

THE AKO CAINE PRIZE FOR AFRICAN WRITING

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Caine Prize shortlist 2010

How Shall We Kill the Bishop? By Lily Mabura

It was Fr. Yasin Lordman who had asked the question — nothing more than a joke. A most inappropriate joke since he loved the bishop. It was Easter besides. But the three other priests in the vicarage heard him. Dafala, the cook who had set a breakfast in keeping with Holy Saturday, heard him. Perhaps it was the weak kettle of black sugarless tea that was to blame, or the sleep raging in his mind, or the pain in his knees for bearing his weight all night, or his fellow priests who would not join him for their usual morning cigarette.

‘I’m fasting cigarettes today,’ the youngest priest, Fr. Ahmed, had declared. He had been ordained at the beginning of the year and had been trying to quit smoking since.

‘The bishop would want us to,’ Fr. Seif had said. He smoked more for the company than anything else.

‘He is ill and he is watching us, Yasin. What do you think he says to the Archbishop in Nairobi, to the Nuncio, to Rome?’ Fr. Dugo had asked.

‘He is the problem, then, I suppose,’ Fr. Yasin had said. ‘Tell me, how shall we rid ourselves of him? How shall we kill the bishop?’

The three were now staring at him under the flickering light of a candle, which was set in the middle of the dining table. The generator had been shut down on Maundy Thursday and the vicarage stood dark and pensive like the arid land surrounding it. ‘You should whip yourself,’ Fr. Dugo said.

Fr. Yasin rose from the table and walked into the kitchen. Dafala retrieved the bishop’s breakfast tray from the wood oven. Dafala was almost as old as the bishop. In his lengthy white *kanzu*, regularly mistaken for a priest’s frock, he was no less of a priest than any of them. His life was single-mindedly devoted to the vicarage. He had no property that he could call his own. He was celibate. He was a man who had lived out his priesthood unwittingly, Fr. Yasin thought. With his conscientious hands, Dafala now covered the bishop’s sconce and scrambled eggs with a purple crocheted napkin. Next to them he placed a flask of tea and chinaware. Then a small glass vase, often used in the chapel, with a single purple rose stem. Dafala had roses for all occasions and kept a kitchen garden even in the worst of

droughts. He skimped on everybody's drinking water if he had to. He handed the tray to Fr. Yasin without a word.

Fr. Yasin knocked on the bishop's door twice before entering. The knock was perfunctory. The bishop was knelt on a prie-dieu at one end of his room. There the wall jutted out like an apse and served as his own private chapel. He was awake and fully dressed as usual. His bed was made even though he had taken to returning to it by midmorning. Fr. Yasin had begun judging his daily disposition by the length of his random siestas. The bishop's broad back was to him and he stared at it under the smoky yellow light of the candelabrum burning on his desk. It was a back still unbent by age or illness, and his neck rose from it like a ship's mast. Above his white shirt collar was the familiar edge of his hairline from which it was so easy to see a clear throbbing vein under the sun. He was always the last man to break into a sweat on the hockey pitch. He looked very much his old self from the back, but his face had begun to change — it resembled his father's more and more each day, Fr. Yasin thought.

There was a photo of the bishop's father on his desk. Having one made a difference, Fr. Yasin had always felt. It was the only thing he envied in other men. Perhaps that was the reason he loved this photo. Raji Lal Sandhu stood there beside his Kenyan wife in his white turban and generous Sikh moustache. He had the face of a man who had worked hard his entire life; a man who, in exchange for a piece of land that he could call his own, had left the Sikh units of the Indian Colonial Army for the ballast pits feeding the construction of the Kenya-Uganda railway. Every time Fr. Yasin looked at this photo, he noticed something new. Holding the bishop's breakfast tray that morning, for instance, he noticed that here was a man who had determined to forget India.

It was the condition of man he was inclined to think. Fr. Ahmed, for example, was hard bent on forgetting cigarettes; Fr. Seif, in his determination to forget the woman he loved, intruded on everyone's quiet time because he could not stand his own; Fr. Dugo determined to forget that the bishop had tested him most before admission; and Dafala determined to forget that the bishop was sick at all and carried on as usual. If the bishop ever determined to forget anything, though, it was sealed in his heart, well hidden beneath the surface of his face.

That face was now cast upwards, to the crucifix nailed onto the innermost recess of the apse. This was the only crucifix still standing in the vicarage. The rest had all been taken down and replaced with bare wooden crosses the evening before. The bishop's crucifix, however, was still standing: Christ's head like a drooping flower, his cranium a framework of metal petals crowned with barbed wire; his cheekbones high and pointed above the hollow flesh; his nose a sharp edge of metal; his beard an emerald mixture of rust and solder; his splayed hands broken at the joints, with ragged strips for fingers; his chest the very semblance of a fallen warrior's breastplate — severely punished and bloodied; below that a gaping hole, as jagged as a cave's mouth, exposing a metal vertebrae blackened with soot; his penis a small and humble-looking rod of metal, placed at an odd angle, as though the sculptor had considered leaving it out all together and then, upon further pondering the matter, had realised that it could hardly be ignored, that it would be more visible in its absence than actuality; and his legs, of course, those corroded buttresses that still held up the church long after Golgotha.

'Fr. Yasin.'

'Your Grace?'

'Have breakfast with me,' the bishop said, rising from his knees. There was a faint smile on his thin face. 'And what has Dafala made this morning?'

Fr. Yasin placed the breakfast tray on a table facing the patio and lifted the purple napkin. 'Hmmm. There is no cook like Dafala, don't you agree, Yasin?' he asked. 'In his mind's handbook are an explicit set of rules on how to cook for a sick priest, a disobedient priest, a vain priest, a good priest ...'

Fr. Yasin laughed and pulled him a chair.

'How is his garden faring?'

'Well, let's say that the birds will have none of it and neither will the locusts if they come this year. They would need pliers for teeth from the way he's been working the wire mesh.'

The bishop chuckled, but his brown eyes seemed tired and somewhat sunken, like a drying riverbed slowly shrinking away from its banks.

'He'd rather be telling you this himself, of course,' Fr. Yasin said. He opened the flask and poured the bishop a cup of tea. 'He's not used to having someone else bring in your breakfast.'

The bishop sipped his tea and said nothing. He was weaning Dafala from himself, Fr. Yasin suspected. When he had been posted to this Kenyan northern frontier town thirty years ago, he had come with two things: his mule and Dafala. A young pregnant Borana prostitute, groaning with labour pangs, had stumbled into their camp the very first morning. The bishop had carried her to his sleeping bag, Dafala had boiled some hot water, and Yasin Lordman had been born. He had a mulatto skin for which the only logical explanation out here was a white soldier from the British military training base. The base was a remnant of the colonial legacy standing amongst stunted acacia trees and withered shrubs of solanum. The stunts of sparse grass surrounding the base were too brittle for cattle to graze on — too brittle even for the camels. There were no doum palms close by either, and Dafala always explained this by stating that sacred plants could not flourish near the base.

When Fr. Yasin stepped onto the patio and lit his cigarette, he could see the old military base with its floodlights beaming out towards the rising sun, which burned dark purple and red, its brow on the dunned horizon as yellow as ostrich yolk. With time, additional military bases had cropped up, government bases that periodically filled with local troops. They were like Roman garrisons, ever sending out legions through this gateway town into the troubled desert beyond. Rumour had it that there was a huge battalion on the way. It was the talk of the town, a distraction from the sick dogs that would not stop howling, from the dry animal carcasses in the bush and watering holes caked with mud. He should have informed the bishop, but there was no need to tell him right away. He had enough to worry about with the emptying school, falling church attendance and the overcrowded hospital. Fr. Yasin wanted him to enjoy his breakfast. If the battalion was arriving today, he would hear it.

The bishop joined him on the patio, a cup of tea in one hand. 'The Lord should give us peace for he has given us all else, Yasin. It was what Augustine prayed for at the end.'

What Augustine had actually prayed for, Fr. Yasin thought, and what the bishop was perhaps praying for, was what Augustine had penned after those words — the peace that is repose, the peace of the Sabbath and the peace that knows no evening. One hardly forgot Augustine, Fr. Yasin felt; not if you read him with passion and plenty of time on your hands like he had while on a pre-ordination retreat at the Red Sea port of Massawa. The heat in Massawa was as exhausting as it was here, as exhausting as it must have been for Augustine farther along that North African shoreline. Sometimes days would go by with hardly a breeze finding its way over the water. At such times red algae would appear suddenly and bloom endlessly, miles and miles of it, as if from the very Suez to the Strait of Bab al Mandeb, like streaks of thick camel blood that would not dissolve away. Then it would die, unexpectedly, and the sea would turn from red to rusty. Eventually Fr. Yasin would wake up one morning and find the algae gone altogether, the sea blue-green again.

That was how droughts ended here: when you least expected. Out of the blue. You simply awoke one morning to the sound of rainfall. The grass, like it always did, would have budded overnight and the women, who always showed up at sunrise for maize rations, indeed, who were already at the gates, would show up as usual, but with their long hair wet, their clothes dripping wet, their faces already nourished.

'The need to confess overwhelms me today, Father,' the bishop said.

His words startled Fr. Yasin, and he looked away in embarrassment, unprepared for such access to the bishop's heart even though he had been contemplating it only a moment ago. 'I'm hardly the man for it, Your Grace,' he said. 'I could place a call to the Nuncio, if you like. He's your old friend. He knows you best.'

The bishop remained silent for a while, gazing at the sunrise. 'I cannot speak to Felice right now, but I have a letter for him. There, on my desk. Mail it for me.'

By its weight, Fr. Yasin could tell on his way to his room, it was several pages long. He was going to mail it later in the day when the post office opened. There was no hurry. Sometimes it took almost a month for a letter to reach Nairobi. Dafala had poured half a pail of water into the washbasin. He used it to shave and bathe. Then he lay on his bed and slept.

The rumble of diesel engines and the laboured rotation of crankshafts woke him up. The air was already tinged with the smell of dust, hot rubber and exhausted clutches. It was the battalion slowly pouring in. Soldiers' voices and soldiers' hard combat boots, hitting the dry sandy ground in unbroken descent, could be heard alongside the rolling machinery.

When Fr. Yasin emerged from the vicarage, there were soldiers everywhere, milling about in desert camouflage fatigues and standard issue rifles. The town, generally sleepy and desolate, was now an anthill of tough unfamiliar faces from other provinces. Fr. Yasin made his way towards the post office

slowly, the bishop's letter in his shirt pocket, the smell of soldiers' sweat in his nose, as old and as rank as a nomad's. He was standing at the doors of the post office when he saw the altar girl, Salima, across the street. Their regular set of altar boys had left town with their families when the drought had begun in search of more reliable waterholes for their livestock; they were deep in the sun-scorched land where wars were fought over whatever little water and pasture remained. Salima had landed their job inadvertently when she had scaled the vicarage's walls and Fr. Ahmed, taking an early evening walk, had spied her in Dafala's garden. It had taken two mad dashes around the vicarage for him to corner her. Her penance, it was decided, was to serve as an altar girl and join the priests every Sunday afternoon in the chapel where they practiced the hymn 'Salve Festa Dies' in preparation for Holy Saturday. It was Fr. Dugo who had come up with the idea — to surprise the bishop. Without the altar boys their in-house choir had somewhat diminished in strength not to mention that they were sorely lacking in the alto department. Salima was the panacea. Such was the strength of her soprano! It was amazing that it could be found in so scrawny a creature. Added to that was the fact that she had memorised the entire Gregorian melody, in Latin no less, during the first practice while they, to learn it, had been listening to a taped version the entire Lent. For her prodigious memory, they had dubbed her Giordano Bruno.

Salima, however, had not shown up for the last choir practice. Fr. Ahmed was convinced that her family had moved. Fr. Seif differed and revealed that he had sent her home with excess rations every time she had shown up for practice. Fr. Dugo, distrusting the exact excessiveness of Fr. Seif's rations, had told him off. Fr. Yasin thought that they were all unnecessarily worried, but did not have adequate conviction for his opinion. Consequently, when he saw her milling in the chaos of that afternoon, his heart lurched and he screamed her name. She did not seem to hear him and, as he pushed against the soldiers to cross the street, she disappeared into the dilapidated clip joint his mother had worked in till her death.

The two men at the door, designated to shake up tight-fisted clients, absconding clients and the like, let him through because they were too surprised to stop him. A huge strobe light rotated from the iron sheet ceiling and dancing soldiers bumped against him under its intermittent glaring lights, swirling about to the music like they would to a war dance: in a frenzy of waving hands, kicking feet and faces as dark and gleaming as Dafala's egg plants.

'The guards at the door swear that you've lost your mind, Father.' It was a woman who spoke to him, a woman like his mother, the kind of woman he always determined to forget.

'I'm looking for someone ... a little girl. Her name is Salima.'

She put her arms around his neck — little stick arms that came from a little stick body. He could break it, he felt, by merely resting his hands on its sides. It spoke of paucity: conceived and bred as such into the natural state of her being.

