

TRIPTYCH

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“Truth and Knowledge” makes brief use of the Horace B. Samuel translation of Friedrich Nietzsche's *Zur Genealogie der Moral* (Dover Publications, 1913; 2003)

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*For Susan Mukiri and Wanjia Munene Mbitiru
and in memory of
Margaret Mwobobia (1929-2017)*

THE PURE AND GLORIOUS

[1] Agnes is the older one Gloria ten years younger or near that. Both will be older but in '93 they are young. Agnes pretty, Gloria beautiful. Agnes works for hers. Beauty Gloria's is. Yes. But like most girls who are nearly pretty I know that pretty is a trick. A trick they don't share the pretty ones forgetting the beautiful have no tricks. They have beauty, which has no secrets. Yet in the end Gloria. Gloria I like her because because. And the hope she would share what no one else can. She never says. No I want her to never say but what she says I say I don't want. But in that darkness total of nights it rains so hard power goes and there is only darkest darkness someone's breath blind over your face. One evening I'm from tuition and they are where we chill this narrow between Court A and Court B with concrete for a sewage line extension never begun. Gloria I see first. Tall and light in gloam to where I wonder who's the jungu, but closer her browner milk tea is brighter. Extensions black and gold she has in a bun. Narrow face,

flat nose, high cheeks and that mouth. Her nose has empty starhole. Gold dots her ears. Brown T-shirt with stripes tight under half-coat. She and Flora and Christine and Violet (and Brenda) are seated. Her legs long lightlight model legs never seen away from TV under black skirt are longer. She is sideways, arms a divider, spaced from the other girls crushed together like they've come to a photo shoot and been told kaeni palé mungojé. All sudden I feel so a beggar asking I attend photo shoot. I greet. No her hand out new girl design. Looks straight, smiles. At least it looks like I don't know. Is it in fun or shyness or but. Look. No. Sasa? Fit. I'm called Gloria. You? Gail. *Gayle?* Gail. Deeper voice. If she's a smoker what. Eyes normal. Teeth same. I don't chat new girls before introduction. Respect. But this one. How the girls watch us. Her black nail movie fingers polish my heart to schoolgirl terror higher in that near dark. See you guys. Home. I change out of uniform. Mum and daddy are at it. *[It seems to me that they fought whenever there was an outage, but this can't be right with reference to '93, because blackouts were not yet as common. Even so, the point stands: they argued, whether to allay their fear or quicken it, I can't say. Darkness breeds darkness.]* When things don't go her way, mum uses Sarah to frustrate dad who likes the person he is arguing with to be in front, not brandishing implements behind him cooking allegedly. No hiding, no avail. My father uses me to pretend he's not frustrated. The dark a cave's. A candle. You get used yes but can you forget to be frightened? Candlelit supper of Sarah's rice mum's weeping mboga and githeri meatless. To my stomach stone these are. I've left girls in gossip couldn't they have waited till the new girl went or they want to show off obvious coz that's how last time with what was she called the fat one that's how us we enjoyed we

backbit that chick we made her she cried I heard she begged to move maybe but wah did she Kaare you are where. You're where? Your mother asked you. Present. Gloria and palaver for three of us, live silent. Of pain. Brothers, sisters were a dream I used. Supper then bed. Her rubber shoes. Not photo-shoot material she wore so well you din't realize. I'm up early and ugly the next day. Dressing, I see Gloria with milk and bread open the gate to Agnes's. Agnes is our next-door neighbour. Someone told me she's a mkubwa in the army. This is a lie. Her husband was the big man, a colonel or something like that. They were together eight years before he died and left her the house. I remember his relatives came to throw her out. A gang of them, men and women, the women fat the men having discovered there is something called gym the week before. It was a Sunday morning. Very early I heard voices. Then I looked from my window and saw that gang, saw her talking to them, fully dressed at seven. She wasn't scared. Then a group of men got out of a Peugeot parked down the street and walked up to the gate. They were dressed like cops as in kabutis and avunjas but I knew these were prison askari. I got scared—for Agnes. I knew they were not there to get her but, I din't know. So I scared. Then I saw her husband's relatives when they saw the askari. They had come to show she was nothing. They called her names. They said there was no marriage how now and she had not given mkubwa kids. That even if government *yenu* would say there was, kikwao that meant nothing. But she was ready. If you din't know what was happening you would think those people—askari, Agnes and her husband's relatives, were having a kamukunji. They talked, these relatives. Agnes with her hands behind her would listen then maybe say one or two things. Or nothing. Then they would talk, looking over their

shoulders, voices lower and lower until you could not hear them. Agnes's level stay was such that the men gave up. The women refused to believe. The men scared made refusing harder and at the end as they were being led away these ladies were shouting their disbelief for the whole Sabbath to hear. When they were gone Agnes opened for the askari, smilers all. She told them to go in for tea, their mother. Then she looked up at me.

[2] No. After that morning I don't speak to Gloria until several days later maybe. Or a week? End terms are a blur. The misery has ended and the fun is like when you jump off the diving board and you are high and free and know in your bones that this will go on forever but everything's quick and gravity has you it never let go to begin with. The good with holidays is friends back everyone with stories to spend and time. Togetherness will never be overrated. But so the fact only some of my friends live in the same estate I don't like to think of because then you pain with that other party the life that's really yours not this passing time that will not pass. Then here is this Gloria, the type to make you pay attention to your thinking, to your want not to think. Those five days or two weeks I see Agnes because even though her hours are regular she has been appearing midday. Her husband's isuzu is still in the street, her new pajero owns the carport. When my mother asks what she a young woman plans to do with these big veeyakös she laughs. I'm even to sell Mzee's because situmii but I find I'm not able. I watch my mother struggle to stay annoyed because for once she's gotten a real answer from under this younger woman's neighborly what have you. But Agnes likes mum, who sees her teeth more than anyone. They chat late in the afternoon outside the gate or through the brickwork and in the

morning if both happen to be leaving for work at the same time. Longer talks at first but then not as much. I do not understand that Gloria's arrival is why. That she has changed their routine. The firstfirst days after closing I don't leave the house except for the shop. Three or so days later I resurrect to deliver a package to my cousin Doris who's going to shags. Mum wants Doris to take clothes she (mum) has bought her eldest sister. The clothes are nicer than what mum tends to wear. [*Years later I saw those clothes on aunt Zipporah's corpse and heard mum explain that my aunt had requested she buy clothes so smart one can be buried in them.*] There on Accra Road I'm sure I see Gloria. I walk towards her but she's too far. Back home I meet Christine and Violet. They are from Christine's boyfriend's house. They don't say that's where they are from but I know coz Christine's boyfriend Ndirangu and I we go to the same school. I've heard that useless creature boast about how he's dinyaed her. This word *this word* is why at first I never want anything to do with sex. Because if for you sex is disgusting then every time people talk sex you have to hear them use dinya instead it's even more disgusting just the sound rubs me ugly. And so to know Christine has been dinywad is to know she's been spoiled even though no one has ever told me that's what happened or explained how. And so I'm sad and how can you allow yourself to be done like that. But she's fine obviously because she's here back from the guy who has dinyaed her and told his friends about it and probably dinyaed her severally Violet waiting at the shop with a soda or maybe she was brought for another guy *wa kukadinya pia ndio kasiachwe nyuma*. Both are so cheshire. They ask you're from where? I tell them. And you guys? They look at each other. Before Violet can open her mouth Christine blurts CU. During the week? Yeah

we're in choir. We make plans to meet later. I had wanted to do a lap with them but they're too much I can't spend another second with. I take a bath as soon as I land home. Eat lunch and call Sarah. She's not home. I've been to her place a few times. She lives in Milimani with her two older sisters. Their lives are weird and for me visiting a paradise. They do what they want when they want. Their father had money. After he died his wife remarried, but the children are older and Sarah said he made sure they had their own property separate. I've never seen the mother, though once I heard the oldest sister on the phone with her. The girls never forgave their mother for remarrying. I'm so sure they would enter that woman into a convent if they could. So anyway they have money and do what people with money do. I love going there but something happened, I don't know what, and so I'm not able to visit as often. On one of these visits her sister saying in my presence that Sarah shouldn't be so quick to invite people who don't invite her or can't afford to it is Gomorrah's fire. I go ask mum if Sarah can visit. My mother immediately no. Why? I've said no. I almost asked if we did not have the money but knew my mother would not just beat she would tandika me whether or not I had the right. And so I wondered if Sarah's sister knew what she was talking about. Then Sarah told me in a not by the way by the way that she might shift schools. Still we talk. Not much but we talk. I hope she'll agree to visit to hell with mum the phone rings and rings but sí there's always someone in the apartment and we spoke before school closed so. Sadly I replace the receiver and go out. The estate is too quiet. Defeated, I walk back carrying boredom and solar. How now surely, as in I'm meant for more, for a life far away from being dinywad and two guys I don't know hard at draughts who fail even to glance at greatness. I see a dog

skinny in the grass, shaking. Just as I get to our gate I hear the lock on the next gate being handled, assume that's Agnes back to work but mid-assuming the gate is swung open. Gloria's taking the key from the padlock, no pajero behind. She's in tumbo cut, shorts, braided hair down. Wait is it her? First there's so much leg, flattest stomach, her tumbo cut is at least two inches shorter than. Were her shoulders wide? She draws the gate back, my attention square with hers. It's her, not sister I haven't met. Sasa. Fit. You're from? Just walking. I'm heading to the shops. She steps out, pulls the gate behind her. I watch. When she walks past the spell breaks, but in the wrong direction. I start for our gate, and over my shoulder hear her ask we're going or? So we go. No *I* go. She strides. Strong graceful steps you want. The draughtsmen notice. The dog's behind us. The shops are butchery, pub, duka, chips shop and duka. Bare wall at the end is where Benson, who's watchman somewhere, is our cobbler come evening. We pass the chips shop. My undertongue pains with what I have not eaten. At the duka Gloria buys matches and chats with Silas like she's known him for years. I'm embarrassed for her. Silas fails my embarrassment. A boy I don't know comes up beside us for chibaz. Gloria catches me. You want? My heart the traitor knocks all blood into my face. My no is too quick. *Sa-wa*, says Gloria, closing the trap. She goes and chats with the chips lady, Emma, another old friend, buys a sausage. Her back to Emma and indignant ngwe ngwe Gloria squats and holds the sausage out for the dog, whom I'd forgotten and realize is tit-swinging bitch. This brown slink wiggles her tail and looks away as in today's the day my hunger gets me killed, looking back and away and looking at last cautions towards Gloria, sniffs, noses and, licking, takes the end between her teeth and pulls the whole from between Gloria's

fingers to trot off to where none may watch. Gloria and I step back out into the noon fire. Because Gloria is not one to talk for the sake of talk her silence is contented. But I'm not used to contented silence. To myself in comfort. Talk is for me utter comfort. Her yes no are havoc. Is this because I refused her to buy me chips? Was there more I was to do? I hadn't wanted to go but she insisted... Her steps are slower. Does she want us to keep walking? I worry she senses my discomfort. What are you doing for hols? I don't know. I'll be here with friends. Not ushago? I make a noise; she laughs. I say better I die, and wonder would she like that? Watching her (Is she thinking about my death? About me for death over what's forced on me?) it's hard to say. We reach our gates. She watches my fingers wetly fumble the lock. You're sure you live here? My yes has no laughter. I'm annoyed and fight annoyed like I fight the lock. She watches, not undecided but revising prior judgement. This look I know from when I don't know how to have friends. Before my face can give me away I open the gate and rush through. We'll talk evening. She doesn't reply, as I lock up I tell myself the work of her own unlocking is the reason. [*The last detail is clearly a later invention. There's no way she would have locked the gate then. Not to mention she was notorious in subsequent years for leaving doors and gates wide open, whether she had gone to the shop or left on a trip.*]

[3] And so then almost out of the blue the others feel yeah we can pick on her, on me, little things, most they're to do with style as in not *our* style. So the wrong top, wrong shoes, wrong nail polish, wrong hair. I'm confused ju I recall they were not as bad when we did this to each other to make each other better, which is not something we say true but might give were we asked, our real

motives being cruelty, cruelty, cruelty and cruelty. And incidentally to keep each other in line. Because to step out is to mark yourself. And to mark yourself pure sin a girl farts and drinks bleach the minute she's home. But after Gloria the girls are worse. Yes we did nothing good before. Yes but 'nothing good' is the most I will ever confess yes? At least I'm aware, even if I don't go so far as to give a name that can sit still and be seen, therefore be unforgivable. These changes most are obscure, then comes the emblem, which is not that Brenda and Flora get into a fight. Brenda and Flora get into a fight. Flora's older sister Flavia beats on Brenda. Brenda's mum goes to Flora's house at night, shouting mama Flora you ave raised thaags. Thaags! Flora's father steps out in vest and trousers and jabs a hardwood rungu at the noisemaker, *wewe mwanamké rudi kwako kabla nikutandiké*. But the Brenda's mum she's taken off the speed governor. People rush to the windows and into the street, she goes on and on her husband nowhere in sight and on until Flora and Flavia's father goes back inside, the Brenda's mum grabs and shakes the gate, Askari Mike, who has been standing there uninvolved himself and being asked you what are you here for, asks the Brenda's mum madam hauoni haya, she ignores him she ignores the men and the two older women against the assault on womanhood and akina Flora's gate, she shakeshakes that gate, she screams and screams until us we realize something is taking place that is not the mere parental standing up for the child that brought her out into the glare of darkness. Flora and Flavia's father comes back with keys, vest, rungu upheld and forthright. The Brenda's mum backs away. Askari Mike pleads for mkubwa to stop but the other man tells Askari Mike and neighbors assembled they must get rid of this woman who, if she is still at his gate in thirty seconds, will be

thoroughly beaten, will be what? thoroughly beaten. Because we do not respect his authority Askari Mike shouts at the Brenda's mum so we know he is the other dumé but someone *wé na wé hio sauti ilikuwa wapi*'s him another's *asakari ushaatupa chansi yako* and one other's you can you be quiet please shut the guy up. The two women defending women's honor try to sooth the offender. And because to stand in the street screaming your head off in rage and humiliation and who knows what else tires even the best of us, the Brenda's mum hangs on for another few minutes then lets herself be led away, the father of Flora and Flavia asks his neighbors why, confused more so when a woman observes and that girl the big one she can fight her own battles, so why do you feel you must venture among us in underwear to threaten someone's mother, which at least sounds serious, but is to those of us for peace fire on fire. Father of Two declares as long as they live under my roof my daughters they are under my protection, you understand you people, and even when they leave, even when they leave, I will protect them, me, their father, their who? Their father, and so now can you all of you take yourselves back to where you came from, because the next person to disturb my peace Mungu akusaidie. *Wé ambia watu wako waendé*. And in short order the only voices are Askari Mike's, the wind's, and silence. I know the Brenda is a bully. To our shame we've accepted her because what do you do, but the one person she bullies and I mean bullies is Flora. And Flora's not a person to run go tell how oh she was mistreated and whatnot, and so this goes on then all of a sudden they're bouting and Flora involves her older sister, though later I hear that Flavia heard her sister had been clobbered and straightaway rushed to thwap the Brenda no questions asked. That is how you do it. Handle immediately.

Don't wait. But in that darkness I wonder. I wonder and remember. Flora liked Gloria straightaway, a connection the rest of us haven't paid any attention to. Do we even know it exists? Our cluelessness is endless. Why? We girls behave as though Gloria is perfect. That focus. But mine is not theirs. That is my lie. Mine mine my way is not their way, of which, care and energy taken to hide itself reveals itself. Reveals lies, reveals lack. Unacceptable. And because they can't accept, because hierarchy of pain, they come for me. My so-called friends. But now coz of how the fight between the Brenda and Flora went, no one wants to be a known aggressor. But the show must what? The show must go on. And everyone must be smarter about their bullying or someone's big sis might turn up even though not everyone has a Flavia in their pocket. But you don't think these things in the moment [*Mine is to wonder, decades later, about a culture I have witnessed not only with teenage girls but extant throughout this society: they did this to me, allegedly their friend, because that is what you call your victim*] like when a boyfriend's beating you saying oh he loves you but you know you're stubborn or you are your father's joy but whenever your father remembers this it is never without making you into your mother or his and the anger when both fail.

[4] And the one person never treated like so is golden woman herself, skinperfect Gloria. The one person who could stop it is Gloria when she wants. But she never says a word. Sometimes I don't mind. What do I mean? I mean she has that distance. And when she says, you guys are boring, it's like you've been struck by lightning. If we're together and the others start on me they might be hit with ach then so you guys are boring, you know that? Does

she do this because she likes me? And but so once she does it these chicks fall over themselves to prove their small god wrong. And they get so busy with that. So busy I'm left to watch them and watch her. And what do I see? A young woman not in kolé. The way she moves and speaks is almost my idea of a first year. I'm sure she's around nineteen. That age, where are you supposed to be? This is how I'm thinking in the era of students being sent home by protests and Karl Marx. But I'm sure Gloria isn't one. But why? What do I see? That there's more she is not only long-legged and lightskinned. When she looks at you I mean she holds you, ant walking her palm. Or beetle. And you don't know to be ant or beetle with her or larger darker thing than is safe for naked skin. But this is my mind. And when the conversations end and we scatter, to stand alone in sunset feels like crawling the palm of myself. *[Many years later, after I had been around Gloria long enough to convince others I knew her well and forgotten everything I knew, and remembered and forgotten that knowledge, only to recall a decade or more later in the dead of night having woken up from half- or first sleep that that girl had looked and not found what she badly wanted and in the process come close to coming undone. It's clear to me, who was there for part of the time, that she had found in everything she found that there is always so much more than she or anyone has thought or would ever think to look for, that discovery undoes both search and the searcher. There is joy promised with revelation, but you may not look that hard and fail to hurt. She wanted the deep, the unknown, and you don't move toward the deep without arriving again and again back at the point where you believe you are nothing. Why? No one is ever satisfied, which destroys our chances of mending the breach, or failure to that a glimpse at least of what is not endless striving.]*

[5] That, we don't talk about. We talk about fashion, hair, fashion, money for clothes, hair, not having money for clothes, money for the good life, good-looking boys, who do you know overseas, good-looking men, where would you go if versus where you go once you know you're leaving. We talk about soul, r&b (Brenda likes country, not even good country, let me just say that). And movies. Always movies. *Menace II Society* has just come out. We watch it at Christine's place. Her older brother Richie has dubbed a master copy from the video lib where he works. We watch that movie I swear every time we go to their place which is every day or almost every day. The one we watched before *Menace* was *Boyz N the Hood*. I prefer *Boyz*. The other movie we go back to is *Boomerang*. I like it yes but how can you believe Eddie Murphy. Ju I saw him in *Beverly Hills Cop* and *48 Hours* I'm used to a guy of action comedy not eti romance. No one agrees. They say like how comes you a girl you're not into this movie just because I am not into Eddie. Let me speak the truth in that whole movie the person who to me the movie is about is Angela. Her she's the hero. But I was telling you about Richie and his Eddie Murphy. I'm one of those people who isn't *soooo* in love with *Coming to America*. I make the mistake of saying this with Richie present. So after he hears me quote unquote badmouthing his favorite actor he comes for me. There's even when he tells me that I am not going home until we watch this movie so you understand why Eddie Murphy is the funniest guy ever and no one will ever reach him. Also: to be funny you have to be sharp up here. How many times does Richie tell me? The first time Gloria comes with us to akina Richie's house me and Richie don't argue. We watch *Menace* like usual. Richie and Gloria don't talk a lot. Just hey hi, introductions, it's whichever movie fullstop. But

when Ronnie and Caine are fucking Richie tries to not look at Gloria, who's seated across with Flora and Richie's brother Bruce Wayne. Flora and I we're on the carpet, Brenda and Christine are sat behind us on the sofa. We're focused, but I glance away to catch Gloria's almost secret smile Richie doesn't see because she has timed him. I start to think maybe Gloria's our Jacqueline and Richie is going to be a casualty Richie who wins every point Richie logical Richie you can never surprise. Walking back from akina Flora's I think here we are with a criminal. But is she an oboho really? She doesn't look it. She especially does not talk like one. She knows where the traps are, that's all. Maturity, not crime. Logical Richie has no chance. And so when Brenda says 'there are no boys in cell' to Christine and I, we laugh. I laugh. I don't want to. I tell myself I'm sure Ritchie and Gloria will get together. I'm sure. Hundred percent. But this confidence it's stress. Ritchie and Gloria party to *mudinyano*. I must empty my head. Richie, what do you think of Gloria? She's okay... You like her? What do you mean? I'm just asking. Now Ritchie is suspicious of feelings he's caught already. And so when again they're in the same space he keeps his distance. Gloria treats him the same. Ritchie floats. Soon he is less interested in this woman I realize has never been into him in the first place. After that first visit Gloria is a regular. She'll go with us, then pose with akina Richie on her own. She is that type, not to say she's Christine. For me it's that I am trying to maneuver us girls we stick no matter what, solidarity like the sun or breathing, then her she reveals another path. And then you are that person who's been sold an avocado to get home and turn on the lights for what? A stone.

