

Kenta

After Breton

Kid brother, with the chicken bone knuckles/uranium skin/eyes of white glass/face
of cold steel/feet of small bear/teeth of smashed crockery/kiss of Ndola mist/voice
of wisps/head of clumps and patches/belly of warm dough/odour of burning/fingers
of crackled peat/chest of cypress wood/thoughts of mango of guava of cassava/smile
of snapped elastic/face of chalk/face of cracked wafer/name of blown eardrum/steps
of falling ash/breath of jet/mwaice wandi, second born, with a heart of bad arithmetic.

Kayo Chingonyi

Originally published in *Some Bright Elegance* (Salt, 2012)

Alternate Take

When they laid our father out, mwaice wandi,
I want to say, I'm meant to say, soft light
played the skin of his spent face and the sobs
were, of course, a jangling kind of song.

If I could take you where the sandy earth
meets his final stone, tiled and off-white,
we might have learned to worship better gods.
He was known, in the shebeens, as *long John*.

At the wake relatives tried variations
on the words of the day: *I am sorry*
for your grieving/your trouble/your loss.
I've been weighing these apologies for years

that pass and retreat like disused stations.
I think of his walk becoming your quarry,
his knack for beguiling women, your cross.
It's enough to bring me here, past tears

to where his face simplifies to a picture:
the shrine in Nagoya, him stood, Sequoia
among lesser trees, looking good in denim;
every inch the charismatic spectre.

In his memory my voice bears his tincture—
saxophone played low slash boy raised on soya
porridge, chloroquine, a promise of heaven.
There are days I think I'm only a vector

carrying him slowly to my own graveyard
and, standing at the lectern, rather than my son,
will be another copy: the same sharp
edge to the chin, that basso profundo hum.

Kid brother, we breathers have made an art
of negation, see how a buckled drum
is made from a man's beating heart
and a fixed gaze is a loaded weapon.

Kayo Chingonyi

Originally published in *Some Bright Elegance* (Salt, 2012)

A Proud Blemish

The year I graduate from size eights,
learn to walk in the grown man's shoes
contradicting the diminutive frame
I parade across the Arndale estate:

2step is an airborne sickness, infecting
every discerning cassette deck,
after-hours wine bar, joy rider's car.
Most weekends I try to fool a woman

accustomed to the lies of men, sneak home
an hour shy of her footfall in the hallway,
to rehearse my lines: I was home ... I just
... didn't hear the phone, the beep

of the answering machine, her repeating
my name till it's a prayer, voice two parts
ire, one despair, that her days are riven
between shift patterns and her only son.

By the time I graduate size nines, understand
Caesarean, when she answers my question:
did it hurt? Shows me the dark groove hidden
under her work shirt, a proud blemish in skin

rippled with ridges from weight loss, she knows
It's not stress. Still we sit, lumps in throats,
wait on tests. They don't know what's wrong
she says, next day she's back to underground

tunnels, thousands riding the same choppy waves.
Soon she's too weak to walk or wash herself.
The bones of her skull vitiate a face that once
stunned grown men into mumbling stupors.

On a grey ward, two months into size elevens,
she speaks in my mother tongue, begs me trace
the steps of its music, but the discord of two
languages keeps me from the truth I won't hear.

She's dying but I won't call her dead, can't let her
become: a body, a stone, an empty hospital bed.

Kayo Chingonyi

Originally published in *Some Bright Elegance* (Salt, 2012)

interior w/ceiling fan

i wish that we could lie here
for the rest of our lives
the blades of the fan above us
whirling like a tanguera's skirt
everything outside this room
a distant country

let me be this unguarded always
speaking without need of words
because breath is the oldest language
any of us know

Kayo Chingonyi

2017