'A desert man always thinks of the going out before he enters,' she said.

She talked like Dafala and her long hair smelt like his mother's: of ancient Cushitic perfume encrypted into his pre-oedipal senses. 'I have to find her,' he said.

'You would need money.'

The only thing in his pocket was the bishop's letter. 'I have none,' he said.

'A trick then,' she suggested, 'something to fool a drunken soldier's eyes for a little while.'

'And you?' he asked, reaching for the bishop's letter. 'Doesn't a desert woman also think of the going out before she enters?'

'Me? I am like a doum palm, father. My head is always in the fire, but my feet run in the water.'

He opened the bishop's letter, removed its contents and handed her the empty envelope. She let go of his neck and smiled — a little broken half-smile that would always remain with him.

'Go back,' she said. 'I shall send her to you.'

In the vicarage living room, after lunch and after the bishop's afternoon siesta, they sang him the poet Sedulius' fifth century Easter poem: 'Hail, festival day, venerable throughout all ages, in which God vanquished hell and took possession of the Heavens/ Behold, the beauty of the reborn world bears witness to the fact that all the gifts of the Lord have returned with Him/ He who was crucified is God, and behold, He reigns over all things; let all creation lift its prayers unto the Creator/ O Christ, Saviour of all things, good Creator and Redeemer, only begotten of God the Father'.

The bishop was in full regalia — his pink cap on the middle of his head, the bishop's ring on his hand. He smiled at the tiny set of dust prints across the red floor, which Fr. Ahmed had polished to a gleam. The prints ended at Salima's bare feet. Tears welled in his eyes whenever she chorused *salve festa dies ...* Dafala cried. Fr. Ahmed, Fr. Seif and Fr. Dugo cried. They all cried because they had never seen the bishop so moved.

But Fr. Yasin did not really cry until sunset when he was lighting the sacred fire from which the paschal candle would be lit. When he knelt onto the dry sand, arranged the dry pieces of wood together and lit them up, tears brimmed in his eyes. He wept then for the bishop, whom he loved. He wept for Dafala's pain. He wept for the woman with a little broken half-smile who reminded him of his mother. He wept until a hard rubber boot bit into the back of his neck and yoked his head still. With bleary eyes he saw a familiar envelope fall before his face and into the fire. At that moment he remembered what the woman with a little broken half-smile had said to him — that she was like a doum palm with her head in the fire but her feet running in water.

A rifle barrel dug into his spine and the pressure at the back of his neck increased, forcing his face closer to the fire. The hair on his face singed all at once and the flames danced and leapt higher as they consumed the crumpled envelope. The hot ash beneath exploded. Something more than mortal man seemed to be holding him down. He faced, then, a fear that is only known to a nomad as he comes to the realisation that he is too deep out in the desert to make it across or to turn back.

Then the boot on his neck lifted unexpectedly and with it the rifle barrel. As Fr. Yasin reeled away from the fire, smoke and heat in his lungs, he saw the bishop on the other side. He was standing very still, the desert sunset reflected so deep in his eyes that it seemed to be flaring from within him. In his hands was the towering white paschal candle. Engraved on it, in golden letters, was the alpha at the top and the omega at the bottom. In between the letters were five red grains of glowing incense, one for each holy wound. When the volley of bullets exploded over Fr. Yasin's head, the paschal candle suddenly glowed with hundreds more; they sparkled red like rubies. The paschal candle remained standing even as the bishop let go and Fr. Yasin blindly reached for his punctured body. It stood, stoic, the candle, at that eerie moment when the dark figure was scaling the vicarage walls and the church bells were pealing to the rhythm of abrupt thunder rumbling from afar.

Soulmates, by Alex Smith

Mary of the bees and thorns, Mary of the porcupines and nubby roots, namelijk Maria, genaamd Magdalena, van welke zeven duivelen uitgegaan waren, Maria minus seven devils, Maria after whom I have been named, help me, please! Outside spiders were spinning webs, bees were waiting, motionless, for day, and porcupines were chewing through the frost and ratty bulbs of the renosterveld. Inside Maria was tearing. The door to the room was closed, but windy wind, tumultuous as Maria's loss, violated the locks and cracks and came in with grit and insects, to witness the splitting of the elliptical entrance to Maria's physical soul, and, regardless of the fragile circumstances, boorish wind rampaged about the room with all the rattle of seven devils. Maria was laid out on a bed of coarse sheets. Bewildered by the soft creature he had acquired, and more eagerly aggressive than clumsy, her husband, Franz, was forcing himself into her with his body, a full two feet taller than hers so their faces were not level during the act of love, which to her felt more like an act of hate, but she knew no better, or other, and so trebled her admiration for all the mothers and wives in history, among them many Marias who suffered love every night in the name of God and family. Onder dewelke was Maria Magdalena, en Maria, de moeder van Jakobus en Joses, en de moeder der zonen van Zebedeus. Her face was squashed under the sharpness of his collarbone, a bone broken and healed up harder than before, now pressing down against the cartilage of her nose. Under a rock-fall of emotion, yes, she was prone since childhood to vigorous joys and sadnesses, it was difficult for Maria to determine which was worse: being suffocated under the weight of her husband or the pain of dry fornication. Am I dead, in hell, or am I really here with this man in me? she asked the vision of three desolated Marias that hovered in anguish at the crucifixion. En bij het kruis van Jezus stonden Zijn moeder en Zijner moeders zuster, Maria, de vrouw van Klopas, en Maria Magdalena. There was the cross of splinters, and then there was the bed. At home in France Maria's mattress, modest as it was, had been filled with feathers and covered, the breezy duck down coddled in velvet. This man's mattress was packed in cotton sacking, stained, and stuffed with straw and horsehair. Earlier that day she'd seen a porcupine, heard its shaking quills, for the first time, and now it felt like the man she was destined to live out her life with was shoving quills up her body. Swirling around her were all the noises of the seven-devil wind, the bristle-faced man, his jolting, sackcloth bed whose craggy sheets sang out in abrading cotton notes a deafening

song of humping. At 16 she was fond of laughing. Where is the joke in all this? Confounded, she asked all the Marias still standing at the crucifixion, and strained to hear their answer over the noise of copulation of which she was the subject, but in which she was playing little part. Some lump in the mattress needled her spine. En Maria Magdalena, en Maria, de moeder van Joses, aanschouwden, waar Hij gelegd werd. Maria tried to move her face, desperate for air, but Franz was too heavy with muscles and lust. Her fingers clawed at his jacket as if trying to dig a way out of the avalanche, but the wool was thick and her husband felt nothing. Before passing out, Maria thought, 'Mary of the bees and thorns, Mary of the porcupines and nubby roots, Mary, Mary, Mary and your son, bless me with quick death rather than life with this brute.' In the din of asphyxiation and unceremonious climax, the angels over Jooste farm didn't hear Maria's prayer: Franz came, he sighed, unrooted himself from her and rolled over. Oxygen filled Maria's lungs and she survived to turn her head and pity and hate the exhausted man with unbuttoned trousers passed out at her side. We are trapped, she imagined telling him, you and I, and this horsehair bed is our four-sided island of matrimonial bleakness. She looked at their respective feet and laughed, for hers were tiny and wistful and his were solid and brutish. I will remember this moment of looking at our feet for the rest of my life. 'Husband,' she said and found the word unsavoury and uncomfortable in her mouth. 'Husband!' It sounded as unnatural as having him inside her had felt. When he did not reply and she was sure he wasn't awake enough to hear, she said: 'Husband, Mary and God forgive me, but I wish you dead.' En aldaar was Maria Magdalena, en de andere Maria, zittende tegenover het graf. There they were, the holy Marias staring at Franz's grave, then they turned in a blaze of guilt, and Maria, feeling a wretched sinner, stared through them at the reeds in the ceiling and took a tally of the situation of being married and no longer a virgin. He didn't even kiss me, she thought, glancing at him again, and unable to oust the word die from her wishes. To hell I'm going, and that made her laugh – to a hell of aching hipbones I've already come. The fine skin over those hipbones was turning a shade of bruise. She offered a prayer, begging the Marias' pardon for entertaining murderous thoughts. When she had beseeched the three ladies sufficiently and convinced herself she would make amends for wishing so out of turn, she realised she was glad Franz had not kissed her. While willing to offer Christian sympathies for his human plight, she would have been dishonest if she hadn't admitted that his breath, his feet, his clothes, his bed, all aspects of him, but especially his blebby lips, were rancid to her. He was a knurled farmer, who spent his blessed savings on negotiating for a bride. Pity me, Marias, if you care, that I am the one. A tear ran down Maria's temple and into her hair. It was bitter in that room with no furniture other than a bed and a table for a humourless Bible in Dutch, Dutch, Dutch! In it, Mary's dead son issued the new commandment on love: Een nieuw gebod geef Ik u, dat gij elkander liefhebt; gelijk Ik u liefgehad heb, dat ook gij elkander liefhebt ... But it was not in the language of Maria's heart, it was in the language of her keeper, the dialect of bondage. Franz, who had stripped her of clothes to fondle, squeeze, prod, suck, suffocate, vandalise and admire her, and now slept fully dressed with his pants still unbuttoned and his mouth hanging open, he would not speak to her in any language other than Dutch – upon her arrival at his farm, he disallowed her mother tongue, French. She pulled up a blanket. Maria had imagined for herself a younger, kinder, more handsome and wealthier husband: a man who understood the significance of a kiss. It was pointless being angry with her family for binding her to such a lot, they had needed money, but she was angry with the Marias. Emphatically, she was angry with the three Marias, always tending to their beloved's crucifixion. And what of my wounds? As wicked as she knew it was, she could not excommunicate the then present notion that all

three Marias, Jesus and his God had abandoned her. Why? She repeated her question again and again as she fell asleep, but no answer came to the windy room.

Morning came in place of enlightenment, and it was icy. Before he went out to feed the cows, Franz, made of chilly skin and cold rough wool as if he'd been dragged from the frosty outside, slid on top of Maria, driving her spine against that lump in the mattress. She had been dreaming until she realised she was dying again. I cannot die on bad terms with the Marias, she thought. The tongue is a fire! I must pray, and hastily, or risk eternity in God's gloomy dungeon, waiting for judgement for the crime of killing my husband in words. De tong is ook een vuur, een wereld der ongerechtigheid; alzo is de tong onder onze leden gesteld, welke het gehele lichaam besmet, en ontsteekt het rad onzergeboorte, en wordt ontstoken van de hel. Panicked, she tried to open her mouth to call her prayer to the mothers and prostitutes of heaven, to ask for help, but her lips were held closed by the avalanche weight of her husband. This second splitting, second coming, was more painful than the first for Maria, but indifferent Heaven's weaver birds were singing in a multitude of nests hanging from Franz's trees. He, her husband, was in as good a mood as he had been in for as long as he could remember. Agony, unlike any Maria had known before, caused tears to flow from her eyes, but Franz's woollen jacket absorbed them all. Dear Marias, why? The lovely mothers spoke only through Franz in unpoetic jerks. Finally he was gone into the wind, out to his cows. Maria shivered, remembering the sandpaper touch of Franz's chapped hands, and got up with difficulty, because her legs ached. Guilty, corrupted by her tongue and ashamed, she pulled the blanket over the new stains on the mattress. She stood, naked at the window. Never in life had she been so cold. In Dutch, she'd been instructed by her husband to make a breakfast of eggs and bread and have it ready for when he returned from the cows. Even when dressed, she felt no warmer, ice had gone into her bones. Still, she had been raised to be dutiful, so she left the dread room and went to the kitchen. There she met Titus. Aan Titus, mijn oprechte zoon, naar het gemeen geloof: Genade, barmhartigheid, vrede zij u van God den Vader, en den Heere Jezus Christus, onzen Zaligmaker. Titus full of grace, he was a slave; there was not much to think of him other than that he was named after an Epistle. Maria didn't think of herself as a slave, she felt she was better than a slave; later she knew she was nothing, no better than a slave. At first, all she noticed about Titus full of grace was his eyes – it wasn't that she admired his eyes, or felt attracted to his eyes, only that she saw dark humour in those eyes. Impish Titus with tapering fingers, who was only three years older than Maria, in spite of everything that was his life, possessed the playfulness of youth. He was a jester, not especially gifted at comedy, but irrepressibly inclined to joke. Chasing chickens around the egg-less kitchen that bleak morning, Titus made Maria laugh until she couldn't breathe.