[6] She fails to tell us she has been in prison until after a whole month of us knowing her. And so me now on the one hand I like her though now I don't know what that means, friends or people who we live in the same estate. And on the other, prison. What me I understand is Gloria and Violet are walking together and according to Violet a GK passes. Gloria jokes these things are smaller than they look. And Violet asks how do you know. Gloria being Gloria tells her. And so when Violet and her close friend are at Christine's and Christine asks about this outing, Violet tells her. [*That girl. Her issue was not being a tattletale, it's that to this day she finds it hard to lie. Her best friend Christine is secretive, and like most secretive people is not shy about helping herself to other peoples' business. She would deny her propensity for mûchéné, which has been impressively consistent, but I teach history, and my historiographical habits, as it were, did not begin yesterday.*] And so this is how the entire estate learns Gloria has been inside. I find out the next time we're at the pipes. There's tension obvious between Christine and Gloria, between Christine and Violet, and between these three and the rest of us, but I'm not thinking bout. Maybe I am the only one. The more we all talk the more I'm here there's not going to be a fight. And but so Gloria in prison it's her who brings it up. How comes you guys you're pretending you don't want to ask? And stares us down, eyes flashing. Christine's first. Give us then the story. I want to shout don't do that. I had thought this is a fake but Gloria has that face of I want to speak truth. I don't want this story. I don't like her now because how can you, a story about being inside, surely, it's not good. But then I am that type who when someone hands me a present I can't. I stare. I am weighed down. I have to crawl back into birthday-birthday if I can. Mostly I can't. So people avoid me, or the ritual

they skip. Now add to this Gloria's what no one in their right mind should want to talk about. It frightens me how she's so unbothered Christine blabbing has robbed her or if you look at it another way and maybe that's why she's not as upset her generosity and Christine's blabbing have given her a chance. I don't shout stop. What is worse is this idea of I stop her. Anyone else yes. But she doesn't tell why. Like every prisoner ever she is innocent. No one wanted to know. She laughs. Those are minor details. Lemme tell you how things are inside. It's hard. Harder for younger prisoners. You learn things. We're thinking what but no one asks. She looks so young now younger than us. That she is a woman fades into innocence of which, looking back, isn't. Innocence is not absolute. It's not one wall to be climbed or knocked down. So I refuse. I refuse that she's ever been a prisoner. Violet and I we talk about it, we're on the bus to town, her for French classes, me to my cuzo Becky in Ngong. Violet has an uncle in remand. I don't know why she is telling me: my confidence is not worth the shame. But for her it is. So I listen. He's there eti for attempted robbery. Three years. The lawyer has said he'll be inside longer, cops want their case. And the judge, no bail. Gloria hasn't said how long she was inside. We don't know about approved schools except that they are there. Then the question, the only one: what do you think she did? Something bad. But not *sø* bad as in, she's out and about. And theft you stay inside. Theft or. Or what. We're excited we have this power. Terrified. Our voices now. The man, his finished jacket. A look. Like we're who to cause such. We ignore, we ignore, then we're done. Silence. The road below, pedestrians, hawkers, a Saturday but boring. We look at each other as criminals. That night, commotion. When Agnes and the colonel were living together it

was rare to hear, which surprised me, because military. It is impossible not to conclude Gloria's telling us has reached Agnes. Me I wonder. I don't wonder oh Agnes knew, because how not? I wonder if Gloria is really her niece. For one they don't look alike. *[Some years ago I read that we in African families, in the African family that stayed, are often one blood with foreigners' faces and foreign bloods with the one face. Or, in less poetic terms, that African populations have the highest levels of genetic variation among all humans]* And they don't behave like aunt and niece. But I can't support. The differences, theirs, mine with aunt Vera, aunt Lucy, Violet's with Dr. Philomena, differences so easy before, I cannot explain them. Maybe they don't exist. But no: is Gloria Agnes's niece? I ask mum. She looks at me the way you look at that man on the pavement with ten diseases in his one kwashiorkor body, tiga kûmbûria viûria biti na magûrû, which is to say, don't ask me stupid questions.

[7] Enter my room the first you see is Toni Braxton. And before you get mad let me say that Janet is number one. Then Whitney. But Toni Braxton. She's in the line of Anita Baker both mum and Becky like her. So at first I don't want to. I struggle. Who dubs her tape for me? Anyway this person makes a copy I ruin listening to nonstop. I get another. I like her style, not voice and looks alone. I'm no Toni Braxton. I try. With clothing there is hope. But no one is doing torn or distressed. Not where I live. I don't have those guts. I try. I look at scissors. Those jeans. Just leave it. And forget leather. One afternoon Gloria and I and Flora listen to my tape copy of *Toni Braxton*. Flora is still upset Christine and I bouted the day before. It's not her and the Brenda's bout, but she's more upset. How now? Shock on me. It's that I like her. I

think of her as a friend proper. We haven't done a lot, we don't know each other well, so why? I'm upset even more, and the girl won't explain herself, it's so immature aki. So we don't really talk. Dare you push me I will push you harder is affirmation that squats in my mouth in full no-go. Gloria says Toni Braxton makes the best late night music. There's not even that smile. Flora is on my bed, legs together, arms folded. Right as Gloria says late night Flora looks down. Gloria who do you like. She looks at me like I'm stupid. Like we're in a movie and I'm the girl who says stupid things. Then, do you know Prince?

[8] Stand by the guest bedroom window and you see. For many afternoons I watch the woman who is not a murderer sit out under the sun in a chair like hard cream toffee and reads I can't see what books. Mills & Boon or for her Ludlum. Also she does her aunt's hair. They'll be there almost the whole day. I don't get. Gloria is fast. The fastest. You learn things. Here first it's hotcomb. She pulls hard. Agnes's neck is strong, still she's dolly-like. No painface for this lady. Hard pulling, yanking, other hand on shoulder and neck, hard grip. Throat. I have never looked at a throat. Hers bold, deep dark. Movie fingers brown against her. Gloria is leaned over, her looking up. They are talking. Soft. Gentle. I have never looked at a woman in that position. At two women. Her hands in her lap I wait for. Gloria drops the hotcomb, pulls with both. Agnes's hands I wait for them to go up. Another day Gloria is on the grass like she's at the beach. On her stomach with a book, feet up, locked. I was dressing and said lemme look. I go downstairs. Christine and I we're going to town for nail polish. She takes long. I don't want to call. I don't want to wait outside or her to knock the gate because mum is unwell.

So I sit until I can't. I go upstairs. I see Gloria up. No book but her dress like the grass shinily wet. Was it like that before? That's when I see Agnes, angry. That one of shaking. Why now, maybe coz Gloria has messed her dress, Gloria who is silent, her arms folded under her boobs not small anymore wet. Shaking, no Gloria stop. Gloria steps and Agnes is shaking backing away like someone who does not want to say no Gloria stop. Then I see that her dress is also messed.

[9] I won't mention names but a neighbor was expelled. Her maths teacher. Is it maths teachers who are busiest? She was found another school, ran away. From there, deep Ukambani. The same again. Back in Nairobi she's locked away. Her parents, no one else. Then these good people part ways. The father leaves. Her mother's work is to tell the other mothers and mine he left because that girl became too much. But no one says drugs. No one. And so her she's who you see being passed from kangé to kangé, doing laps in *Boyz II Men* or *Wesley Snipes*. I liked *Wesley Snipes* until it got into an accident. The owner refused to make proper repairs so it kept breaking down. The same with former neighbor. What I saw I didn't see. I'm sure. I'm sure. It was not that what I thought because no. I've never seen such. Our thing us girls besides like now videos at akina Richie's is we pose we talk and we talk about whatever and we walk nonstop the whole day. And imagine no one bothers us except drunkards, boys from the next esto. And Mama Koi and Mama Ruth. These are two fat sister killjoys they do nothing but pass gossip the whole day call us whores. Their girls who they hate Koi and Ruth are who they secretly want to be these women have to call other peoples' daughters whores to get out of bed. You almost pity them.

Almost. But to Gloria such people are not to be pitied. Hate them with a whole heart. Not half. Or quarter. To hear her. Is to. Lean your face into the fire. I can't stop. It's so good I'm scared. You must, someone like that. But good fear is hard to get, so keep your face there. The way Gloria gripped her hair so tightly. Neck strong and dolly-like. I have never looked at a throat. But what I want more is for life to go on. And my friends, who don't know, what can they be told, a confession to what exactly. I taste metal and a second sun growing inside me. So we watch movies. We gossip. I help Sarah and mum. I go with daddy to Dago to buy meat and sit with my soda while he and his cronies pint. On the way home I plead, teach me how to drive. No. I go with mum to visit her younger sister, her cousin, an aunt technically but the same age as me, another aunt, and to many, many church functions, because Presbyterians we love to rave. I'm so busy my prayers have been answered. I'm too distracted for myself or Gloria, who carries on exactly the same. Here I am, making so much effort while her. It's irritating. Alas, the difference between a Hyacinth and a Gloria. After the hotcomb she bent Agnes bent over a basin and washed her hair rough and playful dried it with the reddest towel oiled it sank her fingers deep to rub and tangle and pull and rub and fluff for the fistcomb and its stainless teeth that with slow sure pleasure she tucked in and out of blackpearl ashine. And the whole time no one said anything. It was so quiet I started to think I could hear their breathing hers slow and sure Agnes's like someone pulling all the world's air into her lungs. And so I persevere with Christine, whom I do not respect, Brenda whom I hate. Catherine is suspicious. For Brenda I'm a stray puppy. I try on Gloria's skin because there is no other way. But it pinches! It pinches and squeezes and squeezes and expands what

I don't want it to. But when you've convinced yourself there is no negotiating there is no negotiating. And for a while I am successful. Much more is it than if I had taken time to just stop. To rest and to think, make room for the rawness right underneath I am in prison—prison proper not approved school mum threatens me with when I am the devil's child not her own. My head is shaved. I'm in rags. We dig a field that's to the horizon, one side a forest dark, the other prison. The prison looks abandoned but I'm sure something within will rush out the second we stop. Or run away. I see Catherine and Violet sneak. I shout for them to stop. Brenda jumps from a Land Rover wearing a police inspector's uniform, with a baton I fear she'll use on me. Of course I'll use it on you. I run for the forest. Too late I realize I am running toward the prison. I lie in a cell, people to the far side, darker than the darkness, a murmur. I shout for them to stop. They ignore me. I call out to everyone I can think of. Except me. Gloria. She takes my hand. I'm too heavy. You have to eat more. There's no time. I sink. She'll let go (and leave), but when I push up she is waiting. A thing is in the corridor. From afar (how did she pass it?) Gloria is saying we leave. The thing enters. Light shoots from my eyes, mouth, and fingertips. So terrible, the heaviness has travelled into day. The strange thing is not that I have slept late. It's that no one has bothered to wake me. After a struggle I climb off. I go downstairs, expecting a lecture. The person I find is Sarah with rag and bucket, bent over the floor and her gospel. I ask the time. Ni mapema. The wall clock in the sittingroom shows nothing I can read well enough. Where have they gone, my parents? What do you mean? Who are those people there? Rag in hand she points: seated on the sofa, where just now there was no one, are my "parents". The faces, the bodies are

theirs. Everything else no. Who are you? My “father” cocks his head and says something I can’t hear. My “mother” is wickedly amused. You know who we are. We followed you from the other place. She holds out her arms and rushes toward me.

[11] My mother wakes me early. She is upset with me, but I can’t tell why without asking. My silence does not help. You’re too slow. I am not slow enough for her to complain. Outside, the sleeve of night is lazing back, the indigo below deep and vivid. It’s not unheard of for mum to wake me early, but she hasn’t said trip. Or have I forgotten? Once I’m downstairs, it’s to see her stood in the livingroom as if by a force. What is it mum? She does not hear, or care to reply. Not a seizure; at least two in her extended family have had them. Since then we have to hear the stories on rewind. She wonders, I think, but fails at the end to voice out the question: will it happen to me? And so I can’t help fear. And amusement. Either it’s happened or mum has paralyzed herself. I won’t feel pity. The effort ties me till I bulge. Mum leaves her terror behind, if that’s what it is, to: what do you think you’re doing? I don’t say waiting for you. I say mum, where are we going? You’ve forgotten we’re going to see Rosaline. Rosaline is my mother’s cousin. She was raised with mum and her siblings. She lives in Golf Course with her much younger husband. I see her at family get-togethers. She is elegant. Friendly once she knows you. She works for KEMRI. Her husband’s a computer engineer, but his personality. He’s odd for her. When we arrive it is not Rosaline or Mark who opens, or their mboch, it’s cousin Evelyn. Rosa comes up behind. I had begun to relax, but this undoes that. We greet each other. I am the aide-de-camp of a visiting dignitary. Inside it isn’t better. Mum and I are on the

couch, Rosa on the chair facing the carport. Evelyn disappears. Mum and Rosa make small talk, Rosa's face turns and lightens as quickly when she asks me to join Evelyn in the kitchen. But Evelyn is not there. She's in the back. When I step out she starts, but doesn't seem to see me until I'm almost on top of her. That wild gaze hardens then thins, her working to set me as me, her as her, her to me. She makes a smile to encourage me to her and seeing it doesn't look away, wilded. I sit from her. She doesn't say anything, doesn't move. I try not to do small talk. I've learnt from Gloria it's never for the other person. But this is hard so. I'm pleased to see you. And um so it's been long since we were together makes a dent maybe. Her face is a mask, a restless writhing. We sit so long I forget I'm not at home. It's quiet in that backyard, which is behind a golf course. Rosa appears above us. Let's have tea, in a voice that makes it clear she is speaking to me and not my cousin. The tea is fine. I don't see my cousin for the rest of the visit, which is like the wait in a doctor's reception. You can tell something is happening behind that door that is not doctoring. If it were, you'd be in there and so you try to follow what is happening while the irritation grows, the suspense, the soreness, the stiffness, the dryness fed unto dull ache same as night's that became needling pure and precise. But the doctor rings the receptionist for the next patient and everything is sorted. In our case we finish tea and leave. *[From this pain rooted in me like a wedge, at the center of my purest reality, at the point of my sensibility where the two worlds of body and mind are joined, I learn to distract myself by the effect of a false suggestion. — Artaud.]* On the way back my mother talks to me in fits, angry, confused and wretchedly sad. I know because I am her daughter. But I worry the strangers will see. I try to speak comfortingly. I've

never had to comfort my mother. She doesn't notice. She is working her words. She's me. Talk is for her utter comfort. Except now, now it can't. The job's what? I think I know. Between Rosa's behavior and Evelyn's, I must, because Evelyn has not gone to school for two years, because Evelyn went to St. Kizito.

[12] Then she invites me. A quite boring day. I had helped Sarah with the washing and gone upstairs to read. The phone rings. I rush to it a desperado. Gloria, asking me to lunch. Straightaway I check myself, change tops, and go tell Sarah I don't know why I tell her I'm going to lunch next door. Na kamkora? I ignore her, say I'll be back later. But she's not done. *Na, nikikupigia—hata bio namba sijui, ama uandike kwanza—nipige simu na nikukosé, nitaambia mamako nini?* For Sarah to be this irritating, but I'm not in the mood. So, in English, and you don't bring me yours. I don't have time. Next door, Gloria at the gate, empress. I go in hesitant. I've been to Agnes' house a few times but not since the colonel died. They kept to themselves, my being there because mum sent me. Now I'm a guest. The scene I witnessed that wet afternoon pulls hard. To ignore, dolly-like I focus, dolly-like, hands I wait for, a house made home for two young women: neat warmth, room, room for whatever, you don't have to now. I'm to sit, Gloria ushers me into the kitchen. Onions and dhanias. And liver. You eat liver, isn't it, is no question. I'm queasy. My father loves liver, mum no, we eat it at other peoples' homes or daddy takes me swimming and what a coincidence the hotel serves liver. I had assumed food is ready. She gives me watered down juo. I'm annoyed but. Me to myself: you you don't like it conc so. But. Eeh, you have soda? Surprised yes there's fanta. Or if you want

another type I can get it for you. If you want. Fanta is okay. Thanks. Or, taking the soda from the fridge, you can mix. Cold disturbs my chest. She puts the fanta on the table, starts the burner, heavy knife off the counter she opens the fridge, braces the door with her thigh for is it cheese no butter, thighs door, peels the wax paper, cuts a slice she moraines onto the pan. She puts the block away, chops fast and expert. She tips the onions, pulls a mwiko from the drawer to stir. Then it's the liver's turn. I watch as if my body, heavy with everything, were faraway, waiting to be called back. Her body swift moves itself light and free. I see a chair, start for it the same time her she's turning—and is startled. We do not collide but that hey of hers is louder than I'm used to from her. Actually it's not hey but nastier. I back away. Then, like someone who stepped away and is back doing their best to show you she's up to date on what happened in her absence, the Gloria I recognize is in front of me. You surprised me but, okay don't mind. A smile sincere but also of effort. It's fine. I walk toward the chair, start to move it closer, stop, continue. I sit. The weight sinks me in. Gloria her she's stirring and talking. I am not listening. Am I shaking? A bit. Why do people dump on me? And when they dump it's they haven't done anything. And the part of me that wants this whatever is saying that madwoman Sarah invaded me with her nonsense. The other wants to make noise. Is strict. You speak up or. I notice silence, Gloria waiting. My what? is harsh a bit. She ignores. I was saying the liver tastes better if you use butter instead of regular mafuta. Is it? Yes. What does she think? I've cooked before, but not with butter. I stare at the pan. Gloria's gaze tilts to follow. Don't forget salt. The butter is salted, or are you one of those who uses a lot? I shake my head, exact. The way I used to when I was little through mum's insisting

finish your food. Rinse for me the spinach, which I do, and hand her the bouquet. She slices off the stems. My mum cooks those imagine. Do you like when she does it? I hate it. Gloria's pleasure is so pure I forget. [*I suspect that this ability to dissolve the agonistic is why so many descriptions of Gloria, mainly by those who don't know her that well and would like to, present her as a kind of sorceress.*] Twenty minutes later we eat. The liver is not liver I have ever eaten. Still. It's liver. Spinach so sweet so fresh I'm like this thing is still alive, how do you make it? I saw her make it but how? I eat. She's not timing. She watches me this beautiful mysterious woman. But can I, yes I'll be like her how? We are talking yes but it's me talking. I notice but why stop. So: me I hate school. That's something as in for me I wish I could leave forever but. And my parents okay they're my parents but me I'm scared for them. Scared why? Because. They fight a lot. I'm tired so them they must be even more tired. Okay sometimes we have peace but my mum is the type her she'll hold onto that anger and my dad him he'll be quieter and quieter until everyone is fearing. Some of it. I look at her, I've gone on, now should I say I'm about to, it's okay. Tell me. Some of it okay my dad is from Molo so right now you know things are thick and he can't go our uncle who he's in Kenjoketty with my cousins his wife died so it's them she died before this so my dad is trying to get them to come be safe but it's so hard he's so stressed it's like other people in the family don't want to help or they're too scared many things and he's trying but like so three days ago he left to go see if he can move akina my uncle maybe bring them to Nai but then he came back yesterday he din't talk to me or mum but her instead of just understanding anyway she's scared and him he's not a person of releasing details so you understand what is happening and yah me I feel lost and

okay I feel guilty because I'm spending so much time being afraid I'm scared coz I want to leave this city and I'm so so scared I'll never go overseas I don't want to be a nobody. For sure I have never talked about myself this long is she I don't want her to feel sorry for me why did I start anyway stop stop stop Gail it's okay it's okay aki you've not told anyone so it's coming out and that is normal. It's normal. It's not. It is. Her hand is hot. Browner chai hot over mine. You're hot. Not like that. I know. Her eyes. Aki you. Her hand is light. Can mine be? Let me tell you I'm not okay the way you see me. I stare. It's of how now? I'm not. I din't tell you guys about prison coz I wanted to. That jinga Christine anyway it's my fault her she's being herself. I'll tell you now. I'll tell you. If you want. You want? I, yes. Okay. I used to live with my grandmother. Her son, my dad, died early, her daughter din't want me and left. She married this guy from Canada and that's where she lives with her new family. So it's shosho I mean Elizabeth who raised me. We lived a simple life. We were not rich but we din't struggle. Elizabeth looked after me which was not her job but she did her best. For me she did the best, you get? I went to school and but I wasn't settled. I gave Elizabeth headache. But she loved me. So some of that ended. Then she got sick. She din't die but she wasn't like before. So now the vultures. My dad's brother, a guy called James, he started hanging around, saying how he wants to help us, help his mother. She's sick, I'm fifteen. So he's around, very busy, kidogo kidogo the guy moves in. Anyway from there it gets worse. He starts mistreating his mother coz he thinks I won't challenge him. But he doesn't know me. So I tell him listen us we can look after ourselves we don't need you. Really? Yes. That's when now when we entered hell. Things started to go missing, when you ask him he doesn't know, why are

you asking me, are you calling me a thief? Then it's an argument Elizabeth is there asking who's shouting now this man runs to say I'm the one causing problems. And shosho even if she knows it's not true, that guy had a way of confusing her. He's her son isn't it? So you have that. He brings women, he keeps telling Elizabeth I'm serious about this one she's my future wife. And it's so funny to them. One told me *rirur gurr* you hear, I'm to be your mother so *utaniongelesha vizuri* okay? A big joke. It got to the point where I slapped one. You can see I'm not small but I think she thought I don't know what she thought but my slaps corrected that. He tried to convince Elizabeth to throw me out. She refused. He tried he tried looking for ways. The theft became mine. That didn't work. Then one day the guy stopped. It was a weekday. I'd come from school. I was excited because my sixteenth birthday was that Sato. Elizabeth was going to buy me a cake and I could invite my friends. It was the first proper birthday, our birthday coz we share a birthday, our first proper birthday since she got sick. So, I wasn't thinking. He comes in, Gloria can I talk to you, I say fine let's talk. So we go to the sittingroom. He tells me how he's sorry that he's been unfair to me. I've been struggling professionally, that's his excuse, I've been struggling and I don't see what I was doing. I was wrong and I'm sorry. I don't believe him, this is the same person who has taken us to hell so why should I? But, Sato's my birthday, so what I did was I said okay fine just stick to that don't repeat it and I don't even wait for him to say more than sure yes I won't. I left. Tuesday comes, no drama. Wednesday comes, no drama. Thursday comes, no drama. Even Elizabeth is wondering what's happening? We laugh about it. Friday comes. Nothing. Sato morning he takes shosho for her checkup. It's not something that takes long. One, two hours.

