding Violence, Conflict and Memory in Everyday Life*, ed. Monica J. Casper and Eric Wertheimer (New York: New York University Press, 2016), p. 111-121.

¹⁸² Shahla Talebi, 'Bahareh: Singing Without Words in an Iranian Prison Camp', in *Critical Trauma Studies: Understanding Violence, Conflict and Memory in Everyday Life*, ed. Monica J. Casper and Eric Wertheimer (New York: New York University Press, 2016), pp. 101-110.

_____, *Ghosts of Revolution: Rekindled Memories of Imprisonment in Iran* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011).

¹⁸³ Schwab, 'Voices of Silence', p. 120.

¹⁸⁴ _____, 'Voices of Silence', p. 120.

In the process, Schwab complicates and unveils the symbiotic relationship between these concepts of individual and collective trauma using the story of fifteen-month-old Bahareh, who witnesses the murder of her own father and spends the first three years of her life with her mother in an Iranian prison camp. While in prison, the little girl never learns to speak, but devises a language of her own, 'using shards of words' picked up from within the cell. Shahla Talebi remarks:

[...] Our communication with Bahareh could not lead to real dialogue [...] without a visible body of its own, as if a ghost, her singular mode of speech borrowed from the body of the major language, while turning it nearly against itself. It spoke without speaking, while her silence frightened us, as if it was the 'Silence of Sirens' in Kafka's story of Odysseus. Bahareh's minimal language, with its simultaneously minimal and excessive expression, was unsettling to us. We were left in oblivion about the reason for the absent presence of her words in her language.¹⁸⁵

Bahareh's utterances remained eclectic and incomprehensible, and yet she was able to communicate using the language of 'her body to express her desires'. In retelling the story and in demonstrating the power of trauma in silencing its victims, Schwab deploys the symbolism of the 'double wall of silence'.¹⁸⁶ Her analogy might help us consider the trauma of silence differently, and perhaps consider the following question: if violent trauma is the material with which these walls of silence are built, then what does the concentric circle of this wall of silence do to the victims caught up within its frame at the level of both the individual and collective? The multiplicity of the sites of sedimentation of this violence as the main substrate of these walls can only mean that the more established they become, the more difficult they'd be to dislodge. Schwab's wall serves as a visual metaphor for how this impenetrable thick wall of silence also serves another purpose: the power of separating victims from each other, and from society, and the symbolic violence which determines the collective unconscious of traumatised communities. Besides, as Schwab suggests, traumatic histories

¹⁸⁵ Talebi, 'Bahareh: Singing without words', p. 104.

¹⁸⁶ Schwab, 'Voices of Silence', p. 113, p. 117.

constitute an attack on memory, language and the symbolic order, which guarantees their return:

The collective or communal silencing of violent histories leads to the transgenerational transmission of trauma and the phantomic return of the past.¹⁸⁷

I find Schwab's concept of communal silence useful in exploring the silences in Vera's *The Stone Virgins*, particularly her proposition about the concept of a 'deep ambivalence' of silence, and on the power that lies in withholding words. In relation to Vera's texts, Schwab helps us reconsider what the moral obligations of telling are, and whether the compulsion to tell far outweighs the ethical considerations of the difficulty in narrating trauma. In *The Stone Virgins*, the voices of Vera's victims, are 'the murmurs of those who sleep in pain, with wounds that no one can heal; the wounds are in their hearts. These are the wounds that no one can heal because bandages and stitches cannot restore a human being with a memory intact'.¹⁸⁸ They remain silenced and tongue-tied and forget who they are; but in that silence they know that they are wounded beings.¹⁸⁹ They stand like apparitions and submit to a lengthening silence. Although their voices 'rise to the surface', their 'pain remains inarticulate', and they will 'die from the accumulation of bitter histories'.¹⁹⁰ But still, no one asks them of their experience of war, or listens to their tales of war. In fact, the whole community is silent because they 'know they owe them too much to even begin to speculate'.¹⁹¹

According to Schwab, 'when we don't listen to silences, when we do not remain within the trauma but skip across it like a stone on water, how many grammars are disabled?'¹⁹² I read her as suggesting that there is a language invested in silence, and that not all victims of trauma may shout or appear enraged by their trauma. And that sometimes, listeners refuse to hear. The rage is quite often deep inside, hidden in silence, and in the terrain between language and non-language. Non-language does not signal lack of voice, or lack of speech: it is

¹⁸⁷ —, 'Voices of Silence', p. 120.

¹⁸⁸ Vera, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 95.

¹⁸⁹ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 59, pp. 58-9.

¹⁹⁰ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 52.

¹⁹¹ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 61.

¹⁹² Schwab, 'Voices of Silence', p. 120.

language. Silence, in Vera's text, can therefore, be read as the spectral presence that is an apt form of dealing with dark and fearful themes. To Eric Wertheimer and Monica J. Casper, these silences are interruptions that matter, so that our 'understanding and narrating [of] trauma as it takes place under the sign of silence offers generative questions, most provocatively, in relation to silence in the realm of poetics'. Generative also suggests a cycle of reproduction, capable of replicating the same silence.¹⁹³

Breaking the silence in *The Stone Virgins*

Vera is not alone in trying to record Zimbabwean history in all its forms, in particular the internecine violence of the 1980s. Terence Ranger's collaborative work with Jocelyn Alexander and Joan McGregor, (*Violence and Memory: One Hundred Years in the 'Dark Forests' of Matabeleland, 2000*), in particular the chapter on 'Wars and Their Legacies' is a response to the silence surrounding the massacres in Matabeleland, in which the authors claim this 'silence has a profound sense of exclusion from national memory.'¹⁹⁴ They see this silence as the product of Zimbabwe's post-independence political and military conflict:

The brutal campaign of violence directed against Matabeleland in the 1980s powerfully confirmed its exclusion from the nation. All of this has given remembrance to the past, and the telling of history, a particular significance in the 1990s.¹⁹⁵

This brings us back to the idea that Zimbabweans have yet to recover from the impact of the trauma of war, but the prevailing wall of silence frustrates all the efforts aimed at addressing that trauma. Trauma theorists, Dori Laub in particular, have made in-roads in establishing the way in which traumatic events affect memory and the act of witnessing.¹⁹⁶ Their work, however, is largely focussed on the Holocaust. Once again, there is no attempt here to make a comparison

¹⁹³ Monica J. Casper and Eric Wertheimer, eds., 'Within Trauma: An introduction', in *Critical Trauma Studies: Understanding Violence, Conflict and Memory in Everyday Life* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), pp. 1-16.

¹⁹⁴ Alexander et al., *Violence and Memory*, p. 1.

¹⁹⁵ _____, *Violence and Memory*, p. 1.

¹⁹⁶ Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (London: Routledge, 1992).

between the Holocaust and the genocide in Zimbabwe, neither in terms of scale nor of methodology, but there are compelling similarities—not least in terms of witness testimonies, and the extremity of violence which both these histories touch on, albeit in very different ways. Both Laub and Vera problematise the way in which violence silences victims. This act of silencing, and the way in which victims of trauma are made to doubt the accuracy of their own testimonies, is at the centre of Vera's narrative. Laub's corpus provides an in-depth analysis of the relationship between literature, psychoanalysis and history. As a psychoanalyst and survivor of the Holocaust, he worked closely with the survivors of the Holocaust, and his work examines the historical ramifications of testifying to such events, and of the relationship between testimony, witnessing and memory. In other words, how do experiences of trauma translate into literary language; and how might such stories be told in the context of what he calls the crisis in witnessing?

Trauma is an indispensable part of Vera's aesthetic of violence.¹⁹⁷ It belongs to her self-theorisation as much as, or in tandem with her literary craft. Her attempt to elaborate or define what might be involved in such an aesthetic is the subject of this chapter. How she does this in the language of the novel is the focus of the next. By 'aesthetic of violence,' I mean the way in which Vera portrays violence as an interpersonal and social phenomenon, and the way violence impinges on people's sensibilities: particularly, how violence affects interactions between men and women, and in some cases, as the only mode of interaction possible.¹⁹⁸ As I will go on to examine in detail, Vera makes violence a tangible form of expression, and turns it into a language. *The Stone Virgins'* graphic narrative of rape forms part of Vera's aesthetic of violence. I see this as Vera's attempt to metaphorise the body and re-work its symbolism and make it the centre of the discourse of violence once more: so that we no longer treat the body

¹⁹⁷ See Donald Meltzer and Meg Harris Williams, *Apprehension of Beauty: The Role of the Aesthetic in Conflict, Development, Art and Violence* (London: Karnac Books, 2008), for an in-depth discussion of the concept of the aesthetic of conflict/violence. I use it here if only to elaborate the centrality of violence in Vera's repertoire.

¹⁹⁸ Mark Sanders, *Ambiguities of Witnessing: Law and Literature in the Time of a Truth Commission* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).

as a given and natural, outside of history, a point made by Susan Sontag.¹⁹⁹ Vera uses the violated body in such a way that the body becomes its own point of view—it speaks for itself.

There is, in other words, a discursive function played by violence in Vera's narrative: the burning of people alive in their homes, the mutilation of victims of torture, and similar other atrocities, which inscribe on the landscape, and on the bodies of the victims, a 'set of political messages'.²⁰⁰ It is through her poetic aesthetic of violence that Vera strives to bring readers as close as possible to an experience:

[...] I want you to be there, I don't want you to hear about it. I want you to be a witness, which means taking part in what is happening each moment, as it happens. But I want to do it without crudity, with certain elegance, so that you feel you can still endure it and see the beauty in it. And this beauty can only be in the language. I don't see where else it can lie. That's where language becomes important.²⁰¹

What makes Vera's work so unique is the form of her confrontation with violent trauma, notwithstanding the difficulty with language, which such an endeavour envisages and provokes.²⁰² In the context of this thesis, trauma theory therefore provides a framework for a psychoanalytic reading of Vera's *The Stone Virgins*. Vera speaks of the horrors in Matabeleland by being a witness to the testimony of others. Through her narrative style, she establishes a triadic relationship between history, memory and literature. The fantastical element of her prose dissolves the frames between these discursive structures, and her writing continually emulates violent trauma itself: 'the fracturing of the text, floating blocks of memory and the amalgamation of a patchwork of thoughts'.²⁰³ There is

¹⁹⁹ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London: Penguin Books, 2004).

²⁰⁰ See Peter Godwin, *The Fear: Robert Mugabe and the Martyrdom of Zimbabwe* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2011).

²⁰¹ See Bryce, 'Interview with Vera', p. 223. During the interview, Vera discusses the philosophical underpinnings of her writing; in particular, her mode of expression and the aesthetic of capturing, narrating and giving voice to women in her works.

²⁰² Other Zimbabwean writers who have addressed trauma in the Zimbabwean novel are Alexander Kanengoni in *Echoing Silences* (1997); Shima Chinodya: *Harvest of Thorns* (1998); and Freedom Nyamubaya, through her collection of poems in *On the Road Again* (1998), and more recently, Tsitsi Dangaremba, in *This Mournable Body* (2020).

²⁰³ Jane Bryce, 'Imaginary Snapshots', in *Sign and Taboo: Perspectives on the Poetic Fiction of Yvonne Vera*, ed. Robert Muponde and Mandi Taruvinga (Harare: Weaver Press, 2002), p. 47.

a constant re-enactment of the present so that it becomes unstable, and is subject to the echoes from the past:

She has forgotten to pack her comb. She tells Thenjiwe. The suitcase is opened again. It is shut, then locked. Nonceba moves out of the room once more, into the unlit air, colourless. The air is still like water. It is humid. She searches the distance with her eyes. There is less sound outside than her own heart beating. The ground tilts. It shifts. She feels empty. The mist surrounds the sky. The hills collapse. The sky is a gray-blue fluid suspended. This she welcomes, not that separate sky far away in her memory, far, deep blue, deep and blue, near, which she remembers.²⁰⁴

The instability in the text – her unsteady shift between the sky of the lived moment and the unwelcome memory, or, as we will see below, between third- and first-person narration could be said to emulate victims who might doubt the veracity of their own experience, when pitted against other narratives that may cast doubt on their truthfulness. These are what Laub calls ‘discrete islands of precocious memories that are far removed from each other but are connected in a complex way’.²⁰⁵ For example, when Sibaso is the process of raping and mutilating Nonceba, there is sense in which she makes us believe that somehow she knows him, when in fact he is a total stranger to her:

I know his name. I cannot recall his name. My tongue is silent, his name on it. I could call out his name. I try but I hear him breathing, near. I am standing, raised up, as high as his shoulder, pulled up. Himself poised for another action. His mind is reeling.²⁰⁶

Anne Whitehead contends that despite ‘the discontinuities and disruptions inherent within trauma fiction, ‘the incomprehensibility of trauma is communicated’.²⁰⁷ How this happens in *The Stone Virgins*, is determined by the text’s refusal of ‘closure and containment’, and the refusal of each fragment within the broader narrative to cohere into a whole. Because, as Vera asserts, individual ‘experiences are not always flowing, non-fragmented but floating.’²⁰⁸ According to Whitehead, traumatic experience is inflexible and replays the past in

²⁰⁴ Vera, *The Stone Virgins*, pp. 138-139.

²⁰⁵ Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, p. 81.

²⁰⁶ Vera, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 10.

²⁰⁷ Anne Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), p. 32.

²⁰⁸ Bryce, ‘Interview with Vera’, in *Sign and Taboo*, p. 223.

a mode of exact repetition, while narrative memory is capable of improvising on the past so that the account of the event varies from telling to telling.²⁰⁹

In the Zimbabwean context, trauma can be said to be exacerbated by a collective forgetfulness, and the refusal to make a truth-claim about the controversial *Gukurahundi* atrocities.²¹⁰ These are the ‘echoing silences’ that still demand an audience, to borrow Alexander Kanengoni’s apt phrase.²¹¹ To recall the words of Elinor Sisulu, Zimbabweans are still suffering from the ‘wounds of silence’, and the plight of the victims and survivors of the *Gukurahundi* massacres, was and remains unacknowledged.²¹² On the other hand, Ruramisai Charumbira warns Zimbabweans not to use the memory of the past to advance the demands of the present. His warning, has perhaps, come far too late:

The hope is that the people of that country and elsewhere will pause before using the past—and the people thereof—as crutches because the living are too lazy to speak ‘unspeakable things [still] unspoken’ about Zimbabwe’s past in the present.²¹³

Vera’s motif of mutilation in *The Stone Virgins*, and elsewhere in her work, gestures us towards this silencing; and the precariousness of memory. Silencing mutes speech, and inhibits those affected by violence to speak out, publicly. In the act of writing, Vera’s emphasis, much like Laub’s, is on the ability to convey and for her characters to speak out about trauma as an act of survival. Laub writes:

This imperative to tell and to be heard can become itself an all-consuming life task. Yet no amount of telling seems ever to do justice to this inner compulsion. There are never enough words, or the right words, there is never enough time, or the right time, or never enough listening or the right

²⁰⁹ Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction*, p. 87.

²¹⁰ See *Gukurahundi in Zimbabwe*. The report was published by the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace in Zimbabwe and the Legal Resources Foundation as *Breaking the Silence*. It provides an overview of the devastating deployment of *Gukurahundi* soldiers—mainly Robert Mugabe’s ZANU (PF)-affiliated militias trained by the North Koreans—in Matabeleland, and the effect of their violence on the civilian population. It also contains individual witness testimonies of the atrocities. There are similarities between the narrative in *The Stone Virgins* and the real occurrences recorded in the report. *The Stone Virgins* is therefore set during this period, and much of its narrative is a silhouette of witness accounts of the real massacre.

²¹¹ The phrase derives from the title of Alexander Kanengoni’s book, *Echoing Silences* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1998). The book is about trauma in the aftermath of the Zimbabwean war of liberation. Munashe, his protagonist, is the embodiment of the effect of the trauma of the liberation war on those who participated in it. He is haunted by the ghost of a woman and baby that he bludgeoned to death during the war. The gradual disintegration of his psychological integrity foregrounds the effects of the horrors of war on those left untreated, and the failure of the state to address the issue of war-related trauma, and to speak openly about it: hence Kanengoni’s metaphor of ‘echoing silences’. Kanengoni was a freedom fighter, and it is presumed that the novel is largely influenced by his own experience of the war.

²¹² See *Gukurahundi*, p. xiv.

²¹³ Charumbira, *Imagining a Nation*, p. 11.

listening to articulate the story that cannot be fully captured in thought, memory and speech.²¹⁴

In his reading of Cathy Caruth's engagement with the question of traumatic return, Stephen Frosh further suggests that it is the 'literalness of trauma that is its hallmark'.²¹⁵ To him, the nowness of the traumatic event is unsymbolisable, because it remains inaccessible, and yet it keeps coming back by manifesting itself in the present. He suggests that there is a backward referentiality, the becoming real that is only possible because an original event has been occluded and foreclosed:

The inherently unsymbolisable nature of trauma is what is being described here, giving it its backward temporality. There is an event, and it is traumatic to the extent that it is not recognised as such but becomes repressed and silenced. It is inaccessible, yet it continues to operate; the psyche wrestles with it and unconsciously identifies with it. When it occurs, its significance passes the subject by; but later it cannot be avoided, it keeps cropping up, and yet it is nowhere to be found.²¹⁶

As such, Vera is not 'hide-bound by convention'—the fragmentation and elliptical moments in her writing can be read as simulations of trauma itself.²¹⁷

A silver sound, like pieces of sharp glass, as the sand hits upon metal and cuts like a knife over the edge of the cart. A boulder juts out near the field just behind the hut and the brick house, an obstacle, a high smooth boulder of polished stone, straight, with a rounded top that stands higher than all the huts. The winds circles and whips against the rock repeatedly, sharp, grinding, unable to hollow the stone. [...] The trees are rid of leaves. My mind is quiet. Not rushing like the wind.²¹⁸

The above quote alludes to the rupture of normalcy as a result of the appearance of an unexpected tumultuous event. The world around Nonceba is disintegrating. The 'sharp edges' juxtaposed with 'sharp noise' symbolise the magnitude of an event whose meaninglessness is overwhelming. Through Nonceba's character, Vera evokes Toni Morrison's idea of a character as a cracked mirror, because trauma not only destroys beings, but it does so by fracturing and

²¹⁴ Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, p. 78.

²¹⁵ Frosh, *Hauntings*, p. 123.

²¹⁶ —, *Hauntings*, p. 123.

²¹⁷ Mandi Taruvunga and Robert Muponde, eds., 'An Introduction', in *Sign and Taboo: Perspectives on the Poetic Fiction of Yvonne Vera* (Harare: Weaver Press, 2002), pp. xi.

²¹⁸ Vera, *The Stone Virgins*, p.124.

fragmenting them too.²¹⁹ In the process, the background of the traumatic event leaps into the foreground. Flesh becomes another reality: although one is embedded in one's flesh, one feels distanced from it, as if the body exists outside of the self. Trauma fiction must of necessity be fragmented, so that in narratives of trauma we are given fragmented beings. These fragmented beings can also be understood in the context of the violence that Vera's characters endure. For example, towards the end of *The Stone Virgins*, the reconstructive surgery on Nonceba's face points us literally to this reconstruction of the disparate fragments of the self, and an attempt to create a cohesive narrative of self. Vera's characters' refusal to speak, and the disruptions to their patterns of speech, signal a movement away from the nationalistic narratives of violence, towards a concern with the way in which such violence destroys the most basic forms of recognition there are, and gives shape to the life of the nation and its subjects:

The skin on my mouth breaks and cracks like clay. I move the finger over the edges of my mouth. The skin peels off in small bits like a broken shell. I open and close my mouth. I suck air into my body. I move my mouth all night in the dark. I am chewing air. Anxiously, I test my ability to speak. I have not heard my own voice for so long.²²⁰

The damage to the mouth, the cracking of the lips and Nonceba's attempt to chew the air, dramatise Nonceba's speechlessness and her attempt to gain a sense of self, since 'she no longer knows how to gather language with the same mouth.'²²¹ Under these conditions, the body is without signification. It is outside of the shared communal experience, and contrary to the politics of resistance, the body does not, nor can it always resist. There are limitations imposed on the body and on the language of resistance. To return to the words of a rape victim who gave testimony to the TRC:

And the effect of it all was that it completely humiliated me, it completely made me feel like I was worthless, that I had gone against everything that I

²¹⁹ See Manuela Lopez Ramirez, 'The Theme of the Shattered Self in Toni Morrison's *Bluest Eye* and a Mercy', in *Miscelanea: Journal of English and American Studies*, Vol. 48 (2013): Literature, Film and Cultural Studies, 75-91.><https://miscelaneajournal.net/index.php/misc/issue/view/8>> [accessed 17 March 2021].

²²⁰ Vera, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 125.

²²¹ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 77.

stood for, that I believed in, and that I had been too weak to withstand the pressure [...]²²²

What this illustrates is that breaking down registers loss of composure. The traumatised, tortured self cannot speak through [its] own language. During the torture, the language spoken is that of the torturer. The routinisation of violence in Zimbabwe has made violence an acceptable, though unpalatable, part of everyday life. There is still a certain nostalgia attached to violence, and a growing acceptance of its use as the means with which to achieve political goals. Hence Mugabe's declaration: 'We have degrees in violence.' The trajectory of this violence goes back to Zimbabwe's past.²²³ After all, Zimbabwean independence was won through violent insurrection. This is important for two reasons. First, in order to heal from violent trauma, Zimbabweans must understand how the violence of the past continues to influence the present. Second, they must understand how the same violence continues to privilege increasingly militant forms of masculinity, as will be the subject of my final chapter.

According to Vera, 'history fades into the chaos of the hills, but it does not vanish.' To her victims, the memory of violence is invested in their bodies.²²⁴ Therefore, in terms of intergenerational trauma, an inherited past re-enacts itself in the present. It is the constant repetition in Vera's writing, of the *willed return* of certain phrases, and of the return of the violent scene, which, as I will show, gestures us towards the persistence of trauma as represented in the novel. The tension in *The Stone Virgins* is sustained by irresolute moments, to which Vera offers no resolution.²²⁵ As readers, at times, it can feel as though we must accept the inevitability of the murderous scenes sketched out throughout the novel. Or at least anticipate the violence, in the same way that Zimbabweans have come to accept the prevalence of its most grotesque forms. Through repetition, and the acceptance of their current existence, they re-enact violence amongst, and against themselves. Under such circumstances, violent expression cannot be separated

²²² Krog, *Country of My Skull*, p. 183.

²²³ Martin Meredith, *Mugabe: Power, Plunder and the struggle for Zimbabwe's Future* (New York: PublicAffairs Books, 2007), p. 76.

²²⁴ Vera, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 104.

²²⁵ Primorac, 'The Place of the Woman', in *Emerging Perspectives*, p. 380.

from the notion of Zimbabwean-ness. Zimbabweans, it seems, have not had the opportunity to mourn the past, for them to work-through their trauma, and to create new meaning out of their suffering. They are the walking wounded who remain fractured inside.

In Peter Godwin's book, *The Fear: Robert Mugabe and the Martyrdom of Zimbabwe* (2011), a victim of political violence in Zimbabwe recalls the moment violent youths destroyed his animals; and there was nothing he could do to save them:

And he heard them setting about his prized possessions, his seven cattle, with axes. 'They cut the tendons on their back legs; [...] I could hear my cows crying to me. But I could do nothing.'²²⁶

The man claims to have heard his cows 'crying to him'. Yet the muffled sound emanating from the cows has no shape, no form that would make it a language. This resonates with Nicholas Chare's account of an animal cry:

The collapsing of boundaries embodied by the scream is accompanied by the crisis of signification. The sign disintegrates as V. N. Vološinov recognised in his description of the 'animal cry'. Vološinov wrote that 'the animal cry' the pure response to pain in an organism is bereft of accent; it is a purely natural phenomenon. For such a cry the social atmosphere is irrelevant, and therefore it does not contain even the germ of the sign of formation'. It is something exterior to ideology and outside the shape of the sign. It is the outing of the inner. It is an intermediary between the inside and the outside, yet it also exceeds intermediation.²²⁷

But he 'heard' his cows 'crying out' to him, imposing an injunction upon him to act. He is broken himself, paralysed by political violence. Here we can now go back to the figure of Nonceba in Vera's novel tied to the hospital bed. As if in response to this shocking moment, in *The Stone Virgins*, Vera's complex erudition, and the dialogic nature of her text, brings into the fold of her writing the notion of the reversed scream—something which negates the vocalised scream:

Daytime is hardest to endure. Objects are clean, as though washed, clear and distinct, submerged in the light. My mind lacks an equal sharpness. There is no sure light in it. I see less. A blur in the room veils everything. Light is pure. Edges are sharp. My mind dulls everything till I swim in a vast opaque liquid. Speckles of light float in the room in which I dream while I am awake, yet not truly alive. I wake in a sweat, drenched. I wake

²²⁶ Godwin, *The Fear*, p. 88.

²²⁷ Chare, *Auschwitz and Afterimages*, p. 51.

with Thenjiwe's name held on my tongue; my mouth is filled with saliva. My limbs are stiff. No part of my body can move; my fingers, my arms, every part of my body is again still. I lie on the bed, listening to my body turn slowly into stone [...] My mouth [is] stiff, as though sewn up, stitched like the hem of a dress, folded; heavy with numbness. I am unable to speak, my forehead is heavy. I carry words at the back of my mind, names of things, objects, places I do not know. My entire face is swollen and it throbs. The skin on it pulls down and tightens; then my mouth quickly withdraws. My mouth has no words, shrivelled.²²⁸

Tied to the bed, Nonceba is all fury, no scream—to reformulate Chare's phrase. In other words, the text cannot register the level of violence that provokes such noise. The bed bound Nonceba, with bandages wrapped around her face and mouth, cannot scream. Her stifled voice is the human correlative of the visceral cries from the cows, in Godwin's story. Her pain is constricted within, it cannot follow the predicted, outward trajectory—the move from the inside to the outside. Vera, once more is concerned with aurality, or vocalisation of trauma. Not only is Nonceba constrained, and tied to the bed, her mouth is closed, so that even if she willed it, her voice would never emit a sound.

In this passage, Vera contrasts light with darkness, and the cleanliness, and sharpness of objects against the dullness of Nonceba's mind. She is submerged under a 'viscous' sea of darkness, a kind of dreamscape, in which she is trapped between the 'unbelievability' of her predicament, and the real and profound way in which the trauma has changed her life, irrevocably. Due to her fragmented mind, there are objects, names, and names of places that no longer make sense to her. Through the occlusion of her face in the darkness, Vera gives her voice: she speaks in her silence. And through the grotesque disfigurement of her mouth, she foregrounds what has been taken away from her: her voice—even if her mouth is 'sewn up', 'stitched', and 'folded'. Like the wounded animals, she might have not words with which to express her suffering, but she can make us see, feel and anticipate the violence too.

If there is a single moment that foregrounds Vera's preoccupations throughout the whole novel, this is it. Vera forces readers to embody Nonceba

²²⁸ Vera, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 123.

temporarily, and through a complex empathic response, she not only provokes our own helplessness, but our own crisis in witnessing. Having witnessed the gruesome rape and murder of Thenjiwe, including Nonceba's own rape and mutilation, we now watch helplessly as she deals with the aftermath of her wounding. Nonceba's innocence, read against her subsequent mutilation, animates her silence into an agitation that can be read against Godwin's rendition of the mutilation of animals by violent thugs. In both scenes something horrendously inarticulable has happened, but what is even more disturbing about Godwin's description of the mutilation of animals, in addition to the obvious violence, is that the perpetrators are children, the so-called war veterans. Violent Zimbabwean youths or 'war veterans' are now the inheritors of the violent historical legacy that continues to haunt Zimbabwe today. More poignantly, this was a method of violence against animals favoured by the guerrillas during the war.

This confirms Christopher C. Taylor's study of the genocide in Rwanda, in which he argues that such violence is not random; that it has a 'cultural patterning, a structured and structuring logic to it'.²²⁹ In Rwanda, the victims of the genocidal violence had their Achilles tendons severed with machetes. Immobilising victims made sense during genocide: the perpetrators could always come back and finish off their victims at their own convenience. The severance of the animals' tendons in the Zimbabwean context signifies the political and ideological motivation of the party's instruments of violence to destroy the livelihood of their potential enemies, through the destruction of their symbol of wealth. Hence Taylor's assertion that we can only make sense of these forms of violence through a comprehensible understanding of local symbolisms.

In a similar vein, in *The Stone Virgins*, Vera pre-emptorily evokes what she calls the language of animals. The metaphor of the language of animals is meant to evoke a sense of helplessness experienced by sentient beings that are deemed not to have a language. The difficulty, as such, is with reconciling animals with human-ness—Gobodo-Madikizela's phrase. But there is a more poignant link between traumatised humans and animals. And that is silence:

²²⁹ Christopher C. Taylor, *Sacrifice as Terror: The Rwandan Genocide of 1994* (Oxford: Berg, 1999).

Now she is in an abysmal place, inert, held down. She is mute. Unable to shape words into language, to breathe freely. She will have to find sources of sound inside her, a pure and timeless sound. Then she will open her mouth and let the sound free. Words will follow, then language. Only then will she discover a world in contrast to her predicament. She will restore her own mind, healing it in segments, in sound. She thinks of the language of animals, which has no words but memory.²³⁰

Perhaps Vera's quest is to find an unencumbered language, pure as the violent act itself, so that all language can do is get us closer to the experience, and develop an intimacy with that violence without crumbling, or succumbing to the violence itself. As Vera insists, such language must have 'no words but memory'.²³¹ It simply becomes and re-enacts itself. And there-in lies the difficulty with the language of trauma: How [can] victims fragment under the experience of trauma, and be able to articulate their suffering in ways that have not been thought before, using a language that will not betray them? And this is the language sought after by all wounded beings as Vera suggests. Perhaps such a language will help us frame our understanding of human compassion as something that will always be reflected through our own treatment of other fragile beings:

When they have tragic encounters, how do they survive? Do they close their eyes and dream, or do they dream with their eyes open? Do they dream at all? Are they born in sound? Do they nurture death inside their bodies like a hurricane, their tongues inaudible? She would like to know the language of all wounded beings. Where do they begin when everything has ended? Is there a language in the ending of the mind, all minds?²³²

The disposition of the Zimbabwean youths involved in the violence can also be framed in Vera's language as traumatised, wounded beings. The inhumane and unnecessary terrorising of animals can always be seen as a prerequisite to something much bigger and more disturbing. After all, these are young people, who no longer have compassion, not even for defenceless animals. The juxtaposition of humans and animals is perhaps intended to complicate our understanding of trauma as it pertains to all sentient beings. And that is, we cannot terrorise animals seemingly without consequence, without losing our humanness.

²³⁰ Vera, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 90-1.

²³¹ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 91.

²³² —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 91.

In other words, collective acts of wanton violence, have tragic consequences for the community. The tragedy unfolding in Zimbabwe can be read as the sign of the absolute collapse of any communal condemnation of violence.

Communal Memory and the Casualties of War

There is no divine providence in Zimbabwe. Nor is there any in *The Stone Virgins*. The storyline in *The Stone Virgins* coincides with the arrival of Mugabe's forces in Matabeleland in 1983-1987. Therefore, *The Stone Virgins* can be read as a premonition which foregrounds a world that has yet to come:

Every road out of Bulawayo is covered by soldiers and police, teeming like ants. Roadblocks. Bombs. Landmines. Hand grenades. Memory is lost. Independence ends. Guns rise. Rising anew.²³³

The arrival of *Gukurahundi* soldiers happens at a crucial moment when the landscape of memory is being forged out of historical events. In war everything is in motion. People change places. There are no boundaries and extra-ordinary things happen to ordinary people. Vera's female protagonists are at a significant crossroads as civil war becomes the continuation of the arbitrary regulation of space for women, and war's libidinal aim extends its trajectory frighteningly towards women. New prohibitive indicators are brought to the landscape: curfew, soldiers and marauding dissidents. Vera's protagonists are caught in a space between warring factions. And, collectively, these women occupy a dangerous nexus of perpetual war, violence and poverty. They are at the mercy of quarrelling factions of men:

The war begins. A curfew is declared. A state of emergency. No movement is allowed.²³⁴

Throughout the novel Vera gives readers numerous pointers hinting at the trauma endured by her characters as casualties of war. What she variously calls, 'disembodied beings',²³⁵ 'the afterbirth of war'²³⁶, women who live in [Kezi], a place 'designated for death', a 'naked cemetery where no one is buried and

²³³ ———, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 66.

²³⁴ ———, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 66.

²³⁵ ———, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 103.

²³⁶ ———, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 105.

everyone is betrayed'.²³⁷ And 'war is taking its toll on [their] minds, too, as [their] minds become perishable, and [their] memory lingers, somewhere, in fragments, because something happened, an event cataclysmic'.²³⁸ In the end Vera's women prefer 'this language of silence which they have found.'²³⁹

When read in the context of a culturally sanctioned impunity, enforced silence predisposes societies towards a state-sanctioned manufacture of fear. The fear which results in the enforced silence, is the perpetuation of violence by other means, in what Pumla Dineo Gqola calls the *Fear Factory*.²⁴⁰ To her, violence and silence operate within the ambit of a coercive disciplinary mechanism: the codification of silence as an admirable quality amongst women. There are codes in silence that enable violence, and codes in violence which engender impunity. But the major function of silence is the isolation of victims of violence from both material and support structures. And it is in this silence and isolation that Vera encapsulates her characters' fragility and mental state succinctly:

I am fascinated with the individual, especially women in Africa, and how they are forced to endure without having a nervous breakdown because they cannot afford it. But they collapse inside, and I am keen to capture that collapse.²⁴¹

In Vera's writing we see how the 'communal' is what such violence destroys. *The Stone Virgins* problematises the concept of communal memory: who does what, remembers what, and when. Even Mahlathini, the owner of the Thandabantu Store, the hub of communal activity, in *The Stone Virgins*, is not impervious to the demands of wilful forgetting or sanctioned communal memory. There is a concerted effort with which he speaks, listens to, and interacts with his customers. It is as if an invisible monstrous fear permeates his surroundings; and seemingly, he cannot interact with ease:

²³⁷ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 159

²³⁸ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 102.

²³⁹ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 162.

²⁴⁰ See Pumla Dineo Gqola, *Rape: A South African Nightmare* (Johannesburg: MF Books, 2015), pp. 78-99. Gqola argues that the fear of rape or violence instilled amongst women takes many forms, such as the cultural sanctions against certain types of behaviour pertaining to women only: the clothes that they wear, the spaces they occupy; when and how. The manufacture of fear uses the threat of rape and the wounding of the female body through the mythologization of violence as beneficiary to women. Approved behaviours are endorsed within a framework of respectability. Women who transgress the behavioural norms stipulated within this framework are targeted by men and in South Africa this has seen the rise of so-called 'Corrective Rape', aimed at women who do not identify as heteronormative, or do not conform to gendered stereotypes.

²⁴¹ Bryce, 'Interview with Vera', *Sign and Taboo*, p. 223.

He does not want to remember who said what, and when. He does not want to know who heard him say what, and when. He picks up the murmur of voices, this tone, that intuition, the terror in the other voice.²⁴²

In the end, even Mahlathini's shrewdness does not save him. Soldiers accuse him of offering a place for a meeting where anything could be spoken, planned and allowed to happen. Through Mahlathini's paranoia, Vera registers the prevailing climate of fear that persists in Zimbabwe today. Even though the soldiers know him, they feign ignorance. Instead, they kill him, in order to 'make a perverse show of his death.' Soldiers spectacularise Mahlathini's death as a warning to others. Their violence translates into an instant power, which reverberates throughout Kezi as apprehension of fear. Witnesses to his awful death remain faceless; described only 'as those who claim to know what happened'.²⁴³ The allusion to 'those who claim to know what happened' suggests that such claims are not absolute, that they are contestable. Fear pervades social memory, and remembering, as collective memory, suddenly becomes fraught with difficulty.

Vera deliberately evokes and problematises the political uses of forgetfulness, and how the politicisation of traumatic memory becomes the object with which the State can create differences amongst its citizens; and exploit those differences in times of crises:

They hold onto its fecundity, and, indeed, its past memories. After all, there is nothing else left communal since that day Thandabantu Store blazed down. Kezi is a place gasping for survival—war, drought, death and betrayals: a habitat as desolate as it is longing for the miraculous.²⁴⁴

The disruption of collective memory prevents any attempt at collective subjectivisation. Frightened individuals do not communicate, as such, they will always find it difficult to organise into a body of collective resistance. Under the shadow of fear, forgetting and remembering are inseparable entities. It is within this gap, in what saddles both entities, that we can explore a nation's painful spots,

²⁴² Vera, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 131.

²⁴³ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 132, p. 134.

²⁴⁴ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p.128.

the discrepancies, and the perforations in the fabric of communal memory.

According to Anne Whitehead:

If individual memory is the concentric circle at the centre, then the social is the immediate circle with which the individual shares memory, and both are within a larger circle that may or may not share their social and individual memories but is bound together with them by history.²⁴⁵

History and Fiction

This issue of local purchase and of denial of memory leads therefore to the relationship between history and fiction. To Terence Ranger, however, there is no doubt that *The Stone Virgins* is painfully about what happens, which somehow, is the face of all these difficulties it manages to convey. In its emulation of trauma, through its textual arrangement, *The Stone Virgins* has no coherent, decipherable form because, as Ranger suggests, it does not concern itself with emplotment of traumatic events, but rather, the rupture in meaning posed by those events, and the struggle to create a language stable enough to lend itself towards meaning making.²⁴⁶ These issues of memory and representations have, crucially, played part in an exchange between history and fiction. Regarding her relationship with Ranger, as a historian, Vera said:

We have the same commitment to telling stories, and we have had an influence on each other. His latest book launched last month, is *Violence and Memory*, and the novel I'm writing now is also on the theme of violence and memory. Although its fiction, you'll recognise the same historical events depicted in Ranger's work.²⁴⁷

If Vera's work has been applauded as well as critiqued for its postmodernist orientation, it is because she abandons the historian's perspective on recording events and concentrates instead on certain imaginative and internal journeys of her characters.²⁴⁸

[...] I am more interested in what happens in the mind of the character. I am primarily concerned with the psychology of these women characters.

²⁴⁵ Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction*, p. 4.

²⁴⁶ Ranger, 'History has its ceiling', in *Sign and Taboo*, pp. 203-216.

²⁴⁷ Bryce, 'Interview with Vera', in *Sign and Taboo*, p. 225.

²⁴⁸ Muchemwa, 'Language, Voice and Presence', in *Sign and Taboo*, p. 3.

How they think; the subtlety of what they are thinking, the disturbances in their minds²⁴⁹

Whilst on the run, Sibaso enters a cave. Like a time traveller, he is suddenly exposed to other histories, carved on the ceiling of the cave, that precede his own, but which he does not consider as separate, or distinct from his own. If anything, he feels that by his intrusion, he is committing a gross sacrilege—by stealing shelter from the dead. The contemporaneous presence of both the living and the dead in the same space suggests that histories are entangled, that the past is implicated in the present. The rock acts as an archive—it does not rot.

In Gulati I travel four hundred, then ten thousand years, twenty more. The rocks splits open, time shifts, and I confess that I am among the travellers who steal shelter from the dead.²⁵⁰

At times we are unsure if Sibaso is dead or alive. But, through his fragmented soliloquy, we gather that he is safe and that he had been involved in an explosion. We can safely presume that the explosion is from a bomb through his mention of a ‘man-made chemistry’ which he ‘tasted in the air’, and the ‘discarded limbs and flesh hanging from uprooted trees’. This all seems in the past. But more importantly, and in terms of trauma, it is also in the present. He takes us back to that traumatic moment, and he relives that moment by means of a flashback:

I enter the lives of the dead. The soil is chaos and ash. I enter its burning. The soil is warm like a liquid. I am among the dead voices. I inhale their last breath. I share their last memory [...] ²⁵¹

In the above imagery, there is fire, soil, and water—all elements that represent life; and yet Vera also adds death, ash and chaos, so that whatever it is that Sibaso is engaged in, it could only lead to destruction. Sibaso, like the nation, is ‘a self-inflicted ruin’, that has ‘succumbed to a violent wind’, and now has to hide in the crevices on the rocks, just like the victims of *Gukurahundi* did, in a country that has plenty of ‘land but no habitat’ and is ‘out of bounds in its own

²⁴⁹ Ranka Primorac, ‘Finding Yvonne’, in *Emerging Perspectives on Yvonne Vera*, ed. Helen Cousins and Pauline Dodgson-Katiyo (London: Africa World Press, 2012), p. 371.

²⁵⁰ Vera, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 104.

²⁵¹ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 105

reality'.²⁵² Minds, and lives, are in turmoil, because of an unacknowledged violent past that keeps on coming back and causing upheaval in the present. As Vera confirms:

[...] Violence is part of the play of opposites, and that during war there are two kinds of lovers, the one located in the past, and dead, the one in the future, living and more desirable. The past is a repast, the future a talisman. This kind of truth belongs to a continent in disarray.²⁵³

Vera's utilisation of postmodernist narrative techniques—flashbacks, repetition and the discarding of timelines, the use of multiple voices to tell the same story, and the use of poetic language and symbolism which resist simple interpretation—allows her to use the fragmented memory of her characters in order to foreground the complexities of both history and traumatic memory.²⁵⁴

For example, Sibaso's soliloquy:

This is the last gasp of war. I am safe. The ground is warm. I rest in that new detonation. The odour of the dead protects me from wild animals, from hyenas, from concession seekers. I lie among the arms, legs, the torso of an already forgotten man. This is a resting place, the singed place, this shrine of powdered stars. I enter the lives of the dead. The soil is chaos and ash. I enter into its burning.²⁵⁵

The 'last gasp of war', the 'already forgotten man' and 'entering the lives of the dead' registers the complexities of trying to capture in ordinary language the sacrifices made by those who fought in the war, particularly the ongoing trauma of a violent war. Also, such complexities, particularly when it comes to official history, are compounded not only by a wilful amnesia, but also by the political uses of memory. As Sibaso suggests:

Then independence arrived and brought with it a spectacular arena for a different war, in which they were all casualties.²⁵⁶

²⁵² —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 83, p. 82.

²⁵³ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 84.

²⁵⁴ Muchemwa, 'Language, Voice and Presence', in *Sign and Taboo*, p. 3.

²⁵⁵ Vera, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 105.

²⁵⁶ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 179.

According to Ranger, Vera 'often wrote between the lines of history and she 'wilfully subverted chronology between the pause and the expectation'.²⁵⁷ Ranger suggests that Vera knowingly 'toyed with history and enjoyed the license to invent'.²⁵⁸

Vera's refusal to be bound by the facts struck me as sublime. So when I visited Bulawayo later in 1993 I phoned her and arranged to meet. Vera told a workshop in Oxford in 1997 that she had come to the meeting in some apprehension, fearing that I would berate her for some historical inaccuracy. Instead she remembered, I told her, 'It's absolutely wrong and I love it.' So, she said, 'he gave me permission to distort and I have gone on distorting'.²⁵⁹

Ranger's own work covers over 100 years of the violent colonial conquest of Zimbabwe, the occupation, destabilisation, and humiliation of Blacks under White rule; and post-independence Black rule. He offers the metaphor for Vera's writing as 'an oil painting with a marked fluidity' and of his own work, as that of a 'painstakingly pieced-together mosaic'.²⁶⁰ Vera's oil painting pitted against Ranger's mosaic ultimately produce two historical narratives whose constitutive elements are in formal tension with each other, but which also agree and touch at certain points. Ranger's work, as a historian, has largely been seen as a corrective to Vera's own, but I see them as complimentary. As Ranger says:

There are these continuities, then. But in other ways *The Stone Virgins* reveals a different attitude to History [...] It is a book about what—unfortunately—happens. It is not a book in which narratives are compressed into a private tragedy. It is a book about a people caught up in, and destroyed by a public disaster. It is not a book that establishes a deeper truth through myth and invented ritual. It is a book that confronts the reality of History and transcends that reality by means of a confrontation.²⁶¹

Ranger implies, therefore, that there is a semiotic exchange between Vera's narrative of the massacres in Matabeleland and the Historical record. Vera, unlike Ranger, does not rely on the Historical record to defend her narrative. For, to do

²⁵⁷ See Terence Ranger, *Bulawayo Burning: The Social History of a Southern African City 1893-1960* (Harare: Weaver Press, 2010), p. 5. Ranger and Vera had an established friendship, and he dedicated his book to Vera thus: 'To Yvonne, mere prose to your poetry'.

²⁵⁸ Ranger, 'History has its ceiling' in *Sign and Taboo*, p. 203.

²⁵⁹ —, 'History has its ceiling', in *Sign and Taboo*, p. 203.

²⁶⁰ —, *Bulawayo Burning*, p. 5.

²⁶¹ —, *Bulawayo Burning*, p.5.

so, would imply a certain compromise in which *The Stone Virgins* becomes a mere supplement to the Historical record—to paraphrase J.M. Coetzee.²⁶² If memory defers to the historical record as a source of its own accuracy, then Vera defers to her own imagination as a mode of validation, but with history as a canvas to that imagination:

By history I mean a record. I felt I had an internal, intimate knowledge of our ancestors, and how they impact our relationship to ourselves, to death, to life, to sky, to rock [...] History begins in 1896 when the Europeans came here, and it continues like this: the spirit *Nehanda* did this, in such and such a year, in such and such a year she was hanged on 27 April [...] And I realised, No, no, no! Our oral history does not even accept that she was hanged, even though the photographs are there to show it, because she refused that, she surpassed the moment when they took the body, and when they put a noose upon it, she had already departed. Her refusal and utterance are what we believe to be history [...] I wrote in a very emotional state of clarity of understanding that there are alternatives to 'history' and that in fact we had constructed it very differently in our lives.²⁶³

In *Nehanda* (1993), the title of Vera's first novel, she re-writes Zimbabwe's history through the eyes of her female protagonist, *Nehanda*, who becomes the embodiment of resistance to colonialist occupation. *Nehanda* was the first woman revolutionary to be hanged in the history of the resistance to the colonial occupancy of Zimbabwe.²⁶⁴ In Zimbabwean historiography, she was also a Spirit, and it is through this duality—her existence in multiple worlds—that she continues to drive the spirit of the revolution, even to this day.

Through *Nehanda* and *The Stone Virgins*, Vera reminds us that the Zimbabwean revolution is sustained, not only by the blood of women, but also their revolutionary spirit too. The murder and mutilation of the Gumedes sisters, and of entombment of 'the stone virgins' themselves—alive, to pave the way for kings - registers the price women pay for wars, as victims, and as revolutionaries in their own right; and yet they are barely mentioned in dominant histories:

They are the virgins who walk into their own graves before the burial of a king. They die untouched. Their ecstasy is in the afterlife. Is this a suicide

²⁶² John Maxwell 'J.M.' Coetzee, is a South African academic, novelist, essayist and winner of the 2003 Nobel Prize in Literature. He is the author of *Dusklands* (1974), *The Life and Time of Michael K* (1983), *Disgrace* (1992) and the *School Days of Jesus* (2016).

²⁶³ Bryce, 'Interview with Vera', in *Sign and Taboo*, p. 221.

²⁶⁴ Vera, *Nehanda*

or sacrifice, or both? Suicide, a willing, but surely private matter?
Sacrifice means the loss of life, of lives, so that one life may be saved. The
life of rulers is served, not saved.²⁶⁵

As Vera says: 'But there's this duplicity—people come back, and all the
heroes are men all of a sudden'. She wanted 'ordinary Zimbabwean women to
know that there was nothing new in what they were doing'.²⁶⁶ *Nehanda's Spirit*,
therefore, is a life-force which maintains the historical link between the past and
the present, the dead and the living, reversing the temporal order of trauma which
smothers the present with the past. It is said that just before she was hanged,
Nehanda declared: '*Mapfupa angu achamuka*—My bones will rise!'

In terms of trauma, she is 'the myth of eternal return and regeneration'.²⁶⁷
In *The Stone Virgins*, Vera invokes *Nehanda's* declaration right at the beginning of
the *Gukurahundi* invasion: 'The bones rising. Rising [...] Guns rise. Rise anew. In
1981.' And through Sibaso's soliloquy, she establishes the historical trajectory of
the violence in Zimbabwe: 'I count each nameless ancestor on my dead fingers.
Nehanda, the female one. She protects me with her bones. I embrace death.'²⁶⁸

More importantly, what Vera is also saying, is that the very history that has
excluded women's narrative of suffering, returns, to abuse and misuse their
sacrifices and in order to perpetuate further wars against women themselves:

They have read enough and know that these women are not mere pictures
from the newspapers folded under their arms, papers announcing a
landslide victory for the new prime minister, but beings they could greet
with care and due respect. *But they do not*. These women have known the
forest in the rain and sun, survived its darkness and light, equally
threatening. These women, alive now sitting on the edge of this smooth
wall, are the most substantial evidence of survival there is, of courage, of
struggle.²⁶⁹

I quote Vera here at length, if only to elaborate on her philosophical
understanding of Zimbabwean history, which is inextricably linked to what she

²⁶⁵ —, *The Stone Virgins*, pp. 103-104. This is where the title of Vera's novel derives from. The stone
virgins were prepubescent girls 'sacrificed' to pave the way for the kings into the next world. Vera's use of
the powerful symbolism of the burial of virgins highlights the sacrifices women make in their continuing
fight for freedom in Zimbabwe.

²⁶⁶ Bryce, 'Interview with Vera', in *Sign and Taboo*, p. 222.

²⁶⁷ Vambe, 'Spirit possession', in *Sign and Taboo*, pp. 127-140.

²⁶⁸ Vera, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 65, p. 117.

²⁶⁹ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 60.

calls her 'spiritual history'.²⁷⁰ She does not see history as static; she sees it as always in a flux: always on the move. This suggests that to Vera, there are different levels of temporality and existential planes; and that there is no precise moment in which history happens. And as such, a narrative does not 'foreordain its own outcome'.²⁷¹ It seems that Vera's assumed ownership of her ancestral history demands an emotional investment:

It was a story of spirituality, of ancestors, a mystic consciousness and a history [...] so it was much better to write it almost intuitively, out of my consciousness of being African, as though I were myself a spirit medium, and I was transferring or conveying the feelings, symbols, and images of that time. [...] I wrote it from remembrance, as a witness to my own spiritual history.²⁷²

Vera politicises an 'assumed hysteria' in order not to be silenced, no matter how irrational her writing might appear at times. As she says:

If you write in a style which quickly tells the reader that you are situating yourself as a woman writer and that your act of writing perhaps is structured around a particular idea of, I don't know, body, structures in the society or independence; that you are making an argument about female identity—immediately that is seen as transporting foreign ideas. You are not behaving yourself, basically. You are hysterical [...] I am giving you a woman and her struggles. Political, religious, whatever; to do with the body, to do with death, to do with all sorts of philosophy.²⁷³

Vera's argument about, or way of conceptualising women's suffering resonates with that of Nana Wilson-Tagoe, who argues that the novel can 'move historical discourse in provocative ways' where that discourse also severely limits what can be told:

[...] The nature of historical representation—its focus on the single act, its single-voiced narration, its search for causations and conclusions, its structuring of coherence—pushes it inevitably towards continuity and closure.²⁷⁴

Writers must therefore be wary seeking closure to their narratives through history, as this can complement already compromised historical narratives with

²⁷⁰ Bryce, 'Interview with Vera', in *Sign and Taboo*, p. 221.

²⁷¹ Ranger, *Bulawayo Burning*, p. 5.

²⁷² Bryce, 'Interview with Vera', in *Sign and Taboo*, p. 220.

²⁷³ Primorac, 'The Place of the Woman', in *Emerging Perspectives*, p. 376.