So Maria left the silent Marias baying at their cross. She grew fond of the Biblical book of Titus, regardless of its Dutch, and from it drew comfort. Want een opziener moet onberispelijk zijn, als een huisverzorger Gods, niet eigenzinnig, niet genegen tot toornigheid, niet genegen tot den wijn, geen smijter, geenvuil-gewinzoeker. When her husband beat her, which was often, that line swirled in her thoughts, geen smijter, geen smijter, geen smijter, each smack, each punch from Franz, she saw those words: geen smijter! Titus danced in the shadows behind Franz's back. He mimicked the master, pulled faces, soothed Maria's pain and dressed her cuts with a lotion made of herbs from the renosterveld. Despite its contradictions, St Paul's Epistle to Titus helped Maria survive life as a wife-slave. Vermaan

den dienstknechten, dat zij hun eigen heren onderdanig zijn, dat zij in alles welbehagelijk zijn, niet tegensprekende; Niet onttrekkende, maar alle goede trouw bewijzende; opdat zij de leer van God, onzen Zaligmaker, in alles mogen versieren. Master of the house, Franz, refused to buy her clothes, but Master of the farce, Titus, surprised her with gifts from nature: a pretty leaf, a flower, a speckled egg, a feather, a plantling. One day when Franz was whipping Titus for some ludicrous misdemeanour, Maria realised she cared deeply about the other slave's pain. It hurt her to see him hurt, and there was another unexpected gift from Titus – after a decade at Jooste farm, Maria believed she had no feelings left. If only you were to me like a brother, Titus, dat ik U op de straat vond, ik zou U kussen, ook zouden zij mij niet verachten. After that, she thought always of kissing him and took to reading the Song of Solomon.

She was the one who leaned upwards and held her lips near Titus's lips. His breath was sweet or maybe it wasn't, but even if it wasn't, it was sweet to her. For an age they stood almost kissing. His lips were beautiful, or maybe they weren't, but even if they weren't, they were beautiful to her. Taken alone, without his being, his lips were perhaps too large, but accompanied by those eyes, his lips were a dream to Maria. It occurred to her that in her life she had borne two children to a wretch, but she had never been kissed by a man whom she loved and who loved her back. Hij kusse mij met de kussen Zijns monds; want Uw uitnemende liefde is beter dan wijn. Poor Titus, that he has to carry the weight of my dreams, so many dreams I have dreamed about him. Dare I burden him so, and at the same time claim I love him? Still their lips had not touched. It would be a crime; it would be adulterous. God and his Marias will never return if I continue on this course. She wanted to open Titus's jacket to touch the skin on his shoulders, but she didn't, she kept her hands behind her back. She looked up at him as a slave looks up to another slave, as beggar to another beggar, with understanding – I know how it feels. Maybe his skin was too dark, maybe it didn't matter; no, this wasn't an imperfection to her, it was part of him, and so she wanted to press her cheek against his cheek, her skin against his skin. What is skin, anyway? His skin was perfect, imperfect, looked soft, as did his lips. Tears came to her eyes because of the dearness of the man. 'I'm sorry,' she said. 'Why?' he asked and she could feel the warmth of his question on her lips. 'It is wrong of me to endanger you for a kiss.' Even though she knew she should walk away out of his sleeping quarters, she did not. She stayed there with him, lifted her hand and touched Titus's brow. He closed his eyes. She ran her fingers over his eyelids, then down his cheek. His skin was smoother than she'd imagined. She touched his earlobe. 'Do you know I have waited thirty years to be kissed?' She hoped he would kiss her then, but he did not. Near enough to kiss, but not kissing. She leaned closer to him so that their lips were touching, but still it was not a kiss. She moved her head from left to right, stroking his lips with her lips. In the cold weather her lips were dry, the skin taut, all the more fragile, more sensitive, but his lips were not dry, they were God's lips. Here I am, almost kissing God. Maria tensed her lips into a kiss and kissed him. He did not take his hands from behind his back. She kissed him again and he kissed her. 'We will die for this,' she said, and kissed him again. 'We will surely die for this.' Now, Titus was moved to unknot his hands and stroke her cheek. 'Never mind, we are already dead.' 'Yes, we are ghosts!' she agreed. She kissed him more and loved him more. 'Dear ghost, I knew from your eyes you would be a good kisser.' Oh, what a gentle kisser he was, and so she couldn't help yearning for more of those kisses. Till that minute she had felt her whole life after her sixteenth birthday like Jesus in his final torment calling out to God, Mary and the Angels, ELOI, ELOI, LAMA SABACHTHANI!

Mijn God! Mijn God! Waarom hebt Gij Mijverlaten! My God, my God, why have you forsaken me! But now all that was irrelevant, God had returned in these lips, in these kisses, God was reaching out to her, embracing her, smoothing her hair, loving her. There was no need for them to ever stop kissing; they would kiss forever on that spot beside the slave's bed, which he, in preparation for love, had stuffed with stolen wool and scented leaves of herbs. The universe was reduced to two ghosts kissing, both ghosts weeping freely, elated, liberated, consoled. No more were they mortal, no more slaves with bodies to torture, there was no human law that could trammel their joy, no marriage contract, no taboo, no judge, no time, all silence, no separation, only union. Their tongues touched and it was thrilling. So much so that she smiled as they kissed, smiled to think how strange it was that touching tongues could be enough to absolve the universe for all the years it had abused her. Delight welled up in her and caused her to giggle like a 16-year-old. It might have been shameful for tongues to touch like that, but she didn't care and nor did she care what heavenly magic made touching tongues so comforting, so happy a thing to do. It was such a simple act, this being close, this kissing, so refreshing in a gloomy life – or death, if she was a ghost. She paused from kissing to look again, then saw in his eyes the spirit she cherished. 'God is in your lips,' she said. The kiss lasted an hour and several minutes – one hour and several minutes of bliss in a lifetime of brutality. The harshness of their mutual existences took the kiss beyond the realms of the regular and into the ethereal. Horses' hooves echoed through the renosterveld. Franz had arrived back. Maria closed her mouth and, before the kissers scattered, Maria and Titus looked at each other, both astonished.

Nothing was the same after that and everything was the same. They kissed many times, with affection, and, when Franz was with his cows, they made love. One January day, though, Franz – 'Schurfdie Franz', 'Rough Franz', as he was known by all in the area – assaulted Maria with a poker, whatever for has long since become irrelevant. Titus was too sickened to dance in the shadows any more. He left the room, returned with a gun and fired. Franz groaned, I'll kill you both, was bleeding, but the bullet had only grazed him. Maria grabbed the rod from Titus's hand, and together she and Titus killed that husband with his own weapon. It happened quicker than a kiss. They stuffed Franz's body into a porcupine hole.

For months they loved as lovers.

Then, quicker than a kiss, the life was excruciated from Maria Mouton when she became, according to history books, the first white woman to be given the death penalty in the Cape, for killing her husband and bedding his slave. Doodsangst, doodstrijd, agonie, geblaker are the Dutch words to describe Maria's end as prescribed by the Cape Court of Justice, who were mortally affronted by her concubinage with the slave. Mijn God! Mijn God! Waarom hebt Gij Mijverlaten! They held burning straw to her face to make her black as Titus, tied her to a pole, throttled her and left her body to disintegrate. Titus is a ghost in history books; little is said of this man, except that he was impaled alive at the Castle of Good Hope and, even with a stake through his innards, he did not lose his humour. After four hours of impalement, the keeper of the castle dairy gave Titus a bottle of rum, from which the slave drank deeply. When advised not to drink too much in case he should become drunk, Titus joked: 'It does not matter, I sit fast enough. There is no fear of me falling.' He lived forty-four hours more until noon on 3 September 1714; three minutes past the hour on that spring day he looked beyond the silent Castle walls at the mountain, for the last time, and thought of all the flowers growing there – gifts he would

give Maria when they kissed again. His right hand and head were sawed off and fixed on the gates of Jooste farm as a warning to other slaves who might dare to love beyond their quarters. Perhaps it was the herbs he consumed, but what history doesn't know is that Titus's blood was miraculously sweet, and so abundant that bees from near and bees from far were drawn to that pike to drink the blood of his severed head. For weeks there was a perpetual swarm over Jooste farm until every bee had fed off him, and in due course, Titus became honey, only to be gathered by farmers and eaten again.

According to the records of the Cape, Maria and Titus are still criminals – as the interrogator of the court put it, they are eternally 'a contemptible slave guilty of carnal intercourse' and 'a woman who gratified her foul and godless lust' – but, today, they would be allowed to kiss, allowed to love and would surely have been acquitted from the charges of murder, for they were acting in self-defence. They are soulmates. Officials, let their names be cleared! Wie oren heeft om te horen, die hore. He who has ears, let him hear.

The Life of Worm, by Ken Barris

Worm, as I call him, is quivering. He needs to go for a walk. I have nothing to fear with Worm on the leash. He shivers with untapped energy, his muscularity itself bristles at the thought of violence: even his walking is violent. His eyes have a lugubrious quality, they are liquid with soul. It is a deception. He crouches at the doorway, hair bristling, his ribs standing out, outrage in his eyes, a sort of terror that he might be denied his walk. I sometimes picture him stripped of fur and skin, a flayed beast walking.

I need to make preparations. I check that the electric fence is working – there is a panel in the garage that makes a ticking noise – and preset the alarm. I take the remotes out of their cabinet. Then I fetch the leash, which I keep in the scullery. There is no line of sight between the scullery and the front door. It is inadvisable for Worm to see his leash.

I have the leash behind my back. I have to approach him carefully. Until it is fastened he is potentially psychotic. His eyes roll as I approach, showing the murky corneas. Then I snap the leash on in a smooth and practiced movement, aware of a certain nausea, a sour taste in my mouth. A curious ripping sound rolls out of him, neither bark nor snarl, strangely high-pitched, alto rather than tenor. He rises on his back legs, foreclaws ripping at the door. I have to jerk him back in order to open it. He lunges out, and I grab the handle from outside, using his momentum to slam the door behind us.

He tugs me rapidly towards the electric gate, while I lean back, a staggering land anchor, slowing him down long enough to reach into my pocket to find the gate and burglar alarm remotes. I am skilled now, I can take out both and juggle them in one hand, well enough to open the gate and set the alarm. It activates, the siren giving a single blip. The gate has a seven second delay before it closes. I hear its trundling noise behind me as we set off at a ridiculous pace. Worm tugs madly, trying to go at his natural speed. He ranges left and right, right and left, testing the leash. Sometimes he chokes on his collar, strangling and gargling, but never relents. I would like to let him go, but it wouldn't work: this is an

animal one dare not unchain. It is difficult to live with a dog of this nature, but it is necessary. I have no choice.

I look back, unobtrusively as possible, difficult at this speed, difficult to keep balance and scrutinize the street. There is no-one behind me. So far, so good. There is obviously no-one ahead. I feel apprehensive as we approach the intersections – who can tell what (or who, more to the point) might be lurking down the road unseen? You cannot tell, until you are right in the mouth of the intersection, and can gaze left or right, and reconnoitre. The first intersection on this morning's route is Avenue Picardie, which rises to a gentle crest above my current position. There is someone – in the distance, there is a human figure, and a small dog trotting – she wears a dress, there is no threat there. Worm lurches towards them, dragging me up the hill, trying to sprint while his claws scabble at the tarmac. Can he see the little dog? I wonder about his eyesight sometimes. I know that he is blinded by rage, by battle madness. When he gets that look, blood films his eye, its blood vessels thicken and swell to bursting. Surely that must damage his sight?

The woman is a stick figure wearing a dress. Her dog sniffs the ground and struts about, oblivious to the approach of terror. The distance closes swiftly, though they seem to stand still, as if the street rolls towards me on massive and silent gears. We are on the right hand side of the road, the side on which you face oncoming traffic. It is better to walk on this side, but the woman and her dog are on this side too. I glance backwards, hastily, confirm that nothing approaches from behind, and swerve out behind Worm, dragging him to the other side of the road.

I begin to make out details. She wears a raincoat, an unpleasant yellow. It is this I mistook for a dress. Beneath it she wears beige slacks and sensible shoes. She appears to be middle aged. Despite the overcast weather, she wears white-rimmed sunglasses, of a type I would think were old-fashioned, with thick white rims. She comes nearer, and I see a spray of silver shot in her cheeks, and sprays of silver in her hair. The woman positively glints, she is metallic with manners and face powder.

To my annoyance – to my consternation – she crosses the street, and comes to a halt right in front of Worm. Before I can warn her, she bends down over him. Is she mad? She takes both his cheeks in her hands, and says, looking up at me, 'Isn't he a love? What's his name?'

I am so astounded I cannot speak at first. Worm's tail wags madly, his hindquarters shake. He pays no attention to the small dog at all, all his sensibility focused on her attention. The little dog sniffs at a pile of droppings just inside the curb, with the utmost delicacy, reading its information, keeping its distance. My dog makes excited guttural noises, sounds I have never heard before.

'Worm,' I say at last.

'What a strange name for a dog like this!' she exclaims gaily.

I clear my throat, unsure how to respond. I take in as much slack on the leash as I can, without pulling him backwards. Does she realize her danger? Does she know he might take her face off?

She straightens up, wiping her hands down on her hips, against the unforgiving yellow of her raincoat. No doubt he has slathered over fingers.

'Such a frantic young man,' she remarks, amused.

The dog is tugging at the leash again, vibrating.

'Well, yes,' I reply, feeling quite foolish. 'I think we'd better move on.'