Meanwhile I'm doing what? I'm getting ready. We bought materials for lunch and dinner the day before. I want lunch to be started by the time they get back. I'm in the kitchen I'm boiling nyama for stew and making chapati. I don't hear him. He's there all of a sudden in the doorway. He smirks. You know smirk yes that. Where's Elizabeth? Elizabeth. You're so disrespectful. That is my mother. And so? He doesn't move but I know. Leave me alone I've things to do. I pretend to turn so. He grabs me I hit him with the rolling pin. But I don't time it properly. I get his shoulder not his face. Today you will know what respect is. You hear? Utajua. He grabs my wrist. I drop the pin. His swings his hand to grab between my legs and laughs. What? *Displin. Kwanza vile haijaguzwa itashika*. I bite him. He slaps me. I bite him. He lets go. Everything is fast. Kick this guy kick him as hard as you can right now or he does what he's here to do. I kick him but the guy keeps coming. He backhands me. I stagger down. I'm going to black out. No. And that kick has bought me time. So I do what? Instead of running away, and where am I going to hepa? Or shout for help from who now? It's the middle of the day. People are at work. I'm alone. This was his plan. I have never been so angry. As in bottomless. I pick the knife I was using to trim and I go for him. I'm swinging I'm swinging I'm slashing I'm slashing I don't stop when he hits me. I don't stop. Then I cut air. He's moved away or. I see someone in the corridor and go after them. He should have died. I stop. I sit. He's there on the carpet. I think one more. I've still got the knife. One more. So he can't try again ever. But what will Elizabeth say? So when she calls, when she calls to ask is James there, I tell her yes he's here, but he has to go to hospital. Yes, I'm here, why did he leave, did he forget something like what now? No, shosho he has to go to hospital. The same day

he's taken the cops pick me. Elizabeth is in shock. There's no one to speak for me. They don't believe I'm underage. Karibu uue mwanaume. That is a very serious crime. Hata ukue class two. So I'm taken to Lang'ata. When the case goes to court everyone is insisting I'm an adult. So even when they're told, even the judge, when they're told this is one is a minor, the judge tells me I cannot allow my own daughter to escape punishment. He tells me I'm lucky James didn't die because there's the death penalty. Even for ladies. I tell him what I've told everyone. Self-defense. Even if. That's what he says. Even if it's self-defense, what you did was too much. So, I go to prison. Prison prison. Not approved. Two years. Then, I don't know. Maybe someone looked at my birth certificate. The lawyer tells me human rights people are trying to get me out. That the gava doesn't want this story to be known. So I'm released. And out of all those people, all those people, it's Agnes who looks after me, she's the one who protected me inside. So when she says you come live with me, how'll I say no? Her nose. Her eyes. Her mouth. They want. I've been struck in the face, the chest, the arms. My legs won't move. I should go. I can't. If she sees I'm not with her. When I went to get the chair how she acted. Won't this be worse? I glance. This kitchen. The knife. A big one. Fast and expert. Her sad is pinching. I've told you coz you're my friend. Not like that, I want to say. I should say. Not like that. You're crazy. Don't don't say that. Time travel. Back to we don't know each other. I see you. Feel nothing. Hi no hi you're nobody to me. No browner chai hot. No you're hot I know. Aki you. No this no now. Sweat nose. Her eyes her mouth. Shy soft. Darker darkness. A girl in cell. You learn things. Still she's here. By love she's here. There's no other way. But ask her. Ask or she won't. Here'll be the end. All the end, not hers or yours. Try. And

so, your shosho? Is she okay, or? She lives with my aunt. I wrote her a letter but she's never replied. My aunt told me she tried to convince her to come see me but she refused. And me I understand. Yeah. I do. If it was me, I would not, you know? To see my grandchild like that, no. No I understand. But I felt bad. And I don't understand why she can't write me. I explained everything to her. And this James guy what happened to him? Him? He's alive. Modelling. Hehe. No I don't I've heard different things. Who cares. But he'll never try another girl. Did you...Did I chop them? She snorts. No. But he can't step in a kitchen. I look away, down. My chest, does it have gunias inside or what. You won't tell anyone, like Violet? It's in my power to her. I'm not Violet. I'm not. I won't say. You're my friend and. And. And us we then from plates the tap, walk maybe kesho or later. I can wash. She refuses. A merry refusal. The wild thought Gloria happy is my doing. Some gunia goes. I was lighter before. I want that. Make her happier then. Liver and Gloria you feared, look now. As we go to the door I stop, to say at least thank you. I don't but she hugs me. Contact and safety fear hope excitement disgust you're going to hell I'm not is gut knot cool solid skin lick undoes, warm my breasts under hers, nose in cotton, scoop of flesh. Fried liver. Cussons. Palmers sweat. Thanks for this. She pulls back, her hand to mine. You promise to invite me? I make a face. She laughs, squeezes. Relax. I know your mum can explode to see me in her house. I laugh as if my heart might fly out. She takes me to the gate. My body comes back with every step. Her face is shining. I smile inside to think mine's as bright. As light and full. Kesho. After she's closed I'm the abductee marooned in the street. They paid. People watch you. You're free to live, to go back home. My heart has gone back to

thumping for dear life. Terror my sun body. My left leg is cramping. I drag it inside and lay on my bed. I wait.

[13] More commotion I pretend I can't hear. I've cleared *Servant of the Empire*. I walk another world. Want anew. Too soon. Forget, be surprised again. How long is that? I remember too much. Is not true. I want what's from behind the shared wall. It isn't a world I know. I've crossed, walked there, but. Not yet. I lock my feet together, I listen. They're arguing. Agnes's voice rises, razor-sharp. She's the louder, but Gloria is dominant. Who I thought she'd sound as that first day. She commands. Immediately the dry throat, heart faster, the pure spurt terrifying, below and to the right. Wetness between my legs. It isn't new I've mislabeled it till now, though but that can't be true or I would not know mislabelling's not what I'm doing right now. Some other darkness I let drop into the void came instead looking for me, this moment. I hard rub my right big toe up and down the V between my left and index. I lift my T-shirt and I place both hands between my breasts and stomach. One moves down. One moves up. Everything's damp, leaking. I tuck in my lips so I don't bite them. I push my lips. I push. I'm pure cage. Pure tank. Sweat. Fear. Pure fountain of—I try it unvoiced, the world doesn't come crashing so—cum. I think I squeal, loudly. Someone. Quickly I pull my top down, the blanket. They stop outside my door. It's mum. She opens to see me tucked in bed. What are you doing? I was asleep. What kind of sleeping is that? Stop reading those books of yours, they're the ones disturbing you. Embarrassment? She knows she's ridiculous, teacher telling her child don't read. It's criminal. I fight a giggle. Mum lingers. More to do, but she's not sure what. At last, go to sleep. Door is shut soft. Love and

power. On the other side they've quit. I strain for Gloria's voice. I strain, fall back. Silence. Darkness. The world is unlit bedroom, obscure, full and alert of what wants right from me and is waiting. My heart's knocking hard. Strain and fall. I'm still wet.

[14] She failed to greet me. That woman is not herself. Ever since this girl appeared. Knitting needles swift in her hands. Her tone from disbelief to criticism the words this girl veers in my direction. I'm the only other person there. I have paused reading the copy of *The Weekly Review* I've hidden inside *ELLE*. I wait to see whether she wants assent. To fail my discomfort: as soon as she speaks the words *this girl* my fingers crackle. Current runs, peels me. I am a naked fact. Here outside she passed us at a high speed, inside the estate, Baba James had to turn to avoid her crashing into us. Aki mum the world veers so invoke my absentee brother. Agnes in her pajero two hands firm. She'll run over whoever. Why? Not her niece. All this time, all this time me toying with elec. Thanks to this woman I should know better. But see the mask her exaggerations, self-importance her underwear, bra she loves so much, expansive panties eggshell the same half a decade across. That sounds dangerous mum. Yes and it is a consequence of losing her husband. She's so young. She is trying to help that girl but she is the one who needs help. I'm agreeing. Strange pity warms me for Agnes, who's never provoked such. Still. I want what she feels, not my mum's doing. I get my chance the next day. Stranger still mum's the one to make it so. We're in town, daddy's dropped us. We do more window shopping than actual purchases. Lunch at Wimpy's. Mum's mood is better. She laughs, tells funny stories about her childhood in Kiambu, with ageless Mucunku Martin and

Veronica Gatwiri, co-wife of Edith Karími, Felista Nyambura and Clara Waithera. Hijinks. Clever last born, outwitting her betters. Guka's wise feet her temple. And training. You read the world to see things before they happen. Is she serious or what. Mum, can I to go see a movie? I don't want to watch a movie I want to see how far this generosity will go. What movie? Eh lemme check. She hands me the newspaper. I go to listings. And pick the least suspect. Are you sure you can watch this, looking at the other titles. It's general exhibition, mum. But not today, hopeful, as if it isn't in her power to thwart me. No tomorrow. Tomorrow I'll go. With Christine. Ah ok. Hers is one of relief. She wants this to go on for as long as it can, tucks her lips the way me I do. Let's stay. I try, can't bring myself to add here forever. I'm thinking so hard so now how will I convince Gloria.

[15] The seats are sticky. Violent. You have assert your bum. The seats are sticky. It has been long so I forgot. We've had to bribe the clerk and his bogus you're not old enough. It's town we have other movies Gloria wants this one. And so we're up high. I'm surprised. Women in threes and fours, middle- and university-aged. Those from church, cinéphiles, the loiterers, two of us and the ten-year-old boy. He doesn't get how he's here. The movie itself, I'm prepared to hate *Fried Green Tomatoes*. The first quarter is slow, it meneanders, it's too boring, thrown together as in life, older people more than the young, as not. And anyway it's hard to follow. Gloria's attentive but not to me. I'm annoyed but. I'm relieved but. It's so cold I'm hot. I wore jeans she wore jeans. My top's too modest, hers is bare arms, scoop of flesh. Too much? But she wore it for you says other me. Other me is right. Third me is the projectionist over this audience of two, bored, half-asleep.

Other me lifts my right arm to close the gap of leg with leg. Stupid stupid to feel everything depends on the slightest. And if I get it wrong, then? What's there to get wrong, stop thinking too much. Thinking kills. It doesn't but a whiff of her, of cocoa b and sweat, I'm too close. Focus on the movie basi you coward. There's honey (and so ûkii and akina ankos' njûri nchéké off to the side), a boy armless like the parkingboys outside who aren't boys. A big, big house like what I imagine Sarah and her family lived in before the apartment. There's gambling. Hammock and a straw hat like in *Tom Sawyer*. Serious serious nyama choma. There is a husband who kicks his paged wife down the stairs, which is almost a memory. [*This conjugal violence, 'almost a memory', was in fact the sublunary echo of a story told to me by a friend, Millicent, my only at the primary school I first attended. As usual I shared what I learnt during the day with mum, who this time scolded me for "being in other peoples' business" and made me promise never to repeat what I'd told her. I did and I did.*] Men in bedsheets arrive. Then a cop so white he looks dead. The food fight is unbelievable. I want blueberries. Blueberries are fruit of the moon. The movie's gone on. We're up high. Who will see? It's now or wait forever. Courage must come. Be a woman. Be who? A woman. I lean forward, eti adjusting, move my hand to the seatback ahead and realize no you don't want her watching. Me other me and third person me drop it along her leg, which I confusedly think has scalded me. Drop it, and after one breathless she's done nothing yet I haven't so do it I slide it down. She shuts her thighs together so hard I think my hand's broken. She is looking ahead, as if nothing's happening. I'm terrified. It's wrong, I'm wrong, she's not, she's herself but everyone else, I'm alone, the other ^{me}s have

gone quiet. I want to disappear, to be nothing nothing nothing. The sound is my heart, louder than Sipsey, than Idgie. I try to pull my hand away. Gloria does not let go. I panic and throw my eyes at her, pleading. The light is on her face, light of bodies. I think my eyes are lying. Is she, is she, yes, it's that secret smile. I am angry and happy in the same but the terror is so strong I'm dying. Please. I pull. She doesn't, again, but it's different? She leans her head on my shoulder. I pull again but with her right she takes hold of my arm. I want to die to live. Sweet confusion too shot through with dread to be honey proper. Her hand slides down my forearm to just above the crook. Her one heavy breath ruffles me. Her don't move ruffles me greater. She lets go. I do not move my brokenfeeling hot hand. We sit like that. I don't know I don't know what is supposed to happen. I don't know. But this is not the worst. Then the clerk enters the theater from the top right exit. I try to get away, but Gloria locks her thighs and the elephantine fear in my chest threatens to break out, huge and bloody for everyone. But the torchlight sweeps over us and onward. Other me wonders, might be I'm not first. Jealousy already says third me. I laugh, a choke. Nuzzling, Gloria makes a moan and slips her hand under my overworked panties.

[17] Daddy leaves again. Mum wakes me to make him breakfast while she helps him pack. My father pretends he's annoyed. Mum can't decide if she wants to beat him or cry. She's stoneface, yes, but not by much. We women of the house line up to see our man off. The vein in mum's neck has popped. Her hand strangles the early morning air. She keeps us busy the whole day. By four we're exhausted, the house immaculate. Sarah makes tea. I go to my room. When I come back downstairs I find mum gone. On the

table is a copy of *Jitegemea*, which I have not seen in the house since April or May. On the cover: 666, War is War. I read a little before I stop and go back to my room. The phone rings. Sarah yells for me to come down. It's Gloria. I tell her I'm not feeling okay, that I'll go see her the next day. For the first time I hear it in her voice: disappointment. I don't feel bad. I feel good cruel. I go to bed and don't leave my room until suppertime. Two long days go by, then two more. Daddy calls. He and mum talk, they argue. When mum hangs up, she's shaking. Your father and your uncle have gone to Molo. Agnes is at our house every day after work. She doesn't bring Gloria. She's good with mum, I won't lie. She listens, comforts her. I'm surprised by the tenderness of both. Agnes is not tender with me. It's like I'm a criminal for seeing my mum in that state. For seeing them both. I don't want to, but do they care? Not about minor details. Agnes is there the afternoon my father returns. My mother is knitting and chatting when that horn jerks her out of her seat. She looks to us—I'm seated next to Agnes—to confirm she's heard what she's heard. She puts her work down and gets up, calls for Sarah to get the gate (nimesikia!). Mum, Agnes and myself wait by the door as Sarah opens the gate. The peugeot is rundown and muddy. The right headlight is broken. The windscreen is cracked. The back left door has the devil's marks. The father-looking shadow steers the vehicle into the carport with extra care. He doesn't seem to see us, but stops the car. He climbs out. My mother goes to his side. Neither is one to hug. My mother is rubbing his arm in a frenzy and smiling a wide helpless smile that might crush my father. He shuffles against her, a kind of hug. Sort of. Agnes twists her mouth, a kind of smile sort of, folds her arms like wings. With his keys in hand my father indicates the boot, steps past my mum and Sarah to

open. Kathambi help Sarah. Sarah and I go to the boot and heave out a sack of green banana to take to the store. When we've finished I spy on mum and daddy. They are quiet. When they speak it's in the couple whisper. I wait for daddy to go upstairs and wash and for mum to start getting supper ready. Then I sneak out. And run into Agnes. Her homeclothes make her my mother's age. Just as I pass she pulls on my name the way everyone in the world knows I dislike. Come here. I'm five or so meters away and don't move. She takes a step closer. I've noticed you are becoming good friends with my Gloria. That is good, it's good for her to make friends. But you be careful, also, okay? Because she is not like other girls, you understand? She likes to tell stories. And you should be very careful you don't believe all her stories. You are a smart girl so you know what I'm talking about. Her silence is so commandingly insistent I almost say yes. Good. I know you're happy your father has come but if you want to visit with Gloria you can do that for some few minutes, okay? Thank you. She walks away and up the street. I look up to see Gloria watching. I go back inside. Daddy told mum who tells me after supper that my uncle and my cousins are fine and have been found a place to stay in Zimmerman. My father has given up on mobilizing the rest of his people and so mum is going to speak to the reverend to organize a harambee. I've spent all this time afraid pretending not to be. Now that I'm relieved and they are twenty minutes away I no longer want to see them. I am thinking of how to dodge mum before she asks me to go with her.

[18] Violet has measles. We tease her and watch our friend give serious thought to throwing herself down from the window. She pretends not to. We tease her some more then leave. At least she

doesn't hear what else what we say. But would we care? Gloria isn't with us. She meets us at the pipes. But it's not a must, for her or for us. We're not bothered she's not bothered. I don't feel guilty. You can't be friends all the time. But she looks at me a look that peels everything. I don't feel guilty. I don't. But the sweetness is in my bones. If I break a finger it will drown the world. So I keep stiff. Keeping heavy I can't do anything about. I want to, I don't, we're closer Brenda and Christine and I are there to help if I want to. As I allege. Do I? We continue. Normal has its taste, Christine talks to me about boys Brenda doesn't puppy me but there is metal in my mouth throughout. Gloria doesn't ask to visit. I look for her at the back. She reads the whole day. When it's hotter than hot she brings an umbrella and takes off her top. Takes it off. No bra. Hers are how I want mine to look but better. Her tummy is flat and a deeper brown. I look away fearing but the world does not drown only my lungs half-full with I don't know okay but don't look. I look. Does she know I'm looking? She knows. Everything akina Violet have told me about how it is bathing in the same place you and other girls agrees and looks with me and comments, sketches and re-sketches with me the half unseen under loose cotton skirt. I don't even want to think is she wearing no. Third me keeps a restless silence. I wish I could so as not to have to ask who is this person? Who does this? With something like anger pushing to jump out of my mouth and through the window. You can't. When Agnes appears her you'll be seen is a hot whisper. Gloria stands to face her. I shut my eyes to bloodstars and swiftly after blueberries everywhere smearing staining skin blue drip and sag, blue hang and naked blue joy, laughing and ducking and throwing more blued nakedness for bluer joy's naked nakedness. The firstfirst commotion returns at

night. I forgot who is in charge. I forgot. The prison boss lady not the former prisoner living under her. That picture of mine was a fantasy. Gloria's being beaten and I'm just here. But what do I do? I watch myself go bang on their gate. The crowd. What do they say? Agnes and Gloria come out together, confused. What's wrong with the girl? Meaning me. Naked to the waist. Everyone watches. Their looks dig out my insides. Their looks dump null and void in me. My parents arrive. I am nil and nothing eating itself. The silence is so loud. You have to call her but so remember it's night Agnes will answer. We've not spoken since that day except hi hi. She is the one to stride now not Gloria. Did I make that happen? I am not powerful. I don't make people. Whose confidence is this for? And what's the point? Who? It isn't me. It's her. But I'm not powerful. Sleep is a rumor but memories tide me. To stop the flood or drown I go watch *Fried Green Tomatoes*. I don't bother with a lie. I don't bother telling anyone anything I just go. But in the middle of the film I leave intent on wandering town. Instead I go straight to Bus Station. I stop with my foot on the first step, but there's no one to harass me up, no one to talk me down. So I climb in. So much space and quiet. A cool steel box with ten, twelve people rolls under a cool grey afternoon sky. We pass cops at work on a bookseller. All over the sidewalk are books that lie very still, pretending to be dead. When I get home daddy is watching *Wild Kingdom*. I used to listen to this man in school. He must be very old. My father brought Molo back with him. He can't say but I see the cargo. I hear it. It ruffles our clean safe air. His smiles come tired. Can someone turn ghost as you watch? Don't go. What's that? Don't go again. He smiles his sad smile. I'm here. I take his hand. His face may melt under tears, but

not today. He squeezes my hand lets go pushes it away all in one movement. His eyes are his impostor's.

[19] Aunt Vera and uncle Mike visit. Uncle Mike works for UNICEF and Aunt Vera teaches high school English and CRE but tells my mother she's re-focusing. She doesn't say to what. As they talk in the back where it's open and mum has lit the jiko and set ndizi to boil Vera tells her sister she's thinking of buying a c-class for herself but that her husband has refused her he doesn't want people at work asking questions. Then my aunt, a proud woman that one, tells mum how upset this makes her because what does she have to do with those people and why is it okay for a man to have his but her no? Mum is Aunt Vera's little sister. She doesn't like my father. He doesn't like her. They've had beef my whole life as in, mpaka I think it's to do with dad into Vera or Vera into dad before he married my mother. I think he realized Vera would give him problems and so he opted for the small sister. And she has never forgiven the guy. So these visits are to show him how well she's doing and what a mistake he made, and to smallen her sister in the bargain. But to see them talking you'd never guess. And to see the two sisters summons other questions, Vera with her Whitney Houston hair and silk dresses and big earrings and bangles and high heels standing over mum with her bare feet and nywele mbaya preparing marigû ja nyama. Uncle Mike is a boaster. He talks at my father about his UN job and his plots and businesses and you have to deal with troublemakers with pure force. My father has already strangled him 36 times. Uncle Mike makes an excuse to step away. I overhear him asking his wife why do we come to this place? She shushes him and after she leaves he pretends to go to the toilet. When he comes back he

has a lot to say about Rolex watches and Austria. He went years ago but you would think he travelled the day before. Back outside Mum's sister is telling her my two cousins are in Kiambu. It was a good trip. Their mother was so lively and had a great time with the two girls. She really misses her grandchildren. But the auntie is too clever to ask mum why she doesn't take me to Kiambu. The nyama choma my father sent for arrives about twenty minutes after mum's marigû ja nyama leaves the jiko. There isn't much talking during the meal and afterwards even less. When they are gone we're relieved though only myself and daddy take care not to show it. Mum harasses our care until my father, who is not good at conversation, starts on about *Wild Kingdom* and his dreams of travel and being a conservationist. You? Since when? Can you see your father doing that? She laughs so hard I'm scared. But my father's arms do not leave the rests. Can you see, I hope you don't get such ideas yourself because I will be quite disappointed in you. Africans don't venture in strange places for the sake of it. Leave that to wazungu. I have never heard my mother speak this way and, from the look of it, neither has daddy. He goes quiet, asks me to get him another beer from the kitchen. Haven't you had enough? My mother's voice is excited and slightly unnatural, like an announcer's. It climbs a little every time she opens her mouth. I fetch the beer and place it on the table. Then I make to leave. Where are you going? Now her voice is sharp, parental. Upstairs. To do what? I don't answer. I look at my father. He looks at me. Help Sarah finish in the kitchen. I have done that. Then sit here with your parents instead of rushing to do whatever it is you do in your room. You must learn to socialize with people. You cannot lock yourself away and pretend the world does not exist. You young girls, do you understand how

difficult life used to be, how lucky you are? And do you think it will get easier because you are hiding? Go make sure Sarah has not forgotten anything. I do as I am told. From the sittingroom a murmur, my father's. My mother's voice is not rising anymore, but it hasn't climbed down. I am so angry but my anger will not land on its cause. Later I cut her head off. It rolls into Gloria's lap. Gloria caresses my mother's talking head but I can't hear what she's saying she really wants me to.