²⁷⁴ Nana Wilson-Tagoe, 'History, Gender and the Problem of Representation in the Novels of Yvonne Vera', in *Sign and Taboo: Perspectives on the Poetic Fiction of Yvonne Vera*, ed. Mandi Taruvinga and Robert Muponde (Harare: Weaver Press, 2002), p. 156.

legitimacy, which in turn, delivers them up to dominant forms of political currency.

J.M. Coetzee on the other hand demands that a novel should evolve its own paradigm and myths, so that it shows the mythic status of history. To Coetzee, there is an exchange between fiction and history—which he sees as very distinct types of discourse. In contrast, with Wilson-Tagoe, I see his argument directing us towards something much more profound and significant. That for the novel to retain its uniqueness as a specific kind of discourse, it must not yield to historical pressures and act as its mere supplement. It must, as Ranger suggests, remain confrontational.

Chapter Three

Touching the Nation's Acting Spots: Women, History and Violence.

Between them there is an absence measured by poses and suspicious silences. Perhaps in one of these silences, he may recover and feel something akin to kindness, not pity. It is remote, pity, in a man like this. He may forget why he is here, why she is with him, who she is. He too may be stunned by his own dramatic presence.²⁷⁵

According to Pumla Dineo Gqola, simple narratives of rape often ignore the multifaceted act of rape itself, which is not only brutal, but highly complex and political. To Dineo Gqola, the demand, in the literary representation of rape, has been the devaluation of the mundane, everyday story of rape, as lacking shock value, in preference for the extreme narrative in which the victim is all but totally destroyed.²⁷⁶ In *The Stone Virgins*, Vera, through the figure of Nonceba, helps us explore the impact of this violence on women's bodies.

To Tanya Horeck, rape exposes the double meaning of representation in so far as it is made to serve as a 'sign' for other issues, and as a means of expressing ideological and political questions concerning the functioning of the body politic.²⁷⁷ One of the ways that rape is an act of power, is that it silences women due to the social stigma attached to it. Such silence, after brutal war-acts visited upon women, can sometimes obfuscate the real dialogue as to why women's bodies have become the ultimate object of war's libidinal aim. It is as if sexual violation itself is no longer enough—both the female body and mind must be destroyed. Francine Banner interrogated ways in which traumatic experience impacts differently on women. She sees women's bodies not as peripheral, but as sites of shifting locations of power. Thus, violence becomes not only an instrument of domination, but also an object through which subjectivities are shaped. Zimbabwe and its neighbour, South Africa, have both been named as rape-prone countries.²⁷⁸ Proponents of this argument suggest that in rape-prone

²⁷⁵ Vera, *The Stone Virgins*, p.6.

²⁷⁶ See Dineo Gqola, *Rape: A South African Nightmare*, p. 55.

²⁷⁷ See Tanya Horeck, *Public Rape: Representing Violation in Fiction and Film* (London: Routledge, 2003).

²⁷⁸ See Peggy R. Sanday, 'Rape and the silencing of the Feminine', in *Rape*, ed. Sylvana Tomaselli and Roy Porter (eds) (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), pp. 84-101.

countries, violence, murder, and rape are part of the collective experience. *The Stone Virgins* therefore interrogates the effect of the protracted brutal wars on the Zimbabwean national psyche. In the words of a witness to the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa*:

When I look around, I marvel at how we battle to be normal, and no one knows how shattered we are inside.²⁷⁹

The situation in Zimbabwe resonates with the harrowing accounts of rape in the Congo, of the unabated use of iron bars, rifle barrels, tree branches, bottles, and knives as implements of rape. In this regard, Vera has the capacity to shock, by turning an ordinary place into the ‘spectacle of the scaffold’—Michel Foucault’s phrase—execution square,²⁸⁰ which unveils human cruelty, as her female protagonists become ‘heralds in their own condemnation’.²⁸¹ Vera delves into the agonisingly mundane: the usual heat and the straggly barking of dogs, such as one might expect in African villages. What shores up the architecture of the scaffold is Vera’s language, which does not baulk under the weight of her subject material. Her language maintains this confrontation through a reverberating stillness. And then in the middle of this calmness, the most extraordinary event occurs:

An ordinary day. Just the heat. Above, the sounds of wings, birds: weightlessness. In the distance a dog barks and dies and barks. It whimpers a straggly sound. On such a day, dogs have found new voices. Already the flies are turning the entire ground dark. The blood on the ground. Death.²⁸²

This unexpected visitation of weightlessness and the voices of the dogs introduces a new dimension to trauma and mimics the way in which violent trauma intrudes on private moments and ruptures the fabric of normalcy. Vera calls this ‘history-in-a-moment’: something out of the ordinary, and unexpected, but nonetheless true.²⁸³ Something that is astoundingly unnerving, were it not for

²⁷⁹ Krog, *Country of My Skull*, p. 185.

²⁸⁰ See Michel Foucault, *The Spectacle of the Scaffold*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin Books, 2008). *The Spectacle of the Scaffold*, like so many of Foucault’s writings on power and control in social institutions, addresses the issue of punishment as an instrument of systemic control and dominance over individuals in society.

²⁸¹ Vera, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 72.

²⁸² —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 72.

²⁸³ Bryce, ‘Interview with Vera’, in *Sign and Taboo*, p. 223.

its realness. At times like this, it feels as if these moments cannot be sequentialised into broader historical narratives but stand alone, adrift from the nationalist rhetoric of victorious wars. For Vera, that rhetoric is fraudulent because women pay the ultimate price of war, and yet their experiences of war, as combatants, and as victims, are often forgotten or deliberately excluded from grand narratives. In re-considering the war of liberation in Zimbabwe, and the role of Black women in it, Vera problematises the whole story of how the war was fought, or who the real victors were—if any:

I wanted ordinary women in Zimbabwe to know that there was nothing new in what they were attempting to do. At that time (early 1980s) women were coming back from the armed struggle and people were not even recognising that they had gone. But a woman led the first rebellion, not just physically but spiritually, which in fact was the basis for our entire struggle that followed—the Second Chimurenga.²⁸⁴

Those mostly affected by the violence in Matabeleland are women. In their unique position as victims of male violence, and as witnesses to the traumatic manifestation of war, women in Zimbabwe have become contributors to such irruptions. Although their contribution to this most horrendous of histories is haunted by painful memories, by telling stories of their own suffering, they alert us to the falsity of patriarchal narratives of History that cast women's experience as always outside of historical narratives. However, if the war of liberation makes sense to women, *Gukurahundi* atrocities towards them seemed to others an aberration, throwing into crisis the dominant rhetoric of freedom. As Richard Webner puts it, 'the nightmarish quality of women's experience came from a virtually ritualistic re-enactment of certain parts created in the liberation war'²⁸⁵.

The Fifth Brigade soldiers were the merciless re-enforcers of collective punishment by the state, re-enacting the part of the Rhodesian forces, yet they represented themselves also as having the moral authority of freedom fighters, and they demanded displays of support of the kind they had known as freedom fighters.²⁸⁶

²⁸⁴ —, 'Interview with Vera', in *Sign and Taboo*, p. 222.

²⁸⁵ Richard Webner, *Tears of the Dead: A Social Biography of an African Family* (Harare: Baobab Books, 1992), p. 169.

²⁸⁶ —, *Tears of the Dead*, p. 169.

The survivors of the Fifth Brigade atrocities, particularly women, will never truly be at ease. They still feel anxious, 'tense in their guts; and worry that the war will come again.'²⁸⁷ As one victim later elaborated:

But we were not very much alive before [...] The most [recent war] was so overwhelming. We lay down, but not to sleep. We fled our homes. We had nothing to eat. We were beaten [with poles]. What else could we do?²⁸⁸

I understand this statement as suggesting that those who stand in the shadow of a traumatic event are survivors in one sense—they have pulled through the event; but have yet to survive in the aftermath. Survival registers a state of ambivalence: the aftermath of war, rape, genocidal massacres, violent encounters, or extreme psychic deformations. As such, survival must not be seen as the fortunate passage beyond a series of violent events, but as an endless compulsion for repetition. The repetition of having to go through it all again, and with each individual event having to envisage what it means to live to tell.

In *The Stone Virgins*, these are a people doomed to the continuing misery of violent lives; and the unsettling thing is that they do not seek to understand why: as in why us? Or, why now? Incredibly they survive, like Nonceba, without knowing how and why. Also, she doesn't ask why. Even during her rape and mutilation, there is a sense in which she has resigned herself to her fate: 'I know he will kill me. I close my mind as simply as I would close my eyes, effortlessly.'²⁸⁹ There is no empathic framework that would serve as a template of what it takes to witness a rape and decapitation—and survive. Survival of a decapitation avails itself of/ demands two complicated acts of reading. The first pertains to the witness who remains outside the frame of the decapitation but registers each delayed moment as it happens, as Nonceba does. And the second reading is when the survivor tries to reconstitute the event scene by scene, in the aftermath, in an effort to register it through an interpretative framework, so that it makes sense—which invariably, it doesn't. That's because the 'surreal' forms of violence far exceed the capacity for language to truly and accurately register the

²⁸⁷ ———, *Tears of the Dead*, p. 165.

²⁸⁸ ———, *Tears of the Dead*, p. 166.

²⁸⁹ Vera, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 110.

experience, for those on the periphery but more importantly, ‘those on the edge of a fine instrument’—Vera’s own phrase²⁹⁰:

My mind tosses, reaches, and touches something solid outside of my own body. I pull my arms apart and stretch them as far as I can reach. I find the shocking stillness of her shoulders. The softness of her body, which is so dark under my fingers. Everything darkens. I see nothing more. I do not hear my body sinking to the ground, buried in that bottomless silence.²⁹¹

In the Zimbabwean political landscape, anomie is no longer a seasonal event—it is a permanent feature of the landscape.²⁹² The role of the state institutions is to create limitations to people’s recollection of the past, and to foster a culture in which truth is contingent upon the prevailing political circumstances. The state, through its various institutions, creates and re-enforces ‘specific kinds of consciousness’—Paulo Freire’s term—to sustain, invoke and establish violence as a way of life, and as an acceptable social practice.²⁹³ An overt, graphic violence underscores the omnipotent power of the state in Zimbabwe. Therefore, state institutions have become a screen beyond which the scene of another memory prevails, shored up by the secret abuse of victims, and by the state’s instruments of violence. As Vera says:

In fact, the summary of that period was that there was no escape from the encounter with brutality. If there were witnesses, then we heard what occurred, but otherwise it just happened. This was going on for six years, so you can imagine how many things happened.²⁹⁴

In countries such as Zimbabwe, survival, during these violent atrocities, becomes an endless testimony to the impossibility of survival. Zimbabweans hop from one traumatic event to another, be it as a result of economic disasters where a loaf of bread costs more than a monthly wage, to living today in the shadow of one of the most devastating pandemics in the world. The spiralling cost of living,

²⁹⁰ Vera, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 110, p. 111.

²⁹¹ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 111.

²⁹² The idea of anomie was espoused by Emile Durkheim, a social theorist, in which he suggests anomie takes root in the absence of sociocultural institutions, laws, and moral values that serve to maintain societal integration. Anomie, therefore, is the absence of a collective consciousness which puts constraints on individual actions that are harmful to society. There is also a play on this concept in the title of Wole Soyinka’s novel, *Season of Anomy* (1973). In it, he grapples with issues of morality and individual agency under a corrupt military dictatorship. There is a semblance to be drawn here with Zimbabwe, in which state-sponsored violence culminated in the murder of farmers. See also, Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labour in Society*, ed. Steven Lukes, 2nd edition (London: Palgrave, 2013).

²⁹³ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

²⁹⁴ Bryce, ‘Interview with Vera’, in *Sign and Taboo*, p. 223.

paired against the non-existent welfare state becomes a testimony to the impossibility of survival. People live under the pangs of hunger and general nervousness generated by uncertainty. Brazilians called it *nervoso*, what Tsitsi Dangarembga, in her famous novel, called *Nervous Conditions* after Frantz Fanon's rendering of the colonial condition.²⁹⁵ According to Nancy Scheper-Hughes, in her study of violence in the slums of Brazil, the nervousness transforms into a persistent anxiety, accompanied by inner turmoil and somatic complaints.²⁹⁶ Symptomatically, this may present as a persistent feeling of dread and rumination over the future. However, there is a more worrying, insidious nature of this existential anxiety that often leads to an existential crisis: when the world around an individual stops making sense. In terms of trauma, this means that there is an overwhelming existential despair, which can become a domineering worldview, effecting a collective inability to apprehend or deal with unexpected or extreme life conditions—particularly if extremity becomes the only way of life. In terms of symptoms, this may present as a flattened affect, in which the individual lacks the capacity for warmth and expressiveness. As Scheper-Hughes observes:

What, I wondered, were the effects of chronic hunger, sickness, death and loss on the ability to love, to trust, have faith, and keep it in the broadest sense of these terms. If mother love is, as some bio-evolutionary feminists believe, a 'natural', or at least an expectable, womanly script, what does it mean for women for whom scarcity and death have made that love frantic?²⁹⁷

Although Scheper-Hughes was talking about impoverished women in the slums of Brazil, she might as well have been talking about all the impoverished women in the developing world. Zimbabwe is no exception. In a state of depressive melancholy, one cannot develop a clearly mapped out understanding of one's predicament. I want to suggest here that there is a paradoxical relationship between consciousness and survival, precisely because one must apprehend trauma as an unwanted intrusion in order to be able to defend oneself from the

²⁹⁵ Tsitsi Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions*, 2nd ed. (London: The Women's Press, 2004).

²⁹⁶ Nancy Scheper-Hughes, *Death Without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), p. 67.

²⁹⁷ _____, *Death Without Weeping*, p. 15.

blows or the aftermath. Which is to say, one must be conscious—in other words demonstrate the level of cognitive awareness that makes it possible to see, in the absence of any visible cultural signifiers of trauma, at the same time as trauma destroys the cultural and symbolic structures through which meaning is apprehended. The excess of *Gukurahundi* atrocities could not be apprehended both because of the statist denial and forgetting, and because it exceeded comprehension.

Women subjectivities in the aftermath of war

In the introduction to the *Anatomy of Terror*, a propaganda document produced by the Rhodesian government to showcase the so-called barbarism of guerrillas, we find the following: ‘The incidents and pictures in this book record the wave of atrocities—murder, rape, abduction, torture, beatings, robberies, and cattle maimings, over the last 18 months’. It is claimed that the publication ‘serves to prove the calibre of men who masquerade as liberators’.²⁹⁸ Interestingly, particularly in relation to *The Stone Virgins*, on the cover of the publication is the photograph of an African woman whose face had been mutilated, and both her upper and lower lips completely cut off. Perhaps this is the historical moment upon which Vera draws inspiration in her writing in *The Stone Virgins*. Of this very moment Vera says:

It’s a very difficult subject, but I have a scene—a ‘photograph’—of a woman being decapitated. They’d cut your lips, or your nose—but cutting someone’s head off [...] I knew for a month or two that that was my opening scene, but the challenge was to find the words to make this work in the novel, both to make it believable, dramatic, but to do it in a way which celebrates writing.²⁹⁹

Vera goes on to say that this particular scene ‘captures all the scenes of horror’ which visited Matabeleland during the *Gukurahundi* massacres. Controversially, she makes the claim that she was there; thus inserting herself into the collective narrative of the atrocities as a witness—‘I was here through it’.³⁰⁰

²⁹⁸ See *Anatomy of Terror*, < <http://www.rhodesia.nl/AnatomyofTerror.pdf>. > [accessed 1 Oct 2019].

²⁹⁹ Bryce, ‘Interview with Vera’, in *Sign and Taboo*, p. 224.

³⁰⁰ Bryce, ‘Interview with Vera’, in *Sign and Taboo*, p. 225.

By so doing she complicates and problematises our understanding of victimhood and witnessing, two central themes in the study of trauma. Vera, and by extension all the women of Zimbabwe, are afflicted by the trauma of the *Gukurahundi* atrocities too.

In *The Stone Virgins*, Nonceba can be read as the embodiment of someone in the grip of a deep melancholy, particularly in the aftermath of her mutilation and rape—she is among the drowned. However, there is another strand to Vera's representation of women's subjectivities in war, which also touches on trauma and representability but in a different way. In *The Stone Virgins*, Vera also attempts to address the plight of women cadres during the war and in the aftermath of war. In doing so, she enacts a reversal in their status. The female ex-combatants who gather outside Thandabantu Store occupy what had been predominantly male spaces. They exude such confidence: they 'walk and dress like men, smoke a special brand of cigarettes' and 'listen to football scores on the radio'.³⁰¹ They are no longer subject to the male gaze. The gaze has shifted, and it is the men who are now too frightened to even approach the women, due to their implied status as heroes. Men, the omniscient narrator observes:

Fumble and fail. With disbelief in their own inability, they submit to a lengthening silence. They linger, too curious to walk away, yet too afraid to speak, too inferior in some intimate detail of existence, some risk they may not have taken. They stand like apparitions.³⁰²

However, this scene is misleading. The female combatants' outward confidence, the domineering of public spaces, the displacement of men from the Thandabantu Store, and their general demeanour, also serves to deflect their shame as their masculinised femininity is juxtaposed with the ruthlessness of trained killers. Vera poses the question that might be the preoccupation of the whole nation, regarding these women ex-combatants:

The killing of doves, is it different in the forest? They would like an account of something simple like that, an answer about killing doves. If they placed their question carefully like that, innocently, plainly perhaps they would get an answer that would satisfy all their questions. Did they kill doves, and if so, how? If they started asking about doves, could it not be that some other revelation would tumble out, a truth they could not

³⁰¹ Vera, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 58, p. 62.

³⁰² —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 62.

even imagine, some astounding fact that would gain them their own legitimacy, some facet of this war beyond their own conception.³⁰³

The question that Vera ponders is whether these women have killed during the war. If they have killed, how does killing affect them—as women? In other words, can women kill and remain imbued with the human compassion that is expected of them? But we have no answers because Vera does not give us access to the women combatants' psychological make-up. In *The Stone Virgins*, Vera offers them no avenue of expression. If the overarching theme in *The Stone Virgins* is to highlight the impact of violence on women, and accord voice to women's experience of violence, we might ask why does Vera maintain such silence around what must have been, and still is, a pressing issue in Zimbabwe: women's own propensity towards violence as combatants and as political agents of the state? When it comes to the male combatants, the question is much more direct: 'did they kill white men?'³⁰⁴ Notwithstanding the limitations of *The Stone Virgins* in this regard, Vera exposes the hypocrisy and the double standard levelled at the female combatants generally and interrogates what it means for women combatants to be celebrated and welcomed as heroes, especially if the prevailing figure of the hero is apprehended and socially constructed as male. Correspondingly, there is no template or conceptual framework for how female heroes should celebrate victory, or in fact be celebrated after the war, other than to avail themselves of, or make their bodies available to, male heroes.

For example, in *The Stone Virgins*, the returning male ex-combatants celebrate victory and independence by drinking and by having sexual liaisons with young women under the trees in the bush: 'Freely and willingly, they [young women] slide beside men as old as their oldest brothers, who have returned from the war with all their senses intact', 'and the women surrender all the freedom in their arms, and nod their heads within that softness of night, and accept those thighs that have climbed the slippery rocks and most severe hills of Gulati.'³⁰⁵

³⁰³ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 61.

³⁰⁴ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 55.

³⁰⁵ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 53, p. 55.

Appreciative nations reward their male heroes it seems, but sexual promiscuity and drunkenness are never attributes associated with a virtuous femininity. So, instead, Vera's female ex-combatants, 'sit on the empty crates, like the men', because 'they have no haste or hurry, no urgent, harrowing hunger to satisfy, no torment they would rather not forget.'³⁰⁶ To them 'independence is respite from war.' Conversely, rather than find them attractive, men are afraid of the women ex-combatants. War by its very nature taints. Despite having arrived from the war with a 'superior claim of their own', and in a position that they can now 'watch sunsets', they also know that 'they are wounded beings with searching eyes looking for simple diversions.'³⁰⁷ The life of female ex-combatants in Kezi is markedly different from their previous life as guerrillas in the bush, even though they remain the 'most substantial evidence of survival there is':

These women, alive and now sitting on the edge of this smooth wall, are the most substantial evidence of survival there is, of courage, of struggle. Alive now and looking right past their own shoulders, as though they are invisible beings, interested in the things beyond, the *secret things* (emphasis mine) that only their minds have known and as close to their own bodies as their more perplexed and curious minds can endure.³⁰⁸

The female ex-combatants retain their camouflage and remain guarded even though the war has ended, thus registering the ongoing fear of sexual abuse at the hands of male ex-combatants:

They do not apologise for their courage and long absence [...] but they understand much better than any of the young women who have spent their entire lives along the Kwakhe River could ever understand about anything or anyone [...]³⁰⁹

But still, they remain silent about their experiences of war:

[...] And they tell them so, not with words, but they let them know fully and well; they let them speculate, let them wonder what those silent lips are about, what those arms, swinging from hip to hip to shoulder are about.³¹⁰

³⁰⁶ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 60, p. 58.

³⁰⁷ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 56, p. 58, p. 59.

³⁰⁸ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 60.

³⁰⁹ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 60.

³¹⁰ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 56.

According to Annie Gagiano, they retain their camouflage beyond the ceasefire ‘because of their inability to assimilate back into civilian life, and because camouflage serves as a masking of their war trauma in the insouciance of their bearing.’³¹¹ Tellingly, they sleep huddled in groups within the Assembly Points, in their full uniforms: ‘the women are said to sleep in their whole attire, in those boots—along with four hundred soldiers living within the barbed-wire fence that surrounds their campground.’³¹² Beneath the steely resolve of their camouflage these women are still afraid, and it is as if they are hiding something much more sinister about which they choose to remain silent. They remain resoundingly quiet about their experience of war, and instead let people ‘speculate’ and wonder what their ‘silent lips’ are about.³¹³ At this point we can re-invoke Vera’s lasting metaphor for women’s silence in *The Stone Virgins*: the figure of the mutilated woman, symbolically juxtaposed with Nonceba throughout the novel. According to Vera:

They have been somewhere dark enough, that when they return, as they have, they carry this dark place in their gaze. They are so impenetrable, the Bulawayo men can only wait for them to say something first, but they meet a dead silence.³¹⁴

At the time that Vera wrote *The Stone Virgins*, there most likely would have been no autobiographies of female ex-combatants who fought during the war of liberation in Zimbabwe. Even to-date, autobiographical narratives of the war written by female ex-combatants remain scarce. This may be due to the ‘political instrumentalization’ of the conflict, which can be seen in the so-called Chimurenga [war] literature in the Zimbabwean context, which by its very masculine nature undermines women’s narrative of war as victims and as fighters. For Vera, one might speculate that the problem would have been two-fold. The first pertains to the articulation of undocumented women’s experience, against the backdrop of female ex-combatants’s refusal to have their experiences of war spilled into the public domain. Ordinary Zimbabweans were no strangers to the

³¹¹ Annie Gagiano, Reading ‘The Stone Virgins’ as Vera’s Study of the Katabolism of War, in *Research in Southern African Literatures*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (Summer, 2007), pp. 64-76. <<https://www.jstor/stable/4618374>> [accessed 12 June 2018].

³¹² Vera, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 130.

³¹³ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 56.

³¹⁴ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 60.

extreme violence of that war as they were the ones caught up in the crossfire between warring factions—they bore witness to it. And the second, the public's resistance to the notion of a heroic womanhood, associated with war violence, particularly in the context of the Zimbabwean war of liberation. Additionally, one might surmise that there was resistance from the female cadres themselves to speak out as they sought to start new lives in the aftermath of war.

The plight of female cadres, as women qua women, was registered by the late Freedom Nyamubaya, one of Zimbabwe's revered guerrilla fighter-poets, in one of her short stories: 'That Special Place'. In 'That Special Place', Nyamubaya interrogates the after-effects of the blatant exposure to extreme brutality in the camps.

Little did I know that only a month after I was released from prison, that same beast Nyathi broke his way into my vagina and escaped with my virginity, though after fifteen minutes' fierce struggle I managed to spit out a piece of his flesh from his thigh. Nyathi had a big black penis whose erection got harder with resistance; little did I know that either. I was fifteen, and I cried as I felt blood run down my legs on my way back to the barracks in moonlight. For years my body reacted to the memory, and it was years before I felt whole again.³¹⁵

In her re-memory of the camps, Nyamubaya's narrator, who is still only a schoolgirl is raped. Nyamubaya's protagonist serves as a synecdoche for young girls who were forced to exchange sex for sanitary towels and soap as the so-called 'warm blankets,' warm being the derogatory and operative term here.³¹⁶ In reality, they were forcibly taken by senior commanders in the middle of the night, as most were too young to give consent. Fay Chung gave an insight into how this sexual exploitation of young women and girls within the camps worked in principle, in relation to Josiah Tongogara, one of the most senior ranking officers within the movement:

Despite his deep love for his family, he, like many of his senior commanders, demanded sexual services of some of the young guerrilla women who had joined the liberation struggle in their thousands. Some of these women chose to attach themselves to the leaders as 'wives', for those fortunate enough to bear children from these temporary unions, or as

³¹⁵ Freedom Nyamubaya, 'That Special Place', in *Writing Still*, edited by Irene Staunton (Harare: Weaver Press, 2003), Kindle Version, Location 3489 of 3882.

³¹⁶ Fay Chung, *Reliving the Second Chimurenga: Memories from Zimbabwe's Liberation Struggle* (Stockholm: Elanders Gotab, 2006).

girlfriends for those who did not. Tongogara and his militarists practised their own code of morality based on traditional feudal attitudes: they opposed both contraception and abortion but felt free to enjoy the sexual pleasures as the reward for their extra-ordinary role in the liberation war.³¹⁷

In any case, consent could never be obtained under duress, since full consent implies freedom of choice, and a full understanding of what one is consenting to. In the camps, women and girls were hungry, and went without food and proper sanitation for days. As a result, they became weak and vulnerable to sexual exploitation.³¹⁸ As such, Nyamubaya's 'That Special Place', acts a site of memory, and of trauma where a reality deemed politically *unspeakable* is given literary voice. As a site of trauma, it has a special hold and resonance in the minds of the victims who survived the camps. Nyamubaya's narrator registers not only the rape itself, but also the futility of war. She also helps us 'sketch out' the interaction between violence and the brutal experience of rape in the camps.³¹⁹

If you were a woman, even if his intention was to sleep with you, he first had to fill you with fear; but if you were a tiny bit more educated than he was, then you had to be thoroughly beaten. This made it easier for him to sexually assault you later [...]³²⁰

In her poem, 'Secrets', Nyamubaya once again pays homage to women's plight in the camps. Her protagonist tries hard to register the brutality of war and its improbable contradictions, through a language that jumps from one theme to another, in order to register the rupture and discontinuities imposed on the mind by the trauma of war: for instance, advantages proffered to women by war, such as becoming commanders and acquiring the ability to speak a multiplicity of

³¹⁷ Chung, *Relieving the Second Chimurenga*, p.125. It is worthy of note that Chung was a high-ranking Chinese-Zimbabwean politician within ZANU (PF). She worked within the Ministry of Education, and together with Dzingai Mtumbuka, was instrumental in spearheading post-independence educational reform. And as head of Information and Media, she formulated ZANU (PF)'s political education programme and remained a powerful figure within the movement. What is even more significant, however, is that her memoirs were published in 2006, 26 years after the war. Together with other senior female figures such as ex-Vice President Joyce Mujuru, they remained silent about their experiences of war violence and rape.

³¹⁸ See *Flame*, dir. Ingrid Sinclair (California Newsreel, 1996), a controversial war film, starring Marian Kunonga and Ulla Mahaka. It was the first film of its kind in post-independence Zimbabwe to pay tribute to women's contribution to the liberation of Zimbabwe. As it alluded to the rape of girl-combatants by senior figures within ZANLA, it was branded an outright lie, pornographic and banned due to pressure from the War Veterans Association.

³¹⁹ See Josephine Nhongo-Simbanegavi, 'For Better for Worse: Women and ZANLA in Zimbabwe's Liberation Struggle', in *The Journal of African Historical Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (2001).

³²⁰ Nyamubaya, 'That Special Place', Kindle Version, Location 3365 of 3882.

languages. But she also evokes the sadness of war, of girls who have been raped and impregnated by male guerrilla commanders; of those who have lost ligaments as a result of the scarcity of bare necessities; and the mindless loss of limbs as a result of war. Touchingly, Nyamubaya's poetic speaker also registers the quotidian: such as the loneliness of the camps, the isolation of women, and the meaninglessness of the violence. There is no one to talk to. The only thing that the narrator can do is to write a fictitious letter to an imaginary mother, deemed too far away from the war zone. But she is the only one who can truly 'listen' to see the violence of war. Those in the camps are far too blinded by the violence and they are immersed in it.

Nyamubaya's literary works act as retelling of the 'tall tales' of war in order to unveil to the rest of the nation the reality of what happened 'out there', in 'That Special Place'. In the poem, the imaginary letter written by a lone woman freedom fighter who has been raped, starved, beaten and humiliated, gestures towards a tightening or minimalizing of the narrative of war, and points us to the camp as the site not only of haunted memory, but a memorial to the grief and loss of life as a result of a violent war:

Amai, I wanted to write to you a letter to say;
I now can speak many languages
Chipo is at Osthisa pregnant
Theresa is now a commander
Anna lost her leg in the battle
They beat me the day I arrived at Tembwe
I was raped by the security commander
Jim lost his big toe from the jigger flies
Many died at Nyadzonya from hunger
I have a new Afrikan name now
You probably know about these things
Last but not least I wanted to tell you
That I love you very much.³²¹

Compared to Vera's dense poetic prose, the simplicity of Nyamubaya's language, and her understated listing of atrocity is striking, as if pared back referentiality and the heights of poetic language are the only two ways of registering the internal dissolution of meaning as a result of violent external

³²¹ Freedom Nyamubaya, 'Secrets', in *On the Road Again: Poems During and After the National Liberation of Zimbabwe*, 3rd ed. (Harare: ZPH, 1998).

stimuli which resist such registration. Nyamubaya's list is in a way misleading. It seems to state the facts baldly but in fact tells us very little. Because, since their arrival in the camps, so many things have happened to the cadres, it is hard to know, truly, what has happened to these women.

At the same time, the silence of female combatants might be read as working for women whose experience of war now determines a new consciousness: the way these women feel, act and respond to their circumstances. In the aftermath of war, and as a result of war, women combatants exist in the realm of a different sensibility—the disjuncture, not just in terms of language, but in terms of women subjectivities that emerge as a result of the trauma of war. The Zimbabwean war of liberation, as Vera elaborates, unveiled and exposed the illusions that shrouded patriarchal assumptions around the whole concept of womanhood. Therefore, Vera's contemplation of the women's condition in *The Stone Virgins*, helps us consider what new, or if any, feminised human values emerge as a result of war. In the latter stages of the war, for example, nationalists recognised that there was a strategic need to adapt and incorporate female labour, in its various formulations, into the so-called reproduction of the militarised revolutionary effort. These sudden changes to the revolutionary principles were a response to the Feminist movement as it gained global significance, particularly in the 1960s and the 1970s, although, in terms of ideology and financial backing, the movement aligned itself to Eastern Block Feminism and was channelled through the Chinese as the main sponsors of the Zimbabwean revolution.³²²

Strikingly, there appears to have been no attempt by Vera to register any forms of local feminism that existed prior to the revolutionary enterprise. Her female combatants wear Western clothes, smoke cigarettes, and generally adopt what could be viewed as Western masculine mannerisms in the context of the novel, although as Gagiano suggests, this can be understood at least partly as a form of self-protection. Perhaps Vera fails to foreground the plight of her women cadres because their circumstances are unique, and because as masculinised

³²² Chung, *Reliving the Second Chimurenga*.

female subjectivities, they exist at the opposite pole of the traumatised women victims of war.

Similarly, the absence of White women in *The Stone Virgins*, as women and as feminists, cannot be overlooked. One has to consider their diametrically opposed situatedness, even in the aftermath of war, to that of local African women, through their contact with, and control over them as servants, labourers and nannies. In other words what did it mean to be a Black woman, to be afflicted by war violence, poverty, and other forms of structural violence within the constraints imposed on Black female subjectivities by the colonialist system?

African women's traditional roles of influence as healers, as mediums, midwives and brewers of ritual beer were undermined by both state and church. African women were either denied access or given limited access to education by both African and European patriarchs. Under colonialism many were raped into submission, were exploited as labourers, and endured subhuman status as slaves as a result of colonial and African patriarchal oppression and capitalist oppression. As women they were exploited and oppressed because of their racial identity by both European males and females. African women were afforded no formal legal protection from being raped by White males. The purity league was formed in 1911 by Whites to prevent illicit intercourse between White males and African females. In the 1930s European females lobbied for the legislation that would prevent African women from being employed as domestic servants because they feared the 'yellow peril'—intercourse between European males and African females.³²³

To highlight the pre-occupations of this particular argument, it is evident that White Rhodesian women played a significant role in the subjugation of Black African women, in their collective investiture in the symbolic violence that was necessary for the repression of Black women.³²⁴ Compared to Black women, White women were not restricted or confined to the Reserves; they were not

³²³ For further discussion, see Cindy Courville, 'Patriarchy as Mode of Production: The Case of Zimbabwe', in *Theorising Black Feminisms: The visionary pragmatism of Black Women*, ed. Stanlie M. James and Abena P.A. Busia (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 31- 43.

³²⁴ See also, Ruth Frankenberg, *The Social Construction of Whiteness: White Women, Race Matters* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

subjected to the atrocities inflicted on Blacks by White men, and were generally not considered as part of the groups who were targets of the genocidal tendencies of the racist Rhodesian regime. Politically and symbolically, White women became emblems of the presumed purity of the White race, and Black women were pitted against that purity as its Otherness.³²⁵

During the colonial period several laws were enacted by the colonial regime which reduced Black women to the status of minors. Their oppression was institutionalised through legislative instruments such as the The Native Adultery Punishment Ordinance (1916) and Native Marriage Ordinance (1917). The legalised and prevailing racism saw to it that Black African women were exploited through a manifold layer of oppressions such as race, class, and gender. Significantly, and more importantly, they were exploited because of their gender and racial identity by both male and female Europeans. For example, they were not accorded legal protection against forced sexual intercourse (rape by White males) when a penalty for a Black man accused of a similar offence against a White woman was death.

According to Cindy Courville, Black women were stereo-typed as lazy, immoral, indolent, savage, leather-headed and depraved, amongst other things. This is at a time when the Feminist movement in Europe and in the developed world was already in its Second Wave. There was a deliberate failure by White women in Rhodesia to recognise and acknowledge Black women's multiple oppressions, at their hands, and to consider their repression and exploitation as their own. As childminders, domestic workers, prostitutes and general workers, Black women were the backbone to the labour that freed White women from domestic work, for them to pursue independent careers outside of the home. As such, under modernity, Black women's oppression became a necessary evil for White women's emancipation.³²⁶

³²⁵ See Hudson, *Triumph or Tragedy?*, pp. 191-210.

³²⁶ For an in-depth analysis, see *African Women and Feminism: Reflecting on the Politics of Sisterhood*, ed. Oyerónke Oyèwùmí (Eritrea: Africa World Press, 2003).

Also, before the war ended, modernity had already betrayed Black African women.³²⁷ The task, therefore, for Black women cadres in the aftermath of war was to recover the memory of a culture, a self-hood and a communal way of life that had been uprooted, undermined, eroded and erased by structural and symbolic violence. In the aftermath of war and in the resulting milieu, there was no mutual recognition, particularly in a social hierarchy based on conflicting and competing claims. Everything remained suspended in the air and an incipient fear ruled.³²⁸

In Africa, as elsewhere in the world, there is a symbolic association of the female body with that of the nation. Quite often, violence is justified when used in defence of the virtue of the female body, even when the woman herself dies in the process:

The attack by the state on the victim's own bodies, [...] by starvation, torture, even to death, seems to fulfil the objective of purifying and cleansing the body of the nation.³²⁹

If the aim of the security apparatus is to negate, silence and invalidate the narratives of atrocities, through the exhumation and relocation of mass graves, the destruction of relevant documentation, disappearances and murder of key witnesses, then Vera's aim is to both fly in the face of these forms of denial and subvert the very notion of enforced truth. She does this by means of the confabulation of the tales of war in order to unveil 'truth assumed possible', to use the phrase of N. Chabani Manganyi.³³⁰ To Vera, truth therefore, is something tentative and provisional. Hence her engaging phrase: 'A woman's place is in the imagination.'³³¹ On another 'real event' at the Zimbabwean International Book Fair in 2005, in a voice that echoes a similar sentiment, Vera alarmed those present with her unexpected revelation:

When I say that I have been raped, abused, been a victim of incest—as the women in my novels have been—I am either met with a shocked silence or shouted down. I write from the margins of my identity.³³²

³²⁷ See Olufemi Taiwo, 'Feminism and Africa: Reflections on the Poverty of Theory', in *African Women and Feminism, Reflecting on the Politics of Sisterhood*, ed. Oyerónke Oyèwùmí (Eritrea: Africa World Press, 2003), pp. 45-66.

³²⁸ Vera, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 58.

³²⁹ Webner, *Tears of the Dead*, p. 160.

³³⁰ See N. Chabani Manganyi, *Apartheid and the Making of a Black Psychologist* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 2015).

³³¹ Primorac, 'The Place of the Woman', in *Emerging Perspectives*, pp. 375-389.

³³² Ranger, 'History has its ceiling', *Sign and Taboo*, pp. 204-205.

Vera's declaration complicates our reading and understanding of *The Stone Virgins*. It gestures us towards the double-bind of the existence of rape: part of Vera's aesthetic is using her own body as a vehicle for expressing a shared experience. By making her experience of rape contemporaneous, the rape is mediated through three acts of reading. The first, as a fictionalised account, and the second as a historical event, and the third as part of a collective experience of rape amongst Zimbabwean women.

Gendering violence in *The Stone Virgins*

What kind of instrument has he used to cut Thenjiwe's head off like that? The head is now dangling on Thenjiwe's breast, separated.³³³

In *The Stone Virgins*, we encounter such extra-ordinary violence, especially gendered violence. I say gendered because of the predominantly male perpetrators of the violence against female victims, and the nature of the examples that I will go on to discuss that pertain to women particularly in *The Stone Virgins*. In the now famous murder scene, Nonceba walks in on Sibaso, the dissident, who is about to decapitate her sister Thenjiwe. Nonceba is unable to register what is before her, because Sibaso's movements are so overwhelmingly fast, and because of the intimacy of the bodies. The gendered nature of the violence and the issue of voice makes it difficult at times to see what is going on. Not just in terms of the numerous movements, but the form of voice and language too: who tells the story, in what language, and how Vera affords her characters voice without the interference of the authorial intention.

To do so, Vera utilises the choreography of dance to depict a gruesome murder. She throws both object and subject of violence into the fray, hence the entanglement of bodies in the 'choreography of violence' in the murder scene.³³⁴ It is as if there is a practised sequence of moves, between Thenjiwe and Sibaso, in which they both anticipate the other's next move. Each motion betrays something intimate about the other; as if there is an organic unity, of two bodies in absolute

³³³ Vera, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 74

³³⁴ Bryce, 'Interview with Vera', in *Sign and Taboo*, p. 224

harmony: 'He is absorbing Thenjiwe's motion into his body, existing where Thenjiwe was, moving into the spaces she has occupied.'³³⁵ In the scene, Vera makes it look as though the decapitation is the inevitable outcome of a dance. What is shocking is that the decapitation is unforeseeable within this sequence of moves. In relation to violence against women, the scene sharply focuses the question of how to give voice to this experience.

In the murder and rape of Thenjiwe, and the rape and mutilation of Nonceba, we have two scenes. The first frames the broader outlines of the event itself and sets the stage for the happening:

The creases down his own thick neck are covered with sweat. Now she must put her fingers in his. She is already escaping while his hands are approaching hers. Their fingers touch like a greeting. They touch and hold. He smiles, though not at her, needing to be touched. The sun is hot. The flies are here, turning the sun dark. I am alive, on this knee. I am waiting. I am alive. She sees a silver bucket approaching from the light blue sky, carried over the head, her sister's arm holding it up along one side and her fingers curling over the rim of the bucket brimming with water; then the arm drops and the bucket approaches, steady, steady in that teasing blue. Now she can see the bucket leaning over, filled with water, the tiniest drops breaking like a spray, spilling; then the bucket crushes its contents to the ground; water breaks like a stone.³³⁶

The second scene stages the messiness of the event through all the elements that make it ghastly: decapitation, blood, rape, and excessive wounding: 'The head is now dangling on Thenjiwe's breast, separated.' The whole scene denotes stagnation: everything stops—except for the 'blood on the ground. Death.'³³⁷ However, it is the movement within the scene itself and in Vera's text, the agitation in the language, which disturbs the boundary of what can and cannot be registered about the event: the materiality of the violence itself:

Everything is still. Nonceba is not breathing. The body is his, pulse and motion. He pulls the arms back, only the arms, and this brings the chest forward, the breasts outward, pushing against the thin cotton cloth of blood. The blood ripples over the breasts.³³⁸

³³⁵ Vera, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 73.

³³⁶ —, *The Stone Virgins*, pp. 72–73.

³³⁷ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 74, p. 72.

³³⁸ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 75.

As the reader who enters the frame, there is a necessity to come back out and re-enter the stillness of each frame and try to deduce exactly what it is that is being registered in the imagery invoked by Vera, with an implicit understanding that, for all intents and purposes, Vera's framing of the violence might contain something else unexpected. As Judith Butler suggests: the frame as a method of containment is always throwing something away, always keeping something out.³³⁹ In tandem with Nonceba, it is imperative that we follow Sibaso's hand, which is what gives the violence its prominent masculine gestures:

He carries the body spread on his back, an arm limp on each shoulder, his motion forceful, true with blood. He is stepping sideways, and back, forward and sideways. On his back, the body presses down along his spine. He turns steadily, with the movements of a hunter who kills not because he is hungry, but because his stomach is full, and therefore he can hunt with grace. He stops. He abandons the body right there where he has been standing, no longer nursing the body, removing this burden from his shoulder instead, throwing it off like a stale thought. The body is no longer his. The body is hers.³⁴⁰

In the end, the reader's bearings, like those of Vera's victims, falter because there is far too much to take in. The reader must contend not only with violence within the text, but that of the text itself. But, the writing exemplifies, violence cannot be contained, whether within the text or in real life.

In *The Stone Virgins*, it is Nonceba, even though extremely brutalised and violated herself, who holds Thenjiwe's [her own sister's] still warm body, after decapitation:

Alone afterward she turns Thenjiwe's body over and pulls the blouse down to cover the wet breast. Wordless. She slides her fingers under the red cloth. Her touch is warm and longs for life, this lingering heat in the flesh, this threshold. Wordless.³⁴¹

What can be easily overlooked here, apart from the tremendous violence evoked by the scene, is that Nonceba is still a child, barely out of school, when she is raped, mutilated, and then witnesses her own sister's decapitation.

³³⁹ Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (New York: Verso, 2009).

³⁴⁰ Vera, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 76

³⁴¹ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p.79.

However, to Nonceba, in the context of the violent encounter nothing else matters, except survival itself:

‘I am live: I will bury my sister with my own hands. I will live. I will crawl.’³⁴²

In emulating trauma, Nonceba’s language reverts to the present. The sentences are short and precise. Trauma victims, it is said, struggle with space-time orientation, their precise location and placement in the order of things. Despite the suffering and the excruciating pain experienced by Nonceba’s character, there is a way in which her survival instinct overrides everything. It is as if she knows and understands that there will be no help, much like victims of rape elsewhere. It is remarkable that there is no scream, no intention to alert. All Nonceba wants to know is where she is, and that she is alive. Her ‘silent waiting’ foregrounds the uncertainty that often prevails when one is held captive—to never know one’s fate and to remain unsure whether or not one would ‘survive the ambush’—Vera’s own phrase.³⁴³ In the midst of the overwhelming violence, Nonceba poses to take note of the quotidian, of the mundane: ‘the ordinary man, wearing an ordinary blue shirt’.³⁴⁴ She expresses this compulsion to recall, to remember and to memorise even the colour of his trousers, his shirt, his feet, and even his shoelaces, and finally, the colour of the sky:

Nonceba keeps her eyes up, in that bluest sky, while her body sinks willingly to the ground and absorbs the final agony like water into the earth. Her body falls the same way sounds disappears. The way it moves away from one without shifting boulders the way water does, without disturbing even the most weightless object, not the slightest feather, without changing the pattern of stars.³⁴⁵

The silent fall and the weightlessness register not only Nonceba’s total surrender to her fate, but also the feeling of an absolute abandonment. Now, all she can do, like most of Vera’s women, is endure, and let all the pain flow through her body. In this regard, the flow of water symbolises an in-built shock absorbance system; and, the unshifting boulder, Nonceba’s inner resilience,

³⁴² —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 111.

³⁴³ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 69.

³⁴⁴ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 69, p. 72.

³⁴⁵ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 74.

strength and courage.³⁴⁶ The bluest sky and the pattern of stars become the only source of beauty; Vera's anti-dote to the crudity of the violence. As such, there is movement within Vera's text in which the text generates another set of images, thereby producing a 'filmic possibility'—J.M. Coetzee's phrase, in which Vera's method cannot regulate its own interpretation.³⁴⁷ A fleeting image is produced in the reader's mind which frames and un-frames each experience of the violent scene anew, necessitating a constant and ongoing engagement with her work.

In the aftermath, the suffocating violence follows Nonceba all the way to the hospital. In the hospital room, nothing else comes to prominence except Nonceba's helplessness. Her whole head in wrapped up in bandages, and it seems that the only aperture left open for her to breathe through is the nose:

A bandage goes round Nonceba's head, round and round and round. A hand is moving over her eyes, a very careful and small hand. 'Is it too tight,' the voice says. It is not a question. It is only a statement.³⁴⁸

In the scene, Vera invokes the scene in Anthony Mingella's film, *The English Patient*. Like Mingella's Count László de Almásy, because of his extensive burns, Vera's Nonceba is an invisible being who is forced into our field of vision by what she cannot do. Like the Count's character in the film, she inhabits a damaged solitude, and in the aftermath of war, her history is revealed in vivid flashes as an indictment of a virulent nationalism:

I want to speak. I want to tell them everything I have seen. The water falling from the bucket that Thenjiwe was carrying. The sliding mud, red with blood. The man, Sibaso. Perhaps he lied about his name. I do not know. I want to describe him, each word he spoke, each strand of hair, his violent contempt of the living. I want to speak [...] I cannot feel my lips moving, or find the shape of my words; a shape to match my words. My mind struggles till I am breathless and a dark pain penetrates the body, and spasms shake me to the root.³⁴⁹

³⁴⁶ This is an indirect invocation of the symbolism of woman as rock, which derives from a Zulu proverb, the rallying war-cry for women's liberation particularly in Zimbabwe and South Africa: *Wathinta umfazi, wathinta imbokodo*—when you strike a woman, you strike a rock. It was first utilised, politically, to coordinate the Black women's response to imposition of the Pass system to include women by the Apartheid regime in 1956. See Lebohlang Nthongoa, "Women of Wonder, 'Wathint' abafazi wathint' imbokodo': August 1956", in *The Sunday Times* ><https://www.timeslive.co.za/sunday-times/lifestyle/2020-08-09-wathint-abafazi-wathint-imbokodo-august-9-1956>.> [accessed 17 March 2021].

³⁴⁷ J.M. Coetzee, *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988).

³⁴⁸ Vera, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 90.

³⁴⁹ —, *The Stone Virgins*, 114.

In both scenes there is no movement except that of the tongue due to the restrictions imposed on the body by the excessive bandages. Through this violent constriction, Vera evokes the nightmare of entrapment in one's own body through a visual aesthetic that demands our intervention in the text. What the text does successfully, if anything else, is to provoke that sense of helplessness that none of us could ever entertain unless we were faced by the same predicament. The impossibility of living inside this experience is also registered by the way the writing moves between first- and third-person narration as if staging the question as to whether this reality is something that can be subjectively experienced or assumed by the person living through it:

Nonceba can only nod her head. She can feel the cloth pressing down, the smell of a medicated ointment. Her mouth is slightly open under the cloth. Her tongue is moving in her mouth. She is thirsty; her throat is burning. She moves her tongue over and over; searching for saliva. She wants to reach the bandage with her tongue. To loosen it. To breathe through her mouth, not her nose. She is hazy, befuddled, and dazed from medication.³⁵⁰

In the above paragraph, it is as if Nonceba cannot breathe, and it appears as though something invisible but forceful is holding her down. There is a haunting invoked by the scene of a ghostly presence that cannot be fully apprehended, of something immovable that constrains Nonceba and even prevents her salivary glands from producing saliva to alleviate her thirst. The desperation evoked by the text provokes an emotive response in the reader, and an uneasiness that accompanies the reading, notwithstanding an implicit understanding that one is reading a work of fiction. There is a way in which Vera's language restrains Nonceba and somehow dramatises her desperation through the invocation of the tongue that not only searches for saliva—a natural substance that should be in the mouth—but attempts to loosen the bandage so she can breathe. Both, the search for saliva outside of the mouth, and of the tongue that loosens the bandage are mere impossibilities. While pondering on this impossibility, it then suddenly occurs to the reader that Nonceba's hands are not mentioned in the scene—because in reality all Nonceba has to do is loosen the bandage with her hand.

³⁵⁰ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 90.

However, further down the passage, Vera brings the arms back into the frame:

‘Nothing can be the same. Her own arms have changed, her body.’³⁵¹

The focus all along has been the tongue. The phantomic arm can be read as a literal or artistic device by Vera to bring into prominence the issue of voice. By way of elaboration, on the same page, and in the next paragraph, Vera returns the reader to the top of the page, by reconfiguring the scene and by making the language slightly less oblique, more of a commentary on itself:

Now she is in an abysmal place, inert, held down. She is mute. A voice dying. Unable to shape words into language, to breathe freely. She will have to find the sources of sound in her, a pure timeless sound. Then she will open her mouth and let the sound free. Words will follow, then language. She will restore her mind, healing its segments, in sound.³⁵²

The above paragraph points us to Nonceba’s muteness, her lack of voice as a result of disfigurement, and the silencing power of trauma. Her silence is heightened by the absence of other voices around her. The absence of the sound of voices apart from her own voice is unnerving. We could read this with reference to Gabriele Schwab’s observation: that what victims of trauma need in abundance, is an attentive listening. In the hospital scene we are given Nonceba in isolation. And through this silencing isolation, Nonceba undergoes a state of transformation: whoever she was, whatever was there in her before, is no longer obtainable:

She has a desperate feeling that everything has changed, gone, not to be recovered. Nothing can be the same [...] The things she remembers have changed: the nature and measure of pain, of joy.³⁵³

Vera peels back the layers of skin covering Nonceba’s nerves and exposes the visceral, the minutiae of life’s basic functions, the taken-for-granted actions that all somehow become the focal point in a crisis: breathing, temples beating. Thought becomes mottled and imprecise, at the same time as being almost abstract (‘pain,’ ‘joy’). Through this imprecision, Vera delivers her most elucidating understanding of trauma: ‘He can see the shape of her disbelief. He owns her like a memory.’³⁵⁴ The power of the sentence lies in the proximity of

³⁵¹ Vera, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 90.

³⁵² —, *The Stone Virgins*, pp. 90-91.

³⁵³ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 90.

³⁵⁴ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 71

two specific words to each other: the juxtaposition of ‘memory’ and ‘ownership’. If the logical extension of the war is the debasement of the human, then it is possible for one human to own another and their memory through the process of brutalisation. Like most victims of trauma, Nonceba is forever beholden to the man who rapes and mutilates her:

He is the type of man to own the intangible—hallucinations, fragrances, death. So, although she breathes, deeply it is with a stillness that he owns, with a hope that he has banished.³⁵⁵

In reality extra-ordinary violence against women globally still exists. In the Zimbabwean context, such violence manifests itself as the ‘new’ political violence. On a visit to a local hospital, Peter Godwin had the occasion to speak to a victim of this new violence, which can be read in comparison to the hospital scene in Vera’s novel.