We spring away briskly. I feel intense relief. I cannot be responsible for foolish people who risk their lives and faces. I close my eyes for an instant, unable to suppress an image of her scalped, exposed. Turning back, I see her departing frame, a splash of yellow. Then I stumble, tugged forward, and scramble after Worm. A gentle, squeezing pressure makes itself felt in my chest, with a single clear tendril of pain moving upwards on the left, and curling into my heart. It is not unpleasant.

*

There is a threat to my security that I cannot do much about. It is an oak tree growing on my neighbour's property, right next to our shared boundary wall. I know for a fact that this tree is rotten to the core. The trunk is hollow. My neighbour, a wizened and stubborn old fool, has confirmed it. I've asked him repeatedly to cut it down, but he refuses. 'Can't go around cutting down trees,' he mutters. 'Not old trees like this. Too much history in them.' He points to the fresh leaves growing from its upper boughs, as if that's proof of its health. When the winter wind blows from the north-west, I cannot sleep. I fear the tree. How much does a medium-sized oak weigh? I try to calculate the direction of its fall. This is difficult, because the tree bows in my direction, the lower half of its trunk leaning slightly over the wall; then it bends back, inclining the other way. The bulk of its branches are on his side, tipping the centre of gravity back towards him; but the northwester would push it onto my side. The soil here is of poor quality, with terribly low compressive strength. If you push a steel rod in the ground to test it, as engineers do – as I have done in front of this neighbour – it goes right in, easily sinking 600 millimetres or more. How stable can the roots be in this soil? It is so precarious.

To make matters worse, he has allowed a bougainvillea to grow up the trunk and into the branches, so a matted, massive network of vegetation – virtually a hedge in the air – hangs from these branches. More accurately, it grows up into the branches; in any event, it must act as a sail; it inevitably must catch and amplify the force of the wind.

I sometimes try to estimate the height of the tree, and mentally convert that to horizontal distance. How far will it reach? It will obviously destroy my lounge and chimney, probably scatter the coals in my fireplace and start a fire. It could well bring down the roof and outer wall of the dining room adjacent as well. I do not think it will reach my garage and so destroy my car. But it is difficult to translate height to length without instruments of survey. I have a number of valuable paintings in my lounge. These are uninsured. How might one replace these? I often consider removing them, but surely the lounge is where one hangs valuable paintings? They are my only heritage – paintings by Boonzaaier, Stern, Jensch,

Maggie Laubser, Ignatius Marx – paintings that capture the country of my youth. I refuse to displace them. No doubt this is unwise. No doubt I will regret it one day.

One thing is certain: this oak tree will shatter the boundary wall. It will cut the electric fence. Once that is down, my first line of defence is gone. This presents no immediate danger, not in a storm. Criminals are as sensitive to bad weather as we are. However, it will take days to repair. In a bad storm, many trees go down in this city. It will take time to get it cut up and removed, the rubble cleaned up, the wall rebuilt. Only then can the fence be restored, only then. Fortunately, I have Worm.

*

I follow a certain protocol at night. I begin with the garage, checking each night on the electric fence charge energizer panel. It has five LEDs to indicate the level of charge. They are arranged vertically, light runs upwards, one after the other, arriving at the topmost with a snapping sound if all is well. Tonight, as usual, there is full charge. It is an excellent unit. If we have a power cut, there is a battery. It cannot provide power indefinitely, of course – not if the power cut runs for several hours – which concerns me. I will install a generator if these power cuts go on. Then I go through each window in the house, and each external door, making sure that it is secured. I do not neglect the windows of my study upstairs. People who believe that thieves only break in on the ground floor delude themselves. I leave open a single fanlight in the bedroom, as fresh air is so important when you sleep. I have burglar bars, but they are easily removed. These are flat strips of metal. All one has to do is adjust a large shifting spanner to the apposite thickness, brace the flat bar in its jaw, and twist. The burglar “bar” will snap soon enough. Of course, that will make a noise, and arouse my dog, but they are aware of this. Now they have battery powered metal-cutting torches that can remove the bars almost silently. All it takes is expertise. Whatever measures you take, they will bring the counter-measure to bear.

I set the external beams and activate all the window sensors. While I am awake, I bypass the infra-red motion sensors inside the house, though not those on the two patios. My perimeter is secure as I can make it. I would like to leave Worm outside the house, patrolling my garden, snaking his way into the dark shrubbery, into every corner. I have reason to believe his hearing is not particularly sharp, though like all dogs he must have a keen sense of smell. But I cannot do this. He barks and howls all night. It was my practice not long ago, but the neighbours complained, particularly the man with the oak tree. One rude, anonymous letter threatened to get the municipality on to Worm. I was not disturbed by this threat itself – the municipality is incapable of doing anything at all other than sending one wildly inaccurate accounts – but I like to keep the peace.

Now he patrols inside the house, which is acceptable, if not ideal. I would rather he dispatched intruders outside, before they come in reach. And even if he didn't – for example, if they sprayed him with some kind of disabling toxin, pepper spray or insecticide for example, or even shot him, none of which is uncommon, it would make a great cacophony, I can assure you. He would not die easily. Another problem is that my security beams are set to ignore any animal weighing less than forty kilograms. I don't know what Worm weighs, but sometimes he trips off the beams, and sometimes he doesn't. It

upset the neighbours again, many times, and there were complaints. They are stupid and short-sighted: there is no boundary between my security and theirs, despite the walls that divide our properties.

On completion of my first-level security protocol, I am free to read, or watch television. Sometimes I listen to music, or prowls the internet. I keep track of incidents in my area through the local Neighbourhood Watch website. It is an excellent service. They email Crime Incident Notifications every day – I call it a CIN – usually two or three, with a synopsis of the event and news, if any, of arrest. They circulate the number plates of suspicious vehicles, and even photographs of people who are suspected of being a danger to the area. These are police mugshots, which proves their danger.

*

I listen to the wind. To say that it howls, as people do, is inaccurate. Howling is a curve of sound that lifts and dies smoothly. This wind surges, mounts raggedly, drops off. It builds up its power unsteadily, using many instruments to steal or manufacture a voice, having none of its own: sheeting slapping under cement roof tiles, the thump of that poorly fitted door against its frame, creaking gazebo timbers, whining telephone cables, the choir of branches that sing as the gale scuds through them. Then rain drums on the skylight, a nerve-wracking percussion, growing high-pitched and more frantic still as hail bounces off. I believe I feel the night go pale at the climax. But none of this matters: my attention is endlessly drawn to that corner of the property above which the oak tree stands, fragile and yet monstrous.

Worm cannot sleep either. His nerves are frayed too. He paces about the house, around the sleeping quarters at least. They are blocked off from the remainder of the building by a steel security gate in the passage, so his area of patrol is confined to three rooms. His claws click on the passage tiles, robotic but anxious, and on the sprung floor of the empty bedroom beside mine. Then he comes back in and flops down beside my bed. He sleeps briefly, snoring and grunting through his flabby lips. A particularly sharp peal of thunder sets him on his feet again, howling in outrage. Howling again is inexact. It is a slobbering, manic voice that lifts at last into a bloodcurdling, high-pitched groan.

'For God's sake, shut up!' I hiss at the dog. A dying cornetto of sound, and then he subsides, slumping against the side of the mattress. Somehow – I do not know how – I sleep again. I dream of Worm torn open like a bloody exploded diagram, his organs and limbs detached and spread out. I struggle to read the total meaning of these hieroglyphs, to picture the animal from which they spring. The wind mounts up too, building up its batteries of spiritual violence. I dream this too, caught between waking and sleep. It grows louder and stronger, a blast sustained. Then there is a crumpling sound, not very loud, as if thousands of voices whisper in resignation, but never in unison. And one meaty percussion, which I feel even in my chest, that unites these voices and give them a single meaning. No doubt the tree has come down. But as my waking mind assembles itself, I realize that the alarm is silent. The electric fence is obviously intact. I am flooded by relief. Just to make sure that the system has not malfunctioned, I check the control pad at my bedroom door. There is no report of malfunction. I must have dreamt the tree collapsing, though this remains inevitable. It is only a matter of time.

*

The storm has blown over. The clouds are sullen and bruised, their edges stained iodine. As Worm and I turn the corner and pace swiftly down Avenue Provence, I realize that my dream was not entirely misplaced. A large section of a neighbouring oak tree has indeed fallen. It is not the whole tree, but it is far more substantial than a branch. I recognize the tree, of course - I walk past it every day. It is one of these oaks with a somewhat bifurcated trunk; or perhaps over the years, its lowest branch grew almost as broad across as the trunk itself, so that it is hard to distinguish branch from stem. In any event, a massive section of oak tree lies halfway across the road. The sight worries me deeply: not the fresh, almost pink inner wood exposed where it sheared off, or the sweaty odour of its sap. It is rather the depth and spread of inner rot exposed in the supine part, a clotted chocolate mould, dense with bacterial and insectoid life. And spreading along what would have been the inner arm of this bifurcated branch or trunk are giant funguses of some kind, a leathery brown mushroom that protrudes, like half a generous soup plate embedded in the rot, feeding off it. This is not strength, legendary or otherwise: it is corruption.

The damaged tree triggers something: I choke with anger. I want to drag that old fool next door by his collar round the corner to see this spectacle of ruin. I want to show him the inner life of oak trees, their weakness, their corruption, the bloated mass of their history. I want to prove to him that his tree, at last, will break open my property. But my dog has done as much sniffing and urinating on the corpse of the tree as he is going to, and now he tugs wildly at the leash, impatient to get on. I tug back, hard, trying to discipline him, but it makes no difference. We lurch round the tree and carry on, Worm exulting in his furious movement, and I merely furious.

By the time we reach Avenue Le Seuer and pace beside the green belt, things are easier. He has used some of his excess energy. I would love to let him go, let him hurtle down the green belt, but this is a dog one dare not unleash. As if to illustrate the point, a cocker spaniel in his prime comes trotting towards us. His body language is worrying. He is confident to the point of arrogance, blind to his danger. I cross the road, trying to avoid the dog, but he swerves in towards us and comes to a halt before Worm, challenging him, growling. I begin taking in the slack, aware that Worm does not indulge in threat behaviour. Then weariness overtakes me. I cannot explain this. It is so extreme that I feel queasy, and all the colours of the street, the greenery, become too rich, seem to float off their objects and fill the air. I let go the leash. There is a brief pause; Worm hurtles forward and sinks his teeth into the neck of the lesser animal. Perhaps he growls, I am not sure; his mouth is muffled by fur, by flesh and no doubt blood. He gives an occasional shake, tightening his grip each time. The spaniel is oddly silent, eyes stricken with disbelief. I think he is being throttled. Slowly, he collapses; Worm lowers him in stages, allowing him to keel over.

My arms are weak, the edges of my hands tingle. There is the cream and liver of Worm, and the copper fur of the spaniel. I've always thought - I realize it afresh - their ears are ridiculous. But life and motive return gradually. The spaniel appears to be dead. I cannot get Worm to release it. He growls if I try to pull him away. He does not try to eat his kill, merely to tighten his grip. To give his victim redundant death, I suppose. Or perhaps this moment is just the completion of his nature. Luckily, so far, no-one has seen us. If I can only detach Worm, make him open his jaws somehow, we will walk on, leaving the spaniel behind us. There will be no consequences. I am filled with a grim satisfaction, which I do not

really understand. It is a relief, however, a kind of pleasure. I stand holding Worm's leash, hoping he will soon let go.

Muzungu, by Namwali Serpell

Isabella was nine years old before she knew what white meant. White in the sense of being a thing, as opposed to not being a thing. It wasn't that Isa didn't know her parents were white, although with her mother, this was largely a matter of conjecture. A layer of thick dark hair kept Sibilla's face a mystery. And even though as she aged, this blanket of hair turned grey then silver then white, a definite movement toward translucence, Isa never could properly make out her mother's features. More distinct were Sibilla's legs, tufts of fur running like a mane down each thick shin, and her strange laugh, like large sheets of paper being ripped and crumpled. Isa's father, the Colonel, was white but it often seemed as if pink and grey were battling it out on his face. Especially when he drank.

Her parents had settled into life in Zambia the way most expats do. They drank a lot. Every weekend was another house party, that neverending expatriate house party that has been swatting mosquitoes and swimming in gin and quinine for more than a century. Sibilla floated around in a billowy Senegalese boubou, sending servants for refills and dropping in on every conversation, distributing laughter and ease amongst her guests. Purple-skinned peanuts had been soaked in salt water and roasted in a pan until they were grey; they cooled and shifted with a whispery sound in wooden bowls. There were Tropic beer bottles scattered around the veranda, marking the table and the concrete floor with their damp semi-circular hoof prints. Full or empty? Once the top is off a Tropic bottle, you can't tell because the amber glass is so dark. You have to lift it to check its weight. Cigars and tobacco pipes puffed their foul sweetness into the air. Darts and croquet balls went in loopy circles around their targets, loopier as the day wore on.