[20] I'm at the pipes alone. It's morning. There is no one I want to see that's why I'm early I've wanted to have here alone for long but then every time I pass I forget. No one sees me. I am not hiding but from that hardship of you can't see me. It's to hide, doing that. And why now? You're fearing to why? Such questions are like ants. I sit eaten when I have come to peace. To distract myself to control them I examine the pipes which is to see them again for the first time even though they have been here from when I was in class seven. They are set five-five in the middle three on either side then two then one like a fish then some were taken by we don't know who these big structures to take one must have been work no shortcut like death so you leave it but you can't so you do not work. Work that is not work let's be fair is pretending from infancy up the lot of us a whole country in full pretend. Except Gloria. I don't get what I'm feeling is a lie. I feel ruined but I'm not. That feeling makes you believe what is not true but you forget when your chest is squeezing stomach twisting your head a fog and your pussy is starting to know itself faster than you you forget be here like the fish of two circles in plain sight unseen until you are here. Really here. I am here, I care for her, I want her but then now? No then now, just here, your

hand in the moment, your heart. My legs won't carry me to her. My arms nail me down. People will see. Go home. Go home. No. Go home. Just go. Don't crack yourself open for nothing. Not her she's not nothing yes she is more too much maybe for you but now you know isn't it now you know. Knowledge is power. No. It is. Is joy also. Maybe but joy won't save you here be sure it won't I can't I can't I can't. I leap for you I twist for you I am happy dead for you my coffin is morning and the going forth wake me up you I am for you wake me wake me to the dream to legs that work and wings can't you or

[21] Until when now juujû comes to stay with us for a week. She and mum don't relate so well but she and daddy are good friends. Juujû is a short lady. She's almost straight-backed not with that excess of carrying firewood for donkey years. And she sees well which is rare coz of cataracts and smoke as common to older ladies who live in the countryside. I mean that she takes care of herself, my juujû. Not only that but after Mucunku died she fed and clothed and took all her children to school and made sure her co-wives did not struggle with theirs. My juujû is a first-rate person. I am not first-rate when she visits. She's like a nyangé so immediately she notices and asks me kana ní ûria tûjí tûgûgû tongatonga nyonto? My mother hears her and immediately starts an argument. I am embarrassed but how amazing to hear juujû talking like that my pleasure so obvious mum pours her thunder on me in front of her own mother who then has to handle the situation the way a parent is supposed to. My mother retreats and sends me away so juujû and I can't continue but I skip like a small girl up the mountain. Later says mum once the distinguished older woman has gone to bed juujû brought herself. Which is not

true. I dislike mum these days almost as much as I disliked daddy when he was being mean forget her. Anyhowly, juujû is never without stories but coz of what is going on with me I find I am not into her stories the way I was when I used to visit her in shags. Observing this juujû tries severally to get me to say what is bothering me believing marital troubles have impinged not to mention there is always unmentionable James but she realizes my issue isn't mum and daddy or undead brother it is me. And so she tells stories I have never heard before. Juujû tells me about how she and her nthukí used to go to the river to catch *nthambara* or dragonflies and press these to their breasts for the stinging to make them bigger. She tells me how if you were on your Ps you went somewhere hidden scratched a hole in the ground and you squatted until you were done. She tells me about these I don't know if you call them vikingi or no a *gbikûmbí* that used to be built in the middle of the shamba and young girls were given the job of staying up there to chase away birds and how to pass time you made songs to sing with the other girls in the nearby shambas that thing of call and response for hours and hours without getting bored. She says that you made everything into a song even a question and its answer like *Kathinki, what's making that sound? I don't know Kathambi, it's too far to see*. And then now the two of you go from there—*Oh Kathinki, use your long legs and jump/ Oh Kathambi, if I jump I'll jump too high/ my head will puncture the sky/Oh Kathinki, cut for me one of your legs/ I want to jump as high as you*—until you both got tired and you move to something else. She tells so many stories I have never heard. So many stories. Too many like if you take one person's life and tell a story of every day of their life or one story of one day with everything in it of their life. She tells me how in 1922 she

protested against colonialists. She says that it was here in Nairobi, of which, okay I don't believe her. First believe I did not even know that Nai existed in 1922 or that juujû was so old! She sees I'm not accepting and laughs and says that I come from people who live for long. And she says that in those days it was not so common to get someone to come all the way from Meru to near Nairobi but her father had been a trader and those people went everywhere and he wanted to buy a plot but even though he made good money them days you din't buy a plot in ancestral land anyhowly and he was only able to because he was blood brothers with a man called Wairungu who made it easier for him to get a plot in Limuru to buy although not the way we do it they did it with honey and respect and that's how come she was able to come to Nairobi. She says that those ten years were the worst even somehow worse than during Mau Mau in the way people working on settler farms were treated because as she says at least with Mau Mau the wazungu were afraid of us. That if you were working on a coffee farm that was the worst job because you were treated like a slave or worse. You worked from very early you did everything exactly the way you were supposed to or even to the excess of that and they beat you and refused to pay you. And after all that when you had finished and went for firewood so you could get supper ready for people you had to go as a group because of sex pests. And but still it might not be enough so that if you went to fetch water you could be locked away all of you and one of her friends had had that happen to her where she was with her friends fetching water only to be locked by this mzee who used to have a deal with these workers and porters or askari where he locked the girls inside the store and then munakujiwa by these guys one by one to go do things for him out there in

darkness and you can't tell anyone. That in Kiambu it was very bad and because she was schooling there she witnessed things done to girls and experienced hardships herself because you could not be an African girl without suffering even if your people had a bit of money. And the problem that made things worse for a lot of girls was how now the DO would canvass people by force to go work on the farms of wazungu, which is why these workers weren't paid because instead of paying them the wazungu bribed the DC good money to forget that story. You don't hear people discussing corruption these days but it must have been there or how did we learn it? Because of how Africans were mistreated and because they had kidnapped Harry Thuku juujû went to a protest with an older friend Eunice who had two nieces in that line and Eunice told her you have to see this so you can tell your people. Juujû says to tell the truth I thought Eunice just wanted company and she knew I was not scared easily. The two of them connected with three other women. All of them were ACK. They wanted to go make noise and agitate until the government released Harry Thuku. They had heard that the reverend vicar of All Saints was going to be there at the protest and so that gave them confidence to join in. But there was a lot of bad feeling because a lot of those women who were protesting even the ones in the EACC were prostitutes and you know watu wa kanisa it's as if Jesus didn't have prostitute friends. So these women didn't tell anyone they were going. Juujû says the men at the protest were just going along with the wazungu men until then now the women got fed up and start shouting for the wazungu to release Thuku immediately and to stop mistreating Africans packing them like kondoo in Pumwani and that they are going to burn down the beer factory and they tell the men the Africans to stop behaving like they wear dresses

or do they want to exchange trousers. After the women refuse to go home and start talking like this the men, all of them, the protestors, the wazungu and the police get very upset and that is when now the shooting starts. No one near her pulls up their dresses but the crowd is one of thousands and she is not close to the front there with those ladies bari na Nyanjiru maybe there those women lift their blouses to the police who you know police they start shooting immediately and people are running and screaming and more shooting because not only the police are shooting the wazungu from the hotel are shooting she starts to lie down but someone pulls her then lets go so she falls hurt someone falls on her the shooting continues the cops and the wazungu want to kill as many as possible she faints and when she wakes up believes she's dead. Only her and Eunice survive. The police let the survivors run away. Maybe they're too tired the way they were so tired that they started shooting. A lot of people have already disappeared into the shanty behind Norfolk and down the river others up the hill. For many hours it is not safe to collect the dead not because of the police but because the wazungu patrol in case there are more Africans and their women causing trouble. It takes me almost the whole night to fall asleep. When I do my dreaming is thick and confused. I dream about the protest. In my dreaming juujû is Gloria. Mum is her friend Eunice. We are all of us there, even Brenda. But I'm the one naked. Aside from dreams like this the whole visit is tension. Daddy is depressed but we refuse to acknowledge this. Mum causes chaos over smallsmall things she fights with juujû until daddy has to tell her it's not done like that. She does not stop right away it takes daddy telling her to stop more than once with force. I leave to wander the estate like a woman after her own heart in full Gail Devers knowing you can't

get near but to give up means death. It isn't living it is the kingdom before death I encounter my friends but pass them like ghosts I see is it Gloria but she's too far away I want to stop but I can't I have come far away from the estate people looking at me like I'm crazy I am heavy with nothing empty my body please, please no organs nothing give me that shining face give me the second sun not this gob of hot spit drizzling teeth down my neck and back and into my stupid pussy. When I get home my father has gone upstairs. He hasn't eaten Sarah tells me looking afraid. I go to my room and read the words crumble my heart a sleepless porcupine urinating mum yelling draws me out and down the stairs to hear her shout you're not going to die in my house! and silence and her breathing like a horse I hear juujû say to her child slow and sure tiga kwigûa bûthûku mam, ndigûkinya mûthia jwa rûgendo rwakwa.

[22] was this a waste, was this confusion, was this to stop being yourself whoever that is, was this to play, to sell yourself short because the long is too long and you are bad at selling yourself you hear that's how it's done but you want to give yourself away you have never known not to people keep insisting you must but you can't and now here we are, no need to imagine, here we are, excess, confusion, waste, cessation and shortselling those alibis for loving bad alibis yes and why bother be real you don't need alibis you don't need to hide from yourself or her you may hide from others because see how they are but not her she knows who you are why bother hiding the part you want to give her most ask better you go find out if you haven't if she's still if she will and leaping within and without I stride to her gate. And knock. A face peers between curtains that make a wimple. Ice plunges my wilded body. The

wait cuts in a blur. I beg my legs to wait. The door opens. I hide my joy from Agnes's looking. I am terrified Gloria would not understand. Her expression joins her stepping to the gate as though at gunpoint. My heart is plunged deeper. The world wimples. Hi. Hi. What was it you wanted? Her hair is down. There is a stud where the hole used to be. Gold dot to match the ones at her ears. Um so to say sorry for being mean to you. She giggles. Her eyes mock me. You tried. But you don't know how. What do we do? What do you want to? You know. Her eyes dance again but the mockery isn't as strong. And there is something else there that looks like fear. I went to visit my grandmother. Oh. I'm not so surprised I miss the searching expression. She wants to know what I think. That's so good. It is. Yes, I, what did, how did that happen? I'll tell you, and opens the gate. She steps out and we walk away. I can feel Agnes' stare drilling into my back but so what. Gloria's grandmother has had a change of heart. She called several times and each time Gloria hung up until she and Agnes got into an argument. Agnes did not want her to talk to her grandmother but she wanted the woman to stop calling and so Gloria answered the fifth time. They spoke and she went to visit. Gloria's grandmother explained that she had been shocked and made all kinds of apologies. She admitted that she was too quick to believe everything her son and her other relatives told her. That she had made a terrible mistake. I told her I didn't expect you of all people to betray me and what you're saying now, it can't help me. It can't. I spent two years in prison. Two years! They did horrible things to me and what you have to say, that you're sorry, what does it mean to me. Anyway I let her talk, I listened to her apologies, she's saying she wants to sponsor me to get my KCSE certificate, that she'll pay for me to go to

school overseas but I—you didn't tell her no. I, I told her maybe. I told her she can't bribe me into forgiving her. Maybe it's not a bribe. Gloria is irritated. It's a bribe obvious. Maybe, I continue, she is floating because she made such a big mistake and does not know how to—to what? To fix it? Not fix it. To look for forgiveness. Not with a bribe, excuse me. A peace offering? I don't care. Gloria is not the Gloria who moves lightly. She is heavy, impossibly heavy. She has been the entire time. She knew it. We could have as well but did not want to. That ignorance is no longer an option for me. Did you forgive her? Who are you to ask me that? She stops and turns to me, her eyes burning. I look away. Who are you? I am so afraid. But she is so close and even in my fear I want to be even closer. I force myself to look up at her and to say I like you a lot and I want us to continue I want you I know you want me tell me I'm wrong. Her burning eyes burn brighter. She stares at me, then walks off. I don't follow her. She's gone a good ten meters before she realizes I am not beside her. She stops and turns. Her arms are straight and stiff, her hands bunched into fists. I don't believe she will attack me but if she does I have no idea how I will react. She's bigger than me, stronger, harder, and didn't she say I tried to be mean? This woman who is not a murderer. Come, I say. Stop your jokes, but her face softens. Her one hand opens, the other is pressed against her hip. Her breathing has slowed. Come. For what now? But she steps towards me with those long lightlegged legs, Gloria, sulky sad injured and somehow fine, alive in strength and lightness no one has yet taken away and won't, not with me here. I know what I will say to her when she reaches me. I will say: I know where we won't be disturbed.

[23] *Extract of letter from Agnes Korir to Abigail Kinyanjui (undated)*

—that she was a devil. A complete and total devil. That is what I concluded initially when she arrived in my care. I was given the responsibility of looking after many young people. Young girls. Not women. Girls. A lot of them were in our institution because of this mistake. The mistake they made was to think they were women before they were women. And you know, most of us when we are at that age we must be closely guided, more than boys. Where this guidance is not present there will be problems, and those problems are more serious I tell you than if it is the boys who are going astray. It is my experience that with boys you have two chances. With girls you have one chance. If you do not get them when this chance arrives you have lost them. And let me tell you, though it is something you have seen yourself: when you lose a boy to immorality and criminality you lose one person. When you lose a girl you have lost a whole village. Now, unfortunately, this is not an issue that is well-known. That is the first challenge. Actually no. It is known but, let me say that society does not see it as a problem. Until that day comes when we can accept that we must take better care of our girls than we are doing presently. I still believe this, even after everything that transpired, actually maybe also because of what happened between the two of us and subsequent to that. Between myself and Gloria. I do not know. No, that is not right. I know, but this is a knowledge I have not reconciled with. Why have I not reconciled? Because it makes me into a person I do not recognize. Still to this day in fact. I live as two people instead of one. No, not two. Three. There is the one who eats and wears clothes and goes to work and to church and gym, and in the evening she comes back to her house and the man

who lives there. There is the one who watches the first woman do these things. The second woman does not watch quietly. She is forever commenting on everything, from the biggest issue to the smallest detail. And she does it with some type of bitterness. Other times it is humor that is dominant. What is happening is a kind of fun for her. And then there is the third person behind the first two who she is like someone from a dream. You know in a dream you can at times recognize a person but the face is different than the one you know. This happens because your mind does not want you to know who it is. It does not want to reveal who that person is. This is interesting because in many of these dreams it is obvious who the person is, because, and this is what I find interesting, your mind is not that interested in its duty of secrecy. It is not so interested in keeping this identity from you. It is giving you the option of seeing the truth, if that is what you want. And the strange thing is that even in dreaming, which is about giving you what you want, there is something you cannot see even though that is what you want the most. That last third person sees everything and is reconciled to herself. Or that is how I think when I am desperate. I think it the way you hold onto a ladder that is shaking, the one you should not have touched. I do not know if where I am going will be there when I arrive. I do not know if I will discover that I came the wrong way. I was sure for so many years I had come the wrong way and I really hated myself, more than I hated Gloria. But I am never sure these days. And if I am not sure, if the person I meet in my dreams is not even that third person I think it is, then it is not impossible that maybe behind her there is a fourth person, the one the three of us are answerable to. If she is there she is who I am addressing myself to.

FREED FROM DESIRE, MIND AND SENSES PURIFIED

This would've been in '98 or '99. I had just cleared high school. Vanessa was in her third year at the University of Manchester. There used to be three of us. My brother Eric died of leukaemia a few days before his twelfth birthday and a month after I joined State House Girls. He was mum's favourite. As for my father, he and mum were fighting a lot right around the time Eric got sick. Without wanting to, I ended up playing peacemaker. Vanessa disappeared into schoolwork. She's the brainiac in the family but like most chops doesn't know what to do about people. Myself I'm not what you call all the way streetwise but I have a vastly better handle on what Paul calls "interpersonal dynamics". Why? Because I had to. When my father moved out Vanessa took it very hard. Not that you'd know she was number two in the entire stream that term. Still: that first week I would hear her crying in the bathroom. She'd cry for a long time but I never saw her come out with her eyes anything but dry and clear. Dry-*ish*, anyhow. It was Mercy, who asked me about all the empty bottles of eyedrop. Mercy, Mercy. She helped a lot. A big gossip but a hard worker, honest, and she liked mum.

Loved her, actually. She didn't like that V was taking her dad leaving so hard, even if she didn't show it and tried to talk to my sister about it. V blasted her, told her she was just a stupid mboch and that she should stop meddling in family matters. That kind of thing. After that they kept out of each other's way, which is hard to do in a three-bedroom. Mum and V already had their tensions and so when she—mum I mean—got on V's case about being rude to Mercy, things just got worse. A month later my sister moved out. She went and stayed with an aunt of mine, Sarah—dad's older sis, who had never gotten along with my mother. Even in the best of times such stunts are wounding. Before mum and dad separated V was always over there. Whenever she came back, and depending on my mother's mood, there would be an argument. But with both Eric and my father gone, Vanessa leaving to go *live* with that woman was a breathtakingly shitty thing to do.

I saw her on the weekends mostly. Sometimes we met at the mall. She'd be with her friends or, one time, with a whole *boy*. It was kind of a shock to see the goody-goody with *boys*. The first few times she pretended not to see me and honestly I was relieved. Then maybe, I want to say two—?—weeks after that, Makena and I ran into her. V came up to us and was so huggyhuggy. Shockingly—I say shockingly but the fake *hiiii* and aggressive hugging had done most of the work—she proceeded to *introduce* us to the guy—a different one. He wasn't into it and okay it's no surprise. He just, I remember he grunted, didn't want to shake hands. A dick, but that was her type, because she didn't know any better. A year after that V did her finals and surprised no one by being in the top five of the entire country. Mum tried reaching out, invited her to a lunch, but V refused. I don't think mum

expected her to accept, but I could see the rejection hurt her. And it hurt me too, if we're being honest, to watch mum—the aggrieved party—making an effort and V giving no fucks whatsoever. I didn't tell V what I thought. I guess I felt—no, I was sure she wouldn't listen, that she might even decide to make me an enemy. But what was I going to do? I didn't know. Being in my first year of high school didn't help with that, or with my general confidence in life, which wasn't high. Then, while all this was going on, my father started divorce proceedings. Remember, my brother has been in the ground for something like six months. And so then the guy filing for divorce was like, like a starter pistol for the rain of shit to start pouring. I got mugged outside our house, something that had *never* happened, and people were so puzzled about it they kept asking us—asking us in quotes—if maybe there wasn't something else going on. A piece of land my mum owns was stolen—they didn't even bother with fake deeds, they just grabbed it. Mercy almost got electrocuted. People would come to the house looking for my father—cops, other guys in bad suits, a woman who said she had a kid with him, *another* woman who said he owed her money meant for starting a church—his sisters—Aunt Sarah and her other three sisters—went around telling everyone that my mum had bewitched him. I mean, and my so-called father, that guy escaped this whole mess. None of it landed on him, to my knowledge. I was watching this movie the other day and one of the characters was talking about the villain. He said: that guy's more slippery than a buttered eel. That's who my father turned out to be. And so all this is happening, what does my sister do? She takes off. Just goes. Doesn't tell us, doesn't say anything until the last minute: I'm going to the UK. She said she was going to study and it was a good school, scholarship, blah

blah blah, but at that point I couldn't see the chop who processed her grief by throwing herself into studying. I could only see that chick I met at the mall, the one who pretended like everything was okay when it wasn't. The one who left us to go live with the eel's sister.

Three years is a thousand when you're that young. High school for me was one of the longest best periods of my life. Or do I mean one of the best longest? And *not* just because it felt like mostly unbroken goodness. But because it still does. Anyhow, nobody wants to say *the* absolute best, so I would count that era as being almost as good a time as now. Why? I was *not* my sister. I wasn't a chop. Smart yes, but like Deng Xiaoping: hide your power, be patient. So far as everyone knew I liked what everyone liked. But it's also more and less than that. I was popular because I started developing earlier. I was a sprout my first year but had college body in Form Two. V had that model height but I was just tallish. But so when my hips popped, my ass, and my boobs, all of that on my tallish body looked bigger. Like the big that makes older male relatives all of a sudden very uncomfortable. Of which, fine, I mean, I was already awkward about it for everyone. These grown men would talk to me looking at the ceiling or at the floor, through the window to the right, at the person next to me who wasn't even part of the conversation, anywhere except *at me*—just in case the eyes slipped. But then, having even one aunt or older cousin in the room, forget a troop of aunties, made their self-consciousness almost excruciating to witness. Almost. Right around this time is when the song blew up. I liked it a lot but then the song didn't really give you an option because you heard it everywhere, I mean. But I would always trip over the lyrics. Like

I would be riding the jav with friends having ducked school and while they flirted with the kangé I would try to get the lyrics. I thought she sang—that is, I thought I *heard* her sing: *my lover's kind of horny/ he's got a strong* release. Since I mean it was possible that's what she sang if you think about what you hear on the radio, I thought this is incredibly open. Like so let me clarify that this parsing of lyrics did *not* happen all at once but rather after a million-plus listens. I understood that this was her discussing her man's potency, down to the detail about the force and volume of load. Which is, yes, something women do with each other, but don't tell men that. Except she wasn't claiming that her man was virile and that he came hard. It didn't matter that this cum-friendly attitude and the part about being freed from desire clashed, because anyone who's ever felt like they were on fire from wanting it so badly and not getting that *it* that you want will play with the idea that maybe it would be better not to feel at all. You get? But also, and this is the thing that's a bit easier to get, wanting *more* of what you're having isn't good for you. So, balance? Or, maybe, she didn't care one way or the other, the way you do when everything's just too intense and too hard to figure out. The singer fascinated me. There was a push-and-pull though still because I was kind of scared to know her. The internet wasn't a thing yet, and I somehow never saw the video for the song or sat to watch that part of the chart show where they have the artist come answer questions about what you're wearing and what *inspired* you to come up with the song. So I fantasized about her life. What she looked like—for sure black, with short bleached hair, eight-karat stud. She lived in New York. In a penthouse. Back then I thought everyone in New York lived in either penthouses or that one awful gorofa ruled by Wesley Snipes (who

deserves a special mention here—as in I’m still tasting orgasms I gave myself fantasizing about him). Anyways, she was black, mocha sister to caramel goddess number one Naomi, and she lived well away from drug lords with god-complexes. She lived in Paris half the year, wintered on the Côte d’Azur and in the Caribbean, which is where she was originally from. Did she come to Africa? Yes, but *West* Africa—Ghana, Nigeria, Senegal to do a track with Baaba Maal. If she did come to the east, I thought, she’d probably pull an MJ and go next door to Tanzania or stop over on her way to Mauritius. They’d interview her at the airport and run the interview on KTN at seven after the crime and politics. When Lauryn Hill came to town and did this impromptu mini-concert everyone who went said was really wild (even Lauryn Hill) I was vindicated. Just by turning up this real-life figure affirmed that my fantasizing wasn’t just fantasizing, which was something I had not considered. Great yes but then now what do you do with it? As far as I knew fantasies were not *for* anything. Killing boredom. Taking the sting out of my sadness. But honestly none of this felt like it was for anything in the way school or a job felt important. Where I got this idea I can’t tell you because I don’t know.

Anyhow there had been talk between my mother and sister. V was supposed to visit but wasn’t sure if she should because the plane might fall out of the sky once the computers reset. I was surprised the two of them were even talking but whatever. I had forgotten about her trip until my friend who was a boy got a call on his phone from my mother of all people. I didn’t even ask how she had his number. ‘Your sister is arriving tomorrow in the evening. You can collect her, isn’t it?’ She wasn’t asking. I asked

Kevin's arm. He was a sweet guy and wanted in my jeans, so he said yes.

We got there late. V had been waiting for at least half an hour. I jumped out and ran toward her and she sort of backed away until she saw that it was her sister. The guy next to her I didn't notice until after she and I hugged and over her pretend-complaining and my not-so-pretend eye rolling. She introduced the guy as Freddie. I wanted badly to mock her accent. I took his hand. And don't judge me but I remember that it was rough, shamba-boy rough. The two of them were standing with their backs to the lights and so I couldn't really see his face. He may have smiled. But he mumbled what sounded like *Hey*. It was hard to tell. I smelt beer. He didn't look drunk but come on, very much *not* a good first impression. Kevin put their luggage in the car. It surprised me when Freddie got into the backseat with V. She didn't say anything and I suppose I wouldn't have wanted her to. Had she told mum she was bringing a guy with her? How was that going to work?

I climbed into the front passenger side and we drove away. Kevin, bless him, did most of the talking and was a gentleman throughout. But the vibe was too strange. I asked him to drop me home first. He wasn't expecting that but did not try to talk me out of it. Vanessa and Freddie were probably too tired to react. When I got to my bed I pulled the cover over my head and shut my eyes, unable to sleep.

I didn't see my sister for two days. When she called she said she and Freddie were jetlagged which, I mean, bullshit. When mum heard us on the phone she did not ask if it was Vanessa I was talking to—exactly the sort of non-question she would usually open a conversation—excuse me, an interrogation—with. She

asked me to help her find the bill for that month's M-NET subscription. So she wasn't hot for the encounter either. V made small talk then came to the point: would I join her and Freddie for lunch at the hotel?