In bed IS-1 is Grace Gambadza from Mudzi. She is twenty-nine. She has sceptic haematoma on her back and buttocks and fractured arms. DW, says the chart—Defense Wounds. She has a tiny baby that is still breast-feeding. The nurse brings her in, in a bundle wrapped in a white hospital sheet, and tries to hold her to Grace’s breast to feed. With two broken arms, Grace cannot hold her own baby to her own breast. It is one of the saddest things I have ever seen. Grace is weeping silently, her broken un-set arms lying uselessly by her side [...]³⁵⁶

This encounter so moves Godwin that he is unsure of his place and his role in this whole scene: ‘I feel hopeless, frustrated and angry. I am not sure what I can do to help. My role is unclear to me.’³⁵⁷ His encounter and confrontation is not only with the most senseless violence, but also with the inadequacy of language to describe what he is witnessing. It is said that violent trauma, particularly the trauma of war, provokes an overwhelming sense of helplessness. Vera captures and articulates the same experience, seemingly without losing focus of the immensity of the act of violence itself. For example, the way in which Vera unveils the murder scene involving the two Gumedede sisters, Nonceba and Thenjiwe:

³⁵⁵ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 71.

³⁵⁶ Godwin, *The Fear*, p.137.

³⁵⁷ —, *The Fear*, p.137.

His head is behind Thenjiwe, where Thenjiwe was before, floating in her body; he is inside her body. He is floating like lightning. Thenjiwe's body remains upright while this man's head emerges behind hers, inside it, replacing each of her moments into the spaces she has occupied. Thenjiwe vanishes and he is affixed in her place, before Nonceba's eyes, sudden and unmistakeable as a storm. The moment is his. Irrevocable. His own.³⁵⁸

The revelation of the violence is not voyeuristic but allows the omniscient narrator to walk us through and re-live the fictitious, and although historically grounded, moments with a significant resonance to the present. There is a darkness that hovers above and penetrates the text. If Vera's language is abstruse, meaning it can be impenetrable and esoteric, it is because the violent imagery evoked through the landscape seems almost to bypass language, even her own, and exposes something harrowing about the way violence creates imagery that is as baffling as it silences:

Her eyes unseeing. Nothing between her and the horizon. Empty air. The rocks unseen. There are no words to describe their absence of form, or shape. They have ceased to be. There are no words. Nothing. There are no words to describe this lack.³⁵⁹

In the above quote there is a mesmerising sequence of events. We are returned to the same theme, time and time again; and it is through the echo of 'no words', 'nothing', 'the absence of form' and finally, everything 'ceases to be'. This takes us back to Vera's earlier question: 'Is there a language in the ending of mind?'³⁶⁰ This emptiness, this lack of language, and hopelessness, foregrounds the inadequacy of language that emerges after an encounter with trauma and the attempt at giving shape to that experience. At the same time, it seems that language cannot fully give adequate expression to such violent experiences, because it virtually ceases to be. In other words, there is simply a void, a resounding fatelessness:

Though I am awake, I am unconscious of the frenzied passage of time. There is a storm in my head. I reach the end of an eternal darkness. When I think of Sibaso, I feel a revulsion so deep that my body heaves forward and Sihle whispers that I should keep still. She holds my body down. I

³⁵⁸ Vera, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 73.

³⁵⁹ Krog, *Country of My Skull*, p. 139.

³⁶⁰ Vera, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 91.

sink into the comfort of her voice, to be at the other end of this blank horror and be alive [...] ³⁶¹

As Nonceba collapses into a faint, she is right on the edge of life and death, shrouded within an eternal darkness, that carries her away from what she can see, feel, hear and think. Here again the text moves into third person narration as if mimicking the fact that the experience is too much for her to bear. As, 'unconscious as she is of the frenzied passage of time', her body still retches, with revulsion, at Sibaso's continual presence. It still maintains a vigil, an internal attentiveness to the persistence of trauma, and of revulsion as its only defence. It is through this darkness, this incomprehensible 'blank horror', that Vera registers not only the futility of this war, but also its devastating, empty promise.

However, in my reading of *The Stone Virgins*, I do not perceive of the darkness of Vera's narrative style as intended to obscure the prevailing reality, as if it were destroyed. I find, instead, that it is when fragments of light are allowed through the darkness that we witness the power of another scene, incorporated as it were within the descriptions of landscape, of the quotidian, and of the fragmentary nature of the everyday. The power of another scene alludes to the localism of Vera's language, and in which everything, including the grass and fauna is imbued with meaning. If, to read *The Stone Virgins*, like Sibaso, is to 'take a voyage and venture into the dark, tragic places, unlit sites, dark and grim', then the perforations on his mind, like a torn net, symbolise the way in which light filters through Vera's narrative. ³⁶² The withdrawal of Vera's characters, which can be sudden and compulsive, back into an inaccessible interiority, engages the reader with the characters' inner thoughts, though the outcome is often dialogic, in the sense that a dialogue ensues between reader and text. These shifts and the complexity of form means that we are led down a labyrinth of suspended meaning. As we participate in the adventure, in the same way as Vera's characters, we are drawn into the search for meaning that Vera imposes on us. In addition, one is almost overwhelmed by the need to know. As Vera expresses it, as readers we are presented with a conundrum: 'How did a man slice off a woman's head

³⁶¹ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 116.

³⁶² —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 82.

while a bucket of water was carried about it? How did a man slice a woman's throat and survive?'³⁶³ As we will see in Chapter Five, this is a question of masculinities and whether in the context of Zimbabwe, the male agents of violence could in fact survive.

This choreographic movement from material objects to sensation and back again is a useful tool in an inassimilable reality. The juxtaposition of objects and of words that do not easily cohere creates a montage of imagery whose constitutive elements are not just thrown in together for effect but convey meaning through its grotesquery. Read closely, there is a fundamental question expressed in the above quote: 'how did a man slice a woman's throat and survive?' There is an inbuilt ambiguity to Vera's question, as we are not told 'whose survival' she's talking about. Assuming that Thenjiwe is dead from the decapitation, why does it matter to Vera whether the man survives? Perhaps that is the crucial point that forces readers to contemplate what kind of human-being survives both the use of extreme violence and the brutality of the encounter itself. In other words, what is the excess that is left of such an individual? Also, what kind of survival is Vera talking about except the sheer, agonising memory of the event?

She sees two shapes out of every object—a dark part of the shadow and a lighter part. Her world is superimposed.³⁶⁴

Meg Samuelson argues that the violence that Vera is writing about, like her protagonists, has to be re-membered, reconstituted and revised.³⁶⁵ Vera's narrative in *The Stone Virgins*, can then be seen as an attempt to reconstruct and revise moments of trauma out of fragmented pieces of memory:

Then he holds the dead body up, this stranger, clutching that decapitated death like a rainbow. He holds Thenjiwe up. Then he seems to hold Nonceba's body up, too, for it is impossible for her to continue standing, for her own mind to survive by its own direction.³⁶⁶

³⁶³ —, *The Stone Virgins*, pp. 72-73.

³⁶⁴ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 90.

³⁶⁵ Meg Samuelson, 'Re-membering the body: rape and recovery in *Without a Name* and *Under the Tongue*', in *Sign and Taboo: Perspectives on the Poetic Fiction of Yvonne Vera*, ed. Mandi Taruvinga and Robert Muponde (Harare: Weaver Press, 2002), p. 93-100.

³⁶⁶ Vera, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 74.

Through Vera's method, we move in and out of the victim's experience - we become privy to the privileged information about women's suffering, and we are immersed in anticipation, only to be reawakened by the victim on the 'edge of sudden and fine instrument'.³⁶⁷ The symbolism of the fine instrument functions at three levels. First, there is Sibaso, the dissident as the instrument of death. Like *Gukurahundi* soldiers, he is an instrument of war created by the state, and now let loose to terrorise citizens. The scene also evokes the mechanism of power dynamics sketched out throughout *The Stone Virgins*. There is an indirect reference, in Vera's text, to the Foucauldian disciplinary mechanism as to how these men become instruments of violence and how they acquire the obedience of their victims—Vera's own question within the narrative: 'What did it take for a man to possess that sort of obedience?'³⁶⁸ Second, there is symbol of the penis as an instrument of war, in the current discourse of war rape, with rape in conflict zones, now seen as a strategic weapon of war—what has been termed the Penis and AK47 war strategy.³⁶⁹ The third symbolism is that of the phallic notion of the fine instrument, which is quickly erased by the blade, and soon followed by silence which often precedes a traumatic event—and then the first stroke, followed by the 'fall' and 'flesh' which become trajectories of violence itself:

The body falls forward and he stumbles and then pulls the body back; bone-bright with flashes, neck-bone pure, like a streak of light the bone vanishes into the stream of the blood oozing out, the knees buckle forward, and the body twirls on its heels, then dragging sideways—a soft ankle held to the ground. He flips the body to his left and the legs turn their weight, and death, over an ankle held soft and dead to the ground.³⁷⁰

In this collage of imagery, nothing sits still. It is difficult to keep up with the movement, location and direction of the blade that decapitates Thenjiwe and mutilates Nonceba. Although Nonceba is physically present throughout, it is hard to tell what she sees, or feels, because the kaleidoscopic quality of Vera's prose dramatises the movement and instability of space, perception and sensibilities. There is a timed delay before the final blow, and as readers, we are taken in by the

³⁶⁷ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 111.

³⁶⁸ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 162.

³⁶⁹ See Baaz and Stern, *Sexual Violence as a Weapon of War*.

³⁷⁰ Vera, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 75.

narration until it occurs right in front of our eyes that this is a murder that we are witnessing with all its complexities. This Verasque technique renders *The Stone Virgins*, interactive, and evokes a participatory quality to her writing.³⁷¹ Her narrative paces back and forth as if agitated. This agitation is pre-emptive, and it foregrounds the decapitation before it happens. Therefore, together with Nonceba, we vacillate between life and death, until there are ‘bone-bright flashes, like a streak of light before the bone vanishes into the stream of blood oozing out’.³⁷²

For those familiar with animal slaughter, this is a sequence of events before the blade servers the animal’s vocal cords. In the murder and rape scene, Vera plays out the power struggle between female and male bodies. The sexual act is sublimated into a violent act whose libidinal aim is absolute power over the victim:

Before this she knew how to hold a thought in her mind. Now she is vanquished. She makes no claim to living, to her own survival. Now she is afraid to look away from red flowers outside the window; she is grateful for their presence, a shape, a form for her mind to absorb, to memorise. An object distinct for her senses, with colour and no sound [...] Everything has changed, and changed her way of seeing, of inhabiting her own body, of being alive.³⁷³

Trauma, Language and Violence in Zimbabwe.

Because of its violent and traumatic past, in Zimbabwe there is scarcity of an [innocent] language that has no political implications. The conflict in the language, or, rather in the narratives of the past, is that there are discordances between the different nationalities of groups that see themselves as ethnically distinct, all conflicted by strategic racism. The politicised and partisan language of each enclave is resistant to the pull of democracy. There are multi-vocal oppositions, or political scripts that cast doubt over the assumed and unquestionable legitimacy of one political voice over all the others.³⁷⁴

³⁷¹ See Christina Davis, ‘An interview with Toni Morris’, in *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, ed. Danielle Taylor-Guthrie (Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 1994), p. 231.

³⁷² Vera, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 75.

³⁷³ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 91.

³⁷⁴ See David Coltart, *The Struggle Continues: 50 Years of Tyranny in Zimbabwe* (Johannesburg: Jacana Media Ltd, 2016).

The difficulty then, for both language and the writer in the Zimbabwean context is to achieve a unity of purpose, and to ameliorate the conflict between zones, because the disparate fragments of Zimbabwean identity aided by war polarisation, extreme right-wing Rhodesian ideology, and post-independence quasi-nationalism have seen to it that there is no intelligible and reliable language anymore. With the lack of reassurance, comes a resounding silence. The outcome of this constant fear of retribution, and of a repressed violence, as a result of an unresolved past, is silence.

Anna Forcinito's *Testimonial Narratives in the Argentine Post-Dictatorship: Survivors, Witnesses, and the Reconstruction of the Past*, deals mainly with the former detainees of the Argentine dictatorship, during which ordinary Argentinians were arbitrarily detained, and sent to secretive locations for torture, some of whom were never found.³⁷⁵ According to Forticino, the labour of memory proved crucial in the Argentinian context after the collapse of the dictatorship, in identifying oppressors, high-lighting methods of torture, and identifying the locations of the detention camps in order to locate the remains of the disappeared, and to establish their conditions of detention. It was also crucial to retrieve any documentation that might shed some light as to who was there, the duration of their stay, and the identities of the perpetrators of violence. In Zimbabwe any trail of any such paperwork has all but since vanished:

Reliable statistics [of human rights abuses] are extremely difficult to come by in Zimbabwe. It is often all but impossible to verify reports of army abuses. Reports one hears in Harare about atrocities committed by dissidents often sound indistinguishable from the reports one hears in Bulawayo about atrocities committed by security forces; neither side acknowledges any legitimacy in the other's version of events.³⁷⁶

Memory work as Forticino highlights, is always hampered by the attempt to marginalise some of the memories because of the context and content of those memories, and their subsequent interpretation. She further argues that it is possible that the marginalisation of certain memories is a direct refutation of those

³⁷⁵ Anna Forcinito, 'Testimonial Narratives in the Argentine Post-Dictatorship: Survivors, Witnesses, and the Reconstruction of the Past', in *Post-Authoritarian Cultures: Spain and Latin America's Southern Cone*, ed. Luis Martín-Estudillo and Roberto Ampuero (Tennessee: Vanderbilt University Press, 2008).

³⁷⁶ Gukurahundi, p. 12.

memories in an attempt to accord specific failures and responsibilities to specific communities. More importantly, Forticino's work validates Elinor Sisulu's argument, with reference to Zimbabwe, that violent atrocities and disappearances do not happen in a vacuum, seemingly without witness:

It happened to everyone. There were no ears prepared to listen, no one wanted to know, they could not bear it. They did not want to feel responsible for what was going on.³⁷⁷

Forticino helps us interrogate the strategic alliance between silence and wilful blindness that allows atrocities to happen seemingly in a vacuum. The same could be said about the genocide in Zimbabwe, and the on-going political violence. Silence in war is a double bind; it protects as it betrays. According to the victims of the *Gukurahundi* atrocities, 'How could one avoid betraying others to the enemy, when betrayal meant protecting oneself and one's immediate kin?'³⁷⁸

In her introduction to *Gukurahundi in Zimbabwe: A Report on the Disturbances in Matabeleland and the Midlands, 1980-1988*, Elinor Sisulu made the following confession:

As I read this report, I felt a deep sense of shame about my own silence. There are many in Zimbabwe who would give the excuse that they did not know what was happening and indeed many of them would be speaking the truth [...] But those of us who had family in Matabeleland had no excuse. Right from the start of the 5 Brigade campaign, news filtered out through family and community networks that there was something horrendous going on. When I visited my grand parents' home on the outskirts of Bulawayo, I recall the lowering of voices when there was discussion about relatives who had been forced to flee the terror in the rural areas, arriving in the city with a little more than the clothes on their backs. We did what we could for them and shut our mouths. What about the rest of us who lived through those years and continued as if nothing was happening. Are we not equally responsible for the wounds of silence, both while the horrific events of *Gukurahundi* were unfolding, and in their aftermath? Even today, some of continue to be silent.³⁷⁹

Sisulu's use of the metaphor 'of the wound of silence' returns us to *The Stone Virgins* in the gruesome wounding of Nonceba. Particularly, the significance of the mouth as the target of the wounding: 'He cut smoothly and quickly. Each

³⁷⁷ Forticino, 'Testimonial Narratives', p. 78

³⁷⁸ Webner, *Tears of the Dead*, p.172.

³⁷⁹ *Gukurahundi*, p. xiv.

part memorised; my dark blood, my voice vanishing. My mouth a wound.’³⁸⁰ Nonceba’s precise language and short sentences mimic an attempt to recall only the essential detail that might help identify her tormentor. In both the wounding and silencing of Nonceba, Vera foregrounds the task placed upon the victims of the violent trauma to recall every detail, and minutiae of their victimisation, to serve at once personal memory, and the demands of the juridical process—if there is any. What Forticino calls, ‘the juridical role of the witness which is still linked to the notion of truth and justice and to the question of Human Rights.’ As such, Nonceba’s ‘only act of courage, given the circumstances, is to identify his [Sibaso’s] arms.’³⁸¹

According to Forticino, such actions as Nonceba’s, aim to ‘put evidence into the complex mechanisms of memory and forgetting, fiction and truth, and [their] overlapping zones’.³⁸² *The Stone Virgins* is testimony to the fact that memory is not just one, but a set of collections attached to often-times irreconcilable meanings, conditioned by, but also conditioning, the interpretations available in the present. As such, Webner states:

Even more revealing is the fact that certain ordeals remained largely outside the personal discourse in which family members recreated their experience as shared memory. The unspoken and, after the atrocities of the post-independence war, the unspeakable, were the ordeals of family members as guerrillas.³⁸³

Tellingly, such narratives remain outside of the fold of the Zimbabwean historiography. The instruments of violence operate with impunity still, and ordinary Zimbabweans continue to live in what Peter Godwin has aptly named the *Fear*. To take his analysis further, according to Godwin, the Zimbabwe security apparatus has developed a smart genocide. Zimbabweans call it politicide: the silencing of all political opposition through extreme violence, in which murder and rape are committed on an industrial scale, on a ‘catch-and-release basis’—Godwin own phrase. The catch-and-release method achieves two things: First, it manufactures and perpetuates fear, while immobilising support for the opposition.

³⁸⁰ Vera, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 108.

³⁸¹ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 77.

³⁸² Forticino, *Testimonial Narratives*, p. 83.

³⁸³ Webner, *Tears of the Dead*, p. 157.

Second, it distances dead bodies, consequently mass murder, from state-sponsored violence:

When those who survive, terribly injured, limp home or are carried or pushed in wheelbarrows, or the back of pick-up trucks, they act like human bill-boards, advertising the consequences of opposition to the tyranny, bearing their stigmata. And in their home and communities, their return causes a ripple of anxiety to spread. The people have given this type of violence and suffering its own name, which I hear for the first time tonight. They are calling it *Chidudu*. It means, simply, 'The Fear.'³⁸⁴

In his book, *Witnesses: Beckett, Dante, Levi and the Foundations of Responsibility*, Robert Harvey meditates on the act of witnessing, and he makes a profound observation: that witness testimony implicates all of us in the original act of violence. This is because everything that is hidden, regarding our own propensity for violence, is brought to light by witness testimony, despite 'attempts by professional representatives of the culpable to try and confound witnesses, or stifle them in the hopes that the deeds of their clients will remain unverified, unprosecuted, unpunished':

Witnesses who are survivors of the most egregious of crimes are revered as repositories whose memory might build ramparts against future genocides and ethnogenocides. Even the witnesses of singular killings stand out in our judgement. These apparently exceptional beings enter the ranks of the righteous among us because they alone have seen or heard or smelled or touched the event-ness of the crime meant to destroy them as well. They are honoured as much as those forever silenced because they have been in the same criminal harm's way yet can tell something of it. Somehow, they have eluded the ultimate consequence of victimhood.³⁸⁵

³⁸⁴ Godwin, *The Fear*, p. 109.

³⁸⁵ Harvey, *Witnesses*, p. 1

Chapter Four

Unencumbered Imagining(s): Landscape as Metaphor and the Body in *The Stone Virgins*

Kezi is a place gasping for survival—war, drought, deaths, and betrayals: a habit as desolate as this is longing for the miraculous.³⁸⁶

In *The Stone Virgins*, Vera is pre-occupied with the idea of space, a way of re-imagining space that is at odds with the official representation of that space. Perhaps her pre-occupation with space derives from what Tanya Primorac describes as the Rhodesian chronotope: the physical as well as the social and discursive dimension of space, or put simply, space as a social construct.³⁸⁷ Primorac problematises the idea of, and uses of space, in the Rhodesian imaginary. Her view is that there have always been conflicting uses of space in which spatial formations or layers of practice, representations of space, and representational spaces clash[ed] to produce what she calls an ‘unequal and conflicting duality’ achieved through racial segregation and racist social practices. Which is to say that there are racialised [and gendered] modes of apprehending space, both as landscape, and as acts of imagination, in order to influence what happens in those spaces, and the forms of interaction which they allowed or restricted. As Vera says, ‘the connection to the land for women is that of the disturbance, something negative.’³⁸⁸

Vera’s use of landscape, as a physical space and as a mental space, foregrounds the vicissitudes of her characters, and how the arbitrary limitations imposed on the landscape, such as the curfew imposed on residents in Kezi, impacts not only on their wellbeing, but also disrupts communal ties: what happens on specific spaces and at specific junctures is largely determined by the politics of the land. Such a mode of thinking about space persuades us to consider how the landscape is reconstructed to reflect material inequalities. And how the

³⁸⁶ Vera, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 128.

³⁸⁷ Ranka Primorac, *The Place of Tears: The Novel and Politics in Modern Zimbabwe* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2006).

³⁸⁸ ———, ‘The Place of the Woman’, in *Emerging Perspectives*, p. 379.

transgression of boundaries, set by the politics of exclusion, by those affected by it signals us towards the body once more.

In *The Stone Virgins*, women are the site of this transgression; and by implication, women cannot escape their own violation as they are the terrain on which the violation occurs. White Rhodesian supremacy dictated bodily movements across spatio-temporal dimensions. If the impositions of ideology on the land, restricted not only bodily movements, but also what could be imagined, Vera's narrative offers an alterity of vision that exceeds these ideological constraints of physical spaces, while also conveying their most damaging impact on women's bodies. These are spaces that have multiple layers of meaning, and a relationship—real or imagined—with other spaces: private, communal, regulated, and political spaces. Land is also invested with memory: how one remembers the past through an interaction with the landscape, and the manner in which that remembering occurs. In other words, time, space, and landscape are inseparable entities. In *The Stone Virgins*, landscape converges with, conveys and transforms everyday histories; and it is also implicated in those histories. As we will now see, landscape is inseparable from the issue of trauma, body and violence. One of the unique features of *The Stone Virgins*, as a text, is achieved through a prose which operates within the framework in which 'language, consciousness and landscape are related' as suggested by J.M. Coetzee.³⁸⁹

Kezi, the location of *The Stone Virgins*, is on the outskirts of Bulawayo. It is described as an enclave. Paired against the enormity of the city scape, with its monuments and specific sites of remembrance, Kezi is a place of otherness. It is a place also that is pure and has not yet been polluted. By contrast, to die in Kezi is to be abandoned to the vultures and unknown graves. Kezi is also a space in transition: war has transformed the landscape in Kezi into a 'naked cemetery where no one is buried and everyone is betrayed.'³⁹⁰ Unlike Harare or Bulawayo, there is no Heroes' Acre, or acreage set aside for the commemorative statues of past heroes. The hills of Gulati are Kezi's monuments. Physical terrain and geographical spaces are represented as making a claim on one's memory, in the

³⁸⁹ Coetzee, *White Writing*, p. 36-44.

³⁹⁰ Vera, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 159.

same way that psychical spaces do. For Vera, landscape lays a claim to her protagonists. It must be remembered that the colonial war in Zimbabwe was fought over land, and that its current quasi-nationalist war continues to be over the redistribution of the land. It is for the land that Vera's protagonists pay a heavy price, with their bodies and their minds:

Their keen voices perforate every reality but their own. They whisper about the hills of Gulati, taking care not to be heard, not to be identified with their own voice, leaving hardly a trace of their concealed agonies, except for the anger rising under their arms [...] To be in Kezi, to be in the bush, is to be at the mercy of misfortune: Fear makes their hearts pound like drums. The war is so near, so close to the skin that you can smell it.³⁹¹

The transition of Kezi, from tranquillity to a place ravaged by war, creates tension and itself generates a language of place through which Kezi is signified as a specific location, is re-imagined, re-articulated and reconstituted by a violent war. Language of place, therefore, necessarily resonates with the fragmentation of Kezi caused by war violence. The descriptions of the landscape assume a premonitory quality, which foregrounds that something of a greater magnitude, unseen before, will soon happen. In order to highlight this, Vera plays with meanings that seem disconnected from each other, through a linguistic dexterity which demonstrates a complex grasp of other languages, and which expounds the boundaries of assumed meaning, through her complicated and coded description of the landscape. When read closer, her idiosyncratic uses of language, reveals another hidden meaning.

Take, for instance, her reference to two words in particular: the earth (*umhlaba*) and the umbilical cord (*inkaba*). Traditionally, and in order to achieve the homeostasis, this balance with the earth (*umhlaba*), at birth the umbilical cord (*inkaba*) is buried deep into the ground, right in the centre of the homestead. This symbolises one's rootedness and deep connection to the land, the country of one's birth. In the aftermath of a bombing, this rootedness to the earth, secured through the umbilical cord, is disrupted. The uprooting disconnects and disrupts the linguistic assonance between *umhlaba* and *inkaba*, resulting in a disequilibrium. As Vera says:

³⁹¹ Vera, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 30.

This is the afterbirth of war, its umbilical presence. This crater is a burial ground, a mound for the dying. This is the last gasp of war.³⁹²

But there is another much more significant rupture in terms of trauma and communal healing. That of the deep personal connection that people feel towards each other, a mutual recognition which provides an empathic framework for apprehending the pain of the other. It is this deeper, communal meaning that is *symbolised* by the navel—*inimba*. It symbolises the way in which people are implicated in each other's trauma through a shared vulnerability and therefore has important links with the philosophy of *Ubuntu*. It is a reciprocity steeped in a shared ethical and moral accountability, so that each violation registers the failure of the community and not the individual and demands a shared communal response to trauma.

Under *Ubuntu* those who kill, also kill a part of themselves since they are part of the community which raises them. As Gobodo-Madikizela argues, 'the dignity and worth of all individuals and groups impose an obligation on all of us to practice care and compassion towards others.'³⁹³ That requires that we 'see' ourselves in the Other, that is, a reciprocal mutual recognition.'³⁹⁴

Inimba as the navel, symbolically marks the centre of one's being, and that of the universe—the etymology of the noun *umhlaba* derives from the verb *ukuhlaba* which means to stab through something—an infliction of pain. *Umhlaba uyahlaba* is a Zulu proverb that encapsulates the dictum that one must endure, that one must remain aware of the presence of the earth beneath one's feet. In addition, it is demonstrative of a shared and implicit conceptualisation of the earth as something that responds to our presence on it: that as humans we must maintain our mutual symbiosis with the earth. If we denigrate the earth through senseless acts of violence, we denigrate ourselves too.

³⁹² —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 105.

³⁹³ In most African societies when a woman loses a child or loved one, other women share her motherly pain, through a symbolic and mutual inter-connectedness. This is the concept of *inimba* as described by Gobodo-Madikizela. *Inimba* is a symbolic structure that provides an empathic framework for sharing communal pain. Amongst women it represents a shared empathy between mothers, so that when women forgive perpetrators of violence, they do this symbolically through the perpetrator's mothers. See Zara Houshmand, 'Ubuntu and the Politics of Forgiveness', < <https://unbuntudialogue.org/unbuntu-and-the-politics-of-forgiveness>. [accessed April 20 2021].

³⁹⁴ Gobodo-Madikizela, *Dare We Hope*, p. 150.

Vera marks the rupture of this symbiosis through her metaphoric use of the internal and external landscape. For example, at the beginning of the novel, there are distinguishable seasons: Thenjiwe can think in ‘rain time’, and she is ‘more beautiful than rain’.³⁹⁵ Therefore, Thenjiwe’s character acts as a synecdoche of the people of Kezi. Prior to the war, the people of Kezi are connected, and attuned to their surroundings, and there is a palpable equilibrium with the earth:

Winter, June and July, is her own abode, her own accolade, a pristine time guarded jealously. October. Then rain time, from November to January. The rainy season of mud and insects caught in the melting anthills, numerous silver-winged, transparent-feathered, sliding boulders and crumbling clouds, burrowing earthworms and black beetles with gray-streaked coats, red-eyed, raised antennae, seeming dead. Each drop of rain a rendezvous.³⁹⁶

However, during the war, there is a palpable and noticeable change in the surroundings. When war comes, even the trees are ‘bare of leaves and carry a stunned lethargic silence’. In *The Stone Virgins*, Vera also highlights the devastating effect of war, by registering the alienation of people themselves from the environment. The people of Kezi have ‘banished their hearing and mistake sound for sight’, which Vera likens to a trance. Vera invokes the symbolism of *amavimandlebe*, small flying ants that emerge from the anthills in the rainy season only to shed their wings and crash back to the ground, to illustrate the plight of the people of Kezi. The noise that the insects make while in flight is believed to block one’s hearing. Vera uses the flying termites to illustrate the ‘tragedy of a people who are floating towards a certain suicide’ because through denial they continually fail to listen and to pay attention to the environment:

Amavimandlebe—a multitude of tiny insects, winged, blind, dashing themselves against each drop of rain, splattering into a white paste on the ground, dizzy and without wings, a multitude of insects rising like glory, ready to die in order to lose their wings, to be buried in rain [...] They banish hearing, not sight, for sight is a trance. They are unable to resist the journey of flotation and suicide, the descent into darkness.³⁹⁷

³⁹⁵ Vera, *The Stone Virgins*, 35.

³⁹⁶ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 34.

³⁹⁷ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 34.

Conversely, through the invocation of the imagery of swarming insects, Vera registers the sudden and unexpected arrival of *Gukurahundi* soldiers who are deployed in the area, and they appear as if from nowhere: 'the battalion of soldiers rising like locusts from the bush, swarming the road, the guns slack and easy under the wrist'. Their victims are stunned into a hypnotic trance: they cannot see to hear. There is so much noise around them that they miss all the signs that indicate that the arrival of the soldiers marks the beginning of a massacre. This disjuncture between two senses registers a collective denial, and at the same time a willed blindness that will ultimately lead to a genocide. Both the denial and willed blindness lull the people of Kezi into a fateful descent into darkness. As such, they cannot resist 'the journey and floatation into suicide' because in Kezi people cannot read and register what the changes to their environment tell them.³⁹⁸

Where all the remnants of a violent history have been elided by a forced forgetting, the crater opens up what is permanently interred and exposes historical artefacts that testify to that violence. The crater symbolises the open wound that manifests itself on the topography of the earth, and its contours. It remains for all to see and bear witness to the events of the past, in the absence of a witness who testifies in the aftermath. Through the symbol of the crater Vera opens up and exposes the connections between the different epochs that points us to Zimbabwe's long history of violence: 'the ungraceful arm of history and the not recent and touchable deaths'.³⁹⁹ When a bomb explodes, rocks open and time stands still. The rupture marks the cataclysmic beginning, and also the fragility of memory. To Vera, in the aftermath of the encounter with brutality, everything drowns in this silence and language coils too. As the people of Kezi rest in this 'new detonation', amongst the chaos, the ashes, the upturned soil, they are forgotten in this 'singed place, the shrine of powdered stars'.⁴⁰⁰ Kezi is at once a site of memory and of trauma: something has been irrevocably damaged. As an

³⁹⁸ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 161, p. 34

³⁹⁹ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p.106.

⁴⁰⁰ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 106, p. 105.

enclave, Kezi is a mode of containment, a crypt that holds remnants of violent trauma together.⁴⁰¹ As Robert Smithson observes:

Words and rocks contain a language that follows a syntax of splits and ruptures. Look at any word long enough and you will see it open up into a series of faults into a terrain of particles each containing its own void. This discomfiting language of fragmentation offers no easy gestalt solution; the certainties of didactic discourse are hurled into the erosion of the poetic principle.⁴⁰²

Likewise, Vera plays with words, not just for effect, but to generate a deeper meaning to her prose. Vera's invocation of the crater also opens up another layer beneath which lies a deadly secret, a secret that has remained interred in the crevices of the rocks for centuries, but still has a resonance in the present: of the 'founding murder' of the Zimbabwean nation.⁴⁰³ Remarkably, through the opening, Vera points us to this other history of violence that continues to shape and reshape the Zimbabwean landscape. As we saw in the last chapter, her title, *The Stone Virgins*, refers to virgins who were forced into their own graves to pave the way for the burial of kings, and of sacrifices made by women in order for the legacies of powerful men to prevail, as Vera states in her anthology:

These women remind us, poignantly, what a woman is, what a man is not. Here, birth becomes an aberration that comments on the ruthless circumstance of female agony occurring in a stultifying, thoroughly confusing construct of authority.⁴⁰⁴

Inside the caves of Gulati we discover the rock paintings of the *Khoisan* and through their absence, a registering of the tragic encounter with the *Bantu* people who hunted them to near extinction.⁴⁰⁵ Their ancestors remain in forever dwindling populations on the verge of the Kalahari Desert, where their battle for

⁴⁰¹ See Nicholas Abraham, and Maria Torok, *The Wolf Man's Magic World: A Cryptonymy*, trans. by Nicholas Rand, introd. by Jacques Derrida (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2005). According to Abraham and Torok, the crypt symbolises unreachable psychic recesses where victims bury unspeakable/unbearable events in their lives. Those who refuse to acknowledge their harrowing experience are unable to mourn the past and will forever be beholden to that past. See also, Schwab, *Haunting Legacies*, p. 1.

⁴⁰² Robert Smithson, *Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), p. 107.

⁴⁰³ See page 20 for a brief explanation of the history of violence in Zimbabwe. Also see Charumbira, *Imagining a Nation*.

⁴⁰⁴ Vera, ed., *Opening Spaces*, p. 1.

⁴⁰⁵ Khoisan is a term used to denote 'non-Bantu' indigenous peoples of Southern Africa. They are popularly thought of as hunter-gatherers who reside mainly in the Kalahari Desert. But their ongoing displacement, annihilation and acculturation is one of the biggest tragedies in the history of humankind.

survival continues against an encroaching and debilitating capitalist venture. Vera points us to another deliberately orchestrated and wilfully forgotten genocide in the multiple layers of the violent history of the nation, and the unresolved trauma that continues unabated. Each subsequent genocide adds another layer, but also marks the return to the scene of the original massacre. Incidentally, there are no graves to mark or commemorate the *Khoisan*. Vera unravels the founding myth of the Zimbabwean nation and complicates our understanding of that history, against competing claims by the nationalists:

It is true everything in Gulati rots except the rocks. On the rocks, history is steady; it cannot be tilted forward or backward. History fades into the chaos of the hills but it does not vanish. In Gulati, I travel four hundred years, then ten thousand years, twenty more. The rocks split open, time shifts [...]⁴⁰⁶

Rock art acts as a counter-memory to the falsified history of the nation. Its strength relies on the solidity of the rock, which is extremely durable and outlasts humans:

I place my hand on the rocks, where antelopes and long-breasted women stand together. Tall women bend like tightened bows beneath a stampede of buffalo, while the rest spread their legs outward toward the sun. Even now as I speak they are hunting something else beyond the buffalo, something eternal.⁴⁰⁷

The rock registers other histories whose vestiges remain invisible as an imprint on its surface. In particular, it registers the haunting of the landscape by the presence of Khoisan art, and yet there is no single memorial site which registers their encounter with tragedy, in the land now called Zimbabwe. It is as if they never existed. Vera suggests, then, through her oblique reference to the past, that in Zimbabwe, true mourning for those who sacrificed their lives in order to allow for the birth of the nation, can only begin with an acknowledgement of all the massacres, and the bodies of the unburied who continue to litter the landscape. To Vera, sacrifice means the loss of life, so that one life may be saved.⁴⁰⁸ However, it is important to note that Vera does not espouse this sacrificial logic,

⁴⁰⁶ Vera, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 105

⁴⁰⁷ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 103.

⁴⁰⁸ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 104.

but problematises and, at the same time exposes it as a horror, especially for women.

Metonymy and the power of naming in *The Stone Virgins*

In *The Stone Virgins*, Vera lulls the senses through descriptions of beautiful landscape momentarily, only to turn the same beautiful landscape into a harrowing, haunting presence:

When it rains, water settles briefly on the grass, not running off smoothly or too quickly. After the rain, the top layer of wet, part decomposed thatch is the softest scent of living things there is—it is life itself. Tall dry grass stands between the sparse trees, as brown as the soil and as still as the heated air, the abundant silence.⁴⁰⁹

The tall grass and the partly decomposed thatch grass are objects that gesture beyond their own materiality in that they force those not familiar with the landscape, to imagine what those objects mean, and for those who are aware of the significance of the objects, to pause and reflect. There is a sense in which the decomposing thatch grass suggests an occupied space with a definite sense of ‘being lived in’, and an earlier history. Vera evokes the sense of smell so that the scent of living things becomes life itself and the landscape creates temporal consciousness. The life of the landscape infuses the text so that the soil, the rain, the trees and the abundant silence evoke a life of their own. As such, the Kezi landscape is not passive, but living and imbricated with meaning.

When Cephas returns to Kezi for the first time after Thenjiwe’s death, he finds Nonceba, still recovering from her wounds sitting under the shade of the *m’phafa* tree, hovering between life and death, in utter desolation. The once promising and open landscape of Kezi is now closing in on her. Its broad vista is shrinking, and Nonceba becomes the focal point for communal disintegration. At this timely moment, Vera’s narrative reverts to the present tense, as if to impregnate the text with an urgency that highlights the nowness of the event. Nonceba is unsure of Cephas’s intention. In her mind, the violence she experienced earlier in the novel has returned in another guise. Her soliloquy has a

⁴⁰⁹ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 17.

dream-like quality to it. It is through this unreality that Nonceba's fragmentation is presented to us:

Is he standing on that faint line? Is this his special task, to make sure that the dead cannot choose their dreams, or the living? This is what the men in the bush and soldiers are doing—both equally dedicated to ending lives. Since he is the man who can take a risk with tenderness, perhaps he can say what exactly it took for a man to look at a woman and cut her up like a piece of dry hide without asking himself a single question about his own actions, not even the time of day. What did it take for a man to possess that sort of obedience? It is in her mind, so she says it to herself, murmurs till she is satisfied, silently, accusing the stranger who is offering her a journey out of Kezi.⁴¹⁰

Vera is cognisant of the discursive potential of Nonceba's questioning hallucinations. As Nonceba's mind collapses, Cephas and Sibaso become interchangeable. In her mind, men and violence become indistinguishable, and she loses trust in other beings. She no longer has any bearings, and she cannot fulfil the demands of the moment because everything becomes unhinged, thus re-enacting the traumatic event itself. Even the *marula* tree, which has been the centre of communal life and its main sustenance, surrenders. The carcass-like skin of its fruit explodes, and the resulting stench, mixed the odour of decaying bodies marks the climax of tyranny. As 'death pervades everything', Vera floods the senses with the pungency of the rotting *marula* fruit. The resulting synaesthetic immersion is an intensity that reflects turmoil. There is a movement, a correspondence that vacillates from material objects, and back to the sensations they provoke:

And those who managed to escape were carrying with them the memory of burning bodies and an impeccable flame [...] and the marula tree is alone in the clouds [...] the fruit is falling down. The skin of the fruit swells with the heat, then cracks, and the sweetness spills. Large slippery seeds hatch and slide out. The liquid flavour spreads out and rises with the heat of the day, carried on the slightest breeze. The scent is everywhere, penetrating each dream, each decision.⁴¹¹

Desolation is marked by the abundance of the *marula* fruit, as there is no one left to eat it. One type of abundance, the abundance of wild fruit, foregrounds

⁴¹⁰ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p.162.

⁴¹¹ Vera, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 51.

and registers the paucity of human life as a result of war. For Vera, even simple objects such as fruit are imbued with meaning. The fragrance of the *marula* fruit becomes a counterpoint to the overwhelming putrid smell of the charred and rotten bodies at Thandabantu Store. Violent trauma enters the body through the nose, creating an olfactory hallucination, and in the grip of this violence, Kezi is transformed from a nourishing place we encounter at the beginning of the novel, to a prohibitive non-place:

There is nothing here anymore, not even a store. Kezi is a place for those who were born here and have nowhere else to go. A place for the trapped. Boulders, ruins, burned villages, the dead, the naked sky. Many people have left and most of the homes are empty.⁴¹²

The landscape is no longer welcoming, and its fragmentation desolate, conjuring up images of uncertainty, drought, hunger and violence. As Nonceba soliloquises under the *m'phafa* tree, Cephass approaches. The symbolism and significance of *m'phafa* tree cannot be overlooked here. In Southern Africa, amongst Nguni peoples (*Bantu* people who speak primarily *Nguni* languages: *Zulu*, *Ndebele*, *Xhosa*, and *Swazi*) the Buffalo Thorn Tree or *m'phafa* or *umhlankosi* (a tree used in the burial of kings), as it is known, is a tree that plays a significant role in the spirit world. After the death of a family member, a branch is detached from the tree and elders within the family would go to the place where the individual died and use the branch to bring their spirit home. Its thorns, one facing backwards and the other forward, are meant to be a reminder of where one has been and where one is heading—the final destination which is the spirit world.

Depending on local practice, the same process is carried out on the first anniversary of the individual's death in a ceremony called *umbuyiso* (which means simply, to bring someone's spirit home). Traditional beer is brewed, and an animal is slaughtered to appease the spirit world. This centres on the belief that those who die, and their manner of death is not known, and whose bodies are not accorded traditional burial, turn into dangerous spirits called *Ngozi* spirits, believed to have an arbitrary influence in the world of the living. In African cosmology the *m'phafa* tree is revered in the ritual of death and spiritual rebirth.

⁴¹² —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 153.

Such is the reverence for the tree, it cannot be used for firewood. Nor can it be brought within the confines of the home except in the context of a ritual.

Gukurahundi atrocities, especially the use of mass graves, mineshafts, and the incineration of bodies deliberately frustrated such local burial customs. Broadly speaking, the Ndebele victims of the massacres cannot be mourned properly, and as such, the healing process and reconciliation have yet to be realised. Vera evokes the symbolism of the *m'phafa* tree if only to foreground Nonceba's 'return from the dead' as she was left for dead by Sibaso. Vera deliberately places Nonceba under the tree to evoke the sense of her impending death, so that Cephas finds her in utter desolation, and takes her spirit home so to speak.

But the symbolism of the tree also marks Nonceba's salvation, in terms not only of her physical health, but also the beginning of her spiritual journey too, marked by the use of the phrase 'deliverance' at the end of the novel. This is one of the many ways in which Vera uses vegetation as part of her language to frame certain experiences within the context of *The Stone Virgins*. Vera deliberately situates the fragmenting Nonceba under the *m'phafa* tree to evoke the sense of an impending death:

[...] She had dreamed him up with all the bits of memory that now lie in fragments in her mind, because that is how she lives now, with her insides all broken up; so he too, has come up from that pile of things that are broken up in her head and could be mismatched any time of day to produce the most improbable event.⁴¹³

The above quote evokes a dreamscape, a kind of hallucination in which the mind and eye cannot quite focus. The dreamscape depicts Nonceba's internal landscape and channels our entrance to her internal life which lies broken. Cephas Dube's arrival to take Nonceba back to Bulawayo is very significant in the turn of events within the novel. Vera moves from a rural landscape to Bulawayo, whose landscape is no longer haunted by the violence. The cityscape disrupts the association between the old and new memory. Bulawayo opens up a vista of possibilities for both Nonceba and Cephas. The transition from the rural landscape

⁴¹³ ———, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 150.

to the urban landscape also foregrounds the significance of healing spaces. There is a shift in the gaze, from the brutality of the rural landscape, to the terrain of urban space, portrayed in *The Stone Virgins* as a space with a liberatory potential. Bulawayo becomes the space where both Nonceba's and Cephas's wounds and trauma can heal. The shift from Kezi, and its dehumanising violence, to the tranquillity of the city emphasises the impact that physical spaces can have on the psychological makeup of individuals affected by the violent trauma of war. Vera uses Nonceba's and Cephas's relationship as a discursive tool to explore the interaction between landscape, recovery and the complexity of relationships. Although the relationship remains largely platonic and unconsummated, there is an underlying sexual tension that draws Cephas and Nonceba together and propels the narrative.

Nonceba's name, like most names used throughout the novel is imbued with meaning. As such, Vera chooses the names of her victims carefully. Nonceba is a Ndebele/Xhosa name, which means Mercy. Again, there is so much symbolism packed within the name itself which then transfers its meaning to Cephas as he becomes the 'embodiment of mercy' in the context of the novel. This is an interesting choice of characterisation by Vera, since the *Gukurahundi* operatives came from the same part of the country as Cephas, Vera's model for positive masculinities. It is also possible that Cephas and *Gukurahundi* are opposite sides of the same coin. In other words, what is being suggested is that they are both capable of being cruel and being kind at the same time. This further complicates our understanding and reading of Vera's characters.

Through the act of naming Vera is making use of the established link between the signifier and signified, whether of things or people, to allow for the metonymical transfer of the characteristics of the thing on to the object or person named after it. Vera chooses 'names to anchor dreams'⁴¹⁴:

The names will cascade like history from their tongues...Beauty, Courage, and Freedom. All their children will be conceived out of this moment of emancipation. Born into their arms like revelations, like flowers opening. It will be necessary to give their offspring middle names that will provide

⁴¹⁴ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 54.

them with strength... Masotsha, Mandla, and Nqabutho. Names to anchor dreams.⁴¹⁵

This is also the philosophy upon which the African naming system is rooted. Names are also used to record significant events in a family's life or country's history. *Mduduzi* or '*the one who comforts*' is the name of Nonceba's uncle whose voice provides solace and comfort to a seriously injured Nonceba on her way to the hospital. *Sibaso* is the *spark* that fuels the flame of genocide, and Cephas, through an empathic identification with Nonceba, becomes her salvation:

Cephas has provided her with a home, and a new life. She has no regrets in coming to the city. Certainly their relationship is undefined. It is pleasurable, supportive. They both avoid defining it, embraced by an innocence born of the tragic circumstances of the unity. They do not complicate it with the questions they do not answer.⁴¹⁶

The resulting relationship helps produce alternative modalities of power and can be read as a counter-narrative to the way in which Sibaso treats the Gumede sisters earlier in the novel. Under the new arrangement, there is no exchange of bodies: outlines, boundaries, and bodily integrity remain intact. In the new reformulation of exchange, Vera destabilises and rearticulates kinship; and she is very careful in describing Nonceba and Cephas's relationship with ambiguous metaphors to define its parameters. Their relationship offers and suggests possibilities, and alternative ways of existence. In the process we are reminded of the complexities of human interactions, and of the significance of the power of safe space—mental and physical—in aiding recovery from trauma, and in shaping those relationships:

He will wait till Nonceba turns to him with a wonder to match his own, with an equal wish, till she, too feels that if he leaves the room, her world will diminish.⁴¹⁷

Cephas Dube is the novel's hero, and Sibaso's character, the novel's anti-hero. Sibaso is the ghost of the novel, and the agent and embodiment of trauma par excellence. As a character he remains elusive. He disappears and appears, as if at will, at the most importune of moments. His one act of the most grotesque

⁴¹⁵ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 54.

⁴¹⁶ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 171.

⁴¹⁷ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 180.

violence continually haunts the novel, and yet still he cannot be anchored to the ground long enough for close inspection. On the other hand, Vera allows Cephas to develop fully as a character. As an historian he picks up the fragmented pieces of nation and attempts to reconstruct another version of its history. However, even as he does so, he is weary of replicating violent histories. As such, his quest at restoration is indubitably haunted by his awareness of the nation's violent past. Right at the end of the novel, it is Cephas who, for the first time, reads back to us Nonceba's medical record; and in a poised, purposeful and measured voice, he narrates the violence behind Nonceba's facial wounds:

He pulls the hospital card from a yellow folder. There is a staccato of narration: ... inflicted by a sharp object ... could be a blade victim did not see the instrument ... grievous harm ... lips cut off ... urgent surgery required ... skin graft.⁴¹⁸

His economy of description magnifies the impact of the wounding, and unlike the actual wounding itself, his narrativisation of the wounding is slowed down by a measured reading inflected with purpose: he wants us to see once more a sharper outline of the violence lifted out of Vera's very shadowy and dark canvas. Although Cephas had known all along, through newspaper cuttings, of the tragedy that beset Nonceba, it is only now, through his proximity to Nonceba, and his inclusion in her inner circle of trust, that finally he is able to articulate the moment that changed everything. This can also be read as Vera's dictum to the nation's men: that if it took a man to destroy a woman's voice, then it should take another man to restore it back to her. Also, that if men continually violate women's bodies, and silence them through violence, it should take men's recognition of women's vulnerability to male violence for violence to end. As such, Cephas pays symbolic penance for Sibaso's sins. He becomes the embodiment of this recognition of women's pain, as a result of which he restores to the female body an inviolable human dignity:

Nonceba is grateful to Cephas, thankful for the existence of his kind of gentleness, which allows an imprecise distance. She does not know if she has helped him. She would like to have helped him, somehow. He is no longer a stranger—it has taken twelve months—yet in this matter, he is unknown to her. Being here with him is as close as she has been to any

⁴¹⁸ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 184.

man: intimate. She carries visible scars; he shields her from the invisible ones. Sometimes when she looks at him, she sees his hesitation, his absolute hurt. The same hurt she had seen in his eyes when they met. It is still there, like a quiet flame, not forgotten. She has no idea what to say to him to banish that hurt.⁴¹⁹

Read against Sibaso's character, there is a remarkable gentleness to Cephas's approach. As such, Vera deploys Cephas's character as an emissary to Matabeleland, the go-between the two warring nations, and as an anti-dote to violent masculinities as portrayed in *The Stone Virgins*. He is the embodiment of the possibility of an innate kindness, because he understands, seemingly, the fragility of both peace and hope. His elegiac and restorative gesture is a welcome relief in a novel that carries so much violent trauma, because as a historian he knows that 'a new nation needs to restore its past'.⁴²⁰

Cephas's character demonstrates that Zimbabwean history is as complex as its gatekeepers. There has been a tendency by those in power to distort its history to suit the present, and towards the subversion of memory, so that what is remembered is not commensurate with the prevailing political circumstances. The attempt to forge new alliances, to forget the violence of the past, and maintain racially specific domains has failed. Violence, in particular violence against women, continues to haunt the Zimbabwean national psyche. Within this framework of violence, there has been a continuing silence regarding violence against women.

Yvonne Vera's project, at least in *The Stone Virgins*, can be seen as an attempt at articulating the lasting effects of violence on women, as a result of these specific moments in Zimbabwe's history. This precise moment needs mapping, and the mental map it engenders becomes key to the act of remembering and witnessing. As Dori Laub insists, the historical power of trauma is not just the experience of trauma itself, but that often it is repeated. In *The Stone Virgins*, Nonceba's only act of courage is to identify Sibaso's arm. Victims of violence are often required to point out with accuracy, the exact location of trauma on their bodies: contusions, abrasions, cuts and torn membranes. However, these are

⁴¹⁹ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 172.

⁴²⁰ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 184.

visible aspects of violent trauma that often neglect the un-mappable dark spots, known only to, and felt by the victim.