The Colonel sat in his permanent chair just beyond the shade of the veranda, dampening with gin the thatch protruding from his nostrils, occasionally snorting at some private or overheard joke. His skin was creased like trousers that had been worn too long. Budding from his arms were moles so large and detached they looked ready to tumble off and roll away into the night. And as though his wife's hairiness had become contagious, his ears had been taken over—the calyx whorl of each had sprouted a bouquet of whiskers. The Colonel liked to drink from the same glass the entire day, always his favorite glass, decorated with the red, white, and green hexagons of a football. As his drunkenness progressed, the glass got misty from being so close to his open mouth, then slimy as his saliva glands loosened, then muddy as dirt and sweat mixed on his hand. At the end of the evening, when Isa was sent to fetch her father's glass, she often found it beneath his chair under a swarm of giddy ants, the football spattered like it had been used for a rainy day match.

Isa had no siblings and when the other expatriate children were around she was frantic and listless in turns. Today, she began with frantic. Leaving the grownups outside propping their feet on wooden

stools and scratching at their sunburns, Isa marched three of the more hapless children inside the house and down the long corridor to her bedroom. There, she introduced them to her things. First to her favorite book, D'Aulaires' Book of Greek Myths. Second to the live, broken-winged bird she'd found in the driveway. Third, and finally, to Doll.

"And this is my doll. She comes from America. She has an Amurrican accent. Her name is Doll."

Bird and Doll lived together in an open cardboard box. Isabella stood next to the box with her chin lifted, her hand pointing down to them. Due to the scarcity of imported goods in Lusaka, Isa was allowed only one doll at a time, and this one had gone the way of all dolls: tangled-haired-patchy-bald. Forever smiling Doll, denied a more original name by her fastidious owner, sat with her legs extended, her right knee bent at an obtuse and alluring angle. From Doll's arched left foot a tiny plastic pink stiletto dangled. Her perforated rubber head tilted to one side. She seemed interested and pleasant. Bird, also on its way to bald, cowered as far away from Doll as possible, looking defeated. Isa poked at it with her finger. The bird skittered lopsidedly around the box until, cornered, it uttered a vague chirp. Alex and Stephie, prompted by Isabella, applauded this effort.

But Emma, the littlest, thinking that the doll rather than the bird had made the sound, burst into startled tears. She had to be soothed (by Stephie) and corrected (by Isa). Isa was annoyed. So, she sat them down in a row on her bed and taught them things that she knew. About fractions and about why Athena was better than Aphrodite. About the sun and how it wasn't moving, we were. But soon enough, Emma's knotted forehead and Alex's fidgeting began to drive Isa to distraction. Then came the inevitable tantrum, followed by a dark sullen lull. The other three children hastened from the room in a kind of daze. Isa sat next to the cardboard box and cried a little, alternately stroking Doll's smiling head and Bird's weary one.

When she'd tired of self-pity, Isa walked to the bathroom and carefully closed and locked the door. She took off her shoes and climbed onto the edge of the bathtub, which faced a wall about two feet away. Only by standing on the edge of the tub could she see herself in the mirror on the wall, which hung at adult height. She examined her grey eyes, closing each of them in turn to see how she looked when blinking. She checked her face for hair (an endless, inevitable paranoia) and with a cruel finger pushed the tip of her nose up. She felt it hung too close to her upper lip. Then Isa let herself fall into the mirror, her own face rushing toward her, her eyes expanding with fear and perspective. At the last minute, she reached out her hands and stopped herself. She stayed in this position for a moment, angled across the room, arms rigid, hands pressed against the mirror, nose centimeters from it. Then, bored of her face, she jumped down and explored the floor. She unraveled the last few squares of toilet paper from its roll and wrapped it around her neck. Then she opened the cardboard cylinder from the toilet paper roll into a loose brown curlicue—a bracelet. She discovered some of her mother's torn OB wrappers, which twisted at each end like candy wrappers. She stood them on their twists to make goblets for Doll.

Eventually drunken guests started lining up outside the bathroom, knocking at the door with tentative knuckles and then flat palms and then clenched fists. Isa emerged, head high and neck at full extension, her OB goblets balanced on an outstretched hand like a tray. Bejeweled with toilet paper, she strolled

past the line of full-bladdered guests. She gave Doll the goblets, modeled the jewelry for Bird. But Isa's heavily curtained bedroom was too cold to play in alone.

Reluctantly, she removed her makeshift jewelry—too childish for her mother to see—and rejoined the party outside. As she marched outside in her marigold dress, she glanced at the other children running around making pointless circles and meaningless noises in the garden. She avoided them, choosing instead to be pointedly polite to their parents, who were still sitting in a half-circle on the veranda, insulting each other. There was something excessive about her attentiveness as she shoved snack platters under the noses of perfectly satiated guests and refilled their mostly full beer glasses, tilting both bottle and glass to minimize the foam, just like the Colonel had taught her.

Finally her mother told her to sit down over by Ba Simon, the gardener. He was standing at the far end of the veranda, slapping varieties of dead animal onto the smoking brai. He reached down to pat Isa on the head but she ducked away from his hand, ignoring his eyes and his chuckle. The saccharine smell of the soap he used mingled with the smell of burnt meat.

Ba Simon was singing softly under his breath. He'd probably picked up some nasty song from the shabeen, Isa thought emphatically, repeating in her head a condemnation that she'd heard a thousand times from Ba Gertrude, the maid. There are three kinds of people in the world: people who unconsciously sing along when they hear someone else singing, people who remain respectfully or irritably silent, and people who start to sing something else. Isa began singing the Zambian national anthem. Stand and sing of Zambia, proud and free. Land of work and joy and unity. Ba Simon gave up on his quiet song, smiling down at Isa and shaking his head while he flipped steaks he wouldn't get to eat. Ashes from the brai drifted and spun like the children playing in the garden.

Isa watched the other children with a detached revulsion, her elbows on her knees, cheeks cradled in her hands, ashes melting imperceptibly onto the pale shins below the hem of her marigold dress. Stephie was sitting in a chair, depriving a grown-up of a seat, reading a book. Isa was scandalized. It was her mythology book! She stared at Stephie for a while and then decided to forgive her because her nose had a perfect slope. Unlike Winnifred, whose nose was enormous and freckled, almost as disgusting as the snot bubbling from Ahmed's little brown one. The two of them were trying to play croquet under the not-so-watchful eye of Aunt Kathy. Younger than most of the adults at the party, Aunt Kathy always spent the day chain-smoking and downing watery Pims cups and looking through everyone, endlessly making and unmaking some terribly important decision. Isa found her beautiful but looking at her for too long sometimes made her feel like there were too many things that she didn't know yet.

Emma, who had cried about Doll, was all smiles now, sitting cross-legged by herself and watching something, probably a ladybug, crawl along her hand. Emma was so small. Isa tried to remember being that small, but the weight of her own elbows on her knees made it hard to imagine. The ladybug was even smaller. What was it like to be that small? But anyway, how could Emma have been so afraid of Doll when she clearly wasn't afraid of insects, which everyone knew could bite and were much more disgusting? Isa had once retched at the sight of a stray cockroach in the sink but it had been a pretend retch because she'd heard at school that cockroaches were supposed to be disgusting. Horribly, Isa's

pretend retch had become real and had burned her throat and she'd felt ashamed at having been so promptly punished by her body for lying. But enough time had passed to transform the feeling of disgust at herself into disgust about small crawling creatures. She watched as Emma turned her cupped hand slowly like the Queen of England waving at everyone on the television. The ladybug spiraled down her wrist, seeking edges, finding curves. Emma giggled. Isa swallowed and looked away.

Far off in the corner of the garden, there was a huddle of boys crouching, playing with worms or cards or something. Isa watched them. Every once in a while, the four boys would stand up and move a little further away and then crouch down again, like they were following a trail. They were inching this way along the garden wall, toward where it broke off by the corner of the house. Around that corner was the guava tree Isa climbed every afternoon after school.

Isa got curious. And then she got suspicious. She stood up, absently brushing ashes from her dress instead of shaking them off and accidentally streaking the yellow with grey. She noticed and bit her lip and squeezed her left hand with her right, caught between her resolve to do good and her need to change her dress. But the adults were roaring with laughter and slumping with drunkenness. Whatever inappropriate behavior was taking place in the garden, it was up to her to fix. She started running across the garden, looking behind her to make sure no one followed. When she was close, she stopped herself and began stalking the boys, holding her breath.

She tiptoed right up to their backs and peered over their shoulders. At first she couldn't see much of anything, but then she realized that they were huddled around a thick-looking puddle. It was mostly clear but, as Jumani pointed out in a hushed whisper, there were spots of blood in it. Isa's eyes widened. Blood in her own garden? She winced a little and looked back at the party: Emma was interrupting Stephanie's quiet read; Winnifred's freckles were pooling into an orange stain in the middle of her forehead as she concentrated on the next croquet hoop; Ahmed, snot dripping dangerously close to his open mouth, stared back at Isa but he seemed sunstruck rather than curious.

She glared warningly at him and turned back around. The boys, oblivious to her presence, had disappeared around the corner. She followed and found them squatting at the foot of the guava tree, her guava tree, with its gently soughing leaves, its gently sloughing bark. She circled the mysterious puddle and walked toward them with purpose, abandoning all efforts at being sneaky. But the boys were too fascinated with whatever they saw to notice her. A whining and a rustling from under the tree drowned the sounds of her approach. Isa looked between their shoulders, her throat tight.

Lying on its side, surrounded by the four boys, was Ba Simon's dog. She was a ridgeback, named thus because of a tufted line down the back where the hairs that grew upward on either side of the spine confronted each other. At the bottom of this tiny mane, just above the tail, was a little cul-de-sac of a cowlick. Ba Simon had named the dog Cassava because of her color, though Isa thought Cassava's yellowish white fur was closer to the color of the ivory horn that her father had hung on the living room wall. But today her fur was crusted over with rust. Her belly, usually a grey suedish vest buttoned with black teats, was streaked dark red.

Isa's first thought was that these boys had poisoned Cassava and were now watching her die a slow miserable death under the guava tree. But then she saw that the side of Cassava's head was pivoting back and forth along the ground. Isa stepped to the left and saw an oblong mass quivering under the eager strokes of Cassava's long pink tongue. The thing was the color of ice at the top of milk bottles from the fridge, cloudy and clear. From the way it wobbled, it seemed like it was made of jelly, maybe more like the consistency of gravy that had been in the fridge too long. It was connected by a pink cord to a slimy greenish black lump.

The boys were whispering to each other and just then Jumani made to touch the lump with a stick. Isa jumped forward and said, "No!" in a hushed shout. Cassava whined a little and licked faster, her tail sweeping weakly in the dust. The boys turned to Isa but before she could say anything, the oblong thing jerked a little and Isa inhaled sharply. She pointed at it, her eyes and mouth wide open. The boys turned back to look. Where Cassava was insistently licking, there was a patch along the oily surface through which they could just glimpse a grey triangle. It was an ear. Isa took her place beside the boys, sitting in the dust, her precious marigold dress forgotten.

Perhaps out of fear, perhaps out of reverence, the boys didn't touch Cassava until she had burst the wobbling sac and licked away all of the clear fluid inside it. Occasionally there was a tobacco-tainted breeze from around the corner. Sometimes laughter would flare up, crackling down to Sibilla's chortle. But the grownups didn't come. At first the children whispered their speculations but soon they were all watching in silence, gasping only once when the outer skin finally burst, releasing a pool that crept slowly along the ground.

There it was, lying in a patch of damp dirt, trembling as Cassava's tongue grazed along its sticky body. It was the size of a rat; it was hairy and pink; its face was a skull with skin. Below its half-closed pink eyelids, the eyes were blue-black and seemed almost see-through. But that was just the sunlight dappling through the guava leaves and reflecting off their shiny surface; the children looked closer and saw the eyes were opaque and dead.

The boys became restless. Cassava was still licking but nothing was happening; the mystery was revealed, the thing was dead, what else was there to see? They got up and left, already knocking about for other ways to pass the long afternoon. Awed and resolved to maintain her dignity and her difference from the boys, Isa decided to stay, silently shaking her head when Jumani offered her a hand up. She was so absorbed in watching that hypnotic tongue rocking the corpse back and forth that she didn't notice the girl until she spoke.

"He et oh the bebbies? Eh-eh, he et them," the girl asked and answered.

Isa looked around and saw nothing. Laughter fell from the sky. Isa looked up into the tree and saw Ba Simon's daughter sitting in a wide crook, her little head hanging to one side as she smirked down upon the world. Chanda was about six or seven, close enough to Isa's age, but they weren't allowed to play together because of an unspoken agreement between Ba Simon and Sibilla. The two girls had been caught making mudpies together once when they were younger and had been so thoroughly scolded by their respective parents that even to look at each other felt like reaching a hand toward an open flame.

Isa's entrance into primary school had made their mutual avoidance easier, as had her innate preference for adult conversation and her recently acquired but deeply held feelings about the stained men's t-shirt that Chanda wore every day as a dress.