I went with Makena. Fair's fair, I thought. I wore a sleeveless yellow knee-length and sandals. I wore my hair back. It was really hot, I remember. My feet were so sweaty that when I wasn't worried about breaking the straps or the smell I was terrified I was going to fall. I wanted to impress my big sis, show her I was worldly and sophisticated. But at the same time I couldn't stand being so worried about what she thought. Anyway. So we got to the Panafric and made our way to the restaurant terrace. And there was my fabulous older sister with I couldn't believe the guy next to her was the very same one I'd seen three nights before. That Saturday afternoon, "Freddie" was the most beautiful man I had ever seen. Who was it who said that what he did—the only thing he did? —was liberate the sculpture from the marble? Well, it felt like someone (my sister?) had liberated Freddie from the stuff of my dreams. He actually got up when we walked onto the terrace. V looked at him like he was mad, then did the same and held out her arms as if to intercept me before I jumped him. It had not occurred to me that that was an option. I may have wet myself a little. Fussing with my dress, I sat down ("Is something the matter with your dress?" "Hmm?") then remembered to introduce Makena.

There's a photo of this lunch, taken by a waiter who was, in my sister's words, "thrilled to bits" with the honour, which baffled the foreigner. Freddie and Vanessa are in the centre. I'm seated on the right, by my sister. She has one hand on my arm. Her other arm is wrapped around my shoulders. She is leaning her

head against mine. She is giving the camera a haughty stare. I look like a disappointed kidnap victim. Freddie and Makena are two people who have just met and are having their picture taken. The waiter has grouped us toward the right. We are bunched up as if avoiding something invisible between the table and a large potted fern. Freddie's white linen shirt is white and lightly rumpled. The top two buttons are open, showing a tuft of the chest hair, the sleeves rolled up. The mocha of his face is a shade lighter on his forearms. He is wearing a large watch on one wrist, a dive watch. On the other is a tan leather strap with coloured beads that looks like it was made by a child. He has a broad face creased with traveller's anxieties, boyfriend worries. Looking into those alert, friendly eyes felt like slipping into a warm bath. At the time I'd have just said his eyes were sexy. Sexy eyes, sexy mouth, sexy hands, sexy everything. Everything? Being literally by my sister's side made it hard to confirm this without risking that she'd catch me. I felt a twinge of something that wanted to be guilt. Then Vanessa went to use the loo. (One of the weird things to happen that trip was that Vanessa's tummy kept giving her trouble but Freddie's did not.)

Makena did the talking. I mostly tried not to be obvious. But then so being quiet didn't help. So I talked at him and hoped I wasn't babbling. Maybe I'm being too tough on myself. When I shut my eyes and sit with my discomfort, there's more that happened and that wasn't uncomfortable that enters the frame. We talked. I can't say about what. I just remember that feeling in my chest like a trap door opened and something fell and kept falling like it would fall forever. And that drop felt so horribly drippily good.

V came back. I should say she sprinted back, and you would too if you left your man in between two pretty young things in skimpy dresses. But then I think I was the bigger worry for my sister, at that slightly below conscious level. And also Makena could walk into Mass naked and no one would find anything wrong. Understand that's not to say Makena wasn't attractive. She was, and she is. But beauty is just one of her gifts. She has charisma too, the understated kind. I once joked that she should run for president (it sounded like the craziest thing I'd ever said for exactly two minutes). Twenty-odd years later Makena is a well-to-do Canadian. When I brought up the presidency thing again in a Zoom chat a few weeks back she said, "not me, Karina", her daughter, then added 'you mean premier,' which until then had struck me as the kind of thing my biological sister would say. Makena, then, could've sat on the guy's face and V would not have batted an eye. I, however, would have *given* an eye to get away with the same. Maybe a minute after V sat down I excused myself to go to the ladies'. I took the last stall. I wadded some TP, which I pinched under my arm, then slipped off the bikini bottom I had on underneath. I'm looking around for a place to put it, and there isn't, so I twist it and pull it up my forearm. Then I sort of just dabbed at myself, press and hold, which sounds maybe odd I don't know, but I didn't want there to be as much—I felt like there was a lot—and if I just wiped myself and looked at it I wouldn't have that window of lying to myself that it wasn't a lot, and preparing myself for evidence to the contrary. But it turned out I wasn't that wet, which I confess to having mixed and slightly panicky feelings about. Anyway, I get back to our table, and V is doing a lot of the talking, which confused me. The V I knew was awkward, bad at conversation. This one dished,

gushed, joked, interjected and did it all in a generic posh accent that was very convincing and, I noticed, had the diction to match. It was the diction that gave away the old Vanessa, the chop obsessed with getting everything perfectly right.

When Freddie asked Makena about herself I decided that was a good in for me to mention by the way that her dad was a hotelier with a stake in a lodge in Maasai Mara and other hotels, including ‘one or two’ at the coast. Vanessa looked at her, blinking her eyes the way she did when something caught her off-guard then said, “I’d forgotten that.” Freddie started offering up their itinerary when my sister cut him off and said they’d left the bulk of their schedule “open-ended”. Makena innocently listed the different places she and I had been to on holiday courtesy of her dad, pausing now and then to fake-check details with me. This was the one thing we hadn’t rehearsed but we were flowing like we had. I was very proud. “And so what about you, Freddie?” That was me, also innocent. Before my sister could answer for him he told us—Makena and I—about growing up in the Caribbean and how life in a tourist paradise can be hell for the locals. “I don’t know that you could relate to that,” he said, “coming from privilege like you do.” This confused Makena and I: remember this is 99; I saw my sis give this little smile. “Same with you,” was Makena’s tart response, followed by “You took a plane to get here so you don’t get to judge us in our own country.” Freddy chuckled and shrugged. “That’s true.” V didn’t glare at Makena, not exactly. I on the other hand was so appalled that things had gone wrong so quickly that before I could think I jumped up and said, “I feel like swimming.” I gave Makena a look that said ‘don’t make it weird by not following me’ and went off the terrace and down to the pool area. I pulled off my dress and tossed it onto the nearest

foldout, kicked off my shoes and dove into the water. It looked so glamorous in my head that even with water in my nose I was dying to see their reaction. Once the discomfort in my nose faded I let myself look over in their direction. They weren't looking. Who was looking was this whale of a guy in black Speedos and sunglasses and a chain. I ducked back under the water. Rather than put me off, Freddie's remark had put his better bits into sharper focus. I mean personality-wise. The way he'd made that remark wasn't malicious. He wasn't needling. He was being sincere. Wrong, of course, completely, but before all of that we had moved between subjects exchanging opinions without it being weird or off-putting. Thinking on that thing he said showed he could be funny. And a good listener; his questions made what you'd just said sound more intelligently put together than it was but also exactly the way it sounded in your head. No wonder my sister had a big head. Being around him made *me* feel, when I wasn't biting my lip and trying not to look, like there would be a time when I could be around him and be myself in a way I hadn't before. I noticed what happened to V when her sense of comfort and security was interfered with. So far, this included the sight of me in a two-piece, dripping. Right as I came up onto the terrace I saw Freddie trying very hard not to follow my progress. I don't know that she caught him, but my sister was tetchy through the rest of lunch. I felt for Freddie. Makena and I went and met some boys at Pavement and then had a sleepover at her place, listening to house and talking into the early hours of the morning.

Makena knew what I was up to and she was scandalized. You can't do it, she said. It's so...bad. Bad? I denied it, and in that moment I believed my denial. And what if he...responds. I saw

him watching you. I saw him watching me and it's just watching. Don't be disgusting I wouldn't let him touch me. And to prove it I made a disgusted face. But I was working out exactly how I would do more than let him touch me and thrilled at my own daring. I remember thinking, like an idiot, that it would have been enough to fantasize about making out with Freddie and maybe getting me off with his fingers while we made out and leave it at that. Where this other thing to want to actually have him came from I didn't know. Not jealousy. And not, I told myself, to see if I could. I was very sure I could. I'd stolen boyfriends before, except I always said it's not stealing if you can't hold his attention. A few years ago a mutual friend of Paul's and I from before either of us knew each other ran into us at a restaurant. She saw the rings and laughed. Then she glanced at Paul and asked me "and who did you steal him from?" Ever since then, Paul, whom I did *not* steal, by the way, has been fascinated by this idea that I was a man-stealer. He won't accept that it's completely unjustified. Anyway, my point is that at the time of my sister's visit I didn't feel there was any challenge in seducing her boyfriend. Still, the fact that I was working so hard to convince myself it wasn't a challenge bothered me. I wanted pure uncomplicated lust like I felt that first time and had known I was feeling while I tried to act like it was something else. After Makena and I got up late the next day we listened to music in her room. Kevin called looking for me, then mum. I really had nothing to say to either of them. Makena noticed my funk but didn't press me. In fact, I think she pitied me, but she didn't want to catch what I had. When she went downstairs I climbed onto the bed. Kneeling upright, I posed in front of the full-length mirror, something Vicky and I did a lot of together. After a few poses I pulled off the sweater I always wore

when I was sleeping over. I folded my arms under my breasts, raised my chin, angled my head to the side, pouted my lips. Which is how Makena found me when she came back. Her mum was going shopping and wanted to know if we would keep her company. Keeping her company meant she would buy us a few clothes and we'd go for ice cream afterwards. While Makena got ready I jumped into the shower. Halfway through I did something I had never before: I got myself off to somebody who wasn't a movie star or singer, somebody I stood a more than reasonable chance of actually sleeping with. I came so hard I thought two things. The first thing was that I was going blind, and the second was that it would be really embarrassing to fall down in my friend's shower because my legs had stopped working because I came so hard.

We went shopping, had a late lunch, ice cream. I felt subdued but happy. Weightless, but tethered to a weight I was right on the verge of lifting.

The next day, or maybe a few days after that, Kevin and I had sex. I'm sure I enjoyed it but probably because I split the difference and imagined I was with Freddie. I know it would bruise Kevin a little to hear that, but if it did it would be because the guy misunderstood: I'm not being as clear as I should be. Speaking of Kevin, I saw him three, four years ago at some corporate thing. Very tall, very proper. Not at all dull, which is what tends to happens when you're proper. I did not get a chance to speak to him for more than a few minutes but we set a lunch date for later that week, which is how I found out that I was his first. Of course I didn't believe him but his very proper insistence on setting the record straight took me some of the way. I said to him: you're a great actor then, because I couldn't tell. He gave me

this devilish look and said, that's what being in corporate communications is: acting. I had the perfectly ludicrous idea that by deflowering him I'd set let something terrible loose in the world. We chat now and then and he's always sending me invitations to events. I've gone to a few, done some great networking there. I even bagged a deal I ended up making so much money from that I was able to buy some upmarket property I'd been eyeing for the longest time. But the really great thing was that there was enough money left over to give myself and Paul an expensive vacation. Which is probably the reason why, alongside the most leisure time I have had since marriage, all this is on my mind.

My sister and Freddie went on safari in Mara, thanks to you know who. My sister pretended to have a crisis over whether or not they should change their plans, but it was too good a deal to pass up. A friend once said to me, everyone's a slut, you just have to know what for. I don't think that's it, exactly. While V and Freddie were away for "three magical nights" I went on with my post-high school career as full-time party girl, part-time layabout. I didn't register that the lovely couple had decided to extend their trip by an extra day until after they were back and I came home to hear my sister's voice in the sittingroom. I eavesdropped until my mother, who had heard someone come in, asked Mercy if that was me. Mercy glanced at me from the kitchen. She looked nervous and upset. I guessed that my sister had turned up without calling ahead. Still looking at me, Mercy nudged her head in the direction of the sittingroom and let out a loud and uncharacteristic "yes, she is the one" in her heavy Kamba accent. I tramped into the sittingroom, which had been like a museum ever since my father left and in which the three seated figures looked like actors

marooned on a long-forgotten set. V and Freddie were in that willed cheerfulness on behalf of the team each member feels she or he has to muster so they're not the one who gets blamed when the tension between them breaks out. From the way they looked at me I couldn't tell for sure if I had been part of whatever massive fight they'd had surrounded by wildebeest. It was obvious they'd had a fight. A big one. It flattered my vanity to think so. And yet, since I hadn't actually *done* anything, I was irritated. Mum was politely oblivious; this was the beginning of the genteel manner she would develop once she decided not to remarry and pursue love instead. She listened to her daughter's report on the trip, then asked Freddie about his impressions of our country, and then about Barbados. I was safely forgotten. I was not going to have any catty sidebar with my sis, so I listened to Freddie's answers, which, once he relaxed, got longer and more detailed. The man could tell a story. While listening to him, I was in Barbados. I watched him grow up in a large family of fisher folk. I watched his grandmother support him when he tried to find a life away from the sea—hard to do on an island—a life of books and learning. A life big enough, he said—and I'll never forget this—a life big enough to fit the castle of his skin. A bit later mum asked Vanessa to help her make lunch and told me to keep our guest entertained. She didn't use the word 'entertain'. It was more 'don't disappear' or 'don't go hide yourself in the bedroom'. I immediately turned on the TV and found something watchable, turned up the volume, lowered it when mum complained. For five good minutes neither of us has anything to say but then so the realization comes to me, you know, that if I stay quiet I will never get another chance. So I open my mouth...and I ask the guy why he and Vanessa were together. (I meant to ask: why are *you*

with Vanessa?) I realize now that I was banking on the tension between the two giving me some kind of opening. Freddie shot me a vaguely hostile look similar enough to another look I knew—the one that pitied me in my ignorance—that I was already thinking up something cutting to pre-empt his answer with. Still. I hoped for a pitiful “I don’t know”. Then I could console him. I thought about how he might even phrase this in a way that told me he knew that I knew that he knew my interest was the opposite of innocent and in such a way that I understood it as an invitation to help find out why, again and again, until we had an answer that satisfied the both of us. I may have used my black goddess come-hithering to speed things along.

Freddie’s face went through several expressions before settling into a slightly sad look that matched his voice as he said, “I’m in love with her.” Almost immediately we both turned to the kitchen: the distress in my sister’s voice had jumped away from the other kitchen sounds and she was shouting. I could hear Mercy muttering. Mum spoke in a low shaky voice. I made out: “—and so what do you want, my daughter? Truly, tell me.”

Vanessa yelled: “This isn’t *about*. You’re not, you *can’t*. You *never* tried! You never *tried*!” She choked back the sobs queuing in her throat and bolted into the sittingroom.

Freddie stood and raised his arms to hold her. She pushed past him to the door. “We’re leaving.” He followed, and started to shut the door behind him but did not.

The three of us listened, expecting to hear them coming back. I looked at my mother, who’d come out of the kitchen, and at Mercy, who stood exactly a meter away. My mother was shaking. Mercy had her lips folded inside her mouth, one arm across her chest like a shield, the other held to her side as if to keep it from

springing forward. I avoided at my reflection. I knew what I'd see. A little later we heard the engine start, and the gravel as the car rolled over it past the gate and out onto the road.

My sister lives in Geneva with her second husband and three children. The children are all from the second marriage. Every Christmas I get a card from her. The cards come with chocolate. I keep the cards in one of my mum's old jewellery box, a glossy teakwood monster inlaid with floral mother-of-pearl designs. I found it when mum finally decided to move out of the old house and into an apartment we got her in Lavington. It's on the ground floor and has a decent-sized backyard where she does her workouts and gardening. She got her first card the year after I did. Hers come with chocolate, but she's type-2 and can't eat them, so she gifts them to the couple in the next apartment. I've met them: they're nice. Every so often work will bring my sister to town for a few days but we've never been able to do more than have a quick coffee before she's off to her next meeting. I tell her about what mum is up to because she won't ask, even though she wants to. I tell her about Paul and I.

On our last coffee date, I asked her about Freddie.

She frowned, her eyes widened.

"Oh. That was a long time ago."

"And?"

"And nothing. We broke up."

"He told me he was in love with you."

She frowned again.

"Doesn't sound like him. He was closed off."

"Intimidated maybe. And he's a man. You have to read the signs."

“Like tea leaves you mean.”

She tilted her cup.

“Or coffee grinds.”

“No thanks.”

Cup down, her thumb moved to the underside of her ring while she stared at a point beyond the traffic.

Then I suppose the silence got too silent and she noticed what she was doing.

She took her finger off the ring.

And noticed me watching.

“What’s he doing these days, do you know?” I had absolutely no idea why I was asking about Freddie, but I kept going.

She had taken out her phone. “Who?”

“Freddie.”

“You’re still on that? Hold on.” A minute later she was leaving for her next meeting. I watched her get into the chauffeured car, the window down, phone at her ear. Just before the car turned into the street she put the phone down, gave me a quick smile and wave. I waved back, but she was on her call again. For a moment I was alone on the sidewalk. I laughed. An older man walking past smiled. His wife/daughter/mistress did not.

It took me just over an hour to online to find him. The trip was already planned and we had two days before the flight. I did it I think almost as a dare to myself. I expected to find nothing. Or maybe not. And anyway if I did I was confident—how could I not be? —that it wouldn’t make any difference (difference to what, exactly? And whom? I didn’t want to go there). I stared at the page for like a minute. It was definitely him. Older, professorial. John Frederick Alleyne, marine conservation

biologist, currently based at the Bellairs Research Institute in Holetown, Barbados. The next thing I did, with much more care and deliberation, was to tell my husband about him.

Once he had heard a version of the story I have given here he kind of shrugged and asked, “your sister’s ex?”

I nodded once, let out a careful “yes” and made the most innocent face possible.

He glanced at his phone, scrolled, looked up but not at me.

“Is he into diving?”

“He’s a marine biologist.”

“For sure, for sure.” Phone again.

“Babe?”

“Hmm?”

“We’ll look him up when we get there.”

Not looking up: “sawa, babe. Sounds good.” But then on the way to the airport he seemed kind of sulky. Eighteen hours later, we were out on the water, and he couldn’t even remember what he’d been bothered about.

It’s been two weeks and I can barely recognize this man I call my husband. He’s a hit on the ship. The recreational guy has basically taken him on as his unpaid assistant. It’s like a movie. They’ll run off together and I’ll have to go looking for them. We have been in Barbados a day and he’s already dropping little Bajanisms into his conversation. And every time one of the locals gives him that seal-riding-a-bicycle-while-balancing-a-beach-ball-on-its-nose reaction, he looks like the boy who won first prize. It’s adorable and annoying. We’re to meet Freddie for lunch tomorrow. At his mother’s house. When he called yesterday to confirm we’re coming I was trying on different bits, some I

brought with me from home, most of it bought here. And they are very bitty *bits*. That's when he added his own now about his mother's house. Your mother? My voice was, I pretended to be delighted. And he's no idiot. He knew exactly what I was up to. I heard it in how he laughed, a sound that daggered my pussy. I had to check myself. She's a great cook, he said. Best on the island. Sure, I said, trying not to pee. We can't wait. End call. You know, I was *mad*, but he did it in a clever way, so not *too* mad. And no mention of a wife so perhaps being extra careful. For Paul's sake. Whom he doesn't know. Men. Paul says I switched suitcases with someone: he's never seen me in what I'm wearing. He likes it, likes to watch me dress in the morning, which then takes forever, but I'm not complaining... Really I just alternate between booty shorts with a T-shirt, sandals, tennis skirt with long-sleeve top. I bought two, but it turns out I can only pull off the one (at my age I'm not complaining God, thank you and thank you). I also have a cargo skirt, tight, floral print, to wear with this very nice turquoise short-sleeve I bought in Saint Thomas. Hat and stunners are of course a must. Sometimes I'll do a sundress, for outings and lunches, because they have got really great designs here and I've bought a few this trip, all of which I must break in. And in the evenings a dera for the informal dinners, black backless gown for when we eat with the captain. Ratchet *and* classy. I like to remember how excited Freddie was, after I FBed him and he was sure he wasn't being scammed. I feel a bit giddy myself. I had this what is it impish desire to send Vanessa photos from the Bajan leg of the trip. Then it went away. Faded into one of those corners of the mind where the things we have outgrown live out the rest of our lives having given up the light and the air and the space and colour to other better things. I've been in this

room too long. Time to shower, change, and join Paul. It's cocktail hour and every girl is Rihanna.

TRUTH AND KNOWLEDGE, OR THE STAKES OF
PLAYGROUND ONEUPMANSHIP DEPENDENTLY
ORIGINATED ON ESTABLISHING WHO ALONE
SHALL CREDIBLY PULL OFF HER INCREASINGLY
OUTLANDISH STORYTELLING AS TRUE DOWN TO
THE LAST DETAIL

There are two sisters: one gives birth to the other and she, in turn, gives birth
to the first. Who are the two sisters?

—the second riddle of the Sphinx

[I don't know anything. I've known this most of my life, but it's only recently that I have found myself able to say with any sort of real confidence that yes, I don't know anything. Mind you, I don't mean the things we can agree on as knowable, as in for example that the weather is sunny or rainy. I mean about the harder trickier variety like okay *I know* that's a smartphone on the table and next to the plate of half-eaten fries its' owner has left to go answer the door. It looks like a smartphone. It has the glassy or hybrid profile and, again from the look of it, the heft and general bristliness you and I and most of the world associate with smartphones, heft and just general bristliness qualities you know

about smartphones from handling them in the past and that would be congruent with those of that particular six-by-three-by-point-four wedge. But how do I know, really, that it's a smartphone, without turning it on and making a call? But what I personally have found even trickier than the (could be) smartphone is the contents of the call I make and receive using it: what, and how, and why people tell me and what—and how, and why—I tell them in return. The question that shrove me apart when asked of me as a little girl and that, to make myself, I have tried to reckon with my life thus far is this: why should I believe you?]

There were three of us: Shadrach “Shadi” (86), Meshach “Shaq” (89), and myself, the Not-Abednego, inaugural nineties’ baby, born into the loving household of Ephraim and Millicent Wafula, bright strong children who would set our parents free. Like the rest of our generation and the one before (but not the one after) we grew up believing we *absolutely* had to tell the truth. We had the understanding, drilled into us daily by parents and school a certain uncle or aunt and other state apparatuses, that not telling the truth was unconscionable—a proscription without caveats and indemnities. Thou shalt not bear false witness. A note: my use of unconscionable isn’t strictly context-appropriate: we did not know this word except through TV. At thirteen I was old enough to understand in a sort of grown up way that every usage-instance of the word more or less invoked the meaning the drama was being staged to bring over: whenever someone described someone else’s moral failure or misdeed as

*unconscionable*¹, this first person, an authority figure or someone cosplaying as Authority, did not just mean bad or wrong but abysmally awful, and was using the word in an epistemically doomed but for this very reason terribly important effort to express the sheer lavid intensity of their authority-figure disappointment, which, for the word *unconscionable* to be used, had gone well beyond the limits of the available idiom. Unconscionable was a word that in the delivery of politicians and actors playing politicians put everything I had not quite understood about the importance of telling the truth and what happened when you did not inside a single frame. Leaving aside the fact that post-Iraq the term has fallen out of use, it has stuck with me, here on the other side of the equator, in a hypostatized and, I realize, equally generic sense².