In narratives of trauma, remembering is the embodiment of, and a metaphor for negotiating disputed bodily memories. To draw a visual map on the body is to connect sites on the body that can help us visualise the topography of trauma and its trajectory since this mapping can provide coordinates for the excavatory process, if we understand trauma as transformative:

Sometimes rape leaves bruises on the skin, cuts and tears. Sometimes it leaves invisible scars only. The body that seems whole, then, can work against the experience of violation narrated by the violated woman.⁴²¹

Vera posits the past in the present, so that the fluid context of her novel allows for an intentional margin of error. Within this sphere of creative uncertainty, of the glaring differences between events, and between events and memory, a gap opens up inside representation and the novel therefore becomes ‘revolutionary’—Mikhail Bakhtin’s expression—and refuses to be subsumed within the historical context.⁴²² The fragmentation of memory signifies a non-unified, multiplicity of voices that cannot form a perfect figure of the past—what Dineo Gqola calls ‘three tongues in the mouth’,⁴²³ and Yvonne Vera, ‘survival in the mouth’.⁴²⁴

Nonceba’s body, and that of other women in a similar predicament, is ruined through disfigurement. The signature of each cut, - of each wound, of each scar - represents multiple traumatic memories of disparate events. Bodily scars bear the ‘stigmata of political affiliation’, as suggested by Peter Godwin.⁴²⁵ In other words, the body becomes a readable text. Scars, such as bodily deformity, quite often interact with others outside of our own bodies. Wounds without an explanatory framework disturb and make a demand of those who ‘possess’ them to explain to others, how they sustained those wounds, and under what circumstances. The wound disturbs the smooth surface of spaces, so that in its

⁴²¹ Dineo Gqola, *Rape*, p. 29.

⁴²² Tagoe-Wilson, ‘History, Gender and the Problem of Representation’, in *Sign and Taboo*, pp. 155-178.

⁴²³ Pumla Dineo Gqola, ‘Like Three Tongues in the Mouth: Tracing the Elusive Lives of Slave Women in Slavocratic South Africa’, in *Women in South African History: Basusaimbokodo, Bawelaimlambo/They Move Boulders and Cross Rivers*, ed. Nomboniso Gasa (South Africa: HRSC Publishing, 2006).

⁴²⁴ Bryce, ‘Interview with Vera’, in *Sign and Taboo*, p.221.

⁴²⁵ Godwin, *The Fear*, p. 109.

silence, it communicates. In a similar vein of thought, we can also consider what wounds communicate in the context of the trauma of genocide, or what wounds recall. Each gash, each crack of the skull of those who survived massacres tells a story, not only of unbearable pain, but also of human cruelty. We can extend this mode of thinking and consider the discursive role that the lack of wounds plays in the post-war resignification of both the perpetrator and the victim. For those without the stigmata of genocide, their complicity in the prior genocide remains invisible, a possibility only. Because where truth is elusive, Vera suggests that 'people settle for the evident.'⁴²⁶

In the final page of *The Stone Virgins*, Vera evokes the symbolism of the wound once more, with the emphasis of how Nonceba's wound was sustained. Some have questioned Vera's 'women-centred fiction of violence', and her use of the image of violated women in her aesthetic of violence. However, as discussed earlier, it can be argued that she re-works the aesthetic of viewing the body, so that the violated body is not always the most docile body. There is no doubt that Vera's oeuvre is confrontational, that the sensorial grotesquery of the violence depicted in *The Stone Virgins* is unnerving. Nevertheless, there is also an aesthetic beauty and intimacy in the way in which she portrays the violence. As discussed in the last chapter, the murder and rape scene in *The Stone Virgins* is suggestive of an intimate relationship between murderer and victim. Sibaso wants to be 'held by his victim, Nonceba; because he needs it'.⁴²⁷ That is not to suggest that Vera romanticises the violence. In fact, she does exactly the opposite: she evokes the erotic in order to convey the terrifying intimacy of a violent scene: the closeness and proximity.

To Vera, even those brutalised by war still crave human warmth. As such, Sibaso 'cradles Nonceba like a wounded child, and he places her arms around his neck as though she were a child he would like to raise in kindness.' 'He rocks forth and back. Forward, rocking back.'⁴²⁸ 'Your fingers are warm. Touch me with these smooth hands. Move your hands this way.' Then 'he lifts her legs off

⁴²⁶ Vera, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 28.

⁴²⁷ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 172.

⁴²⁸ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 71, p. 70.

the ground and places her across both his knees, like a bride. He guides her thumb to his pulsating temple.’⁴²⁹ There is an intimacy to this scene that does not lend itself to any easy reading. Clean, tidy, and distant violence does not bother the mind so much: proximity unsettles. However, Vera’s poetic aesthetic functions obliquely, and allusively; and the tonality of the rape scene cannot be rendered pornographic, no matter how lopsided or skewed our reading. There is the movement of bodies, and of the juxtaposition of the victim and the perpetrator; of the ‘theatricality of violent movement’, and of a violent intrusion in which one cannot see or follow the movement quite clearly.⁴³⁰ But Vera’s artistic optics cannot be absorbed into the act: the hovering omniscient narrator, and the intra-diegetic narrator alerts the reader to the atrocities of a rape, mutilation decapitation. As such, the reader is drawn to the life within the narrative, while also remaining outside of it, thus formalising the disparity between witness and event, thereby preventing vicarious voyeurism. Which means that although Vera’s descriptions of violence are very graphic, they do not pander to the prevailing notion of the rape story as a mode of entertainment, with its problematic, but move us towards a more nuanced narrative of rape. In *The Stone Virgins*, Vera accomplishes such nuance as her character rediscovers that the world beyond is in sharp contrast to her predicament:

Then she will open her mouth and let the sound free. Words will follow, then language. Only then will she discover the world in contrast to her predicament. She will restore her mind, healing it in segments, in sound.⁴³¹

Violence remains in the writing, which is haunted, but it is not allowed to fester in the mind.

⁴²⁹ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 72.

⁴³⁰ See Richard Matthews, *The Absolute Violation: Why Torture Must Be Prohibited* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2008), pp. 43–44. Matthews argues that torture attacks the mind; that the theatricality is extremely symbolic and metaphor laden. His discussion encompasses the arbitrariness of the language of torture, metaphors for the places where torture takes place, and the stigmata of torture wounds.

⁴³¹ Vera, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 90.

Chapter Five

The Gift of War: Understanding Zimbabwean Masculinities in the Aftermath of *Gukurahundi* Atrocities.

This country was won through the loss of blood not elections. Therefore, if anyone wants to take it, they should go to war with the ruling party. Even if other people accept the results, we will not [...] We are married to this country and Mugabe. We are going to support Mugabe till we bury him.⁴³²

⁴³² Norma Krigger, *Guerrilla Veterans*, p. 197.

In October 2000 the government offered amnesty to those who had committed politically motivated crimes between January 1 and July 31, 2000, but excluded those accused of murder, robbery, rape, indecent assault, statutory rape, theft, possession of firearms, or any offence involving fraud or dishonesty. However, very few people accused of crimes which the amnesty did not cover were prosecuted. Even when the arrests were made, no one stood trial. Moreover, subsequent political crimes rarely led to arrests, and trials for such cases were virtually unheard of. According to the ZHR NGO Forum's July report (2010), 'ZANU (PF) supporters, war veterans and CIO members seem to operate with official impunity.'⁴³³ In the context of the ongoing civil unrest and state-sponsored political violence this has become the norm. Since the end of the war of liberation and the beginning of independence, Zimbabweans have existed in-between bouts of violence. According to Miles Hudson, violence in Zimbabwe has been embraced as an enviable and inevitable method of political persuasion by the nationalists:

The transformation of Rhodesia into Zimbabwe was, therefore, both a triumph and a tragedy. It was a triumph for violence and tragic for the reason that violence was necessary. In the circumstances, Rhodesia could not have become Zimbabwe without it—certainly not in the time scale acceptable to African opinion—and the eventual transformation was inevitable from the moment the pioneers raised their flags at Salisbury. To say this is not to condone the violence: it is also to recognise the inevitability of it.⁴³⁴

This inevitability of the political investment in structural violence derives from the power of its symbolism as the means with which Blacks managed to free themselves from colonial subjugation and its subsequent hold on the ruling imagination, as well as from the way in which the theoretical foundation for the understanding of violence by nationalists has been exploited by politicians in Zimbabwe to effect political change.⁴³⁵ As Robert Mugabe said:

Our votes must go with our guns. After all, any vote we shall have, shall have been the product of the gun. The gun which produces the vote should

⁴³³ *The Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum* is a coalition of numerous human rights NGOs in Zimbabwe. Their work includes transitional justice work, research and documentation of state-sponsored atrocities. Their publications include, *Justice Under Siege* and 'Hear them Cry': An Analysis of State Violence Against Children During the 2019 Protests. See <https://www.hrforumzim.org/> [accessed March 17 2021].

⁴³⁴ Miles Hudson, *Triumph or Tragedy: Rhodesia to Zimbabwe* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1981), p. 210.

⁴³⁵ See Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (London: Penguin Classics, 2001).

remain its security officer—its guarantor. The people's votes and the people's guns are always inseparable twins.⁴³⁶

Mugabe reiterated, repeatedly, his steadfast belief in the power of violence. He ruthlessly implemented the scorched-earth policy in Matabeleland, and in a speech to parliament in 1982, made the following remarks:

Some of the measures we shall take, shall be extra-legal [...] An eye for an eye and ear for an ear may not be adequate in our circumstances. We might very well demand two ears for one ear and two eyes for one eye.⁴³⁷

In Zimbabwe the 'ZANU Way' as a political ideology has necessitated the use of violence as a social control mechanism in which masses of people can be controlled and exploited by the political elite. The state, as Louis Althusser has asserted, has become the 'site for the reproduction of cultural relations' with violence as the medium of exchange.⁴³⁸ Therefore, the aim of exploring the concept of Zimbabwean masculinities is to interrogate the genealogy of violence in the Zimbabwean context: both its social, historical, political context, and to explore the basic assumptions of my thesis: that its aetiology, signs and symptoms, can only be read and understood in the context of past trauma and group dynamics. An attempt has been made to address this issue of violence by various scholars in Zimbabwe and elsewhere.

But what is often neglected is the study of Zimbabwean masculinities—in their entirety—including White Zimbabweans and their implication in, and contribution to, the culture of violent impunity which pervades Zimbabwe today, and which forms a core component of Vera's writing. We have already seen the manner in which women themselves (on both sides of the racial divide) become proponents of violence and are involved in the fostering of socialisation processes which spawn dangerous masculinities. As Kagiso Lesego Molope, suggests: 'There are basic behaviour patterns that need to be altered. Much of what we need to do, I think lies in what boys learn—from both men and women—as they grow up.'⁴³⁹

⁴³⁶ Meredith, *Power*, p. 65.

⁴³⁷ _____, *Power*, p. 65.

⁴³⁸ See Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar, 'The Elements of the Structure and their History', in *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 2009), pp. 252-284.

⁴³⁹ Kagiso Lesego Molope, South African writer and novelist, preface to Dineo Gqola, *Rape*.

Routinisation of violence through the figure of the war veteran

It is important to highlight the pivotal role played by the figure of the war veteran in shaping Zimbabwean masculinities, and the violence which ensued, through the idea of self-sacrifice in service of the nation. For the Rhodesians, it was the figure of the communist guerrilla who loomed large in their collective imaginary and necessitated the sacrifice of the lives of young Rhodesian men and women in order to quell the so-called communist insurrection.⁴⁴⁰ Apart from evoking the barbarity of the Soviet Gulags and the atrocities of Maoist China, invoking the figure of the evil communist guerrilla was intended to galvanise international support—mainly European and American—and to act as the screen behind which atrocities were committed against Blacks. But more importantly, the administrative use of limitless violence was aimed at propping up a corrupt, inhumane and oppressive regime with international approval. As such, the legacy of violence inherited from Zimbabwe's colonial past still manifests itself in the present, albeit under a different guise. Out of these combined wars emerged the figure of the war veteran, imbued with heroic sacrifice, and heavily invested with political currency. In terms of structural violence, the figure of the war veteran has continually haunted both the political and psychological landscape in Zimbabwe.

In *The Stone Virgins*, it is through the figure of Sibaso – freedom-fighter turned dissident – that Vera explores and navigates the ambiguity inherent within the idea of self-sacrifice for men. Symptomatically, Sibaso's character is, as we have seen, central to the turn of events within the novel, and in our reading and understanding of the manifestation of trauma in *The Stone Virgins*, as it pertains to male subjectivities in the grip of war. Vera's exploration of Sibaso's character helps us explore the collapse of the fantasy of independence amongst Zimbabweans, and his own internal collapse as a result of the war:

I endure the war anew. I am an instrument of war. I lose all sight of pity for myself. During the brief cease-fire, I lived with four thousand soldiers in one camp. I could tell the difference between each man, whose fear was

⁴⁴⁰ Paul Moorcraft and Peter McLaughlin, *The Rhodesian War: A Military History* (Barnsley: Pen and Military Sword Publishers, 2011).

the greatest. Four thousand soldiers with their ammunition laid down. I did not surrender. I did not fight the war to please another.⁴⁴¹

The etymology of Sibaso's name derives from the root form of the verb *basa*—which means to set something alight. And with the added prefix (*si*), creates the noun, *sibaso*: the spark that finally sets the fire alight. Vera uses Sibaso's character to foreground his actions as the incendiary which starts the fire of war, as his eponymous name suggests.⁴⁴² He also serves as the embodiment of a troubled masculinity in the aftermath of war, as he is the man who 'lit a fire with his fingers and survived'⁴⁴³:

I return to the bush. I want to risk my mind, to be implicated in my own actions, having taken a personal resolve against personal harm. Such a war. I find a prop for every truth, for every mistruth.⁴⁴⁴

Vera introduces him to readers through his self-disclosing monologues: he is on the run, because the end of the war brings with it certain anxieties; not just for him, but for all the young Ndebele men of his generation. The mystique invested in the figure of the freedom fighter is overshadowed by the approach of independence. War violence as something which props up a wounded masculinity, no longer has any utility. In addition, as a Ndebele man, Sibaso is no longer part of the totalitarian dream—he is a threat to that dream. As such, he must be eliminated, even more so, because he is armed and dangerous. Nevertheless, he still has his own deeply held convictions and ability to survive:

You become a target, a definite enemy. You are aware of your responsibility, the commitment in your bones to end the lives of others so yours may begin.⁴⁴⁵

The onset of what might be termed Sibaso's castration anxiety is triggered by the impending demobilisation, and an imminent disarming, which sets in motion a complex persecutory complex.⁴⁴⁶ As a freedom fighter, his fragile

⁴⁴¹ Vera, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 141.

⁴⁴² See Nyambi, 'Silenced Voices', p. 3.

⁴⁴³ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 98.

⁴⁴⁴ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 141.

⁴⁴⁵ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 99.

⁴⁴⁶ As Joshua Nkomo, leader of the ZIPRA ex-guerrillas later remarked, regarding the humiliating demobilisation of his men: 'I felt humiliated just watching [...] That is how the army treated some of the men who had volunteered to serve their country.' See Eliakim M. Sibanda, *The Zimbabwean African People's Union, 1961-1980: A Political History of Insurgency in Southern Rhodesia* (Eritrea: Africa World Press, 2005), p. 252.

masculinity had been ‘propped up by a crutch’ in the form of a gun. To him, and those in his position, the absence of a gun marks his imminent emasculation. To a certain extent, his paranoia is justified, as Ndebele soldiers are routinely killed by soldiers with affiliations to ZANU (PF) within the military. As one soldier later confessed:

We were thousands in Chitungwiza. When people heard that we were going to mix with ZIPRA and our former enemies in the Rhodesian army to form units of the army, that was not normal, that was fearsome. To tell the truth, we did not like it. We thought we were going to form a party only of ZANU (PF), but that was not to be.⁴⁴⁷

It was under these circumstances that Sibaso who represents ZIPRA combatants in Vera’s novel, deserted the military. Unsure of his own future, and still in denial, he retreats into the caves of Gulati. However, his re-entry into the caves marks a symbolic retreat from the prevailing reality. Like *Gukurahundi* soldiers, Sibaso, in his paranoid state, attempts to recreate the conditions of war, which makes excess violence possible. The murder and rape of the Gumedede sisters, is the irrevocable act which seals his commitment to an individual perpetual war. Sibaso becomes the embodiment of the effect of centuries of war on those caught up in the web of war violence. To that extent, at the same time as he is the agent of atrocity, he can also be seen as one of many in a lineage of victims of war. Prior to Sibaso’s generation of victims, it is the stone virgins, as we have seen, who are sacrificial victims of yesteryear, followed by the Khoisan; and after them, the Ndebele victims of the *Gukurahundi* atrocities. In the figure of Sibaso, Vera evokes the haunting of the landscape by the ghosts of those who remain interred in the ground without ceremony, and by those who continue to stalk the living under the pretext of war. At times the war is an internal war with the self. Through soliloquy, Sibaso informs readers that ‘something went quiet in his head’. In addition, that he ‘heard it stop like a small wind’.⁴⁴⁸ That ‘something’ marks the moment of rupture, and makes visible the malevolent wind of change, both in the minds of combatants and those of the nation. Trauma, as Vera’s metaphor of the wind suggests, circulates like an ill-wind:

⁴⁴⁷ Krigger, *Guerrilla Veterans*, p. 119.

⁴⁴⁸ Vera, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 97.

When a body heals, then you discover that the body is made of layers of skin; even the human mind is like this, willing to be unclothed several times, to be naked over and over, healing in patterns like a wound, in scales. Look at the tips of my fingers. These are the fires of Gulati; these are scars of Gulati. A man lit a fire with his fingers and survived.⁴⁴⁹

Sibaso, as the above quote suggests, is a traumatised and wounded being. Like his counterparts in the military, he knows that he must continue to kill in order to survive, and that others must sacrifice their lives for him to continue to live. The brutality of war has killed his soul; and left in its place, an irrevocable numbness. Now, he must murder in order to restore feeling, to feel alive:

I bit my thumb and felt nothing. I bit hard and reached the bone. This is how I lost the flesh there. I wanted to reach something, to restore feeling. A nerve had vanished.⁴⁵⁰

Sibaso is a 'cemetery flower that the earth can no longer nourish'. Nourishment can be read as a reference to a man who no longer thrives inside but exists between bouts of violence. He is a malevolent spirit that could never nourish what it touches. He also 'knows how to sleep in the middle of multiple realities, and he can inflict harm as easily as he can retrieve it: He has lived to tell many illicit versions of war, to recreate the war. Here he is. Him.'⁴⁵¹ Therefore each mimetic murder marks the return to the original trauma that makes him the man that he is today. Sibaso traces the origin of that trauma, by way of a persistent flashback, to the explosion he survived:

The crater. I trace my way back to the explosion. I feel the air for its unnatural flavours. I distil the air. I find the unholy ingredient in it. I find the man-made chemistry. I follow that smell like a wise dog. I meet limbs discarded, the flesh hanging from uprooted trees. The broken ground an aftermath of an ambush. This is the aftermath of war, its umbilical presence.⁴⁵²

The crater marks the opening of an unresolved trauma, of an unhealed wound that remains open. It is the 'afterbirth of war, its umbilical presence'. The unresolvable trauma of war draws Sibaso back into the depth of its crater. The crater symbolises two things: the actual space, the theatre in which violent battles

⁴⁴⁹ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 98.

⁴⁵⁰ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 97.

⁴⁵¹ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 77, p 81.

⁴⁵² —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 105.

take place; and the inner sanctum of his being, in which he continues to fight against the demons of the past. War, as aftermath, gives birth to Sibaso the new man. His mind is a battlefield, and he is already dead inside.⁴⁵³ Through Sibaso, Vera signals that men, too, even as protagonists of this violence, are also its victims. And she achieves this without detracting from the fact that it is the women, primarily, who bear the heaviest brunt of this war.

Sibaso's disintegrating world also foregrounds the turmoil experienced by those in the grip of the trauma of war violence. Through internal monologue, Vera analyses the effect of war on communities, its capacity for a permanent psychical destruction, and of the deforming character of war. And through this, she also interrogates the problematic of the subjugation of male figures to an invisible authority. This, it can also be said, is a central preoccupation of Vera throughout the novel. Therefore, the pull of the umbilical cord in the above quotation serves as a metaphor for the power of trauma over Sibaso's psychical integrity. Here we may reinvoke Vera's conceptualisation of trauma as an ambush.⁴⁵⁴ Both Sibaso and Nonceba can therefore be seen as the embodiment of the aftermath of an ambush, a 'man-made' catastrophe, which facilitates their treacherous encounter with trauma. Through the use of the phrase 'man-made' Vera points us to the intentionality of war, its evitability. This counteracts the prevailing view of war as something that is unavoidably necessary and inevitable.

Formation and deployment of *Gukurahundi* as a paramilitary force.

Sibaso's failed investiture is his inability to ingratiate himself seamlessly into the new order. His personal war, however, has neither moral nor communal support. As a result, his murder, rape and mutilation of the Gumede sisters can be read as providing the justification, after the fact, of the nationalist government's deployment of the ruthless *Gukurahundi* soldiers to Kezi, under the pretext of quelling the so-called dissident insurrection:

The team of soldiers who congregated outside Thandabantu Store had demonstrated that anything that happened so far had not been random or

⁴⁵³ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 105, p. 98.

⁴⁵⁴ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 69.

unplanned. Atrocious yes, but purposeful. They committed evil as though it were a legitimate pursuit, a ritual for their own conviction.⁴⁵⁵

In the above paragraph, Vera puts the responsibility for the massacres squarely on the shoulders of the military in Zimbabwe. Her indictment of the military in *The Stone Virgins* challenges the official stance on military violence in the country. The deployment of *Gukurahundi* soldiers in Matabeleland was justified by Robert Mugabe thus:

Where men and women provide food for dissidents, when we get there we eradicate them. We don't differentiate when we fight, because we can't tell who is a dissident and who is not.⁴⁵⁶

Interestingly, Mugabe's military resorts to the counter-insurgency methodology of the scorched earth policy adapted by the Rhodesian Forces: the burning down of entire villages, shooting and maiming of livestock, and the torching of granaries. Like *Gukurahundi*, the Rhodesian military also targeted unarmed civilians for murder, torture and arbitrary detention. Thousands of mass graves that relate to the war of liberation have since been discovered in Zimbabwe. What *Gukurahundi* insurgents were doing was nothing new. It was a continuation of the old regime. What emboldened the soldiers was the impunity with which they committed murder, knowing full well that they were covered by law, under the *Indemnity Act 1975*, and the *Emergency Powers (Security Forces Indemnity) Regulations 1975*, respectively. In fact, this was the constitutionalisation of state violence against citizens. *Gukurahundi*, like their predecessors in the *The Selous Scouts*, operated in the so-called free zones, where they reverted to pseudo-guerilla tactics.⁴⁵⁷ Selous Scouts wantonly executed Black soldiers on leave in front of their families, by pretending to be guerrillas, only to come back in their capacity as regular infantry soldiers to avenge their deaths. This was the so-called 'grey propaganda' in which the state utilised psychological

⁴⁵⁵ Vera, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 135.

⁴⁵⁶ See Prime Minister Robert Mugabe's speech in April 1983, justifying the deployment of *Gukurahundi* soldiers in Matabeleland. For a more detailed report on the massacres in Matabeleland and the Midlands, see *Gukurahundi*, p.75; see also Ken Flower, *Serving Secretly* (Alberton: Galago Publishing Ltd, 1987), p. 115. Fowler was the head of Rhodesian Intelligence, and this is his account of how the war was conducted by the Rhodesians. He provides extra information on decisions that were made, including the justification for the use of extreme violence and the inhumane tactics adopted by the Rhodesians in order to quell Black insurrection.

⁴⁵⁷ Selous Scouts operated from 1973 until their dissolution at independence in 1980. See J.K. Cilliers, *Counter Insurgency in Rhodesia* (Sydney: Crook Helm, 1985), pp. 120 – 134.

violence against ordinary civilians, with Fear as its *modus operandi*.⁴⁵⁸ At the best of times, civilians did not always know who they were dealing with; that remains the case in Zimbabwe today. Contrary to Peter Godwin's assertion, *Fear* as a war concept is nothing new in Zimbabwe.⁴⁵⁹

It was under these circumstances that *Gukurahundi* soldiers were deployed in Matabeleland. The resulting violence against civilians was unparalleled, both in its intensity and cruelty. The *coup de grâce* of *Gukurahundi* atrocities as narrated in *The Stone Virgins* is the burning to death, and massacre of Mahlathini and his customers, as already touched on in Chapter One:

Those who witnessed the goings-on at Thandabantu on this night said that Mahlathini howled like a helpless animal. When the sound died his skin was already perforated like a lace. Long before they burned the store down, he had died. What followed the series of gunshots, the torture, was a cacophony of sound, which lit the night with its explosion. The odour of the charred flesh filled the air and stayed in the minds of the villagers of the Kezi villagers forever.⁴⁶⁰

Before proceeding, it should be remembered that the necessity for the formation of *Gukurahundi* as a unit should be read against, and in the context of, the formation of the Selous Scouts under the Rhodesian regime, as part of 'Operation Hurricane'—*Gukurahundi* itself is a type of storm—in order to counteract the infiltration of the Eastern Highlands by ZANLA guerrillas.⁴⁶¹ Like their counterparts in *Gukurahundi*, Selous Scouts were formed as part of the militarisation of pseudo-operations. Although both units were formed and trained in secrecy, their extremely violent behaviours, even by the standards of the military, brought them to the attention of the nation. It seems, that both units attracted a particular type of recruit, on the extremes of violent masculinities. Like *Gukurahundi*, the Selous Scouts had various nationalities operating within the unit, allowing for the concentration and cross-fertilisation of violent methods to occur in one place. Most of the men in the unit had served as far afield as Malaya

⁴⁵⁸ See Fidelis Mukonori, *The Genesis of Violence in Zimbabwe*, ed. Tonderayi W. Chanakira and Dennis T. Rwafa (Harare: The Centre for Peace Initiatives in Africa, 2012), p. 61.

⁴⁵⁹ Godwin, *The Fear*.

⁴⁶⁰ Vera, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 134.

⁴⁶¹ Ron Reid Daly, *Selous Scouts: Top Secret War* (Alberton: Galago Publishing Ltd, 1983).

to deal with the insurrection there, and closer to Rhodesia in theatres of war such as Mozambique, Angola and in Kenya against the *Mau Mau* insurrection.⁴⁶²

According to Flower, founder of the unit, who later claimed that forming the unit was the biggest mistake of his life, the unit attracted ‘vainglorious extroverts and a few psychopathic killers’.⁴⁶³ He went on to say:

In contrast to so much in the conduct of war which was well-coordinated, the Scouts frequently operated without authority or beyond recall, and in the latter stages of the war their activities became so questionable that they were the only Rhodesian unit to be disbanded with obloquy.⁴⁶⁴

Perhaps what is missing from this narrative is that Blacks who lived in the areas frequented by the Selous Scouts bore the brunt of their ‘questionable activities’. One such area was the area of Chiweshe.⁴⁶⁵ According to Flower, head of Rhodesian intelligence at the time, the area of Chiweshe became the testing ground for the government’s policies:

All facilities—schools, shops, clinics, and churches—were closed under the negative threat of tell us what you know about the guerrillas or these facilities will remain closed.⁴⁶⁶

In preparation for the arrival of *Gukurahundi* operatives in Matabeleland, the area was completely sealed off under a cordon sanitaire. In *The Stone Virgins*, the moment of the impending catastrophe is registered by Vera thus:

The war begins. A curfew is declared. A state of emergency. No movement is allowed.⁴⁶⁷

In the end, Kezi, Vera’s peaceful enclave, becomes the end of the railroad, beyond which nothing but tragedy happens. Kezi as a location turns into a

⁴⁶² See Caroline Elkin, *Britain’s Gulag: The Brutal End of Empire in Kenya* (London: The Bodley Head, 2014).

⁴⁶³ Flower, *Serving Secretly*, p. 125.

⁴⁶⁴ ———, *Serving Secretly*, p. 125.

⁴⁶⁵ Chiweshe was a so-called *Tribal Trust Land*, located between three farming areas (Centenary, Mount Darwin, and Umvukwe) closer to the Mozambican border, and had seen a huge infiltration by ZANLA guerrillas. The entire population of 50,000 was resettled in ‘Protected Villages’ in order to starve the insurgency of material support. Unlike a similar operation in Malaya, where-in the aim was to win the ‘hearts and minds’, the operation in Chiweshe was based purely on collective punishment, and brute force used against civilians in order to deter them from supporting guerrillas. In the end, the operation achieved nothing other than the complete alienation of local youths, who later joined the guerrillas in their thousands. Coincidentally, the *Tribal Trust Lands* in Chiweshe were the first to experience the wrath of Operation Hurricane, the predecessor of *Operation Gukurahundi*, in terms of the extreme violence and isolation.

⁴⁶⁶ Flower, *Serving Secretly*, p. 122.

⁴⁶⁷ Vera, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 65.

‘hibernation for death’: ‘A stillness gathers before an earth-quake, before war. There is a stillness such as has not been witnessed before, and a new climate trapped in that air.’⁴⁶⁸ The new Kezi transforms into a mode of containment of the infestation by dissidents. To return to Webner’s observation in full:

In such times, agents of the state, acting with its full authority, carry out the violation of the person. It is as if quasi-nationalism’s victims, by being of an opposed quasi-nation, put themselves outside of nation, indeed beyond the pale of nation. They are dealt with ferociously not merely for the sake of political dominance by one part of the nation over another, but more importantly for the sake of the renewal of the nation as a whole. The attack by the state on the victims’ own bodies, in the present tense, by starvation and torture, even to death, seems to fulfil the objective of purifying and cleansing the body of the nation.⁴⁶⁹

Emmerson Mnangagwa, current President of Zimbabwe, and Robert Mugabe’s successor, who was then Minister for State Security in charge of the notorious CIO organisation, made the following declaration at a rally in Matabeleland in 1983: ‘The campaign against dissidents can only succeed if the infrastructure that nurtures them is destroyed.’⁴⁷⁰ He referred to the Ndebele people as cockroaches and *Gukurahundi* as Dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane (DDT), a chemical compound that would eradicate them. He deliberately evoked the notion of disgust amongst many of his troops, and he understood the subtext of his utterances: that for the nation to restore its purity, it must deal with the presence of Ndebele people as the excess that made the nation impure.⁴⁷¹ And from the speeches of other politicians in that period, it is evident, that in the aftermath of the war of liberation, the nation needed new enemies. Under this logic, Zimbabweans had staged a formidable fight against white Rhodesians, thus completing the first stage of the continuous revolution. As intended by the architects of the Zimbabwean revolution, the second stage necessitated the complete annihilation of what was then perceived as reactionaries within the movement. In this formulation, Ndebele people became the new enemies of the state—Hannah Arendt’s phrase—who had outlived the first ideologically

⁴⁶⁸ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 83.

⁴⁶⁹ Webner, *Tears of the Dead*, p. 60.

⁴⁷⁰ *Gukurahundi*, p. 86.

⁴⁷¹ —, p. 67.

determined foes of the movement, that is, White Rhodesians, and became the 'new potential enemies who were discovered according to the prevailing circumstances', to rephrase Christine Weiland.⁴⁷²

The Ndebele people became sacrificial victims of the 'founding murder' of the Zimbabwean nation. Time and time again, *Gukurahundi* soldiers burned their victims alive, as if to emulate the act of sacrifice itself and in order to cleanse the nation of its impurity:

FEB 1983: All the villagers were forced to witness the burning to death of 26 villagers, in the three huts of Dhlamini. [...] Women and children died. There was only one survivor.⁴⁷³

To-date, it is still impossible to understand why and how the intentional burning to death of people in their homes first started, not just in Zimbabwe, but also across all war zones, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa. Somehow, through the militarisation of language, the act of sacrifice has transformed itself; and surprisingly, self-sacrifice, is now a militarised word that denotes an honourable death on behalf of nation.⁴⁷⁴ I shall return to this idea of sacrifice as the embodiment of Sibaso within *The Stone Virgins*.

In addition, there is another obfuscated but still disturbing meaning attached to sacrifice: the justification of human sacrifice in the creation of a pure homogenous nation through ethnic cleansing. Mugabe explained this onerous task to his newly formed *Gukurahundi* brigade prior to their imminent deployment in Matabeleland thus:

The knowledge that you have acquired will make you work with the people, plough and reconstruct. These are the aims that you should keep to yourself.⁴⁷⁵

It was in order to achieve its aim of ethnic cleansing, that the Zimbabwean government, like its predecessor, enacted the *Emergency Powers (Security Forces*

⁴⁷² Christine Weiland, *The Fascist State of Mind and The Manufacturing of Masculinity: A Psychoanalytic Approach* (East Sussex: Routledge, 2015), p. 17.

⁴⁷³ *Gukurahundi*, p. 157.

⁴⁷⁴ See René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. by Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1979). Girard argues that violence is at heart of the sacred, that it is in all of us as something intrinsically human. Controversially, that it is forever present in any notion of sacrifice that restores order to society, such as genocides, or destructive acts of war.

⁴⁷⁵ *Gukurahundi*, p. 73.

Indemnity) Regulations 1975. The ‘state of emergency’ was an instrument of law which served to obscure the state’s position when it came to the extra-judicial killings, by absolving security personnel from prosecution—as long as their actions are undertaken for the ‘purposes of, or, in connection with the preservation of security’.⁴⁷⁶ The necessity for the *Gukurahundi* purge became justification upon which the massacre of the Ndebele people was based. But this ‘state of necessity’ upon which the ‘state of exception’ was founded, could not, as Giorgio Agamben argues, have assumed a juridical form because the language used by the State suggested that those targeted by *Gukurahundi* soldiers were dissident sympathisers; and that as such, they were the excess that did not deserve the protection of the state.⁴⁷⁷ The state’s intention itself was expressed in a jaundiced language, which lacked clarity, and obliquely enunciated its ultimate ambition: to annihilate the Ndebele, and at the same time, eliminate the major opposition to the government’s project of a one-party state.⁴⁷⁸ This was done through rhetoric, in the language of ‘ploughing and renewal’ which could not, in the aftermath of the atrocities, be held to account.

To Webner, *Gukurahundi* was an army only in name. Its practices were those of a quasi-national army whose ‘sole purpose was to behave like an occupying force that had come down upon an alien people to strangle them into submission’.⁴⁷⁹ Therefore, the juxtaposition of the Ndebele with the dissidents, and vice-versa, served a strategic and political purpose. The following question was directed at Joshua Nkomo, deemed the father of dissidents, by Sydney Sekeramayi:

‘Can Nkomo identify a dissident, a dissident supporter and an innocent civilian?’⁴⁸⁰

In the above statement Sekeramayi seemed to suggest that the state and its security apparatus had no mechanism for detecting insurgents amongst the civilian population. If the state, with an enhanced human and technical intelligence

⁴⁷⁶ _____, p. 71.

⁴⁷⁷ Agamben, *State of Exception*.

⁴⁷⁸ See Sibanda, *The Zimbabwe African People’s Union*.

⁴⁷⁹ Webner, *Tears of the Dead*, p. 161.

⁴⁸⁰ *Gukurahundi*, p. 72.

gathering capacity, was unable to identify dissidents, it was not clear how ordinary citizens were expected to discern the presence of dissidents, if any, in their midst. In fact, Sekeramayi relegates the responsibility for the marauding dissidents back to the citizens, and through a warped logic, instigates a scorched earth policy in order to flush out the dissidents from the general population. When the ambiguous nature of the government's policy was challenged, Mugabe responded thus:

Obviously, it cannot be sane policy to mete out blanket punishment to innocent people, although in areas where banditry and dissident activity are rampant, civilian sympathy is a common feature and it may not be possible to distinguish innocent from guilty.⁴⁸¹

However, the sole purpose of the deployment of *Gukurahundi* soldiers in Matabeleland was—according to those who experienced its violence—for the administration of collective punishment and political re-education of Ndebele people. *Gukurahundi* soldiers adopted the same methodology that they had used as guerrillas in order to obtain unwavering support from the masses. As they had in their previous formation as guerrillas, they avoided any confrontation with so-called dissidents, and concentrated instead on politicising and terrorising Ndebele people, hence Mugabe's metaphor of working with people, as the material to be moulded, through ploughing and reconstruction, which can be understood as methods of violent persuasion. Flower registered this underhand tactic, which ZANU (PF) had mastered to perfection:

But the efficiency in the conduct of war, as few of us realised then, was not enough. Military confrontation was a thing of the past and in its place came a much more difficult problem—the new ZANLA tactic of mobilising masses. Guerrillas were beginning to avoid Security Forces and to concentrate on 'politicisation', which led inevitably to intimidation and in its worst forms became terrorism—murder, rape, and other brutalities.⁴⁸²

As such, *Gukurahundi* soldiers saw their remit within the new government more as a tool for the political re-education and repression of masses, than a military unit. During the interview, former dissidents elaborated on their general perception of *Gukurahundi* as an inept fighting force:

⁴⁸¹ _____, p. 86.

⁴⁸² Flower, *Serving Secretly*, p. 121.

Gukurahundi was not a good fighting unit—where do you see soldiers singing while they are on patrol [...] We would come across them singing and would take cover. Soon after you'd hear people crying in their homes [...] We would clash with them, but instead of following us, they'd call for the villagers. That's where they'd take their revenge, that's where you'd hear bazookas and AKs firing into homes.⁴⁸³

During their deployment, *Gukurahundi* soldiers also made it clear that they were above the law, and that officers from the Zimbabwe Republic Police and other military units who queried their actions were told that the brigade was answerable to none other than the person of the president himself. As such, *Gukurahundi* soldiers, acting as Praetorian Guard to Robert Mugabe, kidnapped and murdered Ndebele soldiers, police officers and civilians with impunity. According to existing reports, one of the Brigade Commanders gave the following instructions to his men:

From today onwards I want you to start dealing with the dissidents. We have them here at this parade [...] Whenever you meet them, deal with them, I do not want a report.⁴⁸⁴

Mugabe knew from the outset that the notion of guilt in the absence of law was problematic. If the motivation for the re-enactment of the repressive laws was political, then the resulting violence could not be explained on juridico-constitutional grounds as Agamben has indicated:

This drastic redefinition of the sovereign function implies a different situation of the state of exception. It no longer appears as the threshold that guarantees the articulation between inside and outside, or between anomie and the juridical context, but by virtue of the law that is in force in its repression: it is rather a zone of absolute indeterminacy between anomie and the law, in which the sphere of creatures and the juridical orders are caught up in a single catastrophe.⁴⁸⁵

In truth, there was no intention by the government to minimise or avoid the violence in Matabeleland for three reasons: First, prior to the deployment of the security forces in Matabeleland, there was a concerted effort, through political rhetoric, to marginalise and dehumanise the Ndebele. Second, political rhetoric conveniently became *prima facie* evidence of the presence of dissidents in the

⁴⁸³ *Gukurahundi*, p. 81.

⁴⁸⁴ *Gukurahundi*, p. 75.

⁴⁸⁵ Agamben, *State of Exception*, p. 57.

region. Third, Matabeleland was seen as the stronghold of the main opposition party—ZAPU. It was perceived by Mugabe and his advisors, that a democratic vote alone could not dislodge the entrenched support for the opposition in Matabeleland. Therefore, the political opposition had to be eradicated or neutralised by other means. The same methodology was adapted by the Rhodesian government as evidenced in its propaganda pamphlet entitled *Anatomy of Terror*, in order to depict freedom fighters as terrorists, and to ‘present the war of liberation as Black anarchy without reference to White injustice, as such a representation could therefore justify the government’s cure—a more punitive dose of law and order ‘because this is what the African really understands.’⁴⁸⁶

The state of emergency necessitated the ‘state of exceptionality’—Agamben’s term—and accorded the state the opportunity to quell the opposition with overwhelming force, in furtherance of its political aims. The instrument of law was intended by the state to indemnify its security apparatus from any future unlawful acts:

As well as abductions, the CIO detained hundreds of other ZAPU supporters. Addressing an election meeting in Bulawayo, Mugabe issued his own thinly veiled threats to those thinking of voting for ZAPU. ‘Where will we be tomorrow?’ he asked. ‘Is it war or is it peace tomorrow? Let the people of Matabeleland decide this question’.⁴⁸⁷

This perverse assumption of a militarised response by the state, in eradicating an abstract notion of dissidence, necessitated the abandonment of ethics, so that violent state action was progressed as occurring within the domain of law. And, as Agamben reminds us once more, ‘it must be recalled that the assumption of moral responsibility has value only if one is ready to assume legal responsibility.’⁴⁸⁸ Unsurprisingly, under these circumstances, the state banished itself from assuming any form of moral or juridical guilt, since it was implicated in orchestrating the murder of civilians. Therefore, if dissidence was deemed illegal within the territory of the nation-state, brutal force, as a legal instrument, gained legitimacy as the furtherance of state policy by other means. But what is

⁴⁸⁶ Flower, *Serving Secretly*, pp. 121-122.

⁴⁸⁷ Martin Meredith, *Our Guns, Our Votes: Robert Mugabe and the Tragedy of Zimbabwe* (New York: Public Affairs, 2003), p. 71.

⁴⁸⁸ Agamben, *State of Exception*, p. 23.

also missed in this argument, but is equally important, is that legality alone, does not confer legitimacy.

It must also be noted that political dissidence itself, when convenient to the state, serves a political function—as the litmus test through which the presence or absence of a thriving democracy can be calibrated in any given nation-state with democratic aspirations. For the Zimbabwean totalitarian state, on the other hand, the invocation of dissidence amplifies the necessity of the quelling of any opposition. So that if the opposition doesn't exist, the state must create it, and then respond by suspending any notion of legal (within the boundaries of statute law) or ethical intervention. During the *Gukurahundi* massacres, Zimbabwe as a totalitarian state, invoked the tried and tested trope of a permanent revolution so that the state could impose its will on the masses, while it fought its imaginary enemies. According to Weiland:

The total power of the totalitarian regimes turns out to mean unparalleled destruction of plurality. But since plurality can only be destroyed by destroying humanity, the extermination of the whole population seems endless. Extermination continues and is part of the regime long after all the enemies of the regime have been eliminated. Enemies have to be invented and reinvented all the time.⁴⁸⁹

In Zimbabwe, in order to bring into existence, the real and not imaginary dissidents, soldiers donned civilian clothes, penetrated civilian areas and carried out the most grotesque forms of atrocities, only to return and carry out search-and-destroy missions. The actions of the security forces and those of the dissidents cancelled each other out. Their combined efforts, in terms of violence and brutality, advanced the same aim: which was to terrorise citizens. The state could no longer be expected to protect citizens as it pursued dissidents believed to be embedded within citizenry. On the other hand, dissidents could not protect citizens from the state, as they had no political mandate to pursue on behalf of citizens anyhow. In the end, civilians were snared in this phantasmic reality they could not escape:

⁴⁸⁹ Weiland, *The Fascist State of Mind*, p. 17.

The situation for ordinary citizens was an impossible one during these years: whatever they did, they were likely to be wrong, in somebody's eyes.⁴⁹⁰

The humiliation of violence.

Throughout *The Stone Virgins*, Vera, foregrounds and interrogates, through her characters, the notion of militarised and violent masculinities in war. Through the figure of Sibaso, she connects the prevailing violence to the violence of the past. Men in *The Stone Virgins*, as indeed in Zimbabwe itself, are the embodiment of their own and of past times. This is also the central argument of this thesis, that because of its history of colonial repression, and its continuing political violence, Zimbabwe offers a unique and fertile ground for the study of violent masculinities. The excess of these violent masculinities can be read as a defensive mechanism, the reaction of a masculinity that has long been devalued by the colonial experience: if the racist Rhodesian regime humiliates and emasculates the Black man through violence, then he can only regain and maintain his manhood through extreme violence. Because, as Vera suggests, there is a 'lack for which there are no words to describe'.⁴⁹¹

At the centre of the nationalist's rhetoric of a valuable manhood, is the idea of heroic masculinities: men who are willing to die or kill for their country and defend its territorial integrity with all their might. As Vera suggests, the country 'needs its heroes, and flags—and the notion of sacrifice'.⁴⁹² In post-war Zimbabwe, the figure of the war veteran serves best to illustrate the continuation of that legacy. Violence in Zimbabwe has undermined all moral value systems. These are men who embrace a dual masculine identity in which a heroic and unprincipled manhood reside in one and the same man. They are 'predators with all the full instinct of annihilation', men who 'laugh at death' and make 'reckless journeys into minds'.⁴⁹³ But they are also very 'pliant, malleable and insignificant'.⁴⁹⁴ During the war they adopt new identities as they 'succumb to a

⁴⁹⁰ Gukurahundi, p. 72.

⁴⁹¹ Vera, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 139.

⁴⁹² —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 55.

⁴⁹³ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 69, p. 78.

⁴⁹⁴ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 139.

violent wind'.⁴⁹⁵ And in order to survive, they follow war in all its digressions into tragic places. They 're-invent new enemies whom they have to purge'. More importantly, they possess both 'the will and the desire to attack'—'and a willingness to desecrate and violate kindness'.⁴⁹⁶ To them 'women are without worth'—they are nothing but 'an aftermath to desire'.⁴⁹⁷ Instead of living their mark on history, they maim and leave their indelible marks on women's bodies: they rape, mutilate and violate women.

But what is striking about all these men is their ordinariness. They are men whom, on any ordinary day one can trust.⁴⁹⁸ Not only are they capable of horrendous things, they are also 'disembodied beings whose minds are also perishable'.⁴⁹⁹ If the seizure of land is their absolute concern and the dominant cause or pretext for the struggle, war becomes a prop for every lie, and these men operate with such impunity they have 'no authority above them except the naked sky'.⁵⁰⁰ In *The Stone Virgins* Vera helps us map out the interdependencies between Zimbabwe's history of violence, racist repression, emergent violent masculinities, and a virulent nationalism. And through her work, she also highlights the prevailing silence which conceals the terrible trauma of war. Although the country needs its heroes, it offers no resolution to the psychically wounded: they have 'to have a balm for their own wounds' because no one talks about war.⁵⁰¹ Zimbabwe is a nation that exists 'in the midst of death', a country in which people 'have land but no habitat', and where people are 'out of bounds in their own reality'.⁵⁰²

Nothing is said. Not about the war. [...]. Nothing said today or tomorrow. Nothing.⁵⁰³

Vera warns, peremptorily, that no amount of violence will ever restore dignity. By so doing she also tears down this illusion of a perfect manhood based

⁴⁹⁵ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 139, p. 82.

⁴⁹⁶ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 83.

⁴⁹⁷ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 69.

⁴⁹⁸ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 72.

⁴⁹⁹ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 103.

⁵⁰⁰ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 103, p. 141.

⁵⁰¹ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 84.

⁵⁰² —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 82.

⁵⁰³ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 116.

on the violent acquisition of land. She also helps us ponder the question of what it is that nations ask of their heroes, and how they are rewarded for their heroism. But there is another more nuanced question which she seeks to ask: that of obedience. Towards the end of the introduction, I touched on the idea of humiliation as a major contributing factor towards shaping violent masculinities. As we will now see, humiliation is intimately related to the notion of shame and disgust, strategically deployed to obtain obedience, and ultimately shape violent masculinities. In his study of the Sierra Leonean civil war, Kieran Mitton argues that, in turn, the abandonment of the rule of law, or rather the enactment of arbitrary laws, undergirded a culture of impunity, through the cultivation of what he calls a 'state of shamelessness.'⁵⁰⁴ In his meditation on the causes of the violence in Sierra Leone, he invokes as its lasting emblem, and visual highlight, the double amputations carried out by rebels against civilians under *Operation No Living Thing*. Those affected by the amputations, such as breast-feeding women who could not feed their infants or themselves nor attend to their infected wounds, were deliberately rendered helpless. Collectively, and without any medical intervention, they could not plant or harvest crops. Observed from a distance, the operation seemed founded in unreality, but upon closer inspection, it can be argued that its cruelty showcased the rationality of its intended political outcomes.

Unusually, Mitton's study of the violence in Sierra Leone's civil war concentrated on the perpetrators' narrative of violence, and their motivations, rather than those of the victims. Mitton also argues that the exploration of shame, and the notion of disgust, as major contributing factors towards violence, particularly the extreme violence related to rebel groups, has largely been ignored. He argues, rather convincingly, that those joining rebel groups or similar are very vulnerable individuals who exhibit an injured sense of pride. The injured sense of pride, Mitton explains, creates a sense of grievance, usually as a sense of a past injustice, which is often accompanied by an extreme level of shame. Shame, in this context, can be understood as an abasement of self-pride, resulting in a state

⁵⁰⁴ Mitton, *Rebels in a Rotten State*.

of submission. Here, we can digress slightly, by suggesting that Mitton's work can read in broad sympathy with Julia Kristeva's theorisation of abjection:

There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, it worries, and fascinates desire, which, nevertheless does not let itself be seduced. Apprehensive, desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects. A certainty protects it from the shameful—a certainty of which it is proud holds on to it.⁵⁰⁵

In the debased, humiliated recruit, the abject is no longer external to the self: it is driven inwards, and the horror that constitutes the abjection can only be expelled through violence: this, she suggests, is the impulse harnessed by National Socialists. Therefore, in violent group dynamics, this constant sense of shame and disgust, which is necessarily combined with a resultant humiliation, is achieved through violent intimidation, actual physical violence, and disgusting acts visited upon the individual, or committed by the individual against another under duress, usually, during the recruitment process. Most recently, Mitton's thesis has been validated, to a certain extent, by the numerous instances pertaining to those who commit atrocious terrorist attacks:

In combat training, this process of dehumanisation, or otherisation, was often pursued by forced executions of captured enemies. Including civilian sympathisers and collaborators. Those who refused to kill were punished, even executed; and those who obeyed were given praise and respect for achieving a rite of passage to 'rebel hood'.⁵⁰⁶

The continued exposure of the individual to disgusting, shameful, and humiliating acts results, Mitton suggests, in a persistent shame and disgust that is almost impossible to eradicate. The crux of Mitton's argument is that first and foremost, disgust acts as repellent from a harmful environment, and from specific behaviours deemed immoral.⁵⁰⁷ In other words, it is engrained into all of us as a

⁵⁰⁵ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 1.

⁵⁰⁶ Mitton, *Rebels in a Rotten State*, p. 190.

⁵⁰⁷ See Martha C. Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame and the Law* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), who is sceptical about the whole notion of shame and disgust and their troubling relationship with the law, and the way in which they are used to regulate human behaviour. She argues that the thought of disgust embodies magical ideas which are incompatible with human life as we know it. She strongly suggests that disgust should not be the basis for criminalising certain acts, and that we should remain vigilant and suspicious towards what she calls primitive shame. Nussbaum's philosophical argument

major part of the survival mechanism, passed on from generation to generation. Although the constitutive elements of both shame and disgust can be perceived as indistinguishable from each other, Mitton argues that disgust, unlike shame, 'becomes a guilt-less motivation for a divisive and malevolent Othering; that is, as a threat-reaction and signifier, disgust is a powerful emotion that carries a strong impulse to take action.' He suggests that it 'is in the language of disgust-responses—such as purging, cleaning, purifying, sterilising, eradicating difference—that we recognise as the hallmarks of Holocaust and genocide propaganda.'⁵⁰⁸ The moment of rupture, of the differentiation between violent acts and the guilt in the mind of the individual involved in atrocities, marks the beginning of the compartmentalisation, that is, when one 'crosses the moral line', leading to a severely compromised conscience.⁵⁰⁹

In its most basic formulation, Mitton's rendering of disgust helps us explore the problematic of inter-group rivalry, and the contribution made by disgust towards the dehumanisation and Othering of one's perceived enemies. In terms of trauma, and in the context of *Gukurahundi* atrocities, the powerful and most convincing aspect of this argument is that somehow, after committing certain disgusting acts, one feels permanently violated and beyond redemption. After this violation, nothing within the group is prohibited, and no act of violence, no matter how depraved, is beyond reach.