Isa glared at Chanda's laughing face.

"He ate what? Anyway, it's a her," she replied with hesitant indignation. She gathered some strength in her voice. "Obviously," she said. Chanda was expertly descending from the crook of the tree, flashing a pair of baggy but clean pink panties on the way down. Isa abruptly decided that Chanda had been secretly climbing the guava tree during school hours and that she had stolen the panties off the clothesline.

As she carefully lowered herself to the ground, Chanda said: "His stomach has been very row. And then pa yesterday? He was just cryingcrying the ho day. Manje ona, jast look: he et the bebbby."

Isa was horrified, then dubious. "How do you know?"

Chanda, now standing with her feet planted a little apart, her hands resting on her haunches in imitation of Ba Gertrude, nodded knowingly.

"Oh-oh? Jast watch." Her voice trembled nevertheless.

Cassava hadn't stopped licking the stillborn. Her tongue maintained its rhythm and her mouth appeared to have moved closer to the dead-eyed skull. Isa shuddered and scrambled to her feet. Suddenly, mustering all her courage, she stretched her leg out and with her bare foot kicked the dead puppy as hard as she could away from Cassava. It tumbled away into the dust, a guava leaf trailing from it like an extra tail. Cassava growled ominously.

"Did she do that yesterday too?" Isa demanded, reaching behind her for Chanda's hand. Chanda was silent. Cassava scudded her distended torso across the ground toward the puppy. Isa quickly glanced back at Chanda's face, which, in reflecting her own fear, terrified her even more. Cassava wheezed and growled at the same time. Her legs twitched.

"Let's go," Isa suggested breathlessly.

Their hands still clasped, the two girls ran away, Cassava baying behind them. Isa felt buoyed by her fear, like it had released something in her, and she let her legs run as fast as they wanted, relishing the pounding of her feet on the dusty path to the servants' quarters. It had been a long time since Isa had visited this concrete building at the back of the garden. When she had been a very little girl, like Emma, there had been an emergency when her father had drunk too much from his bleary glass. There hadn't been anyone among the expats to take care of her when the Colonel had tumbled to the ground, football stein clutched unbroken in his hand. So that night, while her mother veiled up and drove the Colonel to the hospital, Isa had gone with Ba Simon to his home for supper.

They'd eaten nshima and delele, the slimy okra dish that reminded her of the shimmery snail trails on the garden wall. Ba Simon had been as kind and as chatty as usual, but it had gotten cold and the servants' quarters had been very dark and cold. Isa had been grateful to hear the soft shuffle of her mother's hair on the floor when she came to fetch her that night.

Isa stopped running abruptly. Her left foot had stepped on a small but sharp rock. Her halt jolted Chanda, who still held her hand. With the pain in her foot, Isa suddenly felt an arrow of real fear piercing her exhilaration, deflating her back into her sulky self. The vegetable patch behind the servants' quarters was just visible beyond the avocado tree. She lifted her foot and examined the sole. It wasn't bleeding but there was a purple dot where the rock had dented it. As she put her foot down she remembered Cassava and turned to see how far they'd run. The garden was huge and encompassed a small maize field, which Isa could glimpse just beyond the mulberry trees with their slight branches and their stained roots. She really ought to go and tell mummy about the dog.

When she turned back to tell Chanda exactly that in her most grown-up voice, Isa found herself surrounded by three other small children. There was a little boy who looked just like Chanda and two slightly younger girls, toddlers, who looked just like each other. Isa stared at them. She'd never seen twins before. They stood with their hands clasped behind their back, their bellies sticking forward like they were pretending to be pregnant. Isa sometimes played this game in the bath herself, pushing her belly out as far as it could go until her breath ran out, but this did not seem to be what the little girls were doing. A picture of Cassava's low stomach from the previous week flashed through Isa's head.

One of the girls was probing around her mouth with her tongue and the other was making stuttering noises that Chanda apparently understood because she replied, pointing at Isa and shaking her head. The little boy was staring at Isa and smiling broadly. He stepped forward and held out his hand, making the same upward-turned tray that Isa had made for Doll's goblets. Isa shook her head and stepped back, unsure. Chanda implored, "Bwela. Come. Come." She pointed at the servants' quarters to show where Isa was meant to come. There was blue smoke and the sound of splashing water coming from around back. Isa relented.

They walked together toward the building, which was low to the ground and had no door, just a gap in the façade. There were also no windows, just square grids drilled into the concrete here and there for ventilation. As they approached, the little boy ran to the back shouting something. A young woman whom Isa had never seen before appeared from around the corner carrying a metal pot, her wrists and hands wet. She wore a green chitenge and an old white shirt, but Isa immediately noticed that she wasn't wearing a bra: you could see the shape of her breasts and the dark outline of her nipples. The woman smiled at Isa and waved and as she approached, said, "Muli bwanji?" Isa knew this greeting and replied in an automatic whisper, without smiling, "Bwino."

The woman shook Isa's hand and Isa noticed that she didn't bend at the knee or touch her right elbow with her left hand as blacks usually did with her. Halfway through the handshake, Isa suddenly realized that she herself was supposed to be deferential. She hurried to bend her knees but they seemed to be locked and she managed only a jerky wobble. The woman lifted her head, sniffing the air imperiously.

Then she looked at Chanda and demanded something. Chanda shrugged and ran up the three stairs into the servants' quarters, dribbling a forced giggle behind her. "Ach," the woman said and sucked her teeth. She walked back to the rear of the house to finish her washing. Halfway there she turned and gestured to Isa that she should follow Chanda into the quarters.

Isa gingerly made her way up the steps and into the velvet darkness beyond the doorway. The concrete floor wasn't dirty—it was polished to a slippery shine—but the dust on her bare feet rasped as she stepped inside. The place had a strong coppery smell of fried kapenta mixed with a tinge of woodsmoke. As Isa moved further in, the smell took on an acrid note that she dimly recognized as pee. It was so dark that she couldn't see anything except for the gold grid on the floor where the sunlight had squeezed through the ventilation grill. The fuzzy squares seemed more radiant for having been through that concrete sieve. Isa walked toward them. The patch of latticed light traveled up her body as she moved into it and eventually glowed on her stomach. It was like being in church or on Cairo Road. She held her hand in front of it and the light made her hand glow like the orange road lamps . . .

A chuckle from the corner interrupted her reverie. Isa looked around, her heart thudding, but she still couldn't see anything. She stood still and concentrated her eyes on the darkness, willing them to adapt.

She could just make out three figures sitting in the corner. There was a young woman, younger than the one outside, an old woman, and Chanda, who sat cross-legged, fiddling with an ancient cloth doll with a vaguely familiar shape. Isa worked out that it was the faceless ghost of the Doll who had preceded Doll; she felt a little shocked that it should be here and then even more shocked that she should have forgotten it to such a fate.

She walked toward the women, who were mumbling to each other. Only then did Isa notice the baby sitting on the young woman's lap. In fact—she moved closer—the child was sucking on the woman's breast. Isa knew about breastfeeding but she'd never seen it before. She couldn't tell whether the baby was a boy or a girl; it had short hair and was naked except for a cloth diaper. She wanted to turn away but she couldn't stop looking at the way the child's lips moved and the way the breast hung, oblong and pleated like a rotten pawpaw. The women continued to deliberate while Chanda, who was responsible for this intrusion, for this straying, sat staring at Isa, absently twisting the doll's dirty arm as though to detach it.

The child started crying: not the wailing of a newborn, but an intelligent sobbing. Isa stared at it and then realized that it was staring back. Its mother lifted it and began bouncing it up and down on her lap. After a moment, the old woman began laughing, a rattling laugh that devolved into coughing and then rose back up again to the heights of gratified amusement. She said something. Then the young woman began to laugh too and finally Chanda joined in with a high-pitched trill.

"What?" Isa asked. "What?" she demanded.

But they kept on laughing and then the woman stood up and held the baby in front of her. Isa stared at its sobbing face, distorted with wet concentric wrinkles like its nose was a dropped stone rippling a dark

pool. The child began to scream, wriggling its little body as its legs kicked. Was she supposed to take the child in her arms? The room echoed with laughter and wailing.

Isa shouted “What? What?” again.

The laughing woman kept shoving the child at Isa’s face in jerks until their noses suddenly touched.

“Muzungu,” the woman said.

As though at the flip of a switch, Isa began to cry. Her breath hitching on every corner of her young-girl chest, she turned and ran out of the room, tripping down the steps in her haste. As she ran past the mulberry trees, the beat of her feet released a flock of birds from their boughs. They fluttered past her and flickered above her bobbing head, their wings a jumble of parentheses writing themselves across the sky.

The night brought the breeze and the mosquitoes. The guests waned in number and spirit. When she’d had enough, Sibilla planted bristling kisses upon their cheeks and sent them to navigate the intricacies of Lusaka’s geography and their drunken dramas on their own. Colonel Corsale was still in the garden, dozing on his chair, one hairy hand holding his football glass clasped to his belly, the other dangling from the armrest, swaying like a hanging man. In the early days, Sibilla used to drag her husband to bed herself. But over the years, his boozing had swollen more than just his ankles. These days she told Ba Simon to do it.

“A-ta! I’m not carrying the cornuto to bed. The man’s earlobes are fat,” she’d grumble, leaving her husband to the night, the breeze, and the mosquitoes.

Isa wandered around the yard, yawning, picking up Tropic bottles of various weight under Ba Simon’s direction. She hadn’t told anyone about the dog yet, or about all the inhabitants of the servants’ quarters—did they realize how many people lived there?—or about the laughing. She felt tired and immensely old, old in a different way from the times she played teacher to the other children. Old like her father was old, a shaggy shambling old, an old where you’d lost the order of things and felt so sad that you simply had to embrace the loss, reassuring yourself with the lie that you hadn’t really wanted all that order to begin with.

Ba Simon was singing something spiritual, not in English, but Isa could barely muster the energy to gainsay his song with her own. She only got halfway through “Baby you can drive my car” before she collapsed on the grass beside her father’s chair. The wicker creaked in rhythm with his snoring. She put her fingers in his dangling hand and he muttered something.

“Papa?” she asked softly. “Dormendo?”

She only spoke Italian to him when she was very very tired. The international school she attended had compressed all her thoughts into English, but some of her feelings remained in the simple Italian her parents had used on her as a toddler.

“I went to the servants’ quarters,” she said.

The Colonel’s whiffling snore continued. Isa slapped a mosquito away from her shin. She stood up and walked over to Ba Simon, who was vigorously scrubbing the grill.

“What does muzungu mean?” she asked, sitting on her stool.

He kept humming for a second. “Where did you hear that word?” he asked.

Isa didn’t reply. Ba Simon hesitated. Then he made a face and said, “Ghost!” He waved his hands about. “Whoooo! Like that katooni you are always watching.” He smiled and moved closer to her with his hands still waving. “Caspah Caspah the shani-shani ghost,” he sang in the wrong key.

“Whoooo!” she giggled back at Ba Simon in spite of herself and they chatted about nothing for a few minutes. Ba Simon wasn’t very bright, she thought and then forgot. But Ba Simon noticed her thought even though she hadn’t said it and soon enough, he told her to go to bed. When she looked back from the doorway to the house, Ba Simon was just getting ready to carry her father to bed. His body was pitched awkwardly over the Colonel, his face contorted, his long stringy arms planted beneath the Colonel’s neck and knees. But when he saw Isa turn back, the strain on Ba Simon’s face dissolved instantly into a smile.

“Go,” he whispered, and she did.

Stickfighting Days, by Olufemi Terry

Thwack, Thwack, the two of them go at it like madmen, but the boys around them barely stir with excitement. They both use one stick and we find this swordy kind of stickfighting a bit crappy. Much better two on one or two on two – lots more skill involved and more likelihood of blood.

I turn to Lapy. “Let’s go off and practise somewhere. This is weak.” Lapy likes any stickfight, but almost always does what I say. His eyes linger ruefully on Paps and the other boy – don’t know his name but I see him a lot – and then he follows me.

I run almost full tilt into Markham and he gives me a grin, like we’re best pals and he’s been looking for me. Markham is my rival. We’ve beaten each other roughly the same number of times. Well, six to five in his favour, but one of my victories was a beauty, a flowing sequence of sticks that even I couldn’t follow before I smashed his nose in nicely. Almost broke it. The satisfaction of Markham’s watery-eyed submission that day makes me smile easily back at him.

“Wanna mix it up?” Markham’s eyes aren’t smiling any more; he won the last one and thinks he’s on a roll. I know better.