It took some doing on my part, even with the toolkit available to a clever six-year old, but I grasped that every authority figure of my middle-to-late childhood treated truth as lived or embodied³.

¹ It's hard not to pronounce 'unconscionable' without thinking midway that you really mean to say unconscious and but then tripping over the flat *a* of what is not a suffix, a sound that tends to start off a word, not function its end. Unconscionable is a steeplechase word.

² As gavel-strike or, in the separate but related juridical JIC-unto-Indo-European context, thunderous resound punitive and lethal—one that, if survived, is *dis*-ordering and reconstitution at minutest level. Rending, rendering, rendition. DA DA DA.

³ My first sense of this was that truth and the body were somehow interdigitated: to speak the truth was not enough. Some aspect to how and when you made a true statement made the statement more or less true or an absolute falsehood. *Who* you were was important as well. But,

this did *not* mean that because you were or were not someone who made mostly true or absolutely true statements that we had to believe you, because what adults might think of as a lynchpin of epistemic good standing wasn't that important circa ages 5-7 and only became more of a factor the older we got. While this inverted order meant was that you were more likely to be believed, within limits, the grindingly difficult issue that kept everyone reaching for their inner Nāgārjuna was that no one could point authoritatively to where the limits were and declare for all to accept that 'this is the limit' without having to conjure said authority from out of the air in some *Kiini Macho* flourish everyone would just boo or giggle at, and because legitimating gestures and the threats they were backed with tended to stall the entire train of playground eudaimonia or devolve it into something so un-fun the group broke up, arguments about whether you were really telling the truth or not quickly became arguments about where to draw the line regarding so-and-so's authority to speak authoritatively on the matter at hand, especially if at least one other person, and it was always the person you least expected, made a similar claim, which they had every right to, a right we were bound to respect or why should anyone listen to one person and not the rest. These arguments would go on until a passing ten-year old or teenager felt the irresistible urge to settle the debate (or mock us for it, at which point humiliation and anger would finish the job, and after lingering for a while we would scatter, eagerly forgetting) and we would either challenge this fiat, which was risky, or make shows of submission until they were satisfied and left, and we wordlessly decided to occupy ourselves with something else, and were very rough with whosoever tried to overturn the upright consensus of the defeated with 'you see, I told you'. It would be the rare person who wanted to keep going, because they would do so alone, and come the next go-

around, whether twenty minutes later or the following afternoon, we would hold it against them. And so early on it was strikingly, unfairly evident to me that truthfulness came down to age. The older you were the more likely you were to be telling the truth. Why? Because, so the implicit logic went, older people knew more, their words had an epistemic weight denied the young. And as far as I could tell this was overwhelmingly true all of the time. It was also true, and perhaps more obscurely implicit, that access to knowledge as a younger or slightly younger child did not then mean you *had* to tell the truth, oh no, in fact you avoided at all costs giving your peers the opportunity to challenge your claims, because it wasn't easy or straightforward to defend them, and because even if you messed up and found yourself having to present that defense, whether you'd spent the night before preparing it or cooked it up the instant you realized things were going pear-shaped, you could be dismissed out of hand and have to spend the whole day pushing your arguments on people who weren't interested, the same people you had assumed would be interested because for two days they'd hung on your every word and could not shut up about how cool you were. A safer and less embarrassing option, especially if the knowledge felt kind of tricky, was to *hint* that you knew and make the other kids wheedle and beg and bribe you to share and to draw this out for as long as you could get away with it, so which meant that a lot of the time the game was to throw off the suspicion you had no idea what you were talking about, which, once you succeeded, naturally led to convincing your friends and playmates to let you make up whatever bullshit you wanted, which then became, after the first five or fifty attempts to describe the wonders of _____ and your part in them the right, subject to review, to make up the most convincing stories, provided you did not give anyone sufficient cause to doubt your bullshit. The attractions of this

And so then maybe out of spite or laziness or because they were most days too harassed, the adults in my orbit were not strict absolutists when it came to telling the truth⁴. My father the

are more or less straightforward. It's fun to do, and no one's upset, in fact, if you're good at it they want you to keep going, even though they won't necessarily come out and say that, but the stronger reason more than likely was that I wanted to be on the other side of an experience that was never less than unbearable: being reminded of how little you know is awful. And as a child it often seemed to me that knowing very little is not that different from knowing nothing at all because, as innocence gave way to experience, it became clear just how much more there was to know that wasn't known, and that you'd been so ridiculously ignorant from the first *but didn't know it*, and were going to have to go through life not knowing how much else there was to know even if you devoted every waking second to knowing more. Aside from believing that secret knowledge gave me an advantage over everyone my age and younger, knowing even just that much more than they did meant I felt less of the shame, guilt, fear, loneliness and despair that detonated inside me whenever my friend Diana or her older sister proudly told me something I didn't know, and in place of these multi-ton, oblivion-sounding emotions I experienced the joy that untwisted my guts and straightened my back and cleared my eyes and widened my ears for funneling more of the cosmos into myself.

⁴ Realizing this about them may have been a letdown. I don't remember. What I do recall is thinking, how can they be in charge? Not only did their answers change, but they got annoyed when I pointed this out and threatened me with violence, withholding the crisps and cartoons that were my due as if there were a logical equivalence between their refusal

historian was a representative example of this quiet majority. I don't know how it is in the private lives of other historians but his demands on the ineluctability of my truth-telling (and his own) were variably dependent on the outcome of AFC-Gor matches, the state of his finances, the progression of his hangover, the politics of that afternoon, ambient job- and marriage-related frustration and despair at the unrelieved horror of being alive and bourgeois in the ROK. Not so much now, I have to say. With my mother it was a different story. The woman wanted accounts—*precise* step-by-step internally consistent narratives of what happened. If he was present in the background and they'd had an argument or he just felt like needling her, my father would sometimes ask variations of 'my love, why are you asking that young girl to give a full narrative of what *transpired*, as if we are in a court of law?' My mother would say nothing, no doubt filing these jibes away for god knows what bedroom juridicals later, and proceed with the case in hand, swanning her head in a regal 'continue'. And I would try to give my mother what she wanted⁵. Many years later my considered though only partially justified

to answer and our earlier and separate arrangement w/r/t crisps or cartoons.

⁵ With my father in the room I tended to do better. My mother's demands did not feel like an interrogation. I was quicker with my answers, more certain, not of their rectitude but of the fact that with daddy in the room being wrong wasn't the end of the world. But with my mother, an ostensibly relaxed Q&A in the kitchen while she and I made supper would pivot, answer by answer, into a formal interview in the headteacher's office, in which my answers were not the right ones when they were and my having to answer was the next-to-last stage on a path to oblivion.

belief is that her reasoning went something like this: without high-order precision there can be no proper or factive assay of the truthfulness of a statement about what really happened. And without that there is no knowledge. And without *that* no way to equitably deal out justice. You see, my mother wanted to be fair and understanding. She could only be fair and understanding if I gave her not just the facts but (this is her now) the facts as they appear in your statements in as close to a causally exact narrative of their happening as possible. But (me again) even as I'm saying this I realize I have left out the crucial issue, the thing that has finally moved me to try and set some of this down, which is that it's intractably knotty for anyone, let alone a six-year old, to give the facts in as close to causally exact a narrative as possible. My mother the philosopher would have known this. And I have no doubt she knew what placing these kinds of testimonial demands on a small girl would mean. Do I mean she knew *exactly* what doing this would do to *her* little girl? No. There's no way to know for certain. But she knew enough. She knew me—or thought she knew me—to where cultivating this svādhā or ethos in her girl was not just a good idea but a perversely great one. I've had time to try and work out her reasoning as best as I can. I cannot check the accuracy of these reconstructions against her own reported sense of her modes of thought: she died of cervical cancer twelve years ago. I cannot discuss them with my father. I've tried, but we can barely reference the fact that she's dead. So we talk about work. Away from teaching (not many history students) he's a consultant for an NGO that's as they put it trying to build local capacity in the archival and information science sector. He got the job because of his connections and early career as a librarian. Mostly he writes reports he is sure no one will read, and so to stay

sane he works in as many disquisitions on his favorite subjects as he can get away with. Otherwise he spends most of his time reading Herodotus and walking around campus. Aside from that he takes a trip several times a year, usually lasting about a week long, to see his great-aunt. Not only did my mother's death create a powerful aversion to talking about her, it unfitted my father for the burgher lifestyle—probative nine-to-five, recessionals every evening at his local, football Saturdays, the Pentecostal host, politicking with fellow wababu, paterfamilias duties, a limber tighter version of my mother tucked away in a rented one-bedroom somewhere. In a way I'm relieved he does not want to talk about my mother, about their life together. He and my mother were together for twenty-two years and legally married for sixteen of those. Whatever he might tell me, were he even willing to share it, would probably be unreliable. Why? Not just because of standard widower's heartbreak. I think it has more to do with personality, weltanschauung, and that thing we call, for lack of a better alibi, mila. During my childhood our father was known—I should say infamous—for his inconsistency. He never told the same story twice. That is to say, less trickily, he never told the same story *the same way* twice. None of us do, to be fair, but unlike emperors we *prefer* variations over the verbatim. We *accept* them because verbatim delivery is hard when necessary and boring when it isn't. Yes, boring because we latter-day hominins have a strong appetitive desire for variation. The desire is obvious because strong when you're in kindergarten. That's when educators seem to make the widest allowance for corvid consciousness but, coincidentally or not, the desire is at its strongest in early primary when, for the first time, you have to spend your entire day repeating what the teacher says you have to

repeat for as long as she says you have to and when you do not suffer the penalty of at least more. And what made school absurd was Mrs. Ogolla acting as if she didn't know and her students did not intuitively grasp that 'every attention, every fixation of our conscience, implies a deliberate omission of that which is uninteresting.' Which at least says *to me*, as an adult reflecting back on her class two days, that from early on formal education pathologizes curiosity⁶.

So around age seven or eight is when it occurred to me that my mother's zealous insistence on precise narrational truth-telling had to do with my being a little girl, whose relationship to the truth was necessarily and constitutively different from that of little boys. I knew this already. Kind of. And because I knew, I found my mother's demand for exact testimony of the kind she wanted deeply unfair. I resented her, as you do, but she had this way of taking that resentment and laying it out for me like a beloved dead cat. She did not actually come out and say anything I interpreted as 'here's how it is'. She asked questions—pointed, built like traps—or to modulate the cat analogy a little, laid out like the obstacle course that is the suburban street, where it's not only three-foot psychopaths you have to worry about but other cats, dogs, cat-sized dogs, dog-sized rats, bikes, javs, everyone in a personal, a preponderance of stable-looking unstable planar surfaces, live wires, water, water everywhere and the lady who does not see you sunning yourself outside her third-floor bedroom window. And so after running the same course over months and then years that one day became *for as long as I could*

⁶ My father would agree: more than once I heard him tell my mother: "by the time we university people get them, it's too late".

remember I had, looking back at me, a map of my resentment and its causes. This makes us sound like a student and her guru, which just now occurred to me as an accurate description of that aspect of our relationship, although at the time it wasn't this for me because I was incapable of making the distinction. My mother I suspect took the teacher-student dyad much more seriously. But so then she had to have been conflicted about it as a result and maybe—this is low, self-serving speculation, I don't deny it—maybe even desperate not to let intellectual mentorship contaminate—contaminate's a strong word—*affect* our conventional mother-daughter dynamics. I don't know that she succeeded. I think it's too soon to make a definitive verdict, and if it is, is it wrong to say I'd rather not?

[Did she though? I suspect I'm the one who made this distinction. Why? Because power, confusion, fear: the wider culture insisted mothers were not intellectuals. I badly wanted a 'normal' mother. Because I didn't have one I policed the boundary between her conventional bits and her freakish ones—internal drama, hard to exteriorize not least because you can't order your mother around and live.]

My mother lectured in psychology at JKUAT. Being a philosopher who taught psychology because it was decided that women philosophers, those monstrous entities, could not *teach* philosophy was, in a word, difficult. Growing up, I knew nothing of this. I did not know my mother got her undergraduate degrees in philosophy and German language and literature at SUNY Stony Brook, her Masters and PhD in philosophy from the Universität Heidelberg, where her mentor had been a student of a student of Cassirer. I knew her as the woman who went over my homework every evening until age eleven. I knew her as the

woman who had her own oral version of the CATs we took in school: I would be getting ready for a friend's birthday party or our father taking my brothers and I for swimming when she would pop up and without my realizing begin a verbal examination. Unlike the sort of parent who shunts you into the subject of her choice, like it or not, my mother's way was to use whatever you happened to be obsessing over in that moment (like swimming) to lead you out of the forest into the reeds, figuratively speaking, and having gotten what she wanted, led you and your grass-whipped thighs and muddy shoes back amid the tall green. Or, if she was in a hurry, because she was headed for her own swim meet, left you to drag yourself out of the muck. For a long time, I thought she sprang CATs at random. Then I noticed that she tended to quiz when she was upset with my father or because of work or, more mysteriously, neither.

The CATs could be 'fun' when she was in a good mood and the questions were silly ones like about songs mostly from musicals (musicals were big in our house), but this was rare. When she was not lobbing impromptu CATs at us my mother demanded we—me mostly— explain statements she found asinine/logically flawed. She would not scold. What she would do was ask why. And if I could not answer she asked me why I couldn't answer, and she would do so without detectable *schadenfreude*, which differentiated her from ninety-eight percent of adults with identical requests. If I refused—which I didn't, not often, because I knew what it cost me—this revolt earned me a hiding. One Saturday afternoon I had to listen my brothers play out in the sun, not quite oblivious, while my mother belted me. The result of this ubiquitous and incessant questioning—along with the occasional punitive reinforcement

I've just mentioned—was that I learned to be prepared for every why, or the kind that fell into the range of what she would likely ask me. I think it was more important to my mother that I approximate the readiness she was looking for from me *eventually*.

What my mother did *not* do and that I wished desperately that she had was say to me: 'you my young daughter, put down that ATT of yours and listen very, very carefully to my words: things are thick for us women, for you especially if your concept of *truth*, to say nothing of *truth-telling*, is not *at least* as robust and sophisticated as your neighbor Andrew's or his father's, or that of *your* brothers' and *your* father's, and so you, my daughter, you had better get robust and sophisticated in not just how you handle speaking the truth but in how you handle truth period, you understand? or these people and the system that enables their maimed ethics and undercuts even their tentative, accidental efforts in the right direction and is always assisting every kind of *Scheiße* will do even worse damage to you than they and it are always already doing at this and every other moment, *dongé*?' She did not. In any case, had she spoken to me like so I doubt I would have done anything different from what most every child does with their parents' unprompted veerition from command-oriented paterlingua—go 'do this', 'don't do that,' 'do what your father says'—to the idiosyncrasy of personal belief: make a face, edit down my irritation to whatever's not likely to provoke her into going on for longer than she looked like she was going to before I made a face. My impression of her style is still that it was closer to a doctor's; for the longest I thought a psychologist was a kind of surgeon.

Why did she think I had it worse having to speak of what happened—having to speak, *period*—with more skill than a boy? Again, let me be clear: my mother the philosopher did not come out and say any of this. There's plenty I cannot decisively attribute to her on the basis of her speech acts that seems nevertheless to form the core of what I think of as my mother's beliefs as relayed by her directly. If she did not actually *say* any of that, where did my belief that she did come from? Where do these beliefs come from?

A few years ago I was in Spain somewhere. I want to say Córdoba. Seated in the sun, not splayed out on the sand in my two-piece as I would have expected. A surprising number of black people padding up and down the beach in front of me alongside what I had thought of as 'Spanish'—dark-hair, honey-skin, dramatic nonverbal style and that physicality whose most striking expression was flamenco and dancing with bulls. And I remember sitting there at the far corner of my mind and thinking that this—the scene in front of me—wasn't any kind of Spanishness I knew. I was not annoyed, mind you, just, what's the word, befuddled. And being befuddled in that way didn't seem normal. It was quite a heightened confusion. I felt *very* out of sorts. Like a nightmare but wideawake. I did the usual *how did I get here?* I didn't make the distinction—I don't think—between my fake or reductive Spanishness and being on that beach. But the whole, the sand, was then all of a sudden trapdoor creaking and buckling with peoples' walking along and cavorting. The sky was that transitive blend of lunar luminosity and daytime brightness you get right before an eclipse or on those afternoons when the blue's so hard you forget the sun is there. And I thought

okay one wrong move one wrong *breath* and you're done. You're over and what's waiting is oblivion. And it felt so unfair to have to believe everything's real and permanent when obviously it isn't. That has stayed with me.

So if my mother didn't tell me, if I don't remember her telling me (which has less weight but skews more honest), I must have inferred it, without knowing that's what I was doing. I must have perceived it, too, since I'd hardly credit inference with doing all the heavy-lifting. And let's not forget, there was so much to perceive when you're a child you want to join with everything. When you're a *bright* child—I realize I'm making certain neurotypical assumptions, but—when you're a bright child you want to know everything about everything. It might seem like I'm making noise over nothing. I'm not. If you think so don't take my word for it. Take my argument, turn it over. Explain to yourself and to your own rigorous satisfaction, how is it that you learn from what other people tell you. Not what, *how*. *What* is easy enough, isn't it? Easier to say, okay her point is that it's hard to explain how you know what you know. That's the takeaway, because of the work I've done, the argumentative work, the narrative work, the goodwill I've shown, yes, you then get to say you know. And get to say with confidence. You do not repeat except to praise or criticize. You don't offer by way of careful rebuttal all the reasons so-and-so is wrong in their own persuasively argued points. No, you offer up a caricature of what they took pains to get across—the likes version. But if you feel they're right—feel here is that interlarded colloquial kind that can sometimes mean thinking too—then... You thought about it and yes the argument persuaded you but at some basal hard-to-parse

level deep down everything they were saying just *felt* right. Your account of their account is caricatured too, but not out of hostility. It might even be love, proper *philo sophia*, that moves you. A lot of the caricature is inadvertent and comes from wanting to genuinely sincerely explain why this idea is self-evident and finding you can't. And so you end up reaching for language that's overblown and makes people not want to buy what you're selling because it's out of character for you to go on like this about *whatever*. And even if your argument—because it isn't B's argument anymore, it's yours—is logical, you've made it so that that's not what people hear in your speech because of this inflationary, nakedly persuasive style you think will convince them but that instead takes away the assurance they have believing what was kind of believable ten minutes ago. You have gone from *chrysotomos* to shoving barrowfuls of Zim dollars down peoples' throats. It does not matter to your friends/interlocutors that she's right. It matters to them that she's having this effect on you.

My mother's presence registered as a body blow moving well ahead of the tactile impress of the large dark paws of her hands. I remember one afternoon padding upstairs to find the door to the bathroom cracked open. There she was, washing her armpits over the sink. She had on a plain sleeveless blouse, baggy on her volleyballer's frame. The smell of Cussons, the slickness of her large arms, the quick easy way she moved one while the other hung restless, that armpit dazzle and the impression of great power applied to the trivial is unforgettable, as is the fact of her physicality packed into what had been a balneal vastness, cool and lightly deodorized. Later, I encountered this same person

crammed into the alcove she called her study, her body a thimble out of which so much *Being* gushed darkly. I don't recall exactly when my mother decided to clean out the alcove and turn it into a study. I may have been in class five or six at the time. We were not supposed to touch or remove anything from the alcove, but we hardly ever bothered: we could do nothing with a space too small to play in, poorly lit even during the day, overrun by mosquitoes at night, and taken up by a chunky camphor desk piled almost to uselessness with books and papers. There were papers in the leg space underneath and on the linoleum to either side of the desk, bursting from binders and folders and spring-loaded boxes or sprawled naked on top of each other. Rainwater had blistered the paintwork. The damage followed the masonry's bumps and fissures to make leafy striations most days and rhizome thread when I was fussier or bewildered. Sometime during my early childhood I watched a fundi, with my father directing him, seal the five-inch-wide narrow between that particular section of wall and ceiling. Days before, Daddy, returning in the early hours of the morning, had surprised bats—also headed home after a late night. They had flown over him *like black fanged water* and up through the narrow into the space above. Years later he would talk about *dealing* permanently *with those visitors*, but like a man who has ceded xenia, however grudgingly, to squatters; and in any case by then mum had converted the alcove to her study.

I spent many afternoons watching this figure of concentrated calm and precisely uncoiled energy metamorphose into my mother and back into a figure whose hunched over back was mutely declamatory sigil. I didn't know why, but I felt the way I did watching a storm gather. And then late one afternoon in

March, on an afternoon that was a thousand such afternoons fused together, I watched my mother write. Through the livingroom's bay window the sky darkened, and the two—lead-bellied sky and mother-writing—were brought together, their contingency bridged by style, as Proust has it. I am not saying my first revelations of style *qua* style are traceable to that moment, but for sure my curiosity about writing is.

Maybe two or three weeks after this vision, I was marooned deep inside a long and utterly boring holiday afternoon (there were many boring holiday afternoons which blurred together into pure edgeless ennui I was certain meant to murder me). My mother was away from the house. I left the livingroom and failing to convince my brothers to let me play just *one* game of FIFA. After wandering the house, I went to the alcove, where I picked the oldest and most exotic-looking book from the shelf just within reach of a eight-year old tiptoe on a chair. It smelled musty and sickly sweet, and I recall vividly the thrill I felt reading that illicit, inscrutably blasphemous title, printed in bold uppercase: MARIA: OR, THE WRONGS OF WOMAN.

[Abednego. Babylonian theonym, 'servant of the god Nabu' (*nābû*, Akkadian for 'announcer/authorized person', cognate with 'prophet' in Syriac, Arabic, and Hebrew). Nabu is the god of scribes, literacy, learning, wisdom and vegetation, the inventor of writing, "scribe of Esagil who organizes the whole of heaven and earth, who directs everything, who ordains kingship". Beatrice, from the Latin Beatrix, "blessed one".]

Every child knew there has only ever been and can be *one* truth. Or rather she pretended to know, for survival's sake, and to

the extent allowed by survival's sake, reveled in the telling.⁷ In a way, a good deal of our effort as kids went to grading each other for best-presented approximation (falsification?) of the truth. The expression current among children those days (that makes it sound like *centuries* ago, and in affective time I suppose it is, but still), the expression we used to vouchsafe otherwise incredulous statements as believably and infallibly fideliou, was: "if I cheat I hate God." What this oath really meant, the way we who used it knew, and we who had to bear its usage hated to know, was: "if *you* don't believe me, *you* hate God".⁸ The burden of believability

⁷ And the hiding too, but that's another story. The revelry comes out of the fact that us kids intuited, as kids do, the game-friendly nature of truth, or rather of claims about what is true and isn't—or might be, or can't ever be, or was, or will be, depending. A bit like fathering handfuls of leaves to fling into the air to watch twist, glide, loop, corkscrew, Immelmann, barrel, pitch, tail and fall onto the concrete in patterns decoded in a foliography contest that only stops when your mothers start looking for you.