In *The Stone Virgins*, *Gukurahundi* soldiers 'commit evil as though it were a legitimate pursuit, a ritual for their own convictions'.⁵¹⁰ They humiliate their victims by stripping them naked, extracting false confessions and torturing them. According to Weiland, within such groups, there is no 'Oedipal prohibition'.⁵¹¹ And as Vera suggests, 'there is no moral authority above these soldiers except the sky'.⁵¹² As such, *Gukurahundi* soldiers operate within an 'infinite moral space'

demonstrates the power of shame and disgust in shaping modern human values, that if left unchecked, could lead to an attempt to hide from our own humanity through unrealistic and sometimes pathological wish to be seen as invulnerable.

⁵⁰⁸ Mitton, *Rebels in a Rotten State*, pp. 183-4.

⁵⁰⁹ It is worthy of note, as already mentioned earlier in the thesis, that comparisons between the Holocaust and latter forms of genocide will forever remain imbued with insurmountable controversy and complications.

⁵¹⁰ Vera, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 135.

⁵¹¹ Weiland, *The Fascist State of Mind*, p. 22.

⁵¹² Vera, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 141.

where everything is permitted. In the same way that Selous Scouts operated in [moral] free zones. According to Weiland:

The moral void simplifies violence. The empty subject must find a victim to contain the void, and now a state of mind becomes an act of violence [...] To accomplish this, the mind transforms a human other into a disposable nonentity, a bizarre mirror transference of what has already occurred in the [Fascist] self-experience.⁵¹³

In Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela's *A Human Being Died that Night*, this crossing of the ethical line—the point of no return—is demonstrated by Eugene de Kock's story of the cross-border raid. Under this schema, and as Gobodo-Madikizela argues, 'perpetrators of human rights violations redefine morality and start believing that they can commit systematic murder and other atrocities for the 'greater good.''⁵¹⁴ Crossing the border can be read as the transgression, not only of physical borders in order to commit atrocities in foreign lands, which is a persistent war phenomenon, but also as the violation of something sacrosanct, much closer to home: crossing the line beyond which one must never venture in terms of transgressing morality, no matter how dire one's circumstances. de Kock crosses both. Of this very moment of crossing over 'to the other side', he says that this occurred after one too many operations during which he killed mercilessly, on numerous occasions:

As he drove back from the killing field, he felt increasingly uncomfortable. He began to notice an odd smell on his body. At first he dismissed it as the normal smell of discharged gunpowder, perhaps a little more caustic than usual but nothing particularly out of the ordinary. By the time he herded home at dawn, however, the acrid smell – now on his clothing as well – had become so unbearable that as he walked into living room, he ripped his clothes off and threw them in a pile on the floor, then headed straight for the shower.⁵¹⁵

Gobodo-Madikizela goes on to say:

A human being died that night in the murder operation. This reality seemed to hang between us. At that moment I thought I saw a man finally acknowledging the debt he owed to his conscience.⁵¹⁶

⁵¹³ Weiland, *The Fascist State of Mind*, p. 22.

⁵¹⁴ Gobodo-Madikizela, *A Human Being Died That Night*, p. 58.

⁵¹⁵ Gobodo-Madikizela, 'A Human Being Died That Night', pp. 50-51.

⁵¹⁶ _____, 'A Human Being Died That Night', p. 51.

In *The Stone Virgins*, it is Sibaso's humiliation at the hands of the state that triggers his desertion from the military and his subsequent engagement in an all-out war. Instead of being rewarded for his contribution to his country's final overthrow of the colonialist regime, he is ostracised and hunted down like a wild animal. Vera does not condone his actions, but she merely points us towards the possible explanation for his disenfranchisement: his mother dies whilst giving birth to him, his father dies as a result of neglect whilst in detention of the colonialist regime. And he abandons his studies to pursue the war of liberation. When he comes back from war, there is nothing waiting for him, and he 'cannot rejoice as he did not fight to please another'. As a result, he chooses to become 'an instrument of war and loses all pity for himself'.⁵¹⁷ Sibaso's voice is a heroic self-analysis which makes visible the dearth of his own soul. He sketches out in fragmentary detail his transformation into an instrument of war. Like Eugene de Kock he embraces the destructive power of war-violence and crosses into the realm beyond which he cannot return, because inside he 'is already dead, an exhumed thing breathing'.⁵¹⁸ He has lost the ability to relate to others, which is a sign of severe detachment disorder, a major symptom of trauma. His remorselessness, this complete lack of feeling is registered by his attempt to bite his own fingers in order to restore feeling. This way, Vera uses Sibaso's character to explore this complex nexus between victim and victimiser, abuser and abused. Thus, complicating our own understanding of what it means to survive extreme traumatic experiences. But she also makes another crucial point here. That Sibaso has as much right as anybody else to tell his story even if readers may not fully understand his motivations. An analogy can be drawn here with narratives of the perpetrators of violence elsewhere. Their crucial testimony (often missing from narratives of trauma) is a form of accountability, a way of seeking redemption through the recognition of the pain of others. It is not, as Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela warns, an absolution from their evil deeds, but something akin to the restoration of their own humanity. More importantly, such recognition gives the victim a glimpse of the perpetrator's humanity too. And this is very significant in

⁵¹⁷ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 141.

⁵¹⁸ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 98.

the context of healing following traumatic events, since communal healing depends on the recognition of a shared woundedness, the very basis of *Ubuntu*.

Sibaso's numbness, his cauterisation and concealment of feeling also serves as a synecdoche for a community that has been completely desensitised from violence and is in desperate need of healing. As Vera says, in war 'no one aids another or suffers for another.'⁵¹⁹ The moment registers Sibaso's desperation to feel something 'akin to kindness' in order to restore feeling towards other human beings since he 'survives on nothing but death.'⁵²⁰ This moment in *The Stone Virgins*, the biting of fingers, offers a momentary reprieve. It is an invitation for the whole nation to stop and take stock. If only they could see the devastation that this violence is causing.

Therefore, Vera foregrounds Sibaso's gruesome act of murder and rape as the embodiment of a traumatised masculinity, what she calls 'disembodied beings.'⁵²¹ Thus, in psychoanalytic terms, the decapitation of Thenjiwe and the mutilation of Nonceba can be read as an acting out of the haunting that hovers continuously on the lives of those who were involved in the war of liberation in Zimbabwe. Sibaso is the precursor of the war veteran who continually haunts the Zimbabwean landscape. But his legend, like that of the war veteran, is a fraud, because he is aware of his 'responsibility, this commitment in his bones to end other lives.'⁵²²

Mitton's conceptual framework for analysing the dynamics of violent groups lends itself to my reading of trauma in the context of *Gukurahundi* violence in Zimbabwe in the 1980s. By way of illustration, and in trying to highlight similarities between Mitton and my own thinking, I shall briefly turn to the historical account of ZANLA's recruitment methods during the war of liberation.

Commented [A3]: Not clear why 'awareness' of his responsibility would make him a fraud. Do you mean he cannot buy into the war veteran legend because his awareness sets him apart from the dominant ideology? This needs rewording and perhaps a final sentence to sum up the importance of this moment

⁵¹⁹ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 35.

⁵²⁰ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 82.

⁵²¹ —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 103.

⁵²² —, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 99.

ZANLA's violent recruitment methods and the economy of war violence

An important step in habituating conscripts to performing violence was dislocating them from their moral and social world. From this point on they could be instilled with new moral and social values which legitimised and celebrated violence. This process began with conscription, when recruits were often witness to brutal violence against family members and neighbours, an event which represented a traumatic aberration of moral and social order.⁵²³

At the beginning of the war, ZANLA relied mainly on volunteers for recruits. As the war progressed, it became apparent that the war could not be waged on volunteers alone. There was an urgent need to fill up the ranks quickly through conscription; in order to replenish guerrillas who were injured, captured or killed in battle. Faced by the lack of volunteers, armed guerrillas corralled students from boarding schools around the country, and forcibly marched them to the guerrilla training camps in Mozambique, and as far afield as Tanzania.⁵²⁴ Life in the camps was brutal. In order to instil discipline amongst cadres, and to invest in them a very specific ideological orientation, conformity became the defining characteristic of ZANU's cadre-ship. In other words, they had to tow the revolutionary line, there could be no deviation from it: there was an imperative for total obedience, and the total elimination of individuality. Nothing in the camps made sense. All the cadres could do was lose themselves in the mass of other cadres within the camp. Critical thought was banished into the periphery of a dominant sloganeering.

As such, in the camp as in the field, there was an over-abundance of the overt display of the administration of discipline. The security apparatus within the guerrilla movement ensured that discipline had to be seen to be believed. Discipline was ruthlessly enforced, and life in camps was lived under the warped logic of *Chirenje*, a mode of ideological self-sufficiency encouraged by ZANLA's political commissars, at a time when most cadres had nothing to exchange but the

⁵²³ Mitton, *Rebels in a Rotten State*, p. 231.

⁵²⁴ For example, the case of 400 students who were kidnapped from Manama High School by guerrillas in January 1977. See, Vusumuzi Dube, 'Lest We Forget: Manama mass recruitment: What they said', in *The Sunday News*.< <https://www.sundaynews.co.zw/lest-we-forget-manama-mass-recruitment-what-they-said>.> [accessed 18 March 2021]

clothes they had on. According to Fay Chung, it was not unusual for cadres to walk barefoot in the camp, with buttocks exposed for lack of clothing:

The young recruits were poorly clad, often with much of their bodies visible through their thread-bare clothes [...] There was a serious shortage of blankets, with one blanket being shared by three or four guerrillas. The only way to keep warm in the cold was to sleep close to the fire. Shoes were also in short supply. This became problematic and particularly difficult because of the prevalence of *matekenya*, or sand lice, which would burrow into the skin of your feet and under your toenails, causing excruciating pain.⁵²⁵

Apart from starvation, beatings, rape and the prevalence of disease such as cholera, and other tropical diseases within the camp, constant humiliation became the method with which cadres were kept in check. One method of punishment in particular stands out—in terms of the level of disgust and the shame associated with it. According to the rules of its execution, cadres were forced to lie prone with buttocks fully exposed—whether male or female. Their hands were tied behind their back, with a wire fastened and pulled back at the elbow, constricting their breathing. And their legs were tied together to further restrict any unnecessary movement. Next, they were beaten on the buttocks with logs, until they defaecated themselves. This could have been for anything, from a very minor infringement of the rules to an attempted desertion; or any number of fictitious scenarios dreamed up by the torturers themselves. During the torture, the cadres were forced to confess to things they had not done, such as spying, or attempting to infiltrate the movement as enemy combatants. The ‘confession’ would later become currency, especially where there was a need to eliminate the cadres for whatever reason.⁵²⁶ The aim, however, was to break down the individual will of the cadres, to the extent they could never challenge authority.⁵²⁷

For the cadres forced to lie in their own excrement after extreme torture, a physical as well as a psychological defilement occurs in which there is a rending of ‘subliminal structures’ in violation of the cleanliness habits acquired in childhood; and, of defaecation as an activity of which one part-takes in private and not in the

⁵²⁵ Chung, *Reliving the Second Chimurenga*, p. 194.

⁵²⁶ See Gerald Chikozho Mazarire, ‘Discipline and Punishment in ZANLA: 1964-1979’, in *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (2011), 571-591.

⁵²⁷ Chung, *Reliving the Second Chimurenga*, p. 93.

presence of others. The predominance of violence in the camps, fragments all meaning: all that can be understood is the visceral sensation of violence.

The brutality of this disciplinary mechanism within the camps was captured by Alexander Kanengoni in his insightful rendition of the bush war in *Echoing Silences*—part history, part fiction, part memoir.⁵²⁸ Kanengoni's work also registers the insanity of war violence, particularly its aftermath. In the novel, his protagonist Munashe, recently arrived cadre in the camp, is summoned to attend the feared security office for interrogation, which was a standard procedure to obtain biographies from cadres in order to prevent infiltration by the Rhodesian military:

Munashe's thoughts were in turmoil. He was paralysed with fear by what he saw inside the dilapidated security building. A young man in nothing but soiled pants writhed in pain on the floor. His arms were tied with a copper wire around the elbows behind his back so that he looked like a chicken being held by the wings; his chest was abnormally pushed out, but the people around him chatted normally as if they were not aware of his quietly writhing presence. Munashe looked at his arms and saw the bulge that had formed between the shoulders and he wondered what wrong the young man could have done to be punished this way.⁵²⁹

Worryingly, this very method of torture somehow traversed across Africa and made it all the way to the Sierra Leonian civil war. As a method of torture, it is believed to be the invention of the Portuguese military in Mozambique. From there, it was passed on to the Frelimo guerrillas, against whom it was used by the Portuguese; and through them, to the ZANLA cadres, through their joint operations in the field. As the technique or techne, the craft-like knowledge of violence was passed on, in the theatre of war, across borders; it was adjusted to the prevailing circumstances and acquired a localised character. Whatever the circumstances of its application, there is no doubt that it is an extremely effective method of persuasion. Interestingly, for the preoccupations of this chapter, this very method of torture also became the *modus operandi* of *Gukurahundi* soldiers in Matabeleland—underlying the very signature of its violence. As a method of administering violence, it became the embodiment of emasculation par

⁵²⁸ Kanengoni, *Echoing Silences*.

⁵²⁹ ———, *Echoing Silences*, p. 9.

excellence. It seems that in their travels during the war, and as a result of war, *Gukurahundi* soldiers collated different ideas on the applications of violent techniques. In the end they could no longer feel shame, disgust or pity: they were forced to live inside their own horror and were subjected to acts designed to terrorise them.⁵³⁰

The subject now exports his own sense of void—the empty self—on to the object who becomes empty, a nonentity and valueless. He sees grandiosity born out of the annihilation of the other. In this the very process of annihilation brings with it emptiness and purity. What comes from outside contaminates and pollutes.⁵³¹

I want to suggest here that *Gukurahundi* soldiers were born out of this grotesque violation and humiliation. Through ritualised torture in the camps, and the subsequent violent initiation in the field, they became a paranoid entity whose surreal violence over-spilled from fantasy into the real. Their violence manifested itself through this unique grotesquery. Precisely what made *Gukurahundi* soldiers such effective killers was that they had intimate knowledge of the psyche of their victims, having been victim themselves. However, in the new formulation, they had the power, and their victims—fragility. According to Webner:

Some of the nightmarish quality of their experience came from virtually surrealist re-enactment of certain parts created in the liberation war. The Fifth Brigade soldiers were the merciless enforcers of collective punishment by the state, re-enacting the part of the Rhodesian forces, yet they represented themselves also as having the moral authority of freedom fighters, and they demanded displays of support the kind of which they had known as freedom fighters.⁵³²

In their capacity as ordinary Zimbabweans, *Gukurahundi* soldiers were unquestionably identical to their victims in so many ways. There was a recognition, mainly on their part, of something of themselves in others before the war: something that they envied in those who had not been brutalised by war so

⁵³⁰ See Alex Vine, *Renamo: Terrorism in Mozambique* (London: James Curry Ltd, 1991), p. 90. Renamo were an insurgency group created by the Rhodesian Security Forces under Ken Flower's direction, with the sole purpose of acting as the fifth column intended to destabilise Mozambique after independence from Portuguese rule. Like *Gukurahundi* soldiers they were renowned for their extreme brutality. Also, Renamo and Selous Scouts carried out joint operations against ZANLA insurgents inside Mozambique. What is also significant is that the Zimbabwean soldiers were deployed against Renamo in the 1980s in order to protect its commercial interests during Mozambique's post-independence civil war.

⁵³¹ Weiland, *The Fascist State of Mind*, p. 22.

⁵³² Webner, *Tears of the Dead*, p. 169.

much. Here I want to posit that the Ndebele people were one such group. Unlike *Gukurahundi* soldiers, they had never crossed the line into the ‘grey zone’—Primo Levi’s term.⁵³³ It could reasonably be argued, that part of the paranoia engulfing the group was a result of the inconsolable loss felt by everyone within the group, of something that had made them intrinsically human before their transformation into ‘rebel-hood’—Kieran Mitton’s term.

The Ndebele people reminded *Gukurahundi* soldiers of that irreparable loss.⁵³⁴ *Gukurahundi* soldiers had given everything of themselves into the war effort. If the aim of the war was to build one cohesive nation, the external threat to that ambition was the Ndebele people: they were the malcontents who drove the persecutory complex within *Gukurahundi*, who were prepared to sacrifice themselves and others in defence of the sacred object that was Zimbabwe. But in embracing death as an absolute value, they contaminated themselves beyond salvation. As a result, they projected on to the Ndebele the negative destructiveness of what they hated in themselves from their own past suffering.

We can therefore surmise, that as a group, it was this loss which moved this mass of young men to rape, murder, and mutilate, as long as there was some kind of re-enforcement, through political songs, and warped narratives of a continuing war, of the necessity of the purge:

Many communities suffered massive material loss in the initial on-slaught, losing huts and granaries. They also lost village members who had been killed or abducted and were frequently forced to watch others close to them dying slowly from injuries sustained from beatings, burning, and bayoneting. Villagers were warned not to seek medical help, and risked being shot for curfew breaking if they did seek help. Many who were beaten, were left with a permanent disability, ranging from paralysis, blindness, deafness, recurrent miscarriage, impotence, infertility and kidney damage [...] In addition to the physical injuries, it is clear from interviews that large numbers of people in Tsholotsho suffered some degree of psychological trauma, leading in extreme cases, to insanity, and

⁵³³ Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* (London: Abacus, 2013).

⁵³⁴ According to Franco Fornari war is a paranoid elaboration of mourning. He suggests that the anxieties and psychotic fantasies that govern murderous groups stem from their external projection of an internalised anger, on to those deemed to pose a threat to the group. The resulting paranoia triggers a persecutory complex, so that the group feels compelled to kill in order to survive. I use Fornari’s idea if only to illustrate how *Gukurahundi* soldiers were one such paranoid entity, and that what drove their killing spree was their joint hatred of the Ndebele people. See Franco Fornari, *The Psychoanalysis of War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975).

in many cases to recurring depression, dizzy spells, anxiety, anger or a permanent fear and distrust of government officials.⁵³⁵

However, it was mainly the humiliation that *Gukurahundi* soldiers experienced as part of their initiation into the violent insurgency in the camps in Mozambique that appears to have affected them the most. The architects of the method ensured that as part of their initiation in the field, each cadre would be forced to commit acts of violence beyond redemption. Based on their experience, they predicted that from then, their loyalty would always be with the group. Shame, as the binding principle of the group, manifested itself as a tacit understanding between comrade-in-arms of the secrecy of their initiation. It fostered a type of silence that enabled violence, something we have seen throughout this thesis, as it paralysed intervention. According to Mitton:

It is clear that desensitisation to violence was an important aim of these forced executions, forming part of the moral disengagement strategies [...] However, a part of this desensitisation involved accustoming recruits to overcome or withstand the experience of disgust associated with killing. Rewarding those who confronted and withstood disgust rendered it a source of pride; at the same time, it accustomed recruits to associating their victims with dehumanising violent disgust. This strategy may constitute what Kathleen Taylor describes as ‘disgust ordeals’, in which the ‘perpetrator training prior to planned atrocities’ involves deliberately confronting the trainee with disgusting stimuli while providing highly rewarding group feedback.⁵³⁶

In Kanengoni’s *Echoing Silences* the protagonist Munashe experienced this first-hand. During his initiation, he had been forced to kill a woman with a baby on her back as punishment for being a suspected ‘sell-out’. Ironically, it was a female combatant who beat Munashe into submission, retorting that no-one had forced him to join the war. Even femininity must surrender to the violent and toxic masculinity of the theatre of war. There is a bizarre transference between the female cadre and the defenceless female victim with a baby on her back—she is the embodiment of weakness at its worst, particularly during a war. There is no explanation as to why the baby has to die as well. But here is a suggestion: that by directing and overseeing the double murder, the female cadre is seen as purging

⁵³⁵ *Gukurahundi*, p. 143.

⁵³⁶ Mitton, *Rebels in a Rotten State*, pp. 190-191.

herself of the perceived weakness of women in the face of violence at war, and in the process proves her worth: in war death-work acts as reward in itself:

Then he looked at the haggard figure of the woman and it lost its shape and its edges got torn and the baby on her back became a protrusion of her hunched back and then he swung the hoe, and he heard the blade swishing furiously through the air [...] The war was an insatiable incinerator that would burn them all up, one after another. The woman fell down with the first vicious blow and the sound of Munashe's jarred and violent cry mingled with that of the dying baby as the hoe fell again and again until Munashe was splattered with dark brown blood and the base commander held him back and he refused, shouting that he wished someone had killed him because he could not live with such memory.⁵³⁷

Moments like this bring us back into the core violence of *The Stone Virgins*. What is most disturbing perhaps, is that both war rape and violence against women, are sanctioned and perpetrated by seemingly ordinary, everyday men—brothers, fathers, uncles and grandfathers. Ordinarity, whether of the violence, the masculinities involved in violence, or the events themselves, is a theme that runs through this thesis. In terms of the *Gukurahundi* atrocities, it is the way in which the 'event attaches its tentacles into everyday life and folds itself into the recesses of the ordinary'—to use the suggestive phrase of Veena Das.⁵³⁸ For the purposes of this argument, this is the very problem highlighted by Yvonne Vera herself in *The Stone Virgins*, because Sibaso, the man who rapes, mutilates and then kills, is just an ordinary man. Amongst the *Gukurahundi* soldiers themselves, one of the highly disturbing aspects of their atrocities was their tendency to single out women for special attention. It appears the genocide provided the platform for their realisation of their [heteronormative] male fantasies under the guise of rape as an intrinsic part of war, and the idea of women as 'loot'. *Gukurahundi* soldiers watched with the greatest of composure and unflinching determination the spectacle of their own violence against women and girls:

FEB 1983: 5 Brigade came to the school and took 60 pupils aged over 14. They were all beaten and asked about dissidents. 20-30 girls were raped

⁵³⁷ Kanengoni, *Echoing Silences*, pp. 30-31.

⁵³⁸ Das, *Life and Words*, p. 1.

and then ordered to have sex with some of the boys while the soldiers watched.⁵³⁹

The coercion of young boys into having sex with victims of sexual violence demonstrates the warped logic that operated within *Gukurahundi* itself, and by extension, the logic operates in Zimbabwe through the figure of the war veteran.⁵⁴⁰ It is as if by forcing young boys to emulate soldiers, the boys have become complicit in the atrocities themselves, and in the end have unburdened the soldiers from a guilty conscience. To date, the continuing sexual and physical abuse of women and girls in Zimbabwe remains unspeakable. There is also a deafening silence amongst women combatants who survived the war of liberation, such as Joice Mujuru—now a very powerful figure in the Zimbabwean political landscape. Mujuru has shown an unwillingness to engage in the ‘debate regarding war rape’.⁵⁴¹ In the absence of authentic female voices from the camps in Mozambique, and those who fought the war as combatants, particularly the young girls who acted as *chimbwidos*, it is hard to estimate how many were affected.⁵⁴²

Recently in Zimbabwe, the topic of the rape of women by soldiers has resurfaced after Judith Todd, the daughter of the ex-Rhodesian Prime Minister Garfield Todd, made allegations that she had been raped by a military officer during the *Gukurahundi* atrocities, Brigadier Agrippa Mutambara, who then claimed that he was acting on the instructions of Gen. Solomon Mujuru, ex-Vice President Joice Mujuru’s husband, the then commander of the armed forces in Zimbabwe—now deceased. Interestingly, Mujuru was assassinated by elements with ZANU-PF seemingly with Robert Mugabe’s approval. Mutambara allegedly took Judith Todd to a room inside a prison complex and raped her, as punishment for attempting to bring the Matabeleland atrocities to the attention of the world.

⁵³⁹ *Gukurahundi*, p. 156.

⁵⁴⁰ For example, the Zimbabwe’s Gezi Border Youth Programme which has been blamed for turning youths into ‘monsters without a conscience’. It is believed that ZANU (PF) continues to exploit vulnerable youths as instruments of political violence. See, ‘The Border Gezi Training Camps: A Look inside the infamous Border Gezi Training Camps of Zimbabwe-YouTube’, <m.youtube.com/watch?v=OOwEi-N0E/> [accessed 18 March 2021].

⁵⁴¹ See Sebastian Berger, <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/world/1556950/Robert-Mugabe-critic-raped.html>> [accessed 3 Oct 2019]

⁵⁴² These were girls who cooked, cleaned and provided sexual services to the guerrillas during the war. For a more detailed account, and testimonies of those who were coerced to have sex with the guerrillas, see Irene Staunton, ed., *Mothers of the Revolution* (Harare: Baobab Books, 1990).

Mutambara admitted rape, but claimed he was following orders; that, in any case, he was covered by indemnity laws as the rape was committed as an act of war, notwithstanding that at the time of the rape Zimbabwe had been independent for more than three years. Officially, there was no war. Also, rape cannot be used as punishment under the law: it is against statute law to rape someone. What is also remarkable about the story is that Judith Todd was, at the time of the rape, a powerful and well-connected White woman, and she never shied away from registering the allegation that she had been raped, and in the process named her attacker. Zimbabwean authorities have known this for over thirty-five years. Despite the presence of a witness, and an admission by the offender, there has yet to be a prosecution for the offence. Many more women have since come forward to tell their stories. Perhaps it's a case of too little, too late. Perhaps the impact of their narratives will now and forever be lost in the cacophony of the accumulating trauma of rape and political violence in Zimbabwe. As one of the young women affected by war rape stated:

It was unfortunate that we had to sleep with the comrades because sometimes we had sex with them. You couldn't even tell a friend because it might be said that you were a prostitute.⁵⁴³

In the above scenario, what is also interesting is that during the war, 'the state of exception' brought by the war did not absolve women, however temporarily, from the demands of a virtuous womanhood. Notwithstanding the contradictions and challenges brought by war to the collective understanding of morals, women were still expected to service platoons of guerrillas, and to allow the guerrillas to use their unique 'feminine resource' and remain uncontaminated. Women were silenced by the social contract which facilitated their exploitation, while those who upheld it refused to listen to their stories of suffering:

They always told us that we should never tell anyone. "We don't want sell-outs," they said. So if a group came today, you might have to go to the *poshito* with one of them—that meant you had to sleep with him; and then if another group came the next day you might have to go to the *poshito* with someone else. Some of the girls fell pregnant. The unfortunate thing is that we did not know the real names of freedom fighters.⁵⁴⁴

⁵⁴³ Staunton, ed., *Mothers of the Revolution*, p. 49.

⁵⁴⁴ ———, *Mothers of the Revolution*, p. 49.

The guerrillas' lack of restraint, accompanied by the endless possibilities of the use of violence by the group, served mainly as a cover up of their dread of 'being unmasked as worthless'.⁵⁴⁵ However, there is another sinister view to this, which suggests that in war there is a subversion of power, so that soldiers—mostly young men—assert their authority by:

Publicly reversing the power relations, perpetrators relegated formerly socially superior individuals to humiliating and degrading positions of powerlessness, simultaneously demonstrating their own new-found power and fearsomeness.⁵⁴⁶

I find this argument compelling as it buttresses my own. Which is that in trying to diminish their collective sense of shame and disgust, and in order to restore their dignity as a unit, *Gukurahundi* soldiers used violent revenge, as the only way in which to restore to themselves an element of dignity and self-respect. In Matabeleland *Gukurahundi* soldiers were renowned for one thing: their unashamed brutality and cowardly acts towards unarmed civilians. Their so-called operations were a euphemism for politically sanctioned terror against civilians. The abandonment of the rule of law created a new culture of impunity, whose overriding theme was the acculturation of an unsurpassed shamelessness. As Vera says, in Zimbabwe 'there is a tragic innocence that knows nothing but death, that survives on nothing but death.'⁵⁴⁷

Mass graves and haunting

As already alluded to in Chapter 2, *Gukurahundi* atrocities against the Ndebele people extended beyond the grave. They burnt thousands of people alive inside buildings and threw their remains into deep mine shafts. They also concealed thousands more bodies in hidden mass graves.⁵⁴⁸ There are orphans in Zimbabwe today who still don't know where their parents are buried. In certain cases, family members from more than one generation are still missing. Therefore, 'haunting' in the context of trauma, remains the watchword for the lasting after-

⁵⁴⁵ Vera, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 139.

⁵⁴⁶ Mitton, *Rebels in a Rotten State*, p. 127.

⁵⁴⁷ Vera, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 82.

⁵⁴⁸ See *Gukurahundi*, pp. 97-113.

effect of *Gukurahundi* atrocities. *Gukurahundi* soldiers clearly understood the significance of the ritual of burial amongst the Ndebele people. The lasting intransigent act they committed was that of hiding the graves or the resting places of those they murdered. There is hope that one day language would be rehabilitated enough, so that it maintains, and continually elucidates the tragic nature of *Gukurahundi* atrocities:

Families were left without breadwinners. Children were left without one or both parents, and with the trauma of having witnessed appalling violence against those they loved. Families were left without the consolation of truly knowing the fate of their kin, or their burial places. Communities were left to deal with the trauma of having seen their parents, husbands and community leaders harmed and humiliated.⁵⁴⁹

In most cases following a death, there is always a narrative of some kind, to illustrate the way in which someone died, of how and why they died. Out of this narrative emerges a level of dignity attached to the memory of a particular death. To the relatives of those who [are] disappeared, there is no coherent narrative that might explain their disappearance. The disappeared mark the persistent spectre of the undead; and for those who die or disappear while still young, the haunting of a death deemed impossible. According to Gobodo-Madikizela once more, for those affected by war violence:

That is their reality—a world full of painful emotional wounds, hostility and resentment at the injustice visited upon them. All these emotions connect them to their loved ones and so are a force which provides continuity and defies death, sustaining their bonds with those they loved who are now dead—‘living,’ through the link maintained by hateful affect.⁵⁵⁰

Until the footsteps that lead to their resting place are identified, and until they are ‘brought home’ and reburied, the prescription for an irreparable loss can never be a coerced forgiveness. Instead, two things need to happen. First, the establishment of a genuine and meaningful connection between the violent act, and an apology offered to the victim. Second, a genuine recognition of the sense of loss visited upon another, whether as a result of one’s negligence or violent intent. If this doesn’t happen, there is a hinted suggestion of the possibility of an

⁵⁴⁹ *Gukurahundi*, p. 81.

⁵⁵⁰ Gobodo-Madikizela, *A Human Being Died That Night*, p. 95.

unwilled holding-on to the past with resentment. Gobodo-Madikizela also suggests that there is a dual function of the negative emotion of holding-on to the past. First, it acts as a connection with the loved ones, and as a mode of continuity with the past. Second, it acts as a symbol of the perpetrator's powerful grip over the victim. Under the latter, the act of holding on creates a dependency on the hateful emotions and denies the victims a chance to come to terms with what happened. On the other hand, she suggests, holding on to the memory of the past can be helpful if it is kept alive in order to transcend hurtful emotions, and as a mode of healing. This takes us back to the concept of the umbilical cord, a mutual connectedness or, as Gobodo-Madikizela suggests, 'We are induced to empathy because there is something in the other that is felt as part of the self, and something in the self that is felt to belong to the other.'⁵⁵¹

But, as already evident in the post-apartheid era in South Africa, healing as a collective aspiration remains intangible and elusive. One wonders what exactly it means to be 'healed' in the context of collective trauma. Also, how can it be that those who suffer[ed] insurmountable losses—not just in physical terms, but psychological and material—are forcefully asked to forgive. It is worthy of mention here that some memories, such as the memory of the brutality of slavery, of the violent mass murder and colonial subjugation of Blacks, of the Holocaust and other still unfolding genocides across the world such as Syria, the Yemen, Myanmar, are worth holding on to, if only to serve as a constant reminder of past injustices, of the connectedness of each historical event to the present, and as signifiers of those who remain permanently wounded. On the other hand, the recent insurrection by the Black Lives Matter movement should serve as a transformative moment that should yield strategies for real change.⁵⁵²

The rawness of the Zimbabwean atrocities means that the memory from *Gukurahundi* atrocities remains opposed by two formidable and recalcitrant forces. The architects of *Gukurahundi* atrocities are still very much alive.⁵⁵³ They

⁵⁵¹ Gobodo-Madikizela, *A Human Being Died That Night*, p. 127.

⁵⁵² _____, *Dare We Hope*, p. 59

⁵⁵³ For example, Emmerson Mnangagwa, then Minister for State Security and Head of CIO, is current President of Zimbabwe, deputised by Constantino Chiwenga, ex-Commander of the Zimbabwean Defence Forces. Chiwenga as the commander of the 1st Brigade in Bulawayo in the 1980s, provided logistical support and information to *Gukurahundi* soldiers in identifying the so-called dissidents. And Perence Shiri, then

are embedded within the ruling party, and its political and military kleptocracy. In its new constellation, *Gukurahundi* was an event in orbit on its own, unattached to any historical precedent. Mugabe relativised the massacre on the basis that he believed that every country in the world has experienced its own moment of madness, an oblique reference to massacres in Europe and elsewhere. The relativisation of the massacre acts as a means to silence the critics of the regime. The same goes for the violent occupation of farms and violence against unarmed civilians.

Following Robert Mugabe's death, President Emmerson Mnangagwa, the new leader of the so-called 2nd Republic, has set up the *National Peace and Reconciliation Commission* under the *National Peace Reconciliation Act 2018*.⁵⁵⁴ But the country is still plagued by similar problems: the continuation of repressive policies, the involvement of the military in political violence, and the lack of political will to create an 'enabling environment' to allow for the commission to begin its work. According to Ruth Murambadoro, the endemic corruption, mis-governance and social injustice have led to the weakening of democratic institutions in Zimbabwe.⁵⁵⁵ Also, President Mnangagwa has refused to apologise for his involvement in the Matabeleland massacres, the political violence leading to land invasions in 2008, and the subsequent electoral violence involving the military in 2018.⁵⁵⁶ He has also suppressed the release of the very significant

Commander of Fifth Brigade, later became the Minister of *Lands, Agriculture and Rural Development*. His role in the coordination of farm invasions and the violence that accompanied these invasions cannot be overlooked. As such, they all played a role in the genocide and benefited from the subsequent violence which resulted in the seizure of farms.

⁵⁵⁴ See <<https://www.herald.co.zw/here-cometh-the-second-republic>> [accessed 14 Nov 2019]

⁵⁵⁵ See Ruth Murambadoro, *One Year After: Has The National Peace and Reconciliation Act Failed Zimbabweans?* <<https://www.kujenga-amani-ssrc.org/author/ruthmurambadoro>> [accessed 14 Nov 2019]

⁵⁵⁶ See Mahmood Mamdani, 'Lessons of Zimbabwe', in *London Review of Books*, Vol. 30, No. 23 (Dec, 2003) <<https://www.lrb.co.uk>lessons-of-zimbabwe>> [accessed 14 Nov 2019]. Mamdani argues that the theft of African lands which began in 1889 was not resolved by Zimbabwe's independence from colonial rule in 1980. He says that in reality the Lancaster House Agreement was not cognisant of the plight of landless Blacks—it simply drew a line under settler privilege. It also sustained an illusion among Whites who thought they could keep the land that they'd unjustly obtained through the violent repression of Blacks. That even after independence Blacks remained embedded in an earlier historical period. He astutely observes that Mugabe's unwavering stance on land redistribution—notwithstanding his tyrannical rule—is what has garnered him support, not only in Zimbabwe, but in Africa generally. He also compares the expulsion of Asians from Uganda in 1979 by Idi Amin, and the seizure of farms by Blacks in Zimbabwe in 2000-3, as two significant historical periods that for him signify true independence for Blacks. He argues that any assessment of contemporary Zimbabwe should start with this 'sobering fact'. To Mamdani, Mugabe's survival should be seen as part of a larger picture and should be interrogated outside of the narrow confines of a regime-opposition polemic.

findings of the *Muhambakwe Commission* which was specifically set up to look into the *Gukurahundi* atrocities. It is believed that this is as a result of his direct involvement in the atrocities. Although the new *Reconciliation Commission* is now a constitutional imperative, it remains at the personal discretion of the President for its work to progress unhindered, which is unlikely.

Following the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* in South Africa, it is evident that truth can only be obtained through both victim and perpetrator testimonies.⁵⁵⁷ As such, the state-led, post-conflict reconciliation in Zimbabwe is unlikely to work, due to the partisan nature of the security apparatus, and the continuing violence orchestrated by the state itself.⁵⁵⁸ As Wole Soyinka says:

Just as they have been gloating on that continent over the predicament of white settler farmers in Zimbabwe, and a history of colonial injustice is held by some to justify current injustices even against former victims of that same injustice, while a climate of fear envelops the whole land and its citizens [...]⁵⁵⁹

As already touched upon, fear, as a mechanism of power continues to operate seemingly unabated. The spectre of the *Gukurahundi* soldier has been revived back into life through the figure of the war veteran. Through a shrewd political manoeuvring by the Zimbabwean politicians, the war veteran has, as his roots, the continuing revolutionary war; and he is seen as the vanguard of the continuing war against neo-colonialism in Zimbabwe. Under this mode of thinking, the war veteran is now engaged in the 3rd *Chimurenga*, the rebellion against economic injustice, under the rallying cry: the land is the economy, and the economy is the land. The purported struggle for land is the continuum which links the various stages of the so-called continuing revolution. And a sustained political investment has been made in linking the youths to the revolutionary struggle. Therefore, these 'new combatants' are the embodiment of its necessity and continuation. The special status of the revolutionary has now been bestowed upon the young war veterans. As was the case in the past, their special status as

⁵⁵⁷ Wilson, *The Politics of Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa*

⁵⁵⁸ See Wellington Mbofana, 'Incising an Unripe Abscess: The Challenges for Community Healing in Zimbabwe', in *Zimbabwe in Transition: A View from Within*, ed. Tim. Murithi and Aquilina Mawadza (Auckland Park: Jacana Media, 2011).

⁵⁵⁹ Wole Soyinka, *Climate of Fear: Quest for Dignity in a Dehumanised World* (New York: Random House, 2005), p. 27.

revolutionaries affords them immunity from prosecution, for any offences committed in the advancement of revolutionary duties—rape and murder included.

In truth most of the so-called war veterans are the products of the Youth Brigade Programme, some as young as fifteen, who have been nurtured, moulded and mentored into ruthless murderers and rapists by their forebears in the military and the police, and other paramilitary organisations in the service of the state, acting as the state's instruments of violence. Like their counterparts, the *mujibas* during the war of liberation, war veterans have been handed over the torch of violence in the on-going 'relay' of violence in Zimbabwe—to return to Judith Butler once more.⁵⁶⁰

They have already proven their worth in gold in the coordination of the violent occupation of commercial farms, the brutalisation of White farmers, and the spread of terror amongst the peasantry in particular. But the young and violent thugs who fall under the umbrella of war veterans are children who have been groomed to terrorise, seemingly without a conscience. Under this schema the formula for the revolution does not change. The only thing that changes is the face of the enemy. The future custodians of violence in Zimbabwe have already been trained. The stage has been set, and they await to be given their task:

Today the party supporters, including the official media, often support party youth who call themselves war veterans, though they are obviously too young to have fought in the war. The purpose is two-fold: first, to legitimate their activities, such as land occupation, as part of the new economic liberation, and second, to capitalise on the prevailing fear ex-combatants still invoke among civilians.⁵⁶¹

Conclusion

⁵⁶⁰ Butler, *Precarious Life*, p. 16.

⁵⁶¹ Krigger, *Guerrilla Veterans*, p. 192.

A number of main arguments have been at the heart of this thesis. First, that the genealogy of violence in Zimbabwe, its aetiology, signs and symptoms, can only be read and understood in the context of past trauma and group dynamics. Second, that there is a political investment in the structural violence which, historically, derives from its symbolism as the means with which Blacks managed to free themselves from colonial subjugation. Third, that political violence, and by extension ordinary violence, now forms an integral part of interpersonal relations within the Zimbabwean context. And fourth, that Zimbabwean masculinities are consequently implicated in and contribute to the culture of impunity which pervades Zimbabwe today. But more importantly, that Zimbabwean masculinities are unstable and often mutate in times of crises. At the same time, it has been central to this study that women are the target and scapegoat for this largely unspoken violence, and that trauma therefore follows specifically gendered lines. And finally, that literary writing, in particular the writing of Yvonne Vera, offers a unique insight into the historic, persistent and ongoing reality of this violence.

My analysis of the genesis of violence in Zimbabwe has focussed on a nuanced reading of Yvonne Vera's novel, *The Stone Virgins*, as a 'traumatic narrative' around which the main arguments in this thesis galvanise themselves. The narrative in *The Stone Virgins* unfolds around the *Gukurahundi* genocide. From this genocide, a 'line can be drawn back to the silence covering the violence perpetrated by guerrillas against civilians during the *Second Chimurenga*, and forward to the present with its various forms of state violence'.⁵⁶² Therefore, I have offered three possibilities for framing Vera's novel. First as a memoir and, second, as an alternative history that gives voice to the forgotten victims of the *Gukurahundi* genocide. Third, as a text which best illustrates the translation of a traumatic event into a narrative of communal suffering.

In Chapter One, I began by arguing that *The Stone Virgins* occupies a very significant period in Zimbabwe's history, in which history, traumatic memory and fiction intersect. With regards to trauma, *The Stone Virgins* emphasises another

⁵⁶² Flora, Veit-Wild, 'De-Silencing the Past: Challenging "Patriotic History": New Books on Zimbabwean Literature', in *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (Autumn, 2006), 195. <https://www-jstor-org-ezproxy.lib.bbk.ac.uk/stable/3821187>. > [accessed 21 August 2020].

facet of history, as an ‘intensive reflection on the position of the bystander’ on the periphery of a traumatic event.⁵⁶³ This way, it ‘renders a critique of limits of representation that should be read as arising out of that vexed subject position’.⁵⁶⁴ Vera vicariously assumed the experiences of the women in *The Stone Virgins* as her own by declaring: ‘This is my story, I want to tell it’.⁵⁶⁵ At times she claimed that she was there, only to contradict herself by saying ‘we heard’ what happened, thus making her own subject position in relation to the genocide ambivalent. I have argued that although the notion of ambivalence and believability can be extended to all witnesses and victims of genocides, they further complicate our understanding of what constitutes victimhood. In other words, can victims of genocide be viewed as distinctly separate from witnesses, as Vera suggests?

I am free from what actually happened and I want to be able to be convincing. So, I would say that it is true, but it is not verifiable.⁵⁶⁶

Throughout this thesis, particularly in the first chapter, have examined/scrutinised Vera’s truth-claims of being present during the *Gukurahundi* atrocities, and how such declarations ‘throw into crisis the act of witnessing itself’—Dori Laub’s phrase. On the other hand, I have argued, with Nana Tagoe-Wilson, that the [auto] biographical element of Vera’s writing renders *The Stone Virgins* ‘revolutionary’ because of its direct confrontation with history. Her main goal, she says, is to ‘bring the reader as close as possible to an experience’.⁵⁶⁷ I show how Vera sees storytelling, including writing, as modes of witnessing. Vicariously, the reader, too, bears witness to the atrocities in *The Stone Virgins* and, by extension, the genocide in Matabeleland:

I want you to be a witness, which means taking part in what is happening each moment, as it happens.⁵⁶⁸

As already discussed in the introduction, Terence Ranger’s view, as a historian, is that *The Stone Virgins* ‘is a book about what unfortunately happens’.⁵⁶⁹ Vera, on the other hand, felt that Ranger ‘gave her the permission to go on distorting history’, thus, allowing her to deliberately blur the distinction between history and

⁵⁶³ Rothberg, *Trauma*, p. 66

⁵⁶⁴ ———, *Trauma*, p. 66.

⁵⁶⁵ Bryce, ‘Interview with Vera’, in *Sign and Taboo*, p.219.

⁵⁶⁶ ———, ‘Interview with Vera’, in *Sign and Taboo*, p. 219.

⁵⁶⁷ Primorac, ‘Interview with Vera’, in *Emerging Perspectives on Vera*, p. 384.

⁵⁶⁸ Bryce, ‘Interview with Vera’, in *Sign and Taboo*, p. 223.

⁵⁶⁹ Ranger, ‘History has its ceiling’, in *Sign and Taboo*, p. 206.

fiction, casting doubt on the nature of her own narrative as historical record.⁵⁷⁰ Consequently, real truth in any context, is seen as difficult to grasp and hold. And when 'truth is elusive; she settles for the evident.'⁵⁷¹ I have argued that it is through this confrontation with history that Vera prisms language open to new possibilities beyond – while at the same time appealing to or including - the historical record:

'As Africans, our history is there to serve us, not us to serve it.'⁵⁷²

Read in these terms, *The Stone Virgins* 'paints a recognisable' picture of the Matabeleland genocide. Recognition, therefore, serves as a metaphor for the uncannily familiar landscape of a country devastated by war:

I have only this cataclysmic moment, this shocking, painful, moment at once familiar and horrifying because of one change of detail which makes everything else tragic. For me, an entire history is contained in such a moment'.⁵⁷³

Cathy Caruth's framework of the 'double telling' provides a crucial tool for our understanding of the power of speech following traumatic events as it helps us interrogate the deep connection between trauma and silence.⁵⁷⁴ It is through Caruth's framework, that I have interpreted *The Stone Virgins* as a 'double telling', because it tells the story of the 'unbearable nature' of the *Gukurahundi* genocide and seeks to demonstrate the 'unbearable nature of its survival'.⁵⁷⁵ The exploration of the psychic deformation of Vera's characters and engagement with Caruth's meditation on trauma helps us pose important questions about the very notion of survival:

Is the trauma the encounter with death, or the ongoing experience of having survived it? At the core of these stories, I would suggest, is thus a kind of double telling, the oscillation between a *crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival. These two stories, both incompatible and absolutely inextricable, ultimately define the complexity of what I refer to as history in the texts that I read.⁵⁷⁶

⁵⁷⁰ _____, 'History has a ceiling', in *Sign and Taboo*, p. 203.

⁵⁷¹ Vera, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 28

⁵⁷² Bryce, 'Interview with Vera', in *Sign and Taboo*, p. 221.

⁵⁷³ _____, 'Interview with Vera', in *Sign and Taboo*, p. 219.

⁵⁷⁴ Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, p. 7.

⁵⁷⁵ _____, *Unclaimed Experience*, p. 7.

⁵⁷⁶ _____, *Unclaimed Experience*, p. 7.

Even Vera herself says that ‘sometimes there is no survival of the moment, of an encounter with brutality.’⁵⁷⁷ In this regard, *The Stone Virgins* bridges the gap between the presumed *unsayability* of traumatic events and their representation. In this thesis, *Unsayability* pertains to the collective refusal to listen to the experiences of the victims of political violence. To that extent, it refers to constraints placed upon language which extend beyond *sayability*, as mere utterance, into the realm of *sayability* as the ability to speak openly, and the demand to be heard. As Kizito Muchemwa argues:

The forces of silence are the taboos that prohibit exposure of rape, incest, and murder in families. That which is hidden from public scrutiny cannot be spoken and written. Rape and incest—as Vera’s work so powerfully shows—violently destroy language.⁵⁷⁸

Similarly, for Vera, the challenge from language was mainly political – in particular, the political manipulation of language, and the abuse of the memory of the past that precedes the abuses of power in that language. Consequently, in Chapter Two, I have argued, that Vera’s quest was—through her aesthetic of violence—for an authentic language with which to respond to the surreal violence of the *Gukurahundi* genocide. The challenge, as I have argued, was how to respond to the extremely violent and hostile landscape in which she, and by extension Zimbabweans, found themselves in. As Vera herself said:

I had just become aware that I understood this, but somehow it wasn’t anywhere in a book where I could read it, and I didn’t know why, except maybe the knowledge had become discredited by other ways of seeing.⁵⁷⁹

Her awareness of ‘other ways of seeing’ suggests that Vera became conscious of the possibility of the multiple ways in which to articulate the violence around her at the time. This recognition, on her part, of the shifting political landscape, in turn called for an authentic voice to depict the internal turmoil experienced by her victims, as the result of political violence. The haunting figure of Nonceba—mutilated, raped and left for dead—visually encapsulates women’s precarious relationship with violent landscapes in the

⁵⁷⁷ Bryce, ‘Interview with Vera’, in *Sign and Taboo*, p. 225.

⁵⁷⁸ Kizito Muchemwa and Ranka Primorac, eds., *Versions of Zimbabwe: New Approaches to Literature and Culture* (Harare: Weaver Press, 2005), p. 197.

⁵⁷⁹ Ranger, ‘History has its ceiling’, in *Sign and Taboo*, p. 204.

legacy of violence discussed in this thesis. In Zimbabwe, it is the spectral quality of fear that heightens its symbolic impact. In terms of collective trauma, the fear of violence—real or perceived—is a remnant of the past that continually haunts the physical and psychological landscape. Therefore, I have argued, that Vera's attempt throughout *The Stone Virgins* is to highlight how the political, cultural and socio-economic landscape impacts on the lives of women, as individuals, and collectively.

As we have seen also in Chapter Three and Five, the political landscape in Zimbabwe continues to deteriorate. Millions have been displaced from their homes. As Naomi Klein argues, on behalf of all the displaced peoples across the world, 'there's trauma associated with these layers of forced separation—from land, from culture, from family that is directly linked to this epidemic of despair'.⁵⁸⁰

Current commentary on the violence in Zimbabwe is limited to the so-called barbarism of Robert Mugabe's government. But I have argued that this violence has a historical resonance. That it evolved from 'subtler forms of coercion' such as the Rhodesian etiquette which, as we saw, worked in the service of racial coercion.⁵⁸¹ Under this schema, Whites killed Blacks, extra-judiciously, in order to maintain white supremacy.⁵⁸² The uglier forms of the violence that accompanies farm invasions are a testament to this. But there is a deafening silence about this aspect of the violence in Zimbabwe. The story of the 'foundational violence' in Zimbabwe does not begin with the violent acquisition of farmland by Blacks—it has a much deeper and troubling history than that.⁵⁸³ As Schwab argues:

It is hard, of course, to imagine reparation and forgiveness for historical violence on the scale of genocide. Certain violent histories, individual or collective, will forever remain beyond reparation and unforgivable.⁵⁸⁴

⁵⁸⁰ Naomi Klein, 'Let Them Drown: The Violence of Othering in a Warming World', in *The London Review of Books*, Vol. 38, No. 11 (June 2016) <<https://www.lrb.co.uk/naomi-klein/let-them-drown?>> [accessed 19 August 2020].

⁵⁸¹ Shutt, 'Manners Make a Nation'.

⁵⁸² Ivan, Evans, *Culture of Violence: Racial Violence and the Origins of Segregation in South Africa and the American South* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), p. 7.

⁵⁸³ Schwab, *Haunting Legacies*, p. 104.

⁵⁸⁴ ———, *Haunting Legacies*, p. 105

It seems that through their reluctance to genuinely talk about the Rhodesian genocide, White Zimbabweans are refusing to acknowledge the connection between the foundational violence with the more recent spates of violence. Consequently, they are concealing a deadly secret. Nicholas Abraham's and Maria Torok's work highlights the significance of a collective psychic concealment or a crypt in which unspeakable secrets are buried. They argue that such unspeakable secrets are a symptom of devastating trauma. In the current Zimbabwean lexicon, there is no word for trauma. Consequently, no language or cultural frame of reference, to render intelligible the traumatic experiences of the past, particularly how that past manifests in the present. Instead, Zimbabweans still speak euphemistically of the wounds of the past. As Judith Herman argues:

The ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness. Certain violations of the social contract are too terrible to utter aloud: this is the meaning of the word *unspeakable*.⁵⁸⁵

As Dambudzo Marechera so intuitively instructed, Zimbabweans 'need to dig deep into those shameful and agonising memories, and to penetrate to the most rotten core of war—its abuse of children'.⁵⁸⁶ And not only children, as we have seen in these pages. In this regard, *The Stone Virgins* can be read as the metaphor for a society haunted by its past, desperately trying to heal itself. Vera's last word in the novel is *deliverance*. As discussed in the final chapter, the current *National Peace and Reconciliation Commission* will necessarily fail because there are multiple resistances stacked up against it. First, White Zimbabweans must acknowledge their involvement in the genesis of violence in Zimbabwe and its continuing and disruptive influence. Second, they must accept that their financial interests cannot remain diametrically opposed to those of Blacks. And third, for all Zimbabweans to be able to work through the trauma of the past, there must be a meaningful dialogue between both identities. But, as I have argued, both sides have embraced this notion of woundedness as exclusively their own. As Wendy Brown observes, 'this fetishisation of the wound as proof of identity' takes the

⁵⁸⁵ Judith, Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), p. 1.