“We could,” I come back smoothly, “but it wouldn’t mean much.” I hold up Mormegil. I’ve told no one I’ve named my sticks though I’m not ashamed. I love Mormegil but I don’t think the others would understand. “I’ve only got one stick with me.” I cock my head to one side enquiringly at him. To be honest, I’ve been leaving Orcrist, my other, so I don’t have to get into any serious battles. Everyone knows I’m a two-stick man. But, I’m not ready to go up against Markham again just yet. Or any of the other top stickfighters. I’ve been trying some new moves. I feel close to a breakthrough in terms of technique. But it’s not quite there and until it is, I only carry Mormegil. Mormegil is as long as our regulations allow, a lovely willow poke, dark willow – that’s why I chose the name. It means black sword in Tolkien’s language. A sword with a mind of sorts. Turin wielded it, and it would cut anything, anyone eagerly. In the end it took his own life to avenge those he killed. My Mormegil has little knobs at the joint and one tip is nicely pointed – we’re not allowed to sharpen sticks – but this is natural. Mormegil is a killing machine, even though I’ve never done for anyone yet. But I will. I like Markham, but I’d like to kill him. I dream of doing it in front of a huge pack of boys. Clinically.

Markham’s henchman, Tich, is a one-stick man but he now holds up two. “You can use this one.” He throws it to me and I catch it easily, angry at being forced to fight. I force a deep gulp of air into my lungs. Fighting angry is bad! Only Simon ever did it effectively and where’s he now? I give Lapy a confident look, taking the measure of the unfamiliar stick as I do. It’s rubbery, too bendy but unlikely to break. It’s also too light. Much too light.

Markham’s not much one for warm-ups, he bounces from one toe to another like a boxer, rolls his head, then gestures to me that he’s ready. I already see a ring of boys forming around us, keen for a real spar and not that sword stuff.

He comes at me, neither quick nor slow, his arms wide. One of his sticks, an ash thing, is almost as good as Mormegil. He let me hold it once, before we were rivals. Stiff as hell and with a good weight, maybe an inch shorter than my beauty. I fend him off easily. Markham is good but he’s cautious. He knows I’ll not risk much with an unknown stick. I could keep him off with Mormegil but I feel I’ve got to try one of my new moves. No one’ll attach too much to this particular fight so I can afford to be bold. But I’m cunning too. That’s what got me to where I am. That and good reflexes.

I hold Mormegil in my left hand and the unfamiliar stick in my right, gripped in the middle – an outdated form I know, but very good for riposting against an over-eager opponent. Here he comes, Markham, his sticks a blur more from technique than power. In goes Mormegil to break that rhythm and then I bring my whippy stick in to catch the one in Markham’s left. It is too bendy to give me much opening but I am quick, and I know not to go for a body blow; the opportunity is small and he’d be able to retaliate. I bang Mormegil against the outside of his wrist, the bony bit, all the while twirling my right hand to keep him caught up. I try for his knuckles but he is no fool, Markham. He pulls back a step, wiping his forehead with the back of his hand. I watch him change his grip to match mine. There’s no sweat on me yet! He’s not angry enough to make a serious error but I feel in my gut, now’s the time to let him – all the boys –

see what I've been working on. I drop my right grip so that I'm holding both sticks sword like. I bang them together once, and advance on him. This is me at my most fearsome: my speed frightens opponents and no one knows exactly what I've got planned so it's now or never. Our sticks clatter against each other left to left, right to right and cross-wise. I use the bendy stick to hold his every thrust and I am glad that the whippiness absorbs much of the power. Markham settles into a pattern and at the last second, I drop one of my parries so that his stick whistles on, at the same time, lowering Mormegil so that my face is unprotected. Markham falls for it and doesn't try to halt his stroke, lunging at my face with gangs of force. Trust him to try and maim me – and this contest means nothing. Both his sticks are held high...so I fall to one knee with both of mine ready, my mind blotting out the murmured wave of anticipation from the crowd. I've thought long about this, long enough that there's no need to think now. It's not enough to go for the balls, the most vulnerable spot. No, a quick stickfighter can inflict double damage. I stab with Mormegil at his crotch, relishing its rigidity and the pain it will cause, yet pulling the stroke a little, for I am a boy also, I know what it means to strike full strength there. Better to kill someone with a temple blow than that. At the same time, I bang the bendy stick on the ball of his knee as hard as I can and roll.

I come to my feet expecting to see Markham in the toils of agony. He feigns total indifference at first, then allows us to see he's in some pain, but only from his knee. He hobbles backward a step, kicking it out to ease it. I wait, tasting the moment but puzzled as to why he isn't clutching his balls howling.

A deep voice rolls out, that of the judge: "Halt, boys!" Markham turns to him, a mixture of reluctance and relief on his face. I'm glad, and now every boy there turns toward the judge. He's not a stickfighter. Not even a boy, the judge. His real name is Salad but we use both. I don't know whether he gave us the art of stickfighting, but he knows the rules and enforces them when he's around. Sometimes he's unseen for days, but his word is binding always, and not because we're afraid. The judge has a fearsome appearance, he's all muscle, like carved wood, his arms bulge and this seems the reason for his shabby shirts – it isn't – and the strain of his thighs against his corduroys makes his hands seem normal, fragile even. But the judge, Salad, is sick. At times, he can't stop coughing and, somehow, it is known among us that the muscles have surrendered their strength though they are preserved in form. The judge's voice is what commands our respect, mostly. He is very fair too.

"What's in your pants, Markham?" the judge is quietly stern. He stands with his hands behind his back. Some of the boys are already taller than him. Markham knows he'll be forced to prove that he didn't cheat, so with little ado, he pulls out through the top of his pants a thick sponge, much squashed, and hands it over to Salad. I grin, but joy is short lived. The judge pronounces: "Markham is disqualified. Match annulled." Damn! I was certain he'd award me a victory, but now it's worked against me that the match wasn't a proper one. And everyone who matters has seen my new move too so the element of surprise, my tactical advantage, is lost. I don't waste time trying to appeal to the judge; he's very strict, and this is why we respect him. I walk away too quickly for anybody to speak to me, Lapy at my shoulder.

In the evening I practise my forms with Lapy, who'd be a good stickfighter if he could be bothered. He never says much, but I like him for this. He's no pushover, Lapy. If he tells me something I listen; he

knows what he's about. He's got the manner of a champion stickfighter: you can never tell what's on his mind and he never seems afraid. When he feels like being scarce, even I won't see him.

Finally, I light a cigarette butt I found and ask him the question that's burned on my lips for hours. "What d'you think of the judge's decision earlier?"

He stops to glance at me in the middle of a stick manoeuvre. "Pretty bog-standard. He cheated but the judge didn't want to give you a total victory. Psychologically that would have demoralized Markham too much." I watch him ponder whether to say more before he begins to weave his sticks once more. Sometimes, I think of giving up this stickfighting lark altogether. I'm thirteen and getting too big to spend hours practising my sticks. The smart boys spend their days poking and scouring the dump. There's a lot of valuable stuff here – it's not just home.

The judge surprises me early the next morning; he's been watching me from behind a car wreck. Usually I'm about early, practising my sticks, snooping on what others are doing. When I notice him, I wonder how he escaped my eye for so long; it's hard to conceal such a bulky body.

He says, his voice hoarse: "Well met, Raul." The judge – Salad, I want to call him as the older boys do – talks like this sometimes. He moves out from behind the wreck heavily, though I know just how agile he is.

"Salad," I say, continuing my single stick forms. I'm not exactly angry, but it won't hurt if he thinks I am. He likes me. I feel him waiting; his silence tells me something of his mood.

"My decision yesterday was based on what I felt was fair." I wait, hoping he'll blurt something. "I know you and Markham are rivals. I know how evenly matched you two are. I know you feel betrayed, you think I've given him the edge because he's seen your new moves." I'm so stunned by Salad's words that my stick hangs momentarily in the air. It's best to neither confirm nor deny, so I continue practising, keeping my face flat. My thoughts race. I now feel sheepish, angry, afraid and resentful of the judge all at once so I push these feelings away. My concentration is so strong that when I stop to breathe a few minutes later, Salad is no longer there. At first I'm glad, and not just because my chest is heaving. But then it hits me that he wanted to tell me something and then didn't. I am hurt rather than curious. Even if it is just more stories – it is Salad after all who tells us about Mormegil, Turin and Beren – he should have said his piece.

I practise with Lapy much of that day, in a remote bit of the dump. He's a good partner, cagey. I use my new moves a couple of times but with no success. By the evening our feet blister from acid waste, and I feel like crap. My sadness has nothing to do with fighting sticks.

I feel no better the next day and decide perhaps what I need is not more practice but to trade blows with someone. I go in search of Markham but before I find him, I come upon a group formed up in a circle around two boys, fifteen-year-olds. I know one of them, Malick; he's a brute, but I've never seen the other. They're going at it. Malick uses a lone stick, swings it like a club although it's regulation thickness. His fights are popular because he's sly, savage. We've seen the judge pull him off people a

time or two. Malick is actually not so brutish, in my opinion. I think he plays it up because he's not liked and wants to disgust us even more. The other boy uses two sticks and is very good. He blends power and finesse very well; he's strong on both hands. I wonder if he's from the dump. Malick will lose and so I stay to watch, even though I'm eager to fight this morning. His opponent seems popular, the crowd murmur his name, Peja, in a way that I detest, despite his skill. When he disarms Malick a little later, it's done without viciousness so that Malick stands empty-handed but unhurt. His eyes roll wildly in his head as he considers his options. I feel sure Malick is on the point of throwing himself at Peja to grapple him to the ground but he doesn't. The fight is over.

Before anyone can move off, Salad pushes another boy forward by the shoulders, into the circle, and points to me. The judge only occasionally proposes fights in this way – it's not the role of a judge, really, is it? But when he does, there's excitement. This boy is a little shorter than me, sandy-haired, compact. His face is bland and I know with a jolt in my belly that he'll be good, probably better than Markham. Salad has put me on the spot but happily I'm spoiling for a fight. I step forward with a readiness that's very like a thrill for blood. I don't know him, I may never see him again but I want badly to hurt him in unusual ways with my sticks. Break his wrist or knock out his front teeth. Around us, as we prepare, lots of younger boys, tens and elevens. A trio of Malick's friends hang about too.

We both take time to limber up. For me it's a chance to study my opponent. With a signal, the judge gets us going. Sandy hair comes right in, quick as mercury and hits my knuckles, surprisingly hard. He does not dance back and we spar up close so my longer reach is a disadvantage. He manages to catch my other knuckles. He's done something to his sticks, this one; they are somehow very hard. Being hit twice so quickly calms me. I'm sweating already and my mind is blank save for a desire to humble this boy. His quickness is at least equal to mine, I think, without dismay. I don't know that he'll tire before me either; my stomach is a pit and my vision blurs round the edges. I should've eaten something but that's not a thought for the present. The next time he launches an attack I go back at him equally hard. His right hand is a little weaker, his ripostes less certain on that side, so I force him to retreat with Orcrist, trying to double his wrist back on itself. He sidles away but I follow, banging his elbow. He tries to reply and succeeds in getting his right hand free. The crowd has been quiet and as we take a moment to breathe, it feels like we all take in air together. This time when he closes with me, Mormegil keeps him away, but I cannot do this for long and I only want him to think I'm tired. He is cautious too – his elbow is likely giving him pain and he teases me with his left hand, batting at Mormegil. I launch myself at him once more, feeling like I did against Markham, that it is now or never. I'm not sure what I'll do but I feel confident enough to respond to anything. He's quick as lightning and rash – going for the eyes when he could have thumped my knuckles again. But he's in close once more and we trade blow and parry until my arms feel they might fall from my shoulders and my breathing fills my ears. I force him to aim a blow at my ribs, leaving my left side open, knowing he'll take the opening. It stings – I feel the skin redden almost instantly – and I drop to one knee, reeling a little bit. He pauses – he lacks the killer instinct – one stick above his shoulder; the other is pointed at me to ward off any blow that may come. But my stroke is aimed once again at the knee, too low for his block, and I lunge rather than swing, to jab him full on the ball of his kneecap, twisting Orcrist – not Mormegil – to cause more pain. He

stumbles back, almost dropping a stick as he hops to clasp his injured knee. Mormegil comes up as I shoot up off my own knee like it's a launch pad though it hurts like hell to do that. I pull my stroke at the last second, grudgingly.

There's something in his eyes – he's not afraid – but I see recognition beyond fear – and acceptance of what I'm about to do, of what I am. Killer. I pull the blow, or push it rather so I miss his temple – the thought flashes through me, through my entire body like a lash, that I don't know this boy and can't kill him. Mormegil lacerates his ear instead. And having changed the stroke, I drop my stick. My knuckles sear again as if in sympathy with him. And I breathe once more, like a bellows, exhausted and desperate suddenly to sit. Sandy hair still clutches his knee, ignoring his torn ear. He's on the ground now in agony and my sorrow is complete. Salad eyes me gravely but I can't abide his eyes on mine; there's only shame in this win. It takes all my willpower to not leave Orcrist and Mormegil as I walk off. Part of me notices – and is bitter – that no one chooses to follow me, to ask what's wrong.