⁸ Strictly speaking, 'cheat' and 'lie' were not fully interchangeable. I mean that we did and did not use the word 'cheat' as a synonym for 'lie'. While we used *cheat* to mean *lie*, hardly anyone ever used the second—which is a rather startling fact. *Lie* was an adult word, hard, distinct: "Don't *lie* to me", "When you *lie*, you hurt God". *Cheat*, on the other hand, was ontologically of a different grade, slippery, flexible. And capacious: cheat meant lie, while lie did not mean cheat. Not always. Equating what was unequal had this tiered exception: the work of power. Or perhaps we just didn't have enough readily available synonyms in our child's garden for 'lie', which is arguably closer to the truth than a metaphysical disjuncture between truthful idealists and pragmatic nominalists inaugurated by the former's shaky grasp of what differentiates the two wor(l)ds.

was transferred from the speaker, snotty and rheumy-eyed like us, whom common sense and sympathy insisted really wanted to be believed, not just for believability's sake but by virtue of being a credible testifier, to the listener or epistemic subject, who, instead of being tasked with your regular friendly-stakes evaluation of the truthfulness of a statement, now faced the starkest possible choice: forswear any claims to disbelief or be denounced as an apostate. The cleverness of this gambit was possibly the most annoying thing about it, except perhaps for the snivelly hauteur of the person deploying it at the first sign you were never going to buy what they were shoveling and who then treated your acceptance as a bribe you had to beg them to take. More than making you angry, having to grovel drove you to this desperation where it was so important *to you* that the putatively truthful speaker believe that you believe that what they had said was absolutely true and that your failure to acknowledge this had nothing to do with the a priori truthfulness of their statement—the pure unequivocal *shruti* to your doubt-ridden, memory-addled *smriti*—and more to do with your defects as a listener—defects, it was implied, that also made you a poor speaker i.e. purveyor of truth. Leaving aside for the moment that this will sound familiar to you if you've ever had to sweet talk a cop into taking the bribe you're offering because he is scarily insistent that you are *definitely* going to spend the night in jail, it is also, like that sweet-talking, a humiliation. You promise yourself to never ever again. Until the next time. Justifications and counterarguments leave the way they came, and you get back on your hands and knees.

If you were like a lot of kids at that age you were very, very self-conscious about your speech and to a lesser extent how you

listened—well or badly. So any implied-to-overt declaration by even just *one* member of this peer group that you were subpar was devastating. The pressure to convince your peers that you were not an idiot was much greater than the pressure to convince that parent-teacher procedural amalgam known as adulting that, you were, school trips notwithstanding.

Responding to this in anything like a cogent manner was hard even for those kids everyone said were ‘geniuses’. I’m thinking specifically of Helen Rose Muigai, who everyone said was smart and who was going to go on to Alliance and after that this place her snooty older sister Giraffe called MIT but that we insisted on calling miti to annoy her. Whatever Giraffe said Helen Rose could do Helen Rose had to do so her sister wouldn’t be a liar. And on top of that she had to do the same work we did to keep from being mistaken for slow. I don’t recall pitying her. She’s a herpetologist now—which is the most appropriately random thing I could have imagined her doing. I couldn’t tell you what Giraffe is up to.

So we ordinary tois worked at cost to our pride, our sanity and possibly cognitive development pretending we knew what we were talking about, or, when that got too difficult, which it frequently did, for reasons I’ve already gone into at length, pretending to the kind of silence that gets you mistaken for quote unquote mentally challenged, but that has the singular advantage of making it so no one will, you hope and you pray, pull you into the sorts of exchanges predicated on your being the sub. I was kind of a quiet child, so, this wasn’t the hardest thing to do. Shut up, daydream, and stay under the radar. I suspect the moderately bright kids eventually worked out what the genius-level intellects among us already knew: that this evasiveness was a stylistic variant

of the kind the grownups practiced, and that went something like: I want to raise my children in peace and safety more than I want a say in the making of peace and safety, my citizen's right and due, but, as such, an act that would eventually necessitate a direct encounter with the state. Perhaps (me again) I'm wrong, perhaps I don't have the proper perspective, perhaps I just want to stay angry, but it's not hard to think of this as what experienced gamblers call *resulting*: where a good result you with your poor decision-making had no business getting is made into the logical outcome of those enshittifying earlier choices. This is the history of our country, which is why it's no surprise we learned resulting in school without learning about it in school.

The hard limit on the best believable story was some version or other of Fitch's paradox. In the simplest and perhaps most misleading way I can put it: the existence of an unknown truth is unknowable. Because so then if *all* truths are knowable, it follows that all truths are in fact *known*, so we can't involve unknown truths, isn't it? What does this have to do with stories? If a story is true, then it is knowable as such, which means all stories are true (although I would tweak that a bit to read *potentially* true) and therefore knowable. But if there is in fact an unknown truth, or for our purposes a story we cannot know as true, then there are likely to be many such stories, more perhaps, than there are knowable ones. Neither position by itself is great for storytelling or for listening to stories. But when you hold them together they produce an infinitely fertile matrix, a chora out of which spawns every story ever told. Children are better at this holding together than their parents, but I think the gap depends on which society you grow up in. And so keep this in mind when I tell you that if

I or one of my friends told a story that met the criteria for really good, not necessarily absolute best ever story, improbabilities and all, criteria that were not fluid but weren't hard and fast either, we wanted it to be true. And so we didn't invoke the paradox. And so you were fine until the next potentially much better story—and so on, with no objection until finally, there was.

With us girls there was more leeway in how far you could get telling tales, because I think there was this implicit understanding of don't knock me down or I will revenge when it's your turn, but at the same time, I think what we were getting out of the stories, whether it's that listener's *jouissance*, you know where the story is just too sweet and no one wants to be Shahryar, or cozy affect that wraps you like a duvet on a rainy afternoon while you binge-watch your favorite series, or that sense of being knit together with these other people you sort of knew but didn't (including the ones in the stories) outweighed the pleasure we got from cutthroat grading, as happened when the storying was done in mixed company. The boys were competitive. With each other they could occasionally be like us, which I knew from spying on them. But being around girls made this competitiveness more aggressive. And so then we picked up on that and did it as well, or tried to without trying to, which would cancel out the attempt as obviously derivative and pathetic—girls trying to be boys—and as soon as they caught on the boys would get even more aggressive. The feedback loop made everyone self-conscious and mean and herd-like. For this reason, I was never in a hurry to be at front of the line. I took that forward into high school and the same is true now. I'll speak when spoken to but I don't make a habit of climbing onstage except when there's no alternative I'm comfortable with. Which is a chore—to be that stringent. But I

can't help it. It's exhausting to wade into conversations I'm not a part of and pretend like I went to fix my makeup and you guys devolved the discussion in my absence. This works more than you think but less than I hoped when I first started. And I'm not annoying. I am witty and, *pace* the mechanics of minding other peoples' business, I am respectful. It helps to have a story on your lips ready to go, but I rarely do. In that I'm more like my mother, whose desire for order and precision was not enhanced by any rhetorical flair: she could tell a story. Period. Part of my father's appeal for her was his facility with the tale: I remember the way she would look at him when he was in the middle of a story with what I thought was disapproval but which I now think demanded 'how are you doing that?' She couldn't match him, and because of that doubled down on her own obsessiveness.

So on the one hand you had my mother and her narratives orders, and on the other you had the lords of the playground folding everyone into their truth & knowledge game, a game we joined and enjoyed because of the guaranteed brutality—or fled for the same reason. Both were helpful at the same time that they were spectacularly unhelpful to my sense of what was true and was not, and to building up grounds for the belief that the little I knew counted as knowledge. I know what you're going to ask: what makes the epistemological Hunger Games you claim to have gone through different from what most kids growing up anywhere on this planet, who have to deal with the same? Context.

Most of these straw kids are taking the piss. I doubt if they're aware of epistemic twiddle-twaddle in the same way as adults. These truth-knowledge games exploit the faultiness of our intuited sense of truth and knowledge, of the fuzzy border in-

between. If they did not, they wouldn't be fun—or cruelly effective as object lessons.

Speaking of *object* lessons, my father bought me a globe atlas—the kind of play thing fathers of that era would spot in traffic, haggle over mercilessly and then arrive home bearing, to hand over without comment on their way to their thrones. The globe was inflatable; I don't think he knew when he bought it, but it's hard to see how given the way inflated balls hold. And so because I thought—at six—that this was a ball, I played with it as a ball. But I kept having to fight Shaq and Shadrach for my deflatory cerulean swimmingpool orb, even though they had their own ball. In the relevant memories I'm playing with mine in the late afternoon and early evening. Shadi and Meshach have stopped tormenting me because something more pathetic than their little sister has distracted them for the time being. My fun is fierce and ecstatic. Without my having noticed, my ball ceases to be a ball and becomes a sky blue crumply object. Excited by this transformation, which has taken place right under my nose, as it were, I kick *hard*, expecting the crumply to wrap my foot, but it soars onto the gutter instead. At that height in the gloaming my globe is a rock and then rock floating on darkness. The next day, slicked with rain, it squatted concrete like buckled tin.

I had my globe atlas for a month—an eternity in toy time. Then it disappeared—stolen, thrown away. I didn't speak for almost a week, not at home, not at school. I didn't speak to Magazeti, my favorite person where we grew up. Magazeti liked me and was the only grownup who did not condescend or paper over the grimdark facts of our collective existence. Mrs. Wachira our class teacher called my mother, who told me what they had talked about over the phone when she sat me on my bed that

evening in the room I shared with my brothers. Mum was upset *for me*. *That* I saw and liked—but not enough to quit my silence. Then the headteacher called my parents. My father opted out—he hated parent-teacher *things* (‘where they tell you how you’re failing as a parent’). So I sat by my mother while first the headteacher tried to get me to talk and then, when she failed, talked down to mum. My mother was polite, respectful—I didn’t understand, but it was always mostly the high road for her, with authority figures and especially where, as I came to discover, her kids were involved. But I wasn’t so little that I failed to see the humiliation. Some of this—like mum being spoken to as if a child—is vivid everlasting impression, heavy on affect, hazy on detail, some is long-form memory insomnia steals from the small hours. An uncomfortable amount is me cobbling together a fictively true semblance of what (probably) really happened. Maybe a week after the atlas globe disappeared I would go to bed and while waiting to fall asleep watch a movie, or movies rather, shorts, to be precise, in my head—non-linear and impressionistic, closer to Mambety Diop and *Memento* than to the pell-mell let’s-blow-up-everything action bonanza of my father’s second-best viewing pleasure. The outer parts of this movie, which was not that obviously different from the usual holographs and gimballed cycloramas, were the kind that shifted about in loosely associative frenzy—my failed attempt to avoid going to bed early, breakfast at school the next day, the secret life of my shoes, polished and tucked under my bed, how I had walked the length from the corner kiosk to our house that evening and noticed, as though for the first time, the row of stately acacia on the far side of the street and felt, through their lilted sway, the attention of living beings.

The more intransitive bits winked every so often into vivid relief: concepts and phenomena I couldn't make sense of but that asserted their presence as if anytime between now and sleep proper they might decide to be understood: *rainbow, space, volcanic, impunity, sex, drug abuse*. It was during one of these after-hour matinees that I first saw it—a blue flicker in the dark that played the moon's trick of moving away the closer I got while keeping still. These sightings thrilled me to exhaustion; I woke up obscurely baffled and cranky for three days. On the fifth, the azure went with me to school, where it became a more or less indistinguishable part of that dense histrionic weave of sensations and ideas permanent until the bell rang. The day was boring; we had a test in the morning but I might be wrong. Breaktime ended too quickly, the middle periods dragged on until I thought there wouldn't be lunchtime. Out of the rest of the day I only remember being relieved to be home finally. Four hours later I got into bed. Perhaps ten minutes after that, in the dense quiet dark (my brothers were asleep) the globe appeared. I knew immediately the globe was truth. I shut my eyes, waited (holding my chest against my heart's noisy knocking), opened them—and saw the globe hovered, motionless, roughly a meter-and-a-half above the rug in-between my bed and my brothers' bunk. I could not see truth's other side but I was too scared to move, let alone get out of bed. I tried to make this tidally locked globe rotate with my mind. When that did not work, I tried closing and opening my eyes fast. But rapid blinking that's intentional is hard to sustain even over the span of a few seconds, and that's without the pressure of telekinesis. Finally, more out of frustration than curiosity, I pulled the sheets back—drawing a shocked shivered breath at the cold—and set my feet down on coarse-knit sisal. As

soon as I did I knew I had made a mistake. I looked up: the globe was gone. I waited, shivering, for all of thirty seconds, then slipped back under the covers. The globe did not appear, and I fell asleep. Nothing the next morning. I saw it only once more after that: the night after Timothy's eighth birthday—he lived at the end of the cul-de-sac and his sister was my best friend that wasn't my friend. I came home too excited to sleep but after sitting on the sofa for a few minutes I crashed and was carried to bed, probably by my father, where I woke up—suddenly and in a fright—to see the globe poised over my bed. My terror lasted all of a few seconds—too long and unbearable in its annihilatory force for me to do more than collapse when, finally, it—and the globe—left me.

I only mentioned this *Aufhebung* once—by mistake: when Auntie Clara was visiting. She wasn't my *auntie* auntie: she was my mother's best friend. They had been friends since their days at Alliance and spent nearly every minute away from family and work with each other. All the same, however, it was unusual for her to turn up at our house, but when she did I enjoyed her personality even though she scared me a little because she wasn't like my mother. My mother was bold and direct, but not like Auntie Clara, who managed to be both and bubbly as well, which was a feat my mother couldn't manage or—now that I think about it—declined to realize on principle. She and mum were together in the livingroom and I walked in on my way to the bedroom when she stopped me to interrogate and tease me about what I was up to these days—as you do when you're the cool auntie. And so I was standing there being flustered and grateful and rambling and I somehow got onto the topic of my atlas globe that got stolen and became truth and appeared over my bed at

night. It sounded to me while I was telling it like the most wildly incoherent story I had ever come up with. But I couldn't stop myself, not even with my mother there, listening with attention that was minutely focused and almost friendly—not motherly, *friendly*, as if I were another, I don't want to say woman, and female doesn't work, sister maybe—listening with attention that granted me the privilege of being on her level and not that of a native informant contextualizing obscure practices or criminal defendant testifying on her own behalf. Maybe that's why I didn't stop—it felt staggeringly good to have *these* two women pay attention like that to me, together. The verbally hamstrung way I told my very true story wasn't that important—until embarrassment overrode joy and I rambled to a stop and my mother said, 'that's an *interesting* story, mama'. My heart dropped into my knees. Auntie Clara's smile changed into the kind almost like that initial reflexive 'keep going' but which, seconds later, now meant 'run along, little one'—an ambiguity that froze me in place. My mother's 'okay you go play' both liberated and stranded me in a world in which I and my radiantly incommunicable truth were not the focus of the attention of the world of women.

[You could also frame my problem like so: *Ich kenne mich nicht aus*]

Telling the truth was the surest way to get yourself into trouble. Because *I* was sincerely interested in truth-as-I-understood-it, which was also Truth-as-it-really-is, this bothered me. I don't mean to suggest that other people generally are less sincere in their interest and estimation of the truth, in the way

they get at the truth, or to look at it another way, which is passive on the face of it but has the advantage of striking closer, phenomenologically speaking, to the experience of truth, that is, *being-gotten-at-by-the-truth*. Nor am I suggesting that those other people with whom I form a ‘we’—call them my fellow language-users or citizens—are deficient. I just mean that the paradox (my first recognizable one?) struck me as a terrible thing that set the notion of truth straightforward and pure on its ear, and that the consequences of this epiphany seemed directly and urgently appalling, all the more so because, as I’ve said, no one else seemed to be bothered or even—and this was the incredible part—register the contradiction inherent to requiring the young to always tell the truth *and* to square this truth-telling with the knowledge that doing so will more than likely have painful consequences for everyone involved *but for her especially*, consequences that, contrary to the bias for truth-telling, no amount of further redressive and/or palliative parresia is guaranteed to set right.

One day James snuck into our one neighbor’s compound and stole a box of pralines from their fridge. I made him share—either he shared or I would tell. Luckily for my stomach his theft had more to do with getting back at Andrew for casting aspersions on my father’s fatherly powers while bragging about the Belgian chocolate *his* father brought back (we didn’t know they were the kind you could buy at the airport duty free): I ate most of them. And we would have gotten away with it but for mboches. One happened to spot my brother scale the wall. She immediately snitched to her friend, who told another mboch, who told another, who told Mrs. Eugenia Muliro, who offhandedly related this account to Andrew’s mother the

following afternoon, while the two of them were talking outside the house gate. Just if you're wondering why akina Andrew's househelp doesn't figure in this sequence, it's because she did her work and avoided getting involved with those gossipy heifers and their wochí boyfriends. Back to the story: I happened to be within earshot of the two women while they were talking: on the other side of the fence, hunting a frog. Once I understood what—and who—they were discussing, hunting became awkward self-extractive movements easily mistaken for an alley cat's and that ended the two women's conversation just as the light in our livingroom came on and my mother appeared in a cube of marmoreal yellow. I went inside, didn't tell anyone what I had overheard. Throughout supper I kept shooting James pitiful looks. My mother noticed and, weirdly for her, demanded I stop. I did, but later when my father looked from the TV and asked me what was wrong I bit my lip and said 'I'm scared.' But I refused to say why and went to bed a wreck. The next day passed in nausea and terror. When the bus dropped James and I my mother was waiting—another shock: normally she and my father came home together at least an hour later. The two of us put down our bags in the hallway and went into the livingroom like our mother told us. She walked on into the kitchen, not to do anything I don't think except bring the terror we were feeling up several notches until we were primed. My mother, the master interrogator. I remember wishing Shadi was with us because two of us being beaten wasn't fair. He was taking piano lessons down the street and so he normally alighted the bus there. Then one of us, usually James but sometimes both of us, when we were feeling in-touch with our siblinghood or desperate to extend the magical interval between homework and supper, went to fetch him. That day

James actually suggested he go get Shadi, but my mother, in a voice that made me think of a knife dragged wetly along a whetstone, said ‘he’ll get his when he comes, don’t worry,’ a statement that terrified us even more and left my brother visibly baffled at the deftness with which our mother had thwarted his gambit. Meshach sat on the couch, small and nervous (consider it pure joy, my brother, whenever you face trials). I sat on the sofa chair to the left. When my mother came back she asked who would go first, and when neither of us said anything she asked if we were sure, because if we weren’t then, whatever came next would be because we had decided to make things difficult for ourselves instead of much, much easier, which sounded better, honestly, knowing my mother, who sat in the cream high-backed chair with the wings by the door and her hands palm over top on her beige skirt. She didn’t wear nail polish, my mother. I remember thinking *today’s the day I get a hot slap*. James—and who else?—called them hot slaps. I’d had slaps before but James knew more about our mother’s *hot* slaps than Shadi and I because he was always getting into trouble. My mother leaned slightly forward as if she was getting ready to stand and deliver one of those hot slaps. I thought I felt the pralines, resurrected and climbing out of my stomach. I wanted not to say anything. I wanted James to say something—to tell every kind of lie my mother would believe, but in the same instant I knew he wasn’t capable of proper, high-caliber untruth and that if he tried he’d make a mistake. I had never convincingly lied to my mother but I was prepared to to keep her from annihilating us. My father’s absence was so odd I thought maybe mum had convinced him not to turn up until after she had destroyed us. I use ‘annihilating’ and ‘destroyed’ not to be hyperbolic but because both are

properly denotative of how I felt. And in the middle of feeling like the world was ending there in that vast and quiet livingroom I had a worse thought than that my father had deliberately stayed away: he was late because of a perfectly ordinary errand and would turn up to hear from our mother about what we had done. The world would end all over again, not because he would beat us—although that, like everything else, seemed possible at the apocalypse—but because he would be so hurt that I had allowed myself to be made a party to my brother's crimes. But if I confessed everything—or the parts I thought she would be more interested in, I mean from a punitive standpoint, maybe she and my father would not be as harsh with James, and my mother, because I had done the right thing, because she was just, fair and merciful and took that kind of thing into consideration, would not be harsh with me, the person who had to lie convincingly, whom she knew(?) could, but refused to. I worried that she could see from the faces I was making, or, more accurately trying *not* to make, the not-scared-in-the-slightest face and I'm-kind-of-scared-but-not-because-I'm-lying face, to be specific, that I was thinking very hard about whether or not to lie to her. I worried that, because she didn't know any better, which was because of me, she had already decided I was about to lie. I could stop her yes but did I want to, still? And if I didn't, what then? And what if I told her the whole absolute truth and *she didn't believe me*? I was thinking so hard my legs started cramping. If I had been sitting in my usual ninja style I could not have gotten up without help. Strangely, my mother wasn't as focused on me as my guilt insisted she should be. She was looking at my brother, who sat with his arms folded and doing his version of our father's stone face. So, she said, no one wants to say anything. That *no one* I was sure meant *you*,

James. Mum, I started—and stopped at a look from James my mother caught immediately. Rather than pretend she hadn't—something she did other times and that told me things were not serious—she stood and approached us, looking from my brother to me as though she couldn't decide who to hit first. I was so horrified I blurted out what I thought she wanted to hear: that my brother and I stole the pralines *together*. Don't lie, she said, in the coldest voice I'd ever heard her use. I thought okay now we're dead. Because it wouldn't make any difference, I added *it's true* in the broken voice I used against unsavvy adulting-types. To my enduring horror, my mother believed me. I could see that she did, and so could my brother. But when she asked him to confirm the truth of my statement, he hesitated—not long, it took less than a second. My mother reared like a cobra. I opened my mouth. James said: we're sorry mum we're sorry—but it was too late. My mother swung on him. I watched, intent on fixing in my mind forever the moment her palm obdured his cheek. To give you a bit of context: I had never witnessed my eldest sibling being punished. I had had to make do with the slap as imagined—something out of *Dragonball Z*.

But the arm did not come down, the hand did not connect. Mother and son stared at each other. With her arm lofted high and awkward, my mother looked like a fast bowler playing statue on/statue off. She dropped her arm to her side (James flinched), shivered her hair into place, pinched her top into something like its former symmetry, smoothed her skirt, and walked out. Over and above the disappointment and general relieved confusion I felt, I was specifically baffled by my mother's behavior. This emergent, second-order confusion did not go away when my father arrived. After supper I walked past my parent's bedroom

and thought I heard mum crying and daddy trying to comfort her. The latter effort was conducted in a voice like the kind he used for me but not—awkward, appalled, and a little irritated. I stepped away from the door and, as quietly as possible, fled.