⁵⁸⁶ Muchemwa and Primorac, eds., *Versions of Zimbabwe*, p. 47.

injury of the individual as the grounds not only for an appeal (for compensation or redress) but as identity claim, such that reaction against injury forms the very basis of politics'.⁵⁸⁷ Therefore, if left unresolved, the fetishised wound 'fixates the very sense of identity on the history of past violence'.⁵⁸⁸ All these things are connected, solutions too. Collectively, Zimbabweans must identify real transformations – the forms of radical searching - that would get them out of their current predicament. As Frosh argues:

This melancholic aspect of the postcolonial state, a cultural situation in which there is a haunting of the present by the felt loss of a treasured past, which has been so comprehensively destroyed as to make even mourning it impossible.⁵⁸⁹

This thesis has sought to cast a light on the broader social, political and cultural practices, that over the years, have shaped the distinctive character of Zimbabwean masculinities. Particularly, the political invocation of the war veteran that has necessitated the continuous revolutionary struggle spanning decades. I have argued that it is through the figure of the war veteran, undergirded by the culture of impunity, that violent masculinities continue to thrive in Zimbabwe today. I have also suggested that for Zimbabweans to understand the continuing impact that the violence in Zimbabwe's past has in the present, they need to fully understand the socialisation processes that gave birth to and continue to sustain these violent masculinities. By way of conclusion, Marechera's intuitive understanding of the genesis of this violence is very instructive:

When I was nine years old I was a witness to a beating where a man actually beat his wife until she was unconscious, and we, all the men and little boys, were all standing in a circle around them, watching, and then he raped her, there and then, whilst she was unconscious [...] I am not talking about violence as something that one suddenly notices when one grows up a bit, but violence which surrounds you from birth. From the time you are almost a baby and not able to understand anything you already have all these violent images around you. As you get to be two or three or four years old you take it to be the normal way of life.⁵⁹⁰

⁵⁸⁷ See Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

⁵⁸⁸ Schwab, *Haunting Legacies*, p. 114

⁵⁸⁹ Frosh, *Hauntings*, p. 8.

⁵⁹⁰ Dambudzo Marechera, *An Articulate Anger*, interviewed by Kirsten Holst Peterson (Sydney: Dangaroo Press, 1988), p. 27.

This reading of *The Stone Virgins*, within history, has helped frame a series of questions for future research. First, there is no doubt that there is tactful silence around White Zimbabweans' complicity in the most serious violence in the past. Second, their absence, not just in *The Stone Virgins*, but in other literary works that deal with the issue of post-independence violence demands critical attention. Third, there must be an acknowledgement that there has been no clean break with the past; that the involvement of Whites in the dialogue about the past remains critically relevant. Fourth, there are still no narratives of the *Gukurahundi* genocide from the perspective of the perpetrators themselves—this is equally important. Finally, all these factors, combined, cannot be allowed to [un]wittingly contribute to the processes of historical forgetting, that at the limit take far uglier forms.⁵⁹¹ As Rothberg suggests:

What is not avowed returns in displaced form. Because this return is especially pertinent to the processing of traumatic experiences.⁵⁹²

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Creative Writing Thesis

Ekhaya: The Years of Childhood

In memory of my Grandmother, Esther Sidlankwe Moyo, my mother, Elisabeth S'phelile Ndhlovu and, my beloved sister, Sinikiwe Sayi, whose voices reverberate throughout these stories.

Introduction

Time is as necessary for remembering as it is for forgetting.
Even the smallest embrace of pain needs time larger than a pause;
the greatest pause requires an eternity, the greatest hurt a

lifetime.⁵⁹³

I was born in Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe in 1969. My earliest memories were borne out of a cultural milieu in which the self was part of a complex network of relations, at the centre of which lay a shared communal language. The same psycho-social organisation also embraced violence as a necessary evil. Therefore, the ‘I’ of the fictional stories in this collection is couched within the communal ‘we’, as a way of exploring the possibilities of representing the unreality of the *Gukurahundi* atrocities and their heavily contested memories in people’s lives and deep inside their minds. *Gukurahundi* is an event that ‘happened but also didn’t happen’, so the collective narrative of this ‘event’ continuously plays this riff of truth and lies. There are certain undercurrents and recurring themes in these stories that are reminiscent of Vera’s work. Like Vera, I draw on the various theories of trauma in order to recreate, aesthetically, a myriad of affects within these stories. But here I seek not to convey the internal dissolution of characters the way Vera does, but to show the rupture to the communal ties and how women respond collectively to this violence. I have chosen the ‘hybrid’ short story form as it offers immediacy, covers much ground very quickly, and in turn generates questions about trauma, and its aftereffects.

In engaging with Zimbabwe’s violent history as the ‘canvas to my imagination’, I am trying to find a way of creatively ‘negotiating with dangerous truths.’⁵⁹⁴ Therefore, stories in this collection are an attempt at multiple points of entry into the history of collective trauma in Zimbabwe as explored in the critical component of the thesis. They are also, more personally, an attempt to resolve an inner conflict that has hounded me for the best part of four decades. Because the story that we tell ourselves about who we are and how we’ve come to be is a collaborative reconstructive process. This way, one can write the self from multiple standpoints through the voices of others.

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⁵⁹³ Vera, *The Stone Virgins*, p. 36

⁵⁹⁴ Meg Jensen, *The Art and Science of Trauma and the Autobiographical*, edited by Claire Brant and Max Saunders (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), p. 2.

It is also one of the aims of the creative component of the thesis to amplify women's voices. After all, it is women as individuals and as part of a collective who bore the brunt of these atrocities. Therefore, I have harnessed the threads of their collective voices in order to demonstrate how war violence diffuses into familial spaces and how it ruptures the communal bond, thus complicating our understanding of the ambivalent and complex role played by women in war zones, not simply as victims but as agents of violence too.

Thinking and writing *with* Vera made me feel more intensely the uneasy alliance between memoir and fiction. As I read Vera's work purposively, multiple questions proliferated. I could not, as Vera so intuited, adequately convey the complexity of another's mental world. In the process of reading and re-reading her work, I began to understand why Vera infused her work with recurring themes of immolation, mutilation, fragmentation and disfigurement particularly of her female characters. It was through the visualisation of the disfigured female body 'as inhabited by, as well as inhabiting, the space of the nation', that I could vicariously convey how Zimbabweans carry the devastating trauma of their past, through a collective thirst for vengeance, especially against women and girls.⁵⁹⁵ It is the women and girls who daily face the wrath of armed men. And it is also the women who, despite their vulnerability, keep communities together. Accordingly, women characters in these stories are the *tar* that binds these narratives together. The men are necessarily archetypally useless men, the embodiment of an impotent rage trapped inside a debilitating paralysis.

At first there seemed to be a lack of cohesion between the two components of the thesis, until I began to think of it more as a hybrid constellation, by envisioning sliding doors between the multiple facets of the thesis. I saw this vacillation between creative and critical writing as a mode of reflection. In both, there was a circularity, an endless loop of repetition and re-writing, all of which are major tenets of the research process. Reading critically and attentively also generated scribbles, annotations, and fragments that subsequently became part of the creative narrative. In turn, the creative process became part of my research

⁵⁹⁵ Sarah Ahmed and Jackie Stacey, *Thinking Through the Skin*, eds. (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 2

methodology, in that it was influenced by and, to a certain extent, also structured by the critical thinking, which by default also became the foundation for my creative writing through the editorial process. And equally, the considerable degree of latitude inherent in the creative process shaped my critical thinking.

As a writer and reader both, my intuition has been to attend to the issue of voice from multiple perspectives. And to conceive of the voice as something elusive that is produced by but also through the act of reading. In the end I settled for a child's voice. I felt that the child's perceived naiveté corresponds with the adults' reluctance to explain their impotence in the onslaught of violence. The child narrator simply pulls the reader into the vortex of the experience, but not as an empathetic guide. Thus, he completely 'defamiliarizes' the experience of war. This way I felt that a child's voice would ameliorate some of the tension between the critical and the creative voice but still maintain the dialogue between both. The aim was to convey this total devastation from inside the mind of a child and to see what alternative possibilities such a voice offered.

There is a chronology that binds these stories together. *1979* and *Guerrillas* provide an opening into the world of segregation. *N'Kayi*, *Gokwé*, *Night Under the Tree*, *Ashes*, and *Day of Reckoning* deal with the post-independence internecine violence, the devastation caused by the forced famine and the inhumanity of that period. And *Olifants Town* engages with familial displacement, exile and trauma in the aftermath of war. Together these 'fragments' advance renewed conversations about history, memory and the 'crisis of witnessing' and the translation of trauma into literary works. They 'speak about and speak through the profound story of traumatic experience.'⁵⁹⁶ It is from within this 'cauldron of violence' that conflicted narratives of the past emerge. They also probe and explore how gendered acts of violence such as rape, and political violence, 'make visible the imagination of the Zimbabwean nation as intrinsically male.'⁵⁹⁷ And highlight the importance of women's voices, and the irreversible harm done to the social fabric by the war of liberation and *Gukurahundi* atrocities.

⁵⁹⁶ Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, p. 4.

⁵⁹⁷ Das, *Life and Words*, p. 13.

Like the rest of the thesis, their overarching theme is language, violence and landscape in the context of war and its aftermath.

Our country wakes up to a new name: Zimbabwe-Rhodesia. Nothing has changed; except we have a new Black prime minister, who is also a priest; and wears leopard skin. Grandma says that he is a clown; and that, like all Black men, he is going to ruin the country. She wonders how he will pray and organise massacres—all at the same time. Only Whites can do that, she says. She also says that if in the past there has been the promise of freedom, now there is no guarantee of any freedom. Blacks, she says, do not understand freedom. But then again, we have never known freedom. It is hard to know what freedom feels like.

It is at the same time that soldiers start to bring the bodies of dead guerrillas from war zones, straight into our schools. Half their heads are missing, and their stomachs distended like overfed lizards. Their entrails hanging out; and a black liquid slowly drips into the sand below. Perhaps someone, someplace else, is looking for them. Maybe they'll recognise their hands, or their feet. A mole. But they are beyond recognition. There is something about the wounds of war; they leave behind holes that are impossible to fill. Grandma says that we do not renounce our dignity at death. War, she says, has a mind of its own, and its purpose is to rip us apart, and disrupt our well-established rhythms; and to make us ill-at-ease. She also says that the White soldiers are far too young to be meddling in death. It is hard to fathom, she says, whether they truly understand the consequences of their actions. Death, she says, is too big for anyone of us to carry by themselves. Instead, she says, we should always seek to understand why things happen, because we are all responsible for the lives that we take. Those who are killed are likely to come back and haunt us. That is why, she says, there is a ritual to be followed in the event of a tragic death. She says that white soldiers, too, need to do this. They are our children too.

However, when we look at them, there is no palpable sadness in the eyes of the White soldiers. They laugh uproariously as they blow swirls of smoke above their heads. And they revel in the loss of lives displayed before them. White power is like dust. It penetrates the most intimate part of our lives seamlessly. If only at times our life feels like a horrible dream. For now, we are just confounded as to why they want to display mutilated bodies in front of school children. We watch, as soldiers stand with triumphant glee next to dead bodies. Their victims,

child soldiers, who have been ambushed, and given no chance to live long enough to see independence. Our memory of their desecrated bodies is all that remains.

Its June, and thousands of soldiers on foot descend on us. Their faces are daubed in war paint; their backpacks are filled with bullets and other necessities of war. We do not ask why they are here. We know that with fantastic butchery, they will erase the last vestiges of our humanity. And the end will be the same: more bodies to view.

Also, daily, we see hundreds of army trucks crammed full of young soldiers. They are heading to the eastern highlands, where the war is at its most intense. A sombre mood prevails on their faces. Their guns at the ready, they poke through tiny slits on the side of the army trucks. We are worlds apart. This rift of racial divisions. Like armadillos, they curl into a ball, but camouflage is just an illusion. We know fear; it's in their eyes. When we wave at them, they never wave back. The trucks pick up speed, and the last of the White faces vanish in the distance.

But we will wait for them to come back; and when they do, the trucks will be deformed beyond recognition, their hollow, charred remains carried on the backs of the recovery trucks. No one will speak of the spectre of the missing. Nor will we ever see the bodies of dead white soldiers on display. Splayed. Bullet-riddled. Vanquished. Desecrated. Besides, Grandma says that the war is decimating both young and old, Black and White. One thing is for sure. We are all just afraid.

Swathes of time will pass in this greyness of war. At times we wake up to the sound of aeroplanes and strange parcels drifting across the sky. We run across the open veld, pick up the leaflets, only to be confronted by the news of another tragedy:

“Remember Manama!”

“*Khumbula ngeManama!*”

At times it is the pictures of mutilated bodies. They are indistinguishable from each other; parts of their skulls are missing. There are no names, or the circumstances of their death. At other times it is the real military helicopters,

flying slightly above treetops, dragging nets bursting at the seams with the previous night's crop of unimportant corpses.

On Wednesdays, on our way to school, we watch convoys of White families heading to South Africa on the Bulawayo-Beitbridge road. They say they cannot live under Black rule. They want to leave because they are unwilling to share with us what they have. Something continually tears us asunder. They don't want to give the new country a chance, these birds of flight. They are attuned to the seasons; this now is the season of anomie, and they are leaving, heading home. After everything that's happened; after all the pain and destruction, they are leaving, to seek pastures new, a colony of their own—a sea of whiteness; they cannot bear the notion of proximity to our blackness. Grandma says that we mustn't forget that they are running away from us; from the nightmare of us as their neighbours. They hide behind their own savagery and the idea of our backwardness. And, yet they will not give us a chance to show them our humanity. Or forgive us our blackness. Now that they are on the move, we treat them with caution. They feel vulnerable to our predation.

They look from behind their car windows with the sternest of looks, their cars overladen with materialistic things. But this land has a hold; Zimbabwe cannot let go of them. And they, too, will never let go of it. The rivers, mountains and springs, are a kind of memory too; and, also, the co-ordinates that will lead them home. And in future, when they come back, a reminder of what they left behind.

At the front, and at regular intervals, between the middle and the rear of the convoy, there is an armoured vehicle, at the back of which stands a White soldier, on a swivelling highchair, his machine gun aimed at us. He gently swivels around, as if moved by an invisible ill-wind. Now and then, we get a glimpse of his face, hidden behind sunglasses. Without seeing his eyes, we don't know how he feels about us. But he can see our wretchedness; we have nothing covering our faces. There is nothing we can do but wait in the freezing cold, in school uniforms, armed with nothing but blunt pencils, and old textbooks, with missing pages. On our way to and from school, we must cross the same treacherous road. There is no safe crossing spot built for us—no footbridge, no road bumps and no

traffic lights. Numerous lives have been lost here, and nobody does anything. There is no outrage about the lives needlessly taken. Drivers negotiate the curve at hair raising speed, and for us, it is hard to see fast cars approaching from both directions. Whites are not obliged to stop for us. There is a war going on. They fear an imminent ambush.

Whenever we see White people, we expect them to give us something. A little of what they have—a gift, however small, that will forever transform our lives. They seem to have more than we will ever have. They move freely, without the hindrance of the barbed wire, and the myriad invisible laws which seem to always hold us back. And sometimes they do throw things at us from fast moving cars: chicken bones, used nappies, aluminium foil, empty bottles and cans of exotic drinks. Occasionally—pencils, pens and other things they have no use for. At times they sit back in their cars and laugh at us, in their peculiar laughter of theirs, which comes through the nose first, the same way they speak. Although we learn English at school, we have no idea what they are saying to us: *munts, croc bait, boot lips, pickaninnies*.

The war intensifies. A new girl moves in next door. She is covered in big yellow pustules, behind her ears, between her buttocks, and around her elbows and groin. Whatever she has, has cut so deep behind her gangrenous ears, they dangle as if they are about to fall off. She scratches as if possessed by a demon, until she bleeds. Grandma says there is more to the plight of the girls from the war zones than meets the eye. There doesn't seem to be a remedy to her condition. The clinic is now closed and there are no buses for ordinary people. She sits in the dust, and rots away whilst everyone gossips about her. Sometimes she comes closer to the wooden fence and stands there. Grandma says we can talk to her but warns us not to touch her.

"You hear me?" she says. "Never touch her!" She is a war-orphan. Besides we don't know who these people are. They arrive here like a cloud of locusts and expect us to warm up to them, speaking in that funny and incomprehensible language of theirs!"

She stops weaving her basket and points at me: “You especially, you little swine. Don’t go foraging for pestilence. If you ever come here with lumps and bumps, I’ll throttle you myself—*Ulalele ukuthi ng’thini?* Do you hear me?”

“*Yebo Gogo, Yes Grandma.*”

“*Umlimu ulamandla,*” she says, as she pulls another thread through. She uses a sharpened piece of wire to piece numerous holes in her basket, in order to create colourful triangular designs: blue, red, yellow green and purple. For some reason, she dips the thread into the dye first, before running it through her teeth, which are now the colour of graveyard stones.

“God has power beyond words. That girl’s mother has been killed and that poor child sits there on her own not knowing what to do. And they have done unspeakable things to her.”

And she stops. This time she warns all of us, with an excessive agitation:

“And I don’t want you calling her names!”

And she points at each one of us, separately, with her sharp needle. A certain rebuke is implied in her words, carried by her countenance.

“But she never talks Grandma, even when we try to talk to her Grandma!” my sister Gift pleads.

“Everyone has a name, go and find out what her name is.”

“But you said...”

A glint of malice shines in Grandma’s eyes—a frozen lake, dimly lit by fading moonlight. And her very dark complexion is set off by the red die in the bucket. Suddenly, she withdraws all kindness, and a thin veneer of saliva flashes over her teeth. We know we just have to leave her alone for a while.

Bongani is 12 years old. She is a year younger than Gift. But she looks young for her age. When we first approach her, she squeezes her tiny face between the poles on the wooden fence, but never speaks. When we talk to her, she just stares at us. There is something odd about her mannerisms. It is as if her mind has gone quiet, and we just don’t know what to do. Since the little girl’s arrival, Grandma seems indignant about something. She has become intolerably sensitive to our presence, so we leave her alone and find a deserted area behind the rondavel, and sit there,

doing nothing for a while. I start drawing the picture of a gun on the sand with my finger and Gift suddenly says, “Comrades do terrible things to girls you know!”

“And how would you know?”

“Grandma says so.”

“Stop lying. When did you hear her say that? Go on telling lies and you’ll eat the cane tonight from Grandma.”

“She was talking to aunt MaNcube yesterday, and she says that they cut girls and use Vaseline to have sex with them. That’s why *Gwenya-kwenya* can’t walk properly.”

“Grandma says not to call her that. Her real name is Bongani. They won’t know you’re a girl anyways. Besides you’re too thin, you have a bald patch on your head, and you cough too much.”

Gift punches me very hard in the chest, and I instinctively punch her even harder in the face. Grandma comes round the corner like a whirlwind. Before I get up, she catches me right on top of the right ear, and for a moment I feel dizzy, and I cannot hear what she is saying to me. Whatever she is saying can’t be good. When she picks up a brick, that is enough for me. I take off running, and she throws it at me with such force it smashes into small fragments. And she shouts after me, “What did I tell you about hitting girls? Why don’t you come back here and fight me if you are so strong you lousy cur!”

I did not mean to hit Gift, but somehow it seemed such a natural thing to do. She is in the middle of pain too, and my anger has nothing to do with her. I sit on a rock while I think of what to do. Now I need to find her and say I am sorry, but I can’t because Grandma is angry with me. I don’t know if Grandma loves me. She doesn’t ever allow us to see who she really is. She is so many different things, sometimes it can be very confusing. But I dread to ask her what it is that bothers her so much, because it has taken much more than she can see. Or maybe the violence is just another decoy. Like everyone, she is clinging to the hope that she can regulate what we are exposed to.

Although Grandma warns Gift and I not to wander off too far, one day we take off running after leaflets when we see them falling from the sky. Between us we

scoop a few and start reading them. Gift says we should take them home and show them to Grandma, because there are pictures of dead people on them that she might like to see. We run back, and my sister starts hyperventilating like a tired dog. And this sets her off into a coughing fit. As we approach, Grandma emerges from inside the rondavel. And before we even manage to say anything she shouts at us, “What did I tell you about running? If the soldiers see you running and start shooting, what will you do?”

And I answer her back without thinking, “I did tell her not to run, Mama.”

“But you were running, No? And who asked you talk while I am still talking? Now what does that thing say?”

When my sister finally gets her breath back, she answers Grandma.

“It says here Grandma that the new army is here. They are called “*The Spear of the Nation*”. And they are here to protect us from guerrillas.”

I quickly interject. “Don’t lie, it says “*The Spear of the People!*”

Grandma cuts in: “Spear of the People, Spear of the Nation. Rapists! All of them! They’ll spend more time hunting for girls than they will ever do fighting the war. Tell me, Mm-hm. Look at that poor child! And they say they are fighting a war. She can’t even walk because of what these animals have done to her. And now they come here, change uniforms and tell us more lies, lies, lies. I am sick of it! And you two bring those lies here! *Umkhonto we Sizwe, Pfumo re Vanhu. Madzakudzaku*. Get out and go and find something better to do than go around peddling lies!”

One day we wake up to the sound of soldiers singing. The noise is coming from the valley below, towards the river. Gift and I run and climb the nearest hill-top; we can see, right below us, in the distance, figures in brown uniforms, the colour of the earth. Everything is brown, like anthills on the move. Curiosity gets the better of us. We run down the hill towards the valley. And when we reach the fence, of what has, up until now been a mining compound, we are stopped in our tracks. There are armed men lying under the cover of trees. They are wearing brown t-shirts. Inside the perimeter of the fence, there are other young men digging trenches. The whole place is a hive of activity. It becomes clear that the

compound has been converted into a military camp. There is a brown flag with the symbol of a spear in the middle of it, with the words "*Pfumo reVanhu*" emblazoned across. The pamphlets were not lying after all. The people's army is here now. The brown uniform mimics the desolate landscape, and the decimated leafless trees. Besides, the earliest green shoots are a long way away. And green camouflage, is easily discernible even to the less judicious eye. To the war-worn eyes, brown camouflage is the colour of the new war. All the soldiers in the camp are Black. We watch soldiers in earth-brown uniforms carrying out drills, marching, and singing songs mainly about dying. For some reason some are selected for special treatment and forced to turn around the same spot with their small finger inserted into the sand—*Tenderera!Tenderera! mfana iwe!* This reminds me of the game we play, mainly at night. During the game, we spread our arms to the side and whirl like dervishes. After a while, the earth rotates on its axis. When we can no longer stand, and feel nauseous, we lie flat on the ground until the trees, the huts and the sky stop spinning.

The soldiers rotating around their finger, cannot stand up straight, as the rotation seems to throw their bodies into a free spin. Rifle butts connect with their backs, and boots raise dust as they lift their bodies off the ground. They rise and fall in baked dust, and their brown t-shirts soaked wet with sweat. Others are made to run while holding their guns right above their heads, with their instructors yelling obscenities at them. Nobody asks why it is necessary to build a military camp in the vicinity of our homes in the first place. Or what it is that these soldiers are training to do. We see recruits daily being brutalized—their heads shaven, while they are frog-marched in the punishing heat. With time, and in spite of all the violence, we learn all their marching songs by heart. It is inevitable that they'll soon end-up on our doorstep, making demands of their own. The young men in brown uniforms are no strangers to us. If anything, they know us in the most intimate ways. They have grown up around here and attended the local school.

Before they arrived, we were free to go anywhere. Now, we can no longer use swathes of the river, because they have erected their targets for practice on the other side of the riverbank. Their targets are caricatures of guerrillas, carved out

of human-sized cardboard. They are impaled into the ground, perfect for the aim. Men with invisible faces. Those who fight and hide—*amabweatsha*. From now onwards gunfire will permeate the air from dawn to dusk. Bullets will stray. Grandma says that the whole war is a deliberate mistake. So, what if bullets stray? Most of our cattle are now decimated this way. Why shoot at cardboard when they can practise on moving targets. Guerrillas, after-all, are known for vanishing into thin air. Grandma also says that bullets can never be expected to account for their own actions. In the end we must learn to follow the truth, however painful.

As soon as the soldiers arrive, women from all over the country converge into the area. As a result, we can no longer play hide and seek amongst small caves on the hills behind our house. It is for the first time that we see women wearing trousers in our village. They paint their faces with all kinds of wild colours, and they invent a slow deliberate walk, in which each buttock seems to have a mind of its own. Even my uncle's wife and her two best friends are in on it. Our diet changes too. Various militarised condiments enter our menu and at the same time silence tongues. And as time goes by, we develop a relationship with the soldiers. We spend time with them, and we develop an affinity with their weapons and equipment. They let us forage through their rubbish dumps, where we find all sorts of intriguing things: folding aluminium frying pans and cups, small military issue Swiss pocket-knives, and used radio batteries. Uncle Sami leaves the batteries in the sun, and once they are fully charged, he plays his favourite records on his supersonic turntable.

We also run errands to buy cigarettes and alcohol for soldiers, in exchange for pocket money. Madison Toasted, Kingsgate Deluxe, Menthol and Peter Stuyvesant. And we follow the trail of prostitutes into the secluded areas of the bush, where we collect empty bottles of beer: Black Label, Castle Lager and Smirnoff and exchange them for money at Ngenisa's Bottle Store. And as soon as we get the money, we run to MaMpofu's Store to buy cherrypies and Fanta. In the sweetness of the cherry pie, life feels good if only for a while.

With time Grandma's resistance melts when she becomes desperate for money. But she never asks directly; she is far too proud for that. She will start a long-winded conversation before she gets to the point.

"My snuff is all but gone. I don't even have a penny with a hole in it. What with things as they are!"

Knowing full well what she is up to, I try to run away before she traps me. But once she starts, it is already too late.

"Are you still selling your bottles?"

"Yes Grandma."

"Then we mustn't spend all the money on sweets. How much do you have on you?"

"Three bob, Grandma."

"Now let me see if I can keep it safe for you. And then, when there is enough of it, you can buy yourself something nice!"

I have no option but to hand it over to her, and I know that this is the last I'll see of the money. Because as soon as I hand it over, it's gone.

"Aw, thank you, my child. What will I do without you?"

And then her tone quickly changes, from an amiable disposition to a satisfied malice.

"Now quickly, before the sun goes down, go and get me tobacco from Thebe. And tell him not to give me dust. I know what he is doing. He thinks I was born yesterday!"

So, I take off to buy Grandma's snuff with my own money. But Mr Thebe is deaf. He can't speak properly. All he does is squeal, rather than project words. And he gesticulates a lot. Most of the time I don't know what he means. Or what he is trying to say. I just handover the money, and he decides how much tobacco to give to me. Besides, he has no scales. If there is any consolation, he gives me biscuits on my way back.

Grandma who, from the beginning, has always been adamant that we should stay away from the soldiers, is now compromised to the neck. In fact, no one really is a prostitute. The camp economy, like the soldiers themselves, has stealthily invaded our lives. Uncle Sami's wife buys him cigarettes and gives him

money for beer. He takes it, and he never asks where the money is coming from. I know it's best not to say. Even when she disappears into the hills to fetch firewood dressed in tight-fitting clothes, Grandma says nothing. Although Grandma decrees that I should accompany uncle Sami's wife at all times, as soon as we get to the perimeter of the camp, she tells me to wait nearby till she comes back. But whatever she brings back, keeps us alive.

But every so often Grandma bursts out in anger when Mrs Tshuma visits. She is an old family friend and she's also the preacher's wife. They share news of the war, and inevitably, the latest gossip surrounding women of ill-repute.

"Right bang in the middle of the afternoon, *MaTshuma! Yim'hlo*," Grandma says as she bangs the floor with her fist.

"Such an omen," Mrs Tshuma says. "When do these women do their chores one wonders? How can a woman expose her shame underneath the trees, and come to think of it—in broad daylight MaMoyo?"

"*Shuwa, MaTshuma bakithi!* And to think that most are married women! What is this war doing to us? And they spread their legs wide open for money?

But God is not blind, he is watching!"

Grandma elaborately points up to the ceiling as her eyes follow her finger all the way up. A murmur of indignation follows, complemented by rolling eyes, and the clasp and unclasp of hands. Grandma's head tilts forwards, because of the excessive jerking movement of her head. If I sit still long enough, they'll continue to talk as if I am not in the room.

But it is hard for me to keep quiet. In the end I just blurt it out, uninvited, risking an instant backlash and Grandma's wrath.

"Yeah, we saw Langa with a soldier behind the bushes!"

Langa is Mrs Tshuma's daughter-in-law. And I know that both Grandma and Mrs Tshuma do not know about her activities with the soldiers.

"And who asked you, Mm-hm? Why do you insist on telling lies? And who asked you to join in adult talk? Mm-hm?" And now that you've started, you might as well finish!"

Mrs Tshuma leans forward: "What were they doing? Tell me, and she'll see when I get home!"

“They were....”

Grandma cuts in before it's too late.

“For a man you talk too much! Go outside and stop hanging around like an abandoned orphan!”

Her tea-swirling lips curl towards the corner her mouth, and her beady eyes become smaller and smaller and pierce right through me. Interruptions, particularly of this kind, do not sit well with her.

Rumours abound of armed men hunting for girls at night. No one knows for sure who they are, but that doesn't matter to Grandma. She hides all my sisters' clothes in the barn. She cuts their braids with her sewing scissors and gives them Ma's oversized t-shirts to wear. The whole thing makes us laugh, because it is now hard to tell the difference between us. But the sound of their voices alone now seems to infuriate Grandma.

“Why are you giggling like whores? Close your legs and sit properly like women. Keep on giggling like whores and you'll see what happens when they find you. *Ki ki ki ki ki*, the little whores that you're!”

Sometimes they forget to sit up properly. Grandma picks up a piece of burning firewood and aims it between their thighs. She only misses because their reflexes are much quicker than she can ever hope for. But they know full well that she means to hurt them. Sometimes they fall over, and they bang their heads against the wall, or they spill food or boiling water whilst trying to evade Grandma's determined advances. Their lives have suddenly become an inconvenience; and, with each bark of the dog, all eyes are trained to the door. Grandma insists that all cooking be done before sunset; and that lights should go out soon after we eat. Night fires across the village die too. Their beautiful ambers no longer visible at night. War kills everything. It is as if we live in perpetual darkness.

It is whilst trespassing on the other side of the river, that Salani and I come across the decomposing body of a woman. It is in the secluded area of the riverbank, frequented mainly by soldiers and prostitutes. Although her body is crushed under

the weight of rocks, her blue and white floral dress remains visible from underneath the pile of rocks. We recognise her instantly from the dress. And we run all the way home to tell Grandma. Grandma says that she deserves to die like a dog, much like the rest of them are. She says that these women are nothing but dogs on heat tarnishing our village with their carelessness. With that, she gives my uncle's wife a scolding look, and canes her without so much as moving her hand. Even as Grandma swallows the food she brings from the camp, she is still adamant that they should all be stoned to death. As for us, she says she doesn't want to hear one more word about dead dogs.

"And what were you doing in the bushes? You dirty little swine! Always snooping around people engaged in private business. Did I not tell you not to go there? Tell me, did I not say to you, loud and clear that you should not cross the river? What are you trying to do to me? Tell me, I am listening!"

In the haste to tell her about the dead woman, I inadvertently reveal to her that we have been playing on the other side of the river, an area from which she has already barred us. And as I leave the room, I still can hear her making the usual threats to kill me. This has become so routine it has no effect on me whatsoever. Besides, I have already survived several attempts on my life at Grandma's hands.

"He's got a big mouth, no head and no ears. I don't know who he takes after. There are no liars in this family! I'll kill him and he knows it!"

Unbeknown to me, as soon as I leave the room, Grandma is already hatching a plan to catch me. But I am far too excited to be aware of her indignation. But grudges feed Grandma's vigilance. She is also an exceptional interrogator: she always lets you lie first. Always. Her devastating mastery makes it difficult to respond with absolute certainty, to any questions she asks, because you never know where she is heading. The next morning she calls me, "Thabani!"

"Ma!"

"*Buya lapha*. Come here!"

"Yes Grandma."

It is still morning and I am still half asleep. I shuffle towards Grandma, completely oblivious to what is about to happen to me. With school now closed, I

have woken up with no plan in my mind. But Grandma, as always, has a plan for me. She is not one for idleness.

“Today I want you to help me plant some mango seeds. Do you hear me?”

“Yes, Grandma.”

“Then grab that hoe over there bring here?”

“Yes, Grandma.”

“Now like a big strong boy, I want you to dig five holes. Here, here, here here and there. Not too deep, otherwise the seeds will just rot. You hear?”

“Is here Ok?”

“Yeah, good boy. Mind your toes with that hoe! Now tell me, what is the river like these days? I haven’t been for a while, and I need to go there and wash your clothes?”

“What do you mean Grandma?”

“What kind of question is that to ask a grown-up? *Uyang’delela neh?* Am I your playmate?”

“No Grandma.”

“Good. As I was saying before you interrupted me, I was talking to Salani and he tells me that you went swimming last Saturday. And of course, yesterday you were by the river again as we both know.”

Then a pause, followed by a quick reflection, then silence.

“And as I recall, you brought home fresh fish. Yes?”

She’d devoured the fish and even chewed the bones. There was certainly no mention of the river then. If anything, she couldn’t thank me enough. But this is Grandma’s world. It is vengeful and it is ruled by an ill-wind.

“Good! Keep the holes tight. Don’t widen the gap too much. You are a clever boy. Now, where did you get the fishing line and hook from?”

“Salani gave - lent - them to me.”

“I see, he is very kind that boy. Now, the day you went fishing I couldn’t find the money I hid behind the pots in the kitchen?”

“I didn’t see any money!”

“Two shillings exactly. I intended to use it to buy snuff. It will probably show up. I know you don’t steal for sure. There are no thieves in this family!”

I have stolen many times before and she knows it. In fact, apart from laziness and malingering, theft is one of many things on her list that she is determined to wean me from

“And did I not say to you not to go to the river?”

“You did, Grandma.”

“And what did you do?”

There is silence. Followed by invigorated digging.

“*Akung'phendule*. What did you do? Is your brain frozen or are you deaf?

I said, what did you do, besides stealing my money? You've forgotten now, have you? Let me remind you! By your own admission you went fishing and then swimming. Not so? And you come back here dangling nothing but your balls like a cur. *Ungum'godoyi*? Are you a dog?”

And then pounce.

“You know what your problem is? You don't listen. I will die and they will bury me! But before that, I'll reinstate your hearing, cut your fingers to stop you stealing, and teach you how to listen. You hear me? Oh yes, you will listen!”

Guerrillas

It is for the first time that we see guerrillas in broad daylight. Two of them wander straight into Grandma's yard, as if there is no war on. They are becoming more and more brazen. They walk with their guns slung over their shoulders like regular hunters on an outing. Their guns look tired and uncared for. They explain to Grandma that they are hungry and would like something to eat. Grandma tells

them that we have no food. But, instead, she offers them water to drink. She also explains that there is a military camp nearby, that perhaps it is in their interest that they should leave. They smell like unwashed dogs; their unkempt hair and beards are colonised by bits of grass and small twigs. It's as though they've been in hibernation for a lifetime. Their clothes are in tatters; as for their shoes, they are just pieces of leather held in one piece by string. I go inside the rondavel to fetch water, but by the time I come back, they are gone. I don't know what else Grandma has said to them.

But soon after, our neighbour's dogs go into a rage. When I look across, there is quite a few guerrillas talking to Mr. Jenkins. Although I can't hear what he is saying he, like Grandma, is pointing in the direction of the military camp. But instead of leaving, they sit under the shade of the big rondavel in Mr. Jenkins yard. Meanwhile Grandma instructs us to catch one of our biggest cockerels. At first, we entice him with kernels of corn, but he is not interested. Tired of waiting, we run after him until we corner him inside Grandma's kitchen—his last refuge. He jumps up and down and fights for his life, but Grandma grabs him by the wings and takes him outside. She steps on his wings and in one fell swoop, decapitates him. His wings flutter and his legs continue twitching even after his head is gone.

To our dismay, once he is cooked, Grandma sends me with a potful of meat to Mr. Jenkins'. When I arrive, there are eight guerrillas sharing mounds of *pap* and chicken that other neighbours have already provided. They don't even turn around to look at me. Mr. Jenkins grabs Grandma's cauldron filled with chicken and motions for me to leave.

When I get back, Grandma asks me to collect all the cockerel's feathers and, afterwards, we bury them in the garden. My sisters sweep the yard. Grandma asks me to drag a big branch over the guerrillas' footsteps. When it is all done, we gather in Grandma's kitchen and she says to us, "Not a word about the guerrillas. You hear me? Not to our neighbours, not to the soldiers, and not even to your friends. You haven't seen or heard anything today!"

We remain silent because on such occasions it is futile to argue with Grandma. Not long after the guerrillas leave, soldiers arrive. They have dogs with

them. They let them loose and the dogs run around for a while. First, they go to Mr. Jenkins' house, and from there they follow the trail back to Grandma's. And they don't stop there. Then proceed towards the hills behind our house. And the soldiers follow closely behind. The rest flatten Grandma's fence as they walk through her yard.

In the evening there is an intense and sustained gunfire exchange, interrupted by intermittent explosions. Gunfire brings trepidation like a persistent hard rain. By late evening it feels so close the ground shakes violently. Tomorrow there will be bodies to view, and the inevitable wrath of soldiers to contend with.

Unusually, tonight Grandma asks uncle Sami and his wife to come and sleep with us. Since he came back from the mines, whenever there are soldiers or guerrillas around, he hides in his room till they're gone. If they find him, the soldiers will accuse him of being one of the guerrillas, and the guerrillas will ask why he is not fighting for our country's liberation. And he has no right answer for both.

Throughout the night, we huddle inside Grandma's little rondavel. We sleep with our ears to the floor in order to listen out for the sound of approaching soldiers. But no one goes to sleep because all the dogs have gone mad with barking. Throughout the night we listen to the sound of sporadic gunfire, and we can hear soldiers walking across Grandma's yard.

Early morning finds us wide awake. Heavy footsteps stop right outside Grandma's hut. We wait for whatever is irritating the dogs to smash through the door. A voice shouts from the other side of the door, asking us to open the door.

Grandma calmly asks, "Who is it?"

"Open the door!"

"I am just an old woman my sons!"

"I said open the door!" the voice bellows.

"I said I am old, and I have nothing to give you, my sons."

Whoever is outside, kicks the door with such a ferocity, it completely dislodges from the frame. Uncle Sami quickly puts on his shoes and Grandma hastily throws his jacket on his shoulders.

"It's not that cold Ma," he whispers.

“We don’t know when we’ll see you again,” Grandma says.

But there is no need to whisper. By now we are completely exposed because there is no longer a door. There is a group of soldiers standing outside. For some reason uncle Sami says, “Ma, it’s me they are looking for.” And with that, he steps outside. As soon as uncle Sami steps outside, they hand-cuff him and pounce on him like a pack of wild dogs.

“Where are your friends?”

“I don’t know who you’re talking about,” uncle Sami says.

“But we know you are feeding them!”

“I haven’t fed anyone, and you know that’s the truth!”

“Just tell us where they are, and we’ll let you go.”

“I haven’t seen anyone, if I did, I’d tell you.”

“You people lie and force us to kill you before you tell the truth!”

It is probably true that these soldiers are very kind human beings, but today they are out to terrorise as if some how they need to. One of the soldiers leans his gun against the wall, and quickly rolls up his sleeves, as if he’s about to begin hard work. This is just a game. Even if uncle Sami knows the truth, he just has to deny everything, until the violence becomes unbearable, in which case he has to tell them what they already know. Or slowly drift into unconsciousness. Whichever comes first. They’ll fake reality even if they know that what they are asking us is insane.

“We know you’ll talk. Everyone has a breaking point!”

Uncle Sami plays with the handcuffs and looks at the young soldier asking him the questions, straight in the eye. It is as if he’s about to say something, but he holds back. His silence infuriates the soldier. He grabs uncle Sami and marches him to the area behind Grandma’s rondavel. Afterwards the other soldiers order all of us to follow them. We clutch onto Grandma as we walk to where uncle Sami is. Immediately, they kick him to the ground, and he hits the ground before he manages to break the fall. They pull his trousers down to his ankles, and he is completely exposed below the waist. One of them presses his right boot hard on his ankles. And he inhales, as if he’s about to chop wood.

Another presses his boot on uncle Sami neck and calmly says, “I know you will tell us. All you have to do is tell us where they are!”

Grandma retorts: “If you don’t know where they are, what have you been shooting at all night?”

They don’t answer but make clear their intent to kill uncle Sami. If not, at least to permanently maim him. They take turns beating him up with sticks. Uncle Sami wails, and his voice pierces right through the morning air. He contorts his whole body, as if he is trying to lift himself off the ground. And this is just the beginning. The soldier with his boot on his neck pushes so hard against him and pins him to the ground. He sobs as if he’s a hiccupping child. Uncle Sami tries to shift his head from side to side, but he cannot move. As the beating intensifies, his scream turns into a muffled sound, as if he is deliberately chewing sand. After a while he goes limp, and they ask him to sit up. But he can’t and that infuriates the soldiers even more.

Grandma pleads with them, “Can’t you see you are killing him? My son has done nothing. And why are you killing us? My son does not deserve to die like this!”

Grandma’s gamble is to search for human kindness, however remote. But they have no mercy, men like this. They are on a quest of their own.

And for the second time the soldier doesn’t respond to Grandma. He simply wipes off the sweat from his brow, and he grabs uncle Sami by the handcuffs and lifts his upper body off the ground and drops him. There is a popping sound. His breathing accelerates and wanes. He is also shaking like a wounded dog. He whispers: “Ma, don’t let them take me. I know they’ll kill me.”

Everything feels so close.

And Grandma pleads with the soldiers: “*Bantwabami, obani noxolo*. My sons, please have mercy!”

We are inside a storm. Even Grandma’s war-worn wisdom cannot reason with their peculiar savagery. But the soft power of her voice is about to fail—providence does not always watch over us; the rest is just false hope. They will not stop until they get what they want.

“Who will look after them?” she says, pointing at us.

Before she finishes, there is a loud cracking sound and a small stream of urine flows into the sand. And there is a smell like no other. Grandma's face suddenly becomes unfamiliar. It is as if she has a burning feeling inside. And she can only alleviate the intensity of this heat by undressing. She strips and stands there, stark naked. Her salt and pepper pubic hair untamed in front of the young soldiers. She has just given up the only thing she has tried to preserve all her life. And calmly, she says to the soldiers, "Before you take my son away, you'll have to kill me first. You will have to kill me first." And she points at us, and she says, "These are my grandchildren. They have done nothing to deserve this, and they have no one in the world except me. No one else. Now kill me!"

She is shaking violently, and her stutter becomes overly exaggerated. She picks up and throws her clothes onto uncle Sami, and she stands between him and the soldiers. A different soldier pushes Grandma to the ground and he strikes uncle Sami on the head with his rifle butt. Before they leave, he warns Grandma not to take him to the hospital. He throws a packet of red and white pills at her and quips: "Don't go telling lies now!"

With that they vanish.

I can see Grandma's indignation, as she turns her attention to uncle Sami, who has soiled himself. His back, buttocks and thighs are completely swollen, with deep cuts and lacerations exposing the reddish-pink flesh below. Grandma pours cold water on him and he bursts into a cough. She gently lifts his head and pours more water over his face and she starts cleaning his face while his wife fetches him fresh clothes. He continuously wretches until dark bile flows out of the corner of his mouth. He cannot sit up unaided. We watch as Grandma tries hard to bring her only son back to life.

His wife is only seventeen. Grandma says that she sometimes forgets to do the things that a wife is supposed to do. So many times now uncle Sami has beaten her close to death, and Grandma always withdraws into an aloof coldness and never intervenes. To her, a man who does not beat up his wife does not love her sufficiently enough. And I don't know how uncle Sami feels about his wife.

Sometimes he works her over as if she's something trivial in his life. No one catches her when she falls. The last time he cracked her ribs and she was unable to walk for weeks. But she stays and never leaves. And she continues to bring him hot water for his early morning shave—if she remembers.

And now, he crawls on all fours back to his bedroom. He can only sleep on his stomach. Every time he tries to drink water, he vomits. And he is unable to pass urine. In the end Grandma encourages him to take the pills the soldiers left behind. Even if we don't know what they are for. With time the vomiting stops, and he gradually starts to produce small quantities of urine. When he relieves himself, he leans against the fence, and a stream of blood-stained urine comes out with much effort.

The following day Grandma attends to his wounds, she dips a small towel into hot water, wrings it, and she gently dabs his bruised purplish skin.

Grandma has a nickname: *Muvu*, a type of hornet that builds its nest on the rafters, inside people's homes. It is ferocious when disturbed and it will defend its nest with all its might. Grandma is renowned for her use of violence to defend her home. However, the terror wrought on uncle Sami is too close for Grandma to bear. Uncle Sami is her only child. And, for the first time, Grandma, never the one to run out of words, is silenced. All she can say is that she is too old now; and too tired, to persistently dwell in profound sadness. She says that they brutalise us into telling lies, and then falsely accuse us of sheltering terrorists; all in order to terrorise us.

Later in the day we hear wailing coming from the direction of the waterfall. I follow Grandma. To get there we follow the dry brook as it meanders under the canopy of tall trees, casting their shadows right onto the rocks. Grandma nearly falls over; it is as if she is pushed by something I cannot see. By the time we arrive the whole village has already descended into the waterfall like a herd of wilder beast. And right at the bottom of the waterfall, lies the bodies of two men. As we get closer, I can see that they are the two guerrillas who came to our home the previous afternoon asking for food. One of them has a big hole through his left shoulder, and the other, an opening at the back of his head.

Grandma sits down on a rock nearby, her headdress tilted to the side, exposing her grey hairs alongside her temples. She places her hands on her lap as if she doesn't know what to do or say anymore. Although she has previously said to us that children should not see dead bodies, she now says that it is my responsibility as a man to bear witness. I ask what will happen to the dead men and she says that all that needed to happen has already happened. That whoever killed them will come back and collect them. Do guerrillas themselves not cut people's tongues so they cannot tell lies? Or their mouths so they cannot eat? Or amputate people's arms so they cannot sustain life? Besides, Grandma says it is dangerous to bury people we don't know. As such, we leave them as we find them. And we walk away in silence.

On the way back Grandma speaks to Grandpa. She sprinkles snuff on the side of the path and speaks to him as if I wasn't there. When Grandpa was still alive, we would walk to the same waterfall and he would pluck wild melons from between rocks. And then slice off their prickly horns with his pocket-knife and pass them on to me, small emerald-green slices of melon with tiny white seeds inside. At times we would dig for worms and fish in silence. Unlike Grandma, Grandpa had an admirable inviolability, and he avoided life's strenuous demands through an uproar of laughter, which masked a virulent strain of tuberculosis, which had colonised his lungs. He used to say that he was appalled by all the violence. And that whatever they say, this war wasn't ours. Now I think I understand what he meant.

Our home is totally exposed. It falls between PaDumi's house and Aunt's house. A shared blood-line cuts through all three homesteads. Pa, PaDumi, and Aunt are siblings. Aunt is the eldest, followed by PaDumi and then Pa. There are four other aunts and numerous cousins a stone's throw away.

Our village, *N'kayi*, is one of the oldest tribal trust lands. It is a dry, arid land, prone to prolonged and debilitating droughts. My family have lived here for more than half a century. Since independence in 1980, there has been much talk of relocation to more fertile lands. It's been more than three years now since independence; we're still waiting.

A severe drought has devastated crops. The local reservoir has shrunk to a third of its size, its water has turned into a thick mud sludge. Some of our animals have perished there, swallowed by mud whilst trying to reach water. Like us, they have been weakened by the drought.

Pa is still in prison. Just before the end of the last war, he broke another man's arm and leg. He nearly killed his wife too. I still don't know why, perhaps my Stepma knows. Since his incarceration, everything has changed. As the oldest boy in my family, I must go to distant places, like *Gokwé* in search for food. The only other person who can help us is PaDumi, our Pa's older brother. PaDumi simply means Dumi's father. But he is seriously ill. Recently, a boy arrived, on the back of a donkey, and announced that PaDumi, who had been missing for days, had been found inside a ditch. Someone had carved his head with a shovel and broken his arm. When he came home, his whole head was still wrapped up in thick bandages and purple gauze. His right arm was covered in plaster. He seemed aged and a lot calmer—as if drained of all life. Now, he sits under the shade, and stares into the distance, as if nothing matters to him anymore.

Apart from my eleven cousins, his other most important possession is his bicycle. It is a bare metal frame on two wheels—with no mudguards or brakes. We call it *koroyi* because it looks like a featherless crow. To stop it, he must create friction against the rear wheel, with the heel of his barefoot. He has no real shoes, but he sometimes wears sandals made from rubber, salvaged from old disused tyres.

Although a formidable man, he is also very cantankerous, with a vicious temper. Aunt calls him *Mfefezo*: it rains spittle when he talks—you must close your mouth when he's speaking. *Umfefezo* is a soft, persistent, wintry rain which soaks through to the bone. In the end it just gets to you—the way he does. He talks incessantly, and he never listens to any other voice but his own. As a young

man he worked as a farm hand for a Boer farmer. This is one thing about his life that he is most proud of. PaDumi's language is peppered with Boer words and phrases, his work ethic is second to none. He wakes me up at dawn to go to the fields, an hour's walk away. Sometimes it's still dark when we leave. It is inevitable that I regularly step on acacia thorns—but he never stops.

When it comes to school, he has no concept of time. Books never fed anyone he says. Sometimes I go straight to school from the fields, still covered in mud. When it rains, I rinse my face and feet in stagnant pools of water on the side of the road. And, sometimes, I miss the whole morning's lessons. In class it is hard for me to stay awake.

But, like Grandma, he sometimes asks me to read and write letters on his behalf, because he cannot read or write. None of my cousins can read or write proficiently, because they never go to school. When they do, it's not long enough for them to learn anything. Even my older cousin Dumi, who now has a beard, is illiterate. I write all his love letters too, including those of my other cousins—Shadreck, Matshobana and Thulani. Except for M'bo, who recently came back from war. But, when I lose our cattle and donkeys, because I am deeply engrossed in a book, they don't take kindly to it.

Our homestead comprises three huts, a barn and our Stepma's and Pa's bedroom. Theirs is the only hut built from mud bricks, with a stylishly thatched roof. All huts face west, except for the girls' hut, whose entrance is directly opposite Pa's bedroom—so he can see who's coming and going. But any chance discovery of the goings-on inside the girls' hut is averted by Pa's habit of being scarcely ever there. Fact is, men and boys come and go. All I ever see is their footprints in the morning.

In the middle of our homestead is a raised concrete platform. It was meant to be the foundation for a new house. But, for now, we use it for drying our blankets. When the heat intensifies, lice crawl out of the tiny crevices inside the blanket. These are no ordinary, translucent, soft, termite-like lice: they are totally black, and fully turgid, as though encased inside a hardened shell. They embed themselves deep under the seams and lay their eggs inside each and every nook in our blankets. They are in my clothes too: under the collar, around the waistbands

and between tufts of my hair. Sometimes I crush them against the concrete floor. Or squash them between my fingernails. In winter, our Stepma boils our clothes and blankets. When the water boils, they float upside down, their torsos bloated from blood.