I feel shunned but the dump is actually a big place and boys here have enough of a struggle to survive not to worry over someone feeling down. I cannot find Lapy and even the lazy search of a day does not turn him up. Hunger attacks my insides suddenly and I hunt for food for hours. I even leave the dump to see what can be scavenged outside. I take Mormegil, tucked under my clothes – for protection. The fearful looks, the clutched purses of the outside are somehow welcome, an escape from loneliness. At least I'm noticed. People on the outside are scared of me but not because I fight sticks. I'm an urchin, a snot-faced, scuffed boy in rags that they want to pity but can't. I stuff my head with stale old chicken and bacon cadged from a greasy restaurant and go back to the dump, hating and enjoying the nervous looks.

When I can't take any more loneliness, I decide to go and find him, the one I nearly killed. That's how I think of him, and I can't shut him out of my thoughts. I'm resolved to go and see how he is. To explain myself. Perhaps to even say sorry, even though I don't know what for. The thing is, I don't know where he stays, perhaps he's not even a dump kid. I ask boys I know and even boys I don't, describing him, hoping they saw the fight. I get a jumble of answers; short sandy-haired boys are a dime a dozen anywhere, I suppose. I give up, then bump into him as I go in search of Lapy once more, just to keep active. He's practising with some mates. They stop as I draw near. He gives me an almost friendly nod, though I notice his eyes are guarded, like when a madman's in the room. Talking is an effort, my tongue feels thick and ashy, and I have to ask him for a word twice before he understands. We go some way away and he makes a show of dropping his sticks, to impress his friends, I suspect. I conceal my smile.

I say it all at once, afraid to stop even for breath: "Look, I don't even know your name, and I'm not sure this will come out the right way, but I just wanted to say sorry. It was a good fight, you're a good fighter. I know what I did wasn't technically illegal, but I feel an apology is needed." I wrestle down the urge to go on. Laconic Lapy. I must be like him. Like the Spartans too. Sandy hair thrusts his hand at me like we've just played tennis or some other cruddy gentlemanly sport. There are no bruises on him; the ear looks whole. For an instant I think I imagined the whole thing.

“Tuor,” he introduces himself. I smile again but not with relief, with real amusement. He’s no Tuor. Salad’s stories! “It was even steven,” he continues. “A good fight like you said, and I would’ve done the same in your place.” And abruptly as that there’s nothing left to say for either of us. I try to give him a smile that’s not so grateful, friendlier, before I swivel and make off. The clacking of sticks starts up again immediately and I feel less guilty.

Days pass before I pick up my sticks again. When I do, I have a strange sense that it’s not me that swings Mormegil or stabs with Orcrist, but some unseen beast that slips into me. The feeling leaves me quite numb. I try to explain it to Lapy but he looks at me as if I’ve lost my marbles. He’s not afraid to practise with me though, our friendship is the same. I neither avoid Markham nor seek him out but he’s in my thoughts. Concede to Markham, give up this whole racket, my ambitions as a stickfighter, pass Mormegil on to some eight-year-old coming up, and do something less deadly, less emotionally sapping. That’s what part of me feels. I too could lose an eye, or be killed.

It rains for what feels like a week and the dump is in wretched mood. There’s nothing to do all day but take shelter. I experience strange exhilarations, tire myself with mad quests that keep me out in the rain. Lapy doesn’t try to settle me down; he’s known me too long. The morning of the third day, I wake shivering, still muddy and wet from the evening before, and with both sticks clenched in my left fist like a lifeline. Lapy gives me water, tries to swaddle me but I’m already too hot. I’m also too weak to push off the stinking kerosene-smelling blanket which suffocates me. I wake from dreams in which the sandy-haired Tuor sets me alight with a burning stick. Other boys I have fought look on, bored rather than excited.

When I wake properly, the sun peers thinly through high clouds. I smell smoke somewhere not far off but the sight and warmth of the sun is rousing enough. Lapy has left me, likely in disgust at my screams and moans. I’m surprised at how steady I feel on my feet. Awake, I remember that Salad was also in my fever dreams and I’m suddenly dying to know what he wanted to tell me when he came to watch me practise. But first I wander aimlessly, hoping for water and perhaps a bite. I know where I can sometimes get food from someone. Not a stickfighter, but he’s so good at scavenging he doesn’t care if we steal from him. Sometimes.

I’m ravenous and tear at some bread so fresh it must be from yesterday, and not crust either. I’ve seen virtually no one but a radio is playing nearby, a warbly song I recognize but can’t put a name to. I sit next to the scavenger’s sleeping den long after I’ve wolfed his food, somehow more wobbly from having eaten. I stand, and there he is. Tauzin – I think, watching me smugly. He’s a lanky, knobbly thing, all bony knees and thrust-out elbows, not at all tough so I don’t expect him to try anything.

He speaks before I can thank him. “That bread was poisoned. I left it as bait for whoever’s been stealing my stuff. Rat poison,” he adds unnecessarily. “Bet you didn’t know I was a master poisoner. Had no idea it was you, but I don’t care really. You might not even die.” He’s talking too much, yabbering on as though we’re in a classroom somewhere, or mates, and what he says really matters. I stick my hand down my craw, squeezing my fingers into a point and forcing them as hard as I can past my gullet. He stops, stunned, and I aim the flood of mush that comes spurting out at him even though he’s not stupid,

he stopped and stood about ten feet away. A second smaller gush of puke rises, and, now I'm sure it's all out. I smile.

"Too late," he tells me, but he's no longer so cool, and not just because I took him by surprise emptying my stomach. No, he's shitless now 'cause I'm advancing on him, both sticks suddenly, magically, in my left hand, a trick I've practised loads to get really good at. He backs up a couple of steps, shuffling as though he'll wet himself if he lifts his feet.

"The poison's already working on your system."

"I've plenty of time to kill you though." I don't mean the words; I just want to scare him. I've no idea if he's actually poisoned me, but as I utter the threat, I know with certainty I'll carry it through. No one's around and this sniveling rat of a poisoner doesn't deserve such a quick end as he'll get. If I am poisoned, I'll be too weak later, too doubled-over in pain to kill him.

It's done almost quicker than thought. He turns to run but his long legs are more hindrance than use and I trip him easily, kicking one foot against the other. He falls like a rag doll, making no effort to keep on his feet, and it's contempt at this weakness that sets my arm in motion. Standing bent over him, I swing the two sticks in my left hand easily, a bit like a golfer, I think, and hard enough that wind whistles through the tiny space between Orcrist and Mormegil. The strike is precise enough to kill; I feel the rubbery give of his temple beneath the tip of my sticks. But once more shame comes on me, so suddenly I taste it mingling with the acid of vomit. I walk away without checking that he's dead. I feel weak again, the return of a fever.

A strange wind comes up that doesn't stir the bushes but pulls at my shorts, keens to me like a dead baby. I stand, clutching my head, afraid I'll fall if I try to walk. The dump suddenly doesn't seem empty after all. Boys are skulking all about, may even have seen me kill Tazuin, and they're just waiting for the right moment to ambush me. I would take one or two of them with me, and the certainty steadies me slightly. After some minutes, I begin walking again, with purpose. To find someone who never moves from his spot.

Aias is awake but looks like he's about to die; his eyes are gummy and he holds as ever the tell-tale plastic bottle in his dainty fingers. Aias looks like shit but his smile is that of a boy who loves the world. He used to be one of the very best stickfighters. One of only two legends we have in the dump. There are almost as many stories about him as about Turin. A champion with two sticks or with a single one. You were lucky if Aias fought you with a single stick; very good if he used two. It was before my time, though Aias cannot be older than seventeen. His smile is jolly, but only if you don't look too closely. He has all his teeth but they are very nearly black, the gums too.

"Aias," I whisper. It seems rude to speak normally around him, to disturb the sleepy peace of glue life. "Aias. Got any glue?" It takes him an aeon to look at me, to turn one muddy and one clear eye towards me. He's got the trembles. I wish I had food to offer him. The hand he extends shakes uncontrollably. He's never selfish with his glue. Involuntarily, I wipe the bottle mouth with my shirt, suck on it hard. There's not much left, barely any in fact. I suck a minute, taking small breaths through my nose and

watching Aias turn his head as though it's buried in a slurry of mud. I feel a mixture of pity and stomping contempt before the warmth invades my mouth and throat. It would be easy to kill him, end his half-life, easier even than with Tauzin. I wouldn't even have to use my sticks, he's like a twig. One wrench would snap his neck. Up close his happy smile seems more a grin of pain. Glue's supposed to be a happy drug. It warms you, it's true, it's a help on cold nights. But it makes me think of blood. I get a bit twitchy on glue, my mind's full of gore. The longer you do it, the more it kills the brain, rots it, or those bits of the brain that make you fight. I suck so hard I get a headache with my warm feeling. I hand the bottle back to him, trying not to gag at his stink. His feet are dotted with yellow shit specks. I walk away with a muzzy head, concentrating on putting one foot in front of the other and clutching at the warmth spreading all the way to my fingertips. It feels like a layer on my skin and yet it's gotten beneath the surface at the same time, sending rays into my bones.

I almost bump heads with Markham. He steps back a pace as if to get a good look, says "you have your sticks, good. Salad thinks we should do a rematch." I think my answering nod is calm but he has a bad habit of catching me off guard. He spins and walks ahead. I follow, his two friends moving in to flank me so it feels like I have an honour guard. I clutch my sticks in anticipation. Markham's own sticks hang from the loops of his shorts; he looks ridiculous.

If anything, I start to feel warmer as I walk. When we find Salad my headache is gone. I'm swollen with energy, and even more eager than usual. More boys draw up. Salad has a few words with us, in a stern tone. He's tireder than ever, and coughs hoarsely. His voice is normal and his muscles have the same rubbery hard look they always do. For the first time I notice he and I are almost the same height. His words bleed out of his mouth, I think because of the glue, and I hear nothing of what he says. I need to release the force building inside me. I can't let it escape before I finish Markham, and I know I will. Snarls echo in my head. Markham will never again challenge me.

I don't limber up; Markham eyes me, perhaps taking note of my confidence. I stand still to avoid wasting the killing essence in me; I don't want it to escape.

So that when Salad gives the signal I go for Markham harder, I think, than I've ever gone for anyone. He's ready though and our sticks swirl faster and more intricately than I've seen in some time. A trick of the glue makes them catch alight. My limbs are weightless and Mormegil, like its namesake, is keen to drink. No wrist blows, no knuckle raps. I go for his throat and he aims for my head. He'll tire before my supercharged arms so I swing and swing, using a good deal of my strength in each stroke. He sweats, I am dry and I watch his eyes dart about trying to follow my sticks.

He doesn't give ground, I admire that. I'm pressed up almost against him and not once does he hunt for space. But I have cunning too, and when the glue in my veins gives me the signal, I switch tactics. I swing with Orcrist a second too slowly, and he rises to the bait. His parry becomes harder, faster, he drives at my neck. I slip the blow, stepping back and aside, tilting my head ever so slightly so that it misses me. He tries to recover – he's almost as quick as I am – but there's time for me to smash the top of his earlobe, to parry his own return stroke and aim Mormegil's tip at his throat. Let the beast slake its thirst. He dives backward to escape, almost as though he's been hit. He thinks I'll give him time to regain his

footing, but I don't. Instead I'm on him, and on his back he tries to sweep my leg with his foot just as I stab again, for his groin. Mormegil catches the inside of his thigh – the twisty fucker – and before I can strike again, with perfect accuracy this time, Salad's arm is in front of me, a barrier of muscle the size of my head. "Fight over," he announces, his voice coming from a long way off. "Raul wins." My skin tingles with the remains of the glue's warmth. My arms, my body still hum with unused force. I close my eyes a second for calm but I cannot turn away. What happens must. I start to swing before my eyes open, I feel bold, so ready. The judge blocks with his forearm, as if he expects this. It must sting like hell even wrapped in muscle like that. His eyes are on mine without expression but the watching boys release a gasp of shock. I smile. They do not know it but I'm freeing them from the tyranny of authority. My next blow follows so hard on the heels of the first that Salad cannot possibly counter, and he doesn't. To his credit he only falls to one knee; I expected a hit on the temple would end him. Stunned, he's at the right height now for me to use maximum power and I hit him again cleanly across the nose. He keels forward not even putting out his hands to catch himself. I give him a chance to roll onto his back, but before I can pick my next spot, another blow lands. Markham's. He hits the judge's knee, a downward chop like an axe stroke, and then pokes at his crotch with the other stick. A spasm crosses Salad's face, the first one. He pulls himself into a ball, his knees up as I stab for his eyes. Markham is circling, looking for an opening, and it's like we're the only two alive in that place, the other boys are all frozen, so still as to be almost empty shells. Markham thrusts into his other eye and Salad's face splashes blood. He still makes no sound.

I'd dreamed of a killing blow, the single cut that cleanly ends life, but I've done that already, with Tauzin earlier. It was sweet. But now's not the time for precision. I swing and thrust, mindlessly raining blows, and Markham is with me, shares my aim for we club at the judge's head with no thought for accuracy. Even when he no longer moves, Markham and I swing for some minutes. Then I stop.