My father was the more laid-back and non-confrontational parent. After that abortive punishment, he became the tyrant we recognized from the stories told to us by friends and neighbors, tales of exotic lands where they did things very differently. I'm exaggerating, but only to emphasize how strange my brothers and I found being flogged at home. An ordeal of school had made its way into our sanctuary—an impossibility made stingingly concrete in the span of less than a week. Talk of whiplash. If that had been the worst of it, I wouldn't have cared: ordeals can be endured. But my father seemed to take the incident as irrevocable proof that we were impostors. And his way of dealing with this—or of not dealing with it but getting everyone, most of all himself, to believe that he was dealing with it—was to demand proof we weren't impostors, which we would scramble to do, and not just because we did not want to be flogged, but because we loved our father and did not want him to be in pain, least of all because of something we did—allegedly.

My mother tried to get him to stop. He wouldn't. I think he felt like a fraud as well; he'd been trying all this time to be a different father, different from his own, different from the other male parentals in the neighborhood. But he wasn't. He was the same. This was the truth he had repressed. For his wife's sake. For his children's. Now that we had shown ourselves as fraudsters, that whole effort was invalidated, and the last enlightened man in Kenya revealed as yet another fake. That there can be no *Aufklärung* of one is a truth this basically decent man,

compassionate, forward-thinking for his time and place, has not been able to fully accept. That is another of the meanings of his silence over my mother's death.

The drama of not being believed as a child when you're telling the truth we are all familiar with. At no other time does the truth seem to matter than when you cannot get its supreme arbiters—your parents, affiliated adulterers—to believe you. The drama of being *believed* is no less intense, with the difference that we don't care about it except when we're watching TV and hanging off our seats for the reveal. That is, until we get to high school, where the newer-than-new novelty of experience and your own insatiable hankering for the solidly true and uncomplicated combine to you start off as a credulous skeptic. As you go on though, it's increasingly important to avoid being gullible. If you're gullible you are defective. There are things you can't do, people you cannot be, people you can't be *with*. You think *he* likes you? You think you're one of *us*? You can't wear *that*. Those games played early on, those credibility tests, they kick in now. But where the stakes were always sweaty down to their ontology, that raw-skinned sense of the actual has in pubescence been pared down. Now it's more about what you know in your bones to be true and real and good and disgusting. I enjoyed high school. I replay huge chunks of it to please myself, fun that isn't spoiled by the memory of the girl I was, or by the way high school ended for me. I was secretary on the planning committee for our first reunion that took place in early December of last year. A big success. I'm friends with a third of the girls in our stream, *good* friends with maybe half that number in my class, although I know this figure will shrink the older we get. I have few regrets, only what I've heard called the faint stirrings of

conscience, which is unfair, since we were kids. What strikes me now is the way we weaponized our ignorance. The privilege of youth, yes, but also its crutch. And every new lot enters the fire for the first time, with nothing to tell them there were others, nothing to disabuse them of what experience never fails to confirm: that only now with their arrival has the world properly begun. This is when my mother's training found its test. I wasn't exactly a handful, but I gave her more pushback. I turned her method on her, pressing, poking, probing. We didn't talk as much. When we did, our exchanges were loaded affairs. I don't know that I had the incident years earlier with Shaq and myself in mind, but for a teenager determined to know the limits of parental authority, the evidence of its collapse is bound to be irresistible. My insurrection was just getting underway when the best worst thing to ever happen happened. After being diagnosed with Stage-3 cervical cancer, my mother started chemotherapy almost immediately—'almost' because we had to raise money for her treatment in India and related expenses. At the end of a particularly hard day, my mother, exhausted and in only slightly less pain would slip into a kind of monologue that drew you into itself so that it felt at times like she was talking to you and maybe to some other unseen person who kept moving in and out of the room and asking questions I couldn't hear, maybe because she didn't want to. My mother had made friends with a nurse named Rita. The two of them spent a lot of time together that was only semi-clinical. Sometimes I found them chatting after I came back from wandering the hospital grounds—to find a place where I could cry, motivate myself to keep it together and spend like a half-hour taking in the fact that I was in another country. When I was in the room but on the other side of the curtain because

mum wanted to be alone but not, I would have my nose in a book—and overhear snatches of what I sometimes assumed, was mum with Rita but also a free-associative monologue conducted in English, Dholuo and German. When she was feeling sentimental and nostalgic she leaned into her Dholuo. When she wanted ironic distance she went in English; and it was in German that she vented spleen. This makes it sound like she made strict distinctions, which she did not; everything tended to blur together at different points, especially in the evening, just as I left for the trainee nurses' hostel and my cot. Sometimes, when she had been really difficult and chased away me and Rita or Lakshmi—her second, less chatty, more conventionally behaved nurse—I would sneak back and peek at her and see a dazedness pinched into amusement sad and ironic and almost unbearable but at the same time fire laminated. In this mood my mother's standby was Nietzsche, whom she would quote at length: 'I have become *Das Krunke Wieb*. No one surpasses her in refinements for ruling, oppressing, tyrannizing, sparing nothing, digging through what is dead and buried, what should be left alone.' This particular quote she repeated often enough in one language or another for me to memorize—along with other translingual bits of Nietzsche—long before I ever took up a copy of *Zur Genealogie der Moral*.

Going with my mother to India was the rare moment I didn't mind a decision about my life being made for me: I had not wanted to go, but my father couldn't go because he had to cover the loans and the exorbitantly refinanced mortgage and feed my brothers whom everyone agreed (me included) couldn't be taken out of Form Three and Four and the dependents he and my mother were supporting 'back home'. I didn't mind. I was

miserable at school and bored by what passed for life elsewhere. I didn't mind because, unbeknownst to everyone, which included me up until the two of us were getting on that Air India jet to leave for two, three weeks in a strange country in which she and I were alone together, the trip meant that, for the first time, I would have power over my mother. A week later, that power came down to being able—barely—to sit with her while she got her chemotherapy. I had brought books, but I couldn't focus. Then, as the treatment went on and the unknown opened all around, I forced myself to pick up whatever seemed the least challenging. I had done that thing people do when they're going away on holiday where they bring the books they've really wanted to tackle: a 'philosophical' Nietzsche biography, my mother's copy of *An Essay on Man* (a raft of tan and dog-eared pages with her hieroglyphic notations packed into the margins), and the old standby *Maria*, which I had been reading since that first time more than a decade before but never through to the end (Spoiler: I did not finish any of them).

My mother talked about her days at Alliance— “many lifetimes ago”. She talked some about her time as a student in Germany, which she had never done. While her American career was a comparatively open book (here and there, however, obscure references were made to events I distantly understood she was ashamed of having participated in, perhaps unwillingly, events of a sexual nature which my imagination, informed by my own experiences, both rushes and refuses to fill in) I only knew she had been in Germany from comments my father and other family members made and from a photo album I found with pictures of her. She did not say as much as I would have liked. I didn't get the day-to-day details. Or what her lessons were like. She talked about

her mentor a lot, who must have been exceptional because I didn't even hear her talk about my father like that. That's not fair to either man to say, since they had different roles in her life, and she wouldn't talk about my father to me as another woman. She talked about meeting other black people, *Afrodeutsche*—who were a huge revelation to her—and those from Togo, Cameroon, Ghana and Tanzania. She told me how discovering them had been frightening, because up until then she had led such a solitary life, going from school to the tiny apartment she shared with a girl from East Germany, working little jobs, translation mostly but other things too, for under-the-table pay. Encountering another black face in the street was a shock and perhaps a delight, but to stumble into a community, to be welcomed, that was almost too much. She alluded to racism, sexism, poverty, depression and suicidal ideation, but she never came out and spoke about any of these with the openness she had spent most of my life training me to practice. I was so angry, but I was too knotted up in shame and guilt and denial and fear to acknowledge my anger. I was appalled as well, in my anger: what kind of hypocrisy was so powerful it kept my mother from practicing what she taught? Then one day, I think because she must've heard us arguing, Rita took me aside and said, your mother is so scared. Don't be angry at her for that. I could tell from the way she was looking at me that I was looking at *her* as if she wasn't making sense. Which is when I started wondering if maybe there was some truth to the idea that my mother knew fear. But instead of talking to my mother, I asked Rita about her experiences with other patients. She told me to try engaging with my mother, but I told her I didn't see how that would end up in any way except a confrontation. It wasn't a lie, not exactly. That's as close as I came to admitting I was scared—

not of my mother's potentially dying, which was something I couldn't comprehend. No, I was frightened of the both of us having a different relationship, one where she related to me, not only as a daughter, but more as a woman she could be at least a little more open with, talk to about her history, her hopes, fears—this is what I wanted, but I wanted it too desperately for the prospect of actual success to be anything but terrifying. And so our relationship survived intact its initial and, I realize now, vastly overdetermined form. My mother did better than I. She opened up more than I'd have expected, but I was not about to let her feel she'd done something hugely important. No, she was overdue, and when you're overdue, a little is not even a start.

The day before we left we visited the Saras Baug. Rita had suggested it to us. She even offered to come but at the last minute had to cover someone's shift. She wouldn't hear of us cancelling, so her younger sister Kavita and brother Prakash took us instead. The place is big, at least I remember it being big, but that's probably because we had the place mostly to ourselves and because of the affective vastness of those weeks.

I remember Prakash saying proudly: my big sister and your mother they really hit it off. His other sister was a bit more circumspect. I didn't know if this was because she thought Rita was doing something she shouldn't professionally or because she herself felt out of her comfort zone.

We stopped so my mother could rest. She sat, her breath settling, attention fixed on the water and ducks. Prakash said he didn't recall seeing ducks, but that it's wasn't uncommon. They came and went. He might have explained further, but I didn't catch enough to remember. I was watching my mother watch the ducks. Then she said, you know, they're so graceful when you

look at them, so effortless, but underneath they're paddling like nobody's business. Kavita looked at her in mild surprise, which I didn't like. Prakash hadn't heard everything except maybe for that last part. He turned to us, asked in what he seemed to think was a mischievous way what was nobody's business. Kavita frowned at him.

Prakash hesitated, because neither my mother or I were acting as if he'd made a mistake, so that perhaps he thought we were being polite. Like his sister. The grin disappeared. He straightened, put his hands on his pockets, then, after a moment, took them out again. We spent about twenty minutes walking around the park. Before leaving we went to the mandir, where, after speaking to the priest, and explaining to us that this was Rita's express request, and asking for permission, which my mother gave, brother and sister made prayers on her behalf. I spent the next five or so minutes crying into her shoulder. Then I held her, really held my mother. She didn't stop me or push me away, or wiggle in that way people do when you're holding onto too tight, even though she was weak and uncomfortable and had more tears in her than the lake around us. Once I'd composed myself we left and ate lunch nearby. Food put everyone in a lighter mood, my mother included. When Prakash brought up that Rita had said I wanted to go buy a few books, preferably secondhand, *good* secondhand, my mother insisted she didn't mind. So while Kavita took my mother back, he and I spent a memorable afternoon hunting down books on philosophy and a few 'serious' novels he insisted I couldn't do without. I had worried I would have enough money but everything ended up being cheaper than at home. Seeing my distress—there were so many I could afford, but too many for my luggage—he suggested

I take a few while he sent me a box with the rest. I remember arriving back at the hospital about an hour before Rita ended her shift. I waited for her, with carrier in my lap, then she walked me to the hotel and visited with my mother and I for a bit. When the time came for her to leave, I heard my mother's voice shake. They held hands, saying nothing. When we got to the door Rita said, I will see you when I see you. Both of you. Just for a moment, I thought of saying something back, but her farewell had stanchied that outburst. So instead I asked, how come you're named Rita? She blinked, frowned, and smiled a confused, lightly irritated smile. Then she took a theatric breath and said, *that is a very long story* that we do not have the time for. So let me tell you for now that my mother is the world's *biggest* fan of Rita Hayworth.

We had six months, six good months. Then the cancer came back. We started putting things together to try and get her a second round of chemotherapy, locally this time. She told us not to. I was enraged, my brothers and father were mutely inconsolable. I think I was angry in part to hide my more treacherous feelings, the kind that weren't proper for a daughter. Like relief. And for a good two months we let ourselves think the cancer was somehow not as bad and, given time, would go away—or at least not get aggressive before we could put together enough money for a second round. But then we heard about Aunt Clara. My brilliant bubbly auntie had been committed by her husband. My mother got the call on a Tuesday morning. I remember because we were seated together in the garden, which we didn't do that often. I had spent the morning tidying up. She picked up the phone—my father's old Alcatel brick—and was on

the call for about five minutes. I watched her face go from pleased to confused to dismal to dejected to gray and anemic. When the call ended she clasped the phone to her chest instead of putting it down and said nothing. Because of her sudden and quite drastic change, I didn't jump to ask what about. Two long minutes afterwards, my mother spoke. And this is how I learned that Auntie Clara had been taking medication for schizophrenia for just over a decade. In secret. Not even her husband had known. He was one of those first-generation, modern educated wanaume who are caricatures of their great-grandfathers. My mother privately referred to this villain as Balaam. The marriage ran into trouble—bad investments, affairs, a car accident—and Aunt Clara, in a heroic but ill-advised attempt to wrest control of her life, stopped taking her meds. She had an episode, which I won't get into here, and her doctor—a fellow colleague, a man, who'd been treating Clara in secret (he was also the guy Balaam claimed his wife was having an affair with, for whatever that's worth)—ordered her to start taking them again. But the incident, which he kind of knew about through rumors and being told stories by his informants and spies, because men like these always have their own Special Branch, had made Balaam suspicious. Not to mention the man was on his fourth *known* affair in three years. So he had gotten an excuse, sort of, to leave Clara, but she was too well-connected for a divorce—especially that sidewinder kind popular with men of that era. Somehow Balaam found out the schizophrenia wasn't a rumor—and stole her medication. Or rather he had the mboch steal it then paid her to vanish. Then he had his wife sent to Mathari. I really believe my mother would have lived longer had her closest friend not been committed. Auntie Clara was in Mathari for five good months—until her side

pulled strings to get her out of there. Anyway, my mother's health deteriorated fast after the news, and I want to say three or four days later we moved her into palliative care at Nairobi Hospital. Two weeks after that, she called us—her immediate family, her two older sisters, one of her colleagues from JKUAT, and told us that she was 'ready'. We were in shambles all of us healthy people, but my sick mother was in a state of grace. She had to be scared as well, but the rest of us were more frightened because from what I could see looking around the room the prospect of our eventually kicking was not a certainty we had had to think about until that moment, standing beside the deathbed of someone we cared for.

I had left Form Two to take my mother to India, and when I came back there was some back and forth between the school and the ministry over whether I should be allowed back. This wasn't out of the blue. The school administration had called me and four other girls "agitators" because of a school strike. Two were expelled, one suspended, the fourth dropped out. I got suspended for two weeks because none of my fellow students would corroborate the testimony of the matron's prime lackey, a spiteful third-former who claimed to have seen me organizing meetings and that I was the "coordinator". Mark you, this was all true. Too bad for her that she couldn't prove it. And you needed proof for well-behaved girls in good academic standing who got on well with teachers and students alike. I underestimated how much that failure to nab me galled my enemies. The school gave me compassionate leave to travel with my mother, only to claim I violated the terms of the agreement by 'overstaying'. I wrote to the ministry, but after two months of fruitless efforts on my behalf the education officer, a woman named Elizabeth, took me

aside and said ‘young girl, those people want you gone. If it is not this issue it will be something else. You transfer. Then I can help. Otherwise you can keep fighting but your schooling will suffer permanently. In fact you will be a zero.’ I took her advice. But no school in Nairobi I wanted would take me. One deputy headmistress told me ‘you people you’re on a list’. I never found out if this was true or not. I spent Form Three cold and miserable at a school in Kinangop. Come December holidays I refused to go back and registered as a candidate with a school downtown. After getting up early to make tea and do some housework (we didn’t have a live-in housegirl anymore, not because we couldn’t afford one but because a string of robberies in the neighborhood had left my father paranoid), I left every morning for Macmillan Library, where I spent the entire day studying. Then I went home, did some more housework, made everyone supper, and disappeared into my room. My father and brothers left me alone. And by “left me alone” I mean that these kind and loving males subjected me to a regime of passive-aggressiveness through which I was made to feel like the cause of my mother’s death and treated as her necessary but inadequate replacement. Once KCSE exams arrived and I had a lot of downtime in between sittings I read and finished the books I mentioned earlier. I read these and more. I read my father’s books. I read my mother’s papers, notes, her journals, all of which my father had lovingly if distractedly packed into boxes and piled in the s.q., which we converted into a storeroom. I read so much that my reading overtook every other part of my life and when I sat down for an exam I would be upset that it had taken me away from that purity but also relieved because I was badly frightened by this obsession. But I was only frightened while I wasn’t reading and as soon as those extraneous

demands on me were answered I had no problem going back to the thing I feared that made me more than I had ever thought I could be and diminished me in the same breadth. I was a ghoul haunting my own life and looked it. But I kept reading. One Sunday afternoon, stuffed to sickness with the read, I sat in the store, toying with a handful of orphaned sheaves filled with my mother's notes. I had pulled them from a box I thought I opened. Most of the contents were xeroxed copies of papers from her student days. But the papers I was holding were from a later period and had probably been placed accidentally with the earlier ones. For one, they were relatively sturdier and whiter, and had my mother's neat hieratic inscribed on them. Reading them, I discovered notes on her own reading, from as recent as the months before her death and, notes on her notes of much earlier readings, in some cases older than the yellowed copies. It hadn't occurred to me that you could *write* about what you read (or, for that matter, about what you wrote about what you read), not in the 'give eight reasons why' structure of KCSE exegesis, but to delight and illuminate yourself, to encounter your active indigent self on the page, to talk to yourself, as much or as little as you like, as fluently or as plainly, about what this self-elaboration felt like, what it meant or did not, what knowing more did and did not do for this condition, and which with the excruciating intensity of life itself seemed to grow, not dim, the more you fed yourself, so that you had to wonder if maybe you weren't hurting yourself with the thing you felt in your marrow was good, perhaps too good. My mother had had similar fears, which I could just make out in her elliptical prose, written as if someone were peering over her shoulder, critiquing, urging her to perhaps not set down exactly what she meant but write around—or drop it altogether.

The dread in her sentences, the abrupt halts and veeritons, the clipped and syncopated rhythms, the tidal longue durée of the approach to a crucial point, the byzantine syntax, the digressive and recursive asides, the counterfactual restatement of everything she'd gotten herself to say in careful and somewhat naked detail, the allusiveness, the self-lacerating honesty that ambushed you and was gone just as quickly, not offhand but precise, like a tank column rolling out of the bush to rain its shells and vanishing, or, when this felt like teutonage that had surprised her, something less *Krieg* and more *Übereinkommen*, more *Winjruok*, the spaces wide enough for a slowing, for agonized raptures of reflection, of being derailed from the objective, of giving way, wanting to understand and wanting from that understanding a tranquility that wasn't also defeat and oblivion, that was freedom active and without shame, without fear.

Apropos of a statement by a certain Frenchman, when mothers mistake effect for cause, carp on about heaven, and feed eternal truths their bodies, their children suffer and die. To her credit, my mother the philosopher hardly ever mistook effect for cause, nor did she preach to us about heaven thank god. Her body was no logician's plaything (all women are liars) or theologian's conundrum (you heifers are to blame, he said), and while we her children certainly suffered, our misery was mostly *not* a unique unrepeatable sequence we couldn't moan about with the other kids. I'm aggregating because somewhere in the course of this story it must have occurred to you that *maybe* I have given the philosophical dimensions of my mother's parenting a heavier slant than is proper, at least if what we're going for is closer to the judicious. She did her best. If that sounds too pat and sentimental and you think forecloses quarrying down to the marrow, which

is incidentally whether or not the woman was a good mother, that's a shame. I cannot countenance my own belief except through this tale, some version of which I will keep retelling for the rest of my life, weighting this aspect while downplaying that one, reworking this flaw into that strength, and trying the entire time to untangle the entangling of myself with who she was and can no longer be because she is dead for the telling. Which, I can't. But the temptation is too strong. I am too much her daughter. I am too much hers, but I'm also more of grubby culturalist splashing about in the muck than winged ontologist brandishing her flaming halberd at the unworthy. My joy and my consolation are the baby's handful of my better choices, my memories, and that I possess something approaching a minimally decent philosophical method. I am still an okay storyteller. And when it comes to testimony, the thing that's really important to me is that you get that me telling you that *p* isn't just me making a flat statement or claim but *me* telling *you* something I want *you* to know, something obviously important, worth the time, effort et cetera it takes to tell and obviously of course the sacrifice you make hanging around to listen and maybe the joy. Something true. And the takeaway for you foremost ought to be that 'okay, this is Betty telling me this.' *Betty*. Not anyone. Her. And the epistemic weight of this is its own uniquely revelatory object distinct from whatever else you're going to hear other people claim, including but not limited to the immediate propositional truth of whatever statement I'm making. This is not to poo poo rigor or god forbid the idea that it's important to speak the truth whenever possible (which requires a pretty robust concept of what truth is and what it means to speak the truth, ergo rigor). Relatedly, my attitude toward argument turns on friendly

competition not winner-take-all. I think of it as being more like throat-singing than a quest to eviscerate your opponent. Ideally. What I believe and, again, yes, have no way of proving, is that my mother gambled on my realizing eventually that *only* logicking and impeccably arguing my way through life was not just impractical and dangerous but morally wrong, because ‘life is not an argument’. At the risk of coming off as some kind of sophist, let me say that it’s an argument for everything and nothing, including itself and statements like this one. When the day came, as it did, as she knew it would, I’m sure she knew, that day would be start perhaps of a richer life, one lived less in fear than in clearsighted attentiveness, goodwill and gratitude. Which makes me think of a day when I was about ten. Five of us girls were playing in sight of the livingroom window directly facing the street. It was fairly early. My father was away on a work trip and my brothers had gone for a sleepover at a friend’s. Because she typically slept in when the males were away, I didn’t think my mother was awake, but sometime during our games she must have come down, because I happened to briefly turn away from my friends and saw her standing at the window. Instead of scowling, my mother smiled—and waved! Later, when my friends left and I went into the house, I tiptoed to the alcove to check on her. She wasn’t there. Instead I found a printed page, heavily marked up, with the last paragraph crossed out and some marginalia scribbled underneath. I started to read and had made it through the first clause of the third sentence when a sound interrupted me: It was Joy, back from the shop. I asked where mum had gone. Joy said she’d gone to meet with friends. *Why didn’t she tell me? Weren’t you playing? Anyway don’t worry*, she said, noting my distress, *she was very happy. Mum?* Yes. Kwanza sana. I lingered, held in place

by this vision and the clink of soda bottles and the aroma of fresh chips as Joy took out two greasy packets. *And she's bought us chips!* My stomach spasmed. *Let's eat before they're cold.* I moved towards the counter and stopped. *Just wait a bit there's something I have to do.* Pouting, Joy turned her back on me to open the drawer for a plate. *Fine, but when yours go cold don't*—the heavy plate struck the countertop with a dull ring, Joy shoved the drawer shut, the plates inside joggling hard—*hassle me to heat them up for you, okay?* I walked back to the alcove, wiped my hands on my skirt, sat down, took up the page, and read.

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