Then there is Khaya's bedwetting. Sometimes I have so much rage against him. When I use the mopane stick to beat him, he yells and screams until my anguish is all but gone. But sometimes I don't hit him; it all depends on how I feel inside. But, whatever I do, he still manages to wet the blankets. Each morning, before school, I must spread them out in the sun to dry. Khaya is one of my cousins. He is a year older than my stepbrother Israel, and three years younger than my stepsister Sipho, who is ten. His mother, aunt Margaret, Pa's younger sister, remarried and left him with his little brother Angelina, who has the most beautiful eyes for a boy, hence his name. We call him Ngelina for short. Ngelina is the same age as Israel. My Stepma never lets him forget that his mother abandoned him. I can see that he is confused. He still calls her mama, which infuriates her. She frightens him, sometimes he wets himself just from her scornful frown alone.

The only person who has time for Ngelina is my older cousin Dumi. He seems patient with him, and somehow, they seem to connect. They spend whole days together. When Dumi plays his six-string guitar, made from a yellow five-litre sunflower oil tin, Ngelina trails behind him as if he too knows where they're going. I still don't know where they go.

On the periphery of our home, a tall acacia's broad shade dominates the yard. Behind it, Pa's parents' graves—*Koko* and *Tata*. Their graves resemble two symmetrical mounds of earth, each with a collapsed centre, like a newly born infant's fontanelle. The graves seem old and tired now. They are overgrown with weeds and there are termites' mounds on top of them. Nobody visits or talks to them the way Grandma visited Grandpa's grave. I wonder if their bones are still there. Because I sometimes come across human bones in the forest, bleached by the sun. The bones are never in the same place. I often wonder who left them there.

Aunt calls me *Mathukuthela* after *Tata*, and she calls my sister Gift, *MaMbuya*, after *Koko*. She says she wants our bodies to be their new spiritual home. Lately, she's taken to calling me *Khulu*, too, which makes me sound like an old man. But I don't feel old inside my bones. Not the way she sometimes complains about her knees or her back. Or headache, for which the only cure, like Grandma's, seems to be copious amounts of tea, laced with spoonfuls of sugar. Although similar in temperament, compared to Grandma, Aunt is lazy. Even at her fastest, she stills moves like a sloth. On long journeys, we must carry her on the back of the cart.

So far as I know, no photograph of my grandparents exists. There are no prominent headstones with their names on their graves. But there are rusty old cups and pots which have since corralled into the vortex of the fontanelles. Some of the gravestones have been displaced by animals and scattered all over the place next to our home. It is hard to pick up a stone and know which grave it belongs to. So, we just leave them there, because we're not allowed to touch or step on them.

From what Aunt says, *Tata*, was a very affluent man. But all his wealth had been squandered by Pa and his brother, PaDumi, through gambling. She says that *Tata's* spirit was so incensed, that early one morning they woke up to find our herd of sheep lying on the grass next to our home. But when the sun got hotter and hotter, they stayed still, until someone checked on them, only to find out that they'd all died. All that is left now is a small herd of cattle, donkeys and goats. They while away hot afternoons under the foliage of the acacia tree.

Nobody says how *Tata* died. But they say that *Koko*, suffered the most. They say that towards the end, she had gaping sores and was totally blind; that maggots nested deep inside her pelvic bone, where they could not reach them. As always, there was someone to blame for her condition. Since they did not know what to do, they kept her isolated in the darkness of the kitchen, where we sometimes sleep.

It is said that, following her death, *Koko* was often seen in the house at night. As if she was searching for something she left behind; even though she had all the time in the world, alone, in the darkness. In the end they slaughtered a cow, and brewed traditional beer, in order to appease her spirit. No one has seen her

since. I've never met her in my dreams. There are no tales of *Tata* ever coming back, except on the day he killed most of his animals.

Although they were both still alive when I was born, I never got the chance to meet them. Pa says that I did, but I have no memory of their faces. They always say that I look like him, but I have no way of verifying this.

My sister Gift and I did not live with Pa's family; he was extremely violent towards our Ma. This happened even when she was pregnant with us. He chased after her with a knife until Grandma came and took us away. Pa never followed; he stayed and remarried Sipho and Israel's Ma, our Stepma. Pa also has another family someplace else. All I know is that I have an older brother, Boyson, and an older sister, whose name I don't know.

Nearby, there is a shrub of mopane trees. Mopane trees are a hardy, termite-resistant wood, used mainly as firewood, poles for fences, and as beams for roofs. Their branches are tender but durable. Lately, they've become the soldiers' preferred weapon of torture. They cut the tenderest of stems with their blades, the way we harvest sweet reeds. And they prune them, with the most fastidious of attention.

This vast dry land encompasses an anxious emptiness. Its sandy loam soils, which are in abundance, are very shallow. Rainwater vanishes as soon as it rains. The road to the Shangaan river is deserted. Because of the war, those who go to the river to fetch water, sometimes never come back. As such, we have not seen water carts for a while now, and the unique smell of river-water, redolent of green algae, is amiss too.

In the midst of this drought the memory of water lingers the most. Sometimes I see birds hovering above dry wells, as though, they too, are beginning to doubt their own memory. And everyone is afraid. An improvised fence constructed from thorn-tree branches separates our home from our fields. We sometimes sleep out in the open, between the edges of the mopane shrubs and the fence. This way, when soldiers set fire to our homes at night while we sleep, we won't perish in the flames. Whilst soldiers roam the countryside—raping, pillaging, setting homes on fire, and killing people as though

there was a war on - our president continues to broadcast his intentions to kill people over the radio.

They confiscate identity cards and party loyalty cards, and then claim that those without are dissidents. As our president says, sell-outs can be found in the most unlikely of places—in every nook, crook, and hiding place. But his soldiers and death squads never venture beyond our homes.

Sometimes, on my way to school, I pick up remnants of sun-bleached newspapers, stuck up against thorn trees, fervently announcing that there is a new war on cockroaches. There are pictures of men with long beards, too, whose faces I cannot clearly discern. They are supposed to represent dissidents. But I know that my cousin Peace and his friends do not look like that.

Sometimes I read stories about White farmers who have been abducted and killed by the same group of dissidents who seem to be everywhere and nowhere at the same time. But everybody knows that White people never venture out here. Since they're no longer allowed to carry guns, they stay as close as possible to the cities.

Also, unlike other parts of the country, development has been very slow here. We're in the third year of an unforgiving drought. We have yet to receive the drought relief our leaders promised us. But our president vehemently denies that he is deliberately starving us to death. He says that everyone is well-fed; that the violence and the hunger exist only in our imagination. Truly speaking, we are on the brink of starvation. People are already praying for the past to come back. They say that things were better then. That, yes, there was killing and starvation, but there was hope too.

Our president now calls us cockroaches: anything can be done to us. Aunt says that our names have meaning. That we are no mere things. That even dogs are still dogs. She says that our disappearance will mark the turning point in the history of our country, beyond which there'll be no coming back. But our president continues with his rhetoric, seemingly undeterred:

"You voted for the father of dissidents, so don't feel sorry for yourselves. All his generals are now rotting away in prison. As for you, no one will save you!"

Nobody asks why he is saying these things.

According to our president, we are now at war. A dusk to dawn curfew has recently been declared. Nothing has been allowed to move in, or out. Those caught using bicycles, donkeys or carts, are shot on sight. They are accused of feeding dissidents. Everyone is afraid.

We call soldiers leaves, because there are so many of them. Also, because of the way they suddenly appear, like new shoots in the spring. It is also under the shade of the same trees that we seek shelter from war, which soldiers use to carry out the perfect ambush. So, we avoid the forest now.

But sometimes when adults talk about leaves, they also mean tea leaves. Since there is a war going on, tea leaves and sugar are both dangerous things to have. They are evidence of collaboration with the soldiers. One must be careful with words.

I sometimes watch military trucks making vertical climbs out of ravines, as if they are about to tip over and empty all the soldiers into the gorge below. There is nothing out here except us and animals; and yet I see soldiers carrying very big guns, like there is a real war going on.

Our president has said, again in his own words, that unfortunately his soldiers can no longer tell the difference between dissidents and us. He is not just playing with words. He says that it is down to us to decide whether we live or die. Whether it is war today or peace tomorrow. He keeps repeating this one thing:

“We will crush them! Our boys will crush the cockroaches!”

“They underestimate our resolve,” he says, “And we will never yield—not an inch—from our revolutionary principles!”

And I don’t know what that means. After the last war, our president had said that we should turn our weapons into plough shears, and let bygones be bygones. Aunt says that he has already reneged on most of his promises. Instead, he has sent his special soldiers not to work with the people—to plough, renew, and reconstruct, but to hunt us down. No one knows anything about them except they are answerable only to our president. It is said that these men have been carefully chosen for their loyalty. That they’ve been trained, specifically for this

task, in the remote and isolated valleys in the north, shielded by the beautiful *Nyanga* mountains. But their red berets provoke an inexplicable dread in us. Our president calls them, simply, *Gukurahundi*: the soft wintery rain after harvest. In *isiNdebele* we call it *Imbolisamahlanga*. The persistent drizzle that gently softens maize stalks; introducing rot imperceptibly slowly, so that when farmers till the land in preparation for the ploughing season after the first rains of October, rotten maize stalks fall and disappear into furrows created by the shears of the ploughs. The rot nourishes the ground for the new crop of maize plants, sweet reed, melon, and pumpkin. But it is January, the ploughing season has long since gone. There is nothing but famine, dust and disease. And against all odds, a severe drought has decimated all our crops, dashing all hope, even for a meagre harvest.

Aunt says that our president has waited for the most importune of moments, to start his war of retribution. Schools, clinics, grinding mills, and shops have all been closed for a while now. There are roadblocks everywhere. Soldiers callously set buses on fire, pretending that this is the work of dissidents. Gradually, everything has come to a grinding halt. This is the beginning of our president's total war: two years after our independence.

Dawn breaks as we cross a small river before entering *Gokwé*. Compared to the loose sands of the forest, the riverbank clutches a very dark, fertile clay. The sight of the river provokes a latent thirst, which has clung to the back of my throat for

the best part of the journey. A mist hovers above the river, and the grass is still wet from the early morning dew. The smell of rotting reeds clings to the air. The hardest part of our journey is now behind us—at least for now. But, in so many ways, this is just the beginning.

The old man Chauke, who up until now, has been sleeping at the back of the scotch-cart, makes his way to the front. He removes the yoke from behind the hump of each bullock, one at a time. Once free, the bullocks charge the stream.

The old man grabs a shovel and walks further upstream. Tall and slender, he is a sharp contrast to my morbidly obese Aunt, of whom, more later. He is gentle in his mannerisms. Unlike my uncle, PaDumi, or Pa, I've never seen him fight anyone. Fighting solves nothing he says. The only time I ever see him upset, is when people brutalise animals for no reason. That, he cannot stand. During the ploughing season he never hits his animals. Instead, he hits the ground with his whip to force them to change direction, or to pick up speed. He always talks to his animals as if he has no doubt in his mind that they can hear him.

Sometimes he leads them to hidden pastures in the depth of the forest. And he follows them around and lets them feed until it's time to go home. This was before this war, when we were almost free.

He listens to the daily news, on his transistor radio, as though it were a ritual. He seems to always know what is going on in the world. He calls me *tishala*, which in Zulu simply means teacher. I call him *Khulu*, which means Grandpa or Old man.

"Ah, *tishala*, they say it won't rain for another month or so! By all accounts our crops will be dead then!"

Or: "*tishala*, come and read this for me and tell me what it says!"

I know that he can read and write. He is just trying to gauge my progress at school. Of all the adults, he is the only one who seems to care about me. There are older boys at home, such as Dumi, Thembi and Dee, but he has chosen me to come with him.

Relieved, I walk a short distance up-stream until I come to a stagnant pool. I jump into the water, fully clothed. I stay under for as long as I can hold my breath.

For now, he lets the animals feed for a while. Later, I sit underneath the shade next to him, but the old man says nothing, which is unusual. He rolls a cigarette from tobacco leaves, retrieved from his small pouch, using an old newspaper. Somehow, the smell from his tobacco blends seamlessly into the order of things. I think he can feel it too. This stillness under the shade next to a river. And, in the nearby trees, the echo of a dove's cooing, as if it knows we're here.

I watch the animals graze purposively. They move from side to side and swat flies with their tails. I fall asleep, hypnotized by fatigue and the tranquility of the river. After a while, the old man nudges me gently. When I come to, I know it's time to go. But, before we leave, I go back to the river to drink water one last time. As I get closer to the water's edge, the water distorts, mirror-like, the shadow of the tall trees behind me. And my face wobbles, making me look well-fed and fat.

We yoke the bullocks, fasten the oxbows. Once again, we are on the move. I avoid the steep rise out of the river valley, and I guide us through a less steep incline. And, in no time, we are on the dusty road again. It is not long before we hit the sand. The bullocks strain every sinewy muscle on their body. In this silence, all I can hear, is the old man's voice, gently egging them on:

"Good boys! There now! Nearly there now!"

They respond by lowering their heads closer to the ground, and pressing on with such a determination, as if they know that it is only a matter of time before this journey, too, comes to an end.

Occasionally, we come across women, some with infants on their backs, others with their necks strained under buckets full of water; and men, holding sharpened axes across their shoulders, seemingly in no hurry to get anywhere. The old man has now dismounted from the back of the cart. He tilts his straw hat to the women as we pass. The way he does when he comes across my Stepma. He is married to my Aunt, by custom he's my Stepma's son-in-law. Whenever they meet, he steps to the side of the path, so there is no contact between them. They

both kneel and clap hands, in a greeting ritual that seems to last for forever. Even in the throes of hunger, he still maintains a surprising dignity.

People here speak Shona, which is a different language from Ndebele. Somehow the old man understands them better than I do. It feels as though there is no war here—we haven't yet come across a single man with a gun. After a while, a collection of thatched huts comes into view. The patterns of thatch carry distinct styles—a mosaic of different shapes created from the juxtaposition of straw-coloured thatch, with the old, brownish, rain-soaked thatch—like well-worn quilts. Granaries, filled to the brim with cobs of corn, stand tall on wooden stilts. There must be a reason why there is food here, but the old man says nothing to me.

The homesteads are much more expansive than ours. Tall, heavy-leafed trees, whose names I do not recall, guard each homestead. They maintain this vigil, while their branches are tossed to and fro by the wind. Underneath their shade, chickens dash backwards and forwards, as if looking for something valuable in the dust. Occasionally, there is the straggly sound of dogs barking, and goats bleating. It is as if everything has an affinity with this terrain.

By midday the heat has already intensified. There is no respite to the drudgery of the hot sand. Or the monotony of the dry heat. Except, far in the distance, translucent clouds bounce between the ground and the air above the road. But each time I reach the exact spot where they've just been, they're all but gone. The road meanders as hunger goads me into a desperate fantasy for food. We cross dry streams. And, in the background, the comforting creak of the cart. The old man has tilted his straw hat over his face, sheltering it from the sun. I have not got a hat. Children do not wear hats. I can smell his tobacco and I feel reassured by his presence. He is now walking beside the cart, holding on, as if he senses an imminent fall coming. We pass small boys carrying knobkerries and improvised fishing lines, heading in the direction of the river, now a distant memory.

We stop, once or twice, when villagers offer us water, which we drink straight out of gourds with hooked handles like a chameleon's tale. The water is thick. It also has a peculiar smell to it. It quenches thirst all the same.

We reach the home of our hosts just before dark, when the heat begins to wane. The wooden gate to their homestead is not wide enough for our cart; we unyoke the bullocks just outside of the compound. The old man ushers them into a kraal and closes the wooden gate. He is on familiar ground.

The compound itself consists of four mud huts and a barn: more ruin than human habitat. Our host is old Mpeta. Previously, the resident rainmaker in our village, till he retraced his roots back to this place where he was born. His family left our village some time ago and have permanently resettled here. The old man was born here too; that is why he has a different name, and an affinity with this land. When he speaks to Mpeta, they resort to this other language, people in our village no longer use, out of habit and for fear of reprisals.

Mpeta is old now. He is completely bald, and he quivers like a river reed even when he's standing still. He has a thin wisp of a grey beard on his fragile chin. His wife, MaMpeta, is much younger than he is. She's the same age as my Stepma, who sometimes sleeps with my cousin Thembi. So, I surmise that she, too, must be the same age.

She has a striking diastema between her front teeth, like Grandma, and a sufficiently welcoming countenance, without being overly friendly. There is also a slight annoyance in her demeanour, which I can only guess is due to our late arrival, unannounced. That can only mean unnecessary chores for her and Fisa, the only girl in the family.

Between them, they have four children, all of whom have a striking resemblance to my cousins. Rumour has it that they're PaDumi's children. That he slept with old Mpeta's wife, out of charity, since he could not have children of his own. By extension, they're my cousins too. But this has never been explained to me. Sometimes rumours are truth. Aunt says that when it comes to women, PaDumi has more than twelve eyes.

There is a familiar greeting between the adults. They huddle together and talk about war, famine, and old friends. After nearly two days of walking, I am left at the mercy of three unkempt boys whose eyes follow me till I sit down with my back to the wall. For the first time, I begin to feel my feet. They carry an unrelentingly dull ache—more discomfort than pain. But there is nothing I can do.

The boys continue to stare at me with a curious but searing hostility. They all look the same. There is nothing that distinguishes them, except that one of them is slightly taller than the other two, and his clothes are intact. The other two are dressed in nothing but rags.

As a gesture of our welcome, a cockerel is sacrificed. But tonight, there are eight mouths to feed. The three boys become even less friendly; they know they are going to have to share food with me. When the food arrives, I desperately try to feel for the enamel plate in the dark. All the meat is gone within a few seconds. I manage just three mouthfuls of *pap* and that is all.

Afterwards, we share a blanket—all four of us. Everyone jostles for the middle, but I am far too tired, and weak, having earlier lost the contest for food. I sleep, instead, on the outside. The blanket smells of stale urine and the congealed stench of unwashed bodies. I begin to worry about lice—again. As soon as the light goes out, cockroaches descend from the thatch, on to the floor, looking for food. I fall asleep, ears hard on the floor, and eyes on the cracks between the wooden door.

The old man wakes me at the crack of dawn. Someone has urinated on my back. I know it's the boy sleeping right next to me, but I have no time to remonstrate against him. Our hosts help us set-up again. We leave with empty stomachs, save for a bundle of dry sweet reeds and dry corn bread for the journey. We go from village to village buying sacks of maize, sorghum, millet, jars of honey and calabashes full of sour milk. By late noon, our cart is fully loaded, and we're ready to head home.

On the way back, the old man takes over the reins. I am sitting at the back submerged between sacks of grain. With my mind at ease and my feet dangling over the edge, I watch *Gokwé* disappear into the distance. As soon as the sun drops behind the canopy of the forest, the moon rises from the east. It slowly drifts up the sky, casting shards of light through the curtain of the forest. The forest road narrows in some places. Branches overhang, whilst a network of roots protrudes from the ground up, and in some places, radiate across the road. The

cart wobbles and tilts. Sometimes the bullocks come to a sudden halt: they, too, are getting tired and impatient. But the old man carefully navigates around this labyrinth of traps. If anything breaks now; or worse still, if we suffer a puncture, we are done for. After all, this is home to the dissidents. We press on and the monotony of the journey is interrupted by the occasional sneezing of the bullocks. In the distance, the hyena's laughter, and the sounds of the night owl. The cart rocks from side-side. With my head now resting on the softness of the sacks full of corn kernels, I drift into a deep sleep.

* * *

We break out of the hairline of the forest just after dawn and join the main road which consists mainly of gravel. With the treacherous part of the journey now over, I am now at the front, holding the rope tied around the horns of the two bullocks, pulling the cart behind them. Barefoot, still, I negotiate my way between aggregates of gravel. My mind drifts ahead: What will happen if Dumi refuses to move out? And what will happen to my sister now that everybody knows?

While I ponder the future, I pick up the trail of military boot-prints heading in the same direction as us, towards our village. I think the old man notices them too, because, suddenly, he starts to cough. I guess more out of nervousness, than anything else. There is an acrid odour of burnt oil in the air. When I listen for any signs of trouble, all I can hear is the rustling of leaves caressed by the wind. But when I next raise my head, I can see, in the distance, three burnt-out, still smouldering, skeletons of buses, surrounded by burnt-out trees. Some, miraculously, still have leaves. I look back to see if the old man is still there. But I am too short to see behind the bulls and cart laden with sacks of grain. When I listen carefully, I can hear the old man whistling now, but cannot make out the words of the song.

The charred remains of the three buses rest on the side of the road. They have been driven off road and wedged deep into the edge of the forest. Where tyres had been before, only rims remain. Now the rims are half-submerged into the sand. Apart from the skeletal remains of the buses, and the scalded trees, there

is no sign of life. And no voices. There are no visible signs of freshly dug graves nearby. This is just a graveyard for buses.

A small strip of green and yellow paint remains at the rear of one of the buses. These are state-owned buses. One thing is certain, these three buses did not self-immolate. We will pay for this mindless vandalism. Without so much as a word between us, the old man and I abandon this corner of the forest to its own fate. The old man is no longer whistling. As we leave the forest behind, the road peaks at the cross-roads, and then drops into a final descent. In another hour or so we will be home.

Throughout the journey, the old man has been gentle with the bullocks. We stop numerous times while he checks them over for any signs of injury or unusual discomfort. He lifts each hoof, and searches, as if looking for answers to a conundrum. On arrival at home, they'll be watered and fed straw from the old man's emergency reserves. And they'll be allowed to roam free for a while.

But for now, he seems very eager to get us home. He uses his whip for the first time and pushes bullocks with a renewed vigour. Every so often I break into a gentle jog, because the bulls, too, are becoming animated and impatient. Now is a very good time for them to use their horns. The last time this happened, one of them tore into Johanne's mouth, and ripped the flesh from the inside out. The bull tossed him in the air like a voodoo doll. He was lucky to survive. I just have to stay alert for a little while longer, but this is not easy as it sounds. The road is pure gravel and the soles on my feet are perforated like a sieve. And I can still see military boots in the middle and side of the road, which is not a good sign.

Our arrival consigns to us the status of heroes. When Aunt sees us, she is thrilled. Her eyes widen and she moves faster than I've ever seen her move. There is no embrace between her and the old man, but when she looks at him, I totally understand why they're together. The old man unyokes the bullocks and walks ahead of them to the barn. They follow him as though they already know where he is going. He heads to the barn, filled to the brim with dry maize stalks, dry sweet reed and hay. The bullocks wait, impatiently, as he pulls out two bundles and throws them in front of the bullocks. He watches them feed with a curious

satisfaction. While they feed, he busies himself filling the trough with water, tiding up the barn, and securing the loose pieces of mopane wood holding the precious feed.

Afterwards the old man heads to his bedroom and comes out with his radio and wooden stool. He quietly makes for the shade. Once there, he hangs his hat on a rusty rail impaled to the tree just for this very purpose. As he fine tunes his radio, there's a crackling and whizzing sound, like that of dying man running out of breath. Now that he is home, he seems satisfied with his world.

My older cousins, Thembi and Dee, unload the cart. They place everything inside a hut with a padlock on the outside. They leave the partition of the food to Aunt. With Aunt now involved, there is still the question of dividing the consignment equally between two families. I am only a child. Aunt knows that. Her greed is the reason why she is bulging in all the right places, like a bull frog, whilst everybody else around her is dwindling. I watch closely as she moves her fat fingers between sacks. She grudgingly pushes aside three sacks of corn, half a calabash of milk, and a jar of honey. One whole calabash of milk is missing, together with a sack of millet. She opens each sack and removes a bowl full of corn; she says that this is because there is more of them than us.

Aunt has an acerbic tongue and an irascible temperament. Her obesity exacerbates her chronic incontinence. Which makes watching her urinate such a spectacular thing to see. When she is desperate, she rushes behind the nearest shrub, lifts her skirt, and urinates from behind like a sacred cow. When we're at her house at mealtimes, she instructs Gift and I to wash our hands, and wait. She lets my cousins eat first. Half-way through the meal, she lets us join in. By then, all the meat and juicy bones are gone.

I use our old wheelbarrow to transfer our share of the food to our home. By the time I finish, it's already late afternoon. I place a straw mat under the shade of the acacia tree and lie down for the rest of the day. There is a reddish hue of new shoots on the mopane trees, right on the edges of our home. Under intense heat, they fold into small butterfly-like formations. Cicadas have sought shelter underneath the leaves, but their stout bodies and large compound eyes give them away. Soon, they lay their eggs under the mopane leaves. After a while their

nymphs hatch and burrow into the ground. After years of hibernation, they'll emerge from the ground. It is believed that they are a symbol of rebirth. This year swarms of cicadas have colonised every tree possible. Their ear-ringing song, compounded by the heat, overwhelms the senses.

When the sun cools down, I make my way to the waterfall where my older cousins wash, shave their pubic hair and share stories. They talk about crabs even though there are none in the river. And they share stories of having sex with a woman who cannot say no, because something inside her head has stopped working. In her world, everything she does is an act of kindness. So, all the men just take what they want from her—which is everything. They torment her relentlessly. They ambush her on her way to fetch water; and pounce on her while she's having a wash by the shallow stream. They follow her all the way to the fields while she works her land and drag her into the bushes and do with her as they please.

When her husband is away, they invade her home too. Pa has had his fair share too. And, so have most of the men in the village.

They laugh, too, about the things that they've done to her. I think I understand but it feels as though there is far too much betrayal going on. These are adult things with a burden of their own. I cannot say, whole heartedly, what is right or wrong, but I know not to mention certain things. But when I get there, the water at the bottom of the waterfall has reduced to a thick mucilage. Threads of green algae absorb all light and the surface of the water reflects nothing back. I watch as a cloud of tadpoles hides under the shrunken leaves of the waterlilies. Since it hasn't rained, the smell of the rain-soothed air is gone. And there is no sound of water. With that, I head home

Just before sunset, armed men, in an assortment of camouflage, flood our home from different directions. When they speak, it is as though ten different languages are being spoken. None of which make sense to me. I am in the middle of giving my stepbrother Israel a bath. We are standing on a slightly raised concrete slab, Pa's abandoned project to build an even bigger house.

Shisa starts barking ferociously. I try to calm her down, but she is just too agitated to stop. One of the soldiers is shouting at me to calm the dog, but somehow, I cannot leave Israel all on his own. I look towards the kitchen to see if anyone will come out, but I cannot see for the sheer numbers of soldiers around us. In the end the soldier loses his temper and he viciously kicks the dog. She whimpers away, contritely, and hides under the barn. From there, she continues to bark, relentlessly. Soon, a sudden burst of gunfire reduces her to a pile of meat. She dies under the barn. Nobody explains to me why they've just killed our dog. She meant no harm to anyone. And they know that.

I keep hold of the rag that I have just been using to scrub Israel. Israel starts to cry. It's not a loud cry but a sob. There is nothing I can do, except wish for the ground to swallow us. Who are these men? What do they want? Clearly, they are not dissidents. So far, they've said nothing about food. Dissidents are always hungry, but they never walk around before sunset—not like this.

These soldiers smell differently. There is the overwhelming smell of cordite which sits on the tongue and harangues the nostrils. There is something else, but I don't know what it is.

In between sporadic gunfire, dogs barking, voices yelling; I can hear screams coming from my cousin Dumi's house. Also, from all the surrounding neighbours. The screams are very loud and confident at first, but they soon wane into muffled sounds: voices begging for their lives. Then they die out, completely, as if of their own accord.

Israel is still naked save for the rag wrapped around his tiny frame. Not a sound issues from him, except for the shattering of his teeth. I try to dress him surreptitiously. I whisper for him to go into the kitchen. But he is frozen right next to me. He is six and I am thirteen years old.

It is then one of the soldiers approaches us. He is not wearing a red beret but a military cap with a flap rolled up at the back. His camouflage shirt is folded neatly above the elbow. He has a chain of bullets around his waist. He looks different from the rest—tall, broad and very light-skinned. He is so big he has a machine-gun slung over his shoulder like it weighs nothing.

“Kijane!” he calls out to me.

I clutch Israel’s tiny hand; I have no intention of letting it go.

First, he asks me about dissidents. Although playful, the way adults talk to children, there is something tenaciously serious about him. I tell him a truth-lie. I say that I’ve seen dissidents in the past, but they haven’t been back for a while. He asks how many, and what kind of weapons they were carrying. I give him descriptions based mainly on the weapons that the soldiers are carrying.

The only dissident around is my cousin Peace, who currently, is visiting his pregnant wife at one of our aunts’ houses. It is more likely than not, that he is trapped. But, dissident or no dissident, Peace is family. I can never give him up just like that. Everyone is prepared to die than admit that they know where the dissidents are. We are always going to be on the side of us. War or no war. That much has been drilled into us.

He also asks me other seemingly random questions. Such as, who is new to the area? Who left recently? And where did they go? He also wants to know about all the important people such as teachers, soldiers, people involved in politics and all their relatives. This time I tell him the truth: that the old man Chauke is the local chairman of the party and that my cousin M’bo is a freedom fighter. I also tell him that he has a pregnant wife and a little girl, hoping that this will save them both. When I tell him this, his eye language changes, he smiles at me. He then says to me that I should tell him if there’s anything else I’ve forgotten to mention. I say to him that I haven’t forgotten anything. With that, he turns around and walks away. I rush Israel into the kitchen to fetch his clothes.

For some reason, all our neighbours are corralled into our yard. They trickle in one by one, in small groups, in various states of undress. Most have been caught in the slumber of the late afternoon heat. This includes my cousin Dumi’s family,

my Aunt and her family, including the old man. We are forced to sit on the bare earth and to wait.

I choose a spot for Israel and me right at the front. I want to hear, properly, what the soldiers have to say. In this heat sweat congeals and sticks to my skin, and a thick thirst stagnates every thread of saliva in my mouth. I don't know if I can drink water whilst under the watchful gaze of the soldiers.

When I turn around and look behind me, I can see our Stepma right at the back of the crowd, her distinctive yellow head-wrap tilted forward. I cannot see Gift, or Siphio. Or, for that matter, Angelina and Khaya. I start to panic because I don't know where they are.

PaDumi, his wife, MaDumi, and my cousins Dumi, Shadreck, Thulani, Thoko and the rest of the family are scattered around in the crowd. It has been agreed that we should not huddle together as a family, lest the soldiers start shooting.

I catch a glimpse of my Aunt, and right next to her, the old man still wearing his straw hat, and my cousins Thembi, Dee and M'bo, and his wife Zina. The rest of the girls are hiding somewhere at the back: Senzi, No, Sindiso, and my Aunt's youngest, Jennifer, is not there. I don't know where she is.

The soldiers order all the men to gather wood and build a bonfire. They insist on big mopane logs. It is going to be a long night. So, the men tear down the fences to harvest mopane wood for the fire. Soon, smoke billows into the air and, slowly, the flame rises. I start to think of the fire and the cockroaches, and what our president had recently said. With that, I start to feel anxious, overwhelmed by the maiming fear of something ominously imminent. The most painful thing is the not knowing—how and when. Somehow, I feel reassured by the glow of the flame.

The soldiers work the crowd into a frenzy as if this is an all-night religious revival. They encourage us to sing about our own death as if this is a good thing. They detach their blades from their weapons, and in a sweeping motion, slice through the air. They say they want to sweep our homes clean with their blades. Through their songs, they list all the places they have been to recently: *N'kayi*,

Tsholotsho, Mbazhe, Nesigwe. I know these places by heart. I have family there too.

The leader of the group is a very dark, short, and stocky man. The broad buckle on his military belt glints against the light from the fire. His red beret has been pushed behind his broad, multi-colored elastic belt on his waist. He has rolled up the sleeves of his camouflage shirt just above the elbows. There is nothing else on him except his blade. Like our president, he has a penchant for sloganeering. He struts, like a cockerel, and pummels his fist into his cupped hand. He then raises his right fist triumphantly.

“*Pamberi na* President Robert Gabriel Mugabe!”

“Forward with the gallantry of our revolutionary soldiers!”

“Forward with the war on dissidents!”

“Down, with the cockroaches and sell-outs!”

And then he breaks into a crescendo of a speech.

“Some say the war is finished. Some even say that we are free now.

All these are rumours of course! Now, here is one thing I want you people to help me with.”

He sticks his finger out into the air as if he’s likely to find the answers to his own question there. Suddenly, a hardened malevolence obtains in his eyes, and his anger comes effortlessly.

“Now, we all know that you are hiding and feeding dissidents. They are here tonight, amongst you!”

With that, he waves his right hand over us as though spreading something only he knows.

“We will flash them out! Please don’t under-estimate our determination to deal with the problem of dissidents, once and for all. That’s why we’re here. We’ll stay for as long as it takes. Or, until there isn’t a single one of you left. If you think that you are hungry now, think again. First, you’ll eat your animals. Then your children. Then you’ll eat your wives. By then, if there are any of you still alive, you’ll eat the soil. You must understand that we are not the national army that has so far treated you as if your life matters. You don’t matter to us!”

A violent throb cups the back of my head. My stomach is churning. When I try to wriggle my toes, all I feel is the sand and the wetness between my toes that wasn't there before. Israel is still clutching onto my t-shirt and is trembling like a goat caught in the rain.

Next, the soldier launches into a tirade about their mission. He smiles when he talks about killing: "The dissidents will come out of the forest eventually. If they don't, we'll burn the forest if we have to!"

The old man stands up, folds his straw hat in his hands, and shouts at him indignantly:

"If you know where these so-called dissidents are, why don't you go and find them and leave us alone?"

The soldier tells him to sit down and keep quiet, but the old man refuses to.

"What kind of men are you? How can you force people to sing and dance at gunpoint? If we must sing, let us sing our own songs, like we've always done!"

Then the old man snatches remnants of an old liberation song, *Senzeni na*, from under his breath. As he sings, others join in too. A group of soldiers stands menacingly in the shadows. Just then, one of them steps out, into the lime-light and interrupts the old man's song. He is very young. In fact, I think he is much younger than Dumi. But he looks mean like the rest of the soldiers. His small eyes dart from person to person, as if refusing to settle on anyone in particular. I try not to look at him. Then he flares up:

"Pamberi NeZanu!"

"Pamberi Neruzhinji rwedu!"

"Pasi Nemadissidents!"

"Down with the sellouts!"

"And who said you can sing?"

No one answers, but the old man continues, unperturbed: "We are free now," the old man says. "It is only yesterday that you were telling us that we were the sea and you were the fish. That without us you couldn't survive! Now you kill defenseless women and children and call it war?"

"Old man, I said sit down!"

Seemingly undeterred, the old man rambles on as if possessed.

“We knew right from the beginning what Boers wanted. We fought day and night against them. That was war! And this? What is this? I can tell you one thing. This is not what we fought for!”

The taut cast on the soldier’s face loosens, tightens, and then loosens again. He adjusts and readjusts the thickness of the fold on his shirt sleeves. He puts his red beret back on, and wades through the crowd until he reaches the old man. He strikes the old man very hard across the face with the back of his hand. The soldier drags the old man out to the front. He pulls him so hard he falls forward. He has nothing with which to break the fall. He pins his head to the ground with his boot like he’s killing a venomous snake. The old man’s dark skin clings to his bones, prominent veins bulge over the back of his hands. He is bleeding profusely through the nose. His arms and legs flail as if in protest. After what seems like an eternity, the soldier removes his boot from his neck.

“Am I not your father, son?”

“My father is not the father of dissidents,” the soldier replies.

“There is absolutely no truth in that, and you know that my son!”

He remains prone, his legs splayed apart. This time the soldier stands back and kicks him hard on the ribs. He then rests his heavy boot on his neck again. The old man drags blood, air and dust in through the nose. It is as if he’s dying with a rib-cage full of air. Then he tries to make a plea, but I think it’s the wrong kind.

“Even the most vicious of dogs accepts defeat. But I am not a dog. You, my son, are robbing us of our hard-won freedom. You are no different from the so-called dissidents.”

With that he lies still and remains silent. He tries to anticipate where the next blow is coming from, by turning this way and then that way. The blows keep coming and land where he least expects them to. He is floating between steel-toe capped boots, inside a cloud of dust. Striations on his back start to form into small mounds of raw flesh. His buttocks are like giant, half-eaten, purple plums. All he keeps saying is, “That’s the truth. I am not an animal!”

He surreptitiously licks his dry lips. The slowest of smiles breaks gently across his face. Without so much as utter a word, another soldier raises the butt of his weapon and strikes the old man right in the middle of the head. He collapses, as if caught off guard. He tries to crawl but fails. They lift and swing his body like a bag of sand; and, finally, they throw him sideways into the fire.

There is a jolt, followed by an incredible howling, like a hyena caught in a hunter's snare. I watch as his body expands like an over-fed monitor. A creamy substance spurts out from the ribs, giving rise to the flame.

I grab Israel's hand and bring him closer to me. I don't want him to start crying again. I want him to keep still to avoid recognition. But he can see what is going on. And I cannot protect him from that.

There is a commotion amongst the crowd as Aunt rises. Suddenly, she surges forward like a wounded walrus, but her weight slows her down. She bellows like a bull about to be slaughtered as the women surround her. They hold her until she collapses into a heap. In between, there are intermittent screams coming from the crowd. I can also hear gunfire. It is not sustained. There's a determined way in which everything is done tonight.

As I try to study the outline of each soldier, each one of them remains elusive. Perhaps it's the camouflage. Or the boots. Or the red berets. Red berets circulate, move into, and around each other. Some tilt theirs to the left. Others to the right. For others, they rest loosely at the back of their heads. It seems that the beret, much like the soldiers themselves, has been chosen with care. When someone dies, we tie a red piece of cloth on the periphery of our homes, so that others can share in our grief in passing. Whoever chose the berets, knew what the red colour symbolises to us. To us, the red berets more than convinces us that we are surrounded—they also bring an inexplicable dread and trepidation. Amongst the soldiers the red beret fosters an unconscionable obsequiousness.

Some of the soldiers remain in the shadows, making it harder to decipher each outline. The intricate design of the uniform makes it easier for each individual soldier to vanish. It is hard to think in terms of the individual peculiarities of each man. Then, again, I tell myself that there is no obligation for me to remember the faces of these strangers.

They move, purposively, juxtaposed. Since they are thrust together into this thickness, I cannot hold each individual gaze long enough to know who they really are. They smoke and talk and joke amongst themselves. It is rare, this kind of laughter in the middle of a massacre.

What they want, they take, including women and girls. Some of the soldiers drag the girls, one by one, into the woods. I watch the girls go in and come out. That is all I see. When some of the girls come back, they carry nervous smiles with them. I still don't know what this means. This goes on all night. Just before dawn, they take my sister Gift, and three of my cousins: Titi, Thula and Senza. I watch them vanish into the woods. All the adults remain silent.

* * *

Our assailants work tirelessly throughout the night. They have a list of names to go through before dawn. It is the haphazard manner in which the beatings are carried out which inflicts the utmost terror. There's nothing arbitrary about their choices, except it must be someone. Anyone. There is no reason why. It doesn't matter who dies. And who lives. Fate, it seems, has no malice. We are just caught up in this violent despair; we seethe, indistinctly, like a bowl full of caterpillars.

In this mass of faceless beings, recognition only comes when you are singled out for destruction. Upon selection, some display a dreadful fear of death. Men try to hide behind women and children. Others push and shove in the darkness. Just as long as it is not them. From now on there will be no story of us without this shame.

When they call out my cousin M'bo's name, nobody points him out. He has recently come back from war as a freedom fighter. He now teaches at a local school. M'bo has a special way of walking. His right arm gives his slim frame a wide berth; as if he's carrying something heavy, that only he can feel. He never walks in a straight line. Or in the middle of the road. They say ex-guerrillas never do, for fear of tripping landmines. After all these years he is still afraid of imaginary minefields. This is a rumour

he neither confirms nor denies. Then again, he never talks about the war. None of them do.

“Ah heee, that was the war! Things were hard!” That’s all he ever says.

But the soldiers think that his kind are all dissidents now. They accuse him of defecting to the other side even though he has no gun. He has never left home since he came back from the real war. He says all those years of hunger, spent sleeping under trees in the bush, inside caves in the mountains, made him realise just how much he missed home. He says that when you fight for it, the idea of home has a different resonance. Home has a hold in your heart that never lets go. He says now that he has a choice, he’ll never leave. All he wants to do is teach and stay at home until he dies. That is all.

They ask him if he has a wife. He looks away, way above the soldier’s head. That’s how tall he is. His eyes stay fixated on something else. Not once does he look at his wife.

There is movement right in the middle of the crowd where most of the women are sitting. Aunt’s big frame has taken much of the space like an immovable statue. She has spread herself out like a mother chicken protecting her brood. Behind her, M’bo’s wife, Zina, is trying hard to calm their baby, to no avail. She squeezes the baby under Aunt’s armpit. Israel says that he wants to use the toilet. I don’t know how to ask the soldiers. So, I let him urinate right where he’s sitting.

The soldier calmly says to M’bo, “We know your wife is carrying another dissident. As far as we’re concerned the child of a dissident is still a dissident. Why wait for them to grow old. I’ve already said that we’re here to deal with the problem of dissidents—once and for all. We’ll find her, I know she’s here!”

He looks at his list again. He calls out Zina, but nobody answers. He calls her again. Again, nobody answers.

“You people think that we don’t know anything. For example, we knew before we came out here that the old man is the father of dissidents. That’s why we’ve killed him. We also knew that his son-in-law, who’s not here tonight, is also a dissident. Now, I want you to show me where this dissident’s wife is. Otherwise, I’ll treat all of you as collaborators. You have no idea what that

means! Those of you with absent husbands, brothers, and sons, I want to know where they are. They're all dissidents. I won't repeat myself again. Just so you understand, tonight I want to know where all the dissidents are, so I can kill them!"

When he finishes talking, he stubs his cigarette out. He grabs his gun like he's ready to shoot someone. Just then, the big soldier I'd earlier spoken to signals for me to come to him. I drop Israel's hand and run the short distance between us.

"*Kijane*, remember what I said?"

I nod, yes, nervously.

"Now, show me this dissident's wife," he says, pointing at my cousin M'bo.

"I know that she's here. Just take me to her."

I don't want to die. I feel I have no choice but take the soldier to where Zina is sitting. So, I walk slowly towards where Aunt is. Aunt tries to plead with her eyes for me to go somewhere else. But, for some reason, just before I point Zina out to him, the soldier calls me.

"*Kijane!*"

When I turn around, he signals for me to come back. He hands over his machine gun to one of the soldiers nearest to him. He steps forward till I can see his face in the full glow of the light. His hands are very big but clean. He speaks in a very funny dialect. I know that *Kijane* is a Swahili word for boy. Most comrades spoke Swahili when they came back from war.

Inside I think, he is a gentle giant. Something tells me that somehow this is not his war. I don't know why. Otherwise, why else would he save M'bo's pregnant wife.

He steps forward and says: "I just wanted to show you all how easy it is to find out the truth. Never lie to me again!"

He smiles at me. Then he immediately orders the other soldiers to shoot M'bo dead right on the edge of our own home. They drag his lifeless body inside one of the huts and leave it there.

I feel betrayed because I thought that when he spoke to me, he was asking me about good people. That's why I told him the truth. Now I don't know what else is going to happen as a result of what I've told him.

Immediately afterwards, they summons Dumi to come forward. He gets up in such a hurry, as if he's got nowhere to sleep tonight. When the soldiers arrived, he'd been playing his guitar. Since then, he's been holding on to it. One of the soldiers orders him to play his guitar. Under normal circumstances, Dumi can play his guitar with such an incredible dexterity. But tonight, it is as if there is a disconnect between his fingers and ears. The soldier asks him to dance. He does not tell him, however, whether he wants him to stop playing the guitar, or dance; or do both those things all at once. This has major implications for Dumi. When he stops, in order to speak, this is his first infraction of many unwritten rules. There is no right or wrong answer. Either way, this is just a game he's bound to lose.

After an inordinate amount of questioning, Dumi is asked to lie prostate. As soon as he touches the ground, a full-force boot lands on his ribs. His slight frame lifts off the ground. He sucks air into his lungs and holds it somewhere inside, as if for an eternity. When he finally lands, one of the soldiers places his boot on the back of his neck and presses it to the ground, so much so, when he exhales, he creates furrows in the sand. Another cuts his belt with his blade and pulls his trousers down, leaving him completely exposed. They work his back and buttocks with a thick freshly cut piece of mopane wood. Dumi tries to put his hands on his back. This only serves to infuriate his assailants.

"Usabate mnfana, iwewe usabate!"

"Remove your hands! I said remove yours hands!" The soldier yells.

But it's impossible not to try and save himself. Anyone can see that.

When they tire, the mopane stick changes hands. They work Dumi with such a sustained ferocity, he drifts in and out of consciousness. There is no reason why they are doing this. None of them, not even the leader of the group, has said anything about why they are killing him. Dumi is not a dissident. This is just the same old tyranny wrapped up in a new flag.

The sun has long since risen. Its glow still feels lighter on the skin. Overnight, a whole landscape of sound has vanished. The acacia tree is still standing exactly where it was last night. Its dry pods have curled into balls like giant snails. Some fall, silently, to the ground. There is an unexpected calm.

Military trucks left early this morning, laden with all the men and strong boys they didn't kill last night: Silas, Master, Dee, S'khwazo, Thembi, Zedius, Shadreck, Sabidi and many more from across the village. They'll be gone for a while.

Those left behind, like Dumi, are seriously wounded. Dumi has been badly beaten; he can barely stand on his own. Also, he is now totally confused and has been urinating blood. There is nowhere to take him because the local clinic is closed, and the main hospital is a long way away.

The soldiers left explicit instructions, that nobody should be taken to the hospital. So, the women have hidden him inside the barn at Aunt's house. MaDumi now has a crippled son and husband to look after. And today she must bury Mbo's ashes too.

Mbo's hut has burned out hollow. Its thatch has been devoured by fire and its walls blackened by soot. Inside, not a single bone remains. All that is left, is a charred metal bed frame and the remains of enamel cups hanging on the wall. I watch his wife, Zina, sift through the ashes, hoping she'll find a part of him, to bury, however small. Somehow, I think that he's still in there, mixed up with all the ashes.

All the girls, Gift, Thula, Titi and Senzi left on foot with the soldiers at dawn. Nobody knows where they are. The women are gathered next to *Koko* and *Tata's* graves. They are digging the grave for the old man's ashes. They'll have to do this all over again for M'bo. They cannot mix their spirits together in the same grave. When this war is over, they'll have to dig them up again and rebury them. During ordinary times digging graves is men's work. Women gather the stones to place on top of the graves. They also stay with the body of the deceased until the grave is ready for the burial to take place. Afterwards, they prepare food and traditional beer. They sing and wail too; this way, nobody mourns alone. But things are different now, and these are no ordinary times. They endure the most terrifying anguish alone.

My Stepma is now waist deep inside the grave she's digging with a heavy pickaxe. Occasionally, she stops and swaps the pickaxe for the shovel. A mound of red earth is beginning to pile up by the side of the grave. Compared to a normal grave, this seems too narrow and too shallow to contain the magnitude of the old man.

The women swap places, except for Aunt, who doesn't do any digging at all. Instead, she keeps herself busy, by walking around the empty grave with her hands above her head. There is no wailing and no one's singing.

When they try to gather the ashes, a small whirlwind scatters them. Aunt sends me to fetch a bucket of water from the kitchen and she pours it over the ashes. Then they use shovels and buckets to transfer the grey sludge into the open grave. Aunt says that she doesn't want to lose any more of the old man. She wants to bury him whole—what's left of him. Somehow, it already feels too late.

Nearby, there are homes that have been completely abandoned. There are others too, that have been burnt to the ground, with the remains of the dead still inside. For those found dead on the outskirts of the forest, the women must bury them where they find them, to prevent dogs from eating them. They bury some of the bodies inside termite mounds to aid their memory. Aunt says that when this is all over, they'll have to dig up their remains and bring deceased's spirits home.

She says that this new violence has disrupted the very order of things; from the way in which we try to memorise everything, to the way we relate to each other as a people. And then there is this fear that it imposes on us, forcing us to discard everything that we know, and all the things that we hold dear—including the way we bury our dead. So many things are missing, so many people too.

By the time they finish, it's almost noon. They withdraw inside, the way they are supposed to after a funeral. They sit around the hearth as though this is a cold winter's night. PaDumi is already inside. Has been since the soldiers left this morning. He is in severe pain. He, too, like Dumi, can barely walk or stand. Unlike Dumi, he was too old to be considered a dissident and was spared as severe a beating. As I walk in behind Aunt, he manages to sit up, not without extreme difficulty.

"What will people say?" Aunt asks. "Were these soldiers not our sons only yesterday? Did we not cook for them? And allowed them to kill on our behalf just as long as they were not killing us? Can we say, hand on heart, that they were not killing innocent people then? And did anybody intervene? I mean did any of us intervene. Did we?"

MaDumi fixes herself. She brushes dust off her clothes that is no longer there. At least there is none that I can see. She's been doing this since she sat down. And when she begins to speak, her voice quivers slightly: "I waited for M'bo, my son, to come back from war, like any mother would. And, each night, I prayed to God, to bring him back to me. And, when he finally came back, after six years in the bush, with all his limbs, body and face still intact, I thanked God for his beneficence. And I slept for the first time! Yeah that's true. I slept peacefully for the first time in six years, because finally, I was convinced that the nightmares were over, now that the spirits were watching over him.

"And I remember how I celebrated like it was yesterday. There was even a greeting, right here in this village: *Nkululeko! Nkululeko! Nkululeko!* The way some people say Happy New Year! Which meant, simply, that we were free. That, finally, the Boers could leave us alone so we could raise our families in peace and watch our children grow into decent human beings. That the time had come for us to see all the good things that we'd been denied by the Boers become manifest in our children's lives. And I never thought that I'll be afraid again! Never! Not under Black rule! And they shoot my son in front of his wife and child. His only crime? To fight to liberate this country! What hurts me the most is that the very people he fought alongside with have killed him. They've taken my son's life for nothing. I don't even know how I'll survive this." And, pointing at Zina, she says, "Now, what am I supposed to do with this child who no longer has a husband?"

And she looks at PaDumi, who in turn casts a glance over the dying flame, as if looking for a way out. He agitates the firewood, gently, as if after everything that's happened, this is the only thing that he has a right to do.

"But that was war," he says. "And we didn't expect, these soldiers, our sons, to come back like this!"

Aunt agrees, as she lifts each of her buttocks and pulls her dress outward, and leans forward conspiratorially: "Now what are we going to do? We cannot continue to dig graves only to fill them up with ashes!"

PaDumi stirs the fire again, exposing the red-hot charcoal at the bottom of the hearth. A small cloud of smoke rises, and he issues a cautious cough as if he's afraid he'll tear something inside his lungs.

“And we were so close,” he says. “*Bakithi!* We were almost there; come to think of it. Almost there!”

He touches his beard with his uninjured hand as if contemplating something bigger than himself: “We were almost there!”

A smile radiates from the corner of his mouth but soon fizzles out. As he repeats himself, there is a sadness that goes deeper than his words.

It is then, that my Stepma, her feet still covered in red soil, leans forward. A half-smile, half-frown, stretches across her face.

“Somehow, they make life feel so miniscule,” she says. “Now, our lives do not mean a thing. We’ll never be free from this. Never! Mark my words, the young will inherit this madness!”

“So, tell me,” PaDumi says, with his bandaged head tilted slightly to the side: “How are we supposed to raise the next generation?”

Inside the kitchen it is becoming stiflingly hot. The adults’ conversation oscillates between yesterday, today, and this other time, not known to me, before the war. They don’t say anything about tomorrow. Aunt says that there must be horrible things that the soldiers have done in the past. That now they envy us for not having the faintest idea of what those things are. She says that they’ll never find peace because there are parts of themselves that are still missing. She’s also convinced that they want to bring us closer to the abyss, so that we, too, can no longer sleep.

“I cannot dig up my husband’s ashes and rebury them where he wanted to be buried. He told me, like he knew he’d die soon. My husband never told a lie in his life. In the end, that’s what had him killed—this obsession with truth. Those who lied yesterday are still here. He married me and slept right beside me every night. Right now, his only brother doesn’t even know that he has been ruthlessly killed by these strangers. How am I ever going to explain how and why he died? I don’t even know which of the two is more painful. They’ve taken much more than his life—much more than that! Now that they’ve taken all the children away, will we ever know what they’ll do to them? If last night is anything to go by, will we ever see them again or find their bodies? And now that everyone is gone, what else is there to do?”

My Stepma clears her throat, as if in agreement. She says that for us to understand what is going on, we must go back to the beginning. It'll take time, she says. With time, this war, will one day feel like a dream.

All PaDumi manages to say is, "This is what I have said all along!"

He stops there.

Everyone is waiting for him to finish, but he says nothing more. All he does is touch his bandaged head as if to see if the bandages are still intact.

Aunt looks at him. Her eyes get smaller and smaller until smoke induces tears in the corner of each eye.

"There is nothing you can tell me. Most men around here are useless. A man touches your wife's breasts like a drunk, and sleeps with your daughter right in front of you and you do nothing! Absolutely nothing! When these soldiers leave, what are you going to say to the children? They saw everything! Tell me, how are you going to discipline them? How are you going to explain the fact that you let small boys, not much older than your own son, cane you in front of women and children, Hmmm?"

PaDumi answers, slightly subdued: "I still don't know how I feel about what happened last night; except, inside, I feel defeated. I don't know how I could have saved your husband, or my sons Dumi and M'bo, for that matter. Look at me? If my sons do not respect me because of my frailty, what else should they respect me for? I think all of us have lost something. I am terribly sorry for your loss."

Never the one to concede defeat, Aunt raises questions of her own.

"And where are these enemies they keep talking about? We've barely put away the weapons from the last war, and now this? Whatever this is, this is no war!"

Since this whole conversation started, a hardened resolve has gradually settled on my Stepma's face. And she says, "In the last war, we slaughtered our animals, raised the young and looked after comrades, while men hid in the cities and drunk beer all day. We carried weapons on our heads and backs; and sometimes hid food in the most intimate parts of our bodies just to feed our sons!

“And we suffered humiliation at the hands of soldiers who touched us in the most undignified of ways. We gave of our sons and daughters, our most treasured resource, to fight for our freedom. Even as they cut our lips to silence us, we kept all their secrets.

“We ignored the fact that they used our bodies all in the name of freedom. Because there was a belief that being generous with our bodies was the minimum we could do. That we could not expect others to shed their own blood in order to free us, without us contributing to the war effort. They took everything from us. Everything we had. But we survived all that.

We watched people forced to dig their own graves before being killed. And we forgave all that. We told ourselves that it was war. No one wants to be reminded of all those things now. There are old women here who lost everything during the war. They have nobody left because of the war. We still have to feed them, clean them, and look after them till they die. It is us who continue to bear the burden of the last war. They have the temerity to come here asking all these ridiculous questions about dissidents!”

And she stops as if to breathe momentarily.

“Did we not clothe and feed guerrillas even as they brutalized us for things not even dogs deserved to die for? They’re doing the same now. They desecrate the graves of our loved ones by forcing us to dance on them. They ask for blankets and take our daughters with them. Yet, we cannot ask what happens to our daughters under our own blankets. Do they not know that we do not share our blankets with our own children?”

She’s animatedly pointing towards the door as if there is someone tall standing there. PaDumi listens, intently, as if he’s hearing this for the first time. And she continues unabated.

“There are still things that happened during the war that our own husbands, fathers and brothers won’t talk about. Since we carry this burden alone, how are they ever going to understand us? Then this? The same cowardly men, like my husband, will come back and start asking silly questions: ‘What happened to so and so? Whose grave is that over there? What happened to my animals?’”

When PaDumi speaks, finally, he speaks gently as though he's had time to think about what he's about to say. Which is unlike him. It is as if he is trying to find this one important thread that could lead him or us to where we should be:

"When we express sorrow, do we not say *kubuhlungu bakithi*? Because when we hurt, we speak to those closest to us."

Before he says anything further, Aunt rescues him.

"Can you not see that everyone whispers now. We are doing it right now. There is this pain that will never go away. That is all I can say for now."

Just then the cattle bells start ringing. The little ones grab an enamel cup each, and exit from the kitchen, one at a time—Angelina, Lonika, M'tha and N'ka. With their bellies distended like giant commodores, they are in the throes of a hunger so deceptive it makes them look full. They are heading for the kraal, lured by the promise of milk. But today, there is no one to milk the cows.

The Day of Reckoning

The first time my sister Gift is raped, I wake up to fast-paced breathing as if someone is about to die. Khaya is sleeping between Gift and I on the hard floor. He twists and turns. Then turns again to face the wall. There is already a wet patch on the blanket. He has wet himself yet again.

I fumble in the dark for the box of matches and inadvertently topple over the paraffin lamp, spilling paraffin over our blankets and improvised pillows—old

jumpers stuffed with rags inside. When I strike the match, I nearly set the room on fire, bringing us perilously close to a flame. It is then, a figure heads for the door and disappears into the night.

My sister pulls the blanket to cover herself but still feigns sleep. I get up and lock the door from the inside. The lock consists of a small piece of iron jammed into the cracked door frame to stop the door swinging backwards. However, it is manipulable from the outside.

I tell my cousin Dumi about my dilemma. He moves in straight away to prevent this from ever happening again. And he sleeps on the other side, right next to my sister. With that, the pungent smell returns, and my sister still maintains her silence. I begin to suspect that Dumi is the culprit after-all.

So, I tell my Stepma, who confronts Dumi. She tells him openly, for all to hear, what she thinks is going on: that everyone is busy hiding girls, under the facade of protecting them from strangers; and, yet there are children still being born without fathers. She harasses him at every opportunity. They argue, incessantly.

Dumi is like a rabid dog. I've seen the way he is with our animals when he gets angry. Twice now, he's come close to harming my Stepma. It is only a matter of time before something happens. After a particularly vicious argument between Dumi and my Stepma, she lights a fire outside the girls' hut and maintains an all-night vigil. Dumi does not take kindly to this. For some reason, he decides to walk away. I don't know where he goes.

The next day Dumi comes back to our house. He is holding a freshly cut piece of Mopane wood, as thick as my arm. I have this ominous feeling that something bad is about to happen. I cannot think of anything that I've done wrong recently. Normally, when Dumi hits me, it's because I have lost the cows or donkeys. Or I have failed to complete some specific chore my older cousins have asked me to do. Sometimes there are just so many things that I must remember; I am in perpetual fear of forgetting something—however small. Today all the cows are accounted for; I haven't beaten Khaya in as many days; I haven't had a fight with my sister; and school is closed.

As he gets nearer to the kitchen, he starts shouting for my Stepma to come out. On hearing the commotion, my Stepma emerges from inside the kitchen and stands outside on the stoop. She's got her hands resting on her hips, as if amused by the whole thing. Her headwrap's loose, she's not expecting anything to happen. She's got her favourite pink dress on. It hugs her upper body, but when it gets to the hips, it fans out like the wings of an irritated grasshopper.

She watches as Dumini approaches her. It is as if something overwhelmingly powerful has frozen all her bones; and, for some reason, she cannot move. Dumini strikes her across the side of the neck with such ferocity, she lets out a faint, gasping sound. She collapses into a heap, right where she's standing.

I take off and head for the dense foliage of the acacia tree. Underneath the acacia tree there are wooden fence poles with no barbed wire—another of Pa's abandoned projects, which I'm meant to finish. There are gaps between the poles. Dumini takes after me and I can hear his heavy breathing very close to me. When he finally strikes, I instinctively dip down between two fence poles. He strikes with such force the Mopane wood breaks in half. I bulldoze through the thicket of thorns; they tear into my flesh like fishing hooks. The fence poles and the impenetrable thicket of the acacia tree save my life.

I keep on running until it occurs to me that soon it will be curfew time. So, I turn around and run back with as much vigour. When I get back my Stepma is lying on the kitchen floor under a blanket. As soon as I walk in, she rolls her eyes and looks at me without moving her head. Her eyes follow me until I squat on the other side of the hearth. Nothing is said between us. I think we both understand, that, above all else, we are not protected. Gift, Sipho, Khaya, Israel and Ngelina join us too.

We sleep in the kitchen, just in case he comes back for us. The lock in the kitchen is much stronger. But, if he's determined to come in, he can use an axe to chop the wooden door down. To our relief, it is an uneventful night.

In the morning, I wake up to raised voices outside. It is our Aunt. When I open the door, she is standing right by the entrance. Her huge untidy frame swallowing all the light. Gift and I help our Stepma sit up and prop her back against the kitchen wall. I think that Pa should be here. That it should be him

helping our Stepma, not us. Somehow, I feel desperate for his return. Not that it will change anything. My uniform is in tatters. I no longer have any shoes. The only pair that I have is beyond repair. Then there are the constant hunger pangs to contend with.

My Aunt continues to obstruct the doorway as if she's annoyed by the whole thing. The veins on her neck are bulging as if they are about to burst; she rolls her big bull frog's eyes closed, as if there is nothing on the periphery, except the fire in the middle of the kitchen floor. Although her big frame wobbles, and she is breathing with difficulty, she still manages to squeeze all of herself through the tiny doorway.

She's even more disagreeable than Pa Dumi. She doesn't ask our Stepma what happened yesterday. Somehow, she already knows. She tells my Stepma, that in future she should be more careful when dealing with boys. But Dumi is not a boy. Nor are her sons, my cousins, Thembi and his older brother Dee.

Normally, when Thembi comes back from fishing trips, he passes by our house. He deliberately counts his money in front of our Stepma. Occasionally, he stops counting his money, and gives my Stepma a look which I do not like. But money means food; even I understand that. Sometimes she gets up, fills up her special cleansing bucket with water, and disappears outside. Later at night he taps on her window, thinking that I am asleep. I know that Thembi's heart is someplace else.

At other times he brings her presents: Colgate, Palm Olive—soap, which smells like fresh fruit, but you cannot eat it—Ambi Pure, a special cream that our Stepma uses to try and look like a White person. Now she has a Fanta face and Coca-Cola neck.

Since Pa's incarceration, this is the other side to my Stepma I haven't experienced before. I understand that there is a war on—what with everything else that she's going through without Pa. Also, I think that her actions are much more profound than that: she is trying to save us.

Dee on the other hand prefers Titi, because she's timid. Titi is Dumi's younger sister. She and Dee are first cousins. Of all the girls, she's unlikely to say anything to anyone. She's only thirteen years old, but much smaller in stature than

Gift. Dee, like Dumi, already has a beard. He never says much to anyone. He keeps himself to himself and no one knows what he really thinks. He normally comes when we play late at night and when we stay over at Aunt's house. Afterwards, we gather in the kitchen and continue playing games until we feel too tired to go home. Besides, there's still a curfew in place; we risk certain death if we run in the open space between our homes at night. All the boys sleep on one side of the kitchen. The girls sleep on the opposite side.

Instead of going to his hut which is across the yard, Dee, however, always sleeps behind Titi, on the girls' side of the room. He pulls her tiny frame towards his body underneath the blankets. They remain cuddled like that for most of the night. Normally, when I wake up in the morning, he is gone. I suspect Aunt knows but she never says anything. Also, I don't think anyone has ever asked Titi what happens to her during the night. All the other girls laugh at her and tease her, because they know what goes on. Sometimes, when it's not Dee, it's any one of the older cousins.

Sometimes Dumi beats our donkeys with Mopane logs until their spines curve in. Every time he walks past the animals they stop feeding and tremble like orphans. He slaughters animals with such precision, sometimes it makes me wonder what makes him feel this way about animals.

To castrate bulls, he ties their testicles with a soft wire. The wire cuts through the skin and flesh of the animal imperceptibly slowly; after a while, everything starts to rot and finally detaches. This can take a while. In the end, all that remains is a large suppurating wound. Afterwards, he applies DDT deep inside the wound. Yet, he has no real understanding of what it does. Except, it makes the animals suffer needlessly. But he has also done much more sinister things than this.

It feels odd, that not only has he tried to kill me and my Stepmother, but also, that he has raped my sister, and other girls too. Because there is a war going on, nothing can be done to him. There are no strong men left.

Dumi is a talented musician. He plays his guitar with such an amazing dexterity. He sings and dances, with such reckless abandon, making us all laugh—roarously. He has also taught me so many things. We hunt together at night for warthogs. Sometimes it takes all night to corner them at the dead end of their lair. They are not easy to kill and can be vicious with their sharp horns. Even our dogs sometimes get seriously injured as a result of encounters with them. It is also easy to catch undulating fever from them, just by touching their meat with our bare hands. Their lean meat provides respite from eating *pap* with dry vegetables all the time. Sometimes we inadvertently dig up skunks, and their foul smell persists on our skin and clothes, and on our dogs' hair for weeks. Dumi just laughs it off and takes it in his stride.

Sometimes I accompany him on the most treacherous journeys, deep into the forest, and watch him steal honey, right under the noses of the most vicious of bees. He pacifies the bees by burning wet branches and generating thick smoke. He uses the smoke to stupefy and disorientate the bees. The fighting bees—the soldiers that's what Dumi calls them—fall into a daze as the smoke subdues their temperament. When he gets stung, he never runs. He just sits there and takes it. Sometimes it is so bad, his eyes almost close from the swelling. We just sit there and help him remove all the bee stings—one at a time.

He says he does it because, the taste of the honey takes away the pain. Like most grown-ups around me, he sometimes confuses me. I don't know when he's telling me the truth or when he's lying to me. I also don't know when he's going to seriously hurt me. I don't mind the beatings so much, it's just that he can be so vicious. I don't know how long I can continue to evade him.

I like to think that he does all these things because he, too, is broken inside. That, in fact, all of us are broken inside. But, as Aunt says, those who are broken can teach us compassion too. I'm not sure whether this is true. Or whether Aunt can conceive of things that have not yet happened. One thing I know for sure is that I have now resolved not to treat our animals or others the way Dumi does.

Our Stepma is bed-ridden for days. She cannot swallow solid food. With the help of soft porridge, she gradually comes back to life. In the beginning she seems

whole. But, as time moves on, it becomes apparent to me that there is a strangeness about her. Not only has her face transformed into a permanent irresolute stare; nothing seems to bother her anymore. There is a look in her eyes, whose meaning I cannot discern. Outward, she appears defiant. Inside she is petrified of Dumi. Each night she double-locks the bedroom door from inside and is permanently engulfed in fear. Every time dogs bark, she jumps. Every time Dumi comes around, she goes quiet.

But, when she's fully recovered she yields to no one's demands except her own. Her mannerisms change too. Even after her near-death experience, she never stops voicing her opinion. She warns Dumi to sleep with one eye open. As she regains more of her composure and her old confidence, she hounds Dumi out of my sister's hut.

There is also a rising tension between her and Gift, whose source I cannot pin down. She also harangues her own daughter, Sipho, too, for the tiniest of infractions. Sipho is still small but she does all the chores that should be done by a grown woman. She cooks, cleans, and sweeps the yard and fetches water, and firewood. Sometimes that is not enough. There is always something, however mundane, that she forgets to do. Sometimes my Stepma beats her up for smiling. Or, for telling her about something good that's happened on a particular day. I think that she's punishing Sipho for all the things that Gift does wrong. Thinking that Sipho's suffering will make Gift change her mind about all the things she's not supposed to be doing. But I don't think Gift notices. She has troubles of her own.

When my Stepma launches into her, Sipho has nowhere to hide. Sometimes she attacks her with an old tennis shoe, with her bare hands, the cooking stick, or whatever-else comes to hand. And, yet, when I see Sipho playing with the other girls, she leaps, claps her hands and laughs and smiles and screams with delight, as if this violence never lands anywhere on her body. Now, she very rarely cries. She just stands there and takes it. She has nowhere to go, no one to tell.

But everyone knows. All I ever hear is all the adults say to our Stepma, "If you continue like that, you'll kill that child!" Sometimes it happens right in front

of them. Yet they do nothing. They allow for this untold cruelty to happen in this silence—like sitting next to a flooded river and hearing nothing. Sometimes it feels as though our lives are not worthy of truth. Somehow, it appears, as though everyone has this inexplicable capacity to absorb pain.

Up until now, my Stepma has kept her distance from Gift and me. Truly speaking, we are not her children. For a while now she seems to have acknowledged that. But, recently, she's begun to argue with Gift relentlessly. There is a rage between them—something unresolved. As time goes on, Gift, too, is becoming increasingly belligerent—disparagingly so. She has an anger I cannot explain. I am afraid that something bad will happen between them. Gift is only 15. She's no match for our Stepma, hardened by the experience of two wars.

When things finally come to a head, I am sitting under the shade cast against the kitchen wall, sheltering from the midday sun. It starts with our Stepma shouting at Gift from inside the kitchen. When she emerges from the kitchen her headwrap is tied closer to her scalp as if she's preparing for war—the way Grandma did.

“You think that just because you now sleep with grown men, you're a woman, huh? You think you can swan around my home whilst I feed you for nothing. Because that's your job around here: doing absolutely nothing!”

“You're not my mother,” Gift says. “You cannot tell me what to do! I didn't come here to be your slave. And you can talk! You think I don't know about you and Thembi? You think I don't know that he sleeps here every night? Wait till Pa comes home!”

My Stepma retorts angrily. She's wagging her finger and demonstratively poking herself right in the middle of her chest, and then pointing away towards nowhere in particular.

“If I'm not your mother, then pack your things and go. Otherwise, as long as you remain under my roof, you'll do as I tell you. Right now, water needs replenishing and there is no firewood! It's nearly noon now. You sleep until the sun shines up your bottom and now you've sat on the same spot all morning, playing with your hair like it's the most precious thing in the world. Well, it isn't!

And none of us will survive from eating your hair. Now get moving before I do something I'll live to regret!"

"Do what you like," Gift says. "I am not afraid of you. I really don't care about your empty threats anymore!"

For some reason, she's goading our Stepma into a fight. I don't think she realises that lately she has changed for the worse. Also, I think she hasn't realised that our Stepma is now determined to resolve this ongoing conflict between them once and for all. Right now, we live together but we're not a family. So many things have gone wrong. No one is even trying to resolve these disagreements peacefully. I sit and watch from a distance as the drama unfolds; the way cockerels square up to each other and get their claws ready before a fight.

Gift is combing her hair. She applies Vaseline to her hair which gives it a glow, before plaiting it into beautiful small buns. She's using a fragmented mirror to see what she's doing. Sometimes when I use the same mirror, I can see broken pieces of my face. I am convinced that the reflection on the mirror is the real me. But I think she doesn't need a mirror because the cornrows on her head are straight. Normally, she can do this with her eyes closed. I sit and watch her bend her neck this way and that way, as if she's in deep thought about something more important than our Stepma's itch for a fight.

She seems perfect to me. Except, perhaps, for two very minor mishaps. She has a bald patch at the back of her head, where for some reason, hair refuses to grow. She started to lose her hair as soon as the soldiers arrived. Apart from that, she also has a double layer of crooked teeth. As if she's designed to eat meat only, like a carnivore.

She's getting ready to go somewhere. I don't know where she goes. All I know is that sometimes she's gone all night. As soon as the sun goes down, she vanishes. She comes back in the early hours of the morning, exhausted and ready to sleep for most of the day.

Ngelina is playing all on his own, building mounds of soil. He lines them up, into a series of mounds. He then demolishes them with his little fists. Each time he smashes a mound, he shouts, "*Kshooo! Kshooo! Kshooo!*" I've no idea what's on

his mind. He's covered in dust like a *tokoloshe*. I think he should sit in the shade. But he seems happy enough. So, I leave him where he is. Khaya, Israel and Siphos have gone to the river, nearby, in search of wild fruit. They've been gone for a while now. It is not long before Ngelina's activities catch my Stepma's attention. She shouts at him and calls him the devil's child. He ignores her. Since the night of the fire, a certain agitation has descended upon him. He seems less afraid and focussed more on strange activities that only make sense in his closed world.

He continues building and demolishing the mounds of soil as if he's working at something more profound. For some reason, he decides to urinate on the last set of mounds as if they're on fire. With the imaginary fire out, he vanishes into the kitchen.

When he comes out, he's holding a battered aluminium cup full of water. He's managed to dip his whole hand into the water container. He's trying to drink whilst he's walking, his bulging eyes visible from behind the rim of the cup. As a result, he spills the water on his bare chest, leaving behind streaks on his body. I know he'll come to regret this, because later my Stepma will give him a proper scrub with a rough pumice stone before bed.

I signal for him to come to me. I know that if our Stepma sees him, she'll kill him. He comes and sits right next to me, covered in dust like a cockerel after a dust bath. Ngelina and I sit under the shade and listen to the war of words between our Stepma and Gift intensify. They're both getting more and more agitated; there is no chance of this waning soon. Also, there is no one else around. Somehow, I don't think they'll come to blows—not the way men fight. Usually, when men fight, someone dies. Or someone's life is left hanging precariously on a thread.

Gift, too, is unusually irascible today. Normally, she would've walked away by now. It is as if something is stopping her from walking away. She yells and yells at our Stepma, until her voice begins to croak like that of a bull frog. In the end all I can see is mouths moving and arms flailing in the air.

"You think I sleep with men because I choose to? Unlike you, I'm not married. Everyone around here knows you're the village bicycle. Everyone has had a ride. Wait till Pa gets home!"

My Stepma grabs Gift by the hair and works the right side of her face with the rubber sole of her black *Bata* canvas tennis shoe. There is dust coming from inside the shoe, covering her face and messing up her hair. If she wants to go out like I think she intends to, she'll have to wash it again and reapply the Vaseline. For some reason I feel it is not my place to intervene. I envisage that they'll end it all on their own accord. Like everyone else around me, I've become indifferent to anyone's plight but my own. I am just tired of it all.

Gift fights back. She pushes, pulls and tears our Stepma's dress from the back to the front leaving her buttocks exposed. This maddens our Stepma even more. She pummels her like a formidable enemy, but Gift's only a child really. I can see she's getting an upper hand. I jump up and run towards them. I beg my Stepma to stop. My sister begs her too, but her soft brown eyes begin to roll back like a small window curtain closing. She emits soft frothy sounds from the corner of her mouth. Her hands unfold. It is not long before she goes limp; and her body contorts in the most unusual of ways, before she falls to the ground.

Our Stepma is still enraged. She reminds me of the day our dog Sport lost her mind. Like our dog Sport, our Stepma's strangeness is slowly turning her into someone I do not recognise. Despite my repeated pleas, she doesn't stop. Gift's life is fading away rapidly under our Stepma's on-slaught. I can no longer stand-by. I pick up a reasonably sized grinding stone and launch it at her, the way I do when I am angry with our donkeys or cows. It catches her unawares. She stumbles and falls to the ground, too. I drag my sister away from her and place her under the shade of the acacia tree. I go back and grab Ngelina and bring him to the shade under the acacia tree. He is sobbing, gently. There is nothing I can do to console him. His earlier exuberance now faded; he quickly falls asleep right next to Gift. It occurs to me that everything has changed—I don't know why.

When Gift comes to, she tries to get up, but stumbles. It is as if she's never learned to walk in the first place. She gathers herself into an untidy pile. Her face is swollen. Her right eye is partially closed. She has a cut, and a purplish skin flap hanging precariously above her right eyelid, as if it needs rescue. When our eyes meet, she smiles. I want to console her; something stops me—I don't know what

it is. Instead, I run to the kitchen and bring her some water. She drinks from the cup in small child-like sips. We sit in silence. That's all we can do for now. I occupy myself contemplating the possibility that she might have been afflicted with the same strangeness as my Stepma.

I look across the yard where our Stepma is. She gathers her dress first, what's left of it, and with much effort, manages to sit up. She places her hand in the area behind her right shoulder where the rock caught her and looks at me from a distance. For the most part she looks seriously worried. She asks me, politely, to get her some water. Reluctantly, I walk to the kitchen to fetch the water for her. Part of me wants something much more sinister to happen to her. The way she beat my sister today more than convinces me, that not only is she is not our mother, but that truly, nobody cares about us. But what can we do? We have no idea where our Ma is. All we must do now is survive until such time that we can leave. But leave? To go where and in search for what?

Since my arrival in Pretoria, there has been one constant: my nephew B. He is twenty-three years old. He comes to my hotel the very first day and it seems he never leaves. Whenever I turn around, he's there; as if he is afraid that I'll vanish—again. This mysterious uncle who's only ever existed in family fables. This is the first time that we have met. On the very first day, he hands me a photograph of a

young boy, wearing dark blue blazer, white shirt, black tie, and grey trousers. The photograph is that of me, aged fifteen, in my school uniform. He says that he found it amongst his mother's possessions. I give it back to him, feeling a wound somewhere, that only I can see.

So, it is only natural that he comes with me to *Olifants* town. In the Uber taxi, driven by a Congolese man, I ask my nephew what he remembers of his mother, my sister, Gift. He claims not to remember anything about her. And he goes quiet. It seems he does not want to talk about his mother at all. For a while it bothers me that my nephew does not want to talk about his own mother. Not even who she was, to him, for the best part of his earlier years on earth.

Growing up, there was only three of us. My sister Thoko the eldest, followed by Gift and then me. My younger sister Poli came fourteen years after me. She was followed by Annie who's almost twenty years younger than me. After Annie, came Wilson who had Down's syndrome.

Throughout my childhood, Gift was the only constant. In 1993 she divorced her husband, the father of her four boys, after he took in a second wife. Too strong-minded to share a husband, she left behind everything she'd worked for, including her boys: M'tha, Langton, Anderson and B the youngest. But it was much too late. Her husband had already infected her with the HIV/AIDS virus. When I'd last seen her in 1998, she had a sickly baby in her arms. She, too, did not look her best. It was only a matter of time. I left Africa knowing I'd never see her again.

In 2005 I received a phone call I'd been dreading. The voice was much too familiar. It was Gift's. She sounded child-like and so faraway. She was alone, and she shared with me devastating news, from a phone box in Gaborone, Botswana. AIDS was playing havoc with her mind and body. She wanted to go back home to Zimbabwe. In spite of our closeness, we'd never talked about her condition. My mother's death I could deal with. Because, growing up, I hardly ever saw her. But Gift and I, were inseparable. I had so many things to say to her. But she was inside a public phone box in the middle of Gaborone. I was in England. And I was not ready.

"I want to go home, to see my children," she said.

I did not ask why. Instead, I asked her how much money she needed.

"Enough to get me home," she said.

And then she asked me: "Are you angry with me?"

I managed to say, "Of course I am not angry with you. I just need to know how much money you need?"

I was lying. I asked her to call me in exactly an hour. I made her repeat this to make sure she understood. I was desperate for her not to die alone on foreign soil. I drove to the nearest Western Union where I made a quick money transfer and returned to the house and waited for her to call. After a while, the phone rang. She was dead on time. I gave her the money transfer reference number. And I asked her to repeat the reference number back to me. I instructed her to take her passport with her to collect the money.

"*Uhambe kahle*. Safe journey home," I said. And the last thing she said to me was, "Please don't be angry with me." With that I put the phone down. My sister was on her final journey home. Alone. Six months later, in August 2005, she died at Mpilo hospital, in Bulawayo, of AIDS-related complications. There is no photograph of my sister, at least none that I am aware of, that captures her last days. But in truth, I am pleased that no such photograph exists.

Even though I have only known my nephew B for less than a week, he appears to be consumed by an unyielding indifference. He is like all the young man in my newly found family: solid and totally impervious to emotion. He gives nothing away. When I try to hug him, his hands stay by his side. He merely looks at me. It feels as though he is ashamed. I surmise, that like me, he thinks that neglecting his own past will absolve him from pain. But I

am also mindful that I am a total stranger to him. Why would he trust me with the innermost part of his life?

I feel overwhelmed by the rise of something in my chest. I am trying to anticipate all the curves on the road. But I have not been down this road before. I feel such a hostage of fate, hurtling down the highway to the unknown. As we negotiate the fourth, fifth and sixth curve, an anticipatory anxiety sets in. I can

feel another panic attack coming on. They come and go, my panic attacks—at train stations, crowded places, at music concerts, and sometimes in the middle of the night. Clouds of an overwhelming apprehension, a descent into the world of limitless worry. Sometimes the uncompromising surge of each attack sends my mind into a spiral of doom, and I become less and less sure-footed, as if my world is about to come to an end. It is as if I am facing an impending execution alone. I breathe in and breathe out. And focus on this moment, right here inside the taxi.

When I next look up, we are on the approach to *Olifants town*. Or, *Elok'shini*—as my nephew calls it. We arrive in *Olifants town* at mid-day. The taxi driver refuses to drive all the way in, leaving us instead right next to the main road that leads into the township. Far too many Uber taxi drivers have recently lost their lives in the on-going taxi wars. Just the week before, a young university student had been bundled into the boot of his own taxi by rival taxi drivers. They tied him up, poured petrol on him, and set him on fire. Numerous others have been robbed. I am lucky, the taxi driver says, because I already have an account with Uber. But, as a precaution, I bring with me a bundle of notes. And I divide the money into various denominations and put it in different pockets. My nephew advised me to bring money with me, just in case.

“Here in the township, they’ll stab you for wasting their time. Robbery is work. They take it seriously,” my sister Annie tells me. She has been robbed more times than she cares to remember. On the last occasion, she tried to explain to the robber that things were tight, even for a woman. She threatened to rob him instead, before asking him, what kind of robber he was anyways to rob women before pay day. He laughed, and then vanished into the night.

Here, to survive, you must have the presence of mind. As a result, entry to each section of the township is regulated by vigilantes. It is hard to imagine how anyone can divide this sprawling mess into specific zones. But to the township residents, there are signs everywhere, that only they can read. Odds are stacked up against strangers.

We walk with a purpose through a myriad of mazes. Any slower or any faster, you start to attract the wrong attention. After meandering and taking numerous sharp corners, at last we arrive in the area where my sister lives. There

is a sentinel by a makeshift gate. A group of men are drinking beer and playing a card game. The oldest of the males gets up and shakes my hand. His hand grip is firm, and he searches me with his eyes. I envisage he can smell fear, but I hide behind a tired policeman's mediocrity, and offer instead, a friendly, non-threatening stare. Sensing that he has no intention of letting go of my hand, I hastily make my contribution to the security fund. I have been robbed in broad daylight, without so much as a word.

As he exchanges pleasantries with my nephew in *totsistaal*, the language of gangsters, he can see that I am vulnerable. *Eta!* Followed by the clicking and folding and unravelling of fingers so fast I can't see exactly what this greeting ritual entails. Another intricate code, interpretable only to the initiated. My nephew is holding his own. Since we left the taxi, he has acquired a hardened resolve. Here you must pretend or die.

I observe and take-in as much as I can. People here seem very direct. Their demands, unmistakable. There are a lot of animated gestures, and the language is coarse. They mean what they say: *voetsek, akusuke lapha!*

Minutes later we arrive at my sister's shack, an outhouse of a kind. Its only connection to the world is an overhead electric cable. There is a door, reinforced by bar-grills. The same applies to the window—more of an aperture than a window. My sister's match-box shack is no bigger than a prison cell. In fact, it feels more of a prison cell than a home.

Inside, a double bed and an oversized television dominate. Everything has its place, and every conceivable space has a thing on it. But nothing belongs anywhere. Its claustrophobic. There is no air. Nowhere to sit or stand. I am nudged into a small area of the room. Three people live and sleep here every night. My sister says: "I wanted you to see how I live."

It is the *how* of things again. Not knowing what else to do, or say, I ask to use the toilet. My other nephew, Tharmah, her son, escorts me to an outside structure which functions as a toilet. I am relieved that it is a normal working toilet, except it is outside, and I cannot see any lights. But it is still daylight. The chain on the flushing mechanism has been replaced by a wire. And nearby on the

wall, pierced through a hooked piece of wire, square pieces of newspapers for use as toilet paper. Nothing goes to waste.

When I come back, she invites me in once more, but there is still nowhere to sit. She says that I could sit on her bed, but I decline out of respect. I sit, instead, on a chair two sizes too small. My nephew B makes an excuse and disappears into the dust of the township. Before he leaves, my sister reminds him that he must take me back before dark. He acknowledges and vanishes beyond the wall of the compound. My sister sends the kids out to play. Now there is just the two of us.

She is sitting at the edge of her bed and is playing with the frayed ends of a grey blanket. There is a bulge on the side of her neck. A vein rises and falls. I ask her about different things. I am afraid of what I don't know. In the end I ask about Tharmah's father. She says that in 2014, Tharmah's father nearly killed her. A few months later he beat her up again. So bad in fact, she ended up in intensive care.

"That's why I have no man in my life. Because I will never let anyone treat me like that again," she says.

I don't understand why anyone would want to kill her. What did she do? How did she meet a man like that? There is so much packed into her tiny frame. I want to ask for more, but she stops me.

"After you left, I never thought I'd ever see you again. And when Ma died, we were so bereft of hope. I thought we might never have a brother again. But I am glad you remembered us. This year is the year of happiness. For now, we must forget the past and move on with our lives. But please don't ever disappear like that again."

The last thing she says is more a plea, than an injunction. She claps-brushes her hands and simultaneously returns to holding the blanket. And then she continues.

"You are an uncle now. I am a single mother, and your nephews go to a government school because we don't have enough money to pay for their school fees. I decided to stay single and to work hard for my kids. Things are hard. The

work that we do doesn't pay us much. But my kids are a blessing. I do wish you could have some so we can look at your carbon copy when you're gone."

And with that she laughs. I laugh too. She allows me just to be. Only I can't forgive myself. She tells me that her escape from home had been precipitated by the death of our sister Gift, and that of our aunt, Gladys, our mother's older sister. She says that before she died, our aunt Gladys had taught her how to wash and iron clothes. She had envisaged that, like her, Annie was destined for a life of servitude.

She pulls out a photo album from under the bed. She hands it over while she talks. I look at her and smile, and I get up from my little chair and sit right next to her on the bed. She edges closer, and I feel her warmth radiate towards me.

"You know when we spoke on the phone for the first time, I did not eat all day. I just could not believe it was you. I was so excited! I am telling you, I jumped up and down and the kids thought that I was going crazy. They didn't realise that you were the best thing to happen to me for a very long time. I said to them, I have brother you know!"

The photo album contains a brief history of our family. She provides context for some of the photographs, and we both laugh at some of mine and some of hers. With each photograph we delve deeper into our family history. Some more so than others; and there is silence around some of the photographs. We still haven't worked out yet how to talk about certain pasts. We elope into the world of silence. It seems, that in spite of the distance between us, silence is the language that we both know only too well.

As we peruse the album, we come across the photograph of our stepbrother Wilson. He is wearing a grey jumper, three quarter length khaki shorts and over-sized white trainers. He looks nothing like us.

Annie runs her forefinger along the edges of the photo and remarks, "It is sad, but everything happens for a reason. God kept him for us, and he was a blessing. I had to sacrifice my life for him. When Gift passed on, I had to quit school and come to South Africa to look for a job. Poli looked after Wilson while

I supported them both financially. But Gift was like a mother to me. She raised me. When she died, I was heart-broken.”

With that, I deliberately avoid Gift’s photograph. Like a scab over an old wound, it is best left unperturbed.

Next, we look at aunt Gladys’s photos. She is tall and slender; she was never the one to indulge unnecessarily. She has a radiant smile, and as always, she looks immaculate. She is wearing pearl drop earrings, a white blouse and black bowtie. It looks as though she is at work. She did rounds in White suburbs as a nanny and domestic worker all her life. Deep down inside she was an Anglophile. She detested bad manners and taught me to clean eggs before frying them. She lived alone in Harare for the best part of her life. No man could measure up to her expectations; and she detested other women just the same. She also taught me about the contingent nature of most things in life, including relationships, by prostituting herself in desperate times. She had sex with men in the same room while I slept on the floor. But I don’t tell my sister that.

When she retired, her last employer gave her a Persian rug and China tea set. And yet she had no home. She moved in with our mother, and when Ma died, she looked after Wilson as if he were her own child. And it seemed she waited for her own end to come. In the end she buried her only sister, our mother, and died alone.

And then we move on to our mother, Elisabeth. Hers is a black and white photograph, most likely taken in the seventies. She looks about eighteen. She is wearing a beret, and on the table in front of her, there is an empty bottle of Castle Lager. It’s more than likely that the photo is staged in the photo studio. The background gives it away. There is nothing on the walls behind her. Unusually for her, though, she’s smiling. Annie teases me and suggests that we both take after our mother for our love of drink. I do not disagree. And as we laugh, there are tears too. Two thirds of the people in the photos are no longer alive. And there is no closure. We both try and accept things as they are.

We talk about our Ma. About her temper, her anger and the benign melancholy that haunted her throughout her life. Annie tells me things that I did not know about her. And she also reveals to me that she saw our mother draw her

last breath when everyone was afraid to touch her. And that is the eternal memory of our mother that she lives with. Everyday. And there is nothing I can do to undo that. I let her be and leave her alone for a while with her memories. I decide not to tell her everything, like when our mother abandoned me and Gift, and remained silent for years, without us ever knowing where she was. Or when she slapped uncle Sami so hard for bringing me with him on an unannounced visit. She did not care that I was her son. Or that she hadn't seen me for a while. Uncle Sami and I just turned around and spent the night with his friend. There is so much that I want to tell her about Ma, but certain things are not for sharing. At last we fold the album and we hug, silently, within the confines of her little shack. I feel lighter, my shoulders loosen.

It's an hour or so before sunset. The smells and noise in the township intensify. Everything is too close. As such, it is inevitable that we speak of violence in the township, particularly, necklacing. Annie has seen far too many a necklacing she says.

"Nothing regulates what we see here. What worries me the most is that my son is daily exposed to this brutality." "*Umtanami lo!*" She points to the other side of the room where Tharmah sleeps, as if he's still in the room. It's as if she wants him there. Close.

She says that one day Tharmah is out playing in the dusty road next to her shack. A Malawian man, on a bicycle, inadvertently knocks him over. In the township, a child belongs to everyone. The unwritten rule is that it is the collective responsibility of the township dwellers to deliver communal justice. And whenever this occurs, there is every likelihood that a necklacing will be involved. Very quickly a mob gathers and surrounds the man. Hearing the commotion, and, fearing that something might have happened to her son, she runs straight into the middle of the crowd. She stands on her own, she says, right in the middle of the baying mob, with the Malawian man hiding behind her, pleading for his life.

"It is hot, a very hot day," she says. An alertness is suddenly brought to her feet, and she restlessly shuffles them. She is reliving the moment.

The mob gathers stones. She begs and pleads. But they, too, are determined. As both her son Tharmah and the Malawian hold on to her, the mob inches closer and closer. Random punches land on the man's body and head. She is warned that she risks meeting the same fate as the man she tries to defend. She moves around in circles. One thing works to her advantage—she is one of them. And behind her, a coterie of strong men and women of the township. In the end, the mob relents. The man limps away, but he is perilously close to death.

My sister exists, like so many in the townships, outside the frame of recognition. No one gives them a chance. There are far too many vices. Violence is never too far away. She met Tharmah's father, aged seventeen, in Hillborough, Johannesburg. At the time, she was vulnerable in so many ways, not least because she was a child and an orphan in a foreign country. Their relationship was volatile right from the outset. They both had no template for a stable, loving and caring relationship. Fighting and violence was all they knew. One day her little boy's father cornered her, viciously kicked her, broke her ribs and nearly ruptured her spleen. Fearing for her life, she plunged a kitchen knife into him. So deep, in fact, he too collapsed. They both drifted into unconsciousness.

"That was the last time he touched me," she says.

Her countenance fluctuates between an anguished terror and welcoming smile, all within seconds. She leaves me unsure at the best of times. This is the opposite of silence. She speaks but says nothing at the same time.

Their son was present throughout the whole episode. He was the one who alerted the neighbours and they called for an ambulance. What kind of memory is that for their son to carry, together with the memory of flames from human barbecues?

But I don't want us to dwell in this sadness forever. To lighten the mood, I show her photographs of my house in England. Particularly the interior. I also show her pictures of me and my wife at home, and on holiday abroad in various countries. She merely remarks, "You live like a White person." And she seems embarrassed for the first time. It is true, my wife is White. And I can see that she is totally confused by this. But I still don't know what to say to her. But I know what she means. In her short life, all she's ever known is that only Whites can

afford to live like that. And that is true because that is what she sees around her. And that truly saddens me. All I want to say is that we live like human beings should live. But I don't voice it out loud. Perhaps I shouldn't have shown her the photos. But I cannot hide my life from her. Not now. Not after everything we've gone through just to be here.

My nephew B comes back with a litre of lemonade and he shares his *brick* with Tharmah. A *brick* is a sandwich made from half a loaf of bread, bacon and onion. They hold it between them and break it up in half. She looks at them and shakes her head. In my sister's eyes, they are both her children, even though B is ten years younger than her. I make an observation that B stops whatever he is doing, and he attentively listens to Annie like she's the only thing that matters. It turns out that Annie went back to Zimbabwe and searched for B till she found him. At the time B was homeless and destitute. Once she found him, she brought him to South Africa. Now I understand what she means when she says that Gift's children bother her. And this adds context to the strength of their bond.

Compared to his brothers, B however, is an anomaly. He doesn't seem to hold any grudges. It's as if he's learned to be gentle with himself, and he appears less agitated with the world. There is something enviable about his brand of manhood. With time, I can see us getting on, but it's early days yet.

It's getting dark and Annie insists that B must take me home. Out of the township. I can see she is starting to get agitated, and B's lackluster attitude doesn't help. I look at my phone and I can see that the Uber taxi driver is on his way to pick us up. We walk silently towards our rendezvous with our taxi driver, and when we get there, he is already waiting, but trying hard to pretend that he is anything but a taxi driver. We leave *Olifants town* as the sun is going down. We enter the motorway and head back towards Gauteng. On the way back I drop B off in the vicinity of *Sunny Side*, where he currently lives, and head back to my hotel. As soon as I walk into hotel lobby, I head straight for the bar, and order a large *Klipdrift* brandy. I drink it neat. As it glides down my throat, a certain warmth radiates across my chest, and it takes the weight off my shoulders. And I drift.

* * *

It's all almost noon when I get up. I get ready and make my way to my niece S'tha's flat. She is my sister Thoko's eldest. She has established a life for herself in Pretoria's *Sunny Side*. She has a car and a two-bedroom flat in a gated enclosure. The apartment is secure, clean and it even has its own caretaker. Hers is the only place decent enough for the family to meet in. She has a daughter, Vanessa, with whom she lives. She also has tenants, a married couple, who occupy one of the bedrooms. Cooking is taken in turns in the small kitchen.

Prior to my departure from England, I arranged to meet my older sister Thoko here. I paid for all her travel arrangements and sent money in advance for any other expenses. When I first contacted her, she never asked me about my life. But one thing kept cropping up:

"How much money are you going to bring me in dollars?"

"How strong is the pound against the dollar?"

"How much do you get paid?"

It was as if she understood nothing but money. I swept aside her curiosities as mere nervousness; her way of dealing with the uncertainty of more than twenty years of my absence. But today, I have come to talk to Thoko about family matters. In particular, our mother's and our sister Gift's death. There are things I still need answers to, that only she can provide. Today, I want to get to the bottom of things.

When I arrive, Thoko has already spread herself unevenly on the sofa. She is listening to religious music. It's mid-afternoon and she is already wearing her distinguishable frown. And it never leaves. It appears she is deeply offended by any notion of happiness. She's surrounded by her younger siblings, her own daughters, grandchildren, nieces and nephews. Today ought to be the happiest day of her life, but her presence is stifling. I catch a quick flash of teeth, but nothing else.

Annie and Tharmah have also joined us. Soon as she sees me, Annie extends her hand towards me. She loosens her wrists and makes small waves like a fish. And she giggles. Surreptitiously, she gives me the nod. I know exactly what she wants to do. She wants money to go and buy drinks. To loosen the

mood. I dip into my pocket and hand over some money. She grabs a small bag and vanishes, only to come back with a cheap sweet wine.

I need a drink. And it'll do. I look at Annie and somehow feel that she has more resilience than I'll ever have.

I have brought a suitcase full of clothes and other gifts. I distribute everything amongst those in the room. But unbeknown to me, I have broken protocol without even realizing it. As the eldest, Thoko thinks its her responsibility to hand out my presents; I can see it in her eyes. I give jewelry and watches to my nieces. And to my nephews, pairs of expensive trainers and designer t-shirts. For a moment everyone gets busy opening and trying their gifts. I sit back and watch them.

B holds his new trainers and asks: "Is this a good brand of *takkies* over there?"

"Popular," I say, "but not as expensive as, say, Nike or Adidas!" I watch Poli scrutinise with distain the bracelet I have just given her. I don't think she knows it's real gold. I ignore her. There has been very minimal interaction between her and I. I feel she is disappointed with me. As for me, I can't re-establish the connection—if ever there was any.

Elsewhere in the room, Tharmah and Praise are frantically trying the zips on their new rucksacks; promptly followed by a squabble over a jacket. Annie seeks Tharmah's gaze. When she finds it, she holds it—momentarily. Something is exchanged between them. He lets go of the jacket.

For some reason, there is a tension in the air; tempers are starting to flare over the tiniest of things.

Thoko complains about an expensive *Oasis* dress that my wife chose for her. I remember the care with which my wife chose the dress, and the amount of time it took her to find it. But all Thoko cares about are clothes befitting a preacher's wife, as she insists on calling herself.

"What is this?" She says. "I cannot wear that to church!" "Do you know how expensive that is in the shops here?" Annie interrupts. "Besides, it is also a very nice summery dress. I'll have it if you don't want it!"

And, as if this is not enough, she makes yet another snide remark about the expensive watch that I have just given her.

“Can’t even read time on that without glasses on!”

My patience is wearing thin at this woman who seems not to know how to say thank you at the best of times. Feeling claustrophobic, I decide we should all go out for a meal. It’s a stiflingly hot day. Annie clings to my arm as we walk the short distance to the restaurant. The restaurant is located on the first floor of the Central Business District in *Sunny Side*. As we get closer to the escalators, the little ones race each other up the escalator, down the other end, and up again. Thoko freezes. She’s frightened. Like me, she’s unsure how to negotiate this unfamiliar landscape. I leave it to my nieces to help her. Passersby watch with amusement; there is laughter accompanied by a slight embarrassment. After a few false starts, they manage to coax her on to the escalators. B and I wait on the landing.

My nieces have chosen a Mexican restaurant. When we arrive, we are met at the entrance by a waitress, who seems mostly preoccupied with counting how many of us there are. The restaurant is not very busy. There is a smattering of couples here and there, but no group similar in size to ours. The waitress leads us to a table for twelve. We sit in a pecking order of sorts. On my side of the table, Annie goes in first, followed by Phiwe, B and then me. On the opposite side, Poli sits right at the end of the table, with her face taciturn and voluptuous figure squeezed into a turquoise dress. Followed by S’ta, Bongiwe and then Thoko. Pongo, who is nearly two, wedges herself between her grandmother and her mother, Bongiwe, like excess baggage. Bongiwe is barely eighteen. Although her Ambi-Pure face glows, not a single jolt of motherly warmth radiates towards her daughter.

I ask the waitress to assign Tharmar, Praise, and Vanessa a separate table. I also authorise for them to be given whatever they want. To Thoko’s consternation, they order ice-cream with skittles, and seem determined to try everything on the menu as long as it is sweet. And in the true spirit of the

occasion, they are accorded access to a playroom, where they disappear in the flurry of soft balls.

Another of my nieces, Tholakele, joins us. She's come all the way from Johannesburg. She's supremely tidy and petite. Her familial resemblance to my other aunt, Sabelo, who emigrated to Zambia in the 1950s, sends a jolt through my body. I am awakened to the fact that this is but a tiny fragment of my family. I can't help but think: where is everybody? We shake hands, and she looks at me as though she has doubt about something. I step out and she sits between B and me. She orders a soft drink; like her mother, she's a devout Christian of sorts; the kind that drowns people in a deep melancholy.

The food arrives; the table is soon covered with various cooked meats: racks of beef ribs, chicken, steak and piles of chips and onion rings. And no vegetables in sight. There is a flurry of activity as everyone helps themselves to the food. As the various condiments exchange hands, Pongo kicks a fuss about the amount of ketchup on her chips because she just wants to lick up the ketchup. She's mercilessly dispatched to join the other children.

Annie and the girls sip cocktails disguised as juice, because Thoko won't stand for any drunkenness. B quietly holds on to his beer; he has a remarkable way of blending into the background, of not raising unnecessary ripples.

He and I are the only men. We don't talk much—not today.

I watch Thoko fumble with her red beret and the frills on her jumper. She swivels her plate around so that the chips are closer to the edge. And then she proceeds to torment her food with such disdain, as if our family gathering is a conspicuous display of vulgar decadence. She spends the best part of the evening chastising the little ones for the tiniest of infractions. I watch everyone over a cold beer. I have no appetite.

I am also conscious that I have a limited amount of time in Pretoria. As such, I am more than keen to talk to Thoko. But it's as if there is a blockade between us that will not allow us to talk. We are both faced with the same dilemma. She's not sure of me. Nor am I of her. Her refusal to talk about anything remotely connected to our mother's and Gift's death confounds me. She is far too cold, too distant from my world. I am not even sure she knows how to give a hug.

By stubbornly refusing to share their memories with me, my family are punishing me. Their pasts will forever be punctuated by my absence. In the same way that I could never talk about my life without invoking their glaring absence from it.

The kids return to our table, their faces painted into tigers and wild cats of sorts. They now demand the attention they haven't had for the best part of the day. A dreary ennui is beginning to engulf everyone. I decide it's time to go. When I ask for the bill, the waitress explains that if I pay by card, she won't get her tip. I pay in cash. Thoko chastises me for wasting money and reminds me that there is no food at my niece's flat. Annie is livid about the size of the tip. They are watching and calculating and keeping scores.

As we make our way back to my niece's place, I lag behind with Thoko. We engage in small talk and pretend that everything is all right. Her focus now seems to be money and nothing else. She wants me to give her money for various things she's been concocting in her mind. I give her money for her trip back to Zimbabwe and enough money for groceries. I draw the line at buying her husband a suit. We fall back into silence again.

As soon as we get back, the kids put on some music. They show off their dance routines: *Gwara-Gwara*, *Vosho*, *Kwaito*. I join in at the risk of embarrassing myself. But this feels alright. Phones come out; few photographs are taken. In the milieu, I overhear Thoko telling my niece, her own daughter, that I have given her less money than I actually did.

As the evening draws to a close, and before I leave to go back to my hotel, I hug each one of them. I promise to come back. I don't know if they believe me. In my mind, I already picture them carrying on without me. Because I am irrelevant to their lives—always have been.

Back at the hotel, alone in my room, I mull over the day's events. I ponder whether Thoko and I have reached a point where our differences are now so irreconcilable, it is inevitable that we will each go our own separate way. That should we remain close, our shared past will overburden the present. And I ask myself: What do we owe those we share mothers with? To what extent should we rescue them in spite of their indifference towards us? I've also learned that when

people seek answers to things they don't understand, they are usually unprepared for the answers that follow. It is what makes us fluent in the language of silence.

